NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea

Profound explorations of emptiness, imagination, and the nature of perception

Rob Burbea

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CHAPTER 1

Energy, Image, Emotion (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h03

> *In this foundational talk from his Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea examines the crucial nexus of energy, emotion, image, and view in contemplative practice. He begins by reviewing the three modes of mindfulness of the body, particularly emphasizing the cultivation of sensitivity to the energy body as both a resource for samādhi and an instrument for working with emotions and images.*
>
> *Burbea outlines two primary practice intentions: the samādhi direction of cultivating well-being and pleasantness in the energy body, and the direct attention to emotions as they manifest energetically without trying to change them. He provides detailed guidance for working with difficult emotions through steady, sensitive attention along the body's midline, emphasizing the importance of bringing more energy to mindfulness than to the emotion itself.*
>
> *The talk includes practical instructions for handling hindrances like restlessness and dullness, and introduces the powerful role of helpful images—both deliberately invoked and spontaneously arising—in transforming emotional difficulties. Through vivid examples, including personal accounts from retreat participants, Burbea demonstrates how imaginal figures can provide healing through love, presence, and energetic transformation. He concludes by highlighting the crucial element of 'otherness' in imaginal practice, noting how the sense that images are 'not-me' gives them their vitality and transformative power.*

On other retreats and occasions, I've talked extensively about working with emotions skillfully, exploring different possibilities for meditators to engage well with their emotional life—both the lovely, beautiful, positive emotions and the more difficult ones. This seems to me a really important part of our practice in general.

Tonight I want to talk about emotions just enough, and in the context of imaginal practice, as it interfaces with our explorations for this retreat. Particularly, I want to go into the interface, the nexus of emotion, energy, and image. I want to explore this relationship between emotion, energy, image, and also view, because that's always an inescapable factor—so the nexus really of energy, emotion, image, and view.

Before we do that, because it's relevant, just a little recap from earlier. We said that there are three modes of mindfulness of the body. We're particularly interested on this retreat in developing sensitivity to what I call the third mode: the energy body. Really developing over time, gradually, the sensitivity to the energy body.

Some people—I have a close friend who knows much more about anatomy than I do—when sensitive to their energy body and the way emotions and energies are manifesting and reflected there, always tie it in with precise anatomy. "Oh, my ovaries feel this," or "my epiglottis," or whatever. I myself don't know very much about anatomy at all, but I want to say don't worry about that. It's really not necessary. It's fine if you do, but it's not necessary for what we're doing on this retreat.

So we can give attention to a quality of energy somewhere in the energy body or the breath, the feeling of the breath, energy somewhere in the energy body, or an emotion manifesting. And we're not sure: is that around my mouth or is that my chest or my throat? Sometimes things get a little amorphous and blurred, and it doesn't matter. So it's not necessary to tie it in, to correlate it with actual anatomy. A lot of the time the energy body is quite an amorphous field filled with awareness. That could be just a space—as we said, just a sort of space a little bit around the body and including that whole space—or it could have more contours similar to the physical body.

This energy body is an experience. It's not something to believe. It's not a hypothesis. We're just talking about an experience and talking about a kind of experience, a texture of experience, a way of paying attention. And we're talking about it with the term "energy body."

Why would we do that? Partly because it's a way into this quality of samadhi that we want to cultivate as a journey in our practice—just developing more and more this spectrum, this range of possibilities for the ways that the being can feel, the mind and the body, the energy body. Cultivating the well-being, the harmonization, the energy, the restfulness there, the brightness, the alignment of the energies. Because that forms a huge resource that becomes a huge wellspring for us, not just for our practice in all kinds of ways, but for our whole life. So that's one reason for developing the sensitivity of the energy body.

The second reason, as I've alluded to, is that in developing sensitivity to the energy body, we develop naturally, we increase our sensitivity with respect to our emotions and also with respect to imaginal practice and the images that come. So the energy body forms an instrument. It becomes quite a subtle instrument and powerful instrument for working with emotions and for sensitivity and navigating through images and with images, navigating the practice.

These are some of the reasons why we want to develop this sensitivity to energy body. But notice something, because implied there is that we're not always trying, or we're not trying always to be in the samadhi mode of tending to a sort of pleasantness and openness of energy. We're not aiming to always be in some state of pleasant well-being, open, harmonized energy. First, I think that's probably relatively impossible. And second, for something to be a resource, for the samadhi and the well-being of that to be a resource—a deep, powerful, potent resource in our life—it's not that it needs to be there all the time. Absolutely not. It needs to be there often enough. Often enough that we can have access to it, dip in and out of it. Not always. It's quite different. And "often enough" will form a resource and create a very deep and nourishing resource for us in our lives. Out of that, freedom comes, and the ability to let go of what we need to let go of in life much more easily, along with many other benefits and gifts of that resource.

So in terms of practice, we have different intentions or intended directions at different times. Sometimes we're cultivating the samadhi or working gently, playfully at tending to this well-being and the pleasantness or comfort of the energy body. And other times we're doing something different. And it's conscious, and we're moving flexibly between those different intentions at different times.

We also mentioned that at times—or rather often—the awareness will shrink. So we're working with this middle size of attention, this sort of body size, a little bit bigger than the body, and it will shrink many, many times, the awareness. It will shrink when we're beset or troubled by an afflictive emotion. It will shrink when there is pain or discomfort somewhere in the body. It will shrink when we are distracted by something, caught in thought, when the mind is caught in thought. All of those—afflictive emotion, pain and discomfort, being caught in thought—all of those involve clinging or craving or aversion to a significant enough degree, relatively gross actually on the scale of things.

And that goes with the shrinking of the attention. Sometimes the awareness just shrinks out of habit. It's habitual, unfortunately, for us to have a more contracted attention. But we can change that habit through practice and have available to us different sizes of attention, like different gears in a car, which we can use at different times. They're available for us, accessible for us as part of the resource of a meditatively trained mind and heart.

We will see that the awareness shrinks many times, and we want to recognize when it has. What does that feel like? Recognize it shrank, and over and over just stretch it again, expand it again to just a little bit bigger than the body, the physical body, then filling that space with this bright sensitivity as we talked about.

Regarding the direction, the intended direction of samatha—this was very creative of samadhi—it's very creative, very playful. Really anything goes that helps you get in touch with that energy body and just helps to shape it or open it up to something that feels comfortable, easeful, nice, relatively pleasant, maybe quite pleasant. Anything goes.

We talk about just hanging out with the more open space of the energy body. Sometimes just that, you start to realize, oh, in a very subtle way, it's actually quite pleasant. I hadn't even noticed that before. But through the style of attention and the openness, it's like, "Oh, there's some vaguely pleasant energy in that that I can tune into and just hang out in."

There are different ways of working with the breath as we went through: either tuning in to the expansion and contraction of the whole energy body space, or the sense of energization, relaxation with the in and the out breath, or imagining the breath centered and expanding from some center in the body—the heart center, throat center, head center, belly center. Could be anywhere actually. Imagining that but then really feeling the energetic quality of that and the effect of that on the energy body space.

Or imagining the breath coming in and out of certain centers—again could be anywhere: top of the head, down in the belly, perineum. If you're standing up, you can breathe up through the feet into the whole body. With that, experimenting with what kind of breath—how does this breath want to be when it's coming in and out there or when it's centered there? So imagining, but really feeling as well the energetic sense.

There's also the possibility of not necessarily using the breath, or maybe combining it with the breath, but using the imagination a little more actively. For instance, imagining certain lines of energy, perhaps up the body, up the body and out the legs, and these straight lines of energy perhaps extending further down or up. That can be very, very helpful—quite subtle, but very helpful.

Or imagining a cloud of light, the body as a cloud of light energy, or actually a contoured body of light. Then there's all the possibilities of playing with metta that we talked about, and many, many possibilities. Anything goes, but the intention for the samatha, the directionality, is really to gently cultivate, gently tend to a sense of well-being of the energy body. And eventually seeing if that sense of well-being can actually spread and permeate, as the awareness does, the whole space.

We also mentioned that sometimes there's going to be not so much a sense of well-being, but rather there's going to be pain and discomfort in the body. Then we ran through certain possibilities. Let's recap.

The awareness shrinks when there's pain and discomfort in the body—very naturally. So just opening it out can help. Just open out that shrunken awareness. Stretch it again over the whole space. Very helpful.

We can gently direct attention, or rather center the awareness more where there's an okayness somewhere, where there's some degree of comfort, rather than getting dragged into the pain or the discomfort. The attention is often dragged in or away in distraction. What if we just put it somewhere, rest it somewhere where it feels relatively okay?

We can imagine the breath or the breath energy moving freely, unobstructedly through that place of pain, discomfort, blocked energy, or whatever. We can imagine breath or the energy coming in and out of the area of pain or discomfort—also very helpful.

We can imagine the metta originating from the very center of the area of discomfort. Very counterintuitive, but sometimes very helpful. All the metta flowing into that point. We can also imagine a light, a bright light centered at the discomfort and the pain and include the whole body. So the light is radiating through the body from that point and the whole body again is in the awareness.

We can bring a kind of light and steady attention to the discomfort, to the pain, wherever it is, within the whole body awareness, within a sort of background awareness of the whole body. Bring a light, steady attention to the discomfort and really allow it to be uncomfortable. Fully allow. The emphasis is all on the allowing. Moment to moment, allowing it to be what it is. It's this moment of unpleasantness. Then another—really opening, really welcoming the unpleasantness. A very, very skillful way of attending.

We can also use the imagination to put the discomfort in the body in connection with some sense of comfort or well-being or pleasure. For instance, we might have an area that feels uncomfortable. But we can tap in and realize the rest of the body, or around that, actually feels quite nice. There's quite a sense of softness or warmth or well-being or openness. And we can surround that discomfort with something more comfortable, almost like holding it or cradling it.

What's important here is the connection—that what is uncomfortable is placed in connection with something that's comfortable, with something that's warm and soft and has more well-being in it.

And perhaps that more comfortable energy, the softer, warmer energies can sort of lap against like gentle waves, perhaps in a lake, lapping against a jagged rock and just lapping and lapping. Perhaps that's the breath. And the breath can feel at times itself quite soft or gentle or soothing or pleasant or healing. And that energy quality of the breath perhaps is like gentle waves lapping against what's uncomfortable.

Sometimes we can even just imagine that there's a sort of channel between an area of discomfort and an area where it's more comfortable and more okay. So for example, I think I mentioned this morning, we could feel tight and uncomfortable in the throat, but the belly feels relatively okay. Well, just imagine that there's a channel connecting those two areas. Just don't do anything else, but just imagine that they're connected with a channel. And that's all. And just see what happens. We're putting something that's difficult in contact with something that's healing. You could view it that way.

Or, again, similar to what we said before, the pleasantness, the comfort, what is relatively okay or warm or soft can kind of wave through what's uncomfortable. But again, always the playfulness, always the experimenting. There's so many possibilities here and possibilities for creativity and playfulness.

And if there's pleasantness somewhere, if there's a sense of well-being that doesn't disappear after a second or two or is really around for some minutes, then can we focus on that, really include it, give it some attention, perhaps enter into it even with the attention, probe it with the attention, really finding the pleasure there and the enjoyment. Or can we open up to it? It's like opening the whole body to this pleasant energy. Or dissolve in it somehow, or dissolve it through the body. But really we're relishing and enjoying, and the emphasis is on allowing oneself, and really the encouragement is to allow oneself to enjoy what feels good in the energy body.

Even if it's unremarkable, even if it's subtly pleasant and doesn't seem much of a big deal. If it's more steady for some minutes, we really want to include that enjoyment and actually kind of prioritize it.

And in relation to all this, in relation to this direction, this intended direction of the samādhi, of the cultivating of the well-being in the energy body, attending to the well-being. We don't have to necessarily make it some ego thing where we're measuring how well am I doing at this thing called samādhi? Am I succeeding? Am I a great meditator or not? We don't have to kind of create an inner critic around all this. It all depends on the attitude.

You know, if you were feeling maybe not so well one day, and I think, oh, I've got backache or whatever, and I need to rest, I'm really tired, and maybe you arrange a bunch of pillows and cushions on a sofa or on your bed, and just arranging them just right so you feel comfortable, so it's restful, so it's easeful. It's unlikely that your inner critic or ego is going to make a big deal out of that. It's just a gesture of kindness. It's just arranging things, playing with the movement of pillows. That doesn't quite work. Let's move it down. Ah, that's better. It's just that movement of kindness or a similar situation.

You're feeling tired or a lot of tension or whatever, and you decide to run a bath and put all your oils or whatever you like in the bath. Similarly, it's not a big thing for the ego to get involved with. We don't tend to measure ourselves. It's purely kindness. What do I like? Oh, a little bit warmer? Okay, let's see what we can do there. A little bit more of this oil or whatever it is, you know. So it's really a movement of kindness and we can be quite creative with it and that way quite playful and kind and that way it's subverting or diverting from the whole involvement with the inner critic and the ego measurement.

So in terms of practice possibilities let's delineate a couple of things. First there is this intention of samādhi we've talked about—this intention for a direction towards cultivating a sense, tending to a sense and nourishing a sense of well-being just as much as possible in the energy body. So we're attending to the energy body and using the images, for instance, or the breath or whatever, to try very gently, playfully to create and allow a kind of opening of pleasure there. And that can increase and we're nourishing that. And that's the direction of what we call samādhi.

And part of that, sometimes, there will be difficulties that come up, energetic difficulties, emotional difficulties, within the direction of the samādhi intention, then we're responding to those difficulties, but trying to sort of smooth them out so that they become more okay, so that what's unpleasant starts to dissolve a little bit and transform into something more pleasant or more okay and comfortable. So that is this first direction or intended direction that we call samādhi, all of that.

Now let's introduce another possibility, a second possibility, which is just an attention to the emotions in the energy body as they manifest, as they express or are reflected in the energy body, whether they're difficult emotions or not difficult emotions, pleasant or unpleasant. But the intent is just the attention to the emotions in the energy body without the intention to move it towards what's pleasant, to tend towards the sense of well-being and...

comfort, ease, pleasure, and so forth.

Now this attention to the emotions in the energy body, as I mentioned earlier, is part of developing our emotional awareness in our practice and in our life. It's also part of learning to work skillfully with our emotions—with our emotional life and its richness and range.

If we place this in a bigger context, a bigger picture with respect to our emotional life, we might ask: what are we trying to do as practitioners with our emotions? Where are we going with our emotional life as practitioners?

I would say we could delineate at least five aspects—there are probably more, but let's say five for now.

The first is that we want to be able to feel our emotions, to be sensitive to our emotions, including all the nuances—both the more beautiful ones and the more difficult ones. We want to be alive and in touch with the richness and range and depth of our heart, with the subtleties of our emotional heart. This sensitivity, this ability to feel, is an important aspect of practice.

The second aspect is that we want to be able to handle, to have the capacity to tolerate, to be with, to be okay with what goes on and comes through our heart and our emotionality. This means both what is difficult—we want to be able to handle what is difficult—and also what is positive or beautiful. Sometimes intense joy is actually quite difficult for people to handle; we're not used to it in this culture. So can I handle what comes through? Do I know how to handle it? Can I develop my capacity?

In our current times, I feel there are dimensions to this capacity that extend beyond the personal. Can I handle what is, so to speak, purely my personal emotional life—what's going on for me personally? But globally, we are facing such a constellation of crises—environmentally, with climate change, resource depletion, failing economic structures, and all kinds of challenges. If we're called to hold emotions that may be much larger, or rather, if developing our capacity to handle what may at times be more intense emotions can hopefully serve the planet—because if I cannot hold those kinds of emotions in the face of the increasing crises we face as a species, then I cannot offer much. I will run away, hide my head in the sand, distract myself, or something else.

The third aspect in this big picture regarding emotions is that we are in the business, as practitioners, of cultivating beautiful qualities of heart—positive emotions like joy and compassion and love and equanimity and appreciation and gratitude, generosity, and all these beautiful qualities of heart, as the Buddha might say. This is part of the trajectory, part of the path.

Complementary to this, we're also in the business of learning to let go of emotions that are not that useful, that are not really fruitful for us—emotions that don't lead us where we want to go. This is not the same as letting go of what is unpleasant, because sometimes what's difficult to bear, what feels a little unpleasant, may be fruitful if we can find the right relationship with it. So it's not just differentiating between pleasant and unpleasant, choosing the pleasant over the unpleasant. It's really discerning what's fruitful—what, as the Buddha might say, leads onwards towards the goal—and what's not. We learn over time to defuse, like a bomb-defusal expert, what's not useful, while encouraging and cultivating what is nourishing and helpful to the being.

The fourth aspect regarding our emotions is that sensitivity to emotions forms part of imaginal practice, and actually part of all meditation. This sensitivity is particularly important when it comes to deepening certain directions in meditations.

The fifth aspect or dimension of what we want to develop with emotions is understanding. This has a couple of aspects to it. I want to understand my personal patterns, my personal habits emotionally. What are the kinds of emotions that I keep constructing, fabricating? How do I tend to react to certain situations or perceptions? How does that arise? There's a lot to explore there, but I want to understand my patterns and habits.

More broadly, I want to understand what we could call the dependent arising of emotions, including view. We'll talk more about this—how emotions arise dependent on all kinds of conditions. I want to understand what it is, apart from just my personal patterns and habits, that gives rise to an emotion. What is an emotion dependent on? Because partly it's dependent on conception and assumption and view and relationship, perhaps involving aversion or clinging. All of that is part of it.

That's the big picture we're really talking about. Here on this retreat, we're approaching emotions via the energy body, focusing on this particular gateway. This is what I want to talk about tonight.

and tomorrow. So there's the samadhi intention, the direction, the intended direction of samadhi, or there's the intention of just paying attention to the emotions as they manifest in the energy body—simply hanging out and paying attention to that ebb and flow, that swelling and decreasing, the coming and going.

This kind of attention to emotions in the energy body often needs to be quite sensitive. We're talking about quite delicate attention—not always, but often. It's asking for a refined quality of awareness. It's also asking us to sustain our attention, at least the way I'm presenting it—sustaining attention on the emotion and the feeling of that, the energy of that in the energy body.

What I'm describing now in this mode of practice, this intended direction, includes quite a range. It encompasses difficult emotions, as we've discussed, and also the positive or beautiful, the pleasant emotions. The whole range becomes something we want to include in what we're paying attention to.

This also includes the more subtle emotions—subtle negative emotions. For example, boredom is not usually a big, strong emotion. It's quite subtle, but that's part of what I want to give attention to: that emotion, those more subtle difficult emotions, and how they manifest in the energy body. And also the more delicate or subtle positive emotions. Sometimes a sense of sacredness, for example, can be really quite subtle. Or a sense of prayerfulness can be a really delicate emotion. We want to include that as well.

So not just the extremes. We're becoming more sensitive with practice to the range of our emotional life.

I want to emphasize on this retreat paying attention to the midline—the central line of the body, somewhere from below the genitals, actually the perineum, all the way up, often up the front of the body. This is where many emotions often—though not always, absolutely not always—express themselves energetically. Later we can expand this understanding, but often much of the emotional action in terms of what's expressed in the energy body happens along this midline, somewhere from the perineum up to the head, even the top of the head.

A gentle, sustained attention to that midline and what's happening there energetically will reveal how our emotions are often expressed along that line. So that's a good place to start sustaining your attention in this mode of practice. As I said, it doesn't have to correlate precisely—we don't need to know the exact anatomical point. Sometimes in meditation everything becomes a little vague, and it doesn't matter where it actually is anatomically or physically. For our purposes right now, it doesn't matter.

So regarding any difficult emotion or energy—this could be a sense of pressure somewhere, perhaps along that middle line, or a heaviness, or a sense of contraction or tightness somewhere. As I mentioned, it could be the throat or the heart or the belly. It

could also be just a strange sense that this area of energy feels kind of foggy, or this area of energy feels subtly like a swarm of bees in a way that's unpleasant. It can manifest as all kinds of things.

With any difficulty, what do we want to do? Let's be clear. We want to attend to that, keep the attention as much as we can in this mode of practice steadily focused on that feeling, on that energy, wherever it is. If attention drifts, just come back to that. So here's this pressure in my chest, or around there on the midline, and we're attending to it steadily.

Then we ask: can I find the right quality of attention? Sometimes we can actually laser-beam the sensations of pressure and really look at it with quite a lot of intensity. And sometimes what's asked for, as I said, is much more delicate attention—much more like holding those sensations delicately, lightly in the attention. But the attention remains steady, and there's sensitivity to discern what kind of attention is needed. That's one aspect.

A second aspect, simultaneously, is making sure that there's more energy in the mindfulness than there is in the emotion. Because if there's more energy in the emotion than in the awareness, than in the mindfulness, then we're sunk. We're overwhelmed by the emotion. So somehow we want to bring a sense of presence to bear. We energize the attention, the mindfulness, so that there's more energy in that than in the emotion. Just that balance.

That the mindfulness is, if you like, stronger than the emotion—this alone is really helpful and really healing. It's something to check, because sometimes people are mindful, or think they're being mindful, but there's not enough energy in the mindfulness. They're actually sinking into an emotion, which isn't really that helpful. So that's a second aspect.

The third aspect, which we've already mentioned, is that the body space, the energy body, may at times contain a sense of resource in it. And that body space can be around what feels difficult emotionally or energetically. Again, it may lap up against what's difficult in the ways we talked about—surrounding it, bathing it, or holding it. This actually is an aspect of kindness: this holding or embracing or connecting of what's difficult with what's more healing and more lovely.

There is often the possibility of some energetic resource in the larger body space that we can use as a context and put into contact with what's difficult. So that's another aspect.

The fourth aspect is this allowing that I mentioned before. If I'm paying attention to what's difficult somewhere in the energy body on that midline, what's really significant and helpful is this attitude, this energetic stance in the attention of allowing. Moment to moment, how fully can this sensation—which is going to be unpleasant—how fully can it be allowed? The doors of the awareness are opening to it, welcoming it even. This happens moment to moment and is really, really helpful.

If you listen carefully to all that, it's quite different than just "sort of being with it"—that vague sense of being with my emotions, sort of accepting that I kind of feel crappy right now or that I'm miserable. This approach is actually much more specific. There's steadiness involved, there's sensitivity, and there are certain qualities that are brought to bear and, as much as possible, infusing the awareness.

This is what matters: the quality of the attention. The kind and quality of attention is what matters in relationship to emotional difficulty. That's one of the things that really matters. The qualities within the attention will either help or actually worsen what's going on. If there's a little bit of judgment or a little bit of aversion or pushing away—just energetically, even without the mind thinking that—it's going to have an effect, almost certainly an unhelpful one.

But if there's warmth and gentleness and allowing—a more deliberate and intense kind of allowing, not just this vague sort of acceptance—this is really what matters: the steadiness, the sensitivity, the quality of attention, the qualities in the attention, the kind of attention.

We could actually extrapolate a larger point from this and say that mindfulness in general includes a kind of question, a sort of subliminal question at times: Is this helpful? We tend to think of mindfulness as one word, but actually we can have many different flavors of mindfulness. So really what we're asking is: Is this right now, this way of attending, these qualities of mindfulness that are being brought to bear in relationship to this difficulty—is this helpful?

It's a question, because sometimes it's not. And something needs a little bit of reshaping or tweaking or changing. So there's a kind of question being asked with mindfulness. This goes for whatever we're attending to, but we can play with it. We can play with the kind of attention, the qualities in the attention, and so on.

All of that implies that the relationship with—in this case, an emotional difficulty, an emotion somewhere in the body—the relationship with it and the view of it (which I'll come back to much more later) are crucially important. That's what makes the difference. We could even say that the relationship with what's going on in terms of an emo-

tion, the relationship with the emotion itself, and the view of the emotion itself are actually included in what we mean by emotion. These things—emotion, relationship with emotion, view of emotion—make one package, one gestalt.

Still with difficulties and working with difficulties that come up emotionally, we can include hindrances in what we work with. I'm talking especially about the hindrances of restlessness and dullness. Both dullness and drowsiness and restlessness are really helped by opening the space of the awareness. The awareness will shrink when there's a hindrance, and just opening it up wider again can be really helpful, just that alone.

Sometimes even the vast space—that third size of attention we talked about—opening up the space really large, looking at the sky or having a sense of the whole space of the room you're in, taking that in, imagining a space, can be really, really helpful. Both restlessness and dullness include this contraction of the attention, contraction of the awareness. So being aware of space, opening up a wider or much wider awareness, can be really helpful.

With restlessness, sometimes attention to the out-breath is really helpful because there's this organic kind of relaxation happening with the out-breath. Just attending to that quality of relaxation can soothe and calm restlessness. Conversely, when there's dullness and drowsiness, attention to the energizing quality of the in-breath can be really helpful, as can breathing a little longer to energize. If there's dullness and drowsiness, sometimes imagining a bright light—perhaps in the middle of your head, perhaps in your heart center—surrounding and permeating the whole body, and just staying with that bright white or golden light can be really helpful.

There are a lot of instructions here. As I mentioned, I'll repeat some of these things tomorrow morning to recapitulate. But let's add a piece here because we're on an imaginal practice retreat. Deliberately calling and engaging with an image that's helpful when there's a difficult emotion going on can be really helpful.

For example, when some afflictive emotion arises, just bring the image of whoever feels helpful—Kuan Yin or Avalokiteshvara or Tara, or maybe a teacher who you feel really embodies a lot of love or support for you. Deliberately bring that image into the awareness and sustain it. Again, put yourself in contact with that beneficent, benevolent image, and put also the pain, the emotional pain in the body, in the energy body, in relationship to that image. Maybe there's a kind of light being beamed towards you, towards the pain—all kinds of possibilities. But really deliberately invoke and engage with and stay with, sustaining, a helpful image.

Sometimes what can happen when there's a difficult emotion is that an image arises spontaneously and ends up being very helpful. This can be very significant for our purposes and can be surprisingly helpful. It's interesting to explore a little bit how these images—whether they're deliberate or spontaneous—help when there's a difficult emotion.

One of the ways they help, perhaps what some people would think would be the most obvious, is that there can be love from the image. Sometimes it's not a classical imaginal figure of love—not Jesus or Kuan Yin or something like that, but some other image that we don't tend to understand in that way.

immediately associate with love, but yet there is love from that image that we feel imbuing us, imbuing the body, touching the emotional pain, somehow healing us. And this love has a very gradual effect and can address, heal, dissolve the emotional difficulty. That's very, very possible and very healing.

And yet, sometimes what happens is an image appears and it has an immediate effect. It's sudden. And what's happening there is the healing effect or the dissolving of the difficult emotion is not coming because of love. Something else is going on. And this is very, very interesting in terms of imaginal practice.

There are all kinds of examples one can give. Actually, to give one example of a spontaneous image, I'm going to read you a letter that some months ago was written to me—a note really, a long note from someone who was on a personal retreat here. And I'm going to read the whole letter just because almost every word is relevant to everything that we're talking about through the course of this retreat.

"Hi Rob. I wouldn't normally write such a long note, but I'm not sure I could share this new image in an interview and still look you in the eye."

So even that's relevant because sometimes images like this, we feel, oh, this is so weird. Well, I'll explain what she's going to say. And we feel this is so weird and I just want to normalize it partly and normalize also the sense of reticence there.

"I have been noticing at points when I'm walking through the house and even in the garden, a sensation of being kissed hard on the mouth. Seemed a bit strange, but I didn't really think any more about it. Then yesterday, after you said that the samadhi practice has a different intention of following and building pleasure in the body, as we've talked about today and yesterday, I decided to do a few sets to see what happened. I was doing all the normal breathing with the body when I had the sensation of being licked from the hara, the lower belly center, all the way up the front of the body. To say that my entire body split in half with pleasure would be a huge understate-

ment. My body started to shake. I sat for an hour and a half and there were many images of skin on skin but not a full image"—by which she means either full body or full visual image, I suspect.

"Since then, I've had the same visits of this intense sexual body energy on three other sits. Last night for an hour and a half, at four o'clock in the morning for another hour, and just now. On this last sit, the image seemed to coalesce. I was having some very intense back pain and was working with the allowing practice, but didn't seem to have the strength to welcome it, at which point a woman started to kiss the area of pain like it was a mouth, and any pain in my body seemed to give her and me ecstatic pleasure. There are visual elements of this image, but it is largely kinesthetic, and it feels like the body in these encounters becomes a sexual organ, the whole thing, and the image is wrapped up in the breath energy that rubs against the body.

"So many of the images you describe in your talks are functioning in a healing capacity. I definitely feel intensely nourished by this energy, but wondered if there was quite a large danger of becoming attached to this in a negative way."

So part of my response to her in a note was that, no, there isn't really a danger and she should keep opening to it and enjoying it. Well, there's not much of a danger, put it that way.

She goes on: "I just want to make it clear that this wasn't a head fantasy. It is completely in the body. Is it okay to keep working with it? And if so, are there dangers or directions you wouldn't go in? If you are busy at the moment, feel free to respond to this at a later time in an email. It definitely isn't distressing me, but since I've never had an experience like this, I'm having trouble integrating it."

But really the integration that she felt she was having trouble with was really just having permission, recognizing that it wasn't crazy, and having permission to open to it, to allow it, to call on it more deliberately at times. And naturally integrated into the body and the experience, the energy body, and the samadhi, the sense of harmonization, alignment, energization, pleasure—in this case quite strong pleasure—arose naturally and organically from the image. And this kind of thing is a lot less rare than many people might expect.

A different example: another person who has a chronic liver condition, ailment, inflammation of the liver. And so we're sitting again on a retreat one day in meditation, and there was this pain in the liver area, and the image of a lion. Now, this image of a lion was an image that she'd had before quite a few times, so this imaginal figure was quite a friend to her. And this lion came—usually it had a lot of power to it, as lions

sometimes do—and started to lick her liver, to lick that area of the body with a lot of tenderness, but it was also, in her words, there was something awesome and majestic about this image. This huge lion licking her liver.

And this went on, she said, in the meditation. She was just with this for twenty minutes and it felt incredibly healing. And as that went on, the whole energy body began to align and open. And again, the well-being started to open, the samadhi started to open, the harmonization of the energy body came more and more. So what started with quite a difficult—in this case not so much an emotion, but a physical affliction—through the image was transformed gradually, gradually, through the love and through the tangibility, energetic tangibility of the image, transformed and samadhi came out of that.

Sometimes the love that comes through an image may feel bigger than the body, bigger than our body. It's as if an imaginal figure or some image creates or opens up a huge space of love, bigger than the body. And then we can literally allow ourselves to feel in love, literally in love, in a space of love. And perhaps then open to that space or feel the whole body, the whole energy body bathed in that love.

that love.

So images can transform emotions that are occurring, can transform the energy, and this happens a lot. And it can also arise when there's no difficulty. Those examples are when people were struggling with this or that, but also when there's no difficulty.

Some time ago I was teaching a weekend retreat—actually, samadhi was the theme—and people were working with the breath and the energy body that we were talking about. A person reported to me that she was really enjoying it, was feeling very calm. She said it was a delicious sense of divinity permeating the energy body and the whole space through the practice. She was just with that.

And then, actually, it felt like this feeling, this delicious sense of divinity, in her words, became personified in the figure of Ramana Maharshi, a great Indian sage and saint from the twentieth century. I think he died in the fifties. For her, she had a very strong heart connection with this teacher. So this delicious sense of divinity became personified as an image of Ramana Maharshi, and the top of her head felt like it opened. The figure of Ramana descended and was absorbed into her body, into her being through the top of the head. With that came a great raising of the energy levels.

So he, so to speak, entered into the body and the being, and much more energy became available. But interestingly, the energy felt, she said, quite "lumpy" was the word she used. It was actually a bit uncomfortable. So there was a big quantum leap in the energy levels, but it didn't feel that comfortable. It was still kind of lumpy throughout the energy body.

So I said, "Okay, let's see if we can smooth this energy out and just work with imagining the flows of the energies. Don't jump to conclusions that it's a bad thing or that I'm going to be stuck here or something like that." She said then the awareness—she just allowed her awareness to drop to her belly and really allow the different energies to flow, very gently working at smoothing them out. Very, very skillful working in practice there.

So regarding difficult energy in the energy body, we have some options. And again, options is a key word. We are complex, and we're encouraging flexibility, not just one way of doing things. So one option is, as we mentioned, to gently emphasize or place the attention, sit the awareness more where there is the comfort, the sense of comfort and pleasure, if that's available.

Another option, though, is to deliberately bring to mind and engage with a helpful image. And one can also do that deliberately when there is no difficulty. So the woman whose letter I read you—now that's become part of her practice and it's a way in for her to samadhi and to the energy opening that way. And other people say a teacher that they have a connection to also seems to come as a presence imaginatively and perhaps fill their body, and it helps everything to open and energize and calm and feel good, or just comes nearby or something like that, and there's a kind of resonance.

So even when there's no difficulty or strong sense of difficulty, we can deliberately use a helpful image as part of what helps. But certainly when there is a difficulty, we can deliberately engage a helpful imaginal figure.

Okay, so that's the second possibility. The third possibility with difficult energy, difficult emotion, is to focus on or to work with the difficulty of the emotion as we explained earlier—just now—in the different ways.

Now, doing that may be—as I attend, as I take care of the quality of the attention and the steadiness and the sensitivity and the ways of paying attention—it may be that the difficulty dissolves gradually as I pay attention in these skillful ways. And it may be that it gets less and it becomes really quite subtle. So maybe it's still there, but it's really, really quite subtle.

Now, one option is to actually stay with it as it gets more and more subtle. And it might be—this is really, really good practice—keep the steadiness, the sensitivity, the qualities of the attention, and let the whole difficulty become more and more subtle as an experience. And stay, track it with that subtlety, stay there. And sometimes it gets more and more subtle and it actually becomes pleasant. So funnily enough, that can also be a way into samadhi. Then that pleasantness can spread. Very interesting.

And it's certainly okay if it doesn't disappear, the difficulty, or if it doesn't become pleasant. No problem. We're just focusing on it and working with it in these more skillful ways. That's the third option.

And sometimes, especially when the focus on the difficulty and the emotional energy that feels difficult is a little lighter—it's not so intense, it's just kind of letting it be there, we're in touch with it, we're not so much focusing in on it—sometimes, just being with it in that way, an image constellates out of the difficulty, you could say, the emotional difficulty. And the difficulty subsides when the image comes, or the energy is transformed, perhaps the energy in the energy body is opened or it aligns or harmonizes, or we just have more energy. I'm going to talk more about all these possibilities tomorrow. Or the emotion is transformed—very, very possible.

So I remember one time I was—actually, there was something going on in terms of wider dharma politics. I'd just read an email and felt a bit frustrated with this sort of wider political situation in a certain sangha. Something was going on with someone. And I was with that feeling of frustration, but something felt a little bit—I felt a little bit stuck in relationship to it, or the energies, let's say, were stuck. The energies were stuck. And there wasn't a lot of clarity as to what to do or what to respond. So the whole energy body felt a bit stuck. The emotion was frustration. It wasn't very clear.

Even the energy itself was not very clear. And it definitely wasn't pleasant. It was subtly unpleasant. As I was with this, just gently, without so much focusing in on it, just kind of holding it and aware of it, an image suddenly coalesced.

It was liquid, some kind of liquid being poured in through the crown, through the top of my head. What was quite interesting was that I found myself asking, "What color does that liquid want to be?" But there wasn't a right color. The color of the liquid wasn't a significant aspect of the image. I'm mentioning this because it relates to some things we're going to explore another day.

This liquid was being poured into my energy body in the imagination, just by itself. It arose spontaneously. And as it was poured in, clarity came and strength came regarding, if you like, my sense of what's my duty here in relation to this situation that I had felt frustrated by. What am I asked to perhaps continue expressing, or not be daunted because my expression doesn't seem understood or accepted or whatever?

So there was clarity that came as strength. And this feeling pervaded the whole body. The liquid pervaded the whole body in the image, and a sense of strength came out. Energetically, strength, fortitude, resolve. I felt much, much better. It's quite a subtle example, but quite telling in a lot of ways.

One thing I want to mention is something we've returned to before, but I'll mention it now about that image: it wasn't clear who was pouring this liquid in. It wasn't me pouring liquid into the top of my head. And it wasn't, so to speak, in dharma language, just pouring or just being poured. There was some sense of an other, and actually a somehow divine other in some vague way. Some vague sense of an other, a somehow divine other was pouring this liquid into me and down into me.

I want to make a general point that I will return to: With imaginal practice, the sense of otherness, the otherness of the imaginal figure, is quite key. It's a key ingredient, this sense of otherness, that in other words, it's not me. This otherness gives vitality to images. It gives a sense of depth to images and potency, power—a sense of otherness. And something we'll come back to.

CHAPTER 2

Energy Body: Instructions (1)

Rob Burbea · 1h34

> *In this opening instructional talk from the Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea establishes the foundation for working with what he calls the "energy body" - a mode of mindfulness that goes beyond simple sensation awareness or materiality contemplation. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's teachings on mindfulness of body, he delineates three approaches: mindfulness of sensations, mindfulness of materiality, and this third way of sensing the body's energetic dimension.*
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> *Burbea guides practitioners through extensive experiential instructions for developing samādhi - not mere concentration, but a whole-body awareness suffused with well-being, comfort, and harmonized energy. The guided meditation explores various techniques: breathing from different body centers (heart, solar plexus, hara), imagining lines of energy, visualizing the body as light, and working skillfully with physical discomfort. He emphasizes the phenomenological reality of this approach - it's not a belief system but a learnable way of sensing that becomes a crucial resource for emotional awareness and imaginal practice.*
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> *This sensitivity to the energy body serves multiple purposes: cultivating samādhi as a deepening resource for practice and daily life, developing awareness of how emotions reflect energetically, and establishing the somatic foundation necessary for imaginal work. Without this embodied awareness, spiritual practice risks becoming mere daydreaming rather than transformative soul-making work.*

Good morning everyone.

Just a general word about the instructions on this retreat before we get into them. There's a lot of material in the instructions. Part of the reason for that is because people are different. People need different things, and different ways of working work for different people, better or worse, or at different times. So I want to be quite generous in what we're putting out so that hopefully everyone can find ways of working that work for them, that are useful.

The material is not only quite extensive, it's also quite different. Some of you, at least, will be encountering the kinds of material that we're working through for the first time or are quite new to it. Just the fact of it being new and unfamiliar also makes it seem like quite a lot. So please don't get overwhelmed with the instructions as we go

through. I'll be repeating quite a lot, putting material out and recapitulating it at some point, perhaps the next day or later on. Do ask questions and do take notes, as I mentioned last night, if you like to. There are also the recordings, so you can listen again in due time and glean more as time goes by.

I mentioned last night that we're going to start with and really establish as a basis for the work that we're doing what I'm calling practicing with the energy body. So let's talk a little bit about mindfulness of the body, which the Buddha emphasized, to set this up and put it in context.

We could delineate three modes of mindfulness of the body—three kinds or types of mindfulness of the body. They're actually not really separate, but let's separate them now just to try and make something clear about the direction we want to go in.

The first is what we might call mindfulness of sensations. This is, in the insight meditation tradition, by far the most common when people talk about mindfulness of the body and also in the mindfulness movement. For example, if you take your hand right now and gently reach down to the floor by your side and just press gently—just touch and then press gently into the floor at your side—bringing your mindfulness, bringing the attention to the sensations that this gives rise to in the hand. What does that feel like right now in terms of the sensations of warmth or coolness or pressure? Notice how if you slightly move your hand around or at least move at the wrist while keeping the hand in place, there's a shifting texture, almost kaleidoscopic shifting of the sensations in the hand, through the fingers, in the palm. This is very simple and what most people can very easily relate to or have a lot of experience with—mindfulness of sensations.

Or, for example, if you're familiar with the raisin exercise, you put that raisin in your mouth or some other food in your mouth, and the sensations of taste, but also of texture in the mouth, touch—we can bring mindfulness to those sensations. Or washing your hands, the hands under a running tap of cold water or hot water—what does that feel like? The coldness, the heat of the water, the liquidity, the wetness, the sensations there. You're walking barefoot in your bedroom and you stub your toe against the foot of the bed. Again, mindfulness can come to those sensations, that throbbing, that pulsing, those unpleasant sensations. So most people are very familiar with that first type, mindfulness of sensations.

The second type or mode of mindfulness of body we could talk about is mindfulness of the materiality of the body. For example, I mentioned this yesterday as well. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha talks about contemplating one's death or actually the decomposition of the body at death, this body or other bodies. Also in the Satipaṭṭhāna

Sutta, the Mindfulness Sutta, the Buddha talks about contemplating one's body parts. So again, this is to do with materiality. It's contemplating the hair on the head, the hair on the body, the teeth, the bones, the liver, the blood, the spleen, the bile, all the different body parts, the muscles, the tissues, the fat that make up the body. So contemplating the materiality of the body in terms of its parts.

And again also in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha talks about contemplating the materiality of the body in terms of what was then known as the four elements: earth, air, fire and water and their presence in the body, throughout the body—the element of liquidity, the element of solidity.

Now these are in the second mode of mindfulness of the materiality of the body. This is actually a contemplation if we think about it. It's different from the contemplation of the mindfulness of sensations, the first mode. It's a contemplation. It actually includes the imagination and conceptions of the body. So it's less, if you like, direct in some ways than the mindfulness of sensations mode. It's a contemplation that includes the imagination and conceptions of the body.

And those conceptions might include conceptions such as "unclean." So the body parts in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta are generally—most people interpret what the Buddha means there as contemplation of what's unclean in the body. And this serves the function of reducing clinging and attachment and also lust. Clinging and attachment to the body and also lust in terms of other bodies.

So this kind—the second mode of mindfulness of the body, materiality—will include conception of the body. Sometimes it's the conception of something unclean or not unclean, but it could also be the conception of beautiful and holy. That would be quite a different spin on it than what you're generally used to in the Theravadan tradition, the Pali canon.

With regard to the four elements—the earth, air, fire, water—again, what's the sort of tone and direction and conception of that? I know someone who every morning gets up and, as part of her practice—it's almost a quasi-shamanic practice—goes outside and bows to the four elements present in nature, throughout nature, throughout the natural world and also in one's body. There's a sense in that practice of reverence, of holiness for these four elements.

But one can also spin or direct that practice in a very neutral way. It's just a kind of deconstruction of the body into its elemental parts, much as we might these days deconstruct—instead of talking about four elements, more modern science would talk

about molecules or atoms, and that would be a similar sort of scientific materialist deconstruction. It's more neutral, and again, it's designed to let go of attachment and identification with the body.

So there's the mode of mindfulness of the body of sensations, the mode of mindfulness of the body regarding materiality, the material body. And then the third one is what we're going to focus most on in this retreat, and that's the mindfulness of the body —the mode of mindfulness of the body, the mindfulness of what I'm going to call the energy body, the space of the energy of the body.

Now, to some of you, that will sound very abstract and a bit like some kind of hypothetical thing that you're being asked to believe in or some kind of new age concept. But actually, I really do not mean it in that way. What I'm talking about is just a way of sensing, a way of sensing body and body space that we can shift in and out of, but that with practice can become very, very familiar to us. This way of sensing this energy body —very accessible and actually very normal.

So philosophically, we're talking about a phenomenological reality, if you like. This is actually a way of experiencing the body. It's actually how we experience if we don't necessarily layer too much on in terms of concepts. It's a style of attention, that's all, that reveals, opens the experience up in a certain way. So rather than a whole big construct and hypothetical sort of new agey thing, it's not that.

Actually, if we just think about this for a second, the mode of mindfulness of the body in terms of materiality actually needs, for example, years of high school biology to know all the body parts and all this. And it's quite culturally determined as a view. So for instance, whether we tend to see matter and materiality in terms of the four elements, as they did in the time of the Buddha, or whether we see matter and materiality in terms of molecules and atoms, etc., as we do culturally in our time and age—which is just something that we've received from the culture, from our education.

So that—not to say it's wrong or right, it's important, it certainly has its truth—but the point is that it's actually informed by conceptuality, this contemplation of materiality. So when I talk about this third mode of mindfulness of the body, the mindfulness of the energy body, I'm really talking about experience, not talking about some elaborate sort of religious belief or something like that at all.

When I talk about the body, the energy body, I really mean the whole space, actually a little bit bigger than the physical body. When I say the whole body, the whole body space—I'm going to use this over and over and over in this retreat—I really mean, as I

said, a little bit bigger than the body. If for instance you're sitting on a chair, it would include even the space underneath your bottom, beneath the bottom of the chair, between the ground and the floor and the bottom of the chair.

So it's almost like an oval or an ellipse or something, or an egg shape. It doesn't necessarily have fixed borders. It can be quite amorphous or nebulous in terms of where it ends. But the experience then is this region, this area of what we could call—let's call it energy. That's the name I'm giving to it. But what I really mean is the tone of that space, the tone of the whole body space, the vibration, the feel, the texture of it, if you like.

As I mentioned last night, this is something we're going to emphasize and keep as a basis for the work of this retreat throughout the retreat. So we're going to really emphasize it at the start and then we're going to keep it as a thread and a foundation for all the other work that we do—this sensitivity to the whole body space, its energy, its vibration, its feel, its texture, its tone.

Now, why? Why place so much emphasis on this energy body experience and the sensitivity to the whole body energy? Well, there are a few reasons.

The first is that we can practice relating to this energy body in a certain way, which I'll explain and go through today, to cultivate what we call samādhi. S-A-M-A-D-H-I is a Pali and Sanskrit word, samādhi. Now, oftentimes that word gets translated as concentration. But I don't really want to use that English word. I want to keep it in the Pali or Sanskrit—samādhi. And what I really mean is not simply a focusing of the mind, a steadiness of the attention, a concentration on some small point or something. What I really mean is an awareness, a sensitivity to this whole body space, a little bit bigger than the whole body.

When the samādhi is developing and cultivating, there's a whole range of experience of the way that energy body feels. Well-being starts to permeate to different degrees—maybe not that remarkable, to different degrees—it permeates that energy body space. Restfulness permeates it. This is an aspect of samādhi, but also energization. So it feels like a very restful kind of space, but it's also energized and bright. The energies may feel sometimes soothing and healing and harmonized.

So the whole body is involved. There's some degree of comfort or well-being or pleasure even. Why is that important? Because not only is that a lovely space to inhabit, it's also very good for the mind.

This samadhi, to whatever degree—and there's really an almost infinitely deep potential there—forms a resource, a deepening resource for the whole being. To cultivate that samadhi, to have that direction in practice at times, that intention to develop this well-being, this sphere of harmonized, comfortable, perhaps even pleasant energy that is bright, awake, energized, yet restful—this is a really important resource for the whole being. So that's one reason why we're going to emphasize it. And that resource pays off in all kinds of ways in one's practice and in one's life.

The second reason is that we want to develop a general deepening sensitivity to the energy body and the feel of the energy body, so that this kind of experience—of an energy body, of the energy of the body in that space—becomes more and more familiar to us. We're developing our sensitivity to it and its experience, its changing experience. Why? Because that sensitivity to the energy body will form another kind of resource for us. It allows us one very helpful way to be aware of our emotions, because they reflect in the energy body, and also ways of working with difficult energies or difficult emotions through the energy body. So the sensitivity is important in itself because it brings awareness, which is very important, and it also enables us to work skillfully with all emotions, but especially the more difficult ones.

The gradually developing sensitivity to the energy body, which we can cultivate in practice, is very important as a basis and a kind of mainstay, a thread in regards to imaginal work, imaginal practice—as I'll explain all these different parts as we go through the retreat. It turns out that sensitivity to the energy body allows us to pick up on the resonances of different images and how they resonate in the being, both emotionally and energetically. This allows us to navigate with images, navigate the practice in different directions, and also discern which images are helpful for us, helpful for the being, for what I'm going to call soul-making.

Sensitivity to the energy body as we practice imaginal work also keeps us connected. There's always a kind of mindfulness of the body involved in imaginal practice. Without that, it's daydreaming. What's characteristic of daydreaming is I'm not in touch with my body—I don't feel the body and the energy body. So the sensitivity to the energy body also allows a greater degree of sensitivity in general with regard to images. And again, that differentiates imaginal practice from just daydreaming.

Today we're going to focus on samadhi, on this aspect, this deepening resource in terms of shaping the energy body. Now we could easily spend a very long retreat just on that—it's a huge thread of our path. I would say almost infinitely developable, so it

could be a very long retreat. But this is the primary focus for today's practice. And again, if you're listening and doing this at home and have longer, you may want to spend longer developing the samadhi. We'll keep coming back to it.

So again, what does this word mean? Samadhi doesn't just mean focusing the attention or steadiness of attention or concentrating on one point somewhere. A steadiness of attention, a focusing of the attention is one element of what I'm calling samadhi, but it's just one element. What's more characteristic or more important in the samadhi, or as important, is this whole body awareness, this space. So awareness is permeating this energy body space. And there's some degree—to some depth, with a lot of range here—some degree of comfort or well-being or pleasure even in that space. The mind wants to fill that space because it feels relatively comfortable. There's well-being, there's pleasure there sometimes. And the energies in that space feel harmonized and bright and energized and restful.

This is not an on-off thing—I have samadhi or I don't have it, I'm in it or I'm out of it. It's more a spectrum, a range of deepening possibility that shares those characteristics for much of that range.

So can we practice tending to, just gently shaping and caring for and nourishing the body energies, the feeling of the body energies, and tending to a sense of well-being? What is it in our way of practicing—which I'll explain soon—that will tend to and nourish and support a sense of well-being through the body or somewhere in the body, a sense of energy, a sense of pleasure even? And can we tend to that in practice? This is the intention of samadhi practice: to tend to this well-being, this more open energy, the pleasantness. Can we do that tending? Can we take care of that and have that direction of intentionality without grasping, without getting tight?

One of the things that really helps us not get tight is to approach this with genuine playfulness. We're playing with this experience of the energy body, exploring the energies in a way that can be deeply creative. There's no right or wrong way of doing it—you can experiment freely. This playfulness and experimentation opens up countless possibilities, helping to lighten the whole endeavor and keep it alive rather than falling into that constricted success-failure mentality. This playful quality itself becomes one of our supports.

I think what would be most helpful now is to do a guided meditation together. I'll take us through some of the possibilities for tending to and being aware of the energy body, exploring different ways of caring for these energies as I've mentioned.

Take a few moments to settle into your meditation posture. We can discuss posture more later if anyone needs guidance, but what's essential now is that you feel relatively comfortable. The body should be upright without being rigid—balanced and simultaneously open. We're establishing an ideal balance of the whole being, mind and body together, through the posture itself.

The posture both reflects and expresses this beautiful balance: uprightness, wakefulness, brightness, while at the same time manifesting openness, softness, receptivity. This ideal balance of heart and mind finds expression through the body, and we simply set things up this way from the beginning.

You might want to very gently roll the pelvis forward and allow the rib cage to lift up and out—but nothing forced here. It's quite subtle, just opening up the posture, bringing in a touch of uprightness while remaining completely relaxed, soft, nothing tight or rigid.

Now take a moment to engage the first mode of mindfulness of the body. Feel into your hands and the sensations there right now—the flickering, dancing quality of sensations, perhaps warmth in certain areas or coolness. Notice how they feel if they're touching each other or resting on your legs. Can you sense any tingling in the fingers or palms?

Staying with this first mode of mindfulness, tune into the sensations where your body meets the cushion, chair, or bench. How does that contact feel? Perhaps warm or cool, pressure, hardness—simply notice these basic sensations of contact.

And your legs, feet, whatever is connecting with the floor right now—what are those simple sensations of contact there? Can you feel that?

You might scan through the body now, beginning with the face and head. Notice any tension, any holding or tightness. With the mind, simply relax. See if you can soften as much as possible—perhaps around the eyes or mouth, any holding in the jaw. Just feel it and relax.

Move to the throat and neck. Again, tune into the sensations and release, letting go, letting be. It doesn't matter whether all the tension dissolves—just this movement of relaxing.

The shoulders—feel if there's any tension or holding and let them drop toward the floor. The arms, upper back, sensing into the sensations. If there's tightness or holding, just relax. The upper chest, and the belly—sensing in, tuning in to whatever sensations are there, and if you feel tension, simply relaxing as much as you can.

Now, is it possible to open up the awareness so that it stretches to fill a region or space that's just a little bit bigger than the whole physical body? The awareness is expanding now, not focusing on one particular point here or there in the body, but expanding to fill a space larger than the physical form.

Within that expanded awareness, perhaps you can sense the tone of the body's uprightness—a very subtle feeling that pervades the entire space, this quality of uprightness.

The awareness will keep shrinking over and over again. I'll talk about this more later. It will keep contracting, so simply notice when it shrinks and gently stretch it back out. Some people find it helpful to imagine filling a balloon, expanding it, filling it with air, filling it with awareness. You're stretching the awareness and then permeating that whole space with this quality of mindful presence.

With sensitivity. This will happen many times. The awareness will shrink. Just open it up again. Stretch it out again and fill it with awareness. Fill it with bright mindfulness. Presence. Sensitivity.

How does it feel? How does that whole space, the energy body, feel? The tone of it. The vibration of it, in it. The feel, the energy, the texture.

So is it possible for the awareness, for the delicate attention to pervade that whole space, the whole body a little bit bigger than the body? It may feel body-shaped, it may feel more amorphous or more kind of oval, egg-shaped, ellipse, circular. Pervading that whole space with a kind of sensitivity to the way it feels, the texture, the vibration, the energetic quality of it. Bright mindfulness, sensitivity, alive awareness filling that space, sensing the whole space, open to the whole space.

Sometimes the feeling is really quite subtle. In fact it's often really quite subtle, so just very delicate with the attention, not forcing anything, just being present throughout the space of the body, sensitive to that whole feeling of energy there.

For some people, it helps to imagine or feel that the awareness is actually centered somewhere in the body, perhaps at the heart center, in the center of the chest, the upper chest. And from there, the awareness expands and fills, or that's the center of this space of awareness and this space of energy. It could be a little lower in the solar plexus. Some people like to feel or are helped by feeling the awareness centered there and then permeating the whole space. Or perhaps down in the hara, the tan tien, a few finger widths below the belly button. Some people find that a helpful place to feel the awareness center.

So what's helpful for you now? Is it possible to stay with this whole body, this whole space awareness of the energy body and just stay open? Keep stretching it when it shrinks—it will shrink many times—and just keep opening it up again, stretching it out to cover that space, staying with that and then beginning to become aware of the breath within that space.

So how does it feel with the breath, the in and the out breath? How does that ripple through the whole space? How does the breath, the in breath, the out breath, feel? How does it affect the energy of the whole space of the energy body?

It can be really, really helpful to gently lengthen the breath, both the in and the out breath. Slow, comfortable, long breaths. As long and as slow as is comfortable. You don't need to move a lot of air, necessarily. So a very gentle breath, but slow and long and smooth. Not forcing, just encouraging the breath to open up, keeping this whole energy body in awareness, this whole space sensitive to the way the breath feels, ripples, affects the whole space. Long, slow, smooth, in and out breath, whole body awareness, whole space, filling the energy body with the energy of the breath, filling it with awareness, filling that space with bright awareness.

Some people notice with the in-breath that the whole body, the whole energy body expands a little. They can feel it expanding, the whole body. In a very subtle way, perhaps, the whole body is kind of expanding, the whole energy body. And with the out-breath, there's a kind of opposite movement, a kind of collapse or contraction, if you like. And one can just remain sensitive to the whole space, the whole energy body, and feeling this expansion and contraction with the in and the out breath. And how does that feel? Really alive and sensitive to that. Keeping the breath long and slow and smooth and comfortable as much as you can without forcing. And aware, sensitive, filling that whole space with bright, present sensitivity.

So tuning into that expansion and contraction, that feeling in the whole space may be very helpful for some people. Or as well, some people might also notice that with the in-breath, there's a feeling of energization. The whole body space feels energized with the in-breath. And how does that feel? Can we tune into that feeling in the whole body? Notice, become sensitive to what that feels like, this energization of the whole space with the in-breath. And with the out-breath, a kind of organic, natural relaxation that happens just by itself with the out-breath. How does that feel? Sensitive to that energization, relaxation, letting go, tuning into these qualities in the whole space with the breath.

It could be the expansion and contraction, could be the energization, the relaxation, could be a mixture of the two. Filling the body, filling that space with awareness, stretching it every time the awareness shrinks.

Now for some people, or sometimes, it can be helpful to feel or imagine—imagine even and then feel—the breath as if it's originating, for example, in the heart center. So that there is a point in the center of the chest—doesn't matter exactly where it is—and the breath expands from there outwards and fills the whole body and then just retracts a little bit back to that.

So instead of a sense of the breath coming in and out of the body, it's as if the breath is centered in the body at a certain center, for example, the heart center. And that's expanding. The energy expands with that. Perhaps the awareness is centered there as well and contracts and expands, and one's feeling that, sensitive to that rippling through and affecting the whole body, the whole space.

It doesn't matter at all if you feel you're just imagining that. If you're imagining it, we want to feel it too. So you can use your imagination, but see if you can really get a felt sense, a kinesthetic sense of that breath energy and how it affects the energy of the whole body.

Now you may feel, if the breath is centered like that, that it no longer wants to be very long, or it may want to stay very long. Just see if you can get a sense—what kind of breath, long or short or smooth or very subtle? How does it want to be breathed? What kind of breath wants to occur when I feel it centered there at the heart center, having the breath center at the heart center and expanding from there?

So be playful. See if you can sense what breath feels the best, feels the most comfortable, the most enjoyable even.

Maybe you want to experiment with the breath energy being centered in the solar plexus, just a little bit lower in the center of the body. And again, sensitive to the whole space, the whole energy body. What kind of breath expands from the solar plexus, fills the whole space with its energy, and then draws back there, collapses down there again? What kind of breath? How long, how short, how smooth, how coarse or subtle? Feeling the whole body, the whole energy, the whole space.

I'm just moving quite quickly just to give you an idea of the possibilities. Is it possible to feel the breath originating within the lower belly center, the hara, the tan tien, down a few finger widths below the navel? Just feel that as the center of the breath energy ex-

panding from there to fill the whole space and then collapsing again. What kind of breath feels the best there? How does it feel to imagine and conceive of the breath being centered there?

Or how about trying in the center of the head, that that becomes the center of the breath? And we're still filling the whole body space with this awareness and sensitivity to the feeling, the energy, the tone of it. Just noticing—how does it feel if the center of the head is actually the center of the breath? The breath expands from there through the whole space of the body. What kind of breath? How should the breath be? Might the breath be so that it feels most comfortable, most enjoyable even, when it's centered there?

How about let's try something else, just to give you an idea, a sense of things you can play with. How would it be to imagine the breath coming in and out from the heart center? Again, sensitive to the whole space, sensitive to the whole energy body, but the breath is coming in and out through the heart center and the center of the chest. And then how does it move? How does it feel? How does its energy expand or affect the whole energy space, the whole energy body? And what kind of breath feels good, feels comfortable or right or even enjoyable there? In and out. Imagining it, but feeling what it feels like to imagine it that way. Sensitive to the whole body.

Play with all kinds of points in the body this way. For example, how would it feel to imagine the breath energy entering the body at the base of the spine, right down there in the lower back? Again, feeling how that breath energy, imagined that way, coming in and out there, affects the whole body space, the whole energy. Feeling what kind of breath feels good and helpful there.

Or how about imagining the breath coming in the top of the head, the crown center at the top of the head? Just imagining that breath energy entering and going out there, but then feeling what that feels like. What that feels like in the whole space, the whole energy body space. Sensitive. Sensitive. Alert to the whole tone, texture, vibration of the whole space.

And what kind of breath feels best there. So be light, be playful with this. Let the whole body be involved.

Now let's try something else, still keeping this whole body awareness, the sensitivity to the whole energy body experience. Let go right now—keeping that wider awareness—but let go of the breath or any attention to the breath, any deliberate attention to the breath. Just let the breath be. Don't focus on it or make it prominent in the attention. Let go of the breath.

Still with this whole energy body, let's play with the imagination a little bit with regards to the energy body. So is it possible within this sensitivity to the whole space of the energy body to imagine a line of energy from deep down in almost the perineum or right down in the lower belly, all the way up the center of the body, a straight line up the center of the body and perhaps from there, from the perineum or the lower belly all the way up to the crown of the head?

And perhaps even out beyond the top of the head, beyond the crown and even lower than the perineum. So does it want to extend in either or both directions, or does it want to just stay in a certain space? Imagine that line of energy. Maybe you see it visually. Maybe it's a certain color, perhaps white or gold. Maybe it's more kinesthetic. You're just imagining a line of energy.

How does that feel? So there's that line there that we're imagining and we're noticing how that presence of that image, whether it's visual, kinesthetic or whatever, how that affects the tone, the feeling, the energy of the whole space.

And then keeping that wider awareness as always, stretching it out when you need to, keeping that vertical line there of energy, can we add two more lines from that point down in the perineum or right in the lower belly, a line from that point where it meets the vertical line that we've just described, a line going out, radiating out through each leg? So you now have three lines meeting at a point in the lower belly or the perineum.

And these lines that go through the legs, they don't need to necessarily bend at the knee if your knees are bent right now. They might want to extend more in a straight line, again, beyond the edges of the physical body. How does that feel, those three lines of energy imagined? How does it affect the feeling of the whole space?

Sometimes, for some people, imagining or feeling certain flows of energy in or out of those lines—for example, in through the legs and out through the vertical one, through the top of the head or the other way around or out through all of them—that can be helpful or feel as it just arises by itself. How does it feel? What's helpful with this imagination?

Maybe you want to stay with that and that feels helpful and supportive to the whole energy, or maybe you can also try again—sensitive to the whole space, it's more open stretched awareness over the whole energy body, the whole space—and actually imagining that that whole space is a cloud of light, a cloud of energy that's luminous, perhaps white or golden or golden white light. The whole energy body is really a cloud of light. And how does that feel? How does that feel in the whole space? So this cloud is by nature quite amorphous.

Or we could try a third thing and imagine a body of light—that your body, your energy body, is a body of light, of light energy. So this time, it actually has contours similar to your physical body. And what color does this body of light want to be? Imagining it, but feeling what it feels like to imagine the body this way. A body of light, perhaps again white or golden, perhaps blue, perhaps red, but it's the feeling of the energy, it's the feeling of the space that's important, that's significant. Is it possible to imagine a body of light and to feel what that feels like throughout the body, throughout the energy space?

So these are some of the possibilities we move through very quickly, throwing out different possibilities for you to play with, for you to try. Right now, just staying with this whole body, whole energy body awareness, sensitivity, just return to whichever felt the easiest or the best for you. Perhaps it was just being with the space of the energy body and sensitive to that. Perhaps it was with the breath in a certain way of relating to the breath or feeling the breath or the breath centered in a certain place or in and out a certain place. Or perhaps it wasn't with the breath and it was just more with the images of energy, lines of energy or a cloud of light or this body of light.

Just for a few minutes right now, go back to whichever attracts you the most, whichever felt easiest or best for you. Whatever it is, the awareness is stretched through to permeate, to pervade the whole space, really inhabiting that whole space with bright sensitivity, a live awareness.

And then whatever you've been playing with, see if you can just go back for a few moments to just the awareness pervading that space, just inhabiting, filling that whole space, the energy body, with this bright, luminous sensitivity to the energy, the feeling, the texture, the tone, the vibration of that space.

And when you're ready, slowly opening your eyes, seeing if you can stay in contact with the experience of the body of that space just as much as possible.

Just to be very clear, what we just went through in the guided meditation was really some options, a few of the options that it's possible to play with. It's not that one would go through all that in that order in a meditation, or even all of that in any order. All of what we did is really a survey, if you like, a taster of possibilities. But I hope it's clear that the breath may or may not be involved.

As I mentioned, you might also bring loving-kindness practice into this work for those familiar with it. While we don't have time to explore metta in depth on this retreat, if you already know the practice, you can beautifully integrate it with the energy body meditation. Begin by feeling into that whole energy space, really establishing

sensitivity to the entire field. Then perhaps the metta becomes a kinesthetic imagination - sensing that energy radiating outward as kindness, as well-wishing and healing energy, or wrapping yourself in that cloud of benevolent energy.

You might imagine it as light - again, really feeling it as energy rather than just visualizing. You may choose to use the traditional phrases or not, but the essential point is integrating the loving-kindness into the felt sense of the energy body itself.

Similarly, you might work with visualizations - Quan Yin, Tara, Jesus, whoever resonates with you. But what remains primary, absolutely primary, is to feel the energy body, the energy space, maintaining that sensitivity to the whole body as the Buddha describes.

When working with imagination - those lines of energy we explored - they might want to extend much, much further than the physical boundaries. Out through the top of the head, perhaps extending quite high, and downward, deep down through the perineum or feet if you're standing, reaching far into the earth below. Really remain open and playful, discovering what works for you.

Sometimes it feels wonderful for people to imagine the lines of energy extending out the crown at the top of the head and then curving back in a great arc, forming a large circle with a generous circumference. This energetic circle curves back to enter at the base of the body - the perineum, or the feet if standing. This creates a complete energetic circuit in the imagination.

But remember - it's not merely visual imagination. When playing with these images, I really want to feel how they feel energetically. Perhaps I imagine fire moving through the central line of the body, out through the crown and back down in that great arc. The key is always the felt sense, the actual energetic experience rather than just the mental picture.

And that might be helpful. So if it's helpful, go for it. But feel into all this, play with it, and see what feels helpful.

Sometimes you can turn things completely around. Usually we feel and sense consciousness facing forward because the eyes face forward, and we're accustomed to that. But actually in meditation you can play with the whole feeling of facing out of one's back—the entire back of the body. Feel the energy body turned around that way, whether with the breath, breathing in and out through the back, or with a center in the back, or without the breath at all.

You can really be very playful. It's not always predictable what will feel good at any time, what will feel helpful. But always there's this sensitivity and tuning, this awareness sensitizing to the texture of the energy body space. Sometimes we won't have a word for that texture—"I don't know, it feels like this." It doesn't matter. The labeling is not important. What's important is feeling that whole space. And if there's something enjoyable in feeling that, then enjoy it if possible.

Now, of course, sometimes in meditation—probably everyone knows this—it's definitely not enjoyable. There's discomfort of some kind in the body, or pain. Very, very common. So there are a few things I want to say about that—six things, in fact, that you can go through as a kind of list when there's discomfort or pain with this kind of meditation.

The first thing is that when there is discomfort or pain, the awareness will shrink. This is a very normal part of what goes on. So the awareness shrinks when there's discomfort, and you really just need to notice that's happening. Open it out, widen it, stretch it like that balloon stretching so it's really the whole body. This in itself will help, and sometimes that's all that needs to happen. You keep the awareness wider, it shrinks again, you keep it wider. Sometimes that's all that's needed, but sometimes we need more. Anyway, opening out the awareness is number one.

Number two: sometimes we have discomfort or pain in one area of the body and we get kind of sucked into that. The attention gets drawn there and we fail to notice, we neglect to notice, that some other area of the body may feel relatively okay, relatively comfortable, sometimes even pleasant. What can be very helpful in this kind of samadhi meditation—still tending to the energy and well-being in the body—is staying a little more with the area that does feel okay. So for example, maybe something in my heart center or around my throat feels tight and uncomfortable, but I notice that down in the belly actually feels quite okay. I relax and find that it feels quite warm and comfortable. So staying with the good instead of getting so sucked into where it feels difficult. That's number two, and it can be very helpful. Without fighting, just gently resisting the dragging of attention toward what's difficult, just gently trying to keep it more centered in what feels more okay.

The third option would be to imagine the breath or breath energy or just energy moving through the area of discomfort or pain in the body. For example, I might have pain in my knee when I'm sitting, and I just imagine that the breath energy moves through that place, down through the length of the leg, through the knee. Or I might be contracted in the throat again, and I imagine the energy flowing freely, unobstructed, through that area—perhaps even out the top of the head, or the other way, down

through the top of the head, through that constriction in the throat. Imagine the breath energy moving that way, or just energy, these lines of energy. This can be really helpful—imagining the breath or breath energy or energy flowing through the area of discomfort.

A fourth possibility is imagining the breath energy or just energy moving in and out of that area of discomfort. So again, if there's tightness in the throat, discomfort there, something contracted painfully, just imagine the breath energy coming in at the throat. You might say, "Well, how does it get in?" A bit like in the guided meditation—well, it's okay, don't worry about the anatomy of this. It's just coming in and out, the energy, the breath energy at the throat where it feels contracted. This can sometimes be very, very helpful.

Or if you're doing the metta practice, you can actually—and this may seem counter-intuitive—station the center, the origin, the source of the metta right there where it feels contracted. So this tightness in the throat, imagine that this is actually where you're radiating the metta from. It's radiating outward from there. Or again, you could do it the other way around and imagine the metta radiating toward that point of discomfort.

The fifth possibility would be to imagine a white or golden-white or golden light, like a ball of light centered at the center of the discomfort or pain and radiating its light through the whole body. So again, you're aware of the whole body, not letting that awareness shrink—or when it does, opening out again. And then just with the imagination, imagine a ball of light centered where it's difficult.

And see how that feels. It's radiating through the whole body. You're feeling the whole energy body, the space, and feel how that feels.

Now, if none of those work—opening the awareness, staying where it's a little easier, imagining the energy move through that place of discomfort, or imagining the breath energy come in and out there, or metta radiating from it, or a light centered there in the middle of the discomfort and aware of the whole body—if none of that works, you can actually just bring a very light, steady attention on that area of difficulty in the body.

So just holding it in the attention as steadily as you can, but with a real lightness to the attention. And then, as you do that, really allowing—so really as fully as possible—allowing the feelings there, the feeling of discomfort, the unpleasantness, just to be what it is from moment to moment. Again and again, holding it in the attention lightly, steadily, and just allowing it, this moment, this moment—just let it do its thing. Really, really emphasizing the allowing as fully as possible. One hundred percent opening the

doors to this moment, to moment opening the doors, allowing, welcoming the actual sensations, the difficult sensations. And that can be very, very helpful. We'll revisit that probably tomorrow.

And again, actually not just discomfort and pain, but also emotions and mind states—both lovely ones, pleasant and positive emotions and mind states, and also more difficult ones, negative ones, afflictive ones, hindrances. All this affects the energy body. This is part of what we want to investigate. I'm going to get into this more tomorrow. But it's something we really want to give attention to, notice, and also learn to work with, and I'll come back to that.

So there's discomfort or pain and what to do with that. And then there's also quite the possibility, as many of you will know, that this energy body can feel quite a lot of pleasantness, or even just a little bit of pleasantness at different times. So this is something—if that's the case, there's a feeling of well-being or comfort or ease or pleasantness somewhere in the whole body or just one region—we really want to include it. It may not be remarkable. It may be quite a subtle sense of well-being or comfort, not ecstatic, but it can be the whole range, in fact. But even if it's not remarkable, we want to include it in the awareness and actually become a little bit intimate with it.

Now this is especially the case if that pleasantness or well-being is not just in flashes. If it's just in flashes, like a flash of pleasantness or well-being, you just have to kind of open to it and let it wave through. But if it's a bit more steady, like it's around for some minutes that there's this comfort or well-being somewhere or pleasantness, then actually we can begin—in the whole body space, still keeping that larger space—we can actually begin to focus on the feeling of the pleasant energy itself, wherever it is, and kind of nuzzle the attention into it. The attention, really get inside that pleasantness, trying to enjoy it.

Open to it. So one modality might be to penetrate it with the attention; another modality might be to open the being to it, open the body to that pleasantness. So we're not just talking about focusing the mind if we say focus on the pleasant energy—we're also talking about opening the body to it, dissolving the body in it sometimes. As a sense of like dissolving that into the body, or dissolving the body into the pleasantness, sometimes dissolving the mind into—all these are possible, but ways of being intimate and really getting into the pleasantness if it's there, or any pleasantness if it's there and it's a bit more steady for some minutes. And the key thing there is really to just enjoy.

So for some of you, that will be a very new instruction—the permission and the encouragement even to enjoy well-being when it's more than momentary. To really incorporate it, literally incorporate it. Open to it, feel it, enjoy it, relish it. Very important.

Okay, one last thing, just again by way of setting this in a larger context. I suppose we could talk about three sizes of attention that we can employ at any time. We can employ —the mind has this capacity to sort of set its aperture like a camera lens or something. So we can certainly employ at times as human beings a very narrow attention. And many of you will be familiar with concentrating on the breath, say at the tip of the nose or the upper lip or just inside the nose. It's a very small point and we narrow the focus, the attention down there, and we pay attention to that. Or some point in the abdomen where we can feel the rising and falling of the abdomen. It's a narrow, spatially narrow focus of the attention. Or when you sweep the attention through the body, for instance, if you know the Goenka practice, the attention is moving, but it's moving in a narrow way. In other words, a narrow focus of attention is mobile through the body. It's still narrow. Or like when we began the guided meditation, I said pay attention to your hands and the tingling in your hands or the sensations in your hands. It's quite a narrow area of attention. So that's one modality, one size of attention that we can employ in practice at times. Very helpful.

A second is this bigger attention. The whole body, and as I said, even a bit bigger than the whole physical body. And that's what I call the energy body. We're really sensitive to the tone, the feeling, the texture in that. Of course, I could be sensitive to that in terms of the sensations as well. But we're emphasizing that size and also a kind of sensitivity in there that's more about energy. But that size, that sort of medium size—this whole body and a bit bigger—is the second one.

And the third one is very, very big, vast attention, a vast awareness, like the sky or the size of space. Sometimes it can feel infinite, just huge. And with practice, that's something that one can get very skilled at as well. And also with practice, one can get very skilled at just moving between these sizes of attention, these modes of attention, the apertures, and very skilled in all of them. They each give something different. They're each helpful in different ways.

On this retreat, we're mostly practicing that middle one—the whole body and a bit bigger, that size. That's the size of attention that we're mostly employing for this retreat.

Again, awareness will tend to shrink from that size, from that medium size. It will tend to contract because of certain conditions. When there's an afflictive emotion—fear, ill will, or sometimes even sadness, though that's a more complicated emotion—these afflictive emotions have in common that they shrink the awareness. The awareness contracts with those kinds of emotions.

Awareness will also tend to shrink, as I mentioned earlier, when there's pain or discomfort physically. That will also result in a contracted awareness. It will also shrink whenever the mind is distracted or caught up in thought or thinking. Have a look at what's become of the awareness—it's shrunken when that happens.

More generally, awareness shrinks from that slightly larger middle size of whole body and a bit bigger whenever there's any clinging or craving—any significant clinging or craving of a certain degree. It will shrink the awareness. They go together.

And lastly, we might say that awareness will tend to shrink just out of habit. For most of us, we need to train and develop a habit of slightly larger attention as we develop the practice. So we have a habit of the attention, the awareness, being slightly shrunk or quite contracted, in fact. That's very, very normal. Through practice, we can change that.

The important point here is that it will shrink again and again. As I'm practicing, I need to notice that it shrunk many, many times and expand it, stretch it out again to the whole body and a little bit bigger than the physical body—over and over. Notice, expand, over and over. Really, really helpful.

So today we're going to emphasize this samadhi, this quality of tending playfully, creatively, lightly to the energy body and whatever sense of well-being, of comfort, of ease, of pleasure even is possible there. Lots of options are possible for working with that, things you can play with. That's really the movement, the intention, the direction of samadhi: we're tending playfully, creatively, experimentally to the energy body and how it feels, helping it move in the direction of more and more well-being and enjoying that when it feels relatively good.

That's the focus for today. Again, if you're listening to this course at home and want to stretch it out longer, take longer with this part if you wish. Take a few days at least. We'll be emphasizing it throughout the retreat, so we will never lose this aspect of samadhi that we keep coming back to.

One last thing—I want to re-emphasize what I said last night to encourage you to slow down and let your movement of the physical body be gentle. The way you walk, the way you go up and down stairs, the way you close and open doors and handle things—let that be gentle and a little bit slower. Not to repress anything, not because we're interested in microscopic analysis of sensations there, but because that slowness and gentleness really helps develop and allows a kind of sensitivity and awareness of the whole body, but particularly of the energy body—this quality that we want to cultivate sensitivity to.

CHAPTER 3

Imaginal Practice: Doorways and Directions (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h02

> *In this second part of his introduction to imaginal practice, Rob Burbea delves deeper into the conceptual frameworks that give direction and depth to working with images in spiritual practice. He emphasizes that what makes imaginal practice most significant is not the images themselves, but the underlying philosophical and psychological frameworks we bring to support this work.*
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> *Burbea outlines three key aspects of what he calls 'more radical conceptual frameworks': expanding our notion of self beyond conventional psychological and Dharma views through understanding emptiness; recognizing that fantasy, image, and mythos already permeate our lives and our understanding of Dharma itself; and exploring 'cosmopoiesis' - using imagination to open up our very perception of the cosmos we inhabit.*
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> *Central to this approach is developing sensitivity to what he calls the 'energy body' and cultivating 'soulfulness' - an appreciation for meaningfulness, resonance, and depth. Burbea suggests this work can re-enchant our perception of self, others, and world, potentially opening space for experiencing divinity through the particular and personal rather than just the universal. He frames this not as abandoning Dharma, but as expanding our understanding of what Dharma practice can encompass, viewing traditional teachings like the Four Noble Truths as keys for investigating the malleability of perception itself.*

Recapping very briefly some of what we've talked about so far: I mentioned the remarkable range of directions, flavors, and conceptual frameworks that support the use of imagination in Dharma practice, other traditions, and psychotherapeutic approaches. Given this range, when one practices with images and explores even a little, one comes to see that what's most interesting and significant about imaginal practice is actually the conceptual framework we bring to bear—the framework we create to support imaginal practice. This is what directs it in one direction or another, what opens it up, what gives it depth and amplifies it. So it's actually the conceptual framework, rather than the images themselves, that proves most interesting and significant.

There's a range of conceptual frameworks available, and I want to emphasize that it's up to you how much of this material you take, where you land with conceptual frameworks. It's really up to you how much and how you use images in your practice. Having said that, I also shared some of my deeper aims for this retreat, wanting to be open about that.

We talked briefly about the cultural history that, over millennia, has given rise to the dominant view in our culture—the view that most people share about reality and, by extension, about imagination and images, what place they have and what place they don't have. Some of this may sound academic, but it's important because those events, those decisions, these debates that happened filter down and become the common view over time. That's what we inherit, what we walk around in, what saturates and permeates our consciousness. It's quite difficult to move out of that, to even realize the force it has and the limitations it places on consciousness, on experience, and on our sense of existence.

Some are not okay with that dominant view. They feel its limitations, or they intuit or consciously recognize the limitations and the fact that it's not necessarily a final truth. They recognize the possibility, feel a calling, perhaps recognize the necessity of opening something up further with regard to imagination and its use—because of what it does with regard to the sense of self and the range of self-experience, the range of self-view and self-sense, and how much that's perhaps needed in these times. Also because of what it opens up in the range of experience and the range of what we sense as beautiful and holy. That whole range of what we regard as beautiful, holy, divine—sometimes people feel this already wanting to expand. They feel that expansion, that calling, that necessity.

With all that, what I'm perhaps most interested in, even above and beyond the use of imagination, is: can we expand our felt sense, our felt perception of the range of sacredness, of what is sacred to us? Can our felt sense of the sacred expand beyond either not existing at all, or beyond a quite narrow limitation somehow given to us by the culture? And through that, with that, is there a possibility for us to re-enchant the cosmos? The cosmos we've inherited from modernist thinking is a very flat cosmos of materiality. Is there a place for the skillful use of imagination that actually opens up something, deepens something, enriches something in our very sense of existence and the world, the cosmos that we live in?

I want to say more now about some of what we'll be exploring in terms of directions in this retreat, and also the kind of conceptions that run alongside the practice, supporting practice. Some of what I'm going to talk about tonight probably won't make com-

plete sense—that's okay. We're throwing it out there as a signpost of where we're going, and also to plant a seed. You might think, "Oh yes, that's a piece I want to understand." So if you get to the end of the retreat and listen to this introductory talk again, you'll say, "Oh yes, that piece and that piece."

Given this cultural history and what is really the dominant view in our society regarding imagination, we're attempting to revalidate—to give validity and importance again to imagination, or certain kinds of imagination, certain kinds of use of imagination. We want to open space and place for imagination that's actually wider and probably more far-reaching than some of the ways it's used in typical psychotherapeutic approaches these days. To open space, place, respect, and validity for that which is wider and more far-reaching than it has so far.

We want to actually reintroduce or revalidate the idea of some uses of imagination as ways of knowing. This is something quite subtle and profound. We tend to think: when I have knowledge of something, I know I'm looking at a table. How do I know that's true? Well, I can kick it. I can ask a hundred other people. If ninety-nine people agree it's a table, that's good enough. Then I know something—I know something that's real. Perhaps I can measure it. Such factors give us a sense of knowing. But what about imagination?

That's not a way of knowing. But what is it? This question we referred to before—epistemology, how do we know anything? What is knowledge? What does knowing mean? That needs to be opened up for us. It's quite subtle and quite profound.

So is there a kind of knowing that's different than the commonly agreed upon meaning and range of what knowing is? If something is just me that sees this image, can I open up my idea of what knowing means to give more respect to imagination in some cases, in some usages, so it forms an avenue as a way of knowing?

To do that, to open up that space and place for some uses of imagination as a way of knowing, we need to map out and differentiate all the different kinds of image that arise—the aspects of imagination, the levels of imagination, the directions, all of that. What is, for example, just the flotsam and jetsam of the mind? What is just daydreaming? What is memory and the coloring of memory through image and fantasy? What is what's called ESP, extrasensory perception? What's archetypal image? What is the whole range that falls into mystical experiences that are possible in terms of perception of self, other, world? And what is this opening—Corbin uses this phrase, the mundus imaginalis in Latin, which literally means the world of the imagination? We can say the imaginal realm, the realm of the imaginal.

So differentiating, mapping out all that and all the nuances, all the subtleties of all that. To do that, to open up space and validity for imagination as a way of knowing, and to place all that in a larger coordinated philosophy and psychology that does explore this question of reality and opens up the exploration of reality—is it just yes or no, it is real or it's not real? Are there more subtle shades philosophically, ways we can open up that whole question of what's called ontology, the study of what's real? And as I said as well, the study of epistemology. All this needs opening up, to place it in that philosophy which includes ontology, epistemology, cosmology—the sense of the cosmos. That would be a huge task, absolutely huge task to revalidate it, to bring it in as a way of knowing, to give it respect, to map it out, to differentiate, to coordinate a much larger, more open philosophy.

So I actually don't know anyone after the scientific revolution who has even attempted to do that. I mean, it could be I just don't know them. I'm not aware. There have been certain people like Goethe, the poet, the German poet, and Coleridge, also a poet. Jung, of course. Owen Barfield, the English philosopher of the twentieth century. Apparently Rudolf Steiner—I don't know any of his works, I'm not sure, I heard indirectly. Ed Casey, the philosopher, American philosopher. Richard Tarnas, a little bit, sort of cultural philosopher. All these, in their way, have added a little to this quest.

And in Tibet, Mipham Rinpoche, a great, great sage of the Nyingma tradition in Tibet, I think in 1908 or 1912 or something like that—very beautiful and sophisticated philosophy bringing emptiness and Tantra together and the whole question of reality and levels of reality. I'm not sure how much by that time the sort of scientific revolution had reached Tibet or how much that was integrated in his thought.

There have been people who have done this, and I wonder now, and I wonder for this course and this retreat—can we add a little? That means you and me in our explorations and discussions. Perhaps we can add even a little bit, if that's not too grandiose an idea, to this movement and expansion and opening and exploration. You and I, together, talking, sharing our experiences. Is it possible that we can add to this opening movement?

Now, one thing that's perhaps necessary, or at least what is possible, is that we can elbow more room, more space, and more respect for skillful and nuanced, sophisticated use of the imagination, so that it's less immediately dismissed, so that at least there's a larger willingness to admit that maybe imagination is important for us. Maybe that it needs including in our psychology, in our sense and view of what the self is and our self as an experience, in our philosophy, in our worldview, in our whole idea about so-called reality.

So elbowing a little more room to include that and, as I said, to give it some respect as a way or really ways of knowing—different forms of imagination as ways of knowing, involved as particular ways of knowing.

One way we can do that is by actually turning around and exposing, questioning, critiquing the assumptions of the dominant culture, what I call the modernist metaphysics, that are, as I said, usually often hidden, not even fully conscious, and very rarely questioned. We can expose, question, and critique those assumptions that run almost in our blood, in the blood of our minds these days.

We can do that without reverting to a kind of simplistic primitivism, trying to go back to the Stone Age sort of thinking or some other culture from centuries and millennia ago, without reverting also to a kind of naive religious fundamentalism or naive New Age fundamentalism.

I've myself spoken and written just a little bit about this in different places with respect to nature, with respect to the self, with respect to the Dharma and other things, coming at it from different directions—either through Dharma understandings of emptiness, deep Dharma understandings of emptiness, or through more recent openings in Western philosophy, post-modernism, post-structuralism, that sort of stuff, even some of the openings from modern physics of the last hundred years or so. All of which I and I know other people find fascinating, really fascinating to explore, and actually it's very important, very important to bring a more sophisticated philosophy in, I feel.

And what's interesting to me, what's very interesting to me, is some people need that to kind of legitimize for themselves imaginal practice, to open the doors for them. They need this kind of elbowing of space, creating more space philosophically.

And some people don't need it at all. They're not even particularly interested in it. This itself is quite fascinating—why some people require this kind of philosophical foundation while others don't.

On this retreat, I'm actually not going to delve too deeply into all that philosophical territory. What I want to emphasize is practice—really getting into the actual work, certainly with some conceptual framework, but not so much a critique of dominant views as an opening up of other possibilities conceptually. I want to really emphasize the practice and see what that opens for us in terms of our experience, and then in terms of our understanding.

So regarding practice and what we'll be doing, I want to make clear what this is not. This is not Gestalt psychology, psychosynthesis, focusing, drama therapy, psychodrama, art therapy, voice dialogue work, or chöd—if you know that Tibetan practice. You may feel, and indeed there are some common aspects in terms of techniques with those modalities and ways of working.

But what I'm emphasizing here is differentiated primarily from those approaches by a different kind of conceptual framework—regarding images and imagination, regarding the self (including emptiness), and regarding cosmology: our sense of how we're looking at and conceiving and perceiving the world, the cosmos itself.

So while there might be some aspects in common, this work is actually differentiated significantly by the different conceptual framework underlying it.

As I mentioned before, I'm interested in the more usual conceptual frameworks regarding images and all those healing modalities I mentioned earlier. But I'm also, if you like, more interested in what we could call more radical conceptual frameworks.

Let me highlight three areas of this right now.

The first concerns the self. We touched on this earlier, but what would it be to really include a thorough sense of the emptiness of self? And then, within that or with that, to really expand the sense of self—not in some kind of expanding oneness, but in plurality. To expand the range of self, not to integrate what we see in imaginal characters or subordinate them to some central sense of self, but actually to expand radically, together with a view of emptiness. And to turn something around in our relationship to imaginal figures—what are sometimes called daimons—and our relationship with them, and the sense sometimes of what they're asking of us.

Instead of these figures serving the self and serving the so-called growth of the self or the journey of the self to awakening or enlightenment or full potential—all very valid—what is it to turn that around in terms of the direction of service?

The second aspect, which I've mentioned before, is the realization—the dawning—that fantasy, image, mythos is already permeating our lives. It's already functioning, already there. And this is not a bad thing. The word "fantasy" has very bad press, certainly in the Dharma world for the most part. But what is it to realize that it's already operating, already there in our lives, and that this is not problematic? We just need to recognize it.

And it's already operating in relation to our sense and conception and vision and very feeling of what the Dharma is for us. When we realize this pervasion of fantasy, image, mythos in our lives—that it also pervades our sense of the Dharma—this does something to our very sense of the Dharma eventually. It puts it on different ground. What then does the Dharma become? Is there another way of conceiving the Dharma given that realization?

The third aspect involves what I call cosmopoiesis—C-O-S-M-O-P-O-E-S-I-S. I'm going to talk much more about this as the retreat unfolds. But this really has to do with using the imagination to open up the very sense and perception of the world we live in, including the material world—very much including matter itself. Through imagination we realize that in a way—poiesis means creating, like poetry, like making poetry—there's an art to that perception and a malleability to the perception of the cosmos.

All three of these—regarding the self, regarding the pervasion of fantasy and what it means for the Dharma, and regarding this cosmopoiesis, this sense of the cosmos—all of this includes the importance and nourishment of a sense of soulfulness. That's another concept I'm going to explain more fully as we go. But I'm talking about meaningfulness, resonance, depth. These qualities are part of soulfulness for us.

We can also speak of soul-making. Again, I'll return to this in much more detail. This is very much part of the conceptual framework I want to emphasize over these days. This taking care of the soul through feeding and nourishing, giving attention to a sense of soulfulness—this soul-making—either will open up the sense of imagination as a way of knowing, or it already requires a kind of

entering into a trust of the imagination as a way of knowing. These two aspects are intimately related to each other.

Let me briefly fill out what we're exploring here. One aspect of the conceptual framework I want to open is our understanding of the self. Is it possible, through the use of imagination in different ways, to expand both the notion and the sense—the actual lived experience—of self and other? When I say self, I don't mean just myself, but the selves of others as well. We're expanding the entire notion and sense of self and other.

Through this expansion, we come to feel and know the self as more than merely a result of neurological or genetic causes or accidents. It's perfectly fine to view the self that way—it's one mode of viewing, one mode of seeing the self. But is it possible to expand the whole notion of self way beyond that? Beyond seeing the self as simply a

result of past conditioning in terms of family, culture, education, and so forth. Beyond too the view of self that is quite popular in the Dharma these days—that the self is just a process, that all there is is process.

Certainly beyond all that, but beyond too any kind of concretized or tight identification of the self with anything—any image or self-view or belief. Can we, through the use of imagination, expand the very sense, the very notion and view of self and other beyond all these limitations? We can include all that at times, certainly, but we're moving toward something radically beyond all that.

Part of what helps is a Dharma understanding that the self—this self, other selves—is empty, totally and thoroughly empty. This means much more in Dharma language than to say that the self is a process of the aggregates in time, a process of psychophysical constituents. To say that it's empty totally is to say something much more thorough and profound than that.

Realizing too that because the self is thoroughly empty, the perception of the self and the sense of the self is malleable. It's something that we can shape through and with the imagination. It's thoroughly empty, deeply empty, and it's malleable, this sense.

But going beyond even this—is it possible to expand the notion of the self, the sense of the self, way beyond the typical humanistic notions of self and personhood? As I mentioned, in Western culture, modern Western culture, and also in Dharma culture, there's a kind of poverty we have regarding notions and attitudes to personality and personhood. It's quite strange and in some ways self-contradictory. There's a kind of flatness there. We flatten personality a little bit, and in a way we flatten the possibilities for a sense of meaningfulness regarding the self and regarding the selves of others.

One of the ways of really opening that up in beautiful directions is through the imagination. Through this, what's quite interesting is that there can be a place again—we open up the possibility for re-including perhaps even a sense of divinity. That's another word I'm going to explore and expand on more as the retreat goes on. But is there a place for divinity in the self, through the self—this self and the selves of others? Can I open up that experience?

The kind of divinity I'm talking about right now is divinity in and through the personality. This is different because it's particular. It's particular to this being or that being, or the face that this being or that being is showing right now through my perception, through my imagination. It's particular. It's different from a kind of divinity that is simply homogenous, like "all is one"—everyone is part of the same oneness, the same

one divine substance or whatever you want to call it that pervades the universe. That's beautiful, but I'm talking about something different now. It's not just universal; it's very particular and personal as well.

Again, we're going to get much more into this. But with that, there is also, as I mentioned before, a possibility for the whole sense of what is divine or holy to be stretched, to expand, so that we can allow a wider range. We can actually see and feel and sense a wider range of what is included in what divinity looks like and how it expresses. There are other gods, if you like—if we put it that way—apart from the ones that we are educated to see as divine, as holy, as sacred.

All of this is part of the second aspect of the more radical conceptual framework I mentioned before—part of a sense of expansion of the Dharma and our sense of what the Dharma is. This is quite interesting, even the word "expansion" itself.

How am I going to relate to this? Are we stretching and expanding the Dharma? Is that what we're doing here? Is that what the movement's going on? Are we fudging it and kind of saying, well, this is what the Buddha said anyway, this is what he meant. I'm not expanding anything, I'm just being historically accurate. Are we radically undermining the Dharma, perhaps? Are we regrounding it? So how even are we imagining that we're conceiving the relation of all this to the Dharma? Again, something I'll come back to later on in the retreat. These are big, delicate and subtle, complex as well, streams of what we want to get into.

Included in that, in terms of opening up of the Dharma and extending our sense of the Dharma, is that we're also extending or altering, for some people, our conception of the Four Noble Truths. What's so central to Dharma practice is teaching of suffering and ending, or at least reducing suffering. And instead using that teaching around suffering, instead of as a sort of teaching that in shorthand says something like, try and live a life of non-clinging. Instead of that, we want to include something, a different conception of what the Four Noble Truths are, rather seeing them as keys, or rather that teaching itself as a key that we can use to examine perception, meaning examine appearances, examine experiences, and see how that opens up.

It invites a way of exploring perception which reveals the emptiness of perception, the emptiness of appearance, the malleability of appearances and experiences. And through that, we're widening the range of possible ways of looking, widening the range of ways that we can perceive and experience and therefore live. So we're not locked into a Dharma view or attitude or attempt to live seeing everything as a process or try-

ing to be in the now or just be mindful or something as if that's kind of the Dharma way or that everything's impermanent, which seems so obvious. And trying not to cling. Trying even to see everything as one. It's quite popular.

So we're widening the whole range of perception and possibility of perception, possibility of experience, through an investigation of perception. And that's a different way of understanding what the Four Noble Truths are.

Again, we'll return to this, and something else we'll return to too, I'll mention it now, is regarding this sense of the cosmos or experience of the cosmos, is it possible that that expands, that our sense of the world we live in expands, and instead of being just a world of flat materiality, devoid of meaning, devoid of deeper echoes and what I would call a vertical dimension. That's another theme I'm going to come back to, another concept I'm going to come back to, that the sense of the cosmos, if you like, is enriched and a vertical dimension is allowed through the imagination, through the conceptual framework, because the typical modernist view is a flat, one-dimensional, material cosmos. We'll come back to that.

So there's a few things here, just to summarize. We're recognizing that image, fantasy, mythos permeates our lives. This is key. We recognize that we see, we experience a lot of the time through image, through fantasy, through mythos. We think also through image, through fantasy, through mythos, and we love through image, fantasy, mythos. So we see, think, and love through image already, through imagination already, recognizing that. That's huge.

And this beginning to recognize, too, an aspect of our experience, a dimension of our experience, which I'm going to call the soulfulness, this aspect of meaningfulness, of depth, of resonance, of kinds of beauty, and much more, and really beginning to include that, to take care of it, to nourish the soulfulness. And through that is a kind of extension of the range of how we see the self. An extension of the range of what we consider beautiful, what we feel beautiful, what we feel is meaningful. Giving place to more and more.

And also this idea of giving back a validity to the imagination or certain uses of the imagination as ways of knowing, everything that's involved in that. And through that to re-enchant the perception of the self, of other, of cosmos, to perhaps open up a sense of or an allowing for a sense of divinity there. And what I'm going to call the vertical dimension. So expanding the range of the sacred. And through all this, perhaps, probably opening up and maybe even changing the relationship with what we consider dharma.

So I'm not, as I mentioned, talking about chöd on this retreat. I'm not actually teaching tantra in the way that it's usually thought of, though there is much overlap in the kind of things that we'll be talking about. And I will talk about tantra a little bit and the connections, etc., a little bit.

But given what I've said so far, it's really asking, we're really asking for open-mindedness in the way that you approach this material and also in the way we listen. And listening is quite an interesting avenue of experience. Sometimes we listen and we listen to something and say, oh, I already know this. It's the same as something I already know. And we kind of put it neatly in a box of something where oh yes it's psychosynthesis, oh yes he's talking about focusing. So oftentimes we listen for the similarities and we kind of shrink something that's maybe quite new or different and shrink it into a box that we already know. We actually miss what's new and different and potentially stretching or challenging. So is it possible, as you're listening over the days, to listen in fact deliberately for the differences.

Listen for what's new and what's different from what you already know, and the boxes that you might already have regarding imagination. We tend to listen in a way that affirms what we already know, rather than challenges us or opens up our frameworks. So open-mindedness and openness of listening is probably really necessary on this retreat.

I'd like to say a little bit more about this in regards to the Dharma and how we conceive of and relate to it. It would be very understandable if someone listening has a kind of loose conception of the Dharma—maybe I haven't really articulated it clearly. A loose conception of the Dharma might involve something like this: The Dharma says, try to always be present, because this is it. This life is it. This moment is it. There's nothing else. This is what's real, and we don't want to miss it. So you want to be present to it.

In addition, this popular conception might say: try not to cling. Try to let go, because everything's impermanent—which seems obvious. You can't hold on to it. And it might also add: try to be kind. That might be too simplistic—perhaps a little unkind putting it that way—but that's kind of the conception we might have of the Dharma. Try to always be present because this is it, try not to cling, try to let go because everything is impermanent, try to be kind, try to be nice.

Some people might have a conception of the Dharma that's a little more influenced by streams such as the Advaita tradition. The kind of goal—if you like; I might not use the language of goal—is to somehow always be in a sense that all is one. Everything is

one. Or to always be in a kind of sense of no-self. There's no self. The self is not arising or is non-existent. These are two quite common, very loose conceptions of what Dharma is that are quite popular these days.

But what if we contrast that with a different conception that I would like to introduce and fill out a little bit? Those injunctions or perceptions—to see everything as all-is-one, or to see and feel there's no self, to be present, to not cling—all these are rather modes. They're modes of perception, what I call ways of looking, temporary options. In other words, one can go in and out. There's great flexibility of perception, of the way of looking.

So I can go into this way of looking and see all-is-one, can go into that and see different ways that the self is empty, can go into non-clinging in different ways. They're all modes of perception—modes, temporary options of ways of looking. There's flexibility there.

What Dharma is, is the practice of this flexibility: practicing a range, a whole range of types of awareness, sensitivity—modes of awareness or sensitivity, different modes of awareness, modes of sensitivity, again, what I call ways of looking. The multiplicity of perception, a really large range of perception and experience, is available to us as human beings that we can actually sense. It's not an intellectual concept. We can actually perceive very differently at different times. And that's what we're practicing through all these Dharma tools and Dharma notions.

Related to that, there are different types and modes—different degrees of non-clinging. There are different ways of non-clinging, different degrees of that. We can let go of clinging just a little bit, or deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper levels. These modes and degrees of non-clinging overlap with the greater range of practice—the flexibility of ways of looking, of modes of awareness, sensitivity.

Through all that, through the practice of all that and developing all that, the perceptual possibilities are opened. We really start to see: how I look, the way I look, conditions what I perceive. The range of perception opens up. We understand perception is empty. We understand the emptiness of all appearances through that. This brings the deepest freedom. To the degree that we see, that comes the deepest freedom in life.

But also what comes from that is further opening up. Through seeing the emptiness, we actually open up further. Through doing these practices, we open up further our sense of the range of perceptual possibilities.

The flexibility of perception is also open. Perception of the self, perception of the other, perception of world and cosmos. So there's freedom coming out of all this, and there's also this opening and flexibility, malleability of the perceptual possibilities. And that, in a way—I mean, there are definitely limits—but in a way, it's infinite. There's an infinite range, an infinite multiplicity possible for us.

So when we say "let go of clinging" or "don't cling" or this or that, it's not—in this way of living, in this way of conceiving the Dharma—it's not that we're trying to move through our life without clinging. It's rather that letting go of clinging is part of a range, or different ways of letting go of clinging are part of a range of ways of looking. Quite a subtly different but hugely different conception.

Because there's this flexibility, there's this malleability and multiplicity of the range of perception and the range of ways of looking—modes of awareness, if you like, modes of sensitivity—that we can practice and develop and open up. That means that Dharma, as practice, is not just one track, is not just one thing. Don't cling or be present or this or that. It's not simple in that way. It's rich and complex and various.

In addition to all that, as I mentioned before, we begin to recognize the necessity of fantasy, the inevitability of fantasy, and the primacy of fantasy—how much fantasy, imagination, mythos is woven into our perceiving and conceiving of the self, of our psychology and that of others, of life, of beauty, and also of the Dharma, as I said, which includes notions of awakening and also includes the notion of the Buddha and the historical Buddha.

Now, in more recent Western philosophy, this also has a parallel in philosophy and then in more recent approaches to history as well. It's called the turn towards hermeneutics in philosophy and later in history. So really this understanding that we're always bringing, if you like, interpretations, biases, ways of looking, fantasies, into our perception of history. So it's not saying we can make anything up about the Buddha, or historically, but it is saying there is no true, objectively existing single story of the Buddha, history of the Buddha.

So we start to realize that it's imbued—our vision of the Buddha, our history of the Buddha is imbued by fantasy. And so is our vision and our sense of the Dharma and of awakening and all this stuff. And maybe in all this, for some people, they say, "I'm going beyond the Dharma now." Some people say, "I've gone beyond the Dharma."

That's the question. Is it? Is it not? How is that for you? Is it okay? What does it mean? Have we gone beyond Buddhism? How am I going to relate to that? Big, big, big questions and important ones. And not necessarily easy.

Okay, so just a few practical things. We have five or six days here together, so really all we can do is open some doors and point in some directions, give pointers and tips for practice. Some of you will want to explore these directions and these pointers much more. Some of you will really want to take this further. And of course you could, if you're listening to this later or on recording, you can take much longer to go through this material, much, much longer. Really take your time and develop it. We're cramming, if you like, quite a lot of material in a short time.

But related to that, it's also really important to realize that we have a retreat of a certain amount of days, and it can be very easy to judge the retreat in terms of what experiences arise in this period of time. But this is not a good way, not a sensible, insightful way of orienting to a retreat. It's not so much the experiences that are important. I mean, they are important, but they're not really what's crucial.

What I hope you can prioritize is understanding, developing, making your own ways of working. So really taking ways of working and conceptual frameworks and supports from the retreat. So that's really what we should regard as our aim—a sort of digestion of ways of working, a developing of skill in terms of meditative ways of working and also the concepts that support them. And that should be the aim rather than aiming for any experience.

And that's true for any retreat. Absolutely, I would say that on any retreat—the regular Insight retreat or whatever, Metta retreat, etc. But particularly here, because if I can learn the tools and learn my way around—learn the ropes, as they say—if I can learn that in terms of practice and get a sense of how the conceptual frameworks might support me in the directions I want to go, then that can stay with me.

The experiences don't necessarily stay with us—the highs of the experiences don't necessarily remain. So we really want to keep thinking about what we want to take from here, what we want to digest and integrate.

I was wondering about offering this retreat, and some of you may be listening as we go through the material and wonder: is this very advanced? The truth is, I don't know. I'm not sure. My experience is that for some people, it might be that certain other elements need to be in place before they can work well with the imaginal practices, and for some people, not. So it seems quite individual. Really the answer to the question "Is it advanced?" I would say, so far, not necessarily. It depends.

I am wondering more generally these days about a kind of curriculum—what would be the tools and meditative skills that need to be developed to really give a person the best platform for their practice to move and keep expanding, to open up into more and more adventure and possibility? That's something I'm thinking about, but I don't know if this material is necessarily advanced.

It's an interesting thing too, because a typical insight retreat would say, on the first morning: "Okay, now concentrate on your breath, and if your mind wanders, come back to being with your breath." Something like that. In a way, if we hear something like that, it sounds very simple. It sounds like that's probably the simplest possible instruction you could give—just what does it feel like when you breathe, and when the mind wanders, come back to those sensations.

So it sounds like the simplest instruction. It's certainly the most familiar for most people in the wider culture these days, and it's very easy to understand. It's also easy to understand the *why* of that instruction. Why would you do that? Because almost no one anymore in our culture, whether they meditate or not, needs convincing that focus is a good thing—the ability to focus the mind and keep it focused. Almost no one needs convincing that calm at times is a good thing. And almost no one needs convincing that it's important to be present. There's a lot of emphasis now in the popular culture about being present with the moment and all that. So it's very familiar, that kind of instruction. It's very simple and seems easy to understand, easy to understand why we would even give it.

But actually, as a teacher, I have to tell you—if you don't realize it already—that for most people it's really not easy to do. To be with the breath, to concentrate on the breath, is actually something most people really struggle with, despite that seemingly simple instruction. And we don't often elaborate much on it in many retreats because we move on to other material about being more with the general experience very quickly. So a person kind of concludes, if they stay meditating, "I'm crap at that. I'm pretty useless. My concentration is rubbish." I don't know how many people have told me that in the past. They sort of accept it and say, "That's okay, you know, whatever."

Whereas unfamiliar structures that we might be going through on this retreat—unfamiliar practices—they may be harder to grasp and even understand why we're doing them at first, but they may not necessarily be harder to *do*. So we'll find out. But don't automatically assume that they are harder just because another kind of instruction sounds simpler or more familiar, or because it's easier to make sense of given the prevalent frameworks and conceptions that we bring to practice.

So over the days—another practical thing—we'll be unfolding different teachings and instructions. And like I said regarding this introductory talk, I'm going to mention things and then return to elaborate them in fuller detail. There's quite a lot of material, but we'll keep cycling around certain themes, many of which I've actually mentioned already in this talk, although I realize not enough for you to fully understand just from this talk alone. But there will be this kind of elaborating, returning to elaborate a bit more, et cetera, of certain key themes and directions.

In the first few days, we're going to almost solely explore and develop practices in relation to what I call the energy body. I'll explain that tomorrow morning. But we're also going to keep that as a practice—this sensitivity to the energy body—throughout the retreat. So the first few days we'll focus almost exclusively on it, and I'll explain why. There are very good reasons. But it's going to be something that's actually going to form the basis of the whole retreat.

So again, if you're listening to this on recording and you want to go through this material at home, I really, really encourage you to linger even longer developing your practice with regard to the energy body and the different ways that we're going to talk about it. Let that really be the basis for the imaginal practices as we introduce them. I will keep emphasizing that as we go through the retreat.

You may want to get or keep a notebook, certainly for the teachings. There will be many teachings, and much of this material will be quite new for most of you, including the practice instructions and practice tips. It can be helpful to jot them down so you have them available to refer back to, if you like to do that sort of thing. Then also, working with images—some people find it really helpful and quite interesting to keep a notebook of the imaginal work they're doing: the different images that arise, the themes that recur. This can be a very beautiful thing to do. So it's up to you, but some people will want to keep a record of the different threads of what's unfolding.

One very practical matter before we end. I want to encourage you to slow down if you're here on retreat for these days—an encouragement to slow down as you're walking around the house. Slow down at least a little bit, if not quite a lot, and see if you can be more gentle in your movement. First, there's no reason to go fast when you're on retreat. We're not really in a hurry here.

But why am I emphasizing this? It's certainly not to dampen your spirit or your vivaciousness or your energy—absolutely not. And it's not for the same reason as in some retreats, such as Mahasi-style retreats or others, where they would say slow down because they want to put the sensations of the body under closer scrutiny, a kind of microscopic analysis as it moves. We're not slowing down for that reason.

On this retreat, we're interested in a different kind of precision of attention. It's not a microscopic analysis of sensations. I'll explain this more tomorrow. But we're interested in a different kind of subtlety of attention, a different kind of precision. Going a little more slowly, moving a little more gently in the way you open and close doors, handle plates, whatever it is—this allows and supports the kind of quality of awareness and sensitivity to the energy body that I'm going to introduce tomorrow.

So as you go through the retreat, just being a little more slow, a little more gentle in your movements will really support that kind of sensitivity to the whole body, and particularly to the feeling of energy in the body—what I call the energy body. This, as I mentioned, will be a very important thread throughout the retreat. It's actually an important basis for everything we're going to do in many different ways.

A skill with the energy body, an awareness and sensitivity to the energy body, as I'll explain, can become over time a profound resource to us as human beings in many different ways, and in regard to many different practices and directions of practice. So as much as you can, I really encourage you to slow down and be gentle, because it's truly going to support the investigations, explorations, and practice we'll be doing over the course of the retreat.

CHAPTER 4

Imaginal Practice: Doorways and Directions (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 59 min

> *In this opening talk of his course on imaginal practice, Rob Burbea maps the vast landscape of imagination and its applications, from practical planning to spiritual transformation. He examines how imagination is used across traditions - from the death contemplations in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) to Tibetan tantric visualizations - while addressing cultural prejudices against imaginal work inherited from centuries of Western rationalism.*
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> *Burbea distinguishes between conventional uses of imagination (developing qualities, concentration practice, psychotherapy) and what he calls more "radical" approaches that can revolutionize one's sense of existence itself. He explores common objections to imaginal practice - fears of madness, conflicts with materialist worldviews, going beyond suffering-focused dharma, and discomfort with non-traditional imagery - while explaining why others are drawn to this work.*
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> *Central to his teaching is the recognition that conceptual frameworks around images matter more than the images themselves, and that imaginal practice can open doorways to re-enchanting our sense of self, world, and cosmos. This foundational talk sets the stage for exploring how working with images can transform not just meditation practice, but our entire understanding of what dharma practice can encompass.*

Welcome everybody, welcome to this retreat and to this course on imaginal practice.

I think tonight, by way of introduction, I'd like to start by talking a little about imagination and particularly trying to open up some space—if that is needed—in our minds, in our hearts, and our collective psyche really, in relationship to imaginal practice. I also want to talk about the kinds of doorways and directions that exist within imaginal practice.

If we consider for a moment the range of ways that people practice with imagination, or the range of uses to which imagination is put—and particularly the kinds of directions, the kinds of conceptions that form around imagination and imaginal practice, and the kinds of flavors that practice can have—directions, conceptions, and flavors—we can see quite a range here.

The imagination can be used for planning, for creative planning, for visioning in the sense of creative visioning. For example, people talk about visioning a different future for society, for civilization, for humankind in regards to the challenges of climate change or environmental degradation and destruction. People speak about needing a new narrative, a new story there. This is a use of the imagination as visioning or inspiration.

For example, at Gaia House, we have periodically Gaia House visioning meetings. Where do we want this organization to be in five, ten, twenty years' time? What are the directions we want to move in? What would we like to see happening? It's a use of imagination in a very instrumental, practical way, really.

Then there might be, for example, the use of imagination to develop certain skills or to rehearse—in sports, to imagine a certain shot or a certain movement or situation in a game, or perhaps in music, a certain passage at the keyboard if you're a piano player, on the instrument, whatever it is. Imagining mentally can actually develop the motor skills—interestingly enough, they've found—to increase one's skill and one's performance.

Then there's a whole range of the use of imagination for self-improvement in different ways, for the cultivation of qualities or attitudes—qualities and attitudes that might be deemed helpful, necessary, worthwhile. And here the range is huge.

For example, in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha's basic discourse on mindfulness, one of the longest subsections is in the mindfulness of the body section, and it regards the contemplation of death. Part of that is going to what was then open cemetery grounds and contemplating corpses in different stages of decay. But the Buddha also says, well, if that's not possible, you can do it in your imagination.

What's the purpose? What's the conceptual framework that's holding that? Well, the intention behind it is for dispassion—dispassion regarding this body and to a certain extent regarding this life—and also a sense of urgency. So urgency with regard to practice, with regard to awakening and the path, and dispassion with regard to other aspects of life, and in relation to the body, etc. That's generally in the Pali Canon their reason for doing that imagination around one's death.

Here, it's interesting to note in that practice, the imagination is regarded—the images used are used in the service of realizing a concrete fact: the material decay of the body, the impermanence of the body. So that's an interesting limitation on the use of the imagination, an interesting direction. It's in the service of a concrete fact, and particularly material decay and the impermanence of the body.

Also in the Pali Canon, the Buddha, in a few different places, advises—particularly if you're beset by the hindrances or feeling a lack of inspiration or faith—he says, think about me, bring me to mind. It's called recollection of the Buddha, practice of recollection of the Buddha. And this is said to bring inspiration and bring also a sense of faith and sense of urgency, sense of possibility in oneself, in the path, in practice.

Also within the Dharma—different Dharma traditions and other spiritual traditions—there is the use of the imagination in the service of cultivating qualities like metta, loving-kindness and compassion. For example, imagining the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara or Kuan Yin, or imagining the Buddha, or if you're in a different tradition, imagining Jesus or Mary. And through the image, constellating, if you like, channeling perhaps these qualities of love and compassion—that helps our love and compassion increase in our hearts, helps our hearts grow into, expand into those qualities. And in some cases, also there will be a growth, a support of aspiration: What do I want to move towards in my life? What do I want my heart to open to and towards? An increase in aspiration, an increase also in faith for some.

Very similarly, or extending from those kinds of practices, is a whole vast range of tantric practices regarding the imagination—tantric visualization practices, particularly practices involving tantric deities, *yidams* they're called in Tibetan Buddhism. And this actually is quite interesting because by now, as it's moving into Western culture and becoming a bit more popularized and lots of people are doing these kinds of practices, the range of conceptions that underpin tantric practice is huge. It's really quite varied. We'll go into that perhaps more later on in the retreat.

But again, a person might be viewing the use of imagination or practicing with images in order to develop their own strength, a quality like that—my strength, my ability to be strong in life, courageous, bold, upright, set boundaries, etc. So sometimes borrowing from tantric practice, for example, the more wrathful deities—fierce, demon-looking creatures—and imagining, visualizing them in practice, in order to develop these qualities for the self and the self's unfolding path.

Even—I heard someone told me—John Kabat-Zinn in teaching mindfulness suggested on occasion to imagine oneself as a mountain or just to imagine a mountain for the purpose of bringing in or allowing in or imbuing the moment with a sense of unshakability. Unshakability of being, of perhaps equanimity, also a sense of groundedness.

So again, it's the use of the imagination in order to develop or bring in certain qualities that are helpful for the self.

And then there's a whole range of possibility—very wide these days—of certain more recent psychological and psychotherapeutic uses of imagination: Gestalt psychology and other psychotherapy and other forms. So for instance, the inner critic or the superego—beginning to imagine them and dialogue with them, perhaps put them in another chair and enact them and move between the self and the inner critic, or a figure from a dream.

But often in these kinds of psychotherapeutic approaches, all these figures—whether it's the inner critic or a figure from the dream—they're all regarded as somehow belonging to the self. They belong to me. They are parts of me somehow. And in some way I want to integrate them into me to make myself more of a whole human being, a more balanced human being. I don't want them being stronger than me somehow, more powerful. I want, in a way, to tame them, to subordinate them to some kind of more perhaps rational or at least sensible sort of executive decision-making self.

And there's a kind of unitive view there, that all these disparate figures—crazy as they might seem, uncompromising as they might seem at first, or unusual, whatever—they're all brought in to be made part of a kind of unity, a wholeness of self. And that's often the vision or the conceptual framework or the directionality of that kind of psychotherapeutic work.

And in many traditions, something as simple as looking at a candle and then shutting one's eyes and meditating, focusing on the inner image, the remembered visual image of that candle is used purely as a concentration practice. Again, it's quite a narrow directionality and conceptual framework. There's no significance given to that object—could be anything. A candle, a stone, it doesn't really matter. There's no significance at all to the imagined object. It's just an exercise that's useful for developing focus of mind, steadiness of mind.

Actually, on this retreat, starting tomorrow, we'll talk about using the imagination to develop what I call samadhi—and I'll explain how I'm going to use that word as more than concentration. I'll explain that tomorrow. But we can use images to work with opening up the energies of the body and what I'll call the energy body, which I'll also explain, to bring a sense of resource, of harmonization, of energization, of openness, of well-being into the being. So we'll explore and explain all that.

So all these, and actually many more that I want to go into in quite a lot of detail, are possible in terms of the ways, the directions we can go in with the imaginal practice and the ways we can think about them—the conceptual frameworks we can put them in.

And of course, there's the possibility as human beings just to be lost in daydreaming, to be lost in worrying about the future and rehashing the past in what we call papañca in the Dharma tradition—just the mind spinning, perhaps with images and fantasies, but not really very helpful in any way at all.

So all that and much more is possible in terms of directions, doorways, and conceptions of imaginal work and use of images for us as human beings.

And when we get into this, and probably as we practice more with work with images and practice with them, we start to realize, I think—especially if there's an open-mindedness—that actually it begins to occur to us that the most interesting aspect of working with images and imaginal practice is not in fact the images themselves. They can be—and we'll go into this—they can be really far out or don't seem particularly interesting at first sight. But it's actually not the images themselves that are the most interesting aspect.

The most interesting aspect is rather our relationship to those images, and particularly the conceptual frameworks that we bring to bear around the images that support those images or send them in certain directions—the conceptual frameworks that we create. If you like, that aspect ends up being the most significant but also the most interesting.

Now, when we talk about that, and as I've kind of alluded to before, many conceptual frameworks are possible in terms of images and imaginal practice. Many directions are possible. For me, almost all of them are interesting and they're all okay with me. So I really want to emphasize that. All of that's okay. Well, most of them are okay in terms of how you're going to use images, how you decide to use images.

If I'm honest, I say the agenda I have for this retreat—and I do have an agenda—part of my agenda is really to support you in your practice with images and open possibilities for you. So that's my agenda, and that's partly up to you, where you want to go with it. So there is my agenda, but there's also—and you'll pick this up, I might as well flag it right now and admit it right now—I have this agenda of supporting and opening what's your desire and your inclination with regard to images.

But you'll pick up that I also have a leaning, personally, and I'm not going to hide that. I have a leaning to what we might say are more radical conceptions regarding imagination and images. I'll explain more what I mean by that, but the kind of conceptual framework around images that is most interesting to me and that I probably lean

to more right now, or that range, is rarer. It has a rarer appeal, I feel, it seems to me, as I look around me and listen to people. Not that many people are interested in it, but you'll pick up that that's my leaning.

You'll see what's involved, because I'm going to unfold that quite a lot over the days. I'll explain, as I said, more what I mean by what's included in that radical conceptual framework.

But in part, part of it includes being open to the range of the kind of images that may come up or that we might entertain or work with. So, to put it a little simplistically, I am very interested and I would like to open the doorway to the whole range—in terms of the kinds of images, both the kind of gentle, sort of white light, angelic kind of diaphanous images that might appear to us full of obvious love and gentleness and kindness, and all the way to including what might seem at first darker or weirder or might seem to some sensibilities or preconceptions a little bit more disturbing, perhaps.

So I really want to open up that range and make it all really okay, really trustworthy. And I mean more than that in terms of the conceptual frame, and I'll explain more as we go.

But that's tricky, then, because I'm in the teacher role here, and so I'm asking you, if this is possible—trust what you want, how you want to orient in terms of imaginal practice, which might change for you over time.

But please trust your sense of your purpose with all this—with images, imagination, imaginal practice. It might be for some that even at the end of this retreat, after exploring all this material, you take away very little. Maybe you take away just an occasional technique using images in your dharma practice. That's all it ever becomes for you—something you use occasionally to spice things up when practice feels a little flat. That's completely fine and entirely up to you.

Or it might be that what you come to—and some of you may already be there—is something far more expansive: a total explosion, a complete revolution in your way of seeing and conceiving of practice, of dharma itself, and what that means to you. A revolutionary shift in how you see and conceive the self, existence, and the world. This isn't merely a shift but a profound, far-reaching transformation of understanding.

So we could ask: imagination and images in the service of what? In the service of self-development? Fine. In the service of standard dharma practice? Fine. In the service of something even bigger than that? That's the question. What is imaginal practice in

the service of? What are images in the service of? Or rather, what am I making imaginal practice and images in the service of? What am I allowing images and imaginal practice to be in the service of? That's up to you.

I'll be honest about one of my deeper aims in offering this retreat and course. I'm deeply interested in the possibility of opening up a different sense of existence. I feel and know this is possible through imaginal practice—as it is through other means, but particularly through certain approaches to imaginal practice. The whole sense of existence, of self and others and this very world we live in, can become quite different in a beautiful, lovely, and profound way.

Wrapped up in this transformation are not just the perceptions that become available—the perceptions of self, other, and world—but also new conceptions of existence and new conceptions of dharma itself. So part of my deeper aim is opening up the sense of existence in these ways, along with the conceptions of existence and dharma.

Part of my reason for saying this is that it implies something that may sound strange: having or getting visual images in one's practice is not really that important. We're actually introducing something else—a different sense of existence, a different conception of existence, of dharma, of practice, of the world opening up. This may affect how you approach the practice. Don't grasp after images or wonder why you're not getting them. Hold a different aim in mind at a deeper level.

Related to this, it's worth noting that in my experience, both personally and in working with individuals in imaginal practice, the whole practice evolves in many ways as one works with images more. Like many practices, it evolves toward greater subtlety, becoming subtler and subtler in numerous ways.

Often at first, imaginal practice—certainly in my experience—was quite clumsy and gross. There might be a tendency for many people to identify too tightly or closely with an image or imaginal figure. Or for a while, to feel like there are no images, that nothing is arising. One's view of what should be happening becomes too constricted. I'll explore this more later.

But whether the practice feels clumsy and gross, or whether there seem to be few images arising, either way, what can happen over time is that more subtle sensibilities begin to open. This is actually what interests me most: the support, opening, and growth of a more subtle sensibility regarding existence, regarding the world—one that is more imaginally imbued, more infused with mythos and fantasy. I'll explain what this means as we continue.

Some people are drawn to this course because they already have many dreams—vivid, intense dreams every night. Or they have images that come to them in meditation or at other times, and they feel they want a way of working with this material. They intuit that fruitfulness is possible with these images, and they sense they need a framework for conceiving of those dreams and images. This would be tremendously helpful, especially since our culture at present is quite impoverished in terms of frameworks for working with and regarding images.

The history of cultural attitudes toward images is quite fascinating. There has been, historically, considerable denigration of the imagination—both philosophically and psychologically in Western culture—over centuries, perhaps millennia. In a book called *Invisible Guests*, psychologist Mary Watkins discusses this cultural suspicion. It stems partly from the view of scientific reductionism and partly from the medical model of psychology and psychotherapy that became firmly established in the mid-19th century and onwards.

But interesting, actually, today, by way of aside, the secular mindfulness schools are also kind of rooted—not completely, but a large part of their rooting is in a kind of medical model. That's where they come from. That's what they're rooted to. That gives them certain attitudes, presumptions, and allegiances, if you like.

Historically, in the nineteenth century, there was a sort of—psychologists, and then the wider culture, would look back on people like Socrates, who spoke with his daemon, his D-A-I-M-O-N, his guiding counselor, if you like. People like Socrates, people like Swedenborg, people like St. Catherine of Siena or Dante, other great artists—many, many people.

Retrospectively, none of these people held to a medical model of psychology. None of these people had any allegiance to scientific reductionism. Yet retrospectively, nineteenth-century psychology and that whole medical basis and attitude regarded them as kind of crazy—maybe high-functioning, but kind of crazy—because of their relationship with imaginal figures.

And even, amazingly enough, Descartes, who of course was one of the hinge pins of the scientific revolution—actually I didn't know this until recently—had a being that followed him down streets urging him not to abandon his search for truth. Some kind of imaginal character followed him and kept pushing him not to abandon his search for truth. So even that would have been regarded as crazy and is regarded as crazy, despite everything else these people were able to do and give birth to in their lives.

So perhaps there is a place for artists, perhaps in some other places and dimensions of our existence, but it's pretty limited. The whole attitude in modern culture towards the imagination is not really to explore it very widely, unless it's for a very limited purpose—like you want to make a crazy movie or something, or you're a novelist.

Instead, what comes into the whole sensibility and way of seeing the world is a kind of literalism. There's just an absence of other dimensions. Everything is just what it seems to be.

You see also, more specifically, in the more common psychological assumptions as we moved into the twentieth century—still talking about the history of cultural attitudes in the West regarding images—so the psychoanalyst W. R. D. Fairbairn, who died in about 1964, I think. There, to sum it up too briefly, the attitude was: if there is inadequate parenting, the young child will seek to withdraw or escape in an unhealthy way from external reality, which he or she should be confronting, dealing with, opening to, relating to. External reality—that's the primary thing. That's what's most important. You should be doing that at the exclusion of any attending to internal fantasy, private presences, or figures.

So when there's inadequate parenting, there's a withdrawal in this view from external reality and an increase in this sort of internal private fantasy figures, and that's regarded as pathologically unhealthy for the infant and, because of that, into adult life—something very unhelpful.

Then just a little bit later, the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, who died in 1971, allowed a little more room for the imagination through his work with play and work with children. He had the idea of a transitional object. So for example, the teddy bear for the child is regarded as a transitional object. It's not regarded by the very young child as totally created by the self and controlled by the self, but neither is it totally something separate and discovered. It's in between those two modes of being—completely subjective, creative and created and controlled, and completely discovered and separate from the self.

And Winnicott said, this is okay. This is even important, but it's transitional. It's a transitional phase. We want to move beyond it. Proper growth, proper psychological maturity means moving beyond and eventually leaving behind these kind of imaginal figures.

But even way before this, before the twentieth century, before the nineteenth century, James Hillman chronicles some of this in some of his writings. Even the Council of Nicaea—the church Council of Nicaea in 787 AD—there was already a doctrinal move in the church, very significant, very far-reaching, to depreciate the images and the significance and status of images.

Then, less than a hundred years later, in the Council of Constantinople, the doctrinal move to regard the soul as being purely the rational spirit—so less the realm of images. That realm of images, the soul as a realm of images—and we'll talk a lot about this over the days—that whole understanding or dimension of soul was either cut off or regarded extremely suspiciously or belittled.

And again, as the so-called Western Enlightenment, the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began and gained more momentum over the coming years, there was the emphasis and elevation of reason and reasoning and empiricism and materialism, really, and measurement over such qualities and capacities as the imagination. So that was, again, a very important move in the cultural development, if you like, in our cultural history that we've inherited.

But again, Henri Corbin, a great champion of the imaginal and a scholar of certain forms of Islamic mysticism in the twentieth century—I think he died in the seventies—points even further back than the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution to the twelfth century, when philosophically there was a debate between the school of Aristotle and the school of Averroes. Aristotle triumphed and became more influential, and this was a move away from what was the more dominant Platonism. Again, with that comes—laid the seeds for empiricism and a denigration of the imagination, the place of images.

Why am I saying all this? Because it's our cultural heritage. It's the air we breathe. Or more than that, it's the water we swim in, like a fish swims in water and doesn't—well, who knows what fish think—but doesn't even realize. We don't even realize. This is the dominant view that we imbibe and that we think through and see through. We see everything by means of this view regarding images and imagination.

So all of these aspects of the cultural history—just highlighting a few points there—all of these and more give rise to or set in place, often quite rigidly, a whole set of attitudes and a whole set of beliefs, in fact, regarding the imagination, regarding the self, regarding psychology.

Beliefs are interesting because most of the beliefs we have encrust and encase and enclose the views that we have, and oftentimes we're not even fully conscious of what our beliefs are about self and selves and psychology and images and reality and all of that.

We can even believe that we have no beliefs, or that because we are practicing mindfulness, we have transcended beliefs entirely. "I've gone beyond beliefs," we might think. But no—look a little closer. There's a lot more going on in terms of unexamined, unconscious beliefs.

All of these cultural and historical events, movements, and developments create and set in place a kind of enclosing space—even a weight—of attitudes and beliefs that inform our practices. They shape what we practice and what we don't practice, how we practice and how we don't practice. This, to me, is very important to realize and then to investigate.

It's been interesting for me in recent years, teaching imaginal practice and finding ways to work with people around this dimension of dharma. I've noticed there are four main reasons—four common objections—that some have to imaginal practice, or what we might call imaginal dharma.

The first is the fear that surely it will make you crazy. "You start entertaining all these images and fantasies, you lose touch with reality, it fragments the self—you'll go crazy." This is quite a common concern I encounter.

The second reason relates to what I've been discussing: the dominant cultural view regarding what is real is immensely influential and usually unquestioned. This is simply what we absorb from culture, what we learn in school. Most people don't have adequate philosophical tools to really explore and question these assumptions. We just absorb them from the culture.

This is why I speak of a metaphysics being provided—usually unconscious, usually unquestioned. What do I mean by metaphysics? Traditionally, in philosophy, it involves three areas: ontology, which investigates what is real and classifies what is real and what is not real; epistemology, which examines how we know anything, how we gain knowledge, what knowledge we can trust (for example, imagination is deemed untrustworthy, but if we can measure something, or kick it, or others agree on it—if it's not merely subjective—then this is knowledge we can trust); and cosmology, which asks about the structure of this world, this cosmos we inhabit.

These three areas form a kind of metaphysics that we simply absorb from the dominant culture, usually unconsciously and unquestioningly. This affects all kinds of things in our lives and hugely impacts our practice. It profoundly shapes how we think of, regard, relate to, and conceive of images and imaginal practice.

The third reason some might object to imaginal practice is that when we really open to this dimension, we sometimes sense it may invite us to go beyond the whole paradigm of ending suffering or reducing suffering—which is central to the Dharma as most people conceive it. The Four Noble Truths are all about suffering and its cessation. Yet practicing with images, we start to sense different inclinations becoming available, different directions, a different range beyond just that. This may not sit comfortably with some people, though I'll speak more about this.

The fourth reason involves the content of the images themselves. The images that arise, or that people hear about in teachings or from others sharing their experience, don't fit into their usually unconscious fantasy or mythos of what Dharma should look like. The stranger images, the more erotic images, the weirder or so-called darker images—these don't match the fantasy flavor of Dharma they've entertained, and this feels disturbing. Something is pushing against familiar limits.

Related to this is when images feel foreign, outside the range of fantasy, image, mythos, or archetype that a person favors or feels comfortable with. There's also often an operating assumption that the self-image should be quite singular rather than plural. When a multiplicity of self-images arises—when multiple images in the psyche are given equal validity, equal beauty and significance—this opens the whole sense of self away from singularity into plurality. For some people, this too feels unsettling.

However, some people are not comfortable with the dominant cultural view. They're not okay with all of that, and they find themselves drawn to imaginal practice—drawn, in fact, for many reasons.

It might be, for example, that they are attracted to or they already sense other dimensions of self. They sense themselves or their being or their psyche in this more pluralized way—and not in a way that's necessarily crazy. This multiplicity might feel attractive, ring true as deeper, more interesting in the sense of the self. And so that quality is opened through imaginal practice.

Something feels bigger and more wide-ranging than the typical humanistic way we tend to regard the self these days in our culture. Perhaps a person resonates with, finds meaningful, intuitively recognizes a kind of truth to a more archetypal notion of the self—the self, our human self, as if you like, channel of some other... it's hard to put into

words... some angelic or archetypal being. And what kind of reality does that have? We'll get to talk about all this. Someone senses that in and through their life, actually senses it, feels their life that way, or intuits it already, perceives self that way. Sometimes that is the case, and that makes imaginal practice very attractive.

And for some people, imaginal practice legitimizes, it finds a place, it re-sanctifies certain aspects of being that can very easily be sidelined or dismissed or denigrated or looked down on. Eros and the erotic. More wrathful energies. Divine madness. A trickster-ish quality—not so straightforward and simple. All these are dimensions, if you like, of being. They are archetypal faces. They are aspects of self, and a person might feel that they have been squeezed out or unlegitimized, their holiness not seen. So this also makes imaginal practice very attractive to many people.

In relation to that, it's quite interesting now because I would say that our modern sense of self—well, long before the 21st century even, but our modern sense of self—it seems to me, as I read the Pali Canon, obviously talking with so many people, our modern sense of self is not the sense of self, the experience of self and the whole notion of self and personality that existed at the time of the Buddha and the Pali Canon.

So you read the Pali Canon, there's almost no reference to anyone suffering with inner critic, which is epidemic in our culture, so huge in relation to the kind of self we feel we have. I don't see anyone who suffers from feeling like they're not expressing themselves, or even regards self-expression as something important. Or anyone who talks about something being repressed in themselves or their self-expression. No one relates the pain of, for example, not feeling seen deeply or met deeply or heard deeply. These are very modern experiences—notions, experiences, feelings, sensibilities. No one complained, it seems to me back then, about their self-expression being blocked.

So it seems to me that we need something more in our notion of the self for the modern West. In the modern West, I think there's quite a lot of confusion around the self, which is a whole interesting thing in itself. We live in a culture where the self is very emphasized and highlighted and sort of celebrated, and has a kind of triumph. There's an elevation of the self. But at the same time, we really poo-poo ego and point at that very quickly—especially in spiritual circles—and are very quick to regard this or that as a manifestation of ego. So we have a confused relationship with the self and its importance, what it actually is, how we experience it, how we relate to it.

But even more than that, the modern West has a kind of poor or thin, relatively poor, relatively thin, uninteresting psychology around personhood—not really honoring of personhood as fully, as extensively as might be possible. We seem a bit confused about all this.

And with personhood, somehow we sense palpably the beauty of a person, and yet intellectually we're supposed somehow to regard their personhood, a person's personhood, as having its roots in nature and biology and neurology or genetics, and/or in nurture—the so-called nature-nurture debate—in the environment, in environmental causes and conditions. So the roots are, if you like, pretty thin for this personhood which we somehow also, many of us, feel to be so beautiful, so important, such a lovely dimension of existence, of being alive.

There is also in that this whole sense of the singularity of self that we're sort of accustomed to conceiving of—a singular self, versus a more multiple self, although in some situations that is acknowledged. And this is one of the things that I want to open up on this retreat: a wider, more pluralized sense of self, as I said earlier.

Now this is not just the same as some of the ways some people talk of anattā, this teaching of not-self of the Buddha. We're not just wanting to say, "Oh yes, I have many characters in me," and then sort of just let them be, or not empower them. We want actually—or I want to emphasize this—in some of what I want to present over the coming days, the possibility of empowering those characters, that multiplicity, of bringing them to life, vivifying them, giving them more life, of viewing them differently.

So sometimes this multiplicity is acknowledged, but sometimes it's just on the road to sort of disempowering these different characters, if you like, that make us up, if you want to put it that way. But I'm interested in something different.

Sometimes it's recognized. So, for example, F. Scott Fitzgerald, the novelist, wrote, "There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He's too many people if he's any good." So it's recognized that there's that plurality. But I want to go even beyond just the recognition of it.

For some people, exploring imaginal practice even briefly, they begin to sense quite quickly how it frees up the sense of self in relation to what I was describing. A flexibility comes into the self-view. Quite a few people have said to me they experience a sense of liberation through playing with imaginal practice. In a way, one is playing and practicing with a flexibility of self-view and world-view. In imaginal practice, one explores that flexibility of views of self and world in different ways.

For some people, it unfolds in reverse. As their practice matures and they begin to have broader and deeper insights into emptiness—and for some, through engagement with modern philosophy and postmodernism—doors open for them in their practice and in their life that re-validate or make valid the imagination, the exploration of imaginal images.

Some people are drawn to imaginal practice and begin to realize, simply by paying attention more sensitively and intently—more discerningly—to their experience and psychological processes, that fantasy and image already imbue our life. They permeate even what we regard as the Dharma itself—our path, our practice, everything that involves. Some people recognize this already, and that realization invites them through a doorway in certain directions related to exploring images.

Then there are those who already have a sense of existence, a sense of the world and cosmos that is not confined by the dominant cultural view of what I call modernism. Or they're drawn to opening that up—opening up a different sense of existence, of the world, of the cosmos. This is the thrust of tantric practice: to open up that different sense of world, cosmos, and existence.

In the Jewish tradition, modern scholarly writings speak of the midrashic condition. Midrash in Jewish tradition represents their interpretations of biblical passages. What's fascinating is that there's never a single right view and wrong view. There's always this infinity of interpretations, an infinity of openings possible for any piece of text. Some modern scholars have described the midrashic condition—this way of being that sees not just the Bible, but also self, other, world, and cosmos as open, infinitely open to an infinite range of interpretability.

Through this approach—whether through tantra, this midrashic condition, or what we're doing—there can be something I feel is so important, so beautiful: a re-enchanting of the cosmos. This is something perhaps that the world and human civilization at present desperately needs—a re-enchanting of the cosmos, an opening of our sense of what is sacred.

Some people are drawn to imaginal practice because they sense this possibility—perhaps clearly, perhaps just vaguely or intuitively—through imaginal practice.

CHAPTER 5

A Little Exercise for the Imagination

Rob Burbea · 31 min

> *In this guided exercise from his Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea leads practitioners through a series of imagination practices designed to explore and develop imaginal sensitivity. Beginning with simple objects like peaches and apples, the exercise progresses through familiar places (childhood homes, bedrooms), beloved people, natural settings (beaches, autumn forests), and music. Throughout, Burbea emphasizes maintaining awareness of the energy body while exploring how images arise through different sense doors - visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory.*
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> *The teacher clarifies that imaginal practice is not primarily about vivid sensual details, but rather about developing sensitivity to the emotional resonances, energetic qualities, and meaningful 'vibes' that accompany images. He addresses common concerns about not being 'visual,' explaining that imagination works differently for different people and can be cultivated through practice. This foundational exercise introduces key principles of imaginal practice: that images need not be visual, that imaginal sensitivity can be trained, and that the emotional and energetic dimensions of images are often more significant than their sensual clarity.*
>
> *This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a practical entry point into imaginal work, demonstrating how ordinary imagination can become a doorway to deeper dharma practice when approached with mindful sensitivity to the energy body and emotional resonances.*

Let's do a little exercise together now. If you want to come into your meditation postures, establish yourself, take a few moments to establish the posture. Upright, comfortable, awake and alert, yet relaxed and open. Receptive.

Just settling into the body, connecting with how the body feels right now. Spreading the awareness throughout the whole body, the energy body, sensitive to the whole energy body. Just abiding there, inhabiting that space of the energy body with awareness for a moment or two.

Let's see if you can, as we've mentioned briefly, stay in touch with that sense of the energy body. It's never something you really lose as we do this exercise. So there's the awareness, the sensitivity to how the energy body feels as we play a little bit with this little exercise.

With that sensitivity as the basis, as something, a touchstone if you like, is it possible to imagine, to conjure in the imagination, to allow into the imagination a peach—a juicy, ripe peach right there, right in front of your nose, right under your nose? Can you feel its texture in the imagination, the sort of furry texture under your fingertips that peaches have? Maybe you can see it—colors of reds and oranges, yellows? Maybe not. Maybe you can smell this peach, that particular aroma that peaches have. This might be very subtle in the imagination.

What if you bite into that peach now and it's particularly juicy? Maybe the juices dribble down your chin from the corners of your mouth. Can you taste it?

So it might be that some sense door aspect of the imagination was easier there for you than others. That would be very normal.

What about an apple? Should we try an apple? So similarly, maybe it's a Granny Smith apple, you know, those dark green apples. And again, it's right there. Can you feel it in your hand, the hardness of it? Can you smell it, that particular smell that apples have, those kind of apples? The smell of freshness. Different kind of texture under the fingertips. Smooth.

What if you bite into that? Can you hear the crunch biting into this green apple? And the taste then in the mouth, that particularly tart taste, almost sour some of them, the apples.

Play with this very, very lightly. See what works for you.

How about a rose? If I say, can we bring a rose, the image of a rose, what happens? Is that a visual image for you? Or do you smell it? Can you get a sense, a flavor of the fragrance of this rose? Can you feel its delicate petals between your fingers? Smooth, or maybe slightly dragging on the fingertips. Maybe you can sense it somehow. Somehow you get a sense of this rose. Maybe somehow you sense, what color is it? What color is this rose? It may not be that you see that color, but somehow you sense it.

Remember to keep some of the awareness with the energy body, with the whole energy body, and just playing with the sense or senses plural of this rose. And you can let that go.

How about trying to enter in the imagination the image of your bedroom at home where you live? Your bedroom. And again, perhaps you can see it. Perhaps you have some other sense of it. What is the feel, the vibe, if you like, the feeling right now of your bedroom for you that you get in relationship to that image of your bedroom? It

might be a whole combination. It might be quite a rich vibe feeling. It might be quite subtle. It might be peaceful or restful, or it's a mess, or all kinds of things. And just, maybe you can even look around the bedroom.

Maybe you get more of a sense of what's in it—the different furniture and other things. This image, in whatever way it's coming, of your bedroom, and also the sensitivity to the energy body, and also the awareness of the feeling, the vibe that your bedroom has right now for you in the image. The vibe that's with the image, maybe.

Now again, staying with the energy body here and now, the feeling of energy, that whole space that we've been talking about. And opening your eyes. We're still doing the exercise. So opening your eyes and just looking around the room—this room here and now that you're in. So not your bedroom, this room that we're in right now. And just glancing around, getting a sense of the whole room. Maybe it's a room you know very well. Maybe it's less familiar to you, but just getting a sense of it.

And then again, closing the eyes and seeing if in the imagination this room can be alive to you—the image of this room that we're in right here, right now. Staying with the energy body, seeing what comes in terms of the image or with the image of this room. What kind of feeling does it have or feelings? What's the vibe or the complex of vibes with this room?

Beauty, perhaps. Dread for some people. Sanctity, safety, love. Purity, devotion—can be many things, or not much at all. But just notice if there is a feeling or a vibe that goes with the image of this room right now. And aware of the energy body as you sit here with that image of the room. Of course that may well include the presences of others right here, right now—the images of the presences of others.

Now how about, let's move on from that—how about trying the house or apartment, a house or apartment of your childhood, somewhere where you grew up or spent a portion of your growing up years. Is it possible to let that come as an image, this house or apartment from years ago perhaps?

Maybe you can sense it from the outside. Maybe you can enter into that house or that apartment in the imagination and explore. Enter the rooms. Again, it may not be visual—it may be some other sense. It might be a smell. It might have certain sounds associated with this house, this apartment. Perhaps some of the furniture or carpets—there's a certain texture even in the body.

And see if you can include an awareness again of the feeling, the vibe, or the emotional resonances that come up with this image of the house or different rooms in the house as you're exploring it, in the apartment.

Okay, so it doesn't matter whether you got all the way through the house, if it was a big house, or you really slowed down. It doesn't matter. It's just playing a little bit, an exercise to illustrate something.

Now let's move on. And is it possible to allow into the imagination, or bring into the imagination, conjure the image or the sense of someone you love? Friend, family member, lover, teacher, student—someone you love.

And again, it may be a visual image. It may be you see them very, very clearly. Maybe you see them vaguely in the eyes of the imagination. It may be more you just have a sense of them—their particular personhood, their presence that's particular to that person, something recognizably them, a feel, a vibe, but somehow someone you love and their presence in the imagination.

Again, staying in touch with the energy body, feeling how that feels as you dwell with and lightly focus on, holding the attention, this image of someone you love. Maybe you can feel the love and the particular qualities or kind of love you have for this person. You feel your enjoyment of them, your delight in their being.

You can gently let them go—the image of them go—if you like, and see: is it possible to imagine yourself at the seaside? Maybe not one of those crowded tourist beaches, but a more solitary beach. Perhaps there's one or two others there. Perhaps this person you love is there with you. Perhaps you're there alone.

Can you hear the surf crashing? Is it crashing waves, or is it gentle lapping waves? Maybe you can hear seagulls. Maybe you can feel sand underneath your bare feet? Is it sandy beach, or is it pebbles or rocks? Is it hot? You smell the sea air.

And when we say something like "smell the sea air," it's partly sensual, it's partly also the whole vibe of that and the whole resonances that that might have for you—the smell of sea air right by the water.

Is it possible to imagine yourself walking along the water's edge? Perhaps running or even dancing by the ocean there, by the water's edge on this deserted beach. A lot of energy, vitality, a lot of vital chi, energy.

Perhaps you can feel that. It's almost as if you feel the movement of the imaginal body there dancing. Feel that somehow at the same time as this physical body is sitting here still—sensitive to the energy body—we can feel this other movement, this other body, the imaginal body dancing, leaping, perhaps turning.

Just connecting with that imaginal environment, that imaginal scene, in whatever ways work for you. Letting yourself be playful, seeing if you can come into close contact with that.

Or how about a different scene? Entering some woods or forest on an autumn day, late autumn, and the forest floor is covered with leaves, with autumn leaves. Can you hear them perhaps crunching underfoot, or is it soggy, damp?

Can you get a sense of the vivid autumnal colors of the trees, the remaining leaves on the trees? Can you get a sense of the air? Sometimes those autumn days are bright and crisp, clear. Sometimes they have more of this foggy quality. Damp.

Maybe you can touch the trunk of a tree, feel its bark, the texture of the bark on the palm of your hand, on your fingertips—the solidity, perhaps even the beauty, the venerability of this tree.

So again, we're open, we're including the sense of the emotional vibes and the resonances. It's part of the image.

And one last one. How about a piece of music or a passage even—just a passage of music that you love, that you know very well, that's familiar to you? Maybe you can hear it really clearly. Maybe you just have a sense of it. Maybe you hear some parts of it, or it's just the quality of it, the vibration.

Somehow you can perhaps imagine or let play in the imagination this piece of music. Again, as you're listening to that, letting that play in the imagination, still sensitive to the whole energy body and the energetic and emotional resonances of that piece of music for you right now.

So maybe it brings energy, expands. Maybe it's exuberant. Maybe it's more melancholy, gentle. How does it affect the energy body? What are the emotional resonances there? It doesn't matter if you don't have words for these things, labels.

Okay, and when you're ready, just opening your eyes slowly.

So we're actually a little unsure whether to do this exercise at all—a little ambivalent about that—in case it gave the wrong idea of what we're doing and where we're going with this whole imaginal practice, or where I was most interested in going. But there is a reason for doing it.

So many people say to me, "Oh, I don't get images. I don't know what you're talking about. I've heard about people—I don't have that. I never see anything." But I hope from this little exercise, just playing a little bit, you can realize that when I use the word "image," first of all, I'm not talking about anything necessarily visual. It may be visual, it may include the visual, but it's not necessarily that.

Some people are very visual, some people are not visual. Someone else is very aural—their ear imagination is very developed—and some people are less so. There's individual styles of sensitivity to the image, to images, and one person may have different senses that are alive for them, and each image might be predominantly this one or that one. So there's a great range here.

The second reason for doing something like this is actually to realize that in some ways we can train the imagination. In many ways we've been trained out of the imagination. But doing this sort of thing, playing with it a little bit—I would rather work with images that are more meaningful for you than some of these might have been, like an apple or whatever—but one can actually train with images.

The more one puts oneself in contact with images and tunes to them and focuses on them and stays sensitive, the more that sensitivity develops. The imaginal sensitivity develops. We become sensitive to images. It's something we can practice. Through that, images can become for us generally more vivid, and we can feel that they become—we become more connected to—we feel more connected and the whole thing is more alive like that, more vivid.

But really, and why I was ambivalent about this exercise, is I don't want to give the impression that imaginal practice—and I'm going to emphasize this again as we go through—I didn't want to give the impression that imaginal practice is primarily about the sensual details of the image. They may be very strong, they may not be very strong. In a way, it's not so important.

So whether I can really taste the tartness of that apple—it may be significant, but it may not be that important at all. The sensual aspect of the images, the sensual details of the images, are not always that important.

We will be more interested on this retreat, and in the kind of directions we want to go, with more of what I call the vibe or the resonances—emotionally, energetically, in terms of meaningfulness—than the sensual details, which may or may not be vivid and clear and very detailed.

But the vibes, the resonances—this is something that we want to develop our sensitivity to and get more and more sensitive, more and more exquisitely tuned to. They may be clearer than the more visual details or sensual details of the image.

Still, this may give you a sense of what's possible.

It's really—I'll talk about this again, but I'm just wanting to give a sense of what's possible. And especially if you feel, "Oh, I can't relate to this at all because I don't have images," please don't let that discourage you. The invitation here is much broader and more inclusive than it might initially appear.

What we're exploring together is a vast territory of inner experience, one that extends far beyond the visual realm. Some of you may find that your imaginal capacity expresses itself through other doorways—perhaps through feeling-tones, or energetic sensations, or a quality of knowing that has its own intelligence and wisdom. The key is remaining open to however this faculty wants to manifest in your unique system.

Remember, we're not trying to force anything or create experiences that aren't naturally arising. Instead, we're cultivating a receptive awareness, a kind of listening that allows us to notice and appreciate whatever subtle movements of consciousness are already present. This is a practice of deep intimacy with our own being, honoring the particular ways our inner landscape wants to reveal itself.

As we continue this exploration together, let yourself be curious rather than concerned about whether you're doing it "right." There is no single right way. There is only your way, your particular doorway into this rich dimension of practice. Trust that whatever is arising—or not arising—is perfect material for our investigation.

CHAPTER 6

Energy Body: Instructions (2)

Rob Burbea · 46 min

> *In this second instructional talk on energy body practice, Rob Burbea deepens the exploration of working with emotions through direct awareness of the energy body, particularly along the body's central axis or midline. He presents two complementary practices: cultivating samādhi through attention to well-being in the energy body, and developing emotional awareness by attending sensitively to whatever arises in the energy field without trying to change it.*
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> *Burbea explains how energy body sensitivity forms the foundation for all meditation practices—from mettā to emptiness practices to imaginal work. He emphasizes that emotions comprise both mental states and energy body states, and explores the full spectrum from intense feelings to subtle energetic qualities. The teaching includes practical guidance on the quality of attention needed: directing, energizing, and tuning awareness appropriately.*
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> *The instructor outlines four key aspects of working skillfully with emotions in practice: cultivating beautiful heart qualities while releasing unhelpful emotional habits, developing sensitivity to the full range of emotional experience including subtle states, learning to handle intense emotions with presence and skill, and understanding how emotions arise through dependent origination. Central to healing difficult emotions is bringing the beautiful into contact with what is challenging, using well-being as a resource to hold difficulties with tenderness rather than aversion.*

I already mentioned that this work with the energy body—practicing directly with the energy body, developing the sensitivity and skill there in different ways, generally giving it attention—will really form a thread through the whole course here, because it forms a basis for a lot of what we're doing.

So it's going to stay with us through the week: the development of the practice with regard to the energy body and the skill with regard to the energy body. And actually, hopefully that skill and development of skill with the energy body can continue to develop through our life, because sensitivity and skill with regard to the energy body will offer all kinds of tools, all kinds of support in our life, in our general awareness and sensitivity, and very much in our practice—in our life of practice in many different ways as we go on and develop and deepen and widen our practice.

You know, we've talked about samadhi and the resource that samadhi is for the mind, for the body, for the whole being—a resource in terms of practice, but also a resource in terms of life and ability to let go. In a way, you could say what samadhi is, or a large portion of the spectrum of samadhi states as they go deeper, are really states of the energy body. There are openings and energizations and particular ways the energy body feels and the mind feels within that in harmony with the energy body. And so using the energy body to start with as a way in to develop samadhi and develop the resource of samadhi is, if you like, approaching it more directly. It's one way of approaching it, developing the samadhi.

Working with the energy body—really part of the purpose of that is for the sake of cultivating samadhi, developing that resource, that deep well of well-being within us that can then be accessible to us in our life at times and for our practice.

We also mentioned how capacity and skill developed with the energy body will also enable us in different ways to work with difficult emotions and how necessary and helpful that is in our lives as human beings but also in our practice. Very important skill for a human being to develop, or skills—range of skills for a human being to develop.

In fact, giving attention to the energy body and developing that sensitivity gives us emotional and energetic sensitivity for all practice. So I would actually ground almost all meditation practices in a sensitivity and an awareness of the whole energy body and really include that as something that's basic and fundamental to how we might approach any practice, all practices.

So for example, with metta or loving-kindness practice, there's a way of doing that that I would encourage—when I teach metta—to really have the sense of the whole energy body as a basis, as the kind of foundation for the metta practice. And in emptiness practices, again, the sensitivity, the awareness of the energy body and the inclusion of the feeling of the whole energy body is really helpful, indispensable for navigating within certain emptiness practices, most emptiness practices and other insight practices. So helpful.

And the same is true, as we mentioned, with imaginal practices, to pick up on the subtle resonances, the nuances of images and imaginal figures in imaginal practice, and to navigate between images and have a sense of where to move, how to move—really helped by staying in contact with the energy body and being sensitive there. And again, it keeps mindfulness around with regard to imaginal practice, keeps it grounded in the bodily sense.

And as the days go by and we start talking much more and predominantly about imaginal practice, just to point out now that really on this retreat I'm going to be encouraging very much a moving back and forth between practices focused primarily on the energy body—for example, samadhi, as we've already talked about, and a second practice around emotional awareness with the energy body that I want to talk about today—moving back and forth between those practices directly with the energy body on one hand, and more direct imaginal practice on the other hand.

So back and forth, and even that imaginal practice is always tied in with the energy body. So no one is probably going to sit or probably should sit and just be focusing on images all day. I'll say more about this later on in the retreat. But there's really what I want to encourage: back and forth. Focusing on the energy body, either for cultivating the samadhi or for the emotional awareness I'll talk about now, and between that and imaginal practice still sensitive to the energy body.

So that, in fact, in terms of time, you will probably spend, or I hope you will spend more time directly with the energy body than with imaginal practices. Again, I'll talk more about this, about the balance and the fluidity of balance there. But all this, again, is just a way of saying how fundamental and important and central it is, the practice with the energy body. So I'll keep referring to it. I'll keep adding little bits to our work within developing that. And do ask about it, please, and different aspects of practicing with the energy body.

So this morning what I want to really talk about mostly is emotional awareness via the energy body.

What do we mean by emotion? Well, actually emotion is one of these inexhaustibly deep subjects. Let's just say for now that what we mean by an emotion is a state of the mind, a state of the awareness, and a state of the energy body, both. So an emotion includes both the mental, if you like, and the state of consciousness, but also the state of the energy body. And that together, those two—the mind and the body, the energy body—make up, or rather form two aspects of what's included in any emotion, or most emotions.

And within what we mean by emotion, what I mean by emotion for our purposes now is certainly the beautiful, lovely, so-called positive emotions that probably feel quite pleasant, and also the more difficult or afflictive or negative emotions. So I really mean all of that when I use the word emotion, and I mean both the quite obvious emotions that may be quite intense in the experience, and also the more subtle range of emotions.

So something like boredom or peacefulness, peace, is quite a subtle emotion most of the time, unless it's a really profound peace. These are more subtle manifestations of emotion. I really want to include them. And sometimes there's just a sense of not much is happening emotionally. So I want to include that, that sense of not much. Feel okay. Feel pretty peaceful. So intense and subtle.

All of this for our purposes in practice. All that is important. The whole range we want to include in our explorations in practice.

And just to recap what I said last night about putting this work with emotions, meditative work with emotions, in a much bigger picture in terms of what are we trying to do as practitioners with our emotions? What are our aims regarding our emotions, or at least some of our aims, principal aims, as practitioners?

And we said that this included the cultivation—the gradual cultivation—of the beautiful qualities of the heart that the Buddha emphasized so much: love and generosity and compassion and equanimity and more. These positive, beneficial qualities of heart undergo a gradual cultivation over time. It's probably not steady, but gradual, let's say, cultivation of those qualities.

Conversely, over time there's a gradual letting go of the habits of creating negative emotions—difficult emotions, emotions that are really not that supportive, that do not serve us. So we have the cultivation of the beautiful and the helpful, and the gradual letting go of what is not so helpful, or the letting go of the habit of creating what is not so helpful.

How does that letting go happen? It happens through the cultivation of the positive, in a way. It happens also through understanding what's going on—how we create what's positive and also how we create what's negative, how that is fabricated. So understanding plays a big part in dissolving these habits, and also learning how to dissolve a negative emotion in practice, how it might be helped to unfabricate, to take away some of what's locking it into place. All that's part of the big trajectory regarding emotions.

Secondly, there's the increasing capacity to actually be in contact with what's happening in our heart, in our emotional life—to feel our emotions as they pass through. We want gradually to develop more and more sensitivity to our emotions and the emotional life and the whole richness and spectrum and depth of that, including subtle emotions. So much about deepening practice is actually about deepening in subtlety. So really developing that sensitivity over the whole range, including the subtle.

Then also, we mentioned a third aspect: learning to handle our emotional life, to handle what passes through when it's quite intense. Or sometimes when it's not—to be present when it's more subtle and it doesn't seem like much is going on. Certainly to handle the more afflictive emotions, the more difficult emotions, but also the positive emotions that sometimes can be very intense—joy or love, and so forth. A person is very often not used to feeling such intensity that's pushing out, expanding the range of the heart. So learning gradually to handle what comes through, what comes up emotionally—meaning to be able to hold it well, to tolerate, but also to hold it in a helpful way. To hold what's happening emotionally in our heart in a helpful way. That's part of handling.

But also part of handling is knowing that in the way I'm handling, for instance, this difficult emotion or this afflictive emotion, the way that I'm handling it actually helps to ease it. If it's an emotion that doesn't serve, it helps to ease it on its way to dissolution or helps to dissolve it. So that's also part of handling. Handling is not just putting up with—or sometimes it is tolerating.

This development of the sensitivity, including to the subtle range regarding our emotions, and this learning how to handle, how to hold and tolerate—those two aspects are very much a part of imaginal practice, very much part of all imaginal practice.

Then a fourth aspect of the big picture, the big journey or trajectory regarding our emotions in our lifetime of practice: through all of these different aspects that we've just mentioned, we really want to, over time, see and understand, witness the dependent arising of emotions. How are they fabricated? Dependent on what? These are not just personal factors. They're more—if you like—impersonal, or just ways that consciousness works, ways that perception and the mind, if you like, the heart work. So really understanding that dependent arising regarding emotions. And there's a lot involved there. I'm not going into that so much on this retreat, but really understanding that dependent arising regarding emotions.

Through all of these aspects, in terms of the big picture, we could say that through all of that we have more and more available to us for our practice and for our life. We have available to us more the instrument of our heart—this delicate, incredibly beautiful, sensitive instrument, this amazing instrument that is our heart and its capacity to feel and its subtlety and its nuance and its range and its extraordinary power and beauty. So we really want in our lives and our practice to have that instrument available and know how to read it, how to play it.

So we have the samadhi practice, which we talked about, and the intention of the direction to tend to that wellbeing and cultivate that in the energy body. And now today—and I mentioned some of this last night—but now today we want to add a second practice, a second direction of intention. And that is really an attention to any emotion, or any experience which may not be an emotional thing, pleasant or unpleasant, that manifests in the energy body.

We said that a lot of the action will happen on the midline, this sort of vertical axis. It could be right on the surface there, like almost on the skin, so to speak, or inside—it doesn't matter, could be either. The attention to what goes on there along that midline does not have to be correlated to some bit of the anatomy. Oh, that's in my small intestine, whatever it is. We don't have to do that necessarily. It's just: I feel this there. And what does it feel like?

So whatever sensations or occurrence of an emotion or an energy somewhere on that midline becomes the foreground—a steadiness of attention. That's the foreground of what we're paying attention to in this practice, the second practice. And the whole body, the whole space of the energy body forms the background. So there's a foreground of attention and a background of attention. The foreground is this—for example, this tightness in my heart right now.

And I'm really tuning into that with this steadiness of attention. But in the background, I'm still aware of the whole energy body space.

So what do we want to do with that? Anything that arises—an emotion or not an emotion, pleasant or unpleasant—in this practice, I can decide to turn towards it and give it, as much as I can, a steady attention. Keep the attention lightly focused on what's going on there, on either the whole midline, or usually it's more some portion of the midline, some area around maybe the throat or in the middle of the head or something. Give it that steadiness of attention.

Light holding the attention on it, and then giving some awareness to the quality of attention. So it's not just that it's trying to be steady and when it goes off into distraction I move the mind back, but also: does the attention need or want to be quite delicate with this emotion or energy that I'm paying attention to on the midline? Does the attention need to have a kind of holding quality to it, as if it's holding lightly this emotion, perhaps this sadness, or these moments of sadness, these sensations of sadness along the midline, perhaps around the throat or the mouth or the heart center?

And there's a sense of, rather than boring into them with a laser beam—which sometimes is really appropriate and helpful—maybe this emotion or this quality along the midline needs a much more light holding, as if the attention is like cupping the hands and letting the energy or the sensations or the feeling of the emotion just rest very lightly and be supported very lightly in the cupped hands, metaphorically, of the attention.

So the kind of attention, as well as trying to keep it steady relatively...

And then also we mentioned last night in this practice, we want to really check that the attention has enough energy in it. There's enough of a sort of vitality to the presence. I'm really there, not sort of half there. So sometimes we need to just check: does it need a bit more energy? Do I need to kind of show up with a bit more brightness to this paying attention to this emotion or this feeling, this energetic sensation along the midline?

So we want, as I mentioned last night, we want the energy of the mindfulness to be always greater than the energy of the emotion in this kind of work. Because if it's the other way around, if the emotion—especially if it's a difficult emotion—if the difficult emotion has more energy than the awareness and the attention, we're actually overwhelmed. We'll get overwhelmed and we sink in that emotion. That's not helpful.

So in the second practice, you can deliberately kind of shift gears and bring the attention to the midline and maybe something's going on there and you just stay steady with that, delicate, holding it with energized attention. Or sometimes you go to the midline and there's nothing happening. So nothing's happening there. I don't particularly feel anything. What is it to stay with that emotion of nothing happening or the energy feeling along the midline of nothing happening and just stay very light, very steady with the attention on not much happening?

Or something was happening, but as you pay attention to it, it gets more subtle, and maybe it seems like, oh, it's dissolving a little bit. And what happens if I just stay? I don't say, oh, forget it now, I'll go back—I mean, I could go back to the samatha practice or something else. But another option with this second practice is just to stay as whatever is present and manifesting in the midline there just gets more subtle and I stay with the subtlety and I let the attention get correspondingly subtle. Very, very helpful.

Now as we develop the skill with the samatha and the skill with the body space energy and the energy body, that can become over time—it becomes something more that we can call on as a resource. So we feel this bubble, this balloon of the whole body energy. It feels quite nice or relatively peaceful or warm or... there's some degree of com-

fort there. And over time this increases as something we have access to and also something that becomes a deeper and deeper resource. The well-being there gets richer and deeper and it's something that we can really use as a resource at the same time as we're paying attention to what is difficult.

As we mentioned, we can sometimes put that resource or feel that resource around the difficulty. This well-being kind of cushions or embraces or laps up against what's difficult—this sadness, this grief, this tightness or pressure or hurt or whatever it is. So the access to the resource is not either-or. It's almost like you have both at the same time. And the resource, the well-being, can be like a kindness around or a holding around what's difficult.

Very, very skillful as one develops the capacity to bring the lovely and the positive, if you like, the beautiful in contact with what is difficult. Because it's this contact of the beautiful and the helpful with what is difficult, that is what is healing. It's the contact of the two. That is what is healing with regards to difficult emotions.

So can there be a tenderness around? Can I allow or somehow very gently encourage a tenderness, a kindness, a holding around what is difficult emotionally, perhaps on the midline?

And a part of all this is also checking the mental view, checking what the mind is doing in terms of how it's regarding this difficulty, what's its attitude and assumptions. So maybe I'm blaming myself: I shouldn't be feeling this. If I was a better meditator, I wouldn't be feeling this, or it's wrong in some way. It shouldn't be like this. I shouldn't be feeling this. So very easily the mind gets into or locked into certain assumptions. Sometimes they're just under the radar. We don't actually realize that we're judging ourselves for having it or deeming this emotion or this manifestation of difficult energy. We're deeming it wrong.

The mind is passing judgment. Sometimes it's very subtle, just under the radar. So to check for that, sometimes what you can do is actually play with switching that for a moment. Just decide to see this that's happening now—that feels difficult—as perfect. It's perfect. It's just as it should be. You're playing with switching the view for a moment and see what that does.

Actually, we should point out that for imaginal practice, we really want the whole of the emotional range. We want the whole spectrum—including what is difficult at times, what is very lovely, what is quite subtle. All that range of emotion will be fertile ground. It's all fertile terrain when we come to imaginal practice.

So any idea that "I shouldn't be feeling this," or "this is a wrong emotion," or "that's too weird as an emotion"—whatever it is, blaming ourselves—that's utterly misplaced when it comes to imaginal practice. The whole range of emotion is fertile ground for imaginal practice.

Now remember, again I'm going to say this so many times, that awareness contracts when there's a difficulty—either physically, emotionally, or energetically. The awareness will shrink. It shrinks basically when there's aversion or grasping, as there will be when there's difficulty.

So notice that and then stretch the awareness, expand it again. Inflate that balloon, if you like, or fill the sail of awareness. Stretch it over the whole body—whole body awareness, even a little bit bigger. Really inhabit and fill that space with awareness again, over and over. Keep checking because it will keep shrinking. See that it's shrunk and open, expand it again. This is so important.

Certain states—for instance, drowsiness, dullness, restlessness, or fear—are very much helped by opening to a much wider space, a vast space of awareness. This might come from being outside and actually doing some walking meditation or standing meditation, taking in the space and including that in the awareness, taking in the sky. Or in the meditation hall or in a room, just take in the space of the room, or imagine a space. Some people with more practice are actually able to allow the awareness to expand in different ways—very, very large. Any way of doing that can be very helpful with certain emotions.

In terms of working with the difficult, we also talked about working with the imagination of the breath energy, or just energy moving, or imagining lights. That's also available.

But with this second practice of actually attending to emotion directly in the energy body—mostly on that midline, let's say for now—attending directly to what's difficult there, or rather, particularly in relation to what's difficult there... Remember, we can just pay attention even when it's not difficult and simply station the awareness there. But in regard to difficult emotions in the energy body, the key element—the key element in what's helpful there—is a lessening of aversion, grasping, and clinging. This is the factor that's so central. That's the thing that makes the most difference.

One of the aspects we talked about is that you can really get into this in quite a focused way by practicing allowing, opening, welcoming as fully as possible. So this is really a practice. It's not just an idea or "I'm trying to allow it." We're making a practice of allowing as fully as possible, welcoming this emotion, this heavy energy, this pressure in the chest or whatever it is—the sensations there.

What do I mean? I mean getting intimate first with what it actually feels like. What does it actually feel like—that pressure, that heaviness, that tightness, whatever it is? Then opening the doors of awareness to welcome that. Let those sensations be there as fully as possible.

Almost all the emphasis in this practice of allowing is really on the allowing itself, on opening over and over, moment to moment, welcoming the sensations. So it's not just a thought—"Oh, I accept this" or "I'm trying to accept this." We're not talking about something too gross or unenergized like that, or too vague. We're really talking about a quite fundamental movement of the energetic relationship with the sensations in the moment.

Something's actually shifting and changing in my energetic relationship to these sensations. There's an opening. And then I'm repeating that change of the energetic relationship over and over. There it is for a moment—I'm opening. Again, intimate opening. Again, intimate opening. Repeating this change in relationship. This is what I call the practice of allowing.

If you like, it's a subset of this second practice. It's a certain strand of the second practice of attending to the energetics of the midline without trying to steer it towards the well-being of samādhi. This is the second practice. Within that, there's the possibility of really emphasizing the allowing, as I just described.

Now that allowing—accepting or welcoming—is not a way of living. We really should bring a little discernment and intelligence here. We would not try to live that way. It's not a way of living.

It's a way of practicing. And even within that, there's degrees of allowing. This is really important in navigating practice.

If I get very, very good at this moment-to-moment allowing—this really opening of allowing as fully as possible—and the allowing goes very, very deep and very full, what I will notice over time, as my skill at doing that develops, is that what I allow deeply, very deeply, when there's a deep allowing, that fades. It actually begins to dissolve or fade if it's a difficult emotion. All the sensations disappear, and it takes me actually deeper and deeper into states of emptiness, if we use that phrase.

So if I really develop the allowing deeply, when it's a deep degree of allowing, what I'm allowing fades. I'm not going to get too much into that right now—that belongs to a different retreat, that whole conversation. But that's important to realize.

Or, in practice, if I'm allowing but less intensely—I'm still allowing this thing, but I'm not emphasizing the allowing in such a subtle and deep and thorough way, moment to moment—then, as we mentioned last night, it may be that just allowing this difficulty to be there more generally, more lightly in the allowing, an image may spontaneously arise out of that emotion or with that emotion, from that state.

So when there's less allowing, if you like, or less of a full throttle allowing, then it might be that a spontaneous image arises. And then that's one of the ways of entering into imaginal practice—when there's a difficult emotion arising, and just relating to it in a certain way allows images to arise spontaneously.

But we also talked about, and now I want to add to the instructions, that we can deliberately bring up, invoke, and then dwell with, focus on, and resonate with—meditate on—the image of a loving figure. That's a very important part of imaginal practice.

That could be a deity—Christ, or Tara, or other tantric deity, or something else. It could be someone you know, a dear friend, or a lover, or a teacher that you have a very helpful, deep relationship with, and that there's a lot of love there. It could be a mythic personage, a mythic figure that embodies this love somehow for you. It could be a previous image that you've had—maybe you've worked a little bit with images already and this particular imaginal figure that you know from before, you can call on and feel their love and stay there resonating with that love and receiving their love. Or it could be a dream figure. Sometimes we have a dream and someone in a dream, something about them really touches us or we feel love coming from them, something very healing. And especially if the dream is recent, one may recall that figure and use it as a deliberate imaginal figure, deliberately recalled and practiced with.

One of the things that's possible is this imaginal figure that you deliberately invoked and deliberately staying steady with in meditation is loving you. They are loving you somehow. And it could be through their gaze—as you're holding this image, you're seeing and feeling how they are gazing at you, how they are beholding you, how they look at you. Or they may be touching you. They're loving you through touch, through the way they touch you, or through their energy. They're just emanating or radiating a certain energy or light or something, and they're loving you in that, through that.

Or it could be not so much they're loving you, but they're loving the hurt or the discomfort that you're feeling. So this pain, this grief that I'm feeling, that is being held as much as I am being held and loved. So they may be loving you, they may be loving the hurt or the discomfort itself, perhaps holding it or surrounding it somehow, embracing it or beaming a light or energy on it or stroking this hurt or licking it or kissing it, bathing it. Many, many possibilities. See what feels like it's right and helpful. So that's a possibility too.

Actually, I just want to mention one thing about attention in general in regards to both working with the energy body and the samadhi or this attention to emotions or working with images. We could—and again, it's slightly artificial, but it can be helpful—differentiate three aspects of attention or three capacities of attention that we can be aware of and check.

One is the directing of attention. This is the first aspect. So we direct the attention to an object, to a sound, or an image, or a sight, or a sensation in the body, or a sense door, just sounds in general, or whatever. So this is one aspect of attention—the directing of attention. Where am I directing it and do I want to hold it a little bit with something so that I know that when it's gone off, I bring it back to directing again? That's one aspect.

The second aspect, which we mentioned already, is the energizing of attention, the brightening, the bringing more intensity into the sense of presence. So that's an important aspect of attention. What is it to know how to energize the attention, to be more fully present, more alive? There's more vitality and energy, brightness and intensity in the presence, in the attention. That would be a second aspect.

And the third aspect is what I would call the tuning of the attention. So these three aspects are not really separate.

They certainly influence each other and blend into each other, but it's worth differentiating them.

The tuning of the attention. With the energy body and the energy space, we can realize: I can tune to this particular quality, let's say, of softness in the energy body, or this particular frequency of energy. There's a frequency of a kind of happiness, and that's a certain quality, and I can tune to that. So it's like tuning a radio receiver to a certain frequency.

Particularly with regards to samadhi, this can be really helpful, because what I tune to, it tends to amplify that frequency. So I want to really get into this softness, or this sense of warmth, attuned to that quality of frequency of warmth within the energy body.

But when we're doing the second practice of attention to the emotions—whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, without so much wanting to direct them towards the well-being and the pleasantness of samadhi—then there's also a sense of tuning to this particular emotion. As I said, some of the emotions are quite subtle. Or there's a mix of emotions and I can tune to one of them in particular if I want to.

So this tuning to the quality or frequency of energy or emotion or of image—because again, we might be working with an image and you start to notice that an image is quite a complex thing. It's beautiful in that way. It's so rich, so multidimensional. And so either what is it to tune to the totality of an image and its qualities or the sense of it, the characteristics of it, or to tune to a particular quality of the image? So particularly, for example, the love of Quan Yin or Jesus' love and compassion.

Tuning the attention in these different ways is a very important aspect. So directing, energizing, and tuning—three aspects of attention. Sometimes it's good to differentiate, especially this last one, tuning. Very, very important, both for the samadhi practice, the emotional awareness practice that we're emphasizing today, and as we unfold more and more of the imaginal practice. It's a very important aspect of that. But actually they're all important: directing, energizing, and tuning.

Just to be clear, today we have two principal practices. First, we have the samadhi and the intention of that direction to cultivate, to tend to the comfort or well-being in the energy body, playing with it in different ways. So that continues, and included in that is working with the difficulties that arise—hindrances and stuck energy and emotional difficulties—but with the light intention, the playful intention of easing those difficulties, dissolving them so they move towards more well-being. So that's one practice.

And then we can move today between that practice and the second practice of just stationing the attention, just staying slightly steady, sensitive on that midline as foreground with the whole body as background, sensitive to the emotions—the whole wide range of emotions, not necessarily intense—but just stationing the attention sensitively on the midline or some area of the midline where some emotion or energy is happening, with the whole body in the background.

And as we do that, as I mentioned, sometimes just doing that—if I find the right kind of attention—sometimes what will happen is what's happening, what is going on emotionally will calm. Gradually it will calm, it will become more subtle, may become more beautiful. And one option is actually to stay and let it grow more subtle and let the attention become, grow more subtle so that we are also developing the sensitivity.

Sometimes what you'll find is it actually goes into a state that's more like a samadhi state, where there's a kind of well-being that comes out of that. So these practices of the samadhi and this attention to the emotions in the energy body, they also fluidly move between each other. And you can very consciously shift gears at times, very consciously, deliberately shift gears between these two practices, despite their being fluidly related.

And as we mentioned, just beginning to include—although this is a bit more a secondary intention right now, or optional, less important right now; we'll include it more and more—is that sometimes, either working with the samadhi, or with a difficult emotion or energy that comes up, an image may constellate out of that. And occasionally you can even ask for an image to constellate.

Let's say this for now—obviously we're going to talk much more about it: if an image comes out of a difficulty or when there's actually no difficulty and it feels all very good, if an image comes, then notice the effects. This is really important: notice the effects of that image on the energy body. So this image comes and how does it affect and make the energy body feel? And how does it affect the emotion? It might be that something lovely comes in the energy body, or the emotion. Then we can open to that and enjoy that.

There's lots to say about navigating between these practices. We'll say more about that later.

So for now, two principal practices: the samadhi, and secondly, the just delicate, sensitive attention to the emotional manifestation in the energy body along the midline. And then if it arises occasionally, you can feel free to go with the images, but really notice their effects on the energy body and the emotion.

CHAPTER 7

Energy, Image, Emotion (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 32 min

> *In this profound exploration of imaginal practice, Rob Burbea examines the intricate relationship between energy, image, and emotion in meditation and daily life. He reveals how difficult emotions often trap psychic and subtle physical energy in unhelpful vortices, creating states of depression or agitation. Through imaginal practice, images can arise that create channels for this trapped energy to flow harmoniously, transforming afflictive emotions into creative energy.*
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> *Burbea makes important distinctions between anger and ill will, showing how anger without ill will can actually expand the energy body and awareness when properly recognized and allowed. He explores how images hold multiple shades of emotion simultaneously and possess a richness that transcends simple emotional states, including qualities of duty, meaningfulness, and beauty. Drawing on examples from John Coltrane's intense musical expression, he demonstrates how our emotional and imaginal ranges can be unnecessarily limited by conventional views.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes that in imaginal practice, the relationship is primarily with the imaginal figure itself rather than external objects of emotion, and that images can provide a sense of rightness and even holiness to what we're experiencing. Burbea challenges common assumptions about the primacy of emotion over image, suggesting these phenomena dependently co-arise and influence each other. He frames this work within a broader understanding of Dharma as the practice of flexibility with ways of looking, ultimately revealing the emptiness of all perceptions and opening infinite possibilities for experience.*

Let's explore this whole thing about difficult emotions a little bit more—difficult emotion and the nexus with energy and image.

Difficult emotion has energy in it, but the energy is caught in a vortex, an unhelpful vortex. If that difficult emotion can give rise to an image or an image can constellate there in that or through that, then sometimes what happens is the image functions in a way that the energy that's caught up in the unhelpful vortex in the difficult emotion, the energy harmonizes. It's somehow allowed to flow. In this example, actually in all the examples, it's allowed to flow or it's channeled. The image creates a channel for the energy.

Afflictive or difficult emotions hold and trap energy. There's a lot of energy in them, but it's trapped, it's in the vortex, in some kind of vortex. And that energy—I mean psychic energy. By the way, when I use the word psychic on this retreat, I don't mean extrasensory perception, ESP and all that. I mean of the psyche. So energy of the psyche, psychic. Psychic energy is trapped by the afflictive emotion, in the afflictive emotion, and also the subtle physical energy of the energy body.

Anger is quite interesting, just by way of example. Anger has a lot of energy in it. And let's make a differentiation right away. Anger and ill will, if I just use these words in two different ways. So anger is not necessarily the same as ill will. Ill will means the will, the wanting, the wishing for harm or suffering to befall another. I want them to suffer, I want them to hurt, I want them to be in pain or be humiliated or this or that. That's what I would call ill will. Anger often does include ill will, but it doesn't need to. It's something that can actually be freed from ill will, and I'm going to explain this a little more in a minute.

But anger has a lot of energy in it. And sometimes what happens is a person actually feels quite low energy or a bit depressed or down. And actually what's going on there sometimes is that anger is there, wrapped up or sort of down in the being. Not ill will, but anger. And it's blocking the energy. It's there and it needs recognizing and allowing. And what's happening is somehow a person is not allowing themselves to see that anger and feel it and not allowing the flow of that anger. And that's keeping the whole being in a kind of low energy depressed state.

When the anger is connected with, recognized and allowed as energy, then the energy body can actually expand. Instead of being contracted and down, it can actually expand, become big or even very big and the awareness expand with it. Maybe there will be an image with that. For example, it could be an image of a wrathful deity or a demon or something. Maybe it's without image. But that anger in the energy body is then, when it's felt and allowed and open to and allowed to open the energy body, it is at that point not an afflictive emotion anymore. It's more like creative energy. It's something we can do something with, use to fuel a skillful response.

That state of being low energy or slightly depressed or dull, for some people, it actually becomes kind of a default groove, much as for other people, it's a state of more agitation that becomes a default groove, the habit of the energy system of the psyche of the being. Sometimes a person doesn't even realize that we're in a groove here. They become used to it over time, sometimes over years. They've got nothing much to compare it to. They don't feel depressed. It's just a normal kind of literally depression of the energy. And sometimes, as I said, what's going on there is something, for instance, an-

ger or libido or eros or some kind of psychic energy is not recognized, not felt and contacted and allowed to flow. And then the whole being is in this kind of low energy state where actually there's a lot of energy potentially available. So a person thinks they have this kind of personality, whatever, and something else a little bit different is going on.

If an image constellates from the emotion, that image may be a very high energy image that correlates with, that reflects the energy in the anger. So, for example, an image of a warrior or some other obviously energetic image. But it might arise from the feeling of anger, the energy of anger, or actually from feeling into the low energy contracted state. I'm with this, and then it doesn't feel like there's energy at all, and suddenly this warrior image or this high energy image comes. Interesting.

But if we go into this nexus of emotion, energy, and image a little bit more, I want to point out something important: images hold many shades of emotion. They are actually, if you like, more complex than a single emotion. One image can hold at the same time different qualities, even seemingly contradictory emotions or different shades. It's quite a complex, rich phenomenon, an image. There's a lot of information in it—though I don't know if that's the best word.

So images hold quite a lot by way of emotion and shades of emotion. But an image also holds more than this, and I'll talk more about this as we go on in the retreat. It can hold, for example, a sense of duty. When that liquid was poured in the earlier example, what came with that was a sense of duty and the energy for that duty. So it's more than just emotion. There's some other meaningfulness and beauty and depth that can be tied up—that is usually tied up—in an image.

So there are many shades of emotion, perhaps, not just one emotion, and actually more than just emotion. There is the aspect of soulfulness, which is more than emotion. It's more than heartfulness. This includes, as well as emotion, the psychic resonances, the meaningfulness, the depth, the sense of depth, different kinds of beauty. All of this is one way of saying that an image is, if you like, a richer, more multi-dimensional, more complex and multi-aspected phenomenon than an emotion. Image is very rich.

Now I mentioned in the introductory talk that part of what we are interested in is expanding our range—psychologically for ourselves, but also expanding our emotional range and our range of images that are meaningful and beautiful to us. It's expanding the range of emotion and image. This is, for me, an important aspect of imaginal practice.

It's interesting as an example of where we can get quite limited in our vision, if you like, in our conception regarding emotion and image. John Coltrane, the great jazz saxophone player in the 1950s and 1960s—in his late period it was, I mean all his life it was very high energy, intense music, but in his very last period before he died it was ultra-intense. The jazz world probably hadn't quite experienced anything like that before. It was really, really intense music.

He was friends by that point with the Indian sitar player Ravi Shankar, and they would meet and listen to each other's music and study a little bit. I think John Coltrane was more studying some Indian music. But Ravi Shankar said to him at one point, "I'm disturbed by this, what I hear in your playing—all the anger. It disturbs me."

And John Coltrane was quite visible in his response: "I'm not angry." It wasn't that John Coltrane was out of touch with his anger. It was just that this intensity, that shrieking through the saxophone, the screaming, the roaring—it was not anger in that sense. It wasn't ill will. It wasn't what Ravi Shankar thought it was.

So Ravi Shankar's emotional view or vision of emotional range was much smaller, and his image of what's beautiful and what's possible and what's okay—or even holy—was smaller in this case than John Coltrane's.

There's a distinction here, and it's important to make. Usually with anger, when we feel angry, there are two aspects. We're lost in the object—all the attention is on who or what we're angry at, judging this person or hating them. And we're not so aware of ourselves and our energy. Secondly, usually, unfortunately, when there's anger, there's ill will. We wish in some way harm or that this person suffers in some way.

But in imaginal practice, there can be a kind of anger, a kind of rage even, but one notices with imaginal practice that there isn't the same concern with the object or whoever I'm angry at. So there can be a warrior image, a raging warrior fighting, but the enemy is not even seen in the image. It's not even so important. There is no ill will, so to speak. The attention, the relationship with the image, is more on the imaginal figure itself—entering into that warrior image, for example—not so much with who I want to suffer and who I want to kill.

I don't know what would be a better word here, because I'm not talking about identifying with that or literalizing a warrior image or being tightly identified with that. But there's a kind of entering into those qualities, and that imaginal figure—in this case the warrior—is what one tunes into, not so much the object of the anger or the enemies.

There's a second aspect here in relation to all this, which is alluded to in that example with John Coltrane and Ravi Shankar. There can be a sense with an image that it gives a rightness, it gives a place, and even a kind of holiness—a kind of divinity or archetypal necessity, we could say—to what one is going through, to the image and the way the image then shapes what one is going through.

This is different than an ego justification. Usually when I'm angry I feel I'm completely right and this person is wrong, and the ego just finds ways of wanting to justify itself and its stance and its actions or its obnoxiousness or whatever. This is different. This is more subtle. Through an image that's alive and soulful and meaningful, meaningfulness and place are given to something that we're going through emotionally.

So a person might feel, perhaps in a certain community or group, some alienation or isolation because of some difference or something. And out of that there may be some loneliness, and that's the emotion.

And feeling into that, perhaps a different image arises—maybe a wanderer, a solitary wanderer. This wanderer in the image is alone, perhaps even carries a degree of loneliness, but somehow the emotion is transformed or shaded, given a whole other level of depth and meaningfulness through the image. It's no longer just dukkha, just simple suffering and alienation. It's given something—it's given a kind of beauty.

In the words of James Hillman, "a pain has found its God"—has found its archetype. Through the image, we discover its true place psychically, and it's given this depth and meaningfulness.

Or again, in that image of liquid being poured through the crown of my head—that did not lead to a simple letting go of the situation, a dropping of my view. What came instead was a kind of poise, a firmness, a resolve, an increase in energy, without taking away the difficulty of the situation and its pain. It wasn't just "let go, drop it, be peaceful." Something else entirely.

So we've explored how we can direct our intention toward samadhi, and through that sometimes what's difficult energetically or emotionally dissolves or gradually transforms into the pleasant. That's one possibility.

We can also focus skillfully on the emotions themselves, working with how they reflect in the energy body. Sometimes this can gradually dissolve what is difficult, what's stuck or painful in the midline of the energy body. Sometimes, as I mentioned, emotions become more subtle before they dissolve. Sometimes the emotion remains, perhaps

growing subtler, but a sweetness begins to pervade around it—the sweetness of connection, the sweetness of that pain being truly held. This is a very important possibility to recognize.

And sometimes being with an emotion more loosely gives rise to an image spontaneously. We can also deliberately bring a helpful image in relation to a difficulty. Whether spontaneous or deliberate, this image can dissolve the difficulty, transforming what's challenging in the emotions or energy body.

This opens an interesting area for inquiry: our reactions to these transformations might reveal attitudes and assumptions we hold regarding emotions and our emotional life. When I practice and an emotion dissolves, or slowly transforms and becomes sweeter or turns pleasant, or when an image arises and difficulty becomes lovely, I might think, "Oh, that can't be right" or "That's wrong." What's happening there?

Or perhaps I have the opposite attitude—I'm trying to meditate, trying to cultivate samadhi, and this emotion feels like a nuisance. These reactions to transformations reveal much about our attitudes toward emotions. Do we see emotions as nuisances standing in the way, mere papañca? Or do we assume, at the other extreme, that emotions are somehow sacrosanct—primary aspects of being that hold an essential truth we must always respect and never try to change?

As we meditate in different ways and witness different unfoldings of experience, noticing our reactions to these unfoldings can teach us much about our attitudes and assumptions. We can also observe what we're willing to try and what we instinctively avoid in practice. We can become attached to certain views regarding emotion and energy.

We might also be attached to always needing to know why a difficult emotion is present. I feel sad and want to understand why. Sometimes this is helpful and the cause is clear. But sometimes we simply don't know why the sadness or other emotion is there—it's not obvious. Sometimes sadness arises from being physically low in energy or something out of balance in the physical energy. Sometimes it's even possible that we're picking up another's sadness. It's not mine, yet I'm searching for its cause in my psychology, my experience, my past.

William Blake said that emotions are "divine influxes." This offers quite a different perspective. Sometimes something else flows through us—not so much about another person, but something from another level of being, an influx manifesting as emotion.

Sometimes we become attached to knowing why, always seeking reasons or demanding memories when afflictive emotions arise. When grief or fear can't be connected to something present, we search for a memory. While this can be very helpful at times and sometimes leads to important discoveries, it can also reveal that we're creating stories. To always seek reasons or demand memories places too much pressure on our emotional and energetic life, betraying certain limiting assumptions about how our inner world operates.

So with, again, around the nexus of emotion, energy, and image—a yogi on retreat, this was quite a while ago, reported a dream to me. I can't remember if the dream was from ages before, but it was quite a comic dream. It was a row of naked men standing in a line in the dream, masturbating at the same time and then ejaculating simultaneously. And there was something quite comical about that.

But afterwards she was talking about it and she said, "Oh, it's just life energy." And I said, "Oh, hold on, hold on, hold on. If you just say that, then actually what's happening—you just say, 'Oh, that's just life energy, it's just an expression of life energy, that image'—what's happening is that in that kind of interpretation, it's too broad. We're losing a lot of the subtlety, a lot of the particularities of that image," which was—it's sexual, it's male, there's something comic about it. It's very, very particular. Even more particular than whatever words we might put on it, like "sexual" or "male" or this or that. There's something utterly irreducible about an image.

So in terms of reducing an image to energy—in this case just a vague energy—be careful of that, because we lose a lot of the subtlety and distinction that images contain so naturally.

Sometimes we feel, in our practice or just in our life, there is an emotion, a strong emotion, and then out of that emotion comes an image, as I mentioned before. I might even use the language that the emotion constellates the image. And we tend to think, again, or a person can think, that the emotion is what's primary. But it doesn't actually necessarily imply that the emotion is what's primary and the image is what's secondary—what comes out of the emotion as an expression of it or just a re-presentation of that emotion. Not necessarily.

It's not necessarily the case that the emotion causes the image or constellates the image, even though I might use that language sometimes, or that the psychic energy causes the image. It may be that an emotional upset indicates that an image is operating in the psyche, but we're not yet conscious of it. And the energy of the image is trapped in this vortex because it's not conscious. So the energy is coming from the image—a dif-

ferent way around. Instead of emotion being primary, we could see that image is primary. Instead of energy being primary, we could see the image is primary. Maybe that image is primary and what gives rise to emotion and energy.

So in relation to these three—energy, emotion, image—what's the truth? Which is the cause there? What's the truth? Which is the one that's primary? Well, actually, like so many of these things, they all influence each other. They all, in dharma language, dependently co-arise, or we could say they influence each other. They have an effect on each other. In some ways, we could say they're not really that separate.

And to bring in this other piece that I mentioned at the start of this talk: the views that we have are also part of all that. So the views that I have of this image, the relationship with it, the views that I have of emotion, of energy, of the image, affect what happens. Now this is true generally for our perceptions and our experience, but in this case even more particularly. The view of which of these is primary—whether it's energy, emotion, or image, how I'm conceiving of that in the moment—affects how things unfold. The view that I have of what is primary affects how things unfold. And I can experiment and see that for myself in practice. It's very interesting.

And as I realize that, it opens up a possibility. Can I play with different views? And can I play with different views of what is primary here? And this becomes part of navigating imaginal practice. We'll talk about this more later.

And really, a big part of what we're doing, as I'll come back to in later talks, is we're playing with the conception, the view, that image is primary, that fantasy and mythos are primary. We're playing with that view and seeing what that does.

And just to finish, to put that again in a larger context, which I mentioned yesterday: the larger context is a vision of the dharma, an understanding of the dharma as exactly that—as playing with views, with ways of looking. That's what the dharma is. That's what practice is. We're practicing, through lots of different practices, we're practicing a flexibility of view and of ways of looking. And through that, it's opening the range of our experience and our perception. Those two words I'm using as synonyms—experience and perception, appearance—these all mean the same thing.

Through practicing flexibility and moving between different views and ways of looking, I see that it opens up the range of experience. And I see, "Ah, this way of looking, things appear that way. This other way of looking, they appear a different way." So meditation itself is the practice of different ways of looking. And seeing how appearances, experience, perception changes with different ways of looking.

Through that, I understand the emptiness of any perception. It's not really like this. It looks like that. It seems like that. It appears like that. The perception, the experience is like this because I'm looking in this way. And understanding the emptiness of that thing, of things, of perceptions, of experiences, allows even more flexibility, allows me to practice even more flexibility with ways of looking, because things are empty, because perceptions are empty.

So this flexibility is both the path and a part of the goal. This is already something I said last night, but just to end, it's so important.

We can conceive the Dharma in different ways, and we're free to do that. For much of it, there's not really a right or wrong. It's hard to prove it. So very common nowadays may be that we conceive—that we've kind of heard over and over and formed a conception of the Dharma very loosely—that it's: Try to always be present because this is it. This is life. This is what we're with—this breeze on the cheek, this raisin in the mouth, this footstep, whatever. Try to always be present. You don't want to miss this reality of this moment. This is all there is, this sense experience. And as well as that, try not to cling, try to let go, because everything's impermanent, everything's flowing and changing. So try not to cling and try to let go. And then try to be kind.

Those three aspects might be our sort of loose conception of the Dharma. Or we might have a different conception, as mentioned, that's more influenced by streams like the Advaita tradition, where the goal is always to be in a sense of oneness—all is one—or there is no self, no self is occurring.

Or, as I said, what I would say, what I want to encourage more vision on this retreat is that these—all of those, being present, being in a sense of oneness, the perception of oneness—all of these are modes. They're modes of awareness, modes of sensitivity. They're ways of looking. They're temporary options. And we have a flexibility to move between them and many, many more than that.

Dharma, as I said, is the practice of this flexibility of modes of awareness, of modes of sensitivity, of ways of looking. So that a multiplicity, a range of perception, of experience is available to us as a sense, not as an intellectual idea. We actually sense all the different possibilities for us. We see them, we witness them, we experience them.

Included in this range of these modes of ways of sensitivity, of awareness, this range of ways of looking—included in that, as part of that range, as a subset, if you like—are types and modes and degrees of less clinging. So less clinging in this way or that way, to this degree, to that degree, very deeply. That's included in that.

All this together opens up the possibilities of perception, the perceptual possibilities, and all of it shows us the emptiness of what we perceive, the emptiness of things, selves and things. That brings more and more freedom to the degree that we understand that emptiness in the heart, in the being. It opens up, it allows us even more flexibility with the perceptual possibilities—the way we perceive the self, the way we perceive others, the way we perceive things and the world and the cosmos. In a way, there's a kind of infinite range to that.

So this whole central teaching of the Buddha of not clinging—of clinging being a cause of suffering and being central in the Four Noble Truths—it's not so much that that's a way of living, trying to live without clinging, but non-clinging, what it really offers us is a range of ways of looking. There are lots of different ways of not clinging. Lots of different modes of that.

In the range of ways of looking, it includes going with the flow, being present, resting in awareness, if you know people that talk about that. Many, many more, many ways of looking.

So here on this retreat, we're also practicing this flexibility, this malleability, this multiplicity and extension of the range of ways of looking, modes of awareness, not just one approach, one track. And part of that—part of that included in that flexibility, as I said—is playing with the very view and the conception regarding images. That's a central thread or possibility of a way of looking and what forms ways of looking in imaginal practice.

CHAPTER 8

What is an 'Image'? (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h01

> *In this second part of his exploration of imaginal practice, Rob Burbea delves deeper into what constitutes an 'image' in the context of spiritual development. He examines how images function as archetypal figures that are irreducible, complex, and alive with autonomy, possessing a vertical dimension that connects the human with the divine. Burbea discusses how we both create and are created by these images, drawing parallels with Jewish mystical traditions and the Lurianic Kabbalah's understanding of humanity's role in creating new vessels for divinity.*
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> *The talk explores how images can manifest as myths (such as Christ, Horus, Eros and Psyche, or Persephone), memories transformed into timeless encounters, or even people we meet who become theophanic - appearances of the divine. Burbea distinguishes imaginal engagement from papañca (proliferative thinking), emphasizing how images require a relationship that honors their mystery and unfathomability rather than reducing them to literal interpretations.*
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> *A key insight presented is that image, fantasy, and mythos are woven into sense perception itself, not added afterwards. This challenges bare attention practices that attempt to 'shave off' these imaginal levels, suggesting instead that recognizing and skillfully empowering our imaginal relationship with perception enables profound soul-making. The practice involves entertaining flexible conceptual frameworks that neither dismiss images as meaningless nor literalize them concretely, but hold them in a playful, sophisticated philosophical middle way.*

So I want to continue in this attempt to fill out and elaborate a little what I mostly mean on this retreat. I want to talk about image, fantasy, mythos, and give more—hopefully a fuller sense of the direction and the inclination, the attitude, the orientation involved in the use of that word, those words, and also what's included in the scope of the meaning of those words for the most part.

Just to recap briefly, we said that an image, in the sense that we're using that word, doesn't have to be visual at all. It may or may not be. It could come through any sense in an imaginal sense, or not so much tied to any sense at all, but still operating potently, powerfully, deeply in the psyche as a symbol, as an image with a lot of resonance.

There may or may not be dialogue involved, and that can happen in different forms. The ways that we communicate or are communicated with, the ways that we interact with an image, the ways that we know an image—there's a wide range of possibility there, and it may not be verbal. Other ways of interacting may be more appropriate.

We also said that in the sense that we're using, what's absolutely characteristic of an image is the sense of soulfulness that comes with it, that it bears. With that, it's not so much about understanding, about taking it concretely, literally. It's more—we're talking more about, if you like, poetic images that are not reducible so much. They have a certain mystery and ambiguity to them, an inexhaustibility to them.

We also differentiated a little between so-called narrative images and what I'm calling iconic or poetic images, which are not so temporal. We pointed out that images don't necessarily need to come in meditation—they can come outside, and they may be kind of more ethereal in their substance or more solid seeming in their substance. All this is fine.

Many images are, in fact, one-offs, but they may be connected to other images, so it's the same sort of constellation appearing in slightly different forms. Some are just one-offs, but generally speaking, images often need repeating to slowly absorb and, with small movements, cumulative movements, allow a different sensibility and an opening of the conceiving really of self, of life, of world and of practice.

And then we talked a little bit about images sometimes having a kind of archetypal dimension to them and seeming to have that whole richness, and other times not. And sometimes when they don't, it's still very beautiful, very healing, very powerful and important. But on this retreat, as I said, the inclination, what I'm trying to set up is a bit more interest, a bit more leaning towards the more iconic, poetic, archetypal images that are pregnant with soulfulness—or in our relationship to them we create and allow the soulfulness, this soul making. I'm going to talk a lot more about what I mean by soulfulness and soul making.

So just to continue then: this word archetype, I will use it of course now and then, but in a way I prefer really the meaning of archetypal as an adjective—an archetypal image. But even that word really, I may not use it that much, we'll see, but really what it sums up is, and what's meant by that, is a pointing to and inclining towards a sense of view and attitude to images that has to do with a way of seeing them, a way of conceiving of them, and a way of valuing of them.

So it's less a category. Rather than a universal category, it's something very individual. An archetypal image, in that sense—and it's just an adjective there—is individual. It's not the warrior archetype. It's this warrior that I see, that I'm interacting with in this image, or this wanderer rather than the wanderer, or whatever it is.

But really what's summed up in that word archetypal, if I do end up using it a lot on this retreat, is really this collection of qualities and aspects and dimensions and values. So it is individual and it is irreducible. We cannot reduce this archetype to something else, some smaller unit or component. And it is not in itself a small unit and component that we can then separate from other ones.

Sometimes, especially in some streams of the Dharma, people really like those kind of explanations of things that chop everything up into simple units and compounds. It can be really helpful, so there's the aggregates and there's the process of dependent origination in time and these units and moments happening, and it's all fine, but it's limited to an extent. And as I will actually point out, it's a particular kind of way of understanding things, trying to analyze things that way.

But in this collection, if you like, of aspects or qualities that we're really pointing to when we talk about the kind of images that we're interested in on this retreat is this irreducibility and this inability to be fully explained, to be fully interpreted. Actually, that word explain is explain—to make plain, to make flat, to flatten out. We're not interested in flattening out these images, rather the opposite.

They are—we feel them to be, when they're alive, these kinds of images—complex. They are complex. There's something elusive about them, E-L-U-S-I-V-E, in the sense I cannot quite fully grasp them or fathom them, fathom them and their meaning fully. They're in a sense unfathomable, just like a person is in many ways complex, elusive, unfathomable, or an animal.

And just like a person or animal, these images are alive. This is the kind of view of images, the relationship with images that we're wanting to encourage, or that one senses in certain images. Unfathomability, elusiveness, complexity, aliveness—they're alive in some way and they have some kind of autonomy. They have a certain kind of autonomy. They're not just part of me that I can control. Not that simple. They have some certain kind of autonomy.

And we could say we sense that they're real in some way, but their kind of reality is not the same as the solidity of this chair or whatever. It's real in some kind of different way, but not unreal. So we're being a little more sophisticated and more nuanced in our whole conception of reality.

And hopefully we'll come back to this more and more as we go through the retreat.

In some way we sense or entertain the idea, the vision, that these images we're calling archetypal as a shorthand have some kind of reality—in some way they are real. We sense that they are deeply important. Even if we can't quite put our finger on why or how exactly they're deeply important, they feel deeply important.

In a way, we could say the image itself involves our entertaining a view about the image. And this is for some people a bit of a stretch, but it involves our entertaining a view, and included in that view is a view of the self and of the cosmos. Wrapped up in this sense of the image is the entertaining of a conceptual view, which could be quite vague—it probably is quite vague—regarding the self and regarding the cosmos.

It's, if you like, a richer, more multidimensional view than the view of, say, modern scientific reductionism, for example, or what they call physicalism, which is a very flat, one-dimensional view. It's a view that tries to explain the movement and behavior of matter in space and time dependent on physicality—other matter in space and time and the way it interacts. It's quite one-dimensional.

Or maybe we add another dimension and view things—as we tend to do in the modern worldview or cosmological view—as only personal or only social. So this image, or my being, my life, is viewed in purely humanistic terms or purely social terms, or purely as a result of the past or the result of matter. All this is what I'm calling flat, one-dimensional.

Rather than that, or rather including that but opening up further, with this sense of images is what I want to call a vertical dimension. There is the sensing, or we could say the giving—both the giving to the image a sense of a vertical dimension. I'm going to come back to this hopefully later on.

So what do I mean, just for now? I mean there is a sense, or I'm entertaining the view, that this image, or my person, my personhood, or my life, the threads of my life, the soul events of my life—we're entertaining the view of vertical dimension, which means something like that this image, my person, my life and its soul events are mirroring or echoing archetypal figures, if you like, or we could even say divine figures. They are in some way rooted in archetypal figures or rooted in the divine, so that there's a kind of vertical spectrum. We can talk about different places on that vertical spectrum—the more archetypal or divine, the more so-called human and material.

We'll elaborate on this later, but that can be a sense within or with an image. One has that sense of something shining through or having its origins or roots in something else, some other dimensionality, if you like, so that it's echoing, mirroring, or rooted or ori-

ginating in that. It's as if the image and the experience of the image, or my being, my personhood, my life unfolding and its trajectories and events and all that in my personality, is existing, if you like, on different levels at once that are mirroring each other, echoing each other.

Saying all that, and as I said, I'm aware that something like that might, for some people, feel like really a stretch. I'm going to come back to this, but really to emphasize—and for me this is important—that if we speak of gods, I realize I am creating these gods. That's not usually how we think about gods, is it? I am creating these gods. The psyche is creating these gods.

This is interesting philosophically because most people will be either in the view that either something is real—and by real they mean objectively existing, independent of the mind, independent of the psyche, if you like, independent of the way of looking—either it's real that way, in that objective, independent way, or we create them. And yet, is there another way of understanding? I'm saying emptiness really helps, and other philosophical openings are possible. Primarily, it's really the understanding of emptiness as I would understand it in its depths—to really understand it's not this either-or. We can, so to speak, acknowledge and recognize that this is fabrication. We are creating these gods, and it doesn't mean they are unreal.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, in a famous and very revered text—a huge text called the Zohar—somewhere in there it says, "God"—remember this is an ancient monotheistic religion—but it says somewhere in there in the mystical text, "God is mystically dependent on humanity's liturgical praise and acts." So somehow humanity's praise, humanity's prayerfulness and reverence and devotion, and also the action of humanity, somehow creates God.

Very easily, some people will hear that and reduce it to a metaphor. A bit like when some people talk about brahmavihāras, which sometimes is translated as divine abodes. "Oh, that's what 'God' means—that we create it that way by being..." It only refers to a kind of—it's just another way of saying that's really good to be that way. Can I hear something like that—"God is mystically dependent on humanity's liturgical praise and acts"—without reducing it to a metaphor and kind of disempowering it?

There's a kind of razor's edge of view here between concretized belief and dismissal.

If I share something—actually, some years ago when I was thinking about it, several people had asked me repeatedly, "Will you write a book about emptiness?" And I kept saying no. For some reason I began to somehow more seriously entertain the idea, but I

knew it was going to be a huge amount of work, and I had also felt in some ways that I had put a lot of that out in talks, and I had moved on in terms of what I was researching and exploring and excited about and wanted to share and express.

A friend and I—he was actually a dharma teacher—were talking about this, and we had been talking about imaginal practice. He said, in regard to the book and my unsureness, "Well, do the gods want it?"

Do the gods want it?

And the answer was, I don't know. I don't know whether they want it. I don't have any sense. I felt very ambivalent. I didn't know.

And somehow—well, this could be a very long story. I'll cut it short. I began writing. I began working on it and was absolutely right. It was very difficult in a lot of ways, very challenging, not just because of the size of the task, but because I had so much else on in terms of work. And also, as I said, because for me, in a way, I felt like there were other things that I wanted to share and explore and express and research.

But in the writing of it, then feeling the challenges, the different challenges involved, I decided actually to relate to those challenges as practice—but not through emptiness practice, through imaginal practice. And so feeling into the whole process of writing and the challenges more imaginally, and taking that to the cushion and working with imaginal practice in meditation.

And somehow out of that came a sense of images in relationship to the book, a whole range of images. Very lovely, very moving. And it's almost like the work and the attitude and the experience birthed these gods. And then these gods fed back into supporting and encouraging and pushing, in some cases, the process of writing.

So what came first there? There was a kind of recognition that these gods had a powerful effect on me and, if you like, guided and encouraged and supported and cajoled and pushed and prodded, recognizing that—yes, and I create them.

So this has a mirror, as I said, in some traditions, and one is the Jewish mystical tradition. In another stream of that tradition called the Lurianic Kabbalah after Isaac Luria, a sixteenth-century mystic in Palestine, he had elaborated a system—it's not entirely his, but metaphorically in terms of cosmology and creation, it's not really a temporal scheme at all—that the original vessels that were created to embody and contain and radiate the aspects of God, of the divine, were created but were actually not able to

withstand the intensity of the influx of divine light. And so they shattered under the force of divine light coming into them. And they shattered into shards that were then scattered in the universe.

And part of, if you like, the task of consciousness, of humanity, is to recognize these shards that contain divinity and, so to speak, raise them up back to a kind of divinity. But in doing that, create new vessels. So not reconstruct the original vessels, but actually create new vessels—new, if you like, containers or aspects or faces of the divine. So this is what humanity does.

So humanity, through our acts, our doings—more importantly, even than that, through our perception and interpretation of self, other, texts, tradition, world—through acts and perceptions and interpretations of humanity, we are actually creating new vessels, if you like, creating new faces of God or new gods, new archetypes.

So there's this recognition there that through action and through—again, everything hinging on perception—through perception, interpretation and ways of looking, that humanity is in some sense creating the divine and the faces of the divine, or we could say the gods.

So if you know a little bit about philosophy, that's a different conception than the more Platonic idea of archetypes or ideas, where they tend to be quite fixed. There's no changing of them. And yet it's not a kind of postmodern nihilism—just if we create things, everything's just meaningless and has no value whatsoever.

So as I said, there's some kind of razor's edge here, which if I can hold that line and balance there between this idea of either they're real or we create them—actually what's a razor's edge, what's a very thin line, opens up huge, huge expanses.

So I am not the same as my gods and my demons, my daimons. They're not the same. Rather, they depend on each other. The self, my life and my gods, my daimons, these figures that come to me—they give life to each other, they shape each other, they're dependent on each other.

We could then say the image is never separate from the way of looking at it. It's never separate from the mind state, from the reaction to the image, the relationship with it, the conceptual framework that's being entertained in relationship to it. Or in Dharma language, the image, this imaginal figure, this god or archetypal image, whatever I want to call it, this daimon, is always dependently arising with the way of looking, with the mind state, with the reaction, with the relationship, with the conceptual framework.

Or to say that in yet another way, it's not yet an image in the sense that I mean that word—it's not yet an image until the relationship with it comes alive in certain ways. So this character that I have in a dream or this image that comes to me in meditation is not yet an image in the way that I mean it until the relationship with it is alive in certain ways. And I may or may not be aware of having that kind of relationship with it. That's also really interesting.

So for a lot of people, moving in life and actually entertaining very, very vaguely certain ideas and relationships to something in life—a perception or a situation or their self or something—not quite aware of what the relationship with it is, what the conceptual framework really is, not aware that it's imaged.

So, again, another way of saying this is that we're playing with conceptual frameworks—and emphasis on the word playing because this razor's edge is a very playful point of balance. It's not rigid and concretized. There's a lot of fluidity, flexibility, lightness, ease to enter in and out of different conceptual frameworks.

I think I've mentioned in several other talks that our word "idea"—I-D-E-A—comes from the Greek word *eidos*, E-I-D-O-S, which implies not just idea, but also what we look at things through—the way we see. So we look at things through, we look at this image or I look at the situation in my life or I look at my journey through life or I look at myself or the self of another through the conceptual framework, through the *eidos*.

With enough flexibility or deep understanding of emptiness or philosophical skill, if you like, we can be free to play with different conceptual frameworks. In this case, we're playing with a conceptual framework of: what if we do not dismiss this image as just the result of random neurological firing? What if we don't dismiss the image? What if we don't literalize it?

The opening of the conceptual framework is: rather than close it down by dismissing it or by literalizing it—let's say if I keep having this image of a solitary wanderer, it means, "Oh, you should go traveling. You should maybe take a walking holiday. Go hiking in the mountains or something"—not necessarily literalizing it. We're playing with the idea of not literalizing it, not dismissing it, not interpreting it rigidly or narrowly as a sign: "It means this. It represents that."

So we're playing with what happens when I don't dismiss it, when I don't literalize it, when I don't interpret it rigidly as a sign. And then also playing with the idea, the conceptual framework, if you like: what if I entertain the idea that the image is primary?

In other words, this image is not necessarily reflecting or expressing my history. Maybe I see a sad child, the image of a sad child, or a child alone, and I don't immediately assume, "Oh, it must be referring to my childhood in some aspect that I either already know or that I didn't realize—that there was some sadness there or some loneliness there." It might be, but what if I don't just jump into that view, which would be that the history is primary, the memory is primary, the material reality is primary, and the image is reflecting that or reflecting some psychological wound or something. What if I play with the idea—turn that around, as we were talking yesterday evening—and say, play with the idea that the image is primary, that it's archetypal in all the ways that I unfolded what's contained in that sort of shorthand word. That it's primary, that it's archetypal.

I play with trusting these images. Trusting them, trusting their intention and their nature, if you like. And part of that trusting is including in my conceptual framework a different or a more open idea in relationship to causality and what's called *telos*. I'll explain what that means.

Both when I'm viewing an image, but also with more and more imaginal practice, this also relates to how I'm viewing my life. So regarding images or regarding my life, myself—we can see very easily, everyone would agree, the past gives rise to the present. The past causes the present. That's one idea about causality and very important. We have to see that. Of course, the present is dependent on the past. A Dharma practitioner needs to be on the journey of exploring dependent arising and fabrication, which I've talked about a lot in other places and written about.

So not just that the past causes the present, but the present causes the present. This way of looking, this relationship, this reaction in the present causes—it shapes the present, fabricates the present, and I absolutely need to understand that. Not just the past, but the present also creates the present.

And then thirdly, there's this idea—there's a Greek word, *telos*, T-E-L-O-S, aim or goal or end, if you like—that in some strange way, the future, we could say, causes the present. That there's something that moves towards some—let's use the word fulfillment—but some end, some goal, some fruition.

So that the past causes the present. Yes, of course, obvious. The present causes the present. We really need to understand that. And we're entertaining the idea that in some way images may have something to do, imaginal figures may have something to do with or may contain within them some kind of *telos*. They're showing us something

or pulling us towards or inviting us towards something—goading us sometimes towards something of what we are growing towards, if you like, what we are moving towards, our trajectory.

In a way, they're a little bit—Corbin talks about the angel out ahead. James Hillman talks about grappling with the angels of one's destiny and how in the psychotherapeutic or psychoanalytic process—we could say also just in terms of Dharma practice—a certain amount of practice and certain amount of suffering and neurosis is dealt with, gone, seen through, learned how to dissolve, etcetera. And then maybe there's a whole other level of this grappling with the angels of one's destiny. It's not something I necessarily just want to dissolve or get rid of or, "Oh, that's *dukkha*, so I'll neutralize it and come to some kind of more simple, equanimous place."

So that's involved in our playing, in the conceptual framework that we're playing with—this idea or this at least admitting or sensing the possibility of something telistic here, if that's the word, something of *telos*, something of where we are drawn, pulled to.

And as I mentioned earlier, there's otherness—this sense or regard of an imaginal figure as somehow other. This otherness is a necessary facet of the image.

Remember what I described of the liquid being poured into my head, and there's a sense I couldn't see who was doing it or sense who it was, but it was somehow other, and that was significant, what gave it power.

Just as with emotions and our emotional life—and again, this is something really important. If you haven't seen this already in your practice or explored this, I would really recommend. We see with emotions how much the conception of emotions, emotional life, emotional goals or directions—how much that whole conceptual framework around emotions affects the unfolding of emotions and what even comes up emotionally.

So just as that is the case with our emotional life, which we can explore and find out for ourselves whether that's true with emotions—it takes a certain amount of courage, willingness, open-mindedness—just as the case with emotions, the same is true with what presents itself as image, and how an image that arises unfolds.

So the view that we have, the conceptual framework, we could say it stimulates, it inspires, it condones certain images, it accommodates and supports certain images, or not. Always, always, always the conceptual framework is an immensely significant factor.

A few more things. When we're still talking about what's included in this, when we say image, it may be that an image is an actual myth. In other words, it's not just something arising just for us, but it may be, for example, the myth of Christ and that whole—for me, I wasn't raised in that tradition. There's a real depth and freshness and beauty for me and moves me immensely. I never felt oppressed by it or bored by it because maybe I didn't grow up with it, I don't know. But that's, if you like, a myth—all that with the crucifixion and the resurrection and the betrayal and the mercy, the beauty of all that.

So it could be that that myth or aspects of that myth are what we're meditating on. Or from another tradition, the myth of Horus, the falcon god, son of Isis in Egyptian mythology—I find a very, very beautiful myth. They are very complex, rich. Or from the classical Greek tradition, perhaps Eros, the myth of Eros and Psyche, the love affair of Eros and Psyche, or the myth of Persephone, who was raped by Hades, the god of the underworld, and dragged down to the underworld. And then her mother, Demeter, was tormentedly searching for her, searching, searching, going through all kinds of suffering. It's a long story, but in the end, Persephone lives half or some portion of the year in the underworld as queen of the underworld and wife of Hades and some other portion of the year in this world.

So really the point is an image for us may be an actual myth. It may be something that we really feel when we hear that story and feel into it. We really feel a lot of resonance and depth and it moves us and it's alive for us.

Actually, in those four images, four myths I just mentioned—Christ, Horus, Eros and Psyche, and the myth of Persephone—one thing that's striking to me is how we can have a sense of understanding those myths. I understand sort of the allegory there or what's being communicated to a certain extent. And yet they always retain, and maybe this is characteristic of images and myths that survive and survive with potency for the psyche, this mixture of "I can understand"—and also in different ways. There's not just a mono-understanding that's possible. They're interpretable in lots of different ways, applicable to our lives in lots of different ways.

But at the same time that there can be sense of understanding or understandings, they always retain a kind of unfathomability. There's always this mystery. I cannot quite get to the bottom of everything that this myth or this image is pregnant with. So that's one thing to notice about those.

The other thing is the mixture within that myth of redemption, if you like, and suffering—in the Christ myth, in the Horus myth, if you know it. Beautiful. In the myth of Eros and Psyche and in the myth of Persephone, they're not so simple in terms of the re-

lationship with suffering and freedom from suffering. I'm just saying that because that's so central in Buddha Dharma, this question of suffering and ending suffering—it's something I'm going to come back to. But often myths are not quite so simple in regard to suffering.

That's actually a very complex question. Historically, some of you will know, some people come down on one side of that question: never let go of the suffering. The suffering is always given a place. And some people, for example James Hillman, and some people will come down on the other side that through skillful imaginal work suffering is completely transcended—for example, someone like Corbin, Henri Corbin. So I want to come back to that, it's a very important question.

But an image for us may be an actual myth, that's completely fine. It may be also that a memory from our life can become an image for us. So again, what do I mean by image? It's not just, "Oh, I remember that because I can remember that that's what happened. I remember that event in my memory, and therefore it's an image because it's a visual image in my mind." No, I mean an image in the full sense that I'm talking about tonight—imbued with all that meaningfulness and depth and resonance and timelessness and everything that we've alluded to.

So any memory—sometimes, for example, it could be an erotic encounter, something in lovemaking and just some

moment in that becomes or comes, stays with us in a kind of timeless way. It's almost like it's transported or removed from the flow of time and exists for us, pregnant and beautiful and deep and mysterious as a kind of timeless image. That memory of something that happened in my life becomes infused with soul, or is infused with soul, soulfulness, soul-making, and becomes image for us.

Now, of course, memory is picked up and imbued with energy and significance when we're in the throes or the vortex of papañca, this kind of crazy ego proliferation mind that most human beings know very well. There's also characteristic there—often or can be—a memory is picked up. There's a lot of energy and significance attached to this memory, but there's a difference there. This is really important.

In papañca, everything is so damn literal. It just means what we think it means, and it's shrunken and small and concretized and literal. There's no soulfulness in it. There's no depth and resonance and beauty. The ego is very identified, taken very literally, and so it's all wrapped up in ego identity. It's very, if you like, lacking in other-dimensionality—in this depth and resonances, timelessness, cosmology. And of course, in papañca, there's contraction, generally speaking. There's not an opening out of the

psyche or the energy body. The energy body is contracted, the psyche is actually contracted. It's very different than when memory becomes image. When a memory becomes papañca, quite a different experience.

So it could be a myth, could be a memory. It's also important to point out that images can appear in stages or develop in stages. This is actually quite common. Maybe over one meditation session, you get a little bit and then a bit more is added and then a bit more, or over several sessions, or sometimes over really, really long periods of time—sometimes even decades, amazingly. So it doesn't necessarily all come at once. There can be a sort of stage-like process sometimes there.

Images can also, so to speak, cross-pollinate. In other words, we might, for example, read something or hear someone else's image or see something or someone or read a myth or hear a myth, and the image contained in what we see, read, or hear plants a seed, if you like, or becomes a seed. Maybe that becomes or joins an image that we already had, or gives rise—as a seed gives rise—to an image for us, becomes an image for us, or joins another image that we already had and makes a kind of combination. These things are fertile and there's a possibility of cross-pollination. That's not wrong at all.

So an image can also be a person I know, as I've alluded to. It can be people we know or people we just meet. This could be someone alive or someone dead. It could be someone famous or not. Could be a teacher, as I said. Again, we might know them or just know about them, so to speak.

Where there is love and beauty and meaningfulness in a relationship, whether we know this person directly or we know about them or we just met them, where there is love and beauty and meaningfulness and a sense of depth and resonance, then that relationship is infused with image, fantasy, mythos. So that's just another way of saying the same thing, or recognizing: if this person, there's a lot of love and there's a sense of real beauty and meaningfulness here for me in depth, then that's another way of saying, look, at that time, an image is alive and working in my perception of this person. And there's no problem with that. The relationship is infused with that and it's beautiful and necessary.

And as I said, sometimes it can be someone we just meet or just see on a film or something. One student was telling me they were actually quite down for a short period. And then they heard a woman speak—she was an activist. And they heard her give a lecture. I think it was even on the Internet, on YouTube or something. I can't remember. And the depression lifted immediately. Why? Partly because this activist was talking, the woman was talking, and her presence and her delivery and something coming

through—she was seen as image, and it triggered the soulfulness and the aliveness of the soulfulness. It triggered a fantasy in the person listening. And where there is aliveness and soulfulness like that,

That kind of depression lifts. We come alive again.

From all of this, it becomes clear that we shouldn't assume images exist somehow a priori, locked away somewhere in the psyche as if it were closed. Rather, the psyche will take anything from our life, from our experience, and make it archetypal if it can, if it needs to. Rather than images being stored somewhere and then simply arising, there's a process actively imbuing perception. This is more what I tend to mean when I use the word fantasy—it's imbuing perception and the sense of life itself.

Through this process, others can become for us what I call theophany—T-H-E-O-P-H-A-N-Y—which means something like an appearance of the divine. Other beings, whether they are teachers, lovers, friends, people we know or strangers, can through skillful imaginal work become what I hesitate to call—because it carries too many new age connotations—channels or faces of the divine. Henri Corbin speaks beautifully about the angelic function of beings.

In such relationships, there's tremendous richness, depth, resonance, beauty, and meaningfulness. Something is ignited, sparked in the soul, in the psyche, often through eros as well. They become for us somehow divine, a face or showing of the divine, somehow angelic. This ties directly into what I mentioned earlier about the vertical dimension.

We perceive that person materially and obviously human, a result of their past conditioning. Yet simultaneously, without discounting this human dimension, we sense other planes—or more accurately, other levels of perception. Everything, as I've said, hinges on perception. We become able to perceive other levels of their being that are more divinely rooted, reflecting, echoing, or mirroring the divine. It's coming through this being—their expression, their body, their speech perhaps, their love.

Now, we know this is a perception, and as dharma practitioners, we should know that all perception is empty and fabricated. So there's something philosophically sophisticated happening here. It's a perception, it's empty, it's fabricated, and yet it has tremendous power. We're not saying this means it's not real at all.

This relates very much to tantra practice as it's practiced in the Tibetan tradition—practicing seeing this place or that person or one's own person as a Buddha, as a deity. The emphasis is on practice: one is practicing seeing in a certain way. This is actually

how Buddhas see in that tradition. One practices seeing this or that or all things as divine. I'll return to this interface with tantra, the connections and differences, hopefully later.

Through all this work with theophany and levels of perception, with the vertical dimension, life changes. Life itself, experience itself, one's own narrative, this moment of experience comes to be seen as image. What does it mean to see life as image? To see it through that lens, to sense it through that lens with a different sensibility?

This could be one's personal life—seeing one's narrative, one's personality, what one is called to express, the events of one's life, all as image. Something that could seem very mundane might suddenly be revealed this way. I remember studying one day, reading different texts, then going to practice—this was some years ago—looking for images, but then realizing that the image actually alive right now was this day itself, or the portion spent at my desk with these texts.

The whole activity—trying to make connections, trying to open up horizons and paradigms, trying to absorb and learn from others, from beautiful minds and hearts that I respect, being connected with the tradition that way—that itself was image. It was somehow sensed as image and infused with divinity. Me, the activity of studying, the tradition, the connection, the effort to open up ideas and push horizons, the whole room I was in—all of it was imbued with this sense of theophany. The whole thing was itself imaged, including my life and all of that.

So it can happen this way. Something very mundane gets imbued with a different sense, connecting with other levels. It could be one's personal life, as I've described, or it could be something more universal or cosmological, which we'll explore more later.

As in tantric practice, we can see this space right now as a Buddha realm, as a mandala, as a divine palace—feeling it, sensing it that way.

It has another dimensionality to it. There are all kinds of possibilities there. We'll come back to this. But the point is, eventually life can be seen as image more and more, or in and out of that perspective. And that could be just in relation to one's personal life, or more in relation to life in the sense of universal life around one and this world, or a mixture of the two.

But again, in that second one, in the sense of what happens to my view and my sense of this world around me right now, this moment around me right now in this hall—it's not necessary that an image in that respect is coming as a visual object, but it's how this here is seen. The way of looking at it renders it or sees pregnant within it already myth-

os, fantasy, sees it, feels it, senses it as image with everything that that means—not some other thing appearing spontaneously out of the psyche or deliberately, but this moment now seen as image, felt as image.

This is important in all kinds of ways. One of them is just a recognition as an insight here. We need to recognize, and with practice, it's possible: image, fantasy, mythos is actually in sense data. It's woven into perception. A lot of the time, maybe not always, but in the senses that I'm using, a lot of the time, it's woven into the sense data. It's not so much added later on.

I'm going to fill this out later on. I'll just mention it now. In another talk, I'll fill it out, but I'll just put it there as I see. When we talk about mindfulness, but especially when we talk about things like bare attention—just feeling the breeze on the cheek, just the raisin taste in the mouth, etc.—the intention there for that kind of practice of bare attention, of what's often communicated as simple mindfulness, the intention there is a sort of shaving off down to something that's supposedly bare, but there's a shaving off of these other levels of image, fantasy, mythos.

So there is, within that kind of stance of practice, a shaving off—that's a good way of putting it—of the imaginal levels, the fantasy, the mythos that can imbue sense data. The idea is: can I be with just the sense data itself in its bare form? That's a very, very valid practice to a certain extent. But it's a different gear than what often happens in life, especially when there's love or when we have a sense of meaningfulness, of depth, of beauty, or certain kinds of soul beauty, let's say. It's a different gear to be in bare attention.

Then other practices—like, for example, the range of emptiness practices or when there's samatha, when samadhi is deepening, or other dharma practices—we could say they fabricate even less than so-called bare attention, than mindfulness practice. So that's a different gear as well. Not only is it not fabricating this soulful aspect of image, fantasy, mythos; it's not even fabricating other aspects of experience. These practices—emptiness practice, samadhi practice, metta practice—as they get going and deepen, they fabricate even less than so-called bare attention practices. There's a whole spectrum of less and less fabrication there.

But if we're not practicing bare attention, if we're not practicing emptiness and samadhi, or any times we're not practicing bare attention or emptiness or samadhi, etc., there will tend to be something wrapped up in our perceiving. And a lot of that time it is what I'm calling image, fantasy, mythos.

So there's something about recognizing that that constitutes a really important insight. I recognize it—oh, this is something I need to acknowledge and understand and feel into and see its effects. I recognize it; that's an insight. And then I can also empower it at times and empower that kind of imbuing or involvement or relationship with perception so that there is this soul-making, this soulfulness—and I'm going to fill out what that means.

For the sake of soulfulness, for the sake of soul-making, we can actually empower that understanding and that involvement with perception. Empowering things in that way or allowing that to have its power—that partly hinges on our playing with and entertaining views and conceptual frameworks, on lightly entertaining views and conceptual frameworks regarding images and what we perceive, as I've tried to explain a little bit.

So again, this willingness to play and entertain certain conceptual frameworks, views, to stretch things, open them out, not just immediately dismiss, etc., as I've explained—that gives power to something which enables the soulfulness to go deeper and the soul-making to happen in a very beautiful and fertile way. It hinges partly on this playing with the conceptual frameworks. Really important—I'm saying that over and over.

CHAPTER 9

What is an 'Image'? (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h18

> *In this foundational talk from the Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea carefully defines what he means by 'image,' 'fantasy,' and 'mythos' in contemplative practice. He explores how images transcend visual perception, encompassing auditory, bodily, and even non-sensory experiences that carry profound meaningfulness. Drawing on examples from meditation practice, Burbea distinguishes between narrative images (sequential, causal) and iconic/poetic images (timeless, archetypal), emphasizing how the latter cultivate soulfulness through resonance, beauty, and depth rather than literal interpretation.*
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> *Burbea references various Buddhist practices including the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's body contemplations and mettā meditation, showing how imagination serves different purposes across traditions. He introduces James Hillman's understanding of archetypal images as 'universal, transhistorical, basically profound, generative, highly intentional, and necessary,' while emphasizing that we both sense and give archetypal value to images. This sophisticated approach recognizes images as empty of inherent existence yet profoundly meaningful for soul-making practice.*
>
> *The talk establishes crucial foundations for imaginal practice, emphasizing soulfulness over dramatic content, mystery over complete understanding, and the transformative power of dwelling with images that open dimensions beyond the purely personal or historical.*

I'd like to talk about what we really mean—at least what I mean—when I use words like image, fantasy, mythos. What's included in that meaning, what an image is, and particularly the kinds of direction, inclination, or way of relating that I'm most interested in exploring. I want to begin to fill that out and shape it a little.

In the opening talk, I enumerated a list of relatively familiar uses of the imagination in life and practice that many of you will be familiar with or at least have heard of. There's really a range in how imagination gets used in different instances or by different people in certain practices.

Just to reiterate briefly, there is the whole use of imagination for visioning—whether it's visioning the future of a retreat center like Gaia House and where it wants to be in twenty years' time, or visioning a zero-carbon future for society. There's the use of the imagination in the contemplation of death and the contemplation of the body parts that

the Buddha teaches in the mindfulness discourse, the *Satipatthana Sutta*. There's the use of imagination taking any object that may not have any significance at all—like a candle or a stone or anything else—and looking at it and then visualizing it internally just for the purposes of quieting the mind, gathering the focus for developing concentration.

Then there's the use of the imagination in practices like metta or compassion, where we imagine in some way the so-called benefactor or friend or neutral person. We imagine this person as the image of them, and it's really just an aid—the imagination there is just an aid to cultivating this quality in our heart, so that it's got an object and we can direct the metta. That way our heart's quality of metta is cultivated, is nourished through that practice using the imagination.

There's also the use of an image of, say, Kuan Yin or Jesus or Mary or Tara—could be anything, some kind of figure or deity. What's happening there, or a big part of what's happening, is we hold that image in the imagination and it starts to resonate with the qualities of compassion, let's say if it's Kuan Yin or Jesus. In that way, those qualities—those same qualities that that deity or figure embodies, manifests, expresses—get empowered in our heart. So oftentimes the imagination is used for that purpose in that direction.

Then there are instances in the Pali Canon where the Buddha recommends a practice called recollection of the Buddha, which again involves imagination. That can bring inspiration when there's lack of inspiration or energy when there's lack of energy. So it's serving that purpose.

Some of you will be familiar with using an image or a memory to trigger feelings of well-being, feelings of joy or happiness even, or energy in the body. People often use that as a little trick when they're doing samadhi practice, and it's completely fine. The image then can be let go of in those instances once the feeling of well-being, rapture, or happiness is established a little bit—that becomes the focus. So the image is just a stepping stone to something else.

There's also a possibility of using the imagination to come into dialogue with, for example, the inner critic, the superego, some critical inner character—letting it constellate as an image, as an imaginal figure. This can be very fruitful to work with that kind of oppressive inner psychic structure.

Just as an aside—I've mentioned this in other talks and retreats—we tend to think that dialoguing with images and having relationships with imaginal figures will make us crazy. Psychologists who actually investigate this stuff find it's the opposite. They find

people who suffer, say, from schizophrenia or psychotic delusions tend to have vague imaginal presences which they don't actually relate to, and rather they turn away from. Similarly with the inner critic—oftentimes we're turning away from the inner critic rather than turning towards it and establishing, entering into relationship.

The craziness, if we can even use that word, or the mental disturbance comes more from not being in relationship, from turning away from relationship, from the vagueness, the lack of sensitivity and feeling out of the relationship. The healing comes through actually turning towards and relating and entering into relationship with an imaginal figure.

Then there are other psychotherapeutically functioning images of all kinds that might help support one's personal growth and personal healing—for example, in Gestalt psychology or psychosynthesis and other modern psychotherapeutic traditions. And then there's a whole realm of extrasensory perception and so forth.

All of that is very fine, and in a way we're open to all of that here—you're using all of that as much or as little as you like.

We made the point as well in the opening talk, just to repeat it again, that always in any of those cases—in each and any of those cases—there's always a conception, a way of conceiving of the images that's involved. So for example, with the candle, as I said, it's just insignificant what it actually is, for the most part, or stone or whatever. In the visioning of Gaia House's future, we're talking about something very practical—that's part of the conception. Or in contemplating death, we're talking about this material decay, and so on.

There's a great range in the conceiving of images, and there's always conceiving involved. Always included in that conceiving is the direction and purpose and the particular kinds of use of the image. So that's a general fundamental point that's really important to realize.

Again, we make the point that we are free to conceive and use images however we want, really. Certainly on this retreat, I'm open to most things. But we have freedom there.

Now, what I really want to expand on and fill out for us is: what do we mean on this retreat? What do I mean when I use words like image, fantasy, mythos? What do I include in the meaning of those words when I use them, or predominantly when I use them? Because, to be honest, like many words, I will use them sloppily at times and more precisely at others. But this is really what I mean, mostly.

So what I include in that meaning, and also the particular inclination that I'm most interested in developing—this is what I'm really interested in, in relationship.

There are quite a few aspects here. Let's just start.

If you recall the imagination exercise we did briefly this afternoon, I hope that one of the conclusions you realized from that was that an image, as I might use that word, is not necessarily visual. This is absolutely fundamental.

It's not necessarily visual. It may be, and that's fine, but it may not be. So it may be aural. It may be that the image is predominantly or includes something that we hear. We hear a voice in the inner ear, so to speak, in the imagination. And we perhaps even dialogue, so it's maybe entirely aural or partly aural, auditory.

Some people, many people in fact, as the meditation deepens for them, as the mind becomes a bit more still, they start to hear a kind of high-pitched, buzzing sound. This has different names in different traditions. Some people call it the nāda sound, which nāda just means sound in Sanskrit, so it's a sound sound, the nāda sound. People give it no significance at all or give it great cosmic spiritual significance or something in between. Some people are irritated by it; some people love it. You can use it in different ways, but one of the ways which is possible is actually to, when this sound arises—or if it arises, it doesn't arise for everyone—one option is actually to deliberately hear it as, for example, the compassion of the cosmic Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

This is someone who was practicing loving-kindness and compassion, someone for whom that sort of language and that sort of conception or image, they were very comfortable with that. And then this sound was arising. I suggested, well, you could hear this sound, which as it goes on feels like it's actually permeating—doesn't actually feel like it's originating in the head. The sense of it is that it permeates the air, the atmosphere, the space. And so in that case there's a deliberately incorporating that sound and deliberately hearing it as the compassion, the pervasive cosmic compassion of the Buddhas and the cosmic bodhisattvas. So the sound itself becomes an image. It was just a sound before and we were hearing it this way or that way or irritating or not interested or whatever, but potentially we can have a different relationship with it where it becomes an image in the sense that I mean it, because it becomes imbued with meaning and depth and resonance.

So the sound, a pure sound if you like, or just a simple sound, becomes an image of that pervasive compassion. So it doesn't have to be visual. It could be aural predominantly or partly.

It could also be mostly in the body. The image is not visual, not aural, but mostly in the body. Now sometimes we're putting a lot of emphasis on the energy body, and sometimes that energy body can feel, for example, that it fills with energy, fills with power. A feeling, an energetic feeling of power comes into the energy body. And then an image from that body sense can come, but it's more a body sense image—for example, of a powerful animal or a wrathful deity or a demonic figure from some kind of cosmology or something that might not be seen. It's more felt. The body actually feels its way into the inside of that powerful animal or deity.

So I remember some time ago, I was actually doing walking meditation on the lawn, and a series of images where this tiger appeared. Now it was partly visual in this case, but predominantly it had a very different dominant sense to it. This tiger was by its nature a very sensuous creature. It had a very direct, sensuous relationship with its own body. And I sort of entered into that tiger and its bodily experience. Rather than the vision being the primary modality there, the body was the primary sense modality.

This tiger was very sensuous, very much enjoying its body, its heaviness, its strength, its slowness, its power. There was pleasure in that, in the sense of its body, even the way it rested on the thick trunk of a tree was oozing this enjoyment of the sensuousness of its body. I was really entering into that, and it wasn't really strong or vivid as an image, but I stayed with it and it developed gradually over time.

Then actually—it's interesting that I did because it had two other chapters to it—one was it started to eat my intestines and devour my entrails, which felt incredibly healing. So there was a kind of—instead of me being identified with the tiger, it then approached me and ate my intestines, which was wonderful and very healing feeling. And then later, which I won't really go into now but may come back to, it's as if that quality of physical sensuousness then started to inform and imbue my perception of nature in a very particular way. So I don't mean the sense of the breeze on the cheek or the step of the bare feet on the grass or whatever. I actually mean sensuous in a more erotic sense. But we'll come back to that perhaps later.

The point is really that the image was predominantly a body sense of sensuality, and also that it developed.

Sometimes an image is not even any kind of sense object of any of the five senses at all. This is quite interesting and perhaps quite common. So it doesn't have to be sight, sound, smell, taste, touch necessarily.

I had a dream some time ago. In the last portion of this dream, I was playing a grand piano outside somewhere in a war-torn country. And there was a big wall. The piano was next to the wall, twenty, twenty-five feet high. And I could tell that the wall was about to be bombed by an aircraft—drop a bomb or missiles at it or something. But I was playing this music, and there was this feeling, despite the impending bombing, that it's really okay because of the music. And there was this absolutely beautiful music. I don't know what it was. I'd never heard it before.

The psyche is so creative from its depths to conjure the most extraordinary beauty. And this music was filling the space—beautiful, beautiful music. It's okay that the wall will be bombed and maybe I will even die there because there was music. And somehow this music, in a strange sort of dreamlike fashion, had a physical directionality to it, like a kind of jagged arrow in the direction I was supposed to follow anyway, the physical direction. And being bombed or being burned or even dying, it was okay. And then the words came in the dream: because it's the music that matters.

And that really touched me. It's the music that matters, matters more than anything else.

So I took that image, and I worked with it in the meditation in the morning. It's not really a visual image. It wasn't really—it sort of peeled itself away, the image. It's the music that matters. That phrase became kind of pregnant with meaning and depth and resonances, peeled itself away from the visual images of the dream, peeled itself also away from the music, the specific music of the dream, the auditory. So it was not a visual image, it was not even a particularly aural image at that point, but more going into this sense of music, music mattering, and something about that.

What is it? What was music? Hard to put your finger on or totally describe in words. It's a symbol, an image, and a lot to do with beauty. The symbol here of music that came alive and had so much depth had to do with beauty, had to do with a sense almost of life as music, and a sense of, with it, a devotional sense of aligning, devoting, letting go into that, devoting my life to that—life as beauty, as music, this mystery, that being the important thing.

The devotion to that, the loving that, the expressing that, also communicating that to others—this music. I don't mean just literal music. I mean this music and everything that that means symbolically: beauty and more. It's impossible to fully express, but prioritizing that, aligning with it, devoting to it, letting go into it, communicating, expressing it.

That was so beautiful and rich and pregnant and deep as an image that did not really belong to any of the five senses. It was a symbol that was very alive, very, very, very meaningful and soulful.

But all of this is really to make the point for imaginal practice that when images come, we need to notice what is the primary or the dominant sense avenue of this image for me, and actually to trust that. So if it feels like it's primarily auditory or through the body or whatever, however I know or perceive that image, I trust that. I trust the primary. I notice and I trust the primary or the dominant sense avenue.

And again, perhaps it was clear from the little exercise we did this afternoon, it's not necessary for the sensual detail of the sensory detail of the image to be that clear. And maybe that's important in some instances, but the kind of pixel resolution or whatever it's called on computer screens—that's actually not that important often. Often, sometimes it is, but usually it's not.

And sometimes it's not even necessary that it's a clear, defined object. The image sense is very, very potent and very deep and meaningful without actually crystallizing or constellating as a clear object. This is the image. I see that image as an object or I hear it as a sound object or whatever. So really, as I said, what I want to include in the word image is something broader than certainly just a visual object.

And then secondly, it's not necessary, as again, probably clear from many of the examples, it's not necessary that we dialogue with images. So sometimes some people are familiar with work in therapy, etc., where you dialogue with images. It's not necessary at all. I mean, it may—an image may involve or invite dialogue. And that's interesting.

Sometimes that dialogue seems to happen at a sort of normal pace that one would normally dialogue with someone. Sometimes it happens even slow enough that a person can even write the dialogue down as it's happening. So it may involve dialogue. It may be in that kind of way. Sometimes it involves dialogue, I find, and other people find. Sometimes it involves dialogue, but it's a sort of intuited dialogue. You couldn't possibly write it down that fast, and you couldn't possibly even speak that fast. It's just we intuit what this imaginal figure is saying to us in our response, etc.

So it may involve dialogue, or it may not. An image may not. It does not have to. Are you assuming, perhaps, that it's better if it does? So that's an interesting assumption: I assume that it's better if I can dialogue with this image. And maybe I even assume that the longer the dialogue, the better. Or better even if the image just gives a monologue to me, just imparts its wisdom as a sort of very wise speech, and I absorb that and listen.

So maybe all these things are possible, but we must be careful of our assumptions around that, or at least notice what assumptions we're carrying. Ibn Arabi, the great Islamic mystic, sage, and scholar from the 12th century, spoke specifically about the kind of images that interested him. He said they do not answer in articulated speech, because then their discourse would be other than their essence, other than their person. No—their apparition, their coming, is identical to their discourse. It is their discourse itself, and the discourse is their visible presence.

Here Ibn Arabi emphasizes the visible, though we don't have to limit ourselves to that. His point is that dialogue actually shouldn't be there, because the image itself is what needs to be expressed. The image doesn't come to express something extra—it is the expression. So we can remain broader in our approach: sometimes there's dialogue, sometimes there isn't. It doesn't have to be verbal, and it can happen in different ways.

It's really important to understand—and I hope the examples make this clear—that other ways of interacting, apart from verbal dialogue, may be more appropriate than conversation. Instead of talking or listening to an image, it may be that the flow of love, or even the flow of eros, some kind of sexual interaction or connection with the image, is much more appropriate than verbal dialogue. We need to expand our sense of what is included in imaginal work.

One quality that's really key for me when I use these words—image, fantasy, mythos—is soulfulness. The image has or feeds or nourishes within us a quality of soulfulness. I'm going to devote a whole talk to what I mean by that and its importance, but for now, let's say soulfulness means resonances—the energetic, emotional, psychological resonances of that image in our being. The image is pregnant with these resonances. It's full of meaningfulness, pregnant with meaningfulness—and I use that word deliberately, in contradistinction to simply "meaning."

I don't mean the image means X or means Y. I mean it's full of meaningfulness—a sense of meaningfulness that I can't quite box in or explain or get to the bottom of. This meaningfulness carries multiple resonances. We're touched. There's a sense of beauty, which is also part of soulfulness. There's depth, enchantment. All this is characteristic of soulfulness, which itself is characteristic of images in the way I want to use that word—image, mythos, fantasy.

Understanding, then—feeling like I fully understand this image—is not necessary. Sometimes a person doesn't feel like they understand at all, yet something is touched, deeply touched. There's a deep sense of beauty or enchantment or meaningfulness even without understanding. The resonances are there, the soulfulness is there.

Also, an image is not understood concretely, in the sense that I mean image. We're not taking them concretely. I once was talking many years ago to a woman who was actually an evangelical Christian, but very lovely. We were talking, and she mentioned that she had seen God's cloak, his majestic cloak, in her prayers the day before. But there was something in the way she was talking about it that made me feel she was taking this really concretely—that actually, somewhere, there was a God and he had this cloak and it was exactly as she had seen it. There was some sense that she wasn't quite understanding that this is imaginal reality, and that's different than concrete reality.

So in my use of the word image, I don't mean that they be taken concretely or literally. An image of a warrior, which has been very common for me, or an image of a wanderer, a solitary wanderer—again, very common in the past—doesn't literally translate. I would never join the army. I haven't hit anyone since early childhood. That's not somewhere I go. The image is not literal instruction to become a warrior or to go wandering or traveling. It's not a literal image.

Images, in the sense I'm using that word, are metaphorical, but more than what the word metaphor has come to mean for us—because that word has shrunken a little. I mean it even bigger than what metaphor usually means. We don't decipher images. An image is not a cipher to be deciphered, to be explained, reduced to "it means this."

Rather, that's what it represents. Something here moves more akin to poetic image, and I don't think the most powerful poetic images are images to be deciphered—puzzles where we exclaim, "Ah, I figured it out, this code!" That represents a poor poetic image. Such images lack depth, pregnancy, and the inexhaustible quality that makes them truly alive.

Poetry that genuinely touches us, that stays with us and remains powerful in its effects, lives within the psyche. It stays alive partly because it resists reduction—because we don't reduce it to "it means this" or "it represents that." There's a beautiful poem I love by Rumi that begins: "Come to the orchard in spring. There is light and wine and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers."

For me, at least in the way I relate to that line of poetry—and this subjectivity is important because working with images is deeply personal—the orchard, the light, the wine, the pomegranates, the flowers are not signs for spiritual facts. They don't function as a code where the light represents this, the wine represents bliss, and the pomegranate flowers represent some aspect of the divine. They're not signs for spiritual facts, nor are they merely material. In the way I relate to these words, Rumi certainly isn't pointing to just a material level of appreciation for nature.

There's something more there that remains endlessly pregnant in that line of poetry. Something touches deeply in those images, resonates, and sets up multiple resonances. An image that's alive in this way, a poetic image that's alive for us, influences our perspectives and the way we encounter both material and spiritual things. The images influence our perspective on both the material and spiritual realms, but they don't necessarily represent other things or entities.

There's something about poetic images—which is really what I mean when I use the words image, mythos, or fantasy—that has a poetic quality: they remain open. They are ambiguous. We cannot figure them out completely. This proves crucial because the mystery of the image, its sense of not being completely decipherable, keeps it alive for us. It stays alive, works in the psyche, and maintains its resonance with vital energy.

The mystery of the poetic image, of the imaginal practice image, is part of what sustains its life. It remains alive also because of the fundamental importance of images for the psyche. The psyche needs images—this is vital for psychological well-being and part of what keeps images alive.

When I use the term "poetic image," this may or may not prove helpful, since poetry today encompasses such broad range and scope. Different poets and poetry readers relate very differently to what they consider good or bad, what they seek in a poem, what poetry attempts to accomplish, or what poetry should be. Depending on your preferences, this may or may not illuminate what I'm getting at.

A poet like Philip Larkin approaches poetry, image, and seemingly life itself very differently than poets like T.S. Eliot, Pablo Neruda, or George Seferis. There's quite a range. But I hope you can sense something of what I mean by the poetic image, the poetic nature of image.

We can also speak of poetic truth. When Mary Oliver writes something like "my love for that poet is like a garden in my heart"—I can't remember the exact line—no one actually looks for soil and flowers in her heart. There's a poetic truth there that we recognize and resonate with, that moves us, even as we don't mistake it for something concretely real.

This soulfulness is centrally characteristic and fundamental to how I use the words image, mythos, and fantasy—this poetic nature of images that is metaphorical rather than literal, not concrete, ambiguous. Jung wrote that "genuine symbols"—he uses the word symbol here, but in this instance he means the same thing as image—"genuine images, genuine symbols, are ambiguous, full of half-glimpsed meanings, and in the last resort, inexhaustible."

That's exactly the characteristic I'm pointing toward. We can make another distinction along these lines...

Some images or fantasies are what we could call narrative in distinct contradistinction to these more poetic images or what I would call iconic images. So there are narrative images and iconic poetic images.

An iconic poetic image is not so much about the sequential unfolding of events—this happened, then that narrative unfolded in time. Sometimes an image comes and it just stays as it is, and there's a resonating with that. It doesn't really go anywhere; it doesn't evolve in time very much at all. Or if it does, it's not so much in its temporal evolution that there's a kind of causal implication: this happened, and therefore that happened; or because this happened, that happened; this happened first, and because of that, that happened. There's not this causal implication in the narrative.

This non-sequentiality, this non-narrative, non-causally implicating quality in time is characteristic of more iconic poetic images. There's a kind of timelessness to them.

Usually we tend to read or view our own life in terms of causal implications. I'll get back to this later in the retreat, but with a different sensibility regarding images and their more timeless, atemporal, eternal qualities, this can also begin to come into the way we read and view and see our life as image as well—not just in the usual narrative sense and usual causally implicating sense.

So iconic poetic images have this timeless quality to them, in contrast to narrative images. And there's something in these images that's bigger than just the purely personal or the purely historical. They're not necessarily historical at all. Sometimes we may feel like the history of our life is mirroring the images rather than the other way around—the image mirroring the history. Again, this kind of shift, this 180-degree turn in the way we're seeing life in images, is part of the fruit, part of the beautiful, mysterious fruit that can come from imaginal practice as I'm wanting to incline it.

With these iconic, poetic kinds of images, there's this timelessness, this quality that's very personal but more than the personal, more than the historical, not necessarily historical. And there's a depth to them, and they feel fertile, and they seem to have a kind of intentionality. There's something they want. This is something I'm going to come back to in a whole separate talk. And there's a feeling of necessity—some necessity. This image, I may not understand it at all, but it feels necessary somehow. It feels right.

Not to make narrative images wrong and poetic images right, but we are leaning toward the more iconic poetic style rather than narrative. Actually, it's a spectrum—more or less narrative or non-narrative. There's a spectrum there.

Part of what this implies is that images we have in imaginal practice may not necessarily be very eventful or dramatic. As I said, sometimes not much happens at all, and one's just with a certain image, resonating with that and the sense of the beauty and complexity of that, the richness of it for the soul.

When I first started exploring imaginal practice some years ago, for I don't know how long, the images were incredibly eventful. This happened, and then we moved here, and then this wizard appeared, and then we slayed a dragon—rich in some ways. But as things evolved, actually a lot less eventful and yet much richer. A lot less dramatic in some ways for some of the images, but more soulful.

And with that too, an image doesn't have to be really far out—like, wow, that's amazing, wow, that's so strange. I remember some years ago practicing imaginal practice when a very striking image came. It was a sort of empty courtyard, a square courtyard of a monastery, a large courtyard empty except for four black-robed figures with their black monastic robes and black hoods over their heads so you couldn't see their faces. They were pallbearers carrying on a stretcher between them—these four monks carrying on a stretcher between them an open coffin. In the coffin was a dead baby, and from this dead baby's head a tree was growing.

If you describe it, it's like, wow, that's an intense image. And it had a certain intensity to it, I suppose. You would say, oh, it looks like a Tarkovsky film or something. But in a way, it didn't really have much resonance in my soul. Maybe in the future it will come back again or something. But it was a kind of far-out image without really much soulfulness to it.

Compare that with an image I had much more recently. Just on the theme of trees, it was a low-branched, black bark tree, not very tall but quite wide, the height of a person, completely leafless and pitch black, as if it had been burnt or charred—but I don't think it had. And although it has no leaves and looks black and leafless, there's nothing actually wrong with it, was the sense.

And sometimes that did actually grow from my prone body, my body lying down, sometimes from the body of a close friend, and sometimes from neither, just in the ground. And I was saying, "I don't understand this at all," but somehow it was making me extraordinarily happy. There was a lot of joy from this tree, or in relationship to this tree. And it's just there. I and others in the image visited it just to be around this tree. It was like a pilgrimage. We tended to the tree and watered it, but actually it didn't even need watering—it was part of our devotion.

So less striking as an image than that dead body, dead baby with the tree growing out of its head, but the second image was much more, felt richer for the soul. Maybe an image is far out and has a striking narrative structure to it, but there's not much soulfulness coming out of it. That's not really necessarily what we're interested in. The far outness can be far out, or it cannot be far out. It can be narrative or not, but it's really the quality of soulfulness I'm going to emphasize in other talks. That's what we're after.

I remember a lovely image from a couple of years ago in meditation—this very silent white horse gently approached me. It moves its head the way horses do. It wants to get my attention, but not for its sake. It wants to get my attention for my sake somehow. And it wants me to go with it. It wants to carry me. It wants for me to be carried and to travel with it somehow, somewhere.

There's such a sense of profound beauty somehow in this image, and of intimacy. There's real love there. Such exquisite, tender, compassionate love, actually both ways—from the horse to me and from me to the horse. Tenderness and peace suffuse my being from this love and from that relating. And somehow this horse was supporting in some very subtle way. I got a sense of support. It was giving me a certain kind of strength, I couldn't even quite say what.

But it was clear this horse doesn't represent this or that, although it did seem to have certain qualities. It was imbued with certain qualities. It seemed to embody, for example, a certain kind of bravery, this horse. Very humble and not in your face, and also doggedness, persistence. It was not flashy, though I was aware, I had the intuition, that this horse was capable of great speed, great power, and very powerful sexuality as well. But the bravery had nothing to do with gaining glory or anything like that in the human sense.

And then at one point he became a magical flying horse and took me on his back and was flying, and I stretched my arms out wide. It was like a crucifix pose almost, and very, very open. Flying through vast space, everything became translucent. That's a bit more far out, that bit. But there's such beauty and depth and soulfulness just in that initial part of the image. Those kinds of qualities are really what I'm wanting to emphasize.

So again, it doesn't really represent anything, but it's in the relating, the love. That's what felt important there. It's not an allegory, it's not reducible to some simple meaning or definable as this or that. It's the presence of that image, the character, the quality, the intimacy, the contact and the love. And also the interest. This horse was somehow interested in me, this beautiful silent white horse, and I was interested in it. And it's those qualities in the relating that make for the soulfulness.

There's narrative versus iconic or poetic images, and that's an important distinction or spectrum. There's also another spectrum that's significant—we're open to the whole range of it—and that is what we might call the spectrum of substantiality of an image. Some images appear very insubstantial. They're almost like made of light, the characters. They're very, not even airy, just energetic or light bodies or luminous, very ethereal. And some other images have a much more earthy, solid sense to them.

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So there's narrative versus iconic or poetic images, and that's an important distinction or spectrum. There's also another spectrum that's significant, but we're open to the whole range of it, and that is what we might call the spectrum of substantiality of an image.

Some images appear very insubstantial. They're almost like made of light, the characters. They're very ethereal—not even airy, just energetic or light bodies, luminous and very insubstantial. Other images have a much more earthy, solid sense to them. All of that is available to us and all of it is good. But just to notice where an image is on that spectrum—we may come back to that aspect.

It's good to point out here that most images need repeating. Occasionally there's an image that really has a big impact, but it's just a one-off. One student told me there was actually an image of me. I was already alive for her as an image for a while, but then there was a particular image of me approaching her. In this image, my head was exploding, and through the explosion of my head, it was actually really transformative in terms of the freedom and the sense of liberation that came with that and stayed for quite a while—stayed at a certain level in her being after that.

But mostly, images need repeating. They're not just one-offs. We come back to them, we resonate with them, we stew with them, we invite them back. What's happening here is small movements, cumulative movements through practicing with an image. Gradually a different sensibility happens, not just through one image, but through whatever images come up. Through repeating and repeating, gradually a different sensibility emerges.

As I alluded to in the opening talk, gradually a different conception as well as sensibility develops—a sensibility and conception of practice, of self, of life, of the world. Somehow through this repeating and stewing and resonating and dwelling with and feeling and being sensitive to, a different sensibility and a different conception of practice, self, life and world unfolds.

There's a question here, and that's really, to me, what's the most important thing: allowing or opening to this different sensibility and these different possibilities of conceiving and perceiving self, life, world, and Dharma.

Wrapped up in that are questions about pacing—whether we just have this image and then move to another one. Usually, as I said, we want to dwell, we really want to dwell with an image when it's there and really focus on it. We're not just drifting with images and daydreaming. We focus with an image, but there's also a question of going back to an image, like coming back to a piece of music that you love and dwelling in the whole vibe and all the resonances that music brings for you.

We don't just—this is something Thomas Moore said, and we'll come back to it—we don't just listen to a piece of music and say, "I've listened to that before, I don't need to listen to it again." If you love it, you want to listen to it again. You want to be in that atmosphere of that music and what it evokes and what it brings up and what it does—the magic of the music, the magic of the image.

So most images need repeating. It's also important to point out that images don't only arise in meditation—they don't necessarily arise in meditation. Images can arise actually anywhere at any time, and that's different from having a hallucination. I hope that's clear. A hallucination means I can't actually tell what's what—what's an image and what's concrete solid reality. We're not talking about hallucination, but it's quite possible that images arise not only in meditation but anywhere at any time.

One person was telling me that they were actually listening to a public lecture in a hall. She found this lecture rather stupid and a little bit offensive, in fact, what the person was saying. Yet it seemed to her that all the people around her—and in fact, she was correct in this assumption—most of the people around her seemed to think it was absolutely brilliant and wise. So she was in this situation where she felt that it was quite stupid and a bit offensive and differing from the opinion of those around her.

Then an image that had arisen for her before of a phoenix—a very powerful, beautiful bird that had multiple resonances and came in different situations—suddenly this phoenix came as she was listening to this lecture, and it filled the room. Enormous size it was, this huge phoenix filling this large hall, magnificent, she said, and completely untroubled by the stupidity of what she was hearing—these are her words. She said this phoenix was so magnificent, it didn't condescend to scrap with such folly. She said this phoenix shattered the hall with its sheer beauty.

This was very, very vividly, intensely, powerfully present as she was sitting there listening with her eyes open—so silent this phoenix, majestic, noble, immovable and dignified. Not in silent meditation with the eyes closed. Actually, that's an image I'm going to return to for another reason later on in the retreat. But the point here is that images don't necessarily arise only in meditation. They can arise anytime.

Let's make another distinction—an image, a little more subtle now, a little more involved. An image may or may not have what we might call archetypal or mythic dimensions to it. This is a little bit more involved. What do we mean here? You get more archetypal, mythic kind of images, if you like, or that have that quality, that dimensionality, that aspect, that depth to them, and ones that are not.

As an example of a non-archetypal image that was still incredibly potent and incredibly healing, I'll tell you a story that someone related to me. By the way, with all these sharings of other people's images, I always ask the person if they're okay with their image or their story being shared—I would never just go ahead and share something without asking.

This was in an interview some years ago at Gaia House. The person was on a long personal retreat, work retreat and personal retreat mixture. Something happened in relation to the work, I think—I can't even quite remember what it was. But something happened, and it triggered for her feelings of guilt. She noticed, she could see, she recognized a pattern of a tendency to feel guilty in situations. Something would go wrong, and she would feel guilty.

Then she recounted to me—very moving in an interview—she recounted to me that many years ago, many years before this, she got pregnant by her husband, but she didn't tell him immediately because he had been diagnosed as being infertile, unable to father children.

She found herself pregnant by her husband but chose not to tell him immediately, knowing he had been diagnosed as infertile. This diagnosis had painfully ended his previous marriage, and she wanted to be sensitive about it. She also didn't want to raise his hopes only to disappoint him if the pregnancy miscarried, as she wasn't yet ten or twelve weeks along.

Then one morning, as they lay in bed, she wanted to make love, and they did. This made him a little late leaving the house. As he prepared to go, she wanted to tell him, "Drive carefully because we need you"—meaning herself and the baby in her womb. But she didn't speak those words.

He had a habit of driving fast anyway, and being later than usual that morning, he drove too fast. He got into an accident. The police and witnesses later said it was his fault—he was driving too fast. He was killed.

This student was absolutely heartbroken and felt unable to mother the child on her own. She decided to have an abortion. That decision, along with the feeling that she had delayed him and failed to say "drive carefully," brought painful guilt that remained with her for years.

Then one day in meditation—she was doing predominantly metta practice at that point—she spoke to the baby, the one that was aborted. She told the baby she was sorry and hoped it would find a loving mother and father. She explained that she had wanted to spare it the pain of not having a father, which was how she herself had grown up after her father died when she was just two.

In the image, the child responded to her with great love, telling her that while it felt sad about what happened, it was okay and at peace. This was profoundly significant for her.

Later, in a different session perhaps the next day or a few days later, she thought to herself, "What if I had spoken those words out loud to my husband?" Spontaneously in the image, he turned back and came to her, and they had an intimate, deep conversation.

Later still, the image of him arose spontaneously—joyously, happily getting into his, in her words, "fizzy cabriolet sports car." She was trying to do metta practice and attempted to return to the metta phrases, but then decided to give attention and sensitivity to that image of her husband getting into the car and having their conversation. This was incredibly helpful and healing—very, very profoundly healing.

What is happening in an image like that? She was under no illusion that her husband and baby were alive. She certainly wasn't avoiding feelings—there had been plenty of grief, and she was comfortable with the grief. Yet somehow, this reimagining that occurred semi-spontaneously was mysteriously and deeply healing.

This is a beautiful and important example of what I would call a non-archetypal kind of image. Sometimes there are images that are somewhat ambiguous. For example, with the subtle body, the energy body, there may be an image of that body being on fire, of fire shooting from various energy centers or from the hands, or the image of the body roaring. In itself, that's not necessarily archetypal, but it could easily move toward archetypal images—fire and roaring and great power. It could shift in that direction very easily.

Other images—for instance, that solitary wanderer or the warrior image I've alluded to on different occasions—people often say these are archetypal images. There's an archetypal image of the wanderer or the warrior. But what does that word really mean when we use it?

I want to explore this a little. Jung, who originated the psychological usage of this term, wrote: "Archetypes are typical forms of behavior which naturally present themselves as ideas and images. By way of these effects, we discover that they have an organizing influence on the contents of consciousness."

The word archetype comes from the Greek, meaning something like "first molded" or "original"—like when you make a lithograph print or some kind of print in art. It's the first form, and then there are copies of that original.

So literally it means something like that.

But what's characteristic of the way Jung means it, uses that word, is that rather than being itself an image, an archetype is not an image in his usage. It's rather what shapes images and shapes ideas. It's a shaper of images and a shaper, a former of images and ideas, rather than itself being a specific shape or form. And what that means is that an archetype, in his usage, archetypes are actually not directly knowable. You never actually encounter an archetype. It's just the sort of, as he puts it, the organizing structure to shape this or that image or this or that behavior or this or that perspective or idea. So that's one aspect, at least of Jung's meaning of archetypes.

And another aspect is also to realize that archetypes interpenetrate. They're actually not separable. So this is also very, very important. And again, quoting Jung, he wrote: "The fact is that the single archetypes are not isolated from each other in the unconscious." Actually, we're going to steer away from using that word unconscious because I think it takes things in a certain direction. It has too much baggage for us and I want to not use it and allow things to open up in a different way.

But he writes anyway: "The fact is that the single archetypes are not isolated from each other, but are in a state of contamination of the most complete mutual interpenetration and interfusion." So they interpenetrate, they mix—you don't get one pure archetype.

Now, sometimes what's very common for people is a tendency to want a kind of neat classification, actually of all kinds of things: Dharma concepts, "this means that," and "what does this exact term mean when the Buddha uses it this way," and the links of dependent origination, but also in regard to archetypes. So the tendency to really want to define things very neatly and separate everything. Maybe that tendency itself is kind of

archetypal. As Jung says, archetypes shape ideas, perspectives. So that wanting a neat classification, taxonomy of things is also potentially an archetype. I think it's very, very common, but it's a little bit mistaken somehow because they're always interacting, interpenetrating, mixing these archetypes.

But let's make a distinction. So for Jung, an archetype is something that's first. It's kind of primordial. It has its roots in the dawning of humanity and pre-consciousness evolving into consciousness. And it's dawning in our biological evolution and all that, partly. There's something first or primordial in time about it.

So compare that meaning with James Hillman's sort of twist on the term, if you like, or evolution of the term. And here it's more that we sort of decide to view an image, if you like. "Decide" is maybe too strong a word, but we orient towards an image and view it as archetypal. So there's an adjective rather than archetype. We view an image as archetypal. And this is saying something more about the image, about its value, rather than its origins, if you like, in misty time or something like that. So we view an image as archetypal.

Listen to this phrase. James Hillman writes: "Any image termed archetypal is immediately valued as universal, transhistorical, basically profound, generative, highly intentional, and necessary." I'll read that again—it's quite a dense sentence. Any image termed archetypal is immediately valued—so it's about value, and "immediate" means without anything coming between—immediately valued in the actual sense of the image itself, immediately valued as universal. It's what I said before: it's beyond purely personal. It doesn't just apply to me. It's transhistorical. It's beyond time. It doesn't have its roots in history. It doesn't correlate necessarily to coming from something historical in my personal history or otherwise.

Basically profound. We're giving it some kind of sense of it's fundamental in the psyche and deep—its roots are deep, basically profound. Generative means that it generates, as I said. It generates ideas, perspectives, emotions, other images, attitudes, all that. It's generative of all kinds of things. It's highly intentional. This is what I alluded to earlier. It wants something. It has a direction for us. And it's necessary, he says. There's this sense of necessity to the image when it has this archetypal sense to it.

In other words, or elaborating on that a little bit, it's the relationship with the image, the love from and to and in the whole image that's part of its archetypal nature.

There's a sense of blessing that comes often with images we see as archetypal. Some kind of blessedness or blessing with them, to them. They seem to make a demand of us, and I'm going to talk much more about that aspect of demand. And they seem to open

us up. Archetypal implies something's opening us up to, we could say, other dimensions of our being, beyond just the ones that we're usually conscious of. There's something giving us, opening us up to a sense of our own depth, or let's put it better—the depth of the psyche.

Wrapped up in this meaning of archetypal as an adjective is what I alluded to earlier. It's when we see something in life or an event in life or a thread in our life or an image, and we see that experience as archetypal. In a way we're placing it in a kind of cosmology with regard to—let's use the word gods, but I want to explain more what I mean by that, both cosmology and gods and what that might mean. But there's a sense of another dimension or depth to it, and we're placing it in a larger cosmology of significance, of meaningfulness, of beauty, of place. It has place and depth in that place.

Now, this might sound perplexing at this point. I'm hopefully going to talk more about it on this retreat, but there's something in that that's very alive. It's not abstract and it's not clunky. We'll come back to it later. It's not some kind of abstract philosophical idea. It's a sense as well.

That's certainly not something we can prove. In fact, none of this is stuff we can prove. It would be impossible to prove that. Impossible to prove that the image actually makes demands of me of some kind that I'll go into more. Impossible certainly to prove this other cosmology involving what we could label in quotation marks almost "gods." But we sense somehow this archetypal value, these qualities imbuing certain images, and that makes them archetypal. So we sense this as part of the soulfulness, part of the texture of the image. Not so much the sensual texture, but the meaningfulness, soul texture of the image. We sense an image's archetypal value.

But, and I really want to emphasize this, we're also recognizing that we are giving it that archetypal value. So there's no truth claim here. To me, this is quite a sophisticated philosophical point. I can sense an image's archetypal value, and I will in all these different ways that I've just elaborated, but I'm also recognizing in a way that I'm giving it that value. That archetypal value of an image, that archetypal quality or characteristics of relating to it, the psyche's relationship to it.

So all this implies that the view, the way of relating, the way of looking at an image is actually included in what we mean by the word image. You understand? Image actually includes, in the way that I mean the word image, a certain way of relating to it that gives it this archetypal value and then senses that archetypal value in it. But I recognize, oh, I'm giving it that. The mind is giving it that. You understand? It's not inher-

ently, independently existing. It's still empty. It's still dependent arising. But in the word image, I'm including in that a certain way of relating, a way of looking, a certain view of it. And that's included in the very concept image, in the very idea of the image.

So when we talk about archetypes, the point of that word or archetypal, the point of that word and the value of it is not in categorizing—oh, it's this archetype or that archetype or analyzing which archetype is this coming from. It's more emphasizing a way of looking or ways of looking that give value, certainly, or find or sense, discover vitality, an aliveness to the image and what it does for us, that give and discover meaningfulness. And again, that doesn't mean meaning. Meaningfulness, vitality, depth, divinity, if we dare use that word, and I'll expand on what we possibly mean by that later on. Vitality, meaning, depth, divinity—in short, ways of looking that are soul-making. I'll explain what I mean by that tomorrow, hopefully. I want to fill that word out.

So that's the point and the value of using words like archetypal. It's pointing to ways of looking, relationships that open up another depth and richness and dimension for the soul, for the psyche.

So with all of that, we are open to all of this. But for the purposes of this retreat, what I want to emphasize more, what we're more interested in is the more iconic, poetic end of things—those kind of images that are like icons or more poetic as opposed to narrative, and more archetypal in the way that I just outlined, that have more soulfulness to them.

And that's partly why I was ambivalent about the exercise earlier in the afternoon. While it may be a good exercise for some people, much of what emerged probably didn't carry much soulfulness within it.

What we're more interested in cultivating are iconic images—poetic, archetypal, soulful images that carry that deeper resonance and meaning.

So let's pause here for a while, otherwise it becomes too much to take in all at once. We'll continue exploring these themes in a little while, allowing what we've touched upon to settle and find its place within our understanding.

CHAPTER 10

Soulmaking (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this profound exploration of soulmaking and its relationship to traditional Dharma practice, Rob Burbea examines how we might understand Buddhist teachings through the lens of cultivating soulfulness rather than solely focusing on ending dukkha. He presents three broad approaches to practice: bare attention (which fabricates relatively less), deep unfabricating practices like samādhi and emptiness work, and skillful fabrication including imaginal practice.*
>
> *Burbea discusses how fantasy, image, and mythos inevitably permeate our understanding of core Buddhist concepts - our vision of awakening, the Buddha, and the Four Noble Truths themselves. He suggests grounding Dharma practice in the recognition that imagination is fundamental, proposing that all self-images are empty and therefore we can playfully engage with multiple self-images without clinging to any as ultimately true.*
>
> *The talk explores how eros (desire for deeper connection) works with psyche and logos (conceptual frameworks) to mutually fertilize each other in the process of soulmaking. When we love something deeply, eros seeks to penetrate further into the image of the beloved, expanding and enriching our perception. This process requires flexible conceptual frameworks that can accommodate deeper dimensions of experience. Burbea emphasizes that this approach to practice is open-ended, potentially leading to profound freedom while honoring the soul's need for meaning, depth, and sacred dimension in life.*

When hearing these ideas about soul and soulfulness and soul-making, it would be very understandable if a person wonders, "Is that the Dharma? Is that Dharma?" Very understandable.

We've said a little bit so far in different talks about the possible ways of conceiving of Dharma that might open up a space for images and fantasy and this whole imaginal practice. I want to say a little bit more about the whole relationship of Dharma, ways of conceiving the Dharma in ourselves in relation to that, and the relationship of that with images, or imaginal practice, and soul, soulfulness. So that whole network of relationships and possibilities—really, possibilities of conceiving relationship there.

Earlier I was emphasizing one very fertile, very fruitful way of conceiving of Dharma and Dharma practice: as practicing, developing skill in a whole range of ways of looking and developing flexibility of ways of looking, ways of relating, ways of con-

ceiving. In doing so—traditionally, at least how I would like to think of Dharma practice traditionally, the tradition of Dharma practice—in practicing a range of ways of looking, one sees that certain ways of looking fabricate less. They fabricate certainly less papañca, they fabricate less dukkha, less suffering, they fabricate less sense of self, and they fabricate less perception. That means less actual appearance, less experience. I'm using those words synonymously: perception, experience, appearance.

One begins to get the sense of what is it in reality—the way of looking at any time, what factors within the way of looking tend to fabricate more self, more dukkha, more experience, and what fabricates less. One goes on this journey of understanding, understanding fabrication, which means understanding dependent arising very deeply. All of that brings an understanding of emptiness—not to stay in any state, not to stay in any one way of looking either, but through the flexibility and the movement that opens up of the perception, the changes in perception that are facilitated by the changes in the way of looking, one understands emptiness more and more deeply.

That might be a traditional way of understanding, or a way of understanding traditional Dharma. There's this range, this flexibility of ways of looking and the developing of the skill with that whole range of ways of looking.

We also delineated within that range three broad camps or directions of practice. One is actually quite a thin avenue—this idea of bare attention, which is a bit of a misnomer and a little bit misleading. Sometimes people think, when I'm practicing mindfulness, when I'm practicing this bare attention, this simple attention, and I'm being with things as they are—to misuse a phrase of the Buddha—when I'm doing that, then there is no fabrication. No fabrication is occurring at that point. I'm seeing in an unfabricated way. I'm experiencing what is unfabricated.

To my way of thinking, that's definitely not the case. It's a real misunderstanding of what's happening there. It's a misunderstanding that will also lock down what's possible for us, both in terms of understanding and in terms of the range of experience. Rather, can we see this mode of bare attention or mode of simple mindfulness as one mode of practicing, one way of looking which fabricates relatively less—a little less than our normal modes of ways of looking as we move in the world every day if the mind is not trained? Bare attention is a sort of a degree, a slight decrease in how much fabrication there is in terms of self and perceptions. There is still some self being fabricated with bare attention. There's still some, definitely quite a lot of, fabrication of perception. There are still conceptions wrapped up in there.

So that would be one camp or avenue within this range of ways of looking that make up the Dharma.

Second, we said, is a whole slew of practices, a whole range of practices that actually fabricate a lot less than so-called bare attention. Deep emptiness practices, deep samadhi, deep mettā practices, all kinds of things will actually not construct—or deconstruct or dissolve—the sense of self. In that moment, in the moment of engaging certain ways of looking, the sense of self, the perception, the appearances themselves begin to desubstantiate, become less and less substantial and dissolve to different degrees, all the way down to total non-appearance of any experience, any sense of self, of subject, of consciousness, of knowing, of space, of time. There's a whole range there. That would be a second avenue—everything that's included, all the practices that are included in that fabricating, unfabricating really quite deeply.

A third group or avenue is fabricating—actually engaging in skillful fabrication of self and of perception. This third avenue opens the door, unlike the other two, unlike the bare attention, the unfabricating. Actually, this third avenue of practice—deliberate, skillful fabrication, creative, if you like—gives permission and gives space and potential for the use of images and imaginal practice and fantasy.

So the bare attention as a modicum of less fabrication, the deeper less fabricating or non-fabricating, unfabricating, and the skillful use of fabrication. In a way, any Dharma practice that we do can be placed in one of those three baskets. Why not have the whole range? We should have the whole range. There's something important and beautiful in having that whole range.

We said all that, and we've also mentioned that with that, running through all that, or alongside all that, is the recognition that we also bring fantasy to our perception and sense of what the Dharma is, what awakening is, who the Buddha was. So there is fantasy, mythos, image imbuing our conceptions and perceptions of all that—of Dharma, of awakening, of Buddha, of path. That's not a bad thing. That's part of skillful fabricating, in fact. One mode of skillful fabricating.

But given all that, then we can revisit, open up a little bit more, the possibilities for relationship of Dharma conception, conception of Dharma, and imaginal practice.

Because, for instance, regarding images of the self—or self-images, if you like—the very emptiness of the self, the thorough, absolute emptiness of any self-image, means that no self-image, no self-concept or conception of what the self is, will be true ultimately speaking. All of them are empty. And that thorough emptiness of the self allows us, in fact, to play with self-images, with different self-images, without believing any of them.

Rather than saying, "No, personality is empty, but the self really is a process," and then having a kind of implicit belief that that process is some kind of real thing—I've talked and written about this elsewhere; I don't want to go too much into it—but that then curtails the possibilities a little bit.

Or often one might come across teachings or believe that we always think of the self as some kind of puffed-up ego thing. Ego is equated with self in a negative way—some kind of big pride or grandiosity. And so we want to cut that, in that view. We want to cut that. Or we have a view: "Well, now I have an unhealthy self-image, and through practice, I want to replace that unhealthy self-image with a healthy self-image. And then once I've done that, then I can see that actually there's no self." So there's this sort of "unhealthy to healthy to no self" progression.

There are different models. One will come across different interpretations of what the Dharma is saying in relation to self. I would, as I said, rather open things up even more. All self-views are empty. None of them will be ultimately true. And that absolute thoroughness of the emptiness of the self allows us to play with infinite possibilities of self-view, with a multiplicity of self-images. And the key word is "play" there, and "multiplicity"—playing with that multiplicity through imaginal practice.

And even the idea or the sense that we can sometimes have with imaginal figures—that they have a certain kind of reality, they do exist in some kind of way; it's a different way than concrete reality, but they exist in some way and they shape our character in this life, or our essence in some way, that they flow through us and they shape what we express in life—even that kind of view has a place. It's okay, because even these imaginal figures—sometimes the word there is daemon, d-a-e-m-o-n—they are empty too. So knowing they're empty, I can entertain this sense and this idea.

Sometimes, again, in Dharma you would come across something that says the self—the nature of the self—is that it's the result of all past causes and conditions and ideas and events that I've come across. And all that connects together; that web connects together and gives rise to the self. And other than the self as a sort of confluence of past causes and conditions, the self doesn't exist. That is the true self.

And that's—in this view—that would be what dependent arising means and what it means to say the self is a dependent arising. It's dependent on past causes and conditions coming together and creating the self, which apart from that has no existence. That's given often as a meaning of what dependent arising means, and what it means to say the self is empty.

And so then, from that point of view, the idea of these imaginal figures existing somehow in some different mode of existing, or kind of reality—different ontological status, if you like—and shaping our life and coming through in our expression, that wouldn't fit, because it doesn't fit this model of the self. It's just the confluence of past causes and conditions. If there are these eternal figures or timeless figures, that doesn't fit that.

But that view of the self—as just the past causes and conditions, and that's what it means to say the self is a dependent arising and empty—that's too narrow, I would say. A full Dharma understanding of what emptiness means goes way, way beyond that. That's one sort of direction into emptiness, to a certain level. Full understanding of emptiness goes way, way wider, multidirectional. We can see the emptiness of something from many different directions and much deeper than that.

So these imaginal figures—they may exist in some way, may shape my character and be expressed through me in my life. They flow through me in some way, or I channel them. They are empty also, just because they don't exist in time. Like anything, all things are empty because time is empty and everything needs time to exist in. So it's not only that things are empty because they're past causes and conditions. They can be empty in lots of different ways.

And all this—the thorough understanding of emptiness—what I'm really trying to say is: the more thorough and the deeper our understanding of emptiness, the more it can open out permission and range in terms of imaginal practice, and also conception. Because we know, "Hey, I can conceive that, because it's empty in another way. It's more fundamentally empty." So there's lots of space here in relation to self, imaginal practice in relation to self, and how it might fit with a broader Dharma conception.

But how about with regard to the whole question of ending suffering, or at least decreasing suffering, and the whole Four Noble Truths, which really are a way of saying there is suffering, and we're in the business of ending it or decreasing it? How about this whole idea of soul and imaginal practice in the service of soul? How does that, or what are the ways that might interface with this whole, very central conception in the Dharma—direction in the Dharma—of decreasing suffering, freeing from suffering?

Many people would wisely say that is what Dharma is: the Four Noble Truths in a nutshell, and we're in the business of ending, or at least decreasing, suffering. So how do images relate to all that? Well, it depends on how we use the images and how we conceive of the images. And there are options here.

So for example, here is some dukkha—some disease, suffering, or pain. One might let that dukkha constellate as an image, then work with the image of this dukkha, whatever it is—the image of heartache, loneliness, grief, or whatever arises. One can relate to that by holding and loving that image. This would be incorporating imaginal practice in a way that serves the direction of decreasing suffering and the Four Noble Truths.

Or quite simply, one might have an image of what is positive and beautiful—for example, Kuan Yin or a bodhisattva of compassion, or simply an image of loving light. Through practicing with that image, there is cultivation of the beautiful and positive. Just that by itself would fit nicely within the classical program of the Four Noble Truths.

Again, we might place that image of love or beauty—that beautiful quality of heart—in contact with the dukkha, or bring that image through imagination into contact with the image of the dukkha. So there is the image of Kuan Yin contacting, embracing, shining upon, holding the image of the dukkha. All this is skillful use of imaginal practice that fits easily within the directionality and conception of lessening suffering found in the Four Noble Truths.

If, however, we bring in this conception of nourishing and deepening and enriching and firing up and supporting and opening soulfulness as a goal—if that becomes the thrust and direction of imaginal practice—then the relationship with ending dukkha becomes more complex.

In nourishing a direction of increased soulfulness in relation to a situation, experience, or image, we may not end the dukkha there. This loneliness, when we relate to it with a sense of caring for the soul and soulfulness and soul-making, may not completely end the dukkha. It may end some of the dukkha or dissolve some of it, but may not completely dissolve the dukkha of that loneliness.

Or this endless longing, this yearning or eros that might burn a little—what I've spoken about as pothos, the infinite longings—may not end. In caring for the soulfulness, I may not dissolve that endless longing that's part of it, or the image of loneliness. I may open up to it in a different way. I may give it place, as we've discussed. It finds a place. It finds its God, so to speak. But it may not end.

Maybe even some imaginal figures, as we've alluded to, may place demands on us. Those demands on the being are of different kinds and are not without a certain burden.

So what does the soul want? It's a different question than simply ending dukkha. What does the soul want? Well, it wants soulfulness. Souls want soulfulness. Souls want soul-making. And that includes fantasy, image, mythos—central to soul-making, to soulfulness. They don't necessarily want to end dukkha. That might be included, or a certain level of that might be included, but these can be different things in relation to any situation, experience, or image.

Even more complicated is when we put all this in terms of long-term goals—when we have this long-term aspiration of nourishing, deepening, opening, firing, enriching, supporting soulfulness. What's the relationship between that and ending dukkha or decreasing suffering? What's the relationship of that as a goal, as a direction, as an aspiration and movement, with the whole idea and fantasy of the Dharma? Complex. Complex and not necessarily easy to inquire into.

Let's go into this slowly. If at times soulfulness is my priority—rather than my priority being letting go or non-clinging or non-attachment or cultivating the positive or seeing that it's not-self or seeing the emptiness of this or that—if at times, rather than all those more traditional dharma intentions in approaching experience, soulfulness becomes my priority, then we can equate that with a kind of recognition.

There's already recognition that image and fantasy are present, and we're already honoring our need for them by making soulfulness a priority and understanding and working with that. But as we practice that way, with that recognition and making soulfulness a priority at times, it will have many openings and consequences.

Let me list perhaps five of them and explore them. As I recognize the presence of image and fantasy and honor my need for that—honor the need for soulfulness—as I do that more and more through practice and get a feel for it, it changes my vision. Literally it changes my ways of looking and perceiving things. And I begin to recognize what we've alluded to quite a few times already.

I begin to recognize the fantasies in everything that I care about. Everything that's meaningful to me, I recognize, is shot through with fantasy, with image, with mythos. It's imbuing everything that I love.

Including—I begin to recognize the fantasies that imbue my whole sense of the Dharma and my whole vision and conception of what awakening is, who the Buddha was, and my entire idea of ending dukkha or decreasing dukkha.

You can see, for instance, just historically, how the vision of all that varies dramatically. If we compare three streams of dharma—the more Vajrayana, tantric tradition has a very different fantasy and conceptual framework of what those things mean: ending

dukkha, awakening, the Buddha. Compare that with more classical Theravadin teachings of ending rebirth and their view of the historical Buddha. And compare that with some of the more modern interpretations of Dharma—what I call more existentialist approaches. Again, the fantasy of ending dukkha, the fantasy of the self on the path, is completely different because the existential view says we can only end dukkha to a certain degree, doesn't embrace the whole rebirth framework, and so on. Three different streams with very different fantasies and conceptual frameworks operating.

I've talked about this in other talks and retreats, so I won't go into it again. None of that is bad. The only problem would be if I don't recognize that fantasy is running through all this. Really, really important.

Once I recognize that and truly begin to admit it and open to it—instead of either pretending it's not happening or admitting it but not recognizing how deeply and fully it imbues things and what the implications are—then actually it puts the Dharma on a different ground. We have a different grounding for Dharma, and it's grounded more in imagination and fantasy. Interesting. That's quite radical, I think.

What does it mean to have as our sense of the ground of the Dharma that it is already imaginal? And then this whole question arises: Why is it so important when we hear some teaching, or this person's teaching, or that teaching, and we read something, and ask, "Yes, but is that Buddhism?"

When we realize that the Dharma is grounded in imagination anyway—and as I'll point out later, also metaphysical assumptions—it's grounded very differently in that recognition. Fantasies are operating around dharma, around awakening, and also metaphysical assumptions.

Now, we could also point historically to how different Japanese or Chinese Buddhism is from Indian Buddhism. It's completely different. I'm not even sure the Buddha would recognize it as Buddhism. So there are historical, cultural changes which we can deconstruct and point to, asking, "Well, is that Buddhism?" That's a different approach. It's important, but it's a different track.

Already in the West, in terms of what we add conceptually and what we let go of in the cultural mindview—there are those kinds of historical changes. But I want to say something a little bit different. It has more to do with this recognition of fantasy at the basis of the grounding of what the dharma is, and also the metaphysical assumptions. The key word there is assumptions that we cannot get away from. If you pursue philosophical questions deeper and deeper and deeper, you get to fundamental questions

about how we know anything, how we can trust what we know, about what's real. And somewhere we have to assume something. I can't get beyond having to make assumptions philosophically. And that's metaphysics, whether I like it or not.

So there's this strange reconfiguring, this tectonic shift—a grounding in the recognition that imagination is the ground of the Dharma, and metaphysical assumptions also.

Then we can start to ask: What is going on psychologically for a person when they're getting agitated about who or what the historical Buddha actually was and whether this or that is Buddhist? What's going on psychologically? What kind of fantasies are operating for that person around the Buddha historically, around Buddhism, around Dharma, around self? Something's going on in the psyche in relationship to all that.

And it hasn't quite recognized the grounding. It hasn't recognized that actually we can ground the whole thing in image. It hasn't realized that anyway there are metaphysical assumptions operating in any framing of the Dharma, of the path, of the goal, awakening—all the rest of it.

So there's this different ground, this recognition of fantasy, and that brings a different ground for the Dharma in the imagination.

And then another question emerges from pursuing soulfulness as a priority at times. It starts to open up other questions, and we start to realize: What is my fantasy? What fantasies are operating in this very question of how we conceive soulfulness and its relationship to the Dharma? And that includes the fantasy of the self.

So this whole question we're talking about right now—one could, and people do, very much try to say, "This is my interpretation of the Dharma, and this new concept probably comes from something Western in psychotherapy or something about childhood experiences," and they try to make a point that it's already within the Dharma historically. Or they say it's a more materialistic view, and again try to spin the history of the Dharma to claim, "This is what the Buddha was really trying to say historically." And so they place the whole thing in a...

I'm framing it as this is within the Dharma. And the self then is just kind of championing, rescuing the Buddha's original message, perhaps. And so one could try, I could try, if I was so inclined, to put all this talk of soulfulness in and try and present it as a more traditional dharma package that was already there, that I'm just kind of amplifying a little bit.

Or we could say, you could, I could say, this soulfulness, what we're really doing is expanding the dharma. We inherited this much dharma, this range, and now we're expanding it as is our right culturally. You and I talking about this business about soul and soulfulness and soul making are actually stretching what the dharma means. And that would be a fantasy. And then the fantasy of the self there is as a stretcher, as an expander.

Or another possibility is we're breaking out of the Dharma. That could be a fantasy of what we're doing with this talk of soulfulness and soul and soul-making. And then the fantasy of the self within that is as some kind of exploder of limits, exploder of tradition—an iconoclastic self, etc.

Different styles of fantasy of how we're conceiving the whole relationship of soulfulness with the Dharma, and wrapped up in that, as always, is a fantasy of self. But with any fantasy of a tradition or a trajectory or a path, it has to be engaging and enchanting to me.

So even if I try and put this—let's say I choose the fantasy of it's within the Dharma. It's already there. It was already there. I'm just highlighting it. Whatever fantasy I have of the Dharma there and of the self, that has to be engaging and enchanting to me. So do you understand? It's like the whole fantasy of this work and the conceptual work itself and also the fantasy of the Dharma. What is the conception? What is the framework of the Dharma that I'm engaging in? Is it engaging to me? Am I engaged by it? Is it enchanting to me?

Because I could go further and say: Is my fantasy of the Dharma big enough for the soul? Or will the soul outgrow the conceptual box and the fantasy box of the Dharma that I have right now? This is an important question.

So when I take soulfulness and this sensitivity to soulfulness and the desire to nourish it and support and, as I say, enrich and deepen and open, expand it and grow it, care for it—when that becomes, if you like, at least at times, the principal navigator, that sets us on an open-ended journey. It has no limits. Soulfulness, the increase in soulfulness, the deepening, the enriching of soulfulness is open-ended and without limit. And in part, that's because the psyche's desire for soul-making will keep opening and deepening the range of perception. I'm going to come back to this.

So when we take soulfulness as, if you like, the most important thing, and we navigate that way at those times, the psyche's desire for soul-making will open and deepen and expand the range of perception of self, of other, and world. And that expanding of the range of perception is part of soulfulness. And that's part of what makes this navigation by soulfulness, by sensitivity to soulfulness, open-ended.

The pace at which that deepening and expanding of the range of perception happens—the range of appearance and experience—the pace at which that happens is quite individual. I think it depends, if you like, on how much fire, so to speak, a person has, how fiery their soul is, how much eros runs through their soul and drives their soul. Some people are really quite fiery and quite quick. There's a lot of eros there. I'm going to come back to this soon. And so this opening of the perception of self, other, world, etc., this opening of more and more soulfulness, and this movement of soul-making that opens up that range happens quite quickly. They burn through quite quickly into new territory.

In other people it's very, very slow. In other people it barely seems to move much at all.

So when we take soulfulness as a navigator, we're in a way saying yes to the psyche's desire for soul-making. I'm going to come back to this. And that keeps opening a range of perception—perception, perception, experience—the range of experience of self, other, world, and that happens at different paces for different people.

But the question: is my Dharma framework that I'm operating in, is my fantasy or vision, if you like, my mythos of the Dharma, is it big enough? Or will the self outgrow it if I let soulfulness be what steers me, or the beacon, if you like, the pole star I'm moving towards, the direction I'm moving in?

So there's the recognition of the place of image and fantasy and the honoring of our need for image, fantasy, and soulfulness, and that expands into this recognition that that's everywhere—image, fantasy, mythos are imbuing whatever I care about—and then recognizing that actually through that, we can put the Dharma on a different ground, on imaginal ground.

And then there's the question, what is the fantasy of how I'm conceiving of the relationship between soulfulness and dharma and the self within that? And then there's the question: is my fantasy and my conception of the dharma big enough, or will the self outgrow it?

In all of this—I mentioned this before but I'll say it again—there can be a very different relationship to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and clinging. Very often people hear that clinging causes suffering and if you don't cling then you will suffer less or won't suffer at all. And they try to make this non-clinging or lessening of clinging a way of life. They try to live that way, and very soon they're going to run into problems there. It becomes—sounds a little unkind—it becomes a little bit silly. It's impossible. It will not fit our life and it certainly will not fit our soul. To try to move through the world that way is a little bit unwise. It won't help the soulfulness. It's not very skillful.

Versus actually regarding this whole teaching about clinging and letting go of clinging and the whole, if you like, shorthand version of the Four Noble Truths—there is suffering, it's caused by clinging, I can release that clinging and have freedom from suffering or some degree of freedom from suffering—that's a shorthand version of Four Noble Truths. It's almost like a lens, a way of approaching things. Using that as a key.

So that shorthand version of the Four Noble Truths and the teaching about clinging and ways of clinging less, using that as a key that opens up the whole realm of perception. And that's related to this whole idea about fabrication, because it's clinging more centrally than anything else, and clinging in the wide range of what that means, that actually fabricates self and dukkha and perception of appearances.

So I start playing with this business of clinging and letting go of clinging and this framework or lens of the Four Noble Truths. And lo and behold, it functions like a key that opens up not just freedom at different times, but a whole deeper understanding of the fabrication of perception, the emptiness of all things through that. Rather than letting go of clinging as a way of life—a lot of people try and get into that, even unconsciously as a mode—rather using it as a way of practicing this decrease in clinging in different ways to different degrees and seeing that it functions as a key that opens understanding and opens perception.

One way or another, through emptiness practice, through imaginal practice or whatever, we begin to see that Dharma concepts—clinging and Four Noble Truths and this and that—they're not realities. They are not realities. Dharma concepts are not pointing to real things. They are ways of looking. A Dharma concept functions best when it is a way of looking. There's a range of ways of looking, not a single way of looking, but Dharma concepts offer—they each offer slightly different lenses, and even those lenses have ranges in them.

So Dharma concepts are not realities, they're ways of looking that bring freedom. And also, that bring freedom both in the future but also in the moment. Dharma concepts are ways of looking that bring freedom, but also that liberate other ways of look-

ing, or that liberate our ability and our flexibility to look in different ways. So we pick up Dharma concepts, not as realities, but as tools, as lenses, as ways of looking. They bring freedom in the moment. We can see that and feel that. And through all that, it actually liberates more ways of looking. In other words, it opens up the perception. Dharma concepts bring a sense of freedom from dukkha, but they also open the perception. And this is crucial.

And that's a very different way of understanding the Dharma, what we're trying to do, what the central thrust and movement of the Dharma is. And as I said, I would feel it's more fertile in terms of what it then offers in relationship to imaginal practice and by allowing place and space for imaginal practice.

And so in relation to this, all this is still talking about the relationship of these ideas of soul and soulfulness and soul-making with the whole idea of ending or at least decreasing dukkha. So we have to have a slightly different way of conceiving of the Dharma than what may be normal to allow this kind of fertility.

Now, I would say that we can orient—one can orient this navigation of practice and practices taking soulfulness as our caring for soulfulness and soul making as what's helping to navigate us. We can orient that in a way definitely that eventually brings more and more really lovely sense of lightness into the whole sense of existence. More and more a sense of the transparency of things, the diaphanous nature of things, the beauty, different kinds of beauty, as I said, depth, sacredness.

We can orient this care for the soul, this care for soulfulness and soul-making, so that it does liberate in these ways and bring a freeing up and an opening of the range of perception. In a way, perception gets healed of its limitations, often limitations that we don't even realize because we're just so used to them and everyone in the culture seems to agree on them.

So one of the freedoms here is this freeing up of the range of perception, the healing of perception, and also in ways that we wouldn't get without taking our navigation through the care of the soul and the soulfulness and the soul-making. Because, for instance, just seeing in terms of just purely in terms of emptiness, the emptiness of all things or the oneness of all things or this and that.

It will give a universal sense—everything is empty or everything is one or whatever it is—but it loses the personal dimension. I'm going to come back to that hopefully in other talks.

So this healing of perception, this opening of the range of perception through imaginal practice and through caring for the soul and taking that as a principle navigator, allows the perception to open up in ways that beautifully bring together or include both the personal dimensions, the dimension of personhood and the universal, and have both together or can lean on one or the other.

So we can take soulfulness as what guides us and the care for soulfulness and soul-making as what guides us in practice. And eventually there will be a lot less dukkha, or we can steer it in that direction. But on the way, it may include the dukkha of certain images and certain fantasies. And we're just conceiving it in a slightly different way. We're saying soulfulness is important, is the primary thing, rather than ending dukkha is the primary thing, which would be a classically dharmic way of seeing things—always ending dukkha is what's most important, decreasing dukkha.

So the goal and the orientation may be conceived differently, but certainly it's possible to steer through the care of the soul and using that as the navigator principle into a lot of freedom, a lot of lightness and transparency, beauty, sacredness, freeing up of the perception in really broad and beautiful ways.

So we might ask, too, given all of this, everything we've said so far about soul and soulfulness and soul-making, let's move on and state that part of soul-making is in relationship to conceptual frameworks. Part of soul-making involves conceptualizing concepts. And we've said this before, but again, to stress it.

The question becomes: what conceptual framework, what conceptions, what eidos—to use that Greek word again—what ideas and ways of looking nurture, deepen, open, ignite, enrich and support and nourish soulfulness? What conceptual frameworks aid the soulfulness? So that becomes a question that is part of practice. Just as in a more traditional Dharma understanding, the question would be: what conceptual frameworks help us to decrease or end dukkha?

So again, I mentioned in other talks, all philosophical systems, if we're talking now about conceptual frameworks, all philosophical systems run into problems of one kind or another at some point, and they all will rest on assumptions. Eventually, we come to a place where we just are making assumptions. We dig deeper and deeper and deeper and go, and we realize, oh, the system of philosophy rests on an assumption.

So one of the conceptual frameworks that really supports a sense of soul and soulfulness and soul-making is this idea which we've touched on already: that image, mythos, fantasy is primary. It's fundamental and primary. That is not something that we could ever prove, I don't think. It's impossible to prove it. I'm not even interested in proving it. I don't feel I need to prove it because there's no truth claim there.

If we turn the whole question around philosophically, what we can prove, and what I spent a little time doing, is actually proving perhaps the mistakes or exposing some of the assumptions or critiquing, say, the dominant views of the culture or any views that claim some kind of reality or truth. One can actually prove that any system or philosophy, even if it's dressed up as not a system, that claims some kind of reality or truth, one can critique it from a number of different directions. Oftentimes, especially nowadays, and even some presentations of modern Dharma will say, "I'm not interested in truth, truth is an oppressive notion," etc., etc., but still contain within them implicitly some notion of what's true and what's false, and lean towards often what's quite a limited version of what's true, while verbally rejecting the whole notion of truth and saying I'm not interested in that.

So one could philosophically, as I said, critique quite strongly dominant views that claim a certain reality or truth, usually implicitly, or dismiss imagination or images, imaginal practice, and this talk of soul as metaphysics. As I've said elsewhere, there's always a hidden metaphysics in those kind of notions. Always a hidden ontology, assumption about what's real, always a hidden epistemology, always a hidden cosmology.

So what if we really open up to that, recognize it, all that, and then just see what if we entertain this conceptual framework and see what happens? And by entertain, I don't just mean think it, I mean actually see through it, view through it. I'm talking about practice here in a way that affects perception. Practice is not practice as far as I'm concerned unless it affects perception. So a meditator is someone who plays with different ways of looking, relationships, conceptions, in ways that affect perception.

So we say, what if this conceptual frame, what if this one, and we sort of put it in and take it for a ride and see what happens. So philosophies and conceptual frameworks become more like doors—opportunities. That word actually is oportas, like portal or port. It's a bit related to the word for door, our word for door.

So rather than getting stuck in truth claims, we're actually very, very light and flexible and agile with conceptual frameworks, using them as doors opportunistically, as opportunities for what can come, what can grow and open up through this door. We enter through this door and a world opens up.

So in terms of we're asking now, what is it that supports and nourishes soulfulness? And one answer to that is the conceptual frameworks that we're entertaining and the relationship with conceptual frameworks.

And another aspect of what supports soulfulness is love. Love and desire and eros. And this is huge. I want to just say a little bit now. I've said before: where there is love, there image or fantasy or mythos is operating. So if a person feels like, "I'm not sure, where is the image in my life?"

Where is the fantasy? Look where there is love. Where there is love, there is image and fantasy or mythos. Or we could turn that around and say fantasy and image are part of loving deeply. They're necessary in loving deeply, especially when we're talking about personal love. Fantasy and image are beautiful, necessary parts of loving deeply.

But we could say a little more. We could say also that, or just state as axiomatic, eros is also part of soul-making. Eros is part of soul-making.

Now, what do I mean by eros? This is quite tricky. Again, I'd partly like to say eros is undefinable, and I think that's actually very wise. I'm not sure if we'll get to it this retreat, how much we can fit this in, but perhaps at another time in the future. There's something about that that's really valuable—to hold eros as an undefinable, very expanding idea.

But certainly by eros, when I use that word, or even erotic, I don't just mean the sexual. It includes the sexual, but not just that. Let's say for now, as a sort of springboard definition, loose definition, that eros is the desire for more connection. You can see how that could obviously include the sexual, but let's say for now, as a springboard definition of eros, it's the desire for more connection with another, with ourselves even, with something in the world, with whatever.

Now, this desire for more connection operates in relationship to anything we love or anything where there is soulfulness. And it desires, so to speak, to penetrate further the image, the desire to penetrate further what we love. I'm using deliberately sexual language, erotic language. The desire of eros is to penetrate further. It wants more connection. It wants to penetrate further, or you could say, in a more feminine mode, it wants to open more. Open more to what we love, or open up what we love even more.

So it wants to penetrate further into what we love for more connection. It wants to open up what we love. It wants to expand it. It wants to inseminate the image of the beloved. So the desire of eros is to inseminate the image of the beloved.

For example, one of the musicians I really, really love is Keith Jarrett. Some of you may know him. He's actually done a huge, broad range of work. I'm not crazy about all of it, but a lot of it I really love. And I love him. And I'm, again, like Eric Dolphy, so thankful for him. But in my image of him, and so in the love and in the image of him, that image, at this point, includes a kind of vague sense of, let's say, what or who he channels. And again, not using that word in too concrete or literal or tight a way as sometimes in the New Age does. But there's some vague sense there of what or who he channels through his music and through his dedication to music.

So in my image of him, he is more than human. The image makes him more than human in some way. You understand? The image of Keith Jarrett is inseminated through the eros to open up, to expand, in this case, in this way. It's not just, I'm interested in more of his music, and I want to hear this, and I want to hear that. But it's actually what he is. The image of him gains depth. He's no longer just a human being. He is that, of course, just a human musician. There's something else with it, but it's vague. And I'm not taking it completely literally.

So this opening up of the image and the fantasy of someone or something that we love, that there is this eros connection with, opens up the perspective, enriches the perspective, and that in itself is an increase in the soulfulness, a nourishing, a deepening of the soulfulness. They're almost like one and the same thing.

There is a nourishing and a supporting and an opening and enrichening of the resonances and the range and the depth of the sense of sacredness. So all this goes together.

Now, in other words, my sense of Keith Jarrett as something coming through is something very sacred. There's a real sense of holiness there. In other words, or with that, if we're now with Greek words mythos and eros and psyche and so on, let's use another word, logos, which I'm going to use as conceptual framework. That also opens up.

In other words, I don't just think of him as a biological machine with amazing neural networks that can do all this incredible improvising and incredible dexterity of the hands, and ears trained in this way and that way. Yes, yes, all that. But wrapped up in the logos, wrapped up in the conceptual framework, wrapped up in the image of him, the eros, the love, expands more and more so that he becomes in the image more than human. And in the image it makes necessary then, I have to make room with the logos, with the conceptual framework, for a different dimension of sacredness beyond the human.

What I'm really trying to say is the eros and the psyche and the soulfulness and the logos, the conceptual framework, they end up fertilizing each other. The eros opens up the image, enriches the image, penetrates, it wants to penetrate further, it needs a space to penetrate into, so it has to impregnate the image of what we love, inseminate it, open it, expand it. And in doing that, it gives it other dimensions. That's part of expanding it. And those other dimensions, the mind, the conceptual framework needs to expand to accommodate and support those other dimensions that we sense in the image.

So the soulfulness, the sacredness, the conceptual framework, the image, the eros, these are all feeding each other. Because when there's more of a sense of depth now, let's say in this image sense of Keith Jarrett, then I love him more because I'm loving more than just the human and all his human challenges and the dedication. I'm loving even more than that. I'm including that, but even more. So there's more eros and more fertility of the soulfulness of the conceptual framework, the way these things grow together.

So images, fantasies, mythoi, they need to and they will contact life. We've talked a little bit about that. We'll talk more about that. And in so doing, they bring healing of different kinds. And they also deliteralize life. So life is just this, just that. This is my story, as we alluded to earlier. The whole, if you like, imbuing of life with images and recognition that image and fantasy operate, it deliteralizes life. Soul-making comes into life and into experience and into the sense of self and other life, coloring life, ensouling life.

Objects, things, experiences are enriched, given depth, another dimension, if you like, if we use that word again without being too tight around it. And they expand the perception so the perception then is different of things because they have this other soul dimension to them. So through the love and because there's a different sense of things, a different perception of things, they're more in-souled, we love them more. The love is deeper. And that love, as I said, that eros wants to, it will by itself, expand further. It wants to penetrate further into this image, open this image up even more into greater depth.

So there is this mutual opening, a mutual inseminating of the eros, of the psyche and soulfulness, and of the logos, of the conceptual framework. Granting and giving soul to the world and souling. What is it to sense the world with soul? And this is actually open-ended. This mutual opening, this mutual insemination of eros, psyche or soul, and logos. Potentially open-ended.

What is it, though, we could ask, and we should ask, what is it that helps to open the soul in this way, the psyche in this way, the soulfulness, and what is it correspondingly that blocks the opening of the soul and the psyche, the soulfulness?

Well, very often what happens is we're stuck and clinging to one view, either one image, or more often we're not seeing something as an image, and we're literalizing it. This is reality. This self-image is true. That image of the other, we don't recognize its image. We're stuck in one view, not recognizing its image. And this whole fertility that's granted by the conceptual framework being open and having room for image and the growth of that, the mutual fertility of Psyche, Eros and Logos is blocked, is stuck.

Sometimes it's that, that we're clinging too tightly to one view. Or we don't see image as image, it's too literal and then the whole thing just grinds to a halt because it's too concrete. Sometimes what we need is to bring in or allow or hear from someone else a different way of storying something in our life.

where actually the soul and this fertilization process has gotten stuck and contracted, rigidified. You need to let in another image or see it through the lens of another image—this experience, or this image itself, or this history of mine. And that brings more freedom. It frees things up and also allows the soulfulness to grow. The soulfulness is nourished.

I remember—some of you will have heard me tell that story of the retreatant where I offered the image at some point when we were talking of the sacred prostitute in relation to her past and things that had happened and paths she had gone down when she was much younger. She was stuck in a certain way of looking, a certain view, clinging to a certain view of that past and of herself in that past that was bound up in shame and literalism. And by just suggesting another, actually just bringing another image into the field as we were talking, a lot of freeing up happened and a re-souling, if you like, happened of the whole story. The shame dissolved.

So sometimes we're stuck in one image, taking it as real, and we need to bring in or have access to some other image, a multiplicity that opens things up.

Or, as I said, it might be that the conceptual framework, the logos, is too rigid. So this is our box of what reality is, or what the Dharma is, or whatever it is. And the box is too tight. It does not allow a deepening or opening of the perception. So I cannot see Keith Jarrett that way because I don't believe that. I just believe in human beings and neurological wiring, which because of neuroplasticity can be trained quite extraordinarily so. The logos has its limits and will not allow this deepening and opening and expanding of the perception of the image. And because of that, the eros cannot increase because it

has only so much area to move into. This expanding of the image that's allowed with a wider conceptual framework or a looser flexibility with conceptual framework doesn't support the deeper movement and growing of love and the movement of the eros. There's a kind of infertility there because of the rigidity and the tightness and the smallness of the conceptual framework, the logos.

Again, just to point out, with the logos, with the conceptual framework, that is an aspect of soul that's involved. Where there is fantasy and love, logos is always involved. Conceptual framework is always involved.

For example, we might have a fantasy of practice, and we might love mindfulness. But wrapped up in that is actually a love of certain ideas wrapped up in the mindfulness itself. My idea of mindfulness, my logos of mindfulness, fantasy of mindfulness—they're all wrapped up together implicitly and explicitly.

So in my love of mindfulness, and my fantasy of practice, are wrapped up potentially ideas about simplicity—the beauty of simplicity. That's an idea. The idea that mindfulness is something simple. Or the idea that when I'm mindful, I'm being with what actually is. Now that's a huge idea that's dressed up as a non-idea, as an absence of idea. "No, no, no, I'm just being non-conceptual, I'm just being simple by being with what actually is." It's an idea, and I'm in love with that idea as part of my love of mindfulness. There's a lot involved in that idea, and it's dressed up, as I said, as a non-idea, as an absence of ideation.

Or maybe wrapped up in my love of mindfulness is the whole love of being versus doing. I love to be. I love to just be and drop doing. A lot of ideas wrapped up. I'm in love with that idea, and that idea itself has a lot of ideas within it.

Or it might be the kind of mindfulness that's really into this microscopic attention to appearances and penetrating them or perceiving them down to their elemental nature—moments of this or that or whatever. And again, wrapped up in my love of practicing mindfulness that way is also that idea of scrutinizing and dissecting things to their elemental nature, to their real nature.

So conceptual frameworks, logos, ideas are involved where there's fantasy and love, just to point that out. This eros, psyche, logos—they're completely interwoven. You could say they're actually aspects of each other, of soul.

And again, to stress that when we cling to a certain logos or a certain conceptual framework, it will limit or prevent the opening of perception. Because it only has a certain range, it cannot entertain and give ground and support to a perception that does not make sense within that conceptual framework. So it limits and prevents the opening of perception, the opening of experiences.

The question is individually: how quick does the fire of eros burn and penetrate and open so that it needs a new logos and also new images or deeper or more fertile? How quick does that burn in us? It's very individual.

But all this—I'm saying it because it's all related to the relationship of soulfulness and Dharma and ways of conceiving Dharma. All this is related, wrapped up in there.

In a way, we could say exploring this very question of the relationship of soulfulness and Dharma is potentially itself also soul-making. It brings into the very exploration the ideas of soul and soul-making and conceptual frameworks, different ways of understanding the Dharma and eros—all that together in relationships. And it can be itself something that is soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

It's very individual.

But all this, I'm saying it because it's all related—the relationship of soulfulness and Dharma and ways of conceiving Dharma. All this is related, it's wrapped up in there.

So, in a way, we could say exploring this very question of the relationship of soulfulness and Dharma is potentially itself also soul-making. But it brings into the very exploration the ideas of soul and soul-making and conceptual frameworks, different ways of understanding the Dharma and Eros and all that together in relationships. And it can be itself something that is soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 11

Soulmaking (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h15

> *In this opening talk on soulmaking, Rob Burbea introduces a profound framework for understanding how certain ways of looking can nourish what he calls 'soulfulness' - the richness of meaningfulness, emotional resonance, beauty, and depth that gives life its sacred dimension. He distinguishes soulmaking from papañca (mental proliferation) and hallucination, emphasizing that soulmaking occurs in conscious relationship with images and experiences, not in the images themselves.*
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> *Burbea presents Dharma practice as the cultivation of many varied ways of looking, spanning three broad possibilities: bare attention, practices that decrease fabrication (leading toward emptiness), and skillful fabrication that can include imaginal work. He argues that while bare attention has value, we cannot live entirely in that mode - we need conceptual frameworks and what he calls 'fantasies' (in the beautiful sense) that engage and enchant us.*
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> *Drawing on diverse wisdom traditions including Kabbalah, Mahayana Buddhism, and depth psychology, Burbea explores how understanding emptiness can actually free us to engage more creatively with fabrication and imagination. He introduces key concepts like seeing 'image as image' and maintaining flexibility around conceptual frameworks, while addressing common concerns about reality and delusion that arise around imaginal practice.*

We've been using words like soul and soulfulness, and so let's take some time in this talk and the next few talks to explore what those words might mean for us, what they might mean for our practice and for our way of conceiving the relationship between those kinds of concepts and the Dharma. Let's open this up for exploration.

Probably most people, when they hear the word soul, tend to immediately conceive some kind of entity—the soul, a soul, some kind of thing which may not be material, but some kind of entity. Of course some people, especially some Buddhists, would immediately protest, saying it's not okay to believe in such an entity.

If we just slow down a little bit, even if one was using the word soul as indicating some kind of entity, there would still be, I would hope, the understanding that that entity is empty—empty of inherent existence. Knowing that, it's then okay to talk in those terms and to use the concept or the experience of that entity, just as Buddhists talk in the language of self and feel the self and conceive of the self, knowing either through

experience or through doctrine that it's empty of inherent existence. But this doesn't stop us talking about it and relating to it and even having practices that are framed in terms of the self.

Just as we talk about and practice and think of and receive teachings about things like the five aggregates—body, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—these too are empty. They do not really exist. They are entities that are empty, and we talk about them, we practice with them, we practice ways of looking that see them and regard them in certain ways. The processes that the aggregates are fundamental to, those processes are not real. The elements of the processes, the aggregates, the psychophysical constituents are entities, and the processes are, I suppose, a kind of entity in some sense—empty, empty, empty entities.

This is really important: not to jump on words like soul, because if one uses it with the flavor of an entity at times, that entity is always understood to be empty, just as self is understood to be empty. We use that word just as we use aggregates and all the rest of it.

But actually, I would like to more often use a word such as soulfulness rather than soul, to take it away from that problematic notion of an entity. Although, as I just said, I don't have a problem with that, I'd rather use a word like soulfulness and also soul-making, which is a word that came from the poet John Keats, I think, originally. Soul-making—you'll notice it's a verb. We make soul, one can make soul, or soul is made, so to speak: soul-making.

What does that mean, or what does it mean that soulfulness is made? What we're really talking about—what I want to emphasize here by shifting the inclination and at times the vocabulary—is ways of looking. That means ways of relating, ways of conceiving, and also ways of acting in the world. Let's call all of that ways of looking, relating, conceiving, acting—ways of looking that nourish, sustain, increase a sense of soulfulness.

So that's what we might say soul-making is: the increase, the growth and the fertilization and the nourishment and the support of soulfulness.

And what do we mean by soulfulness? What do I mean by soulfulness? I mean that richness of resonance in the psyche that involves meaningfulness—as I said, that's not the same as meaning. A pregnancy of meaningfulness, the emotional resonances that are often so subtle and so nuanced, not always, and often beautiful—these kinds of resonances of meaningfulness, emotional resonances of the heart, the heart resonating. This is part of soulfulness.

But also ideas—the resonances of ideas that are resonating. This resonating or quivering with or triggered by or opened by or associated with whatever is feeding that sense of soulfulness for us. Remember, this word idea is related to the Greek word eidos, and also includes how we conceive and how we see things—eidos, how we look. So that also is wrapped up in the whole rich, fertile complex of what soulfulness is: resonances with ideas, and also informing and shaping and directing and giving depth to the way we look and see and conceive. All this is wrapped up in it. In fact, depth as a whole is characteristic of soulfulness, I would say.

Beauty also is very wrapped up in or characteristic of soulfulness. As we said before, the range of beauty grows. So the heart, the being, the psyche, the eyes, the sensibility expand their range of beauty as the soulfulness grows, with the soulfulness. Beauty is a dimension, an aspect of soulfulness, of soul and soul-making.

And with all this, importance—a sense of something being important—is also central to a sense of soulfulness. So much so that we could say that what is soul-making, or when there's a sense of soulfulness, there is at those times a certain relationship with death, in the sense that what is soul-making gives us a sense of deep importance, almost of this thing that in some way echoes beyond, casts its image beyond my mortal span into death. We see life specie aeternitatis—in other words, from the perspective of eternity, beyond our death. When things are deeply soulful, they have that kind of resonance beyond our life, and they frame, they form, they shape and deepen our relationship with death and with our own death—and not in terms of belief. I'll come back to this.

Soulfulness or soul-making also has to do with seeing images, seeing or sensing images, but also with seeing life or seeing this or that experience or event or myself or my trajectory in life, my unfolding as image. So this seeing as image is also a very central characteristic of soul-making.

Love also—we've touched on this and we'll return to this—different kinds of love are very much part of soul-making and give soulfulness different flavors with each kind of love.

And again, necessity—that's something we'll return to—a sense of the necessity of this experience, this unfolding, this image, whatever it is. When it has that characteristic, that feel, that sense of necessity, there's soulfulness.

So all of that, and more probably, is what I'm trying to get at when I use that word soulfulness. And we're either nourishing it or not. It's either being made, that soulfulness, soul-making supported, or less so.

Now we could say, and actually it would be very wise to say, soul is undefinable. It's one of those what sometimes people call root metaphors, and as such, it's undefinable. There will be wisdom in keeping a sense of flexibility and plasticity and range in how we use that word. I think that's very wise and helpful. And so, just saying it's undefinable.

And at the same time, we could say for our purposes that soul is those ways of looking, those ways of relating and conceiving and acting that, as I said, nourish, fertilize, deepen, enrich, and support a sense of soulfulness, a palpable sense of soulfulness. So we can say soul is undefined, and we can also define soul as, rather than as an entity, as a whole range of ways of looking that feeds soulfulness. Now that definition may sound circular, but in a way it doesn't matter. It's leading us somewhere, potentially.

As an example of a non-soulful imagining or image, someone told me ages ago—actually another teacher—they were on a meditation retreat at the retreat center where they worked and had a senior position. They were meditating in a room on their own, and the heating pipes were making the noises that heating pipes do. They were meditating and hearing the sound of the pipes, and then began to hear voices from the sounds of the heating pipes. They heard those voices and started to listen closer and thought they heard another teacher and a friend discussing some problem with the retreat center. As if in secret, he thought in that moment that he could hear their voices in another room being carried to him through the heating pipes. And even at one point they said, "Well, don't tell him"—the meditator, the other teacher—as if they were trying to keep it secret.

Now, actually, that's more an instance of probably something like hallucination and delusion. It often comes when the concentration is too narrow, too tight, with too much energy. And it's what we call a kind of yogi mind manifestation. There is, in that kind of imagining, no soulfulness. There is no recognition, "Oh, this is an image." It's totally concretized. He thought he was listening to an actual fact, an actual situation, a concrete situation that was happening in real time in another room. There's nothing poetic there. So a very, very different thing there. There was no soulfulness in that sense.

Now, we all know maybe that kind of thing, certainly, but we also all know papañca, this Pali word, this kind of craziness of the mind, ego proliferation, the spinning of the mind, like a dog that's got a bone or chasing its own tail, just spinning and creating a mess of suffering and self-building. So all human beings know that to some degree or other. And we can certainly say that is different than soul-making. We really want to get the sense these are two different things. Soul-making and papañca are different, even though papañca might involve imagination and fantasy.

In papañca, some of the differences between papañca and soul-making include the fact that in papañca, it's usually about ego reactivity as the dominant thing. The ego is very tight and caught up in its reactivities. So if it involves someone else, we're trying to get one up on this person or get some kind of revenge or something. It's so narrow in the vortex there. The self-view when there is papañca is completely literal. I just believe what I am thinking or how I am viewing the self. I believe that is the truth about myself in that moment. And if it's that I'm an idiot or I'm a failure or I'm ugly or whatever it is, a useless meditator, that's what I believe in. That self-view is also very, very central in what's going on in papañca. It all revolves around self-view.

Papañca, in contrast with soul-making, where the self-view is not literal. It's not to do with ego reactivity so much at all. There's not the centrality of the self and the self-view. Self-view is not being grasped at. There is not a preoccupation with self-view that characterizes papañca. All that's much, much looser and more spacious and more kind of see-through in soul-making.

In papañca we do not see, "This is image, this is fantasy." There's not that recognition. There is not in papañca a kind of diaphanous quality either to what is seen or the self or the image of the self. No light shines through that. There's no sense of something coming through that's perhaps divine or of another dimension, of depth. There's not much beauty in papañca. We're just in this vortex, tightly spinning and contracted, as opposed to the openness and the harmonization of energies and the sense of meaningfulness that characterizes soul-making. There's quite a difference between soul-making use of images versus papañca or hallucinations or delusions.

Now, I've said this before, but it's so important I want to emphasize it again. Soul-making happens or exists in relationship with images or experiences. Soul-making is in the relationship, or in the conscious working with images and experiences, and that relationship, that conscious working, includes the conceptual framework. So soul-making is in the relationship, is in the conscious working with an image or an experience or images or experiences—not in the images or the fantasies alone. So that's, again, helpful to have it as a verb, soul-making.

It's in the working with rather than it existing inherently, independently in this image. This distinction is really important.

Now, we could just leave it at that. But we could go a step further—though in a way, this becomes a tangent that I'll return to in later talks, I hope.

We could say that soul is that which views in ways that increase soulfulness, that feed and nourish and deepen soulfulness. Soul is that entity—if you want to use that term loosely—that views through ways of looking which nourish, increase, and deepen soulfulness.

Compare this kind of definition with the Kabbalistic tradition of Jewish mysticism, where the soul, the human soul and mind, are regarded as fundamentally not separate from the divine. There's that entity that's not separate from the divine and divine perception. Therefore, because of this non-separateness, the human soul and mind and psyche is authorized—because it's not separate from the divine—and facilitated in its interpretations, both of holy texts and of life and the world and others and self. This openness of interpretation that we discussed before, this infinite interpretive possibility, becomes available precisely because the mind, the soul, is not separate from the divine. It gives the human range of interpretation authority and facility. It's actually helped because of having its roots in the divine.

Soul, in this definition, is that which views in ways that increase soulfulness. These kinds of interpretations, these ways of looking at texts or tradition or life or self or the world, are building soulfulness.

In the Buddha's tradition, there's the teaching of Buddha nature in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions. This teaching gets interpreted in different ways and directions. Some people interpret it as simply saying that the mind is impermanent, there's nothing permanent there, and there's no fixed essence to it—in which case it's infinitely shapeable. So we have Buddha potential because there's nothing fixed in the mind and it's all impermanent, allowing it to change and be shaped eventually into Buddha consciousness.

Other times Buddha nature is seen more as a primordial wisdom awareness that already exists within us but is covered up. Similar to the Kabbalistic interpretation, this primordial wisdom awareness already sees things as divine and empty simultaneously. It sees self and other and beings and this world and materiality and the whole cosmos as divine manifestations—empty divine manifestations—without concretizing them or giving them independent existence.

This is what Buddhas know. This is how Buddhas see in the Vajrayana tradition. And this seeing, this primordial wisdom awareness, exists within us, within everybody, within every sentient creature, but it's covered over.

In that context, tantric practice is actually—or a large part of tantric practice is—skillfully mimicking this vision of a Buddha, this ultimate primordial wisdom awareness. One "fakes it till you make it." You practice seeing in that way, seeing how a Buddha sees, seeing empty divinity everywhere and in everything.

Again, relating it back—it's not exactly the same, but soul, Buddha nature, is that which views in ways that nourish, deepen, enrich, heighten, and support soulfulness.

Or in a more modern context of some modern psychotherapies—Jungian and post-Jungian—we say the mind or the psyche is imbued with archetypes and gods. They're part of the deep essence, if you like, or fabric of the mind. The mind or psyche is rooted in the archetypes and the gods in that way. These archetypes then allow us to see through their lenses, or to be possessed by different archetypes, different gods, and they see in ways that again increase, fertilize, nourish, enrich, deepen, heighten, and support soulfulness.

There are quite a few different traditions that in some way echo each other here by saying something like: soul is that which views in ways that increase soulfulness.

But if that's too much—and we will return to those kinds of ideas later in the retreat, I hope—if that's too much, let's just say what I said before: soul-making is in relationship with images and experiences, not in the images and fantasies alone. It's in relationship with the conscious working with, which includes the conceptual frameworks. It's the conscious working with, the relationship with images and experiences. It's in that relating. That's why we use it as a verb.

Now let's go into this a little more. I've said, and I really want to make this fundamental to the whole structure supporting this entire investigation: What is Dharma practice? Or how can we see Dharma practice in a way that ends up being most fertile, that opens up the most possibility?

I would say: Dharma practice is the practice of many and varied ways of looking. And again, that phrase "ways of looking" includes conceptual framework and relationship, and ways of acting. Dharma practice is the practice of a whole range—the development of skill and flexibility and facility and range—of ways of looking.

It seems to me that any conception of the Dharma that doesn't open up to a range, that wants to either explicitly or implicitly make Dharma a practice of just this way of looking or just this way of conceiving, when it wants to shrink it down like that away from opening up this range and flexibility of many ways of looking—anything that

tends towards singularity, implicitly or explicitly—will quite quickly run into either philosophical problems or dead ends, ethical problems or dead ends, or dead ends in practice and perception. That's a whole other subject.

But let's say this: Dharma practice is the practice of many different ways of looking and the development of that skill and range and facility.

Now, within that range of ways of looking, we could delineate three broad possibilities, or three camps if you like.

The first is actually the one that most people are most familiar with—what's come to be called "bare attention." It's not a phrase the Buddha ever used, but this kind of simple mindfulness, what's come to be regarded that way, forms one strand.

Actually, in a way, it's a misnomer. It's a helpful tool to think about bare attention—that we can actually be with things directly, barely, in that kind of stripped way, as if that were really possible. But it's not, because that kind of looking still includes all kinds of assumptions and conceptions wrapped up in perceiving, in a mode of perceiving, a way of looking that seems very bare compared to our usual perception and ways of looking, but it's actually not bare. Nevertheless, it's a valid and helpful way of practicing.

So one possibility is bare attention—one avenue or camp, if you like.

The second broad possibility encompasses a whole range of practices that fabricate much less than bare attention fabricates. When we're in the mode of bare attention or simple mindfulness, we really can have the sense as practitioners: "Oh, I'm not fabricating so much right now. There is not so much being fabricated in terms of papañca and story and concepts." So there's a degree of less fabrication in the mode of bare attention.

But there are a whole range of practices in this second broad range of possibility that fabricate much, much less than bare attention. Much less. As the samādhi deepens, as the mettā deepens, or compassion practices—and certainly emptiness practices—we go way, way deeper in terms of fabricating less perception, so that the whole fabric of perception begins to deconstruct. Things start to become much less substantial—this is a spectrum here—much less substantial, and then they start not appearing, this or that element of perception, of sensation, just not appearing, all the way down to the total non-appearance of any perception, any sensation, any appearance or experience at all.

So there's a range of decreasing fabrication that one can—again, if one's practicing in the right way and thinking of practice the right way—develop that journey into less and less fabrication. There's a whole range of practices there. So that would be the second camp.

And then the third possibility is skillful fabrication. We can fabricate self and other, and the perception of self and other as this or that, the whole world around us and objects and all that, and fabricate in different ways and lots of different colors, if you like, to that fabrication and directions within that.

So there's bare attention, decreasing fabrication, and fabrication—three broad possibilities that span and break up or make up that range of ways of looking. Lots and lots of modes in there, except for bare attention, which is a more singular type of practice.

We cannot live in bare attention. You can try, but we cannot live in bare attention. We cannot live a life without fantasy—and I'm using that word in its beautiful sense on this retreat mostly. We cannot live without fantasy and without a kind of cosmology, if you like, a sense of what this cosmos is in which we seem to be existing. Fantasy and cosmology give structure, direction, and meaningfulness to self and the world, the cosmos.

So we can have periods when we're in the mode of bare attention—that's possible, that avenue—but I cannot live my life that way.

There are all kinds of very important aspects to that statement and implications of it, places where such an idea that we even could live that way comes from. For example, in the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries—this gradual change in human conception of the world that took place, centered in Europe—came the elevation and gradual dominance of the idea of being able to know reality in an objective way, removing the subject and the influence of the subject from the perception of reality and the world and materiality, or even other humans or society, and knowing them objectively if we take ourselves and our distortions out of the picture. With that came the elevation and dominance of measurement as the dominant paradigm and way of knowing.

Many of you will know, of course, this idea of objectivity and the absolute possibility of measurement grew and grew and got more and more entrenched, but then actually came back around on itself and began cracking its own structure with modern physics about 100 years ago—relativity, and particularly quantum mechanics. The whole idea of being able to be absolutely objective sort of cracked.

But anyway, with the scientific revolution there was—to borrow a phrase from Richard Tarnas—a sense of "ontological diminution" brought about in the wider consciousness, the collective psyche. What he really means is the sense that certain aspects of human experience became less real or were seen to be less real. There was ontological diminution of things like emotion or consciousness, aesthetics, the aesthetic aspect, the emotional aspect of human experience. These sort of became second-class or second-tier aspects of reality. They were seen as less real. The ethical dimension, the imaginative, the intentional dimension.

Now this is actually crucial, because these aspects—the emotional, the aesthetic, the ethical, the imaginative, the intentional—these are actually, if you like, the most human aspects of our experience. More recently, some psychologists think you can measure emotion by brain response or skin galvanic response or whatever it is. We can get people to fill out questionnaires and then rate their answers on a scale of 1 to 10, and therefore it's brought in again. But it's pretty weak that way in terms of the richness that's available to us.

So those aspects that in a way make us most human—though they are so central and so rich to our experience of being human—were actually slowly relativized and seen as less real than materiality and things that we could measure, things that were more so-called objective. And with that, what happened to the sense of meaningfulness in life and meaningfulness in the cosmos? It also got radically undermined with all that.

This cultural paradigm and dominant worldview that we've absorbed has profound implications for how we live and what we need as human beings. We require conceptual frameworks and fantasies that engage us and enchant us—frameworks that are soul-making. This soul-making is not optional; it's what the soul, the psyche, the human being fundamentally needs.

Recently, I've found myself navigating frequent hospital visits, tests, and conversations with doctors about results while facing the possibility of death in the not-too-distant future. These experiences have offered interesting reflections on what is and isn't soul-making within our modern medical system. While hospitals today offer extraordinary capabilities and possibilities for human healing, when viewed through the lens of soulfulness, they present a fascinating study in contrasts.

Soul and death share a special relationship—they go together. The sense of soul, life, and death is central to our human experience. Yet entering the modern Western medical system, wonderful as it is, one encounters primarily conversations about statistics,

survival rates, biology, and matter. The human organism becomes treated essentially as a machine whose functioning we want to maintain and optimize, minimizing damage where possible.

This approach is valuable and important, but what happens to soul when this becomes the only conversation? What happens to soulfulness when these discussions about machine function, survival statistics, risk factors, and biological facts consume all the time and space? Walking through hospital corridors—again, these are wonderful environments designed for biological functionality—one notices how lacking they are in attention to soulfulness as a key element. There might be a small chapel tucked away somewhere, but otherwise, the design serves the biological machine.

If one were to raise this concern with hospital administrators, they might assume we're talking about addressing different beliefs people hold about what happens after death, since patients may die in the hospital or face mortality. But I'm not speaking about belief systems. I'm talking about perception, experience, and appearance here and now—of self, other, and world. Wrapped up in this is a sense of death, but not beliefs about what does or doesn't happen afterward. I'm speaking of perception, experience, and ways of looking that are soul-making in this very moment.

The challenge is complex, and I don't claim to have ready answers. Several centuries ago, when everyone shared Christian faith, or earlier when all were Catholic, there was common ground. Today, the range of what gives rise to soulfulness is enormous. What would need to be present in a hospital to offer soul-making possibilities varies tremendously from person to person. For some, it might be religious context; for others, simply precious time with family, where close human relationships become what is soulful.

This is merely an observation—I don't have a clear solution. But what strikes me is how, as a culture, we seem lost. We've misplaced any sense of direction for finding soulfulness again, for revivifying and re-engaging it, for rediscovering the threads that nourish soul-making. Culturally, we hardly know where to look. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

This loss of soulfulness impacts us in countless directions, and it can infiltrate our spiritual practice as well. Many of my friends and I, whose practice spans decades, recognize it's possible to attempt living in constant mindfulness, trying to dwell in bare attention. This approach receives enormous emphasis and gets presented as an ideal: "This is what I'm trying to do—live in bare attention."

When one truly loves mindfulness and practice and pursues this path wholeheartedly, certain aliveness does emerge. There will be radiance entering one's sense of things and some decrease in suffering. But I know from experience, and many have shared with me, that after genuinely attempting this approach, something troubling can arise. As someone told me recently, "I feel neutered"—this after years of practicing mindfulness with complete dedication. Another close friend described feeling like something in her soul was dying, even as other dimensions felt vibrantly alive.

A dimension, a very important dimension, the soul dimension, was being killed or neglected. All kinds of implications and problems, limitations can come out of that.

So I can try to live in bare attention, try to make my whole life a practice of mindfulness and bare attention, but the soul-making will actually come then around practice itself—around the whole notion of the path, the whole fantasy or idea of who the Buddha was and what he is or was. It will come around all that, around the tradition and around the self as the person walking the path or in the lineage of this tradition.

So I can try to be mindful as much of the time as possible, and yet still the soul-making will come in because it's what the soul does. And it will come in around practice. If my practice is just mindfulness and this kind of shaving off of soulfulness—because that's what bare attention does, just as when there's less fabrication, in those moments there will be less soul-making. It's only in the fabrication of those three broad possibilities that there's the possibility of soul-making, really.

But if we're practicing just mindfulness, then the soul-making comes around practice—around path, Buddha, tradition, self, etc.—as fantasy, as mythos. So even in the time of the Buddha, in the Pali Canon, out of their meditation, the monks and the nuns would have had this whole fantasy, mythos, conceptual framework of awakening as the end of rebirth, and so forth. And that was the trajectory, the journey, the Noble Path that they were on. This whole fantasy and mythos about the Buddha and the fortune of living in the time of the Buddha as this sort of once-in-an-aeon manifestation, in Theravada Buddhism.

And it still enters—the soul-making still enters in relation to practice and Dharma around practice if the practice is very narrow and the practice itself is not so soul-making. It will come around it. And that is not a problem. It's more just something to really recognize and observe and know this is happening. It's not a problem. It's not that we engage in soul-making when we can't handle reality, that we conjure fantasies and mythoi and images when we can't cope. It's not like that. It's simply how the psyche works, how the soul works—through image, through fantasy, through mythos. It creates souls. There's soul-making. There is the nourishing of soulfulness.

You can see this in all kinds of things. For example, food. In relationship to food, what are the fantasies that get woven into relationship with food? Really interesting. Cooking shows seem so popular these days on television. And sometimes I find even some meditators spending an evening reading cookbooks. It's not because they have to cook the next day. They're just interested in these cookbooks and fantastic pictures and such sensuality in the pictures. What's the fantasy? This is not a criticism, but what kind of fantasies get wrapped up in food?

Sometimes it's the fantasy of nature, connection with nature. Sometimes it's richness or the good life. And that's wrapped up in the fantasy that's keeping us—if one is into this, I'm not, but if one is into watching cooking shows—that's maybe one of the fantasies.

You will find plenty of hardcore Buddhist practitioners—and I've been in this camp myself—of just regarding food as fuel. Then that becomes a fantasy. It looks like it's not a fantasy. It looks like it's shaved off: I let go of all fantasy and papañca around food. It's just fuel. But wrapped up with seeing food as just fuel is a renunciate fantasy, and people can fall in love with renunciation and the path of renunciation—the simplicity of it, the surrender of it, the stripping bare of it. And again, that may be tied in with the whole conceptual framework of the Four Noble Truths as transcending clinging, or letting go of clinging.

So this fantasy and conceptual framework gets wrapped up in the idea or the viewing of food as fuel. Or the whole thing that's brought to food might be about mindfulness—and you get this a lot in retreat centers. And then the fantasy, the mindfulness fantasy in relation to food, is about tasting the moment, perhaps, or tasting life, literally tasting life. But also its broader meaning of tasting. Or it might be—and for so many people, their sense of mindfulness and presence, their fantasy that's woven into mindfulness, their practice of mindfulness and presence—has to do with nature: nature and their love of nature and what nature is and interconnectedness, and all that is all wrapped up in there as well.

Or again, if mindfulness is the main thing in relation to food—mindfulness of taste, mindfulness of greed—it's plugged into a more renunciate fantasy and a more renunciate framework that has to do with transcending clinging, transcending this world and attachment to materiality, attachment to sense pleasure, perhaps even attachment to manifestation, not being reborn again.

Or there could be a food fantasy—this would probably be a lot more conscious and deliberate in a lot of cases—as food as the nectar of the gods. Or a slightly darker image: the blood or the body of the gods. And we can actually practice that as an image, as a fantasy in relation to food.

But it will come in. One way or another, in relation to something like food, there's going to often—when it's alive for us, when we're interested and there's connection there—the fantasy comes in.

A fantasy comes in. Which one is it? So this fantasy, the mythoi, images—the psyche and the soul need that. They need soul-making, and they do it through image, mythos, fantasies.

Wrapped up in all this, and we've touched on this before, is the whole question about reality. Is this a delusion? Is it going away from reality and not being connected with reality? All that philosophical objection that comes up for people. But understanding emptiness can be really helpful here—deep understanding of emptiness.

This journey into really practicing ways that decrease fabrication in the moment, so there's a dissolution, a loss of substantiality, and then a dissolution of all appearances. That whole spectrum, journeying on that spectrum and then coming up and realizing what that more and less fabrication is dependent on, how things get fabricated. You understand all these appearances are empty.

I'm not trying to live in a state of non-fabrication—I could not anyway—or a state of less fabrication. But going up and down that spectrum of fabrication, understanding it, I understand the emptiness of all appearances. And that frees fabrication. It frees me to fabricate. It gives license and permission and beauty to the play and the playing with fabrication, to soul-making.

So it frees up fabrication, including the imagination. Because very often someone would say, "Soul-making, fantasy—that's fabrication," with the sense that it's just not true, it's not real, it's a lie, it's fabrication. But once I understand emptiness deeply enough through practice, I really understand all experiences are fabricated, all appearances are fabricated—there are none that are not. And that frees up this whole investigation into soul and image and imaginations and fantasy.

That's not quite that simple. It's not that all appearances are fabricated in the same way or have the same kind of conventional reality, but it can go a long way to freeing up the permission and the avenues to explore, fabricating in different ways, including the whole range with image.

Now I'd like to add to our meaning of soul-making, or maybe say it's characteristic of it. This realization, knowing that this is image, this is fantasy. So there's an awareness, knowing image as image. I want to say that's part—I don't think it's what everyone includes in their definition of soul-making, but let's include it in ours. There's a recognition that this is image, this is fantasy, and knowing image as image.

And even more than that, there's a flexibility around conceptual frameworks and views. We're not landing on one and reifying it, saying, "This is the truth, this way of seeing things, this way of seeing images, this way of seeing life, this is real." So included in what I want to call soul-making is this flexibility and skill and being able to move between different views. That's a really helpful, desired attribute, capacity, skill.

Now that flexibility in regard to conceptual frameworks might come through emptiness practice itself as it goes deeper and deeper. It might come through imaginal practice too, interestingly, or both—emptiness and imaginal practice. It might also come for some people through more modern philosophical investigations: postmodernism, poststructuralism, and that sort of thing. But it can come in different ways or a combination. And some people are already just able to do that. They're very loose and flexible in how they hold conceptual frameworks, very able to move in and out of different ones, even if they seem contradictory.

And it might be—I often wonder—it might be that some people may never be able to do that. They will never, for whatever reasons, be able to have that flexibility of conceptual frameworks. And their whole way of looking is just regarding things as concrete: it either is or it isn't, it's either this or it's that. It may be that some people just don't have, will never be able to stretch and open that way. Just as it says in the Mahayana tradition, some people will never be able to understand emptiness deeply, and so one should be careful who one teaches it to. It may be the same around all this. I'm not sure.

But if we take this as part of what we mean here for our purposes—this flexibility and ability to move between different conceptual frameworks and to entertain them without locking down on this or that as true or the only truth or reality—if we include that, then part of what we're entertaining in terms of soulfulness, in terms of what is soul-making, part of the conceptual frameworks that we're entertaining that give rise to and support and nourish soulfulness, is the idea, the eidos that we're entertaining of the necessity of this image that is meaningful to me, that's resonant for me. That sense of the necessity of this image, entertaining the idea of the necessity of this image—that's part of soulfulness, it's part of the soulfulness there.

And again, to repeat what we've already said: I can sense that necessity, but I'm also acknowledging that it's given to the image through my way of looking, through my way of conceiving. So certainly I have that experience of it being sensed as necessary, but I know also that it's given. And necessity doesn't imply, "Oh, this image is necessary, therefore it's the only image or the only fantasy for me."

It doesn't imply a kind of singularity.

So with respect to the self and soul-making, there is really also the idea, the eidos, of opening up a sense of a multiplicity of fantasies, of mythoi, of imaginal figures and characters. That multiplicity is very much an aspect of soul-making and soulfulness and soul. And also the idea, the eidos, of a certain autonomy that these imaginal figures, these archetypes, these gods have—that's also very much a part, an aspect, a necessary ingredient of soul-making.

So we are not regarding them as factors or essential qualities of the self or the psyche or whatever. An imaginal figure is a person, in some sense, equal to the self. It's not a constituent of the self. It's not a part of the self to be somehow integrated into this chief executive self that will then make decisions and balance everything and navigate successfully through life in a balanced way or whatever.

And awakening then is not so much a process of, say, collecting the whole set of these constituent sort of figures or qualities or whatever and having them together, the full set, in a balanced way without any conflict between different characters, figures or aspects or qualities. We can open up the sense of awakening to even include the possibility that sometimes these figures make impossible and unreasonable demands of us and our lives. I'm going to come back to that whole question.

But that's a very different image of awakening, not as necessarily balanced in the way that we might think, not as completely lacking in contradiction or conflict, not as devoid of unreasonable and impossible demands on the self, coming from, let's say, the depths of the soul, the wider psyche, these imaginal figures.

So all this means that perhaps there are multiple styles, if you like, of awakening, or directions of awakening. I've talked about this in other talks, so I won't say too much. But the views open, the view opens in relation to all that, perhaps.

And then also, we're entertaining the idea—an idea entertained that's really helpful and really opens up the sense of soul-making and soulfulness—that the human being is in the psyche or in the soul, rather than the other way around. The soul or the psyche is something in the human being. So that's quite radical. Esse in anima, Jung wrote in Latin—esse in anima, to be in the soul. The human is in the psyche, the soul. The soul is

something much bigger, if you like, than the human and the human's life. We are in that rather than that is in us. And all of this has implications in relation to the images and working with images and the imaginal figures that come.

So when we see these imaginal figures and the plurality of them, the multiplicity of them, we can see, yes, not self. They are not self. This is not self, this image. But it's a different sense. It's beyond just viewing them as anattā, as not self, in a sort of more classical Buddhist sense, as a way of letting go. I see that's not self, that's not self, this is not self, that's not self. It's a way of deep letting go, this anattā practice, anattā view, way of looking—a way of letting go.

In this way of seeing this image and that image, and that all the multiple images are not self, it's a way of letting go of clinging, but it's empowering and vivifying, giving life to those imaginal figures as well, through all these other ways of fantasizing with the images and the conceptual frameworks around.

And again, in regards to the whole question of necessity: Who wants to come through? Which image wants to come? Which imaginal figure wants to come through? Who is it that acts or feels or sees this way? This is also a question, a dimension, a question that comes out of seeing the necessity of these images.

When we personify, when we let things take form as persons or imaginal figures, there is a disidentification with that to a certain extent. But the who—who wants to come through, who sees this way, who feels this way, who acts this way—that's a different kind of who than you get in, say, the Advaita tradition when they say, "Who is asking this question? Who is wanting to be enlightened?" There, the thrust of that turning the question back to the asker is that there is no answer, or nobody really is wanting that, or oneness is wanting that, or whatever. Here is very much more not this dissolution into universality, no one, or oneness, or whatever it is, but actually letting form as an imaginal figure, a person with all that depth and complexity and richness, knowing also it's empty. So the who goes in a different direction.

And with all this, with this seeing "this is not self," but we're empowering, we're not then claiming this image as a part of the self, as I said, or claiming this image to be in service of the self. Now, we could relate that way. We can regard imaginal figures and try to see them as somehow serving us, helping me with this, helping me with that, making me become more whole, more balanced, more this, more that, more successful, grow on my path, etc. It's possible. But to me, a more interesting way is not regarding them that way.

In terms of regarding them that way, there's a short passage in the Iliad, in Homer's Iliad, where it says the muses met Thamyrus the Thracian—he was a musician. And he boasted that he would win in a singing match with the muses themselves. This angered them. The muses were divinity's daughters of Zeus. This angered them.

This boast—that he was a better musician than them and would win such a contest—angered the muses deeply. They struck him blind. But here is the passage that particularly strikes me: they robbed him of the divine gift of song and caused him to forget his harping. They robbed him of the divine gift of song.

There is a profound view embodied in this passage. The gifts of the soul do not belong to the self. Or in dharmic terms, they don't belong to anyone—here they are regarded as divine gifts. They come from the daimon, they come from the divine, from the archetype, if you like. They are not in service to us. We may be in service to them.

This represents a complete reversal, a 180-degree spin on how we may be tempted to view these things. We want and need soul-making—the psyche needs that. You could say the soul needs soul-making.

James Hillman wrote somewhere, reflecting on psychotherapy and the years of therapeutic work that preceded him, that perhaps what people were coming for was not just to be loved or cured, but to be told into a soul story. Not just to be loved or cured, but to be told into a soul story.

This soul story is another term for what I'm calling fantasy or mythos. A soul story is not so much my story—my human story arising from my personal life—but rather a story that we are in. We are lived by the story.

What does this mean? We are lived by the story. Again, this is a 180-degree flip in how we view our lives. We are lived by a story. This doesn't necessarily mean a classically mythic story—Greek or Buddhist or otherwise—but rather this mythic storying of life. What would it mean for us to view our lives this way?

And not in a clunky, rigid manner. Everything becomes liquid—to use that archetypal metaphor again. We're entertaining a mythic storying of life, but without rigidity, without viewing it in a clunky way, seeing it all as liquid. It becomes poetic, subtle. We know image as image.

James Hillman says, "To be in mythos is to be inescapably linked to divine powers, archetypes, and moreover to be in mimesis with them"—to mimic them, that is. To be in mythos is to be inescapably linked to divine powers and moreover to be in mimesis with them.

Some people hear the word "divine" and wonder what on earth it means. It can make us nervous depending on our background and inclinations. But there's an idea from Neoplatonism—from thinkers like Proclus—called epistrophē, a Greek word meaning reversion, reverting to the archetype, the primal form. This connects to what we discussed earlier about archetypes.

Our life, or rather the way we see our life, involves seeing it in relationship to these archetypes, these gods. This concept also appears in Corbin's writings on the mysticism of Ibn Arabi, where it's called ta'wīl in Arabic. Epistrophē, ta'wīl—this echoing, this seeing in relation to, this mirroring of God or the image, and the life mirroring the God, the archetype, or a manifestation, an appearance of God, angel, archetype, daimon.

Is it possible to open up and give life to these ancient ideas—centuries old—but approach them now with a much more sophisticated understanding of what life is, what the word "real" might mean? Can we approach them with a more open and sophisticated understanding rather than either a naive one or what has become the modernist notion of reality?

Can the Buddhist teaching of emptiness help us here? I think it can. What would it be to entertain words like "divine" or "God," knowing that they are empty, fully empty?

God is fully empty. So hopefully we're going to come back more to this. But in working with the images, we can actually sense something other, something beyond, if you like. Sometimes that's in the sense of timelessness of an image, the eternality, the non-temporality of an image. We actually sense that, again, like a poetic image.

And that sense of timelessness, of something beyond, of otherness, that helps the image gather potency, be powerful, be deep for us, gives it a sense of significance, gives it a sense of something more than the human. So we can sense all that without needing to contract around a kind of naive belief in the reality of some concrete God figure or something like that, or a concrete view of an angel or something like that.

Maybe God is not separate from my life and the way I view my life, the way I view my duty, my journey, my acts. There are all kinds of possibilities here, but we need to open out and be a little more sophisticated with our notions of reality, our philosophical notions of reality.

When we talk about story, we're talking about fiction. A story is a fiction, generally speaking. And this is crucial in relation to all this, because a fiction, a story, is actually a shapeable thing. My story, the story of my life, is not a fixed, concrete thing, once and

for all written down. It's shapeable. The past is shapeable. We can shape different stories, if you like, out of the same material of our lives, and different soul-making. We can make different soul-making stories.

A story is a fiction. A story is also not, therefore, something posited as real. It's not a rational explanation. I overheard someone the other day making a joke about—what was it that they were saying? Of course, saying it's God's will would be equally of equal explanatory power. They were making a joke because they didn't really mean that. They were dismissing the whole idea of God's will. But the idea of God's will at its best is not a rational explanation. This happened because it's God's will—oh that, thank you, that answers my questions. No. It opens up a different dimension of relationship with the event that's happening, with the journey that one's on, with this thing that one's looking at.

The story there, the fantasy, the image is not functioning—it's not even intended to function—as a rational explanation. It's intended to open the soul-making in relationship with. Big difference, subtle difference, but big.

Story, in this sense, fantasy, gives life. It is soul-making. Actually, again, James Hillman points out that story is the only mode of accounting or telling about that does not posit itself as real, true, factual, revealed—that is, literal.

In all this, in the soul-making, or rather with soul-making through images, myth or fantasy—whether it's an image that appears to us or whether it's seeing our life as image, myth, fantasy—something is healing here. Something is healed in this way of looking, these ways of looking. Something is loosened. Aspects are loosened. There's a letting go, a loosening of self-fixation.

In a way, we no longer see ourselves when we see in terms of soul-making as so isolated, because we're connected through this epistrophe that is echoing and mirroring and rootedness in the angelic or the divine, if you like. There is this reintroduction and reconnection with what I was calling the vertical dimension that hopefully I can say a bit more about as the retreat goes on. Therefore, we're not isolated and two-dimensional, one-dimensional.

In all of this, when we use words like soul-making and think more about that, or regard things in that way, conceive of things in that way, soul-making, that takes the focus and the question away from, "Is this true or real?" The question becomes, "What is soul-making? How do I recognize that?" Well, it feels a certain way, opens up a certain way in the psyche, in the consciousness. It takes the question away from this oftentimes too

narrow, too unsophisticated philosophical regard of truth and reality, and takes the question into what is soul-making, what nourishes, deepens, enriches, vivifies, gives depth to, gives range to soulfulness.

So it's a different way of relating. It's a reorienting both to image and fantasy and to existence, self, world, other, etc.

CHAPTER 12

Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (2)

Rob Burbea · 1h15

> *In this comprehensive teaching on imaginal practice, Rob Burbea distinguishes between mindful engagement with images and mere daydreaming or fantasy. He presents a detailed seven-point framework for working with images in meditation, emphasizing that imaginal practice requires the same steady attention as mindfulness of breathing or mettā practice.*
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> *Burbea explores how to sense images through various modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, intuitive), how to let images fill out naturally, and how to attune to the specific character and qualities that matter most in each image. He pays particular attention to emotional and energy body resonances, describing seven ways the energy body signals when an image is 'right' for soul-making: vertical alignment, expansion, softening, energization, increased well-being, harmonization, and the emergence of a contoured energy body.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes trusting the energy body's wisdom over mental judgments about what constitutes a 'proper' image. Burbea also addresses the importance of asking 'What do you want?' of imaginal figures—shifting from ego-centered demands to honoring the image's own intentionality. Through personal examples including encounters with angelic figures and deceased jazz musician Eric Dolphy, he demonstrates how images can reveal different perspectives and invite us into various qualities of love and gratitude. The practice ultimately aims at soul-making through respectful, sensitive relationship with autonomous imaginal beings.*

I hope that it's obvious that in imaginal practice we're really talking about mindfulness of images—bringing mindfulness to bear on images and everything associated with those images or other certain aspects of experience associated with them.

We're not talking about daydreaming, about being lost in fantasy, about not being present. So I hope that's obvious, but sometimes I find that it isn't obvious to some people. Partly that's just because, as I mentioned in the opening talk, this culture is so used to regarding images a certain way. And also sometimes some people are very used to having quite a narrow range of view of what meditation is and what practice is, what it means to be present. So hopefully it's obvious—we're really talking about mindfulness of images or mindfulness with images.

So that means we want to explore now what's included, incorporated into that mindfulness in imaginal practice. What we're talking about is steadily attending to an image, holding an image in attention rather than flitting from one image to another the way the mind does and the attention does when we are lost in daydreaming and not really present. So as much as possible, just as with the breath or something like that, we're steadily attending to, holding in the attention, an image. And when the mind gets distracted, we notice that just as with other practices, and we return to the image. Gently—you don't have to force this, don't have to get too tight, just as with working skillfully with the breath or the metta practice.

As we are holding an image and attending to it in this more steady way, it might want to evolve. The image might morph or change its form, or something else might be added to the image—some other character or something like that. So we let it evolve if it wants. But the attention is really on this image, which either stays relatively the same or evolves in some way or other.

With all this, there's a lot of mindfulness. Actually, it's asking quite a lot of our mindfulness. There's mindfulness of the body, and particularly, as we said, of the energy body—we've really put a lot of emphasis on that. There's mindfulness of the image. And there's mindfulness that it is an image—knowing image as image, as I keep emphasizing. The mindfulness of body, of the image, knowing that it is an image.

There's mindfulness of our reactions and our responses and what happens, so to speak, in response to this image or with this image. So the thoughts that arise in response or reaction to the image, the views of the image, or in response to the image—sometimes they'll be very explicit. We notice that the mind is thinking or viewing in a certain way, and oftentimes it's more implicit. Even this awareness of the implicit view of the image and what the image is or what it might mean or what it's worth—all this, even that is included in our mindfulness. It's a mindfulness of view in relation to the image.

Noticing the associations we might have with something in our life or events or trajectories or meaningfulnesses in our life. Really, a sensitivity is required here with the mindfulness—sensitivity to the resonances of energy, of emotion, to the qualities involved in the image and attending to it, opening and tuning to those qualities perhaps, to those energies, to those emotions, sensitive to the vedanā, the pleasantness or unpleasantness, or neither pleasantness nor unpleasantness—so-called neutrality. So we're aware of all this, sensitive to all that. How is the self-sense in relation to this image? Or how is the self-sense right now while I'm attending to this image? All this is part of the mindfulness and part of the sensitivity.

So it's very different than daydreaming or being lost. We could say we're attending, we're tuning, and we're opening to the imaginal through the mindfulness. Attending, tuning, and opening.

So let's break that down a little bit more and elaborate a little bit more. Here's another list—a seven-point list—just to give you a sense. Some of it's very intuitive and obvious anyway, and some of it may not be. But to give you, to fill out the sense of what's really involved in this practice in terms of nuts and bolts.

So the first one is—and we've touched on this before—how do I sense the image right now? In other words, like we said, what is the primary sense modality? Not to elevate necessarily the visual sense. It could be auditory, the aural. It could be the body sense, more kinesthetic. It could be even taste. So plenty of times something as strange as taste is a kind of knowing through the taste, or an imaginal taste, pregnant with all kinds of resonances.

So how do we sense the image? This is part of the attending, part of recognizing. How do we sense this image? And as I mentioned in one of the talks, maybe it's a more intuitive sense. It's not really one of the five inner senses or the inner correspondences of sight, sounds, smell, taste, touch.

Maybe it's more intuitive, not so much of the five senses. So it's really important to be flexible here, rather than getting stuck in one modality, one sense modality. How do we sense the image? And then trust that. Tune to whichever way of sensing the image—whichever sense or without the senses—is the most helpful to tune into with regard to this particular image that's going on right now. So that's the first on this list.

The second is, again, a bit of a question you can lightly ask: Does the image want to fill out at all? For instance, here's an imaginal figure right now coming to me. Where is this imaginal figure? What are the surroundings like? What's the imaginal territory, so to speak, that they are arising in? Are there any other imaginal figures around, or are they alone?

Really, sometimes the image wants to fill out a little bit, and sometimes not so much. But just lightly asking the question, giving it a chance to fill out, asking certain questions about territory and whether there are others there.

And the third instruction, really, or aspect or dimension of attending, tuning, opening is: Is it possible to get, so to speak, a sense of this imaginal figure or imaginal object? A sense of its character, their character.

So, for example, I remember—I don't know when it was, maybe almost two years ago—it was, I think, a spring day, and I was invited to Totnes to meet two people, two women I didn't know at all, to do an interview. I actually didn't want to go, to be honest. I was too busy. I felt too busy, and I didn't want to go. But I went anyway, and we did some filming of each other, sort of a two-way interview, outside by the river. It was absolutely delightful. There was something about the interaction that was really a lot of fun and very lovely and very inspiring as well, listening to this woman speak. And also when I spoke, I felt a lot of inspiration flowing through.

Then the next day—and that sense of inspiration carried on—the next day in the morning meditation, the same scene arose in the imagination: the scene outside by the river, sitting on the bench with these two women, and even the other people around. The same scene arose, all the sunlight and the loveliness there. But in the background of the imaginal scene came, very spontaneously, the presence of a sort of angelic figure who had a body of golden white light. He had a masculine kind of presence, but his features were not clear, not at all visually clear.

What was clear was the particular quality of flavor or resonance of his presence—somehow very clear and very defined, very, very particular, even though visually it wasn't that clear. And that quality of presence, or the flavor of his presence... it may be very hard to put into words. I would struggle. There was something about joy very much, and about love that was there. But even the quality of love was not obvious. It wasn't the first thing or aspect that one was struck by. But there was something all-encompassing and delightful and bright in there.

Somehow the presence of this angelic figure in the imaginal sort of memory afterwards—this spontaneous image that came—somehow his presence was very connected to and in a way responsible for what I said or the spirit that seemed to imbue how I responded to the questions that were being asked of me. And at the same time, this angelic figure was also pervading the two women who were with us during these interviews, pervading our delight and pervading the enjoyment of each other, and even the scene itself. So his presence was pervading the grass, the bench, the trees, the river, the sunlight. It wasn't separate from all that.

In the sense of the image, as I dwelt with it more and more, everything became luminous. That pervasion of this beautiful light and joy and love pervaded the whole scene. And there was a kind of transubstantiation—if we borrow that word from the Catholic tradition—transubstantiation of all the elements of the scene, all the material

and psychic elements of the scene. It's different than a transfiguration, where something changes what it is or changes its shape. Everything retained its same form, but its substance was different. The whole world and the beings that were there.

In the imaginal practice, I noticed a little bit of a tendency to want—oh, let's talk to him, let's learn something from him. But I could sense, oh, that's not quite right. Just focusing on this figure and his presence and the pervasion and the resonances there, that felt really right somehow, really wonderful and joyful and beautiful.

So with this third aspect of what we can check out with images, there's sensing into the character of the figure, the resonances of that figure and the character of the figure. And especially if there's any complexity of character...

So, for example, in this one, with the example I just gave, the love was there, but it wasn't the most obvious thing. But when you noticed it, then you realize, oh, there's a profound and pervasive love here. It wasn't obvious at first. Sometimes you might get images where the imaginal figure actually seems quite crusty and kind of not very loving at all. One might think even the opposite. But there's a complexity of character to many imaginal figures. So one might see, for example, that here's a kind of crustiness, but underneath, or with that, or looking more closely, there's great love. Great love is there, but it's not obvious.

So with all this, another aspect of that is really the instruction to be sensitive to the nuances of character of an image—not, as we mentioned before, just, "Oh, that's the wonder archetype," and just stick a label on and kind of lose the sensitivity, lose the attention and the curiosity and the openness to the more subtle manifestations of character and resonance. So really, really encouraging the sensitivity.

And this third dimension of the practice, we could actually broaden it to say not just what is the sense of this character, but let's broaden that to, again, ask lightly a question in the imaginal practice: What is the specificity that is important in this image or to this image? What is the specificity that is important in this image? In other words, what is it that I want to be really tuning into here that's important about the image and important to really tune into that specific aspect with a lot of attention and differentiation and nuance and detail?

Different images have different aspects of them that are what is most important, if you like. For example, once, actually quite a few times, sometimes I might be meditating, for example, and there's a sense—if you like, an imaginal sense—that comes of the

birdsong that I can hear. Perhaps I'm outside or perhaps I can hear it through the window. And the birdsong is heard through the imaginal lens, imagined as sacred text. The birdsong in this moment that I'm perceiving is perceived as somehow as a sacred text.

Now, partly saying that, I'm aware, I'm thinking, what do you mean by that? And that's what I want to explain—that the vagueness in some ways is part of it. Now, I may well have read something about sacred texts or something in this tradition or that tradition beforehand, and so there's a kind of suggestibility there of the psyche that's open to certain suggestions that then have fruition in images. No problem at all. No problem whatsoever. If that's the case and you recognize that's probably the case and then think, "Oh, but that's probably because I read this thing or I heard so-and-so say something," no problem. Again, the psyche is creative. It's how it works, how it takes in something from its environment and then creates something or allows an imaginal sense of something.

So there was a recognition that was possibly connected to things I had read in the not-too-distant past. And there was a sense of samadhi with it. But more important, there was a depth and a beauty to this sense, listening to the birdsong and the whole bodily sense, and a sort of inexhaustible depth and beauty to this particular imaginal window or imaginally mediated hearing opening to the birdsong as sacred text.

What was very specific, and this is what I want to get at—what was the specificity that was important in this image? One aspect of that was very specific resonances emotionally to that whole sense of the birdsong as sacred text. And more important, it was a very specific way of seeing, of knowing the world. The world that opened up at that point, the world outside my window, the world that I was in had very particular kind of resonances and feeling tone and sort of sense of its depth, particular kinds of that and its beauty.

Now, I may not have, certainly may not have been able to articulate that. It would be very, very difficult to put that into words. But it was really those aspects—the world quality, the resonances, the kind of beauty, the kind of depth—they were very, very specific and precise and beautiful, difficult as they were to describe.

Other aspects of the image, or that whole opening, were really—it did not seem important that they were specifically tuned into. Those specifics were not so important. So, for example, the exact relationship of this birdsong and the text. What do you mean, certain pitches or sounds? No, it didn't matter exactly. The relation of the birdsong and the text and the body and the energy body and nature itself, the exact relationships

there were not important. Probably, in fact almost certainly, they wouldn't have made sense in a tight rational framework. And in a way, they were not clear, they were not defined, they were more vague.

Was this text a Sanskrit text or a Pali text or an Aramaic text or a Hebrew text? It didn't matter. It was something, and I'll return to this later, something actually needed to be a little vague and open and not so defined in this image. And other aspects, their specificity was very important. The tradition—what tradition are we talking about in this sacred text belonging to what tradition? It was not important. It did not matter.

So the question here, gently, is to tune into, see if you can get a feel with any image:

Again, what is the specificity that is important in this image, whatever it is? This forms the third question—the third thread or aspect of instruction. We're exploring the sense of this figure or imaginal object, its character, and the particular specificity that matters most in this image.

The fourth aspect—our fourth encouragement within this mindfulness of image—concerns the emotional resonances and resonances in the energy body that an image sets up or evokes. There's quite a lot to say about this dimension of practice.

We could describe two extremes regarding these energetic and emotional resonances. At one extreme, it's possible to exclusively tune into and focus on the sense data of an image—really examining the particularities, the specific fine details of a visual image, concentrating purely on the sensual aspects and trying to achieve maximum clarity and precision. However, here on this retreat, we are not pursuing that extreme. This approach, while valid, is not what I wish to emphasize.

We are always connecting with the emotional resonances and the energy body resonances. There's never an exclusive tuning into the sensual detail of an image at the exclusion of awareness of emotional sensitivity and energetic body resonances.

The other extreme might involve focusing exclusively on the emotion or energy that arises with an image. Perhaps an image brings tremendous love or joy, or creates a certain quality of softening in the energy body. One could choose to tune increasingly into that emotion or energy in the energy body, giving exclusive attention to the emotion as emotion or the energy as energy, while letting the image recede.

This approach will take us deeper in the samadhi direction. The samadhi will constellate more and more, creating the quietening of the emotional body that we discussed in earlier instructions. This extreme is certainly an option on this retreat—it's a choice, a kind of leaning or steering where we recognize something happening and consciously move toward the emotion or energy exclusively as we let the image fade.

Most often, though, we'll practice something in between: focusing on the image while remaining aware of the emotional resonances and energy resonances in the energy body. This ongoing sensitivity to emotional and energetic resonances is crucial in imaginal practice because it helps us navigate.

This sensitivity helps us recognize when an image is "right"—right in the sense that it nourishes, deepens, opens, and supports soulfulness and soul-making. I'll speak much more fully about what I mean by soulfulness and soul-making, but within the framework I wish to support, this constitutes the rightness of an image. One of the primary ways we recognize that an image is right and moving in that direction is through its effects on the energy body. The energy body tells us: this image is helpful for soul-making; there's something important here for the psyche.

Several effects signal that an image is right. These are not separate possibilities but interconnected qualities. The first is a kind of alignment of the vertical axis of energy through the body, through the energy body. There's a sense of the energy coming into vertical alignment within the energy body. This can be very subtle, but it's a signal that we're on the right track—the energy body is telling us we're moving in the right direction with whatever image is arising.

When this alignment of the vertical axis becomes very strong, it tends toward the emotions of reverence, devotion, and prayerfulness. These qualities are intimately connected to this energetic alignment.

When it's very strong, those emotions are often not far away at all.

But this felt alignment of the vertical axis in the energy body is one of the cues and clues, if you like, that we're on the right track. A second is just the sense that the energy body kind of opens and expands a little bit. That sense of the expansion of energy, the widening of energy, is also very characteristic as a cue and clue that we're on the right track.

Third can be a kind of softening of the energy body. I don't certainly just mean a relaxing of the physical musculature—that may happen, but again, I'm really talking about energy body rather more than anatomical body. The texture, if you like, or the tone of that energy body can soften to one degree or another. It doesn't mean a slump-

ing—there's still the uprightness there—but the softness, the texture feels like it's got more softness in it. Something softens. This can be very, very subtle or stronger, but it can be very, very subtle.

Fourth is, generally speaking, the energizing of the energy body. When an image is, again, so to speak, right for the psyche, for the soul, the energy body will feel energized very often. Now that energization can be, again, very, very subtle or very, very strong. There's a whole range there of possibility. It's not that one is better or worse, or that stronger is better. It's just a range there. But energization is often a key aspect of what happens in the energy body when an image is important.

With the energization, this energization can bring or reflect a feeling of power, vitality, force into the whole being, into the energy body, but into the whole psyche as well. It brings or reflects a feeling of power, of vitality, of force. That may fill the energy body, and that whole movement may—it doesn't have to, but it may—fill the whole energy body. It may wave through. It may sometimes erupt very suddenly in the energy body and through even into the physical body so that sometimes the head moves or moves back, tilting upwards, a shudder moves through the body. Sometimes the mouth opens by itself spontaneously and it's almost as if a silent roar comes out at times.

These kinds of things are absolutely not necessary. So again, don't regard them as super advanced or better practice. I'm just mentioning them so that one is not freaked out or alarmed or disturbed by their occurrence. They're absolutely not necessary, though. Just to say that one of the aspects that can happen is energization. Sometimes it's strong and sometimes that waves or erupts through the physical body to the extent that for a moment or two it affects the physical body in different ways. But it's absolutely not necessary that that happens. So it may or may not. Neither better nor worse. But the fourth possibility to look out for is this energizing—to notice and to feel.

The fifth—these are all, as I said, not totally separate; they're related, but it's worth differentiating them—the fifth is that there's some degree of increase in the sense of well-being in the energy body or even bliss. Again, this can be very, very strong or really quite subtle, not that remarkable, but there is some degree of an increase in well-being and bliss that's often characteristic of an image being right or soulful. So it could be very, very subtle.

But what we're doing here is really trusting the energy body rather than the mind's initial mental reaction or view or thought that might be actually a little bit too tight about what's a right image or wrong image, or what kind of image I need, or what's okay and what's not okay and what's weird and what's not. We're actually trusting

more the energy body and the manifestations in the energy body, the cues and the clues there. We're trusting that for the navigation more than the mind and its views, which are often just received and habituated from different cultures that we move in.

The sixth is a possibility through the energy body, something to look out for, notice and feel—a kind of harmonization and homogenization of the whole energy field, the whole energy space of the energy body. Harmonization—it feels more harmonized and it feels more homogenized. So the energy feels like it's spread more evenly through the energy body, oftentimes, or can do. But that also includes a homogenization of the awareness through the space of the energy body.

In other words, so often—perhaps it's our culture, perhaps it's just normal—it's very common to feel like the awareness is somehow in the head, looking at the body, or sometimes that they're even separate. There's this sort of awareness located here, and the body is more than that somehow. But one thing that's characteristic here, a possibility, is this harmonization, homogenization of the energy, but also of the awareness through the space of the energy body. So that generally speaking, the body and the awareness are less fragmented, and also the connection between them feels less disjointed, less fragmented.

And a seventh possibility that I think is maybe more common for some people or some people with certain backgrounds in practice is that the contoured energy body can be felt. So remember we talked briefly about that earlier in the retreat. It's not so much this amorphous space right now, but one might also feel and sometimes even see or feel an energy body, separate in space, distinct in space from the physical location of one sitting on the cushion or the chair meditating. And that contoured energy body, this body of light or energy, is felt—actually felt, not just seen, this is important—felt as perhaps dancing or flying or somersaulting with or in response to this image that is occurring. So this image, this imaginal figure is opening up so much energy and such a powerful response that the energy body itself is felt to be moving in space.

Okay, and a sixth possibility that I think is perhaps more common for some people, particularly those with certain backgrounds in practice, is that the contoured energy body can be felt.

Remember we talked briefly about this earlier in the retreat. It's not so much this amorphous space right now, but one might also feel and sometimes even see or sense an energy body, separate in space, distinct in space from the physical location of one sitting on the cushion or chair meditating. And that contoured energy body—this body of light or energy—is felt, actually felt, not just seen (this is important), felt as perhaps dancing or flying or somersaulting with or in response to the image that is occurring.

So this image, this imaginal figure is opening up so much energy and such inspiration of emotion that we become aware of the contoured energy body, and it's felt—as I said, it's dancing, flying, somersaulting, or manifesting all kinds of possibilities—in a distinct location from the location of the physical body. Separate from the physical body, but absolutely crucial: it's felt, it's felt, it's felt.

Sometimes, either hearing about that or experiencing something like that, people get a little nervous and think, "Well, am I disconnecting? Am I disconnected from my body? Am I ungrounded?" And they get a little suspicious or nervous even. But no, it's absolutely not disconnected, that kind of experience. It's not ungrounded as long as we feel it. So it's feeling two energy bodies at once, or a mixture. There's this one sitting here, and in this energy body I somehow feel this contoured energy body, as I said, flying or turning somersaults or dancing or whatever it is. It's not ungrounded, it's not disconnected as long as it's felt.

So there are seven possible manifestations to look out for, without needing to make a big deal of any of them or judging, "Oh, this is good and that's bad, that's better, that's worse"—any of that. Just things to look out for.

With any of these possibilities may come—or rather, often implicit in them—the sense that the energy body at that time has within it very specific qualities of emotion or energy. If we want to say frequencies, frequencies of energy (if we use that term), these are present within the energy body. I may not have a word—again, I may not have a word—for this particular quality of energy or this particular frequency, but any of these seven possibilities I just went through can sometimes imply that, or it's noticeable.

And then it's really important to notice: what is... can I really feel, can I really taste this very specific quality or frequency of energies, or mix of qualities or energies? Really make sure we notice, really taste and feel, open to it perhaps, let it pervade the whole space perhaps. Bathe in it, focus on it, enjoy it as we mentioned before.

So attuning to those energetic qualities, lingering in them, dwelling with them, entering into them, opening to them—all that. To the degree that we lean into that lingering and dwelling and entering into them, to the degree that we lean that way and incline that way, will, as we've already mentioned, allow us to enter more and more into samādhi.

So you can see there's a kind of very fluid navigation here in terms of image and energy and where we incline the whole consciousness and energy at any time. But what's absolutely crucial to the navigation is the noticing of what's happening in the energy body. And then we can decide where we incline and sort of glide with the consciousness and the whole energy body.

There's one thing I should maybe also mention right now. Generally speaking, all this is much, much easier in a meditative posture, as we emphasized at the beginning with the uprightness and the awakeness manifesting in the physical body, with the openness and receptivity and softness there. And so the meditative posture really allows both the sensitivity of mindfulness to the images, but especially even more the sensitivity of mindfulness in relationship to the energy body and working with the energy body. So generally that's a really good idea in the kind of work that we're doing and emphasizing on this course.

But sometimes one will find, occasionally one finds that posture is not right for this image. So not too long ago, someone was telling me they were working with an image—actually it was an image that had been around quite a lot—of a bird that this image had opened up for them. And there was a lot of beauty and preciousness associated with this beautiful image of a bird. And there were the corresponding meaningfulnesses in life that were very important in terms of openness and sensitivity and beauty and lots of other things.

And then something happened actually in life, and then that was mirrored in the image, and this bird was then perceived as having a broken wing and as dying from this injury. So I was talking with this person in an interview about this and pointing out this timeless quality of images. I said, "This bird is going to die, it will die." And we put that into, very normally and very understandably, a temporal context. "It's not dead now, but it's dying, and then it will die, and then it will be dead, and then what? I'll be without this bird, or this will have disappeared, or whatever it is."

But actually, there's a timeless quality to images that we can tune into—I might say more about this later on. So in a way, the bird is dying rather than "it will die at some point." It's always timelessly in the state that it's in now, wounded with a broken wing. That's not going anywhere as a narrative. So that helped enormously. It's almost like feeling into that image at another level, outside of time—and this is really, really crucial.

The person was working with the image, and after we had that conversation, then in the meditation they noticed, "Actually, it's working a little bit, but there's something wrong here." And they were playing with different postures. And then they actually

found when they went to their room and lay down on their bed and curled around—curled their body lying down around this bird, this wounded bird—they said, "That's the perfect posture for the image right there."

Actually, just to continue a little bit because there are some other important learnings here. So not only was it the case that in this instance the meditative posture was not quite right (this is rare), but also then they noticed that they're lying, their body curled around this wounded bird with the broken wing. And then they noticed, as they were meditating in that way, bringing all the sensitivity, they noticed that they were scared to look into the bird's eyes, into this little bird's eyes, scared to see the suffering that they anticipated seeing there.

But she brought herself to look into the bird's eyes and then, very surprised, saw the love that was there in the bird's eyes.

These bird's eyes were radiating love—wide open, the love was wide and steady. This was very surprising, given her fear of actually doing that and what she anticipated seeing.

This points to something important about the autonomy that images have. They are autonomous—they're not just necessary parts of us, nor do we control them as much as we might think. So many times we're surprised by these imaginal figures. It doesn't mean they're completely independent of us—remember, they're not independent of the way of looking—but they have a certain autonomy.

The main point there was about posture. Usually the meditative posture is the best, but we want to be sensitive and open-minded there.

Those were all possible cues and clues, signals that we're on the right track—that this image is right, despite how weird it might seem. They come through the energy body, through manifestations in the energy body. Now, I'm aware that this might reflect my bias or inclination, because my modality is more kinesthetic than visual. So I'm certainly open to other cues or signals that a person might receive. Sometimes people get a light that appears, telling them they're on the right track with an image. There are many possibilities, but this inclusion of the energy body as a thread and basis allows so much other possibility in meditation. If that can be incorporated, it's really important and helpful. There might be other cues in other sensory domains as well for different people.

So there's the inclusion of energetic resonances in the energy body, and also in this fourth aspect of mindfulness, the inclusion of emotional resonances. As we've said, an image may often—not always, but often—contain within it, be pregnant with, or reflect

multiple emotions. It's not just one emotion, but quite subtle shades or many aspects emotionally going on at once. Images are often quite condensed, rich, multidimensional in many respects—even multidimensionally and multi-aspected emotionally.

In the mindfulness, one is aware of the emotional resonances, which might be plural and have very subtle shades of the image or with the image. With this richness, again to reiterate, it may not be necessary to spend hours with an image, or certainly not necessary to go on some journey through imaginal space or territories. It may be that a brief image in one location, meditatively, is very rich. It might take one a long time to articulate all that richness, all that multidimensionality and the resonances emotionally, energetically, and all that. It may take a long time to articulate that verbally, even if one were able to, even from a brief image that's rich in that way.

That's the fourth aspect of mindfulness here: the sensitivity and awareness of, and also navigating possibilities regarding, the emotional resonances and energy body resonances.

Then a fifth aspect of what's included in the mindfulness relates to thoughts, reactions, and views. We've talked a little about this, but let me spell it out in more detail. Careful—it depends on the conceptual framework, but for our purposes, or for what I regard as the most interesting direction here—careful of the temptation to seek advice from an image. We think, "Oh great, then this person can tell me what to do in my life." I'm going to return to this point, but notice if the orientation or stance to an image is, "Ah, here's my fairy godmother, or here's the wise old sage who's going to tell me what to do in this situation in my life."

For our purposes, generally speaking, we're more interested in the resonances. That's much more interesting than getting advice and using it for the sake of the ego and the ego's journey.

Also notice and take a little care—just notice if there's a tendency to want to reduce this image in your view. The conceptual frame might be implicit, not obvious, but notice the tendency to reduce it to "it's just a result of my history, what happened to me in childhood or something else from the past." It's not that this is wrong at all. Sometimes, of course, an image does come from that—it's very related to that. All these things—our history, the image, and our unfolding—mirror each other in a more complex way than simple causality would allow us to conceive. But just notice if there's a tendency in the view to reduce it to just something, a result of history.

Or to view it purely literally: "Oh, it means this, or it means exactly what it looks like. This wanderer means go wandering." Or to reduce it in the sense that "it represents metta, or it represents my strength" or some other psychological concept or force. We're boxing it in, shrinking all the complexity and multidimensionality that's in an image, shrinking it into some concept, whether it's a dharma concept or psychological concept or whatever. Notice if that tendency arises and just take a little care with that. Again, it's not wrong—it's just that it might not be that interesting in terms of what then unfolds.

Similarly, regarding thoughts, reactions, and views, take care that we're not harboring a view that the more outlandish the image, the better—the more far out. Some of these things can sound really amazing when we relate them to others or to ourselves, but that's not necessarily important.

What's much more important is the relationship with the image. Everything hinges on the relationship. The relationship is what matters more than anything else. That includes the sensitivity to the resonances we've spoken about—in emotion, in the energy body, and in the psychic resonances, the soul resonances, the resonances for the soul in terms of meaningfulness. That's what matters—the relationship with the image, not actually what the image is itself.

When working with images in meditation, it's perfectly acceptable for some light reflection to emerge around the conceptuality of what an image is, or around the framework itself. Sometimes a bit of intellectual conceiving, some reflection or gentle chewing over of ideas naturally arises. While we often hear in meditation that thinking is terrible or that we must get away from the intellect entirely, this isn't necessarily the case here.

Certainly we don't want to be merely thinking—that's not the point at all. But at times, this shifting of conceptual framework happens through some light thought, or thoughts simply arise in relationship to our whole way of conceiving. This can be genuinely fruitful. So don't automatically slam the door shut on this process. Again, it's part of learning to navigate. You can sometimes allow that element in, and sometimes have less of it.

As we mentioned before, notice if the mental reaction tends to assign an image or imaginal figure to a particular character type, making a kind of stereotype out of it. "Oh, that's the warrior," or whatever it might be. This approach will kill the aliveness of the image entirely. What we truly want is to let this image, to allow it, to give it enough respect that it can really be alive. It's not just an instance of a category. It's not something to be labeled, causing us to lose our sensitivity and relationship to it.

In a way, this points to the importance of keeping our practice playful and responsive. This quality is crucial in meditation generally, but perhaps even more so in imaginal practice. I might offer lists of seven things to try, or mention other elements to look out for—one, two, three, four, five, whatever it might be. Fine, that's all useful. But fundamentally, these are just pointers. It's much better if you can really allow yourself to improvise with all this.

Rather than regarding the practice as formulaic, learn to be playful, to be responsive, to try different things. You may discover—and I hope you do—ways of working that I haven't suggested, that you haven't heard me describe, or that perhaps I haven't even encountered myself. That would be wonderful.

Regarding this fifth aspect of mindfulness about thoughts, reactions, and views, let me reiterate: the conceptual framework, the view, the way of looking always makes a difference to what occurs, what's allowed to occur, and how it unfolds. There's tremendous power contained in the conceptual framework, the view, the way of looking. This really makes a profound difference.

The sixth aspect of mindfulness, or possible thread here—something I'll speak much more about, perhaps tomorrow—involves asking the image: What do you want? In other words, what does this imaginal figure want?

This may not necessarily be a literal question. You don't actually have to speak these words aloud. Rather, it's about cultivating a particular attitude and orientation in relationship with the image. It's about turning around from "What can this image give me? What can I get from it? What can it do for me?" and reversing that stance entirely. I'll speak much more about this as we continue.

What do you want? Since this may not be literal, there may not be a verbal answer or anything of that nature. It's more about approaching the image and being open to sensing, perhaps, or intuiting some kind of intentionality behind this image—perhaps even a demand, something it wants, a meaningfulness that's wrapped up as part of the deeper meaningfulness contained within the image.

Of course, implied in having this kind of stance in relation to the image—asking it what it wants and honoring that response—is a quality of trust. Again, I'll speak more about this, but it implies that I trust in that moment. I'm entering into, encouraging, or adopting an attitude of trust in relation to this image. I trust it and I trust its intentionality and what it wants.

I'm trusting that it's benign, even though it might appear as some crazy warrior raging and bellowing fire, or something else entirely—perhaps a strangely erotic image or whatever it might be. I'm trusting it, and I'm trusting that it's benign, or better yet, benevolent. There's a beautiful etymology to benevolence: it wants what is good. Like well-wishing, it wants... These images are benevolent. Can I actually play with an attitude of trusting them?

This trust helps me turn the stance around and ask: What do you want?

What this imaginal figure wants may simply be to be seen, to be known, to be witnessed. It may just want to be acknowledged, to be honored, to be given a place, to be respected and, yes, honored. Perhaps even more than this—maybe it wants its holiness and its sacredness to be seen, or even its necessity to be acknowledged. There can be all kinds of subtle aspects to what it wants. Or it may be something more than that, or something different entirely.

Maybe this imaginal figure wants to be expressed in some way in one's life. It wants that your life expresses this imaginal figure in some way. Now again, this doesn't necessarily—in fact, usually won't be—literal or concrete. Something can be expressed without anyone else having any sense of it sometimes, or without it having a literal correspondence with the image, and can be expressed without that being visible to anyone else or tangible to anyone else.

Sometimes, in fact quite often—and this is important—an imaginal figure that comes to us has a different perspective than the ego or than our normal perspective, either on ourselves or on things or the world or a situation or others. So they embody and express and have a different perspective than normal. This is actually the important aspect of the image, and this is what it's wanting to show us or wanting to initiate us into.

Obvious examples would be Quan Yin or Avalokiteshvara as the bodhisattva of compassion, who has a different perspective than the ego's normal perspective. It's a non-ego perspective of universal compassion, universal love. It's seeing through different eyes, and it wants us to know that and honor it and recognize it and wants us to enter into that, perhaps. So those would be more obvious manifestations of different perspectives. But there may be, for us, less obvious ones.

I've talked about my interest in opening the range of what is our usual emotional range, opening the range of our usual psychological range, opening the range of the self and its self-expression. Because images are different, are autonomous, we cannot just

regard them as self. Opening to their different perspective, recognizing, honoring, getting a sense of the different perspective that any image might have also opens our range beyond the more tightly circumscribed usual range that we might have.

Again, in this very subtle questioning or stance—what do you want?—it may be that it's really about love, that the image is wanting to express or manifest or enter into or allow love in all kinds of different ways. It's more about the love, and we sense that's what it's wanting, with many different possibilities here.

It could be, for example, that we enter into an image and interact with the image—that that's what it wants. How? We can interact in all kinds of ways. It's not necessarily that dialogue is the appropriate way or the best way to interact with a particular image. And if it's more interaction that has to do with love, and if love is the sense that this is really the most important aspect going on, then again, we want the sensitivity to the particular quality or kind of love. Because love has tremendous range—there are many different kinds of love and qualities of love. So what is the particular quality of the love that seems so central in this image and with this imaginal figure? It may be universal metta or compassion, but it may not be that. It may be much more personal and particular. There are all kinds of possibilities.

I remember not too long ago, I was doing walking meditation on the lawn here. I heard the bird song, beautiful bird song around me as I was walking outside. The bird song reminded me of one of my favorite jazz musicians, Eric Dolphy. He was active in the late fifties and early sixties before he died in 1964—a beautiful musician, quite associated with the avant-garde at that time. He played alto sax and bass clarinet and flute, really stretching the limits of jazz and the jazz vocabulary. Beautiful spirit, quite out there in his explorations and what was coming through him.

Hearing the bird song reminded me of Eric Dolphy. He used to take his flute to the oceanside in California and sit on the rocks and play with the birds. Different birds would be there near the ocean, singing, and he was such a virtuoso on the flute and improvising. He would mimic and play back and forth with the birds, and they would gather around him—a beautiful image in itself.

So I hear the bird song, I'm doing the walking, I hear the bird song and suddenly remember this story about Eric Dolphy playing with the birds. Then suddenly, very suddenly, I spontaneously imagine—it just comes as an image—that he's visiting from death. He's just visiting for a short time. We talk and I update him. This is not really happening in real time with a sort of concretized dialogue, but it's what's implicit. I update him a little because he played with John Coltrane and with another bass player, Charlie Mingus, in another band. I tell him a little—because they both died after him,

John Coltrane not too long later—and I update him on that and how and when they died, and also on what people said about him, about Eric Dolphy, and how highly he is regarded, especially by so many musicians, by so many people. I think he wasn't really aware of that—he was a very humble person. So wanting to tell him that, wanting to communicate that to him.

At some point, perhaps I get the sense that our time is drawing to an end, that there's just a brief window and that he has to go back to the realm of death. I find myself just blurting out silently, asking, "Play something, will you play something?" I was moved to tears by this request of mine that just bubbles up and emerges—with it, the sense of the preciousness of his music, the beauty of it, and the preciousness of his playing. "Just play something, will you?"

To me, this was an interesting image.

The image revealed itself to be fundamentally about loving him. The love flowing from me to him was what felt most important, most central to this encounter. There was even a quality of wanting to care for him, to tend to him physically in the here and now.

What had actually happened in 1964 was that he was touring in Germany, working as a musician. He was diabetic, and his blood sugar or insulin levels went dangerously wrong. From what I heard, when the ambulance came, because he was African-American and a jazz musician, they simply assumed he was overdosed on heroin and left him, saying, "Oh, he'll get over it." They didn't recognize that he was diabetic, and he went into a coma and died. I don't know how much of that story is exactly true, but certainly his condition wasn't properly recognized, and he died.

Partly because of this, the image carried this deep impulse in me to want to take care of him, as if he could have another life, another chance. Part of me wanted to tell him to wear a medical bracelet that said "diabetic" in different languages, in German. This sense of wanting to protect him, to care for him, was so central to the image—this loving him, and this immensely deep gratitude to him, for him, for what came through him, for that manifestation.

At one point, the love flowed the other way as well. He reached out in the image and touched my heart center with his hand, very gently placing his palm there. There was something about this gesture that reminded me of something Christ-like, or some kind of Near or Middle Eastern mystical blessing. The gesture was full of love and gentleness—really like a blessing. He was blessing me. Really, really beautiful and touching.

As this image unfolded—all of this happening in just a few minutes—occasionally I would get an impulse to ask him for advice. Perhaps advice for the past when I used to be a jazz musician, when someone like him, a complete master, could have helped me or at least sympathized with my passionate struggling to gain mastery. Or advice about creative work now, whatever.

But immediately when that attitude arose, I sensed that this wasn't the point of the image. It felt not right. That wouldn't be the proper steering, the right orientation—to ask for advice or whatever. The whole feel of it, when that impulse arose, the orientation of getting something from him, somehow felt off. Something was stuck or not quite alive. And that indicated to me very quickly: that's not right.

The simpler orientation—and to the mind perhaps more puzzling—of just loving him, just letting the gratitude flow forth, the flow going from me to him, that felt really, really right. There was something right about that, beautiful and right. What was really central in that image was the love, and particularly my loving him and my gratitude. Very beautiful and soul-making, if we use that word again.

So this sixth thread is about the stance, the attitude and relationship with the image: what do you want?

The seventh aspect or possibility in this mindful work with images involves what we could delineate as three possibilities in terms of stance with regard to the imaginal figure.

It can be that you, in the meditation, are beholding this figure or this angel. You're seeing or gazing at this figure and just feeling the resonances as you do that, stewing with that, cooking with that a little bit.

Or another possibility is that you enter into this figure or angel or daemon or whatever we want to call it, and actually feel them from the inside, as if you identify with them. I hope I can find another word at some point because I don't mean the ego identifying in a tight way—I mean entering into, let's say.

There are actually some tricks, a few little techniques you can use. Sometimes this just happens naturally. Sometimes we simply intend it to happen. But gazing into their eyes sometimes helps in order to enter in. Sometimes imagining your energy body mimicking the movement in the body of the imaginal figure—so if they're dancing in a certain way, for instance, you imagine dancing or feel how it feels for them to dance in that way. Feel that in the energy body. This helps us enter.

And then curiously—I have no idea why this works—giving attention to the small of their back, attending to that and feeling the small of their back, entering into that in the imagination, also allows us to enter into them sometimes.

So there's the "I behold the angel, the daemon, the imaginal figure"—I look and gaze at them with the resonances. Or "I enter into them," into their body, into their experience, seeing through their eyes. Or I attend more to this feeling of being seen by this angel, by this imaginal figure or daemon. I really notice: oh, they are looking at me, they are gazing at me in a certain way. I'm seen by them, and I tune into how are they seeing me? How are they looking at me?

So that's a third possibility, and it could be a combination of all of these.

These are just some pointers that could be helpful—some of them indispensable, some of them just possibilities that are helpful within imaginal practice.

CHAPTER 13

Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (1)

Rob Burbea · 41 min

In this foundational teaching from his Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea offers detailed instructions for imaginal meditation practice. He distinguishes between meditative approaches that emphasize subtlety and energy body awareness versus psychological methods that make images concrete through artistic expression or embodiment exercises.

Burbea presents seven practical methods for receiving and working with images: developing samādhi and well-being in the energy body; emptiness practices that render perception insubstantial; working with emotional upset to let feelings constellate as images; deliberately invoking specific figures like deities or meaningful persons; entering imaginal spaces through visualization; transforming daydreams into meditation; and perceiving the world itself as image. He emphasizes the alchemical principle that 'everything must become liquid' - meaning both insubstantial and non-literalized - for fertile imaginal work.

Throughout, Burbea stresses patience, sensitivity to the energy body, and trust in the intelligence (telos) operating through images. He notes that practitioners will likely spend more time cultivating samādhi than working directly with images, and that even brief encounters with images can be profoundly meaningful. This teaching provides essential groundwork for understanding how contemplative practice can open into the imaginal realm while maintaining meditative depth and sophistication.

Good morning, everyone.

To start getting into the specifics—the nuts and bolts around imaginal practice and instructions about meditative practice with images—I want to first place this in context and make a couple more general points.

As we've discussed, there are so many possibilities regarding imaginal practice in terms of approaches, attitudes, inclinations, directions, and theories that support or help direct practice and set it in different frameworks—some slightly different, others very different.

Many modern psychotherapies and psychologies that include images in their approaches often suggest or hold to the view that it's important to make the images concrete, to actualize them or make something solid out of them. For instance, this might

involve painting, sculpture, sand play, psychodrama, or mime. In gestalt psychology, practitioners sometimes set up different chairs in a room, with the individual moving between these chairs, embodying an imaginal figure or dream figure in each chair, speaking as if from that embodied imaginal figure, then dialoguing between different imaginal figures or between the ego and the imaginal figure. In these approaches, it's often postulated that by doing this, the work with images moves into greater depth—it goes deeper, is given more power, becomes more powerful, and has greater effects on the whole being, on the psyche.

Here on this retreat, this isn't quite what we're doing. I'm more interested in the meditative work with images, and particularly—as I've said and will say again and again—the tuning to the energy body and the resonances and effects on the energy body. The inclusion of the energy body, awareness and sensitivity, is very much a thread and basis of the imaginal practice.

Why? Partly because we're limited in time, partly because this more meditative approach and sensitivity to the energy body reflects my particular training and what I've spent most time developing. But I also sometimes wonder whether making images concrete through sand play or moving between chairs and having spoken dialogues, while sometimes allowing images to have more effect, sometimes actually circumscribes and limits their effect in different ways.

The advantage of more meditatively focused work, especially sensitivity to the energy body, is that it allows a degree of subtlety and nuance of awareness, work, and navigation that isn't really possible outside of meditation. This concretizing—and I wish I had a better word, since I sometimes use that term to mean taking images too literally—may keep things at a more gross level and keep the whole imaginal practice and involved awarenesses at a grosser level than what may be allowed through meditative exploration with the subtle body, with the energy body.

Having said that, I want to reiterate that images, as we're discussing them, generally won't be separate from our life, separate from our acts and what we embody in the world, the way we move and speak, what happens in life, and also not separate from our perceptions. There isn't really a division here.

Something like ritual—that whole huge area of beautiful potential—we won't really explore on this retreat, unfortunately. It's also something where I don't consider myself an expert. But ritual would be an example of perhaps the possibility of embodiment, a making concrete in a positive sense, an acting out and transformation of perception

that's somewhere between the more meditative and the more gross, or rather includes both. There are lots of possibilities. We're leaning toward the more subtle end of the spectrum in terms of awarenesses and navigation.

Secondly, and I mentioned this briefly but want to reiterate: on this course, mostly you will spend more time in your meditations with the energy body—whether in the groove of cultivating samadhi and developing well-being through the energy body, or in the groove of subtle attention to emotional manifestations in the energy body, just the energy manifestations. Generally speaking, you'll spend more time working directly with and focused on the energy body than with images, in terms of actual minutes.

Sometimes with images, even two minutes meditatively with an image can be extremely fruitful. It doesn't always need to be a long forty-five-minute stretch with an image. Sometimes that's helpful, but sometimes two minutes contains so much in terms of what it gives the being, how it transforms things, what's possible there, its richness.

Of course, there are exceptions. Sometimes a person practicing metta or compassion and using an image such as Kuan Yin or Jesus as their principal method for developing and cultivating that particular brahmavihara may require more steady bathing. Or for someone where an image of Kuan Yin or some compassion-imbued imaginal figure arises more spontaneously, this may require sustained attention. But it's very grounded, as all these images are, in the energy body, as I'll discuss more.

Generally speaking, there will be more time spent working with the energy body than with the images on this retreat. One moves back and forth, and I'll explain more about that. And of course, as always, there are exceptions.

Let me say something about possibilities for eliciting images or receiving images. I want to run through seven possibilities that can be employed to contact images.

The first we've talked about extensively, placing much emphasis on this track of intention, of the direction of samadhi, of cultivating well-being in the energy body and that spreading and harmonizing to whatever degree, with the mind pervading that space of the energy body, filling it out and hanging out, marinating in the well-being. Much of samadhi practice involves this marinating—filling out and really being there, very alive, soaking it up, the mind and body soaking up whatever degree of well-being is there more steadily, learning how to play with the images.

Within this, we can delineate two possibilities for eliciting images. One is that either deliberately or spontaneously, images can be deliberately invoked or created, or may just arise in relation to the energy body itself. We've discussed many examples: lines of energy, breath energy in certain ways, clouds of light, fire, and many more possibilities.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 2/5). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

But deliberately or spontaneously, images are created or conjured, if you like, or may arise themselves in relation to the energy body itself.

In addition to this, samadhi itself is also quite fruitful territory—a realm or range of experience for the arising of other images of a much wider scope than just the energy body itself. As you move in and out of some depth of samadhi—whatever that range may be, and as I said, it's an infinite range—going in and emerging a little after a while, emerging from whatever depth of samadhi just slightly, perhaps relaxing the intensity of attention... In some cases this can be helpful: emerging a little from this kind of marination in that space of well-being, relaxing the intensity very slightly, and also relaxing the exclusive focus on the energy and texture.

That exclusive focus is really what makes it more of a samadhi state. By relaxing that exclusivity—so we're very much in touch with the energy and texture of the energy body, but we're not solely paying attention to that—this slightly emerging state is generally one of consciousness with more softness, more diffused in terms of perception and quality and feel. And this is very fertile soil for images to arise.

I can't remember if I've mentioned this on retreat already, but some of you have heard me refer to a maxim from the alchemical tradition in the West. I've forgotten who wrote it, but it says: "Do not proceed with your alchemical operation—do not proceed until everything has become liquid."

How can we translate this to the alchemy of imaginal practice? What does this mean—liquid, everything becoming liquid? In the way I would interpret this, liquid does not mean flow. We tend to think liquid flow has something to do with impermanence, being in touch with the process or flow of phenomena. No, that's not really what's meant here.

The liquidity has to do with insubstantiality—liquidity as opposed to solidity. Do not proceed until there's a sense of insubstantiality to things. States of samadhi, whatever their range, or deep metta—these are states where the perception, on emerging a little or in the state itself, is of less substantiality, less density, less solidity. This is part of what "everything has become liquid" means. Where the perception of things—body, world—is less substantial, it's more fertile for images.

But the second aspect of this liquidity is not just insubstantiality, but the sense of not quite being real or literalized. Sometimes the perception of world and self and body, but particularly images in this case, comes with the knowing that this is not something to be literalized. We know it doesn't exist independently of mind and the way of looking. It's empty, as we've said several times.

So there's insubstantiality to things, and we know that things—particularly images—are not to be taken with the same kind of reality as tables and chairs and physical bodies. We're not literalizing an image; we recognize it as image, not independent of mind. This sense of insubstantiality combined with this attitude or view makes up this "everything becomes liquid."

This attitude that doesn't literalize or solidify images, that realizes they're not independent of mind and recognizes the insubstantiality of things—this comes out of and is implied in emptiness practices. I know I keep referring to emptiness on this retreat, but we don't actually have time to go deeply into emptiness.

Let me just say this: if you're familiar with different emptiness practices, you'll recognize that both this sense of insubstantiality and the attitude or understanding imbuing perception—that this is not independent of mind, not taking it literally, not giving it that kind of concretizing reality—these factors are always present in emptiness practices.

And like so many things, there's a range of degrees. What is the degree of insubstantiality in viewing perception? What is the depth and comprehensiveness of that deeper view and attitude that realizes everything has become liquid? This liquidity can extend to the world itself becoming liquid in this sense—not so concretized in understanding and perception as we usually hold it in our culture and in the human mind naturally.

There's a range of degrees of depth in emptiness practice and samadhi, of how much everything becomes liquid. The more familiar you are with emptiness practices, the more you understand and develop skill with them—all the way down to really knowing that time past, time future, and time present are thoroughly empty, that space is empty, that self and all things are empty—everything, if you like, is liquid.

These emptiness practices themselves, again emerging a little from their depth, render everything insubstantial. That view of emptiness, of liquidity, is really there. And this is a very fertile space or range of consciousness for images to arise.

With a lot of practice in emptiness and samadhi, there can be very fluid movement between these practices and imaginal practices. And particularly with extensive emptiness practice, sometimes we can...

if you like, decide to go deeper into the imaginal realm, just by invoking some emptiness practice, engaging some emptiness practice or invoking the felt insight there, the memory of the insight or the memory of that depth of emptiness, to let go in that moment of the perception of substantiality, particularly with regard to the body.

So with a lot of emptiness practice, one simply leans into letting go of the perception of substantiality, and that can take us deeper into the imaginal realm—more vividly, more alive, more stable. This comes as a fruit of, in most cases, quite a lot of emptiness practice. And then, as I said, one can play with a kind of fluid movement between different realms. It's very possible—simply a result of learning the right practices, taking the time to develop them, and cultivating skill in this way.

So that's the second pathway. There's the samādhi, then the emptiness practices.

The third possibility for eliciting or receiving images emerges when we're emotionally upset. When there's some kind of emotional disturbance present for us, it becomes possible to actually feel that emotional upset and, if you like, let it constellate an image. We allow the very emotion to take form, to constellate an image.

Now, it's not necessary that the emotion we're feeling be even clear or definable. We may not have a label for it. It might feel quite vague—completely okay. Not important. Or it might be very clear, with a definite word for it. It doesn't matter. Sometimes an image constellates or emerges from what we've alluded to before—a more nebulous, low-energy or contracted state. Strangely, this can also be fertile ground for images.

Something is, if you like, tied up in there, binding the energy in this contraction, and it's waiting to be discovered. That state of low energy or contraction may not be about anything in particular. We're not necessarily sad about this or depressed about that. It may not feel to be about anything specific. It doesn't need to be.

Or again, we might feel, for instance, beset by the inner critic, harangued and harassed by the inner critic, experiencing emotional upset around that. It might be that we let or even encourage that inner critic to take form as an image, to constellate as an image, and perhaps engage in dialogue with that image of the inner critic.

So these territories of the psyche where we're actually quite upset about something emotionally are themselves very fertile ground.

There's an important factor here that has to do with—again we've touched on this and I want to say more about it later—the importance of trusting the intelligence of the image. Perhaps even in the critic there's some kind of intelligence operating. But in images that come from other kinds of upset, there may be some kind of intelligence that

the image carries and expresses—some kind of soul intelligence. We use the word *telos* as well—where is this pulling me, directing me, showing me the way to? That may not be clear, but there's something about trusting that this *telos* is operating in and through and with the image. An intelligence, a soul intelligence, a psychic intelligence is operating in and through and with the image.

This remains true even though it might seem that what's going on for us is egoic, or this image appears to be what we would tend to think of as not very noble—egoic, maybe what Buddhists would call a defilement, or something that looks strangely anti-social in its behavior within the image. Something so crucial about this: it might not fit my picture. I'm going to come back to this. It might not fit my picture in terms of the smaller frames that the mind has arrived at for deciding what's good and bad. We'll return to that.

But it's interesting here, because we have on one side, so to speak, these states of samādhi and that whole range, and states that come through emptiness practices—what we might call "states of emptiness"—on one side being quite fertile territory. Sometimes it doesn't have to be deep samādhi or really profound emptiness practices, but that whole range. And on the other side, we could say there's the whole territory of upset, feeling emotionally upset.

These two ends of the spectrum are quite fertile. Sometimes what's a little more challenging in terms of images arising—where it seems harder for images to constellate, a little less fertile—is that mid-range between the two, between these more lovely deep states of samādhi or emptiness or *mettā* going deep on one hand, and on the other hand, the more upset states. Sometimes the mid-range is a little more difficult in terms of spontaneous images arising.

But that's three pathways so far: the samādhi in both ways we've discussed, the emptiness practices if you're familiar with them, and thirdly, the emotions themselves when they are quite strong and perhaps there's some upset.

A fourth pathway is simply choosing an image or opening that doorway deliberately. As we've said, but just to spell it out clearly: it could be a deity, perhaps a tantric deity or Jesus or whatever, that one deliberately imagines, conjures, and then meditates on. It could be a previous image that has come spontaneously that we want to deliberately revisit, deliberately dwell with and meditate on again. It could be a dream figure or a fragment of a dream that has made quite an impression on the psyche—perhaps from the night before or even long ago—and we deliberately recall, summon up that dream figure and meditate on it as an imaginal figure.

It could be a memory that, through the way we relate to it and meditate on it, we turn into an image. And it could be a person we're meditating on—someone we know or don't know, alive or dead—where again, the way we're relating to them, the way we're meditating on them, deliberately bringing them to mind, deliberately imagining them, we're making an image out of that, or letting them become an image for the psyche.

So as I say, it could be Jesus, could be Quan Yin, could be someone like John Coltrane, who comes to me quite often. Could be Nelson Mandela, could be the beautiful Etty Hillesum, who left diaries from Nazi-occupied Holland during the Second World War and was murdered at Auschwitz. Beautiful chronicles—I know I've felt very moved reading and rereading, going back so often to her diaries.

Reading her words, one feels she is a friend—alive for me in the psyche, close, as if I had known her personally. She has become a person for me through her imaginal figure.

When we engage in deliberate imagining, in the deliberate constellating of an imaginal figure, the question of intention naturally arises—as we have touched upon several times. Why am I doing this? Is it for the cultivation of metta? Is it to seek advice from this person about a particular choice? Or is it simply because there is such profound soul resonance that we want to be with this image and discover what unfolds? There is a whole range of reasons we might engage in such practice, and this connects to our broader conceptual framework—something we have discussed and will return to again.

In terms of practice, there is the possibility of deliberately imagining and then staying with that image. This constitutes our fourth approach.

The fifth possibility involves using imagination to enter or go to a certain place where one receives images. This might mean going down a stairwell and through a door at its base into some kind of basement. This approach works powerfully for many people, though some find it uncomfortable. It could be a monastery cell—that contained space of intense practice, like an alchemical vessel for transformation. Sometimes entering such a space in the imagination becomes a place for receiving all kinds of images.

It might be a clearing in a forest, where one emerges from dense woodland into an open space, and in that clearing, perhaps other figures emerge from the forest to meet you. Maybe it's a beach—a much more open space under vast sky. It could even be an open-air corridor that one walks down, with other corridors joining at right angles, and perhaps from these side passages imaginal figures appear as you walk the central path.

The possibilities are infinite. Sometimes people cross a bridge into the realm of the imaginal.

Here I would offer not so much a caution as a differentiation, along with a stated inclination. There is a difference between entering an imaginal realm and then, within that realm, going on a shamanic journey that involves moving across great expanses of territory and meeting different figures at various points. Such an approach involves a narrative journey that tends toward the narrative image simply by virtue of moving through time over extended periods or across vast spaces.

The potential downside is that this can sometimes solidify—or has the danger of solidifying—the ego that is making the journey, the self that is undertaking this shamanic voyage. It becomes the journey of the self, versus actually being in a much smaller, contained space—a room, a clearing in a forest—with an image, and simply staying there with that image in that smaller space.

There is often less narrative structure in this approach, which allows the image to be more iconic, more poetic. There is more potential for relativizing or equalizing the relationship between self and imaginal figure. It is not so much the self's journey.

So that is the fifth approach: imaginatively entering a place of receiving images.

The sixth one—and this might sound surprising—is actually catching yourself daydreaming in meditation or at another time. Daydreaming has a way into meditative practice, paradoxically. You find yourself daydreaming, and then you notice that at a certain point in the daydream, the resonances become more pregnant, more soulful, much more meaningful than a usual daydream—which is often quite contracted, disconnected, or lacking in meaning and soulfulness.

You might be daydreaming even while sitting in meditation, and then realize that this has a different quality—there is real meaningfulness and soulfulness here. You can feel the energy opened, the energy body opened. Rather than simply cutting it off, you bring a different quality of attention to what is happening right there in that daydream, and stay with it. We transform a daydream into a meditation.

I will say more about this later, but it is indeed a possibility. I would not recommend it as your primary way of working, but rather as something to recognize opportunistically. Sometimes this will happen, and we realize that something quite important is occurring, even though for the past several minutes it was just daydreaming without any meaningfulness. Somehow a corner has been turned in the daydream, and now something is coming through it that is quite soulful and important. It feels different, and we notice the resonance and stay with that.

That would be the sixth approach.

Lastly, I want to reiterate something we mentioned—because the seventh possibility is actually to open your eyes in meditation. As I am using the word "image" on this retreat, as I said last night, the image can be the world itself, or rather, it comes wrapped up in the very sense perception of the world. It is not so much that an image is present as some inner, separate visual object—or even any kind of separate sense object—but rather something inseparable from the world we are perceiving right now.

So opening the eyes and actually seeing the world as image, imbued with everything that word means as I discussed the other night—this may or may not lead to an inner, separate imaginal object. It may do that, and that is fine if it does. But it may not. It may simply be staying with that sense of perception, the sense of the world as image. Either way is perfectly valid.

Both of them are good. So really, as I said, in a way this seventh possibility becomes one of the most important openings and dimensions of imaginal practice. Whether it leads to a separate inner image or whether it doesn't, both are good.

So that's seven possibilities there.

One last thing, more generally, and again to reiterate: probably most people on this course will be spending more time with the samadhi, with the energy body, cultivating that, attending to either developing the well-being or just tuning to what's going on in the emotional and energetic manifestation in the energy body. There'll be more time doing that.

But also, with imaginal practice, there's this sense of waiting for images to arise, and it's just really important to be patient. Once you do this a little bit, you realize that actually images can arise really suddenly in any moment. So it may seem like nothing's happening, nothing's happening, or nothing's coming if I'm waiting for some kind of image—and then it suddenly arises. Or something arises. Or it might seem like nothing is staying. There's little flotsam and jetsam in the mind. None of it really seems right or important. And then something comes, you know.

So really what I'm saying is to be patient. You're spending more time with the samadhi and the energy body and that kind of attunement anyway. But within that, within the context of imaginal practice, be patient.

And again, just a few minutes with an image—two, three minutes—can be very rich and very fruitful, and it will feel like you actually don't need or even want too much more because there's so much to resonate with and so many echoes left over from this image that you don't necessarily want this two-hour imaginal thing going on necessarily.

Again, the images may, as we said last night, come outside of the formal meditation—sitting in the lounge or the library or standing on the lawn or having a cup of tea or whatever. Just recognize and know that they can come at any time and in any place, whether that's formal or informal meditation.

And then the last thing for now, I think, is just to also sometimes not get so locked into this idea of an image as an object—as some kind of separate, discrete object. Rather, we can practice by recognizing and noticing and beginning to be interested in, even inquire a little bit or feel into: Where is image, mythos, fantasy alive for me in my life? In what dimension, in what realm of experience and perception?

And in that sense, the image is not necessarily an object—not some kind of separate object that we then perceive. So it's recognizing: in my love for this person, in my different kind of love for that person, different image, different fantasy, different mythos alive there, and entering into that, feeling that, recognizing it, and sensitizing oneself to it.

Or in my relationship to Dharma and practice, and the self on that journey, and in relationship to that tradition, and the Buddha, and whatever it is. Or a particular place. All kinds of possibilities there.

And again, this is the more deeper and subtler end of imaginal practice. And I think, in many ways, one of the more important aspects of it.

Okay, let's stop there for now. I'm going to add a little bit more later on—quite a bit more actually in terms of practice. Let's stop there for now.

CHAPTER 14

The Love and Demands of the Imaginal (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h05

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea continues examining Henri Corbin's revolutionary perspective: "not your individuation, but the angel's individuation is your task." Drawing from Hasidic and Kabbalistic traditions, Burbea outlines a twofold spiritual movement - first, dissolution in the mystical nothingness (ayin) that parallels the Buddha's teaching of the unfabricated (asaṅkhata) described in the Udāna (8.1), and second, drawing down divine influx to spiritualize perception.*
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> *Burbea demonstrates how this transcendent unfabricated - beyond subject, object, space and time - appears across mystical traditions from Plotinus's "One" to the Buddha's "consciousness without attribute." He then explores Vajrayāna Buddhism's Buddha-nature as primordial wisdom awareness that sees all appearances as empty divinities, paralleling tantric practice's skillful mimicry of enlightened perception.*
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> *The talk reveals how emptiness understanding enables perception's malleability, allowing imaginal practice to serve not personal healing but divine completion - what Kabbalah calls tikkun ha-olam (healing the world). Burbea frames three general demands of imaginal practice: opening consciousness to the imaginal realm beyond narrow materialism, embracing multiplicity of images rather than singular mythologies, and recognizing that image, fantasy and mythos already saturate all meaningful experience. This radical reframing positions our entire spiritual journey as service to something infinitely greater than individual liberation.*

At the end of the first part of this talk, I quoted Henri Corbin when he wrote, "Not your individuation, but the angel's individuation. The individuation of the angel is your task."

We were presenting that as a radical possibility—a way of looking at imaginal figures, a way of relating to and conceiving them—a sort of reversal of perhaps what might be tempting to many of the usual ways of seeing, relating to, and conceiving of imaginal figures and their relationship with the self.

Of course, Henri Corbin was, as I think I mentioned one time, writing about actually just certain streams of the Islamic mystical tradition—people like Ibn Arabi and Avicenna and Suhrawardi. And so that phrase of Corbin really has its home or origin-

ates from those streams, certain streams, very much a minority within the Islamic mystical tradition, or the range of that. And so that is from a more—or has its context in those traditions.

And we can actually fill out a little bit and elaborate a bit more about that and then see how it might parallel with some more dharmic traditions and Buddhist traditions.

So that perspective on the angel, on the daemon, on the imaginal figure—we can fill that out a little bit and put it into a larger context, actually, from looking briefly at the Hasidic traditions. In the streams of the Hasidic tradition, the Kabbalistic tradition in Jewish mysticism, we see something there that's filled out as a kind of philosophy and practice that gives more flesh around this phrase of Corbin's.

So there they talk about, or it is taught, the encouragement and injunction of the practitioner to practice a twofold movement in relation to the divine.

The first aspect of this twofold movement is a movement towards dissolving the being, dissolving the self, dissolving the consciousness actually in the Godhead—transcending the world of self and other and the world of appearances, in fact transcending and dissolving it in the Godhead. And that Godhead, that essence of God, if you like, in this tradition is also ayin. Ayin is a Hebrew word. It means nothing or nothingness. A-Y-I-N.

So there's this movement of dissolution of self, being, world in the essence of God, which is nothingness—very much a transcendent dissolution there of the world, of appearances, and everything that goes with that.

Now, I'm going to make some parallels here with dharma teachings, classical Buddhist teachings, and right there, as I'll explain shortly, is a very classic teaching of the Buddha about cessation of consciousness in what he would call the unfabricated. So that first of the twofold movement in the Hasidic teachings has really a clear parallel in Pali Canon Buddhism and the Buddha's teaching of the deathless and the unfabricated. I'll come back to that.

So this first movement of transcending and dissolving in the mystical nothingness, the pregnant mystical nothingness of the Godhead. But the second of the twofold movement is in a way a kind of opposite movement, a movement in the opposite direction. So this was regarded as a dissolution or transcending upwards into the Godhead of the being. And then secondly, a drawing down of the divine influx from God in order to spiritualize the material world. I think those words are from either Sanford Drob or Rachel Elior, who wrote about these teachings in the Hasidic tradition—to draw down the divine influx in order to spiritualize the material world.

In other words, there isn't just the dissolution in the transcendent mystical nothingness, just the sort of disappearance of form into the absolute, but there's the drawing down from God into the world and into, as I explained, actually the perception of the world, of the divine influx to spiritualize the material world. That's using a certain way of putting it.

But included in that second aspect of the twofold movement is the idea and the fantasy of our, if you like, completing God. So that our drawing down of the divine influx is part of what, if you like, completes God or actualizes God or, in a manner of speaking, creates God. So this is a very sophisticated philosophy, if you like, that's bold enough to admit that the human being creates God in a sense.

So there's quite a lot I want to pull apart here and elaborate on and fill out, but just to draw attention to one aspect, because what's possible then with such a framework—such a conceptual framework—is the view then of practice and imaginal practice and the whole journey of practice and of life as being for God rather than for the self.

So it's possible to approach and conceive of one's practice and imaginal practice and one's whole journey as being not for the self—the completion, the actualization of the self, the individuation of the self and all that—but for God. Again, quite a radical shift in view. In other words, we are drawing down this divine influx, if we use those words, for God's sake, for the completion, actualization, creation of God.

Now, I know for some of you, just the word God doesn't compute, or even one has an aversion to it. Is it possible to actually entertain such a radical view, hold it lightly, and as I said, still potently in this kind of middle way understanding? Can I hold such a view without believing in God—the existence or the non-existence of God?

So this whole area about the divine and God—the first thing most often people jump to is, does God exist or does God not exist? And they quibble and quarrel over such notions. But actually, is it possible either to just put aside such questions and inquiries of the existence or non-existence, and just enter into holding lightly this way of seeing and way of relating? Or actually to have more sophistication, more cunning, if you like, philosophically, to see beyond such simplistic notions of existing and non-existing?

So can I have a potent sense of God, view of God, if I feel like I'm playing with this? I'm playing with it—it's light and I see it's—I'm not getting sucked into having to believe or not the existence of something, and I can—that can create a kind of platform where I can go even further and turn around the whole purpose of my practice, not for me but for God.

So I don't have to believe in existence or non-existence, and nor do I have to have a clear concept of what the divine is. Interesting that these kinds of views are entertainable without believing so rigidly in things like existence or non-existence—not a question of belief, or a question of having a clear concept of what divinity means and what God is. This is something I'm going to come back to later, but there's a possibility there of a radical shift in view.

So let's fill this out a little bit more. This ayin that we mentioned—this nothingness or nothing in Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions—has its parallels, as I mentioned briefly, very clearly in what the Buddha talked about in the Pali Canon: the unfabricated (asankhata), the deathless, the unborn—something he usually put in negative terms, beyond anything that can be conceptualized, beyond any attributes and any qualities, something that was utterly transcendent, without qualities, without attributes.

I could give many examples from the Pali Canon where he speaks in that way. For example, from Udana 8.1: "There is that sphere where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind"—in other words, no materiality. "Neither sphere of infinite space, nor sphere of infinite consciousness, nor sphere of nothingness, nor sphere of neither perception nor non-perception." It's beyond even the more mystical realms of perception. "Neither this world nor the next world, neither sun nor moon. And there, I say, there is no coming and no going, no staying, no passing away, and no arising. It is without foundation, non-continuing, and objectless."

So he talks about practicing and developing skill in practice. The Buddha in the Pali Canon, as I would read it, speaks of eventually developing that skill in practice to a point where it culminates and one is actually able to enter into or open up to a cessation of perception—not just cessation of appearances and things, but cessation of perception of any kind of forming of anything: any subject, any object, any time, any space. No appearances whatsoever.

The Buddha talks about cessation of perception, the cessation of consciousness, the cessation of mind. And that doesn't mean just the cessation of thinking—it means the cessation of all subtle conceptualities of space, of time, of thing, of subject, of object. Even in the most subtle way: cessation of all appearances, as that description in the Udana and many other descriptions in the Pali Canon point to.

Sometimes he talks about cessation in very negative terms: not this, not that, this isn't there, that's not there. Occasionally he puts it in the positive—this unfabricated, this transcendent unfabricated, the parallel of what we're calling ayin. Ayin, meaning "nothing" in Hebrew, is also a negation, a negative way of expressing this essence of the ultimate.

Sometimes the Buddha puts it in the positive. For example, he talks about "consciousness without attribute." There is a sense that there is some kind of consciousness there—consciousness without attribute, without object, without end, and luminous all around. "Here water, earth, fire and air have no footing. Here long and short, subtle and gross, pleasant and unpleasant, and nama-rupa"—which means all the factors of mind and conceiving and perception—"are all destroyed." It's a transcending and going beyond all those appearances and materiality and measurement and perception and appearance.

"With the cessation of the six sense consciousnesses of smelling, tasting, touching, seeing, hearing, and thinking—with the cessation of the sixth sense consciousness, here all is destroyed." All these other perceptions are destroyed, and it's just this consciousness without attributes.

Sometimes this unfabricated is given a positive description by the Buddha, as much as possible. Most often it's given this negative language—what in the Christian mystical tradition is called the via negativa: not this, not that, beyond, beyond, beyond, the unborn, the deathless.

And occasionally the Buddha says something quite striking. Neither putting it in the negative nor the positive, he simply says: "Where all phenomena are removed, all ways of speaking are removed as well." When all appearances fade—phenomena means "appearance," actually, from the Greek—where all phenomena are removed, all ways of speaking are removed as well. In other words, there's nothing that you can really say about this transcendent unfabricated, this deathless, this unborn. It's utterly beyond words and concepts in the usual sense, which tend to base themselves on subject, object, thing, perception, space, time. The whole fabric of conceptuality is based on that, and this is beyond all that—not just beyond thinking, but beyond perception, beyond consciousness in the usual sense.

We can know this. We can know this transcendent unfabricated through practice. It's a matter of practicing in the right way. It's a matter of knowing how to move deeper into this unfabricating—how can I practice in a certain way so that the mind does not just keep fabricating appearances, self and world, the world of things and the world of space and time?

Through emptiness practices, there is a deeper and deeper unfabricating of the world of appearances. One can develop that. It's just a matter of finding that thread, those threads, and following them, developing them in practice. And we can taste this

unfabricated, we can open to it. A whole different sense of existence comes out of that—of life and death, of being. It is available to us if we practice in a way that leads in that direction.

But this transcendent, unfabricated, this deathless or unborn—as the Buddha called it—has parallels in all the great mystical traditions that point to this same dimension. In Neoplatonism, they speak of "the One" in very similar terms: beyond attribute, beyond space, beyond time, transcendent. The parallels are striking.

Plotinus, the father of Neoplatonism, articulated this with remarkable precision. Neoplatonism was probably one of the most influential mystical philosophies that ever existed. It grew out of the classical Greek era and pervaded Western thought in countless ways, shaping so much of Western mystical practice, religious thinking, and entire domains of Western sensibility. Plotinus declared: "Even being cannot be there." Even being cannot exist in this unfabricated, transcendent One. It is beyond being and non-being.

This teaching echoes powerfully in the Pali Canon, where Sariputta explains to another monk that this cessation of consciousness, this total unfabricating of perception, transcends all categories. You cannot say there is something there. You cannot say there is nothing there. You cannot say there is both something and nothing there. You cannot say there is neither something nor nothing there. Plotinus points to something beyond even the most basic, subtle, non-verbal conceptuality of existence and being.

In Gnostic teaching—another stream within the Western spiritual tradition—we find similar expressions regarding this transcendent aspect of the divine: "Nor is he something that exists that one could know. But he is something else that is better, whom one cannot know. He has non-being existence." Notice how language struggles here to articulate what can be tasted and known through practice, yet cannot be conveyed through conventional perception bounded by space, time, and the usual framework of subject and object. It is not even oneness—not a sense of everything being one—but something beyond that.

The fourteenth-century Jewish Kabbalist David Ben Abraham Halavaan expressed this beautifully: "This nothingness, this 'I am,' is more existent than all the being in the world." This statement parallels very strongly how I read the Buddha's teaching of the unfabricated and the deathless.

When we learn to practice in this way, we begin by undoing grosser fabrication. Take papañca, for instance—this proliferative, ego-driven mental elaboration that creates so much suffering. Through mindfulness and skillful practice, we learn to untie this knot.

We realize: "Oh, that whole perception I was experiencing in that state of mind—that's fabrication." This recognition of gross-level fabrication becomes obvious in hindsight. We see how constructed and fabricated our entire way of perceiving ourselves, others, and situations really was, and we learn how to undo it.

But this is just the beginning. Following this thread deeper through practice, we ask: Can I unfabricate further? Can there be even less fabrication? What else is fabricated in this world of appearances? We learn how the world of appearances—self, other, and world—are fabricated, and how to unfabricate them by removing different kinds of clinging and developing skill in this process.

Eventually, layer by layer, we see: this is fabricated, and that's fabricated too—even what seemed so basic and real. Even more fundamental levels reveal themselves as fabricated. Through this understanding, we can go all the way to the unfabricated. Not to live there permanently, because that's impossible—it's a realm of non-manifestation, non-appearance—but by moving in that direction in practice, we understand that all appearances are fabricated: space as perception, time, self, other, world, solidity—all fabrication.

Reaching toward the unfabricated, we understand the relative reality of everything else. We can speak meaningfully of what is less fabricated versus more fabricated, what is more real versus less real. This is why David Ben Abraham's words ring true: this nothingness, this unfabricated, "is more existent than all the being in the world." It is more real because it is unfabricated.

These parallels appear clearly throughout the great mystical traditions—this first aspect of the twofold movement I'm presenting. In Hasidism, it's the transcending, the dissolution in the Godhead. In Christian mysticism, it's the essence of the Godhead in mystical nothingness. All point toward this same transcendent, unfabricated dimension.

What about the second aspect, this drawing down of the divine influx and this idea or fantasy of completing and creating God? Here, we may need to look to Vajrayana Buddhism for a more fully fleshed out understanding, where the ultimate is not regarded as purely transcendent, unfabricated, without appearances, qualities, or attributes.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, the ultimate—while people use different vocabularies—is Buddha nature in some schools. This Buddha nature is replete with qualities, full of beautiful qualities, not devoid of manifestation, appearance, or expression. This Vajray-

ana ultimate is a primordial wisdom awareness that is empty, yet ultimate because it represents how a Buddha sees—the wisdom awareness of a Buddha that is primordial and cosmic in nature.

We possess this Buddha nature within us, or it forms part of the deep fabric of our being, though it may be covered over. It too is understood to be empty, yet impossible to completely comprehend or fit into neat concepts. We can say it is a kind of awareness—a seeing and knowing that perceives everything as empty, but not merely empty. It also sees all things as divine.

This awareness sees all things, including oneself, others, objects, the world, and the cosmos as divine, as deities. Yet this awareness is not separate from what is seen. It encompasses both the subjective aspect—the awareness itself—and the objects that are seen, the divinities that are manifested. It is both the seeing and the seen: the seeing of everything and everyone, including oneself, as empty divinity, and the objects being seen. The awareness remains inseparable from the divinities and objects seen and manifested.

Tantric practice is regarded as a skillful mimicry of this Buddha mind, this primordial wisdom awareness. It involves entering into or supporting, for a period of time, that view which sees everything as empty divinity—where both the awareness and what is seen, the world and beings, are perceived as empty and divine.

The second Dalai Lama, in his mystical verses, describes the experience of the practitioner: "The world is seen as the mystical mandala and all living beings as tantric deities. Everything that one eats and drinks becomes transformed into blissful ambrosia. All of one's activities become spiritual, regardless of how they conventionally appear. And every sound that one makes becomes part of a great Vajrasana."

This tantric practice rests entirely on an understanding of emptiness. This wisdom awareness is empty. Everything perceived—all material objects, space, and time—are understood to be empty. The deities perceived in practice are also regarded as empty emanations of this primordial wisdom awareness, which is itself emptiness. The whole framework depends on understanding emptiness, not a concretized or reified view.

Often people discuss tantra or believe they're practicing it without having developed the view of emptiness sufficiently. True practice involves emptiness meditation—developing skill with emptiness meditation deeper, wider, and more fully. The understanding arising from emptiness meditations and the developing skills allow tantric practice to unfold more completely, enabling the ways of looking that constitute tantric practice to be explored and experienced as palpable perceptions.

Through understanding emptiness and developing skill in emptiness practice, the world of perception—self, other, and things—becomes much more malleable. Understanding it as empty, not independent of our way of looking, allows us to play with perspective. The world of self, other, and appearances becomes malleable and can be seen as divine, as those beautiful verses from the second Dalai Lama describe.

For most people, the more skill and understanding of the thorough emptiness of everything one develops, the more perception becomes flexible. It becomes a natural outflow of that understanding to see the world—things, self, other, bodies, and cosmos—as divine.

This too has parallels in Western mystical traditions. The Dov Ber, the Maggid of Meserach, a great Jewish mystic of the eighteenth century, said: "First, each thing must arrive at the level of ayin, the level of mystical nothingness, this unfabricated transcendent. Only then can it become something else."

In other words, when I see its emptiness, its equivalence with nothingness, its non-separation from the unfabricated, then it can become something else. Knowing its emptiness, perception becomes malleable, and it can become divine in perception.

One of his disciples said: "When one attains the level of gazing at ayin, gazing at this mystical, unfabricated nothing, the essence of the Godhead, one's citta is annihilated." The translation I have speaks of intellect being annihilated, but let's use the word citta. In that moment of seeing the unfabricated, of knowing it and dissolving in it...

The mind is annihilated, he says—the intellect, the mind, the citta is annihilated. But that doesn't mean just a quietening of thinking. It means, as I said before, the whole of conventional cognition. Any perception, any appearance, any typical consciousness—even beyond all the jhānas, all the eight jhānas—all that's annihilated. All the subtle conceptuality, non-verbal, non-thinking, all the conceptuality that goes on as part of what fabricates perception and appearance, all of that is quietened.

Buddhist practice, through the skill in unfabricating, is a bit like that game Kerplunk, or I've forgotten the other names of it, where you have those sticks or a house of cards. Instead of pulling out one card and hoping that the house of cards remains, you're actually pulling out this and that stick or card, and then at some point the whole thing collapses, the whole edifice of appearances collapses, and there is a transcending of the whole world of appearances.

So the Magi's disciple: when one attains the level of gazing at Ayin, one's citta is annihilated. One's whole cognition and perception and conceptuality, even the subtle, is annihilated. Afterwards, when one returns to the citta, to the whole realm of perception, of conception, mind, and the perception that comes out of subtle conceptuality, afterwards, when one returns to the citta, it is filled with divine emanation.

So again, this mirrors what should be the platform and the support of tantric practice—that there's this deep understanding of fabrication and emptiness, and one, if you like, plunges into that emptying. And then on emerging, the mind is flooded, if you like, with this knowing of the emptiness of all things. There's a malleability, and it's possible to see everything as divine. Actually, that will be the natural outflow of that.

So this, again, in Buddhist practice—this developing skill in unfabricating and understanding the implications—it's not just about the experience of this unfabricated, it's about understanding what that implies about the fabrication of appearances, or in other Buddhist language, the dependent arising of appearances, understanding that they're empty. And that opens up a door, if you like, or a realm of the malleability of perception, of appearance, the possibility of a range of appearances, and the ability for a sense of the divine to be part of perception in all kinds of ways.

In the more theistic framework of the Abrahamic religions, God is regarded as infinite. And so because God is infinite, his aspects are infinite—they're inexhaustible. So not just transcendent—actually the aspects, the manifestations, the expressions, the faces of God are infinite, inexhaustible. But all this, when we frame it this way, all this has to do with perception. Perception, perception. Everything hinges on perception.

As I've said several times on this retreat, one possibility is actually relating to the whole teaching of the Four Noble Truths and this teaching of clinging as a key element to unlock, if you like, the secrets and the doors of perception and appearance, and recognize emptiness, and then see what's now possible. Now that I know that everything is empty, or to the degree that I see that everything is empty, what does it free up in terms of perception?

And of course, practically speaking, the advantage of putting all this—whether it's tantric practice or imaginal practice or these practices from the Jewish mystical tradition or the Islamic tradition, whatever—the advantage of framing it in terms of emptiness, or seeing image as image, whatever language one uses, is that one can play with perception this way, play with this perception of divinity. And even the divinity coming through one, through one's personhood—not just that one's fabric is the same stuff as everyone else's fabric and everything else's fabric in the great oneness of things, not just that kind of divinity. I'll say more about this tomorrow, hopefully.

But the ability to perceive that divinity, knowing it's all empty, knowing self and other and all things are empty, and this appearance too, this divinity too, is empty—it's understood. And that way there's much less danger of what Jung would call inflation, or the ego getting grandiose ideas, puffing itself up and all that.

To return to the Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalistic tradition, particularly the Lurianic Kabbalah of Isaac Luria and what came out of that—they have this beautiful concept, Tikkun HaOlam, which translates to something like healing of the world. And the movement, the encouragement, the injunction as part of practice to heal the world—what does that mean? Dana and loving-kindness and all that, of course, part of that. What does it mean, the healing of the world, the healing of our planet, the care for the other species, the care for the fate of this world? But even wider than that, what does it mean to heal the world, heal the cosmos? It's a beautiful, rich, deep, fertile concept that's there in the Lurianic Kabbalah and elsewhere in Jewish mysticism.

But this movement of Tikkun HaOlam, of healing the world, is actually regarded in the Lurianic Kabbalah as part of God. It's an aspect of God. It's a human movement, but it's part of God. It's part of the Ein Sof, which means literally "without end"—the endless, the infinite. So the Tikkun HaOlam, the human healing of the world, is part of God, of the infinity of God.

And as I mentioned in another talk, part of this Tikkun HaOlam, part of the healing of the world, happens through, in the Jewish mystical tradition, particularly the Lurianic Kabbalah and others, through the interpretation of, in that case, the holy texts of the Bible and the Zohar and other holy texts. In other words, the healing, the Tikkun HaOlam, which is part of God, happens through the interpretation of what is holy, but also the interpretation of the world, the reading, if you like, of the text of the world, if we use postmodern language. And that human interpretation is part of this movement of God. Why? Because God and the soul and the human are not separate.

In the same way that Buddha-nature as that empty primordial wisdom awareness is not separate from us—it's, so to speak, in us, part of the fabric of our being. We are not separate from our Buddha-nature. So that when we interpret—if you interpret a sacred text that way, we interpret, so to speak, the world that way—that's actually God. It's part of the movement of God, so to speak seeing through your eyes.

But more than seeing through your eyes, shaping perception. Seeing in a certain way. Not just seeing in general—we could say that—but seeing in certain ways through one's eyes. Seeing this or that, that way or this way. Seeing imaginally.

For Corbin, he conceived of the faculty of the imagination. The imaginal is not just a human faculty, but actually in some ways continuous with, if you like, God's imagination, God's creativity. So images in the sense that we've been using that word—images are regarded as influxes, as part of the divine influx. They're not just me and my imagination. There's something divine, as I said, they have their roots in some way in the divine, or they mirror or echo divinity.

And so this word interpretation, we really stretch it to mean, to stretch it to become perception. As I say, everything hinges on perception.

So this drawing down of the divine happens—that I mentioned is the second aspect of this Hasidic teaching of the twofold movement. One is the transcendence and the other is the drawing down of the divine in order to spiritualize the material world. That happens certainly through acts and through what we do in the world—the generosity and the kindness and what we manifest—but it also happens through interpretation, in other words, through perception.

How do I perceive this world? My perceiving of it in this way or that way, my perceiving of this as holy, my seeing this person as a theophany, as a face of God or an angel. My seeing of the world and the sacredness of it and its non-separateness from God and its particular manifestation as a particular aspect of God. So not losing the particular there. These ways of perceiving are part of the divine drawing down, drawing down of the divine.

And that includes the imagination, as Corbin was saying. The fantasies and the images, when they're alive for us in this soulful way, is also this—we could see it as a drawing down of the divine, as part of it, through the imagination.

So this range of perception is part of this drawing down of the divine, because in this other language God is infinite and the aspects of God are infinite and inexhaustible. The range of perception can open up infinitely—our perception—and that's part of the expanding of God. So this tikkun olam, healing of the world, is also, in a way, the completion of God, the filling out of God, the actualization of God through our acts, and more importantly, through our perceptions and through the marrying—or, what word would I say there—like the flowing together, the imbuing of the perception with the imagination. The imagination coming into like water, mixing with water. Imagination and perception.

And this opening out is part of the divine drawing down. It's part of the healing, the completion, the actualization of God. Do you understand? We could say the healing of the world—tikkun olam—is actually the healing of God, if we use that language.

But again, I want to put this in this more radical view. There's a lot of pieces to this. I appreciate that. It might be difficult to follow all the threads and how they fit together. But coming back to something I said earlier, when I see things this way, then the whole practice with images and imaginal practice and my whole practice, my whole life even, can be seen as for God. It's for the sake of God, not for the sake of myself. Because this expansion of the perception is part of the drawing down of the divine. And it's also part of the tantric seeing. So it's for the sake of this, if you like, the primordial wisdom or the tantric deities, the deities that are perceived in that way, the divinities.

There's something, as I said, radical in the shift. I'm seeing all this, I'm conceiving of it, I'm sensing it as for God's sake, not for the sake of self, my journey, etc.

And when one begins to open to this kind of way of conceiving, if it attracts one, if one is attracted by it, one also then begins to realize that with regard to the demand of imaginal figures or the sense of the demands they make on us, we could say that God or the gods or however we're going to put it, they're always going to be bigger than me because they're infinite and they're bigger than my life's possibilities. So there's a kind of infinitude here.

Again, I talked in other talks and other retreats about this pothos, this aspect of eros, this kind of infinite longing. There's always more. There's always something on the horizon or beyond the horizon that one is moving towards. So this way of conceiving in relation to imaginal figures also incorporates that or opens to that sense. So I might feel this or that demand from images and I realize I cannot possibly manifest all this in my life. There's too many.

God is always bigger than my life and its possibilities. The gods are always bigger because they are infinite, and that is good. For in a way, what it also means is that there is no end to soulmaking. There is no end to this eros and psyche opening each other and deepening each other.

So the imaginal sense expands, the sense of the divine expands, and there is more love and more. And that love, that eros, expands the psyche further and the logos with it. And that process doesn't end—this expansion and penetrating deeper, this opening and growth, this insemination, this fertilization of eros, psyche, and logos. There is no end to that, no end to soulmaking.

So if with an imaginal figure, or an angel, or daemon, or however we're going to talk about it, or with the sense of God or gods—whatever words we use—we're entertaining this sense of telos, this sense of the God or the angel or the daemon drawing me toward

something, there, as Corbin talks about, is the angel out ahead. But it's open-ended. That angel is always out ahead. I never really, if you like, merge with it or finish it. It is always out ahead.

I remember when I was very young and learning to swim in the sea in Italy, and my father would stand—I don't know, five yards away—and face me and say, "Come, swim toward me." And I would start paddling as best I could. And I was sure he was moving backwards, imperceptibly stepping backwards to get me to keep swimming. And I would protest that: "You're moving backwards!" He said, "No, no, no, I'm not." I think he was. But that's the angel out ahead. It's not a static figure that we at some point reach. There's this open-endedness to the telos. There's a direction. There's a drawing toward, a beckoning toward, a glimpse of something we're moving toward. The telos—this end, this Greek word for end or goal—is open-ended. The soulmaking never ends because the psyche, the image, keeps expanding, getting deeper, getting richer, getting broader. And the eros, the movement toward that, grows with that.

This telos is part of where we're headed, or the sense of goal, of end there. It's part of the meaningfulness in all this. Part of the meaningfulness. Nietzsche, I think it's in *Twilight of the Idols*, says or writes at one point: "If we possess our *why* in life, we can put up with almost any *how*." No matter how difficult or challenging something is for us in our lives—whatever it is, in any realm of being—if we have a why, if we possess our why in life, as he says... if our why is serving something greater, if our why, in Corbin's words, is the individuation of the angel, if this path and this practice and my life is for God and not myself, then that's a big why. It's a big part of the telos and the meaningfulness. And then all kinds of things are possible. We can put up with almost any how, he says, Nietzsche.

To come back to what I threw out earlier: What does healing mean then? When we open up the framework this way—and I realize, I hope this makes sense, I realize it's quite perhaps difficult to understand, especially if you're new to all this and talking about emptiness and things—but what then, if we open up this kind of conceptual framework as a loose conceptual framework, not a belief, not a rigidity, but a loose conceptual framework to be entertained... what then does healing mean?

Who's getting healed here? Is it me? Is it the angel? Is it the soul? Is it God? Is it the healing of perception and cosmology? Healing them from being conceived of as individual and inflexible. Healing them by allowing a flexibility into perception, an opening of perception, a flexibility into cosmology, an opening of that. Rather than this rigid narrowness of "this is true." This what I perceive is true. This one, not that one. Not anything else.

Who is getting healed here? What does healing mean? Me, the angel, soul, God, perception, cosmology—all of those? Are they even separate?

Are they even separate?

Just to finish, we can feel, in relation to demands and the demands that we sometimes sense or feel from an imaginal figure—from an angel or daemon—we can feel a kind of individual demand particular to that daemon. It's quite unique. But in a way, coming out of all this, we could also highlight or draw attention to three more general demands that emerge from imaginal practice. They're connected, they're not really separate, but let's just highlight them.

One is actually the demand to open the psyche to the imaginal realm, to open consciousness to that realm—the realm of the imaginal—and to value it. The more we practice with images, the more we sense that there's that kind of demand to open consciousness to that realm and to value it. Wrapped up in that is a demand to open up consciousness and our sense of value beyond a sort of narrow singularity of view, of conceptual framework, of logos.

Through practicing with the imaginal in the ways we've been discussing, there's a kind of invitation to move beyond any view—but especially the dominant cultural view nowadays, which is a sort of simplistic materialism, a flattening of everything. Everything is just matter. Consciousness emerges as an epiphenomenon of matter. Leave matter alone long enough, and it will eventually form primeval swamp soups, and out of that life will come, and out of that life consciousness will come. There's nothing but materialism—there's nothing but matter. Everything can be reduced to the movements of matter in space and time. That's what neuroscience attempts to do—explaining everything about our human existence through the assumption that everything can be explained in purely neurological terms, neuroscientific terms, as just the movement of matter. We can just find the right neural networks, discover what gets fired, and that will explain everything. Everything can be reduced to that, and through that to just matter.

I'll say more about this tomorrow. It's very potent as a view, and wonderful things have come out of that. But first, it's limited and limiting. Second, for now, it's a singularity of view. And it's that singularity of view that's problematic—the singularity of conceptual framework. Something problematic there.

So again, drawing on the Kabbalistic tradition where many streams—not all, but many—point to the infinitely interpretable nature of teachings and sacred texts. They don't mean one thing. They're infinitely interpretable, as we've said a few times. But

also the world and everything in the world is infinitely interpretable. There's a stretching rather than just a singularity of conceptual framework and perception—an opening to different possibilities of conceptual frameworks, not regarding any of them as simply the truth. With that comes the opening of perception, the range of perception, the malleability of perception, the availability of different ways of perceiving.

Zen teacher Joan Halifax wrote a book on shamanism many years ago. I'm quoting Robert Avens now, writing about Joan Halifax's work. In shamanistic rituals, the neophyte—the novice—becomes a soft man being, a kind of androgyne, neither male nor female, whose essential mission is to be an intermediary between the cosmological planes of earth and sky. Can you see how that parallels what we're talking about? This essential mission to be an intermediary between cosmological planes involves the shaman in the constant practice of transformation, as if moving from one point of view to another provides the experimental ground of understanding, of wisdom, of true perspective.

That's what I want to highlight—this moving from one point of view to another, from one way of looking, from one conceptual framework, one perception. Moving from one point of view to another provides the experimental, the practical ground of understanding, of wisdom, of true perspective. That's part of the demand, the general invitation of imaginal practice.

A second demand, very related and not separate from the first, is the invitation to open to the multiplicity of images and mythoi and fantasy—rather than being locked into one. How easily, as human beings, without even realizing it, we buy into one fantasy or one image or one myth without seeing that we don't have to be locked into it. Being locked into it and taking it literally creates all kinds of problems. There's no freedom there.

In classical mythology, Orpheus was torn to pieces by the Maenads—wild disciples of Dionysus—for his sole worship of Apollo. Because he worshipped just one god, one archetype, one image, they tore him to pieces. You can see the fragmentation there, the tearing apart.

Jung was fond of saying that gods have become diseases. When we don't open to the range and multiplicity of gods or archetypes or myths or fantasies or images—whether in terms of the self or awakening or anything else—that limits us. Particularly regarding the self, the gods we have neglected, the archetypes we have neglected to honor, to recognize, to give place to, will manifest as some kind of psychological disease, or some-

times organic disease. Maybe it's not just individuals—maybe traditions can also suffer from this shrinking of archetypal range within them, this shrinking of the sense of what is divine, and how that limits and causes problems.

So the opening to multiplicity of image—that's also one of the general demands or invitations of imaginal practice.

Thirdly, again connected, and I have mentioned this before, is the invitation or encouragement that comes out of imaginal practice to begin to realize, to recognize, to acknowledge that image, fantasy, mythos saturate life already. Our life is saturated by image, fantasy, mythos. Wherever there's love, wherever there's meaningfulness, wherever there's that richness and sense of soulfulness—there, there is image, fantasy, mythos. It saturates life.

We could go further and say that not realizing this is a kind of ignorance. If I don't realize the presence already of image, fantasy, and mythos in my life, there's a kind of ignorance there.

When I begin to realize this—that image, fantasy, and mythos are already woven into how I see the Dharma itself, how I relate to awakening—then my entire conception of ignorance must expand. Since awakening means the end of ignorance, this understanding needs to broaden to encompass this recognition: that image, fantasy, and mythos saturate everything, including my ideas of Dharma, of myself, of awakening itself.

I've explored this elsewhere and won't elaborate extensively now, but this realization offers us—or perhaps imposes upon us—a fundamentally different ground for our being. We discover that we are, in essence, grounded in imagination, grounded in mythos. When we truly realize or feel this, our entire life rests upon different foundations. The Dharma itself rests upon different foundations when we come to this recognition.

These, then, are some of the broader demands or invitations that emerge through imaginal practice—not merely techniques or methods, but fundamental shifts in how we understand the very nature of our existence and spiritual path.

CHAPTER 15

The Love and Demands of the Imaginal (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h02

> *In this opening talk from his Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea distinguishes between images and mere metaphors, emphasizing that true imaginal figures possess autonomy, aliveness, and the capacity to communicate love and demands to practitioners. Drawing on personal accounts from retreat participants, he illustrates how imaginal encounters can facilitate healing - from childhood trauma to spiritual development - while cautioning against reducing images to simple psychological projections. Burbea explores the complex territory where practitioners sense demands from imaginal figures, examining when these serve genuine spiritual growth versus ego desires. He addresses the delicate balance of seeing 'image as image' while honoring their apparent autonomy and reality, touching on how this work relates to addiction, pathology, and archetypal necessity. The talk emphasizes the middle way of understanding images as both dependently arisen and meaningfully real, neither dismissing them as 'just imagination' nor literalizing them fundamentally. Burbea introduces the radical possibility that our task may be serving the individuation of imaginal figures rather than our own ego development, pointing toward a view where humans become 'doors for what wants to come through.'*

Hopefully it should be very clear by now that when we use a word like "image," I'm indicating something much more in scope than what might be indicated by a word like "metaphor." An image in the way that I'm using it is much more than a metaphor, at least the way we tend to use the word metaphor nowadays.

Looking up the word "metaphor" in my dictionary, it gives an example: "he is a lion in battle." But that kind of expression is not really an image so much as—you might as well say, "he's very ferocious when it comes to fighting." You could simply replace it with an adjective such as "ferocious." It's not an image in the way that I mostly want to indicate and open up the meaning of that word.

In the metaphor as used that way, there isn't the sense of aliveness that this image, this imaginal figure, has—some kind of life and autonomy of its own, some kind of reality, importance, depth and richness of its own being. There isn't what it fertilizes in the psyche in terms of meaningfulness, the love that can pass between the self and the imaginal figure, the sense of necessity and the demands that imaginal figures can seem to bring to us or offer to us. None of that is really there in a metaphor in the way that we usually use the word. So an image is much, much more than a metaphor.

Going into this a little further, what I want to explore and open out a bit more are these aspects of the imaginal: the aspects of love and necessity and demand from imaginal figures, the way they might love us, the way they might place demands on us or seem to. We use those words—love, necessity, demand—and we sense them as we're working with images in imaginal practice, on or off the cushion. We sense a demand, sense their love, sense the necessity of this imaginal figure or image.

We sense it, and as I've already said, we also acknowledge and recognize that it's sensed and it's given this sense. We give, through our way of looking, through the conceptual framework, we give the sense of demand to the image that we then feel from the image. In other words, the conceptual framework and the way of looking constellate the sense of the demand, of the love, of the necessity. We sense it and we know that it's given by the way of looking. It's never independent of the way of looking, of the conceptual framework. So we understand: yes, dependent arising; yes, empty.

But there's power there in that balance of understanding. We're not saying, "Ah, it's not real because I'm just making it up." Nor are we losing sight of the fact that it's a dependent arising, dependent on the mind, conceptual framework, way of looking. Right there in that middle way, there's a lot of power and aliveness without the concreteness and the literalizing and the tightening around fundamentalist beliefs around all this.

Again, I would say it's impossible to prove. How would you even begin to prove that this imaginal figure is, so to speak, really placing a demand on me or really loves me? We're not in the realm of the provable. We're not relating to this in terms of its reality status in the way that we would relate to a scientific reality. We're not approaching it in terms of propositions that are provable or not by experiment.

So the kind of truth, the kind of reality these images have are not scientific-style truths, scientific-style realities—at least classical science, pre-quantum. They're not even quantum-style truths or realities. It's more like art. The whole thing is more like art. We're not in the realm of the provable. We're entertaining conceptual frameworks and seeing what effects, what opens, what is given birth to, what is fertilized. Which direction do things go when I entertain this conceptual framework and entertain the idea of love and demand from imaginal figures?

As I said before, we can entertain different conceptual frameworks. We could entertain the idea, hold the conceptual framework in regard to an image, that this image represents this or that quality or aspect of being that is not yet available to myself—something that I haven't yet developed in myself or grown into. This quality, this psychological quality, will be helpful to me and balancing for me, balance out other qualities that

are available to me or maybe are too strong. In a way, the image represents something that is for the growth of the self, the psychological or spiritual growth of the self. In that sense, they can be integrated.

Many contemporary psychologists would approach imaginal work with the imagination with that kind of conception. And it's really okay and fine. If that's what you feel comfortable with, go for it. But as I've also pointed out many times, there will be limits to that kind of view. It's a limited and limiting view if we only conceive of images that way. Certainly sometimes that's a perfectly helpful and appropriate way, but there are also other possibilities which to me are more radical and more interesting. So yes, fine to look at it that way, but it's not the only way. To regard things only that way would be limited and limiting.

Sometimes a spontaneous image arises for a person with loving demands, and those loving demands are clearly healing for the human self. There are so many examples I could share of that. The demand from the image is something that's clearly in the service of the human self and its growth.

Someone on retreat, quite a while ago now, a few years, was sharing something of their history and then what happened in their meditation. When they were a little girl in the early 1950s, they had a serious accident. They were in hospital for some weeks, strapped down immobile on the hospital bed. In the early fifties, the way the medical system worked, if a child was in hospital they would not let the parents visit. The parents were not allowed to visit her. She was very young, in hospital, strapped down, immobile on the bed.

Decades later, decades later in meditation here, she heard a voice, so to speak...

She was told to stand up from the meditation and then lie down. So she did that. And then the image or the sense—it was a more kinesthetic sense rather than visual—the sense of someone untying, loosening and cutting her restraints, the restraints that were strapping her down on the bed. And it was both gentle, this undoing, and also forceful at times. Sometimes it was gentle, sometimes it was forceful. But there was a great sense of release in that, the release from being strapped down.

Very, very powerful. And then afterwards, sitting outside the meditation hall, sitting looking at the trees and the grass, there were tears. The healing was really flowing in her being, and tears were there. And an image of a baby held, protected, loved, peaceful, in a peaceful holding, totally content. And she stayed with that and the beauty of that image. She could actually feel and taste a drop of breast milk on her lips. So sweet, she said, so beautiful.

So here's an image very much related to a memory. And the demand—stand up, lie down—and then this undoing, very much on the dimension, if you like, of the human self and the healing of the human self of past wounding trauma.

To give another example, someone was relating to me that they were a long-term student of Thich Nhat Hanh and had exposure to him through film and meeting him and his teachings over the years, and felt the image of him and the felt sense of him. "I could feel it in my body," she said. But really, what was specific about this image, in this case of Thich Nhat Hanh, was the sense of his inner authority. That inner authority that he had in his being, coming out of his devotion and alignment—continual devotion and alignment over the years to what was important to him, what was deeply most important to him.

And that sense of his inner authority in the image, through the image, helped her to connect to hers. And with that was this sense of a loving demand, a sense of Thich Nhat Hanh expecting her—that was her word—expecting her to step into that authority for herself. The authority, if you like, over her mind and the authority over what is being chosen, what she chose to cultivate in the present moment: awakefulness, care, loving-kindness, aliveness. So this benign authority was constellated in the image of Thich Nhat Hanh with this loving demand from his image. And she felt that aspect, that loving demand work on her. It was doing something in her being and very, very helpful on her path.

So certainly sometimes the loving demands come from the images and they're operating very much for the growth of the human, if you like. But as I said, we need to be a bit careful here. Sometimes what happens is the ego, if we use that word, wants to make a demand of the image. So the demand is from me to the image.

Someone was sharing of this image of a tramp, and they could see that they weren't a tramp in their life at all, but they could see there was something of that outcast and the loneliness and the isolation and the being shut out and the being impoverished and the being looked down on and the disdain that they constellated as this image. And they could also see somehow the mirroring in their life of that.

The impulse—very understandable—of this man in relation to this image, who hadn't done a lot of imaginal work, was actually, "Oh, well, let's invite that tramp into the..." There was an image: he's looking through a window onto a family gathering and it's all cozy and warm with the fire there. And he's outside looking in, something he's shut out of. Very understandable that the inclination was, "Let's let him in there, or let's give him a friend, or let's give him better clothes or something, bring him in from the cold."

Maybe that's important in a way, that movement, the movement of the demand from the self to the image at times. But yet, as he was telling me about this image, I was also struck by the fact that in the image of Christ, Christ is also something of a destitute, a wanderer, an outcast. There's something about the holiness of the image itself. Somehow in this tramp, maybe if I look deeper, I see Christ. And it doesn't need to suddenly then become shiny and radiant and clean—all the dirt off his clothes and his face. It's something in the complexity. The poor one, the outcast, the one looked down on, is the Christ, is the Holy One.

Very easily that's hard for the ego to understand. It's hard for the usual self to understand, especially when it's connected or one feels the pain of the mirroring of this image in one's life, and so I want things to be different. It's complex.

But really what I'm saying is, it's tricky here to be sensitive to what are the demands of the image and what are they serving? And if I make demands on the image, what is that serving and who is that serving and who is it healing? I don't think there's a right and a wrong here. And certainly talking with this person, I was very tentative. I didn't know; I was just voicing something really.

So yes, sometimes be careful of the demand from the self to the image. But it's tricky. And sometimes what happens is a person is in the image that's happening, that is going on, is themselves.

One sees oneself as an image or in an imaginal interaction in a constellation, but one has entered it so fully that one has actually become part of the image. The self-sense has become an imaginal self differently. And then the demand from that imaginal self is maybe not so much the usual self-ego demand.

As an example, someone was telling me not too long ago they were on a retreat where the teacher was leading a compassion guided meditation, offering as a possibility that one could use a figure like Avalokiteshvara or Quan Yin or Jesus and see them, imagine them as the source of the compassion. The teacher said at one point in this guided meditation, "If it feels okay, put this person, this deity or human person that's the source of the compassion, put them behind you in space so that they are radiating to you from behind. They're radiating that compassion to you from the direction behind."

For this person sharing with me, that image of Avalokiteshvara or Jesus behind soon became her lover. It was the image of her lover behind her. And then a lot of eros, an erotic charge, came into the whole image. And then her lover was entering her sexually. And then it took on a whole other level—then the lover was removing her skin. She

said, like unzipping her skin and peeling her skin off and plunging his hands into her blood and her flesh and pulling her heart out and putting it in his mouth. She said this felt incredibly blissful, not grotesque or scary, but very, very blissful.

In that case she had become image herself, had entered into the image fully. So she said to her lover in the image, "Take me apart, take me apart," in this kind of physical erotic loving way. And the lover took out one of her eyes and then the other and placed them in his mouth. She was feeling that she was being emptied in this way. The lover was emptying her in this way—very blissful, very erotic. And that was happening from behind.

In front of her was the image of her brother and his suffering, and what she called his density—density of being in his suffering—in comparison with the bliss and the emptiness that she was feeling through this erotic compassion that was coming through. That bliss and emptiness came into contact with the suffering of her brother in the image, like a healing contact of compassion, as we've talked about. It's the contact, the putting in connection of the healing qualities with the suffering.

But there wasn't much conscious will going on. It was almost like this was just happening—this movement from behind with the eros suffusing the compassion and the emptying out and the bliss, and all that was coming into contact with the person suffering as a stream of compassion with a particular flavor.

There's a lot there actually in that image, and I hope in the not too distant future to talk much more about eros in relation to the imaginal. But really the point was that although sometimes we need to be careful of the demands of the self towards an image—if we still want to retain the soulfulness aspect, the soul-making aspect, as opposed to prioritizing the self-growth aspect—sometimes we need to be careful about the demands of the self to the image. But sometimes what happens is one sees oneself as image, or one is so much in the image that one can trust the demands and say, "Take me apart." That was the demand of the self: "Take me apart" to this lover and the eros of the situation, the holy fleshiness of the situation, erotic dismembering and emptying. One could, in that case, trust that demand of the self, because the self was so much part of the fabric of the image. It wasn't the usual self-stance.

Sometimes we feel or sense a demand from an image, from an imaginal figure, and it can feel like it's stretching us to accept that demand, to bow to it, to take it on. It feels like it stretches us. There's some kind of trial there. It involves maybe a trial, and there's the discomfort of being stretched and the trial of that.

Maybe the image and the imaginal figure, what's implicit there and the demand—or where they take us, or just being in contact with them—they take us beyond the circumference of the world that we know and the social scene that we know, or the dharma scene that we know, or the culture or community. Beyond that community's ideas and range of acceptable behavior and whole worldview. We might move on. The image is showing us something, pulling us towards something, and we're moving out, breaking through the circumference, the limits of that worldview and that culture and that community, moving on.

And so there might be, if that's the case—as it is in some cases—a kind of loneliness on the human or social level that comes out of the demand, or taking on or accepting the demand of an image.

Sometimes it's the opposite. It might be that actually something in this image is calling us in to more relationship where we actually feel like that would be too much work or too much hassle, or "I don't really feel inclined to enter deeper into the community that way and take up a certain position in the community of responsibility or centrality or something." But there's a demand, generally speaking, and it can be that it feels quite a stretch. Something in us is being stretched, again, beyond the usual range of the self or the ego, if we use those words.

And again, to really make this clear, a demand like that, or any demand, is not inherent in the image, really. We are choosing a conceptual framework when we talk about demands this way. We're choosing a conceptual framework that nourishes, deepens, enriches, widens, supports soulfulness, soul-making, and the beauty and the meaningfulness and all of that. So that's really what we're doing. It's not inherent, this demand. We're choosing a conceptual framework that incorporates that—a conceptual framework that supports the soul-making, that nourishes the soul-making, and a conceptual framework where images and archetypes are somehow bigger than the self.

Rather than being contained within the self, as I said before, they're bigger than the self. There's something in some way eternal, or better to say timeless, about them—about these imaginal figures. Something in some way autonomous about them. Something in some way, in some particular way, real. They have a kind of reality and a kind of divinity.

So in a way these are all loaded words, loaded concepts. But we are adopting consciously a conceptual framework that entertains lightly those kinds of views. And that with all that, they have demands. That's part of the conceptual view that we're entertaining. And that the self serves them, rather than the other way around—that these imaginal figures, or archetypal figures, or daimons, are in the service of the self.

This is tricky in many ways. And again, to point out that entertaining or allowing a notion of demand from the imaginal figure, it needs this view of liquidity, this alchemical maxim of "do not proceed until everything has turned to liquid." That needs to be there—in the sense that we see that way, we see the liquidity, the emptiness, in other words, the insubstantiality of this in order to have the right relationship with this notion of demand as part of our conceptual framework. So it's not literal and the ego is not getting too stuck on this and relating to it too literally.

I keep using this word, tricky. I think there's a real subtle middle way here, as I said.

Someone was telling me, this is again some years ago, a woman was sharing in an interview about her past lovers and things and a sense of resentment at not being met by lovers equally. And I was like, in what way have you felt not met equally? And she explained a bit about that. She also shared that from quite an early age in her life, she was aware that she was very attractive to many men. And also that she had a sort of intuitive wisdom, a deep sensitivity in the areas of the erotic and the romantic. She was in her element in that and deeply attractive to many men.

And so it's almost like, as we were talking, it's almost like she was sort of an embodiment of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and the erotic. And almost that she was, as this figure within her, this goddess, if you like, that was coming through—let's call her Aphrodite—it wanted her beauty and her sensitivity and intuitive wisdom in regards to love and eros and sensuality to be seen, to be recognized, and even a little bit to be worshipped.

Now, how close that is to a kind of ego wanting those things—ego wanting to be seen and to be regarded as beautiful and to be even worshipped—and we think, what an ego trip. Maybe some of that gets mixed into this kind of thing at times, but maybe something else is coming through at times that is in the nature of the divinity that was coming through or the imaginal figure that was coming through. And I'll return to this later.

The part of that is it's not an ego thing when that's wanting to be recognized. It's like if you say God wants to be recognized, the soul wants to be seen, something of holiness here wants to be seen. And that's different than a purely ego wanting or craving. This is very, very tricky. And sometimes you get these things mixed—perhaps more often than we might think. We tend to dismiss something as ego. No—have a closer look, sense more deeply, more soulfully into what's going on.

So all this brings up the question: what is healing? When we talk about healing in all these different ways, what do we mean? What does that word mean? Or who is healed? What is healed? What is freed? Who is being freed and healed? The ego or something else? I'm going to return to this actually. Just put that question out now. What do we mean by healing? Who is being healed? What is being healed? What is being freed?

Sometimes with the demand that we feel from an image, that we sense from the image, it's actually often quite subtle.

It might be—and I've mentioned this before—that the demand is simply to behold the imaginal figure, to witness it. There's nothing else required other than to stay with it, to look at it, to sense it, to feel into it. And in doing just that, in that simple act of beholding, the soulfulness is nurtured and enriched and deepened and expanded. The psyche expands because the soulfulness expands, and the range of image expands. With that, the love of this image—the eros—is expanded. And the conceptual framework is also expanded, as we discussed earlier.

So with all that libido—and I mean this in the sense of the whole psychic energy available in the system, not merely sexual energy—the libido also grows. Just from beholding and witnessing an image, seeing its beauty and feeling our love for it, sensing its holiness and meaningfulness and soulfulness, something is fertilizing the psyche, the eros and the logos. All of that gets expanded.

This is usually a very gradual movement. The sense of sacredness and meaningfulness gradually expands, deepens, and enriches. I'll return to this soon in another talk, but partly through engaging in imaginal practice meditatively, something starts gradually expanding. The sense of sacredness begins spilling over into life. Life becomes multi-leveled. We start feeling and sensing life, perceiving it as richer, more sacred and meaningful everywhere—multidimensional. It's a gradual movement.

So the demand that seems to accompany an image can often be very subtle, yet it's powerful in its gradual effect. Just beholding, just witnessing.

Sometimes the love and demand from an image is not obvious—it's much more implicit, if you like. I remember some time ago, a year and a half perhaps, I had mostly finished writing my book on emptiness. After the huge amount of work that involved, I had sent the manuscript to the publisher and received the proofs back. They were so full of mistakes they had made, formatting errors, and so forth.

In meditation, I was curious to explore the whole relationship with writing the book from the perspective of imaginal practice rather than just emptiness practice, which I already knew quite well. In meditation, I encountered this figure who had come relat-

ively often during the course of writing the book—a master sculptor in a sort of underground cave, a master sculptor and his apprentice. I tended in the image to be more in the position of the apprentice to this master sculptor.

The master communicates in some way—it wasn't quite a verbal dialogue, but he communicates: "One has to finish it. Nearly there." He's talking about the sculpture, but this is a very clear example of how it's mirroring something in my life, the writing of the book. "One has to finish it. Nearly there."

This master sculptor is basically a perfectionist, and he has to be. That is his moral code, the ethos of masters and apprentices like these. He pushes the apprentice to the limit. He's quite stern and not a pushover. He sets tasks and limits and is very firm about it. That's the moral code—the moral code of perfectionism as well. There's a lot of power in that, in a good way. There's a lot of energy in that.

He's communicating, if you like: "You do it right. You do it as perfectly as possible and to the highest standard possible. That's just what we do. That's how we do things."

There's a big rock that's either to be carved or he's half-carving it into a sculpture—he's sort of partway through it. It's a big rock, and he touches it and brushes the carving dust from it with his fingers. Sometimes it feels like that rock is my body. Somehow, through this relationship, he is carving me and carving my body.

In this case, as I mentioned, this was one of those images where there seemed to be a very clear parallel between what was happening in life and the image itself. I found myself asking, in a non-verbal way, about time and rushing—having so much other work and commitments, wanting to move on to other explorations. His response was clear: "It doesn't matter as long as it's done well. It doesn't matter how long it takes. It doesn't matter how you feel about it."

So there was a clear demand present. The love that was there remained much more implicit—not obvious. Even as I relate this, I'm aware that it doesn't sound like there's much love there, but there truly was a profound love present. It's just not the obvious kind of love, and it wasn't being stated explicitly. This master loves his apprentice and cares for him, truly sculpting and shaping him through love. It's simply a particular quality or character of love—one that has its own unique mode of expression, implicit within the image rather than obvious.

Another imaginal figure who visits me relatively often is John Coltrane—clearly a historical figure and someone I love deeply. He comes to me sometimes when I'm meditating, curiously always sitting in the same place in my room, just in front and a little to the left, facing me on a ledge. Sometimes, in terms of work or creative output or vari-

ous endeavors, he offers gentle but firm encouragement. There's something about his very physical presence—this heavy-set, strong African-American figure—and something about his resolution and commitment to his path, the force that came through him, everything that cost him, and his steadiness with that over the years. He had a short life, actually, dying at forty.

There's something in him that communicates with kindness, encouraging me gently yet firmly. Here the love was obvious, while the demand remained more implicit—coming through this gentler, encouraging mode, yet actually uncompromising. You don't simply give in or stop just because something is difficult or challenging, or because people don't understand. He faced similar struggles as his music became more avant-garde and people couldn't understand it.

Sometimes the love is not so obvious—it remains implicit—while the demand appears obvious. Sometimes the demand is more implicit, less obvious, while the love seems more apparent. And sometimes the demand that an image conveys to us feels strong and clear, but isn't necessarily practically obvious in terms of what it means, what it implies, or what it's actually asking of us.

Remember the image I shared some days ago of the person listening to the public lecture, feeling that what was being said was quite stupid and offensive, yet sensing that most others in the room thought it brilliant? Then suddenly this magnificent phoenix appeared, filling the room with its nobility. She shared more specifically about the demand, which I'd like to share with you. These are essentially her words:

"The bird showing up that way could easily sound like a revenge fantasy of sorts, and there certainly was raging going on. But when I feel into it, it's as if the phoenix isn't really concerned about engaging in dialogue with stupidity at all." In other words, it doesn't want revenge or to make anyone look foolish publicly. "It's not even carefree. It's just that by its very presence, it's seeing through and manifesting a different stance than what was being broadcast publicly by the speaker. It's manifesting a different stance and changing everything just by being there."

Then comes this profound part about the demand: "It feels like it's asking me to behold it, to bear witness to the beauty—or not only bear witness. It feels like it wants the beauty to be burnt into and carried by my heart." Somehow it's asking her to witness it, and in that witnessing, it wants the beauty to be seared into and carried by her heart.

"There's a very profound sense of being asked to serve, and I'm not sure what that means," she continued. Again, sometimes the demand feels strong but isn't entirely clear. "And to exercise discernment. The demand is to exercise discernment. And it's asking me to be bold."

All these demands—implicit yet strongly communicated, very touching and integral to the beauty itself—remain somewhat unclear in terms of where they apply, what they mean, or how their broader rippling effects might manifest in life.

It's not practically clear. And then...

As I said, sometimes the demand is just to behold, just to honor and see, if you like, the divinity of something or the beauty of something—to honor that which we're witnessing. Somehow in my life I'm honoring this imaginal figure and everything that they communicate and bear and are and express.

Sometimes it might be that we are called to act in life, in our life, or choose or tread a certain path. Sometimes it actually does have physical bearing or bears fruit in some physical manifestation, physical form or other, or physical expression. Sometimes it's just honoring something in the soul, so to speak. That's the demand. And sometimes we're actually needing to manifest and express something.

It's, again, tricky. It's sometimes difficult to discern or feel into what's being demanded here. And if it's an acting and a choosing in life, then what is the exact expression? As we said, we really need to be careful with the kind of literal, concretized mimicking of what the image is. So if it's asking for something to be acted on or chosen in my life—I need to make a certain choice to manifest something—what is that?

Some images seem to want that and some images don't seem to need that. It's on another level of just the honoring. But if it's the acting, if it needs a physical manifestation somehow, then what? And what about the ethics involved?

Again, this is—I keep using this word tricky. This is complex, rich territory to explore, not an easy, simple discernment and exploration. Sometimes we might be tempted to say: Let's put the ethics primary. Let's put the ethics very clear as a sort of boundary and framework and basis, and let's make those primary, not the images primary. And then we feel that's safer.

There is, and there may be, a real wisdom in adopting that kind of stance or that kind of position. But even that, I think, we can sometimes be a little naive or at least unaware how much our ethical responses or thoughts—our absence or lack of ethical responses in life—is shaped by fantasy and mythos.

I remember some years ago giving a talk about this, the necessity of fantasy, actually trying to point out that, if you like, it's the mythos, the fantasy that shapes the ethos, the ethics. So it's really changed now, but some years ago one could have looked at the Dharma scene—or it's changing, let's say—one could have looked at the Dharma scene and seen: Why is there so little response to the global environmental catastrophes and the problem of climate change? Why is there so little Dharma response to that? Or so little even acknowledgment that that needs to get included in what we mean by Dharma practice and ethics? Why is it that so few Dharma people are speaking up and taking a stand and being bold with that?

That's a very complex question. There's lots involved there. And as I said, it's definitely changing in the years since then. But one of the reasons maybe is because of the domination of fantasies, if you like, that are more in line with the figures of equanimity and non-action, not getting involved, not getting... The revolutionary is not such a myth or fantasy or imaginal figure in the range of myths that are present in the Dharma, that fertilize the Dharma. And because of that, it limits the range of responses or the range of even what's included.

So this is interesting, you know, the whole relationship between, let's say, mythos and ethos, imaginal figures and fantasies and ethics. You know, what happens with terrorists? You could say, well, they really have all this imaginal stuff going and a sense of demand and duty and all that. The problem there is they're not understanding it as image. They're not seeing image as image. So jihad, holy war, is a completely literalized concept, not actually seeing it as a poetic image but something that one actually acts on in a totally literal way. That's a fundamentalist belief going on there in regard to images—completely unaware of the soul element of this, if you like, and seeing image as image.

So what happens if we trust this view, this seeing image as image? And so we use the energy body as a navigator, as I've explained. So there's a lot here—we're touching on what we touched on before, about trust and navigating all this and learning to trust. And as I said, so often scary images turn out to be real treasures.

That black devil man was around for decades. It's still around. He has become much less scary because the practitioner—she's no longer scared of him. She's kind of learned to trust him. But he hasn't, through that, become some kind of simple, desexualized nice guy. He's still the black devil man, but he's an ally—something deeply important and trustable there. Or the black hag figure that I shared the other day from someone else.

She retains that black hag character, but she's no longer scary. So they're not what they seem at first, these images. And again, the way of looking affects how they unfold and how they shape themselves. Always, always that dependent arising, dependent on the mind and the way of looking.

So seeing image as image, knowing image as image, and, if you like, entertaining this assumption of their benevolence—very crucial, these aspects of the way of looking. They really are very helpful in allowing the image to grow and fulfill its potential, you could say. Seeing the image as image and the assumptions of benevolence are part of the fabrication, the shaping of the image there, just like we pointed out in the nightmare.

And then there's also this sense of trusting the archetypal necessity in the image, this treasure image. Perhaps entrusting an archetypal necessity eventually. At the center of pathological behavior, at the core of it, might be something archetypal. Perhaps addiction or some kind of other inclination. Sometimes in something like that, it's actually—we could say in the terms of classical mythology—it's Dionysus sometimes, the wild god of wine and ecstasy.

And Dionysus has certain demands. What are the demands? And do they need acting on? And what happens when I see image as image? And what happens when I feel it more in the body? And what needs acting on? And what can just be honored?

But sometimes in that sort of thing, it's too simple to say that's always it. I'm not saying that's always at the core of, say, alcoholic addiction. I don't mean to imply that at all. But sometimes there's something like that—some other god, if you like, or archetypal necessity at the center of something that looks just a mess of pathology. Something else is going on there. There are other demands that are not being seen in the right way and honored.

What happens if that's the case and if a person feels into that and feels into it with everything that we've been talking about with imaginal practice—all the richness and the nuance and the sensitivity of practicing with that and the conceptual framework, seeing image as image and using the energy body and trusting it and recognizing an archetypal necessity? Just that view, what might that do in relation to the pathological behavior or the addiction or whatever?

Some of you will know that one of the things that keeps addictions spinning, keeps the loop of addiction spinning, one ingredient there is shame. It's part of the vicious cycle. So typically an addict will engage in their addiction, whatever, and then afterwards feel shame. And that shame actually is very difficult to bear and propels another

cycle of addictive behavior. It's almost like what they call acting out, because the shame is very hard to tolerate. And one gets caught in the self-fulfilling sort of prophecy about how useless one is or what a bad person one is. Addiction behavior leads to shame. Shame leads to more addiction behavior. Just looping like that.

But if sometimes a person can recognize the beauty, the unusual beauty, the unusual treasure, the unusual archetypal necessity or God at the center of that pathology and the demands of that God and honor what that is, who that is, then that dissolves a lot of the shame because what was seen as shameful has actually now become to be seen as divine—completely different. And then that causes a different, it opens a different, the possibility of a different way of relating with the whole addictive pattern and everything that's included there. The shame is gone and the shame as what propels this vicious cycle might be dissolved a little bit and replaced with something much more deeply, deeply respectful. And that might have a big effect in terms of the suffering there.

So these may be, for a lot of people, unusual kind of views—this trusting, this deeply trusting the treasure that an image is, even if it looks weird or pathological or dark or whatever it is, or even trusting the archetypal necessity running through what looks a mess or fucked up or whatever in our life.

Sometimes artists sense this easier or can sense this kind of what's operating in their psyche or in the psyche, can sense that easier sometimes than other people. Picasso said at one point, "Painting is stronger than I am, it does what it wants with me." There's a sense—and if you also read some of the writings, not the poems, but of T.S. Eliot or Rilke or other poets—there's really the sense of something bigger making a demand on the being. And the way that is not always necessarily so easy, but it feels important.

So again, to say again, these things, these imaginal figures, they have a certain autonomy, but autonomy—and so the autonomy to be able to make a demand—but that is not quite the same as saying they're completely independent, right?

So that black devil man we were just talking about—we've seen instances, I've shared, where an image surprises one. I could never have thought of that. And so there's an indication of the image's autonomy there. But for example, that black devil man came again in an image and had his back to this meditator. And then he turned around towards her and in her imagination she took one step towards him—this is more recently, years after the more difficult relationships with him—and took a step, took one step towards him. And him, she did in her imagination, but he kept her away with the palm of his hand and an outstretched arm on her sternum, very firm: keep your distance.

And this was very perplexing to her. It was something that he suddenly did. And she realized, he's really not in my control. He's not wholly in my control. There's an autonomy here.

But autonomy doesn't, as I said, necessarily mean independence—independence from the mind or the way of looking. Nothing is independent of the mind and the way of looking. That gesture of his was also contingent on her gesture of stepping towards him. So there's autonomy, but that's not the same as being independent and having an independent existence, independent of the view that's entertained or of the actions of the self in relation to the image.

But this sense we have of imaginal figures and the conceptual framework there—very potentially powerful, very radical.

So a retreatant said to me a little while ago, "We are doors," she said. "We are doors for what wants to come through." Again, it's a way of looking, a conceptual framework that's being entertained in saying that. I'm realizing that. And in that conceptual framework, the human self is somehow less than or within the imaginal figure. The imaginal figure is somehow more. We are just the door for what wants to come through.

Even more radically put, Henri Corbin used to say, "It's not your individuation that is your task, it's the angel's individuation that is your task." Not your individuation, but the angel's individuation is your task. Individuation was a word he borrowed from Jung, meaning growing into the fullness of your particular unique personality and that self-growth implied there. So not your growth, your path, your individuation, but the angel's. That's your task.

So again, there's a shift in view here. We're entertaining a view of the psyche, a view of psychology, a view of the self, a view of the soul, a view of images, and also of divinity and what is of value. All that is wrapped up in that sentence: Not your individuation, but the angel's individuation is your task. There's this kind of reversal of the usual way of seeing existence and what the self is and what these imaginal figures are.

CHAPTER 16

Opening, Tuning, and Relating to the Imaginal: Instructions (3)

Rob Burbea · 1h09

> *In this third instructional talk on imaginal practice, Rob Burbea provides essential clarifications on technique and relationship. He explores walking meditation as a posture for both samādhi cultivation and imaginal work, emphasizing tuning into the energy body's well-being while in movement. The core teaching focuses on shifting our relational stance with imaginal figures—asking 'what do you want?' rather than 'what can you give me?' This reorientation opens possibilities for healing, love, and soul-making through how images see us and act toward us.*
>
> *Burbea addresses common doubts that arise in practice, particularly the concern about 'making things up.' He emphasizes using soulfulness as the primary navigator rather than worrying about authenticity. The talk explores the subtle relationship between images and life—how our existence can mirror archetypal dimensions rather than images simply reflecting personal psychology. He discusses the 'octave' or register of images (their degree of substantiality) and their portable nature, showing how imaginal figures can be transported into daily interactions. Throughout, Burbea maintains that soul-making and the cultivation of soulfulness remain the deepest objectives, transcending any self-help orientation toward a more devotional relationship with the imaginal realm.*

I just want to clarify a couple of things about the instructions and then move on.

First, regarding walking meditation. It's important to understand that walking is a posture, just like sitting is a posture, or standing or lying down is a posture. It's not in itself a meditation. We can do most meditations in the walking posture, practice most meditations in the walking posture. So it's just a posture which can be used to take the meditation in any direction we want.

In the context of imaginal practice and this course, we could divide the walking into two possibilities. On the one hand, we can do walking meditation with the intention of samadhi—cultivating that well-being, that harmonization, ease in the energy body and sensitivity to the energy body. On the other hand, we can also walk doing the imaginal practice, so the imaginal practice taking place in the walking posture.

With the samadhi in the walking posture—some of you will be familiar with this already, some of you really won't—you can start by standing. Same as when we're sitting, expand the awareness, feel the whole energy body, tune into that. If there is some well-being or pleasantness or nice energy somewhere, just stay with that. Tune to it, open to it, feel it. In all the ways that we've discussed, you're welcome to use images if they help open that, or a bit of breath work, or whatever it is, or just tuning to the energy body—everything that we talked about.

When that feels a little bit established, that nice energy or well-being or pleasantness, just linger with it and then begin to walk. But instead of paying attention to the soles of your feet or the sensations of moving the legs throughout the legs, or walking in a much wider space that includes the sky—instead of those options, we're actually walking in the sort of bubble or space of the energy body, tuned to the feeling, the texture, the vibration, the tone of that whole space, just as if you were sitting, but now one is walking. Tune to that, particularly if there's a sense of some degree of well-being or comfort or ease or even pleasure there. That's what we're paying attention to.

Same thing walking between two points, stopping at any time you want in the middle of the path, stopping for as long as you want at the end, just having that as a priority—that nourishing of the well-being in the energy body and the sensitivity to the energy body. You might need to walk a little faster to help you tune in that way, or a little slower, or a lot slower. You might need to stop a lot. It doesn't matter. You're really just taking the same practice, the same samadhi direction of practice, and applying it in a different posture. As always, being responsive, being playful, being creative, and seeing what helps.

So that would be the samadhi practice when we're walking, with the energy body when we're walking. And then it's quite possible to do imaginal practice when you're walking.

In classical metta practice, when I would give walking instructions, you can imagine the person that you're giving metta to at the end of your walking path, so that you're walking towards them, radiating metta towards them in a very lovely way. Then you reach them at the end, and they magically appear at the other end, and then you turn around and do the same thing—walk towards this person that you're radiating well-wishing towards. Or you can imagine them walking by your side, and both of you are perhaps in a bubble of well-wishing, of metta, of light, whatever, healing. Many possibilities there.

Those kinds of possibilities are possible doing walking meditation with more open imaginal practice. But actually, you will find as you play with this, there are all kinds of possibilities and ways that the surroundings can be taken in, which we'll come back to. Many, many possibilities—more than one might think before one actually gets into the walking posture with imaginal practice and plays with it a little bit.

Just as with the walking samadhi practice, you can stop at any time, you can stop for as long as you want, stand if that's helpful at any point, and vary the pace or find the pace for any session that feels most conducive to working with that image. So again, very playful, very responsive practice.

So that was the first thing I wanted to clarify.

The second thing: I feel like I probably expressed something in an unhelpful way about how long we spend with images. I said two minutes is loads. What I really meant to say, what I should have said, was two minutes may be enough. It's very possible to spend a whole session with an image, or a really long time—an hour or something like that with one image—and it's maybe evolving slowly or going through different phases or something.

The key point really is not this amount of time or that amount of time. It's just: Is it still helpful? So if I'm spending a long time with an image, does it still feel full of resonances for the soul? Is there still the soulfulness there through that? And of course, the mind wanders, you bring it back, the soulfulness might dim and then come back a little bit. But it's not so much a time guideline—as always, it's tuning into what's happening, sensitive to what's happening, just sensitive to whether the soulfulness is there and whether it feels helpful. You can spend as long or as short as feels helpful and soulful.

We began to get into a little more detail in the instructions the other day—different aspects and dimensions of the ways we can interact with images, the ways we relate to images and imaginal figures. We brought up the possibility of a shift in attitude: asking, usually implicitly, not necessarily a literal question, but asking, "What do you want?" of the imaginal figure. Not "What can you give me?" but "What do you want?" So turning things around in the relationship. Not necessarily an actual question—well, it could be—but more a sense, sensing and intuiting. It's really a shift in attitude with the imaginal figure.

So I just want to restate that again and say a little bit more about that as we go on through the retreat. What do you want?

And perhaps what this imaginal figure, what this daemon wants is to be expressed in some way, probably in my life. So maybe that's what it wants, but again, not so literally. Its expression may not just be a concrete, literalized mimicry of what the image is.

And it may be that what the imaginal field wants is just to be seen. It actually is not asking for any expression or doing something different. It just wants to be seen, to be acknowledged and to be honored. And the key word there is the honoring. There's a sense this is something that needs honoring. And we get the sense that's what it wants.

And maybe what it wants is really to look at you in a certain way. What's really important with some imaginal figures or instances with imaginal figures is how they see you, how this image sees me, how it looks at me, this imaginal figure or animal or whatever it is. How they respond and act towards me—that's actually what's important.

Because one of the possibilities within that of how they see me and how they act towards me, there are many, many ways in which healing can happen at many different levels. I could give so many examples of this, the healing possibilities, the different healing possibilities of working with images.

I think I already talked about the retreatant who was meditating and had the liver condition and was in some pain and low energy with her liver condition. Then this magnificent lion came towards her that she was already familiar with from before and started licking her liver. The healing that came out of that and how that moved then into the samādhi as the energy body changed over twenty minutes or so.

And then recently someone was sharing how they were beginning in their life to dare to look more closely at a really quite painful aspect of their relationship with their father when they were much younger, and how there was really some sexual inappropriateness there from the father. All the pain that that brought up and the confusion and the difficulty there—opening to that, daring to open to that, and the courage that that took. Another image that she'd had before quite regularly, this phoenix that I mentioned before and will mention again in another context as well—this phoenix came. This huge, beautiful, immensely strong but very compassionate phoenix bird came and enfolded her completely in its huge wings.

It was actually behind her and brought its wings to cover her whole body, particularly her breasts, and so much healing in that. And interesting to me that even in the gesture—we talked about this—in the gesture of doing something very healing, very protective in the unfolding of the wings of this phoenix, the image itself and that gesture had a kind of eroticism to it, the way it covered her breasts. And so in a way, there

was a healing of the erotics there as well. It was erotic, but it had so much love and healing with it that it actually healed something, or began to heal something around the sexuality.

There are so many possibilities. I remember certainly more than a year ago a beautiful image that really touched me. I'll say a little bit about it just because there are a few other aspects that are instructive.

I was feeling not well physically, a stomach ache. Suddenly, in the meditation, this huge Godzilla-like creature appeared, seeming to be made of metal parts, with red blazing eyes and raging. But then very suddenly that also collapsed or shattered or exploded and morphed into this giant anthropomorphic figure, so this giant human-like figure, but it seemed also to be made of metal. Then very quickly that collapsed, shattered, and shrunk into a fox which at first seemed like it was made of metal but then shrugged off the metal exterior to become more fleshy and furry and natural—a fox animal.

This fox is a fugitive. He travels alone and he avoids contact. He hides. I feel myself into his body at times. I feel what it feels like to be him. And I get a sense of him both from within and also looking at him. And I sense his wisdom. There's something about this fox—he's very wise and he knows things. He knows esoteric things and philosophical things. But he's very tentative about who he comes close to, who he lets himself come close to.

There's something—he will only let himself come close if he senses that you really want to learn. And there's something about this fox that's so beautiful. I bow to him imaginatively in the meditation. My heart feels drawn to bow and to make añjali with my hands in that gesture of bowing. There's a real sense of reverence and softness, and I feel tearful in the meditation as I'm doing this.

And I get a sense of him and I see him on his travels, and he will come, this fox, to a circle of people around a fire, for instance, and give of his wisdom. He's open to doing that, but otherwise he avoids, he hides, he is furtive and fugitive. And it might even be that someone is trying to catch him or destroy him.

So I'm getting the sense of this fox and the beauty of it and the reverence in the relationship there. And then he stands on my stomach, and I'm still in the sitting posture in the meditation, my physical body, but imaginarily I lie down. His paws bear the touch of his wanderings, and the paws press in onto my belly at certain points, as if they're

almost acupressure points in my stomach and in my back for healing. And it feels very, very healing. There's something—again, I feel the energy harmonize and heal. It feels very lovely there.

So there are lots of dimensions to that kind of image. In this example, like a lot of healing can go on there in images.

Many different dimensions unfold within imaginal practice. And also, as we mentioned already, love emerges as a central element. In the relationship with the imaginal figure, particularly how they look at me or how I look at them, love may be the most important thing.

I think I told the image of the white horse and the beautiful love between us, really. And then that image of the jazz musician Eric Dolphy as I was doing the walking meditation. The whole thing there really seemed about my gratitude and my love. A little bit about his blessing me, but really it was about my love and my gratitude. And how so much that love is part of the soul-making.

And again, to quote that beautiful poem of Mary Oliver's from her collection West Wind, it's a prose poem actually about Percy Bysshe Shelley, the poet who drowned very young. She says, she's writing about him, "I love this poet, which means nothing here or there, but it's like a garden in my heart."

So the love that we have for these imaginal figures, or that they have for us, it means nothing to anyone, perhaps. My love of Eric Dolphy, you might say, who cares? But something, it does something. It's a garden in my heart. In other words, it's fertile in my heart and in my soul. It is soul-making, the love there. That figure and the love in relationship to it is soul-making.

And as we said, when I talked about another musician, Keith Jarrett, that love itself, the eros there, wants to penetrate further and open up the image of the beloved so that it does open the image and give other dimensions and range to the image and more of a sense of sacredness. And that opening of the range and opening of the sense of sacredness opens and fertilizes not just the image, but also fertilizes—then it asks for an expansion of the conceptual framework to include those other dimensions. And then the eros may love more, and so on. So there's a real fertilizing process going on through the love and through the eros.

And again, I've said this before, it's so important. When the love is there in the image, either way or both ways—from me towards the image, from the image towards me—we're really interested in the particular quality of that love. So love has such a range of possibilities for us as human beings. There's so many flavors and styles and dimensions and qualities to the different kinds of love that are possible for us.

So it's not always just simple universal metta or just compassion. It may be. But they may be, as for instance in this image of Eric Dolphy and the love there, very, very particular quality. So really to tune in and notice the particular quality of love that's present with any imaginal interaction.

All this about the healing and the love is part of this question: how am I drawn or asked to interact with this image? Sometimes we feel almost pulled or led in or invited into a certain mode of interacting. It may be a verbal dialogue, it may be something else entirely, maybe more sexual interaction—there is a lovemaking, you know. There's all kinds of possibilities, all kinds.

But this whole—when we say, as I said in the earlier instructions, to include an awareness of the thoughts that come up in relation to this image and the conceptual frameworks that are operating. And then we add this dimension of a kind of attitude or stance in relationship to the image of what do you want. So all of these things, these aspects of the relationship with the image, they bring up the question or they imply the question of the relationship, the exact relationship: what is the relationship between this image and my life?

And this is an interesting question, to say the least. It's potentially quite tricky, but it's interesting. It's not something we want to think too much about or kind of interpret—you know, think and form an interpretation. It's more something we'll kind of get glimpses of or feeling for, intuitive awareness of that a relationship is there and what is the relationship or how are things mirroring.

So sometimes an image will give advice, sometimes, to a person about their life. So I actually remember quite some years ago now, an image—actually, the image is not that important. There were black and white figures and a sort of ritual thing going on with these figures. And this is years ago before I had done that much imaginal practice. And I remember at some point being drawn to ask these sort of priest-like figures if I should go ahead and write this book about emptiness that people had been asking me to write, a few people. And the answer was clearly yes, that even if it didn't have much—wasn't popular or didn't sell very well—it would still be a worthwhile thing.

But that kind of thing, I think, is quite rare, where an image actually gives advice. And not only is it rare, I think, again, my leaning, or my favorite leaning, as is obvious by now on this retreat, is that it would be more interesting, rather than getting advice, the soul-making and the soulfulness is the emphasis. And that makes it more interesting, the whole relationship with the image, the whole imaginal practice, rather than me just seeking out these images to get advice about what I should do.

This can become too much, possibly can become too much of an ego thing, trying to be successful at this and that, whatever. More interesting, more radical, will be just to prioritize the soul-making, and the soul-making also with respect to the relationship of the image and my life. And what helps that to be soul-making, to have this soul-making stance or support the soul-making there?

It's this sense of life and images mirroring each other, but particularly my life mirroring these images and these imaginal figures, or echoing these imaginal figures. My life, myself, my journey, the soul events of my life, having their origins and their roots in some way in these imaginal figures, in these archetypal dimensions, these more divine dimensions of being, if you like. And that kind of loose conceptual framework, that kind of attitude, is much more supportive and opening for the soul-making and the soulfulness.

Clearly, anyone playing with imaginal practice even a little bit will notice that images reflect life at times, or something happens in one's life, or some thread in one's life, and it's expressed in the images. That's obvious; one can see that. But more interesting to me is this other direction of flow—causality may be too strong a word—where images find their expression in life. Life, as I said, mirroring or echoing or having its origins or roots in the imaginal figures. This to me is more interesting, more radical, and more conducive and supportive of soul-making.

So yes, life leads to images, but more interesting is when images have their fruits in life or are expressed in my life. Actually, even if it seems clear that it's an event in life or a feeling in life that has given rise to this image, the image then, practiced in the right way, becomes—or at least leads to—a way of looking at life, a certain relationship. Even when it seems obvious that the image was spawned or had its roots, was born out of some event in my life and mirrors that, relating to it as image then shapes and constellates a rich and potentially soul-making way of looking and relating to that part of life, my whole life, or that event, or that aspect of myself.

So the image, in the way that we're talking about it, turns into something that is always soul-making, whatever its origins seem to be. Very simply, the question always is: does it enhance the soulfulness? Does it nourish and deepen and widen and ignite

and enrich soulfulness, the sense of soulfulness? Is there soul-making here? Not so much what the origins are. I can see it either way. But if it does seem to come out of life—the image mirrors life rather than the other way around, which would be the more unusual way of looking at it—if the image does seem to come out of life, then picking it up in the right way, practicing it in the right way, does it bring soulfulness? Does it enhance the soulfulness? Does it nourish that soulfulness?

Sometimes the soulfulness with respect to an image is very much helped by the awareness of a kind of loose connection with life or mirroring of my life—that my life mirrors the image or the other way around. Sometimes it's really helped by this awareness in the meditative consciousness, being aware of the connections. It makes it more soulful, more poignant sometimes. And sometimes not, actually. And we don't need to look for it.

This is a curious thing. Most images perhaps really have a connection with life. We see our life mirroring these images or vice versa. And there's a lot of soul-making in that connection or in the awareness of that connection—a lot of emotional resonances, ideational resonances, soul resonances. And sometimes not, and we don't need to look for it.

As an example of one that isn't, I remember a year and a half or so ago, suddenly in meditation there was a pond or lake in moonlight, a very tranquil, almost otherworldly scene, very beautiful. Out of the trees and the foliage right by the shore of this lake stepped a white unicorn suddenly, standing there by this very still moonlit lake in the moonlight at the shore.

There was a deep sense of silence to this unicorn, a very beautiful creature. And again, there was love from him or her—I actually couldn't tell the gender—love from the unicorn to me and also from me to this unicorn. And again, a sense of devotion. I'm not even quite sure what exactly I was devoted to. It brought a stillness into my whole being. This unicorn was solitary, a solitary creature, very unafraid. There was no danger here, very still. But the whole image really seemed to be in another world, a world somehow unconnected with the ups and downs and the vicissitudes of this world and this life—something very unperturbed and unconcerned, very touching, and yet there was nothing about this that had any relationship with the events of this life, really.

So sometimes many images do have that relationship with life, or our life mirrors an image, and sometimes not. We want to be sensitive to that in the practice.

When there is a mirroring or echoing of our life, we want to make sure we have a non-literalistic understanding of that relationship. So if there's this soldier or warrior image, I know it doesn't mean to join the army or harm anyone in any way. Or the wanderer image—I know it doesn't mean that. We've been into this.

Another example: I remember quite some time ago, an image of a painter's studio, an artist's studio. It seemed to have a lot of potency to it, this image, but I was trying to understand it a little too literalistically at first in the meditation. Then I began to be with it in a couple of different sessions, and I realized it was really about the space. There was a connection in terms of my sense of my work and the importance of creative output and being creative, which is something that feels very important to me—letting that flow and producing creatively, which is also something that feels deep in my soul, very important.

But not to take it literally—to become a painter, I'm far from that or hiring a place—but it was about the space, about the enclosing walls protecting this space and this space of creativity and all the attitudes of the artist that go with that, and all the sacred space of the artist. Not wanting to translate that too literally, it wasn't that I needed to go and find some place like that, which I don't have and I didn't do that. But it can be there as an image and fertile and fertilizing as an image in the psyche—the space, the artist's studio. So there's a relationship there, but it does not have to be literalistic or concretely acted out usually.

Now, you've noticed, I know for sure, that as one is practicing with images, all kinds of doubts can come up, just like when one is practicing any other meditation. Doubt is a hindrance, one of the five hindrances classically, and can come up, and there can be confusion or sometimes even paralysis with regards to the practice. So very often, the question is operating there, and often consciously but sometimes unconsciously: "Am I doing this right?" And the fear of doing it wrong. So that question is there and it's dominating and it's pressuring things—getting it right or getting it wrong and the fear there.

Rather than that, what I really so much want to emphasize is an attitude of experimentation and playfulness. So letting go of right and wrong and just playing and having fun and daring to experiment, and asking instead: "Does this feel helpful?" That's a very different question—"Am I doing this right or am I doing it wrong?" versus "Does this, what I'm doing right now, how I'm relating to this image, how I'm holding the attention, what I'm paying attention to—does it feel helpful?" And now we're adding: "Does it feel soulful? Is there soulfulness coming out of this?"

So these questions are much more useful questions and much more fertile questions. They open the avenues rather than locking them down.

And again, a person might have a doubt: "Am I making this up?" Especially with imaginal practice, it happens all the time—"Am I making this up?" So this is really important, and different people who work with images in psychotherapy or other modalities have different opinions on this. I would like to say that actually it's okay if an idea comes into the mind in imaginal practice, or an impulse to make something happen with an image, or to introduce some other element or some other figure into an image, or change it even perhaps at times.

Not a problem if I'm making it up. Always—and this is a rule of thumb now, let's make it into a guiding rule—always the question is: "Does this feel like it's nourishing and opening and deepening and enriching the soulfulness right now?" So the soulfulness becomes the indicator, as I said, the navigator of our practice in the moment. Not so much "it's always wrong to make things up" or "I should always make things..." That doesn't matter. We don't need to get snagged with that question, "Oh, that's the ego doing that." Just use the fruit, the result in the moment, how it feels, and use the soulfulness as an indicator, as a navigator that we're on the right track.

So there's a responsiveness there. If it feels soulful and I've made this thing happen in the image—no problem, it feels soulful. If I haven't and it doesn't, it's tuning into that, the soulfulness aspect and the resonances there, and letting that guide us, trusting that.

So again, with the doubt, some person might say they're with an image and "this is too weird" or "this is too dark" or whatever this image, and the mind comes in with its views. And we talked about this in the opening talk—its limited range of what's okay or what kind of images are acceptable, or what's emotionally okay in the range, or in terms of the self-view. "This is too weird." So often a person will think that in imaginal practice. Or "too dark."

Or conversely, actually, a person says, "This isn't weird enough. This should be weirder. I've heard all these stories. People say this and that happens, or Rob said this," you know, whatever. Or generally speaking, meditating and the thought or the inclination: "Something else should be happening." So this is very, very common. But again, could we rather be more responsive and let other factors, other aspects of what's going on be our guides—namely the energy body and the way that responds when an image is right and soulful, as I outlined the other day in the instructions, and all the different cues and clues we can pick up on in the energy body.

And the sense of soulfulness and the resonances and the beauty and the depth and the meaningfulness and all that that we outlined. So letting the energy body and the sense of soulfulness guide us rather than the mind's often too tight or locked-in views.

And the energy body and the sense of soulfulness, what's going on there, might be quite subtle, might not be that far out or dramatic, those effects there. But we can really use them as indicators, as part of the whole sensitivity of developing the sensitivity of the instruments.

And again, in terms of doubts, for instance, "Well, I don't have images, or I don't get very many images," or whatever. But remember, we've been through this, so this is repetition at this point, but remember, an image is not necessarily visual, and there's a whole range of possibilities there in terms of the sense modalities operating.

This "I don't have images," which I've heard a few times from people over the years—again, to repeat: the views that we have, meaning the conceptual frameworks that we entertain or that we're holding, will allow or support more or less images depending on what the conceptual framework is. So some conceptual frameworks just won't allow and support a fertile enough soil in the psyche for images to arise, because wrapped up in the view and the conceptual framework is a dismissal or denigration, ontologically or otherwise, of images.

And so that's very connected just with attitudes in general. Images are daydreams, they're papañca, they're worthless. It's not being mindful. When there's an image or a fantasy, that's not being in touch with reality—all these kinds of attitudes and views are really, really prevalent, as we said in the opening talk. And they will have an effect on what then arises in the psyche. They will constrain the possibility of images arising.

And of course, especially if you come through the insight meditation tradition, as I do, one has practiced—I had practiced for years diligently discarding images when they came up for the most part and returning to the breath or returning to so-called bare attention or whatever, with all the attitudes implied in that being reinforced. And as a practice, just reinforcing this discarding and returning to something that seemed or was deemed to be more, quote, "real."

And so the attitudes, the views, and the practice over years will, as I said, constrain and decrease the flow of images and the arising and availability of images. So just to be aware of that, if it still feels like, "Well, I really don't have images in that sense," we have trained ourselves out of that through practice and view. But we can open that door again. We can train the imagination, if you like, and train the sensitivity and the opening and the tuning to the imaginal through practice and through opening up the view, as we've talked about.

But in terms of how much people actually have arising for them images in the sense of imaginal objects or figures, whatever sense modality that's coming in—that's not the deepest objective, as I would see it, of the retreat. The thing that I'm most interested in is opening up and sensitizing to a whole different way of sensing life, opening up the perception of this here and now, of life, of self, of other, of world. That to me is the objective that I'm most deeply interested in for all this. And so whether or not I have lots of actual imaginal objects, imaginal figures arising is secondary. It may be that that's part of my trajectory. It may be that's not so much part of my trajectory. But there's another objective that's more important, I would say.

And again, just saying more about the whole question about doubt and navigating all this: So often with imaginal practice, an image that is initially scary arises and becomes, over time—sometimes very quickly, and sometimes really over quite a while, months or even years, in some cases years, but usually because before they've been introduced to all the things that we're talking about—becomes a helpful image. What started scary or was initially felt to be a scary image becomes helpful.

A person was telling me some time ago about what she called "the black hag"—this old woman dressed in black, sort of witch-like, and seemed very dark, the black clothes, and the ugly old woman features, and kind of had this aura of what seemed to be wickedness. But actually, no. This image, with spending more time trusting a little bit, became a really, really helpful figure, deeply fertile in the psyche and the soul and deeply wise as well. The style of love and admonition, if you like, from the black hag was not cute and cuddly and soft. She retained her kind of character, but there was absolute love in it and lots of trust. So it's again a certain particular quality or flavor of the love that flowed through there. But nothing scary in that, nothing harmful in that, just that the mind immediately picked up on it in a certain way and assumed that this was scary.

So often what seems scary at first actually turns out to be something very helpful. And this is important. Can we trust the benevolence of these imaginal figures? Or is it possible even to play with trusting, just enter into trusting for a period, a portion of a meditation, maybe just a few minutes? Can I play with even imagining that they are benevolent, trusting that there's something there? Because that trust becomes a significant factor in the whole mix of imaginal practice. The trust itself will affect the way of looking. In the moment that there's trust, we're looking and relating differently. In the moment when there isn't trust, we're looking and relating differently than that. And the way of looking always affects the images, just like any other perception—the way of looking always affects, always makes a difference.

So you can see this in nightmares, for instance. I don't know if ever in a nightmare, perhaps you're chased by a monster in a nightmare, and something changes in the way that you see the monster, and there's a little bit more of a kinder view of the monster. And guess what? The monster changes in the nightmare. The more fear I have of the monster, the less trust, the more I run away from it, the more oppressive and scary looking it becomes, the more it feels dangerous. And when that fear subsides for whatever reason, if you've ever experienced this in a nightmare, the whole monster as an apparition changes as well. So the image is affected by the way of looking, and we can sometimes play with the trust, trusting there's a treasure there, trusting there's something beautiful and right and necessary there. So we can—again, this is part of the eidos, the idea that we entertain—trusting it, trusting that there's a treasure there, even if it looks at first a little bit scary. This is an important point.

And eventually, through practice with images and the kind of conceptual frameworks that we're talking about, eventually this might actually mature, this attitude and this vision of images. It might even mature to a place where we trust the archetypal necessity even at the center of reality, so-called pathological behavior or behavior that is quite painful in our lives—maybe even addiction or addictive inclinations or pathological inclinations. It can even mature to a place where we trust that even somewhere in the middle of that, there's an archetypal necessity. So this is tricky, and it's a fine line here, so I need to see in that case image as image.

What happens often—it might be that what's happening there is that image that's operating archetypally in this addiction or whatever it is, is seen not as image, is taken too concretely. So if I do identify or get in touch with an archetypal necessity at the center of this pathological behavior or whatever it is, I really need to see image as image. But one gets a sense that in some of the kind of real knots of our life or places where there is addiction or this or that and there's suffering and pathological behavior, it's not—something else can be at the center there, at the root there.

Sometimes people, we can be a little oversimplistic in our psychology and say, "Always it's because what one is seeking is love, and one is going about it the wrong way. Everyone wants love and people look for it in mistaken places. And that's what's driving addiction and that's what drives this dukkha-making behavior or whatever it is or this inclination." Or we tend to, again, be too simple psychologically and say it's always down to the seeking of pleasure and the seeking to run away from unpleasant feelings. And that's what's driving the addiction. It's an escape mechanism.

I mean, that may be going on, but it may not be the whole of what's driving this thing or at the center of it. So I feel sometimes we want to have very simple psychologies and apply them universally. Everyone wants love, and that's what's driving it. They're just seeking love in this mistaken way, or seeking happiness, or seeking pleasure, or fleeing unpleasant emotions. Maybe, maybe for sure, but maybe there's more—richer and deeper archetypal necessities which need a different relationship. They need honoring, but also seeing their image. We could say much more about this, though I won't elaborate further now.

Sometimes, still on the subject of doubt and trust, we encounter an image that seems weird or insignificant. We can't really see the point of it. But over time, it may gradually come to feel more significant and affect our lives long-term—this image that at first did not seem very meaningful. Perhaps something is coming through this image, or our ability to receive what wants to come through—one's daemon—is emerging slowly, gradually, in ways not immediately obvious.

There's an open question in imaginal practice regarding what we might call pacing with images. I've touched on this before, but want to repeat it because it's quite important. I learned this from Thomas Moore, the contemporary psychologist. He talked about listening to music. When we really love a piece of music, we listen to it again and again. No one says, "Oh, I've heard that piece once—I wouldn't listen to it again." If you love it, you want to hear it repeatedly.

This contrasts with, say, a book or dharma talk that explains things in rational terms and takes you there. Once I've understood it, I don't need to hear it again. An image is more like beloved music than information or instruction.

Sometimes with dharma talks I've given, people tell me they've listened over and over. Most often this happens because they're packed with information and explanation that requires multiple listenings to absorb. But occasionally someone says, "There's that little story or image you related"—they're talking about perhaps a ten-second fragment—"and I just loop it round and round. I don't know what it is about that, but I keep listening to that tiny section."

What they're doing is that stretch has become alive for them as an image. Just as someone who truly loves music will listen to the same passage again—sometimes the same piece repeatedly—there's something that's become soulfully fertile, not just informationally fertile.

Similarly with images: Do I want to move on to the next image, or recall one deliberately and marinate with it again? Tune to it again, linger with it, just as we would with music—be in that soul space, that soul world of the image, tuning and marinating in its energies, emotions, soulfulness, and resonances.

So it's an open question: when to bring back an image and be with it more—maybe it evolves, maybe not, it doesn't need to—and when to move on and be more open. I don't think there's right or wrong here. I'm simply flagging this as an element of our pacing.

Sometimes we deliberately bring a helpful image to mind, but it doesn't stay as that image. It fertilizes and spawns other images that seem unconnected. Someone told me they were struggling with a complex life situation—sitting in meditation, feeling weighed down by this intricate knot they couldn't see a way forward with, feeling beaten down by it all.

They deliberately brought to mind their niece and nephew, whom they absolutely delighted in and loved deeply. That image didn't stay. Love arose—they felt the love and delight for the children. Then suddenly the image changed, becoming a woman dancing—powerful in her body, poised and confident, dancing with great energy and passion and bravura and skill.

Tuning to this image of the dancer, which seemed to have nothing directly related to their situation or to the niece and nephew, the whole situation they were facing began to feel different. Through the image of this dancer, they gained not only space but a different perspective on what was unfolding.

The poet W.B. Yeats wrote about "the images that yet fresh images beget." Sometimes there's an image that gives birth to, or catalyzes, another image that can be deeply helpful.

Someone a while ago talked to me about imaginal practice, really picking up on this idea that we can relate to images as part of a self-help tool, journey, practice or path—which is fine, completely fine. But they asked, "How can I steer it beyond that sort of self-help attitude and relationship?" I want to say a bit about that here, because what we're really talking about this morning is more about interacting with images, relating to them and navigating with images.

How do we go beyond the self-help relationship? Well, it's really playing with this idea of perhaps serving—playing with the idea of serving this angel or this daemon or this imaginal figure. In the meditation, playing with that as an idea that I'm serving it

rather than it serving me. And that's very improvised. One wants to tune in to what that feels like. It may involve even a devotional sense. There's no right or wrong way of doing that. We really can improvise with that.

Related to that are all the conceptual ideas we've talked about that support or nourish that soulfulness and soul-making. So it's all of that included. But really, it's taking the time as well with those images that feel deep, that feel important, that we have the sense with them that my life is mirroring them somehow. Those are the images that will really, along with the right attitude towards them—playing with their attitude and this idea of serving—will really turn around into this other more radical relationship.

So serving the angel, the daemon, my life mirroring it, but again, not literal. It's not necessarily so concretized or literalized. That would make me quite nervous, I think, that kind of too tight and too literalized attitude. We're talking again about poetic images, a poetic sensibility, which can be yet very, very powerful without being literal.

And at times, I've mentioned this sense that we can have of the kind of non-temporal dimension of images, the timelessness, or the eternality that images seem to have. That's part of their poetic nature, it's part of their iconic nature, and part of what gives them this power—that they somehow exist beyond time. Tuning into that can be really, really helpful in this sense of opening up a more radical relationship with them.

Again, just to touch on something I think I threw out earlier, just to restate it and amplify just a tiny bit. I talked about the octave of an image, or the register of an image, if we use words from musical metaphors. What do I mean by that? I mean the degree of solidity or substantiality that the image seems to have.

So for example, one might have an erotic image, and it looks like and maybe feels like—it feels very solid, earthy, fleshy. Maybe it's got a more raunchy kind of erotic character or feel to the whole thing. That's one end of the spectrum of this register of pictures, that's one octave. Or one might have, in terms of events that take place or characters in the image, something very similar, but the whole thing appears more etheric, more insubstantial. One could say it's happening at a higher pitch. It might be very erotic without being so obviously sexual, for instance.

There's not a right or wrong here. That's really, really important. It's not like higher is better. I mean, I think some people might say that. Some people might say lower is better in terms of this register of the images, of the solidity or substantiality of the image.

What you'll notice—definitely, again, you can't get away from this dependent arising—so that dependent on the mind state is the sense of the perception of substantiality of the image. In other words, when we're in a very, very insubstantial state, a state that's perceiving a lot of insubstantiality in the body and in everything else—when perhaps deep emptiness or deep samadhi, those kind of states, deep metta—that mind state will tend to constellate images, or the images that are constellated within that mind state, within that state of consciousness, will tend to be insubstantial. It's dependent arising, dependent on the mind state, the state of consciousness.

And it's malleable. You'll find that you can actually transpose an image to another register, another octave—the same image at another octave, or similar enough, or it changes a bit at another octave. So yes, it's dependent on the mind state, and yes, it's malleable.

And, if it's not too much contradiction, one can also sense at times that this particular image—this is the octave that it belongs in. It belongs in the more earthy, substantial, solid range, or it belongs in this more higher, etheric range. That's part of the tuning and the sensitivity—actually feeling what feels right, without making that too heavy a word.

Certainly with an image, certainly with the image or the sense of the self and the body, that can also have this range of register, of octaves. And also—and very importantly, we're going to get more into this—of the surroundings, of the world, can be very solid and very insubstantial. So I'm just pointing that out and seeing if you can notice and learn and play and tune and become sensitive there.

Okay, last thing. All images—probably most images—are portable, so to speak. We can transport them to other situations, other postures, other interactions in the day.

A person, this is really quite a while ago, was telling me how they were beginning to really enjoy playing with bringing in, incorporating the image of Kuan Yin into their meditations, and particularly into the way they were doing metta and compassion meditations. And this sense of Kuan Yin as a living deity, a living imaginal figure, also had a complexity of character. She had different flavors. Sometimes she was very playful. Sometimes she was very tender. Sometimes she was like a kind of pixie.

There was a whole range there of different flavors to her, and therefore to the expression itself in practice, to her personality, to the kind of love that came out at different times in these different flavors.

And so he was enjoying all that and imagining her at times—this is where the portability comes in—actually imagining her in others. So looking at his friend or talking with a work colleague and actually imagining that Kuan Yin was in that person or expressing through that person, that person was Kuan Yin. And depending on the flavor of Kuan Yin that was manifesting at that time, a particular personality or expression, the quality of love, he would feel devoted to them more generally, but also in different ways, depending on the flavor. The relationship changed anyway, just by seeing them as Kuan Yin, feeling and imagining and sensing them as Kuan Yin. And then within that, there was also quite a range of how that felt.

This is very similar if you know about Mother Teresa and her practice working with the poorest of the poor and people suffering from leprosy and all kinds of other injuries and sicknesses. Her practice was basically to see everyone as Christ. So she sees the person, and at the same time she sees Christ within them. And that was her main practice, in fact, and that was what enabled her to do the amazing work that she did.

An image that comes up a lot for me in all kinds of different ways is the image of the jazz musician. I actually was a jazz musician years ago, and the image can come up many different ways. And again, it's something that's portable sometimes, but its portability is quite subtle. One might think with the mind, "Oh, jazz musician, that means improvising. So it just means improvise through the day in your work and in your interactions without having a sort of plan of what to do." But it does mean that this image can be translated in that way, but also in a lot more subtle ways, which maybe on this retreat I'll go into as an example.

The way these images can spill over can be... there's a real range there. There's a whole variety and it can be very, very subtle. So I'm not even sure I could properly articulate the way the jazz musician image then might come in when I'm talking to someone or listening to them. It's not just about improvisation. It's really quite subtle in terms of the whole sensibility of self and other and situation.

So, self-image, other image, self-fantasy, other fantasy, and they are portable. And then we also talked about fantasy of the Dharma. And are we aware of what the fantasy is? That's an optional question—strand if you like. You can investigate that if you want or ponder it or reflect on it or tune into it: what is the fantasy of the Dharma that you've been entertaining?

But basically to say again: where there is love, where there is a sense of meaningfulness, of beauty, of depth, there you will find fantasy, image, mythos operating. Where there is love, meaningfulness, beauty, depth, soulfulness—there, there is a fantasy and image operating. Question is: what is it?

So we can begin to look at this and begin to make it portable—the image, the fantasies of self, the image, the fantasies of other—play with them, and also of the world and the cosmos. And so I'm going to say more about this as we go on: the image, imaginal practice in relationship to the world.

But you might notice already that images you're working with begin to spread out and sort of suffuse or transform a little bit or transubstantiate, but they spread out to the wider world, the surroundings, the environment, and even the sense of the whole cosmos. So just to say for now, it's really okay if that happens. It's part of the portability. It's part of the work with images. I would expect it to happen. Let it happen. Play with it a little bit, sensitize a little bit, and hopefully we're going to elaborate more about that in the next few days.

Okay, that's enough for now.

CHAPTER 17

A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h35

In this third installment of his exploration of sacred cosmos, Rob Burbea delves into various ways of understanding and experiencing divinity within Buddhist practice. He examines four primary modes of divine experience: the transcendent unfabricated reality beyond all appearances, universal impersonal manifestations like cosmic love or awareness, and particular personal theophanies through imaginal figures and beings. Drawing on insights from emptiness teachings, fabrication practices, and the realization that perception is constructed through ways of looking, Burbea shows how different degrees of clinging and delusion create varying levels of fabricated appearance.

The talk weaves together Buddhist teachings on the unfabricated with concepts from Tibetan Tantra, Kabbalah, and Neoplatonism, exploring how the mind's participation in divine awareness allows for both transcendent realization and meaningful engagement with sacred images. Burbea emphasizes that all divine experiences, whether transcendent or immanent, are empty of inherent existence while remaining valid and transformative. He addresses common resistances to theistic language and offers conceptual frameworks that support both rigorous emptiness understanding and rich imaginal practice, showing how meaningfulness and soul-making require adequate philosophical scaffolding to flourish.

So I want to explore what might be meant by words like God, gods, divine, etc. that I've been using throughout this retreat. I want to explore how we can relate to these words and ideas—how we might make such conceptions useful, fertile, enriching, and opening for us.

I'm very aware that for many people, hearing or encountering these words brings reactions—sometimes very strong reactions, including negative, constricting, blocking, and aversive responses. Some people simply get nervous around such language. These are loaded words for many, and we tend to bring considerable baggage to these concepts and ideas. Much of this comes from our personal and cultural history, perhaps our upbringing and early experiences. For some, this includes significant woundedness from certain religious contexts, education, or upbringing that involved unhelpful ideas.

I'm aware of all this, but perhaps even more importantly, I'm aware of how easy it is to bring assumptions, preconceptions, and quite simplistic, unhelpful notions to these words. When we hear them, we immediately think we know what is meant, barriers arise, and something constricts. People argue, and this is rampant in our culture right now—this so-called atheist versus religious debate. The whole discourse takes place on a literalized, simplistic level, with crude notions battering against each other. People might entertain the idea of an old man with a beard on a cloud, judging, as if that really exists, or debate the creator of the universe and such things.

So while I'm aware of all the history and the possibility of woundedness we might carry, it's really these assumptions, preconceptions, and notions that I want to open up and hopefully render useful and creative in these talks.

For some people, the word "divine" works better than "God." In Tibetan Tantra, they use the word *yidam* for the deity, the Tantric deity. They speak extensively about seeing appearances as divine, knowing appearances and sensing appearances as divine. This is standard Tibetan Tantric language. They discuss the primordial Buddha, primordial Buddhas, cosmic Buddhas—all of this.

So again, the question: How can we open up these words, these concepts and ideas, so they become what we might call *eidos*—what we look through? How can we relate to such ideas so they become useful and fertile? Is that even possible?

I want to try—emphasis on try—exploring, describing, and elaborating on some possible conceptions and experiences of the divine, divinity, etc., that we might have in practice and in life. These relate mostly to what we've been discussing. There are many possibilities here, both for conceptual frameworks and for experiences.

This is something I really want to emphasize and probably return to later: the infinite range and plurality of possibilities for both experiences of the divine and conceptions of the divine. I'm obviously only going to discuss some of these, and some of the ones I'll explore can actually mix and infuse each other.

Obviously, being constrained for time, I'll need to be brief while trying to explain these ideas and ways of experiencing as clearly as possible. Some of what we're discussing now—the ideas and experiences—really depend on understanding, a deep understanding of emptiness. Some experiences will also depend on deep meditative experiences of emptiness in practice.

For those not yet familiar with that territory, this might be quite challenging, though it might not be. I wouldn't assume either way.

As an aside, I've been thinking quite a lot about what a good idea it might be to approach Dharma teaching and insight meditation instruction more in terms of a curriculum. This could make so much more possible. It's like: "Okay, now you've understood this, now you've developed these skills in practice. You're able to experience this, you're able to open that way, you're able to have this or that kind of mystical experience, or this or that sense of well-being or dissolution of *dukkha*. Now—now can we build on that? Now that you have that understanding, can we deepen it? Can we open a further door? We've opened these doors before—can we open other doors?"

Without a curriculum, what often happens is that teachings at the same basic level get repeated, and it becomes difficult to move forward without people feeling lost or uncomfortable, or judging themselves. The fault isn't so much in the person or the teacher or teaching method—it's in the lack of curriculum and the absence of an established foundation, both in understanding and meditative skill, that would allow further deepening and building. Without this, the whole range of teaching becomes quite constricted.

So hang in there if these concepts feel difficult. It may take several listenings, and some of this may become clearer as your understanding of emptiness and your practice with emptiness deepens.

By the way—and this is something I will emphasize again and again—when I talk about God, the divine, or gods, always, always, always that God, a god, the divine, etc. is empty. It has no inherent existence. I am not postulating anything having any kind of inherent or independent existence. Sometimes this is hard for people to understand, and they assume that using such words means one is postulating inherent existence. But I am not.

We could ask, why bother? Especially if some of this is going to be complicated, perhaps difficult to understand, and somewhat elaborate sounding. Why bother discussing these concepts and conceptual frameworks?

Well, for a couple of reasons at least. One concerns both soul and soulfulness. There are aspects of soul that love ideas, that love conceptual frameworks—it's part of the play of the soul. It feels almost like a necessity for understanding some aspect of the soul, for its life, vitality, and vivification.

Secondly, soul and soulfulness and soulmaking need a conceptual framework—conceptual frameworks that allow for soulfulness and soulmaking, that enrich and nourish it, that are actually wide enough to give it space to grow. The ideas, the conceptual

frameworks, the logos we are entertaining need to have enough space so that soulfulness can grow. They also need to allow experiences—that's part of soulfulness. Conceptual frameworks need to be wide enough to allow a range of experiences.

This is so crucial. Too often people live and practice while harboring conceptual frameworks that are uninvestigated, unarticulated, unconscious—and this perpetuates a very narrow range of experience, both in life and in meditation. The conceptual framework can function, and we want it to function, like a fertile womb—a space that is actually fertile where things can grow and expand. Importantly, the conceptual framework itself can also grow, expand, and stretch.

Soulfulness and soulmaking need conceptual frameworks that support them. We could express this with Greek terms: psyche needs logos. Psyche needs logos or logoi that support it, enrich it, deepen it, allow it. If the logos—the conceptual framework—is too narrow, then the possibilities for soul and soulfulness and soulmaking are narrowed, constricted. It's no longer fertile. There isn't the possibility of deepening, enriching, widening, stretching the vistas of experience and of psyche.

For example, the assumption or idea that images appearing to one are simply the result of random neuronal firings in the brain—that kind of conceptual notion is probably not very fertile to soulfulness and soulmaking. There are many other ways of explaining things that seem so attractive as truths, especially in modernist culture, that actually kill, stifle, and constrict soulfulness and soulmaking.

Let me begin by dividing up four possibilities—many of these overlap and can infuse each other and mix, but let's delineate at least four possibilities for experiences of the divine that are possible for us.

The first I've mentioned several times already on this retreat and elsewhere: it's possible for a person—much more possible for a meditator—to know, to realize, to experience, to open to... the language of how to put it breaks down, but to know, realize, experience, open to what is unfabricated—the unfabricated, where there is not the fabrication.

Usually through meditation, there is the cessation of the fabrication of any sense or perception of any object whatsoever—anything or object whatsoever, or any oneness or totality of objects. No fabrication of perception of object, no fabrication of perception of any kind of subject, even the most subtle subject of just a bare moment of consciousness or a vast awareness embracing all things. No fabrication of the perception of ob-

jects or subjects or time—not the past, not the future, not the present. All those most fundamental structures of experience—subject, object, time, space—all this not being fabricated.

What is left then, so to speak, is the unfabricated. It's not just a blank unconsciousness, like being in a coma. It's the unfabricated.

We've talked about other ways of putting this. We discussed Avicenna in the Islamic tradition, speaking of the darkness that reigns forever. We talked about the Jewish mystics' Ayin, which translates as nothing. We talked about the Neoplatonist One. All these are actually pointing to the same thing, articulating the same transcendent experience, transcendent opening, unfabricated transcendent reality—if you like—in different language, struggling to find words there.

It's there definitely in the Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart and St. John of the Cross. Twentieth-century theologians and philosophers—for example, Franz Rosenzweig—speak of the God that is before all relation, whether to the world or to himself, the seed point of the actuality of God. He draws on the philosopher Schelling's notion of a dark ground. Different ways of talking about it.

In Buddhadharma, the Buddha describes it in different ways, uses different language. Perhaps the clearest is the unfabricated. And it's a way of conceiving the whole process that moves toward that—learning, as I said, through developing the art of meditation and learning how to fabricate less perception, less appearance, less experience.

Just gradually, gradually—starting at the probably for most people, starting at the levels of horrendous and painful solidification of self and other, an issue that happens in papañca—and just learning, oh, through letting go of clinging, identification, certain gross clinging to conceptions, that can fade away. It cannot be fabricated in a certain moment. And say, oh, that's interesting.

Let's take this and develop the skill, basically, of learning to let go of clinging, and I'm using that word in the broadest possible sense, to include identification and subtle concepts. Learning to let go of clinging more and more deeply, and at more and more deep and subtle levels. Not forever, but in a moment, as a practice of meditation, in different ways, and as I do that, I see the world of appearance of self, objects, and eventually time and space and all that gets fabricated less and less.

Developing that skill, developing that art in lots of different and beautiful ways, I go deeper in this journey of learning to fabricate less. And eventually there's—whatever we call this—realization, experience, opening to the unfabricated.

So this is realizable, experienceable, if we use those words. They're not even quite the right words. We can open to that, we can know that if we know how, if we develop the know-how to fabricate less in any moment. Not to live in a kind of unfabricated, which is impossible anyway, but learning as what meditation is, or part of what meditation is, as we talked about on other talks, learning to fabricate less.

Now this unfabricated, and again I mentioned this before, the Buddha said—it's so transcendent and transcendent of concepts also that the Buddha describes it in three ways. Often he just says, you can't say anything about it. It's so transcendent. Where all phenomena cease, all ways of speaking, all manner of speaking ceases. He says, I think in the Suttanipāta.

Other times, and probably most often, he talks about it as so common in these mystical traditions that reach this level, talk about it in terms of negation. It's not this, it's not that. There is the absence of this, the absence of space, the absence of time, the absence of thing. And so it's sort of what corresponds to the via negativa in Christian mystical teaching. It's not this, not that, neti neti, if you know, from the Vedanta teachings.

And then the third way sometimes the Buddha talks about it is in a sort of positive affirmation as a kind of consciousness, different than our usual consciousness. Transcendent and without object and without support and not of time. Consciousness without attribute, without feature, as the Buddha describes.

Now why am I wanting to call that divine? Well, almost like I say, well, if that's not divine, I don't know what is—utterly transcendent, utterly beyond time, timeless, and therefore deathless. So that's a word the Buddha uses at times, deathless, the deathless.

And in many senses, there's this knowing that one has really a profound, profound and utterly transformative knowing of what is divine. People talk about in the theological traditions, the Godhead, God in himself herself. And this is possible for an insight meditator to know, as I said, just knowing how to go about it, go on that journey.

So there's the experience of that in a way that's utterly transcendent, that totally beyond any appearance whatsoever of any subject at all, any object, any time, et cetera. And then there's also the possibility, either before one has fully opened to that, but more often afterwards, of this unfabricated, this deathless, if you like, I say shining through appearances, shining through the appearances of this world in different ways. This sense of a timeless dimension to things, a sense of this transcendent, unfabricated, deathless, if you like, dimension, if you want to call it. The Buddha sometimes uses that word.

We could say shining through appearances and transforming the sense of this world, the sense of life and death and self and other and all of it. So, so precious. Utterly, utterly precious for a human being to know that and to taste that and to open to that.

So that's the second possibility. There's a sort of pure, transcendent, unfabricated, no appearances whatsoever, utterly beyond all experiences of subject, object, and time. And then there's the way that can actually—the authentic experience of that can kind of shine through the appearances of this world in different ways.

Thirdly, oftentimes what I hear from people, less so recently, but used to be quite a lot in other circles, is people use the language of the deathless quite a lot. Or someone might say, describing their meditation, I'm resting in the unconditioned. All I do is rest in the unfabricated, et cetera. That kind of language.

But really, what they're talking about is some other state. It's a state, an opening, a perception, a meditative perception that is, if you like, a lot less fabricated as perceptions go than normal, everyday, conventional perception that most people have most of the time. But it's less fabricated than that, but it's not yet completely unfabricated. So it's not really the authentic unfabricated or deathless. And there's many, many possibilities. There's way too many to describe now, many possibilities.

All of them are beautifully lovely. Again, some may involve the senses being completely closed in some kind of jhanic way, transcendent of the senses. And some of them —or even the very same states—have versions where the senses are more open. There's this experience, feeling, or perception of that dimension, that particular less fabricated dimension, shining through appearances. And as I said, there are many such dimensions.

Very common in our circles and related spiritual circles—not just Buddhist—would be the experience of one love, one kind of cosmic love or cosmic compassion pervading the universe, woven into the fabric of existence. When people do a metta retreat or practice metta and compassion over some weeks, this will eventually open organically, without my even suggesting it. In a way, I'm often waiting for that to happen—not as the be-all and end-all, but as one opening, one perception that is so beautiful, enriching, supportive, and helpful.

At that point, those people often start using theistic language. There's a flavor, a scent of divinity that permeates that love. That love pervading and surrounding, while holding everything, has the flavor, the taste of divinity—even if the person has never used such words before, never had that kind of experience, never had that upbringing.

Another one, probably even more common in insight meditation circles, is similar, but what pervades the universe or all appearances is awareness. This can come in many different flavors—I don't have time on this retreat to differentiate between them. But there's a kind of oneness of all things in one awareness. Sometimes people call it one mind, big mind, cosmic consciousness, or sixth jhana—different variations of the sixth jhana. There are many possibilities here. The divinity is in the awareness, this awareness that is universal—not just mine, not just in here in my body or brain looking out at the world, but everywhere. All things, if you like, are that awareness or express that awareness.

Or it can be just one physical substance or one energy. One person senses the oneness of all things in terms of matter, physicality, substance. Also very beautiful—a kind of holiness, a cosmic oneness that can be an experience of the divine.

All of these are beautiful. But none of what I've just described are quite the authentic unfabricated, because they still involve time, they still involve a sense of the present moment and a perception of space, and there's still a very subtle sense of subject and object. Still, there can be a sense, an experience, and also a conception of divinity.

There's also a whole range of levels of experience of divine oneness that come from recognizing that everything shares in the nature of emptiness, in being empty. That understanding of emptiness can be at many different levels and bring with it different corresponding levels of a sense of oneness.

So there's the transcendent experience—if we can even use that word "experience"—of the divine beyond appearances. And then there are different ways we can experience the divine through or in the appearances of the world, the appearances of others. Different ways that sense of the divine can shine through.

These can be split into two camps. There's a universal way—the divine shines through universally, and usually impersonally. For example, when the unfabricated shines through, it's universal, shining through everything, and impersonal. It may be easier to see in some situations than others—often in nature—but one gets the sense we're talking about something universal and impersonal here. In many of those other states—one cosmic love or compassion pervading the universe, one awareness of which everything is the play, everything having the substance of awareness—these openings are also universal and impersonal.

But there's a fourth possibility, which we're leaning towards more in this retreat and emphasizing: the sense of divinity shining through a person or thing as a particular theophany, a particular face of divinity or of a particular divinity. It may be an imaginal

figure, or a person or thing seen as image, seen through the lens experientially of mythos, of fantasy. But not universal—particular. And not impersonal, but personal, involving personhood.

This is what I would like to hopefully unpack a little, to explore what conceptual frameworks we might offer as support. Is it possible to open and provide conceptual frameworks for a notion of divinity that can include, allow, support, and nourish a wide variety of experiences of the divine—not just of a transcendent divine or of a universal impersonal divine, but of particular theophanies? Whether they're imaginal figures or the imaginal in and through persons and things.

So my life, my personhood, your life, your personhood, or someone else's, as seen as, experienced as, sensed as, and conceived of as the expression, the manifestation, or appearing as the manifestation of the divine—of particular, unique faces of divinity. Is that possible? This is really what I would like to explore.

Just to say, as we go into this, it seems important to me—interesting certainly, but also important—in trying to offer or explore various conceptual frameworks that might support and deepen and have a place for this idea of divinity, these experiences of divinity, to tie it together with an understanding of emptiness. As I said before, to put everything, the whole Dharma, on a basis of emptiness thoroughly.

So how, for instance, does the exploration of fabrication—seeing what's fabricated, seeing how perception is fabricated and the total way it's fabricated, exploring less fabrication until one opens to the unfabricated—how does that kind of teaching, that way into understanding emptiness, tie together with some of these other ideas and conceptions? How does it tie together with the imaginal? And how does that experience of divinity as the unfabricated tie in, or relate to, other experiences of divinity?

So some of that is tied together, and the relation is actually very simple. It's really just a conception of the dharma, as we've alluded to briefly, and in a lot of detail elsewhere. The conception of the dharma is this exploration of fabrication, and different perceptions, if you like, are experienced, perceived, appear, depending on how much fabrication there is.

So an experience of cosmic love, so to speak, is an experience of much less fabrication than your everyday experience where that's not present and things and others seem very separate and very solid. So there is, if you like, a spectrum of fabrication that we can explore, and different experiences of the divine take their place on that spectrum of fabrication. And so the relationship is actually relatively simple once you get into exploring that.

The cosmic consciousness is a relatively unfabricated experience compared to everyday experience. An experience of a lot of papañcha, a lot of hindrances, a lot of self-building and other-building and issue-building is an experience of more fabrication and almost certainly less sense of divinity there. So some of the relationship is quite simple, fits quite easily—I've mapped a lot of that out before.

But in relation to the imaginal and the idea of theophany, this imaginal figure or that person that I love as theophany, and the particularities and the personhood there, the relationship is not so simple. So in exploring some of this and elaborating on and opening it out a little bit, I'm going to draw on different conceptual frameworks. Some are ones that I worked out for myself, and others originate in other traditions.

Remember when you're listening to this that no conceptual framework can claim ultimate or complete validity or truth. It cannot claim to be the total truth or to be a true explanation of everything. Any conceptual framework—there'll be some place where it either falls down or contradicts itself or inevitably, with any conceptual system, relies on some kind of assumption that's ultimately unprovable.

So rather than searching or trying to concoct some kind of complete or final system, metaphysical system or whatever, rather than that—and that's something I would actually be very much aware of if someone is claiming that or putting that forward, a system of ultimately true explanations, finally true explanations. Rather than that, and rather than seeking a conceptual framework that then is provable, I'm interested in the idea of conceptual frameworks as doorways, portals. The conceptual frameworks themselves are scaffoldings or structures that support our inquiry, our investigation, the fertilization and opening of our experience, of our practice, of our meditation. They nourish and support psyche and the meditative adventure and all of that.

So in what follows, I'm going to try to tie together a few different conceptual frameworks, but it's up to you. There's no obligation here to take any package, and certainly I'm not presenting some polished, complete product at all. You'll quickly realize that. You may gravitate towards one of these frameworks. You may tie them together in the way that I do, or I'm trying to at least, or in your own way. Or you may have some other conceptual framework that you draw on to support the validity of and fertilize imaginal practice, the sense of the divine through imaginal practice.

Let's start with what we've already talked about—this notion of fabrication of perception and the learning, the possibility to learn the skill, the art in meditation of unfabricating to different degrees, of fabricating less perception. And eventually to open

to, realize, experience, so to say, the unfabricated, what is unfabricated, this transcendent dimension, if you like, beyond any subject, any object, any sense of time, including the present moment.

So how does this unfabricating work? Earlier I said it's dependent on clinging, but we could also say it's dependent on delusion. In other words, to the degree that there is delusion operating in the mind at any moment, to that degree will there be the fabrication of perception. Perception is built up, solidified, made more separate, made more intense, to the degree of delusion.

Now delusion goes with clinging and craving, as the Buddha pointed out, but delusion really is, if you like, the most important supporting condition for the fabrication of perception and appearance. That's why it's first in the twelve links of dependent arising that the Buddha outlines.

So when we look with delusion, when there's delusion in the citta, in the mind, in the heart, it fabricates more perception. Now, the state of papañcha is full of delusion, isn't it? And that's why there's more fabrication there—more fabrication of self, more fabrication of issue, more fabrication of other, story. That whole structure is the fabrication of perception.

As there's less delusion, less belief in an inherently existing self, less delusion, less belief in any of the subtle concepts that operate in the citta usually—including belief in time and space and awareness of something, there are all kinds of possibilities—and there's less clinging, so the structure of appearances, the fabrication of appearances, begins to fade. They begin to be fabricated less and less to the degree that the delusion is not there. Or we could say to the degree that insight is there, there's less delusion. Insight and delusion are inversely proportional. So less insight, more delusion, more appearances. More insight, less delusion—in other words, less appearances.

Until eventually we see that in any moment that delusion is really drained from the citta, at that moment there will be this complete unfabricating of perception, of appearance, of experience. And one opens to, if you like, the unfabricated. And we see the world of the fabricated is built on delusion, we could say. The house builder that the Buddha talks about is built on delusion. So on his awakening he said, "Ah, I've understood, and there's not the delusion anymore, house builder—you've been seen."

And so in that sense, the unfabricated takes ontological precedence over the fabricated.

It seems more real because the fabricated appears as the result of delusion. There's also a felt sense, and very much a perception, that holiness resides much more fully in the unfabricated than in the fabricated.

So actually, through this very deep experience we're discussing, a duality is created between the unfabricated and the fabricated. One seems holy, so to speak, while the other appears merely as a product—or primarily the product—of delusion. Fabricated through delusion, dependent on delusion, as the Buddha might say.

But the journey—the meditative journey into emptiness, the understanding and insight in these terms—doesn't stop there, hopefully. We begin to actually question, to see deeper into the whole notion of fabrication, into the structure of the teaching of fabrication itself. We actually see that because time is empty, because what is fabricated is empty, fabrication itself is empty too.

And this is one way of dissolving the whole duality, collapsing the entire duality between the unfabricated and the fabricated. Then there is not this sense that the unfabricated is holy and the fabricated is not holy. Everything can be seen as holy and divine—both so-called unfabricated and so-called fabricated. The duality dissolves. It takes the understanding and the meditative seeing and the being in the world to a whole other level.

In that seeing, everything is equally holy, equally divine. There's actually a possibility of seeing it all as universally divine, or of picking up this sense of divinity through the personhood and the particular that we were discussing.

So when, for instance, one employs a meditative way of looking for a time in practice, or one sees in practice—deliberately practices a way of looking that delicately, skillfully holds the understanding: this awareness right now, this moment of awareness, this mind right now, is not self. Not me, not mine, as the Buddha says. One holds that in awareness.

And one sees also that this awareness, this mind, in the same moment—it's not self, and it's also not separate from the appearances that are its objects. The subject and object, the mind and the objects of appearance, are not separate.

And one also, in the same moment, holds lightly, skillfully, in the view, in the way of looking, that this awareness, this mind, is empty in itself—perhaps, for instance, because it's beyond time in the sense that time is empty. Anything that exists must exist in time, and time is empty, therefore this awareness is empty.

When, through practice—a very, very deep practice I'm speaking of—one holds these insights very lightly, delicately, like an art, and looks and meditates on the present moment: this awareness, not self; this awareness, not separate from appearances; this awareness is, in a sense, beyond time, is empty, and the time that it exists in is empty.

Then that awareness at that time, because it has a lot of insight in it and very little delusion, is really cutting, dissolving delusion at a very fundamental level. Seeing that objects are empty—and we can include that objects are empty and the subject is empty. Then there will be an unfabricating to quite a deep degree.

And the awareness, if we still talk in terms of awareness, moves towards something completely—or to a large degree—towards this consciousness without attribute that the Buddha sometimes uses as a phrase to describe the unfabricated. It unfabricates. There's an unfabricated awareness or consciousness there, very different from our usual consciousness, and not the kind of vast awareness that I mentioned at other times.

But one possibility of holding all that insight, for a meditator who has really practiced and developed gradually this art of unfabricating, is that it unfabricates and opens, if you like, to this unfabricated awareness.

Another possibility, though, and even more artful, is that one can actually play with and modulate the degree of the fading and unfabricating of experience. It's as if you're taking your foot just lightly off the pedal, so that you're holding all this understanding of emptiness very, very lightly in the mind. It's not a great deal of thinking, but that insight is there. It's imbuing the awareness. And yet you're not letting it completely fade because you're not leaning on the insight too heavily. So it's a very light touch.

And so appearances are around, but they're imbued with the whole sense—subject, object, awareness, appearances—imbued with the deep understanding of the emptiness of all of it. Radical, deep, total emptiness.

And it's possible then to play, because appearances are still around, with tantric practice, which essentially is a mimicking of a Buddha's—I'm going to use the word gnosis, just as a translation of the Tibetan word yeshe—particularly so that we don't get confused with words like insight or awareness or wisdom. Using all these words, sometimes the vocabulary gets so confused, with people using different words or not realizing there's a difference. But the practice of tantra is this mimicking of a Buddha's gnosis, a Buddha's ultimate—let's call it wisdom awareness, as another translation of the word gnosis. And that's one way of understanding what tantra is.

In this sense, the word ultimate actually means ultimate because it's what a Buddha has, like a fully awakened being. So we've touched on this before, that in the Vajrayana, in the tantric teachings, the word ultimate is used in different ways. Sometimes it's used to refer to emptiness; sometimes ultimate means what a Buddha enjoys or what is characteristic of a Buddha. And again, there's all kinds of confusion and slipperiness with vocabulary.

So sometimes in tantric teachings, in Vajrayana teachings—now I'm going to draw particularly on someone like Mipham from the Nyingma tradition; he died in 1912, I think. A brilliant, brilliant teacher and scholar from the Tibetan tradition, from the Nyingma Tibetan tradition. He would use the same words like emptiness or suchness or ultimate in different ways at different times. But in their deepest meaning, when he used them in their deepest meaning, they all kind of refer to the same thing. And another word is Buddha nature. It's this ultimate gnosis of a Buddha. It's a Buddha's perspective.

So this Buddha nature, this ultimate, actually in his way of presenting what Buddha nature means, includes both the subjective and the objective aspects of this Buddha mind, this Buddha gnosis, this ultimate Buddha consciousness. Both the subjective—and that subjective is this yeshe, this gnosis, this awareness that is empty and that knows emptiness.

Sometimes people use the word—this is an aside now—sometimes people use the word pure awareness, but awareness always has some degree of insight or delusion in it. And it always has, it's always mixed with other inclinations, some degree of clinging, and so on, some degree of conceiving.

But this idea of the yeshas, the gnosis, the Buddha gnosis, is an empty awareness. It has no inherent existence. But it's a gnosis, it's an awareness that knows the emptiness of everything, including itself—space, time, all objects, all subjects, everything. That's what yeshas is from the subjective aspect.

And the subjective aspect of the Buddha nature perceives the objective aspect of the Buddha nature, which is a world of divine appearances. Not just universally, like all imbued with divinity in a kind of universal way, but also particulars—particular deities, particular manifestations, and particular deities manifesting through particular objects or places or beings in the conventional sense.

So all of that together—the subjective aspect, the yeshas, the wisdom awareness, the empty awareness that knows the emptiness of all things, and the objective aspect, the perceptions of the divinity and the particular divinity of divine appearances—all that is Buddha nature in, say, Mipham's framework. And all of it is the ultimate.

Now, not to confuse things, but there is a parallel here between some of what we've just been talking about and also the teachings of Isaac Luria, who was, I think, a sixteenth-century Kabbalist living in Safed in Palestine. And he elaborated a kind of mythic metaphor, if you like, for the aspects of the divine, for the nature of the divine.

And in that aspect—this is not to be taken literally, certainly, and also not to be taken temporally—but in that sense, then, the Godhead, the innermost transcendent aspect of God, the light of God, if you like, the wisdom, the yeshas, the gnosis, if we translate between systems, or this unfabricated awareness, exists, so to speak. And then within that light of God's wisdom, there's a withdrawing from a certain, if you like, region. Again, this is mythic. It's not literal. It's not even temporal. There's a certain withdrawing of God's own light from a portion of that light, so to speak. And that withdrawing creates a space in which the creation of the world happens.

So you can actually see—I don't know if you can hear in that—that withdrawing is called tzimtzum in Hebrew. And actually here in that, something akin to the teachings of fabrication and unfabrication, if we translate creation as the dependent origination of appearances, then you could hear it or read it as: there is this unfabricated awareness when there's insight and wisdom there to a total degree. If I, so to speak, withdraw some of that insight, or, as I said, don't lean on it so much, or if I allow it to be not so complete, then appearances can be fabricated. It allows fabrication.

There are real parallels I find interesting between that and the teaching of the dependent origination of appearances, once one has understood that teaching at a deep enough level and can hear in a different way these other—which to us sound very strange—theistic systems, often depending on your background.

And then the question would be: why would God withdraw some of the light of that insight? And there are different answers there in this mythic system. Partly because God's nature is infinite. And being infinite, God includes not just the transcendent aspect that's beyond appearances, beyond form, beyond manifestation, but also includes the whole realm of manifestation—indeed all manifestation—because God is infinite in nature, ain sof, without end in the Hebrew. That's one example.

Another part of the answer, which in a way is also very beautiful, is because of God's desire. You may have heard this: God desired to know himself, to know herself through appearance, through manifestation. And so there's this desire to not remain completely transcendent, unfabricated, without form, without manifestation, without all of that. And again, not to stretch it too much, but we can see the desire there and the relation between how clinging and craving work to fabricate appearance in the Wheel of Dependent Origination.

But Isaac Luria goes even further, because all this—that kind of mythic metaphor, structure, conceptual structure of the nature of God, all that, this idea of God withdrawing from a portion of his divine light, withdrawing, creating a region of less light—that whole idea is from the perspective of the human only. From God's perspective, there is no withdrawing of light. There is no tzimtzum.

So again, if you can feel into this a little bit and actually see, oh, that's similar to this, or has parallels with this further stage of the teaching about fabrication—actually understanding both fabrication and unfabrication are empty, that there is no duality there. So the teaching of fabrication and unfabricating is all, from a certain perspective at another level—it's all samata, it's all equality. It's all empty. There is no duality there. So it's a teaching from a certain level of perspective, whereas this is all from the perspective of the human only. It's not God's perspective. It's not an ultimate truth.

Now when I practice and get a sense, if I develop the art of my practice, of my meditative practice and my skill with emptiness and playing with fabrication and appearance and unfabricating, when I do that and develop that, then I can ask at a certain point, at any point perhaps: whose mind is this? Whose awareness is this? Whose wisdom is this? Because I can see it is not self. It's not my awareness. There's a real developed perception possible.

This awareness is not self. It's a really important practice to cultivate. But at the same time, it's not separate from appearances. And if I'm practicing in a certain way, it's not separate from the divine appearances that I sense. And I sense too, whose mind, I ask you, whose mind is this? Because it's not self, it's not separate from appearances or divine appearances, it's beyond time, it's empty. Whose mind is that?

I cannot, I'll get the sense in asking that as a meditative question that both conceptually and experientially, we could say, I see my mind, this mind, so-called my mind, is not separate from this Buddha nature. It is not separate from the cosmic Buddha or the ultimate, as Mipham described it, is not separate from this ultimate mind or God, the mind, the awareness of God or the divine. So not just conceptually, but experientially, I can open up that sense.

And why is that important? First of all, it's a very beautiful, very freeing experience of the divine, but it gives a sense of my being, my citta, participating in the divine at the deepest level. And this is actually a hinge point, this idea of participation in the divine is a hinge point in terms of trying to create or offer conceptual frameworks that support a sense of divinity. Divinity comes in there are many, many possible flavours of participation.

The other day my friend took me to a beautiful stretch of the river, of the river Dart. I'd never been there before. And there was a bend in the river and there was no one there. We were there alone. It was a cold day, beautiful day, beautiful autumn day. And there was a steep cliffside on the other side of the river and trees, wooded and really, really gorgeous. And the colours of autumn and the leaves falling on the water.

And I was sitting there, opening to the whole scene and taking it in and the beauty of it. And into my mind suddenly came a line or a fragment even from Thomas Merton. "Day unto day uttereth speech" was what I remembered. I can't even remember if that's the right thing or if it's half a sentence or what the context was. I think it's the beginning of a passage of writing. Day unto day uttereth speech, whether he's quoting someone else or what, I don't know. I wasn't even sure if I was remembering it right, but day unto day uttereth speech. I had no idea what it meant, or what he meant by it, or what the original thing meant, but it was something that ignited something in me, in my heart and mind and soul and in the perception as I was looking at the river and the autumn scene and the beauty there.

And I didn't quite know what it meant. But that poetic phrase came into the perception and shaped and opened the perception in a certain way. It's actually quite difficult to describe.

So here I am sitting by the river, a beautiful spot and everything that's there. As always, there's many ways of looking. It's only a lack of meditative skill or, as I said, conceptual frameworks that are too constraining, whether we realize it or not, that actually limit our ways of looking.

So very possible in that situation to see that scene only sensually, in the sense of, wow, pretty colors of autumn, yellow and red and gold, and how they reflect in the water. And one is just really, if you like, responding or tuning in at the level of purely sensual pleasure, if such a thing exists, or pretty colours there, is one way of looking.

Or, of course, it being autumn, one could be filled with a sense of impermanence and reflect on impermanence, the leaves falling onto the river and swept gently along by the current and that could be what one is sort of tuning into and what colours and shapes the perception.

Or a different variation of the whole process of nature moving, the river flowing, the decay, the growth and then the decay and the whole cycle that the process one could tune into that, that would be a way of seeing, a way of looking, supported by the conceptual framework of process, et cetera.

But what was there for me was somehow triggered by this day unto day utterance speech, this fragment of writings, poetic, these poetic words whose meaning I couldn't really say. There was really a beautiful and very difficult to describe sense of participation, a kind of cosmology, or cosmopoiesis, actually, if we use the word, was there, was opened for me.

In other words, the whole cosmos, including myself, and the whole scene there, and the whole of nature, was seen in a particular way, was felt in a particular way that involved participation and particularly the echoes of that, of those words, somehow as if the trees were speaking, or the cosmos was speaking, maybe that's a better way of putting it, the cosmos was speaking, but obviously using the word speaking poetically. So there was this poetic sense of speech, the cosmos as divine speech, and of my being participating in that.

I could describe more, but it's actually not that important. Part of what I want to draw attention to is, one may say, a person might say, I sensed or I felt I sense, I feel, I am participating in something larger than us. In other words, the kinds of sense of participation we can have in terms of the way we sense the cosmos are varied.

So many people might say, I sense, feel, and I'm participating in something larger than us. But what was characteristic about this sense was that it did not only refer to the fact that I was aware of or thinking of a vast web or a vast net of physical objects or more dynamically physical events or processes in which I participate, my body breathing back and forth, the autumn air, etc., my even slight sweat coming from my body or how...

into the air, or how this body arose out of the earth and the elements—that kind of level is a horizontal level of participation there.

So that kind of participation, which sometimes people sense or want to emphasize, is what I would call participation at a horizontal level, at the level of physicality. But here, the sense of participation also involved other levels—other than the physical, physical

material in the ways that we usually construe physicality and materiality in modernist culture. I don't know—spiritual, soulful, mental, divine really, and divine in both a transcendent and an immanent aspect.

So part of what was mixed in there was the sense of the unfabricated shining through, but it was only part of it. There was a kind of vague cosmopoiesis. I'll come back to this word "vague" because it's actually important to realize that a lot of the experiences we have that are tied into conceptual frameworks are quite vague, and that does not matter. I'll return to that.

But there was a kind of—if you like—vague, poetic sense of the cosmos, very much involving this multi-leveled participation, a participation at levels that were beyond the physical, that involved my mind, my awareness, the roots of that, and the sense of the root of that in the unfabricated, if you like, and so forth.

Now, I know many people, or some people would say—just as a philosophical point—I know many people say, "Well, you can't prove that that's there, these other levels." And that's absolutely right, and I alluded to this before. We're talking here about realms of experience or dimensions of experience, and conceptual frames. They're not in the realm of verifiability as it is scientifically defined. So we're not actually in the business of proving, and nor are we in the realm of what's provable, verifiable according to the paradigms as defined by science. But so what? So what?

We're talking about experience, perception—deep, life-changing, important, these kinds of things that matter to us deeply. And so what if it's not in the realm of the provable or the scientifically verifiable?

I wonder sometimes whether that kind of perception—I know I only described it vaguely—but I wonder whether that kind of perception, that sense of participation at other levels, the sense of a kind of vague cosmopoiesis or cosmopoetics that involves that kind of thing that I described—whether that's... I wonder whether it's not available to most people. I wonder if it's gone out of fashion in some ways, meaning that it's not really supported as a perception for people these days because people don't read so much about that sort of thing or don't talk about it or hear about it.

And because of that, it's not supported as an actual experience that can open. Or I wonder whether people do actually experience that, but are kind of clumsy in trying to communicate it or express it, or limited because they don't have the conceptual frameworks or the vocabulary, or a little lazy or shy.

So I wonder, actually, about all this stuff—in the imaginal and the cosmopoiesis, this stuff—whether it's more prevalent than one might assume, or whether there's reasons why it's not prevalent. Because it's actually not supported because of not being talked about, not being shared, not being given conceptual structures that support it.

So what I was describing by the river, in a way, as I said, mixes—mixes a sense of the unfabricated shining through and also a kind of cosmopoiesis or theophany, the divine speaking through nature that was more than what we usually mean when we sort of think of poetic metaphors. It wasn't that I heard any words, it wasn't that literal, but it was something that was palpable, that made a very deep impression, more than just a way of speaking about something. But this was a mixture of the unfabricated shining through and a kind of cosmopoetic theophany there.

As I said, there are—we could say—three possibilities of the divine appearing through appearance, of the unfabricated shining through in the authentic unfabricated. There's the sort of universal awareness or universal love, other kinds of more common senses of the divine in a universal and impersonal way shining through. And then there's a third possibility or range of possibilities that involve the imaginal and theophany and cosmopoetics—meaning, the divine coming through particularly, in particular ways, particular appearances through the particularities of a person, their personhood, and so forth. And the particular face of the divine in that way.

And again, just as a philosophical point, a person may say, "Well, yes, okay, you had such an experience or this or many of the other experiences that I describe that people have had or I share with you. And it's supposed to say, well, but it may be that it turns out not to be true or it's not true." This is, again, such an idea. I wonder whether it falls into kind of a tight and narrow and not fully opened up conception of truth—that either it is or it isn't true. It's a way of regarding truth and reality that's very understandable given how we've been taught to conceive and think of things.

But maybe it doesn't have to be in that tight camp of either is true or is not true. As I said several times in this retreat, the whole notion of reality and truth needs opening out, kind of filling out the range. We need to be a little more sophisticated with what we're talking about.

And here, in these kinds of experiences, as I said, we're concerned with perception—meaning experience—and also meaningfulness. And it's important to realize that this is what matters to us as human beings. Perception and experience of course matter. Our experience matters to us. And meaningfulness matters to us as human beings. And they matter to us deeply, deeply.

So it's not so much, "Can I prove this or that?" but experience matters. The range and the kinds of experience and the depth of experience and our sense and taste of meaningfulness and the depth of meaningfulness. We need to realize this is what matters to us.

And these are constructed—perception, experience, appearance. These are constructed and fabricated, inevitably so, and subjectivity, my subjectivity is involved. So right there, there's an opening up of the whole sort of tight way of regarding truth, because we're dealing with perception and meaningfulness there, and we're acknowledging that they're constructed, inevitably they involve the subject. We're not simply talking about something that's independently, objectively real. Meaningfulness—meaning and meaninglessness can never be purely objective, can never be. Actually, neither can perception, and so forth.

So perception and certainly meaningfulness are participatory, constructed and fabricated through the way of looking, through the conception.

This insight is shared by postmodern understandings. Many people have written about this. I feel sometimes that postmodern writers, or writers about postmodern traditions—if you can even call it tradition, or that direction, that thrust—are in a way limited through not having meditative experience. The participation they're talking about, the construction of perspective they're pointing out, is usually to do with texts and words and quite gross levels of perceptions.

Even people like Heidegger and others—all these people really lacked a depth of meditation that would have enabled them to enter deeply into the subtleties of what's involved in participating in experience and constructing and fabricating all the subtle conceptuality that's involved. They're way more subtle than language or words or thought, as they so often pointed to.

When one has that degree of understanding and learns actually to move between multiple perspectives, realizing none are true, it's quite different from just an intellectual, philosophical understanding of, say, post-structuralism or post-modernism that just deconstructs this or that perspective or understanding or piece of writing or philosophy and pulls it down or points out how it's constructed at a certain level.

Oftentimes what happens then is it just veers towards a kind of nihilism, as if recognizing that all perspectives are not true—constructed—but there isn't then enough meditative skill, because one hasn't developed that meditation, to actually then realize: oh,

these are all constructed, actually constructed on a much more subtle and deep level, all these perspectives. I can actually realize that and then enter into multiple perspectives.

Rather than just deconstructing and being left with a kind of cold, barren nihilism or an intellectual game that leads nowhere, I can actually enter into different perspectives. We talked about so much on this retreat and play with that meditatively—moving between different perspectives, different ways of looking, opening up different senses of the cosmos, different soul worlds, different ways of seeing, engaging cosmopoiesis. All of it without clinging to it as real, as ultimately real, as true in that kind of tight way.

But it gives me real, practical, lived fluidity and this increased range in which I can experience beauty of the different perspectives. Doors open, worlds open. Rather than the kind of nihilism and barrenness that might come out of a purely intellectual postmodernism, I'm really interested in opening up the realm of experience, perception that's possible for us as human beings.

But also, rather than that kind of result of nihilism, I'm interested in keeping meaningfulness alive, in keeping the possibilities for meaningfulness alive, keeping them as viable options for us at times. I'm interested in conceptual structures and practices that support a deep and rich and enriching sense of meaningfulness in our lives. Not to cling to a sense of meaningfulness out of some kind of fear of our real existential situation. Not to cling to it at all. It's an option. At times there are different kinds of sense of meaningfulness. We can have a sense of that deep meaningfulness to our lives. And at times it's not there and it's not needed.

When, for instance, there's the perception of the unfabricated shining through everything, that's beyond meaningfulness. And it's an experience of the divine, but in a way it dissolves any sense of or need for meaningfulness at that time. And yet there are other dimensions of the being, the soul, the psyche that need meaningfulness, of which meaningfulness is actually an integral part.

So I'm interested in that—not to cling to it all the time, cling to a certain idea or cling to a certain experience of meaningfulness, but to have it as a viable option, something we move in and out of in rich and wide and deep ways, alive ways, so that this is open.

Of course we can deconstruct meaningfulness—we can do it in many ways—but not only do that. And if I talk about meaningfulness, I'm going to come back to this in relation to all this question of the divine. But meaningfulness, we can realize, has no inherent existence. It's not independent of the subject, of my mind, of the concept. Of course not.

But again, we fall so easily into this polarized or dualistic thinking. Either it's real in some kind of purely objective way, in the way I understand objects as being different, separate from the subject, from me and my consciousness. Either it's real in that way—the meaningfulness of my life, or this aspect of meaningfulness—or I am just making it up, and therefore it's unreal in the way that I narrowly conceive of real. You can see all this is so easy for us to assume. Either the cosmos or life or my life is meaningful in a real way, which somehow means independently objective way, or I'm making it up. It's either one or the other.

But can I see? Actually, no. It has no inherent existence. It's not independent of the consciousness, and yet it still has validity because I'm not falling into that separation of subject and object, subject and world, cosmos—that whole conceptual framework, ideology, lack of understanding.

So I'm really interested in this dimension of meaningfulness, or these experiences of meaningfulness in our lives. And that comes—I'll revisit this later—but that comes through the personal divine rather than the universal divine or the impersonal divine. So it's through the experience of images as we have been talking about them, with this sense of being rooted in archetypes and daimons and other levels that want something from me in my life. This meaningfulness is through those kind of experiences of the divine—they're in images and in seeing my life or my person or another person's life, another person's personhood as reflecting or rooted in or mirroring, originated in archetypes, daimons, some other level that's retaining of the personal and the particular.

So I'm going to revisit that, but all that's implied—part of what's implied there is then how to tie this understanding of emptiness and the unfabricated with this sense of the more personal divine, because that's where the experience of meaningfulness is possible.

So we still have to tie them together, or rather we're interested in tying them together. For someone like Henri Corbin, he was working, if you like, from really a kind of Platonic or neo-Platonic sort of conceptual structural philosophy, or variations on that. I'm not going to go into details of that and describe that—we don't have time. But he was working in that kind of framework.

In that kind of framework, there is, or that kind of theology, if you like, this ultimate reality which is very akin, as we said, to the unfabricated, the neo-Platonic one. In Latin, sometimes they call it the *deitas absconditas*, the hidden god. It's inaccessible to the senses or to any manifestation in form or image—a hidden god or godhead beyond, if you like, human accessibility.

When there is that as a sort of theological construct, then the human being needs angels to span the sort of chasm, the abyss, between the godhead and the human. They are, if you like, images of God, as we talked about, theophanies. For Corbin, he actually held that it was impossible to have an experience of this *deus absconditus*, and he held any such experience to be a sort of self-delusion, if I read him right. But then again, he almost certainly was never given the kind of or taught the kind of meditative tools and arts that I've been describing in terms of unfabricating that would actually help him to move towards that and have that kind of experience.

But in that system there's a kind of transcendent God and then one needs the images to be the theophanies, to have the experience of God, because I cannot have an experience of this inaccessible, transcendent God in that kind of thinking. So in that system, the angels are—I mean, it's quite an elaborate system—but they are tied together, but there's a kind of, they span this chasm, if you like, the imaginal figures.

But he also, I'll stay with Corbin for a minute, he also, for him, would hold the human imagination as, and would regard it as distinct from the divine imagination, but actually kind of continuous with it. In other words, we're back to what I was describing earlier, this realization that we can have, this perspective that we can have in a very palpable way. Yes, it's a concept, but it's also a kind of experience, if you like, that comes out of that concept and out of the meditative play and meditative seeing, that my mind, my awareness, that includes my imagination, is not separate from God's imagination, God's mind.

And especially when we tend towards gnosis, when there's a lot of emptiness and the malleability in the seeing, when there's very little clinging, when there's a lot of insight around, we're playing in that kind of tantric way, then we really sense then, or can sense, that the imagination is not separate from God's imagination, so to speak. God's imagination is manifesting through my imagination. My imagination is a manifestation of God's imagination.

So, and even for Corbin, there's a kind of theological structure there. As I said, I'm actually quoting someone called Thomas Cheetham who writes a lot about Corbin. He said, "The human imagination for Corbin is distinct from but continuous with the divine imagination." You can see how that parallels very much what I was talking about earlier. Whose mind is this? Being that it's not-self, it's not separate from divine appearances, it's beyond time and it's empty. I can sense, I can conceive it as not separate, this mind, this awareness, this imagination is not separate from God, God's mind, from the ultimate mind, from the Buddha nature, etc.

And then this experience that we—I would say is inevitable for someone practicing, doing imaginal practice after a while and practicing deeply with imaginations—you have a sense of, yes, creating an image, but also discovering an image. So creating maybe a soul world or a cosmopoetic cosmos, a sense of the cosmos or this image or whatever that comes, but also discovering it. So yes, it's my mind creating it. I can have that sense of it and I can acknowledge that. We've touched on this a little bit before. But I also have the sense of somehow it has some kind of autonomous existence. You could say, because it's in the mind of God, it's in the divine mind, it's part of the Buddha nature, the potential of the Buddha nature.

Let's stop there and pick up a little further later on.

CHAPTER 18

A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoesis (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 46 min

In this second part of his exploration of sacred universe concepts, Rob Burbea addresses common philosophical objections to imaginal practice, particularly around questions of fabrication and reality. Drawing on Henri Corbin's work on theophanic vision and the mundus imaginalis, he examines how deep insight into the fabricated nature of all perception—central to Buddhist emptiness teachings—actually opens rather than closes possibilities for imaginal work. Burbea discusses how practices of 'unfabricating' perception through samādhi, mettā, and emptiness meditation naturally give rise to experiences of cosmopoesis and divine perception. He explores the mutual relationship between these practices, showing how each supports and deepens the others. The talk concludes with an examination of the Sanskrit roots of 'tantra' and 'mantra,' revealing their connection to the themes of manifestation, sacrifice, and perceiving the world as sacred. Burbea situates imaginal practice within the broader context of tantric approaches, including Dzogchen, while acknowledging that terms like 'divine' can provoke strong reactions in contemporary practitioners.

So again, the whole question of assumptions and views about reality—what is real and what isn't real, ontology if you like is the fancy word for that—is very much part of the context of imaginal practice. The conceptual framework shapes how we'll hear some of these teachings and the confidence with which we'll be able to play and experiment.

I mentioned this much earlier, but it's worth saying again: people are very different with this in regard to imaginal practice. Some people don't seem to need much exploration of philosophy and questions of reality or opening up. They can just plunge into imaginal practice and play to their heart's content without needing any of that. Some people are even aversive to any philosophical discussion or exploration or opening up or questioning—they don't like the conceptuality of that.

Other people need a certain amount, which varies very much from person to person, to legitimize or give a basis or framework, a supporting framework for practice of the imaginal. Some people just need a little bit. A friend was telling me the other day that she just had a conversation with someone at a party, and this person just needed a little something that legitimized certain explorations with the imagination for them. Oftentimes that is the case. And other people need quite a lot.

There will be some people—many people probably—who are so entrenched or indoctrinated, if you like, with the dominant cultural modernist paradigms and views and assumptions that it really either takes an awful lot of time and pondering of the conceptual frameworks and philosophy underpinning the assumptions to liberate enough space and justification for imaginal practice and views, or it's actually impossible. So that's just interesting, especially as a teacher, to note.

I'll just share that for me, I'm actually really interested in these questions of ontology. Not that I think one can ever figure out the truth, but I'm still interested in conceptual frameworks and possible conceptual frameworks. In other words, conceptual frameworks can be things of beauty, and they are structures, avenues that open poetic possibilities and beautiful possibilities for the heart and the soul and experience. So I'm very interested in that, and if you like, a dimension or an aspect of the soul loves ideas and loves concepts.

It's just that I don't personally, for all the reasons I've said, believe that one will come to a conceptual system or framework that is *the* truth or *the* answer. And that frees up the whole investigation. You actually enter into it playing with it the way one might play with images or any other practice.

So there's a lot of range here too around the whole ways of relating to these questions of reality and ontology in regard to the imaginal, imaginal figures, imaginal worlds, et cetera, and all that. And oftentimes, as I said, some people—many people—will object. They're attracted perhaps, or not attracted, and something objects. And those objections, philosophically, if you like, are usually fairly predictable, understandably so, given the culture.

They say, "Well, that's fabrication. Aren't you fabricating that image or that perception of the world or that kind of perception of the cosmos or experience of the cosmos? And it's fabricated." Now, of course, the other unspoken side of that sentence, or that objection, is the assumption that there is something that is not fabricated. There's a perception that we can have of the world or of self or something that is real, objectively real and not fabricated.

The person voicing that objection has not understood, has not seen through practice, through deep insight into emptiness, the fabric, the extent of fabrication. All perception is fabricated. All experience, all appearance is fabricated. Without wanting to say—really without saying—that all fabrication is the same, so to fabricate an image is the same as fabricating a perception of this chair that I'm sitting on. Without saying that, there's something that the insight, the deep, thorough, total insight into the fabrication of perception, and then the emptiness of fabrication too—there's something that that

level and that thoroughness of insight does that opens up and dissolves this objection: "Isn't that a fabrication?" about that image or that way of fantasying something in one's life or self or other or world, etc.

So that objection, "It's a fabrication, isn't that a fabrication?" almost always betrays an assumption of some kind of reality that we can experience—the thing or this or that object or self or experience, a perception that's not fabricated. Not enough exploration of emptiness there.

Or one might say, "Well, these images, imaginal figures, they're not real because they're not material. I cannot touch it or kick it or whatever it is." But again, a little more probing into this shows a lot of problems. One thing that occurs to me right now is that we've talked a lot about how images can affect the energy body. So there is, if you like, a kind of sensation in regards to images. The more you go into the matter of practice, the more you notice actually how strong this can be at times, and how vivid and how precise and particular some of this can be.

But perhaps even more significantly, we might just ask this person who's objecting this way, we might ask them in response: What is matter? What do you think matter is? This may be something we'll come back to, because if you take the route of modern physics, actually, you go deeper and deeper into this question. What is matter? Well, it's made of atoms.

Well, what are atoms? They're made of protons and electrons and neutrons. Well, what's an electron? As you go deeper and deeper into it, it becomes actually very hard to say what matter is and whether matter exists or doesn't exist in the way that we tend to think of what it means to exist—to be something independently in a certain place at a certain time and everything I said before.

When we go into an electron, many of us will say, what's an electron? Well, it's an equation, really. And that equation is an equation of probability of manifesting in certain ways depending on how one is looking at it. What is matter? I say the real is material. I respond, what is matter? What do you mean by matter? And those equations exist in other dimensions than three dimensions—they exist in thirteen dimensions or something more. Actually, they exist in a number of dimensions depending on how many electrons we're talking about.

Or philosophically, if one takes what's called a phenomenological view—as an attempt to approach philosophy through just what we experience—we say, well, I experience resistance, or coolness, or heat, or hardness, or softness, and that's what I'm calling matter. But that's actually a different thing. Then we're back to the realm of perception and fabrication of perception.

So this idea that only the real is what's material is very understandable, but probe a little deeper. What do we mean by material? What is material? What is matter? We can approach that in different ways—physics, philosophy, dharma practice. It dissolves, if you like, hardened notions, ossified notions of what matter is when we explore, when we question deeply through one of those avenues.

Then a person might say, well, what's real is what's shared. So if I get one hundred people in a room and let's say at least ninety-seven of them agree on what is there, what they experience, what they see—everyone sees the table or whatever it is—then we can say the table is real. So reality is given by what is shared, and the other two or three people are just a bit bonkers or weird or whatever.

Again, so saturated and habituated are we to that kind of assumption that we don't often really question it. There are a few things to say here. One is just to point out that many images are shared, of course. Culturally, for example, one just needs to think of the image of Jesus or the Buddha in Buddhist cultures or our culture nowadays. So many images are shared. And of course there are many secular images—it doesn't have to be spiritual or religious—many secular fantasies of existence, of the world, of society, of self, other, as we touched on briefly.

There's also—to allude to this, though it's not the subject of this retreat and we really have to wait for another retreat—but it's very interesting... That's an understatement, but a whole direction opens up when two or more people engage in imaginal practice together. As a kind of relational meditation in the field together, including lots of aspects and dimensions of their experience, meditating together, talking with each other, experiencing, communicating together in the realm of the imaginal, there are ways that images are shared in that way. And actually in all kinds of ways through that. That's really a whole other retreat.

But in a way, more importantly to this objection—the real is what's shared—is just posing a counter question: can something have a kind of reality? Because a lot of the problem here is in that word reality. Can it have a kind of reality, or a kind of validity, if you like, when it is not shared? Can something not be shared and have a kind of reality, a kind of validity? Why not?

This is very important. When Corbin and Walter Wink and William Blake say the imaginal is more real—whatever words they used to say that—more real than the physical, when they say that, they're not implying that if you do imaginal practice right, if ten people do imaginal practice right, they'll all experience the same thing. There's a kind of non-individual shared reality that exists in the object. It's objective, independent of the individual. I don't think that that's being implied at all. Or if it is, I'd like to question that.

And when someone—I don't know who used the term—speaks of the discipline of the imagination or disciplined imagination, again in contrast to the imaginary or just what we call being lost in papañca or just daydreaming and that sort of thing, again it's not that if one practices with the imaginal, different people will see the same image and experience the same thing.

I think, or I would like to hope that the phrase "disciplined imagination"—wherever it was coined, whether by Hillman or Corbin or another—truly refers to what we explored earlier in this retreat: the delicacy and nuance of mindfulness that one brings to imaginal practice. It speaks to the sensitivity to resonances, the tuning of attention and energy, the careful noticing and encouraging of what nourishes, deepens, opens, ignites, and broadens the sense of soulfulness. All of this constitutes the disciplined imagination. It does not mean that such practice will result in experiences or images that are somehow universal or non-individual.

This distinction is crucial. Robert Avens, quoting Henri Corbin, writes about theophanic vision—meaning a vision where something else shines through the image, figure, or imaginal seeing. Perhaps it's another person, oneself, or the world itself, but there's a sense that something divine is showing through, coming through that particular face of the divine. We might call it seeing this or that as angel, if you will.

Corbin wrote that "the theophanic vision is essentially an event of the soul, taking place in the soul and for the soul." Notice here that Corbin's language and conception tends toward using "soul" as a kind of entity. We touched on this in our discussion about soul-making. This usage is perfectly fine—that's his style of language. For myself, I tend toward the language of soul-making, moving away from entities, though entities work as long as we understand they don't possess inherent existence.

Corbin continues: "As such, its reality is individuated for and with each soul. What the soul really sees, it is in each case alone in seeing." In other words, the reality of soul is not consensual, not shared, not socially agreed upon—it's individual. He adds: "The field of its vision, its horizon is in every case defined by the capacity, the dimension of its own being."

I want to share another brief passage, but must preface it by noting that Corbin's system, conceptual framework, and vocabulary differ significantly from ours. He draws from monotheistic traditions—particularly Islamic mysticism within the broader Abrahamic context—and Platonic philosophy. It's quite a different system with different vocabulary and conceptual framework, though beautiful and elaborate. Rather than attempting to outline all of this now, I'm taking the liberty of translating it somewhat for our purposes here, adapting his vocabulary and concepts to ones we've discussed more thoroughly.

Avens writes: "Soul-making creates imaginal figures, but their reality is neither hallucinatory nor illusory. They are neither objectively nor subjectively real, but belong to the intermediary and mediating realm of the mundus imaginalis"—Latin for the world of imagination, the imaginal world. "They are God, or gods, seen in such a form as an individual person is able to grasp." These imaginal figures created by the soul are perceptions that constitute reality for the soul, despite—or precisely because of—their individual nature.

Note in both passages what I want to emphasize: these visions are individual but dependent on the soul. We've emphasized this repeatedly throughout our exploration—they depend on the soul, or the citta, the mind-heart, the way of looking, the mind-state, the inclination, the assumption, all of that in the present moment. Dependent on all of this, the image arises. We never part from this understanding of dependent arising.

Swedenborg wrote that in heaven—we might say in this imaginal world, this mundus imaginalis—"the form of your world is what you are." William Blake offered a beautiful phrase: "As a man is, so he sees." I'd like to add three words to that ending, because one might easily think, "Well, I don't see angels, I don't see beauty, therefore I'm not spiritual or pure enough." But I would amend Blake's words: "As a man is, so he sees at that moment."

At this moment, when the citta is colored in this particular way, when this conception operates subtly or more consciously, as a person is, so they see. Again, we understand this as fabricated, as dependent arising, as empty—like all perception, it arises dependently.

"As a man is, so he sees"—we can take this as a statement about being in the world and seeing the world. I see the world, the self, others in ways dependent on how I am in that moment. Dependent on the state of mind, the inclination, the conception, the way of looking, I see that way, I sense that way, I perceive that way.

That's a fundamental Dharma concept.

But it applies too to the realm of the imaginal. So we have to acknowledge that with conventional reality, with material things, fabrication and dependent arising are part of the perception of everything. Everything—all perception—is dependent arising that way. But we're emphasizing it as well in terms of the reality of the imaginal world.

So again, it's not an objective reality. It's not independent of the individual consciousness, the mind and heart that are seeing that way. And yes, there are differences between what appears purely to the imagination versus something that's perceived as material and shared with others in conventional perception. Sometimes conventional perception is imbued with mythos and fantasy, and sometimes much less so when we're practicing bare attention, as we discussed before.

There are differences in the kinds of fabrication that are operating there, and as I said, I'm not sure how to fit all that together into a grand, overarching conceptual framework. So acknowledging those differences, but there's something fundamental to all reality, which is: as a man is, so he sees. As the consciousness is, as the mind is, so we see at any moment. All perception—dependent arising, fabricated, empty.

And as I mentioned briefly before, it's this exploration and understanding of fabrication—part of which is the exploration of unfabricating, of learning to fabricate less and less perception through different practices, and eventually, hopefully, to open to the unfabricated where one is not fabricating any perception at all. The exploration and the deep insight, reflecting on that and understanding that, opens possibilities and doors in terms of experience, in terms of the range of perception, in terms of understanding, and what's possible in terms of conceptual frames. It's massive.

So putting that as the basis and central axis for what the whole of the Dharma is liberates a lot of possibilities for imaginal work for many people.

Listen to this. In relation to this whole avenue and basis of understanding fabrication—understanding fabrication through learning to unfabricate, then realizing that this thing, either that perception or sense of self or whatever, was fabricated. When I looked in this way, therefore I realized it's a fabrication, going deeper and deeper into that until one reaches the unfabricated.

In a very different tradition, Avicenna was a renowned Islamic philosopher, mystic, also a doctor, a very important pioneer of medical understanding, and just a general polymath, genius person who lived in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. In relation to this exploration of unfabricating and learning about fabrication, in relation to that and the imaginal, listen:

"She who confronts the darkness that reigns forever"—this darkness that reigns forever has nothing to do with moral darkness or evil or anything like that. The darkness that reigns forever is, in Dharma language, the unfabricated, the unconditioned, what the Buddha sometimes referred to as the deathless or the *asaṅkhatadhamma*, the unfabricated. This transcending of any perception, darkness because there is no perceiving there, that reigns forever because it's beyond time.

"She who confronts this unfabricated, the darkness that reigns forever, and does not hesitate to plunge into it for fear of difficulties, will come to a vast space, boundless and filled with light. The first thing she sees is a living spring whose waters spread like a river over this interworld, the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal. Whoever bathes in that spring becomes so light that she can walk upon water, can climb the highest peak without weariness."

Corbin writes about this passage from Avicenna: "Once the soul has emerged from darkness, once it has risen from the abyss of unconsciousness"—again, by the abyss of unconsciousness, he means exactly what the Buddha would call cessation of consciousness, cessation of perception and feeling, if you know the Dharma lingo from dependent origination. So this opening to the unfabricated, this non-fabricating of perception.

"Once the soul has emerged from that darkness, from that abyss of unconsciousness"—and he writes—"this changing the appearance of things, walking on water, climbing Mount Qaf," which is a mythic mountain in that Islamic spiritual tradition, "all these are psychic events whose scene and action are set in neither the sensible nor the intelligible worlds"—that's kind of jargon for some Platonic philosophy; we don't need to go into that, but let's just say the world of the material senses or of abstract ideas—"not set there, but in the intermediate world of the imaginal, the *ʿālam al-mithāl* in Arabic, as it is called, or the world of symbol." We translate: the world of image and typification, he writes. "This is the place of all spiritual recitals."

Now, there's a lot of jargon here. By "spiritual recital," he means spiritual, or so to speak, imaginal encounters with imaginal figures, etc. And this world, he continues, "is intermediary between the intelligible and the sensible. It is the world in which spirits are corporealized, given body—spirits are given body—and bodies spiritualized."

Okay, so there's a lot of stuff in there, as I said, about his system that's different in vocabulary. I don't want to go into that. The real point is the interesting parallel between what Avicenna describes and the *siddhis*, the supernormal powers described by the Buddha in the Pali Canon and other Buddhist traditions: that someone who is

able either to enter very deep samādhi, very deep jhānas, or more commonly, very deep experiences of emptiness, or the unfabricated—this darkness that reigns forever that's plunged into—then for them the world of perception becomes malleable.

And I don't know the answer to how much—I've heard Tibetan teachers, actually been sitting in the room where they talk about people walking through walls, etc.—or is it just imaginal? An imaginal world opens up with great malleability there and great possibility for walking on water and the rest of it.

So I just want to make that parallel really. The central thing is this exploration of fabrication through learning to fabricate less and less, which exposes the fabricated nature of all perception, emptiness of all perception.

And going deeper into that opens up the malleability of perception and the world of the imaginal. We also see, again, the parallels between that phrase from alchemy which we've mentioned several times: "do not proceed until all has become liquid." In Avicenna's teaching there is this spring, the immersion in the spring, in the liquid, and through that everything becomes light—as in not heavy, not solid—the malleability of perception there.

So I'm pointing out some parallels across what on the face of it seem like very different traditions, the Buddhist and the Islamic mysticism. But this is for many people a real key to the imaginal—not for everyone, but for many people it's a real key to opening up the possibilities of magical practice.

Most emptiness practices are practices of unfabricating. I've said this quite a few times now: learning to fabricate less, and in doing so, in engaging emptiness practices, the sense of the solidity or fixedness or givenness of things is lightened as things become liquid, perception becomes malleable. Now, it also does that, as I'm repeating now from the beginning of the retreat, as samadhi deepens. There's a sense, too, of the body and the world of perception becoming less solid, more malleable, also through metta practice.

A lot of dharma practices will share this liquefying aspect, this making less solid of the world of perception, this unfabricating aspect. It's what they do. Imaginal practice also has this effect. So someone might not have done any emptiness practice or any of those other dharma practices and actually just engage in imaginal practice that renders the sense of the self and the world less solid, more malleable. And so actually gives rise to an understanding of emptiness and an experience of emptiness, of this fabricated nature of perception through imaginal practice.

Then both through deep emptiness practice or through metta practice or through imaginal practice, very commonly there arises organically a sense of perceiving the world as divine or perceiving other, or this or that, as angel, as theophany. A sense of cosmopoiesis opens organically by itself as one practices imaginal practice or emptiness practice deeper and deeper.

I wrote about this in the book that I wrote—as the emptiness practice gets really, really deep and starts even spinning back on itself, so to speak, to question even the reality of the notion of fabrication, saying even fabrication is empty, we can start organically, naturally—many people—to start perceiving the world as Buddha realm, if you like, to use certain language from Tibetan tantra. The world opens to cosmopoiesis. The divine world can be perceived. Or we can deliberately incline the perception that way through all these practices.

All these practices, in fact, are mutually contingent. So imaginal practice and emptiness practice and samatha and metta—they all feed each other. Emptiness practices will lead to samatha, to metta, and to the opening of the imaginal and the perception of a divine world. The deliberate perception of divine world will bring metta effortlessly and samadhi and will help us see emptiness and open the imaginal for us.

All of it—metta practice. That's why we did many years ago at Gaia House this retreat. I think we did it three years in a row, a long retreat: "Loving-kindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening," meaning very specifically that as one deepens into metta and compassion, one can actually start directing that metta and compassion towards phenomena and beginning to see then how phenomena fade and how thus they are fabricated, and actually using the metta and the compassion practice to understand the deep emptiness of perception, the fabricated nature of perception.

But when we practice metta, it will give rise to samadhi. It will give rise to metta, obviously. It will give rise to samadhi. It will give rise to understanding of emptiness. The world, for people who do long metta retreats, begins to be perceived more and more at times—in and out—as divine in all kinds of different ways. Cosmopoiesis is functioning there just through dedicated metta practice over time.

So all these practices are actually, if you like, mutually feeding, mutually—yeah, they feed each other, they nourish each other, they open each other and deepen each other.

All this talk of the imaginal and the malleability of the perception of self, other, world—it's all, as I've mentioned briefly and as many of you will realize, very much related to the teachings of Tantra, Buddhist Tantra, which essentially is a whole realm of teachings based on the understanding of emptiness, absolutely having as a basis the un-

derstanding of emptiness. Then based on that understanding of the emptiness of all things, practicing the perception, seeing, the sensing of everything as divine—self, other, world as divine—and incorporating into that, including into that, the practice, the use of the imaginal. So obviously there's a lot of connection here.

The word Tantra is quite interesting. It's worth—I just want to open something up a little bit here. That word Tantra is a Sanskrit word, and the suffix, the last part, tra—tantra—when you have that as a suffix in Sanskrit, it indicates the root, the first part of the word, the tan. It indicates the root as the means of the action, or the instrument of the action that the root means.

For another example, the root in Sanskrit, pat, P-A-T, is "to fly." That's what it means, to fly. So when you put tra on the end, you get patra—the means of flying, the means of flying—which becomes wing. So patra is wing in Sanskrit.

So when we come to tantra, it means the tra of tan, the means of tan, of "to tan." So what does the word tan mean in Sanskrit? It means a whole bunch of things. Listen—I'm not going to spell all this out. Listen carefully. You might have to re-listen here. Listen carefully and ponder.

Ponder these different meanings of the word tan. So the tantra as the means of all this, in relation to everything that we've talked about on this retreat—about archetypes and soul-making and the imaginal and everything we've covered. I'm not going to spell it all out; I'm just going to go through a list. But see if you can hear each one related to or in the field of or brought alive by everything that we've discussed.

So tantra as a practice, imaginal practice, this seeing of, this perceiving of all things as divine through the imaginal, through the malleability of perception. Tan means—tantra means—the means of, the practice of. Tan means to extend, to spread, to weave, to accomplish. So what's being accomplished? Who or for the sake of what is something being accomplished?

It means to perform as well—like to perform a ceremony, for instance. It also means to compose, for instance, like a literary work or a work of art, to assist. Going back to that—when we're talking about daemons and what wants to come through—who or what is being assisted?

It means also to resound, which we could also say to re-sound. So something that has an existence at another level is being re-sounded through my perception, my seeing it, my experiencing it as image here. To resound, to re-sound, to roar, to emboss. To em-

boss means to engrave a pattern of something in or on something else. Again, there's a pattern of something which is coming to me as image, and I might see another as image, as angel. Again, I'm not going to spell all these out.

It also means to prepare a way for, to prepare a path for, an opening for. Again, for what? For me? For gods? For archetypes? For the daemon? For what wants to come through? Tan also means to direct towards. It also means to manifest. Can you hear the resonances of everything that we've been talking about in some of these translations of what tantra might mean? To display. Again, to sacrifice is another meaning. And sacrifice is from the Latin—sacra facere—to make holy. Can you hear the resonance of all this?

In Tibetan usage and the late Indian Buddhism, Mahayana, one usage of the word mantra was actually synonymous with the word tantra. So you talk about the path of tantra, and one might just say the path of mantra. They use them completely interchangeably. And so, same deal—mantra in Sanskrit: tra is the means or the instrument, the practice of man.

And man as a root in Sanskrit, mantra. Again, listen, allowing everything we've talked about to resonate, to echo in these root meanings, the meanings of the root of what tantra, mantra can mean. To believe—man can mean to believe, to imagine, to suppose, to conjecture. And there's that idea of the flexibility of conceptual frameworks, to regard anyone or anything as. So this idea of the fantasies, the mythoi that pervade our perception and our being in the world.

It can mean—man can mean—to think oneself or be thought to be, to appear as, to be of an opinion, to be of a certain opinion. Again, this flexibility of conceptual frames, of views, of perspectives. But also the views, the perspectives, the ideas of different archetypes. We talked about this at a certain point—that each archetype has its own ideational inclination or structures or perspectives.

Man can also be to set the heart and mind on something. It can also mean, very beautifully, to honor or esteem. So again, to enter into a view that honors or esteems—and through what? It can also mean simply to perceive, and that has everything to do with what we're talking about. It can mean to offer or present. So what is being presented in this world to the world of perception? What is being offered through my life or through the life of another as I see it or through the perception of this thing or the world? World as offering.

There's all kinds of... Those root words translated—I'm not just playing a language game here—are pregnant with so much beauty and so much richness of meaning and possibility to explore.

So some of you will know, when we talk about tantra or the path of tantra, the path of mantra, that includes Dzogchen. So some of you will be a little bit or very familiar with Dzogchen teachings. And sometimes it's interesting—Dzogchen is quite popular now in the West. But it is a tantric path. So it's actually, in the context, Dzogchen is tantra, but this doesn't get emphasized that much because there's so much emphasis on nature of mind and instructions and teachings about nature of mind. But Dzogchen is within a context. Teachings on the nature of mind are only a part of Dzogchen.

And that's within a context of this perception or seeing of appearances as divine—that's the context for those narrower teachings about nature of mind, the cutting through instructions and all that. These exist within a much bigger context that has to do with what tantra essentially is: this practice of perceiving all things as divine, of seeing all appearances as divine.

That's the context, and that's the context of the teaching of nature of mind. The purpose of the teachings of nature of mind—because they bring a very deep freedom, of course—but also because they liberate, as I said, tying back to what we were exploring much earlier, they liberate ways of looking, perceptions of that divinity of all things. And again, divinity here is not just a universal divinity—because everything shares in the nature of mind or everything is awareness or whatever, so everything is divine in the same way.

It's quite personal, if you like. There is personhood in this, in that divinity. The universe expresses, if you like, the different persons of divinity.

Now, I'm aware that I'm using this word quite a lot—divine and God and this or that—and I know it makes many people very nervous. Other people just put up walls to it, and all kinds of reactions can arise. So I want to explore that a little bit in the next talk. What do we mean anyway? How can we conceive of this word that to some is very comfortable and to others is very alien and very off-putting?

So I want to explore that in the next talk.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 19

A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoesis (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 54 min

> *In this opening talk of the final series from his Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea examines the cultural context in which contemporary dharma practice unfolds. He critiques the modernist conception of personhood as a 'bounded, unique, integrated motivational and cognitive universe' and its strange marriage with popular dharma views like 'self as process' or 'interconnectedness as ultimate truth.' Burbea argues that both Western materialism and conventional dharma approaches share a problematic reificationist basis—assuming something is ultimately real, whether matter, 'this moment,' or 'bare attention.'*
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> *Drawing parallels between quantum physics and Buddha's teachings on anattā, he proposes a radical alternative: placing the entire dharma on a non-realist foundation of total emptiness. This means recognizing that even our deepest concepts of time, space, and awareness are empty of inherent existence. Unlike partial emptiness teachings that still reify processes or interconnection, this approach understands all experience as co-created through the fabrication of perception.*
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> *Burbea suggests this non-realist framework opens possibilities for 'cosmopoesis'—the creative perception of sacred, magical universes—and allows for seeing persons as theophanies or divine expressions. He challenges practitioners to move beyond the constraints of assuming any ultimate reality, whether materialist or spiritual, toward a more radical freedom that honours the fabricated nature of all perception while opening new dimensions of beauty and meaning.*

In these final talks of our retreat, I want to draw together the threads we've been exploring in practice and discussion, while also elaborating and filling out some of the themes and ideas we've encountered. In this elaboration, I hope to take these concepts further and open doors for the mind—doors to new views and expanded possibilities for practice and experiential exploration.

When we open doors, we often find that passing through brings not only answers but also more questions, providing structure while simultaneously revealing new territories. Some of what I'll be discussing may seem to create more loose ends or to build certain structures while leaving ideas and possibilities incomplete. This may indeed be the case, which means there will need to be another retreat, another course—hopefully.

Over these next three talks, some ideas will be familiar while others less so. Please hang in there if some concepts sound difficult or hard to understand. In the third talk especially, I'll provide examples that should help clarify things, perhaps through repeated listening and concrete illustrations.

Remember how we began this retreat by examining the cultural and historical context in which all our discussions of imaginal practice are landing. We explored particularly the unquestioned assumptions, views, and sense of personhood—both our own and others'—that provide the backdrop for these teachings. These ideas meet views and assumptions we've absorbed from our culture, usually unquestioningly, until they become our reality, shaping how we view and sense everything: personhood, the world, the cosmos, and imagination itself.

Let me revisit and expand on what I call the modernist conception of personhood. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his book *From the Native's Point of View*, offers this illuminating comparison between Western and indigenous conceptions:

"The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures."

We often take this view for granted, assuming it reflects reality rather than recognizing it as a momentary, transitional phase in the history of a particular culture—a way certain human beings have viewed and sensed personhood during a specific period.

Alongside this intuitive cultural view, Dharma practitioners in the modern West encounter other perspectives that make strange marriages with our inherited assumptions. Popular among these is the view that the self is a process—that there is no self, only an unfolding of aggregates, psychophysical constituents moving through time like some computer readout or machine-like progression of physical processes, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and moments of consciousness. Everything else is dismissed as illusion; what's real is this atomized temporal process.

Another common view presents interconnectedness as ultimate truth—the lens through which we should understand selfhood. What typically happens for modern Dharma practitioners is an understandable attempt to cling to one of these philosophical views, perhaps having glimpsed it perceptually in practice, then trying to hold onto that glimpse. This creates a strange marriage between Geertz's bounded, integrated self and either the atomized process view or the interconnectedness perspective. These

views either mesh together awkwardly or battle each other, with different ones dominating at different times, while we cling to particular views or experiences, trying to perpetuate certain insights.

It's worth noting that in the Buddha's teaching of anatta and the emptiness of self, all self-views without exception are regarded as empty, not ultimately true. The Buddha wasn't saying the self is an atomized process or a field of interconnection or any other particular view. Rather, no self-view whatsoever constitutes ultimate truth.

When we truly realize this and take it as an avenue of practice, a remarkable door opens: we become free to use, step into, and put on all kinds of self-views like garments and lenses, while maintaining the knowledge that whatever way we're viewing self and person is not real, not the truth. Because all views are equally untrue, we're liberated to employ any of them skillfully.

But the particular popular ones nowadays—I mean, I could list a whole bunch, but let's just say there's the atomized process or this view of interconnectedness. And interconnectedness may be something I'll come back to later. This is a kind of aside for now—I don't want to lose track of the main point.

But interconnectedness is an interesting teaching when we poke at it a little bit more. It's interesting what is meant and implied and not implied in the teachings of interconnectedness. So usually—I hope I'll return to this later in subsequent talks—we imply something of the physical processes or events that make up my body, and even my brain, my organism, and that of others are connected over space and time. This physical event here, this physical process here, is interconnected with others, or actually all physical processes over space and over time.

Or mental ideas, for example—I hear a teaching or I read a book or some idea in the culture or something like that—are also interconnected, connected over space and over time. So there is, if you like, the teaching of interconnectedness is what I would call horizontal. Physical processes and events are connected with other physical processes and events. Mental events, if you like, are connected or influence other mental events.

At the same level of being, the same dimension of being, there's a horizontal interconnectedness. Though we, of course, admit that the physical state of things affects the mental, and the mental affects the physical, essentially it's a teaching that does not draw attention to or admit or emphasize an interconnectedness between dimensions of being, or invite the idea that there are other dimensions of being apart from the physical. So it's a horizontal teaching rather than vertical. That's an aside for now. I'm just throwing that out as a seed.

The main point here is, again, what is the context of these ideas that we're talking about? This is the modernist context of the modernist person, as Gertz described, or mixed strangely—a strange marriage with a sort of clinging to certain dharma views and holding onto them as philosophies: the atomized process or interconnectedness. And also the context of what is the modernist view or assumption or sense of reality of what the cosmos is.

And that cosmos being essentially physical matter—atoms moving, bumping into each other in kind of meaningless movement and interaction of matter over vast stretches of space and time, which over vast stretches of time now give rise to consciousness in some way that scientists haven't figured out yet. And so there is a kind of level, two different levels—consciousness and matter—but that consciousness is an emergent property of the physical, of matter. And so that's the modernist view of the cosmos.

Not everyone believes that, and we may battle that in some ways. But what that then means in terms of the context of my personhood, of our personhood, the context of my life and the trajectory of my life and what gives meaning to my person and my life, the context of my dharma practice, my view of dharma, my spiritual practice—all of that takes place, if you like, within a context of what we could call a philosophy of materialism, that matter is the primary reality.

A better word is physicalism—and don't confuse materialism as in the chasing of expensive cars and iPhones and all that kind of stuff with this philosophy of materialism. The physical matter is the primary and the only reality, and everything else emerges out of that, and if it's not material, it's illusory. Or if it doesn't have its roots in matter, it's illusory.

So what this means is that the context of everything that I do—my person, my life, my practice, all that, and whatever meaning I chase—is within this essentially physical universe. Everything's taking place within physicalism.

And it's so easy not to realize that these views and assumptions about personhood or what a person is and what the cosmos is are perspectives. They are perspectives. What I would call ways of looking. They are not complete truths. Absolutely not. They originated, some of them at least, as kind of working guidelines for the scientific revolution. And somehow they became absorbed into the culture and the mindset of the culture as if they were proven and complete truths. Very interesting—not proven and not complete truths.

And similarly with those dharma views of the process or interconnectedness or whatever, vast awareness, whatever it is. So these are perspectives, and this is really, really important to emphasize this and to realize this. Absolutely crucial—everything hinges on this: realizing what is a perspective and what is not a truth, a complete truth.

And then the question with perspectives or ways of looking, what I call ways of looking, is: what does this perspective, what does this way of looking bring? What does it open and what does it close? What does it unfold? What are the effects of looking through this way of looking, this perspective, this lens? And what are the effects of looking through another way of looking, another perspective? This is the golden question, if you like, for me—the golden dharma question.

So what do these perspectives bring and what do others bring? Rather than "this is the truth." And in the context of the teachings of this retreat, what does soul need? What kind of perspectives, what kind of views, what kind of conceptual frameworks does soul and soulfulness need? Because that is a deeply important question.

question for the being, for our being.

So there are these contexts that we live and move in, and where we try to arrange and follow the pathway of our life and practice—contexts of views, assumptions about personhood, cosmos, and imagination.

Then we have something like the notion of self-expression: to express myself. How important this has become in modern culture for us! It's something that, as I alluded to earlier, wasn't really an issue at all in other cultures or in the Buddha's time. Self-expression is alive for us; it's something important. We might not speak in those terms, or we might feel very inhibited when it comes to that and want to shove it away as a concept because it's so painful for us, not even realizing that we're doing so.

But in the context of some of these views of personhood or cosmos—for instance, if I'm clinging to a view that the atomized process is really the reality—then self-expression becomes a ridiculous notion. Any emphasis on it is simply absurd. Who cares? It's just an atomized process; it might as well be a machine.

Or in the context of this modernist cosmos, an essentially meaningless universe, self-expression becomes—again, maybe not ridiculous, but there's a disjunction there. Self-expression is often where a sense of meaningfulness comes into our life, where we generate meaningfulness. But it's divorced from the larger context, or there's a disjunction, because all this is taking place within this vast universe of essentially meaningless matter. And somewhere we've been told that this is reality.

So anything to do with self-expression is dwarfed by that. But also, anything to do with our meaningfulness or sense of meaningfulness does not derive in any objective way from the universe. It has no place in the universe. It's alien in the universe—dwarfed and alien, facing a void of meaninglessness. I tend to think it's self-generated, therefore kind of illusory, because this self, despite the interconnectedness at the level of physicality and perhaps ideas, is essentially a strange, alien, minuscule entity in a vast universe of essential meaninglessness. And that is the real reality, the objective reality.

So these views do something quite potent to notions of self-expression or meaningfulness.

In relation to how we think about and view self-expression or personhood, these contexts—philosophical contexts, often unexplored, often unquestioned, often half-conscious—constrain how we think about and view personhood and self-expression.

So that, for example, what we've been talking about as one possibility of seeing a person—my person or another person—as a theophany, as an image or vision or portal expression or face of the divine, as a being, an angel expressing the divine, through which the divine shows itself in a certain form, diaphanous to, translucent to the divine, to what wants to come through.

We talked about this: that the desire is not so much in me—what wants to come through me. It's something I'm not separate from, this divine that wants to come through, this angel that wants to come through, and what it wants. But it's also more than me somehow, other than me—both.

And this divine, this divinity or angel that wants to come through, is in a particular form, particular to a particular personhood. So it's a different concept. I'll elaborate on this later. It's a different conception of the divine than simply that the divine is shining through everything because it shines through everything universally because all is one. Or it shines through everything that has awareness, or whatever, because awareness is what's divine, and therefore anything that has awareness.

This is a different vision or sense of the person and personhood.

Because of the cultural context, the philosophical context—and often we don't really think of any of this as philosophy—there is a constraining, a constricting of the range of possible ways of seeing and sensing the person. And I'm interested in widening that with a range of possible ways of seeing, of viewing, of sensing personhood—mine and

others. What is it, for instance, to see and to sense the other vividly in a beautiful and rich and deep way—the other as self as a portal for soul, for something much bigger, for soul worlds, for the divine?

Now, as I've said before, very much fundamental to these contexts of views and assumptions in which we move and conceive, and in which the teachings land, is the whole question of reality and what is real. We've touched on this; there are different aspects.

But in relation to, for example, imagination—this view of physicalism, that the physical is the only thing that's real—among other aspects which I've talked about before and will come back to, this means that we tend to view, or the culture tends to view, imagination as unreal. We say "imaginary" with a kind of derogatory sense to it for the most part. We've touched on this. I'm reviewing.

And that was one of the main reasons why Henri Corbin coined the term "imaginal" rather than "imaginary"—to escape or set aside the derogatory views and assumptions that imagination has in the culture. I'm talking about a different way of approaching the imagination, a different way of relating to the imaginary which becomes something valuable and has a certain reality to it.

So for people like Henri Corbin, for William Blake, for Walter Wink—a Christian theologian with a quite sophisticated philosophical background and understanding—for Buddhist Tantra, and I'm thinking particularly of the very beautiful worked-out systems of Tantra that you get in some of the streams in Tibet, I'm thinking particularly of Longchenpa and Mipham in the Nyingma tradition. For these people, the imaginal is actually more real than matter.

So there's a turning upside down of the usual cultural view that we now inhabit. Now, the question of what matter is is something I'm going to touch on a little bit later.

But the view is that the imaginal actually has, in a way, more reality than matter. Someone I don't know too much about—Swedenborg, a mystic and visionary in the Christian tradition from a couple of centuries ago—exemplified this perspective. A writer named Slešlam Miloš, writing about Swedenborg and the way he held the reality of the imaginal, observes:

"Swedenborg's detailed descriptions from his imaginal practice of beautiful gardens, their trees and their flowers in heaven, of slums, dirt, and ruins in hell do not mean that he believed they existed other than in imagination." So he understood this imagin-

al world—what he called heaven and hell within a Christian theological and conceptual framework—as existing in imagination. But Miloš continues: "But imagination is the most real existence."

Yes, it's imagination, but the way Swedenborg viewed that kind of imaginative experience gave it a completely different ontological validity. It's the most real existence. For Swedenborg and for William Blake, this other world, this world of the imaginative, is more real than any physical place. There's quite a different view operating here.

When we come to all this and try to understand how these things fit together—we think we understand matter and the experience of conventional reality: this is a table, that's a chair, and so forth, and then there's the imaginal, psychic phenomena and all that—how does it all fit together? What kind of conceptual framework will present to us or outline the truth of what is real here? What is the reality of all this and the reality status of all this?

The easy and unexplored option is simply to follow without too much questioning what's given to us culturally. But when we start exploring, start questioning and probing these things through practice, through experimentation, through dialogue and philosophy in our experience, we realize it's not that simple.

As I said, I don't pretend to have the answer, and I don't think anyone's really worked it out, as far as I can tell. What you get nowadays is people approaching this in three broad ways.

One is this sort of going along with the assumptions of modernist culture and dismissing the imaginal as just imaginary and a waste of time. Reality becomes—even if people dismiss using words like truth and reality—actually a default assumption about what's real operating in their philosophy.

More sophisticated, some philosophers and people nowadays would admit that contrary to the modernist assumption—which is that there is a view or a way of looking that reveals reality, whether it's scientific materialism or, translated to the modern dharma world, mindfulness or bare attention reveals reality—contrary to this singularity of view that's often explicit or hidden in someone's philosophy or approach or dharma teaching, there's a more sophisticated philosophical approach that's quite popular.

This is the postmodern realization, acknowledging that any individual perspective will be incapable of capturing the truth of things or the reality of the way things are. Therefore, there's the necessity of multiple perspectives, just by virtue of a difference in the level at which reality exists.

One analogy I got from Sanford Drob, a philosopher who writes particularly about post-modernism and the influence of Hegel and other ideas, but also on Jewish Kabbalah in the contemporary context. He has this analogy of the way maps of the globe work to try to represent in two dimensions something that actually exists in three dimensions.

There's something called the Mercator projection. When you're making a map of the world in two dimensions, it will necessarily be distorted. There are also political ramifications of this, but it makes certain countries look much bigger than they are, and other countries or continents look much smaller than they are. Then there are other systems—I think one's called Gall-Peters—other systems of translating the three-dimensional to the two-dimensional map, which make different countries look bigger and smaller. Suddenly you see that Africa is enormous, or India is really quite large, while countries like certain European nations are actually tiny.

But there's the acknowledgment that neither is really an accurate definition or description or translation of reality necessarily. The reality being in three dimensions, we necessarily acknowledge that there are some distortions when we try to translate that, represent that three-dimensional reality in two dimensions.

That's a physical analogy of our existential and philosophical situation. The assumption there, implied in all that, is that there is some kind of objective reality to the way things are, to the universe, to things. It is there, but it's certainly not obvious, and it's not really translatable or expressible to human consciousness, to the human mind. But the assumption is it does exist objectively, sort of independent of the human mind. It's just that it's not articulatable at our level.

This kind of thinking has parallels. Some of you may have heard of a physicist named David Bohm, who had some dialogues with Krishnamurti. He was not so keen on some of the implications of quantum physics, which seemed to be implying to many people this sort of non-objective status of reality, of things, of atoms—that an electron or whatever it is, a particle, does not exist in any way independent of our observing of it.

It doesn't exist as a thing in a place at a certain time with a certain energy, with a certain speed or mass. All of that is very much contingent, very much dependent on the way of looking, in a way that has profound parallels with emptiness teachings.

Some people, including Einstein, were deeply uncomfortable with the implications of these discoveries made in the early part of the twentieth century and what they seemed to suggest. David Bohm wrote a book called *Wholeness and the Implicit Order*,

attempting to work out a system of physics which, similar to what Job was saying about the masses, gives an objective reality at a certain level while recognizing that what we then perceive has all these strange features that quantum mechanics describes—but that this isn't actually the reality. In other words, there is this objective independent reality, but it simply cannot be translated or made visible to us, so it gives rise to these strange effects when translated to our level of experience, perception and understanding.

What's interesting about quantum mechanics and its philosophical implications is that most physicists simply ignore the philosophical questions it raises. Very few actually pursue them, and of those who do, some, like David Bohm, are drawn to the project of finding an objective reality. Of course they are—that's what drew them to physics in the first place: the idea that there is a reality one can discover and capture in certain formulations, equations, or conceptions. The whole beauty, romance, and attraction of physics for physicists is to discover what that objective reality is. That's the entire scientific project.

So much of the quantum revolution can be philosophically challenging to the very foundations of the scientific revolution and the assumptions that became embedded after it. But this represents one more sophisticated philosophical approach: assuming there is an objective reality that's simply not capturable or translatable—like the necessary distortions when translating from three dimensions to two.

Now compare this second possibility—assuming there's an objective reality that's difficult or impossible to fully comprehend—with a non-realist, non-reificationist conceptual framework. What do I mean by that?

We humans have a tendency, a deep-seated tendency—and I would say this is what the Buddha is pointing to very fundamentally in his teachings—we have a strong inclination and attachment to assume an objective reality to things: selves, objects, world, time. What would it be to approach this question of reality with a non-realist conceptual framework as the basis for our whole way of approaching things, including the Dharma? We don't reify anything as ultimately real or "this is the way things really are"—any conceptual framework.

What would it be, or is it possible, to put the Dharma thoroughly on a non-reifying basis of emptiness? This, to me, is so important. It opens so many doors. I can't emphasize it enough—how fundamental and fundamentally different that would be. Can we do that? Can we realize the Dharma, shape and conceive of the Dharma, absolutely, thoroughly, completely on a non-reifying basis of emptiness?

That means emptiness, this understanding of a non-realist perspective, actually becomes the total fundamental of everything in the Dharma. The whole Dharma is on that basis. I think that's actually quite rare in the Dharma world.

Everyone who's been around the Dharma for a while would agree with the word "emptiness"—yes, of course, śūnyatā, emptiness. But the meaning is very, very different. There's a whole range of what people actually mean when they use the word empty or emptiness. What I mean, and what I would like to place as the basis, the foundation for the whole understanding and practice of Dharma, is not the sense that emptiness means things or selves are just a process in time of smaller units—moments, aggregates, or whatever. And not just the teaching of interconnectedness or certain other teachings. I'm talking about something much more radical than any of that. Much deeper and much more total.

Because in that process view, for example, the elements of the process are still given a certain reality. I'm talking about something utterly total. Everything, without question, is empty. Even the deepest, most ingrained concepts of space, time, awareness—all of that is empty, thoroughly.

What often happens in the Dharma is people say, "Yes, yes, of course, emptiness. Of course things are empty, of course this or that is empty." But then it's almost like it becomes something that's easily forgotten about in practice. It's like, "Yes, yes, of course," and then one engages practices or views that ignore or don't incorporate the understanding of emptiness. So the whole idea of bare attention, or when we bring into practice the question, "Is this moment enough?"

All of that rhetoric, all of those teachings—while helpful at a certain level—actually reinforce this reification, this making real of something. They serve as possibilities, particularly for beginners, because they seem basic. One can think, "I can get my head around that. Being present in this moment sounds so simple, so attractive in its simplicity, so basic. That's good. It seems as if I'm meeting reality on an undistorted level."

But that apparent basicness very quickly becomes a basis—a foundation for the whole of the Dharma, the entire worldview, everything else. The unquestioned assumption of the reality of this moment, the unquestioned assumptions about bare attention meeting some basic experience—these take root. They create, they fabricate experience in line with that assumption. So it seems that way and perpetuates an experience of this or that, of this moment or this bare attention, as reality.

Then I'm left thinking I just need to align with reality or this moment. I need to be with what is. I need to accept reality, open to what is, love what is—however we put it. Lovely, beautiful, very helpful, but only to a certain level. Quite limited.

The basis there is a realist one, not a non-realist one. The foundation of that kind of dharma is not in emptiness, even though a person might say, "Yes, yes, of course everything's empty." Or they might agree with emptiness but mean something different by it. They think, "That's real. Other things are empty. This moment, this bare attention, this process is real. I can be with that." That becomes the basis—the realist basis rather than a non-realist one.

A non-realist basis is much more radical. Hard to see, hard to understand, as the Buddha said—discernible only by the wise.

So what about, instead of a philosophy that assumes objective reality, instead of spiritual teachings that basically have a foundation in reificationism of some kind or another—what about a basis for the Dharma in exploration? The exploration through practice and through reflection, but mostly through practice—an exploration and understanding of the fabrication of perception.

What about that as a basis, as a summary of what the Dharma really is, how it works, how it all fits together? An exploration through practice, an understanding, a deepening insight into the fabrication of perception, of appearance, experience—using those three words interchangeably. And then eventually, as that deepens, the understanding that fabrication too, as an understanding, as a concept, is also emptied.

What about that as a nutshell explanation of what the Dharma is and as a basis for it? That gives a very different sense of everything—of what the universe is, the world, what experience is—and also a very different sense of what the Dharma is.

Some people might hear this and say, "Well, questioning reality in that way sounds abstract and intellectual." That's unfortunate because it really is not abstract. That might be a reaction, but we're talking about practice here—something very possible, very engaged, direct and palpable in its effects.

Or a person might hear this teaching about fabrication and say, not quite understanding, "Oh, so you just fabricate something, you make up something so that you feel better." But in that kind of response—which sounds like a question but is really a statement or judgment—it's betraying a reificationism. "You're making up something else. There is a reality; you're making up something different." It betrays what the Buddha would call delusional reificationism.

So rather than this reifying basis and understanding about "what is" or "this moment," what about a discovery, an opening through practice and insight that this moment is co-created with me, with the sense of self—even the most subtle sense of self, just the barest sense of consciousness or vast awareness? This moment is co-created with any sense of self, co-created with the way of looking, with the state and inclination and assumptions and conceptions of the citta. It's mutually dependent, mutually contingent and not separate from that.

All of it—the way of looking, the self, the subject and object—are mutually dependent and not separate. And then this moment becomes something thoroughly empty, along with the self, along with the way of looking and consciousness and all of it. Thoroughly empty, magical.

When we assume that this so-called bare experience we might have through mindfulness practice is real—when I assume that even tacitly, even without realizing I'm assuming it, unconsciously—it constrains. That assumption constrains the ways of looking that are possible for me, the kinds of views, the kinds of lenses through which I can look at experience. There's a constriction of possibilities, of range, through the assumption of reality.

Because the ways of looking are constrained that way, then the experience, the range of experience, of perception, of what actually appears in terms of experiences of self, of other, experiences of the world, of time, of space, of things like desire and eros, of cosmos—

All of that gets constricted—the range of perception, of experience I can have of all of that.

And as one gets deeper into the teachings of emptiness and realizes, actually, it's a constriction too in the conceptual frameworks. Because I'm assuming what's real. Tied up in that is a whole conceptual framework. Again, I might not even realize it. I might not even be able to articulate it. I might not even have thought about it ever. I might be unconscious. But there's a conceptual framework operating.

That assumption of reality constrains not only my experience—my ways of looking therefore my experience—but also my conceptual frameworks that I can entertain, move between. It constrains my hermeneutics, if you like—it's a fancy word for me, meaning my ways of interpreting experience, interpreting cosmos and the world that I'm in. Reading, if you like, this field of experience.

And all of that constrains the freedoms that are possible for me and constrains the creativity of existence. Constrains, too, the sense of beauty that's possible and the sense of the range of beauty. Remember we were talking about this before—the range of beauty that's possible for me as a human being. What kinds of beauty can the soul open to and know and taste and wonder at?

So deep, radical, total emptiness—that realization, that level of insight—actually allows so much more. As that insight deepens, it allows so much more. It allows, for example, cosmopoiesis, this word that I used the other day, this opening of the possibilities of seeing, of sensing, of really inhabiting a different cosmos, feeling oneself in, perceiving a magical cosmos, a divine cosmos, a cosmos like this or that, the range of, if you like, poetic possibility—cosmopoiesis, the idea of creating different cosmological poems, poems of the cosmos.

It opens possibilities through insight, through deep, radical, total insight into emptiness.

CHAPTER 20

Theophany and Cosmopoiesis: Instructions

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this profound teaching from the Path of the Imaginal course, Rob Burbea introduces the practices of theophany and cosmopoiesis - advanced imaginal techniques that reveal the sacred dimension of perception. Building on foundational imaginal practice, he explores how sustaining attention on images with sensitivity to their resonance affects three key areas: the emotional field, the energy body, and our perception of self, other, and world.*
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> *Burbea delineates three major avenues of dharma practice: bare attention, practices that unfabricate perception (leading toward the unconditioned), and skillful fabrication through imagination. He emphasizes how the third path - including imaginal and tantric practices - can nourish the soul and open the range of perception. Central to this teaching is theophany: the appearance or shining-through of the divine in images, and cosmopoiesis: the artistic creation of sacred cosmos through transformed perception.*
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> *Through detailed instructions and vivid examples - from hearing birdsong as divine speech to experiencing lovers as angelic theophanies - Burbea demonstrates how practitioners can recognize, tune into, and sustain theophanic perception. He shows how this sacred seeing can spread from individual images to transform our entire sense of inhabiting a holy cosmos, while maintaining the understanding that this sacredness arises dependently with our way of looking, neither purely subjective nor objectively existing.*

I want to begin by summarizing very briefly some of what we've emphasized in imaginal practice, and then open a door from that foundation, building on it to elaborate some possibilities that emerge in a particular direction.

We've said and emphasized that when we sustain attention meditatively on an image—sensitive to the resonance and all the richness we've been discussing—we will notice effects with that image, from that image, on three primary dimensions: the emotional field and emotions; the energetic field and energy body; and the perception and sense of self, other, things, and world.

These three dimensions are not separate, but it's helpful to delineate them for clarity. As we've noted, when we focus on the energy body and tune to perhaps pleasant energy there—a sense of well-being, comfort, or ease—this can lead the energy body and consciousness into the whole range of states of samadhi by tuning to what is pleasant in the energy body.

Similarly, if in the emotions there's a pleasant emotion—happiness, peace, or joy—focusing on that pleasant emotion can also lead into deeper samadhi, and the whole being coalesces and harmonizes in that state of samadhi, an emotional-energetic state.

If what's happening emotionally and energetically is unpleasant and difficult, then focusing on either dimension—if we bring the right qualities into that focusing, into that attention—may calm the emotions and calm the energy body.

Regarding the third aspect of effects we notice—the sense of self and perception of self, other, and things—this may include an awareness of resonances, a mirroring or echoing of the image and imaginal figure in one's personal life. We've given many examples: wrathful deity, warrior, wonder, and so forth. These are usually not to be taken literally, but there's this echoing in personal life.

We've talked about daimons, and there is a sense of this echoing, this mirroring, the recognition of which brings soulfulness into the sense of my life and journey and the events in my life. It adds soulfulness, or rather, I come to resonate more fully with the soulfulness that's already there; I nourish the soulfulness. The sense of archetypal necessity and destiny, or telos, are all part of this in terms of one's personal life.

But within this third field of effects—the resonances of images on perception and sense of self, other, things, and world—we may also notice that there's a sense of holiness, sacredness, or even divinity in the image. What do we actually mean by those words: sacred, holy, divine? Perhaps we'll return to that question. For now, I'll let these words resonate without defining them too precisely. But this quality may be part of what we sense and perceive in the image.

This sense of holiness or divinity in the image is something we can tune into and use in different ways. This is a massive subject, so I'm going to highlight just a few possibilities and directions.

One possibility is to allow that sense of holiness or divinity in the image to spread to the surroundings, thereby allowing what I call cosmopoiesis. I invented this word, though I'm not fond of its sound and haven't found a better alternative. Let me explain what this word points toward.

Cosmopoiesis: "cosmo" refers to cosmos—a word like "world" or "universe" but with more implication of the order or structure of the universe. We speak of cosmology in the West: what is the nature and origin of the universe? The "poesis" part refers to artistic creation—like making poetry, the poet creating poems. So cosmopoiesis suggests

the cosmos as poem that we write as meditators, the meditator as artist creating a palpable vision, an experience of cosmos. Like an artist, we become able to create different cosmoses.

This points to the creative aspect of meditation, the malleability of perception that, with enough understanding and skill, helps us enter into or inhabit different cosmoses. It's like art, as I've explained at other times. This is indeed a huge subject, easily warranting a long retreat of its own.

Let's begin exploring this door. The sense of divinity or holiness in the image can spread to the surroundings, the environment, the world we're in around us as we practice. Through this spreading, we feel that we are inhabiting a different world. There's a creation of cosmos through perception, through the way of looking in the moment.

Sometimes this spreading happens by itself—the sense from the image, the divinity, the holiness, the sacredness simply spreads naturally. Sometimes it's already spread within the image itself, or the image is already mixed with perception. In other words, it's not separate.

It's not an image that's separate to the perception of the world in the moment.

So this is one possibility. Related to that, or if you like, a part of that, is just the—again, here's another word we've used already—the theophanic sense in the image, the image as theophany. Theophany: *theo* meaning divine or God, *theophany*. *Phanic* is a word that means something like showing through or shining through or appearance of. So it's an appearance of a face of the divine, or the divine shows through or shines through it.

And so sometimes we have a sense of an image. It could be a separate image, separate from the perception where I have my eyes shut and this imaginal figure comes, or it could be that the perception of the world is appearing to us as a theophany in different ways. So these two words are very related—cosmopoiesis or theophany—but it could be that an imaginal figure appears to us as a divine being.

Let's say there's that theophanic sense of the image. The image is a theophany. And so, for example, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, or Tara, or Christ, or whatever. And then we can use that image, that imaginal figure, with all the theophany that it's imbued with, and use it, as we've said, for cultivating different brahmaviharas—metta or compassion or joy or whatever.

But this figure may also not be a classical divine figure. It may be just some other human being or a teacher or a lover or a friend. Many possibilities, but they can become for us a theophany. This figure, this imaginal figure or this person that I know or know of becomes for us, through the imagination, through imaginal practice, a theophany. And then we can use this theophanic sense or the cosmopoiesis, the sense of cosmopoiesis, in different ways.

Now when we do that, when that is one of the effects that happens in the perception of the sense of self, other things, world, we never lose touch in practice with the feeling of the emotional field and the sensitivity to that or the energy body. So that's just reiterating something we've emphasized all through the retreat.

But it's this certain openings in the third field of effects—the perception and the sense of self, other things in the world, and particularly the sense of holiness or divinity, and within that the theophanic sense of the image, the image as theophany, or this wider cosmopoiesis or both—that I want to explore a little bit and practice, and look at some practice possibilities there.

So again, setting that in a context of wider dharma understanding—and again, this is something we've touched on before—it's so important to, I think, have a dharma view, a view, a wider view of understanding dharma practice that supports opening rather than closes things down and keeps them boxed in.

So putting all this in a wider dharma context, we said there are, broadly speaking, three kind of avenues of practice that we can explore as practitioners, we have available to us and we can develop all of them.

And the first might be what often gets called bare attention practice, or a simple mindfulness—the sort of presence or mindfulness of presence to what is real. There's usually an assumption that what we're present to then is real. And there's the simple attention, for instance, to the sensual detail of the moment—this taste, this touch, and how it, quote, actually feels—or the presence to the moment, etc. And most people are, in the insight meditation tradition, very familiar with that bare attention or simple mindfulness. So that would be one mode, if you like, one gear of practicing, one way of looking.

And then there's a second kind of camp, if you like, or collection, which involves a lot of practices rather than one simple practice, that have in common that they undo fabrication, they unfabricate the perception, the appearances of self, other, world, to a much greater extent than simple bare attention or mindfulness practice, so-called.

So all the range of emptiness practices and samadhi practices and metta when it goes deeply, all these practices and all those avenues fabricate less perception, they fabricate less experience and appearance of self, other things, dukkha, etc. So that's a whole, as I said, avenue within which there's a range of practices, the second camp of fabricating less, much less than regular perception, much less than simple mindfulness or bare attention.

Actually, most traditional Theravadan practices in the Dharma have that quality in common, that they fabricate less to different degrees, and in a way you can understand the thrust, the movement, of traditional Theravadan practices, for the most part, most of them actually are moving in the direction of the unfabricated.

So all these different practices, even mindfulness or the samadhi or the metta or looking at impermanence or whatever it is, seeing things as not-self, they have this characteristic to them that they unfabricate. They tend, as modes of looking, ways of looking, they fabricate less to different degrees and fabricate less and less until eventually one develops that skill to fabricate nothing at all. Nothing at all is being fabricated and there's the opening to the unfabricated as we talked about a little bit the other day.

So that's the second group of practice, the second range is this learning how to fabricate less, a little bit more and really radically less.

And then the third group of practices would include, what could we say, skillful fabrication. So one is actually deliberately engaged in fabrication, knowing that there is fabrication going on, but in the service of something. And it's skillful rather than unconscious or problematic.

That camp, this third camp of the practices of fabrication, very much using the imagination, imaginal practice or tantric practice, practices that fabricate the appearance, the perception of self, other, world in different ways.

So there's, first is bare attention or simple mindfulness. The second is practices that actually fabricate much less and tend towards a dissolution, a disappearing of appearances, a non-fabrication of appearances. They tend towards emptying out of self and of appearance. And the third group of practices actually fabricates skillfully in different ways, in different directions, if you like, and particularly we're interested in using the imagination, incorporating imaginative practice as being part of that, the skillful range of fabrication of the perceptions of self, other, and world.

Now, of those three camps, if you like, or directions, not everyone, but eventually I would say most people, if they're practicing a lot and diligently and widely and deeply and reflecting on all these things, and if they really get into all this stuff, most people will eventually, I think, come to a position or understanding where they actually see the second and the third of those directions as more important than the first.

So more important than this kind of elevation of the idea of presence or simple mindfulness or bare attention and the whole technology of stress reduction that's involved in that—important as it is and valuable and necessary as it is as an aspect, a platform, as part of our path, a stepping stone—most people will come to regard the movement, the whole direction and movement of learning to fabricate much less and opening to that dissolution and that emptying, that non-fabricating, the unfabricated, and also the skillful fabricating, the beautiful fabricating, using the imagination, tantric practices and all that kind of thing, of the perception of self, other, world. Most people regard them as much more important and fruitful and richer directions in practice than the first ones—bare attention, simple mindfulness, or so-called presence.

Because especially with the last one, the skillful fabrication, it feeds the soul. It gives the soul, if we use that language again, what it wants. It's something that directly nourishes, deepens, opens, heightens, and sparks the soulfulness. Not that the others can't, but there's more range to that and more depth to the soulfulness in that third camp.

And very much it serves what we're talking about, this opening of the range of perception. We learn to fabricate skillfully through different ways of looking and see how the perceptions open and shift and change. This is really moving in that direction of serving this opening of the range of perception, which I've stressed several times on this retreat, in a way that may be one of the most important things and one of the most central ingredients of a different way of understanding what Dharma is and what practice is and the whole movement of the Dharma.

The second avenue, this unfabricating, is also in the service of eventually—not only of opening to this unfabricated and the mystical transcendent beauty of knowing that what is deathless, as I talked about in another talk the other day—not only that, but also through that, through deepening in that way and then emerging out of that depth of non-fabrication, then also understanding emptiness through that and giving us more license, more permission, also more skill and ability to shape perception, to enjoy the malleability of perception and to open up the range of perceptions.

So this again, everything hinging around perception and with that needing a wider view of the Dharma or a different view of the Dharma than may be common or familiar to many people. But needing a wider view of the Dharma, a conceptual framework of

the Dharma that can actually hold all that, accommodate it, wherein all this makes sense. And it's a slightly different conception of what the direction and the aspiration of the whole of Dharma practice is.

When we make that delineation between these three avenues, it immediately, as far as practice is concerned, brings up the question: well, what is it that takes a practitioner in any moment in one direction or another? And as a practitioner, how can I steer and navigate and move between these different modes, these different avenues or directions?

Most people, as I said, will be already quite familiar with that practice of bare attention or simple mindfulness or presence or whatever we want to call it. But it's worth knowing too, in trying to understand better this whole question of navigation and steering and moving between these practices, it's worth knowing too also that clinging—even unconsciously—to a concept of actuality, that when I'm mindful or when I'm practicing bare attention this is the actuality of things, this is things as they are, to misappropriate a phrase of the Buddha, actually subtly or rather implicitly clinging to that concept that when I'm mindful I'm with the actuality of things, that will actually lock this avenue of bare attention, so-called, in place. It will keep it in place as a perception, as a way of looking.

Because I believe this is reality. And in a way, just that subtle belief practicing bare attention—it doesn't even need to be a conscious thought—locks the perception in place and the way of looking in place and then the appearance in place. So it actually cannot evolve too much or change or develop too much.

I'm throwing this out as an aside, but it will be worth, if you want to explore this kind of thing: what's the difference if I'm practicing just simple mindfulness, so-called, and I have a subtle view that I'm being with what is real—say materiality or this or that—and just shifting that view, same practice, but just shifting the view to seeing this is appearance. This is an appearance and that's what I'm giving mindfulness to. There's a difference between appearance and appearance assumed to be reality or physical reality or materiality.

These are subtle views woven into the mindfulness, subtle conceptual views, usually unconscious, woven into the mindfulness. We can make them conscious and then play with practicing with this subtle view, and with this subtle view, and see what happens, how they change the experience, because it will.

But if I have, as I said, if I'm clinging unconsciously, usually, to a concept of this is the actuality that I'm being mindful of, that will prevent the experience deepening and opening, and will limit it in a way, and will also limit the understanding of deeper emptiness.

But most people are familiar already with that simple mode of bare attention or mindfulness, whatever we call it. The second avenue or group of practices, the ones that tend to fabricate much less and with that whole range of less and less fabrication—emptiness practices, samadhi practices, mettā practices, compassion practices, those kind of things—it's really just a matter of learning those practices and developing one's skill with them. It's just a matter of finding the right ways to practice and developing them and then sustaining them as ways of looking.

So I need to learn this particular emptiness practice, let's say, regarding things as anattā, as not-self, all phenomena that arise. I slowly, gradually learn, develop the skill to regard them as anattā, as an example, as not-self. And then I sustain that way of looking, moment to moment, as a deliberate practice. A lot of skill, a lot of subtlety involved in developing that as a practice—a tremendously powerful and beautiful practice. But doing that and sustaining that way of looking will, as an example, will tend to fabricate less and less self and perception of things and world and phenomena.

So steering that way is a matter of just having, understanding what one's doing in those particular practices, developing them and just sustaining them as a way of looking.

In the third camp, the avenue that actually engages and sustains this skillful fabrication of self, other, world and the perception of self, other, world, we need to recognize when that is present for us, when there is, if you like, to use a Buddhist word, a skillful perception of self, other, world—a different perception that's actually there. Recognize when it's there and tune to it.

So this is recognizing, for example, holiness or divinity, recognizing the theophany, recognizing that there's a cosmopoiesis there. So recognizing that quality, recognizing that perception and tuning to that and actually sustaining a focus on that, on that perception, on that way of looking. So whatever it is that one's doing, whatever it is that the mind and the heart are doing to look that way, that needs to be recognized and sustained gently.

But often what actually happens in this avenue is that something sparks, or triggers a different way of looking—a way of looking of seeing the world through the imagination and then seeing self, other, world, seeing, perceiving them as theophany or with

this wider cosmopoetic sense imbuing the perception. Something sparks that and something in us, a sense to that mode of being, that way of looking by picking up that spark and tuning into that perception.

So one could definitely engage, say, a tantric practice deliberately to see one's food as divine nectar, as I mentioned at one point, deliberately trying to taste it that way and see it that way and smell it that way. I'm very clear what I'm trying to do, and I'm sustaining that as a gentle way of looking as much as I can.

Or it might happen more spontaneously. Something sparks in the mind or triggers—perhaps a poetic idea, a line of poetry, a fragment of music, an image, or someone we remember or think of or see who is alive for us as an image in the sense that I'm using the word. Any of these can function as a spark, a trigger, and become a kind of portal to this different perception, this more holy or divine perception and sense of self, other, world. There's something that's sparking this cosmopoiesis, sparking a theophanic sense. The possibilities here are truly endless.

But what's characteristic to any cosmopoiesis, or practice of cosmopoiesis, is that it includes the surroundings. I'm not just dwelling, focusing on just this imaginal figure divorced from the surroundings around me. Whether deliberately or spontaneously, the surroundings get included—where I'm practicing, if I'm outside or in the meditation hall, whatever the sights, the sounds, the appearance of the world around me as I'm practicing. This may mean the eyes are open, but they can also be closed, and one is still including a sense of the surroundings, an awareness of the surroundings.

The cosmopoiesis can be fed or triggered or born from an emptiness practice. States of samadhi naturally bring with them what I call after-effects on perception—they naturally bring cosmopoiesis. Emptiness practice, metta, compassion, or samadhi naturally alter the perception of the world, and through that we can actually understand more about emptiness and fabrication of perception. Kinds of cosmopoiesis can come through all kinds of practices, all kinds of states. The possibilities are infinite—the range is infinite.

So it could come from emptiness practices or samadhi or metta or compassion. It could come from some poetic image or idea that we are practicing with and resonating with. As I said, we notice the sense of holiness or divinity within that image, with that image, and we tune to that and let that spread. It becomes a kind of tantric practice where one can, for instance, see one's surroundings, sense one's surroundings, feel them as a Buddha realm, or sense them as theophany.

I'll share an example by reading you an email that a student sent me, because it highlights some of the possibilities here and some of the possible directions. She was talking about emptiness practices that she was exploring with some friends as a group, working through different emptiness practices together. Then she says, "I have been working with the imaginal quite a bit since we last spoke at Gaia House. The naughty child image has not returned, nor the indulgent aunt. But the sexual image is morphing and changing and feeding me more and more as I experiment with receiving it more fully."

This is actually the same person you may remember from early on in the retreat when I mentioned her experience of feeling like someone was kissing her as she walked through the corridor, which opened up samadhi when she began exploring it in practice. Sometimes the images that have their roots in or obvious correlation with our biographical history and childhood—like the naughty child or the indulgent aunt—are really important for us. But it's often the other images that seem to have less obvious biographical correlation or roots in our personal history that actually may last longer and be more fertile, seem to go deeper. It's almost like they come from a different dimension.

She continues: "The eros is less hard now but still very powerful. I've observed that it seems to come when the samadhi is deepening. Occasionally it comes when I call it, like it is rescuing me when I feel overwhelmed by heaviness or pressure in the body." This is very much what we've talked about—using images in relationship for the sake of samadhi, helping to shape and develop what's happening in the energy body.

"It usually begins with that sensation of being kissed, and it took quite a while for me to allow myself to be kissed and to enjoy it, which feels unbelievably nourishing. Each time this image comes, or occasionally when I bring it up myself, I learn more. One part of the image involves the being that is kissing me, joining me in meditation, fusing or melting into my body. I can feel changes in the body's texture and there is a sense of succumbing to one with greater experience."

This joining, being joined in the meditation, fusing with or melting into the body of some imaginal other—whether the teacher or some divine personage—and that affecting the whole sense of the experience, is so common.

But it's really her next paragraph that I want to draw attention to for our purposes today. She continues: "During my meditation last night, I was imagining everything was made up of silence and holiness. Another favorite practice at the moment."

Let me say something about this. There are practices I would put in the group of emptiness practices, where one listens to silence—listens to the silence in the mind, the silence between thoughts, the silence that pervades thoughts and pervades the body sensations, the silence that is around sounds. Even as one deepens this practice, there's the silence that seems to pervade sounds as well as thoughts. Attuning, listening to silence—this is a whole practice in itself, a very beautiful practice that deepens and deepens. That silence becomes deeper and richer and more mystically pregnant with a sense of holiness.

Very, very beautiful practice in itself.

And she puts, "I was imagining everything was made up of silence." What will happen if you do that practice of listening to silence and you develop it? One will actually have the perception of everything being made up of silence and holiness. It will come very organically, naturally out of that practice deepening. She's using the word "imagining." So one can have a little taste of that and kind of trigger it through the imagination, which may be what she's referring to.

Then she continues, "I was really feeling the spaciousness of looking in this way and everything was very soft. And then the sexual image came and also feeling behind the eyes of tears at several points. The emotion in the tears was of being moved and of touching something sacred." There's not tears of sadness or grief—something like that. It's of being moved. There's a difference. Touching something sacred. "This fusing of the sexual with the sacred is new. Usually I work with them both, but separately."

So that was her report. And it sounds like, from that email—I didn't get the chance to talk with her after this, unfortunately—but it sounds like there's the possibility from this place of the sexual and the sacred fusing in her experience. There's the possibility very much like a threshold for that to evolve so that this erotic image that she's been working with so skillfully and developing can actually expand to a wider sense of, a wider perception of sacredness in the world, and maybe also eros in the world.

This is a whole huge subject. And that would be different than just the perception of silence as holiness that she was alluding to before and I described. Here it's through an image, and particularly an erotic image, and that opening up, actually widening into a cosmopoiesis, where it starts to imbue the whole perception of the world as sacred, in a very particular way. This is such a huge subject, that one in itself, but that would be one possibility.

And just to offer a few more possibilities, give you a sense of the range of what's possible here, or the beginnings of what's possible at least. So some people practice mantra meditation, the repeating inwardly of certain holy syllables or mantras or phrases. And so here, perhaps practicing at first, hearing the mantra internally as a theophany. So the mantra itself, hearing it internally, but hearing it as, if you like, divine speech or the cosmic primordial sound or whatever.

So implicit in hearing it as a theophany inside, internally, so to speak—implicit in that is there's usually a conceptual framework of what is sacred, but it's usually vague. This is something I will return to later. So implicit in the practice, hearing internally as theophany is a vague conceptual framework of the sacredness of it. Practicing hearing the mantra that way internally with this sense of sacredness of theophany and then letting it spread—and again it might spread naturally but letting it spread so it feels like it's not just coming from within but it's pervading the world, pervading the air, pervading the cosmos, pervading nature. And then one has a kind of cosmopoiesis where the mantra is, again, imbuing the whole world, the whole cosmos.

Sometimes, amazingly, and we've touched on this before, even something that happens in meditation that is a distraction can end up sort of taking a turn. In a way, we can notice something in a distracted thought, for example, that it has a theophanic sense within it. We notice that, oh, I thought I was distracted, but actually it's got another quality to it. When I notice it, I pay attention to it in a different way. So even within distractions, sometimes we can notice a gold, a treasure there. In this case, particularly what I want to emphasize is the theophanic sense, the expression of divinity, if you like, in the very distracted thought or idea or whatever. And that's something then we can notice, tune to, and allow and open to.

So an example of this—it's maybe for some people a strange example, but because I was a jazz musician for some years and I used to play jazz electric guitar—so we're working so much at that in the past, sometimes I mean happened a lot in the past when I was actually a musician, that one often has, it's as if a part of the mind is just improvising music all the time and improvising these melodies and jazz lines, if you like. And because one knows the guitar, one's actually seeing, if you like, the image of the guitar and where the fingers would go, and it all just is happening kind of spontaneously by itself in the mind. And sometimes it's very creative, sometimes it's just a sort of thing that's going on.

And so I was meditating, and I noticed that that was going on. And I couldn't—it felt a little sticky as a distraction. It's like, oh, I let go of it, but it still was there. I let go of it, it still was there. And then I was noticing, oh, I can actually hear those musical lines

being improvised. I can actually hear it right now in a certain way, or play with hearing it a certain way, as if that music that the mind was creating, the mind was hearing inside—you can hear it as mirroring or as an analogue of the endlessly creative musical cosmos.

So there's a whole kind of world of idea, quite vague, wrapped up in that way of hearing. The vague idea of somehow the essence of the cosmos is somehow or at some level a kind of music. And the vague idea that the different human musical laws, those different systems and different cultures, those laws of music somehow mirror the cosmic or divine laws. This is all very vague and subtle ideation.

So I know there are those ideas out there in the world. In the meditation it felt really not like a rigid or a clunky idea.

There was something very subtle about this hearing and this loose, vague ideation that was also very subtle. It was quite fluid and not some clunky metaphysical system.

What I'm talking about here is the shift in the hearing of what was initially a distraction in the meditation opened a really subtle meditative sense. Part of what was involved with that was a kind of relaxing of the mind's clinging or aversion to or narrow focus on the music that was in the mind. And the attention suffusing a little wider, including the energy body, as we said, and—I keep stressing—including this sense and attuning to the sense of the wider cosmic theophany that was with this hearing of this music in this subtle way. And also the attention was with the very subtle and vague idea of this music of the cosmos and the way that human music echoes or mirrors or expresses the divine and the cosmos.

I may come back to this image later, because in different ways it might illustrate something. But that would be, maybe for some people, a quite strange example of a way that actually can pick up on something, even in a distraction, and tune to the sense of the theophany there, and the implicit cosmopoiesis that can sometimes open up with that. Actually what was distraction becomes a very beautiful, subtle meditation that one then sustains the attention on, and very, very fruitful in that respect, very beautiful.

It's possible that a person whom we see imaginally can become for us a theophany, a face of the divine. They become, if you like, an angel. Corbin talks about the angelic function of beings. So this is very possible, especially when there's eros. I don't just mean sexual attraction—I include that, but I mean more. Especially when there's eros in the relating to and way of seeing that person, and especially where there's imaginal practice and imagination imbuing that perception, and the logos, the conceptual frame-

work supports it—very possible for a person that we love to become for us a theophany, an angel, to fulfill a kind of angelic function for our soul, for the psyche. And then there's a seeing of divinity in that person.

But this is a different kind of sensing of divinity. It's a different mode than, say, seeing all beings as one or partaking of the oneness of things, whether that oneness is the mystical silence or oneness of cosmic love or the oneness of awareness or whatever it is. Different kinds of oneness share in that they erase or dissolve the particularity of the personhood, the unique personhood. That kind of sense of a divine oneness that includes all beings—that's absolutely wonderful and it will come out of standard metta practice if you do it long enough in certain ways, it will come out of different ways of practicing with awareness and with silence as we've talked about.

But right now I'm after something different: a way of sensing divinity, sensing another person as theophany, as angel, but in a way that includes or retains their personhood, their particularities and their uniqueness. Even though each person might appear to us as not just one kind of theophany, but multiple. So one person, when the imaginal practice is really rich in regard to a person that we love, and when there's eros there, and when there's the conceptual framework opening and supporting it—one person can be different angels to us. They appear as different theophanies. And all of them retain their personhood, their particular uniqueness. It's not this dissolution into oneness.

But then that particular theophany can spread to the world as well. That's actually a huge subject and interesting—again, something that one could easily spend a long retreat on or write a book on. I'll just mention it now as a possibility.

Some of the possibilities can actually be very, very simple. A retreatant a while ago shared that he was enjoying reading a little poetry on his retreat and was reading a Hafiz poem. I can't remember the exact line from the poem that triggered it, but it was something about Hafiz saying all things are gifts from the divine or gifts of the divine or the beloved, using the word beloved as a synonym for the divine. Note also again that when there's the word beloved, there's the inclusion of the erotic component in regard to the divine. Calling the divine the beloved introduces, allows, supports the eros in relation to the sense of the divine.

This poem says all things are gifts from the beloved, the divine. And that line touched his heart and opened his heart. It became, if you like, a poetic eidos, a poetic idea which became a poetic way of looking. That's what we're in the business of here—we're in the business of cultivating these different ways of looking.

So the heart was touched, was opened, and the idea there—all things are gifts from the Beloved, from the Divine—entered and transformed the way of looking, so that things were actually perceived that way. It wasn't just a cute line of poetry; actually it became a meditation, became a perception. He was seeing and sensing things that way. And then we were talking about gently encouraging a sustaining of that way of looking, so the heart connected and perhaps just dropping in like a whisper now and then the memory of that line of poetry, and letting it transform the way of looking and sustaining that way of looking, just very gently, very lightly, without clinging too tightly to it.

Doing that, joy came—in this case, joy came, rapture came, physical bliss, definitely a sense of beauty and depth in the sense of the things of the world. There was cosmopoiesis happening. He was at that point experiencing, inhabiting a different cosmos than the regular one that he felt he inhabited. So that would be a very simple way of triggering, if you like, or encouraging this kind of cosmopoetic perception.

Or it might be that organically one is practicing meditation and some kind of poetic idea that has a cosmopoiesis implicit in it just arises spontaneously in one's mind. I remember some months ago doing standing meditation outside in the early morning sun beneath the beautiful trees we have here at Gaia House, and really opening to the sense of the surroundings and everything. And this phrase came to me: I am prayer.

What does that mean? "I am prayer." It came out of the sensibility in the moment, and it also fed a sense of self in the moment. I am prayer. So it's a very—what am I? I am prayer. What does that mean? I don't know. It's a poetic idea. I mean, it has all kinds of resonances. I could probably say a lot about it.

That phrase definitely didn't mean "I am prayer" as in supplication, as in asking God for this or that favor and sorting this or that out in my life. Prayer as something much deeper, much wider and mysterious in the range of its meanings. Prayer as praise, rather than supplication or asking for wishes to be fulfilled—my wishes to be fulfilled. Even wider than praise.

I cannot get to the bottom of what that means—prayer—and certainly not to the bottom of what it means to entertain the idea, the poetic idea, "I am prayer." And letting that be there in the consciousness and letting it have its effect, the effects of this poetic idea on the perception, on the way of looking and the beauty and the depth that that opens up, opened up.

And that opened up a sense actually of the cosmos and the earth, the very earth and the trees and the ground and the sunlight as prayer. Not just "I am prayer," but all this is prayer somehow. What does it mean? I don't know. I don't have to figure out what it means. I have to open to that cosmopoiesis.

Another possibility would be to practice, say, with breath meditation and practice feeling or conceiving or imagining the breath as the breath of God or a god or a goddess. So what is this breath that comes in and out—either in the anatomical way of air or the whole energy breath that we were talking about earlier, at the beginning of the retreat? What would it be to play with conceiving of that, imagining it, feeling it as the breath of God or the breath of the goddess?

Or perhaps, what is it to breathe with the beloved? To breathe with the beloved. So breathing together. And who is that beloved? It's an imaginal figure. It may be a lover in one's human life. It may be some other figure that there is this deep love for. It may be the divine in some face, some form. And again, if there's eros there, it's really okay. It might be a very erotic motion, in some sense, and way of relating to breathe with the beloved in the imagination.

Maybe with that there's a real sense of blessedness that comes. Probably because it involves the breath and that kind of opening, it's probable that that kind of imaginal work—feeling, conceiving of the breath that way—probably will invite the possibility of being breathed by the beloved, or breathing with, a kind of opening, abandoning, all of which are, if you like, aspects of the energy body, but also aspects of the whole being, the emotionality, the whole psyche, the whole consciousness.

So we can gently introduce some imaginal idea or concept or just the image there and play with, kind of navigate, ride it. What does it feel like it wants to open and do in the energy body, in the emotion, but also in the perception?

Another example: one might hear, for instance, the birdsong or the wind or some other element of sound in the natural world or around us. Hear that as mantra. So that is the mantra. And what does mantra mean? Well, it could be divine speech. It could be sacred vocalization. It might have some other meaning.

So there's no real formula for any of this. It's very improvised. What kind of way of conceiving—very loosely, usually very vague or quite vague—way of hearing birdsong and wind gives it or imbues it with that sense of holiness? So we're just gently supporting, inclining the attention and also the way of looking, the way of relating, the way of conceiving, so that it opens up this cosmopoiesis.

Or what would it be to hear the birdsong, hear the wind as love, as metta, as the compassion of the bodhisattvas, compassion of the cosmic Buddha, the compassion of the cosmic Christ?

Or here, the birdsong, the wind, or whatever it is, as the devas, the angelic beings, praising, singing joy. And these angelic beings, they're imaginal figures. I may not see them. Their being and what they actually are, what they constitute, that may remain quite vague to me—no problem. The specificity that's important there is the shift in perception, the hearing in a certain way. It may not be the actual imaginal figure that gets clear—this angelic being or deva or whatever. You understand?

So either spontaneously these things arise, these shifts, but it's possible that the self, ourselves, or the human beings around us, or the animals, or the birds, or the surroundings—the trees, the grass, the land, the light, the nature—actually even with practice, or when it goes very deep, even the plastic artifacts that may be around us, man-made artifacts, plastic things that may seem to conventional perception very unholy, even those things, this sense of theophany, they can become theophany too, or part of a wider cosmopoiesis.

But it's possible that all this—self, humans, nature, surroundings or specific trees, for instance, specific animals or whatever—can be perceived, seen, sensed as, if you like, angelic. And again, keeping that word quite open, not really filling out what it means. Maybe later we'll do that, fill it out a bit more. But maybe just to say now, it means that they are not just one-dimensional material. There's a verticality being introduced into the other dimensions, if you like, into the cosmology.

So, it's interesting... One could, I suppose, with a lot of practice, actually do a little exercise and practice sustaining different ways of looking at, say, self and other. So just in terms of human beings, what is it to see someone, one's own self or another, as a biological machine—and their consciousness, my consciousness, as just what they call an epiphenomenon, something that arises just out of the right combination of matter over time, consciousness emerges? That's quite a popular view these days, if you like. Sometimes it's a consciously articulated view, sometimes it's a subliminal view. Now, that itself could be seen as amazing. There's a wonder in that, just that possible in that view. Or it could be more, if you like, a bit nihilistic.

Compare that, or add to that—sometimes Joanna Macy talks about deep time, this sense of this biological machine evolving over all this time and eons, not eons, but billions of years, in fact, the evolution of life on Earth and how we share roots. Our bio-

logy shares roots. And in a way, what we are now is connected through all that time, with everything that we have evolved through. And for some, there's a kind of holiness, there's a kind of holiness in that way of looking, introducing that idea of deep time.

Or what would it be to look at the self or the other and see in terms of the classical Buddhist elements, either the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—or six elements, those four plus adding space and consciousness? And as I said near the beginning of the retreat, this, as a way of looking, actually is not one way of looking because in itself it can be directed, as all of these, it can be directed with different flavorings.

So one can look at oneself or another in those terms. It's purely a kind of deconstructive way of looking. It's taking apart, seeing there isn't much self there, and a way of letting go of clinging to a person or to their body or lust or whatever. Or one may look at, in terms of these four or six elements, and see the interconnectedness of this person, this self, or that person with nature and with each other. These elements flow porously between person, self, and world.

Or again, same concept but given a different spin. One actually sees through a lens that feels the holiness of the elements. There are quite different ways of looking within that.

Or with the aggregates, the five aggregates that Buddhism sets up as ways of looking—body, vedanā, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Again, that can be taken in, or rather using that as a conceptual framework—it's not one way of looking, actually several different ways of looking depending on how one's flavoring it. Again, it can be directed or work as a kind of deconstructing of the self or the person so that we don't cling so much to the self or to other selves.

It can also be seen in terms of seeing again the interconnectedness of these aggregates. The aggregates that I have here are not really that different from the aggregates that you have there. Consciousness is consciousness. Body is body. Moments of vedanā, moments of vedanā—what's the difference? So as a way of breaking down the sense of separation, giving more of a sense of interconnectedness, that takes that conceptual framing of the elements and it creates a different way of looking than just a kind of deconstructive tool.

Or again, if you've done a lot of emptiness practices, what is it to see in terms of the aggregates, but know that those aggregates themselves are empty? They are fabrications. Or even further, to see them as divine. They are empty divine phenomena, if you like. The aggregates are empty and divine.

So these are all different ways of looking within a conceptual framework that allows actually within it slightly different conceptual frameworks that form ways of looking. But apart from that very last one, where there's a sort of awareness that aggregates themselves are empty or divine, or perhaps their elements as holy, this idea that we're talking about today of actually seeing self or seeing other as angel, as theophany, as an emanation of the divine—and everything that's implied there about perhaps a vertical dimension that we've mentioned, or the different levels of being—that would be different than seeing more in terms of interconnectedness or just the pure materiality of things. It's different.

But there are, with any way of looking, a kind of cosmopoiesis that's going on here. And involved in that way of looking, in any way of looking of these that I've delineated, is a conception, usually unconscious, of what matter is and what the cosmos is. I don't know if anyone would actually do that as an exercise. You could play with it, and there's no reason why not. But I'm really trying to point out there are different ways of conceiving, and some of them allow more of a sense of holiness and divinity, and that's different than purely interconnectedness—which is a more horizontal connection between things.

But basically, what we're doing, again, in practicing something like this, or opening to this cosmopoiesis, is we're playing with eidos. We're playing with the imagination and ideas, loosely, to create ways of looking. We're playing with ways of looking.

It's worth mentioning, as part of that, one will notice that the perception of the world through this, or of another, through these different lenses, or when one's playing with this kind of theophanic sense or cosmopoiesis, the perception will appear at different registers. We've talked about this before. So it might be, for instance, very ethereal. The whole world might seem very insubstantial and kind of luminous, or it might just look like it ordinarily looks—more solid. So just mentioning that is something to notice. And one can sometimes feel, oh yeah, it wants to be at this register. The perception wants to be at this register. So just allow it to be at that register.

When we talk about a more angelic or theophanic perception, it's not necessarily the case that that sees everything and perceives a more ethereal substance or perceives that higher register. It's not necessarily the case. But we're playing with ways of looking. We're playing with eidos.

And the sacredness here—we recognize this is not independent of the mind and the heart. The sacredness that we perceive and that we feel so deeply sometimes is not independent of the mind and the heart. The citta, the mind-heart, the conceptual framework, the way of looking, gives sacredness to the perception. It gives sacredness to appearances. It gives sacredness to things. It sacralizes things.

Now, if we say that, and if one hasn't perhaps explored emptiness enough, one immediately thinks, "Oh, so what that really implies is that they're not sacred, really." One tends to think that way, but no, it does not imply that. Because we are not buying into the sort of usual Cartesian split of mind and matter, subject and object. There's a different understanding underpinning all this. We understand that nothing, no thing has independent existence, has an existence independent of the way of looking. And that gives a different status to the perception of holiness. The holiness is not separate from the citta. But that doesn't mean that it's not real.

So there are parallels here with, when we're talking about the primordial wisdom awareness, the Buddha nature, and that awareness itself, that primordial wisdom awareness itself being something that's holy and empty, and also not separate from the divinity that it sees, the objects that it sees. So here too, the objects of awareness and the awareness and the sense of sacredness—none are separate. Objects, awareness, sacredness—not separate, and all of them are empty. And it's the understanding of emptiness that's part of what allows the sacredness and the validity of the sacredness.

So in practice, with this theophanic sense, or the sense of theophany in an image, or an image as theophany, or the theophany in the perception of the world, just to point out a few things regarding practice. A lot of this is actually intuitive, but it's good to spell it out as well in case we get a bit lost and just to be a bit clearer.

So in a way, what it rests on is an openness at least to that experience being a possibility for us and also an openness to the whole thing conceptually. To some degree of openness and receptivity to these kinds of experiences and these kinds of ideas may be necessary. And then, so that's one.

Second is the recognition of that theophanic sense in an image or in the perception of another or of the world. We need to recognize it when it's there.

And then that's second, and the third, we need to tune to it. So it's actually something like—this has to do, as I said, with what is the specificity that's important to any image. Remember when we talked about imaginal practice and instructions there. So we're tuning to the theophanic sense because that's something quite specific, has a certain fla-

vor, a certain tone, a certain character or expression. It's a certain kind of—remember we talked about tuning being one of the aspects of attention. It's tuning to the theophanic sense, the theophany.

And that tuning to allows that sense, allows the theophany—the sense of the theophany, the flavor of it—to filter out, to stabilize. It also amplifies it within the larger perception, within the wider perception. It may still be quite subtle, but the tuning to it makes it stronger and stabilizes it.

And then in a way, fourth, we're assenting to this theophany, this theophanic sense. That doesn't necessarily mean I literally believe it concretely. I don't literally believe that birdsong is sacred text. I don't literally believe that my lover is God or whatever it is, in a very literal sense, in a literal, concrete sense of what God might be. But there's an assenting to something. There's an assenting to the view, the experience, and the idea within it.

And then focusing on that, and opening to this sense of theophany, focusing on the theophanic sense and the image, and opening to it and its resonances. Often, sometimes, letting it spread. Letting it spread to become a cosmopoiesis. Letting it spread to the sense of the world, the perception of one's surroundings and the cosmos. So one feels, one senses oneself in a different cosmos, if you like. Or rather, this cosmos transubstantiated.

And again, a literal believing of that is not necessary. We're not really talking about belief here. It's difficult for some people to understand that.

So an openness to the whole notion and the possibility of experience, a recognizing of the theophany, a tuning to it, an assenting to it, focusing on it, opening to it and its resonances, and then letting it spread, letting it spread. And when there's distraction, if there is distraction—which there usually will be—we can perhaps lightly remember the original image and again open to the theophany there and just do the same thing, do the same steps.

Maybe the original image disappears, and there's just the wider sense of theophany, the wider sense of cosmopoiesis, if it's coming originally from a sort of separate image. Or maybe the original image stays, and that stays at the same time that there's this wider cosmopoiesis, this wider theophanic sense.

Let's stop here for now, as I'm just really wanting to give examples of and point in the direction of what we're talking about here and give an idea of some of the possibilities. There's actually so many. Give an idea of some of the possibilities and we'll talk more about this whole area and direction later.

CHAPTER 21

A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 1h27

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines how concepts of divinity necessarily remain vague yet retain immense transformative power - much like our concepts of matter in modern physics. He emphasizes that 'divine' and 'sacred' are primarily matters of perception and sensibility that can be trained and developed through meditative practice. Drawing on personal examples ranging from Christian devotion to Jewish mystical feeling, Burbea illustrates how imaginal figures and experiences can profoundly affect our being without requiring literal belief.*
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> *The talk focuses extensively on cosmopoiesis - the soul's tendency to perceive the entire cosmos as sacred and divine. Through detailed examples involving music, birdsong heard as cosmic music, and gardens transfigured into heavenly realms, he demonstrates how theophanic vision naturally spreads to encompass the whole world. Burbea shows how spontaneous words, memories, and sensations in meditation can serve as 'keys' that unlock mystical perception when approached with the right imaginal sensitivity.*
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> *Central to this teaching is the recognition that meditation is fundamentally about training the flexibility of perception - opening the range of possible ways of seeing, feeling, and knowing self, others, and world. This multiplicity of vision serves the soul's need for poetry, enchantment, and what William Blake called freedom from 'single vision.' The imaginal divine offers infinite faces and expressions, supporting the psyche's natural movement toward expansion, beauty, and soulmaking through sacred perception of existence itself.*

So re-emphasizing a few general points we've already mentioned, but taking them in a slightly different direction regarding conceptions of divinity in relation to the imaginary in particular.

One of the things I pointed out about concepts and conceiving is that it's always going on. By concepts, I don't just mean big conceptual structures and philosophies that need articulating and words. I also don't equate the word conceiving with thinking. By conceiving, I mean the whole spectrum, all the way from big, complicated conceptual structures like some of what we've been talking about, to include thinking, to include just the subtlest conceiving that's woven in with perception.

The idea sometimes of bare attention or non-conceptual awareness and this kind of thing is often quite uninvestigated. Those concepts are very attractive and sound very simple, but they betray a lack of fully exploring the nature of perception and of fabrication. Wherever there is perception—remember I'm using the word perception synonymously with experience and appearance—means whenever there's any experience at all, any appearances at all, there is subtle conceiving woven in with that. I don't mean we're walking around thinking or labelling everything all the time. It doesn't need to be verbal. But it's wrapped up in perception itself. Conception, perception, conceiving, perceiving are wrapped up together inseparably. No conceiving, no perceiving. And any perceiving involves some conceiving.

Another point I want to emphasize now has to do with vagueness of concepts. We might use words like sacred or not sacred or profane. Such words involve conceiving, of course they do. And usually they involve conceiving in a vague way. Or if it's not vague, it's at some level contradictory or circular or rests on assumptions.

So we might say a conception of sacred or divine. What does that actually mean? Even having gone through all this for hours now, it's like, well, still, what does it mean? It's hard, as I said, without being circular, to be really clear and defined and arrive at some kind of final, polished, demarcated definition or conception. The conception of divinity is vague to a certain extent, has a degree of nebulousness to it.

But here's what's important—so does the conception of matter. If I say to you the word matter or materiality, what does that mean? Just as one might ask hearing the word divine or God or gods, "What does it mean?", we can turn around and ask the same question about matter. We touched on this before. Through modern physics, what do you mean by an electron? What is it? What do we mean when we use that? And if I'm talking about experience, what do I mean? Solidity? A sense of solidity? What exactly do I mean? A perception? When we go into what does matter mean, what is matter, just as we might go into this question of divine, it ends up being really quite a vague concept. Mathematical equations, in the most abstract mathematical equations, might describe behavior of some matter under certain conditions when it's looked at in a certain way—actually describe probabilities of behavior.

Basically, we take for granted that our concept of matter, or we know what matter is, but actually, if we go into that, we see that it's really quite vague. We do have, of course, an experience of matter, even though if we poke our concept of matter, we quickly realize it's actually quite vague and not very deep at all, unless you've really studied a lot of

physics or philosophy. But just as we have an experience of matter, undeniably, that we're familiar with, we can have experience of the divine, and the concept remains vague.

Implicit in all this is something I've said before. As well as involving conceiving concepts, divine or sacred or not sacred or matter—these are all perceptions. And this is the important thing. What we're talking about when we say sacred is a perception, or rather a sensibility, a way of looking. As such, the way of looking can be trained, developed, refined, enlarged, deepened, intensified, empowered. This actually is what should occupy us—this training of perception. And regarding conceiving, we want enough maneuverability and flexibility with the conceiving, and enough conceptions and conceptual structures to sanction a sacred cosmic oasis, a seeing of sacredness in the world.

So regarding perception, this is the important thing—the training of perception. We need enough conception to allow that to grow and to support it.

And we need to train the perceiving, the sensibility. That training of perceiving is what I would say, in a nutshell, meditative training is. Meditation is a training of the flexibility of perception.

In the training of perception there is an opening of the range. We've talked about that so much on this retreat, emphasizing that this is what we're wanting to do—open the range for the sake of soulfulness, for the sake of the beauty of that discovery, for the sake of freedom, for the sake of investigation. The conceptual frameworks need to support that opening of the range. And the opening of the range of experience and perception feeds back into the conceptual framework.

The range, by definition, is multiple. We can have so many different experiences of the divine, especially when we're talking about the imaginal divine. There is not one correct perception of God, so to speak, which we might tend to think. What's the right way that God is? What's the real way that God is? We can talk about one authentic experience, if that's even the right word, of the unfabricated, of the Godhead—the deitas absconditus, the hidden Godhead. But not of the faces, the expressions, the aspects of God, the dimensions of God, because in a way they're infinite. And it's about experience here, and there are infinite possibilities.

Sometimes in spiritual circles it's very easy for people to latch onto and cling to and chase one kind of experience: "Oh, that's it, that's it!" Or the teacher says, "There, that's it, you had it!" Or a person is aiming for or has a sense that there's one kind of ultimate experience of the divine: "I tasted it and now I've lost it."

Yes, perhaps there is singularity when we talk about the unfabricated, but not when we open it up into the realm of the imaginal and the fabricated.

Again, to quote the Kotzker Rebbe, but perhaps taking another spin on it: he said, "Where is God to be found?" And he answers, "In the place where he is given entry." You could read that as "Well, he's everywhere," but we don't see divinity everywhere. But it's also saying something about this infinite possibility of the expansion of the range of perception, of experience into all the different faces of the divine and sacredness, the sacred cosmic oasis.

We're talking here about emptiness, divine—again, imaginal divine. And the recognition that we're talking about perception; we're never talking about anything other than perception. Everything hinges on perception and the fabrication of perception, understanding that and training the flexibility, training the sensibilities, the range, opening the range. The conceptual frameworks support that. There's this reciprocal feeling, as we've emphasized many times.

The second thing I want to elaborate on is this: it's very possible for a conception of the divine, or an image of the divine, to have deeply powerful effect on the being, even when we don't believe—as I said—that this is real or true, and we concretize it and literalize it as a belief.

I remember decades ago, I think I was in my late twenties, living in the States. Quite unexpectedly—because I had not grown up at all in a Christian household or education—despite living in a culture where Christianity was present, though on the wane, in England, I'd never really understood the whole thing about Jesus and the cross and Christ. I was kind of sheltered from that in my upbringing.

Then quite unexpectedly, in my early twenties, I fell in love with Jesus. Very unexpectedly and very beautifully—the whole opening of the heart and the soul in devotion, touched so deeply. I began to enter into that and to explore it. I would go, sometimes more than once a week, to different churches in Boston where I was living. I would usually just visit these different churches, sit and stand at the back during the services, and I would be so moved—moved to tears, standing in the back.

Sometimes it was the old parson or priest, depending on the kind of church. Maybe some of these churches were really on the wane—three people there, all in their eighties or nineties. And I would stand at the back and just be sobbing, so moved by the hymns and by the mythos of Jesus and of Christ, the parables and stories and healing stories.

Talking to people and getting a little involved in that world in different ways, they would say, "Why don't you get baptized?" But I never felt I could, because actually I could not credo—non-credo. I could not say, "I believe this." And it was a barrier.

There was something operating through the mythos, but it was not about belief. And yet it was extremely powerful, deeply powerful—this sense that emerged, the mythos of the divine, of God, in this case through particular Christian mythos and Christ, deeply powerful and important without any clear theology. The belief wasn't there as a sort of literalized, concretized grasp of "I believe this to be true and real." The theology, the conceptual frame, was not clear, was vague. The mythos was alive, though, and this is important.

Somewhere along the line, books came out following scholars' research. The scholars of Christianity formulated this document called Q. Some of you will know this—Q, which they said, "Based on our scholastic and historical research, we can definitively say these statements Jesus actually said." Then there was a group of statements where it was probable or possible that he said them, and then statements where he definitely didn't say them.

Following this publishing of Q, there were several books. One that moved me a lot was Stephen Mitchell's book, I think called The Gospel According to Jesus, among others. But I also felt, personally, that there was this attempt to portray a historical Jesus—that this guy really lived. And oftentimes with a lot of the books that came out, there was something saying, "Basically, this guy actually lived, and he was another kind of radical, free, liberated being. In fact, he was a lot like Lao Tzu and a lot like various others—all these guys were kind of similar. And he lived with a great open heart."

I'm being a little flippant because it actually did move me.

But something in that way of casting the figure and the story of Jesus fell short for me somehow, in a soul sense. It was not that interesting or powerful for the soul. In other words, he's a liberated human being. He's a guy who's realized something and is then living from that realization, so he's not a god or the son of God. That kind of story presents him as like any other liberated human being, and in fact suggests that all liberated human beings are pretty similar.

That narrative, attractive as it was, fell short for me as a soul story. It was not that interesting and powerful, as I said. And note as well that it's presented as literal and concrete, or at least probable historical fact—this story itself of Jesus as purely human, a kind of liberated guy with a big heart, like a lot of other liberated people with big hearts, is not portrayed as imaginal. It's not conceived or admitted as imaginal.

So there was that kind of angle or fantasy floating around, not admitting itself as imaginal, sort of portraying itself as humanist, in a certain sense. And on the other hand, I was exposed to this dogmatic kind of Christology that originated, I think, with St. Paul. Pauline theology is this structure of the Son of God and the Trinity, and in its overwhelmingness and its complexity and its arcane structures, it was attractive to me in that it offers itself to the imagination. That kind of structure, that kind of verticality of dimensions, and the rich, complex, multilevel and textured movement of eros-psyche-logos can enter into that and relate to it and enrich it.

At the same time, that dogmatic Christian theology was unattractive to me, especially if I felt I needed to sign up to believing it and say a credo. But again, with that theology, it's presented—just as the humanist version is presented—as fact, as truth. This is a credo that this is true, this Trinity and all the rest of it, and not as imaginal.

Something was operating in me, very powerfully. I couldn't, or did not want to go to one side or the other really. And I could not articulate something back then that I can articulate now. Years later, what I realized—perhaps intuitively then, but could not articulate or realize fully consciously—is this: the Jesus that matters to the soul is not so much the Jesus of matter—the flesh and blood, so-called historical Jesus—but the imaginal Jesus or the imaginal Christ.

The Jesus that matters is not so much the Jesus of matter, the historical flesh and blood Jesus, but the imaginal Jesus, the imaginal Christ. Perhaps something in me realized that, but not quite fully consciously. So I just dwelt in this in-between world, and it was lovely and beautiful. But again, to say: we are interested in the imaginal divine. That's what we're talking about—the imaginal divine.

One last thing on this point, then we'll stop. I'll give you an example that also has to do with vagueness. I was sitting in meditation a little while ago, tuning into the felt center, the whole energy body, as we've been emphasizing on this retreat. There was a little bit of samādhi around, and then suddenly I heard quietly in the inner ear, so to speak, the word tzedakah.

Tzedakah is a word I knew from my childhood. It's a Hebrew word for charity—I think it means charity, or perhaps it can mean giving. Perhaps it's equivalent to the word dāna. But I heard that word tzedakah, just that word arising. And then, with that word, or sparked by that word, came the subtle image, sense, and idea—all wrapped into one—of my being. The sense of my being was completely wrapped up with the sense of the energy body at that time: the subtle image, sense, idea of my being as a gift from God.

That word, and then my immediate knowing of its translation, sparked a certain image-sense, a certain conception in the being. Very, very beautiful. Totally wrapped up with the energy body. My being as a gift from God. And then correspondingly came a sense of giving my being to God as a reciprocal gift. So there's receiving the gift of being and giving my being to God as a reciprocal gift. Very, very beautiful and very subtle. I lost it several times and then found it again.

Actually later, in a meditation the same day—I was on retreat at the time—this sense arose again but attached itself to a person. There's again the sense of the image spreading, but interestingly spreading from a more general sense of divinity to divinity through a person. Usually it's the other way around: we see a person in a certain theophanic way, and that begins to spread to the surroundings, the cosmophosis.

But just to say a few little things about that subtle imaginal sense or opening. I'm mentioning it because I want to draw out just a few points—some of them I mentioned before when we were giving instructions—and to highlight that this image didn't seem to involve any inner physical sense. Rather, it was just a sense in the other meaning of the word: an intuitive way of knowing. It was simply a sense of being as a gift from God and of giving one's being through God to God.

So it wasn't really a kinesthetic sense, though it involved the energy body. It certainly wasn't a particularly visual sense, although it did involve an awareness of the nature around me. And was it auditory? No, it wasn't an auditory sense. The word "sadaka" that I heard inwardly was more a trigger, something that ignited. Hearing that word spontaneously functioned as what we call a poetic spark.

Now, we've touched on this before, but just to spell it out in terms of instructions: when a spontaneous word arises in the mind during usual mindfulness meditation, I would simply recognize it, perhaps note it, then let go and return to the breath or whatever else. But here, in this practice—this kind of imaginal practice, or practicing of opening to at least the orientation, the potential of cosmopoiesis—some things that enter the mind can be taken up and function as keys. Keys that open the being and the perception and the conception in certain ways, that we can then tune to the mystical perception, the image, the mythos, the cosmopoiesis that emerges from that.

So it wasn't, as I said, particularly in any physical sense, nor was it only affective—only a heart thing. The heart was involved; there was a beautiful, subtle emotionality in the heart, but that wasn't the primary aspect either.

More important for our purposes right now is that as this sense opened, the sense of the divine was not located spatially, nor was it specifically defined. Again, we're really emphasizing this vagueness. What is this God or divinity that was so central and integral to this image, this sense, this conception? It was vague. There was not a worked-out, clear, demarcated philosophy or conception of God or divinity. Rather, it was open, amorphous, ambiguous.

Similarly, in practice, when I might use the word "angel," sense another as an angelic presence, or see them as angel—when they appear to me as theophany, as angel—what does that mean? What does this word "angel" mean? What exactly do I mean? What is an angel? We've been through all this elaborate conceptual structure, but still, I don't know. I can be affected beautifully and open in perception and conceiving by all that, but it remains an undefined meaning—not less powerful for being undefined or not clearly defined.

Perhaps it's characteristic of our personalities, maybe our time in history, I don't know, but we can tend to elevate specific, clear, or apparently clear, demarcated knowing of something that's defined, or at least definable. We tend to think this is better if it's clear, demarcated, and definable—preferably, or at least possibly, definable. We tend to elevate that. That's good, that's what we like, that's what we feel comfortable with usually.

But is there a necessary place for kinds of knowing that need to remain open and not very defined? In other words, sometimes we have experiences, and wrapped up in those experiences are conceivings where the knowing is much more open and amorphous and less defined—not clear and not demarcated.

Also, just in terms of that example, in the practice of it, the attention was not really focused on a particular object or particular sense. It was more global, rather general. The sense of divinity was everywhere—different than vast awareness that seems divine in this universal way. This image sense very much involved my personhood. The sense of God and the divine was not very particular, but it definitely involved my personhood, my life, my being. Not just universal—it involved me. There was a sense of self there, and God. The God was more vague but nonetheless powerful for that.

And if this isn't clear, we can tend so much in Buddhist circles to elevate experiences that are more dissolutions of self, or seeing the emptiness of self, experiences of no-self and all that. But knowing the emptiness of self thoroughly, we can then open the door for a whole other range and realm of dimensions of experience that do involve self—which is not taken literally and hardened into reality. This whole range of experiences that involve personhood and particularity is so important.

I'm now repeating what I said before, but despite not being focused on a particular object or particular sense—being global or general—the tuning in the meditation was very precise, very specific, even if it wasn't quite definable. As we talked about before, it was tuning to a particular wavelength or sensibility.

So we talked about this in the instructions, but the image here is more a kind of mystical perception—it's an intuition, a sense, more vague in terms of objects, but the precision in the meditative tuning and steadiness of the attention is on, if you like, this certain wavelength or this certain sense of things, sensibility.

Hopefully it might be helpful to perhaps give a few more examples of theophany and particularly of cosmopoiesis in imaginal practice to illustrate what I'm trying to get at and what I'm trying to open—a field, a door, a window, a portal that we can move through. A door, really, that we can move through, and a territory that can open up. So hopefully to illustrate and fill out a bit of what we've been talking about with a few more examples.

Actually, when it comes to theophany, and particularly when it comes to cosmopoiesis, one of the most potent and rich and fertile classes of examples of imaginal practice involves the erotic and eros—particularly pertaining to loving another and sexual feeling and eros in the bigger sense of the word towards another, whether that's a purely imaginal figure or someone we know seen through the lens of mythos, of image. There's something partly to do with what I talked about before, but something about the eros that potentizes and opens things up in the imaginal in a way that spills over.

So I could actually give many examples where the erotic aspect is actually foremost in relation to an imaginal figure or a figure seen through the imaginal lens, so to speak. But actually I'm not going to because it's such a huge subject in itself, and hopefully we'll be able to do that another time, another retreat or another place.

So I'll give some different examples. There's eros in all of these, but not in the narrower sexual, romantic way that we tend to think of when we hear that word "erotic." But eros pervades all of these anyway, as it does any deep work with the imaginal. It's part of the territory. It's what fertilizes it, as we talked about earlier.

Many of these examples involve music, and I've talked about music and musicians and given examples. So there's a connection between some of them. Rather than the erotic, there's a commonality of music here. It's not that significant—I'm just picking these out to give some examples of cosmopoiesis.

Some time ago, it was dusk time, the evening coming, at Gaia House, and the bird-song of the evening dusk, the birds singing as the evening draws in. Hearing that music as a cosmic music—the bird song echoes, expresses a kind of cosmic music, suggestive of other cosmic levels. Again, there's that vertical dimension implicit in the hearing, in the imaginal hearing. In the very sense, somehow again quite vague, but this sense of all that as music as cosmologically interwoven. Then that had a personal component for myself, remembering my life as a composer for some years, something I really gave myself to very fully, and feeling the soul function of the composer as kind of serving that connection between the cosmic music and what comes through on a human level—or rather seeing that there is a connection and wanting to serve that, and seeing that they ideally reflect each other.

A lot of that is actually quite subtle and hard to put into words. I gave that other image much earlier, the music that matters. It's the music that matters, but music in that sense was something more broad. Here it was still more broad than actual what we think of as music, but not as broad as it was in that other example.

And quite similar examples—actually, this is something I get quite a lot for myself, this particular sense of listening and sound and hearing it as sacred music. I was sitting, reading in the vegetable garden at Gaia House. It was a beautiful, sunny spring day. And I was sitting on the bench there, studying, reading. And I actually heard music—meaning I physically heard music. At a certain point I realized that it was the water pipe at the other end, perhaps fifty or a hundred yards away. At the other end, it was the tap—sort of old, probably fairly on its way out—of water that was running because it was into a hose watering the garden somewhere.

So this music that I heard was actually the sound of the water through the tap and the pipe at the other end of the garden. But it really sounded so beautiful, like some very complex and skillful and exotic kind of jazz through a reed or flute instrument, like improvised. It reminded me of a musician I love, Dewey Redman. He died some time ago, and he used to play an instrument called a musette, a fairly rare instrument that sounds like some kind of Asian reed instrument, and he was a master playing in very free and creative and subtle and complex ways.

So the sound that I was hearing from this tap was really compelling as music. It sounded so creative and fantastic—its sound, its structure, the kind of melodic fragments and so on. There were other sounds that seemed to accompany this. It went on for some minutes. And listening to that and opening to that and the delight in that and the beauty of it—through an actual sound, the sound of the tap—through that, then

listening and opening in this way, the whole garden, the whole vegetable garden became sacred, became as if it had... it became a theophany. The garden itself, the sight of it, the whole surrounding of it became a theophany.

There was as if it was seeing it at a kind of more subtle level, seeing a more subtle dimension of the existence of the garden, of the being of the garden. And of course it was filled with light anyway because it was a sunny day, but this sense of other levels of creation, a sense of other worlds, other dimensions of this world present there. The sense too of this world—if we echo something Corbin said—this world as the imagination of God. That was all kind of implicit in this hearing, and then the whole sense is opening to this other garden, so to speak, in or behind or with or at a different level of the garden.

So there was not so much a transfiguring of the physical perception of the garden as we could say a transubstantiation. It appeared to be of a different substance at a different level. Really very beautiful, that kind of cosmopoiesis or opening perception of a different dimension.

There was a quality that was genuinely heavenly, or divine. When I use such words in this context - when something feels like heaven, when this garden feels perceived as a kind of heaven - I'm not speaking metaphorically. This isn't the casual "Oh, it's heavenly" or "It's simply divine" we might say about a beautiful sunset. There's truly a different sense here of a vertical dimension, interfused with the physical, perceivable in and through the physical.

Another quite similar example occurred during standing meditation outside near the large trees in our front garden as the morning sun was rising. Again, it was triggered by birdsong, though really the whole scene participated. Despite having my eyes mostly closed, there was an awareness of the nature surrounding me - I knew the scene, knew what it looked like - but it appeared very strongly as if that whole world, that entire scene with its birds and their song, was angelic. An angelic world.

These experiences are difficult to describe, but something about the whole thing - the nature there, the birdsong - was felt, was perceived as luminous, as diaphanous to something coming through it, transparent and translucent to divine light streaming through divinities. Sacredness pervaded everything, and there was a sense that everything was praising. Certainly I was praising all of that and the different dimensions present, but the world itself - the birds, the light, the trees - they were angels praising the divine. They were divine, faces of the divine, and they were engaged in praise.

Let me offer another example, one I want to elaborate upon partly for instructional purposes, to indicate how these experiences might actually evolve. Someone listening might think these things happen suddenly - which sometimes they do - but we've discussed how we can create conditions and relate to the flow of what arises in meditation with a different kind of responsiveness than we might bring to other practices.

I want to walk through this example to highlight the ways imaginal experience, or in this case cosmopoiesis, unfolds supported by and dependent upon our ways of responding and allowing what emerges, our ways of seeing what arises spontaneously in meditation.

I had been reading a book on Jewish mysticism earlier that day, or perhaps the day before, and this had triggered what I can only describe as a Jewish feeling. This isn't something that arises frequently for me, but it exists within my psyche. I was raised Orthodox Jewish, then left all that well behind - first as an atheist, then through my entry into Buddhism. Yet it remains alive in my psyche as soul-world, as soul-image, part of the entire history and ethos that constitutes a living imaginal landscape.

The point I want to emphasize is that I was conscious this feeling had been triggered by simply picking up and reading a book on Jewish mysticism. So someone might say, "Oh, dismiss that - it can't be authentic soul material because it was triggered by something external, something you read." Not so. There's no problem with such triggers.

This Jewish feeling was present, and I was simply aware of it, allowing and holding and feeling it within the meditation. As I did so, a point of white light appeared at my solar plexus - like a star in the night sky appearing at my solar plexus. Remaining aware of the whole energy body while focusing somewhat on that white light, some samādhi arose.

This samādhi energy spread through the body, and I felt my sense of both the physical body and energy body as a vessel waiting to be filled. The Jewish feeling continued pervading everything, along with a particular mythos alive within the umbrella of what Jewishness means to me - drawn from my past, from my reading, from soul fantasies.

Specifically, the idea of a tzaddik emerged. Tzaddik translates as "righteous person" - essentially the Jewish equivalent of a bodhisattva. Someone wise, incredibly compassionate, pure, saintly, utterly given to God. The resonances of this entire soul-image - what that word means for me, all the images that accrue to it, the fantasies and mythos - remained quite vague but very potent, extraordinarily fertile in my psyche.

With all of this present - allowing it, feeling it, aware of it as image, as mythos operating in the psyche at that moment, connected with the energy body in some degree of samādhi - the birdsong outside my window became beautiful to me, but beautiful in a specific way: like a sacred text.

I heard the birdsong as sacred text, a text that was inexhaustible - inexhaustibly deep, inexhaustible in its depth and beauty. This very notion of sacred text and its inexhaustibility in terms of depth of possible meanings, infinite interpretations - this too is a Jewish idea, or rather, an idea I encountered through my studies of Kabbalah, or more precisely, through reading about Kabbalah.

So this entire image-sense and the cosmopoiesis involved - the birdsong as sacred text - carried something not completely translatable, this text.

It's not even in a specific language. The details are not important in that sense. But there's, again, the precision of the tuning to the reverberations, the echoing, the feeling, the mythos there that's important.

This image or fantasy, this cosmopoetic sense of the birdsong as beautiful, sacred text, inexhaustible, came, if you like, on the back of all those other micro-stages of the meditation, and relating to them in a certain way. Had I shut down, or dismissed, or judged as unworthy, or just as a distraction, or papañca, some of those earlier stages—the Jewish feeling or the Tzaddik thing or whatever, body as vessel—maybe that sense of the sacred text, of the birdsong as sacred text, would not have arisen, would not have had the way, an opening would not have been made for it.

So again, in that sense, the image sense of the birdsong is not visual, but it's subtle and rich and pervasive. It was auditory. But on opening my eyes, then the world around me—and again, this is the spreading that we're talking about—the world around me took on this quality too. Here's an image, here's a theophanic image, and I'm focusing on that, and it has a certain boundary to it. In this case, the birdsong. But opening my eyes, often then the world around me and my body too seems to be sacred text, also seem to be sacred text.

So there's this spreading of the theophany to a more cosmopoetic sense of everything. The whole world and my body, too, seem to be sacred text.

Maybe a couple more examples. Some time—it was over a year ago—I had a day off and I spent it studying mostly in my room. I was reading different things. Again, I might have mentioned this one before, but then I meditated, and I was exploring imaginal

practice deliberately, but no images arose. This is quite a while ago. I was looking for an image as something other than the world or my life, something that appeared to me in meditation like that. No images arose.

But then actually, the image or memory, if you like, of the day spent studying—so me sitting at the desk, studying, if you like, the sense of, in that, of pursuing what is meaningful to me, of trying to absorb, to learn, to open horizons and paradigms, to make connections. I mentioned this before. That was the image. That memory, that seeing of myself as me, as that memory was the image, infused with certain mythos and fantasy, but the image or symbol, if you like, was me studying with everything, all the richness imbued in that.

But that too had this sense of echoing higher levels. Again, this vertical dimension and this—the image of me studying felt like a theophany, felt like it was expressing a face of the divine in and through, in this case, the particularities of me, but also the particularities of a certain activity in life were expressing other levels. And the sense of theophany was through and in something very particular—certain activities of life and the self.

Now, I wonder—I don't know if I've mentioned this earlier in the retreat—but sometimes when we sense life, I wonder sometimes if we sense life more imaginally in that way. We have that sense of life as image, if you like, we have the sense of theophany and cosmopoiesis in life, then it may be that strange images don't need to arise so much. So that's a conjecture, a thought, something I wonder about sometimes.

It might be for some people that the literalization of life, really believing this or that so much, and the clinging that actually forces images, strange images on them in dreams and other places, you know, in meditation or whatever, or just wherever, because there's an over-literalization. When life is seen more imaginally, then the imaginal comes through and it's not squeezed out of life. There's a broader range for it to come through.

But again, in that image, there was a spreading in terms of the breadth of the image because the surroundings started to be included in the image. In that case, my room that I was sitting in, the whole world of that started—not just me, not just the activity, but the whole surrounding started to be filled with this sense of theophany, the sense of sacredness and the different levels present, if you like, in the world, in and through the world, the different dimensions of the world.

I'll leave out the other example I was going to give and just finish with one. It's actually, in a way, the most complex and perhaps for some, maybe the strangest. It may be quite hard to relate to. Again, it's musical, what has to do with music. So I'm aware it might sound quite strange for some, especially people who don't have a musical background. But I'm choosing it partly, again, to illustrate something about meditative process, about picking up on cues, relating to them in certain ways, working with difficulties, and how that opens theophanic sense, also in this case the cosmopoetic sense up in particular ways. Also, again, to illustrate when we use words like divine, God, etc., that it's really quite broad, infinite, in fact, the range of what might be meant there. It's not the narrow preconception that we might immediately assume when we hear those words, God or divine.

I had a teacher—I didn't have that much contact with him years ago at the conservatory. He was a jazz saxophone player, really, really amazing.

I loved his playing. I didn't have that much contact with him—just one or two classes over the years. On a whim, I googled him and found a short article explaining the basics of a certain musical concept for improvisation. It's quite technical and complex, having to do with advanced jazz improvisation.

Reading this article prompted my mind to improvise lines in moments when it wasn't busy, and even sometimes in meditation—musical improvisations informed by what I'd read, by this harmonic and melodic concept he was describing. My mind was doodling or daydreaming spontaneously music on the guitar, which was my instrument. In the imagination, quite a lot was just coming and coming. I could have stopped it, I suppose, but it was really quite persistent, and I was interested. There was something pushing that, if you like.

That night, or the night after, I dreamt of a jazz guitarist dressed in a colorful jester's shirt—big square patches of bright colors, smart but interesting, arty-looking, very striking without being overly flamboyant. He was playing a guitar solo on a stage, playing the most amazing, creative, original music—very strong, very striking, with this powerful, clear sound. I don't see an audience or anyone else in the band, but he's definitely on a stage performing.

In the morning, I felt something emotionally that visits me from time to time over the years since I gave up being a musician. It comes occasionally—a feeling of grief, of loss, of missing being a musician. Sometimes it's very specific: missing being a jazz musician, missing the trajectory of a jazz life. Sometimes it comes as just a whisper. Other times it comes and I get pulled into it a little bit, and it's difficult not to take it concretely and literally.

So it came that morning—quite strong, actually. Subtle, but quite persistent. It wouldn't go away; it was sticking a little bit. I didn't quite know how to handle it or approach it in practice. The question is always: what's needed? What will be helpful here?

Looking at it, exploring, investigating this constellation of emotion, I realized it's not all jazz I miss. It's something to do with those two images—the image triggered by what I'd found from my teacher and those doodle-daydream improvisations in my mind, and the image of the dream.

There's something about the loose, complex sophistication of the saxophonist's style—his sound and way of articulating, certain harmonic things that have to do with being on the edges, playing in and out of the boundaries of tonality, being liminal. That characterized all of it.

The dream image was more about a sense of almost otherworldly brilliance of intuitive or even channeled music—improvised music when it almost feels like it's from another world, as opposed to the more loosely intellectual, mathematical component of the saxophonist's approach, though that too is very fluid and edgy. So there were really two images there, and they were drawing me. They were so attractive in my soul.

Looking further, exploring more deeply, I realized that much of the pull, much of what was keeping this sadness, this grief, this sense of loss around, had to do with freedom of expression.

This is interesting because in sharing Dharma—in teaching or giving Dharma talks or writing about Dharma—I feel I have a responsibility to be as clear as I can. I aim mostly for clarity because I'm trying to instruct or teach or make things clear. That aiming at clarity, that didactic aim, means I am responsible to you as a listener, responsible to the students, responsible to the Dharma. All of that puts quite a lot of constraints on my freedom of expression.

There are also constraints I feel because of the whole Dharma ethos. There's a limit to how wild my expression can be, a limit to how much wildness can manifest or express when I'm giving a Dharma talk. It's actually very limited. What can happen in the Dharma Hall at Gaia House or another retreat center—the whole ethos is quite constrained in terms of freedom of expression, particularly in terms of wildness and intensity.

I think anyone who listens enough will recognize there's quite a lot of intensity in some Dharma talks and writings. But it's still constrained or held back or modulated for the sake of the listener and for respecting a certain restricted range of the ethos in the Dharma world.

The permission of the stage as a Dharma teacher—when I sit at the front and give a talk—is very different from the permission of a jazz musician on stage. Especially some of the jazz I was into was really very high intensity, wild, what they call "out there" and experimental. The permission of the stage is quite different. It has to do with freedom of expression, with intensity, with libido, with all these things.

So I was exploring and realizing what was involved in why these feelings of grief and loss were there. The mind—it's subtle, but it's not a huge, terrible emotion—was churning a little with this, throwing forward lots of jazz images and feeling this subtle pain.

The question became: how to deliteralize this? I'm taking these images too literally. Again, exploring and looking at the whole emotional constellation there, the constellation with the images...

And I realize at times coming in and out of all this, I feel a real gratitude for these images existing and also for the actual musicians I love. I've talked about this before and the music. Deep, deep, deep gratitude there in my soul, in my heart. And this turned out to be key, because then it turned into a kind of reverence, a devotion, a prayerfulness. And that felt lovely, felt beautiful. There's still a shade of pain, of grief in it.

But then I started reflecting. Actually, this is image. So jazz musicians that I knew personally, well, they were people, and people are not simple, and they're disappointing, and they're actually—the image that I have, say, of the teacher or the dream guitarist who's sort of reminded me of someone else—they don't actually exist in that way. In other words, the actual teacher is much more complex, more aspects of his being that I'm not too keen on, et cetera. So, oh, image, image. Don't get it too confused.

And somehow the reflections and the gratitude liberated just enough space around the images without rendering them less powerful. So all this is quite subtle. It's not that I'm in a great contraction or sobbing or anything like that. So we're talking about quite subtle things here and working quite subtly with them in different ways. And that's really what I want to illustrate in this long example.

So there was more space around those images, but without rendering them less powerful. And then, actually, this is one of the really interesting pieces, is that then they were able to be kind of absorbed. Those images, those two images of jazz and jazz musi-

cians and jazz music and jazz life, et cetera, were somehow able to be absorbed because they were less constricted around, there was more space around, and they were able to be absorbed into the texture of my life, the image of my life as it is now, the actuality of my life now here as a Dharma teacher, et cetera, and doing what I do and all the different stuff that I do, which mostly is not music anymore.

So somehow it's like the ethos, the image of that, of jazz—it's actually hard to put that in a nutshell, what that actually means. I've talked about it before. It means more than improvising, just how you improvise Dharma talks or you improvise in interviews. It means much more than that. But the whole mythos of that was actually able to be translated, and not, again, not in totally delineated ways. There's still a lot of vagueness there. It was absorbed into the texture of the image and the actuality of my life, the way of feeling and sensing, seeing my life. So that was interesting.

But in terms of cosmopoiesis, this is the piece I wanted to emphasize. So I found all this interesting. So I go outside and I do some walking meditation. And I'm interested in this whole question of cosmopoiesis. And so I'm pleased to notice, when I do the walking meditation, that subtly these images, these jazz music images and jazz musician images that I described, they do spill over and spread into a cosmopoiesis, into a sense of the world around me and the nature and the walking and everything. And it's absolutely beautiful. It's absolutely delightful. And joy comes with it.

Again, hard to describe, but it's like the world is music somehow. And that was the sense of it, that at another level, if you like, at another level of the vertical spectrum of the imaginal, the world is music, its nature is music, its essence is music. So I know that we can hear that in different ways, and people talk about it in different ways. So certainly I can hear certain sounds as actual music, but it's more than that. Actually, all the senses were involved so that what I see and the forms that I see, the shapes, the colors, the sensations in my feet as I walk, the whole of nature and the whole structure of nature was music.

Very hard to explain here, and also hard to form a clear, defined sense of. It's quite subtle, yet very wonderful and very powerful. So again, there's the vagueness and the non-delineated and clear conceptual structure, yet still the depth and the potency of the opening. Really another dimension to existence.

And when I was tuning into that, but then the mind loses it, the perception loses it. That happened many times. But what I found was just remembering those two images of the jazz saxophonist, and that whole harmonic melodic approach that he described, just the image, very lightly, the image of that, and the image of the dream guitarist playing, and just remembering them, letting them be there very lightly for a second or two,

and then they started again to act as triggers to infuse the perceptions of the world somehow and those images. Then those two images might linger there or one of them might linger very subtly in the background where the foreground attention is on the cosmopoetic sense, the world as music, or those initial images could disappear either way.

But either way, I stay tuned. I can stay tuned into the sense of nature as music and hold that, tune into that, hold that steady in the attention and open to that.

There are other parts to this I'll just mention briefly. So this is all over a period of a day in and out where I had quite a lot of free time to be practicing and pondering these things and working with them. Later, again in the afternoon, again the mind drifting repeatedly into this sort of imaginal doodling along the lines of this harmonic melodic approach on the imagined guitar in my imagination.

And within all this, I sense another image emerging—one much more personal. A being of white, of blue light: a puer. *Puer* means boy in Latin, and it carries rich associations within Jungian psychology. An eternally young figure—a young man, perhaps a teenager—but what puer really signifies in archetypal terms encompasses a whole confluence of qualities: enthusiasm and spirituality, vitality and eros, and much more.

This puer of blue light appears as an image, somehow mixed with me, or perhaps it is me at seventeen, discovering those harmonic melodic possibilities that weren't actually available at that age, exploring them, knowing how to develop and practice them. The excitement of that discovery, the endless puer enthusiasm—for enthusiasm comes from *entheos*, meaning the entering of the divine (*theos*) into being. What characterizes puer is precisely this kind of enthusiasm, this eagerness, this sense of infinite possibility.

In this image—partly radiant being of blue light, partly myself, partly me at seventeen, all fused together—there's the enthusiasm of discovery and creativity, of exploring this jazz world and developing new dimensions, sensing the infinity and open-endedness of possibilities. All of this forms a kind of gestalt, a constellation present as image, triggered by the same daydreaming and initial images.

With this comes tremendous bliss, much happiness in the energy body—*sukha* filling the energy body along with the sense of this blue light. One option certainly would have been to veer toward samadhi, focusing on the happiness in the energy body, letting it fill completely and absorbing into that. That would certainly have been possible at that point.

But there's this whole imaginal constellation moving from cosmopoetic sensing at one point into something more personal again, yet liberated from the contraction of tight identification with personal history—the literal "this happened and that happened" of one's actual life. Instead, there's a more imaginal sense of one's existence that transcends even time, because I'm certainly not seventeen anymore, and this didn't happen when I was that age. I wasn't into jazz then. But there it is: moving from the cosmopoetic to the imaginal personal in a liberated and liberating way.

Even later in the day, a sense of praise arose for the endless fountain, the cornucopia of music from the psyche—not just my psyche, but the psyche itself. The soul gives rise to music; humanity gives rise to music, endless in its possibilities, like a fountain from the deep soul, the deep mind. Praise for this human dimension, and also praise for that other dimension, that other level: the music that is the cosmos, the cosmos that is music. All the while knowing that this sense of world, of cosmos, and that perception is not separate from mind.

To conclude, when we speak of cosmopoiesis, we recognize—or rather, I'm stating as an axiom—that the soul wants poetry and enchantment. These are essential to soul-making and soulfulness. The soul wants to live, to know, to see, to experience poetically, wanting the enchantment of poetic existence.

In terms of cosmopoiesis, what we're really discussing is this sense of range. We're not asserting that the cosmos is definitively like this or that. We could take cosmology as defined by current science—and that's fine, actually very enchanting and beautiful to me as one vision, one knowing, one sensing of the cosmos. I love what modern physics and cosmology reveal, as much as I can understand it.

But something in the soul wants and needs an endlessness of creativity, a range of ways of feeling, sensing, knowing, seeing, living—sensing ourselves, others, and the world through cosmopoiesis. The psyche wants to expand; the imaginal world wants to expand. Eros wants to expand, with this movement of fertilizing, this expanding tendency of Eros, Psyche, and Logos together, fertilizing each other, the whole constellation growing, expanding, going deeper, opening other levels, other visions, other experiences.

Holding all this lightly, one wouldn't want to assert that this cosmos is real and that one is not, or vice versa. That would be falling into clinging too tightly and concretely to either view—scientific reductionist materialism versus some new-age perspective. This idea that the cosmos is music is a poetic idea, a poetic sense of the cosmos. It's not even metaphor in the way we commonly use that word, and certainly not literalism.

Because the soul, because Eros and Psyche want to see, feel, know, and live poetically, this movement of cosmopoiesis—this opening up of the range of perception of self, other, and particularly world—becomes necessary to the soul. Because Eros wants to expand psyche and soulfulness, and psyche wants to be expanded, soulfulness wants to deepen and be enriched and nourished. Soul-making needs to happen, and it's important for our soul that this soul-making occurs.

Soul needs images in all kinds of ways—a whole range, an infinity of images of life, of self, of others. It needs images that pertain to life, and it may well need images that seem to have nothing to do with life—what James Hillman calls the underworld, images away from life that seem to have no bearing yet are important for the soul. There are the many and plural images of life, and there are images away from life.

But soul also needs this sense of other dimensions, this vertical spectrum of the imaginal. This is what happens when soulfulness is enriched, when soul-making occurs: that vertical dimension opens, and there's also the spreading into the world in cosmic ways—the ensouling of the world.

So to repeat what we said earlier, soul needs multiple seeing. To quote William Blake again: "God help us, or God save us from single vision." We feel this as we live more deeply—we feel it as a necessity of the soul, as something that fertilizes our life, our soul, our experience, our sense of being. This multiplicity is what happens when there is such fertilization.

As I've emphasized many times, a great deal of what I'm emphasizing is this wanting to open doors, to expand the range. Through these examples and through these talks, through this retreat, I really want to give some possibility to open doors, to support possibilities, to suggest possibilities—but these are possibilities of perception, of experience, of sensibility, supported by the conceiving, supported by the practice.

So opening the range, as I said much earlier in the retreat—opening the range of perception, of experience, of sensibility. That's the thrust, the movement that is, I think, so important. Because in that opening up, that meditative journey of opening up the range of perception or vision, if you like, of experience, we are opening the soul, the psyche. And this opening of the soul is what the psyche wants and needs. It is soul-making, as we said.

We're also opening up the range of possibility of practice and of adventure. More fundamentally, we're opening up through that exploration the sense of existence itself—the range of the sense of existence, sense of being, of what we are, what the world is, what another is. Self, other, world—the whole sense of that, the whole experience of that has much more range. So we're not living in a world that's constrained, constricted.

And with all that, we're opening up, as I said much earlier in the retreat, the range of our sense of beauty, of deep beauty, the possibilities of beauty.

CHAPTER 22

A Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h24

In this dharma talk from the Path of the Imaginal series, Rob Burbea examines how we relate to concepts of the divine and their relationship to imaginal practice. He introduces the tentative concept of the 'vertical spectrum of the imaginal' - the sense that selves, things, and world have multiple dimensions beyond materiality, rooted in or expressing aspects of the divine through their particularities. Drawing on insights from the Lurianic Kabbalah regarding the 'breaking of the vessels' (shirat hakelim), Burbea emphasizes the dynamic, evolutionary nature of both conceptual frameworks and divine perception.

The talk explores how eros fertilizes imaginal figures, creating theophany - divine manifestation through particular forms - and how this perception can spread to encompass the entire world in cosmopoiesis. Burbea distinguishes this vertical dimension from the horizontal interconnectedness often taught in Buddhist practice, while relating it to the spectrum of fabrication in perception. He discusses how different conceptions of divinity affect our sense of meaningfulness, arguing that only through viewing ourselves and others as particular theophanies can we access the deep meaningfulness that nourishes the soul. Throughout, he emphasizes holding these concepts lightly, as tools for opening experience rather than fixed beliefs.

In speaking about concepts of the divine, of God, and how we might relate to that kind of concept, I think it's important to emphasize something about how we relate to talking and hearing about these concepts. In other words, how are we holding and conceiving of the whole relationship with concepts—with these concepts in particular?

My intention here is certainly not to build or outline some kind of rigid, complete, and final explanation of everything to do with the divine, some conceptual framework that's watertight and will last forever. Rather, I want to offer something in the way of conceptual structures, conceptual frameworks—logoi in the Greek—that can feed into, support, and open up our experience. Our meditative experience, our meditative exploration, and then meditative experience as exploration can, of course, feed back into the conceptual frameworks, offering something there as well.

So there's this mutual feeding, nourishing, supporting, shaping in ways that encourage, deepen, open, and enrich the soulfulness. I want to offer and build conceptual frameworks, to talk about possible conceptual frameworks and ways things might work conceptually that open up the whole field of exploration, inquiry, and experience—that do not close it down.

So it's important to acknowledge that in all this, maybe it doesn't fit together quite perfectly. It's a bit clunky at the edges. Maybe parts of a conceptual structure, or the whole thing or framework, is vague. That's especially possible and probable, in fact, here in this area when we're talking about the divine and God and those kinds of concepts and experiences, partly because of the nature of that material. The divine is almost by definition something that cannot be contained in concepts.

As a starting point, we're acknowledging the infinite nature of the divine. So whatever we say will not contain it. Whatever structure of concepts or ideation will not contain it, will not be enough. Paul Tillich, a very renowned theologian and philosopher of the 20th century, said, "Every understanding of spiritual things, Geistwissenschaft, every understanding of spiritual things is circular."

So there's a lot to acknowledge here if we're going to bring concepts in for the sake of opening and soulfulness, for the support of inquiry and investigation, for the adventure of meditation, of practice, the adventure of life really—in terms of opening the experience. If we're going to bring concepts in, we have to acknowledge something about circularity, about infinity, about the impossibility of containing and arriving at some neat, final conclusion, some complete structure that explains everything. And that is not a problem. That's not a problem. It's just something to acknowledge because it helps the experience and because it opens the soulfulness.

So there's a different relationship here with all this. If some of it doesn't fit together perfectly, part of that is simply due to my energy levels and the present situation and time constraints from various angles. But also, another dimension of this is that I feel very much like all this is a work in progress for me. I mentioned earlier a different style of teaching rather than sometimes when it's appropriate to sit at the front and give you a complete package—this is it, it's finished, it's all very neat and clear. That has its place. But then there's other styles of teaching, this more what I was calling hermetic in another retreat, this more open-ended teaching. This is, in a way, a collaboration of exploration between so-called teacher and so-called student.

So this is work in progress for me. Ideas, concepts, feeding into experience; experience shaping concepts. And there's no problem in that. There's something beautiful for me in that, in the openness of it, in the creativity, the creation, the adventure, the discovery of all that.

So there's a kind of dance, if you like, between concepts and experience, between conceiving conceptual frameworks and the opening of experience and new experience. They're mutually feeding, shaping, nourishing, deepening, opening each other. And that dance evolves—evolves over time, even for one person.

There are personality differences here, hugely, in relation to all this, in relation to how okay people are with conceptual structures not being taken too seriously, how okay they are with conceptual structures being quite loose, with them evolving, how okay they are with even thinking at all or entertaining consciously conceptual structures. Conceptual structures are always entertained unconsciously. So there are personality differences, but even over time for one person, there's evolution, there's ebb and flow.

So there will be times for some people on this kind of adventure and this kind of exploration where it's really okay that there's very little conceptual framework holding the exploration at a certain time. Other times we need a structure. It really helps support and guide and direct exploration. And yet, as I've mentioned in several talks elsewhere, there is this concept in the Lurianic Kabbalah—what they call the breaking of the vessels, shirat hakelim—that structures will break, all kinds of structures in our life, as they are filled, if you like, from that perspective, from the light of God, but really as we grow, as the psyche grows, as things expand and get fertilized.

Structures—social structures, ideational structures, relationship structures—they will break, they will shatter, the shattering of the vessels. So in terms of conceptual structures, yes, we need structures at certain points. We establish them, we build them carefully, and then they break. And then we form, or new ones are formed, different ones, and they evolve. There's a whole evolution to this.

To me, there's a beauty in that dance between conceptual frameworks and experience and the dynamic of that, the evolution of that.

We could say, "I don't want to dance. I don't want this dance between the conceptual and the experiential—this movement of evolving conceptual frameworks, this evolution of experience." Or perhaps we refuse to enter into that dance because we won't consciously entertain conceptual frameworks. We simply refuse. We don't want to dance.

Alternatively, what happens is we cling to one conceptual framework. Sometimes we don't even realize we're clinging—it operates unconsciously. Or consciously, we keep holding onto something static, trying to maintain it as a kind of rigid, literalized explanation of everything that remains fixed and unchanging.

I think it's crucial to understand something about the nature of perception and mind: there is always conceiving. Conceiving and perception, experience, shape and inform and structure each other. They influence each other inevitably. We cannot escape this.

The idea of non-conceptual experience has become very popular, but it's a myth in the worst sense—an illusion. We must understand that at the subtlest levels of perception, consciousness, experience, and mind, conceiving and perceiving are completely woven into each other. They inform, shape, and structure each other at all levels, from the subtlest to the grossest. It's important to recognize this fundamental truth.

As a person goes deeper into imaginal practice and more fully explores experiences of theophany and cosmopoiesis, one sense that can emerge—both as felt experience and as conceptual framework, the two going together as aspects of the same gestalt—is the sense of multiplicity of dimensions in the nature of any object.

A person, a thing, an imaginal figure—when we see imaginally, there's a sense we can develop through practice: whatever I'm looking at, this object, this person, this thing, this world, has multiple dimensions to it. Its nature is to have multiple dimensions.

I want to tentatively offer the label "the vertical spectrum of the imaginal." I'll explain later why that labeling is so tentative—I'm not particularly gifted at coining phrases and labels. But this vertical spectrum of the imaginal refers to this sense of the multiple dimensions that comprise an object or pertain to an object.

I'm saying something more specific here than simply noting it's possible to perceive selves, things, others, and world in different ways—which is certainly part of the teaching about fabrication and emptiness of perception.

This morning, there was an enormous hullabaloo outside the window—a racket of shouting, screaming, yelling, whooping, and arguing. I'm fairly certain it was a school hiking group stopping briefly outside. Right there, we can hear it through the lens of a certain social perspective about "kids today" and so forth—hearing it as a racket expressing inconsideration. Obviously wrapped up with that is some aversion, some reactivity.

We can also hear it in the mode of bare attention, where it's simply sound. And it's possible to hear it, as the Tantra teachings suggest, as mantra—as holy speech, as the sound of divinity. In meditation, we can hear it differently: not as racket, not even just as sound, but as expression of the divine, the sound of the divine, the music of the divine, the speech of the divine—holy speech.

What does that mean? It's vague. Do we need to elaborate? I'll return to this. I could say this is simply an example of the flexibility and malleability of perception—that it's possible to perceive things in different ways. But I want to say something more in relation to this vertical spectrum of the imaginal.

I look at my friend, someone I've known for a long time and love very much. I can see her as flesh and blood, aware of the physical processes that make up her body and the mental or biological processes in the brain. I can see her through her personal historical background—her upbringing, her woundedness, her trajectories of growth, where she gets stuck, her particular strengths, her characteristics. I can see her in the ordinary sense of self, this modernist sense of self we discussed in the other talk.

Yet as I'm looking at her, meditating imaginally on her presence before me or in my mind's eye, I can also see her, I also sense that she is, or that she expresses, the feminine aspect of God.

She is a face, she is a theophany. At a certain level of perception, level of imaginal perception, she appears to me as one of the feminine aspects of the divine. She appears to me as angel, as dakini or deva if you prefer the Buddhist words. There's a theophany there, and it's quite—it might be really quite particular or a little bit vague. It might even be that at the same time I am aware of the ordinary, modernist way of seeing her—of course I'm aware of that—and I'm aware of this other level. I may be aware of other levels too. I may also be aware of a kind of more universal expression of the divine coming through, but this particular one of the feminine aspect of the divine is very particular to her. It's in and through her personhood, her particularity, and it's expressing an aspect of the divine that has to do with the personhood of the divine or a personhood of the divine.

It might even be that I'm aware of several of these more personal and particular expressions, manifestations, or different levels at the same time as I look at her, as I meditate imaginatively on her, eyes open or eyes closed, looking at her. There can be a sense that there's a spectrum here. It's as if one could tune the attention to different levels. Maybe one stands out and calls for the attention, calls the attention to tune into it. Maybe there's a multiplicity and then one can deliberately tune the attention that way.

This sense can emerge for practitioners—it's both a sense, a perceptual sense, and a conception, so they're woven into each other. This conception may emerge quite loosely, and then, as I said, influence and support the perception, and so the soulfulness and the soul-making. Perception, experience, appearance will be influenced, supported, and will influence and support the conception. It's mutual. In all of that, there's a deepening and opening and enriching and nourishing of the soulfulness and the soul-making.

So this, what I'm wanting tentatively to call the vertical spectrum of the imaginal, is hard to define. A spectrum, if you like, of theophanies, a spectrum of faces of the divine. I really want to emphasize it's a spectrum of perception. Placing perception and the whole way of construing Dharma and imaginal practice and all that—perception is central. Whether it's non-imaginal or imaginal, placing perception and the fabrication of perception as almost the core concept, the central concept, the hinge concept, the basis concept on which everything is structured, built, rests.

So really emphasizing, if I talk about this vertical spectrum of the imaginal, we're really talking about a spectrum of perceptions, not separate from the citta, from the mind, the heart, the conceiving. But it's a sense, a spectrum of what we might call faces of the divine, and it comprises in this spectrum all kinds of manifestations or expressions of a sense of utter sacredness all the way down to non-sacredness.

More specifically, we could say that this sense of this vertical dimension of the imaginal is the sense and the conceiving that selves, things, and world have in and through their particularity—that's very important, in and through their particularity—the selves, things, and world have their roots in, they originate in, they mirror or reflect or they possess or are comprised of dimensions other than just the commonly agreed upon dimension of materiality or self as we tend to view it, conceive it, sense it in the paradigm of modernist culture.

So the sense—and let me say that again—this vertical dimension as a concept is the sense and the concept that selves, things, and world have in and through their particularities, through their personhood, if you like, they have their roots in, they originate in, they mirror or reflect, they possess or are comprised of dimensions other than just the commonly agreed upon dimension of materiality, or of, for instance, self as modern culture construes and views it.

Just to make one thing clear, it's not a spectrum of solidity versus ethereality, what we were talking about some days ago. It's not a spectrum of the octave or register, so to speak, of the image, like very refined and light compared to more bassy and solid.

That's not what we're talking about here. It's really that the imaginal sense is imbued with a sense of the sacred through the sense of comprising or expressing more than the modernist sense of ego, of self, of person, or just matter.

This "more," comprising more, expressing more, the multiplicity, the spectrum there of manifestations, of faces, of theophanies, if you like—this "more" is not horizontal only. So for example, we talked about the interconnectedness of physical objects, interconnectedness at a physical level. I can look at my friend and see her interconnected to us—we're breathing the same air if we're in the same room, we're built of the same stuff that emerged from the same supernova explosion, formed the earth and built of earth and air and fire and water if you use the Buddhist elements.

This interconnectedness at a physical level is also a kind of "more," because usually I see her contained just there. Her body stops at the edges of her skin. When I look through the lens of this interconnectedness at a physical level, there's more, but it's a "more" horizontal spreading, if you like, at the level of physicality.

Or the causes—if I think in terms of the causes and conditions, when we usually talk in those terms, the causes and conditions that give rise to this self, or this object, or this world or environment. Usually, again, that interconnectedness or that inclusion of the web, the net of causes and conditions, is also a "more." It's expanding the view from a tight, bounded object "more," but it's expanding it horizontally. It's talking about interconnectedness and feeding in and expanding the limits of this person or object or thing that I'm looking at, but it's all horizontal. It's all on the same level. What's feeding in there and what's being acknowledged as being "more" is on the same level. It's horizontal.

What I really want to emphasize is something that's not horizontal, something of, as I said, other dimensions, other levels, if you like, of being or existence, but again, really perception. Everything hinges on perception, that that is there, available in the perception.

So vertical spectrum of the imaginal—in a way, it's a sense, it's a perception. We get that sense. But as I said, it is by its nature a conceptual framework. It's a logos. So the sense of it, the perception of this, includes the logos, the conception of it. This is something I want to stress.

I do not have to believe this as something real, and you do not have to believe this as something real. There is no credo here you must sign up to. I'm going to return to this point, because it's so important.

That's one crucial aspect. And it might be that the whole conception of this vertical spectrum is relatively vague. For me, actually, I certainly don't believe it as some kind of literal, concretized, fixed reality that I'm assuming has inherent existence. It remains quite vague for me, but it can still be extremely powerful. I really want to emphasize this and return to it. It can still function so beautifully and potently in terms of soul-making, nourishing and opening soulfulness. You don't have to subscribe to any belief, and it might be relatively vague. It might not be. We'll return to those points because they're very crucial to emphasize.

So it is, to an extent, a sense, a perception. It is also a conceptual framework, a logos. But what's important then is that the conceptual framework, the logos, needs to be loose enough or big enough. My conceptual framework needs to be big enough to allow that kind of perception of this vertical spectrum, of this multiplicity, of these other levels shining through. It needs to be big enough to allow theophany and cosmic oasis.

If I view an image only in typical self-referential terms—there are many ways I could do that, but for instance, viewing this image as arising only because this happened to me when I was a child, or something like that—it's not to say it's not arising in part because of that, or that one couldn't view personal human history as part of the vertical spectrum. But if I only view it self-referentially in those terms, then that view is a shrunken and narrowed, constricted conceptual framework, logos, and it will prevent the sense of theophany. Do you understand?

Mostly this is unconscious. We hold onto views, conceptual frameworks that are quite narrow unconsciously, and there's not enough room to allow experience to open in different ways, as I've said many times now. That kind of viewing an image only self-referentially will prevent the sense of theophany, of vertical space, almost by definition, because theophany, by definition, is seeing an expression, a mirroring, an originating in the archetypal or the divine. I'm seeing this thing, this person, or myself, or this image as originating and expressing and mirroring the archetypal or the divine—an archetypal or the divine. In other words, by definition, it's not just self-referential, because if theophany evolves, other levels of the vertical spectrum come through, other levels are evident in an image.

Now, what also happens through this, as a person practices imaginal practice—we've touched on this already, but let me say it again—is that there is a tendency for the theophanic sense, for the image sense to spread. It becomes a sensibility. So this loose conceptual framework that's operating, the seeing of other levels, and the tuning to that becomes a sensibility and a mode of being. It becomes how we see. And then it spreads in different ways.

One of the ways it spreads is to embrace more objects rather than just the imaginal figure or this personal thing that I'm looking at. Now that might be purely internally—an imaginal world might open up. Or it might be that this world, the world of agreed upon conventional physical reality that we see, comes alive in a kind of cosmopoiesis, that it becomes a different kind of cosmos while still seeing perhaps the same things—the trees over there, my friend here, the sky, the grass, whatever it is, the river, the city. But the theophanic sense, the image sense that was perhaps focused on one figure, whether purely internally, purely imaginal, or through an object in the world like my friend, spreads to create a kind of world, a cosmic oasis.

And what we have there is the image of self and other and world co-created together. Actually, there's another factor there—eros. That's a whole other subject. But there's a co-creation in this spreading of self, other, world. The imaginal sense of all are co-created together, mutually dependent, mutually feeding.

The important point here is that there's often a spreading. This was talked about in the instructions the other day. There's a spreading of the sense of theophany, and there can be a cosmopoiesis.

Now someone might say—it's a fair enough thing to say—well isn't that just coloring the perception? You have this sense and then it's just spreading to color the perception of the world. And yes, it is a coloring of perception, but again, it's important to realize, to have enough depth of insight to realize that all perception, all perception is colored all the time, is fabricated. No perception is independent of the way of looking.

So how does this work? If we go into this a bit more, this idea of the vertical spectrum of the imaginal and this spreading—I've talked about this kind of mechanism before, though it's not quite the right word, but the way that it works. I felt like I didn't quite explain it very well previously, so I'm going to try again.

When there is eros in relation to an imaginal figure—that imaginal figure might be purely in the imagination with no reference to the world of physical objects, or it could be the way I'm seeing my friend through or as image, as we talked about—when there is eros with an imaginal figure, that eros, almost by definition, wants more. It's this desire for more, and particularly it wants more contact. It wants more to be in contact with, and it wants to fertilize. We could say that's what eros is, that's a definition of eros we could start from.

When that's there with an imaginal figure, there's this love, this desire for contact, for more contact, more to contact. But because of that desire, it impregnates and gives more life to the image, not just in terms of vividness and touching the heart, but also it

expands the image, expands and enriches and deepens the fantasy, the mythos that's operating. So much so that it stretches it. And one way it stretches it is by creating other levels, creating eventually this sense of theophany—the sense that certain levels are divine, that the divine is speaking through, shining through in the particular.

Eros doesn't lose sight of the particular. It's often in spiritual approaches that eros wants to just dissolve in the beloved or achieve union or melt or whatever. Actually, in doing that, there is the dissolution of the eros too. So eros needs a particular, a particular person. It needs to see this and love it in and through its particularities and its personhood, and fill that out, make it more multidimensional, more complex. It's not just a movement towards this universal dissolution, union, whatever. That's valid too, but that actually dissolves the eros, and it actually also dissolves the psyche, the soulfulness there.

There's something—we'll come back to this more—this parallelism of two movements, the universal and the personal. Two tracks, very connected. We'll return to this.

But as I said, eros, in wanting more and wanting to contact more, wanting more contact, more to contact, it wants to fertilize and it opens up the levels in the particularity and through the particularity of this thing, this person, this world. It opens up a sense of theophany, of God shining through in different forms and different levels through that particularity and in that personhood. That perception of theophany and that multiple dimensionality implies or needs an increase of the conceptual framework, a stretching of the logos.

So as eros does this and opens up the soulfulness, the psyche, it also stretches the logos. That movement itself, the whole gestalt of that movement, the whole dynamic involves a stretching of the logos to incorporate that. So it stretches vertically, if we use that word tentatively, and it also spreads to the world, to the surroundings in cosmopoiesis—that spreading in cosmopoiesis to feel like we're inhabiting a different world, or we have a sense of the existence of other dimensions of being to this world.

This spreading is also part of eros opening psyche, eros opening the soulfulness, opening the image and the imaginal sense, fertilizing it, inseminating the image of the beloved. It's spreading to the world and also spreading vertically. This spreading to the world, this cosmopoiesis, is also part of eros desiring more connections, part of it creating or discovering—both creating and discovering—more of the beloved. This is what eros wants: I want to go deeper into you. I want to penetrate deeper, discover more of you, move inside you, know you, know the worlds that open up through you. This is what eros wants.

So this widening in terms of spilling over to include the world and the cosmos is part of the thrust, the movement of eros. All of it is the movement of eros wanting more, and the more implies, includes other dimensions—and this is where I want to emphasize it—other dimensions to the object, other dimensions, other levels of beauty and other levels of being in or through this object, person, this world, or nature.

What I'm calling a vertical spectrum of the imaginal, a vertical dimension of perception, is opened up, as well as the wider one that begins to include the surroundings, which you will have noticed in meditation already sometimes.

This vertical dimension, this vertical perception and conception—this sense, to loosely define it, that selves, things, and world have in and through their particularities, through their personhood, have their roots in, originate in, mirror, reflect, possess or are comprised of dimensions other than just the commonly agreed upon dimension of materiality or self as understood and viewed and sensed in modernist culture—this sense and conception of the vertical dimension is a manifestation or a way in which soul-making happens. It is psyche opening. That sense itself and that conception reflects and feeds an opening, an increase, a deepening, an enriching, a nourishing of soulfulness.

If we do not cling either concretely or literally to the whole idea of it, in some kind of new age way, or just cling too tightly to the whole thing. The part that we said in an earlier talk, part of the way I would like to define soul-making is to include this very light holding of concepts—not literal, not concretized, loose, not believed in, not regarded as being other than perception or something separate from the mind, not regarded as an ultimate truth in a sort of final sense.

But this sense of this vertical dimension, the perception of it, which includes the conception of it, you could say is ensouling the world. It's a way of seeing and conceiving that very potently opens the sense of soul in the world and the world being ensouled.

So we could say that psyche, soul through Eros's fertilization, through the sort of thrust of Eros there or the opening of Eros, it sees this way. Or rather, it wants to see this way. There's something in the soul that we could say wants to see this way when there's soul-making and the increase, the nourishment of soulfulness. Psyche will tend, the soul will tend through Eros's fertilization, as I've described, tried to describe. It will move towards seeing more this way.

We could say maybe the soul needs, soul needs this kind of multiple or multiple-leveled, multi-dimensional seeing and knowing and conceiving. William Blake wrote—I'm not sure which poem—"God save us from single vision." It's a prayer: God help us,

God save us from single vision. So there's something in us that as the soulfulness, the soul-making increases, it needs this sense of this multiple, multi-leveled nature of things, of perceptions. And that seeing that way actually reflects an opening of soul, opening of the psyche.

This whole movement dynamic of eros, psyche, and logos that I'm trying to describe—feeding and growing and fertilizing each other, creating space, opening, creating wombs for that fertilization, deepening and widening.

So I said earlier that the word vertical, or the whole vertical spectrum of the imaginal—it doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, it doesn't sound that poetic to me, but I can't think of anything right now. But the word vertical is a little problematic for a couple of reasons. One is that it tends to, or it may, imply a kind of hierarchy. There's up and down, and up is usually better than down in the way we tend to think.

Now, this idea of a vertical spectrum has a long history, or rather, ideas of vertical spectrum has a long history, especially in Western philosophy and spirituality. So there's some parallels with neoplatonist ideas of the great chain of being and that sort of thing, where actually the verticality does imply a hierarchy. One end is good and one... A synonym for the top end of the vertical spectrum in Neoplatonism is "the good," and the other end is not so good. It's less holy, it's furthest from God, and also less real.

So this good is also something called "the one," as I said in Neoplatonism, and there's a kind of ontological hierarchy implied, I think, as far as I can tell. So that that's real, that ultimate, unfabricated, is real, and everything else, sort of progressively, has less existence, less reality, so that matter, in some versions of Neoplatonism, if I'm understanding correctly, is actually regarded as illusory, or even, as I said, unholy.

And in a way, some approaches to Buddha Dharma might be similar. Even in the language, this is unfabricated. The other is fabrication. These other perceptions are more and more fabricated. They're fabrications. So there's a kind of reality imputed to the unfabricated and less reality to other perceptions. That may be an important stage, as I've outlined briefly here and in other places. A very important stage is a kind of way of thinking about things and conceiving of things as one deepens in meditation. It may be actually extremely important as something that unfolds. But to stop there is a problem because it creates a dualism.

So one thing about this vertical spectrum of the imaginal is actually not, I would say—let's not confound it with the spectrum of fabrication of perception. So as I said, in the teaching of the spectrum of fabrication of perception, there is the spectrum from unfab-

ricated to fabricated, a little fabricated, more and more fabricated. And implied in that, and importantly implied in that, is the implication of what's real and what's illusory or empty, unreal.

But wrapped up in that is a dualism. And in a way I feel we need to be rescued at some point from that dualism. As I explained earlier and elsewhere in much more detail, we can actually see at some point in exploring this whole teaching of the spectrum of fabrication that fabrication too is empty. It's like a teaching that's a raft, the whole teaching about fabrication, and at a certain point we realize, oh, that's not a real thing. We recognize the emptiness of fabrication at a certain point, and that reveals, it collapses the duality, it reveals the holiness, if you like, of everything, rather than one transcendent, unfabricated, is holy, and the rest of the world, the fabricated, is less holy. Everything appears holy, everything appears magical. There's the collapse of the duality, any duality between unfabricated and fabricated.

We might also point out, actually, that in Buddha Dharma, when we use the word illusory eventually is another way of saying the same thing. Where usually that word illusory that people say this or that is illusory, it's in comparison in the back of their minds with something that is not illusory. But actually, what is it to recognize that if everything is, so to speak, illusory, actually saying everything is magical and holy? There's nothing that it's illusory in contradistinction to anything that's not illusory. All of it is opened up as magical and holy.

So... Maybe the word vertical could be replaced with the word multiple.

I'm not sure. Maybe the word "spectrum" also gives me pause, because spectrum implies a kind of ordering. Perhaps there is, in terms of experience, a kind of ordering here. So again, in terms of perception or the sense we have of divinity might be stronger at one end of this vertical spectrum in the imaginal than at the other end—progressively different. So that might be a way of conceiving it, though that's different from saying it is so, or this is the ultimate truth.

We might reflect just a little bit more on what the relationship is between the spectrum of fabrication of perception and this vertical spectrum of the imaginal. This is, I think, tricky—not to confound them. I don't think that would work. It's tempting to, but I don't think that would work.

We could say, perhaps—this is really a half-opening of an idea I'm putting out—perhaps they're in some way parallel, or two threads that perhaps intertwine along a spectrum, along a direction. The spectrum of fabrication of perception has at one end the unfabricated, and we could say that as an aspect of the divine, the transcendent, unfab-

ricated, objectless, beyond time, beyond any appearances, beyond any sense of consciousness in the usual sense. So there's that aspect of God, the transcendent aspect of the Godhead, if you like.

As one fabricates a little bit more, coming down from that top end of the vertical spectrum, there is more universal and impersonal shining through of the sense of the divine through the world of objects and things. For example, universal love, cosmic love, the one awareness, the one mind, the big mind. These are points on a spectrum of fabrication coming down that reflect a certain amount of divinity. Then, fabricating more and more down the spectrum, it becomes just the normal, non-sacred perception of self and other and world.

At one end of the spectrum, it's completely transcendent—there's more oneness and less solidity toward that end. As you move down, there's more solidity, more separation, and less sense of sacredness, moving toward more normal perception.

On the other side, or the other thread that's entwined or parallel to that track of the spectrum of fabrication, is what we might call this vertical spectrum of the imaginal. We could say this has its one vertical end in the aspect of God that is more akin to what we were describing with Buddha nature—that incorporates both the ultimate gnosis of the Buddha, the Buddha nature, the wisdom awareness, and its objects. So it incorporates both objective and subjective aspects of the divine.

Within that, or coming out of that, is a spectrum of the imaginal and a spectrum of particular theophanies. So my friend as a particular aspect of the feminine aspect of God, a particular face of that, or other ones that are available there—again, down a spectrum. At the other end, converging with the sort of normal, non-sacred perception of self and world.

In a way, these two spectra have their bottom end converging in normal, non-sacred perception of self, other, world. Their top end converges in the divine, but different aspects. One aspect is the transcendent, unfabricated. One aspect is the non-transcendent, more ultimate of a Vajrayana conception, for example. That's maybe a start—I don't know. I'm just playing with some ideas there.

These two threads would be in a way parallel, or not be the same, but have aspects in common. One crucial thing to realize is they're both spectrums of perception. They're both perceptions. They're not separate from mind. Crucial. They are both empty. That's the second thing they have in common, related to the first—they are both empty. We're not talking about things that have any ultimate reality. Third, what they have in com-

mon is they converge in normal perception at one end, and at the other end they converge in the divine, but at different aspects of the divine—one as utterly transcendent, one as inclusive of appearances.

Right, I'm playing with ideas here that are, as you can hear, half-formed. But in terms of practice possibility, this is actually interesting, because implicit in all this is that we can play with moving up and down each of these spectra. For example, we can play deliberately seeing things as theophany—deliberately hearing those loud, raucous voices outside as mantra, or just tuning into that theophany when it appears. So we can play with the perception of theophany, moving up and down the vertical spectrum of the imaginal, or just responding to what emerges from that spectrum to us as perception.

And then we can also play with the spectrum of fabrication and unfabrication, as I've talked about extensively elsewhere. We can play with moving towards the unfabricated, then play with not letting it fade so much, mixing that with theophany. If perception fades too much, imaginal practice becomes impossible because imaginal practice involves form and particularities. All that fades when you get too near the unfabricated. But there's a play here, either separately or combined—all kinds of possibilities.

I don't pretend this is something that doesn't take probably quite a while to develop. All those possibilities require tremendous skill and art, but they're there for us. There's such breadth and depth and richness—probably infinitude—of possibility for the ways experience can open, for dimensions of experience.

Now, when we conceive of an image-sense having its root in the divine, or having its root in a god or an archetype—using this particular language—we're saying this image-sense is mirroring, reflecting, originating in the divine or in a face of the divinity or an archetype. And this image-sense, in the largest sense, is asking me to honor that. Through the image, this root in the divine or the root archetype is being honored, replicated, expressed, manifested—whether through the image or through the image into my life.

It's through this that one of the ways a sense of sacredness comes—through this sense of another dimension, another level. It's a particular kind, or rather a particular directional range of sacredness: what I'm calling the vertical spectrum of the imaginal. It's not the only one, as we've talked about and made very clear, I hope. But particularly—and what I really want to emphasize—it's from there that a sense of meaningfulness for us is born or supported.

In relation to this having its root or origins in, or mirroring or expressing another level—the divine or archetypal—this has a great deal to do with meaningfulness. I'm going to return to this, but just to say I don't know if that's obvious to you. I'll come back to that.

When we talk about a root in a face of God, or a root in an archetype or a daemon, that root we're talking about—if we use that language—is not a static root. It's something I would like to conceive as much more dynamic. By dynamic, I don't just mean impermanent or changing. I mean particularly dynamic because of everything I said earlier about the way this works in terms of eros and fertilization, deepening and enriching the image. The image, the root, is not static. It's not reflecting something static. It's actually transformed, evolved, stretched, opened, made larger, deepened, made more multilevel through eros and fertilization.

Corbin talks about the angel out ahead—this figure, this angelic imaginal figure that I never quite reach, that always steps ahead, keeps moving ahead. I might catch up a little bit, but he or she moves out further. So the relationship is never one of union. It's one of direction and movement and connection, infusion—but not union. There's a dynamism here that has to do with the eros, the psyche, the logos, as I talked about.

And again, to emphasize so much: when we talk about root in the divine or this archetype or that daemon or this aspect of the divine, we're talking about something that's empty—absolutely empty, empty of inherent existence.

In that dynamism is also the whole idea I described briefly at several points from the Jewish mystical book, the Zohar: that we create God as much as God creates us. A radical idea in theological circles. Or in the Lurianic Kabbalah, this repeated dynamic of the shattering, the breaking of the vessels, of the structures. Here the vessel is not only conceptual frame—it's also an image itself. As I said, it gets stretched or broken, then structured differently again. And that breaking of the vessels also applies to God, or a god, or in a more monotheistic sense, divinity. Our notion and perception of God also breaks, shatters, gets structured differently, grows.

This dynamic itself—the repeated shattering of the vessels, building again, growing, stretching, shattering—that too is part of God. We're actually conceiving that as part of God rather than as some kind of fixed entity in some separate realm.

Again, some of you will recognize this really echoing a kind of post-structuralist or postmodern understanding: rather than assuming fixed, independently existing structures, actually incorporating very much, at a very basic level, this idea of not just fluid-

ity, but a whole dynamic there, and non-independence of these structures, of whatever root an image is reflecting or expressing, or the divine root. We're not talking about fixed, independently existent structures.

And again, to point out the shortcomings and inadequacies of most postmodern philosophers: there isn't, with all that, any practice—any practice of meditation, and specifically meditation as the practice of a flexibility of perception, a practice of different ways of looking. It's not there. So everything stays at the level of language, word games, text. It's presupposed that that's the fundamental thing. It cannot go more subtly. And all it can do is deconstruct rather than actually move fluidly and creatively between perceptions, experiences, and therefore worlds that are recognized not to be ultimately true or fixed or independent.

So this sense or conception—sense slash conception—of things, selves, others, world, image having their roots in, echoing, mirroring other levels, divine levels, aspects—that brings a certain kind of sacredness. There are, as I said, all kinds of possible kinds of sacredness, but there's a whole subset of kinds of sacredness that come out of that kind of sense and conception. That's really what we're emphasizing here.

And that root, as I said, can be conceived in different ways. One way, if you want kind of Buddhist ways—some people will, some people won't—one way is possibly marrying it with the kind of notion of the ultimate in certain tantric teachings, the notion of Buddha nature, the gnosis or wisdom awareness of a Buddha, which also includes the objects that appear to it.

So the root is in both the subjective aspects and the objective aspects of the divinity. The roots of these images are there in, if you like, the mind of God, the divine, the ultimate mind, but also they are creations of that mind, of the appearances to that mind. So that's one way, perhaps, of moving the conception, if you like that.

Now I mentioned earlier that the ways of conceiving of divinity and also of images and that connection there bear a great deal on our sense of meaningfulness. So I want to flesh that out. It may be obvious to some of you already through practice or just from what I've said already, but it may not be. So I want to spell it out a little bit.

Earlier on the retreat, we pointed out a number of times that meaningfulness or sense of meaningfulness pertains to images or is characteristic of images in the sense that I'm using the word image, fantasy, mythos, and that sense of meaningfulness is part of what we were calling soul-making, soulfulness, and the nourishing of soulfulness.

So when we conceive of images in the ways that I've been leaning towards on this retreat—asking, granting a certain amount of autonomy to images, or admitting that they have a certain amount of autonomy, conceiving of them as having a certain amount of autonomy, as being in a way bigger than the human, knowing still that they are dependent arising, not separate from my mind, my perception, fabrication, etc. But when we grant them that greater being, if you like, a certain kind of autonomy, a certain kind of reality, and a sort of origin, or a mirroring of another level, a higher, more divine level, if you like, or levels of the divine, and then we turn that around in our relationship to images and ask, what is it that this imaginal figure wants? What do you want?

If you remember, we emphasize this so much, that this kind of way of conceiving of images and their divinity, if you like, their roots in divinity. This fills out, deepens, brings alive a sense of meaningfulness for us in particular ways that the soul needs more powerfully and more particularly than other ways of conceiving. It nourishes that sense of meaningfulness. It gives us a sense, for instance, of calling in life, of destiny, some road calling me, some pull towards something that I can't quite understand. I'm being pulled by something bigger than me. It puts the soul events of my life, gives them a meaningfulness, a movement that's imbued in meaningfulness that has a lot to do with personhood. My personhood and my life, your personhood, your life, expressing, manifesting on the track of a certain kind of deep and divine meaningfulness. Its origins are not completely in the me, so to speak.

So the soul needs this. Recognize again the circularity of some of these statements and arguments as Paul Tillich pointed out. Never mind. So what? It's part of the territory. And this is a whole big subject about meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is a whole big subject and sometimes people want to assert the fundamental, ultimately true meaninglessness of everything, as if that is true. They might shy away from words like truth and try not to use them, but underneath or woven into what's being said is that ultimately we live in a meaningless universe, and any meaning that we might generate is therefore essentially kidding oneself, not having the courage to face meaninglessness, the existential meaningless and the limits of our existential situation.

There actually—and I've pointed this out other times—there is a fantasy right there, the existentialist fantasy. The meaningfulness that comes into that fantasy is exactly in that, in the sort of casting oneself as being brave enough to face that reality of meaningless, to cope with it, to articulate it, to uncover it. Actually, as a soul story, a fantasy, there's a kind of dead end there for soulfulness. There's a limit. But limits are part of the attraction of that fantasy, the bravery of limits. It's all resting on an assumption of truth, even if that is not recognized or realized or admitted. There's a fantasy in there about what's true. And then the self and the world are cast in line with that fantasy.

So we can, again, just spelling this out with the different conceptions of divinity or cosmology. Again, to say, if I have a completely one-dimensional view of the cosmos—so this is in contradistinction, in contrast to the sense of a vertical dimension of many dimensions—if I have just a one-dimensional view of the cosmos, as we said, for example: Really, all there is that's real is matter. This teaching, this philosophy of physicalism, what's called physicalism or materialism in philosophical circles. And all there is that's real is matter, and everything emerges out of the interactions of matter. Matter is meaningless. The interactions of matter are meaningless. Consciousness and the complexity of our life, etc., and all what looks like tragedy and joy, etc., is just kind of basically based on or emergent from meaningless interactions of matter according to the laws of physics.

But that view, that kind of one-dimensional view of the cosmos, you can see how that erases the possibility of any deep sense of meaningfulness, certainly to the cosmos, but also then by extension, by implication or context, to our personhood and our lives and the images. It's all essentially just the meaningless movement of matter. And that's the only real reality. So as I said, the images that come might be just random neuronal firings.

Then there are some other views and perceptions of divinity. We talked about, for instance, a universal conception of divinity that's quite popular, a universal perception of divinity that's fairly easily accessible for most meditators - the kind of mystical perception of "all is one," and in different ways, maybe all is this vast cosmic universal love or compassion, or all is awareness, and so on.

Interestingly, here's a conception of divinity, but also that conception of divinity also kind of erases or leaves no room for a more personal meaningfulness. In its universality, it has no room for a more personal meaningfulness. That's not so obvious, but by personal meaningfulness, I really mean any meaningfulness connected with the particularities of the person - one's personhood, one's life trajectory, the soul events of one's life, or as I said, a sense of a calling or a sense of destiny in one's life.

Even to take another view of a mystical view or a view of divinity - a simple view of the emptiness of all things, or as we outlined, the view that understands everything is fabricated. If we just stop there, that also erases meaningfulness. And as we pointed out, without enough depth, if the view does just stop there, those kinds of conceptions - "everything is fabricated, there is the unfabricated" - that view may actually disparage the world, the cosmos, as fabricated, and then orient towards this transcendent unfabricated, erasing the world of phenomena, of perception, of manifestation.

And that fits into the classical Pali canon trajectory of ending rebirth. All this is fabricated. One does not want to be reborn into this world of fabrication. One wants to escape, dissolve, end rebirth and dissolve into the unfabricated. So there's a disparaging of the world of fabrication. That does something quite profound to a sense of meaningfulness.

So either in the universal views of "all is one," or "all is love," "all is awareness," or cosmic consciousness, or the view of the unfabricated being divine and the fabricated being the undivine - in all of those cases, meaningfulness only would lie in the movement towards ending rebirth, or unbinding in the unfabricated, or realizing universal love, or realizing oneness, or whatever. Meaningfulness can only then lie in those. If that's the only conception of the divine, that's the only conception of the cosmology there, then meaningfulness just lies in moving towards, trying to move towards perceiving that continuously - continuously perceiving oneness or cosmic love or whatever it is - and perhaps helping others get there.

So meaningfulness comes, yes, to help others get there. But the particularities of beings, of manifestation, of action, of expression, of love, as well as the particularities of personality, of character, they have no particular meaningfulness other than sharing in this universal oneness. Well, they're one like everything else is one, or this universal reality. Basically, it's the same as saying they have no particular meaningfulness. Meaningfulness does not reside in the particularities; it resides in the universality.

So when we think about different conceptions and practice options that we can explore, it's only in this kind of conception and viewing and practicing the view - as we're talking about viewing ourselves, our lives, viewing others and things, and the world as mirroring, echoing, rooted in some particular aspect or archetype of divinity. It's only in doing that, in other words, in perceiving selves, others, things, acts, speech, and all of that as particular theophanies, that we support meaningfulness in this particularly deep way that's connected with our personhood and the particularities of things.

It supports meaningfulness in the most soulful way, the most fully soulful way. It's a dimension of the possibility of meaningfulness. That kind of conception will support meaningfulness the most, will fertilize and root a sense of meaningfulness in deep soil, because the conception gives it that, and the view gives it that.

We've talked a lot now about conceptual frameworks regarding the divine. There's a lot there. I'm conscious of that. I'm conscious that it's complex, some of what was said, a lot of what was said, difficult to digest, difficult to understand, perhaps. So very con-

scious of that. And really, again, the encouragement to take it lightly, take these concepts lightly, take your relationship with these concepts and with playing with them lightly around the concepts of the divine and how that works in with images.

The Kotzke Rebbe, a Jewish mystic from the late 18th century who died in the mid-19th century - I think he's basically the rabbi from Kock, which I think is in modern Poland - he said, "Pfui!" - which I'm assuming is a Yiddish exclamation - "Pfui! I'm not interested in a god any Tom, Dick, or Harry can understand."

So take this lightly. It's okay, in a way, to be - there's something actually beautiful in grasping towards understanding, this movement of shattering conceptions, groping a little bit, putting things together, letting them grow, building them. That's part of the dance.

The Kotzke Rebbe, a Jewish mystic from the late eighteenth century who died in the mid-nineteenth century—essentially the rabbi from Kocka in what is now modern Poland—said, "Pfui!" (which I assume is a Yiddish exclamation), "I'm not interested in a god any Tom, Dick, or Harry can understand."

So take this lightly. It's okay, in a way, to be—there's something actually beautiful in grasping towards understanding this movement of shattering conceptions, groping a little bit, putting things together, letting them grow, building them. That was part of the dance.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 23

An Ecology of Love (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h04

In this fourth part of his series on an ecology of love, Rob Burbea examines how our views of self, understanding of Dharma, and perception of nature profoundly influence our environmental engagement. He contrasts metta (loving-kindness) with eros, showing how metta tends toward dissolution of self into universal love, while eros enriches and complicates self-view through imaginal dimensions.

Burbea critiques common Dharma interpretations that limit activism through narrow conceptions of the Four Noble Truths and non-clinging practices. He argues for a more radical understanding of emptiness that paradoxically allows playful engagement with archetypal images of self - including warrior, revolutionary, and troublemaker aspects often excluded from Buddhist identity. The talk traces how Western scientific materialism has flattened our perception of nature's sacred dimensions, making environmental crisis seem merely technical rather than spiritual.

Drawing on thinkers like Wendell Berry and Confucius, Burbea explores activism as preservation of noble qualities within oneself. He distinguishes between instrumental activism (focused on measurable outcomes) and imaginal activism (addressing soul-level needs), arguing both are necessary for the psychological complexity of climate change. The talk concludes with reflections on how love and sacredness mutually constitute each other in an ongoing ecology of perception, opening possibilities for deeper environmental engagement.

So as I keep saying, eros involves—and this is the fullness of the meaning of that word—eros involves psyche and logos. And in that infinite dance, there's an infinity of possibilities of view and perception and experience and kinds of love.

To point out a few things in the way that it involves psyche and logos and views: in the infinity of possibilities, it will always include a view of self. Or rather, included in that dynamic is always a view of self and of the other—whatever other is in this case, predominantly in this talk, the earth or nature. So always included in this co-fertilization of eros, psyche, and logos is a view of self and a view of other at any level of perception, at any stage to which it arrives and opens.

The view of self and the view of other—these will be important factors. As I said right at the beginning of the talk, views condition; dependent on views, doors open or close. Specifically in terms of action and how we behave, and the styles of engagement

or activism—or not, whether we somehow don't engage, are not active, do not respond to the crises of the earth—wrapped up in all that is the view, not just of the other, of the earth, but the view of the self as well. They go together and they're part of the whole dynamic of eros, psyche, and logos.

So just to say a little regarding self-view in all this: it's going to be part of it. Listen to this from Wendell Berry. In regard to this whole dynamic and ecology of love with respect to activism, listen to this regarding the self-view involved in activism, self-views possibly involved in our activism or in our non-activism.

This is Wendell Berry, the poet: "A protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope more modest than that of public success—namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's heart that would be destroyed by acquiescence."

In a way, he's turning on its head how we sometimes think of activism. It's not so much about achieving this or that in the world, he's saying, but the hope of preserving qualities in one's heart that would be destroyed by acquiescence. Something is holy here in my heart, and I'm going to act and speak and stand up in a certain way because that is holy, and I cannot bear to think of those qualities being destroyed. There's beauty and divinity in those qualities in the self, in the heart. There's some orientation towards leaning, towards emphasizing the self, of the view of the self, and of what's in the self.

Confucius, obviously many centuries before, but in a way elaborating on something, pulling that out a bit more. This is what Confucius said or wrote: "You follow your conscience not in order to change the world, but in order to be a noble person. You are prepared to go against all norms, conventions, dictates and decrees, even to risk your life in order to remain true to yourself."

Beautiful, strong words. And again, not to change the world, this following of our conscience, but in order to be a noble person.

Now we can talk about self and all this—what both Wendell Berry and Confucius write—in terms of qualities of heart, in Wendell Berry's phrase, which would be a traditionally Dharma way of speaking about things, in terms of qualities of citta, qualities of heart. That's possible and helpful, definitely. But when we start talking about things like nobility—which, by the way, is also a word the Buddha emphasized a lot—nobility as a word, as a concept, already draws in, it can't help but draw in, image and fantasy. There's a kind of logos with nobility of what that means, but specifically what I want to say is image and fantasy of self.

What resonance do these words have in us? Nobility, or what Wendell Berry said, or Confucius—the resonances are caused by our soul aspects, soul resonances of the psyche through image and fantasy. The very idea of nobility gets seen through image and fantasy, and that colors the image and fantasy of the self.

This is something I've talked about in other talks. I actually don't want to dwell on it in this talk, but in other talks I talked about how very easily, without realizing it, the image or the fantasy or the archetype of the self gets limited in different ways and for different reasons, and sometimes limited through different cultures, whether that's Dharma culture or other culture. So that certain images of the self, if you like, are not allowed into the sense of the self, into the view of the self—the warrior, the revolutionary, rage as a force empowering the self, giving power to the self's actions. These are all put aside or ignored or somehow not okay. Many others we could mention as well.

Because what often has become dominant is an image or a fantasy or an archetype of the practitioner or the self or of the awakened person as equanimous, cooled—to borrow the Buddha's words, nibbāna is related to cooled—equanimous, cooled, not engaged. And there's an archetypal image operating that does not allow other archetypal images of the self and the practitioner and the person walking the path and the awakened person. There's a constraining on the image there.

Luc Jacquet is a filmmaker. He made, you may know, *The March of the Penguins*, which got an Oscar. And then, I haven't seen this film, but he recently made another film called *Ice and Sky*, and it's about climate change. This Luc Jacquet spoke in an interview of the moral compulsion he felt to address climate change caused by humans. To not do so, he said, would be criminal.

It was a strong word, criminal. He goes on: "I could make endless contemplative films about the beauty of nature, but it would not have been right to do so. We have to deal with this. It's our duty. It's like the war. You want a quiet life with your family, but you have to say, I cannot accept this. You have to get out of a comfortable area and into the political. You must participate in the society in which you live."

Again, strong words. But can you hear wrapped up in these words this sense of an imaginal fantasy sense of the self and, if you like, the duty of the self? That word "duty" is also a word that can be imbued with the imaginal. There's a self-view and archetype wrapped up in what he's saying, and then this sense of duty to that.

When we dare to experiment with and practice with and open up to different self-views and more archetypally imbued views of the self, play with all that and open it up and allow it and allow its force and its current into our life and into the way we sense ourselves, then we can feel, very often, a duty to these imaginal figures that come through. They demand something.

This is something I've talked about before, but just to mention it. It's interesting sometimes when there is a sense of duty to an archetypal image or an imaginal figure that has an archetypal quality to it for us—that can bring a lot of activation in the being.

Someone was telling me they were about to engage in an act of civil disobedience in relation to climate, and she was saying, "Gosh, the adrenaline beforehand, and the anxiety." She had just assumed, of course—very natural or normal, given the culture—assumed that the anxiety was in relation to the possible consequences: "I may go to jail, I may face all kinds of repercussions." And of course, some of it is to do with that.

But there's also another aspect that's more to do with the imaginal and the soul dimension of what's going on. When we feel a duty to an imaginal figure that has an archetypal value for us, when we allow that to fill the self and we feel a duty in our life to that image, the sense of that—because of the other-dimensionality of it and the hugeness of it and the divinity of it and the sense of the human being having to hold and carry and let that flow through—in itself causes a lot of adrenaline. There's tremendous energy and this sense of duty wrapped up in that. It's not just the adrenaline about the fear of possible consequences.

That was a little bit of an aside. The point is that self too—the sense of self, the view of self—is also given verticality through the imaginal and through fantasy. It's ensouled, if you like. And potentially, in this eros-psyche-logos dynamic that we're talking about, the view and the image of self is also endless in its potentiality. It can be forever opening. There's not a limit there to how we can see the self.

Some self-views I've already alluded to will block engagement. For example, the archetypal view of the equanimous one, the cool one who's not engaged that way. But also other ones, less obvious.

I know several people who, although they don't actually think at all—imagine that's part of the problem—are kind of enthused by or enthralled by or live their life by the archetypal image of what you might call the simple man, or the simple man of nature, or nature man, or something like that: living close to nature in the old ways and very simple and renunciate and in touch with those elements and seeing oneself in a certain way.

But often, at least in the couple of people I'm now thinking of, wrapped up in that image is actually the logos—the limited logos of physicalism, of this one-dimensionality. And somehow it doesn't translate in terms of engagement. With regard to the natural world, one person I think of engages a lot with some other issues, but not in relation to the natural world. Interesting.

So what one would think of as, "Well, that kind of person is obviously going to be an environmentalist and obviously going to be engaged in environmentalism"—actually, no, not necessarily. And it may be partly because wrapped up in that for them is this one-dimensional view of physicalism. Maybe.

So where there is metta, if we go back to this metta and eros, where there's metta, the views of the self tend towards dissolution—tends towards a sense, as the metta deepens, of dissolving the self in union, in oneness. It's the way the self-sense transforms as, or at the times of, strong metta and deep metta. The self-sense basically dissolves or dissolves in oneness, dissolves in the sense of universal love that we're talking about. There are other ways of it dissolving through other practices—dissolving awareness, all kinds of approaches.

But in other words, one way that the views of the self can be wrapped up in this sense of other dimensions is through a sense of dissolving of the self into some kind of oneness, a non-fabricating of the self-sense at any time.

Versus in the erotic kind of love, when there's eros, the archetypal views, the imaginal views, the fantasy of the self, get actually heightened.

So the view of self, again, is infused, impregnated with the imaginal, complicated, enriched with the imaginal. And the sense of other dimensions of the self, in this case, and the sacredness is heightened through the particular and through the personhood and the personal.

So one dissolves self, the way of metta, and the eros actually does not dissolve self—it complicates it, enriches it, and retains the particularity and the personhood. And the sacredness is through and in the particularity and the personhood, not the universality.

In regard to activism, there is also the involvement of the view of what Dharma is. The conceptual structure or limits or framework of what the Dharma is, and our imaginal sense, our fantasy of what the Dharma is—these two always go together. Logos and image, concept and fantasy concept. So our view of the Dharma also has a big impact on whether we engage, how we engage, what our activism looks like, or whether it exists at all.

One way is in relation to our belief of what the Dharma says about self, relating to what we just explored about self-view. Some people nowadays, in what has become quite popular, hold onto the view that the dharma teaching is always toward not-self, always in regard to there being no self, or that self is something to be let go of, not engaged. Or, for instance, that what the dharma teaches is that the self is just a process, and the more you can see self that way, the better—trying to see self that way as the dharma perspective to hold onto.

But actually, if we have an understanding of a much more radical level of the emptiness of the self, and of all things really—not just saying self is a process, but saying something much, much deeper than that in terms of what it means to say the self is empty, radically empty. Radical from the Latin word radix, to the root. There's no root to the self. It's completely and thoroughly, utterly empty. All the elements of it, all of it, all that process is empty. Process does not ultimately exist.

Knowing that fullness and radical depth of the emptiness of self actually allows us, seemingly paradoxically, to come back and play with all kinds of views, fantasies and images of self, knowing that they're empty. I can play with the image of the Dharma practitioner as revolutionary, as troublemaker, as warrior—all these other archetypal, imaginal senses or views that get shunted aside or disallowed often in certain Dharma spheres. So that's one way.

A second way that the view of the Dharma—the concept and image of the Dharma—can constrain activism is in regard to our conception of the Four Noble Truths: suffering, the cause for suffering, the possibility of ending suffering, and the path to the ending of that suffering.

There are two ways here in regard to the Four Noble Truths. The first is simpler, in a way, and it has to do with whether I view it purely individually and internally. Do I conceive the Four Noble Truths teaching as only applying to my personal suffering? Or do I allow it to include the suffering of other humans and animals and the suffering caused —second noble truth—by institutions and ideologies and systems, economic or otherwise political, and views that pervade our society and our culture that basically cause suffering? Am I allowing my idea of the Four Noble Truths, and thus of the Dharma, to actually open up to include all that?

I think slowly, and I hope increasingly, more so-called Buddhists are opening up that view. And for some people, it's a kind of no-brainer. How could you not? How can you exclude all that and talk about suffering and then not talk about these crazy tragedies

of institutions and systems and ideologies that cause so much suffering that's so entrenched in our society? A lot of people have said it's ridiculous to conceive of a Dharma and the ethics of the Dharma that doesn't include all that.

I heard one teacher, when asked about this, say that climate change doesn't concern the Dharma at all—it's not involved. Someone might hear that and just say, "How completely ridiculous. You're making the Dharma irrelevant to modern life." But if there's this opening up of the range of what's included in the Four Noble Truths and what it applies to, then out of that there will be care for the earth, just because one is moving in a direction of minimizing suffering—wherever that suffering occurs and wherever that suffering has its origins, whether in my mind or in institutions or systems or ideologies, conceptions, assumptions, political systems, whatever. So that's one way the conception of the Four Noble Truths can limit or open.

Another way is deeper, in a way, because there's often what we might call a kind of cognitive dissonance in Dharma practitioners. Very, very common—I run into it all the time. It's almost like one hears the Four Noble Truths, one hears these teachings about letting go and non-clinging, and the centrality of letting go of clinging. In the Four Noble Truths, clinging causes suffering, letting go of clinging brings freedom—that's the nutshell version of the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are central to what the Dharma is, especially in insight meditation circles.

And so a person actually, either consciously or kind of by default, is somehow engaged in trying to live a life of non-clinging. Trying to live a life of non-clinging becomes somehow an ideal. And of course, it's impossible. Even the idea—if you actually reflect on what that would look like or what that would mean—involves itself in all kinds of sillinesses and contradictions. It's just not possible.

If I really go into what that means and what it would look like, it's a bit of a ridiculous notion. And yet somehow it's held up, and then I fail, and yet somehow it doesn't get questioned as an ideal. Maybe a little bit, we play with words like clinging and craving, and sort of tease them both—craving's okay because it's momentary, but clinging is not, you know, and that kind of thing. But there's still something that doesn't really work and makes sense in that as a life, especially in a life if one wants to include eros, and one wants to include other aspects of life, relationship, and love of one's children, and love of nature and all. It just doesn't work as an ideology.

Implicit there in the understanding of the Four Noble Truths is this non-clinging, and there may be a goal—if one even talks about goals, and some people hate that word—but the goal is of less stress or less depression if you're in the kind of mindfulness modalities, and that's kind of the goal, although one's very careful with words like "goal." Or

it might be that implicit in that understanding of Four Noble Truths is the kind of ideal of being present to life, being present to life—I'm going to give that all kinds of different language—but the whole thing there, the kind of aspiration of trying to live a life of non-clinging, of being present, or whatever it is.

All of that is taking place in a world of unquestioned reality. The world is just what it seems. We acknowledge, of course, that things are impermanent, that we may not like that. We acknowledge the interconnectedness and can kind of see that more. But basically, the world, in that kind of... the narrowness, really, of that conception, the world is... Practice is taking place with a backdrop or in the context of a world that's basically what it seems to be to the dominant worldview, the dominant modernist worldview, the Weltanschauung. Basically, it is that. Yes, impermanent. Yes, interconnected, etc. But basically, it's that.

So that's a very, very common way, or even if a person doesn't really think of Four Noble Truths and all that, it's somehow wrapped up in all that, is this kind of ideology, really, without maybe even a person thinking it's an ideology. It's a conception of what the Dharma is, what the Four Noble Truths is, and what they're for, and where they move to.

Now compare that with a different conception that really picks up this piece of non-clinging, or letting go of clinging, that's there implicit in the Four Noble Truths very strongly, very centrally. It picks it up and really starts practicing with, meditatively, in all kinds of ways, at all kinds of depths and subtleties and all kinds of directions, but to a lesser or greater degree at any moment in time, practices letting go of clinging to different degrees and at different depths and at different ranges of subtlety for a period of time and then letting clinging come back and just exploring this movement of more or less clinging into greater and greater depths of non-clinging, and greater and greater subtleties of what that even means to cling.

So the practice becomes a kind of meditative exploration of sliding up and down deliberately this spectrum, if you like, of how much clinging there is. I realize for some of you this is going to sound really, really strange, and I've filled this out elsewhere, so I'm not going to elaborate too much. But just to say, if one practices that way and views practice that way, then it opens a completely different door.

One starts to see that as one lets go of clinging, or in the moment when one meditatively lets go of clinging more and more deeply, the perception of things, self, other, world is fabricated less. To the degree that there's clinging in any moment of percep-

tion, there's more fabrication. To the degree that there's less clinging in any moment, there's less fabrication. So I see this relationship between clinging and the experience of self and things and objects and world.

And the exploration of letting go of clinging to different degrees at different times, not as something to hang on to—I'm not trying to continuously non-cling somehow in regard to everything. But this more meditative, nuanced, subtle and much deeper movement of exploration in the direction of non-clinging and more clinging and non-clinging and different kinds of less clinging, one sees the intimate connection, the dependent co-arising of perception and clinging. The fabrication of perception means the fabrication of experience and appearance with clinging.

One starts to see, oh, perception is fabricated, and oh, it's fabricated to a much greater, more pervasive and deeper extent than I thought. My sense of things, I begin to understand they are empty. I perceive them this way when I look in this way, when there's this kind of clinging. I perceive them that way when there's this very, very subtle kind of clinging. I perceive them this way when there's nothing left but just this subtlest clinging. What's the real way? They're empty. Things appear dependent on the way of looking, and central in that is dependent on the degree, if you like, and the kind of clinging that's there.

This way of understanding emptiness is actually just a kind of key to the exploration of the fabrication of perception, and from that, our sense and our understanding of what things are, self, other, world. And the sense of the world then begins to open. It's empty. World, nature, is empty of inherent existence. My perception, my sense of it depends, depends on clinging, depends on the way of looking, depends on how I'm looking. And it becomes more open because it's empty. It can be seen this way and that way. All kinds of possibilities of perceiving nature, perceiving world, open up for us through this practice and through actually the exploration of this sort of sliding scale of subtleties and depths of clinging in any moment.

So the whole thing is actually oriented in terms of understanding experience, understanding perception, and what that does is it opens up this understanding of emptiness, which opens up the very possibilities of perception of what self, other, and world or nature is, are. That becomes much more open, an open playing field, really.

So that's one consequence. The second consequence implicit in all that is clinging is not an enemy. It's actually possible at times. And of course, I mean, just think about it.

Just feel into your life. Of course you need to cling. One of my teachers used to say, "You know, you need to cling to ethics for a while, at least. You need to cling to certain levels of understanding in order to open to others. You need to cling to cultivating good qualities in order to give practice a possibility even of this kind of depth and power." All kinds of things you need to cling to, just within the Dharma. And then you think about other aspects of one's life.

So can we view the Dharma in a way that actually, strangely, opens up the validity and possibility and legitimacy of clinging at times? And also opens up a place for eros? Rather than the suspicion of eros and either denigration or just ignoring of the erotic and the sexual, actually has a place, has a place, because I'm approaching the Dharma, conceiving it in a very different way.

So in this way then, the Four Noble Truths and the teaching about letting go of clinging, the teaching about letting go of stress, is not so that we can be free—whatever that might mean—but so that we can see more. It's not so that we can be free; it's so that we can see more, sense more emptiness, know more emptiness of everything. We can see more levels in the perception, if you like, dimensions. We can see more sacredness. There is an openness and an opening of the perception through this way of approaching practice.

To me, there's a much greater freedom there, a whole other level of freedom. It's a much more open, a much richer way of viewing the Dharma.

But in a way, this talk today—I just mention these things—but this talk today is really focused on not so much the self-view, as I've talked about that, not so much the view of the Dharma, and the way the view of the self and the view of the Dharma are involved in all this business about eros and psyche and the dynamic there. But actually, primarily for today, is the view of another, or any other, and particularly of nature and earth, as we started off with.

So just to return a little bit to this—we've said already quite a lot about it—in the so-called Enlightenment in Western civilization. I mean, it was a gradual thing, you know, like these things are. Seventeenth century, sort of. And the scientific revolution, which happened at the same time—these things were interpenetrated. The scientific revolution, Enlightenment.

There was a philosopher or scientist or both, or writer, Francis Bacon, very influential in the scientific revolution. And that whole movement, that whole revolution that came with the scientific revolution and with the Enlightenment, brought about, as I al-

luded to earlier, this kind of one-dimensionality. It's like the shaving off of the sense of verticality, of multiplicity of dimensions in our perception, our sense, our view of things.

So this is—you cannot overestimate the significance and the consequences of this. All kinds of wonderful consequences and really helpful, of course. But like all things, bring with it a shadow, a blind spot, a constriction.

So the philosopher Owen Barfield has written about this quite a lot. And I think it's from an essay called "The Rediscovery of Meaning." But he talks about, he makes a distinction between scientific method, because that's what really started back then with Galileo and others. It's really an introduction of a kind of a way of observing nature.

So Owen Barfield points out, quoting him a little bit, that meticulously observing the facts of nature and systematically interpreting them in terms of physical cause and effect—so in other words, this one-dimensionality is only interpreting things in terms of physical cause and effect—that was introduced as a method, brilliant and revolutionary and important as it is, but it grew as a method and grew in a way that at some point, almost—well, in many cases unconsciously, but in other cases more deliberately—became a sort of entrenched belief and assumption, dominating the culture, pervasive in the culture, the belief and assumption of physicalism or materialism, using those words interchangeably, and sometimes was kind of enshrined as a philosophy with positivism, if you know a little bit about this.

So something that started as a method became a belief and assumption that actually that method of interpreting the facts of nature, purely interpreting them only in terms of physical cause and effect, was not only just a useful way of doing things, but actually the only possible one and the only legitimate one. So it became a belief and something of a sort of entrenched and often hidden dogma that pervades our culture and the culture and the view of modernism. It's an assumption shared by most people in the culture and it's become the dominant cultural view of matter and therefore of nature.

On top of all that, Barfield points out that people believe that that view itself is a scientifically established fact. In other words, the view that the only possible way of looking at things is the scientific one is itself scientifically proven. A, it's not, and B, just logically it's impossible. It's outside of the loop or the system of the relevant terms of the logic involved there.

Something has happened culturally. What started as a method became a predilection, an emphasis on that method, and then that became a view of what was legitimate, and that became entrenched as a belief, an assumption shared in the culture, and then it was even believed that that that was itself established by science somehow. And science being the only legitimate way of establishing anything.

And in and through all that, culturally then, has there been a dying away, a starving, if you like, of our ability to perceive, if you like, these other dimensions? Yes. So all that affects how we sense things, not just the ideas.

Now, I'm not talking about intellectuality, but about ideas—sorry, about the sense, the very experience of nature. Culturally, has it become rare? I don't know—this sense of the other dimensions of things, this sense that things are more than just matter.

So the other extreme, which I think we mentioned before, is a divinity, a sense of divinity that's cut off from materiality in the world—and perhaps that was dominant before the scientific revolution. Divinity is just something transcendent, and materiality is something separate. The world is separate from God. That would be another extreme view. There's a verticality there, but no connection between the dimensions of the vertical, on the vertical spectrum. And it's dualistic.

So one of the things about eros is that it connects horizontally. It connects me to this other that I love, that there's an erotic connection with. But it connects vertically as well. It connects the dimensions so there isn't this dualism or split or divinity cut off. It connects the dimensions through this *eros-psyche-logos*, because it's wrapped up in perception and ideation and the sense of things, infusing our very sense of things, our very image and perception of things. So it connects horizontally—eros helps to connect horizontally and also vertically, connects these dimensions of perception. And it does it, as we said, in and through the particulars.

So *mettā* also connects dimensions, but it does it through universality. And so it's infinite, if you like, in a different way. As I said, it tends to fabricate less, and through fabricating less, gradually, gradually, as you get deeper, there's a sense of this infinity of love. And then, as I said, some people are able to take that further, if they know how, if they're taught how, into the unfabricated. But there aren't the infinite varieties of perception possible that come through the erotic kind of love, the erotic strand of things with this mutual impregnation and insemination of the eros and psyche.

There's something else relevant here about Francis Bacon, the scientific revolution and all that. Francis Bacon wrote about knowledge. One of the things he wrote about was knowledge. And he made a very strong and actually extremely influential statement that became very influential and had significant consequences over the centuries.

Knowledge, in his exposition, knowledge was valued for its instrumentality. In other words, for its practicality in re-engineering nature and in giving humanity power over the elements of nature. So for him, if knowledge wasn't instrumental and practical in that sense of the way we can dominate and reconfigure nature and use it for our ends, it wasn't a worthwhile knowledge. It wasn't even knowledge at all in his book. So he wrote, knowledge without such practical applications is worthless or worth less.

And something else to point out here, because knowledge was also wrapped up with measurement. In other words, in his view, if you couldn't measure something, it wasn't really real. Only what was measurable was real. That was absolutely integral and fundamental to the ideology of the scientific revolution. Only what was measurable was real.

So that began very much to spread its influence in our very sense of what the cosmos and nature was made of. It's only made of stuff that's measurable. And anything you talk about that can't be measured cannot be real and cannot be really what the cosmos and nature and earth is made of. Massively influential. It sounds like intellectual ideas, but they so infuse our ways of thinking and our sense, our perception of things, of others, of nature, of the world, and a sense of what's real, pervading the culture.

Now, measurement and instrumentality are actually inevitably tied together. I don't know if that's obvious. But if you want to see, is this instrumental, can I be able to do something, I need to measure whether it's doing what it's doing and how much it's doing and what I want it to be doing. Measurement—and whether I do that with a slide rule or a microscope or some kind of calibrated measure where they just look at it and say, yeah, that looks pretty good, that one does better than this—measurement and instrumentality are inevitably tied together.

Now all this, I'm going on about it, not just because of the views that come of it, but also in relation to activism. So understandably and importantly, how often in relation to our activism we want to measure the effectiveness of our activism. And in other words, we want to measure its instrumentality. Is what I'm doing ultimately affecting, say, a government so that ultimately, for instance, the measurement of CO2 parts per million in the atmosphere is reduced or limited or stabilized? So we want to measure the effectiveness, the instrumentality of our activism, directly or indirectly. And of course that's so important and so needs to be there as an element of what's going on.

But can there be sometimes an over-emphasis on the instrumentality of our activism?

So of course these questions—what will be effective, what will affect a change in society, in politics, in the natural world? And how can I measure it? How do I measure whether what I'm doing as an activist is helping?—are really, really important.

But if I exclusively focus on instrumentality or overemphasize it, might that very overemphasis actually, strangely enough, reflect and be a symptom of the kind of one-dimensional view, the physicalism, the lack of other dimensionalities, the lack of verticality that's pervasive in the culture? That started with the scientific revolution and had such—as well as so much good that's come out of it—such dire consequences? And the lack also of soulfulness and eros that came, or that grew out of the kind of Western Enlightenment, the scientific revolution ideology when it became entrenched as a kind of limiting belief, dogma. And then the whole view of modernism that in so many ways constrains the possibilities for soulfulness and eros.

So sometimes, understandably, we can overemphasize or exclusively emphasize the instrumentality of our activism. Obviously, it's important. But again, asking, is it enough? Is it enough for the psyche? And is it enough for the whole complexity of the situation of climate change and environmental crisis? The multi-leveled nature of that complexity of those crises?

Looking more specifically at how this applies to activism itself—it's kind of obvious, but it's worth saying, I think. Human activity is part of ecology, but human activism is also, as a human activity, part of ecology. So for better or worse, human activity and activism are part of the ecology of the whole planet, of the Earth. You can't remove a study of human activism and activity from the study of ecology. It's all, of course, integral.

But the point I want to make within that is really about styles or thrusts or levels of activism. We can talk about the instrumental level, if you like, the practical or the effectual, and the emphasis on that as a kind of style or thrust or emphasis, a level of activism. We can also talk about what we might call the soulful or the spiritual or the imaginal, symbolic styles, thrusts, levels of activism.

And this is not either-or. There's an "and" here. I think it's really important to include both, or to allow within the spectrum and the range of activism more widely—whether it's you as an individual, me as an individual—but allow and recognize this: they both need to be included, that whole range needs to be included. They're not even actually totally separate; you can't really separate them.

We all have both of those levels of our being, if you like. Of course, we're concerned with practicalities and effects and instrumentality, but we also have a level of our being that is concerned with soul and with image and spirit.

Why do we have funeral services and memorials for people who die? Practically, I mean, you might say, well, it's hygienic—just stick them in the ground or burn them so it doesn't rot and smell and infect. Stick the body, do that to the body. That's purely instrumental. But something else—we need something else. Why bother to have a memorial service? Something the soul needs it. The funeral service. The soul needs the image and the fantasy. Something in us needs that level of engagement, of activity, in relation, in this case, to a death. It's not practical. It's for the soul.

Or, I heard this story about when the Titanic was sinking. I never saw that film, by the way—Leonardo DiCaprio and... I don't know who else, never saw it. But I heard that in reality what happened was the ship was sinking and there weren't enough lifeboats or enough space in the lifeboats for everyone. So certain people got into lifeboats and got away and a lot of people didn't. And those people who were left on the ship as it was sinking, knowing that they were going to die soon, knowing that the ship was going down, they began singing hymns, hymns to God.

And you think, well, what's the point? What does that do? It doesn't do anything.

It doesn't help the ship not sink. There's no practical efficacy. It's for the soul.

And this is a dimension that emerges when we consider climate change and the massive challenges and possible devastation we face as a species, when we witness the tragedy befalling other species on Earth and feel the horror and sadness that can arise. People often ask me, "What can I do?" Or they say, "I don't think we're going to turn this around." And that may be true.

In a way, holding and allowing that very real possibility—whatever that means, because it's not black and white, is it? It's not simply destruction or no destruction. There's already a certain amount of destruction. But holding that possibility of failure—if you like, failure of activism, of having gone beyond tipping points and edges, of the kind of collapses of ecosystems and civilizations that might ensue—holding that as a possibility, not saying it will happen or won't happen, but acknowledging it might happen.

And then what happens with that? Do I give up activism or regard it all as futile, or become bitter about the whole thing? Or like those people on the Titanic, is there a soul level that needs to be incorporated, brought in, included, activated, brought alive in relation to that side of the possibility of activism?

And of course, we need to ensoul the more hopeful and positive side as well, because we can make a difference, and we are making a difference. But between these two—the instrumental, the practical, the effectual, and the soulful, imaginal—different personalities seem to incline toward one or the other. It's interesting how I meet different people with these varying preferences.

Different situations or predicaments need an emphasis on one or the other, the instrumental or the soulful. I would say the totality and complexity of what climate change is, and the environmental crises, and the complexity of the underlying matrix of its causes and conditions—it demands of us both levels of activism. That would be my view.

I've said this before, but I'll say it again: I feel very strongly, and have for years now, that there's such complexity to the psychology involved in climate change—involved in people's reactions to climate change, their engagement or non-engagement, activism or non-activism, and what causes climate change or allows it in the first place. Such complexity of psychology underlies all that plurality. There's not one approach or one thing or one realization or one change that's going to address all the different kinds of psychology operating in different people, or that dominate in different people, or even the various psychological patterns that circulate within one person.

Recognizing this complexity of the psychology involved calls for different approaches, different directions of entry, different levels of conversation, and different tones as well. That's something I've been interested in doing in just a very small way over the years—approaching it each time from a different direction with a different flavor and tone and level and aspect to the whole conversation. Because the psychology is so complex, no one thing is going to convince everyone.

When we think about what makes climate change such a seemingly intractable issue for us as human beings—seemingly so unsexy and uncaptivating, so hard for most people to really get to grips with or address or engage with—partly it's because it's not acute. It's a chronic issue, a long-term issue with effects extending far beyond our lifetime. Human beings are generally better with acute things. We prefer acute things.

If you're a helper or carer, we prefer someone to have an acute illness. Chronic illness is difficult—difficult to sustain, certainly for the patient, but also for the carers or people around who care. It's difficult to sustain interest. Acute is dramatic; you can get in there and do your helping thing and feel good about it, and then it's over and you feel good about that. Chronic is hard to sustain. Ken Wilber, in his book *Grace and Grit*—I read it years ago—I think makes this point: it's hard for us to sustain interest in chronic illness unless it's ours. Even then, it's sometimes hard to relate to it.

So that's an aspect of the environmental crisis and climate change that makes it difficult to relate to, that makes the psychology difficult. Another aspect is that there's not the same gratification you might get in engaging or helping in other ways. Engaging in action around climate change—for the most part, you're not going to encounter lots of grateful faces after you've done your thing, and experience the gratification of that, because it's a long haul, and sometimes you're not even dealing with people so much. There isn't that gratification we get back from others' gratitude.

Or the gratification of, say, being with someone dying in a hospice—the sense of how beautiful that can be, how poignant, and in a strange way, gratifying. There's beauty in that letting go, in the death and the grace that can be there. There's a kind of gratification and beauty in that, and somehow even that's not present in relation to climate change and environmental degradation.

There is a place for bringing these things in and allowing them and finding them, but often they just can't be there by the nature of what we're dealing with and its trajectories in time and where it affects the earth and people.

The results, like the causes and conditions that give rise to climate change, are equally diffuse. Both the results of environmental crises and climate change themselves, and the results of our activism, are scattered and hard to grasp. It's difficult to see them clearly, to concretize and capture them. They're complex. You cannot think so simplistically in terms of monistic cause and monistic effect—this cause producing that effect.

Given all that and much more we could say about what's difficult and complex about something like climate change, how then can we proceed? Given those difficulties, those challenges, and the complexity, how can we open up the relationship and the view—the way we're seeing it all? Both the crisis itself and our activism—how can we open all that up, the relationship, the view, the way of seeing, in a way that will be helpful?

So this last point, to sum up in relation to this ecology of love, or perhaps just to leave you with some thoughts:

Do we love the earth? Do we love nature deeply? When we do, do we love it and nature deeply because we sense it as sacred? When there's a sense of sacredness, there is implicitly and automatically and organically a love, a deepening of the love. Do we love the earth and nature deeply because we sense it as sacred?

Or is it that in loving it—whether that's through mettā or through eros, but particularly now, emphasizing eros in this talk—that in loving it, we open up perception to what I'm calling other dimensions, this verticality, vertical dimensions, levels? Perception is opened up through the imaginal, through fantasy, through fabrication involving psyche and logos, as we said. This opens it up until eventually it is opened to a sense of the sacred, and then more and more to different kinds of sacred.

So do we love nature because we sense it as sacred, or in loving it does it become sacred? Do we discover its sacredness and give it its sacredness? Or both? Obviously, I would say both.

This is the ecology of love. This opening up of perception, of the levels of perception, the enrichment of the sense of what it is that we love, creates more love. And the love opens up the richness of perception. The mettā and the eros do that in different ways. They open up different dimensions in different ways from each other.

And then in turn, in this ecology of love, the different dimensions, the perception, the experience, the sense of the different dimensions—the different richnesses and levels of what it is that I love, in this case, the earth—those perceptions feed back to the mettā and the eros. When I see, experience this thing differently because of the mettā, it feeds the mettā. Or because of the eros, it feeds the eros. And so the whole thing can organically grow, as we've talked about.

So self, other, world, eros or love, sense of the sacred or sense of the profane—all of that is co-constellated, co-fabricated. And it can be skillfully fabricated, if we use Buddhist terminology. The ways we see and experience self, other, world, nature, love, sacredness—we can fabricate that in skillful ways, and there's no end to that. Deeper and deeper, more and more beautiful, more and more soul, soul-making, soul-enriching.

And knowing the emptiness of all things actually allows that more, allows that play with fabrication, legitimizes it, gives it room—part of the logos, the larger logos there that allows.

So then in all that, in the skillful fabrication, other dimensions of the object—in this case, of nature—come into perception. And that allows other dimensions to our love and therefore to the fruits of that love in action, in our action and engagement, the possibilities of engagement. Opening up, opening up.

So I'm really interested here in opening up possibilities—possibilities of perception, of experience, of knowing, possibilities of love, and possibilities of engagement. All of this is tied together.

What does it need for that not to get locked down, limited, constrained, fixated? What does it need so that it can keep growing into more and more beauty, more and more depth, more and more richness, more and more soulfulness, more and more love and action?

This is, for me, why all of this is important. Why all of this is important for the soul, and it's important for the earth.

CHAPTER 24

An Ecology of Love (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 35 min

In this third part of his exploration of love's ecology, Rob Burbea examines the dynamic relationship between eros, psyche, and logos in our perception of nature and others. He explains how eros, through its involvement with the imaginal faculty (psyche), discovers and creates deeper dimensions in its objects, leading to increasingly sacred and multidimensional experiences. This mutual enrichment requires an understanding of emptiness that allows us to hold both discovery and creation in our knowing.

Burbea addresses concerns about when eros becomes greed (lobha), explaining that this distortion occurs when psyche or logos becomes limited or fixated. Using examples like materialism's one-dimensional view of nature and the tendency to accumulate travel experiences, he shows how constrained conceptual frameworks force eros to seek "more" only at horizontal material levels, leading to exploitation and endless consumption.

The talk emphasizes that fullness of love requires not just heart (mettā) but also soul - involving both imaginal and conceptual faculties. When eros, psyche, and logos are allowed their natural movement and mutual fertilization, they open vertical dimensions of perception that satisfy eros's desire for "more" without material greed. This dynamic maintains the mystery and unfathomability necessary for love to continue deepening, whether toward persons, nature, or existence itself.

So again, in terms of this dynamic—this ecology of love—the eros, the erotic component in love, will tend to insist and push and open in a way that creates more, discovers more, or really both, in an object that it allows. In the case of nature, it will impregnate it, so to speak, through its involvement with psyche, giving imaginal levels to the perception of the object of nature, of another. It will fabricate more, give complexity and richness and depth and dimensionality to nature, in this case to the earth or some particular object there.

In that process, Eros is encountering, so to speak, a new object—a bigger object, a more interesting and richer, more juicy, complex, multidimensional object. It encounters a more multidimensional and rich and eventually divine, sacred sense of experience of nature, in this case of its other, and that excites Eros more. So there's this mutual enriching, mutual deepening, mutual expanding, and with that the logos too—the concept—has to expand as well.

Now, there are a couple of things to point out about this, perhaps addressing some objections.

First, the psyche, through Eros, is giving these other dimensions. We could realize that the psyche is giving these other dimensions to nature, to Earth, and it knows it. As I've said in other talks, seeing image as image, or realizing what is, this is poetic seeing, poetic sensibility, and poetic knowing.

That's why I use both words: the psyche and the perception, through Eros and this dynamic, both discover more in the object—other levels in the object—but they also create that. They discover and create. There's some way of understanding that incorporates both discovery and creation. It's both/and.

Somehow sitting on the cusp there, what allows us to sit on the cusp and include both in our sense of what knowledge is and what happens when we know and encounter something—when we experience anything, what happens in perception—is an understanding of emptiness. It's an understanding of emptiness that allows this "discover/create" experience, this incorporation of both.

I'm not talking here about a kind of New Age style of understanding where typically, or so it seems to me, there's just an assumption that what one perceives or conceives in terms of how I look at this plant is some kind of objective, independently existing reality where there isn't an awareness of fabrication, of fabricating in a certain way—the fabrication of perception that's always there. Or there isn't an awareness of choosing to see and to sense in a certain way. So it's not really talking about that New Age way, nor really talking about the modernist way of understanding what knowledge is and what perception is, where there's an assumption of an objective independent reality—just very different versions of what that is.

In and through everything I'm talking about, there is what I believe and conceive to be a more sophisticated philosophy—a philosophy of knowledge, of epistemology and ontology, what's real, and all that. Something more sophisticated in terms of depth of insight is going on. It's allowed from the Dharma direction through the deep understanding of emptiness.

So what opens here in terms of these other dimensions and the multiplicity of dimensions in our perception of nature, our sense of nature, is a valid way of knowing. We realize the psyche is somehow giving this to its object that it loves, to the sense of nature. But it's still a valid way of knowing. And it's valuable. And it gives value. But there's not a naive realism involved there in any direction. There's something quite

sophisticated—a razor's edge between, a razor's edge of emptiness, really. And that allows, although a razor's edge is of course very thin, an enormity of view, an enormity of view.

So that's one thing that needs realizing.

A second thing: someone might be hearing all this, especially if you've been exposed to a lot of traditional Dharma teachings, and might get quite nervous hearing all this. The very word "eros" and its connotations of sexuality and desire and sensuality and all that, and its associations with these things—well, when is this eros business, and especially the more in eros, the pothos in eros, when does that not just become greed? And greed in traditional Dharma conception is just a kilesa. It's a defilement, it's a problem, it causes suffering for self and others.

So this is a really important question: What is it that sometimes constrains or subverts or distorts Eros so that it actually becomes greed, and the more in it—the wanting more, the pothos—just ends up being endless greed?

Well, there's a lot to say about this. One answer is: when the psyche or the imaginal or the logos or the conceptual framework—either one or both—are limited in some way, then this actually constrains and subverts the eros, and it will become greed.

One obvious example is if the logos—if the conceptual framework of nature—is just one of one-dimensional physicalism, that kind of view that's the dominant view of modernism: nothing but meaningless matter, atoms, building blocks, as we talked about before, randomly moving, and through that random movement, like some kind of machine, creates what it creates in terms of the diversities of nature. One-dimensional physicalism, that kind of view, is actually a limited logos.

And what happens then in relationship to nature? What happens is that the eros that's part of the psyche, that is an indispensable aspect of the psyche, becomes greed. Then you get the growth economy gone mad without realizing or wanting to acknowledge the finiteness of the Earth's resources, the finiteness of the biosphere, the finiteness of what we live in.

Back in the early 70s, I think in '72, there was a seminal paper by the Club of Rome called "Limits to Growth." It was actually just pointing out: hey, we live on a finite planet materially. There's a limit to what our atmosphere can handle. There's a limit to material resources that we can dig up out of the earth.

Really, really important to recognize that and to voice that. And when greed's gone mad, it doesn't want to see that. There's this insistence that the economy must grow—that there's only one way of thinking about economics, and that the economy needs to grow. Well, there are limits to growth. So that's really, really important.

But in a way, part of the problem with that, or a whole other level of the problem, is that because of the one-dimensionality of view and perception of what nature, earth, planet, we, and others are, there's nowhere for the eros and the psyche and the logos to expand. There's nowhere to get more, this wanting more. There's nowhere to get more other than at the horizontal level, because the horizontal level is all that exists. There is just the material.

So whether it's an individual wanting more—more cars, more houses, more this, more that, more plasma TVs, whatever it is—individual materialism in that sense of lifestyle, or social materialism, this expansion to get more, it can only go horizontal. It must expand because of the more in the eros. And it can only expand horizontally, with devastating consequences.

But if this whole dynamic of eros, psyche, logos is allowed—each aspect of that dynamic, the eros, the psyche, the logos, the erotic, the imaginal, and the conceptual—if those dimensions of our being in relation to nature, or in relation to anything, are allowed to grow, are not impeded, not hindered or constrained or locked down through some kind of clinging or fixedness of image or fixedness of view, then there can be a kind of infinite growth, an infinite growth getting more, discovering more, having more of what eros wants—an infinite growth in that sense, without the greed on the material level.

So there are limits on the material level, of course there are. But if the soul's way of knowing—if the facets of this dynamism of eros, psyche, logos, of the erotic, the imaginal, and the conceptual aspects of the soul—if the facets of the dynamism of the soul, facets of that dynamism of perception, of the soul's way of knowing, facets of that ecology of love, if they are allowed to expand unhindered, unimpeded by a kind of fixation in terms of view or image or idea, then eros can expand as it wants to, and thrust deeper as it wants to, and open more as it wants to, without demanding more, without its more being a demand on the material level, because it's able to get other kinds of more—more at other dimensions and levels of perception, and other levels of fulfillment, of beauty, of nourishment.

You understand?

Actually, maybe another example would help to make it clearer—this connection between limitations on view, idea, logos, sense, and also on psyche or image. The way limitations on view distort or deflect eros into greed.

Another example I'm thinking may be more helpful, probably because it's more tangible in one's own life, visible in one's own personal life, at least to some extent—maybe more fundamental. I'm not sure anyway. Another example is the way we can see this working: I'm thinking of the tendency we can get into as human beings sometimes, that can actually dominate our relationship to existence. The tendency to be driven to accumulate experiences, to collect experiences. People talk quite commonly about having a "bucket list"—a bucket list of things to do or experience before I die. That's quite a common notion that people have in their life, even from quite a young age.

Or more specifically with regard to earth and nature, and not necessarily in relation to dying, we can see sometimes people get into this tendency to want to fly all over the world. Every year or several times a year, flying here or there, going on holiday or calling it traveling, to see and experience this place or that place all around the world.

So what's going on with the eros there? Notice a few things here. Because, let's take that example of going on holiday to this place and that. The eros there actually includes, actually even emphasizes the sensual, what we might call the sensual. So typically a person wants to travel to this place, experience the cuisine there—exotic cuisine, despite the fact that you can get most of this stuff in Tesco these days, or your local corner store, if you still have a corner store. But there's this sensual element through the cuisine, through experiencing certain sights or colors of a sunset in this place, or the vistas—to experience this beach or swim in this place or that place, whatever. The dimension of the sensual is definitely included and even emphasized.

So it can seem, if we don't really probe deeply this whole question of eros and what it is and what it does, it can seem like that whole movement to want to do all that includes the erotic and is indicative of someone who has a kind of fuller eros in their life—not just sexual, but in terms of their relationship with sensuality.

But the eros, psyche, logos dynamic is often limited when there's that kind of propulsion, pull, drive to collect experiences. Particularly, the logos can be limited. As I said, oftentimes it's a one-dimensional view of earth, of nature, of materiality—also self, and we'll get to that. But the logos is limited. Often it's through a one-dimensional view. And so the more in the eros, the pothos in the eros, this wanting more, will just go out and out and out and turn into greed. I want more and more, and more and more can only go one place. Next year we'll go there. In the spring we'll go there.

You can see this pattern not just in relation to holidaying and traveling, but with food, consumption—truly with anything. This reveals something crucial about the nature of eros itself.

Notice something important here regarding eros, particularly in how psyche interacts with it. The usual assumption is that fantasy combined with eros spells trouble—a disastrous recipe leading inevitably to pornography and other distortions. We quickly conclude that eros is problematic, fantasy is problematic, and their combination even more so.

But in these examples we're exploring, what we're actually encountering is either an absence or, more precisely, a poverty of the imaginal—a psychic impoverishment in relationship to eros. When psyche encounters eros in this depleted state, there's no opening, no revealing, no discovery of other dimensions. The vertical dimension simply doesn't open. Things remain resolutely one-dimensional in our perception, our belief, our very sense of reality.

The sense of things fails to open through the imaginal, through psyche. Consequently, the pathos within eros continues wanting more, but it has only one direction available—horizontal accumulation. This impoverished relationship, this poverty of psyche in relation to eros, becomes deeply problematic. The issue isn't that imagination works with eros, but rather the quality of that relationship.

The real problem emerges when fantasy or image becomes locked onto and believed as literal—when we don't know image as image, don't see image as image. Related to this is our wholesale acceptance of the modernist ideal of non-fantasy in perception. We embrace a kind of realism that remains stubbornly one-dimensional. This dismissal of fantasy through rigid logos impoverishes the imaginal, cutting off the psychic influx and interaction with eros.

In all these ways, we see limitations, constrictions, and rigidities in logos, and corresponding restrictions in psyche. When both are constrained, eros inevitably gets deflected and distorted into what we might call greed—something ultimately unhelpful.

Let me draw out a third, quite subtle point about how eros operates here. Often when people speak today about reclaiming or rediscovering a sense of the sacred—particularly in relation to nature—there's an implicit assumption that perceiving nature as sacred naturally leads to respect, which then inhibits certain exploitative or commodifying behaviors. This inhibitive function of sacred perception is genuinely important, and I want to include it in understanding how eros works.

But there's something subtly different happening when we recognize that eros, allowed to flow freely through unrestricted psyche and logos, opens a natural dynamic for the soul. Rather than operating through inhibition born of respect, eros becomes naturally channeled to receive what it seeks in ways that are neither exploitative nor commodifying. The natural dynamic arising through the interplay of eros, psyche, and logos opens the sense of sacredness so that behavior transforms organically—not through any kind of inhibition, but because eros is allowed full expression while receiving what it desires through the very sense of sacredness itself.

When other levels of perception beyond the one-dimensional open through this co-feeding, co-constellating, co-deepening of eros, psyche, and logos, we discover dimensions that can have their own kind of infinitude. This opening moves through stages or ranges, then opens again and again because none of the three—eros, psyche, or logos—is being limited, constricted, fixed, or rigidified. When this endless movement of expansion is permitted, eros receives the "more" it seeks without exploiting earth, nature, or other in any of the ways I've described, without reducing them to commodities.

This principle applies to relationships with others, with earth and nature, with any sense of otherness. Eros finds its fulfillment in other ways, receiving other kinds of "more" than mere accumulation of experience at the horizontal level. Other dimensions of "more" become not just available but natural. We relate differently because we see differently.

Problems arise only when the co-involvement and co-fertilization of eros, psyche, and logos is blocked or restricted from any direction. When I spoke of the void in our understanding of sacredness and love, the consequences are absolutely devastating.

When any one or more of the erotic, imaginal, or conceptual facets of our being are constrained, limited, fixed, or locked down in relation to anything—whether a partner, spouse, nature, or any object of our attention—when they're not allowed their natural movement and growth and mutual fertilization and impregnation, what happens to our love?

In a relationship or marriage that endures over time, what happens to the love? What happens to our view, sense, and experience of that person or partner? This applies equally to our relationship with ourselves, for eros, psyche, and logos can become locked down or hindered in relation to our self-view. The same is true whether we're relating to the world, to nature, or even to the Dharma itself. What happens when these faculties get stuck, fixed, or hindered in relation to our view and sense of what the Dharma is, or what eros is, or what the soul and psyche are, or what conceptuality and its possibilities might be?

What happens to the love, to the very sense, experience, and view of whatever it is we actually care about? There can still be tremendous care—just as in a relationship where I care deeply about this person. Yet something has shifted over time. The eros has dissipated. Something has locked it down, stagnated it, or drained its life. Something in that fertile dynamic, that mutual involvement of eros, psyche, and logos and their capacity to impregnate each other and grow together—something has become stuck. This affects how I see my partner, how I see nature, how I see myself, how I see the Dharma. The care remains, but something has become limited. A level of vitality, enrichment, and growth has vanished from that relationship, from that perception, from that love.

If we dare speak of something as bold as the fullness of love—which is probably not even a possibility but rather a direction we move toward—we can point to several essential qualities. As I mentioned before, it needs not just feeling but action. The fullness of love must manifest in our behavior: what comes from our mouth, what the body does, our gestures, our acts of kindness.

The fullness of love needs not just metta but also eros. Both metta and eros—among other aspects of love we could explore—have a natural tendency toward horizontal spreading, toward fullness across the breadth of experience. Metta spreads by virtue of its very aspiration; its ideal image is universal, unconditional extension to everything and everyone. Eros also spreads through that mutual impregnation and growth of eros, psyche, and logos. There's a natural spilling over, an expansion into what I call cosmopoiesis. The enriched sense and view of whatever we love—a person, for instance—begins spreading outward organically. The psyche and imaginal faculty expand this view, the logos and conceptual framework broaden, the eros grows within that expansion, and this perception naturally spreads horizontally to our environment, to the world, to nature, to the cosmos itself.

The fullness of love, if we allow ourselves to dwell with that possibility, that direction—whether toward a person or toward nature—must involve the heart, of course. But it must also involve soul. By soul, I mean what I'm using interchangeably with psyche: the imaginal faculty and the logos, the conceptual framework, the conceiving of what it is that we love.

Fullness of love involves not just heart but soul as well—psyche, imagination, logos, the imaginal dimension, and the conception of what we love. Through the involvement of soul, the vertical dimension opens, along with the multiplicity of other dimensions of perception. This involvement of soul is part of the fullness of love, a necessary aspect alongside heart.

Metta and eros accomplish this opening in slightly different ways, moving in different directions. Metta opens the vertical dimensions in a more universal way. The divinity there is more universal, with a simplification of objects leading toward unity and oneness.

Whereas eros retains the particulars in its sense of the divine. It complicates, it fabricates, and it retains the particularities.

And again, if we stay with that fullness of love—the fullness of love related to what we just said and this whole dynamic or ecology of love—fullness of love needs a sense of mystery. The object, the thing, the person that I love, whether it's nature or whatever, it needs to retain a level of the mysterious, a level of unfathomability, of undefinability.

It's almost like that mystery, unfathomability, undefined quality is then space for eros to move into in this expansion—space for eros psyche-logos to move into. It has to be space, like a womb. It has to be space where something can grow, something can get fertilized. And that's also attractive. It gives the pothos in the eros something: "Oh, there's more here. I can probe deeper. I can penetrate deeper. I can open up to more."

Because eros needs to be able to penetrate and to open to more.

CHAPTER 25

An Ecology of Love (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 57 min

In this profound exploration of love's relationship to environmental engagement, Rob Burbea distinguishes between mettā and eros as complementary dimensions of an ecology of love. While mettā tends toward universality and simplification—potentially leading to a detached equanimity that may not inspire activism—eros operates through a dynamic of wanting ever-deeper connection. This erotic dimension involves the imagination (psyche) and conceptual understanding (logos) in an ongoing process of discovering or creating richer, more multidimensional perceptions of nature.

Burbea explains how eros 'complicates and fabricates' our perception of the natural world, opening vertical dimensions that reveal nature as more than merely material. Through subtle examples—from women harvesting in community to sensing the imaginal presence of ancient elephants in contemporary trees—he demonstrates how the imaginal infuses our environmental awareness. Unlike the horizontal interconnectedness often emphasized in engaged Buddhism, this erotic relationship with nature opens vertical dimensions where the material world becomes an expression of the sacred, potentially catalyzing deeper engagement with environmental crises.

Let's explore this more deeply.

As I mentioned, love, though undefinable as a concept, needs to include—or rather, does include—both metta and eros. Let's begin with metta.

I've spoken extensively about metta, and of course we discuss it frequently in the Dharma, so I don't want to dwell too much on this aspect. But let me share a few thoughts about the metta dimension of love.

A couple of obvious points first. Metta is not just a feeling—it's an intention. We intend to wish others well, rather than simply feeling a certain feeling toward someone. This is fundamental, though I've discussed this extensively elsewhere, as have many others.

The second obvious point is that metta needs action. Again, it's not merely a feeling. I may sit on my cushion with my heart feeling juicy, moved, and rich because of the feeling of metta and love—very radiant and expansive feelings—but it needs action. It must

translate into our lives through acts of kindness, care, and compassion. This too is something those familiar with the Dharma will have heard before: it's not just a feeling, and it needs action. It's not merely a meditative experience.

The third obvious point is that metta tends to spread out, because what's included in the definition of metta is universality and unconditionality. It spreads out to all beings. When we follow the traditional approach to metta practice—moving through the categories of self, benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, all beings—we're essentially spreading the metta out gradually until everyone, perhaps everything, is included. We're simply making it easier to reach that ideal of universality by breaking the practice into stages.

These are some obvious aspects of metta—important, really important—and they naturally tend to spread out and become universal.

Less obvious about metta, and probably not something one realizes unless one has done an extended metta retreat and learned to work quite skillfully with metta, is that metta tends toward a sense of oneness and equality—certainly of self and other, but actually of all things, of all others. Self, other, and world tend toward unity as you go deeper and deeper into metta, with increasing oneness and equality.

What metta is actually doing is fabricating less perception. This isn't obvious unless you've really engaged in extensive metta practice, learned to work with it skillfully, and come to understand something about meditation and the fabrication of perception. Deep metta practice, as it deepens, fabricates less and less. It tends toward an unfabricating of perception.

As this process unfolds meditatively—for a practitioner doing dedicated metta practice going deeper and deeper—the view or perception of self, other, world, nature, and so forth goes through a range that corresponds with the decreasing fabrication that comes organically from deepening metta practice.

This range is actually predictable, believe it or not. I can have someone on long-term retreat doing metta, learning to work with it well, and guarantee that at certain points in the process, particular perceptions and experiences will open up for them. Kinds of oneness will emerge.

First, the sense of "me" and "this other" begins to become one—the heart essences begin to fuse into one radiant heart. This is very typical. But even more significantly, and what I want to emphasize now, is that a wider perception of metta will open up at some point. This is all quite predictable. Everything is held in a kind of cosmic love and compassion—universal love and compassion. Everything is taking place within that.

And then, as this deepens further, all is love. The fabric of everything is metta, is compassion. These experiences are, as I said, predictable and common for people who engage in truly dedicated metta practice, going deeper and deeper.

Rarer is for someone to move even beyond this with metta practice, because you need to actually understand something and adjust the approach somewhat. But metta can indeed go beyond even this, into still less fabrication and toward the unfabricated. There's a movement here, a clear trajectory.

There's a range. And as it deepens, we could say there are certain typical pit stop areas, if you like, in the way that perception opens up—very beautiful, very touching, and very important to have those openings and mystical openings of perception.

But they're characterized by being universal and also predictable. As I said, there's a limited number of them that are characteristic on that range.

One of the things about all that—in that spectrum of deepening metta practice and the perceptions that arise from it—is that sometimes what I see is a person can go through all that, feel very touched by it all, deeply and profoundly touched, and yet no engagement or activism comes out of it for them. They don't become engaged Buddhists or really seem to engage much with the whole predicament of environmental crises and climate change.

So all this—everything is love, all universe, all the trees and the grass and the sky, it's all love, it's all one, no separation—somehow there's not the kind of care that comes out of that that results in activism and engagement. That's really interesting to me.

And again, I don't want to dwell too much on the metta aspect of things in this talk. But why is it sometimes not enough? A person's had these wonderful mystical openings, even getting established as something that's quite regular in their life, and yet somehow something's not coming out of it in relation to the crises that we face in the natural world. Why is that?

Actually, there's probably a lot involved there. But it may be—I just wonder—whether something, because we're talking about a sense of the infinite, this infinite love and the universality of it, it may be that the particular manifestations can be lost from the infinite without any diminishment. One feels then, in that view, in that mystical sense that opens up, that the particular manifestations—whether it's this person or that person, or even myself, or that forest, or whatever—the particular manifestations can be lost from the infinite without diminishing the infinite. That's characteristic of infinity: you can subtract things from infinity and you still get infinity.

Something in the infinity and the universality of the experience means that particular manifestations can be lost from the infinite without diminishing the infinite, so it's okay.

The whole thing, that whole movement, that spectrum of deepening metta, actually moves towards equanimity. Again, people don't always realize this, but deepening metta moves toward deep equanimity. And equanimity is characterized by coolness, by not being perturbed—it uses the word "the imperturbable"—not being disturbed by gain and loss and those kinds of things.

So there's something in this very beautiful mystical movement, this mystical opening of perception, that sometimes can have a cooling effect on activism and engagement. Not to say that that kind of opening of perception isn't beautiful and important for the being and the sense of existence—but sometimes it's not enough to support and stimulate engagement and activism in regards to the natural world.

Okay, so there's metta, and then just touching on that. But what I want to emphasize more in this talk is the eros strand or aspect of love.

So recall this definition that I was starting with, which may have sounded a little strange or unusual, a little un-erotic, actually. Eros is the desire to connect. Let's add one more piece to that definition, because as some ancient Greeks pointed out, always with eros there is pothos. That's another Greek word, p-o-t-h-o-s. And this pothos within the eros—what's characteristic of pothos is it always wants more, more, more. What's beyond? What's next?

So we can expand the definition of eros to the desire to connect more—the wanting, the urge, the intention to connect more.

Now this pothos aspect of eros, this wanting more connection, creates or instigates a dynamic. And this is what I really want to emphasize. It instigates a dynamic of the opening of the perception, of the view, of the erotic object, the other that I love or I'm attracted to—or in this case, nature. It instigates a dynamic of opening up our perception, our view, which again means idea and sense of nature, in a different way.

In other words, it will keep wanting to open up our perception, our sense, our view of nature in different ways. So it opens up and enriches the sense of the other that I feel this erotic charge with—the other there's this erotic connection with, in this case nature. It opens up and enriches the sense of nature, adds dimensions to it, deepens it, infuses it with image and fantasy.

This is what I want to call giving it a vertical sense. Other dimensions come into our sense, our perception, and our idea of the erotic object, of the other, of nature.

Because of this pothos within the eros, because of what eros involves, it starts involving more of the psyche and the imagination, and that changes the perception.

So when we define eros as—and when we see this is what's happening in an erotic relationship, when there is eros in relation to anything—it's this desire to connect more. Then the eros, we could say, if we flesh out what that means, because it wants to push through and beyond boundaries, manifests in a movement or a desire to penetrate more what it loves, its object. Eros desires, manifests as a movement, a desire to penetrate more—more deeply, more fully.

archetype-laden way, in a way that's more infused with archetypes. So the perception of nature, earth, the natural world begins to get infused with archetypal resonances, archetypal dimensions, archetypal senses.

And this can happen, as I said, at different rates for different people and in different ways. But when there's this erotic involvement with nature, with earth, these archetypal dimensions begin to come alive in the perception. So we might begin to perceive the earth as Mother, capital M, or as the Great Mother. Not just metaphorically - though it includes the metaphorical - but actually sensing, perceiving, feeling into that archetypal dimension of the feminine, of the maternal, of the nourishing, of the holding, of the containing.

Or we might begin to perceive certain places in nature as having what we might call genius loci, the spirit of place. There's something more there than just trees and rocks and soil. There's a presence, there's a being, there's a consciousness that seems to inhabit or be that place. And this isn't just projection in the usual psychological sense, though it involves the psyche. It's actually an opening of perception to dimensions that are there but that we normally don't perceive or conceive.

Or we might begin to sense nature as sacred in ways that go beyond just appreciation or environmental concern. Sacred meaning imbued with divinity, imbued with something holy, something that demands reverence not just because of its beauty or its ecological importance, but because of its intrinsic sacred nature, its inherent holiness.

The land itself, the rivers, the mountains, the forests begin to take on this quality of the sacred. They become ensouled, if you like. They become temples. They become manifestations of the divine. And this happens through this erotic engagement, this erotic opening, this allowing of eros to do its work of connecting more deeply, penetrating more fully, opening more completely.

Sometimes this archetypal infusion happens in more specific ways. A particular tree becomes the World Tree, the axis mundi connecting earth and heaven. A particular body of water becomes the cosmic waters, the primordial source. A cave becomes the womb of the earth, the place of death and rebirth. These aren't just poetic metaphors - though they include poetry - they're actual shifts in perception, actual openings of dimensionality.

And sometimes the archetypal opening happens in more personal ways too. The landscape begins to mirror and speak to the inner landscape of the soul. The seasons become not just climatic changes but profound teachings about the cycles of life and death, growth and decay, the eternal return. The weather becomes the moods and movements of some vast being of which we are a part.

All of this - and I'm just giving a few examples - all of this is what I mean by the vertical dimension opening up through eros. It's the infusion of the perception with dimensions that transcend what we normally think of as the purely physical, the purely material, the purely sensual, though it includes all of that.

a way that's more retaining of particulars, doesn't tend to dissolve particulars in a universal sense.

There's really a range, there's a spectrum of how much things dissolve in the universal and how much the particularity is retained in this opening up and adding of other dimensions to the perception.

So that's one range. Another range is just how obvious or subtle is the manifestation of this. Because some manifestations of this deepening and enriching and sort of complicating of what we love through the eros, some manifestations are so subtle that we may not recognize them. You may not recognize them in your own experience, or it kind of may get lost from what I'm saying. Sometimes it's so subtle. There's a range there from very obvious to very, very subtle.

Let's go into it a little bit. Maybe there's just a vague perception or intuition or sense. Now really that's a key word, sense. The word embodies or encapsulates a lot. So I'm not talking here about just ideas—ideas that are kind of just intellectual, divorced from experience. I'm talking about things opening up that are sensed, perceptions, palpable, and opening up as sense perceptions, in a way that affect us, that have an effect on our heart and on our life.

But maybe the kind of opening that happens is just kind of vague, a vague perception, sense, intuition, that nature or materiality is somehow more than just material in the modernist sense—little bits of atoms, meaningless and moving randomly, and just sort of solid little billiard balls, and that's all there is that's real. So maybe it's just a vague sense that natural materiality is more than just material in the modernist sense.

Maybe, as I described in relation to metta, there's a kind of universal sense of universal oneness of love or in love. Everything is in or is love. It can open up, as I've described. That can also happen in relation to awareness. Everything is in awareness or is awareness. These are very, very common openings for people who are dedicated to meditation.

Often with those kind of openings, with a person who, as I've described on the metta retreat, a person who has this cosmic love holding everything, often at that point, a person who has never, ever used languages or a theistic language of the divine or God will start using it. It just seems the most natural thing in the world and most obvious thing and it's almost like this is what we're talking about. So very, very common, even for a person who says never use that, shied away or not even liked much that kind of language or been suspicious of it. Very common at that point in the opening of the meditative perception experience—at that point that people often start talking theistically.

But it may be that nature and things, all things are imbued with—there's a sense of them being imbued with or reflecting or expressing the divine in other ways, not just this universal love or emptiness, in all kinds of other ways. So maybe, I mean again, an example, maybe even, for instance, for some perhaps theoretical physicists, the mathematical physical laws that govern matter, and particularly the elegance of these laws, the beauty, the mathematical beauty, their economy, their symmetry, this somehow—well, it actually is another level than the matter itself. The laws are not the matter, the laws are another level. That is another level, another dimension of the matter, if you like. And that, for some theoreticals, that is somehow, somehow an expression for them of the divine, of divinity.

Maybe, and often it's the case, that the divine, the sacred divinity, is there as a sense, as a perception, as an idea. It's very vague in the sense of not really even knowing what that means. There isn't a formed conceptual framework or definition for divinity or sacredness. Somehow there's a sense of the sacredness of earth, of nature, in this case. There's somehow the sense it's not just a kind of one-dimensional reality or existence. There's more dimensions to the sense and the perception. Somehow there's the sense that the kind of meaningless mechanisms of biology and chemistry aren't all there is to nature and to matter. They are not all that we can know and feel and sense. There's

something—vague as it is and undefined as it is, a sense of divinity or sacredness—that's gone beyond the typical view of modernism in how it views matter and nature and the cosmos.

So what's characteristic here to all of this is these dimensions of existence, really dimensions of perception that open up. As I said, there's various, there's all kinds of possibilities, infinite really. Metta has the characteristic of opening up a certain series, kind of as a predictable and, in a way, limited number of a series, of a range of openings up of these dimensions of perception, of sacredness, of divinity.

But characteristic of a deepening erotic relationship with any other, whether it's a lover or a wife or nature or whatever it is, characteristic of a deepening erotic relationship is that it involves image and fantasy in the perception more and more. Eros and Psyche, if you like, and by Psyche I'm really emphasizing the imaginal dimension of our beings, the capacity to perceive imaginally. Eros and Psyche start to involve—again that word—to turn with, to turn around and mix with, start to involve and fertilize and impregnate and stretch and expand and nourish and enrich each other.

So the eros, this dynamic of eros, kind of starts to complicate the object that it loves. It's unlike metta, which tends to simplify. I erase all perception of differences between people like and dislike, and everything goes towards universality and simplicity and oneness. Metta tends to simplify and dissolve particularities, it tends to unfabricate, moves towards the unfabrication, the unfabricated towards unfabricating.

Eros, on the other hand, complicates and fabricates what it's connected to, its object. It tends to complicate and fabricate more in the perception of nature, and involved in that is more and more image and fantasy in the perceptions.

Now still, with the eros, it may still be vague. There may be a vague imaginal sense that can still be part of the eros as well, or what the eros opens up in the perception. Or it may be, to some degree or another, more specific.

This body, the body of myself or the body of another, is the Buddha. One may perceive that, one may train in that perception. Or sense, or train in the sense, the perception that all, everything—all the world, all of nature, the cosmos—is Buddha nature. It is Buddha nature. It's the expression, if you like, of the mandala of the dharmakaya, the primordial Buddha nature. So these are very classic tantric ways that the perception opens up and can be trained.

Or it may be that this body or the body of another is perceived, is sensed as angelic, as angel. As well as, or rather in and through the human. The angel comes through in and through the human. The angelic comes through in and through the personal, the

human, the material. And using angel and angelic not just as a metaphor—"he's such an angel." I don't just mean a sort of stand-in word for something else. "Such a nice guy." More than metaphor. Something deep and profound and moving and other. Another dimension is infusing the perception, the sense, the idea, the knowing of this thing. And it's retaining the particulars of the human and the material and the manifestation, rather than dissolving them.

But it may be, or again, it may be similar to that, that this person or this thing, or even the whole of nature, or a specific tree or a river, is a specific theophany, a specific expression of God, a face of God, a showing or an appearance of the divine. That's what that word theophany means. There are all kinds of possibilities here.

Maybe, as I alluded to earlier, it's through a skillful use in meditation of the imaginal sexual erotic, through practicing that skillfully, that the divinity of another is sensed more and more deeply and richly and beautifully. And that divinity of the other that is perceived, that starts to spread. Spread to the environment, and to the cosmos, in fact, in a very specific way, as characteristic of what was infusing the sense of the divinity and characteristic of that other with which there was the erotic, imaginal, sexual meditative practice. And then there's perhaps a very specific, and to use a certain language, a very specific perception of the world soul pervading nature, pervading matter. All kinds of possibilities here. We could just go on endlessly, almost.

But what's characteristic here is the penetrating beyond a one-dimensional, the opening up beyond a one-dimensionality of perception, opening up of a multiplicity of dimensions, sensed or intuited, perceived, discovered or created in the perception of the other, the erotic other, or in this case, nature.

So on the one hand, with all of this, and what I'm talking about, these kind of openings, there's the opening up beyond one dimensionality, the opening up of other dimensions in the perception. On the other hand, those dimensions are not separate. So there is not, in this kind of opening, a separation of divinity and matter. Or there is not a denigration of matter in relation to something transcendent and divine. Because that would be another extreme. Either it's one-dimensional or there's this kind of divide between what's divine and what's just matter.

So characteristic of the kind of openings that I'm talking about and the kind of deepenings I'm talking about in the direction of the sacred sense through both matter, but particularly eros now, is this not one-dimensional opening up dimensions and not the separating of those dimensions. So in and through and with, infused.

In the Western alchemical tradition, they talk about the alchemical task being the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit—the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. Now, of course, that was interpreted and explored and practiced in different ways. But what I want to say here is that spiritualization of matter and materialization of spirit is possible through perception, through opening our perception. And that's something we can practice. That is, in fact, what I would say practice is. Spiritualization of matter, materialization of spirit, that alchemical task is possible through perception, in and through perception, as a practice, as a training of perception.

And like I said earlier, some of the manifestations, this kind of opening of these dimensions in the perception and sense of nature are very, very subtle. So, for example, Rupert the garden coordinator was telling me a little while ago he needed to get some harvesting done very quickly for some reason in the garden at Gaia House. And so he put up a note and asked anyone who wanted to help for an afternoon. And it so happened that mostly who came were women. And he showed them what to do, and they were in silence because they were on retreat, and kneeling together and harvesting. I don't remember what they were harvesting.

And he was there with them, also harvesting, and then just looking around him and seeing these women kneeling on the earth and harvesting the fruits of the earth. And it's just so beautiful, something, in that sense, and how traditional—it's the tradition of actually women kneeling on the earth and harvesting, hands touching, knees touching the earth together and the community of that, the connection of that with the earth, the tradition through history into prehistory even of that.

So there's something very subtle here—there's actually an imaginal and fantasy dimension that was infusing his perception at that moment, giving it beauty. In this case, the beauty arose from the nature of humans and also from tradition. A sense of tradition is often part of the imaginal, as a side point. The imaginal infusion of perception often amplifies time. It can give a sense of eternality—it often does give a sense of eternality—but it also amplifies something about time and tradition and the place of the self now in time as part of a trajectory of tradition.

That's quite a subtle example of this kind of enriching, complicating, fabricating and adding of other dimensions to perception.

Another example: a friend told me—I had asked her the questions I asked you at the beginning, and she hummed and hawed, as I expect anyone would—then she related something she'd heard George Monbiot say in a talk. Something to do with the fact that elephants used to roam in this part of the world and then were made extinct and driv-

en south. But elephants used to roam and be part of the dynamics and mechanisms of evolution of many things, particularly of certain trees and the way they were able to grow in certain ways in response to the evolutionary pressure of these elephants moving around, trampling around and eating what they like to eat. There was something he was explaining about what we see now in our environment—certain trees able to grow in certain ways that actually, surprisingly, is a result of elephants being around millennia ago.

Now, that explanation or anecdote or fact could be heard in a couple of ways. One could hear and appreciate—going back to the very beginning—the intricacies and complexities of the dynamics of evolution over vast timescales. Just like, wow, all that working together, all these different forces. But one can hear it and have a sense, an idea of that as something purely material. There's a kind of very complex machine of different evolutionary forces, biological forces going on—this complex machine where different parts impact different other parts, and out of that you get the evolution of this or that, the dying away of this or that, survival of the fittest and all that, and more complex ideas of evolution. But basically it's a mechanistic understanding—incredibly intricate and complicated, involving vast timescales and encompassing a lot, including the totality of ecosystems.

So one can hear it that way, purely material and mechanistic. Or one can hear it as imbued with image and fantasy. When I asked my friend about this, she answered that something in that relation about the elephants and the evolution of certain trees, when she heard it, invoked in her—made present in the here and now perception—an imaginal sense of nature. In her very sense and perception of nature here and now, as she was looking at the trees around her, it made present, invoked those elephants and their movement somehow. It was almost like they were very subtly at the back of the perception. They were infusing the perception. And particularly, as she said, a sense of wildness and majesty. Both wildness and majesty are imaginal words, fantasy words.

There's something in this where the biological had gotten amplified and enriched and extended itself into the imaginal and fantastical. The imaginal fantasy had infused this. So the whole thing, the scene as she looked around her, the trees around her in that moment, was alive in a different way than in a purely mechanistic way. It had a kind of multi-dimensionality rather than just a mechanistically biological way. It was subtle, very subtle. Subtle infusion, but strong nevertheless. Subtle, but strong.

Actually, that was the second time I asked her those difficult questions I posed to you at the beginning and probed a little into that with her. The first time, she gave a different answer. She said that what she had heard gave her a sense of the trees fighting back

against the elephants—like they have characters, she said, and like they are warriors fighting back, and I too am a warrior fighting back. And so that sense of things was infusing her sense of nature and her whole relationship with nature: I am a warrior fighting for nature. This person is very engaged in environmental activism and dharma.

That's much less subtle than the first example. It's much more obvious that that is infused with image and fantasy. So it can be very subtle, relatively unsubtle, or very, very obvious.

One yogi who often looks after the plants at Guy House was saying to the garden coordinator, "Listen to this plant, listen to this plant." And he was touched and struck by her language and the way she was relating to the plant. It opened, again for him, this sense of another dimension of perception, another dimension of beauty. And this all has something to do with dimensions of beauty that are perceivable to us. But for him, her sharing with him that way of relating opened up this sense of the beauty of other dimensions of perception, other levels and dimensions other than purely a modernist idea of materiality.

So again, that's a more obvious example or instance of the kind of thing I'm talking about.

Eros involves or ignites image and fantasy in the perception, in the sense of the other that it loves, of its object—in this case, of nature. We could say it activates image fantasy, it activates the archetypal. And because of what we said—it always wants more, the pothos in the eros—when it attains a certain degree or level or kind of connection, it will enjoy that for a while, and then it will want more, more. And in this way it opens both the psyche and the sense of the object, and those two are not really separable.

So in this wanting more, eros opens both psyche and object more deeply. This is what eros does—it's simply its nature, or at least this is my understanding of how it operates. Eros functions this way if it is not hindered, either by clinging to a certain image or by attachment to a particular logos, a certain conceptual framework that prevents its natural expansion and penetration.

This is what eros does in relation to anything, including a lover, including the Dharma. If the Dharma is something we love, if we have an erotic relationship with the Dharma, it will do the same thing to our understanding, our conception, our image of what the Dharma is—it will keep opening it, expanding it.

Eros operates this way in relation to anything it has an erotic relationship with. It will even transform our very sense of what connection is and means. What does it mean to connect? Obviously we can connect sexually, physically, but through eros the dimensions of connection themselves are being opened. The meaning of the very word "connection" expands. What's involved in the very desire of eros starts to open up through its own dynamic.

Even the idea of eros itself gets opened up through the dynamic of eros, through this pothos within it. Any definition, even a definition of eros, is a boundary. A definition forms a limit. And because eros pushes through and expands, it will push through even that definition of itself, that boundary, that limit. It will expand or transcend that definition, reaching toward other levels of meaning, other possibilities. Hence eros is undefinable, because it is divine, or infinite in this sense. There is no end because of the pothos within it.

Eros, psyche, and logos mutually inform and influence each other. They grow together, they fertilize and inseminate and impregnate each other, if you like—ad infinitum, endlessly, or rather, with endless potential.

Where there is eros, it wants to connect more. In that wanting to connect more, it discovers or creates more of the object by fertilizing the psyche and the imaginal, and sense perception itself. Then I connect with and experience a larger, expanded object—an expanded other that I love, an expanded sense of earth and nature.

Because of that expanded sense, I might say, "Perhaps it has this divine quality." I sense intuitively this divine level. And then my logos must expand with that. If I simply dismiss it—"Oh, divine is silly, that's foolish. We know now because we're modernists that there's no such thing as the divine"—then my logos has no room for that expansion, and it hinders the whole movement.

But if there is either enough force in the eros, or if I'm not too rigid—either in the image or the logos—if I'm not clinging too tightly to a certain image or logos of nature, then the logos must expand as well.

In meeting this different object, encountering and discovering these richer dimensions of what I love—in this case earth, nature—in meeting that, there is more eros. There is more to be enthralled by, more to fall in love with and connect with. More desire of the eros is present.

And this increased desire pushes again, expands, penetrates further. Other dimensions open up—both breadth and vertical depth. The logos must expand again.

So there is this infinite possibility of mutual informing, influencing, enriching, complicating—of insemination, fertilization, impregnation, growing together, expansion. Nourishment. Enrichment is a good word. Richness and beauty, different kinds of beauty, are expanded.

There is a multidimensionality that comes into the sense of the other, in this case of nature—not just material in the modernist sense.

Buddhists often talk about interconnectedness.

There's a lot of talk and emphasis in engaged Buddhism about interconnectedness. But often the idea and sense of interconnectedness is actually not vertical - it's horizontal interconnectedness that's being talked about or put forward as a really important value. And it is important, obviously.

What's really being talked about with interconnectedness is a kind of material interflow of porousness - the air that moves in and out of my body, the food, the sense of porousness and non-separation, interconnectedness at a material level, and horizontal at one level.

We talk a lot, both in ecology and in Dharma, about origins and causes. But those origins and causes of nature - this tree or this ecosystem - are regarded horizontally. They're on the same level as they exist now. In other words, material entities in the past are thought to be the origins and causes of nature now, of this thing now, this ecosystem now. Origins and causes are always thought about in the past, typically, on the same level, on the horizontal level.

So this interconnectedness is both temporal over time, from the past to the present, and also spatial. I'm connected through air and food - trees breathe and all that. This temporal and spatial interconnectedness is horizontal. There's an absence of the vertical dimension from the conversation, at least, if not from the sense.

Consider something like Joanna Macy's beautiful teachings about deep time. Sometimes you just look at your hand and see how that's evolved from - I remember doing it, but I don't remember the specifics - was it fish fins or pterodactyl wings? The important point is that the connection through time and deep time, what she calls deep time, in other words very, very long time, or what could potentially be interpreted as very long time in a mechanism of evolution - that this hand is somehow connected with all those other material instantiations of biology.

That's one way of relating to and hearing that kind of teaching. But compare that with a sense of this material thing - whether it's my hand or a tree or nature or environment - as something that echoes. Rather than horizontally, what about saying it echoes or is an image of the divine? I see and perceive and sense echoes and images of the divine, or what I love, in this object, in nature. Nature as echo or image, expression of the divine.

That has a more vertical sense to it. The material reflects, as I said, or expresses divine dimensions. Some people might use the language of the source or the root. Being in divinity or in divinities or archetypes or divine images, the source of this nature, so to speak, is in the divine or in some divine image.

Now that use of the word "source" is not, absolutely not, A) an explanation, and B) temporal. When I say this tree or nature has its source in the divine, its roots in the divine, its feet in the divine, as some people say in some traditions, that's not an explanation. It's not something like we used to think - God created the earth at time zero. It's not temporal and it's not explanation.

Rather, it's a way of seeing. It's a poetic sense, a poetic sensibility. The more the eros is allowed to do its work and to have its dynamic, that way of sensing things, that way of looking at things, that poetic sensibility will open up. It will come from the eros and bring with it more and more soulfulness, infusing the psyche and infusing the sense of the object, the world, nature.

So infinite possibilities here - infinite possibilities of discovery and creation, both. It's open.

Sometimes the sense of horizontal interconnectedness, as much as Buddhists, and particularly engaged Buddhists, tend to emphasize it - sometimes people talk about that, have a sense of it a lot, and sometimes it's not enough. Either not enough for the psyche and the fullness and richness of what the psyche really wants, or not enough to support and stimulate or catalyze engagement.

CHAPTER 26

An Ecology of Love (Part 1 - Introduction)

Rob Burbea · 51 min

In this opening talk of his series "An Ecology of Love," Rob Burbea poses challenging questions about what we truly mean when we express love for nature and the Earth. He explores how our views (diṭṭhi) shape and constrain our capacity for love, distinguishing between mettā (loving-kindness) as universal well-wishing and eros as the desire to connect. Burbea examines the apparent absence of sacredness in contemporary environmental discourse, suggesting that climate change and ecological crises are fundamentally crises of values rooted in our perceptions and worldviews. He introduces the concept that all phenomena, including nature, are empty of independent existence and can be viewed in multiple ways through different practices of looking. This talk establishes the foundation for understanding how cultivating sacred perception of the natural world might transform both our love and our environmental engagement, arguing that we need not just rational solutions but a fundamental shift in how we perceive and feel about the cosmos.

I'd like to begin by asking you a couple of questions. I am well aware that these are not easy questions to answer, so it's perhaps a little unfair of me, perhaps a little naughty. But I'm asking them to probe into an aspect and dimension of our lives and also of our relationship with the world and with nature that often doesn't get probed into and opened up. Hopefully there's something in these questions, despite their difficulty, that can begin to probe and open up an inquiry and a conversation at a certain level and in certain directions.

So here are the questions. If, as I hope you do, you say or think or feel "I love the earth, I love nature"—if you say or feel or think that—what do you mean exactly? I love nature. I love the earth. You may not have articulated that, but if you feel that, what do you mean exactly? In other words, what is it that you love?

I don't mean give me a list of specific trees—"I love that big turkey oak at the front of Gaia House" or "I love this particular stretch of beach, this place, this whatever it is." I don't mean that. I mean, what is it about the earth or nature that you love? And what do you even mean when you say or feel or think "earth," "the earth," or "nature"?

I said these are not easy questions, kind of awkward and a little bit unfair. Very difficult to answer, very difficult to probe in that direction. What is it you love, and what do you mean, what do we mean when we say earth, nature? Just take a little time right now to see what comes for you with that, to probe a little. What do you mean?

It's not easy, these questions, but just see what comes up and how you would frame it, how you would articulate that for yourself. I'm actually extremely interested to hear everyone's answer, but obviously that's not possible, and for the sake of time I should have given you more time.

Let me add to those questions. Did beauty have something to do with your answer, with what you love? And if so, what exactly do you mean by beauty? Do you mean pretty sights, nice colors and arrangement of colors in a nice sunset or sunrise? Do you mean pleasant sounds, pleasant sweet melodies of birds, pleasant sense experiences? Is that what you mean by beauty?

Again, I'm not being very fair here, but I want to open something up through the questioning, so just bear with this. So is it pleasant sense experiences? Pretty sights, pretty sounds, and so on. Pretty touch of the breeze on the cheek or whatever. Nice fragrances of flowers.

Is it wonder? Is that part of what you know? Is there wonder at the biology of it all, the intricacy of the biology of nature, the diversity of that biology, the mechanisms of its evolution, the staggering complexity of that? Is there wonder at all of that? Is that part of what you love? Part of even what we mean by earth and nature?

Wonder also perhaps at the dynamics of either self-regulating ecosystems or evolving ecosystems. So wonder at that intricacy and the dynamics of that. Do you love and do you mean by nature, and wonder at, the fact of the interconnectedness of all these biological processes? The fact of the interconnectedness of all these biological processes—is that part of it?

Is it a love of the support that you recognize that the earth's biological processes, the biological processes of nature provide for you, for us? The sustenance, the matrix—from mater, mother—Mother Earth, the matrix of support provided by the total intricate net of biological processes.

Does your answer to these difficult questions involve amazement and wonder? I imagine it does. It may do. There's no right and wrong here. Again, just probing.

And if it includes an appreciation of the support that the earth's biological processes provide, does it also include an acknowledgment of the danger and potential harms of that very totality of biological processes, the power of nature in very different ways to harm and cause danger for us and for other beings?

Is it all of these?

These little half-answers I've given. So whatever it is you articulated in response to those difficult questions—what do you love? What is earth? What is nature?—I wonder if now you can step back from your articulation, from whatever you formulated as an answer, and kind of hear it, hear your own answer, but not so much from inside it, almost as if you're hearing it afresh and just sort of appraising that answer, if that's possible, to the extent that that's possible.

Because what I really want to ask in all this is: if you can hear that statement, so to speak, more from the outside, not being wrapped up in it, is there something missing from whatever you articulated, from the statement that you articulated to yourself about your love and about what nature is? Is there something missing? Has your answer captured completely what it is you love and what the earth and nature is? Or is there something missing from what you articulated?

You know, love always, and in many ways, involves view. And by view I mean an idea of something, an intellectual idea, whether it's conscious or not, articulated or not, verbal or not, and also the perception, the view, the way of looking, the sense of something. Love always involves view of what we love. In other words, when I love, I'm looking at something in a certain way, and when I look at something in a certain way, it's part of my love and it affects my love.

Love always involves view. This is a big part of what I want to talk about today. Always and in many ways. And we can view things in many ways. Other views are possible, other ways of looking are possible. So these questions I ask you have to do with love and to do with view, which always go together in complex ways, as I want to kind of elaborate on and expand.

But if I come back to this question, is there something missing from whatever you articulated in response to those kind of unfair questions about your love of the earth and love of nature? Was sacredness, a sense of sacredness, a part of what you articulated? The sacredness of the earth, the sacredness of nature. Was that a part of your articulation? Is that a part of what you love? Is that somehow an integral aspect of your love and of your sense of what nature is and what earth is?

Sacred is a difficult word these days, as I'm going to go into a little bit. But really, there are many, actually infinite possible kinds of experience of sacredness for us as human beings. Infinite. There's no end to the variety of the sense of sacredness, the perceptions of sacredness, the kinds of sacredness that we can feel and sense. So I certainly don't mean to prescribe any kind of particular sense of sacredness or idea of sacredness at all.

Sometimes the sense of sacredness is what would obviously be heard and appraised by someone else as sacred—perhaps nature as a face of the divine, an expression of the divine, something angelic, what's called a theophany, an appearance of the divine, a face of the divine, something as obvious as that. Maybe it really includes, for Dharma practice, a sense of the emptiness of nature. I'm going to come back to all this. Or maybe much less obvious than such sort of blatantly sacred kind of language.

So no prescription, but is sacredness a part of your love, a part of your sense and view of what earth and nature is? And then, if sacredness is part of it for you, do you voice it? Do you voice that sense of sacredness in your activism, in your engagement with environmental issues and engaged dharma? Do you voice it and how do you voice it? If you do, is the sacredness part of it, or is it there but it's somehow not something that comes out in your expression, in your voice? These are the kind of things I want to go into.

In modernist culture, if you like, the culture that we live in these days in the West, what I call the culture of modernism as the dominant view and way of understanding and thinking and feeling things—in modernist culture, this is dominated by what we could call secular humanism, or actually maybe more comprehensive, more accurate to say, it's increasingly dominated or characterized by a seeming abyss between secular humanism and narrow religious fundamentalism.

That's characteristic of modernist culture these days, and you need only read the news, the kind of debates that go on, or really don't go on, because there is an abyss there. Conversations are not being had across this kind of abyss between secular humanism and narrow religious fundamentalism, which sometimes have a lot more in common with each other as poles, polarities, than either end of that polarity would like to admit.

But in this culture, dominated by secular humanism, by this kind of abyss between secular humanism and narrow religious fundamentalism, there seems very little appeal in the discourse around climate change or environmental crises that we face, very little appeal in the discourse to a sense of nature and the cosmos as sacred. It seems to me. And even from religious institutions and traditions or spiritual institutions and tra-

ditions, very little, very cautious or minor in relation to other points. They might make points about political equality and caring for the poor, all of which is hugely important. But this aspect of sacredness seems shrunk or exiled from the discourse, cut out.

Is it taboo? Are we afraid that it will be mocked, dismissed, regarded as irrelevant? Do we regard it as irrelevant? Have we lost over the centuries the vocabulary of holiness, of sacredness, and of invoking that? Have we even lost—not everyone obviously, but as a culture, what's pervasive in the culture—have we lost even the perspective and the sense of sacredness? Has it gone from our view, from our sense of the world?

Historically, of course, there came at some point following the Enlightenment, the Western Enlightenment, and the gradual, slow separation of church and state. This was a very good thing, taking away power from sometimes corrupt institutions. The separation of church and state—a very helpful development that occurred in Western history. But with it also, perhaps, came a separation of not just the institutions of church and state, but a separation of the sense of sacredness from economic, political, and public discourse.

That's a huge generalization, I know. And in some areas of the West, that's definitely not the case. But as a generalization, the sense of sacredness, if it was there at all, if it was left at all, if it didn't dwindle and wasn't eroded completely, became something private and personal, separate from the public discourse on economics, politics, and civil life.

Just recently, Jeb Bush—younger brother of George W. and son of elder George, both ex-presidents, and I think governor of Florida who tends to run for the Republican presidential nomination—said, "I don't get my economic policy from my bishop, cardinal, or pope." He said this in response to comments by the Pope about the obligations of Catholics and politicians regarding the environment and climate. But there's this separation. He is a Catholic, yet even for him, there's a dividing of economics and politics from whatever he might consider or sense as sacred in his life.

In this eroding and denigrating, this exiling or dismissing of the sense of the sacred that has happened over centuries in the West, a void has been created. Where there was sacredness, there is now an absence. And of course, things either rush in or get thrust into that void to try and fill it.

One of those things is love—particularly romantic love. The rise in Western consciousness of the primacy and importance and kind of hype around romantic love has become a secular god for us over the last 150 years or so. Humans must love in one way or another. We must love. But what I partly want to explore today is how our love is constrained, constricted.

We talk a lot about love—we're somewhat obsessed by it, especially romantic love or family love and loving your children. But is our love and our very notion of love and the possibilities of our love constrained in different ways?

Even in relation to climate change, there is—starting in the last few years—this campaign asking people to express and share photos of what they love that is threatened by climate change and environmental degradation. There's something very lovely in that, because instead of just critiquing, instead of the rage and anger and negativity that can so much enter the discourse around climate change and environment, it's good to include and emphasize emotions, particularly the positive emotions of love.

But then you get people writing in saying, "I love chocolate." Chocolate is actually threatened by climate change because of what the cocoa plant needs to grow and the ecosystems it requires. "I love chocolate. I love chocolate. I love chocolate." What's happened here? I mean, I actually do like chocolate. But what's happened in this absence of the sacred, the hype of love, the movement of that into the discourse? There's still the absence, it seems to me, of the discourse of sacredness, of the view and sense of sacredness.

Even writers like George Monbiot, who I have huge appreciation for and whose work I very much enjoy, seem not to include that dimension—the sense of sacredness—in the discourse, in the conversation. I don't know if it's shyness, as I said, or a fear of judgment, or if it's just not there.

So partly what I want to do is open up this question of the sacred and the sense of the sacred, the perception and idea of the sacred. Is it possible to reintroduce it into the whole picture? And also, if it's already there for you...

What can be done to support the courage—and it does take courage—to invoke it and to voice it in one's activism, in what one expresses in the world to others in society about climate change and about the environmental crises that we face? To voice it as part of the whole way of seeing and sensing nature?

Because if our love—and that could be love for anything; we're talking about nature and earth now—if our love is constrained by our view, by certain ideas or conceptual frameworks or just the sense that we have of things, then that has consequences. It has all kinds of consequences. That constraining of love by view has consequences, will create absences or voids in our love and in our actions.

Particularly what I want to get into and explain as we go on is this: if love is constrained by view, then what I'm going to call the erotic element and the vertical element—I will explain these—will be missing from our love and our view. The erotic and the vertical dimensions will be missing from our love and from our sense of what we love, in this case earth, nature. And that has consequences. That will have consequences.

The novelist Jonathan Franzen, in a Guardian article I read earlier this year, wrote that climate change has achieved what none of the madnesses of the twentieth century could: the final defeat of human reason. He writes that "the great hope of the Western Enlightenment—the hope that human rationality would enable us to transcend our evolutionary limitations—has taken a beating from wars and genocides, but only now, on the problem of climate change, has it foundered altogether."

So we can hope to address environmental and climate change issues rationally and hope that we can be smart enough technologically to figure it out. But as he implies there, the limits of human rationality apply to something like this when it's applied alone. Do we not need to perceive and feel differently? Not just to think differently and figure something clever out in terms of solutions—of course that's important—but do we not need to perceive and feel differently? Perceive the world, earth, nature, self and others. Perceive and feel them differently, all of that.

Is there not a need for us to re-enchant the cosmos? The cosmos that has become, over the centuries, lost its enchantment for us. It's become dis-enchanted. We live in a flat cosmos, as I'll go into in more detail as we go on. Is there not a problem with our worldview, our Weltanschauung, our seeing of the world?

So in this talk, as I said, I want to talk about the interaction of love and view and how view might limit or open love and also vice versa. The interaction of love and view and what that does, either by limiting or opening.

The political aspects or dimensions of the conversation around climate and environment, the economic, the scientific aspect—of course, obviously important, crucially important. But really, in this talk, I want to address another level of the whole thing, come at things from another angle. What I see as an important piece of the whole, a necessary piece of the whole conversation, the whole opening up that needs to happen.

Because climate change and environmental crisis—they're not just crises of technology, crises of politics or capitalism or economic systems. Climate change and the environmental crises, multiple environmental crises we face, are crises of values. Crises of values.

And values are rooted in what? Where do we get values from? We have a crisis in our values. And values are rooted in what? Well, actually, that's a complex question, but part of what values are rooted in are views, beliefs, perceptions, sensibilities. Of course, values influence these things, so again, it's mutually feeding. And there may be, too, something about heart capacities and just what we're capable of letting ourselves value, for fear of the stretching of the heart that's involved there and the depth of grief and emotion that are involved.

But for now, what I really want to emphasize is the rooting of values, the conditioning of values by views, beliefs, perceptions, sensibilities.

Before I get into all this, just to say something or stress something about—to put this talk in a context and say a couple of things about that. Firstly, my agenda, if you like, or my intention for the talk is hopefully to open up a range of possibilities generally and in all directions. To sort of hopefully plant seeds, maybe just scatter seeds in terms of views, ideas, communications, the inflow and the outflow of activism, what flows into our activism and our engagement with these issues and what flows out of that. That's my agenda, is really to open that up more and more generally and in all directions.

So I'm interested in the plurality of ways of doing that. I'm not interested in just saying this is the one thing that's important at all. I'm very interested in different approaches, different directions and different tones too and different styles of communication. There is a place, I think, for criticism and stridency, even rage. There's a place for cool analysis and poetry and all of that. But within all that—so that's my agenda, opening that up in multiple directions, and this talk is part of that—but you have to find, as a listener, you have to find what you personally resonate with, and that's up to you. That's the scattering seeds—they grow where they will, and that's completely fine.

So that's what's important, is that you resonate with what resonates for you personally. Now you will hear that I have a leaning and a personal preference in all this, and particularly in what I'm talking about today. But that's not my agenda. I don't want to thrust that on anyone, and certainly not in any particular form. I could not—it would be futile of me to pretend that I don't have a leaning and a personal preference and to try and keep that out from the way I express things and what comes into the talk.

I can't help... I lean towards the mystical. I lean towards the sacred. I lean towards a sense of radical emptiness and what that opens up in the possibility of perception—the sacredness and the mystical sense of things that this brings. So that's my personal preference and leaning. I'm just freely admitting that. But it's different than my agenda. Hopefully, if you do hear that leaning and my personal preference, you won't confuse that with my agenda, which is actually just this opening up.

Because there's a second question or statement to the context here of a talk like this: What do you need in regard to your activism and your engagement? What does your heart and soul need?

It's interesting, knowing activists. Some long-term activists can get kind of hardened, embittered through the course of years of activism. Maybe what's needed is for them to reconnect with the heart—with their heart, with the love that was the origin of their activism. Some of them actually need not to reconnect, but to connect in the first place. They never... Somehow the heart was not something that was opened enough or received enough attention or healing in the first place. So that might be a need in the whole conversation around activism and engagement—what you need.

Some activists need what we could call emotional skills or the skills of working with, navigating the heart's responses to the tragedies that we face and the disasters that are unfolding—the pain and suffering of all that. The emotional skills, the meditative tools to work well with what that does in the heart and the heart's responses to all that. This includes learning skillful responses, how to address burnout in activism. That's part of it—both addressing it in the heart and mind and body, and also just practically in how one is approaching activism.

Some activists need courage. They need encouragement to communicate what they love, or they need to learn the skills to communicate love, so that the love they feel can pour through their communication, their activism.

There are many, many aspects of activism and places where we are at different times in terms of what we actually need. So again, this talk just fits into one... It's one piece in a much bigger pie, if you like. One slice of a pie, one level, as I said—one tack, one approach.

What I want to do is open up and explore our perception, our view, our sense of Earth, nature—and particularly nature, of the sacredness of that, or the possible view, sense, perception of the sacredness of earth and nature. And also open up and explore our ideas, views, perceptions, senses of what love is.

So what is involved in love? That word "involve"—related to "revolve" and "revolution" from Latin. Like what turns in the field of love? What are the elements that mix together and turn together and fertilize and interact within love? Within love, so to speak, that either grows that love or takes it in different directions or opens it in a certain way or colors it or limits it? What is involved in love?

That's part of the original difficult questions I asked you: What is it about nature that you love, and what do you mean by nature?

So exploring in this talk love of nature as a basis for our activism. We're talking about an ecology of love—love of nature as a basis for action and also as a basis for ecology, for understanding or our idea of what nature is. That the love of nature becomes part of the idea, must influence the idea of what nature is. So love of nature is a basis for activism and ecology, and also this exploring love and how it works. In other words, the psychological and spiritual ecology of love—the study of the dynamics of love, the inner and outer dynamics of love, mostly the inner today. Actually, both.

So in the title, "An Ecology of Love," you can hear there's a double meaning. Just to confess, I seem to like putting double or even triple meanings in titles to try and get the most meaning and most expression out of limited time, limited words.

Let's go into this.

This poor word "love"—four-letter word—has become so stretched and has been made to try and do so much work in so many different directions and dimensions, and more and more so in recent centuries. But let's just start with a statement and say love, the word "love," is undefinable. I mean, ultimately, it's undefinable. And admit that.

But nevertheless, although it's undefinable, we could just shrug and walk away from exploring it. It's still explorable, and there are still aspects or dynamics and dimensions of love, or ways of thinking about it and breaking it up that can still be very fruitful in our lives and our expressions—fruitful for the psyche, for the soul, for our being. So we can say many, many things despite the undefinability of love.

But right now, let's say a few things. Firstly, and especially for this talk, what I want to emphasize is when we say love, I want to include two aspects or currents or kinds of love.

One is metta. So many of you will know this Pali word, M-E-T-T-A. It's usually translated as loving-kindness. And...

Both metta and eros always involve a view—by which I mean an idea and sense, both conscious and unconscious, verbal and non-verbal, articulated or not—they always involve the view of both self and other. This view is intrinsic to metta and to eros, intrinsic to love, as I was saying earlier.

Now, one of the things that's absolutely crucial and vital to understand about views is that they're not fixed. They change. Our views change, and hopefully they do.

And more than that—they're fabricated. Views are fabricated. They're constructed. This doesn't mean they're false or that we should dismiss them. What it means is that they're malleable, they're workable. We can work with our views. We have some agency, some choice in our views of self and other.

This is enormously important to understand because it means that love—both metta and eros—can be cultivated, can be developed, can be refined. We're not stuck with whatever limited or constricted views we might have inherited or fallen into. We can expand them, deepen them, make them more beautiful.

The views we hold of ourselves and others directly shape the quality and possibility of our love. If I hold a very narrow, constricted view of who you are—seeing you only through the lens of your usefulness to me, or your appearance, or some single characteristic—then my love for you will be correspondingly narrow. But if I can expand my view, if I can see more of who you are in your fullness, in your mystery, in your infinite depths, then my love can expand accordingly.

This is true for metta and for eros both, though in different ways. With metta, as the view expands, the well-wishing can become more genuine, more heartfelt, less conditional. With eros, as the view expands, the desire to connect can become richer, more soulful, reaching toward ever greater intimacy with the full being of the other.

Our views can change. We need only look around and see how culturally views transform. Of course we can fix views, but looking around culturally, what I mean to say is views don't have to be fixed. They tend, at times, to get fixed, and they tend also to change. But culturally, if we look around us, views change. It's obvious—from culture to culture, from one society's period to another period in the same society.

So in relation to nature, the view of nature, the view of Earth, has changed, just culturally. This is from Adam Karn, also from a Guardian article. Over the course of millennia, he writes, "the way that people have imagined and perceived the natural world has changed repeatedly and often dramatically. The concept of 'nature' is subjective, dynamic, and culturally constrained"—because it's culturally conditioned, you could say.

The classic example is smallholder agriculture. What was once, many thousands of years ago, considered the height of mastery over nature is now an archetypal image of humans living in harmony with their environment. The view of nature changes culturally. It changes. Just to put a tag here on words in what he wrote—noticing "imagined" and "perceived," because that's a lot of what I want to go into. The imagination is part of perception, and also the use of the word "archetypal." I'm going to come back to these things.

So views are not necessarily fixed. They change through and in the culture. They have changed. Views of nature have changed many times, and they will again. They will again, culturally.

So they change culturally, but also as a Dharma practitioner, it's really important to recognize how views are dependent basically on facets of the citta, facets of the mind and the heart—dependent on the mind state, dependent on practicing different ways of looking, actually practicing a different view. And the sense that I have of something, whether it's the world, nature, the cosmos, the self, the other—that sense changes dependent on facets of the citta, dependent on different ways of looking. And that's something we can practice.

So in other words, the things that we perceive, including nature, including earth, are empty of any real independent way that they are. When you really go into this question of view, you realize it's not that things are a particular way, nature is a particular way. It's that all we have is views, and those views are dependent arisings. We can view in different ways, as I said before.

So all things, including nature, including earth, are empty—empty of any kind of real independent way they are, independent of the way that we look at them. And therefore, because they're empty, they can be viewed in different ways. And that's one way of understanding what practice is. It's not a very common way of understanding what meditative practice is and what the path is, but it's, I think, a very fruitful way of looking. Meditation, practice, the journey of awakening—it's practicing skill in different views and seeing what that does.

As we just said, the view of anything, in this case of nature or earth, view is a dependent arising—dependent on what's dominant in the culture, what we absorb from the culture, dependent also on the so-called inner mindset and factors of the mind and the heart and the way of looking. So view arises dependently and also is itself part of dependent origination. It conditions other things. Other things are dependent on view. In other words, it brings consequences. Any view that we have has certain con-

sequences, and one of the consequences I mentioned before is its consequences on love. Views will affect love. They will cause love to deepen or grow in certain ways, or they will limit it, constrict it in certain ways.

So love and view have this mutual reciprocity, mutual informing, mutual influencing, mutual dependency—mutual dependency of love and view. Really, I hope you can hear that this is not abstract. I hope that as we go on in the talk, you can really understand how totally crucial this is and how totally I'm talking about experience and I'm talking about our life and what comes out of our life and how we sense our life.

CHAPTER 27

Mindfulness and Myth

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines the flexible spectrum between prioritizing beauty, sacredness, and soul-making versus personal healing and freedom from suffering. He critiques the prevalent realisms in contemporary Buddhist culture, from secular Buddhism's existential claims to the physicalist assumptions underlying modern mindfulness teachings.*
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> *Burbea argues for a radical re-grounding of dharma practice based on deep emptiness understanding, where all perceptions and concepts - including dharma teachings themselves - are seen as fabricated ways of looking rather than ultimate truths. He challenges the notion that mindfulness reveals 'life as it presents itself,' demonstrating how such phrases carry hidden metaphysical assumptions about independent reality.*
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> *This teaching serves as a foundation for re-enchanting practice, advocating for a non-realist approach that legitimizes imaginative and poetic sensibilities while maintaining rigorous philosophical inquiry. Burbea encourages practitioners to listen structurally for new ideas that don't fit existing conceptual boxes, opening possibilities for a more artistically creative and spiritually fertile approach to the path.*

In case it wasn't obvious, I want to clarify something about what we were discussing earlier regarding what I was calling a spectrum of priorities in one's conception, attitude, orientation, and intention for the path—the aim and goal of practice. On one hand, this spectrum encompasses whether beauty and sacredness and soul-making are genuinely at the forefront, or on the other hand, whether the priority is freedom, healing, and so forth for the self.

Just to make clear something I was assuming: where a person is on that spectrum at any time will vary depending on all kinds of conditions. It's not a static thing. Sometimes, even if generally speaking the priority is opening and deepening and widening the sense of sacredness, there will of course arise moments and times and situations in our life where what we really need is some relief from suffering—some insight or approach or cultivation that opens up a situation from the contraction we've put around it. So it's flexible, it moves, not just in long periods over time, but even within a day, probably quite a few times.

Let me say a little more about these themes—the why themes, why offer a retreat like this, and the context and bases. As I said, these are interwoven themes. I want to preface all this with what you might call an admission. Someone or other said something like: all philosophies that anyone would state are actually confessions. They're personal confessions, and I certainly recognize that if I'm offering a set of teachings or an orientation or a larger conceptual framework, implicit in that is revealing my own orientation, inclination, where I've arrived at, but also my predisposition.

In terms of the context of these teachings and the emphases we'll be supporting in practice over the week, partly this retreat, these teachings, these ideas, these practices, are a response to the situation around us—not just the global environmental situation, but also the situation of ideas in the wider culture, and in Dharma culture, spiritual cultures, and psychological cultures.

It's partly a response to dominant paradigms that often go unquestioned, which is partly why they become what happens to a dominant paradigm. A paradigm might arise first, for example, with the Western Enlightenment and the scientific revolution as a question. But over time, that paradigm itself—all those perspectives and views and philosophies—becomes entrenched, dogmatized, unquestioned, second nature. So it's partly a response to what's become encrusted and solidified in the wider culture and also in spiritual cultures—what has become prevalent and goes often unquestioned and is simply taken as truth.

Within that there are different aspects, and one is that I turn and see realism everywhere—different kinds of realism everywhere, whether in terms of religious realism or naive religious fundamentalism, or secular realism, including the realism that is at the unavoidable basis of secular Buddhism, or the kind of realism that permeates most understanding of dependent origination in terms of process and real events, real aggregates, real moments happening in time—all the realisms that underpin and run through a lot of psychology nowadays, across the whole spectrum of psychology, whether cognitive behavioral or psychodynamic or whatever. It's rare for approaches, whether psychological or spiritual, to not be based on a kind of realism.

A lot of the work in psychology is wonderful, and there's a lot of work on ego psychology that's great, but there's a realism underlying that. It's quite different to have a non-realist basis—to have emptiness as something basic to the path, meaning an understanding of emptiness forming the basis of the path. And even more than that, to entertain this idea, this conception, that fantasy and image is primary. Included in fantasy and image are conceptual frameworks and ideas, and all of this is primary in constitut-

ing, fabricating, creating what we then experience and perceive and move in, rather than our experience being some kind of independently existing reality or the ideas we have being somehow real and true.

These non-realist ideas are really quite rare and radical in a world where realisms of different kinds are rampant. And even more, very often people might hear about a non-realist basis, but it's actually very hard to stay in it. So it's like, "Yes, that's right, great, okay, I get it." But so often then, whether we're talking in the realm of psychology or psychotherapy or dharma or other spiritualities, unwittingly there's a reintroduction of some kind of realism. Something or other gets reified, made real, assumed to be real, and often without even recognizing it. So even though there might be some enthusiasm for this idea of a non-realist, non-truth-claiming, truth-grasping basis for things, it's actually quite rare and difficult for a person to actually abide in that place deeply.

Picking up one area of all that, I find myself, along with others perhaps, responding to what someone coined the phrase "aggressive secularism." You see that in public figures like Richard Dawkins and others, but also within the Dharma there's a kind of aggressive secularism that comes from certain voices and positions within the Dharma. Because of the aggression there and the dominance of that force and the way it takes hold in people's consciousness and takes hold of people's consciousness, it seems to demand a response to balance it, to open things out.

That kind of aggressive secularism actually seems to me to be very much akin to—actually a form of—religious fundamentalism. Obviously, secularists and secular Buddhists conceive of themselves as completely opposite to religious fundamentalists, but there are ways in which sometimes these two positions are remarkably similar.

like camps, are really very similar.

So one is in relation to the word religious, and I've talked about this elsewhere, I'm not going to say too much about it now, but one of the things that's characteristic of, if you like, a religious outlook, a religious mindset and attitude, in contradistinction to, say, an artistic one or a scientific one, is that the authority is sought and placed and assumed to be in the past.

So, again, you see this in secular Buddhism with the sort of emphasis on the Pali canon teachings and a sort of claim of historical, you know, objective historical accuracy there. But in a way there's something religious about that backwards placing, or that placing of authority in the past, that assumption of authority in the past, as opposed to an opening out into the future that's characteristic of art and science in different ways.

But secondly, with regards to the word fundamentalism, there's a kind of fundament, a basis, a ground, again, in realism, in a notion of truth. And in secular outlooks or approaches, that truth that goes unquestioned forms a fundament and a fundamentalism—an unquestioned, unquestionable assumption or basis for everything. All the rest of the teachings are based on this assumption of truth. That's a kind of existentialist truth. This is our existential predicament. This is what it is. This is undeniable fact of the facts of our existence.

And wrapped up in that is usually what's called philosophical physicalism or materialism, the assumption that, as we've talked about before, matter is primary, matter is the only reality, things, consciousness, etc., human beings, apparent selves, emerge out of matter—out of the complex organization of matter over time and evolution. But essentially what's real is the physical as conceived according to classical mechanical science and Newtonian science, etc. These existential and physicalist truths form a fundamentalism. These are unquestioned. They are the bedrock of this.

And together with this backwards authority, this religious attitude, there is a kind of religious fundamentalism. And in some instances, it mirrors, replicates the kind of militant religious fundamentalism that we see around the world today. Because we actually hear this, or witness, a kind of wish to expel or stamp out views that don't fall into that mold—opposite views, opposite sensibilities. And to me, that's questionable. That's really not okay. What's going on there? That's very characteristic of notions of heresy and all kinds of abuse that we've seen in history taking place under the auspices and the aegis of religion, now taking place under the auspices of secularism.

So I would much prefer a plurality, a real range of attitudes and approaches and sensibilities, because there's a range in where human beings are, what they need. And there's a range in souls and what resonates and what is soul-making for different souls. And so for me, it's very important to keep that range and that plurality and resist any idea of stamping out this or that teaching or expelling it.

And I hate to have to share this with you, but if you know, if you're behind the scenes with the politics of retreat centers and that kind of thing, not just here, but around the world, there's probably more of this that goes on than you guys might be happy to hear about. So, you know, can there be, rather than that, a plurality and openness, recognizing the diversity and the diverse needs of souls and perspectives and sensibilities there?

So I also talked about realisms in psychology and psychotherapies and the assumptions there. I think we will, both Catherine and I, return to that whole area repeatedly as the retreat goes on because it asks of us all, I think, today, quite a lot of sensitivity and we want to present a kind of balanced view of all that. So we'll return to that, this whole question of realism in psychology later.

Again, part of this idea of these teachings or this thrust of teachings, this direction, this opening of these teachings is as a response, partly as a response to what we could call disenchantment. So the emphasis on re-enchantment is, if you like, in response to disenchantment.

Disenchantment itself is a word that means different things to different people. It's defined in different ways and there are different kinds of disenchantment. But one kind of disenchantment, I would argue, actually runs through the Pali Canon, because the Pali Canon actually presents a transcendent thrust in its teaching. The movement there is not to be reborn in this world, that's their final goal. There's a kind of, of course, turn away from sensuality with that, turn away from this world as anything that's really that deeply attractive or sacred.

Nowadays, a reading of the Pali Canon is really not very popular because the whole area of the transcendent, also because of secular takes, is out of bounds. So we're left with nothing but this world. So there is a kind of movement to somehow twist, if you like, the message of the Pali Canon into some kind of life affirming or world affirming or sensuality affirming teaching, which actually it's pretty hard to do if you're really openly reading the Pali Canon. It's hard to justify that kind of reading. But that's become, if you like, the prevalent reading in a lot of circles.

So there is a kind of strange tension between disenchantment of a certain kind and enchantment that runs through the Dharma. But even more than that, in the wider culture, which obviously knows nothing about the Pali Canon or is not really exposed to the Pali canon, there's a kind of disenchantment of modernism. Disenchantment was actually a phrase that was first used, I think, by Max Weber, the sociologist, a hundred years ago even, perhaps.

And what does that mean? What's the disenchantment? Partly it's this flatness—the assumption of a one-dimensional cosmos, purely matter, purely meaningless matter, random atoms ricocheting off each other, coming into combination through their physical forces and happening to build stuff for a time that can be quite complex and quite amazing, but then that just dissolves. Nothing but this flatness, this one-dimensionality.

There's a disenchanting that took place as that became the dominant way of not just conceiving but perceiving the world over some centuries after the Western Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, replacing the more sanctifying views of the cosmos that existed in the Middle Ages and other parts of the world. But there's also a kind of disenchantment that comes with secular humanism regarding what the human being is and what the human being isn't—we'll return to this later—and with scientific materialism.

There's a response to the disenchantment that is pervasive now. It's become so much the norm that most people wouldn't even recognize that they're living in a disenchanted universe because they have no recollection of an enchanted universe. But it's important to say that we're not anti-science here. I have a deep interest in science, especially physics and modern physics as much as I can understand it. There's a difference between being anti-science and what needs to get challenged, which is scientism—this creeping outward, overstepping of the boundaries of what science, or what people believe that science, can legitimately explain and take within its purview.

What started in the scientific revolution as really a mode of approaching, a way of thinking, a way of approaching experimental data and a sort of scientific method, slowly over time became an unquestioned truth that there is nothing more than what can be explained by scientific materialism. These became actual realities and truths that will eventually be able to encompass and explain the whole of existence, the whole of our experience. So it's this scientism that actually is part of a kind of disenchantment, although again we can call it a kind of cultural enchantment, of which scientism is one example.

The context of this retreat is partly in response to this creep of scientism. And in Dharma culture—though it's not really only Dharma culture, but wider than that in the culture of psychological growth and healing modalities, the medical model—mindfulness is often presented with what I would call an underlying metaphysics of disenchantment, an underlying metaphysics of non-enchantment in the way that we're using it. Either because it's presented more and more rarely these days in the sort of classical Pali canon thrust of disenchantment toward transcendence, or there's a kind of limited enchantment in the more popular versions of the way insight meditation or mindfulness is taught.

For example, what gets enchanted is the whole idea of the moment and living in the now, or nature to a certain extent. Within those enchantments, why they are limited is because they are often actually assuming a flat cosmos. There's also the assumption of realism wrapped up in that. So the moment is real, this experience is real, these atomic

units of perception or consciousness or factors of mind are real, time is real. Also, the kind of physicalism that's the one-dimensionality of the view of nature. It's all based on a kind of flat cosmos assumed to be real, from a realist conceptual framework.

Part of the response and part of the contrast I want to draw out is what happens when we take emptiness as a radical basis for our path—an understanding of emptiness as a radical basis. This is so crucial and so seemingly hard for people to really grasp: what it really implies to do that, what's really involved in that, and why it's such a radically different basis and approach to the Dharma. Radical actually means, from the word *radix*, which means root. So the whole root, the whole basis is really different.

The idea of the possibility of placing ways of looking—the notion of different ways of looking and the different possible ways of looking, all the different possible ways of looking and the notion of the exploration of the fabrication of perception—these two interrelated notions, putting them really central, really integral to the whole unfolding of the path right from the beginning. And what is it then to have a non-realist assumption? We're not dealing with any concept that we have, any perception that we have, anything that we think we arrive at as real or truth.

Practice then becomes, in all that or with all that as a basis, the exercise of flexibly entertaining different ways of looking—a whole range of skillful ways of looking, which includes conceptual framing. So a conceptual framework or an idea is part of a way of looking, and some of these are very, very subtle, and some of them are broader, grander, more built up. But this whole flexibly entertaining and trying out different ways of looking is to see their effects on freedom, their effects on the heart, on the perception, on the sense of beauty, on sense of meaning, on soul-making. All of this we can experiment and play with because there is this flexibility. Because things are empty, we are free. All there is is ways of looking and we are free to engage different ways of looking.

So this whole idea of ways of looking, the fabrication of perception, forms both the starting working basis of a path and also the end. The deeper and deeper we go, you see, all we're left with is ways of looking. Ways of looking are empty too. But there's something that legitimizes it right from the beginning. And this, as I said, is radical and a big deal.

So all dharma concepts—whatever it is, aggregates or not-self or impermanence or whatever—none of them are truths or realities. There's no dharma concept that really is a truth in that sense or reality. But all of them, all dharma concepts, big ones and little ones, are ways of looking or concepts embedded in ways of looking that become available to us with skill and practice. We then engage them, but they're not truths.

So this is, as I said, a big deal. It's a radical re-grounding of what the path is and what it's based on and what it involves. And it has all kinds of massive implications in the way it opens up possibilities for practice and for understanding.

One of the reasons perhaps why it's difficult for many people nowadays in dharma circles and wider mindfulness circles to really recognize the significance, the radicality, or what a big deal this is—placing emptiness, placing ideas of ways of looking and fabrication in their fullness at the basis of the path, letting a path form around those conceptions—one of the reasons that's so difficult is because there's so much emphasis and rhetoric and assumption on a reality that can be arrived at through mindfulness, through bare attention, that permeates perhaps a lot, if not most, insight meditation teachings and approaches, and also, of course, mindfulness teachings and approaches.

And together with that, what makes it difficult is that the ideas of fabricating, of what is fabricated and seeing through the fabrication of certain ideas or states or thoughts, seeing them as fabrications—that idea is already there, as is the idea that comes up from time to time that we can look at things in different ways. There are different ways of looking at an experience or whatever it is that's happening.

But underneath all that, underneath those relatively limited teachings of fabrication and the acknowledgment of the possibility of different ways of looking, there's this idea that mindfulness or bare attention will reveal what is unfabricated—the experience in the moment revealed barely, nakedly, as it is.

The word unfabricated is often not used, but if it's used occasionally, it means something like this experience just as it is, or this bare actuality of the breeze on the cheek, or the thought as the thought, or whatever. So in that understanding, the whole teaching of fabrication of perception is grossly limited. And there's a limit on the exploration of just how much we can let go of fabrication and move to unfabricate perception more and more.

So underneath all these teachings about mindfulness, bare attention—typically the way insight meditation is taught—is some kind of assumption of a reality that we can meet, find out, that is life as it actually is, experience as it actually is. But there's not this understanding that there is no reality independent of the way of looking.

So yes, sure, we can look at things differently at different times to a certain extent. But underneath that, there's a reality. There's a way things really are, which we can look at a little bit differently. But the whole teaching of ways of looking has a very limited depth, because underneath the teaching or occasional mentioning of different ways of looking at things, there's an idea that there is an actual independent reality.

So what I would like to say is, contrary to that, all we have are ways of looking. They're empty too. There's no reality independent of the way of looking. There's no objective, inherently existent reality. And the scope for unfabricating perception, for moving up and down on the spectrum of fabricating and unfabricating, is complete. It goes into total cessation of any experience of subject, object, space, time, thing—all of that.

So there is not this assumption, this being held onto of reality or bare attention being able to expose, to reveal, to meet reality. Typically people hear these teachings about ways of looking and fabrication, and it just doesn't have the impact. It's like, "Yeah, so what?" It just goes in one ear and out the other or over the head, because being with reality or bare attention is held onto as really the main thing. So teachings about ways of looking or mentioning the flexibility of that is just heard as a sort of, "Yeah, okay, big deal"—a small occasional supplement.

As I said, what I would really want to give is a different ground to the dharma, a ground of groundlessness, a basis in emptiness, in this fullness of understanding and the comprehensiveness and thoroughness of the understanding of the ideas of ways of looking and fabrication. So there is nothing hiding in there about this bare actuality of the moment or meeting things as they are.

So quite apart from the fact that emptiness is sometimes scary to people, the prevalence and the ways these ideas have sedimented in dharma culture and in the consciousness of practitioners means that they're there and they're operating. And what is heard that might actually be deeper or wider or different than that actually tends not to get heard because it just bumps into those sedimented ideas. And as I said before, it's not easy to stay in that notion of non-realism.

What's quite popular these days is replacing the word "truth" in the Four Noble Truths with the word "tasks." And that's good in a way. It's kind of obvious that they're tasks. But still, what happens there is that at one level in recent years, people get very nervous with the word "truth."

And so they don't like it. They feel a bit oppressed by it. So there's a kind of small, superficial liberation in jettisoning that word "truth," and it feels good. But really, as I said before, what's happening? Okay, so one's not using the word truth, but still underpinning that, even if I've replaced it with another word... The shift is really nominal—literally, it's just in terms of a word that has shifted—because underpinning all that is a belief in so-called existential truths, the so-called truth of our existential situation, and

usually a kind of unspoken, unarticulated philosophy—well, rather unthought about, unquestioned philosophy of physicalism involved in that. So the shift is purely superficial there, often.

So how do we even... you know, for some people, what enables this shift of basis to really having emptiness and deep understanding of emptiness and dependent origination as a basis of the path? I mean, curiously, the more one understands emptiness, the more it even makes sense to have emptiness as a basis. So much so that it's almost like one can't really take seriously an approach that claims some kind of realism or truth, explicitly or implicitly. So I'm just saying personally I can't really take anything seriously that doesn't—that is based on some kind of realism that's usually hidden there.

So for some people that approach, curiously, of putting emptiness at the fundament of path will actually come once they understand emptiness more deeply. For others it might come through certain more modern philosophers, and really probably starting with Nietzsche—a very, you know, amazingly insightful, radical thinker—and since then lots of other philosophers in the Western tradition who open up this whole question of truth, kind of deconstruct the assumptions of truth and reality that we've had. So it might be that that helps with people.

It might be for some, I mean, it actually comes through a deep understanding of modern physics. Or for others, it's just that they already are possessed of, or have available to them, if you like, what we might call a more artistic or poetic sensibility. And their personality is already, in contrast to some personalities that tend to see things and think of things in quite concrete, literal terms, some people are already, I would say, blessed with this kind of ability to not fixate consciously, or in a way that articulates, or in a more unconscious way, on reality. And so there's this kind of liberation that comes through an artistic sensibility.

So any of those—whether it's understanding emptiness deeply, or modern science, or modern Western philosophy or some aspects of modern Western philosophy, or this more poetic sensibility—these can liberate and make available for us a shift in the very basis and direction of what the path is. So it's not about truth or based on notions of truth, explicit or hidden, implicit, but it's really more an art. And from whatever direction one is liberated in that way, then we see, we feel that we are free to create. The whole thing becomes art, and I will come back and talk about that.

But the kind of realisms are so prevalent, sometimes they're hard to notice. They're actually, as I said, hidden a little bit. So much in the languaging of mindfulness or dharma... One person was talking about mindfulness as, I think, being with life as it presents itself, meeting life as it presents itself. And that kind of phrase, or that kind of

summary of what mindfulness is, can sound very attractive. It also sounds completely innocuous and completely obvious to people who've been practicing mindfulness a little bit.

But what I want to say is, is it really? Is that really, A, what the Buddha meant, and B, more importantly, to my mind, is it really that innocuous? Or is there, again, a whole slew of assumptions—ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, all kinds of stuff—wrapped up in such an innocuous sounding phrase, such a simple and attractive sounding phrase?

Again, I've talked about a lot of this before, but what does "life" mean? Such a buzzword these days, life. What do you mean when you say life? What's wrapped up in that? It's, again, a word that can easily have included in it all kinds of things that are taken for granted about what's real. Again, our existential situation or the reality of matter, or the flatness, whatever. So "life as it presents itself"—yes, okay, what do you mean by life? What exactly do you mean by life? All kinds of things. I'm not going to labor that now.

But even the phrase "as it presents itself"—"as it presents itself" seems to suggest a kind of independence there, a non-recognition that what is presented in perception or to perception or as perception doesn't so much present itself independently. Perception is not a kind of passive receiving of some kind of representation of reality, or a reconstruction of some passive reconstruction, or sort of passive but faithful reconstruction of some kind of reality. We have to see that what arises as perception, what is presented, if you like, or feels as if it's presented to the mind, is not independent, is a dependent arising, dependent on the ways of looking.

And not understanding that, not including that as either an insight or a mode of working, means actually that we're missing what I would say is the main point of classical dharma, which exactly is understanding that—how perception is fabricated, as I said, dependent on the way of looking. Understanding the deep teaching of dependent arising and emptiness. "This is hard to understand, hard to see. I'm not even sure if I want to teach this," he said. This is the thrust, the main point of what I would call classical dharma.

meaning Dharma doesn't include the imaginal, and so forth.

So phrases like "life as it presents itself" tend to obscure the dependent arising—the arising of perceptions, appearances, and experiences dependent on the way of looking.

Here again, this importance to me, this real importance, this necessity of questioning what is wrapped up in the views operating in this or that position or statement. It's what I call, what I think the word means, critique, as I said in the opening talk. For instance, wrapped up in a phrase like "being present" or "meeting life as it presents itself."

Is there a kind of assumption of modernist physicalism—these random atoms or what matter really is—versus just the notion of appearance, which is a much more phenomenological notion that leaves much more open, much less assumed? We're dealing with appearance. We're not necessarily dealing with what we might think matter is according to a modernist, physicalist view. There's a huge difference in those assumptions, in what opens up by those assumptions, in what's allowed by those assumptions either way.

Sometimes, unfortunately quite often, people write to me or they say something about emptiness and they're relatively enthusiastic about it, and then they say something about how congruent that is with understandings of how the brain works. So this possibility, this understanding of fabrication of perception and the possibility of different ways of looking is reduced to a ground—and the ground is the brain, the ground is the neurophysiology and the different neuronal mechanisms and processes happening in the brain.

But again, we're back at physicalism. Emptiness does not stop, does not have a ground or propose a ground in the brain or in any kind of physicalist ground. So to somehow try and convert the teachings of emptiness and fabrication of perception into an equivalent that posits things in terms of explanations according to brain neurochemistry and neurophysiology and mechanisms is not, as far as I would say, a deep understanding of emptiness. It's leaving out a whole range of territory there.

But this physicalism, this tendency to do that kind of thing is endemic in our culture. We're saturated in it. The way we think and assume and perceive is saturated in that conception, that assumption. It's what sometimes modern philosophers call a sediment—it's sedimented in our view. So much so that we don't... it's become something that's just kind of solidified and hard to see, hard to question, hard to have a different assumption, hard to even see that it's operating sometimes.

As I said, different possibilities of understanding emptiness, more deeply probing, more deeply questioning with the emptiness practices, or modern physics and what quantum physics has to say about the reality of so-called atoms and electrons and those constituents, or modern Western philosophy questioning the whole ideas of physical-

ism—whether it's in continental philosophy or Anglo-American traditions, from both sides of the Western philosophical tradition—that the whole notion of materialism and physicalism is really being, has been for quite a while, deconstructed, pulled apart.

So I would say, and I think this is extremely important: the brain and the mind and the processes of the mind are all empty. All of them are empty. The matter that makes up the brain and the neurons and the atoms and the subatomic particles—all empty. So emptiness really means a groundlessness. We are not positing or assuming a ground in notions of matter, atomic particles, subatomic particles, as something real.

Wrapped up in all this, or just another way of saying all this, is really about questioning. Really about questioning. And for me, that's so key, so much the lifeblood of practice, or one of the things that gives zest and vitality and thrust and openness to practice. Without a kind of radical questioning, our practice is actually quite narrow and quite circumscribed in the range that it can open to.

So very often, someone might hear about a retreat like this or these kinds of teachings. And of course, very often—and as I said, you'll even get it here—an enchantment is contrasted with the real. So it's not real. "Off with the fairies" or something like that. And what a person really wants is "my life, the reality of my life—I want meditation and mindfulness for my everyday life."

That idea of mindfulness and meditation for everyday life can be very attractive. And one wonders what's actually the attraction? Part of it goes back to this coping that people, understandably, are suffering and want to find ways to cope with what most often bothers them, which seems to be things at the level at which we're perceiving them. These are real, they're a problem—how do I deal with that?

But one wonders too whether the idea of mindfulness or meditation for everyday life... somehow encapsulated in the title and the thrust of the teachings, there's a belief in and actually a reaffirmation and a support for habitual perceptions and conceptions of what reality is. And this is much safer, if you like, because questioning deeply notions and perceptions of reality and habitual assumptions is basically upsetting. It's not necessarily peacemaking at first.

Challenging deeply such ingrained assumptions—such assumptions and perceptions and conceptions that everyone seems to agree on about what's real, what's called ontological assumptions, and what we can know, epistemological assumptions, cosmological assumptions about what the world is—this is not easy. So if you like, it's more attractive to hear teachings that seem to reaffirm what we already know, what we already take to be real.

And so there's this, both in Dharma culture and other spiritual cultures—if we even use the word spiritual, which of course some of them don't; it's more about personal growth or however it's phrased—and in the wider culture as well. That word "secular," one of its root meanings is "of this age."

Like, "of this age" is what secular means from the Latin. But to me, what "of this age" should mean is the questioning of what is now outmoded. That's what it means to be of this age—to be moving forward, not just receiving what's actually an old inheritance.

So the assumptions of classical mechanical science, whether one is drawing on them in one's exposition of secularism or teaching, or whether it's just through the neurophysiology, which seems very modern because it's current research, but it's still based on classical mechanical science—and the assumption that we can have objective, independent understanding of anything that's so much at the basis of the classical scientific method which started with the scientific revolution and the Western Enlightenment.

But actually, what is it to really question these old inheritances of ours—these philosophical, usually unspoken, or just tacitly assumed, tacitly born assumptions that we have, perceptions, conceptions? The questioning of them is what is current, not just the adoption of ideas that are actually hundreds of years old and have been surpassed in science, in philosophy, in dharma, in all kinds of things.

So the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer voiced this recognition that the way we see, our perspectives, are partly the result of history, and we have to recognize that. We're not getting some objective take on anything, whether it's a text or our existential situation. Our views are products of history. We interpret—again, whether it's a text, the Pali Canon text or other Buddhist texts or other religious texts or our life—the hermeneutics of that, the interpretation of that is from a certain historical situation as a result of, conditioned by, and by all that, and also has a certain horizon that's historically conditioned and conditioned by all kinds of other factors.

But the possibilities for interpretation, the hermeneutic possibilities, these evolve. So it's also not just a result of history, but it's part of history, and the whole thing can be dynamic. Interpretation is not—we don't arrive at a truth of either "this is what the Buddha said, this is what he meant, and this is the truth, and anyone who doesn't agree with me is just simply wrong, just simply deluded, or whatever," or "I can extract this, or excise this, let's say, so-called Vedantic overlay, or whatever, or this corruption of the text, and arrive at the pristine actual truth, independent of anything else." This is not a very mature understanding of what actually goes on in looking at old texts or in looking at our existence, ourselves and our lives.

The interpretation, hermeneutics, becomes actually inexhaustible—so creative, open. These are some of the ideas that this philosopher Gadamer expounded and expanded upon, but many others in post-modern philosophy as well. And again, these kinds of questionings and seeing through the assumptions of classical mechanical science, of the assumption of being able to have objective, independent understanding and perception of anything—these also can be approached by emptiness, as we said.

Dharma understanding, if I go deeply enough, if I approach it in the right way—if I have to set up my whole investigation into emptiness in the right way, otherwise that too will just reach a wall, and I can't go any further.

So what is it—again I know I'm harping on about this, but what is it to really, really, not just normally, but really understand not to have notions of truth or reality, either explicitly or implicitly, girding our sense of existence, but also the path? What is it really to have to jettison that? And really, if you like, to have a ground of groundlessness, to have a non-realism as not just the basis, but permeating through the whole of the Dharma?

And with all this, as I said, in regard to the contemporary context of all this, of our teachings, of our culture—again, the importance of questioning, and what are the questions of our time? So it's easy to just receive old answers and act as if they're new, or assume that they're new. But actually, what are the questions of our time? What is it time to question? It's a big deal, as I said.

And again, related to all this—we're talking partly about why. Why offer such a retreat? Why is it important? I speak for myself, but I think I know from Catherine also that she has found this as well—since I've been talking about the imaginal, for instance, I've lost count of how many people have reported back to me that because of hearing these teachings, something was legitimized, that they were somehow given permission through hearing these teachings to play and to explore and to pick up concepts like divinity, God, angel, without rarifying them, that they were granted somehow permission.

And certain—to play, to explore—and certain concepts were, and perspectives were legitimized. The whole use of the imagination, words like soul, etc. So I rejoice. It really touches me when I hear that. I'm very glad that that kind of opening has happened.

And I have a question again in relation to that. Where did the pressure come from, the authority, the imprisonment come from in the first place? That it was not legitimate, that there wasn't that permission. Where did that authority and imprisonment come from? Who imprisoned you? How? Where do we give authority? Where do we give up our authority? To whom? How does that even happen? That somehow I can't entertain

certain ideas which might be extremely fruitful, extremely nourishing and fertile for the soul and opening in all kinds of ways. Somehow something has gone on with authority or authority figures or something or other and I'm not allowed. They're out of bounds. They're taboo. What's gone on there? How has that gone on and why has it gone on?

So this, to me, is a real question. So partly I'm offering this retreat to give permission, to legitimize, to open up whole vistas and areas—vast territories for exploration, for play, for the fertility of the soul, for inclusion of aspects and dimensions of being that have somehow gotten amputated. Rendered out of bounds. No entry. Do not enter. Do not even think about using this.

There's a big desire in me to open up those territories because I see how important they are, how necessary they are. And there's a question in that.

So just a few brief things to finish—I said I would share some thoughts about relating to the retreat, relating to these ideas and teachings. How do we hear and how do we frame and hold these ideas and these teachings?

If I just share for myself, I notice that I feel quite sensitive and sometimes a bit reactive—I get a bit nervous when I hear certain ideas expressed in New Age language, where there seems to be too much realism, too much reification. It rubs me the wrong way. I can't take it seriously. Whether it's a more New Age idea or a more secular idea, something really reacts to that in me. I get a bit nervous when I'm listening. That's just me sharing what doesn't work for me when I'm listening.

So if someone is talking that way, or I'm reading something in that vein, I have to work a little bit on how I'm listening so that I can actually take in what might be useful without getting tripped up by what makes me uneasy.

One thing here—and I've talked about this before, but it's so important that it's worth repeating—we have this emphasis on deep understanding of emptiness and dependent arising on one hand. All perception, all experience is empty. There's no ultimate truth in any of what I perceive, no ultimate truth in any conceptual framework. A real strong emphasis and basis in that.

And if you like, on the other hand, what appears to be in opposition to that is this willingness to entertain certain conceptual frameworks or what we might call metaphysics—sometimes quite Platonic in the sense of these hierarchies of existence or things that are given reality. So there seems to be a kind of opposition there.

In a way, this kind of work—imaginal work and re-enchanting in meditation—can seem like walking a razor's edge between these two extremes. There's what seems to be realist spiritual metaphysics on one hand, and radical emptiness and understanding of dependent origination on the other hand. So it can seem like one is walking a tightrope or razor's edge between those two.

But my experience is that the deeper I go into understanding emptiness, what looks like this tightrope balance—this narrow razor's edge, this precarious balancing where I have to keep in the middle to avoid falling off on either side—actually becomes something quite different. What seems like a very difficult, narrow place of walking or standing actually, with practice, isn't narrow at all. It's quite the opposite. It actually becomes a very wide and fertile field, allowing, legitimizing, inviting a kind of infinitude of exploration.

So practice becomes, in this holding together of the understandings of the emptiness of all things—radical, absolute emptiness of all things, complete, thorough emptiness—the holding of that with the willingness to enter into and entertain various conceptual frameworks, even metaphysical ones. With practice, the balance doesn't feel precarious at all or contrived, which from the outside, or maybe at first, it might seem to be.

Going back to this question—how will you hear these teachings? How will you frame and hold these ideas? As I said, I shared what makes me nervous sometimes. The encouragement is to take care, to find a relationship with these ideas, with the practices, with the teachings that works for you.

A second thing related to that has to do with listening in general, or reading. I know I've said this before, but again, it's so important. It seems to me that as human beings, we listen or read teachings almost from inside certain boxes, from certain conceptual structures that we've built up, that we understand or assume to be true or real. We listen to something new or read something new from the perspective of what we already know.

And sometimes in that, what happens is we just cut out and cut off and almost, in some instances, literally do not hear what is new, what doesn't fit into the boxes of our conceptual structures. This is maybe just part of the way the human mind works.

It's difficult sometimes because there are periods—maybe long periods in practice—where those boxes need to get consolidated, need to get built up. We need to hear just little bits that patch this and that and make the structure more firm. But there's a down-

side to all that, because sometimes we simply do not hear what is new, what doesn't fit in the box, what's different, what stretches and opens and sometimes breaks—even shatters—the box.

So is it possible, as we go through these teachings, or other teachings that you come across, or books that you read, to actually listen for the new, to read on the lookout for what actually doesn't fit in your box? This is difficult.

This is difficult. But just putting that recognition out there—the acknowledgment of the difficulty—while offering a gentle encouragement to listen in a different way than what is often habitual for us. Listening for what is new, for what doesn't fit into my box of what I already know. Again, it's more challenging. It's sometimes not so comfortable.

The second aspect of listening and reading concerns hearing the relevance of what's being said in any moment, the point that's being made. I mention this because of a couple of experiences I've had while teaching. Some years ago, I gave a talk where a large portion explored quantum physics and its relationship to emptiness, to understanding reality and perception, and what that meant for freedom. Afterwards, one listener somehow conveyed that he thought I had simply gone off about quantum physics because I was personally interested in it—that I had gotten lost in a tangent having nothing to do with anything, certainly not the Dharma. I was actually surprised because I had perhaps assumed too easily why it was relevant or what the connections were.

Another instance occurred while teaching emptiness on a long course. Going through and explaining these concepts about emptiness, I realized that for three or four people, it remained completely abstract because they couldn't see any connection between realizing the emptiness of things and a reduction in suffering or freedom from suffering. For some people, the whole thing seemed like abstract philosophy. "What does this have to do with suffering?" I realized I had to go back and actually connect things that, to me and to some others, seemed completely obvious. The relevance, the connection of ideas with freedom from suffering, needed to be made explicit.

So I suggest: what does it mean to listen for relevance? If something isn't clear, ask. Ask, "Why did you make that point? What exactly was the purpose?" Or "What was the point of that practice?" Do ask, because when we hear things and don't understand their relevance, their power to transform or open up possibilities is almost completely diminished. It dissolves right there.

Related to this, we can speak of what we might call listening and reading structurally. How often I hear from people that they listened to a Dharma talk from this teacher or that, and they say, "I took one thing"—then they share perhaps half a phrase from

what the teacher said in an hour. It might be "turn towards what's difficult" or something similar. Which is wonderful—they received that and it was important—but it's almost like a myopic or over-microscopic focus on some small detail.

We need to listen for details, to read for details, of course we do. But sometimes what happens is that in doing so, we're not listening or reading for the big picture, for how things fit together. Usually when we're not really listening or reading to see how it all coheres—how the big picture forms, the larger conceptual structure—then what we find in our practice and in our lives, the way the Dharma develops for us, is actually limited. There's a kind of constraint on the movement that's possible and the opening that's possible.

I know this isn't always easy given the way different people's minds work, but just as a general encouragement—not just for this retreat, but more broadly in one's life—is it possible to gently cultivate what I'm calling a more structural kind of listening or reading? So that one really understands the relevance and how things fit together in the bigger picture.

These are just general points about relating to the teachings. We'll talk more about relating to the different practices probably tomorrow, but these apply more generally to the teachings themselves.

One last thing: teachings have to unfold in linear time and in chunks. We can't sit here and download it all in one second. And even if we could download it all at once, it would obviously be very long and everyone, including ourselves, would fall asleep or become exhausted. So teachings must be presented inevitably in chunks, in time.

But on this retreat in particular—and this applies to other retreats as well—sometimes those chunks are not really separate. We're going to explore, for instance, what it means to re-enchant the self and other, to re-enchant the world, to re-enchant time, in all these different areas of re-enchantment or re-enchanting the seeing, the hearing, the tasting, the touching of the six senses. But actually, all these areas of re-enchantment are not separate at all.

They're, if you like, mutually dependent. The enchantment is mutually dependent. They're, if you like, enchanted together. The self, the world, the senses, the perception, the ideation—all of it is actually enchanted together. But we have to split things up to talk about them.

So sometimes you'll be four or five days into a retreat and you'll get a piece of something and think, "Oh, I wish you'd said that at the beginning." Or a piece at the beginning doesn't make sense until later, doesn't quite fit until later. Just a recognition of that—it's a limitation of our existence in a way, of the way things arise for us and need to be separated.

Related to that, there's not really on this retreat so much of a linear movement where we start with this and, dependent on that, we will go to something more advanced. It's not really set up that way, unlike other retreats, with the exception—as we'll talk about tomorrow—of the energy body as that forming a working basis for our practice.

A lot of material to bear in mind and hopefully to open things up and make things fruitful and helpful for all of us.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 28

Beyond the Search for Freedom

Rob Burbea · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea challenges conventional Buddhist orientations by questioning whether the primary aim of practice should be reducing dukkha or opening to beauty and sacredness. He explores the complex relationship between mental technologies like satipaṭṭhāna and the inhabiting of enchanting myths, using the example of Matthieu Ricard's exceptional happiness. Burbea examines how typical mindfulness teachings often function as mere coping mechanisms with so-called reality, rather than opening sensitivity to the sacred dimensions of existence.*
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> *Drawing on insights about fabrication and dependent arising, he suggests that practice can extend far beyond stress reduction to reveal vastly different perceptions, including mystical awareness of oneness and the unfabricated. The talk addresses the tension between self-oriented healing and divine-oriented practice, exploring how prioritizing beauty and sacredness over personal comfort might transform our entire approach to the path. Burbea discusses the open-ended nature of soul-making and freedom, referencing Carl Jung's insights about the impossibility and necessity of boundless individuation. This teaching forms part of his "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" series, offering a radical reimagining of Buddhist practice that moves beyond conventional therapeutic models toward cosmopoiesis and the art of sacred perception.*

So I said I would like to cover four areas in this introduction: what we are talking about when we talk about enchanting and re-enchanting, why it's important, the context and basis for giving these teachings, and also a little bit about how to relate to retreat, the practices, and the teachings. It's probably clear from what I said so far that these four are not actually separate—they're woven together.

But let's continue and perhaps open up a little more about the question of why this might be important, this re-enchantment, why offering these teachings might be important. This is also tied in very much with the whole context of these teachings and these ideas, and also the bases. So these two tie together.

Why is it important? Well, one aspect—and we're going to be saying more about many of these reasons as the retreat goes on—but one reason why all this is important is because of the environmental crises we face, because of the situation that humanity and other species now face globally on our planet. I'm not going to talk that much about that on this retreat because I've talked about it elsewhere several times in relation to

the imaginal and enchantment, and also written about it. So I won't be talking that much about it on this retreat, but in a way it's implicit—I hope that that is a fundamental reason and a strand that runs through the whole of the teaching and what we're doing here.

But even that—it's only for some people that this re-enchantment of nature, of the cosmos, of the world, is actually necessary, or what will transform their relationship to the world, to nature, to the planet, to the earth, to other beings in a way that is more ecologically viable. The psychological and psycho-spiritual reasons behind the huge fix we're in as a species and the environmental crisis—there's too much complexity there. There are different reasons why people act or don't act, or are involved or engaged, or turn to or turn away from, or are interested or not interested. So to think that one thing is going to do the trick for the whole of humanity in terms of changing the relationship—I think that's naive.

But certainly for many people, the disenchantment that has come partly as a result of the Western Enlightenment, partly as a result of industrialization, consumerism, and all kinds of things that are so prevalent nowadays—for many people this re-enchanting is going to be pretty central. And for people who are already involved, activists who are already involved, another level of depth can be opened up there that gives support and strength and equanimity and forbearance in relation to their activism.

Like I said, I've talked about that all before and written about it, and I'm not going to dwell too much on it this retreat. What I want to open up instead, or as well as that, is the whole relationship of the movement of re-enchantment through image with the whole question of freedom—freedom from suffering and happiness. What is the relationship between re-enchantment and happiness, or easing suffering, or freedom from suffering?

This is actually a very complex question, which is why I want to go into it, and something we'll return to as the retreat goes on, opening up different aspects of it.

Some of you may have heard of Matthieu Ricard. He's a French-born monk in the Gelug Tibetan tradition, and he's written a number of books. But one of the reasons why he's well known is because some scientists found him and were doing brain scan readings of people's brain activity, relating that to happiness. Whatever their measures in the brain of happiness were, they found that most people—the hundreds or thousands of people they tested—were grouped within a certain range. And Matthieu Ricard was completely off the scale. He was like the happiest person that any of them had ever encountered, by far, in terms of what his brain waves were showing.

So I have a question—and it really is a question. Assuming we can trust all that measurement business, how come he's so happy? What's going on there? He's a Tibetan monk, quite busy doing stuff, writing and traveling. And if you know that tradition, it's not very meditatively intensive.

The question I have is: Is his extreme happiness, his unusual level of happiness, a result of what we could call mental technologies—of mindfulness, for example? Learning to see a thought as a thought and let go of it, of staying in contact, of being aware and keeping the attention on the nexus of vedanā and craving without, through the mindfulness, letting it go into the next stage of clinging and causing dukkha—is his happiness a result primarily of those kinds of mental technologies?

Or is it a result of the fact that in that tradition that he's in, he has somehow managed to really fully inhabit a myth, a fantasy of the bodhisattva—of being born through countless lives and dedicating those lives and one's whole existence to embodying his own enlightenment for the sake of other beings? He is, in other words, inhabiting a myth that is huge, enormous in its temporal and spatial scope, in its range, in what it means for the whole being, in its orientation, in its meaningfulness. And it's enchanting.

perhaps he has entered into a whole different way of seeing the cosmos. So the Tibetans basically inhabit a different cosmos than we do in the modern West. They live in a cosmos that is enchanted, that is sacred—a sacred cosmos. It's not this flat, materialist, meaningless, soulless cosmos that we typically live in in the modern West. It's pregnant with sanctity, with mystery, with depth.

So of these two factors—and I'm sure he practices some mental technologies of mindfulness and all that—of these two factors, the mental technologies or the inhabiting of an enchanting myth and the inhabiting of a sacred cosmos, which is more powerful for him? Which is more powerful in bringing happiness and freedom? I have a real question about that.

But pursuing this a little more, what we could call mental technologies—these are really important. Of course they are. I wouldn't teach meditation if I didn't think that. But the function of these mental technologies is often, probably mostly conceived nowadays in limited and limiting ways.

We can learn these technologies of mindfulness and seeing thoughts as thoughts, staying in contact, all that stuff. But what they really are, what they're really seen as—and this is explicitly or implicitly communicated—is that what we're really doing is cop-

ing with reality. We're meeting reality, or so-called reality, and coping with it through these mental technologies, learning skills to cope with the reality of our minds, our bodies, and our situation.

And even if those technologies and the teachings are extended to the three characteristics—the Buddhist three characteristics of dukkha, of unsatisfactoriness, of the impermanence of all things, and of the absence of a true self, of a real self—even if the teachings and technologies are extended to those three characteristics beyond just simple mindfulness, still, what's happening there is a kind of endless and repetitive coping with reality.

So the three characteristics are just really seen as existential truths. They're part of the reality we cope with, moment to moment, again and again, and that is the path. The path is just learning this endless, repetitive, so-called meeting with reality, which is really coping with reality.

But this reality—who we are, what our existential situation is—this is regarded as truth. Now philosophically nowadays it's become very unpopular to use words like truth, so people either within Buddhism, within secular Buddhism, or outside in some modern philosophies, try not to use the word truth or poo-poo it. But whether they use it or not, it's still implicit there. They take for granted that these are existential truths or realities. Sometimes modern philosophers use the word facticity—a very unusual word, but basically they don't want to use truth. So they use another word that hides the fact of what's being assumed to be true, unquestionably.

The function of these meditative technologies that we can learn can extend way beyond this kind of coping with reality. It can, and I would say I hope it does extend for us, into an opening, a deepening, an enriching of our sensitivity—the sensitivity of our being, of our seeing, of our knowing, of our dwelling in the world—so that the whole sense of sacredness opens up through that sensitivity. The sensitivity that we grow opens up, reveals for us in many different ways, the sense of sacredness in our lives.

The function of those technologies can extend into really seeing the possibilities of fabricating less perception. So still that teaching of fabrication is there, implicit, even if it doesn't use that language, in typical mindfulness teachings, typical insight meditation teachings. But oftentimes the depth of possibility or the range to which that extends—this possibility of learning to fabricate less perception at times, and what that then reveals, what that opens to us—that possibility is severely truncated. But actually we can extend it. It's enormous.

We can really see the centrality and the possibility of fabricating less perception, learning how to do that and what it implies and what it opens. Because it opens for us the possibility of vastly different perceptions. Whole mystical perceptions of existence open up that are essentially less fabricated. We talked about this with perceptions of different kinds of oneness. And ultimately with perception of the unfabricated, what is completely transcendent—beyond space, beyond time, beyond all notions of subject and object and conventional perception—that the Buddha pointed to repeatedly.

This journey into fabricating much less opens up when we don't constrain it by assumptions of the reality of what we're having to cope with. When we view the path as this exploration of fabricating less and less perception at times—can't live there—we also reveal the emptiness of all things, the emptiness of all perception, the dependent arising of all perceptions at a very deep level, at a deeper and deeper level. Massively significant.

And this in itself opens up for us, or through that, both as process and as result, our skill, the art of the flexibility of moving in and out of a whole range of ways of looking. And part of that, we develop the skill, the art of cosmopoiesis.

Cosmopoiesis as a way of looking—or as ways of looking, plural, as I said, they're infinite—becomes more and more available to us as we extend these techniques, as we don't limit them and the way we're conceiving of them and what they're for.

So tied in with all this is what is the point of practice? What is the point of the path? I don't just mean what's the point of this retreat. I mean the whole path, the whole Dharma. What's the point?

For me, if I'm just honest, for me this extension, expansion, deepening, opening of the sense of the sacredness of everything—everything—the opening of a sense of beauty, the extension of the sense of the beauty that goes with that, the opening of the range of soul-making and the sense of soulfulness, the expansion of possibilities for engaged, creative participation in perception, creative participation in our perception and sense of existence, self, other, world. And creative participation in our interpretation of existence, in the hermeneutical dimension and aspect of our being. How are we interpreting self, other, world, life, existence, being? And all the art that goes with all that that I've just talked about.

That to me, if I'm honest for myself, that's become the point of practice, and maybe it always was for me—I don't know—more primary than anything else. And with that, of course, the wonder, the awe that opens with all that, the deep bowing of the whole being, the sense of blessing, again profound and universal almost, that opens with all that.

This, for me—maybe it always was, but it certainly has become more and more the point of practice, if I just share for me the point of the path.

Happiness, or an increase in happiness, an increase in peace, an increase in or decrease in suffering—these are definitely results of this deeper, more widely conceived path. But in a way, maybe they're side effects.

So I want to tread carefully here, and I don't want to impose any view on anyone. I really have to say I respect anyone's choices around all this, for the most part. So you decide: what is the point of your practice? What is the point of your path?

And some, for a while at least—this is very, very common—some for a while at least, this decrease of suffering, increase of happiness, of well-being, it has to be, or it will be, the primary aim of the path. For a while at least for some, of course. And I respect that. I respect that even if it doesn't change.

But I have a question for you. What is your aim? What is your direction? How are you really holding your sense? How are you holding what is the point of the practice and the path for you?

So this is a real question, and actually I want to push it a little further with you. Because if you answer, as of course people will, it is the reduction of suffering—so I've talked about this in other talks, sometimes a lot of people, the ending of suffering just seems too much like a pipe dream. You say it's the—I'm not going to go into that now, but you say it's the reduction of suffering, at least it's the ease of suffering.

Again, I would, as I said, want to just push that a little further as a question. If that's what you answer, I would just say: is it really, really? Look again. Take your time with this. I don't mean right now in this moment. I mean in your life. Is it really that that's what you most want? It might be. Of course it might be.

Or is it somehow that we've just adopted an idea or a certain languaging or a certain framework from Buddhist teachings and talks and books, and we've just, in a way, kind of been indoctrinated by that? And in that, are we perhaps failing somehow—either because of a lack of confidence, a lack of inner authority, or just through habit, or through laziness, if that word even means anything, I'm not sure it does—but somehow we're failing to ask that question of ourselves more probingly, to ask ourselves: what do I really, really want in the core of my being? And even more: why? Why do I want what I really want? What do I really want and why?

So I really want to emphasize with this: it's your choice. Of course it's your choice. You're free to choose. I mean, actually, that freedom is constrained by conditioning and all kinds of things. But essentially, let's say, or as far as I'm concerned, I don't want to impose or bully anyone at all.

Your choice. But at least ask the question, you know, with some probing, with some force, with some openness—not constrained by what might actually be a strange kind of subtle indoctrination.

So there's a spectrum here where your answer might land. There's one end, and we could say, if you like, the more radical end, the more unusual end, certainly in today's context, would be: what if the path and the goal of the path, the aim, the orientation of the path, is not less suffering, but actually the goal, the aim, the path is an increase, a deepening, an opening, an enriching of the sense of the beauties—beauty is plural—and the sacrednesses, the senses of sacredness of existence. Self, other, world, events, facts, cosmos—all of that.

That would be replacing the goal of less suffering with the goal of the opening to beauty, the prioritizing of the beauty and the sense of sacredness. That would be quite a radical position, quite unusual, and one end of the spectrum. It's quite unusual for people to actually come out and say that or admit it to themselves. And maybe it's unusual as a position, I don't know. But there's a spectrum here, and your choice.

If one did move to or admit that one lived on that more radical end of the spectrum oriented toward beauty, then some of you listening to this might get a little nervous and just say, well, is that even Buddha Dharma? Is that Buddhism then, if that's the orientation? And then get very... yikes. What are we doing here? What's he teaching? Because the cardinal orientation in Buddhism is towards less suffering. It's how everything is framed.

I've talked about this before in other talks. I'm not going to dwell on it too much. Part of what I said in other talks was we have a fantasy always when anyone is involved in the path to the extent that they love it and it's part of their life. Whenever we love something there's a fantasy mixed with that loving. I've talked about this before.

So we can imagine, or rather we image and fantasy our relationship with, if you like, inhabiting this position of replacing the aim of less suffering with the increase of beauty. If we're doing that, we can fantasy it in different ways. We can see the self and the dharma and the whole project in different ways. It could be that we see ourselves

going outside of the Dharma, could be that we see ourselves extending it, could be that we try and engage a kind of historical fantasy and find evidence for "actually the Buddha was always saying that."

So there are different ways we fantasy the self, the tradition, the Dharma, all of that, the goal, and so forth. Always fantasy is involved and there are different positions, different fantasies that we can take with that. I've talked about this before; I don't want to go into it now.

But I would repeat a question that I think I brought up in other talks on another retreat, which is, if this comes up for you—is that Buddhism? Is that what the Buddha taught? Is that the Dharma? Again, I would ask a question: why is that so important to you? Why anyway is that question so important? What's going on for you that this sort of allegiance to something called Buddhism—which clearly means very different things to different people, even here at Gaia House—what a range there is in the way that the teachers, even the core teachers, conceive of what is the Dharma, what it's for, what it does, the history, all of that.

Why is this allegiance to some kind of constructed notion... You have to admit that whatever we call Buddhism is constructed by us through our fantasy, through our selective emphasis on different aspects of the history or tradition, through our understanding as it's limited in the present. And so we construct this Buddhism and then we feel this allegiance to it. What's going on there? And how has that allegiance eclipsed what may be even at a deeper level that I haven't realized yet, more important to me? What's going on psychologically, spiritually, and so forth?

Certainly we're conditioned to approach practice and the path and our conceptions of it in certain ways and with certain assumptions. Even the Four Noble Truths—it's right there. It's core Buddhist teaching that talks about suffering, the end of suffering, the way to the end of suffering. So right there, this primacy of reducing suffering, at least, is given to us through core Buddhist teachings, the Four Noble Truths.

In the mindfulness world, it's very tied to a medical model. Stress reduction, pain relief, cognitive behavioral therapy for depression. These are the roots of the way mindfulness is taking... So the threads of the way mindfulness is taking root in the culture is on a medical model. And of course, a medical model has to do with getting rid of suffering. That's what medicine does, right? Gets rid of physical suffering.

So here I talk about how mindfulness is presented, thought about, and actually sold, if you like, through a medical model which has to do with less suffering. The huge projects that are happening in this country, in the States—the funding for those projects

would never be available outside of a medical model. If I say to the government, "I want to increase the sense of beauty," competing with someone else who wants to reduce suffering, who's going to get the funding?

And not only that, there's the attraction of presenting the scientific paradigm of the medical model to most people in modern culture because, again, it fits the dominant mode of understanding that science is important, and so forth. But even more than that, you know, I was flicking through a sort of new age spiritual magazine, looking at blurbs for different retreats or ads for this or that, and actually various magazines, and almost everything—almost everything in the blurbs and ads for courses and retreats and practitioners—has to do with healing or flourishing, this word that's become very popular nowadays, human flourishing, or self-empowerment or deep rest. It's all, in other words, different ways of languaging or approaching this idea of reducing suffering, increasing happiness. The focus is not on this opening of beauty, making that primary—the opening of beauty and the senses of sacredness.

Notice too, by the way, how healing, flourishing, self-empowerment, deep rest—all of these, in a way, are products of or reactions to secular modernism. The whole way of thinking, human flourishing, self-empowerment—we're going to come back to this—they're products of a sense of self that is conceived within the paradigms and through the constraints and through the tunnel vision of secular modernism. We don't see it because we are not aware of the historical construction over hundreds of years of that kind of sense of self. But these kinds of thrusts of these retreats are also products of secular modernism or reactions, if you like, to modern lifestyle.

So if I'm honest, I really don't actually care that much if through practice you're a little less stressed at your computer keyboard at work or in the kitchen or whatever it is, or if in those activities you're more mindful. I can't say I passionately care about that. Or maybe I should say it differently. I do care about that, but mostly I care about it in proportion to the extent that stress and lack of mindfulness blocks and veils our deeper seeing, our deeper sensibilities, our possibilities to know and open to the senses of the sacred. Our possibility of knowing and opening to a sense of things and self and other and world as being more than this, and this meaning more than the flat secular modernist version or story of what things are and how reality is.

So I care about all this to the extent that stress and lack of mindfulness block and veil the depth that's possible to us, the sense of divinity in whatever ways that might come for us and open for us. These things block and veil seeing emptiness deeply, the possibility of opening to the unfabricated, the possibility of re-enchanting our existence and our cosmos. This is what I care about—I'm just being honest here.

Of course, if I'm sitting one-on-one with someone in an interview and what they care about is their stress at the keyboard, and that's what we're talking about, that's what I will, to the best of my ability, help them with—tools and approaches that can help with that kind of stress. But to be honest, it's not what I'm going to devote my work and energy and existence and thought to. But again, that's just a personal confession, if you like.

Going back to what's in the context of our spiritual culture and psychological culture, what I often feel is that if someone writes a book or is presenting something, and the language of that spirituality or psychology or psycho-spirituality seems to be seeing self and self-expression as theophanies, as faces of the divine, as expressions of the divine. Sometimes I get the sense as I read more, listen more, that actually it's not very full or deep, that truth, that transformation to really seeing self and self-expression as theophany or the divine. It's not that full or deep. There's not really a great shift from the kind of self-centeredness, literally a self-centered view.

So all of this—I might use that language, and often in the Jungian traditions and related traditions they use that language of the divine coming through in relation to the self and self-expression. But somehow there's something in it that just seems like, yeah, but not really. It's somehow still the self at the center that's being prioritized. Or there is a shift, but very quickly it slips back, just slips back to the self being primary and central, and the divinity, the orientation towards divinity rather than self, is secondary and kind of nominal.

Now all this is complicated. This is complicated and something we're going to return to—both Catherine and I talk about this a lot, hopefully on this retreat. So I want to really make clear that the self, self-views, and the personal relevance of whatever it is that we're dealing with—our dukkha, our difficulties, our stuckness, our challenges, this or that event in our life, these images and fantasies that come—the personal relevance of all that is vital and necessary to include. I'm not interested in dismissing the self and all the particularities and the personhood. We need, at least in the way that we are conceiving of re-enchantment and working with images, to include all that in our relationship with images and with our life, the image of our life, the images of our life and ourselves, in the views that we have about all that and in our explorations.

But there's something about the balance of the importance of self and divine in the governing concepts, in the concepts that govern our path. I hope this is making sense. It's like the background assumptions relative to images. What is the purpose? Am I doing this as a kind of self-growth, my process, healing myself, having less suffering? Valid and important as that is, but what is the relative balance of doing it for me or doing it,

let's say, for God? All this practice, all this effort, all this inquiry, all the sessions in therapy or whatever it is—if really something inside shifts, this is for God. It's for the sake of God. It's for the sake of, if you like, God's fulfillment. We'll come back to these ideas. That's a pretty radical, and in our Western culture, very rare transformation of position of priority.

But there's a balance. Or rather, what I want to highlight is that there will be relative weights of self—what we could call self-orientation, or orientation based on self, or towards self-healing, self-growth and all that—and divine orientation. This comes in all kinds of ways, also in relation to the notions of causality. We'll come back to this, and we'll dwell on it now.

But depending on that balance between what we could call the intentions of self or self-orientation and divine orientations, our life and our practices will unfold somewhere on a spectrum of immature enchantment—what we're calling that immature enchantment on this retreat—and, if you like, mature, more fertile enchantment with greater soul-making possibility. So the more the orientation and the conception, the weight of priority is given over to the divine instead of the self, the more mature and fertile and soul-making is the enchantment that we're talking about.

As I said, all this is complex. It's not simple. Because a person might hear about this possible shift of view and intention to prioritize beauty and the sense of sacredness over less suffering and hear and say, "Yes, that's great, it sounds beautiful. After I've sorted myself out a bit, and there's less stress in my life, and I'm a bit more free." And there may be, of course, some real wisdom in that kind of response. It's like, "Yes, I'm really attracted to that, and I've got some work to do beforehand."

But as I said, this is complex. The relationships here between these two sort of thrusts are very intertwined and not simple. The relationship of self-view and freedom and the relationship of all that with the prioritizing of beauty and increasing the sense of sacredness is complex.

Now, it's true to say, I think, generally speaking, that the depth, the degree, the breadth, and the range of seeing beauty, sacredness, etc., generally, it's dependent on the degree, the depth of seeing emptiness and seeing the unfabricated. So to the degree that we understand and have realized and absorbed in the depth of seeing emptiness and less fabrication or even the unfabricated, to that degree our openness, our perception of beauty and sacredness is opened in all kinds of ways. That's the flip of saying what I said before in a way.

When—or in the moments, in the times when there is more stress, when we're more bound in self-concern and sort of imprisoned by certain self-views, imprisoned by self-views—in those moments, when that is strong, then generally speaking, there is less of a sense of depth. There is less of a possibility for transcendence, for perceptions that are transcendent, less of a sense of, or the availability of theophanies of beauties and sense of sacredness, generally speaking.

But still, it's complex because what is the effect of reversing priorities? If from the priority of self-growth and healing and more freedom and less suffering, from that constellation of priorities, if I reverse and I transfer it to my priority as deepening, extending, enriching the sense of beauty and sacredness of all things, of existence, what is the effect of actually reversing those priorities on the very sense of self, the inadequacies of self, and on freedom itself? Because that reversal itself, just the reversing of the priorities before anything else has been seen or opened to or insights had or whatever experiences, just the reversal itself may in itself be immensely healing and unburdening.

So this is, as I said, complex. The relationship here is complex. But the reversal itself can have an effect, an important effect.

And it's also possible that the self can, in its delusion, its habit of contracting and grasping, can easily grasp onto anything and twist it to its own purposes. So even if I do reverse the priorities, I can twist all that and the project of that into just being a reflection of my—or supposed reflection of my progress in doing that. How well am I doing at seeing beauty and seeing sacredness and all that? So a person might even hear about this shift of priorities and orientation and then maybe right away even, the response is, "But I can't do that. Others will be able to do that probably, but I'll fail at it." And the whole thing has become about self again. Self's just grasped hold of something, made it about self, not the divine. "I like the idea, but somehow I just turn it into self again."

So complex, not easy this question, but I want to open it up and just point out its complexity, because I think sometimes we're too quick and too simplistic in our approaching these questions. And, you know, the whole question of the order that I alluded to earlier—do I need to heal psychologically and get a bit freer in my life, a bit more well-being before I can approach all this imaginal stuff and enchantment? Good question, but not simple.

It seems to me that in the world that certainly I move in, the assumption is often, yes, that I need to do that before I can do this. I need to heal psychologically before I can entertain these far out teachings about enchantment and the imaginal. But again, sometimes it is, sometimes it's not, sometimes it's just not simple. Most of the time, the whole

question is much more complex, and we bring to it a lot of assumptions that are conditioned by all kinds of things, but contemporary teachings and contemporary psychotherapies.

This is something we're both going to return to later on the retreat, so we'll talk more about this later, fill this out more. It's very important and integral to everything that we're talking about.

But I want to say, I want to point out that for some people—I don't know what proportion, but for some people—soul-making, soulfulness, beauty in all its range and surprising manifestations and the sense of sacredness and the sense of art, the art of all that, the art of perception, what we're talking about, the living as art—and I'm going to talk much more about that soon on this retreat—but all those things, soul-making, soulfulness, beauty, sense of sacredness, the art, these are necessities to their being. For some people, these are absolute necessities, more than a decrease in suffering.

For some people, these elements represent more than mere preferences—they are absolute necessities, more vital than a decrease in suffering or an increase in the peacefulness and comfort of their existence. For some people, art—and I mean that in the very broad sense I employ when speaking of beauty and sacredness—matters more than anything.

We could certainly argue that there are dimensions of soul that all human beings possess, dimensions that need nourishing. We could say that this soul-making, this soulfulness, the sense of beauty, the sense of sacredness, the engagement with the art of existence—of creative existence—is universal to all souls, representing aspects and dimensions of our being that require nourishment and space to grow.

But attractive as that might be as an idea, I don't want to foist that position, which is far more radical and rare than many people might be comfortable with, on everyone. Too many teachings, psychologies, and spiritualities—whether they use such terminology or not—try to present what they're offering as universally applicable to everyone. And if their approach doesn't apply to you, well, you must simply be deluded. I'm not interested in foisting any particular vision or orientation on anyone. I return to what I said earlier: all this is your choice—your choice of where you land or how you move along the spectrum, back and forth, or how it evolves for you over time. Your position regarding these orientations, these intentions, the balance, the weight—all of this remains yours to determine.

But what I do want to ensure is that those who are often not addressed—those people I just alluded to, for whom these aspects of beauty, the sense of sacredness, the soul-making and soulfulness represent actual necessity, for whom art is primary, for whom the art of existence is what matters most, or for whom art in existence matters more than anything else—I want to address and include these people who are often overlooked in spiritual and psychological courses, teachings, and books. I want to include them and ensure that in the range of teachings and emphasis, that radicality of orientation is addressed, because so often it's not.

All of this is complex, but to add one more piece—and we're still exploring the why and the context—all of this is wrapped up with a whole other dimension having to do with meaningfulness. The entire question of meaningfulness in our lives and the meaningfulness of our lives, our sense of individual meaningfulness, is interwoven with everything we've been discussing.

The sense of meaningfulness goes inherently with imaginal work, with fantasy, and with enchantment—particularly with enchantment, because meaningfulness is not merely individual or personal. Our sense of meaningfulness in our lives relates, yes, to individual orientations and movements through life, to aspirations and directions. But it's also related to the meaningfulness or not of the cosmos itself. Again, this is something we're going to return to later in the retreat: the self and meaningfulness, and how that's wrapped up in imaginal work and in the whole notion of enchantment.

This forms part of our fundamental inquiry: why are we practicing? What's the point of the path? Why is it important to offer these teachings? And there's also a relationship between meaningfulness and freedom—again, we'll return to this.

Just a couple of observations for now. When there's a sense of meaningfulness in life, it often involves a sense of duty—some kind of duty. I know I've talked about this before in other talks. Where an image is alive, where a fantasy is alive, when enchantment is alive, and when meaningfulness is alive and operative, wrapped up in that is not only a freedom that it opens, but also some kind of duty. I mention this now, but we'll return to it.

And one last thing for now: if we do, or to the extent that we do, aim at or orient toward opening up, enriching, deepening, widening the sense of beauty, the senses of sacredness, soul-making, meaningfulness—all these aspects and dimensions of being—to the extent that we orient and aim at those things, the path becomes open-ended.

What's the limit of beauty that we can feel and appreciate and be moved by? What's the limit to the sense of sacredness? There is no limit to soul-making. These things are open-ended. And so when we take them as central to the aim and orientation of the path, the path itself becomes open-ended.

Now actually—and I've said this somewhere before, I can't remember where—when we go really deeply and without simply unquestioningly accepting received tradition or dogma about what freedom from suffering is or where it's limited or what it means, when we actually begin in our thinking and in our path itself, in our lived and practiced path, to open out different kinds and dimensions of freedom, we start to discover that freedom is not one universal, monolithic thing. There are aspects, kinds, and dimensions of freedom, and these are discoverable, achievable. We can sometimes break out into whole areas of freedom—something shatters, and we find ourselves in an entirely other territory of openness, of freedom, that we hadn't even realized before was available, or that we were imprisoned and not free before.

So when we actually start to think about freedom in more probing ways and start to practice in certain ways, the whole question of freedom also becomes open-ended. Freedom is not a finishable project, really. And to me, that's beautiful. Rather than being depressing or a burden, it's actually beautiful. It's open-ended, and that's lovely. It's glorious.

But neither open-endedness is usual, whether it's the open-endedness of more and more, deeper and deeper, richer and richer, wider and wider beauty, sense of sacredness, soul-making, or whether it's the open-endedness of kinds and dimensions of freedom. Neither is the usual concept of the path—it's not usually conceived in that way. So again, this has to do with the context of these teachings and why they might be important.

Let me finish with a few quotes by Carl Jung in relation to this open-endedness that, to me, is very beautiful and very much inevitable when one starts questioning in certain ways and practicing in certain ways. Certainly, as I said, once one gets into the whole realm of the imaginal and the unavoidability of fantasy, and also the whole question and practices with enchantment.

There's something his long-term assistant, Aniela Jaffé, wrote, and then some quotes of Jung. She said: "The goal of individuation—the realization of the self—is never fully attained. Because it transcends consciousness, the archetype of the self can never be wholly apprehended. And because of its boundlessness, never completely lived in actual life."

This is really what I want to emphasize: because of its boundlessness, it can never be completely lived in actual life. Successful individuation, Jung says, is never total. Jung goes on to say: "But it is just the impossibility of this task that makes it so significant. A task that is possible—that is, solvable—never appeals to our superiority."

So there's something about... something in us that needs something open-ended. Something in us needs something impossible. We don't usually think this way. The ego—or the contracted self, without unpacking all these words right now—gets upset when something feels impossible. But something in us needs something impossible.

Another place Jung wrote: "The serious problems of life are never fully solved. If ever they should appear to be so, it is a sure sign that something has been lost. The meaning and purpose of a problem seem to lie not in its solution, but in our working at it incessantly. This alone preserves us from stultification and putrefaction."

So again, a different way of conceiving of the path, but one I think that when one enters more into the territory of imaginal work and this work of re-enchanting, and when one shifts the priorities—or to the extent that one does, or as I said, even when one really opens out the questions of freedom—this open-endedness, the beautiful open-endedness of the path becomes a fact that we start orienting to and opening ourselves to.

CHAPTER 29

The Nature of Enchantment

Rob Burbea · 52 min

> *In this opening talk of the 'Re-enchanting the Cosmos' retreat, Rob Burbea introduces the foundational concepts of enchantment and re-enchantment. He distinguishes four types of enchantment: immature (characterized by clinging and contraction), cultural (such as blind faith in scientism), spiritual-universal (dissolving into impersonal love or awareness), and mature imaginal enchantment involving depth, dimensionality, and divinity while maintaining the wisdom of seeing image as image.*
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> *Burbea critiques modernist, materialist worldviews that reduce everything to measurable matter, advocating instead for what he calls a 'poetic state' or poesis - a creative, artistic stance toward self, others, and cosmos. This approach assumes familiarity with emptiness practice, ways of looking, and fabrication of perception. Central to the teaching is developing subtlety and sensitivity of awareness to notice how perception affects the energy body and emotions.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes that re-enchantment involves inhabiting multidimensional perceptions that include a sense of divinity, while maintaining conceptual frameworks that are dynamic, elastic, and connected to phenomenological investigation rather than rigid truth-claims. This opens infinite possibilities for experiencing self, world, and divine through imaginal practice.*

Welcome, everybody. Welcome to this retreat, to this course, whether you're here in the room tonight or listening at home, to the teachings, the offerings. A very warm welcome.

Both Catherine and I would like to speak a little to introduce the retreat, to get our bearings and get the ball rolling. So I'd just like to speak a little now and really to cover four areas, or to begin to go into four areas.

First, the what. What are we talking about when we talk about re-enchantment in the poetry of perception? What is meant by that? I'll say a little tonight about these four areas, and they are things that we'll come back to and fill out much more. So just touching on them tonight by way of introduction, but as the course goes on, we'll fill them out more.

So what do we mean by re-enchantment? What are we talking about? What are we pointing to? Secondly, why? Why is this important? Why offer a retreat like this? These kinds of practices, these kinds of teachings? Thirdly, just a little bit tonight about the context of the retreat, the context of these teachings, and also the bases. What forms the bases? What are the bases for these offerings, for these teachings? So what, why, contexts and bases, and lastly, a little about some pointers or maybe suggestions, offerings about how to relate to this retreat, how to relate to the practices and the teachings.

Like I said, we'll touch on this now, and these are themes that we'll return to, fill in, elaborate as the week goes by.

Just a reminder, or a statement at least, that the content of this retreat—both the themes and the practices and the orientations—in a way emerge for me organically out of, as an organic expression or extension really, of teachings that both Catherine and I separately have been giving in the last few years. If you like, some of it is an elaboration of that, a further exploration of those things. Some of it is slowing aspects of those previous teachings down and filling them out a little more.

As we hopefully have made clear, we're assuming a familiarity for you, on your part. This is what we asked for. And by familiarity, I mean an understanding, a conceptual understanding, but also a meditative facility—an ability, skill, art in the meditation. So assuming a familiarity with, certainly, all the usual insight meditation teachings that we're familiar with, that are very common these days, but also with teachings and practicings related to the imaginal, and also emptiness.

By emptiness I mean also quite a particular way of approaching it that has to do with the fundamentality of the concept of ways of looking—practicing different ways of looking on the one hand, and also the concept of fabrication and the fabrication of perception. So emptiness from that avenue, and going deeper and deeper into the richness and the fullness and the fruits of using those concepts of ways of looking and fabrication.

I'm assuming some understanding at least, and some measure of facility with that. The deeper that understanding and skill with emptiness in particular, the easier all this is. All this talk of imaginal and enchantment and cosmopoiesis that we'll be going into—it follows naturally and very organically and becomes, as I say, much more easy, much more obvious in a way, much more accessible, the deeper our understanding and practice with emptiness is.

So assuming some familiarity with the imaginal, with emptiness practice, but also some meditative skill working with one's emotional life, both difficult and lovely, some skill too with samādhi, samatha, the resource of well-being in the body and mind, and also with practices like mettā and loving-kindness. There's quite a lot we're assuming familiarity with.

All of these, especially the last three—the skill with the emotions, the samatha and the mettā—we're orienting around those practices, using the energy body as a kind of foundation, as a vehicle, if you like, for developing those skills and practices. So we're assuming all that.

I don't know how much the material in this retreat will make sense without that familiarity. It may to some people, but for others it really may not. Personally, I'm not going to repeat much of those kinds of teachings at all, because we've asked for those foundations to be there and that familiarity to be there. So on this retreat I won't be repeating much, except things or teachings or concepts or points that, in my experience teaching, actually tend not to land with people. People hear them or actually don't hear them. It just goes in one ear and out the other.

They don't seem to see the significance of them or how radical they are, how much they change the whole basis and the whole fabric, tenor, and orientation and possibilities of what's happening. So those things I might repeat later.

One example would be—and this is something we'll touch on as time goes by—what does it mean to have emptiness as a basis for the whole path? Not as a goal, not as some distant thing, certainly not as some option later, but some understanding, some deepening understanding of emptiness as the basis, putting the whole path and the whole conception of anything to do with the Dharma on the basis of this understanding of the flexibility and availability of ways of looking and the notion of fabrication of perception, those two interwoven concepts. Something that's so important, makes such a difference, and yet is extremely rare, and quite often people really don't hear that or understand yet the significance of it. It doesn't really land as a sort of root and fundamental concept, a ground for what we're doing.

But let's get into these four areas I wanted to talk about. So the first is the *what*. What are we talking about here when we talk about re-enchantment and all that?

I found an article in the Guardian newspaper a few months ago that might help us highlight some of what we're talking about and also make some differentiation. It's written by a guy called David Ferguson—I don't know who he is—but it was in the Guardian a few months ago. So I'm just going to read you some of that. It was an article about trees in cities.

He says: "Scientists say that when human beings see the color green and interact with nature, our bodies manifest chemical and psychological signs of reduced stress. One Texas company is trying to quantify, to calculate for cities, the dollar amounts that trees are worth in their combined capacities as air scrubbers, noise pollution reducers, neighborhood beautifiers, and natural stress relievers. Less cortisol, which is a stress hormone, is given off when you see green," said iTree founder David Nowak, who continues, "We want to develop an index of how much green you can see from any given point in a city, how your body reacts to it, and what the economic value is."

Then David Ferguson continues and points out how trees make the climate cooler in the city. They cool the city down. They absorb pollution, making it less polluted, so there are fewer respiratory problems for city dwellers, commuters, and so on.

But then he says: "All of that aside, and as well-intentioned as Nowak may be, there is something absolutely unquantifiable about the benefits of living near trees." And he continues: "I love to visit New York City and London and some other cities, but after about a week or so, all the noise and grimness and the grey concrete all start to get to me. I begin to ache to run loose in the woods like when I was a kid, in the long free hours between the end of school and dinner. Back then I learned to tell time by the angle of sunlight slanting through the pines. I can still smell rain twenty-four hours before it comes in the soil around their roots."

And he goes on: "Maybe it's that trees live longer than we do. Maybe it's that nothing ever seems to bother them enough to make them yank up their roots and leave. But even now, as an adult, there are times when my thinking gets too sped up and scrambled, and I need to wander into the woods behind my house, shimmy up a tree and sit in its branches. Up there, I can slow down my ricocheting mind, breathe in that sweet green smell, and just think long, slow thoughts."

And then he finishes: "I challenge all the legions of bean-counting accountants in the world to put a dollar value to that. I don't think you can."

So why am I picking this article to share? I really feel he makes some very necessary and good points, David Ferguson, and I don't want to take anything away from what he wrote. But I want to ask both what is hidden within what he's saying and what is missing. What is hidden within it and what is missing from what he wrote.

This is by way not of criticism, but critique. Critique means asking questions like that: what's hidden, what assumptions and orientations are hidden, and what is missing there. It's not about criticism; it's critique.

So first thing: notice for him and the way he talks—both David Nowak and David Ferguson—there's a kind of recourse to basically modernist values and cosmologies. The values that he presents and highlights, and also the cosmologies, the way of assuming or perceiving what the world is, are quite modernist. They're quite—we take them just completely for granted. They're part of our culture.

In terms of the values, there is an appeal in what he writes and the kind of sweetness of it.

There's an appeal to the idyllic memories of childhood and this need for and desire for less stress, for not working. There's a kind of idealization and nostalgia of childhood and of not having time pressure, and the whole orientation of slowing down one's thoughts that he talks about.

So these are very familiar. They sound so familiar, and maybe they're so appealing, just because we're saturated with those kinds of values in our society. They're very modernist values, if you like. They belong to our society at the moment.

But secondly, with the cosmologies, notice the absolute absence of what we might call any dimensionality or depth to the whole perception and conception of nature, of trees or cosmos. So in what David Ferguson writes about what's important to him, there's an appeal to what we could call the purely or the flatly sensual. Nowhere involved at all in what he says or even hinted at is any kind of sense of nature being anything more than material and pleasantly sensual or helpful.

This depth and dimensionality—and we're going to speak a lot, hopefully, about what this might mean for us—is just absent from the discourse of both Davids. When, on this retreat, we talk about re-enchantment, re-enchantment needs to have that aspect, needs to involve and invoke depth and dimensionality. And we'll talk, as I said, more about what that means. So any kind of re-enchantment without depth and dimension cannot really be very full or deep at all as far as what we're talking about is concerned.

Now following on from all that, notice the parallels. I'm not going to say much about this now, but just notice the parallels between what the iTree founder David Novak says, and also the kind of claims of unquantifiability that David Ferguson makes. Notice the parallels between all that and the way they speak and write with the dominant paradigms—what have become the dominant paradigms in a lot of meditation circles and mindfulness teachings. Health, less stress, slowing down thoughts. The idealization of simplicity, childhood simplicity, a kind of innocence. Notice the parallels. I'm not going to say more about that at this point.

And again, related to all this—something we'll return to periodically in the retreat—is what we could call the creep of, since the scientific revolution, the creep of what we might call scientism. Not science, but scientism.

What's that? Scientism is a kind of religion, really, including the belief that science can eventually, or will eventually, explain everything. Everything there is to know about life will be or can be eventually explained either already or eventually by science. And that science is the truest, best and most trustworthy explanation of anything. Also involved in this kind of religion of scientism is that science deals with what is ultimately true and deals in real entities, entities that are real.

Again, part of scientism is something very central about measurement and including the measurement of value. So actually, a lot of what David Ferguson claims is not quantifiable. I think some scientists say, actually, we can measure values now in different ways. But this measurement is very intrinsic to scientific belief—the importance of measurement, the necessity of measurement. The measurement and value then get put together so that something is actually only valued if it is measurable. And preferably, if it's physical, then it's taken as real. And preferably if it's physically measurable.

So scientists can measure values by giving people questionnaires about their values, about their feelings, about things. But much better from this point of view is if we can find neuronal changes to measure or biochemical measures to change—cortisol levels and all this. And those measurable benefits then constitute more scientific evidence. So all this and more is wrapped up in scientism, and the article, the debate in the article really highlights indirectly some of that coming through.

Lastly, just about this—she doesn't mention re-enchantment. It's not really a notion that's in the article, certainly not the word. But what would it be then to re-enchant the city? Do we need necessarily a sort of return to nature? Do we need to demolish or abolish cities? Or does the re-enchantment of the city come only by having more greenery and trees? Central to our theme: what might re-enchantment mean and involve?

When he points out in the article how he begins to feel a week or so after he's been in New York or London, he's actually expressing and sharing a kind of sensitivity of attention to his surroundings and to what he's perceiving. So this is actually quite central to the practices and the orientations that we're going to be developing. Because it's in developing a subtlety of awareness and attention, a sensitivity that's so much a part—a dimension, an aspect for me, if I think about it—of developing, growing, deepening in meditation practice.

I'll say this again later and re-emphasize it. Subtlety and sensitivity are almost more than anything—more than mindfulness or concentration or this or that or quietening the mind—subtlety and sensitivity are really core and integral to developing, growing and deepening a meditation practice.

So in relation to what he's talking about, can we notice more and more subtly the energetic, psychic and emotional effects in the moment of what we encounter in the world through the senses? And as always with these things, there's a spectrum of subtlety pertaining to what we can notice of the effects on us, on our being.

More or less gross, relatively obvious, or more subtle in terms of what we can feel and observe in the effects that are palpable on the emotions, on the energy body, etc.

For example, at the more gross end, what happens? How does it affect us—the emotions, the energy body, the being—when we see directly or in pictures vast swathes of land devastated and polluted by tar sands oil extraction? We feel the effect of that on the being. Or when we witness a great expanse of clear-cut forest, or just litter, everyday litter, whether it's in the city or in the countryside. Noticing these effects—some quite palpable, quite obvious.

Or when we are in a place of more pristine nature, or even a photograph of more pristine nature—whatever it is, grass, trees—there's a different effect on the being. The effect of, also the different effects of open spaces: desert or plains or whatever it is, mountains, and more closed spaces like woods.

And then more subtly—it's possible perhaps to notice the different effects on us of different materials. For example, in the city that we see or encounter. So encountering concrete versus stone versus steel, or plastic versus wood. This is happening all the time, of course, when we're moving around, the senses are open, but actually there are noticeably different effects in the heart, in the resonances, in the soul, in the energy body. And part of this subtlety, this sensitivity that we're developing, that can be developed, is to notice all that.

This is actually palpable, certainly on the gross levels, but also on a very, very subtle level. How the being is affected by what it perceives—it always is, and it has to be. But this opens up this possibility and recognition that how I'm affected also depends not just on the material of what I see, of the perception, but it actually depends on the way of looking, which opens up the door to the fact that re-enchanting the world is partly, maybe even mostly—I don't know—in the way of looking, in this flexibility of ways of looking, in the exercise of skill and the art and the poetry of ways of looking.

Let's explore some of this a bit more. When we use that word *enchantment*, you know, I'm aware—Catherine and I talked about it before the retreat—that word can have so many different meanings and implications for people, and people use it in different ways, etc. So we were talking before, and we thought, well, we can at least delineate four kinds of enchantment, at least for us right now. I'm sure there are more.

One we could call a kind of—for want of a better term, there probably is a better term—we could call *immature enchantment*. And that's when we're a little bit obsessed with something, but also with the self in relationship to that something. We can tell an immature enchantment with something or someone because the mind and the being contract around that thing or in reaction to that thing. There's clinging, a kind of gross level of clinging involved. Something closes in the psyche. You could say the psyche, the range of the psyche closes. Something is also reified, made real. Okay? There's a kind of realist belief wrapped up in there. And the self is more important than the divine. Again, this is something we're going to come back to. The self and the intentionality, the orientation of the whole enchantment—in the orientation and intentionality of the enchantment, the self actually has more importance and there's more focus on it than the divine. We'll fill that out. So that's the first kind of enchantment, immature enchantment.

Second kind we might call *cultural enchantment*. And this is, for instance, something like our enchantment with science and technology, which in themselves, of course, are extremely useful, but there's something in the way that we're a little bit blind, not just to the effects, but also to the assumptions that are operating there. We don't realize that we're trapped in certain views, certain quite narrow views. If you like, we're kind of captive, just as we are in an immature enchantment, we're kind of captive within an enchantment.

Then there are two kinds of what we could call very positive enchantments. One is, if you like, the enchantment—a kind of spiritual enchantment—but that has a universal or impersonal orientation or basis. So for example, someone doing *mettā* practice after a while and really deepening and opening, and they begin to experience a sense of cos-

mic love or cosmic compassion. It's a quality that's woven into the fabric and the space of the cosmos, of the universe. And there's a love of that. There's an enchantment with that perception. And also with the capability of opening to that perception. But that love is universal and impersonal.

And also in that, one's own personality, if you like, gets a little dissolved. As it goes deeper, we start to see, I am not separate from this love. I am this love. It imbues me. It's my fabric as much as everything else is. So everything—self, other, world, things, nature, all of it—their uniqueness in a way gets dissolved because their true nature in this perception is universal love and impersonal universal love.

The same thing could happen with awareness—a person doing different practices where awareness is kind of central. Then there's this beautiful opening, mystical, precious openings to a universal awareness, and people give it different names, and it comes in different flavors, etc.

But again, there's a dissolution into the impersonal. There's an enchantment with that. Beautiful, necessary, I think, on the path. Lovely, healing, all of that.

But then there's a fourth kind of enchantment, and this is the one that we're mostly emphasizing and focusing on in this retreat. This is the one that we want to nourish and stoke the fires of on this retreat, partly because it's less talked about, less encouraged.

And that is, again, for want of better words, a kind of mature enchantment that involves the imaginal. So it involves images and the use of the imagination, but also implicit in all that is the sense of what we are perceiving and what we are enchanted with—whether that's the whole of existence or some particular aspect of self or other or whatever—is not perceived and conceived as one-dimensional, as flat. There is a vertical dimensionality to it. There's a plurality of dimensions there, multidimensional. There are levels, if you like, to perceptions.

And wrapped up with that, there's a sense of divinity. Somehow there's a sense of the divinity of what we are enchanted with. I'm going to come back to this because I know it's a loaded concept for some people.

And then also there's a wisdom aspect to this that we have used this phrase before: see image as image. This is an image. And with everything that that means and that implies, we're not reifying, we're not lost in the image that way.

All these aspects are necessary: the imaginal, the non-flatness, the multidimensionality, the verticality, the divinity, and the wisdom that sees image as image. All that is necessary to this kind of enchantment that we're emphasizing on this retreat. It's mature, if you like, but involving the imaginal.

Actually, in experience, in practice, these four kinds, they arise in mixtures. So I might have a mature enchantment involving imaginal going on, but there's some, perhaps, immature enchantment wrapped up in that. I'm not quite free of the clinging or the contraction that goes with a certain amount of reification or belief or whatever, or it's wrapped up with cultural enchantment or with the more spiritual enchantment of universality, etc. So really, we could talk about a continuum of degrees of involvement of these different kinds of enchantment.

But all of them, or at least the last two—at least what we're calling the positive ones—they lead to, if you like, different kinds and directions of opening. And that's why I'm highlighting this, partly. Different kinds of opening to beauty, different kinds of beauty, different kinds of meaningfulness, different kinds of sense of sacredness, and different kinds and directions of soul-making. So the kind of enchantment leads and opens up in different directions.

And these lead to and bring with them different kinds of freedom. Different kinds of freedom. So freedom is not a simple sort of monolith. It's different kinds of freedom. And each kind of enchantment, direction of enchantment, brings different kinds of freedom and also different kinds of knowing are made available. Again, these are concepts we're going to come back to.

Just a brief example. Someone was asking me about my health situation right now—being very ill and the possibility of death, an early death and not too far away—and asked me about that because I'd said something or written something about how even that was perfect.

So this idea of perfection, as an illustration of what I was just talking about: something like that, a circumstance like that, can be felt and seen and perceived as perfect from one perspective, which is that all is one. All is one cosmic awareness or is one cosmic love or whatever. So even this illness and even this death, it is one.

There is, if you like, the spiritual perception there, which sees the universality. So everything, no matter whether it's good, bad, ugly, beautiful, it all has the one taste, the characteristic of this one. Its truer nature is this one, whatever the one is. And then you

can have different kinds of one depending on your perception. So that's beautiful and so helpful as a perception that's available and cultivatable through practice. Mystical spiritual perceptions available through practice.

James Hillman talks about distinguishing spirit from soul. So I'm not too keen on that, making them separate things. But we could call that more spiritual perception, in contradistinction to what we might call a soul knowing, that has to do with amor fati—the love of one's fate or one's destiny—in and including all the particulars of the events that happen to me, the way they happen, all the particulars of my unique personhood, of my life.

So in this soul knowing, in this soul perception that opens up that's possible, there's a kind of—let's call it perception because—a recognition of, if you like, my soul's coherence with divinity, or rather with a divine intelligence, with the world soul, in and through the events and the particularities and the uniqueness of my personhood and my life.

So it's important to differentiate these kinds, but I don't want to separate them as Hillman tended to do—this spiritual and soul.

But this differentiation is important.

So again, just to recap what I said before about what's essential and integral to the kinds of enchantment that we want to feed on this retreat and explore together. There's this non-flatness to the perception, to the sense and the conception of things. The idea that's so prevalent in modernist conception and perception is that everything is just matter. Whatever arises emerges from the interaction and combination of atoms or whatever, and eventually gives rise to consciousness and human beings. But essentially, everything is just matter. That would be the typical modernist sense and conception of things.

What we want is not that kind of flatness, not that kind of unidimensionality where everything is matter, differing only in the hierarchy of complexity in the organization of that matter. We want something that is not flat, something that involves an unflattening. Wrapped up with this is some sense of divinity, some conception of divinity—even if that sense and conception is very vague, very nebulous in terms of what divinity means. But it has to be there, because in an imaginal-based enchantment, the imaginal—at least what I mean by imaginal—already needs to include a sense of depth and divinity to the images and the fantasies and to their origins. In other words, we somehow recognize or conceive of their origins. These images have their origins and roots in divinity.

But all this is not a matter of belief. We don't want you to believe anything. I don't want to sell this to you as a belief and certainly not as dogma. So what are we talking about when we talk about enchantment without belief?

We're talking about what we could call a poetic state—a state, a stance, an attitude of *poiesis*, which means creative making, artistic creation. It's an attitude of artistic creation with respect to the self, to others, to the cosmos, to the *citta*, the mind, the heart, the psyche, the soul, to being and existence itself.

This enchantment really means inhabiting a poetic state, a state and attitude of *poiesis*. It's dynamic, open, creative. We're not talking about something static, and we're not talking about something formulaic. There are no prescriptions here, apart from the most general ones we've discussed. It's more like an art, and that's something we'll return to—this idea of the art of it all.

That word *cosmos* is actually a Greek word, related to our word *cosmetic*, which indicates the original connotations of the word as opposed to *universe*. It has an aesthetic connotation, this word *cosmos*—originally having to do with ordering and forming and fashioning, with ornaments and decoration. In other words, it's creative, it's artistic, it has to do with beauty.

In our practice, what we're endeavoring to do is move in and out of this poetic state, whether deliberately or spontaneously. There's a movement in and out of this state of *poiesis*, or states of *poiesis*.

Now in relation to all that, doubt arises. Almost certainly for everyone, or most people at least, doubt arises regarding notions of reality, regarding the status and the trustworthiness of images, regarding the whole idea of having conceptual frameworks that are non-realist—that do not assume reality or truth about what they conceive or perceive. Doubts about employing ways of looking that are not scientifically endorsed, or even worse, ways of knowing that are not scientifically respectable at the moment.

So doubt around all these things—I would expect it to come up for you. Actually, I would say it's a good sign. It shows that the being is engaged with all this, with these ideas, with these practices. It shows that you're not just believing something in a naive way, or as is somewhat popular these days, trying to return to a kind of primitivism—as if the solution to all our crises now is to just have everyone go back to living in some prehistoric way.

That primitivism is not ours. After modernity, after the Western Enlightenment, after the scientific revolution, after this emphasis on—or belief in—being able to know objectively, where the known must be independent of the knower, after all that, and with

our culture so saturated in all that, we can't just turn the clock back. Somehow we have to absorb all that and move beyond it, forwards. But doubt is going to be part of that process—not for everyone, but for many people. And that's fine and important.

Related to all this, something perhaps a little different from what many of us are used to in teachings is that much of the way we will use words could be said to be more poetic. Words like *soul* or *divine* or *God* or even *enchantment*—we're using them poetically, as a different way of using words. We're using them primarily to stimulate soul-making and stimulate *cosmopoiesis*, this creative transformation in the perception of the world. So we're using words to stimulate soul-making *cosmopoiesis*, not just for you, but also for us, for Catherine and myself.

We're not just using words in this clarificatory capacity. In this kind of teaching, we don't gain that much, really. In many cases, we don't gain anything from tight, neat definitions. Certain differentiations will be absolutely necessary, and we might at times say, "When I use that word, I definitely don't mean this, or I don't mean that," to steer us away from certain well-trodden and not-so-helpful paths in this context. Certainly we might make suggestions of what a word might open up in experience and concept. But this kind of teaching and this approach is not Abhidhamma, if you know those teachings.

Sometimes people get so pleased and self-congratulatory when they can define things very neatly and tightly, and there's a kind of illusion of understanding something. "Okay, I've put everything in a box," but how helpful is that? Occasionally it's helpful, and we think we've understood, and it's all very neat and great, but really, how often is that actually just an illusion that something has been understood and that something is helpful?

It's quite a rare wisdom in regard to practice to actually know, to have a nose for, to sense, to intuit what is actually helpful. In all this availability of teachings and information and concepts and practices, what is actually helpful? What is really important and what is very much secondary? And what leads where? This is quite a big thing, a huge chunk of wisdom, and it's actually quite a rare one.

So we're using words, as I said, poetically, to encourage certain kinds of opening. We're not basing it like Abhidhamma on a realist assumption: "This is this, and that's that, and that's really this, and that's really that." These things—we're not dealing in the realm of truth or reality, we're dealing in the realm of poetry.

Within that state of poiesis that we talked about, integral to that, unavoidably within that, we are entertaining and experimenting with ideas, conceptions, some of which are actually theologies. The conceptual framework, or the logos—I'll be using that word—the conceptual framework or logos that we entertain is dynamic, is elastic, it can stretch. Again, this is something we're not really used to in our way of approaching things, in our way of thinking.

Sometimes concepts will be making very fine discriminations, very subtle discriminations between different aspects or dimensions or directions. And sometimes the conceptual framework will be much more nebulous, much more cloudy and vague. Sometimes it will be very logical and sometimes much more poetic. Sometimes it will precisely circumscribe a certain area, and other times it will be much more open. It's almost like I can't really find the edge of this concept.

But always, always, always, the conceptual framework, the logos, needs to be and will be connected with experience and connected with what we might call phenomenological investigations—our investigations and experimenting with, our practicing with experience and different ways of looking. Always the ideas and the concepts are connected to that. We're not talking abstract philosophy, abstract meaning removed from experience, removed from the possibility of actual investigation. We're not talking about theoretics that's removed from that.

Sometimes when people have very tight conceptual frameworks that either explicitly or implicitly—even if they don't use the word "truth"—are claimed as truths, which is almost all conceptual frameworks that you'll find in the Dharma and philosophy, poke enough at that, whatever that conceptual framework is, and you will uncover contradictions or unjustified, unjustifiable assumptions.

So what happens when the whole way of holding ideas in relation to practice is looser, as I said, more elastic, and not so-called truth-based?

In all this, in this poiesis and the art of it all, there are infinite possibilities. There is not a limit on the possibilities of experience, of the kinds of cosmos that we live in, of the experience, the perception and the sense of self, of the divine, of other, of the world.

Sure, we might make suggestions, we will make suggestions for different ideas, but really the idea is not to follow that too rigidly. It's not prescriptive, as I said, it's not formulaic, except generally as before, that this kind of imaginal enchantment involves the imaginal, it's not flat, it's more than the usual modernist perception of things. It invokes and involves divinity—whatever that might mean, all the possibilities that might mean—and it also has the wisdom of seeing image as image.

But except for those generalities, there are infinite possibilities. Rather, within the circumscription of those generalities, there are infinite possibilities available to us as experience, as life-changing, being-opening experience.

I think it's from the Jewish Kabbalah—I'm not sure exactly who said it—but there's a dictum that says, "In the messianic aeon, when the Messiah comes, each and every person will have her own perception of God." Each and every person will have her own perception of God.

But implicit in that statement, and implicit even in the traditional Kabbalistic teachings, the messianic aeon is really, I feel, an opening, a shifting and opening of ways of looking. Shifting of the way of looking now, here. That is the messianic aeon. It's something that happens in the heart, in the consciousness, in the soul. And then each and every person will have our own perception of God.

I would actually make that plural: we have our own perceptions of God. There is this infinite possibility for all of us.

So here we have what is usually considered a traditional religion, with all its dogma and established structures, actually containing a level of teaching that is completely radical in its openness—very postmodern, if you will. Not at all dogmatic.

This speaks to something profound about the nature of authentic spiritual teaching. Beneath the surface forms and conventional presentations, the deepest wisdom traditions often carry seeds of the most revolutionary understanding. They point toward a reality that transcends their own apparent limitations, toward possibilities that their own institutional forms might seem to constrain.

In this recognition, we find not contradiction but completion—not the dissolution of tradition but its deepest fulfillment. The messianic consciousness is not something that arrives from outside to replace what came before, but something that blooms from within, revealing the infinite potential that was always present in the heart of authentic seeking.

This is the beautiful paradox of genuine spiritual inquiry: the more deeply we penetrate any authentic tradition, the more we discover its essential groundlessness, its fundamental openness, its invitation to direct and immediate knowing that belongs to no single path yet illuminates them all.

CHAPTER 30

The Art of Perception

Rob Burbea · 1h34

> *In this profound exploration of perception as creative art, Rob Burbea examines how historical shifts in understanding imagination—from objective imaginal realms to modernist dismissal—have shaped our relationship with images and meaning. Drawing parallels between artistic creation and meditative perception, he presents the imaginal not as something objectively real or merely fictitious, but as a mode of attention and awareness that can re-enchant our experience.*
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> *Burbea outlines seven essential aspects of authentic imaginal practice: soulfulness and soul-making, depth as dimensionality and inexhaustibility, otherness and autonomy of images, their divine dimensions, meaningfulness, seeing image as image, and beauty and sacredness. He emphasizes how understanding emptiness (śūnyatā) and dependent arising (pratītyasamutpāda) creates the philosophical ground for this 'art of perception'—allowing flexible engagement with ways of looking and conceptual frameworks without rigid belief.*
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> *The talk addresses fundamental questions about knowledge, reality, and meaning, challenging both scientific materialism and literalistic interpretations of spiritual teachings. Through references to figures like Nietzsche, Blake, and contemporary philosophers, Burbea demonstrates how questioning our cultural assumptions about what constitutes 'reality' liberates possibilities for cosmopoiesis—the creative perception of self, world, and cosmos as works of art that are simultaneously created and discovered.*

In the course of history, the predominant views or conceptions of the human imagination—the ways we regard and relate to the imaginal—have undergone tremendous shifts.

Historically, certainly three or four hundred years ago and extending back through time, many people held what was probably the dominant view that something like an imaginal realm possessed objective existence. There are still many people today who hold this view, though they represent a very small minority in relation to the dominant modern perspective. They maintain that the imaginal realm has objective existence—it is just as real, if you like, as this world of materiality that appears to most of us as the only world.

This imaginal realm, possessing objective existence and what some would say has more reality than this world of materiality, exists as a kind of matrix of meaning around our space and time dimensions. The world of space and time is enveloped by this imaginal realm, which generates or infuses meaning for us, direction for us, kinds of identity for us, images, and fantasies. In this way it influences us and influences history itself.

As I said, nowadays this is an extremely rare view. It's very tempting to think that now we're smart, so we don't believe such a silly view—we can see through that very easily as something that's obviously not true. But just a moment or two of honest reflection will reveal: am I really so smart to have this negative prejudice against the reality of the imaginal realm? Or is it just that I'm repeating, reiterating the modern view—a view in which I've been indoctrinated, which saturates my culture? I haven't figured this out for myself or proven it to myself or thought it through. I'm just a product of indoctrination, really. It's not that I'm so smart.

But there is this view, and there has been historically, in many different ways with different forms, articulations, and shades of emphasis—the objective existence of an imaginal realm, a realm of images that is accessible to human beings, and especially accessible when consciousness is purified or trained.

There's a theologian called Walter Wink who talks about this and wants to point out the modern prejudice we have and how rare that prejudice is in the course of human history. He takes something like the ascension of Christ or the resurrection of Christ and says that these were real events, facts, but they happened not in the realm of materiality—not an actual physical body going up to heaven or reappearing on earth—but in the imaginal realm, in the psychic realm.

Even more than that, these happenings in the imaginal realm changed God. So God, in this Christian mythic view, as incarnating as Christ, as incarnate, reappearing in the resurrection, and also ascending into heaven to join the Father—this ascending adds something to God. It adds a new dimension, a new aspect, a whole change to God.

We're dealing now not with archetypes that are fixed in the original meaning, but archetypes that are actually plastic, malleable—which to me is a more attractive idea. And yet, within that, as I've spoken about before in other places, there's also a kind of eternality. This ascension, this resurrection, is always happening. It's always happening and always available—not just, and not even primarily, as a matter of belief. So often that's the emphasis in modern Christianity, especially after Protestantism: it's a matter of belief, of faith. But it's actually always happening, always available, always accessible to us in the imaginal realm as image, with all the potency of that.

So historically, and even a little bit today, there are these ideas of the reality of the imaginal realm. But through history, things changed dramatically and radically, starting some would say in the twelfth century and certainly later, made more emphatic starting from the seventeenth century with the rise of what we could call modernism—this view that is so normal, so unquestioned, so habitual and pervasive in our modern Western society.

For example, there was the elevation of the whole idea of reasoning—that what we know as human beings, knowledge, comes from reasoning. And knowledge actually means something different than it used to mean, because it used to mean something more like union with what is known. That actually constituted knowledge: a union of the human being's mind and heart and soul with what is known, as opposed to knowledge as a result of reasoning and empirical deduction.

Related to that very much was the whole change in relationship with study and reading. Again, before the modern era, the whole idea of *lectio divina*, divine reading—studying something or reading something was a matter of sympathy. The being, the soul, and the body (because people used to read out loud) were animated by the breath. *Anima* also means soul, as well as life. So reading was to come into sympathy with what we are reading. Sympathy means sympathetic resonance—the whole being is resonating with what we're reading.

The Christian mystic Hugh of St. Victor called this kind of reading "an ontologically remedial technique"—strange words that might make us wonder what he's talking about. But the whole conception was very different. The human soul and the human intelligence were not separate from the divine soul, the world soul, and the divine intelligence. So reading, Hugh of St. Victor says, brings light that comes from study and brings a human being to a glow, because the intelligence that's reading is not different from the divine intelligence at the center of the being.

We're going to return to these ideas, I hope, later on the retreat.

More generally speaking, historically there was a shift towards respecting and emphasizing the teachings of Aristotle through a medieval teacher called Averroes, over the teachings of Plato and a medieval teacher called Avicenna. This moved away from the Neoplatonic teachings that were very pervasive in understanding the nature of God and how the divine permeated or informed all aspects of creation through a hierarchy of existence—a hierarchy of emanations from God.

This elevation of reasoning, this shift towards Aristotelianism away from the more mystical teachings of Plato—all of this is relevant to how we regard imaginal experiences. Reasoning becomes more trustworthy than imaginal experience. What constitutes knowledge is not something that comes through the imaginal. It's not a matter of sympathizing with a soul image. All of that, and all the implied concepts and metaphysics that might be either believed or entertained, is relevant to how we view imaginal experiences and how we hold them and how much we respect or value them.

So there is, historically, this view of the reality of the imaginal realm versus the more modern, dominant view that it's completely fictitious, rubbish, not real, does not constitute knowledge. And we now—especially the people who have shown up on this retreat—might flip-flop back and forth between those two positions. We might have doubt. We move in and out of entertaining certain conceptual frameworks. This is our experience.

Actually, it's not that cut and dry, certainly not historically. You get a figure like Plotinus, the father of Neoplatonism, who had a very sophisticated philosophy. I don't mean sophisticated in terms of complicated, but sophisticated in terms of insight that, to me, is similar to some interpretations of Buddhadharma, especially the teachings of emptiness as I would tend to frame them. There are similarities there.

Sometimes, and there's a flexibility in Plotinus's teachings, he would say only the transcendent, unfabricated is real. The imaginal realm, the world soul—all that is not real. At one extreme, there is only the real, the ultimately real, beyond anything you can say about it, beyond all experience. At other times, in this flexibility of his teaching and conception, there would be more the teaching that all appearances, all levels of being, dimensions of appearance and perception—all of that is divine, including the imaginal realm, including matter.

For me, and I think it's the platform we're offering most on this retreat, there's something about understanding emptiness—and more than that, putting a radical emptiness, full, thorough, deep, comprehensive, at the basis of the path. Really letting that bear its fruit in what unfolds in terms of experience, meditation, practice, what appears, conceptions. What this does for me—the deeper one's realization of emptiness, the more it allows and legitimizes this play, this playfulness with ways of looking and conceptual frameworks, an ability to play with them, to entertain ideas, even metaphysical ideas, without holding them as believing in them as true or "this is reality."

For many people, this permission is gained through emptiness, some degree of realizing emptiness of everything. For some it's through philosophy. For some it's through philosophy of science, especially as science has moved on in the last hundred years with quantum physics and relativity.

Niels Bohr, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and one of the central father figures of quantum physics, held complementarity as very central to his philosophy. A statement is at the very same time both true and false. Or a statement that something is true means its opposite is also true. This became part of not only his life philosophy, but it emerged from deep questioning—mathematical questioning, but also philosophical questioning—that came out of that beautiful time at the beginning of the twentieth century. This idea in relationship to truth—that it's not quite as black and white or as neatly packageable or as single as the modernist view would have us believe.

Bohr also said regarding clarity that there's a complementarity between the clarity and the rightness of a statement. The complementarity is such that a statement which is too clear always contains something false. So the whole notion of truth, of knowledge, of what that is and what constitutes it has changed.

Through modern Western philosophy, this has all shifted. So whether it's through emptiness, whether it's through philosophy or modern science, or whether it's just through having an artistic sensibility, the poetic attitude that some people naturally have more than others—all of that allows us and opens up for us what I want to call the art of perception, the poetry of perception, and allows us to play with that.

All this is complex. In terms of conceptual frameworks, it's complex—reality, what is real, what is truth, how do we know anything, the epistemology, the ontology. I've talked about that in other talks, so I'm not going to go too much into that. But really to dwell on filling out what's involved in this art, in this poetry.

What I would like to emphasize more, again, is this seeing image as image—related to the emptiness understanding. We could also say seeing cosmopoiesis as cosmopoiesis, as poiesis—as art, poetry.

As making. As fabrication.

So central to our art, our poetry of perception, is seeing, recognizing, acknowledging, not forgetting: image is image.

Now, I'm certainly open to the idea—not only open, I feel very comfortable with the idea—of extrasensory perception and all that, in some instances when the mind's in certain conditions. But for this retreat, for these teachings, and for us mostly, most of the time, it will be much more helpful not to think in terms of ESP and ghosts and all that kind of stuff. Seeing image as image, seeing image as metaphor and cosmopoiesis as cosmopoiesis. We've filled out what that means, but we'll come back to it again. So important. So that's integral to our art.

Bonus of Ferrara, a fourteenth-century alchemist, had a phrase: *solutio*—that's a Latin word. Solutio is the root of alchemy. In other words, making solutions possible, turning what is solid, what is concretized, what is believed in a rigid way, in a fixed, solid, concretized way—making that solid into a solution, making it liquid. Seeing image as image, seeing cosmopoiesis as not fixed, not literal, not concretized in the perception and in the conception. And that's the root of alchemy.

We'll see how we do with time on this retreat, but alchemy is another word for this poetry of perception, very much. We're in the business, or in the art, of transforming—actually, rather, transubstantiating, more accurately—our notions and our perceptions, our sense, our very sense of matter, of the world, of the self. Of course there's a transformation as well of the self in that, and also of divinity. And this idea, going back to Walter Wink's thing, of changing God—that God is not a fixed being, divinity is not a fixed being. There's something very deep in this. I've talked about it in other talks and maybe will come back to that. But this is what we mean: this art is an alchemy. It's a transubstantiation through perceptions, a poetry of perception transforming all that.

So as well as all that—integral to this art of cosmopoiesis, of re-enchantment—we can list five other factors. Good to bear in mind, to kind of check on. Most of them we've touched before, but I'll just list them now. So seeing images as images is one, and then five more.

One is this whole idea, integral to the art of cosmopoiesis: the playing with ways of looking. It's a part of re-enchanting the world—this playing with ways of looking, the flexibility, the range, the way we're holding that.

And implicit in that is a second aspect: when we're playing with ways of looking, we're also playing with—and again, the lightness of that word "play," the openness of it, the adventure of it, the interest, the research, and also the seriousness—we're playing with and entertaining conceptions, ideas, even large conceptual frameworks. That's implicit in playing with ways of looking. So to recognize that and recognize it's integral to re-enchantment, it's integral to cosmopoiesis as we are using those words.

But third, this is not a purely mental thing. It involves the body. This is why I put the emphasis on the energy body and that kind of awareness. This art of re-enchantment, this art and poetry of perception, needs to be in touch with—we need to keep it in touch with—our body, our cultivating, developing, refining our body awareness and body sensitivity, and also our embodiment.

So we're talking about embodiment not only in the sense of being in touch with the body and the resonances in the energy body—the openings, the contractions, the feeling of that as we're working imaginatively—but also embodiment as action. So what the image, the actions, how I am and how I speak... even right now, talking right now, there's a fantasy of that for me, and also for you, especially if you're enjoying this and if you love it. There are fantasies involved in the action of listening, or in the action of speaking, in the action that we do in the world. And this art of perception spills over not only into the way we see our actions, but also in what we actually do, what it issues in, in terms of our duties, our sense of duty, our sense of commitment, direction. We're going to come back to this.

And of course, as part of this third aspect of the five, it involves the senses. The senses are, if you like, the arenas of meeting of body and of world and of mind—if we even consider those three things separate. But if we do, then the senses are really the arena, the fields, in which those three domains or aspects of existence meet: body, mind—mind, heart, *citta*, really, soul.

So of course when we say body, we're involving senses, and we're talking about re-enchanting the cosmos and cosmopoiesis and all that. Of course our senses are involved.

So: playing with ways of looking, entertaining conceptions and ideas, the involvement of the body integrally, but also the involvement of the heart and heartfulness. And how absolutely essential that is to this work. Sometimes the heart functions as a kind of key. If it's closed, nothing can really happen imaginally. And conversely, the imaginal and the re-enchantment and the cosmopoietic ways can open the heart in different ways.

But heart and heartfulness are integral to this art.

And as we said right at the beginning, so is the imagination—or more accurately, the imaginal. So these five are all included, need to be included, they're integral, and they're part of what we experiment with in this art.

The art of perception means experimenting, playing with ways of looking, with ideas, with body awareness, with embodiment in action, with how we relate to the senses. It means playing with the heart, encouraging the heart and playing with the imagination, experimenting with all of that. And this art reaches out, covers and extends to and involves all areas of our being. There's nothing, in a way, that's necessarily outside of it—nothing at all.

Self, other, world; the mind and the whole way we feel and conceive and experience the citta, the mind-heart, the soul; space even, the perception, the conception of space, of time—all these areas of being, these domains or aspects or dimensions of our existence: space, time, self, other, world, heart, mind, knowing what it is to know. Communication, hearing—whether it's others or nature or whatever—music, gesture, communication in gesture, posture, movement, language and speech as part of communication, eating, seeing, smelling—all the senses.

All of these are, if you like, playing fields for our research—playing fields in which we create (we acknowledge that) and in which we also discover. This create-discover dualism or apparent dualism is something we'll return to as well.

Within this art, and within that playing that includes all of what I've just talked about, there might be generalities. Going back to earlier in the retreat, there are generalities of what's involved—all these factors I'm just enumerating now—but there's no specific formulaic perception. You don't have to... every piece of music or every painting or sculpture or whatever is going to be different, unless I'm deliberately trying to copy something, which is not what we're emphasizing so much on this retreat. We might start that way in terms of suggestions, but in terms of actual perceptions, there's no specific formulaic approach.

If we consider this art of re-enchantment—if we actually pull out one aspect of all I've just been talking about and consider it a bit more—disenchantment in the modernist sense comes from a number of factors and historical reasons. Just to single out two right now: one is the rigidity and singularity of conception and view. *This* way of understanding things, *this* way of framing things, *this* conception is the truth; everything else is not. That's actually very characteristic of modernism, unlike what we might call postmodernism.

So that's something pervasive in the culture that's contributed to disenchantment, and we're not free to play. Playing is delegitimized. Playing with ways of looking and ideas and conceptions and metaphysics is all delegitimized.

But what I want to emphasize right now is also the devaluation in relationship to human imagination—the devaluation of the imaginal and the devaluation of its epistemological value, meaning its validity as a way of knowing. That we can actually *know* through imagination, through the imaginal—which today, for most people, sounds completely bizarre and even bonkers. I'm not saying it's simple as an idea, but something happened to devalue the imagination and the imaginal.

Again, I really want to spell this out to make it clear, because I have just come to realize that what might feel very clear and obvious to me actually takes time for people to digest as a set of ideas and approaches.

When we use the word imaginal, implied in that word—or what constitutes the imaginal, or imaginal practice—is not just that it involves the use of the imagination. That doesn't necessarily qualify something as imaginal.

So I'd like to go through a list of seven aspects of the imaginal as we're using that word—the authentic imaginal. These are connected, but to me it's worth repeating them, even though you will have heard them before.

The first one—not in any order, and as I said, they overlap and connect, some of them imply each other—is that the imaginal needs to involve and imply soulfulness and soul-making. Even some use of the imagination in regard to something that has mythic themes doesn't necessarily qualify as imaginal.

I saw on TV the other day an advertisement for a computer game—I can't remember what it was called, the kind you get on your phone or whatever. It involved kings and dragons and rescuing princesses and wars and all that kind of stuff. Just because the themes are typically mythic themes doesn't qualify them as imaginal themes, unless they're soul-making. Now, they could be soul-making at times for certain people. Oftentimes, watching people who are involved in that kind of thing, it doesn't seem to be soul-making.

But also, usually when people are playing those kinds of games, there's not mindfulness involved—mindfulness in relationship to images. There might be a keen awareness, especially if it's happening in real time and you've got to react and all that, but not mindfulness in the sense we're talking about: sensitivity to the emotions that are constituted, elicited in relationship to the images; the soul resonances, the soulfulness, what's happening in the energy body. All this is fundamental to what we might call imaginal practice and usually is not there in relation to that kind of game. It could be, but usually it's not.

So that's the first one: soulfulness and soul-making.

The second aspect—again, all related—is what we could call depth. I'm hesitant with that word a little bit, but let's call it depth, by which I mean two things. One is dimensionality. When it comes to images that are mixed with perceptions of materiality in the world—like the cosmopoiesis—the dimensionality, the depth means it's not just a kind

of flatness, one-dimensionality of existence that the typical secular modernist view of scientific materialism would hold and assume about the nature of what is real. So there's a sense wrapped up in the imaginal of dimensionality that way.

But there's also a sense of depth as a kind of inexhaustibility, a mystery, an impossibility to fully understand the image. There's always more to this image than I can quite understand or capture or put into a box or convey.

When we encounter an image that we fully understand, or believe we fully understand—when we've placed it in a neat conceptual box, summarized it completely, explained it thoroughly in words that we can convey to another—something vital is lost. The very word "explain" reveals this flattening: to make plain, to reduce to a plane, P-L-A-N-E, removing the dimensionality, the inexhaustible depth, the essential beyondness.

When we flatten an image in this way, either exhausting what was never truly inexhaustible to begin with, or believing we've captured its fullness through explanation and categorization, the image inevitably loses its spontaneous arising. It becomes lifeless, stripped of vitality, and simply stops appearing for us. Either it has completed whatever limited work it was meant to do, or more accurately—and this touches the heart of dependent arising—because the image depends entirely on our relationship with it, on our conception of it, on the very image we hold of the image itself, our flattening destroys its nourishment.

Having truncated its inexhaustibility and limited its depth, we deprive the image of a fundamental dimension of vitality. Without this nourishment of mystery, of being somehow larger than our complete comprehension, the image dies for us.

This principle of inexhaustibility applies equally to ideas and concepts, particularly those intertwined with images—something worthy of deeper exploration in future retreats. When an idea or conceptual framework or metaphysic remains somehow bigger than our capacity to fully grasp it, when we cannot polish it off and contain it completely, when mystery persists at its edges, that idea becomes extraordinarily fertile. This connects directly to what I've explored elsewhere regarding the soul dynamic: the mutual expansion, insemination, nourishment, enrichment, and deepening of psyche, image, logos, and eros in their dance together.

The third aspect of the imaginal is the otherness and autonomy of the image. Here we encounter a sense or conception of the image as having roots that extend beyond our personal human history—at least as typically understood from a humanist perspective. This question of how personal history relates to the genesis of images is delicate and deserves careful consideration.

But what we're exploring is neither a reductionist explanation rooted solely in neurophysiology and brain networks, nor one limited to personal biographical material. Instead, we grant images a quality of otherness, of autonomy. We play with, entertain the possibility of their independent existence. Connected to this otherness is a sense of their divinity—that their roots, their origins, touch something divine. Whether we're engaging an image of the world in its cosmic vastness, an image of another person, of self, or purely intrapsychic imagery, there exists this dimension of divinity.

What "divinity" means here can remain beautifully vague, and that vagueness is not only acceptable but appropriate.

The fifth aspect is meaningfulness—the way imaginal images bring and convey deep meaningfulness to us. This overlaps naturally with soul-making, but meaningfulness differs from meaning in its inexhaustible richness. Rather than "it means X" or "it means Y," we encounter something fuller, more spacious.

This meaningfulness operates personally, impacting our lives, commitments, and direction. This doesn't necessarily translate into specific plans—traveling to particular places for predetermined periods. Meaningfulness and the sense of commitment and direction it brings can be far more open, non-specific, unplanned. Yet it touches what is most deeply important to us as human beings, carrying within it the aliveness and vitality of what truly matters.

The sixth aspect returns us to a central theme: image as image. Seeing image as image constitutes part of what makes something imaginal in our understanding. This includes recognizing that the conceptions and conceptual frameworks we entertain—whether explicitly articulated or merely implicit—related to the images we perceive and engage, we hold lightly. We don't grasp them as ultimate truths or believe in them as fixed realities.

The seventh aspect emerges from the confluence of all the preceding six: the imaginal reveals itself as a realm of beauty and sacredness. I use both words in their widest possible sense. The beauty may not be immediately apparent—in fact, it often isn't at first.

It might feel completely opposite. "This is a horrific image, it's disturbing, it's ugly." But something usually happens in this way of working with such images that we come to see their beauty, or they transform, or we come to expand our sense of beauty just as our senses of sacredness are expanded. So there's no prescription here, no narrow meaning of what beauty and sacredness mean, but the imaginal characteristic is beauty and sacredness.

When we talk about the kind of enchantment that we're emphasizing on this retreat—what we call tentatively mature, imaginatively based enchantment—it will involve all of this too, because it involves the imaginal. This is integral to this art of perception.

Within all this, going into what it means if we're really going to view this and engage in this as an art, first of all it involves a recognition that our lives and the perceptions of our lives already involve fantasy and image. They're already imbued and full of that, especially where we love, especially where there's meaningfulness for us. To not recognize that, I would say, is psychologically naive.

I want to read you a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche—really, it's his encouragement to engage in this art, in this kind of art. He says: "Ultimately man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them." There's a strong statement of dependent arising, of fabrication understanding right there—so much ahead of his time, such a radical, deep, insightful thinker.

"Ultimately, man finds in things nothing but what he himself has imported into them. The finding is called science. The importing we call art, religion, love, pride."

So part of this art of perception is the idea that we're importing. We're realizing that. And it's also part of what we might call the spiritual, religion. It's also there when we love.

But then he goes on to say, and this is even more interesting, even more radical: "Even if this should be a piece of childishness, even if this importing should be a piece of childishness, one should carry on with both and be well disposed towards both." Both the finding and the importing, but also the importing that's coming from childishness—projection from childhood, we could say—and also other kinds of importing.

Continuing: "Some should find, others—we others—should import something."

This is interesting to me, his encouragement to engage in the importing, to engage in this kind of bringing something deliberately to perception, to play with it, to engage in the art of it, even when it is, in his words, childishness or based on pride. For example, when it involves what we call projections based on one's childhood experience and hurts and wounds.

This is strange. This is completely the opposite of what a lot of modern psychology would say. Even when it's based on childishness and pride, engage in the importing. Why? Partly because of the necessity—in a way, the fundamental necessity—of recognizing the more general and important principle of importing, that importing is going on. And that recognition might be possible even through childish projections and pride.

It's not restricted to that. It's not that those are the only times where we're importing. And it's not as if sometimes we import, and there's the possibility of not importing, of a bare attention, of this so-called being with things as they are—the phrase of the Buddha that's basically misinterpreted, I think—of receiving purely the facts of reality.

So recognize the fact of importing, and actually he's encouraging it. Quite a radical teaching.

Again, in the ideas that are underpinning and allowing and opening up this art for us, the art of perception, there's this recognition of the infinite possibilities of interpretation. I was listening to something by Glenn Mullen, another Buddhist teacher, and he was saying how his teacher had told him that many Buddhist teachers—classical Buddhist teachers like Nagarjuna and Asanga and Atisha—deliberately wrote in a style that would be open to multiple interpretations.

And why would you do that? Well, to encourage the creativity of the seeker, of the student. To encourage their exploration.

If you know a text like the Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way by Nagarjuna—an absolutely seminal, central text to all Mahayana Buddhism—consider how over the centuries, and still nowadays, contemporary Western teachers interpret not just certain passages from the book, but the whole project or the whole thrust of what Nagarjuna even means by emptiness. Such a range to the interpretations.

In Buddhist Tantra as well, there are certain Tantric texts, original Tantras, that have many commentaries written on them, and some of the commentators give four levels of meaning to every word, or every sentence. For example, the Tantric Chandrakīrti in his commentary on the Guhyasamāja enumerates all of them.

There's four levels of meaning in this text. Interesting also in Kabbalistic teachings, there's also four levels of meaning to every verse or word in the Bible. It's called pardes—an acronym for the four levels. Pardes also means, as Rachel said, paradise or garden. So the entering into this openness, this multiplicity of meaning and going into the meanings and making them lived and alive and soulful is entering the garden. But in both the Tantric commentaries and the Kabbalistic commentaries, all the meanings are valid. It's not one over the other. They're all valid.

The Bible, both the Old and New Testament, are much easier to read in these kinds of ways than, say, the Pali Canon, because the Bible is, to me, clearly written in a kind of mythical language. It's amenable to, it's open to that multiplicity of interpretation because it's imaginal. Again, it was only with the rise of Protestantism and the kind of lit-

eralism and the wanting to reduce the Bible to one singular meaning—everything just means one thing and you're either right or wrong and it's all very literal. But the Pali Canon is a little trickier. It's very hard to take most of it in any kind of mythical way. Some, yes. But this multiplicity of interpretation, you also see it with Western philosophers. The diversions of opinion on what Kant really meant by something, or Hegel, or Nietzsche, or Heidegger, or Derrida—it's pretty clear that some of them are writing in an ambiguous style that's open to plurality, and they're even acknowledging that, for instance Derrida.

But for us, what all this means is this infinite possibility of interpretation. It legitimizes and grounds and opens up for us this poetic artistic attitude—not just in regard to texts and Buddhist texts or whatever texts, but also to existence. This poetic attitude to existence we're talking about—alchemy—is really what that involves. Poetry and art, the poetry and art of perception.

It's actually William Blake, who was both an artist and a poet, who somewhere wrote, "A double vision is always with me." Meaning, yes, of course, I can see the things that we all agree on now in our post-scientific revolution, Western Enlightenment agreement on things. Of course I can see that. That's one of my visions. But I have another vision, a double vision, a second vision that is always with me, and that's the imaginal vision. Because multiple vision is possible. It's interesting—it's an artist and a poet, someone not a mystic, but someone who had that sensibility, that kind of attitude, and broadened it to existence.

So yes, going right back to the beginning of the talk, there's the imaginal realm conceived of as something real, or at the other extreme, conceived of as completely nonreal, completely invalid, completely a waste of time. My tendency and encouragement is more to view the imagination, the imaginal realm, not so much as something that's real, but more as a mode of attention, a mode of awareness, a mode of being. This includes conceptual frameworks and ways of looking, playing with that, modes of conceiving, modes or ways of looking. And that opens up the imaginal realm. The imaginal realm is really a mode of being, a mode of attention, a mode of awareness, ways of looking and conceiving.

William Blake wrote something even more interesting, radical, if you like, or strange-sounding to modernist ears. He said, "Imagination is the savior. Imagination is the savior, or imagination is the Christ." What does that mean? What's he on about? Imagination is the savior. Imagination is the Christ. And even within that, what does he mean when he says Christ? Saving us from what? Imagination is saving us from what?

From the flatland. From single vision, what he calls Newton's sleep. From an absence of soul-making. And also from what Friedrich Nietzsche almost kept drawing attention to—the dead end of modernist nihilism. So it's through this art and through the imaginal that the dead end of modernist nihilism can be transcended, gone through and then gone beyond. The meaninglessness that pervades existence, the valuelessness that pervades existence, as Nietzsche pointed out. It needs an art to go beyond that and not get stuck in a modernist nihilism.

And there's more to this. Imagination is the savior, is the Christ.

So if we think about the ways that we can conceive of or view or relate to perception, perceptions. One is a very normal and, for us, obvious way that perceptions are received. They're received from the reality of the world. They reflect or represent that reality. This is a normal assumption, a normal mode of conceiving of perception as we move through the world. Maybe it's necessary at times. Of course, we relate to perception that way. It's part of how we move in the world. So perception as something received.

But secondly, it's possible to relate to perception—this is more subtle—perception as something gift or grace from the divine, from God. This is also received, but it has a whole other dimensionality to it. My perception, even the simplest perception, is a gift or a grace from the divine.

But because we investigate in meditation this flexibility of perception and we investigate the dependent arising of perception, the fabrication, dependent arising of perception, we can also come to see through all that, through playing with all that in practice, that perception can also be regarded in a third way as opportunity. Perception as opportunity.

Through perceiving this way, through this cosmopoiesis, through this image, through this fantasy of myself and other and what's happening, there is opportunity as related to the word door, porta—opportunity. Porta is door in Latin—opportunity. We can, through the image, all kinds of possibilities open for us. Open for consciousness, for the heart, for the being, for the life, for meaningfulness, for soul, all of that. So perception as opportunity, as door.

And didn't Jesus say, "I am the way"? So imagination, imaginal perception as doors, as opportunities. I am the way because I am a way, if you like. Opportunity.

And related to that, fourth way of conceiving or viewing perception is—what about this? Perception as redemptive work. Perception as redemptive work. And again, tying it back to Christ. Christ is the redeemer, right? If you know the lingo from Christianity. Perception as redemptive work.

So re-enchantment as redemptive work from the disenchantment that's so pervasive through the cosmopoiesis. We are redeeming something. We're healing something, but it's through perception. But also the emphasis on work. This is something that we can actively engage in, actively practice, actively play with, like art is work. We talk about works of art.

So Tantra can be viewed as redemptive work, redeeming the whole perception of self, other world, matter, all of that. And actually one way, for those of you who are a little bit familiar with Tantric teachings—and again I hope at some point in the future to talk more about this on another retreat—we can regard the imaginal realm as what's called the sambhogakaya. It's one of the Buddha bodies, the trikaya, the three bodies of the Buddha.

So there's the aspects, if you like, of Buddha nature, or dimensions of Buddha nature, and Buddha nature in the sense of a kind of divinity really, all-pervasive, ultimate mind that is not separate from the world, from matter, et cetera. So this realm of the imaginal, the imaginal realm is the sambhogakaya. It's one of the bodies, if you like. And again, notice the language, one of the bodies of the Buddha nature, of the divinity. And again, the Christ. So tying all this together, there's similarities there. Imagination is the Christ. Sambhogakaya is the realm of the imaginal, the realm of divine appearances, the appearances of tantric deities and mandalas and Buddha realms, et cetera. All that's sambhogakaya. And it's an aspect of Buddha nature as ultimate reality, as the divinity, divine consciousness, if you like, and that way that pervades the whole world.

More, still, about this art and the art of perception. Some of you will be artists or musicians or write poetry seriously, et cetera. And don't you recognize that when we make a piece of art or music or compose music or a poem, how in making it, it makes you, it shapes you. The work itself feeds back and influences and shapes, especially if one takes one's time and edits and revises and spends time with the work in the subtle shaping of it. We shape it, it shapes us.

Similar with the imaginal and the art of perception. We're acknowledging that we shape it—there's an art there—but it shapes us too. And what I mentioned earlier, there's a recognition that we both are creating. We create this work of art, but somehow we also discover it.

Again, sometimes you have this sense—I think as Michelangelo said—it's like I'm just chipping away at the marble to reveal the sculpture that's already underneath. That's how he thought of it. Sometimes there's a sense of like, I'm getting to something, I'm revealing, I'm uncovering something. We're discovering the piece of art that we're creating. And we recognize this both/and.

And perception and imaginal perception, we can view them the same. Tom Cheetham, I read a little passage by him where he says this word "invention"—so it's another word for creation, right, invention—comes from the Latin *invenire*, which literally means to come upon, in other words, to discover. So the original meaning of invention was discovery. It's only in the late sixteenth century with the rise of the whole modern sense and experience of self and subjectivity that the whole notion of, or the whole meaning of the word "invent" came to mean to make something up. It was flipped 180 degrees, what it actually means.

But as I said, all this—this create/discover, this shaping and being shaped—we recognize that in relation to images. We recognize also this slip historically, the movement away from discovering images in the imaginal realm as if they had some kind of objective reality towards they're just made up. It's just rubbish, isn't it? And with that, correspondingly, the devaluing of the imaginal as ways of knowing, devaluing of the imaginal epistemologically.

So art, this notion of art and our encouragement then through these practices—now it's like meditation, really what I would like, and I hope you can get this feeling on this retreat—is that it extends to life. This whole notion of art extends to life, to the ways we feel and see ourself, others, the whole of existence. So art as—you know, the usual way we think about art—then the art of meditation, and the art of playing with perception and meditation, then it actually just becomes life. The thing you have to sit in a certain posture and it's all very formal, you have to go on retreat for X amount of time, just becomes life. This is how we live in the art of perception or recognizing life existence as the art of perception.

There's another little quote from Nietzsche. He writes, "We should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them, this subtle power"—the power of making things, of making beauty, of arranging things, of interpretation, of recognizing the work of art as both created and discovered, all that that's involved for artists—"for with them, this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins. But we want to be the poets of our life, first of all, in the smallest, most everyday matters."

So these little moments, little shifts, small everyday matters. The imaginal comes and touches us on the arm. Something opens in the perception just for a moment or two. These are important moments. We can go with them, open them, nourish them, explore them, capitalize on them. And the encouragement to really do that deliberately so that this art of perception extends to the whole of our existence.

And if we regard and relate to the senses that we have and the views, the perceptions that we have of the self, of the other, of the cosmos—if we regard and relate to these as works of art, listen to the words there, works of art—then to me that implies that we can never reduce or fully comprehend self, other, world. Again we're back to this inexhaustibility. As works of art, they have an inexhaustibility. The very sense of them is something that has a beyondness to it. Can never fully reduce them or to some explanation fully comprehend them.

So part of the problem with scientism is that it tries to explain everything from a certain framework and point of view and assumption and reality base, from materialism and reductionism. But this simply will not do. It simply doesn't match or meet or extend really to what needs—to the beauty of things and the soul of things and the meaningfulness of things.

So to always explain things in terms of neurology or biology or evolutionary, you know, biological evolutionism or from the reductionisms of materiality—you know, analyzing a great painting in terms of the molecular structure of the paint and the canvas, it might be interesting to a certain extent. It might explain something. But the art—where's the art? It will explain nothing about the actual art, about meaning. It will explain nothing about the meaning or the meaningfulness that that painting has for us and how it moves us and what moves us in it and what's most important to us.

So the most important thing about this painting is what it does for the soul, so to speak. And a materialist explanation can do nothing to explain that. It almost does not go anywhere at all towards explaining that.

And I would also add to this that great art, if we can use such a word without sounding pompous, great art is never going to be fully understood. There's always something that's beyond even what the artist can sometimes get their heads around or intended. It's only kind of whatever the opposite of great art is—poor art—that can be kind of summed up and explained and fully understood. There's this inexhaustibility. To me good art repays...

what we bring to it in terms of our attention, it will repay us, it will nourish us, it will delight us and open to us and reveal more and more of itself. We will discover more and more dimensions to the degree and dependent on the energy and the quality of the attention we bring to it—the openness and the fullness of our receptivity, our sensitivity, the aliveness of the energy and attention that we bring to it. To that degree it keeps repaying us.

There's a fertility to really great pieces of art. They can be appreciated in different ways, approached from different angles. If you're doing something like Hamlet, how many different ways are there of interpreting that play? Or a Beethoven symphony—you can approach it this way, that way. There's this inexhaustible richness.

All this connects to the art of perception—what we perceive as self, other, world. There's this same inexhaustibility if we really regard them as works of art. But we recognize too, filling out the parallelism, the dependent arising of the art aspect itself. The beauty, the meaning and meaningfulness, the emotions that a work of art elicits for us—we recognize this dependent arising both in the realm of conventional art and in the realm of this art of perception.

So in conventional art, the beauty, the meaning, the meaningfulness, the emotions—all of that arises dependently from the confluence, the aliveness of the interaction between artist, art piece, audience, spectator, context. The information we have, others' views about this piece influence what happens for us. Others' views about art in general or about life in general, existential views—even the artist's own views affect how we view their art. Of course they do. Or generally other authorities, people whose views we give authority to, or just the authority of the dominant culture because it's pervasive and popular. All this mixes together in a dependent arising, and the things that are important to us in the art are recognized to be dependently arisen from all that.

All this too we recognize—it's the same for the imaginal, for cosmopoiesis, for enchantment. So many parallels with art.

And again, we can go even one step further. Sometimes there's a person working with the imaginal or these ideas of cosmopoiesis who thinks, "This is nuts. This is completely crazy." Or there's that doubt about reality and unsureness that we've touched on—very normal, very understandable, maybe an important part of this process nowadays.

But again, putting it into parallel with the artistic process or our relationship with art, you probably don't consider art that you love to be nuts. It's art. It's not nuts. It's not about reality in that literal sense, so doubt doesn't enter in that way.

Even more than that, we can be deeply moved by some piece of art, whatever medium it's in, and moved not just emotionally and not just in ways that we can understand or reductively explain—"Oh, it's a piece about impermanence, it's a poem about my childhood," or whatever. The ways that art moves us go beyond what we can understand about how it's moving us or what's being moved. There's an unfathomability, a complexity, a mystery in the very resonances for the soul, the emotions, the body, the perceptions. That unfathomability in the resonance is deeply important.

It's moving to us, has its effects, all of which function without any idea that this is reality. Because we know it's art, or it's a movie, or it's a novel, or whatever. Without any notion that this is reality, yet still it does something powerful to the soul. Same thing with images, same thing with seeing an image as an image, with cosmopoiesis. It's not hampered by qualms about reality.

And it doesn't need to be realist art or even related to anything recognizable. This art, this painting or music, doesn't have to have any relation to anything recognizable in my life or in anyone's life. An abstract painting—why is it that Rothko is so moving, so deeply moving to so many people and in so many different ways? Or Howard Hodgkin. Or music that has no words to it. I can't say it's about anything you could put into words. It's not translatable. It's not reducible.

Even more than this, in terms of this relationship with reality—when we relate to something as art, it liberates it from this kind of tight, literalistic relationship with reality. And so it can do its soul work for us. It can do its transformative work. It can open up something without this hampering by all these qualms regarding realism.

I think it was Oscar Wilde—I can't remember exactly, but I recognize this for myself. He said something like how much it broke his heart, as much as any person or any event involving an actual person in his life, what happened to someone in a novel by Balzac. And I recognize this too with certain characters in novels or certain historical figures that mean a lot to me—people I've never met and who are dead now and whom I'll never meet, but somehow I care for them, I love them. As Oscar Wilde said, I care for them and love them as much as real people. Think how strange that is.

Loving a character in a novel or a fictional character that's a product of art—loving and caring for them as much as we do for the so-called real people in our lives—would strike someone locked into certain mindfulness or insight meditation dogmas as rather mad. They might quickly want to interpret it: "Oh yes, it's because they represent a facet of your heart, like your compassion or whatever."

But even with the real people in our lives—the flesh and blood friends, relatives, family, loved ones, lovers—perhaps what we love about them is their divine dimensions. This is what moves us. This is what we care about. It's not taking away anything from the human; it's actually expanding what is involved in what the human being is, or how we see human beings—both as subject and object. When I love someone, it's because I am sensitive to, and resonating with, and moved by the divine dimensions of their being. That could involve the whole of their being, but it's a way of seeing.

Often people want to think that beliefs, and also the creation of beauty in one's life and aesthetics, are for the purpose of consolation. Because of our existential situation—maybe not being able to face up to that—people believe certain things, so the idea goes. Sometimes even the creation of beauty is to soften the brute horrors of existence, the facts of our existence.

But if we question that, and if we translate the idea of believing to this idea of the flexibility of a range of conceivings—of views, of ways of looking that we're entertaining and holding lightly and not as true—and if we're also holding this idea of the otherness and the autonomy of images, of an image that means its beauty is not just created but also discovered because there's this otherness, this autonomy...

These two ideas together: belief becomes flexible range of conceptions and ways of looking, and otherness grants that we discover beauty and not just create it for our own purposes. Then the whole idea of belief and beauty being for the purpose of consolation in our life—of reassurance—that crumbles a little bit. It opens up in a different direction.

Belief and beauty are—or if you like, conceptions entertained and beauty created and discovered—aspects of the creative act of perceiving and perception. And that means they're aspects of being, because our being is perception. That also includes, as I said, the beauty of embodied action, in creativity, in kindness, in ethics.

But beauty—creation of beauty, discovery of beauty—and also this playing with, you could say playing with beliefs, or playing with conceptions and views, ways of looking, they become fields of play, fields of opportunity: soul-making. That becomes the point rather than consolation—soul-making.

So just to finish: all of this—recognizing the fact of fantasy and image in our lives, in our perceptions, and also the understanding of emptiness—these things, these two recognitions, allow this art of perception. They open it up, they form its ground, they legitimize it.

It's very different from realist, concretizing views. The dominant view of secular modernity, the existentialist views that permeate a lot of our culture, a lot of philosophy, a lot of psychology, and more and more a lot of Dharma and secular Buddhism, really are formed on, take off from, have their basis in realist assumptions—oftentimes without completely being honest about it.

So for example, the now popular replacement of the word "truths" in the Four Noble Truths by "tasks"—as I said before, it seems like an important move, but still underpinning all that is a whole assumption about what is true and what is real materially and existentially, and what's not true and not real. And that's all functioning with all kinds of limiting effects, without being acknowledged as a perspective of reality.

It's questioning myths and assumptions that opens all this up. Questioning, questioning, questioning.

Again, I'll share a passage from Nietzsche, where he says: "What is familiar is what we are used to. What is familiar is what we are used to, and what we are used to is most difficult to know. That is, to see as a problem. That is, to see as strange and distant, outside us."

In other words, these ideas that imbue our culture—as I said before, we're indoctrinated by them. We just assume that they're true and we don't even realize that they're operating. It's very hard to realize what is actually operating for us as views. Some of them we never even articulate explicitly, or everyone agrees on them. We never question them. But this questioning—questioning the assumptions and the myths that run through our views and our sense of reality—this questioning is a massive part of what opens things up.

For instance, Charles Taylor, a contemporary philosopher—he's very old now, but wrote this massive tome called *A Secular Age* on secularism. He talks right at the beginning about what he calls "subtraction stories." It's the idea that our current view of things—the view of modernity or secularity—is really what we've done: shaken off or exposed as unreal all the superstitions. We've subtracted all the superstitions and all the nonsense and all the misapprehensions.

and rubbish that people before us used to believe. Now we are the ones—if not the generation, then the period in history following the scientific revolution and the Western Enlightenment—who see things nakedly and truly as they are, because we've subtracted all that other rubbish.

You see this as well in fantasies of secular Buddhism: subtracting all the spiritual, mystical, metaphysical gobbledygook and being left with the real thing. One of the things Charles Taylor points out over the length of more than one of his books is how this modernist, secularist view is just as constructed as any other view in history. It results from new inventions, new technologies, from certain shifts in self-view and other ideas from the history of ideas—all of that is constructed and conditioned. It's not a naked, objective, existential reality that we're dealing with.

The myth of subtraction stories, he points out—he says he's devoted to exposing the falsity of those kinds of stories, so popular, so easy to swallow, so seemingly convincing.

The philosopher Michel Foucault says something similar in quite strong language. Sometimes he talked about his work as a kind of archaeology—in other words, digging down into the historical roots of any particular philosophy or position or social structure or idea or convention. In that archaeology, he says, we will ask them—these ideas or philosophies, and in this case we're talking about questioning the assumptions and the myths that we just take for granted, that seem so much a part of what is real, what is generally unquestioned.

We will ask them, he says, where they come from. Some people say, "Well, it comes from the Pali Canon." But that too, as I've pointed out elsewhere, is a historical fantasy. There's a fantasy of the Buddha, there's a fantasy of origins, there's a fantasy wrapped up in that claim, the belief and assumptions that shape certain interpretations of texts or certain historical claims as being absolute, naked things—as it was intended to be.

But Foucault says we will ask them where they come from, toward what historical destination they are moving without being aware of it. In other words, these assumptions that we have, these views that we have—there's a lot of unawareness in them, to echo Nietzsche. Then he continues: what naivety blinds them to the condition that makes them possible? Again, echoing Charles Taylor: How did this thing even come about? Is it really a naked reality, or is it also conditioned, constructed through history?

And lastly, Foucault says, what metaphysical enclosure encloses their rudimentary positivism? In other words, this idea is so popular, so seemingly convincing and appealing—that we can really be just empirically with things as they are and strip away all this so-called metaphysics and gobbledygook. But actually there's metaphysics involved in that. I've talked about this in other talks. And as Foucault says, it's an enclosure. It limits and encloses what seems to be a radicalism—a rudimentary, basic positivism: "These are the facts. We're stripping everything down to facts." Are you really doing that? Or is there metaphysics and enclosure and all kinds of unquestioned assumptions wrapped up in that?

Fundamental questioning is so important for me, so important for a practitioner, so important for our culture nowadays, so important to liberate this art.

There's another quote I'd like to read from Northrop Frye. Essentially, what he's calling criticism—this kind of questioning, what I call critique at the beginning of the retreat—what criticism or critique can do, according to Northrop Frye, is awaken students to successive levels of awareness of the mythology that lies behind the ideology in which their society indoctrinates them. An awareness of the mythology that lies behind the ideology in which their society indoctrinates them.

It grants students—this questioning grants students—an emancipatory distance, a liberating distance from their own society, and gives them a vision of a higher human state. Ultimately this transforms their experience, he goes on, so that the poetic model becomes a model to live by in what he terms a charismatic mode. It's a Greek word, but he's really talking about this mode, this art of perception—being in the mode of being of the imaginal, the art of perception, the cosmopoiesis.

Myths become myths to live by, what he calls myths to live by, and metaphors become metaphors to live in, which not only work for us but constantly expand our horizons. And that relates to the soul-making and the expansion of eros-psyche-logos that I've talked about elsewhere. What he calls entering the world, through all this, of kerygma or transformative power—the soul-making, this re-enchantment.

But it's the questioning—questioning and the insight, whether it's philosophical insight, meditative insight into dependent arising and emptiness, psychological insight, recognizing how fantasy and image imbue our lives and our perceptions. All of that is the questioning and the insights that will liberate the possibility and the range of this art of perception. Liberate also the depths to which it can be soul-making for us, nourishing and re-enchanting.

So it liberates it. Questioning and insight liberate it. They also ground it. So important.

CHAPTER 31

Energy and Transubstantiation: The Alchemy of the Body (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 43 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea explores the nuanced practice of working with the energy body, addressing common challenges and experiences that arise in meditation. He clarifies the relationship between energy body awareness and various manifestations of pīti - the pleasant bodily experiences that arise from non-sensual origins during concentrated states. Students inquire about difficulties maintaining energy body awareness in challenging environments, the heavy helmet-like sensations that can arise in deeper concentration, and how to work skillfully with agitation and contraction.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that energy body practice is not about achieving particular pleasant experiences, but rather cultivating a specific way of attending to the bodily space. He offers practical guidance for working with both pleasant and difficult energetic states, including techniques for soothing agitation and expanding awareness space. The discussion also touches on the relationship between samādhi practice and imaginal work, exploring how concentrated states can support soul-making perception.*
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> *The session concludes with reflections on enchantment and cosmopoiesis - how our ways of perceiving can 'sing into being' experiences of divinity and beauty that re-enchant our relationship with the cosmos. This represents a foundational exploration of how energy body sensitivity supports both meditative development and the cultivation of what Burbea calls 'soulful' perception.*

We'll be recording these Q&As. If you don't feel comfortable with your question being recorded, just say so and Mark will turn off the machine. Generally speaking, your questions will be helpful for other people and for you later on, but if you prefer privacy, simply let us know.

Question: Individual vs. Universal Energy Body

John asks about the distinction between speaking of "the energy body" versus "my energy body" or "your energy body," wondering if this points to there being just one energy body.

At one level, yes, there is one, and there are many, and there is none—they're all true. The languaging of "the energy body" rather than "my energy body" is partly a habit of speech, but it's also intended to create a little less of the self's tight grip around the experience. When we say "my energy body," there's often more self-evaluation and identification involved. Using "the energy body" allows a little more looseness in the relationship of identification with the experience, creating more space rather than the contracted sense of "me and mine."

This isn't necessarily pointing toward the mystical experience of everything being one big energy body—which is a very fine and important perception—but that's not so much what we're aiming for right now. Such variations can open up quite spontaneously, even on retreat, but that's not our primary focus at this stage.

Question: Difficulty Accessing the Energy Body in Different Environments

Chrissy shares that she finds it easy to rest in the energy body when sitting in the meditation hall with the group, but struggles when outside, especially in windy conditions, or when lying down where she feels the pressure on her back. She notices that when something makes her bodily edges or skin stand out, or when stronger sensations take over her sensing capacity, she can't access the energy body.

This is a very interesting observation. Part of this could simply be familiarity. The usual way we're conditioned to pay attention to the body isn't through the energy body—it's through sensations, especially if you've practiced mindfulness and insight meditation. There's a natural propensity for awareness to default to sensations.

The more you touch base with the energy body, the more you want to make it easy for yourself at first. Don't struggle too much in difficult conditions. Instead, hang out where it's accessible, getting used to what I'm calling this sensibility—this particular tuning of awareness. It becomes increasingly second nature, like learning to ride a bike with all its gears. Eventually, you can shift fluidly between sensations, energy body, and other kinds of bodily awareness.

Rather than forcing it where it's difficult, look for in-between environments where it's easier. Let the capacity expand naturally to other regions.

Here are two possibilities to explore: First, try making the awareness space bigger. When we talk about energy body or energy space, we're referring to a space that's usually somewhat bigger than the physical body. Awareness can contract very small, so consciously expanding it might help.

I could pay attention to a minute area of attention in the tip of my finger, for instance, as you can, or I can go really huge. There's a whole spectrum of gradations of how big the awareness can be.

The energy body tends to be this kind of space, but it might serve to go really big for a while and just let everything be there. You'll get maybe a mix of the more usual kinds of sensations in awareness, but they're in a bigger space, so the mind is not sucked into them so much. Do you understand? It has more room, and you just stay—it'll shrink, that's fine—and you expand as big as you can. In that space, you've got sensations and things dancing around, and maybe you can have sensations and energy in that space, and then you can tune back in.

The converse possibility is maybe very gently to go into the center of the body. So if something's on your skin, just gently explore what's happening right at the core. Sometimes for some people what can be helpful is actually using the imagination a little bit. As I said, anything goes with the imagination. But one thing that's helpful when we're talking about the core is imagining a line of energy up the body. Let these sensations be—you don't have to fight these skin sensations—but just imagine that line. Maybe it's a certain color or whatever, but feel into how that vertical axis feels energetically in the middle of the body. Does that make sense?

If you just hold that—going in a little bit more with that imagination helping—then become aware of the whole space but with that central axis. That might help as well.

But generally I'd say don't worry about it too much. This thing, as I said this morning, grows more until it becomes just another dimension of life. It's just another way we can feel the body.

A student asks: "When I'm practicing and I become more concentrated, I get a sense of what I think you call pīti, and it feels like I'm wearing a helmet or a dress or something like that. It's not tingly or anything, but it feels heavy actually. It feels as though there really is physically something there. Is that the energy body? Because it doesn't go around very much—it stays mostly around the head. Is that what you call the energy body, or is that something different?"

The sensation is described as feeling like wearing a great big hat or helmet, with a quality of pressure that's mildly pleasant.

This word pīti is a term the Buddha used quite a lot when he talked about samādhi. I would define it basically as any pleasant experience in the bodily space that arises from a non-sensual origin. In other words, I'm meditating and it arises. It's not arising out of someone touching my skin or from a taste or something like that. All these definitions have edges to them.

This pīti arises and can take many, many different forms. What characterizes it is the non-sensuality of its origin and the pleasantness. It can be extremely intense—like blow the roof off the top of your head kind of thing—or really quite mild. But it's all pīti and it's all good.

So is that the energy body? What I want to emphasize—I think I said this morning as well—the energy body is not a certain kind of experience so much. There are a lot of different experiences that can come within what we might call the energy body. It's a way of attending to the space of the body. So pīti is a certain kind of energy.

There's a lot in your question, so let's take it apart a little bit. Someone wrote me a note this morning, and I was thinking maybe a good analogy is like harmonic overtones. When you hit a note on a musical instrument, it has multiple resonances of other notes that are sometimes less loud. Are you familiar with this?

We could say all of that is the energy body. Within that, we can tune to different wavelengths of experience, or in the analogy of sound, different tones. So pīti is one wavelength—or even there are many different kinds of pīti. They're different tones within this spectrum. In a way, they're all present at the same time. We just don't notice them, funnily enough. You could think of it like that.

Does that make sense in terms of what's the energy body and what's pīti? Just for that part of the question?

"It sounds as though you're saying that all of it is the energy body. It's just a different wavelength."

So when I wrap my knuckles on that and feel the sensation—slightly unpleasant, whatever—you could call that energy body, but actually it's more a certain frequency of sensation. Energy body is usually characterized by more subtlety of the wavelength.

Does this make sense to people? These words we use—gosh, when we get to words like soul and God, it's even more complex. What are we talking about here? But there's something—after a while you get a feel for this. We're really talking about a way of pay-

ing attention and a certain dimension of our experience as human beings that oftentimes goes unnoticed, either because of our meditative training or just because people in society don't tend to talk about it.

So the kind of pīti you're describing—which is one of many, many different kinds of pīti, many different kinds of pleasure that can come up—the energy body feels that way at a certain time. As you practice more, you realize, "Oh, that's just one type," and then there are others and loads of others.

In terms of it being up here, yeah, that's normal. What I might ask is: it sounds quite static from what you're describing. Does it have any movement in it?

"It is quite static."

I mean, I have experienced the other kinds of pīti, like tingling and showering and that kind of thing, but this feels very different.

"And it feels as though—I don't know whether this is my imagination or what—but it feels as though it almost has a sort of boundary, but it's very diffuse. Which is why I wonder whether that's more like an energy body experience."

I think it's all manifestations or experiences of energy body, everything you've described. Quite characteristic of this way of working with the energy body is a sense of some kind of boundary that is quite diffuse. I don't know where it is exactly—that's quite characteristic. But it doesn't have to be. There are lots of possibilities, but that's quite characteristic.

A rule of thumb is: if it's steady, this pleasantness, relatively steady, then your job at times—if you want to go more towards samādhi—is just to enjoy it. That's your priority. That's number one—like flashing neon: enjoy, enjoy, enjoy! And how do you do that? Well, there are lots of ways of doing that.

One is to find where it's strongest. Here's this experience that's sort of up here—maybe it's completely homogeneous over that area, maybe there's an area where it's strongest, maybe sort of around here. Just as you might pay attention to the breath at the nostrils, you dive in, you focus on where it's strongest, you just nuzzle into it and really, really find the pleasure there. That's one option.

Another option is to be a bit more open with it, as if you're just bathing in this and receiving it. The whole area that's being touched by that—enjoying it, just bathing in it like it's really—and you're opening, opening.

So one mode of attention is a bit more probing, a bit more narrowly focused, really always seeking the pleasure. It's very hedonistic. It's good. The other is more like you're sunbathing and just soaking up the sun.

Make sense?

"Isn't that going into more practicing with joy and sukha?"

What we don't know is—one possibility is that as you do that, there are actually a number of possibilities. One is it just stays the same and you just enjoy it. Another possibility is that just by doing that, it starts to spread and fill the whole body. Now if we're talking about samādhi, that's something you want to gently encourage.

You have a second option there, which is to actually imagine it spreading. It feels like it just stops here. Just imagine that it spreads. Or just like—I mean not with your hands, but with your mind—just spread it in the body. And that can be like it's quite viscous, or it's really quite insubstantial and you're just spreading it.

You're painting your body with this essence. Sometimes just enjoying it, opening to it, getting into it, it will spread naturally. And sometimes it won't spread—it just stays localized. Fine, just enjoy that. So the size of it may or may not change.

If we're working towards samadhi, if that's the orientation, that's the intention, that's the conscious intention at any time, then that's what we're gently wanting to encourage—full body immersion. As the Buddha says, suffusing and saturating the whole body.

Another possibility is that as you do this, the quality of the energy changes. So it might shift, as you mentioned, to joy, or it might transform into stillness or peacefulness, or the quality of heaviness might become very light. There are all kinds of possibilities.

Now we could map territories here, but I think for now we don't need to. What you want with this kind of practice is to become a connoisseur—you know, like wine tasters who can be very discerning. We become connoisseurs in the realm of pleasure in the body. Very subtle, very strong, different kinds, different qualities. We really get to know, get familiar with each kind. Then you can start to map them out and see how that fits onto the Buddha's map of the jhānas and all that.

Does that give you a sense of how to work with this?

*_Practitioner_*: Yeah, I think I'm just wondering whether I should practice with the jhānas...

Oh, sorry. What?

Practitioner: Staying steadily with samadhi, not intensifying the pleasure or the stillness.

Oh, thank you for raising that. We have options here. If I use the word samadhi, I really mean a big spectrum of what's possible, of which the jhānas—the really deep states—are just part of that spectrum.

What needs to be clear is: what am I actually trying to do in practice right now? That means in this stretch of this sitting or walking.

At some points my intention might be towards samadhi. In the very broad sense, what that means is just gently encouraging a sense of well-being in the energy body space and the mind getting into that and enjoying it. We could say that's my samadhi direction. I'm not forcing it, I'm not pushing it, I'm not demanding, but that encompasses a whole range—from just sitting and actually not feeling pleasant and working with easing the unpleasant, to very mildly pleasant (nothing to write home about), all the way through all eight jhānas.

But that's all samadhi. So that's totally fine. You're working this subtle plasticine of the energy body, and if it feels like "this is good, this is really good," great—enjoy! If it goes into a jhāna, fine. It's all samadhi.

At other times, the intention and orientation with regard to the energy body is: "No, I'm just abiding here watching the emotional resonances." And it might be grief, it might be sadness, it might be boredom, it might be just peaceful, it might be joy. But I'm abiding with the sensitivity to the emotional resonances in the energy body. And if it's difficult—what's happening emotionally in the energy world—then I'm trying to work with that skillfully. What's helpful here? What does it need? Some love, some softness, some space, some image?

That's the second option.

The third option is working with images, which we did a little bit today. But as I say, always on this retreat, including the sensitivity to—whatever I do with images, I'm always in contact with my energy body. I'm trying to include that in the awareness because that's how I notice what's helpful, what's not, what's soul-making, what's not. The resonances, as we use that word.

Does that make sense? So broadly speaking, three options. And what's important is just clarity about what's happening.

*_Practitioner_*: And can one work with the imaginal in the full range, all through the jhānas, or just with a milder sense of samadhi?

Yeah, so the textbooks say, you know, if you're in jhāna then nothing else is going on in terms of images. What you find with a lot of jhāna practice, and what I find with teaching, is there is the possibility to be in a jhāna... See, a jhāna isn't an on-off switch. It's not black and white. When you start to get into it, you start to realize it's a territory, and there's no exact demarcation point like some people would have you believe.

But what's possible—some people find it easier than others—is to actually be in a jhāna and work with something like an image as well, or even work with a kind of skillful and reflective process. There are all kinds of possibilities. So I wouldn't exclude it.

You'll have to find out what's possible for you. If you're just learning the jhanas, generally speaking, I would say it's better to keep them more pure at first and learn the really pure version—nothing else is going on but this joy or whatever it is. And then after a while, you can realize that actually more may be possible.

Maywa's asking about the meditation we did today with the imaginal figure of love. She discerns two kinds of unfolding that happen there. One is tuning into the particulars and the character of that person. The other is a kind of movement towards dissolving together into one another and something more universal. How would we describe what happens then?

"The personal dissolves," she says, "but then I remember Catherine talking about keeping the personal, so then I try to keep it sitting with me."

When it dissolves, there are many kinds of dissolving. Sometimes the figure is in the body, sometimes different variations occur. Let's say for now—and this is part of the reason why we did this on day one of this retreat—everything's good in the big picture of things, but I think on this retreat we're wanting to stay more with the character of the imaginal figure, like that sense of it.

What you might find is that it dissolves in a way where your person and their person just dissolves in a kind of oneness of something like love. That's a beautiful experience. It's not so much what we're interested in on this retreat. That's a more likely experience in the kinds of meditation that we might teach—metta or insight meditation.

There's another way of it dissolving, which is what I've been calling cosmopoiesis. What happens is: here I am with this character—and I'll say more about this tomorrow, but let's just say a little bit now. I'm tuned to their character. I feel their love. I'm taking that in. There are resonances. I see their beauty and I see also their divinity. What does that mean? I don't know. Let's just leave it open for now, in fact.

There is a sense that they're more than the usual way our culture tends to think about the human being, or if they're even a human form at all. There's a divinity here, and I'm seeing the beauty of that. Something in my soul is touched by that sense of divinity. They're not losing the human. It's almost like extending the range—if there's a human figure or an animal figure—extending the range of what's there.

And then sometimes what can happen is, in being with that and the soul being touched by that beauty, by that love, by that divinity, it's as if the character of that soul starts to spread. So it's not just universal love; it's their love with their character. And somehow the whole of nature or cosmos is imbued with that particular character of that being. Does that make sense?

So something's gone from a singular, particular imaginal figure to what I would call a particular cosmopoiesis that's characterized with the same personality. Here are the trees, the sky, the earth, and somehow it's that figure and their divinity and their love writ large, imbued into the fabric of the cosmos. Cosmopoiesis—enchanting the cosmos in a very particular way.

That's the distinction that I think we're trying to lean more toward—it's the rarer variety in the kind of circles we tend to move in. The other one of just universal love or universal awareness is more normal as practice deepens in insight meditation and metta and those kinds of things. But we'll touch base about that again tomorrow.

I really like what you just said, but it feels quite a long way away. It sounds very interesting, that idea. My experience with the love figure was that at the beginning a lot of grief came up with the particular person that I'd chosen, and so I chose somebody else. And then I found that kind of opening happening. I just wondered if that was...

Yeah, absolutely. And go with the simpler one. All this is flexible. You know this anyway when you do the metta categories—someone's your benefactor, then they look at you the wrong way one day for half a second and hey, down to division four, you know? So it's all... go with... This is part of what we talk about—the sensitivity to the energy, what it's like. Okay, an hour ago it was her or him or whatever, and now this is just too complex. Go with what actually opens in the moment and trust that. So it's not so fixed.

A lot of the questions are quite advanced, if you like. I just want to make sure—the nuts and bolts of the energy body—if there's anyone feeling like, "yikes," or... Yeah, Lauren?

This kind of leads on from Chris's question about being outside and getting a sense of energy. It's very similar to Rowan's experience as well—piti in the hands, dropping, spreading a sense of pleasure, and kind of feeling like it's a little bit outside of the boundary of the skin. Outside, noticing very much a sense of appreciation, which feels good—flowers, birds, everything. Just wondering where to take that. It's not much of a sense of any energy body, just maybe a lightness to the body. Just wondering what avenue to take with that.

Keep the appreciation going. Open up to look for sensations. Maybe use the imagination within the sense of the energy body.

Okay, so I think maybe this goes back to "no right and wrong." Today we said emphasize the energy body, but as the retreat goes on, we're going to open up more the possibility. You say, "Okay, there's not much of a sense of the piti, but the lightness is there. The body feels light." That's energy body. If we go back to the musical analogy, that's a certain wavelength. Great.

So one option you have is: okay, just be with the lightness. That's tuning into the energy body. And let that... the lightness may not be obviously pleasant at first. When I start to pay attention to it and let it fill, I start to see, "Oh, actually lightness—we like the body feeling, generally speaking. It's nice, it's a pleasant feeling." It's more subtly pleasant.

So one option you have is—we have to be careful here. Energy body is not a certain experience. So if I had this piti, now I'm trying to get that back because that's the energy body. No. The energy body is a way of paying attention. And so lightness is also fine. It's good. So that's one option.

The appreciation—you've got appreciation as well. It's a really, really important part. I think hopefully this will get clearer. Sometimes it's just appreciate and don't... it's just let the heart appreciate, let the being, the senses appreciate. You don't have to try and do anything with that.

But there is... there's a third option that we're going to emphasize a little more, which is... I can't remember whose question it was now. But in response to Miwa... so...

Appreciation, like everything else, comes with a whole scale to it. It can be mild appreciation, it can be something that touches us so deeply that the soul is moved. And I think what we want to say is when the soul is moved...

What's happening there? Now there's something occurring in the energy body, there's something happening in the heart. There's also something happening in the perception.

When I'm moved, when the soul is deeply touched, when there's what I call soul making, when there's soulfulness there, the perception of whether it's a tree or nature or another human being or some image—the perception has got more dimensionality to it.

This tree is a bunch of atoms, and I can appreciate that—wonderful! I can go to the molecular structure and photosynthesis—fantastic! Other more soul-making appreciations have other dimensions. It's not obvious because we don't talk about it in our culture. We don't have a language for it, and we want to emphasize a lot on this retreat.

It's not something separate from the tree or the materiality of the tree or the nature of the tree or the evolution of the tree. But in and through the appearance is something that we might call a divinity or other dimensions. That might come into your appreciation. Partly what we're interested in is opening the sensibility to that.

Because the way that we're talking about, the way that we're defining imaginal, the way that we're defining cosmic oasis, and the way that we're defining enchantment—we could define all those in different ways. As we're talking about, that's a key aspect. So it might be that you start to pick up on that more.

Is this making sense?

If that's there, then as the retreat goes on, that's the kind of thing where we're still in touch with the lightness in the body or how that feels, but, ooh, what is that? Can I see the beauty of the divinity, or the divinity of the beauty in what I'm appreciating? Could be purely intra-psychic image, could be something in nature, could be another person, could be a memory of a friend.

Does this make sense? So this is the kind of thing we're going to be talking about. Our culture doesn't have a language for this, unfortunately. But if that makes sense, then you've got different options.

"My energy body, my experience today—sun's been present but also for all sorts of reasons that I'm likely going to—there's quite a lot of agitation out there."

Absolutely. It's totally okay. I'm thankful someone actually says that because you're not going to be alone. So thank you. What's your name?

"Jen."

Look, when we talk about energy body, we're definitely not talking about just a pleasant experience. If anyone comes to me and says, "My energy body is always pleasant," I just say, "You're not paying attention. Pay attention." It contracts, it opens, it softens, it hardens, it gets pleasant, it gets unpleasant. Sometimes across quite a narrow spectrum, sometimes a really big spectrum. That's the deal.

Again, going back to what's the intention at any time in practice. When it's difficult, contracted or tight or agitated, as you say, the question is: What does it need right now? What does it need?

Agitation might need a kind of soothing. Maybe you can soothe in lots of different ways. I'm not forcing it to be different. I'm responding with care to something. That's really important. There's a caring response to how this feels.

Sometimes it's just in the kind of attention we pay attention with. So again, like we said with Chrissy, one option is just going to a much bigger space and letting the agitation kind of rumble around, but it's rumbling around in a much bigger space, and that can tend to help.

Sometimes it's about almost imagining an energy of warmth, for instance, around the agitation and something soothing. Now it could be a full-blown imaginal figure doing something with love, or it could just be kind of energetic imagining—if that makes sense—partly visual, but something soothing.

You can use your breath to soothe the agitation. So you can really play with it. Again, you're not forcing something, rejecting something to be different. You're caring, like you would if a baby's agitated.

I mean, sometimes, of course, parents in the midst of exhaustion do get frustrated—"Just stop crying!"—but that's life. Generally though, the instinct is to wonder, "Oh, what can I do to soothe this little one?" And there are countless possibilities.

Sometimes what's needed is recognizing that there's an emotion creating the disturbance in the energy body, and we want to tune more toward that emotional aspect. It becomes a question of what does this emotion need? So our attention isn't purely physical—it can be deeply emotional as well.

Just in terms of how we pay attention: when there's something difficult—agitation or contraction or grief or whatever—the normal human reaction includes some aversion to it. Rather than judging that aversion, one skillful option is to become more interested in the aversion itself rather than going straight to the underlying feeling. Can I relax around this resistance? Can I soften around that secondary layer? Sometimes dealing with our reactivity to the reactivity can be tremendously helpful.

And thank you for bringing this up, because it's crucial to understand—anyone paying attention will notice this is simply the nature of the beast. What we want is for our range to expand, to be okay with all of that—all the coming and going. We want to be skillful when experience is pleasant, skillful when it's difficult, and also skillful when it's neutral, because there's real art in recognizing that "nothing much is happening here" can actually open into something profound.

We should stop for tea, but let me address this beautiful question about re-enchantment. You're asking if it means putting song back into the cosmos, connecting it to cosmopoiesis—the making of worlds through something like music. There's another meaning of enchantment that involves being trapped, captivated in an unskillful way, losing our center to some compulsive idea or craving.

But there are different kinds of skillful enchantment, beautiful enchantment. It relates to the French enchanté—to spell, to magic. Re-enchanting the cosmos, "the poetry of perception"—which I think was this retreat's title—recognizes that we are the poets. We create poetry through our perceiving, through our sensing of the world.

The poet sings, and I mean this in the broadest sense. Through our ways of looking, we sing beings into existence. We chant into being something that re-enchants the world. It's a deliberate use of these words, recognizing that perception itself is fundamentally creative. Through understanding this, we can open up divinity and beauty.

Should we have just one minute of silence together before we end?

[One minute of silence]

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 32

On Orientations in Practice (Live and Shortened version)

Rob Burbea · 48 min

> *In this dharma talk from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat, Rob Burbea presents a radical shift in meditation orientation, moving away from conventional emphasis on continuity of mindfulness toward flexible ways of looking. He introduces the energy body as a central practice tool—not merely mindfulness of physical sensations, but a subtle attunement to the vibrant field around and through the body.*
>
> *Burbea challenges several dominant assumptions in contemporary insight meditation: the priority of continuous mindfulness, atomistic attention to moment-by-moment processes, and realist approaches to experience. Instead, he advocates for deliberately moving in and out of different ways of looking as a path to understanding dependent arising and emptiness. This flexibility serves multiple purposes: developing samādhi through energy body harmonization, skillfully working with emotions as they manifest energetically, and using felt sense as a navigator for practice.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes precision through subtlety rather than microscopic awareness—discerning the effects of different ways of looking on emotions, energy body, freedom, and world perception. Burbea encourages creative experimentation with practice, using soul resonance and energy body feedback as guides rather than adhering to prescribed techniques. The ultimate aim is various forms of loosening that open practitioners to deeper experiences of beauty, sacredness, and the eternal through this more artistic, poetic approach to perception and practice.*

Good morning everyone.

I want to talk a little bit about practice this morning. For now on the retreat, we want to be emphasizing the energy body. I'm not going to repeat much about the energy body because we've asked you to listen to all those talks explaining this material. I will mention that there will be a chance to ask questions about this later today, so if you feel unsure about certain experiences or how they fit together, we'll have that opportunity.

Let me say very briefly about the energy body: What are we talking about when we say energy body? It's a little bit different than the usual mindfulness of sensations that we're used to in the insight meditation tradition or in the mindfulness teachings. When

I hit my knuckles on the wall and feel the sensations there, when I feel the coolness of the air on my skin, when I feel the sensations on the hands with water running from the tap—this is all what we're used to: mindfulness of sensations.

This overlaps with what we might call mindfulness of the energy body. They overlap, but I would say we're tuning with a different sensibility when we talk about energy body. It's a different kind of tuning, and that ability to tune that way grows with practice. At first, it's a strange thing—what are they on about? But as we do it more, it becomes just part of one's life, that kind of sensibility to the body.

We're really talking about this space, a little bit bigger than the physical body—that field, that field of vibration, of feeling, of texture, of energy. We're talking about a sensitivity to that, a tuning to that, to what's there. In some ways, we might say that when we use a word like "energy body," it's as much that we're talking about, or perhaps more that we're talking about, a kind of awareness, a kind of sensitivity, a sensibility. We're talking about a subtlety of attention, more than a particular experience.

We're talking about a kind of way of paying attention more than about the body per se, or a certain experience like "I remember when I had this flow of energy—that's what the energy body is." No, that's a certain experience. We're talking about paying attention in a different mode, a different way. It's a way of feeling the body, a way of attending or attuning to this field, this space here—the space of and the space around the body.

Why do we do this? There are a number of reasons. One of them is for the sake of what I would call samadhi—meaning the chance to energize the body and the mind, to nourish the body and the mind, to rest body and mind, to let that whole field here, this space here with the awareness, become bright and calm. That serves as a real resource in our lives. There's so much that we can benefit from learning to harmonize the energy body and dwell in that and let the awareness spread in that. The energy body is an integral factor of all samadhi—it's a way of approaching samadhi.

The second reason is it's really helpful in relation to our emotional life. What reverberates, what resonates in the body, in the energy body, expresses and reflects our emotions—some of the very subtle micro-nuances of our emotional life. To have some facility with that, to have a way of approaching it and holding it via the energy body, can be really skillful, really helpful when there's difficult emotion, but also when there's lovely emotion, and also surprisingly helpful when there's very subtle emotion, not really much going on.

The third reason for emphasizing the energy body is that it can serve as a kind of navigator, a kind of indicator of when we're on the right track. It serves to help guide us in practice. Whether that's imaginal practice in the sense of soul making, or an emptiness practice, or samadhi, or metta, or whatever—insight practices—there's a way it can really serve well to tell us, to give us a sense of when we're on track, when things feel in harmony. We're on the right track when something's opening, softening, loosening, energizing, whatever it is.

For all these reasons and more, when we come to talk about imaginal practice and cosmopoiesis and the kind of things that we're talking about, we can't do that all day. Imaginal practice all day is kind of too much for the psyche really. So we want to be going back and forth between practices. This is one of the things we really want to emphasize on this retreat: this flexibility. Flexibility between different approaches at different times, sensitive to what's helpful. But whatever we do, the energy body is going to be a part of it.

We're not going to lose connection with the energy body. That's the encouragement. So whatever direction or orientation at any time in practice, the energy body is an integral part of that and is involved. We're connected with that. We're sensitive to it.

I said today we'll unfold instructions as the week goes, but today really to have more emphasis on the energy body—on being aware of that, on playing with that, and dwelling with that, whether that's just collecting in the samadhi or just being sensitive to the emotions there, or whatever. A bit more emphasis on that, but even now, starting today, you can be fluid between these different practices.

So you can move between images and an image, resonate with the energy body and come back to the energy body, or from images to feeling the energy body and then go to the samadhi. Do you get a sense of how you can move between these? Or you might be dwelling with an emotional resonance in the energy body and then that gives rise to an image. So there is flexibility, but today a bit more emphasis on just dwelling with the energy body. But there's that fluidity.

And maybe you got the sense listening to those talks that anything goes. Anything goes here. The range of creativity and ways of working with the energy body—whatever works, it's fine. Even if you think, "This is the weirdest thing that I've ever experienced," if it's working, it's fine. So really, this encouragement on this retreat from both Catherine and me, to really be creative. Let yourself be creative.

But when we talk about energy body, we're really talking about a kinesthetic felt feeling of energy. So you might be working with a visual image or whatever, but it's always going to be coming back to this felt sense.

I'll talk at the end about walking in the energy body, but maybe just to say some general things about practice on this retreat. Let me say two things about teachings and listening.

It's interesting how we read and listen as human beings because often we read and listen from within a certain box of what we understand. And that's sometimes really necessary because we need to build these boxes, these containers of understanding and sort of let them grow, consolidate them. The downside of that sometimes is that we don't hear what's outside of our box. So we're hearing from a certain framework and we actually don't hear what's new. We sometimes literally don't hear it or we chop a bit off it or we convert it into something so it sounds like what's already in my box. "I'm not really hearing anything new here."

So this is tricky, it's a balance. We need to consolidate structures of understanding and at the same time we need to be aware of this human tendency not to hear the new, almost not to be challenged. Does that make sense?

Holding both those poles in mind, I wonder sometimes if it's possible to listen in general on this retreat—or reading a book or whatever it is, other retreats—and actually listen in a different way. I'm listening for what doesn't fit into my box. Listening to grow, listening to stretch, listening to challenge.

Second thing, related to that and related also to the sort of dichotomy there, is sometimes we listen or we read and we really focus in on one thing, one real small detail that seems to us to be helpful or that fits in our box and resonates. And this is really important. We're listening for that richness of detail.

For most people, for most of us, it's a little harder to listen or read what I would call structurally—listening for the wider relevance. How does this fit in to the bigger picture of what's being presented, or how does all this fit together? Oftentimes we don't really listen. We just hear this bit or that bit. We don't listen in a wider way. But there's something about listening and getting a bigger picture that will help the details and will help confidence in practice and growth in practice.

So again, it's not easy for most human beings. We don't have minds that work that way naturally. But if you can, and if you're not sure why on earth I'm going on about something... I remember a talk years ago, I was saying something about quantum mech-

anics and someone just said, "Oh, I just thought you got lost on a tangent." And it was very relevant for the whole point. But it was obvious to me what the relationship was—I should have made it clear.

So if you're not clear, ask. But there's something about listening structurally, listening for the greater relevance of what's being said, how it fits together.

Now I want to say something about the emphasis of practice in this retreat. This is general now. I'm not giving so much nuts and bolts instructions this morning because you should be familiar with that. So I'll say some things and hope you can remember this over the retreat, because what I'm talking about is also habits of orientation.

Generally, in the insight meditation culture and also in other spiritual traditions, there are certain attitudes or orientations or emphases, inclinations and assumptions that kind of get pretty entrenched for us, so much so that we often don't even realize that they're operating as a kind of bedrock of our practice. It's just how we think and what we do. And they become quite dominant in the culture and in our individual practices. They're very prevalent.

What Catherine and I would like to do is actually break that up a little bit, loosen these up.

One of them has to do with concentration, and I mean that in two modes. Especially if you're familiar with the insight meditation tradition, there's a lot of emphasis on continuity of mindfulness, right? Not here. I don't care about that. No, more than I don't care—I'd rather you weren't. And I'll explain what the alternative is.

Mindfulness becomes a way to live. If I could—we acknowledge that it's not possible—but if I could, it would be best if I was continually mindful. I would like to question that and disrupt that and replace it with a notion of flexibility of ways of looking. Deliberately moving in and out of, consciously in and out of, different ways of looking rather than trying to be mindful all the time. Trying to create mindfulness as a way of life as if it's an end in itself. We could say a lot about that. We may or may not come back to it on this retreat, but I don't want to dwell.

So rather than continuity—and we have to ask, why continuity? I'm not going to answer this, but why has this become so central and such an unquestioned assumption in the dharma? What's underneath that assumption? Actually, there's quite a lot underneath it. Maybe later.

The second aspect of concentration—first is continuity, second is not just the continuity of mindfulness but the continuity of focus. How many times as a teacher have I heard people really trying to just stay with one object, usually the breath, and sometimes decades of frustration at trying to do that. Now, I'm not saying that doesn't have its place, but so often it gets prioritized, this focusing, staying with one thing, keeping the attention steady.

When we use the word samadhi, we're talking more about this harmonization, well-being in the energy body, and less about focusing the mind and keeping it on one thing. Some of you can probably recognize, hearing this, how we become wedded to certain ideas.

So for this week at least, I'd like to shake a little bit of this up, loosen it.

The second thing is what we might call atomism, related to what we just talked about, but this kind of shrinking the mind to smallness, as if seeing small details, the moment-to-moment process, or how finally this or that sensation can be revealed to consciousness. Fine, it has its place, but it's also limited. It's not something on this retreat that we're particularly interested in, both in terms of attention and also in terms of understanding, as if the atomistic process is something real, that there really are moments, that there really are all that.

Third, we'll come back to this in the retreat, is a kind of realism or reificationism. Everything that we're doing is not based on reality claims or truth claims. Maybe this sounds abstract, but once you start questioning, one realizes just how much of most teachings and most practice orientations, most psychotherapies, is all based on some kind of reality claim. What is it to just take that away? What does that free up? What does that allow? Extremely radical.

Another one—we touched on it last night a little bit—is just the emphasis on solitude and self-sufficiency. If we can open that out, as Catherine mentioned last night. Yes, there is a place for solitude, but what is it to open up more to the togetherness and the relationships? Again, insight meditation, Theravada Buddhism has a lot of focus on solitude and self-sufficiency. And it can become, for us, "it would be better if I could be more self-sufficient and solitary."

And just generally, how much we absorb ideas from the cultures that we're in—the wider culture, but also the dharma culture—and we don't quite realize how much power they have. A tremendous amount of power. All kinds of ideas about where we're going, how we should be, "it would be better if this." So much power, and prison, really, from these kinds of things.

Part of what we're doing is wanting to question these kinds of things. None of them are bad, none of them are wrong, these things that I've mentioned. It's just they tend to get over-emphasized and dominant, even to the point of exclusion.

The opposite doesn't have a place, and in that, our practice becomes limited. As much as some of these ideas are helpful, they are also limiting.

Rather than being caught in these constraints, I want to offer something different: the idea of flexibility of ways of looking, deliberately moving in and out consciously of different modes of being, perception, ways of looking. Why do this? Because this is what reveals to us the dependent arising of things. This is what reveals to us the emptiness of things.

If I'm just mindful, I will not know that. It will not come. I will not have that depth of insight. I need to move flexibly in and out. And I see—when I look this way, this is what the world looks like. This is what appears. When I look another way, that's what appears. Dependent arising. Emptiness.

What we want is to really develop this flexibility and this availability of different ways of looking. This, to me, is really what this retreat is about, but in general also what we're interested in developing. So sometimes, you know, in the week, it's really fine. It's okay to not practice—to have periods where there's some basic mindfulness, but you're actually not practicing. What's more important is the deliberate moving in and out at times and noticing what happens. And we'll talk more about this.

Sometimes people wonder about precision. Where's the precision if I'm not practicing in my usual way of close, mindful scrutiny to the details of my experience? What happens to precision in practice?

Precision is not in the microscopic consciousness or the microscopic understanding of things. What I'd like to say is the precision is more in a kind of subtlety and clarity of differentiation, discerning between different ways of looking. What exactly is involved in this way of looking that I'm engaging in right now? What exactly is involved? How is this way of looking—that I'm looking, that I'm sensing in, knowing in right now—how is it subtly different from one that sounds quite similar?

This is not easy—it's a different orientation of thinking about practice. What exactly are the effects in this moment of this way of looking? On my emotions, on the energy body, on my sense of freedom, on my sense of self, on my sense of another, on my perception of the world. This is where the precision is—noticing these subtleties. And why?

Why is it that when I look this way, I see like this? There's a lot of insight here—I'm talking about just a different way of approaching practice, a different core idea underneath practice.

So that's where the precision is, rather than in the microscopic detail or the microscopic concepts.

One of the things I would say we're interested in opening the door to is the possibility of subtlety—the possibility of a subtlety of awareness, a subtlety of sensibility. Now we're not making a hierarchy here. It's not like, "Okay, not focus but subtlety is what we're going for." Rather, we don't want to prevent subtlety. So we want to keep the door open to subtlety. And gross is good too. So it's not always about being subtle.

But there's something about deepening more generally in meditation—generally speaking, I would say deepening involves and to some degree corresponds to an increase in subtlety. Again, this is not something we usually think about. How long can I stay with the breath or whatever? I'm just introducing another domain or dimension of experience that we tend not to think about so much.

And again, the subtlety is not in the microscopicness of attention or "this moment" and how fast I can speed up a second or whatever. But when we use words like subtlety, it's really subtlety of the vibrations, for instance, in the energy body that we're aware of, or the tones—the emotional tones—or the wavelengths. We become more sensitive to more subtlety there, to the subtlety of resonances, the subtleties of emotional movements and states, shades of emotion, refinements of perception in general.

So this is actually, I would say, quite important to be able to open to gradually—gradually more and more over the months and years of practice.

I'm going to leave a bit out. I don't want to overload you. There'll be a chance for questions.

As we journey through this retreat together, you'll find there's going to be a wealth of practice suggestions, instructions, and explorations offered. The unfolding won't be particularly linear - apart from our initial emphasis on the energy body, this isn't structured as a progression where we master one level before advancing to the next. Sometimes you might find yourself on day five thinking, "I wish they'd mentioned that at the beginning," or conversely, feeling ready for something introduced earlier. This is simply the nature of how understanding must unfold in time.

Please don't feel overwhelmed by the abundance we're offering. Sessions are being recorded, so you can always return to what resonates. Take what feels alive for you and let the rest go. Don't worry if certain practices feel too complex or if you feel you've missed something important. In truth, everything we're exploring is interconnected and inseparable - we only separate it to communicate in chunks through time, since we can't download it all instantaneously. This is just how teachings must be shared, so I encourage you to remain flexible with this process.

What we're engaging in may differ from how many people typically approach practice - that familiar mode of simply being with the body, waiting receptively for whatever arises, then staying present with that experience as it comes and goes. This receptive, passive approach is certainly beautiful and valid, but I believe it becomes quite limiting if it's our only mode of practice.

Instead, we'll be offering many suggestions and practices that actually ask you to deliberately engage specific ways of looking, rather than just "hanging out and being with what is." We'll be moving in and out of these deliberate ways of seeing. This usually isn't our habit, particularly when we come to imaginal practice and what we might call practices of enchantment or cosmopoiesis. For many people, deliberately entering these cosmopoetic ways of looking represents unfamiliar territory.

While these images and cosmic ways of seeing can certainly arise spontaneously - and that's wonderful - we're also working with them deliberately. With everything we offer, you might try something and find it doesn't quite work, then refine your approach. Here's what's crucial: be careful to use your energy body and your sense of soulfulness as your compass. If a practice resonates something in your soul, even if it needs refinement, let that be your guide rather than mechanically persisting with something that doesn't stimulate genuine soul-making.

In classical Tantric teachings, you might receive a prescribed deity to work with, a specific image given to you. But our encouragement is different - pursue and stay with only those practices that truly resonate in and for your soul, even if the practice initially seemed contrived or externally suggested. What matters isn't the origin but the soul resonance and your sensitivity to recognizing it. When you feel that resonance, you're onto something precious.

Let this sense of soulfulness guide you completely. Without it, there's a real danger that any kind of practice - not just these approaches we're exploring - can become lifeless, soulless, ultimately pointless except perhaps as an exercise in concentration or visualization. Nothing deep or significant for the soul gets touched, stirred, moved in both senses of the word - brought alive, enriched, deepened.

This sense of soulfulness tells you when you've struck gold, when you've found treasure. The practice might still feel difficult or confusing, but there's gold present. You can sense it.

So throughout this retreat, I really encourage you to play with these practices, to experiment freely. Let yourself be creative. We'll be offering much, but think of it like stepping into a vast artist's studio where we've just opened all the doors. There are paints and canvases, materials for sculpture, video equipment - you can simply play. You can decide what calls to you, work systematically if you prefer, or stay with one approach. Can we bring this spirit of creative exploration to our practice?

But this raises a crucial question: What's the point? What is the actual point of practice? Sometimes, especially as long-term practitioners, we lose track of why we're doing this. Or perhaps our original motivation has hardened into something that part of us no longer truly believes in, something that's no longer alive for our soul. We might find ourselves borrowing Buddhist language or repeating concepts we've heard in countless talks and books, but we must ask: Is this truly my point? Is this the point for my soul? Or has my sense of purpose become half-dead?

This is profoundly human, this questioning of motivation and meaning. We'll likely revisit this throughout the retreat, but let me be clear about the point of all these practices we'll be offering.

It's certainly not to make you believe this or that, or to convert you to some new religion. Catherine and I aren't trying to convince you of particular beliefs about the self, about life, or about the world. Nor is the goal to achieve any specific perception - getting a vision of your body as red energy or any particular experience. Those might arise and be wonderful, but they're not the point.

Or perhaps some other perception altogether. But rather, through all these practices, through this exercising of the flexibility of ways of looking, through exploring an attitude, a relationship with practice that's more like art, more like poetry in relation to perception—through these things, loosening happens.

Actually many kinds of loosening happen. And that to me is a big point: many kinds of loosening. What are the different kinds of loosening that happen? This is of fundamental importance, these different kinds of loosening that occur.

But even more than that, a sense, a perception, a knowing comes through all these practices—something, if you like, maybe vague, maybe undefined, unarticulated, maybe with a lot of variation in your experience or others' experience because of the

ways of looking—but a sense, a perception, an opening, a knowing, a deepening of the sense of beauty, of sacredness. This is more, if you like, the central point. Not a particular thing—it can happen in all kinds of ways.

And even more, a knowing of eternity. A knowing of the eternal, of the timeless. Many possibilities here. And these possibilities—they open, they deepen, they widen. They become more and more accessible in our lives, more and more available to the being, more and more frequent. So I would say at the bottom of it, that's the main point of all the practices.

So today this dwelling in, being with, emphasizing the abiding in the energy body as the primary thing—that would be the main emphasis today as much as possible. And within that there are different orientations.

So it can orient towards the cultivation of the harmony and the sense of harmonization, well-being in that field, and the mind dwelling in that and enjoying that and moving towards that, gently encouraging that—this is one orientation.

At other times it might be just sensitive to the energy body and maybe there's some difficulty there or emotional resonances. Maybe difficult, maybe lovely, maybe actually neither—just subtle. And there's a way of being with the energy body, just paying attention or working skillfully, gently, helpfully with whatever's going on emotionally as it's playing out in the energy body. And if images feel like they are coming, arising in relation to that, or they feel helpful in relation to that, let that come and go too.

Let yourself be flexible, but the energy body is always involved. We're not losing connection with that. We're not losing the sensitivity to that. Or rather we're encouraging the sensitivity to that as part of what's going on.

Opening, opening—there's such a tendency for the awareness to shrink, so just opening again. It's really about tuning, tuning the attention. Not so much in terms of location as in terms of wavelength or vibration, if you like, resonance in the space. Maybe at times about location, but it's more about the tuning, the kind of awareness.

What we're going to try on this retreat is to have an open schedule, just to see how that goes. Which means you can come and go in terms of this space here, the main hall, as you like. You can come and sit for three hours straight. You can come and sit for ten minutes, any time. And obviously just try and be relatively quiet. But basically it's an open space. So you find your rhythm with the sitting and the walking and the standing meditation and so forth. Is that clear enough?

Be careful if you prioritize sitting. You're not just sitting. Those of you who are sitting a lot—it may be that the action really, the fruit is in the walking or in the standing or whatever. So don't be so much about "I should be sitting." Just find what's really helpful for you.

But there's an open schedule; let's see how that goes.

With the walking meditation for today, can we do the walking meditation again emphasizing the energy body? So many of you are familiar with what does it feel like in the soles of the feet or in the legs, the mindfulness, the sensations. Let's do it differently and see: can I walk up and down on my walking path sensitive to this field, the energy body?

Or some of you may be walking and there's a sort of vast panoramic awareness of the whole space and the sky. All of these are wonderful.

I think for us today, let's see if we can do the walking and walk up and down with the sensitivity of the energy body. Just the same with the sitting.

As in all practice, you might need to experiment a little bit. What's helpful? Do I need to walk slower to allow that at this time? And maybe half an hour later it's faster? Or do I need to walk really fast? So play with, for instance, the pace of the walking that allows you to get the sensitivity to the energy body.

You can stop and stand at any point. So halfway through your walking path, you might stop and actually feel, "Oh, when I'm still now, actually this feels good and that's helpful, the energy body." Really explore the rhythm of the walking, the pace, and when you stop and stand. You might end up standing most of the walking period—no problem. Just really what's helping this awareness of the energy body.

Now there's formal walking, walking up and down between two points, which you're all very familiar with. And there's informal walking. I'm going to lunch, I'm going to a group or whatever it is, I'm going to get a cup of tea. See if you can take some of those opportunities too. Just what is it to walk from here to get my cup of tea and be in the energy body, or back to the hermitage wing or wherever you're staying, and actually just walk in the corridor in the energy body? Just for a little bit, play with this.

In general, probably for most people, as you're walking around the house, it's good to slow down. That will help this energy body awareness. Again, not because we're aiming for microscopic awareness and that we're going really slow, but just the slowness will help the energy body awareness for most people.

CHAPTER 33

"I Sing The Body Electric": On Orientations in Practice

Rob Burbea · 1h08

> *In this opening talk from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat, Rob Burbea introduces the foundational practice of working with the energy body—a subtle awareness of the body's energetic field that serves as guidance for samādhi, emotional navigation, and insight practice. Drawing inspiration from Walt Whitman's phrase "I sing the body electric," Burbea explains how this sensitivity involves both discovering and creating our embodied experience through different ways of looking.*
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> *The talk critiques five prevalent orientations in modern Dharma that constrain practice: concentration (as continuity and narrow focus), atomism (microscopic attention), reification (taking experiences as ultimately real), solitude (exclusively inward focus), and sanitization (conformity to conventional expression). These form the acronym CRASS or SCARS, highlighting how they can limit the subtlety and depth available in meditation.*
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> *Burbea advocates instead for flexible exploration of different ways of looking, recognizing the dependent origination and emptiness of all perceptions. He emphasizes that deepening in meditation involves increasing subtlety of awareness rather than microscopic focus, and encourages practitioners to let soulfulness and resonance in the energy body guide their practice choices. The ultimate aim is not achieving particular perceptions but cultivating ongoing access to timelessness, beauty, and sacredness through this attitude of "poetry of perception."*

At the beginning of the retreat, for the first couple of days at least, our encouragement is for all of us to really emphasize the awareness of practicing with what we've been calling the energy body. You are asked to review and become familiar with that whole area of practice before the retreat. So I'm not going to repeat instructions much about that at all, or address the actually infinite range of possibilities that are there with that and are available with working with the energy body. Hopefully we'll have some Q&As so people can ask, or in the groups or individual meetings, you can ask about working with that in terms of what comes up.

But just to say right now, very briefly, a few general things in a short summary around that. Just to remind you: the energy body, when we use that term, we're talking about mindfulness of the body, but it's a different kind of mindfulness than, say, the

usual mindfulness of sensations that we're mostly accustomed to hearing about and practicing within the insight meditation world and the mindfulness world. The mindfulness of how it feels—what are the sensations with the hands under the running water of the tap, what are the sensations of the breeze on the cheek, or when I lift and move and place the foot and the foot touches the ground in walking meditation or whatever—this is the more usual presentation of mindfulness of sensations. Very important, very lovely area of practice, direction of practice.

And in a way, when we talk about energy body as a mode of mindfulness of the body, it overlaps with that mindfulness. It's not really something completely different. It overlaps, but really there's a different tuning, if you like. We're tuning a different sensibility than the usual mindfulness of sensations. It's more subtle in a way. Generally speaking, it's more subtle.

And this tuning of the sensibility grows. The sensitivity to that kind of awareness grows. The more we practice feeling the body and sensing the body as energy body, the easier it becomes, the more familiar it becomes, the more established it becomes. So it grows with practice, like many things.

What we're really talking about is a sensitivity to, a tuning to, if you like, the space or the field of the body—a little bit bigger than the body even—and the energy or the feeling or the vibration of that whole space, maybe certain energy centers or points within that space, but really the awareness of the tuning to, the sensitivity and sensibility towards and with that whole field of vibration, energy, feeling.

And why is that important, or why are we emphasizing that? Well, for a lot of different reasons. I tend to view it as something so useful for almost every domain of practice.

So for samadhi practice, where we can use the energy body and develop what I'm calling samadhi—this kind of energization of the energy body, of the mind as well—deep nourishment can come in. So using the energy body as something we tune into in an orientation of practice that's aimed at nourishment, energization, rest, brightness, calmness—and all this is a huge resource to mind and body. This practice of samadhi or working with the energy body in the direction of samadhi.

Another area where the energy body is really, really, really a helpful resource and really useful is in navigating and responding to and caring for our whole emotional life. So the energy body reflects and expresses what's going on with our emotions very, very subtly—even very subtle emotions. Emotions that probably we don't even have words for in the English language. Shades, subtle movements of opening or contraction or

turning away or whatever it is. Different kinds of love, all kinds of things. And the sensitivity, the attunement to the energy body can be a really, really skillful way of working with the emotions. Really helpful in developing sensitivity and developing skillful responses to the vicissitudes of our emotional life.

Thirdly, the sensitivity and awareness to the energy body, the tuning to that, actually proves to be really helpful in guidance and navigation for whatever practices we're doing—whether it's imaginal practices and one can feel the resonances or a dimension of the soul resonances, of the soul-making and the soulfulness of what's happening in relation to an image, for example. One feels that partly in the energy body. It's a way of gauging whether one is on track, whether an image is going to be fruitful or fertile or soul-making or helpful for the soul.

And also in terms of emptiness practice or much more broadly insight practices. Again, are we on the right track? Well, the energy body will reflect it when there's the release and the relief that should come with insight. We feel that in the energy body, not just in the mind. The energy body will reflect it much more subtly, much more palpably than the mind, much more accurately than the mind.

So the freeing, the release of contraction that should come with any insight, small or large, in the moment—this is felt in the energy body and can tell us: I may not even quite understand what just happened or how I'm looking right now, what the insight was, but something, the energy body is telling me, whatever you're doing, there was an insight there, it was helpful. Or not. Or this is leading to more contraction, in which case, what's going on? What's coming in as a thought or an assumption or a view that's actually causing more contraction—if you like, the opposite of insight, in a way?

But also with metta and, as I said, samadhi and other practices, the sensitivity to the energy body will help us know when we're on track. Whatever little experiment or play or shift we're working with in practice—ah, yeah, that feels right. I can feel it in the energy body. And with metta, sometimes the feeling in the energy body itself can become metta or be interpreted as metta and then radiated outwards or bathed in or wrapped in or whatever. All kinds of possibilities, but really for any, as I said, any direction of practice, any kind of practice, the energy body, for me, can be really helpful to make central.

So helpful in so many ways. And so on this retreat, whatever we're doing, whatever you're doing at any time in meditation practice, can it be done in touch with, sensitive to, open to, aware of, attuned to the energy body?

Now, anyway, when we talk about working with the imaginal and cosmic oasis and things like that, we can't do that all day long, working with an image or with a cosmos. These things come and go.

Right now, at the beginning of the retreat, as I said, we want to have more emphasis on the energy body, perhaps more on cultivating samadhi or tuning to the emotional movements coming and going, ebbing and flowing—just at the beginning, a little more leaning that way. As the retreat goes on, as you get more skillful with all that, even off-retreat over months, there can be much more fluidity and flux in the emphasis between the different practices, between the intentions and orientations, whether toward samadhi, toward working with the emotions, toward feeling guidance, toward feeling the energy body in relation to an image or cosmopoiesis or whatever.

But all of them, as I said, include all these orientations, all these intentions for practice at any time, include, never lose touch with the energy body awareness.

This fluidity or flexibility of emphasis allows any of these practices to move via the energy body from one to another. So for example—and all this should be repeat for you if you listen to those other talks—one's working with an image, and as one's working with the image and noticing all kinds of things in terms of the soul-making and the energy body, one realizes, for example, often, that with this image, a harmonization has come into the energy body, an opening, a lightness, a beauty in the texture there of the space of the energy body.

And if one wants, one can then lean more the emphasis of the attention into that loveliness of the feeling in the energy body with the intention of entering into it, bathing in it, basking in it, wrapping oneself in it, enjoying it. And then the intention has moved from the imaginal work into more the intention of samadhi, of that as a resource, of staying in that. Really valid, really fine, very useful at times.

And of course, things can work the other way around, from samadhi to an image that comes out of samadhi or is made available because of the depth of the samadhi and the harmonization there. Or, for example, one's working with a certain emotion and again in touch with the energy body, and from that emotion—maybe it's a difficult emotion perhaps—and out of the vortex of energy there that's wrapped up in the emotion an image comes and then one works with the image and that feeds back into the emotion. Maybe it unlocks something, helps it, transforms it, all kinds of possibilities. Again, all this should be reviewed.

But this growing fluidity and flexibility to move between these different emphases in practice—and even now at the beginning of the retreat, many of you are familiar with these kinds of ways of working, or you might even find that this fluidity is available, even if a lot of this is relatively new. So some degree of fluidity between these emphases and orientations, intentions of practice is really valid. But at the beginning, let's a little bit more lean into really emphasizing staying close with the energy body, developing the samadhi, or the metta, or the sensitivity to the emotional flux there, and the attuning to the emotions.

But really, in a way with the energy body, especially in relation to samadhi, anything goes. It's very creative. So how we can play with the energy body and the image or images, potential images of the energy body, for instance, visual or with colors or lights or lines or other images that work into the energy body and give it harmony—as I said before—and a nice feeling. The possibilities are actually infinite. The potential for creativity is open and infinite.

But what's really important then, however way one is working, whichever way one is working from—say, for example, from an image or something visual—what we're prioritizing is the felt sense, the kinesthetic sense of that space, the texture, the feeling of it. So as far as the energy body is concerned, that's the primary thing—the feeling, the texture of that space.

In a way, we talk about this energy body, maybe it's for some people a slightly strange phrase or whatever, but in a way we could say that the energy body is as much or maybe even more about an awareness, a sensibility, a subtlety of attention than it is about the body per se. So when we talk about energy body, we're really talking about a way of paying attention, a sensibility, a subtlety of awareness to that space of the body, rather than something about the body per se, or rather than a certain experience of the body. So you feel a certain flow of energy or whatever. Energy body is, if you like, a way of feeling, a way of experiencing, a way of attending to and attuning to the space of and around the body.

Walt Whitman, I can't remember what poem it's from, whether it's "Leaves of Grass" or "Song of Myself," I can't remember, but he has a lovely line: "I sing the body electric, I sing the body electric."

And in a way, we can hear that line as "I sing of, I sing about the body electric, the energy body, the beauty that's there in this sensibility and feeling the body this way." The body alive as a field, if you like, of electricity, of harmony, of that kind of more subtle energy. And I sing also of the well-being that's available in that mode of paying attention to the body.

And some of you will know that well-being has a huge spectrum. It can be very subtle and unremarkable. And it can also be extremely intense or very blissful. All kinds of gradations and shades of well-being, of bliss, of pleasure, of comfort, really opening up the range of possible experiences of the body, this electric body, this energy body. So "I sing the body electric" means I sing about that, I sing of that energy body.

And in a way, you could also hear "I sing the body electric" another way. "I sing the body electric" means I, through my singing, through my enchanting—and the word enchant is, you know, *enchanté*, in French, *enchant*, to chant, to sing, actually. So through my enchanting, through my conjuring, if you like, to borrow a phrase from the Buddha, the conjuring of consciousness of perception, through the spell, the magic spell that I'm playing with in my awareness, through that I sing the body electric. Through my singing the body becomes electric, the body becomes this energy body, the experience of the body becomes that. So I sing that metaphorically. I sing that through the way that I'm paying attention, through the way that I'm conceiving of the body in the moment. I sing, I enchant, I cast a spell, and the sense and the image of the energy body comes into being. I sing it into being.

The emphasis here is on the *sing*, on the enchantment, not on the I. I sing the body electric.

This experience of an energy body, this kind of awareness, is something we create. We're fully acknowledging the dependent arising of this sense of the body, of the energy body, and the dependent arising of that perception and how it feels.

As you practice more with the energy body, you recognize and become skillful in noticing how when you look at it this way versus that way, when there's this quality with awareness as opposed to another quality, it changes the actual experience and perception of the energy body. The lightness, the contractedness, the flows, the openness—all of this changes in dependent arising with the ways you're looking at it. All of this becomes beautiful territory to explore, with so much potential for learning, play, and creativity.

Because of dependent arising, we acknowledge that this experience of the energy body is something created. It's created by and with the mind. Some systems of chakras have four chakras, some have seven, some have nine or more. Which is the truth? Well, the experience of the energy body is not separate from the mind. So you can experience four chakras, seven chakras, nine chakras. It's not different from the conception—subtle or gross—that's operating in the mind and the way of looking. The energy body itself is formed, fashioned, fabricated.

Yes, it's created and it's discovered. This raises the edge of what is created and discovered at the same time—both created and discovered. This is something we'll return to as a theme in this retreat. I'm just mentioning it now in relation to the energy body.

When you do walking meditation today, can you again emphasize the energy body? Just for now, for today—or if you're doing this course elsewhere, take your time with this, perhaps more than a day—can you walk, so to speak, in the energy body or in that awareness? Walk in this bubble or region or space that is this kind of sensitivity to the texture, the feeling, the vibration, the energy in that field.

How fast do you need to walk to allow that fullness of sensitivity, to tune in? Maybe you need to walk very slowly, maybe at normal pace, maybe actually quite fast helps. Perhaps this varies over the course of a walking session. Play with that. At times it will feel more helpful to just stop and stand, either at the end of the walking path or in the middle, because stopping and being still allows you to more fully inhabit and feel the energy body. Be sensitive to what's helpful moment to moment in terms of pace, stillness, movement, whatever.

There's the formal walking practice—can you do it in the energy body, sensitive to the energy body? And there's also informal walking around the house or going for a walk. This too, at times at least, experiment with what it is to just move around in informal movement throughout your day, but in the energy body, sensitive to that. Is that possible, walking down the corridor, whatever it is?

Most people, certainly if you're new or newer to energy body practice—which might be even months or a couple of years, still new perhaps—will be helped by slowing down. As you're walking around inside the house especially, slow down a little bit. The slowing down is not for the sake of microscopic attention—something I'll return to. You can divide the lifting, moving, and placing of your feet not just into three parts but into nine or more. This microscopic division of attention is not a priority or reason why we're slowing down. We're slowing down to allow that different sensitivity, that different kind of mindfulness of the body—this mindfulness of the energy body. We want to encourage this and give ourselves the best opportunity for it to establish itself and become more and more accessible.

Now I'd like to say some quite general things about practice. Because we're emphasizing the energy body and have given all those instructions in other retreats and talks, asking you to be familiar with them, I want to speak generally about practice now. The danger in saying these things at the beginning, and the danger of talking generally, is that these insights easily get forgotten. So if you're taking notes, remind yourself of them periodically.

What I want to talk about right now are five attitudes or orientations or inclinations or emphases or assumptions that are quite prevalent across much modern Dharma. They tend to dominate, underpin, and direct practice and thoughts about practice, constraining and limiting practice. They limit the range of unfolding experience that's possible and also limit the range and depth of insight available. On this retreat, with this way of practicing and conceiving of the Dharma that we're offering, we want to unseat them from their dominance, question them, and replace them with other priorities.

The first is concentration, which so often gets emphasized.

And in two aspects that I want to draw attention to. One is actually as continuity. The first way that concentration gets emphasized is continuity. So I'm not talking about jhanas or anything like that. I'm talking about even a continuity of mindfulness.

Actually, before I get into this, again, I hope you can hear this as a response to the context, to a leaning that to me has sometimes gotten too much or overemphasized and comes at a cost. Not that it's not important, but just leaning the other way to balance things out or open things out in ways that perhaps they don't open because of the habitual leaning.

So in our way of thinking about it, or going about practice, it's not the continuity of mindfulness or attention that liberates. Unlike, say, Mahasi-style practice or Goenka practice, where it really is the continuity that's emphasized—that's the golden key, as much as anything, or the idea is that's the golden key to liberation—instead, in our way of approaching things, it's rather the deliberate and flexible exploration of a range of ways of looking, noticing the different effects of each of these ways of looking on dukkha, on contraction, on self-sense, on perception. And with that, the question: what can we understand from seeing all this? When I look this way, this is the perception. When I look that way, that's the perception. So that deliberate flexibility of exploration—that is more important than continuity of mindfulness.

I might ask, why is it that continuity of mindfulness is regarded so often as so important? To me it's an interesting question. Either it's because mindfulness gets presented, whether it's in Insight Meditation circles or mindfulness teachings or whatever, mindfulness gets presented actually as a way to live—recognizing that it's actually impossible to sustain it, but still it's presented as an optimal. If you could live and be mindful all the time or as much of the time as possible, that is the way to live. So it's a way to live rather than a way of looking. There's a big difference there.

Or sometimes even mindfulness itself is taught as equivalent with awakening. A moment of mindfulness is a moment of enlightenment or something like that. Or, again, the emphasis on continuity is tied up with seeing anicca, seeing impermanence, more and more continuously and intensely, and seeing anicca as reality. This impermanence is the ultimate truth. And then the other two characteristics—anatta, no-self, and dukkha, unsatisfactoriness—they come from the perception of anicca. Things are unsatisfactory because they're impermanent, and there is anatta because things are impermanent. But this impermanence is taken as the reality, the primary reality. And there's a whole metaphysics of reality and a whole conception of what insight is that's tied in with and tied into this emphasis on continuity.

This is quite different from the approach of a flexibility of ways of looking.

So we're not emphasizing on this retreat, in this approach, concentration either as continuity, or in a second aspect, as a kind of prioritizing of focusing, of prioritizing of trying to keep the attention on one thing, whether that's the breath, or the body, or whatever it is.

Samadhi, in the way that I use the word, and I would say in the way that the Buddha used the word, is not actually that well translated by the word concentration, but more—what gives a better, fuller, to my mind, more attractive meaning, translation—is it's a well-being in the energy body and a harmonization of the energy body, which the mind then much more easily settles into and fills out. Yes, steadiness is part of that, but it's only a part of the picture.

So the first of these five is concentration in two aspects: continuity and this prioritizing of focusing, prioritizing of trying to keep the attention on one thing. These are so often emphasized, and we're saying, no, we're not going to emphasize them.

The second is something we could call atomism. So the first concentration, the second is atomism, by which I mean either aiming exclusively for a narrow focus, a narrow area of concentration—maybe the tip of the nose if you're staying with the breath or this moment of taste or this area of sensation in the body or whatever—a narrowness of the area of focus or concentration.

But more importantly, there's an atomism as a kind of prioritizing or elevating or an exclusivity of not just microscopic attention more generally, but also understanding of the view of reality. Again, wrapped up in that is an idea that true reality is atomic—moments of this, these small sensations put together in a process very, very fast, and that's a kind of ultimate reality.

So this kind of atomism, again, is something we want to, on this retreat—really we're not steering towards that at all. We have different priorities, different orientations, inclinations, and intentions.

So concentration in its two aspects and atomism, second one.

The third one we've touched on already: reification or realism. In contrast to what I was talking about—emptiness, ways of looking, fabrication of perception as a basis, as a basic understanding, present at even the most basic level of practice, even the most, right from the beginning. We can teach the Dharma and explain the Dharma in those terms of emptiness. It's not necessarily an advanced thing. But emptiness as present at the beginning and also as the goal of understanding, the goal of practice.

We've touched on this. I'm not going to go into it again. But this is a very different approach to Dharma through ways of looking and the idea of ways of looking and fabrication. And it can embrace, it can hold anything in the Dharma—any teaching, generosity, metta, whatever, ethics—it can all come actually under the umbrella, understanding the rubric of emptiness.

So concentration, atomism, reification or realism.

Fourth one is what I might call solitude or self-sufficiency. Again, there's a tendency in the Dharma to view solitary practice and self-sufficiency in one's process as somehow superior to relational practice. This perspective elevates the solo path above collaborative spiritual work, though we'll only touch lightly on relational practice during this retreat. It remains important to acknowledge this tendency.

By solitude, I also mean a predominantly inward-looking orientation. Insight meditation naturally tends toward silence—silent retreats, silent retreat centers. Eyes typically close during meditation. But more significantly, returning to the Pali Canon teachings, the Buddha speaks repeatedly about escape from the world. Nibbana represents an escape from the world, the unfabricated goal of practice. He uses this exact phrase, this word: escape.

The entire thrust, direction, and intentionality of Pali Canon Buddhism moves toward this escape from the world—to never be reborn again. Wrapped within this orientation lies a disenchantment with the world itself. The Buddha discusses kaya viveka and citta viveka—isolation or removal of the body from crowds, embracing solitariness, and withdrawal of the mind in various ways. This movement always tends away from engagement.

This stands in stark contrast to engaged practice—political, environmental engagement that I've explored in other talks. But it also contrasts with re-enchanting, which forms the very theme of this retreat: opening the eyes, opening our knowing to the world, sensing the cosmos as enchanted. Consider the classic Tantric teaching that sees the nature of all things as bliss, or the recognition of divine beauty everywhere, in all things, expanding through this cosmopoiesis. This path involves seeing or knowing all appearances as divine—to borrow another Tantric phrase—expanding, deepening, enriching, widening our senses of the sacred.

The fifth emphasis I call sanity, or perhaps more precisely, sanitization. This proves even more insidious—a narrow conformity, often unconscious, to conventionally prescribed modes of expression and views. We conform in how we express ourselves across different domains of being, and conform to certain prescribed views typically absorbed from the various cultures we inhabit.

This includes secularism—the sanitization and so-called sanity of secular culture. Most of us move within that dominant cultural framework. But it equally includes Dharma and Buddhist cultures. How often we witness conformity to uninvestigated, biased attempts at dispassion—a complex area requiring tremendous sensitivity, openness of questioning, and balanced approach.

Often there's this pervasive suspicion of desire, suspicion of passion, suspicion of eros that permeates Dharma culture, profoundly affecting how we practice and relate to life, ourselves, and others. All of this sanity, this sanitization, remains safe and secure. Yet sometimes it creates what we might call—staying with our S's—a soggy serenity that becomes the tenor, the ethos of practice and life, rather than fire.

These five emphases, attitudes, orientations, inclinations, and assumptions prove remarkably prevalent across modern insight meditation and other areas of spiritual practice. Can we orient differently? Can we assume differently? Can we cultivate different inclinations?

These five actually form an interesting pattern. If you wish to remember them, they create the anagram CRASS: Concentration, Reification, Atomism, Solitude, and Sanity. In many ways, when these five inclinations and assumptions dominate, practice becomes crass. It remains gross, unable to deepen into subtlety.

This dimension of subtlety calls for our return attention. I see it as absolutely central and vital to the possibilities of practice—subtlety of awareness, so integral to Dharma possibilities. For our purposes here, subtlety represents an element we seek to open and move into, this refined awareness that transforms everything.

Another anagram that we've come out of this to remember is SCARS, S-C-A-R-S, just rearranging the order there. I've heard from people that when these orientations are dominant, or they don't realize what it is that's made them feel this way, when these factors, these assumptions, these intentions and orientations are dominant too long, they can, in a way, scar our soul and scar our potential in various ways.

Maybe all this sounds quite polemical, and probably is. But just to qualify it a little, again, none of these attitudes is wrong. Absolutely, they're not wrong at all. It's just that they can easily become, and probably they have become in the dharma world, over-dominant and even exclusive. A person doesn't realize how practice has closed around these concepts, orientations, assumptions. And as I said, that will have all kinds of limiting effects in all kinds of directions in our practice, in our path, in our life.

So in contrast to all that, we're emphasizing the flexibility of ways of looking, moving in and out of different ways of looking. Through that flexibility, that moving in and out, we reveal, because of the effects on perception, dependent origination of things—dependent origination, fabrication of perception. And with that, or another way of saying that, is the emptiness of all things. So it reveals insight.

But we're also developing a flexibility in ways of looking and the availability of different beautiful, beauty-making, sacred-making, soul-making, skillful ways of looking. Through the moving in and out, we're developing the flexibility and availability as well as the insight into dependent origination.

Within that, as I said, it's not continuity. Sometimes one is fine just not deliberately practicing. There's maybe a minimal level of mindfulness and sensitivity to the body and what's going on around, etc. And that's fine. Right now one is not practicing. One's not striving for this continuity. That's fine as long as one plays enough in the course of the days and in one's life with this deliberate moving in and out of different ways of looking. Because it's that which, as I said, gives us the insight, the flexibility and the availability of different ways of looking, rather than just trying to be mindful as continuously as possible.

With all that, sometimes someone gets a bit confused and says, "Well, what about precision?" Because, for example, in Mahasi style practice or these other more atomistic practices, precision means a microscopic kind of attention. But for us, the precision is really in the subtlety and the clarity of differentiating or discerning between different ways of looking.

So what exactly is involved in this way of looking that's going on for me right now? What exactly constitutes that way of looking? What ideas, what images, what energetics, inclinations of mind, view—all that. There's a lot of subtlety and precision in understanding what exactly is involved in the way of looking right now. And what exactly are the effects of this way of looking right now? On the freedom, on the emotions, on the energy body, on the soul making, on the perceptions of self, of other, of world, et cetera. What exactly are the effects and why?

So the precision is in this area. How is this way of looking right now subtly different from one that a person might describe that sounds pretty similar or that is pretty similar? This one right now is subtly different. How is it different? So that's where the precision comes in. It's in the subtlety, the clarity of differentiation between different ways of looking, discerning and understanding what's involved.

To touch on this point about subtlety that I mentioned some minutes ago, I would say that deepening in meditation generally involves and generally corresponds to an increase of subtlety of the awareness and the attention. Deepening in meditation involves, generally, and corresponds to a greater degree of subtlety of awareness and attention.

So subtlety, in this way of thinking about it, does not—again, I've said this three or four times now—does not mean a microscopicness of points of attention, microscopic points of attention, in whatever sense door, or microscopicness of moments of attention. I can divide the second into however many moments. It doesn't mean that.

By increased subtlety, I mean increased sensitivity to more subtle vibrations, tones, wavelengths, resonances, emotional shades. And more subtle, more refined perceptions. This is what I mean by more subtle.

The movement, as I said, the movement of deepening practice, either in insight or in samādhi or in mettā, is actually into more and more refinement. So the jhānas, the eight jhānas, again, people don't really realize this—they think of it as increasing concentration or this and that—but actually they are increasingly refined perceptions. They're more and more subtle perceptions, what the Buddha calls perception attainments.

Similarly, as insight goes deeper and there's more and more letting go, there's less and less fabrication of perceptions, less and less solidity and coarseness and density to perception. So whether through the spectrum of the jhānas or through deepening insight, perception is fabricated less and so necessarily becomes more and more refined.

This refined attention needed to inhabit such subtle worlds becomes correspondingly delicate and nuanced. The movement into increasing subtlety is intrinsically woven into the fabric of deepening meditation—whether we follow the jhanic path, develop insight, or cultivate the heart qualities. This understanding proves particularly relevant to our work with images, soul-making, and the cultivation of cosmic resonance.

While some of these experiences can manifest as powerful eruptions—moments of profound beauty or overwhelming love—the deeper currents tend toward ever-greater refinement. Even qualities like metta and compassion, as they mature, reveal increasingly subtle textures and flavors. This is something we want to emphasize and cultivate deliberately.

Related to this understanding, we need to remain flexible about what takes priority in our meditation at any given moment. Even within a single sitting, our primary intention might shift appropriately. Let's say we've established a current of samatha practice—that lovely, harmonized field where the mind settles into the energized presence of the body. Within this overarching intention, our moment-to-moment priorities might vary skillfully.

Sometimes our priority becomes staying with the chosen object—the breath, the body's field of energy, or whatever we're working with. This represents the more familiar emphasis on sustained attention and focus. At other times, our priority shifts to tending the sense of well-being itself—gently encouraging and allowing the comfort and pleasure in the energy body to flourish and deepen. This constitutes quite a different orientation than mere focusing.

A third possibility involves tuning toward what feels more energetically subtle and refined within our field of experience. Through this attunement to subtlety—whether in the body space, the mental space, or our perceptions themselves—our attention naturally becomes more refined and delicate.

These three priorities—sustaining attention, cultivating well-being, and tuning toward subtlety—remain interconnected and mutually supportive rather than completely separate. Yet what happens for many practitioners is an overemphasis on the first priority: staying with the object, maintaining focus. The second and third priorities—tending to well-being and attuning to subtlety—get missed, overlooked, or insufficiently nourished.

This imbalance keeps the practice coarse and prevents natural deepening. Practitioners might sit breathing steadily, perhaps even achieving a sense of being "locked onto" the breath, yet nothing truly develops because everything remains at a gross level. They inadvertently block the movement into subtlety through their attitude, their priorities, or by maintaining the breath object itself in too coarse a form.

Most people carry too much emphasis on staying with the object and focusing. When they inevitably don't succeed perfectly, they become upset: "My concentration is terrible. I really need to work on my focus." The whole notion of meditative success becomes tied to how continuously one can maintain attention on a single object, leading to self-judgment and the neglect of those other essential priorities.

Consider the Buddha's instructions in the Anapanasati Sutta, his discourse on mindfulness of breathing. The very first two steps involve breathing long deliberately, then breathing short deliberately—like a skilled craftsperson who turns their wheel with conscious intention, knowing exactly what kind of turn they're making. The distinction here isn't primarily about breath length but about subtlety: shorter breaths tend to be more refined than longer ones. So we see a deliberate movement from the initial longer breath into the more subtle territory of the shorter breath.

The Anapanasati Sutta also includes what I've called the second priority—tending to well-being. The Buddha specifically mentions calming the bodily formations and attending to the pleasure and piti that arise as samadhi deepens. Right there in these fundamental instructions on mindfulness of breathing, we find guidance covering all these priorities and more. Yet so often they get overlooked in favor of simple focusing.

Let me offer some general guidance about the practices we'll explore during this retreat. We'll be presenting many suggestions, ideas, and instructions—perhaps more than you can actively hold simultaneously. You probably won't need to keep twenty pots bubbling on the stove at once, and it may not even be necessary to try everything we offer.

Some approaches will feel more workable than others; some may not seem to connect immediately. Don't become too concerned about this. Everything is being recorded, so you can revisit material later, try again what didn't seem to work initially, or pick up what you missed. Please don't get overwhelmed if it feels like too much or if something isn't clicking immediately.

If you find yourself distracted or daydreaming during instructions, obviously try to stay present and engaged—your aliveness, interest, and openness contribute to the collective field that supports everyone's practice. But don't get caught in overwhelm or self-judgment. The teachings will be there for you to return to when you're ready.

Another point worth addressing: there can be a lot—I've written about this and talked about it elsewhere—one common way of practicing insight meditation is simply being with experience. Whatever experience arises in the moment, one generally tries to just be with that or allow it. For some people, that's the entirety of their practice. That's what they do. That's what insight meditation is for them. And they feel very suspicious of deliberately trying to do anything, deliberately directing the attention or playing with the way of looking.

What I want to say is both are available. They're different modes of practicing. Just allowing—so-called "just being with experience"—I actually think that's a bit of a myth. There's no such thing. But let's say at least for a beginner, that's a fine thing, versus deliberately directing the way of looking. But they're just modes. And I would say they're both really important. We really miss a lot if we're never deliberate. We miss huge, huge potential in practice and what the Dharma can be.

One yogi wrote to me describing that for many years, her practice was more like this first approach—not deliberately really doing anything, just kind of letting what comes, come. She said, "For many years, my meditation practice resembled a chicken running over a minefield," which I thought was a great picture. This disaster and then that disaster, just trying to open to it all and be with it all because it all seems so real. Not realizing that I can change the ways of looking. And that actually, through playing with that, it changes what arises. That's not "not being with what's real" because I realize that there isn't—as I said before—any independent reality here.

So they're both modes. But in regard to imaginal practice and enchantment and cosmopoiesis, for most people nowadays, because of the disenchantment that's pervasive in modernist culture, in modernist Western culture, working with the imaginal, the enchanted perceptions, the cosmopoiesis, are not usually habitual. The mind doesn't tend to go there that much, tends rather to see according to the flatness and the one-dimensional. So we actually need to encourage them, which means being a bit more deliberate.

But you will find over the week, and as you practice more with these kinds of ways, that images, cosmopoiesis, cosmopoetic images—perceptions, if you like, or openings—will happen spontaneously, as I said, out of samadhi or out of being sensitive to an emotion in the energy body, giving birth to images. Both spontaneously and deliberately, images and cosmic voices can arise.

But what I really want to encourage is to return to what I started with: letting the sense of soulfulness and soul-making guide you. And part of that is the sensitivity to the energy body. Let that guide you.

So sometimes we try out something deliberately, some image or cosmopoiesis, either because it's a classical Tantra prescription, a classical Tantra meditation, or as a suggestion from one of us or from someone else, and we might deliberately try that out or deliberately return to it. But what I want to emphasize again is please pursue and stick with and try again only those images and cosmopoieses that have resonance for you in the soul. This is so important to recognize, to be sensitive to.

Even if some of them feel that they were initiated, or they seem to have been initiated in a kind of contrived way or an external way, what guides you is the sense of soulfulness and soul-making and the energy body. Let that guide you into what you return to and pursue and stick with and try again and work at.

Because if we don't use that soulfulness, then actually the practice—the practice that we're doing—will be kind of lifeless, soulless, pointless, really, except as exercises. An exercise in visualization or an exercise in concentration—how much can I stay focused? How long can I stay focused on a certain image? But nothing deep or significant for or in the soul is touched. Nothing is moved for or in the soul. I mean that word "moved" as in to be moving, to be touched, but also moved as in it starts to be dynamic, starts to form a dynamism in the soul. Nothing is vivified, brought alive. Nothing is really getting enriched or deepened.

But if there is, with a practice or a cosmic basis or a way of looking or an image, this sense of soulfulness, then we can be sure that all that is happening.

So really then, the encouragement was spontaneous, deliberate, lots of suggestions in everything that we're offering. Really the encouragement to play with it, to experiment, to let yourself be creative. It's like here is an artist's studio and we're just opening the door and it's got all these materials and all these different kinds of canvas and different kinds of things that you can make sculptures with and a whole bunch of different

paints and watercolors and oils and all these materials and video stuff you can play with—in a way what we're doing is just opening the door to an artist's studio and you can come in and just play. Feel that way about it: playful, experimenting, creative.

Some people, their personality or their style of going about—whether it's this kind of thing or whether it's emptiness practice, whatever—is very systematic and sort of working through in order, kind of comprehensively. And that's fine. If that suits you, go for that if you want to. Or other people are more fluid and a bit more what looks like haphazard or whatever, intuitive. Let yourself work in the way that feels good for you and feels right for you.

So, for example, I think I mentioned in another talk, we're going to be working with re-enchantment, if you like, or exploring re-enchantment and cosmopoiesis through all six senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and mind. This doesn't mean—and this should be obvious by now—it doesn't mean mindfulness as bare attention to the experience in the six senses, to the sensations there. It doesn't mean arriving at those senses or exploring them with the typical modernist concepts of matter. We're opening them up in different ways.

Some people move through the six senses very comprehensively and thoroughly in order, separating them all out. Other people skip around a little bit more. Whatever works. Find the way of working that suits you, that serves you.

Last thing, for now. What is the point of all these practices? We'll be offering all these suggestions and guided meditations. This, to me, is quite important. The point is not to believe this or that about the self, about the world, about life. I've said that before. We're not trying to move you to a place where you believe X or Y about anything. Nor is the point actually trying to achieve any particular perception of a red etheric light body or a blue body or whatever. I don't see the point of all this as achieving any particular perception.

Rather, it's through all these practices, through the exercise of this flexibility in ways of looking—in and out and trying different things—and through the exploration of what we call the attitude of art or poetry in relation to perception, through the exploration of that attitude, through all of that, that a loosening happens. Or actually, rather, many loosenings happen. And this loosening is of fundamental importance, or these loosenings are of fundamental importance. Loosening, liberation, unfettering, being set free from all kinds of prisons.

But more even than that, through all this—through all the practice, through the exercise of flexibility and ways of looking, through this exploration of the attitude of art, if you like, in relation to perception, or poetry of perception—through all that, a sense, a perception, a knowing comes. However vague, however undefined, however unarticulated or seemingly unarticulatable, and however diverse the range appears to be of these experiences or senses or perceptions or knowings—they're plural—however diverse the range, however varied, through the flexibility we just alluded to.

But a sense, a perception, a knowing, or senses, perceptions, knowings come of eternity, we might say—of timelessness, as a better way of putting it—of beauty, different kinds and levels and ranges of beauty, and this opening up of the sense of sacredness.

This knowing, perception, sense of sacredness. And actually, we're talking about a plurality here, so it's not one sense. Even of timelessness, there are different perceptions of timelessness, of eternity, of beauty, of sacredness. And these perceptions, these knowings, these senses, they themselves open, they deepen, they widen. They become, through all these practices and these attitudes and this way of approaching things, more accessible in our life. They become more available to us. And they actually become more frequent. They become regular visitors, regular aspects of our existence.

And that—it's that—that is the main point of all this. That is the main point of all the practices. At least that's how I would see it. That's the main point.

CHAPTER 34

Healing the Imagination (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 40 min

> *In this Q&A session from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat, Rob Burbea explores the practical dimensions of imaginal meditation and the role of the energy body as a compass for authentic practice. He addresses questions about following "what works" in meditation, distinguishing between mental concepts and energetic resonance when working with images that may appear dark or challenging versus those that seem conventionally positive.*
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> *Burbea discusses the relationship between precision and flexibility in practice, offering guidance on working with rapidly shifting images and the importance of allowing enough stability for deep soul resonance to occur. He explores the integration of classical Buddhist approaches with tantric wisdom, addressing the complex relationship between purification practices (removing kilesas) and soul-making work that may include darker, more erotic dimensions of experience.*
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> *The talk includes practical guidance on hand positions (mudras) and their energetic effects, and concludes with advice for a practitioner experiencing intense metta practice accompanied by purring sensations. Throughout, Burbea emphasizes the importance of honoring individual soul needs while maintaining ethical foundations, recognizing that different practitioners require different approaches at different times in their spiritual development.*

So I can't see everyone's face just because of the light, but... anyone? Anything? Yeah, Alex.

I want to... it's been a long time since I've read Joseph Campbell so I can't remember exactly what he means by that. When Alexandra asks about what I mean when I say "follow what works"—are you asking me personally or just to elaborate on what I mean by that?

My guess is what Joseph Campbell means is more something like follow your passion in life, or follow what you really care about, or follow what brings you joy in a kind of larger trajectory in terms of work and where you are. That's my guess, remembering.

So I guess I mean that too, but usually when I say that, I imagine I'm talking mostly about meditation. It's more within the meditation itself.

Yes, I think the first answer is yes. There's this thing—one of the reasons for emphasizing the energy body is it can work as a kind of compass or barometer. So in whatever practice you're doing, let's say with imaginal practice, you might have an image come up that's dark and scary looking. Conventionally the mind goes, "Yikes, this is dark and scary and this can't be good."

But if I'm open enough and just notice—well, okay, the mind is saying that, but the energy body actually has come into some kind of alignment. It's come into some kind of openness, some kind of harmony, maybe more energy. So the energy body is telling me something different than the mind. The energy body is saying, "There's something here for me. It's a treasure." My small mind, usual habitual ways of thinking don't quite get it yet. I don't quite know what it is. It's opposite to how I usually think about what's helpful and what's not. But I would incline more to trusting the energy body there. If something's genuinely not helpful, it won't harmonize like that.

And it can be the opposite. Here's this nice frilly ballerina angel figure, and I think, "Oh, that should be really good for me because I really need that." And the energy body is just not responding—it's the mind thinking something.

So that's one example of following what works.

In other practices, like insight practices or mindfulness practice, let's say I'm just with this heartache or this pain in my knee or whatever, and I'm just trying to be with it or be mindful. Something sounds so simple. But actually I get a sense—I'm being with it and the thing is contracting more. I'm being with it and I feel more tight. And then we say, "Now I'm going deeper into it." Is that really the case? Or is it the fact that in my so-called simple mindfulness, there's something that's actually tightening the problem?

It's tricky because it can be both, but often it's the latter. It's like, what's present in my mindfulness at that moment, or what's missing in my mindfulness that would actually be helpful? How do I tell it's helpful? Something loosens.

In terms of insight practice or mindfulness practice, I often say there are two words: release and relief. But they're felt in the energy body. Sometimes it's mental, but sometimes you just feel relief. It can be really subtle. That's my compass—it's an energy body feeling.

Now, there can be bliss and peace and freedom and well-being and joy and all of that, but at the most basic subtle level, there's some kind of release or relief, and that's telling me—whether it's mindfulness or insight practice—that's telling me I'm on track. But it's through the energy body.

Does that make sense? Is that enough?

I'd say that, because sometimes we come to all this with quite fixed ideas of what we need, and I would trust that more. That's one of the reasons why I tend to offer the energy body and put quite a lot of emphasis on it—because it does so much, there's so much available through it.

That's exactly what works in the moment. Absolutely.

Going back to Joseph Campbell—that's one extreme, one of those long-term trajectories. "Am I going to do this or that? Am I going to work in Africa?" These are great, really important questions in life. But yes, you're taking him out of context, and that's fine. This question of following one's bliss can apply on all different timescales. Mostly I'm talking about in the moment.

Julia, your question the other day about finding an imaginal figure and then, when you came to sit down with it, it no longer worked—it's like, fine, switch. Other times you have to stay with something a bit more and really see if it isn't working. But it's really about being flexible in the moment. Not too much flipping and flopping, because you need to stay with something a little bit, but generally speaking, I'm responsive in the moment without preconception of what's working.

Andrea raises her hand

**Andrea*: My question is around precision, because you used that word as opposed to mindfulness or concentration. My experience outside was similar to that man who asked a question the other day about taking in the tree, where there was appreciation. I'm noticing that something's harmonizing maybe in some respect, but the imagination flits, and what's meaningful changes from thing to thing to thing. There's a sense in me of something wrong with not being able to stay and resonate with each and every one of them.

There was a moment outside where all the rain fell all of a sudden, and there was a loveliness in just staying there for it. Then there was a sort of romance of being a woman standing outside in the rain, and then that changed to a fairy tale image of the sealskin, soulskin, and then later with walking. What I'm saying is, I don't feel that in that moment I can reach in, touch the energy body, sense the resonance. It seems like there's so much to do. What I did was just enjoy the movement of it and stay with that. I know it's early days here, but...

So the question is really: a lot of images are arising quite rapidly, seemingly flitting one to another, not lasting long enough to really tune into the energy body or tune into the image so much, but getting something from each, a beauty in each. What's right or wrong? How do I navigate that?

I tend to think with all this work that there isn't so much right and wrong, but you'll get different results depending on what you do. It may be that those images are actually related to each other. The first two you mentioned—it could be that here's the beauty of the rain in the landscape, the rain as object, and then what happened (I'm not saying this is what happened, but it could be) is that always when there's an image that's meaningful, the object is alive as image, and self is alive as image as well.

So it could be that a woman in the rain, with all the resonance of that, was just the subjective part of that same image. Do you understand? So it's not really flitting between different images—it's flitting maybe between different aspects of an image, which then you can kind of hold together or focus on one or the other. What looks like flitting might actually be different aspects of the same image.

That's one possibility. The second possibility is that yes, experientially, sometimes it does that for a while. It goes to this, or that, or the same image suddenly—I remember one where this character kept taking off clothes to reveal a different character underneath, like a Russian doll kind of thing. "When are you going to finally stop?" And it did, eventually. It settled down to one.

So sometimes it's just a matter of staying and waiting, and it will settle. Other times, maybe just pick one and stay with it. Actually try to stay steady with one and see what happens. Either it will feel like this really isn't right, or it will begin to morph and change and become workable.

But I think my tendency would be to advise integrating it into something that's more settled that you can then come into resonance with. Because what we want is for the whole being to be involved. Imaginal work means body, energy, soul resonances, awareness. If it's too flitting, it can't really come into resonance and do the soul work so much.

But that is... How is that not mindfulness, or how is that not focus?

So I'm not saying don't be mindful and don't be focused. I'm not wanting to say that at all. I'm really responding to context and what tends to get prioritized and sometimes overemphasized so that it excludes other possibilities. So if you hear me say something like that, it's really in response to that.

Catherine was using the word lingering. It's not lingering for the sake of – great, today I notched up two minutes, forty-five seconds, uninterrupted time with this object. It's not for the sake of that or because a still mind is better. The lingering is because we can come more into resonance and feel more and more can happen there.

So being steady with an image or relatively steady with an image or a vision is actually really helpful. In the larger picture of things, it tends to get a bit overemphasized, and so many people get so tight around it, and it becomes so painful, and it's a self-measurement thing about how well one, or badly, usually, one is doing. That's the sort of thing I just want to shake up a little bit.

Sometimes you'll get something that just doesn't seem to settle, and then there are different ways of responding to that.

You talked about mudras earlier, and we spoke a while back about an issue you were having. You told me you had been meditating with your hands up, and I said, "No, no, no, don't do that, hands down." I can't go into why now, but let's just say for now, hands down. So I'm wondering why...

What I see is sometimes people always meditating like that or mostly meditating like that. And what I would rather encourage is have some time not doing that. Even if you're doing just that, the opposite, the palm down, or all kinds of possibilities.

I had actually been meditating primarily like this – and then I switched to this, and that's when things started happening.

Did this come from a Zen tradition? It looked pretty Zen to me. This is a very open gesture, energetically. That's why I think it's working. And this – I can almost feel the pressure, and all the teaching that goes around it. Tightness, presence, brightness, alertness, discipline.

It's not like one's right and one's wrong. It's like everything we do has an effect. Going back to Alexandra's question – what is the effect? We're complex as human beings. We're rich at different stretches of time. Even sitting to sitting, we need different things or we'll respond to different things. So it might be that this becomes one among your repertoire. But it's just clear in the gesture – one's a lot more soft, a lot more open.

It's a bit like this can get a little... there's the possibility at times that this openness with the palms up gets a little flabby, flaccid sometimes. It's not that it will or it needs to, or that you shouldn't do that—it's just that's one of the ways it can go. Just as this position can get too tight and rigid and forced, that openness can get a little loose in a way that actually doesn't allow so much depth.

But really, the answer I would give is: play and experiment. There's much more than just those two options. It's quite a subtle thing, this whole matter with the hands. It's not like a huge difference, though between those two positions is quite extreme, so that could be a deal changer. But even going from this to just turning my hands palms down can make a big difference—it will. And as I said, it's amazing: here are the hands at the heart, and just shifting them slightly, or just a little bit higher, a little bit softer—it's different. It's really subtle, but it's different.

Not to make too big a deal out of this, but it's something we become more aware of. Mind affects body, body affects mind. And by body I mean physical, but also energy body—and then energy falls under perception and all of that.

Question from Participant

So with this kind of way of working with the imaginal—I find it very useful and it's very much like tantric practices—I have a couple of questions. One is about the relationship between soul and spirit, like when you go deeper into this kind of emptiness work and there's a kind of purity or transcendental quality sometimes. How do those two work together? And the second question is about kilesas—whether when you're working in this way, it means that it no longer has that soul resonance. Or is it that the whole traditional conception of being around at the time when the Buddha's teachings exist and awakening is possible—from what you've seen from all your students and everything you've been around—is that not so relevant anymore?

These are really important questions, and I'm really interested in them. I've talked a little about the interface with tantra in the past, and I hope to talk more about it in the future. But these are big, big questions, so let's see what we can say briefly.

Regarding the first one: kilesas refers to greed, hatred, and delusion—the three poisons in classic Buddhist language. These are the defilements that we get rid of in full awakening. The path involves dissolving these obstacles to awakening until, allegedly, they don't arise again for a fully enlightened person. This is all great and important and true.

Part of what we need to understand is that we can cut things at different levels—like chopping a tree at different heights. You can chop kilesas at different levels. The deepest level of cutting kilesas is actually seeing that the kilesa is empty. There is no one who has this greed, hatred, delusion. More than that, ultimately speaking, there is no greed, hatred, delusion.

This realization does several things. It undermines the whole mechanism of the kilesas generating. But it also frees you up in relation to how you're seeing them. Then the whole question becomes: now how am I going to live? How am I going to live in my actions? How am I going to live imaginatively, knowing that? That's complex.

As you say, most traditional tantric wisdom operates with quite a tight basis in the bodhisattva aspiration, in developing goodness and kindness, in commitments and vows of monastic orders and ethics. I think for most people, that foundation in goodness is important. Even today I was talking with someone about this—and I'll mention this maybe later in the retreat—but I think there's a danger of being too much toward the white and the sort of nice, pure white.

That will work for some people. In other words, what's alive... Souls are different, so to speak. Soul-making is different for different people at different times.

So I have a great resonance with purity and purity of heart. It's something that speaks to me so deeply. And I also recognize that I have a lot of darkness. And by darkness, I don't mean evil. I don't mean anything like that. I mean the dark gods, you know, and eros and things.

But it might be that someone—and this relates to your third question—the path of purity and the resonance with purity is soul-making for them. And the whole myth, even the classical Buddhist myth, is just what they need. Or it's what they need all their life, or it's what they need for a portion of their life. And at some point, maybe, it becomes no longer so potent, so deep, and so rich soul-making. What's missing? What's happening here?

I have to also say that when the Buddha was alive, they lived in a different cosmos. They did not live in a flat, scientific, materialist cosmos. The whole thing was ensouled anyway in ways that—I mean, don't get me started—but we approach the Buddhist myth in a much truncated form nowadays. And for some people, even that truncated form is alive for them as myth. It's soul-making. It fits very beautifully. And like I said, that might last a person's whole life, or it might just last a part of their life, or it might never really do it for them.

And some people need a path that allows and invites more of the erotic, more of a place for desire and the beauty of desire, more passion, more darkness, more eros. How that relates to ethics, you know, that's complicated. For me, ethics are very important, but they're also not simple. They're not simple from a soul point of view. They're also not just simple even from an ethical point of view.

One of the functions of Buddhist ethics is actually to simplify things. So in the original Buddhist teachings, the movement is out of the world, simplify, go both the path of mindfulness and the path of non-fabrication, of letting go of appearances and actually transcending appearances. You could say they're not soul-making. The path of deliberate fabrication, deliberately engaging in images, is more soul-making.

So you've got kind of three avenues, which ultimately we can be skillful in all of them: mindfulness or bare attention, deeper and deeper into non-fabricating, and then skillful playing with fabrication, which we'll be emphasizing on this retreat. Two of those cut soul-making because they cut imagery. You understand? They have their place. And for some people, even that whole thing is enough. They don't have a lot of need for imagery and eros. They're just a different soul. Other people, it's not going to fly. It might have its place, but it's not going to be the full picture.

So it's almost like, as I said this afternoon, souls are different, paths are different, we have different needs, and that changes over time. If I do have a lot of eros, if I do have a lot of image, if I do have a lot of passion, there's a huge gift in that, and there's a challenge in that. So with every gift, I'm given challenge. Do you understand?

I'm asked to integrate more. I'm asked to work with more. It's more complicated. It's richer. It's like, how does this fit with that? How do I get skill in this? And then there's this, and then there's this. In a way, it's easier to just not have any of that. And it's all kind of simple, and there isn't a lot of complexity. But the question is...

And this is more of a long-term trajectory as well. It's like, what's my soul and what are the needs of my soul? I think from teaching so much and hearing from so many people—someone said to me, what was the word she used?—"I feel neutered," or "something's amputated. I've been doing mindfulness, I've been doing..." For another person, it's not at all like that—it's enough for them. But this person said it's only when we raise it as something that they realize, oh, that's been missing. Or someone else saying to me how years of practice, actually trying to fit into a certain box without even realizing, and then feeling something's not right.

So there has to be a kind of honesty and a sensitivity in asking, but it is more to ask.

One very last thing. In terms of what you're referring to—something which maybe people don't understand, but Hillman talks about the dichotomy between soul and spirit. Soul being more this dark, labyrinthine, complicated, passionate, involved. Spirit being more spacious, transcendent, long views, peaceful, calm, equanimous, removed, detached.

Most spiritual teachings, classical Buddhism included, are more of the spirit. But I think there's a lot of skill in making that distinction. I also, more recently, would kind of call it all soul and not make that distinction. It's like, if we say our soul has different needs or different levels, so I love the transcendent. I have a pull there and I can't tell you how grateful I am that I devoted so many years towards that and to opening towards that. And it's not everything.

So there's that, if you like, level of soul and level of soul need, and there's other stuff that's not about that—more this darker stuff, or more towards fabrication. I'm more interested now in what way of holding all this actually just allows it to integrate without causing dichotomies or polarities or either-ors, and actually, again, recognizing that not everyone, but a lot of us are complicated beings.

I'm a complicated person, and it's like that complexity does not need to get ironed out. It needs to be respected and opened to and navigated and sensitized to, so that my makeup is bowed to rather than, let's blanch it all out and paint it like everyone else's—nice and white and square and clean and all that. So yeah, I'm more interested in ways of thinking that can actually accommodate all of it in a way of thinking that's useful.

That's the short answer.

Okay. So, Tam, you had a question. Do you want to? Well, we can take time. Some people will need to go, but I'm happy to... Unless you feel like it's a really long one or...

"I've been burning for like three years or something, so I'd really like to ask it."

"Hello Rob."

"Hello Tam."

"Hello. I'm a metta practitioner. That's what I do. I do walking metta and breathing body metta. Well, when I practice metta, I purr like a cat. And it goes vroom, vroom, vroom. And I can feel a sensation and I can kind of hear it. It's not me—I'm being purred. I can move it around."

"Is it nice?"

"And I can move it. Yeah. Good. Wonderful. And I can do all sorts of weird extraordinary things with it. And sometimes it's stronger than others, and as it goes away for a few minutes, then it feels particularly attached. Yesterday was the first time I found it quite boring. I can do it when I'm not meditating, if I choose to do it. Sometimes I can turn it on and off. I can bring it into my daily life. It's transforming how I'm being

in the world. That's what it's doing. I need your help and your guidance because sometimes it's a bit too much to handle and it's a lot and I know that it's more than pīti—it has different qualities, different flavors..."

I've never really read the journals, don't really know much about this territory. I sat with Lily years ago, but I need your help. Sometimes it's overwhelming, sometimes it's boring. What's happening to me when I'm trying to work with this?

To me it sounds really good, actually quite wonderful. Let me offer you three possibilities, three ways of working with what you're describing.

The first is about managing the energetic intensity. If it feels too much energetically, use the imagination a little bit to let it out, like letting steam off. You mentioned it makes you stand up and grows around you—that's fine. Allow it to move how it wants to move, outside of the body, radiating towards other people. When it feels too overwhelming, we ease it by opening the channel so it flows out. This becomes really skillful—it's healing you on the way out as well, but it has more space rather than creating too much pressure inside. There's not enough space for the amount of energy and purring that's going on, so create more space.

The second thing—and you've already touched on this—sometimes it doesn't feel like "me." You said, "I'm being purred." Especially in the context of this retreat, that's exactly what you want to open to more. This has divine dimensions. If it gets boring, that divine quality might be what needs to come alive in how you're seeing it. You can play with that—does that make sense?

Even when it's not boring, I wonder whether this divine dimension, which has everything to do with this retreat, is what's already there. There isn't a prescription for this, but it's about allowing it to have its divine dimensions—plural. Something bigger than you is coming through, as you said. You are being purred, probably for all kinds of reasons. This is part of the imaginal sensibility—allowing that experience to have more than purely physiological or human resonances. I'm allowing myself to feel all the different kinds of divinity that are potentially wrapped up in that perception.

The third thing, which may or may not include the second, is sometimes you want to put the purring in contact with suffering. Cats purr, and sometimes when they sense that a person is unwell, they'll come sit on your belly and purr away. The purring, the healing energy, comes into contact with the pain—psychic pain, heart pain, whatever it is. You can deliberately bring these elements into contact.

So you might be purring and feeling good, and wonder why you'd want to bring up pain now. But it's about bringing it up just a little and letting the purring surround and lap against and hold just a small amount of pain so that those two come into contact. Or you might be in some pain and ask, can there be purring that comes to touch this? What's important is the contact between the purring and the pain, so they don't occupy different realms of our being without touching each other.

Sometimes that contact also happens within the contact of divinity, which casts a different light on everything. Catherine will be talking about this tonight—about dukkha, pain, and divinity, and how they meet.

Yes? So these are three possibilities for working with pain and pleasure, with dukkha and sukha, in our practice.

Does this approach feel workable for now?

The invitation is to explore these different ways of relating to our experience—allowing the purring and the pain to meet, to touch, to inform each other. Sometimes in this meeting, we discover something larger that holds both: that sense of the sacred, the divine quality that Catherine will be exploring tonight in her talk on dukkha and divinity.

These are not techniques to master, but rather gentle experiments in opening to the fullness of what we are. Each moment offers us a fresh opportunity to practice this kind of tender, aware engagement with whatever arises.

Thank you for your attention and your practice.

CHAPTER 35

The Movement of Devotion (Live and Shortened Version)

Rob Burbea · 42 min

> *In this dharma talk from his "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" series, Rob Burbea presents a sophisticated exploration of devotional practice within imaginal meditation. Rather than emphasizing traditional concentration (samādhi) as a primary goal, Burbea advocates for cultivating different kinds of openness - of mind, view, perception, and heart - as pathways to what he terms "soul-making" practice.*
>
> *Burbea outlines four interconnected factors essential for accessing the imaginal realm: lessening fabrication through reduced clinging, synesthetic blending of the senses, cultivating heart attitudes of receptivity and humility, and skillful engagement with imaginal figures themselves. He emphasizes that devotion, surrender, and humility are not mere emotional states but practical prerequisites that allow imaginal figures to "come alive" with transformative power.*
>
> *The teaching includes practical guidance on working with eyes open or closed, relating to sound and environment as potentially sacred, and incorporating spontaneous body movements or mudrās into practice. Burbea draws connections to Tibetan Vajrayāna deity practices while maintaining his distinctive approach to imaginal work. Throughout, he emphasizes experimental discernment - learning what supports opening versus what contracts awareness. This talk offers both theoretical framework and embodied methods for practitioners interested in devotional and imaginal dimensions of the path.*

Probably more than what we might say are typical or conventional approaches to practice and conceptions of the path and ways forward – more than the usual ways we might be familiar with – I think we feel that this kind of way of working and what we're opening up here, and the practices that we're involved in and what unfolds from that, unfolds more individually.

There's certainly general principles, and we draw attention to these, but there's something quite individual about what arises, what kinds of things arise, what order things unfold in, and also differences in people's propensities, what they've done, what their natural tendencies are in this or that direction. Sometimes someone needs to spend time developing this before that is available, or another person it's the other way

around, or another person can move quickly through something that takes longer for someone else. All of this is just in the nature, I think, of the material that we're covering.

So again, in putting out these teachings, we're aware that it's a lot and some of it definitely – for everyone some of it will just be later: I don't quite understand, or sounds good, I get it but not right now, and some will feel very pertinent, and some will be stuff like I know that. There's quite a discernment, I think, and we could talk a lot about just discerning what to pick up, what to stay with, and what to just leave. This being recorded and so on, we're putting a lot out, and just to have that big picture sense.

With that, let me say a few things in that spirit. One thing I mentioned: we're not so much emphasizing or having the direction, the priority in this retreat of focusing or concentration, so-called, as a goal. It's not so much what this retreat is about and this way of unfolding is about. Rather, I would say openness is, or different kinds of openness is more what we'd like to emphasize and encourage and support. So openness of mind, openness of view, openness of perception, openness of heart as well.

Just to say a little bit about this. In this tradition, in our tradition, most of us are used to practicing with the eyes closed. There's an inward gaze and this can be really, really helpful. It's a little early on the retreat maybe, but what about actually, if you feel inclined, experimenting with eyes open or eyes closed? In other words, there's no hierarchy here, and as with everything else, we can experiment and find out actually what's helpful when. So you can start a sitting with the eyes open and then maybe close at a certain point, or maybe they're closed and they open again. Careful if that movement isn't a movement of restlessness, just like something needs to change because I'm a bit bored or fidgety or something. But really this question of like sensitive discernment: what actually helps? What helps? So experimentation.

When the eyes are open, we can still – many people will still be able to see purely intra-psychic images, if we use that language, intra-psychic as if the psyche is something separate. So even though the eyes are open, I can still be sensitive to and in touch with an internal image, but the eyes are open. And when the eyes are open too, there is the chance to perceive the world differently, perceive others, and what's around me in some kind of what we're calling cosmopoiesis. The eyes open may lend themselves more easily to that, and that's part of what we're wanting to explore.

So you might start sitting with the eyes open, actually notice that already there's something different in the way that I'm sensing what's around me, and then maybe dwell with that with the eyes open. Maybe then see, or can I actually have that with the eyes closed? The same sensibility, not necessarily directly visual, for instance. But simil-

arly, with the eyes closed, we can still, as I said, have a sense of the, a different sense of the world around us. There can still be a cosmopoiesis with the eyes closed – comes through the other senses or the inner visual sense, et cetera.

Wrapped up in this, again, is this kind of experimenter's question: why does it – what makes this work or not work? If the eyes are open or eyes are closed, what makes it work sometimes and feel fruitful and other times not? To me these are really important questions for a practitioner to begin to ask these kind of questions, especially once you've done a bit of practice. It's like you want to be your own – you want to be the person finding out and researching and discovering. What happens is not just random. We're not just receiving stuff out of nowhere. Things work or don't work or unfold in certain directions for reasons that we can actually begin to understand and explore and play with.

But in relation to whether, for instance, the eyes are open or closed and whether that feels helpful or not, one of the things that makes a big difference is the relationship with what I'm seeing. Whether it's an internal image or hearing or seeing – seeing is a broad word for what I'm perceiving – but it's the relationship with the object. So if I'm reifying what I see and clinging to it as some kind of reality, or if I'm grasping in a gross way, I want that, or I really need to get rid of that – and this could be anything, something in the body, something, it could be a self-view, it could be a person – the reifying and the grasping will affect hugely what is available.

Another factor would be if I lose contact with my body space, the space of the energy, and I'm leaning out there and I lose touch and sensitivity here. So all those three things, even if that's subtle, that kind of leaning and grasping – what will happen? The imaginal realm will fade and the cosmopoiesis will fade. Something will dissolve of its potential and power.

But we can be, you know, experiment with being more open with the senses if it feels okay and see what happens. There's a lot of people in the hall and sometimes we're used to, you know, just everyone shut up so I can do my meditation and my concentration can get better. And it can be quite common to hear noises from other people as disturbances and distractions from my project of meditation, et cetera.

What's happened there? There's a pushing out, a trying to close in and a pushing out of the sensorium, of the sense realms, versus an inclusion, actually opening to include more. But more than that, there's a view. I'm viewing this person in a subtle way as a nuisance. Why don't they settle down?

Why can't they be quieter? Part of what we're interested in is playing with view.

So here's this human being who strikes me as clumsy and insensitive and too noisy, perhaps even just subtly. Can I play with the view? Here is an angel. Here is an angel. The sounds I am hearing are the sounds of an angel. I'm shifting the view deliberately.

I don't just mean angel as a metaphor—oh, they're so sweet. I mean it in more than a metaphor without a reification. Somewhere in between what that word metaphor has come to mean—a euphemism or whatever for just they're a sweet, nice person, really—somewhere in between that and this kind of solidification of the word angel.

And this shift of view is not the same as like, oh, I'm so judgmental. I should think this or I should be able to see that. We're really talking about the realm of experimentation here. Playing with views, this agility or flexibility with view. There's something you can try and see and see what happens. And this is the kind of thing that we're really emphasizing.

In the practice today then, we're allowing a little bit more flexibility between practices like we talked about and mentioned as a possibility yesterday, so energy body very much. Catherine was talking about how there are different frequencies of the experience of body. We can know the solidity, the earthiness, the soil as an important frequency. And then sometimes it's much lighter and more ethereal than that. All the spectrum is available, and ultimately where we're going with this—it's all divine. It all becomes divine.

But the energy body is connected with whether we're working with emotions, whether we're working with images, whether our direction is more in the way of samadhi. Today you can start to allow more of the imaginal in, if you feel like. And that could be very spontaneous, what arises in image, or it could be more deliberate—like following on from, for instance, Catherine's meditation yesterday with the imaginal figure of love or something that already works for you as an image and you draw it back deliberately.

But there can be a flexibility between these practices, the emotional awareness, the samadhi, and the imaginal—these directions, intentional directions. And always the sensitivity to the body and the sense of what's helpful, what's soul-making, is a central aspect, integral aspect.

Let me say a little bit more about this, particularly in relation to imaginal practice. A few months ago, I think it is now, Catherine told me she was having a conversation with a friend of hers who's a Jungian psychoanalyst. And he was talking about what they call active imagination in that tradition. So it's similar to—there's quite a lot of similarity

between that and what we're doing, not completely. And he said to her, if I remember rightly, something like, "It's just a grace when that door opens, when you enter active imagination. There's nothing you can do to bring that on. It just comes."

I would say not necessarily at all. I mean, yes, it can come spontaneously, but there's this question: what is it that feeds? What is it that nourishes? What is it that opens certain doors? And what is it that closes certain doors?

So in the way that we're presenting the imaginal, we can deliberately practice opening to the imaginal, opening that door, crossing the threshold, if you like, into the imaginal realm. We can deliberately practice cosmopoiesis. And we're interested in what supports that.

So we're including both spontaneous and deliberate. And what is it that allows us to enter the territory of soul-making? What is it that helps shift the mode of being, the ways of looking, so that that opens up?

So I would say, in part of that, four factors or aspects that are actually interrelated and kind of mutually dependent. And the first is, if this sounds a little technical right now, it will make more sense as practice goes on and some of it will definitely make sense right now.

The first is a lessening of fabrication. The fabrication of perception is less in the moments when there is less creation of solidity and separateness and thingness to the things of perception—that's an important contributing factor to opening the door of the imaginal. And so that's one factor.

Now, how do we fabricate less? That's a whole thing, you know.

But basically, in a nutshell, it's when there's less clinging. When there's less clinging and craving, rejection, aversion, and so forth, there is less fabrication of self and perception. So all this practice has to do with—or an integral part of it is—the lessening of clinging, because that lessens fabrication, and that loosens things. We're in the realm of the loose and the alchemical solution.

So that's the first factor: lessening of fabrication.

The second is what I want to call, for want of a better word right now, synesthesia. Some of you will know this word. It's when people's senses get mixed—psychologists make it a clinically pathological condition, but I'm just talking about a mixing of the senses. Sometimes it feels like I see sounds, or I feel colors in the body, this kind of thing.

As fabrication gets less in practice, the six senses tend toward one sense. Some of you will be familiar with this. As the mind calms and gets deeper, what feel like six separate senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind—actually seem to coalesce. Everything is received, if you like, in the same sense field. But there's a continuum there to how separate the senses feel or how they join together. This happens as fabrication gets less anyway. As we let go of more clinging, the senses tend to go more toward oneness. Eventually we go beyond the senses—there's a dissolution, a non-appearance of all sensory perception. But basically there's a spectrum there.

Part of the opening of the imaginal realm is actually—not always, but sometimes—this mixing of the senses. There's more fluidity or blending of the senses that's quite characteristic.

That's the second factor.

The third has to do with the heart and the stance or position or posture of the heart. Receptivity, surrender, humility seem to me to be really important aspects—really necessary aspects for the heart to open this door of the imaginal realm. What is the posture, the attitude of the heart that makes a big difference? I'm going to come back to this in a moment.

The fourth factor is the imaginal itself and the way we're tuning and relating to the imaginal.

So these are all interdependent, but of those four, the first and the third are things we can actually do. We can actually learn with practice, with skill, to cling less so that there's less fabrication and the whole realm of perception gets less solid, more amorphous, more insubstantial, if you like. We learn to do that, and we learn to do it more easily as practice goes on.

And also the opening of the heart—this moving into an attitude of heart that is receptive and has humility in it. Sometimes it feels like, "God, that's such a stretch. I don't know. I'm just locked into this tightness of heart." But as practice goes on, we get better at just shifting to an attitude of humility. It's something that comes and becomes more easy with practice.

These movements—the things that we can do, the lessening of fabrication, this receptivity or humility of the heart—they're things we can actually do. And they allow the opening of the imaginal in ways that affect the soul more deeply, that actually really go deep and are more soul-making. They allow a degree of synesthesia, of this mixing.

As Catherine was saying this morning, it's like different ways of knowing. We tend to only know through the mind or thinking or information, or through "I see it" or "I hear it." But actually other modes of knowing that don't really fit so well into the usual way we think of how the senses work—other modes of knowing become available through all this. That's part of the cosmopoiesis, that's part of the re-enchantment of both what the human being is and what the world is.

So, for example, to just illustrate all this in relation to my illness right now over the last year, and the possibility of dying and all that—sometimes if I'm practicing and I'm using the imaginal in relation to that, and I want to experiment a little bit, what seems important to unlock something, or not to unlock so much as to bring it alive—maybe both, unlock and bring it alive—is the first thing: this humility.

I cannot cure myself. It's not in my power. Maybe the doctors can't. I don't know. But knowing that, or just that recognition—if there's a humility: It's not in my power. I cannot do this on my own. It may or may not happen.

From that humility then another step—if you like, maybe it's a short step—is from that humility, an openness and a surrender to something bigger than me. Let's call it God.

And put that, if you like, in inverted commas, to a God. Whatever language we want to use—something that is numinous, something other, larger than me.

This stance, this posture of the heart needs to happen first before any other. It opens the door to the imaginal. Or rather, as I said, it's what allows the imaginal to then come alive. So then this figure of divinity comes alive because the humility and the openness and the surrender of the heart allow it to come alive. Without that, it does not come alive. It can still be there as an image, but something's not penetrating so deep.

For example, some time ago I was working with this. This movement happened—the opening, the receptivity, the surrender to the divine. And I heard the birdsong outside, a beautiful birdsong. That birdsong was felt as blessing, felt with my whole soul. The birds were a blessing. Their song was a blessing, and in the blessing was a kind of healing.

The birdsong itself was felt in my body and through the listening, but also in the energy body, as if the birdsong, the sound, the fragments of melody were reweaving my energy body, restructuring. And it was all one—the body and the reweaving and the sound, heard, felt. The synesthesia was there. Through sound, in sound, the energy

body was being rewoven. Very, very beautiful. There's a synesthesia between the sound and the body sense, with the sense of blessing, with the sense of the divine, with the sense of the humility, the surrender.

These are sometimes very little, very subtle movements. Sometimes they're a big step, but sometimes they're just subtle movements. Something just—oh yeah—and something is allowed.

Some of you will be familiar with different tantric practices, Vajrayana practices, where you have a sort of prescribed deity. It's Tara or this deity or that deity. It's called a yidam in the tradition. And again, for those of you familiar with this, I would say the devotion to this deity, the surrender, the openness, the humility are really vital and indispensable parts of that practice. They might need to be first—those things first.

In the Tibetan tradition, in the tantric tradition, they talk about preliminaries and prerequisites. It's working on the heart and the heart's relationship with all this—the heart's relationship with being on the path and divinity and all that. And then that allows an opening. So there's reason for all that in the Tibetan tradition.

But this heart surrender or devotion or openness, humility—again, felt in the energy body, brought alive as experience in the heart, in the energy body—can unlock or bring alive. It opens a door, if you like. Otherwise these things are just exercises in visualization or concentration. The heart and its attitude, its posture—the posture of the heart in any moment—is crucial to imaginal practice. Absolutely crucial.

There's quite a lot to say about working with imaginal figures and building on what we did yesterday. Just a reminder: the imaginal figure may feel like it has an ethereal body of light, or it may be very solid. It may be a human being. It may have a certain color, or it may be an animal. There's a real range there. It may be someone I know, maybe someone I don't know, maybe a historical figure. All kinds of possibilities. Maybe the features are clear of the image, maybe they're not. Maybe it's visual, maybe it's not.

But the character, the personality, the qualities of the presence of the imaginal figure—that's what we want to have clear. The visuals might not be clear, but it's the sense that this is a particular character. And I somehow feel that character.

So there's a place for this stance of the heart, and some of it at different times might involve supplication, asking. If this other is some kind of divine, then one kind of relationship with that is asking. That's how usually people think about prayer, which I'll speak about in a minute. It's asking for something. In my humility, I'm asking for something.

And there can also be this receiving, receiving of the love, for instance. Or just harmonizing. The being in gazing at the imaginal figure and being gazed at—there's a harmonizing of the qualities.

We are absorbing, if you like, almost by osmosis, just by being in contact with this imaginal figure, we're absorbing what it radiates—whether love or compassion or power or whatever quality emanates from it. So there's receiving and there's also a kind of harmonizing.

And then sometimes there can be a kind of union. One actually—I think Mayweather mentioned yesterday—there can actually be a union where me and the imaginal figure become one. There's a communion there, where I and this deity become one. Several people have already shared this kind of thing. It's just a very natural part of the way these practices can open up.

We don't need to make a hierarchy between all that: supplication, receiving, harmonizing, union. They're just different dimensions of experience that can open up.

Sometimes that union or that movement towards union can be erotic, can be sexual. And that's completely within what we would expect for these practices. We don't usually include that in practice, but yes—it's there. It's very normal. It doesn't need to happen, but it can be a very natural part of what happens here in working with these things.

I mentioned the word prayer, and I think for a lot of people—wherever they stand on religion or religions—they think of prayer as supplication, as asking. I'm asking God for a favor, help me out here. I want to say that's really fine as one dimension of what prayer can be. If that's part of it, what I would just say is like so much of this: it's about delicate balance and sensitivity.

Be careful when one is in a supplicatory relationship that it doesn't too much come out of or end up feeding actually a quite contracted sense of self—a smaller, harder sense of self that wants something and is kind of pushing for that. The actual supplication may sometimes contract and make hard the self. It doesn't have to. There's a subtle difference between that and what's a humble opening, opening out of the being to receive from something, someone that's bigger. There's a subtle difference there, but always it's like noticing what the effect is. Is it contracting more or is it opening or softening more?

When we use words like prayer, that's such a big word with such a range. So yes, there is prayer as supplication. There's prayer as praise. Prayer as blessing. And even what those words mean—what does blessing mean? We say, "may you be peaceful, may you this or that," and there's that level of blessing which is beautiful.

And there's also—it's almost like the word itself has no end to it in what it can open to and what it can mean—to bless and to feel blessing. It's almost like the word itself dissolves or goes into realms where it dissolves, and it's still palpable and powerful. Blessing. And prayer as blessing.

So all these dimensions are open. But all these things—prayerfulness, devotion, surrender, love, compassion—there's such a range of flavors and intensities that are available to us as human beings with all of that. Such a range.

You know, with compassion it can be very quivering in response, very tearful. We're really resonating with the suffering of whoever it is we're giving compassion to. That's one flavor of compassion. Other flavors of compassion are very soothing and they're much more buoyant or bright or quite spacious. There's all these different flavors and they're all good. They're all available to us.

And all these qualities—prayerfulness, compassion—they're always composites. They're mixtures. There's never one thing. So as practice grows, we can know and experience all these ranges and actually discern the differences and the qualities differently. We don't always need to insist on intensity.

of experience. Intensity is not always better or deeper necessarily. But intensity of experience of emotion can be something that we're more and more able to accommodate. We have more and more capacity for intense deep feelings. That grows. We can develop that slowly over time.

So again, openness, openness of mind here, trying to discern what's helpful.

Let me say one more thing about all this—it involves the body. We've been emphasizing that right from the beginning. And you get a sense of how much the heart and the mind, the citta, affect the body and how much the body affects the heart and the mind. So it's two ways.

Now some of you will notice, or in the course of practice whether it's today or on this retreat or another time, sometimes you're sitting with the energy body and especially when the energy body starts to feel quite nice or harmonized, when there's a bit more well-being, sometimes you get the sense that the energy body wants to move in certain ways or adopt a certain posture, or actually that it already is doing that. I'm sitting here

still, the physical body's sitting here still, and inside the energy body is dancing. Or it's adopted a certain posture, or it's moving in a certain way, or wants to move in a certain way.

So this is different than restlessness. It's just fidgety or just a bit bored. Something is actually quite harmonized and the energy body is moving or wanting to move. So this is something—don't need to make it happen, it's not better or worse, it's just something that can happen. If it happens, it's something you can feel into. What does that feel like, this movement or this impulse to move?

And sometimes we can actually deliberately, actively explore the movement. So let the body do what it has the impulse to do. Actually enact it. So there might be spontaneous movements, or usually they tend to be quite slow with this, usually, but anything can happen. Or it might look a bit like Tai Chi or some kind of dancing or something. But actually it could be anything. Sometimes it's just in the hands.

If you know this word mudra, one of the meanings is hand posture. And again, it might happen spontaneously or you allow the body, the hands, to adopt a certain posture. Some people sit like this and that's a very open posture. There's all kinds of other things you can just feel into. You know, this is a mudra—this Anjali prayer. And there's subtle differences. Actually, that feels different emotionally and energetically to the hands being at the heart center, to being at the head center, or even at the mouth. Even just a little bit up and down, this with the hands forward feels different. It's very subtle how it affects the energy body and how it affects the heart.

But these are the sort of things, if you want to, you can let the body experiment with and feel. What is it to touch the earth, the mudra of the hand touching the earth? And what's alive for that imaginatively and in the soul, in the heart? It's a famous Buddha posture. I can't quite see from here—is he doing that? So there's a whole archetypal resonance of that. What is it to bow on the earth and let the forehead touch the earth? So how does it feel? How does it feel to let the body do some of this stuff? And how does it feel to just keep the physical body still and allow the imaginal energetic body to do it? There's two different avenues there.

Sometimes meditation feels stuck. And say, for instance, with this mudra, with the hand posture, it's quite interesting—sometimes just a little shift of the mudra, of the hand posture, and something unsticks. And because the citta and the body are that connected, sometimes just a shift of the body, even the hands into some different thing like that, and something unsticks. The emotional, the heart opens, the energy body opens, the perception opens, the possibilities open. Really quite subtle can be.

So you don't need to get sort of obsessed with all this or whatever, but if it's something that feels like it's fruitful to explore, let yourself explore it a little bit. There's quite some richness here. Sometimes very subtle changes can actually have a lot of effect.

Okay, so practice-wise, if you want to, you can include this today. And so in the walking meditation, again, energy body. And sometimes, as Catherine was saying this morning, it's just about solidity and the contact. But energy body.

And if you want, the walking meditation can start to include some of this more subtle exploration—how does the energy body want to move? Maybe it's not walking. Maybe I'm standing there and doing what looks like Tai Chi or some kind of dance, or I just want to adopt a particular posture and remain still. Again, it could be actual physical enactment that the body is doing, and it could be that I actually look stock still—the physical body appearing motionless—but inside there's this movement going on, or this certain posture. So let yourself explore if you want to. You can explore that at times, if it calls to you.

Everything affects everything else. Like I said, the energy body, the heart, the emotions, the physical body—it's all this mutually dependent web, this beautiful web. Everything touches and shapeshifts everything else.

When there's this energy body movement, either the inner imaginal movement or the actual movement, sometimes that in itself will open up, as I said, the perception. It will bring an image or it will open up a cosmopoiesis or a shift in way of looking. And sometimes it works the other way around. You're working with an image and it seems like because of this working with the image, or because of this cosmopoiesis, the body wants to adopt a certain posture or move, or the hands want to gesture in a particular way. So often the causality flows both ways. This causes that and that causes this.

What that means for practice is to notice, if you play with this material, and as you do—or as much as you do—can we notice the energy body, the emotion, the feeling and all that, but also what's happening in perception, in the sense of self, the sense of the world, the way of looking, the sense of the body, of other, of environment.

So the last thing—with all this, sometimes it's more helpful to enact things. For instance, prostrations or actual chanting, actual sounds, and it brings the being alive. It moves the energy and something comes alive and we get more sensitive. And sometimes the being wants not to do that. It's actually stock still and I'm just letting it—the bowing is happening. No one can see it, but inside I'm bowing.

Sometimes the being needs that kind of more subtle manifestation, and sometimes it needs the actual physical expression—no, actually bend the body and do that prostration, chant, vocalize. So again, this is part of this complexity and discernment in all this. When does one bring me alive and when, curiously, does one actually just shut me off and not bring the sensitivity? There's not a rule. It's not always one or the other.

Part of the play of all this is to be sensitive to these nuances. Do you get that? Good.

Let's have just a little bit of silence together.

Really, this encouragement—just take what's useful. If something just doesn't feel relevant right now, leave it. Just leave it.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 36

The Movement of Devotion (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 40 min

> *In this second part of his exploration of devotional practice, Rob Burbea examines prayer beyond supplication—as praise, blessing, and prayerfulness that involves the imaginal and divine dimensions. He discusses how prayer can extend from blessing one aspect of experience to a cosmopoetic perception where all things are experienced as praising and blessing. The talk explores the intricate relationship between the physical body, energy body, and consciousness, showing how they mutually influence each other in meditation practice.*
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> *Burbea provides practical guidance on working with the energy body, including how subtle shifts in posture and hand positions (mudras) can profoundly affect emotional states and meditative depth. He discusses the phenomenon of imaginal movement in meditation—where practitioners may feel the energy body moving or adopting postures while remaining physically still. The teacher emphasizes the importance of sensitivity and discernment in knowing when physical enactment versus imaginal movement serves the practice.*
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> *The talk includes detailed exploration of various mudras, from the anjali (prayer position) to earth-touching gestures, and their effects on the psyche. Burbea addresses how these practices can help when energy or emotions feel stuck, explaining how subtilizing awareness can give it more energy than difficult emotions, allowing for greater spaciousness and healing. This dharma talk offers a nuanced approach to embodied spiritual practice that honors both subtlety and intensity.*

Now, all this is related to prayer and prayerfulness. What does that mean? Often people, especially those who are suspicious of religion—or even some religious people—think of prayer as really asking for something. I'm asking God for a favor or to help me out in some situation: what we could call supplication. And that's fine, you know, that's a style or stance of prayer, and it really is fine.

But we need some care here, because supplication or asking an imaginal other—divinity or angel or whatever—for something can be a little too much on the reified, self-serving side of things, as we've talked about. But actually the very asking itself can come out of, and also support or bind in place, a sense of the self that's actually quite contracted and small and hard in the moment. In other words, the very asking itself—the way that we're asking, the relationship with that asking, the whole way that we're seeing it—is keeping a contracted, small, hard sense of self in place at that time.

That's different from a kind of humble opening out of the being to receive something bigger. It's the opposite of contracted, small, and hard. There's a softening and opening out of the being to this something, some other, some autonomous other that we sense is something bigger than us. So one is contracting and one is opening. One has humility and one has a kind of tight smallness to it.

Again, without making too many problems out of this, it's just the sort of thing we want to be interested in. Of course it's going to go one way or another at times. It's just recognizing these movements, discerning what's happening. Ah, okay, can I open it differently? Can I see it differently? Can I shift something?

Prayer or supplication is fine, but prayer doesn't necessarily mean supplication at all—or rather can mean a lot more than just asking. Prayer as praise of the divine or of the divinity of all things. Prayer as blessing—our blessing of someone or something, or our sense of receiving blessing from someone, from something, or from the divine in general, the universe, the cosmos.

Blessing can be something articulable, like "may you be well," or a specific wish. But in their depths, there are also dimensions of praise and blessing that it's almost impossible to put into words. We can't actually translate them into words. The words crumble or dissolve into something that's still very alive, very deep, still involving the divine, involving images wrapped up in it. It's not just a euphemism for "oh, it's pretty in the garden" or "isn't nature amazing." It actually involves a sense of divinity and the imaginal, but while I'm still using words like praise and blessing, and they're palpable, if someone said "what do you mean exactly," it would be hard to articulate. It's something beyond the verbal.

The experiences of this level of prayer—prayer as praise or blessing rather than as supplication—have a huge range, both in terms of how close they are to obvious praise or blessing or the more conventional meanings of those words, and also in their potential loci or reference or focuses: this thing or that thing or wider or this element of experience or whatever.

These experiences of prayer are always imaginal. They always involve the imaginal. They involve image and a sense of divinity, even if that sense and the images involved are subtle or even vague. But they can extend from being associated with one object to an all-inclusive, all-pervasive, cosmopoetic perception of praise, blessing, prayer.

It may start with one thing or one aspect of experience being perceived and felt in the soul and the heart as a blessing—perceived as a blessing or as emanating blessings. For instance, the materiality of the body. The materiality of one's body and its form.

Sometimes there's a shift in the psyche, in the consciousness, in the perception. We perceive this materiality, this form, as a mode of divine blessing. It is imminent, and as form, the materiality and the form is an emanation of a blessing—both a blessing from the divine and itself as blessing.

Not just because it's a miracle of biophysical evolutionary processes—which it is—but not just that. In this sense, in this mystical sense, in this sense of prayerfulness, there are intimations, senses, conceptions—often faint—of other dimensions, of divinity. So there is blessing there in the knowing of body in this way, and the felt experience of body in this way.

And then, as is so often the case, it can extend—a cosmopoiesis extends from one object or thing or person, perceived in this sense as a theophany. In this case, as praise, as blessing, it starts to extend to the materiality and the forms around us, around this body in this moment. There's a natural, organic extension into a wider cosmopoiesis.

So from this body as blessing, or this body as praising, there's an extension to matter—the matter that I perceive in this moment as blessing, as praise. And then also an extension from that, potentially, to the knowing. The knowing of the praise, the blessing, the knowing of the materiality. So knowing it as blessing, and the knowing too is blessing. The knowing too is a blessing.

You can see it starts with one thing, there's an extension—as I said, a natural organic extension. Not always, but often, with these processes, these mystical unfoldments, there's a natural organic extension, a wider cosmopoiesis. And it's possible at times, in practice, to sense all things—all things or beings or objects or elements or aspects of experience—to sense that they are all praising, they are all blessing. They are the praise and the blessing of the divine. They receive the praise and the blessing of the divine and they emanate the praise and blessing.

But always what's involved in this kind of cosmopoetic perception of the imaginal is that this praise and this blessing, if that's what we're talking about right now, is felt and known through the senses somehow. For example, in the realm of materiality, the sense of the warmth of the sun—you could say in a certain language the fire element—the sense of the warmth of the sun on the body is somehow praising, is somehow divine blessing, or the divine blessing existence. Or through the sensations of touch of the feet, legs, body with the earth on which I'm standing, the sense of connection, of rootedness there—this somehow is divine blessing. This experience of touch, these sensations of touch, are emanating blessing, are praising. Or through the sense of smell and fragrance—and not necessarily only pleasant sensations, pleasant smells or pleasant touches, whatever.

And certainly, as I've said in other talks, and I said earlier, these words praise and blessing are not euphemisms for just "oh, how pleasant, how aesthetically pleasing." They don't restrict themselves to the pleasant. There's involved in all this the potential for a kind of liberation from the whole duality of pleasant and unpleasant in experience, and the directives—the constraints and compulsions of consciousness, of experience—that come out of that duality. So we can perceive praise and blessing more and more widely.

But always, what's involved here is the imaginal, is the heart, the receptivity, the openness of heart. Conception is involved, even if subtly and vaguely, and the senses are involved. So it's felt and known somehow through the senses in ways that—we're really talking about ways of knowing, different ways of knowing that are not conventionally acknowledged or recognized.

The possibilities here for this level of prayer—prayer as praise, as blessing—there are manifold possibilities in all kinds of directions and multiple kinds of ranges involved. Possibilities are infinite, in fact. Infinite.

And similarly with all that, there are flavors and intensities of the feelings of prayerfulness, of devotion, of surrender, of love and compassion. All of these qualities, there's a huge range to them, both in their possible intensities and also the possible flavors that they have.

So, for example, compassion. Compassion can be very tearful, quivering with the resonance, with the suffering of whoever we're feeling compassion for. And it can also be very sweet and lovely and very buoyant, light, healing energy streaming forth, and there isn't so much of the tears. It feels very bright, very sustainable, very light. It can be in the middle, a mixture of those two. Compassion can be very spacious or really quite cool. And all of these are flavors of compassion. There's no hierarchy there. Again, they're just flavors that are available to us, and also intensities.

All of these qualities that I was mentioning before—prayerfulness, devotion, surrender, love, compassion, metta—they're actually composites. In other words, love or metta or compassion or prayerfulness is never just one thing. It's a mix of different elements.

This is not just an intellectual point at all. As practice grows and we develop our practice, we can absolutely—and it's there for us to know and to really experience—all the ranges of all these qualities and be able to discern these qualities and the flavors

and the subtle differences and actually tune the mix. I want the compassion to be a little more buoyant right now, a little more light and less heavy and tearful. I want it to be more spacious, or whatever it is.

So we're really talking about what's possible in practice. What ranges can we traverse and what can we know and what can we sense and what can become really just part of our lives? I'm not even talking just about formal meditation practices—also in our lives, in our relationships, in the moments in the day.

So again, no hierarchy here. We're not insisting on intensity for prayerfulness or surrender or devotion. I mean, intensity is fine and great and can be wonderful, but it's not that it's always better or deeper or more helpful. Yes, in the course of practice, in the course of years of practice for most people, our capacity grows. We learn how to accommodate.

Our heart grows. Our psychic space expands to accommodate truly intense, profound emotions—whether difficult ones or the deeply beautiful ones. We learn to hold such forces of sacredness, praise, blessing, beauty, compassion, or love. We discover how to allow these experiences, how to create room for them without being overwhelmed. This capacity to hold intensity without it becoming problematic is part of deepening in practice.

So yes, there is a place for intensity and vastness. But echoing what I said earlier, the movement toward subtlety is equally important. Sometimes these qualities of prayerfulness, devotion, surrender, love, or compassion are far more subtle and less intense—and sometimes this subtlety is actually more helpful. The mind may want and be nourished by this gentleness. We want to allow this movement toward subtlety and fully experience it, not become hooked on intensity, afraid of it, or dismissive of the subtle.

Again, no hierarchy exists here. What this asks of us is open-mindedness, sensitive discernment, careful attunement, experimentation, and flexibility—but always with discernment, with tuning, and with genuine interest.

The heart and its central importance, along with those four interrelated aspects that open the door to imaginal practice and cosmic dimensions—these we've explored. But I want to draw out something implicit in all this: the relationship between body, energy body, and consciousness.

Let me say something about this, as it's crucial for practice. Our physical body, our sense of the energy body, and our state of consciousness—what's happening in the psyche and soul at any moment—are deeply interrelated. One affects the other in con-

tinuous mutual influence. Some of this interaction is obvious and gross; some extremely subtle. Here again we find this range from gross to subtle, and this interrelationship becomes an increasingly important thread to notice in practice.

Consider *pīti* in samādhi. Some of you know this well-being that wells up in or fills the body—this Pali term the Buddha used and emphasized in the progression of samādhi. When this pleasant factor is present, often the head naturally tilts slightly backward. This happens because the movement of *pīti*, especially initially, tends to flow upward through the body like a current or fountain of pleasant feeling. What's felt in the energy body can actually cause this physical tilting—sometimes a little, sometimes dramatically. Here we see consciousness gathered in joy affecting the energy body, which then affects the physical body.

Please don't make a big deal of this at all. I mention it simply in the spirit of experimenting with these interrelationships—not to achieve anything particular, but from curiosity about this connection and sensitivity to the energy body. Sometimes in practice, you might become aware of the energy body's uprightness. Notice this uprightness and allow it as if the energetic axis of the body were unfurling, reaching upward, straightening, filling out, extending slightly. I'm speaking of something very subtle—an inner, imaginal encouragement or allowing.

How does this feel when you do it? Let the physical body be straight and allow that energetic sense, the energy line running through the body's center, to straighten out. Notice how this feels in the whole energy body's space. Then observe what happens, very subtly, if you begin tilting the chin up so slightly that someone watching would not notice or would barely notice. I'm not suggesting jerking or yanking—not even significant movement. Just experiment.

Feel the whole energy body, sensitive to that entire space. Sense this line of energy up the body's center, perhaps extending below and above, and allow it to unfurl, straighten, extend. Then tilt the head back so subtly, so slightly. How does this feel? How does the energy body respond?

You may find that attending to the energy body or allowing it to open in certain ways—or even adjusting the physical body—actually encourages particular feelings. When certain feelings arise, they affect the body, and playing very subtly with the body affects the feeling. There's a genuine interrelationship here.

I offer this as example, but also because we're interested in noticing these dynamics. More generally—and this is what I want to emphasize—when we're aware of the energy body or dwelling in that awareness, especially when there's some well-being,

pleasantness, or harmonization present (some degree of samādhi, though not only then), we may begin noticing something remarkable. At times—definitely not always, but at times—the energy body wants to move, or actually is moving imaginatively or energetically, while the physical body remains absolutely still.

Someone observing from outside sees nothing happening at all—you're sitting perfectly still in meditation. Yet inside, you feel the energy body wanting to make certain movements or actually making them. Inside, you might feel like you're dancing, or that your hands are in a particular posture, or that the body has adopted a certain position.

This is entirely different from restlessness—that "I want to move, I want to scratch, I want to shift, I want to open my eyes, I want to leave this meditation." I'm not speaking of the unsettled mind, boredom, or agitation.

This is actually something else entirely. It comes when we're really with the energy body. It tends to arise when we're genuinely present with the energy body and when something is opening and harmonizing in the citta, in the psyche, in the energy body.

So this can happen, and really the encouragement when that occurs is to let yourself feel into that, to actually allow it and sense this either imaginal movement or imaginal posture, or the impulse toward that imaginal posture. Really explore it. Let it be there and feel how it feels in the energy body.

Now, sometimes you might actually explore physical enactment or allowing the physical body to actually adopt a certain posture or move in a certain way. Usually, that would take the form of spontaneous movements. Usually, they will be quite slow. There's actually no fixed rule, but usually they'll look something like a kind of tai chi or spontaneous moving between yoga postures, or holding of this pose, or some kind of slow dancing or something. But actually anything's possible.

Maybe sometimes it's just in the hands. Just the hands feel like they want to move in a certain way or change into what's called a mudra, a hand posture. One of the meanings of mudra is a deliberate ritual hand posture in some traditions, especially in the Tibetan tradition, though actually quite a few traditions use them. You might have seen pictures of different mudras where the hands and fingers are arranged in different postures—there are many possibilities.

And again, you can allow that movement or the adoption of a certain hand posture, a certain mudra, and notice and feel it. Feel yourself actually doing that, but feel its effects in the energy body, feel its effects on the emotion, if there are any, or on the sense of soul-making or whatever. So you actually let your hands do that, let them adopt a certain posture, let them move a certain way, but you're really tuning to how it feels

in the energy body, in the soul, in the emotions, and so forth. Or, again, you can just let it be an imaginal movement of the energy body, where the physical hands are absolutely still.

All this can be extremely subtle. And for example, with the hands, there's a lot of possibility for subtle and sensitive experimenting. Consider the Anjali, the bowing posture of the hands, or the prayer posture, or the posture of devotion with the palms and fingers pressed together—a very common gesture in Asian countries especially. How does that feel different?

Sometimes you can let yourself experiment, if it feels helpful, if it feels fruitful. Because sometimes this can be just a complete waste of time, or it's not really helpful, it's not really the thing that's most beneficial at that moment. But how is it different? It's very, very subtle. The hands in Anjali, pressed together palm to palm, fingers together, and placed at the heart center, or placed at the mouth, or even slightly higher than the heart center or the mouth, slightly lower—little increments can actually make quite a big difference in the rest of the feeling of the psyche and the energy body and the emotions.

What about the angle of the hands? If they're tilted forward or if they're straight up? If the fingers and palms are pressed flat together or if the fingers are interlaced? What about if the hands in this Anjali posture are touching the forehead? I mean actually touching as opposed to just nearby or not. How does it feel? Can you notice?

So if you're experimenting with this at times, there's an immense subtlety that's possible here. What is noticeable in the effects on the feeling of the emotions, the energy body, and so forth?

Consider the touching the earth mudra—the famous picture of the Buddha sitting with one hand touching the earth. And that can go in all kinds of directions. It's not formulaic, this, necessarily, or the way we're teaching it is not formulaic, as I said before. But touching the earth, and what does that do? Or the head pressed to the earth, bowing, and the head, the forehead touching the earth—all of this affects the emotions, affects the energy body.

Sometimes in meditation, we feel stuck—the energy's stuck, or the emotion's stuck, or the attitude's stuck. And just sometimes—I'm not saying this as a sort of fix-it formula, but sometimes, again, from the spirit of exploring all this—sometimes just a shift in the mudra, in the hand posture, just a subtle shift, maybe even in which fingertips are touching. Maybe the thumb and the second finger of each hand start to touch, or

there's the Anjali prayer posture of the hands, and the first fingers bend to touch each other, fold inward to touch each other, and the thumbs come to rest on those two first fingers.

There are many, many, almost infinite possibilities, really, of different kinds of mudras. But just subtle shifts in the mudra can shift the direction of meditation. They can open the emotions, open the energy body, shift the view even, or shift the sense of possibility and what is actually possible, shift the attitude. And even very subtle changes, as I said, in the hand posture, in the mudra, can allow something to shift just a little bit and then something opens.

This is also helpful, again, if we're interested in why these things are beneficial—one of the things that's helpful here is just the very subtilizing and sensitizing of the awareness and the attention to try and pay attention to how these shifts in mudra affect the emotions.

Just that sensitizing and subtling actually energizes the awareness. It infuses more energy into awareness itself. And when awareness has more energy than whatever emotion we're stuck in—whether depression or irritation or anything else—it can handle that emotion more skillfully. When we're trapped in an emotion, there's a certain amount of energy locked within it. By sensitizing and subtilizing awareness, we give it more energy, more power.

When awareness possesses more energy than the emotion, then that emotion becomes much more manageable. Awareness can encompass it, accommodate it. The emotion no longer dominates. We're not sinking into it or being pulled around by it. Sometimes the emotion can soften and heal, becoming more subtle or simply changing its character. Regardless, it becomes less problematic because the energy of awareness is greater than the energy of the emotion, rather than the other way around. When the emotion's energy exceeds that of awareness, we're essentially drowning in that emotional state.

There are many possibilities to explore here. Take your time, don't become overwhelmed, experiment, be playful.

In walking meditation, we continue maintaining this connection to sensitivity, to mindfulness of the energy body. What we can add now, given everything we've discussed today, is the possibility of exploring movement and posture. You might stand still during walking meditation and explore hand postures, or remain in one place and

dance a little rather than walking back and forth. It might involve feeling the energy body and sensing that it wants to move in certain ways—to dance—perhaps allowing just a part of the body to move and letting yourself follow that impulse.

This could manifest as actual physical embodiment, a physical enactment of those impulses toward movement, certain postures, dance, or whatever arises. Or it might remain as imaginal movement of the energy body. Outwardly you appear to be standing still or walking slowly, and you can feel both realities—your physical presence, of course, but also the energy body. And this energy body might be doing all manner of things: dancing, somersaults, floating in the air. What matters is maintaining awareness and staying in touch with the space of the energy body.

If you wish, you can move between classical walking meditation up and down with energy body awareness, or you can explore some of this movement—either in actual action or simply letting the energy body move while tuning into that feeling.

Whether the movement manifests in actual physical motion or remains imaginal within the energy body, such movement or posture can open up images, cosmophases, or ways of looking, as I mentioned earlier. Sometimes the process works in reverse—a certain way of looking, a particular cosmophasis, or a specific image will affect the energy body so that it wants to move, either actually or in imagination.

Again, there's mutual dependence here. But the encouragement for practice, as we play with this—if you choose to—is really to notice the energy body, the emotions, the feelings, and the shifts in perception. Notice how the sense of things changes, how our way of looking shifts. Observe perception, sense, and perspective regarding the body, the self, and the world—what's around you, your environment.

I realize this isn't typical for this kind of meditative culture. Such practices are quite normal in other spiritual traditions, but for some of you, allowing yourself to engage this way will involve navigating self-consciousness and similar concerns. Please have care with that too. But really notice this interplay between perception more widely and the energy body, flowing both ways.

And to reiterate what we've already implied: sometimes the actual movement of prostration, the actual shift in hand posture, the actual dancing or change in posture will shift things and bring something alive. The being comes into heightened sensitivity, openness, and soul-making. It's genuinely helpful to move. But sometimes it's not, though we might assume it should be. We might perform our ritual prostrations, yet what actually happens is the body acts while the soul turns off. This is fascinating. Why does this occur? How does it happen? Do we even notice it's happening?

Sometimes what's more helpful is the inner prostration, the inner attitude of bowing, the inner devotion, the inner sense of the energy body and surrender. At such times, the mind wants more subtlety. That becomes more beneficial. Awareness comes alive and sensitive not through physical enactment but through this inner movement.

At other times, aliveness, sensitivity, and soul-making arise through actual action. Even discerning between these possibilities asks quite a lot of us as practitioners—to notice what's happening, to recognize what will be helpful right now, and to remain truly open to both possibilities, both avenues.

There's much to play with here.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 37

The Movement of Devotion (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 53 min

In this opening talk on devotional practice, Rob Burbea examines how we can move flexibly between different orientations in meditation—samādhi cultivation, emotional sensitivity, and imaginal practice. He challenges common misconceptions about concentration as merely reducing thoughts, emphasizing instead the quality of our relationship with thinking and the importance of allowing subtlety of attention to emerge.

Burbea outlines four crucial factors that support deliberate engagement with imaginal practice and cosmopoiesis: decreased fabrication of perception, synesthesia (blending of the senses), an attitude of heart characterized by receptivity and humility, and tuning to imaginal perceptions. He explores how these elements work together to open the door to the imaginal realm, drawing parallels with tantric deity practices and discussing three gradations of practice—from invocation and supplication, through harmonizing with divine qualities, to complete fusion or union with the imaginal figure.

The talk emphasizes the vital role of devotion, surrender, and openness of heart in authentic imaginal practice, warning that without these qualities, such practices become mere visualization exercises. Through personal examples and practical guidance, Burbea demonstrates how these factors enable profound transformations of perception, leading to what he terms 'transubstantiation' of the cosmos through communion with imaginal figures.

We emphasized earlier how we are encouraging on this retreat the exploration of different orientations or directions in practice and how they can work together flexibly and synergistically, allowing us to move between them. Those practices include the orientation to samadhi - cultivating that harmonization, that sense of well-being in the energy body and mind, the awareness of filling that out and enjoying it, resting in that alive, bright field of different energy qualities.

We talked about developing sensitivity and skill in relation to the emotions in the moment, using the energy body for that work, with various possibilities there. And we're obviously discussing imaginal practice, again anchored in the energy body, and the expansion of that into cosmopoiesis. So let me say a bit more about these various practices and directions to fill that out further for your practice.

I want to start with something we touched on already. Oftentimes that word samadhi gets translated as concentration, and then carries so much baggage - so much pressure and heaviness and narrow-mindedness in various ways. So often a person practicing, sometimes for years, sits down with their primary objective being to try and have fewer thoughts. If they could ever have no thoughts, that would be fantastic. The whole objective, thrust, and direction - as well as measurement - of their meditation revolves around how much thought there is, with less being better. Unfortunately, this can very easily breed frustration and self-judgment.

If I think of meditation this way, even if I don't quite realize that's what I'm doing, if having fewer thoughts becomes the primary purpose or aim of my meditation and the measure by which I judge my practice, this is a mistake. Even when I'm doing samadhi practice - when that's my orientation and what I'm cultivating in the moment - if that's how I'm thinking about it, it's a mistake.

It's much more important to consider the relationship with thinking, the relationship with a thought in the moment, not the presence or absence of thought, or even how thick and dense thoughts are, how much of a mental thicket they create. What matters is the relationship with any thought that is present.

Is the awareness hooked onto a thought? Does it hook into it and then get dragged along? We're actually grasping at a thought. Even if it's a thought I don't like and want to get rid of, there's a kind of grasping. We become hooked and dragged. Is that what's happening? Is that the relationship? Or is there less hooking? A thought can arise and pass. This is a spectrum - how much hooking, how little hooking, how tight is the hooking? There are other aspects of the relationship with thought involving belief and what we believe about thoughts, but it's the relationship that's primary, not so much the presence or absence of thought.

Secondly, making the reduction of thinking or even the absence of thinking a kind of holy grail that we're chasing would be a mistake for several reasons. But there's a second reason I want to emphasize, which I mentioned already: we want to allow a subtlety of attention.

Now, we're not making a hierarchy here. It's not only about subtlety, and we're not trying to be subtle all the time. There's no hierarchy. But what we don't want to do is prevent subtlety of attention. Very often people practice in ways without realizing that actually prevent the awareness from becoming more subtle, so it just stays at one level. This can happen through the way they're breathing, or paying attention, or the direction they're trying to pursue, or how they're holding their effort - many factors. But very often people prevent a deepening in subtlety in the moment.

Now, by subtlety, remember, I don't mean a microscopic focus of awareness. I don't mean being able to see all the atoms and moments of sensation very quickly or finely. All that's okay and useful to a certain extent - to a limited extent. It has a downside in that it reinforces certain perceptions. If I emphasize it too much, if I have a way of thinking about practice and the path that emphasizes those kinds of perceptions too much, it will tend to reify those perceptions as reality - "this is the basic reality" - and also tend for the mind to keep seeing that way. We've touched on this.

So when I say subtlety on this retreat, what I really mean, as I said already, is subtler, more refined vibrations, energies, qualities, emotions, resonances becoming available to consciousness to notice, to feel, to discern between. A subtler attention is able to receive, perceive, and navigate all that.

When there is less thinking - at those times there is less thinking in meditation - there is the opportunity for an increase in subtlety. It's not a guarantee because I still have to tune to that subtlety, tune to what is more subtle, more refined. We talked about this a little bit.

But when there is less thinking, there's the opportunity for a deepening, an increase in the subtlety and refinement of attention, and then what can be perceived that is more subtle. So many of these things, the causality works both ways—there's a mutual dependency. When there is more subtlety, there tends to be less thinking. But that's a side benefit. The less thinking is a side benefit. Again, it's not the goal.

I would say, especially for this retreat and for many of the practices we're exploring—whether it's a samadhi retreat or a metta retreat or an emptiness or an imaginal retreat—it would be the subtlety that, as I said, we're wanting to allow. Without creating a hierarchy, we don't want to be doing something that prevents that. But we need, as I said, to tune, to incline to the subtlety sometimes of perceptions.

Be careful of the aim, because we don't want to replace subtlety as the goal. That's what I get frustrated about: "Oh, my mind is so unsubtle. I'm so gross. Why can't I...?" We don't want to cling too tightly to whatever aim we have, whatever direction we have in practice, and we must be careful of making too much of a hierarchy there, or any hierarchy, really. We don't want to do that. If we put it this way, we want to have access to subtlety, as well as the not-subtle, the gross, the obvious, and all that.

Now, as I've said before, concentration as focus is not our interest and goal on this retreat. It has its place to be able to keep the mind steady on something, to investigate it, to tune, and so forth. But it's not really the goal. What I'm more interested in is this kind of agility of the mind to switch ways of looking, even for a few moments some-

times. And trusting that and wanting that to become more accessible in one's life—in the busyness of one's life, in a working life, in a life with lots of demands, on the street, in the city.

So it's this agility, this flexibility, these ways of looking we talk so much about, rather than how much can I stick my mind to one object and keep it there with a minimum of thinking and movement. Yes, of course that has its place, but it tends to get way overemphasized as we've talked about.

And secondly, on this retreat, rather than focusing and closing down on something, in a way we could say openness is a big part of what we're interested in. There's a lot to say about that word and its relationship with samadhi. I just want to touch on a couple of things here.

We're interested in an openness of view, an openness of mind, an openness of perception—is my range of ways of looking open?—and also an openness of heart. This is something we'll come back to. The openness of heart is very important for what we're doing, and very important obviously in one's life and in practice in general.

We can also wear open eyes. Now we tend, in this tradition, for people to practice with the eyes closed. You sit down, you close your eyes. In other traditions, they keep them open. If you want, experiment with this on this retreat—eyes open, eyes closed.

You might start a practice with the eyes open, because it might be that there's some kind of cosmopoiesis there already. Already. And we don't notice it. We just shut the eyes. We don't notice that already the world or the people around me—look, I'm sensing them differently. I'm sensing them through the lens of some particular cosmopoetic lens. Then I open, I tune into that, I feel it, I enjoy it, I relate, come into a relationship with that and let that affect me. And then maybe I gradually close my eyes, see if I can take that in with my eyes closed, keep it going with my eyes closed. Or the other way around—I start with my eyes closed, something strong happens with an image or something like that, and then maybe I want to open my eyes and see what effect that has on my perception of the world, see if there's a cosmopoiesis spilling over from the image or the perception of the energy body. Or often, similarly, with emptiness practice—this is very important.

Here at the beginning of the retreat, we've got the open schedule, so people are coming and going, and it might be just too much at the beginning of a sitting to start with the eyes open if there's a lot of coming and going. But see what's helpful.

Be careful here of restlessness. You know, I'm opening eyes, I'm closing them, I'm opening them, and actually what's happening is it's just a movement of restlessness in the mind. So always the question: what's helpful? And the attitude, the stance of experimentation and really seeing what helps. If it's restlessness, it doesn't help to just act it out. It would be helpful to just choose one—eyes open or closed—and just stay with it for a while. Let things settle a while.

When the eyes are open, it's still possible to have what we might call purely intra-psychic images.

My eyes are open, I see the room, but in my mind's eye, so to speak, I'm seeing something else. If I say "intra-psychic," it seems to imply a rigid belief in a division between the psyche and the world, and in a way I'm really not implying that—but I can't think of a better word. Intra-psychic—you know what I mean—just within the mind.

So even though my eyes are open, it's still possible to have intra-psychic images. And with my eyes open, of course, it's possible to see and sense others and the world in some kind of cosmopoiesis or through some kind of cosmopoietic lens. And with closed eyes, just the same.

In other words, both avenues are open, whether the eyes are closed or not. With the eyes closed, of course, I can tune into an intra-psychic image, a purely intra-psychic image, but I can also sense the world around me. Maybe not visually, but I might have an inner visual sense of it, and I might be hearing and feeling in my body and smelling. And that sensing of the world may be a cosmopoietic sense, a cosmopoietic sensation, perception.

So eyes open, eyes closed—avenues are open here for what can happen in either way.

To really have an experimental approach to practice doesn't just mean flipping around between things. It means adding the question: what makes this or that work right now? Or what is preventing this or that from working? And this is a whole other level of question—actually understanding, if you like, the mechanisms of practice.

If my eyes are open and I'm trying to encourage a cosmopoetic perception that's not happening, do I understand why it's not happening? Sometimes it's not possible to understand these things, but oftentimes it is—oh, it's not happening because of this. Or if something is happening and it is working well, what are the factors that are actually supporting that in the moment?

So there's a kind of meditative research going on that's actually really important. The Buddha talks about this in the Pali Canon when he talks about hindrances and factors of enlightenment. He's also talking about a real active, engaged interest in the experimentation, discovering what feeds what—to use his words—and what starves what. The same thing with all these more extended practices. There's really this interest in the question: How come this works now? What's missing? What's needed? What helps?

One of the things that's significant in making an imaginal practice work, or working with a particular image at any moment, or with a particular cosmopoiesis, is the relationship with the object sensed. If, for example, my eyes are open and I'm trying to gently encourage this cosmopoiesis or allow what seems to be there, and I reify too much—either the object in any way, what I'm looking at or sensing, taking it as real, taking this perception as real—or if I'm grasping at it because it's so attractive or it's repulsive and there's too much gross grasping, pushing or trying to cling on, keep the experience or chase after it—this reification and gross grasping will tend to dissolve, destroy, inhibit the cosmopoiesis, destabilize it.

Or again, if I have my eyes open, looking at the world, sensing the world around me and trying to gently encourage a cosmopoiesis, and I lose contact with the energy body and lose the sensitivity with the energy body, again, it probably won't be helpful. If there's any kind of even subtle leaning towards whatever is, so to speak, out there—even subtle—that subtle leaning is a kind of grasping, and the imaginal realm will fade, the cosmopoiesis will fade because of these factors. It's a relationship with what's being perceived.

We're interested in openness, and another kind of openness has to do with the sounds that surround us in the course of the day in a meditation. The sounds of others, of humans—are they sounds or are they noises, which often has a more negative connotation? Are they seen as distractions from my meditation, my concentration? Again, something's shrunken in the whole view there. That whole view is quite tight, quite impoverished, actually.

In the course of what we're doing—and we'll talk about this more and more this week—I hear the noises of human beings around me or far away over the fields or in the street, and rather than try to exclude them to preserve my concentration, so one's in a battle with those sounds, is it possible to encourage this openness to include the sounds?

There are all kinds of ways of doing that, but on this retreat, where we're focusing more on this kind of imaginal-based re-enchantment, can I include them but actually shift the view of them to hear, sense these sounds differently? So these human noises are the sounds of angels, or the sound of the divine speech, of mantra. Can I actually shift that view and include them?

Maybe that becomes then the focus of the meditation—this shift in view, this enchanted view of these sounds and of these people, whoever they are. I don't even know who it is making these sounds. Seeing them, sensing them, playing with their conception and entertaining the idea that they are angels. What does that mean? I don't know. Does it matter? No. What matters is you can feel it come alive. You can feel it change the relationship. And that enchantment come in and that beauty and that sacredness and the openness and the softening.

So there are all kinds of possibilities here, and there are possibilities that don't have anything to do with the kind of enchantment we're talking about that are also very skillful. But there's something about the openness there—opening to include and opening the view, or rather shifting the view. More generally speaking, there's a kind of openness. As we've already emphasized just in this talk, we've taken this flexibility of practices and flexibility between practices.

The energy body is always the kind of touchpoint, the aspect of things, the dimension of our being that we don't want to really ever lose. We want to keep in touch with whatever practice we're doing. But we can move between just focusing on the emotions in different ways, working skillfully with the emotions—both the beautiful ones and the difficult ones, and even very subtle ones that are neither. We've talked about this in other talks that you've listened to already from the other retreats, but there are ways that just staying with the emotions, whatever's happening there, working skillfully with whatever's happening—gross, subtle, painful, difficult, whatever—can be really, really fruitful practice in itself. So that's one avenue, that's one kind of practice.

Imaginal practice, cosmopoietic practice, the direction of samadhi—all of that. We can move flexibly and sensitively and find out what's helpful at any time, moving between these practices. Sometimes one of them is just not a helpful thing to be trying to do. We're bashing our heads against a brick wall or getting too tight with it or something or other, and actually we need to shift to one of the others.

But at this point we can open up—at this point in the retreat we can open up a little bit to allow more images, and then move flexibly between practices, always noticing the energy body and sensitive to the resonances. If we are working with images, we stay sensitive to the soul-making, the qualities of soulfulness, emotion, and so forth, particularly in and through the energy body, but also really in the whole psyche.

So let me say a little bit about imaginal practice and cosmopoiesis. A friend of Catherine's, who's a Jungian analyst, was talking with Catherine, and he had said to her that what they call the practice of active imagination—which is somewhat similar to what I might call imaginal practice—he said, if I remember rightly, that it's just a grace. It's a grace when that happens. It happens spontaneously. In other words, there's nothing we can do to kind of make that happen, this kind of entering into the imaginal realm, if you like.

But this is something that I don't agree with, and I'd like to encourage a different attitude to that. Because sure, the images arise spontaneously and we enter the imaginal realm, so to speak, spontaneously. Cosmopoiesis can also arise spontaneously. But definitely also we can practice deliberately. We can engage imaginal practice deliberately and cosmopoietic practice deliberately. We can incline the psyche and the perception, the way of looking, and there's the possibility of finding attitudes and factors and things that we can do that actually support the opening of the door, let's say, to the imaginal realm and the crossing of that threshold into the territory of soul-making.

We can actually support a shift in the mode of being and a shift in the ways of looking to open into imaginal practice and cosmopoiesis. When I reflect on this and kind of notice carefully what's going on, I see that there are—we could talk about or highlight four aspects or four factors that support and enable this more deliberate opening of the door of the imaginal and the cosmopoiesis. They're not completely separate, as so often with these kind of things. They feed each other. They're mutually dependent. They're dependent arisings. But it's helpful, I think, to separate them and say a little bit about each.

So the first is fabricating less—a decrease in the moment, in other words, in that stretch of practice for some period, a decrease in the fabrication of perception in general. And that can come out of samadhi practice, which—the way I would think about it is almost by definition involves some degree of less fabrication. It's not the way most people think about samadhi practice, not the way most people think about practice, period. We've touched on this. But it could come through metta, it could come through

emptiness, it could come through the imaginal, it could come—basically it comes from less clinging. I'm using clinging in a broad sense here. When there's less clinging, there will be less fabrication of perception in that moment.

And that movement into less fabrication kind of makes everything soluteo, liquid. It loosens everything. And that loosening allows a number of other factors. So some degree of less fabricating is a factor involved in and supporting this opening the door of the imaginal realm and cosmopoiesis—some degree. That's the first one.

The second one is what I would like to call very loosely synesthesia, which is a word that some of you may know. I don't mean literal clinical synesthesia. What it really means is a kind of mixing and blending of the senses so that it can sometimes seem like I see sounds or I hear a bodily sensation or feel that in the body. There's a mixing of all or some of the senses. Actually, as it gets deeper, all the six senses—mind, sight, smell, taste, touch and sound, body sense—

all those six senses, they kind of gather more into one. So it's almost like to think is to feel the thought in the body somehow. To hear a sound is somehow to see. Six senses become one. You can't even separate between what one thinks and hears or sees or feels in the energy body field.

This is a continuum and gradually, this will happen anyway as fabrication gets less. Six senses that seem so separate, each with their own domains, sense fields, etc., gradually become more sort of one in the same sense field. And eventually, when there's really very little fabricating, the senses do not arise. Sensation does not arise. There is the unfabricating of vedanā, sensation, and perception.

But it also happens in imaginal practice, this synesthesia, a little bit, or a lot.

Okay, so first, lessening fabrication. Second, a degree of synesthesia, what we might call synesthesia. Third is a stance and posture, if you like, of the heart. So this is, again, involved in and supports. So it's a factor of, but it's also a contributing factor of imaginal practice and cosmopoiesis.

A posture, an attitude of the heart of, I would say, receptivity, but also some kind of humility and even surrender. I'm going to say more about this, but this heart aspect is very important. So heart is not soul. Soul, if you like, includes heart. That's what I'm saying here. Soul needs to include heart. But heart doesn't always mean soul or soul making.

Sometimes people ask themselves, what do I really want? What do I really want? And they come up with the answer, love or something. And they mean... what do you mean? Do you mean just a heart quality? Because we're not used to thinking in this way. We don't think, actually, what I also want is soul. When I say love, I probably don't just mean a heart quality. I mean a soul element of that love as well. I've talked about it elsewhere, so I'm not going to come back to it.

But a third factor here, a third aspect, is an attitude or a state or stance of the heart. And the fourth is imaginal perception itself and tuning to imaginal perceptions, which I've talked about on other talks, other retreats. These four aspects.

Now, of these four, the first and the third are things that we can do. We can actively trigger them, engage them, move in that direction. That might, for some of you, sound like too much of a pipe dream or something that's not accessible now. So let's say we can learn as we develop practice to do these, to fabricate less and less. We learn that skill, if you like, and similarly we learn how to open the heart in the moment, just shifting something so that the heart opens, so that there is humility, surrender, receptivity, openness, that posture of the heart.

And that those two movements of fabricating less and opening the heart in the moment become easier for us as we develop in practice. For some of you will know that, and for others it's something to realize, take it on faith or whatever, that that's the case. But these movements, fabricating less and opening the heart, if you like, in receptivity, in humility, we can do these.

And that doing of those two allows the opening of the imaginal, the fourth factor, in ways that affect the soul more deeply, that are more soul-making. In other words, if there's too rigid a fabrication being clung to and if the heart isn't open, the imaginal won't open so deeply and won't affect us so deeply.

But these two factors, the lessening fabrication and the opening of the heart, also will, especially the lessening fabrication, will allow some degree of synesthesia. And what I'm calling synesthesia is this mixing and inter-relating, almost like blending and communication of the senses, if you like. And that so-called synesthesia functions then, at that time, as a different mode of knowing.

In other words, the modes of knowing that we know are the six senses. We figure something out through thinking, or we intuit it, or whatever, or we see it, or we know it through hearing because we've heard it, whatever. But in a way, when there's a synesthesia, we can talk about a different mode of knowing.

So, just to give an example, you know, with being so ill and having, well, most of the...

I have this illness, I have cancer, and sometimes when I go to practice and sit, I begin with an attitude of humility. When my illness becomes part of my meditation theme—perhaps I'm not feeling well that day—I start with a felt, deep acknowledgment in the soul of humility, a stance of humility. I recognize that I cannot cure myself of cancer, and it's very possible the doctors can't either. There's a sense that I cannot do this on my own. It's not something within my power.

In that recognition, there's an acknowledgment of humility: I do not, I cannot do this alone. From that humility, a step further emerges—if I'm doing imaginal practice—an openness and surrender to what I'll call God. I'll put it in quotation marks if you prefer, because there is this seeing of image as image, this looseness and non-fixation, this non-reification of any idea of divinity that we're exploring throughout this retreat.

But out of the humility comes a further movement, a gesture of psychic attitude: openness and surrender to a god or angel or deity—something numinous and other, some imaginal figure. This needs to happen first, before that image or sense of that deity comes alive. This openness and surrender includes and involves a deep, deep acceptance of surrender to what will be, to their will, to use a certain language.

It's not a technique to try and fix or guarantee some kind of deal to get what I want. It's more about a profound opening of the entire being—heart and soul—to that deity and to the way it permeates my being and affects my life, the events of my life and my death. But again, the humility and then the openness and surrender to the figure need to come first. They give it aliveness. Not always, but often.

And then all kinds of things are possible. From that openness of the heart, that stance of the heart, when the imaginal has come alive, maybe the synesthesia comes. For example—and I could give many examples here—I hear the birdsong outside, and the heart, the soul hears it as blessing. Blessing the cosmos in all kinds of ways. We'll talk a lot, hopefully, on this retreat about what that word even means: blessing.

But an element of the blessing is that they are healing me. The birdsong has some kind of divine or angelic function as healing. It's as if the sound, the beautiful sound of the birdsong—I'm open to it and it somehow feels, with the synesthesia, that the fragments of melody are reweaving or restructuring through sound. They're restructuring my energy body.

So I'm hearing it, but I'm also feeling that. I'm feeling it as healing. I'm feeling some kind of re-sculpting or rewiring or reshaping, reweaving of this energy body, and opening to that—to the beauty of that and the blessing of that and the divinity of it and the preciousness of it. There's a kind of synesthesia then between the sound and the body sense. They almost feel the same thing. The sound is the reweaving of the energy body, something very beautiful. There are many examples one could give.

Similarly, some of you will be familiar with tantric practices in other traditions—working with the yidam, with the tantric deity, Tara or whoever you're practicing with. It's a similar thing. The devotion, the surrender, the openness, the humility are vital and indispensable aspects or factors in that practice if you're working with a tantric deity. Usually they need to be there first, these qualities of the heart. That's what I need to take care of first—not always, but often.

I need to actually feel them, feel what that feels like: the devotion, the openness, the surrender in the heart, in the energy body. And then a door opens. That's part of opening the door. In the Tibetan tradition they talk a lot about preliminaries or prerequisites. It's a similar thing here. We're talking about something in the heart that actually needs to open, soften, shift.

Without that, a door into the imaginal as something alive will not open. Without that genuine aliveness that comes from the heart opening, those kinds of practices just become exercises in visualization or concentration, focusing the mind on visual images. They become quite dry and barren and actually unproductive.

So the heart and its attitude or posture in the moment is crucial. In that moment, it's crucial, literally—it takes the practice this way or that way. Crucial from crux, cross. This applies equally to working with the imaginal figure of love we explored in our meditation the other day, or any imaginal figure that's loving you, from whom you're receiving love, any flavor of love there, any character of love.

Remember, the appearance of that imaginal figure may be very ethereal. It may have a body of light or a particular colored body—red or blue or whatever. Or it could be very human in its appearance. It could be animal, could be a deity. It could be very solid as opposed to a body of light. It could be someone I even know—a friend or lover—or someone I don't know, if it's human. Maybe the features in the image are clear, maybe they're more vague. But what's clear, and even if it's not, it could be not visual at all—remember, it could be just a sense. But what's clear is the character, the qualities of presence that this particular imaginal figure has.

Their being, their particularity, their personhood is sensed, even if the features are not clear visually. That's what characterizes imaginal practice—a sort of uniqueness of personhood, of character, if you like, in the image.

When these four aspects, four factors are there—the lessening fabrication, what I'm calling synesthesia, the attitude of heart, and the imaginal perception and tuning—if that's all there, then a lot is possible. All kinds of avenues of experience, directions, become possible in imaginal practice, cosmic oasis, tantric practice, whatever.

So in repeating a mantra, for example, or working with a tantric deity yoga, or any kind of imaginal figure as we've been talking about, or cosmic oasis practice, we could delineate three gradations. Cautious of this word hierarchy, let's discern three possibilities there.

First, there can be, in the mantra reciting or chanting, or in the tantric relationship with the imaginal figure of the tantric deity, a kind of invocation that is a supplication. As I'll talk about in a minute, what that means is asking, a kind of praying, an opening to the other, opening to this other who is, yes, larger than me, more powerful. There's a humility there. There's the beauty of that invocation, supplication, opening to what's larger.

Then as one stays with that, perhaps with that image, with that cosmic oasis even, or with the mantra—this is particularly the case with devotional yoga to an imaginal figure or a tantric deity—there can be a harmonizing of one's being in that moment with the qualities of the deity invoked. So for example, Avalokiteshvara—one harmonizes with the compassion that that imaginal figure embodies and emanates and radiates. Or just by holding them in one's imaginal gaze, one starts to harmonize one's energy body, one's emotional body starts to harmonize with those qualities. We absorb them through a harmony that comes about through the sustained imaginal perceiving and sensing.

Or it might be, if we talk in terms of traditional Buddhist tantric deities, Yamantaka has this sort of fearless power to destroy what must be destroyed, whether that's illusion or certain unhelpful structures or even death—the destruction of death through the knowing of the deathless, of the timeless. In meditating on Yamantaka, it's the fearlessness and the power and the creative destruction, if you like. These are the qualities that we harmonize with, and our being gathers and comes into relationship. It comes into relation with the deity and with those qualities and harmonizes with those qualities. So there's a kind of sympathetic resonance going on.

But even fuller or more complete or deeper than that, there is a real sense of fusion or union with or becoming the deity, the imaginal figure, so that we experience our body as divined. We look at others and look at the world through the eyes of that divinity, through the eyes of that imaginal other. We see and know and sense with their vision, with their perception, with their sensibility, and hear things as they hear. We feel and know as that deity.

And because the deity sees us, in a way lives in a different world—meaning they perceive a different world—through that, we actually transform the cosmos in doing so. It turns into a cosmic oasis and reinforces that cosmic oasis that may be already happening.

So the practices of imagining yourself as a deity ultimately involve more than just imagining that you have a red body or imagining that you're powerful or whatever. One actually feels that one becomes that deity. One enters into that deity's experience of body, of world, of matter, of time, of other, all of that.

So all of this is possible. You could say when these factors are there, all these doors are possible and in many different directions as well, not just levels but also directions. And it can happen in many different ways.

For example, when there are all these factors—these four factors happening—less fabrication, synesthesia, the heart stance, the open, humble, receptive heart, and the imaginal perception and tuning. And in all that is implicit that we're with the energy body and the whole space of the energy body that will, in becoming less fabricated as the first factor, the energy body may become lighter or more kind of liquid, if you like.

And sometimes in this imaginal practice, it can actually become one with, as I said, the deity or the qualities or the energy or the essence of that imaginal figure, or even one with the theophany of the cosmos around you, one with the cosmopoiesis. It's as if there's a communion—if we borrow that word—a communion, an influx of those energies and essences, so that actually the body and the being merge with that cosmopoiesis, very particularly, or with that imaginal figure.

Often this happens quite spontaneously when these four factors are present, when there's energy body awareness and one's opening and tuning to the imaginal. One of the things that can happen is this kind of communion or union. Sometimes it can happen very suddenly, in a flash. Something's transformed or opens out into this union in almost what feels like a split second. Other times it can happen much more gradually, one transitioning into this more merged state or state of communion with the cosmic theophany or the figure.

And as I said, in doing that—either becoming one with the imaginal figure or one with the cosmic theophany—there is this transubstantiation that happens through our perception. The world, the cosmos feels, is sensed to be different. We have an altered image of what is there.

I'm thinking actually now about Holy Communion or the Eucharist. In the Catholic churches and some of the other churches, this is regarded as a transubstantiation of matter. It becomes divine. This bread, this wine becomes divine. What we're saying, we're putting that in the realm of perception, but there is a Holy Communion with that imaginal figure and also with the cosmos made divine in the perception, just as in something like the Eucharist or other rituals. It's a transubstantiation through communion that's happening through imaginal practice when we take care of these aspects and factors that feed that practice. It's one of the possibilities that can open for us. Very beautiful.

Just to make clear, we don't have to grasp at any of these experiences that I'm talking about, or so-called stages or levels, or force them to happen. In a way, I'm just mapping territory. If we just practice and open, all kinds of wonderful things will happen. We don't need to grasp particularly at this or that, I don't think. Take care of the conditions and the path in its fullness, in its wideness, its breadth and its depths will open for us.

All kinds of surprises, I think, in imaginal practice. We don't really have to engineer this or that experience. Do this for a little while and you will be very surprised and very pleasantly surprised. It's not easy to predict exactly what will happen, but there are things we can delineate and point out as part of a map.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 38

Matter, Bodies, Worlds (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h14

> *In this profound exploration of cosmology and perception, Rob Burbea examines the contrast between reductionist 'bottom-up' metaphysics dominant in scientific materialism and the 'top-down' metaphysics found in spiritual traditions. He distinguishes spiritual concepts of many worlds from modern physics' multiple universe theories, emphasizing the vertical dimensionality and interconnectedness in mystical cosmologies.*
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> *Drawing from the Pali Canon, particularly the Sāmaññaphala Sutta, Burbea discusses the Buddha's teaching on the mind-made body (manomayakāya) and different levels of embodied experience available through meditation. He explores how traditional cosmologies speak of multiple worlds and corresponding levels of body - physical, ethereal, subtle - each with its own 'matter' and laws.*
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> *The talk emphasizes phenomenological practice over speculative metaphysics. Burbea presents meditation as experimental research into fabrication and ways of looking, showing how different conceptions generate different perceptions of body, world, and time. He introduces the concept of 'alchemy' as transubstantiation through perception - the spiritualization of matter and materialization of spirit - available through any of the six senses. This includes experiencing density and solidity themselves as divine, not just ethereal luminosity. The teaching concludes with practical guidance on sacred space and the evolution from dualistic to non-dual perception.*

Wrapped up in the typical modernist view of the world, of the cosmos, and serving as a basis of classical mechanistic science, are what we might call reductionist views of different kinds. I've touched on this before in different areas, in psychological theories and such, but right now what I want to emphasize is what I call bottom-up assumptions—assumptions that reality and the things of the world are created, if you like, from the bottom-up.

In other words, subatomic particles come together to make atoms, which come together to make molecules, which come together to make larger structures, which make the things, the perceivable things of our world. There's a bottom-up causality and also, more philosophically, a bottom-up notion of reality. In other words, the real things are these little billiard balls, subatomic particles, and then they build up. So it's a kind of reductionism to the smaller and the more elemental.

But one of the things I think is really important to realize in terms of maturity of insight is to recognize that to a certain extent, both in our personal experience and also in science and in the wider culture, the views and conceptions we have or with which we approach whatever it is—a scientific problem or experience, existence—actually in a way generate or give us, fabricate the experiences that it feels like we then discover, if we're not aware of it. This has very much to do with the whole idea of ways of looking and conceptions fabricating perception.

The same is also true about science. To a certain extent, materialistic, mechanistic science will find materialistic, mechanistic results. Through certain assumptions, what we seem to then discover objectively, independently, is just reflecting back our paradigm, our point of view, our assumptions. These reductionist views that I talked about, this bottom-up conception, are actually part of scientific materialism, which is part of secularism, the dominant view nowadays.

Why am I mentioning this? What I want to point out is that there's an alternative view, which is the more Neoplatonic view, or what used to be more popular historically in the West and also in the East—a kind of top-down metaphysics. In this top-down view, things, objects, whatever it is, have their origins higher, their roots higher in the divine. That then emanates down to create a lower stage, but the lower stage is somehow included in the upper stage. So it's a kind of top-down metaphysics, a top-down philosophy—the top being God or the divine, and then there are levels of world soul and all this. There are lots of versions of that, but there's a top-down metaphysics that we can compare and contrast with this bottom-up metaphysics that we have nowadays as the dominant view.

What I want to say is that I'm not interested in just replacing or substituting a top-down metaphysics for the bottom-up metaphysics—not just wanting to switch the belief 180 degrees, substituting one for the other. Rather, I'm interested in what happens if, in practice, we suspend the habitual indoctrinated beliefs and assumptions that are basically reductionistic. Can I actually just suspend that in my view as a practice? Actually just not buy into that right now in terms of my experience?

Within that, what I want to say is that both these views may have a certain validity to them, top-down and bottom-up. Both of them might be views to experiment with—in practice. Practice, again, as experiment, as research, as flexibility of ways of looking. What happens when I view through a lens that is informed by the conception of a top-down metaphysics? We're not used to that in this culture. And what happens when I view things through this bottom-up metaphysics? We can do this as an exercise, and on retreat we will do this as an exercise.

Within that experimenting, there's a curiosity. How then, through this lens, informed by this conception, does my experience arise or differ when there's this lens or that lens? Perception, the fabrication of perception. What are the effects on the soulfulness or the soul-making? And what are the relative strengths and weaknesses, not just as intellectual arguments, but also in experience, of these two views—top-down, bottom-up metaphysics?

For example, recognizing that with the bottom-up metaphysics, as it's usually conceived in a modernist version, there is this kind of flattening that occurs. Scientific materialism holds that everything is just this mechanical, meaningless matter—that's all that really exists. Everything is just that, therefore it's flat. When that is the perception, it's very hard to feel or have a basis for meaningfulness. So we recognize what the effects of different conceptions are and ways of looking.

Actually, in the Pali Canon, and certainly in Mahayana Buddhism it's emphasized even more, in Vajrayana Buddhism even more than that—in the Pali Canon, in Buddha Dharma, and in Islam, and in Kabbalistic teachings in Judaism, and other traditions—there are actually many worlds. So there's not just one world, and that world is just like this. Actually, there are many worlds. Oftentimes, there's a hierarchy involved in a lot of these cosmological systems, cosmologies. But the idea is that there are many worlds, and what matter is in these worlds and what the bodies are is different from world to world.

Each world has its own kind of matter or appearance of matter, its own appearance of body. Each world operates according to different laws—different physical laws, different psychological and spiritual laws.

Chaim Vital was a Jewish Kabbalist, a student of Isaac Luria, who writes of an infinity of coexisting worlds. He also writes—and I may return to this—that every soul has a root in each world. In a way, all these coexisting worlds and levels of existence contain roots for every one of us, every being, every soul. Therefore, we each have infinite roots. Here again we see this interplay, this codependent arising, this co-involvement of self and world.

As a clarifying footnote, particularly for those familiar with trends in modern physics over the last fifty years, I want to distinguish this idea of many worlds—infinite worlds that Chaim Vital and many others across spiritual traditions have written and spoken about over the centuries—from a theory still popular in modern physics called the many worlds interpretation or multiple universes theory.

According to this physics theory, there are uncountable, innumerable parallel, separate universes just like our own. Some are microscopically close to this universe we inhabit, some are slightly more different, and some quite divergent. In many of these universes, I am giving this same talk with something very slightly, microscopically different in the delivery. You are listening, but perhaps with something infinitesimally different in your listening or in the mental processes occurring as you listen.

Some universes will be more dissimilar, quite divergent. In some, you may have listened to a certain point, then grown fed up and decided to switch on the television, now happily watching The Simpsons. In many of these universes, I never made it to give this talk for whatever reason—perhaps I died long ago. Or you never made it to listen for whatever reason.

But right now, parallel to this universe we find ourselves in, are countless other universes differing either infinitesimally or quite widely from this one. This many worlds interpretation in modern physics differs from what Chaim Vital and others describe.

The spiritual, mystical cosmopoiesis of Chaim Vital and other traditions—Islamic, Christian, and many others—differs in two ways. First, it involves a kind of verticality. There's a dimensionality, a hierarchy implicit in these cosmic arrangements. These worlds are often presented as hierarchically structured.

I personally feel comfortable with this word "hierarchy," but teaching in our culture, I want to be cautious because it often brings assumptions, baggage, and dualisms. But in Chaim Vital's Kabbalistic tradition and others, there is this verticality, this cosmic hierarchy of worlds.

Second, these other worlds that Vital and others allude to are not separate from each other or from this here, this world and moment—at least as I conceive it. This dimensionality, this verticality, is not the same as separate universes trundling along and unfolding in parallel on divergent paths.

Worth dwelling on in this extended footnote: I wonder if this modern physics idea actually qualifies as a theory or is more conjecture within the scientific paradigm. As far as I understand, it's impossible to devise an experiment to discover if it's true. Because you can never find out if it's true, I'm not sure this constitutes what could be called a theory.

This conjecture differs anyway, with no notion of verticality and no separateness of worlds—two major differences. Historically, this idea arose in modern physics as an attempt to avoid or explain results discovered in subatomic physics experiments that seemed to show—according to the plain, obvious, rather radical but simplest reading—the dependence of the observed on the observation.

What is observed, the nature of what is observed, depends on the observation, on the way of looking. I look one way, I see a wave. The scientist looks another way, sees a particle. The kind of observation determines what is observed.

In quantum theory, prior to observation, we can only speak of what's called a probability function or waveform. There isn't a distinct thing with distinct properties. An electron or proton exists more as a probability wave—probability of being here or there or way over there, of having this or that velocity, occurring at this or that time with so much energy. None of this is discrete, defined, or determined, but exists as a kind of smudge or wave of probabilities.

The very thingness of the thing and its most basic properties—what it is (wave or particle), when it occurs, where it is—depend on the way of looking. This isn't due to disturbance or inaccuracy from observational apparatus. This is fundamental indeterminacy at a very basic level in the universe. There is no objective reality to things independent of observation, way of looking, and approach of observation.

But that conclusion—that somehow the way of looking, perception, or consciousness on one hand, and the world, matter, etc., are interdependent; that matter, its appearance, behavior, and properties depend on the way of looking, the approach, the conception, the consciousness, the perception; this interdependence of world and observation, of matter and way of looking—

that is so outside of the very ideas that form the basis of the scientific revolution centuries ago.

For instance, the ideal and the possibility of observation free of bias—that's a fundamental scientific ideal, that we can observe things objectively, free of bias, and that we can discover an objective independent existence of things, which we can discover if we are able to observe free of bias, which we can.

And there's the whole separation—the independence of mind and matter, stemming from and championed by Descartes, who divided existence into res cogitans and res extensa. Res cogitans means the mind, the cognitive thing, the cognitive function. And res extensa—matter extended in space.

So these ideas—the possibility and ideal of observation free of bias, the objective independent existence of things which can be discovered in that way, and the separation and duality of mind and matter—are fundamental ideas that underpinned classical science and allowed its progress. Wonderful, amazing progress.

But somewhere along the line, they became, for many if not most, dogmas—beliefs about the nature of reality. And with that, there is a fear for many still that without these kinds of assumptions, there can be no science. Without the idea of an objective, independent existence of things that can be discovered and the distinction between mind and matter, there can be no science. Without them, the whole edifice of science will crumble.

So how to save science and save those beliefs? Different postulations, different conjectures. Rather than the idea of the way of looking of the observer determining whether we see a particle or a wave, whether it's here or there, there is the conjecture that both the particle and the wave exist—or in one universe it's a particle, in another universe it's a wave, in one it's over here and in another it's over there, or in a third place, or very far out in another place. Anything that is even remotely probable, according to this smudge of probability in the mathematical waveform, anything that is even remotely possible—each possibility will exist in one of these parallel, separate universes in the modern physics idea of the many worlds interpretation.

It's only one idea, by the way, among others. And as I said, you can't really prove it, and it's certainly not popular with everyone. I'm not sure whether it's the observation that actually causes the universe to fork or split—perhaps in some versions—or just that these universes already exist, and in each one we have a particular version of reality, a particular outcome of what might be seen in our universe as a probability prior to observation.

So there are these multiple universes in this many worlds interpretation of modern physics—innumerable universes running in parallel, separate, without any interaction between these universes. But all of them, each of these innumerable universes, has objective, independent existence. And each thing, whether it's a large thing or the smallest subatomic particle, has objective, independent existence.

As I said, that idea is not popular with all modern physicists at all, and some would regard it as a kind of baroque idea, really. There's one physicist whose name I can't remember who said this is very heavy baggage, this idea of multiple universes, multiple parallel, separate universes—very heavy baggage for not entertaining the idea of the interdependence of the way of looking or consciousness on things. Refusing to entertain

the idea that seems so dangerous to the fundaments of scientific paradigm. When we refuse to entertain that conclusion from the quantum experiments, then we have to carry this very heavy baggage of this many worlds interpretation of modern physics.

You might say in Dharma language, the cost of not entertaining or not opening to a view of the emptiness of an objective independent reality is this kind of very heavy baggage of this idea. And again, it seems to me it's a conjecture, so therefore I'm not even sure if it comes in the realm of science. But there are other possibilities, one of which is more entertaining—something more akin to the idea of emptiness in Dharma teachings.

So it's not necessary, this idea that is still kicking around fifty, sixty years after it was first proposed in 1957 in the modern physics world.

But again, just to make clear, Chaim Vital and others in different spiritual traditions through the centuries are talking about something very different here than this modern physics notion. There's verticality, dimensionality, possibly hierarchy, and there is not the separation of these worlds from each other or from this one here.

And if you just let these ideas, fantasies really, images—these two, the one more spiritual cosmopoiesis, and the other the more flat conjecture that abounds with some modern physicists—if you go back and forth between them and let them resonate, echo, reverberate, and have their effects in the soul, I would say one notices quite different effects on the soul of entertaining each of these ideas about the cosmos.

One, because of the dimensionality and the verticality and the non-separateness, seems to me to be an idea that is soul-making—an image, a fantasy, a cosmopoiesis of soul-making. The other, because of its flatness, its separateness of these multiple parallel universes, does not give rise to the same soul-making. Or any soul-making. Science fiction and that kind of thing, or strange existential notions or feelings. But not so much soul-making.

Anyway, that was in some senses a footnote, but worth making the distinction.

So many of the main religious traditions of the world, spiritual traditions and practices, have this idea in the cosmology, in the cosmopoiesis, of many worlds. And also many levels of body—you get this in Tantrism, whether it's Buddhist or Hindu, in Sufism, and so forth. Levels of the body. So yes, there's this physical body, and then there's the ethereal body, or the body of light, or the subtle body, or whatever. And these different levels of the body conform to the different worlds that we were just talking about. So each level of body or each kind of body has its own world or its own earth that it inhabits.

This metaphysical framework sometimes runs implicitly through many of these cosmological ideas. But what I want to emphasize—what we want to emphasize on this retreat—is that these concepts, such as the pure land in Buddhism, Buddha realms, or the world as mandala, are not referring to something separate or distant. That is here now.

We're not talking about something removed in space or time. We're talking about perception, about experience. It's possible to experience and see this right now—the room you are sitting in, this space around me, and myself—can all be experienced as a Buddha realm. These levels are not separate; they're here now.

The entire foundation I want to establish is what we could call phenomenological and experiential—it's rooted in practice. We're not engaging in what's often derogatorily dismissed as "speculative metaphysics"—fancy cosmological ideas that bear no relationship to what can actually be experienced.

Sometimes, phenomenologically, in our direct experience, we encounter what feels like a hierarchy. It doesn't have to feel this way, but it can seem as though there are levels of perception available to us as human beings. Pure lands, Buddha realms—whatever language you prefer—these different worlds can be experienced. And so can different bodies—different wholes, different senses of embodiment.

The Buddha speaks of this in the Pali Canon. I'm not certain if it appears in the long version of the Satipatthana Sutta, but it's found in the Samaññaphala Sutta, "The Fruits of the Homeless Life." The Buddha describes the skilled meditator creating a mind-made body—a kind of etheric body. There's an awareness of this body that can, if the meditator chooses, separate in location and journey forth, having all kinds of adventures with a complete sensorium of experience, separate from the physical body's location.

Some of you listening will recognize this as a familiar experience in various forms. It can arise in many different ways. I remember someone on retreat who was simply sitting in the lounge having tea when a blue light body unsheathed itself—that's the very word the Buddha used—from her physical body. She remained quietly in the library, calmly watching this blue light body walk to the other side of the room.

With practice—and I don't want to overemphasize this as necessarily important—such experiences can arise very spontaneously. There was no sense that this was some kind of schizoid break or mental breakdown. She simply observed this experience with calm interest. It was nothing alarming—actually a very peaceful, beautiful experience. With certain meditative states, this becomes readily available and quite enjoyable, opening a whole other dimension of embodiment.

Phenomenologically speaking, it's a phenomenological fact—a fact of our experience, of what appears to us in perception—that there are levels, if you wish to think hierarchically, or a multiplicity of perceptions and experiences available to us. This is simply factual.

We can argue about metaphysics and dismiss things as "mere metaphysics," but as human beings, we face the undeniable fact that a range or multiplicity—or if you're comfortable with the term, levels—of perception and experience are genuinely available to us. We can train in opening to these different levels, extending our range, inhabiting all of this, perceiving more clearly, feeling more fully.

This becomes part of our training in the flexibility of ways of looking. Why emphasize this? Because when we understand meditation in this light, part of the training involves opening up to and recognizing this phenomenological fact. This I cannot argue with.

Someone might be listening and thinking, "Well, that's not my experience." I'm sorry, but I would simply say: you need to practice a little more before making such claims or extending that assertion that "it's not real." Practice more. Open up your experience through practice.

Of course, that person probably needs instruction in practicing in certain ways to open up both their practice and their view of practice. This is what I emphasized earlier—it's not just about meditating more. I need to meditate in certain ways. I need to frame and conceive of meditation in terms of fabrication, ways of looking, and dependent arising.

And I must do this without presuming—as often happens when people discuss fabrication—that "yeah, that kind of thing is fabricated when I'm really caught in papañca, when I'm really believing this crazy self-hating thought. I realize that's fabrication, but other stuff is real."

What happens when I don't make that assumption? What if I remain open in my exploration of fabrication? Who knows what's fabricated? Let's find out. Let's discover this by experimenting, by viewing meditation in a certain way, by exploring and developing ways of looking, and then see what reveals itself as fabricated in terms of experience.

Someone might hear all this about phenomenological fact, experiential fact, the availability to experience of different worlds and different levels, and actually experience that. This is probably much rarer. They might experience even the dependent arising—when I look this way, I see that. This is the perception. They experience all these levels of perception.

And still, even after experiencing this over and over again in lots of different ways—this dependent arising, this dependency on the ways of looking and how perception is fabricated—let's say theoretically that they still hold to, cling to this idea that reality is one-dimensional in this modernist way. Then what?

Then I would say we need to expose and question the epistemological assumptions of that person clinging to that position. What's happening, and what are they assuming about what constitutes valid knowledge? What are they assuming about what knowledge can be trusted? They're not trusting their own experience. This is a person who's hypothetically been through all this and seen this in meditation. Then what are you trusting as valid knowledge and why?

You can see these philosophical questions can sound so abstract, but they're absolutely at the basis of all that we're talking about. Reaching these walls and actually starting to question these assumptions is inevitable for someone who questions their existence deeply, who wants to look deeply into their existence. These questions are inevitable if we want to really open up or even question whether there is a basis for re-enchantment, for cosmophasis.

So what are the assumptions epistemologically about knowing? In this hypothetical case, I'm not trusting my own experience. What then am I trusting and why? Am I just trusting the view that happens to be most popular in the cultures that I move in at the time that I happen to be alive, the common view? A little reflection will show that most people hold that view without having thought about the whole thing much at all or explored it either intellectually or experientially.

Or am I trusting so-called science, but actually what I mean by that is really quite an outmoded version of science and the scientific approach? Or am I just trusting my inclinations, because I have a certain predisposition to a certain view? Why should I trust my predispositions? Why do I assume that they're right?

Or is it fear? Am I actually afraid of opening up the worldview, perhaps because I feel safe in the little container that I've constructed for myself without realizing it? Perhaps I'm afraid of the implications of a widening of the view.

But at any rate, either it's a question of developing the meditation, thinking about the meditation, framing it, conceiving of what on earth meditation is, and opening up that frame in a way that allows this whole thing—allows space and air and actual movement in terms of these openings of perception and these questions—or it's a question of questioning my assumptions about knowledge and what's called epistemology, how I can know anything and what is valid knowledge.

What I really want to emphasize here, over and above all this, is the phenomenology. All these ideas and cosmologies—many worlds or flat world or whatever it is—can we bring it back to practice and experimenting? The whole thing is a phenomenological exploration. It's an exploration of our experience, of our perception of what appears to us and how. In other words, bring it back to practice.

For example, with regard to the body, I can experience and look at the body in a way that sees it as a field of sensation. In terms of insight meditation, that's the most normal way. I can see and experience it, approach it through a way of looking that reveals the energy body. That becomes the appearance, as we've been emphasizing on this retreat. I can see, experience, feel, and perceive the body as imaginal, imbued with image, or the imaginal body as theophany as well. The body as theophany—my body, your body—as theophany, as face of God, the face of the divine.

And I can approach and have a way of looking at the body that has different kinds of conception of organic matter—through molecular or genetic or evolutionary or all kinds of conceptions of what organic matter is. And there are others too that are not quite so reductionist.

But phenomenology, as a philosophical enterprise, always includes conceptions. Some philosophers don't quite realize this. They believe in the possibility of just having a view without any conceptuality involved, a sort of pre-conceptual view of things. It's quite common in spiritual traditions—just being, don't think—as if we can have this naked view, naked phenomenology, naked experience of things.

Always, I say—and I've gone on about this in other talks and retreats—always appearance, phenomena, perception, experience involves conceptions. Perception involves conception.

Most of the time, very subtle, not even fully conscious.

And in terms of, if we just stay with that range, or that example of some of the range of ways we can practice with ways of looking at our body and sensing our body, maybe there's a hierarchy there for you in those. And you can organize them into some kind of hierarchy, or you feel there's a hierarchy. But not necessarily. There doesn't need to be.

And again, there's a flexibility of conception that I would favor. Just reading recently about Plotinus and Neoplatonism, how there was, in his way of teaching too, this flexibility of conceptualization. So sometimes he talked about matter as if it was a kind of illusion far from God, the furthest emanation of the divine energy. And other times it's actually no matter, it's equally divine. Everything is equally divine. They're just different transformations of divinity, if you like, of the substance of divinity. So complex and, for me, amenable to flexibility of conception.

There's a... Most of you know what pantheism means. It means God is... everything is God equally. God is, if you like, nothing else but what exists. So matter is God, and that's kind of it. Actually, it's probably different versions. But then there's something called panentheism, which includes the idea that there's, if you like, again, a level of God, a level of perception which transcends appearance. So there's, yes, all matter is divine. All matter is imbued with divinity. Everything in the world is imbued with divinity. And there's also a dimension, if you like, to the divine that's the unfabricated, the transcendent, that's beyond matter, actually beyond all appearance, all object and thingness.

But in relation to mindfulness of the body and what we were just touching on, when people often think about mindfulness of the body as the first foundation of mindfulness, as I said, they tend to think, in our world, of physical sensations. And wrapped up with that is usually either the rhetoric or the implicit assumptions that when I'm with my physical sensations, I'm with the immediate reality. Immediate meaning there's nothing getting in the way, no concepts, nothing. This is just the immediate reality of things.

And one's not seeing that way, that mode of approaching things as a way of looking. It's taken as the immediate reality and not as a way of looking. You understand? And if I assume that, and if I see that kind of mindfulness of the body as immediate reality and not as just another way of looking, then the whole talk of the energy body is just like, well, that's just something you're imagining or dreaming or believing. It's a fabrication. Whereas the other one is not a fabrication. The sensations are not a fabrication.

Actually, they're both modes of approaching practice. They're both ways of looking. Both of these are ways of looking. They're both modes of mindfulness of the body. And a deeper exploration of emptiness and fabrication of perception also sees the fabrication of sensation through clinging, through conception.

About the energy body in relation to these different kinds of body. We're talking about the energy body. We've been emphasizing it because, going back to the opening morning, because it provides us with a manifold, a multiplicity of resources for lots of different kinds of practices in lots of different ways. I'm not going to repeat that. That's why we've been emphasizing it.

But also, it provides us with one strand, one possibility, among others, of a way in which the body and the sense of the body can be re-enchanted. The energy body provides one strand, among others, of ways that there can be a re-enchantment of the body. Meaning, it's not essentially, truly, the nature of the body is not just matter, just molecules and genes and all that, but there's depth, dimensionality. There is this availability to perception of a subtle body, a body of light, a body of energy.

And that dimensionality, that more subtle body, if you like, or the energy body is connected to and integrated with the cosmos, but not only in the sort of modern materialist ways of conceiving as, of course I'm integrated into the cosmos because I exchange atoms with it through eating and going to the toilet and through breathing in and out, I'm connected with the cosmos that way. That's fine and that's great and that's important. But the ways that the subtle body or the energy body might be perceived to be connected with and integrated into the cosmos are different than that. And there's dimensions and depths of that. I'm not going to go into that. It's to be explored in practice, to be discovered in practice.

So all of this, this question of matter...

Bodies, worlds, and all of it—we could say we're in the business of alchemy. All this has very much to do with what we could call a way of conceiving what alchemy is. I hope I don't need to say that alchemy is not a sort of pre-chemistry. It was not a pre-chemistry where people were trying to convert lead to gold so that they could get rich. That's a certain view of alchemy, but I'm not talking about that at all. I doubt that for most serious alchemists that was at all what was involved.

Alchemy, as I've touched on before, is rather, if you like, a transubstantiation of matter, of world, of body. But this transubstantiation, this transformation of the substance of things, is something that happens in and through perception. So when we talk about alchemy, we're talking about the realm of perception, of our sense of things.

And this transubstantiation is available to us in all of the six senses. So yes, through sight, yes, through sound, yes, through touch—through the footfall and the touch of the foot on the floor or on the ground, on the earth, as we walk, or in the walking meditation or whatever. There can be an alchemy available that's arrived at through any of the six senses, and then again it might spread to the other senses.

So, for example, in touch, what's characteristic of this transubstantiation is that the one touched and the one touching are felt to be transubstantiated together. Again, we're back to the self-world thing. Because subject and object are never separate as they appear to be. The nature of the fabrication of perception is that subject and object get fabricated together. There's a mutual dependency, mutual co-dependency of their arising.

Someone—I can't remember where it's from—defined alchemy or summed it up as the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. The spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. And they said that's what alchemy is.

But when we talk about this transubstantiation, this making divine, if you like, this alchemy of matter, or this realization of the divinity of the substance of matter, of world, of body—it has different images and metaphors for that in alchemy, which I don't need to go into—but this transubstantiation, and this is really, really important now, this transubstantiation doesn't necessarily involve or mean or imply a making ethereal in the perception, making less solid or making translucent or luminous or any of that in the perception.

In other words, there can be this transubstantiation and yes, of course, one option is that I'm looking and the world seems to me luminous, ethereal, less solid. That's actually very common. But it's only one option.

Because also there's the possibility that the very density and, if you like, what people used to call the darkness of matter or the sleep of matter—that is spiritualized. The materialization of spirit right there in that density, in that non-translucence, in that solidity. That solidity itself is not transformed, is not changed to something more ethereal. The solidity, the density, the darkness, whatever you want to call it, is itself infused with a sense of divinity without the object—whether it's body or matter or world or this object or that—without that becoming lighter and brighter.

So there's this transubstantiation in the very sense of density and solidity. It's rendered—that very density and solidity is rendered divine.

Again, going back to what we're trying to do here in the broader picture, we're opening and extending the sense of sacredness. So sacredness doesn't always look like white light or translucence or ethereality or whatever. We're opening and extending the sense of sacredness to everything eventually, in all forms and all perceptions.

And as we emphasized before, all this, this transubstantiation, this alchemy of perception, we're regarding it as art. It's an art.

So, for example, when we talk about seeing the world, seeing the surroundings, seeing the environment now as a deva realm or a buddha realm, as the palace of a buddha or a holy mandala, sacred mandala, and practicing that, or either that arising spontaneously through practice—yes, there's a way of approaching that, and a very valid and lovely one, where, for example, in the mandala, each location has an exact symbology and the detail of all that is important to the way of practicing. That's great and that's fine.

On this retreat we're emphasizing the art of it—a much looser approach, much more poetic, if you like, or potentially more creative, more open. So it's less formulaic. Not necessarily less precise, but less formulaic. And it may be precise or it may be vague.

But involved in that, in that art of feeling the world as deva realm, as the palace of a buddha, as the mandala, whatever language you want to use, what's involved in that art is the sense of all of it being sacred. It's, again, more than the typical modernist view of matter. Something is transubstantiated in and through the perception.

But that includes, if we're talking now about mandalas and all that, it includes a sense of the geometry, a sense of the space and the actual configuration of the space is not something that's kind of dissolved or transcended. I'm not just talking about being in a field of white light, kind of homogeneous, everything dissolves in that. Objects are not faded. I mean, that's a valid meditative experience and direction, of course.

But in this kind of perception of the world around me as mandala, it's not that the objects are faded or I'm replacing one perception of an object with a very different one. But things have their space. The space is set up in the same way.

The geometry of the space is set up as we perceive it usually. But the matter and the space itself is given this or felt to have this dimensionality, verticality. So that's part of the art of this inhabiting a mandala, this cosmopoiesis.

Or again, when we do the exercise of hearing all sounds as mantra, to quote a tantric instruction. Again, we can do it in a sort of very precise way with some set of very precisely defined symbology wrapped up with the syllables of the mantra. Or we can do it in a much looser way, a much more personally creative way. So on this retreat, that's more what we're favoring in this art of alchemy.

So just a couple more things. I mentioned time before. Wrapped up in this whole notion of cosmopoiesis, this whole notion of worlds and what the world is or how we perceive the world or different worlds, is the whole notion of time. Through practice, either through going deeply into emptiness practices—that's one avenue—or another avenue through going deeply into this art of cosmopoiesis and the imaginal, there are two avenues there. Both of them will eventually, and in the case of the cosmopoiesis, probably sooner rather than later, though it's variable, open up our conceptions and our perceptions of time.

Going the direction of deep insight meditation practice via emptiness and this exploration of unfabricating, of fabricating, the fabrication and unfabrication of perception dependent on the way of looking—that way, eventually one will have experiences of timelessness. And they can happen in all kinds of different ways. I'm not going to dwell on it here, but just to say that. And eventually there's the possibility of not fabricating. There is the cessation of the fabrication of perception. No perception, no thing, no self, no other, no object, no space. No time, no event. This is, if you like, a realm or sphere, ayatana as the Buddha called it, completely transcendent to all conventional experiences beyond time. There's no continuity of time there. There's nothing like it.

So that's possible, this completely transcendent experience beyond time of timelessness, beyond any perception. There's also possible through this deep emptiness practice perceptions of that kind of level or that kind of timelessness but in and through the perceptions we have of things happening in this world in time. So kind of the timelessness sort of shines through and we have this again, a multi-dimensionality available to consciousness. Yes, of course this thing is happening in time, and at the very beginning, in the very same perception, if you like, there's a sense of the timelessness of this moment, of this perception, of this thing, of all of that.

So this is what's available to us through deepening in what I would call insight meditation as the way of exploring fabrication and unfabricating will issue in this. And it can happen spontaneously in meditation. Some of that can happen spontaneously. So that's one avenue.

And the second avenue is what we're emphasizing more in this retreat, the avenue of the imaginal and the cosmopoiesis. I've talked about this in other talks, other retreats, about how there can be a sense of the timelessness of an image because the image is kind of iconic and there's a sense of eternity, of the eternality of what one perceives, whether that is the world that one perceives in cosmopoiesis or this particular image or this dimension of a being or a relationship. There's a sense of it happening, if you like, in a different time.

Corbin has the phrase hierophanic time, meaning the appearance of the sacred, literally—two Greek words, hieros sacred, phainein appearance, face. So he talks about the imaginal realm, events in hierophanic time. This image that touches me so deeply, that seems so soul-making, it has a sense that it's happening in another time and eternally.

Alex Wayman, who writes—he's a Buddhist writer, not sure if he's still alive, but wrote a lot about Tantra and translated some Tantras—talks about fruitional time or great time in contrast to, I think he uses basic time for the usual sense of time, linear, unfolding, and time passing, impermanence and all that. In contrast to what he calls fruitional time or great time. And this is the sense of time or the time of the imaginal realm, the time of the sambhogakaya. Again, to mention that word from Vajrayana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism—the world of the imaginal having its own kind of time, which is, if you like, an eternal time, a timeless time, an iconic presentation of the events and the images that take place in the sambhogakaya, in the imaginal realm.

I think why Alex Wayman calls it fruitional is because, if you like, that is, on the one hand, a fruit of awakening. In other words, this is part of the perception of an awakened one, a Buddha or a bodhisattva who's had certain levels of insight, of realization into emptiness. It opens up both the sense of timelessness in the first sense that I was using, but also this sense of the eternity and the sense of timelessness that imbues images and events in the imaginal realm, in the sambhogakaya. It opens up the sambhogakaya, in fact, which is characterized by a sense of eternality, of timelessness, to the images, appearances, events there.

But it will also happen as a fruit just of practicing imaginatively, eventually. We recognize, sometimes it needs to be pointed out to us, but we recognize that the images, the perceptions have a kind of timelessness to them.

And so this, at multiple levels, our sense of time becomes available to us and accessible to us—regularly accessible and easily available as perceptions. Different kinds of timelessness simply become part of how we see the world, not only when we're in a state of transcendence, but actually in and through the very appearance of things.

Yes, of course there's time, of course there's the perception of time, and one deals with that and relates to that. But in the very same appearance is this dimension of timelessness, or dimensions—different kinds of times. So this is all wrapped up in this whole notion, this whole possibility of experiencing worlds and imaginal realms.

Going back to the theologian I mentioned, Walter Wink said the ascension of Christ, or the resurrection of Christ—these are happening in another realm, in the imaginal realm, and that's always available and always accessible, as I pointed out. Why? Because there's a kind of eternality there. It's always happening.

Sometimes a sense of timelessness, either through an exploration of certain expressions or certain ways of approaching insight meditation, will bring an experience of a timeless realm—something separate, as I said, and dualistic with this world, the world of appearances. That can happen. In a way, what needs to happen then is a deeper understanding of emptiness. Or there can be this kind of separation and dualism between the imaginal realm and this realm, this world.

So that might happen experientially, but eventually, sooner or later, these worlds—this multiplicity of worlds that's available to us in cosmopoiesis—and these multiple dimensions in our perception of time, time and timelessness, they are here now, available in the appearance of this world, this moment, all this existence. Not separate, not dualistic, not only transcendent.

Back to the panentheism. Yes, there is the capacity for transcendence beyond all experience, beyond matter, form and all that. And there's the possibility of the perception, the experience, here, now, in and through—and in and through also all the particulars, not just dissolving things. So that non-duality, non-separation of these worlds, of these levels of perception, these realities, dimensions, and non-separation of time and the timeless—all of that can be here, now, available, not separate, not dualistic.

The last thing regarding the way our practice evolves, or the way we evolve towards that realization of non-duality of all this, or the availability, or the inclusion of all these different levels and dimensions and worlds and levels of time—the way we move towards that more integrated experience of this as integrated into this very appearance now, or inherent in, available in, present in, present to perception, to experience, in and through this very appearance, not as separate—the evolution to that availability in practice, in our sense of existence, to that non-separation, to that non-duality, the evolution of that—it might be that duality or separating out of what is sacred from what is profane is actually, for some people, a necessary stage.

It's interesting—everyone would like to jump to a view of "everything is sacred." And of course, I would say that's a more mature view. It is a more mature view. And that's what we're interested in, that spreading, as I said, of the sacred, of the sense of the sacred, the senses of the sacred. So that's great. Everything is sacred as an idea.

But oftentimes, if that as an idea is just words, or it's not deeply based and a fruit of deep and consistent exploration and practice—it's just an idea, and sometimes it's even a secular kind of idea—what happens is that actually everything sacred experientially really drifts or slips or becomes nowhere. Nothing is sacred.

So sometimes many of us, or some, are actually helped by deliberately circumscribing: this is sacred, or this place is sacred. So this temple—there are the precincts of the temple, and within those borders, it's sacred space. We create sacred space somehow or other, perhaps through ritual, perhaps something or other. We conjure, we enchant this space and it becomes sacred. And we're in it and there's an out of it. There's a duality there.

Or people making a pilgrimage. The classical way of thinking about pilgrimage is that place that I'm making a pilgrimage to is sacred. And that's why I'm making the pilgrimage there. It's special. It's different. In a way, it's other.

So what I want to say is: we have to be practical with all this. I'm really interested in practice, in development, in the evolution of perception, of experience, of what's available and what makes a difference in our existence, in our life. And sometimes for us, or for some of us, for many of us perhaps, separating out the sacred deliberately, caringly, and giving that more sanctity or approaching it with more sanctity is actually a stage on the way to perceiving everything as sacred.

So I just want to acknowledge that and actually leave room for that. Because always, when we talk about practice, whether it's these kinds of practices or other kinds of practices or simple mindfulness, always the question that should be imbuing practice and in the background or at the foreground of practice at all times is: what is helpful here? What is helpful? And if I'm interested, deeply interested in moving towards a vastly deepened and enriched and opened up sense of existence, that really one has expanded the sense of the sacred, the senses of the sacred, then I need to be practical about that.

What actually helps me move towards that? I don't care about dogma or nice-sounding formulas. What I'm interested in is actually making a difference in life, in existence, and indirectly in culture.

So not dogma, not dogmatism, but pragmatism. What is actually helpful here? And what are the temporary stages, the provisional stages that move me towards deeper and deeper insight?

Often certain kinds of duality need to be respected and seen and entered into as stages of perception—stages of realization and insight—because they're on their way to non-duality. People want to jump to the non-dual perspective, and while not always, oftentimes it ends up having not much power at all, not much transformative power. It sounds good and there's a kind of attraction to it, but the question remains.

Always, always, always—whatever the practice, whatever the direction—what's helpful here? What is helpful?

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 39

Matter, Bodies, Worlds (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h02

> *In this opening exploration of matter and perception, Rob Burbea examines how our fundamental assumptions about the nature of matter, bodies, and the world we inhabit profoundly influence our spiritual practice and possibilities for healing. He contrasts reductionist views that see birds merely as survival-driven biological machines with perspectives that recognize them as theophanies—faces of the divine.*
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> *Burbea argues that most psychological and spiritual work today occurs against an unconscious backdrop of a "meaningless, mechanistic universe," severely limiting what healing and flourishing can accomplish. He explores the intimate connection between self and world, showing how the re-enchantment of one necessarily involves the re-enchantment of the other through their mutual dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda).*
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> *The talk critically examines our cultural inheritance of classical mechanistic physics and scientism—the overextension of scientific materialism into an exclusive worldview. Drawing on philosophers like Nietzsche, Horkheimer, and Adorno, Burbea reveals how this "single vision" has become a hidden mythology that constrains our perception. He introduces quantum physics and relativity theory as examples of how science itself challenges our ordinary assumptions about space, time, and matter, opening possibilities for multiple valid ways of perceiving reality while maintaining the crucial distinction between mature imaginal enchantment and superstitious thinking.*

I remember some years ago listening to a talk by a senior Western Buddhist nun in the Hinayana Theravada tradition. She was talking about insight, and she said, "You know, you might sit out in the garden and look at the little birds there flying around, sitting on a branch of a tree, singing even, and you might think, oh, how beautiful these little birds, how graceful, whatever, and feel touched by that. But actually, you're deluded. You're wrapped up in delusion because—look at them closely. Look how they move their heads, jerk their heads from side to side, always on the lookout for predators or for a worm to eat, always caught up basically, obsessed, programmed by the necessities of physical survival. And this is the basic harsh reality of their existence, which you are just not really seeing or choosing to ignore."

So the emphasis there is on this fact of dukkha and this disenchantment with the world and with beings in a way. There's imbued in that, or rather that is a description of a view. Can you hear how that's a view? It's a concept in that sense of view, but it's a view, it's a way of looking, it's an interpretation.

Can you also hear how wrapped up in that view and that interpretation, in this case of the birds, is something akin to some versions of modern existentialism, but also a kind of reductionism—a reductionism to explanations according to biological evolution or according to hardwiring of neurology in the bird's brains and nervous system that make them act this way. And wrapped up in that reductionism to physicalism, evolutionism, and neurology, implicit in what she was saying—actually I think it was more than implicit—is "this is reality. Get real. See this. See that this is actually the fact. Anything else you see is a superimposition, a delusion, an obscuration, a veil over that reality."

So explicitly or implicitly, there's a reality claim there. And that reality claim is extensive and thorough. In other words, this is all there is to know. This is the most important thing to know and understand. This is our explanation of what a bird is, why it behaves like it does, even why it sings. And this overextension has been a big part of what I've been calling scientism, as opposed to science.

Now compare that view, that sense, that perception and interpretation—that implicit interpretation, conceptual and perceptual—of the birds in the garden, and compare that view with the view of the birds as angelic beings, as theophanies, as faces, as expressions of the divine. Two views, two different worlds, actually, that are then felt, sensed, inhabited. In a sense, those two views are descriptions of, reflections of, and will give rise to different worlds that we sense ourselves in and perceive ourselves and feel ourselves in. And this is really crucial—of course, it's the main theme of the retreat, but it's crucial to everything.

Nowadays, in Dharma circles and in psychotherapy circles, there's so much emphasis—rightly so—on our psychological growth, our healing, our human flourishing, the flourishing of myself and self-expression. But in a way, most of it, whether in psychotherapeutic circles or in some spiritual circles, is happening within, or I could even say against, a background of a meaningless, soulless, mechanistic universe. So here I am, pursuing diligently my growth and healing and flourishing psychologically, so-called spiritually, and it's all taking place in a bigger context, a literal background—because it's not something I pay attention to—of this soulless, mechanistic, meaningless universe that actually doesn't care a damn, doesn't give a damn about your process, my process, psychologically.

And that background, and the fact that I'm not really paying attention to it, has an effect. Actually, whether I pay attention to it or whether it remains, if you like, subliminal, it's having an effect on me, on my sense of existence, on my actual psychological, spiritual growth, healing, flourishing. It is not irrelevant. It is not without effect. Actually, I would say the effect is enormous.

So whatever we might mean by healing, or whatever we might accomplish in our flourishing, or my personal growth, my personal process, my healing, is actually quite severely limited. Whatever healing is possible is quite severely limited by the context of the world that I inhabit through my view, through my conception, through my assumption. The healing itself is limited. What we mean and what can be achieved in a healing, what a healing can encompass, what a healing can reach, what flourishing can reach, what growth can reach—it will be limited.

And in most psychological, psychotherapeutic, psychoanalytic circles—certainly not all, but many—and certainly the world of mindfulness and quite a lot of the insight meditation world, the whole discourse, the whole conversation, the whole teaching leaves out this side about what the world actually is. How do we perceive and feel the world? How do we conceive of it? It misses the relevance and the effect and what possibilities there are there. Or else it assumes something and then gets locked into it. But generally speaking, it's not given attention. We don't realize the effects that this has, or realize quite what we're assuming and how that ties in with notions of what's possible and who I am, what a human being is, what's possible.

This awareness isn't deliberately included, or when it is, there's usually quite a narrow view that assumes a certain version of reality—for example, certain secular modernist or existentialist versions of Dharma.

As I've pointed out before, the notion of self and the experience of world are always tied together—always. Self and world arise in codependence, influencing each other, shaping and fabricating each other, informing the perceptions of both. The healing of self, or the freeing or liberation of self to whatever degree, and the re-enchantment of self, happens in mutual dependence with the re-enchantment of the world. Re-enchanting self and re-enchanting world are actually aspects of one movement. We're separating them somewhat on this retreat, but as I've said, that's an artificial separation.

Even more than that—the healing of the self and the healing of the world go together. What does that mean, the healing of the world? What is the fullness of what is meant there? What does it mean to heal? What does it mean to free the world? The healing of

the self and the healing of the world are inseparable. When I heal the world, I heal myself. When I free the world, I free myself. What does this mean? What does it mean to free the world?

As usual, there's this mutual dependency. I'm leaving those questions open—I think I've touched on them elsewhere. But there's a fullness of mutual dependent origination here. Self and world go together. Causality goes both ways. When I re-enchant the world, I will inevitably re-enchant the self. I cannot not.

Sometimes we break it down into stages, and that's just a pedagogical tool—a way of presenting practice. Things can happen in stages, and sometimes they do evolve that way. For example, when we do a kind of deity yoga or work with an imaginal figure where there's eros and love, we might first notice this figure where the self is in relationship to an other. Then, as a sort of stage after that, we notice that the divinity of that image spills over in cosmopoiesis to the world, to the cosmos—a perception and divinizing, a making divine of the cosmos.

Similarly, when we do the mantra meditation, hearing all sounds as mantra, we may start with a sense of devotion to compassion—maybe compassion for ourselves, for others. It's to do with self and maybe other. But as one way of opening up that whole practice with the mantra, as we're exploring on this retreat, is that it opens up beyond what the self wants for the self, or for this other, and beyond even sound. There's this expansion into a fullness and a sort of all-pervasiveness of cosmopoiesis—self and world together.

There's a direction of evolution there, but things can happen the other way around too, and they can happen together. They often do happen together; it's just that we don't quite notice, because as I've said, we're often somewhat indoctrinated and trained to keep the attention on the self—the self's growth, the self's freeing, the self's healing.

Within this whole movement of re-enchantment and cosmopoiesis, whether it's re-enchantment of the self or re-enchantment of the world, or both together, I really want to stress again the crucial importance of this relative weighting between self and divine—the orientation. Am I orienting practice and healing and growth? Is it actually oriented within a conception of self-growth? Is that the priority? Is that the orientation? Is that the intention? Is that the conception?

Or is it more weighted towards the divine, with the self really as a vehicle for the divine? Practice, path, life, existence, self-expression, so-called flourishing, freeing—all of it, liberation, the whole thing—for God, for the sake of the divine, not for the sake of the self. That's a radically different view. Where am I generally in my life, and generally at any time, on this spectrum? For the self or for God?

I'm not just talking about words or slipping back into a self-view. I want to pick that up again and stress how much depends on this orientation or relative weighting between the self and the divine. This applies not just to the re-enchantment of the self, but also to the re-enchantment of objects in the world. Just as much as it applies to the re-enchantment of the self, it applies to the re-enchantment of objects in the world.

When there is some kind of enchantment with an object or thing in the world, and that enchantment actually has more to do with the self—more about the self, oriented towards or from the intentionality of the self rather than the divine—that's more my interest, my thrust. Oftentimes I don't even realize this is going on. But when it's that, when it's more actually about the self, this enchantment I have with this object or this whatever it is, piece of jewelry or whatever, then it's probably more akin to what we might call infatuation or superstition.

So things like this amulet or this mala, these lucky charms—we're in the realm of that kind of magical thinking. And their purpose, these lucky charms or this pendant I wear around my neck or whatever it is that people wear all over the world—the purpose of it is for the self. It's to give the self luck or to give the self protection. It's all for the self.

Versus, or in contrast to, seeing these objects, this thing in the world—whatever it is, a natural thing or an artifact—seeing these objects as theophanies, as faces of the divine. They're not for me in any way. Or again, there's a spectrum here. But sensing them as theophanies, feeling them as theophanies. Mostly when I use the word seeing, I really mean sensing. It's just a habit of language. There's quite a lot to say about that, but really hear the word sensing.

But sensing them as theophanies, seeing them as theophanies—rather than tightening it around self and self-protection and lucky charms and all that—this thing becomes a gateway to opening through which beauty is opened in this wide sense. There's a widening, a deepening of beauty, of meaningfulness, of the sense of divinity, and of course the sacralizing of that object, which is implicit in seeing it as a theophany anyway.

With all that there's soul-making—the soul dynamic, if you like, of Eros, Psyche and Logos expanding, feeding each other, nourishing each other, inseminating each other, deepening, enriching, widening together, pushing each other further, penetrating deeper, opening more. All that is made possible by the theophany and much, much less so when it's really seen from the point of view of self-investment and self-conception. For me, rather than for God. As something for me, rather than as a face of God, or for God.

And notice also in that kind of superstitious or infatuated relationship with things and objects of the world, that a kind of immature enchantment in that infatuation or superstition involves also a reification often of their magical power. I really believe that this thing is going to give me luck or protect me from evil. There's also reification of evil then. There is not within that kind of immature enchantment the seeing of image as image. There's what we call an immature enchantment with certain things and certain objects in the world, and I'm not seeing image as image when that's going on. Not only is it about myself and for myself, I'm also not seeing image as image.

As I said, so much hinges in this work, and we don't often realize this, but so much hinges on this: where I am at any time, where I am more generally, in this relative weighting or leaning, so to speak, in the direction of or for the sake of self versus divine—in my conception, in my aspiration, in my intention, in all of that.

Now this whole question about worlds that we, or the world that we inhabit and the nature of that world and the perception of that world, necessarily brings up the question integral to that whole meaning of world: the whole question of matter. And then again, the nature, the perception, the conception of matter. Because the world is, to us nowadays, a world of matter. And matter also implies body. So matter, world, body are completely integral to each other. The views, the conceptions, the sense, the perception of all that is tied together. This is absolutely crucial.

Matter. What is the relationship with, what is the view and what are the ways of looking, or way of looking, if it's singular, at matter? And when people use that word—matter or body or world—what do we mean? What is meant when a person says matter or world or body? What is the conception and the perception?

So again, with matter, most of the time when a person uses it, and obviously mostly they do, what's wrapped up in their use of that word matter is the normal modernist view, underneath which, if you poke them a little bit and say, "What do you mean by that, or what is it?" they would probably eventually, sooner or later, articulate a kind of high school version of classical mechanistic physics. It's made up of atoms, which are a

bit like billiard balls, and they sort of ricochet around and they combine, none of which has any meaning or anything else going on, and they form different things which disintegrate after a while back to the atoms.

But matter might also mean a sort of quantum physics understanding, a more current understanding of matter, where matter is not—if you like, anything—it's not reducible to subatomic particles as things in the way that we usually conceive of things. As independent of the way they're being observed, as being located at any time in any place with certain other properties that we just take for granted as being part of properties of things. So subatomic particles in a quantum understanding are not things in the way that we think of things. There is a whole realm of difference there with what matter might mean once we actually start getting more current with our scientific view.

Or for another person, another time, say matter—the view, the conception of matter—if they've meditated in certain ways, and we've touched on this before, one of the lovely openings that can happen, mystical openings, and can become very much a regular, or not 100% steady, but quite accessible and prolonged in time, perception is that all is one, and different flavors of one. All is one, all actually is awareness in substance.

So matter is a kind of—or the way most people tend to perceive matter—in this view is actually, the reality in this other view is that it's actually awareness, or it's actually love, or it can be many kinds of oneness. But that's a different view of matter.

Or for someone else who's explored emptiness and dependent origination extensively and gone deeply into the whole question of whether matter is real in the way that we think it is—there's a whole way that the perception and conception of matter and materiality, when one explores that view sustainably, deeply, thoroughly, opens up the sense of what is meant by matter.

Or again, there's a kind of Neo-Platonic view where, and this has different versions, matter is seen as an emanation of the divine in a kind of hierarchy. In some formulations, there's a transcendent divine and then a world soul, descending to a divine mind and then matter. But matter is perhaps imbued by the divine. It's a transformation of the divine.

And then also, perhaps a little more at one remove, different psychotherapeutic paradigms. What one means by body or how one relates to that, or the conceptuality underlying body and matter, is also quite different depending on the paradigm. There are psychologies that attempt to be very biological-based, talking about neural networks—very popular nowadays. What's underlying that? And others that relate to the body primarily acknowledging the fantasy through which body is seen, or body actu-

ally seen primarily as a field for that and not acknowledged as a fantasy, actually claimed as a reality. Body means different things in different psychotherapeutic theories. And again, that can become very dogmatic depending on the view. This is reality.

Or again, when a person talks about matter, what are you actually talking about? What do you mean when you use that word? Do you mean the experience, the perception, and wrapped up in that, the conception of solidity, of density? Is that what you mean when you talk about matter? Then there's the whole question of air and water and how solid and dense—and of course that's matter as well. But if you're talking about the experience or the perception or the conception of something like solidity, density, how aware are you? Are you holding that as a reality or as a phenomenon, which means appearance? Are you seeing there's an appearance, an experience, a phenomenality to solidity? It's a perception. It's a phenomenon, which means appearance, perception. Or are you just assuming there's a reality?

So these notions of matter—they're actually underneath. They influence radically as a basis our notions, our senses of the world. So as I said, it's wrapped up in that and also reality. And it's massively significant.

One thing to notice here as well is the word matter, M-A-T-T-E-R, and the word *mater*, M-A-T-E-R, which is a Latin word and means mother. They're actually related, I think, etymologically even. But there's something about this matter and mother, matter and *mater*, in terms of how we relate to that.

Very often the fantasies and images of matter—in other words, what we're conceiving of, but also our whole imaginal sense of matter, and of *mater*, meaning mother, meaning also origins, the birth of things, what gives birth, what are origins of things, or actually to do with motherhood—the fantasies and the images of all that, which nowadays, especially in a lot of psychotherapies, are very central to a lot of the thinking, a lot of the assumptions of those paradigms.

But it's interesting. So paradigms about trauma, about what's called perinatal psychology and influence and what happens in embryonic stages, or just about motherhood and a person thinking about themselves as mother or potential mother. And just the whole area of developmental psychology that has to do with *mater*, mother, origins, and also matter. All this is woven together, or all the origins in terms of the origins of Buddhism. And this kind of fantasy, historical fantasy, of getting back to the basic Pali Canon Buddha and exactly what he said and the origins—and the origins being better.

Notice with all of that, those kinds of ways of conceiving and really fantasizing and imaging matter and *mater*, mother, origins, all that—it seems to me that those kind of fantasies and images which imbue all of that thinking about developmental psychology and all this kind of stuff, there is almost what we could say an almost intrinsic tendency to concretize, to not see image as image. These fantasies going on—and somehow because of the matter, in fantasies about matter, there's a tendency not to see image as image and to concretize it. It presents itself—it's a fantasy, but it presents itself, or there's an assumption that this is reality.

So whether we're talking about actual matter or whether we're talking about, as I said, fantasies of origin, whether it's historical fantasies or developmental fantasies or biological fantasies of origin and mothering and all that—why?

Because why is it concretized? Why do we not see image as image? This relates partly to the subject matter itself. The very nature of fantasies of matter tend to make themselves more solid, more concretized. It's an interesting psychological phenomenon—when we engage with images and fantasies about matter, there's something in their very nature that resists being seen as image.

So as we inquire into this area, as practitioners and human beings interested in existence, interested in our existence and our life and this world, can we recognize that there are operating for us—often at a subtle unconscious level and with huge effect—conceptions, perceptions, fantasies and images of matter? These have great effect on how we conceive, perceive, feel, imagine, fantasize about body, ours and others, about the world, about life, and the whole notion of being with life. Sometimes they give rise to more existentialist perspectives and philosophies. All of that is grounded in, based on, conceptions, perceptions, fantasies of matter.

If we talk about re-enchantment, the re-enchantment of the world and matter needs—almost by definition—to see matter not just according to the modernist view, not just this view of flatness. Matter is all there is. The meaningless movement of atoms is all there is. There is no other level of things, no other level of materiality, no other level of anything—it's all just matter. When that becomes the exclusive perception and is deemed the only reality, re-enchantment needs an opening up of all that. It's not just that.

We can talk about spiritual re-enchantment, where that perception of matter opens up and includes other views. There's a recognition that there's a multiplicity of views—yes, I can see matter as matter, but I can also see all matter as sharing in the substance, the essence of this oneness of awareness, or oneness of cosmic love. There are many different kinds of spiritual re-enchantment.

There's also the possibility of what we've been calling, somewhat clumsily, this mature imaginal-based enchantment. This implies the multiplicity or the availability to perception of more than one dimension. It implies this matter, this object, or the world as a whole, as theophany, in and through the particulars. This is different from the more general, universal, impersonal spiritual re-enchantment. It's in and through the particulars that the theophany of this thing or that thing or this object manifests.

Just like the self, just like desire, just like will, just like our emotions and even our suffering and our difficulties and our difficult histories, just like our images, just like ideas—matter also, just like all of those aspects or dimensions of our existence, in the re-enchantment of it according to the mature, imaginal kind of enchantment that we're talking about, is also seen as divine, as theophany, as having divine roots. But this is in and through matter, in and through the object. When we speak of levels or having divine roots, this is not separate or something only separate or only transcendent to the appearance. It's not something else that I can't see, something outside of experience, something beyond form and matter.

All this is necessary in this kind of enchantment that we're emphasizing on this retreat. But it's interesting—it's difficult with language to come up with words that both make a coherent system and describe well the subtleties of what we're talking about here and what's available. Sometimes I'm aware that the language I'm using will rub certain people the wrong way, or they'll take it to mean something that I'm not quite implying.

More generally, I think it's a really interesting exercise to actually inquire into your experiences of enchantment. When you feel an enchantment with things, when you feel that sacredness or beauty, inquire into what actually is involved for you in that experience, perceptually and conceptually.

We can have experiences of everything being equally enchanted, but oftentimes it's interesting—some things seem to be more enchanted or enchantable than others. For example, plastic artifacts made without seeming care for aesthetics, just functional or convenient, versus a flower. It's easier to have that sense of sacredness and enchantment with the flower for most people. Or in nature or wilderness, as opposed to on a busy city street or a run-down city street. Not always, but generally.

With spiritual enchantment, it's more possible to have everything equally enchanted. But sometimes—and this is just a suggestion which I think is very interesting and can be subtle and difficult to actually discern—when there's a sense of divinity, what conceptions are wrapped up in that perception of divinity for you at that time? It's hard to articulate, hard to actually discern.

It's probably obvious at this point that wrapped up in this whole question of the world that I inhabit is the question of matter, and all of that has very much to do with typical scientific thinking that has imbued our culture. So wrapped up in this whole practice of cosmopoiesis and re-enchantment is the questioning of science, or rather, the relationship with science.

I want to quote from Nietzsche, who writes about science as a prejudice. He's really talking about this faith in scientism, this overextension, this exclusivity, this claim of scientism that everything can be reduced or explained in terms of a certain kind of reduction of scientific thinking. There's a sort of delightful ranting and vitriol in the way he writes sometimes, so you might react to that, but you can also just enjoy it. It's kind of theatrical.

So Nietzsche presents this theatrical critique, one of the many selves he consciously inhabits, offering a delightful vitriol against the faith with which so many materialistic natural scientists rest content nowadays. He questions their unexamined belief in a world that supposedly has its equivalent and measure in human thought and human valuations—a "world of truth" that can be mastered completely and forever with the aid of our "square little reason."

"What?" he asks. "Do we really want to permit existence to be degraded for us like this, reduced to a mere exercise for a calculator and an indoor diversion for mathematicians?" Above all, he insists, "one should not wish to divest existence of its rich ambiguity." Again, there's this call to the multiplicity of perception, the multiplicity of possible interpretations, this rich ambiguity that deserves reverence for everything that lies beyond our horizon.

Rather than circumscribing things in this neat little view—thinking we have reality mapped out with just a few more discoveries to make—Nietzsche asks what lies beyond that horizon. Is there something in us that wants to push through and beyond, to expand that horizon with reverence?

He challenges the claim of justifying an interpretation of the world that permits only "counting, calculating, weighing, seeing, and touching, and nothing more," calling it "a crudity and naivety, assuming that it is not a mental illness and idiocy." Would it not be rather probable, he suggests, that precisely the most superficial and external aspect of existence—what is most apparent, its skin and sensualization—would be grasped first and might even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped?

This seemingly obvious empirical experience, upon which positivism bases its claim that we can only understand through empirical experience and resulting science, might be the most superficial layer. A "scientific interpretation of the world," as commonly understood, might therefore be "one of the most stupid of all possible interpretations of the world, meaning that it would be one of the poorest in meaning."

He continues with a thought "intended for the ears and consciences of our mechanists, who nowadays like to pass as philosophers and insist that mechanics is the doctrine of the first and last laws on which all existence must be based." An essentially mechanistic world would be an essentially meaningless world. He offers a brilliant analogy: "Assuming that one estimated the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated and expressed in formulas, how absurd would such a 'scientific' estimation of music be? What would one have comprehended, understood, grasped of it? Nothing, really nothing of what is music in it."

This relationship we have—whether we realize it or not, whether we think about it or not—with classical scientific, mechanistic ideas and scientism is actually crucial to our sense of existence, our life, what our practice is, what the path can be, this whole notion of the possibilities of re-enchantment. Philosophy of science becomes important, curiously, because it's not at all abstract. So much of our assumptions, so much of our perception, our sense of existence and the world, so much of our Weltanschauung—our worldview—is informed by, influenced by, indoctrinated by certain actually outmoded scientific assumptions that we don't realize we hold.

This philosophy of science is really important nowadays because it's not abstract at all. What has this got to do with the Dharma? It has everything to do with it nowadays—everything to do with our sense of existence and liberation and possibility.

About a hundred years ago, philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno wrote *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*—referring to Western Enlightenment, post-scientific revolution thought. They too critique the assumptions of science that have come to pervade our culture, pointing out that this classical scientific approach and its mechanistic assumptions cannot accommodate everything about existence.

It cannot explain everything about existence by trying to reduce and approach the whole of our existence as if its reality is best and most truly explained at the ground level by this kind of classical scientific, mechanistic approach. This is actually one-sided and prevents—or rather, it provides only an incomplete, diminished understanding of nature—and an understanding of nature as an object to be controlled and manipulated.

This was something that Theodor Adorno stressed quite a lot, and you see here the beginnings of a critique about our relationship with the environment. Nature, through this view, becomes an object to be controlled and manipulated. As they write: "Men pay for the increase in their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power." So yes, science and technology have enormous power over nature through this classical scientific mechanistic paradigm, but we pay for it with alienation from nature.

As the scientific revolution gained steam and its ideas became more pervasive over a couple hundred years, as they became the dominant view in our Western culture, that ostensibly rational movement intrinsic to the Western Enlightenment—the seemingly rational movement to try and eliminate all forms of prejudice and dogmas—remained, paradoxically, limited. That's the whole principle of the classical scientific approach: let's get to some kind of objective, unbiased reality through the scientific method. We have faith in that. We believe in that.

Yet even as this positivist reasoning gained dominance in the culture, it still remains, as Horkheimer and Adorno write, "engulfed in mythology." You haven't actually gotten rid of mythology. You think you have, you believe you have, but you haven't. By positivism, I mean a sort of dogmatic assertion—there's a dogma involved in this philosophy. It asserts, as dogma, that nature must always be understood in terms of quantitative categories. Again, it's tied up with that whole notion of measurement I mentioned on the opening evening: if something can be measured, then that's a sign that it's real. Measurement and reality go together.

But the process, they point out, "is always decided from the start." Mathematical procedure, including the procedure of measuring everything and construing what is measured as real, "becomes, so to speak, the ritual of thinking." So tied up in our whole assumption, the way we think about things, is this mythology and ritual that we don't even realize.

There have been many critiques in modern Western philosophy from different directions and starting positions, beginning to see that we cannot simply adopt the classical mechanistic Newtonian view or assumptions of the scientific revolution. They just do not hold for many different reasons. What I'm emphasizing here is how much this underpins our sense of things in modern culture.

So again, what liberates that? What opens it up? It might be an approach through Western philosophy. It might be that some of us simply have a more poetic attitude to existence, to things, to life and selves. It might be through deep exploration of the teachings of emptiness and the practice of emptiness, seeing dependent arising. It might be

through deeper understanding of quantum physics—actually through science itself—that starts to subvert the very principles or assumptions on which science was initially based.

That's an interesting development, because still most scientists, often including quantum scientists, simply ignore the philosophical implications or questions that arise. They know they're there, but they ignore them, or it makes no impact in their lives.

But as I said, why am I emphasizing this? Because it has implications for our sense of the world we live in, and that has all kinds of implications for self, path, practice, existence, possibility—all kinds of things. Even such fundamentals of existence as time and space—and perhaps in other retreats I could give whole talks about time and space—are part of our way of thinking about world. World involves time, our sense of time, assumptions about time, and assumptions about space. They're fundamental to when we say or feel or sense "world."

But what is the relationship with all that? What is the perception and the conception? Even our notions and sense of space come to be questioned through modern science itself. The usual understanding—again, it's a modernist, cultural modernist understanding of space as the most obvious thing—is that space is simply a kind of empty, neutral, meaningless vacuum that's then filled with stuff at certain locations. That's, funnily enough, actually quite a modernist view: that it exists objectively, and that's the reality of things.

We don't realize it. It's so intrinsic, so woven into our very sense of existence and what the world is. But that's actually a culturally conditioned, culturally constructed, modernist view, and it was not always the view everywhere and for all time that humanity had, that human beings had.

And with the rise of both relativity and quantum physics, we start to see that space is not actually independent of matter and energy. Again, the usual view is there is space and matter is the lumps of matter here or there, moving around in space as something separate from matter. Space is just a context, if you like.

But with Einstein's general theory of relativity from 1916, actually space and time, in fact, are not independent of the matter in it. The matter is not separate from it and actually shapes space and time, as does energy. And then in quantum physics, there are also notions that actually, at a quantum level, space is nothing like what we conceive of it as. It's more like what they call quantum bubbles or quantum foam. Actually, there's all kinds of theories.

So things that are so obvious, like space, like things being separate in space—there's this end of something and that end of something, or there's this corner of space and that corner of space of a room or whatever it is. There's a beginning of something and an end of something. But these seemingly so obvious notions of separation and continuity don't actually hold. They're not, so to speak, fundamental realities as the quantum world gets probed.

Most people these days have heard of the idea of wormholes. They're popular in science fiction movies and novels. So you go through a wormhole in the universe and suddenly end up on a different side of the universe or a different time—wormholes in space-time. What a strange idea.

But even more than that, stranger to our usual notion of space, much stranger, much more challenging to our habitual notion of space, is the whole idea of non-locality. It came out of something called Bell's theorem and then was proven through experiments. Whatever future theories of reality come out of science, this idea that actually two particles can become what they call entangled and actually influence each other instantaneously, even if they're at different ends of the universe—the whole idea that this place is different from that place, and what happens here takes time to get to what's over there, the whole notion of whether they're really different places—it's a radical challenge to our whole notions of space and time.

And John Archibald Wheeler has had a theory of what's called geons. So actually what subatomic particles are is not so much a lump of something, a billiard ball of something, or a point of something moving in space, but actually a particle is a hole—H-O-L-E—in spacetime. So this is a theory that hasn't been proved yet, but it's a way of conceiving. So that matter and space both are not at all how we assume them to be. All of this is getting challenged through science.

Actually, wrapped up in this is a whole other level—what the status of scientific theories is as well. That's a whole other question, but I won't go into that now.

So the typical view, the typical conception of matter, world, space, time, body—it's fine. It's completely fine. It has its validity. Clearly, it's functional. What I absolutely want to object to and raise my voice against is the insistence that it is true and that it is the only reality. This is reality. Anything else is make-believe or delusion or whatever.

Of course it's fine as a view, and it's fine for someone to spend most of their time in that view. Of course it is. This insistence that it is true, it's the only truth, and explicitly or implicitly founding a total philosophy or a kind of dharma or a path that's somehow limited to that and limiting in that way, and founding that on its supposed truth—

whether it's an explicit or an implicit claim—this I do have a problem with. Something not conscious, not thought through, not aware, maybe dishonest, or maybe just lacking in insight.

To get back to what Blake said: "Save me from single vision." That's the single vision. And then it's asserted dogmatically in something that's called aggressive secularism or whatever. This we must raise our voices against, open up through questioning and through insolence that can happen in all kinds of ways.

CHAPTER 40

Neither 'Is' nor 'Is Not': Of Emptiness and the Imaginal (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 32 min

> *In this penetrating Q&A session, Rob Burbea addresses fundamental questions about navigating the apparent tension between emptiness teachings and ethical responsibility. When a practitioner asks how to respond truthfully to realities like climate change while understanding emptiness, Burbea articulates the middle way between existing and not existing—neither reifying phenomena nor falling into nihilism.*
>
> *Drawing on core Buddhist insights about śūnyatā (emptiness), Burbea explains how genuine emptiness understanding doesn't diminish compassionate response but frees us from contracted reactions. He explores how both ethical action and imaginal practice can be soul-making, emphasizing the plurality of archetypal dimensions within each practitioner. The discussion reveals how 'ways of looking' (diṭṭhi) are all we ultimately have, liberating us from the duality of real versus unreal.*
>
> *Burbea addresses practical questions about working with divine images, whether for developing specific qualities like compassion and strength, or in service to the images themselves. He clarifies the relationship between samādhi, imaginal practice, and cosmopoiesis—how imaginal qualities can spread from particular images to infuse one's entire perception of the world. This teaching demonstrates how deep emptiness realization paradoxically opens rather than closes the heart to beauty, meaning, and ethical engagement.*

Truth just comes along and says, "This is what needs to happen. This is how you need to live, this is how you need to think." It has a kind of demand on you. I appreciate that, but I'm struggling to work that out in relation to this material.

Anne is asking about truthfulness coming along with its demands. She gives the example: "The first time I found out about climate change, it came along and said, 'Change your life. Now you've got to start making more choices about what you buy and what you use and how you live and how you spend your time.'" She's asking how this relates to integrity and the imaginal work we've been discussing.

This is a really important question. I'd say maybe two things here.

In terms of the imaginal piece, it's something we enter into consciously. We enter into an imaginal relationship with things where it's not so based on conventional truth. But that's a conscious moving in and out of something. To always live with one imaginal perspective on something—that's a fixation. It's become delusion, it's become something that's contracted around.

So it might be that we feel into our life and there are certain situations or facts or contingencies of existence where we can find an imaginal dimension of our relationship to them. And there are others where there's something about truth that needs responding to. We're not adopting one or the other; we're adopting both. And as always, the skill is discerning when. When do we move? What's possible here?

But I would also add this: it's not that the truth of climate change isn't real. It's real. But both your responses to it and how the self imagines itself, fantasizes itself, in response to climate change—that's where the imaginal comes in.

Consider these possibilities: the world burns around the still meditator. For some people, that fantasy of imperturbability and transcendence has appeal, though it obviously has problems. Or there's the fantasy of the engaged activist who lets his rage and forthrightness flow, who is willing to be perturbed and involved and get dirty.

Here's the fact of climate change. Around that fact swirl all kinds of fantasies and ways of imagining ourselves in relationship to it. There's room for both the reality and our imaginal relationship to it.

Part of the question involves soul resonance and the fantasy of integrity. This came up in the other group yesterday, actually. For me, integrity and purity are really something that lives in my soul. It's something I deeply resonate with. So there's a fantasy level to everything, if you like, that's not the same as just not dealing with reality.

It's more that there's a phenomenon, and it can be seen in different ways. The self, in relationship to it, sees it, images it, fantasizes it differently. Do you understand? Does that make sense?

So there are all kinds of fantasy already involved. You have a resonance with purity, integrity, ethics, ethical questioning. They're alive for you intellectually, morally, actively, but also fantastically. It's like allowing that dimension—just to recognize that that dimension exists in all of that.

This also relates to emptiness. What does it mean to say something is empty? So climate change is empty. I need to respond to it. Not "climate change is empty, therefore, who cares?" If that's a response, I haven't understood emptiness.

So there are two ways of seeing all this. One is as image, and one is in terms of the emptiness of things. And they can come together very much, but there's always with the emptiness path—which is a lot of what you're working on recently—it's like it's the middle way between existing and not existing, and we're always just tipping one way or the other.

So it's not that emptiness is right when there's this sense of not reifying, not contracting something, and not the self contracting in response to it, but still a response—and still a response of care and compassion and embodiment. And that's the middle way.

Can you say what the problem of connection is?

I mean, that's what I was going to say for Catherine as well, about that kind of being very removed by the mantra. But then it's like, no, you can't have that. Why? Because of a kind of Christian part with a sense of truth. You can't have it. So "I can't have it because it's not true."

Okay, so this is really crucial, and someone else wrote a note today. This, I think, is the hardest thing for some people. "If it's not true, I don't value it." Some people don't struggle with that, interestingly, but many people will.

So this is why I keep saying there's such a radical basis—at least in the way that Catherine and I would like to present these teachings—which is not on a realist basis. And that's really rare. It's rare for someone to really be able to hold that perspective. It's extremely rare in teachings anyway. But for a practitioner to actually be able to hold that basis, that way of looking at things—because we tend to go, either it exists or it doesn't. And if it doesn't, not worth it.

Some people don't have such a problem with that because they're more able to enter into a poetic or artistic mode of sensibility and of relationship with things in life. And it might have been in that talk that you listened to the other day—how much art can move us? We know it's not real. And so what's going on there? It touches so deeply and stirs so deeply and stirs us to movement so deeply sometimes. And sometimes ethical action, nothing is real there.

So there's a way into all this, in this balance between true and not true, real—just through the artistic relationship with things, the poetic relationship with everything, actually, with life. So life becomes art, life becomes poetry, more and more, or in places.

A second possibility is the whole emptiness thing, which you're working on, but it takes a while for that to go really deep so that this "either existing or doesn't exist" is really understood and it really becomes a place that's, a perspective that's alive and kind of unshakable and real.

So one answer would simply be more emptiness practice. And I'm not saying this glibly, because I realize how rare it is to actually hold that perspective. What you hear frequently, whether in Dharma or other teachings, is "Yes, yes, yes, it's all empty," followed immediately by speaking as if everything is real, or as if this or that particular thing is real. It's almost like we forget the emptiness, so we're simply paying lip service to this middle way understanding. We're quite interested in placing it right at the foundation, while also recognizing that this is challenging.

Some people can naturally place it there—some coming from philosophy, modern Western philosophy; some from emptiness practice; some from the artistic perspective. Usually wrapped within the question you're asking is the assumption that something is real.

This business of "it's not true"—I can say, "Yes, yes, I understand, everything's empty, therefore I can't trust that, therefore this divine connection is rubbish, it's not trustworthy, it's not real. I can't let it have its power because it's not real." The same applies to meaningfulness. So much in our lives these days, people say, "Well, life has no meaning, the cosmos has no meaning, your life has no meaning. You're free to create meaning, but ultimately, it's just made up."

Underneath this creation of personal meaning and meaningfulness lies a vague belief that the actual truth is meaninglessness—a kind of nihilism. Again, in this stance, I can't believe in anything because I believe something else is real. It's interesting—what then do I actually think is real? It remains almost subliminal. As long as there's something I consider real, everything non-real becomes lesser in relationship to it.

Once you reach the point where everything is not real—everything, everything, everything—then it might still be hiding there, this belief in some kind of reality. If the reality is meaninglessness, or matter, or whatever it is, once all of that dissolves, then everything becomes free. Not into nihilism, not into meaninglessness, but into what I would call the possibilities of divinity, the possibilities of re-enchantment, without any sense of "less than."

In the end, when we speak of emptiness, all we have are ways of looking. That's what it's revealing. There's nothing but ways of looking. There isn't a reality where I can look at it this way or that way, but it really is a certain thing, whatever that might be. There's no certain thing—only ways of looking. And the ways of looking are empty too.

Once you realize there's nothing but ways of looking, this frees up everything and liberates it from the duality of real versus not real, better than versus not better than, valuable versus not valuable, higher versus lower.

How to proceed? Continue as you are—you're doing the practice. You're working extensively with emptiness practice, which is exactly right. It's somewhat like we discussed in our interview the other day. There are certain places where the tendency arises to believe this or that is real, and certain things you can see are not real. What happens as one goes deeper into emptiness practice is that this range expands—both the range of what we genuinely know is empty and fabricated, and our conviction in this understanding.

At some point, it becomes simply: I just know it. As you mentioned the other day, when the gun is against the head, actually, no—I know this is empty. Life, death, all of it. So there's this expansion of both range and conviction that develops.

None of this, for me, takes away from the beauty of the heart's and soul's resonance with integrity, with truthfulness, with dedication, with honesty. If it does, something is wrong—something is out of balance with the understanding of emptiness or the way I'm holding all this. That becomes our measuring stick.

again, indicator or compass or barometer—if I lose the care, if I lose the passion, then something's off in the way I'm understanding emptiness. Something needs more, deeper and more complete understanding or filling out. Yeah?

Okay. There's also a question about how to tell when something is genuinely soul-making. It can be almost like a false friend or a near enemy, because I want to let myself off the hook—I don't want to deal with suffering.

So on Tuesday night I went to see Chris Rock, and the beauty of people like great comedians. I was thinking about divine comedy. But then I thought, where is my compassion for these trade unionists who have told me all these stories? In this moment, my ability to connect to that suffering is diminished. I wondered, is this really soul-making?

Before I answer that, let me just clarify—there was no connection between the comedy show and the sweatshop work. The sweatshop came first and I felt completely compelled and called to action, to participate. And then when I went home...

What I would say about that really is I would draw attention to the plurality of our souls. In other words, both are soul-making. But oftentimes we have, if you like, divinities within us, or archetypes within us, that don't exist at the same time. They move between each other, or they battle each other even—they're contradictory. At times they don't gel, but other times they might gel. So there might be some way where divine comedy and ethical action come together.

But what I really want to emphasize more is not just the multi-dimensionality but the plurality of archetypal characters, of soul voices and directions within each of us. Do you understand? Some people have more of them, or they emerge in different periods of life, but both of those might be soul-making.

Now, they feel different, okay? Both of them involve, will activate, the energy body and the heart and the resonances and the meaningfulness and the sense of dimensionality—all of that. All these are characteristics of soul-making. How do I navigate with all of that? Not any one of them, but all of them.

And it comes alive imaginatively. So even just "divine comedy" is already an imaginal term, you know. The comedians weren't using that language, were they? No, exactly. It's your imaginal filling out. It's come alive as soul. Through that, there's a vague ideation there that's part of the image, you understand? The same thing with the sweatshop and the ethical action. Back to Andy's question, it's like the self is imaged and fantasized in relation to this. The heart is involved, the energy body is involved, the vision of what's going on. So they're both imaginatively alive.

Even if you were a full-time sweatshop activist, heavens, you'd need some time just turning that off and turning on the comedy. That's just practical—like taking care of resources. So be careful of monistic thinking, or single-tracked thinking. You're multiple, you're complex. Soul is multiple, complex, alive in different ways. And they don't always seem like they would fit together, but they are.

So hold the differing possibilities and trust that you'll retain openness to other suffering. I mean, you'll get the feeling. See, if I'm facing a suffering and actually I don't want to deal with it because it's too painful for me, and I turn on the TV—ah yeah, great, where's the popcorn, the chocolate, the beer?

What am I doing? I'm numbing out. It won't feel soul-making to me. But if the thing is soul-making, it's something you enter into, you come back to. That one's not going to die because I enjoy a bit of divine comedy.

So it's like you can trust that things have this ebb and flow. They come, they knock on your door. You know, the characters of the soul knock on your door and they demand something of you. Sometimes it's like right now. Sometimes it needs action in the life. Sometimes it's a more internal reverence that needs to happen. And sometimes it's just—these are threads that come, surfacing and going back down again, surfacing. This soul creature is coming up. It will come up again. Do you understand?

So I don't think it doesn't sound like there's any contradiction there, to me. It's more thinking about the richness of the soul, you know, and the multiplicity of it.

Yeah? It's clear. Okay, good. Please proceed.

I quite like the fact that you've put all this in the book, Catherine. So I've been kind of working with three images, and for me it links into what the person before me was just saying. It brings up a different quality of the divinity, which I'm kind of viewing through the diamond approach—the idea of different facets of light, word, body, nature. And I don't know whether I'm making up my own version of the five things that we talked about after lunch.

The way that I'm trying to do this—the image comes in and I sense the impact on my energy body. What I want to do is to bring that part into my consciousness more. And so I'm kind of stuck between—if I do the first one on your list, which can lead to samadhi, then it doesn't sound like that would just bring up a sense of well-being as opposed to the specific quality of the divinity. I don't really understand the cosmopoiesis in this way, but it seems like I'm straddling the two.

Because what I'm wanting is that quality of the divine. And I guess I'm a bit unsure how to proceed because my ultimate intention is to be able to touch those qualities of Buddha nature to then hold my pain and suffering. Because it seems like they're antidotes to the different qualities that are coming through. Some are about strength, so that helps me when I want to collapse. Others are about love, which helps me when I'm pushing away from stuff. So I'm really noticing there are different qualities which are antidotes to different emotions. But I don't know how—and where does the cosmopoiesis come in? How does that—well, I don't really get the cosmopoiesis if I'm honest, but for me it feels like that's where the divinity aspect is.

But these are big questions. So you know, a lot of this—I might say one or two things. We could speak a lot in response to this.

So just to start where you ended, actually, for me, the divinity is involved in the definition of the imaginal. Okay, so it's not particular to cosmopoiesis. It's like when we say imaginal, or when I say imaginal, when Catherine and I say imaginal, we already mean an implicit divinity there.

So I can use the imagination and imagine my friend or imagine kindness or all kinds of things, but there's no sense of divinity there. It's just my imagination. But when we use the word imaginal, one of the things that it implies is a divinity.

Now that's in a way related to the rest of your question, Chrissie. So I don't think there's any right and wrong here. I mean, obviously there's probably limits, but generally speaking in terms of how people relate to all this.

So one way of using and conceiving of images and image work is, as you said, actually translating images to aspects of being or whatever in a kind of running language. But then what's happening is I'm making the image subordinate to something else. The image is subordinate in two senses. The image is subordinate to something called being that has a kind of—actually almost monotheistic quality. It's one thing of which there are different aspects, and those different aspects might manifest as this or that image. And secondly, I'm using the image to serve my growth, as you said.

Fantastic, beautiful, absolutely wonderful.

There is another option, both in conception and approach, that has to do with saying image is primary. It's not just a manifestation of this or that aspect of being. It is in itself primary. It's not something I can say, "That image represents my compassion, that image represents my power." The relationship with the image is more that I am serving the image. The image is not serving me or even my growth.

Now, that's one option. There's a spectrum here. It's not black or white. So when we relate to image and imagination, you can kind of decide: how am I conceiving this and how am I relating to it? They're both good, but they'll be different. Does this make sense so far?

If we relate the first way—in terms of images as aspects of being that I'm using to develop my compassion, develop these qualities—then that's absolutely beautiful and fine. It will be different. But if you're doing that, then to the nuts and bolts of your question: let's say there's an image of love or an image of power, either one. Just being with that image, my being comes into harmony with that. Part of the harmonization, and through the harmonization, I start... my being resonates with that. It vibrates in sympathy and I am gathering those qualities. They come into the fabric of my being and they get stronger in me. That's what you're talking about.

Now, exactly where I lean: sometimes I can stay with the image and feel those resonances and feel a degree of well-being and harmony, and they're all kind of mixed, and just trust that the harmonization and the gathering of those qualities is happening through that. Other times I can lean more into the samādhi, but the samādhi has a lot of that quality in it. So the character of the samādhi is well-being, but it also feels powerful, for instance. I'm gathering that quality. Or there's the samādhi there, the well-being, but it feels soft and compassionate. I'm gathering that quality.

So it's kind of like: how much do we keep the image around and how much do we let it fade just into the felt sense of the quality? The image can still be there and I'm still resonating with the quality, or I can let the image fade and go completely into the quality. It'll work both ways. Does all this make sense?

So there's that way of working. It's absolutely beautiful and it's working for you. It's absolutely working.

As I said, there's a spectrum of how we conceive of what the word "imaginal" means and how we relate to it and what the relationship of the self and the path with the imaginal is. Each person has to decide at what point in their life they're aware on that spectrum. It's not right or wrong, but they will be different. Does that make sense?

So to me it sounds like... And then the cosmopoiesis, just to clarify, is when an image comes alive—it could be any, let's say, Tārā. The image comes alive, there's all that resonance, there's the energy body, there's the soulfulness, there's the qualities there. And somehow in lingering with that image and tasting all that and letting it resonate, then I open my eyes, open my ears. I feel that the image quality spreads to the world, to the cosmos. It's almost as if that quality of Tārā is somehow everywhere. But it's a very particular quality. It's Tārā as I've just seen and sensed her. So that's what the cosmopoiesis means. It means it's spreading out of the particular of the image.

But just again to say, for you this sounds so wonderful. It's working brilliantly. Go for it. And also be aware that there are...

other ways of relating to the whole imaginal thing, which may or may not interest you at a certain point. But probably on this retreat, we're emphasizing more this approach, so it might sound a bit different. But absolutely fantastic—go for it.

Yes, it feels like I've had it the other way around.

Exactly. But I really want to say there's no right and wrong here. It's like, what's needed right now? Maybe it was really, really important that you had it that way before. So I want to say trust that. Let's see, because what you're describing is wonderful. It's absolutely wonderful.

Good. Should we end now? Is there something else?

How am I? I'm very well. I'm a little tired, but I'm better than I've been in quite a while. Thank you.

So let's just have a bit of quiet together.

CHAPTER 41

Hearing All Sounds as Mantra: A Jewel-like World

Rob Burbea · 57 min

> *In this experiential dharma talk, Rob Burbea offers a guided meditation exploring the practice of hearing all sounds as mantra - divine speech that pervades the cosmos. Using the traditional mantra Om Mani Padme Hum of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, he guides practitioners through an exercise in cosmopoiesis - the creative transformation of how we perceive and sense the world around us.*
>
> *Burbea begins by clarifying five interconnected meditative directions: samadhi (cultivating well-being in the energy body), emotional awareness, working with imaginal images, cosmopoiesis (sensing the world as divine), and sensitivity to the energy body. He emphasizes these as overlapping intentions rather than separate practices, encouraging practitioners to be clear about what they're emphasizing moment to moment.*
>
> *The guided meditation moves from chanting the mantra aloud to internal repetition, then expands to hearing all sounds - including coughing, planes overhead, and everyday noises - as divine speech. Burbea introduces the poetic image of all phenomena as jewels pervading the cosmos, divine creative elements woven into reality's fabric. The practice extends beyond sound to all sensory experience, cultivating what he calls 'creative receptivity' - a way of sensing existence that re-enchants our ordinary world. This approach demonstrates how traditional mantras can serve not just for devotion or concentration, but as gateways to transformed perception of the sacred nature of all experience.*

So in a few minutes, we'd like to do a bit of an experiment—a guided meditation. But I think it's worth taking a few minutes to recap what we've been doing in terms of meditation and instructions. There's a lot we're putting out, and it's hard to discern between things or navigate or understand how it all fits together. So very briefly to recap—some of you might want to write this down because it will help you keep it clear.

You could say that there are five directions we've offered so far as meditative directions or intentions. I'm using those words deliberately—they're intentions and directions. Partly why I'm saying that is because all five are actually interrelated. They overlap; they will occur at the same time. There'll be mixtures in the moment in practice. Sometimes two of them are happening, or five of them are happening. But to help us get

clear, you can think of them as: what's my actual intention here? What am I trying to do right now in practice? Where am I gently encouraging the practice to move towards? What am I emphasizing right now?

They overlap, they're interconnected, they feed each other. So we're thinking about five different directions, but they're not really different.

The first is samādhi, by which I mean tending to, caring for, gently encouraging a sense of well-being in the energy field, in the feeling of the space that my body occupies and the mind occupying that space—enjoying that well-being, whether it's intense or whether it's really quite unremarkable. Some sense of harmony, of well-being there. The intention of samādhi is not so much whether that's happening or not, or how good it feels, but more that's what I'm gently working on. I'm tending to that. I'm encouraging it. That makes it, at that time, a samādhi practice.

It might actually feel quite difficult at times, but that's still my intention. I'm working with the difficulty to smooth out the difficulties or the wonkiness in the system. But my intention is—it's not so much what's happening, it's what's my intention with what's happening. Gently nourishing, shaping the feeling of the energy body towards more well-being. We could call that samādhi.

The second is a caring for and an attention to the emotional life and the emotional unfolding in the moment, again via the energy body. Sometimes it's working with the difficult: here's this heartache, here's this grief, here's this anger, here's this contraction. Sometimes it's just a much subtler emotional state like boredom or something subtler like that. So it includes working with the difficult. It might also include working with the lovely and opening to that, being with that, watching that in the energy body. Or perhaps something that's really quite neutral. But my focus and my intention is to be with, to watch, to care for, to hold, to be sensitive to what's happening emotionally.

As Catherine was talking about this morning, there's all kinds of skill involved—a lot of what you know from your other retreats and mindfulness practice and insight meditation you can bring to bear. And in the talks that we asked you to listen to before the retreat, there are many skillful ways of working with the emotions.

The third is the imaginal. This could be a spontaneous image that arises—you're sitting in meditation and something arises, and it feels like, oh, this is interesting, this is helpful, it feels resonating in my soul, and you go with that spontaneous image. It could also be a deliberately invoked image, something that has been meaningful and helpful to you in the past. Maybe the past is just the last sitting—it came for the first time an hour ago; fine, bring it up again if it feels helpful.

So there's the deliberate invoking, calling to mind, calling into presence and into relationship with an imaginal image. It doesn't have to be only the imaginal figure of love that we did on the first day. It can be anything, as long as it feels soul-making—it touches my soul. It doesn't have to be love. It doesn't have to be a certain kind of love. Love comes in a lot of different flavors.

But it can be spontaneous or deliberate with the imaginal.

The fourth way is what we've been calling Cosmopoiesis. Here the senses open to the world around us and to others around us. We're seeing—again, either spontaneously or deliberately—seeing others, seeing the earth, seeing the cosmos, sensing it other than we usually do, sensing it as divine in some way. On this retreat particularly, a divine that involves the imaginal. We'll say more about this.

Here there's an opening. We talked about opening the eyes, opening the senses. It's not so much just an imaginal figure inside, so to speak. We're actually sensing life through image, sensing the cosmos through image. This is cosmopoiesis—it's creative.

The fifth approach is really just to say energy body again—that all of this is to be done, as much as possible, with sensitivity to the energy body. And what do we mean by energy body? We mean a whole range. It's simply how this feels. It can be very solid—we're really talking about a sense of earthiness and solidity. That's just one range on the possible frequencies of how the energy body can be experienced. Or it can be very ethereal, very light and luminous and translucent and spacious. It's all just the range of the energy body.

Within working with the energy body, we talked yesterday about the possibility of actually listening to the energy body, feeling it and letting it manifest in movement or posture, allowing yourself to explore that. How do the hands want to be? What posture do I want to adopt? What movements do I want to adopt? Sometimes keeping the physical body still and just feeling the inner imaginal body—the energy body—actually dancing, moving in a certain posture.

So those are the five approaches, and they all overlap. Sometimes what you'll get is an emotion that's difficult, you're working with it, and then at some point it gives birth to an image. Then you come into relationship with the image and the image affects the emotion. Maybe from the image actually comes some well-being. Everything is going to affect everything else.

What matters, I think, for clarity is just being clear what's going on, but also: what am I emphasizing right now? Because I could be working with an image—a couple of people wrote this in notes—working with an image and then out of the image a very

nice feeling comes. There I have a choice. I can stay with the relationship with the image, resonating with all the soul-making, beautiful fecundity and complexity of the image, aware of it and enjoying that it feels nice. Great. Or I can almost emphasize more the well-being in the body and let the image perhaps fade or go to the background, and then I'm leaning more in a samadhi direction.

Do you understand? There's just about taking control of my glider a little bit. What currents are here? Ah, I'll ride that one. Okay, now this one.

An image can spill over into cosmopoiesis—all of this, they're all connected. It's just to be aware of what's happening and actually at some point: okay, if this is happening, do I want to shift gears or shift direction and make an intentional shift to emphasize this or that?

Good. Very good.

Let's do this experiment. We're going to start with a mantra—a mantra that probably many of you would be familiar with—the syllables om mani padme hum. It's the mantra of Avalokiteshvara, who from the Buddhist pantheon is the bodhisattva of compassion.

There are many different ways to work with mantras. Many different ways. And many different meanings associated with them. Some people when they start working with Om Mani Padme Hum ask: what does it mean? Each syllable has a kind of very specific resonance in certain tantric teachings. So Om is the opening to the universal, some people say, and Hum of the Om Mani Padme Hum is the embodiment.

We could do all that, but actually what you find is different interpretations, often completely contradictory—which is interesting, again, given what we've emphasized on this retreat.

And it reinforces the idea that all this is creative. They're just ways of looking. We can adopt and shape this however we want. But rather than be very specific about what this means or that means or what it should do, again, we would like to emphasize more of a kind of looser, more poetic, creative approach to this. So this mantra can unfold in all kinds of ways. It can have all kinds of meanings. It can be different from one person to the next.

Now some of you are familiar with this mantra and you've probably heard different melodies for it. And this relates to what I was talking about yesterday with compassion and love. So it's the mantra of compassion, and we could use a melody and sing it in a way that's full of yearning and full of the pathos and the tearful resonances with the

pain of the world. That would be one flavor of orienting the thing—or a certain tenderness, a beautiful tenderness, or just a spaciousness, or a kind of healing quality. All this is possible as characteristics of compassion which can be translated musically into the melody and the way that it's sung.

Partly why this is an experiment is what I want to get at today is, funny enough, not so much emphasizing the obvious aspect of compassion. I want to use the mantra, see if it's possible to use the mantra to open some kind of cosmopoiesis for us. So the interest is more in the transformation of the sense of the world, of the sense of what the world is, than so much in invoking compassion. But again, overlapped, overlapped. And it's all subjective as to what musical character gives rise to what. So let's just do this and see what happens.

If you want to come into a meditative posture that feels comfortable... Catherine and I will chant a little bit till you get the melody, and then join in. But let's come into your posture first and, as always, settle into the posture.

Is it possible to let the center of the awareness be in the heart center rather than the head center or anywhere else? So that the center of your awareness is in the middle of the chest, in the heart. Just letting the awareness be centered there and move outward to the whole energy body, the whole space. From that center... sitting in the heart, in the energy body, open, opening that space, filling it with awareness.

So there is, although we're not emphasizing it so much, there is compassion being intended and radiated through this chanting. So let that be part of it, that there's blessings coming forth from your heart. There's at least the intention for compassion, for care, for love, for healing and tenderness to yourself, to all beings, and actually to the whole world. Part of what's happening here is there's this radiating out of that. It doesn't mean you feel it all the time. It just means that that's the intention. That's included in the intention.

So Catherine will start the chant and we'll join in. And then when you feel like you kind of get the melody, please join in. Let yourself sing it, but connect it to the energy body. And then I will guide us as we go.

[Chanting begins: Om Mani Padme Hum...]

As you keep chanting, see if you can feel your throat and your chest open... And listen, listen as well...

So the chanting, the air, and the intention open you up. Let it open up the whole energy body. Just radiating to expand the energy body and fill out, radiate out from the energy body.

The intention, the sound comes from the whole of you pouring outwards in all directions. Opening, trusting the goodness of your intention.

Letting it take form, take embodiment through sound.
Om Mani Padme Hum.
Through the expressions of your body.
Om Mani Padme Hum.

Om Mani Padme Hum Li Om Mani Padme Hum Li Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum Hri Om Mani Padme Hum Hri

OM MANI PADME HUM

Now Catherine will continue the chant and you fall silent, but listen—listen. Let it echo in your being. The resonances of sound and of soul and of love. Of beauty, of sacredness.

OM MANI PADME HUM OM MANI PADME HUM

In chanting we are enchanting, enchanting. A spell, an invocation, magic.

Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum

In a way, the mantra, the sounds, are actually echoing something that is already present, something woven into the cosmos, part of the fabric of the cosmos. These sounds that are more than sounds—mantra, divine speech. In the incantation, in the chanting, we're joining in, we're adding to something that's already here, already everywhere. The dimension of the cosmos.

Om Nipani

Just very loosely, lightly, without pressure in the opening. You get a sense—the syllables, each syllable is a jewel. These jewels, infinite jewels spread throughout the cosmos. Everywhere already existing, this divine speech. Jewels that are creative elements, cosmic powers, part of the magical fabric of things. They are prayer, these jewels woven in. Woven into the fabric of things is prayer, blessing, praise. Jewels of many colors, beauty, holiness. Divinity.

And now, let it go silent for a bit. Can you have that mantra internally? Very lightly, very spaciously, very delicately. But it's still this more cosmic sense. It's the echoes in your mind, the roots of which are divine. The roots of your mind, of your consciousness, echoing, resonating with the mantra that is everywhere.

Maybe it's the whole melody, maybe just very faint echoes, filaments. Maybe it gets fainter. But the sense of the jewels, the mantra as jewels—that can stay. Just open, open.

So maybe it has the internal mantra, maybe very faintly, maybe it's faded. But these jewels of the imaginal realm that pervade the cosmos, the beauty of that everywhere—within, without, all around.

Om Mani Padme Hum Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Om Mani Padme

Actually, can we hear all sounds as mantra, all sounds as divine speech? So it's in Catherine's voice, it's in my voice. It's in the coughing and the sneezing and the shuffling. It's in the birdsong, it's in the wind. Open, hearing all sounds as mantra.

Through these jewels, the divine is blessing all of creation. Creation is not other than the divine. The divine is blessing itself. Blessing its blessing. So no need to get tight—we're opening to something, we're opening to a poetic, artistic possibility. Very delicate.

And maybe you get a sense—not just sounds, but everything. Body sensations, sights. All things are these jewels. All things, all appearances, all phenomena, all experiences—divine speech, beautiful jewels.

And again, if we just go into silence for a bit. It's not so much about sound, inner sound or outer sound. Perhaps that fades, even the echoes in the mind fade. But this more pervasive sense in all the senses, something more subtle, more magical—a cosmopoiesis.

This encompassing awareness—involving and including all of the senses—is actually what we're tuning into. This is, if you like, the object, so to speak, of the meditation. It's not necessarily in one place spatially; it's everywhere. No need to push anything, just gently opening and encouraging something subtle.

When you're ready, still in this awareness—if you can keep this awareness—and when you're ready, open your eyes and let it come into the sight as well, just a little bit. All things: sights, sounds, the plane overhead, the bird outside.

Now we could try one more thing. See if we can transition to standing up and putting the mats to the side of the room, but seeing if you can do that with awareness of the energy body. Just paying attention to the energy body in the transition of the movement. We're going to do one last thing with this chant. Just see, without pressure, if you can feel the body space as you're moving. So there's the mindfulness there of the body.

And then let's sort of homogeneously fill the room.

Again, in the standing posture, just connecting with the energy body. Letting that space a bit bigger than you, filling it out with awareness. But again, seeing if you can let that awareness center in the heart center, in the middle of the chest. And allowing and including what's moving through emotionally right now, whatever that is. It has a place. It's welcome.

So aware of the heart, aware of the space of the energy body, aware too of the sensations with the feet. But you're in that energy body space. You're filling that with awareness.

Catherine will start chanting again, and the same cosmopoiesis, the same encouragement to that art, that poetry.

Om Mani Padme Hum

So there's openness in the listening, receptivity. There's also poetry. It's a creative listening, creatively allowing the ripples, the radiation. Creative sensing of yourself, of the world around you. Creative receptivity.

Let the eyes open if they're not already. Stay connected to your heart, to your soul, to the energy body, the resonances. Opening the senses.

Now is it possible to walk slowly around the room, walking between each other, keeping this sensibility, this openness, this creative receptivity? It doesn't have to be super slow, but whatever feels like it works for you. You don't have to make eye contact, but you can if you want. But open to these beings around you here in this room.

Who are these beings? What are these bodies? Are they not also jewels? Is not each one a thousand jewels? Sensitive to the energy body, sensitive to the heart, the soul, but open. The senses open. Open to the mysterious depths of otherness. The divinity of these bodies, of these beings.

Om Mani Padme Hum.

And then just wherever you are, coming to stillness.

Om Mani Padme Hum.

Open to your experience, allowing the fullness of whatever's here—energy, soul resonances, heart resonances.

Om Mani Padme Hum.

And then just dwelling together in the silence with that awareness. Eyes might be open or closed if you prefer right now.

There's a mandala here. Maybe as we were moving it was a fluid mandala.

As we settled back into sitting posture, maintaining that same awareness of the energy body, I noticed how these transition times become fascinating opportunities for staying connected. In what we had just experienced together, I could sense countless possibilities opening—so many different ways this practice might unfold for each person.

This movement we're exploring, what we're calling cosmopoiesis, has a particular direction. It moves outward, always toward inclusion. Eventually, everything is embraced—nothing excluded. When we speak of hearing all sounds as mantra, we're not being selective. All sounds means truly all sounds: the sounds that aren't conventionally beautiful, the sounds of tears, even the sounds of pain and dukkha. As we explored last night, this is about re-enchanting even our suffering. The sound of an airplane overhead, the less-than-melodious urban cacophony—the movement of cosmopoiesis reaches toward everything, embracing all phenomena.

This practice is wonderfully creative and flexible. You might enter through various doorways. We began with actively chanting the mantra, but you could just as easily start with pure listening. Remember my story about the birdsong becoming imaginal birdsong through deep connection? Rather than beginning with vocalized mantra, you simply listen with complete openness, allowing sounds to become imbued with imaginal significance until cosmopoiesis naturally arises.

You might set an intention to hear all sounds as divine speech without any specific mantra at all. Or perhaps you're simply listening with radical openness, and through this very openness, something transforms in the hearing itself—in the art of perception, the poetry of perception.

Sometimes we can deliberately recall a cosmopoiesis—a particular way of sensing existence that we've experienced before. Just as we discussed earlier about intentionally recalling an image, you can bring back a remembered way of perceiving the cosmos, not forcing it but gently re-engaging with what has already unfolded naturally.

But ultimately, this practice expands beyond sound to encompass everything—all appearances, all phenomena, all experiences across all senses.

Let me say something about the miracle of speech itself. Right now, as I speak and you listen, we're witnessing something extraordinary. I have an idea, and through this complex orchestra of muscles, larynx, tongue, and breath, I vibrate the air. These vibrations enter your ears, and somehow you understand what I'm attempting to convey. Communication happens between two beings—how remarkable is this?

Consider the subtlety involved—emotion, nuance, even humor. A joke is particularly amazing: some quality of humor somehow crosses the space between us, and we find ourselves laughing together at the same thing. It's truly miraculous.

Speech carries both the miracle of semantic communication—what I'm trying to convey, what you're receiving, our mutual understanding—and the pure phenomenon of sound itself. Even as you're understanding my meaning, you can simultaneously hear this very speaking as divine speech, as mantra, experiencing the sacred in the music of sound rather than just the content.

There's the meaning level and the music level, and the divine permeates both. Can you hear just the sounds of this voice right now? It's the babble of the divine, the spell and magic of divine speech residing not in meaning but in pure sound. While one part of you receives and understands the words, another part can cosmopoetically hear the sound of this human voice—or birdsong, or any sound—in an entirely different way.

This operates on a different level altogether. It's easier with conventionally pleasant sounds, but remember: this sense of the divine isn't about pleasantness or aesthetic beauty. We're not talking about pretty sensations. We're touching something deeper—another level of experience we can cultivate awareness of.

In a way, it doesn't really matter. Again, this emphasis on playing, experimenting, finding what works for you. In a way, what Catherine and I are doing is simply putting out different ideas, different possibilities. Maybe you take them as they are. Maybe you alter them with your own creative variations. Maybe it's something completely different that emerges.

Play, discover, experiment. Find your own way. There's no formula here in terms of specifics, as we said before. The invitation is to discover what resonates, what opens doorways for you into this quality of divine listening, of receiving the world with sacred attention.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 42

Creating the Path (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 43 min

> *In this engaging Q&A session from the 'Re-enchanting the Cosmos' retreat, Rob Burbea explores profound questions about imaginal practice and perception. He addresses how different forms convey divine qualities more readily than others, discussing the spectrum between realist metaphysics of deity figures and the creative fabrication of divine perception through the mind's imaginative capacity.*
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> *Burbea introduces the concept of cosmopoiesis - how imaginal perception can transform our experience of the entire cosmos, moving beyond simple oneness experiences to perceiving the world as transubstantiated through particular divine qualities. He explores the role of eros and otherness in imaginal work, explaining how erotic connection (not merely sexual) with imaginal figures may facilitate the spillover from personal practice into cosmic perception.*
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> *The discussion touches on integrating sexuality and other traditionally excluded aspects into sacred practice, emphasizing discernment through body awareness and soul resonance. Burbea concludes with reflections on choosing authentic spiritual paths, noting that while classical Dharma emphasizes freedom from suffering, some souls may be more fundamentally drawn to beauty, sacredness, or artistic expression. He encourages practitioners to discover what they truly want beneath cultural conditioning, while remaining aware of each path's particular dangers and cultivating the maturity to navigate them skillfully.*

Anyone, please. Yes?

Rob, I have two questions. One you spoke about briefly in yesterday evening's talk, and I was wondering whether you could say a little more. I've been wondering about seeing the divine in different forms or shapes. Seeing Tara in an apple tree is somehow easier, and I think it makes a difference whether I meditate on Tara or Mickey Mouse—it might make a difference. What is it in the forms that makes them more transmitting or conveying?

The Mickey Mouse retreat is the next one—more advanced! This is really a good question. You're going to get different answers from different people, and this is one of those areas where I have a certain philosophical leaning, but you'll hear very different things.

On one extreme, you'll hear a kind of realism given to these deity figures. Tara is this, and she really has these particular qualities, and even she looks like this. As I think I said in one talk, what's really happening there is these things exist in an imaginal realm which has some kind of objective existence, but which has been dismissed from Western culture for centuries. Actually, it does exist in this realm. What you're doing then, if your perception is pure, is resonating with or perceiving those qualities, and they have power—they have divine power. So that's one version. To me, there's a lot of beauty in that.

I find that I can't—like I think I said at some point—I find it hard now, where I am in my whole practice and everything, to take any kind of realist metaphysics seriously, whether it's a materialist one or some other kind. So my tendency is more to say your perception, your way of looking, your mind is in a way creating that divine with certain characteristics. And that's what comes through. For different reasons, because of the cultural associations with Mickey Mouse, it's harder to do that.

So there are two different extremes. But there's also a bridge between these two, which I think I might mention at some point. If the roots of your mind, your consciousness, your citta, your soul, imagination are divine, then what comes out of your creativity of perception is also divine. So there's not "it exists over there separate from me" or "it's just my any old perception." Do you see what the bridge is?

It's saying, in a way, the imaginal realm is not separate from your mind. The roots of the imaginal realm and the roots of your mind have the same roots in the depths of the divine. So your mind and the fabrications of your mind can also be divine. You say, well, it somehow seems more or less divine at different times. Maybe that's true. Maybe it has to do partly with what's present in the citta at a certain time—the purity or the devotion or whatever, as we've talked about, the openness of heart. And partly it's what your mind colors creatively.

Do you see how that might bridge those two? Does this make any sense at all?

Well, they do, but this is also—if you know about art theory and literary theory—most people would not nowadays, or for quite a while now, accept the idea that beauty inherently resides in the art. One of the big chunks we edited out of the talk on art perception was about the dependent arising of art. My reaction, my being moved by art, depends on something in the work, something in me at that moment. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony moves me to tears one day, and the other day it's like... you know. So there's something in the present moment. There's also something in the culture. There's some-

thing about Beethoven and the image and what he might have said about it and what someone else might have said and some other authority in the general culture. All this feeds in to give a dependent arising of what arises.

To say there's nothing in the art, in the art object, would also be too extreme to me.

Why are you asking? What's with the question?

Why don't I see it in certain things, in certain options?

Okay, so seeing Tara in a piece of litter is possible. It's just a matter of practice, actually. I was practicing this. It's harder for me with plane sounds overhead—the plane sounds. Not because they were particularly ugly sounds. I just couldn't help thinking about the carbon dioxide.

Everything else was beautiful—this particular divinity, this particular character of the divine—and yet it wasn't stretching to include that airplane sound. But then I would experiment further. Was this dependent on pleasant or unpleasant experiences?

Walking outside, if it was too cold, then it became harder to sustain this perception. But this is all just practice. And then you can play with this.

So you have that sense—you're meditating, in this case, on Tara. Then you open your eyes and look around you in your room or wherever you are. At first you might notice that it's easier with a beautiful artifact or whatever catches your eye. Then I look at some plastic object and it's harder. But really, in time, with practice, this perception can extend everywhere.

"I just think there is a difference between different options," someone offered.

Well, there is, and I wouldn't deny that. Absolutely there is. And it also applies ethically. People have been writing notes asking, "How can you say everything's perfect when there's terrorism?" Of course, of course. All I would say is that with practice, that ability to see different kinds of divinity spreads.

Now that doesn't mean—as Andy asked—that we don't care about climate change or we don't do everything we can to address terrorism, including examining the effects of what we do that inadvertently feeds that terrorism. But there are still different kinds of divinity that can be perceived there with practice. Yes, they're different. What exactly makes them so, I'm not sure I could say—or rather, I'd hesitate to say.

Another question arose: "I just noticed at some point, okay, now that's just sensual pleasure. Just indulging. Although I tried to somehow keep it alive, some kind of vision—I don't know if that's right. But then I backed off because I felt this is not what I want."

The question becomes: what makes something imaginal is a sense of sacredness in it. To me, that's part of how we're defining imaginal—it has some sense of divinity.

But there are several things I want to say about that. First, the divinity is not separate from the sensuality. That doesn't necessarily mean sexuality, but it's embedded in—it's not something separate from—the appearance or the sensuality or the sensual connection with that being or experience.

Second, the divinity can have an enormous range. We tend to think that sexuality has to be of a particular kind—maybe something all about merging in some white, lovey-dovey, blissful way. But there are other kinds of sexuality, and one can discover different styles of divinity within those expressions as well.

However, if it feels like you're practicing and what's actually happening is there are contractions, or something closing down, or something shutting off from the divine, then leave it.

This is difficult territory because for most people in our tradition, this is a stretch. We tend to either ignore sexuality or simply notice it and breathe with it. It's not really included much in our contemplative framework.

What we're interested in doing—one way of summarizing how we conceive this retreat—is expanding the sense of the sacred. Why is it only here and not there? Why is this included and not that? And this includes, as has come up in previous Q&As, things that traditional Buddhism would call kilesas—defilements, impurities, and so forth.

In other kinds of Buddhism, this understanding is expanded further. Now, you can simply call something sacred and actually just be involved in greed. But this is why I return again to the practice of feeling in. Feel the energy body. Feel what's happening in the soul resonance. If there's beauty there, if there's sacredness there, if there's mindfulness there—which means sensitivity to all of this, to all the emotions and the body and the energy—you can trust it.

I was talking to someone this morning about what Jesus said: "By their fruits you shall know them"—by the fruits. And the fruits you can actually feel in the moment through these practices. It's not as though something will feel really sacred and then you get up from meditation and turn into an ogre. It's not going to work that way. You can trust what you feel in the moment.

Now, I know that because sexuality is... we get confused messages in the broader culture. In Dharma culture it tends not to be so included, not so integrated. There are all kinds of personal histories we carry with this. It can be loaded for people to even think about allowing themselves to approach it. So you don't have to push anything. But if and when you feel a little bit ready, you might explore. I could say much more, but perhaps that's enough for now.

Student: I'm a little confused about the cosmopoiesis aspect. This afternoon I had some really blissful experiences—nature being in me and me in nature, almost my body coming apart and becoming part of nature. They were very beautiful experiences. I'm not sure what the cosmopoiesis is. There was a sense of prayer with it, something sacred there. I don't understand... when you say spilling over and it becoming the actual enchanting of the cosmos, I don't really understand that.

Rob: Yes, thank you. So what do we mean when we say cosmopoiesis? Let me step back and explain this in contrast to a few different things.

There's imaginal work where you have an imaginal figure, and—maybe with your eyes closed or open—you're relating to that imaginal figure and experiencing different feelings and energies in that relationship. That's imaginal practice.

But sometimes what happens is... the key that often makes the difference for an imaginal figure to spill over into affecting the perception of the world... In our culture, there's a certain accepted cosmology—this is what the world is, this is what matter is, this is where we are.

Cosmopoiesis means that through the creativity of imaginal perception, we can see the world differently. It becomes a different kind of cosmos. A world of light, or a world of fire, or a world made of music. As Yuko was saying, somehow that tree is Tara, or Tara's energy is everywhere. There are many possibilities, but the world actually is—we're perceiving the world as transubstantiated. It's a different kind of structure to the world and our perception of it, which involves sacredness and imagination and beauty.

Student: Well, what was happening this afternoon was different.

Rob: It may or may not be. I'd have to ask you more about it. If I asked you: How did the world appear different to you then? How did the trees and the garden around you appear different than they usually do? What was the difference?

Student: Well, there was a sense of connection. No division.

Rob: Yes, beautiful.

So that's what distinguishes the imaginal realm from more conventional spiritual experiences. While the sense of oneness, the dissolution of boundaries with nature that you described is profoundly beautiful and occurs naturally in sustained practice, what we're exploring here has a different quality altogether.

In most spiritual traditions, including our own insight meditation and metta practices, practitioners commonly experience various forms of unity consciousness—everything is matter, everything is awareness, everything is love. These are genuine openings, natural flowerings of contemplative practice that I deeply encourage.

What's far less common, and what we're specifically cultivating on this retreat, is when a particular character, a specific imaginal figure, suffuses the entire cosmos. As Yuka mentioned, Tara isn't merely love in the abstract—Tara possesses distinct personality, unique qualities, particular presence. The remarkable possibility we're exploring is when everything becomes permeated with that imaginal figure's essence.

I'm theorizing—and this remains somewhat theoretical for me—that what catalyzes this transformation is erotic connection. By erotic, I don't mean exclusively sexual, though that's included. I mean the magnetic attraction between characters, the alive and juicy richness that emerges when two distinct beings encounter each other without merging into undifferentiated oneness.

This otherness is crucial. When you recognize the difference, feel the connection across that difference—that's where eros awakens. The imaginal figure isn't merely a projection of your psyche, not just your childhood memory or your compassion personified. It possesses genuine otherness, autonomous existence beyond your usual self-conception.

This autonomy actually helps define what makes something truly imaginal. When I contemplate an image that proves soul-making, I notice it carries certain unmistakable dimensions: a sense of otherness, autonomous presence, layers of meaning, beauty, sacredness. Though this beauty might not conform to conventional aesthetic categories—it operates by its own mysterious logic.

And it has a sense of other-dimensionality and divinity to it. These are the qualities we notice in an image when it's truly alive for us.

When there's an erotic connection present, I wonder if that's what allows the image, when I stay with it, to spill over into the second kind of cosmopoiesis when I then open my senses more to the world. There's something very retaining of the particulars—con-

necting, intimate, open, fluid—but retaining the particulars rather than merging into oneness and losing my personhood and the personhood of the image. It's retained there, and that spreads in a different way.

This isn't a big deal whether it happens or not. We're simply exploring possibilities. Catherine and I were discussing last night whether it's the erotic dimension that, when present and alive, encourages this kind of cosmopoiesis. The erotic is this connection—the desire for connection—but not the kind that moves into merging and the loss of particular personhood of self or image.

I'm just talking about possibilities here. None of this has to happen.

In a way, how we're approaching things on this retreat steers more toward this direction, and not so much toward the kind of experience you had in the garden. But if those experiences happen, I say absolutely fantastic. Enjoy them. They're so wonderful and nourishing and healing in so many ways. But we're steering slightly away from that direction.

Student asks: So that experience can then lead into this one?

It might lead into it, but probably what would happen in that experience is it would stay more in the undifferentiated oneness rather than moving from there into particular connection. In terms of what you described, I doubt it would move from that to the other kind. But anything can happen—this is absolutely brilliant, and you don't have to force anything. We're partly emphasizing this certain direction because it doesn't get emphasized, and there's a whole avenue there that isn't really often talked about.

Student clarifies: The images are still there with that oneness experience, but it is different.

Yes, exactly.

A Question About Kinesthetic Experience

Student (Zazie): One way my experiences tend to differ from much of what you talk about—though still within that range—is they fit much more in the kinesthetic realm. But then sometimes I've been wondering whether I've been getting the otherness aspect, because I feel the divinity of it and I think I get a sense of it, but it's not so much a sense of self and...

A few things here. First, for everyone: image doesn't have to be visual. It sounds like you understand this. It can be primarily kinesthetic, or sometimes you can't say exactly which sense it is—just a very particular felt sense. This is really important.

Regarding otherness—before I address that, one thing I'd say is that the sense of self arises very differently and to different degrees of obviousness at any moment. What could be happening in your experience is that the familiar sense of self isn't arising, but there's still some sense of self. It could be a much more subtle sense of self—not problematically, just much more diaphanous and light, less contracted, less solid, less personality-laden.

So you could pay attention to that. In a way, I'd say there's always a sense of self until the moment when everything disappears—and that's not what you're describing because you still have texture. Within that experience, you could gently feel out and notice: what kind of sense of self is around now? Part of the image, whenever there's an image, is that the self is imaged with the image. This is something you could include in what you're exploring.

As for otherness—it's an interesting word because it doesn't necessarily mean separate from me. What we want to mean by otherness is that it has autonomy. It's not something I can regard as totally under my control or totally part of me. If I do view it that way, something collapses and I lose what I'd call the imaginal dimension. Something loses vitality and power and depth in the image.

So there's some sense of it having autonomy, having power of its own, having its own voice. It's visiting me, and yet it's also part of me. Sometimes I become it, I change places with it—all of this—but still it has a kind of beyondness to it.

Student asks: In that autonomy of otherness, is that where, if there's the sense of autonomy of our image of the self, the way that shifts—sometimes I seem to have autonomy and sometimes I...

Compare that with some versions of modern psychotherapy. It's all me. I am just creating. It's just a part of me. There's two kinds of extreme... It's an aspect of me, or I'm just imagining this.

There are two quite extreme positions. For me, there's a kind of balance here between really understanding that, of course, it's a dependent arising. Do you understand what I mean when I say that? It depends on my mind and the way of looking. I cannot go outside of that understanding, because that's total Dharma understanding. I always understand that what arises depends on my relationship with it in the moment, depends on past conditions, but really in the moment, my way of looking, my conception, my energetic relationship. So it's fabricated in the moment with the mind.

And this thing about autonomy is almost something like... at the same time as I'm holding that understanding of dependent arising, I'm entertaining the idea. I'm just being generous in my mind and granting this thing some autonomy. Believing it, entering into a lightly held view that it has autonomy. And other times it's more like I sense a certain level of autonomy. But all of those kinds of ideas are held together.

Does that make sense?

Yeah.

Does that sound too much of a stretch, or does it sound like...

No, it's not what you were talking about. It's not quite...

Okay. Try again.

I think the nature of self is that it has no inherent existence. The nature of image is that it has no inherent existence. Rather than shutting things down, what that opens up is that all of this will feel different at different times. Sometimes I feel like, "Well, this is part of me that I'm in control of." Sometimes it has more autonomy. Sometimes I'm merging. Sometimes I become that. Now I'm here and that's there.

It's like the very emptiness of it all allows this complete movement between different conceptual views but also experiences of the relationship and of what's here and what's there and who's where and all that. So that's actually part of the whole deal – there's a real fluidity. For me, there's no real formula other than these things about divinity, which are more general principles, but the actual experience of what belongs where – to me that's open and there's plenty of room for movement and it's all good to explore.

Does that... you're just being polite.

Okay, good. But we have a little time if there are more questions.

Yeah, Lawrence.

So my question is... does Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu buy into the metaphysics presented at the time of the Buddha – that rebirth and all that – in the same way?

Yeah, I just kind of have this sense... I wonder... you know, in a way, underneath the question is some fear or anxiety, right? About, you know, what will be the outcome of this? And how would you know? How would you...

So Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu would say – I can't speak for him, obviously – but I think he would just say that he's very much in the Theravada tradition. He's staunchly Theravada, you know. But underneath your question, it's a question about what will happen. Is it, you know...

I suppose there is a personal element to it.

Yeah.

You know, there's all this soulfulness and deep meaningfulness, and it's kind of like, where do we go with this? Is it... you know, all of these divine images that want to come through us, and you talk of them having...

But that could be very soulful for him.

Sure, sure. Yeah, I think one of the key words there was "swept away."

There's a lot I could say here. I'm just aware of time, but let me share some brief thoughts and perhaps we can check in at some point.

But this notion of being swept away—I actually want to step back. I feel very strongly, and I think this is important maturity for everyone to realize: whatever path we choose—Theravada, Mahayana, this tradition, that tradition, secular mindfulness, whatever—it's going to have a danger. There is no path, there is no practice without a particular danger. If I think there is, I'm just missing something.

Some people think secular mindfulness is really safe. Well, it may not drive you crazy, but it'll do something else. Or rather, the danger in it is something else—a potential danger. Every path has a potential danger. Part of maturity in practice is knowing what is the potential danger with this path that I'm on.

So one of the things with purely secular mindfulness is that it's not very soulful. One of the things with Theravada Buddhism is it's cutting off the world. Its aim is actually not to be reborn. The world is not sacred—it's a place to escape from and never to come back to. The danger with this path, as you say, is one could get swept away or could over-reify these things.

Every path has its particular danger of reification—what it reifies—and then its particular effect on the soul, if you like. So that's just something to really be aware of. And if I've chosen a certain path, if a certain path attracts me, then I really need to know what are the potential pitfalls of that path.

So you put your finger on one—getting swept away—and you know that. This is why I say: sensitive to the energy body, mindful of the resonances and all that, but also seeing image as image, like we talked about the other day. That's one of the things that prevents getting swept away, as well as a whole bunch of other factors—cultivation of good qualities, awareness of one's emotions, knowing when to back off, all this stuff.

When that's all in place, then the path becomes less dangerous, because I'm aware and part of my path is a sensitivity to all that. Does this make sense? So that's part of the path. Whatever path I do, it's a maturity to know that and to be on the lookout for it.

And I can't remember if I said this to you, but this kind of thing has come up with several people—the fact that you're asking the question reassures me. It's showing that your mind is alive to the potential pitfalls, interested, curious, alert, sensitive, healthy doubting, all of that. If you weren't, and you were just gung-ho—yeah, blah, blah, blah, and I believe this, and this is the reality now, and everyone should be, you know—then I'd be concerned. So the question shows something already.

I'm moving quite quickly here because we have to end. I'll say one last thing, which I actually addressed in a talk for this retreat, but it's not part of this retreat format: you have to decide, or your soul decides or feels what it really wants.

Dharma—classical dharma—is premised on the Four Noble Truths, which originally contextualize it as an escape from the world, not being reborn again. But we could say more loosely it's about freedom and suffering less. There are some souls for whom that is not the most important thing in their life. That is not the most important thing.

Because we're surrounded by a dharma that we just, day and night, hear about freedom from suffering, release, peace, equanimity, da-da-da, sometimes what happens is a person takes on that and is almost indoctrinated a little bit to think "that's what I really want." And I would say: ask what you really want. Find out.

If that is it, go for it. And what does that mean to you? Because freedom has a whole range of meanings and depths and extents and breadths. What kind of freedom? What level of freedom are you talking about? What range of freedom are you talking about? What areas of freedom?

But it also might be that you really look inside, and it's not freedom that's... Freedom is important, but it's not the thing that's most important. For some people, sense of sacredness is more important. For some people, artistic expression is more important. For some people, it's the sense of beauty—the infinite ranges of beauty.

And in the depths of their soul, that's actually what they care about more. Is that Dharma still or not? There's a whole soul relationship with that question. How am I conceiving how I stand in relation to what the dharma is? Am I a soul that just steps right out of that? Dares to step out of it or not? Or do I create a dharma that actually incorporates... There are whole levels and dimensions to this whole thing.

But I think more important is: what do you really want? You know? Beauty and sacredness don't mean being swept away, being completely crazy. So it's not like black or white, one or the other. But there's something here really important about being truly authentic and just clearing away a lot of what we've simply been told.

Here, over and over, every book you read, every Dharma talk, it's like—great, wonderful. And how much there is to discover about freedom and the depths of freedom and the range of freedom. And either at some point, or always from the beginning, something else was actually more important or becomes more important.

So that's quite a radical question. But basically, you know, am I going to live my life in contact with what I most want, or not in contact? Authentic or inauthentic? In touch? From that root or not? You know?

There's a lot more we could explore here, but there's much in what you're bringing forward that deserves our attention.

Let's have just a minute of silence.

CHAPTER 43

From Inertia, Towards the Solutio (A Fragment)

Rob Burbea · 7 min

> *In this fragment from his "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" series, Rob Burbea examines how the mind operates as a "mechanism of habit," creating inertia in our ways of thinking, perceiving, and experiencing reality. He explores how we become locked into particular patterns of seeing ourselves, others, and the world around us, often without realizing these limitations.*
>
> *Burbea introduces the concept of "cosmopoiesis" - different ways of sensing and creating our world through perception. He emphasizes the importance of "loosening" these habitual patterns through practices like walking meditation in sacred landscapes, moving prayerfully, and allowing the whole body-being to participate in contemplative awareness. The teacher discusses how softening our gaze, attitude, and heart can create what he calls "liquidity of perception," enabling more creative and malleable ways of seeing.*
>
> *This teaching offers practical guidance for expanding beyond conventional sitting meditation to include walking and standing practices that incorporate awareness of the elements and sacredness of the natural world. Burbea encourages practitioners to work with both mental and physical inertia, allowing space for new dimensions of experience to emerge naturally rather than forcing particular outcomes. The emphasis is on creating conditions for transformation through gentle encouragement and openness to what wants to be born in awareness.*

As we move forward in the retreat, the encouragement is to open up a little bit more, as Catherine was saying. We began by emphasizing the energy body—be here, become really wedded to or inhabiting the energy body. This will always remain a part of the meditation, always a fundamental aspect of experience that we're endeavoring to incorporate, always maintaining sensitivity to and involving the energy body.

But now the encouragement is to open up the senses and allow, or even gently encourage and play with, this poetry of perception, this art of perception—a cosmopoiesis, or in the plural, cosmopoieses. In other words, different ways of sensing this world around us.

This obviously spills over into the other postures, especially walking outside. That's a place that offers much availability to this kind of practice—walking on the lawn, going for a walk, standing and moving as we've discussed.

One way of understanding something fundamental about human nature is recognizing that we are habitual creatures. The mind is, from a certain perspective, a mechanism of habit, a creature of habit. This means the ways we tend to think, conceive—even below the level of thinking—and the ways we see, sense, and perceive are often quite habitual. We just tend to see the world in a certain way, tend to see myself in a certain way, tend to see others in certain ways. And they repeat. There's a kind of inertia that goes with being a human being.

How do we soften this inertia? How do we loosen things up? We were talking some days ago about how much of this practice is about loosening—loosening up so that other ways of seeing, other ways of knowing become available to the soul and to the heart.

It's interesting: one aspect of allowing ourselves to perceive differently, or supporting a different kind of perception, is a kind of softening. In our habits of mind, we can look in certain ways or hear in certain ways, and something in the mind automatically rigidifies around a way that we already know how to see, how to hear, how to smell. This fabricates what we see, what we hear, what we smell. It's this—this is its reality. We don't even think this consciously.

Sometimes what supports the cosmic poise is something softening—something softening in the gaze, in the attitude, in the heart, in the being. It's just a little bit of softening that allows more of this liquidity, the alchemical solutio, and that allows the more creative seeing, the malleability of the seeing.

So if you're going to do walking meditation during the day or standing meditation, we're not forcing anything, but opening up to the possibility. What is it to walk, as Catherine was talking about, with this different awareness of the elements and the sacredness of the elements? What would it mean to walk in a sacred landscape? To walk prayerfully in a sacred landscape?

What does that mean? It can mean lots of things. What does this word "prayer" mean? We've talked about that. Prayerfully—what does that mean? How does that affect the body? We've discussed these hand postures or movements, or allowing your body to move in a certain way. Some things—just like when we were chanting out loud—it's as if the whole body is involved. The whole being can be involved.

What is it to walk prayerfully in a sacred landscape? You don't have to force that. It's more that we're trying not to prevent it, so that there can be this liquidity of perception.

Minds are inertial. They're not locked, but there's an inertia there. And sometimes bodies are inertial too. We get used to sitting with our eyes closed, sitting in a certain posture and keeping it still—and that's great, it's a great discipline. But then there's a

kind of thinking: "Well, if I do this movement business that we were talking about, I'll be a bit self-conscious because that's not really the culture here." So there's an inertia that comes from being self-conscious. That's a part that we might need to pay attention to.

What we're doing is recognizing that we're often locked in—as I said—to thinking, to ways of relating, to ways of perceiving. Most of the time we don't actually realize what we're locked into. So a lot of what we're doing is loosening, allowing that loosening to happen. Sometimes only after something has loosened do you realize that you were locked into something.

A big part of what we're doing is loosening, allowing that loosening to happen. And then there can be the shaping, the sculpting, the creativity.

So allowing it to expand, allowing it to be liquid, allowing it to spill out into the world without forcing, but opening up a space where that can be possible.

And when it is, it's almost like, let's say you're walking and there's a sense, some kind of sense of sacredness or cosmopoiesis, something like that. That becomes the meditation. It might be through the soles of my feet, it hopefully will involve the whole body, but the thing that I'm concentrating on is the cosmopoiesis. That becomes what I'm tuning to. It's a dimension of experience that one is then looking to engage and relate to and linger with. Tune to.

No forcing. Allowing things to loosen so that things can be born for us and then gently encouraged, supported.

CHAPTER 44

The Gift and the Artifice of Self (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 45 min

> *In this third part of his series, Rob Burbea delves into the integral relationship between meaningfulness and the enchantment of self. Drawing on insights from Einstein and Jung, he explores how meaning creates healing power and makes life endurable. Burbea examines the complex dance between creating and discovering meaning, addressing how mature insight into śūnyatā (emptiness) prevents nihilistic interpretations of constructed meaning.*
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> *The talk weaves together Kabbalistic teachings on infinite souls with roots in multiple worlds, the concept of amor fati (love of one's fate), and Nietzsche's question of eternal recurrence. Burbea discusses how meaningfulness involves duty and embodiment - not just conceptual understanding but practical integration of imaginal experiences into life. He explores the sophisticated notion of both becoming divine and creating/shaping the divine through our actions and consciousness.*
>
> *Throughout, Burbea emphasizes that re-enchantment requires conceptual frameworks flexible enough to allow soul-making - the mutual enrichment of eros, psyche, and logos. Even the smallest acts can be woven into what Kabbalists call "the soul's garment of splendor" when viewed through enchanting conceptions. This is not merely intellectual exercise but practical training in dimensions of perception that reveal timelessness, sacredness, and infinite potential within ordinary experience.*

So if we're talking about enchantment of self—and again, wrapped up with everything we're saying, all of this connects, every element of what we're talking about connects with every other element—the enchantment of self is integrally related to, integrally involves the sense of meaningfulness that we have in our life. Enchantment brings meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is an element of enchanting the self.

Einstein, actually, in some of his later writings, a book called *The World As I See It*, wrote: "What is the meaning of human life or organic life altogether?" He continues: "To answer this question at all implies a religion." So he's aware these are religious questions. "And then," he says, "is there any sense then, you may ask, in putting it? In other words, it's a matter of conception, belief, and not of so-called science. Is there any sense then, you may ask, in putting it? I answer: the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not only unfortunate, but almost disqualified for life."

Jung's view also emphasized so much the necessity of meaningfulness, of finding or creating meaningfulness. He actually saw psychoneurosis, psychological suffering, as ultimately the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning. Whereas meaning, he continues, has an inherent curative power. So finding meaning in our lives has an inherent curative power. "Meaning," he writes, "makes a great many things endurable, perhaps everything." A sense of meaningfulness makes a great many things in our lives, in our existence, endurable—perhaps everything.

So the question of meaningfulness is so integral to our well-being, to how we live our lives, obviously, but it's also integral to a sense of an enchanted self, an enchanting life. As I think I mentioned in another talk earlier on this retreat, when we open the goals and the aims and the directions of our practice to include meaningfulness, to include soul-making and enchantment and beauty and the sense of sacredness—when these become the goals—then the aim becomes open-ended. The direction of travel, the avenues of the path of practice become open-ended.

There's an open-endedness of enchantment possibilities, an open-endedness of range, but it doesn't stop at a certain point. You can always somehow move further into all this. There's an unachievability in actualizing all of this fully, completely, ever fully arriving at an endpoint of all possibilities for seeing sacredness or beauty or deepening that, of fully living out one hundred percent our individuation.

There's a freedom that comes with all that, an expansion of freedom that comes with re-enchantment and imaginal work and cosmopoiesis. All kinds of freedom open up with that. And also duties. Images, cosmopoiesis, as I said elsewhere earlier on the retreat, seem to demand of us something—some kind of duty, some kind of embodiment, often though not always, some kind of action in life. A part of grounding, if you like, in relation to images may well have to do with duty that comes with an image. And if we neglect that, we're actually ungrounded with the image and the image becomes ineffectual for us. The enchantment, the cosmopoetic experience becomes ineffectual for us because it's not being grounded through embodiment in both senses—both in the body sense, in the energy body, but also embodiment in terms of duty, action, implication for life.

This is subtle. Again, it's so delicate talking about all this stuff and walking around these areas. But again, Carl Jung wrote: "Any content that emerges from the unconscious into consciousness"—that's his system talking; again we talk about images or cosmopoetic experiences—"involves a spiritual or moral task which, if not accomplished, leads to misunderstandings, complications, suffering and illness. Without the corresponding spiritual work of assimilating and integrating the contents, the experience, the

image"—the experience, however fascinating, however amazing or fascinating this image is or this cosmopoiesis or whatever, this enchantment, however fascinating—"loses its value and its meaning."

He was actually, in that instance, talking about drug experiences. People can have amazing images or cosmopoetic experiences on certain drugs, but if it's not somehow integrated through embodiment, through translation, through the duty that's there, the follow-up work—the duty may involve acting in the world and it may not involve acting in the world; I've talked about this in other talks, I'm not going to repeat it here, so I'm not implying that it always involves an action in the world—but some kind of duty in relation to this image, some kind of honoring of it, needs to be made manifest. And that's part of it. So there's a freedom and a duty. And this duty is part of the meaningfulness. Sometimes it's clear what that is, and sometimes it's a lot more vague.

A few months before he died in a plane crash, Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his diary—he kept a diary published posthumously—just a few months before he suddenly died, he wrote: "I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone or something, and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life in self-surrender had a goal."

So there was no event that he remembered, no specific person or image. Something was being asked of him to which he said yes, and that constellation created meaning for him. There was a duty in that—he was in a dutiful relationship of self-surrender, with goal and meaningfulness wrapped up together.

When deep meaningfulness runs through our lives, it brings the enchantment of the self, because the self is given this meaningfulness and trajectory. But part of that is that the meaningfulness feels as though—or we could say we entertain lightly the conception—that the meaningful is being asked of us by what is more than human. Can you hear that in what Hammarskjöld wrote?

We entertain the idea that the duties we have, what we are responsible to, what gives us meaningfulness and therefore enchantment—enchantment and therefore meaningfulness—is asked of us by something bigger than we are, bigger than the human. We're entertaining this idea at the very same time that we need to see image as image and have equanimity in relationship to this sense of duty and embodiment and action. Complex, tricky.

I could have gone into it more on this retreat—this question of how images get translated into life or meet life, how we see life as image, how we navigate this relationship between the imaginal and life. It's an art, complex, requiring many skills as I said.

I can't remember who wrote it, but there's a Latin phrase: *Vocatus atque non vocatus, Deus aderit*—"Called or uncalled, the God will come." It expresses a certain view that the gods, the more than human, are present in our life whether we ask for it or not. That's already a certain view, but we need to entertain that view and that perception. Entertaining that creates the meaning.

Meaningfulness and this enchantment of the self through meaningfulness does not come without entertaining certain views and conceptions—admitting them, allowing them, holding them lightly.

In all this, again, there's this ambivalence, this both-and quality. We are both creating and discovering meaning. I create meaning and I discover my meaning, my meaningfulness, my duty. Some deep, mature insight involves really holding those two together and acknowledging them both.

This is particularly difficult around meaningfulness. People who do extensive work on emptiness sometimes go through a phase where they think, "Oh, it's all empty, therefore it's all meaningless. I see that I can create meaningfulness, but I'm only creating it." There's a kind of nihilism there—a stage that needs to be moved through.

The recognition that I create meaningfulness, that meaningfulness is created for me, will only lead to a puncturing of that meaningfulness and a certain nihilism if lurking in the background of my beliefs is the idea that there is some independent reality where things are actually meaningless, and therefore I have to create meaning. The assumption that really, independent of any creation, things are meaningless.

There's a very deep insight here into the emptiness of meaninglessness itself. Nihilism need not arise—it may be a stage some people go through, but the fact that I acknowledge and recognize that from a certain perspective I create meaning, even as I have a sense of discovering meaning and it being asked of me... I create that too. The psyche creates that. It takes mature insight to not view this in a nihilistic way, not to assume that the real truth is meaninglessness.

There's so much tied up in this re-enchantment of the self. I mentioned Chaim Vital, the Kabbalist, and his statement: "There is no soul which doesn't have endless roots." All souls have infinite roots in this infinite amount of coexisting worlds and levels of existence. Again, it's a metaphysical idea that we're taking more as a poetic idea, which is tremendously powerful.

Can I, in my practice—and this is what practice is—convert an idea like that, hold it poetically, let it have its power by moving it away from the purely intellectual to an actual way of looking? What would that be like?

How can I practice seeing and feeling myself—seeing and feeling another—as having an infinite amount of roots in an infinite amount of coexisting worlds? Even if it's not infinite, just other worlds, other roots. I have multiple roots in multiple worlds.

When I look at the self, can I convert that idea, see it, feel it as a poetic idea? In my art—the art of my living, the art of my practice, the art of my existence, the poetry of my perception—can I convert that poetic idea into something powerful, into a way of looking at self, at other, at world?

Wrapped up in that too, because Chaim Vital continues in his teaching: in each of these worlds, the Torah—that's the Hebrew word for the Bible—the Torah is read in accordance with that world's subtlety and spirituality. So there's this teaching, very profound, radical teaching, that there are infinite interpretations of the sacred text. But more than that, this word "text" can be used more widely of any text, but also of nature—nature as so-called text. Infinite interpretations of nature, of self, of other, of existence, of cosmos.

All these ideas are wrapped up together. All these ideas are, if you like, vital, vitalizing in the re-enchantment of self and the possibilities of re-enchantment of self. And all these ideas actually make possible something—I think I mentioned these words—Latin words: amor fati, the love of one's fate, the love of one's destiny. I believe it was a phrase Nietzsche used.

But all these ideas make that possible. So the re-enchantment of self means that all these ideas can make possible the love of one's self, the love of one's fate, because it becomes something sacred. My life, the events of my life, the tragedies of my life, my suffering, my struggles, my perceptions, my openings, my vision, my work, my creativity, my difficulties—all the amor fati. And not just bearing it. This isn't a teaching of "accept what is."

Included in all this, at least in how I would like to present it, is this understanding: there is no "what is." "What is" is a kind of modern spiritual myth, in the worst sense of the word. It's empty. What is is empty. What is available to us are empty ways of looking—this flexibility of interpretation.

So loving my fate actually becomes, again, an art. It's openness to multiple perspectives. What is can be seen from so many different ways and is colored and shaped and fabricated by so much that there is no independent "what is." So we're not talking about accepting what is; we're talking about loving what is. Loving our fate, loving our life, loving the self. Amor fati.

So my self is not different from what befalls the self, including the sufferings, including the challenges, including the difficulties, including the pain, including my life and death and whenever they come. This knowledge that it's empty, this love of that—love of it, knowing that it's empty, knowing that it's art in how I see it. And again, recognizing that within that we're sensitive to the dimensions of myself, of my existence, of my fate, and the divinity of all that.

So yes, it's given, and yes, we create all of it through our perspectives, through the art of perception. So this loving it—again, to emphasize a distinction we're making in this retreat—it's not "I love it and it's all perfect because all is one." All is equally the same substance of God or oneness of awareness or love or whatever it is. That's included as a level within this understanding that I'm talking about when I use the phrase amor fati. It's included, but we want to add within that the inclusion of, as I said, the personal, the particular as necessary. All of it is relevant for my soul, the persona, for my personhood, and also necessary for God, for the divine.

Nietzsche had this question of eternal recurrence. If you had to live every moment of your life again, over and over and over, your whole life in all its details, without anything changing, over and over for all eternity—so that means all the periods, all the moments of pain, of suffering, of struggle, confusion, even stagnation, and the durations of all those periods, and the timings, the order in which they come, not changing any of that. The joys as well, not just the pains, but all of it. And not smoothing the experience and the life out to being nice.

How would you feel about that? It's only in this amor fati that you can recognize the sacredness of it. What would make such an idea tolerable? And the test of your art of life is your response to that question.

So again, so much about what we're talking about in this re-enchantment of self, the re-enchantment of existence and cosmos, is creative, is art. We're really emphasizing that. I've said so many times.

In many traditions from ancient times unto the present, there's this idea of the possibility of becoming divine. The human being has the possibility to become divine. Acknowledging that that's rare, that kind of development, but we can, if you like, become God or a god or divine. You get this in Plato and Plotinus and then the Upanishads and Buddhist Tantra, in Jung as well.

Many others express this teaching as well. In Orthodox Christianity, it's called theosis. Let me read you something from theologian Jonathan Jacobs, writing about this possibility in Eastern Orthodox teachings. According to the Eastern Church, theosis "transforms the entire human person, including her sense perceptual capacities." This aligns beautifully with what I've been exploring—transformation occurring in perception itself. "Hence the deified, the ones made divine, are those who see things as they truly are."

There are some differences in understanding, but let's elaborate on what he's saying. Before this becoming divine, our sense faculties don't reveal things to us as they truly are—this is part of what's called our fallen human nature in the Christian tradition. He makes an analogy with autism that's worth considering. It's not that our perceptions are completely untrustworthy. Our current epistemic situation—our current condition of knowing through perception—is not unlike that of an autistic person. Autistic persons can perceive much in the world and indeed often have more finely tuned abilities to perceive some things. But they don't have the same abilities others have when it comes to perceiving persons. They may be able to see facial expressions and describe them accurately in detail, but they cannot see them for what they truly are—expressions of emotion, for instance.

Similarly, our "fallen" sense capacities need not be unreliable in general to be defective in what they deliver. We can see things in the world accurately; we just cannot see them for what they truly are. In this case, we cannot see the theophanies—selves and things and events as faces of God. We are, like an autistic person unable to see certain aspects of a person or thing, unable to see them as theophanies, or at least less able to do so.

In Buddhism, there's the teaching of authentic seeing—one definition of ultimate wisdom in some Buddhist teachings. Authentic seeing is the way a Buddha sees experiences as divine and beings as deities, as Buddhas. That's actually authentic seeing. Anything less than that is inauthentic seeing.

Panayiotis Nellas, writing about the Greek Orthodox tradition, explores this idea of being made in the image of God. What this really means is that we have the possibility to tend toward the archetypal image—related to what I mentioned about the angel at

our head—and we have the possibility of serving as effective instruments of the Christ. This is a gift given to us by the divine, but also a gift of our being, a gift of ourselves. It's also, if you like, a destiny, or at least a goal, or at least a potential of our being.

He speaks of a pledge—I'm not entirely sure what he means. Perhaps we pledge ourselves to this, or perhaps the divine makes a pledge to us through creating us in the divine image. But this pledge becomes a marriage—a marriage of the human to the divine image. He writes: "In the archetype, it's in the archetype that one finds one's true ontological meaning." We return to the image and the archetype giving us direction, pulling us, offering us duty and meaning. This is the meaning of our being—our ontological meaning through the archetype, through the image.

For most of us entrenched or saturated with modernism, these are strange ideas. Even if they're beautiful, we can almost hear them as quite dangerous. If you know certain psychological concepts about inflation and ungroundedness, there's the possibility of lack of discernment in all this. But as I've said, skills, capacities, wisdoms, and cultivations need to accompany all these ideas about becoming divine and manifesting the divine to make them less dangerous. Through practice, we actually realize—we make real—the beauty of these ideas.

So there's this thread through many historical strands of becoming God, becoming divine. And then there's also the strand I've mentioned several times about both becoming God and, in that process and through our activities, creating God as well—creating the divine.

You see this in different versions. We talked about Walter Wink's understanding of ascension and resurrection—shaping, creating, influencing, changing God. You see it in Hegel's philosophy as well, where the human being and the consciousness of the human being, and the evolution of that through time, creates at least a level of God.

In postmodern understandings—though it's still very rare within postmodernist theories as a whole to even talk about the divine in more than a dismissive manner—there are glimpses of this recognition.

And there's also the strand I've mentioned several times about both becoming God, but in that and through our activities, creating God as well, creating the divine.

So you get this in different versions. We talked about Walter Wink talking about the ascension and the resurrection—shaping, creating, influencing, changing God. You see it in Hegel's philosophy as well, that the human being and the consciousness of the human being and the evolution of that through time creates at least a level of God. Post-

modern understandings, more postmodern understandings—though it's still very rare within postmodernist theories as a whole for this even to talk about the divine in more than a dismissive manner.

This idea that we both become and create is quite a common idea in a lot of Jewish Kabbalistic strands of teaching. So that our prayer and our voicing in prayer, and the breath that comes through us, and our intentionality in prayer, as much as our psycho-spiritual work, as much as our actions in life, in embodiment—all of this shapes and creates and influences and maintains God, the divine, the divine archetype.

So yes, our actions in the world and our mental states and our work draw down what's called the divine influx. We draw that down into the world. We create it in the world. But also in the so-called supernal realms, in the higher realms, all of this maintains, shapes, influences, creates the divine or brings aspects of the divine together in erotic union. So it affects the intra-divine nature. These are radical ideas that most people who think about religion would never think would exist.

The whole idea in the Jewish tradition of mitzvot, of commandments—as many commandments as Buddhist monks follow, actually more than Buddhist monks, but both traditions have so many things, rules to follow, commandments to fulfill, ways of acting, ways of not acting. But there are ways of seeing that those very actions, those very seeming constrictions on one's behavior—do this, don't do that, do this little thing, this thing I don't even understand the reason for—there are ways of seeing that that enchant existence.

Seeing those little actions, the blessing involved. And with that, those actions become the action of the divine intelligence. Again, this might be in our kindness, in our acts of compassion, in our serving, in our creativity, or maybe more prescribed in certain monastic orders or in the laws of Judaism and Islam. But they become the actions of the divine intelligence through the human, because the divine intelligence is innate there in the human. Entertaining that idea.

So through our actions we express the divine, we manifest the divine, and we create and shape the divine. What's called in Jewish tradition the Shekhinah, the feminine manifestation on earth of the divine—it's that which, through our actions, through our prayer, through our cosmopoiesis, through our images, through our psycho-spiritual work, all of that, is brought into erotic union with other aspects of the divine.

And there's this idea in Hebrew called *tzorech gevoha*, the need on high—in other words, God's need. A certain level of God is beyond all this, is completely unaffected, transcendent, unfabricated, beyond anything that we can do or conceive, beyond

anything we conceive. That level of God is unaffected, the *ain sof*, the infinite. But there are other levels of God or aspects of God that have a need, a necessity—as I said, a necessity for you, for your personhood, for the particularities of your personhood.

So become God, but also become and create God. This is quite a sophisticated notion to be able to entertain and hold and have as one of the ideas that one entertains, one of the conceptual frameworks and the richness that can bring, the possibilities. Quite a sophisticated concept to hold, to entertain, to hold lightly, to look through, to act through, to live through.

Nietzsche said God is dead, but it's so narrowly understood what he meant by that. Certainly he was referring to a certain popular, dominant view in Western Europe at that time, at the end of the nineteenth century, of what God is, based on popular Christian view, and he's saying that view is dead. But really what he meant more fully was God as any truth, any supposedly independent, inherently existing thing. Very radical thinker, and that idea—this notion or belief that we have of independent truth—he said that's dead. When he said God is dead, that's what he meant was dead, of which a certain popularized version of Christianity's version of God is just one instance. He was pointing to something much more radical, much more challenging for people to even understand, and much more far-reaching in its consequences.

But is there a way, just as he said with the concept of soul, there may well be with the concept of divinity? Don't throw that out. Expand what it means. Acknowledge the art there that we create and discover both.

So again, as we said so much right from the beginning of the retreat, all this that we're talking about in the re-enchantment of self—aspects of self, elements of self, dimensions of self, and of the whole of existence and the cosmos—all of it is allowed by the flexibility or the elasticity of our concepts, of our ideas, the ability to move between different concepts or stretch concepts, or that the conceptual frame we start with in the beginning is ample enough to include these ideas of creating God, becoming God. All this is ample enough, the ways that we can see the self, right from the beginning.

So our views and our ways of looking and our practice and our re-enchantment can grow into a much bigger space. It has a much bigger space to grow into right from the beginning.

You get this idea of levels of soul—if we just talk about the concept of self or soul, you get this framework quite sophisticated and ample, amply spaced, having a wide range—in Plotinus and Neoplatonism. Apparently in the Upanishads, although I'm not sufficiently versed in them to know, and also in Buddhist Vajrayana, these ideas of

levels, of dimensions of being, and also of worlds. But there's already there quite a lot of space for different views and flexibility of views of what the self is, all of which allows re-enchantment.

So conceptual frameworks that allow all this to happen in terms of the re-enchantment of the self—but these are not just intellectual frameworks. The conceptual framework needs to be translated to ways of looking, to seeing the aggregates as not just *anatta*, not just non-self, but as divine, as Buddha nature, seeing self as Buddha, seeing others as Buddha, as deity, and making that an actual practical vision, sense, perception, way of looking that we can practice and develop and move in and out of.

And when we talk in that vein, then we're talking about dimensions and levels of experience, not just conceptual levels of defining soul. Sometimes when you read this stuff—Plotinus and all that—it seems so intellectually elaborate. You realize he's talking, I would say, and for us it's absolutely necessary—we're talking about dimensions of experience. Yes, a conceptual framework needs to be translated to practice, to experience, levels and dimensions of experience of the self.

So we see that, and I mentioned before, one aspect is at a certain level, then timelessness, for example, is something that is included both in the sense of self and in the sense of other things. Other levels of conception and practice and view and sense of self doesn't have that timelessness in it. It's more locked into time. And that has its validity as well. But experientially, we experience certain levels where timelessness as an aspect of those dimensions becomes just—we can't not see it. It's integral to that perception.

So whether it's the awareness or the consciousness that's regarded as Buddha nature that's seen as timeless, the consciousness of this perception, or maybe I'm looking at a field and the sun or the trees or whatever, and I get a sense, a felt sense—this knowing of that is timeless. This perception is timeless. This moment is eternal. These are not just conceptions of self; they're perceptions, senses available to us. And actually even frequently available with practice.

So we really get the sense of moving between levels of perception of self and the aspects of self, of dimensions of being, and also across a wide range, as we talked about earlier. But we need, in relation to the self, again, we need conceptions or conceptual framework that will allow this mutual opening, expansion, deepening and enriching of eros, of psyche and of logos. The very conceptual framework itself needs to be able to expand.

And through this, which we've talked about in other talks, through that movement, that soul-making movement, even the smallest act in our life, the smallest, most seemingly insignificant act has a sense of infinite ramifications, infinite resonances, infinite depths to it. It touches on the infinite. It moves into the infinite and towards the infinite. To quote a Kabbalist, it becomes woven into the soul's garment of splendor.

When I am able to view the smallest act of my life, the smallest instance of my self-manifestation, self-expression, self-acting, in certain ways that re-enchant, that allow this soul-making, this seeing through a conception, allows this eros-psyche-logos, mutual fertilization, then even that small act is woven into the soul's garment of splendor. Lovely language.

So we need conceptions, again—I've said this so many times—and we need conceptions that will allow soul-making and will allow an infinite potential for that soul-making because it is open-ended. The pothos in the eros will continue to want more, deeper, fuller, wider connection. The psyche needs the image of myself, of this other, of this thing that I love, of this object, of the cosmos needs to keep expanding. There's infinite potential, infinite space there for all that to expand. And with that, the logos, the conceptual framework as well.

And it's not that that infinite sort of expansion and deepening happens without difficulty. We stagger, we stutter, we stall at times. But that's all part of it, because the suffering also is enchanted. Not that this is all smooth and gleeful all the time. But the conceptual frame of it needs to allow the soul-making, the infinite potential of that dynamic of soul-making. It needs to allow meaningfulness. It needs to allow enchantment for the self, for others, for things, for cosmos. All of this is necessary for all of that, for the re-enchantment of all of that. For the ongoing, open-ended discovery, creation-discovery of senses of beauty and senses of sacredness in all of it, in all of existence—self, other, things, cosmos.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 45

The Gift and the Artifice of Self (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea continues his exploration of re-enchanting the self by examining what aspects need re-enchanting and how to approach this delicate work. He discusses how all levels of the self - from the most fabricated and solid to the most ethereal and barely-there - require seeing as divine, along with all aspects including emotions, desires, dukkha, imagination, and creativity.*
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> *Burbea addresses the complex relationship between desire and spiritual practice, distinguishing between transcendent longing for the divine and daemonic desires that don't fit conventional spiritual categories. He explores how eros - the desire for connection with its quality of inexhaustibility - relates to but differs from craving and clinging. The talk examines different notions of causality beyond just past-causing-present, including archetypal and atemporal causation, and how this affects our understanding of suffering and healing.*
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> *A key theme is the balance between seeing aspects of self as anatta (not-self) versus seeing them as divine - both being skillful ways of looking to be navigated wisely. Burbea discusses the importance of allowing 'artifice' into our feelings and spiritual practice, drawing on Nietzsche's insight that introducing art into our emotions can be more spiritually fruitful than seeking only 'genuine' or purely authentic expression. This challenges reductive secular humanist approaches to healing and opens possibilities for deeper soul-making and enchantment.*

So just to sum up what we've explored thus far, disenchantment arises partly from the pervasive flattening of either biological or psychological reductionism—reducing everything to neurophysiology or past historical events—or sociological reductionism that reduces everything to social conditioning. There's a profound flattening in that reductionism.

There's also an inhibited capacity for enchantment that emerges from certain spiritual emphases, whether in the Buddhadharma or other traditions like Advaita Vedanta. These teachings overemphasize the universal: the self as process, the self as nothing, always regarding the self as empty. This oneness orientation, whatever form it takes, emphasizes teachings or levels of perception that highlight the universal versus those that emphasize and include the particular—the particular person, what is my individual personhood.

The alternative is a regarding of the particular through all the events of my life as divine, and even more than that, as necessary to the divine, necessary to God. My particulars, my person, your person, your particulars, your struggle, your dukkha—all the aspects, the infinite aspects that make you up—are somehow necessary to God. God needs you to go through this because in a way, through you going through that, he, she, it goes through it. It's part of the growth of the being of God.

There's also disenchantment from what's less obvious, more insidious: this relative balance between self-aspiration, self-orientation, intentional self-serving orientation in terms of healing, psychological growth, self-empowerment, or self-expression. It might use the language of the divine, but it's actually about self, or mostly the leaning is about self, rather than leaning more towards the divine. The purpose, the intention, the aspiration, the reason for practice, for healing—one is really grounding it and orienting it towards the divine. The balance is more toward that than toward the self.

We could use these as if they're two separate things, or as a way of really integrating the two. But oftentimes a person might think that's what's happening, or want to think that's what's happening—that it's really about God, and they use that language. But so quickly it slips back to a self-project. Or there's not really the fullness in what was sensed in the orientation in the first place; it really was always just about self, just a self-project. This is very common.

These are some of the reasons that constellate and condition and hold in place a disenchantment of everything, but in this case we're focusing on self and other.

Given all that, we could ask: what needs re-enchanting? When we say to re-enchant the self, what do we mean more fully by that? What aspects or dimensions of the self need re-enchanting?

I would say actually all levels of the self need re-enchanting. Let me explain what I mean by that, because I mean it in two different but related ways. All levels of what I've called the vertical spectrum of the imaginal—all the images of a self or other. I might feel myself or see myself through this image or through that image, and it's as if they exist on a spectrum. All of those images need re-enchanting and need seeing and feeling as divine. We need to see and feel them as divine.

Practice, for example receiving divine light or love—some of the practices we've touched on in this retreat—this receiving of divine light and love is received by all images of the self, anywhere on that vertical spectrum of images of the imaginal. All levels on that spectrum, and all levels on the spectrum of the fabrication of self-sense.

Sometimes the self is fabricated and tense, feels very solid and very contracted. Sometimes the self feels like an atomistic process—that's fine, that's slightly less fabricated. Sometimes a self is a much more universal, cosmic self. Sometimes a self is a nothingness. Sometimes a self is experienced as barely there at all—barely fabricated, very ethereal, very unformed, very tenuous, refined sense of self. And sometimes the self is felt and sensed, whether imaginatively or because of the degree of unfabricating, as already divine and already light.

But all these levels, whether the imaginal levels or the levels of different degrees of fabrication on the spectrum of fabrication of the self-sense—all of it needs to be both... We need to play with, in practice, seeing and feeling all of these different levels as divine. Or we could say practices where we receive light and love from the divine. Again, all the different levels, both imaginal and fabricatory. All of them, from the most solid and the most painful and contracted to the most blissful and divine and barely there at all.

Again, this is one of those things where the more one has played with emptiness practice and seen in practice this spectrum of fabrication, played with unfabricating and moved up and down on that spectrum and really seen the degree of range of the fabrication of perception of self, the more flexibility there is in moving up and down these spectrums and seeing it all as empty and playing with it in these ways.

Somehow or other, and in time, all these levels need to get included, seen as divine, felt as divine, and receiving divine light and love in order to re-enchant the self.

So all levels, but also all aspects of self and others. Our emotions need re-enchanting, our desire needs re-enchanting, our dukkha, our suffering needs re-enchanting, our imagination needs re-enchanting, our mind—and I mean mind in the broader sense, citta, heart-mind, soul—our creativity needs re-enchanting. Our meaningfulnesses need re-enchanting. By that I mean they all need to be given legitimacy.

Because of this confusion we've discussed about different cultures, not all our emotions are given legitimacy, and not all our desire is either. By "given legitimacy," I don't mean acting out or being lost in them or anything like that. Given legitimacy means recognizing that there is something here that is a treasure. There is something sacred. It might be emerging in a way that appears contorted. It might not fit the picture I have of what is legitimate or holy. But all of this needs to be given legitimacy. It needs to be given permission. It needs to be given space to grow and expand and move into—again, not constrained by a certain conceptual framework of what it is or what's allowed, or a certain image of what it must be or what's permitted.

All these aspects of self need to be, as we said before, seen as divine in their roots—if you like, their origins. Not necessarily their origins in time, but their roots—that's a better word. Given legitimacy, given space to grow, to expand, to move into, and seen and felt as divine in origin. So that's the work of both the conceptual framework and also of practice, practicing ways of looking.

We can touch on a few of these perhaps now. Desire—I mentioned desire as one of the aspects of self, one of the elements of self, if you like. I've talked about this in other talks in the past, and I hopefully will talk more in the future about this in much more detail, the possibilities there. But Henri Corbin, for example, talks about longing as being—I can't remember the exact word he used—but almost like the driver, the engine of the human being. There's a kind of nostalgia, if you like, for the divine. He doesn't mean this nostalgia as in the past, as if we were with the divine before the Big Bang or something like that, but a non-temporal nostalgia. Something in our being knows a closeness with the divine, and we long for that again.

Jacob Boehme, a very influential mystic writer from I think the sixteenth century, used words like "purity" and "innocence" because in a way he was surrounded by a culture that put so much emphasis on the impurity and the fallenness of humankind. So he used words like: there is in us still a purity and innocence, and it longs for, it desires what he called "the holy" or "the paradisal element." It longs for holiness and paradise, and that holiness and paradise is inner—it's within us, if you like, the core of our being—but it's also outer in the world. This world as heaven, this world as Buddha realm, as we've talked about. So there's a desire for that. We have a desire that is holy. We have desires that are holy, that are divine in origin, that need to be legitimized and given space.

As well as that, and I've talked about this on other retreats, there is, if you like, the desire that comes from the daimon—desires that we see in ourselves that don't fit the usual Buddhist or, for example, Christian pictures of what it is that we should desire. They seem darker, or we easily confuse them with greed, or we think they're deluded, or that's just clinging or whatever. I'm not going to go into this now. I'm mentioning these as, if you like, two different kinds of desire: this transcendent desire, if you like, that Jacob Boehme was talking about—something in us that is transcendent, that yearns for the transcendent—and also the desire from the daimon.

The whole question with all this, and the question of desire, is the question of eros. This, what I've been defining in other talks and retreats, is eros as the desire for connection. And that having, again, a quality of inexhaustibility, a quality of always wanting more—what the Greeks used to call pothos within the eros—always wanting more, al-

ways wanting more connection, this movement, insatiability, if you like. Very easily, we just put all of that into the camp of craving and clinging and greed, et cetera, in a kind of Dharma language.

So are they the same? How are they different? Maybe one is a treasure. One is the pearl of great price, or part of that, and other ways of relating to that actually make it problematic for us. Certainly the relationship is not simple between eros and clinging, craving, whatever, greed—whatever word one wants to use. So important for us as human beings to really actively ask these questions and not just to receive, as I said, something from a culture, which then becomes stultifying, constraining, actually does not work—certainly for enchantment, but does not actually work in our life.

So Gregory of Nyssa, one of the fathers, I think, of the Orthodox Christian tradition, said: "The thirst of human souls requires some infinite water. How could this limited world suffice?" The thirst of human souls requires some infinite water. How could this limited world suffice?

So again, the thirst of human souls being the seeking for the transcendent, for the oneness with God, but also this desire for the daimon—whatever it is, sexual or something else—so easily seen as ego or lower nature or this or that or clinging, craving, put into a bad camp. But maybe both kinds of desire, both, if you like, the transcendent and what comes through the imaginal and the erotic in that way... If I have a limited worldview and a limited self-view, that won't be enough for us. We require infinite water.

So there's this need for respect for our desires, for changing the view of our desires, for re-enchanting the desires, and also within that, recognizing that there's a kind of infinity to the desire as well. It desires the infinite, but there's an infinitude to desires as well, in terms of what they are in a deeper sense, what they're conveying in a deeper sense.

I said also the mind needs re-enchanting. So aspects of a human being—our mind, and again mind meaning heart, psyche, citta, mind.

We talked about in another talk how some views actually regard the human and the divine mind as being, if you like, on a continuum. So the human mind at its core, at a deep level of the human mind, is actually one with the divine mind. And certainly the human imagination is also on a continuum with the divine imagination. But if we say mind, then it includes our emotions, our imagination, our creativity. It's certainly that idea that all of this at its core is divine. We are impregnated with the seed, with the word, with the logos of the divine.

Although it's on a continuum with the divine, that is a metaphysical concept. But it's one that we can actually entertain in practice, if not one that we can intuit through practice, actually have a real sense of. Again, we create it, and then we see what happens when we entertain it, when we employ it, engage it as a way of looking. But we can also intuit it or discover it. It feels like, "Yes, I sense that to be, in inverted commas, true. I sense that I'm discovering this perspective or this metaphysical fact, if you like."

So these ideas—that particular idea—exist in many different traditions. For Corbin, there's really one fundamental creative matrix for all experience and all sensations, and that is this divine mind, and particularly the divine imagination. Because humans partake of that human imagination, especially when it's trained—what he would call imaginal—it is on a continuum with the divine imagination. And again, in certain ideas of the world soul, very similar, or certain versions of the Buddha nature teaching in the Dharma.

So this seeing of various aspects of our being, of our self, of our humanity—our mind or whatever it is, aspects of mind—this seeing them as divine is different, I hope this is clear, from seeing them as anattā, as not-self.

Many of you will hopefully know that there's a whole practice of regarding the mind, or regarding thoughts, or regarding aspects of mind, elements of mind as not-self, as anattā. It's a very, very important and skillful practice, really an avenue into a lot of depth. So when we regard things as anattā, when we adopt that way of looking, there is this dis-identification, not identifying with this or that, with the mind as a whole, with aspects of the mind. There's a dis-identification and the freedom that comes with that. But there's also something else that happens, which many of you will recognize. There's a kind of prying loose of our automatic tendency to value things, to believe in our thoughts and also what they say about us.

So when we regard them as anattā, we don't tend to believe them so much, and we also tend to not identify with them and not take them so personally in terms of what they mean for us, about us, about what's going on with us even. More largely...

So this is a practice, this seeing things as anattā, this work or a way of looking. To always do that, to always see every aspect of mind as anattā, would be a little silly. It's a practice, it's a way of looking. Again, we're back to this flexibility idea. We go in and out of that as a potentially skillful way of looking, and it's potentially extremely skillful, extremely fruitful. But the question is, when is it helpful? When is it actually the wrong thing to do to view things that way?

To try and view that way always would be silly. We move in and out and it brings much deeper insight regarding emptiness. It doesn't only bring a dis-identification in the moment and prying loose of the valuing and all that. It also brings deeper insights. But still, we move in and out of it according to our sense of when it's helpful, when it's skillful.

Just the same, just the same with this way of looking or playing with conception of the divine origins of the self, of the mind, of our images. We move in and out of that view. We need to navigate that movement in and out. We need to navigate our way, find our way with this flexibility. It would be silly and probably, you can imagine, pretty dangerous to always regard everything that moves through my mind, any element of myself or mind, as holy and divinely inspired and all that. So there needs to be some pragmatism and wisdom here, and sensitivity is really important.

There's another issue connected with all this that has to do with, if you like, the order of what we regard as divine, the order in which we regard different aspects as divine. What is light and what is good—it's easier to see that as divine. But seeing what is dark in us and what is, quote, bad or seems bad, to regard that as divine—would it be safer to really cultivate the good and see the divinity of that and develop what is light and pure, so-called, and then actually, on that basis, with that resource and having cultivated that, then to begin to learn to see and to practice seeing that which is, if you like, darker or the bad in us as divine?

Certainly Carl Jung thought so, that this was the order in which it was quite important that things happened. But still, he emphasized the importance of seeing the divinity of darkness, to open to the dark gods. So he wrote, I think in "Answer to Job": "The guilty man is eminently suited and is therefore chosen to become the vessel for the continuing incarnation"—it's kind of old style language. I hope you can get the gist of what's being said here. "The guilty man is eminently suited and is therefore chosen to become the vessel for the continuing incarnation, not the guiltless one who holds aloof from the world and refuses to pay his tribute to life, for in him the dark god would find no room."

For in him the dark god would find no room.

If we're truly to re-enchant the dark gods, they need to find room within us. They need to be re-enchanted—those aspects of ourselves that we would usually shut out of a spiritual view. "Now, that's not spiritual. That can't be divine." They need a way in.

But Jung's emphasis is that the good needs to be seen as divine first and actually cultivated first. We need, in his language, the development of the Christian virtues. We could say the paramis of the bodhisattva—generosity, patience, compassion, love, and so forth. But we also need insight, insight into emptiness, so that we don't start identifying too rigidly with all this, concretizing it, reifying it, making it real, shrinking around it, clinging to it as a fixed reality.

Many people hearing this will need to spend quite a bit more time developing what is light and so-called good—the classic Buddhist paramis and qualities—and cultivating insight into the emptiness of self and the emptiness of those qualities themselves. At some point, the being, the soul, and the understanding have the capacity and skill to start regarding much more beyond what is obviously light, obviously "good." They begin regarding all of that—the dark, what seems bad, what seems greedy—actually starting to find the divinity in that.

Sometimes it doesn't happen in that order. Mostly I would say that linear progression is one of the things that allows it to be stable and safe. But things aren't that simple for everyone. Some people do things in all kinds of orders, or it's just not so linear.

Wrapped up in all of this is the relationship with the view of the possibility of re-enchanting or enchanting our suffering, our dukkha in life. This is a delicate question. We have to tread delicately, sensitively here. It's complex. In the totality of the teachings of this retreat, from both Catherine and myself, we'd like to present different perspectives on this and give due respect to the complexity here.

Let's go into it from certain angles. Again, I hope you can hear some of this in the context of a response to at least what I perceive as the dominant paradigms existing.

One thing about re-enchanting the self and re-enchanting our suffering: judgment and enchantment do not go together very well at all. When we judge ourselves, or when we judge ourselves for suffering—seeing repeated patterns, still doing the same thing, still making the same mistakes after all this practice, still having the same problems—and there's judgment of that and self-blame, then the possibility of enchanting the self and enchanting the view of the suffering is obviously diminished. Similarly, it works the other way, as many of these things do through mutual dependence: the less enchanted we are with the view of the self and the suffering, the more likelihood there is to judge ourselves and judge the suffering.

When there's judgment, it's hard to see—almost by definition—the depths of beauty of the self. This piece about judgment and self-blame becomes quite interesting when we explore views of self and suffering and healing and the enchantment of that.

Sometimes a person has strands of suffering in their life that seem to last a long time, seem to be painfully persistent over years and decades. Then they're exposed to some psychological paradigm or work or idea, and they come up with what they believe is an explanation for their suffering, for the persistence of those patterns in their life. It might be certain wounds in their history, in the family—causal factors. Maybe a situation or an event caused even a change in neural mechanisms.

Now they have an explanation. This person has an explanation for their suffering, and more than that, for the persistence of their problems or patterns or failures in life. So that explanation is believed, and the believed cause of the suffering is no longer the self. It's because that happened. It's because of this event, or this ongoing set of conditions. So the cause is moved from self-blame to something that's not me—something other that happened to me, that was forced upon me.

There's less self-judgment, less self-blame. And then they find themselves feeling better. The problem's loosening. The pattern's loosening. The problem's alleviating a little bit.

Does that mean that explanation is necessarily true? Is it necessarily real? Or is it that what's happened is just the shifting away from the self as what is to blame? The alleviation of self-judgment is what is actually healing there—that is actually the element that's causative in healing. What's actually going on?

Because the self-judgment, the self-blame, can lock—can be part of a kind of cyclic mechanism that holds the whole patterns and dukkha and problems and persistent failures in place. It's the self-judging.

And by whatever explanation, that's relieved and something begins expanding and moving. There's essentially a restoring that happens, a re-storying, an alternative narrative. Instead of "I'm hopeless, I'm a failure, it's my fault," etc.—which may even be implicit, almost sub-verbal—there's a re-storying of the past, away from self-blame, and this is actually what liberates, maybe. What's going on there?

And these restorings, you know, in different cultures can be vastly different. I remember years ago when I lived in the States and I was studying music, and I used to go around to a friend's house. Hikaru was a Japanese from Japan who was also studying jazz guitar. And we used to play together. We used to jam together for hours.

My Japanese was completely non-existent, but his English was really not very good at all. So our conversations were quite limited. But one day—he was generally a very buoyant personality—and one day I went over in the evening, and he was clearly really down. And I was trying to understand: can I do anything? What's going on?

And in his English—he did have some English and it wasn't that bad really—but in his English he said, "It's my ancestors." And he didn't mean it's my family or something that happened to me in my childhood. It's my ancestors. He was talking from a whole different paradigm, a whole different set of beliefs that was clearly still used and operative in Japan. "It's my ancestors," he said.

But that view of it was clearly something that enabled him to get a little distance from it, to not self-blame, to make him okay with this dukkha that was there.

So are these different views of what's causative for my suffering and my patterns or my difficulties—persistent difficulties—are we talking about truths? I explain it like this, and then that helps. Does that mean it's true? Or are we actually talking about the power of beliefs, of interpretations? Are we seeing how the view and the interpretation of something has an effect, which is part of the theme of this whole teaching, teachings that we're given? What's going on there?

Restoring is part of healing, is a big part of healing. And we can have a naive understanding of what's happening there: just believe now I've seen the truth. Or actually a more sophisticated and I'd say honest understanding: restoring, re-fantasying, re-imaging. Recognizing that this is necessary and part of our humanity, part of enchanting, part of our psychology. And certainly part of healing.

And even when we see—you know, for example, this person, I can see them, or they tell me about how now they're caught in this painful triangle with a friend and an authority figure, and then they report something in the past of how a similar triangle, a painful triangle, with a sibling and a parent, and then the current situation, the pain of that, seems to be replicating past family relationships and triangles and difficulties, etc. Seems to be replicating.

And we easily think, "Ah yes, the cause is there, the cause was in the instance in the family, in the past." But actually not necessarily. That's not proven. It's not proven that implies that the family, the prior family, historical one, was the cause of the thing that happened later in time.

What about this notion, you know, when I use this phrase of something—some element of ourself or something or some image—having its roots in divinity, having its origins in divinity? I don't mean its temporal origins.

What about archetypal causes as an idea? Not the cause, or not the only possible way of interpreting things, way of explaining as the cause is in the past human history. Maybe the cause is archetypal. Maybe this triangle is archetypal. Now, of course, that's the whole Oedipal—well, one version is the Oedipal thing, but I'm not necessarily talking about that at all.

But it's putting—or entertaining the idea that the causes are not purely human and historical and concrete in origin from the past, etc. If I don't allow that kind of causality, then I will be fixed only on a certain range of possible causes, because that kind of archetypal causality is simply not in my frame.

The image is primary. That as an idea. You've maybe heard me say that in other talks, other retreats. If I exclude that idea, then my frame for possible causes can only contain so much. And I automatically make an assumption, an explanation. And it seems obvious.

Years ago, I remember this psychology class or something—this photo that psychologists took and showed to people, asking them to say what they thought was going on. The photo was a street clearly in London in the seventies, or not necessarily London, but what looked like a UK city in what appeared to be the seventies. The photo showed people on the street, a busy high street or whatever, relatively busy high street.

Within these people walking around and shopping were two figures. One was a black man running in a certain direction down the street through the people. Behind him, about ten or twenty yards—I can't remember exactly—was a policeman in a police uniform, a white policeman in uniform. They asked, "What do you think's happening in this photo?"

Most people said, "A policeman is chasing a criminal."

Part of the thrust of what they were trying to get at was this sort of implicit racism, but also something about frames. Because it actually turned out that what they said was, "No, actually what this is a photo of is two policemen—a black plainclothes policeman that you see there in front, by ten or twenty yards, of a white uniformed policeman, chasing a criminal who is not in the picture. He's out of the frame."

So a certain causal interpretation of what's happening is constrained or conditioned by the frame. By frame here, you can see that it's perceptual as well as conceptual. Similar dynamics operate in relation to suffering and healing and causality.

Of course, we can see that the images that arise for us have their origins in the past as well. They're not completely out of the blue, autonomous from beyond, with no relationship to our life. Any exploration of imaginal practice will see that this is the case too. But if I only regard images as being a result of the past, then that won't give them that divine dimension that we've been saying is so important.

Could I see, could I extend that? Yes, of course images arise from the past. But not only. And maybe even extending it further—an even more radical idea—maybe my past also has its roots in divinity, its roots in archetypal causes, if you like, its roots in archetypal images.

So this person who seems to be replicating an early family pattern—it's not that that early family pattern was the cause of what's being played out now in other contemporary relationships, but both are actually mirroring an archetypal cause. Where is the causality here, and what's going on? This is the whole opening up of our whole sense of existence. So not just images are archetypal, but actually the events of our life are archetypal, are divine in origin. They have their roots in divinity.

That's a much more radical and far-reaching idea. Something of the divinity of everything is much more deeply integrated into the view. So we can talk about a mirroring there, maybe not even a causality. Causality in the divine is more like a mirroring—the archetypal, the early family, and the contemporary. All these events and experiences are mirroring each other. Where is the causality here?

This is interesting if we just stay with this idea of causality now, because it actually has a tremendous bearing on this question of re-enchantment of self and dukkha and other aspects of our being. We could say there are three or four notions of causality that are possible.

We can, of course, have a sense that the past—something in the past, some event or some set of conditions—causes the present. The past causes the present. Of course, that is the most common, if not the exclusive understanding that we tend to have of causality. Past causes present. Of course it does. What else does? Past experience, past event causes present event, present experience.

But there's also a notion of the present causing the present that's possible. Now, I mentioned in another talk this idea of non-locality, this instantaneous fact discovered experimentally that even over vast distances, astronomical distances, two particles can actually affect each other instantaneously. The present, if you like, causes the present. That's not the kind of thing I'm talking about right now.

More I want to talk about or emphasize the understanding that's necessary for a Dharma practitioner to understand how views in the present fabricate the perception in the present. The conception and the view, the way of looking in the present, in this moment, fabricates the perception. This is not something that happens in time.

It's a dependent arising. We understand the teaching of dependent co-origination, as the Buddha said—how the present causes the present. We start to wonder about that word "cause." That's the second way of understanding causality.

A third possibility is the idea that the future causes the present—a future event, something in the future, so to speak, causes the present. Again, there's a parallel in modern physics. John Archibald Wheeler proposed certain experiments where you could actually see this possibility, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking more about the idea of telos, the Greek word telos, of what Corbin called "the angel out ahead"—this image that we have that's calling us to something, that's giving us not so much a foretelling of the future, but calling us to our destiny, to our future, to our fulfillment, to our living out and embodying of an image, our individuation.

So causality from the past, causality from the present, causality from the future. And that as a notion or an idea... We could also talk about—I mean, the fourth option is kind of overlapping with the third, but just kind of atemporal causality. So what exists in us, but also for us, but exists beyond time, atemporal, and exists for us as blessing and as challenge. Beyond time, it exists in us and for us.

If we pay attention to our lives, the gifts that we have also bring with them challenges. We need to learn to grow into, to develop skill and art in relating to the blessings and the gifts that we are given, because they also bring particular challenges with them. But what exists as a kind of cause atemporally, beyond time—the integration of that and the consciousness of that happen in the linear time and through the linear time of our lives and our consciousness unfolding. But they come from or they exist beyond time.

So there are three or four possible notions of causality. But the causality from the past is by far the dominant idea, almost universally accepted. So if I hear a Dharma teacher give a talk about how the past, perhaps trauma in the family, causes the present, how the difficulties, the dukkha we have from the past, or even intrauterine, or in the struggles of the embryo, sometimes even in the struggles of the sperm to reach the egg—all of that is a cause of what happens later. The past causes the current experience, and there's a way in that explanation that supposedly is an understanding, and there's a kind of liberation that comes with that. It's a certain view of causality and of dukkha.

I think this is very significant. What do we do with causality and time, and how does that affect our understanding of time? What does that affect in terms of both our sense of suffering and liberation from suffering, but also the enchantment, or the possibility of enchantment, of suffering and of self?

Probably since Freud, and nowadays most psychoanalysts or psychotherapists would, in their relationship both to dreams and to images, construe them as coming from the past. They have their origins in the past. So the dream is conveying something, some pain or triggered by something in the past, whether it's in a purely mundane kind of uninteresting way or something deeper from the past. And that goes for dreams and images. The origin again—causality is in the past, maybe the past as it runs into the present, but from the past.

I just wonder what happens, as in so much of what we're talking about, what happens if we just can have enough wiggle room, enough space inside the consciousness and flexibility to actually suspend that assumption that the images that come to us are coming from the past, that the dreams that come to us are coming from the past.

In terms of dreams, you may have seen this: how often we dream something and see many dreams. If we pay attention, not just to what happens in the days before, because certainly dreams pick up—Freud had a word for it—the remnants or the fragments, the debris, the flotsam and jetsam of the days before and use that. But not only that level of past, but also the deeper past and wounding and all that. But dreams pick up not just the past—they also kind of indicate and usher in the future. They open to the future. There's a forward-moving quality to dreams.

Now this could be something very banal: I ordered something ages ago and it just hasn't arrived, and then I have a dream and lo and behold, in the next one or two days the thing shows up after all this time. Or more commonly, something like I see an old friend once in a blue moon, I hear from them once in a blue moon, we get together once in a blue moon, and I have a dream about them, and one or two days later, in the next couple of days, they call.

Or something deeper for us, something more complex, like a dream comes and it has perhaps a particular kind of religious feeling to it. Or it has in it a particular kind of creativity. We dream in that way, and the dream touches us and moves us. There's a beauty to it. It goes deep. And then one or two days later, or a short time later—often that one or two days seems to be characteristic of dreams, this forwardness of dreams—a short time later, there is an opening or an advent, an arrival of something in the being related to the essence of that dream or that image that I had. Or there is at least, a

few days later, the beginning or an initiation into some opening: a new spiritual direction, a new practice, a new kind of creativity that's really something that then unfolds over years. But the beginning happened just shortly after the dream.

So there's this quality of dreams as opening to, indicating, ushering in the future. And what does this imply?

What might this imply? And what is the self that experiences these kinds of dreams and images—premonitory, if that's the word?

What is the self? Is it just the result of the past? Just the result of my family upbringing and societal conditioning? Just the result of my genes and biological evolution? Of course, it involves all that—but only as part, perhaps only some levels.

If we pay attention, if we are open, and if our frame is open enough, we can see we are visited, we are summoned, we are called by visions, by dreams, by angels, if you like. And in that we're connected to the mundus imaginalis, the imaginal realm, connected to the angels of that realm. We're not separate from that dimension of existence, that imaginal realm.

You could say, of course, that that dimension is an element of the self, but you can also say we are an element, an aspect of that dimension. Both. And integral to that—integral to that dimension, as we've mentioned in other talks—is that the self is not just limited in the ways that we usually feel ourselves to be, spatially and temporally.

The self is more than just something spatial and temporal. I exist here, and I exist now, and I exist from this point to that point, birth to death, or as some say, even longer—lives longer than that, beyond death. But something in us, something of the self, a dimension of the self exists beyond space, beyond time.

We are not only trapped, or only, to borrow Heidegger's phrase, thrown into linear time, the inexorable marching of time—in his case, towards death. Sure, there's time. Sure, that's a fact, a dimension, an aspect of a certain dimension of our existence. But we are not only that.

We get this sense of the self, our being, being more than just spatial and temporal. Not just trapped in time, nor actually just trapped in space as it is usually conceived.

Both—again, repeating something I said before in another talk—both in the meditative playing with the lessening of fabrication, with unfabricating, with that spectrum of the fabrication of perception, and both through imaginal practice and entering into iconic images and magical and tantric worlds through these practices that we're doing

in imaginal practice, through both that and through the experimenting with the fabrication of perception in meditation, time collapses, if you like, or explodes, and we have different tastes, different glimpses, different openings to eternity, to what is timeless.

We recognize through all of this, in this forward-lookingness of dreams, this premonitory aspect of images—we recognize that a dimension of the self is beyond space, beyond time, or dimensions of the self are beyond space and beyond time, and that in different ways as well.

Regarding this, we talked about Corbin talking about the angel out ahead and this idea of images—this telos, this future, calling us to something or something beyond time, then finding its way into our life as blessing, as challenge.

Listen to something from Henri Corbin. He says: "The ritual celebrated by man, the human being—the ritual celebrated by human being in the temple of his being—is his own metamorphosis, his own transformation, transubstantiation, bringing to birth within himself of that form of himself, which conforms to the angelic archetype." This is the angel out ahead.

And through imaginal practice, this ritual celebrated by human being in the temple of their own being is your own metamorphosis, your own transformation into that angel out ahead, the bringing to birth within himself, herself of that form of oneself which conforms to the angelic archetype. He gives a capital to the F of form. There's a kind of platonic idea there of something kind of inherently existing, which we're playing with as an idea, but not holding to as a truth. You can also see the dependent arising of that.

But note also a difference here with, say, a lot of tantric practices in tantric Buddhism, where the ritual celebrated, the angel or deva or deity visualized and practiced with and imagined is actually pre-prescribed. I've touched on this before. In Corbin's version of Islamic practice, the angel is, so to speak, conformed to the individual, to the person. The archetype is not universal.

So this angel out ahead is very particular to me. You also get that in Jung—the individuation, that an archetype is something we never actually experience. What we experience is individualized images that appear to us conditioned both by the archetype that we can never know and the way that forms the image, but also by my personality and cultural conditioning, all kinds of things.

But something here needs opening up in the view—to say this over and over again. And in particular, in relation to suffering, in particular in relation to the self, and the suffering self, in this case.

So, taking that direction from what we just talked about, from Corbin and tantra, and again, Nietzsche refers to seeing the madman—in other words, your craziness, your difficulty—seeing the madman as the mask and a speaking trumpet, the mask and the speaking trumpet of a divinity.

Back to the idea of persona that I mentioned actually on other retreats, but this—my personhood, including my craziness, my struggles, my weirdness, my eccentricities and my suffering—the madman as the mask and speaking trumpet of a divinity. Persona—what sounds through my personality, my dukkha, the particularities of my life.

How do we tend to view and conceive of our madness, our suffering? It's often not as the speaking trumpet of divinity, or if a person does that, then it tends towards some kind of mania, and it's over-literalized. It's reified. It's clung to. There's too much identification. So there's an art here.

We're going to come back to that delicate, tricky art that involves skill, navigation, and insight.

But in all of this, to pick up something mentioned earlier, we see so much the tendency toward reduction to what we call secular humanism—in the way we regard what the human is, in the way we regard our suffering, in the ways we regard what healing actually is and involves. There's this reduction to secular humanism that's become so endemic, so saturated, so sedimented into our modern view, our modernist view.

So healing the past may actually be—I would say it's actually only one level of healing. Healing the past is only one level of healing. It's only one conception of what healing can extend to and embrace. For us so often nowadays, that's what healing means, psychologically at least.

What about the healing of the imaginal? The healing of concretizing, liberation from concretizing, liberation and healing from any fixed singleness of vision, singleness of view—whether that's physicalism or, on the other extreme, a kind of New Age reificationism of angels or whatever it is. Any kind of fundamentalism, religious or secular—secular humanism, whatever it is—a liberation from all that and a liberation of soulfulness and soulmaking. That's another level of healing: the liberation of soulmaking and soulfulness, the full liberation of the spaces and the depths into which that soulmaking can expand.

Now over time, over a lot of practice and a lot of work, maybe a person—or usually over time—maybe a person experiences both levels of healing: the healing of the past and the difficulties of upbringing and societal conditioning and schooling and family and all that craziness, and this other healing, the healing of the imaginal, the healing of

the fixedness of view, the healing of fundamentalism and the rigidities, and the healing—the liberation of soulmaking, the fullness of that, or the allowing of more and more fullness of that.

The person experiences both, opens to both, goes through both, and looks back and may feel that this other kind of healing, this second kind of healing—the healing of the imaginal, of the soulmaking—feels that actually of the two, this is the wider healing, the deeper healing, the more radical healing, and maybe often even the more necessary healing.

And again, we're back to this question of order. Do I need to do the healing of my past before I open to all this soulmaking, re-enchantment business? Oftentimes that's the assumption.

But I actually don't know. I think it varies. It really varies. It's a delicate, complex, individual question. But I would say that rather than an order being universally necessary—that's certainly not true, or even in an individual case—it's more a case of, if we really actually ask what needs to happen here, the fruits of each kind of healing, or gaining the fruits, or a successful healing, if we can even use such a word, that's actually dependent in each case, whether we're talking about healing the past or healing the imaginal.

In each case, it's dependent on the development of certain skills, certain capacities, certain insights, certain abilities, psychologically and in relationship. The fruits of each depend on that, rather than "I do this first, and then I need to do this, and then I need to do that."

So each one of these healing dimensions needs a whole host of capacities. If we're healing the past, it involves compassion. It involves the different flavors of compassion. It involves learning how to feel our feelings and tune into them and hold them and have the capacity for them. It involves all kinds of psychological discrimination, all kinds of things. Many kinds of skills and capacities come together to allow that healing of the past. I've talked about that in other places; I'm not going to go into it now.

But the same thing with healing in the imaginal. So each of them are dependent on different capacities, rather than "this needs to happen, this kind of healing, and then that kind of healing." This kind of grounding, then that kind of grounding, or whatever.

So in regard, as I said before, in regard to healing, in regard to suffering, in regard to self, there's this so commonly a reduction to some kind of secular humanist idea, a reduction to secular humanism. And even in regard to art and our relationship with art—Oscar Wilde wrote, "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling."

Now, for some people, they'd be like, "What?" All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling, he wrote. What's going on there?

Well, there's a couple of meanings here. "Genuine" is from the Latin genuinus, and it actually means inborn. It's different than what we usually take it to mean. Inborn. So all bad poetry springs from inborn feeling—that is, we could interpret what he's saying this way: my personal feeling. All bad poetry is usually too personal. It's too conceived in terms of, again, the secular human, not something beyond the human or divine or whatever.

All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling—something that's too me and my history or whatever it is. There's something too simplistically one-dimensionally human about it.

But of course, "genuine" has this more common meaning to do with authenticity as opposed to artificiality. And again, that also I think is implicit in what Oscar Wilde wrote: "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling." So this idea that we have to be authentic and true to what is authentic, and what is so-called authentic carries much more soul and weight and importance than what is artificial, what is artifice.

So what—again, I'm actually going to quote Nietzsche again. He wrote, "The worst of all tastes: the taste for the unconditional." Now he's unpacking something that's a little complex there. The worst of all tastes is the taste for the unconditional. By the unconditional, he doesn't mean the unconditioned, the unfabricated, in the way that Buddhists might use that, or some Buddhists might use that word. He means the word conceived in a certain way that leaves no space for art, for the emptiness of things and for the creativity to come into relationship with things. It's just unconditional. It cannot be conditioned by our creativity or realized to be a dependent arising.

So the worst of all taste is the idea that wants this or that or anything—concept or self or whatever—to not be empty, to not be open to the art of creative interpretation and shaping. This is the worst of all tastes, he said. And he goes on: "It's cruelly misused and made a fool of until a man learns to introduce a little art into his feelings, even to venture trying the artificial, as genuine artists of life do."

To introduce a little art into his, into her feelings, and even to venture trying the artificial. So this encouragement, again, to not be shy of artifice.

You can see that in metta practice, very, very simply. And if you like, we're acting as if something were true, as if a certain view was true, or entering into something. I may be angry and I'm saying, "May you be well," etc. There's a little bit of artifice there—actually a lot of artifice. In some cases I'm not pretending that I'm feeling that, but

actually there's a place for—you see, as we get more and more into understanding and experiencing the fabrication of things, how much our experience, our feelings in this case, emotions and vedanā, actual sensation of pleasantness, unpleasantness, is shaped and shapeable by the view.

Artifice, and allowing artifice into our feelings, our emotions and our vedanā. We learn to actually shape and reshape and refabricate even basic pleasantness and unpleasantness. What is unpleasant can be very often learned. We can learn how to convert that into the pleasant just by shifting the view. And we see how much the view of something contributes to its shaping.

So for example, seeing the divinity of my emotion, allowing that artifice in, actually shapes the unfolding of that emotion.

CHAPTER 46

The Gift and the Artifice of Self (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this opening talk from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" series, Rob Burbea examines the complex cultural inheritance that shapes our understanding of self. He explores how Western culture combines scientific reductionism, Christian ethics, and individualism in confusing ways, while Buddhist teachings of anattā (not-self) can lead to suspicion of selfhood altogether.*
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> *Burbea contrasts our secular, "purely human flourishing" with traditional views that see human beings as sacred vessels for divine manifestation - citing beautiful examples from African tribal traditions and mystical Christianity. He critiques both materialist reductionism and rigid dharma interpretations that view the self as "just a process," arguing these limit our capacity for genuine enchantment.*
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> *The talk introduces the need for flexibility of self-view, drawing on Nietzsche's concept of "soul as subjective multiplicity." Burbea suggests that true re-enchantment requires elastic concepts that allow us to discover and invent different dimensions of selfhood, moving beyond the constraints of both secular materialism and dogmatic spiritual reductionism. This foundation sets the stage for exploring how suffering can become soul-making when we expand our conception of what it means to be human.*

As human beings now, we almost all move in many different subcultures of the larger culture. It seems to me that our larger culture is a mix—we've inherited a mixture of historical cultures. We've inherited the perspectives of the Western so-called Enlightenment and scientific materialism, that kind of reductionist modernism of modernity I've been referring to. Yet still lingering, less ostensibly in their religious forms but still lingering, is the ethics or value system of Christianity.

In regards to the self—the views we have of selves, of what a human being is, the sense of ourselves and the parameters of ourselves—the larger culture is actually confused, simply as a result of history. We've inherited this reductionism that goes with science. We've inherited all that I've pointed out about modernity. But within that is, or part of that is, an emphasis on individualism. So it's a very individualistic culture and a humanist culture in terms of what a human being is—the range of that not really including the divine so much.

We've inherited all of that, and these ideas of virtue or value or sin, even if we don't use that word, that come from the Christian tradition. For example, pride is a sin and humility is a virtue. Now whether we don't consider ourselves Christian at all, those values in regard to the self—self-effacing, not blowing one's own trumpet too much—we don't like that when we see it in other people, we try not to do it because we know others won't like it in us. There's a kind of humility, which is often a false humility that runs through the culture, at the same time as being an individualistic culture, a culture of who's going to win, who's going to lose, of trying to pump up the individual in various ways, of the individual feeling alienated from society. All of this is wrapped up together and makes quite a confusing mix for us to have inherited in relationship to the sense and the view of self and other.

And then within that, in spiritual cultures, particularly the culture of Buddhadharma, we have this notion of no-self or not-self or the self is empty. This is, for a start, a difficult teaching for people to understand. I think it has lots of degrees of depth. There are many ways that we can talk about the self being empty in this way and that way. They're not the same. And there are levels there.

But what happens within Buddhadharma culture with that is that there's a suspicion of self quite often, or we tend to dismiss someone surrounded by, saturated by these kinds of teachings and attitudes. They tend to maybe lean their orientations in life in a way that self and the enchantment of self will sound suspicious, and maybe self and all that involves is a little bit denigrated and dismissed, or a lot. It happens less now as we have more psychotherapy imbuing dharma teachings or inside meditation teachings, but still, there's a tension here that comes from the complexity, the mixed messages in our cultures regarding self and the sense of self and the view of self and what a human being is. Self and other.

I want to talk a little bit about re-enchanting self and other, and a little bit about what might be involved in that. We've touched on some of that already.

Not as an aside, but as something relevant, there are accusations from some, especially of a more secular persuasion within the dharma—a secular agenda within the dharma—that almost view the whole point, or one of the main thrusts of Buddhadharma, what the Buddha was saying, as this kind of shattering of any notion of soul or self or divinity. That was the Buddha's central project originally. And then what happened historically over time is he died and that message got lost, and then lo and behold, foolish humanity brings back in old ideas that he would have utterly rejected in his secularism—ideas of selves and souls and divinities and all that. So the Mahayana and the Vajrayana teachings are regarded as a pollution and a devolution, as opposed

to evolution, of the teachings. There are impurities coming in from other systems, from human lack of honesty and stiff upper lip and clarity and steel in the face of our real existential situation.

All this is there. Now, I've touched on this before, but hidden in there is an unacknowledged fantasy, an image of the Buddha, of the dharma, of the history, and what Nietzsche calls the glorification of origins—a thing is more authentically itself when at the beginning of its so-called existence and then gets downhill from there. The glorification of origins or the glorification of beginnings. All of that is fantasy and image.

Now, we can point that out. We could also play the game a little bit and say, if we want to, that if we want to play this game of fantasy of origins, actually rather than concepts like divine, divinity, God, angel, self, soul—whatever these words that we use now and that we're seeking to give permission to and re-enchant—rather than those, we can say actually it's the realism and the reification that is so much at the core and at the basis of a lot of contemporary dharma, as well as many other spiritual traditions nowadays, contemporary spiritualities. That's more of a return to self, if you like, and God, if you like, to use these words in their larger context.

Self in the Mahayana means not just personal self, but also phenomenal self—the self of phenomena. Self really means any belief in this thing, whether it's a human thing or an inanimate thing or an atom or whatever. Self really means the belief in that as having inherent existence, and it applies not just to human beings, but it applies to phenomena as well. Personal self and phenomenal self—both are empty.

But it's that return to the phenomenal self, to the kind of belief in the reality, a basic reality of things, whether it's an atomistic reality or just the reality of the existential situation, the reality of matter—all that conceived of in a certain way—that is the return of self. And God—words like life with a capital L or this—they are the god of secular modernism. They're kind of trump words that trump everything else. They're four-letter words that get used actually vaguely, but as if they're something real, as if we're talking about the same thing.

So it's the realism and the reification, one could say, that is more the return to self and God. And it's evident in all these different kinds of teachings and the conceptions of the path and the goal, and the almost ubiquitous language of "what is," of "bare attention," of "being with things as they are"—a phrase that the Buddha did use. The Buddha didn't use "bare attention," but used that phrase, "things as they are," though he meant it in a very different way. He meant things as they are—things are empty. "Be here

now," "life as it presents itself"—we've touched on this before, but we could say that actually it's in the realism and the reificationism that the teachings are polluted, if we want to play along with that game of fantasies.

The most important thing is to acknowledge fantasy—the fantasy of Buddha, fantasy of Dharma, fantasy of history, all of that. So it's complex within this confusion that I was alluding to earlier, the confusion of cultural messages and cultural inheritances. And it's confusing.

As we've been unfolding on this retreat, we've explored different types of enchantment. When we talk about enchanting the self, we don't mean only what we might call spiritual enchantment—the kind that dissolves the person into universal oneness of this or that flavor, oneness that doesn't emphasize particularity but moves toward the universal. We've also been differentiating from what we've called, somewhat clumsily, immature imaginal enchantment and mature imaginal-based enchantment.

So all this is complex. When we come to the question of how to unfold or find a way forward with a re-enchantment of self and other, it's complex for all these reasons. It's complex because we have psychological needs, and there are certain psychological paradigms mixed in with all that about what constitutes a healthy self, a psychological self. These too are historically conditioned.

Again, we tend to think that our current view from modern psychotherapy and history—or depending on your allegiance to different contemporary psychologies—we tend to think that's real. Whereas a notion, say, from medieval times or ancient times about what constituted a self, what even a self was, and what constituted a healthy or unhealthy self, is vastly different now, historically vastly different. We just take it all for granted as reality, as, again, this subtraction story of shaking off prior illusions, encrustations, unnecessary veilings of what is a basic truth about self, reality, health, and psychological health.

So into this complexity as well is the whole delicate, complex question of psychologies, self-notions, psychological paradigms, et cetera. Somehow we need to include all this and navigate among all that in talking about re-enchanting the self and the other. I can only do a little bit of that in this talk, but we'll try.

One of the characteristics of modernity, of the dominant view of the culture in the West today, is that self and divinity have become separated. Or rather, in the dominant view—and this goes back even before modernity to certain entrenched dogmas in Christianity—there was a separation of the human and the divine. In the more mystical traditions, that separation was either never agreed upon, or different practices and

teachings came in to re-wed the human and the divine in many different ways and at many different levels, both as a starting conception and as something to move toward. We'll maybe touch on some of that.

But within the dominant contemporary paradigm is this separation of the self and the divine, if there's any divinity, sense of divinity, or concept of divinity left at all in the general picture of what a human being is and what the cosmos is.

The philosopher Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, in his massive tome *A Secular Age*, offers one way of defining what constitutes secularism: it's characterized by being a time in the evolution or history of human society where it's quite possible for many, if not most people, to have a goal in life of flourishing—purely human flourishing. In other words, one can live one's life, and really everything in one's life—one's work, one's relationships, whatever else it is, the food one eats—it's all seen from the perspective and with the goal of only human flourishing.

At a certain point in the West, in the last hundred years, that became quite possible and quite acceptable as the orientation to life that many people were able to have. Taylor claims it's the first time in human history, though I don't know if that's true, because actually reading the Pali Canon, you get the sense that there were certain sects or teachers who promulgated just such a view. How popular that was in the wider society, I don't know.

But this is his almost defining characteristic of secularism, or one of them. And I think it's quite interesting—this word "flourishing" has become so popular in some sociological and psychological and political discourses. Purely human flourishing. In other words, with no reference or need to have a relationship with divinity, or the flourishing is something that is a flourishing of something more than the human. What Taylor calls "self-sufficing humanism."

The human as conceived according to modernity, with that kind of flatness and exclusion of divinity that I've been alluding to repeatedly, and living one's life for the sake of flourishing within those parameters of purely human flourishing—very, very normal nowadays, very normal in our society, characteristic of secularism.

This is actually interesting historically. When Freud wrote his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he said there are two purposes of civilization or culture. One is to protect human beings against nature, and the other is to adjust the mutual relations of human beings in different ways, in terms of laws and things—protecting against nature, adjusting mutual relations.

Probably, well, maybe thirty years ago or some decades ago, a lot of politicians and sociologists would have said, "We've accomplished these now in the West." I would put a huge question mark on whether we have been so intent on protecting ourselves—so-called protecting ourselves from nature—that now we are actually more in danger from climate change and loss of species and environmental pollution and degradation. And as to our mutual relations, it seems to me that also needs quite a lot of work, though a lot of people would have thought that way.

So these two purposes that Freud pointed to were considered done, and the purpose of civilization was then allowed to expand and add this human flourishing. The very purpose of our civilization nowadays—now that we are, you know, much more protected from nature, many of our mutual relations are taken care of—despite all the lacunae there and the glaring problems that remain, what came in as an implicit or explicit purpose of culture was this goal: culture, or civilization, served human flourishing, humanistic flourishing.

Human flourishing. But again, what does it mean? What does it mean, this word that's so commonly used now—flourishing has become popular. "May you flourish," "allowed to flourish," and so forth. What does it mean? What is it assumed to involve? More than just the basic requisites: food and home and water. And again, even in the United States and the United Kingdom, even these requisites are not guaranteed to every member of society.

But over and above that—the thrust of this talk is not about that—but over and above the requisites, what is human flourishing assumed to involve? And what is left out or actually overlooked in what it means for a human being to flourish or what is a part of human flourishing?

It's worth pointing out that historically, arenas or containers or forms or avenues that care for and provide for and allow and nourish soulfulness—historically they have been part of the stable civilizations and cultures of the human past for millennia. It's only the modern West that is, historically speaking, strange in its lack of emphasis on soulfulness, in the way that it doesn't really integrate that need into its forms, into its rituals. It comes in anyway—it can't help but come in—but it's not really consciously thought about or provided for, probably in the best ways that are possible, because it's simply not part of the dominant paradigm in discourse.

So it gets squeezed out of public spaces, it gets squeezed out of public discourses and public activities and engagements. The self is regarded a certain way, and the whole movement of one's life between birth and death—what it is to be a human being—is all

regarded in the dominant way within our different subcultures and all this complexity. But this leveling, this "only human," this secular humanism and the way the human being is now regarded in the culture...

Compare that to something I heard a few months ago: that in Burkina Faso, in Africa, in the tribes, in the countryside, in the rural villages, when a woman is pregnant—at about six months—the elders of the village or the tribe call the woman to a kind of council, a meeting. They put her into a trance, or she goes into a trance, and they address themselves, the elders of the tribe address themselves to the baby in her womb. They ask that baby, while the mother is in trance, two questions:

"What do the gods want to manifest through you?"

And the second question: "What needs to change in the village to make space for you?"

The mother in her trance is spoken through by the baby, and the elders listen, and they take it in.

Can you hear the way that the human being is being seen? The depth of the respect, the beauty of that, and how such a notion simply has no space in our contemporary society—not just by virtue of the structure of the society, but also by virtue of the structure of the thinking.

Compare that kind of reverence, orientation, respect, openness, sacredness of the human being, of the self being born into this world, being born into the world of society and manifestation, and being born into its individual place within that society and its calling. All of this is there.

Compare that with what has been exposed by various Western philosophers and social critics over the last few hundred years: a kind of individualism that's actually manipulated by capitalism and by the market economy. So we are regarded as pawns for the advertising industry, for the whole way the economy works—consumerism is necessary, you know, all these things. Michel Foucault talks about the objectification of subjects. The human subject, the human self becomes an object in a kind of power play. And the depth of one's humanity, what it means to be a self, is effectively disregarded, reduced in the most complete way.

Before Foucault there was the Frankfurt School—Adorno and Horkheimer that I alluded to earlier—who talked about the culture industry, the way that a whole industry was being set up through capitalism that really manipulated individuals in lots of different ways. Very, very different scope, range, sense, view of human beings.

Again, compare that with Islam, where they say the cardinal sin is the forgetfulness of who one is. In other words, to forget the sacredness, the depths, the range, the divinity of the human being, of the self, of your individual self and your individual callings and all the aspects of yourself. That's actually the cardinal sin: this forgetfulness of who one is.

In the teachings of Buddha-nature, in the Buddha Dharma, your true self—if one uses that language—or your essence, or at least your capacity, is for divinity. So the human being is something much, much more in its range and dimensions than this flatland version.

And again, in the Christian tradition, they talk about the imago Dei, being made in the image of God. And the possibility of the—in the mystical tradition—the possibility of imitatio Dei, but more than that, the incarnation of Christ, the mystical incarnation of Christ in the depths of my mind, in the depths of my heart, in my soul. There's a transformation, a transubstantiation that's already there in potential and at one level in actuality, but that can be incarnated in the fuller sense of that word—brought into manifestation, brought into this world of materiality as we see it in the different ways we see it.

So in modernity and nowadays in our Western culture, we get mixed messages regarding the self and the individual and individualism. Just as we get mixed messages—and this is all woven together—about desire versus greed, and how desire is trumped, and greed is bad, and sexuality. Mixed messages are hugely confusing. And all these aspects of self—I'm going to come back to this.

So we're getting mixed messages about all kinds of things. And yet many people, though it may not be clearly articulated, are suffering from what we might call the disenchantment that's integral to modernism. We're trying to enchant the self.

People are living within these paradigms—oppressed and constrained by them, constrained by social structures. Something within them wants to re-enchant the self, wants to have an enchanted sense of self and other. People do find ways of doing this, or at least limited ways—on occasion, when in love for a period of time, and so forth. But they're trying to enchant the self without allowing a sense of depth and divinity. That's not permitted.

Often this attempted enchantment comes through what modern society and technology provides—in some ways a vast set of toys to play with. But in another way, we're given a very thin, meager palette and set of tools with which the self can be re-en-

chanted. So many people are trying to fashion a unique, interesting self—to appear to create something, to fashion and manifest what appears to be "this is me and I'm unique and I'm interesting."

Yet there might not actually be that much genuine interest there, because the whole view of the self is constrained. It can't be that interesting. And what are we given to accomplish this with? Consumption. Consumerism. You can buy these clothes, create a certain look, buy that car, whatever it may be.

We are rich—we live like kings compared to people in the past. Our standard of living is equivalent to what royalty would have experienced historically, probably way beyond that. And yet at one level we are poor. We are poor in terms of what we receive regarding our view of who we are, what the self is. We are impoverished and unable to re-enchant deeply within that paradigm and with those opportunities we're given.

In fact, the opposite happens. The superficial self-sense seeks enchantment through the manipulations of capital and consumerism—being manipulated by it, being a pawn in a larger game, but given just enough possibility to try desperately to fashion something interesting so that our money and consumerist thrust might accomplish that. But all that trying at that level actually goes back to create or preserve a superficiality of the self-sense.

Because the self-sense is superficial, we try to re-enchant it. We have very limited possibilities for that, and those very possibilities keep the self-sense superficial. So we're caught in something here, potentially.

Add to this another common idea—again, quite a modernist notion though we wouldn't recognize it as such—the idea of the authentic self, the real me. We feel we're told that we need to be authentic, that there's a true me, and we really feel that at times. This pulls me one way, while on the other side there's social pressure arising from how society is structured and the lack of inner depth in how a human being is conceived and felt to be.

So I have this other pressure: what do others think? As long as I don't have access to that depth, what others think and the social anxiety and pressure to conform or avoid judgment becomes enormous. These forces pull in different directions. I've got to be authentic to myself—there is an authentic self that I need to be somehow true to and in touch with. And on the other side: what do others think of me? Is it okay? Am I okay? Tell me I'm okay. What can I do and manipulate and spend on to make others think I'm okay? How am I in the eyes of others? Am I okay? Am I enough? Am I singled out as faulty in the eyes of others?

All this creates so much tension and, if you like, creativity-inhibiting confusion and constraints around this whole wish we have for an enchanted sense of existence and of self and other.

And we've talked about this—I'm repeating myself now—but if I see the self, if I see what a human being is as only really a product of evolution, of biological evolution, then this is what we get down to when we're really talking about what's real. You are a product—in your behavior, your choices, the way you perceive—it's all the product of evolution, all the product of neurology, of neurophysiology.

Now, for some people, that view can be enchanting. But if we're only that, it's probably not that enchanting. If we're regarded with a reductionist view, a biological reductionist view, it's difficult to have a sense of a really enchanted self. Reductionism inhibits that.

Enchantment needs this beyond. We need to be more than that. So of course, biology and neurophysiology and evolution and all of that, historical conditioning, everything. But there needs to be something beyond, something more than, in order for a sense of enchantment, as we said right from the beginning.

And again, you know, Dharma circles are so common nowadays. If we're talking about the self, view of self and other, there's this sometimes dogmatic kind of conclusion or assertion: "The Buddha said, or the truth of the self is, what the self really is, is a process." A biological process and a mental process. Sometimes, in some cases, the mental process is reduced to a biological process, a neuronal one, a brain process. But the self is the process. And sometimes people say, "I've cracked what the Buddha was saying. The self is a process. This is the true nature of things. Anything else is a bit of a delusion. The self is a process."

Now, I would say that's a certain level of meditative view or a way of looking at perception that's available to us—to feel ourselves as process moment to moment, aggregates arising of sensation and vedanā and perception and consciousness and intention. Useful at a certain level. A certain level of freedom will come out of that. But it's only a way of looking. It's only a certain level of perception.

It's not ultimately true. It's not ultimately true the self is a process. I've talked about this in other talks. I'm not going to go into it now. It's not ultimately true. It's definitely not the deepest. That perception of the self as a process does not yield for us the deepest freedom. Absolutely not. And nor is it particularly enchanting as a view of the self. The self is a moment-to-moment arising of conditioned, mechanistic flow, a conditioned arising of a moment of sensation and perception and neuronal functioning. We can try

and enchant that view of process and talk about words like flow and bring in river imagery and all that kind of stuff, maybe to a certain extent. But there's problems with that. Not ultimately true, doesn't bring the deepest freedom, doesn't really open up the capacity and the range of possible enchantment.

Or then there's another kind of view: the self is really one with cosmic awareness or one with cosmic love or one with God, or the self is nothing, the self is a total illusion or whatever. And that's the real nature of the self. And that also, I would say, suffers from the same three lacks. It's not ultimately true. It's not ultimately true that the self is one. It's a level, it's a deep mystical experience, a level of perception, important, beautiful, as is the sense that the self, the perception of the self is nothing—it's absolutely nothing. But it's not ultimately true. I'd say it's wonderful and important to have that as a perception, as a level of perception and understanding. It's not ultimately true, it's not the deepest freedom, and it will not open up the deepest and the fullest enchantment.

What is necessary for re-enchanting, for really full, really deep, really wide re-enchantment—and delivering us from what is not ultimately true, what is not quite deeply freeing—is the flexibility of view that I keep harping on about. Flexibility of self-view and the insight legitimizing and underpinning that flexibility. Do you see all these different kinds of meditative and mystical experiences moving in and out and understanding how they arise and how they disappear? Seeing that fabrication, dependent arising of both self and perception. And then you start to see what's really true is this very flexibility. The flexibility of self-view legitimizes that flexibility and the moving in and out and the adopting of different self-views. There's an insight here of what actually is ultimately true.

And we need a conception, an insight, that allows, supports, and actually insists on a flexibility of self-view. Allows, supports, and insists on a flexibility of self-view. It's this that most fully allows not just the biggest freedom, is congruent with the ultimate truth, but also most fully allows the re-enchantment.

So we can add to this, if we ask this question: okay, there's all this confusion and this disenchantment in our worldview, our view of the cosmos, and our view of self, our sense of self. And to have a soulful re-enchantment of self and other—

Whenever I use "self" in this talk, everything I say about self applies to other as well—other selves, both as an idea and as applicable in practice. I can practice viewing an other in these different ways.

What's needed in re-enchanting self and other is a view and a conception of personality and of the personal relevance of what arises for us. Both within and without, in terms of the ideas of fate or destiny—including the difficult—somehow that needs to get included. I'm going to come back to this. That also needs to get included, not erased out in a universality.

We somehow want a kind of enchantment that really includes and even emphasizes not just the universal, but also the very personal, the very particular and the personal relevance of what arises for us inside and outside in our lives. And included in that is the difficult, is the dukkha.

So that view allows and supports senses of sacredness of the person and of the personal relevance of what arises for us. The events of our life are somehow integrated into a whole view of sacredness, of the sacredness of the self, of the person.

Does the conception of the self—view of the self that we're entertaining, or the wider view of the self—does the conception of the self, but also the conception of its relationship with experiences, and its relationship with the cosmos and time, allow a transformation in our relationship with suffering that becomes soul-making? So that suffering becomes soul-making.

Does our conception of self, its relationship with experiences, and its relationship or constellation with regard to the cosmos and time, allow a transformation of the relationship with suffering, with our suffering, all kinds of suffering, so that that suffering becomes soul-making? And how fully does it allow that and support that transformation? How deeply does it allow and support that transformation?

This is what needs to be included and involved in a soulful re-enchantment of self and other.

At an even more subtle level of what self means—just as subject rather than object, just as consciousness—what does it mean to be enchanted, to re-enchant that subtle level, just consciousness, that level of self as subject? Again, purely the complexities of neurology—there's a certain enchantment in that. How full, how deep?

Some ideas of Buddha nature, some versions of the idea of Buddha nature in Buddha Dharma teachings, some philosophies in the West—certainly in Neoplatonism and other currents through Western history, but also in Hegel, the German philosopher—regard the human subject, in one's subjectivity, meaning in one's consciousness, as divine, as included. There's a view that can be re-enchanted by giving it other dimensions and divinities. We'll come back to this.

But as I said a few minutes ago, somehow an opening of the view, the views and the conception of self, of what a human being is, and a flexibility of views and conceptions of self and other—this is necessary to re-enchantment.

This is again something from Nietzsche. He says that the belief that regards the soul as a monad, as an atomon—meaning as one thing, as indivisible—this belief ought to be expelled from science. It is not at all necessary, though, to get rid of "the soul" at the same time. In other words, we don't need to get rid of this idea of soul. But it's the idea of the soul as just this—one thing that's rigidified and fixed, where there's a singleness of you.

But the way is open, he continues, for new versions and refinements of the soul hypothesis. And then he runs through a few different possibilities, such conceptions as soul as subjective multiplicity—in the sense of plurality of soul and plurality of views of what the soul is.

He's saying, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. There's something in the concept of soul. Or rather, we can extend and give a range of meanings to what we mean by soul that actually might be very fruitful. Don't run screaming or cry "that's illegal!" when people use words like self or soul. Concepts, when they're skillfully handled, when they're related to with insight, actually open things up. And I'll come back and say more about that.

Then he continues with this opening views up this way. He says the new psychologist, by precisely that act of opening up the notion of soul, condemn themselves to invention. They condemn themselves to invention. In other words, you have to be creative in the view and in the perception. We're back to this idea of art and creation.

And he says, by precisely that act, they condemn themselves to invention and—who knows—perhaps to discovery. So again, this ambiguity about creation and discovery. Right there, invention and discovery through the skillful and open use of a concept like soul.

In another work, Nietzsche offers a profound insight: "Some souls one will never discover unless one invents them first." This points to a deep understanding of the fundamental interplay between creation and discovery that characterizes our relationship with soul, self, and other. We are simultaneously inventors and discoverers of the very depths we encounter.

This is why we need the kind of elasticity I've been describing—an elasticity of concept, whether we speak of self or soul or any fundamental notion. This elasticity allows the soul-making dynamic to flourish fully. The eros, the psyche, and the logos—the

eros and the images, the imaginal sense and the conceptual framework—can then feed each other, fertilize each other, open and expand and enrich and deepen each other. All of this vitality depends on the elasticity of the logos, of our conceptual understanding.

When that conceptual framework becomes elastic enough, then we can fall in love with the self. The sense of self—whether the self of other or the self of self—can become endlessly deep, complex, enriched, and filled with image. But if we regard a human being merely from a reductionist point of view—through the lens of biology or cognitive science or mechanistic reductions—then the image of self dies. It loses that essential element of mystery, of inexhaustibility that an image needs to remain alive, as we've explored in other talks.

There needs to be a kind of undefinability as part of that mystery and inexhaustibility. Any concept that serves soul-making—whether self or love or the divine, whether dharma or anything else—requires this quality of undefinability. This allows for an endless moving into mystery, ensuring there is always a beyond, an inexhaustibility that feeds the soul-making process.

Anything that matters deeply to us needs to retain a certain amount of undefinability, mystery, and inexhaustibility. Reductionist explanations that claim to sum everything up cannot allow for this essential quality. But I want to emphasize that we're speaking of undefinability and mystery as something fertile—not merely something undefinable about which we shrug and turn away, not something we dismiss as nonsense simply because it cannot be neatly defined or because it remains mysterious. This mystery is generative, creative, alive. It is the very ground from which our deepest discoveries emerge.

CHAPTER 47

The Imaginal and the Middle Way (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 51 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea responds to practitioners' concerns about sustaining imaginal practice beyond retreat. He addresses the challenge of returning to unsupportive cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of nourishment through reading, listening, and community support. Rather than continuous practice, he advocates for developing agility—brief moments of shifted perception that become increasingly accessible throughout daily life.*
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> *Burbea explores the spectrum between practicing for personal growth versus divine service, noting how both can coexist and how one's position may shift over time. He discusses the delicate balance of the middle way—neither reifying experiences as absolutely real nor dismissing them entirely. This razor's edge, he suggests, actually becomes a vast playing field as understanding of emptiness deepens and an artistic sensibility develops.*
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> *The conversation touches on integrating renunciatory aspects of traditional Buddhism with creative and intellectual pursuits, viewing these as archetypal callings that can be honored imaginally without requiring concrete life choices. Burbea also addresses concerns about religious ecstasy and potential psychological risks, recommending the cultivation of cooling equanimity alongside warmth, and conscious contact between blissful states and dukkha for integration. The session concludes with discussion of dark gods and shadow aspects, acknowledging that different souls require different approaches to the sacred, with some needing extensive work with light before integrating darkness, while others require both simultaneously for authentic spiritual development.*

So again, just a reminder, we're recording the Q&As. But if you're not comfortable with having your question recorded, just say that, and we can pause it. No problem. Anyone, please?

Andrea: I have a question following on from what Lawrence said in the last session, which was more of a doubt of the process of the imaginal for him as a person, but this is more of a fear, really, about returning to the context of home. Particularly as it relates to here seeing your own divinity with so much permission and so much love and support. And it's been hard, even then, at times. So to return to a place that just feels in many ways that it doesn't support this kind of work. How can we take courage and continue?

Can everyone hear that? Hopefully we'll speak to that in the closing day. But the culture does not support that. In fact, the culture probably thinks it's unhealthy and mad, dangerous, et cetera. If there is something in you that feels moved, called to that vision of things, or at least moving in and out of that vision of things, then just like any practice, it needs support.

I was just reflecting a minute ago—it's pretty amazing that we can come together for less than a week and all this stuff can happen, you know, and people having experiences and understandings and connecting things and struggling with all that. Which kind of tells me it's more available. A lot of this stuff is more available than we tend to think or assume.

I think the secret being off retreat—and I will repeat this—is you need to be nourished. Now it doesn't mean 24 hours of every day, every day of the week. It means getting enough, enough input of different views. Because everywhere we look in society, this isn't the view that you're going to get. And we'll be talking about this in the talks tonight and tomorrow night. What is the cultural view of self? What does the culture do with self? We're inundated by that, surrounded by that. Ways of thinking about the self, pressures on the self. The self is this, it's not that. It's supposed to feel this way and at the same time it's contradictory—it's supposed to be doing something else.

So what's important, I think, is getting enough of another message. And that could be through reading. It could be through listening. It could be through friends who are also interested in that. And there's sharing and there's mutual back and forth and support and listening and other people's ideas.

I think we underestimate—and this goes for all kinds of practice and opening to the mystical in its whole range—it needs a lot of support. But that support doesn't need to be continuous. It just needs little openings, little injections, little short readings or whatever it is.

And that goes for practice as well. If we go back to the beginning of the retreat, when I said not emphasizing continuity, not emphasizing focusing the mind, et cetera. What I'm emphasizing or what I'm hoping to get instead is this sense of agility. And that means in one's daily life, in the busyness, in the demands and stresses, there are little moments, little pockets in the day where it doesn't have to even be a half an hour, 45 minute hour sitting—little pockets in the day where there can be this shift of the way of looking.

And that gets more and more agile. And absolutely do not underestimate those. You think, it would be better if I could do a long retreat, it would be better. Not necessarily. Absolutely not necessarily. There can be these little moments and just become these shifts of tapping into something imaginal, cosmic oasis, whatever—divinity in this, that self. They just become much more available, much more frequently available, much more accessible. And don't believe the assumptions of the mind that think they're not. Practice. Practice.

And as I said, I emphasize the flexibility of the way of looking, the agility of the movement of the way of looking over continuity for this kind of work. And actually also for insight work as I would conceive it in terms of understanding emptiness, etc.

[responding to a participant's question about practicing for the benefit of all beings versus divine intention]

You can use the bodhisattva word instead if you want. Could everyone hear that? So Daya is asking about practicing for the benefit of all beings, wondering if that's different from divine intention. For me it's not—it feels complete.

First of all, it's not either-or. It's not so black and white. There's a spectrum there and we move along that spectrum. So at times, or even periods of our life, it's totally appropriate to view the practice as for myself—for my growth, for my healing and all that. And other times, it's just flipped and practice is about practicing for God. Not for the realization of God, but for God.

You could say for bodhisattva, though I'd like to nuance a little bit an alternative to what you said as well. So you could say practicing for the Buddha, or it's the Buddha practicing, or the Buddha is creating the Buddha through my practice. God is making God through my practice.

But not too quickly. The first thing is that there's a range and we may—people fall in different places. No one's forcing you to be in this place or that place on a range ever. I just want to expand the possibility of the idea that there is a spectrum here. Someone's just hearing the idea, then a person can decide where they want to be on that range.

And we move over years. It might be that a certain amount of healing is necessary, a certain amount of coalescing or consolidation of self is necessary before one can then offer that up and let that go and see the whole thing from the perspective of the divine. So that's the first thing—that's really for everyone.

But in terms of really trying to keep this word divinity open so that if that's what works for you, great. It's interesting that I've been using—we've been using the word God and divine more on this retreat than say Buddha or Buddha nature. But you can think of them interchangeably. Even Buddha nature has a range of meanings in the different traditions, people arguing about what it means.

So it's up to you. If that's what is alive for you, then go for it. I still think there's a difference—two distinctions that may be possible just to point out. Again, not saying you have to do anything at all, we're just talking about possibilities.

One is this thing about levels and dimensions. So it could be that one is serving all beings or seeing one's practice in the service of all beings, but all beings is seen in what we're calling a kind of flat way. There's nothing wrong with that, but it doesn't have this other dimensionality, the sense of what a being is or what a human being is and what exactly I'm serving when I serve a human being. It's a bit—what I would call—modernist humanist. It's just a bit flat.

Now if that works for someone, if that's what they dedicate their life to and that's meaningful to them and that's alive to a certain extent in their soul and that's what they want, great. Absolutely wonderful. I really don't want to get into "you have to see it this way, you have to see it that way." Just in the language used, the language didn't communicate this sense of the beings. Now, it might be that that's there for you anyway.

So who is being served? What is a human being? And who is the one serving? What is involved in the serving? Or rather, what is the one serving? What is the bodhisattva made up of? What comprises a bodhisattva?

And that relates to the second thing. It's a bit like—okay, if we put it in more Buddhist terms—I might be meditating on a tantric deity, and my purpose can be to grow my qualities so that I serve all beings. And extending that a little bit, my purpose can be serving that deity. Like, my practice is doing that deity's work. It's part of that. And even—who is it really who's doing my practice? It's the deity. Who is it really who's speaking right now? It's the deity.

In some respects, these are really subtle distinctions, quibbling with words, but actually there's a range here of different dimensions or ways we're conceiving practice. So it could be the Bodhisattva, the one whose aspiration is to serve all beings. It could also be the cosmic Buddha—not a Bodhisattva, but one who has already arrived, already complete. It's already the perfect Dharmakaya manifesting in your practice, with the perfect Sambhogakaya and the perfect Nirmanakaya, the perfect manifestation.

That doesn't mean one becomes stupid and thinks everything one does is exactly appropriate and perfect, that no one can criticize. There's a kind of multi-dimensionality of the view. In this moment, as you're listening right now, this looking and listening is Samantabhadra, is the cosmic Buddha, and it's also the fumbling, foible-filled human being. Do you see? So there's this multiplicity.

What I really want to stress, personally, is that I find it troubling to be told how to view things, or to only be allowed a certain limited view. Unfortunately, that's too common in our world, and it's even common in the Buddhist world nowadays—different sects, secular Buddhism, and all this. It's almost like: "This is the only view."

What matters to me is that there's a plurality of views, because people's souls want different things, need different things, need different views. And there are many people who are actually comfortable moving between views. So even this aspect you're asking about—you can move between different views at different times and have that spectrum of views available.

It's like, if we take the art metaphor—if I say to you that you can only have one piece of art that you get to listen to or look at, that's hard. We want choice. We want a range. We want a range of moves, a range of all kinds of possibilities. Same with views.

There's one related thing around what you mentioned—it feels like such a razor's edge between this conceiving way of looking and belief. I want that to be really clear because I don't want to go into belief territory. But this whole thing about the razor's edge was also in a talk not on this retreat, and it's really important. This has come up several times, this question about real and not real, and it's the middle way in the Dharma. That's the middle way.

Two things. One is: my experience is that what seems like this really fine tightrope walking act between reifying and dismissing, between believing and denigrating—what looks like a razor's edge, this razor-thin tightrope act—the more we either understand emptiness or liberate that artistic view I was talking about, or develop certain philosophical perspectives, that razor's edge, which appears so thin that we might fall off one side or the other, actually becomes a huge playing field. If we can find our entry into that middle way, it actually opens up all the possibilities. It doesn't feel tight at all.

All I can say is—and apparently there was one teacher who, whatever anyone asked him, would just say "more practice is required," which is a little unhelpful—but in a way, I'm partly saying that, especially about the emptiness piece. The artistic piece is something different people find their way into even before they understand the emptiness aspect. It's just a mode of being, an artistic attitude or sensibility.

But also, I would say you're going to wobble. One is going to wobble. I've said this to several people: the fact that you're asking, the fact that you're cautious, it shows the awareness, the carefulness, the care, the alertness and being on the lookout. It's a healthy doubt.

You can wobble, and you can find your balance again. And you can wobble either way—in dismissal or in over-reification. I would say, expect it to happen. Because maybe you've felt like you've done it so much before and then it was so painful, or it led to bad consequences. But this doubt, the sincerity in your question, the integrity and openness and vulnerability in your question—it will prevent it from being so extreme.

But you will wobble. You'll fall off that way and then you'll fall off this way. And this is a micro thing—it's okay. You'll see it's not... there are micro wobbles usually, rather than this whole big lifetime plunged into the abyss of reification or whatever. Do you see?

So I hear the caution and the vulnerability and the pain there. I could of course be wrong, but my sense is it's not dangerous in the same way because of all that care. And it's almost like: don't be afraid.

As I said, it becomes not a tightrope act, actually, as you get into it. But let's use that analogy. When the tightrope walker is learning to tightrope walk, they get up on something this high, and they're falling off thousands of times. It's part of the deal. Or what's that thing about horse riding? You just have to learn to fall off? I've never actually ridden a horse. But yeah, or bike riding, or whatever it is. Part of the problem is the fear of the thing. And actually you realize these micro instances of falling one way and the other are just part of the learning.

And part of the deal.

Or... what's that thing about horse riding? It's like you just have to learn to fall off? I've never actually seen a horse. Yeah, or bike riding, or whatever it is. Part of the problem is the fear of the thing. And actually you realize these micro falling one way and the other.

And some people have a tendency to fall off more to the left, to the reification. And some people have a tendency to fall off more to the kind of nihilistic dismissal of everything. But generally, we just keep falling off.

And as we go deeper, you could say, or get more experience with all this, we get less afraid of falling off. It becomes less of a sort of big life catastrophe—you know, I'm stuck there for ten years or whatever. And we recognize it, and it's less of a big deal, and we can just find our way again.

So it's a really important question, but my sense is let yourself play. You know, children playing—they fall over, it's fine, they get up. That's the way forward.

This kind of relates to the last two questions, which is about moving back into classical meditation teachings and still wanting to engage seriously with that, and to take things like renunciation seriously. But then also recognizing that a lot of those renunciatory approaches can end up being kind of soul-shrinking rather than soul-making. I'm wondering how to balance the two.

So Andy's asking about the attraction to sort of more classical Theravadan-style Buddhism with its renunciation aspects, and how to balance that with these other things we're talking about. When you say renunciation, can you give me an example of that?

Well, I mean something like... when you talk about attitude to sexuality, for example, or to art, to aesthetic pleasure, to political engagement—it's like trying to love and care for all these things, but at the same time recognizing that they're going to be pushed aside, or you're being told, "Don't bother." And then the fear comes up: "Oh, but perhaps I am indulging too much."

Yeah. Perhaps you are. Just kidding.

One way of approaching the question is through fantasy, or through the recognition of fantasy. The renunciation is not just a good idea—it's actually alive for you as something that's attractive as a fantasy, a way of living. Do you understand? As is the artistic sensibility and the intellectual and the creative and all that.

So you have, as we've been saying several times in groups, you are a multitude. There are lots of archetypal callings pulling on your soul or inhabiting your soul. That's multiple blessings, and it ain't easy. Because sometimes they just pull in different directions. Sometimes one goes quiet for a while and one is more dominant. Sometimes they're active at the same time and it's not clear which way to go.

But one can have a life, I feel very much, where actually all of this is included. What partly allows that is sensing some of these modes—let's say the mode of renunciation—as image, as archetype, and letting that image be alive, or the artist, or whatever it is.

I think I shared in some talks, one image that's alive for me is the jazz musician. I was a jazz musician for many years, so it's alive in me. But that's an image that can live on in me and come up in all kinds of subtle ways and subtle moments without me needing to give up everything and go start practicing my instrument again and going out being a professional jazz musician. You understand? The image, fantasy, flavor of jazz music can come up with nothing to do with music. It can be there.

Also, the monk is very alive. And for a period in my life, I was talking to someone else about this—I gave up music. I was on my way to the monastery to be a monk. Gaia House kind of sidetracked me. I'm still here. No, I'm kidding. I changed my mind.

My mind was changed. But the archetype of the monk is still alive in me.

It's a bit like Andrea's question, in the sense that you don't need a big concrete chunk of time or a choice between A and B, between black and white, left and right, or whatever. The monk archetype can be alive for little moments in your day in such a nourishing way. So that hermit, that renunciate, the love of that, the fantasy of that is beautifully alive. Maybe in little actions, maybe in days of more silence or whatever. Maybe in just the smallest little thing, the smallest moment. And that's enough to nourish the soul.

It's getting out of the concretization of either-or big life choices and actually into the fantasy of both, whether it's art, literature in your case, or the monastic, the renunciate. It's like actually both of them can live. When I allow the imaginal to come alive, if I don't, then everything becomes a choice between, becomes so concretized.

So that's one way of approaching the question—actually allowing it to have more imaginal depth and breadth and richness, allowing these pools, you know, and these attractions. Where there's meaningfulness for us, where there's attraction, eros—in this case, the eros of attraction to the Theravadan archetype—where there's meaningfulness, where there's eros, where there's soul making, where there's beauty, that means there is an image operating there or several images that are alive. And you can—it's helpful to recognize that and let them become alive. And then we have much more freedom, much more depth, much more nuance with the whole thing. How does that sound?

"Well, a lot of this... I suppose it's just the kind of question that always comes up, especially when I'm having to retreat for a while, you know—I can move back into the kind of monk archetype. And then it's like there's sort of a worry that, like, well, you should... If you really want to kind of follow that to its end, then the others should be

pushed aside. They're kind of wasting your time in that respect. And so it's just a question of whether things that aren't in that kind of archetype would pull away from the kind of..."

Well, one of the... Two things. One of the reasons, like I said, I left the States, I left the music, actually didn't sell—gave away everything—and wanted to be a monk. And part of the reason for deciding not to was realizing you didn't need to, I didn't need to. If you say, "I have to be a monk to realize the unfabricated, I have to be a monk to realize the depths of emptiness, et cetera," I don't think that's true.

The fruits of practice are available to us if we practice with our hearts, with dedication, with intelligence, with practicing in ways that liberate. We can also practice in ways that don't liberate. Spend lots of time with every earnest, heartful dedication, but I'm just going around in circles. I'm just hitting a brick wall. I don't think you need to be a monk. And I don't think one needs to be a monk. Actually, personally speaking, I don't think you need to be a monk—because I know him, I can say that.

So don't necessarily buy the hype. And then the second thing you touched on is about permission. I know it was kind of a joke, but in a way, just saying something serious about that—Catherine and I were talking—it's like a lot about this kind of retreat, and maybe you've felt it already, is actually giving permission to ways of seeing, to sensibilities, to things that are in us, giving legitimacy and giving permission to. And that's partly why it's good for people to come to Q and A's and groups because you actually see, "Oh, that part of me that I was a bit quiet about is actually shared, recognized, celebrated. It exists in others." So I'm just pulling that word "permission" out and kind of saying something bigger about it.

"My question is about religious ecstasy. I'm just going to name the fact that I'm very frightened right now. As I shared with you this morning, Rob, a lot of this retreat is very familiar, but it's gone really, really deep. So I'm kind of fortunate and blessed to be quite primed to lots of the things that we've been doing. They're very alive in my practice, like having a love being and four elements practice and cosmic kind of love surrounding energy bodies. These are really in my life.

However, the effect of the way that you and Catherine have offered these things to us has caused me to have numerous experiences. I want to say—I want to be brave and go there—I want to say cosmic orgasms. And I don't mean physiological. Like, not consciously at the time, but like looking back and saying, oh, I was enlightened for a few minutes there, and things like that.

What I would like to understand is that I don't feel that I'm going to be grabby or graspy of these experiences, and I have no idea, because I can't read the future, if I will experience them again at home. However, if I go home and find that I can, they might be dangerous or cause, trigger my potential to have psychosis or mania or like feelings of vast bigness, like self-aggrandizement. Please, will you help me understand how I can smallify them, or something. That's not a very good word."

So two things, perhaps I would say.

First, this is related to something important—you have to see what we're doing in the context of a larger path. When Catherine was talking about the black that surrounds the flame, that black is cooling. One of the original meanings of nibbana is cooling. It's one of the meanings—it means cooling.

In a way, people are very... that's why I say I think teaching group retreats is a crazy business. There's so much diversity in what people need, with different personalities and tendencies. It's all wonderful, but some people need to gather the resources of cooling, of calming, of equanimity, as well as the resources of a steadiness of love and steadiness of heart.

So it might be that one of the things for you to consider—not instead of all this, but alongside it—is also gathering and developing access to coolness, to space, to equanimity. This will balance things. It's really about having a vision of the breadth of practice. As I said this morning, this is asking a lot. There's much involved to really have available the picture we're presenting, and different people will need to develop this aspect a bit more, or that aspect a bit more, or this first and then that. You have to know your tendencies.

Since you're speaking of them, one thing would be developing more access to coolness, steadiness, equanimity—a kind of spaciousness of perspective rather than "Wow, here's that amazing thing and I'm just lost in it." What comes is a kind of balance, a poise. The flame can still be there, but it's not just burning everything up or being blown out completely. So consider the kinds of practices and reflections and attitudes that help you access more of that cooling spaciousness that gives you equanimity and steadiness.

The second thing relates to what we've been discussing about putting the divine healing energy you're feeling in contact with the dukkha. Sometimes this means, even when you're feeling great, deliberately bringing up the dukkha—the memory of the

dukkha—and putting it right in the middle of that lovely blissful feeling. Just let that wash over, letting the two come into contact. The more you do this, the more the extremes of our existence begin to meet and integrate.

The third thing goes back to this question of real and not real. I don't know what else to say other than I feel it's not the extremity or intensity of bliss or vision that's dangerous—it's not that. It's making that real now, and either identifying oneself with it—"this is who I am"—or believing "that's exactly how things are. This is now the reality." It's the realism that's the problem.

Often what happens is we don't realize the realism is occurring. We're unaware. What have I made real at this moment? It could be a certain vision of the world, or it could be myself when I'm in this state: "I am that." We become so entranced or captivated, enchanted in not such a good sense, that we don't realize there's too much realism in it.

How does one move to let go of realism without falling into dismissal—"Oh, it's all rubbish, waste of a week, could have gone to Torremolinos"? It's again this pulsing thing, finding this middle way.

I can't think of anything else to say about that right now, but it's important to at least have this as an awareness. It's not just you—it's the human mind, it's consciousness. Just being aware of this and looking for it sometimes.

There's a way that, just as with art, these practices and openings of perception can have immense power to heal, to move us, to give beauty. And just like art, they don't have to be real to do that. They don't have to be believed. The power—that's why I made the artistic analogy—is in that. But you might gently be on the lookout for this kind of grasping realism.

So those would be three possibilities.

And I don't want to neglect this side. John?

"Thanks so much for your teaching this morning about mitzvot and blessings, which really spoke to me. It tied in with a worry I had about your last dharma talk—what you said at the end, which maybe I misunderstood. It was about pragmatism. You said something about pragmatism and then talked about the sacred and the profane..."

What these ritual actions offer me is that through the mitzvot of washing the hands and the blessing, the blessing sanctifies the act itself. If I understand what you mean by practicing correctly, it's not just that the action—that the commandment, the good deed—is merely a convenient or useful way. I feel I can't be instrumental about it.

"A useful way for what?" you might ask.

Well, for anything. The act is in itself holy. It's real.

I'm trying to remember exactly what I said. I think it was particularly in the context of circumscribing the sacred as separate from the profane. For example, going on pilgrimage—that place there is a holy place I will journey to from my ordinary place where I live. Or this retreat space is a sacred space, this temple is a sacred space, as opposed to profane space.

Sometimes you encounter teachings that say everything is sacred. In a way, that's where we want to move toward—seeing everything as sacred. But sometimes we want to jump there straight away and simply declare that everything is sacred. Quickly, though, that dissolves into a mush where actually nothing is sacred.

The pragmatism lies in recognizing the skill of circumscribing certain things as sacred. The biblical temple was sacred—it's not that the rest of life wasn't, but it was definitively a sacred place. The Torah scroll is sacred. There's something essential in this recognition. In Kabbalistic teachings and Hasidism, the encouragement is indeed to see everything as sacred, to redeem it in that sense. But the more intermediate step involves saying "this is sacred" and "that is sacred." You enter into a different relationship.

When you engage in ritual, you're actually creating something—creating a taste of the sacred. This serves a purpose, not merely an intermediate purpose, but intermediate in the sense of being on the way to seeing the sacred everywhere. That's all I meant by pragmatism.

"I understand the word 'circumscribed' now. I think I thought you were suggesting we could just jump over the sacred, whereas what I should have understood is the sanctification of the sacred."

Exactly. Precisely.

Another question arises about seeing all things as divine, especially the kilesas. The images of the divine we have—like the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas—are all these light gods, these benevolent deities. Even though they might have fierceness in their compassion, they're not the dark gods I've mentioned many times.

For this practitioner, seeing the ordinary and pleasant things as sacred everywhere requires being able to see the dark side of things as sacred as well. Otherwise, somehow it doesn't penetrate as deeply with the light aspects alone.

This touches on something fundamental about spiritual development. People are different with this. Souls are different—they have different resonances, different callings, and different ways of developing. Some people, as you're expressing, can't fully access what the light gods offer unless they integrate the dark gods. Other souls need extensive time with the light gods first.

It heals something, it reassures something, it settles something, it opens something. And then maybe at some point there's a capacity to integrate the dark gods. So people are different. What you're saying, someone else might be like, uh-uh. And they may not even be ready to hear about dark gods. It's like it just won't fit. Or it disturbs them because of things that have happened in the past, or wounds, or stuff that is too similar to that, or because of cultural conditioning that they just can't see through—all kinds of reasons.

So first of all, there's a difference. I think when I started teaching about the imagination, I was very much emphasizing the dark gods, and partly... partly I just find a lot of what I teach to be a response to the context around me, which, as you say, it's all this. So it's like, "Well, hold on, what about this, guys? You know, what about this that we're missing?"

What do you need to know about it now? Like, what are you kind of asking? Because you just said, "Could you say a bit more," which I could say lots, but can you... what is it that you're needing?

Just that there's a lot of nice experiences with the light gods on retreat, personally as well. But there are moments when... yeah. There's more, or it comes in the analytical mind, kind of... it comes on, what about, what about. And then there's the sense, there's this... the sensibility kind of grows, or a kind of sense to that, that something's missing. I can't say much more about... some of the... all the loveliness around here.

So you're asking how to make that connection?

Yeah. Because the images we have and the images that I feel like are coming to me don't include those. I think it's more of a question of conditioning and less of a meaning.

Less of a what?

More of a question of conditioning, of kind of receiving those... receiving, witches readily, the dark gods.

Yeah, yeah, sure it is. And it's a question of culture and assumptions and all kinds of stuff. We, you know, culturally for thousands of years, we don't really have a place for the dark gods in Western culture. What happened historically was a lot of gods were sort of amalgamated into the Christ image and other gods like Aphrodite—where you could say sexuality as sacred—got seen as demonic. So culturally in the wider culture, also Gaia House culture, we tend not to—or Gaia House as an institution tends not to really go there and talk about that and include that or sanctify that or recognize the sacredness of the dark gods. And again, that's part of the reason for some of these teachings.

On this retreat, just personally, in contrast to the last few years where I've been saying a lot about darkness, I feel like it's been a little bit more towards the light. But in terms of how to do it, it might be just in imaginal practice—just be open to the diversity of images. A dark god involves a dark image, and "dark" in a very loose sense here. Things like sexuality, things like rage or certain kinds of suffering or loneliness or some kind of what might be regarded as pathological element. And it's like those images, if you like, are darker. Does that make sense?

So you can just be open in your imaginal practice and they will come. Otherwise you wouldn't be asking the question. They're part of what you need. They will come as images. And it's, again, it's always a sense of like, "Okay, the mind is"—not in your case, but maybe the mind is saying, "Oh, I don't know about this one. It's not, you know, it's this or that, or it's not holy or whatever, or it's just my kilesas."

In a way, part of the potency of bringing imaginal work alive and letting it do its soul-making function is just—I'm saying this to everyone now—just granting a little bit of trust to the image. My mind doesn't... I'm not sure if I can trust it. Just give it a little bit of trust. Just give it a little bit, just the beginnings of belief that there might be something holy here. There might be a treasure for me. There might be something that's asking something of me. And that's enough to inject life and potency into the image, and then it can start doing its work. And some of these can become really beautiful soul-making objects.

And the other way around is actually - so one is just more open in the imaginal practice and they will come. Or as you shared before, it's like what moves you, perhaps a painting that you see or a work of art and a character from that that's more dark, if you like.

A second way is through an emotional, through a bodily energy that comes up. Were it a longer retreat, we'd probably talk much more about desire and eros and that kind of thing. But what is it, again, to feel that and to allow it, in a way, and even just entertain the possibility as an idea: there's something holy here. It's not just an impurity, just a kilesa, just greed, just dirty sensual desire. Just having that attitude liberates it a little bit.

So one way is through things that are arising, and the other way is through images and just being open to more images, a range of images.

Is that OK? Are you sure? Like you said, you could talk. OK.

Okie doke. And let's have just a minute of silence.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 48

Sensing Divinity

Rob Burbea · 51 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat, Rob Burbea examines the nature of divinity as experienced in meditation and daily life. He distinguishes between two interconnected forms of divine perception: universal divinity—experienced through practices like mettā (loving-kindness) and the brahmavihāras, where one senses an all-pervading oneness of love, awareness, or silence—and particular divinity that honors the sacred within individual personhood, including our struggles, desires, and unique life circumstances.*
>
> *Burbea explains how universal divinity naturally unfolds through reduced fabrication of perception, leading to mystical experiences of oneness that provide equanimity amid life's fluctuations. Yet he emphasizes the path also includes re-enchanting the particular self, seeing divinity within our very human qualities—even desire, anger, and suffering. Drawing from Buddhist tantra, Jewish mystical traditions, and his understanding of Buddha-nature, he suggests that both the universal and particular aspects of divinity can be cultivated through imaginal practice, where life itself becomes ensouled and image-like.*
>
> *The session concludes with a partner meditation exploring mettā while sensing the divine consciousness shining through another's eyes, demonstrating how spiritual practice can reveal the sacred dimensions already present in human encounter and connection.*

So we said right at the beginning of the retreat that people use these words—enchantment, imaginal, soul, divine—in lots of different ways. On this retreat we're choosing to include in our meaning of what enchantment is, or the kinds of enchantment that we're talking about, a sense of divinity. When we speak about enchantment it includes some sense of divinity, of divine dimensions.

We've already been talking quite a bit, and Catherine was talking about how we're actually interested in enchanting the world, of course, but also the self. Can we re-enchant the self? Last night and in the next couple of days we'll be circling around this and exploring what does that mean? What does it involve? What does it require to re-enchant the sense of self?

There's so much we could say about all this. Let's take a step back and talk perhaps a little bit about divinity. The range of what that could mean, the depths of what that could mean is enormous. We've been making this distinction on this retreat between

what we could call a kind of divinity that is sensed as universal—everywhere and in everything equally, regardless. In insight meditation and probably most meditative traditions that are around these days, that's probably the most common kind of divinity, sense of divinity that's open to us. It can come in all kinds of ways, but in a way it's a natural unfolding of deepening in meditation.

What's characteristic of that opening to universality or universal dimension divinity is less fabrication of perception. This isn't obvious for people, but someone doing extended metta practice, loving-kindness practice, eventually what will happen is it will feel like at some point the whole world has the fabric of love. The whole world is made of love. It is love. That's its essence, its substance, as much as it's concrete or whatever it is. At another level one feels that one's whole being, that the whole world is love or the whole world is compassion. This is a natural unfolding. It has a universal quality. Everything is equally that, including myself. I am part of that oneness.

What's actually happening there is the perception is being fabricated less. Instead of solidity and separateness and contraction of this and that being different, all that fabrication of the perception of separate things is calming down a little bit and joined together in some kind of oneness. It could be a oneness of love, it could be a oneness of awareness. It could be a oneness of silence. There's beautiful poems of Thomas Merton that Catherine was reading last night. One silence pervades everything. One silence at the core of my being, of your being. We can know this. These are beautiful, available mystical perceptions coming out of more usual kinds of practice that we do—one nothingness, one peace. They're all flavors of universal oneness that we can know. It just comes in different ways from letting go of clinging, and the perception just naturally will open out to these mystical perceptions.

Catherine was talking about desire last night. Some people have a passion, a burning desire to know that level of the universal divine. To know that silence, to taste it, to feel it at the center of the being and the center of all things. Or to know all of these kinds of oneness. Something is on fire in the being. I want to know that. And we can know it. So there's a desire for that.

Then interestingly—and this is all classical dharma teaching, what I'm talking about so far—there's a desire for that, a burning desire for these kinds of openings, these kinds of mystical universal insights of universal divinity. And then the knowing of that, the tasting of that silence, of that peace, of that love, does something to my desires in the rest of my life. It gives a context, the black around the flame that Catherine was talking about last night. That's what that black is. It's the universal peace or love or silence or whatever. The flame can burn, but it has context.

All these universal divinities give equanimity in our life in relation to the comings and goings, ups and downs, desires for this person, that person, this thing, that thing. It's all put in a different mystical context. Not, I hope, that we become anemic and bleached of all kind of engagement with life, but the whole swelling up and dying down of our desires in life is just held differently in a much vaster space, in a much vaster context.

And then the kinds of things that we've been talking about on this retreat—beginning to talk about—what is then the place of eros? What is then the place of sexuality?

How does that... We're asking a lot on this retreat, because we're not just saying, let it go—the imagination, the erotic, the sexual, the desire, the dark, the dark gods. We're not just saying, let it go, it's bad, get rid of it, iron it out. We're also not just saying, just be mindful of it.

Can we re-engage with it? Can we include it on the path? It's asking a lot. What we're setting up here as a path is really asking a lot—a lot of skill, a lot of healing, a lot of bases, a lot of development, a lot of intelligent perspective and conceptual framework.

But this black, this silence, this mystical oneness, or these mystical onenesses, as I say, give a kind of steadiness. There's a resource of steadiness in relationship to our desire. And we're freer with the desire. I'm not bowled over this way or that, because I've got this infinite, infinite resource.

So there's this universal kind of divinity and then there's the divinity that comes more through the imaginal. And a divinity that retains personhood, either of the imaginal figure or of myself or of the other, of this object, of this tree, of whatever it is. The divinity in and through the particulars and the persons, an imaginal divinity.

Now these, like we said right at the beginning, these overlap. It's not to make these little neat frames. These overlap, but there's a distinction here. Can we know and taste and develop skill in opening to both kinds of divinity, the universal and the personal? The oneness and the particular. Yes, we can. But as I said, it's asking a lot. It's actually asking a lot. I don't know if you can get the sense of the breadth of what would be involved in such a path, because we're including the dark. We're including the desire and all of that.

So again, we can have desire for both. We long for, I long to know both, both these kinds of divinity. I long to have my life infused by them, by that knowing, by that seeing. The first, the universal, will cool the desires in and for the world. An opening to vast universal divinity will cool the desires in and for the world. The second kind of divinity

will inflame them. Somehow this needs to be balanced perhaps. And there's other factors that are contrary. There's too much to say about this, so we'll be circling around it in the days.

And then we come back to this question of self and re-enchanting the self and saying included in that is seeing, sensing, knowing, feeling the divinity of the self, yourself. How does it feel right now if you consider the possibility of seeing your divinity? How does that strike you, to know that you are divine? Both because you are part of a oneness that you may have glimpsed or intuited or know well, but also that you are divine in and through the particulars of your personhood, all the darknesses, all the difficulties, all the dukkha, your desires, the events of your life.

How does that even strike you right now? How does it feel as a possibility? You, unique you, your unique life, your unique life and death. What does that stir in your being?

And we could say a lot just about that, and we will. What our responses to even that kind of possibility can be. But if I add another question: what's your sense of what would help you know your divinity? In that second sense of the particular, your personhood, every little detail, every little uniqueness, what's your sense of what would help you to know that? Where perhaps have you glimpsed that or intuited that or gotten a sense?

So I don't know about instructions. I'm not sure, it's so individual in terms of so many elements that make this journey up, this part of the journey up that is very individual in terms of what order people do things and what needs to be developed, what needs to be there to actually allow that kind of transformation of perception. So in terms of instructions, I'm actually not sure. I don't know what you need, what's needed.

But we could say some general things. The universal kind of divinity happens, as I said, just through practicing sort of standard practices like mettā and loving kindness and compassion and those kind of things, the brahmavihāras, or resting in awareness, just being aware of awareness and open to all things. And eventually that awareness will just permeate everything, will have a sense of universality, infinitude, and divinity to it. Or just seeing emptiness more and more. All of them characterized by certain degrees of unfabricating and eventually, if one really goes deep and skillfully with the emptiness practice, eventually total unfabricating. And that gives this universal, different kinds of degrees of depths and flavors of universal divinity.

But the other kind of divinity, the more personal one, may arise as a natural evolution of imaginal practice. It may simply be what emerges over time when we open to the path of the imaginal and begin to play with it.

Something happens, usually slowly, that transforms our relationship to practice itself. Instead of having an imaginal figure that we work with during our meditation period, followed by our ordinary day, then another meditation period where we engage it again, something more pervasive begins to unfold. Eventually, a whole sensibility, a whole way of feeling and sensing life becomes available to us.

Life becomes image. Image and life meet, and life becomes image. Life is imbued with the imaginal. We discover a different relationship, a different dimension available to us—what William Blake called "double vision," which we've discussed before.

You can begin to sense this because when an imaginal figure or image is truly strong and soul-making, look carefully and recognize that it already carries the flavor of divinity. It already possesses a sense of dimensionality, a sense of eternality. An image that is truly alive, that genuinely touches you and stirs soul-making, is what I would call iconic. It has this timeless quality—this is the divinity inherent in the imaginal.

Through this process, life becomes ensouled. Soul is everywhere in life; it simply awaits our modes of being, our ways of looking. This includes the self with all its foibles and follies, its crazinesses and beauties and gifts. All of this becomes enchanted, becomes divine in and through the particular.

A couple of people have asked me about something I mentioned in a talk or perhaps wrote somewhere regarding my illness and the possibility of dying soon—or as people say, very probably dying soon. I said that's perfect, or rather, that I can sense in the depths of things a perfection in all of it. "How can you say that?" they wonder. "What's happening there?"

Someone also wrote about Ram Dass's teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, who used to say, "Can't you see everything's perfect? Can't you see everything's perfect?" I can't speak for Neem Karoli Baba, but I suspect that the kind of perfection he was pointing to related to universal perfection.

In the universal divine, if everything is love, if everything is simply awareness—regardless of what it's aware of—if that's the fundamental nature of everything, then everything is perfect. Life and death, good and bad, pain and pleasure—it's all one, all at a deeper level one substance. So everything's perfect.

This is one kind of knowing available to us. But when someone then asks, "How can you say that about terrorist acts and terrible things that happen and your cancer and possibly dying young?" I wouldn't stretch this as merely an idea trying to fit where it doesn't belong.

What actually happens is that these perceptions gradually open the heart, the being, the consciousness. At a certain point, we recognize there's a kind of perfection at that level of universality. But to try forcing it as an idea where it won't authentically go—no.

We must still respond with compassion, respond with wise action to these things in the world. If that response of wise seeing and wise compassion isn't present, and a person is claiming "it's all perfect," I become very suspicious. It's perfect, and yet one does everything possible to respond to suffering in the world.

When that compassionate response is absent and the heart remains untouched by the world's pain, something is off in the "everything's perfect" story. Something isn't authentic.

But when I spoke about possibly dying soon, that's not quite what I meant—or rather, I included that understanding but meant something more. This comes from imaginal practice itself. Yes, certainly emptiness and all that, but through imaginal practice, life becomes image. My life, my being, all the particular gifts and struggles and challenges, the duration of my life however long that turns out to be, the birth, the death, the things that come through me—all of this becomes ensouled.

In that soul, they are felt at times to be inseparable from what we might call world soul. All this arises naturally in the course of imaginal practice, filling out as the conceptual structure expands to hold these kinds of altered perceptions.

At one level, of course, I don't want to die. I want to live. At another level, I honestly don't know what will happen. There's something perfect in the particulars, and it's such a striking depth of seeing. There's a kind of amazement at the perfection of even the smallest details, all the little particularities.

This is the kind of thing I'm pointing toward.

It's different kinds of sense of divinity—the universal on one hand, and in and through the particular—and they're not really separate.

So in terms of instructions, in a way it's just a natural evolution of imaginal practice, that kind of seeing, that kind of availability of that kind of perception. We've been working with this imaginal figure of love, and it doesn't have to be a figure of love. It could be any imaginal figure. But there's a sense, as I said, almost in my definition of imaginal, that it includes a dimension of divinity. We sense a divinity there.

In the meditation, the imaginal figure—or any imaginal figure that feels divine in some way—is gazing at you. Maybe with love, maybe with who knows what. But the sustained gaze of that divinity on me, on you, in the meditation, eventually you become imbued with divinity. The gaze communicates all kinds of things. Not only love, but eventually I feel divine through the gaze of the divine on me. Eventually. I'm not talking about something that necessarily happens like that, but there's an evolution here.

In a way, that's part of what we talked about—the harmonizing. Here I am looking at this imaginal figure and I come into harmony with those divine qualities. And that harmony moves towards union so that I may become that figure or I become divine in these ways.

There was that beautiful quote that Catherine read—I can't remember when it was—from Thomas Merton: "None of me belongs to anyone but you, God. None of me belongs to anyone but you." Sometimes just letting these fragments of poetry arise in the mind and letting them do their soul work, letting them echo in the heart and resonate. "None of me belongs to anyone but you, God." We might not even know, what does it mean? What am I saying? But there's poetry there and the poetry works on us.

In that beautiful line of Thomas Merton, you can hear the surrender, the surrender of the being. "None of me belongs to anyone but you." And that surrender, as we talked about before, can open to a receiving, and that receiving to the harmonizing, and the harmonizing to a union. There is a sense of "I belong to you and I am divine also."

Or it might be that in a cosmopoiesis—again, the imaginer spilled over into the world—whenever an image is alive, whether that's an imaginal figure or a world seen as image in cosmopoiesis, there's always, at that point, the self being imagined at the same time. Sometimes we don't realize this. So sometimes you can just check: "Well, what's the sense of self right now?" And one might recognize there's a kind of divinity also in the sense of self at that point.

What happens, or what can happen—and some people who have been practicing with the imaginal for a while already report this—is being able to just remember the sense of divinity and just bring it into the moment and see something as divine and see

oneself as divine. It gets more available. It just becomes something you can do. Just flip the perception, enter another mode of perception. That might sound like "I don't know how that works," but actually it just comes with familiarity, with practice.

I don't have that much time on this retreat, but what is it to—which we've touched on a little bit—what is it to know, instead of being always suspicious of my desire, "that's a kilesa, that's a defilement, it's one of the three poisons"—what is it actually to even entertain the notion that the desire has divine roots? That there's a divinity, a treasure in my desire, in my eros?

What's the difference between eros and greed? What's the difference? What makes it open up into soul-making? What makes it contract the being, contract the soul, shrink the life and the perception? What's the difference? Do I need to throw out desire? Desire being, if you like, an aspect of self. Can I see the divinity? Can I know the divinity of desire? Discover the divinity in desire.

Or anger, rage—these things that we view as enemies, defilements. Is it just so simple?

In Buddhist Tantrism, there are practices where one deliberately considers or imagines in different ways the divinity of different aspects of the self, like desire or anger or the body or the senses. These are imagined as different deities—all kinds of exercises that one can do.

In the Jewish tradition, there are 613 commandments, like little prescriptions for things you're supposed to do: how you wash your hands, what you're supposed to do or not do on the Sabbath, all kinds of things, every little detail of life. And there are prayers often with a lot of these things. So you wash your hands, you say a blessing. You eat, you say a blessing. You take a certain drink. Everything becomes blessed through these commandments.

So it can look like a bunch of rules, kind of lifeless and constricting. But at its root, the mystical idea there is to bless and to sense one's life and the world and one's actions as blessed. We're opening to seeing our actions as blessing and blessing God, blessing life through that.

And if that kind of practice goes deeper and deeper, this sense of ritual blessing, of blessing life, of being blessed by life, of blessing the divine in and through one's actions, in and through, including the actions of perceiving, of consciousness, of kindness. One can almost feel that one is part of God doing that. There's the divinity acting through me in this action, washing my hands, eating a piece of bread. Who's doing that?

In Buddhist teaching, there's also, who sees? Who are you? And one answer is, no one, nothing. *Anatta*, no self. Another answer, I would say, I hesitate to use the word deeper, but another level of answer, who sees? Who are you? The Buddha. Buddha nature sees. Buddha nature is conscious in your sight, in your sound, in your hearing, in your tasting, in your thinking. Buddha nature, Buddha is seeing, is knowing, is conscious, is alive through you. Buddha is acting through you. The cosmic Buddha, the *Dharmakaya*.

Sometimes the deeper one practices with emptiness and all that, the more these become available. But also sometimes they can just be poetic ideas and we can just try them on. There's a kind of concept there. But the concept is not just an intellectual thing. We can bring it in in a way that the concept becomes a percept, a perception. Not just an idea. It actually starts imbuing. I actually feel like my seeing is different now. It's the Buddha's seeing. It's some divine seeing through me.

And the body is involved. It's not just heady. Concept, percept, and body are connected, intimately woven together.

So really just, if you like, pointing out certain possibilities, how this might come, what might support it. This re-enchanting of the self and recognizing, being able to move in and out of the perception of oneself as divinity in all one's particulars. In one's personhood, not the erasing, the erasure, the blanching of one's personhood, but the inflaming of one's personhood with the divine flame, seeing that one's personhood, one's particulars, are divine fire.

I wonder about doing a little exercise now. Yeah, let's do that.

So, why don't you just turn to your neighbor and we'll do this, an exercise in that. Someone you don't know, if that's possible. So if you need to move places or whatever. Does anyone need a partner? If you haven't got anyone, just stand and... Ah, good, okay.

So first things first. Settle into the body, your body. Tomorrow's another day. Settle into your body. Feel the ground. Feel the connection with the ground underneath you, whether it's your backside, your legs, your feet, whatever's touching the ground. Really get that solidity and your connection with the ground. And just that establishment of grounding of connection.

And from that grounding, feel the rest of your body. Feel the uprightness of the posture. Feel your body. Feel your body sitting. And feel, as we've been talking about so much, the energy body, the field of energy, of vibration, texture. Again, whatever we do, can this be something that we're just remaining in contact with, sensitive to, open to? You're just dwelling, inhabiting, filling that space with your awareness.

So any time over the next few minutes that you feel you've lost that, just keep checking in. Do I still, am I still here in this space? Do I still have some consciousness including how this space, how the energy body feels?

And if you don't, then can that be retained? Not at the exclusion of the other necessarily—hopefully—but retained alongside or in the envelope of the awareness of the other. So that you have your experience and your experience of the other. Not losing myself, my sensitivity to myself in the awareness of other, nor am I losing the other because I'm just with myself.

With this, staying in contact with the energy body, let yourself just become aware of the other. You don't need to make direct eye contact at this point if you don't want to—no problem. But you're just aware of the being in front of you and aware of your own being at the same time. Body and being here, body and being there. Just awareness of self, of other.

Now this person who you may not know very well at all—you probably don't—just offering them metta, well-wishing. I don't know exactly what your struggles are, I don't know exactly what your joys are, but I wish you well. I wish your body well. I wish you well in your being, in your mind, in your heart. Just very gentle, just offering them that well-wishing, radiating it out towards them. Pure and simple. Doesn't depend on anything—what they look like or what you think they might be like. Just wishing well. And just having the intention to wish well. Again and again, the intention repeating gently, gently.

Now, as you're giving the metta—and you can just gently sustain that gentle intention, you're with your body and your energy body—can you also include an awareness that you are at this moment receiving the metta of the other? So you're giving and you're also receiving. And just lightly, spaciously holding or feeling both of those elements, aspects. There's the giving and the receiving of the well-wishing of the other. This other is wishing you well. This other has the intention to wish you well over and over, just as you are engaging in towards them.

And now when you feel ready, if your eyes are not already open, allow them to open and allow yourself to make eye contact with each other as you sustain this giving and receiving of metta towards each other. So metta means implicitly a letting go of judgment. So you're receiving gaze that has the intention for no judgment, only well-wishing. You're receiving that right now and you're over and over giving that. So let yourself make the contact, giving and receiving, caring.

And then we try to add one more piece. If you look into the other's eyes, can you see the life in the eyes? Can you see and feel and sense the presence that shines out of the eyes? Feel and sense the consciousness, the awareness, the brightness and the aliveness of that. This is consciousness that is visible, is palpable, sensible in the eyes of the other, through the eyes of the other. Is that possible? Get that tuning to that, the sense of the bright presence, the consciousness as it is radiating from the other's eyes.

There is this mystery there, this mystery of being, mystery of consciousness, amazing aliveness of that, the brightness, the illumination, the radiance of that, the presence. Sometimes you get a sense of the mystery of it and the depth of it and the almost surprise of it, the divinity of it. Very human and so much in it—the human has divine dimensions. The divinity of this consciousness, the blessing of the consciousness. It's a miracle of it.

And if you feel okay staying with that, or again you might want to return to the metta and the well-wishing—so you can include that awareness of the consciousness or the divinity, but then include now again the metta, the giving and the receiving, offering of these intentions of kindness, of well-wishing. Feeling your body, feeling the energy body, including self, including other in the awareness, in the metta.

And then just taking a moment to thank your partner, to thank yourself. And if you can, pry yourself away from that and return to sitting.

So just to reiterate something I think we said right at the beginning of the retreat: distinctions are useful and categorizations are useful, but they're also limited. So it's helpful to differentiate, I think, between universal kinds of perceptions—perceptions of a kind of universal divinity—and perceptions of more particular personified or personhood divinity. But they overlap. They totally overlap. But if we don't make a distinction, it's almost like sometimes the experience just goes in a certain direction and misses other possibilities. So distinctions are a skillful means, but they're not really real. All these things overlap.

It may be that as you go to walking—which, if you have a raincoat or don't mind the blessings of the rain, if you're happy to soak them in—be outside or be inside.

It may be that these effects or resonances linger after making contact in this way. Really take very good care to keep any inner critic out of the picture. "Oh, I blew it. I had my one chance at seeing divinity and I didn't do it right," or "The other one was more divine than me." All of those places where the better than, worse than, same as story starts to emerge—really take care with that.

We're allowed to practice here in the sacred boundary of the temple. We keep those kinds of assessments outside the gate. So you're really allowed to settle. Let your feet both give and receive blessing as you walk. Hold your heart.

This is a precious day. Every day is a precious day—we don't always realize it. You've put a lot of groundwork in. You have a lot of resource in each of your souls, even if sometimes we're working with feeling like we don't have enough resource. So really use the day. Really let it use you, actually. Let the day use you.

CHAPTER 49

This Fire, This Longing (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 47 min

> *In this Q&A session from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat, Rob Burbea explores the complexities of imaginal practice in daily life versus retreat settings. He addresses how images ask something of us - sometimes requiring reverence, sometimes creative expression, and sometimes subtle integration into our interactions. The discussion delves into the spectrum between practicing for self-healing versus devotion to something beyond, emphasizing that souls have different needs and healing often serves a larger purpose of world-healing through transformed perception.*
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> *Burbea examines the relationship between ideas and images, noting how meaningful concepts like liberation or the Buddha become alive as fantasy with varying degrees of sensual content. He discusses the role of faith and longing for the divine, acknowledging how cultural resistance can challenge but not extinguish this fire in certain souls. A significant portion addresses the tension between dharma teachings about non-striving and the demands of serious artistic practice, questioning dominant ideas about flow and spontaneity while honoring the soul-making potential of dedicated creative work.*
>
> *The session concludes with guidance on modulating effort in practice and recognizing our responsibility to movements of the soul, using the sense of soul-making as a trustworthy guide for navigating the duties that imaginal figures and devotional longings place upon us.*

Just as usual, if it's being recorded, but if you're not comfortable with that, just let us know and Mark will pause the recording.

Anyone, please?

Yes, Nick.

"Yeah, a question about working with imaginary figures off retreat. Because obviously there's way less time to sit and there's less samadhi in the system and less in touch with the energy body, so it just feels like a very different experience doing it off retreat than on retreat. And if I'm honest, I spend more time with images not in meditation when I'm off retreat - reflecting on images that come maybe once quite intensely and then spending more time actually reflecting or writing or thinking about them. And that feels very rich as well. But I'm wondering if that kind of flattens them, or what the difference is?"

"The difference between?"

"Well, between meditatively being with them a lot while sitting and doing it more... it just feels..."

"Yeah, thank you. That's really good. Could everyone hear that? I think the question is - it seems easier to access images meditatively on retreat when there's more stillness and time to meditate. Off retreat, Nick's saying she's spending more time reflecting on an image or writing, etc."

I go back to the soul-making sense. How is an image best brought to life in the soul? How does it best have its power in the soul? How is it best honored and revered? Because one could spend a lot of time in meditation and that's all - and that would be one extreme. But maybe that's not what it needs, and maybe there's something in the meditation that's missing. I think it might even be touched on in the talk tonight - in a way, images ask something of us. Exactly what they ask, or exactly what the responsibility to them is, there's no formula.

Sometimes it might be mental reflection, sometimes it might be some creative work, sometimes it might be doing something different, and sometimes it's much more internal, much more meditative. I don't think there's a rule for that, but it's listening and seeing where the soul-making is. I can certainly think of certain images that maybe have come up once or twice, but they're alive for me. They're woven into my life. And then one can be creative.

When Andy had the question yesterday and I said I have this jazz musician image - probably meditatively it's come up more than once for sure, but one of the important things there, because there was a little bit of grief about leaving that world and having that opportunity for that music to come through that way, one of the things that was really helpful was bringing that in in a very subtle way to my life. I think I shared this in a talk years ago.

I might be sitting in an interview with someone, and I just remember that image. It's just really, really lightly in the back of the psyche, so to speak. But it begins coloring the interaction. Now, the other person doesn't know - I'm not suddenly... "What are you doing?" "Shh, I'm doing my thing." No, it's really, really subtle. But there's something then in the way I feel myself in response, something that is free in a particular kind of way or nuanced in a particular kind of way. What I'm doing then is bringing to life that image in a whole bunch of directions.

For me, a lot of Dharma work is about freeing us up - freedom, right? And with imaginal work, I feel there's also duty. We have duties. An image often asks something of us. It's not always clear what it's asking and how much actual physical manifestation is being asked. Some images require doing something different, changing a life direction - something really big - all the way down to something really subtle like the jazz musician thing. But it's coming in, even beyond that, to even more subtle levels. It just exists internally in my soul, but there's a reverence there. And all it's asking for is the reverence.

I may feel it in my body, it comes into my psyche, but the duty is in the reverence, in the respect, in seeing the divinity of it. Now all this can be worked with - some of it in meditation, but some of it is actually asking for life to become image, for image and life to meet. That's where the work is. It doesn't necessarily need to be purely meditative.

You know, does this... And the other thing, and I said it in response to Andrea yesterday, but I'll say it again. I feel as time goes by with imaginal practice that short periods of meditation—twenty minutes, if you're doing this kind of work, ten minutes—where the mind wanders to the day, or "I forgot to send that email," whatever it was, and then actually a little bit of contact with an image can have real power. It's this moving in and out and being able to access more. So it's not necessarily like I need to get back on retreat and have all that time. I think that's probably more available than you might imagine for you.

Does that answer what... yeah, okay, good, lovely.

Yeah, is it Dave?

"Hi. Something that particularly resonated in the talk we heard last night was the question, 'Who are you doing it for?' Is it for the self or is it for something beyond? For God or for something beyond? And it resonated partly because I think the most soulful that I have felt in my life is when there has been that devotion, a true devotion to something beyond. But certainly at the moment, my practice is very much self-driven, yearning for healing. So, for example, if a loving image approaches, I will imagine it touching the part of me that physically hurts. And then I can feel the resonance going... almost, because it's like I've taken the autonomy away. And I just wondered what guidance you might have on how, when there is that yearning for something from the self, how to open up more to the devotion."

Thank you. So everyone could hear that, right?

I think there's quite a lot in the question. It sounds like there are a few strands there. So let's see.

Like a lot of these distinctions that we've been making, they serve a purpose in that they highlight something that often isn't highlighted if you don't make the distinction. And I think I said yesterday—I think a whole talk was on this distinction that we didn't give on the retreat—but what often happens I find is that people feel they're doing it for one purpose and actually, it has the language of divine and all that, but actually it's just for the self. Or more, it's a spectrum. Potentially even the other way around, you know, that one is talking in terms of that, but actually somewhere in one's soul, so to speak, one is doing it for a greater purpose that maybe one can't quite articulate clearly. So just be cautious about too much dichotomy there. That's one thing.

The second thing is, and we've been stressing really, souls are different, needs are different, past experience is different, and the needs that come out of past experience or wounding or imbalances—and the order in which things happen—is different. And so it's not like first you do this and then the rest of the path is all about that. I mean, it might be, but it might also be you have periods where it comes back and forth, and there are periods, sort of levels of healing the self or the body or whatever. And so you have periods of that and then it opens up and then it's mixed and then it comes... All of that's good. So I wouldn't actually be too suspicious of that at all.

And if you are, if a part of you really wants it to be for something bigger, you can always hold this healing in the context of serving something bigger. But that's more in the back of your mind. Right now, this needs healing.

And sometimes people come here on retreat, for example, and often say other people in their life might say, "Oh, so selfish." Because they wouldn't say that if the person was going to lie on a beach in Bermuda for six months for some reason. I don't know why. Anyway. But a person can be on retreat here and really have the idea that "I am doing this. I recognize I need to build my strength, my equanimity, my capacity, my steadiness, my heart, all of that. Yes, I need to heal, and it's for something bigger." So the long periods of time I've spent on retreat have been with that always in the back of my mind. So there's a mixture.

About the autonomy, I don't know why... These words we've been using—otherness, autonomy, etc.—I'm not sure... The image is healing me and it's for my healing. That doesn't mean that it doesn't have autonomy, the image. This image is other.

But the healing is through the perception. So again, there's a kind of natural—let's call it evolution, but things can happen in different orders—that we can trust here that integrates these things and melts the dichotomies a little bit.

So there's quite a lot there. Ramira, can you clarify the distinction between image and idea? Not idea in the sense of thought useful to solve a problem, but in a deeper meaning.

And another question—about the role of faith in this process of re-enchanting the cosmos. Yesterday, listening to the talk, we were speaking about the longing for the Divine. I have experienced that very deeply, and it aches, that longing. But something very painful was added to that: not finding resonance in the culture. The longing not being legitimized by the culture, by the people I related to—friends, family. The stories around it.

So it's strange to me why I had that sense that didn't have support at all around, or resonance. Why that sense? Why follow that sense when everything around is either indifferent to it or hostile, or tries to squash it? Part of your second question is why that was arising for you—how it could stay and sustain itself despite all this? It's a general question.

Why, for some people, does this longing for the sacred come to life despite not being supported or even fought against by the environment? And what role do you give this in the whole process of re-enchanting the cosmos?

I don't know the complete answer. One possibility is that souls are different—they want different things. Some people, no matter what's around them, carry a fire of longing for divinity that burns clear and bright. They feel it, they feel the vulnerability and pain of that longing, but it doesn't diminish. It's simply their soul's nature.

I think fire, eros, desire burns with different qualities in different souls. For some people, it's their character to have this longing be very visible and fiery. For others, their fire is more like an even, sustained flame—harder to extinguish. Fire manifests differently in different characters, different souls.

But a second answer could be that everyone has that fire, that longing. What varies is how vulnerable different souls are to having it blown out, smothered, hidden, or dampened by what's around them. There are wounds from the past, cultural conditioning that feels forced, or threats that feel overwhelming. It's all related to the confidence one has in oneself and one's ideas.

In some circles, there's quite an aggressive dismissal and ridiculing of these sacred longings. Part of this becomes about how self-confident a soul is, how resilient, how tough, how independent a thinker. It's not just about faith—all these things feed each other.

Basically, I don't know. It's clearly the case that what you're describing happens, and in other situations it doesn't. Some people don't seem to have this longing at all. What's exactly going on, I don't know. As a teacher, I think about this a lot, but right now I'm cautious about claiming one explanation or the other.

Regarding your first question about ideas and images—I'm hoping to give some teaching exactly on that at some point, because I feel that implicit in an image are certain ideas. We tend to think of them as separate, but they're actually interrelated. Always when there's an image, there are ideas wrapped up within it. Even in insight meditation, you're playing with subtle ideation, subtle conceiving as part of the way of looking, and that's really important. These things are mixed up together—there's not such a clear division between the two.

Sometimes images don't come visually, and this is why I sometimes use the word fantasy instead. The amount of sensual content in an image—which doesn't necessarily mean visual, it could be sonic or bodily—compared with the obviousness of the ideational content can vary greatly.

As you say, certain ideas live as fantasies. Liberation is an idea. The Buddha is a historical image. The path—it's lived, it's felt, we feel it, but it's also an idea. Anything meaningful to us, that's alive, that we love, that moves us, has an idea wrapped up in it that comes alive to us as image. But that image might have very little sensual content or it might have a lot.

You can tell that there's soul in the image or idea—the corona of fantasy around that idea—by all the same ways: I'm moved, I'm drawn, I love it. It gives me beauty, a sense of depth, sacredness. All of this tells me something is alive as image. But what might be alive as image could be an idea, or just the sense of the body coming alive in a certain way.

This word 'image' is very broad and overlaps with idea. The boundaries are fluid, and we'll explore this more deeply later.

And how they actually may constrain someone in certain ways.

I realized that for me, I actually like working on something for months or years. I like the precision. I like—there's a word the Greeks had called philoponos, which means "work-loving." And I like—love is too strong a word, but I like the struggle with something, wrestling with an idea or a creative challenge over time. I like the discipline involved. I like having to show up to it again and again, even when I don't feel like it.

And all of that goes completely against the dominant Dharma ideas about flow and spontaneity and being in the moment. But for me, there's something deeply soul-making about that longer process. There's something about the relationship that develops with the work over time, the way it changes you and you change it. The way you have to keep coming back to it with fresh eyes. The way problems reveal themselves slowly and solutions emerge gradually.

Now, I'm not saying that's better than the quick, spontaneous approach. I'm saying we need to be very careful about our Dharma ideas and whether they're actually serving our fullest expression or constraining it.

So going back to the dukkha question—if your dukkha around being an artist is coming from ideas like "I should be more spontaneous" or "I shouldn't be attached to outcomes" or "this struggle means I'm doing it wrong"—those are ideas that are probably making that dukkha not soul-making. They're flattening it, making it just suffering instead of something that could be fertilizing your soul.

But if you can hold your artistic process—including the struggle, the precision, the long commitment—if you can hold that as sacred, as a form of devotion, as a way of deepening relationship with beauty or truth or whatever it is you're reaching for, then that dukkha becomes very different. It becomes meaningful struggle rather than meaningless suffering.

The question isn't whether you should or shouldn't paint. The question is: what ideas are you bringing to your painting? And are those ideas opening up the sacredness of what you're doing, or are they closing it down?

You know, it's because Dharma is rooted in the Four Noble Truths. It's about less stress, less suffering. But here's the personal bit I'll share, and it's just me—everyone's different on this, and again, you need to find what works for you.

When I first started, I was playing music and then began wanting to compose. I read a book by Natalie Goldberg called *Writing Down the Bones*. Some of you will know it. Her idea was simply to play, to do a piece on this and do a piece on that. I started doing that, but the idea was really not to care about the result at all. What happened was really liberating for me. And what happened quite quickly, though, is that I felt what came out was really something I liked, and it was really important.

Then quickly from that, I started—it became very intense. What's the word? It wasn't like a free, light process, composing and writing. If you saw me at the piano writing—"Where's the damn pencil?"—it doesn't look mindful and calm at all. I don't care. I honestly don't care. Why would I care about something like that?

But that goes back to the other question: What do you really want? Some people, there are other kinds of suffering involved in that. You have to look at what are the sufferings, because when you put something out into the world creatively, a lot is about what will people think. I'm not saying that's the case with you, but that's a certain level of ego-suffering, you know.

Some people want a peaceful, unruffled, stress-free life, and that's why they practice. Great, go for it. But that's not what I want, personally. And I'm not saying anyone should be like me. But I think I said in one talk, some people will care more about the art than about anything else. And that includes how stressed they are or whatever, or the cost it takes to do something like a long-term artistic project.

Because there's something in the soul about being creative, about embodying that. And there's something in the soul of the product—the artistic painting or whatever it is, sculpture, composition—that has soul too. The soul of the artist making and the struggle involved. Now, I can reify that and cling to it too tightly, just as we talked about with too much realism. But for some people, it's the soul-making and it's the art that matters more than being peaceful. And if it costs me, it costs me.

There was a time in my life where I said, "I don't care if I die painting. I just love this so much." And then I got really sick, and I could have died. I was like, "It's not that important." But I really hear you. Again, I would still say some people, when that same thing happens—when death looks at them—they say, "It *is* that important."

But it's up to you. Why am I doing this? And maybe something—this is a bit related to Dave's question—something starts with a purity of intention, and over years of being an artist (and this is really the case with Dharma too), either the original intention gets lost. We've lost track of it. We've lost even recognition or being in touch with why I'm doing something, whether it's practice or whether it's art. Or it gets infected with some other intention, which is self-aggrandizing in some way, even subtly. And this will make the process less soul-making, less beautiful, less all of that.

I just don't buy the Dharma—there's a lot of personal opinion here—but a lot of the art that is made with that ethos about being stress-free and quick, it's like... I know. Yeah, it's kind of—I don't want to make any judgmental statements, but there's something more possible.

So again, I'm sitting up here, the microphone is here. I'm being very cautious.

There was something else about the realism thing...

I'm deeply cautious about speaking from this position when my statements might carry undue authority. I really want to distinguish between my personal inclinations and more universal principles. I have a certain soul, a particular personality, specific inclinations—that's my business. What interests me more is drawing attention to ideas and ways we become indoctrinated without realizing it. Please understand that this is everyone's soul journey. You could make very different decisions or directions from me, and that's truly important. I must be careful, especially with things I feel passionate about, to discern what's merely opinion and personal style versus what's actually more universal.

In the past, I probably imposed too many shoulds because I couldn't reconcile these different approaches. How can I pursue artistic excellence when the philosophy I believe in seems to say that such striving goes against non-attachment? It felt like a fundamental contradiction.

Let me add something about striving. If you read the Pali Canon, there's abundant striving there and much encouragement to strive. There's a sutta where the Buddha discusses different kinds of equanimity and different pains that arise for practitioners, along with various ways of letting go. One type he describes is the pain of the practitioner who isn't yet realized but yearns for realization. For all the other pains, he prescribes letting go in specific ways, but for this yearning, he essentially says it goes with the territory.

The modern interpretation of "don't strive, let it go" belongs particularly to Western culture, where we have such a painful relationship with self. It's not written in the original teachings. There's tremendous emphasis on striving and acknowledgment that yes, it's going to rub, it's going to hurt at times. The Buddha simply says to accept the pain, knowing that when you realize your goal, it will be better because you'll have what you're longing for. He doesn't say to let go or stop striving. It's complex—our relationship with striving, what ideation and self-image we bring to it. It's not so simple, especially in our culture and with our divergent personalities.

In Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions within Tibetan Buddhism, there's significant emphasis on non-striving. In Advaita Vedanta too, and in many traditions. But this whole question of striving versus non-striving isn't about right or wrong—it's always about what's helpful, what's skillful.

When someone says, "Just rest in the natural state"—a classic Mahamudra or Dzogchen teaching—how able is a person even to follow such an instruction? There will be vastly different levels of capacity for that. These teachings have their place, but the question remains: is it helpful to me, and what's arising from it?

Historically, Dzogchen and Mahamudra are presented very differently from their surrounding context. In the classical presentation, there would be extensive striving, numerous preliminaries, countless prostrations, with only brief periods spent in Dzogchen practice. It's not a complete teaching system. It's a gear they shift into perhaps ten percent of the time, if that. The rest involves considerable striving and devotion.

I think in the West we hunger for teachings that simply affirm we're okay as we are. That's important, but the question remains what's truly helpful, and that varies. It's genuinely complex.

Even on a micro level, it's about modulating effort in practice—knowing when to back off and become more receptive and open, when to bring greater ardency, diligence, and fire. In alchemy, there's a phrase: "He who masters the fire, masters the work." This intensity and effort—in alchemical times they didn't have temperature controls, did they? You're learning what kind of fire is needed right now.

Sometimes it means backing right off, simply being open and letting things come, dropping striving as much as possible. But there's always striving at subtle levels we don't actually recognize. Learning to modulate this appropriately, in a caring way—there's so much that could be said about this on all different levels of practice, in terms of both long trajectories and moment-to-moment awareness. It's truly complex.

Energy body and states of samadhi—if you want to explore this, I wonder if you would say that there's a limit to the skillful use of the concept of energy body when the perception of space is falling away. What happens with the energy body at these stages? Would you still see the idea, the concept of energy body as a skillful one, or would you say...

So Ava's asking about the idea of energy body when you get very deep in meditation and the actual experience of the body dissolves—and then even beyond, when there's nothing but space, and then even beyond that when the space dissolves.

Formulaically, the Buddha said the first four jhānas are what's called rūpa jhānas—form jhānas. They're actual experiences of the energy body. That's a way of thinking about it. That's part of the reason why I tend to emphasize energy body right from the start. Where we're heading towards is actually different frequencies of experience of the energy body, or different qualities within the energy body, and they correspond with different jhānas. Even before that—so the whole of samādhi can be approached differently. Instead of focusing on a small point and then somehow getting to this energy body thing, you could start right from the beginning with energy body.

As you move through the jhānas, the body becomes rapture, if you like. That's the energy body flavor, and the grossness of the body is dissolved—there is rapture in this space. Then this body becomes joy and it's drinking joy, or it becomes peacefulness, or it becomes stillness.

Then you get—if you're doing classical jhāna—the realm of infinite space, the jhāna of infinite space. One way of looking at this is that in the first four jhānas, as you go through them, the vibration (we're back to the spectrum of the energy body, very solid or very subtle) gets more and more refined. The quality of the energy body gets more and more refined so that the stillness of the fourth jhāna is an extremely refined state, an extremely refined perception. The vibration here is very, very subtle.

It becomes so subtle that there's no body there at all—it's just space. I could look at that two ways. I could see that as the end of the energy body; now we're talking about just mental perceptions, and that tends to be how the Buddha looks at it. Or you could say that at that point, the perception of the energy body or the characteristic of the energy body is one of space. What does it feel like here? It feels like space. It's characterized by spaciousness—I could put my hand through it. There's the absence of any kind of sense of substance.

Beyond that, I wouldn't really call it energy body because you're not even talking about spatial dimensions anymore. Although maybe the sixth one, with awareness, can have a very subtle sense of a body of awareness, but not in any solidified sense. But definitely after that, no way.

We need to end, so let's just have a little quiet together.

I just want to say one more thing—it's partly in response to something that came up, and partly in response to a note that I can't quite read or understand fully. It's about responsibility—the responsibility that we have to the soul, if you like.

Sometimes with imaginal figures or with the sense of devotion we have or longing we have, these are movements of the soul. They come, they knock on our door, they ask of us something. It's not always clear what they're asking, and we don't know: what is my responsibility? Sometimes we get a sense of what it is.

Two things: one is holding it lightly. That doesn't mean not engaging or not following through on that responsibility, but holding it lightly in terms of self-reification, realism.

The other thing is using the sense of soul-making as one's guide. What is my responsibility? How do I feel that? How do I follow through on that? When I'm trying to follow through on my sense of duty, am I on the right track? Again, it's energy body and sense of soul-making that we can trust. If something gets too tight or feels dead, we get the sense that we're not on the right track—something's a bit off.

So always part of the principle is: am I clinging too tightly? Is it becoming a realism? And also, how is my soul with this? How is this stirring the soul?

And we can trust that when it feels soulful, when it feels soul-making, we are moving in a direction that serves not only our own deepest flourishing but the flourishing of the whole web of existence of which we are part.

This capacity to sense what is truly nourishing to the soul, what opens and expands our being rather than contracts it, becomes one of our most reliable guides on the spiritual path. It is a wisdom that emerges from the integration of body, heart, and mind—a knowing that goes beyond mere intellectual understanding to touch the very core of our being.

When we learn to trust this deeper sensing, this soul-compass, we find ourselves naturally drawn toward what serves awakening and naturally moving away from what perpetuates suffering. We begin to live from a place of authentic responsiveness rather than unconscious reactivity, and our actions become expressions of wisdom and compassion rather than mere habit or conditioning.

This is the art of dharmic living—allowing the teachings to penetrate so deeply that they transform not just how we think, but how we sense, how we feel, and how we move through the world. It is a path that honors both the transcendent dimensions of spiritual realization and the very human, embodied nature of our existence.

May this exploration serve your own deepening practice and your capacity to live with ever greater freedom, wisdom, and love.

CHAPTER 50

Tending the Flame

Rob Burbea · 18 min

> *In this closing talk from the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat, Rob Burbea provides essential guidance for practitioners transitioning back to daily life while preserving the precious insights and openings cultivated during retreat. He emphasizes the importance of sensitivity when sharing retreat experiences, recognizing that the heart and soul may be particularly open and vulnerable after deep practice.*
>
> *Burbea addresses the crucial role of saṅgha in sustaining practice, encouraging practitioners to seek supportive communities for continued exploration of imaginal and cosmopoetic practices. He discusses the middle way between realism and nihilism regarding imaginal experiences, noting that while the philosophical framework of emptiness is sophisticated, practitioners should trust what brings soulfulness and aliveness rather than adhering rigidly to authority positions.*
>
> *The talk concludes with encouragement about the vast potential of the path, emphasizing that imaginal and cosmopoetic practices can be fruitful even in short periods and without extensive samādhi. Burbea reminds practitioners that these approaches are part of a wider tapestry including mindfulness, samādhi, mettā, and emptiness practices—all mutually enriching when approached with intelligence, creativity, and the spirit of experimentation that keeps the flame of practice desire burning bright.*

So we're already in transition, at the end of the retreat. Catherine and I want to say a few things in closing.

Because you've all done silent retreats before, you're familiar with transitioning out of silence, out of retreat, back to different environments, the busynness of your home and work life. A lot of that you know—I don't think we need to repeat it.

This retreat, because we haven't put so much emphasis on concentration and silence, there have been these exercises and more openness of the senses as opposed to focus on sense restraint and the smallness of attention. When a retreat emphasizes concentration, smallness of attention, silence, and solitude, the transition is harder in many ways, particularly in the domain of sense contact and sense impact. That's less the case probably for this kind of retreat.

However, the heart and the soul may be very open, so there may be a sensitivity at the heart and soul level more than at the sensory level. This needs care. We need to really respect and listen and feel into what the heart, what the soul needs today, in the rest of the day, in the next few days.

In a way, it's just a continuation—noticing the energy body, noticing the emotions, noticing when the heart is maybe contracting or feels vulnerable, and then what does it need? What does it need in that moment? Just staying, letting the energy body, letting the sensitivity to the emotions kind of guide, letting the contact with that guide and give wisdom about what's appropriate here, what do I need right now?

One part of that is about sharing your experiences or enthusiasm from the retreat. This is something I think we need to be careful with after retreat, but it might be asking again for sensitivity. You might get home and before you've even put your suitcase down you've downloaded the whole thing to whoever you live with—and maybe that's not right for you and maybe it's not right for them. It really does need sensitivity and noticing: what do you need, but really also what do they want? What does this other person want?

Sometimes I think we get a sense of the preciousness or something in this week that's touched us that feels precious and we want to share that. But we need to be careful what you do with that in relationship. It may make complete sense—I'm close to this person, they're my friend, they're my spouse, of course I tell them. Well, maybe, maybe not. Because if they're not interested, or if they're even disrespectful, that really has an impact.

You can sense this in the contact. You start to say something, the eyes kind of glaze over in the other person, or they're just trying to be politely interested. Be careful what you want to do with that. Maybe it's fine, but it's really just being sensitive to what you need, how you need to be received, and what they need. There's timing as well. They might be in the middle of a busy thing with all this other stuff going on. They've been at home dealing with that. When's the time that they're open and ready to hear if they're interested?

But we do need to share, I think. We need to share our practice. We need to hear from others who are practicing. That's fundamental to all practices—the importance of sangha, the importance of receiving, listening, communicating, having a back and forth. It's so nourishing.

In terms of this retreat and these kind of practices and maybe other related practices—emptiness and samadhi and imaginal work—Andrea has put a list together. If those are the kind of things you're interested in, you want to keep, have some contact with people, partly there'll probably be some people in London and other places who can actually meet in person, if that's what you want, or have email contact and set up other ways of contact. The importance of sangha is so crucial in nourishing and sustaining and kind of sustaining the fire under practice. I think it's easy to underestimate that. It's really easy to underestimate how important that is.

We need to talk. We need to share. We need to hear from others. We need to bounce ideas. We need to be supported. We need also, I think, to listen and to read. So easily practice just kind of... sometimes doesn't expand or grow or deepen in the ways that it could because we're actually not inputting much that's new or that's opening things or challenging things or building new ideas and things on which practice can then open to new vistas, new explorations. So we do need to be fed—whether it's dharma talks, listening, there's DharmaSeed and all that, or books, reading, et cetera.

Somehow we need to keep alive the flame of our desire. We talked about this yesterday in the Q&A. Somehow that needs to be kept alive—all the different ways that can happen. It's so easy for that to be diminished.

Part of that is also keeping what we've emphasized so much this week—keeping alive the spirit of experimentation, of play, of creativity. That's really so important to be kept alive. And with that, this question: what's working? When I say to have intelligence in the practice really means to ask, what's working?

What's opening? Where is this leading? How does it work? These kinds of creative, interested questions ensure that the practice is intelligent and actually unfolds in a fruitful way. That's part of the creativity and that's part of the desire.

Just going back to the sharing and the sangha—I think especially with the kinds of practices we've been exploring this week, even some dharma people will not be interested or respectful, or may even be disparaging. So it's really important to be sensitive about where you can find support for this kind of work, if this is what interests you.

Regarding nourishing the practice, I wanted to address something that connects to several questions that have come up recently. This concerns nourishing that attitude of experimentation around imaginal practice and cosmopoetic practice, and it brings us back to this real-unreal question and what's called in dharma the middle way—the middle way between "it is" and "it isn't," between "it exists" and "it doesn't exist," between "it's real" and "it's not real."

That's hard, generally speaking. The middle way is hard. It's a very deep insight, and it's very rare for someone to actually be able to dwell there and relate to life from that place—until the insight into emptiness gets really quite deep. Until then, there's going to be some reification of something. There's just a tendency to reify, which I want to say is really okay. It's not a problem. It's just how it is.

I said yesterday in the Q&A that Catherine and I, just by virtue of sitting up here and by history, are placed in a position of authority. And so we might emphasize this thing of "realism is a problem, drop the realism, don't grasp things as true," and so forth. I'm just cautious about the weight of that authority—that giving of authority, if that makes sense.

In addition to that, a person might feel—and several people have expressed this, and it's very common now in our society—all the damage and danger that has come from religious realism, from people clinging to "this is truth" and fighting with someone else who says, "No, that's not true, this is true," and the identification with that. So we're hyperaware in our culture of the dangers of fundamentalist religious thinking and realism. That may also create hesitation around entering into more belief in some kind of reality of the imaginal realm or of the divine.

There are different forces at play here. It's more recent in human history—and rarer—to see the dangers of secularism, which is actually just a belief in the reality of something else, as opposed to a belief in the reality of the divine. It's the same realism, misplaced somewhere else as the only reality. And there's just as much—well, you can have aggressive secularism as well. And you can be on the receiving end of that. That's another reason I caution about where to share this, because even some dharma people are going to look down on you and disparage it.

But in the bigger cultural and human history picture, realism both ways has caused damage. Don't forget that. It's only more recent—and it's hard to see what's more recent—but the damage of the flat view of physicalism, of secularism, of secular humanism, is not so obvious to us. For millennia, humans have believed in the reality of divinities, granted them reality and functioned that way, and despite all the problems in history and all the terrors, there was also a lot of beauty, a lot of opening, a lot of sacredness, a lot of meaningfulness.

So I'd like to say now: go back to what's helpful. If this middle way is hard—and it's not simple, it's a deep insight—but if it's helpful for you and where you are to lean toward granting a reality to the imaginal realm, believing in the reality of this or that divinity in some kind of way, if that feels helpful, then lean that way. There's a journey here, a journey of evolution of understanding.

We partly wanted to lay out something with quite a sophisticated philosophical framework because I think that's what we need now in our contemporary society, also because of the assumptions of secularism. It needs a response that's quite robust, that's not easily dismissed, that's philosophically quite deep and sound. And that's also contemporary—we can't really go back in time. We need something beyond modernism, incorporating scientific insight, incorporating modern philosophy and all of that. That's the reason I tend to emphasize, we tend to emphasize, that framework quite a lot.

But really, go back to this thing about trust: check the soulmaking, check the soulfulness. If I'm believing something, is the soul alive with that? Is it bringing something alive? Is it helpful? Is it freeing?

Is there beauty that's coming from that? These are the things to check in with, as opposed to allegiance to a position of authority, which might be Catherine or me, or both of us. "Well, Rob says this, so that's what I'm supposed to be doing." Check the heart, check the soul, check what's working. And there really is a journey with this stuff, so please trust that.

Just two more brief points. In relation to imaginal practice and cosmopoietic practice, I don't think necessarily that long retreats are really what's needed. I mean, they're great and they're wonderful, but there's a lot of potential in these kinds of practices for short periods of practice, practice off retreat, practice when there isn't that much samadhi. It can be really fruitful.

We're interested in this flexibility, this agility of the ways of looking, and these quick, agile shifts of the perception of the mode of being. With practice and in time, they can become something you can enter into and out of quite quickly, and this imbues the days and actually changes what's possible in our sense of existence. It's not necessarily "I should go on retreat for three years or whatever."

And last, which has come up indirectly—what we've been doing this week, actually we've been doing quite a few practices, haven't we? We talked about the energy body, we talked about samadhi, we talked about emotional sensitivity and skillful work with one's emotions, whether they're difficult or lovely or neutral. We've talked about imaginal practice and we've extended that to cosmopoiesis. There are a lot of things there, and we mentioned emptiness.

So just to put the imaginal and the cosmopoietic practices in the context of a wider buffet, if you like, of what's available and what's mutually enhancing, mutually enriching, mutually deepening. There will be periods in your life when you're maybe more into imaginal practice, or periods where you're really exploring mindfulness, or periods

where you're really going deeper into the whole samadhi thing or metta or whatever. And just as on this retreat we say, "What's the intention right now for practice?"—sometimes out of retreat you can have an intention or a thread of practice that's really going for a few weeks or a few months. "That's what I'm interested in and that's really where I'm devoting myself to." Sometimes that's really fruitful, to just kind of go with something for a while, but know that it's part of a bigger tapestry, a bigger jigsaw of how things might fit together and be mutually nourished.

The path goes very deep. So much more is possible than I think most people tend to think. It goes back to keeping that flame of desire alive, keeping the intelligence alive, asking "What's working? What's helpful? Is this going where I want?" and keeping that spirit of play alive. When those things are there, an enormous amount is possible.

So the path is deep, but it's also very wide. All these beautiful practices and aspects and how they feed each other—it's there for you. It's totally there. It just takes this spirit of play, of questioning, staying true to what my soul longs for. It's all actually available. It really is available.

So thank you for your practice this week. It's been really lovely, really beautiful. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 51

The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h18

> *In this opening talk from the 'Eros Unfettered' series, Rob Burbea examines the Buddhist teaching of non-clinging (upadana) and its various interpretations. He explores the rich Pali vocabulary around desire - including tanha (craving), raga (passion), lobha (greed), and kama (sensual desire) - and maps these concepts onto the twelve links of paticcasamuppada (dependent origination) through practical examples.*
>
> *Burbea contrasts different conceptual frameworks for understanding the Dharma, particularly critiquing overly simplistic approaches that reduce practice to 'just letting go of everything.' While acknowledging the helpfulness of traditional tools like mindfulness of vedana, reflection on impermanence (anicca), and working with papanca (mental proliferation), he argues these approaches can shut doors to deeper possibilities.*
>
> *The talk sets up a crucial distinction between limited understandings that aim merely for peaceful non-clinging versus more radical approaches that open to the unfabricated and reveal the emptiness of all phenomena. Burbea suggests that how we conceive clinging and desire fundamentally shapes our practice and determines whether we access profound mystical openings or remain trapped in conceptual limitations. This foundational teaching prepares the ground for exploring the more unusual teachings on eros and desire that follow in the series.*

What I would like to do tonight is give a talk that in some ways could stand alone, talking about non-clinging. But in other ways—and this is my main purpose, really—hopefully give something that serves as a kind of preface to the set of talks we're going to start around the alchemy of desire, around eros and practice.

So a kind of preface, but a slightly strange preface, one that serves to give a context, or at least part of a context, for what many would probably consider relatively unusual teachings in the rest of the set. I want to give part of a context tonight, and as well as context, begin also to contrast different understandings or visions or conceptual frameworks that we can have of Dharma and of this teaching of clinging and non-clinging in the Dharma.

This is the main point: to begin to contrast something, because we can take away from listening to teachings or reading teachings, or even be given through teachings, an understanding or a conceptual framework of what the Dharma is that shapes our prac-

tice and shapes our whole sense of what the Dharma is and what the project is and what awakening is and what we're moving towards and what's involved. An understanding, a conceptual framework that is certainly helpful to a degree for many people, and certainly freeing to a certain extent, again, for many people. But that also shuts doors.

This is the contrast I want to make between different understandings, different conceptual frameworks, one of which—or a group of which—I would say, helpful as it is, freeing as it is to a certain extent, also ends up shutting doors. Doors that open to a much wider and much more radical freedom and beauty and openness of being and of the sense of existence.

So part of the context: begin to contrast some different large-scale understandings and where they might lead or what they might block off. I've talked about all of this before and certainly written about much of it. I don't particularly like to repeat myself—I don't see the point if it's already out there. Generally, I would rather move on to new stuff. So a lot of this will be quite brief.

Much of it is widely available. There's probably not a Dharma teacher alive, and certainly not an insight meditation teacher, who doesn't talk about clinging at certainly one of the levels that I want to talk about. So some of it will be moving through territory quite briefly for those reasons, but I do want to draw out a couple of things, a couple of main points that I've maybe only mentioned before here and there, important as they are, again, for the sake of context and for the sake of contrast.

When we look in the Pali Canon, the collected teachings of the early teachings, the teachings of the Buddha, the historical Buddha, we find a lot of different words. Like English, we have passion, desire, craving, greed, clinging, grasping—many words. English is a very rich language. Similarly in Pali, in the language of the Buddha, we have a word like *raga*, which actually means to color or to dye. The coloring, like especially rouge—it's related to the word red, to make rouge. But it really means passion, excitement.

Later on, we'll emphasize this: that passion colors something. When we color things red, we become impassioned, or passion also colors things. So there's a link there. But there's this word *raga*, usually translated as passion or lust.

Kama can have two meanings. One is the object of sensual enjoyment—the object, so something sensually pleasing—but also sense desire. The verb *kamati* means to desire or to crave.

There's the word *lobha*, which can be translated as greed. *Geda*, also translated as greed.

There's a word *chanda*, which is an interesting word, because sometimes you can talk about *chanda*, for example, in Pali called *hitachanda*, as the effort to do good. *Hitta* is what's useful or suitable or beneficial or friendly. So when we talk, for example, in metta practice about well-wishing or doing good in the world, it's *hitachanda*. *Chanda* is really impulse or intention or will. It could be virtuous or it could be a vice. The motivation to accomplish—it means all that. It can also mean excitement, related to impulse there.

Sometimes people want to make a distinction: *chanda* is positive because it's good, good intention, or it can be good. And words like *raga*, *kama*, *lobha*, etc., these are negative words. They lead to suffering. They are unskillful, etc.

However, there are also plenty of instances in the Pali Canon where, for instance, Sariputta in the Samyutta Nikaya says, "*Chandaraga*, desire and lust, these are fetters." So *chanda* there is not qualified—it's just saying it's a fetter.

There are words like *tanha*, which usually translates as craving, and *upadana*, clinging, usually translated as attachment.

This is quite an interesting word because it means literally a fuel or that which supports something. So it can be grasping, holding on, clinging as something that supports. And what does it support? It supports suffering. But as we go deeper, we'll see that it supports a whole lot more than that. It supports the sense of self, supports the very sense of reality, supports perception too, supports any experience. It's fuel for experience. This is taking the whole thing to another level. We'll come back to this.

But there are all these words in Pali, and in the Pali Canon, one way or another, the Buddha says the path leads to the end of—and he uses any of these words, any of them. So in a way, they're kind of used interchangeably. We can certainly make distinctions and try and carve out distinctions there, but generally, although there are distinctions, generally they're pretty much interchangeable. And the Buddha and the teachings say they are all fetters. Kāma, tanhā, gedha, rāga, lobha—passion, lust, craving, desire, et cetera. Clinging. All fetters. Saṃyojanāni, which means fetter, something like a yoke—like an oxen or a bull that's plowing a field has a yoke to pull that on—something that imprisons.

The Buddha talks about different fetters, and in the process, in the stages of enlightenment, how different fetters are eradicated—that's really the word that he uses. So kāma-chanda, sensual desire, is eradicated at the third stage of awakening. And at full

awakening, full enlightenment, arahantship, the rāga, rūpa-rāga—the passion or the lust for material existence, for material birth, for forms. If you prefer more experientially, getting away from the whole teaching of rebirth and all that, the passion, the lust for material forms. And arūpa-rāgo, the passion and lust for immaterial realms or immaterial jhānas, or if you do the whole rebirth thing, rebirth in a formless realm.

And also eradicated at arahantship is uddhacca, which is an interesting word—restlessness, agitation, excitement, flurry, imbalance, shakiness in the sense of being shaken by experience. It's the opposite of being subdued. It's also related to the word "lifting up"—to lift up, to rise high, to be risen. So that too—being able to be lifted up, being able to be excited out of balance in a flurry, not being subdued. What's the opposite of subdued in English? I don't know, but that's restlessness, sometimes usually translated with uddhacca. That's also eradicated.

As I say, we could make distinctions here. And so one of the distinctions that's quite common to make these days is between craving, tanhā, and clinging, upādāna, so that craving is the momentary impulse to have something or to get away from something. So it can work both ways—as an aversion, aversive movement, to move away from something we don't like, what's unpleasant, or to move towards: "I want that thing, I want to get it, I want to have it." This is craving, that kind of movement of the mind, that desire.

And then, if we distinguish them, clinging, upādāna, is when that becomes more obsessive, if you like, or more entrenched. So we start circling around that thing, thinking about it a lot, scheming in ways to get it, et cetera. There's a consolidation, a tightening, a reinforcing, a solidification that's happening.

So it can be helpful to distinguish them—certainly can be helpful at a certain level—but distinguishing and differentiating them won't actually solve the issues that I want to address and draw attention to tonight. It can be helpful, but those doors that I alluded to earlier that can actually be shut by thinking about practice in a certain way, thinking about practice and Dharma in a certain way, conceiving it in a certain way—they will remain shut, even if I make certain differentiations here among those Pali words.

Historically, by the way, I don't know if there's that much—if you really study the text, you see how much overlap there really is between all these words. And historically, you know, the twelve links of dependent origination—so tanhā and upādāna are two links in those twelve links of dependent origination, of the wheel of suffering, as some people call it. Those twelve links, and in fact the wheel, were actually—there's good evidence—they were taken from a Vedic creation myth that pre-existed the Buddha by a long time. That would have been a concept, that whole twelve links

concept, that was already quite well known in the society. The Buddha picked it up, used those twelve links and the whole as a set, which was already there, and used it in a very different way, pointed in a very different direction.

And one would think, well, if the Vedic hymn had had eleven links, would there be certain distinctions, or would the Buddha have picked up a set with eleven links? Sometimes he talks about dependent origination with ten links. Other times he adds ones, they overlap. So the whole sort of project of getting—and I'll say more about this tomorrow—the whole project of getting too picky about fine distinctions and trying to carve out this kind of clarity is sometimes helpful, sometimes it's actually not that helpful.

Why bother? It actually doesn't open what needs opening. So there's a little caution there.

But for what I want to get at tonight, it actually does not help that much. In probably the second part of this talk, I want to go into and actually explain more in detail a very important practical reason—a reason for practice and for insight—why differentiating, for example, between craving and clinging is actually not that helpful. Sometimes, in fact, it doesn't actually make sense the deeper we go into practice.

But for now, let's respect that distinction that's there with those different words and very briefly go through some examples using the map of the links of dependent origination. I'm hoping you're familiar with this already. I'm going to go through very briefly as a way of looking at the anatomy of that whole process of clinging, craving, desire, and the way it leads to suffering.

We could pick any example, really, all kinds of things—what happens when we see a chocolate cake that looks very enticing, and the whole process that happens there inside us. We could take that as an example. Let's take craving for a cigarette for someone who's addicted to smoking.

If we start, there is delusion—avijjā in Pali—delusional ignorance. Really, in this case, one aspect of that ignorance is not really getting it, not really understanding that this is bad for me, this is not healthy, this will cause suffering in the future to my health. For friends who have family members really, really seriously ill with emphysema after years of smoking, something much earlier on knows this is bad for us, but doesn't really get it. The avijjā is too thick there, too entrenched. And so not really understanding.

And there's saṅkhāra, the second link—this kind of habit formations, if you like, or tendencies. So all the habit of moving to reach for the cigarette pack, to light up, the whole momentum that gets wired into the nervous system, into the mind, into the body.

That habit of doing that—those habits involved in that, maybe a habit when we feel a little bit uneasy, that's the impulse to reach for the cigarettes. A little socially anxious, or just after dinner to relax, or whatever it is. But these habits are part of the saṅkhāras.

And then we might take an example—if you're addicted to cigarettes, in this example, and maybe you're out somewhere and you see how the mind and senses, the mind and the consciousness and the sense doors become, if you like, honed or primed or cocked a little bit to notice, for instance, other people smoking. Maybe we're walking down a city street or sitting outside in a café at night and we see other people smoking and the craving arises so easily. The craving—just this little impulse, this little sort of contraction: "I want." Maybe it barely has a thought at first, but there's a movement, a kind of grasping movement of the being. This craving.

And then that can intensify into what we might call clinging—upādāna. So that this craving, this desire for a cigarette actually comes more to dominance in the mind and maybe the mind starts thinking, "I really need one, I really need a cigarette, I could really use a cigarette" or "It would be really nice," whatever it is. So thinking starts to get involved and it starts to become more dominant and more tenacious. The grasping is more tenacious.

And then this intensifies even more to what could be called becoming. Sometimes it's translated as becoming. So maybe we do start playing with the cigarette packet, maybe even take a cigarette out, roll it in our fingers, maybe even stick it unlit in the mouth and just sort of hang it there. "That's okay, right? Because I haven't lit it yet."

And maybe we say to ourselves, "Ah, just one, you know, I know I was going to quit, I can quit tomorrow," or whatever, and the mind starts justifying something to itself, justifying this whole mechanism of desire in its wily ways.

And eventually, this gathers enough force and momentum and dominance that we do light up—light that cigarette, take a long inhale, and then there's relief with that, relief of all this tension that was building up, both through the physical addiction in this case, but also the tension of what was involved in the mind there. There's lighting up and enjoying that cigarette.

And in a way, that process—because there's taken birth, physical birth, as the smoker self. The smoker is born at that point. But unfortunately, that relieved smoker self is a very fragile, sort of brittle self. And very soon, something flips. And maybe a little while after the cigarette, you start to feel, "I failed. I failed in my resolve." Maybe the self becomes "I'm weak. I can't do it. I don't have the willpower. I'm bad in some ways."

So there's this relieved self, the smoker self, that was enjoying a cigarette that was born. It actually dies. It fractures. It collapses. And it's actually replaced with a suffering self, if you like. You could say that. So death and...

those words—despair, lamentation, sorrow, grief. These are strong words indeed, yet from the suffering that accompanies them emerges something more. In this case, perhaps it's the view "I just can't do it. I failed again. I'm weak." The suffering doesn't end there, though. Out of that suffering, those self-views become reinforced. The belief that "I can't" takes hold, and through that very belief, paradoxically, the will—the willpower to quit smoking—is strengthened. Something continues to roll on, samsara flowing forward like a great wheel.

The habits, the sankhāras, those deep movements and programming of the mind and body's tendencies—in this case, reaching for cigarettes when we don't feel good, or when we do feel good, or in whatever circumstances—all of this becomes reinforced through the entire process. Each time through the cycle gives the whole wheel momentum. This is how these processes work, how they perpetuate themselves.

Let me offer another example, perhaps more intricate. Imagine I've been out for a night with friends at a bar, and there's a group of women there. With my male friends, a few of us go over to chat with these women, and I find myself talking with one I find attractive. During this brief conversation, she seems perhaps a little coy, but I give her my number—a card with my phone number.

Wrapped up in this simple gesture, in my impulse to act, is a whole constellation of avijjā—delusion, ignorance. It's never simple. Let's say I carry a particular pattern of believing that if a woman shows interest in me, it proves my okayness, my lovability. There's this belief that something external can prove something fundamental about the self. All kinds of delusion are woven through this—even within that single belief about what would prove my lovability, you can see countless components involved.

With that particular ball of avijjā operating, I also carry—unfortunately—a tendency to view myself as perhaps not okay, as maybe not attractive. Alongside this comes the compulsion to try to prove my attractiveness, my okayness, both to others and to myself. There's the belief that I'm not okay, the belief in what would prove otherwise, the tendency to see myself through this lens, and the drive to prove it constantly. How much of our actions, our choices, our speech, our dress, our entire way of being becomes organized around trying to prove something to the world?

Already there's dukkha present—you can see the pain inherent in this whole structure. And having given her my number and walked away, the entire interaction has loaded my consciousness. Because of the avijjā, because of the sankhāras, it has loaded and primed my consciousness, my mind, and my senses.

The next day, the following few days, I'm at work and can observe how consciousness perhaps narrows around this single point: Is she going to call? Maybe it builds, and the body keeps checking the mobile phone—any messages? Any messages? The pattern intensifies, actually impinging on my ability to concentrate on other things, like work itself.

Craving is already present, and craving is always complex. I'm craving a certain sound—that message notification from my phone—but wrapped up in that simple desire is so much more. I'm craving the ability to check, to know. There's craving operating on multiple levels simultaneously.

Perhaps I even become irritated during those stretches when I can't check—when I have to attend a meeting with the boss, present something important, or listen very carefully to what's being said. In those moments when I must be fully present elsewhere, there's irritation because I cannot check my messages.

This whole process builds, and perhaps there's an increasing frequency to the checking, obsessive thinking spiraling around this one interaction. Throughout all of this, I can notice how my mood and self-view are buffeted around by waves of excitement, anticipation, hope, anxiety, despondency. The emotional landscape becomes a turbulent sea, rising and falling moment by moment.

I don't recognize the number. Oh, maybe this is her. And I pick it up and it's someone trying to sell me health insurance or something. So there was that swelling up, anticipation, excitement, the becoming, and then the crash.

Or again, it rings, and again, it's a number I don't recognize. I pick it up, it's just someone with the wrong number. And the same thing, this rise and fall of the becoming of the self.

And then maybe a few days goes by, a week or I don't know how long, and she doesn't call. But in that week, I'm becoming increasingly despondent. She won't call. And that's reinforcing something: I am unattractive. It's true.

Let's say she doesn't call. And then that self-view gets solidified. Now I have evidence there. Usually this is not so clear as a thinking process. It's kind of jammed together like spaghetti that has melted into each other. It's not so clear - she didn't call, therefore I'm

unattractive. Something's happening in the whole mind. It's getting compressed and mixed up and confused and oppressed. But basically she didn't call, and this self-view of being somehow not okay, somehow unattractive, has been solidified through this whole process.

Then a little more time goes by, a week or a couple of weeks or whatever, and that whole painful self-view that has become so jammed and dense and heavy and painful - actually just over time, being involved in other stuff, having other things demand my attention, preoccupations, distractions, whatever - it gets a little less solid, a little more broken up, a little less intense. There is the breakup or the death, if you like, of that self-view to a certain extent. In this case, it's a negative self-view that's dying.

But still, so there's some relief, but still, what the Buddha called the āsavas, the outflows, the effluent - actually it's related to the word for sewage - the effluent, the outflows from all that. If I don't question all this business about self-view and how I'm trying to prove something to myself and to the world, if I don't question all that, the avijjā, the ignorance, and the saṅkhāras, the tendencies to try and prove, to believe certain things. Without questioning, then through that process, that whole cycle goes through its whole painful contractions and life and death and dissolution and relative disappearance or abeyance for a time.

But without the questioning of my belief that I need to somehow - that there's one way to address this sense of unattractiveness or not-okayness, that's by proving it - without questioning all that, I'm just reinforcing. The whole pattern gets reinforced. So it rose up, it got solid, it dissolved over time, but because there was no questioning, the whole thing just got reinforced. The seeds have gotten bigger. So the next time it comes back, it's perhaps even a little bit stronger. And this will happen until something other, until I have another way of relating, understanding, prying loose this whole process.

Pain. Craving and clinging and all that process, bringing suffering, bringing dukkha.

Now sometimes what we crave is actually what the Buddha called vibhava-taṇhā, a craving for a kind of non-being, for a kind of extinction. Sometimes we have that just when we want to go to bed at night because we're tired and just want to turn everything off - I've had enough of the day. But sometimes in really strong instances, for instance someone wanting to just get completely plastered drunk, there's something seeking a kind of oblivion and a kind of dissolution of the self in that wish that we seek - obliteration, oblivion, a kind of extinction, the vibhava-taṇhā.

Sometimes what's happening in the object that we seem to be craving - maybe it's the chocolate cake or whatever - is that there's actually a painful emotion underneath. Maybe we feel lonely. Maybe we feel unloved. And it's painful to be with that. Something in the chocolate cake and in that whole putting it in the mouth and chewing it in a primal way - there is pleasure involved in that, absolutely. But at another level of the craving, we're seeking to obliterate or cover over or numb out the painful emotion underlying it. This is quite common with food.

So it's complex, all this. There are different forces operating, if you like, different intentions operating.

What's also interesting is that if we pay attention to this, actually craving itself is uncomfortable. There's a kind of pressure that builds with craving. I want that thing - like with the cigarette example, or it could be chocolate cake, whatever it is.

And that craving itself is dukkha. It feels uncomfortable. So what we end up actually wanting by the time we have access to the cigarette or the cake or whatever it is, is actually seeking both the pleasure of the object and the relief of the pressure—the bursting of that uncomfortable bubble of craving pressure. We're seeking a kind of obliteration of the uncomfortable tension that craving itself creates.

So all this can be involved in what's going on for us with cravings and clinging, and that whole process.

Now, we could have gone through this much more slowly. We could certainly devote a whole talk to one example like this, taking apart the pieces and mapping them onto those twelve links. If you want more detail with more distinctions, this kind of material isn't hard to find these days. One place is in the book I wrote, *Seeing That Frees*—chapter ten, I think, is devoted to going into this in quite a lot of detail. Or Payutto, a Thai monk, wrote a book called *Dependent Origination*. You can find it easily, and it's not difficult to understand. It's just, as I said, a kind of anatomy.

Several times over the years with different groups, I've done teaching sessions where we literally lay out these twelve links on the floor, and then we go through different scenarios—how suffering gets built up and tied together and contracted in difficult situations, either real ones or hypothetical ones. It's almost always interesting to me how much people enjoy doing that.

You have this map and you're together looking at, if you like, the tragedy but also the comedy of the human mind in this process of tying itself up in knots. People really seem to enjoy this kind of dissecting of the anatomy or physiology—the process of suffering and clinging in this way. And partly it's because something in the human mind seems to

like chopping things up and mapping them out and feeling like, "Oh, there's this word that the Buddha used, and there's this in my experience, and I can map them together." We seem to recognize something of a truth here, and so we have the feeling: "I've understood something. I recognize a component of the process and I understand it."

So people often enjoy that feeling. But I'm often not at all convinced that this seeming recognition and so-called understanding actually makes much difference. Is it really helpful? What we really need here are practices to be able to actually pick up these concepts—if those are the concepts we're using—and really practice with them.

So if we're using this idea of the twelve links of dependent origination, where exactly can I come in during that process? What are the points of entry? There are various points where I can actually come in and contemplate in a different way in the moment, or pay attention, bringing mindfulness to bear on a certain link or feature in ways that actually make a difference—that relieve suffering, that disband to a certain extent some suffering.

Without that, we get this really unfortunate illusion of understanding something because it looks like we're being clear since we've got something that appears concrete and mapped onto concepts that are in the teachings, that the Buddha used, that otherwise might have remained more abstract. So we think, "Great, I've understood something." There's this clarity of carving up and mapping and corresponding concepts. What we really need is to be at the front line, so to speak, where the action is, with ways of practicing that are powerful, specific, and helpful.

So the Buddha said a lot about all this, and in different ways. He pointed out we can cling—there are lists of what we can cling to or crave. For instance, to sense pleasures is an obvious one. We cling to the pleasures available in the senses. We cling, he said, also to our views and opinions. We cling to our customs and habits, wherever they come from—personal or more social or cultural or religious or secular. And we also cling to self-views, the different views of the self, beliefs about the self.

So all that's there. Sometimes people dissect this anatomy and present it as a teaching or try to approach the teachings that way. And sometimes, with all this there and the Buddha making all these distinctions, what we take as the message is this teaching: just let go of everything. Just let go of everything.

Even as I say it now, you can recognize it simultaneously feels like a hugely tall order. And at the same time, it's so attractive as a teaching. It's so simple: just let go of everything. Something in us loves simplicity. Something in us is seduced by simplicity and simple teachings and simple solutions.

Even if we acknowledge that that's very challenging, it's a very simple message: Just let go of everything. Just go with the flow. Be with the flow. Just be in the moment. Be in the present. But don't even cling to that idea. Just be in the present. Very simple.

The attraction of what I've called "simplism" in other teachings, in other talks I've given, leads us to say: in this "just let go of everything" approach, liberation has nothing to do per se with an experience or any particular experience. So you get the instruction: don't try to repeat experiences. Even if they're wonderful, insightful experiences and openings and mystical experiences—don't try to repeat them. That's just clinging. Just let go of everything. Let go of everything.

Liberation is a relationship of non-clinging with experience. That's what liberation is. Liberation is non-clinging. So it's not an experience—it's a relationship. Very enticing and attractive, the simplicity of that teaching.

People are different. They may take some of those divisions that the Buddha talked about and take them as areas of investigation. But basically, the teaching is: let go of everything. Just let go of everything.

Of course, some people are completely over-simplistic, almost not even going into any tools of how we might actually let go of everything. But generally speaking, we offer tools, and tools are offered.

The first one would be: Well, for a start, how do I notice craving? Do I even recognize the experience of craving? Because how can I let go if I don't recognize it? So that's an important aspect here, an important question: How do I notice craving? How do I notice that movement of desire or clinging, whatever we want to call it?

One obvious way is my thoughts tell me. So I have to be aware of my thoughts. My thoughts tell me when they keep returning to the same object. When I hear the mind say "I want," or even more, "I need"—craving. "I need that chocolate cake" or whatever it is. So my thoughts tell me in different ways. They reveal the presence of clinging by the way they circle around some object or start to obsess around something.

But perhaps more than that, we can recognize that craving itself, as I mentioned earlier, is already dukkha. It's not just that it leads to dukkha—so this smoking will cause suffering, etc. The experience of craving itself, the force of craving itself, is already uncomfortable. It's already a dis-ease. There is dukkha there.

So this presence of dukkha, my mindfulness revealing a feeling of dukkha—just slight dis-ease, uneasiness, imbalance, if you like—all that reveals: "Aha, there's some craving. What is it that I'm craving?"

This happens at a much more subtle level than would be revealed in our thoughts, because craving can be quite active and quite present even when there's no thought in the mind. When there's no thought, there can still be craving.

This is what I want to go into, probably in the next talk: when we use these words "craving" and "clinging," we're really talking about a huge range, from very, very gross and obvious to extremely subtle. At some point, thought no longer needs to be there for the more subtle aspects or subtle manifestations of craving.

But when there is craving, there is noticeable—almost all the time—a tension that is noticeable.

In the body, maybe in the musculature, maybe even more subtle than that when it gets really quite subtle, in the sort of felt space of what I call the energy body or the subtle body, a tension, a contraction comes in. And even more subtle than that, in what we might call the mind space. Again, it's not about thoughts. It's about there's a certain cramping in the otherwise more natural spaciousness and openness of the mind.

So this is what tells me that craving is present—this tension, contraction, which will be felt as some degree of dis-ease in the body or mind space. That's different than deliberately narrowing the attention, like right now I can deliberately focus my attention on the tip of my index finger and the sensations right there in the middle. So I'm deliberately narrowing. That's fine. That's a mode of mind, if you like. But with craving, there's a tension contraction that comes into the body and the mind space that we can feel and that we can get increasingly sensitive to noticing.

Now, one teaching would be when you notice craving, just let go of the craving. Just let go of whatever it is you're craving. Let go of that. Again, sounds simple, and it might work sometimes. It's just let go of wanting the chocolate cake. You know, just let go. And if I'm attached to views, so-and-so said this, but I think that's wrong. It's like, just let go of it.

So that's one kind of instruction—just notice it and let it go. Let's run through a few of the maybe more common tools that are in the service of this just-let-go-of-everything sort of teaching.

One is notice it and let go of whatever the object that you're craving is or whatever you're clinging to, which sometimes works and, as you will all know, sometimes does not work.

Second would be to use some skillful reflection. So here's this thing, maybe it's that chocolate cake. I notice there's this craving towards it, whatever. And just to reflect, for example, on the common teaching on the impermanence of sense pleasures. So I'm going to eat that slice of chocolate cake or three slices of chocolate cake, and then an hour later, either I'm going to have a tummy ache if I've eaten too much, or it will just be gone. Where did it go? Where is that pleasure now? How much lasting fulfillment can it really give me?

This is a very common teaching—just reflect on the impermanence of sense pleasures, of what we're clinging to. And if it's clinging to views and opinions, it's actually reflecting, well, how many times in the past have I changed my view? Sometimes to a diametrically opposed one. And oftentimes I have views and opinions about things that I actually don't really know, if I'm really honest. I don't know what the truth is there. And I'm so attached to my view and my opinion. And just to reflect, I don't really know. Or my view might change.

Or to reflect, here's this clinging. Here's maybe this obsession about something or again, whatever, the chocolate cake or whatever. Is this clinging or this obsession or this thing that my mind keeps chewing over, is this really taking me where I want to go? So I could go down this road of thinking about this, obsessing about it, worrying about it, fretting about it, etc. What will I have at the end of that? Will I have what I really want? Will I have peace? Will I have fulfillment?

I'm going through this very quickly, and we will touch on these in the instructions, but you can find all this in plenty of other places, so I'm just running through it to set a context for the other material that I want to touch on. This is very common. I and probably every teacher, every Dharma teacher has given these kind of teachings.

But that would be the second—skillful reflection.

The third possible tool is to become acquainted with, through mindfulness, what we call papañca—proliferation, exaggeration, hype, storytelling that goes on, that the mind gets into when it gets really crazy about something. So I didn't really elaborate, but for example, in the example where I gave the woman my number and then the whole story building and hype around it. Or maybe it's something that we want and...

or that's really terrible if it happens. And there's a whole identity view and story and history and hyping up of the self and the issue involved. And we can see this happening. This is another thing on retreats – how happy people are to hear stories, funny stor-

ies of papanca. It's a relief. We realize, oh, you know, I'm not the only one to be crazy that way. But just hearing these stories, or just recognizing them intellectually, isn't going to cut it at a very deep level.

At any rate, we begin to recognize, our mindfulness begins to get more familiar with these times and states of mind when the mind has just got into a complete spin. And we could say, using language a certain way, that when it's in this state of proliferation and storm building – building a storm in a teacup – we are fabricating. The mind is fabricating.

Instead of being with the basic experience of something – here is this contraction in my chest – and instead of just being with the sensations, I'm bringing in a whole story of my patterns of closed-heartedness and that has to do with my mother and her mother and all this stuff, and something that's at one level just some sensations that will pass has become this whole heavy story that it's absolutely terrible, I must get rid of this, et cetera, et cetera.

Afterwards, when it dissolves a little bit, we begin to see, oh, we're fabricating something. There was this punctual state, and this whole web weaving of complication and elaboration and proliferation around self and around issue and all of that. There's fabrication.

In contrast to that, when we're simply mindful, we can be – there's the sensation in the chest, yeah, it's contraction, it's unpleasant – and we can be with that sensation in what we sometimes call bare attention. That state of mindfulness and of bare attention is a state of no papanca and no fabrication. We're just with the thing as it is.

Through repeated mindfulness practice, we actually get more of a taste for this, more of a taste of living without papanca, not caught up in the maelstrom in that teacup, not entangled in the cobwebs and the imprisonment, really, of all this intricate, thick, over-elaborated storytelling.

So a degree of clinging and craving is released when we let go of that papanca and we're with things more in the way of what we could call simple mindfulness or bare attention, or we could say being with things as they are, simply. This simple mindfulness practice in contrast to papanca – and seeing that, or seeming to see that we're not fabricating when we're mindful – that's a skillful tool too.

Another one, a little bit more precise, if you like – let's take a negative example. For example, the craving to be rid of something, what we call aversion. So here, maybe I'm sitting on a retreat or something, and my back hurts, or my knees hurt. There's the unpleasant vedana, the unpleasant sensations. And there's a craving to be rid of them. There's a rejection. There's a pushing away.

Again, maybe my mind is saying, "Oh, come on, ring the bell. When's this sitting over?" And spinning all kinds of stories about, again, I have this pain because I'm such a contracted human being, et cetera, et cetera. Other people don't have it, whatever it is.

But maybe even without thought – as I said, there's no thought. There's just this pain and this energetic push, rejection of that experience, a kind of tensing of the being, of the body and of the mind to get rid of, to hold it at arm's length, to push it away. And this again, we can feel, we can notice.

One skillful strategy is actually just to come to train the attention and just see – can I hold it right at that point in the body where the unpleasant vedana are just coming up like a fountain? Moment after moment, there's that unpleasantness, unpleasant sensation, unpleasant sensation, unpleasant sensation in my back or in my knee or whatever it is. Looking at it that way, and kind of intent, but with some relaxation as well, in a kind of balanced way, just honing, training, focusing the attention just as much as I can at that fountain, if you like, of moment-to-moment unpleasant vedana.

Then I'll notice the craving go with that. So there's the unpleasant vedana, there's this rejection. And they kind of go together. But what I can see is this arising and unpleasant sensation, and then this kind of impulse of rejection, this energetic push away.

Of course, I can see this with pleasant sensations as well. Sometimes it's really interesting eating and watching this movement. Here's this delicious food that's been maybe, again, on retreat cooked for me, or cooked it for myself at home, whatever it is, and I'm eating, and I'm really paying attention to the arising of the pleasant sensations in the mouth. The food is in my mouth. And then I can still notice, curiously, how something in the being, in the mind, is kind of grasping.

It's like this movement of grasping, movement towards, to hold, to grasp, to hold onto, to encompass those pleasant sensations. So I see the pleasantness, and I see this impulsive, energetic movement to grasp. The food is already in my mouth, and the pleasantness is already there, and there's still this grasping. So I can see it either way.

And I begin to, or I stay steady at the vedanā, and then what happens is that—and again, this is separating notions of craving from clinging—I see the craving, the impulse arise, but it doesn't build up so much. So I can just stay, for example, with this pain in

the body, this moment-to-moment arising of pain, and just watch these little bursts of impulse, of craving, of rejection, of pushing away, arise. But they don't—they just sort of arise and they subside. They arise and they subside. And this consolidation and building of that and solidification and entrenchment of that into what might be called clinging, it doesn't arise because I'm just staying closer to the vedanā and the craving. So that would be a fourth approach.

A fifth is again relating back to what I touched on earlier—to actually develop an ability where I'm paying more attention to the actual experience of craving and noticing that pressure that is involved in craving. So back to the cigarette example or the chocolate cake example, whatever it is. Here the mind has the image of the cigarette, and then there's this—I can feel this pressure build of the craving, or maybe it's clinging. I can feel that pressure build in the body, maybe even more than the mind. And instead of seeking to obliterate and release and sort of pop that uncomfortable bubble of pressure by having the cigarette, I'm actually learning to just give that some space. Just let that pressure kind of build, ebb, and swell. And then I'll notice, oh, it reaches a certain point and it just subsides again. And maybe it does that again. But what's happening there is I'm staying with it and giving it space. That's key. And I'm learning to tolerate it. I'm developing my capacity to tolerate that uncomfortable pressure so that I don't just have to give into it.

And in time, what happens is instead of getting reinforced, that force of craving, instead of being reinforced because I keep giving into it, because I can't tolerate that pressure, I tolerate the pressure, it flows. It releases. It subsides. And over time, the very force of the craving, when it comes back next time, is a little less, a little less. So I'm learning the skill of tolerating. I'm also eroding that particular craving and maybe the pattern of craving in general. So that would be a fifth option.

And a sixth is more general, touching on what we discussed, elaborating a little bit more what we said before—actually just paying attention to impermanence in general. Really being aware, anicca. Everything is impermanent. Everything is impermanent. So this is so much the thrust of so much insight meditation. Just see that everything is impermanent. Just notice. How can you not but notice? If you're mindful, you'll see that things are impermanent. And we start to notice it more and more. And if we notice that things are impermanent, we let go. We see there's no point chasing things that will just be impermanent. There's no point clinging to things that are going to dissolve anyway.

So, at least that's the theory. And there's a certain amount of truth in that. When we see impermanence, we let go. So the noticing of impermanence, the attention to impermanence, generally speaking, brings letting go. And maybe, and that would be a sixth

possibility, maybe with that sixth possibility, we have times where we, eventually through practice, there are times where we see, wow, there really is just this process of impermanent things. Where is the personality here? The personality is a process that's constructed. The self is just a process of momentary phenomena, momentary factors of mind, momentary moments of perception or consciousness or impulse. There is just this process of impermanent events or impermanent things.

And I am like that, the self is like that, everything is... that's all there is. And again, generally speaking, when we see that, a degree of fundamental avijjā, fundamental delusion about reality, if you like, is cut away. And there's generally speaking less clinging, because there's... if you like, a less solidified... We don't believe so much in such a solidified sense of self. And sometimes that's what happens, and that does work.

But you can already... Here, I'm not... I apologize. I'm not selling this very well. I perhaps could have done a better job of selling it. But in a way, that's my whole point. That's my whole point.

So all this, what I've said so far, and what I've laid out in terms of teachings and approaches to letting go of clinging and desire and craving and all that, in these ways and these approaches — it's not that it's wrong. It's not wrong. It's all good. It's not that the understanding is wrong, per se, but it is limited. That's my main point. It's limited in both depth and breadth.

If we only respond to desire, and only view desire, for example, with the lens "what can this really give me? Because everything's impermanent, might as well let go." Or if we only try to live with mindfulness, with so-called bare attention, staying at the so-called bare experience, or staying at the vedanā even, if we believe that mindfulness and so-called bare attention is really a state of non-papañca, non-proliferation, and really a state of complete non-fabrication. If this kind of more or less sums up my Dharma practice and what I'm trying to do and how I conceive of the Dharma, then I will have missed, and I will continue to miss the possibility of really deep insight.

There's something there, as I said, the beginning shuts off certain doors, in this case, the doors of depth, the doors to a much more radical depth. It also, living that way, viewing that way, those ways, is simply not always going to be helpful. There will be situations, there will be instances, there will be streams or threads in my life where it's very helpful, but there will be plenty where it just is not helpful. I just need some intelligence and some reflection to expose that fact. Plenty of threads in my life where it's completely not helpful to live with, to approach it with bare attention, to approach the dropping of desire because "what can this really give me?" to believe I'm being with reality through mindfulness. All of that, there's a kind of, if I try and do that, if even

with the sort of feeling of breadth and all-encompassingness, or especially if I have that feeling of all-encompassing, it's going to be, there's something a bit, I don't know, silly in it.

Because as well, as well as just simply discerning what are helpful and unhelpful desires in different situations, and very basic, we haven't even talked about that. But as well as that, so much more is possible. So much more is possible.

So how do we think of the Dharma? Is the Dharma, was the Buddha just saying, let go, let go, don't cling and live peacefully. Let go and live peacefully. Is that what the Dharma is? Is that all the Dharma can be? Let go and live peacefully. Whose Buddha is that?

Or is it, and this is what I want to go into in a bit more detail, is it, first of all, that through practice, through picking up this idea of clinging to craving, et cetera, and exploring it experientially with a certain, what I'm going to call practical intelligence, facility in practice. And I start to learn something about letting go of clinging through practice at deeper, what I call deeper and deeper levels.

And something happens in that process — the whole world of experience opens up, dissolves, opens up to a completely different level, if you like. A mystical opening, mystical openings, plural. You can see the whole world unbound. We open to the unfabricated. If we follow this thread of clinging in certain ways, or letting go of clinging, we follow that. Subtler and subtler, deeper and deeper, we begin to, we can know what is unfabricated. Radical, different sense of existence, and we understand the emptiness of all things. Something very, very deep, very profound here.

So if we, again going back to what we said before, if we, even contemplating impermanence more and more rapidly in the meditation, mindfulness gets very intense...

It's true that sometimes we're really intensely focusing on rapid impermanence very finely, and something can happen that can kind of pop that whole experience. Suddenly the walls are shattered, and the walls of the world are shattered, and we are opened to the unfabricated. No subject, no object, no thing, no experience in any kind of conventional sense. No space, no time. Not just no past and future, no present. Something utterly, utterly transcendent and different.

But I'm not quite sure how that happened. I was just contemplating impermanence and then something popped. And it might be that indeed, a certain freedom comes out of that exposure to the unfabricated, that knowing of that. But I come back to the ordin-

ary world of experience, of ordinary appearances, and perhaps it's not really clear to me what the relationship is of that world of appearances to that world of non-appearance, of the unfabricated.

Somehow I need to be contemplating this whole teaching about clinging and practicing with the teachings about clinging in ways that let me understand something about the relationship between appearances and what we might call non-appearance or the unfabricated. The relationship of this world of time, where it seems obvious that everything is impermanent, and the world of the timeless. Not the world of permanence, but not the world of impermanence—the world of timelessness. What's the relationship there?

And might not a fuller freedom, a deeper freedom, a more beautiful freedom, and a greater sense of beauty come when I really understand through approaching the teachings about clinging practically in meditation, in certain ways, in ways that let me understand this relationship of appearances to non-experiences? The relationship of the experience of non-appearance, the experience of the unfabricated, of the timeless, to the world of appearances, experience, conventional experiences, and time.

So if I'm too simplistic and I have the goal of just living without clinging—that's what liberation is—and I'm not picking up this teaching of clinging in a way that's actually going to unlock something much more profound, reveal something about existence much more profound, much more radical, there's a danger there. I need to pick it up in a way that will help me do that.

So it can be limited if I take the teachings in a way that will limit them. It's limited in depth. It's also limited in breadth, and that's the second thing that I want to go into. Again, just having the idea of letting go of desire, letting go of craving, and so forth. Even when we differentiate wholesome and unwholesome desires, even then, what I would like to go into is there will be something in that way of approaching things, something in that attempt, something in that conception of the Dharma—of what practice is and where it's leading—that will not allow an adequate view of self, of others, of things, of the world, and also of desire itself.

In other ways, not just to do with this depth of knowing the unfabricated, depth of knowing the emptiness of things, but in other ways it will not be adequate. That's what I want to go into on this retreat.

So there's a possibility that the way we're thinking about these teachings about non-clinging, the way that we're conceiving of it is, if you like, over-simplistic, and it will limit both the depth that we're able to open to—and that's our whole sense of existence

—and also, if you like, a kind of breadth in terms of how we then view the things of this world in other ways, which I'll go into that have to do with beauty and sacredness. So this is what I hope to elaborate.

CHAPTER 52

The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h14

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea offers a revolutionary perspective on the Buddha's teaching about clinging (upādāna) and craving (taṇhā). Rather than simply trying to live without clinging, Burbea introduces the concept of 'ways of looking' - how our manner of perceiving, relating, and conceiving actually fabricates our entire experience of self, objects, and world.*
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> *Drawing on practices of releasing subtle contractions in meditation, Burbea demonstrates how different degrees of clinging correspond to different levels of fabrication. He shows how even basic mindfulness, awareness of impermanence, and states like 'big mind' are still fabricated experiences on a spectrum. The talk explores how understanding dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) as a practical tool rather than ultimate reality opens up the possibility of engaging with emptiness (suññatā) while still having appearances.*
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> *Burbea addresses the apparent paradox that clinging is necessary for any perception or experience, yet can be understood as empty and illusory. This understanding transforms practice from attempting impossible non-clinging to artfully working with fabrication itself - opening vast possibilities for mystical experience and a radically different relationship with existence itself.*

Okay, so how might we think about this teaching about clinging and dukkha? How might we conceive of it and this aim of non-clinging? How might we conceive of that and approach it in practice in ways that do open up the full depth of what is possible and do not constrain the breadth of beauty and possibility for us? What are the possibilities of conceiving and approaching in practice this area, this theme of the teaching?

There are a few ways into this we could go, but let me try and say something briefly about it. One possibility is to take up this theme, not to actually wait until we're in the grip of some obsessive contraction of clinging around something or other and then try and let go of that. Important as that is to address those kinds of states of mind and states of being when they arise and how we can find some relief, how we can see in a different way. But actually to take up this theme of clinging and craving as a theme and to run with it, even when it seems like there's not much craving going on.

So, for example, in sitting or walking meditation, standing meditation, whatever, we can actually—as I mentioned in the last talk, in the first part of this talk—begin to get familiar and more and more sensitivity to the experience of craving and clinging. This experience of something contracting in the mind and the body. Even when there's no thought there, something's contracting towards a sensation, towards an idea, towards an image, away from. So it could be grasping at something or pushing something away, grasping or aversion. And this subtle feeling we get more and more familiar with.

We notice this is dukkha. This is dukkha. This contraction itself feels unpleasant. As I said, it might be much subtler than even noticeable in the musculature. We're talking about just the sense of the subtle body, the energy body, the sense of the space of the mind. Feeling it, feeling its dukkha. We're talking about subtle dukkha now. Feeling that subtle dukkha and relaxing the subtle body, relaxing the energy, relaxing that tension that's come in with that grasping of clinging craving. Releasing it.

This is actually working directly with the energy of that contraction and releasing the contraction. Now you could, as I said in the first part, think about the object, you could contemplate its impermanence, etc. Or you can work directly with the actual energetics of clinging, of craving. So that's an alternative way.

If you start doing this and you start actually getting quite skilled—there's an art in this—and you start to develop a sensitivity, as I said, it gets more subtle. Because when I let go of, when I release a certain amount of craving, calmness comes into the being, the body, the mind. There's an openness, there's a calmness. And that calmness, like when the water is calm in a pond or a lake or something, I can actually pick up even more subtle levels of craving. So then I can feel that very subtle and release those, and even more calm.

So the very calmness that's made possible through the release, again and again, of finding some craving, releasing it, finding some craving and releasing it, the calmness that can open up through that actually allows me to go deeper and more subtle into the process. This is actually a very enjoyable process. Most people who work that way in practice find it's a very lovely way to practice. Very lovely. All kinds of beauty and softening and ease come in.

And I start to notice something. First thing is, oh yes, when I let go of the craving, the dukkha releases. So we could say the dukkha is being fabricated by the craving. So I really get, I feel viscerally in my felt experience again and again, I just see craving, dukkha, craving, dukkha. And I feel it, I feel its tension, and I feel the ease, the relief of the dukkha right there. And dukkha here means something really quite broad in its range, really from quite gross to really quite subtle.

But as I develop this practice and work with it and enjoy it and develop my sensitivity and the art of it, I also start to realize that the sense of self is also fabricated with and by the craving. In other words, the more craving, the more solid the center self, the more contracted, the more separate from others or from the world.

So this sense of self, I start to see it, like the dukkha, move up and down on a spectrum of fabrication. Sometimes it's so solid, so dense, so separate. And when I let go of craving, when I let go at the deeper end of this spectrum, the whole sense of self gets much lighter, much more transparent, much more melted, much less well-defined. Its edges more melt into a kind of oneness, etc., or begin to dissolve in different ways.

And then correspondingly, there's a mutual dependence the other way. The stronger the sense of self, the more that tends to build craving—unless we come in and work with it this other way by releasing. But the sense of self, the experience of dukkha and the experience of self are dependent on craving. More craving, more self, if you like.

Less craving, less self gets fabricated. Very interesting.

It doesn't stop there either. Because again, as I develop this practice and I enjoy it and I get into it and feel the yumminess of it, I start to see not just dukkha, not just the sense of myself in the moment, but also the sense of the very objects that I'm paying attention to and the sense of the very world that I feel myself to be in. That too gets correspondingly more solid, more separate, more of an issue, more prominent in consciousness to the degree that I am craving. More craving, more solid and more dense and more real, if you like, the world becomes—more oppressive. Let go of craving, let go at a deeper level, start to see these dependencies, start to see objects too begin to fade out. They begin to melt, they begin to blur. The very perception of objects, the very perception of the world is also dependent on craving to a certain extent.

Now some people find this practice really works and can take it very, very deep. Other people reach a sort of limit and they have to slightly change the practice or move to something else. But basically, one way of understanding what's happening there is that we are at any moment in time always inevitably engaging what I would call a way of looking. That's a shorthand phrase. What it really means is a way of looking, a way of perceiving, a way of relating, and a way of conceiving.

I use this word "conceiving" not just to mean thinking about. Even when I'm not thinking, I'm still conceiving. I'm still vaguely feeling there's a me and an it—there's a self, a subject, and an object, and it's happening in time, even if it's just this present moment. Nothing else going on but the consciousness and the object and a present mo-

ment. That's still conception. I've got the tripod there: subject, object, time—still conception. So I use this word "conceiving" to mean something much, much deeper and more pervasive and more subtle than thinking, but it also includes thinking.

So "way of looking" wraps up all together, in any moment, the way of relating, the way of perceiving, seeing, sensing, and the way of conceiving. All that together—just for shorthand, I'm calling it a way of looking. And in any moment, there's always a way of looking. There's always a way of looking.

Now that way of looking might have a lot of clinging in it, or it might have less clinging, or it might have really a little clinging. It might have really, really, really only the subtlest clinging. But always, at some moment, I'm somewhere—the mind, the being, is somewhere on that spectrum of how much clinging and what kinds of clinging are going on in the way of looking.

And I start to see, I start to make connections here. Dependent on the way of looking, including how much and what kind of clinging is going on, dependent on that is my experience—experience of dukkha certainly, experience of self as well, and experience of the object that I'm paying attention to, the objects and the world around me. Also the experience of time, all kinds of things. More clinging, more fabrication of dukkha, of self, of objects, of world. Less clinging, less fabrication.

So there is, as I said, a spectrum of subtlety. It gets extremely subtle, and as we all know, can be very, very gross—the level of clinging and the solidity that comes into all these experiences of dukkha, of self, of other, of world.

When you start to explore this way, apart from the loveliness of this practice—so uncovering more subtle levels of dukkha is actually contrary to what it might sound at first. You might think, oh, that's horrific, this sort of excavation of more and more dukkha, more and more clinging, suffering. No, because I'm feeling dukkha, I'm releasing it, I'm finding ways of releasing it—actually it feels very beautiful. There's great beauty, great, as I said, yumminess, really, in this practice. Really, really lovely way of practicing.

As I start to do this, the whole distinction between words like "clinging" and "craving" also starts to melt. It's okay, it's valid at a certain level, but actually it's not really getting to the really juicy stuff. It's not really opening things out in a very deep way to hang on to, to cling, in effect, to a distinction between craving and clinging, for instance.

When I start to see—if I'm just picking this one way of practicing as a way in, I could pick another one—when I start to see the dependent arising and the fabrication of my entire experience—but let's just say, for now, just of self, but also of objects, as I said—

the dependent arising, the arising dependent on the way of looking, dependent on the mind, and dependent, essentially, on the clinging. The fabrication—if we say the same thing in other words—the fabrication of the sense of self, the fabrication of the appearances of things and of objects and of time and of world and all of that, dependent on clinging. And I start to understand: what does it mean to say that the self is empty? What does it mean to say that appearances appear, but they are empty? They're dependent arisings.

They're fabrications. They're illusory. They do not exist. This self-sense that seems so real, this object-sense that seems so real—this thing before me, this thing in my mind, this emotion, whatever it is—seems so real. Yet it's a dependent arising. It's a fabricated illusion. It is not a thing in itself without the mind clinging at it or to it.

I start to understand, probably beginning to see it more easily with the self, though it can happen in different ways. And then maybe that leads to another kind of practice. Perhaps I see a certain amount of the fabrication of the self, the dependent arising emptiness of the self through this developed art of letting go of clinging and craving. I start to develop a conviction: yes, this self is an illusion.

So when it feels like I'm looking at something and I say, "Oh, that's me, it's me, I am this mind," or "I am this consciousness," or "That is my body," or "This is my emotion," or whatever, I start to see, "Oh, that's kind of an illusion"—because I've seen this whole self is a construction, a concoction, a fabrication. It's a sankhāra, in the Buddha's words.

Then maybe I can move to another kind of practice, which is: let me just dwell in my sitting meditation, in my walking meditation, in my standing meditation, and whatever arises, I'm regarding it as anattā. Attā means self in Pali; anattā means not-self. This is not-self. This is not me. This is not mine.

So this becomes a way of looking. Some people can move straight into that practice. Other people need to do another practice that enables it a little bit. At some point I could, if I want, change practices and move into that. It's another way of looking. I'm regarding whatever comes up as anattā—whatever comes up is not self, is not me, not mine.

Now, this isn't a big, laborious thinking process. It's a way of looking. It's immediate. It's something that's permeating my very perceiving. It's a conception, for sure, but it's also a cutting or replacing of the usual unconscious conception, which is: this is me, this is mine. We don't often think that. We have a sense. I look at my hand—it's my hand. It's not yours. It's mine. Memory comes up as mine. I don't even have to think this, but that conception is operating naturally.

So we're just letting that more usual conception go away and replacing it with another conception: not me, not mine. That becomes the way of looking. And again, this can be extremely powerful. It's a beautiful, beautiful practice to develop as an art, and there's lots to it. Like any practice, it has lots of subtleties and nuts and bolts, and we need to learn how to navigate it.

We can really develop it very, very beautifully. What will happen? Something similar to what we described in that practice of releasing craving. The world of appearances, the sense of self, the world of objects—even as I pay attention to them—they fade. Not because they're impermanent, but because I'm releasing the clinging. I'm releasing the clinging and I see: oh, they fade.

They don't necessarily move to this fast momentary impermanence—I'll come back to that in a second—the sense of rapid impermanence. They fade in the sense that they blur. They dissolve. They fade into white light or into blackness or whatever. They disappear.

So, for instance, paying attention again to the pain in my back or in my knees or whatever, and I'm just saying *anattā*, *anattā*, and maybe even the consciousness that knows this vedanā, this unpleasant vedanā—it's also *anattā*, *anattā*.

I develop that skill. It takes time. Really an art to develop here, and in stages usually. I've talked about it elsewhere, I'm going very quickly now.

It's not that then I see this rapid impermanence of vedanā. No, I actually see that that unpleasant vedanā will—I'm not trying to push it away with this anattā way of looking, but it's almost like it doesn't matter. I've let go of the clinging of believing it's me or mine, and the vedanā itself first goes towards, actually it might go towards pleasant, funnily enough, but eventually it goes towards neutrality.

What was unpleasant either loses its unpleasantness more and more, and may go through a stage of being actually pleasant, and eventually, if I keep doing it, even on the pleasant made, it becomes neutral. And then eventually, even those neutral sensations disappear. There's no sensation there in the knee anymore. I'm staring right at it. It's not that I'm not paying attention, I'm certainly not distracted. It's faded. It's unfabricated.

And I start to see, again, the construction of my experience and my perception and what appears to me. This practice can go really deeply in terms of how much it can deconstruct or unfabricate the world of appearances.

Then, again, based on that practice, maybe I really start to have a conviction because I see it again and again. I start to see whatever appears—whether I take it as me or mine or whatever, it is empty. Not just that it is not me and it is not mine, but it is in itself empty. It's an illusory appearance, to borrow the Buddha's terminology. It's a fabrication. It's a concoction. It's a construction. Construction dependent on the way of looking.

If I look in a certain way, the world appears and it appears very solid. If I look in other ways, it appears, but it appears much less solid. And if I look in certain ways, certain ways of looking, if I pay attention in certain ways of looking, it does not appear. This thing that was troubling me, this thing that I loved, this thing that was neutral, fades.

This undermines, when I see this again and again, it begins to undermine—make the connections—it begins to undermine my belief in the reality of things, the reality of experiences at any level, and we're talking atomic components of experience, very rapid, the reality of anything at all. I cannot believe that they have an independent reality, independent of the way of looking. That belief that they do have an independent reality is the most fundamental level of avijjā, of delusion.

So in the tradition, especially picked up in the Mahayana tradition, clinging—this word clinging—has a much broader range of meaning than just the kind of gross obsession, hanging on to something for grim life. Just the belief that something has a reality independent of the way of looking, independent of the mind, if you like. Just that belief. And again, we don't walk around thinking about this. This is how we tend to see, how we tend to view, how we tend to experience. It's the default way of looking at a very deep level. That belief, that avijjā, is clinging.

So that clinging starts to, or rather avijjā, this basic level of delusion, of ignorance, is a form of clinging. Avijjā is grouped together with other forms of clinging.

Then I can start to actually employ another way of looking when this conviction goes through these developments, these arts, these practices, when this understanding, when I have conviction in my heart, that something in me knows—I've seen them fade, dependently on the way of looking, and I've seen how clinging and self-view constructs the fabrication, fabricates objects, constructs the appearances of seemingly solid, separate things.

When I've seen that enough, something in my heart is convinced, and I can adopt, deliberately, play with, entertain a way of looking in practice, in whatever posture in practice, that just sees things and the way of looking says empty, empty, empty—mean-

ing I know, I don't have to have this shorthand whole thinking thing, but again, it's very fluid, very direct, very light way of looking. I know you're empty, I've seen, I know you're empty because I know that you fade when the way of looking has less avijjā in it, when there's less clinging to self-view, when I see you as not-self, or whatever it is.

So I can start to look at things and just see them as empty, empty, empty. And what happens then? An even deeper level of fading.

This applies to everything without question. The barest sense of subject, just a sense of consciousness, a momentary consciousness, or a vast, eternal-seeming awareness. Empty. Fabrication. Much less fabricated than our normal sense of consciousness or awareness, but still a fabrication. Empty.

The present moment, however brief or eternal it seems, is fabrication—empty. Whatever object appears, however vague, however light, however spacious, however transparent seeming, is empty fabrication.

And there's an even deeper fading because the avijjā is being withdrawn, being undermined in that moment.

You can go into this whole process, taking up the teaching of clinging and going deeper with your understanding of what's involved in this term clinging and how to actually work with it to not cling in the moment. You actually start to see that even attention...

To have any experience, I need to somehow pay attention to that experience. Even if it's a very open attention—I'm attending to the totality of vast awareness—there's attention there. And the mind is actually, in a subtle way, clinging. Attention works through a kind of clinging. I shut this out, so I have this experience. The mind grasps like a pair of calipers; it grasps at the object that we are paying attention to.

So even attention is a form of clinging.

These distinctions—we go back to the twelve links of dependent origination, distinguishing between craving and clinging and saṅkhāra—as we go deeper into the whole thing, the very delineations that we had started off with and that are useful at a certain level begin to blur. We see how clinging, craving, saṅkhāra, avijjā, attention—these notions overlap. They're all different forms of clinging, if you like.

Even in the examples I gave earlier, for instance, the example of fretting over hoping that this woman calls me—you can see that there's the self-view that perhaps I'm not attractive or I'm not okay somehow, and the belief that it would prove that I am okay and

attractive if she called me. You can see that that avijjā is already a clinging. I'm clinging to that belief, and the sense of self there is already a kind of clinging. My trying, my tendency to view things that way, my trying to prove it—that movement to prove it is also a kind of craving, a clinging.

So even at that level, but certainly as you go deeper into this whole question in practice—you practice in these beautiful ways, very delicate, very subtle, but enormously opening in terms of the freedom and what they open in the sense of existence—you start to see that this word clinging has a huge range of subtlety. It covers a lot of ground. And as I said, all kinds of distinctions start to blur and overlap.

But essentially, I learn how to play with releasing clinging in the moment—clinging in this very broad sense at different ranges of subtlety—through playing with different ways of looking. And that develops, and I see that as I do this and let go of clinging very, very deeply, the world of appearances—self, other, world, time—is fabricated less and less.

There's a spectrum here of clinging, of self-sense, of dukkha, of sense of objects, of solidity of time. All of that is one spectrum of fabrication. And if I develop the art of this, eventually—language is difficult—eventually there can be a complete unfabricating. Nothing is fabricated at all. No subject, no object, no time—past, future or present—no space. Something that language cannot approach, except by negatives.

Through that seeing of dependent fabrication, dependent fading, dependent unfabricating, and the totality of that in an experience of the unfabricated, I understand something. All things, all experiences, all phenomena are empty. Empty meaning they do not exist independent of the mind, independent of the way of looking.

So I start with very rudimentary and simple concepts of ways of looking. There are different ways of looking at things, and they involve different kinds of clinging to different degrees, and I can see a certain amount of fabrication. And included in that idea of ways of looking is really the way of relating, the way of conceiving, the way of sensing and perceiving and framing—all kinds of things. All that's wrapped up in the way of looking.

These concepts—ways of looking and fabrication—are very simple concepts. Even a beginner in meditation, actually even someone who doesn't meditate, can see this. Every human being knows what papañca is. If you talk about papañca, every human being will recognize that. Every human being. Even someone who's not gone within ten miles of a meditation cushion knows the experience of papañca and knows the experience of coming out of papañca into a more normal state of consciousness.

Right there is a segment of this spectrum of fabrication. Papañca being much more fabricated—the self so dense, so tight, the dukkha being fabricated more intensely, and the sense of issue or object or whatever it is we're obsessing about also more intense, more real, more dense. A more normal state of consciousness—still the sense of self, very real, but less oppressive, less dense, less separate, less contracted, and similarly with the issue.

Even a beginner who's just exposed to mindfulness, maybe even on their first retreat or first course in mindfulness, gets a taste of states that involve even less fabrication than the normal state. Just a sense of even this self being less solid, less fabricated in different ways.

So even more ease than what they'd known through a normal state of consciousness.

Here we have a little spectrum: Papancha at one extreme end, the normal state of consciousness—everyday walking around consciousness—and then a state of mindfulness when it's "going quite well." Right there are three points on a spectrum, and the level of mindfulness is, of those three, the least fabricated.

This isn't rocket science. What's possible, though, is to really extend that spectrum and see how all our experience fits onto it. In a way, the whole Dharma fits onto that. The whole Dharma is saying something about this spectrum of fabrication and its relationship with clinging, and what that says about the world of appearances and their apparent reality.

So what we're really doing is taking these concepts of ways of looking and fabrication, and through practice—through experiential playing with ways of looking—we're contemplating the dependence of appearances on the mind, on the way of looking, and on clinging.

Let me return to an example: if I'm contemplating impermanence and rapid impermanence in an intense, perhaps Mahasi-style or Goenka-style practice, that's a way of looking. I'm looking at impermanence and I get into a kind of groove of seeing beginnings and endings of things. It's a way of looking that tends to fabricate what it sees in a particular manner.

I start to see process. I start to see more beginnings and endings. Appearances begin to become more fragmented, and I start to say, "Oh, now I'm seeing the atomic reality of things."

But am I? Is it the reality? Is it the ultimate reality? Or is it just a way of looking that, because I look in a certain way, conditions and fabricates what appears to me? Yes, it's less fabricated than other ways of looking, or it fabricates less than other ways of looking. But is it the end of fabrication? No. And certainly a state of mindfulness is not the end of fabrication.

As I said before, it's like: "Now there's no Papancha, there's no obsessing, I'm just with the simple experience of the pain in my chest or whatever it is, and therefore I'm not fabricating, because there's no Papancha." No. Keep open this question: what's the limit of fabrication?

This seems real. Everyone seems to talk as if these things are real—bare sensations, or if I'm in a certain culture, the atomic process of mind moments and experiences. Is that the ultimate reality? Or is that just a certain level of less fabrication?

So I keep this framework of ways of looking and fabrication, and I just see. Don't arrest that investigation. Keep playing. Is there a way that whatever I had taken to be the baseline of non-fabrication is actually still fabricated, and I can learn to unfabricate that too?

Whether it's a vast awareness, whether it's these momentary arisings and passings away of some impersonal process, whether it's just the so-called bare attention to experiences—none of that is the end of fabrication. All of those perceptions are still fabricated and we can go deeper than that.

Now, if through contemplating rapid impermanence in meditation, there is this pop that I described, or a kind of explosion, and one finds oneself suddenly—one doesn't find oneself when there's an explosion into the unfabricated, the unconditioned—then again, why is that happening?

It happened because there was enough of a release of clinging in the contemplation of rapid impermanence. The mind saw that impermanence and just let go. And it's the letting go of the clinging that unfabricates, because clinging fabricates. So letting go of clinging unfabricates. It's not the seeing of impermanence that reveals reality—it's seeing the impermanence that causes the mind to let go of the clinging, clinging in this very subtle way.

Sometimes this doesn't happen. A person is just seeing impermanence again and again, seeing impermanence again and again. But sometimes it can release the clinging at such a deep level that there is non-fabrication and there's an opening to the unfabricated.

But still I need to understand that. If I'm not seeing it in terms of ways of looking, fabrication, and clinging, I don't quite understand—as I said at the end of the first part—what is the relationship between this amazing unfabricated and this world of dukkha and appearances.

I need to understand something there.

So this way of approaching what I've just described—this way of approaching the understanding, the conception, conceiving of what the path is, the aim of non-clinging, and approaching it in practice—it has the potential of really opening up something very radical, very radically inexperienced, in terms of this spectrum into depths and depths of lessening fabrication and unfabricating. All kinds of beautiful mystical experiences are possible there, and an experience of the unfabricated as well. Both in terms of experience, a radicality, and also in terms of understanding.

You might hear this, and hopefully it at least makes a little bit of sense, but without practice it's going to be like: "This is strange. I don't know what he's talking about." It sounds either baffling or very far-fetched, or it's not the kind of thing I'm used to hearing. If I don't practice, I won't see this. If I don't practice in certain ways that allow this and make this understanding possible, I won't see this, I won't understand. And hearing about it certainly won't have much impact.

Sometimes, as I said, even practicing in certain ways doesn't have the impact because I'm not conceiving of it properly. Even if there's this opening or that opening, this experience or that falling away, it doesn't have the right impact or the impact that it could have in terms of freedom and opening up the sense of existence because I'm not conceiving it. I'm not framing it in a way that's actually helping it to do that. Maybe I'm limiting—as I said—my idea of "this is fabricated and this is not fabricated," and I put a bottom limit to my exploration. Maybe I'm just not conceiving in terms of reality rather than in terms of ways of looking, and that's creating a wall that I can't go beyond. Or I'm not conceiving in terms of fabrication in a full enough way, or even at all.

This teaching—the Buddha's central teaching, the Four Noble Truths—says there is dukkha and it arises from clinging, from craving, as its cause, and there's the release of that, and there are ways to move towards releasing it. The shorthand version is just: craving causes dukkha, clinging causes dukkha, and there's the possibility of releasing it. And the teaching of dependent origination is a sort of more detailed explanation of that.

There's actually an analogy for that. Perhaps we find ourselves—we don't know how we got there—we wake up and we are somehow, we realize, locked inside some kind of dark, semi-dark, I don't know, a big castle or something. There are just all these corridors and stairwells and doors, some of them open and some of them locked, and we don't know where we are. How on earth do we get out?

Then we're given a map, maybe a map and one of those adjustable wrenches—you know, you can make it larger or smaller depending on the bolt that you're trying to undo. Looking at the map, I try and decipher what's going on. I start to see, oh, I'm not even on the right floor. The doors to get out are on the ground floor, and I'm stuck on the third floor. So how do I even get down to the ground floor? Some doors are open, other doors on the way to the ground floor I need to unscrew with my adjustable wrench, et cetera, et cetera. Eventually, through all these things, I find my way out. I find one of the doors and I can unscrew that and it actually leads to the fresh air, the daylight, the freedom of the outside—a completely different experience.

So the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination is, if you like, a map—the map of the inside of that castle. I can locate myself and then I can start moving in these ways. And the teachings about clinging are like that adjustable wrench, so I can actually undo the imprisonment.

That's not such a good analogy. It's a little too gothic, and there are lots of reasons why it's not such a good analogy. For a start, it turns out that the whole castle and imprisonment is a bit of an illusion. Anyway, the point is that the teaching of clinging is a tool, and with skill we unlock something that has to do more with understanding—understanding the dependent arising of appearances, the fabrication of the appearances of self, other, world, time, space, etc., the emptiness of these things.

Maybe it wasn't such a good analogy. Never mind. But the fact is that the teaching of clinging as a tool is a key.

The teaching "don't try to repeat experiences" can be skillful at times because we can cling and get too constricted trying to repeat experiences. But actually, in a way, we need to see this many times. We need to see this dependent fabrication and dependent fading many, many times because there's such a deep level of delusion entrenched there for us to believe in the reality of things. Of course this "I." Of course this object in front of me. Of course this feeling, this sensation, or whatever it is. Of course time.

Of course, these are real things. They exist independently of the mind.

We need to see many, many times this fading, very specifically through the release of cravings. So it's not that we're grasping at experiences so much, it's that we want to repeat certain experiences, including the difficult ones. We don't need to repeat them intentionally, because we have them anyway. But we want to see our experience going up and down on this spectrum of fabrication dependent on clinging. I see that many, many times, until it becomes something in my heart that knows the emptiness of all things.

So if I don't understand in this sense, then the teaching "just let go of everything" won't be very deeply liberating. Just let go of everything. I can hear that, and probably many people do hear that, in a way that presumes a certain level of realism—the independent reality of what we're not clinging to. So just let go of this or that. I believe in this and that, and somehow I'm letting go of it. Or there's some level of reality that remains. I can see that there's some construction, some fabrication, but there's some level of reality—maybe that atomistic reductionism. There's just this process of events, of consciousness and perception and vedanā and all that. And I believe that level of reality remains.

And then you get teachings which conflate impermanence and emptiness. So in that way of limited understanding, just to say that the self is empty means it's nothing but impermanent moments, or to say that of anything. But emptiness is saying something much deeper than impermanence, much more radical.

Or again, we might say, "Oh, just let go of anything. Just being and just receiving." When I'm doing that, I'm not engaging a way of looking. I'm just receiving purely. I'm just being. I'm not trying. I'm not doing any way of looking. Oftentimes people hear about this way of looking—"Oh, that's interesting"—and then sometimes I just want to rest and not do, and not have a way of looking. There's always a way of looking.

So if we don't understand this teaching deeply enough, some level of realism—which is basically delusion, avijjā—remains. And then we believe in things like the atomistic reductionism perception, or we believe that I can do something called "just being," and that that's not doing, or that I can just receive, or whatever. I can somehow have a mode of being that has no way of looking.

So somehow I have to pick up this teaching of non-clinging, of letting go, of what it means to let go of everything. I have to approach it in a certain way. I'm not trying to live without clinging. I'm trying to use the teaching of clinging and dependent arising and fabrication and ways of looking—all of which are intimately linked with each other. And that functions as this adjustable wrench, this map, this tool, key, if you like, to unlock something.

Now actually, I can't live without clinging, because when I start—this is curious now, and again, without the experience of this, and without understanding a certain way, this is going to sound bizarre—but I can't live without clinging, because clinging is a part of perceiving, experiencing anything. As I said, it's part of attention. And when I really let go of clinging very deeply, in that moment, appearances do not appear. There is no perception. If I really just let go of everything, the world does not appear. Self, world, time do not appear.

So this is interesting. And this actually—I don't know if people, it seems to me most people are not aware of this—but this actually caused a huge conundrum in the history of Buddhism. How does an arahant, and how does a Buddha, fully enlightened, therefore supposedly no avijjā, no cravings, how do they perceive anything? Perception is part of the fourth link of dependent arising, what's called nāma-rūpa. And if there's no avijjā, and there's no craving, then actually perception does not arise. As I said, you can experience that in meditation and know it for a fact in meditation.

So someone says, "Well, the arahant or a Buddha has a residual amount of kind of karmic momentum that enables them to have appearances, etc. But at their death, their final nirvana, that is dissolved and so they're not reborn again. The world of perception is not reborn for them. There's total unbinding of the world of perception."

When it came to the Mahāyāna, historically, a few hundred years after the Buddha's death, this was then, even that explanation was a problem.

Because for a number of reasons, when it came to the question of a Buddha's compassionate return—if a Buddha was devoted to appearing again and again, being reborn to serve suffering beings out of compassion—how could they possibly have appearances? You understand the dilemma? They have no avijja, they have no craving. Yet avijja and craving, clinging, are needed for the fabrication of appearances.

From a certain perspective, this paradox became the basis for a whole complex elaboration of Mahayana philosophy. I don't think it's that simple, because the Mahayana had many profound insights beyond merely trying to solve the problem of how a Buddha could return. In the Theravada understanding, once a Buddha is gone, they're gone—they don't get reborn. Arahants don't get reborn.

In Mahayana teaching, there's a doctrine that only a Buddha—not even an Arahant—can contemplate the full emptiness of things and have appearances at the same time. As I explained in the practices, for someone who's not a Buddha, which includes an

Arahant, when they lean heavily into attending to something—whatever it is, a sensation, a perception—if in their very attending to that object they're using a way of looking that also knows thoroughly the emptiness of that object, then that object fades.

Either everything fades when they fully contemplate emptiness, or they have to shift into a mode where they're not leaning so much on that insight of emptiness. This residual avijja, this kind of default avijja, reasserts itself so that they can have appearances. If you're listening, this may sound abstract, but it's quite remarkable. If you know this level of practice and understand it a certain way, you see this is true. I cannot have a full leaning on the insight of emptiness at the same time as I have the appearance of an object. It will fade to the degree that I lean on, that I allow the fullness of that knowing of its emptiness into the way of looking.

Only a Buddha, the teaching says, is able to see both—to fully know the emptiness and have the appearance of things simultaneously. This might seem like a strange, abstruse, abstract Mahayana teaching, but there are reasons for it.

One way of conceiving Vajrayana practice, tantric practice, is that it's a kind of—and I use this word in a positive sense—faking of a Buddha mind. We allow our insight of the emptiness of whatever we're perceiving to pervade the way of looking, but in a lighter way, so that the object becomes relatively transparent. I know its emptiness, but I'm not leaning on that insight into emptiness so much that it actually fades.

It's playing with walking a tightrope—keeping appearances around while seeing them, knowing them as empty. If I lean too much on that insight of emptiness while looking at an object, not going away from the object but knowing its emptiness, that object will fade. Tantric practice involves much more than this—and we'll return to this—but one aspect is this faking of the Buddha mind that can fully know emptiness and have appearances simultaneously.

The point is: we cannot live without clinging because clinging is part of perception. Clinging is necessary for perception. Very subtle levels of clinging are necessary for perception.

On top of that, clinging is empty too. Clinging has no inherent existence. This is something really emphasized by all the great Mahayana teachers—Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, you name it. They say there's no grasper to be found, no self grasping. There is no object of grasping to be found. Neither is grasping to be found. All these are empty. All these are void. All these are illusory. There are countless statements to these facts, countless instances of these declarations. No grasper. No grasped, no grasping. No clinger, no clung to, no clinging. They are empty. They are illusory.

When you put all this together, you start to have a different understanding of the whole thing. It opens up different possibilities and certainly a different level of understanding. Don't cling to non-clinging. It's empty and wrapped up in perception. Don't cling to the idea of non-clinging.

This is strange now. There is space for clinging. Because I know it's empty, because I know it's part of perception, part of the magic of appearances, there's space for clinging. Clinging is given permission, if you like.

So achieving the end of craving doesn't mean that I'm living in some way without craving. What would that mean if craving is part of perception? It doesn't mean that. It means seen and understood is this relationship between craving, clinging, fabrication, and the lessening of craving, and the lessening of fabrication, and the dissolution of craving temporarily, and the opening into the unfabricated.

And all this implies, as I said, the emptiness of everything—the self, of the mind, of consciousness, awareness, whatever word you want to use for it, of objects, of world, of space, of time, of clinging. Everything. Empty. Fabricated. Illusory.

I can go even beyond that level of understanding. Something happens in approaching it this way, in seeing it this way, in understanding something that opens up the sense of existence—mystical opening of the whole sense of existence, radically different sense. I'm no longer being in this world that seems pretty real and attempting to try and live without clinging. Free to crave, free to play with different degrees of craving in my ways of looking, free to fabricate more or less.

There's skill here, art actually—free to engage the art of fabrication, to let it go completely quiet, to fabricate in different ways, to different degrees. This becomes part of the practice because I understand something. So I can fabricate a little, I can fabricate a lot, I can go into the unfabricated.

So then, what we might call simple mindfulness or bare attention and the experience of the vividness of things and the simplicity of things. And sometimes what people call the suchness of things, when they just feel like, "I'm just so present, everything's so bright, it just is what it is."

Incidentally, that word suchness actually means completely the opposite of that in the tradition. It means the emptiness of things, that they are not what they appear to be. They are exactly not what they appear to be. Just this, just that, exactly as it is. Suchness means emptiness, means their lack of inherent existence, means that they are not any-

thing in particular. They are fabricated. They are illusory. They are not like this or like that. Strange reversal of meaning that's happened historically, especially in the West. There are different reasons for that, but we won't go into that now.

But that level of, that state of mind and that level of experience of what we call mindfulness or bare attention, the vividness that comes with that and the beauty that comes with that—that's just a certain level of less fabrication than normal. If I'm hanging out in what some people call big mind or vast awareness or whatever, that too is one degree of less fabrication, but it's still fabricated in a certain direction, this beautiful vastness, big mind, everything just arising out of that vastness, disappearing back into it, lovely mystical state. It's one degree of less fabrication—it's a certain direction of fabrication.

Or if I'm seeing this rapid impermanence, this atomistic process arising, passing, arising, passing, again, it's just one degree, it's a certain degree of less fabrication and in a certain direction, fabricating according to the way of looking, just like the vast awareness. And I can go much deeper states of much less fabrication, much deeper unfabricating than either of those—either the vast awareness or this atomistic process, much deeper.

But even through really deep unfabrication—some of you might have heard of the formless jhanas. These are available experiences. The realm of nothingness, the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, the seventh and the eighth jhanas, these deep states of unfabricating, of less fabrication. And even beyond that. As I said, to the unfabricated. The unconditioned. The unborn. The deathless.

And what happens, as I said, is then I can fabricate all these different directions and many more, actually infinite possibilities of fabrication, many, many more than that, in different directions and different degrees and the whole art of fabrication, if you like. And that spectrum opens up for me and the directions of artful fabrication open up as practice, as play, all to do with ways of looking and fabrication.

So living without clinging is not the point of the Dharma. But understanding, seeing the dependent origination, the dependent fading, the fabrication, the dependent fabrication dependent on clinging, and through that seeing the emptiness of things—these are interchangeable meanings, the emptiness of all things. This is the point of the Dharma, and it opens so much up.

Actually, even this teaching of dependent origination, all those links, we start to understand in a way that that very teaching starts to melt itself. Those links, they melt, they overlap, they blur, they fade. We see they're not real things either. And again, the Mahāyāna made this very clear: All twelve links of dependent origination are illusions.

They're fabricated, they're empty, they're not real. Again, choose your terminology—you can find many instances of this absolutely insisted upon. The teaching of dependent origination, the twelve links, is not a reality. This is a tool. This is a key that then dissolves itself, melts itself—that whole chain—in experience as we open to the Unfabricated, but also in understanding, because we understand these are not real things. We're not talking about separate things. We're not talking about elements, real elements or components of a real process here.

There's an incredible skillfulness of the Buddha in finding concepts that we can pick up and use as ways of looking. And if we approach it in that spirit, we begin to see that the very ways of looking lead to other ways of looking. The whole thing dissolves itself and opens up a freedom of experience, but also a freedom of understanding. It comes with understanding.

So we can hear teachings and assume that what we're hearing—or conclude from what we're hearing or reading, or in some instances we're actually taught—that the Dharma is, the point is, the aim is: try to be in the world without craving or without clinging. Be kind, but because everything's impermanent, try to be in the world without craving, without clinging, and you will suffer less. There's obviously some truth to that.

But what if we understand the Dharma and approach these teachings of dependent origination, dependent fading, fabrication, ways of looking, Four Noble Truths, clinging—all of that—as keys that unlock, that unbind the apparent nature of reality and reveal everything as empty, reveal the world as empty, as magical illusions? And that's the point of Dharma. And what that then allows for us becomes the point and the aim of the Dharma.

Because then, as I said, we can shape perception. We can fabricate in different ways. This self is empty. I know that thoroughly. There's no self-view at all—not process, not atoms, not big awareness, not nothing. Any self-view is empty, is fabrication. I can therefore shape this empty self in different ways. I can fabricate different kinds of selves, fabricate different kinds of appearances of the world, of others, all kinds of things, of time, through the art of practice. And there's a huge range there.

The selves that I know are illusory, that I know are fabrications, that I fabricate deliberately and skillfully as art—they don't have to be constrained to look a certain way. I don't always have to look calm, especially as I'm a meditation teacher, or because I'm a Buddhist. I don't always have to look unexcited. That's a certain fabrication of self. If I know it's illusory, well, there's a lot more room to play with. There's a lot more dressing up, a lot more garments to try on, to have fun in the magic clothes shop changing room.

This is really important to me, and it makes a huge difference in what we even consider the Dharma to be or where we're going. Actually, I'll just throw in one more thing to point out: most letting go and most non-clinging actually involves clinging to another object. And there's no problem with this—it's just that almost inevitably, this is how we don't cling. People say "just let go, just let go," as if we do that independently of clinging to something else.

Someone who's been addicted to alcohol or drugs—talk to someone who's been through that and come out the other end. They didn't just let go. There was a process there where they actually clung, and sometimes for dear life, they clung to something that was more wholesome. Maybe they clung to a certain ethical principle—the fifth precept or whatever—through the support of the Sangha. They clung to their sila. Maybe to fellowship, a twelve-step fellowship. Maybe even they took on the identity: "I am—my name is X, and I am an addict, I am an alcoholic." And that clinging to a certain identity was absolutely necessary in letting go of the addictions.

In Buddhism and all kinds of approaches—whether secularly conceived or religiously conceived—and in all kinds of other religions, actually a person is able to let go because effectively they're clinging to a faith, some faith in something or other, again, whether that's a secularly conceived faith or a religiously conceived faith.

Actually, the clinging to the faith and the vision of the faith and what that faith holds out enables them to let go of this or that.

So there are examples from practice that I described earlier in this talk. In this anatta way of looking, that incredible depth and beauty of letting go is allowed because effectively or realistically I'm clinging to the view, the way of looking of anatta. I'm clinging to this way of looking, seeing everything that comes up while staying in that groove of deliberately—very subtly, but deliberately—lightly seeing things as not-self. So I'm effectively clinging to an insight in order to let go at a much deeper level.

Or even when I say I'm in a state of letting go or resting in awareness—some people use that phrase—or "I'm just receiving, I'm just open to things"—that's still a way of looking, as I emphasized before. It's not that there's no way of looking. There's certainly

a way of looking there, replete with all kinds of subtle conceptuality and a certain relationship with things, a certain mode, replete with doing. Please don't think that that state—it's a relatively less doing—still involves doing. But I'm effectively clinging to that doing, and that conception, and that way of looking, in order that it enables a letting go.

I think it was one of my teacher's teachers, Ajahn Dhammadaro, a Thai forest monk in Thailand who died quite young. I think it was him that used this analogy: the Dharma and practice are like a ladder. When you're climbing a ladder, for your feet to let go of the bottom rung, first you need to put your feet on the bottom rung. Then to let go of the bottom rung, actually, your hands grip another rung, or your one foot grips or finds a basis in the next rung. Your hands probably, unless you're trying to do it with your hands, something's gripping something higher or more subtle. And in this way, we go.

If we take the addiction example, clinging to sila is a more refined clinging than clinging to alcohol. Clinging to anatta is much more refined than clinging to self-view—"this is me, this is mine"—in its even unconscious way. And then even clinging to the view of anatta, even clinging to the view of emptiness.

So there's a way where the process of non-clinging develops through clinging to something else. We don't just let go. Again, we're so attracted by the simplicity, the seeming simplicity of that statement. But like with a ladder, eventually you reach the last rung and you can let go. You can let go of the ladder, or the Buddha's analogy of the raft crossing the stream. You can let go of the ladder, the raft. But it happens progressively at more and more subtle levels.

If I don't have ways of looking and ways of clinging to more subtle things, this idea of "just let go of everything" really is pretty silly and will just end up either with complete frustration or blindness to what I'm clinging to, or just this kind of resignation: "Oh well, what are you going to do? Maybe the real masters somewhere living in caves can do something, but basically the rest of us just have to put up with our delusion and our clinging. We try and let go of the grosser clingings and we laugh at ourselves."

But much more is possible.

So it doesn't make sense, as I said, to live without craving or clinging, because it's involved in the fabrication of perception. It's involved in experiencing anything. But as I said at the beginning of the last talk, there's a second problem. There's a second problem with this ideal of living without clinging, in addition to what I've said in this talk.

Would we even really, deep down, want to? It's not to do with delusion, but is it what the depths of the heart and the being really want? What would it even look like, really?

This is what I want to explore a little bit.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 53

The Way of Non-Clinging (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h06

> *In this third part of his exploration of non-clinging, Rob Burbea addresses fundamental questions about whether we actually want to live without clinging and what such a life would entail. He examines how simplistic interpretations of letting go fail to address our deeper passions - engagement, art, romantic love, sexuality, and other soul movements that matter deeply to us. Burbea introduces three distinct levels of desire: basic sense cravings, the subtle fabrication of perception explored through clinging, and what he calls the "movement of eros" - desires that open, deepen, and create soulfulness and sacredness. He critiques reductive psychological frameworks like "discrepancy-based processing" that lack poetry and fail to nourish the soul's deeper needs. Drawing on his understanding of dependent origination and emptiness, Burbea argues that certain erotic movements shouldn't be abandoned but rather understood as essential to soul-making. He acknowledges that different practitioners may need different approaches - some requiring more traditional letting-go practice, others called to explore eros more fully, and some needing to work with both simultaneously.*

In the last part of this talk, we unpacked and outlined a different way of thinking about clinging and this teaching of non-clinging—actually investigating the experience of clinging, that movement of clinging, and times of more clinging, less clinging, even less clinging. Becoming skillful, moving up and down on that spectrum, and opening up through doing that, we first explore what that word clinging means, seeing that it too is a spectrum of clinging from very, very gross to very, very subtle.

We use this as an entry point and a tool, a key for investigation into the fabrication of perception, the fabrication of appearances, the dependent arising of appearances, and the investigation of seeming reality—questioning that reality through the mechanism of playing with ways of looking, of fabrication, centered on the concept of clinging. In this way we open up very deeply, momentously, the actual sense of existence, as opposed to trying to live without clinging, somehow live a life that's free of clinging, craving, and so forth.

Through this we also saw that actually, in a way, it doesn't make sense to live without clinging, to try and live without clinging and craving, because clinging and craving are actually elements, if you like, necessary for the fabrication of perception, for any appearances to appear for us to live in the world, experience a world. So in that sense too, it doesn't quite make sense.

But as I said, there's a second problem with this ideal of living without clinging. The second problem, and in some ways for some people, would be very obvious. Maybe it's hard for them to articulate it, and certainly hard for them to square it and reconcile it with a more usual dharma understanding. But the problem is obvious. For other people, interestingly, the problem and the difficulty here is not obvious at all, and that's interesting. I'll come back to it actually throughout this retreat.

But the second problem is, as I said: would we even want to live a life without clinging, without craving? And what would that look like? Do we actually thought out or explored what that would mean, what it would look like? What would such a goal—living without clinging, craving (I'm just going to use the word clinging for shorthand)—what would such a goal imply and entail for the different domains or areas of our existence, areas and directions of our existence that we really care deeply about?

So what would it entail, that kind of goal, and imply, for instance, for our engagement politically, environmentally? The world is crying out for this, but what if I have this ideal of no attachment, no craving, no clinging, very even keel—what might it imply for areas such as engagement, or even our own personhood and the range of styles of, if you like, persona or expression in the world? What does this rather simplistic and constrained ideal of living without clinging imply for these areas?

What would it imply and entail for art and our relationship with art making? I've talked about all of these in other talks, so I'm not going to dwell very long on this, but for instance: is it even possible to create a large form—say a long piece of music or a novel or a film or a painting that takes a long time—without craving, clinging, attachment, desire? Or the training, the long, dedicated training it takes to develop that kind of mastery and spontaneity, if you like, of the Zen calligraphist or the Zen sword fighter or the jazz artist.

What would this goal of living without attachment, without clinging, without craving mean for the way we love our families, family members, friends, deep friendships, romantic love? What on earth would it mean for the realm of romantic love, for our sexuality, even for food, for the kind of care and attention to detail and loveliness that some people bring when they prepare food, cook food, share it with others, offer it to others?

So, if we have this idea of living without clinging, how then are these areas, these domains and directions of our being and our existence, our life—how are they then related to and viewed? What is implied about them? Certainly if I have too simplistic an idea of just drop clinging, just let go of everything, that kind of thing—what then is implied about all that?

But also if I kind of piece together and fit together a collection of other dharma concepts and differentiate between attachment, clinging, craving, metta and the brahmaviharas, this word hitachanda—this sort of well-wishing but also desire for decreasing suffering, we could say, in ourselves and hopefully in the world. If we differentiate also what the Buddha outlined: clinging to sense pleasures, clinging to views, clinging to customs and habits, clinging to self-view—we bring that collection of concepts to bear on all these themes and areas and directions of our life, engagement, potential engagement, our personhood and the range of styles of personhood, art, family love, friend love, romantic love, sexual love, sexuality, sexual expression, food, all that.

How is it viewed if it's either viewed very simplistically or through this collection of more traditional dharma concepts? How would those areas be viewed? All those domains, our endeavors, our efforts, our clingings and attachments within those areas.

Some would say, "Yeah, all that's delusion. All of it's delusion. Deluded to be engaged and get riled up about these things. Personhood is complete delusion." And certainly anything that doesn't look like the picture of calmness, of unruffledness. "Art—waste of time, really, unless it communicates something about the end of suffering. Family, alright, granted it's important biologically and we owe our parents and that sort of thing, but basically it's an attachment, it's delusion. Romantic love—off the scale as a delusion. Sexuality—just defilement. Food too." And some people would basically hold that—they would answer yes, it's delusion.

Some would say in response that with those other dharma concepts I outlined—attachment, metta, clinging, craving, chanda, hitachanda to the end of suffering, etc., the different kinds of clinging that Buddha outlined—maybe throw in John Bowlby and those kind of people talking about healthy attachment of the infant and mother, the necessity of the evolutionary programming of that kind of healthy attachment—they would say, "Yes, that's adequate. There's nothing missing in that. We can explain our relationships with all these areas if we are engaged, if we have different personalities, if we are engaged in art and family love and all that stuff. It can be explained with all those concepts. And some of it will be delusion and others can be fit into those concepts. It's adequate as a net of concepts."

And others will be screaming.

Something in the being will be screaming, "No, no, it's not adequate. No, something is missing. Something is missing."

I'm going to come back to this and say more about the difference of opinions and views on this—why some people hold the simplistic view as adequate, why some people feel that net of, I don't know, six or seven dharma concepts will be adequate, and for others, no. This is quite interesting to me: why for some people, it's very clear that it's inadequate, and for others, it's clearly adequate. We'll come back to that.

But of those areas that I talked about or named—engagement, personhood, art, love with family, friends, romantic love, sexuality, food, etc.—what of those areas and what of those directions is allowed there? What is allowed to be involved? What is given place, like given genuine place as part of the path, as we're conceiving the path?

And not just in the sense of, "Oh yes, be mindful of everything, so the path includes everything." So if you're doing art, you're just mindful of you doing your art, etc. Mindful of the body, mindful of—I don't know, if you're painting—how does that feel, etc. Mindful of the movements of getting too tight, clinging to desire in that process. But even if you say it's included because mindfulness should touch everything, there's still a constraint on the kinds, directions, and—yes, the kinds and directions of desire.

And also there's a constrainment of the idea of what's allowed in terms of desire, and also a fantasy, an image of what awakening looks like, what kind of desires and involvements an awakened person has, and therefore what we're moving towards. So it's constrained conceptually and by image, by fantasy.

This is a kind of side point right now about fantasy, but as you'll see if you stick the course—and you might have heard me say this before—fantasy is anything but a side issue when it comes to this whole area. So I'm just going to mention this now, and we'll come back to it in a much more integrated way in the rest of the course.

But notice: when such areas as engagement or art are considered part of the Buddhist path or Dharma path—for instance, in some forms of Zen, some arts are part of the whole form, they're part of the practice. Or in some traditions, often Mahayana traditions, engagement is seen and considered as part of the path. For example, in the Thich Nhat Hanh Sangha and other sanghas—when they are considered part of the path, although these areas are often articulated or explained, or try to be articulated and explained, as having to do with decreasing suffering or freedom or liberation, actually, there is fantasy and mythos and whole sensibility wrapped up in their involvement.

In other words, there's a whole mythos around the Zen arts. There's a whole mythos of the bodhisattva and the engaged bodhisattva who's willing to get riled and get dirty and on the street, on the avenue, etc. There's that fantasy and mythos wrapped up. I think Allen Ginsberg said—was it Chogyam Trungpa? I can't remember—sitting, cross-legged, meditating on the railroad track in front of the approaching train that was carrying a nuclear warhead, I think, to its silo. I don't know, was it Colorado or somewhere back in the days of the Cold War? "This is my practice. This is what a bodhisattva does."

There's wrapped up in that, actually more than one fantasy, but it's somehow connected and made a dharma fantasy, a dharma fantasy of what an awakening person does, what they engage in, what they look like, how they feel, what they do. So we'll talk more about this. Fantasies are actually also involved in the fantasy or the idea of "let go of everything"—that seemingly simple, pithy teaching. Actually, usually there's not just a conceptual structure behind that, but there's also, underpinning it, a whole image and fantasy.

It could be several. Maybe it's the image of "let go of everything," and we hold that as an ideal, but it's also a kind of iconic image for us somewhere. Maybe it's the hermit, simple man, simple woman living close to nature, wandering in the mountains and the breeze of the air. And they're being light and fluid because they're letting go—light and fluid as the breeze, as the mountain stream that they sit beside. There's a beautiful fantasy wrapped up in that whole image, maybe other fantasies.

As I've said plenty of times in other talks, the way I'm using that word "fantasy," fantasies are not a problem. Actually, they are necessary. There is the necessity of fantasy, the inevitability of fantasy when we care deeply, when we love, when we're attracted. The problem is when the fantasy is unconscious or regarded as a problem. So conscious fantasies are very much part of our lives—well, unconscious and conscious, but we can make them conscious and we can recognize, as I said, the necessity of that and the place of that for the psyche. We're going to talk much more about this.

But sometimes the fantasies that we have that come out of our Dharma background and Dharma set of fantasies or ideas are actually inadequate. So the idea and the fantasy of metta, for example, being what is adequate for romantic love. When we care about and are involved in or seek romantic love, as so many practitioners do, of course, who are not monastics, and actually even some who are monastics, when that is present, and if we try and think of it as, "What's happening here? Why is this desire justifiable? Well, it's metta."

Or, well, it's kalyanamitta, it's spiritual friendship. This partnership is basically based in metta and spiritual friendship, and that's what my romantic love relationship, my marriage, is.

I mean, certainly I would hope—we would hope, I think we would all hope—that metta is a basis, or at least a component of romantic love and spiritual friendship, which is beautiful. But is that all of it? Does that actually suffice? Does that truly, adequately, psychologically represent what's happening? And am I then going to say, oh, it's metta and kalyanamitta, spiritual friendship, and just clinging, basically? Does that suffice as an explanation?

Can I have a conceptual frame? Can I open to a conceptual framework and a fantasy that actually allows romantic love to become part of the path—and not just in those kind of simplistic terms? The concepts, if I try and stretch too small a set of concepts over the range of things that we deeply care about, the whole structure will snap. It is not adequate. It cannot support it. It cannot nourish those areas that we really care about, if we really care about them.

So we can make all kinds of distinctions between desires of different kinds, and all kinds of divisions. For instance, just those that are what the Buddha would call wholesome, kusala—ones that lead either in the moment or eventually to less suffering—or unwholesome ones, which lead to more suffering. That's one distinction. But actually there are all kinds of distinctions: clinging, craving, as we said.

But what if we made another distinction, based on what I want to get at, and actually say there are three directions or levels or distinctions between desires, clingings, cravings, whatever?

So the first we could call the desire for that piece of chocolate cake. I don't need it nutritionally, but I want it. That's one level of desire. Desire for sense pleasures in that context. But actually, what we're talking about is not only desires here and cravings, but levels of craving, and also levels of investigation of craving. So it's important to investigate and have some facility with letting go of that desire for that cookie, that chocolate cake, whatever it is, that cup of tea when I don't really need it. This is important. That's one level and direction of desire, and it's one level and direction of investigation.

But then there's what we outlined in part two of this long preface talk: the whole use of the idea of, and the movement of, whether we call it clinging or craving or whatever it is, desire—that whole movement and exploring the subtlety of that, and how that unravels for us the nature of appearances, the fabrication of perception, and what that tells us about reality. So we're talking about really, really subtle levels of clinging, and a

much broader range of what clinging means. As I said, avijja is clinging. It's belief in the reality of something existing independently from the way of looking. It's a clinging. I need to refine my practice until I can actually play with the spectrum, actually move that clinging of delusion up and down on a spectrum and see what happens. So that would be a second level, direction of what we might call clinging, for shorthand, and the investigation.

And then there's a third level or direction, what we might call the movement of eros. For instance, our soul passions—so obvious when it's the bigger ones: falling in love, or my passion for my art, or whatever it is. My passion for expression, my passion for engagement. So they can be huge, but this movement, what I'm going to call the movement of eros—without, unfortunately in this talk, explaining too much what I mean, which makes it a little bit difficult—there are other movements that are not just about sense pleasure and relief, not just about unpacking this notion of clinging so that it tells me something about the whole nature of seeming reality. The movement of eros and of soul passion can be huge, marked, deep, or really quite subtle.

So then the question becomes: what is required of each of these directions or levels of investigation? What is the purpose in relation to all three? Each of them has a different purpose. The purpose of my investigation relative to that extra slice of chocolate cake or whatever it is has one purpose, has a range of purpose. It's quite limited where it can take me also, as we've been saying. The purpose of my investigation of that whole concept—from the most gross to the most subtle—of clinging and its relationship with fabrication of perception and apparent reality and world, that has a different purpose. And what is the purpose of my investigation of what we might call the movements of eros, of those things that I'm passionate about? Whether it's engagement or art or expression in life or love, different kinds, whatever it is. What is the purpose? And what is the range of possibility of each, of what can be opened up and revealed and given to us through each investigation?

Because I can look at my desires for chocolate or, when I'm in walking meditation on retreat and the mind says "tea"—and then it says "tea" again—I can feel that pull as a desire, a sense of longing. I don't need that tea. I can look at that until the cows come home. I can spend a lifetime examining that level of desire. But it won't be enough to open up that radical understanding of emptiness I was speaking about in the last part of the talk. Nowhere near. Nowhere near.

Useful? Of course it's useful. Of course it's useful. But it won't open up that emptiness. It won't tell me anything about this deeper movement of passion, the passions that I have. It's simply the wrong kind and level of desire. There's an investigation specific to that. It's important to have some freedom, otherwise I'm just yanked around—just because the mind says tea, I have to go and have a cup of tea. Of course that's important.

But neither that chocolate cake investigation nor tea investigation, nor the deep investigation into dependent origination and emptiness that I explained, will be enough for understanding and opening out and giving nourishment and life and structure and vision and opening doors in the realm and the direction of the soul passions or the subtle movements of eros. And conversely, the investigation of my soul passions and my desire and relation to them—that kind of eros, whether it's really strong or much more subtle—it will actually tell me something about dependent origination and emptiness, something, but not enough for the full depth of that.

So each has its own door, direction, avenue—all important, but not the same. We can't just lump them all together.

Noticing ease when I let go of something the mind is grasping onto or wanting, when I relax craving, is only the start. It's only the start. And as we said before, that letting go and the ease that comes from releasing something the mind is wanting, grasping—that is not liberation. Or rather, that would be a very limited view of what liberation is, if it's just a state of ease because the mind is not grasping onto the things of the world. And it's not, as we said, a way to live.

We question all this. Is it in fact really ease? Is that all that we really want? Is ease all that we really want? And if we're wanting something else, other than this relief from dukkha, are we just going to say that something else is delusion?

From another angle: is sense pleasure or happiness all we seek from our desires? Is that really what we're after—sense pleasures and happiness? Or some kind of shoring up of the self, because the self is fragile? Or is it ease or metta? Does this suffice to categorize our desires and what we're actually seeking from all our desires?

Certainly sometimes we're seeking sense pleasure. We'll talk about this. Certainly sometimes I'm trying to get happy. Certainly sometimes I want metta. Sometimes I want ease. But what else?

It's relatively easy to see that sense pleasures are not going to fulfill me. There's something missing in the way I'm thinking about all this. We can hear this teaching—let go, let go, just let go—hear it a million times. And then decades later, it's still something. It's still not somehow taken root or worked. Why?

We can say, "Well, it's a deep habit, isn't it? It's a deep habit." And yes, that's true. But is it also because it's not enough in terms of our understanding of desire—of the range of desires, the kinds and directions of desires, and the levels of desire?

The framework is not enough for us. We're trying to put it all in one basket or several very narrowly related baskets, and actually it's insufficient. You ask, "Why am I not able to live without clinging? I've heard this teaching a million times."

So what about the directions, the domains of our life where letting go does not take us to where we deeply want to go? Letting go simply does not take us to where we deeply want to go. And not just within practice—because even within practice, just letting go all the time doesn't necessarily take me where I want to go. Probably it doesn't. We need many approaches in practice, of which letting go is just one. But in the whole of my life...

What about those directions, those domains where letting go is not what takes me to what I most deeply want? I'm not talking here about the kinds of things we do which we can acknowledge and accept as basically driven by craving. Having that extra slice of chocolate cake, overeating just a little because someone put something really tasty in front of me, or flying to France or Switzerland every winter—or in the States, Colorado—to go skiing. If I'm honest, I don't really need that. I can see that I sort of justify it to myself because I work hard, so I deserve a rest. But basically, if I'm truly honest, I can see craving has trumped ethics in terms of carbon output and contribution to global warming and others' suffering in the world. If I'm really honest, I can see it's just a movement of craving.

I'm not really talking about all that. I'm talking about our deeper loves, our deep passions, our longings, the movement of our passion there—as well as more subtle movements of eros, though I'll have to explain this in other talks.

In these areas, is it ease that we're seeking? Is that what we want—just ease or sense pleasure? It might be ease I'm seeking, especially if I'm really struggling. When there's a lot of dukkha, a lot of struggle, it can seem like that's basically it. But to varying degrees—and this is something we'll return to—human beings want more than ease and peace. We want more than ease and peace, certainly more than the kind of ease and peace that's merely stress reduction or coping with painful sensations. Even we want more than the ease and peace of the most profound and comprehensive kind.

Look, see, even within the Dharma—isn't it more than ease you want? Isn't it more than that you're looking for? Yes, there's ease. There's the cessation of suffering that we're after. And what? And what? If you love the Dharma, it's not just that. It's not just that.

And then if it's something outside the Dharma, how do I integrate these two aspects and directions that I care passionately about? There's Dharma, and there's whatever else it is—art or something. How do I integrate that? Or romantic love, or this person I'm in love with, or sexuality.

If what the Dharma means to me is just stress reduction and some techniques for stress reduction, then this whole question is not an issue. I thank you very much—you give me some techniques from the Dharma that I use to calm down and let go of this and that and have a bit more ease. Then the rest of my life I just... I can have plenty of passions and whatnot.

But if we really love the Dharma... How do we reconcile this? How do we reconcile "just let go of everything, drop desires, don't cling, achieve the end of craving" with the other movements of what we could call soul, our other loves and passions? How do we reconcile it? How does it fit together?

In the world of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, and spilling over from there into the Dharma, some people speak of discrepancy-based processing. This essentially means when the mind operates in a mode where it notices the difference between where it wants to be and where it actually is—between what it desires and how reality presents itself.

For example, there's a sensation of thirst, creating a discrepancy. I don't want this sensation of thirst; it would be good to drink. There's a gap between the idea of quenching thirst and the reality that, at this moment, there is no water. Therefore I go to the tap or the well. This discrepancy-based processing, this perception of differences, directs the organism to meet its need by noticing differences and trying to minimize that gap.

This discrepancy-based processing stands in contrast to what they call "mindfulness"—in this particular way of teaching about it, mindfulness means simply being with things as they are, accepting, paying attention to, opening to, without wanting to change, without being so interested in that discrepancy between how I would like things to be and what is.

These two operate like different gears: the gear of discrepancy-based processing and the gear of mindfulness. What seems missing is the recognition that you can be mindful of a discrepancy itself, of the desire, of the movement. But let's leave that aside.

There's this idea of mindfulness as something opposite to, or complementary to, discrepancy-based processing. And it's acknowledged that discrepancy-based processing is okay at times—why? Because it's useful, functional, instrumental. If I need a toilet built, I must first recognize there's a discrepancy between what is and what should be for hygiene purposes. Or there's hunger, and we notice the discrepancy between that and feeling satiated and nourished, which leads us to cook. Framing it biologically in evolutionary terms, as many would do: recognizing there's no food, therefore we need to forage or hunt.

So it's useful, this discrepancy-based processing—regarded as okay at times, as long as we don't get too tight, too excited, too agitated. But otherwise, this "mode of mind"—a concept somewhat related to what I'm calling ways of looking, though probably nowhere near as broad in range, diversity, depth, or subtlety—should revert to a more mindful stance, a kind of neutral gear that avoids the suffering inherent in discrepancy-based processing.

But is something missing here? Are we missing something if we conceive this way? Is this kind of psychology adequate? How do you feel when you hear this? Apart from the illusion of non-doing and the realism hidden there, as I touched on in earlier talks, can you hear that the language is straight out of artificial intelligence systems—the language of machines, robots, humans as very complex robots?

How much soulfulness does this kind of conceiving have? How much soulfulness does it support, nourish, allow? Where's the poetry? Does it have any poetry? And do we really want a psychology without poetry? What are the consequences of seeing ourselves this way? What are the consequences of a psychology without poetry?

Because if I regard desires merely as discrepancy-based processing—it's funny—"I want to kiss you" becomes "my discrepancy-based processing." It has nothing enriching to say about my wanting to kiss you. It doesn't open that up, doesn't nourish it, doesn't bring water to it, doesn't fan the fire, doesn't bring out the beauty or reveal the dimensions there.

What does it say about this music that wells up in me, wanting expression? So much that I'm willing to sit through all the toil and frustration, the revising, to write a symphony? What does it say about the gaze of Eros, the gaze filled with and imbued with Eros? Nothing. Nothing to address. It addresses nothing of real beauty or value or poetry or the dimensions of our existence.

Sometimes we can be oversimplistic as human beings, especially regarding spirituality. What can happen is that a person can, for decades, abide in and with an overly simplistic view in relation to craving and desire.

And okay, they might acknowledge, as I said, that some desires are wholesome because they bring a reduction, or they lead to even eventually a reduction of suffering for self and other. But other desires or movements just have no place. How could I possibly justify an abstract art painting? It has nothing to do with releasing suffering.

And then what can sometimes happen if a person actually clings, indirectly—that seems like not clinging, but clings—to an overly simplistic view of living without clinging, and a simplistic view and concept in relationship to clinging and desire, is that we get to a place after some years of Dharma practice where we're, you know, with craving and desire, we accept that it's there, and we kind of laugh at it. And we practice letting go sometimes, and sometimes on retreat we let go of a lot, etc. But basically we kind of fall back into a sort of, ah, well, the self or the mind is pretty wily, isn't it, in terms of getting its desires and what it wants, and it's a deeply ingrained habit.

Well, there's a kind of cognitive dissonance that doesn't quite add up, it doesn't quite fit together—this teaching of letting go of craving and then our passions and what we really care about, my love for this man, this woman or whatever it is, doesn't quite add up in relation to the eros in our lives.

So there's, with all of this, there can come a kind of a status quo that just stays, a sort of stagnation of exploration in relationship to desire. What's happened there? Why? Why?

Again, so is it that whether it's the concept of discrepancy-based processing, that kind of language and that kind of way of thinking or framing things or delineating things or other ways, what do they serve and is there something they don't serve that's necessary for us? And language I've been using recently, does it serve soul-making? Does this idea of discrepancy-based processing serve soul-making? Does it satisfy the psyche, the soul, the depths in me? And again, sorry, I'm not going to explain that term now. It's coming, or it will. In past talks it's been explained, but just to say this.

We use these words, eros. Do we need another term? And I'll explain more fully in the next few talks what I mean by that, what we mean by eros. I don't just mean sexuality, although it includes sexuality. I don't just mean it in the way that Freud, I certainly don't mean it in the way that Freud was meaning it as just a seeking of sense pleasure. I don't simply equate eros and love, and I don't simply equate eros with life force, it's just life force.

So very briefly, and this will beg more explanation if you haven't listened to other talks and teachings. But I hope to unfold it in the course of this retreat. Eros—a desire, a movement of the psyche, of the being, that opens, deepens, leads to soulfulness, sacredness, soul-making, sense of sacredness, opens that out. A desire, a movement of the psyche of the being that opens out, deepens, enriches, complicates also our sense of sacredness. A desire, a movement of the psyche that opens the being, unlike craving.

Eros always has something to do with depth and with expansion and with perceiving of dimensionality and also with beauty. Eros always has something to do with beauty. And I don't mean by beauty just pleasing, what is pleasing to the senses in terms of its sensual arrangement. We'll talk more about this later. The eros always has something to do, is wrapped up, wrapped up in the movement of eros, in these desires, these movements that bring, that open and deepen and expand the sense of soulfulness and sacredness. There's depth, dimensionality, beauty, meaningfulness.

And again, I'm not just talking about necessarily like huge passions, although I'm including that, but also very subtle. It's a subtle movement of eros. Subtle movements of eros.

So we're talking here about relationships with desire, craving, clinging, eros, whatever words you want to use, understanding, understanding and relating to this whole aspect, area, these forces in our lives. I'm certainly not saying that every erotic desire, a desire of eros, the movement of eros, needs to be physically acted upon, needs to be made materially manifest. So you know that if you've listened to some other talks.

But the question is, what does this movement of psyche need? What does it need? Where does it lead? Or rather, are there ways of conceiving, conceptual frameworks, relationships and investigations that open otherwise closed doors for us? And doors that are deeply important to us, that it's deeply important to us to move through because of what they open to, because of where they take us. This is really what we want to go into.

How can we think about the whole domain and the different kinds of desire, craving, clinging? How can we conceive of all that? What relationships and what kinds of investigations can we bring to bear that open this up for us and don't actually keep certain doors shut that are deeply important to us?

Because, and I've said this in other talks earlier, in the last few years some conceptual understanding of dharma, some ways we're thinking about dharma—even if we don't think we're intellectual: be kind, be present and be with what is, let go because everything's impermanent, everything's in flow, relax and try to live without clinging and this will bring ease, this will decrease or even end your suffering if you can do that—a view like that, for a lot of people it's actually fairly common, a view like that, a conceptual framework like that, whether it's articulated intellectually, verbally or not, it will, as helpful as it will be to limited extents, it will also constrain our vision and our experience. Constrain our vision and our experience of self, other, world.

of desire and eros itself, of the whole cosmos, inner and outer, will also constrain the kinds of freedom, the kinds of creativity, the kinds of beauty that are available to us.

I said elsewhere, I think, we can have conceptual frameworks that actually end up constraining our sense of existence, our hermeneutics—the way we're actually interpreting our life, our being, this world, what comes to us in the senses. And when our conceptual framework is limited, when it isn't questioned, when it isn't open, when it isn't adequate enough or rich enough, there's the constriction in the view, the constriction in the interpretation of what we call the hermeneutics of existence. And therefore, out of that, because of dependent arising, our experiences will also be constrained.

And not just constrained because certain sufferings won't happen—constrained in all kinds of ways. We limit our experience through the ideas that we're hanging on to, even when we think we're not intellectual and we don't have to think about all this stuff.

So what I'm asking is: can we question the conceptual frameworks that we have? Can we perhaps add to the conceptual framework that is operating for us? Can we find out what it is for a start? Question it. Add to it. Extend it. Deepen and widen it. Refine it, perhaps.

Then it becomes interesting: what should the order of practice, of the development of practice, be regarding the more traditional teachings about craving and letting go? And if we're going to open up this concept of eros, which I will do very fully in this retreat, what order? Should I do one first and then the other, or how does it work? How should it work?

Some people will need more practice, do need more practice with just the simple idea of letting go of craving. We talked about it in part one—gross craving, slightly more subtle craving in their life—so that they are less chained to pleasant and unpleasant, no longer being led or dragged around by the craving that comes towards or away from pleasant or unpleasant vedanā sensation.

And some people listening, you've already done a lot of that, and yet you feel no particular need, no calling, no stirring in the soul to explore, open up to other kinds of desire, or dimensions of desire, or this thing called eros. And that's fine. Or rather, maybe it's fine.

And some of you listening have already done a lot of what we could call the most prevalent or even classical teachings about taṇhā, craving, and vedanā, etc., and clinging. And yet, you now feel, you're now at a place where you feel there is more. And there's a calling—the soul is called, if you like. There is a deep calling to explore desire more fully, more richly, more carefully, more subtly and sensitively. Not just in the direction of emptiness, but in the direction of what we're calling eros.

And yet others—there's another group—people who feel called, something hears this and says, "Yes, yes." But there is not yet much discernment, much proficiency, much freedom in relation to the classical teachings of pleasant sensation and desire and hanging on to views and opinions and all of that. And yet, they can't postpone the soul calling to include an exploration of eros fully, richly, deeply on the path. I can't postpone it. I've not yet got all that more straightforward stuff figured out, but I can't postpone it either.

Is that just the pull of delusion? The impatience of delusion? Not necessarily. Some who actually don't do things in the order that a neat way of framing things might prefer—so be it. And if that's you, then somehow you'll have to figure it out on the way. You'll have to learn how to discern and differentiate between these different movements and kinds of desire and letting go and dropping something. And that might be more messy. You're doing that at the same time as you're investigating and allowing eros and fire and passion. And it might not look so neat. And sometimes things are not so neat.

It's the same with imaginal practice and papañca. Some need to explore the teachings about letting go of papañca and complication and fantasy and simplify, simplify the mind, simplify the attention. And this teaching, illusory as it is, but of bare attention, because it would be helpful. It's helpful for them. They need that. And some are drawn before they can explore what we mean by, in a way, good fantasy or imaginal practice. And some have explored all that, and they feel ready for something new, this other dimension of imaginal practice.

And, again, there's some who can't wait.

They need to include and learn as they go along through different ways of looking, different practices, trial and error, with the help of teachers, to discern between these different movements. What's papañca? What's imaginal practice? It's absolutely possible to make these distinctions, but parallel tracks are running concurrently.

Just to conclude this long preface: Yes, it's important to learn to let go of cravings, of desires, of clingings in life. That's really important. But so much more is possible than that.

It's possible to take up this notion of clinging and actually explore the whole range of subtlety of what that means—to play with it, learn to modulate it, and see what happens to the dependent fabrication of perception of self, other, world, time. Through this exploration, dependent arising reveals itself—deep insight into how self, other, and world arise dependently. This isn't just about the cigarette craving or asking for someone's phone number. We're talking about something much deeper: the whole fabrication of our very sense of any reality at all, any experience at all.

This leads to deep understanding of emptiness, a beautiful opening of being into states of less and less fabrication, eventually reaching the unfabricated. What this gives us is a radical and extraordinary understanding of the emptiness of all things.

So there's that possibility, as we've outlined, and there's also this possibility of something we'll be calling eros—a movement that brings soul-making. We're going to unpack these terms if you're not familiar with them. This is something important for the soul, something we don't completely let go of. It's already operating. We want to understand it, explore it, develop conceptual frameworks and dharmic understanding that allow us to open to it, to give it its place and receive the richness it brings.

As I said, eros is already there. I'm not just meaning chanda—this intentionality or desire for reducing suffering, for what is wholesome. That might be one manifestation of eros, but I'm not just talking about that. The psyche needs to bring attention to bear so that it recognizes this movement, recognizes eros, delineates it, and perhaps develops ways of conceiving and thinking that actually support the eros. This becomes supportive to the totality, the integrated totality of what we conceive as practice.

Because this investigation and movement of eros also—just like the deep exploration of fabrication through playing with the spectrum of clinging—opens up our sense of the world radically, widely, beautifully. It opens up the whole sense of existence. But in a different way than the fabrication exploration.

But you decide what you want. You decide. Some people, for various reasons, don't want much depth or much soul-making, much soulfulness. We'll actually explore these different reasons as part of the retreat, because what's happening there is quite interesting. Some people—and this needs to be respected—that's not what they want. They want techniques of what we could call self-help, really. They want some ease, some reduction in dukkha, and that's great. That's important.

Others, though, are drawn to this opening of the sense of existence—these radical and remarkable openings that are possible in one's whole sense of existence, not just of self, but of the entirety of one's sense of existence. The deep understanding of emptiness. The deep and wide and eventually all-pervasive movement of eros and soul-making. These, for others, are the most important things—what they care most deeply and most passionately about.

But it's not for me to tell another person what to want. I don't think it's for anyone to do that. So as I said, you decide what you want. But still, we can investigate this whole question of desire and eros, make delineations and distinctions, and see where that leads. Then decide whether we want to go where it leads or not. We can still investigate. It's always up to us where we want to go.

This is what we want to explore on this retreat—a little bit of an introduction to what we want to really fill out and expand in the course.

CHAPTER 54

Dilemmas and Delineations: How Did We Get Here?! (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h17

> *In this opening talk of his groundbreaking series on eros and desire, Rob Burbea establishes the framework for understanding eros as distinct from conventional Buddhist concepts of craving (taṇhā) and clinging (upādāna). Drawing from his background in insight meditation and the early Buddhist texts, Burbea contextualizes this exploration within the Buddha's own teachings on the four bases of power (iddhipāda), where desire features as essential for awakening and jhāna practice.*
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> *Burbea shares a poignant email from a practitioner struggling to reconcile romantic love with dharma teachings, highlighting the gap in traditional Buddhist approaches to eros and sexuality. He argues that eros—encompassing but extending far beyond sexuality—is already present in our lives as connections with nature, the divine, oneself, and the spiritual path itself. Unlike craving which leads to dukkha, eros opens "regions of soul" and connects to what he terms "soul-making"—the deepening of sacredness, meaning, and beauty.*
>
> *This teaching integrates with Burbea's broader work on imaginal practice and dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), offering a non-realist foundation that allows flexibility between different ways of looking while maintaining the traditional insights into emptiness (śūnyatā) and unfabrication. The talk establishes why new delineations are necessary: to investigate overlooked aspects of experience that conventional dharma psychology may dismiss or inadequately address.*

This is really a retreat, a course exploring the themes of eros and desire and the alchemy of desire. I want to take a little time now for the next few talks to begin to delineate what we mean when we use this word eros.

To begin to do that, as you'll quickly see, the way we're using that word is actually woven in with a whole web, a whole dynamic web of other words that we're using—specifically, quite specifically, related ideas, related notions, related experiences. So we'll have to gradually unfold all this, unpack it, or to reverse the analogy, gradually build a framework, an architecture that will help us, our vehicle.

In the course of elaborating on what we gradually mean by eros and what it involves and what it implies, where it goes, in the course of delineating, the question comes up: why delineate? We touched on that briefly already, but there's actually more to say.

Why make this extra delineation of something called eros? Because we have a lot of words—we have desire, craving, clinging, attachment, love—so why make this extra delineation? I want to say a bit more about that, and I also want to weave into all this some reflections on making delineations and definitions in general, some general reflections on that, because actually it is very relevant to the whole project that we're doing and where it can go.

Unless you teach in some way or other, in some subject or art or whatever it is, it may not be obvious to you, but it's obvious to me that teaching is always, always contextual. So in talking about eros now, there is a double context at least. One is the context of how did we get here, what is it that led up to these kinds of delineations and making the delineations and the justifications and the explanations that we're about to go into slowly, gradually. That comes out of a whole trajectory, a whole progression of exploration and insight that, in a way, one thing led to the other, one thing unfolded another. So there's the context of where we're coming from.

In a way, and I'll go into this later, I'm coming from a background in insight meditation, but a certain way of understanding and approaching what insight meditation is and what the Dharma is and how to think of that. But there's also the context of who one is talking to, who one is teaching, and the context in which one teaches.

So teaching about eros and desire and shining a different light on them in a Buddhist context and in an insight meditation context is teaching in a certain context. It's not necessarily the easiest, most straightforward context to raise these issues and hope to bring some fresh illumination or fresh turning of the earth. There are other contexts—for instance, in psychotherapeutic context or philosophical context—where, in a way, it would be much more straightforward. There would still be distinctions and things to make, but in some ways, the context that we're in makes it more challenging. But also, we're lent certain advantages, I think, by our practice and by our understanding that other disciplines and directions don't have.

About the context, I remember an international meeting of insight meditation teachers in 2009, I think it was. It actually took place at Gaia House. So it happens every three or four years, and it rotates between three, maybe four centers—IMS and Spirit Rock and maybe Beatenberg—around the world. And that year, it was at Gaia House. Maybe eighty Insight Meditation teachers, I can't remember. Very senior ones, all the way down to very new teachers, and from all over the world. Well, actually, mostly Europe and America.

Part of that gathering—we had three or four days together, I think—included different discussion groups that were offered. So periodically we would break and certain themes would be offered. Then the people interested in this theme would go and make a little group and discuss it for a while. And people interested in another theme would go and make their little group and discuss it.

One day, one of the themes that was offered was eros. So there are a couple of things that are interesting to me about what happened. One is that it was by far the biggest discussion group. There was enormous interest in that topic, so much so that the subgroup of the large group that were interested in eros and elected to go into that group had to be divided into three to make the discussions manageable, interesting, and worthwhile. So I was in a group that had at least ten people in it, and there were maybe two others like that. That was the first thing. Look how much interest there was in this topic among Buddhist practitioners, Buddhist teachers, insight meditation teachers, already in 2009. And partly because so little is said about it in our traditions. That was the first thing that was interesting.

The second thing that was interesting to me was this: we gathered in our group of ten teachers, and a few of us said, "Well, hold on, before we get into this, can we actually just say or agree what we mean by eros?" And immediately it became very apparent that there was no common understanding. We had come to this group with quite a large range of what people thought eros meant or what it meant to them. No one was particularly attached to "it means this" or anything like that, but there was really not a clarity or a common shared meaning.

So I remember one teacher just seemed to equate it with desire in general. And if I understood her correctly, she was saying that her approach to this was, again, not very conventional Dharma, but it was more like, let the students have their desires. So if you want that chocolate cake, have the chocolate cake. If you want this or that, have it. And in having it and feeling it and exploring it and going into that experience, over time—this was the theory—their desires would mature.

And so instead of being caught up with superficial and unhelpful desires, there would be this maturation through actually going into the desire, living it, experiencing, tasting, following the thread of desire. And there would be this maturation until they would get clear and centered on their deepest heart's desires. So starting with the Mars bars and eating them and whatever, eventually there would be this funneling down, a natural maturation process that would help. Now, that's probably not a fair summary of what she was saying—I might have misunderstood—but anyway, she seemed to equate eros and desire.

And another teacher made the distinction, saying, "This is all very well," and he was saying, "Eros, what I'm more interested in is Thanatos." Thanatos, for some of you will know, is another Greek word—Eros is a Greek word—and in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Eros is sometimes equated with the life instinct, the instinct to want to live, and contrasted with Thanatos, the drive towards death, the death instinct, which Freud introduced later into his psychoanalytic theory.

And this teacher was saying, interestingly, he came to the group to hold the other pole, if you like: "I'm interested in Thanatos, in the death instinct." And I don't think he meant death per se, more as in the unfabricating we were talking about, the movement away towards a kind of dissolution, nibbana in the traditional sense.

Related, but very different to that, another teacher—there were quite a few senior teachers in this group, by the way—said that the Buddha's primary interest, or he was trying to persuade people that the Buddha's primary interest was in addressing Mara, the sort of primordial, if you like, archetypal villain in the Pali canon. Mara actually means death. And so the Buddha was interested in Amara, which is also a word that's in the Pali Canon less commonly, but it's there. Amara, which this teacher was saying, is in contrast to Mara—because it's a negation—is not death, therefore it means life. So what the Buddha is really teaching is life: live, be in your life.

And this elevation of this concept of life—I actually pointed this out to him—becomes a kind of substitute for an idea of God or divine, which this teacher was very much against. But there was this equation of eros with life as opposed to death, and the Buddha was very interested in life and the sort of praise of life, if you like.

And it turned out that the person who even suggested the topic in general at first, when it came to her turn, was actually quite unclear and sort of said she didn't know. But we just tried to elicit from her a little bit, and it turned out that what she really meant was that when she was teaching, she found that she kind of got into a mode where there was very little humor and very little joke-telling, and more than that, there was kind of not the juiciness of humor. So that's what she meant.

There's this huge range, and I don't think we came even to a conclusion about what we were talking about, which is oftentimes the problem with these kinds of groups. But that was another thing that was interesting to me: there was no clarity even about what is meant.

So why am I going into this a little bit? Partly because it's a topic that people are interested in, and maybe especially people who have been practicing a long time. Why? Because they recognize the lacuna there, the gap, presumably, in the teachings around

this subject. And secondly, we can't really go into it until we kind of start to say, what are we talking about here? Or can we decide what we're talking about and see where that leads us?

So eros, as we are using it on this retreat, and as I would want to conceive of it, certainly has a relationship with desire, with the notion of desire. The notion of eros and the notion of desire are clearly related, but let us say—and we can come back to this—that eros is a kind of desire. Specific—it's still very wide what it can mean—but it's a specific kind of desire. So a subset of desires are erotic desires, if you like.

And desire, if it's not already clear to you or clear from the first few talks that we gave, desire is very interesting and not simple. And desire in the Dharma is also not simple. So I don't think we really went into this in the first three talks, but the Buddha lists—in these great lists that he comes up with, the factors of awakening and this and that—there's a list called the four bases of power or success or accomplishment. And desire is one of those.

So it's listed, and the Buddha talks about it a lot. If you want samadhi, if you want to develop the jhanas, if you want to develop the brahmaviharas, if you want awakening, desire is a basis for that. And he lists it and points to it: this is necessary, it's important to develop this, it's important to give some intention to this, it's important to be skillful with one's desire.

He does not say just let go, do not cling, don't drop your desires. Anyone flicking through the Pali Canon—the collection of the original Buddha's teachings—will notice how often words like striving and exertion appear. I've forgotten the exact Pali words, but he uses the language of striving, of ardent desire, really frequently.

If you take the example of his life, the Buddha is a paradigm, a paramount example of someone really dedicated, really desiring, with what most people nowadays in our culture would regard as an extreme passion for realization. He taught the middle way—actually different kinds of middle way—but his middle way in terms of passion for awakening was not really what most people these days would consider a middle way. It was quite extreme in terms of his dedication, his devotion, his passion, his hunger and desire for realization, for awakening.

As I said, all this—what we're talking about on this retreat and the teachings about eros and desire—has a context. There's also the context of themes in the teachings that have interested me very much over the years and that I have tried to share with others

as well. I've talked in the past about passion and desire on the path, wise relationship to practice, and wise effort—looking at the micro-movement of effort and desire in samatha practice and jhana practice.

I might try something on this retreat that could be a little annoying, but hopefully is more helpful than annoying: mentioning other places where you can find more about certain strands or elements of teaching that are involved in what we're talking about. I'm going to mention but maybe not fill out everything, so that if you want more, you have a place to look.

So I've talked about this before—the passion for the path, the passion on the path, the passion for awakening, the desire to unfold certain experiences and insights and how that comes into samadhi practice and metta practice and all that. On this retreat, I want to go into that, but also specifically ask: Why is it that some people have a great passion and choose a path, or a version of Buddhadharma, that allows a great passion for realization, for deep experiences, deep insight, deep openings of consciousness? Why do some people have that passion and choose a version among the different versions on the spiritual supermarket shelf—even within insight meditation—that allows their passion to flourish, and even allows the pain that can come with that passion?

There's a pain the Buddha talked about—I can't remember his word for it, but let's say the pain of the contemplative. In a sutta somewhere in the Pali Canon about equanimity, he speaks of the meditator, the contemplative, who hears about other people awakening, who wants awakening but is not there yet. He doesn't say, "Just relax, let go, don't desire, drop it, too much passion." He doesn't say that. He says, "Yeah, that's how it is. Until you realize, what you need to do is keep going. Until you realize, then your passion will be quenched."

So it's often quite a different message than what we're getting or the interpretation we're putting on the teachings. Why is it that some have this passion and some choose a version that allows that passion even when it's painful, and some don't? Some don't seem either to have that passion or move away, choosing a version where it just bypasses, or tranquilizes, or deflates that passion.

Some choose a path or a version of the Dharma where actually not a lot of passion is needed. The vision, the notion or idea or fantasy of awakening involved is not that remarkable. It's almost something for your spare time. It's not really a big deal. It's quite a small vision of awakening.

Some people don't seem to have an interest or a desire. There's not much libido toward awakening in general. They don't talk about it. They don't listen to talks that mention it. When it's talked about, they'll just lose interest. They'll actually say—I've heard many people say to me—"I'm just not interested in awakening."

So that's interesting to me. Why? What's going on there? What's going on either in relation to those notions, or in relation to the self, or in relation to desire—to the very notion of desire?

Some have, on the contrary, a very high bar for what awakening means. When I place myself in a more traditional interpretation of Dharma, I would say where I set the bar for what awakening means is really quite high in relationship to where others set it—in terms of what stream entry is and all that, if you know those terms.

Some people—and again, I would include myself—at the edge of Dharma would even conceive of an endlessly expanding notion of awakening. Not quite receding, but endlessly expanding. In talks like "In Praise of Restlessness" and "Questioning Awakening," I've explored this: the desire is always there. The flame of desire never goes out because there's always more.

There's always a greater expansion. There's always more depth and diversity and range to what awakening is and can be. There's always new horizons of awakening opening up.

So why? Why all these differences in people? Is it just differences of personality? Soul differences, if you like? Is it conditioning? Whether that's in terms of personality or education or what people have been exposed to—the kinds of teachings or culture or family environment. Is it early childhood wounding, for example, in how one expressed one's passion and one's love and one's desire? The nakedness that the infant has often comes out quite uninhibited in infancy. Is it that there was a wounding there—something in school or with the family or whatever—that caused one to block and inhibit one's desire, one's libido, one's passion?

All of this we're going to talk about more. To me, these are fascinating questions. There's psychology involved in all of this. Why some people are like that? Why others different? Why people go for this kind of path or that kind of path, or that kind of notion of awakening? So I want to include it over the course of this retreat. We'll return to that periodically.

In the past, a few years ago, I gave a couple of talks called "The Beauty of Desire," parts one and two. In the second part, I introduced something that I discovered in practice where there's a certain way of practicing with desire—even if it's a desire not for

awakening, for something else—where it might at first be uncomfortable and bring dukkha, but there's a way of practicing that doesn't dissolve it, that respects it, opens it up more.

Practicing in that way, actually respecting the desire and empowering it without necessarily acting on it—I'm talking about meditation here—practicing this way leads to an experience where the desire does not bring dukkha. Quite the opposite. It brings a kind of fulfillment and opening of the being. So that the whole way we tend to think about desire, even if it's a good thing, inherently brings some degree of suffering because there's tension. Not so simple. Not so simple.

We'll be revisiting and actually elaborating more on that material as part of this retreat, as part of what we call the alchemy of desire. In the first three talks, hopefully it was clear that the whole idea of trying to live a life of non-clinging, trying to live without craving and clinging, just let go of everything—that simplistically understood approach has several problems, which I'm not going to repeat now. That too is part of the context.

And also, what we're talking about on this retreat is very much in the context of the exploration, the elaboration and the expansion of what I've been calling imaginal practice—related to tantric practice, but different. I have talked already a fair amount about eros in the context of imaginal practice, in one set of talks called "An Ecology of Love," in three or four parts. I talked about this dynamic, which we're really going to elaborate on extensively in this retreat, because it's so central—such a powerful conceptual framework that opens up all kinds of things and gives a basis to all kinds of avenues: what I'm calling the soul-making dynamic, or the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. I will explain more about that on this retreat and bring everything back to that quite a bit. But it's already been explored, so again, that's part of the context through imaginal practice.

On this retreat, in a way, it's similar material to what I've explored before in imaginal practice, but now I want to expand that piece about eros, elaborate more regarding eros and its place and its potential, both in what we've been calling imaginal practice and also in the path and for the path as a whole—what that might mean for the path and what kind of paths that opens up.

So that's a little bit of the context, but there's more, because we could say: why bother? Why introduce this other word, eros, when we have lots of words, as we elaborated in part one of the first talk? Why bother? That's a really good question. Do we really need another concept here?

Let me read you something. Someone I didn't know sent me an email sometime in 2015, a little while before I got ill. This arrived at my inbox from Gaia House out of the blue, from a man who lives in the Yukon in Canada—in the Arctic Circle, I think. I'll read you the entire email because there's so much insight here, and he captures so many of the themes that we're going to touch on. He highlights the necessity and in a way answers this question of why bother. So listen quite carefully, because it's very well articulated, very beautifully written, with tremendous insight packed into what he's saying in all kinds of ways.

"Dear Rob, my name is..."

You don't need to know his name. And we've never met. By the way, I asked his permission to use this email in teaching, and he was really fine with that. I'll say this now, and I hope you can remember this because I won't say it every time: when I use examples from other people in the past, if you have heard me do that, or in this retreat or in the future, generally speaking, almost without exception, I've asked the person involved if I could, and they have said yes.

So: "My name is X, and we've never met. I have recently been reading your book and listening to some of your talks, as recommended by my current teacher, Y. Interesting stuff. I found myself being challenged and derailed by some of your approaches to the Dharma, often in a quite uncomfortable manner. This made me realize how easily I tend to align my whole perspective with certain specific sets of ideas and points of view without daring to shake it up. But you woke up the rebel in me, the iconoclast, and I'm grateful for this."

But here's really what I want to focus on. He continues:

"I'm quite new to the Buddhist path, having only been formally practicing for about three years now, but I dive straight into it. I've spent most of the last year as a monk, both in Myanmar and France, before disrobing with the idea of closing my worldly life and ordaining again this upcoming fall. I was quite committed to the idea until I fell in love with a girl who came out of nowhere and disheveled my whole world. Classic story, apparently.

"Now, obviously, from the monk's perspective, this is the worst thing I could have done, but somehow I can't really buy into that. Not just because romance is so sweet and compelling, but mostly because of my intuition that there is something deeper running underneath lust and love, something wider than her and me, something so beautifully alive that maybe it shouldn't be renounced so quickly.

"It's that same intuition that flared up every time I have fallen in love – the feeling that I'm playing a game that is beyond us, that the torrent in my chest is just running through me, unaffected by matter or time, untamed by anybody, that I'm just here as a temporary vehicle for a desire that has never begun nor ceased stretching out towards the Beloved. So my specific love stories become just some personified renditions of a myth, essentially unspoken and inexhaustible."

There's so much beauty in what he writes, and so relevant to the themes that we're going to be unraveling, unpacking, elaborating on. But he continues, and this is why I wanted to write you:

"Because I have never heard anyone else attempting to reconcile romantic love with the Dharma, and I would like to explore this possibility in order to avoid fragmenting my life into discrete arenas. I can't honestly bring myself to set up desire and freedom against each other as mutually exclusive principles, however much this seems to be insisted upon in the Dharma, and this has been a huge difficulty in my recent attempts to engage fully with practice.

"I would like to start imagining an experience of desire or lust that would exceed the lack and the compulsion to fill it in, that would be unconditioned by pain without having to impose an artificial stance of dispassion and sacrifice a dynamic force of the human heart for a peace maybe too sterile."

And he continues:

"Unfortunately, I feel ill-equipped for such an undertaking. My heart just dramatically bouncing from an inclination towards disenchantment tranquility to one of stormy passion and unreasonable attachments, constantly throwing myself off balance, completely invested into one configuration or the other. I don't really know where to start. As of now, I have recently let myself be overwhelmed by a crazy and beautiful romance" – I find this really moving, all of it – "overwhelmed by crazy and beautiful romance to the point of neediness and jealousy. And I want to open this up, to let it breathe, to bring some freedom within the tension of desire itself.

"So I'd like to ask you if you would have any advice, any lead into how I could directly practice with this explosive heart of mine... Thank you kindly and please accept my best regards."

So, beautiful, beautiful email. And I was struck by this, of course, and moved. A bit busy as I was at the time, I was moved to write back and suggest we arrange a time to speak. And we spoke just for about an hour. That was actually all we had the chance to do before I got ill, quite out of the blue as well, and I had to cut down on most of my teaching.

He said, while we were talking, that before falling in love this time, he thought he'd left all that behind him and was now travelling a different path. And what was the image of that path? He mentioned the hermit in solitude in the peace of the woods or the mountains. And I asked him, "Is it peace you're after?" And he said, "Freedom from ruts and from the fear of engaging."

There's a lot here. We talked about imaginal sensibility, imaginal practice, what this meant about self-view, the possible plurality within self-view, the possibility of regarding desire as not just restlessness, as we touched on in the first talks. We really touched on the possibilities of imaginal practice and also on working with the energy of desire, as I was talking about in some of the Beauty of Desire talks. But we only could speak for an hour, and it's such a huge subject that all I could do was kind of give a few pointers, really, and suggest that we have some more contact at some point.

There was another piece to this man's situation. The woman he was involved with—and this was part of the problem that initially instigated his reaching out—was wanting the relationship to be an open one. She wanted them both to be able to have intimate connections with other people, and while she was clear about this desire, he felt very unsure and deeply ambivalent.

I pointed out to him that although this question of an open relationship was certainly worth exploring and pondering, whether it ended up being open or not, and even whether the relationship continued or ended, wasn't actually the most deeply relevant thing. The more fundamental, universal questions he was grappling with—these wouldn't disappear regardless of what form the relationship took or whether it continued at all.

So when we ask, "Why bother? Why bother with all this?" that email articulates really well one of the reasons. The contact we had wasn't enough to truly allow those kinds of questions and the wrestling he described to be opened up and supported. Hence this retreat, hence these teachings, and hence the attempt we're making here.

In the Theravada tradition he was coming from, sexual images and energies that arise in meditation are usually regarded essentially as kilesa—defilement or distraction. There's sometimes a slightly more charitable and open, softer view that says no-

tice them, allow them, but certainly don't encourage them. So there's this spirit of openness—notice, allow—but not encouragement. Sexual and erotic images and energies are not regarded as having any real positive place on the path, except in the very general context that anything has a place insofar as we're attempting, within a certain framing of what dharma is, to be open to all things.

Still, underneath that openness lies a subtext: it's better if these things don't arise. It's easier. Basically, just let go of them. There might be a kind of view of equality—they're just like anything else to be open to, to be let go of—but essentially they're treated like everything else: don't cling, don't get involved, don't create anything there.

Insight meditation has many strengths, including how much emphasis it places on the feet. How many times have you heard this on retreat? Walking meditation, feet on the ground, standing meditation, groundedness. "Can you feel your sitting bones on the cushion?" Really important. And insight meditation also emphasizes—and this is one of its beauties—the heart: openness of heart, the capacities of heart, the cultivation and centrality of heart.

More and more in insight meditation circles, there's an emphasis on what we could call the head—slowly, a few strands within insight meditation are really emphasizing study of texts and intellectual understanding.

So we have feet, heart, and head. But other bits might be missing. Can it involve our hips? Feet, heart, head, hips. Again, there's a kind of lacuna there, certainly around sexuality and erotics.

I really want to emphasize that when we use the word eros, it includes sexuality in the way we're meaning it. We include sexual attraction, sexual energy, and so forth. But it's actually much, much more than that. We're talking about something much more fundamental, something that can be both very intense and very subtle. Sexual energy and attraction can be subtle too, but we're pointing to something even more basic and often more refined than that.

But again, not to over-labor the point: why introduce this concept of eros? Why distinguish something called eros from craving or greed or desire in general? Well, it's there already. Eros, as we're meaning that term, is already functioning every day in our lives. It's already part of our experience, as we'll explore.

Making this distinction draws out something that otherwise might not be so clear to us—and that lack of clarity might shut doors if we don't distinguish it. Making any kind of distinction amplifies something. By distinguishing this from that, A from B, both A and B get amplified, or one of them gets magnified. It's like putting something under a magnifying glass—it becomes clearer.

Setting something apart allows us to investigate it, to take it as a theme of investigation. If I don't delineate it in the first place, I can't take it as a theme of investigation.

The delineation is the beginning of opening something up—like a tear in fabric that reveals what lies beneath, or getting your foot in the door so you can begin to pry it open. Setting it apart allows us to investigate, to become interested in it. And then we can see how it works. What is this thing? How does it work? And where does it lead—this thing that we're going to call eros?

Because, and this is one of our central contentions, eros will lead to different experiences, to different ends than craving leads to. It leads to ends and experiences other than the ones craving leads to. It opens up, if you like, regions of soul, to use a certain language.

Eros is very connected with soulfulness, with what we're going to call soul-making, which I'll explain more what we mean by that. But for now, let's just say the widening and deepening of a sense of sacredness—the widening and deepening and diversification of our sense of sacredness. But this word "soul-making" has much to do with meaningfulness and resonance and depth and dimensionality and beauty and all kinds of things. Eros is connected with a sense of divinity and with what we've been calling in past retreats cosmopoiesis—the very sense we have, the vision, the perception of the world, the cosmos we live in, the cosmos about us, our very sense of existence.

We're going to go into these terms—divinity, cosmopoiesis, soul-making—later in much more detail, because they're very woven into this whole theme of eros.

So that's one reason. Eros is in our life already. We already experience it. We just need to draw it out and investigate it and see where it leads, because it does lead somewhere other than where what we might call craving leads to.

A second reason why I make this delineation is to hopefully establish, or at least highlight, the potential of opening to a recognition of the sacredness of eros itself. The sacredness of eros itself. Again, this is something we're going to come back to a lot. We can see that. And it's very different to see that eros is sacred rather than as a defilement. And that includes also the sacredness, or at least the potential sacredness, of sexuality.

Sacredness never resides in this or that object or thing. We sacralize. We make something sacred through our relationship with it. So there's the possibility of sacralizing sexuality, rather than just viewing eros or sexuality as a defilement, or as leading inevitably to defilement.

And all this, as I said, is not really so adequately addressed in the Dharma at present, for the most part. We talk about sexuality and desire, but we talk a lot about desire in a negative way, mostly. And we talk about sexuality, but very little, except in terms of ethical prohibitions—for example, the precepts. Or we admit it's an aspect of life, predominantly lay life, but still there for monastics. But there isn't really this exploration, this inquiry. It's not really opened up as part of the path.

As we mentioned already at least once, most people have a desire for romantic love, or most people are involved in relationships or in marriages perhaps, and a finer discrimination is needed there. This is not metta. I cannot reduce a romantic love relationship or a marriage to metta. There's something more involved, or that needs to be involved, and part of that more is what we're going to call eros.

And if I'm interested in that—if I'm really interested in really bringing a fullness of investigation, and if I'm really interested in romantic love and romantic partnerships being really integrally part of the practice—then this brings all kinds of inquiries. For example, in a long-term relationship, what keeps the eros alive? What stifles it, what kills it, what erodes it, what just allows it to fritter away, and what keeps the eros alive in a long-term relationship?

So there's that second reason: the re-sacralizing of sexuality and love, but also of eros, and making it more part of the path—integrally, fully, richly.

But really with all this, a third reason why I make this discrimination of something called eros is related to what I said before. I'm interested in creating or opening an area or a direction of investigation. I certainly don't want to just assert something like the sacredness of eros—to tell you eros is sacred and then leave it at that.

Some people will agree, some people will disagree. It's pointless. What I'm much more interested in is a domain and a dimension for really a much freer, more open and penetrating inquiry—dharma inquiry.

Always in dharma inquiry, always there's something really fundamental to see. There's a principle that how we view something—always we see that how we view something affects the perception of that something. The ideas that I have, the precon-

ceptions, the conceptions, the relationship with the something that I'm investigating, the area of inquiry, affects my perception of that something. And affects the experiences, the related experiences that unfold, that can unfold, or that will unfold.

So all that's just to do with dependent arising. The view, the way of looking, affects, it shapes the perception. Fabrication. We've talked about that as part of what we talked about before. Now part of that, so we really have to see this dependent arising. How I view something affects my perception of that thing. So that must be part of the way that I'm inquiring.

And a part of that, a part of the investigation, is perhaps this question: well, what happens? How does it affect this whole thing called eros if I view it as sacred, even if I just try and view it, even just a little, just entertain the idea that it might be sacred? So that's a subset of a subset of the investigation. What happens if? We're not asserting anything here. It's all really in the spirit of investigation.

And I'll say it one more time. We mean by eros something including, but much more than sexuality, much more than sexual attraction or energy or sexual interactions between people. You can have—there exists, there arises for us an erotic connection or erotic connections, plural, with the earth, with a tree or a piece of land, with the stars, with the cosmos, erotic connection with the divine, erotic connection, relationship with the senses, an erotic sensibility, an erotic connection with materiality. Certainly with another human being, but not only humans, with other living beings. Certainly also not just with others, but we can have, and hopefully we do have, and we're going to elaborate on this, an erotic connection with oneself—an erotic connection with oneself, erotic connections, plural, with oneself and aspects of oneself, faces of oneself, or the self's faces, or self-faces, whatever.

There can and hopefully is an erotic view, an erotic connection with the path and with the idea or the vision, the fantasy, the notion, the concept of awakening. Certainly, always there's an erotic connection with imaginal figures, even when it seems like there isn't. And there's even the possibility of erotic connection with ideas and concepts.

So eros pervades very broadly. We mean much more than sexuality here. Eros can also be, or can seem to be, primarily erotic. At different times, it can seem to be something primarily energetic, or primarily physical, embodied, if you like, or primarily imaginal, or primarily intellectual. Can at different times be or seem to be primarily all those things? Actually, I would say it always involves all of these aspects. Eros always involves energy, what we're going to call the energy body and the energetics. It involves some kind of embodiment, some kind of embodiment, or relationship with body and

views of the body and sense of the body. It always involves the imaginal and it always involves ideation, intellect, concept, what we're going to call logos—always involves all that.

So it's already something multidimensional, and we're going to go into this more. And as I said, whenever there is a sense of soulfulness, that kind of richness, resonance, depth, dimensionality, beauty, meaningfulness, in our existence, in the being, whenever there is soul-making, sacredness in our existence, eros is involved. Eros is involved whenever there's soul-making.

Now, I think it's fair to say, I think it's obvious, maybe important to say as well, that different people at different times will find these investigations that we're going into around eros and soul-making more or less interesting. So this, to me, is interesting in itself. It seems to me, it does seem to me, that people differ in the flavours or the characters, if you like, of the ways eros or libido, if we say life force, expresses in their lives. They differ in the flavours, the characters, the ways eros expresses in their lives.

The fire, if you like, if eros is a kind of fire. The fire of eros looks and burns differently. People's soul fire burns and looks differently, one to another. There's quite a range there. The flaming passion, and also at different times, the flaming passion, the very steady, quiet, small, but unquenchable flame, or the raging fire, whatever, you know, leaping from one thing to another, the flames. It looks and burns differently.

But people also differ, it seems to me, in the amount, strength, and depth of Eros—of the libido or life force that flows through them in their lives. Some people are characterized by one quality, others by another. There's a range here. And it's also true, as we've touched on before, that for all kinds of interesting reasons, Eros and libido can be and often are blocked in our lives in different ways. They may be inhibited at certain times or in certain situations, along certain lines of expression while remaining free in others. Sometimes there's a more chronic and pervasive blocking or inhibition of Eros and libido. It's not necessarily that a person's character or style is simply fixed—something may be blocked, inhibited, crushed, or otherwise constrained.

Despite all these varying differences between different people at different times, I would say that Eros is a necessary and integral aspect of what we're going to be calling soul-making. Therefore, an inquiry into Eros is important for anyone interested in or devoted to soul-making. It's simply part of what one needs to consider and explore—to open up, go into, allow, understand, support, and nourish.

So on this retreat, the intention of these teachings is really to open doors. I've mentioned that it's possible certain doors are actually shut or even locked in the way we're conceiving not just of Dharma, but of life, existence, who we are, what the world is, what existence is. The aim of these teachings is to open doors and to sketch—at least begin to sketch—a path for those who would move through these doors into new territory, for those who would like to travel in certain directions.

We're offering a map, at least the beginnings of a map, a frame of reference, and lighting certain beacons for navigation for those who already find themselves in uncharted territory around Eros and desire. They're already there and need some kind of orientation—ways of thinking and practicing, practical tools, the practical subtleties of practical differentiations, navigation, and steering that all practices need.

Some people, as we mentioned, already see that the more usual or narrow interpretations of Dharma may not be enough to open up this territory. Some already sense, as in that beautiful email I read earlier, a holiness in desire—the holiness of desire in life or in certain areas of desire, and also in imaginal practices. This is very common. But they sense that holiness while recognizing it's tricky, complex, and rich. Help is needed—a conceptual framework, tools, distinctions, practice instructions both on the cushion and in life, in relationships.

Again, returning to context: these teachings sit within a larger framework of wanting to open a path that integrates many elements we've explored over recent years—imaginal practice, soul-making, cosmopoiesis, the re-enchantment of the cosmos, the poetry of perception, experiences and senses of sacredness and divinity, Eros. We've touched on all this before, and I'm probably going to attempt a brief glossary of these terms in the next talk, which will hopefully be helpful.

This retreat takes a slightly different angle, approaching from Eros and expanding more on what that means. But all of this, as you can hopefully see, integrates with and sits alongside our usual, more typical Dharma teachings about craving, letting go of craving, and how craving leads to dukkha. It complements those teachings and also the much more radical teachings about investigating clinging—the whole spectrum of what that word means, with all the subtleties and beauties of working with that in practice.

This includes letting go of clinging, moving up and down the spectrum of clinging, seeing what it does to the fabrication of perception of self, other, world, time, and so forth. It involves going deeply in practice and understanding into the realization and insight of dependent origination at a very deep level—not the more common level—and unfolding the experience of the unfabricated and the emptiness of all things.

This opens existence and provides radical freedom, a radical opening of the sense of existence. That understanding of emptiness provides what we could call a non-realist basis for all these other explorations we're engaging in. To the degree that we've taken to heart and understood the teaching of emptiness—how deeply it's penetrated heart and understanding—to that degree we can practice a flexibility of ways of looking and of conceptual frameworks.

We can entertain different ideas and conceptual frameworks without having to believe in the reality of any of it—without needing to think that any of these ways of looking reveal how the world actually is, how I actually am, what the nature of things actually is, or that this idea or conceptual framework represents the truth of things. There's a real facility and flexibility in moving between ways of looking—a really broad range—and all kinds of conceptual frameworks.

So these teachings are woven into and integrate with the usual Dharma teachings about craving and letting go, releasing dukkha, and the much deeper teachings about dependent arising and emptiness. This forms a non-realist basis that partly allows us to open up teachings of imaginal practice and, if you like, tantric teachings—though I make a distinction there. Tantra is based on that understanding of emptiness, absolutely, or at least it's supposed to be, as I've mentioned before.

All of this is integrated together. As I've mentioned, there are other possibilities through imaginal practice and through understanding Eros of having what I call fuller, more adequate concepts and perceptions of self, other, world, and existence—ways of relating, seeing, and experiencing that are more soulful, more conducive to soul-making, that widen and diversify our sense of sacredness and open our senses of beauty, sacredness, and divinity.

I hope you can see in all of this—if not right now, then at some point—that this isn't really eclecticism. I'm not interested in simply drawing different things together and tossing them in a pot for the sake of being interesting or out of restlessness in some superficial way. I hope you can see at some point how integrated all these teachings are.

And if you like, how necessary, how inevitable many of these teachings are, because as I said, one way of understanding the Dharma unfolds a certain depth and a certain possibility, and that just keeps unfolding in a very necessary way. So necessary to what's gone before, but also necessary to our existence and to our practice for the future.

More typical Dharma psychology might focus on teachings like the links of dependent origination, which we've touched upon. One of the immense strengths of the Buddha's teaching is that he gives us a set of concepts, and in a way they become ways of looking. That's what these concepts are—they become ways of looking. But they serve to simplify. Dharma concepts serve to simplify because they fabricate less. When I use a certain set of concepts, there's less papañca, less of this complexifying and nonsense-making entanglement.

At a deeper level too, they simplify in the sense that Dharma concepts become ways of looking that move towards less and less fabrication, and less fabrication is a state of simplicity. So the teaching says: don't think about this, don't think about that, think in this way, look in this way, adopt these ways of looking. There's a disentangling, a certain amount of simplifying—both of the ways of looking by constraining them to certain concepts, but also then in what is seen. There's a simplifying in the perception of things, and that simplifying just goes deeper and deeper.

Not just the simplicity of the is-ness, the so-called suchness of things and the vividness of that, but the simplicity of our life, and then the simplicity of perception beyond the thing-ness of things as we go deeper and deeper into unfabricating, and eventually into something that is in effect so simple that even "is" or "is not" doesn't apply to it—the unfabricated.

Again, if I use the language of the soul, the psyche wants and needs, obviously, a kind of disentangling. And it certainly wants that journey into perceiving less fabrication. But there are, so to speak, other dimensions or strata of the soul—we could use that language—of the psyche, that want something else. Rather than just simplicity, simplicity, simplicity—unfabricating, unfabricating, unfabricating to the unfabricated—rather than just the simplifying of that direction, powerful though Dharma practice and Dharma concepts are, other distinctions and delineations become necessary.

What is the difference between papañca and fantasy or image in the way we're using it? The difference between daydreaming and fantasy and image? What's the difference between soul-making and the kind of simplicity of freedom that I've just talked about? What's the difference between eros and craving, or desire and eros? What's the difference between eros and love, or the brahmaviharas?

Something—and I'm going to make this contention, something I'm really going to come back to a lot on this retreat—something in us, something in the soul wants to know, wants to experience not just oneness, not just transcendence or the unfabricated, the transcendence of the unfabricated, nor just "life as it is," as if there really even is a life as it is, as if such a thing exists, as if such a thing is possible to behold. We don't just

want oneness, transcendence, or that freshness of bare attention. Certainly we want more even than all that—certainly more than bare attention, I hope—but also more than a dissolution in oneness, and also more than the transcendence of the unfabricated.

We need a kind of more elaborate, you could say, or slightly more sophisticated psychology. We need a Dharma psychology that both recognizes that which is already present, but which needs to be, as I said, drawn out, amplified a little more, made recognized. So the fact, for example, that eros is more than metta. It's not the same as craving. It's not even just wholesome desire or chanda or desire that leads to less suffering. We need to recognize something that's already present in our life that hasn't been drawn attention to yet, highlighted, drawn out, investigated.

And we need a slightly more elaborate Dharma psychology because of the different kinds of sacredness and the different realms of experience which a slightly more involved psychology that involves concepts like eros can open up for us—without which either these realms don't open up, these directions don't open up, or they just get dismissed.

CHAPTER 55

Dilemmas and Delineations: How Did We Get Here?! (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 42 min

> *In this second part of his exploration into the nature of eros, Rob Burbea provides a working definition while acknowledging the hermeneutic circle inherent in understanding any concept within a larger framework. He defines eros as a particular kind of desire—one that seeks more contact, connection, touching, knowing, and intimacy with its object, whether outer or inner. This definition deliberately preserves otherness rather than seeking dissolution into oneness, distinguishing it from classical Platonic definitions that emphasize union.*
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> *Burbea carefully differentiates eros from sexuality, Freud's pleasure principle, or mere life force, while explaining how to recognize erotic experience through qualities like attraction, tension, juiciness, dynamism, and arousal of interest. He introduces the distinction between delight (the fullness of soul-making) and bliss (pleasurable energy body experiences), noting that eros typically involves delight and may include bliss. Throughout, he emphasizes that this phenomenological approach to defining eros serves specific purposes within an integrated vision of practice that includes imaginal work and soul-making, preparing the foundation for deeper explorations of how eros relates to spiritual development and the sacred.*

Why Eros? Why make this delineation?

Because it's part of our life already. This should become more and more evident: Eros is involved in our relationship with the path and with awakening. To different degrees, Eros is involved in our relationship with the path and awakening, and the notion of awakening, and therefore Eros needs to be investigated there. Because it's part of my path, because it's involved in my relationship with it.

It's certainly part of imaginal practice. And as I said, Eros involves and leads to soul-making and widening of the senses of sacredness beyond just the is-ness of things, and even beyond the transcendence that's possible for us, for consciousness—transcendence in oneness or the unfabricated. Opening up sacredness wider than a kind of universal sacredness. We talked about this on other retreats and we'll go into this on this retreat. So there's a kind of universal sacredness and then there's particular sacredness, theophanies, that preserve particularities.

There's also the making of the link between sexuality and sacredness—that sexuality and Eros are not just defilements. We want a path that has more than nothing to say, or very little to say, about sexuality and about romantic love, that recognizes more is involved than certainly just procreation, and also than mere matter.

Before I venture a first definition or delineation of Eros, I want to say a few things generally about this definition but also about making definitions and delineations in general.

Firstly, and it's implicit in what I've been saying already, people use the word "Eros," if they use it at all in psychological or other contexts, in many different ways. Over the millennia, it's been used to mean many different things, so there's a range in how people use it. It's important to be aware of that. We are certainly not saying we have the right definition and everyone else is wrong. That would be absolutely ridiculous. It's really not about right or wrong. It's more, for me, about what does this way of defining Eros lead to?

Different ways of defining Eros unfold in different directions. The way we're defining Eros sits within a certain conceptual framework of other things that I've mentioned and a whole set of teachings. So what does that whole set move towards? How does this notion of Eros sit within that framework? How is it supported by that other set and how does it support that other whole conceptual framework? Really not about right or wrong or arguing with what people say, but it's important to recognize this is just one among many possible ways.

The way I'm going to define it in a minute is one among many possible ways. The way we're going to define it over this retreat is one among many possible ways. But it's also a delineation that's based on a phenomenological approach, meaning just the observation of experience and what's actually happening in experience. But that observation is already informed and based on certain directions in practice to do with understandings of emptiness and also imaginal practice and notions of soul-making. Phenomenological observation is always informed by a conceptual framework and adds to that. But the definition we're using is based on what is really observed in experience in that territory.

So not about right or wrong—that's the first thing—but what's it serving, and how can we define it in a way that serves our purposes.

The second thing is a more general point about definitions and delineations that has to do with something philosophers call the hermeneutic circle. Hermeneutics is a word that basically means interpretation. It emerged as a word in terms of the study of sac-

red texts and scriptures: what does it actually mean, this text? How should we interpret when the Buddha said this, or in some tantric text it says that, or actually the Bible or whatever?

It has to do with parts and wholes. If I'm looking at a text or if I have this concept of Eros, it's one part within a much larger whole. This word that I want to interpret in the text, or the text itself, is part of a much larger group. The word is part of a much larger group of words that make up the text, and the text itself is part of a much larger, probably, group of texts, or stream of tradition, or historical context, or whatever. I can't fully understand the part unless I understand the whole.

In this case, we can't actually take Eros on its own and understand it without understanding the other parts of a bigger whole—what we're calling this integrated vision of practice, integrated conceptual framework or architecture of practice that involves imaginal practice and soul-making. I can't really take Eros separate from those and hope to understand it.

But similarly, the conundrum of the hermeneutic circle is I can't understand the whole until I understand the particular parts. I certainly won't understand the whole text unless I understand the individual words within it, and I won't even understand this text unless I have a bigger understanding of tradition and the group of texts that it involves.

This applies actually to everything. It even applies to our understanding of mindfulness. To understand, or to move closer to an understanding of what the Buddha meant by mindfulness, we actually need to understand the whole of the path and the whole of his Dharma, because mindfulness is situated within that Dharma. Its meaning and its directions and what it draws on and the assumptions—all of that has a place, a context. I can't really understand mindfulness until I've understood the whole of the Dharma and what the Buddha was shaped by and opened with that. Similarly, I can't really understand the whole of the Dharma unless I understand the individual elements of it.

But it's the same here in relation to Eros. Eros is, as I said, tied in with a whole other web of concepts. To take it out on its own and try to define it is actually not strictly speaking possible. It's still helpful, and that's what I'm going to do as a starting point, but it's woven together with other notions, ideas, concepts, and experiences.

Everything that I've mentioned so far—all these words that I've sometimes thrown out without fully explaining—will be elaborated over the course of the retreat. Because of this hermeneutic circle, because of this contextualization and the place that something like Eros occupies within a larger framework of ideas and experiences, we're go-

ing to have to move back and forth between small vision and big vision, tying things together. We're going to elaborate what Eros means over quite a long time, and I ask for your patience with that. This approach is necessary and will give us a much richer, deeper, fuller understanding that's actually much more helpful.

The third consideration about definition in relation to Eros specifically is that Eros classically is a god, a divinity. Divinities are, by their nature, not fully fathomable, not fully capturable in concept. They have some kind of infinitude to them, and so they're not fully definable. That doesn't mean we shouldn't venture certain concepts—and I'll explain much more later why we can't avoid conceptuality, and actually why conceptuality is necessary and part of the erotic movement itself. What's crucial is expanding conceptuality, not limited or fixed or stuck conceptuality. That's where the challenge lies.

It's not that we simply say, "Oh, it's divine, it's infinite, it's undefined," and then shrug and forget about it. Then we don't amplify that quality. It doesn't come alive to us as an area of interest. But we can use concepts while never hoping to completely capture it. In some traditions, actually, Eros is a semi-divinity—a demigod existing between the divine and the not-divine. This may allow us to approach it, or at least part of it, through some conception.

We'll return to all this business about conceptuality. But having acknowledged these caveats and qualifications and complications about definitions, let's start with a really simple definition—just to get us started. Bearing in mind that we can't capture it completely, bearing in mind that it involves many other concepts, and that it's not simply right or wrong, let's begin with a relatively simple definition.

I say that Eros is a desire—a kind of desire, a wanting. But wanting what? It wants more contact. It wants more contact, more connection with what we could call its object, or whatever erotic object we're talking about. We're going to use that language frequently. "Erotic object" means what Eros is in relationship to, or the beloved, if you prefer more poetic language.

So Eros wants more contact and connection with the erotic object. Now, because these words—"contact" and especially "connection"—have become so commonly used that they've almost lost their power, I'm going to elaborate this a little.

It wants more contact and connection. It wants to touch the erotic object more. I'm using these words quite broadly. What does it mean to touch? Does touch just mean skin touching something? Certainly it means that, but it means much more. What does

it mean to touch? Consider the fullness of that word and how we can touch things—with what dimensions of our being and our psyche can touch things. It wants to touch more of the erotic object.

It wants to know more. It wants to know the object more. It wants to know the beloved more. And again, that word *know*—think of the fullness of what that word means. "I want to know you." I'm really using these words quite broadly here.

It wants to experience more of the beloved, more of the erotic object. So it seeks intimacy. Eros is a wanting to penetrate the erotic object more, to open more to the beloved, to open to more of the erotic object, to penetrate more of the erotic object, and to be penetrated more. These words—penetrate, open—are also words with sexual connotations, and that's deliberate. But we're not limiting ourselves to that.

Using these words broadly, eros is the wanting of more contact, more connection, more touch, more knowing, more experience of—to experience more of, to have more intimacy, more penetration, more opening to the erotic object or beloved.

Now that erotic object could be anything. Anything. Outer, so-called outer or inner. Anything. The erotic object can be anything.

Notice also in this simple definition the emphasis on that word *more*. I don't know the classical myth well, but Eros always goes along with another god called Pothos. P-O-T-H-O-S is another Greek word, and Pothos is the infinite desire, or the desire for the infinite. It's always the *more*. This is the more. Pothos has something—it always wants to move on to something else. When it's got something, it wants more, more, more.

I'm going to say that pothos is a part of eros. When we talk about eros, it implies and involves and has as an intrinsic element pothos, and that's the more. It wants more touching, more knowing of, more experience of, more penetration, more opening to.

You might be thinking, "That's not a very interesting definition." It's quite a humble definition in a way, really starting quite simple. In some senses, it's quite broad. In others, it's quite narrow. You might think it's a bit disappointing, or maybe not a big deal.

But my contention, and what I hope you'll at some point be convinced by, is actually the beauty of this way of defining it. You will begin to see slowly, hopefully more and more, the power of it as a way of thinking about eros. It has all kinds of implications and consequences that emerge from it, that are wrapped up—not so obviously, but intrinsically—and create the beauty and the fullness, the richness, and the multi-directionality of what eros actually is and what it does.

Again, notice that eros is not the same as sexuality or sexual attraction or sexual energy. It includes that in our definition. That's certainly part of it. Sexuality is one dimension of that, one manifestation of it at a certain level and in a certain direction.

We're also not equating it with Freud's pleasure principle—the seeking of pleasure and pleasant sensations, which would be akin to one of the Buddha's lists of what craving or clinging involves. Pleasure is certainly involved, and I'm going to come back to this in eros. But that's not actually what eros is after.

Nor are we equating it with what Freud would call the life instinct versus the death instinct, or even the life force—just the sort of life energy. Nor love.

The way we're using the word eros, we're not equating it with all of these. There is a relationship between the way we're using the word eros and each of those, but they're not equal. In some instances, eros is the bigger concept—for instance, in relation to sexuality.

In other instances of these other definitions, eros would be the smaller concept.

I would say eros is a part, or an element of life force—or better, a certain direction or manifestation of life force. We as beings have a certain amount of life force at any time, or just in our existence, and eros would be one directionality and one manifestation of the way that life force expresses itself.

Eros, as I said, is one kind of desire. Craving would be another kind of desire. Craving for sense pleasures would be yet another kind of desire.

But notice something else. In some traditions and ancient traditions that continue to this very day—I think it came either from the Platonic teachings or from the Neoplatonic tradition—there was a mystic and sage and philosopher with the wonderful name of Dionysus the Areopagite. Actually, this person I'm talking about had the even more wonderful name of Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, because it seems, for very complex reasons, he was pretending to be the other person, Dionysus the Areopagite, who had lived a few hundred years before.

Anyway, this Dionysus the Areopagite, among other teachers, defines eros as really that force that moves towards unification, towards union, towards melting in oneness. We are not defining it that way. This is important. This is quite common in some psychologies and some spiritual teachings, but we're not defining it that way.

There is a relationship between this movement towards unification, though it's actually more complex. Go back to our definition: eros is this desire, this wanting for more contact, more connection, more touch, more touching, more knowing, more experiencing, more intimacy, more penetrating and opening to the beloved or the erotic object.

So there's a relationship with the movement towards unifying, but—and we're going to elaborate this, both of us will elaborate this much more—eros will always want more. It will always want more, which means more of this connecting, touching, opening to, which means that either it will resurrect a twoness, it will resurrect the beloved object after an experience of oneness or union, or it creates or discovers more of the other, other othernesses, other things to reach towards in the object. It complexifies this. We're going to explain this much more.

Or it simply does not go towards union. It does not move towards dissolution, towards union, towards melting, towards a collapsing of the twoness into oneness. So either it does, but then it will re-instigate, re-create or discover—this is something we'll come back to—create or discover other othernesses, or recreate a kind of more of the beloved other to move towards. Or it will simply resist somehow that collapse to oneness. It will preserve the twoness—the self, if you like, and the erotic other, the erotic object, the beloved other. Much more about that later, but this is a really important point.

So how do we recognize eros? How do we recognize the presence of eros in our experience, in our life, in our meditations, in our relationships?

I remember teaching many years ago and giving some instructions on mind states, emphasizing the awareness of developing sensitivity to how the mind state was reflected in and affected the body and the experiences in the body, and also just the general texture of the mind space. My two co-teachers commented afterwards and said that they thought some people just would never be able to do that, or couldn't do that, and that a much better way of going about it was to say that you recognize the mind state through the thoughts—the kind of thoughts you have tell you what mind state you're in. So if you have angry thoughts, you know that you're angry.

All I can say for now, and actually for the way that I would conceive of this whole set of teachings and the Dharma in general, is that we need, as practitioners, to develop our sensitivity and the subtlety of our awareness to be able to notice mind states—if we're calling eros a mind state or a state of being—to develop the sensitivity to that without relying on the clues and cues of thoughts. Seeing how the energy body is af-

fected, developing the sensitivity to that, to the textures of mind and the space of mind, the subtle mental movements that are there even when there is no thought, or that exist underneath or alongside thought.

In a way, I stand by that in the sense that I can't really see how the kinds of things we're talking about and the capacity to work with them in practice would even be remotely possible without those kinds of sensitivities. We're talking about developing practice in a way that demands quite a lot, and one of the basic things it demands is a sensitivity to the energy body and a more subtle sensitivity in general to the mind.

But this ties into a point I've said before and repeat again: when we talk about eros, like everything, we're talking about a spectrum. It can be incredibly intense and in a way quite gross and obvious, or really, really quite subtle. And somehow we want—if we're going to explore it and investigate it and include it as part of our reach of what the Dharma means and our practice means and our path means—then we're going to have to be sensitive and recognize its presence and be able to work with it across that whole realm of subtlety and intensity.

That means we can handle and work with and not get bowled over by really intense eros. We'll come back to that whole question about balance. And also that we can recognize and work with it when it's really very subtle, and that it's still recognizable, sensible and fruitful.

Also, you'll notice, kind of implicit in the definition and part of recognizing eros, is that eros involves attraction.

There is attraction in eros. Once more, more X, Y, Z, as we said. So attraction is implicitly part of the force of attraction that one can recognize in oneself and feel and actually explore. It's attracted to what, as I said.

But included in that, or because of that, or with that attraction, eros has this felt tension in it. So eros usually involves some degree of tension, often because of the more, you see, because of the more. It always wants more, or because, and as well, because as I mentioned, the attraction towards the erotic object is not dissolved. Or if it's dissolved, it's only temporarily dissolved in union.

There's an element in eros, if you like, that preserves the otherness and therefore the tension of the two and the tension of the attraction. The attraction doesn't lead to oneness as a final resting - certainly either at all or as a final resting place in which that oneness, there's no more tension of the desire. So always, to say it again, there's the preservation of otherness or the creation of more otherness, so to speak - more of this ob-

ject, more dimensions of this object and therefore more otherness, or the discovery, if you like, of more to the object and more otherness, more to move into with this attraction, with the directionality of the desire.

So you can already see it's simple, but it's already quite complex. And we're going to go into this thing about two-ness and one-ness and preserving otherness and all that. We're going to go into that more, as I said.

But recognizing eros - again, eros often has a certain, what we might call, juiciness to it. Now, that's quite interesting, too. The word libido, which some people use interchangeably with eros... The word libido is related to the word lips and the moisture of lips, the drippings of pleasure. I'm taking this etymology both from James Hillman and also from Onions, who wrote a book about the history of Western thought and certain concepts and traces them through history.

Libido is related to the meaning of drippings of pleasure, juices, libation - our word libation - drink, the excitations of lust, the pouring of liquid, as in libation, as I said, to... deliquarius, to make liquid, to make something a liquid or to melt. It's also related to the Latin word litus, which is moistness or fatness or fruitfulness. That's very key to our definition of eros - fruitfulness and gladness.

And also related to the German lieben, which is love, as well as to the word liber in Latin, which means free. And the god... Liber was a fertility god, a procreative figure. It's also related to something you may have heard me say in other talks about the necessity to make all things liquid. Alchemical maxims - don't proceed until all things have been made liquid. In other words, not reified.

So eros, in its connection with the word libido, all this is wrapped up. Actually, we will be using the word libido when we even use it as meaning more something like psychic energy in general, the energy of the psyche. But anyway, it's related. And juiciness seems to be a part of the erotic experience, a part of the experience of eros.

Part of the reason for juiciness is that, and this is something we're going to have to explain in more detail later, is that eros always invokes, stimulates or involves or is involved with the imaginal and soul-making. Eros always invokes, is involved with or involves and stimulates the imaginal and the soul-making. I'll explain more about this later. And that process of soul-making is in itself rich. And so eros brings more richness. This whole process of soul-making is a rich process and a juicy process.

So attraction, tension, juiciness, the imaginal - I'll come back to that - or image is part of eros or involved with eros as part of how we recognize it.

All this implies a kind of dynamism. So there's the dynamism of the attraction towards the object. That's also recognizable as a feature of eros. There's this dynamism of attraction towards the erotic beloved. But there's also the dynamism of what I just referred to, and I'll elaborate much more as the retreat goes on - this dynamism of the stimulation of the soul-making process, which is a dynamic process. It involves movement, expansion, complication, enrichment, widening, deepening of image, of what we might call psyche, and also of conceptuality. So there's a dynamism involved in eros that has to do with that dynamic. It's not always obvious at first. It's the dynamism of the attraction to the object that's more obvious. But actually what it turns out is the object that we're attracted to is more the complex of image, idea, eros itself. That becomes the object - much more about this later.

But there, as I said, if we're recognizing eros, there's attraction, juiciness, tension, dynamism, arousal. Arousal is also a part of the erotic experience. Now, we don't necessarily mean sexual arousal, although of course that's a part of it, can be, or perhaps even measurable or observable psychophysical arousal that a person might measure with electrodes or something or other.

But this arousal involved with Eros is truly an arousal of interest. We speak of the spark as well—there's an arousal of Eros, of interest. We become deeply interested in this beloved, where something engages us, compelling in the best sense of the word. It's captivating, again, in the best sense of the word. The interest is aroused.

And also the energy body is aroused, by which I mean the energy body is energized. It will feel energized, it will feel open, and it will probably feel aligned. I've talked about this in past retreats when discussing how the energy body works in imaginal practice. But it's also a feature of when there is Eros—the energy body is also aroused.

This arousal can be very intense, very, very intense, or really quite subtle, and it may be relatively unagitated. There's often quite a peaceful feeling with it. Not always, but often.

There's also an aspect—which I think I will leave until later when we more fully explain what I mean by this soul-making dynamic, Eros psyche logos—but I'll just mention it now: autoeroticism. What becomes for us an erotic object also involves ourselves and involves our Eros. So the Eros itself becomes erotically beautiful to us, our own Eros, and ourselves also. This we call autoeroticism. I'll return to that hopefully in the next talk.

Now, let's introduce another slight delineation here in relation to some of what we just said. I'm going to make a distinction between two words: delight and bliss. Again, no claim whatsoever that this is a correct dictionary definition or the right definition. But let's use the term delight and say that Eros usually is accompanied by or involves delight.

Delight is involved with erotic experience, by which I mean a sense of fullness, of richness, of aliveness, of interest, as we just said. The delight of soul-making—of this enriching process, this expanding process that soul-making is. We can say, axiomatically, the soul loves soul-making. It's almost a circular definition of the soul. What's the soul? The soul is what loves soul-making. It loves this dynamic, this process of soul-making, of Eros, psyche, logos, and the mutual fertilization, expansion, deepening, enriching, widening.

So soul-making, I wonder, is intrinsically delightful. And Eros, because it goes with all that, almost always has a sense of delight with it. You could say that's part of juiciness, but let's say that's specific to the soul-making quality.

Now, Eros may involve bliss, and again, I'm just creating a definition here for our purposes, defining bliss as an experience of the energy body—of great pleasantness in the energy body, of rapture or joy in the energy body, and that kind of openness. Sometimes, again, very intense, sometimes much more subtle.

But that energy body experience of bliss, I would say, accompanies any lightening or unfabricating, to whatever degree, of the self sense—up to a certain point at least. When you get really deep unfabricating, I'm not sure you can really use the word bliss at all, when you get into the deeper jhānas.

So you can have bliss without Eros, or without delight, or without soul-making. For example—and I'll come back to this too—the bliss of the first jhāna or the third jhāna may or may not be soul-making. In itself, in some ways, it's not, for reasons I'll explain. It's just bliss without Eros and without soul-making delight, the delight of soul-making. And of course, sometimes you can have delight in soul-making without bliss quite often, without that sort of strong feeling in the energy body.

But basically, Eros usually involves delight or is accompanied by delight, and it may involve bliss.

So recognizing Eros—let me run through these again. There's a big spectrum of intensity and subtlety. It involves attraction, that's implicit in it. It includes some kind of felt tension, juiciness certainly, richness of experience, dynamism of different kinds,

arousal of interest and of the energy body, autoeroticism which I'll return to, delight usually accompanies it, and it may involve bliss—this pleasantness, these rapturous or joyful, peaceful, beautiful feelings in the experience of the energy body.

These are some of the elements for recognizing Eros in a very simple way, with some caveats. We're going to see what that does and expand and enrich the very definition or delineation of Eros, really filling it out over the retreat. We'll put it in relationship to other concepts. But these are some of the elements of recognizing the experience.

Already you see in some of what we're talking about, it's hard to go too far without bringing in other elements or parts of this web or architecture of ideas and experiences and delineations that we're going to try to unfold as part of this wider, integrated, more far-reaching conceptual framework or path. So that's what we're going to begin to do—start to draw it together and draw in some of these ideas and involve them in each other.

CHAPTER 56

Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get here?! (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this detailed exposition, Rob Burbea addresses how his teachings on eros and desire relate to broader Buddhist understanding by providing a comprehensive glossary of 20 fundamental terms. He begins by acknowledging that his work represents a significant departure from conventional Insight Meditation approaches, explaining how his phenomenological method—focusing purely on what appears in experience without metaphysical assumptions—naturally led to concepts like soul, divinity, and eros.*
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> *Burbea methodically defines each term, from foundational concepts like 'phenomenological approach' and 'ways of looking' to more advanced ideas like 'cosmopoiesis' and the 'Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.' He explains how fabrication and emptiness relate to imaginal practice, distinguishing between eros (soul-making desire) and craving (contractive desire). Key concepts include the energy body as a mode of attention, soul-making as activities that generate soulfulness, and theophany as particular appearances of the divine.*
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> *This talk serves as both exploration and reference guide, helping practitioners understand how these teachings evolved naturally from simple mindfulness practice while maintaining compatibility with emptiness teachings. Burbea emphasizes that these concepts refer to experiential realities available to anyone who doesn't a priori rule them out, while acknowledging their empty nature—just as we use concepts like 'self' while understanding their lack of inherent existence.*

So, as we've already said, what we mean by eros—the way we are using that term—is actually woven in and related to and indissolubly bound up with and connected to a whole range of other terms that we're using with specific meanings to form a kind of larger conceptual framework. There's a whole web of relationships and implied meanings there. So we can't really unpack what we mean by eros without beginning to include more of those terms and say a little bit about those other notions and a little bit about what the relationships are. But this whole edifice, this whole architecture, this conceptual framework will unfold gradually. There's quite a lot to it, in a way. So I want to begin doing that now.

Just before I do, I'm aware that I'm referring to what is now really quite a large body of work. When we think about all the material on emptiness and dependent arising and imaginal practice and re-enchantment and all that, it's actually quite a large body of work together with this piece on eros. So if someone who is coming from the Insight Meditation tradition or something like that were to just pick a talk at random and listen to that talk, they would probably be baffled, puzzled, probably even maybe shocked, perhaps even outraged. What is this? What is he talking about? What are they talking about? How on earth did we get here? These words—soul, eros, divinity, even the word God, cosmopoiesis, whatever that means—what on earth is he talking about? How did he get there? This is really pretty far out. And is this Buddhism?

Now, I've touched on that last question before. It may be, in some respects, quite an interesting question. In other respects, it might not be interesting at all. What's more interesting about it to me is why is a person asking such a question, and what assumptions and fantasies are operating for them, and what—in our language—what soul styles can we approach this material with in its relationship to, let's say, more conventional interpretations of Dharma. And I've talked about that before; I'm not going to repeat it here.

But just to say that I would say this body of material needs listening to, studying, practicing with—all that material around emptiness, but certainly around the imaginal material—in series. In other words, it adds up. And in that way, only then can a person see and understand what is meant in these teachings. But we'll also hopefully understand, if a person does that—listens, studies, ponders and practices in series—that there is what I would say an almost inevitable or natural evolution of this material. It evolved, if you like, naturally. The doors were presented one after another. The consequences, the avenues were traveled in a kind of logical or inevitable order. One insight, one opening led to another, and so on.

All based on what we might call the phenomenological approach, which is how I would base my approach to Dharma—very, very simple, starting with very, very simple practices, including ideas of mindfulness, but not based on the usual assumptions. This is what makes a phenomenological practice: not based on the usual assumptions, but based on just what do I have as a human being? I have experience. I have what appears to me. Phenomena means appearance. And just basing it on: this is experience, and what can I discover about experience?

And introducing into that very quickly, one discovers, oh, well, I can look at it this way, and I can look at it that way. I can relate to it this way, that way. So the ideas of ways of looking and fabrication eventually come out of that, because I see some ways of

looking fabricate differently than others. So all this unfolds—very, very simple practice, just not based on the usual assumptions. Just suspending them, opening them, relating to what actually is here. Experience is here. Appearance is here. Without other assumptions.

And all this leads to other concepts and other ways of framing what's happening. And out of that comes a freedom and certain conceptual frames, or the availability to look in different ways and to conceive in different ways. If one doesn't understand all that...

If we press a little, if we investigate a little more deeply, we discover that these terms —self, matter, life—are actually quite mysterious. The more we examine them, the more elusive they become. What exactly do we mean when we say "I"? What precisely constitutes matter when we look closely enough to discover it's mostly empty space, energy patterns, quantum fluctuations? What is this thing we call life that seems to animate biological systems?

The same mysterious quality applies to words like soul, divinity, or God. They point toward something in experience, something we can sense or feel, but when we try to pin them down conceptually, they reveal the same kind of fundamental mystery that we find in our most basic, seemingly solid concepts.

So there's a kind of strange inconsistency, if you like, or perhaps an unexamined bias in readily accepting and using words like self and matter and life, while simultaneously dismissing words like soul or divinity as somehow less real or more speculative. In terms of their ultimate nature, in terms of what they actually refer to when we look deeply, they're all equally mysterious, all equally empty, and yet all pointing toward dimensions of experience that are undeniably present.

The question becomes: are we willing to open our practice and our investigation to include the full range of what might be available to experience? Or do we limit ourselves based on the current cultural assumptions about what's acceptable to acknowledge or explore?

This doesn't mean we have to believe anything in particular about these words or concepts. It simply means we remain open to what might reveal itself in experience when we don't foreclose possibilities from the outset. Just as we've learned to hold our sense of self lightly—recognizing its conventional reality while understanding its ultimate emptiness—we can learn to hold these other dimensions of experience in a similar way.

The practice, then, becomes one of radical openness while maintaining the discriminating wisdom that comes from understanding emptiness. We neither grasp at these experiences as ultimately real nor dismiss them as mere fantasy. We allow them to arise and inform our understanding while recognizing their fluid, constructed, and ultimately mysterious nature.

But yes, but what do you mean by that? And if you kept pushing this question, probing with this inquiry, without a doubt it would pretty quickly reveal just how vague the notions of self are—but also the notions of life, and even matter. How full of assumptions they are, how often not well thought out, full, as I said, of assumptions and presumptions that don't actually really bear much scrutiny, much probing. And these can be pretty quickly revealed to be without secure foundations.

Even matter—I mean, you just have to know, well, maybe a fair amount about modern physics, and it's like, matter, this most obvious thing, at a certain point becomes: what are we actually talking about here? And when we talk about it, what are we assuming and presuming, and what is the basis for assuming that? Can we be absolutely secure in those assumptions? Or we find out that it's resting on a set of assumptions, or the definition itself—of self, of matter, of whatever it is—is full of contradictions.

All this applies equally to notions of divinity and soul. They're vague notions. They rest on other assumptions. Any assumptions—you push them deep enough and you're going to come to something you just have to assume without knowing it's an absolute truth. In other words, it has no secure foundations. And a lot of notions actually end up being kind of circular in their definition, as you'll see when we talk about soul.

In fact, that's probably true about everything. There's a kind of assumptionality and vagueness and kind of incoherence or circularity, self-contradictoriness about everything—anything you might name or point to or use as a concept or experience.

Okay, so all that as a kind of precursor. And I'm also aware, of course, that as I said, there's a lot of material here. There's a lot of material on this retreat. There's a lot when you add it to the other retreats and the whole thing about emptiness and imaginal—it's really quite a lot. And it's hard, you know, I appreciate it. It's hard to kind of keep it all in mind, especially hard if you're not practicing with this material in a really exploratory way. And also, a lot of these ideas are not necessarily always so simple or easy to understand, so I fully appreciate that.

And by now, what's happened is that someone very often says, "What do you mean when you say X or when you say Y or when you say cosmopoiesis or this?" And I know that that person has heard me explain it or unfold it at maybe even some length in other talks in the past. And yet still they're asking. So this is very, very normal, very understandable.

So partly what I want to do now in exploring this web is also to hopefully have it function as a bit—somewhere between a kind of exploration of the whole web of ideas and a glossary, a kind of, if you like, glossary of terms. Which is a pretty, I think, strange thing to try and do in a talk, in a recorded talk format, rather than a book where you can just flip to that page and quickly look it up. But I'm hoping it will be helpful. I'm hoping you just know this is the glossary talk and I can just go there and find it and it's about this time in or whatever. But it is pretty strange. So I hope it's helpful. I hope it's not too dry. Hopefully it will serve.

So I made a list of twenty terms. It's also strange because each of these terms... I'm going to be pretty brief. That's the whole point, trying to be quite brief. But each of these terms refer to a wide range of experience and things that I've talked about at much more length. So it's not always easy to kind of sum them up very succinctly. So somewhere between a very brief glossary and a sort of looking at the relationships and filling it out a little bit.

Alright? So, twenty terms.

Number one is... Actually, we just used it a minute or two ago. Phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach.

So, phenomena in Greek means appearance—that which appears. Now, in my life, what I have is appearances. The assumption that this or that is underneath appearances, or it's really matter, or perceptions come from the brain—this is all assumptions. What I have is appearances, phenomena.

I use the words appearances, experiences, and perceptions interchangeably. So what I have is appearances, what I have is perceptions, what I have is experiences. That's what I have as a human being.

In the phenomenological approach, I don't add the assumption that everything comes from the neurophysiology of the brain and that's what gives rise to perceptions. Nor do I approach from a metaphysical perspective that first there is God or beingness or some foundational reality. It's simply that there are appearances. Let's just relate to appearances and see what we can discover.

This is what makes the phenomenological approach so powerful for me—it's a very potent gateway into understanding emptiness and also the imaginal.

One of the proto-phenomenologists, William James, a psychologist and philosopher, held that anything arising in experience was worthy of phenomenological investigation. This includes images, apparent psychic phenomena—whatever appears. Basically, whatever appears to me, I can relate to as a phenomenon and investigate it. I can explore the relationships that function around that thing, whether it's an image, a worldly perception, or something from the different senses. Even an idea is appearance.

All of this is worthy of investigation. Of course there are differences between these domains of appearance, but still—they're all appearance.

What I believe is that if we go deeply enough and radically enough with this phenomenological approach, it can actually open what we might call metaphysical philosophy. We'll return to that later.

The second fundamental concept is ways of looking. This isn't just looking with the eyes, but ways of sensing, ways of knowing, ways of perceiving. It refers to the perspective being employed now and includes the relationship with whatever object I'm perceiving—internal, external, whatever it might be.

Am I grasping at it? Am I pushing it away? Am I seeing it as self or not-self? These are all different ways of looking. Wrapped up in every way of looking is the conceptual framework—the whole collection of conditioning factors in the perceiving that creates the way of looking.

There's always a way of looking. Most of the time, unless you're deeply engaged in this kind of practice, the way of looking remains unconscious. We're not aware of everything involved in our way of looking. Most human beings have very little range or flexibility in their ways of looking—they can only shift them slightly on a gross level.

I see insight meditation practice as the cultivation of a whole range of ways of looking, really developing flexibility and breadth of ways of looking in practice, in ways that have powerful effects.

Related to this is the third concept: fabrication. As we experiment with ways of looking through the phenomenological approach, we begin to see that perceptions, appearances, and experiences are fabricated more or less depending on the way of looking.

Some ways of looking fabricate more perception—a more solid sense of self that feels more separate and contracted. They also create objects that appear more separate, solid, real, and often oppressive. This extends to our whole sense of the world and other phenomena like time and space.

There's a spectrum of fabrication. Different ways of looking fabricate more or less, ranging from extremely gross, solid, and oppressive fabrications to much less fabricated perceptions, down to not fabricating at all. What's fabricated includes dukkha—dis-ease and suffering—but also the sense of self, the sense of object, the sense of world, the sense of time. All of it.

The fourth concept is emptiness. These ideas of ways of looking and fabrication emerging from the phenomenological approach offer a very powerful way of understanding emptiness.

Emptiness means that nothing exists in what's called inherent existence—in a way that's independent of the way of looking, independent of the mind observing it. It's the way of looking that makes something appear as a thing, that makes it seem like a separate, independently existing entity.

Without the way of looking, without being fabricated by the way of looking, there is no appearance of that thing.

You can also approach emptiness analytically and discover that the whole notion of things that seem so real, so solid, so independently existent is actually incoherent. Things are unfindable. That's another gateway into understanding emptiness.

Everything is empty, without question.

So even, not just all selves and all things, but... And that means any notion of self. So even the self as process, not a real thing. It's just arising as a way of looking. It's a relative degree of fabrication. But awareness is empty too. Actually, even the notion of fabrication is empty too. In other words, it's not really real. It's a kind of construct that we see.

Actually, there's a way of going deeper and deeper into the whole teaching of fabrication as a practice. You find out that fabrication too is kind of incoherent. It cannot be a reality.

Dependent origination, similarly it's empty. All those twelve links, or thirteen, or ten, or whatever system you're using, all of them are lacking inherent existence. They don't refer to real units of existence, or units of being, or realities, or entities, or whatever.

The unfabricated actually also turns out to be empty, and the whole distinction then between what's unfabricated and fabricated also illusory. Emptiness as well is also empty. So empty is a very radical, pervasive concept. Everything without question is empty.

What we end up with then, we start with this notion of ways of looking, and we end up with this really radical, thorough insight that in the end, there are only ways of looking. The ways of looking are empty too, but all we have is a range of ways of looking which we can expand, and that's not realities, that's ways of looking. And those ways of looking also don't inherently exist. But all we have, all we come to, the freedom that we come to is there are just ways of looking.

Something very beautiful, very radical, very profound in that insight. And extremely far-reaching.

So, in traditional Dharma approach, we, as I said... the idea of ways of looking, we channel that into the direction of which are the ways of looking that bring more suffering or lock suffering into place, and which are the ways of looking that ease suffering. So the whole concept of ways of looking in the narrow Dharma sense is tied up very much with the Four Noble Truths, with what leads to suffering and what leads to the ease of suffering.

But in exploring ways of looking, we also see that there's other directions that don't have, at least don't obviously have much to do with suffering and the end of suffering that can open up. So a way of looking can open up, for example, soul-making more or less. Or cosmopoiesis, more or less. And they are related to freedom and ending suffering, reducing suffering, but sometimes not in a very obvious way.

Okay, so that's the fourth: emptiness.

The fifth: the words imaginal and image. So when I use the word image, I mean an imaginal image, which means definitely not just imaginary—i.e., just completely fictitious. It also doesn't have to be, as we think, image has to be something visual. It doesn't. It can involve any of the senses and quite unusual ways of knowing and ways of perceiving things. But it also refers to more than just the use of the imagination.

So just using the imagination does not mean imaginal. Nor even if an image comes and it has a kind of mythic character—I don't know, dragons and... You know, even Jesus or, whatever, or some classic archetypal figure or something—it may not be imaginal.

An image is an image for me, or imaginally functioning for me, is an imaginal for me, if for me, at that time, it has a kind of unfathomability to it, a depth to it, just, for example, in the way that a person does. So we would never... Hopefully. We would never say, this person, my friend X, she means this to me. Or she is this. It's like, I mean, we might say that, but we always know that that never captures her entirely. There's something I can't get to the bottom of her. Why? Because she's a person. She's a person. There's something unfathomable there.

I can't reduce her. If I do start reducing her, what's going to happen to my relationship with her? She's probably not going to stick around much. But similarly with imaginal figures, I can't capture them. They have this unfathomability. There's something beyond the reach of my grasp, that I can keep uncovering meanings and truths and dimensions to them, but I can't reduce them.

So I can't, or rather I'm not reducing them for them to be imaginal. I can't say this image is just a result of some random neurochemical reactions in my brain, or neurophysiological pathways being fired, or whatever. Nor can I reduce it in the way of saying this image is coming because it represents this from my childhood or this factor of my mind or something. So imaginal means not reduced. There's a sense of irreducibility to them.

It might encompass all of that or acknowledge all of that is involved—the neurophysiology of course is involved. It might have some bearing, we'll talk about this later, what's the relationship with my personal history and this image, but not reducing the image to the personal history, not seeing it as merely a result of the personal history.

So what is imaginal to me? An imaginal figure has a kind of otherness and a kind of autonomy—just like a person. It's like they're not part of me, I don't completely control them. So you can hear implicit in that: for something to be an image, it requires me to have a certain way of looking at it. Because if I start to see it as "no, no, no, this is just random neurochemistry or whatever. This dream that happened was just my brain randomly firing at night. That's what brains do"—then I have a way of looking there that's not imaginal and the image is resolved or reduced or I lose interest in it or whatever. It's no longer imaginal.

So in the meaning of the word image, it's not just an object—it includes the way of looking at that object. And we are kind of granting it a certain autonomy.

With that, because there's this unfathomability and they're not reducible, in time we sense a kind of—let's call it divinity—to the image. It's part of the dimensionality. So I keep finding more dimensions in this image, in the unfathomability of it. And all of this

is meaningful. So that's part of what an image is—always meaningful in some way. It doesn't mean it means X or it means Y. It's meaningful as a much fuller, less tightly circumscribed term. And always with the imaginal is some kind of sense of beauty and some kind of sense of sacredness.

They may not at all be—they may be quite surprising senses of beauty. There's a breadth and a diversity to the kinds of beauties that can open up, and the kinds of sense of beauty and the sense of sacredness that can open up through imaginal practice. And oftentimes it's quite surprising that that's a feature of image and imaginal practice—beauty and sacredness.

Now, the imaginal and images—and I'll also use the word fantasies almost interchangeably with images, but maybe when it has a bit more of a narrative feel to it, I'll use the word fantasies—we don't just mean intra-psychic. These also relate to how we perceive the world. So images, fantasies come in, they pervade, they mix with, they saturate our perception of everything—of self, of other, of world, of being, of path. They operate in our life.

Some people say, "I don't get any images," meaning they don't get any intra-psychic images, sort of like "I shut my eyes and nothing comes." But images are in our life, and I would say where there is love, where we love deeply, where something's really alive for us, where something's really important to us, where something's really meaningful to us—there, image and fantasy are operating in our life in relation to and around that thing, whatever that thing is, if it's dharma or practice or a lover or... It can be absolutely anything. Where there is love, meaningfulness, importance, aliveness, there is image and fantasy.

Now, I'm going to throw in one more thing here in imaginal practice, which is that it involves also what I call seeing the image as an image, knowing it's an image. In other words, we're not taking this literally. If I have an image of having sex with someone, it doesn't mean I have to have sex with someone or I'm going to have sex. It doesn't mean that at all. I don't have to take it literally. But actually any image—it might have an outflow into life. But often that outflow is almost always not literal. It's always subtly refracted or modulated in life, in the way that it's expressed.

Seeing image as image doesn't mean if I have this image that I'm picking up something, some kind of ESP either, or whatever. Although, of course, there's that possibility too. But I'm not going to go into that distinction on this course. It also means, seeing image as image, that the ideas and the concepts that are perhaps wrapped up with the image are not taken as truth claims. I'm not saying this is the reality or this is true about whatever.

Image and Imaginal

The sixth term, very related, is soul-making, which we've used already. What is soul-making? It's anything—any activity or way of looking or way of being—that gives rise to a sense of soulfulness. We could use it in the way of meaning it's soulfulness-making. It's making the experience of soulfulness. And again, it could be anything, anything in relationship with anything at all. The way of being with it, the way of looking at it, the thing that I do with it or in relationship to it gives rise to a sense of soulfulness.

This is very related to the definitions of imaginal, but when there is soulfulness, there is a sense of importance, of deep importance. This thing is important to me. Strange as it might seem to someone else, this is important to me. It has a deep importance. It has a beauty to it. There's love involved, and often very different kinds of love—a very large range in the kind of expressions of love that are involved in soulfulness. There's meaningfulness. There are resonances.

Soul-making is recognized through its resonances in the heart, in the emotionality, its resonances in terms of image. An image has resonance with other images, and an image itself is resonant—with the energy body, which I'll come to in a little bit, and with ideas. Soul-making also gives a sense of dimensionality. It involves image and fantasy and also idea. I'm going to call this whole complex *logos*.

So soul-making means soulfulness-making in the sense that it creates that kind of gestalt, those kinds of experiences that refer to a sense of soulfulness. But soul-making can also mean making soul, making something called soul. So not just soulfulness as an adjective to describe a set of experiences, but also making something called soul.

The seventh term is indeed that word *soul*. Here, again, I can use it in two ways. I can use soul not in the sense of referring to an entity, but referring to a way of looking. Soul is just a way of looking that gives rise to soulfulness, that gives rise to soul-making. When I say soul, I'm just referring to it as a way of looking.

But I can also refer to soul as if it were an entity, or talk about it as an entity—an empty entity. Go back to what we said earlier about self. We talk about self as if it's an entity, but it's not. It's empty. Yet we still use the concept and we feel it as an entity at times. Similarly, we can talk about soul as if it was an entity.

What kind of entity? Well, it's that entity, that aspect of *citta*, if you like, that facet of *citta* or of being—it's that which sees or senses in a soul-making way. That's the entity of soul. It's that which sees in a soul-making way, and I meant all that before—with image, with fantasy, with meaningfulness, with depth, with dimensionality, and beauty and all that. That's soul.

So soul-making increases soul. It makes soul in the sense that it reinforces, it strengthens, it widens and deepens that entity or that capacity or that tendency to see in a soul-making way, to see in a way that gives rise to soulfulness, to see imaginatively and with meaningfulness and resonance and depth and beauty. Soul-making builds soul, it makes soul.

The eighth term is the energy body. Here I really mean—it can sound like we're talking about some thing, some kind of new age idea or esoteric sort of idea—but really I'm referring to a kind of mode of attending to the experience of body, a way of looking again if we go back to the phenomenological approach. Energy body really refers to that.

A way of attending to this space—actually a little bit bigger than what appears to be my physical body—and the feeling of that, the sense of that, yes, the image of it, but also the palpable sense of that field of vibration, texture, energy.

It's really important to stress here that there is a real spectrum, a wide spectrum in that experience, so that we can experience a very, very refined field of energy—very insubstantial, ethereal—and that's lovely and actually very important. Sometimes even that goes and there's just a sense of space, which is really at the absolute edge of what we might call energy body experience. But at the other end, there's also just the sense of something really dense and earthy and solid and very substantial—we can feel the energy body that way too.

So the energy body refers to that whole spectrum. It means more than just what many people are familiar with from, say, mindfulness practice or more conventional kinds of insight meditation practice—just this what can seem at times like a pulsing or flickering energy field of sensations or field of hot or cold or pressure. Yes, that's a certain kind of mode of attention or experience of the energy body, but it actually is much broader than that. There are ways of paying attention and experiencing energy body that are not like either that or the regular solidity we feel. There's really a whole range there.

That's energy body. That's the eighth.

The ninth is eros, which we've already defined in a small way, and we're going to expand it and make a bigger definition as we go along. So it's the desire—eros is a kind of desire. It's the wanting more contact, more connection, more touching, more experience of, or to experience more of, to know more or to know more of, to penetrate more

or to penetrate more of, or to open more and to open to more of, to have more intimacy with some object, some erotic object, either in everyday perception or imaginally, intrapsychically.

Note that this is multidimensional, multifaceted. We're not just talking about a mental faculty here, some kind of vitakka-vicāra thing where you're just probing the object. I'll come back to that relationship. First of all, it's not just mental. It involves all the senses and it's embodied, which doesn't mean that it needs to manifest in actions.

But more importantly—and this is where the definition starts to get bigger—it involves and it pulls in and stimulates the imaginal and the ideational. So actually, when we talk about eros, we're talking about something that moves towards, that includes the imaginal and the ideational in certain ways, in ways that expand them and move towards soul-making.

So you can see that eros is the ninth term, and you can see eros is one kind of desire, if we use that word desire as the tenth term. And desire, we can maybe use it in a way that's more neutral or as a broader term, perhaps similar to the Pali word chanda. So desire would then include eros as a subset in the way that we've just described. When it does that, when the desire is of that kind, it's eros. But it would also include—desire would include craving and clinging and these kinds of words we've used before, which I'll come to in a minute. But the tenth is just desire as a kind of broad term of which there are different kinds. It's kind of a neutral term.

So that word craving is the eleventh term. And craving—we'll come back to this more—I'm going to say craving is a kind of desire that does not lead to soul-making. Actually it leads to a kind of contraction. Soul-making is an opening movement, and craving brings contraction. As I said, you can actually feel that in the being, in the body, in the energy body, and in the mind, and in lots of other ways, which we'll go into. Craving brings dukkha, in the way that we might use it to distinguish eros and craving, different kinds of desire. But craving is the eleventh term.

And maybe if I use the term clinging as the twelfth term, what I'm really referring to is that whole spectrum that I talked about in the first few talks, where you're really talking about something that can be very, very gross—gripping, "don't leave me," "I need you," that kind of clinging—to something really, really subtle. I'm talking about actually avijjā, just the belief that, the unconscious assumption that this thing, whatever this thing is—this emotion, this fingernail, this foot, this thing—is me or mine, unconsciously, without even thinking about it. Or even the avijjā that this thing, whatever this thing is, this moment of vedanā, or this lamp in front of me, has inherent existence. That's a very subtle level. That avijjā is a very subtle level of clinging. It's wrapped up in

attention because the mind needs to cling in a very subtle way to actually perceive anything. But clinging, we might use it to refer to that whole spectrum in that broader sense.

That's the twelfth term, clinging.

The thirteenth term—I have to apologize here. I've used it already: libido, and I've already used it inconsistently, so apologies. In a way, it's because it's not, for me, well, at least not yet, that important a term. So apologies, and just to note, I have been inconsistent.

Sometimes I might use it in a way that's almost equivalent to the way I'm using eros, and I think that's the way James Hillman likes to use it. And so sometimes I might use it that way. I'm also thinking about using it to mean more something like libido as the embodied, directed, intentional flow of life force into any area or domain. So that might be a stream of creativity or work or relationship or building something or whatever. It might be a stream, it might be a trickle, it might be a torrent. In a way, it refers to psychic energy and the way that can be employed in different ways. I think that's equivalent to how Jung used the term, but I also read something recently where he sort of said that and then said something else, but he didn't really explain the alternative, and I couldn't find anything else. So I'm not sure how he uses it.

But it is a term that people use. For Freud I think it was just the pleasure principle in a way, or the instinct that came out of the id, that sort of pool of animalistic instincts, if you like, and the force often guided by pleasure principle and maybe other things. And that's the libido.

Sometimes Freud referred to it that way. For other people, it literally means sexual urge or desire. And there's also—some of you will know, and I'm going to return to this—a psychoanalyst who was very active in the 1950s and 60s, a Scotsman called Fairbairn, who used libido in a way that sounds at first similar to how we're using eros: a desire to connect. So people use it in very different ways.

It sounds similar, but actually I'm going to point out some differences later on in the retreat. So libido—people use it in very different ways. Sorry, I've already been sloppy and inconsistent there. All I can say is maybe the sloppiness and fluidity in the way I'm using it just reflects its etymology, which I already mentioned: libido, libation, liquid. This is the etymology—it's liquidy, so I'm quite fluid in my definitions. That's a pretty lame excuse. But I don't think we'll be using it much anyway. Anyway, apologies. That's the thirteenth term.

The fourteenth term is *psyche*. One meaning of psyche in the way that I use it is simply the totality of the *citta*—the psyche. In other words, the mind, but not reduced to the thinking mind—just the whole totality of *citta*. But another kind of inflection of the meaning refers especially to soul. So using it equivalently with soul in the way that I defined soul earlier in this talk as the organ of imaginal perception. So psyche as the organ of imaginal perception.

But there's a second way that I use it sometimes, and I really mean by psyche the totality of imaginal perceptions. Jung actually says psyche is image. So I'm using it sometimes as the totality of the *citta,* more often as equivalent with soul—the organ of imaginal perception—but quite a few times I will use it as the totality of imaginal perceptions, almost interchangeably with image.

Logos. So there's another Greek word—your eros, psyche, logos. Logos I'm using to refer to a concept or an idea or a whole conceptual framework. In other words, what we're elaborating here is a kind of conceptual framework. But any concept or any idea or any conceptual framework is a logos.

For example, when I say the autonomy of the imaginal figure—as if they have a degree of being independent of me—that's a concept, it's an idea, it's a logos that's operating in imaginal practice, even at the same time as we know it's a dependent arising, which is another logos. So you have mixtures of concepts operating at any time.

If I reduce the imaginal figure to, let's say, the product of random neuronal firings or conditioned neuronal firings, or it's expressing something from my childhood, or it's expressing an aspect of my personality—any kind of reduction of the imaginal figure involves a logos in operation. Any idea of causality—that this is a result of that in the past, for instance—is also a logos, a concept operating.

Another alternative would be what's called *telos*—there's another Greek word. I'm learning a lot of Greek in this retreat. *Telos*, which refers to almost like causality from the future. I've talked about this, I think, on the last retreat. That's a different logos, a different concept operating where something, so to speak, from the future beckons us and shapes the present. Very different idea, very different logos.

If we talk about the divinity of eros, which is something we'll come back to, that's a logos. Neuroscience as a whole is a whole conceptual framework, is a whole logos. The idea that consciousness arises from matter as an epiphenomenon of matter, of neurology—that's a logos. Actually, evolution itself is a whole conceptual framework, is a logos.

What I want to say is that there's always a conception, there's always a logos operating in the mind—always, always, always—except during experience of the unfabricated, when there's a collapse of conceptuality. By conceptuality and logos I don't just include thought structures and thoughts, but it goes way deeper than that. There's conceptuality operating even when there's no thought whatsoever.

Oftentimes the concepts operating are just assumed, not really checked out, and oftentimes they're operating—most of the time they're operating—without us really being conscious of what they are. But when I talk about logos, because it's wrapped up in perception, I'm not talking about something abstract. We live different ideas; different concepts shape how we live. They inform how we live, but more fundamentally they shape our way of looking. They're part of, they're included in the way we look at everything, and therefore what we perceive, what appears to us. So they have massive influence. I'm not talking about something abstract here. So the fifteenth is logos.

The sixteenth is what I'm going to call the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, or the soul-making dynamic—these are interchangeable terms. I'm going to devote quite a lot of time to that on this retreat, but what it really means is that the more, the wanting more that we talked about with eros—more connection, more opening, opening to more of the erotic object, penetrating more, to know more, to experience more—

This wanting more, that push or wish to open more to the erotic object, starts bringing in, inseminating, influencing, expanding the psyche in relation to that object. In other words, the imaginal perception of that object. So more dimensionality is created and discovered in that object.

In my erotic connection with my lover, I start to see in her, I start to see in him, I start to see more, more dimensions. They're not just this person I can put in a box around. They're even more than just a human being, or rather the notion of humanity starts to expand and have other dimensions. And with that expansion of the psyche, they become richer, more complicated, deeper, wider. There's an expansion of psyche, of image, and also of logos. In other words, my whole idea of who they are, my idea then of what a human being is and what soul is, that gets expanded as well.

This is really, really important. When it gets expanded, they are then more yummy to me, more interesting, more attractive. It increases the eros there. And so there's a kind of self-feeding, self-generating, ongoing fertilization of Eros, mutual fertilization of Eros, Psyche, Logos, mutual widening, deepening, enriching, complicating, adding dimensionality that goes on. We can say much, much more about that.

When I refer to the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, we'll also use the term soul-making dynamic for the same thing. That's that process, and we have a lot to say about that. It's very, very fundamental, I would say, in understanding this and a very central concept.

That's number 16, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.

Number 17 is this term cosmopoiesis. This is something I would say that we start to notice in imaginal practice. As we go into imaginal practice, we start to see that it begins to spill over. Even when I'm practicing with my eyes shut, I open my eyes after I've been working deeply with mindfulness and sensitivity with this imaginal figure. I open my eyes and there's a kind of spilling over to the perception of the world, to the world of perception. Something of the image, and something particularly of the divinity of the image, starts to pervade my sense of the cosmos that I feel myself to be part of. So this is something we notice.

It's also an instance of that whole Eros-Psyche-Logos expanding dynamic I was just referring to. It starts to expand beyond just the object but also to other objects and to the world. There are infinite possibilities for cosmopoiesis.

More typical ones involve a kind of universal cosmopoiesis. So for example, meditating a lot on metta, and eventually at some point a meditator will have the experience: the world is love. The cosmos is shot through with love. Now, you explain that to someone on the high street and they'll say, "What are you talking about?" It's a perception of the cosmos. It's a mystical perception, but it's characterized by universality. All things in the world are of the same substance. The substance is love.

It could be awareness. So if you practice a lot with vastness of awareness and other related practices, you get a similar thing. The cosmopoiesis there is also universal. Everything is awareness. Everything is the play of awareness.

But then there's also, rarer in our circles and more interesting for that very reason, particular cosmopoiesis. So this particular erotic, imaginal figure that I'm working with sensitively and mindfully in practice—then I get up and walk around and look at the world around me and I notice that the particularity of that figure that I was opening to and discovering and sensitive to in the practice comes to characterize the cosmopoiesis. So the whole world becomes this particular manifestation of, or flavored with, this particular imaginal figure and its characteristics, its particularities.

So cosmopoiesis—note that word poiesis in contrast to logos, or in contrast to logic. Cosmology is a word that people know. Cosmology means the study, the science of the universe. So we go and we hear about Big Bangs and all that stuff, which I love. It's absolutely fascinating to me.

The difference between cosmology and cosmopoiesis is the absence of a truth claim that goes with the cosmopoiesis. So we're recognizing that this is a creation of the way of looking. Or a better word is participation. We're participating in something.

The way of looking, the citta, the soul, is participating in the cosmos. So there's a participatory aspect of a kind of cosmopoiesis of the reality creating. And also cosmopoiesis, we're talking about poetic truths, if you like, here, which is something I've talked about before, which is different than the usual notion of scientific truth.

Now this also I've talked about before, there's a whole exploration into the philosophy of science and what's true and what's a model, and all that. And also to point out that when I use the words, so it's contrasting poiesis and logos, but actually when I use the word logos, in the way we're using it, we're not making a truth claim—other than that everything is empty, and even that actually we let go of at some point. Logos is just a concept that we can pick up, or a conceptual frame we can pick up without insisting or even believing it as true. But cosmopoiesis is the seventeenth one.

The eighteenth term is theophany. Theophany literally means an appearance of the divine. I think I gave a set of talks—no, it was the last five talks of the retreat, the path of the imaginal, that had the title something like Insight, Theophany, Cosmic Vision, Sacred Universe, something like that. So dealt with it a lot there. And in a way, the whole of the re-enchanting the cosmos retreat had to do with cosmopoiesis and theophany.

But theophany would refer to maybe when a particular thing or object becomes a particular face of the divine, or becomes a face of the divine. Again, that can be universal, but more I'm interested in the particular. So this—it really could be anything. This tree, or this person, or this body, or whatever, becomes a particular face of the divine. Or this imaginal figure is a particular theophany. It's a face of God, if you like. It's a face of the divine. That's the eighteenth term, theophany.

The nineteenth term is divinity. And again, this is something that we notice. I'm using it very broadly, so I'm actually not defining, but if you like, it refers to a kind of unfathomability, mystery, otherness, including of transcendence—all of that. But actually the notions are really quite wide of what that might involve. But it's something I'd rather leave to your experience and just say, notice with images as you work with them when they become really alive that they have this kind of numinous quality. It's something we notice constantly rather than we define it. So you'll notice in imaginal practice that more and more, with an image, when you get used to it, it has this kind of quality of divinity. So it's part of its otherness.

But just to say a little bit about that also—that word, you know, standard insight meditation will bring experiences of divinity of certain kinds. The whole range, actually various experiences of divinity, mystical experiences, I would say would be inevitable for meditators, meditating with dedication and consistently with insight meditation techniques and approaches. The question is, so for example, that big awareness thing, everything is awareness. It really feels, or everything is love. It really feels like there is a divinity to that love. This is—the cosmos is shot through with a divine love. This awareness has somehow the sense that people often talk, they never have before, they start talking in theistic terms of love almost surprising to themselves when those kinds of very common experiences happen.

And I would say certain kinds of practices, I can put people in a room, get them to do these practices, and it's just a matter of time until these very standard experiences of divinity open up and people almost inevitably start using that language.

And so the question is, if these experiences open up, even in standard insight meditation, what is the attitude to these experiences? What's the relationship to them? How are we interpreting them? How are we conceptualizing them? So a person might be told or might hear or might think, well, all experiences are impermanent. Don't think about them. Don't get attached to them. Don't try and repeat them. We touched on this earlier. That's useful sometimes. Sometimes that's useful, that letting go when it's too tight, the kind of gripping, the attachment.

But mostly it's not that helpful as a kind of attitude or a way of relating to these kind of experiences. It's not quite intelligent enough. It won't open things out in a way that is that beneficial. Insight meditation, standard insight meditation techniques, conceptions, approaches, the conceptions underlying insight meditation, will lead, with a certain amount of dedication and good practice, to experiences that the Buddha did not ignore. He did not say in relation to, oh, just don't try and repeat them, they're just—let's not go there, don't get attached.

He gave them names, he taught the monks to repeat them. These were not experiences he simply brushed off. As the Buddha Dharma evolved after the Buddha's passing into different streams of tradition—the Mahayana, the Vajrayana—there emerged an even greater exploration and range of experience opening up from people's meditative practice, along with more careful, comprehensive categorization of those experiences involving different senses of divinity.

When we say divinity, I'm leaving it quite broad, speaking of a whole range of experiences. Some may be universal and impersonal in character, while others may be very particular. Some relate to particularities in theophanies, and some will be personal—a personal god, an imaginal figure as a personal god, not an impersonal deity. We'll return to this.

That brings us to the nineteenth: divinity.

The last one I'll mention is Buddha nature. In the Buddhist tradition, this term has a wide range of usage and arguments. Some traditions employ it quite narrowly—it simply refers to your capacity to become fully enlightened, to become a Buddha, usually over many lifetimes. This is possible by virtue of the fact that the mind, the factors of the mind, and the contents of the mind are impermanent. Although there's ignorance right now, ignorance is impermanent. With the right training, you could change it. It's not fixed. Similarly with craving and the rest of what gets in the way, or rather whose absence qualifies enlightenment.

In some meanings of Buddha nature, it refers simply to that—your unavoidable possibility. No matter what you think of yourself or where you actually are in terms of your spiritual development, there is always and undestroyably the possibility of becoming a Buddha.

Sometimes in more popular usage nowadays, it refers to your innate goodness. If you think you're a mean person and see lots of not-so-nice qualities in yourself, it's a way of saying that what's in you at your core is something bright, luminous, and good—inherently good, inherently loving.

When I use the term, I probably use it as an alternative to the word God or divinity, which I'm using in a much broader way. Often the words God or divinity really rub people the wrong way, especially some Buddhists. So you can use Buddha nature instead, but in a different way than just that possibility. I'm actually talking about something that's divine.

Again, it has a range of meanings. Perhaps the most full-on meaning comes from the Shentong tradition in the Tibetan tradition, though it's actually a tradition that goes back to Mahayana Indian Buddhism. In that tradition, Buddha nature is interchangeable with words like Dharmakaya and even the word emptiness, which is used differently when they use it in that tradition from the way I'm using it.

So Buddha nature, Dharmakaya, emptiness, the absolute, and other words—quite a few words used interchangeably—mean something like the cosmic awareness that is inherently in me and in you and in everything that knows the emptiness of all things. It

is not separate as a separating subject dividing subject and objects—in that sense it is non-dual. It refers to the knowing, which is also empty; this knowing awareness is empty in itself, but the knowing and the appearances and their emptiness are all known in a non-dual way.

In other words, it includes the whole cosmos as this field of empty awareness, knowing all things and also the emptiness of all things. Everything is Buddha nature. Everything has Buddha nature. Everything is Buddha nature. Everything is Dharmakaya in that logos, in that experience.

Even stranger to some Buddhists—this will sound strange—is that this Dharmakaya or this Buddha nature can act. This cosmic Buddha nature can act in the world and manifest different appearances or different qualities for an individual or in an individual, dependent on what that individual needs for their well-being and their deeper journey. There's a kind of intelligence, something akin to the world soul—a divine intelligence or divine activity that's operating in and through and as Buddha nature, as well as that awareness and its inseparability from emptiness, from appearances.

So there are twenty terms in this glossary.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 57

Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get here?! (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 37 min

In this fourth part of his exploration, Rob Burbea addresses the challenges of presenting unfamiliar spiritual concepts within established Dharma frameworks. He examines how Western culture readily accepts neuroscience and psychotherapy additions to Buddhist teachings while resisting more foreign ideas like eros and soul-making.

Burbea argues that fantasy and imaginal perception are already integral to Dharma practice, whether recognized or not. He critiques overly simplistic psychological models that reduce human motivation to mere vedanā (feeling-tone) responses or self-shoring mechanisms, advocating for a richer understanding that includes erotic and imaginal dimensions.

The talk explores the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, showing how erotic engagement deepens imaginal perception and conceptual understanding in a mutually enriching cycle. Unlike craving, which solidifies perception, eros liberates and expands our experience of the erotic object. Burbea discusses practical implications for samādhi practice and the brahmavihāras, demonstrating how seemingly sexual or erotic imaginal encounters can lead to profound meditative states and compassionate opening. He emphasizes the ehipassiko nature of these teachings - they must be explored experientially rather than simply believed.

Now I'm aware that these are, or many of these at least, quite unfamiliar ideas for many people—perhaps even many Dharma practitioners and people in the culture more broadly. So I want to say something about that.

It's a lot easier to teach Dharma, or rather, there's no objection, which makes it easier, when we teach Dharma or present something as Dharma in cases where we mix in all kinds of assumptions or frames of reference or conceptual bases or conceptual biases—as long as they're well established in Western modernist culture and assumed to be true by that culture. So when you mix those kinds of ideas and assumptions in and package it all as "Dharma"—for instance, neuroscience or some of the ideas from modern psychotherapy—and you introduce them and they become absorbed or blended into "Dharma," that's a lot easier. Rarely does anyone's eyebrows get raised or anyone have a problem with that.

When one tries to introduce or open up more unfamiliar ideas, ideas that are not popular or populist in the culture, that's more difficult. And more than that, actually, when one adds something, so to speak, foreign or new to what we might call Dharma, when it's foreign and new, that addition is much more conspicuous as an addition than when there are ideas that people are familiar with from their culture. It's still happening. It's still an addition. There is still an addition, even when it's not obvious—when we add ideas about neuroscience or modern psychotherapy ideas or whatever. It's still happening nevertheless. Something is being added. It's just not so obvious.

Add to that this other idea that the ideas we are using are not truth claims—they don't refer to realities—and that is very difficult sometimes for people to get their heads around as well, because we're used to saying, used to hearing, "it's like this" or "it's like that," or thinking that Dharma concepts refer to realities. Certainly when we think about neuroscience or modern psychotherapy ideas, almost always, almost without exception, there's the assumption and the message that these are realities.

So it's quite difficult sometimes to hear something or to try and present something as "these ideas don't have truth claims in the way that we usually operate with truth claims and truth assumptions." So unfamiliar, and I'm aware of that, and certainly aware of the difficulties in trying to present all this.

But still, I insist—absolutely insist—that in our Dharma, in your Dharma, in your practice, and in your life, fantasy and image is already involved. It's already involved in Dharma, in practice, and life. I absolutely insist on that. And I also insist that this is not a bad thing. Not at all a bad thing. It's inevitable. And it's important, and it may well, I would say, be necessary—certainly necessary to galvanize in relation to practice and Dharma and to be inspired in life and to have meaningfulness. All that's necessary. So it's not a bad thing.

We need to recognize both the general fact that it's operating and also the particular ways that it's operating for us—that fantasy and image operate for us and the kinds and directions in which fantasy and image operate and mix in with our life and impel our life. So we need a double level recognition: general and a more individual, particular way.

And out of that, we need to expand a psychology that can talk about that and include all that, recognize it and be sensitive to it and be wise in relationship to it, instead of just not admitting it, not seeing it, or trying to cut it because it's papañca. So we need to include, then, in this psychology, in this conceptual framework, we need to include ideas such as soul-making or eros that are not yet articulated in what we call Dharma. To me that seems a necessity, something that is called for.

When we look at our life and the movements of our life with a psychology that's too simplistic, it doesn't serve us, doesn't serve the totality of our beings. "Well, that's just vedanā leading. So when you talk about eros or that kind of thing, that's just vedanā leading. You're just chasing the pleasant or running away from the unpleasant. Well, that's just papañca leading." When we talk about the imaginal fantasy, or "that's just"—you know, what motivates us is either this movement governed by vedanā towards pleasant and unpleasant, or trying to... Some people teach that basically we get attached to things like views because we're trying to shore up this self that somehow deep down we know is not real. Therefore, we attach, we cling to this and that to try and shore up my views, my habits, and all that.

But that kind of psychology—this self-shoring up, or the vedanā leading, or "that's what's going on," or "it's just matter"—I've touched on this before. This is, in a way, it's not sophisticated enough. It's a little bit poor as a psychology. I mean, valuable as it is—we've talked about this—we need something richer, deeper, wider: a psychology that can accommodate and delineate between the kinds of things that we're talking about.

So from our perspective, the movement to seek to increase pleasure or decrease unpleasant sensations, when that is the prime intention of a movement of body or mind and when that's the prime driver—to maximize or increase pleasant sensations and decrease unpleasant ones—when that's the prime driver and there isn't this richness of what we call imaginal perception, then that is axiomatically, in the way that we're talking about, that won't be soul-making. That's not creating soulfulness. It will not do that. It's not eros. It's what we might call craving, as I said.

But to think too much that way, or to really regard as if that's the thing that mostly moves us as human beings—it's really, really poor psychology. But it's interesting.

This kind of need to expand and enrich our psychology extends beyond dharma circles into the wider culture. I had an oncologist until recently who prescribed the standard course of chemotherapy for my condition, though I think he believed it wouldn't work given my disease and its stage. He saw no point in trying more chemotherapy, considering it potentially dangerous—a risk he wasn't prepared to take, believing it might do more harm than good.

In trying to persuade me to give up wanting to experiment with longer and more intensive chemotherapy, he would often say something like, "It's about quality of life. Come off the chemo and enjoy the rest of your life with better quality." I often had the feeling that he and I understood very different things about what constituted a good quality of life.

He would frequently mention going on holiday as part of his package of what quality of life meant—what I could do if I was off chemo. This probably partly reflected that as an NHS oncologist, he was grossly overworked and overstretched, desperately needing a break and craving a holiday himself.

But he never said, "Quality of life—so you can go on pilgrimage." A medieval peasant in Christendom, or a Tibetan Buddhist even nowadays, or a Muslim today—if told they probably had only months to live, one response to the doctor might be, "Then I'll take time off medication so I can make a pilgrimage." A very different mindset.

What's the difference? Typically—and this isn't black and white—one desires or seeks a reduction in stress, an increase in pleasure, perhaps seeking novel or exciting experiences. Whereas pilgrimage, in contrast to holiday, is a movement of soul-making, an actual embodiment of eros, something we do with our bodies that is an erotic movement bringing soul-making.

Different cultures, ancient and contemporary, religious and secular, tend to assume a universality of wants—that people want this or that, that everyone or most people want certain things. In the modern secular West, the choice of what we seek is actually wider, perhaps wider than at any point in human history. This characterizes modernism, secularity particularly, and consumerism. The choice is wider, and individuality has a certain acknowledgment in modern secular Western culture. The individual's choice is respected to some extent in what's important to them. But still, there's usually a presumption that most people will conform to conventional expectations—that you'll want a holiday as opposed to something like a pilgrimage.

With all this talk about eros and exploration of eros, I want to emphasize something you've heard regarding dharma before. Don't believe these teachings. The Buddha said they are *ehipassiko*—to be seen, to come and see. For one to come and see for oneself through practice. Find out—it's not a matter of belief.

For many people, this is the attraction of dharma over other religions. But what often happens for practitioners is we see something a few times—for example, that craving leads to suffering—and something generalizes quite quickly because it's a message we hear repeatedly. We actually stop questioning. We stop the breadth and depth and radicality of our questioning. We stop looking further. In a way, we program our perception and only see this.

I've sometimes asked an audience, "Are you sure that desire leads to suffering?" People nod, "Yeah, absolutely, I'm sure because I've checked it out." But it doesn't always lead to suffering, as I showed in the Beauty of Desire talks. There can be this belief that

we're finding out for ourselves, not believing anything, but actually something gets stuck and we stop the *ehipassiko*. We stop the movement to come find out, to look further, to keep exploring.

What I want to say with all this—I really want to ask for and encourage open-mindedness, exploration, practice, that kind of boldness and experimentation and play and willingness to investigate, to question.

Eros, despite all these definitions and however unfamiliar it might sound, is already in imaginal practice. It already is, I would say, an element mixed in with any imaginal practice. I've said before to people, "Notice the love with the imaginal figures." This is really important. Imaginal figures always involve love. Sometimes it's not obvious at all. Sometimes it can look like the opposite. But there is love there—many different kinds of love, many flavors, characters, expressions of love. This is to be noticed in imaginal practice. And it's both ways. The love flows both ways.

We'll return to this. But wrapped up with the love, related to the love—not the same as, but related—is a kind of eros. It's not the same as sex, and there might be sexuality in the imaginal practice, but there's eros.

When we talk with images and in relation to imaginal figures about opening to them, about feeling that you are somehow in service to this imaginal figure, or that you surrender to this yidam, or deity, or imaginal figure, these words—opening to, service, surrender—they either lead to eros, they deepen the eros, or they already imply that eros is there in the relationship. And actually, I would say eros is inherent in imaginal relationships. A relationship with imaginal figures involves eros.

So I'm talking about something to notice, to see there. And eros is not craving. We've said that. We mean different things by that, and we'll expand on that. But also in relation to more conventional Dharma teachings, it's the case that with a little experimentation, you will discover that eros can lead at times, or it can be steered to lead, definitely, to samadhi, to quite deep states of samadhi.

And a lot of people find this really surprising, because they consider eros, sexuality, that kind of thing, as distraction, as defilement. We've talked about this, but I've lost count of how many examples I could give—and I've talked about it on other retreats—where some kind of often very unexpected or guided erotic interaction with an imaginal figure in the imaginal practice brings about samadhi, and the person is surprised by that consequence. That samadhi comes out of this actually sexual—oftentimes it's very sexual, not even just erotic, it's actually really sexual—and very different kinds of sexuality. Some very soft and loving, and others very sort of darker versions or stronger ver-

sions, if you like. It may or may not even be your usual gender or sexual orientation that you're used to identifying with. Many possibilities, but samadhi can often come out of this. I'll return to these examples, but here's something that's a very standard Dharma concept coming out of something that looks like it doesn't have anything to do with it.

Similarly, the Brahmaviharas—and hopefully there'll be time on this retreat to talk about the link and the relationship between eros and the Brahmaviharas. I think I gave at least one example in that series of talks on Ecology of Love, where actually quite a dark, lusty, and quite strange—or by most people's standards, strange—kind of sexual image actually deepened and opened the flow of compassion, the second Brahmavihara, very, very potently. So maybe we'll return to that later, the relationship between eros and the Brahmaviharas.

Continuing our delineations here with standard dharma—eros, we've already said, is much more than sexuality and sexual energy and attraction. We're not equating them. But it may be the case that exploring eros and the imaginal in practice, in meditation, may bring with it or lead to an opening up of a level and a breadth of questioning regarding sexuality in general—one's own sexuality and one's attitudes. It may well just open up that whole field and also the experience of sexual energies too. We will return to that later.

So just making a few more little delineations. I think I've said this before: I'm not equating eros with love. Love is one of those poor words nowadays. It's come to have to mean so much, this poor word, to do so much work, to span so much territory. We still use it—it's a lovely word—but oftentimes there are problems with just how much it has come to mean or include. There's too much for one word.

So oftentimes two people are using that same word in relation to each other and saying it to each other, and they actually mean quite different things. What they're referring to entails different experiences for them, different perceptions of the other, different feelings, different sense of obligations that come out of it. "I love you. Therefore I'm obliged..." What guarantees are different. The commitments are different.

But if we say, for now, if we use the word love to just mean something like care—care for someone's well-being on every level—then it's clear, if we just look at some distinctions now between different terms, it's clear, of course, that we can have sex, even pleasurable sex, enjoyable sex, without love and without eros. So hopefully there's some respect at least. But sex is possible and for a lot of people maybe it's common without love or without eros.

It's also possible that you can have sex with love, with care, but without eros. In other words, there's sexual arousal, sexual pleasure, etc., and care for this person, maybe sometimes even a lifetime of care in partnership.

But actually, this person—maybe never was, or is no longer—there's no longer soul-making in the sex. There's no longer the aliveness of the erotic and the imaginal in bed. So then there's sex with love, but without eros.

And of course, you can have love, care, without sex or eros. You can care deeply for someone with metta, wish them well, care deeply about their well-being, but this other to whom I give my metta is not alive for me as a soul-making image. They don't constitute that for my psyche.

And if it's not clear by now, hopefully it is: we can have eros and an erotic connection with someone with or without sex or sexual contact.

So all those permutations. But I would say it's not possible to have eros without love. This is quite interesting. It's not possible to have eros without love, because eros leads, brings, stimulates, opens a perception of—more and more so, in fact, as it goes on—a perception of the beauty and the divinity of the object, of the erotic object. This grows. Eros opens a perception of beauty and divinity, and we can't help but love what appears to us deeply beautiful and divine. So I would say it's actually not possible to have eros in the way that we're talking about it without love.

Implicit in all that we've just said is that eros is actually always involved with and involves the imaginal and psyche in the way I used that word before. Where there's eros, the imaginal is instigated, invoked, inflamed, deepened, widened, brought alive. Psyche is expanded, enriched, deepened, complicated.

And vice versa: where there is the imaginal, where that's operating, where something is an image, eros is already inherently wrapped up in that, in the relationship with that image. And also logos. There's an ideation, some kind of idea that's wrapped up with an erotic perception of someone or something. Conceptuality, logos, supports—to whatever extent it can—that eros.

I mentioned this eros-psyche-logos dynamic as one of the things on our list. I'm going to talk much more about this, but what it means is that the eros wanting more deepens and creates, discovers more to the image, gives more imaginal dimensions, imaginal complexity, imaginal facets and faces to this beloved other. And in that, the idea, the logos also of this other expands.

And that eros-psyche-logos, that soul-making dynamic then comes back because the object then is more beautiful, more deep, more rich, more juicy, more enticing, more complex. It offers me more, it offers more for the psyche to move into, to expand, but also for the eros to find attractive and to want more of. So there's this way that it potentially infinitely just expands.

There's this mutual insemination, mutual fertilization, growth, expansion, deepening, widening, complexifying, complicating, enriching of eros, psyche, logos. They all help each other. They're all involved with and involve each other. And that's the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

The fact of that as a fact of our soul, of the way the soul works, implies several things. One is that eros is liberating in different ways. Let's unpack that just a little bit now.

When there is craving or clinging or greed or aversion, we can see in our phenomenological approach that when there's clinging towards something or pushing away or grasping, aversion, it tends to solidify the perception of that object that we're clinging to. There's a solidification of that object, and also a kind of stagnation—a stagnation of the perception. We only see it this one way, or rather the perception gets more solid, more one-way, often in a negative way, or a particular flatly enticing way.

We know all that from dependent origination and the study of that in practice through ways of looking. And the reverse is also true: when a certain perception is solidified, it tends to stimulate the clinging. These two go together—solidification, stagnation of perception, and clinging.

Even when we see something as impermanent or flowing, there can still be a kind of stagnation of the perception, a kind of one-dimensionality and a certain unidirectionality of the perception. The perception stagnates in a certain way.

The solidification and stagnation of perception are the exact opposites of what happens with this eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or they're an arresting of that dynamic—of the way that opens out the perception, the imaginal perception, the sense of, the knowing of, the intimacy with, and the idea of the object, the erotic object.

There's an infinite potential for this mutual insemination, fertilization, expansion, enriching, deepening, to create, discover more of the beauty, more of the dimensionality, more faces of, more dimensions of this beloved, this erotic object. It's the opposite of stagnating or solidifying the perceptions.

There's much more to say about that kind of infinite potential—infinitely increasing or expanding or complexifying or complicating or enriching the object. It certainly doesn't happen as a smooth process. It happens in stages, and often with hiccups and obstacles that need to be addressed or negotiated or made aware of.

But what this means is that eros, in its capacity to open perception and see image as image, is very different than grasping, aversion, clinging, craving. It has the opposite effect. It doesn't solidify, it doesn't stagnate. Actually, it liberates the object. Its effect is to liberate the perception in a certain sense.

Last thing for now. So you've... I can't remember now if I've said it, but it may be dawning on you that—I did say it, didn't I?—that there's a small definition of eros, as we said. Eros is this wanting more contact, connection, intimacy, experience, knowing, penetration, opening to the erotic other, to the imaginal erotic object, to something. And that's what we call the small definition.

There's also, because of the way that psyche and logos and image and the imaginal and soul-making and that whole soul-making dynamic—the eros, psyche, logos dynamic—are actually implicated or naturally tend to evolve, eros will start to evolve and expand unless it's inhibited. We can also talk about eros and imply all that, really imply that whole dynamic, that whole constellation. So that in the small definition, we're really talking about eros as one element of that eros-psyche-logos, that soul-making dynamic.

Or sometimes when I use the word eros, I'll actually be using it in a way that implies that whole erotic imaginal constellation, implying that whole dynamic, that whole expansion of that dynamic, everything that's involved in the erotic, imaginal aliveness, activation, that process, the way it constellates self, other, world, et cetera, which we'll come back to.

So this is just one of those things—again, I probably apologize in advance—I predict that I'll be going back and forth between these two meanings, a more small meaning, and saying something like, when eros gets blocked, it becomes craving, or something like that. Or when the logos doesn't expand enough, then there are problems. But it should probably be pretty clear in context.

Another implication there is that eros in itself, so to speak, the small definition, is neither inherently, intrinsically positive or negative, good or bad. It's just this wanting more contact, more opening, more penetration, more intimacy, more experience, more knowing of all that with the erotic object. So in itself, it's neither here nor there.

Of course, there is no "in itself." We can't extricate it as something that doesn't stimulate this whole movement of eros-psyche-logos, this whole dynamic, interwoven dynamic, or as something that is trying to stimulate that dynamic but is blocked in different ways. So there really is no "in itself."

Whether eros is for the soul, is soul-making, is enriching, is beautiful, is opening and opening up the sense of existence or not—and therefore desirable or not—is really dependent on what happens in relationship to that whole dynamic or how that whole dynamic is able to unfold. We'll talk a lot about this. So "in itself," if there isn't "in itself," eros is neither actually good or bad, positive or negative. It's just this thing. But oftentimes we'll be talking in a bigger definition, bigger implication.

When realism comes in and I really don't see this image as an image, I really take it as literal or a truth or this idea that's wrapped up in the imaginal and the erotic object, and I take that logos as really being true, then problems come in and eros becomes craving. And there's realism. Eros leads to craving, related to what I said before about solidification, et cetera. We'll come back to this.

But there are other kinds of problems that can come in. There can be a cramping or a blocking or a limiting in different ways, either of the eros, of the libido, if you like, or of the psyche, of the imaginal function, or of the logos. So when any of these elements is cramped, blocked, limited, then it gives rise to problems in the relationship with the other, with the erotic object. And we're going to look at this in much more detail as we go on.

Okay. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 58

Dilemmas and Delineations: How did we get here?! (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 1h02

> *In this profound exploration of spiritual methodology, Rob Burbea examines the inherent tensions in creating precise conceptual frameworks for understanding Eros and soul-making. Drawing on Emerson's wisdom that "all things have two handles," he investigates when analytical precision serves the soul-making process and when it becomes counterproductive. Burbea traces how the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic naturally expands and complexifies our understanding, making complete definition impossible while simultaneously calling for deeper inquiry. He addresses the creative tension between poetic and analytical approaches to dharma, warning against both oversimplification and mere pedantry. The talk delves into how delineations can simultaneously liberate and create new forms of self-judgment, examining parallels with Foucault's analysis of sexuality and identity. Burbea emphasizes that some fabrication serves soul-making while other forms lead to suffering, requiring skillful discernment in our practice. He concludes by framing this entire conceptual framework as an open, creative project rather than a closed system, inviting practitioners to contribute to an evolving understanding of dharma. This sophisticated meta-analysis of spiritual methodology offers both theoretical depth and practical guidance for navigating the complexities of advanced contemplative practice.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a lot of things that were sort of addressed to himself, kind of advice to himself, notes to self. And one of the things he wrote was, "All things have two handles. Beware of the wrong one." I think he was paraphrasing or even quoting the Greek philosopher Epictetus.

You can see how that applies to a lot of what we've been talking about so far. It's relevant to desire, how we pick it up, by what handle, by what direction. It applies to eros, to this whole notion of clinging—as we explained, are we picking it up as a key, or are we picking it up as just something to reject at one level? It certainly applies to imagination and images in the conventional sense. Two handles. Certainly also to emptiness, and the Mahayana tradition makes this very clear. To grasp at emptiness in the wrong way is like grasping at a snake by the tail, the wrong end, while its head is just going to come and bite you. With regard to emptiness, I think it was Nagarjuna who wrote that.

All things have two handles. And also delineations. So how we relate to the very process of generating and making delineations, either in perception or in conception or both. So it applies to all this.

Now, what that little aphorism is saying—I think it's not just saying you can pick things up but don't cling to them or don't identify with them. Certainly that's part of it, how we pick something up. Maybe it would be more accurate to say all things have many handles. So there are many ways this admonition to care how, from what direction, in what way we pick something up applies to all the things that we've been talking about so far.

With desire and with eros, it's true at a certain level to say it's fire and one is playing with fire to play with these things, desire and eros. It's true and there's heat there. But where would human beings be if certain experimentation with fire did not take place at some point? Yes, that asks for a lot. In other words, we need to take care and need to have certain things in place, qualities, abilities in place. We talked about this before. But in a way, we could say we're playing with fire to a certain extent.

That doesn't always mean that the fire is raging. It's not always that it's super intense—the eros is very intense, the desire is very intense, the fire is very intense. First of all, it won't always be that way for anyone. And secondly, intense is neither better nor worse. So from one sort of standard perspective, an intense desire, too simplistically, is a bad thing. From another perspective, again too simplistic, it's a good thing—it's better for it to be more intense, more fire.

But what this investigation into, this exploration of this whole subject, asks for is a lot of sensitivity, the development of our sensitivity. I've touched on this in earlier teachings. It asks for a lot of subtlety in our attention, and subtlety of discernment—a very keen, well-developed, sharp mindfulness, if you like, a very sensitive mindfulness, sometimes a very soft, delicate mindfulness.

It asks for a certain adventurousness of spirit, we could say, to go down this avenue and see what happens and explore. It asks for a certain boldness, a certain freedom—we could say freedom to question, boldness to question, to question boldly. And to experiment, to dare to experiment and find out. How will I find out? I have to experiment.

If those things are in place, or we can bring them with us, or we can develop them as we go, then this exploration, I would say, can open up for us radical possibilities, radical openings, radical shifts in our understanding, our sense—as I said before—our sense of

self, of other, of soul, of imagination, of world, of cosmos, of existence. Real revolutions are possible here for us. So the potential with an exploration of eros is huge, huge and profound, wide and profound.

And we're talking about something that, if you like, is a formidable force. It doesn't always mean it's intense. So sometimes Cupid—the name, as you probably know, is the Latin, the Roman name for the god Eros. And some artistic or statuesque depictions of Cupid are of this little podgy, cherubic baby angel with soft, rolling, pinkish, smooth flesh. And so maybe he's slightly mischievous with his bow and arrow and who he's going to shoot.

kind of do the matchmaking thing, and that's kind of all—you know, a little bit cutesy. Compare that, for example, with Plato's description, actually the words he put into the mouth of Diotima, who's a kind of mysterious seeress and philosopher. Her characterization of Eros—I got this from a philosopher called George Steiner, who was a literary critic.

Diotima characterizes Eros as a hermeneutical daemon. What does that mean? Hermeneutics is interpretation, so his business is the interpretation of all things. And all things—Eros has something to do with the way we see them and how we open up and see them as messages, as angels. Daemon is, you could say, another word for a demigod or an angel or something like that—something given more than a purely personal or purely reductive existence and significance.

So Eros is a hermeneutical daemon who shuttles back and forth between gods and humanity, between being and nothingness, between what is real and what is less real, between wisdom and ignorance. And this Eros looks just like Socrates, which is to say shoeless, ugly, impoverished, cunning in pursuit of the beautiful and the good, a lover of wisdom and a master of jugglery, witchcraft and artful speech.

I hope it's evident to you just how powerful and well-captured that description is, how much it points to the kind of accuracy in what it brings and involves there. A hermeneutical daemon shuttling back and forth between the divine and the human, between what is real and what is less real, between wisdom and ignorance. Shoeless himself, ugly, always poor—he himself has nothing. Do you get this, even in terms of what we've described so far about Eros? Eros itself has nothing. Cunning in pursuit of the beautiful and the good. A lover of wisdom, of insight, and a master of jugglery, witchcraft and artful speech.

So his mastery, his realm, his art, is the realm of art. It's not the realm of realist truth in the way that we tend to think about it. There's a lot in there, very beautiful, and certainly not a little cutesy description. We're really talking about something bigger than us because divine.

Now, we said already that we could give a kind of small start of a definition of what Eros is, but we also said that when we talk about this Eros-psyche-logos dynamic—or rather what Eros instigates, inflames, invokes, elicits, and puts in motion—because of its wanting more, in terms of the ways it expands, enriches, deepens, widens, complexifies, gives dimension to the images that it beholds of its erotic object, its erotic object as image, as imaginal dimensions, and the ideas, the logoi, the concepts of that erotic object. Because of all that, the definition that we gave earlier—this wanting more contact, connection, intimacy, knowing, to know more, wanting more penetration, to penetrate more, to experience more—all that provisional definition is exactly that: just provisional.

So we can almost make a kind of axiomatic statement, a fundamental statement that because Eros is not separate from this whole Eros-psyche-logos dynamic and what that does in its expansion, we can never totally understand Eros. There will always be something of it, something of Eros, beyond our grasp, beyond the grasp of our understanding. And therefore also maybe something of it to which we are always subject, because it's more than we can kind of get a full handle on, get our hands around. There may be something of Eros to which we're always subject. We never feel like we got it under our thumb. It's always in some sense bigger than us, bigger than our minds, bigger than our capacities in some sense.

Now this, of course, goes back to that whole origin of the idea of Eros as a divinity, which is something Jung restated, which implies the impossibility of a full definition or capturing it conceptually. But also we can see, if we think about the implications of this whole idea that Eros opens up and inseminates and fertilizes psyche and logos, which then further inflame and inseminate the Eros, we can see that Eros kind of has this tendency, because of the apotheosis, to keep expanding everything, or shattering boundaries, or stretching boundaries.

Whether that's an imaginal figure, or a lover, the way I see him or her, whatever it is, whether it's a piece of art or a piece of music or an artist or whatever it is that's my imaginal, perceptual object—Eros will tend to expand, will want to, will naturally expand, open, deepen, complexify everything. Object and everything it's in relation to.

But also, because Eros itself is tied up in the larger definition with the Eros-psyche-logos dynamic, it means that Eros itself also gets expanded. And this happens in two ways.

It happens, as I said, because when the imaginal object becomes even richer, even deeper in its dimensions, even more wonderful—like a jewel revealing more and more sparkling facets and unknown wonders and mysteries, and becomes more rich, more deep, more wide—then there is more Eros. There is more Eros, more to penetrate. The Eros desires to penetrate what it's now discovering and desires to open to what it's now discovering of the erotic, imaginal other. I see more there. He, she is more. I want to open to, I want to penetrate that. Eros wants to.

So the Eros itself swells. There's a tumescence, there's an increase, there's an empowerment. The degree of the fire, if you like, grows—the amount, the range of the Eros. But in a second way, too. Because in all this, the image and the idea, the psyche and the logos of the Eros—in other words, what is the image that is present of the very Eros that's involved in this whole movement? So certainly there's an image of the other, and the imaginal other, and that's getting richer and wider. But then this spreads—we're going to go into this in more detail and all its implications—it spreads to self-reflect in this kind of auto-eroticism. I'll say more about that in talks to come.

So that the very way that Eros is regarded, the very image of Eros and the very idea, the logos of the Eros in the Eros-psyche-logos dynamic—not just of the object, but also the Eros—those boundaries too start to stretch or start to shatter and then have to reform in a wider, deeper, more spacious and generous and multi-dimensional way. So whatever ideas and images are involved with the Eros, the psyche and the logos of the Eros, so to speak, those too are expanded.

You understand?

So eros—whatever our notion, whatever our image or fantasy of eros is—that too keeps growing, gaining new dimensions, simply by virtue of what eros does and is through the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

The eros itself starts to take on new dimensions, revealing other facets, other resonances, other breaths that it encompasses. We discover depths in eros itself that we hadn't known before.

Now this doesn't mean—this does not imply—that because we can never totally understand it, because of all I've just said, we can never totally understand eros, that we shouldn't explore it. It doesn't imply that we should ask, "Well, there's no point explor-

ing it or trying to create ideas and concepts that address it, that support our exploration." It doesn't imply that we should stop trying to go further, to go deeper, to go wider into the breadth of eros.

Actually, to me, it should inspire a greater inquiry and exploration. Wherever we are in our understanding of eros, or wherever we are in building a conceptual framework of eros and adding to it, wherever we are in that process—there's more. There's more to discover. There's more to add. There's more to find out. There are beauties and wonders and depths and dimensions to be revealed.

So it should inspire us. Rather than feeling frustrated because "I don't really get this yet" or "I haven't sussed it out, I haven't encapsulated it, I haven't figured it out"—it should inspire.

And even as I alluded to before, it could hopefully give us a sense of okayness, and perhaps even rightness, in those times when we feel driven or dragged by eros and the eros seems bigger than us—bigger than what we can figure out, or encapsulate in concepts, or even in an image. We recognize that not only is this okay, there may even be a profound rightness in that.

I don't know—maybe you've been listening to the talks so far and, I can say this for myself, leaning into trying to be more precise and analytical about delineating between different concepts and qualities that we recognize when eros is present, how we distinguish it from this and that. And maybe some of you are listening and perhaps starting to feel a little uneasy at times, feeling as if we're being too precise and too analytical.

I have felt that at times, just in the material we've covered so far on this retreat. I'm not sure. When does the precision and analysis that we're bringing to bear actually overstep its soul-making function? When has it gone beyond its function of supporting soul-making? Because what we're interested in is soul-making—that's what we're interested in. When has the way we're delineating things with precision and making analyses of how things relate and processes work—when does that overstep its soul-making function?

It's not an easy question.

So on the one hand, you have this notion that eros is divine, and because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—this stimulating, inflaming, expanding, inseminating, fertilizing tendency of eros that it gives to eros, psyche, and logos, and more as we'll explain in later talks—because of the divinity and because of that eros-psyche-logos dynamic,

there's always going to be something mysterious retained about it, something unfathomable, some sense of "more"—more that I haven't quite discovered, more to it, more dimensions to it.

So on the one hand, all of that—this unfathomability, if you like. And at the same time, on the other hand, a certain amount of delineating, of defining, of highlighting features actually serves the movement of eros and the soul-making process.

Right here, in relation to delineations and definitions, we have a dilemma. We have actually several dilemmas, but that's one of them.

There is, on the one hand, in approaching soul-making and approaching things like eros, oftentimes what's more helpful—and I've talked about this before and leaned that way at different times in teachings and writings—is leaning more towards the poetic and the mythical sensibilities. A poetic understanding, poetic depiction, poetic presentation or unfolding that calls on the poetics of our understanding. A more mythical sensibility in exploring and receiving and digesting.

When to emphasize that? How much to emphasize that relative to a more analytical approach? I don't know. So far in this retreat it seems to me we've been leaning more towards the analytical. In the past, and in other work I'm doing right now, more the other way.

So there's a kind of dilemma here—a balance. Different people, different times, same person. But that's something to bear in mind about all this, about making delineations.

Actually, I want to say something general—make some general observations about making delineations in general. And I want to add to that and also say some general things about saying general things, if you follow me. Something about general observations about making delineations, and general things about saying general things.

Now, I'm aware some of you might be thinking, "What? This is really abstract now." And I don't know if you're listening and whether this just sounds really not relevant or pretty vague, or just abstract. Maybe in time, hopefully, it will come to seem more relevant why I'm saying these things now—generally about making delineations and about different levels of insight. I hope that it does make sense at some point and seem actually quite both very relevant and quite important.

It's interesting, just in terms of insights that can sound more abstract or that are more general—that apply more generally, or that operate at a higher meta-level, if you like. They can sound kind of vague, so much so that we barely hear them, or they make very little impression. For many people, it's like they don't really recognize the value

when they hear or read something at that level, or they sort of get it, but they don't really get the way sometimes these meta-level insights can have, because of their generality, this really pervasive power.

They're general, but they generate an enormous amount of other insights. They link things together. They make certain ways of proceeding possible, open certain whole avenues—not just a little nook or crack here, but whole avenues. They generate a lot through their generality, their pervasiveness, their all-pervading applicability and their implications.

So oftentimes, you know, I'm a teacher or something, and a person, many people remember a story that I told or a certain image recounted. It strikes, it stays in the memory, it makes an impression immediately. And this is very, I think, probably normal for the ways that we tend to understand, the ways that most people tend to understand as human beings, take in information written or listening. Or when the advice seems very, the insight seems very, very specific, when it's obviously relevant to a situation that I find myself in immediately.

But actually, there often is much greater power, as I said, and much more far-reaching sort of embrace and influence and implication in these other more general, in a sort of more general meta level of insight, oftentimes. So it seems also that it's quite rare, I think, it's quite rare, it's a rare person who actually kind of has an ability to recognize a sort of relative hierarchy of significance of ideas or insights.

Sometimes it's almost the opposite. It's as if the more significant ones and the ones that are kind of really radical—radical is from the word radix, meaning root—they really go to the root of things in their generality, in their power, in their implications. People have a hard time sort of recognizing what's a more radical, far-reaching, pervasive sort of meta-level insight and something that's much smaller just because it seems immediately tangible, immediately obvious, immediately applicable to something that's right in front of me now in a very obvious way.

So that's just, you know, the way most people's minds work, but in a way there's an encouragement there to try and reflect on this material, especially when it might seem a bit like conceptual or that kind of level, in a way that starts to build something for you that's really helpful and will be really powerful. As I said, radical and far-reaching in its implications.

Because one of the things I wanted to say about delineations, making delineations, is that, again, certainly not all, but a lot of people appreciate clarity when they're reading something or hearing teachings or whatever. And it can seem very easily that some-

thing has been made clear to us if we are presented with, if we read or if we hear kind of neat, well-delineated distinctions between things, between concepts, between qualities or factors of mind. And so sometimes people say to me, oh, you're really clear and da-da-da, you know, etc.

So that is something that I do definitely try and do sometimes. So I'm not, I'm certainly not wanting to throw that out. This is where the dilemma is coming. I'm not wanting to throw that out and I'm certainly not advocating a kind of general sloppiness or inattention and certainly not confusion. It's often not that helpful.

But I would say that or just kind of point out that I think we should start to feel a little bit suspicious if the neat distinctions that we have made ourselves or that we are being presented with by a teacher or by a piece of writing or whatever it is—the neat distinctions are, we should feel suspicious, our suspicions should be aroused if those neat distinctions seem to be being regarded by anyone, whoever is presenting them or ourselves listening or whatever, as real. It should be suspicious if these distinctions are presented as delineating real things, as accurately and simply reflecting the reality of things.

If we sense that a person is or we ourselves are kind of slipping into that very common assumption and position, then I think our suspicion should be aroused. Or we suspect that someone or we ourselves are clinging to them, these distinctions or these things that are delineated through distinctions and definitions, clinging as if they're being clung, if we suspect they're being clung to as real things. Remember that's a form of avijjā, that's ignorance at the deepest level, if they're clung to as real or as reflecting simply, accurately the reality of things, we should be suspicious.

The Buddha Dharma, especially in the Mahāyāna, this is made really, really clear. Those links, we said this before, those links of dependent origination, they are not real. All Dharma concepts are just ways of looking. They're just ways of dividing things and they don't reflect reality. They're ways of looking, ways of delineating in the service of something.

So that I would say, along with the Buddha, you know, why did he say after his enlightenment, it's hard to understand this dependent origination I've discovered. Hard to understand, subtle, profound, only the wise can see it, etc. Very famous quote. I'm not sure whether I want to even try teaching this. There's a whole structure of concepts that he's not saying this is reality. He's saying, look this way and you'll understand something about reality.

And eventually, I think I've said this already on this retreat, the very insight that's generated by the structure of the delineations of dependent origination, those links, etc., if we approach it the right way, melts those very delineations and distinctions, melts the very links, so that the whole thing, it's like a snake eating its own tail, swallowing its own tail, the whole thing dissolves.

So this is... The question is how to move. I don't just shrug and say, oh yeah, no concepts. If I just shrug and say, oh, all concepts are false, I'm just left with my default concepts. I haven't gone anywhere. All I've done is probably reinforced a little bit of laziness and sloppiness. How do I actually get from delineations, through those delineations, into a much more profound realization, much more profound freedoms, and actually even beyond those delineations.

So that's definitely there in Dharma teachings. The question is exactly how can I approach these teachings in ways that do that. And that's where I go back to the idea of ways of looking at fabrication, etc.

For me, that's a very powerful way of approaching these teachings. But this insight about the suspicion of neat distinctions is there in Western philosophy as well. Even back to Plato, he used to make fun of certain characters who were so fond of making these distinctions very clear and neat, and they get ridiculed a little bit in his dialogues. And Hegel as well—another one who gets a lot of stick—but actually, partly his extraordinary insight was that any belief in clear concepts as if they reflect reality just doesn't stand scrutiny. As you look at it and bring more investigation to bear, you see it involves its opposite, it doesn't hold, the boundaries fracture.

We can see this in our own practice. Just as mindfulness gets keener, more subtle, sharper, more sensitive, as our investigation gets deeper, more directed, more cunning if you like, and as our insight grows, we will witness this too in our very own experience.

So just for example, at first, the vedanā—the pleasant, unpleasant, or what some people call neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—the three categories of vedanā, and the distinction between vedanā and craving. Here is this pleasant feeling, and then there's the craving to get more of it, or to move towards it, or to hang on to it. Or here's this unpleasant feeling, and the craving to push it away, to get rid of it, to reduce it. And it seems like the vedanā and the craving are two different things. It's very important to delineate these as two different things and actually see in our experience: yes, here are two different things. I can see A and I can see B, and I then see their relationship.

As I go deeper in insight, that very distinction starts to blur. We start to see it's a kind of illusory distinction. No vedanā, no craving. No craving, no vedanā. Craving and vedanā are inseparable, as are craving and clinging—we touched on that before—as are avijjā and saṅkhāra at a very deep level. As are, in fact, all the five aggregates, or certainly the mental aggregates.

It's like perception and consciousness—they are not two separate things. They're divided up in terms of the aggregates, the third and the fifth aggregate, but they are not separate. Perception and vedanā are not separate. Perception, vedanā, and consciousness are not separate. Saṅkhāras—they're all... the aggregates are not referring to separate or separable things. They're not real distinct entities. The delineations are made to serve a certain purpose, but they are not reflective of reality. And we can see that in any domain, and certainly with dharma concepts.

So that's another dilemma regarding making delineations in terms of clarity and the illusions of clarity or the seduction of what seems like clarity.

And there's another potential dilemma, another potential pitfall or danger in making delineations. As I mentioned earlier, when we delineate something—like eros from desire or craving or whatever it is—in doing that we amplify something. We amplify something, a thing, through a distinction, distinguishing it from other things. So we're delineating a theme or an area or a quality or whatever. In a way, we're creating it. In a way, we're discovering it and we're creating it. We'll come back to this create-discover amalgam or duality later. But in a way, we're actually creating something for our experience and reflection.

And then we've got this thing called eros. And then in relation to that area of experience or that theme of eros, it's possible that it becomes an area where we then pass judgment on ourselves. So here I've created this thing—we've created this thing, whatever it is. We create something called samādhi, and then lo and behold, we start measuring where we are in relation to our samādhi, or our insight, or liberation, or eros, or whatever it is.

In a way—I think, I'm not sure if he actually said this—but in a way it comes out of some of the insights of Michel Foucault, in regard to sexuality, in fact. He pointed out in his sort of history of the whole sense and idea of sexuality that you can trace it back and see how much more defined and complex and solidified and prominent it is as a concept now, related to which the sense of self then relates itself or attaches itself.

In other words, over the past several hundred years, two things have grown, and they've grown together. One is the sense of sexuality, or sexuality as a theme of human psychology, of human behavior, of human being. And with that—not just dependent on that, but with that also—the whole idea of individuality, self, and identity, which, as I mentioned before, is a lot more different now in the kinds of interiority and the prominence of individuality than it was several hundred years ago in Europe.

So sexuality becomes this thing, this area where my identity and the measurement of my identity is so often wrapped up, oftentimes in not a very simple way and also quite a painful way because of judgmentalism and actually a lot of ignorance and not knowing. My identity is wrapped up with sexuality. Sexuality is wrapped up with my identity and individuality and what's my sexual expression.

So there exists tremendous potential and beauty emerging from this connection between identity and sexuality, yet there also lies a certain danger. When we bring forth Eros—or create Eros, if you prefer—as a central theme, amplifying its significance in our lives, we inevitably generate countless questions in our exploration. Questions like the one I mentioned: How do we keep Eros alive in a long-term relationship, which differs fundamentally from metta?

However, we must proceed with great care in this territory, because as I've indicated, we risk creating yet another arena in which to judge ourselves harshly. "I've failed. I'm an erotic failure." Or "My relationship has failed in terms of its Eros. I should be this way or that way. It should manifest differently. There's something fundamentally wrong with me. Is there something wrong with me? I bet everyone else is..." You can see how this pattern unfolds.

You can observe this same dynamic with samadhi. Most people today—and this has become more pronounced recently due to the cultural emphasis on attention, workplace performance, and productivity—are intensely focused on developing their cognitive functioning through various apps and methodologies. Generally speaking, unless someone has been genuinely exposed to teachings, retreats, or environments where people seriously discuss mindfulness, presence, freedom from distraction, steadiness, vitakka and vicara—unless they've encountered such contexts—people begin measuring their samadhi attainments. What was previously never given a second thought, what wouldn't have become a source of pain or preoccupation in their lives, suddenly transforms into this significant thing by which they evaluate themselves.

The situation with Eros mirrors this precisely. The distinction opens a beautiful avenue of exploration, yet unfortunately can become another metric for self-measurement. Here lies our dilemma—a genuine double-edged sword.

Yet creating and discovering different themes, dimensions, and areas of our being and the being of the other—this constitutes part of what the Eros-psyche-logos dynamic accomplishes. We'll return to this crucial point. This dynamic creates and discovers ever more dimensions, ever more subtle openings into new territories—like getting your foot in the door, which then opens onto an entire avenue of possibility. Distinctions emerge, delineations form, various forms of otherness manifest. All of this unfolds naturally.

So indeed, it remains a double-edged sword: beauty and soul-making on one side, dilemma upon dilemma on the other.

Sometimes people observe that pointing out differences between various teachings and delineating concepts creates dualities—creates otherness or multiple forms of otherness. This observation holds truth. Sometimes such differentiation even generates further complications.

More accurately stated: this is true, but it's not invariably problematic. The mere creation of duality, differentiation, or otherness doesn't necessarily constitute something harmful that leads to dukkha. Again, we must be careful not to oversimplify here.

Consider even the various schisms among psychoanalytic schools or psychotherapeutic traditions. One could certainly say, "Oh, that's terrible—look at all the difficulties, interpersonal conflicts, and complications that emerged." On the other hand, examine the richness that resulted. Observe the creativity that emerges from schism. The creation of distinctions doesn't simply and inevitably lead to dukkha.

Even in Dharma practice, you can observe this principle at work. Returning to the concept of ways of looking, we can delineate between different ways of looking—really subtly different ways of looking. You delineate between two particular ways of looking, whatever they might be. One fabricates more dukkha and more perception; the other fabricates less. This recognition brings insight and greater freedom, yet it emerges precisely through delineation. So delineation itself, duality itself, doesn't constitute a problem here. Rather, it can prove profoundly helpful, profoundly fruitful.

When I make a delineation that subsequently brings ease, freedom, and less fabrication, this creates the possibility of making even more refined delineations—even subtler distinctions between concepts, degrees of clinging, and so forth. This can lead to fabricating even less dukkha, fabricating even less perception, opening levels of insight that become available through this very process.

We've explained this principle before. The path doesn't simply involve finding a way of being or looking that feels reasonably pleasant and relaxed, where suffering appears minimal, and then just settling back to surf in and out of that state without much intensity or effort. That approach is fine as far as it goes, but it remains fundamentally limited.

The creation, if you like, or the creation-slash-discovery of dualities, polarities, otherernesses, is intrinsic to the erotic process, the process of eros psychologus, intrinsic to the soul-making dynamic. We're going to explain more about this later because it's quite important.

Wrapped up in that is also complexity. As I said, when the eros psychologus dynamic gets going, the imaginal object, the erotically charged other, the erotic beloved, becomes complexified, complicated in a good way. As I said, they're like a jewel. You suddenly see, oh, look at that. It's got even finer facets, and the way it reflects light in the different ways of the different facets—its beauty is increased through its complication, its depth, that there's more to discover there.

So complexity also, not always, but generally speaking on the whole, is generated, created and discovered through the soul-making process. Again, I caution against this sort of addiction to simplicity, this simplistic addiction to simplicity, what I call simplism.

So the question is: when to be simple and when not to be simple? Or actually, more accurately, in this situation, what will a simple perspective give me and what will a not-so-simple perspective give me? Where will it take me if I look in a way that simplifies, and if I look in a way that actually seems like it's not so simple?

On the other hand, sometimes we as human beings make, or we're actually listening to teachings or reading something and someone is offering something to us—some distinction—and it actually doesn't serve anything at all. So what's the point of that distinction? Doesn't free you in any way, doesn't bring any more freeing insight, doesn't open soul-making. It's just a kind of pedantry.

So again, there's a kind of insight in really delineating what delineations are actually worth making, or what are the particular results of making certain delineations. Which ones are just—what's the point of making them? They really don't serve. They may sound clever, but it's just pedantry.

This is what I mean by a meta level of insight. Actually learning how to look, how to create distinctions, when to pull back, what kind of distinctions, where each of them will take me. Daring to find out and toss out the ones that are not helpful and pursue the ones where—even though they seem quite tricky—I can sense there's richness here. There's treasure to be discovered of different kinds.

For our purpose now in this retreat, primarily it's: which distinctions bring soul-making? When does a certain delineation increase, serve, support, and nourish the soul-making?

For example, as we said, just the distinction between eros and greed is, to my mind—and I hope you will see—a distinction that helps soul-making. Don't just tip it out, eros, because it's kind of desire, and desire, I've heard, is a bad thing. Trying to live without it, live without clinging, and so forth. We talked about that.

But even the distinction, say, between joy and happiness—I would define them slightly differently sometimes to actually open up a difference there. Joy, I would say, is a kind of happiness that's richer and deeper, if you like, in different ways. I'll go into that another time.

Someone told me—this is secondhand, so I'm not sure if it's true—but I've heard that in Tibetan, in the Tibetan language, there are only two words for emotions: happy and sad. I'm still not sure whether I quite believe it, but apparently there are just two words. Unlike English, which has a very rich emotional vocabulary—two words for emotions, so you're either happy or you're sad. I'm guessing there's a word for equanimity, because that's a Buddhist word, but anyway. Happy and sad.

Someone was telling me that they knew a Tibetan who then moved to the West and learned English, and they were reporting after some years experiencing emotions after they learned English that they never knew they had before. Is it that the language is highlighting something that was there anyway? Or is it that the language is actually creating new emotions? The very delineation creates something—or both? I'd say it's both myself.

This is interesting in its relevance to soul-making and to fabrication.

We can very easily believe that, or be taught that, words are thoughts, and thoughts bring discriminations, and discriminations have to do with papañca. They create papañca. So don't get entangled in words. Don't get caught up, because they feed thoughts, which feed discrimination, which feeds papañca.

So there's a way that's true in the original meaning of... Well, actually, there's a way that's sometimes true if papañca and fabrication are equated. That delineations create fabrication, sometimes actually.

But it's also, as I said, that the word—say the different words for different emotions, subtle shades of emotion, kinds of emotion—actually the words serve to create delineations in our sensitivity and refinements of our sensitivity. And this actually stimulates fabrication, a diversity of fabrication. In the way that psychoanalysts use the term consciousness, this then stimulates consciousness. We are then conscious of some arena more because we've been given a delineation that opens it up. And some of that increase in consciousness can be soul-making. So the fabrication there—some of it can be in the service of soul-making.

New doors, new experiences, new understandings can be opened through making verbal delineations. So again, the simplistic spiritual teaching about getting away from words and not thinking or not getting attached—it's appropriate sometimes. And like so many things, sometimes the very opposite is true. There'll be more soul-making, more of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic will be stimulated through the delineations of words, through the magic of words. Sometimes there's that possibility.

So regarding delineations, fabrication and soul-making, what can we say? Well, some delineations actually decrease fabrication. They lead to, they support certain ways of looking which will actually fabricate way less than we could have without that delineation. Some delineations will actually increase fabrication and actually create problems or create subtleties of awareness or whatever.

The soul-making could be in the greater fabrication, as we'll point out more and more on the retreat. Sometimes more fabrication means more soul-making, or skillful fabrication, as we could call soul-making. And sometimes there's an element of the soul, we could say, or dimension of the soul, that the decrease of fabrication, the movement towards the unfabricated, and that spectrum there, is also soul-making in a different way.

So the relationship there—there are all the different permutations and possibilities in terms of making delineations, increase or decrease of fabrication, and serving or not serving soul-making. It's not that simple. And it invites our investigation and our careful attention and our intelligence.

Why am I saying all this? You might be wondering. Well, because it will guide our work, or a lot of this will guide our work, certain material that we're exploring together in this course, certainly your practice, especially as it develops. Some of this will really guide that work and your thinking—your thinking about these things and thinking about practice and how you approach practice.

I'm saying some of it also really as a kind of justification for what's being presented here and for this whole structure and integrated path and the introduction of new concepts, etc., that seem kind of unusual or really counter to what we might have heard before. So it's partly, yeah, I admit, it's a kind of feeling it might be important for some people to have that justification and to have it make sense.

But there's another reason I'm saying all this, and in a way I'm saying it for the future. What we're presenting here and what we're going into here and what we're kind of elaborating and building, if you like, and playing with—playing with building in terms of concepts and practices and refinements of attention and all that—it's not a closed system. It might be integrated, and maybe it seems that way, but my hope is it's really not a closed system.

My hope is, or the invitation, really, is that as time goes on in the future or very soon or whenever, that you, or some of you, will feel like you want to or are called upon to add, to build, to what we're talking about here and what we're sharing together here and exploring and experimenting with and presenting.

So I'm saying this for the service of opening an avenue that no one owns, that other people can add to and build tributaries and other avenues that connect up or make more lanes in the highway or whatever the analogy would be, or a building that then is added to and given a whole extension or whatever it is. I'm saying it for the sake of creativity.

Because there's a whole other way, and I'm going to come back to this—there's a whole other dimension of practice which has to do with the creativity of one's practice, or the creativity of even making one's own practice, making one's own path, making one's own dharma, creating, discovering one's own dharma. The eros, and the soul-making of the creativity of Dharma, or Dharma as creativity.

It's open. You understand what I'm saying? I know that sounds maybe like a big deal, and not everyone will feel called to that or attracted to it, but I'm saying this for the sake of an open, shared, creative project so that if the time comes and you or indirectly

someone wants to make further delineations, wants to make further definitions, wants to add to something, wants to question something, pull something apart, give it another level...

that all these generalities that I've shared about definitions and delineations and the dilemmas involved now apply to doing exactly that.

The erotics of an open, endless, creative path—an open, endless conception. And what does it mean to be wise and creative and insightful and playful and artistic? I'm not sure if those are the right words, but how do we cultivate these qualities in our relationship to practice itself?

This is something we'll return to when we explore the relationship with the path in general, and its other dimensions. But hopefully this makes some sense, and perhaps it will make the sense that it needs to in the places where it needs to.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 59

Eros Unfettered (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h36

> *In this opening talk of his groundbreaking series, Rob Burbea introduces the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic as a fundamental movement of soul-making. He explores how eros - understood not merely as sexual desire but as the deep yearning for contact, intimacy, and knowing - operates within imaginal practice and spiritual life. Drawing on Greek mythology's erotes (Eros, Pothos, and Himeros), Burbea explains how this erotic movement penetrates and fertilizes the imaginal realm, creating an endless dynamic of mutual enrichment between desire, image, and understanding.*
>
> *The talk addresses common concerns about sexual imagery arising in meditation, legitimizing the full spectrum of erotic experience as potentially sacred. Through detailed examples from his own practice - ranging from subtle hand-holding to intense ritual imagery - Burbea demonstrates how trusting the intelligence and specificity of imaginal figures allows for profound soul-making. He emphasizes that these images are 'sufficient unto themselves' rather than requiring escalation or concretization.*
>
> *This teaching offers a radical reframing of desire as potentially spiritual, showing how the eros-psyche-logos dynamic can transform not only our relationship to imaginal figures but our entire perception of self, other, and world through what he terms cosmopoiesis - the making of sacred worlds.*

Let's begin to explore and unfold this movement of Eros, the movement of soul-making—what I've been calling the soul-making dynamic, or the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. We'll examine what it involves, what it brings into being and opens up, and also some of the ways that this whole organic movement can be hindered, blocked, impeded, weakened, or stopped.

I'll speak in theoretical terms but hopefully flesh things out with examples. There's really a double intention here over the next few talks: opening up the possibilities of Eros for ourselves—the possible manifestations of Eros in practice, in life, in our existence, in the way we relate to existence and to image—while also looking at what the possibilities of Eros open for us. What comes forth for us, what becomes available to us because of the movement and different manifestations of Eros?

In a way, through this exploration, we're circling around things and ideas and teachings we've already touched on. There's the hermeneutic circle again—we touch on something, then something else, then come back to revisit the first thing, round and round. Much like a seamstress sewing stitches or knitting a scarf will come back over the same area to add another thread, another color, or entwine threads together. A tapestry gets woven by working over the same material back and forth, adding something each time—more intricacy, more density, more complication, more solidity, more color.

It's interesting that some people who work with imaginal practice wonder: "I'm exploring all this imaginal material, I'm on retreat, perhaps devoting a month to these practices, and it occurs to me that there's a lot of Eros here—often very sexual, explicitly sexual imagery. Why all this Eros? Why all this sexuality, both non-sexual and sexual Eros, in imaginal practice? Is that right? Is it okay?"

This is a good and interesting question. To begin a response: one reason is that we love Eros. We love that fire, and we love its juiciness—using a more watery metaphor. Something in us loves that, and the more Eros flowing through us, the more we love it. Eros has this quality of loving itself—it has its own erotic connection with itself.

Another thing is that in imaginal practices, as we've set them up, the teachers and teachings allow it. We allow that Eros. The logos—the conceptual framework we've established, the explanations—sanctifies and legitimizes Eros. The examples we share in teaching also open something up, normalize it, legitimize it, give it place and space within the teachings.

Through examples, we also communicate the range of images—the breadth of possible archetypes and imaginal figures and characters that come, that operate, that demand attention, that make other demands, that ask for reverence and devotion. This range is deliberately broad, so we're not locked in—and certainly not unconsciously locked in—to just a narrow range of traditional Buddhist images: chastity, equanimity, even temperament, evenness of mind, calmness, sobriety, the fantasy of the hermit. The range of images and archetypes is broad, giving permission for those that don't fit into the more official but often unconscious canon of fantasy communicated in traditional teachings among some streams of Buddhism.

So Eros is sanctioned by the teachings, teachers, and examples. It's legitimized, given place.

Another important reason is that psyche and the imaginal involves beauty. The imaginal involves beauty—perhaps in a very wide range of what that word means. But generally speaking, beauty is a component, an element of the imaginal, of images when they're alive as imaginal images to us. Where there's beauty, there's attraction. And attraction opens the possibility of Eros.

In a way, Eros is intrinsic to the imaginal. So of course it's going to arise. You do imaginal practice—Eros is intrinsic to it.

Of course it's going to come up. Eros is intrinsic to psyche, I would say, to some degree or other. And the more you allow the imaginal, the more you actually allow eros.

If an imaginal figure is felt by us or regarded by us as other—as an otherness to us—it's not being reduced to a faculty of my mind or an aspect of my consciousness or even an aspect of my psyche. It's not being reduced to a result of my personal history. Then that otherness, that personhood, allows eros between me and the image, or even between two different images, even two different intra-psychic images. Eros is allowed because of the otherness there. Eros is an attraction between othernesses, we could say.

When in that otherness we feel or regard images, or when we play with the perspective that images have a claim on us—they have a claim, a deep, far-reaching, profound, soul-resonant claim on the psyche, the way a lover does, the way a lover has a claim on us, or a nuptial claim of a spouse—that claim on us is also erotic. It doesn't necessarily mean it's sexual, but it's erotic, in the way a lover's claim is erotic, and it gives rise to or involves eros.

Always, I think I've said this as well, where there's the imaginal and imaginal figures, it's not always apparent at first, but there's always some kind of love. It might be a very—again, a kind of love, a flavor, an expression of love that doesn't fit into the usual range and the usual picture of what the mind has of what love looks like. It can be, for instance, quite stern or strong or involve seemingly even violent elements, but there is some kind of love there with imaginal figures both ways—we love them and they love us. And there's a desire for contact. In a way, this imaginal figure is an angelus, is an angel, a messenger. It wants to make contact with us, and we want contact. We desire intercourse, if you like, in the broader sense of that word—intercourse. Again, not just sexual. And that desire for contact is, according to this very basic, what I'm calling the small definition, the loose definition of eros—that's the desire for contact, to open to, to relate with. That is eros.

As we sense more into an image—again, it might not be at first obvious, but we sense more into an image—what makes it an imaginal image is this quality or dimension that we begin to notice with imaginal images: their unfathomability, their inexhaustibility. They are not reducible to this or that explanation. We don't ever figure them out, or if we do, they die. They can have this sense of endlessness, bottomlessness almost to them. Because of that unfathomability and inexhaustibility, there is, so to speak, always more for eros—the erotic movement towards that image or in relation to that image. There's always more for the eros to open to, always more for it to penetrate, always more for the eros to know.

These words—penetrate, open, receive, know—are all words with sexual connotations, as I said before. But there's no limit to the penetration because of the imaginal figure's unfathomability. That imaginal figure might be an actual person—alive, a flesh and blood person in our life, or that we know about, or a historical person. We've been through all this before. Our perception of them is imbued with beautiful imaginal dimensions and fantasy in the good sense of the word, and there's no bottom to that, so they are in a way infinitely penetrable. We can open to them endlessly.

Sometimes, again I've explained this before, sometimes wrapped up in images, or an image bears this message, this angelus, this communication of somehow a telos, an end, a point, an end towards which the soul is moving. There is the eros of that magnetic attraction of the soul towards this telos, towards this end, something that the being, the soul is beckoned towards, called towards. What Corbin, Henri Corbin calls "the angel out ahead," or we could say the divine root of something that we're called to.

But that angel out ahead—we never reach it. It's not that we reach it in some kind of union and finish with that. There's an infinite movement towards that. It keeps moving further and further. We move towards it and it takes a step back and beckons us further and further, if you like, on the path of soul making, on the path of deeper, wider divinity. So there's something about who we are becoming, our telos. In some images, they are redolent with that. They communicate that. They shine with that and beckon us in that way. That telos implies or needs eros, that erotic movement.

We could say all this in relation to this question: why all this eros? Why all this sexual imagery even more in the imaginal practice when a person devotes themselves to this kind of practice for a time? Of course someone might say, "No, no, no. You let people daydream and what do you get? You get the defilements running amok, the defilements running away with themselves, increased." That might be someone's knee-jerk assumption.

But as I hope you can really see when you explore these practices in the careful ways that we're talking about, that's absolutely not the case. We'll revisit the doubts that may arise there, but you can see that's not the case.

There are all these answers that we could give, but we can tie all that together. We can weave it together through this, I think, more elegant explanation of what we've been calling the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic or the soul-making dynamic, if that's too technical sounding for you. The explanation, the exploration of how the fire of eros spreads, how it catches alight and sparks fire wider and wider so that it spreads. How the tree, if you like, of soul grows—the organic movement of the growth of this tree, or the way the web of soul-making is woven.

These are different, maybe more poetic languagings of what we mean by the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic or the soul-making dynamic. I've talked about this in other talks, I think in that set of talks "The Sacred Universe: Insight, Theophany, Cosmopoiesis," and in more detail in the series "An Ecology of Love."

So there's this rich range of what Eros wants with respect to the beloved other.

Now, when we have this Eros arising, when there's this erotic connection, contact, intimacy, touching, penetrating, opening, receiving—when there's this erotic relationship with a beloved other, what happens? What are the conditions that are created?

Well, one of the things that happens is that both self and other, both the lover and the beloved, both become more imaginal. They take on more imaginal dimensions. They become pregnant with more soulfulness, if you like. They become ensouled in deeper ways, or differently ensouled.

So this is part of what we mean when we say—and I think I touched on this in some of the talks already—that the imaginal is not fantasy. Fantasy tends to be quite two-dimensional. The figures in fantasy, including oneself in fantasy, tend to be quite two-dimensional, relatively flat. The imaginal, by contrast, involves this pregnancy, this soulfulness, this multi-dimensionality. There are depths there. There are mysteries there. There are resonances and echoes and connections that reverberate through different levels and dimensions of being.

So in the soul-making dynamic, in the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, when Eros is operating—when there's this erotic connection with a beloved other—both self and other become more imaginal, more pregnant with soulfulness, more multi-dimensional, more mysterious, more beautiful.

Now, what does Psyche refer to in all this? Psyche, we can say, refers to this very process of ensouling, of becoming more soulful, of taking on these imaginal dimensions. It's the very movement, the very organic process whereby beings—whether it's oneself or the other—take on more depth, more mystery, more beauty, more resonance.

And Logos—what's Logos doing in all this? Well, Logos has several functions. One is that it provides a kind of conceptual framework that makes sense of what's happening, that gives it meaning, that allows us to understand and articulate the process. But Logos is more than just concepts. It's also the very meaningfulness that gets woven into the experience, the significance that permeates it.

When something becomes ensouled, when it takes on these imaginal dimensions through Eros, it becomes meaningful in deeper ways. It becomes significant. It carries weight and resonance and connection to larger patterns of meaning. So Logos is both the framework that helps us understand the process, and it's also the very meaningfulness that gets created in the process.

And here's the beautiful thing: these three—Eros, Psyche, and Logos—they're not separate. They work together. They support each other. They amplify each other. The more erotic connection there is, the more ensouling happens. The more ensouling happens, the more meaningful it all becomes. And the more meaningful it becomes, the more it feeds the Eros, the more it sustains and deepens the erotic connection.

So if it's possible to hear these words with more of their full range. Eros wants all that, but classically in Greek mythology, Eros is always accompanied by two other gods: Pothos and Himeros. Together they form a trinity, an erotic trinity called the Erotes—a little band of three.

I think it's Plato who explains that Pothos has to do with what is not so much present, but what is absent. It's the yearning, the longing for what is absent—and in our case, particularly for what is not yet here. We'll return to this. Himeros, again according to Plato, derives from the Greek word related to stream and rushing—the way a stream rushes. There's a stream of soul, part of this soul movement.

This Pothos and Himeros accompany Eros. What does this mean? Pothos is always wanting more. It accompanies Eros, so Eros is always accompanied by this wanting more—wanting what's not yet here. It wants something further, wider, beyond what has already been reached or met or encountered or known or achieved. Because of this Pothos that always accompanies Eros, there's an endlessly dynamic quality to Eros. Eros

is endlessly dynamic in its thrusting, its penetration, its opening, its embracing movement. With Himeros and Pothos, Eros is movement—endlessly dynamic movement. You always want more.

As I've said, Eros is a kind of desire—actually a whole group of desires that are erotic. But it's a particular kind of desire that always relates to or involves the imaginal. Eros is a desire to know, to experience the other, the object, the image, more deeply, more widely, more sensitively, more finely and subtly, as well as more grossly—the more obvious kinds of intimacy and knowing, as well as developing increasing subtlety in that knowing, meeting, touching, connecting, penetrating, opening to, receiving of the image, of the object, whatever it is. And to know it and experience it more completely and more fully.

There is this movement to keep thrusting, to keep opening. In this movement—a movement into the imaginal—Eros penetrates the imaginal and inseminates it, or opens to it and is inseminated itself by the imaginal, by Psyche. It fertilizes the imaginal, the soil of the imaginal territory. There's an increase in what we're calling Psyche, or an increase in the image. There's a swelling, a tumescence, a growing of something. Not like daydreaming where images get carried away, one thing leading to another, but an increase in the sense of richness of the imaginal object.

It gains in imaginal richness, in complexity—the way a piece of paper or fold of cloth gains dimensionality when you crunch it up with all these folds. There's an increase of dimensionality, of aspects or folds, the faces of the beloved other, the particularities. We discover more particularities, more richness, more complexity, a widening of who they are, what this thing is—the beloved object or other, the imaginal object. They become wider and deeper. They contain more dimensions.

With that, the logos is also pushed forward. If I'm regarding a person in my life in whatever relationship we have, and they become alive for me in this erotic, imaginal way...

The beloved becomes a theophany, a divine manifestation. Through the very particulars of their being, their expression, their actions, I witness how they embody a face of God—not separate from God, intimately connected to the manifestation of Buddha nature and divinity in exquisitely particular ways. This goes far beyond the general recognition that "everything is love" or "everything is awareness, therefore Buddha nature." Rather, through their unique particularities, through their irreducible personhood, through this exact way they appear to me anew, the divine reveals itself.

Because I perceive and sense all this, the psyche undergoes transformation. My conception expands—not merely of who this person is, but of what any human being fundamentally is. The logos of human existence stretches to encompass the understanding that a person is not simply a biological mechanism, however complex and marvelous that may be, but simultaneously and intricately a theophany. The very ideas of what constitutes theophany, the relationship between divine and human and soul—all this expands as well.

Through this thrusting and opening of Eros, both image and psyche expand, and the logos grows in relation to this beloved and potentially to others as well. As they become more sumptuous, more complex, more rich with facets—more refractions of light from the different surfaces of the jewel they reveal themselves to be—this very richness entices and elicits an increase in Eros itself.

Thus the whole dynamic unfolds: Eros inseminates psyche and logos, while the larger, fuller, more complex and beautiful psyche and logos inflame Eros further. You witness this inflating, self-fertilizing, mutually fertilizing movement—not a snowball effect, for that strikes me as an inadequate metaphor—but rather this feeding of each element by the others, the whole becoming increasingly fecund, expanding, widening, deepening.

We could say I discover more in my beloved—more dimensions, more faces, more theophanies. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge that I am creating this. The psyche creates it. This process of creating and discovering reveals more of the beloved other, and this expanding, mutually fertilizing dynamic of widening, deepening, enriching, and complicating does not happen instantaneously.

It unfolds over time, inevitably in stages, not smoothly in the sense of continuous flow. Something opens, we become captivated by that opening, we explore and expand at that level, we dwell with that beauty, and then potentially the movement grows again. There are natural stages to this unfolding.

The movement can also be unsmooth in that it may be blocked or diverted—something we will return to later. But when unimpeded, notice this crucial point: there is never any complete knowing, complete penetrating, complete opening to the beloved. We never fully know, penetrate, or open to receive the beloved other—whether person, inanimate object, aspect of nature, or intrapsychic image. No finality is possible to our knowing.

This creating and discovering is potentially infinite, driven by pothos—always more, always more, always more—or by himeros, the flowing, the onward flowing.

But it is not only the object that becomes amplified, extended, widened, deepened, complicated, made sacred, discovered, created. Because subject and object are always mutually dependent horizons—they always go together—not only the object but the subject, the self as well, is subject to this same process. Caught up in the same web, involved together, turning with the same movement.

Not only does the object receive dimensionality or have its dimensionality revealed, not only are its beauties and complexities given or discovered—we ourselves undergo the same transformation. The imaginal sense of self expands in precisely the same way. Everything I have described in relation to the object applies equally to the sense of self, the imaginal sense of self in those moments of unfolding.

This is not always obvious to people and sometimes gets missed, with significant consequences. But again, subject and object always go together.

And another aspect that weaves together with all of this is the world—the larger perception that encompasses not just the object and the self, not just self and other, but the entire cosmos of our experience. All of this unfolds naturally through the dependent arising of perception. Self, other, and world are always co-fabricated together.

Depending on the eros present—its nature and quality—and how it fabricates imaginally, a particular self-other-world constellation emerges. They become co-constellated, inseparable. We could say self-other-world-in-eros, all arising together as one dynamic whole.

We will return to this understanding, but what's crucial to recognize is that all of these dimensions—psyche, logos, and eros—are expanded, deepened, widened, and enriched together. Self, other, world, and eros itself all undergo this simultaneous transformation. Through this process, unfolding in stages, they too eventually are felt and seen to have more dimensions, eventually revealing their divinity.

This is where our understanding of cosmopoiesis emerges. You work with an image and it spills out into the perception of the world. Why does this happen? Because the object and the eros with the object naturally draw in self and world, weaving them into that imaginal co-constellation. This is inevitable because they form part of that fourfold co-constellation we've been exploring.

Now, we could speak of eros, psyche, and logos as separate things, and we could define eros in that smaller sense we discussed earlier. Yet as I've mentioned before, eros truly implies and involves the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic—the entire soul-mak-

ing process. While we can speak of eros, psyche, and logos as distinct, there's another way to understand their relationship: eros, image, and concept—or idea—are actually aspects of psyche. They are aspects of soul-making, not truly separate phenomena.

We will revisit this understanding, but it's important to recognize that image and idea are not really separate. Image actually always involves ideas—plural. They interpenetrate completely.

This brings us to a fascinating question: what does eros desire? What does it want to touch, to know, to penetrate and open to exactly? What is the nature of this other, whether it's a purely intrapsychic image, an actual person, an object in nature, an animal, or anything else that draws our erotic attention?

The object that eros desires is, in fact, image and idea. It is psyche and logos. Eros wants psyche and logos. This offers another way of understanding what's actually occurring in these moments of soul-making.

The object is constituted by—its very nature is—psyche and logos. It is image and idea. Even when I'm speaking of a flesh-and-blood person, when I'm in a certain relationship to them that allows and gives permission for this way of seeing, the object—my beloved other—is image and idea wrapped up with flesh-and-blood reality.

Someone might protest: "But what about the real object as it is? What about the object as it really exists?" And at this point, you know what the response must be. The response to that question—"What about the real object, the object as it really is?"—is laughter.

Always there is concept, there is logos involved in any perception. I have emphasized this countless times. If there truly were no conception involved in perception, there would be no perception at all—there would be fading. Why? Because concept is part of avijjā, part of the very mechanism that allows perception to arise.

So this notion of "the object as it is" reveals the fundamental problem with realism. I won't elaborate this entire teaching again, but it relates directly to our understanding of emptiness and the absence of inherent existence in all phenomena.

Another way of expressing all of this might be to say that what eros ultimately wants is more psyche. Eros desires psyche, endlessly longing for psyche. There is the beautiful myth that some of you will know—the myth of the love between Eros and Psyche, their eternal dance of desire and soul.

Eventually they get incorporated into the pantheon of gods. But we could say in all this, from a theoretical perspective, what is Eros wanting? We could phrase it a few different ways, and one way of saying it is this: because the object is psyche and logos, and because logos—idea—is wrapped up with image anyway, and the object is image and idea, that's really psyche. Eros wants soul. It wants image. It wants cosmopoiesis. It wants the ideas and concepts and images that are fecund and beautiful. Eros wants psyche—it wants more and more psyche.

Another way of saying all this is that the soul loves soul-making. The soul has an erotic desire for soul-making. The soul desires soul-making. So there are different ways of explaining all this, but in a way, they're just different ways of saying the same thing.

Let's look at that dynamic with a few examples and talk a bit more about it. We'll explore it both in imaginal practice and in life, with different kinds of erotic objects, beloved others.

Starting with purely intra-psychic imaginal practice, we can see that eros is sometimes explicitly sexual—obviously sexual—and sometimes not. Let's begin with sexual eros, partly because what I want to do in these talks is to open up the sexual, open up that doorway of the sexual and legitimize it, sanction it.

Again, we've said before that the sexual is not equivalent with the erotic. It's one face of the erotic. When we say erotic, we don't mean sexual, as has become common parlance. Sexual images and sexual action in life are just one way of knowing, experiencing, contacting, connecting, opening, penetrating. It's just one way—one strand or thread of the erotic movement.

But at the same time, while we've established this distinction, it's not interchangeable with another way. In other words, we cannot simply replace sexual knowing with another kind of knowing. You can do that if you want, but don't assume they're interchangeable strands of eros.

Let's linger with this for a while. Sex and sexual images cannot be reduced—we cannot assume that they are, for instance, just expressing love, or that this particular sexual image is just expressing a voice wanting union, melting together into oneness, or certainly that it's just a desire for pleasant sensations. Sex and sexual images can involve these things as primary elements, but what drives sexuality and generates sexual images is much more involved than that.

I'd be cautious of narrowing it down this way. In spiritual circles, these kinds of ideas about sexuality are very common: it's an expression of love, or it's wanting oneness and union, or it's just seeking pleasure. But remember something from previous courses

about the specificity of images. Images are very, very specific. When we reduce them, they lose their specificity. This image, with all its particular nuances and details and the very particular ways it was felt and sensed, cannot be replaced just by an idea like "it was wanting union" or "it's a movement towards oneness."

The specificity of images is something really important. So yes, the sexual is one way of knowing, but it's also that the image wants this way. The image shows this particular way—this specific way of penetrating, of opening, of intercourse in the larger sense. This expression of eros is being shown in the image. This is what the image wants.

There's a principle here that I've touched on in previous retreats about trusting the intelligence of the soul, the intelligence of the dynamism of the soul. Sometimes that's hard to generate, but just playing with a little bit of trust nourishes the process. It's very specific.

The images are specific. They're not just reducible, interchangeable, or equivalent to one kind of eros with another. If we extend that point, you also see that implied in this idea is the exact specificity of the sexual image—because we're talking about sexual images, starting with that.

What you'll notice, I think, inevitably, if you really do these practices and you're truly open to this, exploring them in the ways we're discussing—with mindfulness, with sensitivity, with awareness of the energy body, with noticing the soul resonances, and all that we've described in what we consider imaginal practice—you will find that often, maybe not all the time, but often the erotic images that might arise, whatever they are, and become what you're meditating with, are what I like to say sufficient unto themselves.

There might be a particular activity, sexual activity, interaction or communication or relationship going on. This is true for all images, whether they're sexual or not. But it's sufficient unto itself. There's some particular activity embodied, manifested in the image itself that is, if you like, intrinsic to the image. That means it doesn't follow the usual way that images—like one thing leads to the next, as they say, for life, and also with images—progress. One thing happens, then one thing leads to the next, and so on. There's a kind of sufficiency unto itself that's part of what the image wants. It's intelligent.

So it's not that you're working in meditation and something erotic arises, something sexual, and then there's this kind of progression or escalation to, say, genital intercourse or orgasm or whatever. It doesn't have that kind of escalation necessarily at all.

In fact, quite rarely. There's something about just lingering. It just wants to be just that, whatever that is. Of course, that might be genital intercourse, but it doesn't have this escalatory sort of propulsion to it.

Nor certainly does it imply at all or propel one to concretize that action in any way in the world. We've been through all this in regard to imaginal practice, but remember that in relation to sexual images as well.

So yes, the pothos and the himeros, the always wanting more and the stream, the onward rushing stream, will give rise to, as I said, impregnating the imaginal, impregnating psyche and fertilizing the images. But that fertilization is a deepening, an enriching, a giving dimension to and a discovering dimension in the image. It's not in the same way that unmindful daydreaming just leads one thing onto another, or fantasy in the way it's usually meant—being lost in sexual fantasy or whatever in the poor meaning of the term. It's not that kind of wanting more and rushing on.

So we go back to things from other retreats that you've listened to. There are narrative images where the whole thing seems to progress in time in this narrative way. This happened at this time. There's either an aimlessness to it or a kind of purposive narrative. This thing happens and then it's great because this next thing was able to happen and this next thing—whoopee! That's usually, not always, but that's usually a telltale sign that the ego has gotten involved and it's spinning a narrative thread, usually towards some kind of triumphant thing or towards collecting something or something like that, or towards doom.

This is in contrast—narrative images are in contrast to what we call the imaginal or iconic images, where there's a quality that we can notice of eternality or timelessness to them. They're more characterized by that. Same with the sexual imaginal, the erotic imaginal. They don't move in time towards some great whoopee necessarily.

Again, it's something to do with the integrity, if you like, and the intelligence of the image, that they don't actually escalate necessarily, and often they don't escalate in that more common way.

They also, again, with this idea of the integrity and intelligence specificity of an image, you'll notice as you play with these kinds of practices more and more, and with the energy body, that images have their own specific register or wavelength of appearance or energy. I can't remember if I've said this on other retreats. I think I have. I'm almost certain I have.

In other words, one could have a sexual image or eros that one's working with in meditation, and it could be very, very ethereal. The forms, the bodies involved are just sort of light bodies, maybe of different colors, or it's all very insubstantial. The resonances with the energy body and the visual, or rather the tangible perception of the image, is towards the insubstantial end of energy bodies. Or it can be very substantial—just feels and looks really solid and earthy and fleshy and very substantial.

That whole range is available. You'll notice, again, that you can play with it because you can actually learn to modulate the register of an image. But it seems to me that, again, images have a certain kind of integrity and intelligence in their specificity. So if it wants to be really fleshy and solid, that's what it somehow wants to be.

And to not immediately want to make it ethereal, or the other way around. This is not always simple as a subject - it depends on the person. But we're saying something about trusting the specificity of images.

Related to this, there's also a huge range in the sexual imaginal, the erotic imaginal - in the sexual dimension of intensity and carnality, of lust and wildness. There's no better or worse with these ranges. Something that seems really lusty and carnal, really intense in its sexuality, really wild, is not better or worse or less spiritual than something that's very gentle and ethereal, where what it expresses of sexuality is quite subtle. No better or worse - it's really about discerning the intelligence of this image. Can I play with the idea of trusting that, assuming there is an intelligence there and going with it, seeing that in the specificity the image offers?

Just to give you a sense of the range here: I had an image some years ago of a couple - I didn't quite know who they were. They were simply on a path in a forest, and all that was happening was they were holding hands. It was a relatively brief image, but there was something in the holding hands. There was Eros there in the hands. The bodies weren't particularly insubstantial - they were just fleshy bodies - but there was something very subtle in what was passing between them, in the erotic movement through the hand-holding. Very subtle, certainly not X-rated, but this was an erotic imaginal image. There was something about tenderness that was actually really palpable - the love, the softness, the tenderness that passed between them through the hand-holding. One could almost neglect it as an image, but I want to give you a sense of the range and this sense of really trusting the intelligence and specificity of the image.

Notice that in this case, it wasn't even that I was involved. I was witnessing another couple.

Another erotic image that came to me was like a celestial wedding. Again, there was a couple there, and again I was witnessing something. This couple was dancing with each other in an almost formulaic ritual way. There were columns with garlands around them, and they were dancing in and out of the columns, touching hands and holding hands. The whole thing had this very light quality - something really delicate and beautiful and celebratory. I was witnessing this union, almost at another level, a celestial union. The whole thing felt very light, very luminous, though it wasn't particularly insubstantial. They were flesh and blood bodies, this bridal couple, not bodies of light.

Actually, something similar I remember - maybe I'll tell this one in more detail, partly because of what these examples might offer for your practice.

I sat down to meditate one day a couple of years ago, and there was actually a lot of distraction - distracting images. I'd seen a movie the night before, and I was noticing how when you see a movie, the images stay in the mind and dominate for a while, for a day or two even, especially if you don't see many movies. So it was taking time to start, to filter it out. Does this have an imaginal sense to it, or has the mind just been impressed upon by something?

Now, it could be that an image from a movie becomes imaginal for me. Certainly that happens many times, or an image from a character in a book becomes imaginal. So it's not that a priori an image from a movie is not to be followed. But there was a sense of feeling the waters, fishing around - what's genuinely imaginal here, has that quality that I might tune into?

After some time for the mind to settle, an image appeared that I'd had before, quite common for me: a young man, relatively young, alone in a prison cell.

And there's a sort of spiraling stone staircase descending into a dark cellar, and that's his prison cell. I can see that I'm traveling down that staircase to where he is in his prison cell, and there's a tiger that appears beside me, and beside that young man. So I'm somehow moving in and out of identifying with him. At this point, I'm just finding my way into the image.

The tiger, too, was a very common image for me at that time. This tiger has a very powerful, very calm and silent energy—an immense power. So I descend into the cellar, and I notice that actually the top of the stairs admits light. This is interesting. I look up, and I think it's actually open. So this is doubly interesting—the prison is somehow actually optional.

As I go into the cellar, I see that it's peopled. There are various characters there. It's not just this young man. There's a sort of wizard character there—again, a character that I'd encountered before with certain characteristics we don't need to go into here. And there's also a beautiful lady in white, again a character with other characteristics we don't need to go into here.

Interestingly—and again, I'm still describing how I'm getting into the image—I'm still not sure what to focus on here. I focus on her for a while, and her appearance keeps changing as I focus on her, mixing with images from the films that I saw. Then doubt arises. I'm not sure—is this right? What's happening?

I'm describing all this just to paint a picture of what actually happens, as we're going to talk about practice, of course, and doubt and all that. What I did at that point was go a little deeper into the sense of samādhi in the energy body. Remember, all this is connected with that. The mind can't really settle here on what to connect with as an image. Let's just go deeper into the samādhi sense and feel the subtle body, the energy body.

In doing that, sometimes what can happen with the energy body—maybe it happens with some people more than others—is that the energy body sort of begins to float free of the physical body. This is not anything at all to do with being disconnected from the body. There's still this real sense of being really intimate with the feeling in the body. But it's as if the subtle body floats free and sort of flies free of the body. You can feel it flying, and oftentimes for me it wants to turn cartwheels or somersaults. There's a kind of exuberant joy in it.

I can really feel that very palpably in the energy field of the body, and I also see it—it's kind of blue and a kind of white-yellow light. It feels really good and joy arises with that. So sometimes for some people it's related to a possibility that arises with a certain amount of samādhi. This feels good and joy arises with it.

Then it's almost like I'm seeing this subtle-bodied angel, if you like, but I'm no longer really identifying so much. There's definitely not 100 percent identification with this subtle-bodied angel. And this subtle-bodied angel and the beautiful woman who was there—she now also has a more subtle body of light—so what happened, as I went into the energy body with more samādhi and followed this energy body movement, it started to change the image. There's that dependent arising, mutual dependent arising of energy body, mind state, and image, and we're acknowledging all that.

But this subtle-bodied angel and the beautiful woman with the body of light, they start to dance. Dance is really the best I can do as a word for what they're doing. They're somehow floating and interacting with each other in such a movement of de-

light. There's so much delight and mutual sympathy and resonance in the way their movements reflect and respond to each other and work together. It's very hard to describe in words, but they were full of delight and the whole scene was full of delight and it delighted me and there was a lot of joy in this.

Also I want to mention that as this was happening, there was a lot of—the thinking mind started flashing lots of insights very, very quickly and intuitively. It wasn't like pondering something, just lots of very quick flashes of intuitive insight around cosmopoiesis and other stuff.

This is quite a few years ago, and I still remember developing this material as insights were occurring to me. Notice also that the thinking mind can be drawn into this process in a really creative way, becoming part of the whole experience.

Now I'm witnessing this erotic interaction, this intercourse in the widest possible sense. But it's really not raunchy or sexual at all—it's very ethereal for a start. What they're really doing is just moving in this way together, dancing if you call it that, in these bodies of light. It truly feels like a vision of another realm where these two, this couple, are somehow eternally in this erotic dance together. Somehow I'm given a vision or an opening into this other realm, and that's exactly what it feels like.

When this had been going on for quite a while in the meditation, I felt like I was losing touch with that world—it was fading a bit. So I went back to this subtle body sense of feeling like the subtle body was flying, the actual feeling of that, turning cartwheels and floating, really feeling how that feels. And again, that feeling in the energy body was very powerful, very lovely and enjoyable, and helped me to access that kind of realm or world again, the vision of that.

So yes, imagining the subtle body floating and flying through the air of the room—because then I could also transport it from that cellar to the room I was actually in, the room at Gaia House. Imagining the subtle body while feeling it, so image and energy body interacting there, allowed that whole sense to come back, that whole image to open up again of the couple.

Just tracing that again as an example—very insubstantial, if we go back to this range of what's possible. Sexual, yes, but in a very gentle way, and certainly not obviously genital or anything like that.

Many times, sitting in meditation, it's as if a deva or a dakini or an angel comes and kisses me on the heart. This has a really healing, soothing effect—very beautiful, very delicate, very loving, but so specific in the qualities of this angel and the way the kiss is

given and the effect, its ripple through the energy body. Some of them are characterized by tenderness or by humor or by mischievous playfulness and a sort of seductive quality. But so many possibilities in the specificity—the range is huge.

Or you might get an image of what you know from the Tibetan word yab-yum: the icons of Buddhas in erotic union and sexual union with their consort. Different Buddhas with their specific consorts in erotic union, right at the center of a mandala or a thangka. This would be quite a common image to arise in meditation.

Again, who is it? Who is it who's involved? What are the characteristics of that yab-yum, of that penetration, of that opening? It may well involve melting. There is bliss in that melting. It may be characterized by tremendous tenderness that goes with the melting, and tenderness melts together. It may be that it starts substantial, becomes insubstantial, just melts into light. What started as two figures just becomes a melting into some color of light, and the figures and their independence and their forms are dissolved in that light.

So all kinds of possibilities here. There may be images and imaginal senses involving different kinds of penetration—sexual penetration, actually all kinds of erotic penetration, because it can even be penetration through the gaze, and this is something we'll come back to. What is it to feel penetrated by the gaze of an imaginal figure? What is it to feel their gaze penetrating you in erotic union that's through the gaze?

But there can be all kinds of penetration, all different ways, and they don't at all need to correspond to or be constrained by any kind of anatomical, biological accuracy. You or an imaginal figure might, for instance, have five penises—there's a statue of Hermes that I saw somewhere that indeed had five penises. You can penetrate or feel penetrated in more than one place at the same time, something that's obviously not biologically possible: maybe in the middle of your head, or in the middle of the imaginal figure's head, or through the front of the throat. It can feel or seem in different ways that the whole body is being penetrated. Again, it doesn't make biological anatomical sense.

There can certainly be gender reversal. So I'm used to thinking of myself as a man or a woman, or I define myself in some way, but there's no constraint or stasis necessarily in terms of gender identities in the imaginal realm. Even with gender, there's not necessarily a clear visual sense that corresponds to gender. There might be, or there might not be.

Penetration, as I said, might have to do more with energy penetrating. It might be very carnal, very physical and conforming to human anatomy. It might certainly be homoerotic. The range is enormous, and it could be a penetration of being, of beingness itself—what's that?

The imaginal is not, as I said, constrained to any kind of gender identity that we're used to. It could be hermaphroditic. Sexual orientations that we're usually identified with, if we are identified with them, hold no sway in the imaginal realm. There's some other intelligence operating that just breaks that open, doesn't feel limited, is not limited by that.

So there are all these possibilities. Let me describe another one. Some of these images, actually this one in particular, has a slightly different context, so there are bits I'll leave out and bits that have connotations that won't be clear from what I'm saying. But I think for our purposes right now, it serves.

In meditation, I see myself or feel myself on a large raft. There's a whole cast of other characters on this raft with me—a large wooden flat raft that's on the sea, drifting. Some of the characters are familiar from other images I'd worked with in the past, that had come and visited me, and some completely new, unrecognized from before. Some of them are very clear, and some are just vague presences. I couldn't even quite get a sense of them or a picture of them.

Not only that, but at first the number of figures—there are clearly quite a few of them, but exactly how many seemed to be changeable. It seemed more or less, and not even necessarily a finite number, potentially. The individuals themselves could change. They hadn't settled down completely.

Then it seemed like suddenly the raft was like a theatre stage. It was being lit up, so it was on the ocean, this big flat wooden raft, being lit up—this theatre that now felt like a theatre stage—being lit up by intense flashes of lightning, very dramatic lightning coming from the heavens, as if from God or something. So this stage, this theatre stage, was illuminated by the lightning, this periodic lightning, whereas the water around it was not. The water around it was black, dark.

Suddenly with all that, tremendous energy shoots through the image, and it begins. On this raft, on this theatre stage at sea, illuminated by the lightning, a rite begins. There's a woman there. She's mostly naked, a dark woman, mostly naked, but her body is daubed in splashes and strokes of black paint or tar or something. She has amulets around her upper arms, and she's full of vital energy and force. She's exuding this vital energy and force.

A rite begins between her and me, watched by the other characters, as if they form a circle watching this rite. What happens in the rite, unlike some rites, is not formulaic. It's more improvised. It's part dance and part sex, basically, and part different acts of union. There's a lot of energy involved. The energy is quite, if you like, dark and powerful, but I don't mean by "dark" evil. We've been through this in the re-enchanting retreat and other events, possibly other retreats. Dark, in my language, is not evil at all, as most people tend to think in terms of certain archetypes.

She's a dark goddess. It's very, very beautiful. But she's not someone like Kali, who's a sort of overwhelming, primordial, destructive force of nature. She's very powerful, and she's a dark goddess, but it's not that kind of completely, just decimatingly destructive force that I think goes with the goddess Kali, although I'm not quite sure of that iconography.

Now, in this rite, part of what we do, this dark goddess and I—I don't know if you ever did this, maybe it's a weird thing. When I was a kid, my brother and I had two friends who lived just up the street. We must have been seven, I'm guessing. I don't know where we got the idea from—maybe it was from a TV show or something—but we cut our arms just a little bit so that they bled a little bit, and then we pressed the two bleeding arms together, me and my friend, so that we would be blood brothers. I don't know if you've heard of this. I honestly can't remember where we got it from; it must have been some TV thing or something. What that was, really, for us back then when we were kids, was symbolic of our friendship and our commitment. I really loved these guys, and we were buddies and we were always out on the street playing or riding to the park. It was symbolic of our deep commitment to each other as friends.

So that's part of what happens in this rite with this dark goddess on the raft—we cut our arms and we press the bleeding parts together to become blood friends, if you like, or related. It's a symbol of our deep commitment to each other and commitment to something. I'm not even quite sure in the image what.

This image was something I returned to a few times. I was experimenting at the time with the whole notion of pacing with images—when to return, when to deliberately return to a certain element of it, when to just move on to another image. I think I hope I talked about that in past retreats. When I return to it at some stage later, even the next day or later that day, I can't remember, we do this rite again, and her blood is actually black. She has black blood. And I receive this black blood of hers into my veins.

Then I went out for some walking meditation. I was on retreat at the time.

I went out for some walking meditation, and this infusion of her black blood into my body filled my whole being with tremendous energy. But more than that—as I was walking, it felt like that same energy, that same black blood essence was suffusing into my body from nature itself during the walking meditation. She was somehow a nature goddess, and I could actually feel this surge of energy, this black blood current from nature, permeating my whole body, my whole energy body.

Engaging with this image in my walking meditation very mindfully—walking up and down, stopping and standing, being present with this unfoldment—that infusion into the energy body actually transformed my imaginal sense of my body and the earth as well. My energy body became a dancing god, like a very thick-set, heavy, muscular form, quite different from the body I have in this life. And this god in my energy body was dancing a really energetic, powerful dance, something like the haka—you know, the dance the All Blacks rugby team performs to intimidate their opposing team. Something like that was moving through my energy body and imagination while the physical body remained still in walking meditation. We've talked about these kinds of possibilities in imaginal practice before.

At other times, returning to this thread of blood mixing, the image took on much gentler qualities in terms of what it opened up. The mixing of blood became this merging of beings in profound, beautiful love and a kind of softly ecstatic union. So the very same thread of the image felt completely different at different times, giving rise to different trajectories within the larger imaginal constellation.

But also at other times—this is all within the same constellation of images on the raft in this rite—the erotic rite between the dark goddess and myself involved dismembering each other. Ripping or chopping each other's limbs, all the limbs, severing them from the other. She would do that to me, I would do that to her. Anatomically, physically, it doesn't make sense, but chopping all the limbs of the other, cutting their body into pieces, laying these out on the raft—these limbs and body pieces—and then smearing one's own body with the parts and dismembered limbs of the other. So that one's own body becomes daubed in the blood, and then feasting, devouring the limbs and flesh of the other.

Why am I sharing all this? To give you a sense of the range. Clearly, that image wasn't insubstantial at all—it was very substantial, very carnal, very intense. For many people, this just sounds weird or pathological or whatever. But actually, there was tremendous meaning that emerged from that image—a tremendous amount, in fact—infused with holiness, infused with beauty. Is it the standard picture of holiness and beauty? No, it's

not. Am I ever going to dismember anyone? Of course not. But what I want to convey through these examples is to open up the sense of the possible manifestations of sexually erotic imaginal imagery.

So we return to this question: What does the image want? Can I trust the integrity and intelligence of images? Or if I can even grant them a little bit of trust—trusting their integrity and intelligence—what does that open up? What does that allow? What does that allow to unfold? What does that set in motion through my trust?

When I grant that trust, and the image has this iconic, timeless or eternal aspect and quality to it, that trust allows the soul-making. This is part of what enables the soul-making. We're interested here in opening and allowing the eros so that the eros can open and allow the soul-making and cosmopoiesis and eros-psyche-logos dynamic—everything we're exploring.

Notice that this granting of trust, this idea of the integrity and intelligence of the image, is a view. It's a way of looking. It's a concept. It's a logos. It's a conceptual framework. We're completely acknowledging that. It's part of the dependent arising, part of our intelligence that we bring to bear, that we play with, knowing it's just an idea and that it will have an effect. Sometimes this is quite a subtle point and difficult for people to grasp.

But what happens in contrast is this: if I reduce an image—if I dismiss it as merely arising because I was clearly traumatized in my past, or as just an expression of my personal history, or if I dismiss it as uninteresting, or explain it away as loneliness when I see a couple holding hands—if I reduce the image in these ways...

If I reduce or dismiss the image, what happens? Then I have a certain way of looking, a certain view, a certain concept—logos operating. What happens to the whole process? It just folds, usually. So again, there's dependent arising here. We're going to come back to this.

What happens if I feel guilty—some kind of guilt from my upbringing or from other kinds of teachings I've received in different cultures—and I feel guilty about having a sexual image arise? That's actually interesting, the effect of guilt. Again, the guilt becomes a view, a lens, a way of looking, a part of the way of looking, and there's a concept built into that: this is something I should be guilty of, that I should feel guilty of, that is bad. There's a conceptual framework informing it, shaping a way of looking in the view, and that affects what happens.

Well, guilt's an interesting one, because it could inhibit the movement, the soul-making movement, certainly inhibit the image, so we just shut it off or bring the mind back to the tip of the nose or whatever it is that we're doing, or different so-called spiritual practices, or bring it back to so-called reality or whatever. Or the guilt can—and I think I've talked about this before—guilt can, shame and guilt can also propel something more. They have their place in the mechanism of what propels addiction. Often it's the shame and the seeing of something as bad that somehow creates an energy that's intolerable that propels the whole process. And I just repeat the addiction because of the shame, because the intolerability of something is part of the whole cycle.

I've talked about that before, so I'm not going to dwell on it here, but the question is: if I feel guilty, it's the opposite of trusting the intelligence of the image. What effect does that have on what can or does unfold?

And then there's the whole question too—and we'll come back to this as well—of if there's a lot of energy, a lot of sexual energy or arousal, or sometimes just a lot of agitation anyway, or stress, and then sometimes sexual fantasy or actual orgasm is something the being is just seeking out as a way of seeking to discharge energy. So we'll come back to that, but if that's what's propelling the whole movement, then it will go down a certain line and escalate—one thing leads to another in that way.

So there are many different things that can come into how we're viewing the image at any time, in terms of ideas, subtle ideas—sometimes we're not even conscious of them—or intentions or whatever views, ways of looking. And this all has an impact.

So that's enough for now, but I want to really start to go into this Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, when we can relate to the image in certain ways that allow that, and how it spills over, as I've mentioned, into the self-image, the images of self that are operating, as well as images of other and world, in cosmopoiesis, and other aspects of this organic movement of soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 60

Eros Unfettered (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h21

> *In this profound exploration of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, Rob Burbea examines how authentic eros naturally expands beyond its initial object to transform our entire experiential constellation. When the soul-making process is allowed to flow unimpeded, it simultaneously deepens our perception of the beloved other, reveals the imaginal dimensions of the self, and opens new ways of experiencing the world through cosmopoiesis—the birthing of sacred cosmos.*
>
> *Burbea distinguishes between narrow desire arising from a solidified sense of self (which constitutes clinging) and imaginal eros that emerges from and nourishes our multidimensional, divine nature. Through detailed examples from meditation practice, he demonstrates how erotic images can catalyze profound shifts in perception, revealing the world as inherently erotic and sacred. The teaching explores how eros functions as what Jung called "cosmogonic love"—a force that literally generates new ways of experiencing reality.*
>
> *The talk addresses advanced practitioners working with imaginal meditation while remaining accessible to those exploring the intersection of contemplative practice and the sacred dimensions of desire. Burbea shows how authentic eros opens infinite possibilities for experiencing divinity, moving us beyond both secular and religious dogma into an ever-expanding field of soul-making exploration.*

I know this represents a substantial amount of material with considerable detail. Let me restate the larger trajectory we are following—specifically, the portion of the trajectory we are currently exploring.

We are investigating and opening up the possible manifestations of Eros and its relationship with the imaginal—the full breadth of what this means and can mean, and the ways it can arise. Additionally, we are examining what Eros, when it is truly open, will open for us and reveal to us. This connects with our exploration of what we are calling the soul-making dynamic, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.

I will offer various examples as we progress through this exploration. Some of these are purely intrapsychic, arising perhaps in formal meditation practice. Others relate to our perceptions in the world—of the world, of others, of self, of objects. Some are sexu-

al, some non-sexual, yet all are erotic. In discussing the sexual dimension, part of our objective is to open up the possible manifestations of Eros, to legitimize and widen what can be taken and used validly and powerfully as part of our practice.

We have said that when this soul-making dynamic is allowed—when Eros, Psyche, and Logos are permitted to inseminate each other, to grow, expand, deepen, enrich, and complicate each other—then not only is the erotic object, the beloved other, amplified, extended, deepened, and widened in this way, but the self is transformed as well. This occurs because, as we have established, subject and object, self and other, are always dependently arising together.

Where there is an object, there is a subject. If I am focusing on an image or an imaginal perception of another in my life, there is both the sense of them as other, as beloved other, and also the sense of self. Often we miss this, or we do not allow the sense of the self the same soul-making dynamic, the same movement and expansion and deepening of Eros-Psyche-Logos in relation to the self as we do in relation to the other. We will return to this in terms of diagnostics and things that can go wrong.

We have also established that what dependently arises is not merely this polarity of self and other, subject and object, but rather a fourfold meeting, a fourfold co-constellation of self, other, world in general, and Eros. A particular kind of Eros gives rise to a particular perception of other, of self, and of world at large. These four—self, other, world, and Eros—co-constellate. They are mutually dependent, almost like facets of the same whole structure or constellation, or what we might call a soul-making constellation.

This means that we begin to perceive ourselves imaginally. We begin to see and feel and sense our self as image, perceiving the imaginal dimensions of our self. Moving through our life, we feel that self gradually acquiring more and more dimensions. We are not merely the flatly existing human being that secular modernism would tell us we are. Despite all our interiority—perhaps even the interiority of an unconscious with its repressed contents—there is a sense of being, perhaps, if you like, manifesting many faces, having within us many imaginal figures, being many imaginal figures.

Through imaginal practice and through the erotics of the imaginal, a dimensionality opens up not just of other, but also of self.

For example, one might have an image that one is practicing with, and perhaps this image involves being in a certain relationship with a particular divine figure—this imaginal figure, maybe a tantric deity, maybe some other kind of god or goddess. Perhaps in the image one is being held by them or resting in their lap, somehow receiving as a human being their divine love or being held by that particular divinity.

Right there in the image, you have a constellation of human and divine. The self feels human and as human receives succor or encouragement or nourishment or love, somehow infused imaginally through that divine other, that imaginal figure of divinity. This is actually a very important stage—that human-divine polarity, with self as human and imaginal other as divine.

But I would say that if you remain present with the image long enough, if you open up the awareness, you begin to recognize that the self is also image here in this image. There is imaginal self. Because dimensionality is always part of an image in the way we are using this term, the dimensionality of the self in this image—of being in the lap of the god or goddess—begins to open up, begins to expand. Dimensionality moves toward divinity, so that eventually what happens is you have two divinities present together, the self and the divine other.

This represents another stage, and rather than saying it is better or worse, it is simply different. It is, I would say, the inevitable movement if we allow the soul-making dynamic to move in every direction—toward the self in the image as well as toward the other, the object on which we are usually focusing. This is not a matter of making anything happen, but rather of noticing and simply being with and allowing something that is a natural, organic movement of the soul, of this Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.

There are all kinds of examples here. In the example I gave in the previous talk of the raft and the infusion of black blood from the goddess, I then went outside and felt the power and energy in my body from this black blood she had given me. I became myself a divinity, sensing myself imaginally as a divinity—as this dancing, stomping, powerful, thick-set, muscular god, somehow also in deep connection with nature, receiving that infusion of the blood, that strange divine nectar from nature.

So there's this spreading of the soul-making, spreading of the imaginal, spreading of the erotic, and spreading also in this sense of the locus of divinity, if you like, in the faces of divinity.

The same is true in regard to all this. When we're actually dealing with an actual person who has become for us a theophany—whatever our actual relationship is with them, whether they're a teacher or a guru or a lover or whatever it is—when actually

we have an imaginal perception of a person, we are also imagining ourself in relationship to them. And even if this person isn't yet a divinity for us in that sense, there's not that theophany there, we want to see what the image of self is and what it can be.

So we include the self image, the image of self, in the constellation, in the imaginal erotic constellation, and we include that and we let it fill out. Eventually, ourselves... Ourself becomes a theophany, or plural theophanies. We are perhaps many theophanies.

And we get the sense, slowly, as I said, of the self as well as the other, as well as the beloved other, as well as the object—it could be an inanimate object—being infinite. That we are infinite. And I don't mean here, in this kind of practice, only... I don't only mean we are infinite in the sense that our essence is infinite awareness or infinite love or some of those more universal openings to a universal essence of oneness. So that you can perceive infinite awareness or infinite love being the fabric of the universe, and we are the same thing in essence, so that therefore I'm infinite. I don't just mean that.

I mean also in the infinite possibilities of the possible faces, if you like, who can come through us—what I used to call the vertical spectrum of the imaginal, but I might drop that word "vertical" because it has too many loaded connotations. There's a spectrum of imaginal faces that can manifest, if you like, through another, I can perceive, and through the self, so through myself and through another, and we can get this sense of all that being there as a sort of spectrum of dimensionality that they are, that we are. There's infinite possibilities there in the perceptions of, in this case, of one's own soul, in its particularities. It's not in its universality of just being awareness or love or something like that, but in its particularities, in my personhood, in my particular manifestations.

This also—so we said self, other, world, and eros. They get constellated together. So all this applies, this movement of the soul-making dynamic to involve and include the sense of the world and the sense of eros itself, if the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is allowed, if it's not hindered, if it's not blocked or refused or dismissed where it wants to go. If the soul-making dynamic is allowed to spread naturally, organically, it will start giving dimensionality, giving beauty, depth, all the imaginal richness and eventually even divinity—self, other, world and eros itself.

So when, a few talks ago, I used that term "autoeroticism," and then I said, "Oh, actually, we'll come back to that as a facet of eros," as something to recognize as an aspect of eros, that there was an autoeroticism that was, if you like, part of eros. What I really meant there was that what distinguishes an experience of eros from just an experience of, let's say, metta or metta with imagination—you know, when we imagine the person

that we're giving metta to being happy or whatever—what distinguishes eros from that, and this is something we'll come back to in regards to the distinction between eros and metta, is that one of the things is that eros has this autoeroticism as an aspect to it, meaning that the self is also regarded erotically, is given dimensionality, is attractive in that erotic way that we've been talking about, and not just the self, but also the self's eros.

So whatever image of erotic connection is involved in the imaginal perception of the constellation of self and other, whatever eros that the self is seen imagining to be participating in that connection—whether it's penetration or opening or being penetrated or whatever it is—that eros is also kind of regarded erotically, if you like. In other words, that too has dimensions, has beauty. The eros itself becomes an erotic object. Our own eros becomes an erotic object for us.

So, not just the other, also the self and the images of the self, that comes alive. There's eros towards the self because the self is given dimensionality, even imaginal dimensionality, and also the eros that the self feels also becomes an erotic object. It's given imaginal dimensionality. There's this attraction towards—almost like wanting to taste it, to connect with it, to open to the very eros more. It has beauty, it has dimensionality, it has divinity. So autoeroticism—this soul-making dynamic is spreading in these different directions to, in a way, touch everything.

So in regard to this and the self and the sense of the self or the image of the self that's operating at any time, we can say that a desire is not eros when it arises from and when it is serving the kind of narrow, habitual, and solidified self that's perhaps seeking pleasant sensations or seeking a sense of solidity to solidify itself or seeking to aggrandize itself. That kind of desire is more what we call clinging and craving or greed.

That sense of self, when it's narrow, habitual, solidified self, seeking pleasure, seeking solidity, seeking aggrandizement, self-aggrandizement—that self is sensed as unitary. This is the self, it's the real self, there's one of them, and it's also kind of one-dimensional. It lacks this imaginal dimensionality, this multiplicity of beings, this sense of shading into divinity, of emanating from divinity and all that. It's unitary, one-dimensional. It's also reified. There's a sense of, "I believe in this self." It's not even an intellectual concept. I believe in the reality of this self.

All of that in opposition to an imaginal sense of self that's not unitary, that has this spectrum of the imaginal, it's not one-dimensional because of that very spectrum, and it, as I said, shades into divinity or emanates from divinity or expresses or is a theophany, and it's seen, it's an image, seeing image as image, so it's not reified.

So desire that comes out of this narrow, habitual, solidified self is not eros.

Imaginal desire can be eros, is eros.

The same principle applies to our sense of the other—when that other, the erotic object, is not seen as image, is not recognized to be imaginal, when we're not seeing image as image. When the object is reified, when we really believe in this "real thing," that too gives rise to a desire that becomes greed or craving.

Already, just as an aside, you can hear me moving back and forth between the narrower definition of eros—simply this wanting of connection—and the larger definition, which implies the imaginal, implies seeing image as image. So just keep your ears attuned to that movement.

Now, oftentimes, simply because of what we've been taught and heard so much, we view desire that arises in a particular way. There's desire—perhaps sexual desire, perhaps erotic desire—and yet we automatically view it as if it's a defilement or something bad, and assume it's something the self is doing. Especially if you've heard enough standard Dharma teachings without sufficient differentiation in them, or interpreted them without enough nuance, then desire becomes a movement of the self. It comes from the self. It's the self that desires. If I somehow had no self, I wouldn't desire. Desire comes from the self and desire reinforces the self. We very often automatically assume this.

Perhaps we can slow down a little and have a look, sense into this desire and let it amplify, let it fill out imaginal space with mindfulness, with sensitivity to the resonances, with the energy body and all that. Because sometimes what happens, if we have this larger perspective on what a human being is, is that the desire arises from the imaginal figure—from, if you like, the divinity, from the deity. Whose is this desire? Is it just this narrow, flat, unitary self desiring? Or is it actually, as William Blake said, a divine influx?

Where is it coming from? Whose is it? Maybe this desire is from Dionysus, or some other imaginal figure that's more personal, less archetypal. But then what happens? This desire arises. I automatically assume something about it—it's from the self, it's a defilement. And maybe that assumption locks into place a certain view which, as always, shapes the perception, shapes what unfolds. Maybe that desire actually becomes craving or greed or clinging in the narrow sense through the very view itself.

Do you understand? This can only be explored by experimenting. We can only explore this by experimenting—what happens if I grant something another possibility? If I enter into another way of looking, what happens? I'm not saying it's easy, and it does,

maybe not for everyone, but probably for most people, take considerable practice. It requires certain meditative skills and capacities and arts to be developed. But if I experiment, what do I see? What do I uncover? What gets opened up?

So this is the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, this weave of soul-making, the way the tree of soul grows in different directions organically, the way fire leaps and catches as it spreads, the way it ignites and sparks other things that it takes hold of.

And one of these directions is the world itself—self, other, world. We've been calling this cosmopoiesis, and we've touched on it in other talks and retreats. I could give many, countless examples here. The possibilities, again, are infinite.

So again, I might give some examples that emerge specifically from a kind of sexual eros that's working in the imaginal—just to open up that possibility where we can sometimes be a little shy, a little doubtful. And of course, I'm aware of how, as I said earlier, if someone were to simply pick up a talk at this point and listen, they might wonder how on earth we arrived here. But I really hope you can see how it fits very organically—we're gradually opening certain doors and underpinning them with understandings and meditative skills that make them truly fruitful and beautiful and important.

Sometimes, in an imaginal constellation like what I referred to before, we perceive a kind of imbalance. We feel very human while the other, the imaginal other, is not human but divine, and there's an imbalance there. In a way, we might feel somehow lesser. This pulls on all kinds of psychological structures, and we'll touch on this. But in a way, sometimes it's just one way of looking at it.

It's just the eros-psyche-logos dynamic has not yet opened up enough. It wants to move in every direction—towards the self as well as towards the other—but it simply hasn't flowed as fully in one direction before flowing equally in the other. Or perhaps it's not being allowed to flow there. We'll return to this.

Sometimes we perceive this same imbalance in an actual relationship in our lives, human to human. Again, there's some kind of perceiving of the other with all their imaginal depth and beauty, perhaps even divinity, and we somehow feel less than, or at a certain stage we feel wanting in some way. This is relatively common.

Perhaps we feel we are in love with this person, or with this imagined figure, or with this person imaginatively imbued. We can feel that they love us, but they're not in love with us. There's a dimension missing—the dimensions are not equal. Or sometimes we

experience that very normal human desire to see and hear from the other that we are desired deeply, and that includes sexually. We want to know that we are desired sexually.

Let me give an example. This dynamic was at play in my own practice, and I said, "Okay, so there's this imbalance right now." Just giving myself—actually helped by the imaginal figure—the permission to feel and allow this wanting. I want her. In this case there was the male-female in the image, along biological gender lines, and I want her. I want to see and hear that she wants me, that she wants to let me in. That means let me in heart and soul and physically as well. That she wants to open her body to me erotically, sexually.

The first thing was simply being encouraged by the imaginal figure that it's really okay to feel that and to allow that feeling. That encouragement and allowing myself to do that actually liberated a wealth of images. The whole territory became very fecund imaginally, with many images arising quite quickly.

Interestingly, I was traveling to teach somewhere when all this was happening. I was sitting on the train during quite a long journey, working with these images—on the train, going to the station, and so on and off in that way.

There was a liberation of all these images from the allowing, from feeling into that slightly uncomfortable feeling but actually permitting it. Liberation of images, and then at some point, tremendous energy infused my whole body, the energy body. The image was of roaring, like a lion roars, and bellowing fire, like a dragon bellows fire. There was enormous energy and power in this. Bellowing fire—and in fact, I became flame. I became a being of flames. A great deal of energy and power was felt.

But still, regarding the original imaginal sense of the situation, despite all this energy and power, I realized I still needed to be granted admission. She still needed to let me in, still needed to say to me, "I want you inside me, I want to let you in." This power was not the kind that would force that. In any situation, you cannot force someone to want you that way, to want to let you in heart and soul and body.

So there was this fascinating mixture: tremendous power that I felt, roaring and bellowing fire with enormous energy in the body, at the same time as recognizing that no matter how powerful that felt, there was also this dependency. I was still, in the image, dependent on her—on this imaginal figure—communicating to me, granting me admission.

There was this double constellation existing: the power along with the tremendous sense of dependency at the same time, these almost opposites coalescing, mixing, co-constellating.

And as I tuned in to the imaginal figure, there was the sense, the recognition, that she did grant me admission, she did want me that way, in those ways.

All this was happening simultaneously—the power, the recognition of dependency, and as I tuned into her image more, the recognition that she did grant me that and she did want me.

What happened then was a cosmopoiesis, in the sense that the flame that I was, I found myself in a world of flames. This was an extremely powerful perception, very subtle. And this was happening on the train, so I was still aware of who was sitting next to me and opposite me, what was outside the window. But at the same time, there was this level of perception—subtle but very powerful—of a world of flames.

This was not a hell realm at all, not the hell realms of burning. It felt very wondrous, very beautiful.

Each thing, in a way, was a flame. A kind of essence of each thing was a flame, and fire, flame, is eros. So each thing was felt to be expressing its own eros, as flame, as fire. And sensing into that, each thing, each being, and the world as a whole—its eros, its desire, was that it wanted me to love it. The eros that I was sensing into there was each thing, each being, and the world as a whole desired, wanted me to love it.

The world, this world of flames, or the world that I now saw—as it was the same world—was erotic in essence. Including the sexual, but not necessarily just the sexual at all. Each thing, each being, and the world as a whole wanted me to love it. And in a way, recognizing that as human beings, this is this kind of altered mystical perception. We can feel that call, not just from the beings, the animate beings of the world, but from the so-called inanimate nature and the things of the world.

And so in myself, I felt the desire to respond to this wanting in things, this wanting that things were expressing. And I felt that very physically. I felt it in my tongue, actually, predominantly in my tongue, in my mouth, in my genitals, in my hands—my whole body was involved in a sense. And as I gave very sensitive, delicate attention to this, opening and working with it over time, I also felt that the eros I was feeling was the eros of the divine.

In other words, this was the gods, if you like, or Buddha nature's desire to penetrate—because I felt it as a kind of wanting to penetrate all things. This is very, again, sexual there. So the movement there was more, quote, masculine, as opposed to the movement of opening and receiving, which could have been both or either. So this is different. The divine's desire to penetrate all things, to sexually penetrate all things.

What does this mean? It's an imaginal perception. It's not the same as the divine desire pervading all things with its essence, its oneness of beingness or love or awareness. There's something much more particular there. All the wanting here—the wanting that belonged to things, their wanting to be loved, and the wanting that was coming through me to respond to that, to penetrate—all was seen or evolved through the imaginal process to have divine dimensions.

I'm reminded of somewhere Thomas Aquinas, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "All beauty yearns to be seen." All beauty yearns to be seen. And I don't know enough about him or what he meant by that, but here's a sense of opening to a mystical or imaginal perception, very particular, where each thing, each being and the world wants its beauty to be seen, to be celebrated, to be loved, to have that erotic connection and in a way for that to penetrate it. So very particular kinds of cosmopoiesis opening there.

Okay, so another example. Sometimes we might be with a pure, so-called intrapsychic image, or actually someone we are in a certain relationship to. And as I said before, eros gives rise to, actually supports and nourishes and increases the way we love people, in the ways that we love the beloved other. An increase also it supports—an increase of the ways and the depths and the breaths in which we appreciate, in which we sense and see and feel their beauties, plural, and their divinity. So eros opens all this because of all of what we've been talking about, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

So that in relation to this, let's say, person in one's life where we have this kind of relationship, the eros there, if it's allowed, can actually start to... I love your body. But it's actually what... That also begins to have a fullness. I love your bones. I love your blood. I love your veins. I love your kidneys. It's got this whole other visceral dimension. And eventually... I love all your matter. I love all the matter that is you, so to speak. And so the eros is, if you like, moving there to the realm of matter.

And it can do this in all kinds of ways. So what can happen there, the way the soulmaking infuses and spills over into the perception of matter—there's so many possibilities. But in this case, it could then be that one feels that eros, opens up that relationship with the matter of the beloved other. And then that spreads into the world again. I'm just talking about cosmopoiesis here.

But the perception of that matter is not matter as a quantum physicist would conceive it. It's not even divine as a sort of emanation of light—it's matter just as commonly experienced, as we tend to think of this sort of stuff that we don't really think much about or ponder. We just bump into it and assume what every modernist assumes. That's our experience of it. So a love for all matter that way. And again, this kind of thing, if it opens up, you might check...

It's often easier for this cosmopoiesis, this love of matter, to spread to other living matter—things in nature, animals and trees and grass and whatever. But I remember experiencing this and actually having some bones in front of where I was meditating. And you could see how it spread—not quite so easily as it did to living matter, but it spread almost as easily to the bones, because they were once living, they were organic. And then a little more difficult to spread, but still possible, to plastic things that were around.

So it spreads to all matter, but not in a way that's linked with or dependent on them providing me with pleasant vedanā. It might be easier with that at first, but it doesn't have to be linked with that at all, or even being conventionally beautiful. Because the whole thing started—we don't usually think of veins and livers as beautiful in that sense. But there was this loving love for all matter, independent of whether it was conventionally beautiful or whether it was providing me with pleasant vedanā.

At other times, this love and appreciation for the body of another, or just the cosmopoiesis that comes in—sorry, the sense of the imaginal other—might spread to a cosmopoiesis that's much more ethereal in its dimensions. So many possibilities here, but for example, one might perceive the world around one—the trees, the grass, whatever it is, the buildings—and have the perception that it's as if light or lights are shining through and into this world of matter, or that this matter and this world is somehow a reflection or a refraction of the light of higher levels, of other worlds, if you like, but in a way that doesn't really diminish this world as somehow less than or inferior or not valuable—this world and these appearances of everyday—but rather giving them beauty, giving them other dimensions of sacredness through the light that comes through them, comes to them and through them. So all kinds of possibilities.

And again, one might be working with an erotic image of a beloved other, and one might have this sort of wider sense of sexual eros pervading the image, constellating the image, and maybe we have, like we've alluded to already, the whole body is penetrated. And independent of whether you're biologically male or female, whatever, the whole body can be penetrated by the imaginal other or penetrate the imaginal other.

The whole body, the whole being is somehow entered, or one can be devoured by the deity or by the god. So all one's flesh and bones, imaginal flesh and bones, is devoured, or one devours this imaginal figure—all these possibilities and permutations.

And again, they can give rise, if we dwell in the meditation with these kind of things and work with them, as I said, sensitively and with the mindfulness there, then they can spread sometimes into a cosmopoiesis. And it might be, for instance, the cosmos is mystically devouring me, it's eating me. And this might sound to someone like, "Oh, that's terrible," but actually can feel really wonderful, and the sense of participating in some kind of mystical dimension of the being, or process of the cosmos.

We can say, you know, this physical body will dissolve eventually and have to, in Buddhist language, give my aggregates back to the universe. This is something different. There's a kind of imaginal, mystical perception that the cosmos is eternally eating me, mystically eating me, and I'm participating in something there at some mystical level of being. Or as I said, the cosmopoiesis might be that I somehow am devouring the cosmos.

What does this mean? Because again, in some ways I do devour at least part of the cosmos—organically and in ideas. So that's all true. It's giving this other dimension, expanding those kinds of ideas into other, more mystical, more hard to articulate dimensions. And it might be that it moves back and forth between being devoured and devouring the cosmos, being devoured by the cosmos and devouring the cosmos—maybe even back and forth very quickly, maybe even in some completely illogical way, simultaneously, the two are happening. The cosmos is devouring me, and I am devouring the cosmos. Of course, again, at a material level, we can see there's a certain truth in that.

There are so many possibilities here. So I just want to really—partly what I'm wanting to do is just open up the sense of just how much is possible.

One more: I was in meditation and an imaginal figure—beautiful—she came and kissed my heart and my torso gently, and just feeling the resonances of that. In this case, actually, it did progress to more sexual imagery. But again, there it stayed at a very specific sexual image, and really receiving from her in the image and dwelling with that and feeling it and receiving, through that sexual interaction and the sexual love there, so much tenderness. What this imaginal figure was imbuing—her sexual love with so much tenderness—and she wanted, it seemed as I fell into it, she wanted out of love, out of pure love, to give me pleasure.

When working with that in the meditation, this is what I tuned into—her love and this wanting to give me pleasure. This becomes a kind of wavelength or dimension of the image, very specific and subtle, the tuning there. And I needed, again, to feel the whole energy body and open to the pleasure there. So this is—well, actually it's not that hard to do, but it takes the kind of skills that we've been talking about developing. But it's very specific, very subtle tuning, whole energy body involved, and the ability to open to that.

And out of that—and you probably are not surprised at this point—samādhi came. So I had this possibility, kind of fork in the road there. You can go just into some kind of jhāna there, or the samādhi, and leave the image behind, or stay with the image and enjoy the pleasure of the samādhi mixed, or let it spread a little bit. And it was the third one that I chose, because what happened was there was a sense of just dipping into the samādhi a bit, and then the sense of a heavenly realm opening up.

Actually, rather, this world that I was in, the room that I was in, became a heavenly realm infused with divine eros. The sense was that the world was transubstantiated—transformed into a heavenly realm infused with divine eros.

Even as I say it now, part of the mind wonders: what does that mean? Even then, part of the mind asked this question. In some ways, it was a vague sense. In other ways, it was extremely precise and very subtle. But it was a sense. It was palpable—an imaginal perception of this world, this room, and the surroundings outside.

In this cosmopoiesis, eros was woven into the cosmos. The cosmos was felt, seen to be a garden of eros, a garden of delight. And with all that, of course, eros was right. There was something fundamentally, profoundly right about eros. It has its rightful, beautiful, divine place in the scheme of things—in the cosmos, actually permeating the cosmos. In that imaginal perception that opened up, eros is divine.

All this brought tremendous delight and a sense of beauty, inner and outer, and much joy. The sense was of profound gift—that all of this was gift. The eros was gift, and the cosmos was gift. The whole cosmos was experienced in such a beautiful way as gift, as erotic gift.

You can see how that cosmopoiesis mirrors, or rather has its seeds in, the initial image. Because I had grown accustomed to some of this before and was playing with it, I experimented as I opened my eyes and moved around with the equality of perception—testing whether it applied just as easily to plastic or the sound of a plane overhead, to things unpleasant or man-made, not necessarily aesthetically pleasing artifacts or functional things, as it did to the beautiful trees and sky.

There's quite a bit more to this. What I noticed was that at a certain stage of this cosmopoetic perception opening, there was a stage where I felt that it was the divine purpose of the cosmos to express eros to me—to love me and give me delight. I was, if you like, a graced recipient of divine eros.

At the very same time, I knew it wasn't just me. It applied to everyone else. It was simply a matter of people opening to that perception. I was not in any way singled out or had any sense of being special or different than other people. But there was this sense—and again, it doesn't make rational sense, and it wasn't meant to. This was image as image, seeing image as image, holding it, holding these perceptions so that we know image as image. We're not reifying them, not clunking down on them as some sort of truth. Yet we're still holding them so that they can have tremendous power. It's neither dismissing nor grabbing at and reifying.

That was just a stage, because eventually it moved to a more general sense of the cosmos being infused with and expressing eros. So the cosmos is erotic. And with all this, there was a sense of dimensionality to the cosmos.

Later, I think it was the same day—I was on retreat at the time—I sat down to meditate. There was again tremendous power and expansion, the energy body really expanding and feeling very imbued with energy and power. Following that, letting it constellate an image of the self, of the energy body, it felt like I had become a wrathful deity—if you know those Tibetan images of Yamantaka and many others. A wrathful deity or a divine beast, a bestial deity.

There was roaring and waves of energy passing through the imaginal body. I wasn't actually roaring—no one would have heard anything. But this was the imaginal sense, and it felt very palpable and strong in the physical body. It felt very, very good, what was going on there with the energy body and the imaginal body.

Then, coming back to the imaginal figure I was working with earlier, this divine beast, wrathful deity, with a subtle gesture in the image, claimed her. It made clear, through a certain gesture of the body, its erotic claim on her: "You are mine."

There was desire there—my desire, my sexual and erotic desire. But it also seemed, again, like tuning in and noticing what's happening with the image...

What else is in the image?

So there was a desire, yes, but also the sense that this claiming, this my claiming of this, of her, of this imaginal figure, was, so to speak, already happening. So it's a desire and an act to do something, and it expresses desire, but this claiming... and this desire is already happening.

It's not so much what I or this divine beast wants, but more that it's already flowing from me, from this imaginal self. The divine beast is flowing to her eternally, or rather timelessly, or as Henri Corbin used to say, in hierophantic time, in sacred time. There's a time that doesn't progress. It's almost like discrete, timeless moments or images. So it's already flowing, this movement of claiming.

As I fell into and got the sense of what was actually pregnant in this image, then a dimension of the image reveals itself, which is this hierophantic dimension we've touched on before. The desire there was to give her pleasure. So again, the desire then mirrors her wanting to give me pleasure before, and now it's me desiring to give her pleasure. And I could see that the imaginal figure, she enjoys being claimed. She enjoys me gesturing in a way of communicating: you are mine.

So again, all this could sound like it's ego or this or that. Far, far from it. There's something so light and so beautiful and sacred flowing through it. It feels very good in the body. And again, the body becomes flames that come and go, that moved back and forth, and again I went outside.

And again, the cosmos experienced as erotic. I'm in a heavenly realm where the cosmos is by nature, in its essence, at one dimension, erotic. It's an erotic cosmos. But in this case, I was not so much the recipient. So in the cosmopoetic perception of self and the world or the cosmos, I was not so much the recipient. Rather, it was my role—the role of this imaginal self or the imaginal role of self—my role and my ability to let Eros flow through me, to flow from me to others, to create beauty in that way and to give delight and to give pleasure through that.

And again, not that that was unique to me. It was clear to me that's everyone's role and ability. But what's unique is the ways in which each of us do that. So again, you can see how the imaginal self interfaces or spills over, shades over into the lived, actually physically manifested self. Because I could say that about my life, and I'm sure everyone could say that about their life. But the perception of that gets a whole other dimensionality and beauty to it through the imaginal dimension of that opening up. It gets this profundity, breadth, richness, complication, sacredness to it.

I think later, still the same day or the next day, I can't remember, but the same couple in the imaginal meditation and really focusing then on our love—not so much her giving me pleasure out of love or me desiring to give her pleasure or claim her out of love, but our love, the two of us in a kind of mutual dance of love, of eros, of delight, if you like. And when I looked around me then, the cosmos after that is again infused with Eros. And our dance, our loving is, if you like, mirroring or echoing or infused with the divine cosmic Eros.

And this is something that can happen between two people, two actual people in their relationship, if they allow the soul-making dynamic to expand the sense of what's happening in actual relationship. But you can see in this little three-part imaginal practice I've just described: when the focus was more on her, on the imaginal figure's actions and qualities, then I felt the self to be the recipient of that in the cosmic perception, reflecting the actual imaginal perception in the narrower image. And when I lost the cosmopoetic perception, I could regain it by focusing on that aspect of the original image—of her wanting to communicate love to me through the sexual, through the erotic. Focusing on that in the image brought back the cosmopoiesis, that particular cosmopoiesis of receiving cosmic love, divine love.

In the second little part there, the focus was on myself and the power and the energy and the divine beast, giving her pleasure again with the eros and the love. And then the cosmopoiesis led to a sense of that in its cosmic place, of myself as a channel, if you like, for the divine's giving or outpouring through me—that's what characterized the cosmopoiesis. And again, if I lost it, I could focus back on that initial image and the cosmopoiesis comes back.

And in the last part, when it's more mutual, it's like the us, the our—our back and forth and flow of love together. Then again, the cosmopoiesis there was reflecting that kind of balance, that kind of equality, if you like.

So we can begin to see the potential here of what it can open up in perception if we allow eros to have and inseminate fully the whole dynamic structure of the eros-psyche-logos and that whole movement, the whole soul-making movement.

And partly, again, I'm using these particular examples, sexual examples. Some of them, you know—I'm aware, devouring and all this—it sounds quite dark and claiming, and some people would be cautious for different reasons around that. But I really want to say, first of all, as I said in the other talk, there's a whole range here, and a lot of the even sexual erotic is not dark at all. It's very, very light and gentle or whatever. So there's a whole range.

But yes, not just of so-called darkness, but also of what might be more straightforward or normal or anatomically plausible, ranging all the way to really quite far-out imagery and experiences. So the entire range is open to us. Within that, we learn to trust if something seems darker or stranger.

What's happening here is not disrespectful to the imaginal figure, or even if the imaginal figure is actually another person with whom you have that kind of relationship. It's not disrespectful. It's not lacking in love. You can notice this. You can feel it. Is it really disrespectful? Don't buy the first thing the mind tells you. Is it really lacking in love? Is it really an objectification of that other person?

To me, objectification means I've somehow shrunk this person down to not see the totality of their being. But have a look if this comes up. Dare to have a look. Is it that? Is it lacking in respect, in love? Is it an objectification? No. You'll see that most often this involves a totality. Respect and love are there. Neither is it out of control, nor does it increase defilement. You can feel in all of this, even in what seems very dark, there's a kind of sacredness and holiness that are palpable.

So again, as I said, the whole movement with eros is that it opens up the range of sacrednesses that we can feel and know about, experience for ourselves firsthand, woven into the cosmos, woven into our being and that of others, in ways that make a difference to our life—a profound difference.

Just to recap a little: the soul-making dynamic, the expansion, fertilization, insemination, deepening, enriching, and widening of eros, psyche, and logos—this mutual movement—needs to flow, or will flow if unimpeded, in all these different directions. It will flow not just toward the beloved other, the object, the imaginal erotic object, but also back toward the self and the imaginal self, amplifying that. And also toward the sense of eros itself.

We have this phrase, "falling in love." Why are we falling in love? Or rather, what does it mean? I wonder where that expression came from. There's something uncontrollable about falling. It may be—I don't know, but one way of looking at it—that what's happening in the expansion of the sense of the other and the expansion of the sense of the self and of eros itself, even of the world, is that the soul-making dynamic moves in all these directions and expands them all, but it doesn't have a limit. The infinite pothos will just keep expanding this potentially.

Maybe falling in love is what we're feeling—a kind of open-ended movement where we're not even sure who we are anymore because we're being opened into a kind of space that keeps opening. The other too. Perhaps our sense of love itself, of eros, is also

open. It doesn't seem to be landing anywhere, and it's not stopping anywhere, because the soul-making, the erotic dynamic just keeps opening. That feeling has this bottomless, limitless quality to it. Maybe—I don't know—maybe that's part of what happens when we say "I'm falling in love with you."

But there's another dimension here, which may or may not happen. Actually, all of this may or may not happen in actual life, as we come back to what blocks this kind of infinite and comprehensive, potentially infinite, potentially comprehensive movement of the soul-making dynamic.

Here, as I've said several times now, it's possible that the sense of eros itself is seen and felt erotically and given imaginal dimensions, so that eventually we feel something like a divinity of eros, or divine eros that infuses the cosmos. My eros, this eros that I feel in me, coming from me, is divine. Or it mirrors the divine eros, or it comes from the divinity—the Buddha nature, God, whatever you want to call it, the archetypes. All this can be there.

As I said, recapping: there's an infinity of possibilities. If the soul-making dynamic is not hindered or blocked in any of its potential directions, movements, and unfoldings, then there are infinite possibilities with respect to the self—the sense of the self, the image of the self, the conception of the self—with respect to the other, the beloved other, of course, with respect to the world, and with respect to eros itself.

That fourfold co-constellated aspect: self, other, world, eros. Each of them has infinite possibilities if the soul-making dynamic is allowed its natural expansion, deepening, movement, fertilization. The image and the idea of each of these—self, other, world, and eros—the image and idea, the psyche and the logos of each of these and all of these, is expanded. My eros is mirroring the divine eros.

That's both an image, it's an imaginal sense, and it's an idea, a logos. So you can see how in regard to each of these, if eros gets going, if the erotic movement gets going, psyche and logos, they touch everything. And everything involved in that constellation - self, other, world, eros - but also the notion of psyche itself, the notion of what the soul is and what an image is, gets also expanded, enriched, deepened, amplified. And even the image and the idea of ideas. In other words, the psyche and the logos of logos.

So, for example, we can feel, we can sense, as this whole soul-making movement happens, that our mind is, through image and through idea, through images and through ideas, participating in the divine mind, the divine logos, if you like. So again,

this is an image, but it's also an idea, isn't it? Or that what comes to us through image or through ideas, through creative ideas, through concepts, is a manifestation of the world soul, of the soul-making process of the cosmos.

So these are both images and ideas, but they're not abstract ideas. Again, we're entertaining them, we're feeling them, we're plugging into them, if you like, in ways that really galvanize and catalyze and have a tremendous effect on the being, on the perception, on the ways of looking, on the energy body, on the soulfulness.

So when we talk about logos, we don't mean, as I said earlier, something abstract. We mean an idea that finds its way into the way of looking, that is imbuing the way of looking. And because the whole being is involved - the body, the soul, the perception, the intellect - these ideas are not abstract. But the very idea of ideas, the very, if you like, psyche and logos of logos, the image and idea of image and idea and soul and mind starts to also get amplified, enriched, deepened, given dimensionality.

So the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, will also expand, complicate, deepen, widen the definitions we have of eros, of psyche or soul, and also of logos, of mind.

And in all this, in describing cosmopoiesis, we might start with eros in relation to an imaginal figure, but if we work with it, if we allow it, actually it brings an erotic relationship with nature. So again, the eros spreads, so the imaginal spreads to nature in the cosmopoiesis. But there's also wrapped up in that, because all these things are interconnected - where there's eros there's psyche, where there's image there's eros, where there's image there's eros.

And we start to feel, when we have - as that erotic relationship with nature starts to get supported and opened and nourished and ignited - then the eros and the love and reverence that are part of that in relation to nature and the things of nature, animals and trees and all that, quite a lot begins to open up in terms of our perceptions of nature.

So we might - we tend to have in our modernist cultures maybe that only human beings have intelligence, some animals have a very limited intelligence, but it stops at animals. But maybe through this erotic relationship with nature, we begin to perceive, in the cosmopoiesis, we begin to perceive other kinds of, let's call it intelligence, other kinds of knowing. What is the intelligence of a tree? And I don't just mean the biochemical intelligence of the way it works and photosynthesis and all that, how clever, or the intelligence of evolution. What's the intelligence of a tree? What's the communication of a tree or stones?

So something happens in the erotic movement beginning to infuse our relationship with nature. Something happens. We perceive other kinds of intelligence. I'm not going to say much about that right now.

Also open up for us in that other ways of knowing. Also in terms of intelligence opening up. So our whole being is involved in what intelligence means. My ovaries know. There's an intelligence in my ovaries. Or in the image, the tongue is connecting with maybe certain body parts of an image of another or something, and there's certain communication through the tongue, a certain information, if you like, that's being transmitted and received by the tongue.

The whole body is involved in the imaginal process and in the erotic process. More and more so. We'll come back to this. Sometimes we'll say your three centers need to be involved: your belly, your heart, and your head. And we'll come back to that. But in a way, your belly means your body and certainly your sexual organs and that whole sexual dimension of your body and the energy. And your heart center, meaning your emotionality and your affect and your love and whatever other emotions are going there, and also your head.

We talked about logos and the importance of that. Sometimes the shorthand is: all your three centers need to be involved. But actually it's the whole being. Every dimension of our being, every dimension of the mind, every dimension of the soul, of the heart, and of the body opens up in ways that we might not expect, just because that's what the soul-making dynamic does. That's what the psyche-logos dynamic does as it expands and fertilizes more and more.

In a nutshell, eros, as I said, supports, opens, ignites, spreads, deepens, widens our sense - senses, plural - of sacredness in all domains, in all kinds of areas, in all perceptions, and in all kinds of particularities that we wouldn't even have maybe noticed before. And the kinds of sacredness are, if you like, also co-constellated. So the kind of sense of divinity is co-constellated with that other four-part co-constellation: self, other, world, eros.

It's also co-constellated with self—with the sense of self, of other, of world, of eros. Even the sense of no divinity, of a flat universe, is still a kind of constellation. When we have that sense of no divinity, there's a certain kind of sense of self that emerges—because only a certain amount is allowed—a certain kind of perception and idea of the other, a certain kind of perception and idea of the world, and a certain kind of perception and idea of any eros or desire that might arise.

So these five are actually co-constellated together.

Let me finish with something that will seed what we'll explore further. Jung wrote in his memoirs: "We are in the deepest sense the victims and instruments of cosmogonic love." Cosmogon—he said in another place, "Eros is a cosmogonos." That's a fancy Greek word. Cosmogonos means something that generates—gonos, to generate, like gonad. It's something that gives rise to the cosmos.

You find these myths where Eros or something like it gives rise to the cosmos. But we can see this in the phenomenology of our actual experience: eros opens up, it gives birth to the world, it gives birth to the sense of the self—or different senses of self, other, world, and eros—and to cosmopoiesis, and also to divinity. So eros opens, brings with it, or rather puts into motion, a cosmos-birthing process. Actually, the birthing of many cosmoses, if you like, because there's this infinity there.

Seeing our eros as divine—as I said, as gods, as divinities, as the Buddha-nature's eros manifesting through us—is a certain view of divinity, and of eros. And you can see how the self and the world is constellated according to that. All of this co-constellates within the soul-making dynamics.

What this means is that the kinds of divinity we are able to open to as perceptions, as actual experiences, are also infinite. Because that five-point co-constellation—self, other, world, eros, divinity—is infinite in its potential, since the eros-psyche-logos dynamic is infinite in its potential.

So the kinds of divinity are endless. The kinds of experiences of divinity, of perceptions, of senses of divinity are actually endless. I'm just throwing this out now—we're going to return to it, though it might seem vague. The perceptions and the conceptions of divinity are absolutely, potentially infinite and varied.

And that takes us out of the whole realm of dogma—either secular dogma or religious dogma. The whole field, including the exploration of what divinity might mean, becomes infinite in its potential. It's an infinitely large and expanding playground for us, for soul-making.

We'll come back to that. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 61

Eros Unfettered (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 59 min

> *In this third part of his series on eros and soul-making, Rob Burbea examines what's necessary for the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic to unfold freely. He explores how certain ways of looking can either support or stifle soul-making - from reductive materialism that flattens experience to one dimension, to spiritual frameworks that allow infinite depth and mystery in the beloved other.*
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> *Burbea demonstrates how logos (conceptual frameworks) must remain flexible to fuel the soul-making process. When ideas become too rigid or limited - whether through psychological reductionism, materialist views, or fixed images of relationship and sexuality - they block eros from its natural movement toward 'more.' He examines how this dynamic plays out in intimate relationships, spiritual practice, and even difficulties like pornography addiction, showing how limited dimensionality constrains eros to horizontal seeking rather than vertical depth.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that concepts naturally limit and define, but problems arise when these limits become inflexible walls that prevent the ongoing expansion of soul-making. Through practical examples, Burbea shows how even personal difficulties can become imaginal and re-enchanted when held within conceptual frameworks that allow for mystery, dimensionality, and divine necessity.*

Let's look a little more at various aspects of what's involved in the movement of soul-making - what's necessary for the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic to unfold and have its range and process. And correspondingly, how that movement and expansion and deepening and widening can be stifled or blocked or diverted, how the movement of Eros can be diverted.

Again, why so much? Why are we circling around this, weaving in and out of this whole business about the soul-making dynamic and the idea of Eros-Psyche-Logos being stimulated by Eros? We're circling because the ideas are unfamiliar - they're new ideas. They are not in circulation in the culture, certainly not in Dharma culture, nor in the wider culture either. Ideas that are new, that are unfamiliar, that are not in circulation, need repeating. For us, we need to chew on them, to digest them, to incorporate them, to assimilate them, to be able to use them, to actually have them be powerful.

So they need that circling, they need the circulation of our reflection in our lives. Not just abstract intellectual reflection - there's a level of that - but actually reflection in our lives, so we actually use them, implement them, bring them to bear on our experience in life, in relationship, on the meditation cushion, in relationship with everything, with nature, with whatever we love.

I believe, and I hope at least, that trying to forge a conceptual framework that is supportive is actually really in the service of opening up what the path can be, opening up new territories - beautiful territories, important territories. All that is served by having a powerful conceptual framework as part of the process.

When we talked about the small, loose definition, beginning provisional definition of Eros, we said it was a desire to connect, to touch, to contact more. We can very easily assume that there's a limit implicit in touching. Once you've touched, you've touched. You can touch for longer, but once you've touched, you've touched. Once you've touched a whole body or a whole object, you've touched it. Once you've connected, you've connected. Once you contact, you've contacted. So we can easily assume that there's a limit implicit in that.

But actually, what we're saying now is that it's open-ended. So the words touch, connect, contact, certainly words like penetrate, is open and there's no limit to that penetration necessarily at all. Or open or receive the beloved other. Open to and receive the beloved other. There's no limit to the opening and to the receiving or know them - or want to know them more, know this more, this beloved object, this beloved other. There's no limit to the penetration, the depth of penetration, the scope and depth of opening and receiving and knowing.

Using those words, but not implying a limit, because we're saying that in the process of Eros stimulating and igniting the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic - the mutual expansion, mutual fertilization - the sense of self, the imaginal self and the imaginal other grow. They expand, they get deeper, they get richer, more complicated, potentially at least. Because both the subject who opens and receives and the object or the other, the beloved other, the erotic object that is penetrated or opened to - both the subject and the self and the other grow potentially - there's potentially no limit to how much penetration or this process of penetration, of opening, receiving, knowing, touching, connecting, contacting.

If we approach it from the other angle, we could say that Eros, from what we've said so far, stimulates Psyche and Logos, the imaginal and the idea, or the concepts involved in the sense of the other, of the beloved other, and also self and all that. Looking at it

from the other angle, just as important and valid, we could say that Psyche and Logos, image and idea, need to allow Eros' further penetration and opening. They need to allow that "more" aspect of Eros.

Whatever image we have of this erotic object or the other, whatever idea, that image and idea need to allow more penetration, more opening. They need to allow that movement of Eros. Wherever it's at in that process, it needs to have something that allows more. If it doesn't need it right now, sooner or later it will need it.

What this implies, to state it again, is that the way of looking at images and the way of looking at perceptions is significant, because either it supports Psyche and Logos to allow that further penetration, further opening that Eros wants, or it doesn't.

Actually, to state again, the way we are using the word "image" already includes a way of looking at it that sees it as imaginal. So that is supportive to a certain extent or to a certain level. But still that might need to grow.

If we step back a little and just look at this whole notion of ways of looking in relation to soul-making, we can see that certain ways of looking not just limit soul-making, but actually dampen it. They put out the fire of soul-making, cause that stream to dry up. In a more watery image, they dissipate the imaginal or dismiss it or reduce it. They put out the fire of Eros. Certain ways of looking will do that.

Among those ways of looking that kill soul-making, some of them reduce clinging and some of them actually increase clinging. But we can differentiate three broad directions or kinds of ways of looking, or views. There is what we might call a group of views that are realist or flatly humanistic. Their view of something that arises might be, for example, that this is a result of or this is representing something that happened in my childhood, representing a faculty of my mind, a component - reducing it in those ways, or even more, this is just a result of random neuronal firings.

So there's a way that the human being is reduced to a sort of flat, modernist, humanist version of what a human being is. And that will not support soul-making. That kind of view, in the realist, flatly humanist perspective, will not support soul-making.

A second group of ways of looking consists of approaches that actually fabricate less, that lead to less fabrication than the usual state of consciousness. This could be just a little less fabrication. What we usually call mindfulness in the traditional sense of the word is, relatively speaking, a degree, a modicum of less fabrication than usual—or bare attention, or what have you. And then there are other ways of looking which actually fabricate much less than the usual state of consciousness, much less than bare attention or mindfulness. We've touched on those before. They can take you into jhanas

or deep states of oneness and eventually even the transcending of all perception and all conventional experience, knowing and opening to the unfabricated, to non-fabrication. So there's a group of ways of looking that actually decrease fabrication—the second group.

And the third group we could call ways of looking that are soul-making—the soul-making perspectives—where there isn't this reduction going on. We are not reducing the image or the imaginal perception of something. Neither are we dissolving it by fabricating perception less. So we're not blurring out into a kind of oneness of white light or deep unfabrication or something like that, nor are we just reducing this thing in some kind of psychological explanation or biological explanation or whatever it is.

So three groups of ways of looking. Actually—and we'll return to this because it's not that simple—the relation to this process of unfabrication, our relationship to it and our conceptual framework of what's happening as we engage ways of looking that fabricate less, can actually become soul-making through the relationship with that and through the ideas we have of it. We will return to that, but just to say it's not so simple, the divisions between these three ways of looking. But broadly speaking, we can delineate three.

When there is—or when there has come about in one way or another—in the perception of an other, a sense that there is more there. There is more depth here. There is a sense of unfathomability to this object, to this image, to this person that I'm seeing soulfully. There's a sense of more to move into, of mystery here—into which, a mystery of the other, a depth of mystery of the other and the perception of the other, into which the eros might expand, might penetrate, might open, or to which it might open. Then that sense of more, that sense of other dimensions, even if we don't see them clearly, that sense actually stimulates eros. It's working the other way around. The psyche, the logos, the sense, the perception stimulates the eros and inflames the eros.

And what happens there—and again, if you really enter into imaginal practice, whether it's with, so to speak, purely intrapsychic images or, again, with someone or something in nature or some person in your life that actually is alive to you as image in this soul-making, soulful, beautiful way—then we get the sense that that other, that object, if you like, contains a multiplicity of images. Some of them will be clearly perceived, maybe right now or maybe we know them from before through our history, through working with this object, this person, this image. And some are kind of intuited. You can feel them there. You can sense the presence of other images within this figure, within this person, within your perception of them. But they're not yet known. They remain sort of presences intuited, but vaguely intuited, but not known.

And with that, there's a sense of this inexhaustible mystery that can arise—that the depth of soul in this person that I'm beholding, the depth of soul I'm beholding in this person, or in this thing, or in nature. Nature in soul. Nature has this inexhaustible unfathomability, levels of mystery to it. And always then, sometimes the intuition, the intimation, is that always the unknown is greater than the known. There's always more to discover because we've learned about this infinity, the potential limitlessness of this process.

And so we can actually palpably feel or palpably perceive a sense that the dimensions and the faces that are not yet known to me, not yet clearly perceived to me, will always, so to speak, outnumber the ones that are known, that have been beautiful and soul-making to me so far. That sense of inexhaustible mystery stimulates the eros, is itself soul-making.

So we can say that eros requires an image, but it also maybe requires, if you like, a region of what is as yet unknown. This sense of territory it can move into, of a landscape of soul, a world of soul, into which our souls can move, so to speak, as we penetrate the other, or to which we can open, needs the image, but also the sense of the mystery, the as-yet-unknown, in the image, with the image. And we could even say that the eros generates this very perception, stimulates the image and stimulates the sense of something more, some territory beyond—this pothos generating a beyond, if you like, that it can then enter, the soul territory, penetrate, open to.

Now, this infinity, this inexhaustible mystery, it might be of a kind of universal nature, as we've touched on before. Very common ones: a universal love, and the infinity of that, or the universality of awareness, or even the unfabricated. You actually get the sense of that shining through everything, if you like, everything embodying that in a mysterious way. But the inexhaustibility that we're talking about here predominantly, or in addition to those kinds of inexhaustibility that are universal—so this universal awareness shining through is the same in everything, or the universal love is pervasive, the same in everything—

So when we speak of the inexhaustable mystery that eros perceives in the beloved, there can be different kinds of infinities operating. One type might be of a universal nature—universal love and its infinite depth, the universality of awareness, or even the unfabricated nature of things shining through everything, each thing mysteriously embodying these qualities. Yet with these universal infinities, there's a sameness: this person I'm beholding expresses universal awareness or love in the same essential way as everything else. That's the essence permeating all things.

But in addition to this kind of perception of mystery and infinity, there's a different kind of inexhaustibility that emerges through what we've been calling the vertical spectrum of the imaginal. Here we discover dimensions inherent within the beloved other—an infinite fecundity, an endless proliferation of theophanies manifesting through the particulars of that soul, that object we're perceiving. This is the infinite fecundity of soul, of divine manifestation, expressing itself through the specific details and qualities of the beloved.

Another way of understanding this interconnected process is that eros generates this very sense of infinite depth and mystery, then falls in love with what it has generated and moves into it, filling it completely. Eros carries within itself this tendency, this inclination, this creative impetus that fertilizes and stimulates the fecundity of both soul and mind. Eros is cosmogonos—world-creating—giving birth to ever more perception, more dimensions of seeing, greater richnesses, complexities, depths and breadths of experience.

In this expansion of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, there is truly a birthing of cosmoses. Through this soul-making process, eros simultaneously creates, fabricates, and discovers more psyche, more image. There's an increase in the range of images perceived within the beloved object, and more generally an expansion of the perceived facets and dimensions of things—especially of what we love. More mystery emerges, along with a deeper sense of dimensionality and inexhaustible depth.

Now let us explore the logos aspect more carefully—how it must grow and stretch to support this dynamic, how it can become limited, and when it either nurtures or inhibits the eros-psyche-logos process through its own constraints or rigidity.

When we speak of logos or conception, we're not always referring to something conscious or involving actual deliberate thought. Logos often operates at what we might call an unconscious level—we remain unaware of the views and conceptions that are actually governing our perception. These operate subliminally, usually based on assumptions we've unwittingly absorbed from our surrounding culture or subcultures.

Logos encompasses a broad spectrum. Sometimes it involves elaborate, consciously worked-out conceptual frameworks, but much of the time it operates far more subtly, woven into the very fabric of perception. We rarely become conscious of these operating assumptions, and even more rarely have we actually arrived at them through our own careful investigation. More often, we've simply absorbed them through cultural indoctrination.

When logos—our conception or understanding of something—becomes too narrow or fixed, it constrains the entire dynamic in various ways. Consider, for instance, a rigidly held materialist or physicalist worldview that insists things are essentially just matter. In this view, consciousness emerges from genetic and neural processes shaped by cultural conditioning affecting neuronal activity, while matter remains simply matter—trees and inanimate objects are nothing more than their material composition.

Such a view, when held too tightly and inflexibly, actually prevents the imaginal level from blossoming. It blocks the fertile emergence of multiple dimensions of perception. Even when something deeper wants to arise in our experience, it gets immediately dismissed because the rigid logos insists, "That's not reality. This thing is just X." This dismissal often occurs barely consciously—the logos simply declares everything to be purely material, so any sense of other dimensions gets aborted before it can even reach birth.

When eros arises within such a constrained logos—and remember that eros always seeks more—that "more" becomes severely limited. Since the logos permits only one dimension of reality (the material), the more that eros naturally seeks is forced to operate solely within that single material dimension. Eros must look for its "more," must find its expansion, only in physical terms.

Where else can it go? It becomes constrained to seek fulfillment through physical acts. In sexuality, it must focus on physical acts alone. Or perhaps it seeks satisfaction through acquisition—buying things, accumulating material objects, obtaining more of this or that physical, tangible commodity. The pothos within eros, that yearning movement toward "more," can only move horizontally within this single permitted dimension.

But what happens then in relationship—whether with a lover, spouse, or any cherished object—when eros can only move into the physical realm? When we can only engage with what we love through whatever physical interactions that one dimension allows, and those possibilities become exhausted? When the physical acts and material engagements have been fully explored and no longer provide the nourishment that eros requires?

What can eros do then? Eros needs fuel to sustain its flame. Without that fuel, the flame of eros simply dies out.

In many ways, one of the possibilities, and sometimes it can happen almost pervasively in a person's life. You can see something was alive in childhood and through the teenage years and adolescence—the flame of eros there, perhaps in all kinds of ways,

questioning and aliveness and stretching things. And then maybe in the twenties, or maybe in the thirties, or maybe even the forties or fifties, something... it's just lost fuel. It's not being fed something. Sometimes it's in the logos, in the limitation of ideation that does not give enough fuel for the eros. And the flame is extinguished.

Or maybe, as I said, it's forced out. For instance, I'm in this relationship or marriage and I'm only seeing it one-dimensionally. Or the dimensions are very limited, let's put it that way, in terms of who is this person, how rich, how deep are they potentially to me? Maybe they're not just material, but maybe they have a certain interiority that we grant them—people and their psychological complexity in the typical modernist view. But the dimensions are limited.

And then what happens? If there's eros once more, where does it go? It has to maybe go to other partners. I have to find someone else because I can only go at one dimension. I can't go deeper into this beloved. There is no deeper. I disallow it. The logos disallows it. So I go looking elsewhere.

Or maybe there's some other area in my life where I go and take up this or that something. And maybe that's an area where the logos actually allows a certain expansion. So maybe it's rich. Or maybe it just goes again into acquiring material things. So there was this thing and I was enamored with it, but because that thing, whatever it is—a possession, a house even—can only really be one-dimensional, then I need to acquire something else. I need to acquire material things or status or something. The eros can only move on one-dimensional, very limited dimensions. There's no vertical depth, other dimensions for it to expand into.

I wonder about something—just thinking about this, I wonder about something like pornography or pornography addiction. And I don't know, I've actually never been into pornography, but I wonder whether, again, part of what sometimes happens there is that the person engaging in that is caught in a limited dimensionality, just seeing matter in a very flat way. Or perhaps there's a split between where other dimensions are alive in their life—there's a sort of spirituality—but there's a split between spirituality and sexuality, so that in relation to sexuality, it's not spiritual. It doesn't have the possibility of feeling, sensing, perceiving, knowing, conceiving other dimensions within sexuality. So there's a split.

And I wouldn't want to speculate, but again, one wonders about abuse within the church and the clergy where people have spiritual teachings that do divorce the sexual from the spiritual in ways that don't allow a dimensionality in relation to sexuality. Or the person just has a materialistic view in the first place, a one-dimensional view.

So all this—pornography feels soulless. Why? Well, it is. In our language, it is. It's exactly that. It feels soulless because it is soulless, meaning there's no possibility there for the imaginal. There's lots of possibility for the imaginary, but no possibility for the imaginal, for the sense of dimensionality, of depth, of mystery, in the body, in the beauty, in the sexuality. There is really an objectification in the sense of narrowing down this or that object or other to just one dimension. There is an absence of soul, a poverty of psyche, a poverty of image.

And when that's the case, then we get what we might call greed. It's got nowhere to move, no depth in which to move. Again, I don't know, and part of this is just kind of wandering out loud, but it may be that someone who's into pornography... there isn't an absence of metta there. I'm thinking of actually two people, students who shared with me what they would term pornography addiction, and both of them had quite a degree of kindness and metta. So it's not an absence of metta, but something is blocked in the eros, psyche, logos dynamics—blocked from its natural inclination to expand, blocked by some kind of logos that either just sees one-dimensionally or doesn't allow dimensionality to infuse the sense of sexuality and physicality.

So we could say, in other words, that with something like pornography, maybe there's no psyche or logos beyond a one-dimensionality with respect to the other, certainly with respect to self and world, and with respect to the eros itself. So that fourfold—self, other, world, eros—that fourfold confluence or co-constellation, the psyche and logos with respect to each and all of them is limited to being one-dimensional and reified. "It is this. This is the truth. I am like this. Sexuality is like this"—whatever.

So in our language, if that small definition of eros, that initial impetus, is there—if it's moving in a person, if they have a lot of libido and life force, and there is that eros—the logos and the psyche won't allow the eros-psyche-logos to expand. And it goes, perhaps, if it's there, it will go just into some kind of greed or pleasure-seeking. It has to stay at that one level. Limited.

Now actually, we could say any prioritizing of one dimension or level of being, existence, perception—any shrinking of that vertical spectrum of the imaginal, whether it's to a so-called purely material level in the way that modernism conceives of it or senses it, or whether it's even some other kind of elevated, ethereal, almost disembodied level—any prioritizing or shrinking down to one dimension or level of that vertical spectrum of the imaginal, and a belief with that, "This or that level is what's really real," any of that will limit soul-making.

It's the openness of the sense of multidimensionality that encourages, supports, stimulates soul-making. And conversely, soul-making opens up that sense of multidimensionality. As always, there's a mutual dependence there.

I think as we're talking—and I think I might have said this before—we can get the sense that eros, psyche, logos, we can talk of them as if they're three almost separate things that come into interaction and mutual insemination. Or we can just as well say they're facets—three facets of one dynamic, of one process, three facets of soul-making.

And this soul-making, in these three facets, can be open and creative, or any of those three—the eros, the psyche, the logos—could be constricted somehow. And then when any of them is constricted, it can hinder or block the whole movement of the soul-making. So the whole process, the whole dynamism gets stuck. The whole dynamic gets stuck at some point, at some stage—rigidified, ossified, blocked, cramped.

So there are so many possibilities here. But for instance, what happens, again, in relationship with a beloved—any kind of beloved—if the logos, the idea, the conception of what a human being is generally, and in which case what this person is, is limited?

Either psychologically, it's limited in the way that a lot of modern psychotherapy might consider a person. Certainly they're complex. Certainly they're a result of past conditioning and family influences and cultural influences and all that. So it's a view. And we acknowledge and we feel nowadays, with modernism, a certain interiority to what a human being is—that a human being has that perhaps in many cases they didn't have, that sense, at other times in history.

But still, with all that, even with that kind of interiority, even with that kind of psychology—Freud's psychology or anything that came out of that, a lot of modern psychotherapy—there's still often, not always, but often there's a kind of limit to the logos of what a human being is. And that can function as a limit. It limits the soul-making movement, the soul-making growth and expansion.

Or it might be just the idea of this particular individual: I have a limited, fixed idea of who or how they are. Or my idea, my logos, my conceptual framework that's operating of relationship. Or of eros—what eros is. Or of sex and sexuality and that movement. I have a limited idea.

Even whatever it is. It might be "Sex is..." Actually, one of these students who considered himself to have a pornography addiction said to me, "You know, sex is just biological instinct. It's just biological instinct." It's a certain limited logos of what sex is.

But even ones that sound like they're more generous and richer and more heartful —"Sex is the expression of love," or "The sexual impulse is a spiritual impulse towards union"—all of them may have some validity. But when it's limited in that way, that too can function as a limited logos. And that will limit the soul-making possible.

Or in relation to sex, "This is how it should be"—some idea of how sex should be, which would include then a clinging to an idea or an image, a self-image of the psyche there, of my sexuality: how I am, how I am sexually, my sexual identity. And that may have got narrowed down or rigidified in all kinds of ways—along character or performance or all kinds of stuff. But there, the logos or the image, the psyche, in regard to my sexuality has become rigid or limited or both. And then again, the eros actually is hindered. The eros in its wish to expand actually gets hindered, blocked.

So you can see how many—maybe perhaps almost infinite ways—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic can get blocked and limited.

Perhaps we could say that it's infinite. Whether it's basically either from the eros being hindered, or the psyche, or the logos, or some combination of those, the permutations individually are infinite, perhaps.

We could also, for instance, cling to the image of another—a certain image we have of another. We neglect to see, we fail to see that this image that I have of this other is dependent on my way of looking. We believe and we act and we assume that the way we're seeing them, the image we have of them, is independent of the way of looking that one is employing at any time. There's a reification of that image.

Or, again, of marriage. Marriage is this. We have a certain image of what marriage is, or a certain logos of what marriage is. And all this can prevent, in different ways, stifle and limit the expansion, the deepening, the widening, the fertilizing of the soul-making.

Now, of course, in an actual relationship with another, soul-making in a relationship —or for the relationship to be a fertile field for soul-making, for the continuing fire of the eros in that relationship between the two there, or in a community, or whatever—it needs a basis in actuality. So it needs, of course, a basis in taking care of our communication. Really making sure the communication is skillful and supportive and helpful and caring. It needs a basis in kindness, in love. We need to voice love, express love, express appreciation. Without that kind of basis, the soul-making dynamic will founder. It won't have enough basis. Generally speaking. Again, it will be limited without that basis at another level, if you like.

But sometimes other things happen in relationship or are blocked in relationship. Sometimes the eros of one partner has a depth to it and a fire to it that is not matched by the other, has an aliveness to it and a range to it that is not matched by the other partner. The spark and the fullness of the eros either is just inherently not matched—they're just different personalities—or, in one of the partners, the eros is blocked. So it's actually there, somehow, but for different reasons—it can be very complex—and the eros is actually blocked. So one partner, their eros is flowing, and the flame is burning, and very alive, and the other, it's just not, and there's a mismatch.

Sometimes what happens is the logos and the psyche, the ideation, the concepts and the images that perhaps were shared—the ideas about life, about relationship, about being—the ideas and images that were shared no longer overlapped. Perhaps there isn't enough overlap to start with, and so there's not enough fuel for the mutual eros to burn. It can't really go anywhere with that. So the eros, again, gets limited, gets stifled, doesn't have the opportunity to grow.

Or, you know, again, for all kinds of reasons, something in him, something in her, in the relationship. Again, I don't have to make it as if it's objectively existing or not existing in them, but something in him or her, in this relational constellation, in this perception, in this dependent co-arising of the relationship, something in him or her doesn't allow the deepening of the psyche, the deepening of the imaginal dimension in relationship to him or her. They can no longer—there's a limit to how my sense of their soul doesn't open into more mystery, more dimensionality, more depth. And it's complex. The psychology here is complex in relation to all this, in relation to why that happens. So that there's a limitation on this eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

Let's make it clear. When we talk about logos, when we talk about ideas or concepts, by nature, their nature is to limit. They define and delineate. That's the nature of ideas. That in itself is not a problem. We touched on this a little bit obliquely in an earlier talk. But that's the nature of logoi, of concepts, of ideas—they limit, they delimit, and they define, and they delineate. No problem. That's just how they function.

The problem, from a soul-making perspective, is when the limit of a logos is reached with respect to the sense of the other, with respect to the idea of the other, of self, of world, of humans in general, of the soul, of psyche, of eros itself, of divinity—with respect to any of that—when a certain logos that's in place, when the limit of that is reached, and it doesn't allow the ongoing expansion or deepening of the soul-making dynamic, and when the limit is inflexible. So it reaches just like hitting a wall, and the wall will not shatter because it's just entrenched, whatever this idea is, and it won't

stretch, so that it won't stretch or shatter to allow more territory for the play of this dynamic of eros-psyche-logos, playing together, this soul-making fecundity and fertilization. There's just something wants to expand, but the limit is reached.

So it's not the fact that ideas, logoi, concepts are limited and limiting by their nature. That's not the problem, because that's always the case.

That's how they work, as I said. Really what's at stake here, what the issue is, is where is the soul's process right now in relation to the limits of the concepts and ideas, the logoi that are in place? Where is my soul-making process at—that intermingling of image and eros and ideation—in relation to the limits that are in place of the logos?

What is the expanse that's created by my conceptual structure? Do I still have more room? Does the soul, if you like, in the soul-making process still have more room within the limits, the playground created by a certain conceptual structure, a conceptual framework, a certain logos? Or have I already filled it? Has the soul already explored that whole territory, that whole playground and needs to expand? It wants more and the more cannot be provided by the limits of that playground.

So that's really the question at any moment in time. Not so much even what the logos is, or how it relates to someone else's logos, or anything like that. It's really a question of relative pacing, if you like, of expansion between the different elements of the soul-making process. If the image wants to expand and the eros wants to expand, but the logos is limiting it, that's a problem—if it wants to expand beyond what the logos can allow.

With all this, I hope you're getting the sense that when we talk about logos or concept or idea, we're not talking about something abstract. In a way, that's kind of irrelevant. Abstract—the word actually means to remove: ab, from; tract, to take from, to remove. So we're not talking about something removed from life, removed from perception and experience and embodiment and living. And again, we're talking about something that's always operating.

Certainly a concept, an idea, a logos can be abstract. But in terms of practice, when we talk about ways of looking in meditation—whether it's to do with emptiness, dependent arising, or whether it's to do with soul-making—we need to actually practice entertaining different concepts, different conceptual structures, different logoi, in ways that actually flow into, actually inform, actually shape a way of looking so that they can be soul-making.

We're not talking about just thinking something intellectually in a way that doesn't come into the way of looking, in a way that actually affects one's life. Sometimes—and this is a really important point—sometimes people don't get the connection here. Why are you talking so much about ideas? And actually find it hard to bring an idea to bear on the actual sensing and seeing and embodiment and life and perception.

We can't just assume that they do connect, because it might just be that we're entertaining this idea abstractly, just listening: "Oh, that's very interesting, fascinating." But it's not actually—we need a way to bring an idea into the world, to the world that we live, in the way that we live it, to the perception. Ideas are there anyway, as I said. What we're interested in is this flexibility of concepts and ways of looking and plugging them in, moving between them, again, in ways that make a difference.

So when we talk—really what I mean by all this is not so much the abstract logoi, but the logoi, the logos, the concepts that are actually lived, that are alive. If they're unconscious, can I make them conscious? And if they're stuck, can I bring in new ones and fresh ones and develop that flexibility? We're talking about the concepts that are lived, that are alive, that are embodied, and that actually involve and affect the heart and the experience and the perception.

Even more than that, I would add: playing with different ideas and conceptual frameworks and actually entertaining them in this way that I'm talking about—in the perception, in the experience—and more than that, creating them, forging them, as we're doing now. This process, both the flexibility of entertaining them, but also building new ones, that is soul-making. That process of engaging with the creativity of conceptuality, of idea, of mind, is itself part of soul-making, stimulates soul-making, supports the inflaming of the eros and the increase of the psyche.

You can see how much idea comes into our lives. For instance, faith is a certain ideation, we could say. And there are many different kinds here. But for example, in relation to some personal difficulty that's arisen in my life or that I might be going through, or some pattern I have in the personality that's difficult or something that befalls my body or me—and the idea, the logos, that it is somehow necessary to soul. It's an idea. And that it somehow has divine roots, that it mirrors something divine. These are ideas.

But if I can plug them in, just play with that a little bit, they make the experience rich. They make the personal difficulty—they give it depth and dimensionality. They make it feel necessary. They make it imaginal and eventually divine. So logos affects perception, affects the image, the lived image we have of what we deal with, ourselves and the things that befall us and make us up.

Then something interesting, because we talk a lot in the Dharma of relating to this pain or that pain or this difficulty or that difficulty with metta. Metta to myself who has to go through this, has to bear this. Metta even to the phenomenon of the pain.

I have spoken about relating to pain and difficulty with metta on different retreats—metta to ourselves as we bear these challenges, even metta to the phenomenon of pain itself. But there exists another possibility: not just metta, but eros in relationship to difficulty. The possibility that our sense of difficulty becomes enriched, given dimensions, rather than simply fading away. While holding difficulties in kindness and finding ways of looking that allow them to fade are entirely valid approaches, there is also this potential for eros in relationship to our own personal difficulties and the challenging events of our existence.

We explored Amor Fati during the re-enchanting retreat—the poetry of perception, the love of one's fate—and examined what allows this to become a lived, heartfelt, soulfelt experience.

In relation to anything at all, a view that reduces it—say psychologically—won't lead to soul-making, or will lead to very limited soul-making and very limited expansion of the sense of sacredness in life. Psychological reductionism and other forms of reductionism may still prove very helpful in addressing this or that difficulty, but they won't lead to soul-making. The reductionism inherent in such logos won't support the expansion, the growth, the organic and potentially limitless development that soul-making offers.

Unless our very psychological difficulties, obstacles, personal challenges, and the difficult events that befall us are seen as images—unless they become imaginal. The psychology itself and the difficulty itself must become images, or the logos through which we perceive them must allow them to become images. Then they become re-enchanted.

Catherine's talk was entitled "Re-Enchanting Dukkha." The very dukkha itself needs this transformation. The logos through which I perceive difficulty must somehow either avoid psychological reduction entirely, or if I do consider it psychologically, that whole psychology must reveal its other levels—mirroring, necessity of soul, divine purpose.

What happens in my childhood, what unfolds in my life, the journey into which I am guided or constrained by life's circumstances—this too receives other imaginal dimensions. A difficulty might indeed result from psychological patterns, but the whole constellation gains another imaginal dimension. The dukkha is re-enchanted.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 62

Eros Unfettered (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 37 min

> *In this fourth installment of his profound series on eros and desire in spiritual practice, Rob Burbea examines how erotic energy functions as a hermeneutic force that opens infinite dimensions of meaning and soul-making. Drawing on Platonic philosophy and Kabbalistic teachings, he explores how eros acts as what Plato called a 'hermeneutic daemon' - a divine interpreter that reveals multiple layers of meaning in whatever it encounters.*
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> *Burbea discusses the crucial difference between horizontal seeking (constantly moving to new experiences) and vertical deepening (discovering infinite depth in present experience). He shares personal examples including a powerful dream vision of a wooden door opening to a sacred forest, demonstrating how imaginal practice can transform our relationship with nature and existence itself. The talk addresses practical concerns about teacher-student relationships, examining how fantasies and images of spiritual teachers can either support or limit soul-making processes.*
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> *A key theme is the alchemical function of containment - how not acting on erotic impulses can create a sacred vessel (temenos) that intensifies the soul-making process. Rather than suppressing desire, this containment channels erotic energy into imaginal dimensions, opening new depths of meaning and connection. Burbea concludes with William James' insight about the 'fantastic and unnecessary character' of human wants, suggesting that our extravagant desires, when properly understood, serve as guides to dimensions of existence beyond our current comprehension.*

So you can see in so many different ways the possibilities of supporting or blocking the erotic movement, the movement of soul-making, the process and dynamic of soul-making. And this, as I say, we could say this is what the soul wants.

What do we love about being in love? We love the love, certainly. But maybe more, maybe more than that, we love the sense of soul-making when we're in love. To echo something we said the other day, we love the sense of the infinite potential, the infinite creation and discovery, creativity and discovering with respect to the beloved other, in and with respect to them, in and with respect to the self, to the world, to the eros, to divinity.

Eros, if it's allowed to stimulate and open this soul-making dynamic, the Eros Psyche Logos dynamic, the bigger meaning of Eros, Eros opens. It opens things up. And that opening is what is soul-making. And we love that.

Part of that opening is this: it opens up the very sense of existence, the very way we see and sense and conceive of existence. Eros, if you remember from Plato's depiction, was a hermeneutic daemon, meaning he's some kind of demigod that has to do with interpretation, with hermeneutics, interpretation of everything. So whatever Eros comes into contact with, whatever it flows towards, wherever there's erotic connection, there's a fertility and an opening up of the hermeneutics there—the interpretation of this facet, this thread, this aspect of existence, the self, the other, the world there, the eros itself.

So eros, if you like, opens for us the gates into the garden of infinite interpretations—a phrase I used on the re-enchanting retreat: the garden of infinite interpretation. Eros is what takes us in there.

I like to draw on some Kabbalistic teaching. Most Kabbalists, both with respect to sacred scripture and also in relation to the world—so both with scripture and any aspect of existence—held almost axiomatically that it's potentially subject to an infinite variety of perspectives and interpretations. Not just sacred scripture, but the world and others and all that. So it's very similar to what we're saying here.

Some of these teachings about multiple interpretation in Kabbalah I got from this writer that I enjoy, Sanford Drobb. He describes one Kabbalist, Moses Chaim Luzzato, Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato, who lived in Padua, Italy in the early 18th century. He's talking about comparing the multiplicity of meanings in and of the Torah, basically the Old Testament, comparing that to the many nuances of the flames from a hot coal. So the flame from a hot coal flickers and has different colors in it at different times. Suddenly it goes green or blue and moves, shapes, and grows, and diminishes. All those multiple flickering nuances are somewhat similar to the multiplicity of meanings of the basic text. It's not taken one-dimensionally or in a kind of narrow literalistic sense at all.

So this Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato said of the Torah, whose words and letters are like coals: whoever is preoccupied and busy with it—in other words, whoever has that erotic connection with it, that arousal of interest that we talked about, that connection there—whoever is preoccupied and busy with it inflames the coals. And from each and every letter, a great flame emerges, replete with many nuances, which are the information encoded in this letter. This is the reason why the Torah as a whole is infinite. Even one of its letters is also infinite. But it is necessary to inflame it, and then it will be inflamed. And so too the intellect of the human being.

So again, we get the image that I was using before—and I think it might even be a classic one—of Eros as a flame. When there's that erotic connection, just as he was describing there without the language of eros, we could say something similar happens to whatever there is this erotic connection with. And eros, as a flame, needs something to burn. It needs the fuel of what? Of the beloved other as psyche and logos. The psyche and the logos are the fuel. And actually then the flame too, if we follow the analogy, it sort of mixes because the psyche and the logos are what is then perceived of the thing. And that becomes the flame that we behold if you translate it back to his image. But again, that really reflects the fact that eros, psyche, logos are not separate.

Again, Luzzato wrote: we enlarge our soul which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the wisdom of God. We enlarge our soul, which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the wisdom of God—or if you prefer, the jnana, the gnosis of Buddha nature, the jnana of Buddha nature. This is what soul-making is.

And somehow that floating, cartwheeling movement of the subtle body allowed the whole imaginal object to come alive again. The door became present, luminous with that same numinous quality from the dream. The organ music returned, flooding through from whatever sacred space lay beyond that threshold.

As I dwelt with this image in meditation, something extraordinary began to unfold. The door wasn't just a door anymore. It became a portal, an opening between dimensions. The carved abstract shapes in the wood weren't merely decorative—they were alive with meaning, pregnant with significance I could feel but couldn't fully articulate. Each curve, each line seemed to pulse with divine intelligence.

The music grew more magnificent, not louder but deeper, as if the very foundations of existence were singing. And in that imaginal space, I began to understand something about thresholds, about the places where the sacred breaks through into ordinary reality. This wasn't just a beautiful door—it was the Door, the eternal opening between the visible and invisible worlds.

What had begun as a simple dream image was now revealing layers upon layers of meaning. The mockery of the young men in the dream began to make sense too—they represented that part of consciousness that dismisses the imaginal, that reduces mystery to mere fantasy. But here, in the actual engagement with the image, the door was teaching me about the nature of sacred space, about how the divine presents itself at liminal moments, at thresholds.

This is what I mean about the vertical dimension opening up. I didn't need to travel anywhere to find more beauty, more depth, more meaning. Right here, in this imaginal door, was an inexhaustible source of wonder. Each time I returned to it in meditation, new aspects revealed themselves. The grain of the wood spoke of time and growth. The stone arch whispered of permanence and strength. The music carried me into realms of feeling I had no words for.

And then something even more remarkable happened. Having been touched by this imaginal door, when I walked outside and looked at actual doors—the front door of the retreat center, an old garden gate, even just the doorway between rooms—they too began to shimmer with that same quality. The imaginal dimension had opened up my perception so that ordinary doors became thresholds to the sacred.

This is the cosmopoiesis I spoke of—how engaging with images in the imaginal realm actually transforms our perception of the physical world. The eros that had been awakened by that dream door, that longing for the sacred, for beauty, for depth, didn't get satisfied and then fade away. Instead, it kept revealing more and more dimensions, both in the inner realm of imagination and in the outer world of form.

The door became a teacher, showing me how the divine hides in plain sight, how every threshold we cross might be an opening to mystery if we have eyes to see. And this seeing, this enlarged perception, was exactly what that earlier quote was pointing to—enlarging our soul, which was previously contracted, in order to be capable of receiving the wisdom of God.

And then that helped, that numinosity and beauty and connection with this image of the door and the sense of sacredness and praise. It helped it all to arise, became really almost just as vital and just as beautiful, just as moving. And really not separate from me. There was something very beautifully connected there.

Then I floated—you know, there was still this energy body sense—so I floated in the image. And I, rather than make the door open, I sort of let it open. And inside was a kind of rainforest, a bright orb of light like the sun. But there didn't seem to be any walls there or borders. It was just this forest and bright light and such a sense of beauty and reverence. And looking up, somehow at the same time looking up, there were stars there, and more music. I could—I was aware in the image—I could sort of travel into this landscape and go on a bit of a journey, but I decided not to, for that reason I pointed out about the difference between narrative images moving through a lot of space, a sort of shamanic journey, versus a kind of image that's sufficient to itself, so the depth there remains a little bit pregnant, not yet fully explored.

I'm mentioning this partly because at one level it sounds like, well, nothing much happened, or it's certainly not sexually erotic. So in one level it sounds like not that big a deal, as a dream and as an image. But it was, first, tremendously touching for me, and second, there is Eros there, right? There's this sense of attraction, beauty, dimensionality, divinity. And in that attraction, in the way that it stirs the soul, there are all the elements of soul-making there.

The reason I'm mentioning it now as well is because as I moved through the day—and I think I was even working that day—I periodically just recalled the vision, the image, during the day at different times and noticed the cosmopoiesis that came from it. So it was a vision of nature in this case, not of some sexual thing, but a vision of nature and a whole relationship with nature, with this rainforest and the beauty there and the door opening into something that actually spilled over into a real sacredness of cosmopoiesis in relation to whatever was around me that was redolent of that image, characteristic of that image.

So again, coming out of the eros and the imaginal—in this case originating not even with actual physical nature—there's a sense of the relationship with nature being opened, transformed, deepened, so that there isn't a need to necessarily go here or there, see this or that place necessarily. Because the more the eros can go, it can get infinitely satisfied in the infinite depth that can open up there. It doesn't need—let's say it's not constrained to the horizontal. It's right here. I don't need to go elsewhere on this same flat horizontal level. It's infinite right here—infinite in depth, infinite in possibility.

So we can see this in all kinds of ways. Also, again, non-sexual, with respect to someone who's not a lover, but an actual person or a thing in our life or something. For example, the fantasy of a teacher. And again, I'm using fantasy in a good sense, in a creative, soul-making sense. There is fantasy and image. When the teacher-student relationship—even when they don't know each other, they've never met in person—when that is potent and deep and fertile, when there is eros there, and there's a fantasy of the teacher, or fantasies and images of that teacher, in the best sense, in the imaginal sense.

But then what can happen is, again, if we're talking about how this process gets blocked or limited—either, for example, my soul-making process of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, in its expansion, reaches, if you like, the limit of what the teacher is presenting. So the image—the way they are, or the way they behave, or act, or comport themselves, or dress or speak or whatever it is—can no longer meet the expansion that's happening in my soul-making process of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. And we need more. We need a larger, wider... someone that can give us that or hold that, if you

like, in their being. Or a deeper, wider logos than this teacher is presenting and communicating or teaching. You understand? Something in your soul-making, my soul-making logos, soul-making movement, in relation to this fantasy of this teacher—it reaches the limit of what they can hold, or what their presentation of themselves can hold, and of their teachings can hold. And the soul needs something more.

And then the eros goes out of that relationship, and oftentimes the power of the teaching goes out of that relationship. The soul-making goes out of that relationship. Or what can happen is my fantasy or image of them, or of what awakening is, changes. So I'm talking about spiritual teachers now. For some reason my fantasy just changes of them, my image of them, or my whole fantasy image or logos of what awakening is. And again, it shifts. The eros can no longer flow there for what the soul-making needs. So there's a diminishing of the eros, or the eros means that I move elsewhere for something that can support that psyche and logos.

I can't remember—I think I've shared in other talks in the past, I don't remember—but I lived as a musician for quite some years in the US, and twice during those years at different times, there were periods where the whole soul-making relationship with music and with making music and writing music and playing music just kind of collapsed. It collapsed to a kind of one-dimensionality, so everything that music was—so full, so expressive, so resonant of other dimensions of existence and meaningfulness—at different times, once for a very short period, once for a little longer, it just kind of collapsed to just like, "Yeah, why all this fuss about sounds in certain relationships?"

Continue beautifying this talk (part 4/5). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

It lost its magic, if you like. It lost its image. Those words—magic and image—I'm not sure, but they may well be related. It lost all its imaginal dimensions, its meaningfulness, its soul resonances. And the erotic relationship with making music, with improvising or writing music, was just gone.

It came back. There were certain things that actually helped break that collapse, and certain things that allowed a new level of fantasy to return.

Actually, if we go back to the whole fantasy of a teacher thing, in some traditions—for instance, some of the Tibetan lineages—the instruction is to regard your lama as the Buddha. It's hard to say how many people actually take that literally, like they really are the Buddha. There's something there that they are the reincarnation of a Buddha, or

something very close to a Buddha. It might be taken very literally, or not. I don't know, and there's probably a real variety in how literally people take this "your lama, your guru, is the Buddha" teaching.

For me, it's exactly this kind of literalism or realism—whether it's religious in the narrow sense or whether it's secular—it's the realism that's a little silly. So what we're trying to open up here is something, a kind of middle way, that's not a realism, not a shrinking literalism and kind of concretization that would strike me as really a bit silly. But it's also not a kind of dismissal and a refusal to admit other dimensions—something about the nature of perception and ways of looking and soul-making and eros that dismisses all that and just goes to a kind of realism of another level, shrinking to that one dimension.

Something, if you like, in between, which isn't some sort of happy compromise. It's something that's at a different level of understanding, of concept, of engagement, of wisdom, I would say.

So there's the difference between an idol and actually believing this thing or this person is really divine in a kind of very concretized, limited and reified way, and then it somehow encapsulates the totality or it is the totality of what divinity is. There's a difference between an idol and an icon. And here I'm borrowing from Henri Corbin and also Jean-Luc Marion, a postmodern French philosophic theologian.

An icon admits of this open-endedness, admits of dimensions of unfathomability, dimensions of divinity that will always exceed whatever is in front of us, always bigger than the actual perception. But somehow this thing, or this beloved other, or this object, or whatever it is, functions as a kind of portal to that infinity of infinities, to that dimensionality and divinity. But it's without naive realism, and it's without limitation as well.

So you can get icons and idols in relation to images, of course, but you can also get them in relation to ideas. So an idea can become, or a conceptual framework or a logos can become an idol. It becomes, again, limited, and we say, "This is the truth, this is real, this is true." Or it can become something that's held in a different way—not reified, not taken with a truth claim, and not limited. It becomes more potentially open, expansive, expanding. We'll return to this in relation to ideation.

But in a nutshell, it's not inflation that's the problem—if you know this word from Jungian psychology. This expansion of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, this expansion of the imaginal and the ideation—that's not what Jung actually meant by inflation. It's not the expansion per se that's the problem; it's the reification and the identification that's

the problem. Reification and identification are the problems, not this expansion, not the inflation. Because where there's reification and identification, there is not the imaginal. It's not image as we're using it.

Now, last thing. Sometimes, and in some relationships—most of the time, perhaps all the time—it's not acting on the eros that actually stimulates. It's the containment of the eros, preventing it from spilling out in certain ways into actuality, that actually allows the increase of the psyche, the growth, the expansion of soul-making, of image, of logos. It's the not acting.

So what happens by creating a space that is free of manifest action is we create a kind of alchemical vessel, a crucible. The heat of eros accumulates in that space where there isn't the possibility to act on the eros in the most immediate or obvious or one-dimensional way. And this crucible and the vessel and the heat—the fire of eros heating that vessel—heats and stimulates and galvanizes, catalyzes the soul-making process. There's alchemy here.

We cannot, or we refuse to get our more—the more that eros wants—on the horizontal material level in this relationship with whoever it is. And therefore the more is, if you like, forced or funneled to other dimensions, to open other dimensions, to discover, to create other dimensions. Because it can't, it's kept out of this area, of this dimension. So it must find the pressure to create, to find more and find it at other levels and create those and discover and open those other imaginal dimensions.

So for example, non-consummation sexually in a relationship, or on the physical plane of manifesting—being friends and hanging out or whatever it is.

Rather than seeing these boundaries—the kinds that often exist and are sometimes stringently reinforced between psychotherapists and clients, or teachers and students—through the conventional psychological lens that views them as opportunities to re-experience the Oedipal triangle and the frustration of not being able to possess the mother (as projected onto the therapist or teacher), we might consider a different understanding. The typical interpretation suggests that by reliving that Oedipal trauma or pain, we can find healthier ways to navigate, confront, and accommodate these dynamics. But this remains largely a psychological reductionist view of what's actually happening.

What if instead we understand these boundaries and their necessity as creating a kind of alchemical vessel? They forge the conditions where an alchemy of soul-making becomes possible through the very containment of eros—through this sacred space, this *temenos*, as the Greeks called it.

Through non-acting at that level, sometimes in certain relationships, a *temenos* is created for soul-making. This isn't about letting go and diminishing our desires, releasing craving from our lives, renouncing eros, or trying to abandon sexual desire. That's not the purpose in our understanding, in this way we're exploring now. It's for the sake of soul-making itself. This space, this boundary, this *temenos*, exists for soul-making.

The erotic tension is preserved, the fire contained, so it heats up more rather than dispersing. The erotic tension remains alive because the two doesn't collapse into a one through union. This boundary, this containment—I'm not referring here to the preservation of sexual energy found in certain ancient and modern sexual yogas, where the man doesn't ejaculate so that energy is contained and rechanneled to open bliss or activate energy centers, allowing consciousness to melt into oneness. That's all valid and beneficial, but it's not what I mean by this kind of *temenos*.

This containment serves a different purpose: the fertilization of the imaginal, the increase and support of soul-making, the very vessel of soul-making. The imaginal is involved here in a unique way.

Let me conclude with a quote from William James, the psychologist and philosopher. I'm uncertain of its exact source or the full scope of his intended meaning, but perhaps you can hear it now through the lens of everything we've explored. He wrote about "the fantastic and unnecessary character of a man's wants"—keeping his gendered language for the moment. He observed:

"Even when the gratification of the wants seems farthest off, the uneasiness they occasion is still the best guide of his life and will lead him to issues entirely beyond his present powers of reckoning. Prune down his extravagance, sober him, and you undo him."

Prune down his extravagance, sober him, and you undo him.

There's something profound in what he calls "the fantastic and unnecessary character" of eros. It does give rise to a kind of uneasiness, an unsettledness. Why? Because it's inherently dynamic, because it grows things. When we allow it to expand in the way it naturally, organically wants to, it becomes the best guide of our lives, leading us to issues entirely beyond our present powers of reckoning. It opens insights, expands our sense of existence—all of this unfolds naturally.

Prune down his extravagance, sober him, and you undo him.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 63

Eros Unfettered (Part 5 - Otherness and the Art of Disappearing)

Rob Burbea · 1h12

> *In this profound exploration of eros and soul-making, Rob Burbea distinguishes his understanding of eros from the Neoplatonic tradition, arguing that eros preserves and creates two-ness rather than driving toward unification. He examines how the soul-making dynamic of eros-psyche-logos increases otherness while simultaneously opening possibilities for knowing various forms of oneness through jhāna and mystical experience.*
>
> *Burbea addresses the desire for oneness that many meditators experience, suggesting it's actually a desire to know oneness rather than permanently dissolve into it. He explores how eros maintains erotic tension while allowing temporary dissolution into unity states, and discusses the emergence of a "third" - whether the "we" of relationship, creative projects, or children - that arises from erotic connection without collapsing into merger.*
>
> *The talk delves into epistemological questions about participatory reality, drawing from quantum physics and modern philosophy to suggest we both create and discover sacredness. Burbea contrasts "the art of disappearing" (dissolution practices like jhāna) with the eros-driven path that maintains otherness while opening infinite dimensions of exploration. He concludes by envisioning how eros might transform Dharma understanding from disenchantment toward re-enchantment, potentially creating an "endless Dharma" through deeper emptiness realization, Mahāyāna cosmology, engaged practice, or soul-making itself.*

Let's pick up a couple of threads we've already touched on and take them a little further, elaborate them more, and weave them together more regarding this whole soul-making dynamic.

One of the things we said quite early on was that the way we are defining Eros—and really these definitions are not about who's right and who's wrong—is not the way some people have defined it historically and some people still do. Coming from the Neoplatonic tradition, we are not defining it as, or saying that it is, a drive or force toward unification, toward union.

Rather, in contrast to that, we have been saying that eros, in the way we're using that word—eros as we define it—preserves and creates or discovers two-ness. So it's not an inclination, a movement toward oneness, melting, or unification. Rather, if we pay at-

tention to this thing, this aspect of our experience, of our phenomenological movement that we can observe that we're calling eros, we can see that eros preserves and creates or discovers two-ness.

Why? Because Eros is in the service of and is part of the soul-making movement, the soul-making dynamic, the dynamic of Eros-Psyche-Logos. And soul-making, as we've also said and explained, as we can observe in our experience, brings an increase of otherness, an increase of the other. The other swells, it gets extended, expanded in breadth, in depth, in dimensionality, and starts to become more complicated and reveal more facets, more manifold facets. Distinctions are made in the erotic movement or through the erotic soul-making movement. Distinctions are made of perception and of conception, psyche and logos, within the other or of others.

So we can see then how, and understand how, Eros does indeed preserve and create and discover two-ness and otherness. It's the two-ness meaning the two of self and other.

But we might wonder then, well, what about the desire for oneness? What about this desire that we have, or many human beings have, for oneness? So that avenue of oneness, of dissolving, of merging into unions of different kinds, I want to say that's important. And I think for many people interested in meditation, that is an important pull, call in the soul. But at the same time, the avenue of two-ness is important. So both these avenues—of oneness and of two-ness, if we have this erotic avenue preserving the two-ness—they're both important. I want to say we can have both. We can have both. We can know both.

But let's go into this a little more, because if we actually examine personally the desire for oneness, and sometimes even a longing for oneness, what actually is it? I would say on inspection, it's actually a desire to know oneness of some kind—a oneness of love or of beingness or awareness or whatever it is, or a desire to know the unfabricated, which is another kind of oneness we could say. It's a desire to know. It's not so much a desire to become one with that oneness, or the unfabricated, or to dissolve into a permanent union.

So it's a desire to know something, not to dissolve permanently into some union. This is interesting. In the classic Pali canon texts, as well as other spiritual contemplative traditions from religious traditions from around that time and before and afterward, the kind of ultimate goal of the path could be construed as exactly that—some kind of permanent dissolution or union, ending of the rebirth of a separate existence, and either permanent union with Brahman or whatever, or dissolution into the unfabricated, something like that.

So classically it's there stated as a goal as a permanent—this is the ending of all rebirths, permanently dissolved and unified, or however exactly one would phrase it, something like that. But I would wonder, is that desire there because it's taught to be the goal, or because it's really desired, or because it's actually a movement of aversion, of subtle aversion—something we'll come back to later on the retreat—vibhava-tanha, desire, lust for non-existence, for erasing everything, turning existence and the world and self off, turning it all off, turning experience off.

In actual meditation, actual practice, an actual spiritual practice, what is possible is all kinds of dissolution to relative degrees, all kinds of unions, unifications, all kinds of experiences of melting into oneness, whether it's different levels of jhanas or of the eight jhanas, or different experiences of the brahma-viharas dissolving into love. All kinds are possible, and even what's called an experience of the cessation of perception in an experience of the unfabricated. These are all available as temporary meditative experiences.

One learns how to do that, develops that art or skill at whatever level of jhana or in whatever direction, or to the unfabricated, whatever, and dips into that dissolution temporarily. And then, hopefully—and sometimes it's a gradual process—one then emerges from that and knows a level of essential unity, an essential oneness with whatever it is—infinite love, or infinite consciousness, or something like that, or even somehow the unfabricated. So one moves in a world experiencing two-ness, but actually knowing oneness.

So one can meditatively, with practice, practicing the right way, finding out how, developing that art, one can dissolve in different ways, to different degrees, into different kinds of oneness, and emerge. And emerging, hopefully, in time, and with some reflective insight, we know something. We know an essential oneness, you could say, something like that.

But knowing implies already some kind of duality or polarity at least of knower and known. Knowing is already implies or is already a state of some degree of two-ness, knower and known. There is the knower and there's what is known. There's the consciousness that knows and there's that which is known. Some degree—to different ways, different kinds and to different degrees.

So what does the spiritual seeker want in wanting oneness, in longing for oneness? She wants to know that she is one, essentially, with God, with universal love, universal awareness, universal beingness, with the Dharmakaya, whatever, at different levels of

understanding and perception, actually, of oneness. But she wants to know that, essentially, she is one. And that's different than a desire to dissolve and have that union as a sort of permanent thing.

And similarly, you know, in tantra—we talked about this on the last retreat, the re-enchanting the cosmos retreat—about becoming the deity, becoming the imaginal figure as a kind of option in imaginal practice and also as a kind of direction or instruction in tantric practice. But that becoming the deity, becoming the imaginal figure, is never, first of all, total. It's never a complete union dissolving all sense of distinction.

And secondly, it's only temporary. Realistically, it's only temporary.

This is important—to actually scrutinize a little bit this desire for oneness and what's actually happening in the spiritual and meditative openings, perceptual openings of experiences of oneness and union, dissolution and merging, whether in meditation or in life with a lover, or in the flow of doing a sport.

We'll return to this desire later in the retreat, this desire for oneness, for transcendence, for the unfabricated. There's quite a lot involved in that, and we'll explore the place of that desire on our path. But for now, let's say that eros will retain and engender, or works to both retain and actually engender two-ness. And it will move towards doing that even at the same time as it knows oneness, or onenesses—because there are many varieties and many levels of oneness.

So the general overall movement of soul-making and the thrust that comes from eros will work essentially to retain and engender two-ness, but also unfold oneness. And eventually those experiences become quite possible—the perception of a sense of two-ness, of erotically charged two-ness and otherness at the same time as one knows and can sense a oneness, or many onenesses at different levels, different varieties.

And again, eventually it's quite possible to modulate the emphasis in the way of looking or in the meditation or in the experience that one's involved with—to actually modulate it towards the melting, towards the unfabricating, as we touched on, or towards retaining the two-ness. What am I drawing out of perception? How am I inclining the unfolding of the experience? This is all very possible with the development of the art of meditation.

But eros keeps an erotic tension in the relationship, whether it's with a person or something in nature or an intrapsychic image or whatever. The erotic tension is maintained. And that erotic tension is not just the wanting to act or "I really want to kiss you" or whatever it is. It's not just wanting sexual consummation either, or the tension of the build-up of, say, sexual energy in the body, or just psychic energy, desire, or—as

we talked about—the tension of craving. It's not just the tension of energy accumulating in the body or the psychic vessel. That's not the only facet of the erotic tension, and that might not even be a big aspect of it at all. And the erotic tension can be subtle.

So it's not just wanting to act. It's not just wanting sexual consummation. It's not just the tension of energy. It's not just the tension of desiring union. Erotic tension that is intrinsic to the soul-making erotic movement is this desire for the other—desire to know and experience, touch the other that we're talking about.

There is always more. There's always more of that desire. So there's a tension because there's always more. It's inherent in the pothos of the eros that goes with the eros. And also because the object is always becoming more through the insemination, impregnation that eros gives to the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic process, soul-making process. The object always becomes more. There's always more to desire, more to know, more to experience. It doesn't collapse into oneness.

So there's an erotic tension just because there's always this desire for more and there's always the two.

Eros creates otherness, or we could say it creates othernesses because it creates also different aspects or whole ranges of othernesses within one object even. It creates and discovers otherness. We could say eros needs otherness. The erotically charged object is an other for eros.

And wrapped up in that, and in the experience—again, just phenomenologically observing the whole experience of eros, of soul-making—there's a fascination with the other. There's the sense, the perception of the beauty of the other. The other is, as we've been saying, an image, a fantasy, so they need to be imaginally alive. The other is an image and a fantasy, and image and fantasy are needed as part of the eros, as we've been saying—and this kind of space, if you like, of mystery or "not yet," or "unknown yet," the space in which the whole process, the whole thrust and opening of eros can happen to discover or create more of the object.

So both the image, replete with its different facets and its beauty and the fascination with that, and also the fascination, the attraction of the space of mystery, the not-as-yet, in which we can discover and create more of the object—all this is part of the experience of eros and soul-making eros.

Some relation to the opening to levels of oneness in meditation and mystical experience: what that means then, what we've just said, is that on the way to, or aspiring to, or practicing towards, in the process of learning to open to or discovering a level of

oneness, eros is there. There's fascination. I want to know cosmic consciousness, let's say. I want to open to it and discover it. There's fascination, there's the beauty perhaps of hearing about it or sensing it vaguely but not quite yet.

It exists for us as an image, replete with fantasy, beckoning from this space of mystery—depth we don't quite grasp, unknown potential waiting to unfold. All these aspects are present, making that oneness, whatever level we're contemplating, whatever we might call the unfabricated, into an erotic object for the soul.

But eros requires polarity, and it constellates an erotic tension. Something particularly fascinating emerges in the experience of eros—more easily observed sometimes in sustained relationships with another person where there's beauty and soul-making, though it applies equally to imaginal figures and objects. Even with something as seemingly unified as cosmic oneness, a sense of twoness and otherness can exist within the larger field of eros, within the soul-making dynamic itself.

This twoness and otherness, this erotic tension and polarity, can be experienced alongside—or perhaps within—a third element. There emerges what we might call the "us" or the "we." Consider: there's the self and the other, with eros flowing between them, each alive as image and erotic object. When the soul-making process grows rich enough, it constellates this third—often the very relationship itself.

So there's you and me, and then there's us—almost as if a third soul gets constellated, discovered, or created. What is the soul of this "we"? It's the soul of us that emerges from the eros-psyche-logos dynamic as it expands, enriches, finds, creates, discovers, reveals ever more. This "we," this "us," doesn't represent a merging into union but rather an integrated constellation of the two—a different kind of oneness composed of twoness, if you will.

When souls come together in relationship, I don't lose the sense of me, nor do you disappear. Both remain vibrantly alive as erotic objects—myself included, which we'll explore further. Yet simultaneously, a third seems to be born: we. You and I create a kind of larger soul together, but it's not a collapse into union. It's a birth.

This birth of the soul of us, of we, could indeed be regarded as a literal birth. Or perhaps the actual birth of a child emerges from this eros and soul-making, this child becoming another facet of the dynamic. The third might manifest as a creative project both parties can love and invest in. From the eros between two, some kind of third is born or emerges—whether the third of "us," an actual child, or a collaborative creation. This becomes a new erotic object, a further channel for eros and soul-making.

All these facets coexist simultaneously as different dimensions of the whole soul-making process. They emerge as one recognizes them, as the entire movement deepens, widens, expands, and refines. Because of this comprehensive nature—the soul-making dynamic's tendency to flow in every possible direction, to fill everything out and impregnate all with meaning—eros will also lead to recognizing essential oneness with the other, all kinds of different oneness.

The very erotic movement, when allowed to unfold fully, will eventually lead us to recognize various forms of oneness. It opens mystical experiences. But in the actual lived experience of eros with another person or imaginal figure, this oneness isn't what's predominantly emphasized. In fact, knowledge or sense of oneness isn't necessary to eros at all. Eros, in fertilizing the soul-making dynamic of eros-psyche-logos, will naturally uncover and reveal oneness as part of its unfolding—but this isn't the dominant aspect, nor what's emphasized when eros is in the foreground.

Eros needs the perception of otherness to remain. It doesn't want to dissolve otherness because otherness is what entices. The scope, size, range, depth, complexity, multifacetedness, and multidimensionality of perceiving the other—this is equivalent to the image, the psyche in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. This otherness must remain and be continually built.

In igniting and stoking the soul fires of eros, psyche, and logos, eros creates or discovers the other and otherness—but otherness it desires to contact, to know, to experience. Eros creates more attractive others that stimulate more eros. This is crucial: rather than creating others from whom we feel alienated or toward whom we feel aversion, eros generates attractive otherness that draws us deeper into relationship and discovery.

The implications of what we're exploring here are vast and far-reaching.

And we'll return to these threads. We'll pick them up later, as I mentioned.

But what it implies is that what some people call the art of disappearing—Ajahn Brahm, I think, has a book called *The Art of Disappearing*—the art of disappearing into jhana, or getting rid of the self, or erasing the self, or experiences of "no self," or emptiness, or that kind of thing, or other kinds of art of disappearing—valuable as they are and important as they are as experiences, temporary experiences on the path in the unfolding of insight and beauty and mystical awarenesses and opening of perception—the art of disappearing is not Eros. Eros is not the art of disappearing. They're different, if you like. You can't reduce one to the other. Eros is not the movement of disappearing. It's certainly not disappearing finally.

All these aspects that we've been talking about, all these pieces—the recognition of the oneness, the knowing of the oneness, the sense of the twoness being retained, the sense even of a third, of something being born from the erotic connection of the two, even the mutual emptiness of self and other object, imaginal object—all of that is actually implicit in the concept of participation. Participation. This is something I've touched on very briefly before, but to me it's a very powerful idea in all kinds of ways. But more even than an idea or a concept, it's actually a sense that is opened for us if the Eros is allowed to do its thing and stimulate the soul-making.

There isn't a hindering, a blocking, a cramping, a constriction, a refusal, a dismissal from any side of the Eros-Psyche-Logos tripod. So we begin to have a sense of participation—participating in the we, participating eventually in the universe, but at much more than just a material level. I participate in the universe by breathing in and out, or I participate by eating and urinating and defecating, whatever. I participate culturally to whatever extent I do. I participate in the community that I'm in, the communities that I'm in. I participate in society by voting, by writing letters, politically, socially, etc. All that's important participation. There's a way that one can see the beauty of all that.

But there are depths of profundity and comprehensiveness to this concept and sense of participation that Eros will unfold. It's not just an idea. We could start with the idea of it, but Eros will unfold, for instance, what eventually we feel like we are participating—my mind, which means my thoughts, my creativity, my insights, my playing with certain ideas. My mind is participating in the mind of God, if you like, or the mind of the Buddha nature. My individual mind, all the micro-movements of my mind, participating in the soul, if you like, of the divine nature, the Eros of the divine, or in the soul of the other, or in the world soul.

As I said, as the Eros is allowed to expand and fertilize the perception, fertilize the psyche, fertilize the ideation, we get a sense of other dimensions to the different aspects of our being and a sense that we are participating in those other dimensions. They're not separate from us. It's not that we're just one. It's not that it's just two either. And there's a sense of a third. This participation is creating a third. Something is being born of my participation in the divine. Something is being born by the divine, if you like, using me and my particular personhood, my particular—all my particularities.

So as I asked, I think it was in the last talk or the one before: whose Eros is this? Whose psyche is this? Whose imaginal perception is this? Whose idea is this? Whose conceptual framework? These begin to be questions that come to the fore. They emerge out of the very soul-making process. And so we can have a sense, a deepening sense of mystical participation.

As I said, participation—it's a big word. And I think anyone with a little reflection would, as I say, it becomes obvious that we participate in all kinds of ways, but there's depth to that and levels of what that can mean to us and the beauty of what it can mean, the beauty of the sense of it. Because in participation, the idea or the sense of participation, as I said, it's got a kind of oneness in it, implicit in it, but it also retains the twoness and it keeps the threeness, or the birth of the third, if you like.

And in it, my particulars, your particulars, the particular of whatever erotic object I am connected to, opening to, engaged with, the particulars are sacralized in that participation, and as particulars, they are sacralized. In other words, my particular bones or this thought or whatever—it's not just sacralized because its essence is said to be equal with the essence of everything else and being universal, whatever, play of awareness or universal love or something.

Particulars—my particulars, your particulars, the particulars of the erotic beloved—are sacralized as particulars in this sense of participation. You understand? Because the participation needs the particulars. Part-icipation. The part is... it's not just all the same. It cannot be replaced. My uniqueness, your uniqueness. And that uniqueness is itself unfolding. And that's part of the participation.

Can you get a sense? It's a different kind of mysticism, if you like. It doesn't replace the oneness and the knowing of universal essence, but it's a different sense and a different concept.

When we say things like that—and in fact wrapped up in everything, literally, but also wrapped up in all imaginal practice, and all this talk about eros and re-enchantment—indeed wrapped up in anything that we might want to take as a subject in our existence is the question of epistemology: How do we know what's true or what's real? How do we know anything? What can we rely on? Epistemology is the philosophy of knowing, of knowledge, if you like.

Actually, forgive me—I'm using that word epistemology right now in a way that includes the implicit questions of ontology wrapped up in it. So really, one word to embrace all that. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions of reality, of what is real, of the reality status of things. How real is this or that, if we could say, or what kind of reality does this or that have? So as I said, just for shorthand, I'm using that word epistemology to embrace all that—that whole nexus and flow of questioning, all that investigation into ways of knowing and their validity and their domains and the whole question of reality.

This is wrapped up, as I said, in what we've just been talking about—the sense of sacredness and the whole notion of the viability, the validity of imaginal perception when we're talking about eros. It's wrapped up in insight into anything—into emptiness, even into impermanence. It's wrapped up in just our existence, even if we don't think and we're not philosophers at all. So this is important.

We're saying these things about sacredness, and what are we saying about that in terms of its philosophical ground, the epistemology?

Well, first of all, as practitioners, I'm interested in opening up the field of our explorations—I don't know why else you would be here. But as practitioners interested in opening up the field of explorations, interested in opening up regions of soul and of soul-making, we recognize and we admit openly that we grant an image its sacredness, its divine dimensions, its autonomy. Remember I was talking about how an imaginal image has a certain autonomy.

But we acknowledge that this is something that we grant the image. We grant it through the way of looking, through the concept operating in the moment, the logos operating in the moment. Through the way of looking, we grant it sacredness, divine dimensions, autonomy. Without that, it cannot have these things for us.

And it's the same with eros. If you like, we can decide to see it as divine, as autonomous in the way that we're talking about—that it's not my eros, it's eros coming through me, pushing through me from the divine, from a divine figure or divine level. It's autonomous in that sense. So we can decide to adopt that way of looking, that conceptual framework as part of our way of looking, and see what happens when we do that. I mentioned this much earlier on the retreat. See what happens when we adopt a certain ideation, a certain logos, and have that actually be in the way of looking.

But it's also true—and if you're experimenting with this stuff in practice, you will get this sense—it's also that we discover sacredness. We discover the divine dimensions, the dimensionality, the autonomy of images and of eros, when we don't contract around or cling to some conceptual framework or way of looking that simply refuses to admit sacredness, divinity, autonomy.

So if, in other words, if we're open and we're not clinging to a certain rigid idea, then we will actually have the experience of getting a sense of noticing sacredness, autonomy, divinity, dimensionality actually revealed in the experience.

So what is it then? Is it that we give it that? We grant it that? That it's just coming from us? Or is it that we discover it? Are both true? Do we create and discover? Is there some kind of amalgam, I think I used the word at one point?

Now, this question in regard to sacredness of the imaginal and of eros—the epistemology there is a very similar question to the epistemology in relation to anything. So this is related to much broader epistemological questions regarding all experience.

All experience.

I would say that in the field of imaginal practice and the exploration of eros—and I mean the wider field of imaginal practice, not just the way that comes into our awareness intra-psychically, but the way it comes into our perception of the world, of self, of other—we can and we should see it both ways.

Both that we acknowledge the dependent arising, if you like. We grant an image, a sense of sacredness, a sense of divinity, a sense of autonomy—a characteristic of autonomy. But we also discover it. Can I move between those two perceptions, those two ways of looking, these ideas? Can I even somehow adopt both at the same time? Yes, I can.

If we can do that, have that kind of flexibility, this will be the most useful for practice. I think it's much more mature than plumping for one or the other. It will be useful in the sense that it will liberate our perception. It will liberate perceptions, experiences. For us, it will open and fertilize that whole soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos. It will galvanize the soul, galvanize soul-making, if we can hold this epistemological question quite skillfully.

This, to me, is a really interesting area. Historically—and I think I've mentioned this on other retreats—probably within religious traditions and perhaps most philosophical traditions until maybe very recently within the history of humanity, there have been streams which have wanted to give a kind of independent reality to the world of the imaginal or to what we might call sacred knowledge.

You get that in Sufism, you get it in many of the Buddhist traditions. In a way, you even get it in the Buddha of the Pali Canon. There was a group in England called the Cambridge Platonists, active in the seventeenth century—Thomas More and John Smith, among others—who resurrected Platonism with variations, wanting to give, or in fact giving, a place for the possibility of knowing in a way similar to how we know things through the senses. The possibility of knowing immediately—not by rational deduction—having sacred knowledge, knowing the mundus imaginalis, which is Latin for the world of the imaginal.

They were actually creating a third kind of knowing. There's rationality and abstract knowledge, and there's what was regarded as concrete knowledge—knowledge that's sensual through the senses of external things. But there was a third category that the

Cambridge Platonists called spiritual sensation. It wasn't to do with thought and rational deduction. It wasn't to do with the kind of sensation where I touch this chair or this table—concrete and externally conceived. It was another dimension which had its own kind of immediate sensation, spiritual sensation.

So they gave, if you like, independent reality to the mundus imaginalis, or to certain things we can know as sacred. And there's a way of knowing that—just a third way of knowing. We say that it's true if I deduce something logically from rational deduction, and if my logic is correct, then I conclude something is true. It's true if I can touch it and see it and everyone agrees with me. And there's a third kind: it's true if I open and use my faculty of spiritual sensation. But all these things exist independently—they just need the right tools to uncover them, discover them.

A lot of these traditions, for instance the Sufi tradition, speak of this way of knowing, this spiritual sensation, this knowing directly of the mundus imaginalis, as available to one who has purified their heart. That word "heart" in Sufism, in mystical Islam, refers to the organ of imaginal knowing—not so much the seat of emotion, but the organ of imaginal knowing. One who has purified their heart knows what's independently existing as a reality in that way.

This still goes on—people asserting this is real, this kind of knowledge, sacred knowledge, or this knowing of what appears in the imaginal. It's an alternative to Cartesian dualism of just mind or matter, and to philosophical positivism, where if you can't measure it or see it with your senses, it doesn't exist. So that's one option. It's been very popular, and it still is popular with different people and different traditions.

But there's an alternative. The alternative is to recognize that reality, so-called, or perception is participatory. Our sense of reality or reality itself is participatory. Our experience is participatory. In other words, we fabricate experience. We are involved in the fabrication of experience, the fabrication of the sense of reality and the fabrication of what we then deem real.

This is not going to the extreme of a slightly New Age "it's all just mind-made, you create your own reality" sort of version. But neither is it the other extreme of just assuming that things we perceive exist as they seem to, independent of our way of looking.

That notion of independent, objective reality has been thoroughly dismantled, if you like, by modern Western philosophy, whether of the continental variety or the analytical Anglo-American tradition. From multiple directions—philosophy of science and countless other approaches—this basic assumption has been systematically deconstruc-

ted. The fundamental notion that we're generally taught and feel as intuition—that things exist objectively independent of our way of looking—is simply no longer viable. This was also a core axiom and goal of the scientific method: the idea that we can know how things exist objectively, independent of mind, independent of our biases and perspectives.

Both in philosophy of science and in broader Western philosophy, the naivety of that kind of objective realism has been left in tatters. It's not really sustainable anymore.

And yet, even among those who've encountered these ideas, there remains an often tacit attempt to build Dharma—the whole conceptual structure of Dharma—on some kind of realist foundation. Whether through religious realism, as I alluded to earlier, or secular modernist realism based on materialist assumptions, or an existentialist version that simply accepts "this is reality as it seems, and this is what we must deal with." Sometimes a third option emerges, quite popular among Buddhists who aspire not to argue or enter conflict, simply declaring that anything goes—people believe different things and it's all fine, let's just not argue.

But in all of this, I see a kind of naivety, an inadequacy of philosophical engagement with epistemological issues.

What's more compelling to me is recognizing that perception, experience, so-called reality is participatory. It's always participatory. We've explored this in other talks through quantum physics and developments in modern philosophy, postmodernism, and various other fields.

Modern philosophy often expresses this insight to a certain level, but frequently doesn't develop it further. Those who have read about it and say "yes, yes, I understand" face the crucial question: what do you actually do with this insight into emptiness, into the emptiness of the inherent existence of things? How do you work with the recognition that our way of looking contributes to so-called reality, that reality is participatory in this profound sense?

Modern philosophers seem remarkably ill-equipped to engage this insight because they lack meditative training. Their actual ways of looking remain extremely limited in scope. They don't possess the range to experientially engage different ways of looking and actually open up different cosmoses. Or they glimpse that emptiness, recognize how reality is constructed, acknowledge it intellectually, but then revert to the same kind of realism that modernism indoctrinates us with—there's a real world, it's material, objective knowledge is the way we know things. Nothing fundamentally shifts or gets challenged. There's a reversion.

This pattern fascinates me. Often it's unstated, of course, because intellectually one knows that's not the correct position. But practically speaking, implicitly and conceptually, when weaving new versions of Dharma, it's still operating there.

I find this reversion compelling—why it happens, why there's this backing down or inability to follow through on that level of insight and open things up. I think there are practical reasons related to meditative skill, and perhaps psychological reasons connected to soul-making that I'll return to later in the retreat.

I believe it was physicist John Archibald Wheeler who coined the term "participatory universe"—a great twentieth-century physicist who worked with Niels Bohr and taught Richard Feynman and Roger Penrose, among others. A wonderful thinker who recognized that knowing is participatory, knowledge is participatory, reality is participatory. There is not this independent existence separate from our way of looking.

We participate also in the concepts we create. Conceptual frameworks themselves are participatory. One philosophical approach to this insight into emptiness is through this notion of participation.

But as I mentioned, this is also something that eros, if we allow it—if we allow it to unfold, to stimulate soul-making—will reveal to us. At some point we develop this sense, this deepening sense of participation in all its mystical levels, openings, and dimensions. We'll experience both the felt sense of it and the logos of it. The concept will emerge as an important logos, a viable one that we can engage as a flexible option.

And what does all that bring then? This sense of participation, this idea of deep, profound participation - what does that itself bring when we open it up as an idea, when we participate in the idea of participation, when we actually have that sense?

Well, one of the things that's implicit in it comes again from Plato's depiction of Eros as a hermeneutical daemon - a demigod, an imaginal figure, if you like, whose realm is the realm of hermeneutics, of interpretation, of ways of seeing, ways of knowing, ways of understanding, ways of perceiving. And this is in regard to everything - the whole sense and every aspect of existence. How are we seeing it? How are we sensing it? What is it to us? What it becomes depends on our hermeneutics, and our hermeneutics is stimulated by eros. So again, it's participation. The idea of participation opens up the hermeneutics, and the hermeneutics - the recognition of hermeneutics - opens up the participation, the recognition of participation in the creation/discovery of reality.

What might all this mean with regard to the Dharma? If eros is regarded with respect, if we don't just pigeonhole it as a fetter or defilement, eros will open things up, as we've been explaining. And in relation to the Dharma, as something we love, as a do-

main we love, eros will open it up. As the soul-making dynamic infuses the Dharma, relates to the Dharma, eros opens it up. You can see this personally, I think, and you can also see it historically.

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha said: "Seeing impermanence, one becomes disenchanted. Disenchanted, one becomes dispassionate. Dispassionate, one is liberated." You can see the wisdom there, the process he's alluding to of renouncing clinging and letting clinging go, and then the liberation that comes from that.

But with this exploration - this further exploration sometimes based on insight and deeper insight into emptiness rather than just impermanence, and also this exploration that opens up through eros and the soul-making dynamic - one could also say now, modeling on his statement and phraseology, something almost opposite regarding disenchantment and dispassion. One could say, or one could see the validity of saying, or the possibility of saying and recognizing: "Seeing the emptiness and eternality of images" - seeing the imaginal, in other words, seeing that image is image but it has this timelessness - "seeing the emptiness and eternality of images, the world is re-enchanted. The world and the self, enchanted and empty, one is free to become impassioned. Impassioned, infinite things open infinitely."

In other words, if we allow the passion, the eros, if we allow the soul-making of the imaginal, the world is re-enchanted. And in that, infinite things open infinitely - this soul-making movement, the way that this opens things up, everything, infinite things, and opens them infinitely, potentially infinitely.

You can also turn this phrase around so that the passion, the eros, leads to enchantment and the sense of timelessness that comes with images, the eternality. All these aspects - enchantment, eternality, eros - they are mutually dependent.

Some of you will be familiar with some Vajrayana teachings, and you can see the connection there or recognize in what I just said something akin to a Vajrayana opening of tantric perspectives, tantric understandings, tantric project if you like.

Something then happens in the whole sense of what we're seeing the Dharma is, where it leads, what the possibilities are. Dharma becomes bigger and becomes endless in a certain way. Eros will extend, will widen, deepen the image, the psyche, and the idea - the logos - of dharma, just like it will with anything it comes into contact with. And the pothos in the eros will create this endlessness to it.

So something, if we allow soul-making really fully, maybe something in us eventually recognizes that we, the soul, need an endless Dharma, a Dharma that is endless. And what does that mean? If awakening - if we're not chained to the mooring of regarding

awakening, final awakening as an ending of rebirth - what does an endless Dharma mean beyond just the reduction of my personal suffering or stress or neurosis in a rather narrow modernist version of dharma?

This reduction of personal suffering or stress, this narrowing of dharma to merely addressing neurosis in a rather modernist framework—that's what awakening becomes. But that's not endless. It's not big enough, perhaps.

How might the dharma be endless? We'll return to this question, but four possibilities occur to me.

The first is through a much deeper understanding of emptiness. Now that in itself is not endless—one perhaps reaches the point where everything is understood to be empty, absolutely everything, at a very thorough, deep level. This is certainly much further than merely aspiring to reduce personal suffering, stress, or neurosis psychologically. Yet still not endless.

However, if one sees fabrication—returning to some of the original insights we explored—and then sees further that fabrication itself is empty too, then the whole duality between fabricated and unfabricated collapses. The entire ground of everything is taken away. The whole distinction between fabricated and unfabricated, sacred and profane—all of that opens up as magical.

What opens up are ways of looking. As I said, we end up with nothing but ways of looking. The range of ways of looking expands infinitely. The validity of different ways of looking and their practical possibility opens. Everything becomes magical—all part of the magical, sacred fabrication in which we can participate. There's an endlessness of exploring different ways of looking, an endlessness in the beauty of that exploration.

This might be one way that dharma could be endless.

Another way lies in the Mahayana vision of what a Buddha is—what an awakened, enlightened being truly embodies. If you know some of these texts, what it involves to be enlightened in the Mahayana sense, progressing through the ten or eleven bhumis to full Buddhahood, represents something so far beyond anything realistically possible. As a Sanskrit teacher I once had, Peter Gang, said: "The Mahayana Buddha makes the God of the Old Testament look like a schoolboy in short trousers." It's so grand and far-reaching, it's effectively infinite—that level of potential we're discussing.

There's a kind of fantasy of rebirth through eons upon eons of time, a vast cosmology. This entire fantasy—and I use that term in a positive sense—contains a kind of endlessness because realistically, no one will declare, "I am a Buddha now." One remains always within that larger cosmological, imaginal fantasy and the beauty of that direction. There's an endlessness there.

There's also endlessness in the more popular understanding of the bodhisattva—one who devotes life and energy to serving others, to easing suffering. In socially or environmentally engaged Buddhism, there's a kind of endlessness. There will never be an end to social problems, environmental problems to address. Endlessness exists in that dedication.

This represents a third possibility of endlessness.

The fourth relates to soul-making. If soul-making is recognized as a fundamental dimension of what practice is and what dharma can be, then that too creates an endless dharma, because soul-making is endless. Why? Because of exactly what we've been exploring—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and the way pothos pushes it to create more and more, discover more and more, open more and more, potentially infinitely. There's an endlessness in the integration, the incorporation of soul-making organically into the scope of what dharma is.

These four possibilities are not necessarily separate at all. You can see their interconnection. We'll revisit this question again.

But if the eros is strong, deep, then I wonder whether this recognition needs to happen at some point—a sense of a path or territory that is endless, one that can accommodate soul-making.

CHAPTER 64

Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h06

Drawing on alchemical maxims about vessel strength and fire mastery, Rob Burbea explores the wisdom, art, and balance needed for safe and skillful exploration of eros and soul-making. He examines the archetypal figure of Dionysus as representing the complex nature of erotic awakening - both dismembering and remembering, civilized and wild. The talk addresses prerequisites for eros practice including embodied ethics, emotional awareness, and trust in desire as potentially sacred. Burbea discusses the relationship between deep equanimity states and the capacity to hold eros without being overwhelmed, using the image of flame within darkness. He explores the tension between duty to imaginal figures and spiritual freedom, suggesting that devotional commitment paradoxically brings liberation from attachment to smaller concerns. The discussion includes practical considerations about preliminaries for tantric practice, drawing parallels with Vajrayāna requirements of samādhi, emptiness understanding, faith, and devotion. Throughout, he emphasizes that all spiritual paths have specific dangers, challenging assumptions about the safety of mindfulness compared to imaginal practice.

There are two maxims or aphorisms from the alchemical traditions that I would like to share, as they are relevant and important for any practice—for all meditative and spiritual practices, for the practice of psychotherapy and the path of healing, and for many other dimensions of practice.

The first is: "The strength of the vessel must be proportionate to the tension in the material." The vessel is the alchemical vessel that holds the material being worked on, and its strength must be proportionate to the energy in the material.

The second maxim is: "She who masters the fire, masters the work"—or "One who masters the fire, masters the work."

These are two gems of wisdom, quite general and broad-ranging in their applicability. If we are going to open and explore this territory of eros, of desire, of soul-making—especially of eros—with integrity, thoroughness, comprehensiveness, depth, and intelligence, then that opening and exploration demands that we take care of many different aspects and dimensions. It demands that we bring wisdom, art, and skill to the whole process.

I want to explore what these two alchemical maxims might mean for us and our explorations.

We have already discussed how the notion of a vessel for the soul-making enterprise is sometimes provided by the boundaries that are in place in certain relationships. These boundaries create what we call a temenos—a sacred space, a vessel that holds and heats the material, the soul material. The eros functions as fire, and there is a vessel created by certain boundaries in many different ways.

Meditation is also a boundary. In meditation, one is not acting out images or other phenomena. We have opened up the possibility that the body moves and reflects or refracts what is happening imaginatively, energetically, and erotically, but sometimes the body is still as well. Generally speaking, there is no acting out, no concretization or implementation in manifest actuality of the image. So meditation—the meditation posture, the meditation session—also functions as a kind of vessel, a temenos.

The whole question of what makes a vessel strong, what contributes to the strength of a vessel, is complex. There are many factors to consider. Even if you think in terms of physical vessels, some are strong yet brittle, or strong up to a certain point before they shatter.

Another kind of strength comes from elasticity. The strength of a vessel—its ability not to burst and thus to contain the material, the work, and the fire—comes in part from its elasticity, its capacity to stretch, to be fluid, to morph and take on different shapes when needed.

Why is this relevant to our work? Precisely because of the nature of what we have explained regarding the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and its natural inclination toward expansion—expansion of image, of psyche, of eros, widening and deepening. You can see that this will need a vessel that is elastic. Just in terms of this analogy, there is much implied about elasticity. This question of the strength of the vessel is a complex issue.

The word "fire" in the other alchemical aphorism can mean many different things in different practices, as can "vessel." A vessel might be a relationship—a psychotherapeutic relationship or teacher-student relationship—that becomes a vessel. There are many possibilities for what the vessel actually is. The vessel can be the body or the psyche itself.

Fire could refer to many different things. In any practice, fire is connected with effort and intensity—the intentness and intensity that we bring to bear on the work, whether that is meditation practice, traditional insight meditation, noting arising and passing, concentration, metta, or any other practice. These questions of effort and intensity are part of fire.

But of course, as we have said on this retreat, eros is fire. Eros is flame, desire, fire, longing. All this is fire. So this second alchemical maxim comes very much into this work.

But it is not simple. Even the question of mastery is complex. Do we ever really completely master the fire that is given to us and the eros that comes through us? Or is it always going to be eventually bigger than us? Even if it is always going to be bigger than us—because of its divinity, because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, because it will keep expanding and opening up other dimensions and meanings and resonances and power—does that mean we should abandon any attempts at mastery, at developing our ability and capacity and skill and art?

It is complex.

All this is complex. Fire burns. We've said this before. Fire burns, so it demands care. And yet without fire, as human beings, just evolutionarily and biologically, we're very limited in what we can do without fire. He or she who masters the fire, masters the work.

In relation to the vessels analogy, I've talked in the past on certain retreats about this teaching from Lurianic Kabbalah, from the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, about the shattering of the vessels. It's not just saying things are impermanent—it's saying that organically woven into psychological development, cosmological development, conceptual development, development of relationship, the vessels that we form at different points in our soul's development or just the movement of the soul might need not just to stretch, but to shatter.

The vessel that we've taken care to build up, that provides the terminals, the support of the structure, containment, orientation—it shatters. Sometimes very unexpectedly, sometimes violently, sometimes it just sort of melts. But this is, I would say, an inevitable part of living life deeply as a human being, and also as cultures. That shattering may be more or less sudden or violent, but it's part of what happens if there is eros. You could say it's part of what happens when the eros ignites that whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Because then it expands, and at some point we might have to shatter something because the wall won't budge otherwise—it's not elastic, it won't expand.

So yes, there's building, developing the strength of the vessel or vessels and their elasticity, and mastering the fire. But even these concepts are not so simple.

Just a reminder: all practices, there is no such thing as a practice or a path without dangers—dangers that may be more specific to this path or that path. Not necessarily more or less dangerous, just that the dangers are specific to each path. So oftentimes people, especially when they're first hearing about imaginal practice, will say, "Oh, that's dangerous. That sounds dangerous." And it's just what we've been indoctrinated by. Is it really any more dangerous than, let's say, simple mindfulness practice? Or are the dangers just different?

If you've been reading the newspapers in the last year or so, you'll be aware of articles appearing about mindfulness and eight-week courses teaching mindfulness, and how there have been occasions where it seems the mindfulness itself has caused some kind of mental destabilization or emergence of repressed trauma. Taking simple mindfulness practice as an example, in the way that it's taught in a very secular context these days, I've had people say to me, "I've been practicing mindfulness and I got a lot from it, but at the same time I feel neutered." A woman said to me, "I feel neutered." Powerful words. What does it mean to feel neutered? Something has been cut off, amputated from her being. In this case, it has a whole erotic connection, doesn't it, to be neutered?

Another friend, a close friend, said to me that practicing and living in an insight meditation center for some years—this was many years ago—something in her soul was dying, was being killed. She didn't quite know what was going on at the time, couldn't quite articulate it or get clear about it until some years later. So yes, a lot of learning, a lot of development, a lot of lovely things, and something being killed that's not so obvious at the time. The neutering is not so obvious to a lot of people, unlike a kind of freaking out or whatever. And there are much more subtle dangers with mindfulness that have to do with soul-making and with realism—the kind of realism that's entrenched or implicitly communicated as a foundation in mindfulness teachings, mostly.

All paths have their dangers. This is something that's just part of wisdom—to be aware of that fact, and aware of the particular dangers we need to look out for on whichever path we're taking. I think it's foolish and naive to think there's such a thing as a path without danger, or that the path I'm on doesn't have dangers while pointing to other paths and saying they're dangerous.

I want to talk about bringing wisdom, developing balance and the art of balance, and bringing equanimity to bear on this whole exploration of eros and soul-making. At the same time, I may need to contradict myself or balance that with this: when we're exploring eros and opening that door, we're opening the door potentially to a wider range of what we might call archetypes than we may have been used to, especially if we think of the Dharma in quite a narrow way.

The classical god Dionysus has a lot to do with eros. Eros is an erotic god, as are many others from different traditions. Hermes is an erotic god. Aphrodite, of course, from that tradition.

But also in the Buddhist tradition, if you look at the Tantric deities, many of them are erotic deities in different ways. Listen to this from James Hillman about Dionysus, and bear in mind what this archetypal elaboration of this god says about the path—about how what the path can be is quite different from how we usually conceive it in a more narrow sense, and what it might involve if we really open up this exploration of Eros.

Dionysus in the myths is dismembered into countless pieces—this happens in different ways, either at his birth or at different points—and then he's remembered. So we have dismembering and remembering Dionysus. He's put back together as a kind of resurrection. Hillman says he's a figure of many guises and pursuits. He is called the divided, but also the undivided—or both together: the divided undivided. He's called the loosener, the lord of souls, the lord of wild beasts.

His realm was outside the conventional constraints of the city. His dances took place on hillsides near woodlands. In the city, he ruled the theatre, both comic and tragic. Can you see how this relates to everything we're talking about? Coming apart, being dismembered, implicates a myth quite different from those we usually associate with strength of character. This is not Hercules we're talking about. This is not ego willpower. This is not Artemis, the ruler of animal nature. It's not Hera, the queen of the household and the upholder of family values.

Instead, Dionysus is the lord of souls, the divided god who was pulled to pieces. He's a strange figure—he was even named the Stranger. He's an intoxicating life force who came on the scene, appearing from outside the usual civilization together with a dancing group of satyrs and raving devotees. And he was also declared to be Hades. There's some strange identity of Dionysus, this intoxicating life force, with Hades, the invisible god of the souls in the underworld—the invisible god of the souls in the underworld. All this woven together. Can you hear the resonances and mirrorings of what we've said so far on this retreat?

Hillman goes on in relation to erotic arousal and desire coming into our life and disrupting things, potentially disrupting things in all kinds of ways. He's not just talking about sexual arousal—again, he's talking about that force, that movement of Eros, and its capacity to stretch our vessels through the soul-making dynamic, and sometimes shatter them. He says: "Realize you are not solely to blame for the conflict brought on by arousal. The source lies deeper than human nature. It is archetypal—a conflict among the gods." The call of Dionysus tends to upset the normal course of civilization, whose wise overseer Athena, another classical goddess, did not permit his goat in her terrain. The goat is this disruptive animal.

Dionysus, lord of women, called to both genders and all ages to join his rituals. This is not something just for men or just for women or just for young people. Women left their household duties to follow him into the hills for release and raving. Two old-timers with grey hair in Euripides' play The Bacchae go off to dance with Dionysus all night and all day.

How do you hear that? How are you hearing that? Is there already for you a certain identity construct? Perhaps you're already quite identified with that archetypal figure of Dionysus and that kind of actualization of behavior. Or perhaps you're identified with the opposite—the picture of calm and cool equanimity and stillness. Where is your tendency of identification, clinging, attachment?

And do you hear this in terms of a necessity of concretization? Oh, I'd better go find the nearest rave and dance all night long. Or if something needs manifestation—we've talked about this before in terms of imaginal practice—is it just a very obvious, very narrow interpretation? Oh, it means actually dancing. Is that what this means? Does raving and dancing in the hills with raving devotees mean actually dancing? It might. It might be concretized that way. But not necessarily. The question is: does it? And how?

How does it move? And what does it call for?

We've explored this territory before on previous retreats. But is my interpretation of this mythological figure, this archetypal figure and divinity—am I putting it into too narrow a box in my interpretation, my translation? What's my tendency here anyway, in relation to all this?

So I'm interested—we're interested—in opening up this territory, opening up a myth. A myth should open, and these teachings should open, rather than just justify what we already kind of believe and are entrenched in. Partly these teachings are to kind of legitimize and realize a place for something we might have been judging in ourselves—we'll actually see that in a different light. But not only to justify—to open as well.

So let's go into this a little bit. What might be involved in creating good vessels—right vessels, if we can use that word—and supporting, let's call it mastery? But that really means the ability with all this: a facility, an art, the capacity and skill of navigation and discernment with all this. What might be involved in creating and forging right vessels and developing mastery?

Those two are not actually separate—just to make that clear from the start. The navigation, the capacity and skill in responding to what's actually happening in one's practice, in one's life, with Eros, with the imaginal, with soul-making, in real time, in the moment—our abilities to bring different factors to bear and all that—this navigation, this richness and complexity of responding and the skill and art and ability in all kinds of different ways, that actually creates the vessel in the moment. So it's not like you have a pre-packaged vessel and then you add a bit of mastery. That actually is making a vessel in real time, in the moment, as things are moving and developing. So they're not really separate.

But let's think about all this. Let's go into this, unfold it a little bit, unpack it. Right vessel. So what might that mean?

You may be aware of this, but in Vajrayana teachings, in tantric practice—at least in Buddhism, in Tibetan Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions—they are almost always only presented after certain preliminary practices which are regarded as necessary. So there's a whole range of preliminaries, and I wonder if we can think about that too: What might be a preliminary for me? What needs to be in place? What do I need to take care of and establish if I'm going to do this kind of practice, exploring Eros?

So in the Vajrayana, the preliminaries would include ethics. Actually, I don't know that tradition from the inside, so to speak, so I'm just getting this from the outside, so I'm hoping and assuming this is the case. It includes ethics—a grounding, an establishment in ethics, as something we'll come back to.

It includes other practices. So, for example, the development of samadhi is probably a preliminary or prerequisite to doing Vajrayana practices, tantric practices. It should be—this I know is actually not always the case, unfortunately—but tantric practice, Vajrayana practice is predicated, is based on an understanding of emptiness and some facility with emptiness practice. We'll return to this. I've said it before. We'll return to this. And I would state all this for our path as well.

Tantric practice also, if you talk to someone, if you read, you get the sense that it's very much based on faith. There's some kind of faith operating here, which may not be a so-called naive, realist faith, as sometimes it gets portrayed or dismissed or labeled.

There's an understanding of emptiness. Tara is empty. Whoever it is, this tantric deity is empty. Oftentimes people don't understand this and they're still practicing Tantra, or they think they understand it. But technically, somehow the faith that's involved is also imbued with an understanding of emptiness. But faith is another of the preliminaries.

And also devotion, tied in with faith, obviously. But that devotion needs to be embodied. So you see again in the Vajrayana practice how either mantra recitation or the prostrations—think of people doing hundreds of thousands of prostrations. How much work and time and commitment and effort is involved in that? There's an embodiment of devotion there. Yes, literally an embodiment of devotion.

So all these form the preliminaries, as does a conceptual framework. Some conceptual framework is provided for understanding...

imaginal practice, and tantric practice. And also—sometimes it's not so obvious from the outside—but sangha is implied as well. There's the support of other people who are exploring this together, teachers and co-adventurers, that one can talk to, one can feel nourished by, one can be in the presence of. That kind of support functions there as well.

So all these—ethics, other practices, samadhi, emptiness, faith, devotion that's embodied, conceptual framework, sangha—this is all part of the preliminaries that are deemed necessary in Tantra and Vajrayana practice. We'd do well, I think you would do well, to reflect on some of this: what does it mean for you? What does it mean for us, exploring this, opening up the range of what practice is and the directions and dimensions of what practice can be and can involve? What might each of these mean—sangha and devotion and emptiness, understanding and ethics and all that?

But preliminaries—it's a question. I'll come back to it. Because part of that question, inherent in the very concept of preliminaries, is this: pre, prerequisite, preliminary—does that imply a certain ordering of my development in practice? An ordering of the development of what? An ordering of what practices I'm developing?

In other words, do I need to—as I mentioned in a previous talk—develop my capacity to really say no to that cookie or that second slice of dessert when I don't really need it, and really feel secure in that, before I attempt any of this stuff? Do I need to feel that I'm not just pulled around by the vedanā or by the promise that someone might love me or make me feel okay about myself, before I open up this exploration of Eros?

Some people do that first, and then get interested in this other stuff. Some people do that and never get interested in this other stuff. Some people need to do that first—need to feel that kind of establishment and security and development before they can open

this. And others, as I said in a previous talk on this retreat, others can't wait. There's something in the depth and aliveness of the eros that moves through them in this life—they can't wait, or things are happening, and the investigations and the development into more traditional kinds of letting go, and this exploration of eros, need to go on somehow in parallel. We touched on this before.

But I would say both letting go—both in a sort of more superficial sense of the cookie and the chocolate cake and all that, and in the deeper sense that we talked about in terms of really letting go of subtle clinging, really opening up this whole range of insights into dependent arising and emptiness—both all that and a sort of conscious and mindful exploration and development of art with regard to Eros, both of these I would regard, for me more and more, as elements or parts of what I would conceive to be a full path, a full practice.

If we're just going to say, "Eros, you're talking about desire, or that's just clinging, and that just leads to suffering. Just put it down. Don't engage with Eros. It's fire. Don't go near it"—well, most of us listening to this are probably lay people. We're not celibate renunciates, for a start. Actually, if you've lived for a while in monasteries, there's still a question of how renunciate are a lot of monastics. They may not be having sex, but there are a lot of other opportunities for sense pleasures and indulgences.

But anyway, both lay people and celibate renunciates—whether they're monastic or lay celibate renunciates—eros is there already. That's partly what I'm trying to say on this retreat. It's already there as an element of our being, as an element of our soul, as a force in our lives and in our practice. Even just eros with regard to the path—which we'll come back to talking about what that means—even just with regard to a narrow range of images and fantasies that are alive for us. Maybe they're just the Buddhist ones, the sort of classical Buddhist ones, but there's eros in relation to them and to the path. Even if it's just that range, and those kinds of directions of eros that are allowed, eros is there already. It's alive in our lives, and it needs addressing, it needs understanding, it needs exploring.

But if we, as lay people, are just going to believe something incredibly simplistic and dismissive—that Eros is basically craving and it brings suffering—then really what we're believing, what we're buying into, is this: if we buy into that, we're also buying into the idea that, okay, we're deciding to live as lay people, so we're effectively deliberately engaging in what leads to suffering. Which somehow indirectly implies that we're either a bit stupid, or our practice is essentially a waste of time. We may get a little benefit, but really what we're doing is opting for some version of the path that is not a full version. It's not the real deal.

Now, of course, some people believe exactly that, and either decide to be monastics or just hope that in a future life they'll be born able to be a monastic. Some people actually believe that. But really, is it true? Is that true?

Is it just true that Eros inevitably leads to suffering? Is it that simple? Therefore we should just leave it—put it down, turn away, or settle for some kind of half-hearted attempt at the path? Is that really true? Are we just settling for second best?

Or do we need—as forms the whole basis of this retreat—other concepts and conceptual frameworks here, so that we can really include Eros and include the exploration of it, as well as other ways of working with the parallel factor of letting go? Both at the more superficial everyday level and at the level of really deep exploration—do we need other ideas and practices that can actually allow us to include and explore both?

There's this whole question about ordering and priorities. But I would say an exploration of eros in the wide sense—and again, I've said this before, but just to reiterate—if we return to those first two alchemical maxims and say that Eros is fire and the vessel needs to be strong so it can contain this fire without bursting or melting, it can sound like we're dealing with something really intense and dangerous.

But don't get carried away with those particular images of fire or alchemical vessels heating up and perhaps cracking. Yes, there's that possibility that we're sometimes dealing with something really strong—something that's really stretching our being emotionally, energetically, conceptually, psychically. But also, a lot of eros, many of the experiences, are really quite subtle.

As I said before, practice needs to be able to span that whole range. Yes, the intense. Yes, the stretching. And yes, sometimes even the breaking. But also the subtle and the easily overlooked and the not particularly remarkable and the not very intense. It's not the case that one is the real deal and the other isn't. Not at all.

So don't get too taken in by some of the imagery from alchemy or other traditions. The exploration of eros in the broad sense—not just sexual, not just intense, but all of that: the intense and the not intense, the sexual and the non-sexual—requires several things.

One thing it needs, touching on what we've already mentioned, is what I would call a heartfelt, integrated, embodied rootedness and commitment to ethics. I'm choosing these words very deliberately: heartfelt, integrated, embodied, rootedness in and commitment to ethics.

Why I'm saying all that is because some people's commitment to ethics is actually coming out of fear, or it's just coming from authority—because some teacher or tradition said so, and one has never questioned it. I'm talking about something that's really heartfelt, coming from deep in the being. There's an engagement, a commitment that's integrated into one's life and embodied in one's life. There's both commitment and rootedness there.

But that involves an engagement, a living questioning. Sometimes what happens is people just follow ethics—whether Buddhist ethics or the ethics of Western societies as they stand in whatever era one lives in—simply because they're afraid of the consequences or they're told to by some authority. They've never really questioned it.

Sometimes that's okay—a person hasn't developed that capacity yet. But sometimes it actually creates a situation where the ethics are not full enough. I've spoken about this in relation to Buddhist ethics: sometimes, because they were formulated at a time before globalization, before climate change, and from the perspective more of simplifying one's consciousness and life, or ensuring a good rebirth, rather than other considerations present in other religious traditions—because of all that, Buddhist ethics sometimes needs more questioning and expanding.

Questioning ethics doesn't necessarily mean giving up this or that constraint. You might decide that something you used to hold as an ethical constraint is no longer something you believe in, no longer feels like the appropriate or right thing to do. But questioning might also operate the other way. Really engaging in a questioning of ethics—lived, beautiful, embodied, heartfelt—might cause you to actually extend your ethical commitments beyond, say, the five precepts as they're usually understood. I've spoken about all that before in other talks.

But I would say exploration of eros needs that heartfelt, integrated, embodied rootedness and commitment to ethics—including the ongoing questioning of our ethics.

A second thing it needs is skill and confidence in emotional awareness, with emotional energetics and energetics in general. This is why we put so much emphasis on the emotional energy body and stated that as a prerequisite for this course.

This means skill and confidence to notice what's going on emotionally and energetically in the body, including subtle—really subtle—manifestations of emotion and energies. Not just the obvious ones, but really subtle movements and manifestations. It means being able to notice and discern and handle energies, especially the stronger ones.

So really having some skill with the energy body—being able to open when energies are strong so there's not pressure building up, being able to allow energies to flow in different ways, and when they feel blocked, having the capacity to tolerate energies that are intense and creating a feeling of pressure.

So this, I would say, is a second demand, if you like, or necessity for the exploration of eros in practice.

And the third is some degree of what we could call trust or faith or even wisdom, actually—a little trust. As I mentioned before, this might even come as a kind of experiment. In other words, we're just experimenting with an attitude of trust temporarily in regard to eros, in regard to this sexual image or whatever it is.

What gives us even the trust to be able to experiment temporarily? Well, hopefully that's an attitude in our practice anyway, as I would teach it. That's very much a key ingredient: experimentation, playfulness with mindfulness, discerning what happens when I do this, what happens when I conceive this way, what happens when I look this way.

But knowing—developing a first-hand knowledge that the conception, the conceptual framework that I entertain at any moment and the way of looking shapes and conditions the experiences that then unfold. Simple, deep understanding of dependent arising. It can be taken deeper and deeper, as we said. But knowing that allows me to experiment even with just a little bit of trusting—trusting, for example, this idea that eros or desire at root is a treasure. There's something to be treasured there. Despite its obvious connection with suffering and dukkha, something wrapped up in eros and desire is a treasure, that it may express a deeper intelligence of soul.

So it's like searching for jewels or searching for gold. You have to clean off the dross and mine a little bit and find something—find the gem there, right in the middle of the eros or the desire. Brush off the other stuff. Again, a limited analogy.

But again, trusting perhaps a little bit that there's some kind of telos operating here, that something through desire, through eros, is pulling us towards an end that is, if you like, constellated by the soul's intelligence or wisdom, or the wisdom of the Buddha nature or whatever. That trust, a little bit of trust, experimenting with that eros may itself be holy or divine in origin, though it's easily distorted in different ways.

So those kinds of trust, which for some may sound really far out already, but they may well emerge just from what we're calling the phenomenological approach with an open-minded inquiry into our experience, into questions, imaginal practice and into soul-making and into eros.

But these things—just what we've mentioned so far: the rootedness in ethics in an integrated way, the skill and confidence in emotional awareness and energetics, and the certain amount of trust and wisdom in regard to eros—we could call this a kind of skill set. I'm going to mention more. But we could call that a skill set, and that skill set, or that language of skill set, implies that these are developable things. That relationship with ethics is developable. That skill with the emotions and the energies is developable. Even that trust is developable. So I use the language of skill set to imply, partly, that these are developable things, factors, elements.

If we talk a bit about equanimity, which is obviously a key word in Buddha Dharma—and so how does that come into all this business of when you talk about desire and passion and eros and all that? Equanimity. We may wonder, well, what about the equanimity? Or I have a lot of eros and I keep falling over or getting floored by my desire or whatever. So equanimity, what does that mean? How does it come in in relation to this path?

So equanimity implies several things. We could say it implies balance. So that means not toppling over, either forward towards this object that we're enamored with or that there's an erotic connection with, or kind of backwards in recoil, in fear—different kinds of fear that can come up in relationships when there's a lot of eros.

So equanimity implies balance. What does this whole word "balance" then mean in relationship to eros? Steadiness is implied in the sense of—maybe that's the wrong word, but not short-circuiting. Yeah, steadiness in the sense that it can last, that the eros can last, a flame that can burn steadily—that's what I mean.

So sometimes the eros, it's like a flame that just—you know, a lot of charge goes through the electrical circuit and it just blows the circuit, or it short circuits, or the whole thing just collapses, it kind of caves in on itself. So all this is very common with eros. There's a lot of eros, and there's this imbalance falling over one way, either towards or away from, or kind of blowing out or collapsing inwards or something.

But equanimity implies balance. It implies this kind of steadiness. It also implies spaciousness, meaning non-contraction. So again, what does this mean in relationship to eros? That it doesn't, for instance, contract in craving.

That it doesn't contract in realism as well. That there's no contraction emotionally or energetically—no shrinking or freezing, no contraction of view. All this is implied in equanimity.

But what does this mean, equanimity in our life and practice, in relation to eros? This is actually more interesting than what we often hear about or might first think when we consider equanimity as a word in Buddha Dharma.

Some of you will know from meditation that really deep equanimity—experiences of deep equanimity—involves letting go of pushing away experience we don't like in some way, that which is unpleasant, and letting go also of pulling toward ourselves or trying to pull ourselves toward pleasant or attractive experience. When there's really that developed in meditation, it goes deeper and deeper. It takes you into deeper and deeper non-fabrication—lessening fabrication, and eventually into the unfabricated.

So experiences of deep equanimity are experiences of much less fabrication on a spectrum of fabrication of perception. The experience of spaciousness is also connected with that. Deep equanimity often is an experience of deep spaciousness, deep unfabricating, sometimes blackness. These are all characteristic of meditative states of deep equanimity—blackness and equanimity, spaciousness. We touched on this in the last retreat.

Generally speaking, over time—not just when those states are experienced once or twice, but through repeated descent or immersion in those states, opening to them in meditation—they bring in one's life a kind of steadiness and spaciousness with respect to the things of the world. We taste something; we taste a whole different perspective and sense of things in those states, a whole different sense of existence. That brings, generally speaking, over time, with repeated immersion—in, out, in, out—this steadiness and spaciousness with respect to the things of the world, and in a way, less craving with regard to the things of the world.

The shadow side of all that is that maybe those kinds of experiences, those perspectives, can also bring disengagement. So that's interesting. Why does it sometimes bring a kind of disengagement, even sometimes a kind of anemia—more like a political or environmental disengagement, non-engagement? What does it depend on, whether it brings disengagement or whether there can be all the fruits of that deep equanimity and still an engagement, passionate engagement?

Partly—I've talked about this before, so I'm not going to labor it now—but partly it depends on the fantasies and on the conceptual frameworks that are operating there in relationship to what the path involves and what awakening looks like. Fantasies are always there; concepts are always there. Dependent on what they are shapes the ethics, if we tie into what we said before, and shapes the engagement as well—the degree of engagement and the fullness and what it looks like.

But shadow aside, potentially those experiences—again, sometimes just one-off will do something radical in one's life, but more generally it's dipping in and out, getting really used to those perspectives and those openings—potentially then, because of the spaciousness and the steadiness, it's almost like something in the being has the spaciousness and the steadiness, and then a kind of confidence that it can allow desire, eros, in regard to certain things in life, because that steadiness, that spaciousness, that perspective is absorbed.

Catherine held up this beautiful picture in the last retreat, or was it a cloth—I can't remember—with the pitch black background, and then within that, a flame in the middle of it. The flame of eros is supported, is contextualized, is allowed, and given strength by the blackness, the deep equanimity, the space around it that we can open to. And so that deep blackness characteristic of states of deep unfabrication.

Actually, a slight aside, but there's an important point and we'll come back to it. The desire for the unfabricated, the desire for the absolute as some people call it, the desire for the transcendent, even the desire for onenesses—knowing different onenesses at different stages of less fabrication in meditation—the desire for all that, I would say, is a soul desire. It's a deep desire.

The desire for equanimity in life, for balance, I would actually say is not a soul desire. It's not something we don't really have eros about equanimity. We can really want it, but we would be hard-pressed to imagine that it could function as a soul-making object for us—equanimity in itself.

But the desire for the unfabricated, or this deep black, or the states of less fabrication, the oneness and the space of all that, and the mystical knowing of that can be a deep soul desire. The desire for equanimity that comes out of here—I have a hard time conceiving that could really be a soul desire, an erotic object, a soul-making object. It's more a kind of, if you like, a medical aspiration in the sense that it's really helpful in our life to have equanimity, to have some coolness, to have some perspective. It's soothing, it's freeing, it's healing in certain ways.

So it's important. It's definitely important. Heavens, it's really important. And it's important in relation to eros because it can, over time, enable this kind of balance with eros. But in itself, it's not really an erotic object or a soul-making object, unlike the desire for the unfabricated and the unfabricated itself, or knowing different kinds of oneness.

But while we're on this subject—so this is still a side note, but actually it's quite important to everything that we're saying.

Eros implies, or rather is implicated and woven into, the very fabric of psyche and image. It implies the imaginal. And the imaginal—psyche and image—implies this notion of what we've called daemons, these imaginal figures, and a duty to the imaginal figure that can sometimes be felt. Eros kind of implies all that, whatever that imaginal figure is or whatever it imbues. And as I've mentioned, there can be eros in relationship to the imaginal figure itself.

What, though, is the relationship between freedom and duty? There's this whole movement in the path towards freedom. And for me, that's a very big word with many dimensions, many directions that may be far more than we initially conceive of or hear about. But what's the relationship between freedom and the movement towards freedom and duty?

Duty can sometimes be a lessening of freedom, a constraint of freedom. I'm not totally free because I have this duty that I need to carry out. So duty often goes with imaginal practice, as I've mentioned on another retreat. But what's the relationship between duty and freedom? Doesn't duty sometimes also mean a kind of constraint of freedom?

This is really interesting to be aware of and explore. But one thing I will say is that an imaginal duty and a kind of devotion to that—or those, plural—doesn't just curtail freedom or certain freedoms, but also brings certain freedoms at certain levels. And oftentimes it brings freedom in relation to the really big things.

For example, in relation to death, or the possibility of dying, or the possibility of an early death. Because one feels that one is devoted to, in line with, following one's calling, plugged into one's duty, carrying out one's duty as best one can in the time and circumstances allotted to one—because one feels that alignment—then there is a certain freedom in relationship to death, a certain deep okayness in relation to death and to the big things in life, the big losses, the big ups and downs.

It keeps your bearings and gives you a sense of what's important. There's that popular phrase book, "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff," with the subtitle "And It's All Small Stuff." But this imaginal dimension and the duty there is saying, don't sweat the small stuff, but it's not all small stuff. If I say it's all small stuff, I lose the soul dimension because soulmaking has everything to do with meaningfulness and importance.

Don't sweat the small stuff, but it's not all small stuff. It matters—matters deeply to our being, to our life, to what unfolds for us, to our souls, to the cosmos, to God, to the Buddha nature, to the tradition. It matters that we follow our duties, that we sense that, that we give that a certain amount of reverence and devotion.

And what does that look like? That's not a simple question either. We mentioned earlier the importance, the delicacy of the question of what an image may or may not be asking for, what needs to manifest from an image, and the kind of open-mindedness and sensitivity in the inquiry with regard to images and imaginal figures and the sense of duty. This is not necessarily at all a simple translation or concretization of the image.

Real care needs to be taken in a middle way between that kind of oversimplistic translation, concretization, and a dismissal of what the image might be asking for. So there's a middle way there, with no simple answers necessarily, no formulaic answers either.

There's that kind of middle way in regard to all this sense of duty and manifestation and importance and meaningfulness. And there's also the middle way between what matters and what is empty at the same time as mattering—seeing image as image, understanding it and relating to it in a way that allows it its potency and power for the soul, at the same time as not reifying and identifying.

In some ways it's asking a lot; in other ways it's just natural to imaginal practice, and it may not require a lot of training to do that. People just understand it, intuit it directly in the context of imaginal practice.

In relation to all this, there is clearly a complex relationship between duty and freedom. In some respects, the duty that we feel towards an image or from an image constrains freedom, maybe constrains the equanimity in some regards. But as we've just explained, on the other hand, it also brings a kind of deep freedom at certain levels, and also equanimity in relation to the big things of life and death.

Let's pause there and pick up this list in the next part in terms of the qualities, the factors that are important and necessary in mastering the fire and shaping the vessel for these practices.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 65

Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 44 min

> *In this profound exploration of balance and wisdom in imaginal practice, Rob Burbea redefines samādhi beyond simple concentration to encompass deep well-being and nourishment that pervades the energy body. He examines how this fuller understanding of samādhi naturally creates equanimity by reducing dependence on sense pleasures and ego validation, providing a secure foundation for working with eros.*
>
> *Burbea discusses three approaches to developing balance: cultivating rootedness through hara meditation and earth connection, dwelling in spacious states of insubstantiality where everything is allowed to come and go, and working with imaginal figures of strength. He emphasizes that balance in erotic practice is dynamic rather than static—like a dancer or cyclist maintaining responsive equilibrium rather than rigid fixation.*
>
> *The talk explores how mandala meditation can develop psychological balance by working with complementary imaginal figures representing different aspects of awakening—emptiness, compassion, action, and the imaginal itself. Burbea concludes by acknowledging the apparent contradictions in his teaching approach, explaining how these reflect the complex, non-linear nature of wisdom and the sometimes necessary questioning of balance itself as an ideal. This nuanced exploration provides essential groundwork for the deeper imaginal practices that follow.*

So we're taking our time exploring the factors and the elements that contribute to creating, shaping, forging a vessel that's adequate for the material and the fire of Eros, and the transformations there and the explorations there, and also what it means to master the fire in relation to this kind of work with Eros and the imaginal.

We've talked about preliminaries, and we've talked about ethics and skill and confidence with emotions and energetics and the capacity to trust a little bit or just play with a little bit of trust. We've talked about equanimity and some other things. So let's pick that up and continue the list.

We also need to talk about samadhi, and people think of that as something that brings steadiness. But oftentimes, and I've said this before on other retreats, this word samadhi gets shortchanged. It gets contracted and shrunk to quite a narrow meaning—

meaning just how steady is my focus. Even when people teach the jhanas, they imagine that it's really a question of getting more and more concentrated and focused and kind of rock-like in one's concentration, as if that's the most important thing there.

But that's just one strand of what's involved. This kind of immovability of mind—the attention being less pulled by things, by distractions—and then hoping that that will just generally be good for me or make me more equanimous. That kind of immovability of mind does happen sometimes, or relative immovability to different extents, but it's primarily a meditative thing when the concentration or focus or steadiness of mind is strong.

You've heard me say before, I would define samadhi as much more than a kind of steadiness, a focus of the mind. It really involves a juiciness, a depth, a real sense of well-being permeating the energy body primarily and the mind and the filling out of the mind in that juiciness, in that well-being, in that loveliness. To whatever degree, that encompasses all the jhanas. I'm speaking loosely now, but that's really how I define samadhi.

Samadhi is also a state of less fabrication. Again, to what degree? You can go through the eight jhanas, and they're all progressively less fabrication of perception. That's a way of thinking about what's going on in the jhana. So there's a connection here—the equanimity, samadhi has to do with less fabrication.

If we acknowledge that samadhi is important in all this, I would say primarily not just because of the steadiness of focus that it brings, or that's part of samadhi, but because of the well-being.

What happens over time—talking about months and even years—when we develop samadhi, meaning developing this sense of well-being, this pool of nourishment and well-being and joy and loveliness in the energy body, in the mind, pervading the being with that? We develop this over time to whatever degree, dipping in and out frequently or a lot. That dipping in and out brings equanimity in general in our life and balance, and again, balance with respect to Eros and more generally.

Why? Because we grow in happiness. We actually feel ourselves that we have access to a deep happiness and nourishment, a deep nourishment. We feel more and more as we develop that kind of samadhi, the well-being there, that we have enough—that we are nourished enough, we have enough to drink of this water that we so need, at least at one dimension. Something I'll come back to.

But that sense of happiness that's available to us and nourishment that's available to us means that over time, as we get more secure in that, we feel like we don't need to—and we can actually see we don't need to—rely on the sense pleasures to give us nourishment. It's such a poor level of nourishment, trying to get nourished and happy somehow from sense pleasures or from what boosts the ego because someone says something nice to me about my appearance or about something I've done. Or just someone tells me I'm okay or communicates to me in some way that I'm okay.

This can all be important communication to a certain degree, but it's such a—relatively speaking—poor basis, such poor security it gives to try and get or secure a sense of well-being, of happiness, of deep okayness through those mechanisms. But when we have the samadhi available to us over time, dipping in and out, then we just become less dependent on these kinds of sense pleasures or ego boosts or being told we're okay. Because we're less dependent, we're less pulled by them, towards them or recoiling away from things or collapsing. And we're less thrown off balance.

So you can see how the samadhi has more to do with that kind of balance, giving us that kind of capacity of balance, rather than just this kind of immovable balance of a focused mind that is not pulled one way or another away from its object, the nostrils or whatever it is.

Why am I mentioning this? Why is understanding this important? In general, I would say that understanding why and how the elements and the factors of the path work is important. So samadhi is good for me. It's important to know why and how samadhi is good for this business of equanimity. If I have the wrong understanding—if I think it's just about being able to fix my mind on the tip of my nose or whatever it is, and that's somehow going to help me or generally help my life somehow—it's important to understand how and why elements or factors of the path are working.

Why? Because as I think I mentioned in an earlier talk on this course, understanding—our understanding of these kinds of things—informs our decisions in practice. So if I understand that it's more about well-being than about nailing my attention to the tip of my nose or the soles of my feet—not that that doesn't have a place, and I'll come back to that—but if I understand more that actually, that understanding itself gives me some wisdom in terms of making decisions at any moment in practice about where to lean, how to navigate, how to incline the mind, what to develop, what to let go of.

If I have an idea that practice is trying to be kind and just accept whatever arises and let things come and let things go as much as I'm able, and that's my idea of sort of Dharma practice or insight meditation, or if my idea is really trying to not be distracted

and judging myself about how much I was with the breath or how much thought was there—these kinds of ideas are so prevalent. Some sound a lot more attractive than others, like the kind accepting, let everything come as much as it goes.

They sound open-minded and soft, but the ideas we have about practice—the concepts, and sometimes we don't even fully realize what we're holding as a concept—are operative in consciousness and have a huge influence on what I do in practice, what I choose, where I lean, what my intention is, what gets developed and what doesn't.

These concepts also have a tremendous influence on how I regard what arises—how I regard this thought, or this image that arises, or this energy, or this emotion. Do I simply stay open to it, let it come, let it go? Or do I resist giving in to it, returning to the breath instead? Any idea I hold shapes my response.

The understanding I have of what practice is, what I'm trying to do, how it works—this has enormous influence. Sometimes this is the less popular part of dharma talks; people prefer the stories and quotes. But there's something about understanding the structuring of practice and how it fits together that will hold you and serve you better in the long run than this or that story or quote.

How I regard what arises determines what unfolds, the experience that unfolds. The samadhi, equanimity, ethics, skill with emotions and energies, this trust—we've talked about all this. We can also develop balance and strength in our lives through certain qualities and other meditations.

For example, meditating on the hara, on the energy center in the tantian or lower belly, with its connection to the earth itself and the sense of rootedness—meditating on that sense and stationing awareness almost like the center of consciousness at that point. This can be a really useful meditation for some people, changing the inclination of mind toward more strength, solidity, balance, and rootedness.

But notice that implicit in this practice is not just being at one point or being conscious of sensations at one point, though that can be useful. What's really helpful to be woven into these kinds of meditations are images of earth connection, images of the earth itself. There's already an imaginal element here—in standing meditation, walking meditation, sitting meditation—feeling or imagining that rootedness in the energy body and feeling the earth, imagining the earth as some imaginal figure. The earth is alive as image.

What is the image of earth? I don't mean necessarily personified as human, but the image of earth as something that supports, connects, roots, gives solidity, gives blessing. Think of the Buddha on the evening of his enlightenment, touching the earth—that gesture made earth an imaginal earth. The earth was alive for him as image in that moment.

This imaginal and energetic and feeling connection, weaving these all together, can be really important for some people to dip into. For others who have done plenty of this already, doing more may not be what needs to develop. But for many people, dwelling in that energetic image and feeling and the fullness of that image, the beauty of that image, gives ballast, gives root.

On the other hand, those states of deep equanimity can also be very insubstantial. The feeling with them is of real insubstantiality of things—that's partly where the equanimity comes from. There's ethereality, and you can almost see through things. Everything becomes very, very light.

The practice of hanging out in those states—of spacious allowing, letting everything come and go, developing that deeper and deeper—practices of wide consciousness, just receiving and allowing everything to come and go, resting in awareness. People give different names to this orientation, this state of deep equanimity, of relative unfabrication. But it emphasizes the spacious quality of equanimity, which is important. It's not solid.

So yes, sometimes solidity gives balance and equanimity, and sometimes the exact opposite—an element of insubstantiality—gives us balance. Dwelling in these states of spacious insubstantiality, letting everything come and go, letting things fade, can be really helpful in the long run. But I'm talking about hours, not just one experience here and there or dipping in for a couple of minutes. I'm talking about developing the ability to hang out there for a long time, making it accessible.

So there's the imaginal connection with earth and rootedness and the belly center with its solidity. There are these more spacious states of allowing and insubstantiality—lack of solidity that still gives balance and equanimity. And there's a third element: the images of strength that are available to us—imaginal figures and images of strength, perhaps solidity, but particularly images of strength.

Now sometimes what happens is a person's imaginal practice is alive in certain directions, certain kinds of images, but not so much in others. So for example, someone might have a rich array of images of devotion—very, very beautiful images of surrender—and not notice, or ignore, or discard, or not choose to dwell in other images that arise for them that are more images of strength.

So they have an inclination or tendency or habit or pattern, an okayness or even captivation with images of surrender and softness. But images of strength—whatever they might be, and they can be many kinds—they tend to ignore, discard, not even notice sometimes, or choose not to dwell in.

Sometimes a teacher can be helpful here. This might come up in an interview. Someone might mention something and then completely ignore it—and it's exactly what they need to pay attention to. So a teacher or therapist or someone can sometimes point that out in working with someone, and that might be helpful. One could even, in some instances, I suppose, prescribe this or that kind of image for a person to develop more strength.

I'm cautious about that—not saying it's not helpful sometimes, or possible sometimes—but I would be a little cautious about it, partly because it also kind of implies that the teacher-therapist knows best, but also for other reasons.

Sometimes as well, when we talk about strength, sometimes there's a kind of general weakness of the being. It seems like there's just this tendency to collapse or kind of everything gets a little mushy and soggy and can't sustain or present. You kind of feel it in a person's being. Sometimes it's just a general sort of weakness.

And sometimes there's a kind of general suppression of libido, of life force. But here, if that's the case, again, we have to be careful because what is just natural to a person—and they shouldn't be told or forced to be different than they are. It's just natural for them to have that much libido or this much libido, whatever it is—a little, a lot—rather than pathologize them as being repressed or being overcharged or over-erotic or over-excitable or whatever.

But when there's this kind of general weakness or general libidinal suppression, if that's what's happening, it may be of course that inquiry and working in psychotherapy—and we'll talk about this—looking at the past and what may have contributed to that, may be helpful. But again, whether it helps or not will also depend on the conceptual framework operating in the psychotherapy. All psychotherapies and all teachings have a conceptual framework. And so if the conceptual framework again has got a certain image of what one should be like or what one's moving towards, or a concept of what's

right and what's wrong and what's okay and what's not, that will determine a lot what actually gets released. But it may be that some work in psychotherapy actually helps with that.

It also might be—I mean, sometimes that kind of general libidinal suppression—it might be that finding where the libido flows easiest in that person's life and expresses the easiest, finding that and encouraging and supporting that may then just start to allow the libido to flow, and then it can begin, maybe, to move towards a kind of general strengthening and vitality, and perhaps opening the range of the libidinal expression, opening it wider than just that one area where it sort of trickled a little bit in the first place. It's complex. All that's complex.

So we should point out that when we talk about balance in practice or in life—but especially with regard to eros—this is really important: we're rarely talking about something that's static. We're not talking about a static state of balance. We're talking about something that's dynamic, fluid, responsive. Think more of a dancer, or a footballer dribbling the ball this way or that, running, or a cyclist even just riding your bike—you're actually in a state of dynamic responsive balance to the little micro-movements this way and that.

So these equanimity-giving qualities that we've been talking about—samatha, spacious awareness, equanimity itself, metta even, which I didn't mention—these equanimity-giving qualities, it's not necessary for them to be there all the time, to be there kind of as a constant, mixed in with or in the background to our passion or our eros or our energetic or psychic charge. So careful with this.

It's rather that we can learn to access these qualities to different depths. And eventually, I would say, we can learn to access them at will. This is what you learn if you practice the jhanas or these deeper states—not 100% of the time, but generally speaking, it's possible to just choose to enter certain states.

We can access them, these qualities, rest in them and kind of marinate in them, marinate in that deep well-being of stillness. Just sit there like you leave a slab of tofu to marinate in tamari and garlic and ginger or whatever it is. You just marinate. It soaks it up. It soaks up into the being. And marinate in them at times. At times.

And then that gives, slowly, gradually, it gives a confidence that that is developable, that access and those qualities are developable. And we trust—we gradually, eventually reach a point of trust that they will be accessible. If they're not accessible in this

moment, or if I'm emphasizing something else in this moment, in the not-very-distant future, this quality of deep equanimity or this deep, dark space of non-fabrication, relative non-fabrication, or this...

lovely nourishment of samadhi, or whatever quality it is, will be available to me in the not distant future if I want it.

We develop a kind of trust and confidence because these states appear frequently enough. They're there. They will be there frequently enough in my life that I'll have that nourishment, that stillness, that sense of equanimity. It's this frequency of access to these qualities and states, combined with trust, that supports our equanimity in life and with regard to eros.

What this means is that we're not fixed in some kind of medium heat setting—not quite an ice block dead, but maintaining a certain amount of warmth and interest while never getting too excitable or too hot with eros. We're not trying to find the acceptable middle setting, the "middle way" thing. That's less how I would look at all this.

Rather, there's a range of being that's being opened up. Through that whole range, all kinds of beauty and nourishment and necessities are encountered—we meet with them, we are fed by them. So there's a range of being, of excitability if you like: arousal, being on fire, being impassioned. And there's a range of stillness and coolness and spaciousness. All of this opens up a big range. This is what I would regard as the vision of what practice can possibly open up for us.

In general, if there's eros—certainly if there's a lot of eros—some people are simply born with this as their natural character. They are born with a lot of eros and a lot of psyche. They just have a lot of eros and a lot of soul. Much comes through them. This needs certain factors or certain qualities to allow it to be fertile and helpful and soul-making, so that it doesn't get short-circuited or implode or explode or fall over in various ways.

Part of this is balance—strength of the citta. So all these factors we've been discussing, and we could add a few more. I would add solidity and firmness: the ability of the mind or attention to stay steady with something. If I'm investigating eros, if I'm working with an image and there's something quite subtle and complex happening, the ability to keep the attention steady with that is important.

And there's general mindfulness—general awareness, the ability to notice, to observe. This might be close, detailed, intimate noticing, but it's an ability to notice and observe that, even if it is close and detailed and intimate, is not entangled. This quality we call mindfulness is important.

I would also add inquiry. The factor of inquiry and investigation is really important—the questioning, bringing questions to bear in the moment on my experience. All kinds of questions at different levels, with specificity and subtlety of questioning, and the specificity of intention that needs to be involved at times in inquiry.

These three things—the firmness of mind in terms of steadiness of attention, the capacity to observe and notice what we call mindfulness, and the capacity to inquire—are all part of what's necessary for this whole investigation.

I'm aware that recently I've said things that really lean away from or de-emphasize mindfulness and equanimity. So I seem to be contradicting myself. I am, in a way, contradicting myself. I'm not really—it has to do with context.

If I said that in the past, it was really in the context of what sometimes happens: a shrinking of the path, a shrinking of what practice means to people, a shrinking of what awakening means. It gets reduced to just mindfulness, or just a vision of equanimity. I was really wanting to open that up, partly by de-emphasizing mindfulness or even critiquing it.

But also, for myself, I've spent years training in mindfulness, developing it extensively and intensively, developing mindfulness and equanimity to a really high or deep degree. Maybe in my case too—I don't know if one can say this—certain people have a more natural disposition to equanimity, and also to mindfulness. I would say that's part of my natural disposition, perhaps.

Sometimes what I'm saying is in the context both of that perhaps natural disposition and also in the context of the general scope of teachings, or how people are thinking about what practice is right now. Given that I spent a lot of time and effort and years developing that, and perhaps there's a natural disposition toward mindfulness and equanimity, it may be easier for me to let go of that emphasis or develop something that seems to be its opposite.

But it's tricky. Sometimes things need to get stirred up a bit. The question is: What do you need? Can that be an inquiry? The question is also: What leads to what? What kind of concepts, what kind of emphases, what kind of explorations, what kind of fantasies lead to what, generally speaking? What am I assuming? What are you assuming to be true just because a teacher, or lots of teachers, seem to be saying the same thing?

There's a lot of questioning involved, or necessary, for all this. If I am contradicting myself—which I admit I am, in a way—maybe a way of thinking about it is that in the very contradictions, of which there are many in what I'm saying, I'm really presenting both sides. There's this, and there's that. There's this, and the opposite is somehow true as well.

So it's really a matter of balance. The contradiction itself is reflecting a kind of meta-level balance that I'm trying to communicate in relation to all this. The responses of balance and wisdom to all this are complex questions. There's complexity to them.

I'll mention one more possibility for developing some of these qualities.

Psychological balance, if you like, is implicitly or explicitly conveyed in mandalas and developable through meditating on a mandala. Some of you already do this, some of you will be not familiar with this at all. Meditating on the mandala as a whole or on some elements of the mandala in combination—I don't mean so much as a visual pattern, but actually what the elements represent or the imaginal figures represent within certain mandalas.

For example, in one mandala, Akshobhya is a Buddha that represents wisdom into emptiness—the vajra, which means diamond, something that's indestructible, some indestructible element of being which is related to emptiness. Meditating on Akshobhya, if you like, and what that means as an imaginal figure, as an icon, one can balance that with another Buddha in the same mandala—for instance, Amitabha, who might be regarded, in some ways of seeing it, as the Buddha of the imaginal.

So right there you have this balance: there's the imaginal, but there's the knowing of the emptiness, and just putting those two in relationship to each other as images—images that are pregnant with idea as well—and putting them in some kind of counterpoint and balance. There's the imaginal, and there's also the knowing of the emptiness. There's the form of the imaginal, and there's the lack of form in the emptiness. There's the imaginal with the eros implicit in it, and there's the coolness of the knowing of emptiness and knowing of image as image. Sometimes putting those two and meditating them and perhaps placing them in your heart or along a certain axis—if these images are alive for you or can become alive—can be really powerful as a way of developing balance generally in relation to all this.

Or it could be putting those two or one of them in counterpoint, in balance, in relationship with, in opposition to, in co-constellation with another Buddha of the same mandala—Ratnasambhava, who might represent the emotions, the actual feelings of compassion or metta or whatever, or we might say more generally the emotional life.

Again, putting them in relationship and actually having them as iconic figures and letting the imaginal work, imbued with a little bit of concept as it always is anyway, imaginal work—actually let that do its work on you by bringing the energy body and the whole consciousness into that, or bringing that into the whole consciousness and the energy body, either way.

Or a fourth Buddha of that mandala, Amoghasiddhi, is the Buddha related to action in the world. So you can see how these things, just psychologically—can I balance the imaginal with the emptiness? Can I balance the emotions with the action or the emotions with the emptiness or the action with the emptiness? In activism and in engagement, how many people have come to me with that kind of question about burnout, about over-involvement, of being over-passionate, or it needs to be balanced more. This is one way of actually playing with all this.

But again, what would it be to balance Akshobhya, the emptiness, the Buddha of emptiness, the vajra being, the diamond quality, indestructible quality of the transcendent—balance that with the Buddha of action, of engagement, Amoghasiddhi? We can play with these figures, these icons, these images in meditation, place them in relationship, in counterpoint, in balance. And it will bring balance. And it's possible with other imaginal figures as well, even erotic imaginal figures. See, play, see what's possible.

One thing I would say about all this in relation to that mandala and the emptiness thing is emptiness, or the realization of emptiness here, is really at whatever depth or whatever fullness you understand it at present, or that is evoked by that image or concept. I know I put a lot of stress on saying emptiness means more than this, and it's more than that experience, and it's more than this—this is what we really mean by emptiness. But at the same time, in this kind of meditation, you might have a sense, some intuitive sense, or even a direct experience of the unfabricated, or the big mind, big awareness, cosmic consciousness, or emptiness as ground of being. These are all things where you may have heard me say that this isn't emptiness in the way that we mean it—there's more to understand, there's a deeper emptiness. But still, they can be really valuable.

So emptiness at whatever level and depth, fullness you understand it, can be really valuable to bring that in the meditation so it's alive and it's personal and it's relevant to you right now. You don't have to wait until necessarily—I mean it's better if you have a deeper understanding or it will be better when you have a deeper understanding—but you can bring in any level of what these images and ideas bring, whatever level is alive for you and that you can bring in. It will still have a lot of power here.

Or that Akshobhya might be the dharmakaya, the non-dual Buddha's gnosis that includes all appearances. In a way, it's not important. What we want is something that's relevant and that has a certain potency and power to bring into the meditation and let it do its work, let it do its alchemy.

Because it is interesting to me as a teacher how sometimes vague concepts or a certain level of understanding and images can open experiences that bring deeper understandings or open understandings that are deeper than a person knew that they even had—knew that they were even conscious of until they played with it in a certain way or until they entered it a certain way. You think, what's going on here? Is it magic? Is it a kind of invocation? Is it just intuitive wisdom that something in us knows emptiness, for example, at this deep level, knows the co-constellation and the balance and necessity of these things, and what we're really doing through the mandala is contacting and allowing to emerge that level of deep intuitive wisdom? Is it the power of the imaginal, the power of image and poetry?

It's interesting that the alchemy here is not entirely linear or expected. So what I'm really saying is trust whatever level of understanding of emptiness you have, if you're going to play with this kind of thing, and trust the imaginal to do a certain work here that's got a certain autonomy to it. It's beyond what we might have imagined in the narrow sense, what we might have expected or thought beforehand.

Okay, so we've just in this talk talked a lot about strength, balance, space, vessel, mostly as a kind of collateral, as how we develop these qualities.

qualities in our life that can then shape and inform and give us balance generally, which will affect our relationship with eros when it arises. In the next part of this series, we want to explore what balance actually means as you're doing imaginal practice, as the eros is alive with this beloved other, with this erotic object. What does mastery and balance and response mean in the moment there, in the actual practice?

What we've discussed today has been mostly around that practice—the development of what I call collateral qualities. The next talk will address what happens within the practice itself.

I want to say one more time: sometimes, for some people, there comes a time to question even the whole ideal of balance and equanimity. Or to question one's clinging to the opposite—to being passionate and up and down, to identifying as "I'm like this" or "I'm like that."

So while I'm genuinely interested in developing the skills and art of balance and equanimity with respect to eros, I also recognize there's a place for questioning these very ideals. Balance is, after all, an ideal. I'll say more about this in the next talk. But there's sometimes a place for simply questioning this whole framework: Where did it come from? Do I have to buy into it? And what does it actually look like in practice?

These questions themselves become part of the deeper inquiry, part of the very balance we seek to cultivate.

CHAPTER 66

Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this third part of his exploration of wisdom, art, and balance, Rob Burbea delves deeply into what mastery means within imaginal practice, particularly when working with eros and desire. Drawing from alchemical imagery of "mastering the fire" and "forging strong vessels," he examines the fluid balance required in meditation—not a static equilibrium, but the dynamic art of moment-to-moment navigation and skillful response.*
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> *Burbea outlines five key approaches when desire arises in practice: letting go and putting it down; focusing on vedanā and the arising/passing of craving; holding with kind mindfulness the emotions underlying desire; consciously navigating toward nourishing practices like samādhi or mettā; and opening to the deeper energy of desire itself. He emphasizes that mastery lies not in always doing the same thing, but in developing flexibility and range—like an eagle riding air currents with subtle micro-adjustments.*
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> *The talk addresses common challenges practitioners face when working with erotic imagery, including fear of merging or dissolution, intensity of bliss or energetic charge, vulnerability from opening the heart, and deep longing. Through detailed exploration of what makes eros "hard to bear," Burbea demonstrates how staying within imaginal practice while making subtle shifts of emphasis can transform difficulty into profound opening, illustrated through a powerful example of divine generatrix imagery.*

Okay, so we're talking about exploring these ideas of mastery, mastering the fire, forging strong vessels that we borrowed from the alchemical maxims, and exploring what that might mean and exploring even the extent to which that's even possible in work with eros and soul-making. But generally looking at what's involved in mastery—what might we mean by that and what might be included and necessary to develop there and practice in all that?

So most of the previous two parts of this talk we were looking really at practice as a whole and the whole of life and what was called collateral development of certain qualities—long-term development of certain qualities that will serve us well and support us well in extending our meditative explorations and widening our practice to include this work with eros and soul-making.

Now what I want to get into is what about in practice, in the moment, in the heat of practice? What might mastery mean there? Mastering the fire—what might be involved in that, what might be called for, and what does it mean to forge strong vessels, adequate vessels, and how might we do that?

So we said already that the balance we're talking about here is fluid balance. We're not talking about something static. And fluid balance, in this case, in practice, means exactly the ability, the skill, the art of navigation—gliding this way and that, responding to what's actually arising and the balance of qualities, energies, directions, and the art of skillful response in the moment, which sometimes is really quite subtle, even in terms of discerning what's happening, and then this very subtle sort of micro-adjustment, very graceful it can be.

So there's, as always, there's a range. We're talking about fluid balance. So in regard to fire, what might that mean? When do we welcome the fire, when do we stoke the fire, when do we guard it, how much, and which fire exactly, or what exactly needs the fire?

But this navigation that we talk about, this moment-to-moment skillful responding, is actually forging the vessel in the moment. Forging the vessel in the moment is not, as I said before, that we arrive with a prefabricated vessel. That's not completely how it is. We're actually always creating, shaping and forging the vessel in the moment by all kinds of things that we're doing—perspectives, emphases, etc.

So as always in practice there are options, and I want to go through, take a little time and go through different options in practice in this regard. And "options" is a key word because it implies that there's flexibility, there's a range here. The art and the wisdom is in the use of the options, is in the flexibility and in that flexibility of response and range of possibility that we can develop for ourselves in practice.

Sometimes, considering all practices, all meditative practices, sometimes I think that there's only one real mistake, if you like, and that would be always to do the same thing. So talking about any practice—always an emotion comes up or something comes up that's difficult: "I'll always be with it and that's all I ever do. If something comes up I have to go be with it." Or the opposite: "I always drop it." Something comes up: "Drop it, come back to my breath. Drop it, come back to my breath."

And doing always even just one of those two is going to really shortchange us in the long run. It's going to really limit our insights, it's going to limit our freedom, it's going to limit our capacity, it's going to limit certainly our fluidity of response, it's going to limit what we're capable of, not just in meditation, but in life.

Or sometimes people are always paying attention in a very kind of microscopic, very narrow, intense way. Great, wonderful. It's the "always" that's the problem, not the approach itself. Always paying attention with a kind of relaxed, open, spacious awareness with a wide sort of panoramic view, if you like. But always doing either one or the other of those two will limit the insight that arises. We get certain insights through a microscopic attention that perhaps are not so easily available through a wide awareness and vice versa.

So this is a general point about the importance of range in practice, flexibility, and not getting locked into one thing, not just doing one thing. And I could give countless examples, but there are two more sort of standard sets of practices.

So as you're listening to all this, you might consider for yourself, well, what's my usual tendency here? Either in regard to an emotion coming up or in regard to desire coming up and feeling that pressure, heat of desire. What's my usual tendency? Am I locked into a habit here that I always respond to in a certain way? Even if I think, "Oh, that's a skillful habit, that's a healthy habit."

So to be aware of what one's tendencies and habits are and to know this can be and probably—well, I am encouraging the opening up of the range of individual possibilities for any individual. So this is all for exploration, for development, so that we can develop this flexibility, this range, and that opens up a greater range of possibilities for us. It's all part of the art, the exploration, the development that develops our art in practice. And a lot of what I'm going to be saying hopefully is repeating or will be repeated in the instructions over this course.

So the question is, when desire is present, when I feel that movement or force of desire—in practice or in a moment when I notice it in life—then what?

So we can say, well, the first possibility—this isn't any order, by the way. So again, just listen to what your tendencies are, what you know how to do, what could be developed, etc. And I want to emphasize a certain subset of what I'm going to say.

But let's just run through some options. One option is, here's desire, here's a movement towards something, here's an impulse towards something or other. And one possibility is, let it go. Put it down. Am I confident of my ability, my abilities to do that? And certainly with the kind of small, kind of petty stuff in life, that cup of tea while I'm walking in meditation or in between the sitting—walking, do I really need it? Or I mean, I might. It might be that actually I do need that break and that space there and that easing off the sort of gas pedal of the effort. But oftentimes it's these small things or that cookie, you know, whatever.

Learning to put this stuff down, to let it go—this is really a good development, a helpful development as one of our options.

There are many possibilities here, and though I think we've talked about some of this already, I'll just briefly go through them again. Being mindful—let's say, take that cookie—and really being mindful of the arising of pleasure in the seeing, in the anticipation, in the whole sensual experience of it, moment to moment. Really paying attention to the pleasure as it arises and passes, moment to moment.

If there's enough attention, eventually—though sometimes initially giving more attention to the pleasant actually reveals more pleasantness—eventually we start to see in the whole experience: how good is this really? Relatively speaking, in terms of the kind of pleasure that a human being can experience, is it really worth it? How good is this really? But I have to pay attention to really answer that question. I have to pay close attention to the pleasure, or whatever other sensation—because it might be quite neutral—arising moment to moment.

I've talked and written about that elsewhere, and plenty of people have, so we don't really need to go into it. But another possibility there is actually, in this close attention to the arising of pleasure, having what I want, actually then asking: where does the pleasure go? Where did it go?

Oftentimes it's so brief. So we can incline then with all this—where did it go?—inclining towards seeing the impermanence, seeing the endings. Not just seeing, but really sensing, feeling the endings, the impermanence of things. Giving attention to noticing endings, really honing in on impermanence, moment to moment impermanence, the ending of this pleasure. Really feeling that, really sensing that.

So there's an inclination there, an incline towards the practice of anicca, of noticing impermanence. You really start to see this pleasure—where did it go? It dissipates so quickly.

Out of that, a related third option is: what will it give me? Really, what will it give me, this thing that I want, this cookie? If I'm genuinely hungry and that's what I have to eat, then of course it's going to give me nourishment, and it will give me some pleasure—but how much, and for how long?

So these kinds of reflections—we could say all kinds of things, but they're related. I have to pay attention enough to notice, and I have to pay attention, perhaps, to impermanence. This forms a basis for a kind of reflection that allows letting go.

So that's the first general direction or navigation in relation to desire coming up: letting it go, putting it down. We could fill that out with all kinds of other possibilities, but let's just keep it at that for now.

The second possibility—and actually related, and again, I think I mentioned this already on this retreat, and certainly elsewhere—is when there's either a pleasant sensation, pleasant vedanā that I'm enjoying, or unpleasant vedanā that I'm craving to get away from, to end, to push away. One possibility is actually to really take up a kind of close attention with the mindfulness and the intensity of mindfulness, focusing intently on the actual vedanā, moment to moment—pleasant, unpleasant, whatever it is.

And noticing within that, not just the vedanā, but noticing the sort of craving that is, if you like, coupled with the vedanā. These ebbs and flows or little impulses and waves of craving that arise with or from the vedanā, or in relation to the vedanā. And just noticing how they keep dissolving—this impulse, this craving, this little swell of craving. "I want it," or "I want more of it," or "I'm pushing it away."

It's not so much in the mind, or certainly that's a level, but in the actual energetics. I'm talking about below the level of thought here, something more fundamental than that, more hardwired even than that.

But focusing on the vedanā, noticing these swells and dissipations of craving, the dissolving of craving—doing that is really good training. Because then one finds that in the noticing of the dissolving of craving, one actually is developing the capacity not to get dragged by it. Over time, this grows so that we're less automatically and unconsciously pulled by vedanā into craving away from or towards something or other. It's a really good skill to develop, that very specific meditative focus. You can do it with any sense door.

Very related to that is a kind of slight shift in the focus to really train the mindfulness on—in a bit more spacious way, probably—the feeling of the pressure that goes with craving. With craving, "I really want this or that," and I can feel it build as a pressure. Again, not so much in the mind necessarily as in the energy body, in fact.

This pressure, because it's hard to tolerate, usually we just want to get rid of the pressure. How do I get rid of the pressure? The easiest way seems to be: eat the cookie, take it, have the cup of tea, get it over and done with—light the cigarette, whatever it is.

But with practice, actually begin to notice this pressure, and what I need to do is notice it with a more spacious mindfulness—allow it, give it space. What pressure needs often is space. That's kind of physics: you squeeze something, there's more pressure. So you want to give it space, and it's like giving a gas more space—it just takes the pressure off. It lowers the pressure.

We just allow that pressure. And again, there'll be a kind of swell, perhaps over quite a bit of time—over some minutes even—a kind of swell of pressure, maybe micro-movements within that, micro-swells within that, this swelling of pressure.

But if I can just be mindful of it in this very allowing way, giving it space, I can see that I can actually tolerate it more easily. And I learn, I develop my capacity to tolerate the pressure of craving or the heat of desire or whatever it is. That learning to tolerate gives me confidence in the long run.

And you find that this pressure and the craving just begins to ebb away. And then I'm free. And the next time it comes back, it will probably be a little less strong. Eventually an addiction can be—some addictions can be—healed just by doing that. A really good skill to have.

So either focusing on the vedanā, noticing the craving, or focusing on feeling the pressure and allowing, giving that space, tolerating it—two versions of a second possibility there.

The third possibility has more to do with holding—these are all related and they can overlap, certainly they do overlap—but holding with a kind mindfulness, or mindfulness imbued with kindness, the emotions that are wrapped up in or underneath the desire and the craving.

For example, a feeling, an emotion of a sense of lack, or even the fear of lacking, the fear of missing out, the fear of losing that's impelling me, compelling me, pushing me to cling on to something or to crave something or to fill up in a certain way with food or whatever it is. It could be actually any kind of fear—fear of boredom. Sometimes this is quite subtle and not obvious. We actually have to notice it, discern what's going on there, and then kind of hone in very delicately on this emotion and hold it, care for it.

What does that mean? Sometimes it can be an agitation. It can be all kinds of things. There's an emotion wrapped up in or underneath that's sort of firing this craving or whatever it is. And sometimes it can be very subtle, sometimes not so subtle, but that's what needs the attention, that's what needs the care.

And what does it mean to hold caringly the complex that's involved there? So one part of this is holding and caring for the self, for me, that who is feeling this complex of emotions—whatever it is, feeling of lack, feeling of emptiness in the non-dharmic sense, a feeling of fear, whatever it is, boredom, uneasiness, stress.

Holding and caring for the self there. Sometimes with mindfulness, we kind of too quickly, or at the wrong times, we skip over or through the self. It's almost like we laser beam the attention down to the sensations of the emotion, which I'm going to come to in a second, because that's actually quite important or valuable as an option. But sometimes also at the level of the self.

So this self that is feeling this difficult emotion, that's put the emotion pushing me into craving—maybe I even know it's not going to be helpful and all of that. Can I hold and care for myself there? Can I give mettā to myself or just hold myself in this kind of kind awareness? So it's the level of the self, of the being.

But a second level is, as I just alluded to, giving a kind of honing of the attention on the emotion rather than the self. So here's this emotion. And one way of doing it is kind of like a laser beam with a lot of intensity. These sensations are arising in my throat, in my chest. It may or may not be that that kind of laser beam intensity or bearing down on it is what's needed. It may be, but sometimes with some emotion, some situation, it's not what's needed. We need something much more delicate, much more caring with that.

And so what is it, again, to hold kindly, almost to cup in the hands like you would hold a little fragile bird or something like that, to hold kindly with mindfulness—bring the mindfulness, but the mindfulness has a lot of holding and kindness in it—to hold with mindfulness that emotion as it plays out in the energy body. But the emotion of it is what's—the actual emotion, the experience of the emotion, the phenomenon of the emotion is what's being held and cared for.

So again, these shade into each other. There are really blurry boundaries here, but we're talking about subtle shifts of emphasis which can make all the difference in practice. I'm not talking about theory here, not talking about neat, clever distinctions that package together very nicely. We're talking about really subtle leanings and emphasis in the moment, in the heat of practice, meeting the difficulty, meeting the beauty, whatever it is.

And these subtle distinctions—this is where when we talk about mastery, when we talk about artistry, when we talk about the beauties of practice, this is really part of it. In this kind of subtlety and the micro-leanings of attention. Think of an eagle or one of

those beautiful birds of prey as they glide and ride the air waves, or a surfer riding the waves. It's really the joy, the art is in the micro-adjustments. And it just sometimes can be really effortless, really subtle, almost barely noticeable to anyone else. And you're riding the currents. What's most helpful here? What's available?

So all this applies to everything—everything we're talking about in practice generally, certainly everything on this retreat, but particularly what I'm exploring in this series of talks.

There's also the possibility of holding and caring for the emotional complex through what I call directing metta toward phenomena—metta to the phenomenon of the emotion itself. Not so much metta to myself, but actual metta with phrases directed toward the emotion. I've taught this technique elsewhere, so I won't go into the details now, but you can find it in other teachings.

What you'll discover, if you genuinely don't try to get rid of the emotion this way, is that oftentimes it fades. But this only works if you're not trying to get rid of it—which would usually be another form of aversion. Instead, you're actually loving this emotion, which means it's welcome, truly welcome. Not as some theoretical idea, but as a real embodied opening, a softening of the relationship to it—welcoming, allowing, and actually directing metta to the emotion in various ways.

Because of dependent origination, because this represents a reduction of clinging, the emotion often fades. But you can't aim for that outcome, because then it's usually just aversion trying to get rid of the emotion. Depending on which emphasis you take, sometimes the emotion fades, but other things might happen instead. An image might arise. Something might shift in the energy body. All kinds of possibilities—some kind of healing with the emotion, some change in the relationship even while the emotion remains.

So we have a third general possibility: the first is letting go, putting it down. The second is focusing on the vedanā or the pressure of craving, allowing it, giving it space, tolerating it. The third is what we could call meeting and holding—tuning in, noticing, meeting and holding, and caring for in different ways, whether for the self, the emotion, or through giving metta to the emotion.

And there's a fourth general possibility in our navigation of practice when desire or craving arises: making a conscious choice to navigate away from it. The Buddha describes this kind of skillful avoidance many times. We're not talking about fear—being afraid of the eros or intensity, some knee-jerk reaction. We're talking about a conscious, skillful response that simply leans or inclines consciousness somewhere else.

Sometimes we recognize that the craving or desire arising right now is actually arising partly or even predominantly because we're not feeling nourished—spiritually nourished, nourished in our being, in our heart, or in our energy. What would serve us better is actually concentrating on giving ourselves some nourishment, opening to nourishment.

Or perhaps we're feeling restless, and the restlessness is impelling this craving. Craving and restlessness, or aversion and restlessness, go intimately together. These hindrances are intimately connected. Or perhaps there's generally not enough space in consciousness—it's getting cramped, often because there's already some craving present. But that crampedness itself fuels the craving in unhelpful ways. There's a kind of intensification, a snowballing effect because there's insufficient space in consciousness.

Or sometimes there's simply not enough energy. We're depleted somehow, irritable, and there's craving or aversion—toward or away from something, whatever our particular pattern of vulnerability when we're tired and depleted.

So we can deliberately recognize this and incline toward some kind of nourishment. This doesn't necessarily mean getting up from the cushion and going for a walk, or taking in nature, or talking to a friend—though of course all that is possible. But within the practice itself, still sitting or walking or whatever the form, we can move into a samādhi practice, for instance, or into metta. If I'm feeling undernourished, I don't necessarily need to give myself metta—I could, but sometimes I might just as well give metta to other people and still get nourished from that. I certainly will.

Or if it's space that I need—opening out the consciousness—maybe taking the meditation outside to help with the outdoors, the sky. But sometimes just opening to listening, 360-degree listening from all distances near and far, will open the spaciousness of consciousness quite organically.

Or generally, some kind of practice that inclines toward fabricating less perception. There's a whole host of these possibilities.

I'm not going to describe them all, but, for instance, an attar practice, if you know it, or actually any kind of emptiness practice—actually the samatha, the metta, and the spaciousness are also practices of less fabrication. So there's a navigation away from the fabrication that's wrapped up in and with the desire, and instead a navigation towards practices which are less fabricating. Samatha, metta, spaciousness, emptiness practices of different kinds—these can be really, really skillful at times. To know that

one has that option, to develop these options so that they are available and accessible, and to experiment with gliding between these different practices, really feeling the resource and knowing and being nourished by these different things at different times.

So that would be a fourth option.

A fifth option I'll just mention here—and we'll introduce it in the instructions—I am referring to what I actually introduced a few years ago in the talk "Beauty of Desire Part 2," I'm guessing 2011, I could be wrong. Very briefly: just here's this desire. Actually, here's some difficulty that I'm experiencing—some pain, some confusion, some anger, whatever it is, some sadness. And sometimes what can happen there is actually, I say that there's probably some desire wrapped up in this difficulty that I'm feeling. Or it might actually be that I'm conscious of a desire that it seems like I can't have, or I shouldn't let myself have, or something or other. But it might just be some other difficult emotion.

So there's probably a desire here. Can I just give myself enough of a platform of deciding to entertain some trust, deciding that maybe there's a treasure in that desire? Maybe that desire is a kind of treasure. So I'm just opening the view away from what I might have been taught or what I might believe already. Maybe there's a treasure in this desire. First step.

Second step: what am I really wanting here? So it seems to be I want this person, it seems to be, I want this to happen—but what am I really desiring? What's the deeper desire, if you like, the more, in a way, more general or abstract desire here? To find out what that is, just gently with the inquiry.

And then really, third step: open to that. Open to the current, the force of that desire in the energy body. I mean really open—really opening the sense of the body to that, what can sometimes feel like a torrent or a stream. Really, really opening to it and allowing it to flow.

So three steps there, and something quite remarkable can happen in terms of the whole state of consciousness and the freedom in relationship to the desire. It's not coming from putting the desire down. It's not coming from navigating away from it. It's not coming from just being mindful of it in the usual sense. There's a different order of something that's available here in terms of—and it really turns upside down the beliefs that we've probably become a little bit entrenched in regarding desire, perhaps over the years of practice.

But here, there's more an emphasis on the energy of the desire itself rather than the image. And also, as I said, the more generalized desire or more abstracted desire, the kind of deeper level, if you like. So it's away from the image towards more of this generality of what I'm desiring deeply, what I really want, and more towards the energy and that kind of general level rather than the image.

So there's five options. But actually this talk, and maybe the next one—we'll see how we do for time—what I mostly want to go into is staying within imaginal practice with the desire that's arising in that imaginal, with the eros, with the erotic imaginal, with the beloved other. Staying within with the image, not navigating away, not going just to the energy of the desire as I just described, not putting it down, not all of that, not just finding the emotions underneath and being mindful of them and caring for them, but actually staying within, if you like, the remit and the direction of imaginal practice, keeping the image alive and working with the eros there.

But remember, all those options I've just been through—navigating away from the desire or from the image, any of the previous ones that we've just been through—are available, as is stopping the meditation, pausing, opening your eyes. It's pretty rare that that's going to be necessary. So maybe some of you are thinking, "God, this is going to be really intense, this eros business and desire and wow and fire and all that." Yeah, maybe sometimes, but it's pretty—I would say pretty—rare that someone actually finds it's just way too much and they need to stop and open their eyes. I mean, it might be, but generally speaking, again, there's a real range here.

So all of those options that we've just been through are possible. Or what I want to really explore shortly is subtle shifts and inclinations, shifts of emphasis and adjustments of emphasis in the imaginal practice that allow us to—yes, part of the mastery—allow us to find our way, allow it to find its way, to open the paths, to open in the imaginal, in the erotic imaginal, allow the vessel to be strong in the moment, and elastic if it needs to be, or whatever. So that's really what I want to go into.

Before I do, a couple of things. One is sometimes it's valuable to be clear—in fact most of the time probably it's valuable to be clear—what I'm actually responding to. So if we're talking about the art of skillful response and subtle responses to subtle or not so subtle things or energies or qualities that are arising in the practice, it's good to be clear: what am I actually responding to?

If or when the eros that's present in an image, in an imaginal practice, feels hard to bear—if or when eros feels hard to bear sometimes—why right now does it feel hard to bear? In other words, what exactly is hard to bear about it? This can be an interesting question at times, and actually quite a helpful inquiry at times. Not that you have to always go into this inquiry, but sometimes.

Sometimes, for example, in what's happening in an erotic image in the practice, there's a sense of merging, perhaps with the beloved, or dissolving into them or together, and there can be fear in relation to that.

Fear of that merging, fear of dissolving, and that makes the whole thing hard to bear. Or it could be that actually there's a lot of bliss arising, a lot of pleasure, and if one isn't used to it or doesn't know how to work with it, that can feel hard to bear. Or, kind of related but a little bit different, just the erotic charge, the energetic charge, can feel hard to bear.

Or sometimes what's happening in the imaginal practice with the erotic object, the erotic beloved, is that there's an opening of one's being, and that opening of the heart and the whole being feels vulnerable, and that feels hard to bear. We feel unsure about that. Or perhaps it's actually gone into craving, and the craving is bringing a certain constriction, and that feels uncomfortable, hard to bear.

Or it might be a matter of trust. You know, here I feel like, "Oh, I'm not sure," and we're feeling uneasy because there isn't enough trust in place—in this practice, in the eros itself, in the kind of image that's coming up. It feels, you know, to the mind, it feels, "Oh, this is weird," or "It's too this or that," or whatever, or "Not enough this or that," or something.

Or it could be, you know, sometimes what happens is there's a really deep longing that arises in relation to certain images and fantasies. And it has this kind of bitter-sweet, but kind of a little bit hard to bear, or very hard to bear, quality to it.

So all these are... you know, there are multiple options with all of these. But I remember just not too long ago working with someone and she was working with an image. We were working with it together. And she said, "Oh, the eros is a little bit hard to bear right now." And I asked her, you know, "What exactly is hard to bear?" And I went through some of these possibilities.

And she was sort of checking in and looking. And she said, "No, what's hard to bear is the giving image." This was... okay, well, "What do you mean, the giving?" And so it was part of the image that was already unfolding for her, that she was, if you like, in.

And this was an image that was very... it was more bodily than visual. It was coming through her body and she was moving her body in a sort of expression of the image and sensing the image through her body. So we've talked about that with the different senses.

But what was needed was actually a little bit more entering into the image, inquiring into the image, and then this sense of, "Oh, it's the giving that's a problem." Okay, well, giving, and "Tell me about the giving. What is being given?" And then going into that whole image of the giving, and she felt herself to be a divine womb.

So the whole thing just went to another level, in the image, into the image, and it opens up. She was a divine womb, a sort of generatrix, and her body was turning out sacred text. So she was making this gesture with her body, kind of rolling her arms. It was puzzling to her. She was following her body, and the image was of this divine womb turning out sacred texts on her arms and with her body and these texts sort of emanated, radiated and then became the cosmos.

So there's some kind of divine goddess birthing the cosmos in hierophantic time here and birthing also the beloved other. It's quite a beautiful and profound image, but it took actually going into the question of "What's hard to bear there?"—an imaginal, it was an aspect of the image—and opening that up.

So in other words, exploring the image more can sometimes make the whole thing easier and give rise to more space. So this is the emphasis, this last one that I've just been through that I want to explore shortly.

But as I said, please remember there are options with all of these. So for instance, if there's a lot of bliss or a lot of pleasure arising with an image... oftentimes the secret here is to open the energy body, give it more space, give that bliss space to flow, to move, allow it. The emphasis is really on opening and allowing and enjoying.

If you really open, really allow and kind of surrender to it—like you surrender to a really powerful shower or waterfall—even you just really open the body to it and let yourself enjoy it, you'll find almost always that that actually takes the unpleasant edge off and the intensity off the pleasure makes it much more tolerable.

Now you could do that almost like again this kind of gently veering away from the image to just a meditation on the energy body and you're just working... you let the image go and you're just working with the bliss and the pleasure in the energy body really opening, really allowing and letting yourself enjoy, surrendering, abandoning yourself to that pleasure and you'll find that it becomes a meditation in itself on the energy body, on the pleasure, etc. It can go to samadhi and different things.

Or you might do exactly that, but keeping the image present. So you're just kind of, again, it's all about shades of emphasis. So there the image is present. I'm not letting the image go and keeping that, but I'm at the same time working with opening the energy body and allowing and enjoying and surrendering and all those things while I'm still engaged with, in relationship to the image. Lots of possibilities.

Similarly with the erotic and energy charge that we talked about before, but they're, you know, in other words, really opening the energy body, etc. But there are other options with the image.

You know, in terms of what we... just the list we went through of what might feel hard to bear just then, you know, if the opening of the being is what feels vulnerable... then again, you can go back to kind of meeting that vulnerability, feeling in with mindfulness. What does that feel like?

Caring for it with mindfulness, perhaps with some metta—maybe just the caring kind of holding with mindfulness. Maybe again, stopping, pausing. You don't need to push yourself through something that feels too much of an edge for you, that you're not ready for. If it's too vulnerable, stop, pause. It's okay. It's really okay.

But again, there are other options: keeping the image around, playing with that edge, working with the energy in relationship to the image—or rather, primarily with the image, even more than the energy or the emotion. The energy and the emotion shift from this different relationship with the image. This is what I want to explore.

The first thing I mentioned from our list of what might feel hard to bear was this fear of merging, or the imminent dissolution that might feel like a tendency toward dissolution. What's helpful here is more of this collateral investment from other practices—if you have experience with the lessening of fabrication, because that's what dissolution is: the lessening of fabrication of self and the perception of other, perception of anything.

If you're familiar with this from practices of samadhi or metta or emptiness, then that familiarity allows you to realize over time that you can really trust this dissolution. If it does go to dissolution, or if it wants to, or if you want to go to dissolution, there's really no danger there. There's no danger. Things can dissolve, merge into oneness—all kinds of different oneness and luminosity and experiences. No danger at all. You're not going to get stuck there. You're not going to lose anything permanently—at least nothing that's worth keeping.

Really, generally, one goes into these experiences and comes out. With familiarity, with time dipping in and out through other practices or even this kind of practice, you realize there's no danger. It might help you, if this is really very new to you, hearing from a teacher—me or Catherine or whoever—saying there's no danger. You can dip into that just a little bit, a little bit more, maybe a little bit more sometimes, and it becomes a beautiful option, completely trustworthy.

Sometimes what happens is there's a sense of the fear of dissolution or the fear of melting. What you can do is just know that there's fear there. At the same time, just notice it's also very nice. It's pretty delicious at that point. You can just not push away the fear, but notice the deliciousness that's around in the body, in the mind perhaps—that's there as well as the fear. Just very gently incline the mind or the attention toward the deliciousness without ignoring or pushing anything away or trying to get rid of fear. Just enjoying that pleasure—that can really, really help.

With all this, it's important to be aware that, as I've said before, often in eros there is a tension—what we're calling an erotic tension. This comes partly because of the pothos, partly because there's always this "more" there, and partly because there's a tension between this attraction toward the beloved other, the erotic object, while at the same time retaining twoness. There's like a pull in opposite directions: a pull toward the object and a pull away to retain, to keep the twoness. All of this creates what we're calling erotic tension.

Sometimes this tension is quite noticeable, and other times it's barely noticeable at all. But just know that this can be part of eros. Yes, there are all kinds of different experiences of peace that we can have in and with eros—quite particular ones, senses of peace that we'll hopefully encounter in this retreat, and kinds of equanimity or balance in and with eros.

But strictly speaking, equanimity is really about the drastic lessening, if not momentary erasure, of any pulling of the object toward oneself or pushing it away—any movement of desire that way. Because it's that lessening of the push-pull toward something, it actually moves toward a fading. I mentioned this in the last part of this talk. Equanimity and fading go together. Deep equanimity involves deep fading. A state of deep equanimity is a state of deep fading.

That's not really what's happening in a state of eros for the most part. It might go toward this melting in union, dissolving in light with the beloved other. But generally speaking, as I said, eros will stay engaged with an other, will retain the other. Whereas deep equanimity will dissolve the other, dissolve the thingness, and actually not be in engagement.

Here's something interesting I'll throw out—some of you will find it intriguing, some won't. The Pali for equanimity is upekkha, the Sanskrit is upeksha. This comes from upa and iksha. Iksha means seeing or to regard or to consider or to watch over. Upa usually means toward or near or together with. So you get this sense of watching closely something. We say equanimity and tend to think with mindfulness it's a watching closely of something.

But the word upa also actually has the implication of extinction, of killing, of diffusing something.

So, at a stretch—I mean, if we just play with words now—at a stretch, *upekkhā* or *upekṣā* could mean something like the extinction of looking. In other words, the fading of perception.

Now, I'm not claiming that is the etymology. I mean, it might actually be involved in it. Personally, I find arguments over etymology and picking over the etymology to try and find the authentic, real, one meaning that the Buddha had for these things—I find that a bit silly, to be honest. I would rather use words to open doors, to give us pathways, a kind of more suggestive hermeneutics there.

But anyway, eros is different, really, than equanimity. We can talk about kinds of equanimity and kinds of peace that can be mixed with the eros or part of the whole opening of the erotic imaginal, but actually there is a kind of tension, an erotic tension, that remains for the most part and to differing degrees when we're working with eros.

Let's look in more detail in the next part. Let's move into what I said I really wanted to talk about, which is the working with, staying with the images and working with the subtle shifts of emphasis and inclination that can happen in imaginal practice in the moment.

CHAPTER 67

Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h18

> *In this fourth installment of the series on wisdom, art, and balance in working with eros and the imaginal, Rob Burbea offers profound guidance on navigating desire through contemplative practice. Rather than the conventional spiritual advice to simply 'let go' of difficult desires, he presents an alternative path: entering deeply into the imaginal dimension, allowing images to reveal their multidimensionality, and discovering unexpected peace and beauty within the erotic-imaginal itself.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that sustainable soul-making requires balance across multiple dimensions—not just perceiving the beauty of the beloved other, but also recognizing the beauty of the self and one's own eros within the imaginal constellation. He shares detailed practitioner accounts illustrating how staying with difficult emotions and allowing images to transform can open into profound experiences of connection, healing, and even theophany. The teaching addresses common patterns of imbalance, such as seeing divinity only in the other while missing it in oneself.*
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> *The talk offers four specific contemplative approaches: perceiving desire as 'divine influx' flowing through us; sensing that which is desired as already happening in hierophantic (sacred) time; recognizing desire, self, and other as theophanies or faces of the divine; and perceiving the entire erotic constellation as God making love to herself. These ways of looking dissolve craving and contraction while allowing eros, images, and soul-making to deepen and expand rather than fade—a fundamentally different result than standard anattā practice alone would produce.*

So we're talking about the development of the art of practicing with Eros so that it is soul-making and fertile—working with the imaginal and informal practice in our life. The wisdom of that: what does wisdom mean? The art of skillful response: what does balance mean? How do we create the vessels? How do we tend to the fire and modulate the fire?

We've already said that we don't want to just alternate between practices of fire and practices of earth, so to speak—the practice of the fire of Eros and practice of the steadiness of the earth, the equanimity of the earth. We don't just want to move between these and hope that a balance comes out over time. That will help certainly; that's im-

portant. Practices that bring steadiness, equanimity, spaciousness, strength, rootedness—these are important when they're done alone and as part of the totality of the path. We've already said this.

But we're also interested—and what I really want to go into—is the question of balance and equanimity, sustainability, fertility, while engaging with the imaginal, while engaging with the erotic imaginal. What I'm talking about here applies to any imaginal perception. We're talking about the imaginal dimension, so it could be something completely intra-psychic, an intra-psychic imaginal figure that doesn't seem to bear any relation to anyone we know. It could be an actual person seen, sensed, imaginally—the imaginal perception of someone in our life, or someone that we know from history, or whatever it is.

For example, someone comes to me and says, "There's this person and I'm really attracted to them. I want to be in relationship with him, with her, with them. And it's painful because they have communicated that they don't want that. They're not interested in that." The natural inclination and the taught path there would be: let go of that. Let go, turn away, find someone else, feel your emotions.

But in fact, another possibility—and in a way a more fruitful possibility, a deeper possibility sometimes—is actually to go in. This person already exists for you as an image. Go into the imaginal dimension. Allow the image of them to be amplified, to enlarge, as it would with the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic operating. Dwell with that image. Be sensitive to it. Meditate with it. Open to it.

And lo and behold, when a person does this, they often find that what happens when I allow the imaginal is that the imaginal will reveal its dimensionality to me. This person becomes much more than the one-dimensional, concrete, actual person. They become alive. With dimensions. They become, if you like, huge—or bigger at least. Multilayered. There's a richness, a depth, a beauty, vitality, multifacetedness of the image there. The image, instead of trying to get rid of it or shrink it or contain it or shrink it down to the actual—actually we're allowing it to open, and ourselves to open to it. And the whole thing opens up. The whole sense of the problem or the situation or this other person, the self in relation to it, opens up.

The problem is flatness. The problem is over-concretized one-dimensionality of perception, reification. And we actually don't see. We think we see, and that the imaginal is not seeing, but we actually do not see. We're not seeing deeply, fully, imaginally, soulfully enough. And therein, in that reification, in that not seeing, in that lack of fullness, is the problem and comes the problem. Flatness, killing, suffocating, strangling, cramping.

And then, if we can open to the image and allow the image to open, we will see very often that it then doesn't feel like it matters much what actually happens in the one-dimensional so-called reality. We've got something else there. Something else opens up and it doesn't actually matter. The image is much bigger than that—much, much bigger.

And we may ask with that: who is this? Who is this in this image? I thought it was this person that I've been trying to tell that I'm interested in them and I would like to pursue a relationship, whatever it is. But who is it? As I go into the sense of them and allow, as I said, all the sensitivity, all the resonance, all the opening, the energy body, the beauty, the soul-making—who is this person? Who is this? The imaginal layer. Can I begin to see and sense in the image of them, in the image, in the way they come imaginatively alive to the psyche? Can I see and sense the angel there, the angel that they are to me, the theophany, the divinity in the image?

So we're really talking about practice here. When that begins to open—that sense of the angel, the theophany, the divinity in the image—then, because I'm actually perceiving that and I'm sensitive, I'm open to it with the whole of my being, the energy body, the mindfulness, the sensitivity, the delicacy, the tuning, it's as if my being, my psyche, is infused, so to speak.

There's an infusion to myself of that angelic nature, of that theophany, of the divinity therein. I don't need this or that to happen. I don't even need this or that to happen in the image. There's an infusion directly. It permeates and penetrates the psyche, and I have something—I have actually much more than I thought I wanted in the first place. Much more.

This could be any kind of relationship, not necessarily romantic or sexual desire. It could be any kind of relationship—with a teacher, whatever it is. Someone might take it to a teacher, take it to a therapist, and they say, "Let go, let go." And of course, that's the standard message, isn't it? Let go. It sounds so simple. It sounds so wise. But not all the time is it wise. Let go—or actually, what does it mean to let go when there are complex situations? Again, it sounds so simplistic. What does it actually mean?

But instead of letting go, there is the possibility: actually, no, go into this image. Claim it, if you like. Let it have a claim on you. Let it have its claim on you. Enter in, open to the image. Let it open. And there will come, in relation to this person that I can't have—maybe they're dying, maybe they might die, maybe whatever the situation is, and whatever the kind of relationship we're talking about, friend, teacher, student, potential lover or not, whatever it is—the image opens, and with it comes peace, beauty, soul-making. The opposite movement of what we thought, sometimes, for us in certain spiritual traditions or other traditions of psychotherapy. We're indoctrinated without even

realizing it, and the indoctrination here is simply: let go. Let go is the answer. Can we explore? Can we question? Can we check where we might be indoctrinated and see what other paths are open to us?

But I'm talking about practice here, not some vague idea. I'm actually talking about entering into practice so that we perceive certain things. There's the imaginal perception. They become very alive, very vital, very meaningful, very tangible, very real for us, these imaginal perceptions.

So in a way, what's happening here is we're allowing the eros. Another way of saying this—because eros and the image go together—is: allow the eros, allow the feeling of the desire, allow that erotic charge, and allow it to increase. Go into the image, allow the eros to increase. They're slightly different angles in on the same thing, really, but allow the eros to increase, and what will happen? The eros-psyche—because the eros is increasing, it stimulates, it ignites—it starts to expand, inseminate, fertilize the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, the mutual insemination, fertilization, deepening, widening, expanding, complicating, enriching of all that we've been through. It expands. That whole soul-making expands. The psyche expands. The ideation expands. And peace comes with that—and this can be a huge surprise if we're accustomed to the usual indoctrination.

Going into the image, opening to the image, opening to the eros, allowing the eros, not cutting it, not trying to stifle it or erase it or put it away—peace.

Sometimes what happens is one enters into the imaginal other, the erotic object, the beloved other, whatever that is, whether it's a human or an animal or some element of nature or an imaginal figure. And there can be a sexual penetration, or there could be just an entering into the being. Because the imaginal object, with the stimulation of the soul-making dynamic, as we said before—the image gets deeper, wider, more complex, more multi-dimensional, more multifaceted. Sometimes in allowing that to happen, it's as if we enter into the imaginal other, as if they've become to us a territory, a soul landscape. And I might enter into them through a—

imaginal erotic penetration, or whatever, sexual penetration, or I might just enter into their eyes, into their soul, and their soul becomes for me a garden, becomes for me perhaps even a paradise.

So the image opens, gains dimensionality, and becomes available for us, and there's peace with that. I have something there. I have something priceless, in fact.

This is all very interesting. And it comes from going into the image, opening to the image, not stopping it, not putting it down, not turning away from it, and also the eros—allowing, opening, going into.

But there's much that's interesting here. When there is desire for us as human beings, when there is desire, I would say there's always operating, whether we're aware of it or not, conscious or unconscious, there's always operating a conception and an evaluation of that desire—a conception of the desire itself that's present, and an evaluation of it. So, for example: it's wholesome, it's unwholesome, it's part of the path, it's definitely not part of the path, it's a defilement, it's holy, it's neither this nor that, whatever. There's always some conception, some evaluation. And either that conception and evaluation of the desire allows us or supports our trusting the desire, its energy, its movement, allows us to see its beauty—or it doesn't allow that. It doesn't allow the trust. It doesn't allow the sense of beauty. So that's interesting too, and that's something we'll return to. What's the concept and the evaluation of the desire itself that's operating? We're going to come back to this a lot.

But as well as that, I wonder whether in some way or another, there's always a kind of projected anticipation or relationship with the having of the object of desire. There's always a projected relationship with the having of it. What I mean is this: desire, when we anticipate getting what we desire, or when we anticipate the consummation of a sexual desire or passion—that's quite a different experience, isn't it, than the desire where we project or anticipate not getting it? Or if it's coming from a feeling of lack, and we anticipate not being able to have this object that I desire, this one that I desire, whatever it is—how does that then shape the whole experience, colour, determine, direct the whole experience?

So those are the two obvious possibilities, but actually there are many more in terms of this projected relationship. What's my relationship with the idea or the anticipation of getting or not getting, being able to have or not being able to have? There are actually others which we'll go into—for example, realizing that I already have it in some way. We'll return to that and others.

But if we take that second possibility, the feeling of lack, or imagining, projecting that one can't have, one won't be able to have this object—sometimes one possibility is noticing that's what's happening and feeling the feelings with that, feeling the whole psychic constellation with that. Maybe it's frustration. Maybe it's some kind of feeling of inferiority.

I want to share something from someone's process that they are allowing me to share. It's a complicated scenario; I won't explain all the details. But this person, he writes—he was describing what happened with someone where there is a kind of boundary, and because of the boundary, and there was the desire, he said, "I felt a bit trapped in a mental and emotional space that somehow reminded me of a teenage feeling or sense I had as a teenager—that I couldn't reach her," this one that was desirable for him, his erotic beloved. "I couldn't reach her. She seemed really together and kind of cool and out of my class. She was out of my reach. It was as if a sheet of glass separated us. I could see her, but I was removed. I couldn't touch her." And in this, he said, "I felt inferior somehow."

This was not a very common pattern for him, but he recognized it from when he was a teenager and before. Somehow he felt inferior, not being able to have. She was somehow better than him, out of his class, out of his league. And then he would consolate into what he would do—go, as he put it, on his solitary and lonely way, kind of a tramp or an outcast, leaving alone. So there was pain and frustration.

Encouraging him to feel it, to really be with that and really feel the frustration, he said in his reporting, "Strong in my body—it was really strong in my body." But actually, with the allowing of it, it became strong eros as he was with it and felt it. And it turned very intense and beautiful.

He described—staying with the image, allowing the eros with the image, really feeling it in the body but staying with the image—and the image started to transform. He said, "Like a lion, I wanted to devour her, rip her flesh open with my teeth, tear her limbs apart." None of it angry or destructive. Don't make that mistake of assuming this is a kind of angry violence or destructive, or anything to do with rape or anything like that.

None of it angry or destructive, he writes, but deeply animal erotic. Holy, in its very particular, utterly non-ethereal way.

Reflecting on that word "devour" – it's probably not etymologically related to the word "devout," but there's something we can call, following Paul Kugler here, an archetypal psychologist, there's an archetypal resonance between clusters of words. Devour and devout. There's a holiness here. As he writes, holy in its very particular, utterly non-ethereal way.

So again, remember we were talking about the substantiality, the carnality of the image. This is a really carnal image, a substantial image. It's not light and airy, fairy and insubstantial. This one is utterly non-ethereal, he writes. It's immensely animalistic, potent, roaring, beautiful force.

In the image, he writes, "I lick her inside, her organs, her blood, tear her flesh, lick her brain – a lion, dominant, standing over its prey."

And again, prey, P-R-E-Y, and pray, P-R-A-Y. Is there some archetypal constellation in the very words here, in the poetry of the words, some connection in this case?

He continues: "Licking, gouging, feasting on her flesh and her juices and fucking her too deeply." So there's sexual and carnal, all of it. And he writes, "There's a particular kind of loving of her in all this too."

So it's, as I said, not violent. It's not just the anger of frustration. Something happened and it opened. And there's a particular – if for most people, a kind of unusual – kind of loving of her in all this. Very beautiful. It was very moving for him.

And the previous stuck sense of not being able to reach her, feeling inferior and frustrated – all that utterly dissolved and was replaced by an intense sense of connection through participating in the lived energetics of the image. So something, through really sticking with what was quite a difficult experience, constantly bringing the mindfulness, really bringing the skill and the art of practice with some help there, opened up this very kind, but very vital, very beautiful, and deeply holy image.

Now, it wouldn't have to be – the image could open up in any direction or with any kind of quality. We don't know. But there's something here: tracing the emotion, finding the difficulty, energy body, let the eros constellate, let the image fill out, and see what happens.

§

Now, sometimes – and I've touched on another point in relation to all this before, and you'll notice how it applies to that image I just shared – sometimes what happens with the erotic imaginal, or with eros, or with desire in our life, and also sometimes with devotion, is that there's an imbalance. A kind of constriction or block, as we've talked about in different ways, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Or a better word is a block in a certain direction causing the whole thing to be out of balance. I'll explain what I mean.

With an image, with working with the erotic imaginal – again, whether it's sexual erotic or devotional erotic or whatever, that whole range of eros – what it needs to be balanced and to be unblocked, so to speak, in every direction of the expansion of the soul-making dynamic, what it needs is not just to see the beauty only of the beloved other, only of the erotic object, of the image of the other. Not just their beauty, because sometimes that's evident enough. Some people have this pattern where that's really evident, really clear. There's the beauty, there's the divinity, right there.

But also, for the sake of the balance and the sustainability and the opening of the soul-making dynamic, we also need to see the beauty of the self in that constellation. Not just the beauty of the other, the beloved other, the erotic imaginal object, but the beauty of the self, and the beauty of the self's eros, the self's passion. My eros, my passion is beautiful. Am I seeing it? Am I seeing the beauty of myself in this self-other imaginal constellation?

In that way, then, the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos, doesn't collapse. It doesn't contract. It doesn't short-circuit or blow out. And some people, unfortunately, have almost a habit or a tendency not to see – just to see the beauty of the other, not to see the beauty of the self in that imaginal constellation, and of the self's eros and the self's passion.

But in order for the soul-making dynamic and the expansion and the eros to be sustainable, to be stable, to be fertile, in order for that to grow in the ways we were describing, and expand and mutually inseminate and deepen and widen – all that requires this kind of balance, balancing the sense of the beauty of the other with the sense of the beauty of the self and the self's eros.

So it's good to notice if there's a tendency or a habit one way or another. I suppose some people might have more sort of self-preoccupation and not see so much the beauty of the other. Someone might say, for instance, "I just see the beauty and the divinity in the other, and I don't see it in myself." And very quickly, those with certain psychological trainings might think, "Ah yes, well, trace it back to the relationship with the father, or relationship with the mother," whatever it is. Careful of the assumptions.

Perhaps that has something to do with it. Is it causal? Maybe, maybe, maybe. Just, let's have this openness of inquiry. Please, please. And then even if that is a part of it or part of the constellation there, or it is even partly causative, it still leaves open the question: What does it need? What does the soul-making need? What does, so to speak, health need here? And sometimes, again, it's allowing the image to do its thing, allowing it its fullness. So it's from exploring the image, from entering into it, from having it enter into us, from opening to it and having it open to us. Listening to the image.

So one thing is just noticing, in fact. Giving attention within the imaginal practice – so here's this beautiful, desirable, lovely, even divine other that there's so much eros and devotion towards. Can I notice, not taking the attention off the other, but widening the field of attention within the imaginal practice to the larger imaginal constellation? Can I notice and attend to the whole self-other constellation there, and notice what is the image of the self here? Can I watch it actually gain dimensionality as I include it in my awareness? Including it allows the self to take on imaginal dimensions, not be stuck in a certain narrow or concretized image, or the usual one, or whatever.

This is, if you like, the natural, organic desire or tendency of the soul-making dynamic, of the eros-psyche-logos movement. As we said, it wants to expand, deepen, widen, complicate, enrich, become multifaceted – all that. But it wants to expand and deepen and gain dimensions, if you like, in all directions. That means in the direction of the other, certainly, but also in the direction of the self and in the direction of the eros.

I'll read you something else which someone kindly gave me permission to share. This person was on retreat not too long ago. It's fairly long, but it's very instructive and very beautifully shared.

She was on retreat and settling in. Over those opening days, she noticed – I'll speak in the first person – she says, "I noticed my general experience that the citta was entering, it was like entering a deep well of sadness. The personal and global sadness that I had been carrying for some time. Here, on the retreat, it finally had no distractions under which to hide."

As she was out walking – a deep lover of nature, this woman – and she was out in the forest, "I felt some opening, even just to share this grief with the cold air and with the also silent trees." In our culture, this already would be called an imaginal perception of nature – to share this grief with the cold air and with the also silent trees. Can you hear how we consider that in our culture an imaginal perception?

"I stopped to literally hug one," so she actually hugged a tree, "and to linger there. Its depth and solidity pointed to a resource of strength that wouldn't be diminished by any offering to me." Again, the imaginal perception of the tree, the beauty of that, the resource of that.

"Gaining steadiness in movement, it's impossible to describe what a relief it was to go beyond, beyond even the prescribed trails at the property's northern edge. I was finally connecting to something wild, at least relatively so."

She had been working with a teacher on this, with Catherine, in fact. And she continues, "Yet as you" – meaning Catherine – "so helpfully observed in our meeting, the sense of belonging I had with nature was nonspecific. Loved I was by the forest, but simply as one of Gaia's countless children, all precious and regarded with universal affection."

She continues, "Returning that afternoon, properly worn out," she did some sitting meditation, "and there I was offered by my very personal benefactors all the love that was needed, and then some." So this is now imaginal meditation with certain imaginal figures from her life, some of whom were dead, but they are living in her as imaginal figures.

"In contrast to what I experienced in the forest, the love from these departed benefactors was very specific. My stepfather and my teacher, lover, friend, and my first lover – these three were there, and they each, in turn, heard and affirmed me. In all three cases, my lived experience was that they knew and loved the fullness of me, messy, complicated, wondrous me."

So the love there is very particular, not this general love that she had from the earth before. Very particular, very unique to her. The specificity, the uniqueness of herself is entering into the imaginal relationship, called into the imaginal relationship at that point with these three – what she's calling benefactors, imaginal figures.

She continues, "Over the next several days, as I was vigilant in honoring whatever sadness appeared, allowing it to fully be present and responding to whatever seemed to be needed, at this point the forms of sitting and walking seemed not just doable, but truly helpful." So she was getting more into the practice, helped by all this, by the way she was practicing with these images and being open to the pain.

So the image is not running away from the pain. It's a way of actually opening. The image is a portal to the pain. The pain is a portal to the image, and then to something much more.

The form is truly helpful, she wrote, though my walking path still had to be outdoors. I began to appreciate my heart for its insistence, its unyielding demand for my attention and rejection of the forms that would skip over its pain.

So she was really up for all this. But now, she continues, my extended walks into the forest were growing slowly and quietly in joy. It was on day seven of the retreat, and she reports something. She was getting ready to go outside for a walk, and then she says, so beautifully: "Like childhood friends at the front door, impatiently waiting on my

presence to begin after-school play, the forest now seemed to be calling me—specifically me—out for a romp. Come out! Come play! Come back!" This is the forest talking to her. "OK, OK," my heart responded. "I'm lacing these snow boots as fast as I can."

She's already, by going into the image, by allowing the image, the uniqueness of herself has been called into that image that previously was more general and not unique.

And then she continues: "Following a different route but still heading north and beyond the trail boundaries, I came to a gentle micro-valley under a canopy of pines and was brought to the confluence of two small streams, a place flat and low with bright sun streaming through onto shapes and colours of such beauty. Rock, snow, dark earth, moss, water revealing and water reflecting. I stood on a squared-off stone elevated right at the stream's intersection and listened to their perfect sound, the sound of needs met. And then out of the quiet space of my mind came the sense: this place is happy. This place is happy in part because I'm here with it. We're together, enjoying this moment and one another, as each of us—rocks, waters, mosses, trees, me, creatures, bit of earth and bit of sky—brings our specific selves to this. We're friends, hanging out."

Very beautiful.

"On the way back to the retreat centre, a snowy clearing, brilliant white in the sun, called me over. A traipse through, and having reached the spot, laid out spread eagle. Through sparse branches I gazed up on the blue above..." And she continues, a very beautiful sharing.

So that's quite complex. There's a lot in that in terms of the points we're exploring. Let's draw out a few here.

First: love is there with the imaginal. In the imaginal is love. With imaginal perceptions there is love. Can we notice the love? I think I've said this before already on this retreat. It's there. Almost by definition, I would say. Love is part of the imaginal. Sometimes we don't notice it. Sometimes it's not obvious. Sometimes it's a kind of love that we're not used to—it's not a conventional sort of expression of love, so we almost miss it. But can we notice it? Can we feel into it? What is the quality of this love? What kind of love is it? Because it might not be conventional. There is love in the imaginal, with images, with imaginal perceptions. Can we notice it?

We love images. What is an image for us is something we love. And again, even that might not be obvious. But sometimes even less obvious is that the images love us. We love the images, and the images love us.

And this can open out—that's partly what happened in this yogi's story that she shared so beautifully. So how can we allow this? Not by closing down, saying, "Oh, it's not the same. I love them more than they love me," or whatever. Sometimes we can just open it, notice it, and that allows it to open. What we attend to, what we tune into, amplifies, gains life—like a flower unfolding its petals, its beauty, its radiance, through the light of our attention and our attunement and our sensitivity.

Sometimes how the whole love, in both directions, in the imaginal constellation opens out is actually by allowing yourself to feel and speak your love—even voice your love to the imaginal. But feeling your love, feeling your love of the imaginal other, the beloved other, you begin to feel again, if you open up, if you just stay noticing, stay attuned, stay sensitive, that the image loves you back. This is really, really important, really, really helpful.

And then—is it possible to dwell in that love? To open the heart, the being, the energy body, the soul, the psyche to that love? And maybe it comes through the gaze. We'll talk about this in the instructions: the gaze of the imaginal other, or lover, or figure of love, or whatever.

And there can be so much healing in this—so much healing in being loved, in feeling loved, in recognizing that one is loved. So much healing, so much beauty there, so much resource and nourishment.

And it's not always easy, sometimes, to open to or to be, if you like, under the gaze—even a gaze that's full of love, that is nothing but love, that's intense with love. It's not always easy. It's interesting. It's complex.

Sometimes that's complex for people because there's a shame, and even a fear, or certainly a discomfort at being seen deeply. And this gaze of the imaginal other—whether it's a person in a life that we're perceiving imaginally, or just an intra-psychic image—there's a shame, or fear, or discomfort at being seen. And something in a person wants to flee from that, wants to refuse it, or just can't take it in.

So sometimes there's an ambivalence. One longs to be seen so deeply—is there a longing to be seen, and to be seen deeply? And there's a fear of being seen because of the shame. And what happens with these two opposite, conflicting forces? Sometimes all kinds of contorted and painful and strange manifestations, determining the behavior, because we've got these two conflicting forces—and what we do in terms of public attention and all kinds of things there. It's complex.

Maybe one of the options—I mean this is complex, I'm not going to go so much into it now—but maybe just to say this, because it's in the line of the theme we're exploring: maybe actually one can ask, if that is the case, "Here I'm trying to open to the gaze of the imaginal other, but actually that's quite difficult too—the loving gaze, even that's difficult to open to. So what does the imaginal other do in response to my ambivalence? In response to my fear? In response to my shame? What do they say to us? This image, this imaginal figure—what do they do? What is, if you like, their wisdom and their wise and loving response in response to our ambivalence, our fear, our closing off, our refusal, our fleeing?"

In that story I shared just now from the yogi, there was a kind of inequality in the love, and that was partly what was painful for her. The image loved her, if you like—in this case, the image of the earth or the trees. They loved her, but in this general way. She was just one of countless of Gaia's children, I think is how she put it—just a sort of generic universal love, if you like, emanating from nature. It's still imaginal. But in contrast, she was *in love* with the earth. She was in love with particular trees and their uniqueness. So there was this kind of imbalance of the general versus the uniqueness, and also of simply loving versus being, so to speak, *in love*.

In that respect too, because of that imbalance, we could say, in terms of our theory, that the eros-psyche-logos dynamic was blocked, relatively speaking, in one direction—in the direction from the image to her. The eros, the imaginal, was filling out and flowing out, penetrating deeply, richly, multi-dimensionally in one direction, but it was more stifled, not completely blocked but more stifled, in the direction towards the self.

But as she, using other images and hanging out with the images—not going away from the emotion and working with it, in this case over some days (it may take longer, may take much shorter, anything's possible here)—working with it, the love of the image for her unique self opened. It was *her* that the forest was impatient for: "Come out and play! You! We want to play with you!"—and her beauty, her uniqueness. So the sense of self there, the uniqueness of the self, was called into the image and given—it becomes an object of very specific love.

There's a quality of balancing of the two loves there. Her love for the trees is now balanced by the trees' love for her. Not just general love both ways, but unique love for uniqueness—love for particularities, particular loves flowing now both ways, not just one way.

And with all that, eventually, the images' love, if you like, becomes eros. So the forest—we could say the forest, in this case the trees—eventually has not just love for her, but erotic love for her. In other words, the self becomes an erotic object. The self can be-

come an erotic object for myself, in the way that I look at myself, or in the way that it feels, I sense, that the image is looking at me. I become alive. Self, this unique self, becomes alive as an erotic object, becomes an erotic beloved other even—either to myself or to the image.

And so in that, because eros and image go together, the self comes alive as an image. And because dimensionality is part of image, as we keep stressing, and dimensionality starts to shade into the divine dimensions, the self comes alive as image—

and it gains dimensionality and it gains divinity eventually—maybe suddenly, maybe just gradually, there's a gradual transition. And this is coming in the image, in the imaginal practice, or even from the image.

So there are two aspects to that story I shared. There's the aspect of love and the opening of love and the opening *to* love. And also the inclusion of the self and the opening of that self in its imaginal dimensions. The inclusion of the self and the opening of the self. The opening to love and the opening of love. Different aspects, all mixed into one there. I could give countless examples of this kind of thing.

Again, what it means for our practice and for this question of balance and artistry and sustainability and fertility, for tending the fire and mastery of the fire and the vessel—it means that the object, and the self, and the world (and that's where the cosmopoiesis comes in, in terms of the imaginal perception of the world), all these three—object, self, and world—actually, and eros too, because we said that before, the four: object, self, world, and eros, need to be included. Included in the soul-making dynamic, included. They're part of the imaginal constellation, and we need to let the imaginal constellation open to really, really spill over and involve them and include those dimensions—the world and the self, as well as the other—in our attention, in our attunement, in our sensitivity and opening. So opening to the other, the self, and the world as images. That brings balance.

If you can imagine a soul-making dynamic, this expansion of eros, psyche, and logos, if it expands in one direction and not in the other direction, it's lopsided, it's out of balance. It wants to organically expand in all directions, if you like, equally. Again, talking about in imaginal practice, but also in relationship, because deep relationships are imaginally infused. They have imaginal dimensions. If they don't, they become problematic for us.

Now, when I say opening to the other, self, world, eros as images, it means, as always, as a reminder now: not reified and not identified with. Seeing image as image.

Sometimes I encounter someone where there is a sense—a very strong, beautiful, palpable sense—of the divinity of the other and also the self. So there's a balance there, but unfortunately, oftentimes the images, the divinity in the image, is not seen as image. Image is not seen as image. Rather, it's reified. And then, in the case of someone I'm particularly thinking of, what happens is she moves between a kind of self-elevation and a self-hatred—the two reified poles of this dynamic. Moving into the sense of divinity of the self. Okay, great, the self is included. It's not just the other. There's not just divinity outside of me. But there's a kind of elevation there. She's buying into it, or she's reifying it. And then that swings to a kind of self-hatred and shame. The images are literalized. There's a kind of bipolarism, you could say, operating there because of the reification, because image is not understood as image. It's not understood to be empty.

Sometimes a person says something like, "I'm really into emptiness practice. I'm really attracted to it, and it goes really well for me. But then I begin to see everything as empty, and this whole insubstantiality of everything—I feel like I'm flying. I feel like I'm invincible." And that goes into something that psychologists might diagnose as almost a kind of mania, a unipolar manic episode. And then people will say, "Oh, I need to go out and do some gardening and dig some earth and stomp around in my wellingtons and kick around in the soil. Definitely practice emptiness less, or practice less in general, because it's all getting out of hand. Too much emptiness."

Is that the only option? Is that what really needs to happen? Is that even the correct diagnosis of the problem—too much emptiness? Is it actually that when a person says "I see everything as empty," actually you've seen everything empty except one thing? That invincible self is the thing left out of the emptiness. The whole world is empty and everyone else is empty, and this invincible self, unfortunately, is reified, is believed in and identified with, is taken to be real, not seen as image, not seen as empty.

Actually, you could say it needs *more* emptiness. The emptiness, the sense of image as image, needs to be pervading equally the self as well as the world. This kind of imbalance or lack of pervasion is very, very common. And what a person might have, for example, is a whole fantasy or elevation of a fantasy or an image of, say,

Passion, or a passionate person, or being a passionate person. Another might have a similar fantasy around being a more equanimous person – a standard, common image of what a good Buddhist looks like, or what an awakening person looks like. Sort of really equanimous. And sometimes there's not the seeing of image as image.

The image itself has gotten stuck, become a little bit rigid. Not only is there attachment to it, but it's actually stuck. It's prevented from expanding and having its multidimensionality in life. So often it's in allowing the image its multidimensionality that it

actually loses its reification. It's in allowing the image its fullness that it loses its reification, because we see its multidimensionality and allow it to have that. Oftentimes it's precisely this that allows us to let go of the reification, the identification.

Sometimes we are shrinking, rigidifying an image, or shrinking ourselves to try and fit into some rigid image. It could be passion, it could be equanimity, like I said, but an image is bigger than an emotion. So again, it's letting the image fill out, making sure image is image, and not something rigid, concretized, literalized.

We can ask in imaginal practice – whether purely intrapsychic or in relation to someone in our life who is involved in this imaginal constellation – who is it? Who is this beloved other? Because I can reduce the image to a flat, one-dimensional person, but who is the self as well? One thing you can do is say: there's Eros, there's this imaginal thing going on, and who, actually, just gently – who am I right now? Who is the self in this image? Who is the one participating in this imaginal constellation with an other, and who is the other?

In asking that, we allow self to become image, or we notice what the image of self is, who is participating in this image. It may be the usual sense of self that we have – it's me, it's Rob, it's whoever – but it gains imaginal dimensions through being included in the imaginal practice. Or it may be that it bears very little similarity to the usual self. But who? We can ask *who* as a gentle way of including the self. Or just look.

With all this we're talking about, we're talking about navigation. Navigating, balancing, responding, climbing, gliding. One possibility, if we speak generally now, is that in practice, working with an image in our life or in our practice on the cushion, we can tune in with sensitivity and notice and follow what is autonomously emerging or given in and with the image. In other words, we're not doing anything. We're just tuning, noticing, and following – trusting, if you like, the soul intelligence of the image, or in the image.

At other times, or to a certain extent, we can do something slightly different, have a different kind of tack, a different relationship with the imaginal practice, where we're deliberately leaning or inclining or gently, subtly guiding the practice in all kinds of different directions if we want. So, for example, with an erotic beloved other in the imaginal, guiding it toward a kind of melting union with that other, with the beloved other, with the erotic object – dissolving perhaps in light or love or whatever it is. Essentially, it's towards less fabrication through the erotic connection, but actually allowing it to go towards this melting union.

That's one option. You can lean that way, or let it go that way if it wants to. But you can also modulate that movement, temper that movement with practice, with skill, so that it goes only a little bit of the way towards that union and towards less fabrication – only to a relative degree of insubstantiality of the perception of materiality. There's a little bit of fading, but actually the forms are retained. The particularities and the uniqueness and the shape or character of self and other, of the two beings of the image, is retained. But they become lighter and more insubstantial. You can play with this spectrum with practice – modulating that, choosing where you'll hang out on that spectrum.

You can experiment with colors – adding, or seeing what color the other wants to be, or your own body, or the interaction, or the breath. We played with that a little bit on the Poetry of Perception retreat. You can deliberately tune into giving and receiving healing, different kinds of healing, or different kinds of the brahmavihāras – mettā, or compassion, or muditā, different kinds of love. You can emphasize the sensitivity and exploration of the energy body, or the particular sense of sacredness, or the particular sense of divinity, or the particular cosmopoiesis that's spilling over, or the particular kind of love.

And something we'll come back to in the instructions as well: sometimes with an image, with the Eros there, there is a sense of duty. A duty that either one of the imaginal characters has, or the self has, and it translates in some way or another to my life – or it doesn't. There's some kind of sense of duty. And again, that could be what you incline towards and draw out through your attention, through delicately focusing on that. It's the duty.

So it's not without the energy body—the energy body is always there. It's not without an awareness of the emotions; that's always there. There's a certain fundamental inclusion of these aspects. But we're talking about the relative balancing of where you put the attention, what you draw out through the attention, what you dwell on, what you focus on.

And so with the sense of duty: Whose duty? Who is the character here, the imaginal character who feels this duty, who carries out this duty? What is the duty? And it doesn't mean necessarily figuring out what it means, like the practical steps I need to take in my life. Just staying with the more imaginal, the pregnant, the depth and the beauty of the feeling of duty. Maybe it constellates an image, or the image changes. Maybe it constellates a sense of devotion. And that's a feeling, that feeling of devotion.

Often, if we notice it, allowing the sense of devotion brings an alignment in the energy body. We're aligned with that devotion to that duty. There's a great beauty here, great depth, great power and strength without any hardness. But that alignment of the energy body is itself a state of balance—and we're talking all about balance here. It's also a state of rootedness. I'm rooted in what I'm devoted to. I'm rooted in my duty because the energy body is aligned there with it. And you can actually feel the energy body rooted in something deep. It becomes almost unshakable. Again, there's a kind of equanimity emerging from the imaginal, from the erotic-imaginal.

So all these deliberate inclinations, plus all the ones we mentioned before toward samādhi or mettā, all of that's possible—anything like that we've mentioned before is possible. You can get this sense of how great a range, and a subtly differentiated range, there is of where you can incline. Like a ship on the open water, or a boat on the open water, or a bird in the sky gliding on the air currents. There's potentially, at least, dependent on the skill, an almost infinite degree of precise directionality available—360 degrees—and also depth, up and down, and all that.

Let's point out a few more directions, dimensions, that are available here with imaginal practice—if we're allowing the image and allowing the eros. I'm going to mention four right now.

If we allow the image and enter into it, open to it, let it open, and the eros, then it's possible that we either start to discover certain dimensions of the imaginal, or, again, we can almost look for them, or incline toward deliberately resurrecting them from the experience before, or whatever.

So the first of these four I'd like to enumerate now is that we see and feel the desire—and whatever the specificity of that desire is, it might be the desire for sex or certain sexual interaction or something, a kiss or this or that, or something non-sexual, whatever. We see and feel the specific desire as what William Blake called a "divine influx." He used that word somewhere or other—a kind of idea of the emotions that we feel as divine influxes.

And what happens when we decide to see something, or we start perceiving something, as a divine influx? In this case, desire. This very specific desire. What happens if I sense it, see it, feel it, in all its specificity, as divine influx? In other words, it's not, as we would usually assume, that this desire I'm feeling is *mine*—not that usual perspective. But actually, that the desire, this very specific desire, is coming from or given by God, if we use that word, divinity, whatever word you want to use. It's flowing through me, or flowing through us, if it's mutual with someone else.

Again, we're talking about a conception here, but one that needs to be translated to a perception. Conceptions on their own, disembodied, abstract—not much help at all. This conception: this desire that I'm feeling right now, I'm in touch with my energy body, I'm in touch with desire, I'm in touch with the image, all of that—can I perceive it? Either I notice or I discover that it is, or I deliberately see it as a divine influx. It's coming from the divine, from a God, flowing through me. And then what happens? Again, there's an opening, because you're opening up another dimension of the imaginal.

And because there's an opening of the psyche and the logos there, there's space to tolerate. There can even be an increase of the eros with that, but there's space there, and peace.

So that's one possibility: seeing and feeling the desire as a divine influx. A second, which I alluded to briefly before, is this: can I notice that which is desired—whatever it is, this kiss, this wanting to dance with you, whatever it might be, even some very intense sexual desire, sexual or not—can I notice that which is desired may be perceivable as already happening? It's already happening. Not on the actual physical level, so to speak, but it's already happening on the imaginal level, eternally, in what Henri Corbin calls hierophantic time. Hierophantic means the appearance of the sacred. So in sacred time, we could say, which isn't a time that flows past, present, future—it's almost like images exist as icons, eternally. There's just this discrete icon and that discrete icon. They may have connections, but they're not temporal connections of cause and effect, this coming before that.

One can get a sense, when one feels deeply into an image and opens deeply to an image, that this thing, this desire—you're also an imager connected—that which I desire, the image of that which I desire, is perceivable as already happening on the imaginal level, eternally, timelessly, in hierophantic time. Again, we're talking about a conception, not something abstract, but a conception that is a seed in the perception and becomes a way of looking. Conception needs to be translated to perception. I actually perceive this as already happening, this image of this desire that I would like fulfilled.

And again the question as well: who? Who is it who is kissing this image, who is dancing, who is making love in hierophantic time? Who is it that's eternally making love in that way? And again, seeing in this way, that level of imaginal perception opens up and the problem goes out of the whole thing—the problem of desire. It may have felt quite problematic, quite intense, quite hard to tolerate, and it goes out of it. A whole other dimension is added with that, all the beauty and fullness, all the richness, all the divinity.

A third possibility, a kind of subtle variation of those two, is that the desire that I'm feeling and the self, the image of the self, and the image of the other are all theophanies. The desire, the self, and the other are all theophanies. They are all faces of the divine, or if you like, parts of one larger theophany. So it's not, as in the first one, that the desire is the deity's desire or the Buddha's desire for his consort. It's not that desire is this God's desire, but that the desire itself is divine, or is an aspect of divinity. It's a very subtle difference, but you can play with this. And again, if I can see that way, sense that way, perceive that way imaginatively, then there's space, there's beauty, and all the peace that comes with that.

The fourth, for right now, is that the whole constellation—in other words, the object desired, the image of the self desiring, and the desire itself, the whole imaginal constellation of the eros—is seen, felt, perceived as God making love to herself or himself. The whole constellation: object desired, image of the self desiring (who is this one that desires?), and the desire—all of it is God making love to her or himself.

Recall the image of those Buddha figures on thangkas or mandalas: this or that Buddha, whoever it is, or the different Buddhas in yab-yum, in erotic union, making love with their consort. The Buddha there is regarded as not just this Buddha and his consort—the Buddha is the totality of the male and the female figure. The consort and the Buddha together are the Buddha. So the whole thing, the whole constellation, is God making love to herself or himself, this or that Buddha making love to her or himself. Can I find that way in, see that way, sense that way, perceive that way?

For some of you, this is going to sound like you could never do that. Actually, this is all available with practice, maybe a lot easier than you suppose. But then the self is not as it usually is regarded—the self as the basic actor, the basic desirer. Basically it's me desiring. And the other is not, in this imaginal perception, this dimension, what it seems to conventional perception. But be careful with this, because it's not that the self and the other are just empty. It's not only that they're empty, or that they're divine in some kind of universal way, or that they're partaking of, or essentially are, universal love or universal awareness or beingness or whatever version of universal oneness. It's not that they're only empty, and it's not that they're just universally divine. Nor is it that the desire is only anattā, not-self.

If desire comes up for me and I regard it as anattā, and I keep that practice—just not me, not mine—focusing on the desire and regarding it as not me, not mine, what actually happens is the desire fades.

One has not erased the eros. One has kept it, actually taken it deeper. Nor the image, nor the other, nor the self. These things are given other dimensions.

So, looking in this way, learning to look in these ways—I'm just offering a few possibilities in practice, again—but with all of this, craving, contraction, dukkha dissolve. Soul-making, and the sense of beauty and sacredness and all that, increases. Because the eros-psyche-logos dynamic is allowed to expand and to open up new dimensions in that expansion. Beauty, soul-making, sense of divinity, sacredness—all of that.

CHAPTER 68

Wisdom, Art, Balance (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 25 min

> *In this fifth part of his series on wisdom, art, and balance, Rob Burbea delves into the subtle art of navigating attention within imaginal practice to maintain sustainability and fertility in dharma work. He addresses the crucial distinction between intensity and potency, explaining how scattered attention can create impressive but ultimately unproductive experiences, while balanced awareness generates genuine transformation and soul-making.*
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> *Burbea explores the delicate balance between heart-centered awareness and imaginal perception, using practical examples to illustrate how practitioners can avoid getting captivated by one aspect at the expense of others. He discusses working skillfully with sexual energy as it arises in practice, showing how mindful attention to the whole energy body can transform such energy into bliss and deeper samādhi states. The talk examines the choice between moving toward union and dissolution versus maintaining erotic tension and otherness, each opening different dimensions of mystical participation and holiness.*
>
> *The teaching concludes with a framework for checking whether all three centers—belly (energy body), heart (emotion and imaginal perception), and head (conceptual logos)—are involved and connected in practice. Burbea emphasizes how conceptual frameworks serve as vessels that contain and support the soul-making process, providing orientation, trust, and stability essential for navigating the three degrees of fabrication in contemplative work.*

A few more things here. We're talking about balance, sustainability, and fertility in the practice—ensuring, guarding, supporting, and encouraging these qualities through the art and artfulness of our practice.

One aspect of this worth mentioning is the navigation between or the emphasis of attention in imaginal practice, and noticing what captivates or captures the attention. What's my personal tendency or your personal tendency, if there is one? My personal pattern, your personal pattern or habit for the attention to keep getting captivated by this element or that aspect of the whole soul-making constellation or movement? This is really, really important, because again, what can happen is the attention gets captivated by something, and all the energy funnels along there, and all the growth funnels along there, and it can be just lopsided.

If you have an image of more like a sphere expanding, or let's put it in two dimensions, a circle wanting to expand in all directions and get bigger, and instead, for different reasons, it's only expanding in one direction, the whole thing tips. That's not sustainable. There's not balance there and it won't be fertile.

I was working with someone the other day who exemplified this pattern. For her, the attention might get funneled, captured, or receive undue emphasis—an imbalanced emphasis towards the heart or the energy around the heart, constellating in the heart with the eros and the love, at the expense of the imaginal. We've talked about the other imbalance where one is lost in the image without the awareness of the emotional resonances and the energy body resonance. Here was an example of the other direction, and I think it was her tendency.

So pointing it out and offering the possibility—what do you see happening here with the attention being captured by all the fire and heat and energy coming up into the heart area in the energy body? The very attention was intensifying that; the constriction of the attention was intensifying the energy there until the whole thing felt like it was getting overexcited—like some flame or a circuit when you blow a fuse. It was going to dissipate in that way or become way out of balance or just disperse.

One option is to open up the energy body awareness and have the whole body involved. We'll return to that. Or, and in this case, what I gently guided towards was not taking the attention off what was happening in the heart and in the whole energy body, but actually just redressing the balance a little bit, giving a little bit more attention to the image. It's almost like the image tended to get lost there with all the captivation of the attention in the heart area and the energy. So just giving a little bit more attention to the image, letting that become more alive and prominent, still aware of the heart and the energy body, and also taking care to balance both—in this case, not just the self, what's happening with me.

I am becoming this in the image, and there was a sort of captivation with that at the expense of the other. So there was an example that was also a little bit imbalanced in an unusual way towards the self and forgetting the other a little bit. Still aware of the heart and the energy body, taking care of the balance between self and other, but giving a little more attention to the image. Then the kind of over-intensity that was gathering in the heart and feeling too uncomfortable—like it was just going to blow—could calm a little bit.

Actually, there was less intensity but more potency. This is a really important distinction: the distinction between intensity and potency. When we work that way, instead of a fuse just being blown because it was too much intensity, or instead of it just being

really intense and thinking, "Wow, that was amazing," and then actually not much happening in terms from the point of view of soul-making and shifts or openings of the psyche and of the perception of the world—actually the spreading of the intensity and the opening so that all that energy could go into other domains like the imaginal made the whole experience richer, deeper and more potent. In other words, it made a difference to the soul.

Don't—this is a general point now—confuse intensity and potency. Intensity is very attention-grabbing and looks very impressive and feels very impressive. It doesn't always translate as potency. Sometimes what is intense can be potent, and sometimes what is potent is really not that intense. There's a more general point there, but there's also this question of the relative emphasis of attention. In this case, we're talking between the heart and the energy body on one hand and the image on the other. All this has to do with balancing and leaning one way, responding to what's happening.

As we're talking about energy, let's talk about sexual energy. Of course, fantasies, images that come into the mind can bring sexual energy with them—lost in a sexual daydream, even something like that, brings sexual energy, sexual arousal. The other way around, we can feel sexual arousal and it constellates some kind of fantasy or daydream or image. When that's the case, actually, one option is to give some attention to the sexual energy.

Oftentimes what happens when we're not mindful is that we get lost in the image in a not mindful way, so it's not really imaginal then, and the sexual energy is just contracted, perhaps genitally or in some area of the body. So give some emphasis of attention to the sexual energy, but in the whole energy body. Really emphasize the whole energy body and really feel what happens if I allow that sexual energy—really allow it in the body and open to it and let it open. Oftentimes it will then spread if we allow it and open to it and open the space for it. It will spread like a gas to fill that space, fill the whole energy body. Really feel it and let yourself enjoy that energy. Let yourself enjoy the sexual energy, opening to it, feeling it, mindful of it in the body.

What can happen is the sexual energy transubstantiates or transforms into bliss. It just becomes rapturous energy or pīti. There's a close connection between sexual energy and pīti, and opening to it that way, and feeling it, and really letting yourself feel it. So we're talking about really an open, skillful mindfulness of the sexual energy in the whole energy body, and it can transform to bliss, and then you can do all kinds of different things with the bliss if you want to go into samādhi or whatever.

But let's be clear: if I'm caught up in an image, whether sexual or otherwise, that's not the imaginal. And if I'm not aware of the energy body, that's also not imaginal. It's not eros then, because it won't be stimulating the soul-making. It's just craving.

Yet even if something arises as what seems like mere fantasy or sexual craving—some agitating sexual energy—there's a possibility to work with the image, to allow it to become imaginal. An image that begins in the superficial sense can actually transform. I can enter into relationship with this image in a way that makes it imaginal, allows it to become imaginal, and then the soul-making and the psyche-logos dynamic can get involved and start to expand in relation to that image.

But imaginal practice for us includes not just the dimensionality and sensitivity with the image, but also the mindfulness of the energy body and the soul-making resonances. There's always the possibility of navigating, of responding skillfully, no matter how something starts. You might just feel this agitated sexual energy, uncomfortable, or encounter an image that seems like nothing more than a sexual daydream. The possibilities of navigating—we can really develop our skill, our art here with all this.

Let me amplify something I mentioned before and draw it out again for the sake of an important point. Sometimes the image may want to, or we can incline it toward, this movement where there's an erotic beloved, some erotic object, and there's a movement or inclination toward merging, melting together into union.

One possibility is we simply allow that to go toward union—we navigate in that direction so there is this melting together into oneness. There's, technically speaking, less fabrication at that point, less fabrication in the perception of forms, and we can dissolve into that oneness to a profound degree.

But there's an alternative. We're talking about navigation, steering, inclination—choices in imaginal practice. We can actually keep the eros in the way that it constellates and retains the twoness that we've discussed several times, keeping the images alive. In other words, the images don't just melt into light or diffuse into undifferentiated love. You're actually sustaining the erotic tension, sustaining the twoness and the otherness and the particulars of the images.

I won't say that's always best, but other doorways and dimensions are opened through retaining that erotic tension—the twoness, the otherness, and the image, and the particularity of the image. Because in that erotic constellation that doesn't dissolve into oneness, we actually experience a different kind of holiness—different kinds of holiness.

We can experience and have the perception, the imaginal perception, of participation—participation in the dimensions of divinity, of the cosmos. And that's different from oneness. Not just a oneness of essence, a melting into that, which is wonderful in its own right, but participation is something different, actually richer. There are infinite varieties and infinite depths and dimensions and facets of participation, whereas onenesses tend to be simpler and more limited.

There are dimensions and beauty to the perception—the deep, almost endlessly infinite perceptions of participation, mystical participation where this image and my participation in this image echoes something and participates through echoing or mirroring something more cosmic or divine. We'll return to this.

But for that echoing and for that participation, uniqueness is necessary. It's not just a oneness of essence, a dissolving of the particularities into one universal substance of love or awareness or light or being. Actually, my uniqueness or the uniqueness that pertains to the self and the other, and this kind of love and this kind of eros in the image—the uniquenesses in the image are necessary to participation in a way that they're not to a sense of oneness.

There's a whole different direction and dimensionality of sense of holiness. But there's always the question of balance and the possibilities here, this infinitely gradated shift of emphasis and inclination and navigation.

So an image may go toward melting, and then there's a sense of the energy body melting, and I could take that into samadhi and actually let the image go. That's possible. Or the image goes toward the melting and union, I feel that in the energy body, but I choose to modulate it. As we mentioned before, I kind of linger at some point, or stop it at some point, perhaps at the edge of where there is the imaginal form and the formless. Just lingering around that edge where things are very insubstantial. There are all kinds of possibilities here.

But there is something that we get through the retaining of the twoness—the retaining of the erotic other and the otherness and the particularities—that we don't get in more commonly described or conveyed teachings about mystical experiences and directions.

Another way of putting partly what we've just been through—another way of dividing it up—is that in everything we've talked about, we can think about or play with the shifting of the relative weight or emphasis of attention. For example, on the desire itself, on the energy of the desire, or on the inquiry into the desire: this deep questioning of what am I really wanting here?

We can put the weight of attention on the energy of the desire, or the weight of attention on the image—and this includes the image of the other, of the self, of the world, and the cosmic dimension of the eros itself—or equally between those. This opens up the sense of dimensionality and divinity. What's the relative weight with those compared with the energy body? And if it's the energy body, is it a particular center I'm working with—the heart, or the throat, or the lower belly—or the whole energy body?

And again, what's the relative emphasis on the sense of love and the kinds of love? Or the emotional difficulty that one might be feeling. It doesn't have to be at all, but any difficulty there. But it might be a sense of lack, or the desire itself is difficult, or some other emotion there.

So we can think about this kind of relative emphasis of the weights of the attention. It's all in the field, but what are we emphasizing more or less at any time in that balance there?

Another way to approach the whole question of balance, another kind of way in, a way to divide it up, is we could also ask ourselves or check, again, at any time, or just more in general: are my three centers—my belly, my heart, and my head—are all three centers involved? Here's this desire, here's this eros with the imaginal, whether it's an actual person or an intrapsychic image—are my three centers involved? Are they all open? And are they connected with each other?

So is my belly and my center of sexuality connected with my heart? Is my heart connected with my head? But really, that's fine as a way of talking, but what we're talking about there, for me, when we talk about the belly center, it's really the body, the energy body. So again, it's like saying, is my energy body involved? Is it open? Is it connected with the other dimensions of my being?

The heart has two meanings. Metaphorically, it's not just that place in the middle of your chest, although it includes that, of course. But it's also my emotion. So is my emotional awareness and sensitivity and care involved? Is it open? Are my emotions open? Are they connected, as I said, these different aspects or dimensions of our being?

Heart has a second meaning in some traditions, as I think I mentioned: as actually more equivalent to the organ of the soul's perception, the organ of imaginal perception. So in other words, is the image—have I forgotten about the image? Or is that involved, included? Is it open? Am I opening to it? Is it connecting with the energy body and all that? Is the energy body connecting with the imaginal and all that?

And then the head, for me, that really refers to the logos. Am I aware of what conceptions are operating? What's the conceptual framework that is actually in play?

This doesn't necessarily need a huge amount of cogitation and thinking and all that stuff, but there is conception operating, as I said, all the time. It's part of soul-making, it's part of imaginal practice, it's part of eros. And is that included? Is what's going on there in the mind—it's not only the brain located in the head, head center doesn't just mean the head center—but is the conceptuality included? Am I aware of it? Am I including it? Can I shape it? Can I respond with it? Is it connected? Is it open? Is it involved?

One very basic thing in relation to concept and the part that has, the conceptual framework in all this: am I clear, for instance, in relation to navigation? Am I clear about the distinction between, and am I clear in how I'm navigating between the three degrees of fabrication, if you like? Remember this from, I think it was the last retreat or the retreat before.

In other words, we can navigate towards, steer towards a lessening of fabrication into samādhi or mettā or different kinds of oneness or towards the unfabricated. Beautiful, really important steering. We can just approach things with a kind of mindfulness or bare attention, which is just a little bit less fabrication than a usual state of consciousness. That's really helpful, really skillful at times, it's part of our practice—but heaven forbid that it become the whole of the practice. But it's an option and it's helpful for some things.

Or we're engaging in the art of fabrication, if you like, the more tantric practice of skillful fabrication, soul-making fabrication. So it's three degrees: towards the unfabricated, the so-called bare attention or mindfulness—a sort of midpoint, if you like—and there's the skillful fabrication of the imaginal soul-making.

So just be clear about that and clear what we're doing at any point and where we're headed, and is it deliberate, and is that where we want to go right now?

But just to say right now, and this is what I want to pick up in the next talk, that the conceptual framework—so I was talking about belly, heart, and head, and head really for me I'm saying is conceptual framework—just to say how important that is. Actually, the conceptual framework that's operating at any time, and there will always be one, even if you don't know what it is and if it's vague or it's unclear, even if it's confused, the conceptual framework operating at any time can potentially be really, really supportive. It can be something that supports the movement of the eros and the opening of the imaginal practice and the soul-making. It contains something. And we need—if we go back to the image of the vessel—vessel is containment.

And one of the ways this whole practice is contained in a good way that allows it to be soul-making, allows the fire to heat up the material in the alchemical analogy, is that the conceptual framework contains and creates, is part of creating a vessel.

The conceptual framework works as a map to guide us. And out of all this, it allows trust because I have a conceptual framework. I have a sense of orientation, containment, support, guidance. It brings trust, balance, stability.

Yes, there is this breaking of the vessels that can happen at certain points and the stretching of the vessels and the shattering of the vessels from the Kabbalistic mythology. And that has its important place. But generally speaking, conceptual frameworks are really, really helpful.

And this is what I want to explore in the next talk, if we're still talking about navigation and vessels—this whole aspect of things. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 69

Logos in the Garden of Souls (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h01

> *In this opening talk from the "Eros Unfettered" series, Rob Burbea delves into the essential relationship between conceptual frameworks (logos) and the practice of soul-making. Using organic metaphors of trees and gardens, he demonstrates how logos functions not as abstract theory but as embodied structure that supports and enables the flowering of eros and soul-making.*
>
> *Burbea addresses the mutual dependent origination between concept and experience, showing how conceptual frameworks operate even in non-discursive states and are always present when there is any fabricated experience. He outlines the extensive requirements for a robust Dharma-based conceptual framework that can account for the spectrum of fabrication, emptiness of all phenomena, ways of looking, the imaginal, embodiment, relationships, death, beauty, and divinity.*
>
> *Crucially, he acknowledges that conceptual frameworks are historically and culturally situated while maintaining their vital function in navigation and meaning-making. The talk explores how the eros-psyche-logos dynamic creates as much as it discovers, leading to the divinization of experience through dimensionality. Burbea emphasizes the need to avoid epistemicide—the killing of ways of knowing—while building frameworks that support fertility and expansion rather than reductive dogma.*

So let's continue in our circling motion, our circling movement between the different elements and facets of this whole area that we're trying to open up of eros and soul-making. And continue our weave back and forth, revisiting certain of those elements and weaving them together with others back and forth like a loom.

I mentioned that I would like to say more about the whole aspect of conceptual framework and draw that in and draw that out more. So I hope it's obvious that any path that we wish to walk down—spiritual path, psycho-spiritual path, whatever—and any set of practices that form part of that path, that path and those practices need some kind of undergirding in a conceptual framework, a logos that holds them together, that puts them in relationship to each other, that makes sense of them, gives them direction.

So they go together; they are indispensable to each other. A conceptual framework is indispensable to a path. And as such it forms, in a way, a map or part of a map of where that path is trying to go. It helps in the navigation—that's what we were talking about before, navigation. What is the art of navigation with all these practices? The conceptual framework is very much a part of that at many different levels.

One level is a kind of macro level, the other level is moment-to-moment. The conceptual framework, our understanding of that, informs our moment-to-moment decisions and responses in practice. In practice, in life, we are constantly meeting, encountering a new situation, a new moment with a new experience, or this or that coming to the fore. And the question is, how should I respond? How should I navigate in relation to what is coming up, in relation to where I want to go? All of that is informed by the larger conceptual framework.

Conceptual framework or logos also makes sense. We need something to make sense, or part of us needs something to make sense of our experiences, of the whole notion of the path, of our life. Conceptual framework is part of that. It offers that, it contributes to that. Actually, there's a whole other level in which it makes sense in the different meaning of the word. It makes sense. In other words, it makes experience. We'll come back to that.

But it forms for us a vessel, if we go back to that alchemical metaphor that we were drawing on. The conceptual framework forms a vessel, forms a structure that contains —we feel contained by, supported by—so that we can trust our movement on the path. Are we going in the right direction? We trust our experiences as they unfold, or we know what to trust. So in that sense, it gives us a sense of stability, support and stability, and that's part of balance, isn't it? So we're talking about navigating and finding balance with the eros, with the imaginal. So conceptual framework, logos, is part of what grounds us. It's a head thing. We say it's a head thing, but actually it grounds us. It gives us a foundation. It gives us a kind of scaffolding.

Now, especially if we're encountering intense experiences, but even if they're not intense, if we're just feeling ourselves move into what might be new territory, or edgy territory, if it's our edge, or if it's regarded by the mainstream of society, or whatever culture we're moving into—Dharma culture, or other, larger culture—as edgy or dangerous or ridiculous, then it's really, really supportive there in all of that grounding, foundation, scaffold, support, vessel. And eros and the imaginal and soul-making for a lot of people is edgy or is regarded as edgy and all that other stuff.

So in a way, to give a sort of image, metaphor for a conceptual framework, it's kind of like a trellis in a garden—a sort of wooden scaffolding that forms a support for a certain flower, maybe roses or something, to grow, and they grow along or up and wind their way along this trellis, and then they can flower, and they can have their beauty, and their beauty can be seen, and we can receive that. And the structure, the trellis, is providing a structure that's supportive and for the sake of all the beauty that flowers there.

So oftentimes we dismiss, or we want to get away from conceptual framework. We don't realize actually how supportive it is. Actually, a better analogy, even better than the trellis, would be for the roses in a rose garden—would be a tree, perhaps a fruit tree. The tree is its own structure: the roots, the trunk, the branches. We could say that the conceptual framework is like the structure of a tree. It forms a structure.

What's perhaps better about the tree analogy is that it's not like the structure is one thing and the soul-making is another thing, as it was in the trellis analogy to the roses. Here, the structure, the conceptual structure, is a part of soul. It's an aspect of the tree. It's totally integrated with the tree. The trunk, the roots, the branches, the structure, the shape of that is the tree. It's part of the tree. It's completely embodied, incorporated.

They're not separate things.

So logos and conceptual framework is part, a dimension, an aspect of soul and soul-making and psyche. Even though we say eros, psyche, logos, remember I said they're not really separate. So that might be a useful analogy.

And then we have the fruit and the beauty and the flowers of the tree and all that a tree can offer. But the tree is—the structure of the tree is the tree.

And also in this tree analogy, it's not a fixed structure. So the structure of that tree is organic, it grows, just as our conceptual framework can, and as I've been saying, needs to grow. The logos needs to grow.

Just like a tree, it's not a fixed, limited, preset, rigid structure. It is actually organic and it grows, and that growing of the tree and of the conceptual frameworks are responsive. In other words, they respond.

If you look at the way, let's say, an apple tree grows in an orchard, you'll see how responsive it is to the light—as plants are phototropic to different degrees—it responds to the light, it responds to the other trees around it, it responds to all kinds of things. It responds also to itself when it's getting too heavy or too lopsided.

Sometimes that response is actually breaking. A branch breaks off or the tree splits in two, a crack appears. Sometimes the tree gets too big for itself, and conceptual frameworks also can break, get too big, a crack appears.

Can we include that fact, that organic fact of the way trees grow, and that organic fact about conceptuality and conceptual frameworks, can we include that in a larger scale conceptual framework?

Right there, there's this Kabbalistic idea, mythical idea of the breaking of the vessels. One kind of vessel, as I said, is a conceptual framework. And those too in our life break at times. Though that can be very difficult—I'll come back to this—I would also say, sad the person whose conceptual framework doesn't break at least once in their life. I'll come back to that.

But here we have perhaps an analogy where the structure is not separate from the fruit, from the soul-making, from what the soul is. It's not fixed. It's organic, it grows—that's part of its nature—and it grows in a responsive way with what's around it. And the breaking might be part of it.

Now I've also said, and it's one of the things that's really worth repeating: when I say concept or logos or conceptual framework or even idea, I'm not just referring to something abstract, something removed, taken away from life, away from experience, away from embodiment into some kind of disembodied intellectual separate realm of the mind. There can be that—we can have conceptual frameworks that's what we're doing with them and that's what they become for us—but mostly I'm really talking about what we live, an indispensable element of our existence that comes into our life, that we actually end up embodying, whether we know it or like it or not, comes into our experience.

Mostly, I'm not even talking about what we think. Certainly a conceptual framework we elucidate and elaborate on in words and thought, and we reflect on it and put it together with other ideas and make sure we understand all that thinking. Of course, I'm including that, but I'm also making the point that I've made before that concept, logos, as I would use that word, operates even when we are not thinking.

Even in the second jhāna and other jhānas and those kinds of experiences, there is not thinking going on, but there is conceptuality going on.

If we don't see that—if you don't see that, and I know some people are really wedded to the idea of non-conceptual awareness in different ways. For some people it means bare attention, for other people it has a Dzogchen context or whatever. But if you don't see that, then what I would unfortunately say to you is it just needs more practice. You

need to practice with more subtlety of sensitivity and noticing, but particularly to practice in the direction of less fabrication. So much so that you begin to see the relationship with concepts, conceptualities, in the present moment, in the mind—how they not just shape the fabrication, therefore the experience, but actually how they contribute, how they actually fabricate anything at all.

In other words, without conception, if you really drop all conception, nothing gets fabricated, no experience gets fabricated. So where there's conception, it fabricates experience, and where there's experience, there's some conception bound up, wrapped up in that experience.

Even the barest level of conceptuality—some kind of knowing with some kind of knower and known, therefore subject and object, the barest, barest, most refined level, and some kind of sense of a present moment. That's conceptuality. Subject, object, and time is the barest level of conceptuality. And pulled almost immediately in with all that is a whole bunch of other stuff about potentiality and change, and therefore past and future, and all of that.

But even that—I don't have any label for what is appearing as object and what is known. It could be a very subtle perception, but where there is perception, experience, appearance, there is concept.

And certainly at the level of mindfulness or so-called bare attention, you just need to play with: is there a subtle concept? This is now a less subtle level of conceptuality, but is there a relatively subtle concept I'm not even conscious of?

This is what I'm mindful of. But for example, am I regarding it as something real? Am I regarding it even as something material? Whatever it is—this tree that I'm looking at, this touch of the foot on the earth—what's wrapped up in that concept of materiality? Or am I regarding it as an appearance, which is more, if you know the philosophical term, of a phenomenological bracketing there. It's appearance. That's already regarding it as appearance.

A mindfulness that regards this touch of the foot as appearance is different already than a mindfulness that unconsciously, automatically, out of habit, regards that touch as the meeting of materials—the foot and the earth.

There's always a conceptual framework, there's always a logos, there's always a way of looking when there's any experience, apart from the so-called experience of the unfabricated. It's a very different kind of thing, where there is no time, no knowing of subject or object. There's always a conceptual framework, there's always a logos, which

creates a way of looking, which is part of the way of looking, which, if you like, is part of determining the experience—not just the interpretation, the hermeneutics of this experience, but the experience itself is part of fabricating.

So when I'm talking now about conceptual framework and logos or idea—and I'll probably use those words interchangeably—I'm talking about something that we want to be translatable, incorporatable into a way of looking, so that it's fruitful, so that it's fertile, so that it opens up our perception. We're talking about something that we live in our experience.

There's always, as I will come back to—I've said before in other talks and I'll come back to—there's always a metaphysics. There's always some belief about what's real, and there's always some conceptuality there. And we actually want that to come... we want to be able to employ different conceptual frames that are actually fertile, that give rise to and open up our experience, and that we can actually embody in our life.

Now, for me, I would say—and you'll have to see how much you feel the same way—if we're interested in building a conceptual framework, opening one up, discovering, creating a conceptual framework in the Dharma and in relation to Eros and soul-making, then it's going to need to be able to do quite a lot, or support quite a lot, the way I see it right now.

It's going to need to account for quite a few things, quite a few aspects of experience, and it's going to have to include and not ignore quite a few things. It's going to need to make sense of quite a few things in our experience. It's going to need to give a vital place to and a purpose to quite a few things, and also connect those things. So it needs to account for, include and not ignore, make sense of, give vital place and purpose to, and connect quite a few different elements of our experience.

One is this whole observation that we have of lessening fabrication—that whole spectrum of fabrication that we can discover in meditation. It's not random. It's not just that things disappear because they're impermanent. We actually see there's a whole spectrum, more or less fabricated, all the way down to no fabrication at all, no experience. Dependent. We need to understand the dependent origination there and what that's dependent on—conceptuality and identification and avidya, clinging. We talked about this all before. But that fact... somehow I need to account for it and include it. I can't just skip over that.

And coming out of that observable spectrum of fabrication, its relationship with, or its dependent arising—either coming out of that or some other way—the emptiness of all things, all things without question. Not the aggregates, or rather, not leaving any-

thing not empty, not leaving the aggregates, the process, the time, the big awareness, being, materiality, atoms, electrons, subatomic particles—emptiness of all, all, all: space, time, and all of that. Somehow this to me has to be included.

If we don't, then something remains not empty and we start building a whole structure on that assumption of reality which is relatively easily disproved in one way or another. And of course that's what sometimes happens, either consciously, or the person doesn't even realize that they're assuming the reality of this or that, assuming the non-emptiness of this or that. And they're just saying, "Yes, yes, yes, emptiness, of course," but there's some basis in reality there, and everything is coming out of that as a foundation, of this real thing, whatever it is—materiality, and then you've got a neuroscience-based dharma, or atomistic process, or whatever it is.

So fabrication, the spectrum of fabrication, dependent arising, the emptiness of absolutely everything. And that also for me, the whole opening up of the idea of ways of looking, the plurality, the legitimacy of a whole manifold range of ways of looking. Not because we want to be nice guys. I don't actually think I'm a nice guy. That's not the reason. I'm not just trying to be, you know, not get into an argument with someone, so I just say everyone's way of looking is fine. That's actually not what I'm saying, and that's not the reason. It's coming out of emptiness. It's going deeply into fabrication, very deeply, and seeing the emptiness of all things, seeing what we are left with. We are left with a range, an option of ways of looking, the diversity, the flexibility of ways of looking.

And somehow in all that, I also need to account for, make sense of, and give purpose to the whole, and really structure the whole relationship of the fabricated with the unfabricated. And then where does this thing that people call mindfulness or bare attention fit into that?

So somehow my conceptual framework has to, as I said, account for and include all this. I can't just ignore that spectrum of fabrication. I can't forget that everything is empty. Yes?

So all of that, but then also, again, what the conceptual framework that to me would really be healthy and relatively robust and beauty-making and supportive needs also to account for, include, make sense of, give vital place and purpose to, and connect all of these with the other ideas.

So also, images and the imaginal—and what does that mean? Are we just going to discount the whole imaginative faculty that human beings have? The noticing of the fact that our life is full of fantasy anyway. The whole movement of soul-making. And

again, are we just going to ignore it? Pretend that that's not something that is part of our existence to more or less degrees for different human beings at different times? It already exists, all this. Are we going to dismiss it? Are we going to ignore it? Or actually, are we going to construct and discover a conceptual framework that can hold all this together and give it life?

And again, part of that, of course, is eros and desire and sexuality. Again, are we just sort of chopping that stuff off or over-simplistically reducing it or dismissing it or labeling it in too reductive or not subtle enough ways?

And body—are we limiting what body is to us and can be to us? Do we just have a sort of materialist reductionist view of body, or do we see it only through the lens of the way we've been taught the four foundations of mindfulness in the first foundation? How much embodiment has been left out of, until quite recently, and even then it's only just hardly made any inroads—but how much that has been left out of Western philosophy and psychology, and what the body is and what the body can be for us, to us. Where there is soul-making, where there's this expansion of psyche-logos, the body too will be drawn into that. I'll come back to this.

So somehow our conceptual framework has to actually include body and give more place to body, more purpose to body, different accounts of body, and then of course also just the whole of the human being. And again, what is our conceptual framework saying about what a human being is? Because that too with soul-making will be expanded, broadened, deepened, given dimension. Am I just sticking it into, again, a kind of evolutionary accident emerging from the primal swamp after long enough time by the vagaries of biochemistry? Or the human being is just what secular modernism says the human being is?

And related to that, of course, relationships. What are human relationships? How does my conceptual framework allow the growth and the expansion, the widening and deepening of the sense and the concept of what my human relationships are? Or again, am I just kind of putting it into some modernist secular box or whatever it is?

Can the whole conceptual framework support opening the relationship with death? How often the conversation about death and relationship with it seems so sort of flatly polarized. After death, what will happen after death? Is there anything after death? And it revolves around rebirth or heaven or hell or this state or dissolving into oneness or whatever. What are you now? Never mind what you will be or what will happen. What is happening now?

If I see that flatly, if I'm limited in what I actually sense and see happening now, if my soul's looking and sensing of this existence now is limited—what is this? What is even this now? What is time? All of that, when that gets limited, then it just becomes "after death, after death." Will it be just extinction? Or is it extinction? No, it's not. It's a flat, polarized, kind of naive and unhelpful argument.

A friend's mother is dying. The friend said she doesn't believe in something better than what she has on earth. As if that's the only way of looking at it. What do you have on earth? How is time woven into all this? And is there a way of—some people respond to death, "Oh well, who dies? No one dies because there's no self." It's just a process that then disbands, or whatever. There was no self, so death is okay. Or you just kind of dissolve into the universal being, or the universal Brahman, or whatever it is, or dissolve into God, or whatever.

Is there, you know, all that, or someone says no, it's just—all that's rubbish, it's just a tragedy. It's just an actual tragedy. Here was this wonderful human being and now they're just gone and there's nothing but unremitting sort of loss about death.

Is there a way, are there ways of relating to death that include all those possibilities but add the whole dimension of the self? The self is not either just dismissed—"No one dies. Who dies? No one dies because there is no one, because there's no self"—just a simplistic answer. Or the self just gets dissolved back into sort of a universal, amorphous, unparticularized being.

Or is there a relationship with death, not bound by time, not bound by any idea about something lasting or what will happen later or anything like that in time after death, that actually still has a place for the self, a soul place for the self?

So all of this—our conceptual framework has to be able to open up, for me, has to be able to open up and support quite a lot more than is often the case in relation to all these aspects of our existence.

And of course, in relation to the earth and the environment, how desperately, desperately we are in need of a new relationship, a new conception, a new perception—a new cosmology, really. Something that can offer, you know, a support, real respect, real openness in regard to the earth, the environment, the cosmos, but also the senses.

Again, how are we seeing the senses? How are we conceiving of the senses? And again, some interpretations of Buddha-dharma, it's as if the senses can be these sort of basic instruments that reveal bare attention. Other versions of dharma have the senses as something you're trying to get rid of ultimately in some kind of transcendent dissolution.

But the earth, the environment, the cosmos, the senses, the beauty—beauties. Can our conceptual framework open up the possibilities for beauty, for discovering and creating beauty? How does our notion of the dharma support or inhibit that?

And our conceptual framework also needs, of course, to do all this—account for, make sense of, give place and purpose to, connect different aspects—and our dharma practices? How does all that connect? The ones that we've maybe learned and new ones that we can discover for ourselves, and how do they all fit together?

And psychology. Again, it's a sense of what's taken as truth in psychology—the psychology of a person or child development. What's the whole notion of, or rather the whole possibilities of psychology? Because that too must expand if the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expands. Psyche-logos—the logos needs to expand.

And, you know, I've said many times before, the whole sense of sacredness, and again the range of that, and this whole notion of divinity. And what might that mean? Or what can that mean? Or how can that open up and become something that's supported and fertile? And if we talk about divinity again, how does the conceptual framework relate to and conceive of divinity?

The whole relationship of, say, the spectrum of fabrication with the fact—tied in with that—that our perception can seem more or less substantial with the refinement and moving up and down of that spectrum of fabrication. And do we just associate that with "less substantial, more refined, more ethereal is somehow more divine"? Is that how we relate there? Or is there some other way that actually gives as much divinity to both ends of that spectrum? Are there other ways of conceiving that support a kind of non-hierarchicalized notion of divinity, of the range, of the spectrum of what divinity can be and how we can sense it?

So the notion of dimensionality, I've said, is related to divinity. And somehow, what's the conceptual framework in relation to the sense of dimensionality we discover in our experience as we pay attention, as we experiment? There's always more dimensionality. Maybe that's tied in with the whole sense of divinity—there's always more, the unfathomability of divinity. But in "always more," it's not necessarily that the more is closer to divinity, just because it's more and I haven't fathomed it yet.

So there's a lot here that a conceptual framework needs to kind of take account of, include, not ignore, make sense of, give place and purpose to, and kind of stitch together in a supportive framework. All that, for me, I would say. And these, for me—again, maybe you agree, maybe you don't—but these are important things. These things mat-

ter to us. Matter deeply. They make a big difference—the conceptual framework and the concepts and the beliefs about and assumptions about all this stuff, perceptions of all this stuff.

Now another aspect of all this that's for me a requirement is we need to acknowledge, as I've already pointed out, not just that concept and percept, conceptual framework and experience, are mutually dependently originated. In other words, where there's concept, there is experience, and that concept is part of fabricating that experience, shaping, determining that experience, giving rise to that experience.

And also, of course, the concepts we have are formed by experience. There's a mutual dependent origination there—to some extent. But in addition to that, not just that, but in addition to that, both idea, concept, logos, conceptual framework, and experience are situated. They are contextually conditioned.

So that history and society, ideas and logoi, conceptual frameworks and experience, perceptions, appearances—whatever you want to call those three—history, society, ideas, and experience are mutually conditioning. Sometimes they're hardly separable. In other words, ideas emerge in history and are borrowed from history. We inherit certain ideas from history. Ideas also shape history. And both of those shape our experience. And of course, experiences emerge and they become ideas and shape history that way. There's a mutual conditioning between all three.

So what that means in relationship to conceiving of a conceptual framework that's supportive to soul-making and eros and everything that we're talking about is that we can't claim—it would be silly to claim—a kind of ahistoricality. Like, we are now talking about some truth, this conceptual framework is a truth that's ahistorical, it's transcendent of all history, it's not situated in this culture, in this time, with this historical influx of ideas and all the rest of it. It's totally contextual. So we somehow need to admit that and actually give relevance and place to that, and maybe even purpose to that—which hopefully is something I'll come back to.

So for example, in the story that I related of the yogini on retreat the other day and her need for the earth and the woods to touch and address and cherish her particularities, her self, her particular self, her unique self—in other words, in the way that we're speaking about, for her what was needed there was her self, in its particularity, in its uniqueness, to be more fully included and involved in the imaginal constellation, so that there was a balance there in the expanding soul-making dynamic of psyche-logos, and also so that the self, or as part of that, the self became an erotic image, either for the self, or in this case for the object of the image reciprocally.

So her need for that, someone could say, "But surely that's just a creation, a fabrication demanded now or kind of conditioned or even forced by the rise of the modernist self, which was a self, a sense of self that didn't exist before." In other words, go back far enough in history, read whatever documents we have, get a sense—and it's like, it's hard to really believe that the sense of self that we so much take for granted now in modernity, in the time of modernity, in Western culture, is the same kind of sense of self of the people that the Buddha was talking to.

You simply do not get the same sense of complexity or difficulty in regard to certain psychological interiorities that we now have that we absolutely take for granted and we feel viscerally—this is myself and this is important. Or perhaps even in the Old Testament as well. You know, it's just, as well as the Pali Canon, it's like this modernist self is—quite a few philosophers have pointed out—it's a creation, it's a construction, it's not a so-to-speak independently existing reality.

It's not to say some sense of self will always be there, but the actual sense of self and the complex interior reality, a rise of psychological self in this kind of—that seems to exist in some kind of independent way, etc., that we feel so normally nowadays—is a creation of modernism, of Western modernism.

And were it not for that creation, this person is pointing out, then there's no need for the creation of an imaginal perception of the earth being in love with me, as felt as a modernist self. There's a double construction there.

To which I would say, yes, absolutely, there's a double construction. There's a double construction there. Soul-making, eros, psyche-logos creates as much as it discovers. So yes, fabrication, yes, construction. But that doesn't make it certainly less soul-making.

So there's a whole soul-making process here that we could actually say includes history, includes the ideas that are bequeathed to us. So the modernist self is, to a certain extent, a soul-making construction—historically emergent, culturally contingent, all of that. It's a soul-making construction, and then it demands—its logos begins to break and doesn't support enough eros, doesn't support enough soul-making—demands another construction. That whole historical movement could be regarded as soul-making. I'm going to come back to this.

But yes, acknowledging that it's a creation, a construction, a fabrication, doesn't make it less soul-making. On the contrary. It doesn't make it less divine either in the way that I would be talking about divinity, and doesn't even make it less real—because

you would have to ask, compared to what? Show me something that is not fabricated. Show me something that's not fabricated. So it's fabricated, therefore it's not real—compared to what?

To stay a while with this point of the mutual conditioning of history, society, ideas, logos, conceptual framework, and experience, perception, appearance—I wonder how many of you have had this experience that I've had, and I don't think it's that uncommon. Perhaps you're with a relative or a loved one, someone who you love deeply. And perhaps they're ill, for example.

And perhaps you massaged their feet or held their feet or somehow held something of their body. Perhaps they were dying. And somehow in the holding and in the love and in the erotic love—and I don't just mean sexual love—in the erotic love there, this person's feet, this loved one's feet, became holy.

Maybe even became, somehow, in the perception there, in the imaginal perception, they gained a dimensionality or dimensionalities of holiness. Maybe they even became Jesus' feet—the body, the feet of the Christ, perhaps the crucified Christ. And wrapped up in that kind of experience, there's something sacred about this person, this person I love, their particularity, their body, something sacred, and something sacred about Christ or Jesus, and something sacred about this kind of spreading from that to all bodies, and perhaps in cosmopoiesis as well. So there's some degree of that movement happening.

Now you could say, of course, if it is, let's say, the sense of touching Jesus' feet there, how rich that is. Some people, this will not resonate with at all, but for a lot of people in our culture, and not just people who have Christian backgrounds, who were raised Christian, that image has such a richness and a poignancy and a beauty and a poetry to it.

So you could say, "Oh sure, but you're having that experience because you're just kind of recalling a cultural icon that you've been fed or conditioned from the culture, from your background, from your family, whatever." And we say, "Yeah, sure, sure, sure. That's part of what's going on." We are fed that image and it's worked its way into the collective psyche. It might actually be almost eroded now at this point in history, but still, it's there. So yeah, sure, acknowledge that.

And both now and even originally in the actual historic occurrence of Jesus' crucifixion and all that with the apostles and the twelve disciples who became the apostles—so both now, in this experience of your loved one's feet, and in the original—could it also be that both you, in this experience, and Mary or whoever it was, Joseph of Arimathea

and these people, were tapping into an archetype that kind of pre-existed Jesus? An archetype of the Christ and the martyred one and everything that's wrapped up in there about death and divinity and an exceptionally soul-making, beautiful love.

So there's a tapping into an archetype, we could say that, a kind of primordial archetype in the Jungian sense. Sure, so that could be both. And it could be that in the original experience historically in the New Testament with Mary and then Paul coming with his kind of theology of the body of Christ—all that was exactly the movement of erotic love stimulating, fertilizing, opening up, widening and deepening and giving dimension and divinity to what it came into contact with as the eros-psyche-logos dynamic was stimulated and fertilized.

In other words, there's this eros to this person. Paul, I don't think, ever met Jesus, but maybe it was Mary and Paul as Jesus' person became image for Paul, and there was an erotic connection there for Mary and for the others. The erotic connection to this person of Jesus fertilized and deepened and widened the soul-making and thus the perception of the body of Jesus and other bodies related to his and the self and the cosmos and all of that.

And out of that, a theology was woven—I mean, via Paul and all that, St. Paul. And this theology somehow preserved Jesus' uniqueness, his uniqueness, and his person, and somehow connected flesh and divinity. And in some theologies, you know, spills over into a cosmology of the cosmic Christ and the whole kind of divine nature of the universe.

So in this third possibility, we're not just tapping into a kind of pre-existing primordial archetype, but the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, as it expands, is actually creating an archetype. Creating a cosmopoiesis, creating a theology. Maybe that was what was going on both historically, at the time of Jesus, and also now.

The eros-psyche-logos, it will tend to divinize. And of course, what happened back then, 2,000 years ago, was historically conditioned, the kind of logos that came out of that. You can also, of course, trace it to the Old Testament and other ideas that were around, and Greek ideas. But you can't escape cosmology, and partly because you can't escape from history and society. Cosmology that was historically around back then, and the kind of messianism and Judaism and all that—of course that informed, but there was also something else happening.

You could say that the eros-psyche-logos dynamic was doing what it does and how it will transubstantiate things. We touched on this in the last retreat. The idea that you can get away from any kind of cosmology that's in the present culture, get away from history and society—I'm going to come back to this—that is highly questionable.

Or, again, as a third example, the idea, the conceptual framework, or the logos of a cosmic or divine eros. That idea that we've touched on, it will seed, it will feed and support—again, think of that orchard image of the tree—it will seed and support the actual sense, the perception, the experience of that, of a cosmic and divine eros.

The idea supports, seeds and supports the experience—intrapsychically, through intrapsychic image, and then, inevitably, through the perception of the world, if I don't get in the way of that. And the reverse. This idea of a cosmic or divine eros that somehow I'm mirroring, or that's permeating the cosmos—all these different ideas, that image, if you like, or that mythos, will emerge from and be seeded by both historically, I would say, but certainly now in practice. You can see it also in how something opens an experience, and then a little while later you read something and discover that someone had this idea that corresponds to your experience—someone had it long ago.

Both historically and now, the idea or the mythos emerges from experience and perception opening in mystical experience and in imaginal perception, and in the cosmic eros that comes from that. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic is operating—everything is becoming, is gaining dimension, and thus divinized. The divinity comes with the dimensionality. So eventually, as I've said before, even the eros gets given dimensionality and divinized and expanded. There's a sense—there's an actual, I'm not even thinking at first, but just from letting, following the mystical and imaginal perceptions, letting, not getting in the way—eventually eros appears divine.

And then that gives me the idea: oh, this is God's eros. I'm participating in it, I'm mirroring it. This eros that I have, this love that I have, echoes, mirrors, has roots in divine eros.

So we acknowledge—or rather, any conceptual framework that I would like to be involved with, or that I could feel I could get behind, needs to acknowledge that it's not some kind of ultimate truth. It's not depicting some way things really are in some independent way, nor is it some ultimately true kind of grand theory, conceptual framework of everything that's completely ahistorical. So it needs to acknowledge all that—it's not ultimate truth, and it's not completely ahistorical.

But at the same time, it needs to recognize, as I said before, there's always a way of looking, and included in the way of looking is the conceptual framework—a logos is operating, always, when there's experience. And that way of looking, and that conceptual framework, will give rise to experience, shape, determine, and actually give rise to experience. And of course the experiences we have shape and inform the conceptual framework and the ways of looking. But it's not possible to be without a conceptual framework or a way of looking. And if you don't know that, find that out. Know that that's true. So somehow we need to recognize that—that needs to be included.

And we need, with all this, a conceptual framework that supports soul-making. Let me run through a list and then go back through them more slowly.

First, we need a conceptual framework that supports soul-making. Second, we need a logos, a conceptual framework that supports the fertility and widening of our experience and understanding. Third, related to that, we need to make sure that we're not engaging in epistemicide. I only learned that word the other day, but I was thinking along similar lines—I'll come back to this. Epistemicide: the killing, the erasure, or the dismissal of ways of knowing. That we're not forcibly reducing to some kind of dogma, that there's just one way of looking that's valid, and that way of looking reveals the true reality of things.

Often that is what happens in secular modernity—there's actually a kind of monotheism, a secular modernist monotheism in terms of ontology (what is real, what's not real), epistemology (what are the valid ways of knowing and what are the not valid ways of knowing), and cosmology (what kind of world we live in, what is the nature of the world we live in). And so shrinking that down to: there's just one way of looking—you can call it mindfulness or science or whatever you want to call it—and that reveals the reality of things. It's actually a kind of monotheism, whether it's religious or secular. It goes with modernism, actually. I'll come back to this.

Fifth, we need to somehow incorporate—this conceptual framework needs to incorporate dependent origination, ways of looking, principally the emptiness of things. And sixth, related to what I said before, is some conceptual framework that actually opens the ways of knowing, embodied ways of knowing, without a prescribed limit. Go back to what I said before—this is a variation of what I said before—but how fertile is it? Am I putting a limit? And are there ways of knowing that are not just mental, rational, disembodied?

Can the conceptual framework, as I said, include the idea that the conceptual framework breaks, and that the breaking of the vessels is in some way included in the very conceptual framework, in the larger conceptual framework? And also what I said much

earlier in the retreat—that we acknowledge and live with and integrate the idea that we can never fully understand eros, either because we say it's divine and unfathomable, or because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, expanding always the nature of eros itself, the perception, the concept of eros itself.

Somehow, all of those need to get integrated into our conceptual framework.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 70

Logos in the Garden of Souls (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 48 min

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea continues his investigation into how conceptual frameworks (logos) fundamentally shape our spiritual experience and understanding. He examines how different views of desire—from "defilement" to "divine eros"—create entirely different experiential realities, demonstrating the crucial relationship between concept and perception in dharma practice.*
>
> *Burbea addresses the complex hermeneutical relationship with Buddhist texts, particularly the Pali Canon, arguing that we always approach sacred texts through our own cultural lens and assumptions. He challenges the notion of discovering "authentic" Buddhism, instead advocating for honest dialogue with tradition that acknowledges our creative participation in meaning-making.*
>
> *A significant portion explores "epistemicide"—the killing of ways of knowing—showing how secular modernist approaches to dharma may inadvertently dismiss embodied, intuitive, and diverse cultural ways of understanding reality. Burbea questions whether stripped-down, secular presentations of Buddhist teaching might constitute a form of spiritual colonialism, arguing for the inclusion of multiple epistemologies and the recognition that all knowledge systems rest on unprovable assumptions. This teaching challenges practitioners to examine their own conceptual frameworks and consider how these either support or constrain the full flowering of spiritual experience and soul-making.*

Just to pick up where we left off when we said that if we're going to forge a conceptual framework, then there are many elements of our existence that it needs to account for, include, make sense of, give vital place and purpose to, and tie together.

Very quickly, repeating what we said: we're acknowledging its historical place—it's historically conditioned, contingent. We're not devising or discovering some kind of ultimately true grand conceptual framework or theory that's completely ahistorical. We're recognizing there's always a way of looking, which includes the concept, and the way of looking and the concept shapes, determines, gives rise to experience and vice versa. It needs to support soul-making.

It needs to support a fertility and widening of experience and also of ideation. It must support a widening and an opening of other ways of knowing, not limiting that in some kind of epistemicide. It's opening embodied ways of looking without pre-pre-

scribed limits to it. We're not shrinking down to a claim that there's just one right way of looking called whatever it is—mindfulness or science or whatever—and some kind of naive notion that there's only one way of looking and it reveals one reality. Even if we don't use the word truth, we're not shrinking down to any kind of monotheism in that way.

We're incorporating dependent origination, the idea of ways of looking and the whole fact of emptiness of things. We're even including the idea that logoi break, conceptual frameworks break, shatter, melt, need to expand. And that we can never fully understand something like eros because of that.

So all that's quite a lot, and we even said more about other aspects of our existence that need to be included. But if we just pick out for now, to pick up our thread again: we need a conceptual framework that supports soul-making.

If we pick these up individually, we've said before, the logos needs to support, needs to allow the psyche, the image, and the eros. If we want a logos that supports soul-making, if we take that aspect, somehow we want a conceptual frame that supports soul-making. Then the logos that we have of whatever it is we are in relationship to needs to support the imaginal perception that's happening and needs to support the erotic connection.

So, for example, back to that idea of the divinity of eros. That conception, that logos in the moment functions—if I'm really incorporating, if I'm really bringing it into the way of looking—that will affect what happens, what I actually experience and how I actually live, how I relate to life. It's supportive of soul-making.

The idea of discrepancy-based processing that I mentioned earlier—to me, that's not... I mean, it might be to a very limited extent because it helps kind of discern between different things. Maybe it creates a bit of letting go or something. But its potential as a soul-making, supporting logos is very, very limited. And there's a way that thinking too much with those kinds of ideas actually will really constrain the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the whole movement of soul-making, the whole potential of soul-making.

Because wrapped up in a logos like that is, either explicitly or implicitly, and in most logoi as well: what is a human being, like I said, and what is important? What is actually important? Discrepancy-based processing—what does it tell me about, what does it almost imply in the kind of subtext and the quality of the idea? What does it imply about what a human being is and what's important?

Included, wrapped up in a logos is ontology—the question of what's real, the assumptions about what's real—epistemology about what's a valid way of knowing, cosmology, metaphysics. And all of this wrapped up in there affects the experience.

So we want a conceptual frame of conceptual ideas that actually support soul-making, that open soul-making. Support and open and support the opening of soul-making. And also that allow the increase, because soul-making is that increase in the psyche, in the image, the growth, the expansion, the widening, the deepening, the complexifying of the image and of the eros.

In other words, the logos needs to be able, at certain points, to support and allow that expansion of the whole soul-making dynamic, which means the logos needs to not be so fixed. It needs to be able to break and be replaced by something else.

You can see the logos of eros, logos, the view of desire. Just compare, oversimplistically: "Desire is a defilement. It's not okay." If that's the kind of logos and the subtext, that's how we're viewing desire. Compared to: "Desire is okay, it's just another thing, everything's okay"—a kind of loose, slightly sloppy, maybe non-dual kind of teaching. "Desire's okay, everything's okay." Or a little more nuanced: "The desire that leads to the end of suffering is good, but the desire that leads to an increase in suffering is bad." Is that enough of a delineation? Or: "Desire is something beautiful and divine."

Four ideas, although in the last one you can say, well, it gets diverted or constricted or contracted. That's possible. Too simplistic. But you can see how differently the different ideas, the different logoi and conceptions about desire would shape the experience.

This is something we're going to come back to again. We've said it already, but we're going to come back to it. If you are in love and you have the sense or you play with the idea that my being in love, our being in love is somehow mirroring the divine eros. We are somehow, through our being in love, participating in a divine in-loveness, in a divine eros. And that becomes the way of looking and the way of looking at your beloved and the way of looking at your life and this moment. What does that open?

What does that lead to?

There are many other variations we've already mentioned about how to view desire or the possible ways of viewing desire, but they all have different effects. We made that distinction—eros is a subset of desire and craving is a different subset and all that—but there are other variations too. The view, the logos, affects the experience. I have to really acknowledge this and find out how, what, why.

I've said this before, and I'll say something else that I've said before as well, just because I think it's so important. If our whole Dharma conceptual frame of thought, if our whole edifice of Dharma conceptually is too narrow or not subtle enough or not sophisticated enough and not making the right distinctions—if it's maybe what might pass nowadays for a sort of typical Dharma conceptual framework—if it's too narrow, and it doesn't have the right kind of levels of subtlety and sophistication and openness, then this can get quite entrenched, unquestioned and kind of stagnant. We don't realize that it's just one possible way of looking, one possible conceptual framework, one possible set of conceptual distinctions. You know: "Be with what is, everything's impermanent, everything's just flowing, so let go because you can't hang on and this is it, this is it now."

That kind of simplistic dharma can very easily become just entrenched, unquestioned, a stagnant kind of dogma and not realize this is just a way of looking. This is just a set of conceptions that informs a way of looking, one among many possible others. It will have its effects. Others will have their effects.

But if that happens and it does become something too narrow, not subtle and sophisticated enough, does become entrenched in that way, then what happens is we look at life that way and our hermeneutics, our interpretation of existence is constrained by that conceptual framework. We might think, "I'm not into conceptual frames, I'm not intellectual, I'm just—this is really simple, this is just really basic, true, not conceptual at all." It's a conceptual framework, and it constrains the interpretation of experience and existence.

And it also then constrains experience—I've said this before—experience of what? Of self, of other, of world, of cosmos, of time, of desire, of eros, certainly experience of soul-making. It constrains the range of freedom that's available to us and the depth of freedom, both wide and deep, the kinds of freedom. It constrains our creativity in all kinds of ways. It constrains our sense of beauty and again, the range and the diversity of the senses of beauty.

Now, if you ask, "Well, what is the relationship with, let's say, Pali Canon—the Pali Canon of what you're saying, or this conceptual framework of all this business that we're talking about? What's the relationship then with Pali Canon Dharma?" I would ask in response, I would say quite a lot in that, so I just want to say some things right now.

One question I would ask in response is: whose Pali Canon? Whose interpretation of the Pali Canon? The Pali Canon, just like any other text, is always approached with an agenda and always approached with assumptions as well, with certain conceptual

frameworks in place already, certain ways of looking in place or a way of looking in place and available, a certain ontology, a certain epistemology, certain cosmology. Whose Pali Canon? Whose agenda? Whose assumptions? Whose conceptual framework?

If I approach the Pali Canon with the agenda and the assumptions and the conceptual framework and the limited range of ways of looking and ontology, epistemology, cosmology of, let's say, secular modernism—sort of based on classical science and a sort of materialistic view of reality and a kind of existential one-dimensional universe and humanism—what am I going to get? What am I going to see? I'm going to see a secular modernist Pali Canon. And then curiously, the Buddha seems like a guy just like me, because I'm looking that way. I have an agenda.

What would it be, we might ask—I think more interesting—to bring a post-modern critique of modernism, a post-modern attitude and kind of agenda, if you like, to the Pali Canon? What would that give rise to? To me, that's actually much more interesting.

But we bring an agenda, we bring a set of assumptions. What happens is we ignore this or that aspect of, in this case, the Pali Canon. We give a centrality of place to this and something else. And dependent on our agenda, and dependent on our assumptions, we have a certain fantasy of the Buddha, and a fantasy of, as well as conception, of what awakening is. All of this comes into creating, if you like, the Pali Canon—creating, discovering the Pali Canon. I need to see this, and I need to admit it.

So, a scholar, so-called, and actually, I have to point out that scholarship itself is part fantasy.

Scholarship itself is part fantasy. And again, I can say that from personal experience, but scholarship itself is part fantasy. What goes on for the scholar that keeps them at it, that makes it alive for them? There's soul-making going on in scholarship and it involves fantasy.

But anyway, a scholar without a practice related to the Pali Canon, a Pali Canon scholar, so-called scholar, without a practice and without really a lived engaging of that material in their life, in their practice, can't understand what the Pali Canon is about. They cannot claim that they understand it. Someone who doesn't have practice and a kind of really passionate engagement with it can't understand it.

And at the same time, yet a scholar who does have a practice that really matters to them and is engaging that material in their life, in their practice, they already have a fantasy and a conceptual framework. They already have an investment and an agenda

and a perspective. So here, again, is a kind of version of, I don't know if it's the hermeneutic circle so much as a hermeneutical conundrum, hermeneutical situation about interpreting the Pali Canon.

If I try and have this objective, almost quasi-classical scientific methodology there, because I don't practice, because it doesn't mean anything to me, I don't really care about it, I'm not engaging it, I'm not really going to understand it. And if I do, I'm already bringing everything that I bring to it. And even someone who's supposedly not engaging brings their whole historical situation to it, and the assumptions of modernity and post-modernity, whatever it is. So here's a hermeneutical conundrum situation fact. Can I be honest and be aware of it? And what is the implication there?

Usually what happens, historically, and it still goes on, actually, is that we create, discover the Pali Canon, just as we do with anything else that's meaningful to us, anything else that's involved in our soul-making, to whatever extent. There is creativity going on. But if I cloak my creative discovery in the language of the tradition, in, let's say, Buddhist language, then it's almost like I smooth over. It's as if, oh yeah, sure, we're all talking about the same thing, there's no problem. We're not creating anything here, we're just discovering. Because we all use words like Four Noble Truths, and we all use words like suffering and awakening or enlightenment or whatever it is.

It might mean completely different things, utterly divergent things. There's a whole range of meanings of these Buddhist words, but because we're all using the words of the tradition it's okay somehow. It cloaks the fact that we're creating and not just discovering, and it also hides the fact that we may be talking about really radically different directions and ideas.

So when the Dharma comes to a new culture, a culture that's new for it historically, now it's happening in the West, the Dharma is coming here, it's just in its very early infancy, not even out of the birth canal really, or just as it went to China or Japan, what happens there? You know, really, if you take Japanese Zen, let's say Soto or Rinzai Zen, or Shingon, whatever, first of all, there's quite a variety there, but sometimes you'd be hard-pressed - I don't know, if the Buddha was alive, would he even recognize that it's the same thing that he talked about? Maybe some words are the same, but it's so vastly different. Or even what passes for Zen, or what has the label of Zen in Western cultures now.

I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I'm just trying to expose something here, and so let's be honest about something. There's historically a way of doing this that still goes on to do with cloaking the creation, the creativity, and using the traditional words to kind of cover something that's vastly divergent - a range of teachings and directions of vast divergence.

Or, you know, again, historically there is what happened with the Mahayana and the Vajrayana in India: you get the teaching that the Buddha said this, historically he said this, but he said it in secret to a small select band of disciples. And so, again, there's a kind of historical factual claim. And now they preserve this teaching in secret, and now we're revealing it, or now this is the tradition. It goes back to the historical, factual Buddha. Or the Buddha is revealing this on another plane of existence. And actually, strange as that may sound to some people, it actually makes more sense. It feels more viable to me if you open up the language of who the Buddha is and who my mind is, etc.

Or you get a terma was found, an actual teaching was found by this particular person, a tulku or whatever, found this old teaching, this ancient original teaching, a scroll or whatever it is. Or you get the sort of modern version of "what the Buddha meant was this. When he said this..." All of it is trying to claim authority and authenticity, and those words are related, via a fantasy of origins and via the particular fantasy and agenda that one brings to the Dharma, to the Pali Canon, to whatever it is, or the Mahayana texts, or whatever it is in front of one that one is invested in.

I don't think now that the Dharma can grow, and it needs to grow, if it's a baby coming out of the birth canal. It will grow. It will change. It has already changed. Western Dharma has already taken on, as I mentioned in one talk already on this retreat, has already integrated into it certain concepts that were absolutely not there in the Pali Canon or Zen Buddhism, like certain psychotherapeutic concepts and certain neuroscientific ideas we just take for granted. So it's already happening.

But nowadays, in our culture, the Dharma can't grow convincingly with this - to me, not convincingly at all - with this kind of appeal to the authenticity or authority of the actual reality of a tradition as if that's something real and we're not owning the fantasy, the fantasy of scholarship, the agenda, the assumptions, the concepts that one brings to it. All of that. For me, that's not convincing. The cat is out of the bag. The cat's out of the bag in regard to our hermeneutical relationship with text and tradition and all that, and historical figures. And if you know, I'm from modern philosophy, I'm very fond of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who talked a lot, wrote a lot about this, the hermeneutics and our situation in history.

Looking back at the text, it doesn't mean we shouldn't inquire and talk about the Pali Canon, but there is no pristine, unsoiled actuality that we're going to arrive at there. To think that we are is philosophically naive—philosophically and psychologically naive, I would say. The cat's out of the bag. We are too aware now of the cultural and historical context.

So if someone said the Buddha in secret taught neuroscience to a select band of disciples, or what's more common—that the Buddha actually did teach this in certain psychotherapeutic interpretations of what's happening—it doesn't really convince me. It's not very convincing.

What about being in dialogue with the Buddha, with the Buddha Dharma, with the tradition? Dialogue, dialogos—we're in a conversation, in a back and flow. That's part of loving a tradition and respecting a tradition: actually admitting that when we love, we're in dialogue with our lover. We're in dialogue with this. Dia logos—back and forth. Dia means through. Logos goes through one way and the other. It's like water through other water, flowing both ways, mixing and coming back.

To be in dialogue with the Buddha Dharma, with the tradition, with the Buddha, with the Sangha—to me, it's important to acknowledge that. And then creativity. Actually, we're acknowledging that we are creative. We are creating, discovering if you want, the Pali Canon or whatever text. We add things. All of that. So to me, it's disingenuous to try to convince others that we're discovering something authentic and independent, something independently existing. The fantasy of that, the fantasy of historical facticity.

Let me say a little bit more about this. I mentioned that word epistemicide—it's a great word. The killing, like homicide—epistemicide, the killing of ways of knowing, the erasure, the eradication, the starving and therefore killing of ways of knowing.

This is something that actually happened in Western society with the emergence of modernism, starting with the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, but really with the Western Enlightenment. A certain way of knowing modeled on the methodology of classical Cartesian and Newtonian and Baconian science was claimed to be superior and to reveal the one universal reality. The project was to reveal one universally valid way of knowing things. It's a mixture of empiricism and rationalism, basically the scientific method.

But again, if you know much about recent Western philosophy, this has been radically questioned. The whole project of modernism and the Western Enlightenment project in relation to ways of knowing, ways of looking, and what reality is supposed to be

has been radically questioned by postmodern philosophy, philosophers of science, post-colonial theory, feminist studies, and even philosophers from the so-called analytical Anglo-American tradition. I think I mentioned this in that talk—even Wilfrid Sellars and W.V.O. Quine, rigorous analytical, logical philosophers, question that whole take on epistemology and the monotheistic approach to epistemology and ontology and so-called reality and ways of knowing.

In this situation we now have, the yogi saying that the trees were calling, the forest was calling her, as she said so beautifully, felt and experienced. Or when I can feel this tree, this particular tree that I visit, is happy at my return today, is happy at my approaching it again. Or when people say in this culture or in other cultures, "We are sensing, we're perceiving the spirits that are around now." Or my friend says, "I'm getting information. It's like my ovaries are receiving information. I'm knowing through my ovaries, through my tongue."

We've talked about a sense of divinity, a sensation of divinity, and many—actually infinitely many more possibilities. All these kinds of ways of knowing that are implicit or claimed or spoken to through this epistemicide of modernism and secular enlightenment are discounted, dismissed, and often actually ridiculed, sometimes openly and also in some Dharma centers. Either explicitly or implicitly discounted, dismissed—there's an explicit or implicit epistemicide happening.

So the whole project of "we're just teaching mindfulness without a cosmology"—really? Is there not a cosmology wrapped up in the whole presentation there? And what is that cosmology? What's the one-dimensional cosmology of classical science? Empiricism with a bit of rationalism thrown in.

If one of us was teaching that way, and let's say someone from an Amazonian tribe or a First Nation Native American person heard it and accused the teacher of colonialism—of this kind of foisting, peddling this kind of view and essentially attempting epistemicide, a very successful attempt, not completely successful but pretty successful so far—what would the teacher say?

Effectively, what you're saying is basically dismissing and discounting and ridiculing ways of knowing that I have grown up with, that are very meaningful to me. If I'm teaching a kind of secular dharma or secular mindfulness, am I, in fact, enforcing what is effectively a kind of white man's religion? A white man's religion. Even though religion seems like the last thing, the furthest thing away from what I'm doing. Am I effectively foisting that, enforcing that somehow?

Somehow. I've been wondering about this for a while now, and I think it's wonderful and really important—the diversity initiatives in terms of people of color, gender orientation and identities, sexual orientations and identities, and all that. This is starting to open in some Dharma centers and dialogues, and I think it's really, really important.

But within that, how many people have stopped to consider that actually a certain presentation of the Dharma—which is sometimes quite aggressive, again, explicitly or implicitly—that a certain kind of secularized Dharma may actually be a form of proselytizing, a kind of violence that's akin to the Christian missionaries of centuries past?

We consider language and inclusion and the environment that we're teaching in and the way we might be more inviting and more inclusive to different groups and identities, et cetera, and respectful of that. But how many people are actually considering the content? Is there a blindness here that actually there may be something that doesn't allow or invite or sit well with certain groups of people because of the content?

You know, in America, the slaves brought over from Africa and enslaved there, or in Africa—African Americans, whether via slavery or Africans in Africa—some of them took on, or you could say were forced to take up, Christianity. But they took it on and—not all, but look at how much they gave to it, the dimensions they gave and gave to it, the dimensions of soul, their soulfulness. It became soul-making for them in their ways. It had to include more body, more hips, more groove than what the white missionaries might have had in their presentation.

So it was taken on board, but something had to be added to it to make it real, fertile, beautiful soul-making. And if you prohibit that—whatever it is that needs to be added, which may need to be certain epistemologies, certain ways of knowing—you're actually no better than a white missionary who would actually even try to disallow that.

So maybe what we consider stripped-down secularist Dharma in the way we present it—maybe that's amputating something, neutering something, as I said someone told me a while ago. Maybe we're smothering something to death. What? Certain ways of being with the body, certain ways of knowing with the body, certain embodiment, the hips, certain ways of knowing.

Epistemicide, like I said—there's a killing of certain ways of knowing. Another phrase: epistemic cleansing. I said I didn't come up with these phrases. I've been thinking about this for a while, and then Catherine taught at IMS recently, and she had a conversation with one of the staff people there who's alive to this. There's a teacher apparently, Bonnie Duran, who's also really drawing attention to this colonialism, epistemicide, et cetera, within the Dharma.

So there's a kind of—I doubt it's with realizing, I don't think it's intentional—but there's an enforcing of a cosmology and a metaphysics and limited fantasies and images of awakening. All of that is kind of enforced. And it's like closing doors and creating a kind of prison rather than opening doors.

A person might say—very tempting to say—"No, no, no, we're not doing that. We're just teaching a certain mode of mind called mindfulness, which brings freedom." Well, I would actually say, not sure, because I don't think it's a very deep freedom that comes from just that, if the mindfulness doesn't go beyond that deep into deeper insights about reality. If it doesn't include this movement into the unfabricated, the understanding of dependent origination at that very deep level, and if it doesn't open ways of looking, the freedom of ways of looking. If it doesn't liberate ways of looking.

And so sometimes dogma and truth—both things that most people would run from and believe that we're a million miles away from or want to renounce, being dogmatic or drawing in that word "truth," which has become very unfashionable now—but yet it's there, underpinning things without admitting or realizing it. How much is that the case?

The last thing about this—I'll pick up later. But I heard a Dharma teacher say in a Q&A that one can't go in a Dharma center, in a meditation retreat—one can't go, he said, one can't go from meditation to epistemology. In other words, just because you have certain experiences in meditation, you can't take that as saying anything about reality. It's not a valid epistemology. It's not a valid source of knowledge.

Now, I could say, okay, fine, you can say that if you want. Absolutely. But where do you get your epistemology from? You must have some epistemology. Okay, so you're just saying that for you it's not coming from meditation. I don't think you can say that for everyone. In other words, what gives you the right to dismiss that as a source of epistemology, and where do you get yours from?

So nowadays in Western philosophy, some of it is quite fashionable—for example, Richard Rorty and other philosophers—quite fashionable to sort of recognize the hermeneutical conundrum with regard to epistemology, but also ontology and all of that, and also recognize the kind of collapse, if you like, of the whole project of modernity and kind of coming up with the one grand theory of everything that reveals the truth and the way of knowing to know that truth, et cetera.

So philosophers like Richard Rorty respond to all that, kind of reiterate it and respond: abandon epistemology, abandon ontology, abandon all that kind of attempt in philosophy. And what it amounts to is a kind of just shrugging, shrugging at the whole

question of ways of knowing. And maybe one comes up with different ideas—and for him it's solidarity with your community, just all kind of believing in the same sort of epistemology, ways of knowing, but kind of letting other communities have theirs. And so that sounds quite nice.

But effectively what happens is there's a reverting to the default epistemology, the default ways of knowing. In other words, you can say that as a sort of intellectual position and declare, "Well, I don't have an epistemology or an ontology or a cosmology," but you actually live one. You live one. You live an epistemology. In other words, there are certain experiences that you trust as being valid sources of knowledge and intimations of what's real, and you make certain conclusions about what's real. You live your life based on that. You live your life with a certain sense of what the cosmos is.

So to say there's no epistemology, no ontology, no cosmology—that's not tenable, as we said before. But because there's not the flexibility of the ways of looking, because there's not the meditative training to actually adopt different conceptual frameworks and different ways of looking, to actually see the experience open up, to inhabit, if you like, different universes, you can say what you like philosophically and intellectually and write it very nicely, but there's just a reversion to the default.

And where did you get that default from? The default is probably mostly from the dominant modernist Western culture. It's just what you receive as much as you learned in high school and whatever most people around you are sort of believing.

So a question would be: why? Where do you get your epistemology from? Is it from what's just popular around you, what's dominant in the culture? Is it just a kind of laziness, where it just slinks to in the being without questioning it? Is it just your own personal inclination? Are you admitting that? Am I admitting that? Why do I choose this or that?

Whatever it is—if I get my epistemology from logic, I get my epistemology from a high school science book, or I get my epistemology from the dominant culture, I get my epistemology from my meditation experience, I get my epistemology from what it says in such scripture or what such and such a teacher says—why? And is it possible to justify any of those epistemologies? I don't think so. Ultimately justify it, I mean.

This is partly why I think epistemology is so interesting: always an epistemology, a decision, a lived decision about what's real and what isn't, will come to rest on some assumptions that are not actually provable, that are ultimately not provable. I end up just having some recourse to some basis that's not actually provable.

So can we be conscious of this? Where am I getting my epistemology, and what are my claims for it? If I realize this—that epistemology rests on some assumptions, which somewhere needs to rest on some assumptions that are not finally provable—then what are my options? Where does that leave me? Am I just going to smooth this over? Am I going to talk as if it's not true, but then revert to as if there's a certain truth? I avoid the word truth—it's a bad word because it's not very fashionable now, and philosophers have shown that it's not a good thing to go bandying around or assuming. But basically I'm reverting to something that assumes a truth.

What are my options if I really hold this in sight? So what's happening in the epistemology? Classical scientific method, as I pointed out, rests partly on rationalism and reductionism—reducing everything to units and atoms and how these work together in a coherent way, atoms and then subatomic particles or whatever it is, or neural processes or whatever. Partly it rests on rationalism and reductionism.

But as Jeffrey J. Kripal, a scholar, pointed out, and he's drawing on someone else's thought called Charles Tart, he said rationalism and reductionism, if you're choosing that as your epistemological framework—that is the basis of it, which a lot of people do—rationalism and reductionism are also what he calls state-specific truths. This is the bit that he got from Charles Tart. That is, they are specific to highly trained egoic forms of awareness.

In other words, rationalism and reductionism pertain to, or are possible in, a certain state of mind that's actually highly trained. But these states of mind that allow rationalism and reductionism and epistemology and all that comes out of that—these states of mind are more easily reproduced and communicated, at least within our present Western culture. In other words, we are trained in that epistemology. We are trained in that way of looking. We are trained in those states of mind in which rationalism and reductionism sort of hold sway.

It's a training. Training of a state of mind, training of a way of looking. What does that sound like?

Oh, it sounds like a kind of how I would conceive of meditation. That we're training ways of looking. It's just that we're so used to certain ways of looking, certain epistemologies, certain states of mind in our culture, that these become much more easily reproduced and communicated, taught to others.

But if we think of meditation as the whole range of flexibility of learning and developing and moving between ways of looking, it starts to take a different kind of contextual place. Again, what are my options?

So we'll pursue this.

CHAPTER 71

Logos in the Garden of Souls (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h18

> *In this third part of his exploration, Rob Burbea uses the powerful metaphor of musical perception to examine how conceptual frameworks support soul-making and imaginal experience. He begins with the analogy of someone who can only recognize "Yankee Doodle Dandy" among all music, exploring what happens when receptivity to deeper dimensions of experience is limited or culturally suppressed.*
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> *Burbea addresses the contemporary clash between materialist worldviews and mystical perception, arguing that questions of "reality" versus "unreality" are less important than questions of soul-making value. He emphasizes that perceptivity—whether to music, nature, or imaginal dimensions—is developable and trainable. The talk examines how dominant cultural views can suppress individual openings to imaginal perception, and how a robust conceptual framework can provide stability against such cultural pressures.*
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> *Central to this exploration is the concept of participation—the idea that consciousness participates in divine imagination, eros, and mind rather than existing separately. Burbea discusses how this participatory understanding, grounded in the emptiness of all phenomena and the diversity of ways of looking, can support ongoing soul-making without requiring belief in ultimate truth. He concludes by examining how soul-making might serve as a fundamental principle in developmental psychology, and how any conceptual framework—including his own—must remain open to expansion and eventual "breaking of the vessels" as understanding deepens.*

I remember many years ago one of my music teachers saying that General Eisenhower —and I could have that wrong, but someone like that—proclaimed, "I only recognize two pieces of music. One is Yankee Doodle Dandy, and the other isn't." I don't quite know the context or even what he was getting at when he said that, and whether it's relevant that the tune he did recognize was patriotic, nationalistic, militaristic. But imagine or consider someone who has that kind of degree or extent of tone deafness in relation to music. They're really quite unreceptive to music and really quite unperceptive. So what they're perceiving, what they're getting from it is, for some people, staggeringly little.

Now, if such a person were to insist that there is just one tune, Yankee Doodle Dandy, and the rest of it was just random noise, or the rest of it was all actually the same thing, what would you say to such a person if they absolutely insisted that their perception

there is reflective of reality? Probably in his case, he's surrounded from childhood with people who seem to be getting something from music—school teachers and others who hopefully kindly explain to him that he's missing something there.

But what if only relatively few people in the society got music? What would happen then? So there were only relatively few people to whom music was very meaningful, full of all kinds of relationships that they could hear between sounds and themes and modulations of key or pitches and harmonies and rhythms and textures. And they perceived a great deal of nuance of structure and shading, evolution and all that, and it had a huge effect on them—on their heart, on their psyche, on the body, on the soul, the meaningfulness.

Imagine if there were just a few people like that in a society where everyone else was more like General Eisenhower. Might it not be then that they were considered somehow a bit, perhaps even pathological, maybe crazy? Maybe some people would think, "Oh, they're just pretending. They're imagining something." And the claim would be, "Well, that's not real. What they're perceiving there and what they feel there, seeing these relationships, these meanings—it's not real."

For me, this is quite an interesting reflection. Is music and those relationships, the relationships between essentially just sounds, pitches, timbres—are they real or not real? It's an interesting question. Is music—and I don't just mean the fact that here's a pitch of so many hertz and this rhythm is twice the rapidity of this rhythm—I mean the whole gestalt of it, including its sense of meaningfulness and beauty and soul and all that. Is that real or not real? Is that even the right question?

Would we better ask: is it important? For some people clearly it's not important, and for others it's extremely important—music, those relationships, the meaningfulness there, the soulfulness, the heartfulness, the effects on the body, all of that, moving it to dance, or just touching the psyche to the core, stimulating. That's not a question of reality or not reality; it's important.

And another question, rather than is it real or not real: is it soul-making? Is it soul-making? So these questions of what's important and what's soul-making, rather than what's real or not real, are more important or relevant questions for certain areas of our experience—actually for quite a lot in life.

It's also interesting to note, and I know this as someone who was a musician and studied music, that the sensitivity to music, the perceptivity, the receptivity, the understanding and the noticing and the picking up of all kinds of nuances of relationships between what is, at one level, just sound, different kinds of sound—that is developable.

So the perceptivity, the capacity of perception, the capacity of the subtleties and nuance, the capacity of understanding concepts there and relationships, and even the degree of effect—all of this is developable, it's trainable.

What if we transfer that whole set of analogies around music and receptivity, perceptivity of perception and conception in relation to music and soulfulness and importance, and transfer that to the perception of nature and the perception of others in our lives or things or the cosmos? Again, we can reduce music just as you can reduce it to the physics of sound—this pitch, that frequency, this timbre with this kind of wave on the oscilloscope—but we are missing something that's more important to us, whose perception we can deepen and open and refine and enrich.

Maybe the same with nature. Maybe the same with perception of others. The imaginal perception that we're talking about, when there's an erotic relationship with music, with art, with nature, with another, with others, with a thing, an object, with the cosmos. So the whole real, not real question is a little misguided there.

And yet you can see how much what is kind of acceptable or the dominant view within a culture can tend to really hold sway and gain an authority just because it's what most people are able to perceive, or it's not what most people are able to perceive. And again, you get the converse as well in history—just the authority of those who claim to perceive something and the reality of what they perceive over those who don't.

And oftentimes this is what you get: apart from the political issues there, you get a clash of realisms, a clash of essentially fundamentalisms. "This is true, all reality is based on this," or "This is real." Someone describes something, a mystical perception, or a spiritual perception, a magical perception—"That's rubbish, it doesn't exist." And the other person says, "They do exist, these stones really are talking to me," or whatever it is. And both are assuming, even if they're not aware of it, they're drawing on, basing their arguments on an assumption of some kind of objective, independently existing reality.

And it doesn't exist like that, or it does exist like that. But that's all that reality kind of means. And people get very charged about this—it's a heated issue, certainly in particular circles.

Some people who oppose giving any importance or place to imaginal perception, mystical perception, or spiritual perception wage a kind of secular crusade. And probably vice versa in history and at present. Someone might say, "Science shows that these things don't exist." But actually this person has not understood science and the whole

scientific project. Does it show that these things do not exist? What is the range of science? What does science even purport to be qualified or equipped to investigate? What is the range of the scientific method?

The very structure of the scientific method is to leave out, deliberately, a whole slew of aspects of our being—because it's determined that's not what we're doing in the scientific method. We're paring that away. Something similar goes on with mindfulness as well. One is amputating, chopping off a whole range of other dimensions of our being, of our experience, of our ways of knowing.

A person who says something like that would do well, I think, to investigate a little philosophy of science over the centuries and especially more recently. They might question even what science says about basic realities. For example, the electron—that subatomic particle. No one's ever seen an electron. The reality given to an electron is not the reality of a little tiny billiard ball. That's a model of it. And even that model is not really the model of modern quantum mechanics and science. It has no where, no when, specifically, objectively, independently existing. The electron is no place, and it doesn't occur at any time. It has no particular velocity or mass. It's not really even a thing, as Niels Bohr said. Does it even have existence?

Don't assume that what you learned in high school and what you surmised about science and what it proves or asserts is actually the reality of what someone at the frontiers of science—a particle physicist at the edge, actually doing creative research—would hold.

What anyway is the difference between the scientific method—where I would deliberately put aside feelings, imagination, even ethical values, aesthetic values—that's the ideal of the scientific method. And it's a method, a methodology, not a fact about reality. So what started as a scientific methodology in the scientific revolution and with the Western Enlightenment actually became, over several hundred years, entrenched as an unquestioned fact about reality and existence. Strictly speaking, it's a methodology. It's one way of knowing.

Someone a little more sophisticated, perhaps, who's keen not to give much place to imaginal perceptions—either intrapsychically or in and of the world—or to mystical states of consciousness and perception, would say something else. They would know that the notion of truth is no longer philosophically respectable. If you go using words like truth, it tends to raise eyebrows in certain circles—disapproval and questioning, supercilious questioning, which is fine. But then oftentimes they avoid that word, per-

haps deliberately, and make a noise about avoiding that word. But underneath, they're assuming some kind of basic existential reality or facticity, to borrow a fancy, fashionable word from modern philosophy, of our situation.

"This is our situation. We live in a meaningless, material universe of which we are—our consciousness and our being and our complexity—an amazing evolution out of matter over eons of evolution. Consciousness is an epiphenomenon. Essentially, the world is material. There are no other dimensions, really. And it's finite. We are finite. We're faced by our death and the extinction of all that. And you're trying to pump up the imaginal or mystical perception or things that happen in meditation—ideas about something transcendent that we can open to beyond the senses, beyond materiality, all that. This is just your attempt at consolation because you can't handle the fact of our existential situation."

Of course, they don't use the word truth. They might use the word facticity or something. But the accusation of consolation seeking already assumes that this is the truth. The existential fact is what you seek consolation with respect to. So I might not use the language of truth, might hide it, but it's functioning there. And there's the clash of realisms so often in these kinds of conversations.

And a person who is drawn to investigating and opening up and exploring the imaginal and mystical states of consciousness and perception—questioning the whole assumptions about reality that are so pervasive in our modernist, materialist, and physicalist culture—can very easily embark on that kind of investigation with all their enthusiasm and openness, and yet very easily be shaken into doubt. They can be pressed into doubt just because of the pervasiveness of the dominant view in our culture.

They might hear a talk or read a book by someone presenting the case for erasing and eradicating mystical perceptions and mystical notions and any place for the imaginal. This could happen in a secular context, in a secular dharma context, here at Gaia House, or anywhere. It's very easy now for a person to be buffeted this way and that by all the opinions flying around in the community, whether it's a smaller community or the larger community of the culture.

So a person wanting to explore and having experiences, being really touched by certain experiences—imaginal openings and perceptions, or meditative openings and experiences of all differing kinds—experiences which potentially can be really fertilizing and fertile as seeds in the psyche, in the consciousness, in the life, can very easily, because of all these different opinions and because of what's dominant in the culture,

and because of a lot of the aggression that often goes with that (which itself is very interesting—why is there so much aggression bound up with this question?), be assailed by doubt, even paralyzed.

They've had these experiences, been touched by them, feel drawn to them, want to open to them. Then something happens: they hear someone give a talk or read a few pages of a book, and somehow it goes into a kind of freeze. Something gets paralyzed, or they dismiss their experiences, or they're ashamed, or they keep it to themselves and then it withers—especially when what they read or hear is quite aggressive.

The person who is being dismissive and perhaps aggressive or polemical in their crusade against these kinds of openings of perception doesn't need to say anything particularly brilliant or radically incisive or particularly new. Oftentimes all they need to do is just slowly and clearly take their time and essentially repeat the dominant, unquestioned view of the culture to which we have all been exposed over years. Even if you grew up in a religious setting, you're still exposed to what I call the dominant view of modernism, of physicalism, of meaninglessness—of what the reality of our existential situation supposedly is.

A person can grow up buffeted by different views—this often characterizes our society—but this physicalist, flat worldview of secular modernism is something we've all been subjected to pervasively and from all different sides, loudly and implicitly. Many of these messages are really not even that obvious for years.

So all the person has to do is just slowly and clearly repeat what you've already heard, what some part of you already understands and knows, without actually making explicit the assumptions underneath that and the historical context. In a way, the power of that argument comes from the fact that it's a repetition—it's a hearing of what one already has heard before and been indoctrinated with. And there's a power from the solidarity, to borrow a phrase from Richard Rorty, just from the fact that so many people either buy into it completely or buy into it at least partially in this kind of cognitive dissonance between that and their more spiritual beliefs.

Because it's a repetition of what you've already been saturated in, and because everyone else seems to agree with it, that makes that position actually quite easy. I don't have to say or write anything particularly incisive or new. Often what happens is a kind of straw man gets set up as an opposition—an easy target. Someone like an Islamic fundamentalist terrorist, or some of the corruption in the papacy, or someone who's clearly ridiculously holding on to something out of desperate fear of their perceived existential situation and wanting consolation. It's a straw man, an easy target.

Why am I saying all this? Just to make the point again that a grasp of—and I use that word carefully—a rootedness in a carefully thought-out, structured, supportive, and generative conceptual framework, one that's to some degree reliable and robust and sophisticated and well-conceived enough, will provide stability in that kind of culture, which is the culture we are in now. We're buffeted by different opinions, often quite aggressive, having been exposed to certain points of view incredibly pervasively, literally inundated by that view, so that we don't even consider it a dogma because it's so pervasive. It's like a fish not recognizing the water it's swimming in.

But a grasp of, a rootedness in, a use of, an implementation of, an incorporation of a careful, supportive, and generative conceptual framework brings a degree of stability, a degree of clarity and orientation. It gives a kind of foundation, and actually will open up experiences further. So those experiences that are potentially fertilizing as seeds can actually be that—they can actually fertilize the psyche, the mind, the heart, the being, the body. This is for the soul that wants soulfulness, that wants soul-making. Admittedly, and I'll come back to this, we want that—human beings seem to want that to different degrees.

This is partly why a conceptual framework is really important: the entertaining of concepts and conceptual frameworks, deliberately, consciously, rigorously even.

We've said that part of what must be included in a conceptual framework is this whole unpacking or explanation of the process of soul-making, based on phenomenologically noticing and delineating different kinds of movement of desire. Drawing out this distinction of eros and what's involved with that and where it goes, just from observation of what is involved for us, for the psyche, for the citta, as human beings in our life. And then exploring and explaining the dynamics of that soul-making process—eros, psyche, logos in its expansion because of the pothos that we've talked about. In some way or another, part of the conceptual framework needs to draw that out and give it a conceptual grounding and structuring that's fertile.

Another aspect of the conceptual framework needs to be this non-separation of the citta—which includes the soul, what we're calling soul—non-separation of the mind, heart, soul, consciousness, citta. There's a non-separation of the citta and whatever we sense of reality, or whatever reality is. Implied in that, or included with that, is the emptiness of all things and the whole notion of ways of looking.

Way of looking is an aspect, or a mode of being of the citta at any time. So all that—this non-separation of citta and reality, and...

The emptiness of all things and the notion of diversity of ways of looking that are available to us. All that needs to be an aspect, an element, woven into the conceptual framework which is said already.

So that mindfulness is not and does not expose reality as it is, things as they are. It does not expose what is. Mindfulness does not bring us into an encounter with something called life—as someone put it, life "exorcised of the tumor of metaphysics." Mindfulness is just one way of looking, wrapped up with a certain conceptual—well, actually quite a lot of concepts wrapped up in mindfulness, in the experience, even of bare attention. It's one way of knowing. Great, it's fantastic, wonderful—it's one way of knowing. Actually probably it's more than that. Really implicit in what the Buddha meant by mindfulness is there's already a range of ways of knowing.

But what we want, what we need, what the conceptual framework needs is to open, open the ways of looking with this different, more sophisticated idea of reality and the non-separation of the citta, including the soul, and reality. Emptiness of all things and the ways of looking, all kind of implicit together in that.

So an idea that I already mentioned, an idea like participation. This is a concept. It's also a perception that I can have. It's an experience, if you like. It's an imaginal perception. But where does imaginal perception shade into what we wouldn't consider imaginal perception? We would just consider perception. But an idea like participation, for instance, that this mind, my mind, in its depths is, if you like, rooted in or participates in the mind of the cosmos. Not that it's just one with, but it participates in the mind of the cosmos. It expresses the mind of the cosmos, the divine mind.

Or that my imaginal faculty, the images that come to me, the images I perceive, either so-called intrapsychic or of the world, these too are the imagination of the divine, or the Buddha nature, or whatever. So I participate in the Buddha nature through my imaginal perception. Or again, the eros that I feel, and all that whole range and all the directions of my eros is—we've said this a few times—I have the sense that I'm participating in the divine eros, in the eros of the Buddha with his consort, the consort with the Buddha. However we frame it, there's some sense of this, of what I experience at one level as mine, is at another level mirroring, echoing, rooted in, originating in and participating in the divine eros, the divine imaginal faculty, divine imagination, the divine mind.

So that idea of participation, or the set of ideas that we might call participation, is an idea or a set of ideas that actually supports and stimulates soul-making. It brings more eros, more psyche, more image, gives imaginal dimension, opens imaginal dimension, and a stretching and a complicating of the logos, of the idea. So we get ideas, as we said,

that actually support and fertilize the soul-making process. And therefore it is a valuable idea. Why? Because it stimulates soul-making. It supports and stimulates and gives this more dimensionality to the soul-making movement and dynamic. Therefore, it is valuable. And therefore, it is valid. It's valid because it's valuable. Those words are actually related etymologically. It's valid because it's valuable, and its value is that it stimulates what the soul loves, soul-making. It stimulates that beauty, that richness, that opening, that fertility, that creativity, that discovery, all of that, and the multidimensionality of that.

This idea of participation, which is, if you like, part of our set of ideas—this set of ideas called participation is part of a larger set of ideas which forms our conceptual framework, or may be part of our conceptual framework. But participation as a set of ideas also includes the understanding that we're not dealing with anything that has an independent existence. So we participate in perception. We participate in the world that's perceived, in the very perception of it. We participate in the divinity. We participate in actually anything. And so it has inherent, if you like, intrinsic to the very idea of participation is the realization that things are empty, that there are ways of looking, that our ways of looking are actually participatory. So what is seen, the way it appears and the way of looking, there's no independent existence implied in that.

So say, this idea of participation in the divine, is that—are you saying that's ultimately true? First of all, it's not necessary to the soul-making that we believe it's ultimately true.

A lot of people find this very hard to understand. I think it's intrinsic to a certain depth of soul-making, because we realize image as image, can actually also realize, if you like, idea as idea. I don't need to believe that something is ultimately true in order for it to have its power, its efficacy, its capability and potency to open and to seed and fertilize our experience, our perception, our understanding, our heart, our soul, our minds, and our lives.

Actually, if you go into this whole question of participation, the very question "is it ultimately true?" crumbles because of what the idea is in itself. If we turn it the other way around, to claim the independent existence, the separate existence of anything—separate from the way of looking, independent of the citta—I would say that is definitely not true. Any attempt at doing that so far in the history of humanity has been pretty seriously questioned. What one finds is that it's actually very hard to construct a coherent conceptual framework on a ground of solidity, on a ground of independent existence.

The attempt, for example, in physics to derive everything from the basic building blocks of matter just comes round again, or so far has just come round again to questioning the reality of those building blocks—the independent reality, independent of the way of looking. We can't find them as independently existing things, independent of the way of looking. Nagarjuna showed this even relative to Buddhist atomism—a brilliant critique exposing the impossibility of constructing a coherent conceptual framework on realist grounds. And again, in modern Western philosophy in recent years.

From different directions, it's almost like to have a grounding in a conceptual framework that actually has the effect of solidity, our ground needs to be not solid. You understand? We can't get away with claiming the independent, separate existence of anything and claiming that's the truth—that things exist independent, separate from the way of looking.

This idea, this set of ideas we're calling participation, also intrinsically implies the observation or acknowledgement that the way of looking both discovers and grants sacredness to something. We don't just discover it. We grant it. The way of looking grants it. We create it—whether it's an image or eros or whatever. That whole admission and observation is not a problem within the idea of participation.

To me, there's a more sophisticated ontology and epistemology and cosmology, in fact metaphysics, wrapped up in something like the idea of participation, which can sound at first sight like just abstract metaphysics with no grounding in anything real at all. So go into these things. Actually really question. Dare to question.

There's a kind of pragmatism here, which again is quite a popular word in modern philosophy, that essentially states you can believe what works for you. There's a pragmatism of approach and of conceptuality here, but it's actually one that opens possibilities—possible new ways of looking, or the possibility of new ways of looking—and actually implements them, opens orientations, opens experiences, opens the living, and opens the field of life for us, the field of our existence, the sense of existence, in ways that we actually move through.

Sometimes what you get is what's called pragmatist philosophy, but all it does is revert almost by default back to whatever was the default concept or ideation of ontology, epistemology, cosmology—basically the default hidden metaphysics there. Can we have something actually that's pragmatic? I mean, really practical. An idea or a set of ideas that is actually practical, that we live, that opens perception, opens experience, opens ideation, opens the heart, opens all that soul.

What is needed, I would say, is some kind of conceptual frame, which means some set of connected ideas that supports an ongoingness, a potential ongoingness of exploration, inquiry—supports the opening of frontiers, creativity and discovery in all domains and in all aspects of our being. And even those domains and those aspects of being can also get opened and increased. In other words, we discover domains, and we discover aspects of being, or we create them, or both. They are opened for us, where before we had no sense that there was even that domain of being, and that aspect of our existence.

Some conceptual framework, some set of connected ideas that will support this fecundity of exploration, expansion, opening—this infinity of domains and dimensions and aspects of being, of existence. Not just the intellect, certainly not. Not just the heart, not just the body, but the artistic, all of this, the soul.

Soul—what do you mean soul? It's a domain of being. The way these open up—like what the body can be, what the heart can be, what the intellect can be. In other words, how it can be conceived, not just the range of experiences there. And so opening up also, with all that, a kind of potential infinitude of interpretations. Back to this hermeneutics—that existence, life, world, cosmos, being, humanity, body, all of this, materiality—there's an infinitude of potential interpretations there. It's not constrained. It's not constricted. Through the participation itself, we're creating, discovering interpretations. That is, if you like, the nature of existence. The nature of the cosmos is not limited.

Infinite interpretations. The garden of infinite interpretations. The orchard of infinite interpretations.

Infinite interpretations, by the way, doesn't mean that any interpretation goes or that any interpretation is just as good as any other one. If you know your mathematics of infinity, there are different kinds of infinity. So you can still have infinite interpretations while not exploring a whole other infinite set. It's the nature of infinity. There are infinite even numbers and there are infinite odd numbers. So you can have infinite soul-making interpretations and helpful interpretations, and infinite unhelpful interpretations.

Only this kind of conceptual framework, to my way of thinking, would be philosophically viable, legitimate, and defendable. But more importantly, only this kind of conceptual framework can satisfy soul. Only a framework that's this fertile, that supports this ongoing expansion, complication, dimensionalizing—creativity, discovery, interpretation—can satisfy soul.

What if we play with the idea of placing soul-making—this movement of eros that stimulates the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, expansion, complication, widening, deepening, enrichment—as a conception that can form a base for other explanations of all kinds of things? Taking soul-making as something basic. Simply saying the soul wants, it has erotic desire for soul-making. It wants soul-making, the expansion of soul-making, the growth of soul-making, the movement of soul-making in all directions and domains, potentially infinitely, eventually.

There's a movement in time here, a becoming. It may happen in fits and starts, with blocks and then explosions and walls crumbling, or just gradual expansion. If we say something basic—it sounds really simple—the soul wants, has an erotic desire for the expansion of soul-making in all directions and domains eventually.

The soul-making in regard to the self, in regard to the beloved other or others, in regard to the world becomes potentially equalized, because the soul wants that soul-making expansion in all directions and domains. This is its natural, organic movement. So as imaginal and erotic objects, the other, the self, and the world are equalized, balanced there. They're all filled out. The soul-making movement is happening in all those directions.

But also in the domains or directions of body, heart, mind—all these are expanded too. The soul wants all these to be expanded: what the body is, how it can be perceived, what it means, what it can do, what it can feel, what it can sense, its ways of knowing, the heart, the mind. Not that one is blocked or stuck or cramped. That would be a blocking or cramping of the whole eros-psyche-logos process, the whole soul-making movement.

Problems arise when one of these directions or domains or aspects of being is blocked as an avenue of soul-making, or there's a stuckness there, or it's cramped—when the logos or the image is rigidified. Or there's an imbalance because one side is blocked, one direction is blocked, one aspect or domain is blocked.

For example, there's not the inclusion of the self as being filled out by imaginal perception, or there's a preoccupation with the self without attending to the other as an imaginal object, erotic object. Or the world is not included. What happens to our relationship with nature when we lose the eros and the sense of dimensionality of the natural world? What happens when we objectify another—when they lose that dimensionality, when we lose the eros there? Maybe there's still attraction, as we've talked about before, but somehow I've objectified them.

What happens if our notion of flesh or materiality or the body is not allowed—if the soul-making erotic involvement with flesh, with body, is not permitted in some way? Then our sense and our concept and our perception of flesh and body is stuck at one level—maybe one-dimensionality. It is this. It's good for that.

It's not good for this. It's this or that. And to me, this presents a fascinating exploration—an invitation to play with the idea of placing soul-making as a truly fundamental movement in our entire approach to psychology, spirituality, and path.

Consider, for instance, how we might reconsider human developmental psychology through this lens. I won't delve deeply into this now, but I'll offer something as a starting point for future exploration.

Freud regarded pleasure-seeking as the fundamental drive of human beings—this was what eros meant to him. Problems arose when these drives for pleasure, often sexual and oriented toward sensual gratification, were blocked or inhibited by the demands of culture, society, and parenting. His entire developmental psychology placed what he called eros—this pleasure-seeking principle—at its foundation.

Half a century later, Douglas Fairbairn, a Scottish psychoanalyst in the Freudian lineage working within what's called the British Object Relations School, proposed something different. He argued that the fundamental movement is object-seeking, which he termed libido rather than eros. For him, what the infant truly seeks is an object—the other. The fundamental drive is to connect with others, not, as Freud suggested, the gratification of sense pleasures or the reduction of tension in the pleasure drives.

Fairbairn proposed this libidinal drive as the primary force, alongside what he called an anti-libidinal drive—a protective mechanism that develops to shield us from the disappointment and pain of rejection or unavailability of the objects we seek. These dynamics can become internalized in complex ways within his theoretical framework.

Contemporary psychology often considers another model entirely: the notion that in the womb there existed a state of oneness and wholeness, a non-differentiated oceanic bliss of unity with the mother. Birth then becomes a trauma of separation into differentiated being, a shock to the system. The construction of self-sense becomes a force for coherence and delimitation—creating boundaries whose function is to protect against dissolution back into that primordial oneness, which carries the memory of birth trauma.

Meanwhile, ego psychology sets as its fundamental achievement the development of a well-boundaried, coherent self—this becomes the marker of psychological health and maturity.

What intrigues me is this question: What if we conceived of eros, as we've been exploring it, and soul-making as the fundamental drive? This would mean something more than Freud's pleasure-seeking, and it would also differ from Fairbairn's object-seeking, even though his focus on connection sounds remarkably similar to our understanding of eros as the desire for deeper connection.

The crucial difference lies in how we conceive the object itself. Fairbairn's object—what the child or infant seeks—is assumed to be fixed, well-defined, stable, and limited. Admittedly complex, yes, but not infinite, not full of potentially infinite imaginal dimensions, not possibly divine.

In our exploration, eros is not equivalent to a movement toward oneness and dissolution that must be defended against. Rather, eros organically creates and retains otherness—maintaining some degree of separation and distinction between self and other. Kohut's ideal of the well-boundaried self need not be fundamental either; it simply becomes part of what naturally happens in the soul-making process, as eros creates some sense of division and boundary.

I'm only touching on this to open possibilities for future investigation. The distinctions may seem subtle, but I believe they're quite significant. We've become so accustomed to thinking about developmental psychology in established terms that they've become almost entrenched. But what would happen if we placed eros and soul-making, as we've been exploring them, at the center as the fundamental drive?

What would this imply for constructing a developmental psychology? How would we understand various human pathologies in relation to this framework? Our conception of the object that the soul seeks differs from Fairbairn's understanding, and our sense of self certainly differs from Kohut's achievement model.

Implicit in our exploration is the recognition of image as image—all of this as part of the natural soul-making dynamic. The question becomes: which aspects get blocked, at what point, and in what direction?

So the soul-making movement doesn't lead to a dissolution of the self or a reification of the self. It's really important to have a sense of a real self before you can let go of it. But is that really the problem? The soul-making process doesn't reify self or object, but that might be a stage in the soul-making process. These aspects of the other—objects conceived less dimensionally, less imaginatively pregnant—might just be a stage. And Kohut's achievement of the psychologically-boundaried, coherent self might just be a stage of the soul-making process as well.

I'm simply playing with something here, but to me it's quite an interesting avenue to explore. So much of what we consider, or what modern psychology considers to be the self—and there is quite a range in that conceptualization—reveals how relative it is to Western modernist culture, as I mentioned before.

Ernst Cassirer wrote a whole series of books called *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. He describes the Bataks of Sumatra, for whom the self existed in relationship with a spirit particular to that individual—I believe it was called a Begu. This spirit dwells within the person but not really, separate from their ego, separate from their "I." All kinds of conflicts can arise—the person wants one thing, the ego wants one thing, and the spirit wants another. Yet there's a power that this spirit possesses in determining the character and even the future of that person.

This is not the coherent, unfragmented self of Kohut, yet it was regarded as normal, as what a person naturally involves. Certain notions of what constitutes psychological health are simply products of modernist Western culture, which we mistake for reality and rarely question.

If we consider developmental psychology more deeply, we tend to think the past causes the present—causality runs linearly from past to present. We look for first causes, conditions, environment, trauma, and trace everything moving from past to present. But what if causality actually opens into a much broader sense of causation? What if it doesn't just come from the past, but we are also called toward something in the future? What if causality also emerges from the present, through dependent origination? And what if what's truly causal extends beyond what manifests simply on a material level in a purely human dimension?

The Bataks' notion of a non-material entity being quite causative raises profound questions. What do we need? What is actually served, and what is lost when we constrain our notions of causality—not just notions of self, but our entire understanding of what constitutes healthy thinking, healthy selfhood, and psychological well-being?

When we consider various pathologies that can occur for human beings, we tend to relate them to developmental psychology—some kind of arrested or incomplete development. But I want to point toward a different direction that could prove quite fruitful. What happens if the imaginal dimension becomes available to open in a certain direction—say, in relation to other but not in relation to self, or in relation to self but not in relation to other? There's a kind of lopsidedness to the soul-making opening and movement. What causes this lopsidedness initially, and what does it result in developmentally? What kinds of pathologies emerge when this becomes a long-term, habitual mode of being and seeing?

What if there's this repeated pattern of not seeing image as image, not understanding "this is image"? Of course, this is actually quite common, though we don't tend to realize it. In our culture and education, there's a real push to make sure the child knows what reality is, coupled with an almost palpable fear of imagination—that it might linger too much, except in very contained directions like art class or school theater. This fear of imagination leads us to suppress it while emphasizing something called "reality."

But perhaps healthy psychology actually requires that the imaginal dimension be allowed more, amplified more, explored and opened to more fully. This suggests a very different way of thinking about psychology, developmental psychology, and pathology.

I wonder: do children, does an infant, does a child really believe their images and confuse them with reality? When children are playing, this doesn't seem to be the case. There's this fear about over-imagination, as if pathology lies in allowing the imaginal to grow too freely. I wonder if we can actually trust the human psyche to naturally see image as image, to understand that image is image as part of its natural development—if it's allowed to, if it's supported, unless it's subjected to some kind of fundamentalist dogma.

And that fundamentalism can take obvious forms—religious fundamentalism that doesn't see image as image—or much subtler forms that are harder for us to recognize because they're so embedded in our cultural assumptions.

totally woven into our culture and we don't even see it.

Not seeing an image as an image is regarded as relatively acceptable if most people around me agree to see it that way—to agree that this is reality, not an image. If my whole community shares some image and doesn't see this image as an image, it's somehow deemed psychologically normal. From outside of that community, it looks pathological, bonkers, dangerous. But I wonder if there's this natural, organic movement of the psyche to understand the imaginal and to see it as image, if it's allowed to, if it's supported to, if it's not subject to the pressures of fundamentalism or some kind of logos that doesn't permit that recognition.

Again, when we think of pathology on this broader scale—as I said, expanding what we've explored in moment-to-moment meditative navigation—we might consider the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, this expansion and mutual fertilization. Where can this get blocked or fall out of balance? Is it in the logos? Is it the image getting stuck somewhere, rigidly identified, not seeing images as images—whether images of self, other, world, the eros itself, the love, or something like the body?

The body might be related to in a way that doesn't allow it to be imaginally filled out. There might be all kinds of belief in an image of the body, or an idea of the body, or the eros has gotten stuck in relation to the body. Something becomes imbalanced, something gets blocked in that whole circular mandala where everything wants to move in all directions. Something gets obstructed in the eros, in the psyche, in the logos, in the image of self, other, world, eros, body, whatever it is. It's not seeing image as image, and pathologies emerge from that—incomplete or arrested development arises from that, perhaps.

These are just some ideas to offer for reflection that might prove interesting and fruitful.

Lastly, I want to touch on something I've mentioned before. In the conceptual framework we're unfolding here with soul-making—the explanation of the soul-making dynamic and what's involved—we need, and perhaps we have, a conceptual framework that implies, already implicit within it, that eros and soul-making will always elude our final understanding. They are always more than we can ever comprehend.

Why? Because the eros, because of the pothos within the eros, always wants more of whatever it comes into relationship with as an erotic object. This stimulates the eros-psyche-logos dynamic to create and discover more—always more. It expands, opens, stretches, breaks the boundaries of anything it encounters in creating and discovering more of that thing, including not just psyche and soul, but eros itself. And whatever logos, whatever idea is involved with the notion of psyche or the notion of eros.

Whatever idea of these—those boundaries and ideas, as I've said before, are delineations. They create boundaries, but they will also be broken open, expanded, stretched. Simply because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, they will eventually move in the direction of eros and in the direction of soul itself. The dynamic will include them in its whole expanding vortex of movement, involvement, digestion, transformation, transubstantiation, creation, discovery.

In a way, this whole understanding of the eros-psyche-logos movement, process, and involvement means that any logos, any idea, will expand or break in time. In time it will crack. To paraphrase Leonard Cohen: there's a crack in everything, and that's where the light comes in.

We might think of this in terms of our broken heart and our imperfections, but we can just as readily apply it to ideas, to logoi, to conceptual frameworks. Implicit in how we're discussing the soul-making dynamic—eros, psyche, logos, and all that—is the Kabbalistic idea of the breaking of the vessels. The Shevirat HaKelim—it will break. And

the crack is a blessing. The light comes in. There's illumination, further expanse. Something of the divine, if we want to amplify that metaphor—the light of the divine enters through the crack.

We will reach a point with any idea, any concept or framework, where it won't be able to contain or account for our experience, new ideas, new observations. The very idea of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic may face this too. It's interesting as an idea, though, because it includes within itself this notion of the breaking of vessels, of cracks, because of what it implies about expansion.

There are already cracks in this idea—structural weaknesses, circularities, as there must be with any conceptual framework. Is that a problem? Perhaps theory, conceptual framework theory, is more theater. Theory is theater more than reality or truth. Theory is theater.

I don't think those words are etymologically related, but let's connect them imaginally: theory is theater. What does that mean? Theater actually has etymology connected to the gods, theos, I believe.

The question is not about its reality and truth, but what is it serving? What is it serving? A theory, a conceptual framework. And we've already said: soul-making. Serving soul-making is... And the theory itself is part of soul. The logos is part of what we're calling soul and soul-making.

So in a way, we discover a conceptual framework based on our observations and deductions from that. But we create it. We could say we forge it—with the double implication of what that word means. We forge a conceptual framework. We are forging a conceptual framework.

And theory is theatre.

This is, to me, a whole notion of concept that's soul-making, that's fertile. To me, beautiful as well.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 72

Doubt and Discernment (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this foundational talk from the Eros Unfettered retreat, Rob Burbea directly addresses the natural doubts that arise when encountering teachings on eros and the imaginal, particularly regarding explicitly sexual imagery in spiritual practice. He transforms paralyzing doubt into active inquiry, encouraging practitioners to investigate for themselves whether these practices lead to escapism or deeper engagement with life.*
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> *Burbea draws on his personal journey of gradually learning to trust erotic imaginal practice, sharing intimate details of dreams and meditation experiences that initially confused him but eventually opened profound dimensions of soul-making. He explores the distinction between genuine eros—which opens the energy body and creates soul-making resonances—and mere craving, which contracts and closes the heart. The teacher emphasizes that imaginal figures often come with a sense of duty or message, seeking translation into lived engagement rather than withdrawal from the world.*
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> *The talk challenges common spiritual assumptions about 'fleeing reality,' questioning what we mean by reality itself and whether dismissing the imaginal actually represents its own form of escapism. Burbea argues that unlike paths toward universal oneness—which can render particulars replaceable—the erotic imaginal offers infinite creative possibilities for discovering sacredness through the unique and particular. He concludes by emphasizing the Buddha's invitation of ehipassikā (come and see), encouraging practitioners to maintain active questioning rather than settling for inherited assumptions about desire and spiritual practice.*

Hearing all this talk about eros and the imaginal, engaging these practices and trying out these practices of the erotic imaginal—especially when they're explicitly sexual—it would be very normal, I think, in our culture, but also in the Dharma culture, for doubt to arise. It would be very understandable, very normal. So it's important to address this and to take a little time to look at that from different perspectives, to unpack it.

Some of what I'm going to touch on here we may have mentioned before here and there, but much of it is worth repeating. And I also want to take it a little further into other discernments, more refined discernments regarding eros and craving.

Someone could hear all this or even do a practice, and even when it happens—when they're surprised by what the practice opens for them and how touched they are by the beauty of it—someone can still come with a question: But isn't this escapism? This business with the imaginal, and especially when it's erotic, isn't this escapism? Will it lead to my not engaging with life?

In a way, is it? Is it escapism? Does it reduce your engagement with life, lead to some kind of cutting off from opening to life, meeting it, engaging with it? Does it close down your care with respect to life?

The best way to address the question of doubt is really to turn it into an active question. Find out. Because at the end of the day, only you and your inquiry and your experience will really have the power, the convincing power. Sometimes the teacher or an authority says this or that and people just trust the teacher—me or Catherine or whoever it is in this case. But really, at the end of the day, we can know something for ourselves through our inquiry, through finding out, turning the doubt away from the paralysis of doubt into an active engagement of questioning.

Find out: is this escapism? Does it lead to a closing down of the care and of the engagement? Notice, see what happens. We actually have to experiment to find out for ourselves.

We can give the question back to you—and I think that's very important—but we can also say more about it. Because we've talked about, a little on this retreat and quite a bit on previous retreats, for instance the Path of the Imaginal, about the fact that images often come with a sense of duty. Somehow, this imaginal figure or this image, wrapped up in that, comes with a message. *Angelos* means message bearer. And there's some kind of sense of duty.

Sometimes it's not at all obvious, or it's not obvious how or whether that needs to be concrete—whether I actually need to do something or say something or whatever it is. And exactly what the translation is, or how the image and the sense of duty in the image translates into my life, how obvious that translation is, in what way, in what form, in what idiom and what domain and what manner of expression—most images, not all, but most images seem to want, seem to demand some kind of translation somehow.

I don't mean translation to a meaning—"it means X, it means I should do this." I mean translation as in moving one thing from one area, dimension, domain to another. Translation. So from the image to the life.

Some images are already wrapped up in life—the imaginal perception we have of our lives, of others, of situations, of our work, of our loves. But somehow the image is asking to be taken into the world somehow. And so there's a discernment: is it asking that? How is it asking that? How does life and image kind of reflect or mirror or echo each other? What's the dance, the back and forth, the dialogue, the theater between those two stages reflecting each other, as if two plays on each stage and they're somehow corresponding and somehow interacting? The players on this stage and the actors on the other stage opposite each other, mixing even.

This is something to point out in terms of: is this escapism? Will it reduce my engagement with life? Will it lead to this kind of non-engagement, withdrawal into this fantasy world of images where one becomes kind of inert and unengaged in one's actual life?

But in relation to that, there's a sense of duty that images often have. So that's one thing.

Another is, you know—and I've pointed this out before, so I'm not going to go into it now—but there is, at least in some spiritual circles, and Theravāda Buddhism could definitely be a case in point, that there is the image of non-engagement, which is actually quite dominant. You understand? The image of the Buddha who kind of looks with affable equanimity at the entanglements of more worldly beings and is not himself engaged so much. So that's the eyes closed, the stillness, the equanimity, and of course the movement to transcendence, which is something we'll come back to.

But there is... It's more like, is there an image of non-engagement that's actually dominant, and oftentimes dominant partly through its unconsciousness, that we don't see it as an image, or we don't have enough range of other possible images, archetypal images, available to us as pictures of awakening direction? So it's not that images lead to non-engagement, and so we better not have images. Sometimes the way Theravāda Buddhism is taught is "don't have images," but there's a kind of not very conscious, implicit fantasy image of where we're headed, and that's towards a kind of non-engagement—politically, environmentally, and so forth. And I've talked about all this before; I'm not going to go into it now.

But engagement is given in part—in part it's demanded by an image, most images, because even an image of non-engagement is a kind of "how am I going to be in life?" I'm going to be not so embroiled, not so involved, not so heated by the fires of passion and involvement and social justice, and so forth. But the nature of the engagement or non-engagement is given by the image.

We could add to all this that, rather than taking us away from life, image and fantasy in the ways that I'm using those words—those imaginal images; I'm not going to say "imaginal images" every time, but almost always that's what I mean—images, imaginal images and fantasies, they actually bring a dimensionality to our perceptions of life and the world, self and other. So that's not a non-engagement; that's a deepening of connection, a filling out. They also bring meaningfulness to the perceptions of self, other, world, through the image, through the fantasy, through becoming conscious of that, feeling our way into it, opening to it, letting it open us.

People say, "Is this not just fleeing reality? Are you not just trying to flee reality?" Fleeing reality—I mean, we've also touched on this in other retreats, but fleeing reality, there's so much wrapped up in that ideation. Something like fleeing reality is a movement of fear and aversion, something I don't want to open to, something I want to run away from, close down from, turn the world off—turn that world off, at least. It's a movement of fear.

Is this what we're talking about, really, a movement of fear? And again, does it close the heart and close the engagement? Fleeing reality out of fear will do exactly that. It will—and it will become quite obvious in time, if not to oneself, to others around one—that there's a closing of the heart happening here. There's a closing of the psyche, and there's a lack of engagement in life. There's a dying of the engagement in life to a certain extent.

Then we could also, again, turn the question around and actually say that this whole notion of fleeing reality into imagination may be missing the fact that it's coming already out of a certain ontology, epistemology, cosmology, which has, over centuries now, belittled the imagination and belittled any kind of sacredness of that, or purpose to it, or soul-making as well. So if we actually open up the conceptual framework, the logos, and actually grant the world of the imaginal a place—a necessary place, an importance, a significance—then we can actually turn that question around and say, "Are we fleeing in our lives? Are we fleeing the reality of the imaginal?" Yes, it's a different kind of reality. And there are all kinds of, for me, very interesting ontological questions for us to work out as human beings. I don't think to find a final answer, but to explore creatively—creative epistemology, creative ontology, creative cosmologies.

But we could easily ask: all this dismissal of the imagination and this kind of fearful clinging on to so-called reality, are we fleeing the reality of the imaginal, fleeing the demands of it, fleeing its implications, the depth, the meaningfulness, the duty that comes from that, the ways that it opens the psyche, the soul, the heart, the vision, the

sense of the world, the sense of the self, the sense of other? Actually, for me, there's more cogency and force in questioning that way around. I'm so used to assuming and thinking a certain way.

And on top of that is just the whole question about, related, is: what do you mean by reality? What are you assuming reality is? Atomic billiard balls buzzing around in some kind of scientific materialist flatland? Is that what reality is? Or is reality exposed by so-called bare attention or mindfulness, and therefore, the imaginal and all that is not reality? Again, I'm not going to go into that. I've talked plenty and written about that in the past, but there's so much kind of unexposed, implicit in terms of assumptions in these kinds of questions. Is it escapism? Is it fleeing reality? Is it wish fulfillment?

It's important to address these questions, but to actually really address them. So, I mean, really make them questions. It's very easy for something to sound like a question, and it's not actually a question. So, you know, "Is it wish fulfillment?"

Is it even my wish? In the erotic imaginal, do I really feel like this is me and my wishes and I'm indulging my wishes? Actually, look into that. Whose wish is this? I'm engaged in this erotic imaginal interaction or I'm watching this erotic imaginal, sensing this erotic imaginal interaction, whatever. Is it really my wish we're talking about? My wish, the ego's wish? Whose wish is it? It's quite subtle.

And am I able to let go? We talked about this before. Am I just dragged without any choice whatsoever, or am I able to practice putting down, letting go, walking away, picking up and putting down?

Someone might ask a variation on this kind of question: isn't all this just indulging greed? All this talk about eros and erotic imagination, isn't that just indulging greed? So yes, important to ask this question. But again, let's go into the question more. What happens to those who indulge what we might call greed or craving over time? Over a year or ten years, you watch a person and when that kind of tendency and habit to indulge greed and craving is given free flow—it's allowed, it's acquiesced to, it gains the upper hand.

People start making all kinds of justifications to themselves: "Oh, I work really hard," and this and that. And I'm talking about dharma folk, people who are living a dharma life in some kind of very full way. It's their work, it's their practice—it's really at the center of their life. And yet somehow over the years, what happens when just things like comfort, convenience, pleasure, security—all very normal—when the craving for

these things starts to gain more leeway? It's given more permission, it's acquiesced to, it's not questioned so much. It just has its river flowing at the side of whatever else we're doing dharma-wise, and it's regarded as okay.

And what happens to the fire? What happens to the brilliance of being, to the intensity, to the luster of the diamond, of the citta, of the heart, of the soul, the radiance? What happens to that over time? Five years, ten years, twenty years?

And what happens conversely to someone who explores the erotic imaginal and actually discerns between eros and craving and investigates eros and opens to it and lets it take things deeper over time? What kind of citta, what kind of soul emerges or is shaped by indulging one or the other—eros or craving?

So look, look around you. Find out. Don't assume. Don't even assume that this person or that person must be living like this or making this choice or that choice just because I assume that about them or myself.

Doubt is questioning, and that's really good. But make it questioning. Make it real questioning. It means inquiry, investigation. Not just settling for a fog of paralysis or confusion, or just a sort of standard, easy answer: "I just heard this, so it must be true."

And then to investigate, of course, we have to begin to discern between eros and craving in the first place. We've talked some about this and we'll come back to it. Again, the centrality of the energy body—just including the energy body already in the awareness and the fullness of that—already moves it, helps it become eros rather than craving. The sensitivity, the openness to the whole energy body. And eros will be characterized, the erotic imaginal will be characterized by an opening and a harmonizing, perhaps energizing of the energy body, unlike craving.

And then there's the soul-making, which we can notice as well. So we've touched on this and we'll revisit it some more. But we can notice the differences here. And actually we can learn, as we touched on already in earlier talks, we can actually learn to navigate between or from craving to eros. That's quite possible.

Something might feel like I'm caught in craving or craving has caught me. There's the contraction of that, a certain way of seeing, a certain state of the consciousness and the energy body. I can discern this, and then with the development of skill and the art of practicing, I can actually explore whether we might liberate this craving into eros—not just let it go, though we can do that too. I've written about that elsewhere, but we can actually learn to navigate from craving to eros, allowing transformation.

Some eros, as I've said, is very, very subtle—and I'm not just talking about sexuality, I've mentioned this many times. Even there, there's really a range. Some eros and some of that erotic connection, erotic charge and movement is extremely subtle.

But let's not be too naive here. I don't want to be alarmist because that would be completely defeating the purpose and it's not justified. On the other hand, just because of this range of subtlety and also because of the distinctions we're making—what leads to what—I don't want to be too naive either.

We've said that eros is fire. There's something about eros that's like fire, and fire is potentially dangerous. At the same time, fire is also extremely useful, extremely productive, very helpful. But it's something that can be dangerous.

Yes, we can learn to navigate with practice, with time, from craving to eros, transforming craving to eros in the moment. But also, something may start as eros, and if we're not careful, may contract into craving, divert, contort itself, or get shrunk somehow so that it becomes craving. So there's a danger in all this—there are dangers in playing with fire.

If you've been around the Dharma for a while, you know that one of the Buddha's central metaphors was of extinguishment—extinguishing the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. This imagery of extinguishing fires is very central in Pali Canon Buddhism.

This is partly an aside, but it's quite interesting because a case could be made historically that the Buddha picked that analogy for a couple of reasons. One was contextual—as all teaching must be, as all dialogue must be. The context he was dealing with at that time in India was a Brahminical religion, Vedic traditions, where they kept fires alive. There were people whose job, whose sacrificial duty it was to keep the fires going—I think there were three fires.

So the Buddha was addressing himself somewhat polemically, wanting to turn something upside down. You don't need to keep three fires going; it's three fires that you need to put out: greed, aversion, and delusion. You can see the relativity of that metaphor—it came partly out of context. Had he been in a very different context, would he have used that metaphor? We are now in a different context, especially living in cold England or New England.

There's a second reason the Buddha chose this metaphor, having to do with the physics, the then-current understanding of what fire was and what happened when you put it out. Nowadays, we think you just put it out—it's gone, extinguished, disappeared. In those days, the sense was that the fire was liberated. When you put out a fire—this

wood fire or whatever—and you extinguish it, the fire is liberated in the sense that it's not clinging to any object. There's a kind of freedom that is beyond space and time—unbound.

There's an etymology there of *nibbāna* with that unbinding of fire—*nibbāna* as unbinding.

But it wasn't just a disappearance and non-existence. It was actually almost more potent, but not clinging to anything. So it was this kind of abstract fire that was liberated.

The point is that if we're used to hearing a certain directionality in regard to the metaphor, the imagery of fire, and then we're using the opposite analogies here about mastery of the fire and stoking it and tending flames, that can cause something in the being to shake a little with doubt.

When we talk about the imagery of Dionysus, which I did in one talk recently, we're speaking of how unsettling, how disruptive, how fragmenting, violent and erotic, and intoxicated this archetype is. Dionysus was the god of wine - intoxicated and wild, raving. This disrupts the sort of serene, controlled, placid, sometimes sterile course of what is regarded as civilized. That's all in the territory when we play with fire, when we're with eros.

And then there's that mythology of the breaking of the vessels from the Kabbalah, *Shevirat ha-Kelim*. All this - we understand what we're saying. This is in the territory of what we're opening to. This comes with the whole landscape that we're entering. It would be very understandable that doubt and trepidation arose. And again, it doesn't fit the imagery that we have or that we've absorbed.

There isn't a kind of Dionysus equivalent in Theravadan Buddhism. That iconography, that mythology just doesn't exist except as something to get rid of. In the Vajrayana icons and deities of Tantric Buddhism - I'm not sure, I don't know nearly enough about the history of how icons get mixed - but many of those gods are full of wildness, those yidams and deities, full of wildness, wrathful deities and phallic deities and the eros and the sexuality that's visible there.

But in Theravada Buddhism, in Pali Buddhism, we're really not used to that kind of mythology. It just is not given a place except as something to renounce, move beyond, get rid of, towards another archetype - the renunciate, celibate, equanimous, uninvolved, calm archetype.

So yes, playing with fire brings danger, and upset, and shatterings, and disruptions. All that goes with the territory of soul-making, and opening to eros, and fire. I don't want to be alarmist because we're also talking about really subtle movements and there's the wisdom of the navigation, but there is that possibility.

But even then, we can ask - and again, it's really important to ask - is there a path without risk? Is there some kind of practice that has no risk? Anyone who really loves a path or a set of practices, anyone for whom it's really important in their life, will be willing to put up with and open themselves to some kind of risk, some kind of sacrifice, some kind of discomfort or confusion at times. Suffering is regarded as okay and acceptable and even necessary on the path.

So ask this of yourselves. Look back at your path or paths you've taken and see at different times how ready and willing you were - and also the nobility of this, the beauty of this - to open to and enter into and go through all kinds of periods or moments, transitions of risk when you didn't quite know, or sacrificing something, confusion, discomfort, suffering basically.

The question is: what kind of risk, sacrifice, confusion, discomfort, suffering are okay on the path? What kind?

It's less dominant now, but the whole Mahasi tradition as it was taught by Mahasi Sayadaw and Pandita and some teachers was very, very intense and strict. The retreats there were full of suffering. Ask anyone who sat through some of those long retreats with Pandita. Someone from the outside might say, "Why do you put yourself through all this suffering? I thought you were interested in getting rid of suffering." But there's a whole logos there and there's a whole image that gives nobility to that suffering, and there's a whole purpose regarded. There are all kinds of sacrifice, all kinds of risk, all kinds of confusion, discomfort - or rather certain kinds. There's a range there in just that paradigm of strict Pandita style.

The question is: what kind? What kind is okay on your path, and how does it fit? What kind of discomfort, confusion, sacrifice, risk, suffering?

Or consider Ajahn Chah - there's a passage somewhere, maybe in *A Still Forest Pool* - where he talks about just meditating in the jungle when he was practicing as a *tudong*, just crying, this deep well of tears. He wasn't even sure why he was crying - maybe there was loneliness and such, but it was beyond that. Many of us know this: just practicing in this upwelling of profound sobbing.

And yet there's the whole image and logos that supports that. This is good. Yes, it's difficult, but this is good. This is heartful. This is healing. This is releasing, whatever it is. And of course, you get that in psychotherapeutic paradigms as well. I've been through all of this - sitting through lots of pain, huge upsurges of emotions, not even knowing what they were about.

What kind of risk, discomfort, confusion, sacrifice, suffering are okay on your path? When you think about an artist—someone who really, truly gives themselves, dedicates themselves completely—how much are they willing to put up with? There's risk in that dedication, confusion, sacrifice. This is not an easy choice. It's so similar to spiritual practice. This is part of the territory. When we love something deeply, when we're really engaged, these challenges arise naturally.

The question with all that is: what does it serve? If there's going to be disruption, confusion, some kind of risk and suffering or burning, what is it serving? All this goes together with an understanding, with a sense of where I'm going, with a logos, with a conceptual framework as we talked about. Any practice brings risk—absolutely. What kind? Multiple kinds. And what's it serving? How are we seeing it? What's okay for us?

If I trace my own process with imaginal practice—not just imaginal generally, but specifically with the more obviously erotic imaginal—I'm certain it took me quite a while. It was really a gradual process to move towards truly trusting images, or working with images of, say, attractive females. I was somewhat cautious.

It's funny now, some years later, after having experimented with all this for several years—I actually can't quite remember why I was so tentative and unsure about exploring the more erotic images. This is interesting in itself: something that had quite a subtle but powerful grip on my consciousness and my choices in practice. I was trying to remember while preparing this talk, but I can't fully recall.

I think it had something to do with a suspicion that anything like that would just be a distraction—would distract and dilute me from my central purpose of what practice was about. There was something in that kind of engagement with eros, sexuality, and the feminine that would confuse me. But this is partly a guess, and it's interesting to me that I can't actually remember. In other words, it's just past. Strangely, I was trying to find it in old notes, but I seem to have lost a notebook.

Carl Jung, in a way, developed his psychology partly from a predisposition that was similarly distrustful of the feminine and the attractive sexual—as if there's some kind of luring siren there. James Hillman and others have made this critique, wondering

what kind of psychology would have emerged from Jung had he been more trusting, more willing to listen to what he called the anima voice, which he was so wary of in developing his psychology and his personal process.

Looking back, I see sometimes there was a tendency at first to choose a non-sexual image to work with in meditation. For example, if I'd had two dreams the night before that made an impact and I remembered both—one more obviously sexual, the other perhaps more obviously spiritual—I would choose the more spiritual one. There was that tendency to lean away from the sexual into what seemed more obviously spiritual.

Or if I was working with an image in meditation where there were multiple figures, I would tend to go to not the attractive female one, for instance. I noticed that tendency looking back. I also noticed I was quite tentative at first—tentative because, well, this is spiritual. So even when there was beginning to be more willingness to explore the erotic imaginal, even the sexual, it was tentative at first. Perhaps I wouldn't go into the more carnal and voracious sexual image, or maybe just hold back a little from letting it unfold naturally. No, this is meditation time, so it's spiritual.

I made a note a while ago about being able to trace a kind of gradual letting myself explore more and more this strand of erotic imagination and the specifically sexual in meditation practice, but I can't find that note. Still, I was aware of this evolution.

Then a few years ago, I had a dream. Somehow in the dream, I was trying to resist the seductive advances of a beautiful woman. I wasn't quite sure after the dream—why am I resisting this? I don't know if she was a yogi or something, if there was some kind of boundary issue. It was something like that. But I felt very ambivalent—very drawn towards her and attracted.

So I felt like only half successful in my attempts to resist her. By that time I was deeply interested in imaginal practice, so I took this dream into meditation. I allowed her to come again, and then I entered her deliberately—not sexually, but entered her being and became her, identified with her, which is one of the options in imaginal work.

I became her in the meditation practice and looked out through her eyes, out of her being, at me, at Rob. I was aware of how much kindness was there. She really cared for me—there was love there. But she was also somehow communicating: you're being a bit idiotic, Rob, and you're missing the point here. This was fascinating—someone very kindly pointing out a sort of stupidity, a rigidity.

As I experimented with different ways of working with images, I asked her what she wanted. Her response—I can't remember if it was verbal or not—but the sense I got was that she had a very simple sexual desire, a simple erotic, sensual longing. In the very simplicity of it was a kind of purity. It's like, look how simple and pure this is. And you're being a little idiotic, Rob.

This was intriguing, so I let myself experiment in meditation with the eros, with erotic imagery, with the sexual. But as I worked with it, confusion arose. What's the point of this? Where is it going? Where would this kind of exploration lead? I'm mindful of the sexual imagery and entering into that, but is it actually going to achieve anything? Does it lead to the end of suffering?

This confusion was very alive for me. A little later, I realized: I actually don't know. And more than that, I am deliberately in a period of exploration here. This is the domain of my exploration—I must always be in a period of exploration, but this is the particular domain. I don't know the answers to these questions: Is there a point? Where will it go? Will it achieve anything? What's it got to do with the end of suffering?

I remembered a time many years before when the domain of my exploration was the relationship between awareness and emptiness. I found all these conflicting teachings, unclear and contradictory, with people dogmatically saying this and that. It was such a searing investigation for me—so much heart and emotion and passion involved. I remember sitting outside at Gaia House, crying tears with so much longing to understand, wanting to penetrate with insight and just not having someone I could ask or fully rely on for an answer.

There was all that confusion in the investigation, the passion of exploration, but eventually insights came in relation to awareness and emptiness. Answers came, ways forward emerged. I found things, discovered things, worked certain things out, found ways to practice.

Remembering that, I told myself: you've been through something like this before—confusion and uncertainty about how to proceed, what's worth trusting. I reflected that in regard to the imaginal, there may be no definite final answer or truth. It's a different kind of investigation. At that moment, I was aware of this and actually okay with it.

So I was partly okay, and there was still this concern and trepidation, this real ambivalence about the possibility of a long but ultimately fruitless exploration. I might spend years, hours and hours of practice time, and eventually conclude that it was a waste of time, or actually not helpful, and find myself stuck with various problems. This

felt like the risk—the risk of the research scientist. Listen to a theoretical physicist: "I spend my days working out equations on paper, trying theories on a blackboard, and at the end of the day, none of them have worked, and I just erase them all."

And then I do the same thing the next day. How many dead ends, how much unknown territory there is in the passion and the willingness to explore. Similarly, in a different way, the same holds true if you're an artist—sometimes there's something parallel there.

But I kept telling myself, well, that's the lot. If you're exploring, if you're actually finding out when there doesn't appear to be any teachings on this that I was aware of, then that's the lot. You don't know. There's a risk there. You're moving into the unknown and you don't know where it's going to lead.

In relation to that image that came out of the dream, what did emerge was a sense of a particular kind of holiness, a kind of feminine divinity that permeated nature. Now I would call that cosmopoiesis. Back then I didn't really—I hadn't made that connection yet. But I noticed that, oh, that's interesting. I worked with that and then outside there was this real sense of feminine divinity in and through nature.

A little later, going for a walk, something felt like I was in a different relationship, a different sensual relationship with nature. Something in the sensuality opened with regard to the nature around me, beneath my feet. It wasn't—rather, it wasn't just mindfulness of sensations, which I had been practicing for years, nor was it only just enjoying the pleasantness of the hot day or whatever it was and the warmth on my skin and all that. Something else, another kind of level came into my relationship with nature that was sensual. Something opened in the sensuality.

And yet it still could not be reduced to it. I wasn't going to put it in the box. It did not feel appropriate or right to say, oh, she, this figure from the dream and the imaginal practice, she represents my sensuality or something like that. No, there was a sense of there's something bigger here. I can't quite, again, get my mind around or fathom completely. It's as if she manifests or embodies this figure, some kind of, at present, unfamiliar kind of wisdom, an unfamiliar kind of depth.

So something was opening, but bigger than I could really figure out, if you like, or the mind could figure out.

A lot of this happens in small movements, and that's partly what I want to communicate about this kind of process, working with soul work and certainly exploring. A lot of it's in small movements.

I'll share another image, and I'll actually give more detail. This is, again, transition over time, some maybe a year later or a little less than a year, I don't know, half a year, a bit more. Again, why I choose certain images to share—sometimes I'll choose an image because it's really intense and really could be regarded as kind of crazy, and it's almost to normalize that there's that range too. Sometimes I choose an image because it's really the opposite. It's really not a big deal. It's not that colorful. It's not that unusual or dramatic. So to really give a sense of the range, like all that is there.

And sometimes I want to share or want to include what goes on in working with the images, including all the false starts and wrong turns in the practice. So you get a sense of actually creative working and responding and navigating, that it's not all just immediately obvious and clear. There's some dancing a little bit with the thing.

So, sitting in meditation and opening myself to see what came, I see a visual image. In this case, I see a young woman sitting by the side of the road and she's sad for some reason. I'm unsure whether to go with the image at first, but then I decided to go with it.

So I sat down next to her and her arms were attractive. There was something like I wanted to comfort her and I stroked her arms, sort of mixture with sexual attraction, but also because she was sad. I noticed that I wanted her to talk, but I also noticed at the same time that there was a pressure to make her talk because of some book that I was reading that basically said you need to get some verbal message or something from the image.

So I backed off a little bit from the pressure of wanting it to be verbal and just opened the sensitivity to, if you like, receiving communication—which, as I've said somewhere before, the communication can be just the image. It's not like there's the image and then it communicates something verbally or some kind of signal. Sometimes the image is the communication.

But this question: what does she want? Backing off the whole pressure to be verbal. And the sense was, she wants to be loved by me. There's some kind of communication in that.

Now, it was actually hard to stay focused. Again, I'm mentioning this because that's all part of it. It's like, oh, this image, my concentration flits in and out of it.

I lose it. It comes back. But I just think, okay, fine. That's just the nature of this image, or it's just one of those days. No problem.

And there's some kind of loving of her. So I'm working with this—okay, it's not so focused, but I'm in and out of that. And there's some kind of... I'm really loving her. But the loving, it's not that it's explicitly sexual. It's not really sexual. It's more just kind of sharing and being with her. Somehow there's love being communicated.

And she keeps changing. And somehow in that, I see that actually—or I kind of reflect—she's empty. She's changing. She's not inherently this way or that. And that makes me realize... I can only love—because I'm sort of trying to open myself to loving her. I say trying, it's a very delicate trying, supporting that movement of the heart and that opening of the heart and that flow. But I realize I can only love who is in front of me right now.

So she keeps changing—how she is, her appearance. And really, I can only love who is in front of me right now and commit to at least showing up for how they appear next. So here's what she is now. And just however she'll be in the next moment or minute or whatever, it's like, okay, well, I'm just going to keep showing up. And whoever it is in front of me, however she seems, I'm going to keep loving that.

So there's a sense of mystery in that, in her emptiness. And then I also realized with a thought, oh, this applies to real beings as well, because they change too, don't they? And it tells me something about love. But okay, so there's a thought, but I said, okay, fine, there's a little insight there about metta and stuff like that, with implications for actual life, so-called. But okay, just noting that, and I don't make a big deal of it, or I don't focus on it.

But again, the whole thing comes in and out of focus. And I have to remind myself to see it all as an experiment. I really have to make a conscious... again, there's this kind of unsureness. What am I doing here? Is it leading anywhere? But I just remind myself of this attitude of experimentation. And that helps.

And so there's this kind of sharing and meeting and she sort of opens up to me. Her being opens and it's like I enter her and then all kind of kaleidoscopic geometrical forms appear which feel quite mystical and significant and wondrous somehow, quite subtle. But again, doubt arises and I don't particularly... so I'm not necessarily picking up on these kaleidoscopic geometrical forms, even though they feel very wondrous.

But then after all this, I feel the subtle after-effects of that whole interaction, of that whole imaginal interaction. So you can hear, as I'm saying this, how kind of undramatic the whole thing is, how much unsureness there is, and how the whole thing is just really these micro-movements that at the time can really seem like... I'm not sure, is this significant? Should I stay with this? Is anything happening? All that.

The word for psyche is a Greek word and I'm pretty sure it's either related to or even some very similar word is the same word for butterfly. I can't remember if I've shared this in a talk before. So psyche and butterfly are related. Now butterfly—I'm taking this from James Hillman—butterfly makes little flitting movements from side to side. It's not this direct supersonic jet flight or crow's flight or bird of prey sort of thing, falcon soaring through space at great speed. It makes these little flitting non-direct movements from side to side, not very fast. That's the characteristic movement, the characteristic flight of the psyche.

And so there's a lot, as I said, in this soul work, soul-making work and imaginal work—a lot of it feels like little micro-movements, little this side and then that side, not this sense of great strides in a direct line that can characterize other movements or other dimensions of soul movement, the movement of other dimensions of soul, spirit.

Now, what's also interesting, again, in the sort of seeming lack of power at first of this whole experience was... so I get up and it was soup time or whatever, and the thought just goes through my head of something I'd read not too long ago. I actually read it again...

about the cosmos being erotic, something to do with Kabbalah that I had encountered. And it's like that thought—just vaguely remembering it, that seed planted from what I had read—somehow came into alchemical reaction with this image that also didn't seem particularly fruitful or dramatic at first, that I was ambivalent about and uncertain of.

But then somehow they came into interaction, and that opened up the whole sense of the eros of the cosmos on multiple levels. It's quite subtle, but really quite a subtle yet powerful transformation of the perception of the world, related to or imbued with this sense of that imaginal young woman and the feminine divinity pervading her. This feminine divinity pervading consciousness, seeping out into what I now call cosmopoiesis—some kind of alchemical transubstantiation of the world there. And then a lot of happiness came with that.

So I made a note: don't judge the value of imaginal practice while you're actually doing it, because it may not feel like much or seem very significant, and the effects can come later sometimes. Again, we're back to this discernment between intensity and efficaciousness. An image or something planted from what we've read or heard in a teaching—these things are like seeds and they can do their work underground and blossom later, just like metta practice.

And then even later, I went for a bike ride and found myself walking, just walking my bike for a while. There was a sense of being in this alive universe—personified, impersonal for sure, but also having this divine personification of what is sometimes called anima mundi, the soul of the world. Related to this image, related to the idea that I had read a little while ago, but such joy and freedom and some kind of sense of relief there, and a really touching sort of mystical beauty in that particular perception. It almost made me laugh with the joy of it.

I'm sharing this partly for the details and the sense of playing with something, staying with it, altering things—picking this up but not that, picking that up but not this. That's a little bit of my process in terms of the movement in relationship to doubt with respect to all this eros and the imaginal.

But basically, as I said at the beginning of this talk, you need to know for yourself. I've had my process with this—it's still going on in other areas related to this—but you need to know for yourself. For that, we all need to keep questioning, keep exploring with respect to desire and craving and eros.

It's that spirit that the Buddha was pointing to when he said the Dhamma is ehipassika: come and see for yourself. Ehi—come. Passeti—to see. Come and see. That spirit of finding out for yourself—you have to keep exploring. We have to keep exploring. Keep that questioning alive.

It's very easy to think we're doing that and to believe we're doing it because we did it in the past, when actually it's dried up a little bit and we're just running on kind of an old range of insights, not extending that questioning.

For example, it's very easy to see sometimes how desire arises from some kind of sense of lack. And then we make a conclusion, and that conclusion is reinforced when we hear teachings that say exactly that: "Yes, desire comes out of lack—existential lack"—people put it different ways. It could be a Dharma teacher saying that, it could be some kinds of modern psychoanalysis.

But the question is: is that always true? Is it always the case that desire always comes from a sense of lack? If we don't revisit this later, I want to say now: no, find out. Because sometimes there's joy and celebration that give rise to desire. Joy or celebration where there is a sense of the libido overflowing—it's not lack, it's the opposite. It's a kind of superabundance. Something is overflowing.

Libido, remember, is etymologically related to libation and has to do with the pouring of liquid—it's one of its etymological connections. And the libido is overflowing. It's anything but lack. Other times it can have a sense that this desire is already flowing—from me to you, from me to this thing—eternally somehow.

It's already present—not a lack I'm trying to fill. There is desire, an erotic connection, and it's already happening. It's not lack-driven. It's flowing from me to you, pouring from me to you, rather than me grasping at something out of emptiness.

But investigation, knowing for yourself, keeping the questioning alive, and not resting on just a limited range and the assumptions that become entrenched from that narrow scope. Any investigation, any exploration needs sensitivity. And this investigation in particular—into Eros, into the imaginal, into soul-making—requires tremendous sensitivity. This exploration demands what I've talked about before: the poetry of perception. It needs sensitivity and subtlety. We must develop the subtlety of our attention, the subtlety of our discernment.

When we speak of imaginal practice and mindfulness of images, of bringing mindfulness to bear on the whole realm of the imaginal-erotic, we definitely include the energy body, emotional awareness, sensitivity to the whole soul-making process. But there's another dimension we need to make clear—we must also be aware of, make ourselves subtly attentive to, the subtleties of relating.

The erotic imaginal implies relationship, erotic connection, and all the subtleties of that relating, of the kinds of eros, the kinds of love with respect to each imaginal figure. Again, back to particularities and uniqueness. Each imaginal figure is unique. With each imaginal erotic interaction, what kind of eros is present here? What are the subtleties of the relating? What kinds of love inhabit this interaction?

Perhaps with an imaginal figure I've had a long-standing relationship with, worked with in meditation many times—but right now, in this interaction, what are the subtleties of the relating that seem to be asked for? What kind of eros, what kind of love, is alive here and now? With the erotic imagination, we're speaking of living relationships—responsive, sensitive relating.

It's so easy for things to degenerate into just a set of techniques. We need vigilance about this. Keep the sensitivity alive, keep the subtlety of discernment and attention vibrant so it doesn't become merely formulaic—"Here's my image, then I do this, then I do that." We want it living, alive, like any practice, but perhaps even more so in the realm of the imaginal.

An imaginal figure, an imaginal relationship—hopefully it never gets consciously or unconsciously dumped into a category we consider completely known. "I know that one, completely understood." What if we approached human others this way? Human relationships with this attitude: "Oh yeah, I know all about you. I know who this person is," with a sense that we completely know them. Of course we know some things, rely on certain recognizable patterns. But what if we carried this attitude into our caring relationships, our erotic connections with human others, our sexual intimacy—just "Oh, I know that. I have the whole thing packaged"?

Or with our perceptions and conceptions of nature—how easy it becomes: "Oh yeah, I know what that is." Perhaps there's some scientific understanding I lack about how trees function or animals behave or evolution works, but there's this sense that nature and all its diversity, nature as a whole, is just "kind of known" in my perception or conception. What happens then to the relationship?

Again, when we use the words "image" or "imaginal figure," we're not speaking only of so-called intra-psychic phenomena, but also our perceptions in the world—perceptions imbued with the imaginal. Imaginal perceptions of self, other, world. All of this is included.

It's important to recognize what differentiates meditating on an image of an explicitly sexual interaction from mere indulgence in what we might call more typical sexual fantasy—fantasy in the small sense. What creates this differentiation?

Everything that differentiates imaginal practice from daydreaming and craving. The mindfulness of the energy body, the sensitivities of the energy body, the subtlety of attention to emotions and soul-making resonances throughout the body and the whole psyche. The non-identification—quite significant, isn't it? The sense of both other and self as theatrical. This is theater. There's something not real here.

The self engaging in this, or involved in this, is not real—but is also real. There's a middle way parallel to the middle way of emptiness between existing and non-existing. There's a middle way of the imaginal between real and not real. There's a sense of the theater of it, different from much psychotherapeutic work or some spiritual work where the self uses imagination but maintains a sense of the self's reality.

Here, what characterizes this is more this sense of theater, and yet potent theater, as theater can be, or as all art can be. There's something palpably not real in the way that we usually think of that word, but also real and powerful there. In other words, we're seeing image as image, to use that phrase we've used before.

But it's also differentiated—this kind of erotic imaginal practice differentiated from what I don't know what to call it—humdrum sexual fantasy, typical sexual fantasy—by the conceptual framework that's operating. So there's a whole, as we said, there's a whole logos here. And that logos structures things and navigates and gives a direction and a purpose.

Wrapped up with the logos, or emerging out of the logos, is a whole intentionality. Because the logos, the conceptual framework, also constellates an intentionality with respect to the image and the eros. So I'm not just chasing pleasant sensations or distracting myself because I'm procrastinating on some project. The intentionality is wrapped up in or emergent from, given by, determined by the conceptual framework in part. And that intentionality, as well as the conceptual framework, makes a big difference.

And the sense of dimensionality in the image that we're relating to—that's a key piece. That's characteristic of the imaginal and the erotic imaginal. And the eternality of the image. These are things, as I've said before, you may not notice at first if you're new to this, but then you begin to see, "Oh yeah, that's there." The dimensionality, the eternality—that differentiates imaginal from imaginary, or just imagination.

And of course, eros is distinguished from craving, and imaginal practice is distinguished from daydream, differentiated by what they lead to in the moment, in the energy body, in the soul-making, and long-term as well, in terms of engagement and longer-term soul-making. The opening of beauty, both in the moment but also longer-term. Meaningfulness, again, both in the moment but also long-term in the life. And the soul-making is the stimulation and the opening of eros-psyche-logos.

So also the mind is involved here. The mind is stretched. The conceptions, the visions, the perception—all of that is stretched into what was previously unfamiliar territory. This is the soul-making expansion. So what's the difference? Well, one leads to all that, and the other doesn't.

And again, as someone asked me just this morning, "Just remind me why we need all this. What's the purpose of all this? What's the purpose of delineating something called eros?" Again, I've talked about it before on this retreat, but just to say one thing right now: we can have a spiritual practice or a path where, for instance, I'm moving towards the insight and the perception of oneness—universal oneness. And actually many kinds of oneness: universal love, universal awareness, universal being, or the unfabricated. There are different kinds. Actually, there's a limited amount of kinds. I've never actually bothered to count, and then there are micro variations of each.

But once one has seen, had those experiences enough times that it's really gone in there as a viable perception and has changed my sense of what existence is and what the self is, opening to all these kinds of oneness, then you're sort of done. And then you either declare yourself liberated or do what you do based on that declaration. But there's a kind of—it's just done, it's finite, and there's almost a formulaic quality. You can map this stuff out.

So in terms of that movement towards oneness, you can pretty much map it out—what the perceptions are, the various ways they might happen. There's always the possibility it just goes by itself, but generally speaking, if you do this and that, it will tend to open this way and that way. You can map it as a kind of predictability or formulaic nature to that kind of opening. Important as it is, I'm really not knocking it. It's really crucial.

So that's one thing about that kind of path of oneness. The second thing about it is that the particulars and the uniqueness of things or beings or aspects is not actually that important. So there's a kind of equivalence or replaceability. Because everything is one, it doesn't really matter what there is. Because whatever else there is in this thing's place, it will also be one. It's all the same. So if this forest gets cut down and made into a car park, or even if species go extinct, it's all one.

Whatever I say, it's all love or it's all awareness or it's just the play of awareness or something.

So there's a validity and a value to these perceptions, absolutely. And there's also, again, there's a danger, there's a risk. In this case, non-engagement and a certain... certain directions and certain doors won't open that way.

Because in contrast with the expression of the erotic imaginal, I would say it's infinitely creative. There's infinite possibilities for creation and discovery of beauty, meaningfulness, dimensionality, dimensions, a sense of sacredness and divinity. The opening of eros, psyche, logos, meaning ideation and image, is actually infinite in its possibilities. It's not just a sort of set and fairly predictable range of experience.

And with the erotic imaginal, the sacredness and the divinity is in and through the particulars, as well as in and through the universal oneness. In and through the particulars. It somehow rescues the particulars. And actually gives them more dimensionality, more kinds of sacredness, more kinds of senses of divinity. How many? I think infinite, potentially infinite.

This is infinite possibilities for creation and discovery. The path of soul-making is endless, open-ended, infinite, potentially infinite.

CHAPTER 73

Doubt and Discernment (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this second part of his exploration of doubt and discernment, Rob Burbea addresses the sophisticated discernment required when working with eros and the imaginal in meditation practice. Drawing on years of traditional insight meditation training, he explores how practitioners can distinguish between eros—which opens the energy body, relieves dukkha, and supports soul-making—and craving, which contracts and brings suffering.*
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> *Burbea addresses common concerns about "feeding the kilesas" (defilements) and provides practical guidance for navigating the complexities of erotic imaginal practice. He draws parallels with samatha development, where initial struggles don't mean abandoning the practice but rather developing wise effort and refined discernment. The talk covers the relationship between eros and various meditation states including jhāna, mettā practice, and states of rest, while emphasizing the importance of understanding emptiness as a foundation for this work.*
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> *Throughout, Burbea emphasizes that this path requires both conceptual understanding and intuitive artistry, comparing the practice to art-making that involves both framework and spontaneous discovery. He concludes by exploring the nature of deep longing and how it reveals both what the soul desires and what it serves, making this discernment essential for avoiding the dissipation of our spiritual energies through unconscious craving.*

Of the practices that we've developed that we've devoted attention and effort to for many of us over years—the practices of mindfulness and the refinement of attention, the awareness of and skill with the energy body and the emotional awareness, insights into emptiness, spectrum of fabrication, dwelling in states of less fabrication—all that. Because of the practice with regard to that and the accumulation of those skills and arts, the diligence there, we are well-equipped for this investigation that we're unfolding. We have the tools and the refinement of discernment necessary to really open it up and make it fertile. And all that comes as a result of practice for many people.

And at the same time, being as many of us are used to a certain range of teaching and concept and direction within a tradition, one can very easily, as I said, doubts can arise very easily. So very commonly someone who's had quite a bit of practice, let's say in a more narrow context, tradition of insight meditation, will say, "Isn't this just feed-

ing the kilesas, the defilements? Isn't this, all this, what you're talking about eros and being with eros and opening up, isn't it just feeding the defilements, greed, aversion and delusion?"

So again, can we actually take that doubt deeper and make it fertile, not paralyzing, but fertile, dynamic, make it into a real question and look, notice, find out? So that we see that eros, in the way that we are talking about it, and practicing with eros, has a quality. It opens. It supports opening. Opening of what? Opening of the energy body. You can feel this. It needs a certain sensitivity, but you can feel this. With eros, the energy body tends to opening up, the perception of the world tends to opening, and if you like, deepening. The sense of dimensionality opens. The senses of sacredness and divinity also are opened. So eros brings with it, supports, instigates opening of all kinds. Beautiful openings.

Actually, in the way that we are talking about it, because the imaginal is involved and wrapped up in what we're calling eros, then it doesn't bring this pressure to act out because there isn't the movement necessarily at all to concretizing, to simple concretizing. I have a desire for X, therefore I must get X, therefore I act to get X. There are all the imaginal dimensions that are opening out there, instead, usually. And there's also eros tends to relieve dukkha. Eros tends to relieve dukkha, although there is the pothos, this wanting more. So there's not complete peace there. And there is the erotic tension that we talked about. But in practice and in life we can see this tendency of eros to open things up in a beautiful way, to relieve dukkha and away from a sort of simplistic concretizing or being tied in to acting out this or that just because I desire it.

Craving, on the other hand, is opposite to all of that. It tends to close, close the energy body—you can feel it, you can notice it, you can be sensitive to it. It does not open the cosmopoiesis, it does not open a sense of dimensionality, it does not open a sense of sacredness, divinity. It tends towards concretizing and a sort of pressure of the impetus to act out, and it brings dukkha. And we can see that, again, both in the meditation practice and in our life.

So it's possible to discern between eros and craving, in those ways and in others. It's quite possible to make these discernments. And it's not always easy and not always simple to discern between the two. Can we dare to experiment? Can we dare to question? Because this is how we're going to really find out and develop our discerning chops, if you like, our capabilities, the refinement of our discerning. It takes a certain daring to question these things, to open up these questions, to experiment and find out for ourselves.

The SAS, the British Special Forces, they have their motto: "Who dares wins." Sometimes, actually often in practice, when we talk about more radical practice, whether it's emptiness or this or that, at some edge, "who dares wins" means there's a certain daring, a certain boldness in venturing into the unknown to find out for oneself.

Sometimes, as I said, it's not always easy to discern between eros and craving, for example. Sometimes we think this is eros, and then it gets all tangled, and we feel, "Oh, well, the energy body is contracting, there is a contraction, there is dukkha." But even the entanglement there, or the tangling of eros and craving together, the two threads tangled, doesn't necessarily mean immediately throw the whole thing out. This is quite important.

There's a parallel here, for example, for anyone who's ever devoted some time and some dedicated practice to developing samatha, samadhi. And often, you know, if you make that intention and practice over whatever it is, however long, on retreat, off retreat, you will absolutely inevitably encounter this question of it's moving towards something, there's something I desire here, I desire to open up these states of samadhi.

I desire to discover them, to master them, enter them, whatever. And in that, I meet, I encounter the question of effort. I need to make effort. There's the desire involved. We talked about the Buddha and his four bases of success. His list there. And I encounter too much effort, too little effort, too tight effort.

So there's going to be dukkha. It gets too tight, the effort towards the samadhi, and here's dukkha. And how many people, what percentage of people in the insight meditation world think, "Oh, this is painful, forget it—this is ego, this is striving." They pick up some other teaching that says, "Oh, you know, just let it all be. Don't try and make anything happen or something." And the whole thing, baby gets thrown out with the bathwater, basically.

So that's a mistake—at least in relation to samatha, it would be a mistake. Rather, can I learn about wise effort? Can I learn about having aspirations and goals and things that I yearn to move towards and to know and experience myself in meditation, in spiritual life, in life in general? And learn how to handle that, how to relate to it wisely without either just getting completely entangled in pain around that, or throwing the whole thing out and not getting anywhere—not really developing mastery of samadhi, etc.

So just the arising of suffering or contraction, if we're working in this area with eros, etc., I wouldn't just use that as a criterion of discernment between eros and craving. The two can get mixed, and our relationship with the whole thing can get fraught, and sometimes it gets a little tight. Remember I was telling you about those Upandita retreats, etc., where actually there's quite a lot of suffering in the service of something.

So just because we meet a bit of tightness or entanglement or confusion doesn't mean we drop it and throw it out. It's actually asking for more subtlety, more artistry in the discernment, in the balancing, in the responding.

As I mentioned, we can start with the arrow. It's all very beautiful and there's the fullness of the image and everything. If something happens, it contracts until it gets diverted, perverted into craving, and vice versa. We start with what's obviously a state of craving and the contraction of craving and limited seeing, and actually with skillful, artful working, we can re-guide that and navigate to open that into the beauty and the fullness of eros.

So there's art here. There's skill. It takes care in the discernment between the two and in the navigation from craving to eros. But certainly in the discernment, there's art, there's skill, there's care, there's sensitivity. It's asking for quite a refined and, if you like, sophisticated kind of discernment. But we develop that. It's really possible.

One of the aspects, as I said, that can help us discern is the sensitivity to the soul-making dynamic and what is happening with that soul-making dynamic, meaning the mutual insemination, fertilization, ignition, widening, deepening, complicating, enriching of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic constellation. This tells us that we're on the right track, and you can get sensitive to the different aspects of that when it's moving, when it's in progress.

With a sexual image, for example, as I said, we can notice the specificity of the image and the kind of iconic quality of the sexual image, if that's what we're working with. It doesn't tend, mostly, to want to escalate to the next thing, the next thing, and then escalate: "Now I need to have an orgasm or now I need to release some steam or whatever"—the next thing until it goes towards, you know, whatever it is, genital intercourse or whatever. There's this specificity of the image. It's sufficient to itself, I think was the phrase I used. There's an iconic quality. It's not really going anywhere except deeper into dimensionality and divinity and beauty. It's not going anywhere in a kind of narrative accomplishment sense.

The pothos there, the desire for more that goes with the eros that we talked about, tends to go to find, to discover and create more in the dimensionality, in the multifacetedness of the beloved other and of the self, etc., as we said in the cosmopoiesis. It doesn't tend to seek its more in the acquisitiveness of greed spreading one-dimensionally: "I have one car, now I need three. I have one lover, wife, husband, whatever it is, and now I need another sexual partner," because somehow they're not interesting to me enough, because I'm not opening to their dimensionality. So then the more needs to go out sideways to the one dimensionality, so we can recognize this difference.

And actually, as I said, we can redirect it, if you like. We can guide it. If it feels like it's getting diverted, contracted, craving, there are ways of seeing, ways of approaching it that redirect it back on the track of eros.

So yes, it's absolutely possible that some uses of the imagination—the imaginary and fantasy in the usual sense of the word—are not what we call imaginal.

Piaget was a very well-respected child psychologist, enormously influential thirty years ago when I was an undergraduate. In his developmental psychology, he said that the imaginary others of children—though I don't think he made that distinction—were "immature and egocentric creations designed for wish fulfillment." That was all he could see in children's use of the imagination. Or perhaps it was helpful in planning and learning conceptual structures, but really, is that always the case?

It's clear with a little more careful looking, a little less biased looking, that that's absolutely not the case. That's why we make this distinction with the word "imaginal" versus "imaginary," or certainly just the casual use of the imagination. One wonders what was influencing Piaget, because already by that time, the imagination had been severely demoted in the Western worldview and psychology. But that's certainly not what he was referring to—not the whole picture, and not what we mean by imaginal and fantasy.

And you can tell: is it wish fulfillment? You can tell sometimes in the sense of the autonomy of the image. Some people might want to discern between the imaginal and the imaginary, between eros and craving, because they sense the autonomy of the imaginal other. It has a kind of independence and intelligence and can actually surprise us. Its actions, what it says, what it does in relation to us—these things surprise us.

I could give so many examples of this, but here's one that comes to mind now. I was working in practice with this beautiful, erotic, imaginal meditation. At the same time, something in the wider politics of the dharma world had upset me—something that af-

fected me directly but was really a much wider issue. I was disturbed by this and could feel that I really wanted to go into that and dwell with it, rather than engage this erotic, imaginal meditation.

The beautiful woman who was in the meditation—at some point she took my hands and put them into the prayer mudra, anjali. She took my hands, put them in that posture, and then mirrored that gesture herself with our fingertips touching, as if to communicate: "Just forget about that right now. We have this beautiful devotion to dwell on, to feed on, to attend to between us." That really wasn't what I wanted to dwell on at that point. Another part of me was really wanting to figure out this bigger situation and upset. But there was a kind of autonomy there, and her intelligence—and of course it was the intelligent thing to do. There was deeper wisdom there.

We get the sense—I could give so many examples of this—is it really my wish fulfillment, as I asked the other day, that's happening with the erotic imaginal? Countless examples make this question possible.

So some people may want to use the sense of the autonomy of the imaginal other as an indication. That's good, but I would be a little cautious there. I know, for instance, James Hillman spoke very strongly against any kind of ego involvement with the imaginal. If the ego decided to do this or that, he was very suspicious of that. I'd like to question that, actually.

For me, it's fine if it feels like your ego is initiating something in the relationship there—in the imaginal relationship—or initiating an image or whatever. That is not necessarily a problem. The test is whether it feels soul-making. I've said this before, but it's really, really important: the test is you can actually feel the soul-making in all the ways that we've talked about in the past on other retreats. I would rather have that be the guide rather than: "Was that my ego? Did I just make that happen?" Don't worry about that. It's fine. It's fine if you did. It's fine if you didn't. I wouldn't get too caught up in that as a criterion.

You can tell if the erotic imaginal feels like it's soul-making. It's very clear in the beauty there, in the devotion, in the divinity, in the dimensionality—all of that.

Sometimes we get a little unclear about what's actually a problem here in our doubt. This uncertainty causes some confusion. What's a potential problem?

For instance, as we already touched on, sometimes something that happens with an image or an image itself, or an erotic relationship with an image, is really intense or just really weird compared to what other people seem to be speaking about or what we

know from what the culture feeds us. Very easily a person can think, "I'm nuts, I'm crazy," or "If I'm not crazy already, this is taking me towards craziness. I'm going crazy. If I follow this, I'll go crazy."

This is the voice of fear, and the voice of the indoctrination from the cultures that we move in. As I said, the imaginal has no place. It's not given a place in the culture. We have a suspicion, unless it's quite contained—you know, making movies or writing sci-fi novels or whatever it is. So it's understandable that there is fear in relation to this.

We have been actually for centuries and centuries kind of indoctrinated, dogmatized if that's a word, to be afraid. Because it doesn't have a place, and there's all kinds of—it's not given a place, it's not given respect, validity, purpose, in our sense of our existence, of what healthy psychology is, of the spiritual paths, etc. So there's all kinds of cultural assumptions coming in there, in that kind of doubt: "I'm going crazy, this is too intense, this is too weird."

So what we're doing here partly is really trying to support, trying to move towards giving the imaginal and the erotic imaginal a place—a meaningful place and purpose in a conceptual framework that's coherent, that really serves something—and to come into relationship with these images. Wise relation, not just drop them and turn away, not just indulge without any sensitivity in a kind of imaginary, wish-fulfilling, daydreaming thing, seeking pleasure. Through the concepts that we're talking about, through the path that we're delineating and filling out, and through the sensitivity and the artfulness of the living relationships here—living, erotic, imaginal relationships—we want to move it towards all that and the fullness of all that.

And as I also said, we want to also give place to and respect to and trust, if you like, to what seems like the darker, more intense sexual images that come up and eros that comes up. Have a look. Is it disrespectful? Don't jump so quickly to conclusions. Is this disrespectful? If I want to devour you and drink your holy blood and lick your bones and eat your organs, is that sadism? Is that some kind of pathological cannibalism? Is it because I'm angry? Is it without love?

So easy to assume all this stuff. It's like, actually have a look, feel, feel what's there. Is it an objectification? To me, objectification means I don't see and value the totality of the other's being. The being of the other. I don't see and value all that they include. I'm bringing them down to one dimensional, one purpose. Whether it's an actual person, whether it's a purely imaginal figure. Is that the case?

Or we can also objectify because I just see them from me. And that includes a kind of spiritual or psychological objectification. I just see this imaginal figure, or this person, this teacher, or this whatever it is, this partner—they just exist. I've kind of shrunk down my seeing them. They just exist for my growth, for my psycho-spiritual process. And we tend to see imaginal figures that way. "Oh yes, I'm developing my faculty of X, Y, Z through this imaginal figure." That's an objectification. Or I don't see, as I said there, I don't see and value their totality. Is it objectification? And if it is, what do I need to do to let it fill out?

Is it out of control? People often go, "Oh, this... This will take me out of control, or this is out of control." Is it? Maybe a little bit at one level, but that's just the nature of things. But really, one can get up and walk away, or there's so much in the art of navigation and steering that we've talked about.

So right there in what for many would be kind of taboo, sexual erotic images and interactions frowned upon, regarded as weird or pathological, right there we can actually sense holiness, sense of sacredness, divinity, feel it.

Or someone might have the opposite doubt: "Oh, this isn't intense at all, and so-and-so shared such a weird image, it was really far out and incredibly dramatic and colorful, and mine is just kind of ordinary, so it's not working for me, or it can't be very deep."

Again, don't jump to such conclusions. Eros includes a great range from very, very subtle to intense, and the same with the imaginal. It can be very ordinary or very strange.

Intensity does not necessarily translate to potency, and it's potency we're interested in. Intensity can just be right there—that experience feels intense, and it's like, "Wow, now I have to tell the teacher, or I have to tell my friends," or I get worried, or whatever it is. And then maybe half an hour later, or a few days later, it's like nothing came of it. Maybe. Other times, something's not intense at all. And actually, because we're relating to it wisely and skillfully and with the art and with the discernment and the beauty of that navigation, the subtlety of that, actually what was not intense can be very potent long-term.

Or someone has the doubt: "Well, I don't really get any images." And I've been through this on the other retreats. So really? Really? Look, you might not get any visual images, but images can come in the way we're using that word. It doesn't just mean visual at all. It might not be anything visual involved at all. It involves any of the senses, as I've said before.

And also, our life is full of fantasies and images in the sense that I'm using that word. Look where you love. Pay attention where you love, where there's a sense of meaningfulness in your life. There is the operation right there. Somehow involved in that is the movement and the operation, the saturation of images and fantasies in the good sense that I'm talking about. Where you love, where things are meaningful, where something is meaningful. But I've been through all that before.

What's more a problem is, as I also said, reification—meaning identification with an image, a rigidification of the sense of self, a concretization of the sense of self, a realism of the image or of the self. Jung's word "inflation" is perhaps misleading. I think what he cautioned about inflation with respect to images—I think what he really meant, as far as I understand, is more what would be better to have said: that the problem is really, as I said, reification, identification, realism, concretization, literalism.

It's not a problem if, to the undiscerning mind, an image seems grandiose. Often it's, "Oh, I can't possibly have that kind of image." Sometimes they're beautiful images, images of service, and someone goes, "Oh, that's too grandiose, that's me in some Mother Teresa fantasy or whatever." Or if an image seems ungrounded because it's very light and insubstantial and involves a kind of flying or all kinds of things. Or if it's weird, as I said, or pathological, if it's not politically correct or psychologically correct. For instance, if it's a sexual thing and it involves some kind of domination or submission—well, that's not psychologically correct, that's not politically correct, this or that. The undiscerning mind can be too quick to jump in here with certain pre-packaged psychological truths about what it's suspicious about, what it's afraid of.

But rather the problem is realism, reification, identification. And it's a problem if, as we said, there's not a kind of equality and pervasiveness of seeing image as image, of seeing the emptiness of everything. So self, other, world, Eros itself, body—all this must be seen. If it's lopsided, where we see image as image and where we don't, where the soul-making is able to open up the dimensions and where it isn't, that also can be problematic, as we've talked about.

Or if there's a rigidity—so we talked about, for example, the image or the ideal of being a passionate person or being an equanimous person. And the image and idealization that's kind of wrapped up in that can actually be a kind of attachment. There's an attachment to an image of what Eros looks like—passionate like this, for example. There's a rigidity there to the image. So all these are more the problem.

As I said, I think certainly on Re-Enchanting the Cosmos retreat, I'm interested in a path that actually really has an understanding of emptiness as a basis for the whole path—understanding the emptiness of everything without exception. What happens

when that is placed as a basis of the path, not just emptiness as something we add on as an advanced thing or something that's an option? And not an emptiness, an understanding of emptiness that leaves some things tacitly not empty—the process or the time or the awareness or the "things as they are" or whatever it is.

So a basis in emptiness lies at the fundament of all this. There's a basis of emptiness, not a truth claim, not some or other truth claim. It's quite a different orientation. You could say, not so interested in building on reality claims—"What is reality?"—but rather on efficacy or potency. If we look this way, if we conceive this way, what happens? If we conceive in this slightly different way, what happens? What is the effect, the efficacy? What is potent there in terms of what it opens for the being, for the vision, for the sense of existence, for the life?

When we conceive only one particular way or look exclusively through a single lens, what unfolds? We begin to prioritize efficacy and potency over reality as our criteria—as the foundation for how we navigate this terrain and what guides our judgments and discernments.

I understand this can be challenging sometimes, this notion that something is "not real." How do I trust something that lacks reality? And if it's not real, or if I'm meant to question whether it's real or not real—if there's uncertainty about understanding this middle way between real and not real—tremendous doubt can arise.

Yet an understanding of emptiness opens immense possibility. It provides a basis of legitimacy for all kinds of beautiful and soul-stirring experiences, creating pathways for us. When we truly comprehend the emptiness of all this, doubt can genuinely subside. Some people, however, may not be quite ready for that understanding, and I appreciate this.

I also believe this can be developed—we can cultivate this stance and understanding that represents a kind of middle way between real and not real, an imaginal version of the middle way, positioned between existence and non-existence. This is developable. We can genuinely cultivate this as we engage with these practices in parallel, through emptiness meditation or through the imaginal itself.

Regarding emptiness understanding, often there's some degree of insight into emptiness that a person can draw upon. Perhaps someone hasn't engaged with the complete emptiness teaching and fully realized the emptiness of everything—that's actually quite rare. But they've practiced enough to perceive some degree of the emptiness of self, to a certain level. Right there, they can draw on that parallel insight. Because they see some

degree of the emptiness of self, yet they don't dismiss the self. They don't reject it or ignore it. They maintain respect for their self and for other selves. They have care for the self, for selves. They perceive selves.

Knowing that they're empty, they possess that insight, but they still perceive them and relate to them, and sometimes they release that perception. Knowing that they're empty, they can perceive, relate to, and care for the self. This represents a level of seeing that something isn't real and yet entering into relationship with it—a relationship of respect, interaction, taking seriously, caring. The same applies to the imaginal.

If you think you don't know how to approach this, perhaps draw on whatever level of emptiness insight you've already integrated. You see that emptiness doesn't mean you need to completely reject something, never perceive it, or never respect it. It's the freedom to move into relationship.

When we see the emptiness of something, it opens a freedom of choice regarding ways of looking. Yes, I can see through this thing and choose not to give it attention, or I can give it attention. I'm free. The emptiness makes me free either way. And as I said, I can relate to it, knowing that it's empty, while still respecting and caring. The same holds true with images.

My experience teaching this reveals that someone can have very little understanding of emptiness from previous practice, and yet somehow sense, in working with the imaginal, that it possesses what I mentioned the other day—this theatrical quality. It's both definitely not real and has a different kind of quality. The way I'm seeing this self in interaction, the way I'm seeing this other, carries this quality that resembles theater. It's not real, but there is a kind of reality to it. It exists somewhere in between, in a middle way.

I'm not simply relating to this self's process and the image of the self undergoing this process in this imagined relationship as merely real—as if what I see of this self is just reality. There's an element, or rather a feel, a quality of theater to it. I'm uncertain whether the word "theater" relates to "theos," meaning divinity, but even without practicing emptiness, sometimes you can actually sense this difference.

Even in using and opening to imagination regarding psychological work on the self—I was discussing this the other day with someone working with inner child work, that therapeutic approach popular some years ago, or other methods where imagination is allowed, such as certain Ridwan inquiries—the imagination operates there, skillfully and beautifully used. But the self inquiring, the self observing that imagination, regards it as real. This becomes a real aspect of self; it doesn't possess that theatrical quality.

Imagine something different, and we can notice when it's one and when it's the other. Even without knowing anything about emptiness, it carries a different quality—the quality of theater, the quality of not being real yet still being genuinely potent, beautiful, moving, and transformative.

Again, something I mentioned before but bears repeating: the big picture, the conceptual framework, will help with our doubt in the broad sense and also inform our micro-choices, our moment-to-moment decisions in practice. This is genuinely important to me.

To cultivate that sense as much as possible—to build the big picture, the conceptual framework: how does this all function, how does it fit together, where are we going, what does this mean as opposed to that? It truly informs our choices. But all this is really an art.

I like to think of it as an art. Which means, and for me, art involves one element—one aspect of art is there is a conceptual framework involved. No matter who you think you are, free jazz, going out of tonality and out of rhythms, there's still plenty of conceptual framework. Jackson Pollock, whatever it is, there's a conceptual framework there.

And if it's art, it involves the conceptual and the intuition, the following of hunches that arise, the arising of what surprises us and what's unexpected in the process of the making of the art, in the process of working in the meditation with the imaginal relationship. And then there's the improvisation of responses to, and the navigation of all that. And that includes the art of working with the energy body, and the art of the different emphases and leaning this way or that, more or less, that we discussed before.

So all that is involved in the art, and all that helps in relation to our doubts and kind of unsurenesses with regard to all this. Understanding the conceptual framework, as I said, functions as a kind of—gives context, gives support, like that trellis in the rose garden. Giving support to what wants to flower.

And out of that conceptual framework, it frames and gives rise to—helps to shape and direct our intentions, which helps so much. Because the intention is for soul-making, for the increase of the sense of the sacredness, the widening of the sense of sacredness, the diversity of the sense of the sacredness, for the perceptions of the other subtle dimensions, for subtle discernments of sensitivity. All these intentions are given, if you like, are determined or handed to us by the conceptual framework that we're developing. So all that really helps.

But discernment, you know, discernment is so key. So for example, regarding the discernment between just what we're calling desire, what we're calling craving, what we're calling eros, and the various responses there. Discernment and response, responsibility. All that's really important.

What is the appropriate or right or necessary order for you? Now at this stage in your practice, in your life, what's the necessary order of practice development with regard to what we're calling craving, with regard to what we're calling clinging in its relationship to that deep investigation into emptiness, that whole revealing of the deep meaning of dependent origination, and with eros?

So even just with those—with craving, the exploration of what we're calling clinging, and what we're calling eros—what's the order necessary for you, your soul's calling? You know, just discerning that is not always so easy. And I don't want to shove it into a formula. You have to do this before you do that. I don't think souls fit in formulae so easily at all.

But if we want to explore making a little more finer distinctions, discernments here—so for instance, between eros or the question of eros in relationship to resting and also in relationship to jhāna practice and in relation to mettā practice. Some of this we'll revisit, but I just want to say a little bit about this now and get a sense of how the discernment can go even deeper.

So human beings, you know, we need to discharge, if you like—if we're kind of like energetic systems, sometimes we need to discharge after we've been charged up. Even when, certainly when the charge is just stress, you know, but even when the charge is wholesome, some creative endeavor or inspiration that comes through us or a beautiful kind of electricity of the being, flame of the being that's there at times, you know, there's a charge there and the system needs to discharge often or usually. And so there's, you know, we rest. We find different ways to rest.

Now what's the relationship between rest and eros? Because we can rest with or without the erotic imaginal. So perhaps more often we are accustomed to a resting, a going to sleep that's a kind of wanting to turn the world off. It's a vibhavatanhā, the kind of craving for non-being, if you like, that we talked about in some of the first talks. There's not the interest alive there. I just want to basically go into a kind of not engaging mode. There's not the interest. There's no image alive there. There's nothing imaginable. And there's no soul-making or eros there, because there's no image. No aliveness there, really. And we just want it to rest, to turn off.

Other times, and probably more rare, but really available to us, is a kind of resting where we're still in relationship with the imaginal, either the intra-psychic imaginal or the imaginal perception, the fullness of the imaginal perception of something or someone in the actual world. And there's the eros there in the imaginants, in relationship. And sometimes there can be, with that kind of resting, a really beautiful, pervasive blessedness at the same time as resting.

And here, actually, because the erotic imaginal are involved, the self, the sense of the self, the image of the self, the other, the world, the eros itself—all these four in that co-constellation are alive, multidimensional as images. They're alive as images. And then they have that multidimensionality and perhaps even the sense of divinity that comes with that as the dimensionality gets kind of richer and deeper. The Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is alive there.

It is working and moving, and there's rest. Usually then the rest feels very beautiful—there's a real quality of beauty and blessedness present. So it's perhaps rarer, but really available. Again, can we discern the difference there?

Sometimes in regard to rest, what we want is to be cozy. That's quite an interesting phenomenon, perhaps, relatively speaking. Is the imaginal operating there with this desire we have when we want to be cozy and rest? Is that what I just referred to—this kind of resting in relationship with the erotic imaginal, where there's blessedness and the aliveness of multidimensionality?

Some of you will know Celestial Seasonings teas. There's one—I don't know if they still make it—called Sleepytime tea. On the cardboard box, I think I remember, there's a sort of drawing of a cute teddy bear dozing in an old armchair. He's wearing one of those old-fashioned sleeping gowns and a floppy sleeping hat, and he's by the fire in his living room—in his snug. I learned that word because I have one in the cottage where I'm staying. The snug is a little old-fashioned living room with a fireplace and armchairs, and the whole idea is that it's snug, it's cozy. Actually, the one I have is completely freezing and drafty, so I don't even sit in there, but that's the idea. So he's in this old armchair dozing in his sleeping gown and floppy sleeping hat by the fire.

So there's an image—the image on the tea box. And it has a certain attractiveness to us. But is that an image for us unless there's eros, unless there's this sense of dimensionality, multidimensionality, unless there's an opening to a kind of sense of sacredness or divinity, unless the eros-psyche-logos, the soul-making dynamic is aroused, ignited, inseminating each other? And there's an interest in the image and in the images of self, other, world, and eros in the constellation.

Now, that image, that kind of image of coziness may be an imaginal image, may be an image in the sense that we're talking about. But in the discernment, the question is: Is it in this moment for you? Is it really imaginal in the way that we're talking about it? Or is it just an image in the flatter, cheaper sense that is in common parlance? And of course, even if it's not an image, it may still have its place in our life. That's fine. But we're talking about the discernment. When is it eros? When is it imaginal? When is it not?

More interesting than that is the whole question of what's present and what's involved in states of jhana, or states of less fabrication, where there's a lot of letting go, a lot of reduction in clinging, and we're resting in awareness, or resting in a vastness of awareness, or in a state of so-called just receiving, and so forth. Any of those states of less fabrication, or states of jhana—the progressive states of jhana—are actually states of less fabrication. This is quite interesting with regard to eros. So there's a kind of rest in these states, but they're very alive as well. This is quite interesting in relation to eros.

In themselves—is there such a thing as "in themselves"? Is there such a thing as anything in itself? No, there isn't, because of emptiness and dependent origination. But for the sake of what we want to draw out right now, let's go along with this idea. In themselves, these states are only soul-making in a quite limited way. Why? Because they involve actually a quieting of image. You understand? Jhana and other states of less fabrication involve both perception and imaginal perception getting less. So there's a quieting of the imaginal faculty, among other things.

Although the series of jhanas or states of less fabrication moves on—so there's something beyond this state, until a certain point there's something beyond this state—each state by itself doesn't have an unfathomability, a sense of unfathomability of meaningfulness. It might have another kind of unfathomability. I actually think jhanas are unfathomable in quite specific ways—for instance, the degree of concentration.

The degree of concentration in jhana is in many ways infinitely increasable. But there's not this sense of unfathomability of meaningfulness within each state itself—not in each jhana or each state of relative unfabrication. This is quite significant.

What does this mean for eros and the imaginal? It means there's a limited kind of soul-making involved in those states. Now, there is a dimension of the soul that loves and desires to know the oneness that comes with these different states—different kinds of oneness—and desires transcendence and the unfabricated. That dimension of the soul is very much nourished by these states.

But the dimension of the soul we've been exploring is only nourished and supported by these states through the fantasies and conceptual frameworks that surround the experiences. These fantasies and conceptual frameworks may support the soul-making dynamic—the ignition, insemination, and expansion of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. This is an important distinction.

For example, when there's pīti or rapture and bliss in the first or second jhana, a person might interpret the experience within certain contexts. You don't have to be a Buddhist to enter jhana—these are simply human experiences. A person might say, "This experience of total bliss and rapture and white light—this was God making love to me, making love to my soul." There's a certain concept and fantasy image of the experience.

Or someone might say, "That experience of jhana, that bliss and rapture, was my participation in—I entered into consciousness of my participation in the divine or the cosmic sat-chit-ananda"—borrowing from traditions that speak of being, consciousness, and bliss.

Neither of these interpretations—God making love to my soul, or participating in divine being-consciousness-bliss—are classical Buddhist ideas. What's more likely within a Buddhist framework is the sense: "Not only was that amazingly pleasant and beautiful, but I am experiencing what the Buddha described." Coming out of jhana, there's this powerful sense of matching his descriptions, of walking the path of the elders, walking in the tradition. This can be such a beautiful, striking feeling.

But there are fantasies wrapped up in that too—fantasies of tradition, fantasies of self (and I use "fantasy" in a positive sense), fantasies of awakening and moving toward awakening, fantasies of being on the path, fantasies of the Dharma itself.

So the soul-making we've been discussing comes through the fantasies and concepts around the experience of quietening perception, unfabricating, entering jhana. It also comes through the longing to know and attain these states that are beyond what I already know. They live in my imagination as a "beyond" for the pothos to desire. This very beyondness creates eros, and in relation to them—and the self and tradition—there is this erotic-imaginal connection. But it's primarily in the fantasy and concept around the experience.

Let me draw another discernment to illuminate these subtleties. What about experiences like resting in the lap of the Buddha, or resting in Grandma's love? If you were at the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat, we did an exercise with the imaginal figure of love. Some people chose figures like Grandma, and later Catherine and Nick sang that beautiful Bill Withers song about Grandma's hands.

When I'm resting in the lap of the Buddha or in Grandma's love—is this the imaginal? Is this eros? There's certainly love there, and use of imagination. But if Grandma or this figure represents simply mettā or unconditional love—which is beautiful and can be profoundly helpful—but if I'm not deeply interested in Grandma herself, if I only want the feelings of warmth, comfort, coziness, security, or just the quality of mettā, then this figure will not be soul-making, will not be imaginal, because there's no eros there.

I'm not deeply interested in them. It won't stimulate the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or only to a very limited degree. Grandma or the Buddha, in that instance, is not an erotic object for me. "Erotic" need not be sexual, but there's no erotic dimension in the sense of unfathomability, of wanting more discovery and enrichment through the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. There's no aliveness and arousal of interest in her depths, her dimensionality. There's no sense of divinity—it's very sweet and lovely and helpful, but I don't find those aspects of unfathomability and mystery in her.

Perhaps with Grandma or the Buddha in this flatter way, we want to rest and sleep in that love, in that comfort and security. This can be perfectly okay, but it's not soul-making.

And it may be actually necessary sometimes, perhaps at certain stages in our life or certain stages in our practice. It may be really necessary, but it's not soul-making.

Or it may be that we're relating to it because we're actually using it in a certain way. We're using this imaginary figure, figure of the imagination, to get in touch with, for instance, the quality of metta or a certain degree of metta. And then we actually forget them. We forget grandma. Grandma, in that case, is just a springboard, a kind of touchstone for a quality of metta. So it's skillful. You use that, you get the quality, and then you can forget grandma. Great, skillful. It's a springboard, a touchstone into the quality of metta. But the soul-making then will be limited. It would be limited soul-making, because it doesn't have this interest in her and her unfathomability, her dimensionality and her depths.

So if I'm primarily, if at any time I'm primarily looking for pleasure, or for rest in this sense, or just for the quality of metta—or if the self and the other, the images of self and other are too concrete and not unfathomable as images are in the sense that we're using, they're not unfathomable, they're too concrete—then at best, in those cases, the soul-making will be very limited and the opening and the expansion and the fecundity of the soul-making dynamic of Eros, Psyche, Logos together working will be very limited.

So there are all kinds of discernments that I think are important as we develop these practices, develop our range and go into this territory.

Another discernment, another thing to notice is where for you the imaginal, the soul-making, the erotic imaginal is alive, and where is it not alive? So for example, some people in meditation, or with respect to meditation practice, there's actually very little eros. There's very little arousal of interest, maybe in general, but there's very little in the way of images, imaginal images of self, other, world, eros, alive with respect to or in meditation. Whereas in some relationships in their life or some actions in their life, all that is alive. The interest, the images of self, other, world, eros are alive there and soul-making—maybe in relation to service, or maybe in relation to activism, or in relation to one of those but not the other, perhaps service but not activism, activism but not service. Whereas in practice, in formal practice, there's very little eros there.

Other people, it might be the other way around, that the eros and the soul-making is alive in and with respect to meditation practice, but in actual life it seems harder to be suffused with the imaginal, to be impregnated with the imaginal. Harder for life to become imaginal in our perception. Harder for soul-making in life, in activity, in relation to the world more widely.

Now, either of those two types or categories—either the one who has the soul-making alive in the world but not in the meditation, or the other who has the soul-making in the meditation but not so much in the world and activity—very easily when there's something not working in my practice, very easily one of the answers that person gives themselves is "I need more concentration, I need more samadhi." So maybe, maybe that's what needs to happen in your practice to open it out, to make it more potent, more widespread, pervasive in its potency and deeper. Maybe that's really what you need, more concentration.

But maybe not. And again, just a little footnote here: please hear all these teachings in context. I'm addressing common assumptions that I meet as a teacher at the same time as probably a good proportion of my teaching over the years has been teaching sa-

madhi, teaching jhanas, and really helping people develop that art and the mastery there and go deeper and deeper through the jhanas. So please take this right now in context.

But oftentimes people have this thought, "I need more concentration, I need more focus." It might be that that's what needs to happen, or it might be actually that what needs to happen is the imaginal needs to be released. There needs to be more suffusion and more fullness and opening of and opening to the imaginal. A wider, deeper imaginal sense igniting, involving Eros, the interest, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic and soul-making. Maybe that's what needs to happen. So somehow I need to allow it to spread to the areas where it isn't.

Or it might be that the kinds of images and fantasies that are operating are too restricted, too narrow. So again, there could be many examples here, and I've given them in the past in relation to engagement or whatever it is, or also in relation to actual meditation—many possibilities. But for example, just one I mentioned: it's very understandable with some people because of what they've been through and everything that they tend to look to meditation for rest, for some degree of comfort and even coziness or a sense of safety. That can be very understandable and quite important sometimes.

But maybe a person has also been in that and actually got stuck in a narrow range of image in relation to meditation and practice. And that's what needs to expand, is the imaginal range, to for instance include images and fantasies of struggle, of courage, of putting up with difficulties. The fantasies of nobility, the nobility of courage, the nobility of being able to sit through the fire, through the struggle, through the difficulty, the nobility of the soul's willingness to do that, the self's willingness to do that, the beauty of that.

Sometimes that whole range of fantasy is missing in a person. They just don't have that there. And without these, there's a kind of—you know, with all the best intentions, there's a kind of flaccidity in their practice. They keep, somehow, something keeps collapsing, because it doesn't have the imaginal support, it doesn't have the filling out of the beauty of the fantasy that would allow one to sit through the difficulty. It's not rendered beautiful, the courage, it's just not given this nobility through the beauty of the fantasy and the richness of the fantasy.

There's a caving in again and again, something collapses, something just stops practice. You just stop practice, turn away from the difficult, always looking every time for what's easy, for what's comfortable, because there isn't the imaginal support for something else, for a different relationship.

And if we do that every time, that has massive consequences in terms of the patterns it sets up—certainly in meditation but also in one's life. Massive consequences. So that's just one example—I could give many, quite opposite ones.

But really, this discernment and noticing where the eros, the imaginal, the soul-making is alive for us and working beautifully and potently and impregnating, and where it's not—it's for us to look and see in our lives.

And related to that, of course, is the discernment and the noticing of: What do I really desire? What do I really want? What is it that I long for? Do I even allow my being to have deep longing? This is an interesting question—we'll come back to this.

But there's the discernment of what do I long for? And then there's also discernment, if I can let myself feel at times the deep longing of my soul. There's a discernment within the longing as well, which is quite interesting.

Deep, intense longing has this bittersweet quality, something that's hard to bear, and yet also has a great beauty in it. But that's longing—it's a desire for me. I want this. My soul yearns for this.

But wrapped up in the very longing is another aspect. It's telling me about what I'm devoted to. It's telling me about what I want, what I serve already or what I want to serve. You understand? The longing is telling me what I'm devoted to. It's not just for me, but it's telling me what I'm devoted to, what I serve or what I want to serve.

And so the longing, the experience of longing, if we can bear it and open to it and even nourish it, can help us discern what we want to serve. Through my longing, through my deep desire, it's telling me something, it's guiding me. So with the longing, there are both important aspects. What do I want for me—this soul wants something for itself—and it's telling me about what I want to serve. There are facets, if you like, to discern between—two facets of the same current, the same deep current, deep movement of longing.

And again, in relation to all this and the doubt that arises: why is this important? Why is this thing about longing important? Well, it's exactly what matters most deeply to us. It's almost a definition of importance—it's what matters most deeply to us.

And it matters to make these discernments. It matters to discern what is craving. If I'm not conscious of craving, if craving gains in power in the way that we're using it, what happens? I end up squandering my energy. I end up squandering the treasures

I've been given. I end up dissipating my soul, if you like, my citta—the energy, the strength, the coherence of it, the beauty of it, the gift of it. I squander and dissipate in the end. I squander and dissipate my life and my soul through craving.

And the discernment of what we mean by clinging and the exploration of all that—why is that important? Because through that I can really understand something profound, radical, utterly surprising in a way that opens up the whole sense of existence. That's important.

It's important to know what matters most deeply to the soul—the longing. It's important to know what is craving and therefore squandering or dissipating one's life, if it's given too much leeway and power. It's important to investigate clinging because of the jewel of the Dharma and the teaching of dependent origination, emptiness, and what that can open for us.

And it's important to discern eros because it brings soul-making. And soul-making is what the soul needs, what the soul loves. Soul-making is what the soul needs and loves. And soul-making needs eros. Or souls, to different degrees, let's say, need eros and soul-making, more or less. We'll say more about that later.

But it already exists. Eros and soul-making in our life already exists. We need to acknowledge it—it's important to acknowledge it, to see it, to discern, to see that it's different from craving or just any ordinary desire. We need to understand its movement and to care for it.

It's important to make these discernments, to be clear and to care for what serves, what opens beauty, what opens a sense of the sacred.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 74

The Holy Life (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 59 min

> *In this opening talk from the 'Eros Unfettered' series, Rob Burbea examines the Buddha's emphasis on transcendence in the Pāli Canon and its implications for practice. Drawing extensively from suttas across the Saṃyutta Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, and Udāna, he demonstrates how the Buddha consistently pointed toward the 'unfabricated' (asaṅkhata) - a dimension beyond all sense experience, the five aggregates (khandha), and conventional perception.*
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> *Burbea analyzes passages describing the cessation of the six sense spheres, the transcendence of nāmarūpa (mind-body experience), and the Buddha's instruction to 'smash and destroy' form, vedanā, perception, saṅkhāra, and consciousness. He explores how this transcendent orientation relates to the 'holy life' (brahmacariya) as described in the Canon - not merely ethical living, but the complete path aimed at ending rebirth.*
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> *The talk identifies three possible orientations for eros and soul-making: the transcendent (seeking what lies beyond all fabrication), the existentialist (limiting freedom to one-dimensional sense experience), and the immanent (finding divinity within form while acknowledging beyondness). Burbea examines how cultural modernism influences contemporary Dharma interpretations and considers the shadows and limitations of each approach, setting the stage for deeper exploration of where eros can be directed in spiritual life.*

So I'd like to begin opening up more fully the exploration of where Eros is directed in our lives and on the path—the whole exploration of Eros on the path, Eros for the path, and Eros for awakening. This includes soul-making on the path, soul-making in the path, and the path as a path of soul-making: to what extent and how? Where does the Eros go in our lives? Where does the soul-making get to flourish? What are the possibilities there, and what are the limitations that we might inadvertently create and sustain?

There's quite a lot to this, so we'll take it gradually.

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha very clearly and very often puts forward as the aim of the path—intrinsically involved and wrapped up in the aim of awakening and enlightenment—the ideal, the goal of knowing, reaching, and experiencing the unfabricated,

what is beyond the perception of any kind of world. In that sense, there's a real transcendent or transcendental thrust to the Pali Canon Buddhist teachings. Transcendent comes from the Latin *transcendere*, meaning to climb beyond.

If we open the Pali Canon, this is unavoidable to meet—this constant pointing towards the transcendent, as if the whole path is really aimed at that. There is this transcendent thrust, transcendent aim, or aim of transcendence.

I could read many passages from the Pali Canon that refer to this. Some of you will know these quotes, which to me are quite an important aspect of the path. For example, in the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha says:

"That sphere, that dimension should be understood, should be known, where the eye ceases and perception of forms fades away. That sphere should be understood and known where the ear ceases and the perception of sounds fade away. That sphere should be understood, should be known, where the nose ceases and the perception of smells fade away, where the tongue ceases and the perception of taste fade away, where the body ceases and the perception of tactile objects fades away. That sphere, that dimension should be understood, should be known, where the mind ceases and perception of mental phenomena fades away."

Great stress on this, isn't it? It's beyond any sense experience whatsoever. Sense experience here is fading, is not fabricated at that time. There is a movement beyond, a transcending of sense experience—the whole world, in other words. Not just the creation of stories and complications based on sense experience, but actual sense experience is transcended.

The Buddha calls this the end of the world. In a slightly playful moment in another quote he says, "I say that the end of the world cannot be known, seen or reached by travelling. Yet I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to dukkha."

So again, this transcending of the senses, this going beyond the world, the fading of the world, the fading of the senses, and the opening to whatever we can call that which is beyond, that which transcends it—this is central to the Buddha's project of awakening and ending dukkha. Without reaching the end of the world, there is no making an end to dukkha. And he's not talking about traveling. Very clear.

In the Majjhima Nikaya, the Buddha says, "There is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond both, there is the giving up of this entire field of perception." There is the inferior, meaning ordinary perception of the ordinary world. There is the superior—the perception of higher worlds, the perception of what the Buddha called the fine material

realm, the realm of jhanas and the immaterial realms, the realm of the formless jhanas, the four higher jhanas, the Brahma realms, and these kinds of things, perhaps attained through different meditations. There is the inferior, there is the superior, and beyond both of these, there is the giving up of this entire field of perception, the entire field of experience of things, objects.

Again, tying it in to the end of suffering—it's not just an interesting kind of experience that one can have if you want. It ties this in with the end of suffering. So it says, "Where nama-rupa"—which really means the whole movement and experience of mind and body, but more in detail it means sensation, *vedana* (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), intention, contact, perception—experience, in short—"where nama-rupa, experience, together with impingement and the perception of form, cease without trace, it is there that the tangle is cut."

Nama-rupa ceasing also means *vedana*, sensation, is ceasing. There is the end, in that experience, of sensation of *vedana*. It doesn't just mean the end of unpleasant *vedana* or the end of pleasant *vedana* to some kind of neutrality—everything is just blank in the sense of being neutral or not registering a *vedana*.

It means beyond even the neither-pleasant-nor-unpleasant. Sensation is, in a way, a more accurate translation for vedana. It's beyond sensation.

The Buddha speaks of this transcendence in the Udana, the Inspired Utterances from the Pali Canon. Addressing a group of monks, he declares: "There is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated. If there were not that unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated, no leaving behind of the born, become, made, fabricated would be discerned. But because there is indeed an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unfabricated, a leaving behind of the born, become, made, fabricated is discerned."

A leaving behind, a transcending of what is born, what is become, what is made, what is fabricated. All this world of creation, all this world of sense experience, is left behind. There is that possibility. There is a possibility of transcending that. The text implicitly points to this truth: this leaving behind is intrinsically wrapped up in what it means to awaken, what it means to be free, what it means to end rebirth in full awakening.

From the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha speaks of something we can know beyond the senses, beyond the body, beyond sensation, beyond perception and experience, beyond all movements of mind, beyond consciousness itself. His instruction is direct: "You should smash, destroy and demolish form. You should smash, destroy and demolish

vedana, sensation. Smash, destroy and demolish perception. Smash, destroy and demolish sankara, mental formations. You should smash, destroy and demolish consciousness."

This strong language points to a meditative technique—learning to unfabricate this whole world of apparent forms, apparent body, apparent sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Smash it, destroy it, demolish it.

What is the Buddha saying in relationship to life? Life, as we consider it, consists of sense perception and the five aggregates: form, vedana, perception, sankhara, consciousness. So what is the Buddha's orientation? How does he orient the path and goal of awakening in relation to life? What is the place of life in the longing for awakening? How does life and the end of rebirth relate to the vision and experience of the transcendent?

It should be clear that the Buddha is not merely talking about a state of concentration. This experience of the transcendent is not some ultra-concentrated state where the senses don't impinge because you're absorbed in an object. All these passages make clear that this is intrinsically wrapped up in the whole liberating process—the ending of rebirth and what awakening truly means.

The Buddha typically refers to this transcendent or unfabricated in negative terms, because it's so transcendent to what we can usually perceive or experience. Being transcendent to the senses and aggregates, it's also transcendent to what we can usually conceive—conception being based on subject, object, time, and experience. So usually he speaks of what it's not, what isn't there.

Very occasionally he describes it in positive terms. In the Digha Nikaya, the collection of longer discourses, he speaks of going beyond the six senses—the usual five plus mind in Pali Canon Buddhism. With the cessation of these six senses and six sense consciousnesses, what remains is described more positively as "consciousness without attribute"—consciousness that does not look at anything, point anything out, or indicate anything. In other words, consciousness without an object. Consciousness without attributes, without end, luminous all around.

"Here, water, earth, fire, and air have no footing. Here, long and short, subtle and gross, pleasant and unpleasant, and nama-rupa—all that experience of mind and body, the movements of mind and body, the elements of mind and body—all are destroyed with the cessation of consciousness." Here, each of these is destroyed: earth, air, water, fire, long and short, subtle and gross, any kind of distinction, any kind of experience, pleasant and unpleasant, nama-rupa—all destroyed.

Here, each of these is destroyed—earth, air, water, fire, long and short, subtle and gross, any kind of distinction, pleasant and unpleasant, nama-rupa—all destroyed. But it's not a complete nothing. This is not annihilation, not total erasure.

And finally, one more quote from the Udana, the inspired utterances also found in the Itivuttaka, another set of discourses from the Pali Canon. The Buddha says: "There is that sphere, there is that dimension where there is neither earth nor water nor fire nor wind. Neither sphere of infinite space, nor sphere of infinite consciousness, nor sphere of nothingness, nor sphere of neither perception nor non-perception"—those are the four immaterial jhanas, realms—"Neither this world nor the next world, neither sun nor moon. And there, I say, there is no coming and no going, no staying, no passing away, and no arising. It is without foundation, non-continuing, and objectless."

This is pointing to something quite beyond the jhanas, quite beyond any sense of materiality or perception of this or that or anything, quite beyond either impermanence or permanence. It's beyond time—no coming, going, no staying, no passing away, no arising, non-continuing. This is really talking about something utterly transcendent there, not just a state of concentration.

Clearly these passages are not pointing to a state of being in the moment. It's beyond a sense of the moment, beyond a sense even of the arising and passing away of things, beyond a sense of being with or reduced to or just open to the process of life or the flow of life, if you prefer slightly more poetic language. Clearly it's way beyond that. It's not continuing, no arising, no passing away. Utterly beyond the senses. Utterly beyond anything whatsoever. Can't talk about process or flow. Flow of what there? Utterly beyond, again, a sort of state or stance or ongoing experience of the touch of life or of meeting life. And certainly beyond anything that could be construed as being with things as they are. Utterly, really transcendent.

Instead, reading the Pali Canon, for me it's unavoidable—these kinds of passages and how everything kind of funnels towards that. The whole path is constructed towards this understanding as central in the opening of liberation. So you can try and explain it away or try and de-emphasize that, but you've got quite a job there. If you try and do that, it's not something you can really ignore. You are confronted with these many, many passages and the whole way everything kind of moves towards that, as I said.

Something, as I said in one of the talks, somehow we need to account for this unfabricated, and the Buddha's emphasis on it, and also our experiential experience of unfabricating and the whole understanding of dependent origination there, and emptiness that we talked about much earlier.

But in a way, the Buddha is mostly saying, in another passage: where all phenomena cease in this transcending, where all phenomena cease, all manner of speaking, all ways of speaking cease. It's only possible to talk in negatives. It's not this, it's not that. There's the absence of this, there's the absence of that. This is not there, that is not there.

And there's what's called apophatic language, or apophatic theology is the equivalent in the Christian and other theistic traditions, or the via negativa. So there's not only that this transcendent lacks any attributes that we can talk about, it's actually that the way to it is a via negativa, a negative way—meaning a putting aside of this, putting aside of that, letting go of this, letting go of that, and going beyond this, going beyond that, going beyond anything, any sense perception, any form, anything, anything conditioned or created. So any experience in the normal sense of the world, of some kind of thing experienced. One goes beyond that, one puts it aside, and one comes to something that is also via negativa in the sense of lacking in attributes that one can ascribe to it.

This kind of thrust is common, I think, probably in all the major religious traditions, spiritual, mystical traditions, certainly because we're really in the realm of mystical experience now. So certainly in Buddha Dharma—or in some Buddha Dharma, let's say—and certainly there in the Pali Canon, in Neoplatonism, in mystical Christianity, Islam and Judaism, etc. And from many of those, or within strands of many of those traditions, it's absolutely intimately linked, if not equivalent, with the supreme goal of the path. So knowing that, opening to that experience—that is entirely conflated with the supreme goal of whichever mystical religious tradition we're talking about.

And so again, in relationship to the world, and in relationship to what we must call life, there is this longing and this aiming for and this pointing out of the availability of something beyond all this, beyond the world and beyond life, beyond sense experience, beyond the aggregates that make up life and our experience of life, self and life.

So Gregory of Nyssa, great saint of the Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, says, "For the thirst of human souls, the thirst of human souls requires some infinite water. How could this limited world suffice?"

So there is, in these different traditions and in the Pali Canon Buddha, this yearning, this longing. And as I point out, the Buddha was extreme in his dedication for wanting to go beyond and open to this. There is this yearning, this longing, this desire, this eros for this transcendent. This exists—this eros, this yearning exists—and it exists very, very strongly in some people. And some people a little bit less so, and some people it doesn't seem to exist much at all. In fact, there might be a turning away from that, a rejection of that possibility, fear of it, all kinds of things. We'll come back to this.

But one possible direction of our eros and our whole movement and longing of the soul is towards this transcendent, towards knowing it, towards opening to it. We want something that...

In Gregory's words, this limited world doesn't suffice. We'll return to that quote because I want to explore the different possible directions for eros and soul-making, so we'll revisit it later.

But one possible direction is towards this transcendent. The eros, the thrust of the eros, and the yearning to open—again, if we use sexual, metaphorical language—is towards this, or in relationship to this transcendence. That transcendence I don't know yet, for some people and to differing extents.

And it's transcendent, clearly, from those quotes. One could read numerous quotes from different traditions—Neoplatonism and the various mystical traditions of monotheism, the monotheistic traditions—but it's beyond. Beyond what? Beyond the world, beyond appearances, beyond even certain knowings of oneness, as I said. Beyond a oneness of love, beyond a oneness of consciousness. It's beyond, transcending—it climbs over, *transcendere*.

So the pothos... Remember, the pothos is what wants more with the eros. The pothos wants this more, and it's kind of set this really transcendent more, this really profound—if you like, or very high, depending on up or down in the analogy. The pothos projects it there, or smells it there, intuits it there, has heard of it there. That's where the more, the pothos, that's where the more gets placed, the sense of the more, and that's where the eros gets directed.

So there's not the spreading of eros in the small sense in one dimension. Yes, the pothos wants more, and so I just get more cars, more sexual partners, more tasty food and different cuisines of different countries, more traveling, more whatever it is. It's not spreading into one dimension. There's actually another dimension, or other dimensions, because usually this unfabricated is mapped—not just conceptually, but experientially—at the end of a series of dimensions.

In a way, you could conceive of the jhānas, the eight jhānas that the Buddha of the Pali Canon points to, as I've said before on this retreat, as states of progressively less fabrication. Each of them is a dimension. So the realm of infinite space—we could say the dimension, same word, *āyatana*—sphere of infinite space, of infinite consciousness. These are different dimensions or realms of being, realms of experience, realms of perception, dimensions. And transcending the eighth, the next dimension, if you like, is this unfabricated. Sometimes actually referred to as nibbāna.

But the pothos is moving into other dimensions and has as its ultimate aim, or what it believes is its ultimate aim—which is something I'll come back to—this ultimate dimension of the transcendent, unfabricated.

Nor does the eros just accept one-dimensionality. So it doesn't just accept that there is only one dimension. And although I have this desire for some other dimensions, what I really need to do to be free of suffering is just accept the experience on this one dimension. In other words, what the senses give to me, the apparent or seemingly obvious finitude of my life, the difficulties that I encounter—all of that. And my job, to be liberated, what I'm moving towards is a stance, hopefully an ongoing stance, of just accepting, not craving, in relationship to this one dimension. Because there are no other dimensions, so don't look for anything there. Rather than spreading out to just want more and more on this one dimension—more cars, more partners, whatever it is, more experiences—the liberation is in just accepting and kind of containing or cutting off the movement of the pothos, the movement of the eros, of the more. And so being accepting of just what is given to me in this one dimension.

So what is the relationship, as I said, of eros with life, if you like? How is eros directing itself in relationship to life and the world?

The holy life—some of you will know—is something that the Buddha talks about and refers to frequently in the Pali Canon texts. It's a very clear, common phrase: the holy life. There are stock phrases in relationship to it. So he might say, or there might be a story, this person or that person, man or woman, received the going forth into the homeless life—so they became monastic. Actually, they were more homeless then because they didn't stay in one monastery; they tended to move around. Then to spend the rains perhaps in one monastery, or short periods staying in this monastery or that monastery, but generally speaking, they were on the move. They were much more homeless than most monastics are today.

But so-and-so received the going forth into the homeless life, and then a little later, or a long time later, this so-and-so reached the supreme goal of the holy life. So the homeless life and the holy life—the holy life, if it's a Buddhist homeless life, is regarded as the holy life. In other words, you can be homeless in another tradition that doesn't have the Eightfold Path, but that's not the holy life. So the holy life is the tradition of the Buddhist monastic practicing the Eightfold Path.

She reached the supreme goal of the holy life, knowing and realizing it, the supreme goal for herself in the here and now. He knew, she knew—and this is the person speaking, what they say at liberation. It's a stock phrase when they've become an Arahant,

fully liberated: He knew, she knew, "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled"—or "the holy life has been led. I've done it, finished the holy life. Done is what had to be done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world."

So there's an Arahant—there's nothing further for the sake of this world. The holy life, in other words, the path of practice in a celibate, renunciate, monastic tradition, is the holy life. So life itself is not holy. The holy life refers to something very specific that's actually oriented towards what is the end of rebirth, if you like, the end of life, the ending of future lives. So it's not life as a kind of wonderment of biological evolution and diversity.

It's not life as in just this amazing, changing kaleidoscope of experiences. That's not holy. What's holy is getting beyond all that.

Nor is the holy life really just living the ethical life. So it's not a holy life if it's just ethical. Ethics, the sila and a celibate life in this case are indispensable. They're also admirable and praiseworthy, but they're not the point or the end. An ethical life is not the point or the end of the path. It's actually just a prerequisite, a necessity for ending rebirth. It's part of the path if you really want to become awakened. And that's what makes it holy: the end.

When the Mahayana came, this began to shift a little bit. With more popular versions of the Mahayana, there's a shift. The bodhisattva ideal became quite prominent—someone who's fully awakened or almost fully awakened and who makes the choice to stick around, not to end their rebirths, but to remain out of compassion, out of love for other beings who are suffering. So the holy life actually becomes more tied in with an ethical movement as we would tend to understand it, meaning a movement of love and a commitment of love. This person is sticking around, not ending rebirth. There's a shift in that with the Mahayana and with the populist understanding of Mahayana teachings about bodhisattvas.

Also in the Mahayana, there's much less of a distinction—there's a kind of non-duality between the unfabricated, totally transcendent realm and the world of fabrication, the world of senses. But as I said, in the Pali Canon, whatever one decides to bring to our interpretation of it, we unavoidably have to deal with this transcendent thrust that's there.

The Buddha talks about escaping from this world, and the jhanas, as I said, have been progressive states of less fabrication—they're actually progressive states of escape. The Buddha described the first jhana as an escape, and then the second jhana as a better escape from the world, and so on. The eighth jhana is the best escape minus the last one.

In talking about vedana too, the Buddha makes a distinction between worldly vedana and non-worldly pleasantness—for instance, the pleasure of the jhanas. It's not coming from the senses. The rapture, the bliss, the ecstasy of the jhanas is not coming from sensual touch, taste, smell, sight or sound. The Buddha also in the Pali Canon talks about the supramundane, beyond the world, the loka—meaning the transcendent.

So there is implicit in all this a kind of relative denigration of the world, a denigration of life. Life is only serving something that goes beyond life. Life is only good to the extent that we use it to get beyond life. And the world is something to be transcended, something to be gotten beyond.

Now, this is not that popular, or rather it's not really brought out much in a lot of modern Western teachings. Sometimes people really try to make the case that the Buddha or the Pali Canon absolutely didn't have a transcendent thrust, and that it's really about being in this life and being open to everything. I find that a little hard to twist things that way in an interpretation of the Pali Canon.

But it's interesting. Why is there that insistence by some that the Buddha of the Pali Canon did not have a transcendent thrust? That to me is very interesting for different reasons. Some is purely individual, having to do with the soul of the person and the soul calling of the person. But a lot of it is also cultural.

In our modernist culture, in our modernist society, with the views that we've grown up with, there's a kind of abhorrence for various reasons for anything that is transcendent in that sense. It's too close to a kind of life-denialism. And if life is all you have—which is what a lot of modernism asserts, that there's just this, and when you die you die and that's it, and there's nothing beyond—and there's absolutely no place for metaphysics, there's no place for anything beyond the senses or what you can see through the senses or through a microscope and infer from that.

So there's a real thrust of that kind of absolute dogmatic ruling out of metaphysics from modernist philosophy and actually most postmodern philosophy, and that has spread into the culture. A cardinal rule is nothing beyond, nothing beyond—there's just

this. And we have to find what we're looking for in this, in just this, meaning the experience of the senses, meaning what comes to us empirically. It also means what science seems to tell us, though that gets a bit more confusing if you take science a bit deeper.

It's not that simple because although many people nowadays clearly believe this is it and when you die that's it, a lot of other people clearly believe in some kind of life after death, some kind of spiritual world beyond where they'll be with grandma again and their spouse. But that kind of beyond is not at all like the unfabricated. It's still a realm of experience, pretty much like this one, only it sounds nicer in some way, and it's not subject to impermanence. There's a kind of split between people who believe that and people who believe there's just extinction, but this whole unfabricated something beyond experience, or a series of dimensions that move beyond all sense experience, all perception—

This perspective feels, I think, for many people too much like extinction, or it simply lacks attraction for various reasons. And so we find ourselves squeezed—with this refusal of transcendence—into either hoping for something better beyond death, where there's this eternal being with one's loved ones, or we're compressed into "just this," into "just life."

The version of Dharma that emerges from this compression into "just this" or "just life"—perhaps reduced somewhat atomistically into recognizing that the self isn't real, that what exists is process, but everything else is also just process, atoms, and so forth—somehow squeezes us into what I might call an existentialist version of Dharma. This approach closely resembles existentialist philosophy or draws from existentialist psychoanalysis.

"This is it." This becomes your arena to somehow find, to eke out some kind of okayness or freedom or acceptance of this undeniable existential situation—that this is it, that there is this life that's essentially meaningless, essentially finite.

But the question here is: when there is this rhetoric of "just this" or "life," what is actually meant? I've spoken about this before. When you say "this," what do you mean by "this"? "There's just this." What do you mean by "life"? Especially when you give that word a capital L—do you mean just the senses? Do you mean bare attention? What's revealed by bare attention, or something else? Or something incorporating much more than that?

Broadly, in this non-transcendent approach—this refusal of the transcendent—we could distinguish two possibilities. There is what I just alluded to: a kind of existentialist path where there is just this one dimension that comes to us through the senses.

There's nothing more than that. We refuse anything beyond what is obvious to most people in Western culture, beyond what the senses of most people in Western culture can perceive. In other words, we're simply going along with what most people in our culture of Western scientific materialist modernism can actually perceive through their limited training in perception.

So there's a kind of flatland of one-dimensionality, and the question becomes: what freedom is available in relationship to that one-dimensionality, taking it almost as given? As I said, it might be acknowledged that the self doesn't really exist and is more of a process, as is everything else. So what's the possibility for freedom there? What's the possibility for soul-making in such a one-dimensional flatland that refuses any kind of other dimensionality or transcendence?

Where does that possibility lie? Is it that working within and accepting that range of possibility—that flatland freedom and flatland soul-making, whatever freedom and soul-making are available there—is actually an individual soul-calling? Might there be, for some people, a genuine calling of the soul to see the world this way, not to see it in ways more expansive or beyond that, and to create soul-making and freedom within the limitations of that view?

Or is it actually the limits of the *eros-psyche-logos* process for that person—limits that have been reached and become somewhat stuck, cramped, or confined, as we've discussed before? Is this coming from a kind of indoctrination from the culture, or from fear of not going along with mainstream opinion, whether academic, cultural, or from one's various communities?

All these questions—whether it's individual soul-calling, whether it's the limits of a certain soul, whether it's indoctrination from culture—we could also apply to the transcendent view, to the perspective of a transcendence which one wants to know and open to, having heard about it. Again, it could be an individual soul-calling, it could be some kind of limit operating, or it could be indoctrination or cultural conditioning.

So there's this transcendent option for the movement of soul-making and *eros*. There's this refusal of transcendence into what we might call a flatland, a one-dimensionality. And then there's a third possibility that we might call immanence.

Immanence is related etymologically to "remaining in." Here, what I mean by immanence—and what it means in most religious traditions—is that the divinity remains in the world, in life, in form, in matter, in the senses. It infuses all this. It's not, at least in the way I would like to use it, limited to that. In other words, there might be a beyond. I

know I've been deliberately open with the definition of what I even mean by divinity—we'll revisit this—but one aspect is that divinity has some kind of beyondness to it, relating to dimensionality.

So whatever this beyond is that carries a sense of divinity is both beyond and also in life, form, world, matter, senses.

In terms of individual orientations, reactions, and transformations in relation to all this, some people will recoil from the transcendent thrust and transcendent teachings. Something in them is either not satisfied, afraid, or resistant. So it's interesting to consider what's happening for someone who doesn't accept that transcendent dimension, and perhaps also doesn't accept the flatland either. They may want, or have the intuition of, divinity not just beyond but in and through. Or some people refuse that transcendent beyond—it's just "in" somehow. Still, I would say it has some kind of sense of beyondness.

We'll revisit this in terms of beyondness and divinity.

In terms of individual orientations and reactions to these transformative possibilities, some people will recoil from the transcendent thrust and transcendent teachings. Something within them is either not satisfied, afraid, or simply resistant. It's interesting to observe what's happening for someone who rejects both the transcendent path and the flatland approach, yet still wants or intuits divinity not just beyond but in and through everything. Some people refuse the transcendent beyond while sensing something sacred just "in" somehow—though I would say this still carries some sense of beyondness. We'll revisit this in terms of beyondness and divinity.

What I really want to explore are the individual reactions, the different stances and gut responses to these three possibilities. These orientations can change over a person's life and practice, and each carries its own shadows, limitations, or potential weak points.

Consider first the transcendent orientation. We can see how someone might want to go beyond the world, rejecting it and directing their longing toward the unfabricated, toward transcendence. But this could become confused with *vibhava taṇhā*—craving for non-existence. The movement might be polluted: "I want to get out of the world, I've had enough, I don't want to be reborn, I want this experience that turns everything off, and then I want to end it all." This represents a confused interpretation, not what the Buddha was actually pointing toward.

There can also be aversion or fear of the body, wanting to transcend its messiness and sexuality, even an aversion to soul-making itself. This becomes a shrinking or avoiding movement—hoping for transcendence while skipping over all the earthy, messy, confusing realm that John Keats called "the vale of soul-making": body, eros, embodied existence. But this movement arises from avoidance, fear, and contraction of being.

Another shadow of extreme transcendent orientation is potentially not caring for the world: "I'm out of here, I'm on my way out, this world has no value." In an extremist transcendent view, the world serves only as a stepping stone at best—there's no inherent divinity in the world itself. This represents an extremely dualistic transcendent stance, yet I know people, including Buddhists, who hold this view.

The second orientation—the one-dimensional existentialist approach—carries its own limitations. There can be attachment to a limited view of the senses, to a narrow logos, to the flatland perspective. This creates narrowness of perception, experience, and even ideation. Paradoxically, though it seems opposite to the transcendent view, this too can lead to lack of care for the world. When we refuse any beyondness or divinity to the world, it becomes difficult to generate deep care. While the humanistic, modernist, secular paradigm may care for human beings and environmental concerns because degradation affects humans adversely, it's challenging to cultivate profound care for a world viewed as merely meaningless matter.

This approach may also limit both the depth of freedom and the range of soul-making available, because the actual sense of the world remains very constrained.

The third direction—embracing divinity in and through the world—has its own challenges. It demands tremendous rigor from us intellectually, ethically, and in terms of practice artistry. If we're truly going to open to body, soul, sexuality, and eros as fields of divinity, it requires integrity, clarity, and scrupulous attention to these areas. It's easy to adopt certain language while lacking genuine rigor intellectually, ethically, and meditatively.

These three directions reflect patterns we can observe throughout history. Sociologist Robert Bellah has investigated what he calls "the history of world rejection"—how religious movements relate to and view the world. Building on Max Weber's insights, Bellah acknowledges that world rejection has manifested differently across various world religions and historical periods. However, he notes a striking pattern: "I want to concentrate on the fact that they were all, historically, in some sense rejections, and that world rejection is characteristic of a long and important period of religious history."

Bellah contrasts this with "an equally striking fact, namely the virtual absence of world rejection in what he calls primitive religions"—those existing before the first millennium BCE, prior to the Buddha's time—"and in the modern world."

So historically, we see primitive religions with virtually no world rejection, followed by a middle period where world rejection became quite pronounced in various forms, and then the modern period with again virtually no world rejection.

"Primitive religions," Bellah explains, "are on the whole oriented to a single cosmos. There is no beyond. They know nothing of a wholly different world relative to which the actual world is devoid of value. They are concerned with the maintenance of personal, social and cosmic harmony." The overriding goal of salvation that dominates world-rejecting religions is almost absent in primitive religion. The idea that salvation, freedom, liberation, awakening, or nibbāna involves getting beyond the world simply wasn't present in these earlier traditions.

"World-rejection is no more characteristic of the modern world than it is of primitive religions." This observation is particularly relevant for understanding what influences us culturally, how we read backwards into the Pali Canon, and how we orient ourselves in our spiritual lives.

So this is really what I want to explore in more detail: the relationships with these directions, what I'm calling the transcendent, the sort of existentialist flatland that refuses transcendence, and if you like, the immanence—which may include a transcendence, but actually insists, if you like, on a divinity, some kind of divinity in the world, in life, in matter, in form and the senses.

So, how does soul-making work in these three directions and inclinations? How does the eros work there? Where does it go? And as I said at the beginning, what is the movement of eros on the path or for the path and for awakening if the path and awakening are construed differently in these ways?

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 75

The Holy Life (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h28

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea continues his exploration of eros and the spiritual path, investigating how our relationship with the path itself can become erotic and soul-making. He examines three different approaches to sense pleasure within Buddhist frameworks: the traditional cutting of papañca (conceptual proliferation), the transcendent movement toward the unfabricated, and a soul-making approach that allows imaginal dimensionality to infuse our experience of the world.*
>
> *Burbea draws connections between Vajrayana iconography of divine sexual union and the erotic relationship between wisdom (prajñā) and skillful means (upāya), showing how awakening can be conceived as an intimate union with appearances rather than escape from them. He critiques both reductionist and deflationary approaches to dharma that limit eros, arguing that the degree and kind of a person's eros determines the depth and breadth of their spiritual path.*
>
> *The talk addresses how secular and limited visions of awakening - those focused merely on reducing suffering or being with 'what is' - cannot sustain deep erotic engagement with practice. Burbea suggests that robust spiritual paths require visions of awakening that include otherness, mystery, and dimensionality to nourish the soul-making dynamic. He explores how anti-libidinal psychological patterns can block eros, and how rigid conceptual frameworks prevent the natural expansion of our understanding of path and awakening.*

So we want to unpack, unfold, have a closer look at and inquire into eros and the path—the relationship of eros and the path, but also eros on the path and eros for the path. What is it to have an erotic relationship with the path that one is on? We want to inquire further into this and explore it all, opening it out for our investigation and questioning and practice.

Because of all that we've said so far about what eros is and what it does, to talk about eros and the path, eros on the path, eros for the path, means, of course, to talk about soul-making and the path, soul-making on the path, soul-making with respect to the path. As we've said, eros stimulates soul-making. It's a part of soul-making, and soul-making always involves eros. As we're using those terms, they implicate and involve each other. So eros and soul-making on the path and with respect to the path.

Now, we should also point out that when we talk about path, implicit in talking about path is the idea or the sense or the vision or fantasy of where that path is going—its aim, its direction, its goal. Awakening, whatever the concept, vision, image, fantasy of awakening is. So talking about eros and soul-making with respect to the path necessitates, involves already talking about eros and soul-making with respect to whatever idea and fantasy of awakening we have, or the different ideas and fantasies of awakening.

And further, to tie a third point in, any idea or fantasy of awakening implies an ideation, a logos, regarding the world. In other words, how does the vision of awakening, the idea of awakening, conceive of the world? What's the relationship between world, the senses, what we experience through the senses, which we could call the world, or life? To talk about awakening means also talking about that—senses, world, life, sense pleasure, all that. The relationship with that is implicit in the idea of awakening, the vision of awakening, the image of awakening. And the idea of awakening is implicit in the vision, image of the path.

So if we talk about eros and soul-making and the path, eros and soul-making on or for the path, wrapped up in that is the whole fantasy and logos of awakening. And wrapped up in that is the whole idea about the world, about the senses and life. So that to talk about eros for the path and on the path is not really separate from talking about eros and soul-making and its relationship to the world. What the path and the ideation, the vision of the path allows or disallows, encourages or doesn't, in terms of the directionality of eros and soul-making with respect to the world.

So these three are connected: the world, life, the senses; awakening; and path, eros and the path. Three aspects that are actually interwoven inevitably in each other when we begin to unpack these things. And as was already made clear plenty of times, hopefully by now, when we talk about soul-making, we are talking about eros, psyche, and logos. In other words, this erotic movement, this erotic inclination, attraction, desire; psyche, meaning image and fantasy; and logos, meaning ideation and concept. So all those three—eros, psyche, logos—are wrapped up with those three: path, awakening, and world, or senses, or life. So all these, one set of threes and the other set of threes, they're all completely interrelated, interwoven.

So let's go into this a little bit and take our time. What does the mind do with respect to, let's say, sense pleasure? How does this tie into what the path says about what we do with sense pleasure? Because that's related to how awakening envisages a relationship

with sense pleasure, and tied in with that then is a relationship with the whole world. So eros, sense pleasure, and awakening—there are possible ways they're constellated or conceived of in different frameworks or different visions of path and awakening.

One that you'll be probably quite familiar with, even if you're not familiar with the words, is that when there's pleasant vedanā, a pleasant sensation, when there's sense pleasure, or the possibility of sense pleasure in the future, then what quickly comes in for unawakened human beings is papañca. Of course that applies to unpleasant sensations as well, but here's this possibility of pleasantness—that chocolate cake, whatever it is, that attractive person—and the mind starts spinning around that and veiling it over, hyping it up with papañca. How wonderful this thing is, how beautiful it looks, how dear they are, how interesting they must be, this person, or whatever it is. There's a veil of papañca, of ideation, thinking and imagination. All that's called papañca—complicating.

This is unanimously regarded as a bad thing. Papañca creates more craving and clinging. It's part of that process and creates self and basically creates dukkha and entanglement in dukkha. And the practice is therefore cutting that link, cutting the link from pleasant vedanā, which is unavoidable in life, and what can flow out of that in terms of craving, but now particularly the papañca. So just cut the papañca off.

What you get wrapped up, implicit in that kind of view often, is that when you cut that off, then there's a kind of reductionism. So we are reducing all this hype, clearing away all this hype and all the entanglement, all the veils of illusory thinking and aggrandizement of the object that I'm attracted to in this case, and the imagery that goes with it, the imagination that goes with it, and we're reducing to just sense pleasure—just sense pleasure. So when I'm in a situation which involves sense pleasure, there is just sense pleasure and I'm not adding any more to it with imagination or concept. There's a kind of reductionism in there.

This can go a couple of different ways, which are not really separate, and we've touched on this before. So it can go into a kind of atomistic, a reductionism towards an atomistic process view, as if there is just this moment of bare sense pleasure, which can be revealed with bare attention.

There's the registering of sense pleasure, but nothing more is added to that in terms of imagination or thought. And so really, what reality is that we can be with is just this bare process of bare registration of sense pleasure. Yes, it's enjoyable, but we just register that and we don't add anything. That's the movement there to strip away down to the bare elements of this atomistic and automatic process, at its barest level.

Or it can go into a slightly softer-sounding vision of path and awakening, which is to be with what is. Be in the moment, be with the touch of life, open to the touch of life. And if the touch is pleasant, then that's what you're open to. And if it's enjoyable, that's what you're open to. And if it's unpleasant, that's what you're open to.

Here, implicit too, there's a kind of realism of the "what is," which is assumed to be real—the touch of life. There's usually the assumption of reality wrapped up in that. When I strip away this parpancha, then I'm passively receiving the real touch of life.

Now that one—the touch of life or being with what is—is slightly more romantic. There's a bit more possibility for some kind of eros and soul-making than with the atomistic process view. But the two get mixed. As I said before, sometimes the word "process" gets replaced with the word "flow," for instance, and then you've got river and water analogies or imagery associated with it, which can be a little more juicy.

But still here, with this kind of view of cutting the parpancha, the eros and the soul-making is limited. A path says: imagination or fantasy and thought about the sense object, about the sense pleasure, is parpancha. Cut the parpancha. In cutting the parpancha, psyche and logos are cut, and eros in relationship to the senses, in relationship to the world, is limited and cut as well.

So that's one view. And whether you know the language, familiar with that exact language or not, you'll recognize that kind of thrust of the teaching.

A second view: actually, if you take a closer look at the Pali Canon, while there certainly is that level of teaching about parpancha, there's also... parpancha is filled out in terms of what it actually means, what the Buddha really means by parpancha. It says a lot more—it has a lot more depth to it than what I've just explained.

There's a sutta where I think Sāriputta is explaining about parpancha. And he says that what parpancha really means—it's equivalent to sense perception. In other words, it's equivalent to sense experience. Parpancha is really objectification, meaning making objects, making things—self and this, this lamp, this table, this piece of paper, this person. So parpancha means the making manifold, the construing in the perception, in the actual experience, in the world, into objects, separate objects, things that seem to exist.

So parpancha is actually equivalent with fabricating the perception of objects, the perception of things. So parpancha has this whole other level of meaning to it, beyond this idea of being cut and removed with bare attention, which is there, but there's a whole other level.

In other words, what actually is the Buddha referring to when he says parpancha? What's included in that? What's the extent of that?

There is, if you like, the parpancha of the senses, meaning the equivalence, actually, of senses and parpancha. So that to let go of parpancha is really to let go of the whole edifice of what we were calling clinging, and the whole edifice, the whole building, construction of the fabrication of perception.

So a moment of no-parpancha is really a moment of no fabrication of perception, a moment of the unfabricated. Where there is no-parpancha, there is no object. You can't really talk of anything, as the Buddha said, where all phenomena cease or ways of speaking cease.

Here then, if the path is construed as this—here is the sense experience and we're trying to get rid of parpancha—the whole movement there, again, is towards the unfabricated. The eros, the erotic movement and attraction is away from appearances, away from the world to the unfabricated. So therefore, of course, the psyche and logos, the soul-making in relation to the world is very limited. It's not itself really an object, an erotic object, an object for soul-making.

Compare that with a view—a third view of sense pleasure—which would perhaps make a distinction between parpancha and the craving that goes with that, and soul-making and the eros that goes with that. So parpancha craving on one side, and psyche, soul-making, eros on the other side.

So where there's eros, there will be soul-making. What's the difference? And we've touched on this before. What's the difference between parpancha and psyche, parpancha and soul-making? Eros and craving, we've talked about: the lessening of contraction, the different experience in the energy body, the fact of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic opening things up and liberating the object away from realism and expansion—all that.

So that, for example, if we talk about sense pleasure, eros in touching a lover, in the touch of two lovers, or eros with respect to the touch between two lovers—eros. What's going on for those two lovers when there's the erotic connection there? Is it really just sense pleasure? Is that all it is between two lovers? It's just pleasant sensation?

And would we teach those lovers, "Bring mindfulness to the sensation in your lovemaking? Notice the bare sensation of pleasure"? Is that the guide to profound lovemaking that we're going to offer them? Bare attention and the noticing of sense pleasure—is that all that's going on there?

Or is it just sense pleasure plus papañca? Are we really going to say that? Some people would. Or are we even going to say that in the touch between two lovers, what's really going on is yes, there's some sense pleasure, and then there's some love, meaning care—they care for each other. So what's really communicated and felt in that touch is a combination of sense pleasure and care. Again, some people will say yes, that's what's going on—a slightly more generous view.

Is it, though? Is that all that's going on? It's not that there's no sense pleasure, and hopefully it's not that there's no care. But really, can we inquire into this? Is it papañca? What's the missing ingredient? Or is it actually soul-making? That there is, in the eros, fantasies, images, dimensionalities, beauties—in the erotic other, in the touch itself, in the sense of the eros, in the autoeroticism, all of that. You could call it papañca, but you would probably be missing something. And to call it just sense pleasure and care, again, would be missing something.

Or again—you know, at Gaia House, and I venture this is true for most retreat centers in the insight meditation tradition, probably all retreat centers in the Buddhist tradition—how many cookbooks are there in the kitchen? It's staggering. If you go into the kitchen, there are shelves loaded with cookbooks, and some of the cooks who cook in the kitchen have their own personal cookbooks as well. Really a lot.

What's going on there? So here, in cooking for the retreatants and the staff, is it just pleasure seeking, the pleasure of pleasant food? Is it just pleasure plus care for the retreatants? Or is there not another element—a fantasy of soul-making in relation to the food? All these cooking programs, all these cookbooks with their fantastic photography and suggestions of the abundance of the earth, the fruit of the earth, the freshness, the interconnectedness with nature, the sophistication of certain orientations to food, the sophistication of the palate and the refinement of sensitivity, or the interconnectedness with all things there.

Wrapped up in this relationship with food and in the movement of preparing food is soul-making, is fantasy, is logos. It cannot be, I don't think, reduced to sense pleasure plus care. Or you can notice when it is—what a different relationship. Different kinds of cooks cook very different meals. Sometimes when it's just about care, for instance—make it pleasant—it's a very different presentation, a very different orientation and relationship.

Or again, in Vajrayana teachings, when the teachings see all appearances as divine—there is in that already some tendency that will tend to transform the vedanā into pleasant. But again, this tantric movement is not just about sense pleasure, not about just enjoying sense pleasure, something very cheap versions seem to mistake it for. And

you could say, "Well, that's just papañca," and offer a kind of dismissal of that whole Vajrayana movement and intention. Is seeing appearances as divine just sense pleasure? Is it just sense pleasure and papañca? Or is it the movement of soul-making?

There is, in that and in the cooking and in the lover's touch, this eros and soul-making with respect to the senses. In other words, how are the senses viewed? What eros and soul-making with respect to the senses, the touch of the world? Certainly with respect to sense pleasure, but actually also with respect to neutral and unpleasant. We're looking at that—what's the eros and soul-making that's allowed by the conception, by the vision with respect to the world and the world of the senses, and in this case, particularly sense pleasure.

If we expand that a little and touch on some Vajrayana teachings, which are very much related to what we're talking about here with soul-making and imaginal and eros, then you get, as I said, these icon statues or tankas or paintings of...

of sexual union between the female and the male Buddhas or bodhisattvas. There's eros between the feminine and the masculine aspects. The feminine is often—or rather the prajña, the wisdom, the insight—is depicted as female in those iconographies. And the masculine often represents what's called upāya, which is usually translated as skillful means.

So in a way, this erotic union, this icon of erotic union between the feminine and masculine, is actually representing aspects of Buddhahood as a union of wisdom and means. The union of feminine wisdom and masculine means, traditionally depicted in this way.

This becomes particularly interesting in light of what we're exploring, because this word upāya in the Vajrayāna tradition can also refer to the maṇḍala. And the maṇḍala is, if you like, not just this arrangement of sand painting or whatever it is, but at its deeper level represents the world of divine appearances.

In other words—and we've talked about this on the re-enchanting retreat—one level of what the maṇḍala is, is this. Right here. If I see it the right way, where I am sitting right now, where I am walking right now, wherever I find myself, in the transubstantiation, the transformation of perception, becomes the maṇḍala. It becomes the means, the skillful means.

In other words, the world of appearances, of divine appearances, when the world and the appearances and the senses are seen a certain way, it becomes the upāya. What is the means of the Buddha? The skillful means. The skillful means is the world. This is what the Buddha uses.

So that means that this sexual union depicted in the iconography—between the feminine prajña, the feminine wisdom, which at its level of Buddhahood actually has the word jñāna, which is related to our word gnosis—the sexual union between the gnosis of the Buddha and the upāya, the divine appearances, the world and sense experience. There's a sexual union, there's an erotic connection.

How different this is from the first version—cutting the papañca, where there is almost no eros allowed, or moving away from it towards the unfabricated, there's no eros, very little eros allowed with respect to the senses and with respect to the world. We'll revisit this several times as we go on.

But here there's eros depicted, symbolized, between, if you like, the experiencer, the wise experiencer, and the experience—in other words, the senses, the world, the divine appearances—between the knower and the known, between the divine subject, that Buddha, that Buddha nature, that ultimate gnosis, that ultimate mind, if you like, ultimate kind of consciousness, between the divine subject, that divine subject, and the divine object of sense experience, of world.

Some people—this is a bit of an aside—actually refer to the coalescence of emptiness and appearance, and that has a couple of different levels of meaning. One meaning, which I've referred to in the past, is just that appearances are empty. You can't get an emptiness that's separate from appearances. That's what it's referring to, and appearances are empty through and through.

There's another level in the teachings, or rather in some traditions of the teaching, which actually redefine, if you like, or expand on the very word emptiness. The word emptiness means different things in different Buddhist traditions, and you should be aware of this. So it can mean really quite a range of things—there's quite a range of what it's taken to mean, the word emptiness.

Mostly I use it as the absence of inherent existence—that things don't exist independently, from their own side, independent of the way of looking, so to speak. That's mostly how I use it. But there are traditions where emptiness and this jñāna, this gnosis, are equivalent—this Buddha's gnosis, this ultimate mind, if you like, ultimate citta.

So that's actually the meaning of emptiness, more than just absence of inherent existence. It includes the absence of inherent existence of what is observed, what appears, and it knows that absence of inherent existence, and it also includes the absence of its own inherent existence. This jñāna, this gnosis, this Buddha nature, this ultimate knowing, is also lacking in inherent existence.

But there's also, as well as all that, a kind of non-duality between the knower and the known, so that this Buddha nature, this ultimate awareness, if you like, encompasses both the knowing and the world, the senses, the appearances.

There's some case in the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra, the Heart Sutra, which is a very famous sutra, where it actually says "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." I used to think that was just bad Sanskrit, and what it should say is "form is empty," rather than "form is emptiness."

And then it continues through all the aggregates. Vedanā is emptiness, emptiness is vedanā. Perception is emptiness, emptiness is perception. Saṅkhāra, mental formations, is emptiness, emptiness is mental formations. Consciousness is emptiness, emptiness is consciousness.

But from some case, and I think some scholars would very much argue, do argue, that actually the meaning of the word emptiness in some of those Prajñāpāramitā sutras is actually in this much larger sense, meaning to refer to the Dharmakāya in this bigger sense of the Buddha's gnosis of the ultimate kind of awareness, if you like, of the Buddha nature.

That's a slight tangent, but I think it's important to know if you really want to get into all this stuff and explore the teachings and understand that there are important divisions to be aware of. And I think I've said in the past, everyone might use the word emptiness. There's really, really quite a range of differences in what people are actually talking about when they use that. And there's a lot of confusion that comes when we don't really understand what a person means by emptiness, etc., or dharmakāya, or Buddha nature, or these words.

But the important point for right now is that, as I said, there's a very different notion implicit, a very different eros allowed between the practitioner and the world of the senses there, and the world in general.

Because this also gets mirrored in Kabbalistic teachings, and we'll come back to all this later. But this union that's depicted in the iconography there between, if you like, aspects of Buddhahood, aspects of the Buddha—aspects of Buddha nature, aspects of the ultimate, aspects of the Buddha's gnosis, whatever—this union between those aspects is actually to be practiced, to be mirrored, if you like, or mimicked by humans in their practice.

In other words, that iconography is encouraging and allowing, but also encouraging, a certain way of looking, a certain way of relating, a certain way of conceiving of senses and sense pleasure and the whole movement of what awakening is and the path and

the soul-making in relation to the world of the senses. So, as I said, it's all wrapped up together there. But this union that's depicted between aspects of, let's call it Buddha nature, is something that is to be mirrored, or better, mimicked, echoed—mimicked is a good word—in human beings' practice, in a practitioner's practice.

So you can see just there, with those three or four different kinds of castings of the path in relationship to sense pleasure, in the first one that the bare senses, or what's received in the senses, the sense pleasure, is regarded—whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—as a basic kind of reality. Missing a whole level of the emptiness of that very sense perception itself, of the sense pleasure, of the sense unpleasantness, whatever. And it also, as I mentioned, as I stressed, limits the soul-making eros in relation to the senses itself, and in relation, therefore, to the world and to life, because world and life is what we get through the senses.

In the second, this movement kind of beyond, this transcendent thrust that we're referring to that refers to puncture—and the senses are kind of coterminous in what they refer to, and movement is beyond the world of the senses. To drop the senses, if you're trying to puncture that and open up to the unfabricated, then there, the unfabricated is regarded as real. And the word fabricated implies a fabrication, something not real. The unfabricated is reality. Everything else, the world of the senses, is essentially papañca. And rather than some kind of basic reality revealable there, the world of the senses is not reality. Unfabricated is reality in that view.

And there's a strong case for that view, of a reading of the Pali Canon that way, very much. But there, the soul-making is only in relation to that unfabricated. That's the thrust. That's what I want to open to. That's what I want to penetrate and reach. And then the fantasy of the path is around that.

In the third, the versions—either the soul-making vision of what we're talking about with the imaginal, etc., and eros, or the Vajrayana versions of that, where they, in fact, overlap, I would say—there's not the reality so much assumed of an independent existence, either of the unfabricated, and certainly not of the senses. Or I should say, most Vajrayana teachings, I would say. The emptiness is implicit there, or in the soul-making, we say, knowing image as image.

But the general point here is there's always a way of looking. There's always a conceptual framework and there's always a fantasy involved regarding sense pleasure, vedanā, and world. There's always a way of looking. In places I've said before, there's always some logos and some psyche, some image and fantasy in relationship with the senses, with vedanā, with sense pleasure or unpleasant or whatever it is, with world. And that's determined by context, by teaching, by intention, by the conceptual frame-

work of whatever tradition of Dharma we're being exposed to or we're in. And it has implications for eros and soul-making in all kinds of ways—certainly in relation to the senses and the world and what's allowed there. Actually more than that. I'll come back to that, but let's just start there.

So we're looking at: where does the eros get to go? Where does it get to be directed or to flow? Where is it allowed?

So a person—and this is not just a hypothetical example I'm going to give—but a person could have with them a lot of eros flowing in their system, a lot of libido, if we use that word, a lot of eros towards the unfabricated. They really want to know that. And towards the opening to, the penetration of, the realization of deep emptiness in their life. And they bring their energy and their intelligence and their creativity and their really into practice in that direction, everything that's involved in that directionality, and they reflect a lot, and they're experimenting, and all that.

But in relation to the world—there, with the things of the world and the senses, there is only craving, there is not eros. In other words, there's no fantasy and image with respect to the world and the things of the senses. The imaginal is not operating there. The imaginary may be operating, the imaginal is not operating.

And then this person is putting all their energy, all their libido in the direction of the unfabricated or deep emptiness. And if you like, just trying to kind of let go of their craving with respect to the world, but they can't shake their addiction—and they're calling it an addiction. They can't shake their addictions to food, keep going to the refrigerator, what's going on there, to sense pleasure in different forms, and to what they were calling ego aggrandizement. Despite the certain amount of, actually relatively deep penetration into emptiness, and despite a certain amount of practice with that, and a certain amount of practice with the jhānas.

What's missing here? What's going on?

In terms of the jhānas, I should say—this is again a slight side point, but it's important to make—the second jhāna is characterized by a really overwhelming, maybe overwhelming at first, then you get used to it, a very deep, deep upwelling of happiness and joy.

And that's the essential ingredient of the second jhana—one becomes really absorbed in that happiness, suffused and saturated in this joy that runs through the body, heart and mind, permeating and filling the entire being.

This repeated sitting in the second jhana has a direct bearing on our addiction to sense pleasure and our need for sense gratification. All the jhanas do, but something particular about the second jhana addresses our relationship with sense pleasure. With time, we're weaned off our habitual seeking—it's no longer where we go to look for happiness. We develop a much richer source of fulfillment.

But this weaning is only possible if we really sit and marinate in the jhanas, particularly the second jhana. A little bit here and there, just dipping in or racing through because you want to experience all eight jhanas before moving on to insight meditation—this style of practicing probably won't make much difference to the operation and pervasiveness of craving in our life. We have to really marinate, really sit in it again and again for hours, soaking it up until something deep in the being is transformed in terms of patterns, needs, and where we truly feel fulfillment. But only if we sit underwater in that happiness like a sponge for hours upon hours. Then it makes a lifetime difference.

The main point, though, isn't about jhanas. Could it be that these practitioners need something completely different? Rather than having all their eros directed toward the unfabricated, with soul-making fantasy centered only around that movement toward the transcendent thrust of the path—while refusing the imaginal in relation to the world, allowing only craving there—maybe what they actually need, completely contrary to conventional assessment or wisdom, is for the world itself to be imagined. Food, even ego, sense pleasure—all of this needs to be imagined.

We need to let the imaginal infuse world, food, ego, whatever we're addicted to. Through this infusion, as is characteristic of the imaginal, these experiences gain dimensionality. Food becomes more than just sense pleasure. Even ego, even self begins to receive image. The whole world of the senses starts to gain dimensionality, and through that dimensionality, some kind of sense of divinity emerges.

Eating or drinking—a simple cup of tea, whatever we're consuming—becomes divine nectar. This is an example of allowing the imaginal to infuse the realm of the senses, instead of refusing the imaginal dimension there and just trying to cut the craving. Why isn't it working? "I'm doing my emptiness practice, I'm really committed to that. I'm doing jhana practice. Why isn't it working after all these years?"

Might it actually be that there's a doorway opening into freedom here that's quite the opposite of what we assumed?

If divine nectar sounds silly or contrived—and it can be contrived—I would say practice with this. Practice in relationship to the world, to the senses and sense pleasure. Images await you. Images that work for you are waiting to be discovered. You don't have to choose the standard Vajrayana ones—divine nectar is a standard Vajrayana practice or instruction for seeing food and drink. But we're practicing the imaginal in a more open and creative, less prescriptive way. Images that work specifically for you are waiting for you to discover them in relation to the senses, to sense pleasures, to the things of the world.

What's the difference between this and what one of my oncologists said about taking holidays—that sense of escaping something? What's the difference between seeking sense pleasure as an escape, seeking to escape something in sense pleasure, or seeking escape from the world into jhana or the unfabricated, as the Buddha sometimes described? What's the difference between that and something that brings embodied soul-making into our sense experience, into relationship—an erotic, soul-making, imaginal relationship with the experience of the senses, with life, with the world?

Pilgrimage instead of vacation.

Nietzsche wrote: "The degree and kind of a man's sexuality reaches up into the topmost summit of his spirit." I'll leave this in his gender-biased language for now. He wrote this in a book containing mostly single-sentence aphorisms, so the immediate context isn't exactly apparent. But what if we replace sexuality with eros? "The degree and kind of a person's eros reaches up into the topmost summit of her or his spirit."

This starts to make sense in terms of everything we're discussing. The degree and kind of eros will shape and determine, open to lesser or greater extents and ranges, the degree and kind of spirituality or path that a person chooses or engages in. The degree and kind of a person's eros determines the degree and kind of the path—and not only in obvious ways.

What is it, then, that might limit eros with regard to the path? If eros determines the path, and if eros itself becomes constrained, it will inevitably limit the kind of path we engage with, the very notion of what spirituality encompasses.

This investigation reveals fascinating and varied dimensions. Richard Tarnas, in his beautiful work *The Passion of the Western Mind*, traces the intellectual currents that have shaped Western culture. He points to a pivotal moment in England: the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Following this restoration, prominent clergy, philosophers, and doctors began emphasizing what they called "sober natural philosophy"—a

mechanistic understanding of the world as composed of inert material particles governed by fixed laws, the Cartesian worldview that emerged with the scientific revolution.

This emphasis on sobriety served a specific purpose: to undercut what Tarnas calls the "passion-inflaming enthusiasm" supported by esoteric worldviews and radical religious streams of that era. Here we see how a particular kind of logos actively undermined the eros that people could bring to their relationship with the world and their spiritual paths. The very word "enthusiasm" reveals this dynamic—*entheos*, the influx of the divine. What was being systematically squeezed out was juiciness, exuberance, ecstasy, breadth of emotional range, and the heat of passionate love.

We've touched on this before: how inspiration from the divine, imagination, and other ways of knowing were replaced by an epistemology that dismissed anything falling outside the narrow confines of emerging Western scientific materialism. The heat of passionate love gave way to mere warm goodwill. Philosophy and religion became sanitized, sobered.

But notice how logos and fantasy intertwine here. Alongside the conceptual framework of the scientific revolution and the so-called Enlightenment ran a powerful fantasy image of sobriety itself. This raises a crucial question: does this pattern persist today? Are juiciness, exuberance, ecstasy, breadth of affect, and passionate love still being squeezed out of certain dharma paths, creating that same sober tone, that same suspicious regard for the ecstatic, the *entheos*?

Consider how some process views—the atomistic, moment-by-moment analysis of *vedanā*, sense perception, and mental formations—mirror that mechanistic philosophy of 1660s England. This too can become a kind of mechanistic processing that systematically undercuts eros. The emphasis on cooling, on simplifying, deliberately excludes and shuts out certain dimensions of experience.

Sometimes what's worse is the subtle disempowerment of eros through apparent acceptance: "It's okay if you feel passionate, it's okay." But this differs radically from actually giving passion a meaningful place and purpose—honoring the ecstasy, the *entheos*, the metaphorical intoxication, the wildness, heat, and passion that comes with complexifying, with richness, with imaginal engagement.

This "everything's okay, just let it come and go" attitude can prove more destructive to the erotic, soul-making, and imaginal dimensions than outright opposition. At least clear opposition acknowledges the power of what it resists.

What's particularly striking about that historical moment in England is how political motivations shaped these limitations on both logos and eros. After the perceived chaos following the monarchy's removal and subsequent restoration, the imperative became clear: preserve order, reinstate stability, keep the lid on passion. The range of permissible logos—the scope of religious imagery and worldview—became deliberately constrained.

These limitations on eros, psyche, and logos were, in significant part, politically motivated. And this raises the essential question: was this merely a historical anomaly, or do similar dynamics continue shaping our spiritual landscapes today?

The Logos, if you like, shapes or allows a certain amount of eros—or rather, shapes and allows a certain amount of eros that determines the eros. And the eros and the soul-making shape and allow and determine the logos, as we've touched on before. But let's go into this a little more from a psychological point of view.

Again, a little bit of history. There's a stream of philosophy—modern Western philosophy—called pragmatism. Some people regard William James, the psychologist and philosopher who was active at the turn of the century from the 1800s to the 1900s, as one of the first exponents of this view. In a way, what he was saying was similar to what we're saying about ways of looking and conceptual frameworks. Rather than thinking about reality in absolute terms, he emphasized what works and what effect a certain way of looking or conceptual framework has. It's pragmatic—something to practice. If you put it into practice, into praxis, and it works for you, then it's something worth pursuing.

More recently, in the 20th century, the philosopher Richard Rorty—who died not too long ago—also labels himself or is labeled as a pragmatist philosopher. But there's a difference between Richard Rorty's version and William James' version. Writers like Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman stress the difference between these different kinds of pragmatism.

I would say that Richard Rorty is what could be called a deflationary pragmatist. Although he's also saying don't get hung up on this idea about reality—that you can come to some way of determining reality or find a single right way of looking and realizing the true nature of things—and advocates moving toward this more pragmatic view of what works for different cultures, there's something in his project that seems intent on disallowing anything that involves enthusiasm, anything that involves a perception or way of looking that would open the perception to other dimensions, to religiosity and divinity.

Somehow wrapped up in what he's saying is a kind of deflation. It's almost like: there is no truth, there's nothing to really penetrate and know, human beings are very limited, we can't really know things. Just calm down and accept this fate and give up on any sense of being able to expand the perception of things in a way that brings enthusiasm. This runs through his philosophy, as far as I can tell from what I've read.

So there's a deflationary pragmatism, and one wonders: where does that come from? Why is it that some people, having grasped hold of the same idea, thrust toward deflation—a popping, a bursting of bubbles and balloons? While other people allow this expansion of the eros and the psyche, an expansion of the balloons, without falling into realism?

I think we can recognize this in different versions of the Dharma as well, in different teachings and emphases. There is a kind of deflationary explanation or take on emptiness, for example: everything's empty, nothing's really there, there's nothing mystical, it's all just interconnected phenomena, there's no ultimate basis. The whole movement sounds like a similar conceptual framework, but the thrust is to burst bubbles—just calm down, don't get too excited by mystical inspiration. It's a deflationary emptiness.

Versus—and I can't help revealing my leanings here—the realization of emptiness being something utterly mystical, utterly wondrous, profound, something to really be excited about. There's something so transcendent about the usual way of seeing, something that brings wonder and joy and dimensionality to existence, and all kinds of possibilities. Instead of closing down possibilities, it actually opens them up.

Emptiness allows a flatland, one-dimensional view, certainly. I have that view a lot of the time, or it's one I can pick up and put down. It allows that, but it also allows much more mystical conceptions and views. Whereas a deflationary take on emptiness tends to, by default, encourage this more one-dimensional view.

Sometimes that extends to the whole Dharma, so that an approach to it is essentially deflationary: simplify, calm down, just be even. Don't get too excited, don't get too depressed. There's a kind of "it's just this—this is what you have to deal with, just this." The flatlanding, reducing the dimensions, is also a kind of deflation—deflating the eros, deflating the soul-making dynamic, the way that expands and grows.

One gets deflationary psychotherapeutic theories or approaches as well: just calm down, just ground more, just rein it in, just sober up a little bit. And I wonder sometimes if there's even a kind of deflationary approach to art, to the arts or different arts.

I mentioned in an earlier talk the Scottish psychoanalyst Douglas Fairbairn, who was active in the mid-20th century. His understanding of libido—similar to what we're calling eros, though lacking the dimensionality we're exploring—centers on movement toward making connection.

In Fairbairn's view, the human psyche splits into two dynamics: a libidinal ego that thrusts toward connecting with objects—essentially with others—and an anti-libidinal ego that constellates out of fear that the object will reject us or be unavailable. This anti-libidinal ego functions as a kind of protective alter ego, dampening our enthusiasm: "Don't get too excited, don't make yourself too available, don't reach toward that too much, because you might get disappointed, they might reject you, they might not be there for you."

There's an ongoing struggle throughout life—until one becomes more conscious of it, and even then one is simply more aware of it and perhaps less controlled by it—between this libidinal thrust and the anti-libidinal restraint, between the libidinal ego and the anti-libidinal ego.

If we take Fairbairn's insight and expand his meaning of libido to encompass what we're calling eros, we might ask: how much does this limiting of eros through anti-libidinal movement stem essentially from fear of disappointment? "Don't puff things up. Don't get your hopes up. Don't make too much of things"—whether that's the path, our sense of the world or reality, or the unfabricated. There's a restraining of what we're calling eros, a limitation born from this anti-libidinal ego that wants to protect us from disappointment, or from the discomfort of allowing that much eros, that much libido to flow through our being.

How much does this anti-libidinal movement of the psyche actually end up limiting the eros and then limiting the soul-making? How much does it limit the eros-psyche-logos dynamic because we're pulling back the eros, not allowing it because of fear, protection, discomfort, or some other defensive reason? And then we choose something that's more of the deflationary philosophy—the deflationary version of the dharma or emptiness, deflationary psychology or whatever it is. How much of this choice actually comes from what Fairbairn would call the anti-libidinal movement?

Let's explore this further in terms of eros and how it chooses, creates, or finds a path—which path, what kind of path it will choose, find, or create.

We've established that eros needs a perception of otherness. Eros requires this other, this erotic object that is other than itself. It's not just collapse into union, into oneness. Eros needs a perception of otherness, and something in that other needs to have some-

thing more or beyond in it. There needs to be a fascination with the other—this is necessary to eros. Part of this fascination is that there's more there in this other, in this otherness, that I don't quite know yet, that I'm not quite in contact with. I can maybe intuit it, or I've been told about it, or I kind of half-perceive it, but eros needs this perception of otherness and, within that otherness, this sense of more and beyond.

What this means in relation to eros for the path is profound. In order to have eros for the path—to be deeply, fully in love with the path and with where it's heading, with awakening—I need to have a vision, a sense, a logos or image of the path and of awakening that has some otherness to it. There has to be something other to know. Just as with another being—a person or thing—the path itself has to have some dimension of otherness, some sense of more, of beyond that I want to know.

For eros to really impregnate the path, to have a truly erotic connection with the path and with awakening—when people are deeply, fully in love with the path and with that movement toward awakening, however they conceive it—something has to constellate. The vision, the sense, the logos and image of the path and awakening has to have some otherness to it, something other that I don't already know.

If my sense of the path and awakening is just about reducing my suffering—if that's my vision and logos, my conception of what the path is—that doesn't allow eros. It doesn't allow enough eros. It's just about reducing my suffering. I can't really fall in love with such a path. It might be very useful to me. I might engage in it, might even be fairly disciplined in my engagement with practice to reduce my suffering. But if that's the only thing in it for me, if that's how I'm seeing and sensing and conceiving of the path, eros cannot really establish in relation to such a vision. I can't really fall in love with that kind of path.

Some secular visions or conceptions of awakening, some visions of where one is headed in secular versions of mindfulness, some secular approaches to how mindfulness is taught and characterized...

Their conceptual frameworks and visions of awakening are characterized by an absence of there being much else to discover or perceive than what is already obviously true, apparently obviously true, or apparent—more than we already know. They're actually characterized by the absence of much beyond to discover or to perceive. The vision of awakening isn't really that there is much more beyond what we already sense and perceive to know.

It may be I learn or discover not to believe thoughts of how I am, or how she is, or he is, or how terrible this situation is, or how wonderful this situation is. And again there's this sort of even keel—go for the equanimity. Don't get too seduced by something seeming wonderful, don't get too taken in by something seeming terrible. So there's an acknowledgment of that, but basically, this that I currently perceive is, for the most part, taken as reality. For the most part. And the vision, the concept of practice or path or awakening is really just a disentangling of my relationship with that reality.

There's not much more to perceive. I'm just changing my relationship by more letting go, by just not being so entangled with that reality. But the reality is pretty much the reality, except for the kind of crazy bunch of things I get into about believing this person's like that, or this situation is absolutely awful, or whatever it is. There is not, then, in such a conception, such a vision of awakening, very much more at all to open the perception to or to discover. Maybe a little bit—oh, there's not really a self, there's just a process, so that's a little bit more. But there's not really that much erotic connection one can have with that idea, or soul-making connection. Again, it's in itself quite a deflationary idea.

Compare that conception or vision of awakening with a path that says something like: awakening means to discover your true nature. Or awakening involves the realization of the thorough and deep emptiness of all things. Or awakening involves an opening to the unfabricated. Or awakening involves a union with the divine, or a becoming divine. In any such conceptions and visions of awakening, the otherness there, the beyond what I already know, what I've already tasted, that is in the vision, in the conception of awakening, and therefore of the path, is much, much larger.

There's more otherness there, and therefore more eros. You understand? More eros, more otherness—because there's more otherness, more beyond, there's more eros can get constellated there, and more soul-making. Very different logoi and fantasies of awakening allow, if you like, and constellate different erotic relations with the path, degrees of eros with the path itself and with practice.

But then even within the limits of what we might call secular religions—why I'm using that phrase is, you know, the religion in the sense of just an insistence, a kind of dogmatic insistence that there is just this, there is just this one dimension. And that dogma, that insistence makes it a kind of religion, but a secular religion, if you like. But even within limits of secular religions, and there might be different versions of that, there's still going to be—and this is where it's interesting—eros is in us as human beings, so there's still going to be a relationship with some kind of otherness that is constellated by the eros.

In other words, the eros in the being will constellate a relationship with some kind of otherness, even within the limits of a secular religious view and vision of the path and awakening. And that relationship with whatever the otherness is that it constellates will be erotic to some extent. In other words, from our definition, there will be a wanting of more contact, of more intimacy, of the aliveness of that contact and intimacy with whatever this kind of other is.

So then you get presentations of awakening or visions of awakening, concepts of awakening that have to do exactly with awakening being an intimacy with life, for example. And again, what's life there? Well, it's—good question—it's senses or whatever, or a flowing with life. In other words, again, here, it's not just a reduction of suffering. The eros has come in, created a kind of otherness, but in this case, the otherness is with what? It's with that one dimensionality. And it's trying to make more of that otherness.

So life becomes an erotic object. Life with a capital L. Intimacy with life. It becomes the erotic object. And there's a kind of romantic, if you like, quasi—I'm using that in a loose sense—the romance of life and the intimacy of life and being with life and flowing with life or whatever. And the touch of life. Life becomes the erotic object. There's a kind of romantic relationship with an elevation of the importance of life, give it a capital L, and an elevation also in the importance of this intimacy with it and the touching life. And there's this desire for the contact, the intimacy, the touch of life.

So eros is finding some otherness there, and this otherness is life, if you like, and it does what it does. It pumps it up, it gives it importance, it gives it a kind of romance in the relationship with it, and there's the desire for the intimacy. But there, the eros is limited into how much it can actually expand the notion of life, if the logos is absolutely rigid.

So, even then, that kind of erotic relationship with life and intimacy with life and that vision of awakening will only allow a limited eros, a limited falling in love with the path and a limited involvement of the whole being with the practice, with the path, with that movement towards awakening. There's still eros trying to do its thing, constellating another, creating a kind of romantic relationship with that other, trying to fill it out, elevating its importance, desiring more contact. But actually it's limited.

Now, if we take Nietzsche's quote again, he may say—and he doesn't pull any punches, Nietzsche—so he may say, well, many on that kind of path, that kind of secular religious path, he might say, well, they just don't have much eros, and they don't have much psyche, and that's why they're okay with that. We might more fairly say, I think, or more generously say, if a person has limited eros psyche, limited libido—and remember, that might just be, you know, people are different.

People are different. If a person has limited libido, limited eros, and a certain circumscribed psyche, then that conceptual framework with its limited otherness—an otherness which cannot expand or become multidimensional because that's refused—might be enough for their souls. There's already a limited amount of eros-psyche-logos fertilization and expansion anyway, so a limited vision and idea of path and awakening comes out of that limited eros-psyche-logos dynamic. This limited vision, this constrained conceptual frame, this bounded image and fantasy of the path and of awakening might be sufficient for some people.

The opposite is equally true. A limited conceptual frame, a restricted logos and circumscribed image of the path and awakening will also limit the eros for the path and awakening—the eros that we can genuinely feel and embody in relationship to the path and the movement toward awakening. The question is: where are those limits coming from? How is it that the eros or the psyche or the logos gets constrained in these ways? Some people encounter limits, but the crucial inquiry is: where does that limitation originate?

If there's a genuine limit on the libido, on the eros, on the psyche, then it might be enough. A constrained conception of what the path is and what awakening is—a vision that doesn't extend much beyond what we already sense and know—may be sufficient for that soul. It depends where the limits are coming from.

Someone with much more libido, much more eros, will need something quite different. If they begin to have an erotic connection with the path and with the whole movement toward awakening and that vision, they will need a bigger vision, a more expansive idea of what the path is and involves, what awakening is and demands and involves and opens to. They need more otherness. They need more beyond. Why? Because the eros needs it and will create it. It will discover it, find it.

People with abundant eros need a greater, wider path, a deeper path. They need more to discover, more to move into. They need a beyond—a more beyond. This "more" that they want and discover because of the eros and because of the expansion of vision that they create and discover will include, at some point, some kind of sense of dimensionality and divinity. In other words, divinity gets somehow included on the path.

If they start with just a flat-line view, dimensionality will be added to that. Eventually transcendence will be added to that. Or if they're oriented only toward the transcendent, eventually the path, the vision, the concept of the path will have to fill out to include the immanent as well. It can't just be about the unfabricated. Why? Because the

eros is pushing, penetrating, opening, expanding, and in its relationship to the erotic object of the path and awakening, it opens and expands the sense of the path and awakening—what the dharma is.

So it can't be just transcendent. It can't be just this world. It will be both, eventually, gradually. If there is no sense of the divine, a sense of the divine will come. If the sense of the divine is only in the direction of an impersonal divinity, then it will add the personal. If it's only personal, it will add the impersonal.

There's this movement toward discovering more and more, actually including and embracing more and more in the path—gradually, gradually. Gradually more and more depth, more and more range, more and more fullness, multidimensionality, more and more richness, more and more complexity. More to the path, more to the sense of what awakening is and can be. All of this comes from the eros, predominantly from the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

People with abundant eros will, if they're not blocked, tend to keep opening in these different directions gradually over time—not smoothly necessarily, but persistently. A vision, a sense, a concept of the path and awakening which doesn't ask for any more, or much more, to be perceived or discovered of reality or true nature than is already apparent to normal, popular, consensually agreed perception—such a logos and vision of the path and awakening will limit the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos, and the eros in all kinds of ways. This includes limitations in relation to what we conceive of and our image of the path and of awakening.

If a person's eros is strong enough, though, it will expand that image, that fantasy, that concept of what the path is and of what awakening is. Or it will actually shatter it—shatter whatever the current image, fantasy, and logos is—and create or discover or find a larger view, a larger concept, a larger conceptual framework, a broader, richer, deeper, more far-reaching image and fantasy of path and awakening.

If this logos of nothing more to discover—which is usually implicit, by the way, sometimes explicit, but often implicit, not actually voiced yet present nonetheless—if this logos is too rigidly held, stuck in place, or not questioned sufficiently, then the eros and the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic cannot expand. It cannot flower. The soul-making movement is thwarted. It lacks the necessary food or sustenance, the necessary soil or basis. It doesn't have this beyond to nourish it, to move into, to open toward.

And the basis we're speaking of, remember, is a basis of groundlessness—groundlessness because of the teachings of emptiness and because of seeing image as image. It's precisely this groundlessness that allows the expansion, the deepening, the enrichment, the creation and discovery of more of the object—in this case the path, but whatever else we're engaging with as well: the world, the beloved other, whatever.

The eros can be blocked, and it can be blocked by this kind of anti-libidinal movement of fear, if you like, or self-protectionism or something of that nature. It appears as self-protectionism. But also the image, the fantasy can be blocked, or the logos can be blocked. So it can block from any direction, and can be blocked in any way.

We've been talking about limited paths and what I was calling secular-religious and one-dimensional views, but it can also be blocked with a transcendent view—just blocking it into that direction, for example. So the blocks can work from any direction and in any direction.

We'll continue with this exploration and delve deeper into these movements.

CHAPTER 76

'The Holy Life' (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this profound exploration of dharma practice, Rob Burbea examines four fundamental approaches to the spiritual path: the medical model (focused on reducing dukkha), the scientific model (research into consciousness), the religious model (replicating the Buddha's awakening), and the artistic model (open-ended creativity and originality). He investigates how our unconscious fantasies and images of the path, awakening, and ourselves as practitioners profoundly shape what becomes possible in our practice.*
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> *Burbea argues that when our vision of the path lacks authenticity to our soul's needs, practice becomes dry and stagnant, often leading to ego-driven self-measurement rather than genuine soul-making. Drawing on the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, he suggests that the soul requires beauty, mystery, dimensionality, and a sense of infinities to expand into. The talk explores how rigid adherence to limited concepts of awakening can block the natural movement between transcendent realization and immanent engagement with the world.*
>
> *This teaching offers a radical reconceptualization of awakening as an open-ended, infinite process rather than a fixed attainment. Burbea suggests that our very ways of imagining the path are themselves part of what awakening means, calling for a transformation of idols into icons - converting fixed, limited concepts into portals of infinite depth and possibility.*

We're looking into the whole area of Eros for the path, Eros on the path, and Eros for awakening—and how that ties in to, or what are the implications there, how it's connected to what's then allowed or supported in terms of Eros with regard to the world, to the senses, to sense experience, to what we might call life.

When we come to talk about Eros, we must be talking about soul-making. That involves images and ideas. So the ideas, the vision, the concept, the fantasies and images of path are involved in this. We're looking at that, wanting to open that investigation up a little bit. Implicit in that will be ideas and images, fantasies about awakening, of course, since path leads to awakening or in that direction. And implicit in that is again ideas and, if you like, a range—what range of images in relation to the world, the senses and life. Those three, we said, are connected.

Let's go a little bit more into this, specifically with regard to eros for the path, an erotic relationship with the path, with the path of practice, with that movement towards awakening. Most people, if you ask them, who've been practicing a few decades, will say, "Oh yes, I'm still very passionate," and so on. But when we say eros, we're talking about fire—fire on the path, fire for the path, fire for awakening.

So there, in comparing how that fire is now, how that eros is now in one's practice compared with ten years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago—is it honestly still the same intensity, depth, beauty? Are we still opening? There's still the penetration, still the inquiry, the heat of that, the flame of that, the passion. And that includes, sometimes, the hassle of that. Fire can be aggravating. There's this possibility of the breaking of the vessels, the shattering of what we once knew and how we once oriented, and the radicality that's involved with questioning and opening at a very deep level in terms of what's fundamental.

It's interesting for some of you who have been practicing many, many years to just really ask yourself about how the Eros is now compared to twenty or thirty years ago. This is what right now I'm interested in: Eros on the path, Eros for the path, and how that involves logos and psyche and sense of ideas and concepts and images and fancies of path, of awakening, of world, senses, life.

If the Four Noble Truths are central to our sort of conception of the Dharma—and for most insight meditation practitioners we'd place that there, even whether they were conscious of it or not—that means that we're approaching the path, we're approaching practice and approaching the movement towards awakening or what awakening is, with a vision and a concept that has to do with ending or at least reducing suffering. Because that's what the Four Noble Truths are referring to: there is suffering, there's a cause for suffering, there is the possibility of ending suffering, and there's a way to that. So the whole of practice really is oriented towards lessening suffering. Freedom, meaning freedom from suffering.

Even if we put aside for now what those words mean—suffering and freedom and all that—we can say that this is a very common approach. Let's call it for now the medical model: the approach to practice and to the path that centralizes the reduction of suffering. The Four Noble Truths actually are, in fact, modelled on the Buddha's—in the Buddha's time, the Buddha modelled his Four Noble Truths on a physician's sort of way of stating diagnosis, prognosis, cure, the Four Noble Truths. So we call that the medical model in that it's trying to alleviate suffering. It's centralizing the alleviation of suffering.

Notice that this approach, what we call the medical model, can certainly, it's very happy to use so-called scientific data to shore up its claims and to perhaps give faith. So if a neuroscientist does CT scans of brains of long-term meditators or people in meditation versus non-meditators and finds that a certain membrane is thickened, which is associated with happiness, or certain secretions increase or decrease in the neurochemistry, then this adds sort of conviction to that medical model. We do measurements, questionnaires of well-being and that sort of thing, and we ascertain that yes, medically this is working—meditation is good for you, it increases well-being, really good for depression, and so on.

That's different from a second kind of fantasy of the path and of practice, which I might call scientistic, by which I mean that the practitioner, the individual practitioner, is actually motivated primarily by a sort of interest in consciousness or an interest in experience. And so sees themselves, has a kind of fantasy of themselves as a kind of researcher: "I'm a researcher into consciousness. I'm a researcher into experience and the range of experience and what's involved there."

Of course, I'm going to give four sort of generic models, and of course they can overlap, and it's really a matter of emphasis. But you can see that the medical model is different than what I'm calling the science fantasy, the researcher fantasy.

And then a third model might be what we might call the religious fantasy, in which what practice is and what the path is and what the movement towards awakening is essentially a replication—it's an attempt to replicate the experiences, insights, awakening, path and practice of the sages of the past, and perhaps the present. To replicate the Buddha's awakening, the Buddha's enlightenment to the best of one's ability. To discover, if you like, or rediscover their truth, the truth that they discovered, the truth that the Buddha discovered.

So it has this replicative kind of agenda to it, replicative fantasy, wrapped up completely, of course, with the fantasy of the Buddha, fantasy of the past, fantasy of the tradition. It's religious in that sense that it's tied to the past and puts the authority in the past, in the text. People say, "Well, the Pali Canon," or some other text, or whatever it is. The authority is in the past, which is very typical of the religious fantasy. Someone might even do that when they consider themselves a secularist.

There's still something religious about doing that.

That's a third model. And a fourth model might be what we might call the artistic. So this is, you know, if you think about an artist, someone who's really deeply involved in their art, that has a kind of open-endedness to it, to my mind, to my sense of that

fantasy. It may involve the replication of the works of past masters and imitating them to learn how they did things and kind of, if you like, absorb and digest their styles, their artistry, their conceptions. And certainly that's part of developing as a deep artist and a powerful artist.

But it also goes beyond the merely replicative into the support for and the interest in new directions, originality, whether that's in terms of practice and path, whether that's new and original kinds of practices or kinds of concepts, etc. So again, all this is a matter of emphasis, but I mean much more by the newness and originality of practices and concepts—of what the path is and where it can go and how it can open and what its range is, etc.—I mean much more, for instance, than just teaching mindfulness to some new demographic, whether it's people in prison or people with a certain mental health issue or this or that, all of which is really, really valuable and really important, but it's really just extending the reach of the medical model, if you like. I'm talking about really, in the artistic fantasy, I'm talking really about the way art breaks and goes in very new conceptions and directions of what it's even trying to do.

So four kinds of fantasy there, which is really a matter of emphasis. But you'll notice, for instance, in the last one, actually in a lot of them to different degrees, but certainly the last one, the artistic one, that dedication and even obsession may be completely okay. Whereas from another perspective, we would say someone's completely obsessed with whatever they're trying to do, or with practice, or they are developing, and that kind of interest. So, well, maybe they're a bit out of balance, or this or that. But certain of these models, for instance, the religious one or the artistic one, actually allow a kind of obsession. It's different than, let's say, the medical model, where there can be a kind of like, let's find an easy medication for everyone. And if we find that easy medication for everyone, that's a really, you know, that's a goal that one might be interested in developing the medical model.

But really what I'm talking about here is how one sees one's individual practice. So whether one is regarding it as a kind of medicine, reduction of suffering, whether one's fantasizing oneself as a kind of researcher or in the stream of the tradition, religiously replicating the past or as an artist with that possibility of open-endedness. You never reach the end of the path with the, either with the scientific or the, well, actually, scientism might say you reach the end in terms of you know everything now. Some scientists have that fantasy. But certainly with the artistic, unlike the religious or the medical, there's no end there. It's open-ended. And although there can be an interest in replication, there's also this interest in the possibility of new directions, new conceptions, very different movements and ranges there.

Most people, in regard to their practice, seem to have a mix of the first and the third, the medical model and the religious model. So in other words, one really thinks in terms of reducing suffering, freedom from suffering, that's the language, that's the intention, that's what makes sense, and that's what's talked about and kind of taken in. And at the same time, we're in the stream of the Buddha, and kind of replicating, discovering for ourselves a truth that they discovered, and the authority is in the text there, as well as it is in the scientific data that support the medical model.

The other two, the researcher fantasy and the artistic fantasy, need, can you hear, they need quite a lot of confidence. It takes quite a lot of boldness and balls even, to kind of even see oneself or fantasize oneself that way. And quite a sense of independence. So this to me is very interesting and has all kinds of implications, makes a huge difference for how our practice unfolds, how much eros is allowed in relation to the path, and what possibilities open up for our path, and the directions and the ranges, etc., that can be made available to us. So a lot depends on the fantasies operating.

But where there is devotion and deep love for the path, a lot of you listening to this will be devoted and have a deep love for the path. There is always some conception and some fantasy or image of the path of awakening, and of the self on the path. Always where there's devotedness and deep love, there is always some conception, some fantasy or image of the path of awakening and of the self on the path.

And the fantasies and images we have, or each practitioner has, or are operating for a practitioner, the fantasies and images, they need to be authentic to that practitioner, for that practitioner. If they're not authentic, they won't be fertile. There'll be a dryness and a certain amount of fertility, but actually a kind of a level of barrenness in what the path can be.

So, for example, if the ideas and the images of path and of awakening are just kind of inheritances from the subcultures that we move in, and maybe from books and talks, kind of indoctrinations, if you like, on whose rungs of measurement and attainment the ego fastens itself. Somehow I've just absorbed this way of thinking about the path, and there's some kind of sense of attaining or measuring or where am I at in this conception, this vision of the path. And if it's not authentic, what happens is what gets hold of it is the soul doesn't get hold of it so much as the ego gets hold of it in its habit of self-measurement. Here it's got something called awakening, something called reaching this insight and that jhāna or being such and such mindful for so much of the time or whatever it is. And what's got hold of it is just the ego with its propensity, its addiction to measuring, measuring things and measuring itself.

And the soul has not got, it's not really the fertile soil for the soul. And this ego measurement actually, and the lack of soul soil there, will smother and kill the soul-making that, if you like, we need, the path needs, the soul needs the whole path to have.

Whether it's mindfulness or insight into emptiness that is regarded as the essential aim of the path—whatever is considered the ultimate goal—if it's not authentic to me, if the vision I carry is not truly mine, then sooner or later a frustrating stagnation will set in. A person begins to wonder, "When am I going to get it together?" or feels, "Maybe I'm just not good enough, maybe I just can't hack this."

Then what often happens is either they tolerate those thoughts and feelings—sometimes for decades—or they become drawn to teachings that say, "Don't try, don't do, there's nothing to do, there's nowhere to go." This becomes the only apparent option between frustrating stagnation and the painful cycle of trying harder, contracting, and giving up again while feeling like a failure.

But is that really the only option? Or is it, once again, a question of soul-making?

I wonder if our vision of the path might be primarily characterized by open-endedness rather than attainment. What if the path is fundamentally open-ended? Consider the path of the imaginal that we've been developing over these past years—to me, this path is inherently open-ended. When will I reach the end of the path of the imaginal? Never, in the conventional sense.

At first, yes, there may be confusion: "What are they talking about? What does this mean? Is this an image or not?" Initially there might be some frustration, some self-judgment. But once one grasps the basic concepts and modes of practice and experience, it becomes open-ended—an unfolding of richer and richer, increasingly diverse ranges and depths of experience.

If the path is characterized primarily by open-endedness rather than attainment, is that familiar kind of frustration and self-judgment even possible? The frustration that comes with thoughts like "I am awakened, I'm not awakened, so-and-so is awakened but I'm not"—can this arise when the path is understood as fundamentally open?

The fantasies, images, and views we hold of the path's goals and aspirations need to be beautiful for us. They need to be beautiful. But if we take them too literally, or if the image of the self becomes too bound within them, they will be neither beautiful, nor fertile, nor freeing. Can we enter into the poetry of the image? This poetic sense, this poetic understanding—the language, texture, and relationship implicit in the imaginal?

But woven into this need for beauty is a crucial question: What do you deeply want? What do you deeply want? Is it a reduction in suffering? The end of suffering? So-called freedom—if we just leave those words for now?

If it is freedom from suffering that you most deeply want when you really look and open yourself to that question, let me ask another: What kind of freedom? What kind of freedom, and in what domains? There are many kinds of freedom, many domains of freedom.

What do you deeply want? Perhaps a more essential question is: What does your soul need right now? What does my soul, what does your soul need right now?

Can we, in asking these questions, release the assumption that we are most fundamentally concerned with freedom, with liberation, with ending or decreasing suffering? We assume this so easily, and then all the language, all the discourse, all the movement and explanation and thinking about the path becomes wrapped up in this framework.

It may well be that ending or reducing suffering is actually the most important thing for you. There are certainly times when that will be crucial. But what if we allow a little more space into this entrenched and pervasive way of thinking about path and practice?

Most Dharma teachings and most other spiritualities cast their paths and make their appeals in that direction—freedom from suffering—with the assumption that this is what we most fundamentally, most deeply want. But it seems to me, listening to people, watching people, reflecting on my own experience, that it's not always liberative efficacy that moves us most deeply. Not always the utilitarian question of how well this path or practice actually liberates me from suffering that attracts us most profoundly.

And who is to say it should be? Why should it be?

On whose authority? On what authority?

Someone was telling me about a sangha in another country where they have different teachers come for retreats, and they were debating whether certain teachers should come. Someone was advocating for two or three teachers to come who would teach together—they taught a kind of what we might call neo-Advaita style. The message they reported was that these teachers came into the retreat and sort of said to the group: "You know, we've all tried technique. You've all tried technique, and you've all tried

striving, and we have all, all of us in this room—we and you—all of us have found that technique and striving doesn't work. Now, we are going to open you to the highest teaching. This is the teaching of no effort, no technique."

And so there's this argument that ensues very easily then: Is what they're saying actually liberating? And is it true that the people who teach technique and some degree of striving are actually teaching something that's less liberating or not liberating? And so the argument kind of locks horns on that level, deciding who should come to teach and whether it's okay for them to say that, etc.

But to me, there's a whole other level to engage that kind of claim, or any kind of claim, about any kind of path, which is: maybe this path that you're painting, whoever it is—could be these people or some other people—maybe this path is boring to me. It just bores me. It's not about whether it frees or not, or this or that, or works, or even whether the Pali Canon says this or that text says that. Actually, it's boring. What does that mean? It means it's not interesting enough for my soul. It's not sexy enough—and I don't mean sexual enough. It's not captivating. It's not full and juicy enough and doesn't have a wide enough range for my soul. It's boring.

And we'll think, well, what kind of argument is that? But actually, in terms of soul-making, it's very relevant. Instead of getting into this argument that's confined and constrained along certain lines of what is it that frees and does it work or doesn't it work to bring freedom, etc., etc.—sure, that's a part of what's important, but there's a whole other thing which is just to do with what is boring or interesting or fertilizing for my soul or your soul right now.

Sometimes people say, you know, nowadays we say we need a Buddhism for our times. We need a Buddhism for our times. We have to rethink Buddhism for our times. And I would say, you know, I don't care about my times. I care about my soul and a path that allows and supports this soul-making dynamic, which means the eros, the psyche, the logos, the whole engagement of all that.

For instance, that neo-Advaita path that's so attractive and so popular to so many people seems to be—or the kind of, yeah, if it's a secularist path—it's not about what's more authentic or what the texts say or this or that. It's about what's going on there. I've talked about this before in terms of soul-making. It's actually what engages my, or your eros, my intellect, the soul of my intellect, my imagination, the whole imaginal dimensions of my being, my creativity, the range and diversity of my longing and my devotion, my heart in its depth, the subtlety of my attention, my particularities.

I don't care if that fits modern times or if it's archaic or if it belongs to something in the future that modernism hasn't yet caught up with. All of that's kind of—who cares? What the soul cares about is what's fertile ground for the soul.

Something has to be, in my vision, in my sense, concept, fantasy of path and awakening—something there has to be fertile enough, provide fertile enough ground to birth, to galvanize and to support all this in me. The eros, the intellect, the imaginal, the creativity, the devotion, the longing in all its range and diversity, the heart's depths and subtleties, the subtlety of attention and sensitivity, all of that, and all my particularities. And to galvanize and support and give birth to and suggest a whole wide range of practices—because practicing in different ways and different directions is beautiful, is creative, is part of the love of practice. And again, to birth and support and open up all kinds of insights, all kinds of experiences and perceptions and openings, widenings of perceptions and all kinds of creative endeavors and arts, etc.

What the soul needs is something that's fertile and commensurate with where the soul is at. That may be bigger than the question of liberative efficacy in terms of reducing suffering. Of course, there's another kind of liberation there. Can you hear that as well? There's a liberation of the intellect, there's a liberation of the eros, there's a liberation of the imaginal, there's a liberation of the creativity, there's a liberation of the longing, all that.

Yet the point is the conversation gets constrained because we tend to keep thinking in certain ways and imagining in certain ways, and it's too small for the soul. Or at least it's too small for the soul at a certain point—it will be too small for the soul. And for many people, it will already be too small for the soul. We don't realize what's going on, and why are we feeling constrained here? Why do we keep going back into the same way of thinking?

So we need something, each soul needs something authentic to that soul, for that soul. But because of the soul-making dynamic and what we talked about—this expansion, deepening, widening—

complicating that happens with the eros psychologos, interaction, mutual insemination.

Even if a vision, a fantasy, a concept of the path and of awakening is authentic for a while, because of the soul-making dynamic and the expansion of eros psychologos, at some point we may well outgrow that vision, that concept, that fantasy. So this is quite common, it happens in all kinds of ways. Something is pushing against the walls and the edges of what the vision, fantasy, logos is of the path and of awakening.

For example, I know a young man who for many years had really quite a fairly strong eros with regard to the path. But the conception, the vision, and the fantasy of the path only really allowed that eros to flow in the direction of a certain image of a kind of monk. He was actually living as a layperson, but living in a very simple way. I think he didn't even have a bank account. He was doing service work and living in a retreat center. But there was this ethos and this mythos of the sort of free-flowing monk. That was the fantasy image.

So within that, the ideals and images of letting go, let everything come, let it go, easygoingness, fluidity, non-preference, whatever life gave him—that's what he would just go with. He wouldn't intrude into that process with his preferences and insist on this or that. The whole thing had a lot of spaciousness, so very beautiful, very potent, with a lot of freedom, a lot of ease, a lot of simplicity. There was this eros to know the transcendent, to know the unfabricated, but it wasn't so much dominated—it wasn't that that dominated his relationship with the experiences of life. So that was there, but not at the expense of a relationship with what was around him. But that relationship had some fantasy of easygoingness, fluidity, spaciousness, non-preferences. So very potent, very lovely, very freeing, very spacious.

But at some point, there arose an overwhelming attraction, almost to the point of a kind of imprisonment of the psyche, to someone, a woman, whose soulfulness extended and was more obvious in relationship to the world and the things of the world. Her soulfulness involved a much more involved relationship with things. Much more, instead of the simplicity of one fantasy image—and not even seeing it as an image. That was the thing. He was in this image. It was very helpful, as I said—freeing, spacious, peaceful—but he didn't realize that it was in fact a soul image that he was caught in the mythos of, caught in the fantasy.

She, on the other hand, had all kinds of images about self, about nature, about relationship, all kinds of things—complex, an enchantment of the things of the world that his fantasy didn't allow because it was a lot about letting things go and everything's just the same: good, bad, beautiful, ugly. It's all just beautiful, just one. There were fewer erotic objects in his world. In the space of that kind of fantasy, in that kind of logos, the world was not full of erotic objects. The world was just all a kind of ground for letting go.

James Hillman, I've mentioned this before, makes the distinction between what he calls spirit and soul. Spirit is this movement towards spaciousness, transcendence, letting go, disentangling. And soul, in his language, has more this quality of entanglement,

complication. So spirit is the hermit on the mountaintop in the clean, clear, crisp air with long views. And the soul is more in the valley, in the undergrowth, in the complication, in the messiness of relationships and images and all that.

I'm less keen on that division and would prefer to just talk about these as both soul directions—both the attitude of letting go and that monk image and the spaciousness and the sense of oneness as a movement of soul, one movement of soul, and other kinds of movements of soul as well.

But here was this someone caught in this fantasy of the monk and the spaciousness, the fluidity, the non-preference, the easygoingness. And he was then overwhelmingly hooked, almost to the point of a kind of imprisonment, I think he would have said, by an attraction to this woman who embodied and expressed and represented a much wider and richer kind of soulfulness, psyche.

It wasn't just that in his monastic endeavor he wanted sex. It wasn't just that he was dealing with "ah, yes, the sexual drive will get them in the end. That's the one that's really hard to overcome." It wasn't just that he was lonely and wanted romance. That wasn't really what was going on, I don't think, or that's one way of understanding it.

He could let go of everything else to quite a remarkable degree, and people were very impressed by his ability to let go, almost in relation to everything, but not in relation to this woman, not in relation to wanting her. It's one thing, this one thing. He can let go of everything, but what's going on here?

Could it be that what was happening was there was an unconscious attraction to psyche, to soul-making? You know, in the myth, Eros and Psyche are lovers. Eros wants Psyche.

We don't need to inquire into his relationship with his mother and locate the cause in the past. There's something present in the natural wish of the soul for expansion—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic moving in all directions. Something, a rigidity of fantasy that isn't realized, hasn't been seen, image as image, hasn't been recognized there, prevents this expansion. And so it knocks and insists. Eventually it will, or possibly it will cause an expansion or a rupture.

However—which I think is actually what happened after we talked—he develops and allows his actions, the sensibilities and the dynamism of soul-making in his life more widely. He starts opening and tuning to and allowing and supporting and investing in and exploring soul-making in his life more widely. That means in relation to everything—what's around him, money, body, relationships, whatever, everything, nature.

Then actually what can happen, what did happen, is he was no longer so imprisoned in his desire for this woman. There might still be attraction, of course, but in a way, what was, if you like, most deeply wanted there was soul. Soulfulness and soul-making wasn't being allowed. Something in him wanted it to go in these other directions. But now, actually, with a little time, actually the soul-making can be everywhere. It permeates life. And then it's not solely and inexplicably in her. She becomes inexplicably this attractive object that he couldn't let go of, his desire there.

The question is: what allows and supports the fantasy-image-logos of practice to be soul-making? What kinds of images or what actually would support the discovery or the shaping of fantasy images, logos, of practice, so that they can be soul-making? What allows the infusion or pervasion of whatever soul-making fantasy and image works for us? What allows that to pervade and infuse the whole of the path for us, the whole of that movement and that engagement?

In a previous talk—I can't remember when it was on this retreat—I gave the example of someone for whom there is no real image in the meditation, there's no eros really alive, no aliveness, no arousal of the imaginal with respect to meditation practice. Very easily there's not this fantasy of the nobility of struggle and putting up with what's difficult. And very easily they just stop meditating or give up—peers go and they don't practice. It's not alive with fantasy, with the range of fantasy that's needed.

One response—a very common response—is: you need to make more effort. If you want to suffer less, you need to make more effort. So this person is suffering, and yet they can't seem to really get a relationship with meditation that really works. Someone might say it's a matter of you just need to try more, stick it out when it's tough, if you want to suffer less.

Is it that, or is it, as we suggested the other day, actually what needs to happen there—there needs to be a widening of the image and of the fantasy of meditation itself, in meditation, of meditation. So we have to approach the whole thing, perhaps, in quite a different way, in a soul-making way. Not so much: what's the easiest? So, oh, this is too hard, the meditation, I'll just go and have some cookies or have a little rest or be cozy or whatever. Not so much that—what's easiest? Not so much get it together, try harder, but rather the question: what is soul-making? Where is the sense of soulfulness for me right now? Is there a way of visioning this, imagining this, finding a fantasy and a logos that actually the practice itself becomes soul-making and soulful, even if it's difficult?

So when I use the word authentic and say it has to be authentic for a practitioner, it means authentic for the soul-making right now of my soul. For my soul-making right now, for your soul-making right now—that's what I mean by authentic.

When there is deep love for the path, when there is eros for the path, that includes and implies—involved in that is a love for soul-making in regard to the path. What we love is the soul-making. We love the soul-making that is involved in the walking of the path. It's not just that it releases us from suffering. We feel a bit better and there's less suffering. That's all good and important. For some people, that's all their meditation is or their mindfulness exercise or whatever it is. But when there's really eros there, when we love it, we love the soul-making that is involved in the path.

That means we love the image. We love the images that are involved in the path. We love the ideas. The ideas themselves are beautiful and attractive to us, interesting to us. We love the eros. We love the actual sense of eros there. We love the expansion of the psyche-logos and eros.

And, as I said, the image of the self on the path. Wrapped up in all of that love of soul-making is a love of beauty. Beauty is always a part of soul-making. So part of what we love, when we love a path, when there's eros for the path and for the practice, we love—there's some love of beauty there. It's not just a purely functional kind of utilitarian exercise in reducing suffering and providing a bit more ease. Something in us finds beauty there, and that's part of soul-making always.

Beauty implies that what is beautiful to us, we draw close to. We want intimacy with—there's the eros. We want connection with. And we love the intimacy and connection. You can see how all this starts feeding on itself, fertilizing itself.

We love sensitivity. When you speak to someone who's really gotten into insight meditation, part of what they love is the sensitivity. Yes, the opening of the heart and all that, but part of what people love is the sensitivity that comes with it, that it develops. So we love the tuning, the sensitizing, the differentiations and nuances that go with rich practice. This is part of the eros of the path. Where there's beauty, there's sensitivity when it's soul-making. Beauty is part of the soul-making.

As I've said in the past, the soul needs some sense of beyondness—some sense of beyond that it can intuit or feel or dimly perceive or sense or that it's heard about—beyond what it already knows and what it already experiences. In order for there to be eros and soul-making, there needs to be some kind of sense of beyond. Perhaps, hopefully, a kind of infinities experience into which to expand, infinities to expand into. The soul needs that to stimulate the eros there.

The soul needs beauty, mystery, dimensionality, sense of sacredness and divinity, needs eros, needs the expansion of the logos, the enrichment of the ideas, needs fantasy and the imaginal, as we've said, needs a sense of meaningfulness and embodiment. So

all these things—beauty, mystery, dimensionality, sacredness, divinity, eros, expansion of the logos, fantasy and image, meaningfulness, embodiment, the sense of infinities to expand into—this is needed. This is what the soul needs. This is part of the beyondness that the soul needs. There's more there of these things, of these qualities, if you like, these perceptions.

All these, you'll notice, are kind of implicit and organically and obviously involved when we're talking about practice with images and imaginal perceptions and theophanies and cosmopoiesis. There is the beauty, naturally, to that. There is the mystery, the dimensionality, the sacredness, divinity, the eros, the expansion of the logos that comes with that, the image, naturally, the meaningfulness, somehow the embodiment. There's a sense of the infinity of dimensionality to expand into, always, when we're talking about practicing with images, with theophanies, with cosmopoiesis.

When the practice and the eros is in this other direction towards oneness, towards the transcendent or a decrease in fabrication or the unfabricated, when it involves, in other words, not so much image and imaginal perception as a quietening of a degree of perception, including imaginal perception—so a quietening of images—we can, in terms of those elements that I just said that the soul wants as part of the sense of beyondness, see that they're all there in the relationship. We talked about this, in the fantasy of treading on that path towards this sense of beyond. It's around the actual experience or in relationship to the path to the unfabricated or to this insight into oneness or this perception of oneness. So the soul-making comes most obviously in the relationship.

But it's actually also there, so to speak, directly. These elements that the soul wants and needs are available directly in relationship to the experience of transcendence or the unfabricated or oneness—a lot of them: beauty, mystery, dimensionality, sacredness, divinity. To a certain extent, yes.

For instance, the unfabricated itself—not speaking in terms of the journey to it, but the experience itself—we could say well, that transcends meaning. It's beyond anything we could call meaning. But I would say, somehow, the experience of it is deeply meaningful. And it's hard to actually say, what does that mean? Something about participation there, something about what it says about the whole of existence, potentially.

And there's also an expansion of logos. But there's no thought there, but actually in the movement towards non-conceptuality, the very fact of it being non-conceptual is in a way an expansion of the logos. Somehow I have to have conceptual movement that expands into non-conceptuality.

But if in that movement to unfabricating, to the unfabricated, or to certain levels on the way of that, to certain kinds of perceptions of oneness, if the eros, psyche, logos—if any of them are limited—then the sense of these elements of beauty, mystery, dimensionality, and kind of infinity to expand into, the sacredness, the divinity, the eros, the ideation, the image, the meaningfulness, the embodiment—the sense of those elements, the perception of those elements with regard to the world will be limited, even if one already has an experience of the unfabricated.

Even if the Eros Psyche Logos is limited, if the soul-making dynamic is limited, then the sense of these elements with regard to the world—the sense of these elements that the soul wants—will be limited.

For example, in a talk some time ago, I gave the example of the senior nun talking about the birds and seeing them in a very narrow way in terms of biological evolution: why they're colorful and what they're actually doing when they're singing or flying around. For her, these were all just the strategic movements of evolution or the effects of natural selection. Someone asked me afterward, "But this nun was a mystic, surely." Yes, she was a mystic, but the mysticism there was only allowed in the direction of less fabrication, toward formlessness, toward oneness or the unfabricated, or the movements toward that in terms of the jhānas, which are states of less fabrication.

So even after attaining or opening to a direct experience of the unfabricated—which one assumes, based on what she shared and wrote, that she had—the mysticism, the mystical perception, was limited in terms of the world. The mysticism was all in the direction of oneness, of states of less fabrication, and of the unfabricated. There was then, in relation to the world, a kind of renunciation and a denigration of the world of things and sense experience. The images and fantasies that were attractive were only forms of the Buddha or of the Buddha-Dharma—only these were regarded as worthy of veneration or holy.

Other forms—the birds, the other particulars of being and life and others and things and nature—were not available to her as theophanies. The perception of them as theophanies, other forms that were outside the range of classical Buddhist forms, were not available to her perception as theophanies, except in the sense of being just equally, like everything else, manifestations of universal oneness, universal emptiness, or whatever.

What I want to say is this: if the eros is strong in a person, and if the psyche and the logos—the range of images and the ideation—is not blocked, either by dogma or rigid adherence to some tradition or teaching, or politically blocked; if the eros is strong and the psyche and logos are not blocked, then even after an experience of the unfabricated, after one has gotten used to that and digested it, I would predict that there will be

a return to the world of sense experience, to the world and to particulars, and to beginning to see them as theophanies, beginning to see them imaginatively, beginning to see and open to the holiness in them.

In other words, there is a movement from transcendence—not throwing away the transcendence, but a movement to then extend what the soul-making wants to extend into what we called, at the beginning of this long talk, the immanence. And not just in the sense of "oneness everywhere," "it's all one love," "it's all one awareness," "it's all one whatever." The soul is hungry. The soul wants more.

So we go back to that Gregory of Nyssa quote: "How could this limited world suffice? For the thirst of human souls requires some infinite water." The emphasis I would put is on that word "limited." If the world is seen in a limited way, yes, the soul is going to want more and move into transcendence. What is beyond this world? This is a really beautiful, important, profound opening of the understanding and the vision, the experience, the consciousness, the citta.

But it won't stop there. Back to the world—back to the world of sense experience and particulars, but not the limited world, the unlimited world. Unlimited because liberated through the imaginal and through the eros and through the soul-making dynamic. So there's a return to that, even after one has had this transcendent experience and digested that and been liberated by that in certain directions to a deep extent. There is a return to the world and the imaginal and the logos and the eros engaging, infusing, filling out there in relationship to the world and the experience of the world.

There's an expansion of the soul-making eventually in all directions—in all directions. This is what we're suggesting in terms of the theory: that the soul-making will do this eventually, in all directions.

If I start with a flat worldview—flatland, one-dimensional—but I don't insist on that rigidly so that it blocks the logos, and I don't refuse the imaginal, and I allow the eros to flow, then even if I start with the flat conventional view of modernism, that eros and soul-making dynamic will liberate the perceptions and the ways of looking that reveal dimensionality. Eventually, one of the directions of dimensionality will deepen to a perception of the transcendent, the unfabricated. One of the directions of the dimensionality deepening.

But even if I start with a transcendent inclination and path—if that's what I've been taught, that's what I grew up with, I do my practices, I discover that for myself, I experience that, and the citta opens to that unfabricated, unfabricating, marvelous, staggering—even then, if I don't stop the soul-making dynamic there, if I allow its natural organic

wish to grow, to open, to fertilize, then I come back to what we're calling immanence. I come back to the world and fill it out, giving it depth or allowing its depths to open in the immanence through the imaginal, through the soul-making, in relationship to the senses, to the world. The beauty is there, divinity is there, meaningfulness is there, all these other pieces we talked about—mystery, sacredness.

So eventually, the transcendent and the immanent, the immanent and the transcendent—just because of what the Eros Psyche Logos dynamic will naturally want, the ways it will naturally want to grow: multidirectional, unstoppable, infinite.

We could go even beyond this, even more than just the inclusion of the transcendent and the immanent. In the last few years, several people have either said to me or written to me—I don't think they're meaning it as a criticism, but maybe some people are, and maybe some people are meaning it as a compliment—they've labeled me or called me an iconoclast. I really don't think of myself that way at all, for a number of reasons. But if you're going to think in those terms, maybe a better way of saying what I'm interested in is: I'm more interested in smashing idols.

An idol is different than an icon. Better to say, I think, that I would maybe—again, if you're going to speak in these terms—say that I'm a seeker of icons, or even a creator of icons, as we all can be.

An icon is something with infinite depth, infinite capacity to open itself, to open us. It's in relationship with us, and it opens us, opens our psyche, but it itself opens infinitely, potentially more and more.

It's, if you like, a gate to infinity, a gate of infinity, a portal to the infinite. But it's also a portal from the infinite. And I don't just mean infinite space—I mean the infinite riches of the soul, the infinite diversity of perceptions and holinesses and all that.

So an icon keeps opening out to more depth, more dimensions, more possibility, more divinity, more soul-making, without end. There's no end to that.

Therefore, this process that we're engaged in, or part of the process of what we're engaged in, involves questioning more typical or rigidified ideas of the path or awakening, which have actually become idols—idols in the sense of something solid, unmoving, fixed, of a fixed and limited form and depth. We're questioning those idols of the path and of awakening, what have become for me or for you idols regarding the path and awakening, opening up instead new possible visions and ideas of awakening where awakening is not limited either by an endpoint or by a direction. Then we're converting idol to icon. What was stuck and rigid and anything but infinite, what was quite limited in form and depth and range, can actually be liberated and opened up into an icon.

And then, with an icon, an icon of awakening, the eros never collapses. Because there's always an infinity of possibility beyond—an infinity of possibility of what is not yet known, into which the eros can move, which it can penetrate into, which it can open to, and into which the soul-making dynamic can expand. The soul-making dynamic actually creates this infinity because of all we've explained before.

So, if you like, the eros never collapses, it never dies down. There's always the possibility because there's always more, there's always beyond, there's always unknown. I don't even know, I can't even construe what might open. Can't even yet imagine the directions and possibilities, ranges, particularities of what might open as awakening opens more and more and infinitely.

So awakening is not something we reach and then tick off.

Again, just with all this to say something we've already said, but to draw it out a bit more as well: Eros for the path, eros for awakening, needs us to see the beauty of ourselves on the path. Yes, just like we talked about in relationship with any erotic object. For eros to really be allowed and supported for the path, for awakening, we need to see the beauty of the self on the path. The image of the self on the path needs to be beautiful to us.

And the beauty of our longing, our yearning, our desire, our passion for the path and for awakening—this also needs to be beautiful to us, needs to be seen as beautiful to us, as well as the images of the path of awakening, including the image that we have of the tradition, the idea of the tradition, the image, the fantasy, the idea of what a Buddha is and what the Dharma is and all that.

Eros needs psyche. Eros needs images and fantasies and ideas that are soul-making. Ideally, we really see and understand images as images. Those images of path, of the self on the path, of our passion, of the tradition, of the Buddha, of the Dharma—all as images. We see image as image.

And because of that, we can actually allow this inflation, this expansion, this deepening of the fantasy and the image. So we're allowing eros, but not craving, because there's not this rigidification and reifying. The eros is stoked, ignited, supported, fed. The craving is released.

So that expansion of the fantasy and image of path, of awakening, and of what the Dharma is might involve—well, we've been talking about a fantasy of the path of awakening and of the self on it that allows an endlessness or an open-endedness. So

what fantasies of the path of awakening, of me on the path to awakening, allow that kind of open-endedness, such an expansion and deepening of the very image and fantasy of path and awakening that actually it's expanded in some senses infinitely?

If we go back to our generic models—the model of the researcher, the scientist, the research scientist, or the model of the artist—these allow, as we mentioned, an endlessness, an open-endedness, assuming you regard science as never getting to the end. Although some people do think we'll reach the end, for me it will be open-ended.

But also, other fantasies and ideas of the path. For example, the Mahayana presentation of path and what awakening is, and the Vajrayana presentation of path and awakening. They involve such a vastly extended and deepened and complicated image, an idea of where the path is going, what it involves, what awakening is, what a Buddha is. They're effectively impossible to reach. There are goals that are impossible to reach. We'll never reach such an awakening, realistically. It will always be further. There will always be a beyond, which is what the soul needs. They're effectively infinite.

And what does that mean? It might mean, with these kinds of fantasies of the path, and there could be others, that something in us can relax and give ourselves fully and passionately and dedicatedly and with fire and aliveness to the path, but enjoy it, enjoy its fruits without getting constrained and hung up and cramped and self-measuring. There can be momentum, practice, dedication, devotion.

The Eros-Psyche-Logos can be active and mutually inseminating, but without judgment or self-judgment, without pressure even, without the pain of the kind of constriction that comes from self-measurement. This happens when the ego is involved and grasping in its measuring tendency, but not so much the soul.

So there are other possibilities. I offer this just to give you a sense of what might be needed if we really take soul-making seriously.

Can you get a sense with all this? I hope you can get a sense. I hope it's not just conceptually, but striking a chord in your soul, something deep in the psyche. Can you hear how this is opening something, if you like, at a whole other level?

The very ways we think of, construe, and imagine path and awakening are part of what path and awakening means. The very ways we think of, construe, and imagine path and awakening are actually themselves part of what the path involves and what awakening involves. There's some infinity here. There's some potential, if you like, for involvement of the totality of our being in all this.

And that totality itself is acknowledged. What we mean by totality and what we recognize to be the totality itself will expand because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expanding. Something—even I can't quite articulate what kind—it's like a gong resounding deep in the soul. Something is asking to be opened here, and it has very much to do with participation.

The whole soul is participating in the creation and discovery of what the path is and what awakening is. The whole soul is participating in that and also participating in what even the meaning of soul is and what it is to be fully involved. All this is being created, discovered, expanded, and involved. There's a sort of profound sense of participation in all this.

This is available to us—this kind of level of involvement, level of beauty, soul-making, eros. It's there. It's asking a lot, for sure, and we'll come back to that, but it's possible. And for some people, it will probably be profoundly attractive.

CHAPTER 77

In Love with the Way: Images of Path and of Self

Rob Burbea · 1h34

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines the essential role of fantasy and imagination in spiritual practice, particularly how we envision ourselves on the path toward awakening. Drawing from his deep understanding of both traditional Buddhist teachings and innovative approaches to practice, he outlines four primary fantasies that shape our relationship with the spiritual path: the medical patient fantasy (following the Four Noble Truths as diagnosis and cure), the religious fantasy (replicating past awakenings), the scientific researcher fantasy (discovering new insights), and the artist fantasy (creating beauty and meaning).*
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> *Burbea challenges the conventional presentation of dharma practice as solely aimed at ending dukkha, instead proposing that authentic spiritual life requires rich, multidimensional fantasies that nourish eros and soul-making. He explores how these different ways of imaging the self, path, awakening, and tradition can overlap and evolve, emphasizing that where there is genuine love for practice, there must be fertile fantasy operating. The talk offers detailed inquiry practices for recognizing which fantasies are authentic and life-giving, examining how different approaches manifest across various domains like emptiness practice, samādhi, mettā, and ethics. This teaching opens radical possibilities for understanding spiritual development as potentially open-ended participation in divine creativity.*

Often it seems to me that there is so much to say, so many angles of exploration and perspectives to open up, directions to explore, dimensions and openings to make available—aspects and pieces of a jigsaw, pieces of a larger picture that feel potentially quite significant and might be very helpful for different people at different stages in their own explorations and considerations.

With so much to try and communicate, I often find myself hurrying through pieces that I would do better not to hurry through. When listening to new material, especially when something is communicated in a hurried way because I'm trying to get on to the next thing, it's not easy for the listener to actually discern what might be significant. Something might be a really potentially significant opening or avenue of exploration, but because of this hurrying or simply because it's new, it's not always obvious what's significant. It's not always obvious where something that is presented fits in a hierarchy of significance, of important ideas, of potential openings.

I apologize for that tendency I sometimes have. But I'd like to redress it a little and take more time to explain something we talked about the other day, to explore it more and actually invite you to explore it in some way.

We were talking about eros—eros for the path, eros for awakening, for the goal, if you like. What is it to have an erotic relationship with the path and with that movement towards awakening? What does it mean to have an erotic relationship? Are you in love with the path? Are you in love with practicing? Is there a sense of beauty? Is there a sense of the richness and dimensionality of the path itself and of yourself on the path?

Is there enough of a sense of a beyond, a more—more to discover, more to open to, more to realize—that allows the eros to be there? And is there enough richness and authenticity and power and fertility to the fantasies and images of the path and awakening? In the sense of a kind of other there—the path and awakening—and also of the self and also of the eros. As we said, these fantasies of other, self, and eros—in this case of path and awakening, self and eros—will constellate together. They will be pieces of a larger imaginal constellation where there is eros, where we love, where something is deeply alive for us in that way.

Also wrapped up in that, and often with fantasies, is some relationship with past and future—in this case with tradition. What's the relationship of the path as I sense it, as I vision it? Path and awakening. Myself on that path. What are the images of all this? The image of my love. The image of my desire on the path. My love for the path. And the image of the tradition that, if you like, goes with that path or that hands us the path.

All these aspects will be involved in a really fertile, rich erotic relationship with the path and with the movement towards awakening. And it's particularly this aspect of fantasy and image of path and awakening, of self and of the desire and of the traditions—particularly the fantasies of the path—that I want to explain a little bit more about and explore with you and invite you to explore.

For most of us, the usual presentation of the teachings and of the path—and this doesn't go just for a Buddhist context, but the usual presentation in a lot of spiritual contexts, not all, but many—is as a movement to end or at least reduce suffering. And with that, to replicate, if not the Buddha's awakening, at least some of the Sangha of old, the enlightened ones, the Arahants of the past.

So one is essentially discovering or rediscovering for oneself, or following the instructions of what some sage or mystic in the past discovered for themselves and offered as teachings and a map. One is essentially seeking to replicate that awakening.

So the awakening is something that's reconstituted, if you like, or sought from the past, from what was given to us in the past. Someone else's awakening that we're reconstituting.

This is not necessarily only Buddhist. We could be on all kinds of paths trying, in a sense, to reconstitute the kind of awakening that we get a sense of—for instance, that Ramana Maharshi seemed to have discovered, or Nisargadatta Maharaj, or Krishnamurti. It might be put in a secular context or a Buddhist context. It might be Advaita, Indian, this or that, or whatever—Buddhist, traditional Buddhist, secular Buddhist—which also has a certain vision, a certain idea of what it means to end suffering, and a certain movement to replicate the Buddha's awakening.

Even if a path is just about mindfulness and we're seeing that as somehow the way to end or reduce suffering, we're replicating that way from whatever we conceive of the tradition there, whether it's Buddhist or not. Usually, there's the ending or reducing of suffering and the replication of someone else's past awakening or something close to what they seem to be pointing to and trying to articulate in language or in their being.

But usually those aspects of the presentation are not recognized as fantasy. They're just presented as "this is what we're doing." It's often not quite stated so boldly that we're trying to replicate something, but those are the two principal thrusts. I'll come back to the fantasy aspect of those.

That's the usual presentation that most of us encounter, whether you're in the Gaia House tradition, or the Insight Meditation tradition, or the Buddhist tradition, or Neo-Advaita, or whatever else it might be. It's a similar kind of presentation, a similar kind of fantasy of the path—a double fantasy of the path there.

These two strands of that presentation, when we talked about this before—and I felt like I hurried through it and wasn't so clear—these two strands we could say constitute what we might call the medical patient fantasy.

So in the Buddha's time, the physicians and doctors of his day would present their medical assessment in a particular formula: diagnosis of the disease, its cause, the possible prognosis if the full course of medication was taken, and then the prescription itself—the main treatment and what else was involved.

This is actually, if you can hear it already, the presentation of the Four Noble Truths. They are modeled on this medical formula. And so we, so to speak, are to follow the doctor Buddha's—the physician Buddha's—orders.

He says: What's the diagnosis? There is suffering. What's the cause? The patient is craving because they have avijjā. So let's say craving and avijjā—what we were calling clinging. The prognosis: if the patient will take the full course of medication—meditation and surrounding activities—they can realize a complete cure of this disease, the end of suffering. And the prescription for that is the Eightfold Path.

So we follow, as patients—as good patients—the Buddha who has diagnosed us and given us a prescription, a possible prognosis and all of that. We're to follow the Buddha's orders. And if we do so, we can end suffering, or at least reduce it to the extent that we're really able to take fully on board his recommended prescriptions.

Now, why am I calling that a fantasy? I'm drawing attention to the fact that there are fantasy elements inextricably woven up with that, as there are with actually all perception—or most perception, or certainly a lot of our perception when we're involved with something, when we love something. Partly, this is fantasy because it gets enriched through the eros and through all kinds of ways that it becomes filled out and meaningful and beautiful to us, and we really care about it.

Partly, also, it's fantasy because—as I've addressed in a few talks in the past—what does suffering mean? It sounds like an obvious thing that we're all talking about the same thing, but what actually do we mean by dukkha, the Buddha's word usually translated as suffering? And what does freedom from suffering mean?

We could have a vision of the path as just coping with the more obvious difficulties, stresses and strains and unpredictabilities and fragilities of our life. Something like continuous mindfulness allows us to meet again and again the incessant stream of the next thing that life throws at us, and cope with it by meeting it in this way that reduces suffering.

There's a kind of minimal sense of what suffering is and what freedom from suffering is possible—what those first and third truths are really referring to. One minimal way is coping through mindfulness—actually extracting just one term of the Eightfold Path—while also acknowledging that some dimensions of existence are just really hard. This is our existential situation. It's brutal, it's meaningless, etc. And we can do our best to bear up to that and cope with it by meeting it without too much demand or expectation, by going with the flow, by bringing bare attention or mindfulness and not superimposing religious ideas or hopes. That's one kind of fantasy already wrapped up in that approach.

Another way is around the whole healing paradigm: healing of body, of energy system, of our psyche—the kind of psychotherapeutic meditation, healing the wounds of the past, healing the ways our personality has gotten twisted from events or situations or just pressures, long-term pressures of family or history. The fantasy that's now quite rich in the culture—the typical psychotherapeutic fantasy, of which there are actually many—makes the path really about that.

In that kind of picture, what does suffering mean? What does it really refer to? And what's freedom from suffering? What does it look like? What tone does it have?

Even somewhere like Gaia House, if you listen to enough teachers over the years, you really get the sense that what people are talking about or pointing to or holding up as a possibility or the goal for practice is quite divergent in terms of what suffering means and what freedom from suffering means and looks like and what its range is. There's actually a huge range in the interpretation or presentation of that third Noble Truth, and by implication of the first Noble Truth as well.

Some teachers at Gaia House and elsewhere say, "I do not suffer. I do not suffer." And you know, at quite the other end as well.

As I've said in the past, in a way, the Four Noble Truths' teaching about suffering and freedom from suffering is more like a skeleton. To borrow the Buddha's image of fleshless bones—an image he used in another context relating to the senses that we talked about—the Four Noble Truths are like fleshless bones in a way. What do they mean for us? What do we make them mean? We need to flesh them out.

We share vocabulary, but it's just like a skeleton. And within that shared vocabulary, of course, it can sound like we're all talking about the same thing, but there's... It might be that for the most part all we have in common is that vocabulary and the kind of reference of belonging to a certain tradition.

But that fleshing out, that filling up of the skeleton happens how? With Psyche and Logos. What are we referring to? How does it work? How does it look like? What does an awakened person do? What do they look like? How are we on this path? Where are we moving to? What's it going to be like? What is it like now? What are the pressing issues that I feel are to be faced, to be opened to, to be explored now?

So there's this medical patient fantasy, as we said, that's part of the usual presentation. And there's also, I would say, religious fantasy wrapped up in the usual presentation as well. Again, whether it's Buddhist, whether it's some other spiritual tradition, it's still presented that way. Freedom from suffering, and you're replicating something that

he or she is pointing to in different ways, usually in a certain style of linguistic communication. And those styles can differ hugely as much as the fantasy of what it looks like and what it involves.

But why I'm calling it religious is because one of the things we could say, one way we could use that word religious is in the sense of re-ligio. Ligio is from the Latin, like ligament or legislation. Something that binds. So it's binding us, re, again, to re-bind us to something. In other words, to bind us to something from the past.

Whether you accept that etymology or not is kind of irrelevant, but there is something about religions, as far as I can see, for the most part, in that they place their authority in the past. The authority is in the past. We've touched on this a little bit on this retreat, and I've certainly touched on it in other retreats.

So you can hear that in replicating the Buddha or whoever it is, Nisargadatta or Ramana Maharshi or Krishnamurti, and replicating that kind of, the sense that we get of the awakening that they're trying to communicate and are somehow trying to replicate it, even if we're not thinking in terms of replication, that that's actually what's happening there. That kind of movement of replication and the authority in the past.

Even if this person is still alive, it's their past awakening that we're referring to. They say, well, on such and such day or whenever this happened and now I'm like this. And we say, wow, that's amazing. And we try and replicate that.

So I'm placing the burden of the meaning of the word religious in religious fantasy for now, not necessarily with respect to the subject matter, but with respect to this kind of fantasy of having the authority in the past. Some people say, no, religious has to do with believing in some kind of metaphysics or metaphysical beyond or transcendent or believe in life after death or you believe in God or divinity or that kind of thing. You could say something like that if you want.

I think just for now, given the flexibility of how we're using words, what I want to point to is this: it's not so much that, but the fantasy about the style, the style of fantasizing self on the path. That's what I'm talking about in these four kinds of fantasies that I've offered already, and I'm just elaborating a bit more. The fantasies of, or the style of fantasizing the self and the path, and the self on the path.

So there's something, as I said, replicatory here with the authority in the past. Now, it may be that this path, or our vision of the path, may involve a kind of felt promise of this more, or beyond, which we can discover later regarding how we perceive self, other, and the world. In other words, the perception of things, our sense of the path might include this promise of something beyond what I already know. It could be just a little

bit beyond, not that different. It could be something massively beyond, radically different, opening up in the perception there of self, other, world. And it could be that that sense of what's radically different is an obviously, quote, religious difference in the way some people use that word.

But that actually could be present, that beyondness could be present in any of these things, any of these four fantasies. And it could also have the kind of religious flavor of beyondness or transcendence or et cetera that's opened up in the perception. But that's not the key thing I'm pointing to because it could be in any of these four.

But as I said, the two sort of interwoven strands of fantasy in the usual presentation of the path or the usual way that most people tend to consciously or for the most part consciously fantasize their path is the medical patient fantasy and what I'm calling the religious fantasy.

And compare that, or either of those, or both of those, with what I was calling a third possibility, I've changed the order here by the way, but let's call it now the third possibility of the scientific researcher fantasy. In contrast to putting the authority in the past, science also looks to the future and anticipates, in its very assumptions and in its very project, anticipates making new discoveries in the future that it does not know today and that were not known in the past.

So yes, it uses the past, but it remains quite prepared to make radical breaks with the past and throw out anything from the past that no longer works or no longer serves as part of the most coherent and economical framework for understanding things.

But science, in contrast to the religious fantasy that looks to the past for its authority, looks also—or let's say predominantly—to the future. There's this... And I think I gave this example a few years ago in a talk. Let's take the scientific study of gravity. We had Galileo and Copernicus making initial observations and hypotheses about the movement of planets and about gravity at the time of the scientific revolution. Then along came Newton who synthesized Copernicus and Galileo with a theory of gravity related to the whole new physics that was emerging and the whole new scientific method. This rested on certain assumptions about scientific method, about reality, about all kinds of things wrapped up in that theory. He drew on Copernicus, he drew on Galileo, and he drew on many others as well—both the scientific methodology and the ideas about planetary motion and gravity.

Then a few hundred years later, along comes Albert Einstein, and in effect, to a certain extent, demolished Newtonian ideas of motion in space and time. Later, Einstein did the same with the Newtonian theory of gravity, replacing them with a whole other

theory of gravity that was really quite different in fundamental respects regarding what was assumed to be real, the whole structure of the theory, and what its implications were.

Nowadays, what's at the cutting edge of research in modern physics is trying to synthesize theories—having realized that Einstein's general theory of relativity, which is a very successful and beautiful theory, doesn't actually work well with the other main theory of modern physics, quantum theory. So various theories have been proposed—none anywhere near proven yet—like quantum loop gravity and superstring theory.

If a scientist were to say, "I believe that Copernicus was right, and I'm only interested in Copernicus. Anything beyond Copernicus is a pollution of the tradition. It's not proper science. It's a devolution," this would strike us as... I'm not sure about this person's scientific standing and authority and how they're thinking about things. It's only the religious fantasy that puts all the emphasis on the past like that.

So you get this fixation on "what the Buddha said." Someone was just telling me the other day about a teacher who said, "This is where Buddhism went wrong, this is where Buddhism lost its way"—going on about the Unfabricated. "This came after the Buddha. It was put in by Vedanta people—the jhanas, the Formless Jhanas and all the rest of it." And it's like, how strange. What is going on there to have this insistence on what the Buddha said as being the ultimate authority? What's going on there? It's a religious fantasy.

A person might be absolutely committed to secularism in the sense that they find exactly that—the idea of an unfabricated or a transcendent—abhorrent, but still there's a religious fantasy. There's a religious secularism there, or secular religiosity or whatever. Am I aware of the fantasies? How come I've just decided that the Buddha is the ultimate authority? Can I not see that there must be a fantasy going on there?

And a person might admit, even within that fantasy, "Yes, well, he was a little bit conditioned by certain views of his time and the limitations of the Indian worldview—perhaps around his political views. I could be wrong here, but he didn't seem to speak up much against slavery, against the practice of owning slaves. Or his attitude towards ordaining nuns seems a little dubious." But still, apart from those kind of slightly minor details, he is the fundamental authority and we are trying to replicate something. We're trying to find what he really said, assume he's the ultimate authority and somehow replicate that.

The scientific researcher does rely on the past and uses the past, but may jettison or shatter models of truth from the past, assumptions about reality, directions of investigation, all kinds of things—as we said with Einstein and Newton. And I think I mentioned this the other day, that the scientific research fantasy may be an open-ended fantasy. If you talk to some scientists, they would say, "We'll never fully understand everything about the universe completely. There's always more to understand." It's open-ended in that sense. Or it may not be. You talk to other scientists and they actually think there will be a time when we've pretty much figured everything out. Slightly comically...

Slightly comically, there was an English physicist who said exactly those words just a few years before both the quantum revolution and Einstein's theories of relativity, which threw everything into disarray and showed how much more there was to understand.

But there is, whether it's open-ended or not in the fantasy, this openness and interest in the new and intentionality towards discovering new discoveries. The emphasis is towards new discoveries in research science.

Relating that to what this means in terms of Buddhism or whatever—the newness here is not so much presenting old teachings in slightly adapted ways to new groups or demographics. Rather, the possibility here is of really different understandings, really different insights.

I remember when I first used this idea of the researcher fantasy. I just tossed it out playfully when I was talking about the beauty of desire in part two of this series. What was so interesting and striking about the material in that talk was this shouldn't happen. I felt like I'd discovered something—I'm not saying other people hadn't discovered it, but for me, I had not seen it before. And this shouldn't happen.

According to the teachings of the Buddha and the Pali Canon, as I understand them, desire, wanting—unless it's in very specific directions—basically brings suffering. But if you find that you can actually go deeper into that desire and hold it in a certain way, as we'll explore in this retreat, it actually does not bring suffering. It brings joy and fullness and abundance of being. Well, that shouldn't happen. So that's really interesting.

That's like Max Planck at the start of the quantum revolution presenting his findings in the laboratory. He really didn't want to present them because he knew this contradicted everything we think about radiation, black body radiation and how radiation is

emitted by hot bodies. He said, "I don't want to share this. Something is really up here." And he did anyway, thankfully, though he felt very ambivalent about it. He knew something was up.

This is really what I'm talking about by the researcher fantasy—things that don't fit, areas that don't fit, directions, insights, openings that actually move into new territory, new insights.

In comparing these different fantasies we're outlining, one may be a researcher into mystical states, for example. One may be a researcher into insights and approaches that some people would deem religious or spiritual. But the fantasy of the movement, how the self engages, how it sees itself, how it images itself in that movement in relation to a path—this is what I'm calling the scientific researcher, the person who can discover, make new discoveries.

These four fantasies overlap, as I mentioned. It's a matter of emphasis. What's dominant for you, for me? What's dominant at different times? Do we have flexibility with them, or am I just stuck? Can I only look this way, only fantasize this way? Is there flexibility?

The fourth is what we're calling the artist fantasy. This is also quite different.

You might ask, what is art for? Is it for the end of suffering? Some art clearly is—politically motivated art with a message. But not necessarily. Even the scientific research fantasy may not be for the end of suffering, or even the reduction of suffering. It might just be an interest in mystical states, an interest in consciousness, an interest in experience, an interest in dependent arising that's not motivated so much by wanting to end suffering.

So what's art for? And who can answer that question? Who is to say what art is for? Is the impulse for art so deep in the human being, in humanity—let's say, because it's not in some people, obviously, but in humanity—that it can't be contained by a certain statement of purpose?

We might also ask what is the artist's relationship with tradition.

So most artists—and I'm speaking of artists one would take seriously—would never confine themselves to merely replicating the masters. If an artist declared, "I only paint like Michelangelo. Anything after Michelangelo is rubbish, and I'm simply trying to replicate his style," we might respect their freedom to hold such a view, but it would sound remarkably limiting. Such a stance would suggest a rather constricted artistic vision.

On the other hand, a serious artist would hardly remain ignorant of their tradition. A painter would likely study not only Michelangelo but what followed—the Impressionists, Cézanne, Picasso, the abstract expressionists. There would be learning to replicate the tradition, perhaps dialogue with it, maybe even fighting against or transforming it. But if an artist were either ignorant of their tradition or wished only to copy Michelangelo, we might question their depth, capacity, power, or fertility as a creative force.

So what might it mean to have a fantasy of self and path that we could call artistic? Let me leave that question fairly open for now.

I believe it was in the talk "In Praise of Restlessness" some years ago where I first broached this radical possibility—a fundamentally different conception of the path and of the self on that path. A vision, a fantasy of the path as art and the practitioner as artist, in a way that goes far beyond mere technique. In the two talks preceding that one—"Questioning Awakening" and "Buddhism Beyond Modernism"—I attempted to expose gaps in the constructions of belief and view that prevent such a vision. Those talks provided groundwork for this artistic fantasy, creating space for its possibility. And certainly in our last retreat, "Re-enchanting the Cosmos," we explored the poetry of perception and the art of perception, further supporting this possibility.

Let me point out another dimension of the artist's fantasy that reveals its deeper complexity. The artist—whether dharma practitioner, soul-maker, painter, sculptor, or musician—may sense or imagine that their discoveries and creations are actually participations in divine creativity itself. They become part of the art of the divine, of Buddha-nature, of God, of the daemons. Their discoveries and creations participate in that divine movement, that divine outpouring, that divine discovery and creation of new logos.

This introduces a profound level of participation, where one's art becomes a conscious collaboration with divine artistry. I mean something more here than the common report of "going with the flow" or "getting out of the way" so that the poem writes itself or the painting paints itself. This vision may involve tremendous struggle, sketching, working out, trial and error, thinking, planning. It shouldn't be mistaken for a merely passive "let it flow and don't think" approach.

This sense of deeper participation in divine creation could apply equally to the researcher fantasy. The creation and discovery of new observations, ideas, logos, frameworks, and conceptions might also be experienced as participating in the becoming of God, the evolution of the divine, the unfolding of Buddha-nature.

This brings me to an important point about overlap. These fantasies are not hermetically sealed categories. The artistic and research fantasies can interpenetrate, as can others we've discussed. These four fantasies I'm outlining might appear neat and separate, but they actually blur into one another. They're also not exhaustive—there may well be many other possible fantasies for envisioning ourselves on the path, our relationship to awakening, to goals, to tradition.

The degree of overlap depends partly on the scope and permission we grant ourselves within each fantasy. Take the researcher fantasy, for instance. The crucial question becomes: what's the scope of research I allow myself? What am I given permission to inquire into, question, and investigate?

You might hear me or other teachers emphasizing play, experimentation, discovery—encouraging permission to be creative. You might apply this when facing a difficult emotion, experimenting with different qualities of attention. Will you laser-beam it with microscopic, intensely energized attention? Hold it in soft, spacious awareness? Touch it delicately like a feather? In that moment, you're researching, experimenting to discover what's most helpful.

But notice how this experimental research remains nested within the medical-patient fantasy—it's oriented toward reducing suffering, which is perfectly fine. However, the scope and permission I grant to my researcher identity remains quite limited. Other things might be occurring in practice that I don't dare pick up on or question, perhaps because I feel I'm still developing my basic capacities—learning to work with difficult emotions, explore the energy body, practice emptiness, navigate the imaginal realm and its new language.

And so, quite rightly, one doesn't start researching at full depth until one has had a certain amount of training. Perhaps the table is a little cleared in terms of not being too overcome with other difficulties.

So there's a place for all this, but sometimes we simply do not give ourselves permission to expand the scope of our research fantasies and to dare to question. We may not even notice certain things that are perhaps worth questioning or might open up a whole new area of investigation, some new discoveries, just because we haven't given ourselves that permission. We haven't given that self-image, that self-fantasy and the relationship with the path and awakening enough scope.

So there's overlap. These four categories are not exhaustive. And to reiterate, all four of these that I'm laying out are valid. They're all lovely and wonderful things. I'm not wanting to imply any kind of hierarchy—first you do this, then you move to that, but if you're really, really good, then you have this one.

The question is: what is authentic to you? What way of fantasizing self, path, awakening, and tradition is authentic to you? That's a different question than simply thinking, "Oh, the artist—that sounds pretty cool. I think I'll go for that one because it sounds more interesting or rarer." We're asking what's authentic to you, and that's not necessarily an easy question. I'll return to that in a moment.

I can also point out something I alluded to a few moments ago: we can be so used to a certain mode of relating to and seeing and fantasizing self on the path in relationship to the goal—for example, the medical patient fantasy or the religious fantasy—so used to a certain fantasy that any venturing out or opening up to another fantasy quickly gets shrunk back down and put in the box of the habitual fantasy again.

For example, maybe I see that I've been in the religious fantasy, with this idea of trying to duplicate or discover for myself this awakening that I hear teachers talk about. They speak of different levels, and I wonder where I am. What happens is that this fantasy easily, as I said, squeezes into a kind of ego measurement.

Then maybe I hear about these different ways of fantasizing self and the path and awakening, and I let go of that whole religious fantasy model—moving towards some awakening which someone else is talking about that's supposed to be fantastic. When I let go of the confines of that religious fantasy and everything it seems to imply, all the baggage it brings with it, I realize, "Oh, that's better. I can breathe now." There's the letting go of that whole structure of self-measurement.

And lo and behold, with that letting go, there's less suffering. I feel unburdened of a kind of suffering because there's less of this ego measurement: Where am I? Am I there yet? Why am I not there yet? Why do other people seem to have got it and I don't? Am I going too slowly?

I let go, there's less suffering. Then very quickly, I relate to the whole idea of different fantasies back in the frame of: "Oh, it's good. When I let go of that one, I have less suffering. So which of these will bring less suffering?" Right there, I'm back in the medical patient fantasy. I'm thinking in terms of less suffering.

There's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly valid. The question is: A, is it conscious? And B, is it authentic? Is it the most soul-making? What are we actually steering towards? What's possible here?

Because in what I just described, I've found my way—probably not that consciously—back into the medical patient fantasy with the logos, with the view and conception that it's about less suffering, and that's what matters most.

So it's tricky, all this. I'd love to simply say something about these four categories and have it be very simple, very cut and dry—hey presto! But you can see how much things overlap, how there are other possibilities. It's really not that simple.

When Jung introduced the idea of the archetypes in his way of thinking about things, he insisted on something people often don't realize: you don't ever get a pure archetype. Archetypes, if you like, their—what was his word there?

always in, his word was contamination, they're always contaminated, they're always mixed, was really his word, with other archetypes. You never get a single archetype on its own.

Again here, you never get a single fantasy on its own. It's variable, it fluctuates, depends on how we're relating, it moves in time, it moves depending on all kinds of conditions, and they're mixed. You have multiple things going on at the same time, multiple fantasies even going on at the same time in different mixtures and emphases.

And then this word authentic is also not so simple a word. When I say it's important which fantasy or what fantasy—better what fantasy, because it might not be just these four—it might be something outside of these four. Which is authentic to you?

Now, that could mean which is the fantasy of the path that's kind of given to or for your soul, so to speak. What are you called to? What is the impression, the fantasy that is summoning you, if you like? Already that question, putting the question that way, implies already a certain fantasy in a certain concept or logos of autonomy, as if the soul has a certain calling in a certain direction, has a certain archetypal influence, that's given to us and waiting to be discovered. Either we're authentic to that or we're not, we're in it or out of it, we're in it to a certain extent or in some situations or not, in others and not others, more or less. I'm not saying it's a bad idea—I think it's a very powerful idea.

But contrast that with the possibility that I would somehow like to hold as well: that we can experiment and try different fantasies. In this case, we can try different fantasies of the self on the path and fantasies of the path and of awakening and of self in relation to tradition. We can experiment, we can create our own or discover slash create, as we said before, new fantasies for ourselves. Try on different ones and see which is the most soul making, so to speak.

So this word authentic might replace which is the most soul-making, which we can either feel into and sense what's calling us, or we can play with things and experiment and find out and try different ones on. I would like to hold both of those fantasies of the approach to soul-making in relationship to these fantasies. I would like to keep both of them open.

But however we relate to that movement and that question, as I said, we need fantasy. We need a fantasy of the path for there to be eros. We need fantasy. And if we love the path, and if we love practice and everything that's involved in that, or a lot of what's involved in that, if there is love, where there is love, there is fantasy. There's a fantasy operating. But to be in love with the path and to have an erotic relationship with path, we need fantasy—we need rich, fecund, beautiful fantasy operating.

So this is, as I said, I wish I could just say something simple, and here's these four and it's very simple, it's very cut and dry and hey presto. But you start to go into things more and you realize that it's not so simple. It's not so simple.

So just drawing attention to some of the complexity of what we're presenting here without hopefully overburdening it with so much complexity that it becomes just utterly confusing and a kind of thicket. But to pretend that it's so simple would also not be very helpful, because very soon you would discover as you experiment and inquire into these ideas that actually it's not so simple.

And can you also hear that there are many levels of this idea of participation involved in what we're talking about? Many levels of this idea, for me, of a very profound idea—the idea of participation, participating in the divine, if you like, participating in the Buddha nature, however you want to put it. In this case, we participate in the creation, in the creating of what awakening is. We participate in the creating, or creating slash discovering of what awakening is.

Which is a different idea than there is something called awakening, sort of there and waiting as a possibility, and you either have it or don't have it, are it or are not awakened, or you're at a certain stage of awakening—you're at the second stage or whatever. That's the usual notion.

What is a radically different notion? We participate in the very creation of what awakening is and can be. Usually when we hear something like that, we tend to think, well if I'm creating it, it must be worthless. It's not real. The only real, the only worthwhile thing or worthy thing is something that exists independent of my creation of it.

I don't know, can you get a sense of a whole other level of ideation here? To me, a whole other level of beauty of an idea, or profundity of an idea, that we actually participate in the creation, and possibly delineation, of what awakening is.

So, going back to these four possible fantasies, what I really want to do is just open up, if you like, a basic notion here, a very basic notion about fantasy with respect to awakening and the fantasy of the self on the path to awakening and in relationship to tradition. Just that as a really basic notion. And just waking up to that fact, if you like, that we fantasize in relation to all that. And that it's not a bad thing, it's an important thing. And so to understand this, understand what other possibilities might be there, and if you would like to somehow stimulate your inquiry into all this.

And that's important to me. I said at the beginning of this talk, to me this is actually very significant, or potentially it's extremely significant, what we're talking about—this fantasy of the self, how we fantasize the self on the path to awakening, all that constellation of fantasy there. It's potentially extremely significant and far-reaching, but it's only potentially significant if we find our way into those ideas and those fantasies and have something move there.

If we don't work this material and this inquiry for ourselves, then the significance and the ramifications of it and the effects of it only remain potential. They don't actualize.

So I wonder if it's possible for me to offer some lines of inquiry for you to ponder, to take away, to carry into your heart and soul and let them do their work. Perhaps we can work with this material together—on the cushion, away from the cushion, in your life. Hopefully we can plant some seeds here.

Let me suggest four threads of inquiry, rich threads that can guide this exploration. The first thread has many elements to it, quite a constellation actually. And of course, you may discover your own threads of inquiry—that's part of the whole creativity of this process. That creativity is itself part of the fantasies we're exploring.

The first level of inquiry asks: Do I recognize where and when there is a fantasy operating—alive and fertile—of the self, of the path, of the self on the path toward awakening and tradition? This whole constellation of self, path, awakening, and tradition. Do I recognize when this fantasy is alive and inspiring, informing and motivating, doing its soul work?

Can I discern the contrast—where and when what dominates is more of an ego-measuring relationship with this same constellation? When is fantasy and soul-making fertile, and when has ego-measuring gained the upper hand? And where is it neither? Where there's no particular fantasy nor ego-measurement lens operating—just nothing much going on.

This first place of entry simply asks: Am I even aware of the difference? Can I tell the difference? What does that require? What kind of looking?

Fantasies can be subtle—the kind I'm speaking of are indeed often very, very subtle. Perhaps it's best when they are quite subtle, functioning as background colorers and inspirers, givers of beauty. This subtlety can make them difficult to notice.

But as I said, where there's love, where there's eros, it implies fantasy. Sometimes what happens is that because of ego-measurement coming in, a fantasy gets squashed. Or perhaps temporarily, or in a certain area, it's simply been suppressed. Or there may be areas of practice where fantasy has not yet arisen.

So this first platform asks: Can I recognize where and when there's fantasy, in contrast to where and when there's ego-measurement, and where there's neither?

Let me nuance this a little. In looking back over your years of practice and involvement in Dharma—or other spiritual practices—you might recognize different periods where the fantasies in play were markedly different. At different stages in your practice and life, for various reasons, different fantasies were dominant or operative. In reflecting on this, in feeling into it or noticing the colors and effects of fantasy and their influences—or their absences—you may see they shift significantly across different periods and stages.

Now let me add another strand to this inquiry. It's important to see that fantasies include not just self, path, awakening, and tradition, but also fantasies of others—images and fantasies of others. For example, the Buddha (which connects to tradition), or other teachers who mean a great deal to us, with whom we have heart connections, soul connections. Fantasy is involved there. They may be alive or dead, we may know them only through books or quite intimately.

It's crucial to recognize that this constellation of images and fantasies, in order to be fertile, must include some fantasy of others: Buddha, Sangha of the past, teachers, present Sangha, friends, co-creators, fellow wayfarers on the path.

This has to be okay. It's part of how the soul works, part of how soul-making works. It's immature not to realize this, immature to try to eliminate it. What's psychologically mature is recognizing it and allowing its depth and function, recognizing image as image.

But the particular nuance I want to open right now concerns different areas of practice.

Because it might be that in different areas or different practices or strands of practice, you actually have quite different fantasies operating around those different directions or domains of practice—different old fantasy constellations of self, others, path, awakening and tradition.

So if I ask you to reflect, in relation to five different areas of practice or directions or strands of practice, on what tends to be the kind of dominant fantasy or fantasies in those directions or domains.

For example, the first of these five: What do you notice is for you the common or dominant fantasy of this constellation—self, other or teacher, path, goal, and tradition—in relationship with deep emptiness practice? That's the first of the five. How do you tend to...what kind of relationship of view do you tend to get into in relationship to the whole area and direction and domain of deep emptiness practice?

Could be...some people say, "Well, when I realize deep emptiness, I will end rebirth. I won't be reborn again," et cetera. Could be that idea is involved. Could be—and probably what's maybe very common is—"When I realize, or if I realize deep emptiness, then I will end suffering. I won't suffer anymore, or I will at least significantly reduce my suffering." And that would be very understandable if that idea was there. That's part of the fantasy. It's part of the logos and it's part of the fantasy involved.

But let's see if we can really open this up and bring in a kind of openness of view and assumption, also a kind of honesty here. And ask: Is that—is ending rebirth, or is ending suffering or significantly reducing your suffering—is that what you most want? What you really most want, what you really most love, what you really most care about? Is that what you feel called to?

It may well be. Or it might not be, or it might be of some importance, but actually there are other things that are more important. So what I'm really interested in here, again, is this authenticity—opening up this territory of inquiry.

And there might be other elements that come in that are important for you. Perhaps there's something about the tradition: "I love hearing the Heart Sutra. I love those kinds of enigmatic-sounding mystical quotes that go back thousands of years. And when I'm engaged in emptiness practice or reading about it or hearing about it, I somehow feel connected with that tradition and it does something." You just recognize this is part of it—this is a thread of the fantasy that's alive for me and important.

Or it may be that that person just says, "Yeah, well, it's not so much all of that, not even so much that I really hope to end suffering. I just kind of enjoy it. I enjoy playing in those ways. I enjoy what that whole framework of moving deeper into emptiness and understanding of that and the practices involved. I just enjoy what it opens up in my perception and my conception and my assumptions and my—I enjoy the way it supports a kind of liberation of ways of looking, that all these other ways of looking become available and all these practices and there's a kind of beauty and art in them."

Which fantasy would that be similar to in our framework of four possible fantasies?

Or again, it might be that in relation to the whole deep emptiness trajectory, it's just not alive for you yet. Or it might be that it very often gets squashed. There may be a love, there may be a fantasy, but that fantasy often gets squashed into a kind of ego measurement thing, and it gets too tight. Too what? Realist? Lacking in soul-making? That would be the first one for you to kind of reflect on, ponder, see what comes to you, see if you can feel into.

The second area or direction of practice would be imaginal practice. And right away we can—for me at least—point out a distinction there. To me, I'm not sure imaginal practice has a goal, has a final arriving point. With emptiness practice, I suppose that at least in the way I would think about it, you can kind of reach a final arriving point, right? You could kind of say, "How much of the time am I able to dwell in that realization of emptiness without getting kind of shifted out of it temporarily or to some degree or whatever?" But basically, it might be one way of conceiving it is just: once one has realized the emptiness of everything, then tick that box kind of thing—it's done.

Whereas imaginal practice, at least in the way we're conceiving it, it doesn't have a goal. It's characterized by not having—it's open-ended, as I said in several talks in the past. There's no end to soul-making. It might be, you know, if you're new to it and these words—what is it that cosmopoiesis means again? And what's the difference between just having an image, using my imagination...

Once you get oriented—and it might take a little while to become familiar with the logos we're setting up, the conceptual framework, and some of the skills and techniques in practice—but once that foundation is there, imaginal practice simply exists without a goal. And because it doesn't have a goal, a kind of scale of measurement can't really fit onto it, as much as the ego might like to do that. It doesn't really stick. There's nothing to grab onto, unlike something like emptiness practice, which can tend to have depths and stages. Even if it's not formulaic, there's a trajectory that you can kind of measure—in a way, you could assess where one is on that scale of realization. In imaginal practice, I'm not sure that's at all possible.

So the second area of practice: how do you tend to fantasize in relationship to imaginal practice? That whole constellation of self, other, path, awakening, tradition—how does that operate for you?

The third area we could explore is samadhi. Traditionally, at least, the Buddha pointed to eight classical stages of jhānas—four form jhānas and four formless jhānas—a beautiful exploration and trajectory there. How do you tend to view that? Or you might be stuck in the idea of nailing the mind to one thing, like the sensations of the breath coming in and out of the nostrils or the abdomen, and that's what samadhi means to you. How does the self fantasize itself in relationship to samādhi practice? It partly depends on what I consider samādhi practice to be, of course, but still—I see so much how this shrinks into a kind of ego measurement for people. So much, whether one views it in terms of jhānas or simply as "how focused am I on the breath?" or "how continuously am I in the moment?"—whatever definition one is using of samādhi. But the question again: can I be aware of what's operating for me in that constellation of self, path, goals, tradition, others, with respect to samādhi practice?

Fourth: what about mettā and the brahmavihāras? You might find this is just the same with all areas of practice—though it might actually be quite different in relation to one area versus another. That's why I'm going through these five. Mettā and compassion may be very alive for you. There may be a real beauty or fantasy there of what you're moving toward and what you're dedicated to, and others who inspire you in that way. Or again, it could be something contracted into ego measurement and self-judgment: "I'm such a mean-hearted person. I'm so judgmental. I should be more kind." Or it simply doesn't register for you—"Yeah, mettā, never was much interested in that." And if it's a fantasy, it's not just saying, "Oh yeah, there's a fantasy there," but really, really sensing what the fantasy is—sensing its beauty, its multidimensionality, its fantastical nature and everything involved in that.

The fifth area, for now at least: what about ethics and the whole domain of ethical practice? This is an interesting one. I've talked about this in the past—in the talk "The Necessity of Fantasy" was one place—but Buddhist ethics, at least, is predicated and set up for the sake of reducing suffering, actually primarily for reducing one's own suffering. So we may be fantasizing Buddhist ethics and thinking of our ethical practices just in terms of the medical-patient model. I know one of my teachers would think of it that way: you're staying out of trouble, making sure your mind isn't bothered and hassled by regrets and worries about being found out for saying something or someone chasing you for this or that. It's not restless and worried about all that.

Or again, it might be that with ethics there's actually a much richer fantasy going on—that something really moves you about purity and goodness and straightforwardness and openness and transparency. There's something deeply touching and beautiful and calling to the soul about the ethical life, whatever that means and looks like to you.

Or it may be that in relationship to ethics, the fantasy of the domain of ethical practice is really as inquiry. In a globalized world, with issues like climate change and very different political systems and possibilities for destruction—destruction without destruction being consciously intended, through the environment or consumption or consumerism having global impacts, all kinds of other things, or ethics around sexuality—we live in a different age now. What might be beautiful to you about ethics is precisely as a domain and arena of inquiry. And that's the fantasy of the self in relationship to the path of ethics. That might again have certain people who are inspiring to you, a certain sense of what you're moving toward, a certain relationship to tradition.

But what often happens in contrast, in relation to ethics, is...

One relates to it out of fear. I better keep these precepts or commandments or whatever it is in a different tradition or these laws or whatever. We just follow authority or what we've been told, kind of out of fear.

Or again, it might just be that ethics—and I think this is the case for quite a few people—is just not interesting. There's a lot more kind of interesting stuff in Buddhism, and so it's just not an area that the fantasy life has enriched and made fertile and made beautiful. It's just, "Yeah, well, probably keep the five precepts," but it's not really alive imaginatively.

So that may help this inquiry into this whole area of fantasizing the self on the path in relationship to the goal and tradition and others. These five strands of practice are just offering possibilities for investigation so that you can till this soil and make it fertile in relationship to this whole imaginal dynamic and constellation around self and path.

So all that was the first area. It was really about recognizing and inquiring where and when fantasy is operating, where it's more ego measurement, where there's just nothing operating particularly—different periods, different arenas of practice or directions of practice.

The second possibility of inquiry to add to that is: Could you play with, could you take for a spin, so to speak, a test drive of these four fantasies, separately perhaps at first, and try them on? Experiment with them. Imagine your way into them. Imagine relating to the path from, say, the researcher fantasy, or whatever it is. Think your way into that.

So just as a kind of experiment in creative inquiry, as a way of extending and loosening up the soul and the soul-making process there. Again, part of why I'm saying all this is we get—it's so easy for us to get tunnel vision, but also just stuck on a railroad track without the ability to steer ourselves in any direction, experiment and be creative and move things and create more space and more possibility there.

So could you, just in your imagination—or even in actual practice—try on these four fantasies that I've been outlining: the medical patient, the religious, the researcher, and the artist? Play with them and think about them and what that would mean and what it would look like and what it would feel like and what it would imply. I think it would probably be fun and informative to do that.

The third inquiry here is really what we mentioned before: What fantasy or fantasies work for you? It doesn't have to be one of these four that I've outlined. It could be something else. You come up with your own, or it chooses you, if you like, if we use a certain language—giving soul more intelligence and autonomy. This fantasy chooses you, calls you.

Again, this word: What's authentic to you? What works for you? How do I recognize that? This presupposes, as I said right at the beginning of outlining these inquiries: How do I even recognize where a fantasy is alive and fertile and offering, irrigating the soil, inflaming the soul, giving fire, giving beauty, giving depth, giving richness, stimulus? Can I even recognize that compared to its absence or compared to the constriction of a more ego-measurement relationship?

But what works for you? What's authentic? What's fertile?

And then the last sort of question or inquiry is: How do you feel about this idea or possibility of the path being open-ended?

It's one thing to be handed and to receive from the tradition a sense that the path has an end. A person might think, "Well, yeah, but I'm never going to reach that end. Other people can." But it can be possibly quite a different thing to actually view the path itself as potentially open-ended because of the possibilities that we've been talking about.

How do you feel in relation to an open-ended path? And how does that idea, or that possibility, affect the possibilities of then how you fantasize self in relation to such a path, and others, and tradition?

That would be another way in, possibly, to all this. But I hope that one way or another you can work this soil a little bit. It doesn't have to be immediately, but maybe carving out a little time or a little intention—setting up the intention to, as I say, till the soil, work the soil, turn it, to bring these questions into the soul, these possibilities into the soul.

I really want to open up—as I said, to me it's quite a basic notion, really potentially significant. Something to understand here, something to stretch the soul a little bit through inquiring into it, into this area.

CHAPTER 78

The World and More: Immanence, Tantra, and Transcendence (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h28

> *In this opening talk from the "Eros Unfettered" series, Rob Burbea weaves together themes of erotic soul-making with traditional dharma teachings, examining how different Buddhist traditions approach the world of sense experience. Drawing from the Dakini Vajrapañjara and other tantric texts, he explores the teaching that "through passion the world arises, through removal of passion it is destroyed," connecting this to dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) and the fabrication of experience through clinging.*
>
> *Burbea examines how the Insight Meditation tradition has selectively incorporated teachings from the broader Theravāda canon, often emphasizing transcendence over immanence. He contrasts this with Vajrayāna approaches that see emptiness and divine appearances as inseparable, exploring parallels with Kabbalistic teachings about the erotic union between transcendent and immanent aspects of divinity. Through personal imaginal practice examples, he demonstrates how eros can lead to both world-transcendence and world-enchantment.*
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> *The talk introduces the concept of "diamond passion" (vajrarāga) - an inexhaustible, sacred eros that, when thoroughly known as empty, transforms the practitioner into a "diamond being" (vajrasattva) perceiving divine appearances. This perspective offers a middle way between world-rejection and materialist attachment, suggesting that understanding dependent origination enables both skillful unfabrication and conscious, sacred fabrication for soul-making purposes.*

Let's continue then with our weaving of this tapestry that we are revealing, creating together. We continue weaving together elements and themes and threads that we've touched on before, introducing other threads, making connections, moving back and forth over the same areas and bringing more out, strengthening connections.

If we look particularly, following on from what we've been talking about, we weave the connection between erotic soul-making and then our relationship to dharma and to notions of awakening, visions of awakening and what the path is. Included in that, we said, must be also the relationship to the vision, the view of the world—which means the senses and sense experience, which also means Eros included in that itself. What is

the relationship with Eros itself that comes out of soul-making, if you like, that is necessary for soul-making, but also that is furthered through soul-making? As an element of that, the view and relationship with sexuality itself.

In going over this again and bringing out certain elements and tying elements together, I also want to look at some parallels or point out some parallels and connections with other traditions. In some cases, other Buddhist traditions, particularly the Vajrayana traditions, Tantra, but also other Western traditions.

As a footnote to that point, the insight meditation tradition—which I consider my sort of root tradition—is an evolving animal. It's an evolving tradition. It's actually relatively new. You could point to its birth in the 20th century, perhaps in Burma and Thailand. There's a case for that. But as a tradition, there's a case for saying it's relatively new, and there's definitely a case to be made for the fact that it's evolving.

Looking back at that short period of the insight meditation tradition since its emergence or inception, we can see very clearly, if you look at the Pali Canon texts, for example, that the insight meditation tradition has thus far been quite selective about what it takes from the Theravadan tradition. It's probably more catholic now in what it takes, more wide in what it takes than it was, say, thirty years ago when I started.

Part of that selectivity has to do with cultural congruence and what Westerners feel comfortable with or what Westerners can buy into or what it was thought that Westerners can buy into in terms of beliefs and cosmologies. Some people are very trenchant in their view that this needs to be upheld as a selection process. But not just in terms of cultural criteria, cultural congruence criteria, but also, for example, a teaching like the jhānas and samādhi is so central in the Pali Canon, so much so that the Pali Canon in the text, when they write it out, doesn't even bother to repeat when the Buddha mentions it again, just referencing "as in this sutta, as in this sutta before," and just references you back rather than repeat it all again.

Only quite recently is there a sort of emergence of interest in the insight meditation tradition in the practice of jhāna and recognizing that as really valid and valuable current of practice, stream thread of practice. Or how little emphasized, for example, the contemplation of death is despite it being so central in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which is regarded as the central text of the insight meditation tradition.

In a lot of ways, we could say how narrow is the selection of the insight meditation tradition from the broader Theravadan tradition of texts and practices and teachings. In addition to that, the insight meditation tradition was born or came out of what had

influenced or the teachings received by the teachers in the insight meditation tradition, the initial teachers and then teachers since then. So it has mixed in with it a good dose of particularly Soto Zen, in the tradition of Shunryu Suzuki and others.

Also—and this again you can trace it back to a certain time period—a sprinkling of Dzogchen, Tibetan tantric teachings. But there again, it's very selective what is taken from the Dzogchen teachings or Mahāmudrā teachings, and they particularly only take... usually, what is taken is teachings about the nature of mind and the way it seems they are congruent with teachings about resting in awareness and non-doing and so-called non-contrivance, and the unfabricated nature of awareness and all this.

So the teachings on the nature of mind form an element, a strand within tantric teachings in tantric Buddhism. And there are different levels of the teaching of nature of mind. What you see when you really go into this is only sort of tantric teachings, a little bit taken out of context for one thing, and also taken at different levels and brought in to mix with or find another language for certain insight meditation teachings.

This is just good to know, and also as a precursor to what I'm going to go into a little bit, and what we've already touched on in terms of corollaries and parallels with other traditions. But also to come back to this point later on: that the insight meditation tradition is evolving. It always has been evolving, and I would say that's a good thing.

That was a little bit of a sort of preface. But let's start with a couple of lines from a tantric text, a Buddhist tantric text called the Ḍākinī Vajrapañjara. All these lovely Sanskrit tantric titles, because of the nature of the Sanskrit language, can be translated in many ways. We could give a translation there: the dovecote of the diamond sky dancers, the dovecote of the diamond sky dancers, potentially, or the indestructible net of the ḍākinīs, or the diamond ceremony of the ḍākinīs—many possible translations. I think, though I'm not sure, that this text, this tantric text, is a commentary on a basic tantra called the Hevajra Tantra, though I'm not sure about that.

But it says: "By passion, or through passion, the world arises. Through the removal or the giving up of passion, it—the world—is destroyed." And then the second line says: "By thorough knowledge, by thorough knowing, or by thorough gnosis—that word gnosis again, that we used before—by thorough gnosis of the diamond passion, the mind becomes Vajrasattva, a diamond being."

All these words that can be translated differently in the title, and even words like "diamond passion" and "diamond being," have in the Vajrayāna teachings, partly because of the Sanskrit language and partly because of the multi-dimensional nature of those teachings and multi-faceted nature of the teachings...

the vocabulary itself has this polysemous nature - it means multiple meanings, multiple levels of meaning.

So what is a vajrasattva? What is a diamond being? What is this diamond passion? And as we saw, the titles can be translated in different ways, kind of like a jewel, like a diamond, reflecting different facets - giving different faces of meaning, of hint, of inclination, of depth, of beauty.

Vajrasattva is like imaginal figures, which a Vajrasattva is, so to speak, in our language - an imaginal figure, an imaginal deity, possessing an infinite depth of meaning as an imaginal figure, a diamond being, as does diamond passion.

Vajrasattva is related - one meaning of Vajrasattva in the Japanese Shingon tradition is simply a tantric practitioner, someone who is moving on that path, opening that path of the empty imaginal in our language. So tantric practitioner is what Vajrasattva means.

Vajrasattva is also the high bodhisattva, or the Buddha, if you like, or an element of Samantabhadra - a primordial cosmic Buddha that has to do with action, and not just meditation. And Vajrasattva is also connected with Sambhogakaya, which I think on the last retreat, Poetry of Perception, we can actually translate in terms of systems as the mundus imaginal - it's the world, the realm of the imaginal.

So there's much more in that word Vajrasattva. It is a tantric deity, really.

But let's explore these lines from the Dakinivajra Panjara. The first one: "By or through passion, raga - we touched on that word in the first talk of this retreat - through passion the world arises. Through the removal or the giving up of passion, the world is destroyed."

I hope it's clear that this is referring to exactly our understanding of dependent arising - dependent origination through what we're calling clinging. By passion, let's say by clinging, the world arises. Through clinging, in all its multiple richness and spectrum of depth of what clinging means - we've been through this before, I'm not going to repeat it here. Through clinging, the world arises: the world of fabrication, the world of things, of self, other, objects, space, time.

No clinging, no arising of the world. Through the removal, giving up of passion, of clinging - when we learn through the art of meditation, meditation on emptiness, to attenuate the clinging in the moment, really drain it out of the plumbing system, the inflation system of dependent origination. Through attenuating avidya, through attenuating the push-pull with experience, through the removal, giving up of passion, of clinging, the world is destroyed, meaning the appearance of a world is destroyed, is not fabricated.

So that first sentence of the Dakini Vajrapanjara couplet there is really just reiterating in a very succinct way the whole of the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination, emptiness of the world of perception, fabrication, dependent arising, dependent fading. And out of that, the understanding of emptiness.

The second sentence: "By thorough knowledge, by gnosis of the diamond passion, through the thorough knowledge of the diamond passion, the mind becomes a diamond being."

Could this be referring to - or one way of reading it is exactly that - through letting go of clinging, but then knowing that everything is empty, and allowing, in our language, eros, that erotic connection, which we also know is empty because we know that everything is empty, and because eros stimulates soul-making, which knows image as image? Then what arises is this diamond being, Vajrasattva, a Buddha who arises with his or her mandala.

Buddhas in Tantric Buddhism, bodhisattvas, go with Buddha realms, Buddha fields. They go with worlds. They're not separate from the world - their mandala, what is around them, which is their perception, the world that they perceive.

So to become a Vajrasattva means to become a tantric practitioner, means to become a diamond being, an empty being who knows an empty world that is divine, divine appearance - the mandala of the world of divine appearances.

So this second sentence can be understood as - yes, the first sentence reflects the dependent rising, dependent fading, which we know from Theravada Buddhism, what the Buddha taught there, and Mahayana Buddhism. And in the second couplet, the Vajrayana tantric understanding of a Buddha's tantric fabrication of a divine and empty world.

Let's pull a few more pieces out of this. I recall that quote from Jung in his autobiography: "Eros is a kosmogonos," he said. Kosmogonos - his fancy Greek word - means a generator of cosmoses, that which inseminates, gives the seed for a cosmos. Eros is a kosmogonos, he wrote.

In our language, we would better say that desire is a kosmogonos. In other words, desire - whether it's craving or whether it's eros, clinging, desire - is a kosmogonos, because of this understanding of dependent origination. With the movement of clinging, in the whole breadth of what that means - desire - it will fabricate cosmos, cosmoses, depending on different aspects of what's involved with that.

Desire, clinging, is kosmogonos. Craving - and this is our language - when it's craving, there is one of the aspects of craving we delineated before and drew attention to.

Craving is based on realism, on the assumption and perception and conceiving—even if unconscious—of the reality of the self at any level. Even a process view of the self, or self as just vast insubstantial awareness, still contains realism. There's still a level of self-view operating.

So craving, in our delineation, is based on a realism of self and of world and of object. When there is realism, what gets generated in this cosmogonic process through desire, through clinging, is a real world—with all the rigidity of that, all the contractedness, and all the imprisonment that goes with realism and the perception and conception of realism, and thus all the dukkha.

This is one of the essential ingredients that delineates craving from eros in our language. When the kind of desire in the cosmogonic movement is what we're calling eros, then what we get is not the imprisonment of a realist sense of the world, of self, of other, of world. We get rather a non-realist self-other world, and also, eventually, a sense of a divine and non-realist self-other world. This is the cosmos. When eros is the cosmogonos rather than craving, then the cosmos that we get is a divine and non-realist self-other world.

Going back to the Pali Canon and the Buddha delineating bhava tanha as what can be translated as craving for becoming or craving for being—that word bhava in Pali and Sanskrit can mean either becoming or being. There isn't really that distinction there. Being and becoming, and if you understand that time is empty—same, same: being, becoming.

So bhava tanha can be rūparāga, meaning desire for the perception of form, or arūparāga, which is a more subtle bhava tanha, a more subtle craving for being or becoming in what's called the immaterial realms or the experience of the formless jhanas. This was a defilement in the Pali Canon, and there's a progressive escaping from this.

Most human beings have desire for material forms and what the Buddha called the cords of sense pleasure and sense experience. To have just a desire for the rūpa jhanas—what the Buddha called fine material form, the realm of fine material form, which if

you know the jhanas really makes sense. The body is experienced as much more refined form, energetic form, which we've drawn attention to with our talking about the energy body. This is an improvement, a move away from the gross entanglement of sense pleasure and materiality in what's called the material realm in the Pali Canon.

But even an improvement over that attraction to the fine material realm of the first four jhanas is an attraction solely to the arūpa jhanas, the formless jhanas, the immaterial realms. And eventually even that—as this is one of the last bastions of craving, of tanha—for what's called a non-returner in the Pali Canon, the third or fourth levels of awakening. With arahantship or full awakening, even that craving for being, becoming, experience of the arūpa jhanas, the formless or immaterial realms, even that is let go of. There's this movement, a gradual transcendent movement to the unfabricated, to that which is even beyond the formless realms in terms of its degree of unfabrication.

So there's a weaning off—that's a good way of putting it—a weaning off attachment to being in any sphere whatsoever. This gives a shape, an articulation to what Robert Bellah called this movement of world rejection that's characteristic of religions of a certain period, and it certainly was there before the Buddha. He inherited that. It wasn't the only teaching around in his time—just as in ancient Greece, there was a pick of world-rejecting movements and religions and philosophies, and those that denied any kind of world rejection and were flatly material. The Buddha chose to incorporate that, to keep that, to sanction that in his initial presentation of the path.

There's a movement through this progressive weaning—what's usually progressive, though sometimes you read of a very sudden ending of that bhava tanha, craving for being or becoming. There's a progressive weaning to the ending of rebirth, to the ending of being and becoming once and for all in any world of form or formless. There's this transcendent thrust.

But either with a tantric formulation or conceptual framework, or the kind of parallels that we're talking about in the language of eros, psyche, logos—there are parallels between those two. I wouldn't make them equivalent, and I'm not interested in doing that for myself, but there are parallels there.

Could we then talk about a non-realist becoming, a non-realist bhava, being or becoming? So that yes, the self is fabricated and the world in a certain cosmopoiesis, the imaginal self and the imaginal other. There is the becoming of that, there is the being of that, but it's a non-realist bhava with the cosmopoiesis that goes with everything we've been talking about. It's part of the tantric mandala and the tantric view of divine ap-

pearances. So again there's a distinction between craving and eros, and there's a distinction between realist bhava tanha and what we might call non-realist bhava or becoming and world.

This Vajrasattva, this diamond being, is implied in that imaginal realm. He's a Buddha associated with the Sambhogakaya, with the imaginal world opening up, the seeing of all appearances as divine. These tantric Buddhas, Vajrayana Buddhas and deities and bodhisattvas, they're not separate from the mandala they appear in. There's non-duality there, subject and object.

Included in that, and absolutely as a premise of tantric practice, is that self, world, and other are thoroughly known as empty. So tantric practice should take place, should take its launch from that understanding and be imbued all the time thoroughly with that understanding—the emptiness of self, the emptiness of the deity, and the emptiness of the perception of the world, of any world.

What does this mean, diamond passions? The word vajra, diamond, has multiple levels of meaning and facets. One of its implications is that like a diamond, it's supposedly indestructible—so indestructible passion. It also implies empty. When you say something is vajra this or vajra that, it implies already that it's empty of inherent existence, and implies too a kind of holiness, a sacredness there.

Indestructible passion, empty and holy, and, if you like, everlasting passion. What is that? To me, we could make a parallel there with what we're calling eros. And I've said many times now, can we notice in the imaginal practice, in the meditation, when there's eros around—and there always is eros to some degree with imaginal practice, even if it's very subtle—can you notice or begin to notice the sacred and divine nature of eros? Meaning just the perception of sacredness and divinity, the aroma, the intimation, the feeling of sacredness and divinity, whatever that means or however that is communicated in the imaginal terrain.

In the practice, however it's communicated to you, however you pick up on that, whatever the expression or manifestation there of sacredness or divinity is—there are many, many ways that this can be presented to us. We can get a sense of that in infinite ways, in fact. Sometimes it comes in a very clear way. It's actually personified, if you like, in the image itself.

Let me share something. There's a sort of background to this image that I think I might have shared in a previous retreat, though I actually can't remember. It belongs to a series of images, moving slowly over a period when I was on retreat and practicing with them, pacing myself as they evolved. One thing led to another slowly over some days, weeks even.

One whole set of images involved a burnt man, a man who's horribly burnt and receives healing bathing from a holy pool, from a kind of beautiful goddess—very pure bathing in pure waters and very loving, very healing. He's horribly burnt and sort of outcast because of that, so burnt that he's incapable of tending to himself and bathing himself. She bathes him with this beautiful, pure water, and there's a lot of grace there, and mercy infusing her healing, infusing her being. A lot of tenderness, a lot of compassion, a lot of grace.

At some point in this image, it's not just his face that's melted from the burns, but his arms too, so that they're melted into his side and he can't even raise them. They're always pressed to his side, so his whole body is fused. There's one large surface of burn-scarred flesh. In this fusion, with the body smoothed out by this scarred flesh, his whole body began to look to me like a lingam, like a huge phallus or those divine phallus sculptures that you get in different cultures—just like a huge phallus.

After a few days, another image linked itself to that image of the lingam that had evolved from this image before, or kind of handed over to another image. Here there was a goddess connected with that first goddess who was bathing the burnt man. This goddess now—is it the same? Is it different? I'm not sure—she was passionately making love with, erotically embracing and being penetrated by this lingam. This lingam, if you remember, is slightly bigger than a tall and wide human body. Again, it doesn't make sense anatomically, biologically, but it's an image, so we have room for that.

She's rubbing her whole body ecstatically and passionately and lovingly against this lingam. It's very sexual, very erotic in that sense. She gives herself. There's this total opening and abandon. She gives herself and her whole body to it. Despite the seeming physical impossibility because of its relative size, she's penetrated by the lingam everywhere—every possible entry point biologically, but even ones that don't make sense biologically. This is more an intuitive sense in the image rather than visual. Penetrated through her eyes. What does that mean? I don't know. It's a poetic sense. Through her senses, through her whole body, everywhere at once.

She is on fire with desire—not literally fire, but her desire is wild, it's fluid, it's fiery, it's full, and it's full-bodied. It's also insatiable. There's something I recognize in the image as I'm working with it about her and about her desire. There's this quality of in-

satiability to her eros. Or should I say, because it's not that she's unfulfilled or pained by the dukkha of desire, by this insatiability—it's just that her eros is inexhaustible. And there's no problem with that inexhaustibility. It's part of the divinity.

This inexhaustible quality is holy. Part of its holiness is precisely its inexhaustibility. She is devoted to this lingam, devoted also to the erotic meeting, to the surrender, to the passion, to eros itself.

In this image, in this imaginal practice, I sometimes feel—we've talked about this before—how identification can be mobile in imaginal practice. At times I feel very vividly as if I am that lingam. I feel the goddess rub herself against me, open to me. At other times I become the goddess and feel it all from within her body. And at times I seem to feel both together simultaneously.

There is so much love here, such love and beauty in this wild passion. I too am filled with some kind of worshipping—worshipping this that I am witnessing and participating in. I'll share one more thing about this image, because I also felt very strongly something going deep and firm within me—some kind of nuptial commitment emerging through and in this particular erotic image. I could have simply regarded this as weird, really out there.

This is partly why I'm sharing all these kinds of images. I've said this before, but it's worth saying again: for many people hearing this, some will simply say, "That's just weird, I can't relate to that." But others will be hearing, and I want to cast a different light on images that may arise for people—images they're initially fearful of, that they think are weird or pathological or unhealthy. I want to say: maybe there's something holy here.

If I can just let go of that stranglehold contraction of my initial fear-mind programming that regards it as abhorrent or too weird—"What will it mean about me? Will I become some kind of deranged or uncontrollable monster?"—I'm partly sharing all this at the risk of people thinking I'm weird. But I know that I'm not, because people talk to me and share similar experiences.

I want to really open this up and normalize something, to expand the range of what practice is and prevent the pain that happens when people start fearing their own mind and the images that arise, assuming something pathological simply because of what the culture—or certain religious or secular subcultures—have indoctrinated them with.

Going back to the image: there is this deep feeling, this strong sense of something going deep in me and very firm—like a kind of devotion, but also a commitment, a nuptial commitment. I'm somehow, through this particular image, binding myself as in a wedding ceremony, though I can't even say exactly to what. I feel drawn into this and somehow assent to some kind of commitment.

I'm not sure exactly what this commitment entails. It's not that it could be anything, but whatever it is, it's something I haven't been fully committed to before. It's something new. In some ways it seems to be a commitment to the earth, to nature and protecting her. At some points the image goes off into other images and imaginal figures I've had from the past—this wrathful deity nature protector I think I've shared before.

But there's also a commitment here to this goddess. I'm somehow committed to this goddess. And with that, I'm committed to this erotic embrace and this penetration, this lovemaking—whatever that means at all levels.

Later—this was relatively early in this practice for me—I have the intuitive sense that the very meaning of this image and of the commitment can grow and will indeed keep growing and expanding, because of eros's tendency toward extension and expansion. At times the whole image has started to include imaginal perception of the world, birdsong as sacred text, other kinds of cosmopoiesis spilling out of that.

I've shared this example for several reasons, but two main ones: First, there was the clear sense, personified in the very image, of the inexhaustibility of eros, and that inexhaustibility being one of the aspects of the holiness of eros. There's this sense of holiness and devotion, unlike ordinary eros. A particular dimension or aspect of that holiness was the very inexhaustibility—this infinitude we've been referring to that relates to divinity. Divinity and infinitude go together in all kinds of ways, perhaps infinite ways.

This is very different from what the Buddha called tanha. This word actually means thirst, with the implication of unquenchable thirst. This inexhaustibility of eros has a holiness to it, unlike the unquenchable thirst of tanha. Can they be mistaken for each other? Do they somehow overlap? Can one transform into another? Yes, we've explored all this before.

That's one element of why I shared that image. And also, again, this sense that there's devotion, divinity, and duty within an erotic image. This is perhaps an element pregnant within the meaning of diamond passion—to return to that tantric word, vajrarāga.

Diamond passion and the duty and divinity that emerge from that. "Knowing, by the thorough knowing of the diamond passion, one becomes a diamond being"—vajrasattva. Empty, divine, and with this, the purpose of the bodhisattva.

As I've said, a Buddha in Vajrayana and Mahayana teachings always comes with his Buddha field, his Buddha realm. A Buddha or bodhisattva comes with that—comes with the mandala, with the world of divine appearances, with the divine world.

And we can see tying that into what we've been saying about eros and soul-making and cosmopoiesis, that that's exactly what we expect. When there's the diamond passion, when there's the eros, and we thoroughly know that, and know the image is image, self and world are divinized in our perception.

So as we've been saying, eros starts to involve, it implicates all the other elements and facets of our experience, of our world, of our self, other world, and draws that in. Through the diamond passion one becomes a diamond being in a world of divine appearances.

And what we've been saying so far is that eros will bring, when it is unfettered, so to speak, when it's not blocked, when eros psyche logos are not blocked, when they are allowed to expand and fertilize each other—eros will bring, will give rise to, will stimulate a widening, deepening, multiplying, manifold sense of divinity. The senses of divinity will widen, our sense of divinity will widen, deepen, and grow more manifold.

So we could start with any erotic object, or eventually any object can become erotic for us. We may start with a human other. We may start with a purely imaginal being that's the beloved other, the erotic object. We may start with eros towards the transcendent, unfabricated, the deathless nirvana, the ayin of the Kabbalah, the nothing, the transcendent nothingness of the Godhead. We may start with the world, either the world conceived as matter—matter is what we love, matter is what we feel this erotic connection with—or the world conceived of as appearances, or just one thing, this tree, that forest, whatever it is.

And also the erotic objects can be mixtures of all these. And in fact, there's this manifold possibility of where eros can go and then what it can make divine. Even in mixtures, because the erotic object can be a mixture of these kind of elements, and because of the eros psyche logos dynamic and because of cosmopoiesis, there will be, I would say, a natural tendency, a natural movement to the mixing of these facets so that each object becomes multifaceted and its very divinity is multifaceted.

So the soul-making dynamic, the eros psyche logos expansion, insemination, movement, widening, deepening in relation to a human other, for instance, we begin to perceive them, sense the divinity of them, in them, through them, in their humanity. And then that spills over into cosmopoiesis, to the world. We've been through this.

Or we start with a desire, the eros for the transcendent God, for the unfabricated, the hidden God, apophatic movement. And at some point, perhaps after the realization of the unfabricated experiences of cessation and that sort of thing, but perhaps before, there's a sense of that divinity. The sense of divinity widens, it deepens and it particularizes so it's not just in this oneness that pervades in different ways, but we can know and we move towards knowing and wanting to know the divinity or God, if you're okay with that language, or the ultimate as transcendent and immanent, as universal and as personal, as circumscribed in itself, so to speak, separate, if you like, from creation and without any circumscribing, without limit, without borders, infinite and in everything or everything in the divine or God or whatever, in everything in the same way, and in each thing in a way unique and particular to that thing.

So all these directions and all these mixings and multifacetedness and the multidimensionality of the sense of divinity—eros will naturally tend to widen, deepen, multiply the senses that we have of divinity, that we can feel, perceive, know. Making manifold, more manifold, ever more manifold of our senses of divinity.

And how to navigate all this? I'd just call on what we actually already touched on. So again, just weaving things together here, going over what we've already gone over with new stitching, perhaps new colors, making new connections.

There can be eros towards the unfabricated, eros that longs for the transcendent other, eros that longs towards different levels of oneness that perhaps we don't know yet, or we're only getting to know. And that eros needs a skillful development of the art and understanding of working with clinging, letting go of clinging, as we've talked about, what we're calling clinging, that whole spectrum, and learning to move or to be moved along that down on the spectrum of decreasing fabrication. And that's a skill and an art that we can develop, an absolutely beautiful and precious thing that is to develop all that range.

So there's that kind of eros towards the unfabricated, to different kinds of oneness. And then there's eros directed towards the world, towards the senses, towards selves and others and the world of sense experience and things. And this kind of eros for the particulars and the not wanting to transcend—this will, in just saying what we've

already said in other language, re-enchant the world and the senses, self and other and the cosmopoiesis. There is a divinization, if that's the right word, of the world and of the senses.

So, a while ago, one of the talks said we can reconfigure some of the original teachings, add a whole other level here that might echo, if you like, or sound almost like tantric language. But now we can say something like what I said before: knowing the emptiness and eternality of the imaginal, or knowing the emptiness and the timelessness of the imaginal, the world is re-enchanted. With the world re-enchanted, or in the world re-enchanted and empty, one is free to become impassioned. Eros is free to flow, to ignite. Impassioned, infinite things open infinitely.

So knowing the emptiness and eternality of the imaginal, the world is re-enchanted. In a world re-enchanted and empty, one is free to become impassioned. Impassioned, infinite things open infinitely.

So it's really saying something about how eros is woven into the imaginal and soul-making, how that re-enchants and divinizes the world, knowing, seeing, sensing the emptiness and the eternality that allows more eros, and everything—infinite things, even more things than we even realized were there, more aspects are revealed to us, and they open infinitely, they gain dimensions, dimensionality.

And as we said before, that sort of quasi-tantric aphorism—or if you like, you can turn it around, because there's always going to be mutual dependent arising between such elements. So the eros is what re-enchants and what reveals to us the timeless level of the imaginal, that sense of the timelessness.

But in fact, they're all mutually dependent. So eros re-enchants, and the opening up of things gives rise to eros, to more eros, because there's more that's attractive there, there's that sense of the beyond, and that stimulates more re-enchantment. All these elements are mutually dependently arising.

In terms of navigation, what's this asking for? It's drawing out one element of our conceptual framework again, as it's so worth getting clear about. It's asking for us to understand this whole idea of the choices we have regarding fabrication and degrees of fabrication. To understand that, and to make choices about navigating and develop the arts of unfabricating to different degrees, expanding our range and capability through understanding dependent origination, skill in practice, and the art of practice with emptiness.

That's one direction. Another direction we might call skillful or tantric fabrication or soul-making fabrication—actually recognizing this is fabrication, of course it is, but it's serving the purpose of soul-making and it's non-realist. So there are these two directions: the decreasing of fabrication, the attenuating of fabrication, and the deliberate fabrication for the purpose of soul-making.

At one point on that spectrum is what most people would call mindfulness or perhaps bare attention, where there's a very slightly reduced level of fabrication compared to normal consciousness. Reduced from more papañca, but just a little less than normal consciousness—though this depends on the intensity of the mindfulness and what else is included with it. But this is simply a point on that spectrum of fabrication and how we're going to orient to that in practice. It's very useful at times. You go into a mode of bare attention, go into a mode of simple mindfulness. It has its place for certain things, for certain disentanglements.

But the whole path, as I would say it, encompasses much more. That's just an incredibly small sliver that has certain limited usage and certain limited possibility for soul-making, certain limited possibility for deepening insight. It's there and it's useful, but to shrink the path to that would be an enormous shame because you would be cutting off so much possibility.

This understanding and developing one's arts of movement in these different directions, these different places on the spectrum of fabrication, is important for our navigation in the wider sense, in the wider picture of what practice is.

As we said before, all this implicates and involves the senses and sense experience and sense pleasure and our relationship to all that. Let me read you something from Nietzsche, a little passage where he writes:

"In the main, I agree more with the artists than with any philosopher hitherto. They, the artists, have not lost the scent of life. They have loved the things of this world. They have loved their senses. To strive for 'desensualisation'—that seems to me a misunderstanding or an illness. I desire for myself and for all who live, who may live, without being tormented by a puritanical conscience, an ever greater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses."

Without being tormented by a puritanical consciousness, an ever greater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses. Indeed, he continues, "We should be grateful to the senses for their subtlety, plenitude and power and offer them in return the best we have in the way of spirit."

Translate this into what we've been talking about. "What are priestly and metaphysical calumnies against the senses to us? We no longer need these calumnies, these threats and teachings. It is a sign that one has turned out well when one clings with ever greater pleasure and warmth to the 'things of this world.' For in this way one holds firmly to the great conception of man—that human being becomes the transfigurer of existence when she learns to transfigure herself."

The great conception of the human being: that human being becomes the transfigurer of existence when she learns to transfigure herself. Can you hear in what he's saying what could be very much construed as exactly what we've been talking about if we substitute for "transfigurer of existence" the words transubstantiation, alchemy—things we've talked about in the last retreat?

Through relating, through an erotic connection with the senses and letting that psyche-logos dynamic do its natural thing that it wants to do, there's a transfiguration of existence in Nietzsche's terms. There's a transubstantiation of self, other, world. There's an alchemy that happens in the perception.

Again, there's a comparison between tantric practice and emptiness practice. The tantric practice of seeing appearances as divine, sense experiences as divine—what reaches us, what we perceive, what we open to, what we fabricate through the senses, in the senses—is to see that as divine and empty.

When there is a fading through insight—just for instance, really getting into the practice of regarding things as not-self, or things as empty—there's an attenuation of avidyā at that point. So ignorance, avidyā, usually regards things as self, and usually regards things as having inherent existence. When I engage a way of looking that regards things as not-self and as empty, the world of appearance—things, self, others, and the whole world of appearance—will fade to some extent.

But one can, in practice, with the development of practice, learn to engage that, incorporate that knowing of emptiness, so that things fade a little but they're loosened up and they lose some of their substantiality, typically. But you're not leaning all the way on that insight into emptiness. You're modulating it like the gas and the clutch pedal on a car. You're just modulating, so you're retaining perception and imaginal perception of divine appearances.

And you can either allow divine appearances to arise naturally or consciously choose to perceive them as divine. You're lightly knowing the emptiness, keeping that awareness present within the perceptions. There's a degree of unfabricating happen-

ing, but you're not letting them fade completely. You're not saying that fading is the better thing. You're not turning away from the senses or denigrating this world, this form of perception and experience.

You're playing at that midpoint, mimicking a Buddha's perception—a Buddha who is able to know emptiness completely and still perceive a world of appearances, of divine appearances. Transubstantiating the world, transubstantiating the self, and sense experience.

This is beautifully captured in Vajrayana iconography through the yab-yum, the erotic coupling or union of the Buddha and his consort. I've spoken about this before, and I find it so beautiful and profound that I want to repeat it now. The prajñā, usually characterized by the female figure, represents wisdom, while the upāya represents skillful means. At one level this means compassion; at another level it represents the mandala of appearances, of divine appearances. The wisdom—the knowing aspect that knows emptiness—and the awareness that perceives the mandala of divine appearances are represented as being in erotic sexual union, penetrating and co-mingling, depicted iconographically through sexual union.

The wisdom consciousness, the prajñā, is the wisdom knowing. And remember, let's keep that knowing plural. If I really have wisdom, what I have is multiple ways of looking and infinitely expandable ways of looking. That's what I end up with if I really understand emptiness, if my prajñā is truly developed. There is not, therefore, the epistemicide—the shrinking down where mindfulness reveals things as the way they are, or classical Newtonian science reveals things as the way they are, or whatever it might be. There is not that epistemicide, what we're calling epistemic cleansing.

There is this opening, because incorporated within that wisdom-knowing is a whole range of ways of knowing. I heard the fabulous phrase "epistemic disobedience"—just refusing to go along with this cultural indoctrination in the West of what qualifies as a way of knowing reality. "This is knowledge. That's reality. There's only one way of getting there." Or if it's a Dharma teaching, shrinking it down to mindfulness or whatever.

I heard someone ask, "Do you want your reality with or without additives?" The teaching there is supposedly that if you want the pure, real reality "without additives," that's what is given to you by mindfulness. And apparently mettā as well. But is that really a full enough, deep enough, radical understanding? Is there not a misunderstanding wrapped up in that?

But anyway, back to this tantric iconography. There's an erotic sexual union, an interpenetration between the wisdom knowings—the knowings that know emptiness and thus have a range of ways of knowing—and the world, the world of form, of matter, of senses, which is recognized to be empty and divine. As I said before, in the Buddhist iconography, this Buddha and consort, this Bodhisattva and their consort, are not actually separate. They together make the Buddha—male, female, both, whatever. Not separate there.

There's not the separation of the wisdom consciousness, the wisdom knowing, and the world—the senses, the world of form and matter. All of it empty, all of it divine. And within that, if you know the teachings, there's room for the transcendent aspect of the gnosis, the transcendent aspect of the Buddha's mind beyond appearance, beyond any form, beyond anything that can be said of it or predicated or attributed to it—unfabricated. And at the same time, there's room for the immanence and the revelation, the discovery of the divine in and through the world of forms and experience in different ways.

You see this also in Kabbalistic teaching, in the Jewish mystical teachings. There's the eros between aspects or faces of the divine, aspects or faces of the godhead called sefirot. For example, between the sefirot of Tiferet and Malchut—which is also the Shekhinah that you may have heard of—in other words, between the divine transcendence and the divine presence in the world, the immanence, the Shekhinah—there is an erotic connection, an erotic love, an erotic union.

Right there, spelled out in all these mystical teachings in very erotic language and depictions, is the understanding that between the transcendent and the immanent, there is eros. Between the wisdom-knowing and the world of form, matter, and senses, there is sexual union. There is this erotic connection.

Or to take another teaching from the Kabbalistic tradition, again from the sefirot: the two sefirot Chochmah, which translates as wisdom, and is associated with a kind of level or dimension of being or a world of pure conception. If we go back to the teachings about dependent origination and fabrication, the simplest conception is just any kind of self, any kind of knower, and any kind of known—which a knower always needs—and any kind of time, not just the present moment, but knowing, a known, and time.

That's the barest pure conception. You could say that's the seed in Chochmah. And that seed fertilizes Binah, another sphere, a third sphere called mother, the celestial mother. She, that sphere, has a kind of parallel, or is associated with a dimension of being, a level, a world of what's called knowing. It's the initial—don't take this tempor-

ally, but it's the first forming, if you like, of objects, of perception or beings, the first appearance of distinct, finite creatures, the realm of angelic or spiritual beings, the mundus imaginalis. Maybe there are parallels there.

But again, there's this erotic union depicted between the transcendent pure conception, if you like, and the world of appearances, the mundus imaginalis, the world of forms. Again, eros and the imaginal are wrapped up together there, and you can also see some parallels here with teachings about dependent origination. Any fabrication needing, as I said before, some elemental, incredibly subtle conception there. The pure conception, perhaps, of Chochmah and how that gives rise then to the world—not necessarily in a temporally discrete progression there.

What's interesting in the Kabbalah about this erotic union is that human practice is necessary to restore these two sefirot, Chochmah and Binah, the wisdom and the mother of the world. Human practice is necessary to restore union, to restore their lovemaking, to turn them back face to face after a mythic rupture within the divine itself. What's necessary for what's called tikkun olam, the restoration, the healing of the world, is also the healing of the divine. Through human practice, these two, if you like, faces of the divine come back into the erotic embrace of lovemaking, of sexual union for which they were originally intended—the wisdom, the father, that's pure conceptuality that generates fabrication and the world that is fabricated there, the world of forms.

So you get in this teaching the idea that human practice is necessary for divine and cosmic healing and completion. And wrapped up in this teaching as well is the fact that this breaking of the vessels is part of this whole mythology or psychology or metaphysic—this multi-leveled, multi-faceted teaching. This breaking of the vessels, shevirat hakelim, happens repeatedly on different levels of being and in our own psyche and souls. Every time that happens, the Chochmah and the Binah, the celestial father and celestial mother, the wisdom and the appearance of forms, are turned away, turning their faces from each other in opposite directions, away from their erotic union. And every time that happens, because it happens repeatedly, this breaking of the vessels, that rupture in the erotic union occurs. It's up to us, up to the human being, to restore that lovemaking between these aspects, directions, faces of God, faces of our being.

Interesting to me. I don't know if you can hear the poetry in here and hear how many resonances there are in terms of ideas that can fertilize soul-making further.

In tantric practice, as I mentioned before, there's a kind of mimicking of a Buddha's gnosis that can see emptiness and has some aspect that's completely transcendent at the same time as immanent and appearance. Mimicking a Buddha who is the only kind of

being that can know fully the emptiness with the wisdom there, and perceive appearances and forms. Tantric practice is a kind of skillful, artful mimicking of that Buddha gnosis. And within that, there's this understanding that the Buddha gnosis is referring to something—a cosmic dimension. This jnana, this gnosis, is something cosmic and divine. And at the same time, it's not other than our very minds. Our very minds, at one level, are the Buddha nature, are the Buddha mind, are the Buddha gnosis already.

It's not separate from, not other than our minds and this world. That mandala, the divine appearances, is this world perceived differently, perceived through the lenses of gnosis, perceived through the lenses of imaginal perception when the eros is allowed to fertilize it, perceived through deity practice in tantric tradition.

Because it's not other than our minds and because it's this world that is being created and discovered as divine and revealed that way, there is this aspect to all these teachings of participation. In the Kabbalah, human practice is necessary for this healing of the divine and restoration of the erotic union between the faces of the divine, and that's part of the healing of the cosmos as well. Participation is woven into these teachings. That idea of participation that I've touched on before and drawn attention to is woven into these kinds of teachings.

Some years ago, I'm sure I would have heard all this—these kinds of things—and it just sounds like completely abstract metaphysics or some ridiculous kind of mythology. Now, it's so resonant, so alive and multifaceted, these kinds of ideas. Anything but abstract, anything but slightly strange, disembodied metaphysics from another era.

What is it, as I hope I've said before in this retreat, to take ideas and let them be seminal, let them be seeds in the psyche? Through entertaining them, can we translate them into ways of looking and into imaginal perception? An idea actually seeds the imaginal and fertilizes the eros. The idea and the image start mixing and giving birth to other images or other dimensions of image. So not abstract metaphysics—all this Vajrayana stuff and Kabbalah and Neoplatonic material—but to be practiced. They refer to practices, to things and experiences that we can actually open to in practice, in our lives. They refer to ways of living and ways of seeing, ways of looking, viewing.

In another strand or related strand of Jewish mysticism that emerged in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, they talked about a double movement. There's the movement to nullify the self and nullify matter and form in favor of the Godhead. In other words, to realize the emptiness of self, the emptiness of matter and form, and to become nothing, to dissolve into the unfabricated, we could say in our language.

into the ayin in the Hebrew, in the Kabbalistic tradition—the nothing of God, the pregnant nothing of God, the infinite nothing of God.

So this one movement is the nullification of self and matter or form in favor of the Godhead. And the second movement of the double movement is to bring about an infusion of the divine, of the divinity, into the material world through religious worship and ritual and ethical action—what's called the mitzvot in the tradition.

So there's a double movement here: what's called the upper unification—this annihilation in their language of the self and of the world, this emptying, dissolving into the transcendent, infinite, unfabricated God. And paradoxically, that upper unification, the ability to do that, enables a drawing down. I would say, to the degree that we're able to do that, we are more able to draw down, in their language, the divine essence into the vessels of the finite world. And this drawing down, this ability to draw down, is called the lower unification.

That kind of teaching is wrapped up in all kinds of language that, for a lot of us now, will be really quite loaded and charged and sometimes, for some people, scary. And there are also elements of that language that I would not actually incorporate, just because it makes either too much of a duality or this or that. So, for example, they talk about leaving the bodily sheath and divine will and divine commandments. Just leaving aside all that kind of language and taking something central from that because of its parallels to what we're talking about.

You can see there, for instance, the parallel, or you can see that double movement in what we're describing as tantric practice. So in typical tantric practice with a yidam, with a tantric deity, there's first the dissolution into emptiness, the knowing of emptiness, and then the emergence from the emptiness and the imagining, if you like, of the deity and even the becoming of the deity, and then at the end dissolving it all back into emptiness. So there's the drawing down or even becoming a vessel of the divine, this drawing down of the divine essence, but that's enabled and shot through with the knowing of emptiness—enabled by or shot through by the knowing of the emptiness and the fading of things.

This is also parallel with imaginal practice, just as we've been talking about: working with an imaginal figure, working with a daimon, if you like, and feeling a sense of the divinity of that, and the way that the sense of the divinity and the dimensionality of divinity of that figure, of that daimon, of that imaginal figure, and then the sense of divinity... Can you see that too? I know it's image, it's image, it's empty, and that kind of enables me to listen, let's say, feel, sense this sense of divinity and divinity. It's all

wrapped up together. And then the question is, how does that divinity embody in the world? Is it just in a sort of inner devotedness? Or is it somehow spilling over into the world—careful of this literalization, concretization? But you can see the parallels there.

In alchemy, there's an alchemical phrase summing up the goal of alchemy as "the spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit." The spiritualization of matter and the materialization of spirit. And so again, you can see here echoes of these different streams of tradition kind of reflecting each other. Different traditions and the way they express things kind of paralleling or mirroring each other or kind of groping towards the same thing. Spiritualization of matter—this nullification of self and matter, recognizing it as empty and as divine that way. And then the materialization of spirit—meaning something like the drawing down of this divine essence into the vessels of the finite world, the divine influx.

In both the Kabbalistic Jewish mystical teachings and in the tantric teachings, in the Vajrayana teachings, there's a kind of double perspective going on. It's made very clear in the Kabbalistic teachings. And this double perspective—it's almost like holding two perspectives, so not just a double movement, but a double perspective held as well. And this double perspective, to me, ensures a thorough non-dualism of the teachings.

Even sometimes we're used to Advaita teachings, teachings of non-duality, and unwittingly, they can actually create another kind of duality in teaching that there's nothing to do, there's nowhere to get, meditation's pointless. You don't need to do anything. They don't say much about ethics and all that. And there's a kind of almost like denigrating of effort, of striving, and that kind of movement there, and avoidance—or rather, missing—of the divinity and the particularity we've touched on.

But with this double perspective, to me, there's a more thorough non-duality. So one of the perspectives is: already recognize that everything, all, is already divine. It's already all one. It's already all perfect. The essence of everything is divine. And the illusion of separate things that are not divine or separated from the divine is exactly that—it's an illusion, because essentially all is one and already divine.

That's one perspective, and the complementary perspective is that we express, or better, we create and we manifest the divine, that we are therefore necessary to the divine. And this implies to me a whole other level of participation: that we are participating in the divine, we create, we manifest the divine, we are necessary to the divine.

But holding those two perspectives—all already perfect, there's nothing to do, any illusion of separate, non-divine things doesn't recognize the essence, the shared essence, the oneness of an already perfect divinity, everything is already just divine—and at the

same time, the complementary perspective that no, we need to create, manifest the divine, and we are necessary to the life of the divinity, if you like, to the soul and the soul-making of the divine.

Both the tantric framework and the Kabbalistic framework and these teachings are related to practice.

They absolutely imply and demand practice. They are not, as I said, abstract metaphysical teachings that have nothing to do with our life.

I want to continue exploring these themes further—delving more deeply into historical processes within different traditions, examining how these developments have particularly affected sexuality, and perhaps touching on some other related elements. But let us pause here for now.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 79

The World and More: Immanence, Tantra, and Transcendence (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h15

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea examines the historical evolution of eros across Buddhist Tantra, Christian mysticism, Jewish Kabbalah, and Islamic traditions. He investigates how these paths gradually elevated sexuality from defilement to sacred practice, asking whether tantric sexual imagery is purely symbolic, merely expedient, or genuinely re-sanctifying. Drawing from the Guhyasamāja Tantra, Kabbalistic texts, and Christian theosophical writings, Burbea demonstrates how erotic imaginal practice can transform our relationship with the senses and the world itself. He challenges the "myth of origins" - the assumption that earlier religious forms are purer - proposing instead a teleological view where traditions evolve toward greater authenticity. Through detailed analysis of imaginal experiences involving solar-lunar symbolism and cosmic mirroring, he shows how sexuality can reflect divine creativity and participate in cosmic harmony. The talk culminates in exploring how both transcendent awakening beyond the world and immanent sacralization of the world offer "infinite water" for the soul's thirst, with eros as the key that transforms this limited world into unlimited revelation.*

Notice how central eros is in everything we've talked about in the first part of this talk: in the tantric symbolism and language, in the kabbalistic symbology and language, in the relationship with the world of sense experience opening up, in the movement towards the transcendent, in the re-enchanting of the world, in the very relationship with the world itself.

When eros is allowed to do its thing, when it is allowed to inseminate, impregnate, galvanize the soul-making dynamic—this mutual fertilization of eros, psyche, logos, this mutual complication, enrichment, deepening, widening—then it will affect the notion of the path and of awakening, the sense and the vision of what that is. It will also affect the relationship with senses and sense experience, with the world, with life, and of course, with sexuality.

It's interesting to notice historically—and I'm definitely not a historian—the rise of Tantra in Buddhism, for example. This historical evolution came after the initial first turning of the wheel in the Pali Canon. Buddhist Tantra came afterwards. In Judaism as well, you have Song of Songs and other allusions earlier in the history of the text, but with the emergence of the Kabbalah in the Middle Ages, and also of Hasidism in East-

ern Europe around the seventeenth century and after, something shifted. Hasidism started as a very radical, mystical, ecstatic movement—a real revolution within the stream of Orthodox Judaism. Now it seems to have become something rather more conservative and really not so radical in that sense.

But in Judaism, in Buddhism—there's this gradual emergence or ascent or elevation of eros historically. Also in Islam, I think, with Rumi and Ibn Arabi pointing to these kinds of things. In Christianity, which maybe we'll come back to, some people would argue that it was there right from the beginning in Jesus' relationship either with Mary Magdalene or the so-called disciple that Jesus loved, who might have been another man. But in terms of what's mainstream orthodox and historically entrenched, and then in time, there's this gradual ascent, usually at the sides in the esoteric, more elitist streams of the tradition. It's a gradual ascent of eros.

It seems that way to me, just looking historically, though I could be wrong. Eros becomes actually more integral to the whole vision. It's given a more central place in spiritual experience, in the path, in these different traditions and in the whole conceptual framework.

Now, of course, many people would look at that and, for example, look at Buddhism as a deterioration from the purity of the Pali Canon—a pollution in time, a devolution. People might look at it that way, but we could also say that it's a necessary evolution. There's something operating in all these diverse spiritual traditions that's manifesting humanity's spiritual genius, let's call it that—the intuition that reaches out and gropes in some way to formulate, to articulate, to create and discover a way of including eros more centrally, sanctifying it, and also matter and sexuality. I wonder about seeing it that way.

It's interesting that I could speak for myself and maybe for other people—I wonder if this reflects not only a historical evolution, but also a personal evolution in practice, in conception, in what one's eros is directed towards and what eros is taken to mean, and where it moves, and then in the whole vision of the path. If the soul-making dynamic is allowed here—eros, psyche, logos—this is what will happen. It will start to re-evaluate, reconfigure the relationship with the senses, with the world, with sexuality, and in that, with the whole path and goal of awakening. All of that. It may happen on a personal level and it may happen on a historical level over centuries. It's interesting to see how they can mirror each other.

I've talked before about Nietzsche's phrase, "the myth of origins"—highlighting the fact that we tend to assume that most people assume the first birth of a religion, of a philosophy or an ideology, is the most pure, the most authentic, the most radical—as in

radix, as in root—and the most powerful. Therefore they try to scrape away historical accretions or cultural accretions and try to return to some kind of hypothetical original form in the present, or actually have a fantasy and reconstruct that vision in the present. Or, mixed with that, they're actually bringing fantasy and preconceptions in and just take what doesn't challenge the current popular metaphysics from this supposedly pure original version. Or they just look at it in a way that history and the knowledge of history deconstructs the whole thing, so that the whole edifice and the whole religious impulse and the whole religious creation and construction becomes devalued, dismissed. Any religion, any philosophy can just be deconstructed historically in a way that renders it almost valueless. There's a certain way of approaching it that way, a certain intention of approaching it that way.

But Nietzsche pointed to this myth of origins, this assumption that the first birth is the most pure, most authentic, most radical. Why not, though? Why not regard religions and philosophies teleologically? We've talked about that word before—the *telos*, the aim. Where are they headed? What are they drawn to? So that the evolutions of, in this case, the different religions or Buddhism or whatever, and the *telos* is actually regarded as more authentic, more true, more radical, and more essential. This is upside down from the usual way we think. But in other periods of history, with Aristotle and after that, this was regarded as a very valid way of thinking about causality.

What about the possibility of actually turning the whole thing on its head and seeing it differently? So whether it's slowly, gradually, or suddenly, human beings think, reflect, intuit, experiment, create, and discover religious forms and practical forms and practices and conceptual frameworks and experiences that are actually part of an evolution and moving towards something. As Michelangelo said of sculpture—I can't remember the exact words—he's just removing the bits of the marble to reveal something that's already there, the statue that's already there in the marble. He's moving towards something, so to speak.

The historical currents and events then are not so much regarded in a way that devalues and deconstructs and then dismisses, but we could even go a stage further and regard them too as the operation of some...

greater intelligence.

So even if there are historical factors coming in and adding to something and shaping and reformulating at different periods in the history and evolution of a tradition, of a religion, even that could be regarded, for instance, as the kind of intelligence of the world soul operating to inform and influence the evolution. All that is, is an intelligent operation of the world soul towards a telos, towards some goal.

But that goal, unlike Hegel's philosophy, is actually open-ended. What does it mean to have a telos, to have a goal, but actually it's open-ended—one never finally reaches it? There's this open-ended movement, but the evolution is regarded as towards more authenticity, if you like, towards more purity, towards more radicality. Why can we not regard things that way?

Despite what I've just said, I know that there are quite a few people around who believe the old scholarship around Buddhist Tantras, which stated that Buddhist Tantrism was basically borrowed from or evolved from Shaivite Hindu Tantrism, and it was just a derivative thing. Therefore, the whole Vajrayana was again a historical devolution, a pollution of the pure, original Buddhist teaching by alien influences in India.

More recent scholarship, for example Bhattacharya and others, actually points to it being quite the other way around. Their research indicates that Buddhist Tantras actually had a big influence on the evolution of Hindu Tantrism. In fact, mantras and dharanis and mandalas and mudras and all these tantric notions and practices are actually present in Buddhist texts as early as the first century of the common era—for example, in the Manjushrimulakalpa and things like that.

This is interesting if we're going to play the game of what's the pure origin of something and regard everything that comes afterwards as a sort of movement away from purity, as opposed to regarding it telistically, teleologically, the other way around—a movement towards more authenticity, a growth, an evolution.

But there is, it seems to me, as a non-historian, a gradual ascent of Eros historically, and therefore also of sexuality. It becomes more integrated, less denigrated, more elevated, given place in the whole spiritual outlook and approach, religious practice and thought.

You see this in Christianity, for example. There was a seventeenth-century Lutheran called Johann Gischtel. Listen to these instructions to Sophia—we have to explain, Sophia is found in the Old Testament, in Proverbs as well. It literally means wisdom, Greek for wisdom, but she is regarded as the first being that God created. She was with God and God's love almost from the beginning, so to speak. She's not God, but she's somehow divine and part of God or something like that. So there are different ideations around who exactly she is, but she's a feminine, quasi-divine figure of devotion prominent in different streams within the Christian tradition.

Listen to this from Johann Gischtel in the seventeenth century. To Sophia, as the essential love: "Make yourself more united, more known to Sophia. And while praying, focus your imagination on her as you do on your wife and give yourself over to her way of loving with your body, soul, and spirit. You will find within your soul a great relief and sweetness and an excellent strength in your prayer."

Actually wrapped up in this teaching about Sophia is a whole cosmology or cosmopoiesis in our outlook. He points out that Sophia's presence is regarded as permeating the created world—the skies, the plants, the flowers, the metals, everything. So he writes, "We also recognize Sophia in this created world since she is emanated in the heavens and on the earth, and in everything that grows, and is to be seen and found on the firmament, and likewise in herbs, flowers, their colors, odors, tastes, or virtues, also in metals of the earth and their tinctures."

There is, one can sense in there, a whole quite elaborate conceptual framework and theology involved in Sophia and relationship with the world and levels of existence and what's called in the Hermetic and other traditions "sympathies"—harmonic resonances between, for example, metals and their tinctures and certain herbs and colors and odors and tastes with spiritual dimensions.

However, Johann Gischtel and the other theosophists that had a similar kind of outlook in relation to Sophia and erotic relations with Sophia in imaginal prayer still often regarded actual physical sensual relations, even within the context of marriage, as much less preferable. Somehow there's still a bias and perhaps a result of entrenched views regarding sexuality and the so-called battle against the flesh, which is such an entrenched notion in both Western and Eastern thought. It goes back to Plato, probably even before that, and is reflected in monotheistic traditions.

But it's striking to listen to that as a kind of imaginal meditation instruction, similar to what we've been talking about.

What comes to mind is a piece of writing by Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who died, I think, in 1968. Beautiful, beautiful writer, beautiful person. He has a really gorgeous piece called, I think it's called "Hagia Sophia," if you've ever come across it. He describes waking up in a hospital bed with a nurse there by his bedside. He opens his eyes and sees this nurse and sees in her face and in her manner and the tenderness of her ministrations—he sees Sophia. He perceives her theophanically. Something very beautiful there, and he weaves a beautiful piece of writing around that.

I wonder how much that perception there was a result, again, of the personal evolution of his practice. I don't know enough about where he came from. He certainly was living as a celibate monk, a Trappist monk, very strict order at that time. I'm told that he had, or I heard somewhere, that he did in fact end up having some kind of presumably unconsummated relationship or friendship with a nurse. I'm just wondering, again, what the play there was of imaginal theophanic perception tied into a beautiful, mystical, multidimensional theology and conceptual framework and vision, and then actually allowed to permeate the human relations and still open to that multidimensionality. I don't know.

In Christian Gnostic traditions, and I'm aware there's a lot of...

In Christian Gnostic traditions—and I'm aware there's considerable confusion around what the word "Gnosticism" actually means and whether it even refers to anything coherent—there's a text called *The Greater Questions of Mary*. Here it describes Jesus in the presence of Mary, who is probably Mary Magdalene, producing a woman from his side, beginning to have intercourse with her, and partaking of his emission—meaning that he ate his ejaculate, his semen—partaking of his emission to show that "thus we must do that we may live." Thus we must do that we may live.

This presents a very striking depiction. You'll notice how heteronormative the bias is in these historic texts—that bias is reflected in the text and its depictions. But one wonders about this image in *The Greater Questions*: is this talking about an imaginal practice, that one does this imaginally? Is it talking about an actual practice? You can't actually produce a woman from your side, but perhaps it means actually having sex and actually partaking and eating of the sexual fluids. Apparently certain sects—I think one was called the Barbarites—actually did this as part of their religious practice and ritual.

So is it an imaginal practice it's referring to? An actual practice? Or is it simply metaphorical and representational—a reference to semen? Because in many Gnostic texts, apparently, the divine element in humans that must be gathered during the process of salvation was metaphorically called semen. So perhaps these images—Jesus and the woman, the intercourse and the semen—are all just symbolic metaphors.

What is it: imaginal practice, actual practice, or metaphor? Throughout history, people have interpreted it very differently.

Similarly in Buddhist Tantra, the opening lines of the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*—which is the root tantra, the most important tantra for many Tibetan Buddhists, particularly for the Gelug tradition of the Dalai Lama—begins like this. I've heard that most tantras, or at least many tantras, start with the same opening line: *Evaṃ mayā śrutam*—"Thus have I heard."

This phrase can actually mean many different things. As I mentioned before, it has to do with the way Sanskrit can fit words together, creating multiple permutations of possible meaning. I would say this plurality of possible meanings implicit in the Sanskrit constructions is intended. It invites the reader into a kind of poetic participation with the text, an exploration that implies a practice—a meditative encounter with the text that must include a flexibility of imagination, view, and conceptual constructs.

This isn't just a text you read for information. It's multifaceted, and you enter into such a text with these multiple meanings as a kind of offering of different meditative stances. A door opens to different meditative possibilities—imaginal and conceptual possibilities embedded in the very polysemous nature of the language.

This intrinsically ambiguous or polysemic articulation supports not just a poetic and practical approach and an openness of interpretability. It also supports a whole conception and view of the image—or of any perception of reality—as multi-leveled, not singular, possessing many faces all at once, none of which exist independently of the mind. They are instead elicited or activated by the way of looking or interpreting reality that the mind has in that moment in relationship with the image.

There are parallels here with Tantric and Vajrayana language in the tantras, with what we're discussing regarding imaginal practices, and as I've mentioned before, with Kabbalistic teachings regarding the Bible and other sacred texts.

But returning to that Sanskrit opening line: "Thus have I heard. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling in..."—now you could translate it as "in the vaginas of the diamond maidens of the mind of all Tathāgatas." At one time the Blessed One was dwelling in the vaginas of the diamond maidens, in or of the heart essence of the body, speech, and mind of all Tathāgatas.

That word I'm translating as vagina—*bhaga*—which is indeed often translated as vagina, also has many possible meanings. It can mean vagina, but it can also mean enjoyment, happiness, or prosperity. It can mean place or inheritance. It can also mean love and sexual passion. So it's a multifaceted word.

It's an interesting choice of word, especially together with all the tantric symbolism. Now you get commentaries on the tantras, on this kind of sentence, which assign each word different levels of meaning. They would say that *bhaga* really refers to the clear light mind, or emptiness, or various other things. So the Buddha was residing in the clear light of emptiness, and each word would have different levels of meaning.

But again, we're left with this question: what actually is Buddhist tantrism getting at with its sexual symbology and references and language? Like we discussed regarding the iconography of the *yab-yum*, the sexual union of Buddha and his consort—is it just symbolic? That's one option: that the eros depicted, the sexuality, the sexual fluids or organs or energy that are referred to, are simply symbols.

So that, for example, the yab-yum, the sexual union of the Buddha and the consort, is just the union of wisdom and means that we talked about before, and it's only a symbol. So you get commentators who insist on that: this has nothing to do with sexuality, nothing to do with that. It's purely a symbol for spiritual orientations or realities or unions.

But one possibility is: is it symbolic, or perhaps only symbolic? Another possibility is that sexuality and sexual energy are regarded in Tantra, or used in Tantra, as a vehicle that's purely practical—as a means, an expedient means. It's just because it's a powerful energy which, when gathered and channeled in the body and in the energy body, can give rise to great bliss and actually shift consciousness.

This is, again, a very common presentation of the tantric relationship or view of sexuality, sexual energy, sexual fluids—that you're gathering a certain very powerful energy. Because sexuality is regarded as the most powerful energy that a human being has or is subject to, it's powerful enough that if it's gathered in a certain way, channeled in a certain way, preserved in a certain way, and then channeled, it can bring this bliss and a shift in consciousness.

Now, for some, actually, it's just about the bliss, in the kind of pop versions. A shift in consciousness is possible that will enable one's consciousness to open to emptiness or clear light without having to do a lot of other practices which are harder and take longer to develop.

But this is a second possibility: that the tantric perspective and relationship with sexuality and sexual energy is really just as a vehicle. And if it was another energy in human beings, or that human beings were subject to, that was more powerful and was more expedient—I don't know what that would be, eating chocolate or whatever—then

they would just use that instead. So there's nothing about sexuality per se that's interesting, other than it's just a vehicle, it's just a means of getting from A to B that's kind of turbocharged.

Or is the tantric view and relationship and conception of and regard of sexuality and eros actually attempting a re-sanctification, a re-enchanting, a divinizing—perhaps a kind of transubstantiation, but certainly a re-sanctification, a re-enchanting, a divinizing—of what was often seen before that as not holy, not sacred? A re-sanctification of sexuality, which was regarded as a defilement.

So: symbol only of something spiritual, a vehicle, or a re-sanctification of sexuality itself, a re-inclusion of sexuality itself in itself. With the vehicle, it's not that sexuality is itself holy, because it's just an expedient means. It could be replaced by anything. But in the third option, it's actually that sexuality itself is being re-sanctified.

People have very different interpretations of tantric texts and teachings. Or is it all three? That it is symbolic, that it has this multi-dimensional, multi-leveled resonances and reflections, sexuality, eros, sexual imagery—that yes, certainly it could be a re-sanctification and also a vehicle.

For us, at least for how we are thinking of it, I would say it's all three. It does have this multi-leveled, multi-dimensionality to it of symbology, of what the image reflects, what the eros, how it's mirrored. And it is most certainly a re-sanctification. I would like to see it that way. There's a widening, a deepening, an extending of what is regarded as sacred, a re-enchanting of the cosmos, and very much part of that is the view and the relationship of sexuality—and not just in a one-dimensional human way as expressing love and our right to pleasure.

And as a vehicle, except that for us, the vehicle is not so much about the energy. I mean, that's fine, and I would actually say there's more possibilities there with the energetics, because you can take any opening of the energy body in a number of different directions if you know how to navigate it. But primarily, the vehicle for us is as a vehicle of soul-making, because the eros and the sexual imagery and the erotic imaginal actually impregnate the imagery, give it dimensionality, and open up that soul-making, and open up the divinizing, the perception of dimensionality and divinity. So it's a vehicle in that sense, but it's a vehicle for the imaginal and the soul-making.

But in all this, you can see in these examples I've been given from the Christian tradition and the Jewish tradition and the Buddhist Tantra tradition, that sexuality is implicated in and reflects and affects the perception of cosmos, world and divinity. So there's

a kind of mirroring here. We've talked about this in these different examples. The human sexual reflects, mirrors, expresses, manifests, affects the cosmos, the world, and the divine.

I remember an image. I shared one very small part of this image a few talks ago. It was where the beautiful woman took my hands and placed them in the prayer posture and then mirrored that with our fingertips touching, and drew my attention to our relationship rather than what part of me wanted to get caught up in some larger political issue.

Following on from that, what happened in that image is, at one point, I take the sun out of my heart. The sun feels like it's right at my heart center, in the center of my chest is this really radiant, bright sun, and I take it out of my heart center to give it to her. It feels like I want to do that as an offering of love, and it seems natural to the image. It seems so at first, but then I become unsure in two respects.

One is, I'm unsure if I'm making this up, if—I think, where did I get this from? Is it that I maybe was looking at some alchemical text briefly and I've just forgotten about it?

I certainly didn't recall ever seeing anything like that, but I somehow became suspicious that it was just some idea I got from something—alchemy or Jung or something or other.

And secondly, it just felt like it wasn't the right thing to do.

Regarding the first suspicion or hesitation, I would make this point now—this was a few years ago, but now it seems clear to me that it absolutely doesn't matter if that idea or gesture or movement was stimulated or seeded by something I had read before somewhere in some text, or something I had flicked through or seen a picture of. It does not matter. That doesn't make it unauthentic. What matters is the soul-making.

Whether the idea came from previous exposure to similar imagery—people sometimes will be more impressed if I really hadn't seen anything like that before, and then later found it in an alchemical text. This is the sort of thing Jung would do quite often, pointing to the reality of universal archetypes. For me, it doesn't matter. What matters is the soul-making. And there's an acknowledgment that this soul-making can be fed, sometimes mysteriously so, by anything at all—by ideation, by reading, by hearing teachings, by dreams, by whatever it is.

More important was the second objection. It just felt somehow, as I did it, that actually this was not the right thing to do. And more important was that the sun stayed in my heart. That was part of preserving the polarity, in fact. Because later, she seems to have the moon in her heart center. And this gave another dimension to the polarity. There's the sun in my heart center and the moon in hers.

And there's this attraction between sun and moon, and polarity there between sun and moon, but also a kind of balance. And all that is mirrored somehow in our erotic, imaginal relating—the attraction, the polarity, and the balance. In that, it seemed like this attraction, balance, and polarity had what I would now call cosmopoetic overtones. And again, later this spilled out into the world in terms of the cosmopoiesis.

So this image stayed for a few days. It would come back in different meditations, or I would bring it back, but oftentimes it would just return of its own accord. It became more involved erotically, with some sexual imagery. And I remember at that time, I could feel my mind trying to grasp intellectually what was going on. What does this mean? What does this sun and what does this moon represent? I was trying to fix this or that meaning.

But letting go of that a little and more getting an intuitive, vague and subtle sense of this sun and moon and this polarity and this balance—it was reflecting something cosmic. It was reflecting a kind of cosmic harmony or relationship, or a part, a dimension if you like, of some kind of cosmic harmony. And that harmony and relationship existed already as a perception.

So it wasn't that this was saying something about me and my psychological balance—balancing sun and moon and masculine and feminine and all that. I was trying to make it mean something like that, but just relaxing a little bit and actually getting a sense that this is something beyond just the personal. It was already existing as a kind of cosmic balance that was already present to be realized and appreciated, rather than telling me something about what I needed to do to rebalance myself or something like that. That was the sense of it.

And also in that sense, in that kind of cosmic, multi-dimensional, multi-level mirroring, there was a sense of the cosmos not being separate from me, not being separate from my imagination. So again, something in the erotic imaginal, mirroring and reflecting something, a level of the cosmos, of the divine.

And we can say there's a kind of alchemy, there's a kind of magic going on there, but it's in the perception, in the sense of the world and of the human being. That's the kind of alchemy and magic that we're interested in.

And again, there's another text, a Hermetic text called the *Asclepius*, a very old text, and it describes or states that the act of sexual union between two lovers is a divine mystery. That sex itself is a divine mystery. Not only, it says, because it's an image, it's a mirroring of the productivity and the androgynous unity of God—that means the transgender or bigender, hermaphroditic nature of God being neither male nor female, both and neither.

Again, actually, in this text, there's still a sort of heteronormative bias there, a normalizing bias of heterosexual orientations. But this is hopefully a progress in history where the logos, the ideation, the image of what sexuality can be might hopefully be growing.

But the act of sexual union in this text is a divine mystery, not just because it's an image of the productivity and the androgynous unity of God, but also because it is actually possible for both of the lovers to experience that original androgyny. In other words, to experience another dimension, if you like, of their being, but also of God's being, of the divine being.

That hermetic text, the Gospel of Philip, also says that the act of sexual union mirrors the union of the human being with the divine. So there's all kinds of mirroring going on. You get this sense in a lot of these traditions and texts—something emerging that points to a multi-level, multi-dimensional, multi-faceted mirroring, echoing, reflecting interconnectedness, inner and outer. It's all interconnected, mirroring, influencing each other.

This word "participation"... There's a mutual participation that's multi-leveled and multi-dimensional. This citta, this mind and heart, this soul, this body—it participates in the soul, if you like, the body of the cosmos and of the divine. Participation. This citta, your citta, my soul, my body, your body—participating and mirroring, influencing, completely connected: the inner and the outer, the personal and the universal, the human and the divine, the material and the spiritual.

But this is a way of looking. It's an invitation to a way of looking, rather than—as I'm sure it can sound—some very abstract and very strange idea. It's an invitation to a way of looking. We can make this a reality. In a sense, you make it, you open to it as an experience by entertaining certain ways of looking through the imaginal perception, through the attitude, through the heartfulness, through the soul-making looking, soul-making sensing. It becomes actually lived and actually materialized—the spiritualization of matter, the materialization of spirit.

Apparently in many, I think, medieval Jewish prayer books, there was an Aramaic formula that preceded certain prayers, or many of the prayers, and some or all of the ritual commandments, what's called the mitzvot, in the prayer book. And it said something like: "This liturgy is performed," or "this or that is performed for the sake of the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Shekhinah, with the Divine Presence or the Immanence." So this prayer that I'm going to say now, this ritual that I'm going to do—whatever it is, washing my hands or eating bread or drinking wine or whatever—this is performed for the sake of the union of the Holy One with his divine immanence, his immanence.

So again, this marrying of the levels, the transcendent and the immanent. Erotic imagery, erotic language running through these different traditions and emphasizing again and again the multi-leveled, multi-faceted, multi-reflecting nature of all this.

One wonders, historically—and I don't know enough about it—what that then was taken to imply by different people at different times and different places in history and these different traditions. What was that taken to imply for the nature and the place of human eros and sexuality? And what was it taken to imply for the meaningfulness—all this erotic sexual description of the divine realms, and the meaning of prayer and what that does, and other rituals and actions, reflecting, influencing, etc.? What was that taken to mean regarding the meaningfulness, the nature, the place of human eros in sexuality?

It seems to me—and again I'm really not a historian—that there was a lot of tension in that question and a lot of ambivalence historically around what it actually meant or implied for actual human sexual relations.

But even that aside, all this is really quite different, I think, from the way we're used to thinking of things in this era of modernism and secular modernism and humanism, secular humanism.

I was raised in London and had an Orthodox Jewish upbringing, very strict, and had to follow all these rules and rituals—you can't do this on the Sabbath, and you have to do this, and you have to wear that, and you can't do that—a lot of rules. But the whole explanation of it that I was given in that Jewish education, in my family and at school, it was all very literal and all actually very one-dimensional, in fact.

And so there was a lot of fear as a young child—a fear of breaking these rules and these commandments and God being angry and punishing you and all this kind of stuff. And it was enforced both at the school and in my family home. And it seemed to me at some point—I really rebelled against it—that there was just a lot of i's being dotted and

t's being crossed. A lot of very particular attention to details that seemed—I didn't have the language perhaps at the time—just seemed to be lacking a whole level, amplitude, dimensionality of meaning and resonance there. It was just this kind of literal one-dimensional fulfilling of certain commandments. A lot of them seemed completely bizarre.

And just as soon as I hit my teenage years, I think, pretty soon, I became an atheist. And just the whole thing didn't... just seemed stupid to me. And I was a sort of secret atheist, and then a much less secret one. Interestingly, an atheist is also just in the grip of a very literalist view. There's a literalist view of all these...

What's called the mitzvot—the commandments, the rituals. And there's a literalist view of how silly they are. It's taking the whole thing—the sense of divinity and the sense of the rituals and what they're for—and both sides are just literalisms arguing with each other.

Compare that with the more Kabbalistic or mystical kind of relationship, the participatory understanding of these rules and ritual elements in Judaism. I'm going to paraphrase a writer called Daniel Matt who writes about Jewish mysticism, though I could have picked quite a few other writers. This is quite a minority view within the Jewish religion, but it's reflective of certain strands of mysticism within that tradition.

Kabbalah, he says, constructs its mythical realm out of the elements of Jewish law. In other words, here are the elements of Jewish law—these rules and rituals that one is told simply come down to one, some of them seeming pretty bizarre. Rather, what the Kabbalah does is this spiritual genius of approaching something that's given and finding, creating, and discovering whole other dimensions of meaningfulness, invigorating it with life in a participatory way.

So Kabbalah constructs this mythical realm out of the elements of Jewish law. The commands of the ruler of the world become instead sacraments and mystery rites that simultaneously reflect and influence the pulsating life of the universe. Sacraments and mystery rites that simultaneously reflect and influence the pulsating life of the universe. The code of law becomes a secret code. Judaism is transformed into a mystery religion. Symbolic and magical aspects of the mitzvot, the ritual commandments, are alternately emphasized. Symbolic and magical, alternately emphasized.

The mystic integrates into the pattern of the cosmos and stimulates the flow of divine emanation. Integrates into the pattern of the cosmos and stimulates the flow of emanation. The ritual act represents the divine and calls it forth. Represents the divine and calls it forth.

Not a rationalization of these laws in earthly terms—for example, you can only eat this because it's actually better for your health, or you can't eat that because it's not good for you. The Kabbalists expand the dimensions. It's not just rational and earthly now. The human actor is now a protagonist in the cosmic drama. The mitzvot are literally the essence of life, according to the Kabbalist Joseph Kikatila—his life and God's life. They are not reducible to autonomous reason, not just practical, humanistic reasons. Nor are they simply imposed heteronomously—a separate God just saying, "You better do this. Watch out if you don't."

As extensions of the divine qualities, they—the commandments, the mitzvot, the ritual acts—permeate the universe and constitute its fabric. What a different view that is, and the beauty, the fullness, the multidimensionality of that creative engagement with this received tradition, giving it whole other dimensions of life, whole other dimensions of beauty.

This is different than a view of ritual that says if we don't do X ritual, the sun won't rise tomorrow—which is clearly not true and quite provably not true. So it's not that kind of literalism, and it's neither the literalism of the one-dimensional child's view of ritual nor the simplistic atheist kind of literalism.

How do we conceive? How do we look at the elements that we are given? How do we look at life, action, our human being, divinity? How do we conceive of these in ways that are soul-making, in the broadest possible range and depth?

In the Zohar—and these Kabbalistic texts, the Zohar being an ancient Kabbalistic text from the early Middle Ages, I think the twelfth century—again, this understanding is offered that the purpose of practice, spiritual practice, religious practice, is to mirror and affect the divine. The purpose is to mirror and affect the divine.

In the Zohar, it says: In every commandment, in every mitzvah, your effort is to unite the Blessed Holy One and His Shekhinah. So this transcendent aspect of divinity with the immanence, with the divinity that permeates the world. In every ritual action, your effort is to unite the Blessed Holy One and His Shekhinah, this divine immanence.

So that mystical understanding and enactment of the commandments, of the mitzvot—in our language we say mystical understanding...

And in the language of our tradition, we could say that the conceptual frameworks and the ways of looking we entertain, we skillfully use in our life and in our meditation practice, open up perceptions. And also our action and our embodiment in the world, when they are engaged with the world seen as divine, as a divine creation, with that sense of devotion and with that sense of participation.

In the words of the Zohar, they serve to "light up the queen." The queen is this divine immanence, the Shekhinah, this feminine aspect of God. "Light up the queen to strip her of the dark clothes of literalness. Strip her of the dark clothes of literalness and adorn her with garments of shining colors of the mysteries of Torah."

Torah is a Jewish word, but we could say: strip her, strip the world of the dark clothes of literalness, and adorn her with garments of shining colors of the mysteries of the mandala, of the mysteries of the Buddha's kāyavākcittaḥ—body, speech and mind. The mysteries of the Buddha nature.

It's a similar principle through the engagement of the erotic imaginal—a whole different way of entering into and relating to and conceiving of and practicing whatever it is: meditation, prayer, action in the world, embodiment, speech. All the beauty of that, the poetry of that impregnating it with this soul-making potential, seed, life.

So in this view, in this opening, in this soul-making perspective, the cosmos is erotic and divine. And the eros is divine. And we are implicated in that divine erotic cosmos, divine cosmic eros. We are implicated in that. We reflect that. We echo it. It echoes us. We express it. We manifest it. We are involved. We are called upon and we are necessary in and through our perception, our imaginal perception, our practice, our meditative perception, our ways of looking. In and through our perception and in and through our actions.

So again, this is not a naive belief in the power of ritual or magic in some very naive way, if there are even such people anymore who believe that—I'm sure there are. Not so much that, as an alchemy of perception, an alchemy of the perception of the cosmos and of the human being. So it's not just intrapsychic psychology we're dealing with here. There's something about this inseminating and fueling and firing up an alchemical process that involves our whole perception of ourselves, of each other, and of the whole cosmos. So in and through perception and in and through action.

And that can include our erotics and our sexual acts, our actual sexual participation. So in other words, if we're including our action in this, then we can include the sexual actions as well, potentially. Not only symbol—they can be seen in this way too, in this larger soul-making way too.

Eros, whether it's in the meditation, in the imaginal perception, in the way we're relating to the senses and the way we move and act and embody in the world, whether it's actually in our sexual relations—the eros is, as we've been saying all along, it brings with it the possibility of stimulating and increasing the soul-making and expanding, enriching, deepening the sense of the sacred.

There is then the tikkun ha'olam, the healing of the world in the perception. In the perception. So we have this kind of place in the cosmos then. And our perception, our thoughts, our vision, our ideation, our speech and action, our embodiment, our sexuality—all have a kind of multi-leveled function. And we have a place where integrated then is not necessarily the heavy kind of responsibility. It's actually quite light because we see it's all empty. This is not a realist view. We're seeing image as image.

But if we can find the way into this through the practice and through that opening up the logos and the imaginal perception and the whole ways of looking, then in the very non-realism of it and through that and through all that opening up, the world can be sacralized. It's re-sacralized. The world is sacralized and becomes infinitely revealing. The world is a world of infinite revelation. There's no end to the revelation in the world that the world is—revelation of soul, of divinity, of Buddha nature.

And the world, through these practices and ways of conceiving and entering, the world is sacralized and becomes potentially infinitely revealing through our perception and through our embodiment, including sexual.

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This is very different than an objectified world. Sacralized, infinitely deep, infinitely opening, infinitely revealing, rather than just one-dimensional objects and the objectification of that. What is the difference in the embodiment there—the erotic embodiment of the pilgrim versus the tourist or the vacationer, as we've said many times now? This sacralization and this infinite revelation happens through the eros. How central that is, the eros.

One last thing. In all of this—in the creation of the divine, in the healing of the divine, in the creation of the Buddha nature, which is implicit in what we've been presenting, in the creation and discovery of the imaginal dimensions of the self, aspects of the self, of the other, of the world—in the erotic moving towards, the erotic movement towards what is beyond, what is not yet quite known, the moving towards the angel out ahead, in Corbin's words, either never quite reaching it because the angel is always out ahead and keeps moving on itself, or never remaining at least in union with the angel or what is beyond.

In all this, there's a kind of infinite movement, or infinite potential of movement, potentially infinite movement, as we've talked about with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. There's telos here, there's moving towards, but that's open-ended.

What I want to draw attention to now is the fact that all of this—this creation of divinity, this creation of self, other, world, this moving, the eros moving towards, beyond, to the not yet known, always this infinite movement—it implies the dynamism of becoming. It implies time. In this movement, time, growth, if you like, telos, the dynamism of becoming, temporal becoming, is seen to be holy. It's bhava. It's becoming. But it's not realist.

And at the same time, there is also the timelessness here. There's also the dimension of timelessness, of eternity, that we know, as I've pointed out, in the iconic nature of the imaginal—that we feel that timelessness, that eternal quality—as well as in the unfabricated, that which is beyond time. So something in all this gives a sanctity and a place and an importance and a holiness to both the dynamism of becoming and the temporal, and to the timeless and the eternity.

If we go back to that line from Gregory of Nyssa: "For the thirst of human souls requires some infinite water. How could this limited world suffice?" How could this limited world suffice?

So yes, beyond the world, beyond the limited world, beyond the limited world into the transcendent, into the unfabricated, beyond the senses, beyond perception, beyond experience, beyond space, beyond time. Yes, know that. And all the levels going up to that of different kinds of oneness, the eros for the transcendent—the thirst of human souls requires some infinite water. Yes, the transcendent. But yes, also the world sacralized. Why? Because, as I said, it's potentially infinite in its revelations, infinitely revealing, infinitely opening. Through the eros, this limited world becomes an unlimited world. Or in the form of limitation, infinite depths are revealed.

So both the transcendent—away from the world—and the world too, but the world reviewed, seen through the heart of soul-making. Both those directions provide us with infinite water. And we can actually move in both of those. We can drink from both of those streams. And in a way, this is what will be a natural movement if eros is allowed to do its thing, as we've said.

CHAPTER 80

Refractions: Of Body, Sensuality, and Sexuality (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h33

> *In this opening talk from the Eros Unfettered series, Rob Burbea challenges conventional Buddhist attitudes toward body, sensuality, and sexuality. He examines how different meditation styles—from Mahasi noting practice to non-doing approaches—can limit erotic engagement with sense experience by reducing it to bare attention or seeking oneness. Burbea argues that both transcendentalist rejection of the senses and reductive materialism miss the soul-making potential inherent in sensual beauty.*
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> *Drawing on early Buddhist teachings while critiquing their limitations, he explores how the Buddha's strong warnings against sense pleasures in suttas like the Nagaravindeyya Sutta (MN 22) have created confusion in modern Dharma. The talk introduces a third way: allowing eros, psyche, and logos to work together in fabricating richer, more dimensional relationships with sensuality that neither chase craving nor dismiss the body's spiritual significance.*
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> *Burbea connects beauty, fabrication, and the sacred, suggesting that acknowledging the constructed nature of aesthetic experience doesn't diminish its value but opens new possibilities for practice. This perspective has implications not only for meditation but for art, nature, and environmental consciousness, inviting practitioners to participate more fully in the multi-leveled dimensions of existence.*

I'd like to say just a little bit more about our relationships with and our views, conceptions of and our experiences of body, sensuality and sexuality, in the service of opening up the discourse, opening up the questioning, opening up the exploration, and opening up, hopefully, some avenues there.

Before I get immediately onto that, I want to say something else that's related. The reason I want to say it is because it's so easy to listen or read teachings and approach them from within a certain set of fixed assumptions. Sometimes we're not even fully conscious what those assumptions are. Or we may be conscious, but they still go unchallenged—they're not really questioned.

Eros, we have said already many times, may be sexual or non-sexual. It can be very, very subtle, extremely subtle, and it can be very, very intense. Whether it's sexual or not sexual, the eros can have that whole range of force or depth—subtle to intense—

and can be what some people would regard as extreme. The eros running in a certain direction in a person's life can seem to others quite extreme. Their devotion to their beloved, whatever that beloved is; the devotion of an artist to their art and the dedication that takes; the devotion, the eros towards a lover when one is in love; or a religious eros, the devotion to the religious beloved, whatever form that takes—all of this can seem extreme, obsessive, ruthless even, out of balance.

Easily, when the eros is very strong and can seem, from a certain perspective, to be extreme, it's easily pathologized by others. When the eros is towards, for example, the transcendent—someone wanting to know the unfabricated and, in some cases, staking one's life on it as the Buddha did—this kind of eros, from many perspectives, particularly from most modernist perspectives of our culture and non-religious culture, seems very easily pathologized as some kind of crazy thing. What you're wanting sounds like nothing for a start. It sounds very abstract and seems to be away from life.

From the other perspective—a more renunciate perspective of certain religious traditions—the eros towards a human being when one is in love is also pathologized. This is delusion, this is crazy, or the eros towards the world.

This pathologization, pointing the finger and regarding others as pathological because we don't share their erotic attraction, and certainly not the intensity of that, happens very easily, either way, in either direction, from either camp, if you like.

What happens there so often is that in contrast to this sort of extremity or intensity of the erotic movement and opening, moderation is elevated. Moderate in all things, and this is regarded as healthy. Anything immoderate or extreme is regarded as pathologized. That may have its place sometimes and may have a certain wisdom to it, but what are the consequences of moderation being elevated? How easily moderation can breed a kind of mediocrity in terms of what opens to us, what we can discover, what we can create. Remember, discovering and creating is the movement of soul-making—mediocrity in terms of what soul-making is then available to us and opens for us as one of the potentially negative consequences of this elevation of moderation.

Why shouldn't one be extreme in one's eros for the transcendent? Why shouldn't one burn with an intensity for knowing the unfabricated, for knowing the divine or the deathless, the divine beyond all concepts, the deathless beyond all concepts, beyond space, beyond time? Certainly, as I just said, the Buddha was extreme in his desire for that, or in regard to any kind of religious erotic movement or desire or longing or calling, yearning.

For example, someone who wants to become a celibate monastic or is a celibate monastic—for so many people, for some people who don't share that, who can't really resonate with that longing, it seems like such a strange movement. It's true that one may be desiring to be a celibate or a monastic or to go beyond the world to know the unfabricated out of fear, out of some kind of closing rather than the opening movement of eros. It's certainly true.

But I mentioned Thomas Merton the other day. He's this beautiful writer and he has an autobiography of a period in his life, I think up to the time he became a monk, a Trappist monk. At that time, the Trappists were an extremely strict order. Their rule was very strict. Not only were they, of course, celibate, but I think they couldn't actually speak, so they had to communicate when necessary about only very necessary things in sign language. It was known as one of the two or three most strict of the monastic Catholic orders.

He describes in this book, *Seven Storey Mountain*, his partial autobiography, the growing longing in him, an inclination to become a monk and to give himself to that life. He visits monasteries and talks with spiritual advisors and priests, and oftentimes the priest didn't share that extreme longing and regarded it as a bit too extreme. But at one point, I think with one of his spiritual advisors or a priest, he says, "Father, I want to give God everything. I want to give God everything." Because the priest was asking, why can't you choose a kind of easier order to go into, less extreme, less renunciate, less hardcore and full on. He said, "Father, I want to give God everything."

So easily that view is just not resonated with, not understood and regarded as pathological.

I also remember for myself when I was living as a musician in the US and I was in a PhD program in composition and teaching at the university there, I made the choice to give that life up and the plan was to ordain as a monk after doing a year retreat at Gaia House. People asked me or I met people and they would ask me...

What are you doing? And this and that. And I would explain, well, this is what my plan is. And in quite a lot of cases, the person I was talking to, their face would drop, their jaw would drop, and a look of horror and disgust would come over their face in reaction to this idea of living as a monk or dedicating oneself to a celibate life and renunciate life away from sense pleasures, devoted to some kind of—what, as I said, probably seemed like just some abstract longing and life of loneliness and all this, who knows what they were thinking.

But this view comes out of not understanding, just not resonating, not having that—the soul aflame in that direction, in the direction of what we might call the religious, knowing God, whether it's the unfabricated or other directions of religiosity. The eros there is limited when people pathologize that or judge it as extreme, that kind of desire. Their eros in that direction is just very limited and therefore they don't value—they can't see any value in that.

And so often, as I said before, what happens is we prioritize something called balance and something called psychological health. First of all, we have very limited views, very socially constructed views of what balance looks like and what something called psychological health looks like—views that we've gathered from our contemporary society and worldview. So the limited views of something called balance and something called psychological health, which of course are related, and sometimes these almost become ends in themselves. I'm practicing my meditation for psychological health. Not that that's not important, but does it always need to be limited to a view that puts that first and sees that as the end or the only legitimate end?

And we've talked about balance before and actually the importance in navigating, but sometimes we prioritize—I feel sometimes we over-prioritize this idea of balance and being balanced. And we have either a static picture of what balance is, or we've just elevated the whole ideal of balance. Maybe there's a place and times for being really not balanced. I am falling, I am climbing, I am out of balance as I run towards something, whatever it is, as I dance. Maybe I just fall, I stumble, and it's part of the erotic movement.

So we can very easily hear or meet someone, or even in the instances of our own eros, look at ourselves and see a kind of—what from certain perspectives looks too intense, is too extreme, this eros in whatever direction. And I said, what about balance? What about psychological health? And I don't want to dismiss that. So again, all teaching is contextual. So I'm responding, as I said, to what can become quite entrenched, often unconscious, but quite a lot of the time not quite fully questioned views. Well, what is it that I have this assumption? And is it really a necessary assumption? What's it based on?

This prioritizing of balance and psychological health, whatever those notions come to mean for us, in contrast with another approach, which would be a little bit in line with what we're saying—let the eros lead. What if we trust the eros and trust even the directions that it wants to go in so that it will make soul and forge ahead and open and penetrate and search and discover and burn through in the directions that it wants to? And if that's towards the transcendent, beautiful. How does it want to? Where does the

eros want to move? And trusting that, and trusting that as we've been describing, at some point in that process, just because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and that mutual insemination, mutual fertilization, mutual widening and enriching, and how that will start moving out to touch everything else. The eros, the directionality of the eros and the directionality of the soul-making will spread.

So as I said, if one opens to the unfabricated, for instance, or even before one has opened, it starts spreading. Something happens. Why? If I don't dampen the eros, if I don't block the movements and the expansion of psyche and logos, it will do that. So another view is actually to trust that and trust being off balance at times and being extreme and people thinking you're weird and this and that.

There's a different kind of imbalance that comes when the eros is blocked or the psyche is blocked or the logos is blocked. Then, as I said before, some people entering the monastery or becoming deliberately celibate or whatever it is, or chasing some transcendent, unfabricated—because the eros is dampened, it's a movement of contraction, of fear of eros. And I'm afraid of sexuality, the body disgusts me, I'm afraid of human relationships, whatever it is. Or the logos is cramped. And this could be, as we said, in any direction.

Well, what about trusting eros and just opening the space for that soul-making dynamic to do its natural thing, which will be like water—it will find its direction, find its multiple directions where it can flow. Or like fire.

So this seems to me important just in the way we're hearing and viewing all this. But as I said, I just want to spend a little time talking a bit more about how eros and in its insemination, its ignition of the soul-making dynamic involving eros, psyche, logos, will affect the views, the relationships, and the experiences of body, sensuality, and sexuality.

So transforming, opening, giving dimensionality to all that. Because of what we said about the potential endlessness and open-endedness, and multi-directionality of the movement of the soul-making dynamic, these aspects of our existence—body, sense, sexuality, along with a lot of others—are potentially infinite. So the way the views can be transformed, the dimensionality given to them, the new openings of perception and view and sense and actual experience, what these things mean to us and the place they have, that is potentially infinitely openable.

In other words, wherever we are now, wherever I am now, there are some unforeseen insights, experiences, views, conceptions, openings, relationships with body, with sensuality, with sexuality, that I have no inkling what they are right now. It's unknown to me now. It's part of the beyond of the eros, of that whole soul-making movement. I just don't know.

So in this field of potentially infinite opening, you can only obviously say a little here, partly due to time and partly because of the fact that relative to infinity, whatever we say is only going to be a little.

Just before we even get into it, notice that even if we have a strong desire, a strong eros flowing through us for the unfabricated—I want to know that, I want to open to it, I want to taste it—in the traditions of Buddhadharma, in following that eros for the unfabricated, we do not, in the way of the Buddha Dharma, the way that the Buddha taught to know that, ignore or cut off or beat down the body and the senses. Absolutely not.

There is mindfulness of the body as the first foundation of mindfulness. It's absolutely integral to the Buddha's path—careful attention, particular kinds of attention, mindfulness of the body, to the body, and to sense experience. So there's attention to sense experience, mindfulness of body, and mindfulness and attention to sense experience.

In some traditions of Buddhadharma, more in the tantric traditions, also with regard to sexuality and sexual energy, it's regarded as a vehicle. This is actually something we do engage. We don't ignore it. We don't cut it off. We don't beat it down. We engage it as a vehicle because we can gather and collect those energies and channel them in certain ways in the energy body, and this allows certain openings of the perception—particularly in the tantric schools, an opening to the clear light mind.

But in all traditions, certainly in Pali Canon Buddhism, the emphasis is that you're not ignoring the body, you're not cutting it off, you're certainly not beating it down. There's mindfulness of the body and mindfulness, certain kinds of attention to the body and to the sense experiences.

However, this mindfulness to the body and to sense experience and the attention to them serves the understanding of the dependent arising, the fabrication of the perception of the body and of sense experience. In other words, it's not for a reveling in the body and sense experience and sense pleasure. It's not for a glorification of the body. It's not to see the beauty or even the miracle of the body and all that. It's actually, at least in my reading of Pali Canon Buddhism—why are we mindful of the body? Why

are we mindful of sense experience? We're mindful in certain ways to understand the dependent arising of the very perception of body and sense experience. And wrapped up with the mindfulness, in a context of practicing ways of looking that actually fabricate less perception of the body.

For example, the jhanas, the progression of the jhanas, you could say, are what they really are: progressively unfabricated perceptions of the body. So the first four jhanas especially, it's really about the body and the perception of the body. The body is, rather than being perceived as this solid material structure, starts to be perceived as fine material form, what the Buddha calls fine material form. The body becomes rapture in the first jhana, becomes happiness in the second jhana, becomes exquisite peacefulness—tender, exquisite peacefulness—in the third jhana, becomes just stillness, still light often in the fourth jhana. Very, very refined perception of materiality.

And then in the fifth jhana, that perception of solidity and what the Buddha calls obstruction is unfabricated even more, is dissolved even more, is transcended even more. And there's no perception of solidity, materiality of body at all. One enters the fifth jhana, the jhana of infinite space. And then that too is refined through the remaining jhanas, all the way to beyond the eighth jhana to an experience of total unfabrication in the transcendent, in the deathless, in nirvana.

So one is moving there, one is using mindfulness and an understanding of fabrication, practicing different ways of looking, of which mindfulness is one. Actually, mindfulness is several. If you read the Satipatthana Sutta, it implies ways of looking. But what they have in common is that they fabricate less to different degrees, and through that we understand fabrication, but we're moving—the experience is moving beyond the body and beyond sense experience.

So what this means is, yes, absolutely not ignoring, not cutting off, not beating down the body and the senses, but we're using mindfulness and attention to body and senses for very specific purposes in a way to go beyond them to the unfabricated.

What that means, though, is that there's limited value given to both the body and sense experience. Limited value in that transcendental inclination of Pali Canon Buddhism, of the Buddha as he originally taught, to know the deathless, to know the unfabricated, to know that sphere, that dimension, where the eye ceases, the perception of forms ceases, as I quoted. There are many passages.

So all this means that, yes, we pay attention to body and senses, but they have limited value. And the stress is on not desiring...

And the stress is on not desiring for the body and not getting attached to the body and to the senses and to sense pleasures and experience. They therefore—body and sense experience—have limited place given to them in the construction of the path in Pali Canon Buddhism. Even though they might feature very centrally, they're actually given a place that is quite limited because it's just serving this other movement.

I would point out that there is a limited—if you like—view, interpretation, and therefore sense of and perception of both body and sense experience. The whole view and interpretation is construed within the framework of a transcendentalist path, and so that actually limits and constrains the very sense and perception we have of both body and sense experience. Because experience and perception of both will be limited by view and concept and interpretation.

So, for example, related to all that, in the first foundation of mindfulness there's a passage on contemplating what the Buddha calls the unclean parts of the body—liver and spleen and kidneys and bile and blood and pus and synovial fluid and all the rest of it. And again, in the Satipatthana Sutta, there in the foundations of mindfulness, there's the encouragement to contemplate the body as the elements of the body—the classical elements of earth, air, fire, water.

One way of understanding that—the simplest, kind of the less contorted, probably, way of understanding that—is at that time, conceiving in terms of elements was actually just like what we would consider now, conceiving in terms of atoms. Look at the body and consider it as just a group of atoms. There's probably calcium there in the bones and potassium and all the stuff that bodies are made of. So there's this view of the elements classically.

We can interpret it and take it in different directions which do different things. There's always a certain view, a certain spin will take the perception and open it in different directions. But one way is just to think of it—what the Buddha was getting at there was this was the view of materiality back then, that it was constructed of basic elements. And it's something similar to our kind of deconstruction. The intention was a kind of deconstruction then of the body. This thing that we tend to get attached to and think, "Wow, how wonderful," is just saying it's just the elements. It's just the elements. It's like us saying it's just a bunch of atoms—in the service of less attachment.

So there is wrapped up in... Actually, let's put it this way. Emerging from our heritage in Pali Canon Buddhism and the transcendentalist thrust there—that's not always acknowledged or realized or given emphasis or place in modern interpretations of the Dharma and teachings of the Dharma that still try to place the Pali Canon at their base—this causes all kinds of confusion and contradiction.

So one is in regard to the body, but also in terms of the senses. In the Majjhima Nikaya, in the snake simile in the middle-length discourses, the Buddha gives—he says sense pleasures, you know, don't go chasing them. So he's really reigning in the eros with regard to sense pleasure, certainly reigning in the craving, but it doesn't make the distinction with regard to eros. So it kind of all gets, as we've said, shoved in one basket, so to speak.

But he says sense pleasures are like fleshless bones. It's like throwing a bone with no flesh and just sort of blood-stained to a starving dog. It completely just gets the dog a little bit excited. The dog will gnaw and chase and chew on this bone, but it's not getting any satisfaction there. So the sense pleasures, the Buddha said, are like fleshless bones.

They're like carrying a flaming torch of straw. So imagine that—a collection of straw, and you're holding it, and it's a flame, and carrying that against the wind. And so what's going to happen there? Your hands are going to get burnt, your face is going to get burnt.

He continues: the sense pleasures are like a pit of burning coals, which you're dragged through. They're like borrowed goods. You might enjoy them, but they're temporary. You have to give them back.

He is even more extreme and more strong in his analogies. The sense pleasures are a slaughterhouse, he said, or like a butcher's block—the block of wood where a butcher will cut up the meat, the carcasses. They are like a stake of swords—those stakes sticking out of the ground with sharp ends where you're just going to get impaled.

They are like a snake's head. Yes, you get bitten and there's poison to the bite. These are really strong words - sense pleasures bring suffering and disappointment. Sense pleasures are perilous, he says.

It's very rare these days to encounter such extreme language or such a forceful thrust of teaching regarding sense pleasures, certainly in the insight meditation tradition and other Buddhist traditions I'm familiar with. I do know teachers who speak this way, though one I'm particularly thinking of does so quite tongue-in-cheek. But even among monastics, why is this approach so uncommon now?

Of course, some of you may know that Tantric texts in Tantric Buddhism actually reverse this teaching regarding sense pleasures - we may explore that more as we continue. But this teaching around sense pleasures in the Pali Canon, its current and tenor, strongly influences our present attitudes and views within the Dharma. Yet it actually results in quite a confused, unintegrated, and incoherent teaching in relation to sense experience and sense pleasure - and there are reasons for this, which we'll return to.

Especially regarding sexuality - sometimes it's actually avoided as a topic altogether in Buddhist teachings - there's this underlying attitude and view permeating the discourse, yet it's mixed with other attitudes and views that we can't quite reconcile. This applies certainly to sexuality, probably to all sense pleasures, and we could say more about romantic love as well, which we've touched on.

So there is this tenor, this voice, this thrust running through the teachings right from the early sources. And I think it has all kinds of consequences. Some people regard the Buddha Dharma, across different traditions, as quite misogynistic. You'll know that in the Theravada tradition there's been considerable controversy and heated debate in recent years around whether nuns can be fully ordained and have equal status to monks within Buddhism.

Quite rightly, I think, there's a case to be made that a kind of misogyny runs through Buddhism - through many Buddhist traditions, not just the Theravada. I've certainly heard stories from women, even teachers of mine, about being in monasteries as young women trying to practice meditation with dedication, only to have many monks treat them with disdain and disrespect. One teacher told me they basically looked at you like you had the plague, as if all they could see was someone distracting them from their path because you appeared to them as a temptress.

Again, you hear this fear and avoidance, this contraction of view and contraction of eros that we alluded to earlier. But I sometimes wonder if the misogyny actually has its root, at least partly, in something more fundamental - a stance of being anti-sensual eros. It's as if sensual eros, eros in relation to sense experience, has no place in certain communications of the teachings, in certain movements of practice.

There can be eros for the transcendent, and there can be eros for the Buddha to a certain extent, in terms of soul-making and imagery. But there's a cutting off, a dismissal, a refusal of place, and a fear of sensual eros - eros with regard to sensuality. And out of that, at an even more fundamental level, perhaps comes the fuel for misogyny. I don't know, but I wonder.

Because in some visions or images - even if a person doesn't think that imagery and fantasy operates for them regarding the path and awakening - it's almost as if the very vision, the fantasy itself, the image and concept of awakening is exactly a life without eros. That's what awakening looks like: the flame has gone out. There's certainly no eros toward sensuality or with regard to sensuality, and there's no eros even for the unfabricated or for any other kind of contemplative opening because that has been realized.

So there's this sense, this image, this fantasy of awakening as what it looks like: a life without eros.

I've touched on this before - oftentimes in teaching insight meditation, if one even mentions or gives instructions around what to do with sexual images or sexual energy that arises, it might be in the more generous and somewhat open traditions. The guidance is usually: "Just notice them, just allow them. That's okay." But implicitly: don't encourage them. For heaven's sake, don't encourage them. Sexual energy, sexual images - as we've said before - they are not...

They are not given any positive place on the path. They simply don't really fit. The only way they fit is in the sense of, well, they're just something else to be open to in a kind of attitude—which is relatively popular—of just being open to all things. They're just equal to anything else, and our job, like with anything else, is just to let them go. Let them come, let them go.

Underneath all that is this: it's better if they don't arise—at least less hassle if sexual images and sexual energy don't arise. But regarding that, and regarding sense pleasure, there's this—sometimes it seems to me, or has seemed to me, and I know that other people feel this way—it's hard. It's rare for them to actually be able to articulate it to themselves or to another. There's a kind of confusion, especially regarding sense pleasure, even more than sexuality. Or there's a kind of lack of coherence or integrity often in our thinking about this, in our view, in our conceptual framework.

So we might say, for instance, contrary to what the Buddha taught for the most part—we turn it a little bit upside down. We say very often to meditators: "Don't chase meditative pleasure. You might have a blissful sitting, but don't try and make it happen again. You might fall into a jhāna, but these are really things you want to be careful not to get attached to them, and don't try and repeat it," etc., etc., etc.

Whereas almost every day in both monasteries and retreat centers, extremely pleasant-tasting food is served. A lot of time and energy goes into preparing that for the retreatants, for the monastics. And if someone dedicated to the Dharma wants to share about, "Oh, I'm going to go skiing in such and such a place," or whatever it is, it raises no eyebrow—even if it's just, "Oh, that's going to be a pleasant sense experience. It's going to be fun and pleasant."

This is completely the opposite of what the Buddha would originally encourage, which is: "Yes, strive to attain jhāna, strive for that bliss. This is something worth striving for. Develop it, don't fear it." Whereas in relation to wanting sense pleasures—nice food, nice sights, sounds, etc.—he was very discouraging.

So there's something here. First, we've mixed up the emphases the Buddha placed on these two things—where we should actually strive for and put effort into, and where we shouldn't. But even more generally, there seems a kind of confusion in our minds and a lack of integrity—coherence is perhaps a better word.

If we're wanting to lessen our confusion, to increase or support a sense of more coherence, more making sense in terms of our vision and our concept of the whole path—what that really means for our life—because we can have a concept that makes sense, and then when it comes to our life, we're not actually really living it. We're talking about people who really love studying the Dharma and are involved in the practice, but actually, these things don't really hang together very coherently in terms of what the teachings say and what one might communicate with others and what makes sense, but then how one actually lives and the choices. There's a lack of coherence, a lack of integrity often for us there.

So if we want less confusion, if we want to support a making sense of the whole thing, integrating it into our life and feeling like we have integrity and there is coherence there, then this means getting clear about a few things. Or becoming more clear regarding quite a few pieces here.

But by clear, I don't primarily mean clear seeing, as in "I see clearly what's there," which implies a notion of reality. Maybe clear means, and getting clear and clearing means more like something like "clear a path"—clear a path for movement. And what movement? The movement of soul-making, the movement of eros, the movement of creation, discovery, etc., that we've been talking about.

So yes, there's some clear seeing in terms of distinctions and delineations, like we've talked about between eros and craving, for example. But more it's like: what's blocked for us? And when does that blocking not serve? So clearing a path, but also clarity of delineation.

Now, included in all that is being clear, delineating between the three or four possibilities that we already talked about—ways that the path and the vision of awakening and the concept of awakening construe our relationship with sense experience.

So, for example, just reviewing now, as we talked about: one very common view is that regarding sense experience, maybe sense pleasure, our job is to cut the papañca—cut the proliferation, cut the veil of images and thoughts and concepts around sense pleasure. Cut it, remove it, so that we can just meet experience "barely," "nakedly," "directly," etc. There's this myth, really, of bare attention—something the Buddha never talked about.

And then there's either this construct of being with what is, meeting the touch of life, meeting life, open to the touch of life, whatever it is. Or there's this kind of movement to a kind of atomistic reductionism: you cut papañca and you're just with the micro-moments of vedanā and perception and all the rest of it.

Both of these—either the myth of "what is" and the touch of life, or the atomistic reduction to perception, conception—both of them are realist, as we've said all this before. But that's the first group of views: cut papañca and practice bare attention to sense pleasure.

And then it's just a moment of pleasantness, and there's nothing else with that.

A second view has a broader and deeper meaning given within it to the word papancha. And the whole movement there is not to the touch of life and the atomistic reality, but rather beyond all that to the unfabricated, to the transcendent, beyond all sense experience. So here is sense pleasure, sense experience. Cutting papancha really means unfabricating. And for the sake of that transcendental thrust, the opening to the knowing of the realization of that sphere, that dimension where the eye ceases, where the ear ceases, where the perception of forms, the perception of sound ceases—that unfabricated, deathless realm we talked about.

In contrast to those two, a third construal or conceptual framework regarding the senses and their place on the path and in the vision of awakening contrasts papancha with what we might call psyche or image or fantasy—good terms in our vocabulary—with soul-making, basically. Papancha versus soul-making, erotic, imaginal engagement with the senses, or in the language of Tantra, with skillful fabrication, the fabrication in which Tantrism engages.

So there's a deliberate fabrication of perception, enrichment, if you like, of perception, a multi-dimensionalizing of perception. Eros, the imaginal soul-making, comes in to enrich, imbue, complexify, widen, deepen, and give dimensions to the perception of and relationship with the senses. Whereas the first two construals—cutting the papancha and being with bare attention, or cutting the papancha as the movement completely beyond the senses to the unfabricated—these do not allow that in those thrusts or those visions of what the path is. They do not allow the erotic imaginal and the soul-making with regard to the senses.

But with respect to all that, what we've been saying is, first of all, to acknowledge that soul-making already happens. No matter what view you have, it will come in one way or another to our path and to our relationship, our view of ourselves and all that.

What we need to do is acknowledge this—acknowledge the presence of eros, fantasy, and soul-making in our lives, in what we love, and if we love the path, that means in relation to the path and to awakening.

And acknowledging that and then delineating that, and delineating that by creating, as we've done, making these concepts and then seeing what that does and what opens up in terms of perception. And also being clear about what we talked about, the degrees of fabrication. So in other words, there's a place for this bare attention, a small place, and there's certainly a place for the whole spectrum of unfabricating, and there's a place for skillful fabricating, for beautiful fabricating, for soul-making fabricating. And there's also a place for the different directions of eros, towards the senses, towards the beyond the senses, the unfabricated.

So all of that, to me, creates more coherence, more sense, allows us to actually have more integrity with respect to all this, and for all that to be integrated more into a vision and a fantasy of the path and a relationship with sense experience, which we can't avoid. You can only transcend sense experience for certain periods of time in deep meditative practice. Otherwise we live in the world of sense experience. That's what the Buddha meant by the world—sense experience, as he says. That's his definition of the world.

So it seems important to open up a conception and a vision here that does justice to really how we're living for a start, but also to soul-making and to that, the movements of eros in the soul and the opening, the discovery of the sacred.

Now, if we're talking about eros, we're talking, as I mentioned, and soul-making, we're talking—eros implies soul-making, soul-making implies eros, and both of them imply a sense of beauty. And beauty and the senses, of course, go together. So sometimes we can, again, here, we can almost be a little simplistic or naive or unquestioning in our assumptions around what beauty is and what its place is or isn't and what it is when it's in the realm of the senses.

So eros implies beauty and a love of beauty and an attraction to beauty. And we've touched on this. What we love in regard to beauty and in regard to soul-making and that whole movement of eros, is the intimacy with beauty. We love the connection that's involved when the beloved other is beautiful to us and there's that soul-making. We love that. We love the sensitivity and the tuning. We've touched on all this.

But what actually is beauty? Now, I've actually written about that, so I don't want to go off on a whole big, too long tangent on all this. I'm not going to say too much about it. But actually, it strikes me as a really important question. What do we mean when we say beauty or we find something beautiful?

So this is an experience we have as human beings. Again, we can ignore it, we can try and put it in the dustbin or whatever, but we have the experience of beauty as human beings. Can we reduce beauty to just pleasantness? To me, they're just not equivalent. Pleasant sensation does not equate to beauty. And any time you feel touched by beauty or in awe of beauty, have a look, you know, look more carefully. Is this just about pleasant sense experience? A pleasant, even if it's art, is it just a pleasant arrangement of colours and proportions on a painting or of pleasant sounds and their temporal arrangement in a piece of music or whatever?

Is it really just about pleasantness? What's happening when we're really touched and moved and kind of opened by a sense of beauty? To me, it's a really interesting question, a really important question for us as human beings.

Is it that there's some kind of resonating going on between us or between the soul, in the soul, with what is beautiful, with the beloved other? Is it that this, whatever it is that I'm finding beautiful, is mirroring something in me? What's going on? Is it that I recognize something?

And if it is any of that, is there some kind of sense of belonging when there's beauty? Like I somehow feel like I belong to something, and I'm not even sure what that thing is. Maybe I don't have a sense of it, maybe it's just this sense of dimensionality that opens, and I belong to that dimensionality. Or maybe it's a divinity, maybe it's not, maybe it's an archetype, maybe it's clear, or not at all, maybe it's just a very vague sense—and often it is.

One of the things I would like to actually insist on—and again I'm not going to go into this now too much—is that a sense of beauty implies a sense of depth. Now some people would do their utmost to try and refuse that notion. But I think for us, when we have a sense of beauty, I'm talking about a sense that really touches us, when we really feel like the heart and the soul and the being is touched by a sense of beauty, there is a sense not only of our own depths, but also the depths of that which is beautiful to us.

And this is very much connected with the whole movement of Eros and soul-making. We've said Eros needs this depth, this dimensionality, this unfathomability of the object, and that's part of what the imaginal gets fabricated with, or is inherent, if you like, in

the imaginal—this unfathomability, this dimensionality and depth. So something here about unfathomability and depth, wrapped up in beauty, wrapped up in the erotic relationship with anything.

Now if we think for a little bit, or consider for a little bit, different styles of meditation, even different styles of insight meditation. Many of you will know of the Mahasi style, taught by Mahasi Sayadaw, beginning in the twentieth century. It was really one of the absolutely dominant influences or streams within insight meditation for many years. So one of the very first influences in the construction of insight meditation was this Mahasi style. Sometimes it was almost an exclusive prevalence of that or domination within how insight meditation was taught. Certainly when I started in the mid-eighties, insight meditation scenes and circles and retreat centers and retreats and teachings were all very dominated by Mahasi-style teachings, alongside others—Ajahn Chah and a sprinkling of Zen. But Mahasi-style was very dominant.

In that style, there is, I would say, a very precise noting of moment-to-moment experience and it tends towards a narrow focus of attention, so a very penetrative, intense application of continual mindfulness to sense experience and an emphasis on bare attention—that notion of bare attention—moment-to-moment, intense sustaining of the mindfulness on the particles, if you like, of experience.

I would say with that, that there is either no, or let's say very limited eros there. There's either none or very limited erotic possibility. Why? Because sense objects are not unfathomable. In that whole presentation of the path, in that whole way of teaching, in that whole presentation of the concept of what one is trying to do, sense objects are not unfathomable. And we've said Eros needs an unfathomability to it.

There is an assumption there in that whole presentation of the teaching—related as it is to Abhidhamma, Theravadan Abhidhamma, which tends towards atomistic reductionism, actually a whole set of teachings of atomistic reductionism that was so criticized by Nagarjuna in the Mahayana teachings on emptiness. But there is an assumption that this atomistic reductionism that's happening through my very probing, narrow focus of sustained moment-to-moment mindfulness on the particles of sensation and sense experience and mental experience, there is an assumption this atomistic reduction reveals reality.

When I'm paying attention in this way, this so-called mindfulness, this so-called bare attention, by its very nature this label is regarded as penetrating to reality. And that assumption supports that kind of attention, that attention reinforces that kind of as-

sumption, and it's a kind of attention and a kind of assumption that stops the eros and therefore the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, because there's not this unfathomability that eros needs.

There is a sense of beauty there, but the beauty comes—people love, you know, actually some people hate it and some people love it, and whatever people have an ambivalent relationship to that way of practicing. But part of the love of the beauty there is more in what I was relating to before. It's in the intimacy, in the connection, in the sensitivity. That's what people love about that path. I don't know whether anyone can really love that kind of atomistic reductionism. So there is some degree of beauty, but the eros there is actually very limited.

In recent years, the predominance and prevalence of Mahasi style in the insight meditation tradition has waned, and it's become part of what informs retreats, and some teachers who just teach that way and practitioners who just practice that way. But more, it's just kind of waned and taken its, I would say, rightfully more modest place and mixed in with other concepts and approaches to practice and teachings.

And then also more recently, in recent years, a kind of elevation of the idea of insight meditation and practice as being most authentically—or one is most truly practicing—when one is practicing "non-doing" or just receiving experience or opening to experience and sitting in or walking in a non-doing, standing in a non-doing and just receiving experience.

I would actually say, in terms of we're asking about eros and sense experience, that that mode of conceiving and perceiving practicing and the assumptions there also limit or there is a lack there of eros as well within that way of practicing. Why? Because again there's a tacit assumption of the reality of being, and being as opposed to doing, that this is somehow real and reveals the way things really are.

Doing would distort the way things are. This non-doing or being or receiving reveals the way things are. And that reality, that barrier there, prevents eros. So where there's a fixed reality view, the eros is limited, in this case in relation to sense experience, in that mode of thinking about practice, in that mode of practicing.

Secondly, you could point out that we used words with sexual connotations – opening and penetrating – to describe the erotic movement, opening to the erotic object, the beloved other, and penetrating it more, wanting more opening, wanting more penetrating. Here, in this mode of practicing – this kind of receiving, opening to receiving experience, and non-doing – the erotic movement is limited to one of opening. In the Mahasi

style, it tends to be limited to one of penetrating, not always. And so that style is, if you like, more phallic in its thrust, and this style is more receptive. But either way, this style limits the range and the style of erotic movement there.

But perhaps most importantly, the reason why it lacks or limits the eros is this way of practicing of so-called non-doing and receiving, opening to receiving. It tends towards the perception of oneness and not particularity, and not the retained otherness of eros. It tends instead towards oneness.

In other words, if I just sit, and I really practice – as much as it seems to me, if I don't realize that it's a bit of an illusion – if I just sit and I believe in so-called receiving and opening to receiving and non-doing, what will happen is it will unfabricate sense experience to a certain extent and it tends towards less of a perception of separation and distinction and towards more of a perception of oneness of all things.

Sense objects, then, are not unfathomable. They don't have an infinite dimensionality of depths in that sense of unfathomable, because at some point in doing that kind of practice we recognize that rather sense experiences are universally one with – probably awareness is the most likely thing, sometimes one with a kind of universal awareness – although as this practice goes deeper, before one realizes that it's actually based on a mistaken conception, an illusion of non-doing and realism. At some point, though, we have the perception and the sense and the kind of recognition that all sense experience and all sense objects are universally one, most likely with awareness, with a universal awareness. And so that's the way that that practice would go as it deepens, as one dedicates oneself to it.

In which case they are then fathomed. I've fathomed their true nature. They are awareness in their essence, or they are love in their essence. Even if the awareness or love is infinitely vast in space or in time – in other words, this awareness seems to have no limits in space or in time, and this love seems to be infinite in space and in time – there's a certain kind of infinity there, but I've reached the bottom level of the dimensionality. It is awareness, or it is love. So they are not – sense objects don't have this unfathomability; they reach a fathoming, they reach a level beyond which they don't go deeper. You understand?

So both these styles – the Mahasi style and the way of non-doing, if you like, or the way of receiving – tend to actually limit the eros with regard to sense experience through the whole way of thinking and through the way of practicing that comes out of that way of thinking and then reinforces that whole view and that whole relationship

with sense experience, so that there cannot be the erotic soul-making in relation to the particularities of sense experience and that unfathomability that's part of that, and otherness that's part of that, that's part of the direction of a certain kind of soul-making.

So this, to me, is again – what are we trying to do here? How is our conception of the path and the way we're practicing limiting certain possibilities, whether that's the possibility of a deeper understanding of dependent origination and emptiness, whether that's the possibility of degrees and depths of freedom or directions of freedom, or the possibilities of soul-making and opening to sacredness? So these questions to me are really, really important. These considerations are really important.

So easily we can bring in assumptions or rest on our practice and our view of practice and of path and of awakening. Rest on certain assumptions that are not fully checked out. All kinds of assumptions.

So in relation to sensuality, the experiences of the senses, and the beauty there, I would say – beauty, what is our relationship there? What place, is there a place for beauty? What does that mean?

So we could be talking about art here, any kind of medium of art. We could be talking about nature. We could be talking about whatever. But as I said, is the beauty that we feel in relation to art or music or whatever it is – is it only sensual? Is that what's happening for us, that there's a sensual pleasure because of the arrangement of these colors or these sounds or whatever it is? Is that what beauty is? Is it just reducible to sense pleasure?

And I can sort of... I'm best served by kind of giving a bare attention to the object of art, whatever that is, or the thing that's beautiful, and then just enjoying the pleasing effects of the arrangement of these elements of the artistic work in time and in space – the colors, the form, whatever it is, the proportions there.

What happens to our sense of beauty if we actually do manage to kind of squeeze it down to that mode of relating to the object, to the art or the beautiful thing?

What happens also, just as with images, if we reduce whatever this beautiful thing is, whether it's something in art or something in nature – what happens when we reduce it to "it means X"? It represents specifically exactly X or Y. What happens when we reduce it to a kind of monovalency of meanings? What happens to an actual experience of beauty?

So beauty seems to me, as I said, to involve this. Yes, of course, that's part of beauty. If you make art, of course it matters—the proportions, the timings, the spatial patterning, the colors, whatever it is, the timbres. This matters greatly. You can't talk about the art separate from those elements. And it may well mean this and that, but to reduce it to either of them or both of them will kill the beauty.

Beauty needs something unfathomable in the depth, some kind of dimensionality to it—I would say some kind of inexhaustibility, including of meaningfulness. In other words, I can't quite capture everything about it. Beauty and eros implicating each other and soul-making and all that. And it has this beyond—I can't quite capture or define or reduce it. This, as I said, applies also to our relationship with nature.

For example, consider landscape, or a tree, or going for a walk in autumn, where there's the autumnal scene with trees of vividly bright colors. One can be really moved and touched, of course—I hope you know this—by the beauty there. Sometimes it moves us to great depth, this kind of beauty, for instance, of an autumn scene.

Is it just that they are pretty, vivid colors? Sometimes we talk as if that's what the beauty consists of, alone. How much can that really touch us? How much depth and beauty can that have? Or is it that, plus the fact that we're amazed at the biological wonder of it? How amazing that trees evolved, with the light and the photosynthesis, and then the chemical changes occurring with the change in light and seasons, making the colors certain ways—that's amazing.

Or even in the autumn scene, the poignancy of impermanence. Here is decay, here is death, here is the cycle of life and death and the poignancy of that to the being. Or even all of those—pretty vivid colors, amazing biology and evolution, and the poignancy of impermanence that the autumn scene speaks to us.

It can be all of those, and yet I would still say that in what I'm calling a sense of beauty, and in what really touches us in the relationship with the sense experience there, can be all of these, but something more is there when we're really touched and we really have this sense of beauty. Something else can be there and hopefully is there because we don't cut it out.

So in our relationship with sensuality, what can be there? What needs to come in in order for beauty to be there? Something that we can't quite define or capture. Some other depth, some dimensionality. Not the monovalency, not the reduction, not just plain or mere sense pleasure, pleasing sense experiences. Yes, that's all fine. Those levels are included. But more.

So I would say, if we want to include a sense of beauty in our lives, and on the path, and include it on the path, and open it, and have it be alive, and give it place—and if we're interested in soul-making and eros, which, as I said, always include a sense of beauty—then it's actually necessary that in our relationship with the senses, in our relationship with sense experience, we don't reduce the view to "this is simply seeking and enjoying pleasant sense experience." Whether that's what we want or that's what we dismiss, there's not a reduction. We don't see it that way. We don't conceive of it that way. Nor are we denigrating the senses because we only want the transcendent beyond. There's something else that's possible here in the relationship with the senses.

I'm talking about how can we understand, acknowledge, recognize, practice, live in a way that allows soul-making, allows eros, understands differently in our relationship with sense experience—so we don't just dismiss it or feel guilty. And we don't flatten it, which would actually kill the beauty and kill the soul-making. We actually acknowledge, get interested, allow and support this sense of dimensionality, which is available to us in relationship to the senses, necessary for beauty and necessary for eros and soul-making.

And in that, something in the whole relationship with senses and sense experience and world transforms, opens up. And in so doing, a whole sense of the path can as well.

German philosopher Heidegger, the twentieth-century philosopher, traced the etymology of the word for beautiful in German, das Schöne. And he traced the etymology to Scheinen in German, which is the root of the word for illusion, Schein.

So that's interesting. He's tracing the notion of beautiful to the word for illusion. Now, we could hear something like that and put it straight into a kind of narrow interpretation—for some streams of the teaching, a very typical Pali canon influenced interpretation. Yes, sense beauty is illusory. And that's what we get from this etymology that Heidegger's pointing to.

Heidegger, one of the things he was accused of was very dubious etymological playing with things. So it may or may not be the case, but again, what matters more to me with playing with words is what comes out of it in the soul-making. Because we could hear it that way—sensual beauty is exactly illusory. It's illusory. There is sense experience, and there is the experience of pleasure or unpleasantness in regard to the senses. But sense beauty is illusory. The beautiful is related to illusion.

Compare that with a deeper understanding of fabrication, the more tantric view, the soul-making view, and the view that allows the erotic-imaginal. And there we acknowledge, if you like, the fabrication and that the beautiful is created and discovered. It's

created by the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, giving more dimensionality, giving more multifacetedness, in relation to that. But because of our deeper and more integrated understanding of what fabrication is and what it involves—the inevitability of it, the place of soul-making and the necessity of that, the place of eros and all that—there is no problem that the beautiful is connected with the illusory or the fabricated. No problem at all. We understand this is expressing a deep wisdom and a deep way of integration. It unfolds the possibility of a path. It opens the door of a wider avenue of practice, of creation and discovery, and of sacredness.

One of the things I've been thinking about for quite a while in art and beauty and all this is that in a lot of modern Western poetry, there was a point—I'm not sure exactly when it happened—when the emphasis shifted really to things. It's like the important thing to have in a poem is things. In other words, don't talk about your feelings. Don't talk about—certainly for heaven's sake—metaphysics or spiritual realities or that kind of thing. Talk about things. Depict things. Give us, in a different sense, images of things.

So that's the most dominant tenor or fabric of a lot of modern Western poetry—it's really based in things. The message there to budding poets is everything to sense experience. Tell us about things. Don't tell us about your feelings. Tell us about things, and your feelings will be communicated indirectly by what you say in and through what you say about things.

But the things there are so often just imagined purely materially. They are conceived of as purely material. There's a kind of one-dimensionality or flatland view of things, and therefore of sensuality. And that view of things is also tied together with a view of things and human beings as well, of their fragility—the fragility of these things and the fragility of human beings, of the ephemeral nature of both humans and things.

All that is wrapped up, of course, in a kind of assumption about the reality of our existential situation, our death and our finitude. All of these—fragility, ephemeral nature of things, solidity of things, the sensual being the only important thing, finitude and death—all of these are taken as realities in the unspoken backdrop.

So that so often what the poem becomes is just about things, and about holding things and others as dear, because that's all we have given our existential situation. We have these flat things and humans, and these things can become dear to us. But it's all against a kind of tragedy—though not in the classical sense—of our existential situation, of finitude, of death, and of one-dimensionality.

How different the view of the image of things and the image of human beings. So there's a whole current—and some of you may be aware of this—there's a whole really dominant current in modern poetry in the West that kind of ties all this together. These are the kinds of poems that are acceptable or taken seriously, and others won't be taken seriously.

And it's all based on a certain worldview. It also tends towards the kind of deflationary art I mentioned the other day. So the view of art and sensuality and life and what's beautiful reflects the culture's conceptual framework and logos regarding reality, regarding the senses, regarding things, regarding apparent existential situations, regarding what human being is. It reflects the dominant worldview and the actual lack of eros and soul-making within the wider culture.

To me, these things are really important. They might not seem relevant to you, but to me, poetry is very important, art is extremely important, music, all these things, and the relationship with nature. And what then is given, for example, to our relationship with nature if we can open the view of all this—in regard to our sense experience, in regard to the eros and soul-making—and let that in: dimensionality, and the non-realism.

What is given to our relationship with nature, and therefore to the environmental movement and the ecological movements, if we open our view and if we understand the soul-making dynamic and eros, psychologos and everything that we've talked about? I would say that whole relationship with nature and also the environmental gains are given other levels. It opens up in different ways. The environmental movement is given other ways to enter the discourse.

So it's not just about one-dimensional nature in a materialist sense that we're somehow trying to elevate in value. And so we can only speak in terms of humanistic values or instrumentalist values as resources or this or that. There's very rarely any talk of sacredness in relation to nature or anything else, apart from mainstream religion, because that's kind of gone out of the discourse of the worldview. And I wonder—I've talked about this before in those talks on ecology of love, so I'm just moving very quickly here because I need to end—but I wonder, can we dare to talk that way and dare to open up that kind of view and relationship with nature?

Then we see, in understanding all this and what we're talking about in this retreat, then we see the soul, the citta, is not separate from the beauty, from the divinity, from the dimensionality, from the unfathomability of nature. And we open those dimensions and that sense of sacredness. And then that can open the whole discourse around the environmental movement, which sometimes just seems so stuck on one level.

So if we go back to what Heidegger wrote: the illusion in beauty, or the fabrication. This doesn't—the realization that fabrication, if you like, which is tied to the word for illusion—something is a fabrication. The acknowledgement of that, the realization of that, the entering into that does not at all demean the beauty that is fabricated there.

Beauty is not separate from us. There's a whole other level of participation being alluded to here. What does it mean to participate in nature? Yes, I've touched on this before. There's a whole other level here in the soul level, in the soul-making level, in the erotic movement, in the recognition of fabrication, in the recognition of the creation and discovery of beauty and dimensionality.

So illusion is only a derogatory word when we're harboring an assumption somewhere—usually at the back of our mind if you're used to these teachings, still harboring something at the back of the mind, or at the front of the mind if you're not familiar with these teachings on emptiness. But illusion is always put in contrast to some assumption: there's something that's not illusion, there's something that's not fabricated, some experience, some bare experience that's not an illusion.

But there isn't. The only thing that's unfabricated is beyond experience, beyond the senses, beyond any form, beyond any being of an object. So there's not this supposed non-illusion to which illusion is compared and found to come up short. And when we realize that, then the fact of fabrication, the recognition, the admission, the entering into that is not a demeaning.

And there's something—can you hear it? Can you grasp it? What this is inviting us into in terms of responsibility, but also in terms of the awareness of the multi-leveled participation we have in the cosmos, in divinity, in being. Opening up the preciousness there.

CHAPTER 81

Refractions: Of Body, Sensuality, and Sexuality (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h09

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea applies the fundamental Buddhist insight of paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination) to sexuality, demonstrating how our sexual experiences are always shaped by our ways of looking and cultural conditioning. He contrasts reductionist biological views with the rich imaginal possibilities found in ancient Sumerian mythology of Inanna and Dumuzi, showing how sexuality can participate in something cosmic and divine.*
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> *Burbea challenges practitioners to examine their unquestioned assumptions about sexuality inherited from Western Christianity and Pāli Canon Buddhism, questioning whether sex truly prevents samādhi or realization of the unfabricated. He explores various intentions behind sexual activity—from pleasure-seeking to soul-making—and investigates what allows sexual experiences to become imaginal, revealing multidimensionality and sacredness.*
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> *Drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of how sexuality became central to modern identity formation, Burbea examines the double-edged nature of this development. He emphasizes that the test for any relationship with sexuality should be whether it serves soul-making—the expansion of meaning, beauty, and sacred dimensionality—rather than ego-contraction or neurotic identity-fixation.*

When we reflect on sexuality, I hope one of the most basic insights in relationship to it is that of dependent origination and emptiness. In other words, we are aware and never lose sight of the fact that sexuality, like anything else, like everything else, does not exist independently of the way of looking. Sexuality doesn't exist independent of the way of looking. It has no inherent existence as this or as that. It's always colored and shaped by the way that we're relating to it, the way that we're regarding it, our assumptions about it and our assumptions about the path and about what is spirituality or morality or what is in contrast to it.

When a person thinks, "Yeah, but really sexuality is this," it's that "really" that needs to be called into question. This is the movement of avijja, not realizing the dependence on the way of looking. So when we talk about sexuality, we're talking about something

that is not a fixed independently existent thing. No matter how much it seems to be just a biological fact, we can't look at it independent of all kinds of assumptions, ways of relating and regarding it, and archetypal styles.

How open is our imaginal context for what sexuality is and can be? If we use even just the Greek gods as archetypes, Aphroditic sexuality—with its attention to pleasure and sensuality and the generative urge of procreation—is very different from, say, Hermetic sexuality. Hermes is not interested in monogamy, for example. Or consider the Dionysian, with its ecstasy and intensity, and also the effeminacy as much as the power. These are all different archetypes from that of the faithful monogamous couple in marriage.

We bring both conceptual ideas and assumptions, and a kind of narrowness or breadth of archetypal lens to what sexuality is. Some of that we get from the culture, from the wider culture, and some from the subcultures that we move in. We're always bringing something. We're not talking about something that exists independently that really is like this or really is like that. This is a fundamental insight that we must keep in mind and keep in our consciousness as we're exploring sexuality and opening it up as a topic.

I remember when I was an undergraduate studying psychology, just after Richard Dawkins' book The Selfish Gene had been released and people were talking about it a lot. I actually had Richard Dawkins as a personal tutor for a very short time, which is a whole other story. A student colleague of mine, a friend, was quite influenced by that book and that whole way of thinking. He used to say, "Love is just a genetic program to release certain chemicals in your brain. And that's what love is. That's all love is." This is a very fundamentalist, evolutionary, biological survival-of-the-fittest way of reducing things—a very reductionistic way of looking.

Or consider a person I knew, a practitioner, who was very adamant that sexuality is just a biological impulse to procreation that's been evolutionarily selected. He was very intent on that conception of sexuality, and that was the same person who described himself as addicted to internet porn. Is there any relationship there between the view and the behavior? Is the behavior coming out of a certain view, because it doesn't allow for much more?

Nicolas Chamfort, a French moralist around the time of the French Revolution, said or wrote, "Love is nothing but the contact of two epidermis"—that's the biological word for skin—"and the exchange of two pale fantasies." I don't know enough about him to

know whether that particular aphorism was coming from a broken heart—his wife, I think, died—or how much it was just the view that he arrived at at a certain point in life.

I've talked about the Buddha and what he's recorded as saying in the Pali Canon in relation to sexuality, using very strong language, very dismissive. There are views that reduce sexuality and lovemaking, and even human love, in different ways, and pigeonhole it, either biologically or spiritually.

I remember teaching a retreat at one of the major retreat centers in another country. We were sitting at lunch with a few senior teachers and some others around, and something came up because it had come to their attention that there was a subgroup of teacher trainees elsewhere in the country who had started a group involving something like mindful sex. I'm not quite sure of the details, but it may have involved mutual masturbation. They were promoting it as a sort of spiritual practice to integrate sexuality, to explore and open sexuality mindfully.

I was just listening, not knowing much about it, and watching the back and forth of the conversation. What struck me was the immediate dismissal of this group and this idea, and the wanting to be clearly disassociated from it and make sure the insight meditation world was clearly not in any way associated with it. There were some strong statements about how the Buddha taught that we need to let go of cravings, so this couldn't be related to Dharma.

Then in the very same mouthful, the teacher who said that commented on how this was such a lovely meal that we were being fed by the retreat staff, and how this was in fact their favorite meal. I was struck by the obliviousness or seeming obliviousness of those two statements. One was around the area of sensuality around sexuality, and one was around the area of pleasant-tasting food. One was completely okay—seemingly to just declare one's enjoyment and that one had a favorite there—and one was really not okay.

This struck me very much at the time. I remember being struck mostly by the seeming lack of openness and questioning there.

Sexual ethics often draws intense scrutiny—consternation, outrage, tutting—while other ethical issues, like climate change, receive almost complete silence. We rarely see the same willingness to speak up, to teach ethics around environmental destruction, or to take strong positions there. Yet sexuality readily provokes heat, strong statements, black-and-white declarations, with people very ready to condemn.

So I wonder: Are we exploring our relationship with sex and sexuality deeply enough? Are we truly examining the views we hold about this? Or are we simply absorbing, drinking in, being unconsciously indoctrinated by some unquestioned legacy—perhaps Western Christianity that saturates our culture? Even in secular contexts, Christian ethics largely remain, as Nietzsche pointed out. We're saturated by Christian-influenced views of body, sensuality, sexuality, alongside those found in Pali Canon Buddhism.

My inquiry concerns how open our questioning really is—how willing we are to examine our relationships and views around sexuality, sensuality, and eros. I'm absolutely not advocating moral nihilism, suggesting anything goes around sexuality. Rather, I'm questioning how much genuine questioning exists regarding our attitudes and assumptions.

For me, this remains an open exploration rather than contracting down to "we know the answer, this is the decree." There is not, as yet, any arrival at a final answer.

When someone declares in a dharma context that "sex is a distraction," or "sexual thoughts and images are distractions," this already implies a particular view. Such seemingly authoritative statements carry assumptions we rarely examine. Yet anything can be a distraction—pleasant food, ideas about dharma, whatever. I'm certainly not advocating abandoning ideas or being "non-conceptual," simply noting that anything can become a so-called distraction.

Similarly, statements like "the Buddha said X, therefore X" imply all kinds of views and fantasies that we rarely unpack. What assumptions lie behind such compact-sounding pronouncements?

What's the most important thing? Is it being a Buddhist? But what does being a Buddhist mean? Is it freedom? What kind of freedom, and how many kinds exist? Is it soul-making? Freedom and soul-making together?

How does what I'm thinking and saying to myself and others actually reflect what I consider most important? Or have other considerations gotten tangled in there—assumptions, views, fantasies I haven't recognized?

Whenever anyone says "Buddha said," there are usually many unseen views and fantasies wrapped up in such statements—fantasies of path, awakening, Buddha, tradition. All these things we've touched on remain typically unexamined.

Is it really true that sex, lovemaking, sexual arousal, sexual energy, sexual images prevent samadhi? I can relate experiences—my own and those many students have shared—where sexuality, sexual energy, sexual images, actual lovemaking, actually quite support samadhi. They don't leave stickiness, craving, or contraction of being at all.

Yet people often assume it's either-or: either you're open to sex and sensuality, or you're going for the unfabricated. Is this really true? To disprove such thinking, we need only find celibate people who haven't realized the unfabricated alongside non-celibate people who have. Both certainly exist.

This either-or thinking wraps up all kinds of unexamined assumptions. Often there's real polarizing—perhaps tracing back to Plato, Neoplatonism, or Pali Canon Buddhism's rejection of sensuality and sexuality in favor of knowing the transcendent unfabricated, versus rejecting anything transcendent altogether.

We'll return to this later.

We know we've touched on this—the whole field polarizes. Either this or that. Is it really the case? Is that really true?

So we can compare, for instance, such views as we were talking about before—my undergraduate fellow student, or the person who described himself as addicted to pornography, or what Shafo said, or what seemed to be articulated by the teachers around the lunch table. Compare all that with views of sex and sexuality, whether actual physical sex or imaginal, that we touched on the other day: the view of sexuality and sex as participating in, mirroring, echoing something much larger, something cosmic, and even perhaps creating or healing the divine through that engagement.

What a different view that is of what sexuality is—or should we say could be, can be, how it can be transformed, again, by the way of looking. Really quite a different view.

Sometimes I wonder if that kind of view—participating in something much larger, something more cosmic through sex—if that sense is perhaps easier for women. Because of the cycles of menstruation, for example, and because of the potential, at least if not the actuality, of pregnancy, one really feels subject to something much larger. Someone once told me that in the cycles, in what is being born in you and coming through you, what your body is subject to, your whole being is subject to—menstruation, pregnancy—you're subject to something much larger. And there's the possibility of feeling that in a very different way, much more embedded, cosmically reflecting the earth and cosmic cycles. Something bigger than you are.

Whereas potentially, at least for the male, it's possible to scatter one seed, sow one seed, enter and leave, and not have that sense of being caught up in something or at the center of something much, much vaster, much more multidimensional, much more cosmic in its order. It may be easier for the woman, for the female, to feel that than it is for the male, perhaps.

But compare those views I was talking about before with this participatory view, or let me read you something from the myth of Inanna and her courtship with Dumuzi, the shepherd. Inanna was a Sumerian goddess, and Dumuzi may have been immortal—it's unclear, I'm not an expert on this myth—but may have become divine through lovemaking with Inanna, through partnership with the goddess. There are all kinds of parallels here to what we've been talking about.

This passage is quite long, but because it's so different from the typical ways we regard sexuality in our culture, I think it's worth reading at length, just to get a completely different sense of the regard, the reverence, the texture of what sexuality is and what lovemaking can be.

So Inanna, at her mother's command, bathed and anointed herself with scented oil. She covered her body with a royal white robe. She readied her dowry. She arranged her precious lapis beads around her neck. She took her seal in her hand. She's a goddess, remember. Dumuzi, the shepherd—he's becoming the king through this lovemaking—waited expectantly.

Inanna opened the door for him. Inside the house she shone before him like the light of the moon. Dumuzi looked at her joyously. He pressed his neck close against hers. He kissed her.

Inanna spoke: "What I tell you, let the singer weave into song. What I tell you, let it flow from ear to mouth. Let it pass from old to young. My vulva, the horn, the boat of heaven, is full of eagerness like the young moon."

As an aside, I read a short interview with Diane Wolkstein, who translated this not too long ago. She was talking about translations made first in 1937 of the Sumerian myth, and they kept words like "vulva" in Latin because back then you simply could not publish such things in English. The culture was not ready, she said, though she thinks we're more ready now. She found that rather amusing.

So: "My vulva, the horn, the boat of heaven, is full of eagerness like the young moon. My untilled land lies fallow. As for me, Inanna, who will plow my vulva? Who will plow my high field? Who will plow my wet ground? As for me, the young woman, who will plow my vulva? Who will station the ox there?"

Who will plough my vulva? Dumusi replied, "Great lady, the king will plough your vulva. I, Dumusi the king, will plough your vulva." Inanna said, "Then plough my vulva, man of my heart, plough my vulva."

At the king's lap stood the rising cedar. Plants grew high by their side. Grains grew high by their side. Gardens flourished luxuriantly.

Inanna sang: "He has sprouted. He has burgeoned. He is lettuce planted by the water. He is the one my womb loves best. My well-stocked garden of the plain, my barley growing high in its furrow, my apple tree which bears fruit up to its crown, he is lettuce planted by the water. My honey man, my honey man sweetens me always, my lord, the honey man of the gods, he is the one my womb loves best. His hand is honey, his foot is honey, he sweetens me always. My eager, impetuous caresser of the navel, my caresser of the soft thighs, he is the one my womb loves best. He is lettuce planted by the water."

Dumusi sang, Inanna sang: "Make your milk sweet and thick, my bridegroom. My shepherd, I will drink your fresh milk. Wild bull Dumusi, make your milk sweet and thick. I will drink your fresh milk. Let the milk of the goat flow in my sheepfold. Fill my holy churn with honey cheese. Lord Dumusi, I will drink your fresh milk. My husband, I will guard my sheepfold for you. I will watch over your house of life, the storehouse, the shining quivering place which delights Sumer, the house which decides the fates of the land, the house which gives the breath of life to the people. I the queen of the palace will watch over your house."

Dumusi spoke: "My sister, I would go with you to my garden. Inanna, I would go with you to my garden. I would go with you to my orchard. I would go with you to my apple tree. There I would plant the sweet, honey-covered seed."

Inanna spoke: "He brought me into his garden. My brother Dumusi brought me into his garden. I strolled with him among the standing trees. I stood with him among the fallen trees. By the apple tree I knelt as is proper, before my brother coming in song, who rose to me out of poplar leaves, who came to me in the midday heat. Before my lord Dumusi, I poured out plants from my womb, I placed plants before him, I poured out plants before him, I placed grain before him, I poured out grain before him, I poured out grain before my womb."

Inanna sang: "Last night as I, the Queen, was shining bright, last night as I, the Queen of Heaven, was shining bright, as I was shining bright and dancing, singing praises at the coming of night, he met me, he met me. My Lord Dumusi met me, he pushed his

hand to my hand, he pressed his neck close against mine. My High Priest is ready for the holy loins, my Lord Dumusi is ready for the holy loins. The plants and herbs in his field are ripe. O Dumusi, your fullness is my delight."

She called for it. She called for it. She called for the bed. She called for the bed that rejoices the heart. She called for the bed that sweetens the loins. She called for the bed of kingship. She called for the bed of queenship. Inanna called for the bed: "Let the bed that rejoices the heart be prepared. Let the bed that sweetens the loins be prepared. Let the bed of kingship be prepared. Let the bed of queenship be prepared. Let the royal bed be prepared."

She spread the bridal sheet across the bed. She called to the king: "The bed is ready." Inanna called to her bridegroom: "The bed is waiting."

He put his hand in her hand. He put his hand to her heart. Sweet is the sleep of hand to hand. Sweeter still is the sleep of heart to heart.

Inanna spoke: "I bathed for the wild bull. I bathed for the shepherd Dumusi. I perfumed my sides with ointment. I coated my mouth with sweet-smelling amber. I painted my eyes with coal. He shaped my loins with his fair hands. The shepherd Dumusi filled my lap with cream and milk. He stroked my pubic hair. He watered my womb. He laid his hands on my holy vulva. He smoothed my black boat with cream. He quickened my narrow boat with milk. He caressed me on the bed. Now I will caress my high priest on the bed. I will caress the faithful shepherd Dumusi. I will caress his loins, the shepherd of the land. I will decree a sweet fate for him."

The queen of heaven, the heroic woman greater than her mother, Inanna, the first daughter of the moon, decreed the fate of Dumusi.

Her advisor, Ninshibur, the faithful servant of the holy shrine, led Dumusi to the sweet thighs of Inanna and spoke: "My queen, here is the choice of your heart, the king, your beloved bridegroom. May he spend long days in the sweetness of your holy loins. Give him a favorable and glorious reign. Grant him the king's throne, firm in its foundations. Grant him the shepherd's staff of judgment. Grant him the enduring crown with radiant and noble diadem.

"From where the sun rises to where the sun sets, from north to south, from the upper sea to the lower sea, from the land of the huluppu tree to the land of the cedar, let his shepherd staff protect all of Sumer and Akkad. As the farmer, let him make the fields fertile. As the shepherd, let him make the sheepfolds multiply. Under his reign let there be vegetation. Under his reign let there be rich grain. In the marshland may the fish and birds chatter in the canebrake. May the young and the old reeds grow high. In

the steppe may the deer and wild goats multiply. In the orchards may there be honey and wine. In the grasslands, may the lettuce and cress grow high. In the palace, may there be long life.

"May there be flood water in the Tigris and the Euphrates. May the plants grow high on their banks and fill the meadows. May the lady of vegetation pile the grain in heaps and mounds. O my queen of heaven and earth, queen of all the universe, may he enjoy long days in the sweetness of your loins."

The king went with lifted head to the holy loin. He went with lifted head to the loins of Inanna. He opened wide his arms to the holy priestess of heaven.

Inanna spoke: "My beloved, the delight of my eyes, glistened me. We rejoiced together. He took his pleasure of me. He brought me into his house. He laid me down on the fragrant honey bed. My sweet love lying by my heart, tongue playing one by one. My fair Dumusi did so fifty times. Now my sweet love is sated."

It's possible, I suppose, that some people could hear this poetry and interpret it through a historical lens, deconstructing it: "Ah, yes, well here was the beginning of agriculture—or at some point agriculture was very important to this civilization, and this was just their way of not understanding agriculture, so they presented a myth of how crops grew, and they prayed so that crops would not fail, and the floodwaters would come and irrigate the soil."

There's a way of hearing it that reduces it to some kind of biological evolutionary impulse from an ignorant time when they didn't understand the science of agriculture. But you can hear in that poetry something very different—a completely different regard for lovemaking, for sex, for sexuality, for sensuality. There's nothing there that implies any kind of dirtiness or lessness or demeaningness.

It's juicy. It's completely holy because it's tied in with the cosmos. It's full of cosmopoiesis.

It's full of the earth and references to the fertility of the earth and the agriculture and the blessings of that. Honey and wine and orchards and fields and milk. This whole thing is redolent, pregnant, overflowing with multi-dimensionality of divinity, of spirits, a reverence and sense of participation. I feel the sexual act, the human sexual act, reflecting divinity, reflecting the vision in cosmopoiesis, reflecting and echoing, participating in the cosmic. This gives rise to a very different sensibility regarding sexuality and sensuality.

We live in a different time now, in a very different culture. When we come to sex, it's interesting to see what intentions nowadays are present, what we can use sex for, what is the intention in entering into sexual acts and sexuality between people.

Certainly it's possible that sex is just reduced to wanting to experience pleasant sensations—a desire to experience pleasure, pleasant vedana, basically. It's also possible that we may be using sex, to some degree or as part of the mix, for what we might call ego gratification, to prop up or inflate a certain self-view, a certain ego image. Either this happens through making sexual conquests and wearing them as a feather in one's hat, or through using sex as an indication of one's own desirability or lovability. "He loves me, she loves me, they love me. How do I know? Because we had sex." All this is possible.

Frankly speaking, sex can be for political reasons. Certainly in the history of different cultures, marriages and liaisons have been arranged for political reasons, for empire reasons, all kinds of things. But even within a relationship, there's a political possibility that sex is granted or withheld or used in strategizing, maneuvering for other purposes as well.

Sometimes there's the possibility that one is approaching sex just, either just or in part, seeking a release of stress, a release of tension. Whether it's work or something around the home, there's a certain amount of energetic stress that accumulates in the body and tension, and certainly orgasm can discharge that. Sometimes one is driven by that. Psychologically, it's interesting to consider what's giving rise to that stress in the first place—all kinds of psychological factors that have nothing to do with how busy we are or how much stress there is at work.

There's also the accumulation of energy. Some people are consciously entering into sexuality as described in some tantric practices, entering into conscious sex with another or with oneself, trying to accumulate and gather the sexual energy in certain channels in the body. Either this opens up consciousness or gathers bliss instead of discharging into orgasm.

Of course, the reason for having sex can be about love—expressing love and feeling the connection, the heart connection of love between two people. And sex can be for the sake of soul, for the sake of soul-making to some degree. In that case, the imaginal is involved, just based on everything we've been saying about soul and eros.

So we can come to sex with all these different intentions mixed together, and probably many more besides that I can't think of right now. But if we're talking about soul-making in and through sex, sex in the service of soul—and this doesn't need to exclude any of these other things—that involves soul-making, which implies the presence of images and engagement with images.

If we are interested in soul-making going into every direction and dimension and domain of our existence, then that will include sex. If we're interested in opening up sex and sexuality and sensuality, then it means allowing the soul-making and soulfulness and the imaginal and the erotic to imbue the sex. Because remember, we can have sex without eros. But soul-making involves this meeting and pervading of each other—the imaginal and the sexual.

Then the question arises: if we're interested in soul-making with regard to sex, what allows, what supports memories of sexual moments—whether on one's own or with another—to become images, in the sense of imaginal images? What allows just a memory of a sexual moment to be elevated, to have the fullness of the imaginal?

Or during the actual sex itself, what allows and supports the perceptions, the experiences in the present, to become imaginal, to become image, to have that iconic sense, that sense of the eternal, that sense of dimensionality, divinity, participation? What allows the multidimensionality to be revealed? What supports the multidimensionality to be discovered or revealed?

To me, that's quite an interesting question. What allows the soul—not just talking about heart, not reducing soul to heart—what allows the soul to be present? That's a connected question, but it's a different question.

What allows the soul—not just the heart, but the soul—to be stirred and awakened through sexuality? This is a connected yet distinct inquiry. What is it that allows the sex to be soul-making?

Is it simply a matter of pacing? Do we need to slow down to allow that dimensionality to unfold, for the perception to expand into the fullness of the imaginal? Perhaps, but I wouldn't want to be formulaic about this. Does this mean we must always have slow sex? When I speak of slowness, I don't necessarily mean the physical movements themselves, but rather the pace of the entire encounter—the rhythm of being itself.

Perhaps it's more about not becoming too carried away in a certain momentum of goal-orientation toward orgasm, or swept up in a contracted view or intention. This offers a clearer way of understanding it. Once again, everything returns to contraction—and this encompasses far more than just the heart. We speak of contraction of view, contraction of vision, contraction of sensibility.

The heart could be completely open while the soul-making sensibility, the visionary way of perceiving, remains quite narrow—closed, contracted, restricted to a limited view. So perhaps the question becomes whether we're being carried away in some contraction toward whatever goal we hold, whether orgasm or something else, or whether our view and intention have become constricted.

But when we're not carried away, when there's no contraction, then possibility opens. The possibility of perceiving, of imagining, of the soul-making dynamic—the *psychopoios*—actually coming alive in the moment, expanding, taking on its own life, filling out. However we might describe it: the fire spreading, the water flowing and filling, plumping out and expanding, so that dimensionality emerges. The cosmic dimension opens, the vision of the other deepens, the vision of oneself clarifies, the erotic imagination flowers—all of this that we've touched upon becomes possible because we're not contracted in greed, craving, or narrow vision.

Still, I wouldn't want to impose any rigid rules or formulas for exactly how this unfolds. This remains, for me, a deeply fascinating question to explore.

What's remarkable and worthy of gratitude is that even when we miss the soul-making in the moment, the beautiful emptiness of memory allows experiences to become soulful later. Dimensionality can be revealed and discovered and opened through remembrance. This applies not only to sexuality, of course, but to any experience. Sometimes the vision in the moment isn't consciously open enough, yet as memory holds the experience—perhaps the next day or whenever—it can begin to gather imaginal reality, imaginal dimensions.

This opens an intriguing exploration: What supports soul-making in sexuality? What allows sexuality to become soul-making? This extends beyond heartfulness, beyond love, beyond all the other elements we've discussed, into the specific question of what nourishes the soul through erotic experience.

Related to everything we've explored, if soul-making through sexuality is what interests us, it might initially seem more obviously soul-making when the sexual experience—whether actual or imaginal—carries certain flavors, tones, or characteristics. For instance, when it's very light, melting, warm, tender—obviously warm and tender. Such experiences, whether imaginal or actual, might feel unmistakably soul-making.

But in the *eros* of *psychopoios*, because of the movement toward expansion, can we —and some will find this easier at certain times than others for many different reasons —include not just the light and melting and warm, tender sexuality that obviously nurtures the soul, but also, as we've discussed, the darker, more voracious, less conventional expressions? These too hold tremendous soul-making potential.

Again, we must resist quick assumptions. Some people assume, because of social norms, cultural conditioning, various forms of indoctrination, that certain expressions must be disrespectful. They assume there's no love in such encounters, that they necessarily involve objectification.

But what does objectification actually mean? To me, it means not seeing and valuing the totality of another person's being. Can we look again, more closely, more openly, without assumptions, and actually question: Is this truly disrespectful? Is there really no love present? Am I actually objectifying?

Perhaps there's a holiness, a divinity, a sacredness here—whatever words we might choose—that becomes palpable and evident when we open our eyes and attune our gaze. Perhaps we need to notice it, to relax the gaze, because this isn't something we can force. We cannot gaze at an image or experience and demand a sense of sacredness appear.

I don't want to be heavy-handed with this approach. Remember: the poetry of perception, the art of perception. This is always an art.

And sometimes that's more a matter of being more open, more spacious, more receptive, more attuned, more subtle, more light. There's a time for heavy-handedness. There's a time for laser beam attention and all that. And there are other times where what we more is revealed in the art of perception through much softer and less pressured approaches.

But again, if we're talking about soul-making and we talked about the three different ways that, for instance, the sexuality and the sexual images and language in tantric Buddhism could be interpreted—as just a symbol, only symbolic, referring to spiritual realities, certainly not bodily or sexual ones. There's one interpretation. But if we're really interested in bringing the soul-making, allowing the soul-making to fill out, to

change and to open and to give dimensionality and beauty and divinity to our sense of sexuality and our experience of sex and sexuality, then we have to go beyond just this view that it's only symbolic. That sexuality can only have a symbolic function in the path, in spiritual teachings.

Can we—is it possible, and I think it really is—re-sanctify sex and sexuality, a whole relationship with something that has been deemed dirty and kind of low? Or that has just received a modicum of soulfulness in its relation to heartfulness—"I really love this person"—which is wonderful. But can we actually re-sanctify it?

As I said, that means not just the light, but also the dark. Not just the insubstantial, but also the dense. Not just the gentle, but also the ferocious. So that the whole range of possibilities becomes opened. We're not shrinking down, limiting the soul-making dynamic with regard to sexuality.

In that third possible interpretation of sexuality in Tantric Buddhism, it's only a vehicle. It just happens to be the most expedient vehicle for re-channeling the energy, body energies, so that the consciousness opens to emptiness or clear light, or so that you get a more intense bliss or ecstasy. That's all good and fine and possible and certainly valuable to explore. But in the way we're talking about all this, it's also a vehicle for soul-making. And that means the cosmopoiesis and the divinity is wrapped up with it, as we said, in this whole sense of participation. It's not only symbolic, and it's not only a vehicle for bliss or energy or emptiness.

So re-sanctification of sex and sexuality actually involves the imaginal. It involves the imaginal. This is what will open a multiplicity and multidimensionality of sacredness in the perception of anything, once the relationship with that thing becomes eros, imaginal.

As we alluded to before, what can easily happen is, instead of the relationship with sex and the conception of sex, and the view of it, and the way we regard it, instead of being soul-making—and the sex itself, and the whole way we conceive of it and relate to it—it can very easily become about the ego. And that's different than soul-making, isn't it? Because it's got this reification thing, and it's got this tight self-view thing. Ego's not a word I use a lot, but let's say that. Versus the dimensionality, the openness of our definition of soul-making.

I think I mentioned early on Michel Foucault and his history of sexuality. He did a lot of these studies where he called it archaeology—tracing movements, political movements, or certain discourses in modern Western societies and modern Western culture, and how certain discourses grew or took certain directions and certain institutions developed, and ways of thinking and political laws and all kinds of things.

One of the studies he did was in relation to sexuality. He also did something similar in relation to madness and other things as well. So he traces through the 19th century the upsurge, swelling in the kind of discourses on sexuality. It started then, and suddenly there's this burgeoning of discourses on sexuality. And particularly among these discourses, the focus on details of what was regarded as sexual perversions from the norm. So that suddenly started being fascinating for people—chronicling it and dividing it up and diagnosing it and all the rest of it.

He traces certain institutions that were part of that process and concentrated that process and crystallized it. One was the Catholic confessional. Of course, people go and —"Father, I've sinned." "What have you done?" "Well, I've masturbated," or whatever it is. And then also Freudian psychoanalysis, where there was an intense scrutinizing of sexual fantasy and sexual behavior, put in quite a rigid interpretive framework, as was, generally speaking, the Catholic confessional, and other institutions and discourses that emerged then, in that time, in the 19th century. I mean, the Catholic confessional goes back before, but there was perhaps a growth in that then.

Foucault was quite interested in power dynamics and what happens to the whole notion of the human subject. So he traced, in this archaeology, he traced the emergence of a series of discourses and practices that either were deliberately designed or intended, or inadvertently had the effect of making the subject of these discourses or these procedures or institutions more reliably and extensively responsible for itself.

I'm actually quoting someone called David West now, who wrote a book on certain philosophical streams in the 20th century and before in Western philosophy. But Foucault's quite interested in this—something was really not much of an issue.

Sexuality was promoted in this process from a relatively unimportant fact about bodies, like going to the toilet or digestion, to something decisive for an individual's sense of identity. That's really quite interesting to me. Sexuality promoted from being a relatively unimportant fact about bodies in Western culture of a certain time to being something decisive for an individual sense of identity. Again, not for everyone, but quite a lot.

So it becomes something quite loaded and quite central and intimately connected with the whole sense of self and identity. And wrapped up in that is this whole power dynamic, which Foucault was particularly interested in. So that, for instance, in the Catholic confessional or in Freudian psychoanalysis, you are now responsible for this. We're opening up this territory. You're talking about this experience. We're interpreting it a certain way.

In Freud's case, it's something very dangerous that civilization needed to keep a lid on, so to speak, and maybe let out enough steam so that the boiler doesn't blow. But generally speaking, the id and the instinct of sexuality needs to be repressed to a certain extent, or controlled at least to a certain extent. And again, in the Catholic confession, it has a certain interpretive view of sexuality, and so this is now getting the subject, this self or that self, to be, in West's words, more reliably and extensively responsible for itself.

So something that hadn't been so, this whole area that one needs to fret about and think about and control - it becomes now an area either to worry about, to feel guilty about, to obsess about, or, what's more common nowadays, central to my identity. So a lot of identity construction revolves around sexuality, sexual expression, sexual style, sexual manifestation, sexual experience, or lack of experience - sexual prowess, whatever it is.

I probably wouldn't make this too black and white. I'm sure these were all seeds that existed in Western culture anyway. But what's interesting is how they get amplified and drawn out and connected with the sense of identity.

This is related to something I've touched on a couple of times over the talks: our whole sense of self, our whole notion of self, and our whole actual sense of self - who I feel I am, who you feel you are, what we feel is involved in a self and important in a self - is actually enlarged in modernism or with the advent of modernism to include, in this case, a new delineation. Sexuality, what kind of sexuality, what's the sexual expression, what's the sexual style, what's the sexual domain of experience, and so on.

The larger point is that the self that we experience as so natural, and in many cases problematic, is actually a different kind of self-experience than, say, that the Buddha was addressing in the time that he was teaching in India - Pali Canon Buddhism. We now have a whole kind of complexity and range and landscape of psychic interiority that didn't really exist for people before these delineations were made, whether it was sexuality or this or that or whatever.

So the whole complexity and range - making these delineations makes the interiority more complex and more stretched, if you like. And then all this plays into questions about identity and our fretting about identity or our celebration of identity and all of that.

Now, I'm not actually judging this or even the rise of the importance of individualism and identity. I mean, it certainly has a shadow side and we don't need to rehearse that again and go over it. It's pretty obvious, especially if you've been exposed to any Dharma teachings. But go back to what we were talking about - making delineations near the beginning of this course. And Epictetus saying, "Everything's got two handles. Beware of the wrong one."

So when we make delineations, for instance, the whole fretting of identity can get hold of it in a way that's actually, like a double-edged sword, problematic. It can be problematic. There has been a proliferation, according to Foucault and even beyond his time, around sexuality and its relationship with identity, and it's become, as I said, something decisive for an individual's sense of identity. Not for everyone, and certain generations may be less so, but certainly beyond a certain date in Western society.

People may not talk about it so much, but that may also be wrapped up in reasons why we're not talking about it, and there might be someone not talking about it. Actually, there's still a kind of identity view around that. Not for everyone.

But this kind of proliferation of delineations and of the whole emergence into what it means for the self, and what a self is, and the interiority, and the complexity, and the identity there - it is a sort of double-edged sword. There's a growth there, which we could regard as papañca, or we could also regard it as exactly the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expanding in terms of making delineations, thinking about these things, having fantasies and images around all that, and even the eros in regard to sexuality - in other words, the erotic relationship with sexuality, in the meaning of the erotic imaginal, filling it out.

So it can be that, and it can be that for the individual, or it can be a snag for the ego - get too tight around this whole identity business and fretting and worrying and feeling constrained or whatever it is. So as always, in our way of thinking, I'd say the test is: is it soul-making? Is it soul-making? And if it's not, can I actually find a different relationship with it that opens it up as soul-making? Rather than it leading to neurosis or worry about the self and the identity and alienation, pressure to conform, pressure to perform, whatever it is. Or pressure to be interesting or unique or whatever. All this is the concrete, narrow, contracted...

self-view or ego, if we use that language. It's not soul-making. Can soul-making be the test here?

It doesn't need, or it shouldn't need saying, but it's actually important to say: there needs to be kindness with all this. How easily we can get either very self-judgmental with this, or down on ourselves, or worried about ourselves, or actually quite militant and rigid in our thinking. Again, it's just too much concretism, too much concretization, too much literalism, too much reification.

But really, in regard to all this and the possibilities in our relationship with sex and sexuality, we really need kindness in the exploration. So that's really important to say, to realize that.

CHAPTER 82

Refractions: Of Body, Sensuality, and Sexuality (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea examines the shadows cast by Buddhist insights and the importance of questioning our own tradition's blind spots. He warns against a "lazy Buddha Dharma" that dismisses the complexities of embodiment and sexuality as mere papañca (proliferation), arguing that soul-making requires engagement with delineation-making rather than spiritual bypassing.*
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> *Burbea presents a revolutionary understanding of the body through the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, showing how soul-making inevitably opens up our sense of embodiment. Drawing on phenomenological approaches, he explores the energy body across its full spectrum of perceived substantiality—from ethereal lightness to dense materiality. The body becomes both imaginal object and subject, a locus for diverse ways of knowing that extend beyond conventional sense perceptions.*
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> *Challenging Freud's notion of "polymorphous perversity," Burbea proposes instead a "polymorphously erotic soul-making" where the body reveals infinite facets and dimensions. He envisions the body as a "soul-scape" with its own intelligence, will, and desire—not merely a biological system but an endless source of discovery and creation through the soul-making process.*

To say in different words something I think I've said before, perhaps on a few different occasions: It's important, I feel, to question and to be mindful and to be on the lookout for our own shadow. As we proceed on our path, it's very easy to look at someone else's path, some other tradition, and see their shadow, their weak spots, their unexamined areas, their blind spots, places where they're out of balance. More relevant, more important, is to look at our own shadow and the shadows of our own tradition and our own trajectory and our own path-making.

I'm using the word shadow here probably in a slightly different way than you might have grown accustomed to it. I'm using it in the sense that any time we throw light on something, anytime any object or event or thing is illuminated by a light, by consciousness, by exploration—so anytime a light illuminates something—that thing, or that whole process of the light and the thing, casts a shadow. Any time we open something up to questioning, we illuminate it, bring consciousness to bear, look at it from different

perspectives. All this creates shadow. Shadow is not just the place rejected by trauma or something in the psyche. It's actually what happens any time consciousness brings itself to bear, so to speak, or is put in relationship with anything. Light and an object causes a shadow—if you think just about the physics of it.

In other words, insights illuminate, but they also cast a shadow—a shadow of insight. Each insight, each perspective that insight brings, or each insight that is a perspective, casts a particular shadow, or a shadow in a particular direction, has a way of shadowing in a corresponding direction to the insight. Imagine here's the light of insight shining from a particular direction on an object—a stone, a tree, an animal. There's then a shadow behind that stone, tree, animal in relationship to where the light is coming from. It's just how light and shadow works. It's similar with insight.

We can talk about the shadow of particular perspectives, or the shadows of particular insights. The whole Four Noble Truths is a kind of insight system, a perspective, a set of insights, if you like, and it casts a lot of light, a lot of illumination, but it has a shadow to it, or shadows to it, blind spots—things that by virtue of that very light that's shining from a certain direction are then cast into darkness.

The whole movement, or just the insight of not-self, no-self—fantastic insight, really liberating—will cast a particular kind of shadow in relationship to the self. Or the movement of renunciation. Or the whole movement to simplifying. It can be so helpful to simplify: just papañca, proliferation, let go. But this brings a certain blindness, a certain blind spot in a certain corresponding or corollary or opposite direction. What's the shadow of simplism? What's the shadow of the teachings of no-self? What's even the shadow of the Four Noble Truths?

This is important. I mean it in that sense, in a very wide sense. For me, wherever we are, whatever we're opening up, whatever we're exploring, however we're moving, there's this possibility of shadow, shadows, and there's an ongoing kind of exploration there. It won't ever end. We don't ever get to the end of shadow, so to speak. It's created by the very process of consciousness itself. So this is important to know and important to include in our ongoing journey.

In relation to what we just finished in the last part of the talk—elaborating on and describing this emergence of sexuality as a sort of area of delineation that then became interesting and became filled out and became complicated and added a new complexity to the self and the notion and the felt sense of self—and that whole movement, historical movement that Foucault was tracing and we were talking about in different ways, elaborating on and adding to what he said: we said this proliferation of delineation, this

increase in complexity, increase in the psychic interiority of the self and the whole sense of what the self is, that that proliferation is a double-edged sword. We have to be careful with that.

We can see that it is a movement of soul-making, a movement of this expansion, widening, deepening, complicating, enriching—the eros psychē logos, the dynamic of soul-making, and those three facets kind of do to each other or involve each other. It can also be a snag, a snare, a trap, a net of entanglement for ego. So it's a double-edged sword.

Now in terms of shadow, what I mean is that it may be easy to look at all this from what we could call the perspective of a kind of lazy Buddha-dharma, the response of a lazy Buddha-dharma. One could sit here and just in a very relaxed way, very almost lazy and sloppy, say: "Proliferation. You see, that's papañca, that's exactly the translation of papañca—proliferation. Sex, these things bring dukkha. They only bring dukkha. Let go."

Let go. Be simple. Let go of all this business about self. Let go of all these delineations. Let go of all this exploration of the complexities of sexuality and all that. Let go. Be simple. So shrug it off.

And basically there is this shrugging off and the seduction there of the simplism, the seduction of the promise of peace, but the seduction also of simplicity. And really the encouragement is not to engage. Don't engage with the process of soul-making and the complexities of soul-making, which will involve a rub, which will sometimes involve a rupturing of vessels, as we've said, the breaking of the vessels, which will involve friction and heat and confusion at times and expansion and stretching of the soul, of the vision, of the concept.

So one of the shadows of Buddha-Dharma—and it almost comes with the package of the Four Noble Truths, and what I was referring to as the medical model and this emphasis on peace and letting go—so it's a treasure, but it comes with a shadow. And part, especially nowadays, part of that shadow is this what I call simplism and the seduction of simplism and the kind of non-engagement.

What will happen if we adopt that approach, if we sit back in that kind of lazy posture there, what I'm calling a lazy Buddha-Dharma, then there will not be, there cannot be the soul-making with respect to self and individuality. And personhood and persona and these things that we've touched on in the past, self as a whole, direction, avenue, doorway, movement and manifestation of soul-making just cannot happen. Nor sex, nor sexuality.

Why? Because we've just gone back to the simplism and shrugging it off and calling it all just papañca, proliferation, and just self equals a bad word. Didn't the Buddha say there's no self?

And in that, one is not recognizing, if one adopts such a posture, one is not recognizing something we touched on right at the beginning of the retreat, and we spent a lot of time expanding, elaborating on that. The soul-making process, the soul-making dynamic, the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic, involves and works by—in part works by—making delineations.

Delineations become clear to the perception of the sensitive soul, of the sensibility that is refined through eros, through interest, through arousal, through contact and desiring more contact, emotional sensitivity, perceptual sensitivity, sensual sensitivity, mental sensitivities and delineations of the concepts.

We can call it papañca and proliferation, and yes, there's all kinds of dangers involved in it, as we're pointing out, but it is also intrinsic, for the most part, to the soul-making dynamic.

And even when one moves—I can't remember if I said this—but even when one moves towards the simplifying of less fabrication, states of oneness, jhāna, and moves on that trajectory of lessening fabrication towards the unfabricated, there is still a very subtle and important delineation making going on, according to what? According to the Four Noble Truths. Where's the suffering? Where's the release from suffering? What is involved in supporting suffering, in what we're calling clinging, and everything, all the subtlety of what's involved in clinging, and letting go of that, all these subtle delineations are involved in that particular movement of soul-making towards the unfabricated, towards the different levels of oneness.

But generally speaking, adopting that as a kind of lazy Buddha-Dharma posture or stance in response to all this and the complexity and the demands, really, of all that, what the soul is being called to, what the soul is calling us to in relationship with sexuality, in relationship with sexuality and body, and also in relationship with self, self-notion, self-construct, self-view, self-images—to adopt that lazy posture would be not to recognize the intrinsicness of delineation making, not to rise to that challenge, not to meet it, not to open it, not to be bothered, really.

So the soul-making dynamic involves delineation making of all kinds, and more subtle and more complex delineation making, not as some kind of sort of anally retentive accountant approach, categorization process and boxing everything into neat boxes and being too picky about that. But it includes that.

And the soul-making process will include and will affect the sense of self, the view of self, the idea, the concept of self. The sense of other, the view of other, the idea and the concept of other and of eros. So all this, it's included. We can shrug it off, try and be simple, decide not to engage, criticize it with certain Dharma by labeling it with Dharma concepts of papañca and self, defilement and all that. But the soul-making process will involve delineations and will include and affect how we view, sense and think of self, other and eros, which means sexuality as well, as a part of eros, as a dimension or a strand of eros.

You know, in recent years there's a growing movement of opening up and making more visible and opening up for discussion and questioning not just the possibility of sexual orientation and the definitions and what's allowable in terms of sexual orientation, but also in terms of gender definitions and delineations, and a kind of refusal to be limited by the sort of two possibilities given to us, male, female, that are handed to us, if you like, seemingly, obviously. So there's a possibility of being polygendered, if you like, or both, or neither, or something completely different.

This whole movement of opening those discourses up around sexual orientation, around gender, delineations and definitions, identities, opening it up, questioning, talking about, and refusing to be nailed into just two delineations there—I wonder whether that whole movement of opening that's happening more and more I think in recent years, if that could also be seen as a soul-making movement.

It's the movement of your *psyche-logos* doing exactly what it tends to do. And that can be an individual movement, of course, for the individual in relationship to those areas and those delineations. The soul making comes into contact with them and it doesn't fit. It wants more. The vessels need to be broken. And it can also be a cultural movement. Soul making can happen on a cultural level as well.

So I wonder if that's one way of seeing what's going on there, quite aside from all the political issues there. There could be really at heart there a soul-making movement.

In imaginal work, as I've mentioned before, when I remain open to the imaginal and allow the mundus imaginalis—the imaginal realm—to receive me and lead me without constraint, the whole restriction of gender simply doesn't apply. One may embody the gender typically associated with oneself, or the opposite gender—though even thinking in terms of "opposites" reduces the vast spectrum to merely a binary male-female possibility. One could be hermaphrodite, could be non-gendered, or might transcend even the constraints of biological and physical actualities.

The imaginal eroticism one witnesses or participates in may be heterosexual or homoerotic, may not involve human beings at all, or may involve partly human beings. As I've said before, one might be penetrating or penetrated in ways that don't correspond to biological actualities. The imaginal realm remains radically open in this way.

And as with all imaginal practice, one of the essential questions becomes: what wants to manifest in actual life, in lived experience, and how? Among all these imaginal possibilities, some may require no manifestation or expression in daily life whatsoever. Some need manifestation that isn't obviously related at first glance to the original image. Others call for more direct, recognizable forms of expression.

The eros-psyche-logos dynamic—the soul-making dynamic—as we mentioned almost from the beginning, will eventually open everything up. More precisely, it tends toward opening more and more of our experience, more and more facets of being. This represents its natural inclination because of how it fundamentally operates. Included in this opening is the body itself: what the body means to us, how it appears to us, how we feel and sense it, how we think about and conceive of it. This opening up of the body through the soul-making process becomes inevitable—it must be included.

This opening happens in very obvious ways and also in much less obvious ways. Already we've touched on some of this, and it forms part of what we're presenting and teaching here. Simply by beginning with what we call the phenomenological approach —attending to the actual experience of body—we discover what we term the energy body. Just by adopting this phenomenological stance and backing away from rigid ideation about what body is according to whatever dogma we've been indoctrinated with—whether modern secular materialism, scientific reductionism, or some religious worldview—just by giving a bit more space from these conceptual strangleholds, the sense of the energy body begins to become clear.

As we play with this perception through different ways of looking, experimenting within our phenomenological approach with various modes of attention, tuning in differently and bringing sensitivity and curiosity to this experience of the energy body, the very range of energy body experience starts to open. Already, through this basic, simple approach and exploration, there is an opening of what the body is to us and what our experience and idea of the body encompasses.

But at some point, wrapped up with this or in addition to it, the body can also become image. We realize there are imaginal dimensions to our perception of the body. This can happen both directly and indirectly. The body—our own body, a lover's body,

or someone else's body—can become the erotic object for us, included in their personhood or simply as body per se. The body becomes the erotically beloved other. In this way, the body gains imaginal dimension directly through erotic relationship.

Or something else serves as the erotic beloved, and there's a spilling over, an expansion of soul-making sensibilities that comes to include and involve the perception of the body, perhaps through cosmopoiesis. We realize, as we do with all perception, that imaginal threads and imaginal dimensions are woven through our perception of the world, of body, of everything. We can speak of imaginal body just as we speak of imaginal earth—the imaginal perception of body, the imaginal perception of earth.

But whether directly or indirectly, the body in the soul-making process—in being included, wrapped up in, drawn into, involved in this soul-making gestation, digestion, vortex, whirlwind—becomes more than it was yesterday, more than it was last year, more than it was to us before. The body becomes more, like everything else included in the soul-making process. It gains dimensionality, beauty, sacredness, multifacetedness, complication. The body becomes more.

It becomes alive in ways beyond what we typically consider in our usual, culturally given and sanctioned ways of thinking about and perceiving the body. Where we normally think of body as either alive or dead in an obviously biological sense, it becomes alive in other ways, becomes more. It's given dimensionality and multifacetedness that it didn't possess before.

This "moreness"—this gaining more, being given more, having more discovered within the body—happens in two ways I'd like to delineate. First, the body as object: the object of my sensing, my perception, my vision, touch, smell, taste, hearing. Also the object of my thought and of my imaginal perception. All of these are interconnected, of course. But the body as object becomes more, becomes more alive, is given dimensionality.

Second, the body as subject—meaning the body as a kind of place, a gathering place or locus for ways of knowing. Subject is what knows, as opposed to object, which is what is known.

Body as locus of ways of knowing. And those ways of knowing, again, they're more than I knew yesterday. They may be new to me as an individual. This body, and through the body, through the soul-making process, through the erotic imaginal ways of knowing, are open to me that opened to me in that process that I hadn't known before, that I wasn't familiar with before. All ways of knowing that are new to the culture.

So it might be that those ways of knowing were known to perhaps ancient cultures or certain indigenous cultures in this or that place in the world, but they might be new to this culture, or they might be new to all cultures. But again, because of the soul-making process, there is not this contraction of ways of knowing in some kind of dogma. Only this way of knowing and that way of knowing are legitimate. Everything else is a delusion, a projection, a fantasy in the bad sense, immature wish fulfillment, whatever, confusion and ignorance.

There is not that epistemicide and epistemic cleansing that we spoke of before. Rather, there is an opening of epistemic potential. The body becomes more as both object of sense, thought, image, and as locus of ways of knowing, potential ways of knowing.

We'll return to this. But already, previously on this course and on other courses, we've presented things and tried to open up the sense of the body and what the body is. For example, with the teachings on the energy body and our trying to stress and insist on an inclusion of the whole spectrum of perceived substantiality of the body.

In other words, if we talk about energy body, it can be extremely refined—almost like you could put your hand through the body, or it's just light, or sometimes even beyond that, it's just empty space—all the way down to really dense, solid perception of materiality. I'm saying all of that spectrum is included in what we're calling the energy body. Sometimes I regret the way I name things—I feel like I could have chosen better words, but anyway, it's there now. Including all of the spectrum, really getting familiarity with that whole range and everything in between.

Sometimes this encouragement to do that is a matter of kind of rebalancing where there's too much tendency one way or another. For instance, occasionally there are people who keep tending just towards the very sort of airy, more refined, less substantial sense of the body, and it would be good for them to dwell a bit more, have equal range and play in the more solid, more densely material, heavy sense of the body.

But for me, the encouragement to have that whole spectrum there is really not only for the sake of so-called psychological health or psychological balance. Yes, that's important sometimes, but really for me the more important thing is for the soul-making. Because the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic wants, in its natural inclination, to open in all directions and include everything that it can possibly come in contact with. It wants to have all that spectrum. It wants to inhabit and fill out and sacralize all that spectrum.

Part of what it wants and what it achieves by doing that, and for me part of the whole purpose of all this teaching, all this work, is to widen our senses of the sacred and, if you like, of the divine—if you're okay with that language—widen our senses of the sacred, so that the sacred is not just limited to the ethereal, the insubstantial, the white light. It's also right there. The divinity is right there, as we've touched on before, in the density, in the solidity, in the so-called darkness of matter.

We can look at different cultures, whether they're spiritual cultures or the wider culture, wider Western modernist culture, and ask: what's the typical sort of leaning here? In the wider culture, it's certainly towards density. Probably very few people in the wider culture have regular experience of a sort of light body or anything like that, and would probably get quite alarmed if suddenly they did have that—that's my guess.

Conversely, there might be certain traditions of spiritual teaching and practice where they emphasize much more the light body and almost put down the more dense experiences. But what I think we're interested in is both—both the dense ends and the more refined, more insubstantial, more ethereal ends. Everything in between is open to be filled with the erotic imaginal, seen through the erotic imaginal, filled with soul and soul-making and thus sacralized. And one is familiar with that whole range of experience.

We've talked about that in terms of opening up the body. We've also drawn attention to, again with the way we're talking about the energy body, that the felt sense of the space that the body is or occupies is larger, potentially, phenomenologically. It's actually larger than what is obvious to the visual eye or what is obviously physically measurable. In other words, the sense of the energy body can extend either a little bit beyond the visible, physically measurable physical body, or actually quite a bit.

But the space of the body is also something, or the perceived and conceived space of the body is also something that we have expanded in the way that we've been presenting these teachings. Soul-making tends to include and involve more of the body space. Soul-making, again, is part of the whole Eros-Psyche-Logos tendency of expansion, isn't it? But when there is a movement of soul-making, when there's soul-making in process, it will tend to expand, to include, to involve more of the body space, or the body space, the center of the body space, to have more area to it.

In fact, in our kind of definition of what imaginal practice or mindfulness of images involves, if you remember, it involves, by definition, attention to the whole energy body, mindfulness of the whole energy body. We're including that in what soul-making is,

what imaginal practice is, in the way that we're talking about it. And if it's not there, it's something that one can open towards or encourage or lean towards or support in order to give good ground to the soul-making process.

Actually, in connection with that, if we refer back to what we were talking about yesterday with regard to soul-making in sex, whether it's actual sex or imaginal sex—what that then means is that if we want to support sex that's soul-making, sex that's soulful in our sense of the word, then that soul-making needs for the attention not to contract to a small area. For example, the area of maximal pleasure, whether that's the genitals or whatever it is. Because of what we just said, soul-making tends to include more of the body space and expand that, at least to a certain extent.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 5/9). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

If we contract the area of attention—say just to the genitals or wherever there's maximal sensual pleasure, which would be a typical movement of the attention—that won't support soul-making. Rather, it needs us not to contract that awareness, or it's supported more by not contracting that, as well as, as we pointed out yesterday, not contracting into a kind of craving for pleasure or a craving for achieving the goal of orgasm or whatever it is.

If there's contraction in those ways, then soul-making won't be supported so much. This means, in other words, that the imaginal perceptions of the whole experience and the imaginal dimensions that are discoverable or revealed in the whole experience will be diminished—whether that's of the other, of the beloved other, of the sexual partner, of the imaginal other, of the self in that moment, and also of the eros and the sexuality itself. If there's contraction, either of the area of attention too much, or into a kind of goal-driven contraction, then the imaginal perception, the imaginal dimensions of other, self, and eros are diminished, contracted as well, limited, not supported.

But returning to what we're talking about mostly today, in terms of opening up the body and what we've already touched on—we've already alluded a little bit, I think, in different examples to the way that different organs of the body and different body parts can become ensouled. So, for example, the hands or the feet or the genitals or the intestines—they are ensouled in the sense of being given imaginal dimensions, given imaginal beauty, imaginal place. They are seen and felt and sensed to reflect, to echo, to mirror, to express not just the personal in the human level, but also the archetypal, the daimonic, the imaginal dimensions and the imaginal figures expressed in and through the organs or body parts, or the body parts expressing, being those things.

There are all kinds of possibilities here, and I actually can't remember now what examples we've given over the different retreats, but really so many possibilities. I think we talked about the possibility if you massage someone's feet when they're ill or an old person, and how those feet and those legs might take on whole other imaginal dimensions. For instance, they become Jesus' feet or connected somehow with Jesus' feet or something like that. That would be one example.

Another very common one—many of you will probably be familiar with this, I imagine—is just how sensitive the hands are. How easy it is, especially with practice with the energy body, to feel healing energy streaming from your hands or from the palms of your hands. How easy, or relatively easy, let's say, that is, or maybe relatively common practice.

We could say that's an energetic perception. Of course, it's also an imaginal perception. They're both mixed there. And it's a lovely, lovely thing to practice. Sometimes, sitting with someone who's suffering in one way or another—and they don't even have to know—one just turns the palm to them, and it's a way of radiating healing, perhaps as they're talking, perhaps as you're sitting silently, perhaps as you're talking. There's a whole other level of the interaction going on there that's bringing these imaginal dimensions and the blessings of healing and connecting bodies and all of that.

If you haven't played with that sort of thing, it's really a lovely possibility and I would encourage that. And of course it could be from anywhere in the body, the whole body or the heart center or whatever. So many possibilities here.

What about—we talked on the last retreat, I'm not sure how many people picked this up, it's part of what I was referring to as the problem of inertia that we sometimes have as human beings, as practitioners—but the possibility of actually moving in the meditation. Meditation doesn't have to be static. So either the physical body is moving, and it's visible to others if others are there, or the physical body is still, but the energy in the imaginal body is moving and one is really sensitive to the feeling of that. That might look like a kind of slow dance thing or it could look like anything. Or one adopts certain postures that may not be typical postures because something is being expressed through the energy body and through the imaginal body.

What would it be, for instance, to play with that kind of thing—a sensitivity to the whole energy body and feeling the whole body and really attuning to that and feeling the movement of the hands and sensing the movement of the hands as music? Again, there's a synesthesia that we referred to in the last retreat, in the retreat on the poetry of perception. Music is a sound thing, and hands just moving is a bodily, kinesthetic sense, and perhaps a visual sense as well. What is it for the hands moving that they're

somehow making music? Maybe they want to move and the hands do a slow dance or a fast dance or whatever it is. And it's music. And what is that music? Celestial music, divine music, the music of the deep body, the music of the earth, of the soil.

All kinds of possibilities here for this expansion of the body in terms of its parts and its organs. The expansion of our sense, our perception, our ideation of it. So the images of the body, the psyche with respect to the body, and the ideas of the body, the logos of the body, open up in all this, in the soul-making process.

But also the eros, the third of our little trinity there—also the eros of the body opens up. This might mean for some people that there is more eros and more libido flowing through the whole system. The system is open to more eros. We can see that as a divine influx. One is open more to the divine influx of eros. One can just see it as the, if you like, inevitable mechanics of the soul-making process. As we've said, as the eros stimulates and opens the psyche-logos, then there is more of the reciprocal stimulation of the eros, and so there is more eros. There's more attraction, there's more beauty, there's more divinity, there's more dimensionality, there's more yumminess, there's more sensitivity. All of that, and so there is more eros.

So the eros that's running through the psyche and through the body is opened up. And with that, the erotic sensibilities of the body are also opened.

So the images of the body, the ideas of the body, and also the eros of the body and the erotic sensibilities of the body—all this is opened. This is just one of the smallest examples of how this could happen, for it could unfold in countless ways. It's one of the ways the eros opens, if you like, and with that the perception of bodies opens.

I remember being at a course with one of my teachers, a monk in the States. It was a half meditation, half study retreat, and somehow we were discussing renunciation—perhaps exploring the Satipatthana Sutta. He was talking about the ways of contemplating the unattractiveness of the body as methods to let go of attachment. I think we were examining the passage from the Satipatthana Sutta on the unclean parts of the body. He explained how you could use that contemplation if you were bothered by sexual desire—contemplate the unclean parts of the body, and that would dampen your sexual fire.

Then someone in the group spoke up: "Oh yes, but I work as a nurse on the surgical team for transplants. When someone's waiting for a liver transplant and we get the call that someone has died in a road accident and they're a donor, and their liver is on its way in the ambulance—it's operation time. There's this anticipation for this liver to arrive, and it gets delivered in this blood bath. It's literally in a basin, soaked in blood because it needs to be preserved in blood. Something which, to most perception—in

terms of what you're describing—would be absolutely disgusting: a liver soaking in blood, a raw liver soaking in blood. But actually, it looks beautiful. There's real beauty in the scent of the miracle of it—this is going to save a life."

My teacher, being very skillful, acknowledged this perspective. He didn't use the language of "ways of looking," but I'm pretty sure that dependency was recognized. This was long ago, but the point about the dependency on the way of looking was clear.

We've given examples too of the erotic imaginal—this sense of feasting on the flesh, feasting on the organs, drinking the blood of the erotic beloved. In that sense, the erotic relationship with the body has gone far beyond this division of clean and unclean parts, beyond the yucky and the superficially pleasant. It's transcended what traditional teaching often presents: "It's all very nice on the surface, but if you really saw the inside, you wouldn't like it." The expansion of eros has moved way beyond that.

In this eros moving through perception, moving through the body, there's also an expansion in the ways it perceives the body as attractive and what that encompasses. As I mentioned when giving those examples, there's no danger here of actually becoming a cannibal or anything like that. We're speaking of something deeply respectful, beautiful, loving—strange as that might sound to some people—imbued with holiness, but a lustful holiness, a lusty holiness, an erotic, full-blooded erotic holiness with much more range to it. That's just one small example among many, many possibilities.

So in other words, yes, there's this traditional contemplation of the unclean parts, and usually we think it's all very nice on the surface, but you'd be pretty put off in terms of the eros you feel toward someone and their body if you could see inside. But the nurse was saying it's not that simple, and that was acknowledged. We're adding a whole other level to that understanding as well. There are so many possibilities here.

I'm aware of painting in quite broad brushstrokes the whole movement here, but there are indeed countless possibilities. Freud, at one point in his theorizing, said that the human infant is characterized by "polymorphous perversity"—a wonderfully evocative phrase. The human infant is polymorphously perverse. Part of what this means is that the whole body of the infant is erotically sensitive. The entire body is, if you like, an erogenous zone. The infant naturally will be inclined, perhaps at different stages, to seek to gratify its eros—in Freud's view, its desire for sense pleasure—through different parts of the body, the whole body, in all kinds of ways.

There is thus the necessity of training by parents or caregivers, and through that training and what Freud called the superego—the moral supervisor, if you like, in relationship with the ego—this dynamic leads to a kind of contracting or shrinking of that

polymorphous perversity, that unrestrained and all-inclusive eroticism. It's contracted through the training of upbringing and through the psychic structure of the superego, perhaps pushed down into the so-called unconscious. And also physically, there's a shrinking of the ways the body feels eros most easily, what's available in terms of how the eros moves in and through the body, where and how.

Now Freud—you can hear it in the very language he used: "polymorphous perversity." Perversity implies something bad, twisted, abnormal, negative, problematic. But Freud, in his view of human nature, regarded this contraction as really necessary. In his understanding, we are basically wild animals.

He was following on from Darwin and all that. We're basically wild animals with massive instinctual force that needs to be tamed, controlled by the strictures and structures of civilization and upbringing, and even the structures and dynamics of the psyche internally. So polymorphous perversity is part of the Freudian theoretical legacy.

But now we're saying soul-making will open everything. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic will open everything, including the body, including the eros, in all kinds of ways. So we might say that in its opening up of the body and of the eros and of the sexuality, what it supports and opens is a polymorphous erotic soul-making—a polymorphously erotic soul-making, and a polyvalently erotic soul-making.

Polymorphous may mean it can change and manifest this way, manifest that way. Polyvalently might mean it can be situated here or there—the eros, the arousal, the erotic connection—in all kinds of locations, physically and psychically.

Rather than polymorphous perversity—suggesting something is there intrinsically and then needs to get squashed down—we're suggesting quite the reverse. The soul-making process, the expansion, enrichment, complication of eros-psyche-logos, actually begins to open the erotic soul-making of the body and of the psyche, so that there is this polymorphously and polyvalently erotic soul-making.

This means that the whole sense of eros and the body as a location and a vessel and a point of contact of the eros—and an object and a subject of the eros—becomes multi-faceted and multidimensional and multi-delineated in different ways. In other words, the body presents, and the eros of the body grows new facets, grows new ways, things we hadn't even thought of before, things we hadn't even been sensitive to before.

Facets, dimensions, delineations—going back to what we said before, delineations get made. Because the eros-psyche-logos dynamic inevitably will include the body. It has to include the body at some point, and it will do it more and more. It's an increase

in the facets, a multi-facetedness, a multi-dimensionality, an increase in the delineation, a kind of poly-erotic, poly-directionality of the eros. An increase in the modes and the surfaces and the subjects of the eros within one body and the directions.

Again, I'm aware of painting in broad brushstrokes, but just to give you a sense of the principle involved here is the most important thing.

Now, if there's potentially—theoretically—no limit to the soul-making process, to the dynamic of eros-psyche-logos and the way that expands, deepens, widens, what that implies is there's no limit to the ways the sense of the body can open. If the body is included in the soul-making process and gets involved in that, then there's no limit to the ways the sense of the body can open, because there's no limit to soul-making.

This means that the images, perceptions, ideas, understandings, and experiences of the body—no limit to the way all that can open. But also, no limit to the way the sense of the body as a site for myriad and diverse ways of knowing, ways of perceiving—that's also potentially infinite in the ways that it can open. The body as a site for myriad and diverse ways of knowing and ways of perceiving.

We've touched on this—for instance, my friend saying she senses with her ovaries or her ovaries have intelligence or knowing, knowledge coming through the imaginal tongue. There are all kinds of possibilities here. And if it's potentially infinite—the way that the body can open up as a locus, as a site for myriad and diverse ways of knowing and perceiving—we can't know what the future holds, what ways of knowing might open up for me, for you, for humanity. Because it's infinite, because the soul-making process will make delineations that don't even occur to me right now, or you, or us. It will gather sensitivities, will open up visions and senses and knowings there.

No limit to the ways the sense of the body can open, potentially, because there's no limit to soul-making.

Included in that is a statement about the logos of the body—in other words, the conception we have of the body. So often we consider the body and the mind or the body and the soul as different things. But as the soul-making dynamic opens up more and more, what it does is open up different views, different potential views. Going right back to the beginning of what we were saying, what that eventually means is that there is this potential to move in and out of different views, to entertain different views.

So the statement that the body is not the soul, or the body has no soul, is just one view. It can enter into that, it can see that way, it can sense that way, it can think that way. Sure. But it's only one view. And there are other views.

If by soul we mean—going back again to the beginning and the kind of glossary we were doing—that which knows and senses soulfully, that which knows, sees and senses soulfully, well, does the body have that?

Or one goes to a purely material view—there is no soul, there's just matter, and if you connect things the right way chemically, you get consciousness and thought and such—and that's just another view.

With soul-making and with reflection and intelligence and understanding, we have the capacity to entertain different views. The range of views we can entertain, the range of concepts and conceptual frameworks we can entertain—this expands with soul-making, with the practice. We're not believing in one idea, a single or ultimate truth or reality. This is how things are. This is how the body is. This is what matter is.

So there's something here about the very idea, the very logos of body. But there's also something here about the body as logos, meaning the body as a structure or structures of knowing, and the expansion of that beyond just the five senses given to us by contemporary psychology. The Buddha had six, but there are systems that have seven or eight or nine, and sometimes I've heard up to twelve.

The body as logos, as a locus of structures of knowing, more than the ones we are given by current neurophysiological science. The body as a womb of epistemic structures, a womb of modes of knowing. As the soul-making process, as the eros-psyche-logos dynamic meets and subsumes matter, flesh, body, then there is this womb, this potential. The body becomes a kind of womb or an area of potentiality of epistemic structures, of possible modes of knowing. They can emerge, they can be born out of that. That's what the body is as subject.

With the whole imbuing or filling out of the sense of the body imaginally, the imaginal perception of the body, and that sensitivity and the beauty of that—the body, the sense of the body, the perception of the body can become greatly expanded in all kinds of ways, alive and multidimensional in all kinds of ways. This body can become a landscape, a soul-scape that is alive with its own intelligence, with its own will, with its own soul. Body as soul-scape that we can enter into. The multi-dimensionality of that. A very different way of perceiving and conceiving of body.

For some, that might be already the experience and already quite obvious. Body has its own intelligence. Again, I don't just mean how clever it is that the blood can transport immune factors to a site of a wound. I don't mean just a kind of metaphor of intelli-

gence for something that's actually quite blind and dumb—a process that's just evolved through the forces of blind natural evolution, survival of the fittest. I mean intelligence, different kinds of intelligence. And I mean soul, and I mean will and desire.

For some, that's already obvious and already part of the experience. For others, this might sound completely preposterous, and the possibility of actually being able to perceive such a body—the body that way, with one's own or someone else's—might seem very distant.

In a way, it doesn't matter either way. What matters really is: what's the next step for the soul-making? With the intelligence of the movement of soul-making, where does it want to go next? And is there a block there?

We can ask that for the individual. Where does the soul-making want to go next? What does it want to do if it's with the body right now? What's the next opening for that individual, for any individual, me or you or whoever? Do I need to stay with a certain opening for a while, get used to that, before something else starts pressing and insisting on opening? And what am I blocking? What's being blocked and how? Through the image, through the logos, whatever. The block of the eros.

We can ask it individually, but also culturally. What is the next step? What is the next step for the soul-making? Where does it want to move? What does it want to expand? What does it want to enrich, widen, deepen, complicate?

With regard to the body, then, the body becomes infinite. Or the body is infinite. But by that I don't mean spatially infinite, and neither do I mean the body is infinite in the sense of being interconnected with all things—the butterfly wings in China affecting the breeze, or breathing in the air that the Buddha breathed in his first sermon. I don't mean infinite in that sense, interconnected with all things. I don't mean spatially infinite. I don't mean there being infinite awareness or infinite love or whatever it is in essence that the body is.

I mean infinite more in the sense of endlessly revealing, endlessly opening up for discovery, for creation—creation-discovery—new facets, other facets, dimensions, aspects of body, and endlessly revealing as infinite in that sense.

So really, we're interested in what the body becomes, what it becomes through the soul-making process.

Also, of course, what the self becomes, what the other, what others become, what the sense of a human being becomes, what animals become, what plants, what the cosmos becomes through the soul-making process, and can become, what matter becomes, what divinity becomes through the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, what it becomes to us, to our experience, to our perception, to our conception.

And that's a different question than what it is. Being interested in what the body is presumes more of a realist notion—it is this. And I'm going to discover or prove to you or insist on my version of what it is. In terms of the energy body, you get different systems. There's these chakras, and they're placed here, and then another system, and some other tradition will say, "No, no, no, there's these many chakras, and they're placed here, and they're this color, not that color," and so forth. "Well, these are the channels that flow, the energy channels through the body, not those channels."

Or someone insisting on, again, the sort of scientific reductionist, classical scientific reductionist view of matter—this one-dimensionality—that's the reality. Or even what's quite popular in some more modern ways of thinking is kind of systems theory. The body as a system. So it's not reduced to a sort of basic element there, but it's a system. It's still a kind of limitation there, an insistence on reality and a kind of reductionism. Even as much as systems theorists protest that they're not reducing, there's still a kind of reduction to physicalism there.

But we're interested—I'm interested—in what the body becomes, what the body can become to us, just as I'm interested in what the self can become, what the other can become, what a human being, what animals, what the cosmos, what matter can become, what divinity can become, what nature can become.

Becoming—if we talk about the body, what it becomes as a felt field of experience, again, that whole range, what it can become as imaginal object and imaginal subject, what it becomes as object and subject, and what it can become as a locus, a field, a womb of ways of knowing. How can the body be experienced in perception as an object and as a subject in its epistemic potentials, with its epistemic potentials?

And again, for me the interest here is not even primarily—certainly not only, but not even primarily—for the sake of psychological health or balance, but the interest is in what does the soul-making want? What does the eros want? And to me that's interesting individually and culturally both.

And one of the movements there is a movement out of being restrained by a kind of duality between soul and body. So that there's, as I said, this opening of views to more plurality and more flexibility of views. So that one view is body and flesh has intelligence, intelligences, has desire, has eros, has soul, has will. And the sense of the body, the experience, the perception, the concept can be expanded. We can discover.

CHAPTER 83

Eros and the Brahmavihāras

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this dharma talk from the "Eros Unfettered" series, Rob Burbea carefully examines the connections and distinctions between eros and the brahmavihāras—mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (sympathetic joy), and upekkhā (equanimity). He clarifies that while mettā involves universal, unconditional love for all sentient beings, eros includes desire, attraction, delight, and love for the particular uniqueness of the beloved other.*
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> *Burbea explains how imaginal practice naturally involves erotic love between self and imaginal figures, which differs from simply using imagination in mettā practice. He explores how eros complexifies and adds dimensionality to perception (increasing fabrication), while the brahmavihāras tend toward simplification and oneness (decreasing fabrication). Both paths can lead to experiences of cosmic, divine love, but through different mechanisms and with different qualities of sacredness.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for combining erotic imaginal practice with brahmavihāra cultivation, showing how the energy and divinity arising from eros can be directed toward compassion for suffering beings. Burbea emphasizes that sexual energy and erotic images need not be distractions from loving-kindness practice, but can actually deepen and energize it when skillfully integrated. This integration serves the broader purpose of soul-making and expanding our senses of sacredness beyond traditional categories.*

Until quite recently, I tended in teaching to try as much as possible to avoid repeating myself—repeating things that I had said in other talks or teachings. This was partly a personality style in relation to creativity, perhaps, but partly also because I felt it didn't serve the teaching or the student. In the age of recordings, or with a book where you can always go back and read again to do your own repetition, I thought this approach made sense.

I also used to think that sometimes it's better not to spell out fully the obvious consequences of whatever teachings one is presenting. For example, in the book I wrote or in other series of teachings, I didn't fully spell out all the consequences, partly because I thought that if the listener or reader engages and inquires and questions into the material, that personal engagement would actually lead to them digesting, understanding, and assimilating the material better, having it available to them more fully.

But I'm really questioning all that in the last couple of years. I think there are a lot of assumptions there. Certainly in terms of people engaging, I think that happens in different ways. It takes a certain amount of confidence to question or even make one's own conclusions from certain things that are presented. So I'm questioning all this and revising it very much.

Why I'm saying this is because now, at the risk of repeating myself but for the sake of clarity, I'd like to take a little time and explore the relationship of eros and the brahmavihāras—loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. I want to explore these relationships, the differences there, and also point to the possibility of using eros and the erotic imaginal in the service of brahmavihāra cultivation and practice, or even in actual brahmavihāra practice with metta and compassion.

As I've already said, with imaginal practice there's a lot that's not immediately obvious. Once we hang out with it and get used to that terrain and that opening, that world, we start to notice certain qualities or aspects, characteristics of that world and the relationships there. One of the things we've pointed out that's noticeable—maybe immediately, maybe very obviously, maybe really much less obviously, something that dawns on us slowly or gradually or only in time—is the presence of love.

Within the imaginal, in the imaginal space, there is love. Maybe obvious at first, maybe much less obvious. There is love from ourselves to the imaginal figure. We love imaginal figures. Sometimes this is really not obvious at all, but it's there in one way or another, in one form or quality of love or another. The range of kinds of qualities or presentations or flavors of love is enormously variable.

There's love from self to the imaginal figure, and there's also love from the imaginal figure to self. Everything we just said applies: it may be really obvious, it may be not obvious at all. It comes in a whole wide range of flavors, colors, expressions. But what we're talking about here is erotic love, because eros and the imaginal go together. So we're talking about erotic love in the imaginal, in the imaginal world between imaginal figures and ourselves.

Eros has a lot of aspects in common with metta, but it's also more than metta. There's more to it. It's different, and this is what I want to really make sure we're clear about.

Most people, perhaps, when they practice metta—loving-kindness or compassion—use their imagination to some extent. At least you have some kind of sense of the person to whom you're giving metta. Maybe you use white light, or maybe you see them

smiling, or you just sense their being in the imagination without a visual image there. The use of imagination in metta is great, really valid and okay, and for most people it's very helpful in whatever ways that works.

But that per se, the use of the imagination in metta, is not the erotic imaginal. Imagination doesn't equate as imaginal, and metta doesn't equate as eros.

We also gave the example of what we were calling in the last retreat an imaginal figure of love, and using them actually in different ways—one for the sake of cultivating the metta and the other for the sake of the whole movement into the erotic imaginal. We talked about, for instance, grandma or the lap of the Buddha.

I made the distinction that if grandma is not an erotic object for me—not necessarily a sexual object, but an erotic object in terms of meaning that she is full of dimensionality, my interest is aroused, there's more to her, I want to know her and contact her, she has these dimensions to her being that I want to enter and open to—if that is not there, then grandma may be a really valuable metta-figure, a figure for the cultivation of metta, an imagination figure, but she's not imaginal, and that's certainly not erotic there. There's no eros.

This is really valuable, certainly okay, very helpful, but erotic imaginal is something different than just the use of the imagination for the sake of metta, or this figure that may express metta to us but is not full of eros either way, from us to her or from her to us.

But there are similarities and overlaps between eros and the brahmavihāras. Certainly there are. As I think I said right near the beginning of this course, care, to me, is a part of eros. When there's an erotic relationship, there is care there.

And I was using love in that sense as care, care for the other's being. So to me, that's actually part of eros.

There are other similarities, for example, between eros and the brahmaviharas. Equanimity is something you may know that we can talk about in two ways. The Buddha kind of implicitly made this distinction between equanimity towards beings and equanimity towards phenomena.

So there's equanimity towards beings. Here it's related to compassion practice. We care for their suffering. We try and do what we can to alleviate the suffering of some being. But we also realize that in a way they need to take responsibility. There's a limit to how much I can do sometimes. There's a limit in complicated relationships, complicated situations and circumstances to what I can do to alleviate their suffering. Recogniz-

ing those limits and recognizing that they may need to take responsibility in some way is a part of what supports the equanimity towards beings in the context of compassion towards beings. And actually, sometimes another person's suffering is really up to us, and we can step in there and do something, extend ourselves.

But as well as equanimity towards beings, the Buddha talked about equanimity in a way that what he's really referring to is equanimity towards phenomena, pleasant or unpleasant phenomena. There's a kind of evenness, not getting so aversive to the unpleasant and rejecting it and trying to get rid of it, caught up in that kind of knee-jerk reaction. And so not craving and contracted around seeking out the pleasant or seeking to hold on to the pleasant, fear of losing it. So there's a kind of equanimity and evenness, an impartiality, if you like, towards phenomena - pleasant, unpleasant, beautiful, ugly.

So it's possible to practice equanimity, to have equanimity in relation to beings and in relationship to phenomena. And the same is true of eros. Everything we've talked about on this retreat - there's eros certainly towards a human other, but there's eros towards anything that can be alive for us as an erotic object, if it fulfills the criteria that we've delineated. The relationship with anything. It could be this lamp in front of me, it could be this talk, the ideas, it could be you as the listeners, it could be an imaginal figure, it could be a tree, anything. It could be a heartache, that there's an erotic relationship with my heartache. It's different than just a metta relationship with my heartache. And the heartache has dimensions, has divinity, has meaningfulness, has purpose. It comes alive in that way through the erotic relationship.

But like equanimity, eros can also be towards beings and towards phenomena - actual beings, physical beings, imaginal beings, and phenomena, actual phenomena and imaginal phenomena.

And maybe some of you will know this, some of you are less aware of it, but this is also true of metta and compassion, loving-kindness and compassion. Most of us understand those or have been exposed to those as teachings of what we can practice, qualities we can cultivate in relation to beings, to sentient beings. But I think really beautiful practice and very powerful in terms of the insights that it can liberate - not just the healing and opening that it can bring experientially, but also the insights into dependent origination - the practices of loving-kindness and compassion towards phenomena, directing love towards dharmas. This is less commonly practiced and much less commonly understood in terms of its implications for understanding emptiness and dependent origination.

But anyway, there are lots of similarities and overlaps between eros and the brahmaviharas. But what about the differentiations between them? Can we get clearer about differentiating between eros and the brahmaviharas?

So eros, we have said, has desire in it. It has this wanting, wanting to connect, wanting to connect more, wanting to contact, wanting to know, to penetrate, to enter, to open to. In that sense, it has attraction, it has desire and attraction in it. It also has delight as part of it. It's accompanied by delight, or delight is part of the whole experience of eros, we have said.

So desire, attraction, delight. Also with eros, the perception of beauty is an integral feature, an inevitable feature of eros. The perception of beauty and also, I would say, of meaningfulness. This erotic other, this beloved other, whether it's an object or a person or whatever, a being, is somehow meaningful to my soul. And the eros itself is also meaningful. But that is because eros goes with the imaginal. All these qualities are part of that.

So desire, attraction, delight, beauty, meaningfulness. In contrast, metta, for example - attraction is not part of metta. Metta does not involve a desire to connect more with, to know more, to penetrate, to open to.

Let's be really clear here. Metta may support a realization of interconnectedness, that we are already interconnected. There is already an interconnection, actually on lots of different levels, of being between me and this person I'm offering metta to, directing compassion to. So metta may support and open the realization of an interconnectedness that already exists. And similarly, a realization of interconnectedness supports metta. To the degree that we realize the depth of our interconnectedness, to that degree is metta made easier and supported. The practice of metta towards this person is made easier and supported by the degree and the depth to which I realize and the fullness to which I realize our interconnectedness.

But that's different - realizing interconnectedness that's already, so to speak, an existential fact, if you like, is different than a desire to connect more. It's different than that. You understand?

And again, in contrast, metta may support, give rise to, and increase our perception of the beauty of the other. If you've done much metta practice, you'll know this. Here's that person - they're just kind of neutral, I don't think much of them, or I actually find them aversive in some way, even ugly or repulsive. I don't like them. But as you practice

metta, you start to see in different ways - all kinds of different ways - some beauty there. There might be some delight in their being, in their presence, certainly in the practice of metta itself.

So metta may support an increase in the perception of beauty and delight, but the perception of beauty and the experience of delight in the other - delighting in how they are - these are not essential to metta. Almost by definition, because that would make metta conditional. In metta, the whole point is that it's unconditional. I don't need to find you beautiful. I don't need to perceive you as beautiful. I don't need to delight in your being and presence. It might arise from metta practice, but the whole point of the unconditionality of metta - that's the goal, the ideal of metta - is that these are not essential, not necessary to metta: the perception of beauty of the other and the delight in the other.

This contrast is quite important to be really clear about and draw out.

We have been saying that eros includes something like what we might call personal love - in other words, love for the particulars of this being, of this person or thing. Love for the uniqueness and through the uniqueness. And that's different, again, than metta.

Again, metta is just - you love them. Why do you love them? Just because they're a sentient being. It's not about loving their particulars. It's not love for the particulars. It's for the universals, in a way. Sentient beings suffer. We share suffering. Even if I don't share exactly the same kind of suffering that you do, there's something in common with suffering, with mortality, with fragility, illness, vulnerability, emotional vulnerability.

The compassion runs through those strands of universality. Just because you're a sentient being, just because I'm a sentient being - whereas the eros is for, in and through the particulars and the uniqueness.

This is noticeable with images in the imaginal realm. Sometimes it's immediately noticeable, and sometimes we need to perhaps spend longer dwelling with sensitivity, with openness, with receptivity and a kind of fine-tuning or attunement of our attention, of our being, in the imaginal realm with an imaginal figure, to realize: ah yes, there's more than metta here. There is this personal love, or love for, in, and through the particulars and the uniqueness.

In that story of the retreatant who had this beautiful relationship with the trees and the forest - loved them, was in love with them and their particulars and their uniqueness - at first felt there was discrepancy, an inequality: "I'm just loved because I'm one of Gaia's children," a kind of universality there. But then, actually hanging out with the image until realizing: oh, oh yes, there's something else here.

It might feel like something has shifted in the image. I actually think it's there from the beginning in the imaginal and we need to notice it.

What I want to say is we need that kind of love as well as we need metta. We need this personal love. We need to love particulars and uniquenesses. And we need our particulars, our personhoods, our particular personhoods, our unique personhoods, our particularities and uniquenesses loved. We need to feel that.

Why? Because we have - as I've pointed out before - we just have, we experience, we sense, we viscerally feel ourselves to be a different kind of self. We have a modernist self now. The whole self-experience is different. It's more complex. It is more individual. There is more complexity to individuality nowadays - more particularities, more edges, more contradictions.

This is something that modernism... Actually, I was talking to Catherine the other day, pointing out that it started with St. Augustine, perhaps, and then through centuries actually changed Christianity. The relationship with Jesus was part of what gave rise to more of the sense of individuality in the modern self.

But anyway, at this point, in our culture, we have a certain very complex, very multifaceted sense of self of which uniqueness of that self and the personhood and the uniquenesses in that self and the particularities are absolutely essential dimensions. We can't just erase them and get rid of them.

And someone might say, yes, but that's a construct. And I say, yes, of course it's a construct. But it's also our experience, our visceral gut experience. Not all the time, because there are different practices, different ways of looking that move in and out of that and turn it up and turn it down. Bring out the contrast, fade them through less fabrication. But it is an experience that we will keep coming back to. And we will keep being confronted by it because we've grown up with it, but also because it's in our society.

And anyway, if a person says that's a construct, that kind of self is a construct, say yes, but everything is a construct. Show me something that's not a construct. Show me something that's not fabricated. As we've explored, if you point to bare attention or the moment-to-moment process of aggregates, I would just say, look deeper. More practice. More practice with the ways of looking that show that that, too, is a fabrication. That, too, can fade. How it gets fabricated is just a level of fabrication.

And thirdly, we could see, from everything we've been saying, what we've explored in this retreat, we could see that modernist construction of self as indeed a construction, but a construction emerging individually and culturally from the very process of

the soul-making dynamic, from the stretching of the eros-psyche-logos. A new kind of self is created or discovered, or if you like, the self is expanded, complicated, enriched, widened, deepened, given dimensionality.

The modernist self may be, or one way of seeing it, is actually as a result of an individual and cultural process of soul-making. And now, that modernist self is inviting a further level of soul-making through all this, through the love that it's asking, the erotic love that it's asking for, asking us to open to this dimension, not shut it out, and open to what personhood can be and can mean and divinity of it and all that. It's inviting and asking for more soul-making.

But we cannot erase or ignore this self that we feel. You certainly can't erase it permanently. That can go quiet to different degrees, beyond the personality, and then much deeper than that even. But we can't live in a way that erases that self or ignores it. And to try to do that, or to think that one has to, would be poverty's mistakes, and they would make us poor rather than richer and fuller and freer. They're actually strangely kind of constraints. And to try and ignore it, to try and do that, would just betray actually a lack of full insight, I believe.

So there's this, what we're calling love for in through the particulars, the uniquenesses. And what would it be to dwell in that, to open to it? Both our love for the imaginal figure in their particularities and their uniqueness, or the uniqueness and particularities that are, so to speak, part of them, and also their personal love for us and our particularities and our uniqueness. To sit in that, to dwell in it, to abide in it, to feel it, soak in it, absorb it, take it in, either from the gaze of the imaginal other or from some other communication which may or may not be verbal, it may be tactile, it may be sexual, it may be from life streaming—all kinds of possibilities—but to open to and dwell in and open to receive the imaginal figure's love for you.

Is that possible? So much healing is available there. To feel loved, to be loved, to know one's love, to recognize that one is loved in all kinds of ways, in our particularities, and with all the sense of dimensionality to that love, to that figure—in other words, to the origin of the love. Because the imaginal figure in that case is the source of that love. And to feel like that source itself is multilevel, multidimensional, multiaspected. And also in ourself, what receives it within us is multidimensional as well, or it's received at different dimensions of our being, put it that way.

And again, as I said before, this can be difficult, this kind of opening to the loving gaze of the other, whether it's a human other or an imaginal other can be difficult. Oftentimes, teaching mettā practice is interesting because you just see for so many people, it's often harder to receive mettā and compassion, to receive love than to give it. Often-

times that's—and perhaps in the Buddhist time, you would have found that very, very strange. Certainly, I know the Dalai Lama was very surprised when he came to the West first and saw that. For a lot of people, certainly not for everyone, absolutely not for everyone, but it's often harder to receive love than to give it.

And we talked before how even we can have in all this a very ambivalent relationship, a very charged relationship with being seen. Something in us yearns and longs to be seen, to be naked, to be gathered in another one's gaze, to be transparent, not hidden. And also, this can be very, very difficult, very charged, very hard to tolerate sometimes for some people, this being seen. So they end up with a—one ends up with a very ambivalent relationship, something we yearn for and fear or run away from or back off from or close ourselves off from, turn away from. Or it might just be, it might be the whole of ourselves, it might be just places within ourselves, parts of us.

I find that there are parts of ourselves where being seen places us right on the edge of ambivalence. Pain can be wrapped up in this dynamic, shame that causes this ambivalence. We're ashamed to show some part of ourselves. We believe we're unworthy, or we shouldn't be a certain way, or whatever story we carry. And grief, too, can be wrapped up in this difficulty with being seen.

This pattern is relatively common for us in the modern West. It perhaps exists in other cultures as well, though I'm less familiar with those contexts. When this ambivalence is present, we face the question: what order should we follow with these kinds of practices? How should we pace ourselves?

Am I going to acknowledge this real ambivalence, or will I force myself into surrendering to the gaze of this loving other—whether it's an imaginal figure with their erotic gaze or simply their loving presence? There isn't a formula for this. Not everyone needs to proceed in the same order. One approach won't always be easier than another, and there's no prescribed pace that works universally.

As always with these kinds of practices—with practice in general—we need sensitivity, the ability to feel what's right. This changes constantly. We must remain fluidly responsive to the whole unfolding of our practice. But in time, with this responsiveness, perhaps with the help of teachers, loved ones, and friends, practicing alone and together, there can be an increasing capacity to expose ourselves to the erotic gaze, to the love of the imaginal figure or other, and to dwell there.

When we first explored this territory, I mentioned the possibility that if there is this ambivalence—if there's even an inability to give metta to ourselves in traditional loving-kindness practice—there might be an imaginal figure we can approach. We can bring this very difficulty to them and simply observe: What do they say? What do they do? How do they respond?

There's an autonomy here that imaginal figures sometimes possess, an autonomy that can truly surprise us. The way they express love, their desire to love us, their wish to communicate something—this can be startling in its authenticity. The word "angel" means messenger, communicator. The angels that come to us in the imaginal realm, the figures we open to there, they want to love us and they want to communicate something. They possess this sometimes surprising autonomy, a kind of intelligence that we couldn't have engineered or predicted.

Here's something that might seem to come out of left field, but there's love there anyway. Their love exists regardless. It's not something we have to earn or achieve. It's ongoing, whether we try to avoid it, turn our attention away from it, or resist it entirely. At one level, this love simply is.

We can and hopefully do learn about love through our human relationships. We can take care of and work at those relationships that matter to us, learning how to love and how to be loved, how to receive love. We discover what love is and what it involves through our commitment to staying present, working through difficulties, and hanging in there with the challenges that arise in our human connections.

But we also learn about love through, with, and from our imaginal figures—the beings of the imaginal realm that come to us. We can discover profound truths about love through our relationships with these figures.

Yet with all this exploration, remembering the distinctions we made earlier, eros involves more than metta. Whether flowing from us toward the other—the imaginal object or the actual other—or from the other toward ourselves, eros encompasses dimensions beyond loving-kindness alone.

Sometimes we can be overly simplistic in how we understand the Dharma, in what we take from it and what we neglect to explore, flesh out, and bring alive in our lives. Very easily, we think there is just metta, loving-kindness, with its far and near enemies as traditionally taught. We learn that metta's far enemy is ill-will, and its near enemy is attachment. These become our categories, our complete map. But the territory of love is far vaster than this framework suggests.

And it's got to fit somewhere in there. So if you say, "Well, yeah, I really love my partner or my lover," and I say, "Well, okay, it's metta, definitely metta, plus some attachment"—and yeah, okay, it's just attachment. But actually, is that what's going on? I mean, not to say there isn't attachment there. There may well be. There often is in the complexity of human relations, of course there is. But there are also other delineations that we can draw out that this doesn't really capture, does it? Metta and attachment—that's the mixture of my love here, the love that flows between us.

So again, we can be a little—I don't know what the word is—lazy, sloppy, simplistic, oversimplifying, a little too quick to close the case. But this is not to imply that eros is always better, or we should always strive for an erotic relationship. That's not to imply that at all. There's absolutely a place for metta and the simplicity and the simplifying that it brings and involves, and for its universality and for its unconditionality. Absolutely necessary. And that's why the Buddha placed such emphasis on it. I don't know how common that was in the teachings of his time to actually put so much emphasis on the brahmaviharas, but so important and skillful to really know those practices and develop them. I can't say how much treasure there is in that.

So I'm not saying eros involves more than metta, therefore it's always better, therefore always try and do that. I'm not saying that at all. There's really a place and a necessity for metta, compassion, and the brahmaviharas—their simplicity, their universality, their unconditionality. But there are differences.

In fact, related to just these factors that we just talked about—simplicity, universality, and unconditionality—in relationship with another, whether... and actually that other could be an imaginary other, an actual other, or the self, in relationship with the self, or in relationship with a phenomenon, the practice of metta, for example, or compassion, or equanimity, leads to, progressively, as you do it more, its direction is towards fabricating that other less, fabricating the perception of the other less.

Again, whether it's self, giving metta to self, whether it's giving metta or directing metta or compassion towards phenomena or equanimity, or equanimity towards phenomena, or towards another, the brahmaviharas actually tend towards a decrease of the fabrication of the perception of the other—of certainly the object to whom one is directing the metta or compassion or equanimity or whatever, but then eventually to all things. They simplify the perception of the other as part of that movement. And also, because self-other-world always arise as constellations, as we said, they will also simplify the sense of self. So the simplification is part of the movement of less fabrication.

And the perceptions of oneness that come out of that—self and other are really one, one luminous heart essence of love or whatever the perception is—the perceptions of oneness, as we've said several times on this retreat, are also, if you like, station points on the spectrum of lessening fabrication of the perception of the other and self that happens through the brahmavihara practice. You understand?

So the brahmavihara practice—they decrease, as you get deeper into them, they decrease the fabrication of the perception of other and also self. Part of that is the simplification of the perception of other and self, and partly also world, and partly the perceptions of oneness, the sense of oneness that happen there. It's all wrapped up in the movement of lessening fabrication.

In contrast, eros actually fabricates more. It doesn't simplify. It adds complexity to the object, to the beloved other. It becomes multifaceted, multidimensional, as we've said, this beloved other, whatever it is, whoever they are. And they may even increase in the images they sort of express. So one person for me might sort of hold a whole range of images and might manifest to me with different imaginal faces. The movement of eros is an increase in complexity, a complexifying, a complicating, as we said, and an increase in the fabrication of other.

Yes? Eros can go towards melting and union, so to speak, with the other. And we've talked about that in practice, and you've probably experienced that by now. But it will seek, after a sort of dip into that union, it will seek to kind of reinstate the sense of twoness, the erotic polarity, the erotic dyad there. There will be a return to that, because of the fertility of that and the necessity of that to the eros. Even when we know the oneness, it's like the knowing of the oneness would just be something that's sort of in the background, part of just the mix of what is known in the erotic twoness, in the erotic coupling, in the erotic tension of twoness there in the dyad.

What ensues from that particular difference—the difference in the movement towards less and towards more fabrication, if you like—what ensues is a difference in also the perceptions, the openings, the experiences of sacredness and divinity that come out of these two directions of practice.

Why is that important relative to the brahmaviharas? Because—and again, you'll know this if you've done a lot of dedicated brahmavihara practice, especially metta and compassion—but if you did that, say, cultivated metta and compassion, let's say on a retreat for some weeks or at home, you know, whatever, then there would be a point, and I think this is an inevitable point, unless something's kind of getting in the way, there

will be a point, maybe quite fast, but usually quite gradually, where the metta or the compassion begins to feel like I'm not doing it. Actually, I sense it everywhere. I sense it in the air.

I sense it in the space. I sense that metta or compassion is woven into the fabric of the cosmos itself. There is metta and compassion filling this space, the space of the universe.

When I begin to feel that, I can let the cosmic metta, the cosmic compassion that pervades everywhere, do the work. Often people having this kind of experience—opening to it—apart from the relief and beauty and how deeply it touches, find it brings also a sense of divinity. They will often start speaking in theistic language, even if they've had no inclination to do that before.

As I said, it begins to feel like it's not me doing the practice—I'm not cranking this wheel of metta and compassion. I'm not holding the other person's suffering, if that's what I'm trying to do within compassion practice. I'm not having to respond. It's almost like it's already there, a little bit effortless. It's like the cosmos is doing it. The divine is doing it. Buddha nature is just doing it. All I'm doing is opening to letting that happen as it's already happening and recognizing it. All I'm really doing is opening and tuning my attention to that, tuning into that wavelength of perception.

Because it doesn't feel at that point like the self is doing it—the self is responsible, the self is having to work at this compassion, I'm responsible for this compassion, I'm the one holding the suffering—this brings huge relief. There's this sense of "Oh, wow, phew."

With all that, equanimity comes in. The vastness gives rise to an automatic sense of effortless compassion and love, and the holding equanimity and steadiness that are shot through the cosmos allows the self to be much more equanimous in relationship to the suffering we're touching in compassion practice. Correspondingly, with all that, there's an increase in our capacity to face suffering, to open to suffering. We don't have to run away. The heart—in some respects we could say literally—gets bigger. It's no longer my personal heart; it's the universal heart. It's the universal compassion, the divine compassion that the heart is opening to.

Our capacity to meet suffering, to face it, to hold it—although it doesn't feel so much that we are holding it—is vastly expanded when we're in touch with that sense. Because it's not me that has to do it. It's not little old me that has to somehow hold this

enormous suffering you might be going through, or that's in the world, or that we see on the news, or that the planet is facing. Something much vaster, more powerful is holding it. We don't have to create and work at it; all we have to do is recognize.

Now that kind of divine or cosmic, cosmically infused love and compassion could be just from normal, standard loving-kindness and compassion practice, or it could be coming from the erotic imaginal—even the sexual imaginal. We can know both these possibilities.

That sense of cosmic, divine love and equanimity that imbues loving-kindness and compassion can come from more standard Brahmavihara practices—loving-kindness and compassion without any of the imaginal, certainly without any erotic imaginal, and certainly not with any sexual, erotic imaginal. That's very possible, and I've just described that—a very normal thing I would expect for people doing the Brahmavihara practices in the standard way.

But we can also know it through and with the erotic imaginal, and as I said, even the sexual, erotic imaginal. We can explore both, know both are possible, and explore the differences.

What's part of the differences? Well, they both give rise to this divinity. They both sacralize. They give rise to and spread a sense of sacredness.

Eros does it because of the eros psyche logos dynamic we've talked about—giving a sense of dimensionality and beyondness to, at first, the erotic beloved, the other. That's part of what will happen with the eros psyche logos dynamic as it gets going, if it's not inhibited, if it's not blocked. In the sense of dimensionality, in that sense of beyondness and mystery and beauty, there will at some point be some kind of sense of the divine or the mystical.

I'm going to come back to these words because they're actually hard to define, and rightly so. But the mystical is, you could say, partly just—when does something become mystical? When it's beyond whatever is agreed to be the normal, agreed-on perception of what something is. Obviously there are lots of caveats with that definition, but because of the eros psyche logos dynamic—the opening up of dimensions, the perception of dimensions, the perception of the sense of beyond, of mystery, of beauty, the logos then expanding the idea of what that thing is, what that other is, and all the soul-making involved—there is an inevitable sacralizing that comes with it through eros, because of the soul-making dynamic that it instigates, ignites, inseminates.

Metta and the Brahmaviharas also sacralize, but they sacralize through this decrease in fabrication, this lessening of fabrication of perception that they support or unlock. Because of that, there's a kind of limited direction of the sacralizing. It's always going to be in the direction of less fabricating, and that follows a kind of spectrum.

Perhaps you could say there are infinite gradations on that spectrum, although it certainly seems in my experience that there are typical or common stations along the way—stopping points, plateaus along the spectrum of lessening fabrication. But there's a limited direction. It will always have something about oneness in it, some kind of oneness, and to greater or lesser degrees and different kinds of oneness, always then some sense of universality, often some sense of luminosity as well. But universality and oneness will be characteristic of this narrowing of the direction of sacralizing.

Whereas with Eros, when Eros and the sense of love and cosmopoetic divinity come out, there are infinite possible directions of sacralizing because the Eros picks up on and amplifies, ramifies the personal, the particular, the characteristic, unique qualities there. It multiplies or spreads them through the soul-making dynamic, perhaps in cosmopoiesis, to discover and create them—discover/create/discover/create—everywhere throughout the cosmos. So it's infinite in the sense that there's not a limited number of possibilities of the flavors that can have and the characteristics that can have. It doesn't just move along this narrow line deepening into oneness and less fabrication. Certainly there's depth there, but it's much wider in the sense of the number of possibilities being infinite.

So what I would like to open, apart from getting clear conceptually—because I think it is helpful—is also the possibility of practice. If you feel enough trust in practicing with Eros and the imaginal and the erotic-imaginal, you may want to explore this combination, this navigation, this mixing of the Eros with the Brahmavihāras, if and when you feel enough trust in the practice of the erotic-imaginal. And again, I'm really including the sexual erotic-imaginal as well.

Though it might also be that doing this kind of practice and seeing how the erotic-imaginal, even the sexual erotic-imaginal, can support the Brahmavihāras greatly adds to your trust in the practice of the erotic-imaginal.

So one possibility is working with imaginal practice, getting a sense of the Eros involved there in the practice with this imaginal figure and all the beauty of that and the multi-directionality and multi-dimensionality of that. And then when that's there—and sometimes that can be very quick if you're familiar with it, and sometimes it takes time to get used to all those different aspects and qualities and linger in it and feel the beauty there, but actually it can be very quick—then one can navigate either straight

into a mettā and compassion practice and just let the image go. But more interesting for us is actually to direct it, including still the erotic-imaginal and the Eros and the sense of the Eros and even the image, and directing, navigating, steering in a way that includes the erotic, the Eros, and the erotic-imaginal while opening to the mettā and compassion. So it's a kind of fusion, a mixture.

For example, one can be working with the Eros in the imaginal practice, and then introduce a person that you know is suffering. Of course, it could be your own suffering, but for instance, introduce a third person. So there's the self and the beloved other, the object of the Eros, and then a third person. And you know that they're suffering, and you just introduce that into the constellation. Maybe it has to constellate spatially a certain way—you can be really creative here.

And what's possible, as I said, is the erotic divinity, the sense of the divine love that's coming out of, being supported by, emerging from the erotic image, can actually be what then spills over and meets the suffering and the suffering person. So it can become like water spilling over, like a tide coming in, or light can radiate, or all kinds of possibilities. Actually, all kinds of possibilities. You can be very creative here for the way that the divine love that is emanating or being expressed through the erotic image extends and carries over to include and to meet and encompass and address the suffering other and their suffering. All kinds of possibilities. Again, we can be really surprised here. The imaginer has a dimension of creativity which is not our own. And we can also be more deliberate and bring our own steering—do it this way or that way, more deliberate, more intentional navigation.

When I first started exploring this nexus, this meeting point of Eros and the Brahmavihāras in practice, this was really interesting to me. Because typically we would assume that Eros, in the way that we usually think about it, is associated with craving, and it's kind of self-interested. What can I get for me? I'm interested in my pleasure. I want to keep this erotic object for me. I want to hoard the pleasure for myself, or my whole being and my orientation is contracted around the Eros, contracted around the other, and around the self. And one sees that, actually, that's not the case. Interesting.

Again, because Eros tends to open, open up in all dimensions, in the energy body and so forth as we've talked about before, this was much more possible than I had anticipated. I mean, I thought actually that it would work, but it was really much easier than I anticipated.

Also, what was easier was the fact that we can actually hold two very different images simultaneously. So there's this image of the beloved other and whatever Eros is happening inside, communicating, flowing between us in that image, or maybe not

even between us—it could be a couple, an imaginal couple that we are witnessing outside of ourselves. But then we can have a third image of this suffering person. So there's the erotic other, and there's the suffering person. And this possibility to hold a kind of network of images, certainly more than one image or two images at the same time.

And also that because we tend to think, especially with mettā, of it being something very tender and gentle and soft, and that's the direction of the mettā practice as it evolves—

This transformation unfolds with surprising ease—the dharmic possibility becoming accessible through what reveals itself as a natural capacity to hold multiple images simultaneously. There emerges the erotic beloved, the flowing eros between or through us, perhaps witnessed as imaginal couples existing beyond our immediate experience. Alongside this, a third image: the suffering being, whether within ourselves or another. This network of simultaneous images expands our contemplative range beyond the typical constraints of single-pointed practice.

The discovery challenges our usual assumptions about metta's trajectory. We expect loving-kindness to evolve toward increasing subtlety, gentleness, and steadiness—less tempestuous, less tearful when compassionate, moving toward reduced fabrication with greater equanimity. This movement represents the natural progression toward less constructed states of being.

Yet what emerges as particularly striking is how the complete spectrum of erotic expression translates directly into the brahmaviharas without dilution or domestication. The carnal and voracious eros, those demonically divine images that carry such power, lends itself remarkably to compassion without requiring transformation into something merely tender, sweet, or desexualized. Similarly, the most subtle eros—perhaps just the gentle holding of hands, or even subtler intimacies of pure non-physical connection—translates with equal authenticity into the qualities of divine abiding.

Fierce eroticism might give birth to protector deity consciousness, manifesting love and compassion with that same fierce quality. Even the seemingly transgressive images of consuming or feasting upon the beloved's flesh and bones can transfer directly to the suffering other, where this apparent devouring expresses profound compassion. The strangeness dissolves when we recognize that in the imaginal realm, such fierce intimacy can embody the deepest care.

Catherine once witnessed this principle embodied in Sarnath, where a wounded dog —throat somehow cut—was surrounded by other dogs who licked the wound continuously until it healed completely over several days. This tender persistence, this healing

through devoted attention, mirrors how erotic licking in imaginal practice can transform into the gentle ministration to suffering hearts. The dogs' instinctive compassion reveals something essential about how intimacy and healing interweave.

The translation between erotic image and brahmaviharic expression takes many forms. Sometimes the action itself transfers directly—the licking becomes tender care. Sometimes light emanates from the body parts or actions central to the erotic image, carrying both erotic quality and compassion toward the suffering being. Sometimes a particular emotional quality—devotion, for instance—becomes amplified and spread, washing through the suffering person with that characteristic devotion now expressed as compassionate care.

The possibilities are truly infinite. Light may beam directly to the suffering person or suffuse in all directions. The transfer might occur through qualities rather than actions, through emanations rather than direct contact. Each practitioner discovers their own pathways of connection.

What surprises many practitioners is the natural arising of bliss—not merely sexual pleasure, but authentic pīti, sukha, and samādhi. These jhānic factors emerge from the erotic imaginal whether practiced alone or combined with the brahmaviharas. This challenges our assumptions about what constitutes spiritual versus worldly experience.

Perhaps most remarkably, a natural, effortless equanimity accompanies this practice, particularly when working with suffering beings. Anyone engaged in sustained compassion practice quickly recognizes the necessity of equanimity when opening the heart to worldly pain. The cosmopoetic dimension—the recognition that divinity or deeper sources operate through these practices rather than the small self performing them—naturally generates this supporting equanimity.

These possibilities deserve our attention and, when readiness arises, our experimental exploration. They invite play and discovery within the sacred space of practice.

One might ask: why complicate what already works? Why not simply practice metta and compassion in their established forms? The traditional approaches certainly need not be replaced—they remain foundational and complete.

It may be that for some people at certain times, because there's so much libido involved, so much energy available when Eros is alive in us, this gives a whole other level of energy to loving-kindness or compassion or mudita practice when it's allowed to infuse those brahmavihara practices. There's an immediately available depth of energy that becomes possible when we can join them and make the navigation work.

But I also want you to know that sexual images, sexual energy, eros—none of this has to be a distraction. If one is intent on brahmavihara practice and it feels like the eros is coming in, the sexual desire is coming in, the sexual energy and images are arising, and this seems like a distraction from metta practice or whatever it is—actually, it doesn't need to be regarded as a distraction. You can include it in very creative ways that actually give a whole other depth and texture and range of possibilities to the brahmavihara practice. So just to know that's possible.

But for me, it's something in just knowing that it's possible that's opening up our views and our understandings and our conceptual framework and our exploration. And this, to me, is really important, really, really important.

It's not that doing this is just for the sake of the brahmaviharas, because then you might ask, well, why not just cultivate them without the erotic imagination? It's more complicated, you've got more to learn, and so on. Fair enough. If my goal is simply the cultivation of the brahmaviharas, if that's the sole purpose of my practice, then certainly this might seem unnecessary.

But in this wider understanding of what practice is, where we're going, what the possibilities are, what I want involved and integrated into my sense of practice and life, integrated into my understanding—if it's more than just the cultivation of the brahmaviharas, then this integrating and including and experimenting with eros and the imaginal and the ways they may interface and contribute to and flow into and open up directions and possibilities with the brahmaviharas becomes a necessity. There's a point beyond just the opening up of the brahmaviharas. Soul-making.

For me, what's so important is the opening, the increasing, the adding to our sense of sacredness—our senses, plural, of sacredness. The pluralizing of our senses of sacredness. The giving of depth, breadth, and range to the senses of sacredness, the experience of sacredness, the experiences of sacredness, the expansion of all that. To me, that's one of the main reasons for all of this and all these teachings.

So I offer this as an opening, as a possibility, as something you may want to practice with and experiment with, and also as an avenue for further investigation. You can find out things here for yourself. You can add to the research, if we borrow that fantasy. All kinds of things are possible.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 84

Opening The Dharma of Desire (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h08

> *In this foundational talk from the Eros Unfettered retreat, Rob Burbea presents a revolutionary approach to working with desire that differs from traditional Buddhist methods. Rather than viewing desire as a kilesa (defilement) to be overcome, he offers a three-step practice: first, asking 'what am I really wanting here?' to unhook from obvious objects and discover deeper desires; second, clearing away Dharma preconceptions and entertaining trust in desire's intelligence; and third, fully opening to the energetic current of that deeper desire in the energy body.*
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> *Through detailed examples including a woman's long-distance romance and his own impatience with learning, Burbea demonstrates how this practice can transform dukkha into abundance and fulfillment. The talk explores how what we typically call craving may result from not connecting to deeper desires, suggesting that desire contains a treasure when approached with proper understanding. This practice differs from imaginal work by focusing on the energy and general qualities of desire rather than retaining specific images, yet both approaches share common ground in trusting the deeper intelligence of eros and working skillfully with the energy body.*

Let's continue our inquiry into desire, the whole realm of desire and desires, and expand our explorations regarding desire—our skills, our capacities, our insights in this area. I'd like to offer a different approach, a different way of working with desire than we've elaborated so far, and tie that together with some of the previous things we've been discussing while making some other observations about desire and our relationship to it.

This different approach I mentioned briefly in the past, in the talk "Beauty of Desire Part 2" from 2011. You can find it if you're interested in more details and examples. But I want to offer it again here.

What happened for me was this: I was meditating in my room at Gaia House and felt moved to try something different in my meditation. Through this approach—which I'll explain—I discovered something that was certainly new for me, something quite surprising that I'd not heard anyone else mention or describe or point to, something that had very surprising implications outside the box of what was, up to then, my understanding of Dharma, and any other understanding I'd heard of Dharma at the time.

I can't actually remember what was troubling me. I know it was something to do with Gaia House politics—I only remember that because it's in my notes. I didn't write down what it was. In the course of time, exactly what was upsetting me in the political situation at Gaia House behind the scenes has completely faded and is of much less interest to me than the actual insights that came and the possibilities for practice that emerged and felt like they were discovered.

So something was going on and I was troubled, agitated, and a little upset by something to do with Gaia House politics. I was sitting in meditation, being with this situation and my feelings. For some reason, I found a different way of approaching it, and I asked myself: What do I really want here? Is there a desire for something? And if there is, what does that desire really want?

I can't remember whether it was obvious to me that there was wanting and desire in the first place, or maybe I just assumed that because there was dukkha. But anyway, I asked this question: What do I really want here? What does this desire really want? I let that question reverberate in the being.

The answer that came was: freedom from constraint.

I understood that answer. It had meaningfulness for me, even though it might sound quite abstract. In its very abstraction—this is something I'm going to come back to—it was very meaningful for me. Freedom from constraint. This really was what the being, the psyche, desired.

So I felt into that desire for freedom from constraint and really allowed it, felt its movement within me. More than just within the psyche—within the whole energy body, actually. The energy body reflects the psyche, reflects the citta. They're completely intimately connected, as we've discussed before.

But not just allow it, accept that it's there. I mean really open fully to the energetic current of that deep desire for freedom from constraint. Really allow it. Really feel the movement of that current of desire, really open the whole energy body, the whole body, even bigger than the physical body—open fully, as fully as possible, to that energetic current or stream or movement of desire through the being, through the energy body.

When I did that, it felt like the quality that I was wanting—this freedom from constraint—was actually already available. It was, so to speak, made available or discovered to be already available through this way of approaching it. So I had, right there, the very thing that I most deeply wanted: this sense of freedom from constraint, this knowing of freedom from constraint.

And it came not from turning away from the desire, but actually going deeper into it and allowing it more fully, opening to it more fully. It wasn't a putting down, it wasn't a letting go, it wasn't a recognition that desires are delusions or anything like that—quite the opposite.

Out of this discovery, which really struck me very strongly—I thought, "Oh, that's really interesting"—so very enjoyable as an experience, but the insight there was really striking. This is not what should be happening according to conventional understanding. I haven't seen this before. I haven't heard this before.

This was condensable, filterable down to a set of basically simple practice instructions. When one notices that there's dukkha—whether one notices that there is a desire obviously there or not—in other words, sometimes we're experiencing dukkha, we're experiencing dissatisfaction, and it's clear: "I really want this, I need this," or whatever it is. It's clear that...

the desire is present within the dukkha and wrapped up in the dukkha. And sometimes we have dukkha, and it's actually not obvious that there's a desire there at first. So it doesn't matter either way.

When there is dukkha, whether desire is present obviously or not, the first step is to ask yourself: What am I really wanting here? What am I really wanting?

This question involves unhooking the desire from its most immediately obvious object—from the thing that captures our attention. I want that person, I want a relationship with that person, I want this event to happen, I want that object. This is the immediately obvious object of desire. And in a way, this question—what am I really wanting here, what does the desire really want more deeply—is asking us to unhook from that immediately obvious object that it tends to get stuck on, contracted around, infatuated with, and let the desire reveal what its deeper essence is, what its deeper purpose is, what is more deeply wanted.

This will often be, in fact it will always be, more general, more of a generality. It might even seem, if you're hearing this, more abstract. Notice too that it involves an unhooking from the image.

So we're on a slightly different tack now—a different way of working, a different approach to the deeper desire. In my case, like freedom from constraint. It wasn't that I wanted this or that to happen politically, or someone to say this or that. In the example I gave, it was freedom from constraint. It sounds more general, more abstract. It's the deeper desire there.

The answer to the question "what do I really want" was not so much coming from the mind, but it's like dropping that question into the being, to the whole citta, the whole psyche, the heart and the soul and the mind.

So first step: What am I really wanting? What is really more deeply wanted by this desire? What is the deeper desire?

Second step: clear away, clear off the table, sweep clear the table of any dharma preconceptions that one has regarding desire. Desire is a kilesa, it's a defilement, it's an impurity, it leads to dukkha, it is self, it brings self, it's craving and that's problematic—all this stuff that we're used to, familiar with, that's really important as perspectives and approaches. But just for this approach right now, clear it. Just clear the table clean of any preconceptions.

And in that open space, more open from preconceptions, just introduce—is it possible to play with, just a little bit, some kind of trust of the deeper intelligence of the soul, or of the desire? Just playing with the idea, the possibility, that this movement of desire that looks problematic, may even look petty, certainly looks like it's causing dukkha or wrapped up in the dukkha—just play with the idea that actually there's something to trust here.

There's a treasure deep down there in the desire. It manifests in its movement a certain intelligence of soul, like phototropism—the movement of sunflowers turning towards the light, turning towards the sun, and other plants as well. You know how plants and trees grow towards the light. Maybe the desire deep down—certainly it gets twisted, certainly we get into a wrong relationship with it—but maybe deep down there's something akin to phototropism there, a kind of intelligence of the soul.

But at any rate, let's just trust it and see if there's not a treasure here that, if it's not actually already there—if that's too much as an idea to trust—actually trust that the way of relating to desire can turn it into a treasure. That's an easier step in terms of trust.

So the second step: clear away preconceptions, introduce some degree of trusting this movement of desire.

Those first two steps are actually reversible. The asking "what am I really wanting, what does this desire really want," unhooking from the obvious object—that's the first step. The second step, clearing away preconceptions, introducing a little bit of trust, entertaining some trust of the desire—you could flip them. Even when I don't yet know what the deeper desire is, I could just introduce the entertaining of the idea that there

is a way of paying attention to desire that turns it into a treasure, or there's something buried deep in desire already that is a treasure that can be discovered. The order doesn't matter.

There are those first two steps. Then the third step in this three-step process would be to really feel that desire and really allow it. It's almost like you can feel it in the whole being and especially in the energy body and feel it—perhaps it's a current, a movement, a stream, a surge.

Perhaps it's really strong. Perhaps it's quite subtle. But really feel it. Really, really allow it and really open to that energy, that stream, that current, that movement. Really opening the space of the energy body and allowing that to flow. That's the third step.

So let's give some examples to flesh that out a little bit, that process, that practice. These examples are actually repeats from that talk I mentioned, The Beauty of Desire, where there are more examples as well. Part of the reason for repeating them is because after I discovered this practice, I became very interested in it and started trying it out with this hunch that I had about how it would work. I began experimenting with it on yogis in distress during interviews, with friends, colleagues, and with myself in different situations.

This was part of what I'm tying in now to the researcher fantasy—this whole exploration actually grew and emerged alongside that fantasy, though to be honest, it had been there on and off as an available fantasy for quite a while for me. But it emerged with this discovery, and then I rode with that expanding researcher fantasy as part of the whole investigation that fed into everything. So I was conducting research, if you like, on myself and with others, trying this process out when people were going through different difficulties.

I experimented with it for perhaps a couple of months, quite intensively. And I estimate that it was successful in the ways I expected about 95% of the time. It became so predictable—exactly what would happen, how it would open things up in this particular way. There are nuances I may come to later, but basically it would open up, relieve the dukkha, and reveal the abundance of what one was desiring. The dukkha would release, and there would be a transformation of the experience of the body, the energy body, the consciousness, and the psyche as a different state would open up.

This became so predictable that I actually stopped pursuing it so intensively in my research and stopped taking notes on what I observed with myself and with people. The one time I remember it not working was with a friend who, as we were doing it, was slouched on a sofa. I hadn't suggested—partly because it was a friend—that she sit

up so the energy could flow more easily. Apart from that instance, I'm pretty sure it worked every time. So I became convinced and stopped taking detailed notes, which is why I don't remember many examples now, as I moved on to using the researcher fantasy to explore other areas.

So these are old examples. Excuse me for repeating them. They're actually good examples because they reveal different facets of the process and the assumptions involved.

One involved a woman student who was not on retreat but had met a man in another country and was engaged in a long-distance romance. He was very far away, and this was a new romance for her with lots of texting and messaging back and forth. She came in for an interview that she requested and said, "I'm craving." She had done considerable dharma practice, and we had worked extensively in the past with vedanā—watching craving, stationing awareness on craving, noticing different vedanā, and learning not to get caught up in craving. We had done quite a lot of that practice, and she was very interested in equanimity. That had been her leaning and interest for quite a long time in practice.

She said, "I'm craving, and I feel that craving is a contraction of the being. It's painful. There's also fear that I might lose this budding romance—it might fall apart. I fear that..." She was planning to visit him to see what would happen. "I fear that it won't work out, and then there'll be the loss and the pain, and this is all dukkha." So amidst the loveliness, she was also getting into a reasonably difficult state with the whole situation.

She was aware that craving involves hype. We had talked about this before—how it involves constructing artificial differences and amplifying the differences between things and times, so they seem really different. That over there becomes so much more preferable than this over here. Here and now becomes less than, not so interesting, not so desirable. It's really markedly different from that over there. The papañca that comes in amplifies that process. The word papañca is actually connected etymologically with the word "amplify"—it implies expanding, amplifying.

She was already somewhat aware of this, but we talked about how it was operating in this case, because she said, "The adventure begins then." In other words, when her plane arrives in that country to see what happens with this man—"The adventure begins then," she said.

Now I'm just kind of in limbo. I'm just waiting.

We examined this and saw how much of a construction it was, because there was actually lots of lovely electronic exchange happening in the present moment. But the papañca comes in and the kilesa comes in and denigrates the here and now while raising up the there and then. Really inquiring into this - is it actually that different without the mind making it so? Without this process that craving tends to ignite, this papañchizing process that increases differences, which then feeds back to cause more craving in that whole saṃsāra cycle?

We talked about a way of looking that worked against the papañca. I suggested she recognize that she has six sense objects here and five aggregates here, and when she arrives in that foreign country to see him, there will be six sense objects and five aggregates. Is it really that different, or is it the mind painting things, making them seem different in a way that's actually not helpful?

This is fairly standard Dharma teaching. We went into deconstructing the hype so that craving could release, and as craving releases, the hype gets deconstructed - a mutually reinforcing process. This approach was helpful, and we explored it thoroughly in our long interview.

But then I introduced another, less standard approach. I asked her simply, "What are you wanting?"

Her reply was immediate and certain: "Him." Very simple. Him. It seemed obvious to her - I want him. She looked at me as if I were asking the most elementary question imaginable.

You can see how difficult it sometimes is to look beyond the most obvious object that desire seems to be presenting. I want him. But I encouraged her to explore this more deeply. What's actually involved in that desire?

When I asked again, creating more spaciousness to open up the inquiry, she said, "I love that I can say anything with him and I'm listened to." Even this was more general - an expansion from the specific person to a quality of relationship.

We went deeper still, exploring what lay beneath even that desire. She identified four components of this deeper longing: "I want the opening of the heart. I want the expression. I want the connection of being received. And I want to love."

Can you hear how these are relatively general, more abstract sounding? Certainly more universal than "I want him." At this level, the desire is no longer hooked on or contracted around a limited object. What it wants is actually a more open object, a deeper-level object. It's not really even an object in the usual sense of the word.

Feeling into this deeper current, she recognized it as quite powerful and profound - not how she usually experienced herself or, in her words, how she usually took herself to be. I encouraged her to let this feeling fill her body, to really allow it and feel it, emphasizing the importance of opening the body to this current if possible.

As she did this, with my support, something remarkable happened. She reported that her self-boundaries - the sense of the edges of herself - began to dissolve, and an expansion started happening throughout her whole being.

Now, she had done some practice, but not much at what I would call the deeper levels. So this expansion of her entire sense of being, with boundaries dissolving, was quite frightening for her. Some resistance and contraction kicked in naturally.

I reassured her: "We don't need to force anything. Let's just respect the fear here. What are you afraid of?"

What's the fear that's causing this resistance and contraction? Is it fear? Yes. What is it? Is it losing yourself? Is it disappearing? Is it just the unfamiliarity? No.

At that point we ran out of time in the session and I had another meeting or something. But we talked about the need for compassion for the self that's resistant and fearful to that opening and that new experience. The compassion, introducing the compassion and not forcing over a threshold into new territory of being and experience. The compassion for the self that feels fearful, that is resistant, that is a little bit contracted there, or trying to keep contracted, can really help.

It's possible to play one's edges with new experiences. But eventually—and whether it happens immediately or relatively quickly, or really quite at a gentle pace, slowly over some time—these kinds of expansions of being, and I'm mentioning it because it's actually quite a characteristic experience of working with this practice that I'm elaborating on right now, not always, but often. Eventually, we're able to allow that kind of expansion.

We can feel in that a whole new sense of life force, libido, connected with the desire, a whole new sense of self that goes with that, a whole new sense of strength, openness, independence—being independent of this or that thing happening, event happening, getting this or that object. One sees this abundance and opening and independence and strength and beauty that comes. All that treasure that kind of comes up to the surface and is made available is strangely not seen to be dependent on the object of desire being there, as I said, on having it.

We are fulfilled to a huge extent, to a surprising extent. I mean, almost always there was a surprise involved here for people. Fulfilled to an extent more than what we are used to feeling in our lives. We're not used to feeling that extent of abundance and fulfillment and openness and treasure and brightness. But we're fulfilled not by getting this or that object, and not even by trying to renounce or ignore or "let go" of the desire, but actually through the very flow of the deep desire. We're going, as I said, deeper into it and really respecting and really opening to it. The libido, the life force is opening the being there through the desire.

Then we may wonder: is it actually possible that craving, which as we've been saying has this kind of contraction to it, feels painful—in this case, this woman, there will be the swings to the fear of loss, of rejection, involves this repeatedly moving away from the present moment to daydreaming and being lost in the future and that kind of poor fantasizing—is it possible that that kind of craving, in that sense, the contraction of craving, is actually a result of not connecting to, not allowing, not realizing, recognizing, and not allowing the deeper desires to unfold, to be felt, and for those currents to flow?

You understand? What we call craving is a matter of not connecting to, not realizing, not allowing the deeper desires to unfold and to flow. Similarly with eros, it goes to craving when it doesn't have the imaginal dimension, when something is blocked in terms of psyche and logos. Here is a slightly different approach that we're talking about, and it will move to contraction of craving when there is not this deep respect for the desire, connecting to it, recognizing it, feeling it, and really allowing it.

This funneling into craving and the contraction of craving and the pain and all the kind of craziness that goes with that may just also be a habit of the being. In other words, we are trained away from the erotic imaginal and away from the deeper levels of desire, as we talk about in this other approach.

One wonders, what is going on here? Why does it take one course habitually into the contraction of craving and not others? Is it that actually there's a result of not allowing something else—not either in the context of the erotic imaginal direction, not allowing the psyche and the logos to expand, not allowing the imaginal dimensions to flower? In the context of this kind of practice, not allowing the deeper levels of desire and that movement of the being there—the contact with it, the allowing it, the opening to it, the respect for it.

Another example I could give is actually also from myself, partly because it's a different kind. This goes back a few years when I was interested in—still am actually very much—what a study of modern physics could bring to a Dharma understanding and

the ways it could open up certain parallels with emptiness, but also the implications there for ontology, cosmology, and more and more now, actually, epistemology as well, studying the philosophy of science.

But this is back then, as I said, these are old examples, and I was studying a lot about modern physics. In the heat of the eros there, of the desire, I felt something which I recognized was familiar to me and my kind of personality structure or constellation. It was a kind of impatience to understand and a pressure to understand. So I was hungry to understand. I was studying a lot.

Really the sense was, well, you read something, but that just takes you to the next thing to read, the next book. One book leads to another, and you kind of follow these leads. The feeling of impatience and pressure was coming in, sort of in the background, but then a little bit pushing on the whole psyche. It felt like I was unable to read these books fast enough. There was something, a sense of, I wanted to arrive at the sort of end of the whole process. Now I understand. Now there's no more books to read. Phew, done.

So I recognized this pressure, actually just as dukkha, didn't see that there was a desire in it, then recognized the desire that was pressuring there, and felt it, as I said, with these instructions I've outlined, and going to the deeper question, what is it wanting, this desire?

This example is a little bit interesting because the desire at first blush seemed to say, I want to end this process of inquiry. I want to understand everything so I don't have all this kind of continuous more books to read sort of thing, because one thing leads to another and one understanding leads to another, or one line of inquiry opens another one.

When I went more into it, actually, what was deeper and more fundamental was that it was a desire for inquiry itself. It was this desire to question, to make discoveries, to explore. In this case, discovery for myself by absorbing what others had discovered and making connections with what I was doing in my own practice.

This question—what is it wanting—actually opened this sense of joy in the ongoing inquiry. So the desire changes tack in the inquiry. Or we could say that it opened to a realization of how much of a desire for inquiry was ongoing. The change in tack is that ongoingness becomes beautiful and becomes the thing that's wanted.

And there was tremendous joy liberated with that—the joy of ongoing inquiry, ongoing questioning, ongoing discovery. So this whole pressure that was felt and the sense that "it needs to end" was liberated through asking the question and opening to it. There was a whole beautiful and energizing opening that happened in the energy body, in the whole citta, in the whole psyche really, of this joy of discovery.

Let me state again those three steps. So there are two examples, three steps. First—and I may clear away... let's reverse that, because the first two steps are reversible, so we'll put them in the other order this time.

First, one clears away whatever dharma preconceptions make one dismiss desire, or denigrate it, or be suspicious of it. "It's a kilesa, it's only coming from self, or it feeds the self, or it causes selfing, or it is selfing, or it's craving, it just brings dukkha," all that. Just clear away, even just momentarily, even just as an experiment, just temporarily—without needing to clear them away forever or saying there's no insight involved in them, that's absolutely not true. Just temporarily clear them away and see if you can introduce, just temporarily, a kind of playing with or entertaining of a trust, a trusting of a deeper intelligence to the movement of desire. That there is, either in the way that I relate to it, or already there at bedrock, if you like, a treasure waiting to be discovered in the movement of desire.

And then this question, second step: what am I really wanting? What is this desire really wanting? What is the desire really for? Unhooking or ungripping, if you like—letting the desire ungrip from its immediate, obvious image of what I want, or this person or that object or that event, whatever it is to be this way or that way. And let it find or reveal to you what's the deeper thing wanted, the deeper level, if you like, of the desire, which will probably sound more general.

And then really feeling that in the psyche, in the body, and allowing it, especially in the energy body—really opening, really opening the space for that current, that energy, that movement there.

Now, I was going to report some more findings regarding the actual experiences and the states that seem to tend to open up when one does this kind of practice and bring a bit more specificity and nuance to that. But I think I'll leave that actually for now and leave you to research it for yourself and play with it and see what you discover in terms of the directions and the experiences and the states that can open, and if there's patterns there and repeatable kind of observations and movements that happen. So perhaps that will be for another retreat.

But just to say something around all this—actually around everything we're talking about on this retreat: sometimes with desire there is lack wrapped up in it, or it's coming from a sense of lack, or another emotion, or something like that. And sometimes, of course, we may need to first be with the actual emotional experience of distress or difficulty or lack or sadness or grief or whatever it is—anger, upset—that's going on. And maybe that too has a few different aspects, or is a mixture, as often an emotional state is, a mixture of different emotions. Not always, but often. And just to be with that, and see, and feel, and allow what's going on there emotionally.

And oftentimes there is a lack there that's felt. And the question then is: two questions. One is, do I have the skill to do that? Do you have the skills to do that? As we've talked about in some of the energy body work and on other retreats and teachings elsewhere—just really developing my ability, your ability to work well with, in this case, difficult emotions. Also, beautiful emotions can be difficult to handle. But do I have that? Do I know that? Is that in my toolkit—that I really have different ways of working well, meeting well, opening to, caring for, in meditation, in my life, the range of emotions that come up for me in the course of life and practice. So do I have that skill? First question.

And second, is it necessary to first do that before trying this other approach? Because what can often happen is we assume that it is. And even more than that, we can get into a kind of habit where we always go to the lack or we always go to the negative and we always kind of linger there in a way that just keeps it at a feeling of lack. In other words, it doesn't really transform it very much, or maybe it just kind of...

gradually, gradually soothes and we're kind of okay or we just get distracted by the next thing that's demanding our attention. But we can kind of get stuck in a habit here and also in an emotional constellation of lack.

So that, yes, lack and desire often go together, not always, often as I'll come back to. And we can get more into or have a habit of tending towards, going towards the lack thread of those two threads that are interwoven, the lack and the desire. We always go to the lack thread.

And we might feel, because of our habit of doing that, that this practice that I'm explaining now regarding a way of being with desire, this practice, that's a kind of artificial construct. You're making something happen if you do that because it's not natural if you do that. The real thing, the thing that's actually present, the thing that's natural, the thing that's unartificial, not a construct, is the lack itself. And that feels like the natural thing. I'm just, quote, "being with what is."

Failure then to see the dependent origination. This is so important. We've touched on this before. So, so important. I'm not seeing the dependent origination. If I have that kind of view and that kind of response to hearing these different practices and these different approaches, I'm simply not understanding the dependent origination of experience.

And it may very well be that through the habit of what I pay attention to and the ways of paying attention to it, that I'm actually, I just keep building this particular range, limited range of emotions and experience. Through what I pay attention to and how I pay attention to it and the habit involved in that, I do not see that I'm actually constructing. I think I'm just being in a way that's very natural and not adding anything to the experience. I'm just being with what is, but I keep constructing that same "what is," whether it's a sense of lack or whatever it is. I'm not understanding the dependent origination, the fabricated, constructed nature of all experience and all perception. And I'm just locked into a kind of habit there without even realizing what's going on. And I take it as the truth, reality, quote, "what is." Things as they are, et cetera.

So again, you know, it's just my particular emphasis in how I teach is that can we hold this aim of flexibility—flexibility of practice, flexibility of approach, flexibility of conception—that can we hold that as a principle aim of practice so that we can do it lots of different ways? Here's this dukkha, I have lots of different ways of approaching it. Here's this feeling of lack, I have lots of different ways of approaching it. Here's this desire mixed with the lack, we have lots of different ways of approaching that. Lots of angles and ways that it unfolds the experience in different directions.

Can we, again, experiment and see, rather than just being locked into a set of assumptions that we're no longer investigating. Experiment and see. Okay, can I go to the emotion and care for that and be with that in different ways? And can I actually other times try this thing with the desire? Can I do both? Can I learn to do both? Do I have that in my repertoire? And if not, can I actually gradually move towards a place, a time when I have that—then both in my repertoire? They're both just ways of approaching things.

Part of that might be that I actually need the skill to differentiate lack and desire. Because they're not the same. They're two different things. I mean, they're connected, for sure. They can be connected. But I can differentiate them as two strands that are perhaps entangled, and actually unentangle them.

And I'm not necessarily assuming an order. First I have to do this, and then I'll be able to do that. Well, then only then am I allowed to do that. Only then should I do that. First I have to do this. Yes, sometimes, and sometimes not. Sometimes you could go

straight to this working with the desire, as I've elaborated in this talk, and the Beauty of Desire Part Two talk, and sometimes not. Sometimes I want to dwell more with the emotional difficulty, care for that in different ways, then maybe go to the desire thing, or not do the desire thing at all.

So there's a lot here about ways of practicing and order of practice and our assumptions around all that. And again, presenting this kind of practice, is it a desired prerequisite, a necessary preliminary capacity to be able to let go of desires and cravings that we talked about right at the beginning? You know, some familiarity with that. Do I also even allow myself to feel desire? Or is there this kind of—we talked about this anti-libidinal force.

I just shut it down before I've even felt it. And then it's wonderful to find Buddhism because it seems to validate this approach: "Yes, desire is bad, therefore just shut it down." But what's actually propelling me is a kind of anti-libidinal drive—in Fairbairn's terms—or this deep fear of having desire at all.

Can I actually feel it? Can I feel the energy of it, have the feeling? Do I recognize it? Do I know it? Do I know the different shades of it? These may well be prerequisite skills—capacities and abilities that could be necessary for these kinds of practices.

So there are three basic steps, and this question about being with the lack beforehand—or how much, or whether I need to—these are questions involved in all of this that I'd like to open up as inquiries. There's this need, I think, to experiment, to learn how to approach things in different ways, from different directions, in different orders, questioning our assumptions throughout.

Another element to add to the instructions for this practice concerns posture. For most people, certainly at first but often most of the time, posture will be quite important. Allowing and opening to energy flow—the third step of this practice—will be easier when the physical body is relatively open and upright and uncontracted.

I'd like to offer this practice and encourage you to pick it up as another possibility and play with it—try it, do it repeatedly. It doesn't have to be now, but at some point, engage with it repeatedly until you understand how to do it. Have it, as I said, in your repertoire. But to have it available as a working resource, you need to actually do it. You need to try it. You need to experiment with it.

My suggestion is that through experimenting, through trying it and making that effort to play with it for yourself, it can become incorporated into your toolbox. And that's a really valuable tool to have—not to use all the time, certainly not. It's like a toolbox: you have a range of tools. Apart from being genuinely helpful because it in-

creases your resources, it's also enjoyable. That's part of the creativity. But you're only going to incorporate it and have it available as a tool if you pick it up, listen again to the instructions, play with it, and make it your own. This applies to all practices, of course.

One thing that struck me when I first introduced this in teaching was that I only heard back from two people who actually took it on board in a way that they repeated it for themselves. In other words, not with me sitting there guiding or offering it to them, or even asking if they were willing to try it and then guiding them through it, but doing it independently.

Now, it could be that many people were practicing it everywhere, but I doubt it. I could be wrong, but I only heard back from two people. One of them actually died a few years ago. The other—I don't know if she ever repeated it after the initial thrill of discovering it, the ability to do it, how transformative it was, what it opened up, and how remarkably easy it was to do.

This observation is quite interesting to me. Either people simply weren't telling me, or it reveals something about my own naivety in not repeating teachings sufficiently. I think that for new things to be taken on board—new approaches, new teachings, new practices—they need an enormous amount of repetition, probably by much more than one person. They probably need to be quite widespread in their dissemination, across continents and over time, with different voices. They also need to be offered much more slowly—even slower than I'm doing here in this talk—so that they become integrated into instructions repeatedly and people become accustomed to them, really hearing and doing them.

Maybe it also needs a special name. We have names for different practices, and perhaps that's part of what allows something to be digested and assimilated organically. I'm not very good at names, but something like "opening to the deeper current of desire"—that's a way of summarizing this practice. Still quite a mouthful, but anyway, this was interesting to me. And again, it connects with this whole researcher fantasy theme that runs through these teachings.

I wonder why people didn't learn the practice or repeat it for themselves, apart from this need for repetition in teaching. Often what happened when I worked with people through this practice, taking them through it step by step, was that they were so struck by the actual experience and transformation—the sense of the body, the state of consciousness, the feeling of super-abundance that arose. It was a "wow" experience.

But this is really interesting to me: how we can be captivated by the intensity of an experience—I've talked about this before—the wow factor, and miss the principle involved. This relates to the researcher fantasy because it's the principle, the learning of the technique or practice, and then the principle that emerges from it. What is it saying about desire? What are the principles of the practice and what are the ramifications, the implications?

Actually, the more significant "wow" to me is not so much the experience that opens up in the moment when you do this, but the principle itself—how it fits or doesn't fit with narrower Dharma understandings, the greater freedom that emerges from that, and the questioning of it all.

So one thing I observed was that people were often quite struck by the experience and neglected to inquire. In other words, there was an absence of the researcher curiosity to explore the principles.

What's going on here? Isn't that surprising? What does this imply? What does this mean we have to rethink? What avenues does this open?

Sometimes, of course, part of this absence of deeper inquiry stems from people simply feeling relieved to feel better. Someone might have been feeling quite upset about something, and after working with this approach, they're just grateful for the relief. This is entirely understandable, but there's a way the deeper investigation gets eclipsed. This connects directly to our exploration of fantasies of the path and of the self—the researcher fantasy isn't being supported in these moments.

One final observation about this practice: I've found myself explaining this approach in various settings, and occasionally someone will respond with something like, "Oh, so what you're saying is just to accept everything and be with what is." For many reasons, I've come to expect this kind of response. There's a tendency to hear something new or different and immediately assimilate it into what we're accustomed to hearing, what we already know.

People are familiar with basic dharma teachings about being with what is, accepting what's happening. Even when someone might be presenting something quite different from that, it can simply get missed. This used to shock me, but I've grown accustomed to it. I think it stems partly from how we're taught and partly from how we learn as human beings—it's important to create categories and fit experiences into those boxes, but there's a cost at certain stages of development.

Clearly, though, if we examine the three steps of this particular practice, it's not the same as simply accepting everything. It might sound somewhat similar, but when we say "really opening to the energy," this isn't the same as mere acceptance. Acceptance can be very passive, very "meh." It's not the full-bodied, complete movement of opening within the energy body that I'm describing.

Neither does simple acceptance include this active engagement with trust—entertaining the idea that desire might be trustworthy, might conceal or eventually reveal treasure if we relate to it differently. This element isn't present in generic "be with what is" teachings.

And there's certainly no exploration of the deeper level of desire—this question of "What am I really wanting here?" Generic acceptance might notice, "Oh, I desire this person, I want this to happen, I wish that wouldn't happen," but it remains at the more immediate level of objective desire, not diving into the deeper currents.

So this approach is actually quite different. If we have a limited conception of what the dharma is—if it's simply about being with what is and trying to accept everything—then our understanding remains constrained. And when our understanding is limited, our practice becomes limited because it flows from that understanding. Practice gets reduced to generically trying to be present, to what someone once described to me as their understanding of dharma: "essentially just trying to be in your body."

This limitation in concept and practice inevitably leads to limited experiences and insights. The range of practices available to us, the spectrum of experiences that might open, the possibilities for shifts in perception, openings in consciousness and feeling—all of this becomes constrained by the narrowness of our conceptual framework and the practices that emerge from it.

One final point: this practice of opening to the deeper current of desire—surely there's a better name—is also different from what we've been exploring in imaginal practice. In imaginal practice, the image is always retained. It may deepen, it may transform slightly, but the image remains central and is always preserved. By central, I mean we don't reduce the image—we don't say it's "really just" a representation of something else.

In this practice of opening to the deeper current of desire, however, the image is regarded as secondary to discovering the deeper, more fundamental desire. In this sense, the image might be seen as representational and secondary. Generally, the image isn't retained because we're moving toward what we might call the more general, deeper level of content—both the object of desire and the energy involved.

We're exploring a different doorway into the experience of desire, a different approach entirely. Though having said all this, it's really a matter of emphasis, and there's certainly overlap between these approaches.

Erotic-imaginal practice, as we've emphasized throughout this retreat and others, involves trusting—playing with trust, offering at least some measure of trust to both eros and image. It also involves working with the energy body, including opening and expansion. So there is overlap here.

And when we look more deeply at this practice of opening to the deeper current of desire, we discover that this whole deeper trust of desire we're entertaining is both an idea and, in its own way, a kind of image.

So I hope in the future to explore how image and idea are really not separate. They shade into and imply and connect with each other.

We could say there is overlap here because the opening to the deeper current of desire practice already involves image in the imaginal, in its relationship with desire, in the form of this deeper trust of desire that involves the imaginal.

But to say something we've emphasized right from the beginning of the retreat—and hopefully by now you're getting very aware of this, it should be blindingly obvious—just how easy and relatively common it is to stop or arrest prematurely what could be much wider, deeper, more nuanced explorations of desire, craving, eros, clinging than we may first assume are warranted. It's so common to just stop that movement of exploration so it doesn't actually get very wide, doesn't go very deep, and lacks subtlety and sophistication around this whole area of desire, craving, clinging, eros.

We see this in the practice I talked about in "The Beauty of Desire Part Two," which we're now calling opening to the deeper current of desire. We saw it in terms of this bigger and more subtle exploration with what we were calling clinging, and realizing the spectrum of clinging and all the subtlety that can be evolved in that, along with the framework of understanding what's happening there—that when we let go of clinging, there's less fabrication. When we fabricate, there is less fabrication of perception, self, other, world.

This is telling us about the Buddha's teaching about dependent arising, dependent origination, and emptiness, which is intimately connected with the understanding of dependent origination through the fading of perception that happens, and through the fabrication moving up and down the spectrum. We've talked about this extensively, and I've written about it a lot. That's a whole other deeper exploration of this whole question of desires, a whole direction there that goes much deeper. We can actually realize a

whole integrated conceptual framework of understanding regarding dependent origination and emptiness through the investigation of clinging and playing with clinging and the spectrum of clinging and its reduction and what that means.

So that's two large areas. And then of course the whole area that we're focusing on for the most part on this retreat—eros and soulmaking.

Just see how much there is worthy of a wider, deeper, more sophisticated, more subtle, more careful and more nuanced exploration in these directions. In other words, with regard to desire, eros, craving and clinging.

CHAPTER 85

Opening The Dharma of Desire (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this continuation of his profound exploration, Rob Burbea delves deeper into the sophisticated understanding of desire, particularly the crucial distinction between eros and craving (taṇhā). He examines how our assumptions about desire—that it always stems from lack, always leads to dukkha, or always reinforces selfing—can be questioned through direct inquiry and imaginal practice.*
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> *Burbea offers practical guidance on working with challenging desires, such as longing for an unavailable teacher or beloved, showing how boundaries can create an alchemical vessel (temenos) that transforms craving into soul-making eros. Rather than simply 'letting go,' he demonstrates how allowing the imaginal dimension to open can lead to equanimity with eros intact, recognizing that what we often seek is not the concrete object but the soul-making process itself.*
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> *The talk explores how desire is inseparable from our entire cosmological view—our understanding of self, other, world, and time. Through examining the etymology of 'desire' (from Latin 'desiderare'—from the stars), Burbea reveals how this fundamental human experience can be viewed as divine influx rather than defilement. He concludes by articulating the double meaning of 'alchemy of desire': both the transformation of craving into eros, and eros's capacity to transubstantiate our perception of existence itself through the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.*

Perhaps more fundamental than any of the details of what I'm talking about or elements of the fabric, the structure of what we're trying to communicate and convey, is this encouragement, permission, and even request to inquire for yourself—to experiment, to play, to ask questions, to turn over stones and see what's underneath. Let yourself find out, interrogate.

So the permission, the encouragement, and even the request to inquire. A part of inquiry is becoming aware of what our assumptions are and questioning those assumptions. Inquiry can be very much a movement of soul-making, part of soul-making. I would say the other way around: soul-making always involves some inquiry because of this expansion of the logos in the eros-psyche-logos. Inquiry can be soul-making.

More general and fundamental than any of the details or the little insights or this or that practice is this need for inquiry and this permission and encouragement to inquire.

In the practice we described in the first part of this talk—what we're calling the opening to the deeper current of desire—through that practice, it will almost certainly question or overturn certain assumptions if those assumptions are in place. For example, the assumption that desire that is not for ending suffering or a desire that is not just for metta or for jhāna—such desires that are not so narrowly conceived as kind of path desires—that other desires are defilements and lead to dukkha. Through engaging such a practice, it should almost inevitably upturn and uproot such assumptions, question them, bring one face to face with them and their questioning.

Or the assumption that desire is always from something called the self and leads to selfing, building this bad thing called the self. Again, looking at such desires and feeling where they come from and what they do when we relate to them in certain ways should confront us with these assumptions and hopefully bring more sophistication, more nuance, more depth and breadth of insight into our whole understanding and relationship with desire.

Through this course, we could say there are many uncommon observations—not commonly reported or talked about or chronicled or systematized observations in relationship to desire, what desire is and does and can be. Observations that are contrary to the usual assumptions and conclusions, at least in our kind of contemporary dharma understanding. We have quite a whole host of these observations that don't fit in the usual logos and set of assumptions and conclusions.

For example, we have talked about delineating eros from craving, saying desire is a large subset and we can delineate something—a kind of desire called eros and a kind of desire called craving if we use language in a certain way and define them. We're saying these are not equivalent, interchangeable words. Eros is not craving. And the imaginal is not papañca. So the erotic-imaginal is a very different thing than the contracting and proliferating and crazy-making movement of craving and papañca.

We shared that if one is involved in one's life perhaps with some other who is unavailable for whatever reasons—either because of boundaries or because they're already involved with someone else or they're just not interested or unavailable due to health or whatever—and one feels the contraction of dukkha, stuck in the contraction of craving, looping in a circle and feeling the pain of that, contrary to usual instructions to "just let go," let go of that person, let go of the craving, let go of the attachment, one possibility is actually to allow more of the imaginal element, the imaginal realm. Allow the imaginal to open up in the seeing of the other and open up the whole constellation.

Everything that goes with that—the sense of beauty, the sense of meaningfulness, the sense of necessity, depth, dimensionality, especially the dimensionality that comes with the imaginal—so that this other that I seem to be so stuck with and frustrated by not being able to have, actually they become more through the allowing of the erotic-imaginal, through seeing and sensing in that way. They become, if you like, expanded imaginally. They become more angel, if we use that word in its imaginal sense. Their angelic function becomes more apparent to our erotic gaze, to our imaginal sensing. And also then, related to that, their divinity.

So opening—actually, rather than turning away and trying to close down or just avoid this person, or shut down the desire, or contemplate their foul body parts—another possibility, and yes, it's not easy perhaps at first, and it's certainly unusual, but with practice, absolutely possible, is to enter more into the imaginal, the imaginal vision, the imaginal sensing of this person.

The expansion that they then go through in perception of this other, the filling out and the expansion, widening, deepening, complicating of this imaginal object that they are, also brings with it, rather than more problem, the evidentness, the self-evidence that this is image. So rather than getting stuck in a kind of concretization and realism, as we let the imaginal inflate, give dimensionality, give extra beauty, give angelism, an angelic function, a divinity to this person, all of that, it's obvious that we're dealing with image.

The mindfulness is there, and the energy body, and the attuning to resonances. That takes, because it punctures the realism, the problem out of it and it's no longer craving. It steers craving towards eros more.

So letting the psyche, the image expand and deepen so that this object, this beloved other, this person that I feel I'm infatuated with or frustrated by or whatever, they're obviously more than just what they seem. And it's obviously imaginal.

When we get stuck in craving, even despite the papañca, there's the realism there, as we said before. Actually, the object is limited. It's limited, it's capped. Even if there's proliferation, it's capped.

The extension of the object goes into fantasizing about the future rather than expanding the dimensionality of the object itself and of the self. So I'm reviewing now these unusual, uncommon insights that we've unearthed here.

In allowing the eros, in allowing the feeling of the eros, often that actually brings an equanimity in the experience of the eros, and a spaciousness at the same time as there is eros and soul. It's not an equanimity devoid of eros. It's not an equanimity and spaciousness devoid of soul, or at least with only very limited soul-making.

In allowing the eros—we've given examples of this—actually allowing the eros, trusting it, trusting the erotic imaginal, there can be peace there, even if I'm not able to have this person for whatever reason in the way that I think I want them. There can be peace here, not from letting go, turning away, avoiding, repressing, or deciding to see them as ugly or stupid or unworthy. But in the very opening more to the eros and the imaginal, we can have a sense of peace because somehow we have more. We have more through the image, in the image, with the image.

I'm not talking about daydream—I don't need to repeat all this now. But in the increase and the allowing of the imaginal and the erotic in relationship to this other, with whom I've been contracted and craving and stuck, there can be equanimity, spaciousness, with eros, with soul, and also peace.

So "just let go"—which is sometimes so simplistically offered as a teaching recommendation—is certainly an option. It's a good possibility sometimes. But it may come at a cost. What's the cost? What am I losing there in terms of eros and soul? It's an option, absolutely, and it's something we can cultivate—that ability and capacity and skill in letting go in that sense. But it's not the only option.

Wrapped up in that option of "just let go" is the assumption of all kinds of things. One of the things it's assuming is a realism: this real self is letting go of that real object. One can contemplate the emptiness of self and object. But there's also this other way of actually recognizing who this person is to my psyche, letting the psyche create and discover the depths and the fuller beauty of this imaginal other. Yes, maybe that sounds dangerous, maybe it sounds crazy, but it's absolutely possible. And it doesn't really take that much development of practice to be able to do that.

We've talked about fantasies of the path and self on the path, and one piece of that constellation I mentioned was the fantasy of the teacher, the fantasy of others on the path. As with working with a therapist or working with a teacher in any area or domain of education that one loves and cares about, there can be the fantasy of the teacher and the eros in relationship with the teacher. This is really quite common, I'm sure many of you are aware. At the same time, there's the boundary between teacher and student. It's not just a relationship where one enters into this or that and decides to consummate sexually or just be friends.

Oftentimes the encouragement is to let go or just stop doing that—either the teacher says to the student, or someone else says, "Drop it. Think of something else, find someone else." Or it's conceived in a classical psychoanalytic model of the Oedipal triangle: "I want this mummy or daddy," and it's related to that way—it's a projection based in the past and needs a healthy walking through together, the disappointment and the firm keeping of boundaries, just walking through that disappointment there. Fine.

But in that kind of approach, other possibilities, other dimensions of possibility, are actually missed. Like any other teacher, I've been on the receiving end of that—that's a strange way to say it, isn't it? That has arisen. Students have expressed that from time to time towards me. It's completely what I would expect. When a person loves the path and there's that relationship, in the teacher-student relationship, and there's the fertility of the soul-making, the eros is going to involve, in this case, the teacher, as that's part of the constellation.

I don't take that, if it happens or when it happens, in some way that's going to puff up my ego. It's not me as real. It's not that it has nothing to do with me, of course, nothing to do with what I teach—

But I can't take it about me. It's about the soul. It's about soul-making. It's about the erotic movement of the soul and the erotic imaginal there. And if a person is told "just absolutely stop it, just turn it off," or if it's only reduced or shrunk into that kind of Oedipal paradigm—or variations of the Oedipal paradigm that are common in modern psychotherapeutic circles—if it's only that... I'm not saying that's not sometimes an important element to address, but if it's only that, something else gets missed.

Someone wrote to me a while ago, and I realize the danger of sharing this and how people might hear it and what they then assume. So I'm not talking about anything that involves boundaries not being there and being very clear. They absolutely were there, and neither am I talking about something that I took personally or got off on in some way at all. I hope you can really hear that and trust that and understand that we're talking about something that's a little more sophisticated than probably a lot of too easy assumptions and explanations about the people involved or about what's going on.

And the person wrote: "After some time, you and your teachings have never been just a teacher and teachings for me. You've been a key that's unlocked the whole cosmos and let it out of a box."

So this person then actually realized after some time what was happening in that movement of eros and the fantasy of the teacher. In this case, there's an erotic image, there's an erotic beloved other, and soul-making was allowed through that image, because she didn't just stamp on it and turn it off, and she didn't just reduce it to "it's about daddy and wanting daddy."

So the soul-making was allowed through an erotic image, and when she said "a key that's unlocked the whole cosmos and let it out of a box," in a way she literally meant that. Because, as we've been talking about, allowing the eros and the erotic imaginal opened up the cosmopoiesis. The whole realm of the imaginal perception of herself, of others, of the world—all this soul-making, cosmopoiesis, cosmopoetic sensibility—was opened through, yes, through the teachings, but also through the allowing of the erotic other and allowing of the eros there.

And she says, "Falling in love with you was falling in love with an entire world. No wonder it felt so big." You understand? She also says something... so it feels so big because it literally is big. It's a whole world. It's a whole world that's opening up in cosmopoiesis. That's actually what she's falling in love with. It isn't me. It's not me, this person, that I should then take personally and feel like, "Wow, aren't I this or that or attractive." It's actually falling in love with an entire world. What world? The world of soul-making and the world seen and sensed through the soul—through the eyes of the soul, the sensibilities of the soul.

And she continues: "I think I needed to borrow your soul for a while while my own was just waking up."

So the attraction, the eros and the love is for the soul-making. We could say psyche is in love with itself. Eros is sparked by the glimpse of psyche's own treasures. So you might see in someone else the treasures that belong to psyche, they belong to you, not just the other person. Psyche is sparked by a glimpse of its own vision—of its own possibilities of deepening, widening, being enriched.

Do you understand? Psyche is in love with itself. The eros is really—the eros of the soul, the eros of psyche—is for soul, for psyche. Psyche is in love with itself, it's in love with its own growth. Soul loves soul-making. Soul wants soul-making.

And when something happens with a person and there's that erotic connection there, often what's happening is they or the relationship or something in the relationship or the totality of that constellation is feeding soul-making. And at first sight, it can seem like it's them. "I want them. I need them in a certain form or mode of relating."

Sometimes it may be that that's allowed for in the circumstances and it's the right thing and lovely. But oftentimes it's not really about that. We make the mistake. It's really about the soul-making. And we love it and we sense it and the soul longs for it.

And she's honest here: "Of course the immature enchantment got mixed in there too. Maybe if you'd been an eighty-year-old wrinkly sage, it wouldn't have. But I'm glad that part has been ebbing; soul has taken hold."

So there was this process over time of going back—there's soul-making, but it veers into craving and contraction: "I want this," or a very particular form. But the boundaries...

But the boundaries that the relationship has—that it only exists within this particular range and not a larger range, extending itself to manifest in this way or that way, whether sexually or as friends or whatever in the usual sense of the word—that agreement functions as a boundary. And the boundary creates a kind of container. It functions to create walls, if you like, that manifest the potential for an alchemical vessel.

In other words, that container can become, if it's related to in the right way, an alchemical vessel. The fire of eros heats up the soul material in that vessel, the contents of the vessel, and there is the alchemical process—the soul-making process that is allowed by the vessel and the fire and the imaginal perceptions.

So that container is not there to contain the feelings, if you like, so that one can feel the original disappointment with one's parents, in the more standard psychotherapeutic models. That may be part of it, as we've acknowledged, but principally it's an alchemical vessel, a soul-making container in potential. We still need to have the art of alchemy relate to it rightly—protect that vessel, watch the fire, work on the contents, on the images.

The walls there, note this too, are not walls or barriers or blocks to image, nor to logos, nor to eros. The Eros-Psyche-Logos trinity—no aspect of it is walled off or blocked or limited or cramped. It's the boundary that creates the agreement, that creates limits of action and actual manifestation. Of course, there's going to be friendship there, deep friendship, but it's limited in terms of how it manifests.

And that boundary—not walls of Psyche, Logos, or Eros, but that boundary—allows what we called before a *temenos*, another Greek word, which I translated as sacred space. Better to translate it, in this case, as a space that allows the making sacred. A space, *temenos* is a space that allows sacralizing, allows the alchemical process to transubstantiate the material into divine material, sacred material, soul material.

So *temenos*, a boundary, creates a space of potential. It may or may not realize that potential of soul-making. And how does it do that? This goes back to what we said much earlier on the retreat. How does it do that? It's because the more that's desired in the eros, the *pothos* in the eros cannot pursue or look for that more at a certain point. It realizes it cannot, it will not get its more on the level of one-dimensionality and the level of more contact or sexual contact or hanging out or whatever it is.

So the only way it can get more is—it's forced, if you like (maybe that's too strong a word), but it's contained in this alchemical vessel. The only way it can get more is in the imaginal. Only or principally, let's say, the imaginal is the direction and space made available and offered for the movement of eros and the more of the *pothos*, the more that it wants. So this is the available space. This is the fire of the eros and the materials directed into the imaginal.

And there's, in the discovering of the fullness of the imaginal, more and more fullness of the imaginal, the creation of that, the discovery and creation of that, there is soul-making. And because self too, we've touched on this, will be wrapped up or involved in that constellation—soul-making constellation—it's not just about the other, about the teacher, about the therapist or whatever. Self, other, world, Eros itself—the whole constellation will be involved there and is supported to heat up and have that soul-making process.

And the soul-making is allowed to deepen and widen until it's seen for what it is. And it's not that object that I want, that person in that form. I actually want something more than that, deeper than that. Yes, in some instances I will get that through a certain form of relationship and that's all fine if it's okay. But actually the soul is after something else, hungry and thirsty for something else.

So then that, as you said, that part of it ebbed away. And there's still strong love, she writes, but it's very different now. It's eros, and love and care, minus the craving. The craving has been drained out of it.

So that whole process was allowed to give rise to soul-making—more and more, wider and deeper, a complicated and beautiful process of soul-making over some time, and peace, supported by the *temenos* or the alchemical vessel provided by the boundaries and provided by the teachings and provided by a certain way of relating to the whole thing.

All this is still talking about assumptions now, and opening up assumptions and inquiry. Do we trust Eros? Do we trust the imaginal? Do we trust the erotic-imaginal? Do we understand Eros? Or put it another way, because we said it's impossible to finally answer: is there an expanding of our understanding of Eros? Are we moving in that direction, or have we just decided something and stopped looking?

Do we trust the movement of soul-making and the intelligence that might be propelling that movement of soul-making? Can we trust that?

Sometimes what happens is there's a sort of partial trust of the eros in one direction but not in another. So, for example, in that polarity we've talked about between the unfabricated on one hand—some people with a longing and a desire, an eros towards the unfabricated, if you like—and they might look, such people might look with distrust and suspicion and disrespect at people whose eros seems to be for the world and for their senses and for others.

And vice versa. The people whose eros seems to be, or they feel it, directed to this world and the senses and beauty here and other human beings, look with perplexity or suspicion of some kind of psychological wounding or something at those whose eros wants the unfabricated and maybe has chosen to leave aside the world and the senses and the kind of erotic engagement for the sake of the erotic movement towards the unfabricated.

So these two camps of directions are often suspicious of each other.

This becomes so heated and contentious philosophically within the Dharma as well. This assumes one even allows eros, but such opposition is taken for granted between what we might call the transcendent, spirit, or the unfabricated on one hand, and the immanent, matter, the senses, or worldly things on the other.

But this opposition—whether in terms of inclination, philosophy, or otherwise—can only really hold if there's realism. This dichotomy, this tug of war, this mutual suspicion can only exist on the basis of realism. If we don't understand or see the emptiness of both—the emptiness of the world, the emptiness of sense perception, and the emptiness of the unfabricated—only then does this opposition hold.

Or perhaps we've moved beyond realism because we've explored the eros sufficiently in both movements. We've explored eros enough to understand that whole movement of rendering things, allowing their imaginal nature to open up, seeing image as image. And perhaps we've explored both directions.

So there's this apparent opposition between the transcendent, the unfabricated, and the world or matter. We need to account, as I said, in our logos—I feel we can't really ignore this phenomenological observation that when clinging is reduced, to that extent there's a decrease in the fabrication of the perception of self, other, and world. Somehow I need to account for that. I can, based on certain epistemological assumptions, decide to ignore it, but to me it's something we need to account for, especially as meditators.

So we need to account for it. But it also seems to me that if eros is strong—if there is a strong, deep, and powerful eros running through a person—and if there's a logos or intelligence that allows expansion and understanding, and also if we've been exposed to a concept or idea of the unfabricated or transcendent, or if an intuition of it or the possibility of it has emerged somehow in consciousness—a glimpse, an intimation of it, either in meditation or through a certain direction of inquiry around fabrication, or as one moves about in the world and there's perhaps the veiled sense of it, the glimpse of it, there as an intuition of a possibility—then the eros will actually eventually go in both directions.

It will be eros for the transcendent, if we've been exposed to the idea, probably. If there's a certain amount of intelligence and logos that can hold such a concept, even if we don't quite understand it yet, and if the eros is strong, then the eros will go towards the transcendent at some point. It will actually go in both directions. We've said this before.

But the desire for mystical knowing and the desire for the unfabricated, to me, when they are there, they are signals, almost always. They are signals of a rich, deep, powerful eros in a person. People with less eros tend not to want to know the transcendent, the unfabricated. That very desire indicates a deep, powerful longing, a deep, powerful movement of eros.

It's really quite remarkable. Several people have reported to me that others look at them—maybe they know them relatively well or perhaps less so—and they see someone who has this mystical inclination and who has a desire to know the unfabricated, and they assume that because they want that, because there is this eros in that direction, this movement towards the unfabricated and the mystical sensibility, they assume that they're therefore not interested in close relationship, in erotic or sexual relationships. Strange assumptions, based on this opposition, this dichotomy.

Actually, it's probably the opposite that is the case. A person who longs for the unfabricated, who moves in that direction, who makes inquiries and practices in that direction and wants to know and wants to open and wants these other levels of perception that we could call mystical—usually that person has a lot of eros and also has a lot of eros in human relationships, and sometimes in the purely intrapsychic imaginal.

Sometimes there are assumptions made by those without so much eros running through them. They make assumptions about other people in a way they don't understand, because they don't know, because they're basing their view on just how much eros they have. Or there's actually an anti-libidinal kind of fear that we talked about, that they're making their assumptions based on—this fear of allowing eros. Not just that they don't have it; they might have it, but they might be dampening it. And so their eros is dampened or only channeled or allowed in a few limited directions because of this anti-libidinal fear of disappointment, rejection, whatever it is. Based on that view, the view that comes from that limited eros, they're reading other people and making assumptions about other people and what's going on for them or what they're like.

So there can be so much—it's so easy, again, just on the theme of this part of the talk—it's so easy to not let our questioning loose, if you like, or not to gather power in our questioning. Questioning is related to eros. It's penetrating, if we use that image, or it's opening. So sometimes the questioning is actually driven by eros. And again, sometimes people who keep questioning—it's also indicative of the movement of eros, of the fullness, the depth, the force, the power, the richness of the eros there.

But with all this, we see just how easy it is for assumptions to be operating without us even realizing. And these assumptions wield a lot of power and they have a lot of effects. They really affect how we view things, how we view others, how we view self, how we view existence, and then what unfolds for us. All kinds of assumptions.

So we mentioned, just as an example, the assumption that desire always comes from lack, from a feeling of lack. Does it? Does it? Can I question this? And it's possible—I would say it's possible—for desire to come out of joy, out of a sense of celebration, out of a sense of abundance, overabundance even, superabundance.

Somehow the desire flows out of that. Again, this word "flow" is intimately related to libido. There's an overflowing of the libido that manifests as desire. And sometimes, at another level—and we've already touched on this as well—there's a recognition that desire is somehow already flowing from me to you on the imaginal level, in the imaginal realm, so to speak. It's already flowing. It's not coming out of lack. It's already there in some fullness.

I think earlier, at some point in one of the previous talks, we explored how desire may be viewed in different ways. We can view it as really not okay—it's a defilement. Or even if we don't use such strong language as *kilesa*, we somehow anticipate or imagine that in awakening there's going to be zero desire, and we're just kind of going along with the flow without really wanting anything or desiring anything. Somehow the whole movement is away from desire. Desire becomes a sign of non-awakening.

Or we might have a view that desire is, well, it's okay. Everything's okay. Everything's all equal, it's all one—whatever it is, no problem. There can be that kind of view of desire.

Or there might be a more nuanced view that only some desires are okay. For the Buddha, the desire for jhāna was certainly okay. The desire to cultivate the brahmavihāras was certainly okay. The desire for awakening was certainly okay, the desire to live an ethical life, the desire to ordain into the monastic order. Some desires are acceptable depending on what they're for, where they're headed, while others are not.

Or we may have the view that desire is okay if it's only a momentary arising. In other words, you get a pop-up of something called desire or craving, and as long as the mind doesn't cling to it and attach to that desire, get caught by it and dragged along with it, even just in the mind, then it's okay—it's just a momentary arising.

That would be a fourth view. Or a fifth view: that desire is something divine. There's a treasure there, a divine treasure of great beauty.

I can't quite remember if I've shared this before on this retreat, or even on another retreat, so forgive me if it's a repeat, but our word "desire" in English comes from the Latin *desiderare*, which derives from *de sidere*, meaning "from the stars." In other words, from the heavenly realms, from the gods, as the stellar constellations were seen and regarded as gods, as divine. So right there in our English word "desire," it bears the etymological origin of a regard for it as divine.

So we could say there are five ways that desire may be viewed. But actually, maybe even more discernment is needed than that, more nuance to our views of desire.

If I haven't said it already—and I hope I have—the conception I have of desire and the evaluation of desire plays a role in what the desire does, or what happens to it, or what unfolds. It's not a neutral factor; it's part of the dependent arising of the desire itself. The same is true with anything, in fact. The conception and evaluation of desire plays a creative part, plays a role in fabrication.

And there's always some conception and view of desire. Sometimes it might be quite elaborate and involved, especially if you've had a lot of teaching and Dharma training, and desire is quite a loaded, central subject. But even if not, there's always some conception and view of desire.

There's also always—and I'm just reviewing a few things before moving on—an imagined or assumed relationship with getting the object that we desire. For example, here's this desire, and I anticipate getting what I want. Something simple like being thirsty, so I want some water, so I go to the tap. I anticipate getting it. I don't anticipate a drought, or certainly not in Devon anyway. I don't anticipate not being able to find clean water, because one of the good things about our society is it provides clean water.

But that's part of what comes into the whole relationship of desire. And this is often overlooked, because it's very different when I have a desire and I anticipate not getting it, not getting the thing I want. How does that color and shape the whole experience and the very desire itself?

Or then there's this other possibility—as we said—of realizing or sensing that on an imaginal level, there already is what I desire. What I desire is already here. And that means there's a relationship with eros there in the imaginal.

So there's a relationship with the anticipated getting, or not getting, or realizing it's already here on another level in the imaginal realm. We're talking about very different things then, and there's always going to be some view about or relative to this getting, or not getting, or however we relate to the object.

So that last one—the sense of it already being here—as I said, already involves the imaginal.

Again, just reviewing a little bit. Desire with the imaginal—desire that's become eros—opens up all kinds of possibilities. We explored several ways of looking, which are really practices for transforming desire into eros, allowing more equanimity and spaciousness while supporting soul-making and beauty.

Four approaches emerged from our exploration. The first involves seeing one's desire—perhaps a desire that feels problematic because fulfillment seems impossible—as having its origins in divine influx. When we recognize that the desire itself springs from this sacred source, what happens to our experience? What transforms in the desire itself, in our sense of the whole situation, in any dukkha that might be present?

The second approach, which we just touched upon, involves recognizing through imaginal sensibility that what we desire is already happening in what Henri Corbin called "hierophantic time." Through attunement to the imaginal realm, through opening that particular lens of perception, we discover that our longing is already being fulfilled on another plane of reality. Again, what does this recognition do to the dukkha, to the desire, to our entire perception of the situation?

A third possibility involves the practice of seeing—and this requires developing considerable facility and skill with imaginal perception, which can indeed be cultivated to extraordinary degrees—seeing the desire, the beloved other that one is yearning for, and the self as theophanies, as faces or aspects of the divine. This differs slightly from the first approach. Rather than the desire originating in the divine, here the desire itself *is* divine. The desire is divinity, is God, is the primordial Buddha or an aspect of the primordial Buddha.

The fourth possibility we explored was practicing a way of looking that sees the image of the other, the image of the desired object, the image of the self desiring, and the desire itself—all four elements—as the primordial Buddha making love to herself, or God making love to himself.

Now, for some of you hearing this for the first time, the question naturally arises: "How could I ever develop the capacity for such perception?" Actually, it's far from impossible and not as distant as it might initially sound, especially if you haven't yet engaged deeply with imaginal practice. We can learn to play with the views of desire, of self, and of the desired object or other, developing this as a genuine art.

These approaches differ fundamentally from seeing that desire is not-self, is anatta—they represent entirely different ways of looking. But we can indeed develop these skills, this art of perception, and discover the extraordinary diversity of beautiful possibilities awaiting us.

All of this emerges when we include the imaginal in our relationship with desire—when we allow the imaginal to enter that relationship and infuse it, amplify it, extend it, and beautifully complicate it.

We can also transform our relationship with desire by working with the energy of desire as it manifests in the body. This becomes particularly clear with sexual energy—sexual energy that feels problematic because it cannot be moved or released due to circumstances. Pressure can accumulate in areas of the body, often in the genitals, creating sensations that can be uncomfortable, even painful, and genuinely difficult to bear. This is, of course, a perfectly normal human experience.

One possibility we explored involves expanding awareness, ensuring it stretches to encompass the entire body, the entire energy body. Sometimes simply stretching awareness allows the energy to begin spreading naturally. What often happens in the uncomfortableness of stuck energy is that everything contracts—around the desired object, around the imagination of fulfillment—and the energy itself becomes contracted. This contraction creates pressure, for pressure and contraction are intimately related. When gas is compressed, it exists under higher pressure, and that pressure becomes uncomfortable.

Sometimes we don't even need to actively try moving the energy around, though that remains a valid approach. A more subtle and refined method involves simply spreading the awareness itself.

Because the awareness has more space, the energy will also spread to fill that space. And because it spreads, it's less contracted, there's less pressure. And sometimes what can also happen in that movement, in allowing the energy to move because it has more space, because the awareness is giving it more space, is that the pressured, uncomfortable sexual energy actually turns to bliss, to something like pīti or rapture.

There's a second possibility I'd like to offer as well. If there's a similar kind of situation where the uncomfortable pressure of sexual energy is gathered in one area of the body—say the genitals—try being aware at the same time of the heart center in the center of the chest. Be aware of both regions simultaneously: the heart center and the genitals where the pressure feels gathered uncomfortably. Just being aware of both will allow the energy—I don't have to move the energy or make it do anything or yank it around, all of which is fine too, but this is sometimes all you need to do—just be aware of the heart center as well. Not instead, not saying "go away from the genital area," but include both. It's almost as if there's a channel then made between the heart and the genitals, that area of pressure.

One's including both. And naturally, what will usually happen is the energy will begin moving up that channel and into the heart. So then it's spread between the heart and the genitals. What you then have is it stimulates the heart or re-invites the heart back into the energetic experience and the emotional experience. So it actually allows more love and warmth and connection with the other that one might be desiring. So you've got the heart as well as the genitals. And in that spreading and in that softening with the love and warmth, it doesn't take the sexual energy away or dampen it or get rid of it or anything like that, but it allows it to spread and include another dimension—in this case the heart dimension—so that it's less pressured and less uncomfortable.

So that's just a little suggestion, an offering, if that's sometimes the case, if that experience arises and it's difficult. But the main point right now is that, like anything else, like images, like actually any perception, any desire is dependent on how it is looked at. It's dependent on the way of looking, what we're calling the way of looking. And if you remember, the way of looking includes the way of conceiving and the way of relating to it.

So any desire is what it is, how it is, how it's felt, what happens to it. All that depends on how it is looked at—the way of looking, which includes the way of conceiving of it and evaluating it, and also the way of relating to it.

Whatever name we give to desire, we've chosen to use certain labels. But whatever name we give to it, it's not good or bad in itself, so to speak. Neither its nature nor its trustworthiness is determined by its obvious object. In other words, not "that's a sense desire, therefore it's a kilesa," or "that's a desire for awakening or compassion, therefore it's positive." It's not so much as we would usually tend to think with Dharma teaching—that this is a desire to trust, this is a desire not to trust, dependent on what it seems to be for. Because we've gone into this "what is the desire for" in a number of different ways, whether actually allowing the imaginal amplification and dimensionality to open up through the imaginal of this obvious object, or through asking the deeper question of what is being desired.

Sometimes we think about this desire or that desire and imagine that it's a thing in itself, but we get confused because we're kind of implicitly including the idea of acting on it or following through on the desire physically or practically in the world.

So when we go into all this, or just this question of even the impulse to inquire into desire, we start to realize—in addition to all that I've just said in this talk, much of which is just reviewing what we've already been through—we start to see we need to consider and differentiate in our inquiry. If we're going to inquire into something called desire, then there are differentiations to be made between:

Desire acted on, or desire repressed, or desire "let go of," or desire not noticed. Or desire whose energy is open to, but in relation to a deeper object, if you like, as we did in the opening to the deeper current of desire practice. We need to differentiate desire from the movement of what we were calling pathos and that kind of infinite longing as something spiritual or soul-making. The kind of desire when we realize, in relation to what we said a few minutes ago, desire when it's realized to be already consummated in hierophanic time in the imaginal realm. Desire seen as empty.

All these differentiations: desire seen as divine influx as we talked about; desire regarded as defilement or problem or sin in other language; desire regarded as or assumed to be originating in lack, whether that's an emotional lack or an intuition of the existential lack of a solid self. Some people explain the Dharma that way—that actually we have a suspicion or intuition or occasional glimpses that we lack a solid self, and based on that we try and solidify a sense of self, as if getting things and getting involved with desire will somehow shore that up. It's based on this intuited sense of existential lack, lacking a solid self. Or desire assumed to be originating in the existential intuition of impermanence of all things. The sense of impermanence of all things—that's why there's a kind of hunger there. Or desire regarded as an avoidance strategy, avoiding grief feelings or these feelings of lack. Can't handle the impermanence. Can't handle the lack of a solid self or whatever.

So it's interesting. We, as usual, assume something to be findable as that thing. There are things and they're findable. They're obvious what they are. So we assume desire is findable as something—a mental event, if you like, a momentarily arising quality, an inclination, a factor in the process of the citta, whatever language you want to use. There is a thing called desire. There it was, right there in that micro-moment in the process of the citta.

But actually, desire is inseparable from all kinds of other factors.

It's actually inseparable. I cannot find this thing called desire in itself—not just inseparable from the thoughts and actions that follow from it or are imagined in pursuit of the desired, but also at a much more subtle level, from the very conceivings of object and desired, of objects in general. Inseparable from that, inseparable from time view, time sense, self view, world view, philosophical system—even unconscious philosophical systems, which actually most philosophical views and systems are. They're just kind of habitual views about what's real and what the world involves.

In a person's life, in any instance or any moment, the relationship with desire and the conception or view of it—conscious or unconscious—the relationship with it and the conceptual view of it, view of desire, conscious or unconscious, whether we're conscious or unconscious of the conceptual view—these are woven into a whole view and sense of existence and cosmology. You understand? It's wrapped up in the whole thing. It's implicit in what we've been saying all through the retreat.

The relationship with desire and the whole view of desire are woven into a whole view and sense of existence and cosmology. If it's a flat world, this is it. If there's an assumption there's no real meaning or purpose to existence, then let's just maximize the pleasure. The view of heaven and hell, reward, punishment, sin. Or the view that

we need to transcend this world, as the Pali Canon suggests, with its transcendental thrust to achieve an ending of rebirth. All these, and much more subtle ones, are woven into our relationship with desire.

This is woven in and informs our relationship with desire. All these assumptions about objects, things, time, self-view, world-view, philosophical systems—this informs and shapes the relationship with desire. And similarly, the relationship with desire and the conceiving of desire, any desire, or desire in general—both will make a big difference. Again, the causality is both ways. The very ways we conceive of desire will make a big difference, not just to the unfolding of that desire and the actions involved that it impels or doesn't impel in the world, but also to the view and the sense of self, other, cosmos and desire too. How I conceive of desire makes a big difference to all of that—the very view and sense of self, other, world, cosmos and desire.

I'm just drawing out what we've perhaps only alluded to here over the days. We asked, what is desire? Well, on one level we can define it. Of course, on another level it's an unfindable element. I can't find it. I can't find it separate from all this other stuff. It's inextricably interwoven and linked with all that. It's unfindable.

And yet, amazingly, we can still inquire into unfindable things, and we can still talk of the alchemy of this unfindable element, the alchemy of elements. The alchemists used to talk about different elements—mercury and this and that. Unlike the alchemists who used to work purifying this or that element, it's not possible to have pure desire, just desire in itself as some kind of isolated thing. We can't reduce this complex, interwoven mass of existence, can't really reduce it down to its basic elements and separate them. But still we can talk about the alchemy of those elements and the alchemy of desire.

I can't remember if I've already said this, but it's hopefully obvious by now if I haven't—that phrase, "the alchemy of desire," we were using with a double meaning. We're talking about the transformation of desire, greed and craving, what we were calling greed and craving into Eros, and into the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic being liberated—into the liberation of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic soul-making movement. The transformation of greed and craving into Eros and the Eros-Psyche-Logos movement. In other words, the transformation of a desire that's neither freeing nor soul-making into a kind of desire called eros that is more freeing and more soul-making. So that's the first meaning of alchemy of desire.

And the second meaning, which it means at the same time, is that the possibility that desire, when it manifests as eros, and that eros is allowed to stimulate and galvanize the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—when neither eros nor psyche nor logos are blocked or

cramped in some way or another—then that kind of desire, that kind of eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic will lead to a transubstantiation, a sense, a perception of the transubstantiation of other, self, world, and eros itself. There is an alchemy, if you like, of everything—of existence, of the whole cosmos. Transubstantiation of how? Given these imaginal dimensions and depths and divinity and sacredness and beauty and all of that.

So on one level we can't find it. On one level we can delineate it and make these delineations. On another level we can't find it, desire. And yet we can still talk about and practice this alchemy of desire and all the beauty and the soul-making that comes out of that. As we said before, knowing the emptiness...

CHAPTER 86

From Mindfulness to Divinity: Towards the Tracing of a Phenomenology of Soul (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h51

In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines how honest, open mindfulness naturally reveals the play of eros, fantasy, and soul-making in our lives. Rather than dismissing these as distractions, he demonstrates how acknowledging their inevitability and necessity opens profound dimensions of practice. Drawing on both classical Buddhist texts and contemporary understanding, Burbea explores how our phenomenological approach—investigating ways of looking and their effects on fabrication—can lead to experiences of both transcendent and immanent divinity. He addresses the complex relationship between soul-making and the reduction of dukkha, questioning simple assumptions about Buddhist goals. The talk examines how experiences of the divine involve relational qualities, infinite echoing, and dimensions of timelessness, while critiquing reductive approaches that separate 'real' from 'imaginary.' Burbea argues for starting with phenomena rather than metaphysical postulates, showing how careful investigation of experience can reveal the sacred dimensions often missing from contemporary Buddhist psychology.

If we pay attention well, if our mindfulness is not too blinkered or too narrow, if we honestly and carefully observe our experience and our life—especially the play of meaningfulness, senses of meaningfulness in our lives, and the play of any sense of devotion (I don't just mean religious devotion, but anything we are devoted to, when we feel or want to devote ourselves to something)—if we honestly and carefully observe our life and those aspects of our life, then we will come to recognize and inevitably acknowledge the play of something that we are calling eros, and the play of what we are calling fantasy, and something we are calling soul-making.

Just through careful, honest, open observation of our experience, of our life, especially in certain aspects of our lives but actually in general, these things will be recognized and acknowledged. These delineations that we have made and explored will be recognized and acknowledged, as well as the inevitability and the necessity of eros, of fantasy, of soul-making in our lives. This whole complex—eros, fantasy, soul-making—is an inevitability that arises in different ways at different times as threads running through our life: threads of meaningfulness, threads of fire, threads of all that. And they are necessary. They are inevitable and necessary to us as human beings.

When we recognize and acknowledge that, then we can begin to actually allow more this soul-making movement, the eros that's involved in it in different ways, the fantasies, the images. We can allow and explore that whole complex movement and process and dynamic of soul-making involving eros, involving fantasy, implying the imaginal and the attention to what we're calling image.

Allowing and exploring all that, a lot will be opened to us, for us. A lot will open in our experience, in our sensibility, in our feeling, in our emotion, in our conception. Much will be opened, much will unfold from that allowing and that acknowledgement, that recognition, that allowing and that exploration. Much will open, much will unfold, much will be discovered and much will be created. Much will be discovered/created.

Let me recapitulate some of what we've drawn attention to—some of what will be opened, unfolded. We will notice (and it's sometimes quite subtle, sometimes what we don't actually notice at first when we begin to start exploring these territories) that implicit aspects of the image, or of what we're calling the imaginal, what we're calling image, will start to reveal different aspects.

For example, the resonances. What is imaginal for us, what is image for us, involves and creates whole sets and ranges of resonances in the being that we can notice. Part of the resonances are resonances of meaningfulness. This is an implicit aspect of what we're calling image or imaginal.

It also has this sense of theatre to it—this kind of middle way, if you like, between real and not real. Powerful, potent, moving, captivating in a way, but not really real. Theatre at its best, if you like.

There's the aspect that we notice of timelessness, what we're calling the iconic nature of image. There's a timelessness, there's the eternal that's palpable as a dimension of the image, of the imaginal.

There's the unfathomability that we sense there of an image, the inexhaustibility and thus, in a way, the mystery, because it always involves something beyond in that unfathomability.

Often there's the aspect of duty involved somehow, somehow to be discovered, created, found out in relation to the image: duty, how does it interface, how does it stream into my life, the physical reality that I move in.

There's the aspect of love in the image—love in the image, from the image to me, from myself to the image. Love. This is plural. There's an implicit aspect that we notice. All this is maybe not so obvious at first. It's like our eyes, so to speak, become accus-

tomed to the light in the imaginal realm if we use certain language in relation to images, and we start to notice these things. Sometimes they're really obvious at first, sometimes less.

The eros there, what we're calling eros, begins to be more obvious to us. The effects on the body and the sense of the energy body. This sense of the dimensionality or the dimensions, the opening of dimensions in the erotic imaginal, in the erotically beloved other, in the image.

There's the whole complex movement and dynamic of eros-psyche-logos in that mutual insemination, fertilization, expansion, enrichment, widening, deepening that we've talked about. However we use words or however exactly we slice up the delineations and definitions, something of that will be discovered as an aspect implicit in the imaginal, in image for us.

There's the cosmopoiesis, the spreading into the world, but also, as we've said, into the self. The image gets involved not just in the other—self, other, world, and eros itself become imaginatively infused, become alive as images for us. And with that cosmopoiesis, actually implicit in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, in the dimensionality that comes to be perceived and sensed that way in self, other, world, and eros, different kinds of senses of sacredness—of, let's say, the divine—different senses, various diverse senses of the divine, start to become more and more palpable, more and more obvious, more and more evident and experienceable in the imaginal constellation.

Then, for example, as we said, that unfolds more and more, the dimensions of divinity into divinity, if you like, so that it becomes both a perception and a concept that my eros, this eros that I am feeling, is divine, or is the divine. It belongs, it comes from, it originates, it has roots in the divine. That's all kind of an implicit evolution, if you like, or already present in the image. Or, as we said, that my eros participates in the divine eros.

So all this is kind of implicit, waiting to be discovered, revealed, if you like, once we acknowledge and then allow ourselves to explore eros, fantasy, image—the whole constellation, the whole movement of soul-making.

It's these aspects of divinity that I actually want to dwell on and say something about in this talk and the next talk. So we'll return to that, but it's worth running through a little bit and drawing out again, going over again, things that we've already mentioned that are implicitly involved or implied by this movement and opening to explore soul-making and the erotic imaginal.

So one of those aspects involves an implicit movement toward making less discrimination and harboring less of a conception of difference between something called "life" and something called "fantasy." That whole division—so imposed on us by the dominant philosophy of modernist Western culture—tends to become attenuated. We become more and more aware that there is nothing called "life" separate from fantasy. Life and fantasy blend into each other. Our lives are full of fantasies. We need to learn to notice this, to attend, to become sensitive to that reality. This is really, really important in terms of a direction that's implicit for me in this exploration of soul-making, of Eros and the erotic imaginal.

So often, images of self or images of other or images of the world move toward—there's a gradual evolution, and sometimes right from the beginning or even now—they are operating as images of self, of other, of world. They look, for instance... an image of self appears just like it's simply me. So at first blush, at first sight: Who are you in this image? "Oh, it's just me," someone might say.

Or it's that depression, which can feel like other—something visiting me, this darkness descending and wrapping around me. Or this anger that wells up, this fire of anger. Or the world—it looks like it's just this depression, it's just that anger, it's just the world as it usually is.

So the image of self, for example, can be something where I'm involved in this image and the image of self is something very odd. Suddenly I'm some kind of creature or something. I'm a bull with horns, bellowing fire or something like that. So clearly there's an image of self that I'm identifying with.

But this is not necessarily the case. We've been through all this on the other retreats. Again, I'm recapitulating, but there are certain things that are important to draw out. This is one of them: that the image of self or other or world doesn't necessarily need to be very odd or different from the normal sort of appearance, or obviously different from that. And there may be a gradual evolution, a process, an opening to include the more subtle images, if you like, that bear more resemblance—at first sight—to just, "Oh, it's just me, it's just this thing," or whatever.

Now, it is the case sometimes that we have no fantasy, no image operating in relation to something—no image or fantasy in relation to myself with this aspect of the path, or myself... whatever it is. There is either a kind of realism—so actually there is a kind of fantasy there, but in the poor sense, and we're taking it as real: "I'm a failure. I'm a loser because I keep experiencing this," or whatever it is. It's not a fantasy in our pregnant, dimensional, theatrical sense. It's a realism.

So sometimes that's the case for us. Sometimes there's a flat kind of absence of the imaginal, where in flatland we're perceiving the self, others, and the world flatly, or some aspect of self, other, world, and eros flatly—the absence of the imaginal.

But sometimes fantasy, for example of self, is there, but it's subtle, as I said. And this needs us to, if you like, expand the range of subtlety of our attention, allow our attention and our sensibility to become more subtle, to enable us to notice the subtle fantasy that's operating and to attune to it.

So these kinds of subtle fantasies, subtle images, are often present in our life, but we just don't recognize them. And we come into wrong relationship with them.

There's something related here as well that we should note: that often we are given images. We are given fantasies, if you like. We are called to them. We notice or discover images. So we have to, as I said, develop the sensibility, the sensitivity to discern them, to sniff them out, as it were.

It's not the case that it's always either possible or advisable just to move into a kind of active manipulation mode of practice where you just decide to see the self or life or this situation or this other or whatever it is—see it some way or other that's prescribed from the outside—as an image, as a fantasy, and that's supposedly helpful. Sure, there's a place for that, there's a time for that. But there's also a dimension of soul that we are given. As I said, we discover, we notice, we're called to, rather than just taking it out of a textbook and deciding to see it this way.

So both of these are helpful, but for me, for the fullness of soul-making and the depth, we also really need to be open to what's—if you like—what am I called to here, now? What image, what fantasy, what eros am I called to? Can I notice that?

But the main point right now is that sure, there's a place in our practice, in our lives, for images that are obvious. I had a dream last night and it's clearly an image visiting me in the dream. It may not seem to bear any relation to my life immediately, obviously. So I take that image from the dream and I can work with it. Or I'm sitting in meditation and doing some samatha or doing some emptiness, and the loosening that happens gives birth to an image. Or I'm tracking my emotions, I'm opening to my emotions in the energy body, and that gives rise to an image of this or that in meditation, and it's clearly an image.

But to me, the whole movement starts to include more and more.

The increasing subtlety of what image means to us, what fantasies we are in touch with and alive to in our lives—this is the movement. Eventually, we sense life as image, as soul. We sense life as image and as soul.

Imaginal meditation practice should gradually increase and develop our sensibility, our ability to sense life. What is life? Life is experience. Life is experience and appearance of self, concept of self, other, world. That's life. So imaginal meditation practice should develop and increase and open and deepen our sensibility and capacity to sense life as image, as soul.

Implicit in this is that there is less and less separation between something called meditation and something called life or relationship or work or whatever it is. But our culture—the dominant culture in the West and sometimes the dominant meditation cultures—do not support this.

That kind of bleeding into each other, overlap, interpenetration, recognition of the saturation of image and fantasy in our life, the necessity and inevitability of that recognition and the permission to enter into it and explore it and even expand it and use it artfully—the culture and the dominant teachings that we get through the larger culture of Western modernism at present does not support this. It supports rather the division into a simple real and a simple unreal. It's either real or it's imaginary. Or what is image gets reduced to some kind of psychological explanation.

Another thing that becomes evident as we recognize and acknowledge the centrality, necessity and inevitability of eros, psyche, fantasy, and image, and soul-making in our lives, and we begin to allow and explore all that, is that we start to realize that what we are calling soul is actually a missing element, an absent element in many psychologies at present. Certainly not all. And there are some psychologists who might use that word soul, but actually mean something either much smaller than what we're talking about, or in fact quite different. And certainly many philosophies in the past have used that word soul to mean something different.

We start to see—because we can't help but look around and feel the difference—that it's a missing element in many psychologies, this idea and experience of soul that we've been unfolding and exploring. Certainly many psychologies include heart and heartfulness, and certainly thought and awareness of thought and analysis of thought and belief, and maybe even the concept of modes of mind to a certain limited extent. But much less so elements of what we would call soul-making, soul and eros and the imaginal as we are presenting it.

Again, many psychologists might use the imagination, and some might really shun that and be fearful of the imagination, any use of the imagination, fearing one will lose touch with reality. But generally speaking, the element of soul and soul-making and eros, as we are talking about them, is often absent—it's a missing element.

Even in classical standard Theravādan Buddhist psychology, which is handed down to us in the Abhidhamma—the so-called higher teachings—you see this kind of minute attempt at classification, categorization, analysis, an almost bureaucratic movement of the mind in categorizing, for example, emotions and mind states. So you get a list of sad, happy, excited, peaceful, aversive, desiring, bored, and so on.

But one quickly gets the sense that it's either what we would now call a psychology without soul, or a psychology that does not serve and support and nourish soul-making. We get that sense, or that there actually is a fantasy operating there, but it's a fantasy of order, usually of one-dimensionality, of reductionism, and of clarity—a fantasy of clarity, that in dividing things up this way into some kind of neat categorical system, there is clarity.

But the question is: in that fantasy, that kind of limited, oftentimes one-dimensional fantasy, what comes from that? What is allowed from that? Where does it tend to go? What does it tend to open up for us in the experience of life? Where does it lead? What does it support? What does it not support? What does it not allow? What does it nourish? What does it not nourish?

We will also notice, again, if we recognize and acknowledge these aspects and dimensions of our existence that we're calling eros, fantasy, soul-making, image—the inevitability and necessity of that—we will also notice that there is fantasy operating in our relationship with the path: a fantasy of the path, a fantasy of awakening, a fantasy of the tradition, a fantasy of the self in relationship to that tradition on the path towards awakening.

And with all that, there's a fantasy or fantasies of the Buddha, if you're a Buddhist, or whatever teachers are important to you, have come alive to you through the aliveness that soul-making in relation to them must be there if there's devotion. The fire of that must be there. Whatever teachers have become alive to you and important, there will be fantasy of that. So it's fantasy of Buddha if you're a Buddhist.

And it's not that in realizing there's a fantasy of path and awakening and Buddha that we then say, "Oh, this is rubbish, throw it all out." There's a much more sophisticated understanding here, a much more sophisticated psychology here. Actually recognizing the fact that we have fantasies of the path, fantasies of the Buddha—the Buddha

for us is fantasy. It doesn't mean it's completely made up. Fantasy is in dialogue with what's there on the page in the suttas and what we've heard from other teachers and everything. But there's a fantasy that imbues that dialogue. I cannot separate it. And in the more sophisticated psychology, we understand we don't want to separate it. It would be a silly move.

There's a liberation of that capacity for fantasy to a certain extent. We feel liberated in relationship to the fantasies of Buddha, path, awakening, tradition, self on the path, and so forth. And there's soul-making allowed there.

I hope that you will dare to explore this in your relationship with practice in your life. So a person might say, if they hear from such and such a teacher, or read from such and such a teacher, or someone or other—some scholar or supposed scholar—"The Buddha taught basically something very simple. Try to be kind. Everything is impermanent. Everything is a process or a flow. So let go and experience ease. This is the goal. That's what the Buddha taught."

And the person might hear that or read that, or someone's trying to convince them of that. But recognizing this aspect of fantasy, they might actually say, "Is this such a Buddha who just taught that? Are they even that interesting as a Buddha? Is the fantasy there that I can kind of build on that or around that? If that's my fantasy of the Buddha, is it a fantasy commensurate with my soul and the needs for soul-making? Would such a Buddha as that be worthy of study and of the injection of eros and devotion in all the ways that devotion can come in—all the dimensions, if you like, or manifestations of devotion that can come into a path? Would such a Buddha as that be actually worthy of that much study, or the infusion of the erotic imaginal?"

And again, if one is subject to that kind of insistence from a writer or a teacher or whatever it is, who claims the Buddha did not teach any transcendent, unfabricated knowledge—as might be one interpretation of the Theravāda, that its central thrust is to a transcendent, unfabricated—and so and so might be saying, "The Buddha did not teach transcendent, unfabricated. He did not teach what we might call in our language the deep emptiness of all things," which perhaps was one of the two central thrusts of the Mahāyāna, of the development of the Mahāyāna. "And the Buddha did not teach how that understanding of the deep emptiness of all things begins to reveal more and more the divinity, if you like, or the sacredness of all things," which again you might see as one of the central thrusts of the Vajrayāna. "And presently the Buddha taught none of that." The person is insisting or claiming and trying to create a scholarship which sort of claims that.

Then one response would be: can I discover then, if you're saying that, can I discover or create and discover, create a Buddha that did or that will? I'm aware already that I discover slash create the Buddha anyway. I create and discover, you create and discover the Buddha anyway. And you might want a Buddha that taught deep things, wonderful things, much more for you to move into, to learn, to discover—a Buddha that taught the unfabricated, the transcendent unfabricated, that taught the deep emptiness of all things, that taught the opening into the perception, the cultivation of the perception of the divinity of all things, as they say in the Vajrayāna, to see all appearances as divine, the sacredness of all things.

Recognize that we create, discover the Buddha anyway. Aware of that, can I discover, create a Buddha that did teach all that, that will teach all that?

We talked also about this strange religious fantasy that puts the authority in the past, and if the historical Buddha didn't teach all that, why can we not regard it as an evolution of those who came later in his wake, in his stream, drawing on his platform, his teachings and giving another dimension, another level to the teachings as an evolution, as an improvement?

But there's something here about actually taking away a realist basis for the path in different ways through the emptiness and through the understanding and the imagination, taking away realist basis and recognizing the primacy of image, the inevitability of image and fantasy, the necessity of it, as we said. So the whole path, it's like taking away a tablecloth, you know, when you've got all the plates and cups on, whisking it away—and it comes to rest on the solid ground of what? Emptiness and image and fantasy.

So we have our solidities reversed, usually. We think the tablecloth is the most substantial thing that's keeping everything up, its insistence on reality and historical fact and whatever it is. Actually, as we've said, it's usually just me importing whatever my metaphysical beliefs are into my interpretation, my scholarly interpretation. Scholars do that. And actually taking away that insistence or desperate attempt at a kind of realism and actually recognizing that all this rests on the ground of the groundlessness of emptiness and of the imaginal. A whole different basis for what we're doing. A whole different basis. And the possibilities that opens up for us—experience and perception and conception and soul-making.

So there's all that. And again, one last piece about what we recognize, what we come to when we recognize and acknowledge this movement of eros in our lives and fantasy and soul-making. And we allow ourselves to explore. We recognize, implicit even in

that statement, is that we recognize that we care about soul-making. We care about soul-making. And more than that, we see that sometimes soul-making is not the same as reducing or ending suffering.

When we recognize this movement of Eros in our lives—in fantasy and soul-making—and allow ourselves to explore, we encounter a fundamental recognition: we care about soul-making. More than that, we see that sometimes soul-making is not the same as reducing or ending suffering. This presents us with a profound dilemma.

In what we're calling our phenomenological approach, we begin to recognize fabrication—of self, of perception, of world, of dukkha. We begin to understand dependent origination through playing with ways of looking. This gradually reveals the emptiness of all things, and eventually even reveals the emptiness of the whole notion of fabrication itself. It's a radical, radical emptiness of all things.

In the end, what we're left with is the recognition that all we have are ways of looking. There are just ways of looking, and those ways of looking are empty too. But that's all we have. There's something akin to a very radical version of postmodernist understanding here—all we have are ways of looking and the range of ways of looking that we have developed and can play with.

This raises a crucial question: how does one choose? On what basis does one choose between these different ways of looking—all the diverse ways we may have cultivated in practice?

The standard Buddhist answer would be that you choose according to the Four Noble Truths. In shorthand: I choose a way of looking that brings less suffering, either now or in the future. Whether that's metta, compassion, exchanging self and other, seeing whatever difficulty as anatta, contemplating impermanence—there are many possibilities. The standard answer from Buddha Dharma would be to choose the way of looking that most diminishes suffering.

But we might also choose a way of looking by asking: what brings soul-making? What is the way of looking, the way of relating to this experience—this constellation of self, other, world—right now that brings soul-making?

If we recognize in our lives Eros and image, fantasy and soul-making, and acknowledge their inevitability and necessity, then often we'll have two options. We can ask which of our available ways of looking decreases suffering, drains it out of the situation, or leads to less suffering. Or we can ask what supports, nourishes, opens, ignites soul-making.

Sometimes these two roads—toward less suffering and toward soul-making—are the same. Quite often they overlap significantly. But sometimes there are areas where they diverge.

The relationship between soul-making and the reduction of suffering is actually quite complex. If we're honest and careful in our observation, we cannot avoid this complexity. We will encounter these questions about the relationship between soul-making and suffering.

We've said that Eros and soul-making bring a decrease in dukkha and contraction—unlike craving and papañca, they actually bring less dukkha and ease contraction in various ways. But simultaneously, Eros always involves a certain amount of erotic tension, because it maintains the polarity and the pull toward more. The erotic relationship, because of imagination, often involves some sense of duty—to be deciphered, discovered, created. And if there's duty, then in relation to that duty, there is not complete freedom.

So we have freedom and the end of suffering on one side, and duty and erotic tension on the other—all involved in Eros. The relationship of Eros and soul-making to suffering is not straightforward.

Additionally, with the firing up and expansion of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, as the fire catches and spreads deeper and wider, sometimes in the breaking of the vessels, this expansion causes walls to shatter—walls of concept, vision, sensibility, awareness, relationship, structure. This expansion, particularly when sudden or abrupt, is not always peaceful. Sometimes it's even disturbing and disorienting.

Is that a reduction in suffering when soul-making happens that way? Sometimes it's delightful and beautiful, and sometimes it's not. The relationship remains complex and worthy of our deepest consideration.

And yet again, with all that, we could say, well, there's a kind of freedom of sorts right there. Freedom of what? Well, these walls—the walls of concept, the walls of vision, the walls of perception that I was enclosed in—have now just crashed open, and a certain freedom of thinking, of seeing, of sensing has emerged. So there is a kind of freedom there, but it's not always peaceful. And sometimes it's disturbing, complex.

James Hillman, in his presentation of the way he thinks about the imaginal and all that, insists that what he calls pathologizing is part of what the soul does. The soul is always involved in creating dukkha through the imaginal, and he devotes quite a lot of time to that and insisting on it. I would actually not agree with him that it's always the

case. In a way, maybe he was, as always, teaching contextually, and he was perhaps reacting to certain currents that were very dominant around him at that time in the 60s and 70s when he was first developing his ideas.

But I think for myself, I don't always agree with him about that at all. Or rather, I don't agree that that is always the case. Sometimes I think we need to recognize what he calls the pathology in a certain image opening up, the pathos in it, the kind of suffering that is endemic, intrinsic to a certain image, so that certain images do open up freedom in one way and a certain kind of pathos or suffering in another way.

So, for example, in the past I used to share about certain images that I would get recurrently, different variations of the kind of solitary wanderer. Beautiful, beautiful images and the divinity in them and the kind of archetypal nature of them and the beauty and the meaningfulness and depth of resonance there. I wouldn't want to trade that in for something that was more bland and avoided the soul-making that was implicit and involved in them. But there was a kind of loneliness in those solitary wanderer images, beautiful and moving and touching and opening and deepening as they were.

So I wouldn't agree with James Hillman in saying it's always like that, that soul-making always involves pathologizing. But I think we really need to keep the door open and be sensitive and discerning when that pathologizing—when the suffering—is actually part of the image, but it has this beauty and this meaningfulness-making and this opening quality to it in the theatre of it, and in the beauty of it. So it's almost like, don't shut the door on that. Recognize that it's necessary to some images at some points, and some movements of soul-making. And can we discern, can we listen, can we recognize?

Fourthly, in the Dharma, there's the teaching of—to quote Ajahn Chah—the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. He used to ask people, is this just suffering, or is it the suffering that's leading to end of suffering that you're going through right now? What kind of suffering are you going through right now if you're feeling suffering, if you're miserable, if you're distraught? Is it the suffering that leads to the end of suffering?

So there's this idea of the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. I was telling you about the Sayadaw U Pandita retreats in the 80s and how much suffering people used to experience—they called them the Dukkha retreats. It involves suffering, but it was thought to be the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. Or even just in people so often, as I think I mentioned as well, trying to develop their samādhi, their samatha, and hearing about the jhānas and wanting to go for that, and getting so tight around that movement and that directionality and that goal orientation, and then just dropping the whole thing because it's like, "I'll just be with what is" or whatever.

How do we determine if it's actually the case that this suffering that I'm experiencing is a suffering that leads to the end of suffering? It's not actually that obvious.

Furthermore, we recognize that soul-making is involved in a fantasy that's involved in the practice, about the practice, about the path, and about the suffering that the path involves—the difficulty, the hardship, the stretching of oneself. So, for example, on a Sayadaw U Pandita retreat, plenty of fantasy around the retreat, the retreat form, the experiences, the teacher, where it's going. And even the suffering on the retreat becomes embroidered into that fantasy. It's part of the fantasy, the suffering itself, the hardship, the dukkha.

Or on other retreats, in Goenka style, for instance, the suffering is conceived of as a purification. But certainly that kind of suffering becomes part of the fantasy. It's wrapped up with the sense of meaningfulness, the fantasy of the self, of the tradition, all of that.

It's not simple, this relationship of soul-making and the supposed lessening of suffering. And implicit in all these four ways that it's not simple that I've just gone through is what I've also mentioned before at different times—that the meaning of dukkha, often translated as suffering, the meaning of that word as the first noble truth, and the meaning of ending dukkha, ending suffering, or even reducing suffering, is now completely open to interpretation. Completely open.

Now where a lot of people, perhaps most, don't really subscribe to a belief in rebirth and that the end of dukkha is the end of rebirth and all that—what does it mean, dukkha, suffering? Some people say it just means this constriction and sort of pain at the existential situation, it's just that one is not adding to that with a kind of neurosis. But basically, in all these different interpretations, all these different explanations of the path and Buddhism, the meaning of the two central terms—dukkha and the end of dukkha—has become open to interpretation. So that also adds to the complexity, the openness of that question of what is the relationship between soul-making and the end of suffering.

Even more, and I'm not going to dwell on this, we can easily assume, if one is a Buddhist practitioner or certainly a Buddhist teacher, that one's engaged in something that just brings less suffering in the world. And it's very clear we're part of the movement towards less suffering in the world.

And so this question warrants much more investigation than might initially appear possible. Even when a person expresses deep gratitude—"You're so helpful, your teaching means so much"—I don't find myself completely drawn into the assumption that I am simply serving the end of suffering in the world. Even when hundreds of people offer such appreciation, it still warrants deeper investigation.

I've spoken about this before, though I won't dwell on it here: sometimes certain streams of Buddhism, particularly the insight meditation tradition I'm most involved with, tend to demonstrate a relative lack of engagement or modeling of political and environmental activism by us teachers. All of this leads me to question whether we can truly examine these fundamental assumptions—even the seemingly obvious one that we're contributing to a movement toward less suffering.

It appears so self-evident: of course we are, because we teach about love, letting go, kindness, and release. How could we not be reducing suffering? But I'm not prescribing how people should or shouldn't be, or what they should do instead. I'm not claiming definitively that we are or aren't creating less suffering. Rather, I want to open and insist upon questioning what we actually mean when we speak of ending or reducing suffering—dukkha and the cessation of dukkha. Can we perceive everything involved in these concepts, all the assumptions, the diversity of views and interpretations, the contradictions in our very language?

This questioning invites and necessitates an awareness of soul-making and fantasy in all of this. So again, the question of choosing ways of looking, of navigating our paths and lives—how do we choose? Is it simply those approaches that reduce suffering? What about soul-making ways of looking, relating, and conceiving that generate more dimensionality for the soul?

The relationship between these two premises or criteria for choosing and navigating is profoundly complex. If it doesn't seem complex, I believe it's only a matter of time before it will. As we delve deeper into both sides—the meaning of suffering and the recognition and exploration of soul-making—we discover a beautifully intricate relationship. We needn't be daunted or discouraged by complexity; it invites further exploration and questioning.

This lengthy introduction serves to recap what unfolds when we recognize and acknowledge eros, fantasy, and soul-making—when we accept their inevitability and necessity, allow them, and explore what opens from that recognition.

What I want to focus on now, and perhaps in the next talk as well, is how through this phenomenological approach, we begin to experience what we might call the opening of senses of divinity, along with the development of concepts of divinity. In both experience and ideation, divinity begins revealing itself through our phenomenological exploration.

I want to first acknowledge that different people have varying responses to certain words and language. Some, particularly some Buddhists, react strongly or uncomfortably to words like "God" or "divinity." Others experience quite the opposite—these theistic terms open something that Buddhist language doesn't reach or illuminate as fully.

Someone recently shared—a person with Catholic upbringing, though this doesn't necessarily depend on cultural conditioning—that hearing the word "God" opens far more within them than hearing "Buddha nature." Another expressed that their sense of the sacred heart of Jesus holds much more dimensionality, beauty, attraction, meaningfulness, and resonance than simply the word "compassion" or "karuṇā," or the cultivation of other beautiful qualities.

People differ in their responses, and I find myself somewhat torn about what to suggest. I could advise simply being comfortable—if I or others use words like "divinity" and you're uncomfortable or unmoved, substitute words that resonate for you. Choose your own language, be at ease.

On the other hand, I might suggest using words that stretch you, that you're unfamiliar with, that leave space for something new to open within you. Words you haven't already categorized with "I know what that means" or "It refers to this experience I have."

Perhaps it would be interesting to experiment with both approaches—the comfortable and familiar, and the stretching and unfamiliar.

Words like "divine," and I would include "Buddha nature," imply something—perhaps not even a thing—that cannot be fully captured, something infinite.

When I use terms like Buddha nature and divinity, I mean something not capturable, something infinite. Something not containable or graspable or fully definable—and this is often recognized in relation to divinity itself. So having said that, there is considerable folly in then going ahead and starting to talk about this. But still, I think turning away from the whole thing is also not the answer—just not speaking at all or not exploring delineations, definitions, the magic of words. All this can be soul-making. All this can fertilize our perception, our sensibility, our conceptions.

So we could draw attention to some aspects of the divine, if you like, or what we might call the divine or Buddha nature. I'm actually going to use those words interchangeably—or God or whatever—and I realize, of course, that's very contentious for some people. But we can draw attention to the fact that both experiences and concepts of divinity or the divine have in those experiences and concepts some sense of something that is more than the experience or more than the concept, something that's beyond.

In the very experience and concept is wrapped up, I think, a recognition, a feeling that the concept or the experience can never fully capture what divinity is. However, I would insist that concepts can still be helpful. It's like a jewel with infinite facets. This concept illuminates or reveals for our encounter, for our contemplation, for our experience and exploration—it reveals one facet, and a different concept reveals another facet. But the jewel itself could be said to have infinite facets. Therefore, it's still helpful to explore concepts. Just know that you're never going to get a concept that completely circumscribes the whole thing.

And the same with experiences of the divine. In the experience itself, there's this feeling—generally speaking I would say—as if there's more. Something that, this experience is just one face, let's put it that way. The experience is just one face of the divine. With experience, that's not always obvious at first. And of course, we can come into wrong relationship with concepts and believe that we have captured something like that fully, the divine fully. But with concepts and experience, I'll say it's the same.

There's such a diversity of experiences of the divine, such variety. And again, I would say infinite—the senses of sacredness that we can have, the senses of divinity we can have are infinite, partly to do with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and the way that moves, as we've been discussing.

Implicit in what I want to say also is that our experiences of the divine over time evolve. We get to have more depth, more diversity, more range in our experiences of divinity. So we're talking about something that, in both the experience and concepts, hopefully—certainly potentially—evolves. Experience and concepts of divine evolve. Partly, as I said, because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, and partly just through deepening insight into less fabrication. But there's always this sense of more or beyond or an infinity in some way that can't quite get around.

Concept means to, in a way, to take. So there's a taking, a kind of grasping at—the word concept actually implies a holding of something, taking hold of. There's something in the sense and the concepts of divinity that I would say sooner or later, and usually soon, recognizes that can't be completely grasped that way, either through the experience or through the concept.

But I want to point out something about experiences of the divine that maybe isn't obvious, partly because it's so hard to articulate. If we look carefully and kind of get used to those kinds of experiences, experiences of the divine have—we sense something of relationship. They're relational experiences. Now, they can include the sense of a personal divinity and the relationship of this self with a personal divinity, absolutely. But even experiences of an impersonal divine—vast awareness or vast love or all kinds of things—they still feel or seem, or we still sense, again maybe not obviously at first, but they're related to who I am. So there's still relationship implicit in them in terms of who I am.

Or we could say experiences of divinity are related to who I am. They have something to say, something to open me to, to inform me about who I am. They bear on who I am most essentially, most fundamentally in my depths. So this, I think, is not obvious at first, but I'd say—I just want to draw out a couple of characteristics of experiences of the divine, despite their diversity. I'd say they're relational—at least they're related to who I am. They say something about me, inform me about me, open me to realize something about who I am.

Now, we could say that experiences of the divine involve a sense or recognition that who I am, this self, the very existence of this self, of who I am—whether I realize it or not, I recognize in an experience of divine that whether I realize it or not, when I'm aware of it or when I'm not aware of it, or if I'm not yet aware of it or someone else who's not yet aware of it—is somehow always contained. This self, this who I am, is somehow always, or at least a part of who I am, is always contained or subsumed in or part of or related to or participating in something vaster.

Not something vaster that's rigidly boundaried, like a nation-state, for example. So someone could feel like, I don't know, with the rise of nationalism at different times in history, in different places, and feel like I'm really part of something vaster. But that's very rigidly boundaried because there's us and them.

Not like that. Rather, something that also contains, subsumes, includes, and in a way is everything—and more than everything. In other words, it's not just the totality of things.

We could say that experiences of the divine are relational, involving a recognition about the relationship of who I am. They relate to who I am in its relationship with—whether one realizes it or not—something much larger that contains and subsumes it, that the self is a part of or related to or participates in. And that something is not a rigidly bounded identity, but rather something that, as I said, also subsumes, contains, includes, or is everything and more than the totality of things.

But even that may be too far a step. If we just go back a little and say experiences of the divine—the diversity of experiences of the divine—have some sense of being relational. They are related to a sense of who I am most deeply, and recognize that this is the case anyway, whether I realize it or not. What they say about who I am and what who I am is in relationship with is the case whether I realize it or not—because that is an aspect of experience of the divine.

Perhaps it would be better to say that the nature of the experience of relationship with the divine in those kinds of experiences is something akin to echoes—like echoes in a canyon. We cannot find the end point. We cannot find the terminus, the termination, the limit of those echoes or of the sense of the divine. So there's a sense in this relating that it's somehow like an echo, echoing into the infinite beyond or the unknown.

It's something I know very palpably and it's very right here, and yet there's also this dimensionality, this echoing into the infinite beyond, the unknown, some kind of unfathomability, and therefore some kind of mystery. Again, there's a range, a huge variety there.

But the nature of the experience of relationship that's intrinsic to an experience of divinity is something akin to an echoing without an end point. Or something like infinite mirrors reflecting each other—the reflection of the reflection of the reflection of the reflection. It's hard to put this into language. This is the best I can do right now. But again, I'm pointing to something that we can notice in our experiences when we feel a sense of divinity. It's very hard to articulate.

That sense of infinite echoing, infinite mirroring, the endlessness of that, the sense of endless mirroring or echoing—it doesn't necessarily imply spatiality, that kind of endlessness. It might or it might not. It doesn't imply vastness in that sense necessarily. But that sense of endlessness and infinity intrinsic to the experience of the divine—that sense of infinity and endlessness in the echoing and the mirroring and the lack of a discernible end point—is not nihilistic in its implications or its feeling. It doesn't give a sense of meaninglessness. Rather, it gives a sense of beauty, a sense of belonging, of love, of place, of blessing.

All this, as I said, are aspects of experiences of what we're calling the divine. There's a huge diversity, and the experiences of the divine evolve, or can evolve, as well as the concepts for different reasons.

I would also say that there's a dimension of timelessness to the divine, to the Buddha-nature. For me, it involves that. It might not be all that it is, or all the dimensions of the divine might not be timeless, but there is a dimension of timelessness to the divine, to the Buddha-nature.

As we said, there will be dimensions of the Buddha-nature that are beyond the full grasp of our understanding or our conceptualization. But in all of this, there's a sense of rightness. There's something right about the experience. There are implications—a sense of meaningfulness implicit in the experience, involved, woven into the experience, implied by the experience—and beauty. In the divinity, there is beauty. And in our relationship, our sense of the relationship that's implicit in the experience of divinity, there's beauty in that as well.

All that I would point out—again, what's actually quite hard to articulate and what's not always obvious in these kinds of experiences. I'm sure I'm leaving much unsaid.

Now, our experiences and our concepts of divinity we could divide into two types, and I've touched on this before already.

We could divide our experiences and concepts into the transcendent experiences and concepts, and what we call immanent. Now these two words, transcendence and immanence—people use them in divinity contexts and in very different ways.

What I mean by transcendent in this case is that the divinity or the unfabricated transcends perception, transcends space, time, a sense of self, of other, of any object whatsoever. It transcends any kind of conventional perceptual constellation of subject, object, time—even if it's a sense of oneness and a sense of present moment. So I mean it in that sense: the unfabricated, the transcendent, what's transcendent to our usual perception is the main point.

As I said, we've talked a lot about and written about the way that in the Dharma, meditation practice can be used—certain ways of looking—to fabricate less and less perception and eventually open up to that transcendent, unfabricated.

So there's the transcendent sense of divinity, or kind of experience and concept of divinity, and there's what we might call the immanent. Again, used in different ways, but what I really mean here is this world of fabrication and a sense of that world itself being divine. So yes, these objects that I perceive, this self that is perceiving, the subject,

the object, the perceiving itself, the world—all of that. There's a sense of an increasing fullness, if you like, of the perception of divinity in the realm of perception and in all kinds of ways, so that yes, it's fabricated. One acknowledges that. One has gone perhaps deep enough into the understanding of fabrication that divinity starts to reveal itself in different ways, and different possibilities for that perception open up.

But we want, I would say, to open up these experiences of transcendent and immanent divinity from our practice or through our practice. In other words, from what we're calling our phenomenological approach. This, for me, is really important. From the very phenomenological approach that we talked about right at the beginning of the retreat: through practice, through approaching practice with a certain very open, basic conceptual idea, and then through the exploration of ways of looking—all this can open up.

So often, historically in the West, it is assumed that anything that kind of talks about or points to or upholds something beyond the sort of flat one-dimensionality of materialist existence—any talk of divinity—is metaphysics. Metaphysics is often a very charged word and a very derogatory word sometimes, but it's used in very different ways, or rather it means quite a lot of different things and it's used to mean different things by different people at different times.

But one of the things it means is this talking about or referring to or pointing to or insisting on or drawing attention to anything that's beyond this sort of flat one-dimensional view of reality. Any talk of divinity—anything, actually, that is more than what is obvious to the normal, untrained, modernist perception, unless it's approved scientifically by scientific authorities. Anything that is more than what is obvious to the normal, typical, untrained perception of a Westerner today in our modernist culture is regarded as metaphysics.

And it's often assumed that any talk of divinity or something like an unfabricated is metaphysics. And metaphysics is rooted in abstract thought, in belief, in speculation. Those words often go together: metaphysical speculation. Actually, the word speculation is from the word speculum in Latin, which means mirror. So it's supposed to mirror reality, if you like, or truth, but it's come to mean something quite different. Speculation is just like conjecture, or groundless speculation.

But there's often this assumption that all this talk about divinity is just metaphysics. It's just metaphysics. It's something beyond the seemingly obvious one-dimensional, therefore it's not real.

For example, I have this book here by a guy called Moshe Barasch. It's a book called Icon, studying the histories of the idea of the icon in Western, but also Middle Eastern thought. And he quotes a passage from our friend who I mentioned earlier in the retreat, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who wrote some works, one of which is called Mystical Theology.

Barasch writes that he gives a concise summary of apophatic negative theology in the shape of a compressed description of what happens when we are being uplifted. Let me read the quote from Pseudo-Dionysius and then come back to what this means or how one might read it, how different people read it.

So Pseudo-Dionysius writes in his Mystical Theology: "As we climb higher we say this: It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech or understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. Darkness and light, error and truth, it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it. For it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and perfect nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation. It is also beyond every denial."

You will recognize, if not in all of that, at least in other words—apart from the thing about cause—something very, very close and almost echoing the Buddha's words in some of those quotes I shared earlier about when he taught about the unfabricated. There are passages in the Pali Canon: "This neither long nor short, beyond measure," and so on, "no sun, no moon shines there," all of this, where phenomena cease, all ways of speaking cease, beyond mind. All this is very characteristic of what is called the apophatic movement—the movement, in our language, towards the quieting of fabrication and eventually the cessation of the fabrication of perception. In Christian terminology, that's called the apophatic way, the via negativa, the way of negation. Not this, not that, neti, neti. What we want is something that's beyond all fabrication, all perception, therefore, in the usual sense.

To me, that passage clearly reads as a description of...

of the experience of the meditator or the person in prayer, as they go through this process of letting go of fabrication, letting go in relation to what is fabricated and therefore fabricating less. Remember, relating all this to clinging, letting go of clinging, the spectrum of what clinging is, and then the decrease in fabrication. And going, if you like, in St. John's language, into the cloud of unknowing, into the darkness of God. Or in Meister Eckhart's language, beyond creatures, beyond what is created, what is fabricated.

To me, this passage of Pseudo-Dionysius is a clear description of a meditative progression of experience. What strikes me as amazing is what follows immediately in Moshe Barasch's book. He writes: "It is tempting to speculate what Dionysius could have had in mind when he tried to imagine, however vaguely, what the ascending soul might meet on its way upwards." In other words, he's reading this passage as just some kind of imagination and speculation on Pseudo-Dionysius' part. It's merely metaphysics, this abstraction coming from thought that you then imagine what someone might experience. And then Barasch continues: "This is not the place to indulge in such speculation."

So often there's this assumption about talk of other dimensions or divinity or something that sounds like what we just heard from Pseudo-Dionysius or the unfabricated. There's this insistence that it's just abstract thought. I don't know enough about the history, but sometimes I read things and it does seem that often some people start with some kind of ultimate metaphysical positing of, say, perfection. There is something or some entity that is perfect, and then proceed logically from that to deduce all kinds of things from that ultimate speculation about something that's perfect—speculation in the modern sense of the term.

So for example, in Plato you get something called the Good, and it's the ultimate reality, and it's assumed to be perfect. And then following in Neoplatonism and in Thomas Aquinas and many, many teachers and writers in Western history, there is the perfection of the Good. And because the Good is supposed to be perfect, therefore it follows X, and therefore it follows Y. So for example, out of this perfect One, because of its very perfection and absence of limitation, the many are born. And there is the world of manifestation and plurality and diversity that comes out of it. And even out of this Good, because of its perfection and superabundance and lack of limitation, even evil comes out of it.

There's a kind of logical movement from some metaphysical postulation of something ultimate and perfect, and then a sort of logical deduction of the world and what we find in the world coming from that. And this is detectable not just in Western philosophy and the Greek tradition, but it's also evident in Indian traditions. In Dzogchen it's actually called the Great Perfection.

I don't know enough about the history of that, but certainly in Indian Mahayana teaching you can see a historical movement, inclination, tendency to kind of axiomatically posit as a fundamental truth the Buddha's perfection—so he is the ultimate being and he is perfect in every way. And so what follows from that: he must have been like

this, he must have had this kind of body and he must have had this, and he must be able to do this and that. This is a kind of expansion of what a Buddha means historically just by virtue of positing his ultimacy and perfection.

Now that had all kinds of strange and unforeseen consequences, also very interesting consequences, and I think actually fruitful ones, but I know people would debate that. So if a Buddha is, for example, ultimate in his compassion, he is the ultimately compassionate being, how do I square that with the fact that by virtue of his realization, his enlightenment, he's going to end rebirth and therefore not be available to help people who are suffering? He's supposed to be ultimately compassionate.

So these two conflicting threads of the teaching and the supposition about ending rebirth and yet being ultimately compassionate, infinitely compassionate—they actually came together because they're conflicting. They actually had to give rise to a kind of expansion of the logos of what Buddhahood was, the Buddhology, if you like. And included in that, which I've touched on before, was the whole explanation and ramifications that came out of it, of how then the Buddha is the only being, a Buddha is the only kind of being that can fully and deeply see the emptiness of things at the same time as actually perceiving those things.

Because for everyone else, as I'm pretty sure I've explained, as you contemplate the emptiness while you're looking at something, that thing will fade. Why? Because the avijjā is getting less, and the avijjā fuels, stimulates the fabrication in the wheel of dependent origination of nāma-rūpa, of which perception is a part. More avijjā, more perception, more solidity of perception, more forms, more delineation. Less avijjā, it quietens down. No avijjā, no perception.

A Buddha is the only person—this was all very, I think, beautifully and cunningly, but slightly bizarrely, had to be drawn in to answer this question of: well, if he ends rebirth and he's ultimately compassionate, how does that fit together? Because if he's compassionate, he needs to see beings, but yet he must...

Anyway, the main point is that it's often assumed that metaphysics is rooted in abstract thought, abstract belief, abstract speculation. So there is an aphorism or slur that, I don't know who came up with it, but it's sort of around, that metaphysics—in other words, the pursuit of divinity and of the unfabricated—is like a person walking into a dark cellar at midnight with no light and looking for a black cat that is not there. So it's kind of funny, but obviously it implies that metaphysics is something ridiculous. It's a futile endeavor. Looking for divinity or the unfabricated, some kind of beyond—just silly, pointless, futile.

What, though, if we start with phenomena instead?

Which I'm almost certain that many of these teachers in the past, and possibly even Plato, certainly Plotinus, had experience of this unfabricated, this beyond, this good, this whatever they called it. Certainly it is not the case that everyone is starting with this abstract thought.

What if we start with phenomena instead—in other words, appearances, that's what that word means, appearances. What appears to us? What do we experience? What if we start with phenomena instead, rather than starting with some kind of ultimate postulate of what God is or whatever?

Then we might say that metaphysics taken the other way round—starting with some kind of postulate of what God is or how God must be or what the divine is or what Buddha nature must be or what Buddha must be like—then a better metaphor for metaphysics, rather than this looking for the black cat in the dark that isn't there, would be something like putting the cart before the horse. In other words, getting things in the wrong order.

What if we start with what we observe, what we actually experience, and investigate that experience and the range of it and how it is affected in different ways by ways of looking? Then that phenomenological approach can actually open up the discoveries of metaphysics in the sense of other dimensionalities, the divine, the experience of the divine, the unfabricated. We start from phenomena, from appearance, from experience, and our play with that, our investigation of ways of looking at that.

Now that implies that experience is somehow being used as a basis for our epistemology, for our claims of knowing something. Experience is somehow a basis for epistemology. But what I would like to say is we must include a range of experience there. We must include the experience of lessening fabrication, the observation of how appearances fade to different degrees depending on the degree of clinging. We must include the experience, if we can call it that, of the unfabricated. We must include this growing understanding of dependent origination and of how ways of looking condition and fabricate the experience.

So experience somehow is a basis for epistemology, but how and to what extent? And there is always an epistemology. There is always an epistemology that we are engaging in, living and practicing. And epistemology always involves some assumptions, always rests on some assumptions that actually are ultimately not provable.

So that goes for what I'm presenting as the phenomenological approach. It's not outside. It doesn't exist without certain assumptions. It certainly involves an epistemology, what I'm calling a phenomenological approach. And that epistemology rests on some assumptions, and some of those assumptions are unprovable. And that is an inescapable fact of our existence.

One of the questions here is, can we recognize this? That there is always an epistemology. That epistemology, whatever we use for our epistemology, always involves some assumptions. And actually expose that, recognize it, become aware of it, and expose it. Be honest about it. So not doing that leads to all kinds of pitfalls and contradictions and limitations.

You can imagine a kind of conversation, for instance, if I said to someone of a certain dogmatic persuasion, "Space and time are not fundamental, they are emergent." And they might reply, this person perhaps from a sort of devout, secularist, dogmatic point of view, "Oh, that's metaphysics." If I say space and time are not fundamental, they are emergent—"Oh, that's metaphysics, because that's saying something about some kind of transcendent beyond."

And I might say, or a person might say, "Oh, but actually it's science." And the word science has a certain clout in our culture. "It's still science." And then you refer to theories of both special and general relativity, and how time and space are shaped and relative to the observer and all kinds of things. But even beyond that, in the more contemporary theories that haven't been proved yet but are certainly strong contenders and themselves emerging into the forefront of modern physics research, is actually not just that space and time are shaped, but that they actually emerge from something more fundamental, that is beyond space and beyond time. Even the present moment, all of it. Not just shaped, but actually emerge.

So I could say, whoever is in dialogue with this person, "Oh, but that's science," and explain that a little bit to them. And they might say, "Well, that's all very good and well, but it's better for practitioners to go back to their experience, or we are basing our teaching on experience," to which a person might respond: "But what if a transcendence of space and of time are sometimes a person's experience?" Certainly something that we cultivate in meditation, the access to that kind of experience.

So you're saying, "Oh, forget about all that science stuff, which can sound kind of mystical. Let's go back to experience." But what if a person's experience does include that? Sometimes going in and out of a transcendence of space and time and things. If you're basing your epistemology and teaching on experience, then why not include these experiences? Especially as they're repeatable experiences. One can actually learn

how to move in and out of such experiences, dependent on certain laws—if you like, laws of fabrication, of dependent origination. Why do you say you include those experiences, but not these experiences?

We have the authority of science, but science involves training. Not everyone can be a theoretical physicist who understands relativity or quantum mechanical reality. It involves training. It's not easy. Practice is the same. It involves training. Maybe not for everyone. Not everyone wants to. And some of it's not easy.

But there's something, a question here. Why, if you're basing it on experience—which you clearly are, or a person says, "We base our dharma on experience"—but then you're excluding certain meditative experiences just because what? Because you haven't had them? Why should the authority of what counts as true or untrue, or dharma or not dharma, or epistemologically valid—why should the authority rest with those with less skill and less range in their experience and meditation?

Some people get nervous. It's like, "Well, we can't have elites claiming a certain esoteric knowledge and then having all the power." There's a danger there, of course there is—priests and abuse and all that kind of stuff. Because we know, we have the power, we have the mystical insight that you don't have. There's a danger there, of course there is, and people have pointed to this in history, in all kinds of ways, religious and secular as well, in fact. Nowadays, sometimes some journalists are pointing to the swing the other way. There's a kind of dismissal and ignoring and denigration of any kind of expertise. So it's like ignorance is to be somehow celebrated.

But there's questioning about authority, about epistemology, about consciousness and honesty about epistemology and authority, exploration of these things. And what is the place of experience—and what range of experience—in the epistemology, in the revelation and discovery of, let's say, reality, truth, dimensionality, divinity, whatever words you might want to pick there.

So going from what we're calling a phenomenological approach—and just to point out, our phenomenological approach, or the way we're using that word, phenomenological approach, that phrase, is not just the same as just observing. We're including more than that in our phenomenological approach. I would say just observing is a bit of a misnomer and based on a misunderstanding, but it's one of the ways that the term phenomenology gets used or practice gets thought about as well.

Why is it different? Why is it more than that for us? Because we realize and we acknowledge and we see that the ways of looking fabricate the experience. So the experiences that we encounter, undergo, that are open to us, that we live, if you like, are de-

pendent on the ways of looking that we are employing, that are in place at any time. And we recognize, we realize, we acknowledge, we see also the necessity and the inevitability of making certain delineations in our conceptuality—conscious or unconscious, subtle or gross—and how that also gives rise to, fabricates the experience.

And the exploration of all that—contingency, dependency on ways of looking and conceiving, how all that gives rise to experience and the range of experience dependent on that—that's what we're calling our phenomenological approach.

So sometimes some phenomenological philosophers want to talk about the experience of self phenomenologically, but there is no one phenomenological experience of self. A, it's culturally conditioned hugely, and B, as we've just said, it's dependent on the way of looking and the delineations existing at any time. So we can talk about experiences of something that we might call self, but it is plural. If we just observe, what we realize is that the self is like this. More than that, we, as I've said many times before, we actually see that without distinctions and delineations and ways of looking, no perception is possible. There isn't any perception without some conception, which involves distinction, delineation—even the barest subject-object, or present moment, delineation, distinction, discrimination. Conception is involved in perception. Perception implies ways of looking. Nothing arises, is fabricated without distinction, delineation, ways of looking.

And there is no reality—if you like, there's no perception independent of these. There's no experience independent of ways of looking, distinction, delineations. Nothing is given to us by something independent of ways of looking.

The myth of the given, I think, is a phrase in contemporary philosophy.

So with our phenomenological approach—what we're calling our phenomenological approach—we can open to the unfabricated and the understanding of dependent origination or the emptiness of all things. That is one type, one face, if you like, one aspect or dimension or divinity that can open through the phenomenological approach.

If I view practice—Dharma practice—as just being mindful in the sense of just being present and learning to concentrate or focus my mind and developing metta, developing kindness, being kind... if that's what my practice involves, just that: mindfulness, being with what is, concentrating my mind, focusing my mind on my breath or at times to calm down, and being kind—that's not the phenomenological approach that we're talking about. That involves this exploration, conscious exploration of the range of ways of looking.

That kind of view or conceptual understanding of what the Dharma is and what practice involves and what meditation is—mindfulness, concentration, and metta—almost certainly is very unlikely to lead to an understanding, a deep understanding of the radical emptiness of all things. And it's highly unlikely that it will open up all the possibilities that come both out of seeing emptiness and out of the recognition of soul-making and eros and the allowing of that.

So what we have again is a broader mindfulness, a certain way of thinking about what mindfulness is that we're calling our phenomenological approach. And that can open us to, in time, the sense of a transcendent divinity. We might call it the unfabricated, or whatever word we use for it.

And within our broader phenomenological approach, within a sort of—as I said right at the beginning of this talk—less tightly constrained or conceived of mindfulness, we will also lead to an exploration of eros and soul-making. And that will bring more of this, more experiences and concepts of the immanent divine. I mean, the way via reduction of clinging and going right through the unfabricated and then the emptiness of the unfabricated also brings a certain kind of experience of the immanent divine, absolutely. But the range is greatly opened up once we include an awareness of eros and soul-making and allow that and begin to explore that.

Let's go into that a little bit more in the next talk. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 87

From Mindfulness to Divinity: Towards the Tracing of a Phenomenology of Soul (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h41

> *In this profound dharma talk from the Eros Unfettered retreat, Rob Burbea continues his exploration of how a phenomenological approach to meditation—understanding how different ways of looking create different appearances—naturally unfolds experiences of divinity. He examines how the practice of lessening fabrication leads through various onenesses to the unfabricated, and ultimately to seeing the emptiness of all phenomena including the unfabricated itself.*
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> *Burbea demonstrates how this understanding of radical emptiness opens permission to explore the imaginal realm, as the division between 'real' and 'unreal' softens. He details how the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, when allowed to unfold naturally, creates both transcendent and immanent experiences of divinity—from universal consciousness to the recognition of all things as sacred. Key concepts include the 'angel out ahead' from Corbin, the tselem from Jewish mysticism, and Vajrayāna deity practices as ways the self participates in divinity.*
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> *The talk explores how soul-making eros moves in two directions: toward the unfabricated transcendent and toward soul-making fabrication in the world. Drawing on Kabbalistic and other mystical traditions, Burbea shows how these apparently opposite movements can be unified, with our human eros participating in divine eros itself. He concludes by examining how phenomenological practice arrives at insights equivalent to classical metaphysical teachings, but through lived experience rather than abstract theorizing.*

When we adopt what we are calling our phenomenological approach to practice—when we think of meditation and practice and inhabit it as the exploration of how different ways of looking lead to different appearances, different experiences, different perceptions—we engage in an investigation into the dependent arising fabrication of appearance, perception, experience, of self, of others, of the world, of things both external and internal. We explore how different ways of looking condition, give rise to, and fabricate differences in appearance.

When we adopt that phenomenological approach as a way of conceiving what meditation is and as a way of directing our practice, this will unfold a stream of discoveries and insights whereby we understand dependent origination—the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination—more and more deeply, more and more thoroughly, really unfolding and unfurling for ourselves the mystery and beauty of that teaching.

Part of this process is the development of the skill of learning to fabricate less, so that we encounter and open to states of less fabrication of perception, less fabrication of experience. With time and practice, we extend our range on that spectrum of lessening fabrication and develop the meditative skill, art, and know-how of moving up and down that spectrum and broadening that range.

Through all of this, or as part and parcel of all of this, we encounter as stages of lessening fabrication different kinds of onenesses. As we've said before, there is the oneness of a kind of cosmic consciousness or universal awareness, of infinite space, infinite nothingness, oneness of materiality, oneness of love—all kinds of oneness.

We also encounter, eventually, hopefully opening to the unfabricated, what's beyond even those kinds of oneness. And we can even go beyond, so to speak, the unfabricated, to recognize the emptiness of all things—absolutely all things. We see the emptiness, the thorough emptiness, not just of the self, but also of all things, all objects, including the aggregates that make up, in one system of Buddhist psychology, the elements of the process of self. We see those too are in themselves empty of inherent existence. They are fabricated as well. We see the emptiness of space, of time, and even the emptiness of the unfabricated.

Following this trajectory of deepening insight and the beauty of that path, we come to a position of freedom where we have liberated ways of looking and are left with ways of looking to play with—a potentially increasing range of ways of looking. There are, if you like, only ways of looking, as a way of putting it.

In that journey, there are various experiences of divinity that will emerge for us as palpable experiences at different stages of that process—different stages of the insight opening, different stages of perception unfabricating throughout that whole journey.

These kinds of oneness can be perceived and felt as perceptions of divinity, absolutely, and they usually are. As a teacher, I'm struck by how people often start talking in theistic terms when they open to this universal sense of compassion that seems to be woven through the fabric of the cosmos, or this infinite consciousness, or whatever.

Then there's the divinity of the transcendent, unfabricated—that's also part of that journey. And there's the experience of another kind of divinity, where all is divine. This comes because one has gone beyond and seen through any duality between the fabricated and the unfabricated. We see the emptiness of that duality eventually, and it collapses, so to speak, so that we can enter into a way of looking that sees all things as not separate from an awareness that is beyond time and beyond space, and not mine. Then everything is sacred. There isn't this hierarchy of unfabricated over fabricated. All of it is divine.

But it's all, in a way, beyond time—unlike the other awarenesses, the other onenesses of universal awareness or infinite consciousness or universal love that seem to exist eternally in the sense of for an everlasting time.

On that route I've talked about and written about much before, we could say that there are these kinds of divinities that emerge for us, are revealed to us, that we discover. They include, if you're listening carefully, both the transcendent kind and what was called the immanent kind, because it does involve the oneness, the divinity here, pervading, woven into, not separate from the things of the world. So that direction of unfolding of divinity includes both transcendent and immanent experiences and conceptions of divinity. But they're all universal divinity—all experiences or conceptions of some kind of universal divine on that trajectory.

Any point on that trajectory satisfies something in the soul, satisfies something in the psyche, in the citta. The oneness of universal love, for instance, really satisfies something in the soul. Something in the soul is really touched by that and really is satisfied. Is it finally forever satisfied with that? No. But something is satisfied.

The fantasy that gets woven around that journey and that movement to these different stages of realization, the eros in relationship to these different beyonds that we're yet to encounter, the fantasies and the eros in relation to these experiences of universal divinity and concepts of universal divinity—those fantasies and eros in relation to all that is soul-making in the sense that we have been talking about it.

So these unfoldings, these openings, these relative unfabrications, these deeper movements and openings of insight, satisfy something in the soul. And in relation to them, soul-making in the sense that we have been talking about on this course is also involved.

Now, when we really understand for ourselves the emptiness of all things, the thorough and radical emptiness of absolutely everything—certainly when we see that for ourselves, but even if we can only intuitively sense it before we've even seen it, or even

if something in us has faith in that—this can also be quite powerful. What happens or what can happen is that such an insight, or even if it's only an intuition or faith—by intuition I mean just a not complete realization in the being, in the perception, in the experience, and in the understanding—can be transformative.

That realization of the radical, thorough emptiness of absolutely everything softens the divisions that we tend nowadays in our culture to make between the real and the unreal. Because we understand there is no object of perception that is not fabricated. There is no object of perception that is not fabricated.

We can only really buy into that division of real and unreal when we believe that the real refers to something, or we are vaguely implying in our thought that what we think of as real is something unfabricated. Going deeply into emptiness, we rather cannot find an object of perception that is not fabricated. It's all empty.

Because it softens the division between real and unreal, this is the least that emptiness does: to open up a permission and a legitimacy for exploring the imagined. Because there isn't this hardcore distinction between the real and the unreal, the real and the imaginary.

Now, it's not quite that simple just to say everything's empty, therefore everything's equally real or real in the same way or unreal in the same way. At a certain level, that's true. In other words, the ultimate ontological status, the ultimate kind of reality that everything has is that it's empty, so that ultimately they're the same. But on other levels, there are differences. Of course there are differences.

So there are differences in what we call ontic status, in the kind of reality that's possessed by, let's say, a physical object on the one hand and an imaginal perception on the other. Just because everything is empty doesn't imply that the imaginal has the same kind of ontic status as physical objects. Ultimately it does, in both being empty and thoroughly empty. But they're not quite the same.

Still, the seeing of the deep emptiness of things, or trust in the deep emptiness of things, conviction in the deep emptiness of things—the thorough emptiness of all things gives, as I say, at the very least, in relation to the imaginary, some opening, permission, legitimacy, freedom and flexibility to explore the imaginary.

I actually think the ontology is interesting. What exactly can we say about, in our ontology, about the kind of reality that an image has versus what is imaginary, the imaginal versus the imaginary, versus the psychic, a dream or an image that is actually what

we call extrasensory perception, picking up on something that then happens in the future exactly as one imagined it. And what's the difference between that and physical objects or mental thoughts or emotions?

To me, that's all very interesting. People at different points in history have offered different systems of ontology and explanation, either with a lot of intelligence or not so much intelligence and more or less value in terms of the use that comes out of it. But these change over history. And on what authority could we ever even finally discover the truth about this? To me, it's still interesting.

Something happens when we realize something about conceptual frameworks, about logos in general and truth, and we realize that no conceptual framework, no logos is going to capture once and for all and universally the whole truth of things, of existence—even of one dimension or aspect of our existence. Let's say the imagination or even emotion or eros, or even materiality.

Once one realizes that kind of level of emptiness, then to me it's possible to explore and play with, as I said, entertain different conceptual frames, different logoi, different ways of looking. In other words, different ontologies and epistemologies, different cosmologies, rather than just shrugging at our inability to find a final truth and then ending up just by default reverting to whatever is the most popular worldview of ontology and metaphysics in our culture.

Instead of just shrugging and reverting, we can actually be quite creative with this. Enter into and entertain different logoi, different ontologies, different conceptual systems. Because one realizes something about conceptual systems and truth in general.

In addition to these points, we've also said that if we just observe our life and our experiences honestly, openly, without too much constriction in our logos, and what we actually observe—in other words, if we're quite open in what we're paying attention to—there's another kind of phenomenological approach here, or an aspect of our phenomenological approach.

We begin to recognize and acknowledge that eros is in our lives. There's something called eros which isn't really the same as craving. It's a kind of desire. It's different than what we might call craving. We need to make a delineation. Something is there that's operating already in our life. Maybe a lot, maybe a little. Fantasy operates in our life. Soul-making operates in our life.

These are delineations that need to be made once we start looking at our life, and making delineations, as I've said, actually opens them up further, enriches them further—like putting your foot in a crack in the door and being able to open up a path. We recognize and acknowledge the inevitability and the necessity of eros, of image, of fantasy, of soul-making. Then we begin to explore.

We can begin to explore. And what do we notice, as we said? We notice the perception of more dimensionality, more dimensions here in the erotic object, in the element of the erotic constellation, the imaginal constellation.

We notice dimensionality, dimensions, meaningfulness, beauties, timelessness, unfathomability—all these aspects of the soul-making erotic imaginal. And all these aspects—dimensionality, meaningfulness, beauty, timelessness, unfathomability—we could say they are all aspects of a sense of sacredness. We could use that word.

So we start to encounter more and more of a sense of sacredness. And why more and more? Because the soul-making dynamic, the eros psyche logos dynamic, tends to expansion, fertilization, enrichment, complication, multifacetedness, widening, deepening. So that involved in that, implicitly involved in that, is the sense of sacredness. And because that's woven into the soul-making dynamic and the expansion of eros psyche logos, the senses of sacredness are also enriched, deepened, widened, complicated, given other facets, given other dimensions.

So they're widened cosmopoetically—in other words, more and more this sense of sacredness spills over to infect, in the good sense, the way laughter is infectious, infect the whole cosmos, so to speak. It widens in that sense. It also widens in the sense that the kinds of sacredness, the perceptions of sacredness and what sacredness means to us widens. The senses of what we might call divinity widens. So there are at least two ways it widens there.

And all this, again, is something that we notice. If eros is doing its thing, if it's igniting the soul-making dynamic—in eros, the interplay and the mutual reciprocal feeding and nourishing and supporting and fertilization of eros psyche logos—we notice, we begin to notice this, to become sensitive to what's happening here.

And implied in the eros psyche logos movement and dynamic is that it spreads to involve everything. All aspects that include, that are elements of that dynamic, all aspects of our being, all aspects of existence, and the kinds, as I said, of divinity. So self, other, world, eros—all those involved as elements of the imaginal constellation, of the erotic soul-making constellation—and kinds of sacredness, as we said, kinds of divinity, uni-

versal versus particular, or universal and particular, gets included, starts to get ignited, both those faces and kinds and directions of experience of divinity, concept of divinity, both the personal and the impersonal.

Infinite potential here. Unlimited, endless, boundless possibility here. Because that whole process creates. It's creative. It's endlessly creative if we don't block it, if it is not blocked. As we've talked about, there's the creation-discovery, the creation-slash-discovery process of perception, of images, of imaginal perception, of ideas, of delineations. All that means that that process will be endless if it is allowed to be.

And why have we harped on and on about the soul-making dynamic and the eros psyche logos dynamic and what it involves and what it implies and what it does and how it works? Why? Because if we understand that movement, that dynamic, that process of soul-making, of what we call eros psyche logos, then, because we understand it, or to the degree that we understand it, it actually informs our practice. We then understand how to practice, what to look for, what might be needed, what might be being left out, why something feels like it's, quote, going wrong, or we feel stilted or stultified or blocked or stagnated or whatever it is.

So understanding, again, understanding the logos means that we can understand how to practice. How to practice. It means how to think, how to perceive, what to look for, how to work with images. All this is kind of, or a lot of it is implied in just understanding this very large, or large-scale conceptual idea of the soul-making dynamic. And that's why, it's partly why we're going on and on about it.

So eros involves—literally it brings into its bubbling cauldron and stirs in, involves, turns, it brings in to turn with, to stir with—the elements of self, other, as we've said. And eros will, in that, increase, if you like, and expand and deepen and enrich the sense of the divinity of the beloved other, the erotic object, whatever that is, and, as we've said, of the self and the world and eros itself. And again, this is what we notice.

And there are all kinds of different ways it can do this and different possibilities. So in regard to the self, mentioned on, I think it was the Path of the Imaginal Retreat, perhaps a few times, Corbin's phrase, the angel out ahead. So this angel is always out ahead, appears to me, appears to you in its presence. Sometimes we think we have one angel, but sometimes it seems like there's more. But certainly in our view, there's more than one angel.

It's an image that appears to us that's always beyond reach, or so to speak, is always itself growing, evolving, changing, taking a step further away from us as we move towards it. From another perspective, it's moving towards us, but... So there's this, again, there's this infinity there to the angel out ahead. We never reach it, so the pothos is included in our erotic relationship, as it must be with the angel out ahead.

In the Jewish mystical teachings, they speak of the tselem, the divine image. This image serves as one's counterpart—one's angelic counterpart, as Corbin refers to it. The Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition similarly speaks of imago dei, human beings made in the image of God, as Genesis tells us.

This tselem, this angel out ahead, is not universal—it is uniquely mine. It appears to me in a particular way. The soul reveals something essential about myself through this image. The self enters relationship with something that is somehow myself and somehow not myself, yet is divine and utterly particular to me, bearing unique characteristics that belong to no other.

In the Vajrayana tradition of Tantric practice, practitioners learn to identify with a chosen deity—usually one given by the guru or teacher. Through visualization, one practices becoming that deity in the imaginal realm, in reality itself. This profound practice rests upon the understanding that I am empty and this deity is empty. Both share the same essential nature of emptiness. As this understanding grows more subtle, we can recognize ourselves as image—recognize ourselves as images.

The Greek Orthodox writer Panagiotis Nelas teaches that this archetypal presence that speaks to us, this angel in our midst, this being made in the divine image, represents both a gift from the divine—or if we shift our language, a gift from Buddha nature—and simultaneously a goal toward which we move. This process of deification, this theosis, must be approached with great care. The ego can easily grasp these teachings and hear them completely wrong. But when heard with the beauty of understanding that knows the emptiness of all things, that recognizes image as image, these teachings make the self pregnant with dimensionality, beauty, meaningfulness—with all the riches of the imaginal.

It is not only the guru or teacher who manifests as image of the divine, as Buddha. The self is equally so. This understanding can open within us, become something we move toward, something we play with as an idea and way of looking. We can let it permeate our lives so that our whole sense of self gains ever more imaginal dimension. We recognize ourselves as image, with everything implied by that word in our imaginal understanding.

Meister Eckhart wrote: "We must become heaven on earth so that God can find a home here." We might interpret this on one level as a call to create the kingdom of heaven on earth through moral behavior and kindness, establishing a social order where God can dwell. This interpretation carries profound importance.

But there exists another interpretation—what we might call theophanic. We must become heaven on earth by seeing ourselves as heaven on earth, as temple, as not separate from a world that is itself heaven, as divine. When I see myself this way, when I live this way, then God has a home here. Perhaps from this theophanic understanding—from grasping the deeper implications of Buddha nature—the social manifestations naturally follow: the creation of the kingdom of heaven, or in other language, the sangha as bodhisattva.

So much opens here as we revisit these themes. Yet for most people, the self remains overlooked. The imaginal dimensions of the self go unfilled. There is always reification—either grandiose or, more commonly, a flattening and constricting that diminishes us into something inferior. This is why these teachings matter so deeply. Something profoundly beautiful becomes possible for us here.

Of course, we do not pursue the imaginal self at the expense of the imaginal other and world. Rather, we include everything—the full spectrum of imaginal possibility.

Thomas Aquinas observed that all beauty yearns to be seen. The original Latin suggests something even stronger: all beauty yearns to be conspicuous. Through the spreading of eros, through allowing and breathing space for eros, we recognize the beauty of the self—the beauty of what we are, of what manifests through us, with us, in us. We discover the dimensionality of self as well as other and world.

All beauty—this treasure, this recognition—all beauty yearns to be seen.

What does that mean for the way we see? And what does it mean for the way we live? Am I going to, as Jesus said, hide my light under a bushel? What is my light? What is your light? Or lights?

So yes, to include the self, or the self will naturally—there will be a tendency for the self to be included, drawn into, involved, to turn with, to mix with this divinization process: self and the other and the world, seeing the beauty, the divinity and all of that in that. And this is what we refer to as the art of perception—the art of perception, the flexibility in that and the possibilities of perception that can open up for us with practice.

And this is amazingly the case. Of course, if one isn't practicing this, all this just sounds completely abstract, far-fetched, theoretical, silly metaphysical nonsense. With practice, so much is possible, even for someone who comes at this starting with quite a narrow, let's say, one-dimensional, flatland, materialist view. Just practice. Just allow things. Just be a little flexible. Just play with perception. See what happens. See what happens to the experience. See what happens to the senses of self, other, world. See what happens to the understanding.

So Eros, as I said, left to do its thing, or encouraged to do its thing, supported to do its thing, will spread into every direction, dimension, aspect, facet, draw everything into that soul-making dynamic, so that the Eros itself, as we said, will come to be also regarded as divine. Not just the self, but also the Eros.

And one begins through practice opening up to a sense, moving in and out of a sense that human nature—my human nature, your human nature—reflects and is rooted in divinity, the divine. That we participate in the divinity's eros. My eros participates in the divinity's eros. My awareness participates in the divine awareness. My mind in the divine mind, my soul in the divine soul, my soul-making dynamic in the divine soul-making of Psyche Logos. And not just by virtue of sharing in a universal essence, but also through the particulars. We've touched on this so many times, especially in the last retreat—through the particulars, this is actually feeling the necessity of my particularity, of your particularities, and the particular events and the particularities and uniqueness of your personhood necessary to the divine unfolding, to the divine movement of Eros Psyche Logos, to the divine mind, however we want to say it, the divine soul.

If I don't include all that, and if I don't allow and explore Eros, image and soul-making and all that—if my mindfulness is either without Eros or with a very limited Eros, a limited allowance of what we call Psyche, image and Logos—then such a mindfulness may indeed open up experiences of divinity. But they will also be limited, correspondingly limited and quite predictably limited to certain expected experiences or manifestations. Faces of the divine will come out of a mindfulness that's limited and excludes a lot of Psyche or Logos.

So you get the divinity of this moment, this life, or whatever it is—almost a kind of flatland divinity. Or the divinity as flow, as the process. Or the divinity of oneness, because that can also come out of mindfulness with certain limited Psyche and Logos, as we've talked about already. Or the unfabricated, the divinity of the unfabricated. That's certainly possible if we keep out, at least, the conscious exploration of image and consciously restrict our logos there in relation to soul.

But if we understand fabrication deeply, really deeply, really thoroughly—that whole spectrum of fabrication goes through the unfabricated, so it's beyond the duality of fabricating and unfabricating—we are granted permission to fabricate, if you like. It opens up that possibility. Fabrication is empty. There is no duality, there is no hierarchy there.

But not recognizing, as I said, the play of Eros and not giving it soul-making and fantasy in our lives and not then allowing it and exploring it limits, in quite a narrow track as we described, our experiences and our concepts of divinity. And depending even on how we're picking up our practice and our conception of practice, it might be even limited in terms of how far it goes along that narrow track of what divinity can be. Because certain ways of practicing, as I said, are actually quite unlikely to unfold very far down that track.

But if we acknowledge and we recognize soul-making, as I was saying in the previous talk—we recognize the fact, that fact in our life, the necessity, the inevitability—we explore it, and the Eros Psyche Logos dynamic is allowed to expand and be encouraged, and it's not blocked, then the sense of divinity starts expanding in all kinds of directions. The sense and experience and concept of divinity starts expanding and emerging in all kinds of directions and manifestations.

There's a line, I only know it from gospel music—it's quite a common thing to set to music.

"I'm guessing it comes from a Psalm in the Old Testament: *My soul doth magnify the Lord. My soul doth magnify the Lord.* Beautiful."

In a way, now understanding the soul-making dynamic—Eros, Psyche, Logos—we can exactly understand, if you like, one possible meaning of that. Yes. Soul, my soul, soul-making doth magnify, doth expand the Divine, the Lord. Yeah? We create and discover, and we create-slash-discover the Lord, the Divine. The soul does that. Why? Because that's what the soul does, and that's what it loves. It loves soul-making.

Now, of course, someone can hear that—yes, it's creating, it's fabricating this divinity. We've already said many times, that whole criticism or objection would be based on this implicit realism. There is something, probably this, that is supposedly not fabricated in someone voicing such an objection. It's always harboring some kind of fundamental realism, even when they say they're not. But we cannot find anything that is not fabricated. There's nothing that is not fabricated. So the objection kind of doesn't really stand. It has no ground.

And we understand through the exploration of emptiness, through the exploration of fabrication, dependent arising, the phenomenological approach—what we're calling our phenomenological approach—that the mind and the way of looking is not separate from perception. Perception is not separate from mind and way of looking.

My soul doth magnify the Lord. The soul is not separate from the Lord. It's not separate from divinity. What we're calling soul, the thing that does soul-making, the process of soul-making, is not separate from the divinity that emerges with it. Understand this. Understand this.

And we go a step further and say that with a deep understanding, a deep—if you like—development of the phenomenological approach and the skill in meditation, the art of meditation, playing with ways of looking, etc., understanding emptiness, understanding dependent origination—one possible way of looking that emerges extremely profound, extremely potent and beautiful is that the mind or awareness or the fabricator, if you like, the mind that fabricates, is not mind. It's anatta. Not only is it unattached, it's empty in itself. It has no inherent existence. It is, in a way, beyond time. It doesn't exist in time. So it's not mine. It's thoroughly empty and it's beyond time.

That mind is operating in me, if you like, in you. That's Buddha nature. That mind, that awareness is Buddha nature. It doesn't belong to me, it's thoroughly empty, and it's beyond time. We could say, in some understandings, what Buddha nature means—in the way I would like to use the word Buddha nature—that's Buddha nature. That's at least one aspect of Buddha nature. Exactly that mind. The divine mind, in other languages. Divine mind. Not mine. Thoroughly empty, and beyond time.

And it's this—we could say in this way of looking, this profound way of looking as one option—it is this Buddha nature and divine mind that fabricates all perceptions. That's what's fabricating that mind. Both physical perceptions and imaginal perceptions and perceptions that combine the two. And those perceptions are empty. And this divine mind is not separate from those perceptions. And that is in us, if you like. That's not quite the right language. We are in it.

We participate in it. That is the root of our mind, the root of our perceptions, the nature of our perception. This is a possible way of looking.

Once one is able to see that awareness is anatta—which is already quite a deep level of emptiness practice—going further and deeper, we discover that mind and awareness is thoroughly empty too, has no inherent existence. And that it is beyond time, not separate from the objects, and those are empty too. So this becomes, with a lot of emptiness practice, as I would conceive it, a possible way of looking.

My soul doth magnify the Lord. God's soul magnifies God. The Buddha nature's soul creates the Buddha nature. Can you get a sense? I know I'm talking about something very deep here, a possibility of a very deep end of practice, but can you even get a sense of the beauty and the potency and the depth and the magic of such a view, of such a way of sensing existence?

The Eros, allowed to do its thing, supported to do its thing, will discover and create divinities—both transcendent and immanent, as we said. Universal, particular, impersonal, personal—actually an infinity, an infinitude of possibilities for the faces of divinity, the experiences of divinity. And they're all available, all potentially available.

Not so much this kind of divinity at the expense of that permanently—a transcendent, unfabricated divinity at the expense of the divinity of immanence, or a divinity that involves no perception, no image, at the expense of the kinds of faces of divinity that come out of the imaginal. Certainly, in the moment of transcending perception and all image and all perception, in that moment of what's called the cessation of perception, at that time it is at the expense of image, sure. But eventually one can just move and have all of this available. This kind of divinity is not at the expense of that kind of divinity permanently. We don't have to choose between these two.

In a way, both the divinity that opens up through the imaginal—the divinities that open up through the imaginal—and divinity of transcendence, in the way that we've been using the term transcendence, the unfabricated, they're both transcendent, but in slightly different ways. So we can talk about two kinds of transcendence.

One is the transcendence of what we've been talking about—the unfabricated. It's beyond concept, beyond attribute, as the Buddha said. It's beyond any perception. It's thoroughly transcendent in every respect.

But there's another kind of transcendence that pertains to the direction of divinity that opens up in the imaginal. And that's the transcendence of the potential space, so to speak, that the eros-psyche-logos dynamic can expand into—the transcendence, or a kind of transcendence, of being infinite, of infinite potentiality. Infinite potentiality of the variety of theophanies, the endless possibilities of soul-making, of psyche, image, therefore perception, and logos, conception of divinity—the endless possibility of creation, discovery.

So this kind of transcendence in this direction is the transcendence of the not yet seen, the not yet sensed, the not yet known.

So here's my beloved other, and I look at them—him, her, it, them—and I see them as either an image or as a multiplicity, as potentially a multiplicity of images. And maybe I'm familiar with this person who has become alive for me as an image, and I can look at them or be with them and sense that kind of simultaneous presence of the different imaginal perceptions of them. And yet still, there is the not yet known that I haven't come to yet. If the eros in relationship to her, him, them is allowed to remain and allowed to grow and do its thing in the soul-making dynamic, there will be other facets, other images. So there's the transcendence of the infinite, of the not yet known, the not yet seen, the not yet sensed.

The eros-psyche-logos dynamic creates that kind of beyond transcendence and actually needs it, as we've said before. It discovers and creates othernesses. And those othernesses remain and are still created and discovered even after a realization of the unfabricated and that other kind of transcendence, if we don't collapse the logos, if we don't put a logos there as a wall, as a limit to the soul-making process.

So as we've said before, and been at pains to really want to stress on this retreat, eros can incline towards the unfabricated transcendent. And eros can also incline to soul-making fabrication, to fabricating in a soul-making way. It can incline towards unfabricating—that whole spectrum we talked about, towards the transcendent and the onenesses and all that. And there's eros in that direction, in relation to that. And there's eros in the direction of fabricating for the sake of soul-making—soul-making fabricating.

But historically, this movement towards transcendence, or the idea of a transcendent God, is so often put in opposition to the movement towards immanence and God-ness being here and manifestation and earth. And so, reading recently, someone—Arthur Lovejoy—believes actually, in a way, a lot of it's... Actually I would say it's just natural to the... Well, once we realize what soul is and what soul does, then it's natural that that would happen. But there's been such a conflict that's been historically common.

He traces it to a kind of double directionality in Plato that he didn't quite fill out. But it's there also in Buddhadharma. In different traditions and streams of the Buddhadharma, you see this inclination one way at the expense of the other. Usually these days it's to the realm of manifestation and objects and this at the expense of that, the transcendent other.

But historically it's been very different. So there's often this opposition between the two inclinations and movements of eros—towards the transcendent and the unfabricating, and towards the soul-making fabricating.

Some traditions, and I would like to think now within Buddhism, and also in other tradition streams—for instance in certain Kabbalistic streams in Jewish mysticism and Hasidism and different traditions—talk about or in different ways just include that double movement, that double movement of the eros. So there's something that goes towards the dissolution, the oneness, into the transcendent, into the unfabricated, and something that brings God, if you like, brings the divine, brings the Buddha nature into manifestation, into the perception of the world and into the embodiment in the world.

A contradiction between these two, I don't think, is necessary. Not at all necessary.

Interestingly, as I said, we don't have to choose one over the other. Interestingly, we could say that each of these two movements has what we might call its near enemy, to use Buddhist language. We talk about the near enemies of the brahmavihāras—the near enemy of mettā is attachment, the near enemy of compassion is pity. So the near enemy of the inclination and eros and movement towards the unfabricated, we could say the near enemy is vibhavatanhā. It's this craving for extinction, for non-being, for disappearance. Turning everything off. As the phrase goes, deep sleep is the poor man's nirvana, the poor man's extinction of perception.

So the near enemy of that movement of eros is craving for non-being, for extinction, disappearance. The near enemy of the soul-making fabrication would be papañca. The near enemy of that movement of eros to soul-making fabrication, to the imaginal creation, would be some kind of combination of what we would call bhavatanhā—identification. It's got a realist basis of self or some object. The reality of self or object is assumed in that kind of grasping at becoming or being this or that—a combination of that and sense desire, when what is perceived in the senses is conceived flatly, one-dimensionally, without the erotic imaginal.

So each has its near enemy. We have vibhavatanhā on one hand and papañca or bhavatanhā and sense desire on the other hand. But we can open up to include, allow and encourage actually this double movement.

We could even say, and we could even see and enter into a mode of conceiving and perceiving, that that very double movement is divine, is the Buddha nature—the very eros towards the unfabricated, the movement towards transcendence, and the movement towards divinizing the world of perceptions, the immanence, the soul-making fabrication. That double movement is divine, is the divinity, is the Buddha nature.

That double movement discovers and creates the divine and the Buddha nature, as we said, but it also embodies the divine and the Buddha nature. So to put it in classical terms—and some of you will know about the distinction between being and becoming

—but something here, because of the creativity involved in the soul-making dynamic, in the movement of eros, allows both the being aspect, if you like, the timeless aspect of the divine, and the becoming aspect of divine. God as creative and being created, Buddha nature as both transcendent and timeless, and also becoming in time, created, discovered, manifesting, outpouring in time.

Love doesn't just want to melt into union, into oneness, to dissolve into unity. Love doesn't just want that. God or the Buddha nature doesn't just want you or things to be absorbed into her, his, its essence, whether that essence is conceived timelessly or atemporally. It doesn't just want that.

There's some eros, there's some wanting certainly for that dissolution, that kind of transcendence. But eros, as we said, has this inclination to preserve the otherness, and actually to create more otherness. The idea in some traditions—and again, in Kabbalah and some other traditions—of drawing down the divine influx, so to speak. That's the phrase they use, drawing down the divine influx. Take it metaphorically.

But that drawing down allows a preservation of otherness, of particularities. And particularities that are necessary to the divine. That's part of the drawing down. It's not just making everything into an oceanic oneness. It preserves the necessity of the particularity we've said so many times, even while perceiving an essential oneness. Yes, we know oneness. Yes, it's there. But it doesn't erase in the perception, and certainly doesn't erase or demean in the conception, the necessity of the particularities, the uniqueness, the unique manifestations, the unique expressions of the divinity through you, through me, through this, through that, through this or that perception of self, other, thing, world, action.

So it allows for and encourages the particular theophanies, the particular faces, manifestations, expressions of the divine, of the Buddha nature. If we allow eros, if eros is full and vital, if there is a lot of libido, it brings a lot of liberation—liberation in multiple directions. There's an openness of what liberation means.

If Eros is allowed, and if Eros in relationship to Dharma is allowed—all of this that we've been talking about, and the Dharma is an erotic object for us, a beloved other, if you like—and there can be the soul-making dynamic in relation to the Dharma, then the Eros, Psyche, Logos, and the Dharma, the image, the fantasy, the idea of what the Dharma is, needs to open up. Through allowing Eros, it will need to open up, and as I said, we will at some point need an endless dharma, a dharma that as one of its characteristics is almost axiomatically endless, open-ended, able to morph, to take on different shapes, explore different facets, present different facets for our exploration—a Dharma that can expand.

We touched on some possibilities, I think it was four possibilities for ways that Dharma can be endless in that way. And each of those has many as well, or implies many, an endlessness.

Perhaps some of you with backgrounds in philosophy can see something here and we could have a little fun. You might be able to see how through a kind of phenomenology of Eros or of soul-making we arrive at what a lot of people would call metaphysics. Through the very exploration of Eros and the imaginal, just letting it do its thing, in the natural movement, we arrive at the kinds of concepts and perceptions that are usually labeled metaphysical.

Someone with extensive training in philosophy sent me an email a while ago. She wrote that she had some recent inquiries into her relationship with materiality. She realized this is probably not the most commonly held default position either, but there is usually a mix of wonder and bewilderment, depending on her general mood, that something such as matter even exists at all. "Even philosophically, I do not have a good explanation why in the mutual unfoldment of subject and object and time and space these gross solid forms of measurable matter appear at all. Do you?" she asks.

What she's talking about there—subject and object and time and space—is really getting down in her practice to the most basic conception and perception as one realizes any kind of subject implies any kind of object. The most basic, the most subtle subject—nothing near personality or anything like that, really subtle—just a bare, subtle, refined, perhaps vast awareness or moment of consciousness as a subject, any kind of even very subtle, very refined object of that awareness and a present moment in which it happens.

This is the basic understanding of the mutual dependent arising of those three—subject-object time, this tripod, if you like, at the most basic level of dependent arising. And how out of that the present moment is implied, but the present moment implies not-the-present-moment. It implies past and future. Something, this object, can change, can be other than it is now. All this is implied—I won't explain it now because I've explained it elsewhere before—but this is a basic mutually dependent tripodic structure that we discover when we go deeply into dependent origination.

She's saying, even that, it's like, why should there be measurable matter? Actually, measurement is part of it, because as I said, there's this object in the present in relation to something that it could be other. This implies an other-than-this, and an other-than-this is either in space or time. So time, space, subject and object are kind of woven into each other, mutually implicating, mutually dependent, and measurement is part of that. Things differing, therefore measuring.

But why matter? Why the perception of matter? Often it seems almost unrelated to non-material experiential realities. She has a lot of immaterial experiences as well in her meditations, as if the material is somewhat incidental to some extent. And yet it is a fact of experience one constantly "bumps into," so to say. This position is not necessarily believing in a self being other than materiality, identifying with non-material factors instead. It's rather an acknowledgement of this utter mystery of how different dimensions of being, in fact, overlap and fit together fairly well, most times at least.

Of course, from a different starting point, a non-phenomenological starting point, some people start with the belief in matter and then deduce consciousness and experience from that. There are a lot of problems in that point of view as well. But if we take her phenomenological approach, from what we've been exploring right now, she said, well, what's the explanation for the phenomena of matter, the appearance of matter, of diverse forms of solidity and substantiality, as well as insubstantiality?

From what we've been exploring, I'm just having a bit of fun now, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, because of what it does, "explains" it phenomenologically. We would expect diversity of perception, wouldn't we? Just in what it does, it creates, as we've explained so much before, in the perception, in the experience, multifaceted, multidimensional experience.

So that the dimensionality of one aspect, such as substantiality or solidity, will begin to open up. The spectrum of solidity, perceived solidity, will open up, and materiality is one portion of that spectrum of perception.

Why I'm just having a bit of fun here is because historically, metaphysics, as I was saying in the previous talk, explains—is regarded as explaining and deriving from some kind of abstract postulate like the One or God or the Good or whatever—explaining and deriving the many from the one, or diversity or materiality or immaterial levels of existence.

By the way, just in case you get the wrong idea, which people often do with these kinds of things: like the Buddha's teaching of the dependent origination of perceptions of forms, dependent origination of mind, of perception of vedanā, of subject-object time, these metaphysical ideas—if you like, the ideas that come in certain branches of metaphysics—are not kinds of explanations of a temporal process or descriptions of a process of creation unfolding in time. Really they're more, if you like, logical derivations or implications—if you like, the implications of the divine, the logical necessities of what follows from divinity.

So, like the Buddha's teachings of dependent origination, they are not really temporal explanations, explanations of a temporal process. That should be clear as well.

So, for example, if we conceive of the divine as infinite, then, as Sanford Robb explains in a Kabbalistic context, in order for the Ein Sof—which is the, if you like, the most transcendent aspect of the divine; it literally means "that without a limit," the boundless—in order for the infinite to be truly infinite, it must be actual and concrete as well as potential and abstract. You understand? It can't just be transcendent because then it's not infinite. There are other possibilities that it needs to manifest if it's truly infinite. Therefore, its essence as an infinite being necessarily propels it into creating a world. There's a kind of metaphysical explanation there.

Or if we take the divine Buddha-nature or God or whatever as an awareness of—and again, an awareness that's not limited to not knowing itself, so a kind of infinite or unlimited awareness—then that must include, because it's not limited, it must include kind of self-knowing. Actually, even to properly talk about awareness, I think it would include that. Then that self-knowing actually also implies the barest sense or the barest beginnings of a division of subject and object.

As we said before, because of dependent origination, that must involve or include a sense of time and a present moment. This is the most basic sort of structure of conception and perception: barest subject, the barest object, and the barest sense of the present moment. And already involved, already implied in that, because of dependent origination, already implied there is actually an infinity of the not-yet, of becoming, of the generation of otherness. Just in saying that the divine is infinite awareness. It implies this not-yet, this generation of otherness and the et cetera.

Or, again, playing with the metaphysical way around of doing it, so to speak, top-down: if you say the divine is love—"God is love," as you might have heard, or Buddha-nature is love, or whatever—well, love needs a beloved. I need a lover and a beloved. Again, there's this duality, or at least polarity there. It needs an erotic object, an other. It won't collapse that duality of beloved, lover. It needs to preserve the otherness, the erotic tension there. And if we say the divine, the Buddha-nature, is infinite love, then one could say, from a metaphysical sort of direction, then it needs infinite objects of love. And infinite love needs infinite objects of love, and so there is diversity.

Or again, we could bring in our understanding of how the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic works, and it works for the divine. Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic: when there's divine eros, when there's the eros of the Buddha-nature, it will unfold multiplicity, multidimensionality, et cetera, as we've been exploring on the whole retreat.

So, a phenomenology—if you like, an exploration through observation of our own appearance, and through playing of our own appearances of what appears to us—a phenomenology of Eros or soul-making, and the imaginal, which means practicing with it, which means really exploring in practice. Otherwise this is just going to sound—all this is—and if you've just landed into this talk without having listened to all the pre-requisites and the talks that came before, this is going to sound completely and utterly abstract, I imagine.

But a phenomenology in practice of Eros soul-making and the imaginal means, as we said, that we start experiencing the divine in the dimensions of the erotic imaginal. Yes? We start to experience, as we said, "My eros is divine." We start to experience your participation in the divine eros. That my eros is the divine eros. And that the soul is divine, or the soul echoes, or mirrors, or participates in the divinity, in the Buddha-nature.

So these are metaphysical assertions, and they sound like metaphysical assertions. They're also spiritual intuitions. And even more, what I'd like to emphasize is they are phenomenal, phenomenological inevitabilities. In other words, this is exactly the kind of experience that will unfold for us inevitably if we allow the soul-making process—exactly those kind of what sounds like metaphysical assertions, because of the Psyche-Logos dynamic and everything we've explained about that, and with the infinite potential of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic and endless possibilities and expansion of that, the necessity of discovering, creating otherness, and all that we've explained about that.

What we arrive at then, putting all this together, is something equivalent to the metaphysical explanations, but approached backwards—starting from our appearances, starting from our experience, starting from phenomenology, expanding into a sense of divinity, and then discovering what our eros and what our soul truly is. Through this phenomenological approach, these seemingly opposite explanations actually become almost equivalent or interchangeable.

To say it succinctly: when we recognize the presence of eros in our life and soul-making, when we start to recognize its necessity and inevitability, when we allow it and explore it—giving a place to eros, paying attention to what it does and its movement, what it does in the psyche, what it does in perception—then we notice something like this eros-psyche-logos dynamic interplay, this mutual insemination, mutual expansion, widening, enriching, deepening.

We notice that this whole soul-making process, ignited by eros and driven by eros, creates and discovers—creates *slash* discovers—different facets, dimensions, perceptions of different experiences. It creates and discovers more in relation to whatever it comes into contact with, and it will draw more and more into that experiential vortex,

into that creation-discovery, into that revelation. Every possibility starts to be opened up gradually over time—every possibility of perception, of experience, of conception, of facets, of dimensions of a thing, of a perception.

If there's a spectrum of possibilities, the whole spectrum gets filled out. If there's a range, the whole range unfolds. If there's a corner or direction that isn't yet involved in that soul-making transformation, then that corner will start to be filled and involved. One part of that process, included in all this, is the sense of dimensionality. And part of the sense of dimensionality, along with other aspects, is the sense of divinity.

One of the aspects whose divinity is eventually seen is eros itself. So the sense and the concept and the perception that *my* eros is the eros of divinity—is divinity's eros, is God's eros, is the Buddha's eros, is the eros of Buddha-nature—becomes one of the available senses, one of the available perceptions of eros.

From a phenomenological point of view, one says: my eros is creating and discovering all these aspects, facets, this whole range of perception—including, for instance, the perception of solidity, materiality, forms. My eros is creating, opening, revealing all those dimensions because of the soul-making process. But because one also has the experience in this unfolding—the experience and sense that one's eros *is* divinity's eros, is Buddha-nature's eros—one could just as well arrive at, from this same phenomenological perspective, the equivalent statement that divinity's eros is creating and discovering all these facets, all these dimensions, all these experiences, all these concepts, including the sense of solidity, substantiality, materiality, as well as immateriality.

So from the phenomenological perspective, we have arrived at something pretty equivalent to the seemingly abstract, top-down statement of metaphysics: that divine eros, or divine soul, or divine mind, or divine awareness creates and discovers all these facets, all these dimensions, all these experiences for us—materiality and everything else. We've arrived at something that sounds equivalent to the metaphysical explanation, but we've arrived at it starting from phenomena, from phenomenology, starting from just our experience, from what appears to us, observing that and letting that lead us, letting that grow.

Through and in our own experience, our own unfolding, we have come to the same realization that we might read if we picked up some ancient metaphysical text. But because it's through our experience and from our experience—because we're living it in our perception, through our perception—it does not feel abstract. We feel, we sense, by virtue of the way we're arriving at it, that we're participating in this. It's real, it's tangible, it's palpable. It has an effect on the being, and it's happening through us. We're

participating in this divine eros, in this beauty, in this magnificence, in this wonder. Not abstract at all. And yet it's the same realization, the same insight that we can articulate. We've just arrived at it from a different direction.

That's why I said—and I'm not sure it's the best metaphor, but I can't think of another one right now—that the usual metaphysical way of going about things is kind of putting the cart before the horse. That which can pull us more convincingly, and more in a way that really makes a difference to our life, is not that we're excluding conception, but that more than conception is the phenomenology—the experience, the exploration, the recognition, the making of delineations, the allowing, the encouraging, the supporting, the inquiry, the investigation in practice.

Again, I'm not really attempting to explain the existence of matter. I don't see a necessity to explain it. What may be better than explaining is exploration—exploration of these things, of experience. What happens when we recognize the necessity of soul-making and we don't take these things as rigid truths, but hold them within a conceptual framework that can accommodate these experiences without regarding them as absolute? There's a whole different kind of metaphysics, or direction into metaphysics, there.

So eros—allowed, unblocked, unfettered, unhindered. The psyche, the logos—allowed, unblocked. That whole complex, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, is allowed. There's the perception of divinity, and it will, if it's allowed, start to include that double directionality—the double movement towards the transcendent and towards the immanent. The multiple faces and multiple experiences and concepts of divinity will emerge from that. Included in that is the sense of the divinity of eros itself.

All of this could be a kind of explanation as well for the ascent of eros historically within culture and within religious traditions—within both secular and religious cultures. There was, at a certain point in history, this dominance of the transcendent thrust at the expense of—well, at the expense of the constraining of eros. Certainly a constraining of sexual eros and how it was regarded, and the movement towards asceticism at the time of the Buddha, in the Abrahamic religions. And then this historical ascent of eros that can be viewed as a kind of cultural movement of soul-making.

In the Kabbalah, which comes many centuries after the Old Testament, the highest Sefirah—which is like an aspect of God; there are ten Sefirot in the Kabbalah, aspects of the Divine—the highest one is called *Keter*, meaning "crown." It's higher than the other ones, for example *Chochmah* and *Binah*, which translate as wisdom or conception and understanding. This highest one, *Keter*, has a double meaning: it can mean both *Ayin*,

which is nothingness, but it can also mean will or desire. So the very highest aspect of the divine—again, I'm speaking about the ascent of eros historically—the very highest aspect is desire: the eros of the divine.

In this whole conception of what divinity is and what aspects of divinity are, if you like, the highest - desire is right up there. It's sometimes equated with the transcendent nothingness, the I am. And we've also seen how the sefirot, or faces, or aspects of God are portrayed, or symbolized, or given in the image - they are engaged in sexual union. The different aspects of the divine, of the manifestations of the divine, are portrayed as being in sexual union, or needing to be put back into a sexual embrace, sexual relationship, into lovemaking. That is an image which means that symbol, that image in our language, has many dimensions, many levels of what it symbolizes and resonates. It is basically an image in our language.

So the highest aspect of the divine has the meaning of desire. There's this portrayal of different aspects of the divine being in erotic embrace, needing to be reinstated and resupported to enter into erotic embrace with each other. And there are ways of conceiving, of living and seeing our lives - not just our meditation, our prayer, our ways of looking, but also the embodiment and the action, and if we extend that, including our sexuality, our lovemaking. Seeing, sensing, conceiving our lives as serving and participating in the eros, in the love-making, in the sexual love-making - we could say in the sexual soul-making, the erotic soul-making, not just love-making, but soul-making - between the transcendent divine and the world.

So our lives are implicated in that. Our actions are, our perceptions, our meditative trainings and openings, serving and participating in the eros, the erotic soul-making, the sexual love-making between the transcendent divine and the world, between the divine that's transcendent and the divine that's, so to speak, in and through the world - two faces of the divine. Our lives are involved and implicated in that. We can see that way, we can feel that way, we can think that way, we can live that way.

And again, as we've touched on in the Buddhist tantric traditions, in the Vajrayana, there's the symbol of Yab Yum - it's everywhere. The Buddha, this Buddha or that Buddha, in erotic embrace with his consort. But actually the whole thing is the Buddha. The Buddha is the couple in erotic embrace. And again, there's many levels of implication and symbology there. But it includes something about, as we've touched on before, the eros between, if you like, the transcendently divine mind, the jñāna, or the Buddha nature - at least one aspect of that - on the one hand, and the mandala, which means the appearances, the divine appearances, on the other hand.

So there's this ascent and movement historically. There's this ascent of Eros, the ways we think about it, and its movement towards being placed really centrally in the symbology of the path, in the thinking of the path.

We have been on this retreat thinking, conceiving, thinking and conceiving of eros - which I shouldn't need to say at this point, but eros implies for us soul-making in the imaginal - we've been thinking and conceiving of eros as basic. We just conceive of that as something really basic. But even this - we're playing, we're playing.

Hegel said: A so-called basic proposition or principle of philosophy, if true, is also false. So we're playing with the idea of eros as basic. But eros is not basic. It's not fundamental. It's a dependent origination. It's empty. And you can see in your life how much of a dependent origination eros is. There is actually nothing that is basic. There's nothing that is basically true. So it's the understanding of emptiness, thorough emptiness. There's nothing that's basic, there's nothing that's basically true.

We've been playing with the idea of Eros as something basic, of soul as something basic, even as the divinity of Eros, and the divine Eros as something basic. We've been playing with that. Why? Because it's soul-making, because it's fertile. So that even if we know that there is nothing that's basically true, we know that Eros is not basic, fundamental, we can still say that...

William Blake wrote: Eternity - by which he doesn't mean an infinite stretch, like a really, really, really long time - Eternity, that which is timeless - Eternity is in love with the productions of time. That eros. And we could read that: the eternal, the timeless, the Buddha nature, the divine mind, the divine soul, which is ours in our depths - our minds, our souls are rooted in that, are that. You could say we participate in this Buddha nature, divine mind, divine soul. That eternity is in love with the productions of time.

Talking about the eros again, between that timeless transcendent and the world, the appearances, the productions of time - perception, experience, appearance. And we participate in that eros, in that love. We are that.

The world is that. Eternity is in love with the productions of time. We're not separate from that love. We're not separate from that eros. We're in it. It's in us. It's through us. It's poetry. Seeing that way is poetry, is writing a poetry in our perception.

It does something, it does something to the being, to the experience. Soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 88

The Problem of Desire

Rob Burbea · 58 min

> *In this opening talk from the retreat "Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire," Rob Burbea addresses the cognitive dissonance many Buddhist practitioners experience regarding desire. He critiques oversimplified teachings that view all desire as problematic, examining how contemporary culture and economic systems complicate our relationship with wanting. Burbea introduces a crucial threefold distinction between craving (unskillful desire that contracts being), clinging (the full range of grasping from gross attachment to subtle reification), and eros (desire for deeper contact, intimacy, and knowing that supports soul-making). He explores how different types of desire lead to different outcomes, emphasizing that while developing skill in releasing craving is important, there exists a sacred dimension of desire—eros—that opens dimensions of existence beyond ordinary experience. This eros, intrinsically connected to the imaginal and soul-making, offers a path toward expanded senses of sacredness and meaning. Burbea challenges practitioners to move beyond the limiting goal of eliminating all desire, instead developing discernment to navigate skillfully between different qualities of wanting in service of awakening and the sacred.*

The principal themes for our retreat are desire and soul making, as well as the connection and relationship between desire and soul making. These are themes that by their very nature are inexhaustible, endlessly profound. A lifetime of exploring these themes will not exhaust them. But let's at least try to find a way in and offer some introduction to these themes.

If you're the kind of person that's put yourself in the position to listen to this kind of talk, it's probably obvious to you—you'd probably agree—that looking at our wider culture, the wider Western culture, actually the wider globalized culture now, the world would probably profit from some more investigation, some more discernment, some more wisdom regarding desire. That's a theme you've probably heard many times in Dharma talks and other spiritual teachings.

In a way, actually, we can look at the history of our culture and see that, with regard to desire, there actually have been quite some liberations over several hundred years. But also some more entanglement and more complication with regard to desire. Part of it is due to things like the kind of economic thinking that underpins our societies and politics that absolutely insists on a growth economy. So it therefore insists on propelling and injecting, pumping life into consumerism. Part of it's dependent on that. Part of it's

also our modern sense of self—our modernist sense of self is, if you like, based on the exercise of choice and the propping up and the inflation of certain kinds of identities that come through the exercise of choice and consumerism. So all these are complicated factors. There are reasons that give us a whole extra dimension of problem with desire related to all this economy, globalization, and the modern sense of self.

What I want to go into right now is the kinds of problems that we might have and confusions that we might have as Buddhist practitioners or people who are interested in Buddhism or similar kinds of spiritual teachings. In a way, again I'm sure you'd agree with this, we have a set of teachings and practices that actually help us a lot in regard to desire and a lot of the entanglements in desire. But at the same time, we can also be prey to a kind of cognitive dissonance with regard to desire. This is understandable, I think, and it's difficult. It's not easy. So it's not something to judge, just to become aware of. This is what I want to go into as a way of opening our topic up and setting a stage.

Because sometimes as Buddhist practitioners, spiritual practitioners, we can be prey to an oversimplification in our thinking of and conceiving of and relating to desire. Either that, or we are subject to contradictory messages, teachings that are mutually contradictory, that contradict each other, so that we end up confused with regards to desire, to clinging, to craving, attachment, and also with regards to where we're moving in the whole path, what awakening or enlightenment is, and what that does to or with desire, clinging, craving, attachment. So there can be quite some confusion. Sometimes we're not even that conscious that we are confused and that we are harboring a cognitive dissonance, prey to different and conflicting messages.

Sometimes, for example, as I said, we oversimplify. And so we just say, "Desire is a problem because it brings suffering. Desire leads to suffering." And awakening, enlightenment, is imagined or conceived of as some state where there's the absence of desire. One has no desires. And so desire leads to suffering—it's a problem. At awakening, there won't be any desire. So that's the ideal of awakening. Very, very simplistic. What comes out of such a teaching? What comes out of such an interpretation of the teaching? What comes out of such a view? How does it translate into our life? Is it even coherent? Does it make sense? Does it work?

It can be very oversimplified like that in some instances, or a little bit more sophisticated, taking up the teachings and the differentiation that the Buddha made originally between, for instance, wholesome desires. He sometimes made this distinction between wholesome desires, kusala, or skillful desires on the one hand. So, for example, the desire for awakening is a skillful, wholesome desire. And the desire to cultivate, develop, possess path factors—factors that move us along the path: samadhi, mindfulness, com-

passion, factors of enlightenment that move us towards the end of suffering or the decrease of suffering or the end of craving and desire. This desire for path factors—these are wholesome desires.

Unwholesome desires, akusala, unskillful, would be desires for sense pleasure, or desires to avoid unpleasant senses, unpleasant sense contact, desires—the desire to shore up or solidify or boost the sense of self or the ego. These are regarded as akusala. So that in that kind of distinction-making, in those delineations, then the desire, for example, for jhana, to open to and explore deep states of meditative absorption, is regarded as a wholesome desire.

The desire for the pleasant taste or comfort we might get from chocolate chip cookies is regarded as an unwholesome desire.

So there's a certain sophistication and clarity in this framework. Yet nowadays, many of us—and this is very understandable, as this is not an easy area—have become quite confused about all this. Not always, not everyone, not in every respect, but there can be considerable confusion.

We often think, "I should let go of my desire for jhana. That would be a kindness to myself, to let go of this grasping, this striving." If we tell ourselves, on the other hand, "I won't have that chocolate chip cookie," this is sometimes regarded as an unkindness to ourselves. We've got it exactly backwards from what the Buddha might have said 2,500 years ago.

We struggle with the self's movement in time toward what it wants. We might use words like "aspiration," but we quickly encounter contradictory teachings about becoming—and becoming is not something to be attached to. Becoming is ego, so this movement of the self through time is regarded as ego movement. These teachings don't add up coherently.

This becomes even more pronounced in the realm of romantic and sexual desires, longings, and relationships. It should be obvious to anyone over the age of fourteen that sexuality and romance do not bring the end of suffering. They don't usually even decrease suffering. Yet somehow, in our mishmash of teachings, we recognize that for most people, sexual relationships and romantic relationships—that desire—is important. So it's kind of okay somehow, but we say, "It's okay, but don't be attached." Does this even make sense? Does it work?

"Have that, because for some reason—I'm not quite sure why—it seems important to us, but don't get attached," whatever that means. What does that look like?

Or again, in relation to the world and the senses—sense experience, beauty—we might say, "Oh, enjoy it. It's okay to enjoy it. Just don't get attached." What does that mean? "Let it come, let it go"—this almost oversimplistic teaching. "Let everything come and let it go. Be in the moment. Be with what is. Open to the flow."

What does it look like to try to live life this way? Is it really a complete enough teaching? Is it an accurate teaching for what moves us, what we are moved by, how we live? Is it an honest teaching? If I am telling you to live this way, am I really living this way in regard to all this? Who lives this way? How can I have integrity in relation to such teachings? Are these teachings even enabling me to live with integrity with respect to them? Because they don't form an integral, coherent unit.

Perhaps there's something too simplistic in our interpretation, our understanding, our approach. There's not enough sophistication in the psychology. It's not adequate to our needs.

What gets served by this kind of oversimplification or contradictory teachings? What gets served, and what does not get served? Is there a way to serve what we most want and need to be served somehow in our understanding of all this? Is there a way to approach this that really makes sense in the deepest, fullest way to our whole being—a coherent understanding that opens us?

From a certain perspective, if we take that understanding that awakening or enlightenment is the end of suffering, and we reduce it in a kind of thin and brittle, reductionist way to really emphasize that awakening is the end of suffering, then actually you could say that even the desire for awakening is really essentially the desire for the end of suffering. If that's really what's moving us, then the desire for awakening from this limited point of view—this limited conception—is really just a desire for a radical decrease in our unpleasantness.

and unpleasant sensations. You can look at this a few ways. If you say, well, suffering is the second arrow—if you know that teaching of the Buddha's—it's just the second arrow, but still a kind of unpleasantness. It's the unpleasantness of the second arrow. So by removing that second arrow at full awakening, in a certain system of what awakening means, then I've drastically reduced unpleasantness.

Or if my vision of awakening is not to be reborn, that means really the end of both pleasant and unpleasant sensation, the end of vedanā, the end of perception, the end of experience. So is that how we're going to conceive of what is moving us if we desire awakening? That we're desiring this radical decrease in the unpleasantness? Because conceiving it that way, this is what's moving, this is the desire there.

That's different than—it's not conceiving it as a desire for awakening, as the desire to know and to open to true nature. The true nature of oneself, the true nature of all things. It's not then being conceived as a desire for truth, a desire to open to and know the Buddha nature, to live the Buddha nature, and know that one lives the Buddha nature, to know, to open to the divine, or God, if you're okay with that language.

Some people say, "No, that kind of desire is just a desire for consolation. All this talk about Buddha nature and God and divinity, it's just consolation. That's what you're after, really, is it?" Really, let's look into the psychology, our psychology and what moves us here.

And if the desire for awakening is conceived too narrowly, this desire really essentially for a reduction or an end of unpleasantness, then it's not being conceived as a desire for beauty, to open to, to know, to live in beauty. It's not a desire for mystery.

So what about the desires of a mystic? Is that what a mystic wants? Just the decrease of unpleasantness? And is our desire, deep desire for beauty, or desire for deep beauty, is that just a desire for pleasant sensations?

What of our love of the world? What of our sensuality? What of our love and desire for that which is beyond the world? Beyond the senses? Beyond experience? The transcendent? The unfabricated? What about that desire? Is that really just about eradicating or drastically reducing unpleasantness?

What about our desire for art? To make art? To participate in art, to receive art? What about our desire for scientific knowledge and discovery? Is all that, are all those kind of desires, are they really just delusion? One could look at it that way, and I think some people do sometimes. Is science, for example, only for the purpose of—only non-delusion or not a waste of time when it's for the purpose of reducing suffering? For example, in medical research or in development of technology that makes our life safer or more comfortable or whatever.

Is romantic desire, sexual desire, is that delusion only? Is it only delusion? I mean, certainly delusion can come into all of these movements of desire, but is it only delusion? Is it only the seeking of pleasant sensations? Is it only an expression of love, meaning care, meaning mettā, really? Or a kind of search for security of the self, or a pumping up of the ego in some way, being reassured that one's attractive or desirable or lovable or whatever it is, or some kind of combination of all? Does that kind of combination of all those things, does that sum up the movement of desire in romantic desire and sexual desire?

Or is there something else too there, beyond all of those? More than, alongside even, something that's vital to our being and to our sense of existence, something vital to our psyche.

So we have—I don't think we have really a Dharma language yet, or a Dharma psychology that has words for the kind of desire that is not a desire for an increase in pleasantness, or a decrease in unpleasantness, or a decrease in suffering. The kind of desire that's not just to solidify the self somehow. We don't have a word for that kind of desire that actually is for the sake of, and leading to, and supporting, and involving soul-making.

And so, we don't have a psychology that really has a word for that. So we want to use the word eros, E-R-O-S. It's a word that's familiar. Different people define it a different way, have different kinds of associations with it. I'll come back to it in a few minutes. We want to define it in a very particular way.

Eros as a movement of desire, a kind of desire that involves, supports, opens, stimulates, and is for the sake of soul-making.

Just as in the realm of imagination we made distinctions, so too with desire we can discern different qualities and movements. In imagination, we spoke of what's imaginary—papañca, getting lost in fictions that entangle us and serve no purpose, mere delusion. We distinguished this from what we might call skillful use of imagination, helpful imagination that is creative: planning to build a retreat center, organizing a shopping list, preparing a lecture. One uses imagination in a creative, constructive way.

And then there's a third category we've been calling imaginal—something that doesn't equate to those other two, something else entirely. We need this other word to draw attention to something unique.

Similarly with respect to desire, I would like to distinguish three kinds: craving, clinging, and eros. We will be using these words differently than you've probably heard before. These are our definitions—not claiming they are the right definitions that everyone should adopt, nor necessarily the historical definitions. I simply want to make a clear delineation between three kinds of desire.

What emerges from making this delineation is recognizing that these desires each unfold differently. They each bring us to different places, lead in different directions, have different effects. Our task becomes partly to discern between these three. Can we recognize what's craving and what's eros? Can we navigate between them when possible? Can we transform one into another? Can we recognize clearly what unfolds from each and how, using them appropriately as needed?

Yes, absolutely, part of our path involves developing our skill and capacity to let go of craving—by which I mean the kind of contraction of being around something that does not ease suffering. It contracts the being, does not lead to soul-making. It's a movement intent on either seeking pleasure, decreasing unpleasantness, or solidifying the self somehow, yet actually gives us little. It does not open the being or expand our sense of existence—rather the opposite.

So yes, absolutely, one strand of our path is developing our ability and skill to let go, to drop craving when it arises, or to transform it when possible into something more skillful. For example, with those cookies or that chocolate cake—do I need it? What will it give me? If it's just pleasure or comfort I'm seeking, or that holiday where I imagine two weeks of pleasant sensations and release from unpleasant ones—can I recognize these movements? Do I have the ability, the know-how, the skill to let go?

Or when desires are actually not so much seeking pleasure but are movements of trying to avoid unpleasantness—running away from something, being driven by fear of facing something within ourselves, some difficult emotion. It might emerge as reaching toward that cake, but it's not actually the cake I'm after. I'm seeking something to shield me, numb me from something else.

All this recognition, this noticing and developing skill at letting go, dropping, transforming—this is really important. But the Dharma is much, much more than that. The possibilities of our being, the possibilities of our existence go way beyond just the dropping and letting go of craving in that repetitive, endless movement through life where it arises again and I drop it, it arises again and I drop it.

trying to drop craving and live without craving, and then sometimes just giving into it and then dropping it again, etc. And kind of reaching some kind of status quo that's sort of okay with that. There's so much more beauty, depth, possibility, wonder, magic waiting for us beyond that. Important, but so much more is possible.

So the second kind of desire is what I would want to call clinging. And again, these are not standard usage of these words. I just can't think of other words right now. I just want to make something clear.

So, clinging—by which I mean any pulling towards us at any level of being, even if it's just the subtlest movement of mind to pull something towards us or push it away or pull ourselves towards something, or any pull or push towards an object or an anticipated object or whatever. And there's a huge range of that push-pull, of what we call clinging.

So the most gross—literally clinging to someone who we don't want to leave us, for example, at one end, at the most gross end—and at the most subtle end, even just the momentary clinging perceiving of anything, the momentary experience of anything in the attention. Attention works by actually, if you like, grasping around the object that it's attending to. Even just for a moment, that's a very subtle form of clinging. And even just the sense or the belief, not even conscious, that the thing that I'm paying attention to has an inherent existence independent of the way I'm looking at it, independent of the mind's way of looking. That belief, which is usually not even a conscious belief, that belief is fundamental avijja in the Dharma tradition. It's fundamental delusion and ignorance. And that constitutes a very subtle form of clinging. This reification, this grasping at as real, is, if you like, the most subtle level of what we call clinging.

So there's this huge range of this push-pull. And what one can do in practice is develop different ways of looking, a whole host of ways of looking that one can play with, enter into, move in and out of, and explore their effects on the whole world of perception. And different ways of looking let go of different degrees of clinging, different kinds of clinging, so that one plays moving up and down this range of how much clinging there is in the consciousness, so to speak, at any time.

And one learns from that—apart from the sheer delight of that play—one learns from that that perception, all perception of self, of object, of world, of space and time is dependent on clinging. To the degree that there is clinging, these objects appear and they appear solid and separate, etc. To the degree that I let go of clinging, that whole world of objects, selves, the world and space and time, all the rest of it fades.

So we understand, we begin to understand through this play in meditation with ways of looking, developing that art, we understand the fabricated nature, we understand the fabricating of perception and the fading, the dependent fading of all perception, all perception. So we understand the dependent origination and the dependent fading of all things, and we recognize, we come to understand gradually the radical emptiness of absolutely everything, all things, not just self, but every object, inner or outer element, or whatever aspect of experience, the whole world, space, time.

And in that, there's a possibility of opening to the unfabricated. It develops this art of letting go, of clinging more and more subtle, more and more deep, and there's an opening of the being to the unfabricated, what is not fabricated. And not that one lives in such a state, but one emerges from that with that understanding of emptiness, of going up and down, exploring dependent origination, and it opens up radically the whole sense of existence. Beautiful, precious possibility to know that in life and live with that knowing.

Living with that knowing, living with that opened up sense of existence is not to live without clinging. One actually comes to the insight and recognizes through this whole play with ways of looking, understanding dependent origination, etc. One recognizes a few things that mean that one would never regard it as a goal to live without clinging.

One realizes, first of all, that it's impossible. Clinging is involved, subtle clinging is involved in any perception, any experience whatsoever. So I cannot live without clinging. Even just to pay attention to anything at all is to cling. It's impossible to live without clinging.

Would I want to anyway? Do I not, when I love my family, when I have friendships that are important to me, or I'm with a lover, or in a romantic relationship—these kinds of relationships, the way we understand them these days, the way they are beautiful and meaningful to us these days, they actually involve clinging and attachment. We are not trying to live with some kind of monastic ideal like that or hermit ideal like that in society. And it's not that having that attachment is some kind of second best in terms of awakening.

This understanding of emptiness actually, as I said, opens up the whole sense of existence and liberates ways of looking. So existence becomes the art of ways of looking, the flexibility of ways of looking, the play of ways of looking. We realize, too, that clinging itself is empty. Through all this thorough, radical, deep investigation into dependent origination, we realize that clinging, too, is empty.

And then there is freedom there, freedom to look in different ways, freedom to relate in different ways, including clinging. So we can move in and out of different kinds of clinging. There's freedom there, not trying to live without clinging. Because if I do try and live without clinging, that's impossible, and what would it mean anyway, and would we want to?

But one of the most essential things I want to highlight right now is this: if I'm trying to do that, if I'm oversimplifying, if I'm trying to live without clinging, I will actually miss eros and soul-making. There's a good chance that I will miss eros and soul-making, the soul-making that goes with eros.

We're free, rather, to move and to explore and see what comes from what. So there's craving, there's clinging, and there's eros. And eros, as I said, is intrinsically bound up and intricately bound up with soul-making, the whole movement and dynamic of soul-making. Catherine's going to talk more about soul-making shortly, but let me take a little time right now to define what we mean by eros.

I'll offer two levels of definition. Right now I'll give what we call the small definition of eros, and we'll explain more later how this is bound up with soul-making—and it's really important to understand how.

As a small definition of eros, what is this word and how can we begin to understand it? Eros is a desire, it's a wanting. Eros is the wanting of more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, more opening to an erotic object or a beloved other.

Let me say that again, because I'm using these words in a really full way with all the range of their implication. We'll come back to this, and why that's actually intrinsic to the definition you'll see. But just for right now, this small definition of eros is very important: Eros is a desire, a wanting for more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, and more opening to an object, an erotic object, let's call it, or a beloved other.

Now, you might not recognize your experience of eros in that, and it actually sounds perhaps quite dry as a definition. It's quite humble, if you like, as a definition. But there's tremendous power. I hope by the end of the retreat, at least, you're going to see just how powerful that definition is, how much emerges from it, how much it implies and sets in motion and implicates.

So can you remember that small definition for now? Eros is the wanting of more contact, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, more opening to an erotic object, a beloved other.

Eros, you'll notice in that definition, is certainly not just sexual attraction or sexual energy. It includes that—you can hear that in those words—but it's more than that. It includes sexual attraction, sexual energy, but it's much, much more than that.

We're also not equating eros, in our definition, with Freud's usage of eros as the pleasure principle, essentially just the seeking of pleasant sensations by the organism. Yes, pleasure is involved, but it's more than that. Our definition will actually include that, but be broader than that. That's not the principal movement. That's not the principal principle.

I think later in his theorizing, Freud equated eros with the life instinct in contradistinction to thanatos, which is the death instinct. So there's a relationship between our definition of eros and that life force, but we're not equating them.

Notice also that we're not equating eros with love. Some people just say eros just means love, and that's fine. How other people define it is completely fine. I'm not arguing with anyone. I'm just saying we're going to use it in a very particular way.

Neither—and this is subtle but really important—neither are we equating it with the way the Neoplatonists characterized eros as a movement or force for unification, towards a unifying movement towards oneness. Again, there's a real relationship there between that movement and what we're calling eros, but absolutely not—we'll say more about this—we are not reducing eros to that at all.

There was a Scottish psychoanalyst active in the twentieth century called Douglas Fairbairn. He belonged to the British Object Relations School, if you're familiar with that. He defined libido as the wanting contact or wanting connection with an other. So you can hear the similarities there between what he calls libido and what we're calling eros, but there are still really important distinctions between how we're using it and what he described and what he was pointing to, and we'll come back to that.

So notice a couple of other things about this definition of eros, or what we mean just for now. One is that it has a huge range.

Eros really encompasses a huge range. It certainly includes the most intense sexual desire. Absolutely, it includes that. Voracious desire, fierce desire, sexually or whatever. Absolutely, it includes that. And in the realm of the imaginal, when the sexual eros is very strong and intense, sometimes it can open up the image or cast an image or vivify an imaginal scene that involves images that wouldn't actually be possible physically, sexually, because the anatomy just doesn't work that way. Something that's beyond what's physically possible just because the eros and the soul, if you like, is demanding it and needs it for the soul-making. Or it might involve things that you would never, even if they were possible, actually do.

So there's a whole range there, from very, very intense, down to really quite subtle movements of eros that are just kind of pregnant there in the subtle attraction, for instance, between two people or with an image or with something in the world, the subtle delight or magic or magnetism that can be there in the beauty of certain connections in that subtle attraction. The subtle opening and magic that can be there in the contact with an object. And that object can be anything and that subtlety can be really, really very subtle.

So for example, it could be with—I'm looking at a cherry blossom, the cherry blossom on the tree. And there's that beauty there. And I'm present there just with this some kind of subtle magic in the perceiving, in my opening to, in the way my gaze and

my being, actually my whole body, penetrates and opens to that vision in this case. And maybe I just want it to continue. I want to continue in that subtle magic. I want to linger there.

So the point is there's a huge range, huge, huge range of eros in terms of intensity and subtlety.

And a little bit implied by what I just said, eros can be in regard to anything at all. There can be an erotic connection, an erotic regard, an erotic relationship with anything at all. Any experience or any element of experience—an external object, an internal object, an intra-psychic image, a perception in the world, of the world, anything, any object, even an idea, an emotion, even a suffering, a dukkha, a sense of divinity. All of this is possible to have an erotic connection with. Eros can be there with regard and in relationship with anything at all.

So we're going to fill out later as we go on just what the relationship is between that wanting more contact, connection, intimacy, knowing, penetration, opening, et cetera, and soul-making. We're really going to explore that and fill it out. But for now, I just want to point out that eros, what it does in a nutshell is it opens up and stimulates an opening of dimensions and facets of existence, of the beloved, of the erotic object. It opens up dimensions and facets beyond what we already know and experience. That's what eros moves towards, that's what it instigates.

That involves—that can involve, most of the time it does involve the imaginal. So in this opening up of dimensions and facets beyond what we already know and experience, it involves the imaginal. There's also a way it can work by the quieting of the imaginal and the quieting, the unfabricating of perception. But for this retreat, we're emphasizing mostly the way that eros involves soul-making and the imaginal.

Now, eros is already in our life. I'm not talking about something that doesn't exist for you, that you have to kind of have this experience that you've never had before. Same with soul-making, in fact. What we want to do is get familiar with it and draw it out by defining it in a way that will enable us to investigate it, to explore it and see what it does, what it opens up, where it takes us, where it takes the being and the sense of existence and how it does that. Also to understand how it does that.

I mean, I've said already, it takes us, it opens up soul-making. Part of soul-making is it opens up, it expands and enriches, widens and deepens our senses of sacredness. To me, that's an inevitable and intrinsic part of soul-making. It's what soul-making does. And one of, for me, the most important aspects, tasks, if you like, results of soul-making.

Eros also, in its movement, in the soul-making movement, will also make possible for us a view of eros itself and desire as sacred. That view becomes possible as something we can enter into, play with, entertain.

So why are we bothering making this delineation of eros? Because, as I said, it's part of our life already, just as soul-making is. Where there is love, where we really love something, where we're devoted to something, where there's meaningfulness to us, there, there, there, there is soul-making for us, and there, there is eros. So we're talking about something that's already in our life that we would do well to understand more.

So an implication from what I just said—it's there when we love the path. And so we have, in other words, an erotic, or we can have an erotic relationship with the path. An erotic relationship with the sense of where the path is heading—to awakening, enlightenment, whatever word you like. And understanding that as a potentially erotic relationship has all kinds of implications. All kinds of implications that we often don't realize.

Far-reaching, profound, radical implications. We'll go into this.

Eros, as I've already intimated, is an intrinsic element of the imaginal, and therefore of imaginal practice. You're certainly not doing this retreat if you're not already involved in imaginal practice and deeply interested in it. So it's part of what we want to understand when we understand imaginal practice and develop that.

And as I've already said, eros potentially instigates and supports soul-making. Part of that soul-making is a widening and deepening and enriching and making more manifold, a multiplication of our senses of sacredness. So beyond, for example, just a sense of the sacred being universal—some kind of universal oneness or whatever—we're making more and more manifold, more and more multifaceted, multidimensional our senses of the sacredness, wider, deeper.

And also, lastly, I'm answering the question: why get interested in eros? Why make the delineation? Why bother? Because of our relationship with sexuality, and I think a need to bring sexuality more actively into the path so that it forms an integrated part of the path. It's coherently woven into the threads and strands that make up our path. It has meaningfulness, it has place. It has a relationship with sacredness or the possibility of sacredness in and through sexuality as a possibility for us.

It's not just defilement or delusion, or just that we have nothing to say about it in relation to our path other than the few ethical considerations which people tend to interpret very widely anyway. Or we just say, well, it's just an expression of love—people

showing their care, which what they really mean is metta. And then we acknowledge that, yeah, there's also some craving for pleasant sensations. It's some kind of mixture like that.

There's so much more richness and depth and beauty potentially available for us if we can weave and open up our exploration of sexuality as part of the path. And beyond including that—beyond also just the view that says sexuality is a desire for merging union. That's what it is. That's what the movement is, as well as some craving and some care. It's actually a mystical or regressive, either way, urge for union somehow in our sense of what sexuality can be, and the eros involved there.

Lastly, we're trying to explore eros and make the delineation, trying to understand it, but eros, I think, will always keep some sense of mystery. It will always remain at least partially mysterious, some sense of something that's not been fully fathomed there, finally understood or captured in some conception or understanding or definition or whatever. Eros will always retain that mysteriousness, that beyondness.

Partly, that's because of the soul-making dynamic itself, which we'll explain later as we go in. There's something in the soul-making dynamic and in eros itself which keeps making eros bigger than we have understood at present.

But also, I just want to finish with something I think is important to recognize about what we're trying to do here, and again, what we're trying to serve.

In relation to understanding anything, it's important to understand something about understanding. Our understanding of anything, our concept of it, or the conceptual framework we approach it with—our understanding of anything—is part of what determines, shapes, conditions, fabricates what that thing becomes for us and part of what unfolds for that thing.

So the very concepts that we use, definitions, delineations, understandings of whatever it is—in this case eros—are part of what determine, condition, shape, fabricate what that thing, in this case eros, becomes and what it leads to.

So if we want, if we're seeking a kind of final watertight understanding, as if there's some kind of objective understanding we can have of anything, then this insight into understanding presents us with a conundrum. Because whatever concept I have—and there will always be some concept—it shapes the thing. Is that just a dead end, chasing my tail round and round? Or is there an insight there that we can actually use well?

I think the latter. Because rather than aiming at some kind of objective assessment or truth about what this thing or that thing is—in this case eros—rather, we understand something about understanding. And so we use that insight because we recognize: okay, well, we want to support whatever conception or understanding or conceptual framework will open up more soul-making. We support the conception, the understanding, conceptual framework that opens up more soul-making, that supports more soul-making.

It's that that we're after in our use of concepts, in our use of understanding. Soul-making. Not something called truth or objective truth or neat watertight definitions or cleverness or anything like that. Soul-making. That's what we're after.

CHAPTER 89

Eros and Equanimity in the Movements of Soul

Rob Burbea · 1h29

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea investigates the intricate relationship between eros and equanimity within the soul-making process. He begins by acknowledging the inherent difficulty in defining soul-making, emphasizing that these concepts appropriately resist complete explication due to their poetic and artistic dimensions alongside their psychological mechanisms.*
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> *Burbea introduces the "eros-psyche-logos dynamic" as fundamental to soul-making, where eros (desire for deeper connection), psyche (imaginal perception), and logos (conceptual frameworks) mutually fertilize and expand each other. This process naturally wants to flow in four directions: toward the erotic object, toward the self, toward the world (cosmopoiesis), and toward the eros itself. When allowed to move freely in all directions, this creates a natural balance rather than the toppling that might be expected.*
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> *The talk addresses common misconceptions about eros and equanimity being mutually exclusive. Instead, Burbea demonstrates how allowing eros to fulfill its natural expansion creates the very balance and equality of perception that characterizes upekkhā (equanimity) in Buddhist practice. He distinguishes between intensity and potency in practice, emphasizing that balanced awareness across the imaginal constellation (self-other-world-eros) creates greater capacity for transformative experience.*
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> *Crucially, Burbea explores the middle way between taking images as real versus dismissing them as unreal - a razor's edge that, once inhabited, opens vast creative possibilities. This non-realist approach to imaginal practice allows for powerful erotic engagement while maintaining the wisdom perspective that prevents imbalance and reification.*

You know, we're practicing with and talking about soul-making and soul as almost kinds of fundamental concepts, fundamental orientations, fundamental commitments. But it's actually quite hard, perhaps impossible, to really define soul-making or soul completely, to really fully capture what soul-making is, for example, to pin it down. And I think perhaps that's quite appropriate. It's quite right. There's a truth in that impossibility.

There's something here in the poetry of these concepts. They resist full explication, full capturing. There's a balance between the poetry and the science, if you like, of what soul-making and what these concepts are. We want to understand mechanisms, pro-

cesses, dynamics, what's involved in soul-making, how it works, but there's also an artistic dimension to all this, a poetic dimension to the words we use, and we've talked about this before. Something in the nature of soul and soul-making makes them actually appropriately hard to define.

Because of that balance between the art and the science of what we're involved in, it doesn't mean, just because things are hard to define, that we should abandon any attempt at making delineations or definitions. Can we approach a definition or start with definitions in ways that are actually helpful, without locking them down, getting too tight, thinking that we've captured something in some watertight definition or truth? Can we use the defining process, the defining movement in ways that are helpful? What for? To serve soul-making. The definitions that we come up with are in the service of soul-making. And for that reason, they need to be relatively light. At least I hold them relatively lightly, relatively loosely. They're serving the movement of soul-making.

So what is this soul-making? We've been circular already. But let's say, what is soul-making when we use that term? Having said what we just said, we could give a relatively abstract definition of soul-making and say that soul-making is a certain relationship with experience—but a certain dynamic relationship with experience because it is a relationship that involves the opening and the expansion of ways of experiencing, ways of knowing, ways of conceiving and imagining and relating to experience. So soul-making is this expansion of my sensing, my conceiving, my perceiving, and an expansion in the way that includes the imaginal. An expansion of the sensing, conceiving, perceiving of both object and subject.

Already there, I couldn't help but use the word imagining. What also makes it hard is that a lot of these concepts we're using kind of imply each other. So there's a circularity of definition. It's okay.

That more abstract definition may well sound really abstract. If you're quite familiar, if you've done a lot of work with soul-making, you'll actually recognize that there's an insight there that captures well in a general principle something fundamental to soul-making. If you have a little less experience, it might just sound way too vague or open or abstract. But you will recognize soul-making in and from your own experience. In your own life, you will recognize the experience of soul-making.

When there is for us a sense of meaningfulness in regard to something or some movement—not so much meaning as it means X or Y, but meaningfulness, the pregnancy of all that's involved there—when there are multiple resonances for us in the soul, when there is beauty. This is also characteristic of soul-making. It has a sense of beauty, a wide range of possible kinds of beauty.

The imaginal images and fantasies—and because there's image and fantasy in the imaginal sense of image and fantasy, that involves, starts to involve other dimensions of the image, other dimensions of what we're perceiving come to be sensed by us.

Reverence is also characteristic of the experience of soul-making. Reverence is from the English word to revere, obviously, which is from the Latin *reverere*, to be in awe of, to be in awe of and to respect deeply. And this has something to do with the sense, when there is soul-making, of opening to something bigger than us. So it's connected with this opening of other dimensions, connected with the sense that goes with these experiences of the unfathomability of something, the inexhaustibility of an image or the perception that we're having. Inexhaustible in its meaning, meaningfulness, inexhaustible in different ways.

Different kinds of love are also present in soul-making. So soul-making usually, or I'd say always, has some kind of quality of love. And again, it might not be obvious at first. So all these are ways, aspects of soul-making, ways that we recognize soul-making in our experience, at times in our life.

And I would include, what we're going to get to shortly, that soul-making involves eros.

When we ask what does soul mean, and if we try to define soul, we could say soul is a perspective that brings soul-making, that gives a feeling of support and opens a feeling of soulfulness at any time. And you see the circularity of all these definitions.

It's the only way we can do this. It's better to say that soul is not so much a perspective but a set of perspectives—a potentially increasing or open set of perspectives. In other words, there are more and more perspectives that we are open to, perspectives that themselves open soulfulness and support soulfulness in different ways.

So we could say, if we want to avoid talking of soul as if it's a thing or an entity, we could simply regard it as a way of relating, a way of looking. It's an open and expanding, potentially expanding set of perspectives that supports and opens and gives rise to and ignites soul-making and the sense of soulfulness.

If we wanted to talk about soul as an entity, as if it were an entity, then we could say something like: soul is that which relates this way. Which way? That set of perspectives, that opening, open and potentially expanding set of perspectives that support soulfulness. Soul is just that which relates that way—that in the citta, if you like, that relates that way.

And so in this opening set of perspectives, it will include image and fantasy. It will include the realm of imaginal perception and all that this implies and involves. So before you recognize this—the unfathomability, the inexhaustibility, the sense of the autonomy of an image, the mystery, divinity perhaps—comes in the dimensionality that opens up, that we start to recognize more and more in the imaginal experience.

Now, we said yesterday that eros is central in this process of soul-making, in the movement of soul-making. It's a fundamental, indispensable component, if you like, if we talk in that language. So how does that work?

If you recall our small definition—what we were calling the small definition of eros—we said that eros is the desire, the wanting for more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with, more knowing of, more penetration of, and more opening to something, to what we're calling an erotic object, the beloved other. So there's quite a sort of small, humble, relatively dry-sounding definition.

We could add to that, just noticing there are certain aspects of the experience of eros that we will notice in our experiences. So for example, eros involves—there will be some kind of feeling or sense of juiciness, we could say—of different kinds of love, some kind of love in the experience of eros. There are many different kinds of love. There will be some kind of sense of energization and also of beauty. We could point to these as aspects of eros, as well as just the sense of attraction, of course.

Now, we can nuance that and go into that in all kinds of ways. But let's also point out, in terms of aspects of the experience of eros, a couple of other ones: arousal. Now by arousal, I don't just mean sexual energy or sexual attraction, sexual arousal. It can be that. That's absolutely possible, of course, as one manifestation of eros. It may be that if someone hooks you up to some kind of scientific measuring equipment—measures your, I don't know what they call it, skin galvanization response or whatever it is, and measures of brain waves and such—that they can measure that there's arousal even there with non-sexual eros in the way that we're using it, in the way that we're calling part of our range of what eros means. Certainly that's possible.

But what we can say as part of eros is an arousal of interest. So something in the being is captivated, let's say, in a good sense. Captivated. It's attracted and there is this arousal of interest. Because mind and body, citta and body are always connected, that arousal of interest and the openness that usually goes with eros—this tends to energize, arouse, and energize the energy body.

So we're not necessarily talking about sexual arousal here—that's included—but there will be an arousal of the energy body, let's call it that. The energy body will feel energized. It will feel opened and probably aligned. And this we say is characteristic of imaginal practice too. This may be super remarkable and intense, this opening, alignment, energization of the energy body. It may be very, very subtle. Oftentimes it can be there without feeling at all agitated, and so forth. So it's not an unpeaceful feeling. We'll come back to that. Let's come back to the energy body material.

So arousal as well as attraction, what we could call juiciness or aliveness, some kind of love, energization, beauty—all that. There are also two other aspects we could draw attention to in the experience of eros. One is dynamism and one is what I'd like to call autoeroticism.

Eros is dynamic in the sense—you can hear it—because the wanting, the attraction, there's a dynamic attraction, movement towards, if you like, the object, the erotic object. But eros has a dynamism beyond that, which I need to explain a little bit more in order to explain the fullness of that dynamism. And similarly with the aspect of autoeroticism.

If you recall that small definition of eros, I don't know whether this stood out to you—that word "more": wanting, desiring more contact with, more connection with, more intimacy with. This "more" is extremely significant. Classically, eros was part of a triad—

of gods or demigods that were called the Erotes, and there was Eros, and one of them was called Pothos. And Pothos is this infinite longing, always wanting more, always looking, so to speak, to the horizon, to the beyond. There's an infinite yearning that goes with eros, so to speak. So eros is always accompanied by Pothos, and that, in our more dry definition, that's the "more"—more contact.

This wanting more is not to imply that the connection we have and the contact we have is not fulfilling. There's not this kind of poverty there, or thirst in the sense that we don't have a sense of fullness. Part of, and I could actually say one of the aspects of the experience of eros, is delight. There is delight in the present contact, and the "more" in the definition of eros may just be a kind of wanting that delightfulness and the magic of that connection to continue, wanting to linger in that magic, in that beauty, in that opening.

This "more" may not be that obvious in the experience. It may not stand out in the experience. It may be really quite subtle. I'm emphasizing it, though, heuristically—for educational purposes. I want to draw something out here. I want to explain something about the process or the dynamic of soul-making, because it hinges, or it's driven by, propelled by, that word "more." It's extremely important.

So how does this work? What are we talking about here? When there is this Pothos with it, there's this desire for more contact, connection, intimacy, knowing, penetration and opening—as I said, all those words used in as full a sense as possible. This desire for more will set in motion a dynamic that can then unfold in different ways.

Now, one of the ways it can unfold is that if I am open to the imaginal, the realm of the imaginal and the realm of imaginal perception of this beloved other, of this erotic object, whatever it is—if I allow the imaginal aspect of experience to open up, the imaginal dimensions, if I respect that, if I tune and open to that—then what's possible is that the movement there of the psyche with the eros and this desire for more actually starts finding more, discovering more in the beloved other, in the object. It also, we could say, creates more. It creates and discovers more.

What more? More in the imaginal. So that my beloved other—she, he, they, whatever, it, if it's an object—becomes more through the erotic contact, through the erotic connection and sensing and gaze. So that my beloved other starts to reveal to me, through my gaze, through my sensing, any of the senses, other facets, new facets. They become more complicated, more manifold. They have other dimensions, other forms, sides or faces, facets.

So, for example, they become a theophany, or they become a goddess, as well as who they are. I know them, I know their history, I know all their physical being. It's not as if that all disappears, but as well as that obvious physical dimension that we can all kind of generally agree on, there are other dimensions of their being that I start to perceive.

So the process of "more," it kind of thrusts in, penetrates more to reveal more, opens more, discovers and creates more in the erotic beloved. So, she, he, they start to gradually, in steps, show me more faces through the imaginal. I start to perceive their multidimensionality, this image coming through them, this god, goddess, or angel, or whatever it is—and all kinds of specific examples we could give here.

Now, because they are now more complicated, the jewel of their being is more multifaceted, shows me more faces, there's light shining from all of them, or more mystery there. They're, so to speak, bigger as an image, more complex as an imaginal perception, there's more to be attracted to. They're more mysterious, more unfathomable,

more inexhaustible. There are more different kinds of shades of light and characters shining out of them. And so the eros is then further inflamed, further amplified through this increase of the image.

You understand? Through this making manifold and dimensionalizing of the image. It doesn't all happen at once. It happens—it can be really a process in steps, or usually is, over time. So the eros is inflamed more, and that, again, has this wanting more in it, and so the process goes around. It inflates, amplifies, expands, widens, deepens, complicates the image even more—the erotic, imaginal other.

As this goes on in the steps, at some point, it kind of knocks on the walls of my concept, my ideation, my belief structure about who this is that I'm encountering now. What a person is, what the soul is, what image is. My conceptual belief system is getting pushed on to expand with the expansion of the imaginal perception. You understand?

And that too then adds multidimensionality—in this case a kind of conceptual multi-dimensionality—and complication and deepening. I cannot, if my conceptual structure and belief system, my conceptual framework of who they are and who I am and what psyche is, all that, is pushed out—I cannot just believe this simple, flat, reductionist, one-dimensional view of who they are and who I am and all that.

So this further creates more attractive depth, complexity, yumminess, and that further inflames the eros.

So gradually and in stages, the whole process cycles on itself, feeds itself, nourishes itself. All these aspects—the eros, the image, and the imaginal dimensions, and the concepts, the ideation—start to mutually inseminate each other, to mutually inflame each other, to mutually deepen, widen, enrich, expand each other.

So you've got the eros, what I'm going to call psyche, and the logos. Let me explain what I mean.

Eros, psyche, logos.

Eros is the eros, as we've explained—this movement. The psyche is really... I can use this word psyche in two ways. I can mean by it the totality of the citta, the psyche. I can also mean—and what I mean in this instance here—I'm using the word psyche to mean the totality of imaginal perception present in the moment.

And then the last word, logos, that I'm using as part of this dynamic—the eros, psyche, logos dynamic. Logos means my concepts, my ideation, my set of beliefs, my conceptual framework.

So these three—eros, psyche, logos—are the movement of eros and that particular kind of desire, the totality of the imaginal perception in the moment, and the ideation wrapped up in all that, the conceptual frame wrapped up in all that. Eros, psyche, logos come together to mutually feed, nourish, support, open, widen, deepen, inseminate, fertilize, ignite each other in what we call the soul-making dynamic.

And a big part of what that does is it widens, deepens, enriches, complicates, makes more manifold and more yummy the erotic object. So they become, for instance, a theophany. They're expressing some kind of angelic dimension or nature that's coming through them, in addition to their being—obviously, I know this person, I know their physical history, their psychological history and all that. But they start to have theophanic or angelic dimensions.

And there's also the movement into cosmopoiesis, which comes back to the imaginal—movement starts spreading beyond just that object, starts spreading to the world. We've talked about this in other retreats, so you should be familiar with that movement of cosmopoiesis.

Now, this eros-psyche-logos dynamic, or this soul-making dynamic, soul-making process, what I've just described could just keep unfolding like that in stages—very rich, very beautiful, very expansive, expanding. Or it can get blocked at any point, and actually from a number of directions.

So, for example, if I have a rigid—I don't know—secular scientific materialist conceptual structure, and that's my logos, and I absolutely refuse to give any validity or reality to the imaginal perception that I might have, then that will cause me to dismiss the imaginal perception and disempower it that way. So it cannot feed back into this whole soul-making enrichment process.

So it could be an idea that's more, if you like, existential. It could be an idea about who this person is. It could be a concept about what our relationship should be—I shouldn't look at them that way, or it needs to fit into this box or whatever it is.

It could be also something—the possibilities are endless—but for example, a person might think, "Well, I've been practicing the Dharma for ages, years and years and years. I know what the Dharma is." And if something happens in my perception which pushes the boundaries and starts to want to expand the walls of how I've boxed in the Dharma, and so I... I'm an authority, perhaps, or I know what the Dharma is, as I said, and then it's actually coming from the ego structure, the hardened ego structure that's creating

walls that will not expand. Because I don't want to disrupt or threaten my self-view of knowing what the Dharma is or having it sorted out or being the one with answers or an authority or whatever it is.

So this could come from all different directions. Or it might be that a certain image is refused. So the block can come from the direction of logos in all kinds of ways. It could come from the direction of the psyche—in other words, the image. I refuse that kind of image. It's too weird. It's too, whatever it is, dazzling. It's too dark, whatever it is. And again, many ways that can happen. But a similar sort of arresting or blocking or constriction of this process will happen—of the whole soul-making dynamic and tendency to expand will happen, or can happen, being blocked through the psyche direction, through the imaginal, or the restrictions on image.

And it can be blocked through the restrictions on eros. Perhaps we feel that that energy is too much. We're not okay handling that desire. Perhaps there's been a certain psychological history with desire that we tend to limit how much flows through us, or the way it opens up the bodily energies we're not comfortable with, we don't trust, or the way it opens the heart, all of that.

So the blocks in the eros, psyche, logos dynamic... unhindered, it will just keep tending to expand in stages. There's potentially no limit to it. It's infinite—infinitely deepening, infinitely widening, infinitely complicating, infinitely enriching in potential.

But of course, being human as we are, it can get blocked and does get blocked in all kinds of ways. Hopefully these blocks are sometimes temporary—we recognize them, and then something either shatters and expands, or expands gradually through whatever means. But other times the blocks can be more habitual or longer lasting.

This eros-psyche-logos dynamic is really, really important. It's a fundamental concept that we'll return to again and again. You'll begin to see how this small definition, in the way it opens up this soul-making dynamic, is immensely powerful when we can understand it. You'll see how it applies everywhere in our life—potentially everywhere. Every domain, dimension, aspect and direction of our existence can be brought into and involved in this movement, the furnace, the beauty of this dynamic.

This is truly essential. We'll keep coming back to this and use it as something we can relate everything to—we can relate all our experience to this understanding.

Once we open up that understanding a little and bring it to bear on our experience as it unfolds, we could also say that we have this small definition of eros that we've defined twice now. But in a way, when we use the word "eros," because of its tendency

to fertilize, stimulate, inseminate, and ignite that soul-making dynamic—that soul-making process of expansion, opening, and complication—it's almost as if eros already implies and involves soul-making, and thus the imaginal and soul.

So when we use the word "eros," sometimes we'll mean the small definition, and sometimes we'll actually mean this larger definition of the whole eros as it exists in the soul-making dynamic, in the eros-psyche-logos process of expansion and mutual fertilization and feedback and enriching. There's a larger definition of eros with larger implications of what's involved with it. Do you understand?

Something should be obvious that I'll mention: eros is clearly not equivalent with metta. I would say that eros, similar to what I said about soul-making always involving love of some kind, always includes some kind of love. It might not be obvious—we've talked about this before in other talks. Eros, because it is involved with soul-making, always includes some kind of love. Part of our job is to discern and notice what kind of love, how the love is expressing, what's the character and quality of it.

But eros, though it includes love, is in a way more than love and not equivalent with metta. It's more than just metta. Metta is implicit in it. We'll come back to the relationship between eros and metta in a little while, but notice a few other things as well.

As we mentioned the other day, eros is not just, as some people define it following the Neoplatonic tradition, a movement towards union, unification, or oneness. Actually, if we draw out one of the implications of what we've just said about the way eros operates in the soul-making dynamic, eros actually both needs and creates and discovers otherness. Eros implies and involves otherness, two-ness.

Eros needs this polarity of something that it's attracted to—it needs that two-ness. But also, in its whole movement, as we said, it creates and discovers, or creates-discovers, other aspects of the object. It creates more to the object rather than collapsing the object or collapsing into the object in oneness—a sort of melting in white light together or whatever. It actually creates more complication, facets, dimensions.

And it needs that to further stimulate the eros. So it needs this two-ness, this otherness, these facets and dimensions—these othernesses, plural—that are attractive to the eros. It needs them, but it also stimulates the creation and discovery of more and more otherness. And if, as I said, this soul-making dynamic is potentially infinite, it will just keep creating more and more otherness.

There's a kind of tension there. There is the attraction towards, and partly there is an attraction towards melting at times—we'll come back to that. But at the same time, there's a need for otherness and two-ness, retaining the two-ness, retaining the polarity

of the two: the subject and the object, the self and the beloved other, connected. I might even know that we're one, but I need to retain the two. The eros needs to retain the two, and it will stimulate further and create and discover more of that otherness, and more and more othernesses in fact.

We'll elaborate this as we go. So intrinsic to, or implicit in, the movement of eros—as it is allowed, to the extent that it's allowed to fertilize the whole soul-making dynamic and be involved in it—is that it does create and discover more to the object, more to actually everything in the end. So it creates-discovers more. It's both a creative process and a revelatory process.

There's a lot we could say about this, but let's just say that for now. Part of what's implicit in what I've just said, implicit in the sense of two-ness and implicit also in the otherness that it creates and discovers and needs, is that there's a beyondness that's part of the erotic connection. Again, it's both a need, a necessity for eros, and also a creation of eros. It will create some beyond what I already know, and it will discover a beyond what I already know and experience, which serves to attract the eros more.

Now, that beyondness is not totally transcendent in the sense that the eros still delights in the appearance that's there and in the connection that's there. So it's not "I want the beyond—who cares about this now that's here, that's present, that's immanent in the appearance." It's not a beyond that's dismissive of the tangibility and presence in the sensual appearance as it is right now in whatever stage of perception or imaginal perception. It delights in that. It includes that.

But there's also, as part of the dimensionality, there's a beyondness as well—shining through, or intuited, or glimpsed. And that's part of the whole package of soul-making, part of the whole constellation of eros, and what eros constellates. Both a beyondness and a presence in the sensory contact, in the imaginal perception, in the appearance. Both are attractive. Both are delighted in. Both captivate the eros.

There's a lot here. We're moving quite quickly, I'm aware of that. We can bring this out more in the groups and the Q&As, and the individual meetings as you start. And I would like you to really start trying to relate this to experience—your experience as it unfolds—as much as you're able, to help digest this and let these ideas and concepts, let the logos, in fact, be really fertile for you for the soul-making process.

If we think about the relationship between eros and equanimity, there's quite a lot to explore and unpack there. These may be words that we don't often think go together—eros and equanimity. What is the relationship? Are they mutually exclusive? How does it work?

Related to all that are questions about balance in practice, equanimity being related to a sense of balance, or rather balance being one of the factors involved in a state of equanimity—equanimity implying a balance of the consciousness, of the citta, of the being. What is the relationship between eros and equanimity, and how might we support our navigation in these kinds of practices so that there can still be a kind of balance there?

Again, there's so much to say here, but let's just say a few things. This soul-making dynamic has, as I said, a natural inclination, when it's not hindered, to just keep cycling on itself—growing, fertilizing itself, inseminating, giving itself the eros, the psyche, logos, the different dimensions, just feeding more and more, giving each other more complication, more expansion, widening, deepening, everything that we've said, more enriching.

Now, that process of expansion, that soul-making expansion, also wants to expand in different directions. So it's not just in the direction of eros, in the direction of psyche, in the direction of logos—which anyway are really three aspects or connected aspects of soul, you could say, rather than three separate things or mechanisms. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, also wants to expand in different directions.

By which I mean—and again, this is something to notice in the practice and really, really important for navigation—what sometimes happens, what often happens, is that, let's say we're working with an image, and there's some kind of eros in relationship with that image, as there will be when an image is imaginally alive. Some kind of eros—could be sexual, could be not sexual, whatever. And the soul-making process, the eros-psyche-logos, starts to impregnate and expand and create, discover more to the erotic object, more to the object, to the other.

Oftentimes, what we don't notice in the imaginal constellation—or rather, we each have different tendencies here, but what can be quite common is for some of us not to notice that at the same time, at the very same time, that the object of the imaginal perception is expanding, the subject is similarly expanding. My sense of self is also becoming imaginally infused, imaginally enriched. I also become for myself an erotic object. The image of myself is part of the whole imaginal constellation. It includes self and other. It's not just other.

Oftentimes our gaze is so transfixed by the beauty of the other or the awe or the fear or the weirdness of it, or just in attending to it out of habit, we put the attention on the object. So it's making the attention a little bit bigger to notice what's happening with the imaginal sense of self in this practice right now, in this imaginal constellation, and you will begin to notice that the self too, as I said, is drawn in and impregnated, amplified,

complicated, widened, enriched, deepened, in the imaginal perception, in the web of the imaginal perception. It includes not just the object, but also the subject. Not just other, but also self.

And this soul-making dynamic also wants to naturally include the world. Its expansion into the world—in other words, the environment, the world around us, and the fullness of the senses—is just another way of referring to what we've talked about before, the process of cosmopoiesis. That through this beautiful other that I'm with, whatever it is in the image, whoever she, he, they, it are, that becomes imaginally alive, imaginally deep, and there's the eros there. Also the self, and also the world.

This cosmopoiesis is a natural movement, the expansion outwards to include the world. It's like the imaginal perception spills over to imbue, to fertilize the perception of the world. I'm not going to say too much more about cosmopoiesis because we've dwelt on it a lot in past retreats.

So the imaginal constellation includes not just the other, the object, the imaginal object, or this person who I'm perceiving imaginally—in other words, I'm including the imaginal dimensions in my perception of them—not just the other, but also the self and also the world, three aspects, and a fourth aspect, the eros itself.

In other words, our very sense of the eros involved in relationship to the image, the imaginal, the eros with the image, erotic connection with the image, that too begins to be subsumed, to be drawn into, to be imbued by the imaginal erotic gaze. It's subsumed and drawn into the soul-making dynamic and the fertilization by eros-psyche-logos. So that the eros itself that we are experiencing, our eros right now in relationship with this imaginal object, also begins to become imaginally alive. We perceive it imaginally.

It starts to have other dimensions. The eros itself can eventually become a sense of theophany—it is sensed to be sacred, sensed to be divine in different ways. It appears to us gradually as unfathomable, mysterious, inexhaustible in different ways.

This eros-psychologos dynamic, that three-faced soul, also wants to expand in this fourfold way—towards object, towards self, towards world, and towards eros. Self, other, world, eros. It wants to move in all those directions. In a liquid analogy, the waters of soul want to flow in all those directions. Or if you prefer a fire analogy, the fire wants to spread in all those directions—the fire of soul-making, the fire of eros and the erotic imaginal.

Why am I mentioning this? Partly it gives us a clue about navigation in practice. We can check at any moment: am I including all four directions? All I have to do is include it in my attention—just what's happening with the self. Sometimes just including the

self-sense, the image of the self, in the attention allows it to be fertilized by image and eros, and it comes alive. Or the world, or the eros itself. So sometimes it's just a matter of attention.

Now we might have, as individuals, certain habits of tendency. Some people's attention tends to be more habitually focused on the self when they're doing imaginal practice—and probably in life as well—and they tend less to be able to keep the awareness open to the object at the same time. Or vice versa: we become so transfixed and captivated by the divinity of the object that we don't pay attention to the self-sense. And if we did, that would start becoming correspondingly divine. It would start to grow in divinity as well.

For example, if you're doing a devotional practice with a tantric deity or yidam, or just an imaginal figure that's divine for you—and there are all kinds of possibilities—let's say you're somehow resting in the lap of the Buddha or Tara or whoever it is, being held by them. They appear to have all the divinity and I'm the human receiving their love and their healing energy, whatever.

If I dwell in that image, just keep dwelling it and letting it do its thing by the way I'm tuning, by the way I'm opening, by the way I'm sensitizing in the practice—opening the energy body, paying attention to the resonances—if I just let it do its thing, it will just be a matter of time before the sense of myself in that image, resting in the lap of the Buddha or being embraced by a divinity or loved by a divinity, starts to feel my divine dimensions.

The divinity in the image, the theophany starts to spread or catch light, so that not just this Buddha or this yidam or whoever it is—this tantric deity, this imaginal figure—is divine, but I am both human and divine at the same time. I'm given dimensionality just through the soul-making process happening.

So sometimes it's just a matter of attention. Other times we have a more long-standing tendency—and there can be different reasons for this—for not being able to open to a sense of, for instance, our self as image. We've rarefied the self, and the other is image, and there's something blocked there in the whole soul-making dynamic.

The dynamic wants to flow into the self. It wants to impregnate the imaginal perception of the self, give it dimensionality, beauty, mystery, unfathomability, inexhaustibility, divinity. But for whatever reason—whether it's habit or other reasons—I'm only allowing it to go and do its work and fill out and come alive in, let's say, one of these directions. For instance, just towards the object and not so much towards the self, and not so much towards the world or the eros.

There's a sense somehow: I have all this eros towards this person that I'm perceiving with such beauty, that they have such beauty and depth of divinity, but I'm feeling myself as just a human, and my eros is just maybe a little bit embarrassing or clumsy, or maybe even still carries remnants of the view that it's defiled or defilement in some way.

Or the block may be towards the world. The person's doing all this practice—I touched on this in the last retreat, the re-enchanting retreat—doing all this practice, good work on their psychological process and all this. But the world in which it takes place just remains a flat world, remains unenchanted because it's unimpregnated by the soul-making movement, the soul-making dynamic. The eros hasn't reached there to bring it imaginally alive.

So it's worth checking a couple of things. One is: is there a long-term tendency to always lean one way? That's interesting to know about oneself. And then: can I practice including the directions of self, other, world and eros where I don't tend to lean habitually?

Or maybe it's just a momentary imbalance, if you like, or non-opening in one of these directions. And what the practice needs in that moment is just: ah yes, I can let it include that. Which oftentimes just means, as I said, just opening the attention there to include. Let's include the self.

So I'm aware of an imaginal constellation here—self and other, maybe self and other and world. And let it spread that way.

My experience teaching and working with people with this practice is that this dynamic is not at all obvious. We often don't realize that the soul-making dynamic can open, wants to open in all these different directions, is even potentially open if we would only notice it. We might feel stuck, or more often we feel out of balance in some way. Sometimes something is very hard to tolerate—the eros is hard to tolerate, or we're toppling over in some way. In other words, there isn't equanimity, there isn't balance.

But can you see, even if we use a physical analogy, that if the flow of the eros is allowed to go in these different directions—towards the other, but also back towards the self and out to the world in all directions and to itself—then the whole movement, like water flowing, balances itself? We're not toppled over towards the object or imploding in ourselves. Playing with this, making adjustments, cultivating awareness,

opening up to include all directions, tuning to this—this is crucial if we're interested in allowing the process to open more fully and have its full life and power. Not just efficacy, but also navigating in a way that's actually balanced and sustainable.

Related to this, I'll make another distinction. It's close, but different. Again, something to check, something we might have individual habit patterns around, either just out of habit or for particular reasons.

I was working with someone recently who felt there was a lot of eros with a certain image, but there was too much intensity. It was hard for her to bear. She felt it was just going to blow her fuses—she'd short-circuit or get too excited in a way that would just dissipate and fritter away. What had actually happened was that her attention and consciousness had become captivated, not in such a helpful way, by what was happening in her energy body, specifically around her heart area, with the eros and beauty and opening—this flame there. It was hard for her to bear that flame. She felt it was getting too intense in a way that would explode the process, leaving her with nothing. Not that she thought she was going to go mad, but it felt so powerful that it was actually fragile.

I recognized what was happening and also saw that she hadn't realized she was putting too much focus in one place. Because she was so captivated by the intensity of the feeling in her heart, she was actually giving less attention to the image—the very thing that had started the whole process with its beauty and eros. As the energy built in her energy body, she began giving less attention to the image. The concentrated attention on her heart area was putting it under too much pressure. There wasn't enough spaciousness in the attention to allow the energy to move more widely. Instead of flowing freely, it became like a pressure cooker in her chest.

This opening can happen in two ways. One is opening of the energy body. You should be familiar with this—opening the awareness, letting the energy and currents move how they want to move within the energy body, giving the whole sense of the energy body more space. Because the awareness is bigger, the sense of the energy body will be bigger, and the energy can flow how it wants to flow—in, out, up, down, around, spirals, whatever it wants to do.

Especially when there's intense eros or intense sexual energy, it often gets caught somewhere in the body—maybe around the genitals, maybe around the heart, could be anywhere really—and it needs more space. It needs to be allowed to flow and fill a space or even move in or out of a space as it wants. Sometimes we don't give it enough space with our attention and it constricts, becoming unbearably uncomfortable or intolerable, throwing us out of balance. To have more capacity to hold what wants to move through us—in terms of eros, energy, beauty, opening—what can really help is

creating more capacity in the space by opening the awareness. The energy body opens, and we allow it, even help it by imagining it flowing. We've talked about this before on other retreats.

But there's a second way the awareness can open to help. Related to this example and to what I said before about the constellation of self, other, world and eros: recognizing when we have too much attention too tightly bound and myopically focused on one aspect of the energetic experience. In this woman's case, there was tremendous intensity, but because attention was so caught up, it felt like it would just dissipate somehow, discharge or short-circuit.

The solution was to keep aware of the energy, give it more room, but primarily to re-include the imaginal other. Include not just the energy body experience—which is vital to imaginal practice, as we keep stressing—but also don't lose track of the other, of the imaginal object, the erotic object, the beloved other. Then you have a constellation. You have the imaginal other, and attention becomes interested again in their beauty, not at the expense of your experience here, either energetically or imaginally, but not denying them either. There's this openness and inclusion. The energy, instead of being caught up in the physical energetic body in one location, can both spread through the body and through the whole imaginal constellation of self and other and eventually world.

Do you understand? So there's more capacity there, and the whole experience can have more potency. The whole soul-making can be more potent.

Intensity is actually neither here nor there, and this goes for all kinds of meditation practice. Intensity can feel like a big deal—wow, something really important is happening. It may or may not be. What's more important is the potency. In the case I've been describing, there was a lot of intensity, but there wasn't going to be much potency until she opened up that awareness to re-include and balance it with awareness of the imaginal other and the beauty there and the erotic connection there.

Anytime there's a choice between intensity and potency, we want the potency. We want the soul-making to fertilize the soul and open it. Otherwise, I just have an intense experience and then it's over. So what? Nothing's stretched, nothing's changed. Maybe I even get a bit freaked out or scared.

Intensity can be a lovely and organic part of the process, remarkable even. But what we're more interested in is the potency. That potency sometimes will require intensity of experience as part of it, and sometimes it actually doesn't even need to be that intense. We can still have the potency. Sometimes something's gotten too intense because it's not balanced—the awareness is not spread in the directions it needs to balance.

We're talking about balance, about navigating in the practice, developing our art, developing our skill. I should point out that with self, other, world, eros, energy body, imaginal, emotions, and desire, it's not that all these elements need to find some perfect point of static balance where they're always equally balanced in attention.

It's more about understanding, having a conception that these are aspects of the total imaginal experience we can pay attention to within our field. At any time we can lean more or less and emphasize more or less any of those aspects. We can bring them into some relative balance, which doesn't necessarily mean equal balance.

We can move—lean more towards the object or more back towards awareness of the self, the image of the self, or more out towards the world or all equally. More towards the energy body, or more towards the sense of desire itself, or more towards the image. The whole thing is dynamic and fluid, a kind of dance that's really an art, rather than some static ideal or formulaic thing.

We can play with this. All practices involve finding out what the moment needs, what unfolds from different emphases and how I lean. That's part of the beauty and fun and potential of practice.

I should also add that when we're talking about balance and equanimity, developing our skill in letting go, in dropping craving, in easing craving when it arises—just letting go of something, not being compelled to engage or give our attention to anything at all—that skill and capacity to let go is something we want to develop.

For many people doing this work, they will have developed quite a lot of that capacity before they even go into these kinds of practices involving the erotic imaginal and opening to desire. It's not always that things move in that order. Some people are actually open to explore practices of eros and opening to desire at the same time as they're learning practices of letting go and putting down and dropping.

But there is a question here about what to practice when, what order in my life of practice I develop these different approaches. The capacity for cultivating equanimity, for sitting in a really still, equanimous state—whether that's more absorbed in jhāna or more open to the multiplicity of experience—the taste for and accessibility of equanimity in our life and practice is really, really important. It complements what we're exploring now, the kinds of things we're emphasizing on this retreat.

But can you see that if the eros is allowed to do its thing and inseminate the whole soul-making movement, inseminate psyche and logos and re-inseminate eros and spread out that way and spread out in cosmopoiesis and include not just the other but

the self and the world and the eros itself, then there's a kind of balance implicit in that? Balance being characteristic of equanimity, there will be equanimity that comes from the eros being allowed to do its thing, not from shutting down the eros.

We tend to think either I'm in a state of desire or eros, or I'm in a state of equanimity. There's a way of going about it like that, but if I actually allow and explore allowing the desire in different ways, then actually I can have an equanimous eros, or at least a balanced eros.

If we allow eros to do its thing and open up in all these dimensions and directions and aspects that it naturally wants to and will open up, then you can also see that there's a kind of equality of things. Not just the other, but the self also, and the world also, and everything in the world is involved in, drawn into, subsumed in, caught up in, imbued by this whole erotic imaginal process, the whole soul-making process and the opening of imaginal perceptions.

In the cosmopoiesis and in that inclusion of all these aspects, there is an equality of all things. Everything becomes imaginally infused, imaginally alive, imaginally perceived. Everything becomes dimensionalized, unfathomable, inexhaustible, mysterious, beautiful.

There is equality of all things. Some of you will know that an equality of all things is one of the ways, particularly in the Mahāyāna tradition, they actually define equanimity—regarding all things as equal. That's also in the Theravādan tradition.

These characteristics of balance and the equality of all, balance in relationship, and the equality of all things that comes to our perception—these are characteristics of equanimity, by definition, in Buddhist usage of that term. And they're also characteristic of the whole soul-making dynamic, the whole movement of eros, when it's allowed to do its thing.

When it's allowed to expand that way, when it's allowed to impregnate that way.

There are certainly differences, of course, between eros and equanimity conceived in a Buddhist way. Equanimity, being one of the brahmaviharas, shares a characteristic that all the brahmaviharas have. Like metta, it actually moves in the direction of lessening fabrication—lessening the perception of the other, lessening the perception of objects, lessening the self-other divide, the subject-object divide. All this—and if you've done dedicated metta practice over a while, you'll see that this fading is characteristic. I and the object of my metta begin to melt into oneness, a oneness of being, a oneness of heart. We are one luminous heart together. This is the way metta goes.

Deep equanimity practice, being the quieting of the push and pull with all experience—I'm talking about equanimity towards phenomena now—leads, because of the quieting of the clinging, the push-pull there, to less fabrication. There's a quieting of the fabrication.

Eros, on the other hand, in distinction to that, actually moves in the direction of more fabrication—more beautiful and skillful fabrication. It's the path of tantra, if you like, of skillful fabrication premised on, based on, involving an understanding of non-realism, an understanding of the emptiness of what is fabricated. I know it's empty, therefore I can fabricate. I see image as image, therefore I fabricate.

So in contrast to the fabrication of papañca, which has a kind of realism to it—I believe this thing is real, I believe whatever the imaginary thing is—the fabrication that comes out of eros when it's allowed to impregnate the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is not based on realism. So it's this magical, beautiful, skillful soul-making fabrication, in contradistinction to metta and equanimity which tend to quiet the fabrication.

So there are differences there. But this aspect of the presence or absence of realism—to me this is really pivotal. I actually still haven't thought of good words for this. What's a good word for an image or a fantasy when we believe them to be real? I use the word "image," and most of the time when I use the word "image" or "fantasy" in these contexts, I really mean an imaginal image, an imaginal fantasy with everything that's implied by that use of the word "imaginal" in the way that we're using it. What might be a word for the kind of image or fantasy when it really is reified, when it's not soul-making, it's taken as real, and it's kind of one-dimensional? It doesn't have that dimensionality, that seeing image as image.

I realize this is difficult for people—this whole what we're calling the middle way between real and unreal. So it relates to the middle way of emptiness between is and is not. But there's a similar middle way in terms of imaginal practice for me.

I often get nervous when I'm with someone and they're using the language of images, but it seems to be somehow that there's quite a lot of ego in it and quite a lot of realism in it. Sometimes people use the language of divinity and soul, but somehow it's just—I've talked about this before—somehow about me and my process. And the reality of the self is still somehow really central. Even if they're using the language of God's will, this or that, it's all very reified. And the ego is actually getting quite solidified in that process. It's very dramatic, but it lacks that quality of theater, of knowing that it's theater. Personally, it makes me quite nervous, and I've seen some quite difficult and abusive things through that kind of engagement.

In defining soul-making, you may remember from talks from another retreat, I actually included in the definition of soul-making an awareness of seeing image as image. I was very hesitant about that and thinking about, for example—Catherine, I was talking about Mother Teresa, who saw people as her beloved Jesus. So there's an imaginal perception there, and I wonder what her notion of real or not real was with her whole concept of Jesus and Christ and the Catholic doctrine. I'm actually not sure. But I sort of hummed and hawed for quite a while and then just decided to land on the side of including that awareness—this is image, seeing image as image—this awareness of the kind of middle way between real and not real, including that in my definition of what is soul-making and what it means to have an imaginal perception.

There's a problem here, and I realize this is difficult for people. If you say "image is image," or "don't take it as real," then people understandably go to the other extreme and dismiss. It's not real, therefore it's just delusion, or it's worthless, this image, or any sense of divinity I had is not real, therefore it doesn't have its power. It's a tricky one.

I think maybe this comes in stages for some people, and there's a journey towards that. I can just say that for now, when I inhabit what feels to me to be that middle way, that razor's edge between real and not real—

either in regard to all things in terms of emptiness or in regard to images and the whole notion of soul and divinity, that this ultra-narrow razor's edge or tightrope—what seems so precarious—actually ends up being incredibly powerful. Incredibly powerful in what it liberates in terms of perception and transformation and dedication.

What appeared—I can't remember if I said this before—what appeared to be really narrow, with no space on either side and very precarious balance, actually opens up. It's not narrow at all when you get inside that understanding and live it and feel it deeply in the core of one's consciousness. This middle way actually opens up a vast playground or dancing hall, and there's so much freedom and power and beauty and room for movement—creative movement and dynamism and energy that can come through there.

I've alluded to this before, but just in terms of this realism question, maybe you already know that kind of power—to some degree at least—because it comes through in our relationship with art. We've touched on this before. A piece of literature, a novel that you're reading—something moves you so much. You know it's not real, but it still has immense power. Or poetry. We talk about poetic truth. We've been through all this before. Or theater. You know it's theater. I'm sitting right there. I know these actors.

Some of them are my friends even. Something about it moves me in a way sometimes more than so-called reality itself, as we tend to think about it. Or in movies, or whatever it is.

So there's a power—you can have a feeling of this power through art, and that's exactly what we're talking about. Or you might know it in your own Dharma practice. To whatever degree you have realized the emptiness of self, to whatever degree, and you know this self is empty, you still can engage yourself, think in terms of yourself, feel yourself, respect yourself, care for yourself, and others' selves—the selves that you care about. So the knowing of the emptiness doesn't make something worthless. It doesn't make yourself worthless. It's not only that you throw something out.

So you may have tasted—I know it's difficult—this what I call the razor's edge or the tightrope of the middle way here, whether it's in regard to emptiness, whether it's in regard to the imaginal. But I think there are other avenues in our experience where we may already have a sense of how to come into relationship and occupy that middle way, how to be balanced there. It's maybe already in our life to a certain degree. But again, I acknowledge it's difficult, or it can be difficult.

The thing about it, though, as I said, is it liberates. And where there is the seeing of emptiness—this neither is nor isn't, neither real nor not real—and seeing image as image, this allows the erotic engagement, allows the power and the potency and the magic of that and the captivation of that and the dynamic of that, without being out of balance. So this, out of everything, is the most powerful thing that allows, so to speak, equanimity in regard to eros, balance, and so forth. It's that balance of the tightrope of the middle way, which turns out, as I said, to be a whole beautiful playing field, a whole dance floor, rather than a thin, precarious tightrope balance.

So the seeing of the non-realism, together with everything that we talked about earlier—the other aspects, balancing them—but the seeing of the non-realist seeing allows more opening, more intensity if intensity is appropriate, if it feels appropriate to what's going on. It allows more trust and allows us to move and navigate and dance with all this.

I actually feel that that sense of the middle way, that sense of theater, is actually right there in the imaginal perception. In other words, I think it's intrinsic to her. And again, it's one of these things that we begin to notice. It's like, oh yeah, if you ask someone who's with an image and it's clearly alive for them as an image in an imaginal way, "Would you say it's real or not real?" and they say, "Well, actually, no, it has some other

category. It's palpable image." This sense of theater is endemic, intrinsic to the imaginal experience. And that's why I wanted to include it in what I call soul-making or imaginal experience by definition. I feel it's intrinsic.

Okay, very last thing for now, and I realize it's a lot of information. Hopefully this will be useful to you for some time. Very last thing: with images in general and with imaginal practice, the way we're conceiving it, a lot is about my relationship with. Part of that relationship with means exactly what kinds of awareness and sensitivity and attunement I'm bringing to the engagement with the imaginal, to the erotic connection.

As we talked about, it's like being aware. What's the natural register of this image? What register of substantiality or insubstantiality does it want to exist in, to play out? I can play with that deliberately, but it might also be listening, attuning, sensitizing, respecting something.

With regard to sexual erotic imaginal—where it's clearly sexual and sometimes intensely sexual, or even, from a normal perspective, bizarrely sexual, whatever—you'll notice something else. Again, a lot of this is just stuff to notice, aspects to notice of imaginal experience. You'll notice that when we're entering into imaginal practice, and here's a sexual image, it doesn't tend to escalate in the way that, say, a non-imaginal sexual fantasy tends to escalate.

You're daydreaming and thinking about whatever, then this person appears, and you have a fantasy that tends to head in one particular direction. There's a kind of escalation, a movement toward a certain goal that plays out in the fantasy.

What characterizes images in general—and particularly sexual or erotic imaginal images—is that they are more iconic, more timeless. Rather than escalating with this narrative movement through time toward some grand finale of orgasm or climax, they tend to remain as one thing, something that stays relatively static in time. They don't have this goal orientation.

It's as if the image, when it's truly imaginal, becomes sufficient unto itself. It might depict sexual intercourse or any intimate act, but it tends to exist complete as it is. The image might simply be holding hands, or any other expression of connection, but it doesn't carry that escalatory, propelling movement through time toward some goal. There's something iconic about it. This image in itself reveals theophany—it doesn't need to go anywhere else.

This is something we notice more and more as we begin to trust this quality in relation to sexual images, in relation to strongly erotic imaginal images, and in relation to imaginal experience generally.

Connected with all this is a larger point: in time, we begin to trust the imaginal soul-making process itself more and more. No matter how bizarre, strange, unusual, intense, or even understated an image may be, we develop an increasing sense that there is something bigger than us here. There's a movement bigger than us, an intelligence, an autonomy that extends beyond our individual will.

At the same time as we understand imaginal experience as dependent arising—shaped by our way of looking and the concepts we bring—there's something that, from a certain perspective, is bigger than us and worthy of our trust. We start to trust the imaginal, to trust soul-making, to trust where it leads us and what it brings us, including the beauty it reveals.

This trust also encompasses what appears to us as dark, weird, or bizarre. We've explored all of this territory before.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 90

Faith in Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 30 min

> *In this Q&A session from the retreat "Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire," Rob Burbea addresses practitioners' questions about working with imaginal figures and the nature of erotic relationship in spiritual practice. He explores the concept of being "faithful" to imaginal relationships while remaining open to multiple images, drawing parallels to how religious traditions naturally develop pantheons of spiritual figures over time.*
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> *Burbea discusses having an "erotic relationship with the path" itself, explaining how eros infuses all meaningful relationships - whether with people, nature, ideas, or spiritual practices. He clarifies that any relationship involving love, devotion, and meaningfulness contains imaginal and erotic dimensions, even when we don't recognize them as such. The discussion includes practical guidance on distinguishing between craving (which contracts the energy body) and eros (which expands awareness), and how to work skillfully with images that may initially appear as objects of desire.*
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> *Throughout the session, Burbea emphasizes the primacy of sensitivity and experimentation in imaginal practice, cautioning against rigid formulas while offering concrete techniques like expanding energy body awareness, cultivating humility and reverence, and recognizing the infinite meaningfulness of imaginal figures. This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners insights into the subtle art of soul-making through contemplative relationship.*

Before tea, we have half an hour for questions. We have a couple of remote microphones, so we'll pass them to whoever would like to ask something.

Bridget asked about confusion during the guided practice. She had been developing a relationship with one particular image that was proving very fruitful, and wondered whether to take the opportunity to see if something else might arise. At the same time, she felt this would be unfaithful to the evolving relationship.

This is a beautiful question. When you say being open to something else coming up, do you mean another image or character, or something different happening with the same image?

Another image. In a way, there's no right and wrong to all this—we're exploring soul. Let me offer a few perspectives.

First, it's not necessary to change images in terms of what we want to explore. Anytime there's an image, there's eros. That might feel questionable—you might think, "I don't think there is eros here." But there is, in the way we mean by eros. It might not be so noticeable. The guided meditation implies that eros may be really obvious, quite unsubtle, and sexual, but any imaginal relationship I would call erotic. I'll unfold what this means more as we go on.

So there are two aspects to staying with the same image: becoming more attuned and sensitive, and noticing what's actually involved in that relationship. It's absolutely fine and wonderful to stay with it. You might notice more and more about the texture and qualities in that relationship.

It might also be that with an image that's regular for you, the nature of the relationship changes. It's the same image, but the relationship evolves, sometimes in quite surprising ways—like relationships do. So you stay with the image and see what happens. It could be that on the face of it, nothing much new happens, but you're actually noticing more than before. That's option one.

Option two: you stay with the same image and remain faithful to it. This is really beautiful language—we're faithful to that image. In being faithful, you're truly open to that image, open to what you put in and get back, and what the image gives to you. So it evolves; it's dynamic; we don't know what's going to happen.

The third thing is different: I would say, at least the way I've taught it so far, that we're polyamorous imaginally. We're also polymorphously perverse, but we'll return to that later. This means it's not being unfaithful to have many images. The nature of most people's psyche is that there are many images. Just because you have multiple and sometimes contradictory images doesn't mean you're not faithful to one. It's different from how we usually think about faithfulness in relationship.

This is complicated by the ways we tend to think about erotic relationship in the larger sense in most Western culture, but also religious relationship. Typically there's one Buddha or one Jesus. But even in religions, you can see how Jesus comes, then Mary, then different saints. There's a tendency—and we'll explore this more as soul does its thing, as soul-making happens—toward making manifold. More and more images: more separate images, more contradictory ones, more complementary ones. But also one image starts to become more complicated, creating more faces, more aspects.

You see this in institutional religion as a cultural, historical movement. We have Buddha, then Kuan Yin, then Tara—that's what happens historically. You'll see it internally in your own soul-making process as well.

None of these options, to me, constitute being unfaithful. They're all valid, beautiful potential explorations.

So, in a way, I haven't really answered your question. How does that sound?

Last night you mentioned something about having an erotic relationship with the path, and I was just wondering whether you could say more about that.

There's a whole other talk about that, and we might also devote a bit of practice to it in a couple of different ways. But a little bit relates to, in a very general way, what we were talking about with Bridget. What happens—and I think this is in the talk tonight—what happens is that as Eros gets going and as the whole soul-making process gets going, it is very generative, creative and prolific in what gets discovered and created.

In every facet of our life, in every dimension of being, Eros can come and infuse and start to inseminate that thing or that relationship or that aspect of being. And then soul-making happens in relationship to that being, to whatever that aspect is or that thing is. So this could be obviously a person, it could be the path, it could be nature, it could be something in nature, it could be oneself, it could be some aspect of oneself.

In that process, the object comes alive and comes to be more than it was before. And wrapped up in that is meaningfulness, love, dedication, devotion—all these things in relationship to the erotic and imaginatively pregnant object. So that happens in relation to the path.

If I turn around what I just said, I say: where there's love, where there's devotion, where there's meaningfulness, there there is Eros, there there is image happening, there there is fantasy. And often we don't realize that. So we think our life is without images. But our life is infused with images. Where are they? Look where there's meaningfulness, where there's love, where there's dedication, where there's devotion, where there's aliveness. That thing is erotically, imaginatively alive for you.

And it could be something you would never have thought to put the word Eros or imagination with. It could be an idea. It can be something very—your feet. It could be absolutely anything, from the most gross concrete thing to something very subtle to something seemingly abstract. Anything can come alive in this way.

So that's a general point. Do you want more about that specifically now, or do you want to wait?

It was more just the sense of relating to it, because it's not an object, it's not a visual image, it's not something kinesthetic. It's not like an image—relating to the pull, or to the pull of that kind of calling.

Well, I would say it is, but the idea of the path or the truth or something like that is not kinesthetic or visual. It's not like an image, not a being.

Actually, I want to go back to your question because I think it's quite important. When you speak of feeling called by something that doesn't quite have the quality of a being, yet demands something from you - this is very common and very valid.

An image doesn't need to have a discernible form. As I mentioned briefly in the guided meditation, we often think of images as having clear visual characteristics - he looks like this, she looks like that. But an image can be something as vague as what you're describing, and it still constellates as an image. Around that calling, in relationship to it, there's still the fantasy of the self, the movement, the world it happens in, the tradition, the history, the future. Do you understand?

It's perfectly fine if our images aren't clearly delineated visually or in any other sensible way. They can remain vague and that's entirely valid. But there will usually be something in the constellation that is a bit more formed - like the sense of self and what the self's job is in relationship to this calling.

I realize the kind of practice we did in the guided meditation might seem harder to do with something so formless. But you can still feel energetically and heartfully and soulfully what that pull and calling does to you, even if the object isn't quite clear. It's going to do something in your being when you open to it, when you sit with it, when you align with it, when you give yourself to it. Sometimes that's all that needs to happen.

What does that feel like? Sometimes when you let yourself do that, when your being opens - and this relates to the earlier question about images changing - something then shifts in the image and something may become more formed. But it doesn't need to be. It's not necessarily better if it's in technicolor and really clear.

There's a fullness and multi-dimensionality and multi-facetedness to that whole erotic relationship that you can find your way into. You can let it fill out more without demanding that it have a certain form. These things unfold organically. I'm very much not about telling the imaginal world what to do, having an agenda where it should be like this or fix certain aspects of our personality. I incline much more toward being led by something, listening to something and letting that guide - the other way around.

Now, regarding your question about resonances versus interpretation - you're absolutely right that the way of relating to images is much more about resonances than analysis or interpretation. But I understand your wondering whether, especially in early days when this approach is being learned, there might be a place for moving between receptivity and some analysis or interpretation.

Because what I find is if I allow that, it can kick it off again. It can get something moving again.

So if I understand—by early days, you mean early days in your practice? And so something makes sense analytically, or you can see why a certain image would come up, and then that kick-starts what? Then it kick-starts something happening spontaneously.

I'm absolutely fine with this. The thing about soul making is that every dimension of our being is involved, every facet. So for me it absolutely includes the intellectual faculties in all kinds of ways. The only caution I would give is: don't limit. So once I've analyzed it—done, put it in a box—the image will die. The opposite is what we want.

If you have this sense, or grant—let's say grant, play with the idea, entertain the idea—that the image is infinitely meaningful, then whatever analysis comes to you or you come up with at any point never exhausts the image. It doesn't finish it. It's just one facet. It means this, and it might mean its opposite, or it might mean something complementary. It might mean many things. It's not that you necessarily have to find them all out, but there's a kind of superabundant depth to that. Does that make sense?

So fine, absolutely. And especially, again, you're finding what works for you with this. I really encourage experimenting with what works and what gives it life. I would just be cautious about putting things in boxes, because then they die.

I suppose it happens—if an image comes because I've taken something to a sit, so I'm going to look at this, and then there's some apparently completely disconnected image, then at some point there'll be an "oh yes, I can see how this relates back to the question or issue I brought to the sit."

Yes, beautiful. And how about this: the image was always there. What drove the issue was the image. Do you understand? So the image—we're playing with an idea here, partly. We're playing with the idea that image is primary. It's not how we tend to think, at least not in this culture. We tend to think exactly the way you said: I had this issue, I had this thought, and then this image came. Fine, this is a great way of thinking, but also the other way around. You're kind of supporting this view of superabundance and mystery and fullness and primacy of the image—the specific image.

That sort of involvement of the intellect can really be fertile for the whole soul-making process. It kind of gives it more soil and more structure to unfold in and grow.

Yes, Mary?

Two quick little things, really, that have come out of what both Catherine and you have said. One is what Catherine said—that every desire has an object. And I find that problematic. I understand it because that's the psychology of desire, that's how it's spoken about. But I've worked for quite a few years now with Prapto, Prapto Suyadharmo, a Javanese movement teacher, and he always says: not subject-object, but subject-subject. And I think it relates to what you say about allowing an image its autonomy.

There can be many problems when we start thinking about an image, a tree, or a flower as an object. That's something I wanted to share.

The other thing is my difficulty—it's probably just how I image soul, but I don't feel a difference between heart and soul. Heart gets bigger sometimes, but it seems to be the center and the engine of soul for me.

What do you mean by heart, exactly? Well, certainly I feel it in the energy. I feel it here. And sometimes it stretches and can stretch way out there. But any image that has that kind of resonance—this is where I'll feel it. I'll feel it in the body as well, all over the place. And I'll get mentally excited. But that's the center.

Catherine and I were talking about this recently. So there's no reason to change anything there. Again, I would just be quite open. It may be that for you, this is the center or the faculty or the instrument of soul perception. But fine. For me personally, it's not located in any one place, but it does definitely involve the energy body. It has to be involved. But for you, it might be centered here. For someone else, who knows? So, great.

In some of the Sufi traditions, they talk about heart as the center of soul perception. It's not quite what we mean by just openness of heart and sort of emotionality. There are linguistic problems here. There might also be—and I'm not sure, I don't know the answer—there might also be just personal ways we tend to feel this differently, and that's fine. Again, I would just keep open. It might be that it's always going to be that way for you. It might be that it evolves.

In terms of soul—and again, I can't remember what's in the talk tonight, but I might touch on it—so we can talk of soul as a subjective entity, as if it's a subjective thing, like we talk about mind or something like that. We can also talk about soul as just a way of relating, and that takes it out of this "where is it" sort of thing. It's in the relationship. It's a mode of, or actually it's modes, plural, of relating, if that makes sense.

I think probably what you'll find when I speak is I slip between those two ways of talking about it. But again, I'm a little loathe to tie it down to one or the other, if that makes sense.

Sampo, did you have a question? [Question inaudible: something about analysis and interpretation and hesitancy...]

So again, I go back to this thing of there's no right and wrong. It's like surfing or cycling or that kind of thing. In the sense of—like any meditation practice, we could be talking about emptiness practice here, we could be talking about samadhi, we could be talking about metta—there's a creativity and a playfulness and experimentation involved.

You get the sense of like, "Whoops, I've gone down a hole here," or "Whoops, I've fallen off," or "I've hit a brick wall," or whatever it is. Or, "Oh, that's interesting, it feels just right now," or "It's opening nicely." And I wouldn't have thought that my analysis would have done that, because analysis is supposed to be a bad thing. Or vice versa, I'm analyzing and I get all just heady and disconnected here.

So rather than creating a rule, I would just say this is part of the sailing. You're feeling the wind, you're feeling the breeze, the currents of the water, and what kind of catches it, in the moment. There are things we can say, absolutely, that this tends to help and that tends to hinder, but generally I don't think there's such a formula to all of this.

It's asking—that's why I keep going on about sensitivity and all of this. It means in the moment, how's my little boat doing here, you know, with the wind? You understand?

And the second thing, just to reiterate something or put in different words what I said to Linda, there's analysis at different levels. So there's an analysis that might be particular to this image and say a connection or whatever—my psychological history perhaps, or who knows what. But there's also just the analysis in terms of understanding, for instance, the whole process of soul-making and how that happens. So there's a kind of—do you understand?—it's more like a meta-level.

So it's all good if it's good in the moment. Do you understand? I would be wary of giving prefab formulaic answers, really. How does that sound?

Student: Sounds good. And will you be talking more about transforming the craving, clinging desires into more erotic desires instead? Because that's also something that with some images, especially in the guided meditation when you suggested that we just bring an image of our choosing, there might be... well, it's not exactly like a divine image at the moment, but it feels like there might be something coming on. It might just turn out it was something I craved or that was cool or whatever.

Yeah, sure, sure. This is—yeah, I think we'll be talking about it more. I'm pretty sure we will. I actually can't remember what's in the talk, but I'm pretty sure. If not, let's talk about it more.

Basically, yes, we can move. So you can have eros, all that lovely divinity and multidimensionality, and then, whoops, it's just contracted into craving. How do I know? Energy body is one thing, yeah, that tells me. With craving, the energy body contracts—that's one signal.

But similarly, we can stay with something and say, oh, this is—you know, this shouldn't work or this is craving, whatever. And the way of relating to it—and it might have to do with bringing the heart more involved. It might have to do with getting the energy body more involved.

So one way to lean it more towards eros is to really get the whole energy body involved and expand that field. When there's craving, the energy body also contracts, the awareness contracts maybe to one area in the body. Sometimes extremely, you know. Sexually, sometimes what can happen is the awareness contracts to one area of the body. So what can really help is opening that, getting the whole energy body involved.

So what is it to look at this imaginal object—and I use "look" in inverted commas—to look with my energy body? Do you understand? And that leans the whole thing more towards what we're calling erotic.

Humility is another thing. There's a sense—it's related to the autonomy—so I give this being, this imaginal figure, rather than they're an object that I want, or they're an object that's going to do something for me. You understand? So even you can have a spiritual—I can have a god that's basically just trying to do something for me, or that's how I see him, her, etc.

So there's something about humility and reverence as well that leans it towards, or opens it towards the erotic. So there's two things for right now, but hopefully we'll be saying a lot about that. Does that sound okay?

*_Student_*: Yes, thank you.

Okay, good. So there was the tea bell. Let's just have a couple of moments quiet together.

CHAPTER 91

Clinging, Craving, Eros (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 43 min

> *In this Q&A session from the retreat 'Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire,' Rob Burbea offers nuanced clarifications on the relationships between clinging, craving, and eros—three manifestations of desire central to his soul-making framework. He explains clinging as existing on a vast spectrum, from gross mental obsession to the subtlest movements involved in any perception whatsoever, including the appropriation of experience as 'me' or 'mine' and the assumption of inherent existence (avijjā).*
>
> *Burbea distinguishes craving from eros by their phenomenological qualities: craving contracts the being and reifies both self and object, while eros tends toward opening, expansion, and the soul-making dynamic he calls 'eros-psyche-logos.' Rather than viewing clinging as inherently unwholesome, he presents it as empty and potentially skillful—part of existence itself that can serve compassion and soul-making when engaged wisely. This perspective draws from Mahāyāna developments that grappled with how perception functions for awakened beings.*
>
> *Practical guidance emerges throughout: involving the energy body to transform craving into eros, loosening the sense of reality through emptiness practice or imaginal exploration, and asking soul-oriented questions like 'What is soul looking for here?' The session also addresses working with difficult emotions such as anger through imaginal practice, treating even personal patterns as potential lessons from soul. Burbea emphasizes an exploratory spirit—navigating fluidly between fabrication and non-fabrication, trusting the process while maintaining humility and reverence toward something larger than the personal self.*

So, does anyone have anything? Ramiro, yes.

A very easy one.

Can you just remind me of the difference you established between craving and clinging?

Yeah, thank you. So can I just recap? I took somewhere or other and made a differentiation, a delineation between what we're calling craving and clinging. In a way, I'm making this up. I wish I was better at making words or whatever. So it's not necessarily the same as the distinction that you might be already familiar with.

Both clinging and craving are manifestations of desire, kinds of desire, along with eros. So you've got three kinds—eros, craving, clinging—at least.

Clinging, I'm just really referring to, is a quite generic term in a way. But really, what I want to say is that it has a huge range to it. I really mean any movement of body or mind towards or away from anything. So anytime we try and push something away from us—now that could be really that the mind is just "get it away from me, I hate this," or very, very subtle, there's no thought involved, it's just a kind of micro-energetic inclination of mind to push something away, or to pull something towards us, or pull ourselves towards a thing. So any kind of push-pull of the consciousness, something like that, is called clinging. And it has a huge, huge range.

You know when you're really in the grip of something, really, your whole mind is kind of rebelling or obsessed with that thing and the thinking is going round and round—that's a kind of intense, strong, gross version of clinging. The gross end of the spectrum. Down at the subtle end, you're really talking about micro-movements of push and pull. Sometimes there's no thinking involved. How do I know it? I see some kind of contraction in the being. It might be very subtly in the energy body. And it might be just actually in the space of the mind, the sense of the awareness kind of contracting a little bit.

At the really subtle end, clinging is involved in any perception. Not everyone in the Dharma would agree with that, but that's how I would present it. Actually, to experience anything in the world, there's some kind of clinging. There's Ramiro, and my mind is doing this a little bit. And that's a kind of grasping movement, just to have you in my attention for a moment. So any experience, in or out, there's some kind of subtle degree of clinging.

And we talk about—so that's a very subtle level of clinging, just that's involved in any perception. Wrapped up in that, and also at the very subtle end, are things like: here I'm sitting, there's the sensation in the arm, sensation in the backside. Without thinking, the default, wrapped up in the default experience of that, these are my sensations. Of course, they're not your sensations. They're not Jill's sensations. So we have this appropriation in regard to any sensations as me or mine. And then we have even subtler, just the idea that it exists independently of the way of looking, that it has inherent existence. That's *avijjā*, the subtlest level of clinging.

So all that is clinging. Eros is a kind of clinging, in fact, and craving as well. Really the distinction is between craving and eros. The distinction I would make, or one of the distinctions I would make—actually, because there's probably quite a lot involved—is we just recognize that craving tends towards contraction. There's a contraction in the be-

ing, and there's a reification of something or other. So the view is contracted. It's a real thing that I want. Real me can get a real thing, or wants to get a real thing, or wants to push a real thing away. And with that, the being basically contracts in all kinds of ways. And this we can feel. It's palpable. So there's a kind of solidity and stuckness, reification, concretization, and dukkha involved.

Whereas eros, which wasn't in your question, tends to open things out. Because it gets involved in the soul-making dynamic—what we call this eros-psyche-logos business—it will tend towards opening things out, opening the being, opening the perception, opening the sense of things.

So you could look at these as two extremes, yes. Very nice.

If we tie this in with emptiness teachings, you could say something like: all perception involves fabrication. Perception is fabricated. Experience is fabricated. Clinging is part of what fabricates experience—some degree of clinging is always on that spectrum. Now, we can fabricate in a way that we call papañca. Do you know this word, papañca? Problematic, crazy-making, all that. That's fabrication in a kind of crazy-making, dukkha-making way. Eros and soul-making is a kind of fabrication, let's say, in a poetic way, in a magical way, in a beautiful way, in a soul-making way. But both are fabrication, as you put it. Very nice. It's kind of like that, if you like.

So you're asking: is clinging classified as an unwholesome factor in my view?

I've just done some other talks where I spent a long while on just this. In probably—I don't know if most or not—but certainly some traditions, and probably the ones that you're familiar with, clinging will be regarded as an unwholesome factor. It's wrapped up in the whole cycle of dependent origination leading to suffering.

Something really interesting happened with the emergence of the Mahāyāna tradition, because if there's this understanding that there needs to be clinging for perception to arise, then the question becomes: how does it work for a Buddha? How does it work for an arahant? And not only that, what kind of a Buddha is he who's just going to die and leave everyone suffering and not be able to be reborn back into the world of perception?

So you could say—you could explain the Mahāyāna tradition, and I'm not saying this is the way to do it—but you could say that's part of what they were trying to answer. How does it all work? What is a Buddha? How does awakening function in relation to this understanding of dependent arising and the fabrication of perception? I don't par-

ticularly buy those kind of reductive historical models, but you could frame it that way. And then out of that came all this complex Mahāyāna philosophy, which is either horrific or beautiful to you, depending on your opinion.

So in my view—is what you asked—no, clinging is not unwholesome. Clinging is empty and can be used skillfully or not, beautifully or not, in the service of compassion, in the service of soul-making, or not. It's part of existence. Existence involves clinging. And that's part of what we dance with.

You know, we have this image of fire, and it's a double-edged sword, fire. You can get burned by fire. So it's like that. But fire gives us so much. It's something like that.

Then we have to kind of open up the understanding of: whoa, what are we doing with the Dharma here? Because I thought we were supposed to try and live without clinging somehow—as if that's even possible. I don't really think that's possible. Nor is it probably, I imagine, what anyone in this room actually wants.

I would just ask, maybe I should pose it as a question: if you envisage a life really free of clinging...

What is that? What does it look like? And is it what the being really wants? We can get back to that.

So Natalie's asking, in a similar way, is it possible to transform craving into something more useful? Yes, absolutely. Not necessarily easy all the time, but as you begin to discern more the difference, you find that eros can slip into craving without us sometimes even realizing what's happened. And craving can be transformed into eros, into something more open, more beautiful, more poetry-making, more soul-making.

The big question is how. I'll say two things for now. One is getting the energy body involved. There is this contraction that happens with craving. Here I am with this thing, whatever it is that I'm craving. If I begin to involve my whole body in the perception of that thing—this is a bit of a strange angle here, but one can see with one's whole body, let's say. Bringing the whole energy body into the relationship usually means opening it out from something that's a little bit more contracted. Do you see what I mean?

Everything that's involved in soul-making is involved together. So you might think it's a hopeless tangle when trying to understand things, but actually there's a gift in that, because it means you can wiggle any one bit and the other bits start jiggling. Do you understand? So, for instance, because the energy body tends to open in harmony, you can play with that, and it tends to open the soul-making. That's one thing.

Another thing is realism, concretization or not. Craving involves a real thing. I think this thing is real. I usually think I'm real. In a real world, in real time, all the rest of it. So sometimes what can happen is just some way of loosening, liquefying that reality perception. This can happen in many ways. One is through a little bit of emptiness work. Another is actually by going more into the imaginary.

With this thing, you could say part of the problem with craving is that things have not gotten imaginal enough. This is completely opposite of what we've been taught and what we tend to think. Because the thing has no dimensionality—I just want that thing. I have no dimensionality. It's all so flat and so real and narrow. So it's almost like meditating more on whatever this thing is, whatever it could be, and letting it be more imaginal, letting it have its imaginal dimensions. Then the eros has something to move into, and it can do this eros-psyche dance. It can expand, and that transforms the whole thing. Does that make sense? So there are different ways with this real-not-real quality.

Those are two things for now. But I go back to this general principle that everything in soul-making, everything involved in soul-making, is almost like facets of the same thing. We think there's this and that, and there are all these pieces, but really, you can have so many different ways in that catalyze the process and support it. There can be a lot of creativity, and everything's connected there.

Does that make sense? Yeah?

Could a helpful question be, for example, if I feel some craving is happening, could I ask: What does it mean to me? Or what sense does it have? Or how does it speak to me?

Yes, absolutely. So as a bit like Natalie was asking: Is there a way, when I feel some craving, to loosen it up and help it perhaps move in the direction of soul-making? One way might be asking myself, "What meaning does this have for me?" What was the other phrase you used? "What sense do I have of it?" Yes, absolutely. Or "What is soul looking for?" Very good.

What I would add to that, similar to Linda's question yesterday, is that it might be that one answer to that ignites something, and that's all you need. But it might also be that one answer is too boxed in. So there's a kind of openness in asking. You won't necessarily get some final understanding: "I understand that now. I put it down to this, and this is what it is." Sometimes that will work, but sometimes you have to have more of an openness.

Connected with that sense of allowing openness is what I would call humility and reverence, these words I was talking about. And when you ask that last question —"What is soul wanting here?" or "looking for?"—then listen to that question. It puts

the agency almost outside you, or bigger than you. You didn't say "my soul." You didn't say "What am I?" I mean, you could language it like that, but there's a sense of something bigger that I'm receptive to, that I'm humble in relationship to. Do you understand? That attitude is also part of soul-making. That's an aspect of soul-making. So again, you're igniting one piece there, and the whole thing can start to shift. Yeah, absolutely. Beautiful.

Yes, there's someone back there. What's your name, by the way? Thomas, yeah.

So I've been working with an image and noticing the tendency for the subjective pole to dissolve.

Dissolve how? Actually, I'm going to repeat it anyway, so just finish your question.

Okay, so working with emptiness practices, and particularly with the emptiness of self practices, there is an ease in that dissolution into space, and also working with ājīrṇa practices. As you've mentioned before, that has a tendency to somewhat dampen the eros sometimes when the subjective pole dissolves, and then there is an identification with what was previously objective. I'm going to sound too technical, I hope it's making sense. Which is beautiful, because there is an ease and a falling away of dukkha in that moment, because duality is somewhat softened into a not-duality. And then the question comes: to increase that dynamic, to add, to adduce this dynamic, or to increase the whole thing, the creative fabrication of a new self in relation to object? This is something I'm just playing with right now, and I'm a little bit lost—not lost in the sense of... but on the intentional creative fabrication.

Okay, so let's see if I can sum that up. Thomas is saying, if I understand correctly—correct me if I'm wrong—he has found it very fruitful recently exploring a kind of practice that, through some understanding of emptiness, particularly of the self, kind of dissolves the experience, particularly dissolves the sense of self to some degree. And then there's this lovely openness of less fabrication, essentially—less duality, less polarity. And this is really nice. And yet in that space, because there's not so much of the twoness, there isn't so much of the eros. So the question is how to navigate there.

First thing: this sounds wonderful, great, fab. I would put everything that we're talking about on this retreat into a larger context, which relates to Romero's question about —how would you say—unskillful fabrication, what's called skillful or beautiful fabrication, soul-making fabrication, and then there's the path of non-fabrication. Do you understand? All of that is our playground. We tend to say, well, unskillful fabrication—we don't want to be playing there too much. But actually, I'll come back to that because we can qualify that. So you've basically got a choice as a practitioner.

You're gliding around. With time and with development, you can simply incline where you want to go. You might have periods where you're really drawn to the dissolving dimension—emptiness and the fabric of experience. That's great. Go for it. But at some point, and that might be now from your question, you might say, "Okay, that's all very nice. What else is there? What's possible?"

One of the things about emptiness practices is they can, if I go back to a phrase I think I used before, make everything liquid or water. There's that kind of looseness. Samādhi does it as well. Mettā does it as well. All the traditional practices in the Dharma are actually movements into non-fabrication, and part of what they do is they simply liquefy.

So sometimes you go into one of these states, whatever it is you're talking about, and then you just have to kind of back out a little bit, just a little bit. You take the intensity down slightly. It might be at that point that there's a bit more looseness and liquidity in the being, and in that space, images can arise. You can be deliberate about it. What I want to say is: don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of old patterns coming back. Just view it as a playground and see what happens.

I don't want to foist this on you like a religion or a dogma, but I would venture to say that as this whole thing gets underway, we begin to have more of a sense of soul being something bigger than us, so to speak. And then we even get to a point where it's like, "My personal dukkha, my history, my patterns—these also are kind of lessons from soul." It might not be that I'm quite relating to them the right way or seeing them the right way, but even if you take that question and apply it to my patterns, this dukkha, there's something that starts to get re-enchanted. I start to see and experience my patterns in a more soul-making way, and then they take on other dimensions. Do you understand?

So if old patterns come back, no problem. What you want with this emptiness thing is just this facility to say, "Hey, it's fine if dukkha arises, if I get contracted." The whole thing gets very fluid—in and out of dukkha, in and out of contraction, in and out of reification, no problem. I'm not trying to live in some kind of state of dissolvement all the time.

Don't be so afraid of that. And in terms of other images of self coming up, you could play with a Vajrayāna deity, for instance, just identifying with that. You could take anything that has already become imaginal for you and just linger with that in the meditative imaginal practice.

I'm pretty sure I must have said this last night in the talk—I know there was a lot of information there. Sooner or later, the self pole of that whole constellation will start to come alive imaginatively. I'm not making that happen. I'm just dwelling with whatever has become alive for me as an object. It might be the world. It might be whatever it is. And then at some point I begin to notice—I expand my awareness, so to speak, metaphorically—and just check out: "Well, how am I sensing myself now? What's the image of self?" And you will, at some point, notice that the self has become imaginal. It's taken a different form, or the energy body has shifted, or the image of the body, or the whole picture. Do you understand?

You don't have to force this. It's more like you notice this stuff. You're kind of letting it happen and just gently inclining one way or another.

Joel, hi. We've not met before.

Johan, sorry, hi. Okay, sorry. Yeah, thank you, Johan.

So Johan's asking—we're talking about alchemy of desire. And is there an alchemy of anger? And an alchemy of confusion, or delusion even? Then you've got your three main Buddhist *kilesas*. And this could actually be one view of the tantric path: it's the transformation of the *kilesas*, that there's treasure in each. So absolutely, yes, no question about it.

The other thing I was going to say to Natalie as well, and this applies here too: when there's an emotion, when there's something like desire or like anger, there's a lot of psychic energy involved. It's just the way we've got hold of it that takes it into the not-so-skillful. But part of playing with this kind of path that we're filling out now is this: let's just play with the idea that there's a treasure here, that there is an alchemy. You know, mercury in alchemy can transform things. So we're just playing with the idea that there's something potentially gold, potentially a treasure in there.

I would say, if you feel comfortable with it, let that anger be there. Feel it in the energy body. You're caring for it. And let it constellate an image. Does that make sense?

Well, the image that came to me is this young man. He's quite... It's hard for it to form an image, or it's hard for me to just sort of dwell on this aspect of that image without leaning into the unskillful anger.

What gives you the sense that it's unskillful?

Oh, I just feel like a contraction.

Oh, okay, yeah. Does an image—there's an image there?

Yeah.

Oh, okay. So the anger didn't start the image. The image had that in it.

Yeah. It has it as one of its aspects.

Yeah, yeah. Would it be possible to just play with the idea of trusting it? It's like, you know, sometimes in practice what you're doing is setting up a playground or a perimeter which is safe in that period. And kind of just seeing what happens if I trust. Because the presence or the absence of trust makes a big difference. What is he doing, this young man in the image?

I think it's just like, you know, metaphorically he wants to slam the door and leave.

Leave. Okay. Yeah, yeah. So it might be that it's not going directly through the anger first thing. This poet has become image for you, and he's probably quite a complex character. There's some mystery to him. It might be going through different aspects of this image, going through different other doorways rather than directly through the anger. That might be helpful.

When you're meditating with this, do you really feel like the energy body's involved?

You do.

And what happens? The energy body fills with anger?

Well, actually... yeah.

Now, is that charge—is that the way his body feels?

I don't quite know.

Okay. So that might be something to play with. It's almost like getting a sense of what his body feels like. Sometimes you can enter an image and become him. And that might actually do something to the feeling inside.

Jill is just sharing two images. One was looking out of the window from the meditation hall and perceiving a kind of corridor of light from the window into the nature. That came up later, and following it brought a sense of mystery and unfathomability.

The second one is actually something she wrote, and is a lovely piece about going through very difficult elements to reach this woman who recites this piece of her past as a soldier. Her lover was killed in battle, and she decides she's not going to wear that sort of armor anymore. She puts on the robes of the contemplative, and so she's become this hermit, this solitary, who receives visitors.

So that piece of writing might be something to revisit and play with imaginally. Does that feel right? Yes.

Yeah, I think what I would say about both of them is they're quite different, but both of them are, I think, potentially rich imaginal images for you. And what I would perhaps emphasize with both of them, particularly because you're quite new to this, is very much beginning with the energy body, actually sensing that corridor of light, that tunnel of light. What is the effect on your energy body? Or when you contemplate this figure and your relationship with her, what happens with the energy body? And very much keep, like we were saying earlier, that whole body sense of the relationship with the image, with the other, with the beloved, with that light, with that mystery.

Beginning there means that the play with the elements of the imaginal becomes a little easier. They somehow open naturally. So rather than just trying to pile on the meaningfulness or the dimensionality, sensing into how it affects the energy body, how it opens the energy body, what it does with the energy body really helps. And then it's actually like the image gives, it gifts new aspects, new qualities, new dimensionalities. You feel like you're kind of co-creating together rather than you trying to impose some kind of thinking on the image.

Both really valuable, and the range of imaginal practices is just huge. But both of them, absolutely, go for it. You recognize the imaginal not so much in what the kind of image is, but in what it does. How do I recognize imagination? It's soul-making. How do I recognize soul-making? By the emotion, by the meaningfulness, by the beauty, by the depth, by the dimensionality—by all these things.

So here could be a king and a wizard and a fairy and a dragon and all that, and one might say, "Oh, it's imaginal." But it could be completely not imaginal if it doesn't do anything. Or here's this room right now. Here's my hat—it could be an imaginal hat. It is, in fact, an imaginal hat. But it doesn't matter what it is or how weird or mythic it seems. It's not in the thing. It's in the relationship.

And so there's this—I almost feel like saying, I don't know. I don't know how to do it either. What this is, is an exploration. What happens if we bring mindfulness, sensitivity, curiosity, energy body awareness, this sophistication and care around the questions about reality—what happens if we bring all this into this practice and see what unfolds? If you can have that kind of spirit, I think it's certainly better than asking me. I'm happy to help, but I don't view this as something I've figured out and am handing down. I view it for myself as an exploration. We are discovering, you are discovering, I'm discovering—not just images, but also how they work, and what the conceptual framework needs to be. To me that's beautiful. So you're absolutely on the right track.

We've talked about the ways you can work with these things. And sometimes an image informs my life, the directions I take, what I decide to do, what I manifest in the world. Sometimes much less so; it's not so obvious. And then eventually it will spread into the world so that the sense of the world itself begins to get more imaginal. That, for me, is where we're going. Some people will start there. But for many people, I think the intra-psychic imaginal starts expanding into the world of relationships, into the world of relationship with the self. That corridor of light could be—we talked about cosmopoiesis—the way that images start to spread through the world, into the world of nature. And that could be one of the doorways into that.

It seems to me we don't know. Sometimes images might be one-offs. They're just one-offs. But they're still somehow significant. They do something. They're part of the whole song. But the image never comes back, and we don't particularly feel called to draw it back. Other images might be around for years, and there's a real relationship there.

All I would add is that, like with a human being—if you think about a relationship with a human being—hopefully we don't just have a one-sided relationship, like "What can this imaginal figure do for me?" If we open up, if we play with that kind of way of entering into a relationship, where the image has a kind of autonomy and there's a two-way quality, then there's a fullness and multi-dimensionality. And yes, some relationships with images could go on for years. Absolutely.

CHAPTER 92

Instructions: Letting Go

Rob Burbea · 27 min

> *In this dharma talk from the "Of Hermits and Lovers" retreat, Rob Burbea presents renunciation and letting go as essential threads in an expanded understanding of spiritual practice. Rather than viewing renunciation as the sole approach to desire, he emphasizes the importance of developing fluidity between different practice modalities - sometimes exploring desire with sensitivity, other times skillfully letting go.*
>
> *Burbea offers four practical approaches to renunciation: returning to nourishing practices like mettā and samādhi when our inner reservoir is depleted; investigating underlying emotions that may be driving surface desires; creating spacious awareness around the dukkha inherent in craving itself, allowing it to arise and naturally subside; and engaging in wise reflection on impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature of phenomena, and our past experiences with desire fulfillment.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes developing confidence in our capacity to let go, understanding that this ability grows stronger with practice. Burbea concludes with practical guidance for mindful eating as a laboratory for investigating the relationship between the senses and desire, suggesting mealtimes as opportunities to observe craving, vedanā (feeling-tone), and the mind's constructions around sensory experience. This teaching supports practitioners in cultivating the discernment to know when to explore desire and when to practice renunciation.*

So if we want to expand our path, expand our sense of the possibility of what the path can be for us, what can open from the path, then obviously our practice needs to expand and our understanding as well needs to expand. A lot needs to expand, in fact—heart, soul, sensitivity. So it's asking quite a lot, this expansion of practice, asking for a lot of elements or threads to be woven together as part of the development. It's necessary. And that comes, like everything else, almost inevitably, gradually.

Already on the retreat we've introduced two or three threads, at least. We have the practice thread of cultivating this well-being in the energy body just as much as we can at any time. That's a kind of thread of intention that can be there at any time. We call that samādhi—gatheredness, harmonization, well-being. That's one thread. And that brings nourishment, brings deep nourishment to the body and to the mind and to the heart. This just dwelling, resting in this permeated well-being. That's a really important thread of practice.

The second thread is again related to the energy body but it's really using the energy body to be in touch with and to care for what's happening in the emotions. So the energy body as the indicator but also the vessel of care or one of the vessels of care for what's happening emotionally. Really important as a thread in practice.

And then yesterday we introduced the whole thread, the direction of imaginal practice and working with images there. And we talked about the balance with two-ness, between self and other, self and image.

So those three threads already, and they weave together like a rope is made of different threads. They support each other, you can move between them. So part of developing the art of practice is not only developing the art of each thread, but the art of moving, navigating. How do I approach this sitting or this moment or this walking? What's going on? Which thread will I explore? So there's a somewhat improvisatory element involved in that.

Now, add another thread, but it's a thread that you already know, that you're well familiar with—the thread of renunciation. So we're stretching what practice can be, but it relies on the basis of what we probably already know from our Dharma teachings.

So renunciation, letting go. It's all good and well and what we're trying to say is very important and fruitful to play with trusting desire at times. This is part of what this retreat is about. What if I trusted? What if I regard desire in a different way and approach it in a different way? And if you like, follow it—follow it in a sense, not necessarily act it out, but follow it in the psyche, in the being with the sensitivity, for example, in imaginal practice and we'll talk about other possibilities.

So that's great and we really want to offer that and open up that possibility as something that's not commonly offered. It's great and all very good, and you need more volume. And at times we want to just cool down, turn it off, let it go, drop it. Really, really good. Really kind. So to have these options, not to be stuck in any option, and just always bashing away at trying to do the same thing, always on one thread, on one tack of practice. We have this fluidity, this flexibility that we're slowly gathering skill and art in.

So sometimes, either you just discern, this is the wisest thing to do now—drop it, let go, let the desire go, go somewhere else. And other times, you might just deliberately try to explore that mode of dropping and letting go. So there's this fluidity and discernment that we need. We're slowly developing.

I want to remind you of that possibility and stress its importance today. As I said, really a kindness. If you like, the capacity and the ability to let go, to drop desire, is developable. In other words, it's something that with practice, with care, with attention, develops. We get better at it. We get more confident that we can let go of desire if we want to, when we want to. That confidence is really important as well.

Just to offer—and we could talk about this for weeks in fact, but just four possibilities. Probably you know them anyway. So rather than get into a whole extended thing and where this might lead, just four practice possibilities.

So the first is come back to what's nourishing. Come back to a nourishment practice. So what's a nourishment practice? Well something like loving kindness is a nourishment practice.

whether the loving kindness is directed towards yourself or towards another. Let's say, if I'm having a hard time here or I can't let go of something and I think, "I'll give myself loving kindness," maybe that's really helpful. Maybe I give someone else loving kindness. Look, it's got to permeate me on the way out. I'm going to get soaked in that loving kindness as well. So don't always think it has to be you—just loving-kindness mode will be nourishing.

When we talk about samadhi, that's almost by definition a nourishing state. I'm just going to hang out in this field, in this bubble and make it nice and warm and just as comfortable as can be and just dwell in that, let myself rest in that and be nourished by it.

Often we grasp at things and we can't let go because our level of nourishment, the reservoir, is too low. The water is low in the reservoir. You understand? So I'm looking out everywhere: What can I get? What's that? What about him? What about her? What about this? What's for lunch? And there's the anxiety of endless grasping coming from needing more nourishment. You understand? So indirectly taking care of the nourishment takes care of this kind of endless grasping and craving that's part of the human condition.

So, anything that brings any degree of yumminess—metta, samadhi, calmness, the harmonization of energy. What happens is our muscle to let go, just drop it and come back, whether that's the breath or the energy body or the metaphors or however you're doing it, just the more in our life we practice just this thing, and just drop it and come back, drop it, even if it feels completely futile, over time that muscle gets stronger. We get better at just dropping and returning. So to have faith in that—it's very, very simple.

Let me qualify that a little bit now and ask you: what is your tendency, what is your historical tendency in regard to that kind of practice and desire and dropping things? So you might be, historically, you look back at your years of practice and you see, "I tend to drop a lot and come back to my nostrils or whatever it is, or my abdomen or whatever it is." Or you might be the opposite: "I tend to be a very investigative type and I'm always going out exploring what's going on. I don't give much attention to developing the well-being and the nourishment."

So what's your tendency? What's your pattern? And sometimes it's good to just—okay, I realize that's my tendency, let's practice the opposite. Let's learn to lean the other way. You understand? So again, eventually in the service of this flexibility, we have just a multitude of directions possible to us. We can tack in any direction, we're free, we're fluid.

So, in this case, both the exploration of eros and desire, as we're opening it up, and also the letting go and the coming back. Always going the letting go route, as I think I said in the opening talk, as a way of living, it ends up being a little silly. It doesn't kind of cohere as a path of practice. It doesn't make sense. It's not our life and it doesn't fully serve our life. So we need some discernment here. Always going after desire and exploring eros and opening to it and letting it open us will also be somewhat unbalanced, and it will—if I do that, I won't be able to open other doors, for instance, the door of deep emptiness exploration, because that involves letting go of clinging.

Okay, so that's the first one, is just come back to something nourishing. That's the first possibility, just come back, come back, just drop it.

The second one is also a little bit related to nourishment and really it's to do with the possibility that sometimes what's happening when we're chasing after something—"I really need that thing, I really want that thing," or the mind is just distracted that way—what's actually happening is that there's some pain underneath the desire. The desire is not actually the primary thing. I don't really care about those chocolate cookies or whatever it is. What's happening is I feel lonely, or what's happening is there's grief, or there's heartache, or there's boredom. It could be something quite subtle as boredom, and we're disconnected from that heart state, and then we're going after this thing as a way of smoothing over, covering over what's going on. And we hope that somehow—if I can, it's not conscious of course—if I can disconnect enough I'll maybe get better.

No, we need to connect. Come back, come back, have a look at the heart. Something there might need caring for. And caring might just be connecting, which means just touching it, just holding it, just holding it in a caring awareness. That maybe is all it needs.

The connection heals. The kindness in the connection heals. And in being connected, we're more grounded and naturally step out of being chased by our desires. Coming back to what's painful might feel daunting, but the connection itself begins to slowly soothe what's painful. It starts to heal it. Then there isn't this sense of being propelled by some emotion that we're not fully conscious of. Does that make sense?

So the second option is to look at the emotions. If you're troubled by a desire, have a look at the emotions underneath. Give them some caring attention.

The third possibility involves recognizing that when there is craving, that craving is uncomfortable. The craving itself is dukkha—it's not an easeful feeling. There's tension and pressure that we feel when there is craving. You can feel it actually, certainly in the mind, but you can feel it in the body and in the energy body. The craving itself is dukkha.

Sometimes what we're craving—whether it's a cigarette or a drink or whatever it is—it's not even so much the thing that we're craving or the pleasure of it. We're craving the relief from the discomfort, the tension, the pressure of the feeling of craving. So when I get that thing, the balloon of pressure bursts. And it's actually that relief we're seeking. It's a kind of aversion again driving us, similar to the second practice thread. It's an aversion to the underlying emotion, or an aversion to the craving itself. We just want relief from that.

What's possible is getting in touch with that feeling of the discomfort of craving—the pressure, the tension of it. Where do I feel it? Sometimes you can feel it in the whole body, buzzing with that energy. Sometimes it's much more subtle. But it's really helpful to notice that craving is dukkha. Craving not only leads to dukkha—it is dukkha.

And what does this pressure need? All pressure needs is space. So I create more space around that pressure. I let it bubble away, this discomfort, but I give it more space in the awareness. If it's a pressure cooker and we make it bigger, the temperature goes down. That's how pressure cookers work—they create pressure and that heats things up more. So you create more space.

Just let it be. Let it be uncomfortable. It's going to be uncomfortable. Like when you stub your toe, you just have to give it some space for a few seconds, and it does its thing and then peters out.

So what happens here is this craving, this discomfort of craving, the pressure of it—I know it's unpleasant, I just create space around it and let it bubble away. It will rise, get more intense, and then reach a peak. Then it just subsides. And then it's gone, then you're free.

Now it might come back. But every time you go through that whole cycle—because you've given it space and not been dragged into action by it or into following the mind's proliferations—every time you do that, the whole cycle, the whole peak gets less. The intensity and grip of that craving on the whole system gets a little less, gets a little weaker. Make sense?

So that's the third possibility: noticing the discomfort, noticing the pressure and giving it space, just giving it space. Learning to tolerate, developing our capacity to tolerate the discomfort of craving.

This gives us confidence. You go through that cycle and you see, "Wow, this is possible." The strength of the being grows and the confidence of the being grows.

A fourth and last possibility for now is that a little bit of reflection can really be helpful.

So we get caught in wanting this thing or that thing, or this situation to unfold, or that person, or whatever it is. And how many times have we been through this before? How many times has it really satisfied us? Sometimes a little bit of reflection can be really helpful. What is this thing? What is getting this thing really going to give me? Am I really going to be fulfilled getting it? These are all very standard dharma approaches—you should be quite familiar with them.

Sometimes it's a matter of going deeper into what I want. Is this thing what I really want? Do I even really want it? I'm so caught up there, but is that really what I want? What I deeply want? Recognizing it's not what I really deeply want, there can be more ease in letting go.

Sometimes it's remembering how often in the past we've gotten what we wanted, but it ended up being not quite what we had imagined it might be before we got it. Surely. Almost always things turn out differently than what we think. So it's like bringing that wisdom at the starting end instead of at the end end. It's like, "Oh yeah, wait a minute. This relationship, this whatever—forget about it. It's not going to make you completely happy." And if we're exploring desire and opening to that, it's not because we think it's going to make us really happy. There are other reasons.

Lastly, there's just the reflection on impermanence. This thing will change. I will change. What I want will change. This thing will change. Change, change, change. Impermanence. Just reflecting on that. Sometimes beginning to notice impermanence, beginning to look at beginnings and endings. Lunch comes and then it goes—where has it gone? The retreat comes and then it goes. Everything. Interactions. Mind states—"I really want some of that samādhi they keep going on about." It comes and it goes.

All the sense contact, it all comes and goes. Impermanence happens on all time scales. Lives come and go. Death comes. Birth, life, death. Galaxies come and go. Mind states come and go many times over a day. Relationships come and go. Moments come and go—these words right now, how many different sounds, moment to moment.

So sometimes just inclining more towards impermanence—we're not really going to do that too much on this retreat, but it's a possibility—just going into that mode where everything's impermanent, and one lets go more.

Related to that, because everything is impermanent, everything is dukkha, everything cannot ultimately satisfy. So another possibility is going into a mode where whatever comes up, it's just dukkha, it's just unsatisfactory. All it means—it's not a philosophy of life, it's just a kind of gear, a possible thread you can pick up. Half an hour, an hour, ten minutes, whatever comes up—the sensations in the back, dukkha; the sides, dukkha; the sounds, dukkha, unsatisfactory.

I'm not saying that is the reality of things. It's a mode of looking. It's a way of looking. And there's just letting go, letting go. Why? Because things cannot satisfy. Just let go. Let them come, let them go. Very, potentially very beautiful.

This sounds like it might be a recipe for misery, but actually it's the opposite. Something really—I know that many of you in this room understand this—very beautiful opens up in practice, what it can reveal for beings. But that's a more extended possibility.

So we have these threads we're weaving together in terms of expanding the path. We have quite a few threads already. Don't get overwhelmed, but learn to navigate between them. One thread is this business about renunciation, which you can approach in different ways.

In a minute it's lunchtime, and I'd like to offer a thread within a thread. I invite you to take food, taste, smell, and sight as themes for exploring the senses and desire in relation to the senses. Mealtimes can be excellent places to investigate and explore these teachings.

We'll pick this up at several points during the retreat. For the starting, entry-level approach to this practice, we'll work with our theme of renunciation for today. One way of approaching this whole arena of how the senses engage with food is to look at it from the perspective of renunciation practices.

What this might mean is taking at least one, but perhaps several mealtimes, meditatively. There will be a lunch queue, and you may find yourself at a certain position in that queue. What happens in terms of the movement of craving in relation to where you are?

You can stand there in the queue and be aware of craving, if it arises. It might be craving for the lunch itself. It might be craving with a fear component—will there be enough left when I get there? Will all the good food have gone? This too is part of craving. You can simply be aware of that.

Standing in the queue becomes meditation—just opening to these movements of mind and heart. When you have the food and you're selecting it, remain aware of your relationship with taking. Do I fear that I won't have enough and pile the plate high? Am I stingy with myself? There's so much to discover in our relationship with food.

Then there are the smells and sights. This word *vedanā*—one translation is sensation. The sensations when food is in the mouth, or the smell, will give rise to hopefully mostly pleasant sensations. But this is quite interesting. If you really meditate on the food, on the sensations arising in your mouth, what's actually there?

There are explosions—vivid explosions of taste. Not much else. Gaps between them. What is the mind building up around the whole experience? What does it think food will be? Actually find out. Be close with the sensation.

What happens with unskillful craving is we get caught up with the mind's idea of what an experience is, instead of being at the level of sensation. There's taste, there's smell, there's sight. I invite this practice as a starting point, and we'll develop it further with food as the days go by.

You're probably familiar with this approach. I simply invite that practice—it could be now, could be at some point—but do at least a couple of mealtimes like that. At least a couple, and we'll continue from there.

But enjoy lunch, dear friends. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 93

Opening to Desire and the Imaginal (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 40 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea responds to practitioners' questions about opening to desire and working with imaginal practice. He addresses how the energy body can contract when images arise, offering guidance on maintaining spaciousness through the 'two-ness' practice of holding both awareness and imagery simultaneously. Burbea explores the relationship between desire and depression, suggesting that some forms of depression may arise from blocked eros or an absence of alive images rather than simply lacking desire. He discusses how reification creates obstacles to the natural flow of soul-making, and how eros seeks to expand and penetrate into the imaginal realm. The talk covers practical concerns about being flooded by difficult imagery when opening awareness, distinguishing between imaginal engagement and overwhelming exposure to world suffering. Burbea emphasizes that imaginal practice requires developing sensitivity to navigate subtle energetic shifts and the natural forks that arise in contemplative practice, whether moving toward samadhi, staying with pure energy, or engaging with images.*

I will try and repeat the question so that anyone who's listening can hear it better. And if you'd rather your question isn't recorded, then just let us know and we'll press pause.

Tom is asking about working with the energy body. He's saying there are times when he can establish a relatively spacious energy body that feels very nice, comfortable, pleasant, and really yummy. But there are other times, especially when an image comes, that the attention contracts towards or around the image, and with that the energy body contracts as well.

This is partly why Catherine was doing the two-ness exercise and what we did on the first day. It's like, can I have that and this? It takes practice—we need to develop that ability to have both.

I would guess a lot of this stuff is supported by not just one thing, but many different things. One of them is simply the more you hang out in that energy body space, and the more you take that with you into daily life. Here's the thing: splitting life into formal meditation and the rest of life is a mistake for a start. So you sit, and that's maybe where in the sitting or walking or standing you get your first taste of this nice energy body awareness. When you end the meditation, take that with you.

In other words, end it slowly and see if you can get up off the cushion and walk away with that energy body feeling. Standing in the lunch queue, can I just get it back? Walking meditation in the energy body is really helpful, obviously, because it's mobile and that's more like life.

The more you can get a taste of this, what the energy body becomes is just—it becomes eventually the default hangout. It's this kind of "this is nice," and we want to be here, and it feels good, and there are little micro-adjustments and things. So the more you do it, and the more you spread that doing into different activities, that will help.

Then you can begin doing more of what Catherine introduced on the first day or second day—this kind of doing it in relationship. Now it's hard with a human other. Most people find it hard with a human other because a human other is a whole other world and they're looking at you and maybe they're judging you and who knows what. So it's probably easier with something like a tree or something. You practice extending it like that, and then also with images.

It might work the other way around, though, in the sense that when an image becomes alive as an image—in other words, not just a mental picture and not just a fixation—when it comes alive in that imaginal way, then you might find that your energy body is actually quite expanded. So it's not just the fact of an object and the mind doing that contraction. It's actually the nature of the object and the relationship with it.

I would wonder whether actually it's not quite a uniform experience that you're having. There are differences—when there's a different relationship with the image, there will also be different effects on the energy body. So look out for that as well.

It's not that you need to try and do something with the energy body with the image. First of all, it might not be really a soul image. It might just be whatever mental content. That's fine. Or it might be that just as you hang out more with a certain image, it becomes more infused with the imaginal, and that changes the energy body relationship with it.

Everything that's involved in the imaginal or in a soul-making dynamic feeds everything else. It's connected with everything else. So where you see the problem—like "oh, my energy body's contracted"—is not always the place where you need to go and try and fix it. You can give attention to other aspects of the whole constellation, and that will just naturally fix itself. There are a lot of different ways you can work with that.

Today the practice was to open to the current of desire. I would like to know your thoughts when there is...

heroes like a flame that is not fueled, or if it is rather the case that eros is always alive but part of it has taken hold of an idea or an image, has turned against itself and is counteracting a part of this current of desire. Do you have any thoughts on this and how to work with that lack of desire?

"Yeah, the lack of desire or the... Yeah, lack of feelings."

"Okay, so... You made that noise again, didn't you?"

"Did I make that noise?"

"I was just going to agree with Ramiro about the... If you look at it in terms of life force, certainly if a life force is kind of got to be encapsulated with an inner critic, for example, that's a lot of life force in there. It's not necessarily eros, but it's a lot of life force to hold us down. So I was just agreeing with that point."

"So let me see if I can summarize, if I understood. So I'm a little tired today. So what happens when there's a kind of depression, really, you know. Is it that there's a lack of desire, or is it that somehow the desire has got kind of stuck or worked back on itself in a way that's stifling and closing down something, or something like what Catherine just said? I don't know. I'm interested. To me, it's a really interesting question."

I certainly think, and just relating to what Catherine said, so let's take something like the inner critic. Imagination is involved in the inner critic. It's got this voice or this character or whatever. What the inner critic is not is imaginal, generally speaking. So in our... What's happened there is something's got reified. Actually, more than one thing has got reified. The inner critic has got reified, and I've got reified.

So if we go back to this self-other-world business, both self and other are both reified. They're concretized. I really believe what the inner critic is saying about me. So even if I don't believe the inner critic's a real person or thing or character, I believe what they say, that kind of object, is saying something real about a real subject, me. So the problem is in the reification.

There's a lot to your question, but what happens when there's a reification is it's like... push of the eros. This eros wants to push. It wants to expand. It wants to penetrate. It wants to open. It wants more. It's this pothos with the eros. It has this dynamic quality. When it meets some kind of block, and there can be all kinds of blocks, but one kind of block is reification, concretization, that push meets the block. Something's going to happen.

Either the push of the eros, the life force, is strong enough to break the block. And then it can go through that reification block into the realm of the imaginal. And the imaginal has the capacity to expand deeper, get richer feedback on the eros, make the whole thing really fertile. If the block is stronger than the eros, or just really entrenched, then something can happen. The eros cannot move into depth, cannot move into dimensionality, into the imaginal. It has to do something, and yet could get tied up in a negativity, could just have to go horizontally, all kinds of things.

So there's that possibility, and I guess it could happen in many ways. There might also be, and you also mentioned, what can happen is, I sometimes wonder, I think, I'm certainly not an expert on depression, but I wonder whether depression is actually, like so many things, many different kinds. And one kind of depression is actually the absence of fantasy. The absence of anything, any kind of image, specifically around the self or around one's activity in life or expression, that is not alive as an image, is not permitted or hasn't found its way. And then there's nothing to kind of, the waters of eros or the fire of eros to flow into and galvanize and give life to, which then feeds back into the whole libidinal energy in the whole life.

So yes, sometimes I think depression is an absence of image. Or it's an image that's fixation, to borrow Catherine's word from this morning, and there's a stuckness.

This is a fascinating question. The fear of opening too wide and being flooded by all the painful images we carry - the torture, cruelty, and suffering we've absorbed throughout our lives - feels very real. But I wonder if this kind of flooding actually happens when we're truly open, or when there's repression.

Think of that pressure cooker image again. What you're describing - opening the awareness really wide - is almost by definition an easing of pressure. There's more space, so less constriction. When awareness expands, it creates room rather than intensity.

Jung went through a period around 1913 that he described as nearly psychotic, documented in his Red Book with all its florid, overwhelming imagery. But I wonder how much this was a product of his particular time - before the First World War, when there was enormous collective repression brewing, when the whole psychological framework was built around the dangerous "unconscious" that could erupt and overwhelm consciousness.

We live in different times now. I don't think there's that same kind of pressure building toward flooding for most people. When you're genuinely open in the way you're describing, the tendency is actually toward a kind of beneficial liquidity - more images can flow, but they flow rather than erupting.

Paradoxically, when awareness is really wide and open, it often moves in the direction of quieting imagery altogether, toward what we call non-fabrication. So rather than being flooded, you might find that painful images - the dark, torturous images of world suffering - do arise, but they arise within this vast, spacious awareness that can hold them without being overwhelmed.

The flooding typically happens when we've been holding these images in a pressurized way, when there's been unconscious resistance or repression. True openness creates the very container that can receive whatever arises with grace.

Absolutely. The imaginal is essentially a certain set of ways of relating. I can turn on the news and be flooded with really difficult imagery these days—and that's a reality, let's say. I don't take it imaginatively. I still have to navigate that in my heart and my soul and my house: how am I going to work with this and with my sensitivity and the way I'm impacted and the pain in the world and try to respond to that and take care of it and balance my compassion. So all that has to do with compassion practice. It's really, really important.

When we're talking about the imaginal realm, we're talking about, to some extent, a different kind of relationship with that imagery. Already people are starting to report something that is very common with imaginal practice: an image that the mind at first goes, "Oh, that's horrific, that's violent, or that's dark, or that's weird, or whatever." And in the realm of imaginal practice, it's like, just stay with that. Can I just have a little bit of trust in that image? It's not a flat, literalized image of something that's going on in the world. It's imaginal. What looks dark and disturbing has got its own kind of beauty and its own kind of reason. If I can stay with it and trust it, it opens up in a different way.

So it's almost like mixing camps a little bit in your question. What's the real pain in the world and what's more imaginal things that come out? They're different. Is this making sense?

Absolutely. As I said at some point, what we're doing here is asking a lot. It's kind of saying that to do this kind of practice we're talking about requires that we have skill with our emotions—which means knowing when we're numbing, taking care of it,

learning how to soften the heart, open it, take care of it, balance it, be sensitive. It's a lot already, that's a lot—in relationship to our personal history, in relationship to present relationships, in relationship to world pain.

So all that's kind of—we're not talking that much about that on this retreat, partly because we're just kind of saying, let's build on that as if it's already there. But we know this is difficult stuff. So I'm not sure what else to say about that piece right now. Could we talk about it another time, perhaps, if that's okay? But it's a really, really important question.

"I was spending time doing that, and it's very romantic."

"Spending time opening that desire?"

"Well, I suppose, yeah, opening that desire. And then I suppose from it, it wasn't the way that Catherine described, or the other people, the way she described it. It wasn't like, oh, I had..."

"So let me check with you. I was picking up on Catherine's talk last night and the instructions this morning, with opening to desire, and the desire was to just see people happy and flourish. And then what happened seemed to be neither just opening to the energy and having that desire manifest nor something imaginal but it was more like an opening to a realm of happiness—is that a realm of not an individual image but kind of like as if I was walking through that world?"

"Oh, okay. So my question is why is that not imaginal? It's an imaginal realm, an imaginal world of that."

"I suppose I was just checking."

So, yes, absolutely. There's a couple of things there. It's an imaginal realm, an imaginal world. Yes, linger there, enjoy it. When an image opens up, it's asking us for sensitivity. It's asking us to resonate with it. It's asking us to be with it and in it and relate to it.

It might be that then it unfolds some other—you know, it might be that it feeds back on this world and the way you see this world, so to speak. That would be one of the ways that it could kind of infuse or mix with the perception of this world. And then that would be an interesting thing. But there's all kinds of possibilities. It sounds like that's what's opening there.

And so in terms of the instructions, I think I said this morning, it can, once you're open to that, it could go into an image, which sounds like what you're describing, or it could just stay with the energy free of image, and you just have that. And they're both fine choices.

Both experiences point to something beautiful about the nature of practice itself: almost every step along the way presents us with choices, with what I think of as forks in the road. This happens constantly—whether we're exploring emptiness practice, developing samadhi, working with the imaginal, or following desire. Every short while, the path branches, and we learn to sense which direction to take, or sometimes the way simply unfolds naturally.

Someone shared a perfect example of this today in a note. They found themselves in what began as a sexual fantasy, stayed with it, and somehow discovered they had moved into jhana. This is actually quite common, and there are several reasons why this happens.

Much of it relates to the energy involved. Sexual energy can be remarkably similar to piti—that quality of rapture we cultivate in meditation. What typically occurs with sexual fantasies is that we become fixated on the images while remaining disconnected from the broader body experience. We might feel sensation in specific areas, but we're not opening to the full energy body or allowing the sexual energy to spread throughout our being.

But if we approach it differently—if we take that same fantasy or daydream and, instead of fixating on the images, allow the energy of enjoyment to spread, opening to the sexual energy itself—it naturally moves toward a beautiful energy body experience and samadhi. This represents one of those forks I mentioned.

This principle applies to any image that comes alive imaginally. When an image truly awakens in this way, it will always be reflected in the energy body through some kind of harmonization, opening, or pleasurable sensation. This energetic response serves as one of our most reliable indicators that we're moving in the right direction with an image—even when our rational mind protests that what's arising seems weird, dark, violent, or somehow inappropriate.

The energy body offers honest feedback about our imaginal work. At any moment when this energetic aliveness is present, we can choose to let the image go and simply rest with the energy body, or we can continue playing with both the image and the energy together. These choices keep appearing throughout our practice.

As we go deeper, much of our development centers around cultivating sensitivity, responsiveness, and delicacy in navigating these subtle currents. I imagine it might be like hang gliding—learning to ride the air currents with tremendous subtlety, picking up on what's available in each moment. Sometimes these movements are extraordinarily subtle, requiring us to sense a possibility and then gently incline toward it. Other times, it feels more as though the soul itself possesses its own intelligence, guiding and offering the unfolding in ways that surprise us.

Let me turn to someone who hasn't spoken yet. David, was it you who wanted to ask something?

David shared two interconnected questions. First, regarding the instruction to follow the stream of desire—he finds this experience quite dynamic, sometimes very strong, sometimes extremely subtle, but often accompanied by intense and quite enjoyable energy. His second concern relates to physical pain in his shoulders, neck, or back that frequently arises during retreat. Following the suggestion to inquire into the deeper wanting beneath the pain, he received a series of answers that seemed to exist at different levels, with the deepest pointing toward some form of perfectionism.

When you mention that "it's pointing to," David, do you mean the desire itself or the physical pain? And when you speak of getting rid of it, are you referring to the desire, the pain, or both?

But there's not that sense of the eros building or being ignited or kindling in some way. Yeah, so a few things. Sometimes when there's an opening, it's almost like we need to rest there for a while. There's something that needs to integrate or settle or be received. And we can actually push too much, you know, if we're like, "Well, that was nice, but now what? Where's the eros?" There's a way that the psyche needs to actually receive what just happened.

So that would be one possibility. Another thing is - and this is something we'll talk about more - but sometimes the eros is actually in the opening itself. It's not that we open and then the eros comes after. The eros is actually the opening. There's an aliveness, there's a dynamism in the very process of opening that we might not recognize as eros because we have ideas about what eros should look like or feel like.

And the third thing is that sometimes when we've had an opening, there's a kind of natural completion to that movement. It's like the desire has been fulfilled in some way, at least temporarily. And so there isn't more eros there because that particular thread has reached a kind of natural conclusion for now. And then we wait, and usually something else will arise, another desire, another longing, another movement.

But if we're too impatient and we're like, "Well, where's the next thing?" we might actually not allow the space for the next desire to emerge naturally. Does that make sense? So sometimes there's a quality of receptivity, of just being available, that allows the next movement of the soul to show itself.

Yeah? Okay. Someone else?

Yes?

Actually, can I just add one more thing to what I just said? Sometimes when we've had an opening, particularly if it's been quite significant, there can be what we might call a "fear of the depth" or a "fear of the bigness" of what we touched. And so part of us might actually be putting on the brakes a little bit, not allowing the eros to build again because we're a little overwhelmed by what we contacted. And that's completely understandable. So if you sense that might be happening, you could just acknowledge that and maybe ask, "What would allow me to feel safe enough to let this energy move again?" or "What support do I need to be able to open to this aliveness?"

And then there doesn't seem to be much eros present. I would prefer to connect the word *eros* with the imaginal. It comes and goes—it's not something that's there all the time. When an image reconstellates, then the eros will return in relation with that image. This isn't something to worry about or some state we're trying to sustain.

What you've accomplished in the opening to the current of desire practice, if you've done it in the classical way, is that you've let go of images. There's a fullness of libidinal energy that transforms into something that's not eros and not imaginal. So then you're resting in that state, which is totally understandable and not a problem at all.

Eros is connected with image and fantasy. When there's craving, you can transform that into eros. But you don't need to worry about maintaining eros all the time. Like everything else, it moves in waves, and certain conditions feed it.

I'd suggest two approaches. First, if you want to return to the imaginal, it's a matter of loosening again—perhaps loosening the energy body through some emptiness practice, liquefying the psyche so that images can be reborn. When some issue arises or presents itself, that will reconstellate the whole imaginal realm, and with it, eros.

But also, we can look for eros where it's already present—where we love, where something holds meaning for us. You don't always need to search for an intrapsychic image. You could look around you on this retreat and notice the meaningfulness it holds, the appreciation, the love, the dedication. Eros is connected with all of that—here in the environment, in the world around us.

The third possibility is that eros can be extremely subtle. Rather than wanting more eros and worrying that it's something you lack, what might be needed is greater sensitivity in noticing its much more delicate manifestations. Eros can rage powerfully, or it can be incredibly subtle. This could be quite an interesting exploration.

To me, much of practice is about opening—expanding our capacity and skills, our ability to handle more than we thought possible. When we consider the world, compassion, our own emotions and energies, much of our practice involves this expanding work. It's about developing the capacity for a great deal to move through us and touch us deeply in a way that's truly sustainable.

But there's also a whole dimension of practice evolution where things become much more subtle, with fewer fireworks. This may be calling for greater sensitivity, more attunement to subtleties. We often learn tremendously from these quieter experiences rather than the more dramatic ones. This might be part of what you're encountering as well.

CHAPTER 94

Instructions: Opening to the Current of Desire

Rob Burbea · 30 min

> *In this dharma talk from the retreat "Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire," Rob Burbea presents a radical departure from traditional approaches to desire. Rather than viewing desire solely as the source of dukkha, he introduces a practice called "opening to the current of desire" - a three-step method that transforms our relationship with wanting itself.*
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> *The practice involves: first, identifying what we're truly wanting at a deeper level beyond specific objects or people; second, temporarily setting aside conventional dharma teachings about desire being problematic and trusting that there may be soul intelligence within our longing; and third, genuinely opening the energy body to allow the current of desire to move freely. Through detailed examples, Burbea demonstrates how this approach can yield the very thing we seek - not through getting the external object, but through recognizing its essence as already present within our being.*
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> *This teaching challenges practitioners to discern between desire itself and the accompanying feelings of lack, frustration, or grief that often become entangled with it. Burbea emphasizes that this is an internal practice focused on energy transformation rather than external action, though he acknowledges that sometimes desires do call for manifestation in the world. The talk offers a sophisticated exploration of how trust in desire's deeper intelligence can open pathways to abundance, freedom, and fulfillment that transcend conventional subject-object dynamics.*

We've got this general idea that we've got threads that we're weaving together—threads that we can actually separate and move between in our practice as we navigate our experience. We've got the thread of what we're calling samadhi in the energy body and cultivating that well-being—really, really helpful. We've got the thread of awareness of our emotions in the energy body, with the energy body, through the energy body—also a really indispensable element of practice, really important in developing the art. Then we've got this whole infinite area of imaginal practice to explore.

On this retreat specifically, we're interested in eros in the imaginal. Of course that involves all imaginal practice. Eros can be very, very strong—obviously sexual—to very, very subtle and not sexual at all. But eros is, I would say, an intrinsic part of the imagin-

al, and the imaginal involves eros. So in this retreat we're exploring the imaginal with that thread as one of the main emphases, and within that, the exploration of eros. So that's the third thread.

The fourth thread involves the whole investigation into the dynamics of polarity, of two-ness and one-ness as part of what happens both in imaginal practice and just in perception generally. That's a part of desire and eros. And then the last thread so far is what we introduced yesterday—the thread of renunciation, letting go.

So I'd like to add another possibility, another thread that we actually really encourage you to try out and explore. Any of these threads you can use as much or as little as you want, dip in, dip out, and so on. But we would really encourage you to explore at least a little bit what we're going to offer now.

To make a distinction: as I've just said, in imaginal practice, or with imaginal practice, eros is implicit. It's intrinsically woven in. When something is imaginal, when something or other comes alive to us imaginatively, there is eros involved. Where there is eros, if it's left to do its thing, if it's not blocked in some way, it will open up the imaginal. So the imaginal and eros kind of go together.

What I want to introduce now this morning as a possibility is a practice we call opening to the current of desire. And in this practice, the delineation I'd like to make is we actually let go of the image. The image is not so much primary, and we're working more with the energy of desire. So when there's eros, image is implicit and we tend to work in the field or in relationship with an image. This is almost like letting the image go a little bit and focusing more on the energy, as I'll try to explain.

So there's a delineation there. Like all delineations, it falls apart at a certain point—it blurs, the distinctions are not that clear. What's common to these two practices—the imaginal eros and the opening to the current of desire—is that they both involve a trust. Trust is necessary to some degree, even just a little bit, just a grain of trust: trusting in the image, trusting in the imaginal in one case, and actually in both cases, trusting desire and trusting eros.

So we're not letting go, as in the renunciation thread. We're actually opening to desire here, allowing it, trusting it, and seeing what that opens for us, in us, what that opens to us.

There are three steps to this practice. It's actually quite simple. I'll say what they are and then go through some examples and then nuance it a little bit.

The first step: if you notice some dukkha, some dis-ease, some suffering—or even if you just notice a desire—you can work with this. If you notice dukkha, there will be desire wrapped up in it. That's basic Dharma teaching. Where there is dukkha, there is desire wrapped up in it. So if you notice either dukkha or desire, you can ask yourself: What am I wanting here?

Even if I don't actually see a desire at first, if all I notice is dukkha—I feel this or that—actually bring in the question: What am I wanting here? But what am I wanting more deeply? So you have to go really to the deep level of the desire. Rather than this person or that thing, that car, whatever it is, something more abstract, seemingly abstract. What am I really after here? Something seemingly more general.

Here's this thing that I want, this person that I want, this relationship that I want, this event that I want to unfold a certain way, whatever it is. And letting that go—letting that fixated image, that fixation go—and coming to the generality of what it is that I want. It's a deeper level.

It might seem more abstract, but it's actually a deeper level. So here, as I said, the image is not primary. In imaginal practice, we're not saying the image represents my desire for this or the image represents this quality in me or whatever. We have the idea in imaginal practice that we entertain the idea that the image is primary, like we said with Linda the other day. Here we let go of that and we come to something more general, more abstract underneath.

So we're unhooking from the specific object that we feel we want—the specific person, the specific event, the specific fixated image. You're unhooking from that and finding something deeper. What is it that I'm really after here?

The second step is to just, if you like, sweep aside whatever dharma preconceptions you have about desire. We all know desire is a problem, it leads to suffering, it's a defilement, all that. Just temporarily sweep them off the table and just drop in a couple of grains of trust. Maybe this desire, maybe there's a soul intelligence that's stimulating, that's giving birth to this desire. Maybe this desire is a manifestation of a deeper soul intelligence. Maybe there's a treasure here in this desire. Just temporarily, we're playing with that conception, that trust, just a little bit.

Now those first two steps could be done in any order. In other words, you can entertain the idea that there may be something to trust here, there may be a treasure here in the desire. You could do that first, and then you could ask, now what is that deeper desire? What is it that I'm really after here?

The third step is to open to the current of that desire, to really open up the body, open up the field of the body for that energy of desire to move. I'm making this gesture upward as we heard. Yes, oftentimes it is upward, but it might not be. It could be outward, and as Catherine was describing in the talk yesterday, it could go downward. Something is dynamic. Something in desire is dynamic. Desire is a dynamic force. And we feel that energetically in the body. So what is it to really open the body to that current of desire?

Now, I mean really, really open. Everyone in here has heard "open to whatever is going on"—a desire or a pain or a sadness, be with it, accept it—sort of general mindfulness teachings. I mean really open. I don't mean just be aware of it and kind of it's okay that you have this desire right now. I mean really open. Open the being to it so that you can actually let that current move as much as possible—the current, the stream, the energy of desire in the energy body.

What happens when you do that? Something very, very interesting happens, actually. I'll come back to the example that Catherine used last night, but that already gives it away. Something doesn't at first make sense in terms of traditional dharma teachings. What happens is an abundance comes, a sense of abundance comes into the being, is given and made manifest in the being. The state of consciousness and of body transforms. Peace comes, joy comes. The thing that we wanted, that which we really desired, is then palpably and immediately recognized and felt to be here. I have it already, whatever it was that I was after.

We may come back to this on this retreat because there are different ways that that which we're already after, whatever that is, is already present. But this is one of them. Somehow, in the treasure of the desire, it has yielded to my being, and opened to my being, the very thing that I wanted, and I haven't done anything different in the world. He may still not be interested in me, or whatever it is, can't get that job, whatever it is.

So let me give a few examples. I'm a little wary of time, but I want you to understand this. I'll give four examples. I hope that's not too much. The first one is actually in a way the most straightforward. The other ones are nuanced a little bit.

The first one was, I was sitting upstairs when I used to live here, and this is some years ago. Something was going on politically with Gaia House, I can't even remember what it was, and it was troubling me. And so I was sitting in meditation, I was troubled by whatever the situation was, and for some reason it occurred to me to ask myself, what am I really wanting here?

What's going on here? What is the desire for? What I saw was that what came was - again, it's this - I want this problem to go away, or whatever it was politically. I actually can't remember, like I said. But the deeper answer that came was freedom from constraint. What I wanted was freedom from constraint.

You hear the generality of that? It can sound a little abstract, but actually it was very meaningful to me. It's not an image, it's a kind of abstraction, if you like, but a personal one rooted in the being. So I really just let myself open to that, let myself feel that desire, and lo and behold, what came was freedom from constraint. I felt it. Nothing had changed in Gaia House politics - it probably still hasn't changed. Sorry, can we take that bit off? Yeah, I'm a dinosaur.

But there it was - the freedom from constraint was palpable, and the release of that was right there in the moment, in the being, to enjoy, to open to. And I thought, isn't that interesting? So that's a very straightforward example.

Second example: I was working with someone a few weeks ago, and here there wasn't any dukkha. So in my example there was dukkha. In this example there wasn't any dukkha, and she said - she was talking about someone, her lover - "I want to kiss him on the mouth." And there wasn't a problem there. She could kiss him on the mouth or whatever.

But then I was exploring this a little bit and asked, "What comes with that image?" So again, we're not sustaining the image as prime. What comes with that image? What is it that you're really after? Or what do you imagine you'd get through kissing him on the mouth? There's no, absolutely no hint of "what do you imagine you'd get" as we were doing yesterday. It's like there's nothing - it's not dukkha, it's not impermanent, a kiss on the mouth is not... So we've changed gear here, right? We're out of that "it's unsatisfactory" mode. You get that?

What do you imagine you'd get through kissing him on the mouth? And she said, "Joining. I'd get joining."

So I was working with her and thinking, is that deep enough? Is that abstract enough? It turned out it was. It could have gone to another level. I asked again, "What do you get through joining?" - take it to an even deeper level, more general if you like. But actually it turned out to be fine. That was enough, and there the sense of joining came right there, without the kiss. And it wasn't through imagining; it was through the energy. So it was enough, and there was the delight of joining right there in that moment.

Third example: This is from some years ago. I just need to remind myself of the different elements because it's a little bit complicated. I was working with a woman in an interview and she was about to go off to California. She'd met someone there - a guy - and they were about to start a new romance. It had just been long-distance texting and Skype mostly before that. Anyway, there was some contact electronically.

But she came into the interview in a state of anxiety about the whole thing. And she said, "I'm craving."

And I feel that's painful. I feel the contraction of it."

We talked a little about it. She expressed a fear of loss—perhaps she would go out there and it wouldn't work out. So alongside all the loveliness of a new romance was this anxiety, this fear that maybe it wouldn't work out.

The first thing we did was talk in the more standard dharma way about craving and how it relates to dukkha. Craving involves what we might call hype—papañca. When there's craving, the mind goes into hype about how wonderful it's going to be, how great this thing will be when I get there. The same happens with aversion—how terrible this thing is going to be.

So craving involves hype. We discussed how the mind in the grip of craving constructs an artificial distinction between things and times, making them seem so dramatically different. Here and now seems so different from there and then. It's hyped up by the mind through craving.

She expressed this perfectly in her own words: "The adventure begins then when I get to California. Now it's just waiting, it's just limbo." So now was just boring waiting time. Here and now—there and then would be the adventure. Even though there was lots of Skyping and texting, lovely exchanges, the mind was creating and emphasizing this polarity between things and times, events and times.

Do you see it? Is it really that different? This is more standard dharma teaching. Is it really that different—things and times, here and now, there and then, past or future?

In dharma language we could deconstruct it. What do I have here? What is my world here? It's five aggregates: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Six sense fields: touch, taste, smell, sight, sound and mind. I have that here, I have that there, I have it pretty much wherever I go. Is it really that different? A little bit different kinds of pleasure, different kinds of unpleasantness. There's a deconstruction of the hype.

Deconstruct it into the elements of existence. Is it really that different? So that's standard dharma teaching. Less hype, less craving. Less craving, less hype. They feed each other.

But then I was interested in working in a different way, seeing what else might open up. I asked her, "What are you wanting? What do you want?"

She said, "Him." It was obvious. And it's hard to see—it's like, what do you mean? Of course it's him. It's hard to see that it's more than that.

As I gently explored whether that question could open up, she began to go deeper. She said, "I love that I can say anything and that I'm listened to." This opened things up. Going deeper into this question of what she was wanting, she said actually there were four things—quite complex, but you can hear the generalities here.

"I want the opening of the heart. I want the expression. I want the connection and being received. And I want to love." Four things.

Can you hear the generalities there? So here the desire is not landing on a limited object.

Then we did this thing: Can you really trust that? Can you really open to that? Just trust it a little bit. Really, really open to it.

Now for her, that current was unfamiliar. The force of it was unfamiliar—a little bit like what Catherine was alluding to last night. The current was deeper and more powerful than who she usually took herself to be.

So can you let it fill the body? Can you really allow it? Can you really feel it?

Her boundaries of self began to dissolve. Now where she was at in her practice, that was quite a new thing. So we worked a little bit with kind of being okay with that. There was the expansion of the sense of being. There was a little bit of fear with that, as I said. We investigated the fear, brought in some compassion, and so on. And that was enough for her for that time. But something was really opening.

Eventually, whether it's gradually or suddenly, we are able to allow that kind of expansion, that kind of dissolution. There's a whole new sense of self, of life force—strength, openness, independence, not dependent on the object of desire being there, fulfilled somehow to a great extent by what we could say the life force opening, the deep desire flowing, not on getting.

This is not so much standard Dharma teaching.

Fourth example, just to revisit the example from last night that Catherine shared in her talk: someone in the group saying, "I want not feeling alive. I want to feel alive," having a fixated image, letting go of that, "I want to feel alive," and then what happened is the aliveness came—in this case came down, that current. Then what happened is it went into an imaginal image.

So there's a little bit of a fork in the road here. In other words, liberating the desire this way can open up the realm of the imaginal, and that can be very fruitful—and you go into the imaginal. Or it opens up the being, and what we want is already here, and there doesn't need to be an image. So it can go either way.

Let me just say a little bit because sometimes what happens—often times what happens, but not always—is that wrapped up in our experience of desire is the feeling of lack, a feeling of frustration, a feeling of perhaps grief or loss, or a presumption of not getting and not being able to get. We just either assume it's a fact or we just assume that.

In other words, desire is wrapped up with elements that make it more complex and more problematic. It's really helpful then to be able to discern sometimes what's wrapped up with my experience of desire and my assuming I won't be able to get. But why? Because it's always been that way for me. Is it actually what I'm feeling—not so much the desire but the lack or the frustration? These are actually different things. They get intertwined. Do you understand?

So sometimes with this practice that we're opening up to, sometimes what we need to do is to care for those other elements first, and need to discern: are they present? What else is present? Is there a sense of lack? Is there a sense of crushedness, impossibility, frustration, grief, whatever? Discern them and actually go to them first and care for them. This—we've talked about at other times—but this kind of heart work is really, really important.

And sometimes we do not need to do that. Sometimes we don't need to do that. So often in these circles, there can be a kind of habit just over years. It's really good practice to do that, but sometimes we don't need to do that. We don't need to be with the difficult first.

Sometimes, as I said, there's a habit of the movement of the mind and the heart to go to the difficult, to the lack, to the frustration, to the grief or whatever. And we can get a little bit stuck in that. We always do that, always do that. And in a way, we never get out of it. So I'm not liberating the desire, I'm just going to that lack and that pain. And it might be tender, it might be lovely, but there's a way sometimes that it just stays there.

I'm just circling endlessly in my sense of lack. This doesn't always happen, but it's a very real possibility. The attention becomes habitually drawn to the lack, to the grief, to the disappointment, to the frustration. What I don't see is that this very attention and this habit of attention is actually keeping the whole pattern of lack and disappointment in place. I don't see that.

Instead, I think this is real, this is the reality. That exploration of working with desire—that feels like I'm creating something artificial. This other way, staying with the lack, this feels like the real thing, the truth. I don't see that my attention is actually fabricating and manufacturing even this sometimes.

This requires really delicate investigation in practice. It takes tremendous courage and care to investigate this territory. So I hope that's sufficient to convey the understanding. There is this option, this thread that's possible in our practice. I'd really like you to try it, if you're drawn to it. Use it extensively if it resonates. If you prefer, just visit it occasionally. You can put it on the shelf for later exploration, whatever feels right. But please try it at least a few times—moving away from the image, into the current of the desire itself, and working with that while trusting the treasure that lies within it.

One final consideration: you'll notice that the desires we have in life, especially the deep desires and those profound currents of longing, are extraordinarily important. They matter deeply to us. Some of them genuinely need acting upon. It can't always be simply a matter of awareness of desire. Sometimes, particularly with imaginal material, something is actually being asked to manifest in the world. What that is may not be obvious or clear, and sometimes it may be nothing at all. I've explored this theme in other retreats.

Both with our deepest longings and with what moves through us imaginatively, sometimes something is truly demanded of us. What that is isn't always apparent. Yet sometimes it's neither appropriate nor possible nor necessary to act on a desire. We can work with the imaginal dimension or with the energy of the desire itself, and no external action is required. Nothing in the outer world needs to change, and taking action isn't the point.

Other times, action absolutely is the point. Something needs to be brought into being. Words need to be spoken. Actions need to be taken. But at other times, it's completely not about outer manifestation. The work is what we might call internal—that's where the real transformation occurs.

In this particular practice we've been exploring, we're emphasizing this internal dimension: the opening to the current of desire itself, rather than the acting upon it. Is this sufficient to make sense of this approach? Does it feel clear enough?

So let's sit together now in the spirit of this exploration.

CHAPTER 95

Visions of the Beyond

Rob Burbea · 1h43

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea invites practitioners to examine fundamental questions about their spiritual path: What do you love about practice? What do you want from it? He explores four distinct approaches to conceiving the path and awakening. First, the traditional Buddhist movement toward the transcendent unfabricated realm through lessening fabrication of perception. Second, the limitation to one-dimensional horizontal seeking when dimensionality is blocked. Third, secular approaches that emphasize coping with existential limitations while refusing metaphysical possibilities. Fourth, tantric and soul-making approaches that recognize infinite possibilities for discovery through the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Burbea examines how different fantasies of the self on the path emerge - the medical patient seeking healing, the religious devotee following tradition, the scientific researcher driven by curiosity, or the artist creating beauty. He emphasizes that recognizing the role of fantasy and image in our spiritual conception is not diminishing but essential for authentic soul-making practice. The talk challenges practitioners to investigate whether their path conception supports genuine eros or contracts into craving, and whether it opens unlimited dimensions of discovery or remains confined to predetermined goals.*

I'd like to start by offering you a few questions to explore. These are admittedly big questions, so you might want to spend time with them now or take them away to contemplate for as long as feels fruitful or interesting.

Let me begin with one question: What do you love about the path? What do you love about your path? What do you love in practice?

When you drop that question in, what comes? What responses arise from your being? What do you love?

You can linger with whatever answers come, responses that arise from your being, and sense their resonances in the heart, in the soul, in the body, in the emotions. Feel their effects on you—the effects of the responses, the effects of the questions. What do you love?

Perhaps there's a whole stream of different responses and answers, aspects that you love. Perhaps it's one particular aspect or thing.

Now let me ask a second question, related but different: What do you want from the path, from practice? What do you want? Where are you going? Where do you hope you're going? Where do you conceive you're going on this path?

Some people feel themselves moving towards something. What are you moving towards? Or in a different conception, what are you opening to, or hoping to open to, to receive even? These different images—active and receptive—offer various ways to approach the question.

So what do you want? Where are you going? What are you moving towards? What are you opening to?

We could use different words here—your sense, conception, image of the goal, the destination, the aim. Or if you prefer, the result or fruit of the path, or simply the direction you're moving in. Whatever words or way of articulating it helps you. What is it that you're after? What is it that you want?

Again, feel into the effects of that question, the effects of the responses in the different dimensions of your being—in the body, in the energy body, in the heart, in the soul, in the mind. You can linger with the answers and feel their resonances, sense their effect on you.

Perhaps some responses have come to each of these questions—what you love about the path, and what you want from the path. But let me ask you this as well: Do the responses that have come so far feel complete, exhaustive? Or is there the feeling that yes, that's part of it, but there's something left over, something you haven't quite articulated yet, or perhaps even discerned or identified? There's no right or wrong here; I'm simply asking.

You can return to these questions and reflect on them anytime you want, for as long as you want. But let me now bring to bear a few perspectives on all this—on path, on goal—from the point of view involving many of the ideas and directions of inquiry and exploration we're focusing on in this retreat.

I don't know if you realize this, but to some extent, the conception we harbor or entertain of the path and of the goal—let's call it awakening—and the fantasy of the path and of awakening, are going to be conditioned by what we read and hear.

The very way I think of the path and the goal, what it includes or what it is, what direction it's going to take me or supposed to take me, what it includes and what it doesn't—all that will to some extent be conditioned by what I'm exposed to: reading, hearing, teachers, friends, and others.

Some of this is dependent simply on the era, the age we live in, the time we are in. The sense of self we have now, that we just feel or most people would feel is completely obvious—this is what my self involves, this is what my self includes, this is the kind of interiority I have, this is the way I not just think of the self but feel the self, experience the self—that sense of self and also the freedoms I conceive or feel or hope or aspire to for that self, the kinds of freedom and the ranges and directions of freedom for that self, are different now than they were in the time of the Buddha in India.

One has only to read the suttas to notice the complete absence of certain kinds of relationships with the self, both difficult and exhilarating or interesting or opening or complex.

So that our very sense of freedom—the freedom for that self, or the freedoms, plural, for that self and of that self—are actually different. They're conditioned by the age that we live in and what comes to us from the outside, from the era, and so forth. To me, it's interesting to realize that. It does something to realize that.

Then we might ask, on the back of such a realization: if our views of all this and our fantasies of path and awakening are conditioned to some extent by my environment, what is a conception and a fantasy that is, so to speak, authentic for me? Or am I just a kind of puppet pulled this way by what I'm hearing or reading and what's in the air around me in my culture, in my time, in my society, in my spiritual fashions, for want of a better word? What would be an authentic conception and fantasy of path and awakening for me—authentic to me? I mean, authentic means like born of myself, in independence, actually related to the meaning of independence.

Now that question—what's an authentic conception of fantasy of the path—is not a question that the Buddha and other spiritual teachers of different ages would ever even have thought to ask. It would never even have occurred to them to ask it. Partly because we live in a very individualist culture now that didn't exist back then. That whole way of conceiving self and choice just didn't exist. The Buddha would never have asked, "What's an authentic conception for you of path or of awakening?"

So that's interesting too. And I wonder whether even for us these days it's really a helpful question. Perhaps a better question—I think a better question—would be: which ways of conceiving and fantasizing path and awakening are soul-making for you? That's different. Again, it's related, but it's a different question.

So what ways of conceiving and fantasizing and imagining path and awakening are soul-making for you? That's actually quite a radical difference in approach and questioning.

Now, notice that if we come back to this point about our being to some extent conditioned—our views of what we can conceive of as a path and what awakening is, is to some degree conditioned by the culture—whether it's conditioned to a great degree for me or to a very small degree, my views and my conceptions, my images of path and awakening, how much it is conditioned for me by the culture is actually not the important factor.

So it might be a lot, or it might be a little, but what's important is not the so-called authenticity or independence. It's the soul-making. That's the test.

Just like when we talked about in imaginal practice: it doesn't matter if you deliberately introduce an image or change an image in some way and you think, "Oh, is that just my ego? I shouldn't be doing this." It doesn't matter. The test is in the soul-making. So here too, the degree or the extent to which it feels like "Well, this is just conditioned from my culture, from what I've heard"—that doesn't matter. From this point of view, the question is: is it soul-making? How soul-making is it? Is it supportive of soul-making or not? You understand?

But notice, too, a more radical distinction from the ways we usually think about these things. The goal—aim, destination, direction, result, fruit, whatever word you favor there—the goal that you conceive or fantasize is not just conceived of. The question is not just "Is that helpful for you to conceive and imagine that way? Is it healing or is it freeing?" Whatever those words mean, but "Is it soul-making?"

So that's quite, I would say, a radical difference of approach, of orientation, of entering into these questions.

Traditionally, in the Buddhist tradition at least, what seems to me unavoidable if you read the suttas—but actually I really don't care whether it's so-called historically accurate or not; it's not important, especially not important for what I want to unfold in this talk—but let's say traditionally, in the Pali Canon, the goal, destination, aim, fruit, et cetera, the path, was a realization of the transcendent unfabricated, meaning this transcending of the world of perception itself. Not just the world of labeling, but the world of sense experience, and the world of any kind of sense of experience of subject, any kind of experience of object, of space and time.

And this dimension, āyatana, realm of the unfabricated or the deathless, transcendent realm, was something the Buddha put a lot of emphasis on, and one way of intuiting, sensing, understanding the coherence of the whole Pali Canon: it's all a movement of lessening fabrication, culminating in this opening to the unfabricated.

Something utterly beyond anything that we can say of it or describe it, except by talking about it for the most part in the negative, as the Buddha mostly does: not this, not that, beyond this, know this there, know that there, et cetera. Something utterly, utterly mystical and transcendent there.

Now, I'm not spending a long time talking about that in this talk, but I have in other places. Some people, in my experience, are very interested in this. And they hear about this realm, this dimension, this possibility, this opening of the transcendent, unfabricated, the deathless—whatever you want to call it—and it really sparks their interest. There's a fire there. Some people yearn for this opening, to move towards that, to know it in this lifetime, et cetera. And it's actually a central yearning and thrust of the whole way they feel the path, as it seems to me it really is in the Pali Canon as well.

And some people, other people, hear about this or read about it and are not interested in it at all, for different reasons. So that's just something to notice. And in the tradition, this realization or opening to the transcendent unfabricated was intimately tied up with the end of suffering.

So that in the moment of—let's say—experiencing that, for want of a better word, opening to that, the moment of unfabricated, that comes about through a complete dying down in the moment of the factors of clinging, push, pull, including avijjā, ignorance. In the moment, so that the clinging and the avijjā propel fabrication—if you know the teachings of dependent origination—in the moment when those are completely quieted, there is no fabrication of perception happening of self, other, subject, object, world, time, space, et cetera.

The arahant, the so-called completely awakened person, has just erased or eroded or cut off all clinging and all avijjā, and so at the end of their life they are not reborn. In other words, there's not the propulsion to create more fabrication of perception. So no perception, no world is reborn, if you like, put it that way.

They are not reborn into the world. This movement toward the unfabricated is intimately tied up with the view of ending suffering because one ends rebirth - getting off the wheel of rebirth, ending that whole cycle of death and rebirth.

Returning to our opening talk, some people have a yearning to know this unfabricated, this transcendent - a deep desire for that. Yet it's not completely captured or described as a movement where all they want is to end suffering. Wrapped up in that yearning is the desire and the longing of the mystic. It's not only captured by, or even primarily described as, a desire to end suffering.

There's a whole range here for people at different times in their practice. How much desire do you or I have for this? How much does any practitioner have for this opening, this realization?

Another thing to point out: other kinds of mystical experiences, including experiences of universal oneness - whether oneness of awareness, cosmic consciousness, infinite consciousness, universal awareness, universal love, or the universal ocean of being - are all connected on a spectrum of lessening fabrication, which has its endpoint in a complete cessation of fabrication. They're all degrees of less fabrication, grouped together along a thread of lessening fabrication.

In practicing different ways of letting go of clinging, one moves on that spectrum of fabrication, opens to these different perceptions of less fabrication, which involve less fabrication of subject and object, self and world, and that split and concreteness. One knows and experiences all the different kinds of beauty of those universal onenesses.

One thing this movement has in common is that there is a beyond. In all these openings, before I've fully opened to them - whether to universal love permeating the fabric of all existence, universal awareness, or this transcendent unfabricated - it constitutes for me a beyond. Beyond what I already know and have experienced. I might intuit it, have heard about it, or had glimpses, but it's still a beyond.

Recalling what we've been saying about the soul-making dynamic: where there is a beyond, one possibility that constellates in relation to that beyond is eros. Eros involves a beyond. This whole sense of possibility - opening to realizing different kinds of universal oneness, mystical experiences, this transcendent unfabricated - becomes something in relation to which eros constellates.

With eros allowed to do its work, it will constitute and constellate fantasies and images in regard to that beyond and the movement toward it - what it includes and involves, what's around it and associated with it. There is the erotic imaginal involving fantasy and image of awakening, of enlightenment, of realization, of the Buddha who showed the way or other teachers past and present who have realized what I haven't yet fully realized. Images of those who are showing the way, living that, exemplifying that. Fantasies and images of the path and of the self on that path.

All of this is soul-making rather than something negative. There is beauty that comes with that filling out of the erotic imaginal, that constellation. Beauty comes with it, meaningfulness, a sense of depth - soul-making.

Another possibility is that it constellates craving rather than eros. What determines whether it constellates craving or eros? What guides it one way or another, conditions it, sends it into craving rather than eros, into eros rather than craving?

When there is craving and its pain, a teacher will often say to a student who has this aspiration to realize the unfabricated but is struggling: "Drop it. Drop desire. Drop striving. It's not about getting anywhere or achieving anything. Nowhere to go, nothing to do."

This is crucial: What determines what happens? Is there a tendency when desire arises to emphasize the sense of lack rather than the desire and its beauty? Does a self-view become very reified and solidified in relation to what I desire? Perhaps I assume I'm not going to be able to realize this.

Or the self-view constellates and hardens in some kind of relationship or construction of self-measurement in relation to this. Where am I on the ladder towards awakening or on this experience or that unfabricated or this thing? And measurement comes to be the dominant flavor and all the pain of a realistically conceived self-measurement. And the contraction of that.

Then what happens when we have that contraction? What do we do with it? And is one of the possibilities, the issues from a sense of contraction at some point or other, that I drop it. I just drop it. And I go into some other kind of relationship that has just dropped that desire and that view and that sense of possibility.

Or perhaps there is what we touched on when I was telling you about the psychoanalyst Douglas Fairbairn, and he talked about the anti-libidinal ego defense. That when we fear not being able to have what we desire, or being rejected, or the impossibility of getting it, there are structures in us that kick into place that actually prevent us from even wanting it. Anti-libidinal, they prevent the libido, the eros from constituting to even want that and come into relationship. They would just cut it off. Sometimes to the extent we don't even feel the desire at all.

So interesting to me and complex is so important. What goes on for us? What constellates out of that possibility of any kind of beyond? Beyond what I know, beyond what I already know, what I already experience. What happens with us in relation to that?

So a sense of the beyond can constellate eros, as we say. When it's a desirable beyond, it constellates eros as a possibility. But the reverse is also true, as is so often the case with these dependent origination things, that where there is, let's say, a lot of eros

in a person's being, in their soul, as it's flowing in their life, that lot of eros, that fire, that movement of water, if you like, that eros will constellate a beyond. It, as we've said, needs eros needs a beyond. And it will discover and create a beyond.

So the beyond constellates the eros, the eros constellates the beyond. The transcendent, unfabricated, or any of these kinds of stages on the way to that—of some kind of perception of universal onenesses—are one possibility of beyond, one direction of possibility beyond, of possibilities of beyond.

If dimensionality is allowed to the sense of existence, to the sense of consciousness, but also to the sense of the fabric of the world, if one allows dimensionality, one of the possibilities is that it moves in this direction—different kinds of onenesses, along the spectrum of lessening fabrication until eventually it's the unfabricated, opens the unfabricated.

So if dimensionality is allowed, this constellation of a beyond that comes from the eros, one possibility is that. If dimensionality is not allowed, it's not something that the psyche or consciousness or the logos or whatever allows, admits is possible. But then what happens to the eros?

Here is a person with a fair degree of eros, in the small sense, and it cannot open up into, or it cannot open up, other dimensions of perception. So there is just a one-dimensional world—this is it—and then that eros, in its wanting more, can't open, discover its more, get its more, have the beauty of the satisfaction, the fulfillment of more and an endless more in the opening of the perceptions of dimensionalities. It must go, so to speak, flatly outwards, horizontally, and move in one dimension, wider and wider. I need more, I need more, I need more. The eros wants more always.

And so more this, more that, in the one-dimensional world, more acquiring, endless acquiring of experiences or possessions or whatever it is. It's only got one way to go, and that's horizontal. It has no depth of beyond to move into. The beyond is just beyond, flatly, in terms of more that I can acquire, in terms of conquests or relationships or possessions or experiences or whatever it is. Facebook friends. Endless, wider and wider horizontal movement that eros has driven into what we call greed and craving in the Dharma language.

And conversely to all this, if there's not much eros in a being—and that could be because it's blocked for the different reasons that we've touched on and we can keep going into that and exploring that, how does it get blocked or limited in different ways, the eros and that whole dynamic. Or it could just be, you know, some people, just natural to their being, natural to their soul, is that there's just less eros.

Some people really have a lot of fire, a lot of rivers, torrents of water. There's a lot of eros moving in the soul. There's a soul with a lot of eros, and some less so. And there's no judgment here, or more or less. It's just natural to a being, because I'm certainly open to that point of view.

The question is whether it's natural to me, this much eros, whatever that much is, or whether it's blocked, or whether it's kind of forced and I'm straining for an eros, or a torrent or a fire that's actually not natural to the being.

But sometimes there's not that much eros, and so there's not enough eros to constellate much of a beyond. You understand? Not much eros, not much sense of a beyond, that which I haven't yet known and experienced and opened to and penetrated, and the excitement of that and the attraction and the beauty and the longing for that.

Not that much eros, therefore not much beyond constellated.

But with regard to this transcendent and that whole spectrum of lessening fabrication, the different kinds of mystical experiences of universal onenesses and the like—in regard to that, one of the questions and investigations for us as practitioners is whether we can notice if there is a sense, a relationship with the transcendent, and that eros for it, and desire for it. How does it move, when does it move, and why does it move between eros and craving?

Coming out of that question and investigation is: how do I take care? What is involved in taking care of the soul making and the eros in my relationship with the transcendent—this thing, this dimension, whatever dimension it is that I haven't opened to yet?

This is a very different way of thinking about this. Can I take care of the eros here? Implicit in that means: can I take care of the soul-making? Which means: can I take care of the image in all this with its different aspects?

So it means in relation to that object—that erotic object, that whatever specific beyond that I have heard about and I intuit and I've glimpsed and I want to open to—the object, but also the self. Remember this imaginal constellation: object, self, world, and eros. So can I take care of the eros and the soul-making? Can I take care of the soul-making in relationship to this kind of beyond, a transcendent beyond, or whatever, in that direction—the object, the self, and the eros itself? How do I do that? What's involved in that? How do I care for that?

So that's one possibility—let's call it the traditional one, the movement towards transcendence.

The second possibility, which we've already touched on, is that dimensionality—any sense of dimensionality to existence, to the way that the world is—is blocked. It's absolutely refused, or at least not supported in the worldview, or for whatever reason it's blocked. Then what we get, from our small definition of eros as wanting more, wanting more contact, can only move in one dimension, and the "more" will just push it wider.

So I need, if it's in relation to a certain lover or whatever, more contact. And then at a certain point that's exhausted because I can't have any more contact with you, or I get tired because you're just one-dimensional. There's not more to discover in you, so I go chasing someone else, or I have affairs. Or I have this car and then I need another car. Whatever it is—I've been on holiday here, now I need to go there. And it's not coming from a limitation in the self; it's coming from a limitation of the soul-making dynamic.

So it becomes this kind of chasing of experiences or trying to accumulate and acquire experiences. And because it's flat and doesn't have the other dimensionalities to open up, to create, discover, to be revealed, to move into, it becomes in some way or another just a chasing of pleasantness, pleasant sensations, and a kind of avoiding of the unpleasant, and this movement to somehow prop up through this accumulation of experience the ego moving in a one-dimensional world.

Part of the tragedy of all this is that in our contemporary Western society, it's actually nowadays quite possible to keep chasing this quite a long time, even for people who don't conceive themselves as in the rich portion of society. Even people who, relatively speaking in terms of Western society, are not of greater means financially can still pursue this. How many TV stations are available? How much different kind of food experience is available? How many cheap holidays are available?

So it's actually, unfortunately, quite possible—with all the effects this has on the environment and all kinds of other consequences—it's actually quite possible, unfortunately, to keep chasing this really quite far down the line. And there's an endlessness possible here, but it's flat.

What's not recognized is that this one dimension doesn't come alive as fantasy. It's all conceived as real—a real self having a possibility of accumulating or possessing real objects or real experiences in a real world. And if we are viewing it critically from a Dharma perspective, the eros there, or the desire—the craving there, better—is also viewed as a real thing.

Of course, some people from a Buddhist perspective say, well, that's not a path. That's samsara, this endless flowing on. *Sara* means "to flow"—this endless flowing on, this endless chasing, endless thirst of *tanha*. But that's one possibility of what happens with the germ of eros, so to speak.

Coming back to what people would consider—because that is a kind of path, I suppose, but people would generally not consider that a path. Buddhist people would not consider it a legitimate path.

But if we come back to Buddhist versions of the path, there are some approaches—particularly what some people might call secular Buddhism or mindfulness-based practices—that would state right away that there is no beyond. And certainly not a beyond that's anything other than fantasy in the pejorative sense: mere hope, wishful thinking, consolation. There's no real beyond. Any transcendence you might conceive of or harbor is dismissed as "just metaphysics"—in other words, nonsense.

In this view, the path is the goal. There's very little difference between path and goal. Both are characterized simply by this life, this experience of finite existence. This finite life—limited in so many ways—*is* the path. The goal is simply meeting this life: being open to it, letting it touch us, coping with that encounter repeatedly and endlessly until death brings the extinction of consciousness.

From this perspective, there's just an endless repetition of meeting life with its finitude, its tragedy, its existential limitations. We're asked to meet and cope endlessly with what life *is*—conceived quite flatly, one-dimensionally, bounded by strong existential limits. Eventually we might arrive at a stance of resignation, or what some would call equanimity, in the face of what's construed as reality—what contemporary philosophers call "facticity," avoiding words like truth.

This is what's conceived as real: this life, what I perceive through the senses. Life is just what it seems to be—what most people would agree upon. In this understanding, there's not much more than what appears obvious through sensory experience and conventional understanding of existence. There's not much beyond what I already know to discover or open to. Awakening doesn't constitute or involve much more than I already realize and experience. There's not much of a beyond there to discover.

Yet notice what happens when eros enters the soul. Life begins to acquire a capital L. It becomes somewhat romanticized and elevated in various ways—perhaps through celebrating the touch of breeze on cheek or the moment-to-moment flow of existence.

Whether this romantic view preceded the path or eros later impregnated these elements with its elevating quality, something gets lifted up, though always constrained by the limitations of the worldview.

One possibility is that Life with a capital L encompasses the Sublime with a capital S. This concept, originating with Romantic poets and painters like William Turner, describes something simultaneously beautiful and terrifying—beautiful to the senses yet overwhelming because of its vastness compared to the small, fragile self. The sublime combines aesthetic sensibility with existential trembling before the hugeness of things, wrapped up with the tragedy of impermanence.

This becomes what life *is*: the sublime and the tragedy of impermanence. The path asks us to face this, to open to it, to feel its poignancy. These elements become central aspects of practice.

This does constitute a kind of beyond—beyond the fragile me, beyond my existence. The possibility of erasure in non-existence at death, which could happen anytime, anywhere, and the tragedy of that disappearance, this too becomes a beyond. So there is a beyond here, allowed by this limited logos, though any other beyond either doesn't occur to the practitioner, doesn't interest them, or is flatly disallowed a priori—completely disqualified as possibility. The very conception and image of a more expansive path or awakening is ruled out from the beginning.

The path becomes about, principally about coping with this—life conceived and sensed in a certain way with its existential limits, with its inherent meaninglessness and inherent tragedy. These factors, these aspects come to the fore, and that's what the path becomes about: coping with this.

In this kind of approach, the eros and the soul-making dynamic—the eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—are limited. They're quite limited here, partly because of the realism. It's just that this is real. Nothing else is allowed. This view is what reality is—the facticity, if those words are used. Oftentimes words like "truth" are avoided, but this is real.

Because of that realist basis, and because of the refusal of any more dimensions to existence—to discover, to open to, to know, to penetrate—there's a one-dimensionality. That one-dimensionality and the realism at the base of the view limits the eros-psyche-logos and also how much eros may constellate or gather from that.

So in this view, there's a kind of rhetoric of being in touch with this, and everything that we said, but not the rhetoric or the invitation to any kind of opening or knowing or experiencing of what is beyond what is already pretty obvious. There's a little bit of that, but not much.

There are many possible reasons why that kind of view, for many people, has gained a lot of traction and is even attractive or seems inevitable or the only one they can get behind. The rise of secularism, of course. The domination of views of scientific materialism, the movement of existentialism in philosophy and psychology and psychoanalysis in the twentieth century. There are many reasons—we don't have to go into that.

I know you've heard me speak quite critically of this kind of thing in the past. But I really want to say: this is perfectly valid and okay for some. For some people, it really suits their soul. Maybe for them that view of the path, that concept of the path and awakening, is actually soul-making to the degree that satisfies their soul and their eros. Maybe a set of fantasies of the self and the path and the Buddha and what awakening is constellate around that whole view, imbue that view and form that view in a way that's, to some degree, soul-making, or to the degree that satisfies their soul. So I really want to say: it's completely okay.

Again, the question is: is it soul-making? Is it soul-making for you? Is it soul-making for me or someone else? It might be that such a view satisfies because there's not much eros in that particular soul, and that's completely okay. Why should there be? Who's to say that's a good thing or a bad thing? It's fine. It's just natural, maybe. And so there's not that much eros-psyche-logos dynamic, expansion, the fire of that.

But the question is really: why? And is it soul-making? Or are there anti-libidinal patterns or blocks in the logos, or rigidity or fear, that's actually coming in and blocking the whole thing? So it's not actually as soul-making as it could be, or not, so to speak, genuine, authentic to that soul. These, to me, are the more important questions. Not: is it right, is it wrong, is it what the Buddha said? This is all a whole other level of view and story and soul-making fantasy that comes in around that.

The other possibility is what can happen when someone starts with that kind of view and that sense and that concept of the path. That's what they're given to understand from what they've encountered or read or what they've been taught. But that person has a lot of eros in their soul, so to speak, and the eros is not being blocked. Or rather, the blocks are not sufficiently rigid. The walls there are not sufficiently rigid enough to prevent the eros, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, pushing on those walls and stretching

the view and stretching the possibilities of experience that then that person opens to—stretching the logos and the conception, the whole sense of what awakening can be and what the path then is.

Either stretching it gradually or in stages, or shattering that view, breaking those walls—this breaking of the vessels I've talked about before, the *shevirat hakelim* they talk about in certain streams of Kabbalistic teaching. And because of the eros and the aliveness of the eros...

The expansion of that, the breaking of those walls, requires a new conception to be consolidated and constructed—a bigger conception that allows more, a bigger fantasy that allows more. Because some people do have a lot of fire, a lot of soul, a lot of eros, and there will be this movement toward expansion. Often there's a quickness with that, along with all the multi-dimensional, multi-aspected fertility of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. They need, or they create, or they discover, or they open to more.

So a fourth possibility is what we might call classically a kind of tantric view, or a set of views that we might call tantric, as a way of conceiving the path and awakening. If you've seen a lot of those tantric thangkas or icons—paintings or sometimes sculptures—there's the depiction of a Buddha as actually a couple in sexual union, erotic sexual union. There's the yab-yum. Usually it's male and female, the Buddha and the consort, but the totality is actually conceived as the Buddha. It's not only the Buddha and something else—the totality of that union is the Buddha, or is a Buddha. This represents and conveys through an image a vision and a conception of awakening.

There is the union, depicted sexually—the union of emptiness and appearances. Sometimes it's conceived that way. Emptiness in that view, often in the tantric view, doesn't only mean emptiness of inherent existence in the way that I've mostly explained it in the past. It means really a transcendent, non-dual awareness—a non-dual wisdom awareness, a gnosis, a jñāna, a non-dual wisdom awareness that is not separate from appearances, that is empty in itself and that knows the emptiness of all things. So that jñāna is actually what emptiness means in some tantric traditions, not just the emptiness of inherent existence.

And that is, as I said, in erotic union, in sexual union—we're not separate from the senses, the world, experience of the senses, appearances. Those appearances are empty and divine.

Or in some explanations, this yab-yum, this erotic union, sexual union that's depicted there, represents the union of prajñā and upāya—wisdom and skillful means. Wisdom, which again is this wisdom consciousness, this wisdom awareness, this gnosis of a

Buddha, of a fully enlightened being—what I said before, this jñāna, this empty, knowing, pervasive, universal, cosmic awareness of emptiness that is non-dual, not separate from means.

So there's wisdom and means, the two treasures of a fully enlightened being. The means is not just skill in teaching—it actually refers, in its deeper meaning, to the upāya as the mandala, which is the world, the world of divine appearances that appears to that wisdom awareness. So there's this union of wisdom and means, which effectively means the union of subject and object, of wisdom awareness and world, of psyche and physis, of soul and the world, soul and the world of the senses, the world of appearances.

Now in classic Tantra, at least in some streams that I'm familiar with, that constitutes a beyondness—something that I'm not quite fully realized yet that I want to know, want to experience. But notice that the divinity there and the beyondness there is both in the divine appearances, but they also have a place for the transcendent, the non-fabrication of perception and experience. Both are there.

There's the tantric instruction, the instruction in the Vajrayāna—the thrust for me, the central thrust of that whole yāna, really, of Vajrayāna—of seeing, sensing, knowing, recognizing all experiences as divine. Not just empty of inherent existence, but divine and empty of inherent existence. Knowing all experiences—not just some experiences, all experiences. So there are these radical teachings about eating feces and eating semen, about seeing unethical actions—all of it as divine. Can I see all of that as divine?

Now you're probably aware by now that what we're teaching here, what we call imaginal practice or soul-making, that whole movement, has a lot of parallels and connection points with that whole direction and movement of Vajrayāna teaching and tantric teaching. They're not the same, and I wouldn't want to equate them or claim that, but there are a lot of parallels there, obviously, with what we're teaching.

Both of those streams—just like the tantric—the soul-making direction, the sense of the path as a path of soul-making, the sense of awakening as a movement into soul-making, the movement of soul-making, gives place to and gives an important place to the imaginal. That's characteristic of both tantric practice and soul-making practice, of course. And that includes the intra-psychic imaginal, of course, but also the imaginal pervading the world and opening up the world of the senses.

So there's not just this transcendence—there's this opening to the senses and the inclusion of the senses as part of the path. And there's the possibility of divinity not just transcendent to the senses, but in and through the senses in what we've talked about:

theophany and cosmopoiesis. So the possibilities of beyondness here—to open to, to know, to fully penetrate, to fully explore and become intimate with—are many. In fact, they're unlimited, they're infinite. Do you get that? There are infinite possibilities of beyondnesses, because the ways that theophanies can manifest, the possibilities for theophany and the possibilities for cosmopoiesis, are unlimited. And the possibilities for imaginal divinity are just infinite. There's no limit on the soul-making creativity there and discovery there.

Notice too that in this way of conceiving things, awakening or the goal or fruit of the path becomes or is something infinite and something open-ended. In the Vajrayāna conception, because only a Buddha has that kind of awareness, is actually able to fully—for example, able to fully see the emptiness of things without that perception of whatever thing they're perceiving fading.

So only a Buddha, not an Arahant, not anyone else, is able to both fully perceive and cognize the emptiness of something and perceive that something at the same time. And so they have this full awareness of emptiness and divinity simultaneously—only a Buddha. And no one's going to say, "I'm a Buddha," or "I have reached," or even think they have reached that. So there's a kind of open-endedness that effectively constellates the path as part of the path itself. It becomes open-ended: "I'm not there yet, I'm not there yet." Do you see what I mean?

And from the soul-making conception, in that understanding of path and movement, because of the infinitude of possibilities of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and what it creates and discovers and what is revealed and opened there, the path is also, and awakening is also, open-ended. At what point in this soul-making dynamic am I going to draw a line and say, "That's awakening now—finished"?

Notice, too, something even more radical. In different ways with the tantric conception and with the soul-making conception—let's focus on the soul-making conception now—there's a primacy given, as I've talked about before, a primacy granted or recognized to image, to fantasy. And so we come to recognize at a certain point that our sense of the path, our conception of it, our fantasy of the path, of awakening, of Buddha, of self on the path, is fantasy, is grounded in image. That's a really radical reframing of the whole venture—a really radical realization, a really radical reconstitution.

With this soul-making, as I touched on just now, what happens then, if you get the sense of this movement, to the whole idea of attainment? There's just this infinite possibility of opening of the soul-making. It's endless, potentially unlimited. What happens

to the idea of attainment? What happens to the self-sense in relationship to whatever happens to the idea of attainment? What happens to that whole self-measurement construction? Do you understand?

So there's quite a lot to notice here. I'll just point out a few things—they're all connected, so it's not in any particular order, but I want to highlight a few things in addition to what I've already pointed out. Some of them we've already touched on, but I want to draw them out a bit more and make sure you realize them, recognize them.

This I've already said, but just to reiterate: In what I was calling the traditional perspective on things, this movement either towards the transcendent, unfabricated, or to some point of oneness—universal oneness of some different kind on that spectrum of lessening fabrication—the stages on that thread, on that spectrum, are actually limited in one direction. There's just a movement of lessening fabrication. We could probably enumerate the typical experiences, the different kinds of oneness and so forth, and eventually this transcendent unfabricated. There's a kind of finite series of perceptions, of openings to different dimensions, different kinds of senses of divinity that go with those openings when they're very strong and deep for the being, for the opening of consciousness there.

But there's a finite series, and that series moves in one direction—the direction of lessening fabrication. It might get flavored a little bit differently, with tender compassion versus awareness or whatever. There are a few different flavors, but they tend to be a finite series that are grouped together around this spectrum of lessening fabrication.

In contrast to that, we're trying to open up a path that really places soul-making quite centrally, or at least has a place for soul-making, that would allow and give a place to all that—definitely that movement along the spectrum of lessening fabrication, all the different finite series of perceptions of oneness and less fabrication and eventually non-fabrication that happen along that spectrum. But in addition, there is an infinity of other possible directions because of the endless diversity and creativity of the imaginal faculty, the imaginal dimensions.

So theophany can happen—theophanies can take this form, or that form, or this character, or that flavor. Instead of just going along one line into less fabrication, having a few similar-ish kind of experiences that are quite common for spiritual practitioners who practice with a lot of dedication and depth, there's actually a kind of movement out in every possible direction. All the creativity and discovery that can happen in different kinds of cosmic places, different kinds of theophany. You understand?

Second thing, and again, I've touched on this too, just briefly: Some conceptions of the path—actually probably often, but some more than others—some fantasies of the path more than others, don't realize or would be very reluctant to admit or refuse to admit that fantasy is part of the whole movement there and part of what's constellated there. That there is fantasy of the Buddha, fantasy of what awakening is, fantasies of the self in relationship with tradition, in relationship to what the path is and moving on the path—not realizing that or admitting that. And I'm thinking particularly of the third conception where there's no beyond, this kind of almost existentialist Buddhism that's popular among some people who conceive themselves as secular Buddhists.

that the whole thing is kind of dependent on realism—that the world really is like this, that the existential limitations are real as I perceive them, that this is the facticity. I might avoid the word truth, but the whole kind of sense of what would happen to the sense of tragedy, what would happen to the bravery that's required there, to open to that and feel the poignancy of it.

If I acknowledge that it may not be real, that this is just one view, one way of looking, one perception, the whole thing collapses without the realism that underpins it and the belief in the reality of this difficult existential situation. That's the reality of things. The whole thing collapses. It can have no traction and no kind of power. And it's hard then to create a fantasy around it. Hard for it to become really sustaining.

Third thing to point out right now. And again, I touched on this before, or hinted at it before. Notice that in each of these four possibilities I gave—the traditional possibility of moving towards the unfabricated or different kinds of oneness; the possibility of just moving in the world, really acquiring more experiences because there is no dimensionality; the third possibility of insisting on one-dimensionality but then the path is coping with that and being resigned and having some equanimity in relation to that, opening to that reality of the one-dimensionality of existence; and the fourth possibility, what we call the tantric or soul-making vision and conception.

In each of those four, notice that each implies something with respect to the senses and the world, to how we then view and relate to the senses and the world as part of the path or as not part of the path, or just how the path situates itself, and awakening—however it's conceived in each of those four types—how it situates itself in regard to the senses.

So for example, what I was calling the traditional view, that whole movement to the transcendent, unfabricated—beyond the senses, beyond anything remotely like sense experience, and that movement towards the ending of rebirth, if it's really classically conceived—that says something about the world of the senses, and you get this in the

Pali Canon. It's something to be let go of. It has nothing really to do with the path. There's nothing good in the world of the senses. It's just something to be put up with in this lifetime, but eventually to be transcended.

In the one-dimensional view, in the craving, samsaric, non-path kind of view, the senses are just something one is trying to acquire. You see, they all imply something about the senses and the relationship we have, or the path has, and then the view and the attitude constellated with respect to the senses in the world.

In the soul-making or tantric view, there is a beyond, but that beyond includes, yes, a transcendent beyond, but also the beyond in and through the senses. So there's a beyond, so to speak, that's not beyond the senses. In and through this experience of this beloved other—this tree, nature, the world, my body, whatever it is—when we come into erotic, imaginal relationship with that thing, that sense experience, there is a beyondness. There's more to it, there's more to fathom, to connect with, to open to, to discover, to be revealed, to enjoy, to penetrate.

So we'll come back to this more, the implications for the senses. And related to that, there's an implication of each of these conceptions of the path with the whole movement of fabrication. So again, in the transcendent model, the movement is to end fabrication. The whole thrust is towards less and less fabrication. Everything on the path in a classically conceived model moves in the direction of less fabrication—pretty much everything on the path. And eventually one wants to not fabricate at all, have that experience enough that there's this complete non-fabrication of the world of experience. And there's the elevation of that.

Whereas in the soul-making view or the tantric view, there's the recognition of the importance of that, but also the recognition of skillful, or let's say soul-making fabrication, beautiful fabrication. One knows it's empty, sees image as image, and one consents to, allows, opens to, supports that beauty of the soul-making fabrication.

Can you see, do you realize how the questions that I asked you right at the beginning of this talk were potentially questions about eros? I don't know if you see too implied in what I've just been saying in the last few minutes that if the eros is strong and if it's allowed, then the one-dimensional view won't be enough. It will, as I said, crack at a certain point or be expanded at a certain point.

If the eros is strong and if the eros is allowed, it will expand the actual view and conception and image, if you like, of path and awakening and all of that beyond. It has to open up more dimensions and thus more possibilities and more of a sense of beyond to discover.

And if eros is allowed to impregnate and catalyze the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and the soul-making dynamic, the view of a one-dimensionality where I'm just endlessly chasing more experiences and pleasure for the ego, horizontally, wider and wider—that also won't be enough. Something will open up and we'll realize, oh, I can get, there's another kind of more, other kinds of more I can get as I go deeper, as the dimensionality opens, the facets of things open.

But actually, what I want to say more than that right now is that if the eros is strong and if it's allowed and if it's allowed to galvanize that eros-psyche-logos dynamic, and if that's allowed to self-fertilize and do its thing, then both the eros for the transcendent and the eros for what we might call the immanent—the sense of beyondness in and through the world of sense experience, the sense of divinity in and through the world and the world of sense experiences—both the transcendent thrust, the transcendent opening, and the immanent, or the opening to the immanence, the divine immanence, both will eventually be open to, just because of the tendency to...

unlimited and multi-directional expansion of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. Do you understand?

And that could happen in any order. Someone might be really at the beginning, you know, really wanting to know the transcendent, and that's really what they want to move towards. But when they've opened to that, when they've experienced that and, so to speak, drunk from that well and that whole spectrum, then something might turn around back to the world of the senses, and that might start opening up in its imminence, in the sense of divine imminence there, and the whole soul-making dynamic with relationship to the senses.

Or someone else might do it the other way around, and the soul-making happens first with the imaginal and the whole world of the senses, and then at a certain point, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic also recognizes that another kind of dimensionality can be had in the progressive lessening of fabrication of perception.

But if the eros is full enough, it will actually eventually want both. And why not have both? Why not be able to move into both? Not in any particular order necessarily. It could happen both ways.

These four possibilities that I've described a little bit are not intended to be an exhaustive list. But there are possibilities for the ways we conceive or imagine the direction and the aim of our path, or that anyone conceives or fantasizes the direction or aim of the path.

Now I know this is a lot and I really don't want to overload you here. But as much as there are, or as well as there being conceptions and fantasies of the direction and the aim, we can also open up an investigation of the fantasies of the self on the path. Now this is connected with what we've just been through. And again, I don't mean to be exhaustive here, but I just want to mention this because we'll actually come back to it tomorrow.

We could, for example, delineate a few possibilities of different fantasies—the way the self imagines or conceives what it's doing on the path, its relationship with tradition, with the job that it has to do, if you like. So this is a little bit different, but related to what we just talked about. And again, this list is not exhaustive.

We could—and most people do, I think—conceive of the path in what I might call the fantasy or the conception of the medical patient or the medical doctor. This is actually how the Buddha originally presented his path, in what was then the language of the doctor's diagnosis, prognosis, and prescription. So basically, we tend to talk and conceive of the path as a movement towards either eradicating suffering, or for most people, just reducing suffering, so that it's the increase of peace, calmness, and well-being, and getting rid of or reducing suffering.

And so we are the patient, so to speak, receiving the medicine, the prescription from the Buddha, from the teacher. Or some of you are teaching already, and in that case you are the doctor prescribing. So there's this very—this is extremely common because it's the language of the Four Noble Truths, which is the principle building block of Buddhism. It's conceived and presented as a movement about what? About the First Noble Truth, about suffering, and the investigation of the cause of it, and the movement beyond, or to lessen it in the Third Truth, and how that happens in the Fourth Truth. So the whole structure of Buddhism, the whole language and conception of it is very much planted in or imbued with a whole medical patient, medical doctor image and conception.

A second possibility that's very common is to have what I would call a religious fantasy of the path and the self on the path, in which, as is characteristic of religious movements, the authority is in the past. So there's a great emphasis on tradition, and what one is doing—the self then in this path, in this fantasy of the path, in the religious fantasy—is really attempting to reproduce an awakening that has been achieved and taught by some religious figure, authority in the past. So it looks to the past, and in its tendency to scrutinize texts and seek authority in the past, in the text, in the explana-

tion of the Buddha. The Buddha said this, the Buddha this, the Buddha that. And then what I'm trying to do is have some kind of awakening that's, to some extent, replicating the awakening the Buddha had. That's the kind of awakening I'm going for.

Moving through these very briefly—we're going to come back to it. So this is the medical patient, this is the religious fantasy, the second one.

The third fantasy, and I think this is quite unusual, is the fantasy of the scientific researcher. So that one is on the path, but one is perhaps motivated more by curiosity. I'm curious about consciousness. I'm curious about states of consciousness. I'm curious about perception. I'm curious about what can be discovered there. I'm open to the fantasy and the possibility that I might discover new things about consciousness, and we might discover new possibilities of perception and conception and experience and theories and all of that. In that model, the ending of suffering, or even the reduction of suffering, may at times not be the primary thing. The primary thing is interest, curiosity, understanding, opening of discovery.

A fourth possibility is what I call the artist fantasy. And again here—and I've talked about this in the past—what's the point of art? What's art for? I don't think there's an answer to that question.

Human beings cannot fully circumscribe or define or capture what motivates us, what motivates an artist, what motivates our love of art. Why is the artist doing what they do? Some art makes a political statement or tries to alleviate suffering in some way, but most art has nothing to do with that. It goes well beyond the medical fantasy – the artist fantasy.

This relates to beauty, yes. To creativity, yes. And what's the relationship with the past then? We might, as an artist, imitate past masters and know how to work in this style or that style, but the conception of art more generally is of something open-ended, just as some conceptions of science are. They look more to the future rather than the past in the religious fantasies. Art is open – I don't know what new forms, what new ways of thinking about art, what new creations will come. It's not just that we're trying to reproduce something from the past. And what's it for? What part does beauty, in the range of that word, play in that?

So there are four. When a person might have an adventure fantasy, the path is just an adventure. Maybe I'm slaying demons, or maybe I'm just – I don't know what. Or it could be – that could be a fifth one or a sixth one – a lover. The whole path is fantasied

as a lover. And what is a lover? What's the movement of a lover or the fantasy or the sense of self? The path as lover. Lover of what? And what do lovers want? And what do lovers do?

We're going to talk more about this, but I don't know if you can get the sense – I've alluded to it already – how each of these casts into the larger imaginal constellation that each one of these fantasies creates. The past is cast in a certain way. How I view authority, the past of the Buddha, the tradition – my relationship with that. And also the future and the direction. Also cast differently is what the self does. What is the job of the self? What is the interest or the priority of the self? What gives joy, and what supports eros. So all of these are different depending on the fantasy. Eros and image go together, so of course it's dependent on that.

So here are some questions. Again, unfair, too quick, and so forth. But do you realize that you have a fantasy of the path and of the self on the path and of awakening? Do you realize that there's fantasy operating there? Maybe that's a better way of putting it.

Can you – and implicit in my usage of the word "fantasy" is not that it's a bad thing at all, quite the opposite: important thing, necessary thing, beautiful thing that gives rise to beauty. But do you realize that it's there? The fantasy is there. Do you recognize what it is? Or let's say what are the dominant fantasies? It might be more than one. Do you recognize what they are for you? Or what it is for you? What's dominant? What fantasy dominates? Tends to dominate?

And this can be complex. I'm aware of this because they can be mixed, or different periods or times in our practice where one or the other is the dominant fantasy, or different in relationship to different streams of practice. But can you start to get a feel for this? Are you aware of it?

More importantly, I'd say – am I, are you, locked into a certain fantasy? Just locked into that medical model?

I'm trying to fit everything into that, and the whole way I construe the path and the self and my movement is caught within that framework—or perhaps trapped within the religious model, or whatever pattern has taken hold.

Where am I in relation to how well I have replicated what I hear my teacher or other teachers talk about or describe—what they seem to be living, embodying? Am I locked into a certain fantasy, or is there flexibility? Is there some creativity in the whole way I imagine myself in relation to the tradition, in relation to the goal or the aim or the direction? Locked in or flexible? We want flexibility.

And again—I know this is moving quickly—is it authentic? In other words, where has this fantasy come from? Am I simply adopting the medical fantasy and fitting myself into that framework because that's how ninety-nine percent of teachings are presented, not just in Buddhism either? We talk about freedom, talk about liberation, talk about healing, talk about meeting suffering or easing pain or peace or well-being—different flavors, and that's so much the tenor of the language, so much the presentation that we can't help thinking that way. And there's also this sense of "Well, he was the Buddha, or they are this teacher, and they must know, and therefore I'm trying to replicate that."

But is it authentic? I'm not saying these approaches are bad at all, but the question we might ask—perhaps more appropriately now—is: Is it authentic to you? And again, the deeper question: Is it soul-making?

Are the fantasies that are in play, the fantasies in which you move and in which your path moves, and which, if you like, cast the path before you—are they soul-making for you? Do we realize, do you realize the implications of simply the fact that there is fantasy operating in our construal, in our relationship, in our conception of path, of awakening, of Buddha, of teacher, of self on the path? Do you realize the implications of that?

And more questions, but going back to what we asked at the beginning about what you want from the path—if you answered those original questions by saying you wanted peace, or ease, or less suffering, or whatever it was—just to check, and I asked this at the beginning: Is it only that that you want? Is it only ease or peace or less suffering?

Certainly at times that's the dominant thing we want, and probably appropriately. I'm not saying it should be or shouldn't be. Just check: Is that all you want? The ending, or even just the reduction, of suffering? If you want just peace, just ease?

I think it's worth pointing out—and I know this is quite radical—that if we emphasize the medical patient or medical doctor fantasy as the most fundamental one... It's fine to have a bit of the artist, or a bit of the adventurer, or a bit of the lover, or the scientific researcher, whatever it is. But if most fundamental is this medical patient, medical doctor fantasy, I think it's worth pointing out that giving it fundamental status—even if you're not usually conscious of this—will probably limit the soul-making potential.

If that medical patient fantasy is too fundamental in how you're conceiving your path or how you're teaching, soul-making may be allowed, of course, but it's somehow always within or in service of the medical fantasy or the medical model. Soul-making is valued because it presents different ways of healing, or whatever.

Of course, we could ask: What does healing mean? And we could talk about the healing of the soul in a bigger sense than just healing of suffering. What does that mean—the healing of perception? I've touched on this before: *tikkun olam*, the restoration, the healing of the world, the healing of perception through soul-making, the opening of soul-making.

And with the artist, of course—what does the artist make? The artist is creating what? One answer could be: they're making soul. In the poetry of perception, they're making soul. The artist makes soul, creates soul. We could construe that as the purpose of the artist. And the researcher is researching soul. So you could construe it this way.

And the lover—what does the lover want? What does the lover love? Not an abstract lover, but your lover. The lover in you. Or the hermit in you.

So again, you can take these questions away, or if you're listening to a recording, press pause at any time and sit with them if they feel fruitful, if they're interesting and opening. But what is your response, or what responses are triggered in you when you realize that your love and your devotion...

to the path, your love of the path, your devotion to the path, and all that's involved in that, when you realize that it's partly at least based on and imbued with fantasy, how does your heart respond to that?

How does your thinking respond?

How does your body respond?

How does your soul respond?

You realize there's a certain basis in fantasy, a certain inextricable involvement of fantasy. What's the response of the soul, the response in the body?

And if you feel like somehow this takes the rug out from underneath things, and there's a kind of deconstruction of the fantasy and the concept of the path, that doesn't last—if that's even what happens. But that won't last, because we need to construct, and we do construct.

So the question becomes: what is constructed in the aftermath of that deconstruction? There will be a construction. What is constructed? And is what's constructed a realist construction, given a kind of realist belief and conception as a basis, or not?

So if there's a deconstruction, what is constructed in the aftermath? And is it a realist construction or not?

With all this, we could ask: what is driving and pulling me? What is driving and pulling all this love and dedication? Well, it's Eros. That's a big part of it. Eros is involved. And where does that come from?

We can say the soul loves soul-making. We said that as a kind of axiom: the soul loves soul-making. So the Eros is for soul-making. The Eros of the soul is for soul-making. The soul loves soul-making. But whose Eros is it? Whose soul-making is it?

Whose soul-making is it? Whose soul is getting made, so to speak?

So then with all those questions, what is the view that I have of this Eros? What is my relationship with this Eros? Those questions have a large bearing.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 96

Energy Body and Image (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 45 min

> *In this Q&A session from the 'Of Hermits and Lovers' retreat, Rob Burbea addresses several profound questions about embodied practice and perception. He explores the concept of the 'energy body' not as a separate reality but as a particular way of looking and relating to experience - a fabricated perception that can range from dense and contracted to light and expansive. When students encounter difficult sensations like breathlessness or 'drowning' feelings during meditation, Burbea offers multiple approaches: inclining attention toward pleasant sensations to allow them to wash over difficulties, exploring what the stuck energy wants to do and allowing movement, or practicing radical acceptance with minimal aversion.*
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> *The discussion moves into imaginal practice, examining how ordinary perceptions can become infused with sacred dimensionality. Burbea explains that this shift requires a loosening of conceptual grip, inclusion of the energy body, and an attitude of reverent humility. He addresses concerns about images that seem to deliver messages and then disappear, suggesting that reducing images to utilitarian functions drains their sacredness. Instead, he advocates for relationship-based engagement that honors the inexhaustible nature of imaginal perception.*
>
> *Throughout, Burbea emphasizes that all experience - whether samādhi, energy body sensations, or imaginal visions - arises through dependent origination and is shaped by our ways of looking. This understanding liberates practitioners from rigid conceptual frameworks while supporting both calming samādhi practice and soul-making imaginal work.*

Bye.

What are the useful distinctions around physical or gross body and energy body? Where do we put down one and pick up the other? And what to do with this mixture of feelings that's going on?

You're asking about experiencing the energy body as light and pleasant, while the physical body has more gross sensations. You've also heard of things like the astral body. What's the distinction there? Is there even a distinction?

Practically speaking, sometimes it feels like the energy body extends quite far out—yesterday in the hall, maybe 8 or 10 feet. You were even experimenting with reaching it out to the tree through the window. Out there, it feels really quite nice and rarefied and subtle and pleasant. But something in here feels difficult, particularly around breathing and sometimes jerky sensations, with the physical breath very shallow and stuttery.

In terms of conceptual distinctions, I don't know the answer in a way. I'm not sure how much it matters. I feel like we're a little bit stuck with this word "energy body," which maybe if I go back a few years, I would come up with something different, because it's more a way of seeing, like everything else—a way of relating.

Sometimes this space feels more like a field of energy and light and pleasant, and maybe that's where it got its name. But that partly comes from a way of paying attention to it. It partly comes as a reflection of what's going on emotionally and energetically. But at other times it can be very dense—dense in a problematic way, and dense also in a lovely way. There's a whole spectrum to what it can feel like in terms of density or insubstantiality. All of that's energy body.

So energy body is more a way of relating, a way of seeing, a way of sensing. It's not confining my experience to just the range of the usual kind of sensations we have or the usual ideas of the body. It's a way of perceiving, a way of looking.

As for astral body and all that—you can have all kinds of experiences. What the truth is about that, I'm more inclined to say the truth depends on how I'm looking at it and the divisions I make. It's interesting when you see different people's systems. This system has four chakras, that system has seven, that system has nine, that system has eight. This one's red. No, no, it's purple. It kind of goes to show that the way I'm looking at the body, what's going on conceptually, what's going on in my relationship to it, fabricates and constructs what's happening to it.

Is that a problem? No.

No. It doesn't matter. So I don't know the answers, if there even are any, other than it's a dependent arising. Do you feel like you need—and this is the first part of the question—do you feel like you need to know the answers to that? What's behind the question?

With the breath, it's very subtle. There's something going on here. It's called dukkha. So if we come back to that in just a second, the problem and how we can relate to it and work with it. You said something very lovely: it's an exploration. So what you're exploring is experience. With that experience, there will be certain conceptions of what the energy body is, but explore.

What I would feel wary of is getting too stuck in one kind of experience. I'm always dense and I'm always focused on dukkha, or I'm always really wide because that's the cosmic consciousness or whatever. It's like all these ranges of experiences are available. Can it be related to the breath? Absolutely.

So there's breath and they talk about subtle breath. I could use those words interchangeably: breath body and energy body, subtle body—it's all good. Or you can have an experience where the experience of the energy body and the perception of the energy body doesn't seem to have anything to do with the breath. You stop breathing and you're still—there's all the vitality and you're alive.

I tend to be more fluid with these kinds of divisions. Divisions, delineations, concepts—they're only useful insofar as they're useful. And they're not realities. So it's like you can pick up a delineation, create a delineation, and if it's helpful for you, go for it. Just don't get locked into it. If it's not helpful, leave it.

But if you view the whole thing as an exploration of experience—which means perception—and all reality is in the realm of experience and perception, which is bound up with ways of looking, dependent on ways... You understand? So if you view it that way, then... Do you understand what I'm getting at? It's like the conceptions are not realities outside of you. The whole thing is just in the service of exploration of experience, either what's helpful, what eases dukkha, or what's soul-making. Or both.

So in terms of this thing that you're feeling, I don't know—maybe if we have time together we can do a little bit. But what I will say is... Sometimes what happens is, let me work the other way around. If it's pleasant out here, it depends on your intention. If my intention is to have some samadhi, some well-being, then first port of call would be to go to where it's pleasant.

In the stream of that intention, that's not the time to get entangled in the difficult. So the difficulty—you're not ignoring it, but you give more attention and nuzzle up and enjoy the pleasant. Most people have a habit of getting pulled into the unpleasant in ways that are not helpful.

So the first port of call—what you'll often find is that inclining the attention towards the pleasant and just again and again enjoying it... So just, let's find the pleasant again and again. What can happen then is that the pleasant begins to wash over the unpleasant. It's the subtly unskillful attention to the unpleasant that's keeping generating unpleasantness sometimes. You understand?

So there's just one kind of—if you can incline the mind that way again and again in the moment, just very, very relaxed. Your job is just to find the pleasure and just subtly enjoy it and keep doing that. And sometimes you don't need to bother about this. It will blend over if the intention is towards samadhi.

Sometimes that, still within the intention towards samadhi, doesn't help. So then you can see: does this thing want to move in any way? Now you mentioned restlessness and it seemed like it was a bit... so then you might get the sense that somehow it wants to—you know, could be—go out the top of the head, or out the throat, or this way, or... It's like, what does it want to do? And kind of allow it to do that.

So the energy body is dependent on perception—it's a fabrication, that whole structure. You can either imagine it doing that, or just kind of open it. Open the energy body to allow it to move how it wants to move.

As a principle, and I'm speaking to everyone here, sometimes contraction, pain, these difficult sensations are, in energetic terms, just stuck energy. They want to move in a certain way, and we simply need to help allow them to move. So you can use your imagination, whatever works. You can use the breath.

What is it? If it's here in this particular place, maybe it wants to breathe in and out this way, or in and out through the back, or up and down, and out through the head, or in through the head, or out through your heart—you know, whatever. There's some way of bringing the dynamism of the felt and imagined breath energy into play with this stuck place, including it, and that allows it to move more.

The thing I say about samadhi is: anything goes. Anything. If it works, great. It doesn't matter. We're just in the business of—here's this field, let's try and get some well-being without struggling too much. So if it's the imagination, great. If it's a more energetic approach, fantastic.

There's a third possibility, still in the realm of the intention of samadhi. Okay, those two didn't work, and then you go to this stuck place, this contracted place, this difficult place, and actually move into a mode of hyper-allowing.

So it's unpleasant, and then you say, "This moment I just completely open to that unpleasantness. I completely..." There's this kind of open, open, open. What's happening then is you're entering into a way of looking that has minimal aversion. You have to get to 120% opening, allowing, welcoming to this thing. Because what's keeping it in place is the aversion—there's a subtle aversion to it.

There are so many different responses and things you could try. Sometimes it's a matter of caring for the being who feels like they're drowning. So drop the "I'm trying for samadhi" agenda. Something needs care there. There's vulnerability, and breath is so primary. If you feel like you can't get your breath—I mean, you're not going to asphyxiate, I can tell you that. But still, that might not be enough reassurance.

So something needs some care there, in terms of that experience. With this way of approaching it, you would more gently focus in on that and want to hold it. And it's not just the sensations, because you can kind of laser beam those unpleasant sensations with mindfulness. We want also to care about the person who feels like they're drowning. It's not just sensations reduced from a person—it's sensations with the person, with the self.

When I teach people to work with the breath in these moments of intensity or discomfort, I emphasize that there are so many different possibilities—endless approaches from many different angles, moving in many different directions.

Sometimes, as Andrew mentioned, you can actually use the breath to smooth out these difficult sensations. But you have to be very gentle; you're not forcing anything. If you're coming from a place of "Come on, change this," it won't work. It's really like you would stroke a wounded cat or something tender. You're just easing something with the breath—with kindness and with the breath. Sometimes this can really shift the energy, heal it, calm it, open it. There are so many possibilities.

Andrea raised a question related to what Sampo asked the other day about feeding the practice or leaning in a particular direction. "I've been noticing that I might be taking a breath that feels rather lovely, but is not necessarily desire, but I've been perceiving it as desire in the moment, which leads to more breaths or more currents that feel like eros, not necessarily with an image attached to them. And then sometimes an image does come up as a result of perceiving in that way. So the question was more around if there are ways of looking that allow more imaginal to come through—like with metta, sometimes feeling the sun on your face and suddenly feeling that that's metta coming to you helped me lean into metta. Can you do that with desire, this perceiving lovely sensations that may not have that relationship as desire?"

I understood the example about metta and the sun, but I asked her to clarify the connection with breath and desire.

She explained: "You might suddenly take a breath in the hall that goes from the nostrils all the way down to the perineum and feels wide and open and lovely. There isn't an image in your mind at that moment—it's just the body opening. But the next breath,

the head's tilted back and there's more sensuousness with the breath. It could be just words that you or Catherine uttered that suddenly sends the body into a little bit of an 'ooh,' and not necessarily an image, but a leaning into that sort of 'ooh,' having a momentum that would propel."

Let me try something, if I understand. If we go back to the sunlight on the face—sometimes one can feel that warmth and that light, but essentially it's an imaginal perception of the sun that's fused with metta. All that's an imaginal constellation: sun, skin, warmth, metta. These things—if you go to Newton Abbot High Street and say, "Do you know that the sun radiates loving-kindness?"—it's not a usual perception. So it's an imaginal perception.

So there's something that arises in a moment, and then you can gently encourage that or deliberately return to it at a different time. The same with the experience of body and breath—actually, the experience of anything.

I was wondering—it's actually quite hard to articulate what it is that... you know, when we talk about intrapsychic images, for most people that's relatively easy to understand. Some people say, "Oh, I don't get any," but that's a different kind of thing. But when we talk about—like the other day when I said this is an imaginal hat—it's not an imaginary hat. Actually, it's not imaginal, but it could be imaginal. It's not imaginary in the sense that there is a thing here. But it can be an imaginal hat.

So it's quite hard to articulate what it is that moves the material perception of anything—what is it that infuses it with the imaginal? And how do we make ourselves available to that? And how do we support that?

A lot of the time, what happens is actually what you're describing already—we catch things on the breeze. We are in a receptive mode, relatively speaking, and something... a current just comes and a perception begins to open and we just ride it. In time that gets more—depending on a lot of conditions—that kind of receptivity and sensitivity gets more and more encouraged.

But apart from that, it's actually quite difficult to pinpoint what we can do in the moment to encourage that opening. I think part of it is listening to poetry—there's something Catherine mentioned that illuminates this. Ideas and words and other images function as drops of some kind of poetic potion that goes into the mix and sparks an imaginal perception. It's not just visual—it could be sound, it could be absolutely anything. Something starts to function as a kind of poetic, alchemical elixir.

What else is happening there? I haven't quite articulated this fully, but I can identify several elements. There's a loosening that's happening—a loosening of my ideas about what things are, of how things are. This involves the logos. It doesn't have to be a big deal, but I've relaxed the idea that the sun is only a massive ball of hydrogen undergoing nuclear fusion. It is that, but I've loosened my conceptual grip.

There's also more looseness in the perception itself, so that images can move. The energy body becomes involved again—this is another crucial aspect. The more the energy body is total and engaged, the more openness there will be to catching those currents.

There's also this sense of something being bigger than—and sometimes that's hard to pinpoint. What exactly is bigger than what? But there's this quality of humility and reverence, and the heart is involved with that. All these aspects arise together.

What this means is that we can consciously loosen some of these elements or cultivate certain attitudes—like coming into heartful humility and reverence—and that will support the opening. Sometimes what happens practically is that you've had that experience before, and you gently remember it and open and loosen in this way, and it returns. You can ride it again or open to it again.

But yes, it's actually quite difficult to formularize. I would be wary of creating a step-by-step process, although there are certain elements that consistently support this opening. Related to what Catherine was discussing, this represents a principal direction we're moving toward.

Sometimes people want an image, or they hear about someone else's fantastical encounter—a monster that arose in meditation with nine heads, purple skin, green flames coming from its mouth. That's an image, and it might be really meaningful. The test is in the soul-making. But even more important, I believe, is when the world itself becomes imaginally alive, imaginally perceived, opening up this dimensionality of sacredness. Some people will start there. This capacity to support that opening is really crucial.

Rachel had a question about this process. She described being in a receptive mode where images come that are very beautiful, definitely feeling like she's in the realm of the imaginal. After some time, the image delivers its message—it offers an insight or something important. Then it goes quickly, and the next image comes flickering in. In this receptive mode, it feels quite flickery. If she stays with an image longer, it feels like it's offering something up, and once she receives that, the next thing comes.

So Rachel is describing how images sometimes arise, and there's definitely the quality of the imaginal—she recognizes that. Then the image delivers its message, conveys whatever it came to communicate, and simply goes away as another image arrives. This process doesn't necessarily happen super quickly; it could unfold at any rhythm.

Okay.

When you feel like you try and hang on to the image, does it feel a little, what—forced, contracted?

"Yeah, it feels like the sacredness is falling away."

So when she tries to hold on to it, the sacredness is falling away. I wonder if I'm trying to hold on to this image because either I think I should, or because there might be something else it has to tell me. In other words, why am I trying to hold on to it? It might be that the intention is making the difference, draining the sacredness out of it.

Is it possible to start with the sense of sacredness itself? That the sense of sacredness is not exhausted by the message you've already received? If you think of an image like a person, then the person could rightfully feel insulted and not respected if you just view them as being there to give you this one thing, and then when that's done, they can go.

There's a way of entertaining the sense that the image is inexhaustible. That message was important and part of it, but it doesn't exhaust the image. The sacredness is always bigger than that message. What's really happening is we're granting an image its sacredness—entering into that posture, that relationship with it, and seeing what that does. This is different than trying to make it stay.

If that's possible, then if it goes, it goes. But I'm not entering into—what's the word? Utilitarian relationship. If I reduce an image to one meaning or one communication, it dies. It's like entering into a kind of relationship and attitude that doesn't do that.

"I mean, I feel like on some level I get that, and in a way that's why I'm opening to it, because I don't want to reduce it just to one message—like give me the message and go."

Maybe it's like getting away from the whole message idea. More just being in relationship. What about just loving it? What about just hanging out? What does relationship mean? There's a different relationship with the relationship itself.

It might be that there's the obvious thing, and then there are more subtle communications—but they might not be messages or instructions or insights. There's a rapport, a back and forth, a communication in the broader sense of the word: from the image to you, from you to the image. Some of that stuff is much more subtle. It might be a matter of quieting and taking the pressure off, just attuning more.

Having said all that, some images do just come and go. Sometimes it's just the restless mind. Sometimes it's just the nature of things. It depends on a lot. Sometimes you're skidding around and images are moving very fast. Then one becomes meaningful, more long-lived.

But it might be a matter of granting it that sacredness and that moreness, then easing into more sensitivity without grasping. There's something about the rapport, the relationship.

Yeah, so I would say yes, absolutely. But I would also say—and I think I mentioned this here the other day, I can't remember—but when you do imaginal practice, generally speaking, there's some release or opening or harmonization in the energy body that comes with the image. This is your indicator that you're on the right track. There might be agitation in the sense of excitement, but something in the energy body... You know, pīti is also agitating, right? So it's not so much the presence of agitation as the presence of some kind of harmonizing in the body. That reminds me of something else to say to Lawrence, but...

What you get as you develop imaginal practice is that at any point there's this possibility of just leaning more into the samādhi—leaning more into the energetic quality of what's going on and enjoying that and opening to that. And it takes you into deeper samādhi. So you're kind of letting the image go to some extent.

But then you can also go the other way. You can lean more into the image, into the complexity, into the meaningfulness, into the relationships within the image, into the emotions that are involved. Both directions are available to you, and both are part of the practice.

So yes, it definitely gets more subtle. The imaginal has its own spectrum of subtlety, just like samādhi does. At the gross end, you have very vivid, complex images with lots of narrative and emotion. As it gets more subtle, the images might become simpler, more archetypal, more essential. The emotions become more refined. The sense of meaning becomes more distilled.

But it's not exactly the same kind of subtlety as samādhi. In samādhi, things tend to merge and lose distinction. In imaginal practice, even as it gets more subtle, there's still this quality of relationship, of eros, of meaning-making that remains. The image might become very simple, but it's still an image. There's still this sense of "other" that you're in relationship with.

This is part of what makes imaginal practice so rich—you have these two vectors available to you at any moment. You can go deeper into the samādhi and let everything become more unified and peaceful, or you can go deeper into the imaginal and let the meaning and relationship become more complex and profound.

Eventually, you can learn to play with different emphases of attention. You might give very little attention to what's happening in the energy body, or place most of your attention there. You could focus primarily on the image, or on the emotion that's arising. There are all these facets of experience, and with practice, you can decide where to lean at any given moment.

Imaginal practice can absolutely take you to different levels of samadhi, simply by staying in touch with what's happening in the energy body and then, at any point, peeling off into that dimension and focusing there if you choose.

But there's also a way that images, as the whole thing matures, become more subtle—like most dharma practices. Going back to what you said initially, samadhi is a movement toward less fabricating. When you do imaginal practice, you fabricate. But what can happen is a kind of settling into samadhi where you can go as deep as you want and rest there if that's what appeals to you.

Then at some point, you can simply come up a little, so to speak—just loosen the whole thing slightly. What will have happened in that plunge is that the psyche has become loosened, creating a space where images can be born. If I'm deep in that stillness, I'm truly in a state of non-fabrication—and actually, all fabrication, all perception is fabricated. This includes worldly perception, bodily perception, and imaginal perception.

But it's like taking that plunge, then coming up just a little. The whole psyche becomes looser, and more imaginal material can arise if you wish.

This brings me to something else about what Lawrence mentioned—this energy that feels unpleasant. This is actually quite common. Piti can indeed feel unpleasant at times. I define piti as non-sensually arising pleasantness, but for many people at different stages in their exploration of samadhi, piti actually feels uncomfortable. It's too agitating, or too coarse.

This is very common. Many people who have tasted the calmer dimensions of samadhi become what I call "piti snobs." Something you would have given your right arm for years ago—this bliss—now becomes unpleasant. We need to find a relationship with it that allows it to be pleasant again.

Part of that is about allowing. There is some enjoyment present, even if it doesn't seem so. Often we've simply gotten into a relationship with piti where we tune into the unpleasant aspects, and our very resistance to it fabricates it as unpleasant. If we can open to it and find the pleasure within it, this actually begins fabricating it as pleasant.

This pattern is quite common at different stages of practice. Again, everything depends on the relationship. The relationship conditions, fabricates, shapes, and guides what unfolds—body, world, emotion, mind, image, energy, all of it. Everything depends on the quality of relationship we bring to our experience.

CHAPTER 97

Awakening and Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 38 min

> *In this Q&A session from the "Of Hermits and Lovers" retreat, Rob Burbea explores profound questions about spiritual awakening and soulmaking practice. A practitioner with physical limitations asks whether enlightenment is possible without traditional meditation, leading to a discussion about the flexibility of contemplative practice and the narrow definitions often imposed on meditation. Burbea emphasizes that awakening can occur through walking meditation and other practices beyond sitting, drawing on sutta accounts of liberation in various postures.*
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> *The conversation delves into how imaginal practice naturally leads to jhāna states through energy body alignment and attention captivation. When cosmic imagery spontaneously gives rise to samādhi, practitioners can learn to navigate between deepening absorption and continuing with imaginal exploration. Burbea explains how any image—whether peaceful or wrathful—can serve as a gateway to concentrated states through energetic resonance.*
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> *A deeper philosophical inquiry emerges about whether image or body should be considered primary in spiritual practice. Burbea addresses this through the lens of emptiness, explaining how different conceptual frameworks create different experiences and truths. Whether starting from embodied awareness or imaginal perception, eros serves as the unifying force that eventually sanctifies all dimensions of experience. The devotional quality (bhakti) inherent in this work connects directly to eros, creating an expansive soul-making process that transforms understanding across psychological, philosophical, and experiential dimensions.*

Anyone?

Suzanne, yes.

First, I want to say that your talk last night and this morning really resonated with me and was very useful. It got me very excited. The world of the senses is kind of taken care of for me. For as long as I can remember, I've always had a yearning, a really deep yearning to connect with something divine. I've interpreted experiences as Buddhism 101—all things are connected—and I had some synchronistic experiences. Then when I learned about emptiness, I thought, oh my god, I knew it. It just seemed to all make sense, and I developed this passion for experiencing it.

I know that it can slip into cravings sometimes. But in our meeting yesterday, you mentioned that I don't have to meditate. Because of my physical limitations, I don't think I'm going to be able to meditate in the traditional way. I know I'll have to try different things and be flexible.

So I'm wondering: can you have—as you were saying, you don't have to meditate to become enlightened—but what does enlightenment look like if you're not sitting on the cushion? Can you have an experience of the unfabricated? I know I've heard stories about monks and sudden realizations. What does that mean? Is it the same thing as having a cessation experience, or is it something else? Is it something different for everybody? I would think not, to a certain extent. There's a certain knowledge that you gain, right?

I just want to know that I'm moving in the right direction. I don't want to go off thinking I could just do this or that when it's not really a good direction.

Let me summarize the basic question: given what's happening physically right now with health, and feeling like long meditation sessions and frequent meditation sessions are not within the capabilities of the body, is it still possible to get enlightened? And is that kind of enlightenment I might get without long and frequent meditation the same kind of enlightenment as the beyond that you've described?

Thank you. I don't recall saying to you that you don't need to meditate.

What I did say was that meditation might not look like what you have a picture of. When someone asks me what is meditation, what is insight meditation, people give all kinds of descriptions. They think it's a certain posture or concentration or stillness, whatever. To me, it's just, in a nutshell, practicing a flexibility of ways of looking and seeing what comes out of that flexibility of ways of looking. Understanding comes out of that having to do with all kinds of things, but primarily emptiness. That doesn't have to look a certain way.

To make a distinction between meditation on retreat, on the cushion, and not—I feel that's overdone. People become enlightened during walking meditation absolutely. If you look at the suttas, there are loads of stories of that. There's this strange hierarchy between the four postures—sitting, standing, walking, lying down. Sitting is usually considered the best one apparently, but this division is artificial. Even in the Buddha's teaching, there are the four postures.

Even in the division between retreat and not retreat—long meditation sessions and long meditation retreats can be really fruitful, but they're not necessarily where a person's most transformative insights and liberations come. I have spent a lot of time on

retreat, but even looking back, I wouldn't pinpoint the long times or sessions as the moments of greatest transformation. I don't think it stacks up that way. I don't think that bears up to scrutiny, really.

We have these ideas. I shared with Suzanne that when I was about 21, I was on retreat at IMS and had all this crazy energy happening. The teacher asked me to sit at the back of the room because I was disturbing people. When I was still disturbing people from there, they told me to go away. I sat on the other side of the courtyard, outside the meditation hall, in my room by myself, and eventually they asked me to leave.

I was 21, living in a foreign country, so passionate about the path, so wanting enlightenment and awakening.

And I remember after he said, "You know, it's better for you to leave. You're going to hurt yourself. You need something," he recommended. And I was devastated. I was absolutely devastated. I told you this story. I walked up that road thinking, "How am I going to get enlightened now?"

To me now, looking back, I really feel for him and that kind of passion, but it seems I was so naive. There was this simplicity: "If I can't do long retreats, then I won't get enlightened. If I can't sit a long time still..." I had gotten into this jhana practice and was trying not to be attached to it, but also thinking less and less fabrication—that's how it's going to happen through jhana practice.

But that's just one way things unfold. I've had many teachers say that there are ways other than jhana practice, that jhana practice is supposed to get you to a place where you can do insight. But that's just how it's often taught.

Teachers are important. Right now we're having this dialogue—I'm the teacher and you're the student—and I really recognize the support of that. But in this moment, I'm feeling a little uncomfortable, partly because this is such a big, tricky area. What is one's relationship with teachers and outside authority and people who say it's like this or like that?

For example, that idea about jhana. In my Insight Meditation tradition, jhana was taboo territory for a long time. Then certain teachers began to teach jhana, and some said you need jhana because it will sharpen the mind, and so on. This is all just dogma, really.

Jhanas can be really helpful for lots of different reasons to some people. For others, they're just not a big factor on the path. I don't buy this thing about sharpening the mind so you can do insight. I just don't buy it at all.

As a teacher, I know there are many teachers who teach a way of doing things. One reason I always love talking to you is because you encourage me to do what's right for me, whereas other teachers say, "Don't do this," and then I start doubting. But I don't want to do that. I still want to meditate.

But again, I would open up what that word "meditate" means. If I look back to when I was twenty-one years old, there was a period when I didn't meditate. I cared so much about it, but that period and everything that came out of it—everything I learned, the bodywork I did—it was so helpful.

I'm not a doctor, but I don't think what you're going through will last your whole life. It's a period. And meditation is more than sitting still and getting the mind to shut up. If it were just that, it's nice, but there's so much more.

If you have this broader view of what meditation means, it becomes something much more creative. Things like insights into the unfabricated and fading—they come, but it's not so linear. The person who sits twelve hours straight isn't necessarily the one who gets it. It's not like that.

The jhana thing as well—sometimes people say, "I sat there and didn't have a thought for two days or something." And it's like, okay, where's the insight? It doesn't stack up that way. I'm not saying it's not worth it, but it's not a one-to-one correspondence at all.

In terms of the unfabricated as well, sometimes—and this isn't textbook dharma—one has the perfume of that even without formally meditating. You walk in nature, you walk somewhere, or even when you're with someone, there's something we sense. That's meditation.

What's happening there? The way of looking is opening up. The perception is getting attuned to something. I can't put it into words. I can sense it somehow, beyond sense or whatever. These are the kind of things. They start working their way into your life. Not only do they stack up, but they also bring a certain amount of liberation.

Before you've had... well, let's leave that. But these things give you a faith that you feel in the marrow of your bones in something like that. All of this...

And then the last thing is—and I also said this to you the other day, relating to what I was talking about yesterday and today—you're going to want a big, fat liberation, not just a deep liberation. You know, a wide one, because of the art and because of... Do you understand?

So it's like how you find your path, create your path, discover it, is going to have to include all that rather than getting too tight around it.

Johan's question brings up something fascinating. He's describing something that seems to be occurring quite regularly with the same image. There's an image that has to do with stopping of time and is kind of cosmic in terms of galaxies and stars and things. And there's eros with that image, there's beauty. It's a poetic image that captures something. There's an image of stars and space, and as we're moving through it, all of a sudden it freezes. And then here's the jhāna. It happens quite frequently.

He's a little surprised how sometimes that leads into jhāna, or quite frequently into jhāna, rather than what I was saying about how imaginal work tends to create more complexity and branch off. This is actually leading into more simplicity, less fabrication.

This has actually come up a couple of times here. This is really common. So why is it happening? I think it happens because when something is imaginal, the energy body responds first of all, and comes into some kind of harmony or alignment or openness or something like that. And if the mind—part of the mind gets—attention gets captivated by what's happening in the energy body and the kind of harmonization there, it will just go into jhāna because focusing on that is a jhānic state.

So anytime there's an image, it doesn't have to be an image of stopping time or space or some kind of image of stillness. Actually, it was you, Johan, the other day, asking about an image of anger. Do you remember that? So it could even happen with an image of anger.

You think, here's this—not the image you were alluding to—but maybe some image of stomping, monstrous, raging dragon god or something. And it's all this fire and energy. The power of that can be felt in the energy, but there's a resonance with it. The anger itself is kind of transmuted alchemically into whatever its golden equivalent is, so to speak. But the energy body starts resonating with that energy, and one can—one of the options is that it enters jhana.

So as I think I was saying yesterday, at any point with imaginal practice, you can kind of glide in any direction. You get to have a little more say sometimes; sometimes it just takes you. But because of the energy body involvement, there will always be a possibility of samadhi. You can always lean off into that. At the moment it sounds like it's kind of happening because the energy body constellates that, and then probably the attention is just getting captivated by it.

But as you develop, it will become more and more an intentional possibility. So you could always just do that—let the image go. You could say, "Very nice energy body stuff, but I want to go further with the resonances with the image," so you don't go so much into the samadhi. And then you can play with the emphasis of attention—like how much attention is on the meaningfulness, the beauty, the poetry of the image, how much is on the energy body, how much is on the emotional impact.

With time, all this becomes like—you've always got these directions you can lean in multiple ways. Also in terms of how much attention am I giving the image versus how much to my own process or my own self, the way the self is constellating in the imaginal constellation. So you've got things like self, other, world, and the eros itself, all of which can be imaginally infused, come alive as image. You understand me?

And then you've also got things like the emotional aspect, the energetic aspect, the samadhi aspect, the image aspect, and you can kind of—sometimes you're just taken into one or another. Sometimes you need to rebalance things. I think I alluded to that in the second night's talk. Sometimes we're just too much in the image or too much with the self or too much—like the self needs to come alive imaginally. It's all over there, the divinity.

So there are all these options. Sometimes you're balancing things so that there can be more steadiness and equanimity and fertility with the image. And sometimes you're just making a choice out of curiosity, and sometimes you're just taken one way or another.

So I'm answering more than you're asking, but do you get a sense of what can evolve here? This is not at all uncommon. It also happens with non-imaginal things. Sometimes one way people kick-start jhana or samadhi is just by remembering something that brought happiness, for instance. And then that happiness infuses the being, and there's just a gentle inclining the mind to that happiness—getting into the happiness and letting it suffuse. And for some people, that's a way into jhana. So it's a little bit similar to that as well, but that's not so imaginal.

The image falls away into samadhi and you let it go because the samadhi is what you want? Well, I didn't realize I was doing that. I just thought it was a natural progression.

I have more the feeling that as it unfolds more and more, you'll realize that you can—like sailing or something—you can kind of lean different ways and guide it. A little bit related to Suzanne's question, you know, samadhi is great. I really, really value it. And jhanas and all that. But if there's a lot of eros in a soul, that won't satisfy. It's part of what we want, but there will be something that wants the image as well.

I mean, a jhana by definition is a non-bored state, but something in the soul, in one's life, will get—okay, that's enough. Not enough, but it's like, I want more soul-making. I want more of the poetry. So I would keep both options open. And some people have long periods of time when they're more leaning this way or that way. Other people, or as it unfolds, you might just go back and forth more regularly between the two.

Does that help?

Yes, it's Bo, yeah. So I'm very new to this.

I'll do the English thing and apologize for anything that's not correct. But you have planted some really beautiful seeds, both of you. And I wanted to cross-pollinate a little bit with some things related to the body. One of the things I think you said is that image is primary and experience is secondary, or image is primary.

So image is primary, and I was reflecting a little bit on some lines of research that have come out about the body. One is in the area of connective tissue that talks about our tissue not being inert, but always moving, all the time, kind of in what has been called intelligent chaos. And then also, embryologists are starting to say that we never lose the embryo. As adults, it's still present in our bodies, and that motion is...

Thinking about fabrication, I have been hearing things like, the body doesn't have a soul, the body is a soul. And I'm wondering if part of the beauty of all of these exercises is a sort of... you talked about who is the soul-making for. Could the fabrication and the soul-making be part of stepping into the soul of the body, if there is one, through all these many threads, nature and the connection to this? There are times when I think in my experience here, it's just feeling like there's a moment where there's music, you're stepping into... I wouldn't be sure I had to sum that up.

Are you asking, like, whether instead of image being primary, we could view body as being primary? Is that part of what you're asking?

Yes, and there's one tiny thread, which is that part of what we're doing here seems very devotional, like very bhakti in nature. It's part of our devotional practice to do these things.

So Bo's asking whether body could be primary instead of image, and also noting that part of what we're doing is very devotional and has bhakti in it.

Here's how I might frame it or think about it. We have eros as human beings. If everything is empty, and any conceptual framework, including the scientific, cannot possess a claim to the singular truth of things, then classical science, fantastic, wonder-

ful. Embryology and all this stuff, brilliant. It has wrapped up in that as a whole conceptual structure, way of thinking, assumptions. Great, very fruitful. Is it the ultimate truth of things? Is it the singular truth? No.

Starting from those premises and looking at things and asking questions, from those premises unfold certain experiences and truths. Starting from some other premise will... You understand?

So what if we start—and we could start anywhere. We could start where you started with the body. We could start with the idea that image is primary. But if someone asks me, is that an ultimate truth? I say, no, of course it's not an ultimate truth.

Once you've seen something about reality and about epistemology and about all that, you start to realize, oh, I participate in truth-making. And I participate in world creation and perception creation, if you like. And so I can, we can, just play with entertaining certain concepts and conceptual frameworks and seeing what they open.

So we could start with the idea that body is primary and motion in the body, as you were alluding to.

Beautiful, absolutely beautiful. We could start with the premise that body is not separate from soul. You could start with the idea that image is primary. When we say "this is primary," we're already suggesting something quite radical: What happens if we take that as a basic principle?

Instead of, for example, taking my psychological history as primary, or materiality as primary—all of which are fine as starting angles that will give a different perspective on reality. It's like those disco balls, you know—reality kind of shimmers and shifts depending on how the light hits it. And I am really cool, by the way, in case you're wondering.

So yes, we can start with image as primary. We can start with what you said, absolutely. Each approach will unfold its own revelations.

Now, we could start with Eros as primary. In a way, this retreat is leaning in that direction. What happens if we just pick up the Eros thread and discover what Eros is through our experience and what opens from that? That's what we're doing here, to some degree.

Or you could start with—I think I tossed this out at some point—the soul loves soul-making. This is my axiomatic proposition. What the hell do I mean by that? Well, I unpack what I mean. It ends up being somewhat circular as a definition, but it proves to be remarkably fertile.

So if I take Eros as primary—let's say I have noticed in my experience, in my life, where there's Eros. And wherever it moves toward... that could already be the body. It could be materiality. It could be my lover. It could be the transcendent. And I just trust that Eros. I investigate the experience of Eros psychologically and phenomenologically—what it does and what it opens.

Then I will find that it starts to subsume everything, as I said. Everything gets made sacred and made valid, if you like. So if I start with "my body is just not soul," eventually I will come through experience to the perception that opens up: the body *is* soul. You understand?

Now, another person might start more from there—that's where their Eros goes immediately. Another person might seem a million miles from there. They want to be unfabricated, they want to go beyond form, all that. But if we allow the Eros and allow that fire to catch, it will eventually catch everything. It will eventually discover more things, more facets, more sacrednesses. It will discover soul everywhere. It will create soul everywhere.

You understand? So there ends up being this unlimited perspectives and unlimited soul-making, unlimited en-soul-ing. And you ask, which is first? Just follow your experience, follow your own unfolding.

So if you start with what you're saying about the body—there's both conception and personal experience there. You have a felt experiential connection with body and bodies, and the investigation and experience and understanding of that. There is Eros there—conceptually, experientially, soulfully for you. If you do that, then it will just... it will go to other things. Someone else approaches it the other way around. Just soul-making, yeah.

I could have cut all that and just said yes. Yes, you're right, and so is someone who says something else, and so is something else entirely. Because of this, there's something quite radical here—a shaking up of the whole notion of truth and objective reality.

Again, if we follow the thread of this retreat, it's like we have this experience of Eros. If we just name it, we begin to see what it does a bit more. Then we say, "I'm going to trust this, I'll follow it." And then you start to see what it does—experientially, erotically, soulfully, psychologically, philosophically, conceptually, all of that.

So it's like, it's all right, you know? It's all true. Does this make sense?

And the devotion is exactly connected with that, because where there's devotion, there's Eros. Where there's Eros, there's devotion. Again, this might not be so obvious at first.

You feel into it. Let me explore my experience of devotion. Let me explore my experience of eros. Or as I said, just in the imaginal—here's an image and you start to realize, hang on, start to notice: oh, there's devotion here. Oh, there's eros here. And then I trust that. And then that's how that threads into the other. I'm just following my devotion. The whole thing opens up conceptually, experientially, heartfully, soulfully, physically, energetically. You know what I'm saying?

So those two parts of your question are extremely related. The bhakti, the devotion—it ends up being a kind of philosophical opener as well as an experiential opener.

Does this make sense?

Well, just what I just said: the devotion is—where there's devotion, there's eros. Where there's eros, if we get interested in it and don't get in its way and allow it to do its thing, it will instigate, inseminate, ignite that soul-making process which starts changing my experience of things. So it changes my experience of body, of what my body is as a thing, from the point of view of subject, from the point of view of expression. Everything—it gets the image, the sense, the experience, the felt sense, the ideation, and that's where the philosophy bit comes in.

This is why soul-making is so significant, because every dimension of the being, experientially, it's got this expansion, and I know it, I taste it. And not only that, I know it in a way that's important to me, and everything comes into support—that ideation, the conception, the philosophy, the psychology, the emotion, the energy, et cetera, et cetera.

Does that make sense?

Okay. I'm happy taking a... Yeah, okay, sure.

This is from Nick's book. "Does your bear have a name?"

"Bear."

Bear. Bear is asking—he's enjoying your teachings. He thinks they're quite good. Would you like me to justify your claim that there's no such thing as bare attention?

I bow to his greater wisdom.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 98

On Blessed Ground: Fantasies of the Self on the Path

Rob Burbea · 32 min

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea challenges conventional approaches to Buddhist practice by examining the fantasies that inevitably shape our relationship with the spiritual path. He argues that wherever there is love, devotion, or deep meaning—including in our dharma practice—fantasy and imagination are always operating, creating what he calls "imaginal constellations" that encompass our perception of self, others, and the world.*
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> *Burbea identifies several archetypal fantasies of the self on the path beyond the traditional medical model of the Four Noble Truths: the researcher investigating consciousness and perception, the artist creating through practice, the adventurer exploring unknown territories, the lover devoted to psyche, and the receptive meeting place for multiple threads of experience. He suggests that recognizing these fantasies—rather than trying to eliminate them—opens up new levels of liberation and psychological honesty.*
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> *This teaching invites practitioners to examine what truly ignites their practice, what fantasies are actually driving their spiritual life, and whether these serve soul-making. Rather than viewing fantasy as something to overcome, Burbea presents it as inevitable, beautiful, and essential to meaningful practice, while emphasizing the importance of holding these fantasies lightly rather than with rigid realism.*

I have to admit I feel a bit ambivalent about talking more right now. We are very conscious that it's a lot of content, and different people need different things at different times, digest differently. I still feel a bit unsure, but I think I'm going to go ahead. Tonight, just so you know, there won't be so much content. We'll have a different way of being together, so there won't be so much stuff coming at you.

I want to see if, without talking too long, I can say enough to open up something else—another possibility, a little bit connected to some of the material I was exploring last night.

When you're in love, or when you love anything, when you're devoted to anything, when you're dedicated to anything, when something is meaningful to you in a deep way, there is fantasy and image operating there. There is an imaginal constellation, and it's an imaginal perception of you in your life and of something in your life. In other words, it's not just intrapsychic. We're actually seeing others and self imbued with

fantasy, so that the whole constellation of other, or thing, or object, or event—work, other, self, world, and time—all that constellation is ignited as fantasy, and also the eros, the desire there.

This also applies to the path and to our idea of awakening: our fantasy of awakening, fantasy of the Buddha, fantasy of teachers. All this is brought in or engulfed in the movement, in the beautiful movement of fantasy, wherever there's love, wherever there's meaningfulness to us, wherever there's that devotion.

Now, usual psychology says when you're in love, for somewhere between three and six months, you're a little bit doolally. There are the fantasies there, and we call it projection. And there's all that. Hopefully you make it through that period, and then you start to get real. And then that's proper love. But is that actually what happens? Is that actually, so to speak, the best thing to happen?

Or is it more that in time, as things progress, there is this attunement to and attention to the relationship, the needs in the relationship, the different psychological patterns that one confronts and meets in oneself and in the other? One cares for all that and cares for the relating and the dialogue and the interactions and the patterns. But at the same time, the fantasies don't and shouldn't go away. They might change, they might deepen, they might become more subtle, more attuned to the—let's use that word—realities, more nuanced, more sensitive.

What happens if they go away over the months, over the years in a romantic relationship? What happens? It might be the end of the relationship—people get bored—or it might be the relationship just finds another way of being together that's more about metta and friendship, but the eros is gone. How common is this? The sex might still be there, but the eros might be gone. You can certainly have sex without eros.

Same with the path. When you love the path and you're dedicated to the path, whatever that means, it's imbued with fantasy. What happens when our path is not imbued with fantasy? What happens to it? We lose our inspiration, it becomes flat, or we go into a kind of fixation mode and it becomes about measurement: How am I doing? I've heard about these different stages of awakening. I wonder, have I got that first stage yet? Where am I?

And it becomes fixated, reified, concretized, rigidified into a kind of movement or a relationship of ego measurement. This is what happens for people who care, for people who love and invest themselves—how easily the eros and the richness and the beauty of the fantasy goes into craving and fixation. Probably everyone in this room knows that.

So what I want to see if it's possible to open up a little bit for us is to talk about fantasies of the goal, if you like—fantasies of awakening, fantasies of the path and what the path involves—but also fantasies of the self on the path. In other words, like I said, when there's image, there's a whole imaginal constellation. It's not just that object or that other person. We forget to see—this is so important—we forget to see sometimes the self needs to be included in that fantasy, is included in that imaginal constellation.

What's going on with the self image in the good sense? What is, so to speak, the fantasy of the job of the self on the path? What's your job on the path? And what's the image of the self walking that path?

Now usually in spiritual teachings, whether they're Buddhist or other, especially Eastern teachings, they're taught and framed in what we might call the medical model—a medical fantasy, the Four Noble Truths. There's suffering, there's a cause of suffering, there's the possibility of the end of suffering, and there's the way to the end of suffering. This is actually a medical formula that the Buddha adopted at that time in India.

This is how a doctor would talk to a patient. "This is your problem, this is what's caused it, you can be cured if you do what I say, and this is what you need to do—this is the prescription." So we've inherited that. That's absolutely the most central thing in Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths. And even if we don't consciously think of the Four Noble Truths—if someone asks "What are the Four Noble Truths?" and we respond "Oh, I don't know"—even then, we've become completely, or almost completely, imbued with this idea that what we're doing is reducing suffering. We're healing suffering. It's a medical model, and this is what we need to do.

So this whole idea and fantasy—this medical fantasy—imbues our thinking so deeply that when a person talks about their practice or thinks about practice, or when someone's teaching, it's always somehow related to freedom. What's it going to help free us from suffering? What's going to help alleviate suffering? The entire way we frame practice to ourselves and to others, the whole conceptual framework, the complete relationship with the path and the self on the path and the job on the path—all of this operates within this medical fantasy model.

Coupled with that in spiritual teachings is what we might call a second fantasy: the religious fantasy. By that I mean something relatively specific, though all these fantasies I'm going to explore are quite broad, with lots of wiggle room. What's characteristic of what I'm calling a religious fantasy is that in my practice, the job of the self is essen-

tially to replicate as closely as possible someone else's awakening. It's the Buddha, right? He had this awakening, and we're somehow trying to get something pretty close to, or at least in the direction of, that awakening.

The characteristic of religion—and I use that word loosely, in different ways at different times—is that the authority is in the past. You understand? The authority is in the past. We look to the past, look to the tradition, and the self fills out this fantasy with beauty, with reverence, by replicating something. So in a way, there's not much new in the religious fantasy. It's not that we're going to make new discoveries. We might open up the demographic of where we take the Buddha's teaching—Mark is working in prisons, taking that to that demographic; Jamie's doing some wonderful work—so we're opening up the demographic, but essentially the discovery is not new. We might use research on what mindfulness does to your brain, but this is just a kind of corroboration with culturally sanctioned ideation that supports what's already there.

There's nothing wrong with this. This is all beautiful and lovely. But sometimes—you may have noticed this—what do you actually want in practice? What do you actually want? Now, at times, of course you want an alleviation of suffering, and that's why you're practicing. But all it takes is a little bit of honest inquiry and reflection, and you see that some portion of the time—maybe even a lot—that's not actually what you're primarily most concerned about. It's something else. If we keep talking about it as if it's that, and keep prioritizing that, it's as if we're looking at the world, looking at ourselves and reality in a kind of blinkered way. We're not being psychologically honest, perhaps.

So we've been using this word soul-making, but sometimes when one sees what one actually wants, whether one uses that word or not, it's actually soul-making. I'm more interested in that at times than I am in the reduction of suffering. Is this making sense?

The fantasies of the self can be larger than or other than the religious fantasy and the medical fantasy. When I say something's a fantasy, it doesn't mean it doesn't have any "reality" to it—of course it does. What I want to say is there are other fantasies possible of the self on the path and of the job of the self on the path, as much as there are of awakening and all of this.

Maybe there are loads, but let me offer some possibilities to open this up a little bit. One could at times have the fantasy of—how am I actually seeing my practice? Who am I when I'm practicing? What am I doing? And one might have the feeling that I'm researching. I'm a researcher, I'm a research scientist. What am I researching?

Well, it could be the end of suffering within the medical model. It could be that I'm actually researching consciousness, or I'm researching perception, or I'm a phenomenological researcher of some kind. But then the whole job of the self and the fantasy and what gives juice and aliveness is different there. Do you understand?

It may be that it's bound up—and there's certainly an overlap—with this reduction of suffering and the relationship with the Buddha's discoveries and teachers who are important to you. But there's a different fantasy of self operating there. What's really exciting and galvanizing at times is this possibility of discovery.

If we think about a scientific researcher, what's the relationship with time? The religious fantasy looks backward to replicate. Science uses the past as a platform, but it's looking to the future. It is presumed in science that the science of a hundred years from now will know more than the science of a hundred years ago—not just the same. There's a forward movement.

So what would it be to have a fantasy of the self that you could make discoveries that are not discovered yet? That you could be researching in a way that's moving forward? What is the job there? What's the goal of that fantasy and the aliveness there? It's not just the reduction of suffering. There's more involved. It's not just functional in that way.

Or there could be—so that's a third possibility—the fantasy of the artist. I've talked about this elsewhere. What's the job of the artist? What's the purpose? If my practice is art, I'm playing with these ways of looking and really—like we called the last retreat—the poetry of perception.

Why do people make art? Why do human beings make art? What's it for? It's a rhetorical question, because what I want to say is whatever answer anyone gives—I'm sure there'll be loads of beautiful answers—you're never going to capture it. You're never going to capture that urge, that human urge to create and to be involved in art. Art is always going to be bigger. Why does the artist do what they do? Why do human beings make art in the broader sense? What's the purpose of it?

So if I'm fantasizing and feeling my practice as artist, what's the purpose of it? And I keep trying to talk about it in the medical model, but actually something is relating in a different way. What's the artist's relationship with the movement of time, past and future?

An artist who really gives themselves to the art—most artists will want to explore the past, the past masters, and absorb those styles, replicate. But they don't want to stop there. And the whole idea with art is that it can go in a million different directions. It's

going to be new. It's not predetermined even where it's moving. And what does the artist create? What does the artist make? What does the practice artist make? Artists, we say, make things or create things.

What about an adventurer as another fantasy? What's the adventurer's relationship or fantasy of their place in time? The relationship with tradition? What's the job of the adventurer? What's the goal? Does an adventurer have a goal? Or is adventure the goal of the adventurer?

What about the lover? Fantasy of self on the path. What am I doing? My job is to be a lover.

What does that mean? What does it mean—my job is to be a lover? Lover of what? Lover of whom? What is the job, the duty of the lover, and what is the sense of self and sense of goal that the lover would have?

I was working with someone not too long ago, inquiring into this with her. In just one session, she explored what makes you feel most alive in practice—when you love it, when something is really ignited in you. What is it that you love at that time? What is the fantasy operating then?

Feeling into it, exploring this several times with different answers, I asked: "Who are you in that? What's the fantasy?" She said, "I'm a landing place. I'm a meeting place for all these threads and characters"—from her history, from her life, from the culture, from the intrapsychic realm. Her job was to be that meeting place, that landing place, and simply to open. You can hear that's a much more receptive fantasy, really beautiful. That was her job, her fantasy of self.

A little while later she said, "I'm a lover—a lover of psyche. I'm a lover of psyche." Very different, a different fantasy operating entirely.

So again: where there's love, there is fantasy. Fantasy exists as a ground of the path. There's usually a mix of fantasies, in fact, but the path is not just functional. It's not merely accumulating techniques to reduce suffering, though sometimes we talk or present things as if that's what's happening.

All of this is good, all beautiful. There's certainly not one fantasy that's better or right or wrong than another. If I am in that reducing-suffering fantasy, maybe it's not just functional or utilitarian. Where we love something, there's always fantasy involved.

Of course, there are people who go to a class and learn a couple of stress-reduction techniques. That person may or may not fall in love with practice. If they don't, then it could remain purely utilitarian. But once we start to get involved, practice becomes imbued with fantasy. Even that medical, functional reduction-of-suffering fantasy gets imbued with other fantasies.

No right or wrong here, but can we see this? It's almost like waking up psychologically. Can we recognize that fantasy runs through our life wherever there's meaningfulness? Can we acknowledge the necessity of fantasy, the inevitability of fantasy, the beauty of fantasy and the gift of fantasy?

For many people this is a completely upside-down way of thinking. I'm feeling more and more that a psychology which doesn't realize the necessity, inevitability, beauty and gift of fantasy and eros almost inevitably ties itself in contradictions. People say one thing, but what's really driving them is something they're not quite fully admitting—or they have no conceptual framework to flesh it out and support it. There's almost a kind of incomplete integrity in not admitting the place of fantasy and eros.

To me, I'm beginning to feel more and more that psychology needs to be more sophisticated to truly shine light on something that's already there for us. It's just that we don't have words for it so much. Often we don't realize—we don't think this way—something that's already present in our life, ebbing and flowing, getting ignited and illuminated, then ebbing away. We don't realize that fantasy is involved almost as the ground of our path, the ground we walk on.

We often don't realize what the fantasy is that's driving us, supporting us, inspiring us—or what they are, plural. And we don't realize the implications of all this.

What are the implications? I think there are many, and they're far-reaching.

I'm certain this is landing in different places. I hope that for some people—hopefully now, but maybe sometime soon—you can sense there's a whole other level of liberation possible when you start to open this. A whole other level, a kind of meta-level of liberation.

On the other hand, some people might be thinking, "I'm not really sure what you're talking about." And others might feel, "This is really, really disturbing."

So I'm really aware of that and want to be sensitive to these different responses. It might be that some of you are thinking, "Well, if you're talking about being on the ground of fantasy, aren't you just pulling the rug out from under my whole path and my whole sense of what I'm doing? You're just saying it's fantasy, and the whole thing kind

of crashes and deconstructs." And it might be that we're left without any juice, inspiration, or fire, because we've lost the fantasy. Because we've realized it was fantasy, we conclude it can't be real, therefore we can't trust it, and so forth. This might feel horrific, disorienting, disconcerting.

At some point there will be... but that's not the point. In other words, that's not the real possibility I'm pointing to here. There will be a reconstruction. We construct as human beings, we fabricate, we fantasize. There will be a reconstruction. The question is: what's my belief about that reconstruction? Is it realist or not?

This is only horrific if our view is too realist. If I really understand that fantasy imbues our life, imbues our love, and that it has its juice precisely in the non-realism—if I get that, there's a whole other level of liberation here. Is what's reconstructed as fantasy realist or not? Or is it, let's say, poetic or not?

With all this, one of the questions becomes: am I locked into a certain fantasy? Maybe I don't even realize it—am I just locked into a fantasy that doesn't really fit me, but I'm simply stuck in it? Maybe there's just a kind of mono way of seeing. Or can there be flexibility here? Flexibility in the fantasizing.

As with images, it doesn't matter to me at all whether the fantasies that are supporting you, inspiring you, driving you, drawing you on, pulling you forward—it doesn't matter whether they're your inventions, so to speak, or your discoveries, or whether they're just received fantasies. That's actually irrelevant. It doesn't matter at all whether you read them in a book, heard them, or received them from a teacher. The question, as always, is: are they soul-making? In other words, do they open up the inspiration, the ignition, the dimensionality, the depth, the beauty, the meaningfulness, the eros?

So what is going on, what is inspiring, what is igniting, what is beautiful when you feel most alive in practice? What is it really? At those times, what is it that makes you feel alive? What is it that you love? There's a lot of room here. I've just run through six possibilities, but there are all kinds of others.

And then, what does this particular fantasy that I'm in—how does it fantasize an ending? Is there an ending? Is there a completion? When I asked the woman, she said, "I'm a lover of psyche. I'm a meeting place for all these threads." I said, "And is there a completion to that? Is there an end?" "No end." "Is that a problem?" "No." Whereas with other fantasies, there definitely is a problem—we're wanting to arrive somewhere. Or are we?

Wrapped up in all of this is even the question: is there an end, is there a completion? Does this make sense, what I'm talking about?

I'm going to stop there. I just wanted to see if this could be opened up a little bit and maybe put those seeds out—just sprinkle some seeds and let them land where they land. To borrow someone else's phrase, we may revisit this and work with it as an exercise. We'll see. But this is—I don't know if it even makes sense—as I said, there's something immensely potent here, potentially at least, in this kind of re-looking or opening up.

So we may revisit it, but I just wanted to scatter some seeds a little bit.

I wanted to explore this territory with you, to see if we could open up this inquiry together and perhaps plant some seeds. Like scattering seeds in fertile ground, they will take root where conditions are right.

There's something immensely potent here—this kind of re-looking, this opening up of our fundamental assumptions about practice, about completion, about the very nature of our spiritual journey. We may return to this exploration and work with it more systematically, developing it into a practice exercise. We shall see where the Dharma leads us.

For now, I simply wanted to scatter these seeds of inquiry, to invite this quality of questioning that goes beyond our habitual patterns of seeking and attaining. In this willingness to not-know, in this embrace of the mysterious nature of our unfolding, perhaps we touch something essential—something that cannot be grasped or completed, but only lived and embodied moment by moment.

The path continues to reveal itself, not as a destination to reach, but as an endless deepening into the mystery of what we are.

CHAPTER 99

Beauty and the Buddha

Rob Burbea · 1h32

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea investigates the nature of beauty and its connection to soul-making practice. He begins by examining how the Pali Canon restricts the concept of beauty primarily to mental states like the fourth jhāna, while viewing sense pleasures as dangerous distractions from liberation. Burbea challenges this bifurcation, exploring what our actual phenomenal experience of beauty reveals—something that touches us beyond mere sense pleasure or craving, involving resonance, participation, and dimensionality.*
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> *Drawing connections between beauty and imaginal perception, Burbea argues that experiences of beauty naturally involve soul-making, where objects become magnified and imbued with meaningfulness rather than singular meaning. He critiques approaches that limit aesthetic experience to tragic impermanence, proposing instead that beauty emerges in the relationship between subject and object, neither wholly within nor without. Through practices that honor the whole energy body and allow for flexible ways of looking grounded in emptiness teachings, practitioners can open to experiences of beauty as expressions of the divine pervading sense experience itself, supporting the endless creativity of soul-making.*

I'd like to speak about beauty, and I hope that in doing so this will perhaps seed something, nourish something. In speaking about it, I'm going to try and tie together some things we've already touched on, and also open them out further—so both tie together and open out.

I'm not sure there's a linear path possible through what I want to communicate. Perhaps there is, but I can't quite see it exactly. Perhaps in the nature of what I'm trying to do, what we're doing, is shining light on what is already tied together, implicated together, mirroring each other, and what already opens out further, or suggests a further opening, so that a linear motion through the material is not really possible, just by the nature of the material and the way it's connected.

Many of us would say and feel very much that beauty is important, deeply important to us in our lives, and therefore also the whole realm and conversation, investigation of aesthetics and application of aesthetics, is also important. For some people, it's not, or it really doesn't seem to be that important. I know quite a few people for whom beauty is not something they invest in a lot, that they care about a lot, that they pay a great deal of attention to and support and care for.

There is a connection though with Eros and soul-making. It seems to me that those people for whom beauty is not that important are also people for whom there is not a great deal of soul-making movement happening in their lives, not a great deal of Eros. Beauty is a part and an element in soul-making.

If we look to the Pali Canon and see what it says about beauty, as far as I'm aware, we find something that might strike us at first as a little curious. The word beauty is only found in relation to the mind—and not only that, in relation to the mind or certain minds or minds in certain states.

So the fourth jhana—sometimes the Buddha and the texts refer to that as the beautiful jhana—that stillness and the radiance of the mind there, and the state therein of equanimity that goes with the fourth jhana. This is, as the Buddha said, equanimity based on singleness, when there's a kind of closing out or really deep fading out of the senses, and the mind is just collected into stillness and a kind of radiant presence of stillness and equanimity there.

Or the Buddha talks about equanimity based on multiplicity as a connected but slightly different state, where one is still open to sounds and sights and smells and touches, but there is equanimity in relation to stillness, and actually there is a degree of fading. So in both of those, whether it's equanimity based on singleness or multiplicity, there is a degree of fading. That's important. Fading of the perception of senses and sense objects.

So there is this reference to the beautiful, but only really in regard to the fourth jhana and beyond, or to a Buddha's mind, or an Arahant's mind, free of defilements, pure and therefore beautiful, or sometimes to the body of the Buddha, the physical body of the Buddha, which is full of the thirty-two marks of a great man and is regarded as beautiful.

With respect to the world, the world that we live in and the earth and the senses and what comes to us through the senses, the word beautiful and beauty is not used. Beauty is in or of the mind, and everything else is just talked about in terms of what is pleasing to the senses or sense pleasures. This bifurcation of language has all kinds of implications.

And more than that even, because the Buddha talked about sense pleasures being like a snake's mouth or a pit of burning coals or a torch of hay that one is carrying into a headwind. All these images of danger and pain associated with what is pleasing to the senses.

The whole Pali Canon, as we've touched on before, has this movement, this thrust, towards transcending the world of the senses—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—to the unfabricated, to the fading of sense experience in all six senses, including the mind, and through that to the ending of rebirth, an end of being reborn in the world of senses. So there is clearly a very negative connotation given to sense experience. It's not a realm of beauty. It's not where we look to for beauty.

That's quite interesting, and it has a legacy which I think we are still not clearly investigating, aware of, open to, sensibly confronting, questioning.

Bearing that in mind, and what's there in the Pali Canon, if we look at what is our phenomenal experience of beauty—what is our actual experience of beauty—we have, as human beings, at least most people have, at times, experiences of beauty. And I would say, and most people would say, that's more than just something being pleasant in the senses, and more than sense pleasure leading to a kind of craving.

Most people would say, when I experience beauty, it's something different than just a pleasure in the senses that the being, the mind or the body craves for. Something in the experience of beauty touches us. It's more than craving. Something is touched in the being. But by touched, I also mean more than an obvious emotion.

An obvious emotion is grief or compassion or some kind of passion for something that may be touched and triggered in the experience of beauty. But we are touched in the experience of beauty in our being in ways that go beyond or include more than what are obvious emotions.

I have a Buddhist friend who wrote a piece recently about beauty, and particularly about aesthetics, really, and his approach to aesthetics. He was saying that beauty was something that comes out of mindful experience, or mindfulness of experience, so that there isn't the craving, there isn't the tanha. And through mindful experience, for instance, on retreat, the world appears radiant. The things of the world appear radiant. And that radiance is a perception and experience of beauty.

Notice that this experience of radiance—and some of you will know this from being on retreat and being silent, being mindful, as the mindfulness kind of ratchets up its power—

There is a radiance in experience. You go outside—the grass, the sky, the cup, the steaming tea rising from it—all possess this quality of radiance that we can feel. It's a universal quality.

So radiance seems to, in that state of heightened mindfulness, pervade everything. Everything appears radiant. It's universal, not so much tied to particular objects. The radiance of this is not particularly different than the radiance of that. There's something universal present here, which I wanted to note.

A further thing to inquire into with this radiance is: what is it? What do we mean by radiance? Certainly not, in our friend's way of thinking, some kind of luminosity—and certainly not a numinosity attributed to the object or flowing through it from beyond in some way. I think what it actually is simply an experience of vividness, a vividness of perception of anything that comes into the realm of sense experience.

Why? Because with mindfulness there's less distraction. The mind doesn't dissipate so much energy; it accumulates energy, becomes brighter, more alert, more present. With that, the grime is wiped off the windscreen, so to speak. There is a vividness, a brightness, a radiance of perception. This radiance that's perceived and experienced as enjoyable—perhaps some would call it beautiful—is really just a property of mind or awareness in certain states. Some people even say it's a brain property.

I have some questions about that experience of radiance and what's involved there. But our friend goes on to talk about the sublime, which we've discussed earlier on this retreat—this whole Romantic notion of the sublime. He means what is beautiful in terms of pleasing sense experience, but not just beautiful—also terrifying, dwarfing to the sense of self, the fragile human body and existence confronted by a vastness that could swallow it up, dwarf it, erase it easily.

Think of Turner's fantasy of being strapped to the mast of a ship in a storm—the colors and vividness of sense experience combined with that hugeness, that terrifying confrontation with or openness to nature. In this experience of the sublime, which is very important in our friend's notion of aesthetics, especially Buddhist aesthetics, something transcends the self here. There is a kind of transcendence.

But what transcends the self is really only impermanence, tragedy. It's seeing contingency and dependency—things being dependent on other things. There's a kind of emptiness there, but implicit in this understanding of emptiness is that it's tragic, that it really means impermanence. It just means these real things are dependent on other real things; material things are dependent on other material things.

What transcends the self is the existential predicament of the self that surrounds it, that is inevitably waiting for it—our unavoidable existential predicament of inevitably moving towards non-existence. There's a kind of transcending of the self there.

In his view, art is also regarded as transcendent, but in a slightly different way, because we can't quite fully say what this piece of art or that piece of art means. Our friend says more: "This makes me uneasy, I feel uncomfortable. I want to be told what this painting I'm looking at means, what this sculpture means. I want to be told what it means, and I want to be told how to feel about it."

He connects this with the poet John Keats' notion of negative capability, which in Keats' words is "a state of uncertainty or doubt without any irritable reaching out after facts or reason." This is negative capability. Our friend takes that to mean being without any reaching out away from a state of uncertainty and doubt, except certainty and non-doubt about the existential predicament.

Here, what's important to our friend is the poignancy—the poignancy of the tragedy of our existence and the tragedy of impermanence, of our impermanence, of everything's impermanence. Making art in a Buddhist context needs to be about this, because this is what the Dharma is about: opening to this. Art is only really about that. There isn't then the possibility of an art that can expand beyond being about that poignancy and tragedy of impermanence.

This is all fine and legitimate. Everyone's allowed to have whatever view and approach to aesthetics they would like. But from our point of view—what we're trying to open on this retreat as ways of practicing and ways of conceiving—notice a couple of things.

One is that there is a limited and singular view of life here. Life is taken axiomatically, dogmatically, to be really about or to involve this absolutely real existential predicament: moving to non-existence, the tragedy of impermanence. There's a singular view of life—this is how life is. It's a limited view and a limiting view, limited to that singular perspective. And also of art: this is what life is, therefore this is what art, at least Buddhist art, should be.

Notice also that in this approach, any individual or anything is mostly or only interesting to us insofar as it moves toward obliteration, toward extinction, toward erasure in the universal facticity of impermanence. The thing itself may be different from that other thing—we can see that—but that difference isn't particularly interesting in itself. The individuality has no real depth to it. It's only interesting insofar as this thing shares with all things the tragic impermanence that characterizes existence—all things, all selves, all individuals.

As I said, all that's fine and totally allowed—no problem. But from our point of view, it is both limited and limiting, or from the point of view of what we're trying to unfold on this retreat and in other retreats and teachings.

Let me explore and flesh out a little what's involved in the experience of beauty—what are the facets or aspects involved in the experience of beauty, again from an almost phenomenological point of view.

First, in the experience of beauty, we're not just enjoying the beauty of the object, whether that's a sense object in nature or art or whatever it is. What's also involved in the sense and experience of beauty is that we are enjoying our sensitivity, our subtlety, our awareness or attention with respect to that beautiful object. We actually enjoy the way that we are engaging with it. Do you see? We enjoy our attunement. We enjoy the arousal of being, of consciousness, of senses, mind, heart that is there in relationship with the aliveness that's present for us, in us, through us. We enjoy the state of intimacy and the relationship of intimacy. We enjoy the connecting connection.

All this means also that in an experience of beauty, we are enjoying our eros, our erotic connection, our experience of the erotic connection with the object. Part of the experience of beauty, I would say—whether we're fully conscious of it or not—involves seeing the beauty of our eros, of our response. You might not have realized it fully consciously, but when I have a sense of beauty, I'm also appreciating and seeing the beauty of our eros, my eros.

Another related aspect—and this is hard to articulate, or at least I'm finding it hard to articulate—is that if you pay attention when you're experiencing beauty, sometimes there's a sense of something within us resonating. There's a kind of resonance with whatever we're perceiving as beautiful. There's a chiming or an echoing between the object and the subject, or some kind of—it feels as if perhaps something is being echoed there in the object, or we are echoing the object, or the object is mirroring something in us, or something in us is mirroring it. A resonance, a chiming, an echoing, a mirroring of something within us with the object.

Now this isn't a state of merging in oneness and union. There is still the otherness there that's necessary to eros that we've talked about. The otherness is there. The polarity is there. The twoness is there—connected but two.

Maybe there's a sense of participating in something. I think there is. In a deep sense of beauty, we feel that we are participating in something, deeply. But what is it that we're participating in? What is the object of beauty? What is the beautiful thing? Again, whether it's a sense object or a mental object or an image or a piece of art or whatever it is, a piece of music.

What is that object with which we are resonating, in which we are participating, in which there is a participation together? That object itself, I would say, is magnified in that erotic connection, in the perception of beauty. The object is magnified, amplified, widened, so to speak.

If you listen to music—wordless music—and there's really a perception of beauty, it is not just bare sound. It is not just bare sound. I would say it's not even just pleasant bare sound. The object is, in the experience of beauty, somehow magnified, amplified, widened and deepened. What does this mean? How is it thus widened and deepened?

Thirdly, and I've just touched on this, an experience of beauty is more than—is not only—an experience of pleasant sensual contact or pleasant sense experience.

That is not an experience that qualifies as beautiful in the way we're speaking about here.

Nor, I would say, is it simply a matter of a pleasing arrangement of visual elements or sonic elements. What is it about a Rothko abstract painting? Yes, certainly there are pleasing proportions and arrangements of colors and shades of color on canvas. Or William de Kooning, another abstract painter. Or in wordless music, yes, of course there's a temporal arrangement of different timbres and sounds. But the experience of beauty is more than just being pleased at the arrangement of pleasant sense experiences.

I would go further and say that to me, it's not that we can reduce beauty to "it just means this or that." This painting means this, this piece of music means that. When we reduce art or sense experience in nature to meaning—"it means this"—there's a kind of monovalency, a singularity of meaning. Even if it has one or two meanings, we've reduced it, we've limited it. That's different from the notion of meaningfulness. Again, it may not be the best word, but there's an openness to that. It can include specific meanings, but there's something more in the experience of meaningfulness. And that, I would say, is more characteristic of the experience of beauty. It's not a reduction into a kind of monovalency—"it means X or Y."

Nor is it, as I alluded to before, that the experience of beauty is confined to an emotional experience. Or certainly not just that. It may include emotions triggered by whatever is beautiful, emotions associated with or referring to my personal narratives, things that have happened in my life, or human narratives in general. It may include all that, but I would say there's something more—it needs to be open.

So experiences of beauty, if I'm exploring the phenomenal experiences of beauty that we have as human beings, I would say partly what characterizes them is this sense of *more*, of *beyond*, of unfathomability, of inexhaustibility. As I just said, also of meaningfulness. And as I said before, there's an involvement in the experience of beauty of, as well as the object, also the self. And again, maybe not so obvious, but of the world.

So our sense of the world is transformed when there's a deep experience of beauty of anything. It affects our sense of the world. And also our eros is involved. So again, we get that fourfold constellation that's always involved in any perception: self, world, other, and desire—in this case, eros. The involvement of all of those is, as we've already said, involved in a sense of beauty.

Can you see, can you hear how the characteristics, or some of the characteristics of the experience of beauty echo, mirror, are similar to many of the characteristics of imaginal experience? There's some relationship between our experience of beauty and our experience of the imaginal.

And I shouldn't need to say this at this point in the retreat, but I will: by imaginal we do not just mean so-called intra-psychic—the images that come to me when my eyes are shut and out of contact with the world of the senses. This is so crucial. The imaginal really involves a set of perspectives, of perceptions, ways of looking. It involves soul-making beauty, and it can be right there in my perception of this room right now, of the ground beneath me, of my own hands, of you as I'm looking at you, of this tree. Our perception of the world can be imaginal.

So there's a mirroring, an echoing, a similarity, a correspondence between the characteristics of the experience of beauty and the characteristics of imaginal experience. So much so that I would wonder: does beauty actually imply—does our experience of beauty imply that there is soul-making happening? It implies already some opening up of the imaginal with respect to this piece of art, with respect to this piece of music, with respect to this flower that I'm looking at, with respect to whatever it is.

So it involves depths, dimensionality. That's part of the experience of beauty. And these are open-ended. There's an openness of depth, an unfathomability. The dimensionalities that might open are without limit, without preordained limits.

Again, referring back to our friend's aesthetics—in this awareness of the sublime, there is a *more*, there is a kind of *beyond* that's part of the whole aesthetic sensibility and project. As we talked about the sublime in previous talks, there is a meaning there. But the art has this kind of singularity of meaning. It means, it refers back to, it points towards always this poignancy, this tragedy of impermanence.

But as I said, relative to what we're trying to open up here, it's a limited perspective on both life and art, and it's limiting. There's a monovalency—it has one meaning. And that meaning is the poignancy of the tragedy of impermanence. The fantasy, the image, the soul-making is only in those kinds of perceptions, those kinds of perspectives, and in those artistic endeavors that would come out of that and be restricted to that. The fantasy, the image, the soul-making is only with respect to that tragedy. It's limited by that.

The transcendence is also limited. It's monovalent or, if you like, bivalent. As we said, there are two kinds of transcendence that one might consider: the transcendence of the art and the transcendence of the sublime transcending the self. But it's just that—two kinds of transcendence. It's bivalent only, and only refers to the uncertainty in regard to the art and the tragedy with regard to persons and things.

My friend and I have quite different—I would say, though it might sound quite similar at first—quite different views, conceptions, interpretations of emptiness.

And this is part of what's at the root of the difference in approach to life, practice, beauty, aesthetics, and a whole range of other dimensions.

For my friend, the teachings of emptiness and the fact of emptiness are actually tied to a fantasy of tragedy and opening to tragedy—the tragedy of impermanence and the fact of existential uncertainty. His understanding of emptiness implies dukkha. Because there is dukkha, because things are empty. And there is tragedy, because things are empty.

This is quite the opposite of most of the Buddhist tradition, where emptiness implies and leads to freedom. Our confrontation with it, our exploration of it, leads to freedom. Knowing the emptiness of things, opening to the emptiness of things, brings freedom. It's not tragedy, not dukkha—quite the opposite. It's a remedy for dukkha.

The teachings of contingency or dependency—everything being interconnected, not having one basis or being based in itself—are really used in those other approaches just to say: don't get excited about any one thing, because any one thing relies on everything else, is connected with everything else, depends in some way on everything else. So don't get excited about any one thing.

The whole premise and tenor and directionality of the teachings of emptiness is really quite different than the way I would present it or view as being the basis for our work here.

In our friend's presentation, there is not this inclusion of the dependency of things on the way of looking. There is not the allowing of different ways of looking because things are empty. There is not the allowing of a flexibility of ways of looking, and there is not the practice of the flexibility of ways of looking. There is, in fact, just one way of looking, which is geared toward seeing this impermanence and tragedy. At least one kind of sanctioned way of looking.

Rather, in how I would understand it and how I've taught it, emptiness means the emptiness of something means it's not independent of the way of looking. There is no independent reality independent of the conception and way of looking at any time.

So rather than emptiness being tied in with impermanence and equally tragic, the emptiness of things, or the realization of the deep emptiness of things, means understanding that things—all things—are neither permanent nor impermanent. Neither impermanent nor permanent. They are beyond the categories of impermanent and permanent. Neither impermanence nor permanence are ultimate truth.

The Mahayana teachings in particular are full of these kinds of emphases and point this out repeatedly. For example, in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, form, feelings, vedana, perception, mental formations and consciousness are not permanent or impermanent —are neither permanent nor impermanent. In another Prajnaparamita Sutra, the perfection of wisdom does not describe any phenomenon as permanent or impermanent.

So to keep harping on about impermanence and to rest only in the view of impermanence is not a perfection of wisdom. It's a certain relative wisdom that needs to be transcended, deepened, gone beyond.

Nagarjuna, who is the paragon teacher of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition—second really only after the Buddha—also wrote in some of his main texts: "In a relative sense, everything is impermanent, but in the absolute sense, nothing is permanent or impermanent." And again, he writes: "There is no origination, there is no destruction. The customary usage of origination and destruction, and otherwise impermanence, has, however, been expounded by the Buddhas for practical purposes." It's a stepping stone teaching.

So to limit our dharma understanding, our exploration, our perspective of life, and also our approach to aesthetics and art and sense experience just by a limited understanding of impermanence and a limited exploration of emptiness—well, it limits.

How might we open up the possibilities for beauty and also for our aesthetics and our practice? And in that, open up soul-making, because they're connected—beauty and soul-making.

Perhaps we need to explore more deeply the nature of objects, of things, of life. If we feel like we say, "Oh, life is uncertain, life is this or that, it's huge," but we've actually nailed it down, nailed what it is and given that a reality—what is it? Well, it's this tragic impermanence and this hugeness that might dwarf me or erase me or extinguish me and my existence at any moment, the fragility of that. You see, that's what life is. We need to perhaps explore more deeply the nature of objects, things, and life to open up the possibilities for beauty, for aesthetics, and for soul-making.

And also, we need to open up and explore more deeply if there are, for instance, this view of life, these feelings, these emotions in regard to selves and things—this what my friend would call the unbearably poignant feelings, emotions of unbearable poignancy, seeing this fragility, impermanence of things, seeing this sublime.

Going deeper into those feelings, not just stopping there with the first sense of them and then perhaps intellectually formulating them, but not stopping—really feeling into them, certainly not avoiding or brushing them away, but going deeper into them, exploring them, opening to them. Do you have the skill to do that? Go deeper into these feelings, care for them, see how that actually transforms the feelings themselves—not by avoiding them, not by brushing them over or painting them pink, but through deeper exploration.

Don't arrest that exploration of what you're feeling if it's painful, that unbearable poignancy. Deeper exploration transforms the feelings, because everything is dependent. The transformation of the heart transforms the self-sense and the sense and the perspectives, and then the very sense and experience of things and of life—just through going deeper and exploring more and caring more and being more careful with the feelings.

So both poles—both the object pole, so to speak, and the subject pole of experience—need more exploration in order to open out the possibilities for beauty and aesthetics, and also soul-making. Both poles, subjective and so-called objective.

Beauty is in-between. Beauty is not wholly within, nor is it wholly without. Beauty is in-relationship. We say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It's not just in the eye. It's in-relationship—of subject and object, just like image is. The image is not just there, nor is it just here. Image in the sense that we're using it, imaginal image. And just like soul

is—what we mean by soul is in between, it's in the between, it's in the relationship. And actually, just like existence is, and life is, and being is, and world is, and the senses are—there's an unavoidable, inextricable link between the subjective and the objective.

They are inseparable, subject and object, these poles. There's a mutual involvement, a mutual dependency of object and subject, a dialogue, a conversation, a mutual participation. And the same with the soul and the world.

So if we're stuck, or rather in order to open up further our sense of beauty, both poles—the subjective and the objective—need working with. We can explore fruitfully both poles, where they are limited, where they are less pliable.

In the pole of the object, we see that it's empty, in the sense that it doesn't exist independently of the way of looking—it doesn't have an inherent existence. It's empty in all kinds of ways, in fact. We're not reducing it to a scientific materialist or reductionist materialist view, because then I've limited the object. I've decided that it is this. And that kind of reductionist materialist view of things or objects or sense experience doesn't hold water if I investigate it. If I limit my view of objects, things, to a one-dimensionality, then it's almost like I'm not investigating them properly. I'm limiting what I can see there, what I can sense there. So this one-dimensionality needs to open up to the dimensionality, to the experience of dimensionality in sense objects.

And also, as I said, the subjective pole, the pole of my experience—taking care of the heart, the emotions. Catherine was talking about the senses connecting to the heart, an experience and a conception of the senses as connected with the heart. This will also support the sense of beauty and the opening and deepening of beauty.

We can also say that, as we touched on already in the retreat, in experiencing, in coming into sense experience with something, the whole energy body is involved. So I'm taking care of the subjective pole by bringing the whole energy body into contact with it. It's not just my eyes that see. What is it to look with my whole energy body as well as my eyes? What is it to know with my whole energy body as well as with other senses? So this whole energy body is included in the knowing. It's epistemically and epistemologically included. We're not shrinking down and dismissing other ways of knowing. There is no epistemicide or epistemic cleansing, which has been so rampant in Western society in the last few hundred years.

This knowing—or rather involving the whole energy body and the whole image of the body in the knowing, in the sense experiencing, in the looking or whatever it is—is also a way, as we've touched on, that supports eros to arise in the sense contact. How do I move from craving to eros? One of the ways is getting the whole energy body involved, so that the imaginal and soul-making can open up.

And then we've said before, again talking about how to open up our possibilities for beauty and deepen the possibility for aesthetics, we need to allow the fertility of the imaginal. We need to allow psyche, and we need to allow logos to expand. And we need to allow the eros to flow through and in our relationship with sense experience, or art, or whatever it is, so that through this allowing, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic can expand, can enrich and widen, deepen.

And there is the perception, eventually, of dimensionality and divinity, both of object and of subject, as we've touched on. We need to allow ways of looking that are legitimized because of the emptiness of things. Allow this diversity and flexibility, plasticity of ways of looking, including, for instance, deliberately sensing this sensation, or this vedanā, or this perception of an object in any and each of the six senses as divine. Deliberately sensing this as divine—so this is a deliberate practice—or as from the divine.

Or deliberately sensing and viewing—a way of looking that deliberately senses and experiences and perceives or conceives this knowing, this awareness of this thing right now, in this moment, this knowing itself as divine or as from the divine, or that in that knowing I am, you are participating in divine knowing.

That kind of deliberate divinization of, if you like, the experience of the object or of the self or of the eros or of the world—that deliberate divinization may be, the capacity to do that may be developed from that experience just spontaneously arising through similar perceptual shifts where any of those aspects, any or all of those aspects—self, other, world, or eros—appear to us as divine. We have that sense through practice, through soul-making practice.

Or it can come through, or be supported through emptiness practice—ways of looking that see this object, or this vedana, or this sensation, or this knowing, the awareness itself, as anatta, not self.

And that loosening of the self-appropriation—"this is my knowing, I am knowing, I am the one who is aware," or "this is my awareness," or "this is my hand," or whatever I'm looking at—this loosening of that identification and self-appropriation with regard

to experience and the aggregates, the so-called five aggregates, also opens possibilities because of the loosening. Then it becomes much easier to see them, for instance, as divine. Not mine—they're divine.

But these possibilities are supported in different ways through practice. I'm talking about how to open possibilities for beauty, possibilities for aesthetic conception, possibilities for soul-making. And oftentimes, again, it's the logos that limits our sense of beauty, the range of beauty that we can experience. It limits our aesthetics and limits our soul-making.

So for example, to have just a body of teaching that, either directly or indirectly, ends up saying there is no beauty to the world and in the senses—it's all just craving at sense pleasure. And then because of that implicit or explicit teaching, one moves into a mode of relating that avoids or dismisses or denigrates sense experience and the world, the world meaning the world of sense experience. And there's the movement to transcend that, as we've talked about. Or we just get the more modern Western version: enjoy but don't get attached. How does that work exactly? It's not really a very well fleshed out teaching or something we can have a lot of integrity with.

The relationship with the senses is implicit in and directed by a whole metaphysics that comes with teaching. The relationship that we have with the senses and that we try to pursue with the senses is implicit in and directed by the whole metaphysics that comes with whatever teaching we're exposed to and following. There's a logos of what is real and what's not real and how we can know and what the world is. And there's a fantasy wrapped up in that, completely wrapped up with the conception, the fantasy of the path and what awakening is and how that relates to the world and the world of the senses.

So someone saying, like our friend, "Buddhist art is about impermanence, tragedy and the sublime." Why? Because that's what is believed to be real. These are real things. Life really is like that. These are real. So again, there's a metaphysics involved that ends up determining the relationship with the senses, with art, with beauty.

What would it be not to limit art, not to limit beauty and the possibilities of beauty, not to limit the possibilities of soul-making? That they are actually open-ended, as we've discussed, potentially infinite in their directions. So notions and fantasies about reality and the relationship with reality, including some kind of beyond, are tied up in the aesthetic sense.

We talk about physicists and mathematicians talking about a beautiful theory or a beautiful equation. Part of that sense of beauty is not just the elegance or simplicity of the equation or the theory. There's something, there's a dimension there. It reaches to a dimension of what isn't yet known, what is not obvious. And in another way, that's a way of saying depths, isn't it? The deep is what is not immediately apparent, what is not obvious. The theories that are beautiful connect the apparently unconnected, and they penetrate and open to what's beyond understanding, to another level.

So there's metaphysics in physics, there's this movement, and that's part of the whole perception of beauty, the whole sense of beauty, and the aesthetic sense.

And when it comes to practices, we also might be engaging practices that may limit the experience of beauty and the experience of soul-making. Bare attention to sense experience, to art, or to something in nature—bare attention will not bring a sense of beauty by itself. It will not bring a sense of beauty or soul-making. It might bring a sense of vividness and that radiance. If it does bring a sense of beauty, I would say at that point it's no longer bare attention. We actually haven't realized that it's not actually bare attention. It doesn't bring a sense of beauty and soul because it doesn't allow other depths and dimensions and the imaginal to open up in relation to what is perceived and what is sensed.

Or for instance, Mahasi practice, where there's this very focused, narrowly focused, sharp attention—kind of microscopic attention to the details of experience. And what comes down is these moments of sensation, moments of vedana, moments of perception of heat, cold, color, whatever it is. And there's a kind of atomism, which we've touched on in previous retreats. This atomic seeing, this deconstruction or reduction of the world to atomic moments of experience and elements there, is regarded as real. And being regarded as real in the logos, it creates a limit. This is the limit, because this is real. We've reached the base of what reality is—reality is made up of these extremely fine grains of sand of experience.

But then because there's a limit there and that's taken as reality, there isn't this unfathomability, this inexhaustibility, this mystery to things, to experiences, to perception, to sense experience. There is in that teaching a beyond sense experience, a transcendent, the unfabricated, but it's not in and through.

The beyond there is not in and through. It's away from experience. It's with the erasure, the fading, the cessation of experience.

Or as a third example of practices that might limit the opening of the senses of beauty and soul-making: a practice where one simply receives experience and abides, rests in a kind of openness of awareness. This will, as it progresses and deepens, lead to a sense of one taste. Everything, all experience has one taste—probably the taste of awareness or love—just has one taste, insubstantial. It might be infinite spatially because the awareness opens up as if vast. But in terms of dimensions, it reaches only that one dimension. This one taste of everything is awareness, or everything is love, or whatever it is. But the dimensionality doesn't open up either beyond that or more than that or wider than that. There is not the fertility of soul perception.

So I would say, why limit? Can we not limit beauty, art, soul-making? I would actually say, just like eros and just like soul, beauty also will always be larger than however we define it. It will not be captured in any definition. Why? It's part of the mystery of being. Beauty and our capacity for beauty and our sensitivity to beauty and the existence of beauty is one of the mysteries of being. We will never exhaust it in experience. We will never exhaust it in our creation of it. We'll never come to the end of the possibility of creating beauty or experiencing beauty. And whatever definitions or ideas of beauty we hold will never completely exhaust what beauty is, will never arrive at a final comprehension that captures it. Just like eros, just like soul. And also, just like divinity, the divine.

Some people hear that word—divinity, or the divine, or God—and think, "What on earth do you mean?" Or they assume you mean some figure they've heard about: a guy sitting on a cloud, meting out judgment to people with a long beard, or whatever. Sometimes people find it very perplexing. "What do you mean when you say that—God, or divinity?"

Maybe what might help for some people to open to that word, if one is curious and has enough looseness and flexibility and permission in the soul to allow that word or explore what that might mean, is opening up that relationship to the word divinity by analogy to beauty. Something analogous here.

If someone said—which people of course do say quite commonly these days—"There is no divinity, there is no God, there is no Buddha-nature, there are no metaphysical dimensions. None of that. Or if there is, it's irrelevant..." In a way, that would be similar to saying—if I pursue this analogy a little bit—similar to saying, what if someone said, "There is no beauty in the world anywhere. There is no beauty in the world, there is no beauty anywhere. And anyway, even if there is, it's not important, it's irrelevant."

Of course, a person can say that and they can believe it, and that might be their own experience: there is no beauty in the world anywhere, and even if there is, it's not important, it's irrelevant. But surely it's too much to generalize that for others and just claim that everyone who perceives beauty or for whom beauty is important is simply deluded or deluding themselves. So fine, if a person has that experience, but one cannot generalize that for others.

Divine, as I am using the term, or divinity, refers to experience. Just like beauty, it refers to experience. And the way I am using divinity has, again, parallels to beauty—an analogy to what I mean by beauty—because I am not claiming that divinity exists independent of perception, of a way of looking, of soul. Just like beauty.

So it refers to experience, and I'm certainly not claiming that divinity is something that exists independent of my perception, independent of certain ways of looking, independent of soul. Now, if a person wants to say, "Ah, so it's basically an illusion—you just said it doesn't exist independently. It's an illusion. It's non-existent. It's just a fabrication"—again, this would be silly on a number of counts, such a statement, because show me something that's not fabricated. Show me something that's independent of the way of looking. All things are. Bring that thing to me. Show me. Point to it. There is nothing that's not dependent on the way of looking.

Nothing that's not fabricated. And if a person were to say that beauty is non-existent, an illusion, just a fabrication in the poor sense of the word—would you really believe that? If someone tried to convince you there's no such thing as beauty, that it is merely an illusion, or if they said people believe in beauty or seek beauty as a consolation—people say that about divinity, don't they? We believe in divinity, we seek divinity as a consolation.

It's possible that some people do approach divinity this way, or beauty. They either believe in it or seek some kind of experience as consolation. But really—and divinity is so charged and has become so problematic, so translate that to beauty—if someone said to you, "You believe in beauty or you seek beauty as consolation," possible maybe at times, or for some people at times. But really, as a kind of psychological assessment of what's going on within our relationship with beauty? It's hardly accurate, hardly comprehensive, let's say. It doesn't really flesh out what's actually happening for us in an experience of beauty.

It's not that we desperately create beauty to console ourselves against the reality of a meaningless universe and the finitude of our existence. As much as we might seek beauty or create it, it finds us. As much as we might seek or create it, it finds us. We are struck by beauty. If we are only open—and open means more than heart, more than just heart, more than just the senses—open means soul open.

There's something to recognize here. There's a mystery to beauty. It's always going to be bigger than the reasons why—the reasons why we create beautiful things, the reasons why beauty is important to us, the reasons why we experience beauty. We make those reasons, and beauty will transcend them. It will be more than that. Our whole relationship with beauty will always be more than that, just as with divinity and what I mean by the experience of divinity and the conception of divinity. So I'm making a parallel here.

And what's more, certainly in the way that I would like to open up that exploration of divinity and inclusion of that notion and that experience—divinity, like beauty, is not outside of sense experience. So there is certainly a dimension or aspect, if you like, of divinity, of the transcendent, unfabricated, that might be wholly transcendent of sense experience. Sure. But divinity, like beauty, is not outside of sense experience, in the way that I would like to open that up.

This is an analogy. I'm not saying beauty is God or God is beauty or anything like that. I'm not equating the two. I'm making an analogy. If divinity is just a baffling notion to you and there are all kinds of reactions, think about and explore your relationship and your notion and your experience of beauty. There are, I think, many analogies there with the experience and possible notions of divinity.

I could use actually love or mercy or intelligence rather than beauty, because in mystical experience and mystical perceptions that are possible to open up, we can have experiences of love or mercy or intelligence or many other qualities pervading the cosmos, being present throughout the cosmos. But those kinds of experiences are less common than an experience of beauty in the cosmos, in the universe. Even though beauty can be harder to find at times, most people have had an experience of beauty. We don't think of it as a mystical or rare perception, a rare experience, though actually it is a kind of mystical perception.

I'd like to say more about the experience of divinity and the breadth and range of those kinds of experiences, but I'm aware of time, and I've talked about it recently elsewhere, so I'll leave that for now. But just to say that when I'm talking about the experi-

ences of divinity and that notion of divinity, we're really talking about infinite folds—infinite possibilities, infinite folds of the infinite, if you like. Infinite aspects of divinity that can open up for us everywhere and in everything.

Every facet of our being and every facet of existence can be divinized or experienced as divine in infinite ways. Because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, because of the expansion of soul-making, of the movement of soul-making, everything that involves and implies and galvanizes, there is the ongoing possibility of the creation and discovery of divinity everywhere, in everything, in every facet. Even the creation and discovery of facets that we haven't, that we don't even yet perceive in things, in ourselves, in our being. And then those too will be divinized, these new facets, these unknown facets.

Now sometimes, of course, people really don't like that word "divinity" or "God" for all different reasons. And so sometimes people might use the word "Buddha nature," and actually I could use them interchangeably as far as I'm concerned. In Buddhism, Buddha nature has, you know, a whole range of teachings, divergent teachings. People disagree about it.

People argue about it—a whole range of ways that word and concept of Buddha nature is used.

One of the ways it's used, especially recently, has come to mean simply your nice qualities, your good qualities. So you might feel that you lack generosity or compassion or patience. But actually these things are there in you, just waiting to be unearthed. This teaching helps us in regard to self-judgment because we recognize this innate goodness.

Some streams of the tradition use it in a second way—related, but different. Buddha nature means your potential to be enlightened, to become a Buddha. The possibility of you becoming a Buddha is your Buddha nature. Why is that possible? Because the mind is impermanent and the factors of the mind are impermanent. So if you're stingy and not generous, if you're judgmental, if you're impatient, these are just impermanent factors of mind. Because they're impermanent, they can go away and you can cultivate opposite qualities—generosity, compassion, patience. In cultivating them, you grow towards Buddhahood.

There's another way, which I prefer to speak about, which is what I mean mostly when I talk about Buddha nature. This refers to something much more mysterious, mystical, transcendent—or transcendent in some respects. It refers to the Buddha mind, the cosmic Buddha awareness, if you like. But it's not even just an awareness. It's a non-

dual awareness. It is empty in itself, but it's inseparable from what it knows. And what does it know? It knows the world, the world of appearances, which are also empty, and it knows that they are empty.

So it's a knowing of emptiness and the totality of both the knowing and what is experienced—the awareness and the world. It's, if you like, the whole intersubjective field that we call included when we talk about subject and object, the whole field together. It's the gnosis, the ultimate knowing of a Buddha, the ultimate intersubjective field of a Buddha mind, but it's cosmic knowledge. This is more what I would like to infer when I use the word Buddha nature.

Buddha nature comprises, in the Mahayana tradition, dharmakaya as one aspect or dimension. In some teachings, dharmakaya really just means—kaya is body and dharma is consciousness. One meaning of dharma is mental factors. It's just the body, if you like, the collection of the Buddha's mental factors, of the Buddha's mental dharmas. In the Prajnaparamita Sutras, it means much more than that. It's not just the collection of the Buddha's mental factors possessed by a certain individual—Siddhartha, Gautama, or whoever. It's actually referring much more to this non-dual, empty gnosis that's inseparable—subject and object, awareness and world—that whole cosmic intersubjective field that knows the emptiness of things, is empty itself, and includes both awareness and world, subject and object, all being empty.

Actually, Buddha nature also includes not just dharmakaya, but also sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. We don't have time to go into that, but I've talked about this before. If we don't restrict the meaning of those words and these kayas to just an individual, historical individual, or one possible individual in this finite form—their Buddha nature or this person's Buddha nature—and regard it more widely, more cosmically, then the dharmakaya and the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya really include this cosmic, universal subject, if you like, the whole realm of imaginal perception, the imaginal realm, and the world of physical appearances or appearances that appear physical to us, whatever that means.

All of that brings us to something much more mystical, much more inclusive and much less dualistic as well. With a certain understanding of Buddha nature that I would like to relate to the use of the word divine or God as well. Can we move towards that? What would support that kind of opening of the view, that kind of platform of a view, actually in experience as well as in conception?

We know, for example, with just a little bit of reflection, that my body, your body, though it looks like a distinct thing, is actually in constant permeable exchange physically with the material world—the air we breathe, the food we eat, what we drink, what we excrete. There's permeability between my body and the world's body, if you like.

As we go more into and allow more and support more the soul-making dynamic and the igniting and the fire of eros-psyche-logos, we begin to be able to perceive and to sense, not just conceive, but to perceive and to sense—because things that we perceive and sense become erotic objects for us, then the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic, as we've described—we start to perceive and sense those things, and the world of things, and everything, and every facet, and every fold, and every dimension, gains a kind of autonomy. We sense it as having a certain autonomy, a certain intelligence, a certain soul, psyche, and also its own eros.

This tree has a certain—comes alive as soul. It has soul. It is soul. It also has eros. So psyche and eros and intelligence and all the rest of it and autonomy are not just in the human or animal minds. Actually, with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic expanding, deepening, widening, fertilizing, we start to sense ourselves and conceive ourselves in an ensouled world, a world that has soul, that is soul. An animate world—the word animate actually refers to anima, has soul, which is Latin for soul.

The world becomes animated. The world of things, of objects, of so-called inanimate objects becomes animated. The whole open field of being becomes the field of eros and soul and eroses and souls and psyches.

So psyche is not just in here. Soul is not just in here, or in you, somehow. And we've already actually implied this by saying, in the use of the word psyche, we said yes, it means soul - my soul, your soul - in the subjective citta sense. But it also means, in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the totality of imaginal perception. We said that, if you remember. In other words, the totality of objects and perceptions. So it's already implicit that psyche is not just in here, so to speak.

And eros too. I told you about Eros always being with Pothos and with a band of gods or demigods called the Erotes. Well, another character, as well as Eros and Pothos in that little band that always goes together, is Anteros. This is responding or returning eros - the mirroring of eros. And what we see with our imaginal experience, whether it's a purely so-called intra-psychic image or an imaginal perception, the deepening of the soul-making perception of something in the world, is that that thing, whatever it is, or that beloved other, we start to sense that they have eros for us. The eros is returned; it flows both ways - from us to them, from them to us. The world of things loves us. It has eros for us. It has soul. It is soul. Souls multiply, become more manifold.

So in all this, we're collapsing, or if you like, going beyond the sort of typically now ingrained assumption and perception of Cartesian dualism that Descartes made between mind and matter - cogitans and res extensa. Actually, reading recently, quite interesting - it really started with Galileo, not with Descartes. That's interesting anyway. But this - not so much collapse, but opening out of that dualism, dissolving of that dualism - becomes not just an idea, but a lived sense. It's sensed, it's felt, it's experienced, as well as conceived.

So that movement happens, as I said, just through soul-making and supporting soul-making and being interested in that and exploring it. And that expansion there through the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic, as we've been explaining, it will move to that place. And then that place will just keep becoming more manifold - the senses of divinity, the perceptions, the experience, the dimensions, the facets, creation, being created and discovered, all of that.

It may also be supported - and again I'm answering this question, how do we open up that sense of the divine? What supports it? - it can be supported for many people through emptiness practices, really deepening. For some people they need to go through that route.

So we see with the way I would teach emptiness and that whole line of exploration, we begin to realize through playing with ways of looking that the mind fabricates perception. And through that, this thing or that thing, this perception or that perception, this object or that object is empty, is fabricated. And then we also see that this mind or this awareness too is not-self - it's anatta. And we can play with that view and see what happens. And we recognize eventually that this mind, this awareness that fabricates, it too is empty in itself. It's not only not me or mine, it's also empty in itself.

We see more than this in this whole opening. We see that time is empty. And because of all this, fabrication itself is empty. The whole duality between what is fabricated and what is unfabricated, what seems illusory in some sense and real in some sense - that collapses. All of it, including the mind, can be perceived as sacred, as divine.

And we can say yes to a certain, or in a certain manner of speaking, a certain relative truth: the mind fabricates, but the mind that fabricates is this divine mind. It's not mine. It's the divine mind, which is not separate from the things and the world, because we've seen all that through the dependent origination, through the understanding of emptiness. It's the divine mind that fabricates all perception - so-called physical, so-called imaginal, so-called combination perception. And this view becomes, this way of looking becomes available. It's a possible view. We can move into that.

So I can engage that, deliberately, that view - that it is the divine mind fabricating, the divine mind that's timeless, that's empty, that's beyond all that can be said about it. That divine mind is fabricating a world of perception - the world of things and objects and selves and others and all that. It's not separate from those fabrications, but it's that that's fabricating, not me, not mine.

As Catherine has emphasized, we could say mind, but we could also say the senses or include within the word mind the senses. We tend to split these things; they're not really separate. The word, the Pali word and Sanskrit word, I think, is ayatana.

The Pali is certainly that, āyatana. And it gets translated as sense bases or organs, so ear, eye, etc. Or agents, implying this active role that they have. Their extent, their reaches, their fields—this is also a perfectly valid translation and is implied in the meaning of āyatana.

So that word āyatana encompasses much more than how we tend to divide those meanings up in English. If we say ear, we don't tend to think of the whole field of aural perception. Or eye—we don't tend to think of the whole field of visual perception, but actually that's included in āyatana. And so it includes the objects as well, the objects of sense perception, the fields of sense perception, the activity of the agency, the way that it is actually active and participatory. The senses are active and participatory, and also the so-called physical organ or base.

Again, this āyatana points to this intersubjective realm, this non-dual sense, if you like, that we can have of the whole realm of experience.

So through the view of emptiness, if we go through the practices of emptiness, for some people, it's what opens up the possibility of a certain view of Buddha nature, of divinity. And implicit in that is a certain soul-making practice—a view of soul and the soul's participation. And it can form a basis of possible further ways of looking and conceptions, a basis for the flexibility of that and being able to entertain, because we've seen the emptiness of these things. And because of that, further soul-making, and as I said, further folds, further facets created, discovered, come on that basis of that sense of participating and being in this divine field, if you like—the world as divine, the experiences of the senses as divine, ourselves, our minds, every fold, every facet of the being as divine. And that can be multiplied and deepened and enriched because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamics.

Now, it may be that someone is listening and thinks, "Yes, but is that real? Is that true?" If you have this sense...

I hope that it's obvious by now from everything we've said in previous retreats that we have moved beyond, we have deconstructed naive notions of reality and truth. We are in the playing field, the realm opened up by the Middle Way—neither existing nor not existing, neither is nor is not, as the Buddha said. "I teach neither is nor is not"—the Middle Way. That is a basis, a result of emptiness practice, and if you like, a basis but also a refinement or product of the refinement of imaginal practice.

So is it real? Is it true? In a way, we get locked into very naive—philosophically naive and psychologically naive—notions of reality and truth.

And what are we doing here? I'll say this again. I've said it before. What are we doing here? Is this whole exploration, whether it's of eros, soul-making, beauty, aesthetics—are we wanting to serve something called truth? I mean, maybe that's partly... I think it is actually a part of it. But so often when people hear that word, or "reality," or whatever, they just have some idea—we just have some idea of something that's singular and objective, existing independently of the way of looking. Is it that we're trying, this whole movement of practice in the service of reaching some singular, objective truth? Or is it soul-making? And that's a different intention.

We need to really open up what we mean by truth. But for me, we're in the service of soul-making. We're interested in supporting that movement of soul-making. And in the movement of soul-making, there will be an expansion. By definition, soul-making means an expansion of perception, an expansion into perception of dimensionalities and divinity, divinities and Buddha nature and all that. Limitless creation, discovery, revelation. This is the movement of soul-making. This is what we want to serve.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 100

Modes of Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 36 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea explores the nuanced relationships between emptiness practice, samādhi states, and mystical perception within his innovative soulmaking approach. Participants share experiences of perceiving insubstantiality in everyday objects and question whether they are experiencing samādhi or emptiness. Burbea clarifies how both samādhi and emptiness practices involve progressively less fabrication of self, other, and world, creating a convergence that opens mystical possibilities.*
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> *Burbea challenges conventional Buddhist interpretations that view emptiness as merely "deflationary," instead presenting it as a gateway to divine perception and multiple forms of mystical experience. He discusses how soulmaking amplifies these possibilities infinitely, moving beyond traditional spiritual frameworks that offer only universal perspectives. The conversation touches on cosmopoiesis - the soul's creative perception of the cosmos - and how imaginal practice can transform both inner images and worldly perception.*
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> *Participants explore questions about the directional nature of eros in practice, the experience of merging with imaginal figures, and how this approach differs from classical Tantric practices. Burbea emphasizes trusting the soul's natural unfolding rather than forcing prescribed outcomes, encouraging practitioners to notice the beauty and aliveness that naturally arise in their practice.*

Sometimes when I sit in my kitchen and open my eyes—or even during the sit—things become insubstantial in the sense that the kitchen cabinets now look completely new and fresh and still, and almost vibrating at the same time. The other thing is I'm not quite sure sometimes whether I'm in samadhi or emptiness; it's just a blend. I'm thinking about it.

Let me see if I can summarize adequately. She used to be what she calls "an emptiness bore"—I'm really interested in that. So this whole area of imaginal practice is relatively new. We're talking a lot about divinity and mystical experiences and things. She recognizes from the past that whether at home or here on retreat, opening the eyes after there's some stillness, she perceives the world as shiny and radiant, but also recognizes in hindsight that in that perception there's some majesty and some mystical depth. She also experiences the insubstantiality—the kind of film-set quality with that

sense of insubstantiality to perception. And she's not sure: Am I in a state of samadhi or emptiness? What's the relationship? And is it possible to experience the mystical opening and the divinity through emptiness?

Thank you. This whole business about the path—the whole way Buddhism is construed, and who the Buddha was, and what he tried to communicate, and where the teachings go—even here at Gaia House, if you were here for a while and went to every retreat, you would get very different, almost completely opposite pictures of what that is.

You will get people who say the Buddha was categorically not a mystic. He was trying to go away from all mysticism and anything like that. And then you get people who would say the Buddha was a mystic and he was opening that door. So everything within the Dharma—things like emptiness and samadhi—they all get interpreted according to this vision or fantasy of the package of where the whole path is going.

In a vision or fantasy of the path that categorically refuses any mystical sense, then emptiness has to be interpreted accordingly. Sometimes what you get is emptiness having this kind of deflationary quality—it's a deflationary teacher. Emptiness is saying, "Don't get excited about anything. Why? Because there's nothing behind anything or mystical. Nothing has any depth. Everything is interconnected, so nothing is worth getting excited about." And the path is essentially letting go of any kind of possibility of that. It should meet this existence, face up to it. It's what it seems to be.

Versus the way I would construe the whole path of emptiness—it's an opening to divinity. That's where it goes, absolutely. Or that's where it can go. Put it that way: that's where it can go. It may not be obvious at first with the whole way, at least the way I would present the way emptiness opens up. It may be that the first thing is just a bit more cooling, a bit more spacious, a bit more ease with things. But as you go deeper—and this I would again be in the plural of it—divinities, perceptions of divinities, different kinds of mystical experiences open up.

Emptiness can provide certain almost predictable experiences that open up for people. And then at a certain level it provides a kind of platform that allows all kinds of other experiences to open up of divinity. So divinities or experiences of divinity, different kinds of mystical experiences.

What we're adding on this retreat is that actually those possibilities are amplified, magnified even more in any possible direction. It's not just everything is divine because it's empty, or everything is divine because it's universal love, or everything is divine

because its nature is awareness. What starts happening with the soul-making process is the kinds of divinity and where you find them, the faces of divinity—it just multiplies in the opening, in the perception.

Am I in samadhi, am I in emptiness? The two are related. They're related by virtue of the fact that states of samadhi are states of progressively less fabrication of perception of self, other, and world. And doing emptiness practices are also practices that fabricate less.

So they converge in direction. In that movement toward less and less fabrication, mystical experiences arise along a certain avenue. Does this make sense? What we're doing is saying: not just that avenue, but this avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue, that avenue. It's infinite and proliferates in the best sense in every possible direction, rather than just the classical direction you tend to get in most spiritual teachings that offer a more universal perspective on things as opposed to personal deity.

This is one of the places where I see the emptiness path opening out most valuably—creating a platform or legitimization, a freedom to see in all kinds of different ways without getting hung up on the idea that something needs to have some kind of objective reality. You've released all that, and what you have is simply freedom to play with perception in all kinds of ways.

Let me clarify something about the jhanas, because someone asked this in an interview today. When I say the jhanas are states of progressively less fabrication, I'm not suggesting that's the way everyone needs to go—that everyone needs to practice the jhanas to know the unfabricated. It's more a way of understanding what happens in classical Buddhist practices.

Everything in the Dharma—metta, generosity, samadhi, insight, you name it, all the practices in those classical lists—moves in the direction of less fabrication. I don't mean to suggest it's a practice everyone needs to do: "Do the jhanas, otherwise forget about it." Rather, there's a way of understanding what that whole movement in the Dharma is. It's a conceptual framework for understanding this business about fabrication and what gives you the freedom to fabricate in beautiful ways. But it's not necessary that everyone tread that particular practice path.

Dave is asking about examples—we've talked about the force of eros being able to open up cosmopoiesis. Cosmopoiesis means the creation of cosmos—*poiesis* means to create, like writing poetry. Through perception, through ways of looking, we're discovering and creating the cosmos in beautiful ways through the force of soulmaking.

One way this can happen is through an imaginal image charged with eros. The whole galvanization of the soulmaking process—perception, movement, involvement, relationship—happens with that image. Then it begins to spill over into the world. You look around after meditation and notice the world looks different. How does it look different? How do I feel it differently? What is the world? The idea and perception and sense of the world is transformed, transubstantiated in connection with the flavor of the image.

You mentioned an example with a tree—the sturdiness and patience of the tree perceived in other objects in nature, though perhaps not in the pervasive way that might have been alluded to. Don't get too hung up on cutoff points. I would just keep practicing and see what happens. It can also happen the other way around—you're walking or sitting, and suddenly everything is a certain way.

With these things, try not to force or pressure. We work hard in meditation, asking what we can do to find balance, learning the skills and elements of the art—and that's good and important. We bring our heart, soul, dedication, and intelligence to it. But you can also conceive it another way: that the soul is driving this. What perceptions arise for different people at different times is what needs to arise.

Sometimes images move in series, building gradually rather than jumping to something dramatically cosmic. Sometimes the whole experience is very dramatic, sometimes really, really subtle. The key is not putting too much pressure on yourself, wanting the dramatic experiences you've heard about. What's needed is what arises naturally for you.

But how does that sound?

Look, I'm not hearing a lot of frustration in your question. It sounds more like curiosity rather than struggle. So beautiful things are happening, right? Would you say? Trust that. Stay with the beauty. Something really beautiful is happening.

You don't need to force anything. Much of imaginal work is simply noticing—we start to notice more and more. Some of that comes from familiarity, some from attuning more deeply, rather than trying to make different things happen.

So this whole teaching about self-other-world eros—what's a quadrupod? This four-legged stool of imaginal engagement—it's not obvious at first. The world, the cosmopoietic dimension, is usually present in images as the object. We don't realize, as I mentioned, that the self is actually also ignited and infused in the imaginal constellation. We

miss this. Sometimes that's fine. Other times, whoa, things get really out of balance. The whole quadrupod has lost a leg, and we need to look around for what's missing to restore balance.

That was something I just noticed over time. Much of this work, including the cosmic ways, is about noticing: "Oh, that's interesting." I can't remember if my first recognition was dramatic or subtle—it doesn't matter. The point is noticing gradually rather than making things happen.

This applies to many aspects of imaginal practice. Even recognizing divinity—it's "Oh yes, it does have that quality." I might not like the word divinity, but it's what we notice rather than manufacture. This is characteristic of the imaginal. You start to notice: "Oh yes it is, oh yes it is, oh yes that, oh yes that," rather than trying to make it happen.

Now, I'm wondering about your question regarding how I use the word eros. When I talk about it in definitions, I mention contact, this wanting toward the beloved, this desire to penetrate or open to. You noticed I don't make any distinction between those two modes—penetrating and opening to. Is there a reason for that?

In your own practice, you feel a lot of eros for your direction, your path, but what your being wants to express is more in what we might call the feminine mode—not so much about going toward, but about being known by, being opened to rather than penetrating.

When you talk about eros, it often seems to carry that penetrating tension, that more masculine quality. Thank you for raising this.

Yes, when I talk about eros, it does seem more penetrating. I'm a guy. In terms of what we call masculine and feminine energies, I'm very masculine. So I have a lot of that penetrating quality, and I apologize if that emphasis comes through too strongly. The truth is, eros includes both movements—the reaching toward and the opening to be reached, the knowing and the being known.

Continue following this principle of how Eros wants to move in every way—go with what seems to be alive. If the directionality flows toward opening the self to what we were talking about this morning, if it's the anteros first—which is similar to what you're saying—then fine, just go with where it's alive. It's like a flame; wherever it's alive is where you trust, and then it will start moving. So eventually you get both the penetrating and opening, and so on.

I think I mentioned in the guided meditation that you can have purely sexual, erotic, imaginal experiences unfolding, and you could be the penetrator, and then transform into the one who's being penetrated. It doesn't even make sense anatomically, but it doesn't matter. You just trust—again, back to Dave's question—there's a soul movement here that will unfold how it unfolds, in the order that it unfolds for you, in the order that it unfolds for others. It's going to be different for everyone.

It's a bit like the question yesterday about conceptually starting in different places and experientially starting—some people more with the body, some people more with other dimensions. It doesn't matter. Trust the Eros and let it do its thing, and it will flourish. So apologies if my language tends to tip in that direction—it's just how it is.

Another practitioner shares about images and merging

So often when people talk about working with images, it's like merging with the image rather than relating to an other. But actually, whether there's an image which I merge with or whether the image is just myself, there is a sense of other in the conscious being-known within that image. The experience is that I am the image, but there isn't so much...

That's interesting. It doesn't seem like there's so much of an other—the self, or that pole of the self-other dynamic, has become the principal image, and there's not so much duality because there's quite a lot of merging going on.

Again, I would just trust it. When there's Eros, it creates otherness—othernesses, actually. What happens is it proliferates more and more othernesses. So you become multiple. The folds of your being start proliferating. It's not just one self—it's like this element or this dimension of my being that becomes a pole. And so there will be another, a beloved other, and then there will be more and more.

So again, I would just say trust it. What we're not doing is only diving into a kind of complete melting, dissolving experience. That's fine, and probably that happens for different people—that's quite normal. You can let that happen, you can enjoy it, but always there's a coming out of that. We don't want to get lost in that. We want to know it, and then otherness reestablishes itself in a beautiful way. There are degrees of melting, but there will be this proliferation of othernesses. You can basically just trust, I think.

The practitioner continues sharing about experiencing multitude within the image of self

Yes, that's fine. There'll be othernesses within that, yes. So it's like self almost becomes like another, like a beloved other, or beloved others, within that knowingness.

Oh yes, exactly. Thank you.

Jamie asks about Tantra

You mentioned in one of the talks that there are elements of Tantra that are analogous to the soul-making paradigm. I'm wondering if there are any critical ways in which it's definitely different.

There are probably lots of different ways that Tantra gets disseminated—classical Tantra, I mean. First of all, there's Buddhist Tantra and Hindu Tantra and all kinds, and then there's modern Western sexual Tantra. So what are we talking about? But even in Buddhist Tantra, there are many different schools and traditions.

One thing that comes immediately to mind is that often what you get in tantric teachings are prescribed deities with prescribed forms and prescribed colors and prescribed meanings and all kinds of specifications. That's all great and fine. I think we're leaning more toward this trusting of the soul and what comes up individually—what images come to you. So that's one difference.

There are others, but I'm not sure whether I want to say what they are right now.

I think I won't, if that's okay. Sorry. Is that okay? Is that enough?

The practice is so revelatory and powerful that why has no one found this before and talked it in a considered way? Well, what's in Tantra? Should I go to Tantra and see what else is there?

I'm not an expert on Tantra. I don't consider myself at all an expert. I suppose one of the ways it opened up for me was from the emptiness practice—it almost to me just suggests tantra, suggests the ability to do that. You reach a certain point when it becomes the obvious next step and the obvious unfolding.

So I went to the library next door and rummaged through books and tried to apply myself to the practices they were taught, but it worked to a certain extent, though it actually felt like it wasn't the right thing. And then for me, what was really a big thing was reading James Hillman. Moving through that and taking that and then just experimenting.

Your question of why isn't... It has a lot to do... That's why I tend to try and talk a lot and think a lot about conceptual frameworks, conceptual ideas that actually block it, that prevent... Why isn't it? There's actually a reason why. It's because we believe X or

we believe Y or we believe that X or Z is wrong or this and that. There are actually ideas and psychological reasons—lots of reasons why not, why it doesn't. So that's actually quite an interesting question.

But yeah... then become the image in a way you need it.

I'm just a little... Dodgy territory. Well, it's dodgy for a reason I don't even want to say why. Let me just see what to say now. We can pause there if you want.

I think... Tantra is effectively infinite. I might have said that in a talk the other day. It's not taught as infinite. And it's also... The direction is prescribed. There are more directions than, say, in classic Theravada. But the directions are prescribed.

I think what I'm just kind of letting the cats out of the bag a little bit, here and in other talks and places, it's like, let's really open up that infinite thing. Let's really admit that that's implicit in the whole soul-making, and the directionality is infinite. And what happens if we just really open to that idea, realization, and then create a path out, or find a path out of that?

Tantra is an odd animal. Or religions are odd animals because there's this religious fantasy which goes backwards. So I have to tie something to this authority and this logos and this image of what awakening looks like. And then some things expand. There is a soul-making, but I still have to tie it to... Did you see what I mean? And there's a tension there.

And there was in Tantra right from the beginning because often... Historically, probably a lot of the tantric roots came from shamanism and village shamans meeting kind of orthodox Buddhism and stuff. So to me it's interesting, but there's still a kind of reined-in-ness that... it's a big step to do that, but that's a bit of an answer. Is that okay?

Okay. Let's just set someone who hasn't maybe asked anything. Anyone?

"This is one that could be answered or not answered, but it feels like one of the Eros practices that both of you have been seeding in us is maybe the art of asking beautiful questions."

I've been reflecting on how we can ask questions that elicit what you could call images in their own likeness. Because we have, literally, Eros and Psyche sitting in front of us—did I hit the mark there? Yeah. And as we prepare to go, with the knowledge you have now, sensing us the way that you do and having that heart connection, is there a question that you would craft for us together that we haven't thought to ask? For everyone.

You've been doing that all along in some ways, so it doesn't have to be answered now, but what would be... I'm also aware of that part of myself that always wants to ask: "Is this right? Is that right? Are we doing that right?" So this is just an open invitation at any point.

What was that about doing it right? I didn't catch that.

Well, as we prepare to leave, having some sense that the questions which elicit answers in their own likeness tend to be... I mean, we could probably map them out together, all the ones that... "Am I doing this well enough to be able to go home?" But what would...

Because you've been teaching us things like: "Is this soul-making? Does this feel alive?" To recognize the quickening that happens inside us when we ask something beautiful, or when there is an image of beauty.

We can think about it. Is that okay?

Yeah, maybe we'll ponder it and see what comes.

Okay. Unless anyone has something burning, shall we... We might, but... Okay. Shall we have a bit of quiet time?

Okay.

CHAPTER 101

Longing, Vulnerability, Anteros

Rob Burbea · 26 min

> *In this profound dharma talk from the "Of Hermits and Lovers" series, Rob Burbea examines the intersection of longing, devotion, and vulnerability in spiritual practice. Drawing on Greek mythology's concept of Anteros—reciprocal eros—he reveals how we are loved by that which we love, exploring how devotion creates a mutual relationship with the divine.*
>
> *Burbea shares intimate examples from his own creative work, demonstrating how staying present with emotional difficulty and anxiety can constellation imaginal figures that transform our relationship to challenge. He illustrates how moving through the "crucible" of dukkha opens doorways to imaginal practice, where angels of our work appear to support and love us in our devotion.*
>
> *The talk explores how authentic devotion must include image and fantasy, not just material reality. Whether relating to Buddha, Jesus, Avalokiteśvara, or other divine figures, Burbea shows how beginning in humble human-divine relationship eventually ignites the soul-making dynamic of expanding eros. Through this alchemical process, both devotee and deity become erotic objects, transubstantiated in sacred relationship. He concludes by questioning how we participate in creating and discovering sacredness, using the example of tangerines becoming sacrament through blessed perception.*

What I want to talk about is longing and devotion—some aspects of that whole dimension and movement of our being where divinity meets humanity, where our humanity meets divinity. Specifically, I want to explore where our longing and devotion touches and includes our vulnerability, our brokenness, or even our burden.

I'll try to illustrate with a few examples, but see if you can translate these to you and your life and your longing and your devotion. What I'm trying to get at may have levels to it—levels of meaning. So if it sounds simple, perhaps there are other levels as well.

Longing, devotion, vulnerability.

I remember when I wrote a book a few years ago. For many different reasons—too many to go into now—lots of different conditions, inner and outer, came together around those years that I was writing it, and it was very difficult to write. I didn't want to be writing that book. I had moved on from the subject matter in my own explorations, and there were many reasons that made it very, very hard for me. It felt very hard.

Instead of just seeing the emptiness of all that and letting go and sailing through equanimously, I chose—because I was actually more interested by that point in imaginal practice—to relate to the challenge of it in my own practice and the difficulties through imaginal practice. And that was hard. It wasn't even immediately apparent how to do that.

So there was a lot of difficulty in writing it, lots of different kinds of difficulty. At a certain point, the work itself, the book itself became image. There was the image of the book. It wasn't even written yet. There's the image of the book. And there are the imaginal beings that come to meet the difficulty of writing it, the difficulty of giving oneself, of being devoted to something.

So there are angels of the work, angels associated with that which we give ourselves to, and they might come and they might love us. The book is an angel, the book is an image—it becomes image. Figures came, angels come, healing, ministering, loving me, loving me in the difficulty, loving me for taking the trouble.

Only through going or being in, sitting in the crucible—the alchemical vessel of the pain, of the need, of the dukkha—sometimes, only through that can the image and the imaginal world open up and the whole movement of devotion open up and another aspect of the alchemy of desire can happen. We have to go through whatever it is: the sense of burden, the sense of difficulty, the sense of brokenness. I can't, most often, circumvent that.

Devotion includes eros. Where there's devotion, there's eros. Where there's eros, we may not recognize it at first, but there's devotion. They go together.

In classical Greek mythology, Eros hangs out with a sort of crew, a band of what's called the erotes. One of them is Pothos—this infinite longing, this infinite desire that always wants the beyond, the next thing. We've emphasized that and how crucial it is in the whole dynamic of eros.

There's another character in this little band called Anteros. And Anteros is reciprocal eros—eros coming back to us from our erotic beloved other. We are loved by what we love. We are loved and beloved and held erotically, embraced erotically by that which we are devoted to. We are loved by that which we love.

You can say, "But I love that person and they don't." Listen: we are loved by that which we love. That which we are devoted to is devoted to us. Anteros. Where there's eros, there's anteros. And it may not be obvious.

More recently, there's another huge creative project that I'm involved in, even bigger, probably. Yes, colossally huge.

It feels that way to me anyway. This is even just some weeks ago, and I found myself very consumed in it, very much giving myself to it, and then feeling at certain times anxious about what the outcome would be.

So, anxious for the outcome. Would this work disappear without a trace? Would it just sink? Like when something sinks in water, it's just gone.

Sometimes when we long for something, when we give ourselves to something, when we're devoted to something—please translate this to whatever longing, whatever devotion—we need to touch that possibility of not getting what we want, the possibility of losing, the grief at the potential losing and the pain of that, what we hope for, what we long for. Something in touching that may constellate an image, even if it's an image of that pain. And then I can have the imaginal relationship and something can open.

Because eventually then, that whole devotional relationship opens up faith, energy, alignment. We recognize somehow that we are not alone in wanting this thing. We're not alone in it. It's not only up to us. If we want something really deeply, let's say it this way: the angels and the divine wants it too. It wants it through you. The angels want it through your wanting. And I ask them, whose eros is it? We asked the other day. Whose eros is it? Whose longing is it? Whose devotion is it? Where is it coming from?

So I had this worry or anxiety come up, something felt consumed by giving myself to, that it might just disappear, get lost, sink. And with that there's the sense of self gets constructed around: I am responsible, I am burdened with this, it's up to me to make sure this happens, to make sure it doesn't sink. I was actually talking with Catherine about it and she was helping me inquire into this.

So being with that anxiety, being with that worry, and articulating it, and being with that emotion, not covering it over, being in that difficulty, and staying with that, and then that emotional difficulty and the willingness to be in the fire of the emotional difficulty constellated an image.

And the image that came was of a black woman and she is a single mother, but she had lost her only child. Either he'd died suddenly or been murdered. And she was stunned, in a state of just absolute stunned. Life had become baffling. There was a sense of meaninglessness. She was in a state of shock. Everything was rendered meaningless and disorienting. She was just standing there in her kitchen or something.

So this was an image, it was a very emotional image, it was really impacting emotionally. The image had to do with loss and the devastation of a feeling of loss when one poured all her love into her only child. Gone. Gone.

Something about being with that image was powerful. But I want to go slowly here because I want to illustrate what happened. It wasn't then that something just opened up. It actually put me into a state where it was like murky, like water that has sediment in it, you know, and it's all like particles floating around. It wasn't like great clarity came in. So I was in this kind of state of, what would you call—yeah, like kind of sedimented water. So it was kind of dark, but there was something that had shifted there in the anxiety. But I didn't know what it means or it wasn't even clear what the effect was.

Over time, and it was really I think maybe the next day, something settled. I didn't really even do anything. I was just with this image, with this murkiness, and with that image of the single mother.

And the next morning I was able to sense—it came to me—the soul of this project, the soul of the work, the angel of the work. And that wasn't something separate from the life, it's not something separate from the work, it's not something separate from other people. So a second image came, which is actually the primary image, the image of that which I am devoted to. It comes alive and it's bigger than me. It has its own autonomy, it has its own intelligence, it moves.

I am part of that movement, I participate in that movement, but it's not up to me. There's a sense then that it's bigger than me, that there's a soul intelligence moving that I can trust. I open to the sense of this movement. There's a flow there that's wider and deeper than I am. It's not just my responsibility. And then I can align with that. Then I can give myself to that. Then I can feel the trust, trusting in the intelligence of that. Then I can devote myself again. Then I can have faith.

Or another example: you might have a practice of, perhaps when you're feeling vulnerable, putting yourself in relationship with a deity. Maybe it's Jesus, maybe it's a bodhisattva of compassion, maybe you curl up in the lap of the Buddha. This constellates the human in vulnerability, in relationship to and being held by the divine. Really, really important. With that humility, with that reverence, with that recognition and feeling of that which is bigger than me, that which holds me.

Or perhaps you're in relationship with Quan Yin or Avalokiteshvara or some other tantric deity, and you're giving yourself to them, devoted to opening to and surrendering yourself to them and to their mission. The mission of Avalokiteshvara is compassion. What is it to open myself to that deity, to open myself to their mission, their mission of compassion? What happens over time if I do that again and again?

This level of the relationship—me the human and them the deity, they are the other, they are divine, I am human—that level is really, really important. It has the humility, it has the reverence, it has all of that. If I hang out in that space long enough, what happens? The whole soul-making dynamic starts getting going because of the eros in the devotion.

So that in time, self, other, world gets subsumed, involved, ignited in the dynamic of expanding eros, psyche, logos. I'm lying in the lap of the Buddha, I'm sitting at the feet of Jesus, I start to become divine. Why? How? Because of the self, other, world constellation being drawn in and catching the fire of the eros, of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamo, I start to feel myself as divine. Then two deities are exchanging and sitting. We both become—the other is already an erotic object. I become to myself, so to speak, a beloved other, an erotic object. I become erotic to myself. My own eros starts to become erotic, an erotic object to me. I see the beauty, I see the divinity of my longing, of my devotion, of my eros. Everything gets caught up in the fire of eros and transubstantiated in the alchemy of desire. All of it, all the elements potentially. And one can have both perspectives at once: human-deity, deity-deity.

So when we really allow ourselves to give ourselves to something, to someone, when we really pour ourselves into something, to someone, then something or someone pours itself into us, pours itself through us.

When we don't know the outcome—this thing that I long for, please translate this to wherever your longing burns—when we don't know the outcome, don't know if I will get this, receive this, open to it or not, there's that vulnerability of not knowing. If the hoped-for goal does not, maybe won't manifest, what happens with the devotion? What needs to happen with the devotion?

Also, when we start to see that our devotion is based—as I think we were talking about yesterday—start to be a little more psychologically aware, you start to realize that devotion is based on fantasy, it's based in image. So both from either angle, we start to realize that devotion must be to image. Devotion is to image. Must be.

I mean, it must include reality, if we use that word, materiality, physical appearances. But devotion is not just to a flat reality. The depths of devotion include image. So what are we devoted to? What are we devoted to, really, when we're devoted? Are we not, at some level in a certain manner of speaking, actually devoted to soul, devoted to beauty, whatever that thing is that it seems like it is?

So even when we're devoted to the manifestation in materiality, some manifestation in materiality, that's what we long for, that's what we're devoted to, it needs a soul dimension. The devotion needs a soul dimension. It needs a fantastic and imaginal dimension. And devotion needs trust. It needs enough trust.

Trust in what? Devotion needs trust in something. Trust in what?

Do we discover sacredness? Is it revealed to us? Or do we create it? If we discover it, if it is revealed to us, how? How do we discover it? How can we open to that discovery? How is it revealed to us? If we create it, how do we create it? How can we support that creation?

And if we create-slash-discover—that word that we don't really have—how does that happen? We participate in the creation-slash-discovery of sacredness. We participate in that. We participate in perception. We participate in truth-making. We participate in the creation-slash-discovery of the nature of awakening.

By "participate" I can't quite articulate this—I mean something much deeper than we participate in life because we pay our taxes and whatever. Something that, if we think too much in the usual ways of thinking in terms of subject and object duality, doesn't make sense or seems silly. If I go to oneness and just the perspective of oneness, it also doesn't quite make sense.

Eros, as we've been saying, needs twoness. It needs otherness. Eros also creates twoness and creates otherness endlessly. And through that, Eros discovers-slash-creates sacredness. It reveals sacredness.

I was very touched by the ceremony last night. I don't know—of course people have, each person even has many different experiences during whatever it was, an hour and a half. How do those tangerines... how are they made? How are they sanctified? How did that happen? If it happened at any point, how did that happen? How did the tangerine become sacrament?

We bless things. We bless each other. We bless ourselves. We bless the world. We sanctify self, other, world through our ways of looking, through our conceptions, through our actions, through our body, through our speech. And then the sanctified world, the sanctified other, blesses us.

I don't know—when I put those tangerines in my mouth, it was quite powerful. How does the world get made holy? How do we discover the holiness of things?

Shall we have a little quiet together?

CHAPTER 102

Shaping Vessels

Rob Burbea · 13 min

> *In this closing talk from the 'Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire' retreat, Rob Burbea addresses a crucial question for practitioners: how do we sustain and grow our spiritual practice beyond the retreat setting? He explores the paradox that those most passionate about the Dharma often feel lonely within meditation communities, despite their deep commitment to the path.*
>
> *Burbea introduces the concept of 'vessels' - sacred containers that support soul-making practice in daily life. These include formal sitting groups, study circles, and particularly the sharing of imaginal perceptions and images. He emphasizes how intimate images are to our spiritual development and discusses the Greek concept of 'temenos' - sacred space that requires respect, care, and proper holding for deep sharing to occur.*
>
> *The talk examines how Right Speech (sammā-vācā) functions not just as ethical conduct, but as a practice that sanctifies perception itself. When we share what is most beautiful and alive in our practice within appropriate vessels, our speech feeds back into consciousness, deepening imaginal perception and creating alchemical transformation. Burbea offers practical guidance on creating both formal and informal structures that can hold the vulnerability required for authentic spiritual friendship and mutual support in continuing the soul-making journey.*

I really want to say thank you to you for your practice, for the willingness and openness to try different things and bring the fullness of yourself, open to perhaps new ideas. To throw yourself into something of such beautiful quality—I feel like saying, thanks for coming over to play. It's really, really beautiful and precious.

And so the vessel of the retreat ends, but life goes on, certainly, and practice goes on, and the path goes on. Creating these kinds of vessels, creating vessels or discovering vessels, is really, really important. It's not about jumping to the absence of any distinction between retreat and life, everyday life, so to speak, and retreat. There is that distinction. But in a way, there is no distinction either. Practice goes on; practice needs to go on.

So just to pick up something Catherine just touched on: What would support that? What would support practice, not just putting the time in—someone used to say just sort of treading water until the next retreat—but what would support and sustain a

growing of practice, of these practices, of your soul-making off retreat? This is a real question. What supports it? What might sustain it? What might enable us all to grow, for our practice to grow, for our vision to grow, for our sensibility to grow, for our soul to grow, to digest what we discover in the growth, what we've discovered here, to fertilize, to be fertile, to expand the edges? What would sustain it? What might help? What would support that?

It's interesting—in the last few months I've come to realize something that I was vaguely aware of before, but it's become more clear to me. At least in insight meditation culture, we have somehow—certainly not everyone; there are people in this room for whom this is really an exception—but it seems there's a kind of... for people whose lifeblood is practice, who have a deep passion, where it's maybe the thing, the path and their engagement with the path and that whole movement and that whole opening and receiving is perhaps the most important thing in their life... And curiously, it's those people who often feel so lonely, even in a Dharma world.

Somehow we have set up, or there has emerged, a kind of culture of—maybe not non-sharing, but limited sharing. And this is really interesting to me. I know this from my past: How is it that the ones on fire end up being the lonely ones? Actually, there's a lot to that question. What has happened? And what might open it up differently and support the beginnings of perhaps a new way of relating?

What happens, or what has happened to you in the past perhaps—not everyone, I know that—where there has been an attempt at sharing and something has happened that causes us to back off, or it's ended up that we've backed off? And we yearn to be seen and to see and to share what's at our edge, what's most alive, what burns in our heart. And so people might go to sitting groups and it's fantastic, and yet the things that are aflame in them, the things that are really on their edge, are the things that are not shared, that are not explored. I'm not saying everyone at all. And I know people in this room who have created something or relationships where there really is that possibility. And there are others in this room where, much as they want it and much as they know they want it, it's not there. And there's still interaction with Dharma people and friendliness and everything, but some level is missing.

And it's difficult, you know. What comes in? There's the whole measurement thing. Maybe I share and I'm not up to the level of the other person. Or maybe I share and it's beyond them, and then there's this whole trip that they think I've got a big ego or whatever it is. Maybe I fear they will judge me in some way. There's vulnerability, as you know. Part of what we've talked about is vulnerability and being together—all the complexity of vulnerability and being together.

Last night, while you were listening to the talk, I went for a walk and went up the hill. Maybe some of you know it. I came to some houses quite away from here, a farmhouse. Everything was just getting dark. And this lovely dog came out. And it was just in the middle of the road, just sort of flipped itself onto her back and just opened her belly —just "rub my belly." It was so unguarded and so simple and so beautiful, you know. Really, really lovely dog. And then when belly was rubbed and we had a sort of connection, it was like, "Okay, so..." Off she went, wagging her tail.

It's usually more complicated for us as human beings.

We have another practice to give you. No, not on this retreat. Next one.

Yeah, it's complex. We have history. It's not easy. We are complex beings. There are parts that haven't been seen or have a history of being unrecognized or slighted or disrespected or misunderstood. It's not easy for us, unfortunately.

So again, I go back to this question: what would support? What would support that intimacy? What would support the soul-making? Whatever has been meaningful, whatever has been your edge - why cannot there be a sense of a growing edge of retreat that can continue? It's really a myth that it all happens on retreat. So the question: what supports that?

We talk about vessels. There are different kinds of vessels. This retreat was a vessel. Coming together and being in silence and sitting together can be a powerful vessel. I know that you know that. Listening to talks together, reading, studying together, discussing what you've read, studied, listened to - that's a vessel as well. It's a certain kind of vessel.

Sharing images is also a vessel, and it's a particularly potent vessel, or can be. But images - have you noticed, I'm sure you have, how intimate images are to us? When I was doing the Path of the Imaginal retreat, I was saying to Catherine beforehand, "I'm not sure how it's going to work. Are people going to feel okay to share this together?" There's a lot that needs to be taken care of if we share images with each other because they're so intimate. They can be. Did you recognize this?

So might it be another kind of vessel to actually share images with each other? Then what does that need? How might we take care of that?

Perhaps you've gotten a sense here - in an interview or in a group or in these little dyads and triads - of a vessel being created or just formed spontaneously that actually really takes care of something. And then there's an alchemy in the sharing and in the listening and something in the togetherness and the mutuality.

But it needs a temenos. Soul, images. Temenos is a Greek word. It means a kind of sacred space. We don't have to make a big deal of that, but it basically needs respect and care and holding.

That can be formal. So you could set up really formal structures - like when we do these dyads and you take your posture and you've got all that stuff that we've been doing and then there's your go and then my go. There's a formal structuring that can really, really help the intimacy. Or other times it's a much more informal back and forth that helps. But both are possible.

Another vessel is to share live images. What's the image? Catherine asked yesterday, I don't know how it was for you in the dyad, "What's alive for you right now?" And maybe some of what came alive in that moment was imaginal perception.

While you were playing, while you were working, Catherine and I just sort of did it for like a minute and she asked me that question. I can't remember exactly what I said, but I noticed that she was asking me, and I saw the divine light coming out of her eyes. This is an imaginal perception. And I shared that, and I said that.

I don't know if you noticed this, but for me I noticed something very interesting: that in the sharing of it, it took the imaginal perception and opened up the dimensionality. I know some of you know this.

So if I go back to the question I put at the other end: what is it that sanctifies? How do things, how do others, how do selves, how is the world sanctified? In lots of different ways - through body, speech, mind, through way of looking, through speech. We sanctify, we bless, we open our ways of looking, sometimes through what we share verbally or in writing.

And sometimes through listening. So sometimes there's even a vessel that deepens our images in the moment – right speech. The Buddha talks about right speech. It has a whole other level when you realize how the speech feeds back into the consciousness and into the perception.

And not just in the sense of if I go out trashing people in my speech and lying, then I get a dull mind and a worried mind about what people are going to be saying about me and all that – but also in this kind of speaking of that which is most beautiful, taking care about how that is expressed, trusting, putting that in a vessel that can hold it, that can care for it, feeling that mutuality.

And then the whole thing gets reflected back by, so to speak, the walls of the vessel and by the other. And we hear the echoes of our speech and it does something, it's part of the alchemy. This is not so common in our culture.

The main point here is that, again I go back to this question, what's going to support? What will support? You know, or you will find out, or you will begin to experiment or something. Lots of possibilities, lots, lots. What will support?

So, bless you and thank you all.

CHAPTER 103

Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this opening talk of 'The Mirrored Gates' series, Rob Burbea offers crucial clarifications on imaginal practice and soul-making dharma. Rather than adding entirely new material, he focuses on supplementing and clarifying previous teachings to support deeper understanding and practice. Burbea introduces the term 'sensing with soul' as complementary vocabulary to 'imaginal,' encompassing both intra-psychic imagery and imaginal perception of the material world.*
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> *The talk presents approximately eighteen interconnected aspects that constitute the 'constellation of the imaginal,' including love and being loved, eros, beauty, dimensionality opening to divinity, beyondness, autonomy, two-ness with soft boundaries, infinite mutual mirroring, meaningfulness, theatrical quality, logos (conceptual framework), eternality, humility, reverence, grace, soul-making capacity, embodied awareness, and connection to the broader imaginal context. Burbea emphasizes this represents a spectrum of imagination use, from papañca proliferation to fully imaginal experience.*
>
> *Addressing practical concerns, he offers guidance for practitioners who feel they 'don't get images' and explores how imaginal capacity can be developed. The talk balances rigorous precision with generous amplitude, acknowledging the dynamic, evolving nature of imaginal experience while providing clear discernments that serve as 'ignition keys' for deeper practice. This foundational teaching prepares the ground for understanding how imaginal practice can dimensionalize and enrich traditional dharma approaches.*

Good evening, everyone. Welcome to this short course, this set of talks that will focus on soul-making, imaginal practice, related ideas like eros, and other themes we've explored over the last several years. We'll examine what these concepts mean, what they might mean in the Dharma and for the Dharma, and how they might expand, stretch, enrich, deepen, and dimensionalize our understanding of what Dharma practice is, what it can open up, and where it can lead.

Actually, if I'm completely honest, I know this will change, but right now I'm feeling somewhat ambivalent about giving more talks on these themes. There's already quite a large edifice of teachings around soul-making in the Dharma, and it's substantial. It's a lot to digest, to come to terms with, to integrate into practice. It's complex to understand and for the heart to open to. It's not simple, and I'm acutely aware of this.

These teachings are quite new in being different from usual cultural ways of seeing the world, feeling ourselves, and sensing existence. They're also quite different from other Dharma approaches and perspectives on what Dharma is and can be. So I know it's substantial, and I'm feeling hesitant about adding too much more to that edifice at this point. I don't want to overload you or put out too much too quickly in a way that might be consumed hastily, leading to indigestion or confusion.

There's a certain pacing that's necessary to give proper attention and mature reflection to the appropriation and digestion of these teachings. So I won't be adding much genuinely new material or ideas or whole new directions. Rather, this set of talks will supplement, elaborate, and clarify previous material we've already presented.

On the other hand, I won't repeat everything we've covered over the last few years in terms of laying out that whole edifice again or explaining what we mean by all these terms and practices. Instead, I hope to clarify and supplement aspects of what was already taught where clarification and supplementation seem needed, based on what we're hearing back from people.

This is an attempt to clarify certain aspects, themes, and elements, and to fill out some strands of what we've done and their implications. Perhaps I'll show just a few possible directions for extending practice. As I said, I'm aware it's already substantial—a lot to take on in terms of practice possibilities, the skills and art that requires, the know-how and capacities needed, as well as intellectually. For the heart, the soul, the practice, and the mind, it's a lot. So the purpose is not to add more, but rather to supplement and clarify what's already been offered so that you can digest and understand it better.

All of this—both these talks and past talks from recent retreats—will sound quite abstract, even bizarre and baffling, unless you've done considerable serious experimenting with imaginal practice, eros in practice, and what we're calling soul-making, alongside general Dharma practice including mindfulness, samadhi, metta, and some understanding of emptiness.

Without quite substantial grounding and intimate familiarity with these practices, all of what we'll discuss will sound puzzling and it will be difficult to recognize its value. If that grounding is present, or to the degree it's present, then I think and hope you'll truly recognize the value and significance of the discriminations and clarifications we'll make, and see their relevance. But without that practice foundation, it will likely sound strange or simply uninteresting and irrelevant.

In this first talk—or first group of talks, depending on how you count them, as I might divide them into parts—I want to examine in more detail this word "imaginal" that we've been using. I want to clarify what Catherine and I mean when we use this term.

I'm aware that "imaginal" is somewhat in vogue in certain circles right now, and there's plenty of overlap between how different people use it. However, there are also some really significant differences—not to say one usage is better or worse, right or wrong. I'm not interested in such judgments. But in terms of what we're trying to lay out and put forward—this edifice of teaching, conceptual framework, and practice idioms—it's quite important that we're all on the same page about what we really mean when we use the word "imaginal."

So I want to clarify this by reiterating and re-emphasizing certain aspects or elements of what this means—this word "imaginal" or imaginal experience—that may easily have been missed in past teachings or haven't been clear enough for various reasons.

Secondly, in this first group of talks, to help clarify what we mean and what's involved in these practices, I want to introduce a new term: "sensing with soul." I want to add this alongside, not replace, the word "imaginal." I'm aware some people don't resonate with the word "imaginal," while others love it. Some love it but could use more understanding of what it means and its discriminations, as I mentioned. Some might prefer this phrase "sensing with soul."

This isn't really a new concept or practice or way of looking. It's another language for what we'll explore as we go through this first group of talks.

some of, or quite a bit of, what we've already been talking about. It's almost—we might say—identical with the word imaginal or imaginally, perceiving imaginally. They're almost interchangeable. And I'm quite happy with the word imaginal, but I'll try to use them roughly fifty-fifty so you can gravitate toward whatever word you prefer. But hopefully the understanding is most important, rather than the words. By introducing this different term, it will open up and increase the understanding, making it fuller and more precise.

When I say "sensing the soul"—and I'll explain more as we go—I do mean to include the perception of intrapsychic images. I close my eyes and see whatever it is: an image of a wise old man or some other intrapsychic image. That's part of sensing with soul—perceiving with the inner senses, the inner vision or the mind's eye.

But another part of sensing the soul, equally important, is perceiving this material world we live in—others, objects, things, trees, whatever it is—and perceiving them imaginally. When we've talked about this word imaginal, we've actually been including this perception of the world imaginally. So another way of understanding all this, rather than using the word imaginal, is "sensing with soul." I'll try to fill this out more as we go along.

The third aspect in this first group of talks is a little of the how. We've covered some of the what—what we mean by imaginal, what we mean by sensing with soul, what's involved. Now, a little about the how.

Sometimes I hear from people: "It sounds really interesting, I really want to develop this, but I don't get images. Therefore it must be irrelevant to me." I want to address the practitioner who thinks this is their case. What might we do to develop in practice? How might that develop beyond the statement "I don't get images"? What needs to be understood? What needs to be developed? How can it be developed?

Or someone might listen to this more nuanced and finely discriminating definition of what imaginal means and say, "Hmm, I get images, but now listening to what you say about what imaginal means, I'm not sure they're imaginal"—which is actually a really good thing to be aware of. How might such a practitioner be addressed and helped in practice? In other words, what allows some object of the imagination to become imaginal? What supports that?

Another practitioner might say, "I only get intrapsychic images—I haven't found a better word—but I don't really get what you mean when you talk about things like cosmopoiesis or seeing someone imaginally or sensing the world with soul." What might be offered to such a practitioner?

And the opposite or complementary practitioner says, "I get this kind of perceiving the world as sacred and the sense of divinity in nature, and how the understanding and practice of emptiness opens that up and legitimizes it, but I don't get any intrapsychic images. How does that happen?" I want to say something hopefully helpful for such a practitioner as well.

So regarding practice, hopefully a little about better receiving images, opening to images. A little about how objects of the imagination might be supported to become more fully imaginal. And what is it—how can we support a sensing with soul, a sensing of the world, self, other, material objects in the world? What supports that movement toward that kind of opening of perception?

That's the third domain about practice that I hope to weave into this first group of talks.

Lastly, fourthly, just a little bit more about some of the assumptions and implications in what we're saying. Really a little bit more—I know I've touched on it quite a bit in the past—about some of the philosophical dimensions and aspects of this whole subject. Specifically, and again I know I've touched on it before, about ontology: the question of what is real, or what are we associating

So with regard to practice, hopefully a little about getting—or better, receiving—images, opening to images. A little about how objects of the imagination might be, how we can support them to become more fully imaginable. And what is it, again about practice, what is it—how can we support a sensing with soul, a sensing of the world, self, other, objects, material things in the world, sensing the soul? What supports that movement toward that kind of opening of perception?

So that's the third domain about practice that I hope to weave into this first group of talks.

And lastly, just a little bit—fourthly—just a little bit more about some of the assumptions and implications in what we're saying. So really a little bit more, again, I know I've touched on it quite a bit in the past, but just a little bit about some of the philosophical dimensions and aspects of this whole subject. Specifically, and again, I know I've touched on it before, but specifically about ontology—that is the question of what is real, or what are we associating with regard to the world, ourselves, others. This question is so central in terms of what gives a foundation to these practices, this kind of whole outlook, this whole conceptual framework. But it's also part of what gets opened up—our whole sense of reality can be opened up, questioned, challenged, extended.

And complementary to that is the whole philosophical area of epistemology, which is: How do we know? How does a human being know? I know I'm sitting on a chair right now—that's knowledge. Everyone would agree, you can see me, Rob, sitting on a chair. And we just say, well, I take that knowledge for granted.

But when we get more into the imaginal or sensing the world with soul, then this question arises: How can I claim knowledge? How can I claim this as knowledge? Most of society, contemporary Western society, discredits, discounts that kind of perception as any kind of knowing of anything real.

So again, these practices and these concepts and these ideas and these sharings push on and break open or extend our epistemological notions. They call them into question and they also rely on a questioning of epistemology, a penetrating kind of assessment

and investigation of epistemology. What counts as knowledge? What counts as knowing something? I don't mean intellectually knowing something. I mean knowing something with the senses as well, or the intuition. Knowing something with the heart. We'll go into this a little bit.

So I just want to touch on these areas. So those are the four main themes and strands that I want to weave together in this first group of talks.

Okay, let's make a start and focus a little bit on this word "imaginal." And it seems to me that in various ways this word imaginal is confusing for some people or not clear—really its meaning is not clear for perhaps many people. Sometimes a person is aware of their confusion or their lack of clarity as to the meaning of the word imaginal. And other times they're not so aware. They're not even aware that they're confused. The conception that they have is confused. The idea is confused. And they're not aware that they're not clear.

So as we said, it may be better for some people to use this term—this phrase that I'm introducing now called "sensing with soul"—may be for some people more helpful for them to use that to get a better understanding and a better feel and approach to practice with the imaginal.

So if we think about the imagination for a moment, we can see very easily that the imagination is certainly part of being a human being. It's a faculty of the human being. But there's, at least to my mind, clearly a difference between what we might call *papañca* and the way the imagination spins in a state of *papañca*, of proliferation. He, she looked at me a certain way or didn't look at me a certain way, and now I believe they're evil or I'm a loser or whatever it is, and I spin off—the imagination spins off, creating catastrophic scenarios in the future or whatever it is. So clearly there's that kind of use of the imagination or ensnarement in the imagination run riot there, very different than a mindful use of the imagination.

For example, imagining my friend and keeping the image of her, the sense of her—whether that's a visual image or not—keeping the sense of her mindfully in the consciousness and radiating the intention or energy of *mettā* toward her. And there's a deliberate and mindful use of the imagination, clearly very different than the use of the imagination for *papañca*.

And maybe even that use of the imagination is not just mindful, but quite embodied. In other words, my energy body, my awareness of the energy body is really integrated seamlessly in that experience of mindful imagination, for example, in *mettā* practice. So that I have the sense of my friend and the image of them and the sense of the

awareness of the energy body, and the intention of the *mettā*, and all that kind of harmoniously woven together in the embodied mindful imagination in the *mettā* practice. And certainly that's how I would tend to emphasize the practice of *mettā* and how I would teach it.

And then there might be a healing—for example, we talked about the figure of love in the imagination a few retreats ago. And so it could be even someone like Tara, or a deity like Tara, or the Buddha, or Jesus, or your grandma, or whatever it is, and one, again, with mindfulness, and with the energy body awareness, is aware of this image, and there's healing flowing there toward one. Really, really helpful.

So there's *papañca*, there's mindful imagination, there's embodied imagination, there's healing imagination, or a healing image. And then there's the imaginal. And we could make more gradations as well.

What do we mean by this word "imaginal"? Because it's certainly more than—let's say, more is implied and included than in those other examples of sort of categories of use of the imagination: *papañca*, mindful imagination, embodied imagination, healing imagination. When we use the word "imaginal," we mean something more than that.

So I want to tread carefully here, and let's maybe open up the idea of a spectrum. There's a spectrum of—we could say a spectrum of the use of the imagination, in what I've just outlined, from *papañca* on one side all the way to, let's say, the imaginal on the other. Or we could say that's the spectrum of the imaginal, and it's all—we get more and more toward the, if you like, authentic or fully imaginal.

There's a spectrum of experience with the imagination. What do we mean when we use this word imaginal?

As I pointed out earlier, people have used and do still use that word differently. It was originally coined by Henri Corbin, but different people have picked it up in different psychotherapeutic modalities and other directions, using it differently from each other. I really don't believe in a right or wrong here. People are free to use words however they want, and I'm certainly not interested in saying I'm right or someone else is wrong. But there is a particular way that we are using it.

A particular way that we are using the word imaginal that is not completely the same as the way Henri Corbin used it, or James Hillman, or Tom Cheetham, or Philip Pullman—although I don't know his work very well—or Mary Watkins. Many of these people, except for Pullman, have been very important to me personally, very influential and dear to me, and have contributed significantly to my relationship and explorations of all this. But still, there are differences. We are using it in quite particular ways.

There's much overlap and similarity between how this word is used among different groups, but there are differences. The same is true of the term soul-making that we're using. Again, it's a niche word, but relatively common these days. Words like eros, soul, or logos are all used differently by different people. There's quite a bit of overlap and similarity, and some very significant and important differences that actually mean the whole trajectory of practice and understanding and revelation unfolds differently depending on how the terms are conceived in the first place and thus how practice is approached and what then unfolds.

If I were to briefly throw out a list of what is involved—the aspects of the imaginal as we are using that word—there are different aspects that come together to make up the fully imaginal as we use that term. I do this with quite a lot of caution, trying to walk a tightrope between helpful precision and discernment on one hand, and daunting pedantry on the other. You'll perhaps hear my own ambivalence about the whole thing. But for the sake of clarity and bringing more life, color, beauty, and power to this direction of practice, let me throw out a list very briefly. We'll return to these elements or aspects of the imaginal in more detail later.

What are some of the aspects or elements in the constellation of the imaginal? What nodes are involved in making an imaginal experience? I'll throw these out quickly and we'll return to them. I'm deliberately not numbering them. I roughly count eighteen, but that depends on how you divide them up, because something might count as one item on the list but actually involve several aspects, so it might count as more. There's a reason for me not being too precise about this.

First would be love and being loved. I've talked about most of these before in different talks, and right now I'm not going into detail. We'll pick up many of these as we go on in this first group of talks.

Second, eros. Again, I'm not going to define it here. We've talked about it extensively before. It's different from and more than love and being loved.

Third is beauty. Beauty is involved in the imaginal.

Fourth is a sense of dimensionality—depth—but dimensionality that eventually opens out into a sense of divinity. Dimensionality opening out to a sense of divinity.

Fifth and related would be a sense of beyondness. Not complete transcendence, but an image has a sense for us of there being more than I can quite get my head around or grasp or even see or sense right now. It has more for me to move into. Actually so much more that one intuits a sense of unfathomability to the image.

Another aspect is autonomy—that the image is not sensed as just a part of me or an element of my consciousness. It has its own somewhat distinct autonomy, its own somewhat distinct independent being, so that there is a two-ness. Two-ness is an aspect of the constellation of the imaginal.

There's me, and there's this image, this imaginal object or person. And even if it is an object—this book, for instance, may be imaginal to me—as the imaginal sense deepens, there is a two-ness of person, of personhood. It's as if the book also has, or is also, a soul, an intelligence. And so there's this autonomy, there's this kind of distinct two-ness, yet the boundaries are not definite. There's a kind of softness or blurring of boundaries of the imaginal object.

So that's six or seven so far. There is also, number eight, what I would like to call a kind of infinite echoing or infinite mutual mirroring between the image and me or my life—you or your life, if it's your image, obviously. There's a kind of infinite echoing and mirroring between the two. I'll come back to what I mean by this later, as I said.

This includes meaningfulness. The image is pregnant, full, super-abundant with meaningfulness—a sense of meaningfulness for us, for the subject. But we cannot quite grasp or delimit or totally articulate or define the totality of that meaningfulness, the complete meaningfulness. But it's pregnant with that; it has that sense of meaningfulness to us. Meaning is a part of meaningfulness. So yes, it may well have meanings as well, but meaningfulness is even bigger than meaning or meanings plural.

And in that, perhaps ninth, we are not reducing the image to "it only means this," "it only represents that," "it only is this." There's not a limitation or a reduction of the image in any way.

Another element is that there's a quality of what I call theatricality to the imaginal. Meaning it's powerful. It has an effect. It moves us. It stirs our soul like good theatre. And it's intimate like good theatre. But we know that it's theatre. It's neither real nor not real—rather, either one of those doesn't feel quite right. There's what I also call sometimes the imaginal middle way between real and not real. It's a really crucial part of the imaginal, the theatricality, the imaginal middle way.

I've lost count now, but it's about ten, I think. The imaginal is not a non-conceptual experience—if such an experience is really possible for a human being to have. The imaginal is definitely not non-conceptual. Implicit in the imaginal, in the constellation of the imaginal, in the experience of the imaginal, is a logos, is some kind of conceptual framework, some kind of conception of what is going on. Now, it might be very loose

and quite open and unarticulated, but it's not a non-conceptual experience. And the imaginal, and that whole realm of the imaginal, involves logos, involves the mind in that way, the conceptuality.

Next, an imaginal image has a quality of what we might call eternality to it, and timelessness. Something is different in the sense of time that pertains to an image or that an image inhabits, if you like. Again, we'll come back to all this, and I've mentioned much of it before.

Next, humility is an element in the constellation of the imaginal. We feel humble in relationship to the image. That's a quite loaded word, and again I'll revisit this. Some people are not quite sure what that means, or it gets too squeezed, that word. But humility—I'd like to explore a little bit what that means.

And also next, reverence. And grace. When an object is imaginal for us, whether it's a purely so-called intra-psychic image or something in the material world that has become imaginal, there's a sense of grace there, of kind of inexplicable gift, an overflowing, a bestowing on us from something greater—a sense of grace.

And another kind of defining element or aspect or quality of the imaginal is that it leads to, it brings with it, a sense of soul-making, a sense of soulfulness. As I said, it stirs and engages and ignites our soul with full of resonances and richnesses. What does that mean? Soul-making—we'll come back to this, and I've touched on it a lot before—but basically the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is stimulated and starts to expand and deepen and enrich and mutually fertilize its elements of Eros-Psyche and Logos. So soulfulness as an element in the constellation of the imaginal. And that's more than heartfulness. It includes heartfulness, but it's actually more than heartfulness.

More than just being touched in the heart.

Next, the imaginal could actually be conceived more as a way of looking at something than as the thing itself, than the object itself. So we could say that in the constellation of the imaginal—which includes both subject and object—what's key, a key aspect, is the way of looking at the object and the way of conceiving. Part of that way of looking includes the awareness of the energy body in this very integrated, very sensitive and responsive way. It's part of the way of looking that, if you like, makes or supports something to be imaginal.

And lastly, when we are with an image, with the imaginal object, we have the sense that it is part of a bigger context of the imaginal. It's part of what Catherine and I sometimes call the concertina of images, or the concertina of the imaginal. In other words, this is one image, but we have a sense—either sometimes directly right then in the mo-

ment, palpably or sensibly right then in the moment, clearly, and sometimes much more vaguely, much more intuitively—of other possible images, possible other imaginal objects, if you like, waiting in the wings of the theatre, so to speak. So there's that sense of the concertina, of the context, the imaginal context.

Okay, so there's a brief list of, say, eighteen, or depending how you count it, maybe twenty-something elements of the constellation of the imaginal. I'm going to come back to many of those in more detail and expand on them.

As I said, I'm cautious here, and I'm wanting to walk a bit of a tightrope. So as I said, we might, in our understanding, conceive of a spectrum of experiences that involve the imagination. If you like, culminating—one end of that spectrum is the authentically imaginal, if we can use that word, or the fully imaginal. Again, I'm not quite sure about those words.

So I feel a little ambivalent here about churning out a list like that or stipulating a list like that. Now, you probably know this about me already, but I can admit that perhaps my personality type, my tendency, is to be quite picky and precise and fussy. I am perhaps a quibbler by nature. Some might say I'm a quibbler by trade. To me, that's just my tendency.

So I'm aware of that tendency, and at the same time, I want to encourage a kind of generosity or amplitude in these teachings so that a certain looseness is required to kind of balance out, or at the same time as, this kind of fussy precision that is perhaps my tendency, but I think is also quite necessary if we're really going to get the power and the potency out of these teachings.

If—and I might as well share as well—if I have a fantasy or a hope of, at some point in the future, a kind of creative sangha contributing to and developing these directions in practice, these logoi, these conceptual frameworks, these ways of practicing, then I think both a kind of looseness and a kind of rigor of discernment and precision and clarity are going to be necessary to allow that potential of communal creativity to actualize. Just as in the arts or the sciences, the ability to create and discover in those fields needs a clear common ground in understandings and a developed mastery—if you like; again, I use that word with caution—developed mastery of the history of its tradition, whether it's painting or jazz or classical music, whatever it is. And then, based on that, can come new creations, new discoveries out of that grounding.

So my sense is it's similar here. And so we need a certain precision, a certain kind of subtle discernment that's quite rigorous. And we need a certain looseness.

Now, many of you—just again about the relationship to lists—I know one or two of you, maybe no more, one or two of you actually like lists. Like, you like when the Buddha gives lists and you like when I give lists. But there are, I'm guessing, probably many of you who actually hate lists and it turns you off.

It may help that latter group to know that I feel quite ambivalent about lists, actually. Sometimes though, when one is teaching something that's relatively new, this can be a good heuristic, a good educational tool or device to stretch and light up the awareness and the discernment where it might otherwise just not notice what is new. We tend to hear what we already know and kind of hear within a box. So lists sometimes help stretch it. You say, "What was that number twelve on the list? Hold on, what does that mean? Am I including that? Am I thinking about that? Is that in my awareness?" So it helps us to notice what is new and different outside of our habitual conceptions.

However, lists can also get dry, and if care is not taken, what I think is even worse is they can get regarded as atomic truths, which I get a bit nervous about.

But I'm ambivalent partly because I don't want to discourage you, and you might hear all that's on the imaginal and think, "I'm nowhere near that. I don't know what you're talking about, and this thing, and that kind of dimension of experience, and this and that." So I really don't want to discourage you; I rather want to encourage. And what I'll come back to later on in this first group of talks is you'll actually see that the elements of this list actually each end up being a kind of ignition key for deepening the imaginal experience and practice. So it's not just useless pedantry and pickiness. I'm actually pointing to these things, these elements, because awareness of them and turning towards them, as I'll explain later, can actually deepen the practice. They are keys to igniting and deepening the whole imaginal opening and soul-making opening.

I'm cautious in treading a tightrope for another reason, an even more subtle reason: if you've been following the teachings so far over the last couple of years, you'll recognize the fact that imaginal and soul-making experiences are dynamic. They're not static experiences. This is because, as we've explained in previous talks, the soul-making dynamic starts to involve the other elements, so the eros and the logos, or the image, and they start to deepen and widen and enrich and fertilize and complicate each other.

That's a dynamic - it's moving, on its way, expanding, enriching, growing more complicated and deepening. And then, as you may remember if you've been listening closely, when there's an imaginal perception, eventually at some point the sense of the self becomes involved in that imaginal constellation. So subject and object, self and other, and then the world too in cosmopoiesis, and the eros itself. Within all that, as we alluded to earlier, there's this infinite echoing and mirroring.

At some point in the dynamic - and all this is a process, it's happening, expanding and enriching - the self-image becomes actually one's whole life, one's whole storying. It's not just this moment now without past, without future. As I said, something of the relationship with and the concept of time is opened out and altered.

But the main point right now is that there's a dynamic. So how much of this - what stage of complication and enrichening and deepening and widening of the eros, of the psyche, of the logos, what stage of involvement of the self and the world and the image of the eros or the logos of the eros are we at, at any moment, in relating to an imaginal object? At what point in that dynamic, in that unfolding process of mutual enrichment and involvement deepening and complicating, at what point are we going to say now it's imaginal?

So I might have all the beauty and meaningfulness and theatricality and all those other elements with the imaginal object, but the self is not quite fully involved yet as image. It hasn't been drawn into and involved in the imaginal complex, in the constellation of the imaginal. Am I going to say that's imaginal or not imaginal? It's a little bit arbitrary.

So that's another reason, more subtle, why I'm cautious about throwing out these lists that can easily become sorts of rigid or formulaic and stipulative categories. There is this spectrum. Clearly something like papañca is imagination, but a state of papañca is not imaginal, neither is it imaginal when we do a straightforward mettā practice necessarily. And there's this gradation of uses of the imagination that we could say get more and more imaginal. Exactly at what point we say "now it's imaginal" - we could argue about that.

So what that means as a practitioner is that one wants to listen to all these elements and ask: How can I move towards more of that, the fuller end, the more authentically or more fully imaginal end of things? How can I enrich my experience, deepen it, open it out, make it more fertile? So it's not so much about judging oneself or measuring up. It's the direction we're interested in.

For me, the clarity is important. We're really talking about something other than just the use of the imagination, or something merely mythic, or whatever.

CHAPTER 104

Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 48 min

In this continuation of his exploration of imaginal practice, Rob Burbea examines the spectrum of imagination use in Buddhist practice, distinguishing between unskillful papañca and beneficial imaginal perception. He clarifies that the imaginal is primarily about the way of looking rather than specific objects, involving lessened fabrication, duty, trust, and intention not primarily for self-benefit.

Burbea addresses common concerns about "not getting images," offering practical techniques including samādhi-based approaches, emptiness practice, dream recall, and working with emotions. Through detailed examples of both unremarkable and dramatic images, he demonstrates that imaginality depends not on visual intensity but on soul resonance, beauty, meaningfulness, and dimensionality. He emphasizes that imaginal perception can apply to ordinary present-moment experience - the body, conversations, confusion, or dedication can all become imaginal when met with appropriate receptivity, humility, and energy body awareness.

This teaching bridges formal meditation with daily life, showing how imaginal practice develops from initial techniques toward a natural mode of being characterized by attunement, receptivity, and play. The path involves alternating imaginal work with simpler practices, cultivating the sensitivity and openness that allow the mundus imaginalis to reveal itself in the most ordinary circumstances.

Just to recap briefly, we said we could notice, acknowledge, and think about a spectrum of uses of the imagination. For example, there is the unskillful, unhelpful use of the imagination in papañca, and then there are many kinds of good, useful, important ways the imagination can be used that are actually part of developing practice. We can differentiate different ways imagination can be used, and we can discern a little bit more finely and understand what we mean by imaginal—the imaginal imagination, if you like.

In doing that and pointing to some of those features, attributes, and aspects of the imaginal, this will be useful not just for the understanding and the logos and the usefulness of the conceptual framework, but also in terms of igniting practice. These discernments can function—and I'll explain how later—as keys to understanding imaginal practice.

So on that spectrum, we talked about, for example, the use of imagination with mindfulness. What's often not there when there's papañca, of course. So mindful imagination, for example, in mettā practice, compassion practice—we're deliberately and mindfully using the imagination for skillful ends. We have mindful embodied imagination and healing imagination, again with mindfulness, with body awareness. All kinds of possibilities there: light shining onto the body or in the body where there's illness or injury or all kinds of possibilities.

But these examples—the mindful imagination in mettā or compassion, embodied imagination, healing imagination—they are not necessarily imaginal. They may be very, very helpful, important, necessary parts of practice, very useful, very beneficial, but they're not necessarily imaginal. Often they are not. They may be imaginal. In other words, it's possible to be using the imagination in a compassion practice and it becomes imaginal, or it is imaginal. And the same with healing images—it's both imaginal and healing. So they may or may not be what we're calling imaginal. Actually, even a daydream—we can catch a daydream and then there's mindfulness, then we stay with it and start relating to it in certain ways and it becomes imaginal. So these may or may not be imaginal.

I rattled through very quickly a list of attributes, aspects, and characteristics of what we're calling the imaginal. That list was not intended to be exhaustive, and it certainly wasn't exhaustive, nor was it intended to be too rigid or too neatly delineating between these different elements or aspects of the imaginal. It's not too rigid, not too neat and sharp, these distinctions between these elements, and it's certainly not an exhaustive list.

For example, we talked about the imaginal—you could sum up what the imaginal is: it's more about the way of looking than about the object per se. But that way of looking includes some degree of lessening of fabrication in the way of looking, that it's fabricating perception less, even if that's very, very slight.

Also in the way of looking—and I'm actually mentioning some elements now that I didn't mention in the list yesterday, mentioning things that we could have said were implicit in the list, but actually we could draw them out and kind of add to the list. So in this relationship that makes up a part of the imaginal, the actual relationship between subject and object, in the poise, the stance of that relationship with the imaginal includes a sense of duty—duty to what is perceived, the duty of the self to what is perceived. I've talked quite a bit about this on several retreats in the past few years. Duty is another element of this constellation of imaginal. Trust as well, and again that's something that I've highlighted several times on past retreats dealing with imaginal practice.

Duty and trust. Now, if someone's coming to this new and they just hear those words—duty and trust to something in your imagination—it sounds completely bonkers, certainly very dangerous. What, I have a duty? I'm going to follow all the voices in my head and do what they say? And I just blindly trust them? I'm not going to go into it right now, but if you're familiar with the material we've covered, you'll know that it's much more nuanced than that, much more subtle than that, and doesn't come without caveats and certain qualifications. But duty and trust are elements we could add to the list.

As is, and again related to the relationship that makes up the imaginal, that constitutes the imaginal: the intention for being with this image and for exploring this imaginal image needs to be not primarily for the sake of self in the ways that we usually understand self, not primarily for my psychological process, for my spiritual development, for my personal growth, for my empowerment. All these things may well accrue with imaginal practice, but something happens when those intentions are the primary intentions. And strictly speaking, again, if we're talking about a spectrum here, we're not really in the fully or authentically or genuinely imaginal there. So something, again, about the relationship: duty, trust, and the intention is not primarily for self. And that's also something I've talked quite a bit about in one of the last retreats—I think it was Re-Enchanting the Cosmos, I'm not sure.

So not an exhaustive list, not too rigid a list, not so neatly, sharply cut up between the elements. But most of these elements will apply to so-called—I wish I had a better word—so-called intra-psychic images, imaginal images, and the perception of this material other, material object or other person, or the world, or the self—an imaginal perception of that. This world that we move in, that we agree in, seen imaginally.

So this list applies to both, because, again, the way we have been and still want to use that word, imaginal, means more than just intra-psychic images, more than just "I close my eyes and something appears in my mind's eye," or I hear something, or whatever it is. And as I said, we'll come back to this, but a better term, a more helpful term for some people to really make that aspect clear—that it's not just intra-psychic—is this "sensing with soul." We'll return to that.

Now, before we elaborate further some of these elements that I've touched on in this constellation—if we even call it a list—some of these constituent aspects of the imaginal constellation, before we amplify them a little bit and fill them out and say a bit more about them and also how they might be used as keys or, if you like, ignition points in practice, let's just touch base a little bit about intrapsychic images and say a few things about practicing with them.

A number of people have said to me over the last few years, "I don't get images. Oh, but I don't get images. It sounds really interesting, but I don't get images."

So I have talked about this before—again, this is also something I've talked about in the past. I can't quite remember where. I think it might be in the talks entitled "Orienting, Relating and Tuning to the Imaginal," or something similar, which is in the retreat "Path of the Imaginal." There may be—I don't know how many talks there are—two or three perhaps. I think there's quite a few instructions in there for this kind of thing, and obviously scattered elsewhere. Someone else may know better than I do.

But if we just briefly review some of those possible approaches to kind of open the gates a little bit to the images or stimulate the imaginative faculty, at least, towards images and the imaginal.

So, and again, just rattling through some possibilities because we're really reviewing briefly: There's the possibility of samādhi, some degree of samādhi, dipping into that—however, whatever ways work for you—dipping into that. And again, I mean by samādhi this whole body harmonization and alignment of the energies in the well-being. Dipping into some samādhi, to whatever degree possible, and then kind of just coming out a little bit and slightly relaxing the sort of intense focus, if you like, or grip on that sense of well-being that's the object of the samādhi, and just relaxing that a little bit and sort of just hanging out in that space where there's a relative degree of samādhi but it's more relaxed. That can be a very fertile ground or space for images to arise in.

Similarly, very similarly, some kind of emptiness practice. And again, whatever you know and to whatever depth you sort of develop that. Working with that, with the emptiness, and then again, just backing off, taking the foot off the accelerator, the gas pedal, a little bit, slightly relaxing in that space that has opened up. So both these—with the samādhi and emptiness—really what's happened is we've kind of decreased the fabrication of perception of self and objects, and then kind of loosened the mind just a little bit. So those are two options.

Another is actually to recall a dream figure or a dream scene that has touched you or felt potent in some way. Often it's easiest right after the dream or pretty soon after the dream, say in the morning or something, when it's still alive and the soul resonances are still kind of accessible when you recall the dream figure. And taking up the dream figure as an object of meditation or entering into a meditative exploration of relationship with that dream figure.

Or it might be a previous imaginal figure, something that has ignited for you and felt fertile as an imaginal image in the past. And absolutely, you can just deliberately bring back that image and work with it again. Reconnect in that relationship. See what else needs to happen or just find yourself again in the same kind of territory. Maybe something different wants to happen. So that's another two possibilities: recalling a dream figure or a previous imaginal figure that has worked for you and deliberately reincarnating it.

There are, of course, a whole host of deliberate meditations on pre-prescribed imaginal figures. Often for those of you who have Vajrayāna backgrounds, there might be Tārā or Avalokiteśvara or many sort of tantric deities, or it could be non-Buddhist, depending on your background, whatever. They're actually prescribed. This is a standard meditation on this figure. And then we enter into—and there are differences between the way we're approaching things and sort of more, let's say, standardly taught Vajrayāna approach.

It could also be a character from history or from literature, a novel, or a film that, again, has touched you, has sparked and grabbed your soul, moved your soul. Again, I've spoken in the past—Nelson Mandela, John Coltrane, I mean, there are many for me, and some purely fictional characters that are potent as images. So that's, again, a very, very beautiful way in.

It could be an actual living person that you know or know of—a friend, a teacher, something else, even a family member, someone in your family who is alive as image for you. Someone was telling me of her grandchildren and the delight there and the eros there and how they came alive as imaginal figures for her. So someone who you know who is alive as image, as imaginal image for you. They're already alive and then you take them—even though they might not be present with you in the room at that time—you bring them, you elicit them, you conjure them in the consciousness and meditate on them as an imaginal figure.

I'm pretty sure I shared a certain technique which was useful to me for quite a while. It's actually imagining deliberately myself descending a staircase—oftentimes it would be a stone or spiral staircase—down into a kind of cell, more like a prison cell, and then waiting there in the dark, and oftentimes different images would appear in that cell. Very beautiful, very fertile.

Or perhaps beneath the foliage of a tree—a big tree, a little tree, a beautiful tree—and sitting or standing under the leaves and the dappled sunlight and the shade there, warm or cool or whatever it is. And in that space, that enchanted space, images can enter or arise or certain encounters can take place.

And again, really, really, really not to overlook the possibility that often when the emotions are quite alive—either in a difficult way, when there's a difficult emotion, when we're struggling with something, or in a lovely way, when there's some very beautiful emotion—there's the energy in the emotionality that can constitute an image. We just have to hang out, open to be with, find ways of being with that emotion, difficult or lovely, in ways that can give birth to images. So I'm hanging out there, open to, connected with, intimate with the energy body, and sensitive to and caring for and receptive to what arises out of that kind of vortex of the emotions and what arises as image or may arise as image. A really important possibility.

And then we can also, for example, deliberately imagine the body in a certain way, or with regard to the body. So I can deliberately play with imagining my body as a body of light, perhaps a certain colour, or a body of fire, or fire emanating from my body. Or, as Catherine did a beautiful guided meditation on the last retreat there, body as the beloved other and then entering into that body as beloved other with all the senses and all the sensitivity and receptivity. So there's all kinds of possibilities, and I really encourage you to try some of these if it feels like you're one of those people that says, "I don't get images."

Now, I'd like to actually give you an example of a very unremarkable image to make the point that—because sometimes people say, "Oh, I don't get very interesting images," or, "Rob, you describe your images and they're really intense and far out and kind of amazing." I've tried on past retreats to deliberately give both kinds—far-out images, if you like, or kind of intense-sounding images on the one hand, and on the other hand, really not far-out, quite ordinary-sounding images—to really emphasize the fact that, in a way, the remarkability or unremarkability of images is really not that important. It's kind of irrelevant. It may impress your friends if it's something remarkable, but in itself, it doesn't mean much at all.

So not too long ago, I was sitting in meditation and a visual image came up. It was fairly vivid as an image, but it was really unremarkable and very limited in scope. The visual image was of a black suit coat—I don't know what they call it, like what a businessman might wear, a sort of overcoat on a suit. And it was just its lapels. It wasn't even the whole coat—just the lapels, and the white shirt underneath with a kind of dark tie there. And so it was just that for a while.

Of course, initially one thinks, "Well, that's not very interesting." And it wasn't like there was a particular great upsurge of soul resonance or emotion. But just hanging out with it—hang out, not too quick to judge. Just be open, be sensitive, be delicate.

As I stayed with this, it was almost like I'd get more of a sense of the man who was wearing this very standard sort of Western attire of a certain style. I get a sense of him. I don't really see him that much per se, but I just get a sense of him. He's a kind of research scientist. In his inside coat pocket, he has papers, and they contain a theory. He's traveling around with these papers, studying and contemplating this theory on his travels. Sometimes he's alone, and sometimes he's moving around—probably, I don't know, some kind of Western country in Europe and fairly modern, sometime in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

Sometimes he meets with others who are similar to him to discuss and share and study these papers, this text together. So there's a very small group of men bound together by this intense focus and passionate involvement and devotion to this study. All this is a kind of sense I get. It's not like I really see all this happening and there's a whole film of him going and meeting all these guys. It's more sort of visual, but certainly not dramatically visual in any intense way. It's more just a sense of his nature—what he is and what he does and what he's about in his story.

I also get the sense that it's not even that they think this theory represents or seeks the truth in some simple way—like "this is the truth" or "this is the theory of the world." There's something about this theory that's as much a creation, as if it's an art, and there's also something religious or spiritual about it for them. So it's a curious kind of blend—sort of scientific and sort of an artistic creation and sort of religious, all of that. And that goes for their relationship with it. It's a kind of religious spiritual thing. It's an art. It's all of that. It's research.

There are not very many of these people in the world. And it's not secret what they're doing. It's not like some super confidential thing. But they don't really speak or share much about it, or about their devotion and passion. They don't really speak much about that with those who are not interested. And most people are not interested. So they don't really talk about it with most people, basically.

But their focus and their devotion to this exploration, this study, and this sharing together gives their lives a kind of profound sense of alignment and rootedness and a steadiness of depth. And to the extent that something is more important to them than their individual fate, their individual life or death. And again, none of this is very dramatically conveyed in the image. It's just a kind of intuition I have about what is going on there with this man and these people.

I am also, during this image, struck by the fact that these are white men. They're all white men in suits, conservatively dressed. I don't know, is it like the 30s or 40s or 50s? So that strikes me, and I'm not sure how I feel about that, but that's the reality of what appeared.

I'm reminded at the same time of ancient or medieval mystical esoteric texts shared among small and often disparate groups of initiates or seekers and carried on journeys by traveling members of this group or collective. The texts are carried and communicated to each other before the printing press, before pressing send on an email, before all of that. Sometimes it's paper, sometimes it's a sort of paper-bound leaflet or booklet, sometimes it's a dark hardback book. The specific form isn't so important.

Now, the reason I'm saying all that is it doesn't sound very interesting. I imagine it doesn't sound very interesting. It wasn't visually rich as an image—it was a visual image, but there's a lot that wasn't visual in it. It was more like an intuitive sense of who they were and what was going on there. It wasn't visually detailed or rich or complex. And the effect on the energy body was definitely not dramatic. Sometimes it can be really dramatic, the sense of alignment or release or energization that comes into the energy body with an image that really resonates with your soul. So it really wasn't dramatic, but it was there. There was an effect on the energy body.

I can't remember, actually—I can't tell or decide: was I in the image as one of them, or was I kind of outside just watching them and in a soul relationship with them?

So very unremarkable, probably not very interesting if one tells one's friends such an image, but imaginal nevertheless. Why? Because of the soul resonances it had for me, which were quite subtle. Again, not dramatic, not fireworks, not shooting flames and all that business—but the soul resonances and the kind of reciprocal, infinite echoing and mirroring of the image and the imaginal characters with currents of my life, currents of my soul. Some of you will obviously recognize that in the image.

But the point is, images don't need to be dramatic, intense, vivid visually, or remarkable, unusual, far out, et cetera, to be imaginal. On the other hand, we can have very remarkable, vivid, intense and dramatic images that are not imaginal.

So here's an example of one like that. I'm sitting in meditation and suddenly a snake appears. And it's very vivid—a very vivid visual image and very intense. Its presence is very intense, right there, like its head or its hood, like a cobra, is right face to face with me. But I can't quite relate to it somehow. It actually doesn't feel imaginal. What's not

there? A sense of beauty, a sense of meaningfulness, a sense of dimensionality, divinity. These are not obvious. Nor is my energy body signaling a soul-making engagement. So I'm a little bit puzzled, but really struck by the vividness.

And I sort of ask it—but not necessarily as a formal question—try and get a sense, you know, what does it want? What do you want in relationship to it? Again, that doesn't need to be a formal question. Sometimes that can be a little too clunky as a technique.

And the snake says something like, "To burn you or to burn through you." It wants to burn me or to burn through me, which means to hollow me out through its fire breath. It breathes fire, the snake, which it then instantaneously does. So that's a really dramatic, intense thing. Suddenly this vivid image, and it wants to burn through me, and then it just does that, and I kind of disappear.

So there you have pretty remarkable, very vivid, visually intense, dramatic. There's even talking going on, all of which can sound really impressive.

But it wasn't imaginal.

Another aspect that was missing there was love and also trust. What happened over a little time—I think it took a few sessions—was that I started playing with a few elements. This is the kind of thing we'll come back to later and amplify a little bit: playing with a few elements or gently allowing the possibility or looking for a few elements like love, like trust, or introducing them a little bit. I was also aware of the dependent arising of the image. We've talked about this before—when I introduce just a little bit of trust, the image actually, if you like, is shaped by that trust. Image is always—an imaginal image is always a dependent arising. We're not overlooking that fundamental dharma insight.

So it was only then that it began—still, it took a little time—to become more imaginal. I won't go into what happened right now, but I will say one more thing: I didn't trust it. It did this thing with its fire breath and disappeared me and said, "I want to burn you or burn through you." And I sort of said, "Why?" And it said, "So you can live forever." I was very suspicious. It's like, that's a very strange-sounding thing. Something about it I didn't trust—actually quite a number of things about it I really didn't trust.

So it wasn't imaginal at that point. It didn't have the beauty, the meaningfulness, dimensionality, divinity, love—all of that, despite the vividness, intensity, and all that remarkability of it. But in time and with practice, it did become imaginal, opened up, and was actually quite fertile.

Again, repeating things I've said before, but it seems important because of how often I hear people say things which makes me think they haven't quite grasped this aspect or that aspect of what's important here: An image in our sense, despite the way we tend to hear that word in our language, is not necessarily visual. Any of the senses could be primary, not just sight. It could be hearing or the kinesthetic sense or touch or smell, taste, whatever, or something we can't even quite put our finger on. How is it I'm sensing this? But an imaginal image is not necessarily visual.

When we're—again, I'm trying to address someone who says, "I don't get images"—oftentimes what happens is a person dismisses what comes up as a potential image too quickly. So I could have easily dismissed the image of that suit lapel, the lapels of the suit with the tie. It really wasn't that interesting. It hardly registered as being interesting at all. But really, don't dismiss too quickly. Because something that appears insignificant or appears—"Oh, I just made that up"—don't worry about whether you think your ego has made it up or whether it feels like it's not interesting or it's insignificant or it's just the tail end of a daydream. Don't dismiss too quickly. Stay with it a little bit and see what can be worked with, what happens when you hang out, when you come into a different kind of relationship with it.

So we have to be patient, both in a session if we're trying to work with imaginal practice, and also over time, with the development of this practice. But really what we're talking about is that with imaginal—again, it's more a way of paying attention and being with that constitutes the imaginal. If you allow something that might seem insignificant, uninteresting, a total mental fabrication of some element of me that is not even that profound or interesting—it's the way of paying attention to and being with that that oftentimes is the most important, to allow that germ, that seed, to become something imaginal, to gain that dimensionality and beauty and meaningfulness and all of that echoing.

I think I've said this before—I've definitely said it to some individuals who were quite surprised when I said it—but I don't think I am a natural. I don't naturally have a super imaginative faculty that just churns out images and all that. I don't consider that the case at all for myself. I'm not a natural. Some people really are—images come very easily to them. That's not me.

But what I can be, and what I was in the initial stages of developing this—and I still very much feel that I'm developing this, that I'm learning, that I'm expanding—what I can be, rather than being a natural, is I can be patient, I can be dedicated, I can be curious, I can experiment and play, and I can notice: "Oh, that's interesting—when I experiment like this, that happened. Oh, that's interesting." And I can ponder.

So bringing those qualities to bear, something gradually—it really took some time, and it's still very much developing for me—something begins to develop, to accrue, something starts to come together. A facility starts to emerge and get founded and flower and blossom and unfold and take you places.

So it may well be—and if I think for myself, it was the case—that I did use certain techniques at first. I ran through them briefly before: descending a staircase to a cell and waiting there, recalling a dream figure, all of that. I did use that at first, and you might need to at first if you're one of these people who says, "I feel something in me calling when I hear about these practices, but I just don't seem to get any images."

So go ahead, use some techniques at first. No matter what James Hillman said about that, I would judge it by the results rather than being suspicious of your ego, suspicious of technique. Techniques at first might be helpful. What we're looking for is the soul-making.

We use the soul-making as the indicator. I sense that I'm on the right track. I can smell it. I can feel the eros. I feel the resonances. But techniques at first, and then in time it becomes more just a mode of being, if you like. The imaginal is opened by this mode of being that we just move in and out of with kind of less fuss and fanfare. It's something that we just glide in and out of in our lives. It becomes more of an art rather than a technique. It's more a matter of attunement, receptivity, flexibility, play, discovery, all of that. But sometimes we need the techniques at first.

Some people need, like myself, the techniques at first or different approaches that you might discover for yourself to kind of get into the territory a little bit and then develop it. And even if they're not fully imaginal, genuinely imaginal, as we said before, it gets you into the territory and then you can start working with that, as we'll fill out more as we go through this first group of talks.

Sometimes we might be trying too hard to kind of get an image or receive an image. And maybe what's needed is we just need a little more sensitivity and attention, without pressure—sensitivity and attention to perhaps a pain or a lack or confusion we're feeling. And we do that with the energy body or just paying attention to the energy body and just dwelling in the energy body, as we've emphasized on the retreats. Just hanging out there. It's really good practice. Even if no image comes, just this skill and facility and familiarity with the energy body is so helpful in so many ways and for so many practices.

Sometimes we're trying too hard to get an image. Just let it go. Let that whole attempt go and just go into some samādhi to develop the well-being, nurture the well-being in the energy body, whatever way you know how, or some emptiness practices if you know those. As I've mentioned in the past, we want to alternate. No one's going to be doing imaginal practice all day long—the balance would be off there. So we want to move in and out of other practices which really put down images, let them go, let them quiet, let them fade, come into something simpler, some emptiness, some basic mindfulness practice.

Maybe sometimes what we need to do, when we're trying too hard for an image, is just loosen the mind and let it drift for a while. Yes, let it drift. Just let it drift. Just with a light mindfulness, just let the mind drift a while. And sometimes out of that an image emerges.

And maybe sometimes we need to stop meditating and realize or notice that an imaginal image is sometimes already existing for us in our lives—in how we see our lives, or again, the persons in our lives, or certain persons in our lives at times, or ourself, or our endeavors, or activities. It's already there. The images or the fantasies that run through our life—I don't need meditation to find them. They're already in my life. All I need is a certain kind of understanding and a certain kind of awareness to notice what they are.

Where there's inspiration, there's fantasy, there's image. Where there's love, where there's dedication, there's fantasy, there's image. And when we start picking up on them outside of formal meditation, then I can maybe get a sense of what they are and take them, if I want to, into the formal meditation.

You here now can also be seen imaginally. Not something other—you, here, now, can become image, can become imaginal image. So, for example, even the image of oneself humbly, reverently waiting for an image, and maybe even slightly frustrated. And then it's the way of relating to that, the way of seeing that—that itself becomes imaginal. The self, sitting here, waiting, whatever it is, walking up and down, becomes image. Self-practicing becomes image.

Or the inquiry, your inquiry, your dedication in asking a question, your aliveness, your longing to know, to open, to understand. This too can become image. It's nothing different, but what is going on, just seen differently, becomes imaginal image.

Or a conversation with a teacher or with a fellow practitioner—the very conversation becomes image, or the memory of the conversation becomes image. It's almost like realizing something about it or seeing it in a certain way, opening to certain aspects of it that we might have not allowed or not caught the scent of.

Even yourself confused or having difficulties on the path, but still earnest in one's attempts and one's dedication and one's efforts. That too can become image. This confusion, this difficulty that the self is experiencing, and the self that is experiencing that difficulty, but still showing up—that too can become beautiful poetry and image, an imaginal image of meaningfulness and depth and divinity and all of it.

So an image can be—nothing's actually appearing different. The image of the body doesn't appear as blue light or this or that or with flames shooting out or anything else. It's just the body as it usually appears.

But it doesn't appear differently. It's sensed, if you like, in relation with or surrendered to or given to divinity. All these possibilities—the self, another, an object, the world, our eros—each of these can become imaginal without something different being introduced as the image.

We don't need necessarily something like a pink rabbit suddenly appearing to the mind, spewing forth profound and pithy and bizarre Zen utterances. This here now, very ordinary looking to one view, and quite fathomless and pregnant with meaning and with beauty and with poetry to another view. Nothing, no different object, if you like, is in the consciousness or made to be the image or introduced as image.

When there is humility and the softening or opening of the heart, when there's even just a little less fabrication, when there's a certain looseness and openness of the perception and the perceptual grasping, when there's a delicacy of sensitivity, when there's the whole energy body awareness—all these together, and other factors, support the opening to the imaginal.

So it's less about getting an image than something in the stance of the being, in the mode of the being, in the way of looking, in the relationship with what is here now in the material world. Certain factors, certain elements, constituents come into that, and they together support the opening to the imaginal, the opening of the mundus imaginalis, the world of the imaginal.

This here, now, is image, or it becomes imaginal. It can be imaginal when related to in a certain way.

CHAPTER 105

Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 56 min

> *In this third exploration of imaginal aspects, Rob Burbea presents a sophisticated understanding of how imaginal experience operates as an interconnected lattice or constellation of elements. He emphasizes that nothing is inherently imaginal - rather, the imaginal emerges through specific kinds of relationships characterized by particular aspects or 'nodes' that mutually support and ignite each other.*
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> *Burbea examines three key nodes in detail: energy body awareness, soul-making capacity, and the bidirectional flow of love. He explains how practitioners can work skillfully with these elements - sometimes through deliberate attention, sometimes through gentle noticing - to support the emergence of authentic imaginal experience. The energy body, conceived not as a fixed entity but as a way of sensing bodily experience as fields of energy and vibration, serves as a crucial gateway that can activate other aspects of the imaginal constellation.*
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> *The teaching maintains a delicate balance between technique and grace, acknowledging that while practitioners can learn to work with these elements, the imaginal always retains an element of mystery and gift that transcends purely technical approaches. This reflects the deeper wisdom that soul-making and authentic imaginal practice involve receiving something beyond our complete control while still engaging our capacity for refined discernment and skillful participation.*

So if we recap a little before we continue further, we've given a loose list of elements or aspects that we can identify that constitute the imaginal, the fully imaginal. We've said that there's a spectrum of the skillful use of imagination, from mindful imagination all the way to the imaginal. In relation to these elements and aspects of the imaginal that we want to point out and discern, we're developing our discernment and our refinement of discrimination and noticing. In relation to all that, we're holding it all loosely, with some ambivalence.

We do want to increase the precision and the depth and the subtlety of our discernment because that's part of the whole work. And we want to be loose with this. How many elements there are on the list is loose depending on how we divide it up—you'll see things are connected, or we could divide it differently, or say that's one or that's really two. The intention is certainly to encourage, not to discourage or overwhelm. So we need a little looseness.

There's a spectrum, and even what we mean by imaginal and soul-making has its own dynamic to it anyway, which is to some extent relatively arbitrary. At what point of that evolution of a dynamic do we say there's a cut-off and declare "now it's imaginal"? All this is held loosely, and I hope you can enter into that spirit of looseness with precision—precision with a kind of ease to it, looseness and fluidity to it.

We also said certainly that the list wasn't exhaustive or complete; we could add to it, do it differently. The elements and aspects that we're pointing to apply both to so-called intra-psychic images and to perceptions of material things—selves, others, objects in the world. So it applies both to so-called intra-psychic images and to what we're going to call sensing with soul.

One of the first things to say here is that in the way we understand it, there is nothing that is inherently imaginal. Something, some object or thing or event, is imaginal for someone—and even then, for someone at a specific time. There's nothing that is by itself inherently imaginal.

An imaginal image, or the imaginal, or sensing with soul, is a way of looking, a way of conceiving, a way of sensing an image or a perception. That's a better way of putting it. It's a relationship. It's a way of looking, conceiving, sensing—a relationship with an image or a certain perception in any of the senses. That constitutes the imaginal or sensing with soul.

When the relationship has certain elements in it or certain aspects to it, then something comes alive imaginally for us at that time when the relationship is such. We can also say when something is imaginal, there is a certain kind of relationship. In other words, sensing with soul is a relationship—a relationship that we're talking about that is characterized and constituted by all these different aspects and elements.

Someone might have a film or a book in mind, or a piece of art. That film, book, or piece of art might have slightly surreal or imagistic representations in it—forms, figures, characters. They might be what seem to fit into the classical archetypes. This film has someone who's a warrior and someone who's a king and someone who's a clown and someone who's a mysterious prostitute and someone who's a thief and someone who's a madwoman—they're all classical archetypes, and we say, "Oh, it's an imaginal film, it's really imaginal," or "it's an imaginal book."

But in our conception, such a film, book, piece of art is not necessarily imaginal. Nor, incidentally, is it necessarily archetypal according to the way James Hillman would define archetypal. I'm not totally equating what we're doing with James Hillman's work, but there's overlap there. It's more in the relationship, more in the fruit of what an

image or an object or a perception gives, that qualifies it to have the word imaginal or archetypal according to our conception—and also in terms of the word archetypal, according to James Hillman's understanding.

Clown, warrior, king, prostitute, madwoman, thief—these are not inherent aspects of the imaginal. It's rather the relationship with anything at all. When that relationship opens up, creates and discovers a sense of dimensionality, a sense of unfathomability, some kind of sense of divinity, some kind of sense of beauty that touches us, some kind of sense of meaningfulness for us, some kind of way that it echoes and mirrors us and our lives in that meaningfulness, some kind of mystery, some kind of eros, some kind of potential expansion of the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic—all that and more. When the relationship stimulates, triggers, opens, invites, creates and discovers all that, then we say this thing is imaginal.

Maybe that film, book, piece of art was all that, did all that at a certain time for person A, but for person B, they look at it and just see—it's not triggering that imagination. Why? Because the relationships that person A and person B each have with said film, book, piece of art are different. One constitutes, supports, fertilizes the whole opening of the erotic imagination, and one doesn't.

I want to elaborate on some of these elements over this group of talks—some just to touch on, some to elaborate a bit more. One way of thinking about all this: when we talk about an image, we think of an object. I've also pointed out in talks in the past that the self gets involved, drawn into the imaginal constellation. The self becomes imaginal in relation to the imaginal other or object. And then the world does in cosmopoiesis and all that. That's really important.

But to expand on that, we could say that when we talk about an imaginal image, what we're really talking about, or one way to understand what we're talking about, is that there's a kind of lattice—a constellation, an arrangement of elements that are all connected with each other.

I don't want to push this analogy too far, but imagine something like a fluid crystal structure—a lattice or constellation. There are nodes or elements that are somewhat discrete, yet not entirely separate. As I said, they're all interconnected.

When we talk about something becoming imaginal or entering the world of the imaginal—this relationship that supports, constitutes, opens, and ignites the erotic-imaginal—we're really speaking about this lattice. There's a lattice with nodes distributed

throughout. When something is fully imaginal, all the nodes are firing, igniting, alive, mirroring each other, feeding each other, opening each other, reflecting and empowering one another.

For practice, this understanding isn't merely a matter of definition and precision—it has real implications. When we consider the spectrum toward the imaginal—from various uses of imagination toward the fully, genuinely, authentically imaginal—part of what determines where something falls on this spectrum is how many of these nodes in the lattice are firing together and mutually empowering each other. How many are lit up? How many are alive in this way?

What this means in practice is that we can sometimes nudge things along this spectrum. When we have an image or perception, we can guide it toward the more fully, authentically imaginal in several ways—by taking into consideration and being aware of the different possible nodes in the imaginal constellation, in the lattice, and perhaps wiggling or jiggling one of them.

Just wiggle this particular node—the energy body, for instance. Bring that alive a bit more with increased awareness. Sometimes this requires deliberate action. Other times it's simply a matter of noticing—noticing a certain element or aspect we haven't fully perceived. It's there latently or potentially, and our mindful noticing of it, our resonating with that particular aspect—let's say the energy body—brings that node alive in the very act of noticing, making it more imaginal.

Here I am with this image, but it's not really fully imaginal. Here I am with this perception that's not really fully sensing with soul. Then, for instance, I begin to notice how it echoes and mirrors my life and journey in some way that's really hard to articulate fully—perhaps I can partially articulate it. I start to tune into that and allow myself to feel and notice, paying subtle, sensitive attention to that echoing and mirroring between myself, my life, and this image.

Or I start to notice how the energy body feels, or I notice the sense of meaningfulness, or I observe that it has this kind of dimensionality and unfathomability, or the aspect of being neither real nor not real—somehow neither category really applies—this imaginal middle way or theatrical quality.

One possibility is simply noticing, gently looking for a certain element. Often, as I said, it's already there, latent, waiting in the shade or darkness. Our noticing and attuning to it brings that particular node alive, and then that node begins to ignite others. It's like blowing on a corner of a fire—that side of the fire or piece of wood ignites another one.

We could say that noticing one of these aspects—sometimes it takes just one—can ignite that particular node, that specific aspect or element. This can either suddenly or gradually illuminate, ignite, fire up, and turn on the other nodes, until the whole thing becomes imaginal. It's as if we're blowing on a node.

Sometimes it's a matter of noticing. Sometimes it's about empowering it somehow. Sometimes it involves what I'd call wiggling or jiggling it. With the energy body, for example, this might mean paying attention to it in a different way, or imagining the body in a certain way, or spreading the energy. These are what I mean by wiggling or jiggling possibilities.

There's something very important in all this—in this loosely speaking list we're going to explore. As I said, it's crucial for refining discernment and achieving clarity, but it's also important for practice and potentially has significant power. These are like keys or ignition points that can turn the whole thing on and move it toward the fully or authentically imaginal.

Having said all that, I feel quite strongly about this: there's a kind of middle way here. Soul-making and the imaginal, for me, involve an element of grace. It's not purely within the remit of what we can control with clever techniques, nor is it fully outside that range. It's as if we are given something. Soul gives us something, opens a door for us. It's a grace.

It's never fully—and that's the key word—never fully in our control or under our control or mastered by our technique. There's always some mystery in it and some sense of receiving something. I think, "Gosh, where did that come from? How did that happen?" We could say that in a certain way, soul is giving us something, showing us something of herself.

So to me, that not just attitude, but that awareness, that acknowledgment, recognition that there will always be a limit to our technique and to the degree with which soul and soul-making and image are under our control and mastered by our technical manipulations. And yet there is, at the same time—we can do things, we can jiggle things and notice things and something comes alive.

Much of this conception work involves straddling different conceptions and different attitudes, different orientations, somehow mysteriously holding both. This is really, really important. On the one hand, there's a grace involved. The soul is always bigger than me. It's always bigger than, and if you like, more powerful than my ego and my

will. And at the same time, there's quite a lot we can subtly work with and support by our placement of attention, our attitude, our inner work—what we could loosely include under the word technique. So it's straddling both those approaches or attitudes.

I touched on the energy body. We could actually start there. I threw it in at some point in the list towards the end, but we could start there, and there's no order in which these elements or nodes of the lattice need to ignite or progress. It's more like a network of nodes or lights, and you can enter from any direction—part of the beauty of it. But let's start with the energy body, just to give an example.

What this means—I've already said it, but let's make it really clear—is that awareness of the energy body is characteristic of the imaginal. We could say it's one element of our list, depending on how we divide it up. Something is not imaginal in our language. There is not the sensing with soul for us without the awareness of the energy body. So that's characteristic of the imaginal, characteristic of this relational constellation.

As we go through the nodes of the lattice, you'll see that some more obviously seem to pertain to the object and some more obviously seem to pertain to the subject. But all that gets mixed up and expanded. If we just start with this: characteristic of the imaginal and that relational constellation is awareness of the energy body, a sensitivity to what's happening in the energy body in the moment.

What this means for practice is that bringing awareness to the energy body, filling that energy body with awareness and sensitivity and the delicacy involved in that, tuning to it, including that in our awareness as we pay attention to either a so-called intrapsychic image or something else in the material world—including the energy body awareness—can, because it's a node in the lattice, actually stimulate, ignite, fan the fire of, and bring into co-burning the other nodes of the lattice.

So bringing awareness to the energy body, just noticing what's going on there and turning the dial up on the awareness and sensitivity there, can stimulate the opening of the erotic imaginal. This has two aspects. The erotic part means that if there might be craving there, sometimes what happens as we bring awareness to the energy body is craving morphs into eros. We could say that. There's a transformation of craving or grasping into eros, and we've talked a lot about the difference between those two in the past. I'm not going to go into it right now. But because the energy body is a node in the lattice, giving attention to that, we support that node to come alive, and then that might start to spread, and the whole thing becomes more imaginal, or completely imaginal, so to speak.

There's a mutual dependent origination between the nodes of this imaginal constellation, this lattice. In other words, when the energy body awareness is included and comes alive, then either suddenly or gradually the soul-making resonances might come alive, or some other aspect of the nodes of the lattice, and vice versa. As we allow the soul-making resonances to come alive, we start to feel some of those resonances in the body and it stimulates the energy body. We could probably take any two elements of this lattice, nodes in this lattice, and say that they are mutually dependent, which means one gets stimulated, another gets stimulated, or they feed each other and can trigger each other.

If we were to give instructions, it might be: here I am working with an intrapsychic image or working in relation to some thing, some object, some person or being in the world. I'm wanting to support sensing them with soul for that relation to become imaginal. As an instruction, can I just drop in perhaps the question or encouragement to myself: can I be in relationship with this object, whatever it is, intrapsychic or otherwise, with the whole of my body?

Sometimes I'm in relationship with just a part of my body, or I'm just relating through the eyes, or just through one sense, or just through my head center, or just through my heart sense. Can I somehow put my whole body in relationship with this other? That includes the whole body, the whole energy body—I'm feeling it, and I'm feeling it in relationship. What is it that I sense this other, this object or person, with my whole body? And within that, including that, my whole body—I'm aware of the energy body there and what that feels like, what my sense of it is.

I'll come back and talk more about this whole concept of the nodes and the lattice or the imaginal constellation and the ignition of that later. But I hope you get the general principle of what I'm talking about. It's really worth including this awareness and starting to experiment with it and noticing the magic here.

confusing or hard to grasp clearly. In a way, it's tricky because these are deliberately open concepts without hard edges—and that's part of their beauty, though I recognize it might be frustrating or simply confusing for some people. My articulation of these concepts is evolving over time, but the concepts themselves are intentionally fluid. They don't have rigid boundaries, as I've mentioned before and will explore again.

So what do we mean by energy body? The energy body is actually a way of looking and conceiving rather than a particular experience. When we speak of energy body, we're referring to a whole range of experiences understood through a specific lens—a way of looking at and sensing bodily experience that feels the space of the body as a field of energy, vibration, or texture.

This encompasses an enormous range of possibilities. The energy body might feel very solid, dense, earthy in a certain sense of that word, all the way to extremely ethereal, with everything in between. It's a way of looking and sensing that perceives the space of the body as a field of energy, vibration, and texture, embracing all the range potentially included in that.

Importantly, it's also a way of conceiving that doesn't limit the body or our idea of body to only the conventional scientific, materialist, and typical modern conception. For example, it moves beyond the view that the body is just flatly material—mere matter without depth, dimensionality, or soul—where consciousness somehow emerges when neurons fire, though no one quite understands how. This classical scientific materialism conceives matter as fundamentally flat and claims this physicalist reductionism as the only true understanding of what the body really is.

Even physicalist systems theory, though people argue it's not reductionist, still falls short when we're talking about something beyond the purely physical. While it may view the body as a system of physical elements that emerges into something higher than pure matter, it remains limited.

The energy body conception also means that our sense and understanding of the body isn't being judged according to socially fashionable notions of attractiveness. The energy body embraces all of this—it's a way of looking and conceiving that transcends these limitations.

While we're exploring this subject, let me elaborate on something we may return to later. This connects to the whole idea that any concept we're using is linked with other concepts, and where one concept shades into another is not rigidly defined or clearly demarcated.

At the risk of adding complexity, I think this will help fill out our understanding of body and energy body. I would say that whenever there is any sense of body—anytime whatsoever—there is some concept, some image, and some inner felt sense of that body.

Any sense of body includes some concept of what that body is, some kind of image of it—whether visual or otherwise—and some inner felt sense. This includes energy body and applies to any experience of body.

The concept might be, for example, that typical scientific materialist biological conception of bones, organs, tissues, and so forth, composed of cells, which are themselves composed of intercellular structures, and so on. All of these, in this view, exist in interactive relationship with each other and with the outer material environment. That's one possible concept.

At other times—and some of you will have tasted this—the concept might be that the body is made of light. There's an actual conception of a light body, a subtle body of light. The concept might emerge from certain meditative experiences, particularly some jhanic states.

For instance, coming out of the sixth jhana—the sphere of infinite consciousness—one might have a very real conception and sense that the body's substance is actually consciousness. All this apparent matter is revealed as consciousness, perhaps a kind of cosmic consciousness. This would be a typical concept arising in the aftereffects of the sixth jhana.

There's always some concept operating whenever there's a sense of body. We might not be fully aware of what the concept is or able to articulate it completely, but some kind of concept is always present when there's any sense of body.

I also mentioned there's always some kind of image when there's any sense of body. This image may be one of space—the very nature of the body experienced as space, as in the fifth jhana. The image might be imaginal in the sense we've been using that word, where the body is perceived as numinous, multidimensional, possessing its own autonomous intelligence—all those aspects of the imaginal constellation we're exploring in these talks.

Of course, the image of the body might also be very non-imaginal—just the contours of a body in the mind's eye with nothing numinous or multidimensional about it, certainly nothing suggesting autonomous intelligence. It's simply a body in the usual sense, and the image itself feels rather flat.

So there's always some concept, there's always some image, and there's always some felt sense—some inner felt sense of that body, of the texture of sensation in the space of the body. In the space the body is perceived to exist, there's always some sense. And again, that sense might be that there is an absence there. That would be more akin to some of the formless jhanas. That kind of felt sense involves a disappearing of felt sense, but you still have the felt sense of absence, of non-solidity, of space. So there's always some kind of felt sense or other—the sense of some kind of density, some kind of field of feeling or vibrational energy. And again, the range is huge.

Now, of course, all these three—concept, image, and felt sense that are part of bodily experience, the phenomenon of the body for us—they're actually interrelated and not separate. They overlap each other. Just a little examination of your experience and thinking about this, you'll see that. So we say, it's good to delineate things, and it's also good not to get too stuck on these delineations. There's some concept, some image, and some inner felt sense, and they overlap.

So why are we saying this? We're talking and delineating this way, not to claim or even attempt a description of truth. This is the truth of the body. This is the reality of the body. It's really this kind of matter or it's really that kind of matter or whatever. We're saying all this and making these delineations in order to help open up the possibilities of experience, of image into the imaginal, of conception, of energy, of perception and emotion—in fact, of body, matter, self, others, world, soul, and cosmos.

We want, by making these discriminations, opening up and putting them in relation to each other, to stimulate an awareness that can then unblock—because we're not trapped in certain conceptions that we're not really even aware that we have. So we want to unblock what may, without our even realizing it, be blocking or inhibiting these openings of soul-making.

So that's behind all these delineations, discriminations, and definitions.

Going back to our main point, the energy body awareness is one node in this lattice that's mutually dependently arising. In noticing it, in wiggling or jiggling it, in tuning to it, blowing on that ember, if you like, brings it—fires it up more, ignites it more—and that can support the opening of the whole, or the ignition of the whole lattice into something more profoundly, fully, authentically imaginal.

Another aspect that is intrinsic to what we would call imaginal images or sensing with soul is that the imaginal and sensing with soul open up soul-making. It's kind of a circular definition. And we will return to this word, soul-making. I've talked a lot about it in the past, but we'll return to it even in this set of talks. But basically, that's an element of the imaginal constellation—there is a sense of soul-making. Something is only imaginal if it brings soul-making. We're only sensing with soul if there's some sense of soul-making there.

So what then is the relationship between this second element that we're focusing on—this business of soul-making—and imagination? Not imaginal and soul-making, but imagination and soul-making.

In the way we're using that term soul-making, as I said, it may be quite different from how other people may use it or how you may understand it at this point. There are quite a few differences as well.

So soul-making implies, in our definition, that eros and psyche and logos—concept—are involved and worked or stretched in the process, in the dynamic of soul-making. Eros, psyche, and logos are involved and worked and stretched.

Now psyche, we said in previous retreats and talks—when we use the word psyche, one of the meanings we intend is image. The image, that is also the collection of images. So, in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the psyche, the image, may not be image in the obvious sense. In other words, there's an image that I see intrapsychically, or this object that I'm looking at in the world. It may be more the fantasy of what is happening and the self in relationship, or in the process of what's happening.

For example, a person practicing with dedication and opening up the jhanas deliberately, going step by step and piecing it together and really beginning to feel—first of all, this is amazing. What beautiful states, what a blessing to be able to open to these dimensions and discover them and be nourished and resourced by these dimensions.

But secondly, one is struck on that path, on the jhanic path as one develops it. One is struck like, wow, this is what the Buddha was talking about. It just totally fits the description. When he gives those beautiful images of the lake fed by an underground spring and delineates what's involved in the second jhana, third jhana, one absolutely recognizes intuitively—this is absolutely what he was talking about.

Then one feels this beautiful connection between oneself and the Buddha and the whole 2500-year tradition carried on. Here little old me is experiencing what the Buddha was talking about. I recognize it from the words, and it's been handed to me through the tradition. I'm walking that path, and who knows what else we'll be able to open.

So there's a fantasy there, actually, in the good sense, of the beauty of that connection, the inspiration of it, the fantasy of the self on the path, which is also fantasy, and the tradition, which is also fantasy, the whole thing. So that's one aspect of the way image or fantasy is working there, with the jhanas, which in themselves are actually non-imagistic states.

They're the quieting of mental representation and image, by definition, almost.

But it also might be that the soul-making pertaining... Let me approach this differently. The soul-making might arise when something is new for us, when we are opening up new territory that feels meaningful, that has a kind of beauty and is beyond what we already know.

Imagine I'm in contact with a jhana. A jhana's opening, and it's new to me. I haven't thoroughly become utterly familiar with it. That takes a while—to get used to jhanas. It's still new. It's still got this kind of otherness, of beyondness that I can get to know more of. So it becomes an object of eros for me, of attraction. But it doesn't involve image in the usual sense.

Anything that, when we're at the stage with something that's just opening for our psyche, for our consciousness, for our being—so for instance, jhanas, or it might just be heart work. Perhaps we've never really done any heart work, and then we come to Gaia House retreats, and some of the teachers speak so beautifully and encourage this kind of sensitivity to one's heart, and the opening of the heart, and the valuing of the beauties in the heart and the vulnerability and the honesty with oneself about one's heart and the honesty with others.

All this might be new. It's new territory. We're expanding into something. And for a while, it stays new. When it's new and meaningful and beautiful like that and attractive—even though we might be a little daunted—then in that stage of newness and beyondness, it creates a "more" for me in expanding my being, opening new territory of expansion. Then there can be soul-making in relation to that thing. And as I said, the thing itself and the self in that process can become fantasy as well. But it might not be an image in the usual sense, or in the commonly thought-of sense.

Just body awareness. Someone may never have done any body awareness. I remember back to my really first years, I was very young, starting meditation. Just coming into my body, it was like, "Wow, wow." And even more than that, I remember—I think I might have told this story before—I started learning meditation in a class, a weekly class. And the homework, I think it was for the first week, was to do five minutes of meditation a day. Not half an hour, not forty-five minutes, five minutes.

So I dutifully did that. I was very taken by the teachings as a first-timer. And it was like opening a whole world. That five minutes, it was... And I went back to the teacher and said, "Wow, it's just unbelievable. I really feel different." And I couldn't quite—I was struggling to articulate it with him. What had happened? He said, "That's mindfulness." Oh, mindfulness. And just that five minutes, it was new for me. So there can be soul-making in relation to that, and again, in relation to this path, what I'm discovering, what's being stretched.

But it's not an image in the usual sense, or the typically understood sense. And again, like I said, jhanas, body awareness, energy body might be new, and it's like, "Wow," and that itself stretches us, and may—again, we have a sense, a fantasy of ourselves on the path of practice. That whole thing becomes fantasy there.

Or playfulness. I've emphasized a lot the importance of playfulness in practice. And again, someone might have had very little of that in their life. And then they begin to let themselves have some playfulness, and that feels soul-making at first. Just the playfulness itself, because something is being expanded, drawn into new territory, with all this meaningfulness and beauty and kind of beyondness that's beyond what I already know.

But these elements—playfulness, heartfulness, energy, body awareness—in themselves, they are necessary and integral elements of imaginal practice, of sensing with soul and the imaginal constellation. So playfulness, heartfulness, energy, body awareness—I didn't mention some of them before, but they are also necessary and integral elements. But in themselves, they do not make something soul-making. Just playfulness in itself... They don't make something imaginal either.

They may if they're new.

Conversely, as we've already explored in previous talks, mindful imagination or embodied imagination is not necessarily imaginal nor soul-making in our sense. When we use our imagination, it might be skillful and genuinely helpful, but there's often a kind of reductionism involved. We find ourselves reducing the image, making it too literal, or narrowing it down to a singular meaning. We might view the image and imaginal work as serving solely or primarily our personal growth, or see it as representing merely a part of ourselves.

All these attitudes and elements won't allow the full and authentic imaginal to emerge. They will limit—not prevent entirely, I hope this all makes sense—but they will limit the degree, depth, fullness, and range of soul-making that's possible. In other words, it's quite possible to have skillful and beneficial use of the imagination without it being soul-making, or with only very limited soul-making occurring.

However, if using the imagination skillfully is something entirely new—something that previously wasn't allowed in one's tradition or upbringing—and we're suddenly introduced to it or begin allowing it, then this skillful use of imagination, because of its newness, may indeed be soul-making to some degree.

So any skillful imagination is not necessarily imaginal. Any skillful use of the imagination is not necessarily imaginal, but it may be soul-making.

Similarly, one might encounter an image from a book, a daydream, a film—any imaginative form. This image might deeply touch our heart, perhaps even move us to tears of compassion. While it's beautiful and important to be touched in this way, it doesn't necessarily mean that just because the heart is very moved, the experience is imaginal or soul-making in itself.

Soulfulness is, if you like, bigger than heartfulness. It includes heartfulness but involves much more. In certain language, you could say heartfulness is a necessary but not sufficient element of the imaginal constellation. The imaginal does touch our heart in countless different ways, but heartfulness alone is not enough for something to qualify as imaginal.

Let me highlight one more element before we close today. I mentioned this in our earlier list—it might have been the first one—and it represents our third node: loving and being loved. You could count this as two elements or just one.

Both the imaginal and sensing with soul include a sense of being loved by this imaginal object, other, or being. I've spoken about this before, but I want to highlight it now. The love in the imaginal, or the love of the imaginal, from the imaginal, always has a particular flavor or character specific to that image and that relationship. This imaginal figure loves me in a very particular way that harmonizes with its character and our unique relationship. This love may evolve and change over time.

I'm emphasizing this because sometimes we hold too narrow a vision of what love looks like and feels like, how it can manifest. There are vastly different kinds of love. Some loves are tough loves—more stern, distant, disciplined. Others are soft, warm, melting, comforting, and easeful. It's all love.

Part of tuning to an imaginal figure or object involves discerning and feeling into the particular quality or characteristic flavor of the love that is present, the being loved that exists there. Sometimes this being loved isn't obvious at all initially, but we gradually recognize: "Oh yes, there is love here." This recognition ignites and stimulates that particular node of the lattice, which can then stimulate others. It helps us enter and open more fully to the authentically imaginal, moving us along that spectrum.

The love flows both ways. We might be more aware that we love this tree but not yet notice how the tree loves us—with its own particular kind of loving. Or vice versa. We notice one direction of the love that flows, moves, connects, and passes between us, but not the other.

Whether you count these as two elements or one, this is part of what we can notice and even work with intentionally. Actually affirming our love, for instance, is more than just noticing that we love.

I'll come back to that, I hope, in a later talk. What is it to actually speak? "I love you" – to say that, to feel it, not just to feel it and notice that we love, but actually to affirm it, to make that gesture.

So sometimes it's that kind of wiggling or jingling or empowering that actually stimulates the love, which can then stimulate the sense of being loved, perhaps, or just generally the other nodes of the whole lattice. And sometimes, as I said, it's much more about noticing. It's like, "Oh yeah. Oh yeah, there's that. Oh, how beautiful. There's that element of love there."

And just tuning to it, bringing that sensitivity to notice what kind it is and linger with it and resonate with it and vibrate with it, so to speak. Let it touch the soul.

Okay, let's stop there. Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 106

Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h22

> *In this profound exploration of imaginal practice, Rob Burbea examines the complex constellation of interconnected elements that constitute sensing with soul. He presents imaginal perception as a dynamic lattice where different nodes - including energy body awareness, eros, beauty, dimensionality, divinity, grace, reverence, humility, trust, and duty - can ignite each other to create authentic soul-making experiences.*
>
> *Burbea explores how practitioners can develop sensitivity to these various aspects, learning to attune to different qualities and modes within the imaginal constellation. He discusses how any single element can serve as a doorway, triggering or igniting the whole lattice through what he describes as either sudden quantum leaps or gradual transitions along spectra of experience. The teaching emphasizes both the technical artistry involved in imaginal practice and the essential element of grace - the receptivity needed to receive what is bestowed.*
>
> *Key concepts include the imaginal middle way (neither real nor unreal), the relationship between dimensionality and divinity, and how qualities like humility and reverence function within soul-making dynamics. Burbea addresses potential cultural resistances to terms like divinity and humility, offering nuanced perspectives that avoid both reification and dismissal. The talk concludes with an examination of duty as an inherent aspect of imaginal relationship, exploring how soul-making experiences carry implicit obligations for integration and honoring.*

So we've been saying that from, for a number of reasons, it might be helpful at times to adopt or enter a perspective that recognizes that the imaginal—or an imaginal perception or sensing with soul—is actually constituted with different elements that are interrelated, or different aspects. We investigate a little and see what is involved there, what are those elements and aspects of this imaginal constellation.

Exploring in this way, bringing this perspective, and then looking a little closer and teasing things apart, even if that apartness is somewhat artificial, and looking a little closer, is for the sake of increasing our understanding, filling out our conceptual framework, also increasing and developing our sensitivity and our discernment to actually be sensitive to these things and notice these things, and our attentiveness and our attunement, our capacity to attune to them and feel their different qualities and modes and aspects.

But it's also useful and helpful to adopt and explore this perspective because of the potential for practice in igniting the imaginal, entering more fully into the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal world, moving along that spectrum of imagination experiences, moving more along that spectrum towards the fully, authentically or genuinely imaginal.

So we can say again, that an imaginal perception or perceiving imaginally or sensing with soul actually involves a constellation or a lattice of elements, of aspects, and any star in that constellation or any node in that lattice, its triggering can trigger or ignite or infect, if you like, the whole lattice.

For example, it might be that seeing the self—seeing myself, yourself, seeing the self as angel—is what occurs first, or we notice first, or what actually ignites first in the experience. And then this seeing the self as angel, as part of the whole larger constellation of imaginal experience at that time, then ignites the sensing of other-world and eros, imaginally, erotically, theophanically.

So it might actually happen in time that they get ignited, or it might be actually that there's a noticing that happens in time, one and then the other and then the other. Or the first to ignite—or so to speak, the door that opens first, the node to resonate first—with eros and to resonate erotically and imaginally, might be the humility of the heart. We will come back to this.

The sensitivity, awareness of the energy body—we've touched on that already. It might be the middle way of the imaginal, actually sensing that middle way, this kind of neither real nor not real quality. It's related to the middle way of emptiness, but it's different. It's what I call the imaginal middle way, or the middle way of the imaginal, the theatre-like quality or status of what is occurring, what is being experienced, the perceptions involved.

Or it might be an idea or conception that's involved in this perception, or we start with an idea or conception, and this starts, as I said, infecting, inflaming, igniting, triggering, opening the other nodes in the lattice. We actually start with an idea or a conception that's implicit there.

Or we start with the eros, or some part of the whole multi-directed eros that is flowing, that is alive in the self-other-world relations there. It might be we start with the sense of deep value, that that is the first door to open, the first to be ignited in our consciousness, and the sense of deep value or treasure of what we are perceiving, or some aspect of what we are perceiving, some pole of what we are perceiving.

It may be a sense of the divinity, or a theophany, again, of some aspect of perception. Or it may be the very sense of participation with or within that sense of divinity. It's that sense of participation that then inflames the whole constellation, the whole lattice, makes it burn more brightly, takes us deeper into the imaginal.

So an awareness of one or some of the different connecting nodes in the lattice allows us to try different things, if you like, to trigger or ignite the constellation, to ignite the imaginal experience, to enter further into the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal world.

But as I said, sometimes we can jiggle and wiggle one node and actually do something there to support that particular star or node igniting and illuminating. And sometimes it's more a matter of—more precise and helpful to recognize—that what we are doing at times is rather than changing anything, it's just noticing some aspect that is already aflame, already ignited. And it's this noticing, this attention, that allows that node to ignite further and more fully and deeper, and then the whole lattice to get ignited and triggered from that.

Either simultaneously, the whole lattice, the whole imaginal constellation kind of illuminates at one point, like a light switch going on, or gradually, kind of node by node. And this is quite interesting, too. When it ignites the whole thing, or turns on, if you like, becomes alive imaginally, when the whole lattice ignites simultaneously, it can feel like something just took a quantum leap. So from one discrete state to another, it's like a sudden jump of a system, if you like, this system of nodes and lattice to a different state.

So it's something that can feel really like, well, we just suddenly shifted gears there into a really different state of perception, of consciousness, of being, and a different experience.

Now, we haven't talked much, and we won't talk much yet—maybe perhaps for quite a while—about actually working in a dyad with another intensely, with the soul-making and the imaginal perceptions that involve each other, and being in participation and dialogue and reciprocal relationship in that erotic-imaginal dyad. Sometimes what can happen—I'm just mentioning this—but sometimes what can happen is that quantum leap happens not just for one person, but for a whole field of two people, or sometimes more. It's like the whole field, in this case, if we're talking about dyad, and both people suddenly undergo that quantum leap. There's some kind of almost magic of a shared entry or a shared inflaming or illumination of the imaginal together. We won't dwell on that.

And at the same time, I already mentioned this, it's good to recognize that where there is eros in the imaginal, there is always—and we'll come back to this too—a sense of grace, of gift. And with that, therefore, there must be a sense of receptivity. We receive gifts. We receive grace. We open to it. It is bestowed on us.

If it's grace and gift that we are receiving, that means that the quality of receptivity, the stance, the poise, the posture, the inner posture of receptivity, and of sensitivity and flexibility and attunement are necessary. It's as if we notice the gift. We pick up on the grace, on the breeze, so to speak. Our antennae, so to speak, are moved. Our receptors are moved. And then, ah, what is that? Something on the wind, something on the breeze, an intimation, a fragrance. And we tune to it, cock our heads to it, turn towards it, open to it, to receive it.

So there's this real element of grace, gift. "No one knows whence the Spirit bloweth," to quote roughly Jesus. And so it's not completely in our control. We don't completely direct this.

There is an element of technical art and skill and deliberateness—bringing images back deliberately, gently supporting this or that, working with responsiveness. But there's also this element of grace, of openness, receptivity, sensibility, flexibility, and receptiveness. These qualities are part of the imaginal constellation as well. It's not just about technique, but it does involve technique. It's never totally under my control and mastery. Recognizing that fact is humbling, but it also, to me, makes it more beautiful. I said this before: soul is greater than ego, is greater than me, greater than you.

But again, we have a conception or an approach or an attitude that kind of straddles two modalities or two inclinations—the inclination to receive and the inclination to be deliberate and active, proactive, a kind of mastery. We're straddling and including those. There's space here, flexibility, range.

A little bit more about this process or dynamic of what we might call ignition, or turning on, or illuminating the imaginal—the imaginal becoming illuminated. I've talked about these nodes and elements of the imaginal constellation, but it's not just that they're like on-off settings—this element of humility or this element of eros is either on or off, just like an on-off switch. They are also, at times at least, more like spectra or dimmer switches. Instead of a flick on-off switch, a dimmer switch—you turn the lights up or down in the middle, like a volume control or like a fire. If each is a kind of individual fire, it's not simply on or off. I mean, that's one way of looking at it, but it's also like a degree. Is it just a kind of ember, or is it really flaming or really a raging fire?

It's maybe too clumsy an analogy, but at least it's more nuanced than a switch, which is something that we switch on or off. So this idea of suddenly sparking or the ignition of one node triggering or igniting suddenly the sparking of other nodes or elements—that's a good way to understand this, and that actually can convey this sudden change of state, this kind of quantum leap that can often occur here.

But at other times, the transition, as I mentioned earlier, is actually more gradual. So it's like dials or faders moving higher or lower up their scale, more or less on or off. And we can actually actively turn any one of them up by simply noticing or paying careful, gentle, attuned attention to that element. Perhaps then the whole lattice is gradually turned up—the whole imaginal constellation gradually turns up with that. Or sometimes, at a certain threshold of tuning up one of the elements, there is a sudden ignition of all the others. So all kinds of transitions are possible here, all kinds of developments.

One more thing about this. All this that I'm talking about—we're really talking about developing the art or the skill of imaginal practice, of sensing with soul. In time, as that skill or art develops, along with the whole range of what's involved there—because it's really a collection of all kinds of capacities that are implicit and required for imaginal practice—we may find that we can even guide the relative balance of the settings of any two, or maybe even more, of these dials.

So, for example, the attention to the energy body is one of those nodes, one of those dials, and the attention to it can modulate from anywhere—from just a background minimal awareness to a kind of complete immersion in the sense of the energy body, the whole energy body. The awareness is completely immersed in it. That energy body awareness, where it is on its scale relative to the attention to the image itself—you understand? So here's this image, whatever it is, and here's my sense of the energy body. I've got basically both of them, awareness and attention to both of them in imaginal practice, and the relative degrees of where the attention is weighted, more or less, we can vary that.

So I can lean it back, so to speak, into the awareness of the energy body, and more of the energy goes there, more of the sensitivity there and what's experienced there. And I might go so far as into a jhana—I can lean so far into the pleasure that's going on in the energy body that I actually enter a jhana, and the image is either completely gone or in the background. Or vice versa—the energy body is there, I'm aware of it, but the primary thing I'm paying attention to is the image.

There's a whole gradation there of relative weighting of attention and emphasis of attention. And similarly with the emotion—we can give what's emotionally present... maybe an image brings with it some kind of poignancy or a particular kind of loneliness or a particular kind of loving and being loved, or sadness or joy or a particular kind of delight. And again, we can lean into that, if we want to, in time, much more than the image, while still keeping the image around. Or we may just, so to speak, completely lean into an exploration of being with and holding the emotion going on, and let the image kind of fade. And vice versa—we can be much more with the image or some other aspect of the imaginal constellation, and just be aware of what's going on with our emotions in the emotional body.

Similarly with other aspects—the emptiness aspect, for instance. We can play with the relative emphasis of attention, or leaning of attention, or weight of attention, on any of these different elements.

I don't know how that sounds. It might sound to you like that's really advanced. Certainly it takes practice to develop that kind of facility and flexibility and nuance of art and attention.

But it's similar in many ways. Some of you will know I used at one point the analogy of a great hawk or eagle gliding on air currents as a sort of image or symbol for how one can move really quite gracefully and sometimes with minimal effort between, say, an insight mode of working, a way of looking, and the samadhi that kind of organically comes with the letting go that arises from the insight.

Just like this hawk riding high on the warm air currents—if it wants to go left, it's just the slightest movement. It's sensitive to what currents are already there, what thermals, what directions are winning. It can just pick the one that's going left, if it wants to go left, for example. And just a slight inclination sends it that way. This hawk is riding on what's already present. And similarly, if it wants to go right, there's just a slight inclination, a slight modification. There's a real beauty and gracefulness and art to that.

One develops—again, it's all part of developing the sensitivity in practice and the attunement—and there's so much possible here. If it sounds outlandish, it isn't. It probably takes time and practice to develop, but it's certainly possible.

So if we continue with our list, we've already mentioned the first element: energy body awareness. We said a little about the second one: the fact of giving rise to soul-making, the sense of soulfulness and soul-making happening. So soulfulness as an ex-

perience is another element. The soulfulness of what's going on is another aspect. The third we mentioned was loving and being loved, and we spoke about the particularities there and the attunement there.

With that third element, really tune in and feel that particularity and let it touch you. Let this being loved touch your being, touch the heart, feel it in the body, feel it in the soul. And we also said that in the range of what those loves can manifest—how they can appear in imaginal perception, in sensing with soul—is really, really large.

Yes, absolutely, it includes metta, it includes compassion, at times it includes mudita, and we should also say equanimity. So it includes the classical brahmaviharas, but there's much more particularity in the kinds of love. And the range is actually larger than what we tend to think of with the brahmaviharas, whose range is also quite wide because there are different flavors of metta, of course, and all that.

A fourth element or node in the imaginal constellation is eros. I've talked a lot about eros before, but I won't go into it much, just mentioning it here. Again, it's something we can notice, tune into, and that noticing and tuning into ignites it further, and then that can trigger the rest of the lattice, take us further into the imaginal, deeper into the more authentically, fully imaginal place.

And we also said, for example, being in relationship with the whole of my energy body and the sensitivity of the energy body is likely to support eros opening rather than craving. And the dissolution of craving is going to support the opening of eros. So eros feels like an opening. It also opens. It opens the imaginal.

We've been through all this on other retreats, so I'm not going to go into it much now. But all this presupposes that I'm able to notice eros, that I'm actually familiar with the experience of eros. Again, I'm not going to delineate everything that's involved in the experience of eros—we've done that before. But that also may take some practice. Like, oh, this is eros present. How do I recognize eros? Am I familiar with it? And then I can kind of hone in on it more, open up to it more, allow it more—all that supports that particular element or aspect or node.

So eros is very important in distinction to craving. As I said, craving is a contraction and it contracts, it limits and contracts the possibility of soul-making. Eros is more of an opening and it opens all the dimensions of the possibilities of soul-making. It's really that that makes a difference here.

But I've also talked about a fifth element: beauty—a sense of beauty as an aspect of the imaginal constellation. But just like love, the range of beauty that we can feel touched by and feel open to is huge. So oftentimes, like with love, we tend to kind of box in a little too narrowly our sense of what qualifies as beautiful, or what beauty is, what it looks like or sounds like. There's a huge range here.

Be surprised at the range that beauty can have for us, our sense of beauty, the things that we can find beautiful. And again, I've talked quite a bit about beauty and written about it recently, so I'm not going to go into it here much. But just to mention that it's again a factor, if you like—a node, an element, an aspect that we can tune to, begin to resonate with, be touched by, open to, appreciate, enjoy. And in the fullness of that, that node comes deeper and more fully alive, and that can trigger the other nodes to come alive and the fullness of the authentically imaginal.

Now, I really have lost track of the numbers, which is a good thing, because as I said earlier, if there are numbers here to the elements of this list, don't take them too seriously, or too rigidly, or too tightly at all. You'll see that these elements kind of reflect each other, blend into each other, and are not that discrete. Some of them are obviously not discrete; others are interconnected anyway.

But I think it might be number five, number six—and this is a sense of what I call dimensionality. It's a little hard to describe, but this dimensionality is almost as if a thing is not just flat. It has other depths, if you like, or there's more to it. And those dimensions kind of recede or proceed into a sense—they shade into a sense at some point of divinity.

Again, I've talked quite a bit about divinity here in the last few retreats, so I'm not going to say too much, but it's a mysterious word, isn't it? What do you really mean when you say divinity? And this is, again, one of those words that I would deliberately not put in too tight a box, because by its nature, it won't fit there. And in addition, there are infinite possibilities for the experience of divinity. We could, and I have, delineated certain common elements, if you like, of experiences of divinity. But actually, I would say, there are infinite possibilities. There is not one experience of the divine. Once we get into imaginal practice, infinite experiences we can have of divinity.

So it's a word that's mysterious in a number of different ways, but for me it feels like a very important word. And actually for most people who experience imaginal practice and get the flavor of it and get into it and get the sense of it, all this makes sense. So it feels like, yes, that is the right word. I might never have used that word before, or really related to it much, but there's kind of no other word for this sense I have of this imagin-

al figure, or this way that I'm sensing this thing in my life, or this person, or whatever. It has a sense of dimensionality, of multiple dimensions to it. They may not be clear, and that dimensionality shades into a kind of sense of divinity.

So the sense of divinity also implies a kind of infinity, or kinds of infinity itself. In other words, the word divinity to me implies that we can never exhaust it, we can never fully fathom it. So it's related to the unfathomability of objects as well—of imaginal figures and objects and of things, that which is perceived when we are sensing with soul, that which is sensed with soul.

The divinity means that I can't reduce this, or it feels like this perception, this sense of whatever it is, is not reducible to X or Y, or "it is this," or "I sum it up," or "I box it in," or "I understand it now." There's always going to be more. There's always going to be more dimensions, more depths, more heights, if you like, more beyond what I can either capture with my intellect or even fully experience. So there's always an infinite and beyond element to an experience of the divine.

But—and again, I've been through this before, but I'll say it briefly now—that beyond is not, I would say, especially when we get into imaginal practice of sensing the soul, by definition, the beyondness of the divine is not only beyond appearances. In other words, it's not only the transcendent, unfabricated, the fading of experiences. Nor is it a beyond in that it's always lighter or more ethereal. It's somehow in, with, through, as the appearance itself.

So yes, there is a sense of a divinity—we've talked about this before—a kind of divinity that is beyond the appearance, with the fading of the appearance, so revealing the essence of a thing, we might say. But there is also, in the particularities of this appearance, an immanent divinity that has still a beyondness to it, and an infinity to it.

Both the notions of dimensionality—or if we say depths, or heights, or supernality in some traditions, the supernal, I mean the heavenly—both notions of dimensionality and of divinity make some people very nervous, understandably, because of some of the history associated with such concepts and the kind of metaphysics involved. But particularly the implications for valuing—what is of value and what is of more value and what is of less value, and what is considered more real and less real.

So these two aspects—valuing and real—are tied up, or at least historically were very much tied up, with notions of dimensionality and divinity. And many people felt that this sort of entrenched Western religions would value the deep or the high or the transcendent over the immediate, the material, the superficial, and sometimes exclus-

ively valuing one over the other with great cost to all kinds of aspects of our existence. And also valuing of the divine over the human, and then this had a reaction with humanism and scientific materialism.

But to me it's actually not that simple. It's quite interesting, not that simple. I would like to say that perhaps, in terms of the question of what's real, perhaps we can think of this notion of dimensionality and to a certain extent even of divinity, as not so much a question of more real. So it's not an ontological assessment. This is deeper, this is therefore more real. When we get a sense of depth in some perception or pertaining to some figure or something that we're sensing—

Rather than making an ontological claim, this becomes simply an epistemological one. When we speak of depth, we mean something that is harder to sense - requiring the instrument of perception to be opened, tuned, and prepared with greater care. What we call "deeper" or "more obscure" or "less obvious" demands this heightened sensitivity rather than being inherently more real or valuable.

Instead of asserting ontological distinctions about reality, we acknowledge that these dimensions we sometimes feel graced to perceive require more refined attunement. The nodes of the imaginal lattice must be empowered and activated to enable this sensing of dimensionality, which may be felt obscurely at times and more specifically at others.

Regarding value, I would say that greater dimensionality does encompass increased value, but precisely because these dimensions don't devalue the immediate, the apparent, the form, or the material. We're simply not viewing the material through a reductive lens that dismisses it as purely unholy or mere illusion.

When we speak of deeper dimensionality, higher dimensionality, or divinity, we're not asserting ontological priority - that these are more real, or that only the divine beyond is real while appearances are not. To avoid making such ontological assertions is somewhat unusual. It's also to say, from another perspective, that divinity is neither real nor unreal.

This may sound mysterious and challenging for those accustomed to discussions of divinity that involve assertions about hierarchies of reality. They might wonder: How can it have power, value, or meaningfulness for the soul if you're not claiming it's real or more real? How can something that is neither real nor unreal possess such significance?

Yet it can and does have power, value, and meaning for the soul. Those familiar with emptiness teachings understand this middle way - neither real nor unreal - and the beauty and transformative capacity this understanding opens. We can apply this same principle here through what we might call the middle way of the imaginal, which is related but distinct.

This sense of divinity that moves us so profoundly, that bestows and gives and opens, carrying implicit value within it - this divinity we sense as neither real nor unreal in the conventional sense. Wonderful. Beautiful.

Perceiving, imagining, or sensing with soul involves some conception, whether clear or obscure, of the sacred or divine nature and origin of an imaginal image or whatever perceptions are involved. These are not conceived merely as results of personal human history - arising because of some past experience - unless that very human history is also understood as an expression, manifestation, or journey of the divine. In this case, any image representing or recalling such memory also partakes of divinity, having its origin in the divine.

Nor are these images simply the result of random brain activity or contingent responses to sensory input. The valuing permeates everything - it's not separate from appearance itself.

Related to this aspect of divinity - whether we count dimensionality and divinity as one element or separate them into two - comes what we might call our seventh element: grace. Grace is intimately connected to the sense of divinity.

Grace carries this quality of being given something, of receiving. The image, the perception, the sense of beauty and divinity - all of this comes from divinity. The divinity itself, its beauty, its very appearance and experience are sensed as gift, as given.

This differs from mere luck, which implies random occurrence. Grace suggests some divinity or greater dimension bestowing something upon us - not through fortunate chance, nor through our clever engineering of circumstances. Neither of these would constitute grace.

There's this sense of gift, of receiving, of grace. It's a beautiful word that carries something inexplicable within it. No matter how much preparation we've undertaken, there's always an element of surprise in opening to an image - always this quality of "What a gift!"

Who would have imagined this? Who would have foreseen such a thing? There's something inexplicable, a mystery there—and a sense of being, as I said, given something, receiving something from some dimension, some divinity bigger, greater, beyond ourselves and beyond our capacities, our machinations, our ken. And with all that, with that kind of gift, there's a sense of beneficence, of the goodwill and bounty of something pouring down on us, visiting us, being given to us.

So that's another element or node aspect of the imaginal we can tune into. Very related to that is perhaps an eighth, depending on how we're counting—and I've mentioned this one before very briefly on retreat: reverence.

Reverence, obviously related to grace and divinity. Reverence, as I think I pointed out when I previously mentioned it, is from a Latin word that means to be in awe of. So again, this sense of something that's beyond us, beyond our ken.

And reverence is, for some people, a strange word, or it's a word that has associations of perhaps stiffness, or a sense of should—"reverend, you should be reverent, you should be respectful." Like we're being told by authorities or elders to be reverent, with a sense of should and stiffness.

What I mean—the sense of reverence itself, when it's authentically experienced—is something very beautiful. It's something that has a pliability to it. The soul and the heart are pliable. And again, here we have reverence itself as a composite. Like grace and other things that we'll come to, it involves the heart. The heart feels reverence. It involves the soul—it's more than the heart. And it's also a kind of concept. There's a concept involved, again, of something to which we feel awe, something bigger, greater, beyond us.

We can feel that reverence in the body. We feel it in the energy body—the pliability, a certain softening perhaps, a certain opening, a certain energizing. Very beautiful quality.

Where there is eros, and where there's the imaginal perception, where there's the erotic imaginal perception, and eros is allowed to do its thing in inseminating, fertilizing the eros psychologos dynamics of the soul-making—where there's the erotic imaginal, reverence is implied there, reverence is included there. It's part of, if you like, certainly the subjective pole of the imaginal constellation. An attitude, a poise, a stance, an opening in reverence—something very lovely.

And if we go on to our list related to that, this kind of constellation—you see how closely related and interconnected and overlapping, actually, a lot of these elements are. But still, I feel it's really important to draw them out and discern between them and draw attention to them.

So this next one—ninth or ninth and tenth, depending on how you're counting: humility and also bowing. And again, they're related.

So humility is another word that can be kind of loaded for us in our culture. Or we get a little bit narrow and stuck in a certain range of meaning or a certain stiffness in relation to what it means or what it looks like. So we certainly do not mean by humility any kind of self-shaming or self-blaming or self-punishing or anything that's kind of life-denying. Some people, even if they don't consciously think that's what humility means, it has those kind of echoes, perhaps from the past or dimly from some cultural associations that we have with us.

Certainly not what we mean with that. Humility goes with reverence for the other or the imaginal object and for the self. Again, the imaginal constellation spreads over self, over other, self and world. So there's reverence, not just for the other, but to the self. Humility goes with reverence to the self. There is respect and reverence for the self included in our humility. Do you understand?

We tend to think humble and we tend to think of a sort of belittling of the self, some people. But actually there's reverence for the self in the very experience of humility in the face of another, or towards another.

This participation of the self with another through humility reveals something even deeper. For humility implies and involves a profound and wonderful participation of the self in the other, in the imaginal object, in the cosmos, in existence, in God. We'll return to this notion of participation - it's a crucial but subtle point.

Humility doesn't create alienation; rather, it implies a kind of participation. I'm included in what I am humble towards. I somehow mysteriously and deeply participate in that theophany or that divinity, that beauty in relation to which I feel humble. Again, this goes with grace and with a sense of meaningfulness.

These can be tricky words for us - humility may be one of them for some. This difficulty is partly cultural and historical. Often in the West, with secular modernism and the ethos that dominates our culture, we sometimes lack the humility found in other cultures or periods. Instead, we carry a kind of arrogance.

There's a sense that we can do everything, that everything depends on me. If we want something, we can rearrange it, fix it. We can master nature through technology - that rapidly growing impetus and movement and desire, perhaps addiction, to master and control everything, to make everything dependent on us, on our will.

While this brings beauty and gifts and help, the lack of humility that sometimes accompanies secular modernism is also tied to a kind of existential alienation and unrootedness of the self. So the self feels less humble, more powerful, if you like. But simultaneously, it feels this existential alienation, this unrootedness, and the abyss of what's supposed to be the ultimately real meaninglessness of existence. This forms an existential abyss of unrootedness.

You can make up meanings or arrange your life to give it meaning, but at the bottom of it all, we're living in a meaningless cosmos. This abyss of existential meaninglessness and alienation, this unrootedness, becomes the flip side or the wages of this lack of humility. They very much go together - this presumed ultimately real meaninglessness of one's existence, struggles, life, and choices.

At first glance, the humility of another culture, whether past or present elsewhere in the world, might look to us less powerful. But again, it has a flip side. Someone embedded in that culture might truly have a sense we lack - of much deeper, wider, and more intimate belonging, and of meaningfulness to their lives that we sometimes don't possess in our dance with what can be a lack of humility.

Such cultures offer an embeddedness in the cosmos, a significance and value of the self, of one's life, choices, actions, and duties. Sometimes this is harder to achieve within the cosmic picture we currently hold. I'm not suggesting a primitivist return to other cultures, but can we bring awareness to this and find ways to open up so that we can cultivate a beautiful humility that gives us gifts without completely sacrificing technology?

How can we move forward, not backward, to receive a more healthy, soulful sense and perspective of the self and cosmos? How can we progress toward that?

Humility is implicit in the imaginal constellation - implicit in our sense of the images' or imaginal figures' autonomy, which we'll return to, in the non-reductive, non-reducible nature of the image, in reverence, unfathomability, divinity, and dimensionality. You could say humility emerges from this; it's implicit in all of that.

If we can notice it, tune to it, allow it, and open to it, we can draw it out, amplify that node, encourage it, and perhaps even ignite it further. This ignites the whole mode.

I mentioned bowing as well, and this is deeply intertwined with this sense of divinity, grace, reverence, and humility. Bowing, for me, is a profoundly beautiful stance or poise or movement of being - a movement of devotion.

By bowing, I don't mean just a physical gesture, though it may be, or it may look different from what we typically think a bow looks like. Something in the being is moved - and it may not even manifest as physical movement - in reverence, in surrender, in orientation to that sense of sacredness, in giving oneself to something.

Bowing is not merely a gesture. It's also not simply accepting - "I bow to my fate" or "I bow to this illness." It's not just about acceptance. It includes a sense of the sacredness of what one is bowing to, and implicit in this is the unfathomability of what one is bowing to.

Humility can be, for some people, a slightly awkward word or one with tricky connotations, even if these operate subtly in the field, in the aura or cloud of the word and what it might mean for us. But as we're using it, humility doesn't preclude empowerment. Because I feel humble doesn't mean I'm disempowered. It might mean I feel great empowerment in all kinds of ways.

Empowerment and humility can coexist in the experience of an image, just as they can coexist in life - in our relations with others and with events and the cosmos. But this is only possible if neither the humility nor the empowerment is identified with.

Only if neither the humility nor the empowerment is identified with. So again, this kind of imaginal middle way is necessary so that we don't take on the identity of the humble one and reify that as who we are and really believe that—or the empowered one or whatever.

But one of the points here is humility doesn't always look or feel how we typically think it looks or feels. So humility, even grace for some people, these kinds of words are often loaded for us, and they can mean different things and be loaded in different ways, depending on our past conditioning with such words.

But in imaginal practice, or with sensing with soul, these words and these attitudes—humility, grace, reverence, etc., bowing—the words and the attitudes to which they refer, they need to not be too self-weighted, too heavy with self, too focused on self, and certainly not on heavy concepts like sin and the sin of the self and all that kind of heavy, contracted, dense and tight fabrication of self-sense and self-story.

You could say these kinds of words, humility and reverence and the rest, and the dispositions that they refer to, occupy a certain region of the spectrum of self-fabrication. In other words, too much tight, dense, solid self-fabrication in association with those words, and we've lost the imaginal. Outside of that region of at least slightly lighter self-fabrication, the imaginal perception, the sensing with soul, won't work and won't be fruitful.

Let me say one last thing as a general point about this cluster of notions—humility, bowing, reverence, grace. If they are involved in soul-making and imaginal practice, as I'm saying they are, when they are involved with soul-making, they will themselves get caught up as objects of the soul-making dynamic, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

And so the very sense, the very experience and the very idea of, for example, humility will expand, will stretch, will break open and be reconstituted larger. As we have explained about the whole process, the whole way the eros-psyche-logos dynamic works, when anything comes into its vortex, into its orbit, when anything is caught up, subsumed, involved, implicated in it, then it comes alive as an object of soul-making. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic goes to work on that object itself.

Our sense, our idea, our experience of humility—of what that means to us, of what that can be to us, of what it looks like, of what its range is—similarly with bowing and the rest of them, will itself become image. Humility becomes an imaginal object and an object of eros. We start to have an erotic relationship with the humility that we are experiencing or that we glimpse. You understand? And the whole thing gets infused and ignited itself.

Again, we don't reject delineations in this whole conceptual framework that we're unfolding. We don't reject delineations and concepts and try to just open and be non-conceptual or whatever. But we use definitions and use delineations from some starting point—wherever you are, wherever that is for an individual at the moment, in your sense of "this is what humility means."

And then that quality, humility or whatever it is, can develop because it gets stretched, it gets expanded, it gets busted open, it gets worked, deepened, widened by the soul-making dynamic. The quality can develop because we're practicing it and because we're allowing it and opening to it, but then it gets a whole other kind of gear of opening and development of the image and the idea of that very quality of, say, humility or reverence.

And as with all soul-making, it's potentially infinite. What's the range, what's the limit of what that word can be and mean and feel and be experienced as by us? Like the rest of the soul-making dynamics, it's potentially infinite—its range, its depth, its subtlety, its nuances, the individual shadings and delineations we start to make within humility, as well as our relationship with it. And that gets all opened up.

So like everything else in imaginal work and soul-making work, we make delineations, but those delineations we make don't get dissolved or erased. The twonesses that we make—humility and non-humility, or whatever—don't collapse or melt into a oneness only, although we can be conscious of the dimension of unity pervading everything. But rather in imaginal practice, in soul-making work, the delineations and the twonesses are mostly retained, but they have soft and elastic edges so they can expand, they can be stretched—whether we're talking about the twoness of self and object or self and imaginal object or self and other, self and world, or just the twonesses of delineating between concepts.

So we introduce some of these words, like humility, and they might sound a little awkward or unfamiliar. We're just not really used to that kind of word, or that kind of stance, perhaps. And we're not really familiar with it. We don't get a flavor of it yet. We haven't got a flavor of it yet. But as we practice with it, we start to notice that we get more familiar with it. We start to amplify it. We start to feel more comfortable with it. It starts to grow and develop.

And then once it becomes itself an object of eros, once it itself becomes imaginal—when we have an imaginal image of this humility, of this bowing, of this poise, whatever it is—then there's an even greater development, potentially infinite development of the depth and the breadth and the complications and the nuances of what can be involved for us in that very word humility. But we start where we are. We start where we are and it grows from there just through the attention, through the care, through the gentle and subtle entering into the practice and responsiveness.

So I think—I've lost count, but I think a tenth on our list is trust. I've mentioned it briefly as we ran through the list, and I've talked about it on previous retreats, I think, the Path of the Imaginal, perhaps other retreats.

Sometimes what happens with images is that we might have a sense of clearly good beings nurturing us, and this feels genuinely helpful. But then perhaps other characters enter the image, and they seem to be destroying or attacking or wiping out what we thought were the good guys—clearly they must be the bad guys.

One option in imaginal practice is to intervene imaginatively, supporting the good guys against the bad guys. But it may also be that there's again a deeper intelligence working. What seems problematic or dark, what appears pathological, may have a deeper intelligence to it, a deeper wisdom and necessity.

So what if I simply move back into a mode of witnessing that destruction of the apparently good guys by the apparently bad guys? I witness it, resonate with it, feel the pathos of it, and sense in the soul what that does. I sense in the energy body what that does.

Again, we can use the sense of the energy body being aligned, energized, opened, harmonized. This is a very good indicator that we're on the right track. My mind doesn't get this—it was all very nice with the good guys, now the bad guys have come and they're destroying everything. But if the energy body is saying "yes," if there's a sense of opening and expansion and beauty coming through this, then I trust that. I trust that there's something here that my conventional thinking doesn't understand.

Sometimes what we call "dark" imaginal figures or images are actually serving the soul in ways that we don't comprehend with our usual thinking. They may be destroying something that needs to be destroyed, or initiating us into some necessary wisdom, or breaking open some structure that has become too rigid.

This trust—this willingness to suspend our usual judgments about good and bad, about what should be happening—is fundamental to imaginal practice. It's a trust in the deeper intelligence of the psyche, in the soul's own wisdom about what it needs for its unfoldment.

kind of taking over from the good guys, somehow my energy body just is getting more harmonized and more open as that happens. I can trust it even if my mind doesn't get it. You understand?

Or sometimes there are deeper than just the mind's superficial conventional objections and fears, there's a sense of the soul-making and the resonances and the meaningfulness. We don't completely understand it, but it feels somehow right. It's touching us and resonating with the soul deeply.

Let me offer one last element for now—number eleven on our list, though again, it depends how you count: duty. I mentioned it before, and it's something I've talked about quite a bit, certainly on the Path of the Imaginal retreat. To me, this is really important as well. It's another aspect of the imaginal constellation and indeed of any soul-making experience—a sense of duty that the soul feels.

It has a duty. It's not always clear what that duty is or how it should manifest. I've explored this before: whether it needs to be literal, whether it needs to be concretized, whether it needs to be an obvious translation or something much more subtle, whether it needs to be just purely internal—through the reverence, through the bowing, through the respect and humility. So I won't go into that again, but I will point out that, as I said, it's always an aspect of the relationship with the imaginal object, the imaginal figure, and indeed of any soul-making experience.

Even, for instance, when what's happening to constitute a soul-making experience is not so much an image, but just an idea, or a framework that has expanded—our whole logos, or conceptual framework, or just an individual idea. We have a new idea, and we can feel the importance of it. It's new. Something's expanded in my whole conceptual framework just by the introduction of this new idea. It might be something about anything—about the cosmos, or about the nature of God, or the nature of self, or soul.

Or it might be the expansion into a new way of looking. It might be even the perception of a level of oneness that is relatively new, as an expansion for me, or a state of consciousness—for example, a jhana that's relatively new. But when it feels soul-making, somehow, and often vaguely, we feel at some level a sense of duty—for instance, to explore it further, to consolidate it.

So if I've perceived that oneness, there's somewhere in the being a sense of: I need to go into this more, I need to open to it more, I've got a duty to consolidate it, make it part of my life, let it or support it to actually influence and guide or undergird my everyday life, my choices, my values. What would it be for this new idea, this new conceptual framework, this new way of looking, this new perception—whether of cosmic oneness of some kind, or just this state, this jhana that I've glimpsed, this remarkable state, the third jhana, utterly remarkable—what does it imply about my life? What does it imply about how to live and what to choose and what's important and what's valuable? And how can I bring that in so that it really flows in and informs and supports and grounds my life, my existence, my orientation?

Somehow, I feel that we vaguely, even when there's no obvious image involved, when there's soul-making involved in any way—it's different with imaginal figures, but still the same—there's some kind of duty that we feel. At the very least, not to forget it. At the very least, not to forget it.

So again, I would say that's an aspect, an element, a node of the imaginal relationship—again, more of the subjective pole. It may be also an objective correlate or a correlate in the imaginal object, in the imaginal figure.

But let's stop there for now.

CHAPTER 107

Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 1h22

> *In this fifth installment of exploring aspects of the imaginal, Rob Burbea examines three crucial elements of authentic imaginal practice. He begins with "fullness of intention," emphasizing that genuine imaginal work serves soul-making rather than personal growth, requiring practice "for the sake of divinity" rather than the self. This intention encompasses more than just passion or emotional intensity—it includes the full eros-psyche-logos dynamic that extends understanding and brings dimensionality.*
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> *Burbea then discusses the autonomy of both the imaginal other and the practitioner, exploring how imaginal perception preserves twoness rather than collapsing into oneness. Using examples from his own practice on Dartmoor, he illustrates how images maintain their independence while remaining in relationship. This connects to fundamental questions about free will versus determinism, showing how soul-making requires both the givenness of what comes from soul and our freedom to respond.*
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> *The talk concludes with "indefinite boundaries"—how imaginal objects have soft, elastic edges that fade into unfathomability. Unlike material perception with its apparent sharp boundaries, imaginal perception involves infinite echoing and mirroring between image and life, creating meaningfulness that includes specific meanings while remaining open to unlimited interpretation. This element reveals how personhood, whether of imaginal figures or beloved humans, cannot be reduced to singular meanings but maintains inexhaustible depth.*

All right, if we continue with our list of elements and aspects of the imaginal and of sensing the soul—and I think you'll probably almost certainly have gotten the sense by now that you should take my counting of the elements on this list with a large grain of salt—I think this is number twelve, depending on how you count and how you slice things up. So number twelve. I'm not quite sure what to call this, but let's call it "fullness of intention" for now.

Now this is related—you'll hear—to many of the previous elements. In fact, they're all related, but this one is more obviously related to many of the previous elements: grace, reverence, humility, divinity, duty, and so forth. In a way, we could say that it's perhaps implicit in the fullness of the meaning of those elements, but we want to draw it out. I think it's helpful and worthwhile to draw it out as something standing on its own—or rather, separate it out as if it were standing on its own, when it's not.

The reason I'm choosing to speak again about drawing out and delineating these lists is partly just in response to what has come back to us so far in terms of what we hear people not quite understanding, or things they've heard but perhaps weren't clear about, or they forgot or overlooked. So this choice of going through the list in this way is basically a response to the sense we're getting from people who are working with this material. And partly, as I said, it's helpful to draw these elements out because it will contribute to our understanding, but also our sensitivity and discernment, and also to the art of practice and our kind of finesse there—our subtlety, our art.

So number twelve: fullness of intention. Now this itself has two parts or two aspects or two dimensions. It's interesting—as I was reflecting on it, I don't know that this is something that we so much notice, and in the noticing of it, it ignites the other factors. But it's something that we may be able to focus on as we're working, or working with an image, or with a certain sensing of soul, and then kind of wiggle it, jiggle it a little bit—open up or bolster it or deepen this dimension of filling out the intention, letting the intentionality fill out. So it might be more that an activity is implied in this node rather than just a sort of noticing it. That may be the case.

So, two aspects of this, two parts. And the first is—well, they're both actually relative to the subjective pole. In other words, my part of the relationship or attitude to the imaginal figure, the imaginal object, the perception that I'm sensing with soul. It may be, as we get really deep into this, that one perceives it's actually also an element of the object itself, of the objective pole of the relationship, of the imaginal constellation.

But this first part of this fullness of intention—and I've mentioned it already—is that my relationship or attitude... the intention there is not primarily, not primarily in the service of my growth, my spiritual growth, my empowerment or whatever it is, my psychological growth, my healing even, or my psycho-spiritual process. It may be that that intention is mixed in there. It certainly is the case that these kinds of things will be endemic. They will grow with the imaginal. They are gifts of the imaginal relationship as it deepens. But the intention is not primarily in the service of that. It's not primarily for my growth, my empowerment, my psychological or spiritual process, my healing.

So I mentioned this before, but it's quite radical. It's quite rare as well. People often use certain language, but when you just ask a little bit or hear a bit more what their relationship really is, it often is in the service of self-growth. And it can be a bit almost baffling to the modern mind often to conceive of some other kind of intention in this regard.

So again, I don't want to overwhelm you or have you feel like, "Well, the bar is just set so high here for what you're talking about, Rob. I don't know if I've ever come close to that." There is a natural evolution in practicing with images and bringing all this to bear, so that even if this particular piece feels like, "Hmm, I'm not there yet," or "I don't think that's really the case for me"—remember, there's a spectrum. There's a spectrum of skillful uses of the imagination, and it kind of gets more and more into what we might call the fully or authentically imaginal. So we're on that spectrum, and we're just interested in encouraging the movement to that fuller, more genuine, more authentic end.

And there is a natural evolution. In other words, if we begin to love this kind of practice, this kind of work, if we begin to start to understand some of the ideas and begin to work with it in practice, there will be a natural evolution over time towards the intentionality being primarily for soul-making. Soul-making is the primary intention for engaging with the imaginal, in relationship with the imaginal other, the imaginal figure, in sensing with soul. Soul-making is the primary intention.

Another way of putting that—and I think I did focus on this in some talks at the beginning of the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat—is practicing for the sake of God, for the sake of divinity, not for myself. And we can easily adopt that phrase, but actually a genuine opening or shift or deepening or filling out of the intention is actually quite rare. So, so beautiful. And so transformative, in fact. But as I said, there is a natural evolution. If we get into it, eventually something in all this works its magic and that becomes the primary intention, the primary reason why we're doing all this. And there are lots of other gifts too.

But the primary reason is the soul loves soul-making. And we love that and we want that almost, in fact, more than anything else. We're practicing for the sake of God, in the service of the God, in the service of divinity, in the service of Buddha nature.

Okay, so that's the first part of this fullness of intention. That this is not primarily for me and my process and my growth or whatever it is.

The second part is kind of related, but it's to say that the intention in being for soul-making is more than just an intention for heartfulness or for passionate living. So sometimes people... I sometimes get the sense that a person has elevated those qualities and either mistaken them for soulfulness or just kind of fixated on those qualities in their life as being of paramount importance in the way that they relate to organize their life or their practice or what they select out from what's most meaningful to them in the world, in relationships, in stories, etc.

So what we mean here is if the intention is for soul-making, it's more than just for the sake of a rich and deep and intense emotional life, beautiful and lovely as that is and beneficial as that is. It's more than just a kind of elevation of feeling passionate or passionate engagement. Again, necessary, beautiful, lovely and fruitful as that is. It's more also than only a wanting of eros, or eros only, in the kind of small sense, in the sense of, "I like this feeling of eros, I like the juiciness, I like the fire, I like the engagement, I like the passion, I like the aliveness of it, and the buzz and all that," in the small sense.

Eros in the big sense, if you remember back to the talks, we explained this in quite a lot of depth. If eros is allowed to do its thing fully, it automatically inseminates, involves, fertilizes, extends the psyche and the logos and lots of other things too. And so then we can talk about eros in the big sense as an element of that larger and more involved dynamic that does involve psyche, does involve logos, etc.

If the intention is just for the buzz of aliveness and the juiciness and the fire of eros in its more isolated sense, without it really including the range of what is impregnated and catalyzed in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, then that too is not full enough of intention. And certainly not a desire just for sex. Or, again, if it's a desire for the pleasure, the delight in the soul-making and the eros. Again, it's not full enough. Or a desire for an intention for fascinating images. It's endlessly fascinating, like what might come up. Great, wonderful, extremely rich, bountiful things. Certainly interesting, but in itself, it's too small as an intention, finally.

So the intention for soul-making in a more fuller sense includes all that, what we've just been through: emotion, passion, eros in its smaller sense, pleasure, delight, fascinating images, all that. But it also includes eros in the larger sense, which includes logos in terms of understanding. Something is being pushed on and extended and enriched and deepened and complicated in the understanding, that whole dynamic, with all that sense of dimensionality and divinity, all that.

In other words, eros in its small sense, for example, a fascinating image, might not be so pregnant with that sense of dimensionality and divinity and really all the elements that we're talking about. So sometimes people, again, it's slightly personality style, it's slightly a cultural sort of influence or conditioning, but sometimes people love the eros, love the images, and kind of forget a little bit about the logos, where it doesn't yet quite land and open as something really important and really fertile aspect of the whole dynamic or fertile dimension of soul.

Logos, in the sense of understanding, conception, the stretching, the enriching of that, is itself an aspect of soul. We love that logoistic element of soul-making as much, eventually, as we love any of the other aspects: the delight, the eros, the vitality, the juiciness, etc.

And I've also said in some other talks, I think it was primarily on *Eros Unfettered*, that the logos is also important for balancing and stabilizing with the images and intense energy and all that. That conceptual structure, having a conceptual structure that's actually adequate, can bring a lot of wisdom into the proceedings and understand how to attenuate things or respond to things or what to emphasize, what to seek out, etc. But also in itself provides, in its structure, balance and stability.

So in this second part of this fullness of intention, we're not limiting what we're aiming for. It's bigger, it's wider, it's more inclusive than just those more limited elements, wonderful as they might be and kind of vitalizing as they may be. All of them that we went through—emotion, emotionality, passion, eros in the small sense, pleasure, delight, fascinating images, whatever—they are all, in one way or another, elements of soul-making or subsidiary to soul-making, if you like. Sometimes very obviously, sometimes a little bit obliquely or more obscurely or less concretely.

I'll throw one more thing in there, because it may be—or I'm wondering, it may be—however, as a qualification to what I just have been through, maybe that the desire for one of these elements, for instance, passion... So one can become kind of passionate about passion and interested in it and seek it out. And if the desire for one of those elements, those sort of subsidiary elements, I wonder if that particular desire is allowed and pursued with intelligence, intelligently pursued and fully pursued, whether it itself won't inevitably open up to the other aspects of soul-making and naturally evolve into a more full intentionality for the fullness of soul-making.

Do you understand? It's one thing. The soul's got hold of one thing. Let's say it's passion, and it's enamored with passion, and it's interested in passion. And if it follows that interest, and that connection, and that desire for passion, and inquires into, what is it that allows me to have a fuller passion, if that's what I want? I'm on the arrow of desire, but I'm pursuing it with intelligence, with rigor, in fact. And allowing and riding that, but inquiring into what allows it, what allows passion to be full and rich and multidimensional and multidirectional and all of that.

And eventually the passion itself, that singular arrow, will open up in the whole field of soul-making. At least I'm wondering if that's the case, and I have a strong suspicion that it is. But in itself, it may well be too limited. And an aspect of, let's say, the more fully imaginable, that end of the spectrum, is this fullness of intention in those two parts that we said.

So that would be number twelve, I think.

Number 13, roughly, autonomy, the autonomy of the imaginal other, the imaginal object. Now, I've talked a lot about this. I think it was right from the beginning in Theatre of Selves and things like that, and I keep stressing it.

So, to me this is very interesting. Actually, this number 13 is autonomy and twoness, but two things we've talked about before, the twoness much more in the last couple of retreats, but autonomy and twoness. So, what does that mean? It means that the imaginal figure or the object, the other perceived, sensed with soul, if it's something in our material world or another in our material world, has an autonomy. It's independent of me. We get a sense of it. It's not kind of a part of me or an aspect of me. I can't reduce it to that.

This is interesting in a number of ways. One is that, in the way I would like to lay out the whole logos of this work, we never lose sight of the fact that any perception, including an imaginal perception, an imaginal other, whatever it is, is anything other than a dependent arising. All perception is sensing with soul or imaginal or regular material perception, whatever it is, in the mind, it's all a dependent arising. So somehow acknowledging the dependent arising of things, and that's a kind of unshakable base of the larger logos that I would put out there. But somehow within that, we get a sense of the independence of this thing.

So again here we have, right in this notion of autonomy, we have a kind of straddling or bridging of two apparently contradictory attitudes, understandings, relationships. On the one hand, we see its dependent arising. On the other, we sense or feel it or allow it to manifest to us as independent. You could say the way of looking and the way of conceiving grants the imaginal other or the object sensed with soul a sense of autonomy and independence. It doesn't feel right or true to just reduce it to an aspect or a part of me or my psychology. It's not reducible.

Extending that a little bit, we could say that this autonomy, when it's allowed its fullness of autonomy, what it really means is we begin to recognize and become alive to the personhood of the imaginal figure. Or the personhood of anything we are perceiving, sensing with soul. It could be a tree, it could be a piece of land, it could be my own

body. And we think, well, that's a part of me. But actually, once we get into sensing our own body with soul, the body itself begins to have its own intelligence, its own agency, its own intention, its own soul. You understand? So we're entering what I've talked about before on other retreats. We're talking about the autonomy within the intersubjective field. An intersubjective field. Two subjects get established or filled out. Me and the imaginal other.

So it's as if there's a sense of respect for and a sensitivity to and a relationship between two souls there. So this is of course related to this twoness that we've been talking about on a couple of recent retreats and emphasizing. Sensing with soul, imaginal perception does not, for the most part, for the most part, does not collapse things or dissolve things or merge or melt things into oneness. There are exceptions to that. I've been through all this on recent retreats. But generally speaking, it doesn't do that. It preserves twoness. So imaginal perception, sensing with soul, preserves twoness.

Now there's a lot to this, but as an example, I was out for a walk on Dartmoor a few months ago, in fact, in the summer. And I'm walking on a lovely area there. And the image arose as I was walking of many, many kind of thick, muscular tentacles rising up from the earth that I was walking on, rising up, these thick, muscular tentacles, almost like giant reptilian sort of octopus tentacles. They're like a foot wide, each of them a foot wide, many, many of them, rising up to claim me, to capture me. One would think to suck me down would be the initial impulse, but really they were just rising up, countless of them, and densely covering the land, the Earth's surface, around me, at least.

Now, if we're not careful, this could be construed, such an image—and by the way, it was very, very delightful, very sort of rapturous image in both senses. It was very blissful in that sense, rapturous, but also sensed as a rapture, a seizing from the earth, but instead of the usual rapture, people tend to think it's up, it was down, down and earthy, rather than up and ethereal. But usually we might construe that kind of image out of dharma or spiritual habits or habitual teachings that we're used to as an image kind of indicating oneness or a move towards union, dissolution in the earth below, a kind of oneness emerging with that rather than with the spirit above.

Yes, we can see the difference—it's down and earthy rather than up and ethereal—but we might tend to suppose that it's an image portending or indicating or signaling or initiating union, movement towards oneness. But the image did not proceed forward in time to a dissolving union. And I've been through this before—imaginal images are most often not what I call narrative, moving in time, but iconic.

Again, there are many exceptions, but they are, if you like, almost static, eternal moments, despite the dynamism and energy implied in them or present in images such as this one. There's something timeless—I'm going to come back to this eternality of images later as an element on our list.

So if we see this image of the tentacles claiming me for what it is, rather than through the typical assumptions of union or dissolution or a kind of dharma that prioritizes that movement towards union, dissolution, fading, and so forth—that whole spectrum as the primary aim of spiritual endeavor—if we resist that temptation of the typical lenses, then you actually see that what stands out in this image is the twoness. It's the earth and me in relationship. There's relationship there. There's both twoness and eros, and there's not the dissolution, but twoness and eros are captured in or through the image.

There might be more than two, actually. There might be many, because I'm not sure now whether it was many or just the earth—many tentacles, many others, or just the earth. And also what's noticeable is the power of the autonomous desire of the earth, the eros of the earth. It was the earth's eros. In other words, there was two there. It—the earth, she, he, it—had its own eros. Its desire was autonomous, and that was also vividly sensed in the image. It was not my desire. There's two there. There's autonomy.

So eros, as I said, sustains twoness. Generally speaking, there are exceptions—I've been through it before. But more than that, eros and soul-making needs twoness. It needs two. It takes two for eros. It takes two to soul-make. And further—we've explained all this before—eros and soul-making will create and discover twonessess, othernesses, in an ongoing way. More and more twoness, more and more otherness. Eros needs to and also creates and discovers twonessess, othernesses, in an open-ended way.

Now, otherness is actually already a given of our existence. We sense othernesses. We sense otherness. There's a sense of self, there's a sense of other. Even if we know and perceive fundamental oneness—and one knows unshakably the fundamental oneness of all things and can have a vivid, palpable, deep, mystical sense of that oneness, at whatever level it is (there are different kinds of oneness, I've explained all this before)—it's still the case that phenomenally or phenomenologically, others appear to us. Otherness appears to us. Perception delineates othernesses. Otherwise we wouldn't be able to move in the world. We wouldn't know how to function. We wouldn't be able to operate anything. We wouldn't be able to go to the toilet. We wouldn't be able to eat. All that.

So perception delineates at a very basic level othernesses, otherness. This is already a given, an aspect of the way consciousness works and must work. But the thing about eros is that it creates and discovers—or eros, as it's allowed to catalyze and ignite this whole soul-making dynamic of eros, psyche, logos, and all that—will create and discover more othernesses.

This doesn't mean more distance, more alienation between self and other. It's not the same as unskillful fabrication, building more dukkha. But there will be an ongoing creation and discovery of more and more dimensions, more and more particulars, more and more images, more and more aspects within a beloved object, a thing, a being scented with soul.

We've been through all that before.

Now there's something I'd like to add here that perhaps I haven't emphasized so much before, so I want to draw that out. So autonomy and two-ness. There's the autonomy of the other, the autonomy of the imaginal other, the autonomy of the other sensed with soul. But also there is implicit in that, and worth drawing out, the autonomy of the self, the autonomy of the subject. In other words, here I am in this imaginal world, this perception, engaging in relationship with this imaginal other, but I also have some autonomy there.

So very often, and related to a lot of what we've said, even in this talk so far, the things that we perceive soulfully, when we sense with soul ourselves, our life, our circumstances, or some perception opens up, or an imaginal figure—all of that can seem, in the realm of soul-making, in the realm of soulfulness, that it is given, that it has a kind of necessity. So this imaginal figure—and I've talked a lot about this, again, I think right from the start—this sense of the necessity of this imaginal figure, even with all its seeming craziness or perhaps pathology or whatever it is, and I don't understand it fully or it puzzles me, it seems like soul is giving us something.

And this is related to these ideas about claim and duty. And even when we sense our lives and the elements of our life and the events of our life and the paths of our lives, sometimes we can get the sense of necessity there too. My illness, maybe, I don't know, my death. When we're sensing with soul, this is a face of, or a sense within that of being given something, of something being a necessity, and that it asks of us something. There's a claim there and duty.

But the other side there, balancing it, is that we are, in relation to imaginal objects and in relation to imaginal figures and whatever objects sensed with soul and whatever it is—we are free. At the same time as there's a necessity and something is given to us

and we're just the recipients, we are also free to act, to choose, to intend, to steer, to adopt ways of looking and attitudes and thoughts, conceptions and conceptual frameworks, ideas that either move us deeper into the soul-making, or less, or this way, or that way.

So there's this curious kind of, again, straddling or balance between two views: the givenness, the necessity of what comes to us from soul, let's put it that way, and our freedom to steer, guide, enter into, hold a certain attitude, adopt a certain attitude, to choose, to intend. So this is something that—yeah, I think it's a very significant aspect of the whole soul-making business.

It's related a little bit, I want to linger on this just a little while, it's related a little bit to ethics, actually, and values. So I'll explain—I'll try to be brief, and I may well come back to this in the future, but I'll try to be brief now.

Implicit in or fundamental to the very possibility of ethics—in other words, just the whole idea of ethics, of right and wrong and choosing rightly or wrongly—fundamental and implicit to that is the perspective of the possibility of free will. No free will, the whole realm of philosophy of ethics is pointless. It's like human beings can't choose. So the perspective of the possibility of our free will is fundamental and implicit in the very possibility of any ethical discussion.

Because if everything, every response or feeling or intention, impulse is totally conditioned, if we solely adopt that view, that everything I think, all my responses—if I hate something, if I desire something, any feeling I have, all that is just conditioned from past history and present input from the environment and from others—if I just have that view, that everything is conditioned that way, then there can be no possibility of making ethical choices, right?

That's implicit when we hear ethical stories that move us, for instance. A beautiful passage from Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, when he talks about being in Auschwitz, being in the concentration camps, and he says something—excuse me, I won't say it so well, but he says something like: we who lived through the camps, we remember those who had nothing, had almost nothing, who were sick and weary and in the same boat as we were. And yet they went around giving away their last piece of bread, comforting, consoling others. And they bear testament. Such acts that human beings are capable of bear witness to the fact that you can take everything away from a human being except their freedom to choose their own way. Whatever the circumstances are, there is that freedom. And the beauty of that—we can choose what is noble, what we value, we can choose what we feel deeply is right, and that can transcend any other concern in our life.

So I hope to come back to this area, as I said, but I just want to say a little bit now. So the question of free will versus determinism—it's kind of an open one, and I'll say a couple of things about that. All we can say at this point, I think, is that neither extreme view, that of complete determination or conditionality—everything is just conditioned, all my impulses, all my thoughts, all my feelings—or that of a total free will—I'm always completely free and I am the one who's solely responsible, I'm purely self-determined—I don't think we can at this point really say either of those is solely or ultimately true.

And in any particular situation, the exact balance, the exact mix or relationship of those inputs from, so to speak, the self and from, so to speak, conditions, is too complex to fathom. They are, however, therefore, both available to us—both these views, the view of self-determination, self-choice, and the view of conditionality—they're available to us separately as views, or together, kind of fused, if they're held lightly as perspectives. And there are also views that go beyond both of them.

So emptiness to me and no-self—that teaching doesn't stop at just "everything is just conditions, you're just a process of conditioned elements, conditioned from your past and conditioned from the environment. And so there's no self, there's no self-choice, there's no free will." Conditions too are empty. Any of those kind of dots or elements you might want to say are the conditioning factors, when probed, they are recognized to be empty too.

So there's a whole view even beyond these two. And people often get a little—I feel a little silly with this insistence that there's no such thing as free will. It's too extreme a view and it just doesn't bear honest, authentic introspection.

The idea or the view that there is no free will, that everything is dependent on conditions, is a skillful view to adopt at certain times. It can really help with blame, and I've talked and written about this before. It's a way of looking, skillful at times. At other times, the view of free will is skillful. They're kind of opposite, both true and both adoptable. So I think it's really important to bring some intelligence here and some actual honesty and discernment, actual clarity of seeing.

Sometimes you get certain spiritual schools or even within Buddhism that kind of lean way too much on this insistence that there is no free will. Not only is it a little short-sighted and not particularly intelligent, but it's also not very beautiful. It doesn't open up much beauty. Neither does it open up much soul-making potential, which is the connection I want to make.

Because, just like ethics, soul-making needs a perspective of the possibility, to some extent, of individual free will. And, at the same time, a view that, to some extent, regards the circumstance of our lives and our individuality and the imaginal figures that come to us as given to us by the soul, by the God, by divinity, by Buddha nature, whatever words we want to use.

Soul-making needs a perspective of the possibility of both—to some extent, individual free will, and to some extent, this givenness of our lives, of our circumstances, of our fate, of the images that come.

It is in this balance of self and other, really the balance of the autonomies of self and imaginal figure, while the two are at the same time somehow not separate. It's in that balance and that kind of straddling again, the balance of self and other, both autonomies and at the same time somehow not separate. It's in that mix or balance or kind of meta-view, if you like, that soul-making and imaginal practice is possible and fertile.

So the autonomy of self and the autonomy of other. Soul draws us—there is a telos that we can sense in the way soul draws us, or draws us on, or towards something, or in hindsight we can see that. Soul gives us our circumstances, our individuality, the trajectory of our lives, our fate, our images. And at the same time, we assent with our free will. We have to assent to soul-making.

So all this relates to another element—a deep and central notion which I've mentioned before—of participation. And it's all wrapped up in that, in a sense. We participate in soul, we participate in the divine, we participate in all the dimensions of our being. Aspects of our being participate in the divine or in soul or in the Buddha nature, in the imaginal other.

This notion of participation, a very deep notion—one of the beauties of it is it preserves an autonomy in a sense of non-separation. The idea of participation preserves an autonomy and a sense of non-separation. We'll come back to that.

But the very word, even, soul-making—soul-making implies, in the suffix, in the "making" bit, implies agency in doing. Soul-making. Agency in doing is not, in other words, a completely passive receiving that is involved in soul-making. We receive, we're given, but we also need to do and adopt and relate in certain ways. We assent to soul-making, as I said, and our free will is involved in that.

So the two-ness of soul-making, of imaginal work, of sensing the soul, preserves, to some extent, my autonomy, the subject's autonomy, as well as that, for example, of the imaginal figure, of the other. It preserves, emphasizes, requires my choosing, my will, my consciously orienting, my deliberately considering and viewing and adopting a certain way of looking and stance.

Okay, number 14 on our list. Many of these elements, perhaps you've already heard how some of them are implicit in each other, or you could say, well, that's part of that or whatever. Others, if you like, qualify each other. This is an aspect of the soul-making. This is an aspect of sensing the soul. This is an aspect of the imaginal constellation, at the same time as that which is opposite to this is as well.

So many of these elements kind of interpenetrate, many of them kind of qualify each other or balance each other or give complexity to the richness of paradox. That's maybe a good way of putting it—paradoxical implications, apparently self-contradictory relationships between some of these elements.

So, number 14: We've said already that despite the dependent origination, there's one paradox already—despite the dependent origination, there is the sense of and the granting of independence and autonomy of the imaginal other, the object-sense of the soul. And yet, number 14: the boundaries are not definite.

The boundaries are not definite. Indefinite boundaries is the 14th element on our list. Boundaries between the subject, the self, if you like, and the other or the imaginal figure—that boundary is not a definite boundary. But also the boundaries of the other, the object sensed with soul, the imaginal figure, and in fact of any soul-making delineation.

So it is with the boundaries of being. When we contemplate other human beings, there's this natural sense of soft edges, of their being extending into mystery, into depths that cannot be fully fathomed. And the same applies to ourselves - when we truly introspect, we don't encounter solid boundaries but rather a sense of extending into unfathomable dimensions.

This quality of indefinite boundaries in the imaginal realm becomes even more pronounced. The imaginal figure or object-sense sensed with soul doesn't end abruptly but rather fades gradually into mystery, into what cannot be fully grasped or defined. Like music that seems to blend with the silence that surrounds it, or like the way a beloved face in memory seems to extend beyond its visual contours into realms of meaning and relationship that have no clear edges.

These soft edges are also elastic. They can expand or contract depending on the quality of attention we bring, the depth of our engagement, the resonance of the moment. Sometimes the imaginal figure seems to fill all of awareness; other times it feels more contained while still maintaining that essential quality of extending beyond definite limits.

This elasticity reveals something crucial about the nature of imaginal perception. We're not dealing with fixed entities but with living realities that breathe and pulse with the rhythms of consciousness itself. The boundaries stretch and contract like the membrane of a living cell, permeable and responsive to the movements of soul.

And here's what's particularly significant: we actually sense these soft, elastic edges. This isn't just a conceptual understanding but a felt reality. When we bring attention to the edges of an imaginal figure, we can perceive how they blur into infinity, how they extend into dimensions that our ordinary perception cannot map. This sensing of the indefinite boundary is itself part of the imaginal experience, part of what makes it numinous and alive.

This quality of soft edges allows for something that rigid boundaries would prevent - the interpenetration of being, the sense that the imaginal other is both distinct and mysteriously connected to ourselves and to the larger web of existence. The imaginal figure maintains its autonomy and independence while simultaneously participating in the fluid dance of consciousness.

When we recognize and attune to these indefinite boundaries, the whole experience deepens. The imaginal becomes more fully itself precisely because we're not trying to contain it within sharp definitions. We're allowing it the space to extend into mystery, to participate in the unfathomable dimensions of being that are its natural habitat.

This is why conventional approaches to imagery or visualization often feel flat or mechanical - they assume definite boundaries, trying to construct clear, contained images rather than allowing for this essential quality of extending into the unknown. True imaginal perception honors the soft-edged nature of these realities, creating space for the mystery to breathe.

The edges are blurred—the bottom, the top, the sides—they're soft, and they're elastic. We can explore this simply by paying attention to the sense of self, the sense of another human being, the sense of anything really. It's also possible with animals, non-humans, and even material things. Just be present with the sense of this thing. It's harder with material objects, but with enough meditative depth and acumen, this quality will emerge.

So here we have element number fourteen: boundaries that are indefinite, soft-edged, and elastic. A thing has elastic edges. A human being obviously has elastic edges as well—a human being can grow. Any being, whether it's an imaginal being or anything scented with soul, also has elastic edges, and it will expand. In other words, our sense of it—our sense of what it is and involves and includes, its depths and range—must be elastic, must be extendable, and it will be because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

We've talked extensively about this in recent retreats, how that dynamic gets going and the elements start enriching and fertilizing each other, complicating and pushing each other. The very sense of what a thing is, what it comprises, what is included, the depths and dimensions of the thing will change, extend, expand. Sometimes it shatters first—our original idea and conception and sense of this thing just explodes—and then it grows. Other times it's more elastic and elastically extendable without being so catastrophically dramatic as a shattering of the vessels.

Related to this element but actually a little different, we come to number fifteen, which I'll call infinite echoing and mirroring. There's something in the perception of the imaginal, something when we sense something with soul—though this is much more apparent with intrapsychic images. I think it's still there, much more subtly and obscurely, when we sense something with soul in what we call direct cosmopoiesis—that's not a cosmopoiesis arrived at through a previous intrapsychic image then opening out and spilling over into the environment. This element of infinite echoing and mirroring is present also in sensing with soul objects that are in the world, but it's much more apparent with intrapsychic images.

What I mean by this infinite echoing and mirroring is that imaginal perception involves or includes some sense of infinite mirroring and echoing, mainly between this image and one's life. There's some kind of mysterious and infinite-seeming quality. We get the sense of this infinite echoing, like mirrors placed opposite each other where the reflections go toward infinity. Or again, like an echo in a canyon that doesn't seem to clearly stop at some point. We can't discern exactly when that series of echoes ends; the edges, the further or deeper edges, are indistinct. They fade into infinity. We sense that this echoing or mirroring is or might be going on forever. We can't quite make out the edge.

This sense of it is not often primary in our attention—it's usually secondary. But it's actually very important, this kind of infinite depth of mirroring and mutual mirroring and echoing, usually between this image and one's life. It's related to meaningfulness, which will be the next element of our list. This image somehow reflects my life or as-

pects and dimensions of my life, some of which may be quite clear and some of which are a little indistinct and not so obvious. And there's a sense there's more of that reflecting than I can even quite delineate. The image is reflecting my life. My life is reflecting the image. They mutually reflect each other.

As I said, this is an important element, an important aspect to become aware of. It's intrinsic to imaginal perception.

I was working with someone a few months ago—I can't remember the exact context now—and she described an image she had had of a kind of Balinese or Indonesian figure, quite a common stance for an Oriental statue. You'll have seen this somewhere: a figure that's a little fierce with a sword raised above the head and held like a dagger pointing outward. Often one foot is raised and the other foot is bent at the knee.

So there's this kind of very elegant, very dynamic, fierce warrior pose. The image that this person had was of this—whatever it is, excuse me if I'm getting the cultural reference wrong—Balinese or Indonesian warrior god. She could tell it was important, but it wasn't quite becoming fully imaginal. She could sense there was a sacredness to it, but the sacredness was not familiar to her. Now you could say, well, it's from a culture she's not familiar with—she doesn't know that iconography. But also her poise in relation to the sacredness of this image, that too felt unfamiliar. She didn't recognize her own stance either. The whole sense and feeling of sacredness wasn't quite accessible to her, and the entire image really had not become fully imaginal. In her words, it was a bit two-dimensional.

So we were talking, and I suggested that perhaps she could notice and tune into and linger with—probably there are many ways, but really any noticeable way—how she recognized this archetypal image echoing her life personally. The personal echoes, the echoing between image and personal life, the mirroring and being mirrored by this image, this archetype, this icon, whatever it is.

One has to be careful not to be too clunky here. It's a very delicate thing, usually, and I'll talk more about this. It's like—and I have talked about it before—not landing too heavily on "it means this." A lot of this work is really quite subtle. We're picking up resonances that are quite subtle, certainly in their deeper ranges as they become more indistinct and carry that sense of infinity. They're really quite subtle, almost by definition. So you can't be too heavy-handed in this approach of feeling into that infinite echoing and mirroring.

Some of the resonances may be distinct—not entirely clear, but you really get a sense of, "Oh yeah, I can kind of see a sort of refracted or inflected version of that stance of that god in my life, or in a certain thread through my life, or in a certain current of dealings or events and my relationship with them." The instances of this mirroring may be very specific psychological aspects of oneself—very specific personal psychological aspects or patterns. Or they might be events in one's life, or tendencies to approach or be in certain situations a certain way. Or the potential that we don't often manifest or realize—to be in certain ways, in certain relationships or situations.

In other words, there might be something we're capable of, and the image, the imaginal figure, is partly catalyzing something or opening the door of a possibility. It's showing us: "Hey, you know, you actually have this in you as well—this stance, this possibility, this way of relating."

All this connects with the sixteenth element I want to highlight, which is meaningfulness. Again, you can see some overlap here. But this recognition of specific and finite representation or mirroring—when I recognize that, it brings the image alive. It's part of this sixteenth aspect: the sense of meaningfulness. When I notice this specificity—oh, that's echoing, I see that echoes this—and maybe I get the sense of the larger infinite echoing as it shades off into less distinct echoes and mirrorings, then that ignites the constellation, the imaginal constellation. That ignites the other nodes.

So again, there's a middle way to tread here. If I conceptually reduce and limit an imaginal figure to "this image means x only" or "y only"—if I limit it to just this meaning, this one singular meaning, or even a couple of meanings, or five meanings, whatever it is—it will sooner or later, and often sooner, kill the imaginal. It will kill the image as an imaginal image, as a potent, fertile, endlessly deep imaginal image, and also kill the soul-making. It will squash it, constrict it, take the fire away from it.

I'm mentioning this because I want to be clear. Based on feedback, I wonder whether I've been clear enough on this, or perhaps overemphasized something. I was working recently with someone who had an image of riding on a flying dragon—straddling this dragon on its back, flying—and there was a lovely relationship between the person and the dragon. But they had completely no sense of it meaning anything, and the whole thing didn't really open up. The richness and fullness of the imaginal wasn't there. It was just an interesting image, but it wasn't really rich and deep and juicy and multidimensional and colored.

Because I knew this person and their practice quite well, I could see very clearly some of the echoing, some of the elements that were mirrored between their life and this image. Even when they were describing how they were wanting to squeeze the

dragon with their legs—like you would with a horse, using your inner thighs to signal and be in relationship with the horse you're riding, in relationship with the dragon. There was that kind of relationship going on, but he was just baffled. It meant nothing to him.

Knowing him, for me it was really clear. This kind of echoing was going on between that image and very much to do with practice—effort in practice, relationship with effort, modulating effort, the sense of practice having enormous potential power and really being able to fly, to take off, with all the beauty and soul-beauty of the dragon. Even elements of practice like samadhi. Yet he was stumbling a lot, often running into difficulties around effort. For me, knowing him, it was puzzling sitting there: why doesn't he see that? Why is this not taking off? Why doesn't he see that echoing and that meaning?

He actually told me that he'd thought he wasn't supposed to look for any meaning in images. So it's possible that I just wasn't clear in the past in making this distinction between meaningfulness and meaning. I may have overemphasized not reducing it to a certain meaning.

So I would rather say now that meaningfulness includes individual meanings. In this infinite echoing mirror—related to the last point, the last element—we can discern individual echoes or individual reflections between life and image, but we're not stopping at that.

So often we revert to an attitude or relationship with images and imaginal figures, including dream images and figures, an attitude or relationship that wants to figure out what it means and sum it up. It's not, I want to hopefully make clear, that we need to shut down that meaning-seeking attitude, but we need to make sure it doesn't dominate. It doesn't take over and limit.

Another way of thinking about this is that an imaginal figure or something sensed with soul, as I said before, has personhood. We sense more and more of its personhood. This imaginal figure is a person. This thing or object sensed with soul is a person. And it would seem ridiculous in our lives to ask about a person that we love and are touched by or who's important in our lives and psyche, "What does he or she mean to me?" I mean, I might be able to say a couple of things about someone who's deeply important to me in my life, some person, but I can't say that exhausts them or it's only that they mean X or Y to me.

An imaginal figure or a dream figure even is just the same. It doesn't, I would say, only mean X or Y any more than a person who is deeply important to me and in my life, whom I love and who loves me, only means X or Y to me. There's personhood there, and personhood is unfathomable.

So meaning, individual meaning - yes, there is this meaning, there is this echo, there is this whatever it is - may be part of it, may be part of what the imaginal figure is or does. But we can never reduce either an imaginal figure or a person in our lives to one meaning or even several meanings.

So the meaning-seeking and meaning-finding attitude is part of imaginal practice. I didn't mean to exclude it completely or banish it from imaginal practice, but rather don't stop there, don't limit it to that. When it's there, notice it and take whatever meaning, whatever individual meanings, that attitude or faculty comes up with. Oh, it means this, or I notice this echo, or I make this conclusion. Take it as just one "true" meaning of potentially infinite meanings that are carried by and in a certain image, a certain soul perception.

In this way, we do include that. It is important because it might - in this case, with the image of the dragon or the figure of the warrior god - be part of what stimulates, as a node in the lattice, the filling out of the imaginal. So yes, meanings are fine, just don't limit it. Keep open the gates to the garden of infinite interpretations. Keep them open. Don't just settle for one tree or one apple in that orchard.

So we're including individual specific meanings. When I use the word meaningfulness, it's really fullness, meaningfulness, which means there's an unlimited possible number of meanings, and there's this infinite mirroring and echoing of image and life.

So there's a middle way here. On one extreme, a mistake would be any kind of monovalent reduction to one meaning only - "This image means this." Or even several meanings. That would be one extreme of mistake. Another extreme would be a refusal to see any personal and specific meanings in the image at all. That would be another extreme, another mistake. And as I said, if we do that, then probably the image will be without meaningfulness. It won't come alive, it won't open its full sacredness to us, it won't have its full beauty potential or the aliveness of the dynamic of its beautifying, its depth, as it could.

Meaningfulness includes meaning, meanings, and sometimes it's not actually clear. We don't have a clear sense of what any meaning is. And that's fine. "I'm puzzled by this image. I don't know." But at least let's not shut down the possibility of individual meanings, individual discernible echoes and reflections between life and image.

You can probably hear again that this talk of meaning and meaningfulness is related to duty. It's also related to values. And again, I'm hoping at some point to talk more about values and ethics and the relationship with soul-making. But meaningfulness is related to values. We find a sense of meaningfulness in life in relationship to, or part of our sense of meaningfulness is, our relationship to what we value, and what we value most highly, and what's most important to us in our life. This will give our life meaningfulness to the height of that value.

The thing about values is they're limitless. They always will have a beyond to them.

If we say love or goodness or beauty—and these are things that, for some people, and I put myself in that category, they mean everything. Soul-making, soulfulness—these are open-ended values that mean more even than life, more even than life and death. But they don't have a limit to them. They're transcendent in that respect.

They're also transcendent in the sense that any manifestation will be actually limited in how much it instantiates or manifests any particular value. A piece of art will always have some kind of limit to its beauty, if you like, or some kind of compromise that it's making. With goodness, when we're actually faced with ethical choices, we're often making a kind of compromise—well, if I take care of this, then that goes a little bit, or if I'm taking care of this, I can't take care of that.

So there's a sense that values need to manifest in life, and we need to make choices, and oftentimes choices are hard because we can't have perfect, complete and comprehensive goodness. We can't have perfect, complete and comprehensive love actualized in life. The *brahmavihāra* in the heart in meditation is one thing. Actualized in life, we make choices.

There's something about values that they're always kind of beyond what we can reach. Not only can they always be more—you can always be somehow more good or more beautiful or more soulful—but they're also... how we actually manifest them and encounter their manifestations is always going to have some kind of limit or compromise to it.

This in itself is something very interesting. I may return to that in later talks or a later series. But it means that in relation to values, they've got a kind of infinity to them. They've got an infinitude, a transcendence, a beyondness always. And that is part of why we can have an erotic relationship with values and ideas like goodness and beauty and harmony and soulfulness. Because of the infinity, they're always going to have a beyondness, and it always allows Eros to constellate in relation to them.

Values have a part to do with meaningfulness, and values also have a part to do with images and sensing the soul. Whenever we have an imaginal perception, and whenever we're sensing something or other with soul, values that are really important to us, that are dear to our souls and hearts, are bound up—if you like—or expressed or refracted or hinted at, or shining through that imaginal thing, in that imaginal constellation. I hope to come back to this at some point. That's part of meaningfulness—it's our sense of value.

CHAPTER 108

Aspects of the Imaginal (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · 1h30

> *In this sixth installment of exploring aspects of the imaginal, Rob Burbea continues his detailed examination of elements that characterize authentic imaginal perception and soul-making. He explores meaningfulness as something larger than specific meanings—a pregnancy with infinite potential that's never fully exhausted. The discussion moves to eternality or timelessness, explaining how imaginal images have an iconic rather than narrative nature, existing in hierophantic time where beginning and end happen simultaneously.*
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> *Burbea introduces the crucial concept of the imaginal middle way—neither real nor not real—drawing parallels to the traditional Buddhist middle way of emptiness while distinguishing this theatrical quality of imaginal perception. He emphasizes the necessity of play in both senses: the theatrical dimension and the capacity for creative experimentation in practice. The talk explores participation as a mystical concept, examining how one participates in divine archetypes, the mundus imaginalis, and larger soul-making processes while maintaining autonomy.*
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> *The discussion concludes with the concertina aspect—the sense of other possible images waiting in the wings—and the role of concept in imaginal perception. Unlike mainstream Buddhist emphasis on non-conceptual awareness, Burbea argues that imaginal perception is deeply conceptual, requiring concepts that are both vague and open yet capable of refined discernment. These concepts must serve soul-making by maintaining soft, elastic edges while supporting increasingly subtle differentiation and sensitivity.*

Let's take just a moment to remind ourselves of the point of what we're doing right now—to frame where we are and the trajectory of what we're trying to accomplish in this set of talks.

We were identifying a group or list of elements or aspects of the imaginal to make more clear what we really mean by that word "imaginal," which different people use. This supports the understanding and grasping of the conceptual framework that we're using, and also deepens, enriches, and refines the sensitivity and discernment in practice when one begins to notice these things, pay attention to them, and tune to them—these aspects and elements of the imaginal constellation experience.

In addition to that, we are pointing out the possibility of noticing and tuning to some of these aspects in different ways in order to support the movement or development, the evolution of some perception into the more authentically imaginal realm. There is a spectrum of the uses of imagination, and at one end is what we're calling imaginal.

These elements can be played with, attended to in a way that amplifies them, ignites that specific node or element aspect that one's paying attention to. That in turn can ignite or spread that illumination, that activation—that soul life can spread through the other nodes of the lattice, the other stars of the constellation.

The general point about this kind of amplification or ignition is that we can notice one of these elements or aspects. Here I am working with an image; here I am with a certain perception and I notice one of these elements. I bring my attention to that and I sensitively tune into that particular quality, or I bring a delicate question to bear in relation to that node.

For example: Is this imaginal figure autonomous? Do they seem independent? Just the introduction of the question lightly shapes my attention in a way that shines a light on that particular element. The light may illuminate, ignite, amplify that element, draw it out to consciousness, bring it to life really. From there, the whole thing may become more imaginal.

Or the question: Do I have a sense that they're—would I call them real or not real? Sometimes the questions can be posed in actual language in time like that. Sometimes that's way too clunky. It's more a kind of question that's very subtly implicit in the very attention itself, in the looking—very, very nuanced and delicate.

Another question, another way of bringing a kind of very sensitive, curious attention—again, say with the example of an imaginal figure or imaginal perception that we're wanting to help move, evolve along the spectrum towards fully imaginal, fully sensing the soul—might be: Am I loved? Am I loved by this other that I am perceiving? Or, what kind of love do they have for me? What's the quality or character of that love that may be there that I might sense?

So again, this possibility of just noticing, or a kind of questioning, or a kind of curious, sensitive attention to one of those elements or aspects.

Thirdly, there's the possibility that one can actually shift one of those elements, move it, turn it on, switch it on, wiggle it or jiggle it or change it a little bit so that it turns on. In being turned on, it turns on the other elements and the whole constellation, the whole lattice is turned on, amplified, to resonate in that imaginal wavelength of things.

So there are those three possibilities: just noticing; a kind of questioning or sensitive, curious attention; and the possibility of actually focusing on shifting it, switching it on, turning it on, wiggling, jiggling it until it comes on. Very, very delicate, all this. Very delicate, very light, not so clunky.

I've said before, and I'll say it again right now: A lot of the evolution, I think, when we talk about practice going deeper or evolving or maturing, has to do with things becoming more subtle, actually. Not so much more fireworks, more clunkiness, more grossness. A lot has to do with the experiences becoming more subtle and correspondingly our awareness and our responsiveness becoming much more delicate and nuanced and subtle.

Sometimes there's a third or fourth possibility. We can actually start deliberately with one of these elements that may be accessible for us at that time. For example, we might just have accessible to us a general sort of humility in relationship with what might even be a very vague sense of divinity. It's just the sense of my humility in the face of the divine, or whatever words one wants to use. In that humility, despite the vagueness there, again it functions—that node is being illuminated, amplified, brought out more, brought to life more, and that can spread. The vagueness may remain. We talked about a sense of divinity as one of the other nodes. Well, that may remain vague, or it may get more clear or more particular.

Or another one that might one deliberately start with is actually loving. Here's this perception of another. What if I actually express love? We said that love was one of these nodes—loving and being loved. What if I actually just now, deliberately, feel the germ, the seed, the basis of that love? It's just a little bit.

What if I amplify it? What if I express it? What if I tune into it, switch it on? Then what happens?

Or it might be, as another example, for those who have a deep understanding of emptiness—one that's really accessible in perception. One can have that understanding in the moment, in the actual perception of things, of the middle way of emptiness: neither real nor not real, and the magic of that. If you do know that kind of level I'm talking about, the way that opens up all kinds of possibilities as well as the sacredness of things—then that middle way of emptiness, for some people, becomes quite fertile ground to open up the middle way of the imaginal that we'll come back to shortly. That can open up the whole realm, the whole tenor, field, texture and wavelength of the imaginal.

Or it might be that what's accessible right from the beginning in a deliberate way is that fullness of intention—that element I drew attention to earlier in our list. I can be here, intending in practice, in a stance of relating to this other or this imaginal perception, not primarily for my sake, but for something bigger: for the sake of soul-making, for the sake of the divine, for the sake of Buddha nature, whatever makes sense. That fullness of intention is also going to have an alchemical, catalyzing capacity.

Or it may be—and I think I've suggested this and we've done a little bit on some retreats—one can start with a deliberate image of one's energy body or deliberate image of one's body. For example, just imagining the body as a body of light, maybe a particular color, blue or anything. Just staying with that imagination and then tuning in—it's a deliberate imagination, but then feeling what that feels like, what the body feels like, with sensitivity tuning to that particular wavelength of that image and that sense of the energy body. See what opens up from this image of the energy body and the sense of it. It may be that other images open up, or that itself becomes a genuine imaginal image, or something starts to interact with that, or it relates to its environment in a way that's genuinely imaginal or sensed with soul.

I think on one retreat we did a guided meditation with the Om Mani Padme Hum mantra, imagining the syllables as jewels and the body as made somehow, in some mystical way, of these cosmic, magical jewels of compassion—the syllables of the Om Mani Padme Hum mantra, or just jewels, magical, mystical jewels. What is it to have a body of jewels?

Or it might be something at the other end of the spectrum in terms of earthiness and solidity. What is it to imagine the body as a body made of, or at one with, or mixed with, or emerging from the roots of trees underground in the dark, damp, fragrant soil, the moist earth? Actually imagining that, and then again tuning into that and seeing what comes from that.

So there are different possibilities in terms of how we use these nodes, how we relate to the nodes in supporting and encouraging that movement into the fully imaginal and fully sensing with soul.

We were going through our list and got to number sixteen: meaningfulness. We made the point that specific meanings, specific echoings of the image with life and life with the image, and the sense of particular duties or particular values—these elements are all sub-elements or parts of the aspect of meaningfulness. But meaningfulness is something larger than any specific meaning or even a limited, finite collection of mean-

ings or echoes. It cannot be reduced to values. Meaningfulness is something larger, somewhat akin in its largeness and openness to that infinite echoing and mirroring. It's bigger than individual echoes or ways that life and image reflect each other.

So meaningfulness is more like—we say this image or this perception I have is pregnant with meaningfulness. There's something discernible and something half-hidden, just like when you see a pregnant woman or animal. The pregnancy is visible, palpable, but what is being gestated is not yet visible. Sometimes things emerge from the imaginal, from sensing with soul, from a hiddenness into manifestation, but we never exhaust that meaningfulness. The pregnancy is never fully over. The imaginal is always pregnant. The soul is always pregnant and always giving birth, or at least very often giving birth again and again.

So there's something tangible and something obscure. There are intimations of meaning—all that is intended by the word meaningfulness. But the obscurity or the not quite knowing what's there, half-hidden, does not make meaningfulness any less powerful. The fact that we're not entirely clear what it is that so moves us, that has this meaningfulness for us and gives us a sense of devotion and orientation and functions like a beacon, touches our heart, touches our soul—the fact that we're not exactly clear what it is, can't neatly define it, wrap it up, sum it up, does not take away any of the power of that meaning.

Number seventeen on our list is something I'd call eternality or timelessness—some sense of the timelessness or eternality of an image, or at least some kind of alteration of the time sense. Some sense of the timelessness or eternality of an image is an aspect of what makes it imaginal in our language, in our conception. I've talked about this before in a few places, and for me it's a really important element. There's a difference between...

or rather imaginal images have what I was calling an iconic nature versus a narrative nature. They don't go somewhere in time towards some grand resolution like a story, some heroic finale and redemption necessarily. The power and the redemption of the imaginal is not in its narrative nature. Apotheosis is not in its narrative kind of culmination or end point. So this to me is quite important. I call it iconic rather than narrative. Images tend to be iconic rather than narrative.

So for example, nowadays a lot of people are very importantly drawing attention to the need to, as hopefully humanity needs, make a transition or an evolution, really, a development of wisdom and practical wisdom into, let's say, 100% renewable energy. So important—coming away from fossil fuels and polluting fuels. And so the imagination, the faculty of the skillful imagination that human beings have, is a very important fac-

ulty. Can we imagine that future when everyone's homes are powered and energy comes and transport comes from 100% renewable energy, electric cars and whatnot? Can we imagine that, and imagine the stages that might move us towards that, that might transition us towards that state, where there's no depletion of resources, minerals, etc., from the planet, species—can we imagine that? The skillful use of the imagination, that's more of a narrative image. It's not yet imaginal.

Imaginal has more of this timeless, eternal quality. It's not moving in time necessarily towards some goal. Or if it is, because some images do have a kind of relatively narrative quality, it's what I tend to call, use the word fantasy, but they have this aspect of—it's always already happening, this story. All the elements of the story, all the stages of this fantasy, of this narrative image, are actually somehow still happening, always happening in hierophantic time, in holy time, in sacred time. And somehow, curiously, the beginning is happening at the same time as the end of the story, even if they're, on the face of it, separated in time. So that there's still this timeless or eternal sense, however we use words to describe that, in an imaginal image that is of a relatively narrative nature.

So what this means in practice, regarding this element, is that we can pay attention, when we're working with an image, to the sense of temporality—the sense of temporality within and of that image, or that imaginal perception, or the way we're sensing something with soul. So we pay attention to the sense of temporality and notice it.

Now this is often quite subtle, and it's as if the two levels go on at once—the movement in time, of course, and the eternal aspect. But can we start tuning to the sense of temporality, attending and noticing the sense of temporality and noticing and tuning to the sense of timelessness within the larger sense of temporality? The sense of eternality somehow pervading this image? And that, again, just as with the other elements, that noticing can amplify that very sense of eternality, which brings the whole thing, raises up, if you like—or if you don't like that vertical innuendo, amplifies or illuminates or brings alive that element of the imaginal. And then that element, again, spreads and the whole thing becomes imaginal.

So there are many possibilities and flavors of time and also of timelessness when we sense with soul in the imaginal. It's not just one kind of experience we're talking about. There are many possibilities.

So, for example, one may be dwelling with a whole body, energy body awareness, and the sense of eternality of, if you like, of oneself as image, and of one's life as image, but in a certain way. Meaning, in this case, just as an example, the sense of one's whole life with its narrative and its difficulties and its dukkha and its challenges and its tra-

gedies and all of that, its story and the conditions of body, of soul, of story and conditions of relationship with others and world—all of that sensed or seen, so to speak, from, if you like, after death, from out of time, from the perspective of eternity.

So what is it to get a sense of oneself and one's whole life, that whole stretch from birth to death, maybe even more, seen, if you like, from after death, from out of time? And that's one possibility. I'm just giving a possibility of a kind of eternality or timelessness. And one can sometimes actually find one's way into that perspective with the energy body. And if there's that energy body awareness and that eternal energy, it can open up the door to the imaginal—the doors, the gates to the imaginal, the gates to the *mundus imaginalis*.

The imaginal world can open up just from seeing oneself. One's self becomes image, one's life becomes icon and becomes seen with soul, sensed with soul. And this will bring with it the other elements—the humility that we talked about, the fullness of intention that we talked about. It will ignite, illuminate, amplify, bring those into existence. And likewise, those elements, for example, humility and the fullness of intention, will likewise help that sense of, in this case, timelessness—this perspective of eternity—will help to ignite, illuminate, amplify, bring that into existence.

And then one is sensing, sensing oneself, sensing one's life and one's death, and that whole journey with soul, as well as this moment now, as well and including the dukkha—all the dukkha, the whole life with the dukkha. And that itself is extraordinarily beautiful and extraordinarily redeeming, healing, transforming, prayerful, mystical perception—sensing all that with soul. And then at that point, there may be other possibilities that open up from that.

One can relax that sort of whole life from the perspective of eternity, especially an eternal artist. One can relax that whole perspective and emphasis a little bit, and then there are other aspects or another relationship with time that can be sensed with soul—other relationships with timelessness.

For example, the unknown of the future and the moment can come and be sensed with soul. That very unknowing—we do not know our fate, we do not know the future. But when it's arrived at that way, opened up that way, with that kind of fullness and richness and dimensionality, that's quite different from just a kind of more flat acknowledgment or recognition of a very basic insight that we don't know the future. Quite different, quite a different level of sensing and perception there.

Now, someone—maybe someone hearing this who hadn't listened to all the other material—might say, "What are you saying? Are you saying this is something that's not impermanent?" And for a Buddhist, obviously, that would be a kind of horrific heresy or just ridiculous or whatever. So I probably don't need to say this to you at this point, but of course images are impermanent. Of course everything is impermanent. Impermanence is obvious.

By introducing this aspect or element of eternality, of timelessness, we're not dismissing the perspective that things are impermanent—that images, this very image that one is perhaps so moved by and senses as eternal, this very image is impermanent, comes and goes. So we're somehow holding both at once again. Yes, of course, it's obvious it's impermanent. And there's this timeless kind of strata or dimension or aspect to it.

Sometimes, again, people with a lot of deep emptiness practice—if that's something you've developed or just know is a possibility—can come to the point where one thoroughly and absolutely knows the emptiness of time, alongside everything else. And that knowing of the emptiness of time kind of opens up and legitimizes many possibilities in practice.

So we're holding the impermanence and the—not so much permanence as timelessness, but you could say permanence—always already happening. We're holding them together. As William Blake said, help us or save us from single vision. Save us from single vision. It's not just this or just that. It's not just eternal. It's not just impermanent. There is this capacity in the imaginal to see with more than one way of looking at once.

Nothing here is being presented or practiced because one can't face the truth of impermanence and the fact of death. There's completely nothing to do with that. All this practice is grounded in—yes, death comes, and we don't know when, usually. Everything dies. Everyone dies. I will die. You will die. Everything is impermanent. And we do need to face up to that in life. We need to open the heart and the being to that. This is just not coming out of an inability or a refusal to face that.

Nor is it a kind of clinging to this sense of timelessness at the expense of an acknowledgment of impermanence. I hardly need to say this. We're not talking about images of "happy ever after"—that this is what will happen—or an image that kind of ends all rosy. Something completely different. In what I just described about sensing the whole of one's existence with soul, there is still death, there is still suffering, and sometimes quite difficult suffering that a life is afflicted by or given to handle. It's not transmuting that into some other kind of ending.

Number eighteen is what I've been calling the imaginal middle way, or the middle way of the imaginal, or the theatre quality, the theatre aspect of the imaginal. This involves non-reification. It's not taken as real and literal and purely concretized. The relationship with the real self in a real world is much more less solid, less fixated.

Someone might have an image or a vision of teaching or of serving or whatever it is. Traditional or maybe more usual kinds of dharma or spiritual approaches to that kind of thing—someone having those kinds of images or visions of themselves teaching or serving—

whatever it is, would be: let go of the attachment to whether that vision materializes and whether you get what you want, whether it comes to pass. So there's the teaching of, yes, you had that image, but just let go of any attachment to whether it materializes.

Or it might be, again, in the more usual or common approach: Can you be aware and discern with that vision or that image of serving or whatever it is? Because it may be, if you like, true or accurate or kind of prophetic intuition of something of the future or something that you're called to. Or it may be your delusion, your wishful thinking.

But in either of those two more common or usual spiritual approaches, they both rest on a kind of realist appropriation of the image or the vision. And they refer it simply, directly, literally and concretely to a real self in a real world of real time. So all these other elements that we're talking about—the timelessness—that's not there. And it's all about a real possibility in a real self in a real world.

And in neither case—whether it's "let go of the attachment to whether it materializes" or "discern whether this is an intuitive glimpse of the future or just delusion"—in neither case is the image treated imaginatively. Neither case relates to it as or allows it to be an imaginal image in our sense of the word. Instead, it has to be categorized as either real or not real, either real or delusion.

And the middle way, the imaginal, is not content with either "real or not real," either "real or delusion," "real or papañca." This is what I mean by the middle way. Neither "real" nor "not real" seem adequate or accurate or truly appropriate categories or labels for this imaginal perception or this what I'm perceiving when I sense with soul.

Another word I use here is theatre—the theatre element of it. When we say theatre, that doesn't necessarily mean dramatic. Remember I was giving examples of images that are really not dramatic at all, or even particularly narrative. They're just a sort of freeze frame of something. So the word theatre doesn't imply grand drama or narrative. But it implies this quality or status: this figure, this perception has power for the soul, has a certain depth, a certain ability to affect and move me or us. It's important to me

and it even feels necessary, and soul-making comes with it, and there's this infinite echoing. All that we talk about as poetic truth or artistic truth—that's another way of saying this. We're talking about something that's true, but it's a poetic truth. It's not a literal truth or necessarily a concrete truth.

I don't know if you've ever been, as I have, to a play in a theatre, and the theatre is very small, and one's sitting very near the actors, and the actors may be very good, and it's a very intimate, vulnerable experience to be in good theatre with powerful actors in that way. It's very intimate. You are involved. You cannot not be involved unless you really go into some kind of shutdown mode. It's actually vulnerable for you as a member of the audience. You're right there, open, your being is open, the actors can see you.

All this relates to imaginal figures as well. When we sense things with soul—which I'm using interchangeably—you can't be untouched in that situation, unimplicated. It's not the cold distance of the ideal scientific method that's uninvolved.

When we are practicing and something's imaginal, we can notice: Oh, it has this theatre-like quality in terms of it's not real because it's theatre, but it's not not-real either. And I don't just mean by "not not-real" that it was just happening, so therefore something exists. I mean there's something, there's a deeper kind of poetic truth being communicated there.

This aspect—and again it's something we can notice, and I'm pretty sure that in time, anyone doing these imaginal practices and getting into it will just notice that this is an element, this is an aspect of the imaginal—may not be obvious to us at first. It has a quality of theatre, it has an air of theatre to it. It's neither real nor not real. Neither of those labels or categories really applies. It's in the imaginal middle way.

Again, noticing that tenor of it, that status of it, that air or quality to it, amplifies that quality. It becomes more apparent. Over time, it becomes something that one can just notice immediately with practice. And then, again, the whole constellation can amplify, illuminate, evolve toward the more authentically, fully imaginal.

So that word play, which I tend to use a lot in my teaching—whatever I'm teaching, dharma-wise and practice-wise—is necessary or relevant in both of its senses. We go to the theatre and we see a play. So there is something of a play happening, but something that has this artistic, poetic, necessary, vital, deep truth to it at the same time as it's theatre.

Play in the other sense is necessary as well: the capacity and the permission for us to play in meditation and with perception and in life. Play with concepts, play with experiences, play with ways of looking, play with energies.

Are we able and are we free? Are we granted permission to play? To me, that's absolutely necessary. Actually, it's the way I tend to teach. I think it's maybe not necessary, but really, really helpful for all practice. And in this realm of the imaginal and soul-making, I would say it's vital. Absolutely vital. Necessary.

So play, in both senses, is an ingredient of imaginal practice. It's an ingredient of soul-making that remains fertile and expanding. Because something can be soul-making, then something freezes. We've been through all this on previous retreats when we talk about the soul-making dynamic in eros, psyche, logos. So we could say that the quality of play, the aspect of play in both its senses, is a prerequisite of soul-making and imaginal practice.

Some practitioners have deep desire. There's no doubt about their desire and their aspiration and their dedication to practice and the path. But that element of play is not so easy for them. For different reasons, possibly—maybe the capacity to play is actually inhibited by the very image or the logos, the psyche or logos of what practice looks like. I encounter this occasionally, and it's so important, I think—play in both its senses.

You just have to watch children playing to see how sometimes very serious that play can be, how captivating it is for them. To me, it's something really, really beautiful. And they're not mistaking it for reality. If they're playing soldiers or whatever, they're not mistaking that for a real war. It's like, "I just shot you, bang bang, you're dead," and now you get up. That doesn't make sense—there's no confusion. They're just so with the play and playing in this imaginary way, in the theatre. There's no confusion about categories of reality for the most part. We'll come back to this.

But the play can be very serious, very engrossing, very vitalizing and deeply important. And of course, we talk about playing music. See the play and the beauty and the necessity and the seriousness—well, I know for me as a jazz musician, when I was playing.

Sometimes, what I've also noticed recently is that people—and I don't think I've really touched on this so much, or not really made it transparent—the relationship of this imaginal middle way to the middle way of emptiness, the more traditional middle way that the Buddha referred to in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta in the Pali Canon and then was really amplified by Nāgārjuna and the whole Mahāyāna teachings. Middle way referring to emptiness between is and is not, exists and doesn't exist, real and not real.

So what's the relationship between that traditional emptiness middle way and the imaginal middle way? They're not quite one and the same. I would say the emptiness middle way is—for me it's extremely important—but in terms of imaginal practice it's

more like understanding the emptiness middle way as part of a much larger conceptual framework of the whole of practice and a certain range and directionality, a range of directions of possibility of dharma. In other words, understanding that deeply—the middle way of emptiness is an integral part of a much larger logos and conceptual framework which we're trying to unfold and explain and also develop. So it has a different place in the scheme of things.

Not entirely, because for some people, the emptiness middle way, when they really get a deep sense of that, actually opens up the possibility of the imaginal as a viable and sensible path—legitimized—and also opens up that sense of sacredness and the possibility of perceiving things imaginally, with the imaginal middle way. So for some people, that understanding of the emptiness middle way is a springboard, either conceptually or in actual practice. The practice has actually arrived at that very deep center of the emptiness middle way, and that's what opens up the imaginal middle way.

Other people—and I wonder whether they're in the majority—don't need that deep sense of the middle way of emptiness in their practice. It's quite a deep level we're talking about, and they don't need that. It's more that they have a poet's sense of things, of poetic truth, of artistic truth. They have the sense, and they can feel it, of the theatre element. So it's just there in the perception, integrated into the way they live and consider things and relate to existence—already this potential of the imaginal middle way.

And as I said earlier, if it's not there initially, it will emerge just as one gets familiar with the mundus imaginalis, with the imaginal realm and the perceptions. One actually notices, "Oh yeah, there's that quality," and that distinguishes this imaginal way from other perceptions.

For me—and I thought quite a lot about this when I was starting to teach this kind of thing, and was unsure whether to include it or not—but more and more I really leaned towards wanting to include it as a necessary part of soul-making, a necessary part of what it means for something to be imaginal and for something to be sensed with soul. I feel it's absolutely crucial, and not just for the philosophical sense and framework that it gives.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 7/11). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Not just in the service of creating and establishing and opening up and filling out an adequate and robust conceptual framework for everything that we're doing here. I think that's very important too, actually. I think it's very, very important. But it's more

crucial in the sense that this really helps the balance—especially when there's a lot of eros, especially when the soul is on fire that way and there's all that beauty and all that attraction to this path and opening, and all kinds of things are opening up.

It really helps this middle way, this sense of the middle way, the theater element. It really helps the navigation, the balance, and, as I say, the fertility. It helps in soul-making. It's an element of any soul-making. I'm going to come back to this because it's actually not quite that simple, but let's just say that for now. And I would like to just emphasize just how important that is.

That was number nineteen. Number twenty is something we've already said: that the imaginal, or soul-making, or sensing with soul, is, as they say of beauty, in the eye of the beholder. Or we may say in the soul of the beholder, in the senses of the beholder. And that realization, that awareness, that recognition, that concept, helps the imaginal middle way. When I realize, oh, something is not objectively independently imaginal—whatever it is, we've gone through this in this talk earlier, in part one, I think—realizing that, remembering it, recognizing it, and being aware of it, keeping in mind that concept, again very, very lightly, it helps establish us, open us onto the middle way.

In other words, soul-making, sensing the soul, the realm of the imaginal, an imaginal figure or imaginal perception of something is in the eye, in the senses, in the soul of the beholder. Another way of saying that is, again as we said before, the imaginal is really a way of looking. And by way of looking, I mean that includes a way of conceiving, a way of relating. So nothing is, so to speak, objectively or independently imaginal. The imaginal arises as a function of the way of looking.

That twentieth aspect as a concept, as an awareness, as a recognition, helps, for some people, in the establishing of that middle way, the imaginal middle way.

Now, for some people, this talk or this teaching that perception, or actually any perception, whether it's imaginal or material, is dependent on the way of looking—this teaching that anything is dependent on the way of looking is tricky. When one hasn't quite seen it for oneself in practice through deep fading and all that, and the way things manifest dependent on the way of looking and what's wrapped up in the way of looking, and then it comes as a teaching—and I know I emphasize it over and over again—for some people it's a little tricky because the usual way of thinking and understanding can't help but conclude that if something is dependent on the way of looking, whether I sense something with soul, or I have this imaginal figure, or this beautiful perception of sacredness, and if it's dependent on the way of looking, then somehow it actually can't

be real then. Because our usual way of conceiving of reality is independent of the way of looking, having objective existence, and it can't be real, therefore it can't really have value, and it can't really be sacred.

So this is troubling. And because I emphasize it so much, it can be a bit of a stumbling block for some people and inclined to sort of do away with that element.

A couple of things about this. I would say that, again, a deeper understanding, a journeying deeper into that whole experimenting and playing with and exploring ways of looking and the whole notion of fabrication and that whole revelatory journey, beautiful revelatory journey—the deeper one goes, at a certain point, one really sees for oneself, one understands in one's bones the emptiness of everything.

That means it's not that objects are dependent on way of looking, meaning that the self somehow or the mind or the awareness or something here in the subject or the way of looking, this is real and it forms a real basis for what is not so real. We go deeper on this journey into understanding emptiness in practice—it has to be in practice—and we understand that everything is empty. Self is empty. Subject is empty. Awareness is empty. Mind is empty. Ways of looking are empty. They don't inherently exist.

And what that does, because everything is empty, and equally empty, if you like, then all becomes—rather than one thing is valuable and in relation to that or relative to that, this thing is not valuable, this is sacred because it's real and that is not sacred because it's not real and therefore not valuable—everything, because everything is equally, deeply, mysteriously, mystically empty, if one really goes into the roots of what emptiness means, what we can sense of what emptiness means, everything actually becomes sacred. Everything becomes valuable. Everything has this status of the, if you like, traditionally Buddhist middle way of being neither real nor not real.

And there's a magic in that, in how it is and how things are and their appearing but being empty. So it rather opens up the door to more sacredness, more comprehensive sacredness and more possibilities of kinds of sacredness. I've talked and written about this before; I'm not going to go into it right now.

What I want to emphasize right now is the twenty-first element of our list: the sense of participation. I'm highlighting this because it stands in contrast to that immature or incomplete understanding of dependent ways of looking, which reifies either the way of looking itself or the subject—the self, mind, or awareness that does the looking and sensing.

The notion of participation gives me a sense of dependency on the subject, on the way of looking, on the mind or awareness of self, but not without retaining any objective pole—a pole of value in the object, a pole of sacredness or reality in the object. So this sense of participation forms our twenty-first node or element.

As I mentioned in one of the earlier parts of this talk, the idea of participation preserves autonomy within an understanding and sense of non-separateness. Do you understand? When something participates in some way with something else, it maintains its own autonomy while being kind of non-separate. The sense of participation we're discussing—both the concept of it and the felt sense of it—is something sensible. We perceive it. I'm not talking merely about an idea, just an idea. This is a mystical participation.

We might have a sense and concept of participation in a divine archetype. When we're working with an imaginal figure, perceiving this imaginal figure, there's a sense that I'm somehow participating in the divinity that I'm perceiving. I'm participating in an archetype. The archetype actually needs my participation, and yet I also witness that archetype.

I can get a sense and concept of participating in the mundus imaginalis. But again, it takes my participation. My participation is part of it. It supports it, feeds it, nourishes it, transforms it, changes it. I am not separate from this mundus imaginalis, and yet it's not just me. It's not reducible to me or merely a figment of my imagination in the impoverished sense of that phrase.

I can sense and conceive of participating in the always-already happening in hierophantic time of whatever I'm witnessing—participating in, being part of, partaking of, fabricating of the image. I can sense participating in the eros of the divine or the divine eros. We talked about tracing that movement and evolution of that sense. I traced it particularly in the Eros Unfettered talks.

One really gets a sense, a perception mixed with concept, that my eros is somehow participating in some larger, deeper, more mysterious, more unfathomable, more divine eros. Similarly with the mind—one's own mind, insights, perceptions, conceiving, holding and entertaining of ideas, the arising of ideas. One's mind is somehow participating in divine mind, in Buddha nature, in cosmic Buddha nature.

One can also sense and perceive participating in the intersubjectivity of the imaginal other—the object or thing, the person being sensed with soul. One participates in the intersubjective communication of eros flowing back and forth, love flowing between self and other in soul-making.

As all this deepens—and I would say this is a natural evolution, the trajectory I traced in some of those talks, particularly in Eros Unfettered—it's actually a natural and inevitable evolution of the sense of things and the concept, if we're following this path. At some point, without needing to rush or hurry it, one can get a sense that this perception I'm having right now, this soul-making happening right now, perhaps my whole life, even the life of culture and history, is participation in the larger unfolding mystery of soul-making—in some larger unfolding of divine soul-making.

It's the soul-making happening of Buddha nature, and I and my soul-making, all that involves, all the elements and aspects and dimensions of my being that involves—in that perception, conceiving, openness, in the body, all of it—is participating in some much larger mystery of soul-making that's unfolding. The Buddha nature soul-making. The soul-making of the cosmic Buddha, the soul-making of the divine, the soul-making of God, whatever.

When I get a sense of this—and I find it quite hard to convey—it's a deep and mysterious concept. We're not talking merely about, for example, when the food delivery truck pulls up at Gaia House and several coordinators help the work yogi and kitchen coordinators unload the food delivery and put it away, and you say, "Oh, I participated in unloading the food delivery today at Gaia House." That's typically quite a flat sort of participation.

I'm talking about something that includes that but is somehow more, somehow more mysterious.

As with many of the other facets and dimensions of the imaginal, this one may not be evident at first. It may be one of those qualities that emerges to our attention and consciousness. We notice it more after time, after we've become more accustomed to the imaginal realm and perceptions there. We say, "Oh yes, there's that quality."

The sense of participation can be quite intense, but it can also be really, really subtle. There's great variety in how palpably and obviously it manifests. But I'm speaking here about a deep and mysterious concept, a deep and mysterious sense of mystical participation in something.

Number twenty-two is what I want to call the concertina—the imaginal concertina or the concertina of the imaginal.

We used to employ the phrase "vertical spectrum" or "vertical spectrum of the imaginal," and I think one or two people picked up on it, though I can't remember when. But we want to retract that now. It was an unfortunate choice of words. We want to replace that same concept with the notion of the concertina.

You know what a concertina is? It's like an accordion that opens outward, or like the bellows used to blow air on a fire—something that expands to reveal its contents. Think of those old file cabinets that stretch open to reveal individual files, or can be compacted so you don't see all the files there. There's probably a better word, but this gives you a sense of what I mean.

When there's an imaginal image or a perception of something sensed with soul, it's also sensed to exist within a context of possible other images. This imaginal image—this way I'm seeing my beloved, sensing her, him, them imaginatively, sensing them with soul—an image comes that is sort of them and sort of not them. It's coming through them; it's a theophany. But there's also a sense at that point, sometimes quite dim at the edges of consciousness, of "Oh, this is one image that I'm perceiving within a larger context of other possible images."

Because I could perceive her, sense her with soul, him, them with soul, and another image might come to the fore or replace this one or be there simultaneously or linger in the background. It's as if this concertina reveals other possibilities, other possible perceptions waiting in the wings. Like a theatre where this character, this image, is waiting for its time to come on stage, and other actors are waiting. There's a sense of other possibilities in potentia.

Sometimes some of these others can be clearly sensed or even perceived. They're individually discernible. One might actually perceive two images simultaneously, sometimes along with the regular perception of my beloved other, or this tree, or whatever I'm sensing with soul. Other times, the sense of the concertina is more vague, more implied—again, like a kind of pregnancy. Either the images there are vague, or they're just very dimly perceived, or we simply have a sense that the concertina is open, that there is a concertina, but the individual images are not coming to the fore and often not individually perceived. Perhaps that's more often the case—just a sense of context.

We can notice when that concertina expands, or when it comes online. The context, this range of possible images, or just the sense of a range of possible images, comes alive, comes online, expands. Again, we can notice that concertina and tune to it, and that helps the whole sense become more imaginal. It helps the imaginal constellation become more filled out, more genuinely imaginal.

With that allusion to waiting in the wings, this element of concertina or aspect of context might be regarded as an aspect of the theatre element or the middle way. As we go through this list, you can see how some elements are implicit in others or qualify others, as we've noted before. In a way, this presence of the sense and concept of a concertina or context prevents us from getting too narrow in our perception, from getting

too fixated. To quote William Blake, it prevents us from collapsing our relationship and perception and conception into a kind of single vision, because we're aware of the concertina. That awareness does something to the whole tenor, texture, ether—the realm, the air of the perception.

Now for the last one: concept. Concertina or context was twenty-two. Concept is twenty-three. As I mentioned at the start when we rattled through the list, imaginal perception, sensing with soul, is not non-conceptual. It's not a non-conceptual perception.

One of my ongoing concerns is with how freely and lazily the notion of "non-conceptual" gets bandied about in some spiritual and Buddhist circles. I don't equate concept with thinking. Concept is much more subtle. You can have concept, you do have concept, without actual discursive thought or heavy-duty intellectual, complex ideas.

I reserve the word "non-conceptual," the category of non-conceptual, just for moments of the cessation of perception—just for moments when there is no fabrication and all perception is pacified, to borrow Nagarjuna's phrase. There's a fading of all perception, cessation of all perception and feeling. That is a non-conceptual experience in my book, and only that really qualifies. I've written and talked about this extensively elsewhere, so I won't go into it too much right now.

But for me, all and any perception has concept woven into it.

Certainly any dharma perception, or perception that arises in the context of dharma practice, has this conceptual element woven through it. This includes mindfulness. Mindfulness is not non-conceptual. So-called bare attention is not at all non-conceptual. There is always some sense, no matter how faint or subtle, of subject, object and time as the basic tripod of fabrication underlying even very basic perceptions and conceptions.

Wherever there's any perception of any kind of subject, any kind of object, any kind of time sense—or sense of the present moment, even the present itself—there is concept involved. And actually in many dharma practices, in regular mainstream dharma practices and mindfulness, there are all kinds of concepts woven in. In imaginal soul-making practices, in sensing with soul, all kinds of concepts, a great range of concepts are brought in, or involved rather—they're an important part.

We mentioned the conception, some kind of concept no matter how vague, of the divine nature of this other that I'm perceiving, this imaginal figure or this other that I'm sensing with soul. The divine nature and origin is a perception, and also a concept.

The concept that's involved is not reductive, as I said. This image is not simply a representation of my compassion or something in my history conceived too tightly or narrowly or flatly. So the conception has to avoid being too reductive or narrow in that way.

But things like this eternality or timelessness that we're talking about—that is also a conception, a concept. "Always already happening" is a conception as much as it is a perception. When we have an imaginal figure—could be anything—and they have certain qualities, there's the conception, among many others, of their nobility and their courage and their dedication and devotion. These are all conceptions as much as they're perceptions.

The whole conception and sense of an imaginal figure's autonomy and personhood, their subjectivity, their soul—or them as souls—is also a concept as much as a sense. Love, as another element, is a concept, of course. It's also not only a concept—it's a lot more than that, as are all these elements. They're not just concepts, but there is a conceptual element as part of any and all of this.

What we were referring to earlier about the participation of my mind in the divine mind, the participation of either the thinking, the conceiving, or the perceiving, or both—the participation of your mind in the divine mind—that's again a concept as much as it's a sense, an imaginal sense.

Something akin to this actually has a long tradition in Western spirituality. I don't know if it started with Aristotle and his idea of the act of intelligence—it might have been before that—and then it was modified and went through a kind of evolution. Lots of spiritual traditions, Kabbalah and others, draw on that and transform it and use it as quite a central mystical principle in their conceptual frameworks.

But we also get a sense of this kind of thing, the participation of mind in each other's minds or in the divine mind, in our life. We get glimpses of it, tastes of it at different times. For example, when there's a kind of creative artistic flow—and even if that's not necessarily something that happens instantaneously, like those Zen drawings that you do very quickly, or a haiku that just comes really quick, or some phrase that comes when you're improvising music and there's a sense in the moment of "wow, something just came through"—but also in the longer stretches of struggle with a big creative project over a long time.

Something might take two or three years to complete—writing a novel, writing a symphony, writing a book, whatever it is—and you can still get a sense of this creativity that's happening. It's me and it's not me. I'm participating in something. My struggle with this, my creativity, my application of mind in and through the creativity is a participation of my mind in something larger—call it divine, whatever you want to call it.

But also between each other. Sometimes people sharing humor—that moment when you and someone else or a group of people grasp something together intuitively, and the spark, the flash of communication that happens there, the brilliant intuition that happens, the connection that happens in finding something humorous or seeing something together. And sometimes it would be very hard to actually articulate what it is. Something happens in the communication of that between human beings.

But also with poetry and with language and with love and communicating love, sometimes non-verbally—there's some way we participate in some greater mind together. And that's how we can have these intuitive flashes. We're participating together in something, we get it together in a brilliant moment of revelation that defies any kind of mechanistic translation from one place to the other through flatly conceived materialistic means.

So this kind of concept and sense is something that we can get a sense of in our life as well. But as I said earlier, when we're talking about participation as an idea, as a concept, as a notion, participation in the divine is a concept, but it's very hard to articulate, very hard to define clearly. And perhaps that's partly what I meant when I said it was a mysterious and deep concept—perhaps it defies such completely clear articulation.

We could give another analogy for participation, something like the arm or the hand of a clock. Big Ben's big hand is part of the clock and participates in the clock's functioning.

The clock needs that to be a fully functioning clock, yet the hand is not the clock itself. It participates, but this mechanistic analogy is far too gross for the deeper, more mysterious participation we can sense when practicing with the imaginal and soul-making.

This brings us to notice that many concepts within our soul-making logos are deliberately vague or, if you prefer, open. When we speak of meaningfulness, the suffix itself leaves possibilities open—infinite, inexhaustible potential that cannot be fully discerned. Love functions similarly, as does the very concept of soul. These are intentionally vague and open concepts.

Soul-making itself embodies this paradox—it is simultaneously vague and precisely defined. On one hand, it encompasses countless nuances, subtleties, qualifications, specificities, and particularities. There are things to notice, include, exclude—endless refinements. Yet simultaneously, it remains a somewhat vague and open notion.

This relates to our earlier discussion of soft and elastic edges—not only for imaginal figures, but for concepts themselves. The concepts that serve soul-making best are those whose edges become soft, elastic, stretchable, even if they didn't begin that way.

We find this fascinating tension: conceptual vagueness and openness alongside the birthing of increasingly subtle delineations and discernments. There's this and there's this, then this and this—each slightly different from the other. The entire soul-making dynamic, through the way eros-psyche-logos fertilize, inseminate, complicate, expand, enrich, deepen, and widen each other, creates and discovers ever more discernments, differentiations, and delineations.

So we have this remarkable straddling: vagueness and openness on one side, increasing subtlety and precision on the other—both in conceptual terms within the logos and logoi, and in our sensitivity as beings, in what we can actually sense. There's an ongoing creation and discovery of new dimensions, sides, and elements.

We need a conceptual framework that serves what we're doing—soul-making. Therefore, both our larger conceptual structure and individual concepts must serve this purpose. They need to be simultaneously open and loose, yet capable of very refined, subtle discernment. The conceiving that's wrapped up in perceiving requires this straddling, this bridging, this inclusion of both aspects.

It's precisely in this manner of relating to and holding concepts that soul-making is supported. If we were pursuing classical scientific method or certain social sciences, we'd want sharper, measurable, strictly definable concepts—either zero or one, like computers operate.

But when we're interested in soul-making, our relationship with conceptuality is not non-conceptual. We're deeply engaged with conceiving, with logos, with the concepts we entertain. We develop flexibility, richness, and sophistication with them. This becomes something beautiful to us—not the absence of concepts, but their masterful engagement.

The logos aspect of soul-making comes vibrantly alive as an equally important, necessary, and valid part—a vitalizing element of the entire soul-making movement. We won't be non-conceptual, but our way of handling concepts, the kinds we choose, and how they straddle vagueness and refinement—this entire approach becomes integral to our practice.

CHAPTER 109

Sensing with Soul (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h27

> *In this opening talk of a new series, Rob Burbea introduces the phrase "sensing with soul" as both complement and alternative to the term "imaginal." He explores how this encompasses all seven senses - seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, thinking, and imagining - as potential arenas for soul-making practice.*
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> *Burbea examines the relationship between intrapsychic imaginal work and cosmopoiesis - the spreading of soul-making perception into the world itself. He outlines four factors involved in all perception: conception, intentionality/desire, sense data, and the imaginal faculty, showing how these cooperate in soul-making perception. The talk delineates four possible skillful modes of sense contact, from ordinary functional awareness through dharmic lens-focused mindfulness to perceptions of oneness, culminating in sensing with soul.*
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> *Drawing on philosopher J.N. Findlay's emphasis on mystical rapture as "the only things absolutely worth having," Burbea articulates his primary intention: the re-enchanting of existence through opening possibilities for genuine, transformative senses of sacredness. He demonstrates how sensing with soul includes and transcends mindfulness, involving presence, sensitivity, appropriate attention, reverence, discernment, and play as essential elements of this approach to practice and liberation.*

I hope these talks prove helpful in some way. As I mentioned previously, much of their content and structure emerges from my sense of what has been difficult to understand or frequently misunderstood. Sometimes I need to rebalance certain emphases—when particular aspects, approaches, or leanings have been stressed over recent years at the expense of others, contrary to my original intention. This is an attempt at such rebalancing, if necessary.

In previous talks, I described a process—an evolution of practicing with the imaginal. One might begin working with an image where eros is present, and that image becomes imaginal, sparking the soul-making dynamic. This involves, catalyzes, and ignites the whole Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic with their mutual insemination, mutual complication, enriching, deepening, and widening. We've discussed this as one way of understanding the essence of the soul-making dynamic as it unfolds.

Within this vortex of eros, psyche, and logos and their interrelations, there can sometimes be a spilling over of the image. When working with an imaginal figure intrapsychically, it begins to overflow into the extrapsychic realm—into the world itself. The soul-making perceptions, the imaginal perceptions, begin to spread and include not just the imaginal figure one might be working with intrapsychically, but also the self, the world, one's eros, and all elements of being—both intrapsychic and extrapsychic, but particularly in the extrapsychic realm and the world.

We use the word cosmopoiesis for this phenomenon—an unusual term in our time. Cosmo derives from cosmos, meaning both the world and the organizing principles of the world, the structure of the universe. Poiesis refers to a kind of poetic creativity. Cosmopoiesis describes what happens through the depth, vitality, and beauty of imaginal practice: this spreading of soul-making perception to include and involve the world around us. When one opens one's eyes or while sitting, walking, or simply standing, the world becomes imbued with imaginal perception influenced by the original intrapsychic imaginal perception.

The word poiesis is carefully chosen here. Cosmology typically implies truth—usually scientific truth. Cosmopoiesis implies a poetic truth, a kind of truth that one would not feel comfortable dismissing as mere illusion in one's integrity, completeness, and the fullness of one's being and soul. I provided many examples of this in recent talks on the path of the imaginal and during the "Re-enchanting the Cosmos" retreat.

This represents both a creative process and a discovery—discovery in the sense that there is some kind of truth to these many possible perceptions of the world, the cosmos, the universe. What occurs is a spilling over that spreads to include the world, self, other, world, and so forth in this cosmopoiesis. All perceptions of the world are then shaped, colored by, or exist in relationship to the particular image one began with.

This doesn't mean that if one is imagining an imaginal figure—a god, goddess, divinity, or deity—the entire world is necessarily perceived as that deity. Rather, one might perceive oneself and elements of the world in relation to, in reference to that deity: as the lover of that deity, the consort, the food of that deity, or in countless other ways. All perceptions within this cosmopoiesis are shaped and colored in relation to the particular image that served as the starting point.

The possibilities for cosmopoiesis are infinite, truly endless, because of the infinite fertility and possibility of the soul and the imaginal faculty, the imaginal realm. In such perception, all those elements and aspects we listed as pertaining to the imaginal in the previous talk become elements of that cosmopoetic perception. In other words, it is

soul-making. Some elements seem to refer more obviously to the subjective pole, others to the objective pole of that imaginal constellation, that cosmopoetic perception, that soul-making perception.

Actually, this kind of cosmopoiesis could be considered the larger subset of all possible cosmopoiesis. We can also include perceptions of the world when perception is influenced and imbued with visions of universal oneness that can arise from certain deep meditative states or formal meditation practice. These are perceptions of the oneness of love—everything is of the nature and substance of love; love permeates and forms the essence of all things. Or compassion, joy, or peace might be perceived as the fundamental essence. These represent different kinds of perceptions of oneness that become different forms of cosmopoiesis.

Again, one wouldn't feel comfortable dismissing these perceptions as mere fabrication or delusion. One intuits some kind of mystical truth here: everything is awareness.

The nature of all being is awareness, or is nothingness. There are, within this category of what we could call perceptions of universal oneness—cosmopoieses that are characterized by some kind of universal oneness—actually a finite number of possibilities. I mentioned this in the Unfettered series, and there are certain variations.

For instance, around the sixth jhana or practices of resting in awareness, either one can give rise to quite a few states where the essence of things that permeates everything is consciousness or awareness. They're not exactly the same, and if this is the kind of territory whose beauty moves you and interests you, it can be really fascinating to sail on those seas, to navigate that territory and make those discernments.

But that set of perceptions or cosmopoieses that involve a perception of universal oneness—of some kind of universal essential essence—they are more limited as final possibilities. Together with the ones that come through more imaginal practice, they form the whole set of all possible cosmopoieses, which is actually infinite. Although perceptions of universal oneness form a finite set of cosmopoieses, the others are infinite, completely open-ended. There's no limit to what the soul can conjure, weave, create, discover.

So one may be working primarily with a so-called intrapsychic imaginal figure, and then this spreads out into a cosmopoiesis that's shaped, colored by, or in relationship to that particular image one was working with. That cosmopoiesis is very particular, and there are infinite possibilities.

Or one can actually not start with an intrapsychic image, but rather begin with some object of the five senses—something one is seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing. Some sound, smell, taste, touch, or a person that one is seeing, listening to—whatever it might be. One basically starts with the world and the things of the world, and the initial starting point in practice is with that sense contact, rather than with the so-called intrapsychic imaginal. One is starting with the extrapsychic.

And there too, in some instances when we practice, Eros and Psyche and Logos get involved in that sensing, in that perceiving. We speak of perceiving my beloved, my friend, my teacher, my lover—whatever it is—imaginatively. Or we use this phrase: sensing with soul. We're sensing this or that thing, this or that object. We're sensing the world with soul.

Sensing with soul—I introduced this phrase and I'd like to dwell on it a little today and over the next few days. The cosmopoiesis, the movement from an intrapsychic imaginal figure to that cosmopoiesis, is also a sensing with soul. So there too the world is sensed with soul. The order of practices by which we arrived at that point—whether we started intrapsychically or extrapsychically—is irrelevant. At that point of cosmopoiesis, we are sensing with soul.

So those kinds of cosmopoieses are subsets of a larger mode of being that we call sensing with soul.

As a kind of side point, the more traditional kinds of oneness perceptions of the world and those cosmic visions I mentioned earlier—they may be soul-making, as I've said before in other talks, and they may be a kind of sensing with soul if they are newer to the consciousness and so present a kind of beyond. "I haven't quite got my head around this. I haven't quite plumbed the depths of this perception." They present to the psyche a kind of beyond, which is more than I know, more than I'm familiar with, more than I can quite grasp or sense right now. And so they have allure and there's eros there because of the beyond, because of the pothos in the eros.

Those kinds of oneness perceptions can also be soul-making if there's a fantasy of the self in relationship to that experience, or in relation to a tradition that teaches and lays out the way to those kinds of experiences. So that could be soul-making. We could then also call it sensing with soul, when all that is present with a certain image, a certain sense of universal oneness.

Perhaps I'm too loose sometimes, or not caring enough about drawing rigid definitions of words. But another way to carve all this up is to say that soul has two directions of desire, two directions of eros. One is the direction towards unfabricating, towards

the unfabricated. And those different states of perceiving universal oneness—love, peace, joy, awareness, nothingness—they are points along that spectrum towards the unfabricated. They are states and perceptions of less and less fabrication. We could order them and delineate them along that spectrum.

And we could say something in the soul—it might not be alive for all people at any time—

But in other words, a person—this might not have come alive for them yet—but I would say that the soul has some desire, some eros in that direction, some pull and magnetic attraction to the beauty and the mystery and the wonder and the deliverance, in the Buddha's words, of those states, all of those states along that spectrum, all the way to the unfabricated. This is a hunger, a desire, an erotic pull of the soul.

And the soul has a second direction of its desire or eros, or the way its desire and eros points and wants to open, explore, expand, unfold. And that is towards—not so much the unfabricated, but towards what we could call poetic or soulful fabrications that include the imaginative faculty, the imaginal faculty.

So there's a movement towards unfabricating and everything that's on that spectrum, all those onenesses. And there's a pull, a movement, a longing, a love, an erotic movement and desire for poetic, soulful fabrications that include the imaginal faculty.

As I said, I sometimes feel I don't really care about the language too much. But let's just say for now, this last one, this poetic, soulful fabrication—soul-making fabrications that include the imaginal faculty—we're going to call or want to introduce the phrase "sensing with soul." In other words, sensing that is soul-making. Therefore, sensing this world, sensing this thing that I'm in touch with—this material thing, this person, this object, this element—sensing in a way that gives rise to some sense and concept of divinity, of sacredness, of meaningfulness, of beauties opening up. So sensing that opens all that up.

And this—this opening up of the sensing of the world in ways that are soul-making, in other words, opening up the possibilities of the sensing of divinity and sacredness and holiness in and through and not just beyond the world itself, and opening that up widely and infinitely in ways that really make a difference to the soul and to one's existence, opening up the meaningfulness and the beauty—this to me is the main point of imaginal practice. It's not so much getting fascinating images or this or that, but this transformation of the whole sense of existence, this redeeming and healing of the

whole sense of existence, this open-ended creation and discovery of what exists, all of existence. This to me is really the main point. And that can be very subtle at times and very undramatic.

To me, the main point of even intrapsychic imaginal practice is not so much the intrapsychic images for their own sake. Yes, healing comes in all this practice, imaginal practice, soul-making practice. Personal healing comes. Yes, dukkha is healed, attenuated in all kinds of ways. I'll dwell on that in the next talk. Yes, all this imaginal practice, the way we're teaching it and the sensing with soul and all of that, catalyzes, fertilizes, works and brings to—I was going to say fruition, but it's also an open-ended process—what we could call self-growth or my psycho-spiritual process, your psycho-spiritual process. What a Jungian would call individuation, though there are significant differences.

In other words, yes, all this imaginal practice brings personal healing, brings the resolution of my dukkha and actually also the dukkha in the world. Because we live, we see the world differently and we care for the world differently because we see it with soul, we sense it with soul. Our relationship with matter, with nature, with other human beings and other sentient beings is also deepened and enriched, made more beautiful, made more meaningful, made more importantly woven into our very sense of existence and value. So all this has huge implications for the reduction of dukkha.

But we could also just refer to all this—personal healing, reduction of dukkha, individuation or something akin to it, personal meaningfulness and relevance, personal process work—we could include all of this under the term "sensing with soul," where the self also is sensed with soul. In that way, with regards to one's own person, one's own existence, one's own self, the self becomes an object of soul-making. The self becomes an erotic other. The elements of the self become erotic beloveds to our own soul. The self and my existence and my journey and my struggles become pregnant with meaningfulness, amplified with different meanings and meaningfulness. I start to see the beauty of myself, the beauty of my journey, of my struggles, of my aspirations, of my efforts. I start to see the divinity of myself. And that has nothing to do with ego.

As we talked about on the Re-Enchanting the Cosmos retreat, there's a re-enchanting of dukkha, of my suffering, of my travails, my tragedies, what life has given me to work with, to deal with, to face. The whole sense of self is opened when it's sensed with soul. And all that self-process and soul-fertilizing of the self, soul-making of the sense of self, is happening in a context where the world and others and objects and the things of the world are also re-enchanted.

So all that is happening—something akin to individuation and personal healing and personal reduction of dukkha and all that. But the main point is this sensing with soul, sensing existence with soul—existence and the things, the elements of existence with soul. To me, that's the main point. That's where all this is going.

I want to quote a little bit from a philosopher that I've been getting acquainted with over the last six months or year, named J.N. Findlay.

He's dead now. And he was very unfashionable when he lived. I think he died in the 80s, so he lived, born in the early twentieth century. And he would be interested in certain philosophers and branches of philosophy and directions in philosophy that were really not fashionable during the period of his life, so that he spent a long time kind of really in the provincial outskirts, sort of banished because people thought he was a bit of a fuddy-duddy.

But I find a lot of what he says and writes and what he's trying to get at and trying to open up and trying to emphasize the importance of—I find it very beautiful, very touching. And I just want to quote from an essay that's slightly autobiographical, and he says of himself: "I myself have always been constitutionally mystical, feeling that certain kinds of rapture concerned with work, beauty, love, and a few other things, are the only things absolutely worth having." Listen to that. The only things absolutely worth having.

"I dropped my mysticism for a long period, partly on account of certain disillusioning experiences in my twenties with certain spiritual groups" that he was involved with, "and partly out of deference to the dry methods and doctrine that prevailed in British philosophy."

Then he says, latterly, however, increasing age—he was only sixty-two when he wrote this—has brought him back to his openness to mysticism and his seeing of just how important that is. And these aspects of beauty, love, work, beauty, love, and a few other things are the only things absolutely worth having.

And he also says, also seeing "the completely nugatory accomplishments"—that means the completely trivial accomplishments—"of purely unmystical analysis." So he was a mainstream philosopher in that sort of very dry Anglo-American tradition that prevailed for so many years and still is quite popular. And he knew all that, he worked with all that, he was respected as a proponent of all that in academic institutions. But then, as he approaches the end of his life, seeing the completely nugatory, trivial accomplishments of purely unmystical philosophical analysis, "I have found myself reverting increasingly to my original mysticism."

Sometimes, you know, maybe it's certain teachings, or maybe it's certain kinds of philosophy, and you just think, well, so what? So what? So for me, and one could even say, even with working with the imagination, it's like it can be, oh, so fascinating, and it's also so kind of sexy-sounding, or whatever. But the main point to me is this sensing existence with soul. For me, of course, you're free to make whatever is your main point, and whatever's most important to you, but for me, and my intention in sort of even starting with these teachings was always that. It's the re-enchanting of existence, the opening up of the possibilities and the legitimizing of and making accessible the possibilities of genuine, vital, and meaningful, and deeply transformative senses of sacredness—in the plural, senses of sacredness. That's my sense of what's most important here.

So in all this, there's a process or journey of opening to make more accessible and more refined this soul dynamic, soul process of the creation slash discovery—or the creation and discovery—in very individual ways as well as collectively or socially together. This creation and discovery of senses of sacredness, sensing the world with soul and the possibilities there.

Life and death, existence, self, others, objects, world, matter—all the elements of being become image, can become image. That doesn't mean all the time, twenty-four hours a day, every day. But the access to that, the refinement with that, the flexibility, the depth and breadth of that, it grows. It gets worked, gets opened over time. And all of that, all the elements of being—matter, self, other, world, life, death, existence—can be perceived imaginatively in the infinite different ways that that is possible, in the infinitely richly and bountiful ways and helpful ways that that's possible. All of that can get sensed with the soul. And that, to me, as I said, is the primary thrust, or where this is going, the intention of what is being opened.

Now, just a little bit, again, I mentioned it already in the first talk at some point, but about vocabulary here. So we've been using this word imaginal, and we're still using it, and I personally don't intend to necessarily give it up. But I am aware, of course, as I said, that it can be confusing for some people, or it has been confusing to some people, whether they're aware of it or not, or limiting for some people. So I just want to say a bit about these different vocabularies—imaginal and sensing with soul—and really kind of, again, introduce or wave the flag for this new phrase, sensing with soul, alongside the word imaginal as a complement or an alternative. And actually, say they can be used almost interchangeably, I think.

So for some people, it seems that the word imaginal seems to imply a necessary involvement or centering around an intra-psychic visual image. Just the word image in our common usage in the wider culture seems to imply something visual and seems to, for meditators, imply something intra-psychic as opposed to like an image in an advert or something. And then we've been through this as well and some people say, well, I don't get any of those. I don't get any images. So there's still this idea of intra-psychic visual images.

So I thought about it, and it occurred to me that maybe the phrase sensing with soul would be a helpful complement to the word imaginal, perhaps, for some people. Why? Because sensing with soul would imply, or it seems to me to imply, that it includes seeing, hearing, touching people, being touched and the use of the kinesthetic sense. Tasting, smelling, thinking and imagining. Any and all of those, if we say seven senses, if we count thinking and imagining as the sixth and seventh. And you'll know that classical Buddha Dharma counts the mind—whether it's thinking or imagining or all that—as the sixth sense.

But any of those senses—seeing, hearing, touching, being touched by, tasting, smelling, thinking and imagining—can be engaged with soulfulness or in ways that are soul-making. So sensing with soul means using any of the senses in ways that are soul-making, using them with soulfulness.

Now, of course, this just begs the question: what do the terms soul, soulfulness and soul-making mean? That needs explaining, which I've done elsewhere, but I will explore again. So there's a kind of circularity of definition, but all the most... well, I was going to say all the most important things in life have circular definitions, but let's just say this one does. And that's fine, because hopefully you will really get a sense and a taste of what we're talking about here.

This phrase then, sensing with soul, implies an involvement or inclusion of both intra-psychic phenomena—images—and perceptions of this world and material objects and others in this world. In other words, sensing with soul embraces both the so-called intra-psychic and the extra-psychic.

It may be that the tendency with the phrase "sensing with soul," because of the emphasis on sensing and our usual association of sensing with the five senses and hence the link to the extra-psychic and the material world, might drift the other way for some people, away from the intra-psychic. But no phrase or term is going to be perfect and eliminate all incompleteness of understanding or misemphasis or unfair emphasis of

direction. So I want to introduce it as a kind of complement, or for some it will be an alternative to the word imaginal—as I said, embracing both the intra-psychic and the extra-psychic.

But also the phrase "sensing with soul" hopefully makes it clear that images are not necessarily visual. We could give so many examples here, but I think it was in the talk "Image, Mythos, Dharma," in the first part of that talk...

Some of you may be really dedicated musicians, deeply into that art of music and that whole life. And in the way that a musician who is really into it, in the moment when they are playing with soul, their instrument—the way they touch the instrument, the way they move their fingers or their lips, the contact, the manner, and all the extreme subtleties that you would be really hard-pressed to even analyze into their components or sum up—that way of touching and playing an instrument is part, of course, of their technique. It's part of how they are accomplished in the way that they get the instrument to make the sound that they want it to make. But it's also imbued with soul.

So again, if you're a musician, you'll recognize this: when you're playing with soul, then the way you're touching the instrument, the movement and the contact and the kinds of contact with the instrument, the actual physical impact, is being perceived with soul, perceived soulfully, sensed with soul, and also moved by soul. So the whole thing—all that touch and contact—is imbued with soul and actually involves a perception of the self, some kind of other, which may be the instrument and the music and the sound and maybe other musicians in the present moment that one might be playing with, and also other musicians in history that are alive as images somehow imbuing your music-making creative process in the moment. And also the world and the audience and the sense or the imaginal perception of the audience's participation and listening and involvement and enjoyment and openness and appreciation of the music.

There's nothing necessarily visual there. The imaginal element of sensing with soul is really happening in the touch and in the listening. It's happening... and if we're talking about the way of touching the instrument, it's very, very subtle, and the way it's woven into touch there is very, very subtle.

Maybe more accessible for a lot of people would be an example of the way lovers touch when they're in love. Of course, it's sensually pleasant. Of course, there is goodwill communicated. But there's another element there of the erotic imaginal in and through the touch. Even if one has one's eyes closed...

You understand, so sensing with soul, or sensing and acting with soul, involves all kinds of perceptions of self, other, object—could be in any of the senses—and world. All seven senses.

Actually, on that musician example, some of you know B.B. King, the blues singer who died not too long ago, a great blues singer and guitarist. And he, you may know this if you know him, called his guitar Lucille. So his guitar was, for him, a feminine person that he had a real intimate relationship with. So there's an imaginal relationship there, and maybe a sensing with soul. But that's relatively gross. If you just say, "Oh, his guitar becomes a person," that's a relatively gross sort of sensing with soul, a relatively gross imaginal perception.

When someone might not personify their instrument that way, for example, and the whole sensing with soul is happening, as I said, through the touch or through the sense of the audience or through the sound or through the kind of historical connection that's happening so subtly with previous musicians who are images for us... but the main point here was that it doesn't have to be visual. So it can be extremely subtle and can happen through any and all of the senses.

And again, notice that when I made kind of seven senses there, thinking is included in sensing with soul. So again, in the thinking, in the conceiving mind, there can be a soul-making fantasy of thinking, of my thinking, of the thinking happening itself.

It becomes imaginal. The thinking itself, our sense of our own thinking becomes imaginal—we perceive it imaginatively, we sense our own thinking with soul. Then the thinking itself becomes an image, becomes erotic. Our thinking, the thought, the thinker, ourselves as thinker.

And also, a distinction we've already made: there can be a soulful conceptualizing of, or a soul-making with respect to or in relationship to, one's conceiving.

So all of the senses can be arenas—spheres, to borrow the Buddha's word, ayatana—for soul-making. Soul-making can happen through and with and in all the senses.

In some respects it's useful to make a distinction between intra-psychic images and extra-psychic sensing with soul—intra-psychic sensing with soul, extra-psychic sensing with soul, or the imaginal perception of this material world. Let's say sensing the soul includes the intra-psychic imaginal, and we can just about use the words interchangeably: imaginal and sensing the soul.

If we explore a little bit the nature of sensing, the phenomenology of sensing, and this notion of sensing the soul, I'll just highlight a few things.

One could say that there are good, justifiable reasons for saying—from a certain point of view, or a certain way of thinking about things, analyzing things—that any and all perception, which means any and all experience or any and all appearances (I use those words perception, experience, and appearance pretty much interchangeably), is fabricated in a way that involves or mixes or relies on the cooperation of or is infused by four elements, dimensions of our being or aspects or factors.

One is conception, and I've emphasized this before. That includes everything from the most gross conception to really, really subtle conceptions and assumptions about what is real and what knowledge is. Any kind of delineation of perception involves a delineation of conception, whether we're conscious of what's going on conceptually or not—and for the most part we're not. So conception.

Secondly, intentionality or desire is also a factor involved in, mixed in with, cooperating in and infusing any fabrication of any perception. Any perception at all. So that means: what is actually the intention in perceiving? What is the desire? What kind of desire is it? Is it clinging—and if you know the way I would explain the phenomenology of perception and the whole ways of looking and fabricating, it needs to be some kind of clinging. Is it craving, though, or is it eros?

Some kind also of aspiration, which might be very developed—the aspiration to see along some kind of dharmic lines, to see impermanence, or the aspiration for liberation, or the aspiration to sense with soul. It might be quite a developed and conscious aspiration, a sophisticated aspiration, or it may be very, very subtle. It may be conscious, it may not be conscious. But some kind of intentionality or desire or aspiration is involved as a second factor.

The third, we could say, is just sense data.

These four factors—the fourth being the imaginal faculty—are all involved and mixed together, or they cooperate, or they infuse each other. We could say they're in dialogue with each other. Sense data, the imaginative faculty, conception, and desire, intentionality, aspiration, are in dialogue with each other to inform, shape, influence our perceptions of anything, of life, things, and existence in any moment.

Though dialogue is not really a good word because it implies a kind of separability—this is in dialogue with that. The imaginative faculty is in dialogue with the sense data as if the sense data was something raw and pristine and we could arrive at it and separate it on its own. We can't. That's not possible despite the sort of teachings of bare attention that used to be quite common in the Dharma world.

These four factors are inseparable. They are mixed together in a way—we're artificially separating something just as a conceptual structure right now that's not actually separable. So sense data is always mixed with conception. It's always mixed with intentionality and some degree of imaginal faculty.

So each of these four—conception, intentionality or desire, what we might call sense data (in inverted commas), and the imaginal faculty—they are all involved to some degree or other. In other words, you can have a really rich involvement of the imaginal faculty, and it can be shaped this way or that way, like towards more papañca, or towards more soul-making, or colored this way or that way. And as I said, there can be a really sophisticated, conscious involvement of the conceptuality, or just a very unconscious and not very sophisticated involvement of conceptuality.

So they all can be more or less, each individually and relative to each other, and they're inseparable and there's a confluence—they're all influenced, they're all mixed together.

We can say that with some justification as a sort of way of conceiving what's happening with any and all perception, any and all experience or any and all sense of an appearance.

When we talk about sensing with soul, one way of understanding what we really mean is that those four factors are working in a way that brings soul-making, that opens soul-making. So the conception operating, the kind of desire or intention or aspiration operating, and the imaginative faculty operating, are operating in a way that supports and opens and nourishes soul-making in the moment, so that the imaginative faculty is not papañca, towards papañca, nor is it so reified—that would be a good distinction to make.

but it's more imaginal with all those elements.

So sensing with soul is simply those four factors mixing and cooperating, each existing in certain states, and through the way they blend together, soul-making emerges as the result. This offers another way of understanding what unfolds in these moments.

When there is extra-psychic sensing with soul—meaning material objects or persons present to us in physical actuality are perceived imaginally—there is an obviously direct meeting, mixing, infusing, or involvement of the imaginal faculty. When I perceive my beloved and see her, him, them imaginally, when I sense them with soul, or sense this tree or mountain imaginally—perceiving it with soul—the involvement of the imaginal faculty becomes very obvious and direct in that imaginal perception of things, of life, of matter, of world, of objects.

When the sensing with soul is more intra-psychic, the involvement of the imaginative faculty with life, events, and material objects is present, but seems less direct. We have discussed this kind of mirroring and echoing—sometimes it is not so obvious. Yet in both cases, whether intra-psychic or extra-psychic sensing with soul, the imaginal faculty is involved in both ways it meets the world. In the intra-psychic sensing, the meeting of the imaginal faculty with the world is sometimes not so directly apparent.

But whether we speak of intra-psychic or extra-psychic sensing with soul—and you can tell I don't really even like those terms—all sensing with soul implies that reverence is present. All sensing with soul involves reverence, involves humility, involves love, involves the perception of and being touched by beauty. Beauty opens up the perception of beauty in ways that are deeply meaningful. This involves love, a sense of duty or duties, a sense of unfathomability—something beyond my perception and conception that the eros, the pathos within the eros, wants to reach toward, connect with, know, become intimate with, open to.

All sensing with soul includes dimensionality, a sense of dimensionality, and eventually a sense of divinity. It involves soft, elastic edges, some attenuation of grasping, and eros as well. It will preserve the twoness we discussed, even while we remain aware of an underlying oneness. All sensing with soul, if we stay with it, will eventually reveal a sense of participation and a conception—even if vague—of participation, and so forth. Essentially, the entire list we explored before, all those twenty-three elements and probably more we didn't include, will be present when sensing with soul. All of those elements and aspects are important components of sensing with soul.

If we place this in a slightly different context and consider sense contact—borrowing this phrase from the Buddha regarding sense experience—we might ask: what are the possible skillful modes of sense contact?

Before outlining these, let me point out that "skillful" is a word the Buddha used. But what constitutes a skillful mode of sense contact? Several things come into play. First, what is skillful is contextually determined by at least two factors. One is tradition—the tradition we inhabit determines or decides for us what kind of sense contact is skillful. It establishes what skillful means.

If opening to seeing Christ in everyone and everything is the goal of the path or an element one wishes to cultivate, this obviously determines what skillful means. If one interprets Theravada Buddhism along certain lines, then skillful carries quite a different meaning. Even within Buddha Dharma, you can see how this word means quite different things to different interpretations of the Pali Canon. What does skillful sense contact mean?

We must always remember that all of this is contextualized by tradition. We are informed by, persuaded by, sometimes indoctrinated by the tradition we inhabit. Whenever we use "skillful," it remains relative to a certain tradition or according to a certain tradition.

Related to this point, the word skillful—or the label skillful for any kind of sense contact, thought, or conception—is also contextualized or contextually determined by one's long-term and short-term aims. For instance, my long-term aim might be to explore all this imaginal territory and open up the eros. But it might be that right now this is not the right approach, and I need to move into another mode. So presently, the skillful sense contact would not be to open up more eros—the fire is already raging in a way that's not helpful, and I need to relate to sense contact differently.

If the long-term goal is knowing the unfabricated and eventually not being reborn, this forms a long-term aim that informs what skillful means. But the short-term aim might simply be making it to the teacher's talk tonight. So I cannot be unfabricating too much because I won't be able to get there—I won't be able to find the place or function in the world if I'm constantly unfabricating like that.

We can make many such distinctions. The point is that when we speak of skillful modes of sense contact, we must understand this as a contextualized word dependent on various factors.

That said, we could delineate four possible skillful modes of sense contact, of sensing. One is simply the normal way we engage sense contact when moving through the busyness of life, encountering objects and tasks that need completion. There's a kind of perfunctory mode of sense contact—

And of course, this is perfectly fine at times. We need such moments. We simply move through the world—get in the car and drive it, get on the bike and ride it to reach our destination. Sense contact is delineated for practical purposes. We're accomplishing something toward some other end, hopefully a beneficial one. This mode is completely appropriate, according to the Buddha Dharma, when accompanied by a certain level of mindfulness—just a basic level of what the Buddha calls *sampajañña*, usually translated as clear comprehension. I know where I am, what I'm doing, how my body is positioned, where I'm going, and what my intention is. This basic mindfulness within a normal mode of sense contact—moving through a busy life, getting things done—is fine and completely appropriate at times.

A second possible skillful mode of sense contact involves what we might call a slightly more intense mindfulness, specifically a more narrowly focused mindfulness directed through the lens of some dharma concept. For example, sense contact viewed through the lens of the second foundation of mindfulness, or the first foundation, or aspects of the fourth foundation when the Buddha delineates certain lists. This might involve sense contact examined through the dharma lens of the six sense spheres, or fields, or the eighteen sense constituents—organizing one's experience according to this more intense and narrowly focused mindfulness. In other words, focused narrowly according to this dharma lens.

This second approach has the effect of simplifying things through a certain reductionism. By virtue of this kind of lens or grid through which we examine experience—three kinds of *vedanā*, three kinds of reactions to three kinds of *vedanā*, and so forth—we're simplifying through reductionism, through a certain kind of helpful reductionism. Even the idea of bare attention as a dharma concept becomes a dharma lens. It's simplifying and helpful. The same applies to the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—or simply the idea of contact, or the twelve links of dependent origination.

This approach is extremely valuable at times, as you know if you've practiced this way. Because of the simplifying and other factors, there's a relative degree of lessening of clinging and craving. There's a relative degree of less fabricating. Things simplify and are fabricated less to a certain degree. These modes of sense contact or ways of looking are extremely valuable—really helpful, genuinely beneficial skills to develop.

A third kind of possibly skillful mode of sense contact is one that senses or sees, if you like, or knows oneness. We've explored different kinds of oneness—love or awareness or peace, or even the emptiness of phenomena. The sensing then becomes a different kind of reductionism, not so atomistic. When this is really deep, there's almost a mode of sense contact that doesn't buy into the whole idea of contact. It's not so much this touching that, this sense sphere touching that. Instead, there's a sense that all is one essence.

Rather than this sense base touching that sense object, there's more a sense that both the so-called sense base and so-called sense object are really just waves or foam in the same sea, the same ocean—not so much this touching that. This too is extremely valuable at times, extremely beautiful. With it comes probably an even greater degree of lessening of clinging and craving and fabrication.

Actually, as we discussed before, one can unfabricate so much that even the perception of sense contact fades. One doesn't actually have bodily sensations, and sometimes even vision or hearing fade—there's actually a dissolution. In this third mode, in what

we could call the direction of unfabricating or seeing different kinds of oneness, the whole structure of sense contact begins to melt into oneness and actually into a kind of fading and disappearing.

Then we could say there's a fourth possibly skillful mode of sense contact, which is what we're calling sensing with soul—imaginal sense contact, imaginal sensing. In this mode, my personhood and the personhood and particularity of what is sensed is preserved. There's no reduction to merely seeing some kind of process with different constituents, as in the second mode, nor atomization, nor dissolution into some kind of true nature of love or being or awareness or other kind of oneness. Instead, there's a preservation of both my own and the object's personhoods, souls really.

This mode also liberates and makes present different kinds of senses of beauty—and again, beauty means much more than just pleasant *vedanā* or pleasant sensations arranged. It liberates and brings to presence a sense of meaningfulness, much more so than the getting-things-done quality of the first skillful mode of sense contact. It liberates a sense of mystery, unfathomability, holiness, value—all these elements of soul-making we've been discussing.

This fourth approach, this sensing with soul, this sensing in a way that is soul-making and involves the filling out of that dimensionality, that amplification, the expanding of all that's involved—this too decreases craving and increases equanimity. So we talk extensively about eros and fire, but we shouldn't overlook the fact that this sensing with soul...

generally also brings equanimity in a different way, but at a very deep level. And it also involves a reduction, in the moment that we're sensing with soul, a reduction of craving. And I will also say more long-term. When we sense food with soul, and that becomes more a common and frequently accessible perception of our food, for example, then the whole kind of craving for—I need to eat X or Y or this tasty food, or it has to be like this, or it has to be whatever—it gets attenuated, it dies down.

We are fed by something much more important than pleasant vedanā, much more nourishing than pleasant vedanā. The body is nourished by the food and the soul is nourished by the soul-making perception of the food, by sensing the soul. And as I said, this kind of sensing with soul and sensing one's existence with soul brings, I feel, a really profound and widespread equanimity.

If I speak personally, there is a very immediately accessible example: just in relation to my cancer and the possibility, being given such a dire prognosis, the possibility of dying very soon. When I am able—when I sense my existence and myself and my ill-

ness and my life and my death with soul, and confronting, including, embracing with soul the very real possibility of death soon, and all the disability and the impediment and the restriction and the unpleasantness and the difficulty and the incapacity that being ill long-term involves—when I sense that with soul, and in all kinds of different possible ways, I honestly say what a deep equanimity comes.

It comes in a very different way than just seeing it's empty. Oh yeah, it's impermanent. Life is impermanent. Health is impermanent. Very different way than just applying mindfulness to unpleasant sensations. Different way than oneness. There's a whole different realm of possibilities for the letting go of craving and for the deepening and strengthening and widening of equanimity in one's life in relation to the most difficult elements that can be faced or experienced.

Just the point right now is this fourth possibly skillful mode of sense contact we can move in and out of. A developed, mature practitioner will move between these skillful modes of sense contact. But this fourth one, sensing with soul, different than the others, also involves, to some degree, less fabrication, but still preserves fabrication. It involves less craving, but more eros. And it brings equanimity, as should the second and the third.

A second point, perhaps, in contextualizing this idea of sensing with soul: sensing with soul must include, at least implicitly, sensing with mindfulness. Now, people use the word mindfulness in quite broad ways and emphasize different aspects of it according to different schools and ways that it's taught. But sensing the soul must include, at least implicitly, sensing with mindfulness, which includes then, to me, the qualities of presence, wakefulness, careful attention. These are central to what we mean by mindfulness, of course. And there's no sensing the soul without presence, wakefulness and careful attention.

Sensing the soul also includes the qualities of sensitivity and responsiveness. So sensitivity and also the capacity to modulate our mindfulness or where we direct the attention or how we respond—that's part of mindfulness, at least in the way some people would teach it. It's not just a blanket, one-gear sort of passive mode of attention.

Mindfulness also includes appropriate attention. That's a translation of the Pali yoniso manasikāra, which is sometimes emphasized and sometimes not at all, but it's linked with mindfulness, and the Buddha placed a lot of emphasis on it. It was a very important concept for him. I would translate it as something like minding, or knowing, or even thinking by way of the matrix, or by way of the womb—yoni means womb,

matrix. This implies that involved in the whole way we're paying mindfulness and involved in the intention of mindfulness is an interest in exploring and investigating and an attention to the dependent origination of what arises and what passes.

So in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta when it says attending to the arising factors, attending to the dissolution factors, some people just translate that as noticing arising and passing—in other words, noticing impermanence. But the Pali word that goes with it is samudaya, which really means dependent arising—the same word used in the arising of suffering and the arising in dependent origination. So in its broader sense, I would tend to emphasize that that's what appropriate attention means or includes: this awareness of the dependent origination of what is arising and what is passing.

Similarly, when we're sensing the soul, we're attuning to, interested in the dependent origination of what is happening. Sensing the soul is not just a kind of passive receiving in a fixed mode. It's agile, responsive, flexible, and aware of and interested in the dependent arising. Like, if I trust a bit more, then the image opens up more.

dwell with my sense of humility, or whatever it is, then the thing becomes more imaginal. As it becomes more imaginal, I see that the self becomes image. All this is the dependent arising of the imaginal perception, the dependent arising of what is sensed with soul.

And so for some people, that is an important part—that appropriate attention, as it's sometimes translated, *yoniso manasikāra*, is an important part of what mindfulness means and likewise an important part of what sensing the soul involves.

The third of the qualities of mindfulness that we can just highlight right now of sensing with mindfulness that is also implicit in sensing with soulfulness is reverence, which we've touched on before. Mindfulness is nowadays taught in different settings, with different intentions, with different slants, with different contexts of cosmology and all kinds of business. But many people in teaching mindfulness actually very beautifully emphasize that mindfulness involves a kind of reverence. It's included either explicitly—maybe not that word exactly—or just implied as an aspect of mindfulness in many contemporary mindfulness teachings.

Reverence for what though? So sometimes it might be, again, implicit or explicit. Reverence for this moment. Sometimes that's what's communicated. Reverence for life, with a big L. Reverence for what is. These are all either explicit or implicit communications that go along with the different ways mindfulness is presented.

Still, those kinds of reverences or objects of reverence, if you like, are different than a reverence for soul—with all the open-ended creation and discovery that is implied and involved in the word soul. And a reverence implicitly then, in the reverence of soul, implicitly for the possibility that this experience, this experiencer, the self, me, this object, experience—that this matter, that is also soul. So when there's a reverence for soul, there's an implicit possibility that all that too can be included as soul. It is soul or can be ensouled, if you like—come to be sensed as soul.

So when the reverence in the sensing for soul, sensing with soul, the reverence is really for soul, which may be quite different—that may not be in the circumscription of certain mindfulness teachings, where the reverence may be more for nature, or this moment, or life, or what is, or whatever it is. Reverence for soul that's included in sensing with soul is broader, more far-reaching, more multi-dimensional, as we've explained. But anyway, reverence as an aspect of mindfulness—and because sensing the soul includes, at least implicitly, sensing with mindfulness—reverence is there. There are overlaps.

And mindfulness, actually, again depending on how it's taught, but basically mindfulness includes, implicitly at least and usually explicitly, discernment regarding what leads to suffering and what leads to a decrease in suffering. Because mindfulness, the teaching of mindfulness, is actually embedded in the centrality of the Four Noble Truths, which concern themselves absolutely fundamentally with what leads to suffering, what leads to locking suffering into place, what leads to increasing suffering, and what leads to freeing from suffering, decreasing suffering.

Sensing the soul also involves a discernment along these lines. It involves discernment generally, as we talk about all kinds of discernments, but also discernment between eros and craving. And here again, it's like the movements of desire that not just lead to more suffering or less suffering, but also soul-making or not soul-making. And discerning between imaginal perceptions that are more going in the direction of *papañca*, and ones that are more along the spectrum towards the imaginal. And discerning between concepts and *logoi* that nourish and open and support soul-making, and those that imprison soul-making and also imprison the being, and those that don't.

So discernment is actually a factor of mindfulness, and likewise it's present in sensing the soul. I would say that the range of discernment is broader in the sensing the soul as well.

And last, just to point out—to repeat, I've already said it—but sensing with soul involves play. Play is an element in the sense of the permission and the capacity for flexibility, fluidity, experimenting, trying things out, curious responsiveness and experimentation.

And so play, as I would understand it, needs to be part of the image and the idea, the logos, of practice, of my path, and of my goal. That actually liberation, awakening, enlightenment—actually one of the things that means is a liberation, a freeing up of the flexibility of ways of looking, ways of relating, ways of being. That's what's liberated. That's what's opened. One of the most significant features for me of what liberation might mean, awakening might mean.

So the image of playfulness and the idea, the notion, the logos of playfulness needs to be part of the image and idea of what I have of practice, of path, of goal. Sensing the soul needs that too, as I've pointed out before.

All right, let's stop. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 110

Sensing with Soul (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 48 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea deepens his exploration of "sensing with soul" - engaging our senses in ways that support soul-making and open dimensions of beauty, meaning, and sacred connection. He examines why conceptual understanding is crucial for sustaining and deepening these experiences, providing the "soil and ground" that prevents soul-making from becoming merely ephemeral.*
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> *Burbea articulates two complementary definitions of soul: first, as the phenomenological recognition of qualities like meaningfulness, beauty, and sacred dimensionality; second, as an "organ of sensing" - our capacity to perceive in ways that cultivate soulfulness. He explores the mysterious balance between receptivity (grace, givenness) and active participation (choosing, steering, desiring) in the soul-making process.*
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> *The talk focuses extensively on the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic - the three interweaving elements that constitute soul-making. Eros embodies the wanting for deeper connection and intimacy; Psyche represents our imaginal faculty; and Logos encompasses our conceptual frameworks. Burbea explains how these elements mutually stimulate and fertilize each other, with Eros containing pothos (infinite longing) that continually opens new "beyonds" to explore. This process naturally involves transgressing boundaries and making increasingly subtle distinctions - not just conceptually, but in our embodied sensitivity and awareness. Understanding these dynamics, he suggests, is vital for addressing contemporary challenges including our relationship with nature and environmental crisis.*

So we introduced a bit of new vocabulary, a new term, sensing with soul, as a possible alternative to the word imaginal for some people, or a complement to it—a way of phrasing things that perhaps gives a slightly different slant or emphasis in case that emphasis was somewhat unfairly skewed towards the intra-psychic previously for some people.

We said that sensing with soul simply means sensing, engaging the senses, being involved with our senses as human beings in ways that support and fertilize or bring soul-making. Sensing with soul is just sensing in ways that are soulful, that bring soul-making.

This business of sensing with soul is potentially vitally, crucially important for our being in the world—for how we relate to existence, for how we relate to the gift of human life, how we relate to each other, how we relate to time, how we relate to nature and the planet, and also to the grave environmental challenges that we face as a species at this point, as do other species.

For me, there's something here in this whole business that we're trying to illuminate from different directions that's vitally important. We can relate to our senses in ways that close certain doors or open doors that we may really not want to open and go down, that may have grave or limiting consequences. Or we can find ways to relate to senses that actually open up gift and grace and beauty and soul.

I want to dwell a little less on giving examples and focus again on understanding what are we getting at here? What's involved? Why is this so important? Understanding the concepts involved allows that vitality to come forth, to come through in our relating to the world. It's actually understanding that can provide a kind of robustness to this whole endeavor, to this whole exploration—a robustness to our experiences.

If we have soul-making experiences, we have experiences that touch us, that move us, that seem to have bigger implications, one of the things that gives them grounding and gives them the ability or potential to be more than just ephemeral experiences that we sometimes forget or that seem to have no consequence or are easily dismissed or don't seem to carry out and bring forth their implications is the absence of a conceptual structure that really gives that soil and ground and rootedness and nourishment and fits it into a context.

For me, this understanding is crucial. I realize that for some people it's not how they tend to relate to things in terms of concepts and structures and how it all fits together. Many of the ideas that we're introducing are quite alien. So I realize that for some people it's quite difficult, for other people it's quite attractive. But there is something crucial and vital about understanding, because that allows the greater vitality of what's going on, of this business of soul-making. It allows and offers robustness, durability, fertility to the whole project, the whole exploration.

So I want to dwell just a little on some of the concepts involved. Sensing with soul, we said, was sensing in a way that was soul-making. Now, why do we call it soul-making? Because if we define sensing with soul that way, it just begs the question for someone listening: well, what do you mean by soul? What do you mean by soul-making or soulfulness?

So why do we call it soul-making? What is made? What is the making? What is soul-making? I've been through this in different ways quite a lot in the last few years, but to say it again, one way we could approach this—actually, before we even say that, was it soul-making?

We pointed out in the last talk that this making is not only a passive process. There's a kind of straddling. It can feel to us, and in the movement of soul-making, it will feel to us that something is given to us. Images are given to us. Circumstances are given to us. Perceptions open up for us in a way as if there's a greater intelligence operating, as if the soul bestows on us as graces these openings that we call soul-making.

And yet at the same time—and that's a very important perspective—there's a sort of opposite or complementary perspective: it's not only a passive process, this making. So yes, there's a sense of givenness, of grace, of necessity, of something being handed to us. And sometimes that involves what is difficult being handed to us, as well as what is beautiful. So yes, there's all that.

But it's not just passive. There is also required in this making our assent, our willing, our choosing, our responsiveness, and our steering, and our desire, our eros. So in the making, it's this mysterious, beautiful, somewhat paradoxical mixture or encompassing of both the passive sense of receiving, giving, grace, and also of doing—our making, our choosing, our design.

But why do we call it soul-making? What is made here? Two ways of approaching this. We could say soul. Soul is made through soul-making. What is being made? Well, soul is being made, hence the word. But then that begs the question: what do we mean by soul?

Again, we can approach this in different ways and at different levels, but we could say soul means a quality—or rather the collection or manifold of qualities, aspects, or dimensions that constitute a sense of soulfulness.

In other words: meaningfulness, beauty, a sense of beauty that touches us, an involvement of the imaginal capacity or fantastical capacity, an ideation or conceptual structure or framework or logos that is stimulated and can support the whole network of elements—the lattice, the constellation of what is involved in soul-making.

Eros is involved—this wanting more connection, wanting more penetration, wanting more intimacy, wanting to know more of the erotic other, the beloved erotic object. There's a sense of theater, this middle way between real and not real, this infinite echoing and mirroring, a sense of theophany, and so forth. All of this constitutes a sense of soulfulness.

Soul means the various qualities, the collection of manifold qualities, aspects, or dimensions that constitute a sense of soulfulness. This is what we mean by soul, and this is what's made in soul-making.

Soul is something we recognize—we recognize soulfulness, we recognize soul, and we recognize soul-making phenomenologically, in our experience. We recognize that dimension or those aspects of experience.

A second way we can think about or speak about soul is—holding this lightly—as an organ of sensing, or an instrument of sensing. The human organism is composed of different organs, and we could think of soul, very lightly, as an organ. It is that in us, or perhaps which we are in, that senses in ways that bring and increase and open a sense of soulfulness.

Soul is that organ that senses in ways that open, support, and deepen a sense of soulfulness. It is an organ of soulful ways of looking.

This organ—which we could put in inverted commas—we can also deconstruct. By putting it in inverted commas, I mean it doesn't have inherent existence. When something doesn't have inherent existence, we can conceive or view it like this, and we can conceive or view it like that. It's open and amenable to different ways of being conceived and sensed.

Because soul doesn't have inherent existence, it is not one fixed thing independent of the way of conceiving it and the way of sensing and looking at it. We can look at it from different angles, different perspectives. We can deconstruct it further into its various elements or aspects or ways of looking or properties.

But we could say soul is this organ which is or holds the capacity and ranges of ways of looking that bring soulfulness. It's an organ that employs ways of looking that support or open, nourish soulfulness—a sense of soulfulness.

It is this organ or instrument or capacity—or you could just view it as a range of available ways of looking. Soul is that. It's more of a verb. Like soul-making, it's a range of ways of looking. And it is this organ, this capacity, this instrument, or range of available ways of looking that is made in soul-making, that is built, that is developed.

Right there, there are two ways of seeing what we mean by soul, or conceiving what we mean by soul. The first is a phenomenological recognition—it's an object of experience. We have the experience of this theophany or beauty or meaningfulness. The second is the imputed subject of that range of objects or experience—this organ of ways of looking that bring soulfulness.

We can conceive of soul as object or as subject, or both.

Soul, in its activation into the soul-making dynamic of Eros-Psyche-Logos—which we'll review in a minute—soul makes. In other words, it creates as well as discovers soulfulness, and it creates as well as discovers soul capacity and soul sensing.

Soul is that capacity to sense, that ability to sense in a soulful way, in ways that bring soulfulness. It makes the objects, the aspects and dimensions of objects, the subject, the self, the world in cosmopoiesis, in sense of divinity, with eros, with dimensionality, with beauty. It makes and creates and opens all that up in the very sense of the fabric, the texture of existence, and the sense of what our existence is.

All that is why this is so important—because it has enormous implications for how we live, how we relate to our life, death, and the world around us. It is this openness and potentially increasing capacity to make soul, which means to sense in those ways, that is so important.

Now, as we just mentioned, soul amplifies what's happening in the soul-making dynamic by having elements. One way of breaking up the elements is to say that eros and psyche and logos are always involved when there's soul sensing, always involved in imaginal perception.

Eros is this wanting more connection, wanting more contact, wanting more penetration, intimacy, opening to the erotic object—whatever that is, whatever that erotic object is, what we might call the beloved other. We've talked a lot about eros.

Psyche—one definition of psyche in this sense is that it's the imaginal faculty. The sense of image, of sensing with image.

And logos is the conceiving faculty—the notion or ideation or whole conceptual framework that's operating at any time with a perception.

So that all these factors are involved when there is a sensing with soul - there has to be eros, there has to be the imaginal image involved, and also some kind of ways of conceiving that support that deepening movement and that sensing with soul, with all the elements of what we call the elements of the imaginal constellation, the elements of soulfulness that we've enumerated.

In the soul-making dynamic - what we were calling the soul-making dynamic, or the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic - these elements of eros, psyche, and logos interact with each other. They get involved with each other, woven into each other in ways that stimulate their mutual feeding, mutual expanding, enriching, complicating, deepening, and widening. This can happen in many ways.

One of the most obvious ways that it happens is because eros, if you heard in the definition, has that "more" in it. It wants more. So whenever there's eros, there is the enjoyment of what is present and the appreciation and the beauty there. And at the same time, it has *pothos* within the eros. And *pothos* is the Greek divinity of infinite wanting, of wanting always more. So within it, eros has this *pothos* that no matter what beauty and what depth and what richness it has, it's always got an element of wanting more.

Rather than being a problem in the way that craving is a problem - this endless thirst that the Buddha talked about, *tanha*, creating more and more suffering, keeping us on the wheel of rebirth - there's something creative and stimulating and fertilizing about this *pothos* within the eros, this wanting always more. It orients itself to what is beyond what it already knows, what it already fully experiences, what it's already fully familiar with. It discovers beyonds, if you like. It also casts out and creates beyonds. And it sets itself in relation to - in erotic relation of longing, if you like, or just desire or impetus or dynamic - towards that beyond.

In doing so, it then finds, creates and discovers more beyonds in the sense of what is going on. In the sense of the object, the imaginal sense of the beloved other is deepened, widened, given more aspects and dimensions. All this is created, discovered also in the self, in that imaginal constellation, and then in the world. So eros, because of the *pothos*, always constitutes a beyond. And that beyond, it wants to move into, it wants to penetrate, it wants to open to what is more. And that engages and stimulates and fertilizes the whole Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.

When there is more beyond being perceived, then we could say the image is enriched, and then that greater image - the greater beauty of it, dimensionality and aspects and complexities of it - stimulates more eros, and so on. And then at some point, maybe the whole idea of what is going on here - what am I in relationship to? Who is this that is in relationship? What is myself? What is the soul? What is this looking? What is this eros? What is this world around that I perceive? - the whole idea, not just the sense or the imaginal image of all that, but also the whole idea, the notion, the logos of all that, also gets stretched. It has to get stretched.

So either our previous ideas are shattered and they get reconstituted, if you like, in a larger way that can encompass what we're experiencing, or they just get stretched gradually in this whole gradual movement of the soul-making dynamic. So this can be over time, either at sudden junctures where there's a kind of breaking of the vessels, or much more gradually in this kind of elastic stretching over time.

Just to point out something there: in this beyond, eros has an element of impetus to transcend. But the impetus to transcend can be, as we've pointed out a lot in previous retreats - the impetus to transcend can be beyond the appearances, beyond the objects, or it can be a transcending in the sense of transcending just the limitations of our idea and image of what we are presented with, what we are encountering. And in that way it stretches, rather than going beyond into a kind of fading of appearances - the transcendent beyond of unfabricating - it's actually the beloved other itself and the self, whatever eros and soul-making dynamic kind of gets involved with. That object or other gets expanded.

So there's a kind of transcending of the limits, but not beyond the object so much as beyond just what was known of the object. So more gets created, discovered - more dimensions, more aspects, more beauties, all of that. So in a sense, eros has this push or impetus or longing or direction of - we could call it transcending, we could call it transgressive. In other words, literally moving beyond boundaries, moving beyond limits.

I'm just mentioning this as a sort of side point, but because of this *pothos* in eros and the constitution of the beyond, eros, we could say, or wonder - does it need to be transgressive? Does it need to go across boundaries? Go across - wherever there's a boundary, eros will push across that in different ways. Does eros in a way constellate or create transgression?

Now transgression, if you're familiar with that word, often has a kind of moral implication, doesn't it? But I really mean it in a much broader sense. Transgression of any kind - it may be moral, it may be a transgression of category or type or behavior or divisions - but transgression implies this otherness, something other than what was within the limit, something beyond. Eros, as I said, needs and creates othernesses and beyondnesses.

When people have affairs or find themselves drawn to or attracted, or they can only be kind of sexually or romantically stimulated in certain conditions or environments or when something's happening that's a little taboo, that's a little transgressive or a lot transgressive in the moral sense, I wonder whether part of what's really happening there is it's this natural impetus of eros to constellate a beyond, which it then wants to explore and dive into and open to. It wants to, or it does need and constellate a trans-

gression, but that transgression is actually much - potentially much bigger if we allow ourselves the whole involvement of psyche and logos, the imagination and the logos and dimensionality and all that.

So it's perhaps a kind of limited or constrained or thin manifestation of a movement, of a transgressive movement and impetus in eros, which is really, as I said, a thinner and poorer and limited manifestation of something much larger and more essential and much more potentially fruitful and more giving rise to, more supportive of soul-making than those kind of purely - the turn-on of some kind of taboo often is.

So again, I'm dwelling on the conceptual framework or the understanding of what's really involved when we're sensing the soul and what's really involved—or one way of understanding what's involved—in the soul-making dynamic. I'm dwelling with that and looking at it from different angles, trying to shine light on different aspects of it, because I really think and see that understanding the larger picture—understanding the dynamic, how soul-making works, what it involves, what supports it—really digesting it conceptually in ways that we can actually bring forward and engage in our practice and experience, that understanding of the dynamic will be so helpful, so fruitful. It really gives the whole movement of soul-making much more power, range, and fertility.

Also, it brings a beauty in itself. We see the whole thing when we understand it more. As we understand it more, the whole thing emerges to us or is revealed to us as something of much more power and beauty and consequence. So that's why I'm dwelling a little bit on these elements of the dynamics.

Let's say a few more things about it. If we consider these elements—Eros, Psyche, and Logos—central, if you like, aspects (they're really parts of the same thing, but we could divide them into three, as I've said before, divide that whole soul-making process into three as if they were separate), it seems to me that it might be generally true to say that Eros is more labile, more subject to change, more changeable than psyche, than image, which is in turn more labile, more changeable than the logos.

So it seems like there's a kind of gradation between the three terms or aspects of this trinity—a gradation of how mercurial they are, how changeable they are, how labile they are.

So Eros—and again you'll notice this if you engage these practices and really notice what's going on and track your own experience—Eros comes and goes and fluctuates, it ebbs and flows relatively quickly. Even over a few minutes, the Eros is coming and going, getting stronger and weaker, disappearing and coming back.

An image, the psyche aspect, tends to stay a while, though it does need some focusing on and steadying. We need to kind of engage the psyche aspect, the image, and hold it in a way that it can stay steady. But it tends to be, once it's there, relatively steady. And within that, the eros in relation to that image can ebb and flow up and down.

The concepts involved, the logos aspect, tend to be even more steady, less changeable. They expand or shatter only under greater or more sustained pressure. In other words, only through repeatedly sensing this whole other dimension of being that we get when the eros opens up the image again and again, or if it's very marked—only under greater or more sustained pressure does the logos change, move, stretch, or shatter.

Though with practice, we can be quite agile and quite flexible in deliberately moving between different conceptual frameworks. And again, this is something I would really encourage. It's almost like you can just look at something with a certain logos and then switch, move agilely, look at it with a different logos, a whole different conceptual framework. And that's very much available with the maturing of practice—something I would really like to encourage.

All of that agility and flexibility of conceptual frameworks fits into this much larger logos that is partly a function of the whole deep teaching of emptiness and dependent arising, able to open up. It legitimizes that and allows it, gives us that permission and that ontological and metaphysical legitimation.

If we just dwell with this trinity of Eros-Psyche-Logos and the dynamics involved in that, and say a bit more about logos: the logos in the soul-making dynamic, in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, doesn't expand only when the sense of the image or the sense of the self expands, when the psyche expands.

What can happen—again, you will recognize all this if you really get into these practices and this way of approaching things and exploring this territory—when there is eros for logos, in other words, when we see the beauty of the whole framework and the beauty of the conceiving function of the soul, when there is eros for the logos and we're attracted towards that and it becomes something that is beautiful, attractive, has a beyond to it, divine, has dimensionality—when there is eros for logos, the logos is ignited through that eros.

And this igniting of the Logos engenders more creation and discovery of new concepts and new conceptual frameworks. You understand? So it's not just through the psyche. There can be a direct erotic connection with Logos itself, with the whole conceptual framework, but also with the very element of the soul that we call Logos, the very capacity or that part of the instrument that we call Logos. And then that engenders

more creativity. It's like there's a whole activation of the whole logos structure or strand of the soul. And all kinds of creativity and discovery in regard to concepts and conceptual frameworks is born from that erotic connection with logos when that gets going.

And of course, the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic might itself be stimulated into expansion when the logos itself is directly stimulated—again, not just by the sense of the image, the imaginal sense opening to then knocking on logos's doors and limits and saying something needs to stretch here. The Logos can be directly stimulated, directly stretched or shattered or ignited by something one reads or something one hears, a concept, a thought, or a thought or concept that arises spontaneously in the mind. And that stimulates the Logos directly to expand, to stretch, to enrich and complicate, deepen, to come alive, to come on fire.

So there are different ways, perhaps different styles, that each of the elements of this trinity operate under, but also different ways in. It's not always the eros stretching the psyche, which then stretches the logos eventually at some point, if there's enough sustained pushing on that and expansion of that. There are many ways these elements can kind of get stimulated, involve each other and fertilize each other.

We could say, and I think it's pretty fair to say, soul-making—it's complex. So what we're trying to unfold here in this kind of vision or logos or conceptual framework of the whole business that we're talking about is complex.

It's not easy to understand, and it's not easy to explain either or sum up in a nutshell. It's quite foreign, quite alien to our usual ways of thinking in modern society. And I would add that probably the way we're conceiving it would be alien to ancient and premodern societies as well.

In somewhat lighthearted justification of this difficulty, I quote Richard Feynman, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist—quite a character and a beautiful spirit who won his Nobel Prize for pioneering work on quantum electrodynamics. The day he was informed that he'd won the Nobel Prize, the phone didn't stop ringing and reporters flocked to his house wanting interviews and photos. One reporter came to him, stuck a microphone in his face and said, "Professor Feynman, can you explain your theory in five minutes for our audience?" Feynman looked at him and said, "Do you think that if I could explain this theory in five minutes that it would be worth a Nobel Prize?"

Some things are complicated, unusual in the way they stretch thinking, difficult to explain, and can't necessarily be summed up very simply until one has familiarity and experience with the terms. Then you can sum things up in a nutshell—but there's a lot being implied in the words spoken.

The word *soul*, or the concept of soul, like other crucial and important fundamental words—like love, like dharma, like self—concepts that really matter deeply to us and to our sense of existence, are in a way undefinable. And they need to retain a certain dimension of undefinability. It's important that they not get trapped in a logos, in a conceptual framing that is too tight, too rigid, too narrow—so that Eros, Psyche and Logos can expand and enrich themselves, becoming complicated and deeper and wider in relation to that very concept.

In other words, soul-making can happen in relation to soul. The very idea, the very concept of soul is something that soul-making gets hold of and expands by expanding the Logos—enriching, deepening, widening, stretching, shattering, opening, complicating that very concept. The idea and sense of soul will keep opening, deepening, getting richer. It is in itself fertile. If I lock it in too tight, too narrow, too limited and rigid a definition, it can't be fertile. Its fertility is limited.

When we say "undefined," we don't mean nonsense or non-existence—that soul is just a nonsense concept because you can't define it, or that it just doesn't exist. Nor do we mean that realizing its undefinability, we should shrug and turn away from the idea of soul because it's a silly concept, not strictly and rigidly definable. Actually, just the opposite. Its ultimate undefinability opens or furnishes space for a kind of never-ending creativity of exploration. It allows this never-ending creation and discovery in the exploring, in the conceiving, in the logos. And it's this never-ending exploration that is soul-making and is fertile.

One last point: as soul-making gets going and there's the fertility of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic and the discovery and creation of beyonds and more dimensions and more sensitivities and discernments in both the image and in the sense of eros and in ideas themselves, that creation and discovery essentially makes more distinctions. They're made to perception, made to conceiving, made to nuance, made in the realm of emotion. Making distinctions is part of what happens in soul-making—an element. The whole thing gets more nuanced.

We discern between this and that—for example, between eros and craving. There's an infinite birthing, creating and discovering of distinction-making, discernment-making, not purely conceptual, but also in the body, in the ways we relate to and with the body, in the very sensitivity of the psyche and consciousness and organism and sensing, and also in the concepts.

Soul-making brings distinctions, and making certain distinctions also opens up and supports the possibility, fertilizes the possibility of soul-making. The distinction between eros and craving, for example, is supportive of the whole endeavor of soul-

making. If we just limit desire to "it's all craving"—which is way too simplistic—that won't serve soul-making. Or even if we limit it to just either unskillful desire, craving, or skillful desire, *kusala* desire, *chanda* for the elements of the Eightfold Path or the factors of awakening—that too is not a fine enough and nuanced enough distinction to support the conceptual elements and experiential elements that are part of soul-making.

So soul-making engenders the making of distinctions, discernments, and fine discernments at all levels and aspects of our being. Soul-making involves making discernments and distinctions—delineations of reality. And certain delineations, distinctions, and discernments support and open, fertilize and catalyze soul-making, catalyze this process of creation and discovery.

Let's pause there.

As I've mentioned now for the third time in this talk, there's a whole other level of beauty and import that becomes apparent, that is revealed to us, and a whole other level of implication and power that also gets revealed when we understand—conceptually, when we really develop a working understanding. This means in practice, not just purely intellectual or abstractly intellectual, but in practice we develop a working understanding of the elements involved in soul-making, what it means, and what sensing with soul means.

That's why I'm dwelling on these elements today.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 111

Sensing with Soul (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 28 min

> *In this third part of his exploration of sensing with soul, Rob Burbea delves into the alchemy of perception—the dynamic processes through which ordinary experience becomes imaginal and soul-making. He examines the temporal dimensions of transformation, noting how the eros-psyche-logos dynamic unfolds across different timeframes, from sudden shifts to gradual consolidation over months or years.*
>
> *Burbea emphasizes the fluid, responsive nature of soul-making practice, encouraging practitioners to balance precision with playful experimentation. He discusses how attention might need to dwell with different elements—self, other, or world—and how various aspects like energy body awareness, emotional resonance, or engagement with desire might require patient cultivation. Drawing from his understanding of the imaginal teachings, he addresses common habits that can limit soul-making, such as avoiding certain bandwidths of experience or falling into overly restrictive patterns.*
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> *Crucially, Burbea addresses the question of reification—the tendency to solidify experience—noting that while it can obstruct authentic imaginal perception, practitioners shouldn't become 'reification police' toward themselves. He compares teaching these practices to teaching art or music, where principles provide guidance but exceptions always exist. The talk concludes with encouragement for dynamic responsiveness and freedom to explore, emphasizing that mistakes are part of the natural learning process in developing the capacity to sense with soul.*

I'd like to look in a little more detail at the alchemy of perception—that transition, the process through which we come to sense with soul, sense the world with soul, sense others and things. How does that transformation of perception actually happen? What are some of the elements involved in that process? How does life become image? I want to give some examples and explore what's going on there.

But before I do, something occurs to me that I feel compelled to say again, perhaps to reassure you—though I don't know if that's needed. As I said in the first talk, I feel like I'm treading a bit of a tightrope. On one side, I want to bring in a sense of precision and careful discernment, a kind of acuity and refinement of attention and wisdom in terms of what's involved in all this business of imaginal perception—perceiving, imagining,

sensing the soul. On the other hand, in that sort of careful delineation and examination of what's involved, I don't want to discourage or make it overly prohibitive or formulaic or too tightly circumscribed.

So I really would like you to feel like you can jump in and play and experiment. It doesn't have to be, "Am I getting it right?" This kind of freeze, this cramp that so often plagues meditators and people on different spiritual paths—especially, I find, in the way we teach insight meditation—I seem to encounter that a lot. So I'm really wanting to strike that balance and say a bit more that helps you feel hopefully free in this process, free to play.

I've pointed out that when we talk about soul-making and that whole journey or trajectory, that direction of soul-making, what we're really talking about is a dynamic process. There's a dynamism involved. In fact, there are all kinds of dynamism involved in soul-making. Eros itself is a dynamic movement towards wanting more, or of bringing something towards us and opening to it. There's a dynamism there.

There is a dynamism in what we described as the very soul-making dynamic—the eros-psyche-logos process, the way they get involved with each other, inseminate each other, fill each other out, complicate, enrich, widen, deepen. There is what I mentioned at the end of the last part of this talk: the kind of process involved in soul-making will bring, will give birth to discernment, discriminations, distinctions, delineations in both our conception and our perception of all kinds of elements of experience—emotional, material, sensory, intellectual, you name it—in terms of the logos, the conceptual framework. And the very making of some discernments and distinctions and refinements of delineation also feeds the soul-making process. There's a kind of dynamism involved in that—all kinds of dynamism involved in the soul-making movement.

And I would say dynamic responsiveness—the ability to respond to what's happening. We talked about that hawk gliding on the thermal air currents, and the ability to respond to what's happening, to dance with what's happening in the being, in the perception, in the body, in the totality of that, and move in response to that very dynamically, very beautifully. That dynamic responsiveness is also an element of soul-making.

However, when I say all that and imply all that—that there's a dynamism involved, that we're talking about dynamic processes involved in soul-making—one also has to consider the time frames of what we're talking about. If something is dynamic, it can be dynamic with a very sudden dramatic shift of something bursting into consciousness or a sudden change of responsiveness that's happening in the moment. Or it can be dynamic in a very almost imperceptible way over time to build up a change. Or it can be dynamic in stages in the sense that we plateau for a while—it's not the best word, but

let's say things look relatively static for a while. They're being consolidated. We're steadying with something, and then something suddenly shatters or just gradually changes.

So one has to look at the kind of temporal styles or different temporal characteristics of the way change happens. Dynamic response, dynamism, doesn't mean that there's always change happening, that it's always rapid change, and things are always exploding or moving rapidly. Sometimes it appears like that, and sometimes it's much more characterized by different trajectories of change.

For example—and I did already touch on this when we talked about the eros-psyche-logos dynamic in the last part of this talk—they actually have different labilities. They're changeable in different ways. Logos tends to change more slowly over time. We need to consolidate a conceptual framework or just a new idea, get used to it, over quite some time usually, and then something might shatter or change. Or, in time, with practice, there's this ability to shift it quite rapidly, deliberately.

So we can say logos is involved in sensing with soul. In other words, there's always a concept happening. There's always a conceptual framework being engaged when we're sensing with soul. It's not a non-conceptual experience. But the sort of expansion or stretching or shattering of a logos is something that's usually more gradual, slower over time. It's less labile as one of the elements in that trinity than, say, eros.

As another example, we talked about the movement—the organic movement, if we're not blocking it—for the soul-making dynamic to sort of spread from not just the erotically imaginable object or other, but also back towards the self and the elements of the self, and also out towards the world. What can be very helpful at times is attending to that particular trinity—self, other, world—and just allowing that to be, or encouraging that to be more balanced, the soul-making spreading in a more balanced direction at times.

But even saying that, it doesn't mean it always needs to be balanced. I don't always need to make sure that self, other, and world are equally balanced in this soul-making situation to the same degree or intensity of soul-making that's spreading equally in all directions. No, the whole thing is fluid. So sometimes we're much more with one of those three, much more than the other two. And it may be that we actually need to dwell more with certain poles there. We could add eros to that and make it self, other, world, eros—in terms of what becomes, if you like, an object of soul-making, becomes taken up by the soul-making process and becomes an erotic, imaginal object for us.

But maybe we need to dwell with one of those poles of that pattern. For example, habitually we might not allow the soul-making process to return to ourselves. We're always—and I've mentioned this before—seeing the divinity, the beauty in the other, in the imaginal object. Yet habitually, for different reasons, it doesn't return to the self, or we're blocking it from returning to the self, or simply neglecting to look there. Through the looking, through the noticing, we allow it to ignite the self as an erotically imagined object for ourselves.

So that might be a habit. We might need to linger a little with the self as image and stay there, being somewhat imbalanced the other way for a while, because it's countering our habit. Or it could be the other way around—we're always with the self and in situations where we forget to notice, "Oh, what's happening with my perception of the other at the moment?" We let that become more imaginally alive.

In working with different people, I see people have different habits here. Sometimes, if I'm working with them, I need to gently remind them: "What about that? Can you notice what's happening there?" And then something opens. The water spreads in that direction to balance things out, and that helps the whole soul-making process.

Or it might be that in the soul-making or in the sensing of the soul, we need at times or stages in our practice to give more attention to the bodily experience, the energy body experience in what's going on. This might be because attending to the energy body hasn't become second nature to us—we lose touch with it in our erotic fascination with the other as we go outward. Hence the exercises on *tunas*, or part of the reason for those exercises we were doing on recent retreats.

We may need to linger more with the energy body and really become accustomed to what it is to pay attention in a way that brings the energy body alive. That in itself can take months and often years. It's really a journey for people. As I've pointed out before, it doesn't just equate with mindfulness of the body. It's a certain quality that opens up the experience of mindfulness of the body, opening up the wavelengths of that experience much more broadly.

Within that, we may be so used to attending to the energy body experience that our habit is always very solid—always just the sensations of the body on the cushion or chair, very gross level, solid level sensations. We need to become accustomed to, and this can take time, the much finer range of the spectrum where things are much more ethereal, and the sense of the body as a kind of luminous space of refined vibration. Or vice versa—that's someone's habitual default, and they need to become familiar with the more solid, earthy sense of the energy body.

Again, in terms of energies and body, someone might be, for various reasons, comfortable with different kinds of resonances and movements and feelings in certain areas of the body—for instance, the heart area can feel very alive there. But when it comes to the hips or the sexual energy, it's a bit cut off or frozen, not felt there. So there might be a period where that area needs to feel out more. Or again, vice versa—the heart and the whole quality of heartfulness and how that feels, the movement of emotionality filling out with the energy body, is not something a person is used to attending to.

Extrapolating from that, maybe within the whole constellation, dwelling more with the emotions as the pole of what one's paying attention to might be important for some people at certain stages in their practice. Really leaning toward that over and over might be very important as a kind of growth.

Or we get the sense of the imaginal and the whole soul-making process, and it's always habitually very nicey-nicey—always white-robed angels of light, very ethereal in the texture of the images, with less of the dark gods. Maybe, conversely, it's all a bit dark and filled with *dukkha* and angst, or dark in different ways—perhaps sexually or otherwise. There needs to be that opening out to the more obviously traditional, ethereal, beneficent, angelic, light, luminous, refined presences.

Again, what's the habit? What's needed?

Or, as I've noticed recently, the whole realm of desire—for many people, it's actually not okay to have desire. That can be a cultural transmission from the wider culture, an early religious transmission, or something in the family or schooling, or in the Dharma teaching. Even just allowing one's desire and allowing one's eros, if we talk about the opening to the current of desire practice or just the awareness of eros in the imaginal practices.

There might be a period where one is learning to notice desire, actually feel what it feels like, allow it, and be okay with it. Then even recognizing it as a lovely thing and a beautiful thing, and that can increase all the way to sensing it—as I've explained in the Eros Amphitheater talks—sensing it as a divine thing, our desire. It's divine desire.

So that might be a whole way that the dynamic or the constellation needs to be weighted for some people, perhaps for a while.

We've talked about balance and all these elements, but there's also the individual growth or development of a soul, if you like, as an expression. What is the habit that we need to address? "Oh yes, that always happens. I always neglect to do this." It's just a

little shift or a little shift of attention that allows us to break out of our normal habit. Sometimes these habits are not—you know, "Oh, that's terrible, that's going to take me decades"—it's just a shift, and then, "Oh, that's moved right there in the moment."

The habit might still carry some entrenchment, but the actual shifting of it often proves less daunting than we imagine. Sometimes the process requires more involvement—we may need to examine certain murky beliefs absorbed from our education, our culture, or even dharma culture itself, beliefs that block off, inhibit, and disallow our desire and our celebration of its inherent beauty, or even the possibility of such celebration.

This brings us to the essential question: What is habit? What does it need? And what is given by soul to me?

It may be given that this particular complex emotion needs lingering with, or that this bandwidth of the energy body—this entire spectrum—requires patient attention. These are gifts from soul, part of our soul-making, our soul education. So we must distinguish: What is given by soul? What is purely habit? What is needed here?

I'm not suggesting these are necessarily easy questions, but I encourage maintaining this quality of light inquiry rather than approaching these questions of balance and dynamism with rigid formulas about what needs to be happening, what should be happening.

There's also the question of personal soul style—the unique way that my soul is, that your soul is, which deserves deep respect. Some people carry more darkness in the beautiful sense of the word—beautiful, rich darkness—as part of their soul makeup. Some people naturally have greater facility with the ethereal than with denser realms. Some simply carry more sexual libido and eros than others. All of this needs honoring.

So we ask: What's personal soul style that needs respecting? What's habit and indoctrination, or simple encrustation through repetition? What is given to me by soul? And what is actually needed?

All of this inquiry remains very light, very open, playful. Don't fear making mistakes in this exploration. As Miles Davis understood, mistakes are simply part of the creative process—not something to fear, but something to respond to dynamically. They become part of our responsive dance.

I really want to encourage this sense of play, this permission and freedom to simply dive in and explore. Though I'll qualify even that statement later.

All this talk of dynamism and dynamics connects intimately with pacing. I believe I discussed pacing in the Path to the Imaginal retreat—though I'm aware there's an abundance of material being communicated, so this concept might have gotten lost in the vastness of information being shared.

Pacing operates on multiple levels. There's pacing in relation to a particular image: How long do I stay with this one image and deliberately call it back? When do I let it move on naturally, transform, or invite another image in? These questions I've explored before.

But now we're bringing pacing into relationship with these elements and this entire sense of dynamism. How quickly do we move through different logoi? Consider the breaking of vessels that I've discussed in several retreats. Vessels cannot break constantly. There must be periods of building—building vessels, building structures, understanding conceptual frameworks, truly absorbing and digesting them, making them work for us, extracting their full juice and mileage. Only then might come the breaking or stretching or questioning.

So there's pacing in all of this—pacing questions and discernments to make throughout this exploration of dynamism with regard to the different elements.

I speak extensively about reification and how crucial this middle way of the imaginal is—this theatrical quality that belongs to the whole sensing of soul and imaginal work. While the reality is more complex than I can fully articulate here, what I want to emphasize now is this: reification is indeed a significant issue, and it often lies at the root of problems we encounter in these practices.

When the work feels like it has exploded or hit a brick wall, when something goes wrong or the soul-making feels stuck, when dukkha arises instead of the opening of the soul-making process, when things fail to be fully or authentically imagined in the way described in this series' first talk—often we can trace these difficulties back to reification of something or other, sometimes quite a lot of things.

This is genuinely the case, and it is truly important. Yet I don't want us to become the reification police, with "Thou shalt not reify" as our first commandment.

We don't, you know, it's like—expect to reify. Look, it's human. To me, that goes with the first noble truth: there is dukkha. Dukkha arises. It's like dukkha rests on reification. And so we will do that. We will reify. Expect to reify.

And again, in the context of what I'm trying to say right now in this little fragment here is: don't get too hung up on all this. Sometimes it's necessary to reify something, and maybe for a while, and there can still be a lot of soul-making that happens in a reified perspective. So it is a big deal, but you don't need to get frozen thinking, "Oh my goodness, what happens if I reify?" so that the whole thing gets stuck that way.

Expect that you will reify. It's probably quite a maturity to really whittle that down so that it tends to happen less and less. But you know, it is a big deal, but don't get too hung up on it. So we really don't want to be the reification police with this, and we don't want you to be the reification police with respect to yourselves.

And so just finally for right now, you know, I feel like whatever I say in all this—trying to make these delineations, trying to say things, "Do you see how this is working? It's like this, or it has this element and not that, or this rather than that, and it must include this"—whatever I say, whatever we say in trying to provide a framework and a platform for all these explorations, there's going to be exceptions. I'm beginning to think so. There will be possible exceptions.

Teaching this stuff, I feel like it's more like teaching art, or teaching music. It's like, yeah, it's really important. You learn rules of harmony and things to look out for when you're improvising and different ways you can do things. "And did you think about this? Or you can explore this and don't forget this," and all that. But whatever one says as a teacher—I think, or whatever one is told as a teacher—there are exceptions possible, and someone can just give an example of exactly an exception to what you've just explained, and the opposite of it.

That doesn't mean, though, that all that explanation, that delineation, and the exploration of those delineations and those refinements of perception and those conceptions and conceptual frameworks is irrelevant just because there are exceptions.

So again, I feel there's this kind of—tightrope's too dramatic a metaphor—but there's a balance and a looseness with precision that's involved in this. A looseness with a precision of discernment and refinement and attention.

So again, I'm inserting this fragment at this point just because it occurred to me and because I really want to encourage and not discourage. So I hope that's helpful.

CHAPTER 112

Sensing with Soul (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h14

In this fourth installment of his exploration of sensing with soul, Rob Burbea examines how soul-making practice naturally evolves toward greater interfusion of life and the imaginal. He outlines four essential conditions for sensing with soul: openness and intimacy with the object of attention, whole energy body sensitivity, reduction of clinging, and receptivity to aspects of the imaginal constellation such as meaningfulness, beauty, and sacredness.

Through detailed examples including a student's experience with vedanā practice transitioning into imaginal perception, and a beautiful ritual involving the sanctification of tangerines, Burbea illustrates how ordinary experiences can become imbued with soul through association, proximity, and recognition of deep value. He presents an extended account of a practitioner's eating meditation that demonstrates how horizontal awareness of interconnectedness can open into vertical dimensionality and sacred perception.

Burbea emphasizes that sensing with soul doesn't replace conventional perception but enriches it with dimensionality, meaningfulness, and sacredness. He concludes by examining how different intentions—particularly the common 'medical model' focused primarily on alleviating dukkha—can sometimes limit the fullness of imaginal perception, suggesting that while suffering may be transformed through soul-making, it need not be the primary goal.

Let's continue. Let me pick up again our elaboration of this idea of sensing with soul and our exploration of the possibilities that can open as there is this opening of the field of experience and the senses—the sense of experience.

Let me start with one larger observation. Generally, it seems to me—and there are always exceptions—but generally, as soul-making practice matures, or evolves, or grows, there is an increasing mixture or interfusion of life and image. In other words, we sense more with soul in different ways. This is something I've observed quite generally, and there are several aspects to this development.

The first aspect concerns what becomes primary more and more—though often in quite subtle ways, not clumsy or ego-driven ways. What becomes more primary is the relationship between the imaginal and life. Whether we're speaking of intra-psychic images or extra-psychic ones, there emerges through the sense of demand and duty

what needs to be expressed or manifested. This duty or demand is born from and comes with the image. Again, what I'm describing really isn't too clunky or clumsy—it's not an ego identification or reification, as those patterns have been loosened.

This brings forth the importance of the relation between the imaginal and life, and it can be quite subtle. It brings with it the question of *how*: What is demanded? What is my duty? How and at what level and in what domain does this image translate into an expression, a manifestation through my life? What is involved in that infinite echoing and mirroring I alluded to earlier? These are subtle and delicate questions.

There's always the problem of gross reification, literalization, and concretization—very oversimplistic translations of image into life. While not always the case, sometimes this can signal a kind of inappropriateness. So this is one aspect that comes with the maturing of soul-making practice: this mixing and meeting and interfusing, more and more, of life and the imaginal, and this opening of the sensing with soul.

The second aspect is that we sense life more with soul. More and more, the mode of sensing that we have is infused with soulfulness, is more soul-making, is more imaginal. We see—if we use the visual metaphor—we see life as image, more and more as imaginal image. This becomes, again, not a permanent state, but something we move much more often and regularly in and out of.

Part of this sensing life with soul includes a kind of recognition, in hindsight, of how much and how often the imaginal and fantasy—different fantasies—have already been operating in our lives. Image is primary. Actually, one way of conceiving all this is that we are driven by fantasy, by image, in a good sense. Sometimes we ignore it, or we collapse it, or reify it, or make it too small, or don't recognize its divinity, or over-identify with it.

But with this growing maturity—both in the understanding and the experience of soul-making practice—one of the facets is that in sensing life more often with soul, and more deeply, more richly with soul, we come to recognize the primacy and frequency of how much and how often the imaginal and the fantastical is already operating in our lives—already primary, already driving, pulling us, calling us. We see and can understand, or rather we can bring this as a perspective—one way of understanding what has been moving us in our lives, what does move us, what galvanizes us, why we choose certain things, why certain ways of interacting tend to manifest themselves in expressions.

So there's this quality where it becomes more about the relationship between the imaginal and life. There's also this capacity where we simply see life more with soul.

Thirdly, there is the widening, the deepening, and the variegating—the making more manifold, creating more options—of our senses of sacredness. In other words, the ways and directions and places and levels at which we sense sacredness expands, gets wider, gets deeper, becomes quite varied.

I should mention that for me, this piece—the opening up and diversifying of the senses of sacredness, sensing the sacredness in life, in existence, in death, in all of it, and all the elements of that—for me, that's the main point. Now, of course, and I really do mean this, anyone is free to decide what for them is the main point. If one is taken with these practices and interested in them, anyone is free to decide what is the main point for them.

But just to say that for me, this is the main point. There's so much richness, so much bounty and gift through these practices, through these ways of conceiving—so much is opened up. But at the end of the day, if I'm just honest, for me, that's the main point: this opening up of the senses of sacredness.

I should add this, because it may not be obvious, and sometimes even that word "sacred"—people think, "What does that mean? I don't know. I can't relate to it." Or it's a problematic word, or a charged word, or a taboo word, or just a dead word.

But just to say, in case it's not obvious, that a sense of sacredness doesn't necessarily mean something solemn or stiff. So increasing the senses of sacredness that we have, that are active in our life, that are working and flowing and opening and dynamic, doesn't mean that we become more solemn and stiff. And sacredness doesn't always translate or manifest in some kind of always sober manifestation. Just witness the poems of Rumi when he talks about Shams. I got a note from a yogi quite a while ago, and she said, "I was with this imaginary figure and we were in hysterics together. It was hysterically funny." You never said that could happen, but all kinds of things are possible, and certainly sacredness does not always look solemn, stiff, and permanently sober.

So those are just a few general observations. But I said I was going to look in a little more detail, probe and open up through examples how this sensing with soul opens up. How does our sensing, when our sensing opens up to a sensing with soul, how does that happen? What supports it? What are the shifts or triggers or influxes or other openings that allow that?

Very generally and broadly, we might say that in order for something in the material world—whether that's a person or an object or an event or whatever it is, or a feeling, an emotion, a state that one is going through—in order that something in the material world or the experiential world is sensed with soul, we could very broadly, very generally say that, loosely, four things are necessary.

The first is that we need to be open to this thing and intimate with it. So this thing, whatever it is, and I'll give some examples, I need to actually meet it and touch it with my consciousness, with the senses. I need to be present to it and I need to be intimate with it. For example, if it's my dukkha that I'm experiencing at a certain time, just in a moment, or it might feel like it's a lifetime of a particular kind of dukkha that I struggle with again and again, I need, in order to sense that dukkha with soul—or in different language that we've used before, for that dukkha to be re-enchanted—this pain, this suffering, this sorrow, this thing that actually I don't like, I need to become intimate with it. I need to open to it and become intimate with it. And this is a sort of sine qua non. It's basic. I can't skip this step. So whether it's my dukkha, whether it's some object, a material object, or some thing, or whatever it is, any phenomenon, I need firstly to become open to and intimate with it.

When I outline these four, I don't necessarily mean that they happen in time, in some linear order. It might be mixed up which comes first.

The second factor or element that needs to be present is, again, emphasizing the inclusion of the whole energy body pervaded by sensitivity, by that kind of delicacy of attention that fills out that whole space and that whole openness to the whole range of vibrational possibility there in the energy body. This, again, serves as a platform, a key, a door to sensing with soul.

Thirdly is some reduction in clinging. Now, not so much that absolutely everything fades. If you're familiar with deep emptiness practices, actually all perception begins to fade. That's actually too much because sensing the soul is a perception, of course, as is internal, imaginal perception. Any sensing of the soul, intra-psychic, extra-psychic, involves the fabrication of perception. So there can't be too much of a reduction in clinging because then all perception or most perception will fade, certainly the level that we call sensing the soul. But there can be actually quite a lot of range. There has to be some reduction in clinging, some kind of loosening of maybe the habitual grip we have, either pushing away or holding on to a certain idea or a certain perception or an energetic relationship with something. Some loosening of clinging is a necessary element in sensing the soul. Again, there's not a temporal linearity to these elements.

And lastly is a kind of whole bag of tricks which we've touched on before. I would say just some receptivity or tuning into whatever the most helpful other element of the —what we call element or aspect of the imaginal or node of the imaginal constellation. So it might be, for instance, humility, it might be the neither real nor not real, it might be anything within them, the meaningfulness, the beauty, anything at all of that list that we went through.

So there are these four elements: openness and intimacy with whatever object we're talking about, and in whatever realm of objects, whether that's intra-psychic, intra-personal, as an emotion, or dukkha, or out there in the material world, or another person, or whatever; whole energy body sensitivity with that openness of what might be included there and the range that might be included there; some loosening of clinging, grip, fixation; and then a kind of open, opportunistic receptivity or tuning into whatever otherwise is the most helpful element of the aspect of the perception there, of the imaginal perception of the sensing of soul.

Now these four elements are often going to be mutually dependent arisings anyway. They're mutually dependent. In other words, as one gets ignited or illuminated or fired up with the imaginal, the fullness of the imaginal, with the sensing of the soul, then it tends to influence the others and open them too. Especially between the second and the third, the sensitivity and awareness, permeation of the whole space of the energy body with the sensitive, delicate energy...

awareness and tuning in there—that factor, that second factor—and the reduction of clinging tend very much to show an easily observable mutual dependency between them. So as we open up to include the whole energy body and an awareness of that, and the sensitivity to that, including that awareness and sensitivity in how we're relating to some object, inner or outer, that opening up of energy body sensitivity tends automatically to attenuate, reduce, and loosen the clinging in relation to that object and in relation to other elements as well—other factors in our being, in our perception.

And vice versa. When there is a lessening of clinging, the availability of the sense of the whole energy body—that kind of awareness of the body as energy body and that space as energy body and all that that means and might be—tends to open up or just present itself, become more accessible or become noticed as there's less clinging. It becomes, if you like, maybe not the default, but one of the strong options for how we then sense the body. As there's less clinging, the body tends to be perceived more as an energy body.

So there's a very obvious, easy-to-spot, mutual dependent arising of the second and third factors of that little list. And with practice, that mutual dependent arising will also be easy to spot with the fourth. The whole list of what we went through—what we're calling the nodes of the imaginal constellation, or the nodes of the lattice of the imaginal constellation—anything there, as I said: humility, reverence, duty, meaningfulness, that whole list, will be included. So we can, in tuning into that, something happens with the energy body and the clinging. And in reducing the clinging, finding ways to reduce the clinging, those elements or one of those elements will present itself, become more accessible, become more available to be receptive to, to tune into.

So with practice, those three—the last three factors of this little four-item list—it becomes obvious, their mutual dependency. Also the first, but it's not necessarily the case that someone opening to and becoming intimate with something, in the usual ways that we talk about it in insight meditation—we put a lot of stress on that, broadly speaking, in the insight meditation tradition. Can you open to it? Can you be with it? Can you become intimate with it? Whatever it is, this experience that's passing through right now.

We put a lot of emphasis on that, but it won't be the case that someone doing that in the context of a more conventional insight meditation approach will then necessarily open up the others. There won't necessarily be a huge reduction in clinging. There will be some, just by virtue of approaching and opening to the object. There won't necessarily be the inclusion of the sensitivity of the whole energy body.

But with practice, these four items or factors of this little list become—one can see the mutual dependency and actually use that to catalyze or enhance or deepen the whole process, the whole movement of opening into sensing with soul.

Let's look at a few examples. I've just chosen a few to give you a sense of this process—what's involved in, what can be involved, the kinds of things that can be involved in experiences, but also what can be involved in the processes of how that transition into opening, into sensing with soul happens.

A student sent me an email some time ago, and she was just describing what was going on in her explorations, in her practices. She was getting very interested in the whole imaginal strand of practice. She was also interested in others—in samadhi and emptiness and all kinds of things. But she was reporting that she was noticing, in her words, "even the emptiness practices are getting consumed by the imaginal."

So the example she gave was: "One minute I'm tracking vedana." She's observing, in other words, the arising of vedana in relation to whatever—she doesn't actually say. It could be the totality of experience, it could be one sense door, it could be one particular experience. "One minute I'm tracking vedana," she says, "and perceiving it as empty."

So that's an extra kind of way of looking. She's training her attention on the vedana, keeping it lightly there, and employing some mode of looking that perceives that vedana as empty of inherent existence, of which there are many, and we've talked and written about that plenty, so I'm not going into that now. Just the fact that she was employing an emptiness way of looking in regard to the vedana.

And then she reports, "and in the next moment, it becomes holy. The vedana becomes holy and turns into leaves fluttering from branches." There's a beautiful image there.

So in our language, there's the emptiness practice and the intimacy. Tracking vedana, one has to be intimate with it, because actually it's a felt experience. One can't do that intellectually. One can't do that kind of at a large distance. One actually has to feel pleasantness, unpleasantness, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—all of which is an intimacy, an intimacy of attention, an intimacy of feeling, basically, as vedana sometimes gets translated as "feeling."

So there's the intimacy there, and there's also the emptiness. And emptiness ways of looking, as you probably know, as I've harped on so many times, naturally bring a reduction, a loosening of clinging, which allows a loosening of perception, a lessening of fabrication. Less clinging, less fabrication. Less fabrication means this thing that I'm perceiving—a vedana, whatever it is—is then less fabricated, less rigidly, tightly, solidly formed as a thing. It becomes, to borrow an alchemical metaphor that we haven't used for quite a while, water. All things become water. If you remember from some years ago, we used to say that a lot in relation to the imaginal.

Don't proceed until all things have become water. That's an alchemical maxim. All things becoming water means all things not so rarefied, not so concretized, not so rigidly conceived of and perceived as just this. This is what they are. And then the self in relation to that also, this is what it is.

So all things become water through the lessening of clinging that goes automatically with an emptiness way of looking and the lessening of fabrication. The solidity gets fabricated less. The thing is fabricated less as this rigid, solid, concrete whatever. And this happens quite regularly for some people, this loosening.

In the context of trying to do an imaginal practice, automatically in the making water, making liquid – don't proceed until everything is liquid – in the making liquid of the perceptual field, we could say, either images arise, intrapsychic images arise in that water, or whatever is in that field begins to be sensed with soul. So there are two factors here: the lessening of clinging, in this case, came from the emptiness practices. And there's also the intimacy that's implicit in the very practice that she was doing.

Some of you listening were present and participating in the retreat that we did – I think it was the last retreat, the Alchemy of Desire at Gaia House. You'll remember the ritual we had, I think it was towards the end of the retreat, involving the tangerines and the kind of sanctification that happened there. So I want to remind those who were there and also try to explain what happened because I don't think we recorded it in any way. Probably one would need to have filmed it to get a sense without being there.

Earlier in the retreat, we'd actually spent a day reminding people of the importance, generally, of being able to put things down in the sense of not clinging, move away from an image, give it up, go back to the breath, go back to the energy body, whatever it is, not get so caught up and have some freedom in relation to that. We were exploring the whole idea and a few practice possibilities in the realm of just letting go – letting go of clinging, letting go of grasping, letting go of holding onto this thing, whether it's a wonderful, fascinating thing or a difficult thing.

We offered the possibility of bringing mindfulness, really careful mindfulness, to a meal. I think it was before lunch. This is quite common to do on an Insight Meditation retreat – very important, beautiful practice. And also looking at the craving and the clinging that might arise in relation to the whole eating experience and queueing for food and so on, complex for us as human beings what comes up in relationship to food anyway. We had given that as a practice and we actually intended to follow that through on the retreat as a theme and then look at what it would be to open up the possibility of actually relating to food imaginally or sanctifying the whole experience with food. But because there was so much on the retreat and we really wanted to be cautious about not overloading people in a week's retreat at Gaia House, we let it go and didn't follow that through.

However, somewhere I think towards the end of the retreat, Catherine led this very beautiful ritual, and part of what it involved – these are my words now – is a kind of sanctifying of food, in this case tangerines. If I remember some of the elements, we created a special space by moving into a circle from the semicircle we'd been in, moving into a kind of loose circle around a lovely blue velvet cloth that Catherine had brought.

She had a little sort of, I don't know what to call it, it looked a bit like a kind of half an oyster shell, but it was gold inside. It was laminated with gold – quite a beautiful thing. Someone had given it to her, I think, and she talked about that. She placed it in the middle, so we were in a circle around this central sort of altar of dark blue velvet and placed it there and talked about gold and luster, the luster of gold. So there was this gold oyster shell thing, beautiful thing, and she asked us, if I remember, to reflect on what has or is becoming gold for us on this retreat – meaning what is precious for us, what's a treasure, what speaks to us or resonates with us in any way of what we deeply, truly value in our being.

So how and where has gold, this sense of treasure or value, been showing up for us? It may be conceptually, intellectually, heartfully, imaginatively, energetically, in relationship to the body. We were exploring all these different elements and more. So the gold, the sense of treasure, deep treasure, and gold itself, obviously, is an image, and this oyster shell of gold was placed there as an image, or at least as a touchstone, really, of that whole sensitivity to the sense of value of gold in our lives, in our practices over those days.

And gold might be sacredness and dimensionality and the kind of beyondness that calls us and that we're pulled to and that we want to move into and connect with when there's Eros. So this bowl or oyster shell, painted or laminated with this gold luster.

Catherine then explored a little bit the etymology and the history in relation to the word lust and pointed out that the word lust only became a kind of negative term in English in the West in the 16th century. Before that, it was actually somehow luster and lust were associated, or at least could be associated for the soul.

So there's this association of gold and shining brilliance, luster, related to Eros, related to lust, related to the Eros in the way that we're using it. Eros is something that will make sacred, that will create and discover dimensionalities and beauties and sacrednesses and meaningfulnesses. Lust making luster, lust making the luster of gold, lust making treasure, making gold, lust discovering treasure and gold—lust in the sense of Eros in the way that we've been talking about.

So we can talk in a much fuller way about, if you like, a healthy appetite in and for the senses. Rather than the senses—we went through all this in the Eros Unfettered retreat—the senses as merely a problematic area for us to either disconnect from in our move to the transcendent, or kind of hold at bay in this limited way with some notion, limiting supposed notion of bare attention, supposed bare attention.

So there was this kind of altar created and a togetherness in the group, entering into the ritual together, and the ritual space, if you like, was created. Catherine was bringing this object and speaking about gold, about luster, about the shining brilliance there, about treasure, and asking us to reflect on where the gold is or was for us on that retreat. And feel into that.

This is important again: intimacy, opening to, connection with, sense into that actual knowing. So it's not just an abstract intellectual list—"Oh yes, there was that on Tuesday morning or whatever." There's this sensing into the knowing of this. And then further—I'm partly elaborating on this because I'm actually quite interested in ritual as a way of sensing the soul, but that's maybe for another talk—sensing into that sense of gold, where it has been for us. Not abstract, not intellectual, getting the body and the emotionality and the soul involved.

And then we were invited to, in our own time, while everyone was chanting together in a kind of open chant, if you like. It was actually Om Ah Hum. And I think I said something about this represents the body, speech, and mind of all Buddhas, or the primordial Buddha, if you like. Om Ah Hum—body, speech, and mind of primordial Buddha. It's kind of quite an open chant in terms of people can enter into all kinds of relationships individually with that chant in ways that each person finds useful, so it wasn't too formulaic or too tightly circumscribed.

And then as that chant was going on, Catherine invited us, if we wanted to, to come to the center of the circle and make some gesture—actually either in the center of the circle or wherever we were sitting—some gesture of the body. It could be anything at all that kind of expresses or reflects this honoring and this recognition of gold, this sense of gold that we have, this sense of the beauty and the depth of meaningfulness of whatever it was that we felt that in relation to, that sense of preciousness and instinctual sense of soul value.

So one could do that through the sound or through any gesture, no matter how subtle or involved or gross even. There was an openness and a freedom there to connect the body with the sense of sacredness and with the honoring of that, and actually join them through the expression.

Before the invitation to express with one's body or one's voice, we divided up some tangerines and placed the segments there on the cloth around, just sort of around in an aesthetically pleasing manner, around the gold bowl or oyster shell. And so the dark blue velvet cloth in the candlelight with this lustrous gold bowl and the deep orange of the tangerines was there as a sort of focal point for our energies and our attention and our gestures and our coming together there in this ritual.

I can only speak for me, but what happened through that is there was a focusing, bringing to consciousness and to visceral feeling and sense, to the soul sense, of the sense of sacredness. It was connected with the bowl. It was connected also with the group and the circle and the togetherness and the invocation and the power through the gesturing and the voicing together of the chant and the singing together. We were allowed to improvise however we wanted with the chanting as well.

All that created, if you like, a kind of soul field or soulfulness field or soul-making field or force field of soul, whatever we want to call it. And so what happened was that, at the very least, I would say for me—at the very least—what happened was these different elements became kind of sanctified together, or in other words, they became imaginally perceived together. They gained dimensionality, meaningfulness, resonance. There was reverence in relation to all of them, beauty, all of that.

So the tangerines then, as much as the chant, as much as each other and togetherness and the bowl and the sense of gold and all of that, became—kind of each element there, each sensual element became infused with soul. We sensed it. I sensed it with soul, and I sensed what other people were as well. There was a sensing with soul of the tangerines, which, in fact, I don't think anything had actually been said—we haven't said anything about the tangerines. I don't think Catherine has said anything. We just placed them in proximity, in this field of focus, if you like, in this soul field.

And through proximity, through the kind of contingency, the touching—contingere, to touch, to touch together—through association, if you like, the tangerines became sensed with soul. And whatever that might be for each individual person, there's going to be individual variations. But it will involve these general elements of sanctification, meaningfulness, beauty, dimensionality, depth, divinity, all that stuff.

And so when it came time to eat the tangerines again—slowly, mindfully, ritually, individually in whatever way we wanted—people were also given the possibility of feeding a tangerine to another in the group in a ritual manner of their own choosing. When that moment arrived, the tangerines themselves had become holy food. It was food of the gods. It was the blessing of the earth. It was all of that. It was spiritual nourishment, soul nourishment, which is so much more than just material biochemical nourishment for the biochemical processes in the cells of the body.

Again, if we analyze a little what was happening, there's this coming together through association, proximity, contingency, and through the element of value—those two together forming the prime elements. And there is also something about field, which I'll come back to soon. The field of others, if we're open to them and if there's not some problem there, then the field—the social field we're in—can become a soulful so-

cial field, a soul-making social field, so that it becomes catching. In other words, the tangerines caught soul, if you like, through being in close proximity with the bowl and with the sense of sacredness, and caught it from us, and we caught it from each other.

I may come back to that whole question of field in this series of talks. But these two central elements were deep value and association. So again, if we're analyzing—I don't want to be too technical about this—those were the primary elements there. We could also note the involvement of the body in the chanting and the opening of the body, the involvement of all the senses—hearing, seeing, moving the body—the involvement of the body in gesture and the invitation to express through the body whatever devotion was there.

We had, by the way, opened the retreat with a similar invitation to express in the body one's devotion to Eros and devotion to the mystery of desire, even if one didn't actually understand or that wasn't completely clear or free of problems. So this ritual also had a connection, following on from that previous soul-making ritual with which we opened the retreat.

But in terms of conceptual understanding right now, there are these two factors. When we sense with soul, we sometimes sense something with soul through association with something else that we're sensing with soul, through proximity to it. It gets caught up in the field, if you like, infused with soul-making sensing, and also through value. This is something I might return to—when we feel into our sense of deep, deep valuing of something, the goal, the treasure for us, and we feel it, that also can be an element that stimulates soul-making. So in that whole ritual there, I certainly was really touched by it. I thought it was very beautiful. There we can begin to understand how that process happens.

I think I'll give another example. It's actually a lot more involved, and there are many elements at work here. So I'm going to read from an email that a student sent me a while ago—I have her permission to do so. But there are many elements, so I'm going to intersperse it with commentary, drawing out for our attention the elements that involve what's happening in this process of opening to sensing with soul, or transforming, if you like, the perception, the sensing, so that it becomes more soul-making, more soulful.

In fact, the very inquiry I'm talking about now—this process I'm trying to illuminate—was the very inquiry that this person was working with when they opened in this way that they then wrote to me about. So I'll read what she says.

She says, "I've also been working with what I'm calling transitioning into the imaginal. I know that we are imagining twenty-four hours a day, but the soulful quality is not always present. So this has become a question for me: What do I bring to the imaginal that allows the soulfulness to blossom and feed me?"

This was actually a question she had asked on retreat. I will point out, now that we've said everything we've said in the first talk of this series, that I would change the wording there. She says, "What do I bring to the imaginal?" I would rather say, "What do I bring to the imagination, to the use of the imagination that allows the soulfulness to blossom and feed me?"—in other words, that allows the fully, authentically imaginal to blossom or allows a sensing with soul.

There are many elements here, as I said. Partly, notice that she's starting with an inquiry—her imaginal explorations are infused with a certain inquiry that she invented. Actually, she'd asked me something about this on retreat, which I had at the time only given a limited answer to. So she picked it up on her own—I don't think with any further suggestion from me—but there's this impetus, this willingness to inquire, and that's really, really important to me.

As you'll see in what she describes, there's a lot of flexibility. There's this willingness and availability to play, to experiment. Let's see what happens. Let's try different things. Let's just have fun, even, in the context of this inquiry, this curiosity, and also a deep yearning and longing for these kinds of openings.

So she has this question, and then she says, "One of my discoveries came during an eating meditation." This actually links to what we were talking about before—the sanctification of food within the bigger subject of sensing with soul. She continues, "I had decided to continue with your instruction of taking a few meals meditatively"—this is after the retreat where I'd given those instructions before lunchtime. "I decided to continue with the instruction of taking a few meals meditatively, but decided that rather than emphasizing the emptiness, I would draw out the imaginal."

I made some hummus and prepared a plate of vegetables and then sat down to eat. I began with the more horizontal contemplation of all the hands that had touched this food—the growers and the transporters and the supermarket workers, and so forth.

A couple of things here. What she means by "horizontal" is that there's a spreading out of awareness of what's involved in this thing: the hummus and vegetables and my sitting down to eat. What are the dependent arising factors in the material world that contributed to this? Many of you will know this is a favorite contemplation of insight meditators, and certainly of Thich Nhat Hanh, who speaks extensively about this. Can

we spread the field of awareness to see that this plate of hummus or vegetables depends on so many factors coming together to be now on my plate, and that I'm able to eat this? As she says, the growers, the transporters, the supermarket workers, the growers' parents, the transporters' parents, their education, their everything.

So there can be a horizontal meaning—it spreads outwards to involve more and more of the world. But "horizontal," she's saying, is in contradistinction to a sense of verticality, or dimensionality, which is the term I'm currently favoring.

She said, "I began with the more horizontal." There's even an awareness: "Okay, I'm not doing imaginal yet. I'm just spreading it horizontally, this awareness." And in so doing, there's already a loosening of the thingness of things, of the tight center. This is a plate of hummus. It's nothing but a plate of hummus. This piece of broccoli or carrot is just that. It has very clear borders. There's a loosening of that through the contemplation of this horizontal interconnectedness and the conditions.

Also, with that sense of interconnectedness, metta and compassion probably open and soften the heart somewhat, because then you become aware of all the work and care—oftentimes sacrifice—that might have gone into this plate of vegetables and hummus from the growers and the people transporting and the people working in the supermarket who might be tired or whatever. In the sense of interconnectedness, it also conditions or forms a basis for the softening of heart with metta and compassion, heartfulness. So I point that out as well—we're looking at the factors that support, catalyze, and make possible this transition to sensing the world, sensing things in the world with soul.

And then she continues: "And then I looked at the vegetables and tried to 'see' all the water and sunlight and earth that made up the walls of their cells." So again, the interconnections, the horizontal interconnection of meditation is broadening even more to these more subtle elements: water, sunlight, earth, in the thing, so to speak. And so she's aware—she puts "see" in inverted commas. And again, there's a kind of furthering of this loosening of the sense of the thing and the concept of the thing.

Actually, again, as Thich Nhat Hanh points out, the rain is in this hummus. The rain is in this carrot. The soil is in this carrot. And if the rain is in it, then the clouds are in it and the sea is in it, and so forth. Very beautiful. But for now, what's important is the sense that this is part of the loosening.

And she continues: "Which led to this desire to taste all of that—all of the water and the sunlight—on the tongue." So, and she continues: "To taste the dreams of the children whose parents had operated the machinery." How beautiful. To taste the dreams of the children whose parents had operated the machinery.

In the opening up of the interconnectedness, the heart opens, and part of what opens is this desire to taste all of that. Desire and intimacy. Yes? And she continues: "And the dukkha that might have arisen in this long chain." Okay, so there's the compassion and wanting to taste, wanting to become intimate with that dukkha. Yes, in the imagination, but still, there is this desire, element of desire, expansion, and a kind of desire for something intimate there. She said to taste all of that on the tongue.

So at this point, we've got elements of imagination, desire, heartfulness, love, all of that. And then she continues: "And I could feel in my body that the imaginal was operating. This feeling of liquidity and a bit of electric charge." So now she's—I read it as referring to the energy body.

The energy body feels different when imagination is operating—something electric, alive, energized, less solid. She continues: "I still hadn't eaten anything. I was just opening to that charge." She's approaching this very consciously with mindfulness and sensitivity, aware of the different elements at play.

"When I thought of you"—she's writing this to me. Jane, some of you may know, has been so kindly and beautifully preparing food for me since I've been ill, with such grace and loveliness. This person knew of Jane's generous service and my severely compromised digestive system after the operation and chemotherapy. "I was just opening to that charge in the body when I thought of you and Jane and the food that she was preparing for you. And I thought, how dearly I would love to feed you."

Again, heartfulness here—love, eros in our expanded sense (not sexual, remember; eros encompasses much more), perhaps devotion. These elements will be present for any beloved, erotic-imaginal other in our understanding. It might be a friend, partner, family member, teacher as in this case, historical figure, or as I've described, certain musicians, artists, or spiritual teachers from the past. It could be a literary character, a fully imagined figure, or someone from a film. But these elements will be there—devotion, love, eros in our sense, heartfulness.

"And then the words 'my body is your body' were offered into the mind, and there were some strong body convulsions as you and I merged."

Much is happening here. Notice how, as we explored extensively in the Eros Unbound talks, self and world, as well as other, are included in the imaginal perception—here in sensing the soul. It's not just about me or the food, but "my body is your body" offered into awareness. There's an opening in the energy body, something happening at another level. It doesn't have to be convulsions—it can unfold very smoothly and subtly. In this case, it was stronger.

"As you and I merged"—self and world become involved, as well as other. That trinity of self, other, world becomes subsumed, drawn into the whole imaginal perceiving, the whole sensing of soul, including the food she was attending to.

"And this food perceptually had the potential to heal you." Again, love and care, knowing about my situation with cancer, chemotherapy, the operation. There's a transformation of perception involving self, world, the vegetables, the food itself, and me. The food is sensed as having potential to heal.

She continues: "It was sacred, holy food, because it had been touched by everyone and everything, and it could offer its rain and compost and human emotionality into your system." Very beautiful. Do you see how everything becomes involved, drawn into the soul-making vortex, the soul-making dynamics?

"The feeling of you entering me, of this kind of fusion that happened, of us consuming the food as one body and yet still two—it's truly indescribable. I'm struggling to describe it, to convey it in words."

Again, there's inquiry, flexibility, many elements involved, all approached with careful, attentive, soulful mindfulness. There's experimentation throughout. In this case it involves me as the imaginal other, but in a way that's healthy and beautiful, with very clear boundaries functioning as a temenos that allows this opening into the imaginal without needing concretization or feeding anyone's ego.

Her inquiry continues: "Since then I've tried to recreate the above"—she puts "recreate" in quotation marks—"with varying results." She's following a thread of inquiry, which I find so important.

Her inquiry continues, and she writes to me: "Since then I've tried to 'recreate' the above with varying results." She places "recreate" in quotation marks, recognizing something important about this word choice. Again, she's following a thread of inquiry here.

"I feel like there is still so much to know and learn about the conditions that align when the imaginal is most potent." This is exactly what I've been exploring throughout these talks—understanding the conditions that support and nourish imaginal perception.

She reflects further: "Perhaps the clue is in the word 'recreate,' which suggests that these sacred visits from the imaginal, from the soul we might say, might be just the result of tinkering with the conditions and gaining 'control' over when and how they appear." But then she recognizes something crucial: "This lacks the erotic thrust, the sublime impregnation of how I experience these moments. It's like you've said many times—they have a divine autonomy. The element of surprise and grace is flattened by believing I, anyone, as a human being, could fashion it alone."

In other words, it's not all simply up to technical mastery. There is that dimension of skill and understanding conditions, but there's also this element of grace that I tried to include in the first talk of this series. If we look back at one phrase from her earlier description, she had written: "And then the words, 'my body is your body,' were offered into the mind." This exemplifies the element of grace—something was simply given, occurred to the mind, planted itself, landed in consciousness.

This kind of gifting is very common in imaginal work. It's as if we're given something by soul, handed something as if the soul has its own intentionality, its own direction that it wants to stimulate in us. But we still need to assent to it, to pick it up with skill and sensitivity and responsiveness and free will.

So here's an example involving many elements, all subsumed into a larger inquiry with considerable flexibility and experimentation.

Let me offer a few final observations for this section. When there is sensing the soul—whether extra-psychic or intra-psychic—the conventional perception of the physical or material world doesn't necessarily disappear. In fact, most of the time it won't. I'm still seeing what anyone might see through conventional perception. It's just that dimensionalities have opened up—meaningful sacredness and other elements have emerged not in place of that object, but imbuing it, filling it out, enriching and complicating it in that soul-making way through these imaginal aspects.

In all this sensing of soul, it's actually possible to have two perceptions simultaneously. One might be the very conventional level of perception that anyone in normal consciousness would have in that situation—the sensation of body sitting, touch with

cushion or chair, feet or legs on floor, all the normal bodily sensations of sitting. At the same time, there can be an image of the body or sensing of the energy body that's very different from these conventional physical sensations.

So one can feel sitting still in a chair while simultaneously having an essential experience of the energy body doing cartwheels or dancing or flying or coiling around the vertical central axis of an erotically beloved imaginal other, or experiencing the body as a light body of a certain color. This imaginal perception can occur alongside conventional perception of sitting wherever one is sitting.

Or one might be in the physical presence of a beloved other, seeing them as one normally would, as everyone would see them, while simultaneously holding an imaginal perception of them as angel or cosmic king or queen—infinite possibilities. This imaginal sensing might be sensorially vague; we might not be able to clearly discern details but know it's angelic or this cosmic queen presence. Sometimes it can't be precisely described. But as I've pointed out many times, the vividness of the image to the senses isn't what matters most. What matters are these other elements of sensing the soul, these other aspects of imaginal constellations.

One last point about intention. I've talked on recent retreats about different fantasies of path and goal, including what I called the medical model—the approach many spiritual teachings employ, sometimes unconsciously. This was actually pointed out by some Greek philosopher whose name escapes me: philosophy as medicine for the soul. The Buddha used this analogy explicitly and consciously—Buddha as physician diagnosing, giving prognosis and cure, with the Eightfold Path as regimen of treatment.

In this medical model, one's trying to end suffering, or for most people, simply decrease it, whether momentarily or long-term. But sometimes this very intention to alleviate suffering as the primary goal may block or stifle the fullness of soul-making that's possible, the authenticity of imaginal perception, the richness of sensing the soul.

We discussed in the first talk how fullness of intention is one element of imaginal constellation. This is complicated, because I don't mean that the desire for alleviating suffering isn't present as part of exploring these practices. But at some point, it may well not be the primary intention, and that's perhaps the crucial piece.

Imaginal perception, sensing the soul, may indeed end certain suffering, may totally dissolve particular forms of suffering.

It very probably and almost always attenuates or alleviates, sometimes to a remarkable degree, some suffering. So that is very probable. But again, in my way of thinking about things, at least where I am right now, it's not really the point of this work. It's somehow included in the package more often than not, but it becomes something that's not the primary point of what we're doing.

Oftentimes what happens is the suffering is translated, if you like, or it's cast differently through the sensing with soul, through the imaginal perception. The sensing of the soul puts the dukkha in a different light, in a different context, if you like. It sets it on a different stage. And this kind of allows or brings soul-making. In soul-making, that's what's happening—not necessarily the ending of suffering.

But this is complex, and I will actually return and devote a whole talk in this series, I hope, to some of the strands of the very complex area of dukkha and soul-making. But just to say for now, this piece about intentionality can be significant in sensing the soul, because if the primary intention is getting rid of dukkha or just alleviating dukkha—which is a fine intention, and very appropriate at times, and completely valid and everyone should be free to choose that at times, or even all the time if that's what they want—there will be times when, if that's the primary intention, it actually blocks and stifles and prevents a fullness and a full deepening and opening of the sensing of the soul.

It may be, as one explores all this, that there may be some dukkha, some grief or suffering of some different kind, and one starts with the intention of just wanting to alleviate that dukkha—that's very understandable and very normal. But then when the suffering is alleviated just enough or just a little bit, the sensing of the soul begins to emerge or become possible, and maybe that then becomes the primary intention, and through that maybe the suffering is decreased further.

Or it may be, like I said, as the imaginal opens, suffering is decreased. So there's also fluidity in terms of intentionality that can be possible here. But just to draw attention to that briefly right now.

Okay, I think that's enough for today. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 113

Sensing with Soul (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this fifth part of his exploration of sensing with soul, Rob Burbea examines how imaginal perception often involves receiving something from beyond ourselves—a quality of grace that cannot be fully mastered through technique alone. He shares intimate examples of how soul-making can emerge through relationship: receiving imaginal perception from another person, communicating these perceptions between people, and how shared fields can suddenly shift into imaginal awareness.*
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> *Burbea illustrates this through personal anecdotes, including a story of receiving imaginal sight from Catherine McGee during a moment of creative anxiety, and therapeutic work where sharing the perception of 'sacred prostitute' transformed a client's relationship to painful memories. He emphasizes how each person refracts the divine in unique ways, offering this as perhaps our most precious gift to one another.*
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> *The talk also addresses how life situations themselves can become imaginal—how what we might dismiss as papañca (mental proliferation) may actually contain soul-making potential when approached with proper attention to energy body awareness, humility, and soul resonances. Burbea concludes by noting how each element of imaginal perception—humility, desire, values, logos—deserves deep exploration in its own right, suggesting these as areas for future contemplative investigation.*

I very much hope that all this analysis of what's involved in and what supports sensing the soul, perceiving imaginatively, soul-making—taking apart what we mean by those words—I hope that this is helpful. I hope that it opens up possibilities and makes actual possibilities for you, allowing you to open up this field further.

I hope that through what we're saying here and through your own practice of it and dipping in, you really get a taste of the kinds of things that we're talking about, the kinds of experiences. Get the taste in terms of actually experiencing for yourself these kinds of openings, deepenings, transformations, whatever you want to call them. That you both get the taste and get the idea—as a metaphorical term, but also more literally—and you understand conceptually as well. As it opens up experientially, may it also open up for you conceptually, making sense and being grounded conceptually, both through what we're saying and through your own practical explorations.

With that, again, I really want to encourage you to play, to experiment. Experiment means trying different things, doing some different things in practice than you might usually do. But experiment implies with it a sort of attentive, careful noticing of what happens—a kind of inquiry in and through the practice, sometimes even questioning. Through that combination of play and inquiry, we could say experimentation is attentive noticing when we're playing. A maturing of soul-making and imaginal practice and of understanding will take place.

It's that combination—playing or experimenting with a kind of attentive noticing and inquiry and thinking about it as well. All of that together will inevitably open up and establish a kind of gradual maturing of these kinds of practice and of the understandings. This way of approaching things is very different from a kind of harassment or pressure of the question: "Am I getting this right? Am I getting it right?" which so often plagues meditators and oppresses the meditative exploration and the meditative path.

Slowly, gradually, we're looking at what is it that allows, opens, supports, catalyzes sensing with soul—sensing life, the world, the things of the world, the materiality, the bodies, the beings of the world, sensing any and all of that with soul. We've touched on the importance of certain aspects of the way that we are present, the way that we show up in the present moment and bring our awareness and our being to bear. Certain factors or aspects of our presence are key.

For instance: humility, heart opening or heart softening, a certain amount or some degree of lessening of the fabrication of perception, some degree of loosening of perceptual and conceptual grasping too tightly on what a thing is and how reality is. Sensitivity as an aspect of presence, energy, body awareness—these kinds of things.

I'm just repeating now what we've been through before, just to reiterate it once more. We said any aspect or element of the imaginal, any node in the imaginal constellation—we went through that whole list—attention to or noticing that node can either suddenly or gradually bring that element alive. From there, the whole lattice can ignite, become illuminated. The fully imaginal can be moved towards or entered into, either suddenly or gradually.

In all of that, some of those elements won't necessarily be there at first or in the beginnings of your practice with all this. Something like the sense of participation, for instance—I wonder whether that's just a bit more subtle. In other words, it's maybe not likely to be noticed immediately. It could be that the fact that you've heard me say it so much stimulates that noticing and makes it more accessible. But the general point right now is that it's not necessary that all these elements are noticed at first.

As I said, there's a maturing of the discernment that happens, like your eyes getting used to the dark, but over a period of time—like, what's actually involved in imaginal perception, what's actually involved in sensing the soul.

We also said that the order of practices is not important. For example, one might start with a so-called intrapsychic image or intrapsychic sensing the soul, and from there it spreads out to some thing, some object, some person, or just the general environment in a kind of cosmic sense—to what we might call extrapsychic sensing the soul. Or it might work the other way around. One starts with some material object or the general sense of one's surroundings, perceived and sensed with soul, and from that arises some intrapsychic image of oneself or of someone else or something else.

So it can work in either order, either way. It might be only extrapsychic. It might just stay with this object in front of me, this thing, this being, whatever it is in the material world manifesting materially, and one senses them as soul, and that's just what it does.

It might be that we start with, for instance, some degree of cultivating some samadhi, and the well-being, the harmonization, the integrity and beauty, really, of the energy body experience there liquefies to a certain extent, lessens fabrication to a certain extent, loosens things to a certain extent. In that loosening, liquefying, there's the possibility for more sensing the soul of the world around us, because everything is liquefied, a little bit loosened.

Or it can be emptiness practices first, which essentially do a similar kind of thing. They're all in the movement of less fabrication, lessening of fabrication. Or some other element—for instance, we've mentioned humility earlier. It might be that lingering with that sense, allowing that to open one and allowing oneself to open into that realm, that mode of being that we call humility with everything that's involved there, in whatever way that does and whatever that means for us or however that opens at that time. It may be that that element is the way in, the door that opens to allow the sensing of soul into the mundus imaginalis.

In all this analysis, there's this possibility to develop our understanding conceptually of the conceptual framework and understanding regarding the elements, some of the elements that might be involved in—whichever way you want to put it—opening a door or building, creating this constellation, this construction, this fabrication that is the imaginal.

And also with practice. So dwelling on this allows both the understanding and the practice, hopefully, to develop, for you to gain some confidence in, because you can actually try different approaches. Dwell or focus on this or that element, try changing this or that, just noticing or tweaking an element or amplifying it or whatever it is.

But we also made the point that okay, there's this understanding and skill that develops regarding what elements may be involved, but never, never, never is soul-making going to be only a matter of technique or something that can be harnessed under the rubric of mind mastery, of our mastery. It's never going to be only that.

Yes, there is skill and art that can develop in practice, and yes, there certainly is quite a beautiful and remarkable evolution of refinement, of discernment conceptually and perceptually and all that. And that's really, really helpful and important. But it's never going to come just under that. I'm never going to get it completely under my thumb. There's always going to be an element in soul-making of grace, of the unexpected, of something being given, a gift, and receiving something, so to speak, from beyond ourselves.

This sense of grace, of gift, of receiving something from beyond ourselves, is always, I would say, to some degree, an element in soul-making practice, in sensing the soul, in imaginal perception.

So that's the end of the little review. If we pick up on that little point and amplify something that I mentioned earlier—I can't remember when, but recently—so we can, as I said just now, receive something from beyond ourselves. And that beyond ourselves might be from another human or other humans right now in the present, materially with us, together with us, or a whole field, or group, or whatever. That's one possibility of the beyond ourselves that we may receive from.

Now, I'm not going to talk—we're not going to talk, and we probably won't talk for quite a while—about, I don't know what to call it exactly, deliberate dyadic soul-making practice, where there's deliberate sort of erotic imaginal exploration deliberately face to face with another and kind of held there and explored there and allowed to amplify with each other. I think we'll save that till later. I don't actually recommend that practice quite yet. It takes some very beautiful, very wonderful prerequisites psychologically in terms of skill with one's own process, relational skills and arts, all kinds of things, energetics, etc.

So I'm not really wanting to talk so much about that as a deliberate avenue and possibility and practice. Rather for right now, just to mention a possibility, because some of you will have experienced this anyway, and it happens, of course, that we receive, we

are given something from beyond ourselves, sometimes from other human selves right now that we're in relationship with, and that opens up for us. It's what we get from them, what they communicate to us, that opens up the possibility right then for us of sensing the soul.

I could possibly give a few examples of this. One actually is something that I can report for myself, helped by Catherine. I think it was the last retreat, the Alchemy of Desire, and I was talking at some point, perhaps in the talk called "Longing, Vulnerability, Anteros," and was talking about something that happened, and my worry, or fear, regarding a certain creative project that was very dear to my soul and heart and my fear, my concern, worry that it would just sort of get lost or dissolve or not come to fruition. And also my recognition that it didn't depend on me and how that opened up through an exploration that Catherine helped me with, but that was primarily my own image that I explored.

That was around the same time—I can't remember if it was before the retreat or after the retreat—but Catherine and I were Skyping. And I think it was a similar uncertainty that I was in, or similar anxiety, really, about this thing that felt, this creative project that felt very, very important to me.

At a certain point, I was maybe sharing some of this, and some of my feelings. And at a certain point, her perception shifted into an imaginal perception. In other words, she was sensing with soul. She was sensing me with soul through the medium of Skype, perceiving me, sensing me with soul. In other words, I for her had become image at that point—not so much as a narrative, but in that moment as a kind of iconic image. Not so much the whole story of this, if I remember rightly, but with everything that involves: the theophany and the dimensionality and all of that.

And she shared that with me in real time, in the moment. She said, "This is how I'm seeing you right now." She was quite struck by the perception and the sort of luminosity there, and the beauty of that in her perception. Her communicating of that perception—in this case of me—communicating that to me in the moment, in the midst of my sharing open-heartedly about the anxiety that I was feeling, did something to my perception of the life of this work, or the life of this creative work that I was caring deeply about and actually concerned about.

So her communicating that perception to me—it's not so much that I picked up that exact perception and saw myself iconically, theophanically, as image as she was. It was more that something illuminated in the field, and then I was able at that point, somehow in the magic sort of ignition of that field of her communicating, that was triggered

by her communication of her imaginal perception, I was able actually to perceive the life of the work more imaginatively, the life of this creative project more imaginatively. And then the kind of contraction of anxiety that was there was able to relax.

It's as if I caught the sensing the soul, or caught the imaginal field from her. Or her perception, her communication of that perception, that imaginal perception, ignited not the same perception, but a related perception perhaps, but a different perception in me, imaginatively.

And so I had been in this kind of grip of "I need to figure out what to do to ensure that this creative work lives and becomes generative in the future, if I die," etc. In my shift, that was catalyzed by her shift of seeing me imaginally, in my shift, then that kind of grip relaxed and there was a whole different seeing of this creative project, of my relationship with it and the possibility that I might die before it comes to fruition.

That all relaxed and became imagined. There was a very different relationship with the whole situation.

So that would be one example of something we receive from beyond ourselves that opens—if you like, turns the key in our perception—so that we are then able to perceive, to sense with soul.

A second example might be—and some of you might remember this, since I'm pretty sure I recounted it in a talk, which I think might be the Theatre of Selves, maybe in the second part. I was relating the true story of working with a yogi on retreat who shared with me some really difficult memories that she'd felt a lot of shame about for many years concerning something that happened when she was quite young, a very young woman really.

As she was talking—and we hadn't discussed anything about the imaginal, hadn't even used that word, this was really quite a few years ago—I heard the words "sacred prostitute." I was sort of wrestling with myself as I was listening, wondering whether it was okay to share that phrase. And I did.

In a way, what came to me through these words was an imaginal perception, a sensing with soul of the memory of the whole scene and narrative that she was sharing with me. It was so painful for her and so bound in shame decades later. And my sense, my imaginal perceiving of that story, that episode in her life, I then shared with her.

In this case, she immediately picked up the flame of that very same imaginal perceiving, that very same sensing of that memory, of that narrative with soul. It was the same image, so different than what happened with Catherine and me on the Skype, where

what ignited for me was a slightly different perception. In this case, it was the same image. I'd been listening for a few minutes to this very painful thing, but I shared what came, and she immediately grasped that image.

It immediately cast the whole episode and the whole pain of it in a very different light. It was literally seen with a different way of looking. The memory was re-membered—not the facts, but the whole color and the whole actual movement of what was going on there.

What was going on in this painful memory? We can interpret it this way: the hermeneutic is shaming, it's a kind of moral inferiority and great mistake, and there's no beauty, nothing redeeming in it. But something shifted in this perception. It wasn't just my intellect coming up with how to recast it, to bring in a different way of looking. Something was, if you like, given to me.

So I received something from beyond myself, which had to do with the field, and in the field we were looking together at that memory. I received something from beyond myself—who knows from where, from soul, from whatever—and then communicated it to her. That was exactly what she needed then to shift and see the whole thing with a re-sanctification, a redeeming, an opening up to see what was beautiful there and what was divine. Mercy began to flow, healing began to flow.

Her sense, not just of the past, but then of her present as well—it's as if she recognized the necessity and the truth, if you like, the truth of that imaginal perception, the truth of sensing what happened with soul, remembering in that different way both her past and herself. And that means herself in the present too.

So that would be another example of receiving something from beyond ourselves and it being communicated between humans.

Another one—and again, it was something I was involved in with a very good friend, sometime in the last few years. I don't quite remember what led up to it, but I think we were both feeling a certain particular kind of tenderness and openness between us.

It wasn't that something had been closed or hardened or hidden or held tightly behind certain doors for fear of being seen. It wasn't that at all. But something happened and I think we both felt this kind of, metaphorically speaking, nakedness with each other. And again, it wasn't that we were hiding anything before that, and suddenly it was like, "Ah, now I can show you what I'm ashamed of" or anything. It was nothing like that at all. That can be a very important moment in human beings relating, but it actually wasn't that. It was just that something happened, or in the flow of things there was suddenly a sense of this really beautiful kind of nakedness together.

We were talking a little bit, but there was a lot of just silence and a really slow pace to things. I was checking, paying attention to this kind of beautiful feeling of nakedness, metaphorically. And I sensed, oh, it's got this real innocence with it and a kind of real unguardedness. And again, not that there was really much guardedness before, but it had this kind of almost pristine Edenic quality—as in Garden of Eden. Something very young, very innocent, sort of open and unguarded and really naked.

As I tracked this inside, in the flow of this very sparse conversation, just being together—there was a lot of love there—I was paying attention at the same time to this sense that I had.

And in the paying attention, it became imaginal. It took that quantum jump. And the very sense of my nakedness and innocence, openness, unguardedness, and the youngness of that began to have those qualities of beauty and theophany and dimensionality. It became iconic for me—there was something of the iconic image in that.

As we talked about elements of the imaginal, I began to pick up and notice these elements. I wasn't doing it in any deliberate way. I don't think I'd even articulated this business about elements of the imaginal to myself at that time, but I began to notice the element of eternality. It's as if that nakedness, innocence, unguardedness, openness, youngness—this image—I sensed the eternality of it. There was this young naked boy that had this "always, always already happening in hierophantic time" quality to it. And that amplified the sense of divinity of the whole thing.

I haven't talked about it for quite a while, but I spoke at some point, perhaps in *Path of the Imaginal*, about this possibility of seeing an image as an object or becoming an image—two possible different ways of relating to an image, among others. In this case, I opened more to this iconic divine image and its eternality and the beauty of it and the sweetness of it, the innocent purity of it. And I became that more.

Again, it's not that I was identified. There wasn't this rigid, tight ego grasping at it. But it's as if I let myself enter into being that image or feeling myself as that image. And with that, it felt like, as part of the image, there was a blessing radiating from that image. As I entered into the image and became that image physically in my bodily experience, it felt like my body and my hands were emanating blessing and were part of the image.

I remember placing my hands on my friend's head in blessing, and she could feel the blessing energy. It was very beautiful and touching and interesting.

Now, again, there wasn't really much reification going on or identification. If someone were to go around placing their hands on people's heads with this sense of being identified with having blessing energy coming out of them—"that's good for me, it's good for you, telling people it's good for you if you let me touch your head because I've got blessing coming out of my hands"—that personally would make me very nervous. Maybe that's just my style, but here it really felt in that theatre, in that imaginal way, with all the loveliness and power and ability to affect the soul and heart, but not the identification, not the ego identification and grasping and reification of that.

So what happened was through the touch—well, we were together in this heart experience before—but through the touch, we both were sensing the soul. Through the touch, the image, the imaginal was shared between us, and part of its sharing was sharing through the touch.

In all those three examples I've just given, we could say something comes from beyond ourselves. It could be from another human being, or we could talk perhaps about the field. Like fields in quantum theory, it's as if the field takes a quantum leap. In other words, what two people are experiencing—the whole thing becomes imaginal together. This to me is really quite interesting. In the field, whoever is participating, there is a quantum leap into a new imaginal sense.

Notice that in the examples where there was dukkha, that imaginal sense doesn't ignore or erase the dukkha that was there, nor the particularity of the persons involved, or the events, or the story. But it transforms the seeing, transforms the sensing. Something has gone to sensing with soul. Something has opened up in the field, taking that quantum leap. It's taken a quantum leap into the imaginal realm—imaginal perceiving has opened up.

What can happen, as I mentioned, is this quantum leap can be given to or arise first in one person, if there are two people there. First in one person who then communicates it to the other, and the second person's sensing also then makes the quantum leap so that the whole field has shifted. Both of them are in this new perception, and the whole sense of what was and is present—the perceptions, the selves, the others, objects, events, the world—all become, as they do in the soul-making dynamic, involved and transubstantiated, transfigured, and the beauty of that.

So again, I'm mentioning this as one of the ways in which sensing the soul opens for us—that we receive from beyond ourselves. But I do want to put the brakes on a little bit in terms of this deliberate dyadic soul-making practice, which I think does take quite a lot of preparation and prerequisite capacity, skills, arts in all kinds of domains—relational, psychological, personal, energetic, insight, all that.

But some of you will recognize from these kinds of examples that you've already actually experienced this. As I said when I described what happened with the ritual with the tangerines, some of you might have felt, "I've already experienced this many times"—talking with a friend or in an interview or something, or sharing some images in a group. Of course, lovers in love know this kind of thing. They might not have a conceptual framework for it, but people taste this kind of thing. You may know the possibility from your own experience with times when you were in love.

And it's not so much about that form or definition of a relationship. It's more like where there is the erotic-imaginal alive, it can spread between two people. And the erotic-imaginal alive does not necessarily mean sexual or romantic between two people.

As another example of this field or receiving from another, let me share something that Catherine told me, that her niece told her. This particular niece is just five years younger than Catherine. When Catherine's mother died—which was Catherine's niece's grandmother, despite the fact that Catherine's niece is only five years younger than Catherine—

When Catherine's mother died two and a half years ago, Catherine's niece shared something deeply moving with her. "Nanny was the only person," she said—that's what she called Catherine's mother, her grandmother—"Nanny was the only person who would say to me when I went round to her house and sat beside her and told her my problems, 'Let's sit quietly and put ourselves in the hands of the Lord.'" It was beautiful. "Let's sit quietly and put ourselves in the hands of the Lord." And then Catherine's niece continued, "Now there will be no one who will say that to me anymore."

Catherine's mother, a devout Catholic who died in her nineties, was the only figure in Catherine's niece's life who still had that kind of devoutness, that unabashed, unashamed, humble relationship with God that she could share with others. Not in a pushy evangelical way, but as the only person in Catherine's niece's life who would communicate that sacred presence.

Looking at this through our analysis, several elements converge here. In that simple invitation—which probably happened many times throughout Catherine's niece's life—different dimensions would open up depending on what the problem was, depending on countless factors as they sat quietly together and put themselves in the hands of the Lord.

You can see the humility there, the reverence. You can see what is communicated from one human being to another—receiving something of that humility, and also a certain conception, because there's a whole understanding involved in putting oneself in the hands of the Lord. It might be vague, but there's a conception of divinity, a conception of the human relationship with divinity being communicated.

An idea is there. An invitation to humility is there, coming from another. And also an image is there. When someone says, "Let's put ourselves in the hands of the Lord," presumably no one literally visualizes some giant hand descending from the clouds. It's a metaphor, but it's a loose image that can become, as a vague metaphor, itself an imaginal perception that opens up the sensing with which problems can be met and resolved.

There are definitely several elements converging: an image, an idea, and this other—in the field, or in this case, a kind of dyad from which Catherine's niece receives something from beyond herself, something she's not quite able to access on her own for various reasons. All of this, together with the invitation to humility and other elements, opens up the sensing with soul. This can then manifest and unfold in different ways depending on what the actual problem was or what other factors were present in the moment.

I want to say something else about this particular anecdote that could easily be overlooked when someone shares such things after another person dies, or in what people generally report of their lives. It might be obvious to some of you, but I think it can be very easily overlooked in our present zeitgeist, in our culture's way of conceiving existence.

To me, when I hear this—of course I could be wrong—it seems that Catherine's niece, in saying that to Catherine after her grandmother died, is expressing that she's missing not just her grandmother's human kindness, not just the comforting that happened, but something much more specific. She's missing what was communicated of the sacred through her grandmother in a very particular way. When she said, "Now there will be no one"—it's very rare in her life, very precious.

She's missing not just human kindness and comfort, but what came through her grandmother in a very particular, very personal way—of the sacred, of the sense or idea or image or conception of the divine, expressed or brought into presence or conjured through a particular person, their style, their mode of doing that. As if each of us is potentially—and hopefully more than potentially—each of us refracts the divine in a different way.

Each of us in our life has the opportunity to sing the praise of existence, to communicate through our being in countless ways our sense of the sacredness of existence. We all do this; we refract the light of the divine, the infinite light of the divine, each in our particular ways. We each have our different songs or ranges of songs that we sing.

Over and above the human kindness or comfort that she might have received from her grandmother, it's this that Catherine's niece is expressing she's missing—the rarity of that, the loss of that from her life. "My nanny, my grandma had this particular way that she expressed and brought the divine into manifestation through how she related to the divine, through how she felt it, how she expressed it."

Is this not the most precious gift that we bear and give to each other as human beings? The ways that we express and refract the light of the sacred, of the divine, of the beyond, of the mystery?

There's something much more going on here than just a strategy for decreasing suffering. It could be seen that way, and it certainly had that function—there's something useful there. But there's this whole other level: the taste, the intimation, the disclosure, the fragrance of the particular expression or slant or refraction of divinity that we receive from each other. It's not useful.

In a way, it's useless. I'll come back to that in another talk, I think. But is it not the most precious gift? I think it is. One of the most beautiful things that we love in this existence.

So let me move on to another possibility that I've alluded to many times, but let's draw it out a little more. A life situation that we're in can become image for us—it becomes imaginal for us, or we sense that situation with soul. There is that potential.

Instead of just thinking "this is just a problem" or "just this thing that I like" or "this thing that I'm interested in," we can in practice allow it to become fully imaginal for us. Sometimes that's obvious, or it's clear that something can easily be fully imaginal. But oftentimes it's not—not at all. We just regard the thing as something we're caught up in, some predicament, or a problem we have: "I have too much desire," or "this or that."

So oftentimes we're not aware—a person isn't aware of the potential in a life situation to liberate the imaginal that's there and to plug in, to connect with, to open to a very different sensing of that situation, of themselves in that situation, sensing it with soul.

Someone was sharing with me in an interview a while ago—I asked her permission to share it with you. She was describing a slightly complicated nexus of conditions, and I think she may have said in relation to imaginal practice, "I don't get images." She may or may not have said that, but I think it's important in this connection because what I'm going to say now also addresses those of you who still might think, "I don't get images." We've said quite a lot about that in past talks.

But oftentimes the image is there in our life. It's just that we haven't recognized it as image, recognized the fantasy that is propelling us, that is calling us, that is pulling us anyway. It's in what we love. It's in what we're moved by. It's in what is meaningful to us. I think I said this in the Image, Mythos, Dharma talks, but I've said it many times over the last few years: where we love, there is image. Where we're dedicated, there is image. You can look there.

It's a matter of unearthing the image or illuminating the image there, and then allowing it to shine its light on us and on the whole situation.

So here was a situation with different sides to it. Let me present the whole picture very briefly. She had shared with me that she had gone to an exhibition of a certain Japanese artist, Hokusai—some of you will know him, a wonderful artist from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She was sharing how much she really loved art and literature, but was regretting that she had no time in her life to study it as she would like.

But it turned out some of the impetus to study was because she was in a certain social situation. She had moved to a new town where many of the people she was encountering were into the arts, but in a way where they seemed to be boasting about their knowledge—showing off how much they knew about it. So she found herself in a slightly intimidating social scene where she felt she had to equal their knowledge or risk being exposed as ignorant. It didn't sound like a very pleasant social scene that she had been introduced to, and she was understandably very ambivalent about whether she wanted to be in that scene at all.

This "I don't have time to study it" was itself mixed. It was partly "I need to know more to keep up with these people around me"—it had this slightly harsh, judgmental quality of comparing and measuring each other. And some of it was just coming out of love.

Another piece was that she also had a column in a magazine in her profession, which had nothing to do with art or literature—a regular column. She was talking about her relationship with that, with teaching and communicating the teaching in her column.

As we discussed this, she reported how she could get really manic in relation to some of these things—either in relation to this column she had to write, or in relation to getting excited about art or literature. She felt that energy in the chest, and then her mind just spins: "Well, then I'll do this, and then I'll do that, and after that I'll do that"—this kind of forward momentum of overexcited papañca was something she recognized and didn't want to get into. I think she used the word "manic."

Most of us will recognize that possibility—when we're in planning mode, overexcited, not really in our bodies, and it's all gone out of hand.

As we were talking, I said, "That's really good to be aware of that. And there are three fantasies, at least three fantasies, woven together here in your life." And I mean fantasy in the good sense—something that is already image and fantasy for us in that it has beauty, it has meaning, but it needs to be recognized as such and allowed as such, given permission and granted respect and trust in order for it to have its power.

Because otherwise what happens is we mistake something that's potentially imaginal—we mistake it for papañca. Sometimes what comes to us as image and fantasy can be papañca, or it can turn into papañca, or it can actually be papañca but we start relating to it differently, and then it becomes imaginal.

What I want to offer as a possibility, as a permission, or as a reconceiving, is that maybe it was actually imaginal to start with. Because we didn't trust it, because we didn't pay attention and relate to it in the right way—because we were suspicious of it, or we closed it down, or we didn't involve the energy body and didn't respect it—it became more of a papañca force and a problematic energy spinning in our consciousness, in our being.

Do you understand?

So these things are usually always redeemable at any point. It's not that we have to catch them and nip them in the bud. It could be years of what I've been considering as papañca, an unskillful relationship with something. And actually then I re-conceive it, I just give it a little bit of trust, I enter into relationship in a much more different way with much more attention and respect, and grant it the possibility that it may have some treasure in it. And actually the thing becomes imaginal and not papañca.

So here, there was the possibility, as we were talking, that woven into her life there are at least three fantasies pulling her, propelling her—good fantasies in our sense of imaginal fantasies, soul fantasies, and functioning already. One was around art, one was around what we might call Japanese Buddhist aesthetics or Japanese way of life,

one was the whole realm of literature, and one was her column, her teaching column in this magazine as her own creative flow rather than as just something that she did as part of the duties of her job, as a kind of "oh dear, it's time to write that column again."

All these were possible and kind of live fantasies that somehow in relating to them or conceiving of them, there was more suspicion than trust and not quite the relationship that allowed the blossoming, the blooming into full sensing with soul and imaginal relationship. But all these fantasies, these imaginal narratives—the art, the Japanese Buddhist way of life, the literature, the column as heroic, artistic, creative—all of them had beauty, soul resonance, meaningfulness, mystery.

All of them can be and sometimes were what we were calling fixations—in other words, images that weren't imaginal, fixated images, the stuff of papañca. They could be that if we relate to them in the wrong way. So for example, if that wanting to measure up to this strange new social situation that I'm in where everyone's sort of dropping hints of how much they know about this art or that art or literature or whatever, and I feel like I have to keep up and it's very intimidating. If that part of me that gets roped into that not very nice social way of relating and the kind of ego measurement involved in that, if that part of me gets hold of this, then I'm going to be relating to these potentially beautiful fantasies and potentially imaginal fantasies. I'm going to be relating to them as they become fixations, not imaginal. I'm going to be relating to them from the need or from the effort to try and impress others with what I know about art or whatever, or in my column that I'm writing, or my fear of failing to do so.

But what we can do at any point in practice is actually take it into the meditation process—take these strands in our life, this complex, this nexus of fantastical strands in our life, and begin to meditate on the soul resonances that these have for us. So that Hokusai art, for example, can meditate on, tune into, bring back into the mind's eye those paintings and meditate on the soul resonances and how they move and touch my soul and what they mean for me even if I can't articulate it or put it into words, but feeling into that, allowing those very fantasies of my wish to somehow be artistic in writing this column that's about something completely different and my wish for a creative flow there.

So meditatively taking up these strands, perhaps at first singly and then perhaps in combination, meditating, feeling into the soul resonances, taking one's time with mindfulness, with the sensitivity to the energy body. And then within all that, one can be aware, for instance, of what happens in the energy body when it goes into the excite-

ment of "I'll do this, and then I'll do that, and then I can do this, and then after that I'll do the next thing." And perhaps relating to that in energetic terms as one possibility within the meditation—how does the energy want to flow when I become excited?

So it goes into this almost intolerable kind of what she was calling manic energy in her chest. And then probably at some point what happens—and she was trained in mindfulness—but probably at some point what happens is we lose connection with the body and then the mind just spins about what I'm going to do. And then when we think, "I just need to drop all this, this is crazy, forget all this, it's all papañca," we just cut the loop. And sometimes that's really important. We talked about this, the necessity of being able to do that.

Sometimes you can just let's go in slowly and really tune into the resonances, the meaningfulness, the beauty, the dimensionality, the mystery. And within that, the energy—what does happen to my energy body? When I think about my own possibilities of artistic flow or my own wish to be creative artistically somehow in whatever form is given for me or available for me to do that, then I see it tends to go to excitement. Well, excitement is an interesting energy. It comes from inspiration. It comes from love. It comes from eros.

So what happens to the erotic energy in the body? If we just stay with the energy body experience dimension now, what happens in the energy body experience of eros that it goes from something that's very lovely and harmonizing and takes us deeper into the imaginal, and opens up beauty and empowerment, what happens is that it goes into a kind of excitement that's a little too top-heavy and intolerable and feels not very helpful. How is it that the energy wants to flow?

Maybe I can allow it to flow that way. Perhaps it wants to go up and out the body. Perhaps it wants to radiate out the chest in this kind of outburst of energetic song like a songbird, or out the throat. Maybe I can allow it to do that or even imagine it flowing that way, moving that way. Maybe sometimes it's just the simple awareness of what's happening energetically. But I can also use the imagination, as we've talked about, in the energy body awareness, and have an image of my body, maybe have an image of my body a certain way with this kind of inspired energy in it.

Then because I'm approaching it meditatively with this delicate, sensitive attunement to soul resonances and how the heart is touched and how the meaningfulness is touched and how the energy is and wants to be and wants to move, and again, the dynamic responsiveness and sensitivity to all that, the whole nexus of these meditations, fantasies, soulful fantasies, can open up in a way, open up their beauty, their dimensionality, their gift to us, rather than become problematic.

And again, one can do all this with a particular fantasy, like even of what I want to, or this impetus that I have, or this calling, or this wish to be creative, or it might be a combination of fantasies. And then one can play, as I mentioned, with the kind of balance of awareness within that, with the attention to the fantasy and all the elements involved in that and to the energy body, maybe a bit more in the energy body, play with that. When we talked about the—each one is like a dial, and what the relative settings of my dials of attention on the energy body alongside attention on the soul resonance of the fantasy itself, I can play with that. What feels helpful? There's so much to explore there and allow to open up in potentially a much more helpful, fruitful, soul-making way.

So again, the images and the fantasies were, so to speak, already there underneath all this complexity in the sense of papañca, in the sense of manic energy and all that.

But they weren't quite being related to yet in a way that brought soul-making, that brought empowerment, that brought freedom, that brought the creativity and discovery of soul-making, of sensing the soul.

But it really is possible. And actually, in a way, this applies to so many of the examples that I've given over the last few years in talks. There's a way of hearing them again from that perspective. This or that situation or this or that event or whatever. And is there a way that actually the image or the fantasy can be made sensible again, in the sense of we sense, oh, that's the image, that's the fantasy, what's involved there, how does it feel, we enter into it, and we give it life, or we allow it to have life, and it gives us its life, instead of strangling us in all these spaghetti loops of papañca, and then constriction, and then feeling, oh no, I shouldn't do that, and it's not okay, and over the top, or whatever.

Now, another related element in all this, and again, in hindsight you'll see that this is the case, imaginal images and fantasies or sensing the soul always includes, I've said this already, always includes a sense of value or values, what we deeply value, which is, if you like, a part of the meaningfulness that it has for us.

So if we think about the example I just gave of that person, the valuing of art, the valuing of artistic expression and creativity, the valuing of a certain kind of aesthetic, Japanese aesthetic or whatever, loosely speaking. The valuing of, with Catherine's niece, the valuing of everything that was involved in the beauty of Catherine's grandmother, of Catherine's niece's nanny, saying that, bringing that forth, bringing that possibility, opening that possibility, opening the door into the realm, into the territory of that mode of being. It included, wrapped up in there, were things that Catherine's niece, or elements, or dimensions, or directions of experience that Catherine's niece valued deeply.

So always when there's sensing the soul, and similarly with that story about the seeing of this episode as the something shining through it of the sacred prostitute, always in the imaginal images of fantasy and sensing the soul, values are part of it.

Now this is something I want to return to, probably in this set, almost certainly in this set of talks, and hopefully at some point even more in the future. In this set of talks, partly why I want to return to it is because it's not obvious at first, and I'll explain hopefully how, but this business of values relates to our...there's something about the philosophy of the imaginal or the philosophy undergirding this whole business of sensing the soul. It has to do with epistemology, which is how do we know or recognize that we're knowing something. And there's something about values that mirrors that, how we know and recognize values. But I will come back to this.

Actually, I'm looking at the time. I think I'm going to end soon. One possibility, which I may do soon or maybe in the future, is we could perhaps do a whole guided meditation where one enters or opens up the sensing the soul, opens up the imaginal realm through a sense of value. But I don't think I'm going to do that right now.

But just to say, just to finish, actually, on a more general point, many of the aspects that we've explored and the elements that I've enumerated over these talks so far, for instance, this whole notion of value, values, and humility, whatever, many of these aspects we could single out and really dwell and linger on them and explore them much, much more. Each one.

So for example, humility. We could spend a whole retreat even on just this question of humility. And what does it mean for us? What happens when we hear that word? How do we relate to it? Does it prickle us in an unpleasant way? Do we resist it? Does it have a soul resonance already for us? What do we think it means at the moment? What happens for us as that word becomes, and that concept of humility and our experience of humility becomes drawn in and involved in the soul-making dynamic, becomes itself an object of eros and an imaginal object? What happens to it and what happens when we start making, because of the soul-making process, we start making more and more refined discernments and discriminations within what we might call humility? Oh, there's this kind of humility and that kind of, and that color and that color. So we could easily spend a whole retreat on just that.

Or the whole relationship with desire. We talked a lot so far already in other retreats about desire and eros and all this. But we could back up and just look at, what is my relationship with desire? Am I stuck because I actually don't see it as a good thing, or only certain desires are a good thing, or it's not spiritual, or I'm afraid of it, or is it just

completely out of control in my life, or what are the different kinds of desire? All that, we could spend quite a while just looking at where we each are with desire and our conceiving of it and our relation to it and our discriminations of the kinds of desire.

Or with the whole idea of conceiving and logos, which some people find so, you know, it's anathema to the spiritual path, or there's resistance to the idea, or afraid, again, might be one's personal relationship with, I'm afraid that I'm stupid, and you say all this stuff, and it sounds so smart, and I don't get it, or whatever, or thinking, I already know, I already understand all that, or whatever it is, or maybe there's a kind of rigidity, or we don't hang on enough to certain ideas.

So each of these aspects we could easily slow down and really, really explore just where are we each. And what do we need, and what's current for us right now as this particular aspect, as one of the many elements involved in the whole movement and opening of soul-making. What do we need right now? What do we see right now? What do we sense right now in relation to that? Where are we? What are we bringing with us from the past? What can we let go of? What do we need right now? To expand and explore each of these elements, aspects, or building blocks, if you like, of the whole soul-making movement, of the whole practice of sensing the soul and perceiving imaginally.

But I'm just mentioning that, and hopefully it will be something for the future.

Let's stop there for now.

CHAPTER 114

Sensing with Soul (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · 1h05

> *In this sixth part of his exploration of soul-making, Rob Burbea delves into the philosophical foundations underlying imaginal perception and sensing with soul. He examines how ontology (what we consider real) and epistemology (how we know what's real) have been shaped by the scientific revolution from Galileo through to modern quantum physics, and how this affects our capacity to claim knowledge of values like beauty, love, and goodness that are inherent in soul-sensing.*
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> *Burbea traces how the historical shift from Galileo's primary/secondary qualities distinction through to contemporary scientism has relegated values to the realm of mere subjective opinion, creating epistemological confusion that constrains our ability to honor imaginal perception. He argues that different modes of being - scientific, poetic, moral, soul-making - require different hierarchies of values and ways of knowing, and warns against allowing one dominant mode to colonize others.*
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> *Using examples from his own retreat experiences and contemporary religious fundamentalism, Burbea illustrates how powerfully ideas shape perception, including how we experience our own bodies and materiality. He suggests that recognizing the influence of conceptual frameworks can free us from unconscious limitations and open space for both scientific and soul-based methods of knowing to complement each other in a more expansive ontological and epistemological framework.*

At the beginning of this series of talks, I mentioned that I wanted to explore some of the philosophical questions involved in this whole endeavor—this opening up and exploration of soul-making—and particularly questions of ontology and epistemology.

Just to refresh your memory on these words, which I've been using fairly regularly over the last few years: ontology is, roughly speaking, the kind of philosophy that deals with or decides or tries to ascertain the reality status of different things. So what we count as real and what we count as unreal. To state it in a more refined way, ontology is the philosophical discussion of what kinds of reality different things have.

Epistemology is the philosophical investigation regarding how we know, how we know what is real. What qualifies as knowledge? What qualifies as a mode of knowing, a way of knowing? What qualifies as something that is knowable?

I said at the end of the first talk—which has now actually become two talks, "Aspects of the Imaginal" and "Sensing the Soul"—that I would like to visit those questions of ontology and epistemology, and also hopefully later on in the last talk of this series.

I want to open that up now a little bit because I think it's really important. But it's a huge subject, and I just want to open it up without letting the threads get too out of control or too sprawling, because they do have all kinds of implications and ways that they connect with all kinds of things.

For now, I want to open up this philosophical territory in questioning and rethinking regarding ontology and epistemology with respect to soul-making, sensing the soul, imaginal perception—and connect that with where I left off in the last part of this talk. There I made the observation that sensing with soul, whether it's so-called intrapsychic images, or purely extrapsychic, or a mixture of those, has woven into it a sense of values.

For instance, beauty. Kinds of beauty, love, goodness, nobility, courage—the sense of that, either explicitly or implicitly, consciously or less consciously, is woven into the very sense of soulfulness that we have when we are sensing the soul.

Also, a sense of the value of tradition or a sense of the value of its kind of complement or opposite—innovation, or perhaps even revolution. Humility, surrender, duty—these are values that we can sense not just in ourselves, in the relational poise and stance with respect to what we are sensing with soul, but also in the object. All kinds of values and all kinds of shades of different values are discerned, sensed, picked up on, attuned with, resonated with.

Can we say that they are known? This is where I want to tie these questions of ontology and epistemology with this particular strand of the observation that sensing with soul includes, involves, a sensing of values.

In our culture, modern culture nowadays—one of the things that characterizes the modern global world is just how much differentiation there is and how much plurality of cultures there are—but what we might call the dominant culture is characterized by a certain ontology and epistemology, and I would say a lot of confusion regarding epistemology with respect to values.

This affects or is related to how difficult it is for us to stake out or claim some respect with regard to sensing the soul or imaginal perception and the reality of that, or the possible reality, or the reality status of that.

One can imagine no one objecting if you shared with almost anyone: "I had an image and it was really lovely and it really touched me." The person would be either interested or not interested, or say, "Oh, that's nice," or whatever. A few people would say, "Well, that's very dangerous, because you might go psychotic or you might lose touch with reality."

But if you said, "I had an image, or I sensed this tree, and I sensed that this tree loved me. I knew that this tree loved me"—then people, many people would object. "You can't use the word 'know' there. You are making an epistemological claim that you have no warrant for." It's not the norm in our society.

When we try to open up and see what we can do with this question of ontology and epistemology with regard to the imaginal, we are confronted by a contemporary cultural viewpoint that limits severely the knowledge claims—the epistemological claims and the ontological claims—of anything that we might sense when we sense with soul.

I'm going to hopefully in the last talk pick up on this realm of values in the way that they are an element of, or a part of, our sensing the soul. As I said: love, kinds of love, beauty, kinds of goodness and nobility—that whole list we gave. Hopefully there I will offer some different pathways with all of this and ways that the whole sensing the soul can actually be navigated in slightly different directions.

Sometimes it's possible when we are sensing something with soul—say it's my beloved other, someone with whom there is a sense of the erotic imaginal perception—and perhaps we are holding hands. I am holding hands with her, with him, with them. In that touch, and perhaps in the sight, but let's say just in the touch, I'm sensing with soul, I'm perceiving imaginally with everything that that means.

Within that, one strand of that sensing with soul at that time might be her love, his love, their love for me. How do I know that? How am I picking that up? I can say I know it. I know it through the touch. Is someone going to convince me that I can't know that love—her love, his love, their love for me—through the touch?

Love, as I said, is a value. How am I picking it up? I'm going to elaborate on this.

What about loveliness? Her, his, their loveliness. We are touching, we are holding hands, whatever it is, and within the whole kaleidoscope and multidimensionality of the perception, the total sensing that is going on when we are in that erotic imaginal space together and sensing the soul together, I sense her, his, their loveliness.

It's part of the sensing the soul and it's part of their particularities and my particularities and myself and all that. But there's a way possible of tuning in to just that element, just the loveliness. Now that is much more than just pleasant experience. It's a particular kind of pleasant experience. But if I go into it more, it's almost like I can open up and focus on and open up the very essence of loveliness and the essence of a certain value, in this case, loveliness.

And it's sort of her, him, them, but it's sort of kind of a universal beyond. It's some kind of essence of, in this case, loveliness. So it's almost like there's a whole other pathway that can be opened up when we sense with soul. I hope to return to this later as a sort of additional possibility, perhaps in the last talk.

But let's leave that for now. The main point is about values and sensing the soul involves a sensing—and can we say a knowing—of values. What does that have to do with the ontology and epistemology and those kinds of issues with regard to sensing the soul?

So first, I hope, a very brief sort of history lesson or historical perspective. Galileo—Galileo Galilei, brilliant scientist in Italy in the fifteenth, sixteenth century—believed that the world, he said, the book of the world, reading, understanding the world, is reading a book written in the language of mathematics. This was a sort of fundamental, almost religious principle that he held.

In that view, he decided to pick up on and reinstate a view that was prominent in one stream of ancient Greek philosophy, the atomistic view of Democritus and Lucretius. He said when we deal with the world, there are primary qualities. He didn't actually use that word—it was Locke who coined that phrase. But it's something like there are primary qualities. For instance, how heavy a thing is, whether it's moving or at rest and how fast, at what time it's happening, where, its location, its size, its shape, whether this thing that I'm talking about or looking at or trying to investigate is one thing or a collection of a few things or a collection of many, whether it's touching X or Y or not touching—all those are amenable to mathematical representation. They can be measured and given some kind of mathematical symbol or status.

Whereas qualities like taste or sound or smell or color, these are—again, it's Locke's actual phrase, but Galileo made the point originally—secondary qualities. He said these are more subjective qualities. There's something in the sensitivity of the sensitive soul, sensitive organism, and they're subjective. They are not real. Only primary qualities are real. They are secondary qualities, qualities of a secondary status.

Now, that idea, enormously brilliant and very fertile in terms of giving birth to the whole scientific revolution there, was picked up by Descartes, by Francis Bacon, by Locke and Hume and others, and gave birth to the whole notion of Cartesian dualism. I'm following the writings of someone called Marcus Appleby here, who points out that people often think this Cartesian dualism—this is a little bit of a tangent, but I'll throw it in right now—the whole idea of mind and matter being separate and completely different things, originated with Descartes because of a kind of idea of a transcendent God, and that the mind, spirit, et cetera, was linked to that transcendent God.

But actually, Descartes was much more secular in his thinking than, say, someone like Thomas Aquinas who'd come before him, who was much more influenced by religious thinking and had a much less dualistic philosophy regarding mind and matter. So Descartes really kind of incarnated this what we call Cartesian dualism between mind and matter. Then the whole scientific method was born from Galileo with Descartes, Francis Bacon, et cetera, extended in the philosophies of Locke and Hume.

What came with that gradually over time was this kind of relegation, a whole ontology and epistemology and a relegation of certain aspects of our experience, aspects of the world, into what were called secondary qualities, meaning less real, and then what we might even call tertiary qualities, even less real than that—for instance, values.

This took a long time. So values, with the scientific revolution and the so-called Western Enlightenment and modernism, eventually became just regarded as historically conditioned opinions, really. What is beautiful? What is good? What is right or wrong? What is the nature of love? What is one's duty? All of this.

So there's a kind of hierarchy established over time, historically, starting in Europe and then in the West and then more globally, concerning what is real, and therefore, as I touched on in an earlier talk, what is respected and valued because it is more real, or real as opposed to not real. This happened gradually, and so the hierarchy of ontology and with it of epistemology and also of respect and valuing, and therefore also respect for different kinds of knowing, or eventually this kind of feeling that you're not justified to say you know X.

This spreads into all kinds of subcultures—the actual divisions of what is real and therefore what's worthy of respect and valuing. Different cultures have different demarcations, of course. For example, in psychotherapeutic cultures, what's real and therefore what's worthy of respect is slightly different, varying even among the different psychotherapeutic subcultures.

Different spiritual paths, whether so-called secular or religious, all bring in—either implicitly but more often explicitly—a certain ontology, a certain hierarchy or categorization of what is real, what is not real, what is more real, what is less real. With that comes a hierarchy of respect and value for things themselves and also for modes of knowing.

So there's an ontological, epistemological, and moral hierarchy that's rolled out implicitly or explicitly with any kind of culture. Each one will say: "This is real and therefore valuable, worthy of respect, and we respect the knowing of that real thing or aspect. But that, in contrast, is not real, and therefore we don't respect and value it—and we don't respect and value the knowing of it—at least not as much, or not at all."

Originally, what started as a kind of liberation from religious dogmatism with the scientific revolution, the Renaissance, and the Western Enlightenment gradually became, over several hundred years, a kind of imprisonment. We are somehow told by whatever culture or cultures we move in that there is this hierarchy: this is real, this is less real, this is more worthy of respect, this is less worthy of respect, this kind of mode of knowing is valuable and worthy of respect, and this is not.

That can actually become an imprisonment. What started as liberation in Europe just after the Middle Ages becomes, in some ways, an imprisonment for us.

I want to make several interconnected points here. One concerns what we value—this changes with the dominant ontology and epistemology. I also want to make a point about the ontological and epistemological status of different values themselves.

Where I'm going with this whole talk is this: if sensing with soul includes the sensing, perceiving, and perhaps knowing of values, and if historically the knowing of values is dismissed—because values are not primary qualities, not even secondary qualities, but something else that doesn't conform to the epistemology of classical science and scientism—then sensing with soul, because it involves sensing and perhaps knowing values, cannot claim any knowing there. It's not given any place or platform, because values are not given any place or platform.

I also want to point out the incredibly powerful influence of ideas in our psyche, in our modes of discourse, modes of conceiving, ways of looking, ways of relating—our whole conception and sense of existence.

Actually, values can never be removed from our way of looking or conceptual frameworks and orientations. Values always orient us. Even the scientific method, which Galileo gave birth to and which was developed further with Descartes and Bacon, is in part an implementation of certain values—valuing this over that, valuing a certain mode of knowing, a certain way of establishing knowledge.

So even though values themselves may be ontologically relegated, they always come in—even to a system that devalues them or relegates their ontological and epistemological status. They still come in to inform, orient, and direct that system or culture.

More widely, we need to recognize that different modes of being, different ways we are in the world and relate to the world, are governed by different hierarchies of values. The mode of scientific investigation, the mode of poetry, the mode of art, the mode of politics and economics, the moral mode of navigating ethically in our life, the mode of soul-making—all these are different modes of being, each with a different hierarchy of values appropriate to it, a different way of organizing and relating to what is most important.

We need to be careful not to be stuck in one mode of being's value system or hierarchy when we're actually moving into another mode of being, another mode of relating to existence, to the universe. Because certain value systems and hierarchies are dominant in our culture—established over hundreds of years through the education system, through the way people talk to each other, through cultural agreement—it can be quite hard to recognize: "Now I'm in a different mode. That value system, that hierarchy of values, that whole ontology and epistemology and what goes with it, does not quite apply here. I'm in another field now, another domain, another mode of being."

How do we decide between all these hierarchies of values? How do we decide and orient when we're in different modes? And how do we prevent one dominant hierarchy from overextending its influence, spreading like a kind of colonialism into areas that are actually beyond its reach, beyond its prerogative, beyond its purview, beyond its domain?

So again, two main threads here. One is about the influence of ideas—I'll come back to that—just to be really wary and conscious of the influence of ideas. I know I've returned to this strand often over recent years; I think it's so significant for us as practitioners and simply as human beings.

At any time, whenever we lived, but certainly at this time, in this point in history. So that's one general point: the influence of ideas.

And secondly, this idea that there's something about the way that values and a sensing of values are woven implicitly or explicitly into sensing with soul. The epistemological confusion and quandary and relegation with regard to values that we have in our modern culture—generally speaking, in the dominant culture—there's something about that epistemological confusion that relates to our hesitation or shyness, our non-permission with regard to the ontology and epistemology we might develop or claim with regard to sensing the soul.

With regard to that brief historical perspective, we could trace that thread back to Galileo. This developed and developed, becoming more and more entrenched and more and more taken for granted, really woven into the actual normal perception of human beings and how they spoke to each other—the dominant discourse.

Unfortunately for that whole perspective and the dominance of that hierarchy of values and perspectives, just in the realm of physics, if we follow that thread from Galileo, there came Einstein's theories of special and general relativity and the quantum physics revolution in the early part of the twentieth century, roughly the first quarter century.

In those discoveries of relativity and quantum mechanics, all of Galileo's primary qualities were rendered, if you like, non-objective. His whole point was that these are objective elements of reality. Everything else—taste and sound and smell, color—is subjective, and then later, values even more subjective, and therefore less real.

But with the quantum revolution and the revolution in physics—relativity and all that—all these primary qualities, mass, velocity, time, even the simultaneity of events, like what came first and after, location in space and time, size, length, shape, whether something is even one or a few or many, whether things are part of one unit and touching or not—all these so-called fundamentally, objectively real aspects of reality were exposed as being not objectively real, anywhere near the degree to which we thought they were.

What the quantum physics and relativity physics revolutions exposed was just how much all these factors—mass, velocity, time, location, size, shape, one or many, contingency and all that—were dependent on the observer, dependent on the observing object. So that whole differentiation that Galileo and Locke made between primary qualities and therefore more real, and secondary, or even what we might call tertiary qualities and therefore less real—that just dissolved.

The current state of physics makes it really hard to justify a belief or the sustaining of that whole notion, of that whole hierarchy. In a way, what we realize is that all of these things, all of these elements of experience, including value experiences, all these

aspects of reality, aspects of the world, involve the subject, involve the observation. Participation is implicated in all of them. They do not have purely objective reality. So that whole hierarchy, that whole structure, that whole edifice, that whole tower crumbles.

Sometimes, if we're not careful, or sometimes I get the sense that it's possible to pick up on certain Dharma notions and construct a similar-ish kind of hierarchy. The notions of bare attention, for instance—a notion that the Buddha never used—but that whole notion, if I cling to it too tightly, too rigidly, believing, "Oh, this really is bare. This really is as it is, as things are." Now I'm really being with things as they are.

Or certain limited ideas related to that in relation to mindfulness. Again, not what the Buddha taught, because the Buddha's mindfulness included: is there matter, is there not matter? What is of value, what is not of value? Even just pleasure and pain, pleasant, unpleasant. The Buddha did not have such a pared down lens and a pared-down ontology and ontological and epistemological structure. It's true that there was a certain simplification and reductionism that he encouraged, but it wasn't that reduced.

But similarly, with science influencing the wider culture, and in a way, this whole Western Enlightenment, modernistic and scientistic influence coming in then to so-called spiritual cultures and implementing implicit or explicit ontological and epistemological hierarchies there with ideas like bare attention—the idea of what's real, what's more real, what's less real. The sensations in the chest, the complexity of the emotion, the story, papañca—this can tend to bring an implicit value judgment about what's real and what's worthy of paying attention to, what counts as actual knowledge and what's just fabrication in the negative sense.

All that can get woven into our Dharma practice in ways that aren't fully questioned or elaborated enough, I feel. And then also into just obviously the way we live and how we relate to existence and how we relate to others and what we care about and what we invest in and what we stand up for.

So these ideas influence reality notions of ontology and epistemology. Ideas get a grip and shape our cultures—plural. We move in different cultures these days. Ideas get a grip and they shape the cultures we move in and therefore shape our beliefs, assumptions in a really fundamental way, particularly regarding our basic sense of reality, unreality, more or less real—ontology and epistemology—and therefore what is of value, and all that's related.

As I said, two points woven together: what we value, because of reality notions here, ontological and epistemological notions, and also the ontological and epistemological status of values, like beauty or goodness or whatever it is, love. Two themes I want to weave together. I am weaving together here.

But ideas—the point right now is about ideas and just how influential they are and how important it is to be aware of that so that we can get a little freedom, so we're not just caught in a kind of indoctrination there.

So Jung very wisely wrote, pointing out that at the time of the Renaissance—some people use that word Renaissance interchangeably with the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, and other people point out there were three different movements going on there, but around that time, they all happened around the same time—

Jung observed how, during the Renaissance period, "the newly won rational and intellectual stability of the human mind nevertheless managed to hold its own and to penetrate further into depths of nature that earlier ages had hardly suspected," despite the persistence of old religious dogmas. But then he makes a crucial point: "The more successful the penetration and advance of the new scientific spirit proved to be, the more the latter, as is usually the case with the victor, became the prisoner of the world it had conquered."

In other words, what was initially a liberation has, to a certain extent, become a kind of prison for us - a prison of view, of assumption, and therefore a prison of limitations on value and care in regard to the world.

From a soul-making perspective, we could see the scientific revolution as initially involving a kind of shattering of the vessels. There was a widening and deepening of what we might call the eros-psyche-logos dynamic of the cultural Weltanschauung - the whole way culture saw the world. The eros, the impetus of scientific investigation, expanded along with new images of humanity in that endeavor, new images of what the world was, and new concepts of what was real, what a human being was capable of, and what nature itself was.

Science sought to know things more widely and deeply, to penetrate their nature and workings, and to discover the laws governing their behavior. These physical laws - whether Einstein's $E=mc^2$, Newton's laws of acceleration, or Maxwell's laws of electromagnetism - represent another dimension of the being of things. In some ways, they're similar to the imaginal dimensions we speak of in soul-making. The laws that govern an electron's movement belong to the electron, but they constitute another dimension of its being.

So initially, there was an erotic movement, a movement of imagination and logos, a shattering and opening. But in time came the shrinking down to scientism - the belief that everything can be reduced to physicalist, materialist, usually atomistic explanations. Only with this rigidification did the soul-making dynamic of the culture become frozen.

What if we could keep the scientific method open as one mode of knowing, one mode of being and investigation with its own hierarchy of values and ontology-epistemology, while also opening soul methods of knowing? These two could live together, complementing each other and expanding both further. Perhaps what's needed now is some kind of meta-level ontology and epistemology that allows both movements - the scientific method and the soul method of knowing - to expand and complement each other. This might be a step toward unfreezing the eros-psyche-logos dynamic of our dominant culture.

Ideas influence. Dominant ideas that run through culture, education, and the ways people think and talk influence, constrain, and direct our existences - our movements and expressions of care. They direct our practices, which then shape our perceptions and values according to those very ideas. It's a self-reinforcing cycle prevalent not only in the larger culture but in psychological and spiritual subcultures as well.

I once read an article in The Guardian by Stephen Tompkins that made a striking observation: "The Bible doesn't state anywhere that it should be read literally." Yet for many Christians, Muslims, and Jews, a literalist approach is core to their faith - an all-or-nothing belief that if the world wasn't literally created in seven days, or if Jesus didn't physically ascend to heaven, then the whole edifice collapses.

But as Tompkins points out, "Biblical literalism is by no means an essential Christian tenet. No creed says anything about how to read the scriptures." Christians believe the Bible is the word of God, but why should that fact "mean it has to be read with naive absolutism?" In other words, if it's God's word, why can't we say that God is a poet? Why can't we understand that spirit speaks poetically?

It was written by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit speaks and writes more as a poet, more as an artist.

And then he points out—and many of you will know—part of the problem is historical, that something happened with the Protestant Reformation. I don't think it was actually primary in what Luther intended, but one of the things that he favored and that came out of that was a very literal interpretation of the Bible and a real limitation, a tight circumscribing of the range of how scripture could be interpreted. It's a really fun-

damental shift that happened there, and part of the result of that was religious fundamentalism. And that influences so much in the way one then sees existence and the whole hermeneutics, the interpretation of our existence, of our perception of existence.

That movement, I think—that literalism, that biblical literalism—affects and influences not just those who we might call these days religious fundamentalists. It also affects many other people who consider themselves religious, and the wider culture, even secularists or people who consider themselves secular and non-religious. Something happened in the whole regarding of the ontological and epistemological status of what we call in our language sensing the soul and an imaginal perception—an imaginal reading of scripture, an imaginal reading of the texts of reality, the text of existence, the text of body, of matter, of world, of others. Massively influential.

And disturbingly, in another article by someone called Harriet Sherwood, also in The Guardian quite some years later, there was a survey or study, and I find this a little disturbing myself—but that just betrays my biases. They found that when a church emphasized a literal interpretation of the Bible, that actually helped increase church attendance and brought in a much younger congregation. So many more people are attracted, it seems, by a literalist interpretation of scripture, and for some reason, younger people are as well.

There's something here—again, the larger point has to do with the ontology and epistemology of our endeavor, our exploration of what we're calling imaginal perception and sensing the soul. And we're talking about large cultural ideas that really influence, limit, circumscribe, prohibit certain modes of knowing, modes of being—but also even more significantly modes of knowing, or what we might even try to state, to claim as modes of knowing.

So this happens in all kinds of ways. There was a Christian example, but we could give a more Buddhist example regarding the way we see bodies, or our body. Now that, of course, is dependent on the way of looking, which always includes a conceptual framework and the mind state. So when I use the word "way of looking," you know that it means a lot of different elements within that concept and also just what we call mind state or state of mind or mood or whatever.

So I remember many years ago, I think it was almost twenty years ago, I did a retreat completely on my own in a cabin in the woods when I was living in the States. And I'd never done it. It was a really, really solitary retreat. I didn't take any books, any dharma talks, no recordings, nothing. Just me in the woods. I think I saw one person in the

whole ten days by accident. And there was an intense heat wave during that time, and then it rained for two days straight, and I was just on my own and in really total solitude.

At that time, something really happened in terms of my jhāna practice. I went really interested—I had had a bit of an opening, quite a significant opening before in terms of jhānas, and I really sensed, oh, I wonder what will happen. I really want to explore that. So I went, and the first four jhānas really began to open up, and I was really excited by that.

And I also had, in terms of fantasy and image, running through those ten days a very sort of vague background, faint fantasy of being a monk—and actually filled out the fantasy. It was actually a Theravādan Buddhist monk. And that kind of sustained and gave some soulfulness to my days there and my explorations and my efforts and my solitude.

At that time, I had no articulation or words or even interest in imaginal practice. I wouldn't even have—I'd never heard of it, never heard of any of this, and certainly hadn't thought about it and explored it the way we have now. But in hindsight, I could say that that was running through alongside everything.

And I remember at some point there was a sort of large mirror, broken mirror that was outside the cabin. And I remember washing—I would get water from a well nearby and wash outside my cabin. There was no one around. And just at some point catching sight of my naked body in this large broken mirror fragment. And it looked so strange. My body looked so strange to me at that point.

Something happened in the course of those days in regard to my body awareness. Because of the way I was practicing and because of the fantasy and because of the practices I was doing, something occurred that influenced and shaped very much my perception of, in this case, my body.

I was eating very simply and not eating much at all. There was a surprisingly easy renunciation with regard to sense pleasure that was very much helped by the opening up of deep equanimity in the third and fourth jhana. So in regard to the senses and particularly to body and materiality, I was - I can only see this in hindsight - but what struck me right then was just how strange my body looked.

With the jhanas there, the view of flesh is kind of one of anatta. It really just goes very quickly to the sense of not me, not mine. And in that whole complex - the fantasy, the Theravadan monk fantasy that was operating there, and secondly in the jhanas, and renunciation with regard to eating and sense pleasure - all of that together, there was

no sense of the body as anything sacred. No sense of this body as something wondrous and sacred. If anything, it just looked a bit like a strange sort of animal. I could see my animal nature, almost as if it were kind of an appendage.

It wasn't that there was hate or aversion, nor was there love. There wasn't any self-judgment - no "oh, I wish I had bigger biceps" or whatever. Nor was there any aversion to the animal nature. But there wasn't either any sacredness or any particular interest or opening up of that sense of materiality.

In the fourth jhana, in the first four jhanas, as you might know from the Buddhist description, mindfulness saturates the bodily sense. So we're not talking about being disconnected from the feeling of the body at all. But it's a very particular kind of body sense, and with it comes a particular kind of body conception and view - with that particular practice and with that whole complex of ideas and fantasy that goes with the Theravadan monk thrust in relation to body and flesh.

I remember a colleague, an insight meditation teacher colleague, referring to her body as "a sack of meat" or something like that. It wasn't that it was particularly aversive, but she was saying it because it's a way of referring to the body that represents one of the strands very strong in the Theravadan lineage, in which she was very firmly rooted. And it wasn't that there was aversion or hatred, at least not obviously, but it's a certain way of regarding it - not sacred, not having this dimensionality, not as something that the eros can open up, but something with regard to which we want to let go, see it in a way that leads to dispassion, disinterest.

As I said, in the first four jhanas, the Buddha called them rupa jhanas. They're really body awareness jhanas primarily. That's the dominant experience. But the body awareness undergoes transformation. The awareness is of the energy body, of that space, and then the different frequencies or textures of that space change. It's not that we're out of the body or disconnected in some way. Body awareness is saturating and suffusing the body sense. But there's no real interest or focus on the materiality of the body, and certainly not an opening up of that sense.

And when there is focus under the Theravadan insight rubric, it's hardly ever sacredness or wonder or a kind of erotic interest that is cultivated with regard to matter or body. It's more letting go, disinterest, a minimum of involvement - just enough to keep it together so that you can liberate yourself - or regarding it as just the four elements in a kind of reductive way. Let's not get too excited about this. It's just the four elements. Or it's kind of on its way to being a corpse. It's already a corpse, one imagines. The body is dukkha.

The point is, here was a certain fantasy and set of ideas that I had absorbed and was really taken with - borrowed from the Pali Canon, Theravadan Buddhist logos and fantasy and set of teachings regarding body and materiality - and that massively influenced my body perception and conception at that time, vividly and immediately, in the perception as I caught sight of myself in the mirror there.

Regarding the body or materiality or anything else, I say it so many times: the way we see it, the way we experience it, the way we feel it, the way we conceive it is always dependent on the larger conceptual framework. Whether that's Pali Canon Theravadan Buddhism, whether it's Tantric Buddhism, whether it's popular secular culture and we tend to regard the body in terms of self-judgment or certain body types are elevated or denigrated or ego identification gets involved. Or if it's the larger conceptual framework of the cosmology of, say, an indigenous Amazonian person.

Always that larger conceptual frame, the larger idea - ideas influence. The larger set of ideas, as well as the mind state in the moment, and there's a huge range in that, as well as the feeling in the body and the image of the body. And that image overlaps with the conceptual frame of the idea.

Idea and image overlap. It's something I want to come back to later in this set of talks.

So something like body and materiality is hugely influenced by all that. The point I want to make now is how much it's influenced by idea—how powerful ideas are—and what ideas we're absorbing, certainly from the wider dominant culture, but also from the individual cultures, the subcultures, if you like, that we move in and are educated by.

This brings us to a crucial recognition: our experience is always being shaped. Nothing we encounter—whether it's our body, our emotions, our sense of self, or the world around us—exists in some pure, unmediated state. Everything comes to us through the lens of our conceptual frameworks, our conditioning, our moment-to-moment mental states. And this shaping is happening whether we're aware of it or not.

The question then becomes: what kind of shaping do we want? What conceptual frameworks serve our liberation, our understanding, our capacity for love and wisdom? What ideas open up possibilities rather than close them down? What ways of seeing support our deepest intentions for practice and for life?

This is why the dharma offers us not just techniques or methods, but entire ways of seeing, complete conceptual frameworks that can transform our experience from the ground up. When we truly understand the dependent arising of all phenomena, when

we see through the lens of emptiness, when we recognize the constructed nature of our perceptions, we're not just learning concepts—we're being offered tools for the complete transformation of how we meet reality.

And this is ongoing work. It's not that we adopt a dharma view once and then we're done. These frameworks need to be cultivated, practiced, lived into. They need to become not just intellectual understandings but embodied ways of being that naturally influence how we perceive and respond to each moment as it arises.

CHAPTER 115

Sensing with Soul (Part 7)

Rob Burbea · 50 min

> *In this profound exploration of epistemology and soul-sensing, Rob Burbea examines why our culture grants validity to certain forms of knowing while relegating others to second-class status. He investigates the parallel between the epistemological challenges of sensing soul and our cultural difficulty with claiming to 'know' values like beauty, goodness, and love.*
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> *Burbea distinguishes between intra-psychic images (dreams, imagination) which have gained some cultural acceptance through psychoanalysis, and extra-psychic soul-sensing (such as knowing a tree loves you) which faces greater epistemological resistance. He explores how the imaginal middle way—holding perceptions as neither real nor unreal—allows for a fruitful relationship with soul-making perceptions that brings freedom, wonder, and meaning without fixation.*
>
> *The talk delves into participation as a key concept that transcends the subject-object divide, suggesting we participate in both creating and discovering truth, reality, and soul. Burbea challenges the dominant materialist ontology as a form of 'epistemological colonialism' and invites practitioners to explore how different conceptual frameworks can open or close possibilities for soul-making and imaginal perception.*

Now let's come back to the connection I made at the beginning of this talk between epistemology—epistemological questions and concerns regarding sensing the soul—and similar questions with respect to values.

Remember, epistemology is about knowing. Why is it okay to say "I had experience X and I had experience Y," but I am only allowed to say "In having experience X, I knew X," while I can't say "I know Y, I knew Y"? Some things we can say we have experienced, but in terms of knowledge—knowledge of reality—that's the epistemological remit. What constitutes knowledge? What qualifies as knowledge? How can we know? What are the modes of knowing? What is knowable?

Why can I say of some experiences that there was a knowing, and of other experiences they were just experiences? Epistemologically, they have second or third or perhaps fourth class status. There's that whole question with regard to sensing a soul, and it's linked to this similar kind of question with regard to values.

I can say, or it's deemed okay for me to say, "I know this bag of potatoes weighs X kilograms." That's fine. Or "I know they are potatoes." Or "I know we were in a car crash the other day." But once I get to things like "I know this is beautiful," then some people start to get a little bit nervous. "I know this is more beautiful than that." Or "I recognize, I know beauty, I know goodness, I know love."

This is a knowing of values. "I experience a sense of beauty. I experience this is good. I experience love." "I know" gets a little more tricky when values are involved, or people are less willing generally in the culture to grant the same epistemological status as knowing there are potatoes in front of me and they weigh X kilograms, or knowing that this piece of metal smashed into that piece of metal at X miles an hour.

If I say, "I know this tree loves me. I know this tree—this tree that I love—I know it loves me," versus "If I say, I feel that it does, or I experience that it does, that it loves me," that's generally more acceptable. People might raise an eyebrow too, but to say "I know that it loves me" seems like an epistemological step too far for our culture.

I want to really open up this area a little bit—ontology and epistemology—and I hope you can get a sense of how important it is. Can we just walk around in there and pick up some stones and overturn them and see what's underneath in that domain of ontological and epistemological questions?

Values have been relegated slowly in terms of their truth status in our culture. As I said, especially with modernism sort of rolling into post-modernism—or a certain kind of postmodernism at least, the dominant kind of postmodernism—values are just regarded as historically conditioned, culturally conditioned opinions of what is beautiful, of what is good, etc. So to say "I know this value, I know it to be there" has had its status epistemologically and ontologically relegated.

The connection with sensing the soul is partly analogous, parallel. There's an epistemological parallel in the relegation. As I said, if I say "I know this tree loves me," or this imaginal dimension—"I know that"—again it seems too far for the modern outlook, the dominant modern outlook. So partly it's a parallel with the epistemological cramping with sensing the soul, and partly it's because, as I pointed out, sensing the soul includes a sensing of value.

These are bound up together—not just by analogy, but because one is included in the other. They weave together.

It is sensing with soul—the sensing with soul of others, of the world, of the self—that in our time needs epistemological validation.

When we come to purely intra-psychic images, as opposed to extra-psychic sensing the soul—let's say "that tree loves me, this tree loves me" as an example of extra-psychic so-called sensing the soul—when we contrast that with a purely intra-psychic imaginal image, it needs a different kind of validation, or that kind of validation less.

There's a kind of validation that most people these days would give—many people in our culture would give a certain epistemological validity to intra-psychic images just because we've had more than a hundred years of psychoanalysis post-Freud. Most people—well, let's say many people—would accept that the psyche has a kind of intelligence regarding our inner life and feelings, and a moral kind of intelligence of the psyche regarding its moral judgment of our actions in the world. The psyche manifests this intelligence through images, in dreams, in our imagination, and in many ways, in many forms—but dreams and imagination would be dominant ones, common ones.

So that degree of validation—there is a kind of knowing. If I get an image of something or a dream of something, it may be, or at least many people in our society would regard it as having a certain validity as some kind of knowing, but in regard to my inner life, my inner feelings, some part of myself reflecting on another part of myself or where I've acted or relationships that I have to certain people or certain things in my life or my childhood or whatever it is.

There's a certain knowing there manifested in the image and we can know that knowing. When we interpret this dream or this image in a certain way, that constitutes a knowledge of ourselves. We say then we're knowing it.

When it comes to extra-psychic images, it's really these that need the epistemological validation or championing or perhaps promotion after their relegation over the last hundreds and hundreds of years—and perhaps a different kind of promotion.

So this tree that I love, if we take that as an example—this tree that I love—how do I feel, sense that it loves me? How do I know that it loves me, that love flows between us? There's an epistemological, ontological question. How can I feel justified in saying, "I know that this tree loves me?"

Let's linger with this a little bit.

When my friend says she, he, they love me, how do I know that she, he, they love me? Saying "I love you," as any honest and mature human being knows, doesn't guarantee the truth of that love.

Consider someone incapable of expressing their love verbally or through obviously interpretable motion or gesture—say someone who's paralyzed. Did you see that film *My Left Foot* with Daniel Day-Lewis? It was many years ago, and I thought it was fabulous. He plays a boy with cerebral palsy who cannot speak and has very limited motion, just in his left foot. So he's essentially paralyzed and rendered incapable of communication for much of his adult life.

One of the things I found so touching and beautiful in that movie was the relationship he had with his mother and their love flowing both ways. But how did she know that he loved her? How did she know? He was incapable of expressing it, and even when it became a complicated thing—when he did eventually manage to express it—it was dismissed by some people around him. "He's just a vegetable," was the sort of view.

Very movingly for me, she said to him at one point when they were alone—she looks at him and says, "Sometimes I think you are my soul." Very beautiful.

But in that sort of situation, or with a pet or a dog incapable of expressing their love verbally or through some obviously interpretable emotional gesture, and in the absence of some scientific measure of love, how do we know that this being loves me? How do we know?

We could open it up even more. What is love anyway? Is love a feeling? Is love an action? Is love a commitment to action? Which actions and when? Maybe it's an attitude. Is love an attitude? Or is love a tendency to try to view and act in a certain way? None of those possible definitions is universally agreed upon or enacted by human beings.

So in relation to something like love, we have a problem epistemologically.

But this tree that I love loves me. I know that. I know that the way lovers know—the way lovers know not just that they love, but that they are loved. The way they feel that. How do I know it? By what organ of perception? By what instrument of knowing? By what mode of knowing do I know that?

I could say I know it in my heart. I know it in or through the soul. I also know it in my body, in the touch. This tree that I love loves me, and I know that the way lovers know.

So what we call perceiving imaginally or sensing with soul—perceptions of the imaginal, soul-making perceptions—always involve, although they are not reducible to, they always involve sensing value. For example, beauty or loveliness or meaningfulness

or whatever. And knowing values, like beauty or goodness or love, is not, it seems, as simple as knowing what is material, what is measurable, and what is socially agreed upon reality.

This is why there's a difficulty here for us nowadays. In the modern West, we find it hard, or it is not so generally accepted—and especially, as I said, after postmodernism—to claim we know something's beauty, or even something's goodness. We are only allowed, it's only politically correct, to claim a subjective perspective: "I find that very beautiful," or "I find that not beautiful," or whatever.

And there's really some intelligence in that—this escape from dogma and this freeing up of the individual subjectivity to grow in its own way and find its own sensitivities. But it's easy to go to another extreme here.

Because only a kind of—if even there is such a thing—completely dispassionate human being, and even then, only with regard to what does not involve him or her or them, only such a person in such a relationship or situation will say and really believe, regarding a sense of right or wrong in terms of value or beauty or whatever, will say and really believe when they say, "It's all relative and only a matter of opinion."

So for me to consent to the possibility that the Smurfs—do you remember the Smurfs? I checked with Mark and Ava, and they're much younger than I am, but they remember the Smurfs—so these were like these little blue, kind of dwarf-like cartoon characters, and they had a few hit singles, a hit movie, and number one top of the charts singles.

But for me to consent to even the possibility that the Smurfs' songs are as beautiful—if we take beauty as a value—are as beautiful as Beethoven's late string quartets or John Coltrane solos or whatever... Politically correct as it might be to say that one is not really more beautiful than the other, if I were to say that, or to be in a situation where I'm forced to say that, I can feel something—it does something in my soul and my cells.

And yet to imply that it's not so, to imply that one is more beautiful than the other—and I know that is kind of not politically correct—we're not granted that epistemological validity of knowing with regard to beauty. And what we know in... You see the connection here? Why are we talking about the Smurfs now?

The question of claiming, making knowledge claims, epistemological claims with regard to values—and so with regard to beauty, with regard to the Smurfs—is related to our hesitation, our shyness, our withdrawing, our non-claims, if such there be, or pos-

sibility of making knowledge claims with regard to sensing the soul. Because what we know in soul ways of knowing, as I said, always partly involves values and ideals, not only what is measurable or material or socially agreed upon.

So if we remember that when we talked about the spectrum of uses of the imagination, we said there's papañca, and then there's a kind of possibly mindful images and mindful healing images and imagination and intrapsychic images and we could say extrapsychic sensing the soul images. It's really, in that little list along that spectrum there, it's really the epistemology and the ontology of that last category, the extrapsychic sensing the soul, and to some degree the intrapsychic, that's the category that's tricky for us. The papañca we just dismiss.

Even if we insert into that little spectrum the kind of image that comes with ESP, or extrasensory perception... It's really that last one because we can find a category, oh, it was valid. That dream I have that turned out to be a premonition of this happening or gave me some information in advance, so to speak, of some event happening. Something that minds can do under certain conditions, in a way it's really not a big deal, but on another level it is a big deal because it has lots of implications. But that in itself, it's easy to find an epistemological and ontological slot there. It's like, oh, okay, so I knew this in advance somehow, and even though it wasn't proved until that thing actually happened and I found out that it was true, there was clearly some kind of knowing in advance. And so we can give it that place in... We can support it with its own kind of ontology and epistemology.

The thing that's difficult with the epistemology there is just that, as I said, we don't know its knowledge until we've checked it with asking our friend, were you in such a place there? Or they do call when we dreamt that they would call, or we get some news when we dreamt that the news would be such and such as opposed to something else. And we only know, get it checked off as knowledge at that point. But still, epistemologically and ontologically, it doesn't seem to create that much of a problem.

But particularly the extrapsychic sensing of souls, that's tricky for us. If we connect that to what we've been saying about values, images that might come—and remember images might mean any sense modality—but dream images or some kind of extrasensory perception images in any of the sense stories, don't seem to involve a sense of values so much. I mean, this is just my observations. I think it's fair to say. They don't feel imaginal. They don't have those qualities, those aspects and elements that we ran through in the list. It's almost like just a communication of information. They don't have... They're not permeated by a sense of beauty or meaningfulness, or maybe meaning, but not meaningfulness, not depth, not unfathomability, etc. They feel, ESP images,

if we can call them that, feel just kind of matter of fact. They're bits of information only, really. And they don't have that whole imaginal constellation of elements and aspects that we ran through in the first talk.

So ESP experiences feel very matter-of-fact, ordinary in themselves. Perhaps when we reflect on the fact that we can even have such experiences at times—it's really the mind under certain conditions has such experiences; we look at it that way, it has nothing to do with ego—but perhaps when we reflect on the fact that we can have such experiences and reflect on what the implications are for understanding the nature of awareness or mind, consciousness and its relationship with matter, then that whole reflection and acknowledgement and recognition can be and feel soul-making for us if it's a new reflection and a new opening of the logos there. But the sense and texture of the actual ESP perception or image itself is often very ordinary. It doesn't have a sense of holiness or divinity or all the rest of it to it.

There are other kinds of perceptions. I'm going back to this kind of—I think I put it right at the beginning of the Path of the Imaginal Retreat—this kind of classification or categorization of different kinds of uses of the imagination. Because there are other kinds of perception. Someone was telling me about being present at her grandmother's death and being aware somehow of her grandmother's soul or awareness entering another realm, leaving this realm and entering another realm and sensing the joy and the gift and the wonder and the revelation of that.

Now, in that kind of perception, there's immense meaningfulness, a sense of beyondness, depth, divinity, wonder. The energy body, as she experienced that, was harmonized and open and all the rest of it. So those kind of perceptions are closer to imaginal perceptions, though they are taken as true and real rather than in a kind of very theatre sense, in that imaginal middle way sense that we were emphasizing.

So there's all kinds of divisions here in terms of ontology and epistemology. How to distinguish these different perceptions of other dimensions or realms from what we're calling imaginal images and soul-making perceptions, sensing the soul, how to tell the difference.

It may well be that some of what we classify today as imaginal - neither real nor unreal - may at other times and places in human history, both past and future, be classified as real and accurate perceptions of matters of fact. Just because, as I said before, ideas in history change, and that influences massively our sense of what is real. Even if we're not philosophers and have never heard the words ontology and epistemology, ideas in the culture massively influence our understanding. This will shape how we think of all these different kinds of experiences involving the imagination.

But there is a certain subset of experiences that we might call ESP - extrasensory perception regarding matters of fact in this material world that feel very ordinary and unimaginable in the sense we've outlined, lacking the imaginal constellation of elements and aspects. So I think this is very complex. Can it remain an open question? I don't know anyone who's figured out - certainly not to many other people's satisfaction and agreement - some kind of categorization of the ontology and epistemology involved in different sense perceptions, if we include sensing the soul and imaginal perceptions. Perhaps there are grey areas, perhaps there are crossovers and in-betweens. Complex, interesting, complex.

I think for us right now, apart from wanting to walk around in this area and turn over some stones that maybe haven't been turned over for quite a while, to create a bit of space in what can usually be a domain that doesn't have any space to walk around in - it's just given to us: this is how things are, this is what's worthy of respect, this is not worthy of respect - so just wanting to walk around in there.

At a minimum right now, we could say that experientially, even when we do hold to this imaginal middle way - not really saying it's real, not really saying it's unreal - those perceptions, those imaginal perceptions, that sensing the soul can have a huge effect. Even with this middle way held regarding ontological status and reality, that sensing the soul, that imaginal middle way, can have a huge effect on our conceptual frameworks, on our orientations, on the directions we have in life, on what we're devoted to, on our whole sense of existence, and actually on our ontology, epistemology, cosmology.

Picking up on that point, it may be that humanity may never arrive at a conclusive and finally complete answer regarding the ontic status of imaginal images, of what we sense with soul. It may be that there's no way of finally knowing any of this for sure. But phenomenologically - that is, in our experience - we can notice that adopting or finding ourselves in the imaginal middle way, sensing images or soul-making perceptions as neither real nor not real, automatically and often effortlessly allows us to have and feel, with respect to an image or perception, a sense of devotion with freedom and relative non-attachment, a sense of sacredness and meaningfulness without fixation or tightness, senses of depth that are still open to more discovery.

So phenomenologically, the stance of the middle way, the poise of this middle way, is a very helpful and fruitful perspective. We can notice that, we can notice how it feels for us as we receive the gifts of freedom, of energy, of wonder, of beauty, of joy. This poise of the middle way is very fruitful and helpful in terms of freedom, energy, wonder, beauty, joy, devotion, soul-making.

Conversely, we can see and notice, we can feel what happens when an image is reified or literalized. We can see what happens, we can see what dies. Something tends to die when that imaginal middle way gets squeezed, when the theatre goes out of it. Something dies in the whole experience, and those gifts of freedom, energy, wonder, beauty, joy - particularly the freedom - are often unavailable when an image is reified or literalized.

As is often the case, we need to look to the effects of our way of looking to inform our choices, our stances, our attitudes, our perspectives and conceptions. What we can say is that the stance of the middle way, the stance of the imaginal middle way, brings really good results. We feel its bounty, its fruitfulness. When we're talking about theatre, it's powerful, it has effects, but we recognize the theatre of it. And one of the fruits is the soul-making.

At the same time, we could go a little further with the ontology and epistemology involved here. Adopting that middle way is, in some respects, very fruitful. In some respects, it's also a relatively cautious approach.

I think at the end of the Eros Unfettered talk, I mentioned a phrase - I don't know who coined it - about metaphysics and a disparaging comment that metaphysics is that branch of philosophy which, for some people, translates as anything spiritual or anything we would call soulful, equivalent to being in a dark basement, a pitch black basement, looking for a dark black cat that is not there. That whole way of talking about other dimensions and divinity is something equivalent to that - quite a disparaging comment.

I can't remember if I made the point, but what if I hung out in such a basement wanting to find such a black cat, and maybe someone gives me infrared goggles...

Or maybe I start not looking with my eyes, but touching with my body, with my hands and the feeling and the senses there. Maybe my eyes just get used to the dark. And actually there is a cat there and I experience that cat for myself.

And then what was called metaphysics just becomes the valid conceptualizing or attempt at conceptualizing and forming conceptual frameworks with regard to what I experience. Because here I am touching this soft, warm, furry thing that looks and feels and sounds like a cat, a black cat.

So just as science is the endeavor of creating valid concepts and valid conceptual frameworks of what we experience, Buddhism—whether it's "religious" Buddhism or "secular" Buddhism—involves a valid conceptualizing of what we can experience and what we do experience, or at least what some people experience.

If it didn't occur to me to start sensing with my touch to find the cat, if my eyes didn't get used to the dark, if I didn't spend long enough for my eyes to adjust, if no one gave me or I didn't find infrared goggles there I could use, I wouldn't experience the black cat and I would consider this all just ridiculous waste of time conjecture—metaphysics in the most disparaging sense of the word.

But once I experience things through my meditative dedication and work and practice and opening up and careful intelligent practice, once I experience them, then those things come into the realm of why I need some kind of conceptual framework for these things. And if I experience them regularly and extensively, and if they make a difference in my life, I'm going to need some kind of valid conceptual framework around that. Just like science, just like actually any kind of philosophy, whether it's educated philosophy or just everyman's working philosophy.

Again, with regard to ontology and epistemology, science and philosophy debate ongoingly the being or non-being or ontic status, reality status of what seems most evidently there. Ontological debates still go on in science and philosophy regarding things that we experience and things that seem really obvious: chairs, chariots, cats, quarks—all this is still up for ontological debate in the realm of science and the philosophy of science and also wider philosophy.

Same with gods, same with divinities, same with soul. We experience it. It seems evident to our senses with practice. And so it can be drawn in. There's a validity to drawing it in to the ontological and epistemological debate. Experience must be accounted for, generally speaking.

Philosophy—even if it's not worked out philosophy or conceptual structure—we account for experience with our ideas. Somehow, we try to account for experience with our ideas.

And again, we inherit or receive, are impacted by, a whole set of hierarchies and value systems regarding ontology and epistemology from the cultures that we move in. So if we regard someone who's tone deaf or color blind—obviously being polite about it and not offensive—but we somehow regard them as having something inadequate or not quite competent or deficient in their perception, or as a perceiver.

Or an autistic person—one of the theories of what's going on there is they can't read emotions in another person. So it's as if another person is devoid of emotion for them, of emotional reality. There's no reality to them. They can't actually perceive it. And again, generally in terms of psychological diagnostics, we regard autism as a kind of pathology. There's a perceptual deficiency, inadequacy, incompetency there.

Now, some people—and again, it's not quite politically correct, but it's pretty dominant—might regard, let's say, a pre-modern, so-called pre-modern tribe, an indigenous tribe somewhere, and that whole worldview, and regard them also as deficient or incompetent perceivers and conceivers and thinkers because they don't have science in the way that we do. They don't have that scientific methodology or that scientific directionality.

But we could ask, isn't that an epistemological colonialism? We've got this view and we're convinced this is right and this is better. They are deficient, just like an autistic person is deficient in their perception and conception, just like a colorblind or tone-deaf person is also deficient in their perception of color and sound. There's a kind of bias there of what we could call epistemological colonialism. Our culture is right. That culture is wrong. We know what's real. They are barking up the wrong tree with regard to reality.

Why, just in principle, doesn't someone who thinks that way accept this culture's regard for your inability to perceive souls or spirits, for example, in nature—something we might call akin to sensing the soul? Why don't we perceive that as a deficiency? Like that's a kind of autism. We are simply unable to see some aspect of reality, like tone deafness or like color blindness.

We, our culture or the dominant culture, has ruled out that as qualifying for reality status. It's got a relegated ontological status and any kind of knowing that one might claim is not justified. Any kind of "I know this tree's spirit" or "I know this forest's spirit"—that's not given epistemological validation.

So we could really push at this circumscription, this cramping that has been given to us, imposed on us by the dominant culture.

In regarding ontology and all that, I actually regard it as a never-ending exploration. I don't think humanity will ever fully answer these questions. It's more like the questions themselves and the positions that various cultures take with regard to them over time is part of the story of humanity. It's part of the soul evolution of humanity.

Conceptual frameworks, ontologies, epistemologies reflect and engender soul-making. Certain conceptions, certain ontologies, certain epistemologies can open up possibilities for soul-making. Certain emphases of conceptual frameworks open up soul-making differently, so that ontological and epistemological conceiving becomes part of the whole soul-making movement, potentially.

What's quite popular in a lot of modern philosophies—some philosophers such as Richard Rorty, for instance, who's quite popular in some circles—is to almost look back in history and just acknowledge that the whole philosophical and scientific endeavour to arrive at a kind of conclusive ontology and epistemology has proved unsuccessful so far. Therefore their attitude is just to drop that whole investigation, just kind of shrug and give up and leave it and poo-poo those whole threads and investigations and explorations in philosophy.

What it seems to me, reading someone like Richard Rorty more closely and people who say that kind of thing or espouse that kind of thing, is that they're saying to drop all ontology and epistemology. But actually what happens is there is a default reversion to just whatever is the dominant unconscious and usually unquestioned ontology of the main culture. In other words, Rorty often lets slip—I don't think he's even quite conscious of it—that his notion of reality is a kind of atomistic, physicalist one of atoms moving in space according to random, meaningless laws. That's underpinning, or hidden—it's his hidden default ontology and the epistemology that goes with it.

Despite the talk of "let's just drop all this talk of ontology and epistemology, because people just argue; let's just keep everything open so that we can move forward together in a spirit of harmony," actually underneath there's a real entrenchment and preference for one kind of ontology and epistemology. In other words, the secular, modernist, scientific, materialist, dominant ontology and epistemology over and above anything so-called spiritual, religious, soulful.

So if there is this kind of never-ending philosophical possibility, if soul-making is potentially never-ending, and part of soul-making is logos, and that too is never-ending, and part of logos is the exploration of ontology and epistemology and opening them up and trying different things out and shifting ideas—and if soul-making is endless, then part of that endlessness is the endlessness, the never-endingness of ontological and epistemological exploration or conceiving, creation, discovery, play.

And it might be that one of the ideas that perhaps its time has come might be this idea of participation. Because up to now, the dominant philosophical and scientific modes have really veered towards a kind of objectivism and subjectivism. This goes all the way back to Descartes and before: reality is what is objectively independently real, and you can talk about what's subjectively true for me or my opinion or my taste or whatever, or my just being a pawn of the culture and being totally culturally conditioned and moved about by trends in history and historically contingent. But basically there's a gulf between subject and object.

A notion like participation is in a way a very ancient concept and goes back to Plato. I don't know much about how he used it, and I know that he was actually quite vague—he never really filled out what he meant by it. For me, it strikes me as a very important and possibly very rich and fertile notion and a really key concept. And again, it's hard to fill it out, but one of the things that we touched on before about participation is it does not fall into a kind of view of subjectivism nor a view of objectivism. Not "reality is what is objectively independent" or "everything is just dependent on the subject."

There's some kind of mutual participation of what we typically conceive of as object and typically conceive of as subject. What we typically conceive of as truth and what we typically conceive of as a knower of truth. So instead of truth being objectively independent, real, we are participating in the creation slash discovery of truth. Creation and discovery of truth. There's some word between or straddling or encompassing both creation and discovery that the word participation hints at.

So it's a really deep concept that embraces and involves ontology and epistemology and reality and notions of God and all of that, even notions of awakening, as I mentioned in one talk. So none of these things—matter, reality, selves, subjects, objects, truth, liberation, soul, divinity—all of them are participated in. We participate in creating, discovering all of that.

To me, this is a very profound and potentially very fertile concept as perhaps a new step in our play in logos, which is part of our great play in soul-making. A new step in our play with ontology and epistemology, conceptual frameworks, and how involved in that play is also what we perceive, what we sense, sensing the soul, perceiving imaginatively.

CHAPTER 116

Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h44

In this opening talk of a series, Rob Burbea examines the complex relationship between dukkha and soul-making practice. He explores how imaginal perception and sensing with soul can relieve suffering, while also addressing the prerequisites and areas of care needed for sustainable soul-making work. The talk emphasizes the importance of energy body awareness, emotional intelligence, and relational skills as foundational elements. Burbea discusses various approaches to working with emotions in meditation, from laser-beam attention to delicate awareness and kindness-infused mindfulness. He highlights how soul-making often occurs more readily in relationship with others, requiring sophisticated communication skills and psychological maturity. The concept of temenos—sacred space—is introduced as essential for sharing imaginal experiences safely. Throughout, Burbea balances encouragement with honest assessment of what this path demands: facility with samādhi, insight into emptiness, mettā practice, and the ability to discern between eros and craving. While acknowledging these practices as potentially 'advanced,' he emphasizes that all these capacities are developable and accessible, forming gifts not only to oneself but to the world.

This talk was initially planned as the second of a series of four. It's now the third of a series of five. In it, I would like to talk about dukkha and soulmaking.

This is, I think, a really huge, vast and complex subject. It's also what we might call an open field, an open subject, in that what we emphasize, what we conclude, and the paths we take and clear in this whole area depends a lot on conceptual frameworks and ways of looking that we develop and implement. What arises for us in terms of suffering in the context of soulmaking—how soulmaking addresses and impacts on suffering—depends very much on what we mean by soulmaking, what we mean by imaginal and eros and all these other words, and our larger conceptual framework. So it's open. We're in the process of creating and discovering our ways in all of this.

Because of that largeness and complexity, this talk is only going to look at some areas of this whole domain and some strands within that. Mostly what I want to focus on in this talk, which will almost certainly have several parts, is how imaginal perception, imaginal practice, how sensing with soul—the different ways, or some of the different ways—it can relieve and ease dukkha, bring about some relief or even ending of suffer-

ing. Similarly, within the whole soulmaking paradigm, I want to explore the ways that eros, or working with desire skillfully and with discernment, can do something similar in terms of freedom from suffering, relief, ease from dis-ease.

I also want to touch on what do we mean by dukkha? What kinds of dukkha are we talking about when we say dukkha and Four Noble Truths? What are our conceptions of dukkha? What possible conceptions of dukkha might we bring to bear, and conceptions of the causes of dukkha, and also of freedom from dukkha and relief from dukkha or alleviation of dukkha? In other words, the paradigm of the Four Noble Truths and how it relates to the soulmaking path.

A third area that I want to open up is to highlight some of the ways and areas where this kind of practice, soulmaking practices, this kind of work, this kind of exploration, asks us for care. We need to take care with certain elements. What does that mean? What's involved in that? Which elements? And how? There are certain things that we need to be aware of in the whole endeavor, in the whole movement and exploration. There may be certain aspects that we may regard as prerequisites—it's good if this and that are in place, if we already have a facility, a skill, a capacity, that we have that under our belt.

Without that kind of care, without those kinds of awarenesses, and without those prerequisites, it's sometimes possible that practicing with eros, practicing with desire, trying these practices, practicing with the imaginal, actually brings dukkha—because we are not taking care, there's not enough awareness of certain aspects and areas, and not enough sensitivity and attention, and we don't have certain prerequisites. So that's another piece of all this that I would like to address, and that's what I want to start with: areas where we might need to take care, what that looks like, aspects and elements that we might need to pay attention to, to be aware of, and what might be prerequisites for this kind of path, explorations, and practices.

I think I've said before, I can't remember which retreat, sometime in the last couple of years, that one could say this soulmaking business and these practices are pretty advanced. Maybe that's true. It's a word I tend to shy away from myself, but we could say that, and I could go along with that. I think it's fair to say, using different vocabulary, that the soulmaking path, as we are unfolding it, outlining it, opening it up, describing it, exploring it, asks a lot of us. It demands quite a lot—a lot of know-how, we might say, a lot of skills or arts in relation to a lot of domains of our being and experience.

For example, with respect to our emotional life and the life of our heart and the needs of our heart, and with respect to body and energy body, what we're calling energy body awareness. With respect to being in a dyad or a tunus, in relationship with

some kind of other—whether that's a human other, a totally intra-psychic imaginal other, an other in nature, whether we ourselves become in some way an erotic imaginal other to another aspect of ourselves. How we are in tunus, whether we lose ourselves, whether we can't connect, whether we have our body and our sensitivity there—all of that, that whole domain of sets of skills and awarenesses and arts.

It asks of us quite a degree of sensitivity in our mindfulness, of what we can actually pay attention to, notice, stay focused on, attuned to, really opening up the realms of subtle discrimination, subtle awareness. It's asking of us the art of engaging and entertaining conceptual frameworks without losing our body and the connection with our body and the fullness of that and the beauty and richness and juiciness of that, nor our heart. What is it to have all three aspects of our being—body, heart, and intellect and mind in that sense?

It's also asking of us that we have some capacity and some capacity for growth with regards to these qualities: humility and reverence and the awareness and sense of beauty and sensitivity to beauty. It's asking that we have developed or are developing the skills, the arts of handling energies in and through the body, of handling and working skillfully with our eros and the energy of our desire and the movements of our desire, that we can discern between eros and craving—such an important distinction in this kind of work.

This whole path, this whole journey and everything it involves, actually asks of us quite a set of relational skills, which I'll come back to today. We also need really basic insight meditation skills, like just the ability and capacity to drop something. Even if it's fascinating or beguiling or gripping or intense, can you actually put it down, let it go, let go of this image, let go of that eros?

In many cases, sometimes that's a skillful move within the larger movement of the path. And this work also requires all the more commonly taught and spoken about Dharma skills: loving-kindness, metta, mindfulness, some degree of skill with samadhi, knowing what works for you there, some understanding and a little bit of skill with emptiness. So it's quite a lot, you know. Maybe that warrants the word, the epithet "advanced"—the adjective "advanced."

It's also probably fair to say that this path, these practices, these kinds of investigations and explorations—playing in this way—can and often does bring up a lot, so to speak. Or we could say it pushes on a lot in our being, in our psychological and psychic makeup. It opens and stretches a lot. Whether that's in terms of our heart, our emotions

and our emotionality, whether it's in terms of energies that we experience from time to time, whether it's in terms of our views—the views we have of self, of others, of world, of existence, of desire, of all kinds of things.

Psychologically too, it pushes on quite a lot, or can bring up quite a lot at times. Certain things that have gotten stuck in us or fixated can arise. We're also including the possibility that eros does become sexual at times. Remember, eros doesn't only mean sexual attraction and energy, but it includes that. So it may bring up things around our relationship with desire, around our whole sexuality, and how that is for us. All this arises.

Now, many of you are already practicing in this way—introduced in this way, playing in this way—and have already seen, felt, experienced for yourselves just what kind of openings are possible here. Many of you are, I know, really, really touched and almost amazed and taken with this way of practicing and what it can draw into its orbit and include and redeem and transform and open up.

You will also realize, if that's the case, or many of you I hope will realize, that for all that beauty and opening and grace and gift to be possible in a way that's long-term sustainable, we need to inquire into what are the elements of this path. When the Buddha talks about the Eightfold Path, what makes this sustainable? He doesn't just say, "Go and be intensely mindful," or "Just zip through the jhanas," or "Just contemplate emptiness and let go." What actually makes this kind of path sustainable? What are the elements—the essential pieces of equipment, if you like—that we need to take on this journey?

As I said before, I want to walk a tightrope somewhat in some of these talks and really want to be encouraging. I don't want to be forbidding at all. Many of you have already been really surprised by just what is possible, even with a little bit of practice in these kinds of ways. But there's also this question of bringing a kind of maturity—psychological maturity—to looking at the whole path and what it might need. What is good practice in the long term? What is good taking care of myself, taking care of the soul, taking care of this path and these practices?

So in the context of really wanting to encourage and offer freely these teachings for the long term, I'm balancing that with a kind of encouragement also to reflect. Each one of us, if I want—if you want—to open in this way, to explore in these ways and move in these ways of soul-making, what do I need to develop? What do you need to develop? What are the essential elements of the path, or pieces of kit for the journey?

We can be somewhat universal in answers to that, but a lot of it's quite individual as well. What do I need? Where I am right now as a human being with my history, the teachings that I've had, the practices that I've developed, the skills, the things I've worked through, my psychological history, my different capacities and needs—what do I need to develop now?

Me myself, right now, where I am—if I'm attracted to this path, if I want to open it up and move forward in a way that's really fertile and fruitful and sustaining and beautiful. It doesn't mean it's always going to be easy. Even if I have all these pieces and elements, even if I'm taking care in these ways, it will be challenging at times. But this really makes it actualizable, realizable—not just something that sounds good and exciting, or just some fireworks that flare up, look amazing, and then very shortly thereafter disappear without a trace.

I'll talk about some of these pieces. I've mentioned quite a few already, but if I find—or you find—that a foundational piece or an area needs some more work, it's quite possible to decide to focus on that piece for a while, or that area for a while, without forgetting or giving up on the bigger intention or the larger love of soul-making and that whole trajectory, that whole movement.

I keep that in sight. I know what I want to develop. I know where I want to go. I know what cools my soul and my heart. And I also see that right now this piece is important. Actually, that's quite interesting too, this piece. And that's part of the whole journey. If I want to get there, then I need to go over here. Maybe this bit is a little bit of rocky terrain, or it's a little dark here. I'm a little bit lost in a forest, but I have a kind of map. Or it's kind of uphill for a while.

Just that whole attitude of, "Okay, I'm not losing sight of the bigger picture of my soul's desire and that big calling and yearning. But right now, I'm going to focus on this one. I'm going to develop this piece. This is good." There's a kind of maturity in that, a psychological maturity in that kind of view. There's also a kind of maturing possible there of our fire and our eros for the path.

In other words, a wise or mature discerning longing to travel the path. A wise burning of our fire for soul-making involves at times actually going slower, actually staying in one place for a while and developing something or other—putting certain foundations in place, making sure we have the right footwear, if you like, or whatever it is.

This translates across many other traditions. For instance, in Tibetan Buddhism, there are extensive preliminaries for the bulk of the path, especially when approaching Tantric Vajrayana practices. Practitioners are regularly required to do 100,000 prostra-

tions—hard work physically—before they even begin something that might seem more exciting or alluring. Or 100,000 mantra recitations. This is part of the maturing of the vision, part of preparing the soul, cultivating humility and patience. It's about maturing the fire, tending the fire.

There are those Zen stories where a practitioner seeks out a certain teacher and is made to sit outside the teacher's cave through snow and heat for three years. If they can stay steady, then the teacher says, "Okay, let's see. Let's give you some teaching." In the Jewish mystical tradition, many Kabbalistic lineages stipulate that you cannot study Kabbalah or enter into those mystical practices and teachings until you're at least forty years old. The people who arrive at that threshold have already been saturated with basic Jewish teachings, traditions, and practices—study of laws, rites, rituals. They possess substantial prerequisite understanding and education before moving into the more esoteric teachings.

There are parallels in what I'm suggesting. I wouldn't want to be so rigid myself, but it's really good to consider this maturely, this whole question of possible prerequisites. It's valuable to maintain a long vision with this work, to think about patience as a core element of any authentic path. Thoroughness—what does it mean to be thorough? To really be thorough because I love something, because I care about something. For me, caring about this path is also a way of caring about the world—they are indubitably, indisputably, totally woven together. There's a manifestation of deep care for the world in my caring for this path, in my caring for teaching about it. They go together.

If I love something, I'm going to be thorough. I'm not going to cut corners. I'm not going to build on shaky foundations. If I love my children and I'm building them a pram or a bed, I'm going to make sure it's solid. I don't want it falling apart, because I care, because I love them. The integrity of thoroughness really emerges from care and love—the fullness of love, the fullness of desire, the maturity of desire.

What does it mean to incorporate—I use that word carefully, meaning really to bring into being, into one's body? All of this knowledge and know-how and skills and capacities—emotionally, energetically, even conceptually—goes into the body, becomes incorporated. To incorporate good foundations, to bring honesty in terms of what's needed, where we are. A steadiness of dedication and practice that goes with patience, obviously. An unshaking commitment: "This is what's involved, I'm up for it." And actually one discovers that all the work, even when it's difficult or involves healing, is beautiful—it's soul work. In all of this there's humility and the willingness of the lover, the willingness of the devotee.

Some people approach things very linearly: they engage with the more commonly taught dharma practices, take care of themselves psychologically and address any healing that needs to happen, and then begin the emptiness and soul-making work. It's all very sequential, and that's wonderful if it works. For some people it's really good to think about things that way.

For others, it's not so linear. Many people will be called to this soul-making work and imaginal practice, sensing the soul, and actually almost start there. This makes things more challenging because then one has to develop all these other skills perhaps in tandem, or perhaps pause for a while to develop them. One might have some experience with soul-making practices and logos, really fall in love with it and see how fruitful it can be, but also at some point realize: there are some pieces here, some foundations, some incorporation that needs to happen. This can unfold in different ways—either by pausing in a certain area, slowing down, or actually working in tandem.

But again, all this implies an honesty with oneself and maturity in a number of respects. And it's also something you can ask a teacher who's skilled in this kind of soul-making teaching, who's versed in that and used to it. You can ask, "Do you think I could... What do you think I need?" And it's not to say the teacher's opinion is some kind of decree, but it's good to have some input like that.

Among the elements or foundations or pieces that we've emphasized—that I've already in the past placed great emphasis on—is energy body awareness and skill with the energy body. And for some people, I would say actually maybe many people—in fact most people—developing that, I mean really developing it, takes years.

So on the recent retreats we've spent a day or two at the beginning focusing just on that and then really emphasizing it. We've asked people to have practiced with that before they can even come to the retreats. But generally, there's generally quite a lot to develop until one really feels comfortable and it becomes almost second nature. The energy body awareness and the different ways of working with it can really take years.

That's not to say that one can't have quite a lot of fruitfulness and discovery and benefit from that kind of practice quite quickly, but really kind of making it almost like second nature and normal for one to be grounded in the energy body with that whole awareness, with that whole range that's implicit in what we mean when we say energy body—from really dense, solid, kind of earthy element experience to very ethereal and everything in between.

And to develop the ways that the energy body is really useful in practices of samadhi and samatha and metta and just generally as one mode of mindfulness of the body, how useful it is in insight practices, gauging whether we're on the right track or not in terms of what's useful in any moment, and also in imaginal practices—all of which I've touched on before. This can take quite a while, and even if one just did that, it would be so beneficial, such a huge resource in one's life, in one's practice.

And then particularly the energy body with regard to caring for and skill with our emotions and our emotional life, our heart life. To me, this skill and art with an awareness of our emotional life and everything that goes on there and really knowing facility and flexibility with how to care for that—to me, this really is indispensable for soul-making. It's an absolutely necessary element.

Actually, in the way that I would tend to teach the Dharma—like everything in the Dharma, whether it's metta or whatever—I would also really emphasize a lot of development of the art of emotional awareness and emotional care. I think it's so important for every aspect of the Dharma, every aspect. So in terms of the way I conceive of the whole broad teaching of Dharma, I put that very, very centrally. I realize that not everyone does, not all teachers do, but for me it's a really key element in how I teach.

And just, again, tied in with the energy body, just then what it can then open up. Having that confidence regarding one's emotions and especially how they are in the body. Having the understanding, having the facility and flexibility with working with them and caring with them—really, really important.

So I've talked a lot about working with the emotions and with mind states in the past, a lot. I can't remember the titles of the talks. If I try and remember now, there are talks called "Emotional Healing and Emotions" and "Freedom or Mindfulness of Mind States." There's a three-part talk, if I remember, called "Psychodynamics in Meditation." There was a whole retreat I did once, if I remember, just focusing on working with emotions. That was the main practice for the whole retreat. What's that called? "The Boundless Heart," I think. And every morning we gave a different kind of very specific instruction with regard to emotional awareness. It's quite sort of disciplined and circumscribed, each kind of practice there. And I think they were called "Working with the Emotional Body." And there are seven of them, day one to seven.

So there's all that available if you want to check it out and really develop this. And I really recommend that. Of course, it doesn't have to be those talks, and it certainly doesn't have to be me whose teachings you listen to on this subject. But I would really recommend—and again, it's part of the way I teach—that you develop, over time, so you're really comfortable with, you really have facility and flexibility with a whole

range of approaches to working well with the heart life and the emotional life. There's another one called "Heart Work," I remember, in the context of a Metta retreat, so emotions other than metta, during metta.

But so that we have the skills, the arts, and the confidence—how rare it is for human beings to actually feel really confident that whatever emotions come up, generally speaking, I'm confident that I can work with it on my own. It's not that I'm closed to working with it in relationship and having other people input, sharing that with others or in group process or whatever it is. But I'm also confident that I myself can pretty much handle anything that comes up emotionally. That might mean that I have to grapple with it or play with it a little bit until I find just what approach kind of proves fruitful or helpful. It might be a challenge, but I'm basically confident.

And that's really, really possible. And so part of this, what I'm really encouraging, that we all develop this set of skills or the art and developing that confidence is a kind of—I don't know what to call it—just a sort of habit. Maybe that's the best word, a habit, a sort of automatic, ingrained habit of awareness of the mind state and the emotional state.

Someone was asking me about this recently, and I can't remember their exact question, but I found myself saying something quite interesting that I hadn't fully realized before. I think because I have paid so much attention to what I'll call my heart life, my emotional life—and I should note that emotions don't just happen in the heart area but actually occur throughout the entire body—from so much habit developed over years of psychotherapy, years of journaling work in a very embodied way, years of mindfulness and insight meditation where emotional awareness was central, and then incorporating it deeply into practices we've developed with the energy body and other aspects of Dharma practice.

Because of all that accumulated practice, I think it's almost as if—and I'm sure it can't be literally true to say that in every moment I'm automatically aware of my mind state and emotional state—but it feels true to say that in most moments, there's just a sort of organic, automatic quality to this awareness as part of my ordinary consciousness.

Now, the point I want to emphasize is not anything particular about me, but rather that it's truly possible for all of us to become much more aware of our emotional states. We don't have to remain strangers to our own hearts, wondering "Oh, what am I feeling? I have no idea." I remember when that was certainly the case with me—either I was completely overwhelmed by an emotion, or I simply didn't know what I was feeling. I couldn't recognize that I was actually experiencing a particular emotion.

So while this development can involve a lot of work, it can become really just part and parcel of one's normal state of awareness—this ongoing awareness of what the emotions are. And by emotions, I use that term interchangeably with "mind states," which includes something much more subtle than what we usually call an emotion. I'm referring to the very subtle texture of mind and heart right now—perhaps a little cramped because I'm slightly tired, or on neutral keel, nothing remarkable, just a bit peaceful, maybe slightly bored, whatever it might be. This awareness encompasses both really subtle states and gross emotions as well.

So there's this development of awareness across the whole range. We cultivate both the capacity and willingness to feel, including the willingness to be aware of intense emotions and the ability to actually feel intense emotions—recognizing that the heart is big. And equally important is developing sensitivity to really subtle emotions, the capacity to notice them, to make fine discriminations between perhaps wordless, subtly different heart states and mind states.

Tied in with this awareness is the development of sensitivity to make fine discriminations between states we may not even have words for—these subtly different emotional and mental conditions. And then, as I've said, part of the whole art is really learning to care for them, having different approaches to caring and developing facility and flexibility with all of that.

This includes understanding my emotions, which is a vast subject. What does it mean to understand one's emotions? It encompasses quite a lot. One aspect I'll mention right now is understanding how the very conceptual framework we're entertaining at any time—whether we're conscious of it or not, whether we articulate it clearly or not—actually impacts the experience of emotion and how that emotion unfolds. In other words, an emotion is not separate from whatever I'm conceiving or whatever conceptual framework is operating at the time. That's part of understanding emotions—quite a deep and subtle part, though there are many other dimensions as well.

All this work with emotions takes time for most people, though not for everyone. Some people are fortunate enough to receive this education in their upbringing from parents and school, or they're naturally gifted in this way. I don't feel I was. So it takes time, and that requires patience. It can take courage—the courage to be willing to feel what moves through the heart and emotions because it's intense, or because we're frightened. "What will happen if I feel this? What does it mean about me?" It also takes honesty. But it's so, so worth it to develop that art. So worth it. And it's really, really possible.

Now, I want to share just a couple more things about emotional awareness and the art of being with one's emotions well, caring for them skillfully. I spoke about having flexibility in different approaches, facility to engage different ways of relating to what's going on emotionally. I think this is worth lingering on a bit.

I'm emphasizing this partly because the Buddha did speak about emotions—we could say this is an element of the third foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of mind states, mindfulness of the citta. Different traditions and teachers emphasize different ways of relating to emotions and mind states within this third foundation of mindfulness. So it's very commonly taught, of course...

Actually, some people don't teach it, but it's generally quite common that different ways of relating to emotions within the third foundation of mindfulness are explored. However, you might have been exposed to, or simply out of habit, a somewhat narrowed range of possibilities for skillfully relating to what's going on emotionally. Through no fault of your own, or simply through habit or limited exposure, you may have narrowed down the spectrum of approaches and ways of relating skillfully to emotional states or mind states.

Some people have been exposed to a practice that encourages a very intense, narrow, laser-beam quality of attention directed toward emotions as they manifest in the body—focusing on vedana in the body or simply bodily sensations. This approach can become the predominant way of paying attention to emotions in meditation practice. Sometimes, for practitioners who engage extensively in this kind of meditation with considerable intensity, this becomes their primary way of attending to emotions in daily life as well—this laser-beam focus on sensations.

For some emotions, for some people, at certain times, this approach can be tremendously beneficial. The amplified energy of attention, the intensity and focus gathered into mindfulness and directed with great concentration toward sensations in the body—whether in the throat, around the mouth, the heart, or the belly—can be genuinely helpful with particular emotions at particular times, partly because of the energy involved. I've discussed this previously, so I won't elaborate further now.

At other times, or with different emotions, this becomes a quite unskillful way of paying attention. Sometimes it simply obliterates what's happening, causing us to lose touch with the emotion entirely. We fail to develop any degree of nuanced awareness or sensitivity regarding what's actually occurring emotionally. Sometimes it's actively unhelpful for the emotion itself, burning it in a way that adds hurt to painful emotions or creates additional wounding. Through this laser-beam focus, we miss something of the bigger, more delicate picture.

A second possibility involves much more delicate awareness. We might still focus on the bodily sensations of the emotion, but it's as if we have a dial for the intensity of our attention. We can turn it all the way up to ten for laser-beam intensity, or all the way down to one for the lightest possible touch. I've used the analogy of a feather touching the most delicate piece of cloth—the attention just barely makes contact, very light and gentle.

Something like sadness can be quite a fragile feeling. Not only do we feel fragile when sad, but the actual feeling itself possesses fragility. We need to approach it with very delicate attention in order to learn about it and care for it properly. Part of the art involves developing this capacity—like having a fader switch or dial to adjust how delicate or intense our attention to the emotion's sensations will be.

A third possibility shifts from attention as a beam directed outward toward sensations to attention as a quality of holding. Metaphorically, the attention becomes like hands gently cupped, with the sensations or emotion resting lightly within this holding—safe and gentle, but not crushed within the cupped hands of awareness. The awareness itself contains this quality of holding.

This leads to a fourth possibility: infusing the awareness with kindness. I remember teaching a retreat years ago when someone coined the term "kindfulness," which some people now use. It's mindfulness, it's awareness, but with the kindness dial turned up. This too can manifest in many different ways, with various qualities, because we can be kind to the sensations, kind to the emotions themselves—which is slightly different from sensations—and kind to the self who is experiencing the difficult emotion.

This kindness introduces a quality of softness. I've used the image of gentle, warm water lapping against a sharp rock. The kindness infusing the awareness laps gently against the difficult, hard emotion. It's this softness around it, this warmth, this contact between difficulty and kindness that actually promotes healing.

We could distinguish between possibilities where one pays attention purely to sensations. In this mode, awareness shows no interest in the story, no interest even in the self—the "poor me" and the sense of self having these emotions. It's not particularly concerned with identifying exactly what emotion this is, because sometimes we don't know, sometimes there's no word for it. Even when aware of the emotion, attention remains focused at the level of sensations—less concerned with what the emotions are and less concerned with what the self is.

Again, this is useful, but if it becomes the only way we ever pay attention to our emotions, that becomes quite limited and probably not psychologically healthy in the long term. However, it remains an excellent option at certain times.

Then there's a sort of middle level focus, if you like, where we're not so much getting into the story, not so much getting into the self, but we are caring for this emotion. We really have a sense, with the sensations, what the emotion is. So there's a sense of more richness or fullness to the experience. We're not going for this kind of reductionist attention, which can, as I said, be really helpful at times. We're going for something more medium range, if you like.

So it's really—I really sense this is sadness. I'm not getting into the story of it. I'm not getting so much into the self that's constellated with the sadness. I'm just saying it's just the sadness with the sensations.

And then another one, perhaps this is the seventh. This list, again, is not exhaustive and not so clearly delineated, but I hope you can understand what I'm getting at. The seventh possibility is that we actually allow the self and the sense of self. We include the sense of self in the emotional awareness. So yes, the sensations. Yes, the emotion. And yes, the self.

Again, what can often happen with mindfulness teachings is that we kind of get the sense that self is not okay, or it shouldn't be in the picture. Story is certainly not okay. Self is not so okay. And we kind of get used to just the sensations or just the emotion. And again, really good practice—really good to have that gear, have that facility to be able to look in a way that just kind of looks underneath the self, so to speak. It's just this emotion with these sensations. And that's what I'm mindful of, and that's what I'm with, and I'm just steady with my attention there.

But often what happens with long-term mindfulness meditators, people who have been kind of schooled in the mindfulness tradition—and again, this was something I'm sharing from experience, something that I got into in my early years in practice—we kind of think, "Hold on, I have to recalibrate the lens possibilities here on my awareness, on my attention."

Another possibility is actually letting the self constellate, including the self. So the attention includes the sense of self and the care includes the care for this self. So it's not just this emotion or these sensations. I'm caring for me. It's me who's feeling sad. It's me who's feeling grief. It's me who's feeling angry. And that me, right now, needs care. Yes, I know it's empty. Yes, I know all that. But right now, we're addressing that self. We're including that. I'm not kind of focusing so closely that I don't see that.

So that's another possibility. When we open that possibility, the seventh possibility, then we could say, well, that actually splits into a few sub-possibilities, because we could say, well, which self? Self is a fabrication. So again, in other words, self can be fabricated a lot or a little or this way or that way. So if I say I'm going to include myself, which self? This opens up all kinds of possibilities.

One possibility, and again, if you have these kinds of other pieces of practice under your belt, it can be really, really helpful. One possibility is knowing that the self is empty, I know that the self is a construct, but let it be fabricated quite lightly, so that here's this sadness, and here's these sensations, and I'm aware of them, and I'm caring for the self. But the self that I'm letting arise is quite light. It's not a really heavy, dense, contracted self. We'll come to that in a minute, that possibility. But one possibility is knowing the self to be empty and just letting it be fabricated a little bit. So you have a kind of light sense of self with the sensations and with the emotion. It's a lightly fabricated self, so to speak.

A second possibility, if we go back to this—well, which self if we're including the self in the emotional awareness? The second possibility is an imaginal self, or a self that's, if you like, imbued with imaginal perception.

Part of that, remember, is the imaginal middle way. So to say an imaginal self is not the same as a habitual self-image that is viewed as real and believed in—"I'm a loser, I'm a failure, I'm this kind of person, I'm bad," and so forth. An imaginal self is not a reified self-view or habitual self-image.

But a second possibility here, in the larger possibility of including the self-awareness, the self-care in the caring for emotions, is a kind of imaginal self. So this loneliness that I might feel is the loneliness of that wanderer. This weariness or courage or nobility is the loneliness of that warrior. And it's mine. In the way there's this infinite sort of echoing and mirroring that we talked about—this part of the imagination—it's mine too. But it's this warrior. So it's this warrior's or this wanderer's emotions, or it's Avalokiteshvara's compassion, Avalokiteshvara's empathy, or Jesus' heart, the sacred heart of Jesus. All kinds of possibilities there—obviously infinite possibilities—but it's not the same as just the habitual, problematic, constricted, over-solid and reified, believed-in self-image.

A third sub-possibility of this seventh possibility of including the self in the awareness of the emotions and the sensations is actually, you let the self be reified. It's okay. As I've said many times, in the big picture of things, we know the self is empty. But at times, it's important—and certainly probably for a lot of people, for long stretches of

their practice—it's important to just inhabit that view of a reified self and relate to that healthily, relate to that in a way that's fruitful, rather than just say, "I can't have self-awareness, I can't have a self-sense, I can't have a self-view."

Until there's really quite a lot of emptiness understanding, having a reified self will be very, very common. And even to the point of "I don't even know that it's empty." So it takes quite a lot of emptiness practice just to let it reify at times, and somewhere in our awareness we know that it's empty, but we're not leaning on that knowledge of its emptiness. And that takes quite a lot of practice.

So for many years, probably for most people, it's going to be mostly dealing with a reified sense of self. "I've heard this thing about emptiness, I've glimpsed a little bit about it, but not in any way that really makes too much difference yet." Given that's the picture, I need to find ways of relating to the reified self—either with the whole story that goes with it, or the stories that go with it, or just the self without the story.

Can you see there's all kinds of possibilities here? The reason I'm mentioning it is just because in some interviews in the last couple of years, I became aware—oh, that's really interesting. People are, especially people who've done a lot of mindfulness practice, have gotten into a habit of kind of paying attention to sensations or bare emotions, so to speak, but without the kind of caring for the self. It's like, oh, there's a whole dimension missing there that's really important. Because again, if you miss some of these things out, it will have consequences.

There's all these possibilities, and again, there's the possibility of facility and fluidity and flexibility with all of that.

So just to dwell on that last possibility, the third possibility of the seventh: sometimes with a reified self, and that's okay, and sometimes with the story—the story that I'm believing and this real self that I'm believing and all the pain of that and the history. And still, that's the perspective. That's the conceptual framework way of looking. What's the healing, opening, fertilizing, helpful way of looking at that, of relating to that?

There's a set of three talks that I mentioned—the psychodynamics in meditation talks, if I remember. A lot of those talks were really dealing with that, a reified self, and just some of the skillful ways of looking and conceptions and approaches regarding the psychology and the emotionality of that. And as I said before, anything I refer to—this is such a huge area, the emotions. It's so endlessly rich and fertile. So whatever I mention here, it's only part of the bigger picture.

Sometimes what happens, though, when we include the story and the reified self, it's always going to be from the perspective of some psychological framework or other, some school of psychology or another, even if we're not aware of what it is or that we're doing that. As I said, we can't help bringing in a conceptual framework—in this case, a psychological conceptual framework.

What I want to return to also in this talk later on is the need, I think, on the one hand, not to lock into any particular psychological view. "The view of this kind of psychological school looks at it this way and interprets things this way and this is the truth of what happened. Or this one does it this way." You start to realize there's all kinds of different conceptions and all kinds of different approaches and all kinds of possibilities. And to really be open to that and not too quickly lock into a certain view and then just become entrenched there as "this is the truth of me and my history and the story and this is the true fact of what happened," not realizing it's an interpretation according to a particular conceptual framework and that there are others possible.

Having said that, it may be—it may well be—that at certain times on our journey, individually, each of us may need to kind of lock into a certain view and really dig in there with a certain psychological view and interpretation and way of working, whether it's this or that way. It might be necessary just for our particular larger trajectory, that for a time we look that way, hopefully at times. Then after a while with that, we can kind of say, "I don't need this anymore, and what else is possible?" And then it still becomes an option, looking that way. But we're not so locked in, entrenched, and effectively imprisoned by something that can be quite narrow-minded, and if I think back to some of my history, quite dogmatic sort of entrenchment.

So oftentimes what happens is people get fixed on a psychological system or logos and not realize that depending on the logos, depending on the psychological conceptual framework, different experiences in different directions actually unfold from whatever is going on and whatever history we have.

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The main point there was that in our awareness of and care for the life of the heart—the emotional life—we want to include at times the possibility of including the self and self-awareness in various degrees of fabrication and directions of fabrication in our awareness and care.

Let me touch on just one more piece about working with the emotions. I mentioned those seven instructions working with the emotional body—I think they were called "a sequence of seven instructions and guided meditations." Just to say, if you do feel moved to check them out or you find yourself doing that, I want to say a little bit about them. They're very circumscribed in what they're trying to do.

Again, anything we say about emotions is an infinitely rich and infinitely expanding area for human inquiry. Human beings, I think, are never going to exhaust the infinite possibilities of ways of understanding emotions and ways of relating to emotions. It's just one of the deep mysteries of human existence—our heart life.

Those particular seven exercises on that retreat are really quite tightly focused sets of practices, partly given exactly for the reason that what often happens in regard to our emotional life is we're all a bit at sea. Either things are too subtle and we don't have the awareness needed to notice what's going on, or when something intense is happening, it's so big and we're so thrown about by it that we can't really get a grip on it in a way that's helpful and fruitful. So those practices are deliberately very narrowly focused, very tightly circumscribed.

One way of looking at them is to regard them as exercises. It's a bit like practicing scales at the piano. Potentially they can prepare us or develop our facility and capacity to work well with strong and live emotions when they arise. So it might be that the practices themselves feel a little funny—some people love them—but one way of understanding what they are is they're just like playing scales at the piano. So when you actually go to play the pieces that you love or you're improvising and you're in the heat of the flow of the moment, you have the facility to work well both with intense and also with subtle emotions and experiences in the heart.

But not just that—not just as exercises. They can also be regarded as practices in their own right, which open up a few directions. One is they can potentially open up to us the world of subtle experience, subtle energy and subtle emotions. Again, this is of-

ten an area that human beings, for lots of good reasons, haven't really developed that subtlety in relation to the emotional life—of noticing and caring. So that possibility can be opened up through those practices. It's an avenue into subtlety, into making subtlety accessible.

The second way they are practices that can actually open up their own fruits and realms and directions is that you will probably find, if you really spend a little time with those seven exercises, that they can—at least some of them—lead or will lead to some samādhi, and oftentimes really quite deep samādhi, when the practices are sustained.

I can't remember if I explained it there, but it might be that one starts with, let's say, a little bit of sadness in the heart, or somewhere else in the body, and one's paying attention to it in a way of finding the right kind of frequency and modulating the attention in a caring way of finding, "Oh yeah, that really helps." Being with it and being with it, maybe it goes through a few different phases or needs and you respond to them. And then maybe one just keeps focusing on it after all that. And the whole thing, just through the caring, appropriate focus, can just gradually get more and more subtle, more and more quiet. It's not that we're denying it. It's not that we're out of touch with it. It's not that we're telling it to behave itself and "don't be so damn silly" or anything remotely like that. But just through the sustained attention and the kind of appropriate and caring attention there, the whole being, including the emotional, just gets more and more subtle, more and more quiet, goes into some kind of samādhi.

So those practices—one of the possibilities of opening there is as a way into samādhi.

Thirdly, for now, I just want to mention this. Again, if you do happen to play with those seven practices, with those instructions and recordings, it's possible that through playing with them, what becomes much more evident than is usually the case for human beings is the dependent arising, the dependent origination and dependent cessation of our emotions.

Those practices, because they're so circumscribed, we're very clear what we're trying to do. When I pay attention this way, when I think that way, when I pay attention like that, then I see the emotion getting more difficult or more easy or softening or being blended with care and transforming or healing or whatever. So through being quite precise and focused and sustaining what one's trying to do in the meditation in these seven instructions, the dependent origination of emotions is revealed to us.

And dependent origination, as you will know, is a crucially important insight. In regard to emotions, I view it as—it's not the be-all and end-all of what we need to understand with regard to emotions, but it's so, so important. It's so crucial. It makes such a difference to our lives, our practices, and just our whole understanding of ourselves and others when we understand that. It's not the whole truth, it's not everything, but it's a really important strand.

So we've mentioned just briefly a lot of factors. We've dwelt a little bit on the energy body tonight and a little longer on the emotions and what might be involved in this sort of prerequisite or need for emotional awareness and emotional care—the skill, the art of all of that and the range, flexibility and facilities there.

A little bit related to that, or partly related to that, I've noticed something over the past couple of years, and that is that for many—I don't know if it's for most people, but it might be most people—soul making happens perhaps more readily in relationship with other human beings, especially those also interested in soul making, than it might on one's own. It happens more in relationship, or more readily in relationship, for many people.

Or, what we could say more accurately, is that eros and image are activated, and perhaps activated and ignited significantly, in relationship—particularly in relationship with other people interested in soul-making—more than they might be when one is alone. People are different, and there are exceptions, but I would say this generally holds true.

The question, though, is whether eros is activated just in its smaller meaning along with image, or whether the eros is really allowed to activate and ignite the whole Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic—the whole soul-making dynamic that fertilizes, enriches, complicates, widens, and deepens through their interplay and interrelationship. Is that whole soul-making dynamic actually ignited and turning in a way that sustains? Or does something merely flare up quickly and then fade out, fizzle away?

Sometimes something flares up with great intensity—whether eros or image or both—and then it breaks down, or something short-circuits, so to speak, or a fuse is blown. Or it simply gets snuffed out by receiving the wrong kind of air or environment, or by something heavy landing on it, to use these metaphors.

So it's often in relationship that this happens, and the question becomes: what actually allows the eros and image that might arise in relationship—just from being around and interacting with other soul-makers, doing this kind of work—what allows that to be genuinely soul-making in a way that can be sustaining?

Because part of the way problems can arise—where the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic is disrupted or inhibited or squelched—is exactly in relationship with each other, or around relationship with each other. Sometimes that's precisely where we run into difficulties.

What this means, again, is that we need, or it's really beneficial to have developed, our psychological awareness and emotional awareness—not just in ourselves, but also of others. That doesn't mean telling other people what's going on for them or anything like that. But it means being able to have that awareness in relationship, and some degree of sensitivity to another. Perhaps that's a better way of putting it: sensitivity and openness to another's psychological, emotional, and energetic process, while we have our own awareness, sensitivities, and capacities.

All of this, plus what I think soul-making work asks of us—and I think it does—is relational skills, as I mentioned earlier. This includes communication skills: really being able to communicate well with another, to listen well, to work through difficulties well, to communicate difficulties with precision, to be sensitive, caring, and appreciative—all of that.

If we unpack this a little further: when soul-making happens, as we've said, eros is a factor. Eros tends to arise or be ignited when soul-making is occurring, and we might catch that flame from another or in a field, whatever the case may be. Even if we're not working deliberately in an erotic, imaginal soul-making dyad—even if that's not the case—there can be, just in the field with the eros that's arising (which might be eros for something else entirely), in the way that the soul-making dynamic can work, as we've described in past retreats, the eros might spread to be directed toward or in relationship with a fellow soul-maker. So I didn't start with it, but now I have an erotic, imaginal connection or ignition with this other soul-maker.

It's really good to be aware of this as a possibility. And then this asks us to consider what tends to happen when there's eros and someone becomes image for us: all our patterns, or some of our patterns around intimate contact with other human beings, get elicited, triggered, activated, and ignited as well.

For some people, this might be fear of rejection. Just as soon as I have eros and this person becomes alive for me as an erotic, imaginal other, that kicks in my fear of rejection, or my fear of getting hurt, or my fear of loss—some kind of fear, or a projection of rejection, or an anticipation. It's not even that I'm waiting for it to happen; I just assume that it's already happened.

Or I find myself, or I find the other one, bringing in or dragging in needs that don't really belong in this relationship. These are perhaps, so to speak, old needs, or needs that belong in a different kind of relationship where a whole different set of rules are established and understood. Again, we may or may not be aware of this, whether in ourselves or others.

Then there are the other person's patterns and reactions, and how I react to their reactions, and my patterns when someone else responds—all of this is possible. So again, to have some awareness, some skill, some sensitivity, some discernment, some willingness with all of that is really, really useful.

One element within all this that I've talked about before—I can't remember in which retreat, it might have been in the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat—is just what happens for us as human beings. I very much think this is endemic in modern, globalizing Western culture: what occurs around being seen, being seen by another, and being seen by another who's important to us.

For many people, there's a curious and painful mixture in the being of a kind of need to be seen—an intense and deep need to be seen, a wanting to be seen—and a fear of being seen. To be seen deeply, fully, openly. All of this gets mixed in a way that's confusing and uncomfortable and causes all manner of shuttling back and forth, opening and closing and hiding.

In the way that I see the soul-making work and understand the nature of soul, I would say that soul—the soul, your soul, my soul, or the divine in me—wants to be seen. It wants to be seen. It wants to express itself, to manifest itself in the world and to be recognized for what it manifests. It wants its particular beauties, its particular way. It refracts the divine, to go back to past talks and what I was sharing there. It refracts the divine light and luminosity in its particular style, the way it sings of the beauty and the depths and the infinite creations and discoveries of soul and divine. It wants and perhaps needs that to be seen.

That's what I would call a healthy soul desire and healthy need. But at the same time, being seen—I think in our culture, because of the culture of individuality and, well, actually all kinds of reasons, including in many ways a kind of brutality in our culture with regard to some aspects of soul and sensitivity—for lots of reasons...

Being seen can be very loaded for us, for some people, for many people. It carries with it, it brings with it a lot of pain and confusion that's often unresolved. And what's often unresolved as well is this mix of motivations and needs.

So we get quite, as I said, confused. Sometimes the being seen is more an ego thing. I'll go into this, hopefully, in this talk. And we want to be, you know, we want our ego to be boosted, or we want to hide, or we're ashamed, we're riddled with shame, or we have this core feeling of being bad, and so we want to hide that.

At the same time that we recognize that we know somewhere our soul's beauty and that is the beauty of the divine and not separate. And our particular soul's beauty, the particular way that that divine beauty comes through us, that divine mystery comes through us, expresses itself in and through us. And some part of us knows that too.

And so it's quite common to be really quite confused, and confused by the messages we get in the culture, certainly, but also confused just in our own psychology and heart and soul, because of our history with all that.

And in all of this, again, if we just linger on the relational skills piece, if you like, of soul-making, we don't sometimes realize just how sensitive we are and how sensitive is the other in relationship, how vulnerable is, in some ways, how vulnerable is the soul, and how vulnerable is the soul of the other, in some ways, or at some level, let's say. And so again, here, there's a lot of self-honesty, there's a lot of sensitivity and awareness that is asked for.

And fourthly, we could mention, which we've talked about before, the ask of handling erotic charge and sometimes handling sexual charge, sexually erotic charge. You know, is that okay with me? Is that okay with the mind or does it meet some kind of censorship or some kind of inhibition or block? Can I handle it appropriately and keep the boundary? How to do that? What helps with that? Do I even notice what's going on with that? And then we've talked a lot about what helps there. May or may not go into it again on this set of talks.

Similarly with desire, we talked a lot about how to handle the current of desire in a way that's actually helpful. And similarly, how to, if you like, handle or relate to images when they arise. Because we've said so many times, if I reify and literalize and concretize this image, oftentimes, most often, it's going to cause some problem. So can I relate to the image and allow it to become fully imaginal and allow the imaginal middle way, the theater element, to open up if it needs to?

So handling all that, eros, desire, the imaginal skillfully, handling, as I said, our own energies and emotions and psychological patterns. So all this, we could say, is part of the, all these things, factors are part of the prerequisites, if we use that word, the foundations for fertile and sustainable soul-making in relationship with others. And as I said, for many people, that's where it actually tends to happen.

So this deliberate soul-making diet where there's deliberately the investigation, the opening, the exploration, the focus on the inclusion of the other as beloved erotic image and opening that up with mindfulness, sensitivity, care, creativity, and discovery. We're not teaching that yet. That probably is something I wouldn't hesitate to add the word advance to.

But there's elements of some of the same skills that will be necessary for that, kind of in a maybe less urgent need, just because, as I said, where most people will most readily have the soul-making be ignited is in relationship with other soul-makers.

So, again, please, I don't want this to sound discouraging. I don't mean to overwhelm you. All of this is possible. So you may go, boom, boom, boom, that's a huge list and blah, blah, blah, and there's all this stuff, but it really is possible. And interesting to develop, and really, really useful stuff to develop, but it's definitely possible. It's definitely possible that we grow in these capacities, we gain these skills, we develop these arts. Absolutely possible. I'm not talking about anything that is not possible at all. What would be the point of talking about it if it wasn't possible?

A little bit related is, or very much related, is, and I don't know whether you've noticed this with these practices and with talking with others about these practices or in some of the dyad work we've done on retreats and stuff, is something about, I don't know if you've noticed, how vulnerable it can be, and sacred as well, and there's a relationship there. It's vulnerable because it's sacred.

How vulnerable it can be to share images with another person. So this to me is really interesting. Sometimes a person might share a trauma history or some kind of psychological difficulty with others or in a group interview or with another practitioner or something. And that seems often, sometimes seems often to feel less vulnerable and intimate for many people, maybe most people, than sharing imaginal images that are really potent for oneself. Even though one is likely to identify less with an imaginal image than if we say purely human or flatly human history or condition or fact.

So even when one's identifying less with the imaginal, when that imaginal image is potent, it's actually somehow more vulnerable to share it than to share a really difficult psychological thing we have or some even abuse history or trauma history. It's quite interesting.

So the imaginal has intrinsically, as we've said, a quality of autonomy and otherness from self, this imaginal figure, for instance. And yet it is bearing that to the world and standing connected to it, but apart from it. So bearing it, but feeling I'm connected to this, I'm standing with it in my sharing. And bearing it, opening it, sharing it with the world, standing connected to it but apart from it, that seems vulnerable.

Despite this otherness and autonomy of the image that's intrinsic to the imaginal, I've touched on this before, but again, to me it suggests, from a slightly different perspective, that what is most essential and important to the soul is not the flatly or simply human identity. There has to be a better way of putting that.

Traditional developmental psychology, or what's common for developmental psychology, is to put this flatly or purely human identity—and not soul and soul-making—at the core of its theories. It's always talking about this kind of human level self, flatly human level self, and the hurt there. That's the core of the theories and the driver of its processes. I may return to this later on.

But you know, it's interesting. I've noticed this a lot with people. Revealing the angel, so to speak—revealing the angel is harder, closer, more intimate, truer and more authentic, even in its patent fictionality, than revealing the flatly conceived human self, the self of normal human discourse, of conventional psychological discourse. Revealing the angel seems harder, closer, more intimate, somehow more authentic and truer than revealing the flatly conceived human self.

And this leads me to a final point about something I've mentioned before—a word called *temenos*, which is another Greek word that means a kind of sanctuary or the enclosure around an orchard. Sacred space, protective space, something like that—*temenos*.

I'm mentioning it now because of the relational piece and the care that's needed as an element in relation as an element of the care for our soul-making and soul-making practice, because a lot of soul-making happens relationally. And also because of what I've just said about how vulnerable it can feel to share images with another human being because of the sacredness involved there.

In other words, it's not helpful to just spout out an image without taking care of the space that I'm in, the relational field that I'm in, the timing. Where's the other person at? Are they paying attention? Are they being respectful? Are they open? Are they sensitive? Am I paying attention? Am I attuned? Am I in touch with my body? Am I just

rushing it? Am I present? Am I showing up? Am I in relationship? Is it the right location? Is it private enough? All kinds of things. Really, really caring, again, for the soul and for this work, and for the image, if you like.

Again, if an imaginal figure is a person—and we're talking about an imaginal figure, and that includes this tree that is in the park where I go for a walk, and my sense of that tree, my sensing that tree with soul. Everyone can see the tree, everyone can feel the hardness of that bark, but a lot of people will not be sensing it with soul, and even sometimes I won't be sensing it with soul. Whatever we're talking about here, we're talking about a person and something worthy of respect.

So a *temenos*—you could say *tabernacle* is another word, or *sanctum*—is needed to support the sharing of images in ways that are soul-making. So we might share an image, but again, if we want that sharing to be soul-making and possibly even fertilize something for the other person and for ourselves in the sharing, then *temenos*, *tabernacle*, *sanctum*—some kind of care for the space, the field wherein that sharing is happening—is needed to care for the soul, to support the soul-making there, and the persons involved, and to respect all that: respect the soul, respect the imaginal perceptions, what's sensed there, and the persons.

And these words are words that are associated with religious ritual, temples, and sacredness in the past—the *temenos*, the *tabernacle*, the *sanctum*. Obviously we get our word *sanctification* from that word *sanctum*. Just as one would treat a divinity. Just as one would treat a divinity. And again, this doesn't need to be too heavy or too rigid. But there's something of a kind of reverence for the relational field, for the sharing, for the space that's really important here. Just as one would treat a divinity, a God—just as one would be and create, be in the presence of a God and one would create for the presence or in the presence of a God.

Now, someone might say, "But that sounds like some kind of religious dogma and realism, like you're saying this is divine, you're saying you need this thing." If someone were to say something like that, we could explain it more like this: We could say that in order that you have the sense, the perception, the felt sense of divinity arise in a way that is soul-making for you and or for another... And the sense of divinity, remember, is an aspect, an element, a dimension of the imaginal constellation of the sensing with soul that we talked about in the way that we're using those terms.

In order that you have that sense, that actual experience of the divine—at least the dimensionality and movement into the sense of divinity of the erotic, imaginal other, of what is sensed with soul—you need to treat an image in a particularly caring and respectful way. That is, with some kind of temenos, as I've just described.

This is not religious dogma, nor like you need to perform some special rite. It's simply a psychological insight: you need to care for this stuff. You need to care for these experiences. You need to care for these senses that you have of things. And you need to care for yourself and other in relationship around them. It's just a psychological insight. It's also an insight into the dependent arising of perception.

In other words, if I don't care—if I don't care for this possibility of a certain perception, in this case a perception of divinity—that perception of the divine either won't arise, or it won't arise in the other, or it won't get communicated. Or it might be there to start with and then will be dissolved because it doesn't have the vessel, if we use the alchemical term. It doesn't have the temenos, the tabernacle.

So a temenos can be supported by actually ritualizing the time and space. That's one way of supporting it—creating a ritualized space together. This may involve candles and incense; it may not. But it might, and such things might absolutely serve the intention. An interview, actually, between a teacher and a student, is also a kind of ritualized space. There's a form, and you sit a certain way, and there's a time frame, and there's a very specific intention, and there's a kind of focus there.

At the same time, though, a formal or ritual space does not guarantee a temenos. So the presence of the temenos is actually a subjective thing. It's not something you can objectify. Just because I burn some incense and light a candle and burn some sage, I'm not necessarily creating a temenos. It's a subjective thing—an experience, or if you like, an element of experience that one or more people have.

And it depends also on the qualities of attention, sensitivity, openness, emotional attunement, conceptual attunement, emotional energy, body awareness. All these factors are actually really necessary elements in creating a temenos, in establishing a temenos. Without any one of those, it will probably fall apart. That's partly why I said an interview works, because a lot of those qualities are gathered together there in the interview format.

So it's not so much the rituals themselves. As I said, these factors—these factors of soul, factors of consciousness, factors of intention—are themselves more likely to be gathered together and supported through establishing some kind of ritual or special vessel or space. In other words, the burning of the candle, the incense, does help sometimes to gather those qualities of consciousness and qualities of intention. But it's really those that make the space.

One last thing about temenos for now, related to what we just said: I don't think there are definite rules in establishing a temenos. As I said, nor is it that a temenos is only or always created by or in a formal space or time.

Rather, the soul-making that is possible in relationship through sharing images and perceptions is fragile. It's easily fractured. It's easily smothered. It's easily covered over, it's easily withdrawn, it's easily deprived of its ground, or if we borrow our alchemical metaphor, its incubating vessel. That's another word for a temenos—it's an incubating vessel.

So, for example, some kind of pressure emanating from one person to another, from one party to the other—some kind of demand, some kind of need that is not openly expressed. So I'm bringing this need and this demand to this interaction where an image is being shared, either I'm sharing with you or you're sharing with me, and either it's not okay or it's not really clear that that's what's going on. Or it's got other, more less obvious or slightly murky complexities attached to it, this need or this demand that I'm bringing, that I'm not quite aware of.

That's enough. Something like that, that kind of pressure or influx, is enough to puncture or collapse any possibility of temenos there. And then the soul-making in that moment, and what the other person can take in, and what can ignite in them, and what happens to one's own soul-making—all of that is compromised.

So again, with the temenos, part of that is in the realm of relational skills. The necessity of relational skills, sensitivities and attunements in order for soul-making to be possible in relationship with another is clear. It's part of what's involved in creating a temenos.

And soul-making is helped by a temenos. Sometimes we're deliberate in the creation of that. Sometimes it's very easy, just a very easily established thing. Other times we have to take a little care and find our way to create the temenos here.

But again, all of this—actually everything I've said tonight—I really want to be encouraging and not discouraging.

And at the same time, I want to point out there's this and there's this, and this is the way to really care for this. If you love, if you feel drawn, if you have the desire to explore these things, it's good to take all this into consideration and build these capacities. Sometimes that's slow and gradual, and sometimes it's much easier, but it's all doable, it's all developable—everything that I've talked about is accessible.

To walk this path and to develop these facets and these building blocks, these foundations, is such a gift. These are gifts to oneself, all of this: the emotional awareness, the energy body awareness, the relational skills, the taking care of spaces, the awareness of all that and the capacity to tend and care for all that. All of these things that I've mentioned and others this evening—such a gift to oneself for one's practice, for these particular practices, for one's wider practice, and for one's existence, for one's life.

And I think you can probably really hear that it's also a gift to others and actually a gift to the world to develop this. Really doable, really developable, really possible. The fruits, the bounties, the beauty of all this are there for us if we want them.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 117

Dukkha and Soul-making (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 44 min

> *In this second part of his exploration of dukkha and soul-making, Rob Burbea delves into the practical elements necessary for sustainable imaginal practice. He emphasizes the importance of pacing - knowing when to open to new experiences and when to consolidate and deepen with particular images, desires, or insights. Burbea discusses the need for balance between practices that build equanimity (samādhi, mettā, mindfulness, emptiness practices) and practices of eros that engage with imaginal figures and soul-sensing.*
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> *The talk addresses common concerns practitioners have about soul-making work, particularly around sexual erotic imagery and 'darker' images. Burbea emphasizes that imaginal images have an iconic, non-escalating quality that distinguishes them from ordinary fantasy. He explores the fear that such practices might reinforce kilesas (mental defilements) or lead to psychological instability, explaining how proper practice actually expands our sense of sacredness rather than feeding greed or delusion.*
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> *Central to Burbea's teaching is addressing the fundamental issue of realism - the fear either that imaginal experiences reveal something problematic about oneself, or conversely, that engaging with non-consensus reality is dangerously delusional. This leads into his concept of the 'imaginal middle way,' which navigates between naive literalism and dismissive reductionism, treating imaginal experiences as neither purely real nor purely unreal but as meaningful encounters in their own right.*

Let's continue by looking at some of the elements we need to take into account and bring into our awareness on this path of soul-making—if this vehicle, this soul-making vehicle of jhana, is not going to spring a leak, run out of steam, or blow a fuse. In other words, what are the elements we need to be aware of and care for if imaginal practices, sensing with soul, and soul-making practices in the broad range of what that means for us are not going to actually increase dukkha?

On Pacing

One crucial area is pacing. I've touched on this already several times on different occasions. You may have heard me say that one way of conceiving the goal—if we can even use that word—or the direction, or the delivery of this kind of path, is as a potentially infinite and endless opening of soul-making, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

With that comes the accessibility and development of facility and flexibility with a whole range of possible ways of looking and ways of conceiving. Broadly speaking, this could be conceived as the goal or direction of this entire path.

When we put it that way, the emphasis is really on flexibility and opening, and it sounds like there's going to be this kind of endless movement, always moving from one thing to another, always opening to the next thing. In reality, that would be misleading and would overemphasize the movement aspect, giving a sense of constant movement. Whereas sometimes what happens on our path—at any point in the path—is that we need to hold onto or stay with something.

I don't just mean the breath, but it can mean that. It might be a logos that's opened up: a new idea about divinity, or about self, or about soul, or something psychological. Something has just opened here. Then we need to settle with that new thing, keep that in our sights, keep that plugged in. We need to keep coming back to that logos, use it, orient from it and around it and to it, and let that do its work.

In other words, there's an opening, but then we need to hold on to something, stay with something. It could be an image. We've talked a lot about this in the past regarding pacing with images: when to deliberately bring in an image that has worked for us before, when to just be open for new images, or whatever comes. Or it may be a desire or a movement of eros. It's not just that we want to feel that eruption of flame in the being, the energy and the psyche—sometimes that desire or eros, we need to really steady with it and focus on it.

Let it fill the body, fill the psyche, let it align the being. This is incredibly important when it comes to steadiness, equanimity, devotion, and commitment in the long term. Just letting our desires run deep—and because they run deep, they root us deeply. It's really like having a root deep into the earth. When we take time with our deep desires, let them run deep, let ourselves feel them run deep, and let ourselves almost be constellated or constructed—our very body and psyche constructed from the base of that desire—like it's one of the foundations of being.

So rather than just this desire, that eros, this image, another eros, another idea—all these aspects of eros, psyche, and logos may need us, after the initial opening which reveals the new aspect and presents it to us as a possibility, to really steady with that for a while. And that could be quite a while, or shorter, or whatever. We might need to return to it deliberately over and over, recall it deliberately, use it.

In principle, then, there's an opening, but then there's some kind of closing—closing around what has been revealed in that opening, what has been gifted to us in that opening, what we have discovered or created in that opening. Some kind of grasping of that new logos, new image, new desire, and grasping it for a while, consolidating it, strengthening our connection with it and our accessibility to it, the vividness of it, the power of it.

Otherwise, if it's only endless opening—certainly if it's only of ideas and logos or images or desires—it's just going to be chaotic. There's not going to be that steadiness, that strength, that grounding. And nothing really transforms. It feels like it's always constantly erupting new stuff and turning, and I don't know where I am. It can be kind of exciting, but one of the potential drawbacks, if it's just this kind of opening again and again, only opening, is that it's not actually, in the end, that transformative. It doesn't go deep and become fertile and potently meaningful and transformative in our lives.

So when we talk about pacing, some wisdom has to come in. Yes, a vision of increasing fluidity, flexibility, availability of ideas, conceptual frameworks, ways of looking—and also of that potentially infinite and endless expansion, deepening, widening of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. But what that means from day to day, from moment to moment, is that there's a wisdom regarding fluidity and stability, consolidation, settling, staying steady with whatever that aspect is.

Integrating with Other Practices

Related to this—and I think I've said this before on a couple of retreats—if you're working with this material on retreat and wanting to incorporate soul-making practices into your retreat life and schedule, know that it's probably not good to be doing imaginal practices all day long and nothing else. We dip in and out, a little or a lot as suits and serves, into practices of the erotic imaginal. Within that context of moving in and out, when we move out, we move into other practices.

Other practices are really helpful complements and supports to practices of the erotic imaginal, sensing with soul. In a way, I would view them as one kind of larger mandala or integrated set of practices and approaches that form the soul-making path.

Dwelling in the energy body with that sensitivity permeating the body. Either developing samadhi or metta or being with the emotional life. Emptiness practices of different kinds, to whatever depth one's familiar with—and one can always develop that too, alongside or before or afterwards. Mindfulness of any kind. All these are really helpful complements to the soul-making practices.

say auxiliary - that makes them sound secondary - they all fit together to form, to tessellate together, to form this bag of (not really tricks, but) practices and approaches that are really helpful to the whole movement and ship-shapedness of our vehicle, if you like, and also the efficacy of the soul-making practices - their sustainability, but also their depth in the moment.

So really, any practice that decreases fabrication of perception in the moment - perception of self, other, world - will be a good mix with the soul-making practices and imaginal practices. As I've said, most imaginal practices are actually practices of skillful fabrication. In contrast to practices that fabricate less in the moment, fabricate less perception - emptiness practices, metta, samadhi, even mindfulness fabricates less to a small degree. These are all practices that fabricate less perception. Imaginal practices and sensing the soul are practices that fabricate perhaps a tiny bit less, but are actually engaged in skillful, what we might call skillful soul-making fabrications of perception.

So another way of conceiving of this mix is that there are practices that, again very broadly speaking, build equanimity directly. For example, samadhi practices, generally speaking; metta practices; brahmavihara practices; mindfulness; emptiness. Generally speaking, although they can also be quite exciting in terms of the energies they release at times, the movement of those practices is toward more equanimity. So you've got that on one side, that group of practices. On the other side you've got what we could call the practices of eros - actually opening to the desire and the eros and the erotic imaginative.

One can think about loosely speaking having a balance of those practices. It doesn't need to be fifty-fifty, and the balance itself will be fluid of course. But we need both. We can't just be plugged into these super intense erotic imaginal practices all the time. It's super exciting, but it's going to tip the boat over at some point, or just burn the engine.

I've talked before, particularly in the Eros Unfettered retreat, about the possibilities of working within the erotic imaginal practice, with the sensing the soul, and actually by a nuanced, delicate responsiveness and skill in those practices, balancing those practices at the same time as one is engaged in them. So instead of going back and forth between these kinds of practices and those kinds of practices, actually giving attention, for example, to the spreading of the soul-making toward self, other, and world equally; to the ways the energy might expand or need to move in the energy body; to bringing in different ways of looking; to ways of relating to desire, for example, with the opening to the current of desire practices; to being aware of where in the soul-making dynamic which of the elements of Eros-Psyche-Logos may be inhibited right now and may be

blocking the soul-making and so kind of tipping things over or drowning them a little bit. And allowing it to spread there, and so helping to balance the whole soul-making process.

We've talked a lot about that. But broadly speaking, there's a back and forth one can engage in between different kinds of practices, and also a perhaps more sophisticated balancing at the same time within the practices of the erotic imagination, within the practices of sensing the soul.

Again, if you've listened to a number of talks already - and sometimes I know we're supposed to listen in order and I know that people don't - if you've listened to our series, and perhaps you're on retreat or something and trying to practice with this stuff, just to say it's really not necessary to do all the practices or anything you don't feel comfortable with. You shouldn't force yourself. If that's not obvious, I'm saying that now.

And even more broadly to say, this soul-making business and these kinds of practices - it's just not everyone's cup of tea. Some people will never be interested in this stuff, and that's completely and utterly fine. Souls are different, and they're drawn to different paths for lots of different reasons. So if you're listening to this stuff, please don't buy into some should. If it just doesn't attract you, let it go. There's plenty of other practice possibilities. Even if you're ambivalent, don't force yourself to think, "I really need to do that practice and that practice. That one sounds a little hairy, but I should make myself do it." Please don't think that way.

So again, there's pacing with all this. Many people do find themselves ambivalent. They're deeply drawn to these kinds of teachings and practices, and at the same time, they're really ambivalent, really unsure for different reasons. If that's the case for you - if it's not just a question of "Actually, this isn't really my thing, I'm not really drawn here," but there's this ambivalence - then I would encourage, first, perhaps talking to one of the teachers that's very versed in the soul-making paradigm and sets of practices. But also just a gentle questioning with yourself: What actually is the fear? Why do I feel reluctant to engage or explore such practices? What assumptions perhaps are involved in whatever fears might be operating or concerns?

Really, as always with fear, it's generally good to let it become more conscious. Oftentimes - I've said this many times before - oftentimes we're bullied, pushed and pulled and inhibited and shut down and directed this way and that by fear, and we're not even fully conscious of what exactly it is that I'm afraid of, what exactly it is that I'm assum-

ing here. So I'm saying this as an invitation to a real gentle, caring, careful and thorough inquiry, not as just another fancy way of saying "get over it and move on and push yourself through into these practices" at all.

So timing - again related to pacing - timing with all this, and timing with also questioning oneself or inquiring what's going on for me if I feel ambivalent. Time is a matter of respect and sensitivity. I need to sometimes respect my concerns and my fear and be sensitive to when is the right moment to turn to them and say, "Now what's going on for me? What's going on in my heart and soul that there's this...?"

This fear or refusal or ambivalence about taking another step—sometimes that needs to be respected, sometimes we need to be sensitive to even the fact that it's there and not push through something, a kind of ambivalence that we haven't even noticed because we weren't paying attention to how we felt.

So on the one hand, timing is a matter of respect and sensitivity. On the other hand, there's also a place for courage and boldness and fire in these explorations—certainly, but also in the exploration of the relationship with the explorations, if you follow what I mean.

Some people may well think, and I know people have said to me, that these practices and these teachings are dangerous, or they sound dangerous. It's usually they *sound* dangerous, because it's usually someone who's not really engaging who's saying that. And I mean, you might say, "Yeah, maybe, but dangerous to what? What is it that you're thinking or assuming or concerning yourself with there?"

So oftentimes a person will worry that allowing eros to arise—especially allowing sexual eros to arise, or allowing other desires and their energy to open, as we teach in different practices in different ways—that this can only be encouraging and feeding and reinforcing the kilesas: movements of greed, because greed and desire are the same, or delusion, because fantasy and image must be delusion, or attachment, and so on.

This is really important to check out. I can say to you, it's not the case. Practices with wisdom, with sensitivity, with care, with responsiveness—soul-making practices and entering this kind of conceptual framework with all that care and responsiveness—it's just not the case. Now, only you, if you have that concern, can actually verify that for yourself. But I think you will find that it's so. And in a way, what we're talking about in this talk now, in these different parts of this talk, is: what exactly do I need to care for? What exactly do I need to keep my eye out for? What exactly needs to be in place in order that we don't just end up feeding the kilesas and thus feeding dukkha?

A second concern sometimes that people have, related of course, is that sometimes people are happy talking about using the word "imaginal" and using it in a slightly different way, as I pointed out in the first talk, and using it in a way that I would say is a little more tame, a little less radical, a little kind of safer, and a little more under the thumb of the self, really, of the ego. And so this relates to sometimes the way Jung would encourage people to think about things. So people often say, "Yeah, working with the imaginal and kind of engaging the sub-personalities."

And I just want to point out again that that wouldn't be—that way of thinking about things wouldn't be quite what we mean by the imaginal and by sensing the soul. "Sub-personalities" in the very word, in the nomenclature there, implies "sub." It's less than something. Less than what? Less than the ego or the self. There's something that's got the final say and is bigger than. "Sub" means less.

So this self is keeping my eye on things, keeping sort of in charge and organizing and overviewing, of which there are these little sub-personalities which can be fascinating and really helpful and bring some healing to integrate them into this bigger, superior personality or ego or whatever. And it can be really, really useful. And some people, that's what they want to do. That's the extent of their interest and engagement. And that's the extent of the kind of logos or conceptual framework that they're willing to play with. And that's absolutely fine.

I think we're going beyond that. And because of this sense that these elements that I outlined in the first talk—part of the imaginal, part of recognizing what we call the imaginal, an imaginal figure—means autonomy, means divinity, means unfathomability, means in some way, I cannot figure out or get to the bottom of this imaginal figure. In some ways it's bigger than me. In some ways I am gifted something by something, by something I don't understand, by something that is larger, more mysterious than me.

Sub-personality, therefore, is really the wrong word. They are autonomous persons. We are, at least—let's say—we are entertaining that conceptual framework more often than not in our logos. So we're not putting these things in our pocket or harnessing them or something like that. There's a different stance, a different relationship, essentially really a different, as I said, different conceptual framework, deliberately entertained.

We can move in and out of that, absolutely, and put it down, adopt another one—even adopt the sub-personality one—but at times at least, and probably the favored one, is not to box them in and diminish these imaginal figures as sub-personalities.

So sometimes a person hearing that—sometimes people don't hear that and they just, again, just hear the word "imaginal" and assume sub-personality because they've heard that elsewhere in some psychological paradigm or other. And so they don't hear the difference. I've dwelt a lot on the differences. And sometimes people will hear this kind of, if you like, more radical vision, and it will be scary. "I'm going to be a split personality, I'll have split personality disorder," or "That sounds bonkers, isn't that what crazy people do?" and all this. So that might be a fear.

But again, is that really what happens? Is that really the consequence of this practice when we take care, when we develop these elements, when we cultivate responsiveness, when insight and wisdom emerge? I really don't think so. Rather, something more powerful and radical and far-reaching opens for us. A much vaster landscape of soul is revealed when we don't limit what emerges—for example, constraining an imaginal figure to the category of sub-personality.

A third area that can generate concern—and again, it's a valid concern—is that this work sometimes involves a radically different way of conceiving and thinking about practice, path, life, existence, being, and every element of existence and the universe. This isn't merely engaging these thoughts idly or abstractly in ways that don't make a difference, but actually employing them. Again, when I use the phrase "entertaining certain conceptions," I mean plugging them in, seeing through those lenses, sensing through those lenses, and actually feeling palpably in the body, emotions, and soul what difference this makes to our sense of things.

In engaging these concepts and practices, there can be what I've discussed over the past few years—this "breaking of the vessels." This Kabbalistic concept describes something that stretches and sometimes shatters some old way of thinking, relating, conceiving practice, or understanding self. There can be this fracturing, this breaking of the vessels.

While there's a gift in this process, it's not always easy when we reach certain points. When a vessel breaks that we've grown accustomed to, or when it stretches to a point of tension and discomfort, the experience can be challenging. It's not always a smooth cruise. When these periods arrive in our lives—and I hope they do, because this is how psyche works at times, through the breaking of things—they become part and parcel of growth, of movement, of the opening and deepening of the soul-making dynamic over time.

When these experiences come, whether in small ways or larger ones, they require tremendous equanimity and wisdom to navigate the fracturing, opening, and rebuilding of something new. Someone hearing these teachings might sense the potential for

breaking out of structures they've grown accustomed to, structures that may have supported them for a while but have passed their expiration date and become inhibiting. This possibility can feel worrying or daunting.

Returning to what I mentioned earlier—first, the larger-scale pacing involved in this path. This breaking of vessels, as the Kabbalah calls it, can happen across different domains of our life. Sometimes it occurs even when we're not engaging in soul-making, as part of maturing and growing up as human beings. It happens anyway, so it can be part and parcel of what this path catalyzes for us.

As I said, the path doesn't involve constant opening and fracturing, with endlessly new things slipping and sliding. There must be times for integration, consolidation, settling, rebuilding—for getting used to new structures, building new ones or allowing them to be built, then learning from them as I mentioned at the beginning. There's a movement between what we might call building and breaking, consolidation and shattering. This rhythm is part of our life anyway, as it should be. If it's absent, one might wonder what's happening in one's life—one would probably feel quite dead as a human being without this dynamic.

The second point I mentioned concerns questioning and the encouragement to inquire. Inquiry and questioning are dangerous endeavors—very dangerous because of exactly what we've been discussing: the breaking of vessels. When we inquire and question, we push against old structures, challenging them. Sometimes inquiry carries enough force, vitality, and soul that things break, whether intra-psychically or extra-psychically.

Yes, questioning can be dangerous. As I've said, it requires respect, sensitivity, and not forcing, but also courage, boldness, and fire. Questioning can be dangerous, but what's more dangerous than questioning—always in the long run—is not questioning. In fact, if we never question, there's an enormous cost to the soul from living a life without inquiry.

Just a couple more points for today. A reminder regarding typical areas where people feel nervous, ambivalent, or unsure about these teachings—obviously not just regarding eros generally, but specifically when the eros is sexual.

So when engaging and exploring the sexual, erotic, imaginal in practice, some people find this worrisome. I'm not going to repeat this endlessly, but we're talking about cultivating deep mindfulness, sensitivity, care, and respect—all in service of the movement toward opening divinity.

What one will quickly realize—and this bears repeating—is that when an image is truly imaginal, including an erotic sexual image, it has that quality of being iconic, as I mentioned. This means it's almost non-narrative in nature. For sexual erotic imagination, this translates into something quite remarkable: it doesn't tend to escalate. Unlike the sexual fantasy or imagery we might usually relate to, which builds toward some final denouement or climax, imaginal erotic imagery has a different quality altogether. It might simply be a single instant captured like an icon, something we resonate with deeply. It has this quality of not needing to escalate.

From the very beginning of teaching the imaginal, I have encouraged—with varying emphasis at different times—the inclusion and trusting of what we might call darker images. This means moving beyond the nicey-nicey, the all-white angels and cherubs, though these certainly have their place in the landscapes of the soul. But there are darker images too: more voracious, more carnal, sometimes seemingly violent. We've spoken of images of devouring and such things. I don't know if I mentioned this before, but "devour" may be related, for the soul, to "devoted."

These images are often not what the mind fears them to be. Even if they seem genuinely unhelpful, there are usually ways of relating that can redeem them, transform them, liberate the sacredness that's actually within them, reveal the treasure they contain. It's not a matter of evil or doing something strange. It's all in the ways of looking.

So there's this encouragement—again, at your own pace and only when it feels comfortable—to include what we might call darker imagery, including the sexually darker. For some, this comes very easily; it's already part of what they feel comfortable with in their sexuality. For others, less so. There are many reasons for this difference—education, past history, wounding. And souls are different. Some souls, if you like, have more darkness in them. This isn't good or bad; it's simply character. Some have less.

Part of this whole discernment process with soulmaking involves recognizing what is given to me rather than trying to fit into some pattern that's actually someone else's soul pattern. But with all this—with the sexual erotic imaginal and with the darker images or darker sexual imagery—when they're there, they're there. The divinity becomes clear. And as we've established, that aspect of divinity or theophany is one of the elements of the imaginal.

One starts to see that sacred presence, to feel the dimensionality, to sense the love—and implicit in love is respect—all these factors begin to emerge, and one starts to trust the whole process more. Sometimes, as I've pointed out, just a drop of trust at the beginning can allow these other elements to reveal themselves, and then we can let them become more illuminated and amplified.

But for me, what's possible here and what's most important is this logos and potential: the expansion of our sense of sacredness. Even in those areas that seem like the opposite of what the mind says is sacred, or that can't be sacred, or where I tend to feel sacredness only in certain expressions—this whole movement of soulmaking offers an important potential for recognizing the particularity of different kinds of sacredness. Not just a universal "everything is sacred, everything is perfect," but this particular theophany, that particular theophany, through this particular thing, that particular expression. This is central to the opening up of soulmaking.

But really, with all these cautions, what I think is most commonly at the root of people's fears, concerns, or ambivalences is the issue of realism. It's perhaps the most basic problem, sometimes underlying other apparent difficulties. This is what we encounter most frequently.

A person might be dealing with an image that feels scary, that doesn't fit their idea of what's holy or acceptable. Sometimes they fear this means something specific about them—that they're bad, that they have some strange pathology. There's a kind of reification, really an identification, and this brings up fear. It's fear that the image is really saying something definitive about who they are.

On the other hand, there can be fear that this image or entertaining this image is precisely not real. By engaging with what is not real—simply because it involves imagination, or because it doesn't conform to consensus reality, the socially agreed-upon, dominant cultural worldview—they fear they're practicing and reinforcing a dangerous disconnection from reality. They worry about being out of touch with something called reality.

With either of these fears—whether it's fear of what this means about me, or fear that I'm encouraging myself to be out of touch with so-called reality—the question becomes: what will be the consequences of either of those concerns?

With either of those fears—whether it's a fear of what this means about me, or that this will somehow manifest, or because I have an image and it must be a premonition, or it's a fear that I'm encouraging myself to be out of touch with so-called reality—the consequences become: "I will do this, it will get out of hand," etc.

Underneath all this, underneath what we're talking about with the fears around sexual, erotic, imaginal—with almost anything—most common underneath it all, most basic as a kind of issue or problem that needs attention, is the realism. That's why we talk so much about the imaginal middle way, about the theatre quality.

So let's come back to that. The imaginal middle way recognizes that images are neither purely subjective fantasies nor literal objective realities. They exist in a third space, a sacred theatre of soul where meaning unfolds through participation rather than belief or disbelief. When we approach our inner images—whether erotic, mystical, or otherwise—with this middle way understanding, we can engage them fully without the paralyzing fears of either "this must mean something concrete about me" or "this is dangerous unreality."

This theatre quality allows us to be present with the image, to let it reveal its depths and teach us, while maintaining the wisdom that we are participating in a sacred play of consciousness. The image becomes a doorway to understanding, to beauty, to the expansion of our being—not a threat to our sanity or a burden of literal meaning we must carry.

In this way, the imaginal becomes a profound spiritual practice, a way of engaging with the depths of existence that honors both the reality of our inner experience and the creative, non-literal nature of the soul's expression.

CHAPTER 118

Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h44

> *In this third part of his exploration of dukkha and soulmaking, Rob Burbea continues examining how we can relate wrongly to imaginal practice in ways that create unnecessary suffering. He focuses particularly on issues of realism, reification and identification with images and soul perceptions.*
>
> *Burbea shares personal examples of creative loneliness and questions whether apparent attachment to certain images requires liberation in the traditional Buddhist sense, or whether there might be a duty to imaginal figures that includes accepting some dukkha. He explores the impossibility of perfectly manifesting images in material life, and the polytheistic nature of our inner imaginal figures with their conflicting demands.*
>
> *The talk delves into complex ontological and epistemological questions about the nature of erotic-imaginal perception, presenting a spectrum from "creating something unreal" to "discovering the real" to participatory ontologies where self, other, world, mind and divinity all participate in each other. Burbea emphasizes maintaining eros rather than letting it shrink to craving, connecting with the fullness of intention for the whole of soulmaking, and recognizing that images ask for other images rather than only conceptual responses. Throughout, he balances practical advice with profound philosophical inquiry into the nature of reality and perception in imaginal work.*

Let's continue our consideration of some of the ways in which we can perhaps get hold of the wrong end of the stick, so to speak, with imaginal practice—grasp it in the wrong way, relate to it, and conceive of it in ways that actually bring unnecessary dukkha. Opening up that awareness, what do we need to pay attention to? What do we need to consider and take care of in order that this jhana, this vehicle of soul-making, works for us and is actually able to do what we intuit that it can do, and perhaps even more?

Let's continue and pick up where we left off in the last part of this talk with the whole issue of realism, reification, and identification in relation to images and what we sense with soul.

In this part of the talk, I certainly want to offer some hopefully helpful advice regarding this whole question of what we need to care for and how we can actually make sure that we're not just increasing dukkha through trying to engage in imaginal practice—how we can actually prevent that.

So part of what I hope to do is offer some hopefully helpful advice. Another strand of what I want to do is less about me telling you how it is, me having the answers and disseminating them, but rather trying to open up some questioning, open up the discourse around certain aspects of existence. I want to in part ponder out loud with you without having the answers myself.

Some of what I want to touch on regarding ontology and epistemology, and how that weaves into this paradigm of soul-making, this path of soul-making, and the practices of sensing with soul—some of all of that, regarding ontology and epistemology, is perhaps not given to human beings, and perhaps never will be given to human beings, to know definitively. These are open questions of ontology and epistemology.

How we relate to the impossibility of arriving at some final answer regarding ontology and epistemology that satisfies everyone in every realm of existence—the fact of that, how we relate to that fact of impossibility—either we make it interesting and fertile, or we just close it down. It becomes a barren wasteland, an area that is not supporting soul-making and that itself is not opened through soul-making.

So some of what I'd like to go into is really just opening up a discussion, pondering, wondering out loud with you.

When I survey the problems we get into with sensing with soul and imaginal practice, realism of one kind or another is the most common problem. In many ways, it's at the root of other problems. A problem or difficulty one encounters, or a way that dukkha is created, might seem at first that it's not to do with realism, but we can expose or trace it back to some kind of realism going on underneath. In that sense, it's the most basic as well as the most common problem.

Included in that are the kinds of ways it spins out or tangles a web for us. Something in us concludes: this image or this sense that I have of whatever I'm sensing with soul means this or that about me. Either we get puffed up by that because we're believing that to be true, or we worry about ourselves—we worry about our sanity, we worry about our goodness or badness, we worry about all kinds of things.

Another possibility is that I perceive this such-and-such imaginally, this image or imaginal figure, and then we take it as indicating: this is what will happen in my life, this is what will unfold in the material world. Or we take it as meaning: this is what I should do. In the squeezing of a sense of duty, there's too much concretization, too much literalization of the image. What I should do becomes too clumsy and clunky and too plainly translated into life.

Those are some of the obvious and immediate ways that perspectives of realism—usually unconscious, in that we don't really quite understand that we're in the grip of realism—can manifest.

One of the symptoms of realism is that it often goes with a kind of pendulum motion, an almost violent swinging from one extreme to the other. Realism tends to lead to swings in view—big, diametrically opposed, polarized swings in view or opinion, and also in the sense of things.

For example, between a kind of self-elevation on one side and then swinging to self-deprecation or self-abasement on the other side. In other language, swinging between a kind of grandiosity of the self and inner critic putting down of the self. Realism will tend to pick up those extremes and believe in them and swing between them without much in the middle. We're either pumping ourselves up and believing that kind of reification of grandiosity about ourselves, or the opposite—we believe in our worthlessness, failure, badness.

Similar and related to that is the swing between what we might call mania and depression, to use words from clinical psychology—the high of mania and the low of depression. With that comes a believing in a concretized, reified self-view, a rigid identity in either extreme, and also a believed-in, rigidified worldview that goes with either the extreme of mania or the extreme of depression.

These swings are indicators that we haven't really found that territory of the middle way. If I look at my history and experience and see that swing, that pendulum swinging between these poles, it's a signal that something around realism and the imaginal way needs more opening up for us, more vivification for us.

I'll add this as well, as it's related: what I also notice is a kind of swinging between what we might call realist religious dogma or religious fundamentalism on one hand, and a realist secularist dogma or fundamentalism on the other hand. This is quite an interesting thing to witness as well—that a person can be so entrenched in some kind of religious dogma, really fundamentalism in the sense of "this is true, I insist that X is real and true," whatever that religious belief is.

And a little time later—sometimes just a year or whatever later—they're just as entrenched in what we might call a realist-secularist dogma or fundamentalism, denying the reality of what they used to believe in and insisting on the reality of a more so-called secularist view.

Or if there's not this kind of pendulum swing, then there's this very awkward and strange sort of coexistence of the two. So one's an ardent secularist while also having all kinds of strangely superstitious beliefs or attractions to the magical, the mystical, the spiritualist.

These kinds of patterns—this swinging pendulum between extremely entrenched views, opinions, and senses of things—are symptoms, as I said, that something about realism needs a bit more turning of the soil, a bit more opening up, a bit more space, a bit more investigation.

In a way, those kinds of manifestations of realism and the problems they cause are somewhat more obvious, and the answers with respect to them are also, I would say, a little bit more clear-cut. There's a whole realm—at least in my current thinking—of questions or manifestations around ontology and epistemology, manifestations of what possibly is a kind of reified identification or general reification, that are actually more subtle.

For example: Am I actually attached to a certain image? I can feel it's soul-making for me, it's beautiful, it's fertile, all of that's meaningful. I sense the divinity. I even sense the middle way with respect to it, and the theatre quality with respect to it, but is there some still kind of level of entrenchment or identification?

So I'm going to share something from my own history. Something I realize in sharing this is that I'm perhaps making myself vulnerable to accusations from certain people who have certain perspectives—that really all this that I'm sharing is just a sure indication of some kinds, probably plural, of various kinds of psychological pathology on my part. So I want to take that risk in the hope that this is helpful, partly because you might see in my sharing the detail here, you might see not exactly the same images operating, but maybe you can translate the kind of general framework of what I'm talking about into some of what you see in the way you relate to the images that are really meaningful and the fantasies that are really close to your soul that run through your life.

I also want to illustrate that for me, there's always a questioning. Here's this conceptual framework—I still want to be open to questioning it. Here's this image or the manner of my relationship to a certain image or fantasy, and I still want to be open to questioning that. Questioning: How is my relationship with that? What do I think about that? Is there another view possible? Is there another conceptual framework possible?

So in the spirit of that openness to questioning, and with the hope that it's all helpful, let me try and take my time and unfold it. It's a little bit involved.

Some time ago, quite a little while ago, I was talking with Catherine one night, and we were inquiring into—I can't remember what it was that brought this out, that made it sort of present for me—we were inquiring into a certain kind of pain that arises for me, for my soul, that's related to, very much entwined with, we could say, the pain of certain kinds of loneliness that come up often for me, or have come up in the past often for me over my life, around much of what we might call the creative work that I have done or that I do.

So that might be in music when I was a composer, or writing poetry, or also in teaching Dharma—especially the pain around where things are a little bit unusual in terms of what's being composed or the teachings that are being constructed or expressed, and may stretch sort of boundaries that are then current, or limits of the ways people tend to conceive this or that.

The image that had been alive for me for many years and through many of these different phases of sort of creative or artistic work—whatever you want to call it—was very powerful. It's not something that sounds particularly dramatic, perhaps, but it's powerful. It's powerful for my soul. A lot of inspiration, a lot of beauty, and also this kind of poignancy. It wasn't free of suffering in the usual sense. And it's what we might call an image of creative aloneness or—creative loneliness, actually, more usually, rather than just creative aloneness. Creative loneliness.

So the dukkha of loneliness wrapped up in an image that was also very powerful, deep, meaningful, fertile.

So the image of essentially working alone, often working very hard, and then in the perception that tended to come out of that image, the perception of not being understood as fully as I would like, and in that also occupying a somewhat—being a somewhat far-out figure, somewhat sort of liminal, at the edge, if you like, of any community, whether it's a musical community, artistic community, social community, dharma community, as well as in the larger culture, the larger culture of our society.

So that was an element of this, not just of the image, but also of the particular kind of pain that was kind of wrapped up in, woven into the image.

Also, the sense in the image of having to sort of do battle, in a sense—this echoing and being echoed of the warrior image that I've shared, the lone soldier image that I shared many times in the past—so battling sometimes with the very people that are listening to whatever it is or reading or whatever, battling in some sense certain views

about what art is or dharma is or this or that, or battling with authority figures, sometimes battling with both, and so having to battle to kind of express, manifest, bring into being what wants to come through me creatively.

Again, I'm sharing this. These are images that are very powerful, very close to my soul, close in to me, and I'm aware of how they could be perceived from certain psychological paradigms.

So Catherine and I were talking about this and kind of inquiring around this whole constellation of images or pattern with regard to certain images. And I realized as we were doing it, I realized a couple of things. One was that as we were inquiring, I was sort of assuming a little bit, or fearing in fact, that this inquiry had a kind of agenda and adopted a perspective which was presuming that it would be better if the loneliness weren't there. In other words, the loneliness is a signal that something is wrong. Something is being wrongly related to or over-identified with or whatever.

There was also a presumption that these images of creative aloneness needed transforming or healing, that they needed to be held differently so that my feelings and choices in behavior toward others in the larger community could be different and more as they ought to be.

In other words, there was this unspoken pressure in the inquiry—or my fear that there might be such pressure—coming from the culture, from myself, from whoever, that was pushing the idea that something was wrong here, that this needed to be different. The approach to the image seemed to want to transform it or relate to it differently.

The second thing I realized was that there was a subtle concern or fear of losing two aspects of this whole constellation of images, of this entire imaginal network that had become very precious to me and to my soul.

Somewhere in my being, there was a slight fear that if the lonely aspect of the image goes—or actually if any aspect of the image goes—then something of an integrated whole would be destroyed. Because the image is actually of lonely creative expression: lonely creative work, struggle, toil. The image is not of creativity with an optional extra of loneliness or aloneness that could be added or not. The concern was that I might lose the entire image.

And in losing the image, I would lose everything that goes with it—all those aspects and elements of image we've talked about. Beauty and love are inevitably woven into and with any imaginal figure. Beauty is there, even if it's very unconventional. It's the

beauty of the soldier solitarily fighting day after day through exhaustion. It had a kind of unconventional beauty to me, a surprising beauty—beauty in the large sense that is bigger than a narrow understanding.

And then also the love. In relationship with an image, there's a love of that image and a being loved by it. Because the imaginal figure opens into dimensionality and divinity, it becomes divine to us when we let it fill out. So wrapped up in the very imaginal experience is this love of and being loved by the divine, and the gorgeousness and grace of that.

There was a fear that if I somehow surgically removed the dukkha part of the image—the loneliness—I might actually lose it all because it's an integrated whole, and it's not possible to lose just a part of it.

The second concern was that I might lose the actual creative capacity and inspiration that I love, that is like lifeblood to me, that is a joy of my being, a thrill with which I have a profound sense of duty and beauty. I think it was Rilke who said he didn't want to be psychoanalyzed because he was afraid of losing the divine creative outpouring through that process.

Both of these gifts—the beauty and love, the divine beauty and divine loving and being loved, and also the capacity and inspiration for the kinds of creativity that I love—I've gotten used to them. They're deep treasures for my soul.

As we talked around and in and about this, something in the way we were talking didn't really shift much. The way I was approaching it didn't enable a release regarding this image of creative loneliness.

Then at some point—I don't know if it was later or during the discussion—something occurred to me. Over some years, there have been changes, transformations, evolutions in certain images that have been woven close into my soul and my soul movement and journey and expression.

That solitary soldier or warrior image doesn't arise so much these days. Sometimes that solitary wanderer image has been added to or has an extension where the wanderer, often walking alone through deserts in endless traveling, sometimes gets to rest. Sometimes he's taken into a tent in the desert and receives healing. His feet are massaged by angelic figures. There's a kind of divine or angelic succor given to him through another that addresses the wounds and marks of his solitary wandering, his bruised body.

It's not that the image has disappeared, but it's gotten a whole other part to it.

Images of a tramp or destitute figure, really at the edges of society, having nothing, sometimes receive nourishment and nectar from a goddess. These are very touching, very beautiful to my soul.

There's also a figure with considerably more weight and fleshiness than I have in this life, resting in a pool or jacuzzi, very at ease and relaxed, into resting and really not doing much, not going anywhere or getting anywhere or being in a supercharged, turned-on state. This figure emerges at times as an alternative to another archetypal image I think I shared some years ago, borrowed from the myth of Horus, the Egyptian falcon god.

This falcon god is born and immediately flies swifter and further out than all other gods before him. There's something in that image of quickness and fastness and brilliance, the far outness of it—he goes really far out. But then that far outness is both at times...

delicious, exhilarating, enjoyable, and at times exactly that far outness brings a kind of vulnerability of aloneness. So he has all this particular power of his kind of divinity that he manifests and expresses and enjoys and revels in, and it comes at cost. There's much more to the myth, and I think it's very beautiful—it touches me a lot. But the point is exactly that it touches me a lot. It's an archetype, an archetypal image that I can really resonate with and that moves me.

This stands in quite a contrast to this imaginal figure of this person just resting easily in a pool, without any sense of duty of having to fly far and fast. He has a very different kind of work—his work is to rest in this jacuzzi and to enjoy it and to luxuriate in it.

So in addition to the typical images that had persisted over really quite a long period of time, there arose gradually and slowly certain modifications or additions or extensions or alternatives to these images. The question I had originally was: was there an attachment to or an entrenchment in a particular image, like the image of the solitary wanderer, or Horus, or the solitary soldier warrior?

But in all these instances where the image, the original image, was broadened or supplemented with another related or complementary image—in all these instances, the extension, supplementation, complementation came through imaginal work. It wasn't through challenging the apparent attachment to the image intellectually, or questioning either explicitly or implicitly its health from the perspectives and standards of some other predetermined conceptual framework—for example, conventional

Buddhist teachings or the assumptions of contemporary psychodynamic or cognitive behavioral psychotherapies, all of which presume health looks like this and have both a logos and fantasies that run through them for what health looks like.

So it wasn't the kind of questioning coming from those perspectives. It wasn't a kind of intellectual challenging. It wasn't logical deconstruction of the image or some kind of reductionist approach. None of that—which I was happy to play with, and I think that's also an important point I want to stress—none of that made any real shift in, certainly in the depth of power of the original images, or in the kind of allegiance to them, the way something in my soul would keep coming back saying, "No, there's something about that, there's something about that that just feels more essential or more close to me." None of that had any effect really.

It was only through working actually over and over again, repeatedly, with the original image itself as it arose, without any agenda of changing or improving it. So to go back to that original fear I had about whether that was kind of sneaking into this inquiry—whether I actually had an agenda of changing or, quote, improving this image—the transformation, the opening up of this image, the broadening of these related images, happened through imaginal work, and not through imaginal work that was trying to change or improve the original image. Or it happened through imaginal work with other images which arose organically, or in imaginal work sensing with soul in the sense of experiences of life and relationship as imaginal perceptions when they naturally became images for the soul.

It was only in all of that imaginal work that the original image, whatever it was, was significantly modified, expanded, or made more flexible.

So that's one point there. Is it possible I'm attached to this image or too entrenched in a certain image or a certain way of seeing things? It may be through imaginal work, going deeper into that whole imaginal constellation or expanding the imaginal work without an agenda, that it's actually opened up, rather than necessarily just cutting off the image—although that is a possibility in some cases too.

In our inquiry, there was conceptual questioning and the possibility of looking at other different supportive conceptual frameworks. That's always going to be a fruitful and indispensable element of inquiry, and even soul-making inquiry. We did kind of turn the soil there. It helped. But to quote Russell Lockhart and Thomas Moore, two psychotherapists who work a lot with images and the imaginal: images ask for other images. This image, whatever it is that I'm entertaining, that I'm relating to, that I'm strug-

gling with, or that I'm questioning whether I'm entrenched in—images ask for other images rather than only conceptual responses or only heart and emotional responses. The image asks for other images. It asks for an opening up of more imaginal work.

And only those images that were discovered by the soul—or you could say given by the soul—were effective here in opening things up. It wasn't like the ego's idea: "I think we should throw in another image of a guy in a jacuzzi because that's really different from the falcon god guy." It arose organically. It was given by the soul to the consciousness. It was discovered by the soul rather than contrived, placed there in a contrived way by the ego's idea of what was right or wrong, or grasping too quickly at something that might be an opposite of that other image that I thought maybe I was entrenched in or attached to.

Not for the purpose of self-improvement or healing or whatever—that was not even in the thinking, in the paradigm, in working with the images. And I would doubt whether any of that—placing an image there in a contrived way or grasping at something to try and improve the self or heal—whether that would really be soul-making.

There's a lot more I'm saying here, and it brings us back to that question or that pondering when I talked about different fantasies of the past. Soul-making may well overlap with what we might call healing and liberating, but those aims and directions are not necessarily equivalent and interchangeable. It depends how we define things. So soul-making, yes—connection, overlap with healing—

healing and liberating, but not necessarily exactly the same thing, or we can simply substitute one word for another.

To open that up just a little bit now—I'll hopefully return to this in later talks—people often these days speak of healing, but what is meant when a person talks of healing? Who or what exactly is healed? Is it the self of modern ego psychology? Is it the self that is made to adapt or pretend or simulate, or to hide certain aspects while revealing others according to what the dominant culture deems acceptable? Until this self can be functional within the assumptions of our modernist Western capitalist society?

Is it the Self with a capital S that Jung speaks of? Is that what is healed? Is it the self as the process of the five psychophysical aggregates and their conditioning mechanisms in a temporally unfolding process? Is it the soul? And if so, what does that mean?

Similarly with the notion of liberation. What is liberation? Is it the liberation of Buddhism? Or if we say yes, which Buddhism? Whose Buddhism? Even if you listen to teachers just at Gaia House, you can see there's a pretty vast range in the conception of

what liberation is, where the path goes, what's possible, what we're even fundamentally addressing when we say dukkha. I'll come back to this. Even just among the teachers at Gaia House, let alone if we venture outside.

We tend to believe, partly conditioned by past teachings, that any apparent attachment to an image needs liberating. We need to liberate that attachment, undo it, find space, somehow make a movement toward non-attachment—something called non-attachment, space, liberation from any apparent attachment to an image. That would be the traditional view of healing and liberation.

So this idea instead—that perhaps we have, or might have, a duty of some kind to an image, to an imaginal figure, to a soul-making perception; that it somehow has a hold on us, places demands on us; that our soul somehow must answer, is called to answer (we're never made to answer—we're called, that's a better way of putting it); called to answer to this duty even if a certain amount of pain and suffering remain wrapped up in that image, without dissolving, wrapped up in the image and our relation to it—that's quite a different idea. Not, on the face of it, compatible with the usual contemporary notions of freedom and non-attachment.

James Hillman is quite extreme in this. He insists that pathologizing is central to soul-making. In stark contrast to traditional Eastern spiritual views of liberation and the whole path toward it—where it's simply about more and more space and more and more freedom—Hillman was quite insistent in his view that soul-making needs pathologizing. There's something about pathologizing, of making problems, of making dukkha, of being ensnared in dukkha that's essential to soul-making. You have two quite disparate views there.

I wonder about all this, and I wonder about the possibility of really daring to explore it while being aware of what teachings we're conditioned by, what authorities we defer to. Can we be bold and creative with the conceptual frameworks and ideas regarding all this? Is there a way of embracing all of that into one larger conceptual framework that's perhaps more subtle?

These questions around soul-making, around the path of soul-making, are really interesting questions for me. Part of why they're so interesting, rich, and exciting is that we can ask these questions in a way that also questions whether there is a truth to be discovered in the answers we may arrive at, or that we may create in asking the questions.

We can ask a question without believing or going into an idea that the answers to these questions are therefore going to be truths. We can—and it's my preferred mode, approach, attitude—realize, or let's say entertain the idea, that just as much as we can conceive of our questions potentially uncovering truths, we can view them also as creations. The questions lead to creations. They even lead to what we might call soul-making fictions. Any answers we arrive at or entertain, we can regard as creations and soul-making fictions. It's a very different idea from the answer being the truth.

With all that, we realize also—which makes the questions so exciting and rich to me—that the path that then unfolds for us, or that we create, if you like, discover and create, depends on the way we answer these kinds of questions about suffering, about attachment, about what healing means, about what liberation is, about duty or no duty, about pathology. The path that unfolds for us is dependent, as always, on the conceptual frameworks we form and adopt.

There's something here in this whole meta-paradigm, if you like, that's so rich, so exciting to me because of that liberation from a rigid notion of truth and discovery of truth.

It's more, if you like, in tune with the sort of potentially liberating issues of post-modern or even pre-modern ways of conceiving, rather than the typically modern approach. I've talked about some of that before, I think. But to me it makes it kind of fun and more exploratory, and the very questioning is participatory. It's open. It's an open field rather than a narrowing down. It's creative rather than limited, as it would be in a kind of realist or truth-assuming approach.

So I hope all that makes sense, and I hope it's helpful. There's quite a lot in there. But again, if we continue, there are subtle and complex and deep questions regarding the way the universe is, regarding ontology and epistemology that are kind of open. So as well as questions of identification and attachment, there are these bigger questions around ontology and epistemology.

Again, if we trace what we're doing here, as I said at the start of the talk, we're looking partly at ways in which realism can lead to identification, reification, attachment in ways that are not helpful and how that can be liberated. But there are also, as we get into this whole question of realism and dukkha more, we also realize that as well as potential over-identification, or the question of whether it's okay and fruitful to be identified and have that image closely woven into one's life—as well as the nuances and more subtle questions around those issues—there are also questions regarding ontology, epistemology, cosmology, which are more subtle.

So for example, I shared—I don't remember when, maybe in the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat—a sensing with soul of the bird song outside the window and how the song of the birds was kind of weaving my energy body, weaving my body and healing me. A very beautiful image, full of grace and loveliness. But I think I also shared, I hope I shared when I shared that image, that the meaning of healing was not closed down or limited or too narrow or put into a box.

Similarly, sometimes there are angels of light that come as if they're caring for me, breathtakingly beautiful, and also part of a healing. But with those images for me, there's a kind of openness to what healing means. In other words, I may well die soon. I know that. I know that I may well not survive this cancer. But it doesn't take away the sense of healing and the kind of sense of the possible reality of that healing. It's just that what healing might mean, including on a physical level of healing, might not mean surviving this cancer or this illness.

So if these angels of light—beautiful, radiant in terms of luminosity, radiant in terms of love—if these angels of light are caring for me, watching over me, if they are touching me, if they are interacting with me, if they are guiding things a little bit, if that's the sense, the imaginal sense, if that's the sensing with soul, it still does not mean, to my conception—and I don't have to work at this, it's just natural with that imaginal sense, with that sensing with soul—I'm still not guaranteed a certain outcome. There are no guarantees that just because angelic figures of light tend to me and minister to me and feel like they're interacting with matter, or the birdsong or whatever, it doesn't mean that there's necessarily this or that outcome.

So sometimes, several people say similarly, and I could say the same for myself, sometimes it feels like the trees care for me or the birds care for me, but that doesn't necessarily imply an outcome that suits my ego or just what I want. I might die. And yet that takes away nothing from the beauty or the reality or the healing of the sensing with soul, in my case, or in the case of others who've shared similar things with me.

Certainly, this to me is—again, I'm just opening doors for discussion and questioning. I don't want to close a door on the possibility of the material efficacy of prayer, of what we might call magic, or of the kind of intuition that a person might have of something that's happening in what we might say are the unseen realms. I don't want to close the door on that possibility.

But for me, one, it doesn't narrow down to a sort of tight meaning of what healing means. And it doesn't necessarily at all imply an outcome that my ego would be pleased with or would want. We're not really talking about that here. And that to me is part of the whole sense of sensing with soul. It's part of all those elements of the imaginal perception.

So with these kinds of senses—the trees and birds care for me, these angels, the bird song—there's a sort of aura or cloud or space around and imbuing the perception that's one of just more space. It's not so tight, it's not so narrowly grasped in terms of what it means and what it implies and what will happen and what I want. There is some kind of spaciousness of the Middle Way. The spaciousness of the razor's edge of the Middle Way. Some kind of questioning, some kind of acknowledgment of "I don't actually know what this means fully."

Sometimes—and it's actually relatively common if a person dares to let themselves sense something and sense in these ways—sometimes a person senses, and they might have different ways they articulate it to themselves or to others: "The universe wants something from me. I sense the universe wants something."

It might be more specific than that. I sense the universe wants something—not just something vague, but actually in this particular direction, this kind of thing or that kind of work.

I remember reading or hearing something about Princess Diana. I really don't know much about her or that whole situation—I was in the States for most of that time—but I remember she had said something to her father when she was young, in her teens and early twenties. She had been very strict with herself about maintaining her purity, and she told her father, "I have a sense I'm going to be in the public eye. I just have this sense, and somehow that's important."

I also remember hearing an audio snippet of an interview with John Coltrane. He was talking about a dream he'd had of a band, just before he left Miles Davis' group as a sideman to form his own band for the first time in a sustained way. He said he'd had this dream of a certain sound—this quartet with a particular quality. He was very careful in the interview, very humble. "I don't want to insinuate that I can see the future or anything like that, but I had heard this sound, this band, this quartet."

If you know what they call the classic John Coltrane quartet of his middle period, it really was a revolutionary sound in jazz—so groundbreaking, such an unbelievably rich and deep gift to the world. What came through him in his whole life, but especially that band in particular.

So I don't want to close the door on these kinds of possibilities—intuitions, prayer, what we might call magic. But there's something that makes me nervous when someone gets too tight with this, too reified, too identified, too believing. Alarm bells go off for me.

If we linger on this a little, someone might have—perhaps I may have had—an image of performing something in front of large crowds, music or whatever, and there's this sense, this gripping image that feels beautiful. But it's still worth asking with these kinds of things: what is essential to the image? If it's performing music in front of large crowds, is it the size of the crowd, the numbers, the amount of people in the audience that's actually essential?

It might be. As Diana said, "I feel like I'm going to be in the public eye"—a lot of people looking at me, under scrutiny. So the numbers might be essential to the image, but it's worth questioning because they might have nothing to do with it. Actually, it might be something quite else that's more essential and meaningful—more the core of the divinity and beauty and duty in that image.

Again, I'm opening up the conversation, hopefully the discourse, the questioning, the allowing of pondering and reflecting on certain possibilities, while expressing what I think is a healthy caution with all this.

To me, signals that one is on the right track are humility, reverence, duty—but a duty to whom and to what? To that toward which we are reverent and before which we are humble. That's what we have duty toward. It's not separate from ourself, but it's larger. It goes in those dimensionalities of divinity.

The image, the imaginal figure—it's me and it's not me. In that kind of middle way, me and not me, some of the graciousness with all this is able to come in—the fluidity, flexibility, non-rigidity. That's a signal too, that it's not so rigid in terms of what actually transpires. There's a sense in the reverence, in the humility, in the duty of unfathomability that's part of it. It's not so narrowed laterally, but also vertically.

Another thing I'd like to throw in—it's quite unusual, I'm not sure how to say it—but there's something in imaginal perception that carries with it a kind of impossibility: the impossibility of complete material manifestation, the impossibility of perfect replication of that image in one's life. Oftentimes imaginal things carry this impossibility with them.

In regard to that, there's going to be dukkha in the manifestation of whatever it is in my life that echoes or mirrors that image. Why? Because it's impossible to completely manifest that image. This has echoes of, or analogies to, what Hillman's getting at.

There's some dukkha related to soul-making work, some dukkha related to imaginal work. Part of it lies in the impossibility—on some level, it's impossible to completely manifest or perfectly replicate the image in one's life.

So what manifests is always less than, always an imperfect replication or imperfect refraction of the image.

There's also another kind of impossibility with regard to imaginal figures—the impossibility of manifesting everything that all the many angels and demons require of you, of me. In other words, we are complex. The psyche is complex. We don't have just one imaginal figure calling us. We have many, and they move in different directions. Often they have quite opposing styles, wishes, desires, movements, expressions, and systems.

When one begins to realize this—to borrow from Hillman—one recognizes a kind of polytheism within. Many angels, many daemons come to me, ask of me. I have a duty to many of them. And I cannot possibly do it all, and I certainly cannot possibly do it all at the same time.

To share from my own experience: there is a monk and there's a musician, to name just two. I certainly can't be a monk and a musician at the same time, certainly not in the Theravadan tradition. The degree of intensity and passion and devotion which each one asks for in their purity of their archetypal styles—for me, you can't do both. Either you're going to devote yourself to one or the other.

Many people have shared similar experiences: "I feel drawn to be a nun, but I'm an artist." There's the tendency to want to lock into a kind of reified view, a realist view: either I'm going to be a nun, or I'm going to be an artist, or I'm going to live on retreat, or I'm going to devote my time to making art and being busy in the world of art, trying to make a living that way.

But once we realize that this is our situation—this polytheism of angels and demons for many of us, for most of us, I think—we see that we can't possibly fulfill their conflicting demands and directions. We can't possibly manifest or express or commit to all of them at once in our life. So there's a kind of dukkha in that—the sadness, the grief even. I wish I could fulfill these callings that I have, these passions, these images that speak to me so beautifully. I wish I was able to fulfill them both in manifestation, expression, dedication, material manifestation. I wish I was able to do them both at once. Maybe one has periods in one's life, as I have, but still there's this dukkha.

This is related to something I want to return to regarding values and the way that values important to us also often conflict, are impossible to manifest and bring into being or pursue simultaneously. That's what's called antinomous—I'll come back to that in another talk.

But what this means is when I realize the polytheism there and the conflicting duties, the pulls and beauties there in my pantheon of imaginal figures of daemons and angels, then I realize I can't possibly reify too much. I can't possibly over-identify too much with "I am this and I am that," when this and that don't really go together, can't possibly be manifested together.

Seeing this, acknowledging it, opening out to that view of the wider complexity and polytheistic landscape of our psyche also helps—allows us to reify less, identify less with regard to imaginal figures, and so experience less dukkha.

Wrapped up in these points is another element I've touched on before: where there's eros, it will create and discover—or create/discover—more beyond. It will always create, discover more beyond what I already know, already have manifested, already am inhabiting, already am familiar with. Something transcendent—not beyond perception or sensing as far as the soul is concerned, but transcendent in and through. Eros always will create and find a way to create and/or discover more, more beyond.

It's really good to know that. Because of this quality—related to the pothos in the eros and the longing—there is this tonality, this flavor of some degree of dukkha, or at least potential for dukkha, in the beyondness, in the not-yet-ness, in the wanting more, not quite satisfied.

Rather than saying that's all just tanha and useless and craving that brings samsara, we're saying: ah, no, with the eros, there's the possibility of beauty and discovery and creation of divinity and all the soul-making. But because it has this beyond, this not-yet-ness to it, there can be the slight flavor of dukkha wrapped up in the eros, in the movement of eros.

But again, as we've emphasized in this series of talks, recognizing or noticing or paying attention to this aspect—the beyondness aspect of the imaginal—knowing that it will be there because of the eros, noticing it, tuning into it, will allow the whole thing to become more imaginative. This attention, noticing this node in the imaginal constellation, illumines that node, and then that illumines, ignites the whole constellation of the imaginal.

And then that brings with it what's obviously not real, because one of the other nodes that is ignited is the sense of theater or middle way. And rather, it's divine. The divinity also shows itself.

So it's not necessarily easy when we feel the dukkha of wanting more, or we feel we're a bit stuck on wanting something. But if we can notice that beyond aspect, recognize that it's part of what happens with eros, let that ignite within more and let that ignite the whole imaginal constellation, the whole imaginal perception, then there's more ease because we realize it's not real, we cling less, and there's more beauty and divinity. Not necessarily easy, but definitely possible.

And so there's a loosening of any tight craving or the grip of too much grasping, and so less dukkha.

Another way of approaching what we've just said is to say that in the experience of the imaginal, in the experience of sensing with soul, we can investigate both the object and the subject. Who am I now? Who is this now? What am I now? What is this now that is in relationship in the sensing with soul?

And that investigation is with eros, with the sensing with soul, with soul-making, with the imaginal. It's not a deconstructive or reductionist investigation, which would just inhibit or drain the life out of the whole sensing with soul. But in investigating who or what, again, we expand into the beyond, both of the object and also of the self, of the subject.

More imaginal, the imaginal middle way opens up. It's obvious that this what—that I perhaps am feeling dukkha with because I'm grasping too much and wanting it or something or other, some kind of grasping, there's some kind of dukkha there—it becomes clear in the imaginal way. What it is and what I am is neither real nor not real. It's got that theater element, it's got the dimensionality to it, and it's got the divinity, so that what this is that I may be stuck on is the divine, and has the unfathomability of the divine.

It's more than what I took it to be at first blush, or from the perspective of the view of craving, the view that I was in when there was a lot of craving. So with the opening up of the middle way, with the dimensionality and divinity that comes, there is again a lessening of identification and reification and a lessening of dukkha.

Again, all these pieces that I'm talking about, or angles that I'm talking about, are related, and with a little pondering you can see that.

But another really important piece to bear in mind here is that element that we talked about in the first talk—the fullness of intention, that helps make something fully imaginal, authentically imaginal. This fullness of intention will help with the equanimity. And where there's equanimity, there's a decrease of dukkha.

So where the intention is fuller, in other words, where we're not shrinking what the object is or what we're after in our connection with the object, where we're not shrinking it or getting caught up in craving for this object. When the intention is actually fuller and we realize, oh, my deeper, fuller intention is for soul-making, for the whole of soul-making. It's not for this object as I immediately perceive it. It's not for any smaller element.

So again, this can happen. We might start off with a sensing with soul and then eros actually, if we're not careful, can shrink to craving and then that shrinks the perception and the intention shrinks and all of these factors. So we're in a dynamic situation whenever we're sensing with soul. And it's possible that we start with the erotic imaginal and there's all this beauty and loveliness and if we're not careful, it shrinks to craving with a shrinking of intention and shrinking of perception, all kinds of things.

But having or opening up to that, reminding ourselves of a fullness of intention, it's like planting deep roots. And like a tree that has deep roots, it will be stable in the winds. So there's something really, really important about reminding ourselves or aligning or dwelling with the intention or opening up the intention when we're engaged in this work. And that's one way of relieving some dukkha that might have crept in through some kind of cramping or grasping or shrinking of either intention or of craving or reification or something or other.

So we remind ourselves or we realize, in fact, that what we really love, what we're really wishing for, yearning for, and intending for is the whole of soul-making. So it's not just the excitement of imaginal perception or eros that I'm after or the sense of aliveness or the sense of juiciness or delight or some kind of pleasure or thrill. It's not, as I said, just the object in its kind of very tightly circumscribed, delimited form without those soft boundaries, soft edges and unfathomability that we talked about. The intention's bigger than just for that. Nor is it just for eros. Nor is it just for images. Images. Psyche, if you like, in the small sense of psyche.

But the intention can be, and I would say it is, in the soul's deeper intention anyway. So it's something we realize or we connect with—an intention that's already existing in the soul. Might be dormant, might be hidden. We might not consciously realize, but we connect with that. The intention is for the whole of soul-making.

That means for the sense of dimensionality, for the sense of divinity, the opening up of sacredness, for the sense of meaningfulness—all the aspects and elements we've outlined. And included in the whole of soul-making, our intention, our direction, our longing and yearning is also for logos. Remember, if we speak of the soul-making dynamic, the three principal elements are eros, psyche, and logos—which means also conceptual framework. So I'm hungry for this. My intention extends to logos and conceptual framework.

Sometimes it's very understandable, given our culture and the excitement that can arise around some of this material, that we find ourselves wanting simply to extend or intensify the eros or the images we're having without recognizing the larger soul-making movement that is happening or could potentially happen. We want to extend or intensify the eros and the psyche and the feeling of that, but we're less interested in the logos, less interested in the conceptual frameworks or ideas operating or the possibilities there.

But what happens if we align with, remind ourselves of, or connect with the recognition that our deepest passion and commitment—or the deepest passion and commitment of the soul—is for the whole of soul-making? The deepest commitment of the soul is to soul. That's the fullness of intention, and we can reconnect with that.

If we emphasize this logos—because for many people, that may be the missing piece—what would it look like to consciously include it? Of course, it could be the overly focused piece at the expense of others, body or whatever, but oftentimes it's the logos. If we recognize that it's the whole of soul-making, that includes curiosity—curiosity about what is happening in my experience and why it's happening, the dependent arising of all that, the factors that feed or starve or squash or ignite. Curiosity regarding conceptual frameworks and their effects.

Going back to those talks where I discussed different fantasies of the path, one I called the researcher fantasy—that fantasy of experimenting in practice and being interested in the results of trying this and that. What happens if I do that? What happens if I lean this way? What happens if I emphasize that? What happens if I bring this into awareness?

Inhabiting that fantasy brings with it, I believe, a certain amount of equanimity in regard to the actual experiences happening, because I'm less taken with the experience and more interested in why this is happening, how it all fits together, what there is to understand, what conceptual framework might be emerging.

Some people familiar with Enneagram personality types might say the researcher fantasy is like a type five, tending toward aloofness or distance. I'm not sure it necessarily implies that—I have reservations about personality typology anyway. In this case, I don't think the researcher fantasy brings equanimity through standing back, crossing one's arms in more aloof, uninvolved noticing. Rather, it could bring more equanimity because it provides more roots through an enlarging of one's commitments. Now I have the root of logos as well—the root of intention for investigating logos and conceptual framework as an additional root, making me more stable.

Also, I have an additional thread or strand of intimacy with whatever is going on. The intimacy between me and whatever or whoever I'm sensing with soul now has that extra facet, that extra strand of intimacy in and through the logos, in and through conception.

This applies to human beings as well—some of the intimacy, certainly the soul-making intimacy that can flow between human beings, is dependent on or supported or enlarged through the logos that might be shared. We can be intimate through logos, as well as through body, energy, psychically, heartfully. There's a kind of being intimate through and in logos.

In terms of what happens when one's sensing with soul, the researcher fantasy offers one way where, if there's dukkha and instability, bringing in more of that researcher quality can, for some people, bring more equanimity and thus less dukkha into the whole process.

But the larger point concerns the fullness of intention—reminding ourselves, refinding that, reopening to it, realizing that's actually what we really want when we're wanting. It's not this or that person, not this or that thing manifesting. What the soul most deeply wants is soul-making and the fullness of soul-making, everything that entails.

Connected with all this, dukkha decreases when—or rather, dukkha increases if eros becomes craving or shrinks to craving. Craving goes with dukkha, dukkha goes with craving. But if the eros can be maintained as eros and not shrink into craving, then there won't be dukkha coming into the experience. There will definitely be a significant reduction in dukkha coming into sensing with soul, into imaginal experience.

If any craving present can be alchemically transformed into eros—which is very possible, as we've discussed before—then that conversion of craving to eros alleviates dukkha, draining quite a lot of dukkha out of the experience. One way we've talked

about is including more energy body awareness—the whole energy body allows craving to manifest more as eros. Shrinking bodily awareness to one part tends to go with craving.

Eros, unlike craving, opens—it opens the sense of dimensionality, opens the sense of divinity, and divinity in potentially infinite forms or faces, infinite possibilities of particular theophanies rather than just universal abstractions.

When we consider what we might call, somewhat humorously, run-of-the-mill versions of divinity—those universal conceptions of the divine—eros operates in a fundamentally different way. Eros opens, creates and discovers richnesses and facets of what we're sensing in the soul. It opens up the sense of beauty, the possibility of expression and individual expression, the creation and discovery of all these qualities. Essentially, eros goes with and opens up and leads to and stimulates and supports soul-making and sensing the soul. Craving does not. I won't elaborate extensively on this since we've explored it thoroughly in past retreats.

We've put forth quite a few teachings acknowledging that eros can be very subtle, and can also be very strong at times. Part of the possible maturing involves learning how gradually to ride that eros, handle it, or respond to it—to modulate it sometimes. Different approaches are possible, and they're really useful as part of the developing art. Yet we should never forget there's always the possibility—and we should never lose sight of this—of simply letting go, cutting something, dropping it for now and simplifying. We can let the image go, let the eros go. This possibility exists too when there's dukkha present because the eros feels too strong.

In relation to eros, let me read you something by the poet W.H. Auden. Someone sent this to me, though I neglected to ask from which of his writings it comes:

"When someone begins to lose the glamour they had for us on our first meeting, we tell ourselves that we have been deceived, that our fantasy cast a halo over them which they are unworthy to bear. It is always possible, however, that the reverse is the case—that our disappointment is due to a failure of our own sensibility which lacks the strength to maintain itself at the acuteness with which it began. People may really be what we first thought them, and what we subsequently think of as the disappointing reality may be the person obscured by the staleness of our senses. The vision of eros is, in my opinion, a religious vision. It is an indirect manifestation of the glory of the personal creator through a personal creature."

You can see many similarities with the ways we're presenting things, and some differences too. But notice this crucial insight: "It is always possible, however, that our disappointment is due to a failure of our own sensibility which lacks the strength to maintain itself at the acuteness with which it began."

In terms of dukkha, if we frame this within our understanding of suffering, people often think: "I fell in love with this person when I first met them. They looked so wonderful, so angelic—that's how I sensed them. Then after a while, they're actually just a schmuck like everyone else." We typically conclude that eros was a projection when we fell in love, that it was a delusion, wishful thinking, grasping, or craving.

But Auden, in that brief quote, is asserting something quite different. He's saying no—eros helps us to see reality. It's only through eros that we perceive what is real about this person. Because eros and the kind of acuity and sensitivity of soul and sensing that it demands of us is somewhat too much for us to sustain—we're not practiced at it, we're not given encouragement, it's hard work—our initial sensing of this person, thing, or whatever, slips to something more ordinary, more commonly agreed upon, more flat, less holy.

He's suggesting that eros is actually the mode of being or the lens through which we perceive and sense what is real. There's a particular ontology wrapped up in what he's saying, and I really want to open this up as a possibility for our consideration.

So one position aligns with what we just heard Auden articulate. An alternative ontology suggests that eros, as we've discussed, stimulates and supports and opens and ignites soul-making in the ways we've been exploring. This is actually the intention—for soul-making. That's what the soul wants. It's not seeking this object alone, or the sense of excitement or aliveness or pleasure for their own sake. Rather, it's not for this object in itself, somehow separated from its whole involvement in soul-making, not separated from the whole vortex of soul-making and the entire imaginal constellation that opens up with sensing the soul.

In this process, there is this elasticity and softness of edges of the object. In that elasticity, in the softness of edges, is where we sense both the potential for soul-making and the actuality of soul-making—that expansion of the object. This is what the intention truly seeks.

But in terms of the alternative ontology, rather than eros showing us "the real"—this person, this object, this thing, this world, this "I" as they actually are—we have one viable ontology very much at odds with the dominant worldview at the moment. An al-

ternative ontology suggests that eros brings soul-making. And in soul-making, there's this recognition—at least in the way we're discussing it—of the truth of participation in perception, the truth of the participatory nature of perception.

Rather than a simple reality one is inducted into, one recognizes in the process of soul-making a truth or reality of a more participatory nature—a participatory understanding of reality itself, of perception.

Regarding the perceptions and senses of things that arise in and through the erotic imaginal, we could actually delineate a rough spectrum of ontologies concerning the perceptions that arise through the erotic imaginal. This is something I want to offer to open up our discussion, to think out loud together.

Through eros and through sensing with soul, we encounter profound questions about the nature of reality itself. At one end of the spectrum of ontologies—perhaps representing the dominant modernist cultural view—lies the perspective that in this sensing with soul, I create something unreal. That image or sense of things has simply emerged from my mind, my neurology, my imagination. It remains unreal in the simplistic sense that most of modern culture conceives of reality and unreality.

At the other end of the spectrum stands a radically different view: in imaginal perception, in sensing the soul through eros, I discover the real. This may be something more akin to what Auden was expressing—that through erotic engagement, we encounter genuine reality rather than mere fabrication.

Between these poles lie two positions that I find more interesting and philosophically viable. The second position along this spectrum suggests there is nothing real "out there"—only mental projections. Matter becomes merely a play of awareness; this is all mind only. In this view, there exists nothing substantial beyond consciousness and its projections. Therefore, in imaginal perception, I am simply creating freely, perhaps at the whim of soul or directed by my will in adopting this or that way of looking. Nothing truly real exists out there; all remains mental projection.

A third view presents what we might call the participatory perspective—more difficult to explain, more mysterious in its implications. In this ontology, the self who senses, the thing being sensed, the other, the object, the world, matter, mind, and divinity—all these elements participate in each other. The mind with its will, its perception and perceiving, its ways of looking and awareness—none of this exists separately. They all participate in each other.

Can you enter into contemplative pondering of what this might mean? What might this do to our entire sense of ontology and the possibilities it opens for an epistemology regarding sensing the soul? Self, other, world, matter, mind, divinity—none separate, yet not simply one thing either. They all participate in each other.

Rather than insisting on any particular way, what I truly want is to open possibilities for more creation and discovery, for pondering, for reflection, and for creating some conceptual space regarding the ontological and epistemological foundations for sensing the soul and these kinds of perceptions.

You might also ponder what kinds of suffering or possible ways of suffering, and what kinds of soul-making, are made possible or prevented through each of these different ontologies. If we consider what happens with eros in terms of its effects on perception and what conception of reality emerges through erotic imaginal perception, what does each possibility deliver for the soul and in terms of dukkha? After all, this remains our central subject.

I want to explore more about eros and fire in the next part, so we'll return to that. Let's pause here for now.

CHAPTER 119

Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 4 - 'Mastering the Fire')

Rob Burbea · 1h39

> *In this fourth part of his series on dukkha and soul-making, Rob Burbea introduces the alchemical metaphor of 'mastering the fire' - developing skillful relationship with the various forms of desire that arise in soul-making practice. Drawing on medieval alchemy's maxim that 'one who masters the fire masters the work,' he explores how different qualities of desire can either support or hinder the soul-making process.*
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> *Burbea distinguishes four types of desire: craving (which contracts and brings dukkha), devotional yearning (with its beautiful bittersweet quality), intelligent responsive practical desire (the everyday engine of skillful action), and eros (which opens the imaginal and supports soul-making). He examines how to discern between these different fires, noting their distinct phenomenological signatures in body, mind, and energy.*
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> *The talk addresses crucial questions for practitioners: How do we develop capacity to tolerate intensity? What internal patterns and habits shape our relationship with desire? How do we distinguish authentic soul desires from ego-driven wants? Burbea explores elements like emotionality, discipline, focus, and containment as aspects of fire that need attention, while emphasizing that complete mastery is neither possible nor desirable - the soul's fire must retain its wildness and connection to something greater than the ego.*

Let's linger a little while longer on our larger theme, considering different facets of the soul-making movement or journey that may ask of us greater attention and awareness. What needs care? What aspects and facets need attention, inquiry, and respect? What requires modulation and responsiveness in order that soul-making opens up and not dukkha—so that the relationship with the imaginal, the sensing of soul, and the whole soul-making journey doesn't bring dukkha?

My hope and intention is to offer things that might be helpful by way of advice, but also to stimulate and open your own reflection on these issues and aspects—your own soul-making reflections, observations, experimentations, and considerations. I aim both to disseminate advice and to open up a field, drawing attention to it while inviting you to create and discover within that field regarding these facets I'm highlighting.

We ended the last part by speaking about Eros, pointing out the distinctions between Eros and craving. Craving contracts the being, does not bring soul-making, and brings dukkha. Eros, by contrast, has an opening characteristic. It stimulates and supports soul-making and does not in itself lead to more dukkha, generally speaking. We've explored these subtleties and details in other talks on previous retreats, so I won't delve into them extensively today.

Instead, I want to dwell on a few other aspects of desire, eros, craving, and that nexus—what we might call "mastering the fire." Some of you will remember an alchemical maxim from the Middle Ages that I've used in perhaps one or two talks: "One who masters the fire, masters the work." This referred to alchemy and the transubstantiation of existence—transforming the matter of existence into sacredness. The fire that heats the alchemical vessel must be mastered to master the work of alchemy.

If we use that metaphor of fire loosely for this collection of qualities—desire, eros, craving—what does it mean to master the fire? What might be involved in such mastery? Because if we master fire, then that fire does not create dukkha.

Fire, from the beginning of humanity's discovery or harnessing of it, has been recognized as both dangerous and incredibly helpful. It's very potent and dangerous if we have the wrong relationship to it, yet invaluable for heating, cooking, warmth, protection, and countless other purposes. Mastering the fire—using this alchemical metaphor—means being in right relationship with it so that the path of soul-making and practices of the imaginal don't lead to dukkha, but rather allow alchemy to happen in soul-making. Where there's the alchemy of soul-making, there is generally the draining away of dukkha, the release and freedom from dukkha.

Let's examine this fire as metaphor, shorthand, or image for desire and the different kinds of desire, exploring how to cultivate careful relationship and discernment with them.

I was speaking recently with someone in an interview about this—someone who'd been practicing quite a long time. Because the Dharma she had encountered hadn't included the element of desire, what she had absorbed from teachings was more about putting aside desire, shunning it, regarding it only with suspicion, ignoring it, or trying to quell the fires of desire. She was beginning to be interested in the wisdom and potential of actually having greater discernment and flexibility in one's relationship with fire of different kinds. We discussed desire in the broadest ways and the need to discern between different kinds of desire, their operations at different times in our lives, and what they need—some of what's involved in the metaphor of mastering the fire.

We talked about the necessity to learn, probably gradually, to discern between different kinds of burning. First, cravings. Second, devotional yearning. Third, intelligent, responsive, practical desire. And fourth, eros.

With all these, the divisions are not always clear. They overlap, and we find ourselves in situations, mind states, and states of being that involve mixtures of these. Part of the alchemical work is the refining, purification, and modulation that comes once discernment is there.

Craving, we've said, brings contraction. How do I know?

I feel it in the body, and yes, you can feel it in the mind in different ways—a kind of gripping of obsessive thinking, certainly, and also a shrinking of the space of awareness. But I would draw attention to how, when there's craving, we feel a contraction in the energy body and a non-harmonizing of the energy body.

As well, we notice that the sense of self and the sense of other or object—they are both reified. Both self and other, subject and object, are reified by craving or in the experience of craving. So there is not that sense of what we call the imaginary middle way, nor is there the sense of the emptiness middle way. There is, too, we can notice, not a sense of the object having a kind of unfathomable depth, and nor the subject, nor the self.

So one of the things about craving—and its closing down and kind of drawing tight limits and solid limits around what it involves, or what it connects, if you like, or disconnects in a way—is that it circumscribes subject and object and time. Rather than these soft, elastic edges, and rather than the dimensionality and the unfathomability, the unfathomable depth that we sense within the erotic imaginal, in our sense of imaginal figure and the subject, the self, there is not that unfathomable depth with craving in object or subject or world or time. And as I said, craving brings dukkha with all this contraction, reification, circumscription—it flattens things.

If we contrast that with the second kind of desire that I mentioned in this fourfold, loosely structured scheme—devotional yearning—for many practices, it's going to be really important to recognize, "Oh, what is that?" If I just lump that experience, that movement of the soul, if I just lump that into a category called craving, or "that's just desire, that's no good, that leads to suffering," boy, am I missing out on something that's so beautiful, so rich an aspect of human being, a possibility of human being.

Yes, there is often a kind of bittersweet quality, a kind of poignancy to devotional yearning. We yearn for the divine, we yearn for the beloved other of the erotic imaginal. We yearn for that depth that's just beyond. There's something beautiful here, and we

can recognize that beauty mixed in with the poignancy and the bittersweet quality of it. It also has a kind of poetic characteristic to it. Our yearning itself feels poetic—and that's also not quite the same as the theatrics aspect, but something like that. We feel in a poetic frame of being, a poetic mode of being, when that devotional yearning is pouring through our soul, kindled in our soul.

Is that dukkha? Well, you could say the bittersweetness, the poignancy, the yearning, the not-yet-ness—yes, I guess you could say there's a kind of dukkha, but it's a different kind of dukkha, isn't it? It's got that beauty, that richness, that poetry, the bittersweetness in it.

And again, if we talk about distinction with craving, there is the infinite, unfathomable depth of the beloved other, the object of my yearning. That infinite unfathomability and depth and dimensionality is discernible. The divinity also is discernible, whereas craving, as I said, it flattens, it contracts things. Things become just that—what I think they are. And they don't have this palpable, discernible, sensible sense of infinite and unfathomable depth.

So that's the poetry, the beauty, the bittersweetness, the richness, the poetic quality of soul at that point, of sensibility, the infinite, unfathomable depth, the dukkha that one isn't sure that one really would want to let go of. All this helps us to discern this kind of desire, this kind of fire burning in the soul—devotional yearning that comes and goes, visits the soul, is kindled in the soul, in the being at different times.

And then there's a third category we could call intelligent, responsive, practical desire. So for example, one is practicing samadhi, and even in jhana—yes, in jhana, it may not be a kind of mystical or divine experience in a particular jhana, say, whatever it is, first jhana, second jhana, maybe, may not be. And the desire itself doesn't have that kind of poetic poignancy, but it's just practical. It's just the desire, moment to moment, to sustain the particular pleasure that is the dominant feature of this or that jhana. So the piti in the first jhana, the sukha, the happiness and joy in the second jhana, the exquisite peacefulness of the third jhana.

Just the desire to sustain that, to permeate it, to permeate that through the body, to stabilize it. This desire is operating in a very kind of low-key way, as a kind of engine, as a kind of navigator, as a kind of director, moment to moment, of what one is doing—yes, doing—in the jhana. And it's really not a big deal. It's just kind of a part of the mind is just intelligently, practically, responsively—in other words, it's responding to what's actually happening. I don't have to push at permeating anymore. I don't have to desire

permeation anymore if the body is already permeated. It's just a gentle ticking over of desire that's directing the attention and the intention to sustain, let's say, the pervasion of sukha, the permeation of sukha in the whole energy body.

It's really not a big deal. I can't get too tight with it. I can't get too kind of manic with it. I can't get my knickers too much in a twist with it. It's just part of the art of jhana, part of the skill of jhana, and it's very kind of low-key—just an intelligent, responsive, practical desire. Just as a kind of equivalent from the world would be, I've got a meeting somewhere...

I have to go to that meeting—a dharma meeting, a teacher meeting, an interview, whatever it is, a soul-making meeting with a friend. I have a desire to get to that meeting. So I get in my car, get on my bike, and drive or cycle there. But I'm cycling responsibly, responding to what the conditions around me need. There's a car coming around the corner—slow down. The lane narrows—I have to wait for this car to go by. Now I'm going uphill, so I change gear. Now I'm going downhill, so I freewheel with maybe a little braking now and then.

There's intelligent, responsive, practical desire. It's not a big deal. It's just part of life, an everyday element of our lives most of the time. We cannot make an enemy out of this. We have to recognize when there's just that kind of desire. We need it. It's part of our life. We do it all the time, whether we think about it or not. It's part of meditation, part of everyday life, part of sustaining what's beautiful. And it's part of our path.

The fourth category we can contrast is eros, which opens the imaginable, stimulates and supports and fertilizes and catalyzes the soul-making dynamic of eros-psyche-logos, bringing with it the unfathomable infinite depth, also recognizable there. The theatrical quality, the unfathomability, the dimensionality, the divinity of the object.

Contrasting it with craving, the object does not have that unfathomable infinite—this is how we can discern. There's not the reification with eros, not the tight boundaries. There are more porous boundaries or soft, elastic edges. The beauty, the divinity, the meaningfulness, the energy body harmonization and alignment and openness, again in contradistinction to the experience of craving. All that—subject and object, self and body, erotic object, erotic other, beloved other—opened up in depth.

We can discern between these different kinds of desire. And that discernment is part of what we might call mastering the fire. I need to discern if I'm on the path—any path actually, but certainly the soul-making path—because then that distinction, particularly with eros, needs to get made.

I've mentioned some of the different ways that desire and opening to the current of desire actually releases dukkha. Where there is dukkha, rather than just letting go of the desire—which is a very viable option, a very sensible option at times—there's a real art of opening to the current desire and releasing dukkha, dissolving dukkha, and discovering treasure right in the heart of the desire.

We've also mentioned how in desires, especially in deep desires, in deep longings, in our devotion, is the gift potentially of equanimity. Connecting with, fixing on, focusing on, feeling in one's body, meditating on, surrendering to, aligning oneself with one's deepest movements of desire and devotion—hanging on, grasping onto that desire with the body, with the whole being, with the heart, with the mind, with the energy body—how helpful that can be for rooting the being.

In that deeper rooting, there's equanimity, and thus not the dukkha that comes with being blown this way and that, knocked over this way, knocked over that way, blown off course, unstable, unsettled.

So sometimes hang on to your desire, hang on to your deep desires. Find ways of doing that in meditation with the body, with the heart, with the whole being. Really skillful teaching.

But in giving such a teaching, it also invites and requires a subtlety of awareness, a kind of questioning, a probing, an asking, a listening. So it's good to be aware: is this desire that I feel, that I'm opening to or aligning myself with, is it an open-ended desire or not? In other words, is it a desire that I hope at some point to fulfill, to then tick off—done that, achieved that? Or is it a desire that's more open-ended?

There's no real end to this. And that can be a problematically open-ended thing or an unproblematically open-ended desire—that desire to close, to go out, to reach an end, to be limited, to not have more territory to open, to create, to discover. So is this desire open-ended or not? And in what kinds of ways?

Also, to be aware or to investigate: any desire happens in what we could call a context or a field of conditions, inner and outer, that make that desire feasible or not. Certainly, the achievement of that desire, feasible or not, or even just moving in the direction of the desire, feasible or not. In other words, I need to be aware if I have this desire, and it's actually, for that desire's goal to materially manifest, impossible with this set of outer conditions, or with this set of inner conditions. Or I can't even move in that direction with this set of conditions. Or I'm actually in a field where there is that

possibility. Or it may be possible if the conditions change. So in a way this is just common sense. But this is part of bringing some kind of awareness and common sense to desire.

Less perhaps obvious, and though in some ways perhaps even more important, is another aspect or set of conditions we need to be aware of. Often a desire that exists or moves in us or arises in us meets what we could call an internal pattern of habit with regard to desire. This, I think, is very interesting and very important in terms of one's psychological self-awareness.

So I might have, for example, a habit of feeling lack. I've talked about this when we discussed the beauty of desire and the opening to the current of desire practice. It may be that my tendency is to go into feeling the lack and not so much into feeling the desire and the potency of the desire. I get stuck a little bit in this feeling of lack. There may be, we could say, good reasons for that. It may be actually important to feel that. But that may also be a habit, an internal habit. That's what happens. The desire rises in an internal field of a certain pattern or patternings. And one of them is this feeling of lack. That does something to the desire. It sends the desire in a certain way or dampens it in a certain way or blocks it in a certain way or convolutes it in a certain way. It ricochets off somewhere else.

Or a desire might arise in an internal habit field, if you like, or pattern field of expecting disappointment or expecting the frustration of this desire. Or it might arise in an internal habit field of disallowing or judging desire—again, for different reasons: cultural conditioning, education, spiritual education, family education, religious education, and so on.

Or their opposites, of course. I never feel a sense of lack. I just go straight into the desire, gunning myopically to get the thing that I want. I never expect to be disappointed or that my desire will be frustrated. I never question my desire. It's rarely "never" or "always," is it? But tendencies, habit patterns and tendencies, patterns of tendency.

These kinds of habit patterns, internal conditions around the desire, have a huge effect on what unfolds and whether the desire is felt or experienced as healing, as clarifying, as freeing, as empowering—as it may be, for instance, in that opening to the current of desire practice that we taught—or as dukkha in various ways. Desire can bring dukkha in lots of different ways, and it depends on what it interacts with, especially internally in the saṅkhāras, in the patterns of belief, thinking, assumption, tendency—all of that.

One other element to be aware of with one's desire if one is questioning whether this desire is worth opening to, whether this is something to hang onto: is the desire authentic or not authentic to my soul?

Often I have the sense that as human beings we can get caught up in desires that actually we don't really care about. Somehow we're putting a lot of energy chasing this and that, and actually we don't really care about them. I don't just mean consumerist movements of "I need this or whatever," but also spiritually. Sometimes, as a person, I really want to realize emptiness. That may not actually be, at this time in one's life, one's actual, authentic soul's desire. It may be that one has just got one's head full of "I need to realize emptiness, I need to realize the unfabricated," or whatever it is, because we've been exposed to certain teachings that emphasize it a lot, and certain people say this is the really important thing, and we're in a crowd that

People are really into that, and we pick up on that energy, getting swept along and pushed into a certain direction. It may not be authentic to our soul at that time.

It may be that when we think we want to realize this or have a deep insight or have that jhana experience or realize emptiness deeply, what's actually happening is the ego trying to measure up. I've touched on this in past talks, and I feel it's a really important possibility to be aware of. Is this authentic? In other words, is this desire coming from my soul, and will it be soul-making? Is it what I really authentically want? Authentic has to do with author and self—*auto*—yes, to me, to my soul right now.

I remember a conversation with someone, a very seasoned practitioner. She said to me as part of our discussion about Eros and desire and soul, "I'm not sure if I'm actually attracted to... if I actually long for the unfabricated and all that you talk about, Rob. When I look inside, I see that what I long for—I do long for the holy, I do long for a sense of sacredness—but I long for the holy embodied in this or that person and relationship." Then she asked, "Should I be more mature? I find myself not wanting this so much, but wanting that—this kind of holiness, not that kind of holiness. Should I be more mature?"

She was asking me, as her teacher, for my input. What felt important to say in that moment was to point out that the paradigm coming to us from the Buddha and the Pali Canon, from the Theravadan teachings, is a kind of paradigm filled with patriarchal assumptions and inclinations—or we might say, in quotation marks, typically masculine assumptions, movements, inclinations, priorities, and styles.

It's hard not to recognize—with all the caveats about language and boxes and gender—that the Pali Canon and the whole tradition emerging from it is really a patriarchal lineage, both in its power structures and its regard for women's inferiority and inability. This has been at the forefront of Theravadan Buddhist consciousness recently with the bhikkhunis. But it's also evident in the styles of being, the styles of aim, and the approaches to goal and desire.

The Rhinoceros Horn Sutta exemplifies this—a text where the Buddha extols and praises solitude and the solitary wanderer. Sangha is great, but the solitary wanderer is held as the highest ideal. Be solitary, be independent. The model of the Buddha himself represents a very—again, in quotation marks—typically masculine archetype. And there's this whole transcendent versus immanent thrust and priority.

As this person was saying in our interview, the holiness beyond in the transcendent unfabricated doesn't actually draw her. What draws her is holiness embodied in this or that person, in this or that relationship—a more immanent opening, thrust, movement, priority, and desire.

Do we have the courage and discernment and intelligence and openness to actually question some of the priorities that have come down to us through different spiritual traditions, teachers, and lineages? Can we recognize that while there may well be value in this or that teaching, we must ask what's authentic to our soul and what represents the partiality of this or that tradition, this or that lineage?

For some people, this questioning feels too scary or arrogant. One thinks, "How could I possibly do that?" Perhaps here again we need to expose ourselves to sangha. The image of the bold, solitary questioner represents one style. The image of inquiring together in relationship, hearing and listening to each other's heart and soul concerns, represents a different style of questioning—what we might call, in inverted commas, typically masculine or typically feminine approaches.

Please excuse that language. I hope you can understand what I'm getting at, though perhaps there are better ways to express it. What I'm really talking about is authenticity—authenticity to my soul, to my soul-making right now. Does this thing I'm setting my sights on, that I feel I have a desire for, is it authentic to my soul right now? And does it bring soul-making, or is something else going on?

Another piece worth mentioning: when we talk about fire—fire is hot—and with Eros as well, and with opening to the current of desire practice, some of what we've been implicitly discussing is the ability to tolerate that much Eros, to tolerate that much desire, and to tolerate that much energy. This involves learning to handle it through how one skillfully responds to it, addresses it, and remains in relationship with it.

This tolerating of intensity is sometimes a necessity—more for some people than others, which I'll explore further as we continue.

But in this soul-making process, in the soul-making path, we need to develop the capacity to tolerate the intensity of eros, of libido, of energy in general at times. To forge soul requires heat. Yes, the ironmonger's forge is a furnace and part of the process is heat. It also involves cooling, doesn't it? You take the heated metal and then you cool it and then you bend it and you put it back in the fire. So involved, part of the mastering of the fire is the timing of the fire. When, when hot, how much heat, what kind of heat—which we'll get into, hopefully a little bit—and when to take it out of the heat. But at times, yes, red hot, white hot flame in the forge.

And so tolerating the capacity, the ability to tolerate intensity at times of energy, of eros, of desire, of libido in general, to forge soul, to create and discover soul and soul-making, to forge the sense of self, of other, object, world, eros that goes with soul-making.

So again, we've talked about this, I've talked quite a lot about this in different retreats, especially recently the Eros Unfettered and the Alchemy of Desire retreat of Hermits and Lovers, and the different things that can help in practice there.

But it's also worth pointing out, I think, that again, personality is a significant factor, as is habit, as is cultural conditioning. So, you know, I've been at parties or dinners or dinner parties, and you can see sometimes certain personalities, good friends actually, have a different relationship with intensity. Putting on a piece of music at a party—there's actually some John Coltrane who I mentioned the other day—and a good friend of mine said after a little while, "Can you put something else on? It's a bit intense." Or when a conversation gets kind of heated, not necessarily arguing, but just kind of full of intellectual passion or brilliance, and some people it's just a bit intense and they'd rather not. It's just not the habit or it's not okay in a certain situation or whatever.

And sometimes that's personality, and sometimes it's habit, and sometimes it's cultural conditioning, as I said. And sometimes we create a habit, or we create conditions that have an effect on the fire. So I mentioned years ago, just a little bit of alcohol—drink a bit of beer or a bit of wine every day. What happens to my fire, my fires? It dulls

and dims my fire, it dulls my intensity, dampens all that. It makes soggy that alcohol, that liquid dampens, makes soggy my fire. And one can see that in others. You see the fire, their intensity, and over time you see that go out of their life. They actually become kind of lacking fire because of their daily or regular habit of drinking even just a little bit of alcohol.

And then there's cultural conditioning and cultural inhibitions, depending on the situation or upbringing and all that, that affects how we relate or whether we can tolerate intensity. Because intensity isn't just something to tolerate, so to speak. But if I then have a voice of cultural conditioning saying, "This isn't okay," or "It's not good to be intense," or "It's not good to be intense in a social situation," or "Not good to be intense when you're..." whatever it is. Or "This kind of intensity is okay, that kind of intensity isn't." That's going to put another kind of pressure on the fire that makes it also hard to tolerate. Either we just smother the fire or it gets smothered, or we actually feel a kind of intolerable pressure and we can't tolerate the intensity.

And implicit in all that, what I've just said, is our capacity and ability to tolerate intensity, heat, fire, is also dependent, of course, on the logos that's going on at the moment. So, for example, if it's with an imaginal figure and there's the fire of eros there, then the logos that we have regarding imagination, regarding soul-making, regarding the kind of perceptions that we're calling sensing with soul, the logos we have regarding fire, eros, desire, et cetera—all that helps or hinders my capacity in the moment to tolerate this intensity.

In other words, as I said before, and I think in that talk "Logos in the Garden of Souls" on the Eros Unfettered retreat and other places, a logos, if it's the right logos, it really helps give stability and capacity, and it helps the soul-making. A logos that doesn't—that is suspicious of imagination, or suspicious of eros, or a logos that kind of makes the fire burn, builds a structure of wood, if you like, if we extend the metaphor, builds a structure of wood where it all just burns too quickly—not that helpful for tolerating.

So tolerating depends on logos. My capacity to tolerate intensity depends on the logos operating. And also, of course, on the images operating, the fantasies operating that are in play. So, for example, the self images operating, the images that go back to that party of Coltrane and of that kind of music, and the images also of intensity, the images, if we're talking on a dharma path, of, again, of oneself, of what a seeker is and feels like, what it means to be a seeker. Is a seeker someone with fire? What kind of fire? What's the image? What's the fantasy of that? Again, the fantasy of the self on the path. What's

the fantasy of the path? What's the fantasy of the dharma? The fantasy of the tradition and other seekers that we might know. And the fantasy of that lineage and their relationship to all this.

all the fantasy, the image of intensity with respect to talking about ideas, like that's not okay to have that kind of intensity. For what reasons? All this will affect our capacity to tolerate intensity, tolerate heat.

So the logos and the image of all of fire and all of that, what we've said as possibilities there, outlined as possibilities.

Now I should say, with all this, we're talking about fire, and it may well have occurred to you already that fire is an image. We're using it as a metaphor or an image and not as a clear concept. It's not a clear concept if I say, what is fire? I'm not exactly just translating it as desire. But that's okay. It's not a problem. But we could go into it as a concept and have a look at what's involved in fire.

What does fire include? So we've said and we've dwelt a little bit on eros, craving, desire, and differentiating between them. But fire includes that. Passion. Commitment, energetic arousal, intensity of focus, mental arousal, alertness, sensitivity, receptivity, penetratingness. All these, we could say, are included in what fire can mean.

We talk about someone's fire or my fire, your fire on the path or in relation to something. We really mean all this. Eros, craving, desire, the play of all this. Passion, commitment, energetic arousal, intensity of focus. As I said, mental aspects like alertness, sensitivity, receptivity, penetratingness, all that.

We can also say, in terms of what's involved in fire, what are the aspects of fire that we might need to be aware of in mastering the fire? I actually don't want to go into this too much, so I just want to throw some things out relatively briefly for you to reflect on, for you to consider in your awarenesses, in your investigations, experiments, explorations, conversations.

Talk about mastering the fire and use that as a loose metaphor, a loose image. What might be involved for me right now? What can I notice? What can I take care of? What can I perhaps modulate and respond to there? What are the elements involved?

So again, I'm not intending to be rigorous or complete or systematic here, but just to sprinkle some seeds for your process, for your creativity, for your discovery. I'm actually quite reluctant to be systematic here. Again, that reluctance is probably my personality style. Partly because there are, as I've said before, different soul styles. Different souls or different souls even at different stages in their life. The fire burns differently.

It's a different kind of fire burning in that person. And that person, you can't really say it's more or less. It's just a different style of burning. This one rages and it's that colour. And that one's...

So there's different soul styles and soul styles need respecting. It's not for me, not for anyone to say, all fires should look like this. Your fire should look like this.

So as a teacher, what's my responsibility to a student in regards to their fire? And what's your responsibility as a practitioner in regards to your own fire? What is my soul style? What is your soul style, your fire style, or your fire style in relation to this or that aspect? And what actually needs some attention, needs some care, needs some mastery, some active responsiveness, some taking care, some change, some adaptation, some steering.

So again, there's this dialectic, this tightrope is too dramatic an analogy, but with all this.

So for example, emotionality is, we could say, an element or a character, a characteristic of fire. So sometimes it's characteristic of certain people's fire. It's like their style, their fire style, their soul style, is very emotional, and less so with other people's fire. And again, it doesn't mean there's less fire, or it's a fire of less quality.

It's a fire of different quality.

So the question is, for example, here is the passion, and how much emotion is there in that passion? Passion can be very steady, very unremarkable and kind of undramatic looking to the outside eye and also to the inner sense of it. It hasn't got a lot of emotionality in it. And other people or other styles or the same person at a different time—the passion has a lot of emotion in it.

If there's emotionality in the fire, it has a characteristic of fire. Whatever emotionality is in the fire, it needs to be relatively fluid. That means not too rigid or frozen, either in fixed, repetitive patterns. "I always get really upset about this," and it gets locked into something in a way that's actually frozen, rigid, repetitive. This is just samsara. This is just this dukkha cycling around again. It's got a lot of emotion, it's got a lot of fire, but it's just a kind of samsaric prison—only certain emotions around certain things, and I'm just locked into that. Too much, too constrained, too small, too repetitive. The fire is frozen, in a way.

You get this, and this is just a side point, but you get this also with the range of a person's empathic warmth as well, if we talk about heat and fire. Sometimes a person can be very empathic with something where they agree with or understand or are fa-

miliar with a certain logos, and they have a certain view of why that person is suffering and that kind of suffering is justified according to a certain logos. The compassion flows, the fire flows, the warmth there, the compassion, the empathy flows very freely.

And when a person is describing a kind of suffering that doesn't quite fit into the remit, into the extent, the circle of the logos that that person has, then this person is suffering maybe just as much as the first person. But the listener has no empathy there because the logos, as I said, functions as a face, as a connecting point, a connecting strand of intimacy between people. Because the suffering that you're talking about, I just can't really understand it. Or I can't, in my worldview, my logos, my dharma view, whatever, it just doesn't make sense. And I can't therefore really empathize much. I can't really extend the warmth of the empathy and the compassion, that kind of tender fire there.

So there needs to be a certain fluidity to the emotionality, to the fire perhaps, to the way it burns. But not too much fluidity so that one is kind of emotionally disturbed and agitated about everything. Everything sets off my fire. I'm just on a hair trigger. Everything disturbs me. Everything agitates me. The fire is not—it's too undisciplined in a way. Too fluid. This little thing I get upset about or on fire about. And that little thing. And then this little thing. It's just flitting. The fire is flitting all over the place in a way that's not really harmonized, not really building anything, not really opening anything at all. Just one agitation after another.

So these elements, you can see again how they're related, how they overlap. Passion needs commitment, and commitment needs passion. We talk about a fire that's steady—that's the commitment element and passion. I feel really passionate about this, and I look at my behavior, and it just doesn't play out in any kind of consistent dedication or devotion or commitment. But a commitment needs some kind of passion. It needs some kind of warmth and fire and ignition, sparkle.

And part of that is the fluidity, if you like, of the fire being neither too great nor too limited. And again, that has to do with the tension—the tension flitting from this thing and that thing. "Oh, that's got my fire now, that's got my fire now." There's a certain amount of harnessing that needs to happen for the fire to really be soul-making. But not too much, too tight, too small. And also of the emotionality.

So we could say the fire needs to sustain, it needs to not burn out or exhaust its fuel.

What does this mean as far as soul-making is concerned? As far as Eros is concerned, the fire must sustain, not burn out and not exhaust its fuel. What does it mean for our path, our paths?

It must burn, fire must burn, our fires must burn in ways that support the sustaining of something else. That is the path, our commitment, the necessary practices, study, preparation, questioning, struggle, hassle, purification, all that. The fire is in the service of sustaining something else. Fire must sustain, in our case soul-making, everything that's involved in that.

Fire itself is not soul-making, just as fire itself is neither helpful nor unhelpful. As I said, it can be dangerous, it can be extremely beneficial. Fire in itself is kind of neither this nor that. So fires in the service of something, we want it to burn in a way that it can actually support and serve, sustaining other aspects.

Because you get, you know, quick-burning fires. Or there's wood, there's kinds of wood that burn very quickly, and there's kinds of wood—and I think hardwoods, you know, they burn much slower. The flame is more steady. What does that have to do with patience, longing, devotion, yearning, Eros, and patience? This is one of the paramitas the Buddha talked about.

There are fires, there are woods or conditions of wood where the fire causes a lot of smoke—more smoke than fire. Or conditions of fuel where there's very little smoke. It's all fire. What might this mean? What might this mean when it comes to our fire and the possibilities of mastering the fire, or just discerning, discernment with regard to the fire, awareness, responsiveness, possible responsiveness?

So we could say, related to a lot of what we just said, discipline is necessary for a holy fire. Discipline is an interesting word. So I mean it in both senses of the word. So we've got this retreat coming up in a couple of months, tending the holy fire. And what do we need for a holy fire? For that metaphor, that image. Discipline is actually an ingredient, as well, perhaps, or some discipline, let's say. Because a lot of these things, there's kind of opposites, complements, paradoxes.

So discipline, I mean it in two senses of the word. The actual word has this—discipline is a teaching. A disciple is a pupil, is someone who studies. So discipline in a holy fire requires learning. I have to study in the broader sense of what that means. I have to develop. And implicit in that is a stance, a poise, an attitude of humility. And that's necessary for a holy fire to burn within me, within my life, within my path, on my path.

And the second kind of meaning of discipline, some kind of steadiness or rigor or actually containment. So it's interesting. If you think about those religions or places or traditions that burn a kind of eternal holy fire—so there's that in synagogues in Judaism, there's that in the Parsi religion, I'll come back to the Parsi attitude to fire, or the

Parsi teaching and ritual around fire in a little bit. Also, other places, the Olympic torch, I think under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris as well, where there's eternal fire—that eternal fire is contained.

So in other words, the fuel is brought to the fire in order that it keep going. And it's contained in a small space. And then compare that with a wildfire where the fire finds the fuel. It spreads to find the fuel.

Maybe the soul needs both. The soul needs us, needs a fire that's contained, and it also needs to spread. The soul-making dynamic, as I said, spreads. The vortex of Eros, Psyche, Logos spreads in different ways, into different domains. It's breaking the vessels. There's a wildfire.

So some discipline and some, whatever the opposite of discipline is, some wildness—I'll come back to that too. Perhaps the soul needs both, but discipline for now, let's dwell on that one, in both senses of a willingness to learn, an attitude, a poise, a relationship of learning, studying, developing, humility, and of, let's say, the rigor of containment that allows steadiness.

Our word, talking about containment now, our word focus actually comes from a Latin word which means hearth or fireplace. And so, you know, in this word focus, as in a hearth or a fireplace, it was where people gathered before there was electricity and before there was central heating and all that.

The family, the village or whatever, would gather around the hearth, the fireplace. That would be the focus—the focus of social life, the focus of spiritual life sometimes. This word focus has everything to do with fires burning, with mastery of fire. A gathering of energies. Like a magnifying glass that focuses the rays of light and energy intensely enough that something can actually ignite.

So listen to this with your soul. All of this is what we might call poetic metaphor. How will it translate? How might it translate? What might it mean for you? What might it give you to consider? There's something that needs, or that involves, a kind of gathering of energies, a kind of focusing in the way fires sometimes need to burn.

And there's also—back to this word focus and its meaning in Latin of hearth or fireplace—the fact that when a fire is burning in our soul, it brings to it, it gathers to it other qualities. Other beings gather. Beings gather around fire, the focus, the hearth, the fireplace. And soul—part of the alchemy of the fire in the soul is that it draws to it other aspects of soul. Images, imaginal figures are drawn to that fire. The divine is drawn to the soul's fire.

Actually, staying with this just a little longer, this business about focus and gathering energies: In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, many of you will know, in the English translations, often translated as—for example, a monk, a meditator dwells or abides, looking at or regarding or contemplating the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, etc., ardent, alert and careful. And "ardent" is a very common translation. It directly translates the Pali word ātāpī, which itself translates as heat, as the heat from the sun, ātāpī, or the fire or burning of zeal. Again, you have—actually also in Latin, ardere, to burn.

So there's something about the Buddha's... we're talking about gathering the energies in a certain way, gathering the focus—mindful, sampajāno, fully alert, knowing what's happening, and satimā, careful, with mindful care, and ardent, with the fire gathered, focused, or with one's fire burning in relation to this, with zeal.

Of course, in that more Theravādan style of the Pali Canon, the combination of that description—mindful focus, ardent, alert, careful—repeats in the refrain throughout the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Implicit in that combination, with the sampajāno clearly comprehending what's happening right now and carefulness with the ardency, with the burning zeal, the fire—implicit in that combination is a style of burning that is very focused, contained, we might even say restrained. The fire is restrained.

This is not a wild and ecstatic fire burning, as it might be in other traditions—say tantric traditions, or some tantric traditions, or Dionysian kinds of things. So there's fire there, it's a certain—if you like—image of the way a fire burns. It's much more contained, much more steady, but there's fire.

We could also point out that fire needs—I don't know what to call it—intelligence, perhaps. So sometimes what happens is we get into, as human beings, a kind of black and white thinking with regard to something. And that black and white thinking is coupled with and fueled by a certain reification and a certain clinging to some self-view. So that something that sounds perhaps really good is actually being fed by a kind of thinking that's not so fully explored or perhaps lacking a certain kind of intelligence.

So even like: "I must do a year retreat so I can realize emptiness. And then"—you know, implicitly, why?—"because then my problems will go away." And maybe even underneath that, if you ask why: "Well, maybe I'll be a better person then," or again, "I have proved my self-worth," measurement, etc. Again, we have this: Is it authentic? Is it authentic? Is it soul-making? But also, what's constructing a kind of black and white thinking and involving, pulling in a kind of reification, a self-view there, perhaps in a way that the fuel for that fire is going to make that fire burn not in a way that's really helpful.

Actually, if we stay again with this—go back to this containment analogy—then sometimes a person is kind of enamored with fieriness, or there's a kind of—to use words we used on a previous retreat—immature enchantment with fire or with passion. And so the fire tends to get itself always reified. We're talking about fire now; it's an image. And the relation with that image, when it's imaginal, can be loose and responsive and poetic, and not so clung to in a way that's unhelpful, not so with the tightness of craving and grasping.

But sometimes you see in a person's style some kind of tendency to almost always reify and concretize—to be enamored of passion and then to reify and concretize what fire is going to look like and to make it visible. It always needs to manifest, and perhaps again in a very sort of—through a very sort of black and white thinking: "My passion for this, my fire with regard to this manifests in this kind of total action," a very extreme kind of implementation or playing out or expression of something or choice.

I drop everything and I do that.

And of course sometimes that's part of a freedom—it's exactly the right thing to do, and there's some beauty in that, some radicality in the best sense. But partly it's more that there's this immature enchantment with fire, as I said, and with that, a rigid belief in what it looks like, a too-tight tendency and impulse to always concretize, wrapped up with this black and white thinking. If there's fire, fire is good, and passion is good, and if there isn't, I do this, and it's very radical and black and white.

Is it really necessary that there's that kind of black and white thinking or concretization, this total concretization of something? Is the image we have of fire and passion being reified and clung to in ways that are perhaps not that helpful and not necessarily that soul-making? Do they end up yielding interactions in the world or situations that are not soul-making because they're built, again, on some kind of reification, some kind of black and white thinking and attachment to self-view and attachment to a certain idea of fire and passion?

What would happen instead if the fire and the passion itself were allowed to become imaginal—properly imaginal, authentically imaginal, genuinely imaginal? This means lingering with the very sense of fire and the perception and the ideation of fire and passion, sensing its beauty, sensing its unfathomability, its dimensionality, its beyondnesses, its divinity. And in that, discerning what is the actual duty that's wrapped up in the beauty of this fire for me, of this sense of passion for me—not just plugging in an automatic, immature enchantment, black and white thinking, reification, solid self-view.

Then, if we can approach it more imaginatively, more maturely, our enchantment becomes mature enchantment, and we can have the beauty and the dimensionality of that imaginal fire. We can have action that is not burdened or injected with reification and identification in ways that make it problematic, that issue in something problematic or meet something problematic later on in the world.

In a way, we could say that's also a kind of containment—not just jumping into this immediate translation into immediate black and white interpretation, concretization of duty. The fire needs a little containment. Let's stare into that fire a little bit. Let's feel that fire. Let's meditate on that fire. Let it become imaginal and see what comes from that.

So sometimes we could say fire needs a bit more containment, or containment of a different kind, and sometimes it needs less containment. These are seeds for you to reflect on, to consider, to talk with each other about, to inquire into, to experiment with, to become aware of in practice.

We can talk about fire in different dimensions of our being. To feel fire and to allow the fire and to respond to the fire in or of the mind—the fire of attention, the fire of the intellect and the brilliance of that, the fire in thought, in conception. Or the fire of the heart. Does it need to be either in the mind or the heart? Or can we have both together? Why not?

The fire, as we said, includes empathy as a kind of fire, a kind of warmth—the fire of the heart's passion, the heart's being moved, the heart's longing. And fire in the body, so to speak. And then even in different parts or dimensions of the body: what does it mean, fire in the whole body? What's fire in the belly? What's fire in the loins? These are all directions or kinds of fire or elements of fire that we can explore.

I mentioned that the Parsi religion of ancient Persia actually came out of the Zoroastrian religion, or rather is the continuation of Zoroastrian religion. It was based in Persia many centuries ago. In that religion, Catherine told me about this, and I did a little research on it, they burn—they keep burning a holy fire, an eternal fire, as part of their ritual.

But to make a new fire and to consecrate a new fire and a new fire temple takes more than two and a half years. It's not just that you light a fire and then decide that it's holy. Again, listen with your soul. Listen to what it means for you and for us with regard to soul-making, with regard to passion, with regard to eros, with regard to path, with regard to ritual—all of that, both outer and inner.

So it's a big deal to consecrate a new fire, to consecrate a new fire temple. There are sixteen different kinds of fire that need to be brought and gathered together to consecrate a new fire. Each of those individual fires needs to be individually consecrated. This newly consecrated holy fire in the new temple needs to be ignited from sixteen different kinds of fire, each individually consecrated, brought together. One by one, they contribute to this newly consecrated fire.

Those sixteen—I'll read them to you if I can find them—are the fire used by a dyer, meaning someone who dyes wool or cloth or garments or material, in a pot, in a cauldron. The fire from a dyer. The fire from the house of a king or a ruler.

There's two. This is not in any particular order, by the way. The fire from a potter, someone who makes pottery with clay. The fire from a brickmaker.

How might each of these kinds of fires function as little images or imaginal seeds that might get translated and planted in the soul? This kind of fire, that kind of fire in the soul. I'll leave you with that if it's interesting to you or if you're attracted to it.

The fire from a potter, the fire from a brickmaker. They do different things in the culture, don't they? Someone who dyes cloth or wool or whatever. Someone who rules. Someone who makes pots and dishes and jugs. Someone who makes the bricks that build houses and buildings and temples.

The fire from an ascetic. The fire from a goldsmith—the fire that burns what is precious and makes of it beautiful ornaments and decorations, beautiful things of great value. The fire from a mint, the fire that burns metal to make coins. The fire from an ironsmith—the fire that burns iron, heats iron in the same way to make different tools, different implements. The fire from an armourer, making very particular kinds of implements: shields and swords.

The fire from a baker, from the baker's oven—fire that makes the goodness of bread, the nourishment that comes from turning the earth and the wheat and the rye or spelt or whatever grains from the earth, helping that to become nourishment for us, wholesome nourishment. The fire from a brewer, someone who brews alcohol. That's interesting too, isn't it, if we connect that with Dionysus.

The fire from a soldier. Again, I've talked about nobility and the duty of the warrior image, the soldier—everything that goes into being a soldier in the best sense of the word, or at least the imaginal soldier. The fire from any house in the community—just the kind of ordinary hearth.

Those are fourteen so far. Then two fires that come not from humans, or not from living humans at least. One is the fire from the burning of a corpse, fire from the cremation pyre. And lastly, fire from lightning, from clouds.

So the first fourteen are all fires from different kinds of human and social interactions. This is one of the ways that, socially at least, we can say that the Zoroastrian community, in their sacredness, gathered together, pooled together the social cohesion, involved everyone.

But to me, it's more than that. Again, translating for us: it's not just me and my fire, but our eros, our fire, our soul-making ignites from others, with others, from the sangha, in the sangha, as we've pointed out.

But then these last two fires—the cremation fire is the fire from the dead, so there's a connection with the ancestors, fire from the beyond of this world, the beyond of human beings. Fire from the dead, the connection with death, and soul has a connection with death.

And then the fire from lightning—the fire from the heavens, from the sky, again another natural or non-human dimension.

So I offer that as something that perhaps for some of you will stimulate a kind of further reflection, thinking, poetic imagining into fire and kinds of fire—what might be involved and what might be necessary, what makes a fire soul-making, what allows and supports a fire to be soul-making.

A couple of things just to end. Having said all this and played a little with this metaphor of mastering the fire in the context of really saying: if our fire is not mastered, if it either just goes out or if it burns in a totally uncontrolled way, then there is dukkha. There are different ways that fire can create dukkha in the soul-making process, in the erotic-imaginal process, if we're not careful with it, if we're not attending to it, if there isn't enough mastery of the fire.

But in a way, I can't help but want to qualify all that and contextualize it by saying a couple more things. One is that there has to be, at least in the way that I would conceive of the whole soul-making process and dynamic, a realization that we will never completely master soul's fire or fires.

So it's a good metaphor, it's a lovely image, an alchemical image, and it's really important in this consideration of how we actually have this vehicle of soul-making work well for us—deliver what it can, open what it can open, issue where it can issue. Mastering the fire is part of that.

But I have to say, again, complementing or in dialectical tension with what I've said: I don't think we will ever completely master soul's fires. And I'd say we wouldn't want to. The soul wouldn't want to master its own fires, if you like. The soul will always, as I've said, be and have more than me somehow, more than my sense of ego.

So again, to borrow that phrase from Jesus—sorry if I'm misquoting it—no one knows where the Holy Spirit bloweth. And he's making an analogy with the atmospheric wind of the earth. No one knows where that bloweth. It comes, it goes, it changes directions. We can't predict it. We receive it, we're pushed and pulled by it. We can do something with that push and pull, as sailors do, but no one really knows, and you can't predict where it bloweth—where the spirit bloweth, where the Holy Spirit bloweth.

And the soul's fire, like the Holy Spirit—and fire is also an image for Holy Spirit in many traditions—is not going to be completely predictable or completely controllable. I cannot ever completely arrive at final mastery of my soul's fire, and nor would I actually ever want to. There's the beauty of that beyondness, of something bigger than me, of the unpredictability of it as well.

So yes, at times it blows out of my control, or I don't quite know where it's blowing or why. At times it seems to blow out, and then at times it comes back. It re-emerges from the embers, from what seemed like the ashes. It doesn't seem to be always directed by me. From some perspective, it seems never to be directed by me. It's given to me by soul, as I said, and it's my job to harness it, to respond to it, to have some mastery in relationship to it.

We talked about, on previous retreats, the potential realization somewhere on the trajectory of soul-making that my desire, my eros, my will even, is actually rooted in or emanating from the divine eros, the divine desire, the divine will. This fire is not even my fire. Now that's a genuine—and I'd also say inevitable—soul-making perception that arises inevitably at a certain point, with a certain maturing of the whole soul-making movement. It arises at times, in and out, and then it's something that, with practice, we can deliberately tap into, that perspective.

I'm talking here about it needing to be an embodied, sensitive way of looking, a perspective. It's not just a kind of attractive idea—and actually a kind of convenient one, because then it's like, "Oh, any desire I have is good because it's God's desire, it's divine"—that kind of very immature, ego-serving appropriation of a perspective.

But there's this humility, and I would say beauty, mystery, and magnificence in realizing that yes, I can reflect on and practice and attend to mastering the fire and my capacity and my ability with that, and tolerating, and everything that we've talked about

and more. But I will never completely master the fire. There's always something—soul will always be bigger. Soul will always be greater. Soul will always be more powerful, in my book.

And on that note, related to that, again in the context—we've talked about how we can take care and attend and respond in imaginal practice, in sensing the soul, in the whole soul-making path, so that it doesn't create more dukkha or lock dukkha into place or exacerbate it. And so this is really important, this business about fire and exploring that metaphor and seeing what it means in my life, on my path, in my practices. But there's a sense where it's never going to be under my thumb completely. And thank God for that.

Donald Winnicott, the psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott, wrote somewhere, "We are poor indeed if we are only sane." Here's a man who devoted his life to psychiatry, to the support of sanity, if you will. And he wrote, "We are poor indeed if we are only sane."

There's always going to be some part where the fire rages out of control, some thread, some times. There's always going to be something Dionysian, some craziness, some insanity, some holy madness. I hope it's holy and not unholy. We are poor indeed if we are only sane. We could also say we are poor indeed if we are only safe—just to play a little bit with what he said.

So if the fire is always under my thumb, if I've always mastered it, if it's always under my control, if it's always just contained just so, then I'm always sane, I'm always safe, I have a feeling of always being safe. But maybe I'm not then receiving the full grace and gift and impetus and direction of soul and soul's desires, designs, and intentions for me.

CHAPTER 120

Dukkha and Soul-making (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 56 min

In this fifth part of his exploration of dukkha and soul-making, Rob Burbea examines how imaginal practices can serve as powerful tools for transforming suffering. Rather than avoiding dukkha, he demonstrates how intimate engagement with difficulty—through the emotional and energy body—can allow imaginal images to arise that transform our relationship to pain and challenge.

Burbea presents the imaginal approach as one option among many for working with dukkha, alongside approaches that prioritize the nervous system, personal history, or relational dynamics. He emphasizes that these factors are mutually dependently arisen rather than causally primary. Through detailed examples, including work with romantic attachment and disturbing impulses, he shows how sensing with soul can reveal imaginal images buried within pathological patterns.

The talk explores how imaginal perception can regulate the nervous system and harmonize emotions not through direct intervention, but through the emergence of soul-making images that provide beauty, meaning, and dimensionality to difficult situations. Burbea suggests that image itself may be primary—that healing often involves revealing the imaginal seed buried within contracted patterns of craving and fixation. This approach maintains challenge and duty while transforming the quality of engagement from contracted suffering to soul-making participation in the mundus imaginalis.

So we've spent some time now drawing attention to some of the elements of soul-making practice around which we need to take care, to which we need to give some consideration, or some development if we want to ensure as much as possible that these kinds of practices and this kind of path of soul-making doesn't actually create more dukkha in different ways or bring its own whole set and level of problems.

Now I would like to turn that around and talk a little bit about how sensing the soul and imaginal practices can relieve dukkha, free us from dukkha, bring some kind of liberation in regard to some dukkha that we are experiencing or some situation of dukkha, some kind of healing, some kind of resolution or clarity or empowerment.

If you've been listening to the imaginal talks from when we first started, Theatre of Selves, and maybe even before that, and the whole trajectory there in different retreats, you'll have heard many examples of situations of dukkha, or sense of some kind of

dukkha, some kind of pain, suffering, imprisonment, confusion, in all the different domains of one's being. Then practicing not an avoidance of that dukkha, not turning away from it, but rather a being with it, an intimacy with the dukkha, a holding of the pain in the emotional body, in the energy body, aware of the situation.

And then that being with the dukkha, with care, and with the body, and with the sensitivity, out of that an image arose, an imaginal image, and that transformed the whole sense of the situation, the whole sense of the dukkha, bringing some relief, some ease, some freedom, some dissolving of the dukkha—not often completely. So it's a slightly different approach here. What it leaves is not a blandly peaceful situation. But the being with the dukkha, the going into it, holding it, relating to it in a certain way, allows sometimes in the kind of alchemy there an image to arise that becomes imaginal. And that then transforms and with it brings an alchemy that transforms the dukkha, that brings some kind of freedom from dukkha. That's often quite remarkable and beautiful.

I want to talk about that a little bit. As I said, if you've been listening, you'll have heard many instances, and I hope that also if you're listening, you will have recognized this in your own experience by now. Many, hopefully, situations of dukkha for yourself that have been transformed, liberated, opened up, given another dimension, freed in some regard through the emergence of the imaginal—in a way that wasn't contrived, wasn't coming along and deciding, what can I imagine to make myself feel better here, and moving away and avoiding the dukkha, but by being intimate with the dukkha and the imaginal arising out of that.

So I want to draw attention to this—it should already be obvious for anyone listening at this point, but just say a little bit more about it—as one of the options that we have as practitioners, one of the ways of approaching dukkha, and also one of the options we have of conceiving of what is going on in regard to imaginal practice, in regard to dukkha, in regard to pathology. One option among others, not better, not worse, just another option, another angle in with regard to dukkha and freeing from dukkha and also with regard to the whole kind of edifice of conceptions around dukkha and freedom from dukkha and soul and all of that.

As I said, you will have heard many examples, stories I've related of myself or of someone else I've been working with or who's shared with me something and said it's okay to share it. And hopefully you'll have seen this for yourself. There's some kind of emotional difficulty or unsettledness where the mind won't settle down, some kind of

difficulty in the field of relationships that one is in or the work or social situation one is in. Any of that—emotions, nervous system, mind, relational, occupational, whatever it is, or combination of those kinds of dukkha.

And one option is, as I said, being with that dukkha with the emotional body, with the energy body, and caring for it in the ways that we've described before. Out of that kind of crucible of the alchemical vessel, an imaginal image arises, or we sense the situation with soul. We could say it may not be that the image is—it might be that the situation itself becomes image, or I become image, and I look just the same in the image as I do now. It doesn't appear that different than what we might call material consensual reality, or something might be very different. But some kind of sensing with soul emerges out of the crucible, out of the alchemical vessel and heat of the difficulty because of the way we're being intimate with it and connecting with it, with the energy body, with the emotional body.

And that imaginal perception, that sensing with soul, does something to the energy body. What was a feeling of agitation and disharmony and unsettledness and jangliness in the energy body that went with the dukkha actually now becomes a sense in the energy body, palpable and immediate, of harmony. Something—to use a certain language—the nervous system has been regulated through the emergence of the image, through the emergence of the imaginal, through the sensing with soul. The nervous system has been regulated. Something has been soothed, something has been healed.

But it's not so much through addressing the nervous system directly. Not so much in this case, that trajectory I've just described, through addressing the energy body and playing with the samatha or ways of breathing or imagining the energy body. Not so much through thinking about one's personal family history or wounding or whatever it is. So there's just one option among other kinds of angles of approach to dukkha.

But for this to work, what arises has to be imaginal, has to be soul-making. And remember, that's for me now. In other words, as we said, the imaginal is only for a person now, for me now. What was imaginal for me yesterday may not be imaginal, or a year ago may not be imaginal for me now. And so it has to be alive as image for me now. And images transform.

So for example, as I shared the other day, there was that Lonely Wanderer image. It might be that months ago or years ago, that image or the solitary soldier, that image might have done its alchemical healing work because it was alive for me as image as it was, and transformed the dukkha and relieved the dukkha. But it might be that today, some weeks later, some years later, that image has transformed. And whether the image

as it used to be would still function for healing or whether it needs the new one, there's not a formula for this. We can't predict it, but we actually feel when something is imaginal in the moment.

So it has to be imaginal for me now, where something comes into my mind with a kind of spark, a poetic spark, an imaginal spark, and something serves to help me see or sense the situation with soul.

Often what arises as image may borrow from historical persons or actual people in my life, but when they function as imaginal figures, my imaginal sense of them need not conform to historical reality.

I remember precisely this kind of situation where the mind wouldn't settle, the nervous system felt jangly with agitation related to what seemed a difficult political work situation. I was uncertain how to navigate the relationships involved. A book by Michel Foucault had arrived in the post, and I glanced at the small biography on the back. That came into my mind—this image of him—and he functioned as an imaginal spark for me.

In my image of him, I had assumed several things about his character. Noticing he died quite young, I imagined perhaps he died of this or that, perhaps he was this kind of personality. That image triggered something else, which triggered something else, and the whole situation—these upcoming work meetings—became imaginal for me in a way that immediately released tremendous energy. There was harmonization in the energy body, settling of the nervous system, regulation and relief.

Later, curious, I researched Michel Foucault online and discovered that what had functioned as such a helpful imaginal image—what had made him so beneficial for me—wasn't actually historically accurate. But it doesn't matter. When historical figures, famous people, or even friends become imaginal images for us, correspondence with so-called historical reality is irrelevant.

Something happens: dukkha is relieved, the nervous system regulates, emotions find healing, and perception of a difficult situation transforms—as does perception of self. This doesn't mean the situation is transformed into something no longer difficult, rendered bland and without challenge. The situation may retain a calling, for this is part of the duty of image.

We're not talking about "no problem, no self, no issue here." With image, the situation might still be challenging, but the self has become imaginable. The situation has become imaginable. With this comes duty—the soul issues duty as part of the process. This may still be challenging, still charged with emotion and energy.

We're not discussing mere relief or a bleeding out of life from the situation. It remains charged, but the emotions are harmonized—harmonized with the imaginal self and the imaginal sense of the situation. With the duty that may emerge through image comes clarity about direction, about one's part, bringing poise, stance, resolve, empowerment.

The whole thing becomes soul-making. It feels soul-making. This doesn't mean without challenge or even without difficult emotion, but everything that characterizes soul-making is present: beauty, duty, meaningfulness.

Consider the examples I've used throughout these talks—the solitary wanderer and the solitary soldier warrior. In a certain situation of suffering, a certain difficulty, when imaginal perception opens and we sense with soul that whole social constellation, dukkha transforms. Something shifts, though some dukkha may remain.

There may still be a certain loneliness—the loneliness of that solitary wanderer. It remains, but large portions of dukkha have departed. Similarly, a certain kind of battling may remain in whatever situation. One stands up for what one believes needs defending, resists what one's soul knows must be resisted. One speaks out, perhaps putting life or career on the line.

Much transforms, much dukkha drains from the situation, discombobulation clarifies and aligns, poise emerges—yet still certain dukkha remains. For these examples: the dukkha of the solitary wanderer, the dukkha of the solitary warrior.

But this dukkha, now seen in imaginal opening, is given place. It has rooting, grounding in the imaginal, in the mundus imaginalis. It has rooting in soul, in divinity. This dukkha carries all the nobility, beauty, and meaningfulness given by finding its place—by taking its place, by having its rooting and grounding in soul recognized.

So dukkha remains, but with beauty. There can still be purpose, nobility of different kinds, love. That solitary wanderer carries much love, receives much love. One doesn't abandon duty—may even be given duty through relationship with the imaginal, as we've touched upon repeatedly.

The whole thing becomes imbued with meaningfulness, set in a kind of fluid, light structure of meaning. Everything opens to dimensionality. Life and dukkha, whatever situation we inhabit, oneself—all begin to be sensed with soul, seen as image.

As we've elaborated in this series' first talk, this creates infinite echoing, infinite mirroring of image and life, self and image—my story and endeavors in the world dancing with this imaginal figure, whatever it may be.

And that sense and the mystery of that infinite echoing and mirroring comes as a blessing. It adds a texture of profound and sweet blessing, although some kind of strand of what we could call dukkha remains through this whole thing. But because of that, the larger part of the dukkha is attenuated, released, freed.

So in terms of part of what I want to do—as I said, situate the soul-making path alongside and in context with other paths and approaches, particularly around approaches to dukkha—one could, for example, approach dukkha with a sort of regard for the nervous system as primary. Something has happened—a situation ongoing, an event, whatever—and it's jolted or programmed, if you like, the nervous system to get stuck in certain unhelpful patterns. It can be very difficult. And so one can approach the dukkha that then arises at any time with a conception that places the nervous system as primary care, and also an approach that heads straight for the nervous system. And that's great and fine.

Or one can regard one's history with the family, or everyone's personal psychological history, and regard that as primary. Obviously related to the nervous system—not completely the same, but overlapping. And again, take that as the primary approach. This dukkha now—how does it mirror what happened to me when I was a child, the situation I found myself in? Go back to that and heal that, so to speak. Open that up, address that first, and then allow the current situation to heal from that. Wonderful, too.

Or one can turn one's attention and place one's conceptual primacy on the current actual relations and what they need, how they need to be addressed, what is skillful relationship here, what's actually going on in the room. And all kinds of other possibilities too.

But these are all, as I said, possible conceptual frameworks and possible practical approaches in terms of what they approach first, primarily, and what is given conceptual primacy of place in their structure.

But there is also the possibility to approach via the imaginal first, via sensing with soul. That becomes the leaning of the approach. At times—not always, but one approach among other options—would be to look for, if you like, the imaginal. Where is the imaginal here? What needs to emerge? Is it something that needs to be revealed here, some image or some way of sensing the soul that can emerge? And that can be, if you like, the primary leaning of the practical approach. And we can create or discover a conceptual framework that gives the soul in our sense of the word, or the imaginal in our sense of the word, conceptual primacy. In other words, we regard that as the foundational factor, if you like.

Actually, one can see that all these are tools and all these are aspects of a kind of human situation of dukkha that are mutually dependently arising. In other words, what's happening in the nervous system—whether it's regulated or not, what kind of patterns gain control at any time in the nervous system—how we see a social situation or work situation that's difficult, the actual situation we're in and how we perceive it, what images of self are operating in the plural way (images), and whether they're imaginal or not, the relative activation of the erotic-imaginal—in other words, the energy body sense—all of these are actually mutually dependently arising.

As I said, what is the dominant and dominating state of the nervous system depends on how I'm paying attention to the energy body, and vice versa. And my perception of this social situation, this difficult work situation or whatever it is, depends on the energy body and the state of the nervous system. And my perception of the situation that I'm in also depends on whether that's imaginal or not. In other words, I can have an imaginal perception of that, and how I'm paying attention to the energy body, and what is the sense in the energy body. All these factors are mutually dependently arising.

And sometimes what happens for us as human beings is we forget that. In fact, we forget it a lot. And we want to, or we find ourselves clinging to some conceptual framework—even if we don't think we are—that forgets about the mutual dependent arising of these things. So it wants to take one of these things, for example the nervous system, for example the family history, or whatever, and place it as primary and focus on that as the most important thing and the most foundational thing. Forgetting that how I see my history actually depends on all kinds of things in the present moment, like what's happening in the energy body, like what's happening in the nervous system, like what kind of images are operating, how authentically imaginal they are, like what social situation I'm in in the present also influences my perception of the past.

So all of these—we can paint arrows of causation, or we should realize that the arrows of causation move among every node there and others, and in all directions. Mutual dependent arising between all of that.

So, as I said, I really just want to highlight the imaginal and sensing the soul as one option among others, possibly among many others, including many Dharma approaches. And I've also given examples of how we can be in a situation with another person, and perhaps we're experiencing dukkha of some kind, and this is our friend or teacher or something, and something is communicated by that person from us, or by us to that person, and the one who is suffering is able to see imaginatively, to sense with

soul. Something has been communicated, either because the other has an image alive for them, or feels something in the present moment of image, or sees the suffering that we are in imaginally, and they communicate it to us.

So the imaginal is communicated in the field. We catch that spark, something of the imaginal perception, something of the sensing of the soul is ignited in us through what is being given to us by another.

I described that situation of Skyping with Catherine when I was struggling with something that was really important to me. She saw me imaginatively, communicated that to me, and that helped me see the whole situation—the work itself, what would happen to it, myself in relation to the work. I was able to see that as image, to sense it with soul, and the dukkha went out of the situation. The beauty came in. The soul-making expanded the whole thing, and it became clearer what to do, what my poise and relationship and stance and duty was in relation to it all.

Or the story I shared of the words I heard, the image that was vaguely emerging for me as she was telling me something from her history that was very difficult—something that had happened some decades before. I voiced the poetic phrase or image of the sacred prostitute. Something was communicated, picked up by me, communicated to her, and then she was able to perceive that whole history and herself and the entire trajectory of her life in this imaginally filled out way. It became rich with image. It was transformed.

The whole situation was given its mirroring, its echoing in the Mundus Imaginalis. The situation was seen as a contracted echoing—what happened in the history was seen as a contracted echoing, a contracted, distorted mirroring of an image, of something in the imaginal realm.

As a teacher, I have completely lost count of how often this happens—working with someone and sensing an image as potential, glimpsing something, or sometimes even sensing what wants to happen in the energy body of the other, or seeing the image of their energy body. All kinds of things, very subtle and not really a big deal. In communicating that, the other person taps into an image and, for instance, may open up to a different sense of themselves because they're sensing themselves with soul—a different sense of their body, a different sense of empowerment, perhaps a kind of empowerment that's really not familiar to them.

Sometimes when working with people, I'm a little unsure. On one side, there is this real potential to communicate images in a field so that another picks up on them and their sensing soul is ignited. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder how much should

I say, what the timing of that is. One wonders, does it matter where the image arises first in a field? There will be many examples where the image arises just in them, and I am simply a witness or holding space.

All this can happen in a field, and it can also happen alone, in one's practice, in solitude.

I pointed out, I think it was in Eros Unfettered, that there might be times or situations where there's a desire to be with a particular person romantically, sexually, and one feels stuck because this other person—that's not what they want in the relationship with us. There's a very clear boundary, it's not possible, or something. One finds oneself locked into a kind of grasping and clinging and stuck with the dukkha of that craving in relation to this person. There is some eros, but there's also a lot of craving mixed up with it, and the whole thing is painful. If we're in some kind of relationship with them—perhaps we're friends—that relationship also becomes quite difficult because of this stuck clinging, this grasping.

Rather than only the options of letting go, putting it down, cooling off, finding what you want somewhere else, or looking at what one's dragging in that's inappropriate and doesn't belong here and needs a different kind of healing—as well as all those options and many more—there is the option of letting that person become image even more, become imaginal even more.

Dwelling with them, with the image of them meditatively, tuning in to all these elements of the imaginal we described in the first talk of this series, letting that amplify, letting that fill out, letting it flesh out and gain that richness and dimensionality. Allowing oneself, encouraging oneself even, to dwell meditatively, mindfully, sensitively, exploringly with the image of this person and tuning to them as image, as potentially soul-making image—then what happens is we start picking up on some or other imaginal aspects or elements of that whole imaginal constellation.

There's this ignition as we notice a certain aspect, the ignition of that particular aspect, the illumination of it as imaginal image, and then the whole constellation. One of the elements of that imaginal constellation will be the very sense of imaginal middle way, the very sense of theater, the very sense of not quite real, not quite not real. Neither category seems to apply. This is one of the things that will make all the difference.

Instead of "I need to manifest a concrete romantic or sexual or whatever kind of relationship with this person," the whole thing—the very sense of them—is expanded, altered, enriched, deepened, widened. It's allowed to become more imaginal, allowed to become more authentically imaginal than it perhaps wanted to be in the first place.

There's a sense we're not mistaking—we're seeing image as image, not mistaking potential image for concrete reality or something that needs to be concretized. That's one of the aspects and elements of the imaginal constellation that we actually encourage and support to become more obvious to us, more palpable to us, so we don't make that mistake between insisting on material fact and actually recognizing what is image, what is the Mundus Imaginalis, what is theophany.

In the whole soul-making dynamic that's supported by that kind of sensitive tuning, in the whole soul-making dynamic that opens up there, we create and discover the more that pothos wants. Remember how we described the whole dynamic that eros pushes on, because eros wants more connection, more contact, more penetration, more intimacy, more touch, whatever. That's the pothos in the eros—it always wants more. If we don't allow things to open up on the dimensions of the imaginal, we pursue that more in concrete reality.

Or we find ourselves compelled, so to speak, to shut everything down—to shut the eros down, return to simply letting go or whatever path of renunciation we might follow. There is a third option, if you will: the option of erotic imaginative opening that unfolds the soul-making dynamic and hence enables us to sense with soul.

In this possibility, the *more* that the Eros seeks is created and discovered within that soul-making dynamic—within the mutual fertilization of Eros, Psyche, and Logos, their widening, deepening, complication. I have then more intimacy, more faces and aspects of the Beloved with which to become intimate. Different light shines through—deeper, wider, more varied. I have all kinds of intimacy available in those dimensions. With all this comes meaningfulness, beauty, divinity as part of the dimensionality.

I am actually receiving all of this as grace through allowing the image to expand rather than shutting it down—or rather than locking onto it and demanding it manifest concretely, physically. In receiving this abundance, all the beauty and gift of it, and in recognizing the imaginal middle as one of the elements in this constellation, the clinging is reduced. The grasping, the fixation diminishes. The pressure of the situation lessens, including the pressure I am placing on this person in whatever our actual relationship might be.

There is less pressure in my psyche because there is *more*—because the soul-making dynamic's opening has created more vistas, more facets and dimensions of the beloved, of myself, of the eros itself. Larger, deeper, there is more space, and therefore less pressure. With this relaxing of grasping and pressure, not only might that person feel less pressured by my insistence on some particular material form of relationship, but my own dukkha is eased through this relaxation of clinging and pressure.

This represents a truly important possibility. Let me emphasize three aspects of it.

First, this transformation is not necessarily easy to accomplish. It might require considerable practice and skill to be able to effect such a shift. But it really is possible—I cannot stress this enough. It's almost as if both they and we become larger through the soul-making expansion. The whole contraction of craving is released, and everything emerges with a different sense entirely. It would be remiss of me not to stand by this possibility and point it out clearly. Yet I must also acknowledge that it may prove quite difficult, involving considerable maturity of practice and development of skill in imaginal practice and with the erotic imaginal.

Second, in working this way with a person who might actually be present in our life in some form—though perhaps not in the kind of relationship we think we want or that our craving desires—this practice doesn't mean turning away from dukkha. Nor does it mean turning away from actual relationship, avoiding this person, or neglecting to care for any potential difficulties in our relating. We must still address and approach the actual relationship and what it needs, because when there's significant clinging and one person wants something the other cannot provide, this often creates considerable difficulty in the actual relating. That too requires attention.

The inner work, from this angle of possibility, may involve opening up the whole imaginal perception, opening up the sensing with soul of other, of self, of the eros itself. All of this is possible, but not at the expense of caring for the actual relationship. What actually unfolds—whether you end up in a romantic or sexual relationship with this person or not—becomes much less important because you have received something else that was, in essence, what your soul was seeking.

I could offer countless examples of instances where something truly disturbing was occurring—a memory, or someone deeply troubled by recognizing their impulses in certain situations or relationships, or difficult events or circumstances, or self-images that were genuinely disturbing, painful, contracted. So many instances of different kinds of suffering, whether in relation to impulses one observes in oneself, memories, situations, events past and present or potentially future, self-constructs and images that cause real pain—not imaginal constructs, but seemingly solid, terrible realities.

Whatever the dukkha, it can appear almost irredeemable, terrible—something that shouldn't even see the light of day, let alone be shared with another. Shameful, pathological, strange. I'm not sharing some specific examples now, partly because the immediate effect might be disturbing, and partly because I've already offered many illustrations throughout these talks.

But what can happen—what is truly possible, and what I have witnessed repeatedly—is that this thing which seemed so strange, so terribly difficult, pathological, hopeless, can through soul-making practice become image. The whole situation can be seen with soul, beginning with the dukkha itself. Perhaps the sense of that dukkha, or the very thing that was dukkha, comes to be perceived imaginally. In this transformation—this transubstantiation, as I've called it—an image or sensing with soul emerges from that difficulty, from becoming intimate with it. And with this emergence comes some release of dukkha.

Not avoiding the problem, but going into it in a way that opens up the sensing of the soul. And then that opens up the whole situation, opens up the sense of the dukkha without dissolving it completely. It transforms it.

In a lot of these transformations that I'm describing, and I have described, one wonders whether it's actually—or whether one way of conceiving would be, as I mentioned earlier—that the image is actually primary. It's almost that in this difficulty, in this pathology, in this terrible thing or this impulse that I have, or even in the memories and events or situations I'm in, in this contracted self-image that seems like it just can't be helpful at all—one wonders sometimes whether it's almost like there's an imaginal image, or potentially imaginal image, kind of, not hiding, but buried in there. And that the healing, the liberation, the relief from dukkha comes when it is revealed. The image was there all along. It perhaps was driving the whole difficult pattern.

This is what I meant when I said right from the beginning, in Theatre of Selves and all that: image is primary. What would it be to consider image as primary? What would it be to entertain the conception that image is primary?

So that's there, buried. Somehow we've gotten into a kind of wrong relationship with that image. And what could have been Eros, or what started off as Eros, got contracted into craving, which brought more contractions. What started off as image and potentially imaginal image was grasped the wrong way and became what we call a fixated image, not imaginal image, reified, or became, in other language, kind of *papañca*.

If you, again, trace your own examples where this has happened for you, or if you recount to yourself different examples that you've perhaps heard me give of this transformation of dukkha through the erotic-imaginal and through the sensing with soul. And play with: oh, I could see that in a way that conceives of the image as primary—not my history as primary in itself, in the usual way we think about that causally, not my trauma as primary, not my nervous system as primary, not my whatever it is. But actually, one could at times, and again, this is just one option among others, and that's something I'll come back to.

One could—I think it would be a very good exercise. If you really want to fertilize and till the soil of your understanding and your grasp and your taste for these practices and this whole path, it's really good to kind of play with the conceiving.

So as I said, trace it if you can—bring to mind instances where you have undergone this kind of transformation of dukkha through the imaginal, through the sensing of soul. Or you've heard me or someone else give an example of that movement. And can you kind of see that in many of those instances, one could actually reconfigure the conception to see: actually, there's kind of a seed image in there. And that seed image has been related to in the wrong way, and all this difficulty has come out of it. And Eros, as I said, becomes contracted to craving; potentially imaginal becomes fixated image or *papañca*. And what may be required from this perspective for healing, for liberation, for relief and easing of the dukkha is the revealing—or creation slash discovery—of the imaginal image, the uncovering of the imaginal image at the core of the pathology. You understand?

CHAPTER 121

Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · 1h33

> *In this profound talk, Rob Burbea examines how skillful intimacy with dukkha can open the gates to the mundus imaginalis. Rather than avoiding suffering, he demonstrates how connecting with difficult situations—illness, vulnerability, uncertainty—can give birth to imaginal images that bring healing and liberation. Drawing from his own experience with cancer and severe osteoporosis, Burbea illustrates how dukkha becomes a crucible for soulmaking when approached with humility, receptivity, and what he terms 'sensing with soul.'*
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> *The talk explores how imaginal perception differs from mere mindfulness of images or getting lost in fantasy. When we sense our difficulties as image—not as escape but as deeper engagement—the oppressive grip of suffering loosens while remaining present to the tragic elements. Burbea discusses the mysterious sense of perfection that can emerge when life's difficulties are perceived imaginally, not through spiritual platitudes but through authentic soul-making practice that preserves both the reality of suffering and its sacred dimensions.*
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> *This sophisticated exploration addresses practical concerns about environmental destruction and social issues, showing how soul-making responses to dukkha extend far beyond intrapsychic healing to include warrior images that call us to action. The teaching emphasizes that authentic imaginal perception requires fullness of intention—practicing not merely for personal relief but for the love of soul-making itself, recognizing our participation in the divine process of sacralizing existence.*

Generally speaking, we can observe that when there is dukkha of any kind in any situation or dimension of our life, we can allow ourselves to find skillful ways of being intimate with that dukkha—opening to it, connecting with it, contacting it, holding it, and responding to it in different skillful ways. Sometimes out of that crucible, the heat of the dukkha, if you like, in relationship to the dukkha, an image might be born.

That image might be born just within ourselves, in our own solitary practice. It might be born through a field in which the imaginal spark jumps, so to speak, from one person in the field to another, or the image is communicated from someone else to ourselves. And that opening of the imaginal perception, or the arising of the imaginal in relationship to the dukkha, to the difficult situation, the sensing with soul there, we could say, is a kind of way of looking, or rather sensing with soul embraces a whole world of ways of looking, of perspectives that will bring, in some way or other, some healing, some liberation, some relief and release from the dukkha.

This is just a general observation that I hope you've seen many times already, if you've been practicing, and you can trace it through many of the examples that I've given in talks, or Catherine has given, or perhaps other teachers too.

I want to point out a few things about all this. As we said, often there's some situation that feels oppressive, where there's dukkha, and we see that very situation imaginatively, or we find an image there of that very situation, or of ourselves in that situation, or of the other—perhaps the other with whom we are in difficulty. Seeing them as image, or the seeing of them, or ourselves, or the situation as image, arises for us out of that crucible. And that seeing, that kind of way of looking, sensing with soul, brings with it a lessening of the oppression, a lessening of the contraction, a greater degree of spaciousness and ease.

It's not because we've gone away from or avoided the situation or the pain in it. It's not that at all. But it's because we've allowed it to have or to give birth to or reveal—or we've created or discovered—the imaginal dimensions of it, other or more dimensions of that very dukkha, of that very situation. In that, that creates more space. And there is, as we pointed out, an aspect of the imaginal constellation that is inevitably the sense of what we call the imaginal Middle Way or the theatros. And that's there too. And that, in a way that parallels quite closely the Middle Way of emptiness, also releases some suffering out of the situation, some of the grip or the craving and the contraction in relation to the difficulty that causes extra suffering.

So there's, generally speaking, because of these factors, more space, less concretization, less of just one flat view of what's going on—and all of that makes the whole thing feel less oppressive. And it's as if the image or the imaginal figure or the perspective of the imaginal perception, perspective of sensing with soul, has a kind of wisdom in it, a soul wisdom, that comes, is given to us, is transmitted to us through the imaginal, through the sensing with soul, regarding action, speech, bearing, poise, attitude, intention in that situation. In other words, something is communicated to us of a kind of practical wisdom or that has implications for how we might then be differently in that situation.

Sometimes it's a matter of then consciously trying to implement it. Sometimes the very opening to the imaginal by itself affects that shift in our action, speech, bearing, courage, poise, intention, what we're trying to do in the situation, what we can stand behind and commit to doing.

So this way of sensing with soul, this way of imaginal perceiving, stands as I said alongside and together with, or in, our larger repertoire of tools, arts, as practitioners, that we can have in regard and in relationship to suffering. So it's not always, "here's

some suffering, oh, can I see it's impermanent? Can I see it's empty? Can I bring more metta? Can I just let go?" These are all very, very important, valid, indispensable tools, arts, if you like, skills that we develop in Dharma practice, but there's also the way of the imaginal. There's also the way of sensing with soul.

Now, if someone's very new to this, and they hear something about "find the image here with the suffering, in a suffering situation," that's probably very liable to be misunderstood without much previous experience in imaginal practice. "See it as image, or find the image here" may seem to be suggesting some kind of disconnection from the reality of the situation, some kind of going into an extreme of anti-realism or avoiding it with a sort of pleasant construct of wishful thinking or daydreaming. But by this point, you've been listening and practicing and you know we mean something much more sophisticated and artful than that, that involves and demands our integrity and our sensitivity and our presence and connection and openness and humility and all of that.

But with all this and this possibility of sensing with soul as one of the modes, one of the ways in which dukkha is eased and relieved, we might also ask, again, regarding this question or this factor element of the imaginal of intention—and what are called the fullness of intention in that list of elements of the imaginal, aspects of the imaginal—and we might ask: does the intention in sort of endeavoring to see this difficulty or this difficult situation as image or to find the image there, does it have to be, my intention there have to be more than just for the sake of trying to find some ease?

In other words, does my intention have to be for the love of soulmaking and the fullness of soulmaking? When, as we pointed out before, that very fullness of intention is part of what makes it imaginal, what qualifies it to have that adjective or label "fully imaginal, authentically imaginal." But it's also, fullness of intention is also what opens up and delivers to us the authentically imaginal sensing with soul, soulmaking.

Here we're asking, does the fullness of intention... If—or rather, let's put it the other way around—if I'm only trying to find a way to relieve my dukkha, I say, "oh, okay, let me try an image, maybe that will get rid of the dukkha," and that's the kind of extent of my intention, I'm only trying to relieve dukkha, will that be enough to relieve the dukkha? Or does my intention have to be even bigger? It's not that I don't acknowledge and I'm not aware that dukkha may well be relieved in the sensing with soul, but the fullness of intention—that it's for the love of soulmaking, the whole of soulmaking, and that that soulmaking is more than just my personal psycho-spiritual process. It's for the sake of the divine.

That's all in the meaning of what we mean by fullness of intention, as we said in the first talk. So the soul is more than my personal being—I'm conceiving soul-making as more than my psycho-spiritual process. And I'm also conceiving the locus or location of soul as more than just here. In soul-making, it's not just my soul which is here that gets made into soul or whose soul is increased and magnified. It's also, so to speak, the soul out there as other—nature, the trees. What is perceived and discovered in the object is also soul.

So soul-making means soul-making everywhere, in all the aspects—Psyche, Logos, all of that. What we find is when there's that kind of fullness of intention, or to the degree that there's that fullness of intention, to that degree is the imaginal opened up, is the sensing with soul opened up and supported and galvanized and deepened and enriched. And to that degree is the soul-making, and also to that degree is the release of dukkha.

In other words, if the intention is only for the release of dukkha—I'm just trying to find an image so that I might have some relief from dukkha, perhaps approaching it in quite a contrived way even—there are two points there. One is about the limitations or range of the intention, the fullness of the intention. The other is about how I go about it, whether it's contrived or I let it emerge. Of those two, the first is perhaps most important: if my intention is only the release of dukkha, it may be that less dukkha is released.

The contrived thing is a little more open as a question, because sometimes we do act deliberately. Here is this difficulty, and I'm curious what happens when I bring this imaginal figure that has been so meaningful to me in the past into dialogue, into relationship, into connection with this dukkha, or with myself experiencing this dukkha. Now that might be contrived in the sense that it's not just emerging organically by itself from our connection with the dukkha. So that may or may not be useful.

The dukkha that is released—or rather, the release, the decrease of dukkha that is enabled through imaginal perception, through sensing with soul—is very interesting in what it delivers, in how that release is experienced, as I've touched on already. There's something akin here to the two arrows metaphor that the Buddha used, the second arrow being the kind of secondary contraction or reaction to suffering. So it might be physical suffering, and perhaps the mind is getting embroiled in that, and the body also has a secondary level of contraction. The energy body contracts around pain, around emotional pain, around physical pain.

This release of dukkha that comes through sensing with soul releases what we might call the cloud of second arrows. But it might leave, of course, what is inevitably difficult, inevitably unpleasant, inevitably painful physically at some point, or even tragic. And what it does with that in leaving it is it doesn't leave it in just a flat way. It leaves it in a way that is impregnated and shot through and rich with soul.

So there's this definite sense of release of dukkha, this cloud of second arrows, and you can feel that in the clarifying opening, harmonizing of the energy body and the easing of the mind and the nervous system. And the rest of the dukkha—the unavoidable tragedy of what we might be facing, the unavoidable difficulty—is rendered with soul. And sometimes, in fact very often, what happens if this process goes deep is that this is then perceived as perfect.

There's something perfect about this very difficulty that I actually wouldn't wish on anyone. I certainly didn't wish it on myself—no, I'd rather it really not be here. And somehow, in the sensing of the whole difficulty with soul, in the sensing with soul of the whole difficulty, there's one great level of reducing of the suffering, and the remaining dukkha is regarded as perfect. And again, not in a contrived way, not as a shallow sort of spiritual posture or intellectual posture.

Someone on a retreat since I've been ill—I can't remember exactly what it was in response to, perhaps something I'd written or shared in a talk—wrote me a note. I can't remember exactly what it said, but it asked, "How can you talk of your cancer and your situation as perfect?" And "I have a really hard time with this," and I think the note mentioned terrorism or something like that. So it's a really, really good question. I don't think I had time on that retreat—I think I squeezed a little bit into a Q&A reading from the note, but I didn't really have time to amplify it. So I'd like to say just a little bit about that now.

Because one can, and people do, adopt a sort of concept that everything is perfect. And it's a kind of spiritualized attitude. So everything is perfect, including the tragic, including all dukkha. But that posture or concept or idea is sometimes—we can hear it—just way too facile. It's lacking in integrity and in sensitivity. There's something disconnected in it. It's not really letting the heart and the soul be impacted, engaged with, meet, be worked on by the dukkha, by the tragedy there.

There's something disconnected and unattuned, something indifferent sometimes to the point of a kind of callousness in relation to one's own suffering or in relation to someone else's suffering or the suffering in the world. And actually, therefore, for all

the ultimate sounding, spiritual sounding wisdom in that "everything is perfect" sort of idea, there is actually a lack of wisdom and intelligence as well as those other factors—sensitivity, connection, attunement, integrity.

But somehow, because of the prevalence of those kinds of teachings, which when they come from the right place do have wisdom in them, but sometimes they don't come from the right place—a person is just picking it up, and it's not wise, it's not sensitive, it's not intelligent.

Other times, students pick up teachings about emptiness—hearing a teacher say "everything is empty, so everything's okay"—and try to apply this perspective to great personal tragedies or social and environmental catastrophes. But that student might not yet have developed the visceral understanding, the practiced, worked, integrated, digested comprehension of emptiness. That level of depth and comprehensive realization might not yet be available to them naturally—not at the level that would be commensurate with genuinely seeing something as perfect.

And by seeing it as perfect, I don't mean seeing it as perfect in a way that leads us to simply not give a damn—to just disconnect, go watch TV, watch a film, tune out completely.

I've stressed many times that emptiness is a tool—a very, very powerful tool. To the degree that we realize emptiness, it becomes a tool of that degree of power. But like all tools, it has a certain range. We apply it where it works for us, where it's appropriate. Trying to apply emptiness when we haven't developed the capacity to really pick up that tool at the necessary level, or where it's simply not the appropriate tool for some other reason—this isn't wise practice. It's not skillful practice.

This sense of the perfection or the rightness—the mysterious perfection and rightness even of some dukkha or tragedy—is available as a genuine and profound realization that is soul-making and fruitful when that tragic situation or event is seen as image. When the imaginal perception is there, when the sensing with soul is present, then emerges this mysterious, almost ineffable, almost unarticulatable sense of the perfection and rightness, and even the grace of what is most difficult and most tragic. This emerges when we see it as image, when we sense it with soul.

For example, the cancer that I have, the prognosis I was given, and the real possibility of facing an early death—finding ways, or having ways emerge, for this to become image, to be sensed with soul, transforms and transfigures the whole sense of the entire situation.

This sensing as image, this sensing with soul, is a sensibility. It involves receptivity, tuning, humility. It's not a technique, as we've pointed out before—or it's certainly not only a technique. In situations like these, it's probably even less in the realm of mastery or technique. There's grace involved, receptivity to what soul is giving us through the very dukkha itself.

Sometimes a situation, an event, a feeling—some kind of dukkha, some kind of tragedy—needs to become image first. Using my cancer as an example, it needs to become imaginal image first. We're present with it, and through our connection with it, through our openness and sensing into the whole situation, it becomes imaginal. We sense it with soul first, and then arises this recognition: "This is perfect. This is somehow perfect in ways I can't even get my head around, ways I don't fully understand." The whole thing becomes imaginal.

But I'm not approaching it first with this conceptual idea of the perfection of all things, the perfection even of dukkha. If I do try to approach deep difficulties and suffering with this kind of attitude—"this is perfect"—as a spiritual position without being truly attuned, it can be really silly, really a kind of platitude, and actually offensive.

Someone might be taken with certain non-dual teachings and hear this sort of thing: "everything's perfect." Or they might embrace a different kind of truth: "everything is God's will." But it all depends on the integrity, the sensitivity, the openness, the humility, the inner work, the receptivity, the attunement—the quality of the crucible in which the sensing with soul, the imaginal perception, can emerge.

All of this is to offer the imaginal and sensing with soul as one option—either in addition to or mixed with other approaches available to us as Dharma practitioners when faced with suffering, when faced with dukkha.

In this regard, there's something more I want to address. I've touched on it many times, and briefly in this talk as well. I've stressed the importance of contacting, connecting with the difficulty, opening to it, and then allowing the image to emerge from that connection, allowing the sensing of soul to emerge with it. We can hear this teaching and lodge within our understanding a belief that there's something objectively real in the suffering that we can contact—that we can see it "just as it is." Maybe that's a better way of putting it. The assumption becomes: when we connect with it just as it is, then out of that an image can come.

That's fine, and that's sometimes the best way of working—to approach the dukkha so that the soulmaking can emerge from it.

But as I've said so many times, the contact with dukkha or with anything is never direct, bare, simple, unmediated truth or fact revealing. There's always a way of looking, and wrapped up in the way of looking, there are always ideas, concepts, and conceptual frameworks with any contact or connection with anything. Anytime there's any perception, wrapped up in that is some kind of way of looking, and wrapped up in that are all kinds of concepts and ideas and conceptual frameworks.

So the dukkha that we connect with when in our practice we're trying to first connect with dukkha—the way we might sense it or perceive it or contact it—is not actually the bare actuality, is not the fundamental thing, the real thing. Nor even is the story we give to ourselves of its origin, of its cause. That's something I'll come back to.

Sometimes, and I hope in all this talking, you can get the sense of an alternative possibility, either of actually sensing or conceiving, that the image is primary. That the way we sense with soul is primary, is first. I don't mean temporally first—as first in a temporal sense, then a nanosecond later some interpretation or something like that. I mean in the sense of conceptual frameworks often placing something as more fundamental, as more the primary driving force of the psyche.

And you can get a sense, sometimes I hope, at least in your experience or in your conceiving about experience, that there's a possibility of actually conceiving and sensing, feeling that the image is primary. The imaginal is primary, is so to speak, first.

And it may be that one also gets the sense or the sense in hindsight, or entertains the concept that, as I mentioned earlier just briefly, the image is primary somehow. And out of that, situations arise with that as the sort of seed or kernel. Out of that, our life situations arise, mirroring the image or some kind of... dukkha arises, which we quickly get into a kind of unhelpful and non-soulmaking relationship with. So then we're just left with the dukkha, and the image might become papañca, the eros that might be there might become craving, and everything's gotten flattened.

Maybe sometimes even a step further—we can sometimes even come to be able to regard at times, or move in and out of the conceptual framework that might even regard our very process of learning as somehow given to us by soul or in the process of soulmaking, so that this image and then everything we went through with that, it's given to us as part of the soulmaking, for the sake of and as part of the soulmaking. So our history, even the painful aspects of our history, and our learning and our development psychologically, in soul and in relationship, all of that is somehow part of the soulmaking process and given to us as potential by soul, a seed by soul.

And I certainly don't mean to foist these ideas, and one shouldn't really enforce it on oneself or on another ever. It's more just—these are possible ways of looking, ways of framing, ways of conceiving we can entertain. As I said, move in and out of entertaining certain concepts, certain conceptual frameworks, if they prove helpful, if they prove soulmaking, or when they prove soulmaking. Rather than a fixed dogma: this is how things are, this is the truth of things, this is how one should always respond, this is how one should always think and regard, this is the truth.

So this seeing or sensing my dukkha or what difficulties and challenges are given to me, this seeing and sensing of all that as perfect in this kind of mysterious way—and that itself is kind of unfathomable. That's what I mean by I couldn't quite get my head around it or articulate it. This seeing and sensing of it as perfect, which implies that it has become image first, seeing it as a gift from the soul, as a gift from some god, or however we want to put this.

This doesn't imply just a passivity of receiving: it's perfect, it's all gift, so I just kind of—all I have to do is receive something. Again, there's a kind of, to me, a little more sophistication in how the conceptual framework is working.

So as I pointed out—I can't remember when in this series of talks—but we can regard it as given. The soul gives us these things, if you like. That's a certain conceptual framework, a certain way of conceiving, a certain sensibility also.

And at the same time, in order for it to be soulmaking, it's not enough that I am given something. I need to assent to what I am given, and assent to endeavoring and working to make soul there, to see it in a way that makes soul, to relate to it in a way that makes soul.

So yes, we can say that something is given, these things are given to me. Soul gives us the beautiful and the difficult. And at the same time, the soulmaking needs my assent. The soul gives us what it wants for our soulmaking, and at the same time it needs my assent, my will, my soulmaking orientation, my soulmaking intention, my soulmaking tuning, my participation is required.

So as I pointed out, in the twoness of Eros, the twoness that's part of soulmaking perception, imaginal perception, sensing the soul, not just the autonomy of the other, but also my autonomy is necessary, is preserved in that twoness, and also has its due emphasis in the twoness that is part of the imaginal constellation. My autonomy is necessary because I need, or the soulmaking needs, my autonomy. I need to harness my will,

orient in a certain way, adopt a certain attitude, work towards the soulmaking, and there's the grace of what is given to me. And somehow, again, that curious polarity is embraced—mixture of opposites or paradox or whatever there.

So my choosing, my will, as well as my listening, my deliberation—which may well include doubt and uncertainty regarding what is happening and what the right approach is—all this is necessary as part of soul-making. Perhaps without them, without my choosing, without my will, without my listening, without also my deliberation, my doubt and my uncertainty, soul-making is not possible, or it's limited. The extent and depth and range of it is limited. Perhaps.

And maybe that's exactly because of the stretching that's part of the soul-making dynamic—the Eros, Psyche, Logos getting stretched as part of their mutual fertilization and expansion. So if we don't feel stretched, then soul-making is not happening. Sometimes being stretched is difficult. It feels difficult. And there's doubt and uncertainty, and work involved.

So connecting with dukkha through that connection and the kind of poise of that connection—the sensitivity and receptivity and attitude and intention there and the listening, in the attuning—something in or around, in relation to the dukkha, or from the dukkha, emerges as image. The gates to the mundus imaginalis are opened. We sense what is happening, ourselves included, the dukkha included, with soul. And out of that can come, as part of that soul-making unfolding, a sense of perfection—the almost mystical, unfathomable, baffling perfection of the very dukkha itself, of the tragic.

Some of you will know that recently I received a diagnosis of very extreme osteoporosis. Really extreme. Apparently I had no idea until I started breaking bones without any impact, or with very, very little impact, or just nothing at all. Bones started breaking. I had a scan and the doctor said, "You know, it's really, really severe." I had no idea, so that was quite a shock. And I didn't get to find out what it means long-term. It sounded like they can't really make it much better, so what does that imply if I survive the cancer? So it was somewhat of a shock, and there's a lot of unknown in terms of what will actually happen, what will be possible for my life and my range of activities.

There's a sense with that, obviously, of vulnerability in the body—that one might very easily break bones with the slightest of impacts, break one's back, or even, as I said, without even an impact, just moving in a certain way, not even particularly hard or strange movements. So there's a sense of vulnerability with that. There's the vulnerability of not knowing, the sense of physical vulnerability on top of the cancer and the chemotherapy.

I found myself with that and was just sitting with it, sitting with the whole sense of the whole thing—the unknown, the physical, the sense of the frailty of my body. Opening to the whole of it, connecting with the whole of it, with the whole of the energy body, and the vulnerability being a difficult emotion, but one that lends itself or has a door that opens into the possibility of humility.

So right there with the whole energy body and then the humility easily accessible—the humility of the not knowing, the humility that came via the vulnerability and the frailty, the sense of frailty of the body, both as an idea and as a sort of physical sense. And then opening to or finding within that the sense of eternality as another aspect of the imagination. I didn't approach this in a contrived way—this was just organic. This is more in retrospect; I'm reporting and articulating what stages enabled something to open up here, and these are the elements involved. As it happened, it wasn't contrived or planned. But there was a sense with the whole energy body, with that connection with the dukkha, with the humility that opened and was a lovely kind of softening there. Then the sense of eternality.

I think I touched on this earlier, just very briefly—many kinds of eternality as an aspect of sensing the soul. In this case, it was a sense of the whole life, my whole life, with its narrative and its difficulties, and particularly the physical difficulties and the sort of narrative of illnesses and physical challenges. The story including the conditions of body, of soul, of relationship with humans, with ideas, with friends, with foes, with societies, with cultures—all that was kind of sensed or moved into a mode where it was sensed or seen, so to speak, from after death.

As if the whole life, that whole narrative and everything involved in it, all the dukkha involved in it, these particular dukkhas and that whole stream was seen from a perspective out of time, from after death. Like the whole thing was just there, sort of there. As I mentioned when I touched briefly on this before, the whole theme, the whole narrative and story and all the conditions and all the difficulties seen sub specie æternitatis—in Latin, from the perspective, if you like, of eternity.

And that combination of the whole energy, the openness to the dukkha, connecting—not hiding from it, not running away, but connecting in good, healthy ways with the situation, with my feelings, with the fact of it—with the whole energy body awareness, with the humility opened via the vulnerability, and with this particular kind, in this case, of sense of eternality, then the whole imaginal sense of the whole situation opened up. Again, we could say the doors, the gates of the mundus imaginalis, the realm of the imaginal, open up.

But it's not something other than—not something other than cancer and possible early death, or possibly a longer period of time with a very frail and incapable body and severely restricted activities. It's not something other. It's this body, this dukkha, this moment, this life, this death, this story, all of that sensed with soul.

Yeah. Again, it's not necessarily that there's going to be, because of that, because that perception then feels so healing, so beautiful, so tender in the presence of the divine, so blessed in and with all the difficulties, all the vulnerability, all the unknown, all the frailty—it's not necessarily because of that level of healing that then the situation is without difficulty or without, from a certain perspective, a certain tragic element, or that my bones then miraculously go back to normal. I mean, maybe something like that happens—I don't know—but that's not the level that felt even the most important at that point.

There was such blessing, reverence, tenderness, grace, mystery of dimensionality, divinity, an attenuation of the dukkha through relating to all of it, and the opening up of the soul-making there.

To draw one element out of what I just shared: when we can sense this or that dukkha, or our life, or ourselves with soul, sometimes when that deepens or unfolds to a certain extent, we can perceive all of it as gift—all of it as grace. So that even this difficulty, even this cancer, even this possible early death, even this possible... I don't know what a life with severe osteoporosis looks like, extreme osteoporosis. I don't know, in that restriction and whatever it is, that vulnerability—all of that is felt as gift, and the gift of life, and the gift of my life, with its particulars.

Again, I'm really not wanting to force this on anyone as dogma: "You should see things this way. This is how it is." I'm talking about ways of looking, talking about possibilities, and there's always a sense of both sensing, discerning what is appropriate to us right now in our situation. What helps? Is it soul-making? Does it heal and liberate and relieve dukkha? And in what ways? Or what might be given to me—my antennae are alert for what soul might be prompting me, or handing me as clues for where the soul-making is.

But one possibility, one possible way of looking, is that in the soul-making, in the sensing the soul of all of that—dukkha, life, self, etc.—with soul, there is a sense of all of it as gift, all of it as gift.

Now when we talk about the gift of life, or sensing life as a gift, that idea has many possible different levels. We can understand it, we can have a sense of it, or it might mean something at many different levels.

For example, a more conventional way of seeing it, even for someone who has a religious orientation or attitude: sensing myself as something separate from the divine, and sensing time more conventionally, sensing life and death more conventionally. There is something or somewhere or some level that we might call divine, and we receive this gift of life from that divine—the miracle of it, the beauty of it, the dukkha in it that we can't quite fathom. But the sense of the gift of life, then, is very beautiful still. But because of the more conventional view of time, of life and death, and the more normal view of oneself being something separate from God, the beauty there and the sense of gift is only at a certain level.

There's a whole other level possible in the sense of grace and gift when we begin to sense that this self and my soul is not separate somehow from the divine, from the Buddha nature, whatever we want to call it. We participate in God and God participates in us—not separate, in the most profound way. And when life and death, my life and my death, become imaginal image for us, when they are seen and sensed with soul, seen and sensed as imaged—which doesn't mean there is no death or I'm going to live forever in some kind of afterlife or there's a heaven or whatever it is, or I'll be reborn or whatever. It doesn't mean necessarily believing any of that. It's more that life and death, as they appear to us, become image, become imaginal.

There's a whole other level here of sense of the gift of life when the self and the soul and the divine or the Buddha nature are not seen as separate. They're interpenetrating and interparticipating. Life and death become image. They are perceived imaginally, and time is recognized as empty—thoroughly, deeply empty. Then there's a whole other level of gift that opens up.

Part of that gift is exactly the sense of the depths and the mystery of participation—of our participation, my participation, your participation in existence and in the divine. And also our participation in sacralizing existence and the cosmos. This is part of the work of the soul, I would say. And what to me is so important, or perhaps the most important thing in soul-making, is the sacralizing, the making sacred, the rendering sacred, the perceiving as sacred, and then relating to as sacred of the whole of existence and the whole of the cosmos—and that in an infinitely expanding possibility of ways.

It's that sense of the depth of participation and the mystery of that which is so much a part, or which comes with a whole other dimension of the sense of gift, of the soul-making perception of gift of life.

I shared—I think perhaps on my website, I can't remember—a practice that arose organically one night. It wasn't too long after the operation, after they'd analyzed the cancer tissue that they took out and gave me a prognosis, which was not very good at all, with the stage 4 cancer and all that business.

I remember not being able... At that point, my tummy was still very unsettled, so it was difficult to sleep at night. One night I gave up on trying to sleep and sat up in bed, practicing in the dark. I'd just been given this prognosis and the news about what stage the cancer was at and all that.

I practiced in different ways with the emptiness—really seeing everything as empty: self, world, time, everything. That rendered things liquid, malleable, as we said. And in that liquidity, it was possible to sense the moment and sense also more than the moment—the whole larger situation of my illness and the prognosis that I'd been given and everything. It was possible to sense that with soul.

So here's an example of the emptiness practice opening or taking us to the threshold of imaginal potential at least. And there was a sense, through that, of sensing...

It's like my soul was sensed with soul. My soul became image for me in an emotional way, as I just described. And then with that, there was a sense of—the sense of my soul then was that the soul was somehow not separate from my life and my experiences and my death.

And it was also not separate from my time span or whatever time span has been given to me for this life, whether that's fifty-two years or a long life, or a relatively short life, or whatever—this duration of my life, my temporal duration between life and death, what happens in it, my experience of it, and my death, my life and my death, and my time, if you like, my time span. All of that, from this perspective of sensing my soul with soul, that was my soul. It wasn't other than my soul. You understand?

So instead of the soul being something in here, or as I said, an organ that perceives in a certain way, or something ethereal, like some kind of energy body that goes away when I die, or something like that—all of which are good conceptions. We said at some point when we were talking about conceptions that we want to have the concept of soul be kind of, to a certain extent, not finally defined, so that it can sometimes be expanded. The very concept and sense of what soul is needs not to be limited, because if the very sense and concept of soul becomes itself caught up as an object in the soul-making dynamic, the meaning of it, the sense of it, the concept of it for us will expand. So we can't tie down too tightly the definition of what soul is.

And in this kind of experience that opened up in the middle of the night, sitting up in bed, meditating, my soul is not something other than what I experience. It's not something other than my life, its experiences, and my death. It's not something other than the temporal duration that is given to me between birth and death. That is my soul, and all of it is theophany, because that's what the soul is. And none of it is separate from the divine, because that's also what soul is when it's sensed with soul.

Whose soul? God's soul. My soul and God's soul. Buddha nature's soul. So not separate from the divine—not just both universally in those kinds of ways that we talk about with emptiness practices and non-fabricating practices, but also this is not separate. This life that I have and this temporal duration and these experiences I undergo, my stories and my narratives and my death, is not separate from the divinity, is the divine in some sense, or participates in the divine, in and through all the particulars of my personhood, of your personhood, my choices, your choices.

So there's that divinity of the universal, there's the divinity of the personal and the particular, and we dwelt a lot on that in some of the last retreats. As we said, the imaginal perception, the sensing the soul, preserves particulars and persons as soul and as rooted in the divine. And actually will create and discover more and more facets of persons and particulars and more and more particulars of persons and of beloved objects.

So being then that my soul and my whatever duration is given to me between birth and death is theophany—that is my soul and that is theophany, and that's not separate from the divine and that participates in the divine—with all of that, there's a kind of perfection implicit there, even if that time duration is short, even if there's all this difficulty there. Perfection is implicit in a sense of divinity. But perfection—and this or that perfect—may not look like what we typically think perfection looks like. And, of course, with all that, I don't know what's going to happen.

So we said earlier that there's something we could say that is given to us, but it still needs my assent, my will, my soul-making orientation, tuning and intention, my participation.

So this is a different approach to dukkha than just regarding things as impermanent. My life is impermanent, health is impermanent, whatever—valid as that can be at times as a way of looking at dukkha, as a way of bringing some relief from dukkha. Nor is it only saying it's just empty, and adopting that viewpoint as well. And nor is it saying it's just dukkha. What do you expect? Life is dukkha or life involves dukkha, however you want to interpret the first noble truth. And this is our existential situation and kind of—face it, there's going to be tragedy. Again, valid as that can be at times for some people.

And nor is this approach saying, "just accept." So because of this sense of perfection I'm talking about, this gift or grace, it doesn't mean just accept. I deliberately seek out all kinds of treatment and am willing to put up with a lot of unpleasantness that treatments cause as well. So it's not "just accept." And again, sometimes that's a perfectly appropriate and perfectly skillful response to some kinds of dukkha.

So this whole mode of practice is not just a matter of just accepting, nor is it a prioritizing of the attitude of accepting as some kind of finality. Acceptance has to be there at the beginning in terms of connecting with one's dukkha and opening to it and feeling it. If I'm in denial about it, or if I just refuse it, or if I'm fighting it, then I can't even connect with it enough for that crucible to be formed or heated up for the alchemy to happen.

But it's certainly not—I think what I'm trying to point out now is I'm certainly not trying to point to a path of, "Oh, just accept." And that's the final delivery of soul-making practice or sensing the soul of some dukkha—that it just enables us to accept things at a deeper level always. That's what it gives us. That's where it goes.

So I think it was on the Poetry of Perception retreat, the Re-enchanting the Cosmos, when someone asked in a Q&A, if I remember, about the perception of sacredness in plastic things, or in the unpleasant also. And I can't quite remember what I said there. And another person wrote me a note—again, which I only had time to write a note back to, but I thought the question was very important. Someone saying that they care very deeply about the earth, about the environment, and about society, and struggled living in a city and moving around all day and seeing so many cars and smelling the pollution and knowing, even when she can't smell it, that the cars are releasing carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

And the question was something like, well, I've tried to practice imaginal work with that. I tried to see the cars as kind of big, cute animals or something like that. And it was really an earnest question. She said, well, that didn't really work. And there's a real earnest questioning there.

So this, again, in relation to this whole question about acceptance, and do soul-making practices, do imaginal practices, issue in a kind of depth of acceptance? Is that where it's always going? I mean, the short answer is no. But sometimes what can happen is this: if we talk about the unpleasant right now—which may be the physically unpleasant, the physically painful, actual painful situations or something else that's unpleasant, even the sight of plastic or whatever—sometimes with enough practice of emptiness, and it may be emptiness of the sensation of unpleasantness itself, or some kind of perception in any of the sense doors, sometimes with enough realizational

sense, practical sense, felt sense, perception of the emptiness of whatever is unpleasant in the moment, in practice, that can automatically—sometimes, if it goes really, really deep—there's a kind of sacredness that we perceive there.

Or what can happen is that the unpleasantness itself is actually malleable. In other words, what is unpleasant can be transformed. When we understand its emptiness enough, it can be—oftentimes, not always—oftentimes transformed into the pleasant. So this pain in my back, this pain in my knee, whatever it is, with skill in emptiness practice and also with jhana practice understood the right way—we understand jhanas are a training in perception. Because perceptions are empty, they're actually malleable, including the perception of pleasant and unpleasant and neutral. I'm pretty sure I've talked—I've certainly written about this elsewhere, but I think I've talked about it somewhere or other.

But they're also malleable in the sense I described earlier in this talk, that there's a kind of liquidity that comes in, and so the sensing the soul is possible because things have been made liquid, to borrow that alchemical metaphor. And in that, even the unpleasant, even if it stays unpleasant, can be sensed as sacred. And with that, we accept it, or it becomes easier to accept them, whatever the unpleasant is there.

But there's also, I feel, really a necessary place—important to point out—a place where there's also the requirement that we see, or ask at least, what these things, if we're talking about too much plastic, whatever it is—see and ask what these things are asking of us. What are we called to? In action, in voice, or whatever. What are we called to? To redeem them.

So again, I've shared in the past this Kabbalistic notion of tikkun olam, the healing of the world or the restoration of the world. And sometimes the level of healing is just the healing of the perception of the world. And so, again, in relation to my illness, like birds weaving their bird song, weaving a healing in my energy body, magically changing and transforming the flow of energy in the energy body, stitching my body together with their melodies. And not knowing, of course, does that have any physically measurable effect on my illness? But the healing there is a healing of perception—of self, of body, of world, of birdsong, of existence, of cosmos.

So there may be a tikkun olam, a healing of the world on that level of the healing of our perception of the world, out of the flatland of being sensed without soul, and its dimensionality opened up—its beauty, its mystery, and all that—in the ways that we're talking about in all these teachings. But it may also be that these things, these ugly

things, these harmful things, or these unpleasant things, difficult things, also ask us—or we are being asked—to change them, or to work towards changing them, to work towards changing the world, transforming society in some way or other.

And that might mean, again, implicitly, that it's not just an acceptance. It might mean some kind of sacrifice in our life, some kind of hard work for the sake of beauty, for the sake of justice, for the sake of goodness. It might mean in that that we have to let go of a certain amount of comfort, a certain amount of convenience, a certain amount of pleasure that we have access to in our lives, a certain amount of security that may be, again, part of what is being asked of us, part of what we might say is a calling for us.

So that in all that, in what is being asked of us, we might be stretched spiritually, or the soul might be stretched. And then, again, if that's seen also with soul, then our very stretching, our very being stretched, can be seen as part of—as I said—the soul-making of God, God's soul-making process, or the divine or a divinity's soul-making process, or the Buddha nature's soul-making.

So we always talk about a sense of the perfection of everything and the gift of things and grace, et cetera. It's not simply that all—and sensing the soul and how that opens those kinds of sensibilities and perceptions. It's not simply we're talking about moving towards a kind of blanket view of "all is perfect, all is divine, just as it is." So there are different possibilities here. Sometimes that's what happens. Other times we're actually asked for an engagement that comes at cost and risk—in our lives, in our material lives, in our relationships, in our status.

Sometimes what happens in relation to dukkha—what is unpleasant—is that a healing image constellates in relationship to that difficulty. The bird song I mentioned earlier serves as an example. Anyone would have heard the birds singing outside, but sensing them with soul, they became image—in this case, healing image—in relationship to this dukkha, this unpleasantness, this difficulty.

This could happen in various ways: Avalokiteshvara coming, or Jesus coming, or even bringing Jesus there consciously—whatever the healing image might be in relationship to the difficulty. Because of the imaginal and the way the imaginal fire catches, if it's Jesus or Avalokiteshvara, there's already a kind of divinity present. The sacredness is already there, and that sacredness begins to spread to the difficulty, so that in the pervasion and expansion of soul-making, the difficulty too is perceived as sacred.

Sometimes what needs to happen is that an image arises that's not so much an obvious healing image, but more something like the warrior image I spoke of—whether solitary or as part of a whole army or clan or group of warriors. Perhaps for the person

who wrote me about the cars and pollution and her soul pain around that, rather than trying to see the cars as enchanted, beautiful images—attempting to take away the dukkha by seeing them as cute, big animals slouching along the street—it might be that the self-image is more appropriately transformed, expanded, deepened, perhaps into some kind of warrior image.

The question then becomes: how does that translate into life? What's the duty to that image? What's the echoing in the life of that image? What's the mirroring? The self, the other, the world, the eros itself—they can all become imaginatively infused in the constellation around the dukkha.

If this does move over into our life in terms of actually doing something—whether it might be standing up more strongly, civil disobedience, creating other kinds of structures, or offering a healing response—there are different kinds of tonality possible. Action, voice, commitment and image may all be involved, and they're all related.

As a partial response to the question "What is this dukkha calling me to? What is this difficulty, this ugliness, this unpleasantness asking of me?"—sometimes a healing image in relationship to it might be a partial response. A warrior kind of image in relation to it may be another partial response.

Another way of expressing what we're exploring: soul-making in general, and soul-making with respect to or in relationship to dukkha, extends far beyond just intra-psychic images. Sometimes it is just an intra-psychic image in relation to some dukkha that arises, and all it needs is some kind of reverence and recognition of the holiness of that image. There's almost no visible or sensible echo in the life that anyone else might discern at all. Sometimes that's the case.

But oftentimes, soul-making and the soul-making response—or the soul's response to dukkha—goes way beyond just the intra-psychic, beyond the confines of the intra-psychic.

This is not simple, and we cannot approach it in a contrived way, with some kind of formulaic approach. We need discernment, and that requires a careful kind of listening, a careful kind of attunement, responsiveness, sensitivity. It involves both our receptivity and our activity, our proactiveness. All that discernment, listening, responsiveness, action, receptivity—all that is in the service of a kind of inquiry: Is it possible that there can be discovered or created, or created-slash-discovered here, an image, an imaginal image that is soul-making? Can this be sensed with soul?

Take the situation I shared of the person who felt dukkha around what she regarded as a lot of papañca stirred up by seeing particular artwork, then having this column to write and the social situation she was in. She regarded it as papañca and a kind of manic energy, but it may be that there's something buried in all that which is actually potentially imaginal. Connecting with that, and practicing with it in all the ways we've discussed—the sensitivity, the receptivity, the energy body, tuning to it—allows that imaginal to blossom and changes the whole relationship with that set of circumstances in life, or changes the inner movement, the inner relationship that was perceived as suffering.

As we've said, that discovery or creation of an image that is soul-making in relation to or in the dukkha may not be what a certain ego level of us wants. It may not be the outcome that would be most obviously what everyone might deem freedom from dukkha.

We could make some distinctions here. There's the image of a situation that we believe is "how things really are"—what we might call a fixation or papañca image, a fixated image. Here's this dukkha, or this situation, or social situation, or ourselves, and we're lost in an image that we're taking as real, as true, as "this is how things are." This is something every human being knows.

Then, as dharma practitioners, we also know the possibility of an image or story or fantasy whose presence in consciousness and whose believability we are mindful of. We realize that there is this fantasy going on, this image happening. That mindfulness of the image allows less identification with it. We are less lost in it, less believing it to be true. We see what's going on.

My mind has got this interpretation through this image, and I can really feel a tendency to believe that's true. But with enough mindfulness, we can just see that, and we're not so sucked into it. There's some distance to doubt its complete veracity. So we could call that mindful observation of image or of what the imagination is doing.

And then, of course, there's the third possibility, which is what all these teachings are emphasizing and drawing out and exploring and expanding: an image that has become imaginal in the sense that we have outlined, or that we have entered as an imaginal image. When that's the case, naturally, we don't sense it as either real or not real. There's the imaginal middle way as part of the imaginal constellation when it's imaginal. It's theatre. It's the kind of middle way that we talked about. So because of that, we're less lost in it, less believing it flatly, less identified, less reified.

All this should be obvious, but the point I want to make in this context is that both the second and the third of those options are freeing. A mindfulness of image or mindfulness of what imagination is doing and what the mind is doing in regard to its tendency to believe an image—that option, the second option, is freeing to a certain extent. But just as freeing is allowing something to become more imaginal.

The mindfulness kind of keeps it at bay. I see that image is there, but it's just kind of over there, and I see the tendency for me to get sucked into it, but I'm keeping it at arm's length a little bit, mindfully, so I'm not getting so sucked into it. The third option of actually entering more fully into the imaginal, letting it become more imaginal, is just as freeing with respect to whatever image is there.

The difference, though, of course, is that in entering more fully the imaginal and allowing something to become more imaginal, the image is empowered, whereas being mindful of what's in the imagination and the tendencies around it disempowers it. So there's also a dynamic quality—based on everything we're saying, a soul-making dynamic quality—that's possible in the last option. This still involves mindfulness, so it's a mindful entering in and all that receptivity and sensitivity. The second option of just a mindful observation and, if you like, resisting what's happening in the imagination—the image that's happening in the imagination—is a bit more static.

You don't really get what's helpful in the image. What was the gift that the image was pregnant with? We don't really get that until we enter into the imaginal, until we allow it to become fully imaginal. That's maybe a better way of saying it.

So it's calling us. If we enter into a wrong relationship with it, it will bring more papañca, more dukkha. But it's also pregnant with a treasure, with a gift. And if we can allow that relationship to become fully imaginal, fully soul-making in the way that we've been outlining, then there's a whole other dimension and range of gifts that we receive there.

So sometimes the question is: is there an image here that needs liberating? I don't have so much a question as more just a subtle background attitude and style of approaching. Oftentimes, within the dukkha, there's an imaginal image that's buried there. And the liberation of it, the realization of it, the entering into and exploration of it, the filling out of it, the blossoming of it, the liberating of the image that's buried there liberates us, or liberates that dukkha. It liberates us from that.

Again, this sensing with soul doesn't mean seeing the situation differently or going away from the situation or turning away from it. Sometimes, as the Buddha pointed out, there is skillful avoidance. But this sensing with soul that we're talking about now has more to do with the situation not being different. It's the same situation, it's just sensed with soul. We're not running away; we're entering into and opening out.

CHAPTER 122

Dukkha and Soulmaking (Part 7)

Rob Burbea · 1h34

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea investigates how imaginal perception and sensing with soul can dissolve dukkha and prevent certain forms of suffering from arising. He examines the pain of being seen in merely human terms without acknowledgment of our soul dimension, and how being perceived imaginally by others can facilitate deep healing. Burbea draws connections to Kabbalistic concepts of tikkun olam (healing the world) and the 'need on high,' suggesting that our particular struggles may be somehow necessary to the divine's own fulfillment. He contextualizes soul-making within different interpretations of the Four Noble Truths, critiquing purely medical models of Buddhist practice that focus solely on ending suffering. Drawing from personal experience with serious illness, Burbea argues that much modern dukkha stems from soullessness and the absence of meaning, beauty, and enchantment in our lives. He proposes that after basic human needs are met, soul-making and beauty—though seemingly 'useless'—may be among the most worthwhile pursuits, addressing a fundamental form of suffering: the absence of soul itself.*

We've been talking in the last few parts of this talk about the ways and some of what's involved in how the imaginal sensing with soul frees us from dukkha, relieves dukkha, dissolves dukkha, drains the dukkha out of a certain situation or thing that's happening. And I hope, again, that you have felt and experienced that for yourself in your practices with the imaginal.

One begins to get a sense, a palpable felt sense and conviction of not just the fact that sensing with soul can relieve dukkha—that's often one of the results that issues from it—but we begin to get a sense and a conviction of the necessity of the imaginal dimension, the necessity of sensing the soul, the necessity for the soul, of sensing the soul, but also necessity for our well-being, and necessity in terms of a relief from suffering. Or rather, just the prevention of suffering by ensuring that the imaginal realm is open to us and accessible by practicing sensing the soul, by having that facility and that access.

Sometimes we see that some dukkha is locked into place when there is not the access to the imaginal dimension, when there isn't that facility and flexibility. And sometimes we even sense that dukkha arises when there is the absence of the imaginal dimension, when that door is shut—that very shutting of that door, the absence, allows a certain dukkha to arise.

This happens in relationships as well. Sometimes we're with someone in some kind of relationship, it could be any kind of relationship, and in that moment perhaps, or perhaps longer in the stretch of the relationship, we sense that they are seeing us, but they're seeing us in a kind of flatly human way. They're not seeing more than our flatly human dimension. And in that, we can feel like this person has missed us. They've missed actually our personhood, the fullness of our personhood, because they've not seen the soul dimension. They've not acknowledged that. They're not sensing us with soul. They've missed us, missed our personhood, missed the fullness of it and the fullness of our humanity.

So it's not that soul is one thing and human is something else. The fully human, I would say, embraces or includes the soul dimension. Of course it does. They're not really different at all. But we can feel the pain and the dukkha of not being seen, of being missed when the soul dimension is missed in the way that we are being looked at, perceived.

And conversely, sometimes it's exactly being seen imaginally by another, being sensed with soul—it's that that heals, or begins healing, or contributes to healing, as much as, and sometimes more than, another level of being seen.

Sometimes someone sees us through a way of looking that, though it's trying to give love and compassion or encouragement or protection to some aspect or feeling or character within us, mixed up with that is a reification. And it's reifying that very part that it wants to give compassion to or love, encouragement, protection, whatever. It's reifying that and perhaps it's shrinking us to that. There is then the absence of the imaginal. There is not the middle way. Something is being reified. And if it's shrinking us, then there is not the concertina. And there's certainly not the imaginal concertina, the sense of I have, you have a whole concertina, as we described and went through the list of the elements, the aspects of the imaginal. You are a whole concertina of available images that is infinite. One senses that, so that one isn't selecting just one or two and reifying them. They're all available, they're all theatre, and they're all available.

So sometimes we're looked at in this way—there's all the good intention of love and compassion and wanting to protect us or encourage something, but something there is not imaginal. It's reifying, perhaps it's shrinking us to that. And even—so it's gone out of fashion now, but that kind of inner child work that was quite popular in psychotherapeutic circles, probably still is in some streams of psychotherapy. And even when someone recognizes or is talking to that child part with a lot of love and compassion and recognizes that this is a child part or this is a young part or this is a vulnerable part, and even they might think and communicate "I know you're also an adult and

you're also strong and you're also capable," even then when they still have that "this is only part of you" perspective—and despite the intention of the healing, there's something that doesn't quite do the trick there sometimes because the soul is not seen.

There's reification and this kind of reification, and oftentimes a kind of narrowing. At least there's not the imaginal concertina. And in that, we feel unseen. Or if we're looking that way at someone else, they feel unseen. Certainly some aspect feels seen. They feel that some part is being seen and acknowledged and perhaps they're appreciative of that. But the person also can feel like something is not seen in them. It's frustrating.

And what is seen is seen in a way that actually lacks the full power of the healing potential, the full power of that kind of magic that can be communicated and the healing that can come with that, and the freeing and the kind of liberation that can come with that when the imaginal is opened, when there's sensing with soul. It lacks power because it's reified, because it's flat. It's a flatland view, flat person view, flat human view.

We sense when sometimes—I don't know if you recognize what I'm talking about here in your experience, or you might feel in the way that you have sometimes looked on another friend or whoever—we are being, in these times, if we feel we're on the receiving end, we're being somehow approached through too narrow and too rigidly held a paradigm, a psychological paradigm, psychological conceptual framework, one that doesn't recognize the daemon, doesn't see the daemon there. So there's some compassion, but it's not actually as full and multidimensional and rich and powerful as it could be.

multifaceted as it could be, and it's somehow too solid sometimes.

Sometimes we feel, or the other person feels if we're looking at them this way—from a soul perspective, but in a kind of incomplete way, in a truncated way—that we've cut off certain dimensions. Sometimes the person says, "I want that holiness in my suffering. I want the holiness in my weirdness, in my pathology to be seen, to be even celebrated, to be revered."

Yes, I know there's dukkha in that. Yes, I know I'm not completely clear about that, and I know there are other parts too. But there's something I want you to see. I want to be seen here. I want the soul to be seen—even that aspect, that daimon that has with it its arrogance or whatever. I want you to see the soul of that, the soulfulness of that. Yes, I know it's problematic. Yes, I know it has its problems socially or whatever. But I want you to see the daimon's struggle as well—the daimon's brilliance, the daimon's beauty, whatever it is—to be seen, celebrated, even revered.

Remember, reverence is part of the imaginal perception, the constellation of imaginal perceiving. But this seeing, celebrating, this reverence, this revering, is not reified. It's not a reification, because it's imaginal. It's the imaginal middle way. It's got that theatre aspect to it.

So we're going a stage further and actually pointing out the suffering of the neglect of the imaginal dimension—the suffering, the dukkha that ensues and is kind of locked into place perhaps when we don't sense with soul, or when we are not sensed with soul in relationship, when a relationship isn't that full.

I realize that depression is a complicated business and there's not one kind of depression for human beings. But I would say that some kinds of depression or some periods of depression actually are instances of, or we could say are caused by—and then of course like all these things they kind of loop around, they get into a kind of stuck place—but they're actually caused by a lack of eros, a cutting off of eros, an inhibition, a disconnection from eros and from soul-making.

Nothing is alive as imaginal, as fantasy in the good sense. Everything is flat, and the soul is deprived of its fire—if we want to use a fire image—or it's deprived of its juice, its juiciness, its moisture, its water. Flatness leads to depression. The soul-making dynamic is arrested, is ground to a halt, is inhibited, is restricted. Eros is not opening and penetrating. There's not the dynamic there and there's a depression.

So again, I hope you can recognize what I'm pointing to here in your life and in your practice. And if not, this is one of those aspects I feel would be really worth considering, reflecting with this idea on your experience, on your past, on your history, and very lightly, perhaps even on the history and the past or the situation of a friend or someone you know.

Because it's through reflection, actually making, bringing alive these ideas in your own consciousness, in your own reflection, in your mind, that they kind of go deeper and things start to connect in your understanding in the logos. I really want you to get the taste of all this, the taste of soul-making, which means experiencing it for yourself. And I also want you to get the idea of it. Do you get the idea?

And getting the idea means also really digesting and utilizing and making active and making your own the conceptual framework. Then you can actually build it or build onto it or whatever. But that together, the logos is part of the whole soul-making dynamic. It's getting the taste and getting the idea.

But I'm pointing to right now the necessity for us of sensing the soul, of soul-making, of imaginatively perceiving, perceiving imaginatively, in order to decrease suffering at times, relieve suffering at times, or certain kinds of suffering certainly, and in order that certain kinds of suffering don't arise. We need that kind of mode of being, or those kinds of modes of being that we call soul-making, a sensing of soul.

And to add to that, I want to touch on again something I have mentioned before: you will notice, as your soul-making progresses, or as you get more into this, there will arise—when the soul-making starts to go deep and starts to really get rich and in the nooks and crannies and in the soil of our being, and that soil is turned and tilled and worked and made moist and planted with seeds in the soul-making process, and the soul-making increases and expands and deepens and enriches—there is, in that process, the re-enchantment of our dukkha.

And so important—so very important. We've touched on it already in this series. As that builds, the re-enchantment of the dukkha, there is, with the soul-making dynamic, a taking up of the dukkha itself as an erotic object, re-enchanting it. Then there emerges both the perception and the idea—both the image and the logos, if you like—of my dukkha, this dukkha right now, being somehow necessary to God.

Somehow this suffering, in some kind of not fully explicable way, is necessary to God, necessary to the Buddha nature, necessary to a divinity. It's a perception and a conception that arises organically, I would say. Something like this perception or conception arises organically with, and inevitably with, the deepening of the soul-making process and the soul-making dynamic.

I think I spoke in one retreat about the Kabbalistic notion of the need on high—in other words, God's need, the divine's need, however you want to put it, the need of the Buddha nature. But that need is in and through the particular: the particular events, currents, elements of my existence, your existence, of one's life and one's unique personhood.

So the divine need is not just some abstract universal thing, nor is the divine just this—as we've mentioned many times—just this universal essence of some kind by virtue of which there is a kind of equality of what looks ostensibly different. This particular and that particular are all one because they're all of the same essence or divine essence or substance. There is that view and the importance of that view. We've touched on this before.

But this need on high that we're talking about now, this perception of a need on high, and the sensing of the divine and the divine's need in and through the particular—my particulars, the particulars of my personhood, my journey, my life, my story, my dukkha, the elements of my existence—that means my thinking, my intelligence, my emotion, my sensitivity, my body, this sense door, that sense door, all of that, my perceiving. That's only possible when the particular is sensed in an imaginal way.

This dukkha or that, when sensed imaginally, can actually rise to another level where it's not just sensed as image. As the sensing as image expands, as sensing it with the soul expands and reaches even deeper, then it senses part of the need on high. Then it's necessary to God in some strange way, this very difficulty. This is a kind of amplification, a deepening of the re-enchantment of the dukkha.

But the suffering or the element that I'm talking about has to be alive as an image for us—that is soul-making—in order for that to take place. It's as if that being alive as image is a first step that allows the perception of a particular as necessary to God.

And it's not even only dukkhas. My particular way of thinking or perceiving, someone's very particular kind of sensibility or aesthetic or way of feeling beauty, particular relationship with one of the elements or particular sense door or whatever—it's unique to me somehow, part of my personality. The dukkha and whatever it is becomes image first and then can become—the sense of it can become—necessary to God.

Sometimes this idea of the necessity to God of our particular difficulty, or some particular element of my psyche, or the way my mind works, or something in my body—this idea that you're hearing now, and maybe you've heard before, might then function as a kind of seed or spark to trigger image. We've talked about this before, so it's almost like a poetic idea or a kind of logos that goes into the mix, is taken up by soul-making, then sparks a kind of imaginal seeing of that very element, or of a particular element. So it can also work the other way around, or it can even work that the two happen together.

The re-enchanting of the dukkha, or the seeing a particular as image—any particular—and the seeing it, the sensing it, the knowing it as necessary to God, the entertaining of the conception that this particular, or this particular dukkha of mine, is necessary to God—sometimes they can even occur simultaneously. So really, any order, actually.

In a way, you could say there's a kind of mutual dependent arising there: the sensing imaginally of a particular event, a trajectory of one's life, an element of one's existence, a particular dukkha that's there, on the one hand, and the sensing of its necessity to God. We could say those two are co-dependently arising facets of a single kind of com-

plex shift or quantum leap of perception, of relationship and way of looking, rather than two shifts where one causes the other. I mean, it can occur that way, or they can just be regarded as mutually dependent horizons.

Let me say that a little more clearly. The sense, the perception, the conception of any particular event or element of one's being or narrative in one's life or one's particular unique personhood—the sense of any of that as necessary to God—that sense, that perception, that conception will usually arise on the basis of already perceiving that particular and imaginatively sensing it with soul. So with that as a basis, then as it fertilizes more, there's this kind of fuller level of perception of its necessity to God. So usually the causality is that way around: imaginal perception first, and then of this particular, and then that particular being sensed as necessary to God.

Sometimes the causality works the other way around, of course. So we have this idea of something being necessary to God, and that idea—we might hear or read it or something—functions as a seed, a stimulus to open up the perception so that we can perceive something or other, some particular, as perceiving imaginally, sensing with soul. And then the third possibility is that both of them arise together. They occur simultaneously. We're really talking about one organic movement of soul-making that affects the perception and the conception.

But the usual direction of causality is the imaginal perception first: sensing with soul of this particular dukkha, this difficulty, this story, this current of being, this element of my existence, of my mind, of my body, of my psyche—perceiving that imaginally first. And then through that imaginal perception, fertilizing and enriching more, comes the sensing of it as necessary to God, the conceiving of it as necessary to God.

That's the probably most common order of causality.

I've also talked in the past, in several retreats, about the Kabbalistic notion of Tikkun Olam—the healing or restoration of the world. In that Kabbalistic conception, functioning as a kind of archetypal, cosmic, psychological, and philosophical metaphor, Tikkun Olam encompasses an entire movement. It includes the very alienation, destruction, chaos, or fragmentation that calls forth a redeeming, a tikkun, a restoration.

In the bigger picture, the whole process unfolds: the very difficulty itself, then the soul-making with respect to that dukkha or difficulty, and then what emerges—whether through what comes forth in action or voice, or simply as a shift of perception, a way of looking, a re-enchanting, a healing of the world through our existence and being, through life and death, through the ways we can now perceive and conceive of it.

This entire movement—the alienation, the destruction, the fragmentation, the difficulty, the soul-making process in regard to that, and what emerges as the fruit or outcome of that soul-making process, whether it manifests in concretized action and voice or simply in the modes of being, conceiving, and perceiving—all of this is the Tikkun Olam. All of this is the mystical movement that we find ourselves going through and engaging in, being inevitably drawn into in our life and having to deal with, or called to deal with. It's also the movement of the divine—a cosmic archetype.

Now, I really want to repeat: you cannot, I cannot, and you should not foist this kind of idea on anyone or try to convince anyone of this. This notion of necessity to God—of this whole movement of dukkha, soul-making in relation to the dukkha, and then what comes out of that—emerges as an idea, or as a perception, or both, through a degree of soul-making.

When we can relate to our dukkha in the right way—through connecting with it, through honesty, through humility, and then beginning to sense it with soul—it becomes image. Our dukkha becomes imaginal, or is imaginatively perceived. We imaginatively perceive our dukkha. We see it, we sense it with soul. The dukkha is re-enchanted.

The same transformation occurs with our eros. As we've discussed many times, the eros becomes an erotic, imaginal object to ourselves. So our very eros is re-enchanted, given dimensionality. Our very process of soul-making undergoes this same transformation. All these—our dukkha, our eros, our soul-making—they all become re-enchanted. They're all sensed with soul.

In this dynamic, over time, at some point they too are perceived as somehow divine, somehow rooted in the divine, somehow not separate from divinity. We sense, perceive, and conceive that through our dukkha, through our eros, and through our soul-making, we are participating—in and through the particulars of our life, including the particular difficulties and struggles and challenges—in the divine, in and through those particulars.

At the same time, the divine is participating in and through those particulars in us. The divine is participating in us. Divinity is participating in us. Divinity is being made and created in us. This is necessary to God, necessary to the Buddha nature.

For some, these may sound like strange ideas, but as I've said, I think there's a kind of inevitability to these kinds of perceptions. They're not rigid, ultimate truths. They're perspectives. They're soul-making perceptions. They're conceptions that one can eventually move in and out of, or finds oneself moving in and out of.

Some of you will recognize something in all this that parallels or has analogies to the philosophy of Hegel. I only recognized this recently, as I wasn't familiar with his ideas before. There's a kind of parallel in what he was trying to get at and what's emerged in the soul-making dharma. There are many differences, but listen to this quote from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

For Hegel, the central principle or goal or movement of evolution of the whole of existence was toward what he called spirit, or rational being, or spiritual rational being. I can't and don't want to explain fully what he meant by that right now, but he said: "Spiritual, rational being demands the seriousness, the anguish, the patience, and the labor of the negative."

If we substitute "soul" for what he means by spiritual rational being—which is more than it probably sounds at first—we get: Soul, soul-making, demands the seriousness, the anguish, the patience, and the labor of the negative.

Again, there's a necessity to soul of our dukkha. I want to be absolutely clear that I'm not communicating a dogma or religious belief.

It's rather, as I said, I just want to point out the probable inevitability of such a view emerging, such a sense, perception and conception. And also, turning it around a little bit, we could say alternatively that this view or concept supports soul-making.

So that the way we are perceiving—if we have that conception of the possibility of the re-enchantment of dukkha and the possibility of sensing it with soul and the possibility of it being somehow necessary to the divine in ways that we can't even quite fathom or completely neatly articulate. So there's a conceptual seed there, if you like, that just functions as a possibility, and that shifts or introduces, as a concept, it introduces, or it's supportive of soul-making, and it introduces the possibility of seeing and sensing in certain ways.

As we've pointed out before, it therefore becomes valuable and valid. It's valid, not so much as a scientifically provable truth or some kind of religious dogma or credo. It's valid because it's valuable. In other words, because the idea supports soul-making or can support soul-making. So we can choose to entertain such a view without necessarily believing it as true. This again to me is one of the great gifts of this approach.

Actually, just lingering with Hegel again—he wrote a lot about Christianity as well. In the time he was living in, that was the paradigm everyone was in. And for him, God didn't choose to create the world and create something that wasn't God, so to speak. Nor was it simply that everything was of the substance of God. It was more that in Hegel's

thinking and his philosophy, God needed to, God had to create the world and create what looked or what might have seemed as not divine in order for God's own fulfillment.

So God needed, for God's own soul-making, to create the world—what seemed to be outside the divine—and create it with difficulty, with resistance, with finitude, in order to realize his, her, its own personhood, to become what it, in essence, really could be. In other words, the model there was the Bildungsroman, the romantic novel of someone who encounters a lot of struggles and antagonisms, and that builds their personhood. It makes them who they are. They're shaped by their struggles and by encountering adversity.

So the self at the beginning is not a full and rich personhood until it goes through that encounter and all those difficulties and works those difficulties in the ways that it can. It's an encounter with the world and the antagonism of the world and the difficulty of the world. So that personhood, whether it's humanly conceived or the personhood of the divine or angel, only emerges or is created or discovered in and through the struggle with and the ultimate victory over and appropriation of the initially alien.

I'm paraphrasing a writer called Cyril O'Regan who wrote a very interesting book about Hegel and his religious thought. He goes on to say: for Hegel, personhood, even divine personhood, is only narratively possible. And that narrative has to include suffering and the encounter with suffering and the working through of alienation and difficulty and fragmentation and destruction.

So the idea of a divine that doesn't suffer was really not attractive to Hegel. The apathetic divine, the non-suffering divine, wasn't something that, for him, qualified as divine. A divine that doesn't suffer is not worthy of the name divine in this whole understanding of things.

If I borrow this and adapt it: our suffering in and through my journey, your journey, my particulars, the particular elements both of my joys and my particular ways and styles of existence, and my dukkha and the way that becomes soul—this is part of the narrative of God, and it's necessary to God, to the divine, to the Buddha-nature, for its own fulfillment, its own coming into full being.

So this is a teleological process, as we've talked about before. The causality is kind of in the future; there's something being pulled towards this fullness of soul-making. But in our paradigm, unlike Hegel's, soul-making has no end. It potentially has no end. So

the point of all this is soul-making. And that can be regarded as the soul-making of the divine. The soul-making that my soul goes through, creates, discovers, is a part of the soul-making of the divine.

And again, it's a perception or a conception or conceptual frame that arises out of experience, or that can arise out of experience. I don't mean to insist on it as a belief. I think I've traced the phenomenology of soul-making, how divinity and this whole perception and conception can arise, inevitably even, as one just works with the soul-making.

So in this path of soul-making, the logos that we have in relation to dukkha, in relation to suffering, is not primarily to explain why we suffer, or furnish reasons for our dukkha. Sometimes that's the way, as human beings, we wonder why. But sometimes explaining suffering or giving reasons for it doesn't do much for us. What would an answer for why give me? I mean, it may be that if I am blaming myself for suffering and there's some other reason given that doesn't point the blame or the causality to myself, then perhaps I can blame myself less.

So there's a point to asking that question, why? It serves a purpose. But if an answer is just an answer, and it gives you no meaningful task, gives me no orientation that is meaningful, hands me no struggle, then perhaps that's a kind of soul death. You understand?

So in creating or discovering or establishing or thinking about a logos, a conceptual framework around suffering or with regard to suffering, when we begin to think about what place suffering has or why suffering arises or these kinds of questions, we have to be careful what we're looking for and what we get with certain kinds of answers.

I remember some time ago—I can't remember when it was, a few years ago—I was invited to participate in a dialogue with a rabbi in London, a sort of Buddhist-Jewish dialogue. Several people were involved and they were suggesting themes for the dialogue that he and I could explore together from Buddhist and Jewish perspectives. It seemed that many people were suggesting this question of theodicy—the concept or explanation of why bad things happen or why suffering arises, or what is the point, what is the place of suffering? Or if God is good, how come there is suffering? That sort of thing.

When I got there, with the audience, if I remember, there were also several questions along that theme. For instance, why do bad things happen to good people? That kind of question. And if I remember, I think it was even suggested as the main theme of the evening.

Having grown up in a Jewish religious environment, I recognized there's something —particularly, I think, for some reason, it's quite a common question in Jewish circles. And I think someone asked in the audience, and I responded that we have to be careful with questions, because sometimes we can ask questions like, "Why is this happening to me? Why am I suffering?" And it sounds like a question, because it's got the word "why" in it, but actually we're not really asking a question. We're just kind of complaining out loud or to ourselves. In Yiddish, they say kvetching—it's not a question. Kvetching means to complain.

In a Buddhist paradigm, one would explain suffering as the karma from kilesas, as the outflow from greed, hatred, and delusions. That viewpoint or that answer may give us some way of going forward in the present. In other words, it may give us a task if we pick it up in the right way. As I said, it gives us then a struggle. My struggle, my task then is in relation to these kilesas and what can I do then to purify, and so on. So it gives us that kind of framework around which to structure our practice and our intention, our aspiration—to purify and eventually not make karma, in a sort of Buddhist vision.

In the soul-making paradigm, or logos, the answer is for the service of soul-making. An answer to the place of suffering or the purpose of suffering or the why of suffering or explaining it or a reason for suffering—we want the answer to be in the service of soul-making. It should support and stimulate soul-making. In other words, we want to adopt, entertain, engage conceptual frameworks, ways of looking, ideas that open, support, nourish, deepen soul-making, increase soul-making with respect to and in relation to our dukkha. You understand? This is a different paradigm than just ending dukkha and just finding some explanations—"Oh, okay, that's why I'm suffering."

Those kinds of conceptual frameworks that might support soul-making, those kinds of ideas, will involve the dukkha itself becoming image, being sensed with soul. And conversely, sensing our dukkha with soul, sensing it imaginatively, will tend to expand and stretch and impregnate our concepts and conceptual frameworks, our logos. So if we open up the logos and the conceptual framework with certain ideas, then it's easier to sense the dukkha with soul, sense it imaginatively. And sensing the dukkha, imagining, re-enchanting the dukkha, being able to sense it with soul—our dukkha, this dukkha—will, because of the soul-making dynamic that we explained with the eros-psyche-logos stretching, open up our ideas and eventually make available to us accessible concepts and ideas, conceptual frameworks, whole kinds of views or ideas about what the cosmos is and what existence is, that we can then move in and out of, that we're called in and out of.

So that's one point for right now. And the second is this: if we are thinking in terms of reasons and explanations around suffering, if the mind tends to go that way, why do we tend to think causally and in terms of temporal origins of beginnings? We tend to place the cause in the past—and I've talked about this before, but I really think it's important.

We're really not used to thinking in terms of telos. I am suffering right now because I'm called to something at which I have not yet arrived. I'm called to something I can only dimly work out. I'm called to something that's going to take some work and some reworking and reframing and turning upside down, inside out, and breaking and stretching. There is suffering because of that. The suffering is in the service of this telos rather than the suffering being a result of a cause in the past.

It's such an unfashionable and rare way of conceiving now.

As pointed out, Hegel was fond of that kind of teleological causality, that teleological way of thinking. It's a very different way of looking at this dukkha going on now. We immediately go back to the past. I'll come back to this. We immediately go back—it's caused by what happened to me when I was a child, it's caused by my family situation, it's caused by something intrauterine, it's caused by a past life. It's always past. Maybe there's a whole other way, or a whole other conception that we can entertain at times.

Again, this really isn't dogmatic. I'm not suggesting replacing one so-called truth with another claimed truth. But it might be interesting to be able to switch between, to move in and out of these very different conceptions—almost polarly opposite conceptions of causality. Cause in the past leading to the present, or cause somehow strangely teleologically in the future, so to speak, explaining, if you like, my suffering now, this dukkha now.

Again, it might arise through the practice, through soul-making practice, or it may be something—what would it be to just play with this? Not as a replacement forever, but as a very different view. What unfolds in the present moment becomes very different, because we're bringing a different way of looking. Part of the way of looking is the concept, and part of conceptuality is causality. So if the conception of causality is different, then the conceptual way of looking is different, the way of looking is different, and because of dependent arising, what unfolds is different. What is sensed in the moment is also different.

So then, practically, the question becomes: what can be created and discovered through this dukkha when the logos gives it place and relationship to soul? Now it can still do that in the conception of causes in the past, temporal priority. But what if it was

the other way around? What can be created, discovered through this dukkha when the logos gives it place and relationship to soul? The logos gives this dukkha a place, and gives it a place also, potentially teleologically, when we may not exactly see clearly at all where it's headed.

And what limits do we place on what can be created, discovered through that? In other words, do we only discover that clinging and craving bring suffering? Hugely important to see. Or do we create and discover more than just that insight as well? Really important insight—fabrication, clinging and craving bring suffering. Or is there more too? We create and discover more than that. Are we placing limits on what can be created and discovered through this dukkha? The telos is open. It's not so much an arrival point as a movement, an open-ended movement. And the creation-discovery that's possible through this very dukkha is potentially open-ended, if we don't limit it.

So all this brings up questions regarding the contextualization of soul-making, logos if you like, with respect to the Four Noble Truths. And wrapped up in that, it also brings up questions of the interpretation of the Four Noble Truths. I've talked about this before, especially in those talks "Questioning Awakening" and "Buddhism Beyond Modernism" and "In Praise of Restlessness."

So Four Noble Truths—everyone agrees on the Four Noble Truths. But what is dukkha? How are we regarding that? What is it exactly that we're addressing that's dukkha? And what does the third noble truth, freedom from dukkha, look like? And what exactly is involved in the second noble truth, the arising and the causing of dukkha?

Just listening to the range of Gaia House teachers, what a range there is. Everyone uses the language of Four Noble Truths, and yet they're kind of just empty words that get filled with really very different meanings and ranges and directions and concerns and developments.

Compare, if we're talking about Four Noble Truths, a vision where the Third Noble Truth, freedom from dukkha, really means ending rebirth once and for all. Dukkha really means this whole being caught up in this endless cycle of samsara, of being reborn in different realms and worlds and circumstances and all that pain, and ending all that with the ending of rebirth. Arahantship is the priority, is really the priority of the path. That's the whole gearing and conception—everything in the path is aimed at heading towards that.

And compare that with a probably more common version in our times, where the path is primarily concerned with erasing and doing away with unnecessary suffering, primarily by simplifying the way the mind gets entangled in things and makes things complex with all its ideas and relationships and selfing and business like that, just really draining out all that unnecessary suffering through simplification and letting go. And then that becomes the vision of the third noble truth, the vision of what we're addressing as the first noble truth, and the vision of the freedom from it. The entanglement and complication, papañca, in that meaning of just the mind's complicating things, is viewed as the second noble truth.

In a way, sometimes I've alluded to this before, sometimes that kind of emphasis on simplifying is exactly, at times, in opposition to soul-making, which enriches, gives more dimension, gives complexity, invites the complexity and fluidity of logos, and also invites image and the imaginal imagination, all that.

So in those two views or paradigms of the Four Noble Truths—ending rebirth as a priority, or this erasing unnecessary suffering, obliterating unnecessary suffering by simplifying one's mind and one's relationship with the world—in a way there's no...

Looking at these paradigms more deeply, I observe that there's no conscious place—and I want to emphasize the word "conscious"—given for soul-making in the obvious articulation of either of these frameworks. I'll return to why this distinction matters.

But there's another paradigm, quite popular these days, which we might call existentialist. It's similar to the second one, except it focuses even more intensely on dukkha—clinging to the dukkha of existence and the tragic impermanence of our existential situation. Here in this world, everyone and everything, ourselves included, remains impermanent. This view seeks to alleviate some of the extra suffering of that condition, but wants to hang onto what it sees as the undoubted, basic, real fact—the facticity of existence's dukkha, the tragic impermanence of this world. There is nothing else but that.

Our task in the Third Noble Truth becomes reconciling ourselves to this tragedy, this tragic impermanence, this existential predicament. Sometimes there's an almost clinging quality to this vision, an insistence on this reality being the only reality. The existential predicament becomes paramount. One emphasizes the tragic impermanence more than the particular personhood or the particulars that are lost through impermanence. It's almost as if the impermanence itself becomes more important, more interesting, more clung to than the actual particular—the wonder that is lost, the beauty and depths of that beauty of this person, that personhood, this element of being.

In this clinging, a kind of rigidity sometimes emerges, a dogmatic assertion: no divinity allowed. Even if you experience a sense of divinity in meditation or in nature, it's dismissed as illusion. It's regarded a priori as something to dismiss. Even the idea that such experiences might be worthy—not discoveries, but creations—is seen as taking you away from the primacy and dominant, hard reality of our existential facticity, the tragic impermanence of ourselves and everything we encounter.

So a kind of clinging can creep in. For some people holding such a view, when this paradigm frames and fills out the meaning of the Four Noble Truths, there's a rigidity and a disallowing of what might actually emerge organically in perception and experience—dimensionality, divinity, soul.

But in all three views—ending rebirth as priority, erasing unnecessary suffering by simplifying the mind's relationship with things, and this modernist existentialist focus on the existential predicament and hard reality of tragic impermanence—I would say something crucial: don't believe the official versions of whatever doctrine is spelled out.

Look through the understanding of soul-making logos at what's actually happening. Soul-making and fantasy always creep in—they're always already there wherever there is love, wherever something is truly alive for us, wherever we're committed. Any of these paradigms, when a person is actually committed, when they're on fire with their practice—even if they insist they only teach the ending of rebirth and everything is geared toward that—soul-making and fantasy have crept into the whole thing, pervading it around the edges.

The same holds for someone emphasizing simplicity and letting go, erasing unnecessary suffering. There's still talk that creeps in about beauty, about something that inspires not just the heart but the soul. In the existentialist paradigm, one may be enamored of a certain fantasy of self and world, situated in a fantastical narrative that gives something to the soul—which is, to a certain extent, soul-making.

Wherever something's really alive, wherever we love something, wherever we're truly committed, soul-making fantasy is already there, already pervading, already in the cracks.

This recognition is crucial because if we don't acknowledge and identify this reality, we're not seeing what Derrida would call what's at the margins of our philosophy. We have this neat arrangement of ideas that all fits together, perhaps aligning with what the Buddha said, with terms we can translate and interpret in familiar ways. But actually, there's all this activity at the margins—where much of our juice comes from, our fire, our sense of beauty, and actually much of whatever soul-making is happening.

A fuller path, a fuller logos, a fuller conceptual framework needs to acknowledge this thing called soul-making and this thing called eros for which we don't really have adequate words, which don't usually get included in the paradigm but are there, functioning, operating, vital and vitalizing. A more adequate conception of the path, including its relation to the Four Noble Truths, is made richer by including these elements.

This is what we outlined earlier through Hegel's understanding of suffering and its direction. But more importantly, there's this vision of a path that gives soul-making priority, that re-enchants dukkha and eventually recognizes the necessity of this dukkha—this particular narrative I'm in—for the divine, or to the divine. These are quite different ways of situating or conceiving what suffering is, how it arises, what we're doing with it, where we're trying to go with it.

I believe I mentioned in the Path of the Imaginal retreat, perhaps in the Soul-making talks, that how we conceive of soul-making in relation to ending suffering—in relation to the Four Noble Truths framework—how we contextualize or inter-contextualize the two depends on our individual soul styles, our individual soul moods at any time, and our individual fantasies. This includes where we are in our own movement with all this material.

One could conceive of the whole soul-making paradigm as a movement beyond the boundaries of the Four Noble Truths and classical Buddhadharma. One could conceive of it as gently pushing at the edges and stretching them, essentially expanding what Buddhadharma is for contemporary times. Or one could conceive and articulate it as being within Buddhadharma—just highlighting certain aspects that perhaps don't usually get emphasized, but remaining within the paradigm of the Four Noble Truths.

Where we stand among these positions, which of these conceptual structures we inhabit, seems to me itself a soul question. One person tends toward a radical, wall-breaking, barrier-breaking identity. Another wants to identify with tradition, with what's more conservative, feeling themselves within that continuity. Still another wants to see their soul as on the edge of what's being developed and stretched.

We can go to a whole meta-level here and recognize that even our philosophical positioning becomes part of the soul's movement, part of how the imaginal is working through our understanding of the path itself.

In a way pointing out that the very way one might want to conceive of this whole logos that we're unfolding itself depends on individual soul styles, individual soul journeys, individual soul moods. In other words, it might even change from day to day for a person.

That realization itself is radical because it gives a kind of primacy to soul, to the imaginal, to fantasy. So not to be too bothered—do you understand? To not be too bothered whether I conceive it this way or that way. We could do it this way, we could do it that way, we could do it another way. It depends on soul. It depends on soul style, on soul mood. That itself is quite a radical position, if you like, that gives primacy to soul.

I've said this before, I'm pretty sure. Let's stay with this a little bit, because again, I'm pretty sure I've said this, but I've pointed out when I talked about the different kinds of fantasies we have of our path and goal, that what I call the medical model—the model that really conceives of what we're doing and the direction of what we're doing as the alleviation of suffering, either the ending of suffering or the alleviation of suffering—what I call the medical model, which is actually a model that the Buddha himself used, deliberately framing his teachings in an analogous way to the way a doctor would frame things in his time in India.

And I pointed out, and I still hold with it, that it may be that if we're too wedded to a medical model of the path and our path, if we emphasize that medical model too much and there's not much else going on in our fantasy and conception of the path, that restriction of the fantasy and the conception of the path may itself limit the soul-making. We're emphasizing too much a certain model that concerns itself primarily with alleviating suffering. And there may be something in that—limitations in that intention—that limit the soul-making that's then available to us.

Because an alternative would be—and I know some of you feel this way, at least at times—the sense or the feeling that something is more important to me than ending dukkha, than this Third Noble Truth of ending dukkha. Actually, to be honest, I care more about something else. Something else is more important than ending dukkha, whatever that would even look like to end dukkha. So we could frame things that way. We could arrange things that way so that the soul-making paradigm, that being more important than ending dukkha, as one point of view.

Or we could also do something else, or frame things in a different way, and suggest that much of the dukkha in modern times that you and I experience—I mean, there's a lot of horrific suffering in the world—but much of the dukkha of modern times comes from the loss of or the absence of meaningfulness in our lives, or any sense that any meaningfulness that we can feel in our life has any kind of deep roots ontologically that we can relate to. It's only a construct. A loss or an absence of the sense of dimensional-

ity of existence, of the depths of divinity, a loss of enchantment, a loss of a sense of duty that again is given to us in a way that's more than just my personal decision or invention.

And it may be—or one could say and suggest—that these losses, these absences of soul permeating much of modern life in our culture, then exacerbate, give rise to a lot of the ecological crises we face. Because we look at nature as something completely flat and lacking in sacredness, and we can't galvanize a care for it, or a depth of care, a depth of reverence that would come from sensing it with soul.

So if we view things that way, if we frame things that way and make that suggestion that, hey, look where a lot of the dukkha is coming from in our modern affluent Western existence, and what ensues from that lack, from that loss, from that absence of soul, then we could say that the movement of soul-making, the engagement of the soul-making dynamic and that whole direction is actually reducing suffering because it heals, it addresses that lack, that absence of soul. Therefore, because it's just a part or a dimension or a level of the suffering that gets healed, we can place the whole thing, the whole paradigm of soul-making, squarely and easily in the Four Noble Truths. Again, with our particular interpretation of what exactly is involved in dukkha, the First Noble Truth, and what exactly is entailed by the freedom from dukkha, and how exactly dukkha arises. But the whole thing is then framed within the Four Noble Truths.

If I share just personally... The hardest thing for me—and again, this is just personal—but the hardest thing for me in being ill the last two and a half years was not the original diagnosis and realizing what that meant, to have pancreatic cancer. It was not the operation and the kind of severe incapacity and weakness that I had for about a year afterwards and still carry, really. It was not the prognosis when they found where the cancer was at and all that. The hardest thing for me, and the most dukkha for me, was not the idea of dying. It was going for the weekly chemotherapy infusions at the oncology department in a hospital nearby, which is about an hour away. That was the hardest thing for me.

And it was something very particular that was the hardest thing. It really was, I have to say, at the edge of my practice, at the edge of what I could embrace with my practice in a way that actually significantly reduced the difficulty of it. So it wasn't the unpleasantness and the pain of feeling sick and toxic from the chemotherapy. That was all there, and it was definitely difficult. Nor was it being hooked up to this infusion thing and this drip computer machine going in your veins—and I had chronic urgent diarrhea from the chemotherapy and post-operation, so you're in this ward with this, hooked up to all this considerable encumbrance of contraption, and knowing I'm sitting

there and I might suddenly and urgently have to get up and run to the toilet to move my bowels, with all that chemotherapy paraphernalia attached to me and infusing and whatnot.

Nor was it—the most difficult thing was not like being really cogently reminded of my own mortality and the possibility of my dying very soon just by virtue of being in that situation, feeling the way I was feeling and having all this kind of heavy-duty chemotherapy and all that. And nor was it actually the fact of just seeing so much suffering. I mean, sometimes it's pretty grim in the chemotherapy ward in terms of what people are going through and what kind of state they're in. Sometimes young people, and the other patients. And nor was it the fact that the staff and the doctors or nurses were unkind. For the most part, actually, they were very kind and caring and helpful and sort of pleasant.

The most difficult thing for me—I can only speak for myself—the most difficult thing for me to handle and to practice skillfully and adequately with was the soullessness of the place.

That was the hardest thing.

It's been the hardest thing so far with the osteoporosis, with the chemotherapy, post-operation, with the diagnosis, with the prognosis, with the possibility of dying, with the sleepless nights, with the lack of energy, with the restriction on what I can do and where I can go and hardly going out of the house. The hardest thing was the soullessness of that oncology department for me. The absence there of any beauty or any consideration of beauty or any consideration of what we would call soulfulness in the way it was designed and how it worked. It's that plastic and stale, actually diesel-filled toxic air being recycled and death everywhere, the possibility of death all around vividly there and yet not being engaged or talked about or met soulfully, it seemed to me.

So I could say I was not able to perceive the soul in that place. I could say it like that. And all of this, all this soullessness, when in the face of death, in the face of the proximity of death, the possible soonness of death, one needs soulfulness the most. That was the most difficult thing for me.

Someone said, I don't know if it's true, I think it must be true, there's some anecdote about Oscar Wilde's dying words in bed and dying. And his final dying words, looking at the wallpaper in his room and saying out loud to the wallpaper, so to speak, "One of us has to go."

You know, he's a funny guy, Oscar Wilde, but he was also, I think, very soulful and concerned with soul. And it may be that those dying words were not so much, or not just a kind of comically out-of-place flippancy and superficiality next to death, just a concern with the decor, but actually a concern with beauty and a statement of the fundamental and absolute importance of beauty as a necessity for soul. I mean, I don't know. But I think about those words again, which I used to find just witty—it's good to go out with a witty aphorism. Maybe there's a whole other level there.

We could say beauty, soul-making, soulfulness, they're useless values. Beauty is certainly regarded as a luxury and soulfulness as a kind of luxury, and it doesn't really achieve much materially. In a way they're useless. But maybe the useless values are the most important and the most worthwhile. We can feel that they are—not instead of having our basic prerequisites met of food and shelter and clothing and warmth or healthy life for the body, safe society. Maybe when the basic prerequisites are met, when the sort of gross neuroticism is at least placated or healed, when the most difficult psychological patterns are healed, when there's a basic kindness pervading, then what? Then what? End suffering? End all suffering?

Somewhere in the Pali Canon, the Buddha says, maybe several times or implies, that basic prerequisites—food, shelter, medicine, clothing—need to be there to allow or need to be there as a basis for practice and the path for the quest for what is most important and most worthwhile, which was nibbāna. So he pointed out, this needs to be there. Without that, you can't really give your attention and give your energy and give your commitment to trying to reach nibbāna, which is actually the most important thing.

But in the paradigm of endless cycles and possibly infinite cycles of death and rebirth, that perilous process, sort of adrift on a vast cosmic ocean of enormous, infinite spans of time and infinite worlds perhaps, and just being reborn dependent on karma one didn't even know what that was—all the vicissitudes and ups and downs and kind of wild circumstances that one found oneself in. So much suffering is at stake in whether that just goes on and on and on with all that suffering or whether one can find a way out of that endless, endless suffering.

So for him, reading him as actually that vision of nibbāna, that vision of the Third Noble Truth was actually what he was orienting towards. So much suffering at stake. That was the most important thing.

But if our version of awakening or version of the Third Noble Truth doesn't involve or assume all those infinite cycles of rebirth and that degree of dukkha... And again, he was in a world where there wasn't modern medicine and painkillers and antibiotics. There's not even the possibility that people would have that. Now at least we have the

possibility—it's not an actuality in our world, but the possibility that everyone in the world has access to modern medicine and painkillers, which is not the case right now. Antibiotics, etc.

But for him, looking around, just what horrendous suffering, and you're on this roulette wheel of where you end up, life after life after life, and if you have a good one, you probably have a bad one, because you've probably got some bad karma waiting to ripen that you don't even know about.

So in the absence, or when our vision or conception of awakening doesn't involve or assume all those infinite cycles of rebirth and all the horrendous pitfalls of that perilous rollercoaster, what then is the most important and worthwhile thing to practice for, to practice towards, after basic prerequisites are met? Again, the Buddha said, after basic prerequisites are met, this ending of the cycle of rebirth, ending of this again and again and again, in ad infinitum of the pain of birth, being separated from what we love, and death. What's the most important thing? For him it was ending rebirth after the basic prerequisites are met.

If we don't have that paradigm anymore, and many of you don't, what then becomes the most important thing? And could, in a way, the most important thing be something that is in some way useless? Soul-making, beauty becomes the most worthwhile.

So there's a suffering that I think probably you wouldn't be listening at this point if this wasn't the case for you, but there's the suffering of the absence of soul, the absence of soulfulness. We're missing something. There's the suffering of the failure to honour what seems or is, from a certain perspective, useless.

It's useless, but I miss it. And when we miss it, when there is that absence, when it's not addressed, when it's not included, when it's not allowed, when it's inhibited, there is a suffering—the suffering of the absence of soul.

This recognition points to something profound about the human condition. We can have all our basic needs met, live in relative comfort and security, yet still feel that something essential is missing. That something is often precisely what conventional wisdom would label as impractical or unnecessary—beauty, meaning, depth, the sacred dimension of existence.

The Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths remains eternally relevant, but perhaps we need to expand our understanding of what constitutes suffering in our contemporary context. Beyond the obvious forms of dukkha—pain, loss, impermanence—there exists this subtler but equally real suffering that arises when we neglect the soul's deeper yearnings.

When we fail to honor what appears useless but feeds something essential within us, we create a particular kind of emptiness. This isn't the beneficial emptiness that the Dharma points toward—śūnyatā or suññatā—but rather a hollow absence where richness and meaning should flourish.

The path forward may require us to hold both truths simultaneously: the classical understanding that attachment to the beautiful and meaningful can indeed cause suffering, and the recognition that complete dismissal of these dimensions of human experience creates its own form of dukkha. Perhaps wisdom lies not in choosing between utility and beauty, between the practical and the soulful, but in finding ways to engage with both that honor our full humanity while remaining aware of the potential for attachment.

In this light, the cultivation of soul—through art, beauty, contemplation, and meaning-making—becomes not a distraction from the spiritual path but an integral part of it. The challenge is to engage with these dimensions of existence in ways that nourish rather than bind us, that open the heart without creating new forms of clinging.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 123

Dukkha and Soul-Making (Part 8)

Rob Burbea · 1h21

In this eighth part of his exploration of dukkha and soul-making, Rob Burbea examines how our conceptual frameworks fundamentally shape what we perceive as the causes of suffering. Through a detailed case study involving childhood images and fantasies, he contrasts traditional psychological interpretations focused on past trauma with alternative frameworks like James Hillman's archetypal psychology and teleological causality. Burbea critiques the cultural tendency to narrow explanations of dukkha to individual psychological history while overlooking broader environmental, political, and spiritual causes. Drawing parallels with philosophy of science, he advocates for flexibility between multiple conceptual frameworks rather than attachment to single explanatory paradigms. This approach, he suggests, supports more open-ended soul-making practices that don't rely on fixed developmental stages or final goals, thereby reducing the ego-measurement and inner critic that often arise in more structured spiritual paths. The talk emphasizes how our participation in perception through conception actively shapes the evolution of psychological and spiritual phenomena in time.

We've been talking about dukkha and soul-making and that whole nexus between the two—how they bear on each other. This draws in, of course, the structure of the Four Noble Truths and our interpretation and conception of them, and their relationship with soul-making, because the Four Noble Truths deal essentially with dukkha: its arising, its causes, its release.

We began this exploration many parts ago, looking at and drawing attention to the ways it's sometimes possible for imaginal practices or soul-making practices—if they're related to in the wrong way or if we don't quite have the right pieces in place—to actually give rise to dukkha. Then we moved on to examine some of the ways and aspects of how imaginal perception, sensing with soul, can actually release dukkha and relieve suffering.

If we stay with that piece a little longer—the way soul-making practices relieve dukkha—we've talked extensively about individual instances and what's going on there and how that works. We could also make an observation at a larger scale.

It seems to me that it's much less likely for the inner critic to arise, or the kind of suffering of ego measurement to arise, in the context of or in relation to soul-making practices and that whole soul-making path. It's much less likely for that kind of suffer-

ing—ego measurement, inner critic—to arise there than it is in relationship to, say, emptiness practices, or the movement and quest for the unfabricated, or jhana practice and the exploration of the eight jhanas that the Buddha referred to, or the whole search for stream entry or other stages of awakening.

This is just an observation, and it makes a lot of sense to me why that might be so. At least the way we have been presenting it, this soul-making business is without any final goal. Unlike jhana, or the unfabricated, or stream entry, there are no stages of progress or a final goal mapped out. I would actually rather conceive the path as more open-ended that way.

So there aren't these gradations of progress, stages of progress by which one measures one's progress, nor some final goal that one can say, "I've arrived at, I haven't arrived, my friends arrived, but I haven't." In the absence of that kind of ladder of measurement, the ego structures around measurement and the inner critic have no scaffolding on which to fabricate themselves. And so that whole pain—so difficult for so many people in our culture today, the whole pain of that inner critic and self-measurement and ego comparison—really doesn't arise so much. It seems really not to arise so much in the soul-making movement and soul-making practices.

As I said, this is something we'll return to. But today I want to dwell a little on a larger level, talking about paradigms and conceptual frameworks with respect to dukkha and how we conceive of dukkha and the causality of dukkha.

Let me share something from an interview some time ago with a student who asked to talk about soul-making, imaginal practice, and that kind of thing. I have her permission to share this, as usual.

Quite a lot came up, and she was telling me as part of the interview about experiences she'd had in relation to eros and image from her childhood through her adulthood. She shared that she came from a childhood where her parents quarreled quite a lot, and that wasn't something she liked at all. She really wished that they hadn't quarreled so much and found it difficult and unpleasant.

She also shared that perhaps when she was around eight, she used to go to bed and, awake in bed, would have these fantasies or images—it was a little vague, but something like some men taking her or dragging her down into some kind of mine or coal mine, and then doing sexual things with her or to her. I don't think she used the word abuse, but we were exploring this a little bit, and I asked her what that felt like, or what its effect was, and what exactly they did, and she couldn't remember what the effect was, or what her feeling about it was at the time.

Let's just slow down here. I don't want to ride roughshod over this. I know that just hearing that kind of image, just as an image, can have quite an impact. There's been a lot of news recently about sexual abuse and actually the exposure of that in Hollywood and the film industry and elsewhere. So just take time here and take care of yourself if that brings up difficult stuff for you.

What I want to focus on here is something about images and conceptual frameworks. This is an instance of an image. In an instance of actual abuse, it's really important, of course, that it needs to be exposed, addressed, confronted, and healed. And that healing actually involves not just the victim, but also the perpetrator, who can only do such things when there's some kind of wounding at some level in the psyche.

Here I'm not dwelling so much on that, but I want to make a point about images and conceptual frameworks and assumptions around causality. I'm aware that even just sharing that as an image can have an impact, so I want to take care around that.

She also shared that she was raised as a practicing Catholic in that household with a Christian education. And she also had in her youth fantasies of what she called sexual union with God. Again, they weren't very specific fantasies, but they were definitely there.

As she grew up and still in the Catholic faith, she shared several things which showed how she was not—and never really seemed to be—a weak character, easily dominated in life, nor dominating either. She had this Catholic upbringing, and around ten years old...

She had a Catholic teacher, a woman she deeply loved and admired. One day they were waiting together for confession when this student noticed her beloved teacher wearing furs—a coat or scarf of some kind. Without hesitation, she challenged her teacher directly: "Why are you wearing dead animals? Why are you wearing furs?"

The Catholic teacher was visibly stunned by this question. She actually got up, went to consult with her colleagues, and returned after several minutes with her response: "God told us to subjugate other animals."

Right there and then, this student lost all interest in Catholicism. There was a spirit in her willing to question authority and make her own moral decisions. Even though she loved this teacher dearly, she recognized that this path was not worthy of pursuit.

Later, something remarkably similar occurred when she became involved in the Zen tradition and began meditating. She questioned a roshi or teacher about the Japanese army's use of comfort women during World War II. This teacher gave her an answer that basically justified this abuse of women by Japanese soldiers, claiming it wasn't wrong.

Once again, this student immediately dismissed any authority she had granted to this teacher and that entire lineage. She lost interest and moved elsewhere, eventually finding herself in the Insight Meditation tradition.

There too, she experienced another pattern—having erotic feelings and even sexual images in relation to a female teacher, though this wasn't her typical sexual orientation. Similar experiences occurred with teachers of different genders.

Why am I sharing all this? This was part of a much larger conversation, but what I want to dwell on here relates to my earlier point about images, conceptual frameworks, and assumptions about causality.

During that lengthy interview, we explored that initial image of the coal mine—that sexual image of being dragged or taken down. One piece I brought up was the myth of Persephone, which you may know. Persephone was a young, beautiful goddess out with her friends on a mountainside in spring, picking flowers. As she stooped to pick up a particularly beautiful bloom, Hades, the god of the underworld, either disguised as the flower or somehow using it, snatched her and dragged her down into his realm.

What follows is a long, complex myth involving her mother Demeter's grief and desperate search. The outcome is that Persephone becomes Hades' wife and queen of the underworld, dividing her time between the upper world—our world of earth and nature—and the underworld, the realm of spirits and souls. She spends half the year in each domain.

I'm drawing here from James Hillman, who uses this myth as an archetypal presentation of what he calls the initiation into the underworld of soul. In his view, this doesn't necessarily have anything to do with sexual violence or sexuality per se. It's a myth of being pulled down—of apparent innocence being drawn into an entirely different dimension involving darkness that is actually about soul. The underworld is the realm of souls.

This relates to death and the seemingly pathological sides of the soul. As I mentioned in an earlier talk, Hillman maintained a real emphasis on the pathological—the necessity, in his view, for the soul to pathologize, to create complexities, ensnarements, and entanglements in dukkha.

So this myth of Persephone being dragged into the underworld, where she eventually finds herself completely in her element, represents an initiation into the underworld of soul and soul-making. It's not about evil, not necessarily about sexuality in Hillman's interpretation, but about a movement at some point in one's life into the realm of soul—including its pathology and darker dimensions.

I was sharing this perspective during our conversation, and we explored together a possible interpretation or conceptual framework to bring to bear on these memories and images the student was sharing. Perhaps this was the beginning of this kind of initiation into a darker form of soul-making.

By "dark," I don't mean evil—I don't even necessarily mean sexual, although it might be in this case, given the fantasies of sexual union with God and the eros toward different teachers. But this represents an initiation into different kinds, different faces of divinity. Persephone's mother is Demeter, goddess of earth, fields, agriculture, and earthiness. Hades is god of the underworld, of shades, ghosts, and souls—a very different kind of divinity altogether.

They are both gods. Hades is sometimes also Dionysus—they are sometimes equated. So the myth functions as a kind of initiation, an opening into suddenly a different realm, different kinds and faces of divinity, different theophanies, different kinds of beauty that are darker, more complex, more shadowy, involving death and the metaphor of death and the soul meaning of death.

And so could it be—and again, I'm not insisting on this, just opening up a possibility—could it be that what is initiated by the arising of these images for this young girl are the seeds or the prompting of a movement that may take decades to mature in the soul? Just as I think in the story of Persephone and Hades, it took her a while, it took that whole process a while to mature and reach—not agreement, that's not the right word—but a new point of balance, if you like, with her being queen of the underworld.

Could it be that, as I've pointed out, this soul-making—one of the ways I feel it's very important to see it, or one of the most important aspects of it—is this expanding of the range of the sacred, opening to more kinds of beauty, more kinds and places and directions of sacredness and divinity? And that includes, for some people at least, opening to the dark and maybe the sexual and maybe these kinds of divinity and beauty, and the possibility of sensing, engaging, and being worked on by those directions, those dimensions, those colors as soul-making—opening up and discovering and creating beauty and divinity in those directions and dimensions, with those faces and those kinds.

So that would be a very different kind of theory to "explain" the arising of these images than some of the more familiar psychological theories that we're exposed to.

So it's really this business about conceptual frameworks and ideas and assumptions about causality that I want to just open up a little bit and bring into our consideration. Very often we might hear someone share something very similar—like that image from a young time, an image of being dragged or taken underground where something sexual happens—and we might very easily infer conceptions of causality. "Infer" means to carry in—from the Latin—we sort of carry in conceptions.

Now this, of course, is related to what I've kept emphasizing over and over again: that concepts and conceptual frameworks imbue our perception. They're involved in any way of looking. Most of the time we're not conscious of exactly what conceptions are involved. Most of the time we don't have much flexibility with what conceptions are involved, but they come in, they are inferred, they are carried in, and they color, shape, and determine to a large extent what we then see—and of course how we feel about it, how we react, how we respond.

So often we hear something like that—an image like that—and almost without being able to help ourselves, the mind brings in conceptions of causality. And causality usually functions in terms of from past to present to future. Something must have happened before she was eight years old to give rise to these images. So something in the past gave rise to those images, and there's a causal explanation based on temporal priority—versus, as I mentioned the other day, what we might call a teleological explanation or teleological causality, if you like, where somehow the being, the psyche, and what arises is pulled toward something, or pulled—for example, one explanation was that the image arises and it's pulling us toward something that we don't even quite know what it is. It's pulling us toward a certain possibility, toward a certain opening or direction or door of soul-making.

So in that teleological view, the cause, if you like, is in the future. But it's not a finished fact in the future—it's a very different way of conceiving of causality, a very different conceptual framework. Rather than the view—which could be a very possible and viable view of causality—that this image arose for her when she was eight years old because something in the past happened that caused her to have such a pathological image, or what many people would interpret as a pathological image.

And that too is open to questioning, because when I asked her, she actually couldn't remember what the feeling of those images was. It might have been that she enjoyed them, that they were beautiful and rich. It might have been that they were distressing—maybe a combination. There are much richer differentiations we could make between possibilities of how it actually felt for her, what effect it had, but she couldn't remember.

The question is: could we, in a teleological way, rather than assuming something happened that was difficult and gave rise to this particular pathological expression, this particular pathological image—could we consider that actually in the seeming pathology of this image, the soul is, in a teleological way, drawing us toward something? The seeds are in the future. This is the seed being planted from the future, opening up or leading us, inviting us to a door of—in this case—wider, deeper, and different kinds of soul-making.

So one of the points I want to make is: can we look at and question, can we be aware of and then also question whatever tendencies we have of assumption and leaning and narrowing of interpretation or concept regarding causes in the psyche and for the psyche? Can we acknowledge and be aware of how much cultural conditioning there is that creates habits of assumption, tendencies to lean this way, tendencies to narrow the conception and assumption in certain ways?

So there's quite a lot to this, but let's slow down. For the most part—except perhaps in times when we're attempting to practice a very close, very narrowly focused, microscopic awareness or mindfulness or so-called "bare attention"—and in a funny way, for all the clarity that they seem to bring, they also bring their own kind of blindness. When you're myopically staring at something so close, you tend to not see the bigger picture.

But for the most part, human beings, in our awareness of things, in our mindfulness of things, in our everyday awareness, we see and experience things with and through some lens that involves concepts of causality. The causality, as I said, is part of the conceptual framework that goes on—most often not explicit as thinking, not even that conscious—but then it can become conscious, or we elaborate on it, or we draw it out as a conclusion, or we insist on it. But whether we do that or not, it's woven into our actual experience, our actual ways of looking.

Ways of looking tend to include some or other concepts around causality. When we hear about a student's images from childhood, we naturally tend to see them as results and/or as causes, or at least as nodes in a causal network of other events, inner and outer. This is either the result of something inner or outer, or it's the cause of something

inner or outer. This is simply part of the way we tend to see the world. It's part of the way consciousness works, for the most part, unless we really try to make it otherwise at times, with certain ways of looking.

So whether those images the student shared with me are considered the results—as representations of some actual abuse or trauma—perhaps she was sexually abused, and these images are telling her that story, a replay or representation of that experience, or a metaphor for some other kind of psychic abuse or trauma or ongoing situation. They might be considered either representations of actual abuse or trauma, or the result of her psyche's response to that actual abuse or some kind of ongoing traumatic situation in her environment, in her upbringing, in her family.

For example, a response of avoidance through papañca, through daydreaming. Her parents quarreled—did you catch that bit? Did the mind connect that? Her parents quarreled. So this creates a difficult environment, and she's avoiding that kind of psychic pain through daydreaming, through papañca, and through craving for and grasping at the pleasant vedanā of this kind of sexual, erotic fantasy.

Or the images might be considered the result of the soul and the eros seeking what's possibly its natural and fundamental movement and inclination to create and discover new and other areas, other realms, aspects, colors and faces for soul-making—in other words, the divinity of the dark and of the sexually erotic in this case. These are very different ideas about the causality going on.

However we are considering it, we usually see and experience what we hear in this case—these images—as a result of something or other. The mind tends to put it in a causal network. And likewise, we will always tend to see it, sense it, interpret it as causal, as causally implicative of something or other.

Psychological theories and conceptual frameworks come in, and we say, "Oh, this is going to be causal of the perpetuation of that trauma." In other words, if as a little girl she has those kinds of fantasies after this or that trauma and woundedness, unless she attends to it and has help attending to it properly and understanding it correctly—understanding why she's having it as a result of this abuse or whatever—then that trauma is just perpetuated in the psyche and in the nervous system, unless it's attended to and understood "correctly."

Or from a more narrowly classical Buddhist perspective, indulging in those kinds of fantasies would just be reinforcing tendencies of craving, aversion, and the delusive habit of papañca, of daydreaming. Never mind the cause of these fantasies—these kinds

of images you're having are just building craving for that kind of sexual pleasure, or aversion to what's actually going on in the moment, the way things really are, or it's just the delusive habit of papañca, just daydreaming. Imagination is nothing but that.

Or again, they're causal—they're the first movements, the first shoots from the seed towards opening different directions of soul-making, perhaps in a Catholic upbringing, towards certain colors of soul-making, certain directions. Perhaps this was the first little shoot coming out of the seed of a different direction, opening up a different direction.

These perspectives are quite different in terms of causes and causation—what might be the causes of this kind of image and that kind of indulgence, if we use that word, and what that might cause, where it might be going if it carries on, if one practices that, if one indulges in that.

We're always, or almost always, seeing things in terms of causation and in terms of past and future and the connection between things or events, past, present, and future. How we are conceiving and perceiving a thing or event in terms of its causation and its effects, or the range of possibilities we are considering as its potential effects—what we bring in, in terms of those assumptions and concepts about cause and effect, and the range of possibilities that we even admit into our conceptual framework in terms of potential effects—that determines, that's part of how we actually approach that thing or event, what we then do with it and to it, how we respond to it.

How those images and that psychic fact—that fact of the psyche of these images arising and whatever feelings—how that is then steered depends on our conceptions. We're participating in its evolution in time through our inferring, our carrying in of different ideas, concepts around cause and effect and that whole nexus between past and future and present.

Because we participate in perception that way, and we participate through conception—through different kinds of conception, we participate in perception—we then participate in the evolution of things in time. In this case, of images and of souls and of perhaps sexuality and eros and all kinds of things. We actually create and discover the effects of something by how we interpret it conceptually.

So that's an example of one level of the way that we cannot help but participate in perception. Our participation determines what we see, because how we conceive of the past in relation to the present determines what happens in the present, what we perceive in the present, what we emphasize in the present, and then what unfolds in the future, because it determines all kinds of aspects of how we relate to it.

What I'm wanting to do is open up this whole range of discourse, open up areas and directions and themes for us to consider, for you to consider. Open up the conceptual framework a little bit. Part of that, as I said earlier, is wanting to draw attention to—and hopefully we can all be aware of—just how much we are culturally conditioned in the conceptions that we bring to meet existence, every aspect of existence, from the most seemingly simple material aspect of existence to the most complex and spiritual, including the psychological and the imagination and all kinds of things.

Just to be aware of how conditioned, how culturally conditioned we are. We bring in certain ideas just because we are surrounded by certain ideas or we've been educated with certain ideas in either the larger culture or different subcultures. Then we form habits of assumption, habits of leaning, tendencies and habits to narrow down our range of assumptions.

and concepts operating, and thus what we do with things, how we respond to things, what we feel needs doing, how we conceive them, how we feel about them, all of that.

So to me this is particularly interesting around what arises psychologically for people, and also around pathology—in other words, suffering and dukkha. Sometimes I'm really saying this and pointing this out for the sake of opening up a plurality. I don't want to replace one conceptual framework around causality with another conception around causality, declaring this one's true and that one's not, this is better than that one. I'm really interested and I really hope you can hear this—I want to open up to the possibility that we can actually broaden our range of conceptions and actually learn to see things in different ways and move between these different ways of seeing things. That's the point of all this. I don't want to replace one with another in that kind of rigid movement.

But sometimes what concerns me a little bit is when I sense there's this kind of narrowing going on and this quickness to assume and a sort of lock-in to a certain psychological framework that carries with it all kinds of assumptions that somehow we've stopped questioning.

So from this point of view, and in the spirit of wanting to open up to a plurality, sometimes I wonder why is it that so often—among colleagues and perhaps in the wider culture, in the wider psycho-spiritual movements—the universal experiences and traumas of physical birth and intrauterine experience, or even sometimes the biological fact of the sperm struggling to penetrate the ovular wall, these kinds of physical material facts are given such emphasis?

I've heard people describe feeling in meditation the dukkha of the desperation of the sperm trying to penetrate the wall, experiencing that as suffering now, reliving the pain of that, and believing it's influencing their life—that if they can re-experience that in a certain way and relate to it differently, they'll be freed of the suffering that's being perpetuated in their life right now as a result of that thing in the past.

Sometimes I have no problem with the possibility of that. Sometimes where I get a little bit nervous is just how quickly it can shrink to this emphasis on the past. The past is causal. So why is it that those kinds of things—the trauma of birth, physical birth, the intrauterine existence, the struggle and desperation of the sperm—are considered more significant and more causal for what I experience and feel now, in my case fifty-two years later, or someone else decades later? Why is that given more emphasis and regarded as more significant and more causal than, say, my reading about an oil spill a month ago, two months ago, off the coast of somewhere thousands of miles away?

Why is the focus on the individual and the past of the individual, going back and back and emphasizing the past, given more significance than my reading about an oil spill and how that might cause pain in my soul right now, how that might affect the way I am in relation to the world and the whole patterns that get constructed if I'm exposed to that kind of thing, if I'm in a world that exposes me to that and also exposes me to the kind of seeming lack of care where these things go on and it seems like it's kind of okay, not really that big a deal on the scale of humanity's concerns?

Or my awareness of the demise of the number of birds in Europe—massive demise, even just in the last ten years. In the last twenty years, you know, just at Gaia House, there's a lot less birdsong, a lot less birdsong. Or the demise of forests and Amazon rainforests and actually all kinds of forests everywhere. Or the overwhelming amount of plastic pollution—even today and yesterday I was reading about this massive investment or cooperation between the Trump administration and large fossil fuel companies, ExxonMobil, agreeing to build a hundred-and-eighty-billion-dollar investment in new plastic-making factories in the Texas and Louisiana coastal areas, right when we're in the middle of all this news and alarm about the extent of massive plastic pollution and how long-term and pervading that is.

Why are these things sometimes not brought up for consideration as things that are causative of my dukkha right now? Causative, as I said, of whatever cramping I have in relationships and self-expression, or the pain for some souls when one looks at the world and moves in the world, and it seems that one is surrounded everywhere by an emphasizing and prioritizing of comfort and convenience and pleasure and security, way beyond actual material needs. Everywhere there's this kind of automatic jugger-

naut running on of just prioritizing those values—comfort, convenience, pleasure, security. They are values, but those values are emphasized, and then seeing, witnessing, moving in a world that for decades has and continues to emphasize those kinds of values and what that gives birth to, the concrete material things and facts and artifacts that that gives birth to in the world.

And the pain of a soul, maybe can't quite even articulate: this is my pain. I'm somehow trapped in this kind of Kafkaesque world where this goes on and so few people even seem to feel it as a concern. And those kinds of values—comfort, convenience, pleasure, security, the lower-level values—are emphasized and prioritized and invested in in this almost unquestioning way, it can seem to a soul in the world. They're emphasized over and above values like beauty and soulfulness and love and truth and exploring what does that mean, what's that journey into opening up more beauty, creating and discovering more beauty and truth? What does that mean? And what are the domains of truth and love and the kinds of love and the manifestations and the expressions and the courage to explore all that?

So all these are different kinds of potential causes of suffering, of dukkha, of pathology, if you like. For me right now, for a soul right now in this world, just as much as what happened in my birth or how it was with my mum when I was a certain age, and certainly going back even more in the womb and with the sperm.

Can we open it up, if it needs opening up?

Can we open it up?

So I have this question sometimes, and yes, sometimes a little nervousness around what appears to me a kind of shrinking and narrowing of concepts, assumptions, and the habits that accompany them. In those ideas that give real priority to what happens in physical birth, what happens in the uterus, and the sperm, it's worth pointing out that those kinds of associations and memories are actually quite conjectural.

They're usually suggested to or interpreted first by some authority figure—a psychotherapist or physical therapist of some kind—and communicated that way, then introjected into the client's experience. Only then does one begin to feel, "Oh yes, I feel this." I'm not denying the truth, but I'm questioning where it actually comes from. What's the mechanism? What's the social mechanism? We talked about how images and soul-making can be communicated in a field—this can too. Again, one wonders about truth and origin.

Whereas the pain around, let's say, oil spills and environmental degradation, and the obliviousness or lack of care that compounds such environmental degradation—what this does to a soul—oftentimes no authority figure needs to point this out. It arises more independently, it seems, at least more independently than sitting in a room with an authority figure who tells them what they're probably experiencing.

In this narrowing down of emphasis to the material past as causal, always bringing in that conception or leaning that way, we can see—from a certain perspective—the dominance of what I called in an earlier retreat the "fantasy of origin," something Nietzsche described. We're somewhat obsessed with how things start: "This is the origin of this now, and it's in the past." We also see, related to that, this logos—this conception of temporally linear causality. The past causes the present, and the present will serve as past cause to the future.

Also wrapped up in this narrowing, though more obscured in the way it's embedded, is the whole history of the modern construction of self. As I've pointed out in previous retreats, how we feel ourselves, how we think about ourselves, and our actual experience of self now in this culture is really quite different from other cultures in the world at present, and from what it was even in these same places in the past.

The way we feel ourselves—we take it for granted. The whole sense of our own individuality and our own individual trajectory, with all the conception of causality wrapped up in that—this entire understanding has a history. It wasn't always that human beings felt themselves like this, assumed that who they were and what a self is and how people feel. This whole sense—it's not even an idea anymore, but has become a visceral sense of what the self is as normal experience.

But again, please, I'm saying all this not to replace one psychological paradigm with another and claim this one's better, more real, or more true. I'm actually more interested in the narrowing, and my hope is that we can open up our views and open up the kinds of conceptual frameworks we can bring to bear and entertain.

It would be extremely silly for me to say that the past doesn't affect the future, or that trauma in one's past or difficult conditions don't affect future growth of a human being. That would be really silly. So I'm not denying that; I'm not denying the importance of those kinds of approaches to looking, healing, and thinking.

What I'm really interested in is opening to a plurality of conceptions—a plurality of conceptual frameworks and causal theories and causal thinking. What happens if we can open up to this plurality and move between different conceptual frameworks? What would that give us? What would that offer? What would that open up for us?

That's really my interest—not to disregard one and replace it with another at all. Each becomes a paradigm, a conceptual framework, a sort of lens that we can enter into regarding this or that suffering or experience, and move between these frameworks.

I think—I can't remember whether I've just written about this recently or shared it in a talk, so excuse me—but I'm not going to elaborate on it fully. However, I would say it's quite possible, using the concepts of eros and soul-making, to construct or discover a kind of psychology, including developmental psychology—a psychology of human development based on eros and soul-making as the primary drives.

When Freud made his psychological theory, it was based on the primary drive of the pleasure principle, with Oedipal fantasies as the foundational images. That was the basis of his theory—the whole developmental impetus in a human being was the pleasure principle seeking pleasure, and how that interacted with family situations and the larger situation of civilization and its laws. These two forces, often in opposition to each other, and what ensued from their contact, determined human development. But what was primary there was the pleasure principle, along with the Oedipal fantasy.

Someone like Douglas Fairbairn, a Scottish psychoanalyst who came much later, placed contact rather than pleasure as the driving principle. This is what the infant wants—contact. Someone like Kohut, in his ego psychology, places self-coherence as primary. The fundamental drive or impetus in the psyche is toward constructing a coherent and stable sense of self or ego.

So we have very different ideas with different psychologies, different psychological paradigms of what is fundamental—what's the fundamental drive. You can hear that, of these three examples—there are many others—the closest sounding to what we're talking about would be Fairbairn's emphasis on contact. The drive for contact, the impetus for human connection drives psychic growth and human development in that psychology.

Contact—you'll recognize from our definition of eros—wanting more contact, more connection, more intimacy, touch, penetration, opening of the beloved other. It's just that for Fairbairn, that contact is more limited in what it means.

It's construed in what we call more of a flatly human way. In our paradigm, it's possible—my point is it's possible—to construct a whole developmental psychology and also a psychology of pathology that's based on eros and soul-making as we are defining those terms as the primary developmental impetus, and then see what comes out of that. That might be really interesting to do.

And in what ways can that... for instance, we talked about the soul-making dynamic getting out of balance with the eros-psyche-logos, or with self, other, world, or whatever. What kind of pathology, what kind of developmental difficulty, or arrest, or imbalance would that give rise to? You understand? I'm not going to go into this. I'm just pointing out something for the sake of a larger point.

So if we talk about developmental psychology, that whole paradigm, or just the psychopathology, or those two paradigms, then we can regard a developmental psychology that focuses on causes in the material past and just goes back, back, back as much as it can to the sperm and maybe even to past lives and whatever, as one possible way of looking, way of conceiving among other options. Can we regard it as one possible angle of direction, way of looking, way of conceiving, conceptual framing, among other options.

So often it seems to me, at least nowadays in the circles I move in—it may be very different in other cultures—but so often it seems to shrink to that, though. It's not one among other options; it just becomes a kind of mononarrative or monoconception. I only have one pair of glasses, and at a certain point I forget that they're even glasses. As I said, sometimes that can become too narrow. That kind of lens can become too narrow. We might miss then the political, social, cultural, environmental causes of dukkha, psychological distress, developmental bending out of shape—and also physical.

It's quite... I think way before I got cancer I pointed out in a talk just how I felt it was really dangerous for people—oftentimes people who don't have cancer or some disease that modern Western medicine has a hard time curing—oftentimes people jump in there and say, "You have this disease, you have this cancer because you haven't dealt with some emotion from the past, you haven't processed it," etc. And it's a kind of gross assumption or a heavy accusation to bring in. And in a way it's really a step too far of this narrowing, or it's an example of a step too far of this kind of narrowing down of the causes of dukkha.

So we neglect to see, well, you know, there's a pretty mind-boggling cocktail of pesticides in our environment. Our air is polluted. Our water, our food. And we forget that because we've somehow narrowed it down to this certain range of causes in the past that actually focus more on the individual and the individual's story, wrapped up into that, constructed, if you like, by the whole construct of the modern, if you like, Western construct of self.

And also sometimes there's a narrowing, and much more often a narrowing, regarding the notion of temporal causality being in the past, as causal of present and origins being in the past. So what if there are just different options available to us in terms of conceptual frameworks? How does it feel when I say that, when I suggest that it could even be possible?

You know, one of the things I'm really quite interested in is the philosophy of science, and in science you can have—in fact you often do have in different points in history, and right now we have—different theories that have equal explanatory power and equal predictive power. And there have been times in history even when two or even three or four theories explain the same physical phenomena, but in very different ways, and predict the same things, but again, for very different reasons.

Then in the realm of science, in the world of science, what tends to happen then—this situation exists and it exists regularly in the history of science—then scientists seek to move towards a consensus where they decide, we now favor this theory. This theory edges it over that one at some point, either because we find different predictions and we do experiments and we realize that this one predicts what happens better, or for other reasons. I'm not going to go into this now, it's actually quite interesting.

There's also, if we talk about conceptual frameworks or theories and truth, there's also, again, I think very interesting debate that's been going on for decades around what actually is the status? What's the link? What's the connection between a theory, a scientific theory, and reality? And we might kind of introduce that kind of thinking here as well, or that kind of questioning.

So there is—forgive me if I get the name not quite right—but there's something called correspondence notions of truth. It means that one believes that this theory or the elements of this theory correspond to actual elements of reality. And that's what you're aiming for when you construct a theory, and that's what you're achieving when you achieve a theory that works, or you're hoping for that. So the theory is actually just a representation, a kind of one-to-one representation of—it corresponds, there's a correspondence of the elements of the theory and the elements of reality.

And there's a different kind of notion of truth that philosophers talk about, and that's called a coherence notion of truth, or coherence emphasis, or something—I can't remember. But what that means is that it's not so much that the theory, the elements of the theory correspond with elements of fact or physical reality. Actually, what you've got when we say this is a truth or this is a theory that works is that the elements of the theory fit together in a coherent way, but more than that, they fit together with other

theories that we have, so that they fit well with our sort of, and in a coherent way with our, if you like, family or set of theories and conceptual frameworks for looking at the world and interpreting existence.

So that to me is quite interesting, and what if we reflect in those kind of ways? So some of you have more of a bent to think about these things conceptually, and I think actually it's—for me, it's part of the whole soul-making dynamic at some point to actually ponder these things and kind of exercise one's muscles there. It actually is soul-making.

But if we bring in these concepts or these different notions of truth in relation to the soul-making paradigm and how that may or may not affect our thinking and reflection and use or movement between all these different psychological theories and theories of human development and psychological development and theories of psychopathology, etc., and theories of why dukkha arises now and all that.

And some scientists, so for instance Einstein, actually pointed out that you never really know if it's truth that's being revealed by a theory. And again, also in a different way, Einstein's point was, being a scientist is a bit like being a watch—having a watch, an old-style watch—and you're kind of, you look at the face of it, and you look at the hands and the rest of it, and you can kind of hear it ticking, and all that. And you're really kind of guessing or constructing theories for what's actually going on inside.

But you never really get to see what's going on inside to finally corroborate your theory. And he said science is always like that. We might get to look deeper, so to speak—it might feel like we've got more access to the interior because now we have electron microscopes and other advanced instruments. But actually there's always a level at which you cannot see. So there's a sense that we never really know whether a theory corresponds to reality.

In a very different way, quantum mechanics and what's called the Copenhagen interpretation is saying that our physical theories are not really about what is there. They're about what arises in experiments—what happens on the needles and dials and readouts in the laboratory. The theories are really about that.

Richard Feynman, who won a Nobel Prize for his quantum electrodynamic theory, also said something similar in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. I was trying to find it before this talk, but I couldn't locate it. But I remember him pointing out how interesting it is that you can have quite different theories that have similar explanatory power and similar predictive power.

Philosophers—many contemporary philosophers—are even more keen on this idea of opening up or questioning the whole relationship between theory or concept and fact, or even perception and so-called reality. There's a long history of this in Western philosophy with Hume and Kant and Nietzsche and even more so later on.

What we have here in all this is the recognition that different conceptual frameworks explain what we witness, explain what we observe in the human being, in our lives, in our experience. Different conceptual frameworks explain that differently, and they lead us in different directions. Maybe that's a better way of saying it—they point us and prompt us in different directions.

Different conceptual frameworks explain what we observe very differently or somewhat differently, and they also direct us in different directions. What I want to suggest and even hope for—partly helped by realizing the thorough and deep and radical emptiness of all things and going into that extensively—is that it's possible to realize there is no ultimate truth of things, no perspective on reality where one can say, "This is how this thing is."

That understanding extends from there. One realizes that and it extends from there. That understanding goes deep, and one realizes it extends also to conceptual frameworks. This doesn't mean they're all equal—we'll return to this in the final talk of this series. But one senses that there is no possibility of arriving at some ultimate truth in that sense.

One begins to sense through these kinds of practices—through emptiness practice, but also through soul-making practice—one really senses one's participation, as I've emphasized several times, one's participation in perception, one's participation through conception in what arises, and even deeper than that, one's participation in the truth, or in what reality is.

Maybe through that—maybe it's already accessible to you through some other facility or natural inclination—it's possible that we can open up for ourselves this flexibility of conceptual frameworks. We are actually free to move between different conceptual frameworks and become adept enough in different conceptual frameworks. We're not relating to any of them as "this is the real one, that's not the real one," or "this one is true, that's not true," or "this is the final explanation of things, of what we see," or "this is the final explanation of human psychological development," or "this is the final explanation of human suffering or pathology or difficulty."

But we can have, conceptually and practically, this flexibility. It's really available to us. Each of them, we recognize, has a different emphasis, a different way in, a different angle. Perhaps we could say it opens certain doors and directions more, and perhaps others less, and delivers certain fruits more and others less than an alternative one.

But we can, at times at least, entertain a conceptual framework because it is a conceptual framework that stimulates and supports an open soul-making. It's not so much about truth and this being the final reality. It's a conceptual framework that works to stimulate, support, nourish, and open soul-making for us.

That would be one conceptual framework among others in the ways that we relate to dukkha, in the ways that we relate to our ideas about human development and what it is to develop well and how that can be impeded or contorted. It's one paradigm among others, one conceptual frame we can entertain, we can adopt, move in and out of.

Wrapped up in that idea is a kind of meta-conceptual framework of flexibility among conceptual frameworks. There's a higher level idea that it's actually valid and valuable and helpful and really legitimate to move between different conceptual frameworks—whole different paradigms about psychology and development and pathology and suffering.

A meta-conceptual framework. And for me, that meta-conceptual framework is also a framework that stimulates, supports, encourages, and nourishes an open soul-making. To me, that's actually part of the soul-making paradigm, the larger soul-making paradigm—that there's this flexibility between conceptual frameworks. And that idea has its place in soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 124

What is Awakening? (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h12

> *In this profound inquiry, Rob Burbea examines the fundamental question of what awakening truly means and how we relate to this central concept in Buddhist practice. He invites us to investigate our motivations: Are we seeking awakening to measure up or prove ourselves, or from authentic longing for beauty, sacredness, and exploration?*
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> *Burbea challenges common assumptions about liberation as the mere cessation of dukkha, questioning whether ending suffering is what we genuinely want most. Drawing on insights from jhāna practice and emptiness realization, he suggests that our desires for mystical depths, soul-making, and the discovery of beauty may be healthier motivations than ego-driven achievement.*
>
> *The talk examines how our relationship with authority and tradition shapes our understanding of awakening, and explores the possibility of open-ended rather than final conceptions of liberation. Through penetrating questions about intention and authentic desire, Burbea opens up what he calls a "meta-freedom" - liberation from our very concepts of liberation itself.*

In this next talk, I would like to explore the question: what is awakening? I want to examine the experiences and ideas of what enlightenment, liberation, and awakening might mean. Again, I hope this will be helpful for you. Some of it will be similar to the previous talks on this retreat—advice or information or clarification or outlining possibilities, pointing out and indicating possibilities for us as human beings, as practitioners.

Alongside all that, I'm partly hoping to open up the discourse around this and open up our thinking around these notions—awakening, enlightenment, liberation—using these terms interchangeably for now. I also want to open up our questioning. If you listen, you will hear that there are actually several questions interwoven in the questions I'm opening up. There are several questions, and they're connected, weaving in and out of each other.

Teaching, as I'm pretty sure I've said before, is always contextual for me. Teaching happens in a context. It's informed and conditioned by that context. It has to be. In a way, it's conveying what a teacher has received from the tradition, from different traditions, from their teachers—in all different forms and from all different directions per-

haps. It's also a conveying of what one has discovered for oneself, the possibilities there, and what might be helpful from one's own experience. And it's also, of course, a response to the student or students—what has been coming from the students towards the teacher or what is witnessed there.

So, as I said, I really hope this is helpful. Sometimes a teaching is helpful only at a certain time, at a certain point in one's practice. It might be that we hear certain teachings and it's just not the right time for us to hear them. They don't impress us, we don't understand, they don't make much sense, or they just seem silly to us, or they don't fit with another idea we're more favoring at that time. So really, whether it's helpful also depends on whether it's the right time to hear a certain teaching—at a particular time in your life, in the development of your practice, in your journey.

So what is awakening? If one listens to or reads different teachers, listens to practitioners, or asks a range of teachers or practitioners "What is awakening? What is enlightenment? What is liberation? What does it mean to you?"—you will surely get these days a very wide range of answers, a very wide range of notions and responses there. You will also encounter many practitioners who don't really think about the notion at all. It's not in their vocabulary, or they make very little reference to it, or perhaps it only really means moments of mindfulness or moments of wakefulness—therefore moments of awakening. It's not really in their map, in their orientation. They're not really referring to it; it's not really a reference point for their practice and for their thinking and discourse.

But there is really a wide range. Perhaps in Buddhist circles, because of the centrality of the Four Noble Truths—which we've been discussing a little bit in the previous talks—dukkha, and then the third truth, the ending of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, liberation or freedom from suffering might be the most common sort of nutshell response to this question of what awakening means. But then that just begs, for me, the next question: What does that mean? Freedom from suffering? Liberation from suffering? What does that mean? What would it look like? What do you mean by suffering? What kind of suffering?

To me, just that much is interesting. The fact that there's now such a wide range—I've touched on this before—but that social fact, if you like, is very interesting to me. It marks our age, and it marks the Dharma in our age, and it marks the Insight Meditation community as well.

I'm going to talk now about this kind of material, and obviously I can't help but communicate some of my thinking on the subject—my current thinking, my current approach—and of course that's going to be conditioned by, reflective of, an outcome of my

journey with all this. But I want to—it's not about me—and I want to hopefully say enough that opens up this territory for anyone. Obviously it's going to be reflective of and informed by how I have related to this question in the past, which has, along with other factors, conditioned how I'm relating to it right now.

But I don't mean to communicate anything final. I don't mean to give you a categorical, final, authoritative answer to what is awakening. In a way, that's part of the very point that I want to communicate.

The relationship and the way we relate to the notion of awakening—the very idea we have of it—evolves. This is, again, a point of view. It should evolve, and it should be open to questioning. Is our notion of awakening truly open to questioning? Is the very question or the journey we have with the notion of awakening and what that might be genuinely open-ended?

So right there, it's quite a perhaps different point of view—one that you might not have encountered before or be used to. I don't want to be communicating a final "this is how it is" dogma. But of course, much of what I say will inevitably be influenced by my history with this question, my experience with practice, and my current way of relating to it in approach and thinking.

But let's start with this business of how we approach the very notion. People say awakening, enlightenment, liberation, and as I mentioned, for some people these words just don't register—they simply ignore them. For others, they're really quite alive or charged words, quite emotive for us.

One of the things I'm really interested in—I'd like to start there—is how are we approaching this question of awakening, this notion of awakening? How are we looking at it? How are we relating to it? How do we conceive of it? What intentions are we bringing to this concept of awakening, this idea of awakening, this goal, if you like, of awakening? And what of those intentions are conscious and what is perhaps unconscious in the intention? What are the assumptions—and what are perhaps the unconscious assumptions—that we bring to this word, this idea? What movements of the being, of the psyche, do we bring there?

This to me is where I'd like to start and one of the really indispensable questions to try to open up this whole field. How am I approaching it? How are we approaching it? How are we conceiving? What are the intentions, assumptions, drives involved for us? What goes on for us with respect to the idea and the notion of awakening? What goes into that relationship? What goes into that conception and that notion? What are we bringing into it?

I think it's really helpful in this area, really important, and in fact, potentially liberating. In asking what is liberation, and in asking what is awakening, what is enlightenment, it's helpful, important, and potentially liberating to draw attention to and contemplate—or at least consider the possibility—that we, many of us, let's say, will tend to approach the question and the teaching of awakening, enlightenment, liberation with motivations that are, to some extent, informed or impressed or driven by two kinds of motivation that I would highlight right now.

The question is: how much is our approach informed by or motivated by or shaped or directed or limited by these two motivations? How much is our perspective, and then the whole field, shaped, directed, limited, informed by these motivations?

One is the wish to measure where we ourselves are on some kind of scale towards awakening. So the question is: how much of the motivation involved in the way we approach the question of awakening and the goal of awakening is actually a kind of ego measuring wish, if you like—an ego wish to measure up, which is actually quite a normal movement and inclination of ego, to measure itself.

Ego, or actually self, self-sense, is conditioned by, is fabricated based on any kind of measurement. This goes extremely subtle, extremely deep. I can't remember the name of a talk I gave—something like "Beyond the Measuring Mind" or something. But really, in the subtleties of—not just in the gross way when it's really ego and inner critic, which is really important to look at—but also in the very, very subtle movements where the very fabrication of perception of object and subject is based on measurement. I'm not going to go into that right now because I've talked about it a lot before. I think that talk was called "Maya and Nirvana" or "Beyond the Measuring Mind"—something like that—but if you're interested.

Right now I want to talk about the grosser level, which is this kind of ego measurement, the sort of normal movement or inclination of ego. So how much is that a kind of motivation when we relate to and approach the notion of awakening?

And secondly, how much is there a kind of wish or inclination to frame our questioning about awakening within the frameworks given to us by the tradition or traditions we are currently viewing as authoritative?

So it's not really common, as an observation I'd like to make, it's not really common to radically question the views and definitions of awakening, enlightenment, liberation —whatever you want to call it—that are handed to us by the traditions that we are cur-

rently viewing as authoritative. In other words, wrapped up with this whole question of what is awakening and how we approach it is this relationship with authority and tradition, and how free we are to really bring a kind of radical questioning there.

So two questions for us. How much is our approach to awakening, and our approach to even the idea of awakening—what it might be, what it can be—how much is it motivated, informed, shaped, directed, limited by the tendency of the self or ego to want to measure itself, to measure up? And secondly, by a kind of unquestioned authority of tradition, or a non-questioning of the authority of tradition?

Sometimes those two factors combine, of course: the measuring self and the lack of questioning of the authority of a tradition in all kinds of ways. And sometimes it's not one tradition—it's like a tradition such as Pali Canon Buddhism, or even just insight meditation tradition. As I said, you'll get different interpretations from different teachers within that tradition, which I think is actually quite healthy. But then the question is—and this is not an easy question to answer—why do I adopt this teacher's interpretation as an authority and not that teacher? What makes sense to me? Is it just that? What's going on for us psychologically in the ways that we relate to authority, and in this case specifically the authority of certain teachers, and then the authority in relationship around the notion of awakening?

To me these are really important questions, considerations to open up, to bring to our awareness.

Regarding the first one, this tendency of the ego—the tendency of any self-sense to be built on measurement, the discrimination of measurement, better or worse or whatever—and the tendency of the grosser levels of self-manifestation, ego and certainly inner critic and all that, to be based on self-measurement. Sometimes a student who's been practicing a long while will ask me, "What do you think? What's your take on stream entry or the first stage of awakening that the Buddha outlined in the Pali Canon?"

Sometimes I find myself actually wanting, rather than just say what I think, to ask what seems like a more important question in response: Why are you asking? And sometimes I wonder—and sometimes I think it has turned out to be the case, not in every case at all, I don't want to insist on that—but sometimes I wonder, is it that you want to feel you've achieved this thing called stream entry or this stage? As if, "I want to be one of those. I want to be a stream enterer. I want to be in that club. I hear people talking. There are these web forums and people say this. Or I was at a meeting and people were talking about stream enterers, and I want to be in that club."

Or—obviously a very related question but subtly different—is it that you don't want to think and feel that you're not in that club, that you're not one of those? Why? Can we dare to really explore this question? It takes a lot of courage to explore that question. It's quite radical to turn the questioning around that way. Can we explore it vigorously? Sometimes I've brought this up and a person kind of shrugs it off. And sometimes it's been my sense that there's a lot more to investigate here.

I don't mean by this to jump to the other extreme which sometimes is communicated in certain teachings: just drop all notions of awakening, forget about it, it's just an ego trip. Don't harm yourself by even asking the question of what it might be and might it be possible and how. Just drop it, just forget about it. Don't go near it because by going near that question, you're poking the dragon of the inner critic. The dragon will be awakened and torment you.

But by asking this question—"Why are you asking? And can you really vigorously explore that?"—I'm asking it out of kindness. When I ask it, I ask it out of kindness. Part of the reason for asking it is kindness. Can you get that? If I'm actually chasing something just for the sake of satisfying the unsatisfiable inner critic—getting my stripes, measuring up, finally being good enough—that's really unkind, to live a life that way, to pursue practice that way, for one's practice to be shot through with that kind of drive.

So the question is coming, if one poses it to oneself, or with a friend where it feels safe to ask that question together, of each other, out of kindness.

But there's also a lot of boldness and radicality in the questioning. It's kind, but there's boldness and radicality there. Why am I even asking this question about awakening? What is my relationship with this?

There are aspects—this is one aspect—and there's a whole other kind of level of what we might call meta-freedom, M-E-T-A, a whole other level of freedom that can open up when we open up our relationship with the very notion of freedom, of liberation, of awakening, enlightenment. That's partly what I hope to open up a little bit. It's like a whole other level of awakening, a whole other level of freedom.

But even asking this question—why am I asking? And asking: what am I bringing to this question? What are my notions? What's my relationship? What are my intentions? These are not easy questions. I think they take courage, they take honesty, they take integrity, and they take boldness.

Personally, I am very interested in awakening, enlightenment, liberation—what that might mean, what it can be. I'm very interested in the possibilities for a human being, possibilities for consciousness, the possibilities for living, for life, for the sense of

existence, the possibilities for perception. The breadth, the range, the depth, the possibilities for soul, the possibilities of what liberation of my action in the world means. And the possibility in relation to all this for society. We talk about awakening, liberation. What might that mean socially? What might it mean for the wider sphere of being and beings? I'm also very interested in the ideas about it, notions, and our relationship with it, and our relationship with our ideas about it, as I've just said.

But when someone talks to me in an interview, and sometimes the student might bring it up—they're feeling this pressure or this measurement or this way that things have just gotten really tight and constricted and painful in relation to a question of some kind of achievement on the path, meditative achievement, whether it's awakening or jhana or emptiness stages of emptiness realization or whatever it is—when someone's talking to me, one of us, either it's them or me, is wondering about how much of the intention is coming from this measuring, wanting to measure up, and how much pressure there is coming from that. Then often I feel that at that point, the most necessary and most interesting piece to explore in the conversation is exactly that. It's the relationship with.

It doesn't mean we won't get to the rest of it and the ideas and the possibilities of what it might mean and how one might move towards that or open that up, whatever metaphor we might use. But this piece about relationship with and what comes in in terms of intention and motivation is a really necessary piece. Oftentimes it's like we need to do that before we can go any further. And it's actually quite an interesting piece, I think.

So sometimes, or at different points, let's say, for a person, the dominant intention or push regarding either the whole of practice or some particular strand of practice, like jhana practice or emptiness practice or whatever, is to prove oneself. What's going on? I have to prove oneself. Is it to myself that I have to prove myself? Is it to others, and who? Is it to a certain teacher or teachers, to measure up somehow?

Like I said, if this is the case, or even if one of us in the conversation suspects that it is the case, then in my role as teacher, I actually become more interested in that at that point, or as a necessity to understand and unpack it and find freedom from that particularly narrow and painful drive. That becomes, at that point, more interesting and more necessary than attaining jhana, attaining this stage of realization or whatever.

If we just dwell a little bit with jhana practice—the same kind of psychological, painful psychological mechanics regarding motivation can go on there as they can in relation to awakening. With long-term practice, I mean really doing a lot of jhana practice, doing it very thoroughly, one sees—I think it's almost unavoidable to see, I hope it

seems pretty obvious that one would see—that the attainment of any jhana is not really dependent on myself. It's dependent on the conditions in the moment. When the conditions are there, when the past and particularly the present conditions are there, then the jhana, this particular jhana, will arise or will stabilize or whatever it is, or will deepen. And it's not really to do with self.

It becomes really, really clear when you do a lot of jhana practice, dipping in and out over a long time in all sorts of conditions, and bringing a kind of intelligent attention or scrutiny or curiosity, willingness to understand: how is this even working? Why is it that some days it seems to go really well, other days not so well, and everything in between? Or sittings well, or not so well, etc. If there's an interest in that, it's kind of unavoidable that one realizes, you know, it's not really that the self is so fantastic and the architect of all this. It's the conditions.

So this realization dissolves any attempt to use the jhanas to measure up or prove oneself. It's not about oneself. That's not what it depends on.

When, though, there's just been a little practice of the jhanas and a little success or attainment—you know, first four jhanas, just a little bit—and then we go, "Oh, that's it. Yeah, I got it. First jhana, got that. Got the second, got the third, got the fourth." There's this quick sort of ticking off and getting of one's stripes. Oftentimes that realization of their dependence on conditions has not become clear yet. It's not mature yet. It's all too quick. I haven't seen, I haven't paid enough attention. I haven't had enough experience there.

So one possibility is that you get this strange effect where the practice—just a little bit—has unfortunately reinforced the whole ego-measuring, ego-proving orientation and focus and motivation. In a way it actually feels good to the ego, but it's actually reinforced that whole problematic stance.

Again, it's really important to bring a kind of curiosity and intelligence both to the motivation and to actually asking: does this even justify being pumped up about achieving this or that?

I actually think, if we just stay with jhanas for a little bit, a much healthier desire for jhanas and for emptiness experiences is a love of and a curiosity about the depths—those kinds of depths of consciousness, of opening, of perception, the beauty there, the nourishment of mystical experiences of various sorts. I think a kind of greed, if you like—if I even dare to use that word—a desire and a love for those depths and even an attachment to those depths and the beauty and that nourishment and the love of those mystical depths, that's a much healthier motivation.

Sometimes what happens is a person becomes afraid of becoming attached to pleasure regarding the jhanas. But I don't think attachment to pleasure, in itself, is rarely a problem in my experience teaching the jhanas. It's rarely a problem. What can look like attachment to pleasure arises predominantly when one or the other of two conditions serves as a basis.

In other words, it looks like there's attachment to pleasure when actually what's going on—the root of that seeming attachment to pleasure—is actually a chronic avoidance of some kind of psychological or emotional or relational pain, and one is just hiding. Or part of one's motivation, let's put it that way, part of one's motivation is this chronic avoidance of certain psychological, emotional, or relational pains or difficulties or challenges. It's actually not attachment to pleasure.

It's also the case that what looks like attachment to pleasure can only really take root when there isn't a sense of soul-making, of mystery and beauty in the discovery of the jhanas. You understand? The jhanas have become kind of flat because one hasn't opened up that dimension of soul. They're just pleasant experiences of different degrees, and one hasn't really—for whatever complex reasons—opened up to the sense of mystery and beauty that they can reveal. There's not really a sense of soulfulness, of deepening and soul-making going on there. It's just become about pleasure. And sometimes that's when the attachment to the jhana, the attachment to the pleasure, can be a motivating force—because there's nothing else. It's just pleasure. Or it's mostly avoidance masquerading as attachment to pleasure.

The pleasure of jhana—just even taking the first four jhanas—the pleasure of those jhanas and the kind of nourishment and fulfillment far exceeds the pleasure that's available to human beings in the flatly sensed senses. Not, you know, without sensing the soul—just the pleasure of a meal, or the pleasure of the sensations of taste, or the pleasure of the sensations of sex or whatever, when it's flatly conceived. The pleasure of jhana dwarfs those. You're talking about a totally different realm.

But the pleasure of soul-making, and that kind of dimensionality opening up—the delight of that and the nourishment of that far exceeds the pleasure of the jhana when the jhana is conceived flatly and felt flatly, when it's just a realm of pleasure. "That's convenient, that's a lot of pleasure, I'll hang out there in the third jhana or wherever it is."

So wrapped up in all of this is this question of motivation. What do I want? What am I wanting? Whether it's from jhanic experiences, whether it's from emptiness, whether it's from the whole path, and whether it's from awakening and that whole idea or goal.

If my motivation is this kind of proving myself or measuring up somehow—the ego measuring up—I would say that's not a deep motivation. It's not really what I would call an authentic desire. It's not a soul desire. Let's just say it's not even authentic. It's not a deep desire. It's a superficial psychological mechanism where the pain can feel like it goes very deep, but it's not what I call authentic. It's not really your own. It's somehow put on one socially. This desire to measure up is a kind of social desire.

What do you want? What's your authentic desire for practice, for the path? What kind of awakening do you want? What is the awakening that you seek? What possibilities do you hope for, long for, yearn for?

When we ask this question "What is awakening?" we could approach it by studying various conceptions and statements and differentiations of the notion of awakening. We're going to do a little bit of that in the Buddhist tradition as well as other traditions and teachings. We could also describe the apparent characteristics and lifestyles and personalities of those popularly considered as enlightened.

But as well as all that, or even instead of all that, we could ask this question: What do you want?

But do you see that the answer to what you want may be—and may be to a large extent—informed, conditioned, and even closed in by the study of various conceptions and statements about awakening, by the Buddhist tradition, by stories and images describing the apparent characteristics and lifestyles of those popularly considered enlightened? Do you see how what we receive from an authority or from a subculture actually might shape, inform, direct and limit the very answers we give ourselves when we ask what we want? It may shape, limit, inform and direct what we actually want or what we feel we want.

Of course, if we ask "What do I want in life?" this question is not just about what I want in my existence, in this movement of time that I have between birth and death. What do I want from that? What do I hope for? What do I long for?

I don't need to tell you how much we are assailed, barraged by advertising and images in the culture, pushing, prodding, dragging, harassing us to develop this desire or that one, shaping us. Sometimes we'd like to feel "I'm not—I see through all that," but it's so prevalent and so powerful. Sometimes some of that is really obvious and we can just let go of it easily—we're not pulled in, whereas we might see others pulled in by our society and culture. But this also exists in much subtler ways and in other areas of our lives.

I was reading about an indigenous native tribe in the Amazon. An oil company came—or was it a damming project, people putting up a hydroelectric plant—and they tried to bribe the tribal people. They said, "Let us give you these satellite TVs and alcohol and things." The tribe wasn't interested in them at all, but they were given them anyway. Because they had the satellite TVs and all this stuff, they saw others with all kinds of things, living very different lifestyles—affluent Western lifestyles, of course, which is what you see on TV. They were exposed to corporate advertising directing and magnifying their desires, and over not very long time, this began to shape what they wanted. They wanted all that stuff. That had devastating effects on that region of the Amazon, on the social cohesion and well-being of that tribe.

You can see this happening large-scale in the world. So the question is: to what degree is what I want the product of conditioning? How much of my answer to what I want is the product of conditioning, of ideas, of images, fantasy?

Just another thing I read recently in the Guardian—up to 1990, they did some study in Fiji. Eating disorders were unheard of there in 1990 and before that, when they did anthropological social studies. In 1995, TV was introduced in Fiji. Most of it was American TV, and it was teeming with food ads—hamburgers and sweets and this and that. Within three years, twelve percent of teenage girls in Fiji had developed bulimia.

This kind of thing is really painfully shocking, but you're obviously aware of that kind of conditioning. But the point I want to make is that we can also be subject to spiritual conditioning, a spiritual influencing of what we want spiritually by those we come into contact with—by teachers, by authorities, by a sangha, by what's popular in books, by all of that.

For some of you who've been around a while—I mean really a while—and perhaps come across or been in and out of different sanghas, different spiritual communities and teachers and fellow practitioners...

I don't know if you have wondered this as well, but sometimes in some of the communities I've moved through over these thirty-plus years—whether settled sanghas or more mobile communities of practitioners—I've noticed something curious. Sometimes I wonder whether certain figures in a sangha, perhaps senior students or teachers, seem to inhabit or project a particular persona in a way that feels almost unconscious, yet somehow calculated to influence others.

It depends on the sangha, of course. Some are monastic, others decidedly non-monastic, but there can emerge a certain archetypal image—perhaps of someone jovial and warm, yet somehow distant or aloof. There's an affable amusement at the world and at

those who scurry about, busy and attached, but with genuine goodwill underlying it all. There's something about this persona that I find myself wondering about—as if someone might be unconsciously or semi-consciously inhabiting it, even selling it a little through their smile, through the way they walk or stand in the lunch queue, through the casual way their shawl falls over their shoulder.

Certainly it can be beneficial to model a certain possibility of disinterest, of non-entanglement. It's good to embody an archetype of equanimity, even one that appears somewhat aloof. But when does this become a fixated image that goes unquestioned and rigid? When does it begin operating in a way we're not quite conscious of—this pull toward conforming to what awakening should look like, this unconscious stamping or rigidifying of a model? It remains a certain style, but it becomes a fixated image rather than an imaginal one, even though it may be operating relatively unconsciously.

And again, there's this question: what do you want? What do you really want?

I was recently having several conversations around awakening, with different people presenting similar issues around this very question. When I asked them what they really wanted, very often the answer came back easily: "I want the end of suffering." But it didn't sound authentic to me.

"What's suffering?" I would ask.

A person might respond—and this has happened several times—"Well, I'm kind of addicted to food." This is actually a relatively common response. When I inquire what's involved in their relationship with food, we're not talking about anything like anorexia or bulimia, just a pattern of overindulgence.

I find myself wondering: how much suffering is there really around this pattern? How much is it actually a problem? They say they're interested in awakening, that they want the end of suffering. But is there really that much suffering involved? Many people have robust digestive systems—they can indulge in all kinds of foods and sweets and overeating and feel perhaps a little sluggish, maybe some minor indigestion. But it's not really a significant problem.

So I probe: is that really what you want—relief from that particular suffering around food? Is that really what's most important to you?

Sometimes, when we go deeper into this question, a person will think more and say, quoting the Buddha, "I don't want to be an untrained, ordinary, run-of-the-mill person." This is stock phrasing that the Buddha used to describe someone unenlightened, someone who hasn't engaged in practice or progressed on the path.

But this answer reveals something different. When I probe a little deeper, it becomes clear: is it really about the end of suffering? Are you really that concerned about the suffering you experience in your life? Actually, there isn't that much suffering present. There's this relationship with food, but it's not causing significant difficulty.

This deeper answer suggests to me the very issue we've been exploring around ego identification and ego measurement: "I don't want to be that kind of person."

I don't want to be in that camp—what the Buddha calls "untrained, ordinary, run-of-the-mill person."

So is it, again, the motivation coming out of ego and measurement? Or is that motivation—let's say that aspect of the emotional, that strand of the motivation—is it larger than the attraction to actually lessening suffering? In other words, what's the relative dominance of the different motivations?

Or is there an attraction to beauty? We haven't even said anything about that yet. Actually, we did when we talked about the jhanas. So what's the relative weighting of these different motivations?

If I say "I don't want to be an untrained, ordinary, run-of-the-mill person," it seems to be voicing, it seems to be indicating that these questions of identification, ego identification and measurement are actually dominating.

And sometimes even then, the psychology is much more complex. So a person is saying, "I don't want to be untrained, I don't want to be..." But some part of them is really rebelling angrily against the prospect or the demand of training. The Buddha talks about training a thoroughbred horse as a metaphor for the development of meditation and practice—sila, samadhi, panna.

So at the same time, one part of me is wanting this—I want to measure up and not be counted as one of those the Buddha calls untrained. And another part of me is rebelling angrily at this demand or even prospect of training. To me, that's interesting. What is going on there? Can I open this up? Can I actually look at it with honesty, with integrity, with courage?

In the absence of a cosmological belief—basically, a cosmological context of awakening meaning the ending of rebirth—that's a kind of cosmological idea that the Buddha adopted and taught. In final awakening is the ending of rebirth, the stage of awakening, the movement to the ending of rebirth in arahantship. So you get non-returner—that means you're not born again in this material existence. Once-returner—you have one more rebirth in this material existence. Sotapanna has a maximum of seven.

So the whole thing is this trajectory to end rebirth. It's a cosmological view. And wrapped up in that view is there's basically an infinity of suffering awaiting us in endless rebirth. Endless rebirth is equivalent to an infinity of suffering, albeit in a kind of seemingly random roller coaster—up and down, highs and lows, fortune and misfortune, pain and pleasure. But inevitably, the suffering there outweighs the pleasure, and a lot of it will be absolutely brutal.

So there's a kind of cosmological view. Awakening is situated in that cosmological view—ending rebirth. In the absence of such a cosmological view, which I think is the case for a lot of people these days—it's not really gripping to them, that whole cosmological view of ending rebirth. It's like, what I'm really trying to do is end rebirth and not be reborn into the human realm. It's quite the opposite, actually. If people believe in rebirth, it's actually quite an attractive notion these days.

But anyway, in the absence of such a cosmological belief structuring the larger view of what awakening is, the question comes again: what is awakening as you conceive it? And why do you want it?

A very easy answer in a Buddhist context is to conceive of awakening as the end of suffering. Again, sometimes—in fact, a lot of the time—is that what you really most want? The end of suffering. Is that really what you most want?

Sometimes when we have a lot of pain and we just feel trapped in a lot of pain, whether it's psychological or physical, that can be the dominant thing. "I just want the end of suffering." But when that goes, or when we've seen through that kind of psychological pain, or whatever it is, for our whole lives, for our whole existence—is that really what you want, what you most want, the end of suffering, the end of dukkha? Is that your greatest desire? Is that really what you're after in practice?

Often, someone is saying that, and it's palpably clear, actually, to both of us, that they don't live like that. They're not living and choosing the end of suffering every day. Far from it. There's lots of suffering in their lives, and they actually don't mind too much. It's not such a big deal—a little bit of indigestion, a little bit of sloth and torpor, a little bit of whatever it is. They're cutting deals with suffering. "I'll have this much pleasure and I accept this much suffering that goes with it when I crave that or I indulge in this."

When a person is living their life that way, they're saying "I want the end of suffering," but it's not really what's going on. So "end of suffering" is one way that one might frame it.

And it might be a valid answer. My question is simply: is it? And if it is, then great—that's your orientation. But is it?

The person might say, "Happiness—I want happiness. Awakening is happiness," somehow tying the notion of awakening with happiness. I'll just mention this observation—I'm not quite sure what conclusion to make with this, but it made me smile. Maybe you can draw your own conclusions.

From the Guardian in December 2016, there was a nationwide poll in the UK. They asked if people would regard themselves as happy. Ninety-two percent of UK residents said they were happy. Which I found very interesting.

Then they were asked another question: to estimate how many in the UK would say they were happy. In other words, what was their estimate of how many people would answer that question "Are you happy?" with a yes? The average estimate was forty-seven percent.

So ninety-two percent said they're happy, and the average estimate of what people think about how many other people are happy was forty-seven percent. I think that's interesting. I'm not quite sure what to conclude from that.

There's also the statistic—I don't know if it's just US or UK—that one in five people are on antidepressants. So I don't know quite how that squares with ninety-two percent of people saying they're happy.

Is happiness something that you relate to, or is it a goal for you? Or do you feel like you're sold that by some kind of spiritual teaching or psychological teaching? What does it even mean, anyway? I have problems with all these polls, but what does happiness mean? It's such a loose word. There's so much range to what that can mean—so many kinds of happiness, so many shades and discriminations we could make between kinds and degrees of happiness. One wonders what was the range and conception people had when they answered.

But what would it look like to say "I'm happy"? What does it look like if happiness is a goal? I don't know if that's something people commonly say. I rarely come across that as an answer, though perhaps it's part of a larger answer about what a person wants.

Then there are also considerations around—again, we're talking about notions of awakening and how we get locked into what we want, or whether it's really what we want, and how that's related to notions we have and what we've been exposed to. As I said, all these questions are interwoven together.

Why is it that we often—or it seems most common to—cling to a notion of awakening as some kind of finality? The Buddha did teach it that way, and most spiritual traditions teach it that way. They convey a sense of "this is a goal beyond which there is nothing"—no further development, this is it, the end of awakening, the final goal.

What's the relationship between a finality of goal—an awakening conceived as some kind of finality—and self-view, or the tendencies of self-view? As I alluded to at the beginning, and in a previous talk, self-view takes as a scaffold some kind of view of finality with regard to awakening. That very finality becomes a kind of basis, or support, or scaffolding on which self-view and ego-view can be constructed, fabricated, and oftentimes hardened.

Whether trained or untrained, ordinary or extraordinary—"I am X." That whole kind of black-and-white thinking, which is also quite characteristic of addiction and many other difficulties, can very much come into play in terms of both self-view and view of goal, view of what awakening is. And they go together. There's something important about that.

So we tend to think in terms of some kind of final reaching point of awakening. We might, just as we ask what does happiness look like, also ask what would the end of suffering look like? The cessation of dukkha—how would it manifest? What would it look like to live the end of greed, aversion and delusion? What does that actually look like?

Now, again, you encounter these classical Buddhist terms from the Pali Canon—suffering, nibbāna, the Four Noble Truths, the three kilesas—and each admits very wide interpretation of what they mean. But actually, with any interpretation, I would still ask: what does it look like? What would it look like to actually live the end of greed, aversion and delusion—the complete end of those?

Where are you going to draw the line for what greed is? Some of you will know my tendency, my preference regarding what delusion is—to regard it as a spectrum, and also clinging as a spectrum. So when we talk about really subtle clinging or really deep, subtle delusion, they actually are implicated thoroughly into the very fabrication of any and all perception. So that to really be without delusion is also to be in that moment without perception. And to be completely without clinging is also to be without perception in that moment. One cannot live that.

So where on the spectrum of clinging and delusion am I going to draw the line and say this is delusion but that isn't? And if—as we'll get to—if actually one's motivation, when one looks inside and asks, "Is it the end of suffering? No, not really. I'm not sure. What is it that I really want? What is it?"—if through practice and honest inquiry, you discover other answers...

This is really your question, not for me or anyone to tell you what to want. But if the answer is that actually, why am I practicing? What am I practicing for? And it's really about the love of exploration—the love and longing for sacredness, for sacrednesses opening up, the love and longing for soulfulness, the love and desire for beauty and beauty opening up, the interest and beauty of what we're calling the creation and discovery of self-other-world and all of that—if it's actually those kinds of things motivating you, why would we not allow the notion of awakening to be open-ended?

What's the limit to my love of exploration? What's the limit to the sacrednesses that can open up, or the soulfulness, the soul-making, the beauty, beauties? What's the limit to the kind of poetic and skillful and soul-making fabrication of self, other, world and eros? Would that be okay—to have an open-ended notion of awakening?

I want to continue, but again, just to sum up: I really want to stress what I feel is important to unpack, to unearth, to look at and ask. What is around and in my relationship to this idea of awakening? In my relation to my practice toward awakening, what's involved in my approach, in my conception, in my relationship, in terms of intention, assumption, drive?

To me, as I said, that question is itself motivated by kindness, but it has a lot of boldness in it—or it can have. And in itself, it can actually open up a whole other level of what we might call awakening, liberation.

Let's stop there for now.

CHAPTER 125

What is Awakening? (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h15

> *In this second part of his inquiry into awakening, Rob Burbea examines the wide range of interpretations found within modern Theravāda and Insight Meditation traditions regarding what constitutes awakening and sotāpatti (stream entry). Rather than arguing over textual etymology, he explores the deeper question of what motivates our adoption of particular views about liberation.*
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> *Burbea discusses the three fetters destroyed by a sotāpanna according to the Pali Canon: doubt (vicikicchā), attachment to rites and rituals (sīlabbata-parāmāsa), and sakkāyadiṭṭhi (often translated as personality view). He offers a detailed linguistic analysis of sakkāyadiṭṭhi, breaking down the compound into 'sat' (existing/real) and 'kāya' (body/collection), suggesting it points to belief in an existing or real body/collection of elements.*
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> *The talk explores the relationship between knowing the unfabricated (asaṅkhata) - that dimension the Buddha said "should be known" - and understanding paṭiccasamuppāda (dependent origination). Burbea suggests these are intimately connected: seeing how all phenomena are fabricated through various forms of clinging leads to understanding their emptiness, while the unfabricated can be known through cessation experiences or sensed "shining through" ordinary perception. He emphasizes that awakening is not merely an experience but a fundamental understanding that allows fabrication to move freely along a spectrum, bringing genuine freedom from suffering.*

We mentioned in the first part of this talk that even a little attentive listening and curiosity into different teachers' positions or teachings on what awakening is and what stream entry is—just even within Theravadan-based teachings or Pali Canon-based teachings, and even within the Insight Meditation tradition—will quickly reveal something important. Just a little attentive reflection, listening, reading across a range of voices of both teachers and fellow practitioners will make it obvious that despite a lot of similar vocabulary taken from the tradition—dukkha, end of dukkha, four noble truths—despite this similarity of vocabulary, there's actually quite a wide range of interpretations of what awakening and different stages of awakening mean. There are many takes on what the Buddha outlined as the first stage, stream entry.

I think that's good. I'm pleased that there are many different takes. Different visions of awakening and different ideas about what it encompasses will suit different people, and that's important. The diversity in the modern Theravadan tradition, the modern

Pali Canon tradition, and Insight Meditation tradition—the plurality there, the divergence, the lack of agreement—I think that's important and healthy and actually necessary these days.

More and more, for myself, engaging in or even just hearing other people argue about etymology of certain words and quibble over texts in the Pali canon, trying to insist on just one interpretation of a certain word or passage as if it's the only true possible interpretation or the correct interpretation, narrowing down the hermeneutic possibilities that way—it seems to me, where I am right now at this point in my practice and life, which is different than what it was before, a little bit silly. Something that I would have engaged in myself a fair amount and put quite a lot of stock in now seems silly to me, this arguing about etymology and words and picking over texts in that way. That's just my personal feeling at this point in my development, life, and practice. I'll return to perhaps why I feel that way.

Related to what I said in the first talk, I feel there are other ways to orient to this question of what is awakening, rather than going back to the text and quibbling about word meanings. There are other ways which I feel, for some people or some people at certain points in their path or trajectory of practice, are perhaps more fruitful, more interesting, and actually more helpful. There are other ways to orient, which we'll return to.

Also, as I mentioned in the first talk, I feel it's important to realize, to be aware of: why am I adopting any view I have? If I have a view that this is awakening, this is what this word means—why? What's going on for me that I lean towards this view or grasp at that view or insist on this view or adopt that view, whatever it is?

For example, with stream entry—sottāpanna—as I said, the Buddha in the Pali Canon talked about different stages of awakening: stream entry being the first stage, the beginning stage; once-returner and non-returner, the second and third stages; arahant, the fully enlightened, the final stage.

Someone told me that they were speaking to a fellow retreatant after retreat, and that retreatant was saying that he thought he was a stream-enterer, or considered himself a stream-enterer, because he could go with the flow. I'm not sure where he heard that idea—not important—but he could go with the flow in life, and that made him what the Buddha called a stream-enterer, because streams flow, and if you're in a stream, you're going with the flow, perhaps.

We could get into a whole argument with that and say, well, the Buddha did not teach going with the flow. You could trawl through the Pali Canon, and there's very little language about going with flow or even that kind of trope or tenor of things. Going with the flow is quite a modern western notion. The Buddha did talk about flow in the word saṃsāra. Saṃsāra, one meaning of it, is the flow, the flowing on. Sara is from the root sr in Pali and Sanskrit, and that actually means to flow. It was exactly this flow that the Buddha was interested in stopping—stopping that flowing on, ending it, ending saṃsāra.

So there's very little textual support in the Pali Canon for teachings about going with the flow. Or we could say there was a teaching of flow, which is saṃsāra, which is really problematic. Then there's this teaching of stream entry, where with a lot of effort and with a lot of striving and diligence—and these are the Buddha's words—one attains to a stage where one has seen something or understood something, or something has opened or changed in the being that forms a kind of platform for further realization and a kind of platform from which one cannot fall. One cannot go back. One progresses inevitably from this. One has entered a stream that will take one inevitably—it's a different kind of stream, one could say. There's the stream of saṃsāra, the sara of saṃsāra, and there's another kind of stream that leads towards awakening.

Rather than argue all that, which, as I said, doesn't seem particularly fruitful to me now for different reasons that I'll mention as we go on, I'm more interested in what's going on that someone would adopt such a view and believe, "I feel like I'm a stream-enterer now because I go with the flow, and that's my understanding of it." That's what I'm more interested in: What's the motivation? What's going on that's directing, propelling, inclining the adoption of such a view and such a self-view?

As I said, it's quite a contemporary Western idea, this idea of going with the flow. You could trace it to certain Taoist ideas. It's a very simple idea, and simple ideas—and certainly ideas that are popular in the culture—can be attractive. They're attractive because they make sense to us and they sound simple to us because we're familiar with them.

it's also a relatively kind of low bar for what the first stage of awakening is.

So it's quite easy to understand what it means because we're kind of, or at least it seems easy, but actually if you probe into it, what does it mean to flow, to go with the flow? So if neo-Nazis come to power, I just go with the flow? No.

It's actually a deceptively simple idea – it's not really a simple idea, but it seems simple and it also seems like it's relatively easy to attain. And so it might be that what's going on is that because it's a popular, relatively simple sounding idea, because it sounds like it's relatively easy to attain such a thing as going with the flow, or pretty much going with the flow in one's life as a kind of lifestyle, then it might be attractive. Again, I'm not insisting or claiming that that is what was going on for this person. I don't know because I said it was second-hand. But I'm more interested in what's actually going on. What's the motivation? What's propelling me to adopt this or that idea of what awakening is and what it looks like, a vision of it, an image of it, and also a self-view in relationship to it?

So, actually, if we do go back to the text just a little bit, having said all that, when the Buddha kind of outlined the different stages of awakening and what was involved in each, he didn't say that much about it, actually. In relation to all stages of awakening, he describes ten fetters, and the different stages of awakening sort of remove or severely attenuate different of those fetters. So an arahant has destroyed, eradicated, once and for all and for good, all of the ten fetters. A stream entrant, the first stage, has uprooted three fetters, and those fetters are doubt, attachment to rites and rituals is the way it's usually translated as a second, and a third, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, is usually translated as something like personality view or the theory of individuality or something like that.

But again, it's not an easy proposition to ask what actually, exactly is meant by each of those three fetters. So even that one, attachment to rites and rituals, one has disregarded that. I've heard many different interpretations of that. Some say it's not being attached to believing rituals will have a magical effect in one's life. Some people say it's not being attached to practice meditation or certain styles of meditation over others and insisting this is the right way, that's the right way. You have to meditate like this. No, you have to meditate like that.

And especially when we get to this one about this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, this is really interesting. What does that mean? So I don't know the history of that term, but just a little kind of rummaging around makes me wonder whether it was a term – *sakkāya* was a term that already pre-existed the Buddha. It was something he picked up, and it might have been a positive term, and he said, no, you need to get rid of that. It's not an experience or a view you want to attain, you want to get rid of it. So the renunciation, the letting go, the seeing through of... *Diṭṭhi* means views, or some people translate it as theory – I'll come back to that – but the letting go of this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*.

When we look, just dwell on this for a little bit, when we ask, well, what does this mean, this *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*? I know the translation, or the most common translations put it that way: personality view, individuality theory, or something like that, the theory of the individual, *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*.

In Pali, *sakkāya* is actually what's called a compound word, which means it's two words jammed together, like they have in German and some other languages. And those two words are... So we spell it, *sakkāya*, S-A-K-K-A-Y-A. And that compound is actually made up of two words: *sat* and *kāya*. So S-A-T and one word, and the other word is *kāya*. And what happens when you jam the words together in a compound is the T kind of elides with the K, and you just make it a double K. So *sakkāyadiṭṭhi* is actually short for *satkāyadiṭṭhi*.

So you've got two words there: *sat* and *kāya*.

Kāya, the second word, is quite an interesting word. So it means body, but just as in English, that word body has different meanings. So it means body as certainly this physical body, but even then it carries a second meaning often of like we have in English body as a sort of group or collection or a mass of things or a totality of things. So we talk about in English a body of work or a body of people or a body of water, for example. So it also in Pali carries this kind of double meaning. Sometimes the physical body was also regarded as a collection, a heap, a kind of bag of stuff – what of the four great elements, earth, air, fire and water?

So *kāya* has this kind of double meaning. It also can mean the term for kind of an organ, the organ of touch, meaning you touch with your *kāya*, you experience touch with your *kāya*. So like the eye is the organ of vision, the mind is the organ of thought, the *kāya* is the organ of touch. It can also be kind of just the locus or the seat of sensation or awareness. It can also be regarded as that which we act through. So it has an ethical component because we're responsible for our actions, we've judged our actions, and this is what acts in the world, is the *kāya*.

Then you've got this word *sat*. And *sat's* an interesting word. And it can mean, as some of you will know from the Hindu traditions, being or existing or being present.

That's one of the meanings. So you would have the existing or existent body—the belief, the theory, and the view of the existent body. This is what we're giving up, or the view that this collection of elements exists in some real way.

Sat can also mean real or actual. Satya, as some of you know, is the word for truth in the Four Noble Truths. So we're speaking of the belief that this group of elements is somehow real. What's real—the group or the individual elements?

This word sat can also mean "that which is," that which is real. So we're talking about this really existent or true body, if you like. With stream entry, I'm giving up belief in a true body.

Sometimes in compounds like satkāya, sat can mean "that which is possessed of"—possessed of this body or this heap or collection of elements. So I'm not believing in something that possesses all this.

Sat can also mean living—to live, to be, to exist. So I'm not believing in a theory of the living body.

You can see that a word like sakāya is quite open to slightly different interpretations. Often, as I said, it's translated as personality views—sakāyadiṭṭhi—or identification with the aggregates.

The second word, diṭṭhi, is usually translated as view, sometimes opinion, but some translations say theory. To me, that translation doesn't really work that well. If I speak to my mum about what her theory of personality is or her theory of self is, she'll say, "What the hell are you talking about?" If I ask, "Well, can you explain how you conceive of the self?" I think she would just cut short the conversation. She has no theory of self as an intellectual position to articulate.

Sometimes people interpret the giving up of sakāyadiṭṭhi—this fetter in stream entry—as a kind of giving up of any intellectual position, or holding this intellectual view or that, or positing this or that about the self. But for me, it has to be something much more fundamental than a theory. There are plenty of people in the world who have no theory of self at all, and I think one would be hard-pushed to call them awakened or stream-enterers.

Sometimes I've heard people interpret sakāyadiṭṭhi as meaning just the ending or the radical quietening of the inner critic. It's quite interesting that this view arises—it's a particularly modern, I'd say modern Western view. There's so much pain around the inner critic and so much suffering people have once they've got the basic prerequisites and are quite affluent, with material wealth and ease and comfort in their life, but they're really suffering with the inner critic. So it makes sense to fit the framework of the inner critic to the Buddha's teachings, or fit the framework of the Buddha's teachings to the inner critic, when that's what's predominant in one's life.

The freedom from that, either completely or to a large extent, is regarded by a few people I've heard—not very many—as stream entry, or the ending of this fetter, which is the most significant fetter with stream entry: this ending of sakāyadiṭṭhi, letting go of sakāyadiṭṭhi.

Other people view this personality view, or view of the individual, or self-view, differently. For them, the realization, the letting go or cutting of that fetter, the removal of that fetter, is to realize that what this self is, is a process. That realization—"I realize what the self is, it's a process"—is a process of the psychophysical aggregates in time. It's the process of the bodily processes and the processes of vedanā and perception and mental formations and consciousness, moment to moment in time. To realize that this is the true nature of the self is to realize the emptiness of self, or to let go of personality view, and let go of this third fetter. This view is around as well, quite a lot in certain circles.

The Buddha also talks about—often it's a slightly enigmatic, puzzling phrase, because it's never, to my knowledge, really explained exactly what it means in the Pali—but you often hear stories of such and such a person attaining stream entry. The epithet for that is "his or her Dharma eye was opened." There was the opening of the Dharma eye at that point. It's a kind of epithet for stream entry—the opening of the Dharma eye. What does that mean? I'm not aware of any place where it's actually explained exactly what that means.

The opening of the Dharma eye. I wonder, might it be any of these that we've mentioned—any of these interpretations of what's involved in stream entry, and particularly what's involved in letting go of that fetter of sakkayaditthi?

Might it also be when the Dharma—what's central in the Dharma—becomes clear? When the Buddha talks about after awakening, he says this Dharma is hard to see, hard to fathom, discernible only by the wise. It's somewhat ambiguous what he's talking about at that point, what he means by "this Dharma" that's hard to see, hard to attain. He wonders whether he should bother teaching it because he doesn't think people will understand.

But at least part of that quote identifies this Dharma as paticcasamuppada—dependent co-arising, dependent origination. So that's at least part of it. Opening the Dharma eye might be connected to that sort of centrality of dependent origination. When the Buddha talks about the Dharma, it's like the nutshell of his sense of what the Dharma is. Perhaps opening the Dharma eye means this understanding of dependent origination—understanding it experientially for oneself, not just intellectually.

But then we have another problem: what does it mean to understand dependent origination? Again, if you've listened to enough teachings, read enough books, asked enough questions, you'll see that the range of interpretations of what dependent origination means or points to—even the level of existence at which it applies, what under-

standing of it involves and delivers—all of that is up for grabs. Some of you know my version, my preferred take, would be quite different from others. So we still have that question.

At other times—and some of you have heard me stress this in various talks—the Buddha says several times, "That dimension should be known, monks and nuns. That dimension should be known where there is no seeing, no hearing, no smelling, tasting, touching, no thinking, imagining, or mental perception. That sphere should be known."

Other times he talks about what's beyond perception—the cessation of perception, no form, no mental factors, no sun, no moon, no coming, no going, no stopping, no starting, no long, no short, no coarse, no fine. There are many passages in the texts pointing to this kind of dimension beyond perception, beyond the fabrication of perception.

It's clear that when the Buddha says "that dimension should be known," he's talking about what we call the unfabricated. In his descriptions, there is not the fabrication of perception at that point. That dimension should be known. He's not saying it's just some cool experience that some of you might want to check out. It should be known—that's the grammatical construction. The implication is for awakening, for or by an awakened person. That dimension should be known.

Having said I'm not particularly interested in making cases for this or that, I just want to lay a few things out. If you go to the Pali Canon, these are the kinds of things you find. I want to spill them on the table and ask: how does all this fit together? Does it fit together? But in a way, that's secondary to the main point I'm interested in.

Regarding the unfabricated and that dimension that should be known—which the Buddha talks about quite frequently in the Pali Canon—we're really at the edge, if not actually beyond, what language can articulate. In describing or pointing to that dimension that should be known, the unfabricated, we reach the limits of language.

Sometimes the Buddha talks about it as a kind of awareness, a kind of consciousness—consciousness without limit, without feature, or consciousness without an object. Awareness without an object. Sometimes the Buddha articulates this unfabricated that way.

At other times he makes it very clear that it is not the same as consciousness or awareness. The opening to it only arises with—and he actually says this—the complete cessation of all six consciousnesses: the consciousness of sight, smell, taste, touch,

sound, and mental consciousness—thought, imagery, and so forth. With the cessation of those consciousnesses, there is this opening to something, and he talks about it more in the negative.

So sometimes it's put in the positive—either as consciousness or in some other positive way—and sometimes, more often than not, it's put in the negative. We're at the point where, in trying to articulate or even point to that dimension that should be known, that unfabricated, the Buddha was at the point—anyone who tries to articulate or describe that is at the point—where language cannot do justice.

And so you get contradictory statements, paradoxical statements, completely cryptic statements. Just in what I've said so far—is it awareness, is it not awareness—it's clear that what's being pointed to here is not simple. It's not simple for us to understand.

The cessation of all consciousnesses - we can't conceive of that other than... Most people wouldn't be able to conceive of that other than being either completely dead in the modernist sense of the word, or in a coma, or under anesthetic, or something of that nature.

So in a way, there's something here that's really not simple for us to grasp - not simple for a consciousness that hasn't opened to it, or hasn't at least moved significantly in that direction, to grasp. You could say it's not simple. You could equally say it's so utterly simple that it's beyond the kind of level of simplicity that the mind can get to - or that the usual mind can get to, the conditioned mind can get to. It's simpler than awareness. It's simpler than oneness. It's simpler even than nothingness.

I want to point to these difficulties with language, which are part of the inheritance of particularly this area around awakening, and particularly the constellation of texts that describe or point to or teach the unfabricated. You get similar problems with language around emptiness, starting in the Pali Canon for sure, but picked up even more and exacerbated over a thousand years of Mahayana teachings. What you get - and I include myself in this at times - is teachers being at times very precise in their use of language with the concept of emptiness, and at times quite sloppy, the concept being used in different ways at different times and in quite a slippery way.

On top of that, different traditions use the same words like "emptiness" and mean very, very different things - different Buddhist traditions using the same word to mean very different things, almost diametrically opposed meanings. All this gives rise to a lot of confusion for the modern practitioner: what does this word "emptiness" mean? What's it pointing to? What is involved in a realization of emptiness?

Just briefly on this - what's my response? What's your response to hearing all that? It can be quite frustrating as a student, as a practitioner, to be in the thicket of a bewildering and very slippery range and use of a single concept. So what does it do to you? Does it make you want to jack the whole thing in and give up? Do you hear it and think, "Oh, that's all just intellectual and fussy, and I don't want to fuss like that, I don't want to be involved in that kind of fussing"?

Or is there something like: "I really want to find out what these two - actually way more than two - what are all these different strands of tradition, these different teachers saying? What exactly is the difference, and where do I stand in all this, and what do I gravitate to, and what can I see in my practice?" Is it over-fussiness, or is it important fussiness? What is at stake here in this profusion and confusion and difficulties with language and terms? And again, why do I have the response that I have? That it feels really important to me, or it just feels like a bunch of silly intellectuals arguing over how many angels fit on the head of a pin? Why? What's going on for me? Is it, or in what way is it, or is it not, a soul question for me?

If I was going to spill out the pieces of the Pali Canon - different references and so forth - put them on the table and see how that jigsaw, how those pieces of a jigsaw fit together, and also what makes sense for my practice, I guess I would say: what does this Dharma mean?

It means knowing the unfabricated experientially. But that knowing of the unfabricated, pursuing this meditative exploration into less and less fabrication - as I've described in detail elsewhere - also means understanding dependent origination. In other words, in pursuing this question of fabrication: how does the self sense, how does the sense of various objects in my perception, how does the world sense get fabricated, in what ways, and with what conditions? How does it get built, fabricated, constructed, saṅkhāra-ed, and how not, and how much less? Understanding that everything is a dependent arising, that everything is a fabrication, and how it is fabricated.

These two - the experiencing of the unfabricated and understanding dependent origination - should be intimately tied together with understanding the fabrication of all phenomena: that they are fabricated and how they are fabricated. In other words, understanding dependent origination not just intellectually, but in one's experience and through one's experience. This includes intellectual understanding but goes to a certain level beyond intellectual understanding, because there is the dissolving of the concepts and the elements involved.

Those two go together: the knowing of the unfabricated and the thorough, deep understanding of dependent origination. And this means the same thing as the knowing of the emptiness of things, or it's involved in that trajectory. To understand that something is a dependent arising, that it's fabricated, means to know it's empty.

Sometimes a practitioner in the broad range of practitioners of different sub-traditions of modern Theravada, Pali Canon-inspired Dharma, reports - and they've reported to me and other teachers - a cessation experience, what's called a cessation experience, the cessation of perception. In other words, the non-fabrication of perception. So an experience of what we could call non-fabricating, or the unfabricated.

Now, when someone reports an experience like that, it can be quite tricky, again, based on the language. It's really a struggle to articulate what that experience is or how it is. So someone can report an experience, and it could be, could not be...

And this is where the wisdom of the Buddha comes in—though I will dwell on this for a moment—the wisdom of focusing more on the fetters. Well, what's gone now? What's changed now? Not so much: what was that experience? Partly because the difficulty in describing such experiences is actually enormous.

People could be describing many different things. I remember being a student on a retreat, and in a group interview, someone described what sounded very much to me like just his first experience of the first jhana. What he said was "everything disappeared." It wasn't until he was asked a few more questions that it became very clear that everything did not disappear. This is quite common as one goes through the jhanas—one hasn't quite ascertained or discerned what has disappeared and what remains.

In the first jhana, hindrances have certainly disappeared, and in many cases, the solidity of body perception has disappeared. But much remains: perception as subject and object, time, piti as the main experience, sukha—all of that continues. So when people say "everything disappeared," there's both a language difficulty and a discernment question. Really, did everything disappear, or was there other stuff remaining?

For instance, all perception of form can disappear in the fifth jhana—does disappear in the fifth jhana—and a person can say "everything disappeared." Or in the seventh jhana, in the realm of nothingness, and actually there is still something there. What's the something? It's the nothing. In the seventh jhana, a perception of nothingness still remains. You see how subtle this gets, how deep it becomes.

To say there was a cessation, everything disappeared, there was a cessation of all perception—it goes very, very deep in terms of the more refined perceptions that remain and that can then be transcended.

But even if one thinks, "Well, maybe this person did have a cessation experience," my experience as a teacher is that that cessation experience, cessation of perception, may or may not bring freedom with it. In some instances, unfortunately, it just seems to give rise over time to clinging—clinging to that experience or clinging to the memory of it.

A person looks at their life, and sometimes an authority, a sayadaw or someone, has said, "No, no, it's stream entry." The person says, "But I don't feel any different." And the sayadaw says, "No, you're a stream enterer now." Sometimes what happens is a person has an experience and actually there's not much freedom coming out of it. Or even worse, the effect is to cause clinging.

Sometimes there's a kind of devaluing of the world of perception, or dualism emerges: there's that fantastic thing, and all this around me is just rubbish. In other words, their experience of the unfabricated—they have arrived at it. It has opened up through intense non-clinging in a moment, so there's not the fabricating, and then there's the opening to the unfabricated. But because they haven't been exploring in a way that prioritizes the exploration of fabrication—fabricating more, fabricating less, the dependent arising of perception—that hasn't been a theme. They've just been, for instance, contemplating impermanence really intensely.

Then what you get is this kind of amazing opening to an experience so different from ordinary worldly experience, so different from the realm of perception, which is all this. And it seems to have nothing to do—these two realms of perception and the transcending of perception, the fabricated and the unfabricated—seem to have nothing to do with each other. There's a radical dualistic split.

The function of that split sometimes can be helpful in one's life. There is something beyond, and that shines through on this life or implies something about this life that's very helpful. There can be freedom. For someone else, it might be that this dualism between the fabricated and unfabricated just creates a dismissal and disconnect from this life of perception, from the fabricated world, in a way that isn't that helpful. Then one's got just this thing that I want to get back to—this unfabricated—and what about this world of fabrication?

Now another person, another practitioner, another student coming in may be really getting interested in this question of dependent origination and fabrication—how self, other, world get fabricated through different forms of clinging and to what degree—watching this movement up and down the spectrum of fabrication. They've never had a full cessation experience. It's never been for them that everything completely disappears. But they see this movement of the relative fading of perception to different de-

grees, maybe really deeply, and then fabricating up and down, up and down on this spectrum. They see its dependency on the way of looking. They see the dependency on clinging.

Because they see it, they understand dependent origination more and more. Even without experiencing a complete cessation of all perception, a complete unfabricating of all perception, understanding this movement up and down—at some point, the intuitive wisdom just gets it. I don't even need that experience.

I just grasp it scientifically, inductively. I just understand something.

And this brings—they haven't had a cessation experience, but it brings a liberation that is greater than the other person I alluded to who's had the cessation experience, got the certificate from the teacher or whatever, but hasn't understood dependent arising, hasn't understood the relationship of the fabricated to the unfabricated and how fabricating works, dependent on way of looking, dependent on clinging, and different degrees and kinds of clinging.

So that's something I know will be important for some of you to know.

It also seems to me more and more, as I hear from more students, that one can have, of course, a sort of what we might call a full cessation experience. It's fully vivid and immediate—in the sense of unmediated—experience, opening to the sense experience of the unfabricated. In other words, there's nothing else going on. All other perception has stopped.

Or, at different times—and I remember saying this in a Q&A on some retreat in the last few years in response to a question—one can have a kind of sense of it, an intimation of this dimension that should be known, kind of shining through, if you like, the experience of this world.

Now, certainly one will get that sense—some people get that sense of the shining through of the unfabricated—after they've had a sort of complete cessation experience. But I think it's also possible for some people to kind of get it before they've really fully opened up to it, with something of the genuine unfabricated shining through.

We have to be a little careful here because—and again, some of you who know the different jhānas, especially as it gets into the formless realms, will know that in the aftereffects on perception of a different jhāna, it's quite common for that perception to kind of shine through the world of the fabricated, this world of experience and perception. And so what we can get is all kinds of onenesses can shine through. The oneness of cosmic love, the oneness of cosmic consciousness, the oneness of awareness, the one-

ness of nothingness, etc., can be sensed as shining through as we are moving about in the world with our senses open. There's this mystical shining through and the blessedness of that. There are actually many different versions.

So how do we discern the, so to speak, genuine unfabricated? I think it's difficult. I would say, though, that the unfabricated is characterized, if we can say that, by being timeless. It's beyond time. It's somehow not even a now, not even a present. And so if there's that quality of—we could say eternity, but let's say timelessness—not just beyond past and future, but beyond present as well. That quality shining through is particularly characteristic of the unfabricated, this dimension that the Buddha said should be known.

And also, secondly, and connected with what I mentioned earlier about how the Buddha talked about this realm, is that it's kind of got this... Is it or is it not aware? It doesn't quite feel right to say it is aware in the usual sense of awareness—A, because it's not in time; B, it has no object. And it doesn't quite feel right to say it's not aware. So those two elements—the timeless and this kind of middle way of whether it is or isn't aware—perhaps can help in discerning whether it's that unfabricated shining through.

So one version... as I hope you can hear, I'm actually really not interested in selling you any particular version of all this. But one way of thinking about it—and I can't remember if I shared this in talks before or just individually with certain students—one way of thinking about awakening, or a sort of metaphor I had, was of a ball bearing in a U-tube.

This ball bearing can be—when the tube is shaken, the ball bearing can kind of zip up the sides of the tube. Up the sides of the tube indicates away from the bottom point of the U. I hope you can picture this—at the bottom of the U, that's the point of knowing the emptiness of everything, knowing the dependent origination of everything. And everything means self, any phenomena, awareness, time, the now—you name it.

So this is one view. The ball bearing can be right there, in the knowing of that emptiness. And then out of that comes the freedom from suffering because we know that things are empty and there isn't the clinging.

With a stream-enterer, it's like the knock of the eight winds and just the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and all that. Knock the tube and the ball bearing can go up the tube, climbing the walls. And as it goes up the tube, it's away from the kind of rootedness in that view of emptiness. So there is the relative forgetting of that emptiness. I might know it somewhere in my being, but right at that point I've lost access to it and I'm caught up in reification and clinging and then dukkha. In that moment the ball

bearing is up. But because of gravity, at some point the ball bearing falls back. It falls back down the sides of the tube and reconnects with that place at the bottom of knowing complete emptiness.

So you can fill out this analogy if you like—it might be quite interesting. An arahant, someone who's fully awakened, perhaps is someone who doesn't move from that point at the bottom.

This, though, I have problems with, as you can maybe guess. If I completely know emptiness thoroughly, utterly and deeply all the time—or rather, in the moment that I completely, thoroughly and deeply know the emptiness of all things—there will be a cessation of fabrication of perception. I won't perceive anything except the unfabricated. So if an arahant is someone staying just exactly at the bottom, it doesn't quite work with this understanding. There's some conundrum there.

Historically—I can't remember if I've explained this again, either just individually to people or on other retreats—actually out of that conundrum was one of the philosophical conundra that the Mahāyāna had to deal with.

They had to come up with an answer. How does a Buddha get reborn into the world of perception so that he can save other beings and help them be there with the world of form when a Buddha knows all the time, one hundred percent thoroughly, about the utter emptiness of all things? Because if a Buddha is in that knowledge and with that knowledge in the mind, then there isn't the fabrication of perceptions. How can you be in the world? How is there a world then? So we could play with that analogy, but I'm just pointing that out.

The other stages of awakening might be that, just as for the stream-enterer, the ball gets knocked out of that center point of stasis, lowest gravity, and gets knocked out up the sides of the U-tube and then falls back down due to gravity, due to the stream of wisdom being in that momentum. A once-returner would be someone who, when it gets knocked up, perhaps does so less often, or the ball bearing rises less high, so it comes back more quickly to that sense of emptiness, and thus less clinging, less reification, and so more freedom, less suffering, less dukkha. So that's one way of understanding the stages of awakening—an analogy or metaphor that may be useful to some people, that's seemed useful to some people in the past.

If we dwell again, just a little bit, on the ten fetters that the Buddha outlined, we touched on three of them for the stream-enterer. For a once-returner, there are two other fetters. A once-returner makes a major dent in greed and aversion—sense desire and

aversion. A non-returner has eradicated those two fetters. And then an arahant has five other fetters that they eradicate. So from non-returner to arahant, there are five more fetters.

The point I want to make, though, is that according to that theoretical scaffolding that the Buddha outlines with those ten fetters, the stream-enterer has not made any impact on sense desire and aversion. It's only at the stage of a once-returner that these are addressed. I'm saying this because sometimes what happens is practitioners get really hung up on their relationship with sense desire, their relationship with food or whatever it is. In this theoretical scaffolding, if we take it strictly as the Buddha points out, it would seem that actually the first thing to address is the sakkāya-diṭṭhi and the other two fetters that go with stream entry.

In other words, look at fabrication, in the outline that I gave. Explore fabrication, because through that you will see the emptiness of any self-view—which is to say, you would see the emptiness of any and all self-views, rather than worrying too much about your greed or apparent greed. So it might suggest something about the order of our practice, of what we kind of aim for and preoccupy ourselves with, what we focus on. This question of fabrication may be the one to look at first, and probably for a while. Then out of that, building on that, the others may be easier.

It's important, I think—again, much of what I'm saying is really a response to the kinds of things that students bring or the kind of places where people often get stuck—to point out that when we talk about awakening, we're not talking about an experience. So for some people, certain experiences like an experience of non-fabrication may be really significant, but awakening itself is not an experience. It's not an experience of no-self, for example.

The way I tend to teach is that there is a spectrum of fabrication. So when someone comes in and says, "I had an experience of no-self," in the way I would interpret things, it's really that they've had an experience of usually a relative degree of less fabrication of the sense of self. The sense of self is on a spectrum. It can get fabricated more—higher on the spectrum, so to speak—or much less, or much less. So when people say "an experience of no-self," they might mean an experience of the temporary quieting of the more gross personality constructs or beliefs. There's really a spectrum of degree of fabrication of self, and we need to understand that spectrum. But awakening is not an experience of no-self or an experience of whatever.

If it's an experience, then often what you get is someone saying, "I had this experience and it lasted for X amount of time." Sometimes it can be, "I had this experience, it seemed to last for months"—sometimes people report this. Again, one wonders about

the closeness and level and subtlety of discernment involved in scrutinizing what was actually involved in that experience. Was there really no-self? And was it really without fluctuations during those several months or days or hours? Then they say, "I had this experience and it lasted X long and then now I've lost it. So I was liberated and now I've lost it. I was in awakening or nibbāna and now I've lost it."

To me, there's a problem in clinging to any experience and calling that awakening, for several reasons I've just touched on very briefly. I think there's another kind of freedom that comes from a kind of understanding—an understanding of that dependent origination, understanding of how fabrication of self and of phenomena works with clinging, and understanding the implications of that.

And when I say understanding, I don't just mean intellectual - I mean something that permeates one's heart and body almost. This understanding allows us to recognize that the self is empty. The self-sense is a dependent arising. The self is a phenomenon that gets fabricated more or less at different times depending on certain conditions.

Once I know that it's empty, once I truly understand it's a fabrication, this actually allows the self-sense to move up and down on that spectrum of fabrication. It can be more fabricated or less fabricated, appear less solid, appear very refined, appear in this way or that way, appear as a process, appear as an atomistic process of aggregates, or as a mist, or a space, or a vastness of awareness, or disappear completely at times in cessation of everything. But I understand - oh, it's just the fabrication of self. It's fine. It's really fine.

So I'm not trying to cling or believing that I should be in some kind of stasis of a certain experience - whether it's cosmic consciousness or no-self or this or that. Understanding, really understanding and digesting a certain understanding, allows fabrication to move up and down this spectrum, allows more or less fabrication of self. And we come to understand - oh, self is not-self. Self is not-self. It's just this fabrication happening. It's not self. It's okay. It's okay to move on the spectrum. It's okay to fabricate. It's okay that certain constructions arise.

In all this, you can hear how I construct the jigsaw when I want to map the Pali Canon elements to the whole picture. My solution to the jigsaw tends to be like this. Again, I'm not going to convince anyone - it doesn't really matter.

But we can step back from this and approach it with a whole different set of questions and ponderings, different probings in our approach. How high is the bar for what we're calling awakening? How high is a different teacher, or yourself, or I, or anyone, setting the bar for stream entry?

In what you've heard of my solution to the jigsaw, yes, stream entry is, relatively speaking, a pretty high bar. In fact, it's a very high bar compared to some of the other possible interpretations one could have. Seeing really the emptiness of all and any self-view involves seeing the emptiness of any and all phenomena.

For instance, to see that there is a process in time - if I then decide that the self is a process in time of the psychophysical aggregates or the five aggregates or the eighteen sense constituents, if I see that the self is that, or if I decide that's my self-view, to me that's still a self-view. I've decided that's what the self is, or I'm clinging to that position. And there are suttas where the Buddha makes it clear that any self-view is a wrong view to be let go of.

But more importantly, I think, when one realizes that those elements of the process - the aggregates themselves - are empty of inherent existence. The body, the atoms, the vedana, the moments of consciousness, time. The elements of the process and the time it happens in are also empty. That's like dissolving any possibility for forming a self-view there. It can't form on anything. You can't say the self is the process of these elements in time, because one has seen that time is empty and not a reality. It doesn't form a basis for any kind of self-view. And the elements themselves that make up this process are also empty.

So for me, it's relatively speaking quite a high bar. Just so you know.

But more interesting questions, or questions that interest me more now, include: How much is the inclination to measure myself and want to measure up, or the pain of the inner critic, or the dominance in our psyche of the inner critic, influencing the decision or the view or the interpretation we adopt of where the bar is for stream entry? Why am I adopting this or that view? Is it actually that in the background the inner critic is running the show, deciding what views I have and what practices or interpretations or views I'll turn away from because it's just too painful? Because if I feel like I can't, or I fail, or the inner critic says "you haven't yet" or "you can't" - does it pull all the strings actually? Or does it say, "just drop the whole thing with awakening - it's just way too painful"?

That's one question. There are other questions - as I said, we could argue over Pali Canon etymology and different texts that seem to contradict each other, or this one emphasizes this and another emphasizes that.

To me, that's much less interesting at this point. What draws my attention is a whole other set of questions.

In setting the bar, if you like, or the definition of stream entry at one level or at a more difficult level, what does that do? What's the result? Not so much what's the cause —"I'd set it there because I've read this in the Pali Canon" or "this word means this"— but actually, what's the result?

What kind of person is made when we set the bar here? And what kind of person is made when we include this in the definition?

If I say that stream entry is simply a softening of the inner critic, what kind of person results from that view? If I say stream entry just means going with the flow in one's life, what kind of person emerges there? If I say stream entry means seeing the radical emptiness of all phenomena through dedicated exploration of the mysteries of dependent arising, what kind of person results?

What kind of person do we want? What makes an interesting person? What are we after?

As I alluded to at the beginning of yesterday's talk, do we dare to bring a kind of radical questioning into all this—even a bold questioning of what has been established in terms of the meaning of awakening or stream entry, and the different claims that people might make? Is that possible for us? Do we dare? What would make that possible? What would justify that?

And again, we could ask: what is the soul's relationship—your soul's relationship—with this question of awakening? With your awakening and your journey toward that, or this question of stream entry? What does it mean for this to be a soul question? How does the soul hold that very question?

How does it relate to awakening, or relate to the possibility that there are potentially different interpretations, and your movement toward that or opening toward that? Is there even a soul relationship with these questions and notions, or does the soul simply not get involved in those questions and notions? And if not, why not?

Without any preconceived answers of "it should" or "it shouldn't," but just: what's actually going on there on a soul level in relation to all these questions?

CHAPTER 126

What is Awakening? (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 59 min

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea challenges conventional approaches to defining awakening and stream entry (sotāpanna). Rather than debating historical accuracy, he examines the psychological motivations behind setting higher or lower standards for spiritual attainment and questions what kinds of persons emerge from different approaches to liberation.*
>
> *Burbea addresses the complex relationship between ethics (sīla) and awakening, noting how moral standards shift across cultures and time periods. He critiques the fantasy of pure origins in Buddhist tradition, showing how the Dharma has always been a synthesis of multiple influences, from the Buddha's time through its transmission to China and the modern West.*
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> *The talk outlines a possible trajectory of awakening centered on exploring the fabrication of perception through different ways of looking. This path moves from seeing the self as psychophysical aggregates (khandhas) through experiences of oneness, to realizing the emptiness (suññatā) of all phenomena, including awakening itself. Burbea suggests that true awakening involves an open-ended process of discovering infinite possibilities for perception and being, rather than reaching a final state.*
>
> *Drawing from his personal confrontation with serious illness, Burbea shares four insights that provide profound freedom regarding death: perceiving the unfabricated with its mystery and sacredness, sensing the emptiness of all phenomena as beautiful and mysterious, experiencing life through imaginal perception with soul, and feeling aligned with one's soul duties. This deeply personal and philosophical investigation reframes awakening as an infinite opening of doors rather than a destination.*

So let's stay a little bit with these questions that I've just thrown out there. Rather than arguing about which definition or setting of the bar captures the "real" stream entry according to the historical Buddha, we could ask: why does one want the bar for stream entry lower or higher? And actually wrapped up in that, a corollary might be: what is going on for you psychologically in this kind of emphasizing of the historical Buddha's take? What assumptions are operating when we do that? When we go to the books and look there and engage in this arguing and nitpicking about the text, why prioritize that? And what are the consequences of prioritizing that?

I realize for some that's going to sound like a very odd and dangerous and radical questioning. But if you can actually open it up as a question, without any implication of "it should be this way" or "it should be that way," it's more like: Really, why? What's actually going on for you in the psyche with all that?

And then, as I threw out as well, one of the questions: what kind of a person is made in attaining a stream entry that, say, is going with the flow? What kind of person is made in attaining a much higher bar—say, this thing about recognizing everything, absolutely everything, including the elements, including time, including the now, including awareness, all of it, all phenomena empty?

I don't know, actually. But it's more like turning the question around and looking at the result of decisions rather than looking backwards for why we would choose this or that.

I suppose that if the bar was set higher—this kind of radical emptiness of everything—that person, in their journey to that, would have almost inevitably had lots of quite interesting and unusual experiences and insights, and a pretty large range of experiences, insights, and perspectives. Perhaps they'd be shaped by the really complex and challenging journey to that kind of level of realization, and also shaped by the kind of dedication, focus, and choices it took to get there.

I don't know if you've ever met anyone who declares themselves an arahant or finally fully enlightened: "It's finished for me, I've done it all." They're often not that attractive as human beings and not that impressive when one hangs around them a little bit. Actually, there's quite a lot missing there. As one of my teachers in the States said—I don't know if she had anyone particular in mind when she said it, it was just mid-flow in a dharma talk—"If that's awakening, you can keep it."

Now, this business about "I've finished," someone saying "I've finished, I've reached full arahantship, there's nothing further," or "I am an arahant, I'm fully enlightened"—I'm interested in that, or the problems with such a claim, not so much because of the kind of view like, "Oh, someone who's fully enlightened wouldn't be arrogant like that, or they'd be humble or something." That doesn't quite square with the Pali canon either, actually, if you know the lion's roar of the arahant. But actually, for another reason: this kind of "I've done it, it's finished" view does not allow the kind of open-endedness that to me is much more interesting and much more soulful and much more fruitful, really.

Another aspect of this—I haven't mentioned it so far—is one could look, in all this questioning of what is stream entry, at the ethics of a so-called stream enterer, as an indicator or a necessary and basic qualification for any kind of awakening. Somewhere in the Pali canon—I can't remember where—the Buddha actually points to that: the ethics, as a stream enterer can't go against sila, ethics.

But that, too, is a problem, or in that area. We also tend to be, in the area of ethics, blinkered by whatever is the normal ethical view of our time, of our society, or of the subcultures we move in.

You know, some of you will know my concern with climate change and flying. But it's tricky. I sometimes wonder—it's like, you know, a stance of thinking about the ethics of climate change and thinking about the ethics of carbon use, individual carbon use. Scientists calculate how much individual carbon can each—if we shared it out equally among the human beings of the Earth—how much carbon is each person sort of, what's their individual carbon allowance if it was just equally shared? And that's even disregarding the past and history and cultures and whatnot, and the kind of excessive use of modern Western cultures and people in modern Western cultures. Just from now on: what would you each be entitled to?

And just a couple of transatlantic flights a year would easily exceed my quota as a human being entitled to what anyone else is entitled to. So how am I going to square that? If I'm sitting across from someone, how am I going to persuade them that I'm entitled to more carbon and so it's okay for me to do this flying, and sorry that you can't, or it's better for me to have it than you to have it? How do I justify that exceeding of my fair share of personal carbon dioxide emissions?

Something like that, as an ethical consideration, is strange and uncomfortable to a lot of people. In a few years, it might be widely regarded as just a basic, adequate ethical consideration. It's like that just maybe becomes just how human beings think. It's like, you know, if you go to a party and you eat all the cake, or you're living on a desert island and you get to shit everywhere—how do you justify that?

In a few years, or some years, it may be that that's just adequate, basic, normal ethical behavior to not take more than your fair share of carbon, not to exceed that, rather than what it might sound right now—a way of thinking that's really kind of strange, especially if one tries to convince other people that they should think that way and they think you're just obnoxious: "Back off."

Actually, I read the other day that in the new set of interview questions that they ask candidates for undergraduate admission to Oxford and Cambridge universities in England, that's actually one of the questions.

Something like, "Well, we know that flying produces excessive carbon emissions and causes dangerous climate change that will affect people. How can you justify flying? If you know the plane will fly anyway," as people say, "I know it's going to fly whether I get on it or not, so it doesn't really matter"—is that a valid ethical argument? The candidate has a few minutes to present some kind of intelligent moral reasoning.

This is interesting because Oxford and Cambridge are rather traditional, mainstream universities. So this kind of ethical questioning may be finding its way into what becomes normal discourse. You know, ending slavery was once an outrageous proposition, but eventually it became simply basic ethics—of course you don't own slaves, you don't treat human beings that way. But at the time, during the abolition movement, it was hotly debated. If you freed a slave in some places, you were breaking the law. Campaigning to abolish slavery, or working against Nazism, or fighting to establish female suffrage—retrospectively, all these actions are regarded as brave and ethically correct, as basic responsibilities. But at the time, it wasn't obvious to most people, and some actually regarded such actions as unethical.

People are going to prison now, being sent to prison for civil disobedience of different kinds in relation to climate, environment, all kinds of issues. They are viewed by various states as engaging in unethical behavior. So our views of what's ethical and what's not are really influenced by the contemporary culture we live in and move within.

So ethics has something to do with awakening, but what exactly?

A person may simply be an ethical conformist, rather than someone who considers their ethical choices deeply, who questions deeply, who wrestles with these difficult questions. These questions are especially difficult now in the time of globalization, where we actually know and can see and measure our effects. We're aware of our individual impacts on all parts of the globe—on people, animals, and plant life everywhere. This makes ethical questions much more complex.

So what should the requirement be regarding ethical conformism for a stream-enterer? Is stream entry just adopting the Buddhist precepts? And is that adoption merely another form of ethical conformism—just accepting what's given by the tradition without questioning?

There are aspects of the Buddhist tradition that many people these days are questioning ethically. For example, the ordination of women. I've stayed at monasteries where they weren't recycling. When I asked about it—how come you don't recycle this plastic and paper?—the answer I got was, "This is just samsara. Who cares? Who cares what happens in samsara? We're on our way out." This was a Theravada monastery.

Is that ethical? It's not breaking the Buddha's five precepts, or at least not in a certain interpretation of them. There's strict conformity to the monastic rules there, but the rules don't say anything about recycling.

And when you get into the five precepts themselves, as I'm sure you're aware—what exactly does the third precept mean? What exactly does the fifth precept mean around sexual behavior, around alcohol, drugs, and so forth? The range of interpretations, just within the insight meditation world, is actually quite large.

So if we're saying that ethics must have something to do with awakening—and somewhere in the Pali Canon that connection is made with stream entry and keeping ethics—what exactly is this relationship? What ethics are we talking about, and what kind of relationship is it?

When we consider awakening, much of what I've been saying relates to this: awakening, liberation, enlightenment—whatever we want to call it—is a concept and a vision set within the context of a dharma. In our case, Buddha dharma, but it could be Hindu dharma or another tradition. Awakening is a concept and vision set within the context of a dharma, a tradition. It exists within a particular vision and understanding of what that tradition offers.

When I consider awakening in this light, I realize that awakening—liberation, enlightenment, whatever we choose to call it—is fundamentally a concept and vision set within the context of dharma. In our case, Buddha dharma, though it could just as easily be Hindu dharma or another tradition. Awakening exists as a concept within the framework of a particular spiritual tradition.

If I were to ask my mother what awakening means to her, what liberation signifies—well, these words would mean nothing at all to her. She's not involved in any tradition that employs such terminology, so these concepts remain completely foreign. This illustrates how awakening is inherently a concept embedded within tradition.

When we examine traditions and our relationship to them, certain modern philosophical perspectives offer valuable insights. Thinkers like Nietzsche and Michel Foucault explored what they called genealogy—not quite history, but rather an investigation of the diverse elements, fracturings, strange combinations, and external influences that converge to form entire streams of thought and practice through historical time.

This genealogical approach critiques what Nietzsche identified as the fantasy of origins—the belief that something existed in a pure, superior form at the beginning. It also challenges the fantasy of a single, unbroken trajectory, the notion that we can somehow locate and follow a purely authentic tradition. These fantasies, these unfounded beliefs, often accompany discussions of Buddhadharma.

Sometimes people, wrapped up in this fantasy of origins, argue that the Buddha existed in radical independence from his historical context, that everything he taught was boldly new and original—a completely unprecedented appearance of spiritual wisdom in human civilization.

But consider Einstein's theory of general relativity and its revolutionary understanding of gravity. While dramatically different from Newton's gravitational theory, it simultaneously borrowed from, built upon, and retained much of Newton's scientific framework. Scientific revolutions, like spiritual or philosophical ones, change certain elements while continuing others uninterrupted, using previous foundations and retaining aspects of earlier worldviews.

The Buddha operated in precisely this way. He found himself within a particular culture, country, and historical context rich with diverse spiritual, philosophical, and cosmological perspectives. He adopted much of this existing framework, modified certain aspects, and preserved others. The Buddhist tradition didn't begin with the Buddha—this is my central point here.

When we speak of tradition, we easily slip into idealistic thinking, imagining some pure tradition we can somehow locate, something that started with the Buddha in pristine form and perhaps suffered contamination later. But the tradition already existed before the Buddha encountered it. There were multiple traditions that the Buddha engaged with and incorporated. What we call the Buddhist tradition already represented an confluence of ideas from that time, place, and culture—those ways of thinking, worldviews, and conceptual frameworks.

This reality becomes even more pronounced in the modern West. Dharma teachings arrived here during the twentieth century in various waves, and as modern Westerners, we inevitably bring our complete set of assumptions, interpretations, needs, dispos-

itions, and what might honestly be called errors or directional changes to what we ostensibly receive from the dharma. And remember, what we're receiving was already a multiplicity of different traditions.

Our contemporary engagement represents a genuine mishmash—Theravadan traditions mixed with elements of Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Advaita, and substantial Western worldview. We cannot avoid this synthesis. Even if we could somehow separate what we receive from what we bring to our receiving—which is impossible—what we receive was already plural, the result of 2,500 years of genealogical development, misinterpretations, contradictions, and cultural influxes.

The historical transmission of Buddhism to China illustrates this process perfectly. Initially, Chinese culture rejected Buddhism outright—it made no impact whatsoever. Later, when Buddhism gained acceptance, the Chinese culture accepted only certain elements, creating a form of Chinese Buddhism dramatically different from Pali Canon Buddhism. The Chinese mixed Buddhist concepts with Taoism and Confucianism, filtering everything through distinctly Chinese cultural dispositions and sensibilities.

Chinese culture harbored a particular abhorrence of anything transcendent, emphasizing instead this-world tangible experience—a perspective radically different from the transcendent thrust popular in Indian spiritual circles and evident throughout the Pali Canon. The Chinese essentially rejected this transcendent dimension entirely, excising it from their Buddhist practice.

They similarly rejected or significantly downplayed rebirth teachings, partly because Chinese culture placed enormous importance on honoring personal family ancestors through prayer and respect. The logic of infinite rebirths, as Tibetan teachings explain, means that everyone eventually becomes your ancestor, dissolving the significance of one's particular lineage in an infinite sea of ancestral connections.

This pattern repeats whenever dharma encounters new cultural contexts. There are inevitable tearings away, influxes, reinterpretations—people bringing their needs, dispositions, and assumptions to whatever they receive, transforming it in the process. The same dynamic unfolds in the West. This cultural transformation is not an aberration but an integral aspect of how spiritual wisdom travels and takes root.

It's part of what must go on. It's unavoidable. You and I cannot step out of our own cultural Weltanschauung—our worldview, self-sense, the way we feel existence, our sensibilities. We cannot step outside; you can't step outside of your time in history and receive the Buddhism in some pure way.

So we bring to it all kinds of things, some of which we're conscious of, and much of it we're not even conscious of—exactly what we're bringing in terms of need, belief, disposition, assumption, interpretation, emphasis.

The modern West, to my view, is characterized by complexity and plurality, but perhaps the most dominant worldview is a very non-transcendent view. We believe much of the time that this is it. Any kind of talk of something transcendent is not popular in the dominant culture. This shapes the flavor of the Dharma that takes root in the West—what we keep and what we reject, what we emphasize.

This is it. This is it. This sense is quite dominant in Western culture—there's nothing more than this, no other dimensions. Anything transcendent or unfabricated would be baffling. This "this is it" tends to find its way into the colors, emphases, and teachings of the kinds of Buddhism that proliferate and become popular.

I'm saying this not just for abstract historical reasons, but to make these points about tradition. Awakening is rooted in tradition. What is a tradition? What's involved in our sense of tradition? Can we be more realistic, or at least more wise, about what actually is involved in a tradition?

When we see all this about the dependence on culture and the breadth and complexity and plurality of what a tradition encompasses—any tradition is a multi-tradition full of tangents and contradictions and borrowings and influxes and often shavings off—then awakening is rooted in tradition. What does awakening mean?

When you actually realize what's involved in tradition, the question "What does awakening mean?" might actually become "What can awakening mean?"—as if there isn't one singular version of it. Because we're actually in a moment of creation in the modern West, as the Dharma comes into the West, and there's this mixing of everything that we as modern Westerners bring to it—intellectually, aesthetically, in all kinds of ways—"What does awakening mean?" might become "What can awakening mean?"

Even more than that, modern Western culture, perhaps even modern global culture, could be characterized as postmodern—not even having one dominant view of this non-transcendent view, but characterized by plurality and utter diversity of views and worldviews and senses of reality. So the whole question around awakening might move from "What is awakening?" or "What does awakening mean?" to the much more open question: "What can awakening mean?"

Beyond that, we might look into what I said earlier about approaching the question from what it results in. Rather than "awakening means X," we ask: What does such a view or opinion or way of conceiving of it result in? What does this view of awakening

result in? What does that view of awakening result in? What does a third view result in? It's approaching the question from the other end—what does it result in? Again, what do I want? Where do I want to go?

Having said all this, and not arguing on grounds of historical accuracy—though I could—but for the reasons I think you can probably grasp by now, such arguments don't seem that interesting or fruitful. It seems a little silly to me.

So not arguing on the ground of historical accuracy, though we could, and not trying to persuade you, I could outline a trajectory—let's call it a trajectory—that is or might be a central strand in one notion of awakening. Or it might be, if you like, a direction of development, or better yet, exploration or discovery that leads to what? Freedom? Freedoms?

Plural?

That's certainly interesting in terms of what senses of self and world it allows—the senses of self and world that open up, beauty. So I could outline a trajectory that is a central strand, might be a central strand in a notion of awakening as a kind of direction of exploration, discovery that opens up freedoms, interesting senses of things, beauties and more.

One strand—this trajectory—among others which would include psychological and emotional awareness and skill, relational awareness and skill, development of the heart with kindness and compassion and generosity, some of which will emerge from this more central strand.

But again, not claiming historical accuracy, though that would be possible, not trying to persuade you, but just putting out something—a possibility of conceiving, taking as fundamental, as central to this exploration—the exploration of fabrication, the fabrication of perception, of all perception of any phenomena. So that means not just the self-sense, but also any object sense, inner and outer, time and space—all of it. Exploring fabrication through playing with different ways of looking, and that whole direction and thrust of investigation, of meditative exploration.

In so doing, if one stayed with it and learned to play with the richness and depth and beauty and subtlety of it all, and the joy of that play and exploration, one would come to a level—one kind of simple level—of seeing: "Oh, I get this experience of the self as just a process of the psychophysical aggregates, the skandhas in time." There would be a certain seeing, a certain level of relative lessening of fabrication.

But one could go beyond that. One will go beyond that if one kept up this exploration, didn't stop there and kept exploring this direction of fabrication and unfabrication, playing with different ways of looking, seeing how much they fabricate and in what ways, what they fabricate and how they unfabricate. One would open up to all kinds of perceptions of oneness—different kinds of oneness—and the self being one with that: I am love, I am awareness, and all these.

One would eventually, in this direction, open to the unfabricated, and one would also realize that all dharmas are empty. Selves, any constituent of the self, any element of existence, any object, any subject, time—past, present, future—awareness, consciousness, space. All dharmas are empty. One would realize that in this ongoing deepening of exploration.

And then one would realize, as I said making the connection earlier, that all self-views are not to be clung to. Any self-view. Because you realize the radical, thorough emptiness of absolutely everything, all self-views collapse as objects of clinging to, of believing in, of being real. This is what the self is.

One can go even deeper—and I've outlined this in quite a lot of detail elsewhere—to see that even this notion of fabrication, which was the very notion that we started with, you start to see: oh, that's empty too. Because if time is empty and the things that are fabricated and fabricating—the elements that are fabricated and the elements that are fabricating—they're also empty, and the time in which fabrication happens is empty, the whole notion of fabrication starts to crumble as a real notion.

And then, because fabrication is empty, the whole notion of the unfabricated is recognized to be empty in a whole other way, a whole other level. The whole duality between the unfabricated as something holy and the fabricated as something unholy—that collapses. Radical non-duality between the unfabricated and the fabricated.

As one goes even further, one sees there's no—because of the radical emptiness of all things—there's no singular way things are. There's no way of looking that one can snuggle into and adopt and hold and say, "This way of looking reveals how things are, the real way things are, what is." There's no way of looking that reveals a final truth of how things are.

With that, one begins slowly to realize it's almost like that also relativizes all conceptual frameworks. It doesn't mean that any conceptual framework is as good as any other and I can believe we're all bananas—I mean actual bananas like fruits, I don't mean that we're all crazy—that's as good as believing the more conventional view of reality.

But it's a more subtle point that no conceptual framework will reveal the ultimate truth of things, and no way of looking will reveal "this is how things are, this is finally, this is the take on things."

Then on this trajectory, one begins to open up to that really radical sense of possibility. One sees even deeper—not just the participation in perception, which was clearer before with this business about fabrication and ways of looking—but actually participation in the whole notions of truth and also in the notions of what awakening is. We participate, or we can participate, we do participate. There's a whole participatory view that becomes viable as a conceptual framework.

So I could have outlined very briefly a trajectory that might be a central strand, as I said, of one possible notion of what awakening might be, among other strands involved in it that seem very important to me—psychological, emotional, relational awareness and skill, development of the heart, generosity and love. Generosity and love I would expect to come out of the metta as well, by the way.

Now, we could say, okay, so where do we place the stages in that? But again, I would just say: why is that important? What's behind the question? What's driving the necessity to place stages there or map it onto this or that?

In that conceptual framework—in my conceptual framework, which is maybe how I tend to think at the moment—awakening includes ending the inner critic, certainly, freeing oneself from that. It includes, more broadly, healing our psychological wounds to a significant extent. It includes being able to flow with the stream of life. It includes the direction of eradicating the kilesas and moving in that direction.

Some of these conceptions, as I've pointed out before, might be quite popular, but when you probe them a little bit or explore them in actual life, you begin to ask the question: what does it actually mean to go with the flow? What does it actually mean to really eradicate those kilesas of greed, aversion and delusion, as I've talked about?

And something in those notions begins to lack a little coherence. Nevertheless, they can be helpful as elements to include in this larger direction, this larger conceptual framework.

It includes the transformative experiences and perceptions and understandings of oneness of different kinds, of anatta, no-self, not-self, all that. But for me, I want to say something further. It also includes this radical emptiness of all phenomena and this non-duality that I was talking about earlier.

But for me, awakening, though it includes all these experiences, insights and directions—as much as they are not ultimately incoherent—is beyond all that too. It includes and involves something more. It includes even the seeing that awakening too is empty. Awakening too is empty. Many Mahayana texts point to the emptiness of awakening, the non-duality of nirvana and samsara.

But this emptiness of awakening doesn't mean that we throw away—for me, doesn't mean that we should throw away—the concept of awakening, the notion, the goal, the vision. It doesn't devalue it. It doesn't say it's empty, therefore it's a lie, therefore it's just a con, or it's rubbish. As someone once said to me, "We're all stuck anyway, we're all schmucks," or something like that. They were talking about a certain spiritual teacher that they felt disillusioned about, and then they'd just gone to this: "Oh, we're all the same, there's nothing possible."

To me, the emptiness of awakening is not saying that. That's not what it opens, that realization. But awakening is empty, in several different ways. And one of the ways it's empty is that if it involves what I was tracing in that outline of a trajectory, awakening will also open all kinds of doors, all kinds of possibilities in many different directions.

That whole movement of awakening will open all kinds of doors, gates, possibilities, and many different directions—manifold and perhaps even infinite possibilities for ways of looking and ways of conceiving. And it will open them for actual use in life, to be engaged, to be lived, to be practiced, knowing they are all empty and at the same time viable, workable, practicable. This is part of what awakening does in this vision of awakening.

And because there's infinite possibility there, there's not an end to this opening. There's not an end to this movement of opening. It's open-ended.

So that's a possible trajectory. I offer it as a possibility, again, without trying to persuade anyone or play other games. I just offer it as a possibility. To me, it's a very beautiful possibility—a possibility of doors and gates being opened by this journey of exploration, in this journey of exploration, through this journey of exploration. And that process itself becoming open-ended in terms of the ways of looking and the conceptual frameworks that open. The whole thing just opens up realms and worlds of possibility of experience and conception.

Let me share something personal about freedom from suffering and equanimity. All this trajectory I've outlined—what does that have to do with freedom from suffering? There are all these different possibilities of views and maturings of view opening up further to another level.

If I just share for me—and it's only for me, personally—it's not the emptiness of self, the insight or view encapsulated in the question "Who dies?" I'm talking about my relationship with the possibility of dying, and dying an early death, or dying soon. It's not so much that question, "Who dies?" that kind of question, the emptiness of self that seems to capture... Or the view that at death there is just the disbanding of this process of the aggregates. It kind of falls apart as a process. This process of the aggregates in time that stuck together makes the self. Or the view that the process was all there was, or is, or was the self.

For me, those kinds of views don't really make a difference and bring deep freedom and deep equanimity with respect to the possibility of dying soon, dying a relatively early death. Even less is it a reflection on impermanence—just the fact that we all die and that everything is impermanent, is born and dies. Nor is it, or was it particularly, the perception—the available perception for me—of oneness with nature and oneness with the elements.

I remember being struck immediately after I got the prognosis. I had a CT scan and the doctor said to me, "You've got a tumor in your pancreas." And I had heard enough about pancreatic cancer to know what that implied. I remember coming back to Gaia House—it was summer—and sitting in the walled garden, reflecting on it, taking in and digesting that news.

Looking around at the beauty around me, I had a possible perception, a possible experience. I was able to enter into that way of looking that just saw myself as one with nature, the body at death dissolving back into nature like that, becoming earth, becoming air, becoming water, and energy. It was available and it was helpful to a certain extent, but it wasn't really a view that brought a lot of deep freedom or equanimity or transformative power.

Rather—and again I'm just sharing for me—I suppose I could list four insights that really were helpful instead, that over the last few years in relation to this possibility of dying, this news, this very real possibility that I am confronted by and live with. Four insights, four ways of looking, four perceptions.

One is the insight into the unfabricated world.

The sense, the perception of that unfabricated realm. But in a way that includes—and this to me is important—in a way that includes a sense, a palpable sense of the mystery there. The mystical beauty and sacredness of it.

In other words, it's something that's functioning in a way that's saying something more than "everything's empty," or something more than "there's just this beyond." It has a soul element in the mystery that I perceive and sense there—the deep, unfathomable mystery, and the beauty, the mystical beauty and sacredness of it. That perception, for me, makes a huge difference.

Secondly, the related insight or view that knows and perceives the emptiness of everything—of all phenomena, of space, of time, past, future, and present, of the now, of consciousness, awareness, and so forth. And again, it's not that I see the emptiness and realize nothing matters because it's all empty. It's not that view or that sense of "nothing matters" that I feel is making the difference for me, the liberating difference.

Rather, it's this realization, this insight-view of the emptiness of all things in a way that makes felt some unspeakable mystery, beauty and sacredness again. It's in the emptiness that there is this sense of this indescribable mystery of everything—everything, everything—and the whole of existence. And that's palpable in that insight or way of looking or sense of the emptiness of all things. It's not that everything is empty, therefore everything is worthless or it doesn't matter. There's some soul element, some element of mystical appreciation, resonance, beauty. That makes the difference for me. That's what I find when I connect to it—that's what cuts through everything. That's what opens it out.

Third, the insight or way of looking that I've described earlier—the sense, the perception of myself and my life and the things and events in my life and in the world as image, the imaginal perception of all that, the sensing with soul of myself, my life, and the things and events in it.

This isn't a constant perception; it's something I move in and out of. This sensing with soul, this imagining, perceiving with all that is involved in that—as we described in the first talk of this series, all those elements and aspects of the imaginal—including, as I described in the last talk on dukkha and soul-making, the sense that when I sense my soul with soul, there is the sense of the non-separateness from the divine of my personality.

And the sense of in and through and as my personality, my individuation, my uniqueness and even my weirdness and my particularities as necessary expressions and fabrications of the divine's unfolding—the soul-making of the Buddha nature, of the cosmic Buddha nature, of whatever you want to call it, of God.

There's this perception of that, as I described in one of those dukkha and soul-making talks. And there's also, as I described there, a sense then that the time span of my life, whatever that turns out to be, the duration of my life, is itself an aspect of my soul. The time and soul are somehow not separate. And the time given to me or allotted to me, whatever that ends up being, is somehow an aspect of my soul. And my soul is not separate from the divine. And in that way, the soul and what is happening and these events and the time and all of it is perfect in that strangely indescribable way that I alluded to in that talk.

That kind of perception, that kind of way of looking, that kind of opening up of the sensing with soul of myself, of my existence, of my life and the events and the story and the personalities—that makes a big difference, huge difference in terms of the relationship with death and the equanimity that comes with that. The sense of grace, gratitude, blessing, ease, peace.

And lastly, again related to imaginal perceiving or sensing with soul, is when I feel myself on track or devoted to my soul duty or duties, which, as we've pointed out, are imaginal perceptions. The perception of duty is part of the imaginal constellation. It's an imaginal perception, which means it's neither real nor unreal. My sense of what my soul duty is in life, or soul duties are in life—it has that theatrical element. It's neither real nor unreal. It has that imaginal middle way. And yet when I feel myself on track and devoted and plugged in to that constellation of duties, that makes a big difference in relation to death.

So I'm just sharing that. We could ask: what insights, what ways of looking make a really radical difference with respect to what matters most? What insights, what ways of looking? If we're opening up this question of awakening—what does it involve? What does it mean? What is achieved there?—what insights, what ways of looking make a really radical difference with respect to what matters most?

Life, death, personhood—what matters most? You tell me, what matters most to you? And what insights and ways of looking make a radical difference and give deep freedom, deep equanimity?

That's the question for you. But still, even that, in relation to freedom and equanimity, I would still place that in the even larger vision that I outlined—that trajectory and that whole strand and the other strands that were involved. I would place even that in that larger context.

in a larger vision.

And that's the vision of this possibility of a movement of awakening, opening doors for us, opening gates of possibility—of perception, of the sense of being, the sense of existence, possibility of action as well. And that opening of doors, opening of gates is potentially infinite and open-ended. Open-ended.

This vision encompasses not just our individual liberation, but a continuous unfolding of what's possible. Each insight, each moment of freedom, each deepening of equanimity opens onto further possibilities we couldn't have imagined before. The path doesn't end with some final attainment, but keeps revealing new dimensions of awakening, new ways of understanding, new capacities for compassion and wisdom.

So when we ask what matters most, when we seek those radical insights that transform our relationship to life and death and personhood, we're participating in something far greater than personal salvation. We're contributing to an endless flowering of human potential, an ever-expanding recognition of what consciousness can become when freed from its habitual limitations.

This is the magnificent scope within which all our practice unfolds—not just individual peace, but the infinite opening of possibility itself.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 127

What is Awakening? (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h37

> *In this fourth part of his inquiry into awakening, Rob Burbea presents a radical reimagining of liberation through what he calls the "phenomenological approach" - exploring fabrication and ways of looking in practice. He traces a possible trajectory from understanding the fabrication of personality and self-sense, through experiences of universal oneness, to opening to the unfabricated and realizing the complete emptiness of all dharmas. This leads to recognizing that fabrication itself is empty, creating non-duality between the unfabricated and fabricated realms.*
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> *Burbea introduces the soul-making paradigm as expanding awakening beyond traditional boundaries. He distinguishes between "icons" (imaginal forms with infinite depth and soul-making potential) and "idols" (rigid, limited concepts), arguing that awakening must involve the liberation of eros, psyche, and logos in dynamic interaction. This includes embracing conceptual frameworks as creative tools rather than final truths, allowing for reconstruction after deconstruction.*
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> *Drawing on Biblical imagery of Abraham's call to "leave your country," Burbea presents awakening as an ongoing movement - not a fixed attainment but a perennial calling to venture into new territories of soul-making. He advocates for freedom in relationship to awakening concepts themselves, suggesting we can move fluidly between different frameworks while remaining unattached to any single vision as ultimate truth.*

Somewhere in the last couple of parts of this talk, and certainly in much more detail elsewhere in other talks and writings and courses, we've explained how a practitioner might at some point cotton on to this idea of fabrication—fabrication of dukkha, fabrication of the self-sense, or of some perception of issue or whatever. Having seen that things are fabricated through the way of relating, through the way of looking, they might get interested in these two related concepts: fabrication and ways of looking.

They might decide to keep open that question: "Well, I can see this is fabricated—the self-sense, for instance. What else is fabricated? What is not fabricated?" And they might pursue that question with the tool of ways of looking, developing the skills and arts involved in different ways of looking with different degrees, depths, subtleties, and kinds of clinging involved. They pursue this double question of fabrication and ways of looking in practice—not just as some abstract intellectual idea, but actually getting hold of this and running with it in practice.

This is what I've referred to elsewhere as the phenomenological approach: dealing with and meeting one's experience, bringing these concepts to bear—fabrication and ways of looking—and seeing what we can learn about experience, about fabrication of experience and ways of looking, through exploring them, through playing and experimenting with that.

As I've explained elsewhere in quite a lot of detail, and briefly in the last couple of parts of this talk, if a practitioner does this in practice—explores fabrication and ways of looking, probes fabrication with ways of looking—then a possible trajectory will almost inevitably arise out of that. A trajectory of developing insights that we could conceive of as forming a central strand for a notion of awakening, or one of the notions of awakening, or part of the notion of awakening I'm offering as a possibility.

This direction unfolds as a deepening, a developing of insights, including insights into the fabrication of the personality and the perspective of not identifying with one's personality at times. So, for example, one would experience and understand the perspective that the self is just a process of the psychophysical aggregates. One would move beyond that in time, eventually, with the ripening of things, into views and experiences of universal oneness—the self being part of that oneness, all things being part of different onenesses at different levels: of love, of awareness, of nothingness, of all kinds of things.

Pursuing this non-fabricating direction even more, one will eventually open to the unfabricated, the deathless, and understand with that the thorough, complete, and radical emptiness of all dharmas, all phenomena without exception. Then, realizing based on that understanding that any and all self-views should not be clung to, cannot really be clung to as any kind of final position, at least, because one knows the emptiness of all phenomena, all the elements that might possibly make up or be a foundation for any self.

Eventually one sees that fabrication itself is empty, and that relativizes the whole sense of the unfabricated so that there's a non-duality and a non-elevation of the unfabricated over the fabricated, the beyond over this world, so to speak. The holiness is then everywhere.

Pursuing it even more, one begins to open up to the realization that all conceptual frameworks, conceptions and conceptual frameworks, are in a sense empty. They're not finally true. They don't reflect or summarize or articulate a final truth, an ultimate viewpoint on how things are. Through that realization comes an even deeper sense of participation in the cosmos, participation in perception, participation also in truth, and even in the notion of what awakening is.

This possible trajectory perhaps makes a pretty good solution to the pieces of the jigsaw that we find in the Pali Canon—fitting together the Buddha saying this and the Buddha saying that—together with some Mahayana elaborations of what the Buddha said that are found in Mahayana texts. These elaborations go back to the Pali Canon, but the Buddha didn't really pick up on and elaborate there—for instance, in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta and similar texts.

Now, I've outlined this trajectory. It may or may not be attractive to you. I try to present it quite neutrally, but is that attractive—that sort of journey, that sort of unfolding, all that's involved in that? Again, this question: if it's not attractive, why? What's going on for you? And if it is attractive, what's going on for you? What is it that you want? What do you want?

All those questions I threw out in the first part of this talk are very much connected. They interweave all the way through this question of what is awakening and this discussion of awakening.

Actually, trajectory is the word I've been using, but it's not quite the right word because it implies a kind of linearity, a movement from here to there along a certain line. My experience as a teacher is that things are not always linear. Even with that group of insights that I just enumerated very briefly, the movement of realization, the movement of opening up of experience and understanding, is not always linear.

Yes, those are deeper insights. Generally speaking, they're harder to understand, to open to, to realize, to experience. They're more comprehensive, they take in more, they're more inclusive. For example, the experience of the unfabricated in a way that's dualistic with the fabricated—not yet moved to a level of non-duality—doesn't take in the holiness of the fabricated, doesn't include that. So the latter end of that list is more inclusive, more comprehensive, more fundamental in some sense.

Yet my experience, both for myself and working as a teacher, is that intuitive wisdom can make all kinds of leaps at any point in practice, or in one's life of practice, that make a bit of a mockery out of any linear map. So trajectory isn't quite the right word.

At some point—whether right near the beginning of someone's practice along this trajectory of exploring fabrication and ways of looking, or whether they've gone through that whole trajectory and then start hearing about soul-making and the erotic imagination—one might add in, or perhaps better, weave in to that...

trajectory or set of insights that I described there—weave in, add in the whole paradigm and whole exploration of what we call the soul-making paradigm or the erotic imaginal exploration. The erotic imaginal, in itself, is not linear at all. There's no real

linearity—well, perhaps there's a little bit of linearity, but generally speaking, it moves in many different possible directions, not really so much as a linear movement, as I've alluded to earlier.

But start to weave that in with the other trajectory regarding fabrication and ways of looking and emptiness and all that. The whole thing becomes really not so linear. So the trajectory is not necessarily—or at least as a universally common trajectory—perhaps not really adequate as a label.

But this question, "What do you want?" With the soul-making side of things and the erotic-imaginal side of things, perhaps what you want or the desire operating must be authentic, because the eros and the desire is integral to the movement of soul-making. It's indispensable, it's fundamentally wrapped up in the movement of soul-making in the erotic imaginal. No eros or desire—very little eros and desire—means very little soul-making. So the question of what do you really want, the authenticity there, is oftentimes in the soul. When we can speak kind of more purely of soul-making, it's kind of inevitable there.

Remember too, just as a sort of footnote here, that the paradigm of soul-making includes eros with images or in relation to images, and also eros without images, without the imaginal. I've elaborated this in the Eros Unfettered talks. Eros without the imaginal or without images means that eros for the unfabricated, or for the realization and the opening to those realms that are less fabricated—that have less to do with image and perception in general on that whole spectrum.

But eventually, that movement, that eros for the unfabricated or eros in the direction of unfabricating along all that spectrum of onenesses and jhānas and all that—eventually, with its maturity, as we mentioned, there's the realization of the emptiness of all things and the non-duality there between what is fabricated and what isn't and different degrees of fabrication. And then this opens up the legitimization, the possibility to fabricate skillfully and fabricate in a way that includes images.

So even the eros—there is eros that doesn't include images, but if I go deeply enough into that, it kind of delivers me a legitimization and a platform from which to explore fabrication with images, and then the eros with that. And then there's also eros with images, the erotic imaginal, and that directly involves itself in the participation of fabricating images. It participates in the fabrication of images with the erotic imaginal, with eros that is in relation to images.

But when we include the soul-making, when we include the erotic imaginal—I should say, when we include sensing with soul—this will open up the whole sense of awakening and the whole sense of the path much wider than that trajectory that I outlined in the last couple of parts of the talk. Sensing with soul opens out the whole sense of what awakening is and can be, and the whole sense of the path opens much wider.

And in so doing, in this opening, it will push on the influences of however we have conceived of or imagined the tradition, what the tradition says about awakening or what we have conceived of or imagined the tradition says about awakening. It will push on this soul-making movement. This expansion of the soul-making dynamic will push on the unquestioned images that we have of awakening—the fixated images, the rigid images. Sensing with soul, the erotic imaginal, that aspect of the soul-making dynamic will really push on that.

Some of the ways this happens—in small ways and in large ways—for example, we might have, and it would be very understandable (I think a lot of people do have), a kind of fixated fantasy or idea. By fixated fantasy, I mean not one that's rich in soulfulness and eros, but one that's got that kind of rigidity to it and clinging to it. But fixated fantasy or image or idea regarding awakening that it kind of happens in a sudden moment.

One of the places we get that is from the myth of the Buddha, who sat up all night, made a strong vow, sat up all night in meditation, and just as the morning star was appearing, that was the moment. And everything permanently changed in that moment, at that moment. "Done is what had to be done." And there was, in this assumption, this idea, this image—it happens very suddenly, all done, everything is permanently changed. And there is also the freedom and the liberation that ensue, that open up, are pervasive. They're total and they reach to every part of the practitioner's life.

Now, that makes a good story, doesn't it? The suddenness of it and the kind of black and whiteness of it. It's sudden, it's very dramatic. But again, I'd just like to question that. Is it a true fact, or is it a kind of myth in the poor sense of the word?

Oftentimes there are many people you can meet who will share similar accounts, not necessarily with that degree of effort involved, and oftentimes they emphasize the exact absence of effort. But for myself—and you'll have to find out for yourself—but sometimes I meet these people, listen or read their accounts, and sometimes look at, hang out with, hear about the resultant awakenings. And sometimes it's really not that impressive. Oftentimes it's not that impressive what happens when there's that kind of story of sudden and then assumed pervasive liberation and deep awakening.

The awakening often doesn't seem that deep. It's not also that pervasive. The insights are not so deep, nor are they pervasive, nor the freedom. So there's a kind of—I would call that a small way, it's a small point.

But there are bigger and I think more important ways in which the opening up to sensing with soul, the imaginal perception, will push on the whole notion and the whole image and fantasy of awakening and what's involved in it. This is very interesting to me, but I have observed that certain areas or kinds of freedom—areas or kinds of liberation—may open at different times for a practitioner, and not by, for example, realization of the unfabricated or emptiness, or the so-called eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion. Certain areas, certain kinds, are not going to be opened by those traditional means, those traditional ideas.

So for example, can we even talk about sexual freedom? What is that?

What does that mean? What even happens when you notice inside, when you just hear that? What does it mean? What is that?

So I want to say very clearly right now that I do not mean by the notion of sexual freedom acting in any way that is not respectful of another human being, or in any way that is unkind. So that's not sexual freedom. Whatever sexual freedom or freeing might be—and freeing might be a better way of putting it—it doesn't mean that lack of kindness, lack of respect in sexual relations, lack of attunement, grossly misattuned to what's going on there, what the other person wants or needs, or what you want or need.

For both oneself and whoever one is being sexual with, there needs to be kindness, respect, attunement. It needs to be consensual. There's no question about this. Whatever sexual freedom or freeing means, it doesn't go against that. It doesn't cross those lines. And whatever you hear me say or have heard me say, or perhaps another teacher around exploring eros and sexual images and sexual eros, it never contravenes that in practice.

And also sexual freedom, again, whatever it might mean, to me doesn't mean that we necessarily have to open to what someone else or some subgroup considers more free or better, or what we are feeling pressured by some should or some fashion around sexuality or orientation or self-identification or morality. You decide if something's not okay for you. You decide if it's okay and if it's interesting. Not pushed around by subcultures and the kind of rhetoric that can happen there. So that's just an aside, but I consider it so important, just in case there's even the slightest misunderstanding in what we're saying here.

But the main point here that I was trying to convey is that certain areas and kinds of freedom may not be opened up through realizing the unfabricated, realizing emptiness, eradicating greed, aversion, delusion. What's that going to do in regard to my sexual freedom? I mean, do you really think, is there any evidence, does it seem that the spiritual teachers who claim awakening—that their liberation really extends fully to their sexuality? Fully? I mean, they might just choose celibacy and keep to that. That's not quite the same thing as sexual freedom in the sense of the more open possibility of what that might mean.

Or not just sexuality—what about the area of intellect and ideas? You think that's going to open just because one has realized the unfabricated or the so-called eradication of greed, aversion, delusion? What does it mean to be free? What is a freeing in relationship to the intellect and ideas? What is a freeing in relationship to creative expression? What is the liberation of personae as masks of God?

So what kinds and what areas and directions of liberation, of opening, of freeing are possible to us, and how do they arise? If I'm locked into too narrow a view of what liberation delivers and also what is the path to liberation—I expect this kind of path to bring that kind of liberation—is that realistic?

But it may be that imaginal practice and practice with particular images leads to all kinds of very specific liberations with regard to whatever that image or imaginal figure embodies in a certain area. Sometimes I meet people who are practicing fairly diligently and steadily over some years. Maybe they've done some therapy and found that useful and it's an important part of their process, and they're practicing, trying to deepen their emptiness inquiry and their inquiry into fabrication. But there are areas that none of that has reached—not the psychotherapy in whatever traditional forms and attitudes, and not the emptiness practice.

This person is a very balanced, sane person, but the courage to stand up publicly and stand behind one's deepest convictions and passions has not been liberated—the courage to do so even at the risk of upsetting someone, of being disadvantaged perhaps in terms of one's career, or maybe people won't see me as a nice guy, or I'll piss someone off, or I won't be a good boy, or whatever it is. More than the emptiness, more than even many kinds of therapy, it might be that working imaginally, in the full way that we've talked about, with images that involve such courage, such expressions—areas that are really not being opened up after years of steady practice in certain directions.

It may be that images involving those kinds of things—and they have to be arrived at in all the ways we talked about and emerge in all the ways we talked about—but it may be that might open up areas and directions of freedom, prisons that don't even really feel like a prison. One is not even really realizing the lack of liberation there. But the imaginal practice may open up those areas where the other practices won't.

So it's easy to find a spiritual, or certainly a Buddhist basis, to simply ignore those areas that I alluded to and those kinds of freedoms—not to be free in those areas with ideas, with sexuality, with creative expression, with the liberation of personae, but to be free rather from sexuality, from desire, from active engagement, from intellectual questioning and expansion. Because we can always find a teaching that says sexuality is just greed, activism is not equanimous and peaceful.

It doesn't fit the image, the archetype. I've explored this in different talks previously.

And with intellectuality, we can always find rationale that says intellectuality is just conceptualizing. "That's just conceptualizing, and we want non-conceptuality, or we want something called just being, or being simple," or whatever it is.

So there's the possibility, through the erotic imaginal, of opening up wider areas and different kinds of liberation, awakening, freedom—awakening and liberating a whole other range, or greater range of images and archetypes, breaking the lock of certain fixated images or a narrow range of archetypes that we might be operating unwittingly under.

So that's part of what's involved in this larger and, I think, richer and more multi-dimensional possibility of path and vision of awakening. The very images of awakening and the areas of awakening open up.

Now, again, we've explored this in detail in other retreats, but we said when the soul-making process gets going—the soul-making dynamic—it involves the mutual feeding, inseminating, widening, deepening, complicating, enriching, stretching of eros, psyche, and logos. They feed into each other and create and discover more of each other. The whole thing expands. We've explained that many times over the last few years.

The soul-making dynamic is liberated. In other words, rather than being stuck in one particular circumference or range or way of relating, the soul-making dynamic—the eros, psyche, logos dynamic—is liberated. Eros, psyche and logos are liberated to some extent in that soul-making dynamic. That's another way of saying what's going on in soul-making.

And as well as images getting pushed forward, as we talked about just now, the logos —ideas—will also get pushed forward. And more than just get pushed forward: ideas, logos, as one of the elements of soul-making, is exactly that. It's an element of soul-making. It's involved. It's worked. It's stretched. It's relied on. So that's part of soul-making, what a vision of soul-making awakening and path must involve.

Logos must involve concept, must involve idea as something creative, fertile, active, experimental, so that the exploration of and the experimenting with ideas and with conceptual frameworks—different ideas, different conceptual frameworks—exploring and experimenting with them in practice so that they inform ways of looking and thus open up different perceptions and experiences, and that feeds the whole process.

But that whole involvement and inclusion of ideas deliberately, and conceptual exploration, conceptual flexibility is, in our definition, part of the very soul-making dynamic, part of what is liberated and part of what moves in the direction of awakening.

So we borrow, discover, create ideas and conceptual frameworks. And then in the practice, in the soul-making that happens in practice, those ideas get stretched or they break. And then we forge, discover, borrow, create new ideas and conceptual frameworks—perhaps built on those old ones, perhaps different, whatever. And all of that, and that whole process, is included in awakening.

And awakening—notice—is a verb form. Well, it can be used as a verbal noun, but it's actually also present participle. Awakening: it's something that is happening, ongoing awakening, this open-endedness that I referred to.

So sometimes, for different reasons—and I've talked about this before—there's a real shunning of the conceptual, not really an inclusion or an embracing or a willingness to play with and experiment with ideas and conceptual frameworks. And that hesitation or suspicion or refusal comes from many different directions.

Some of it comes from teachings of non-conceptuality, as we mentioned just a few moments ago, as being somehow more spiritual, the direction of spirituality or whatever. Other hesitations come more from modernist Western philosophy, which is really suspicious of any kind of metaphysical systems, metaphysics in general, or conceptual frameworks in particular. Even just building an edifice of concepts or a system —quite popular in the last, I don't know, let's say 100 years—is this suspicion of systems and conceptual frameworks.

And it goes with postmodernism, I think, at its less well-considered depth, because oftentimes people think that if you have a conceptual framework, if you have a system, you must be claiming that as an ultimate truth. You must be claiming that as a kind of

all-encompassing final take on what reality is. And that's not the way we're using concepts. That's not the way that this soul-making dynamic engages with ideas. It's not the relationship it has with concepts, conceptual frameworks, and ideas.

So a philosopher called Richard Bernstein was writing, and he talked about several other philosophers—one guy called Jürgen Habermas, a 20th century philosopher, I think he's still alive—and he's talking about some other figures like Heidegger and Adorno and Derrida, and pointing at these thinkers and saying all these people defend themselves as if they were living in the shadow of the last philosopher.

They are still... This is Habermas talking about Derrida and Heidegger and Adorno. They are still—these figures who are quite adopted by postmodern thinkers—Habermas continues, they are still battling against the strong concepts of theory, truth, and system. By this he means what I just described: to say X or Y, this is my theory, or this is the conceptual framework, or this is the system. A strong concept of that means one pushes it forward as all-encompassing, ultimate reflection of reality. They are still battling against the strong concepts of theory, truth, and system that have actually belonged to the past for over a century and a half. They believe that they have to tear philosophy away from the madness of expounding a theory that has the last word.

And this philosopher Bernstein continues, "Their failure, according to Habermas, is not to realize and fully appreciate that the fallibilist consciousness of the sciences caught up with philosophy too a long time ago." By fallibilist consciousness, he means fallible—able to make mistakes. According to Habermas, science has this idea that you tentatively put forward a theory, and if it matches the experimental results, great. But you never claim it as a final truth in that philosophy of science, and you realize that it's fallible. Someone might do an experiment, or some experimental result might show up at any point that proves your theory is not quite right.

So that's the fallibilist consciousness of the sciences, and according to Habermas, this caught up with philosophy a long time ago. What you get in some strands of philosophy is this idea where all they want to do is tear things down—tear down systems, tear down ideas, tear down truth claims, tear down theories, tear down conceptual frameworks. Deconstruct, deconstruct, deconstruct.

Bernstein is making the point—and this is where I would really agree—that deconstruction is not sufficient. It must be complemented by reconstruction.

Just a word more about this business of fallibilist consciousness of the sciences. That reflects another philosopher called Karl Popper, whose theory of philosophy of science was that it tentatively puts forward theories which approach the truth. Theories ap-

proach the truth incrementally, and they get proven wrong, and then another theory replaces that, but you're approaching something called "the truth." So it's quite a realist philosophy. It says we may not know whether this theory that we have now is completely true, because it can always be proven wrong by some as yet undiscovered experimental result. But there is something called truth, and we can approach it. There's a kind of realism there, and Habermas is a kind of realist. That's a different idea, a different notion than, say, a participatory notion of truth based on the deep notion of emptiness and ways of looking, as I've talked about. But that's just a side point.

Let's come back to this: deconstruction is not sufficient. Any deconstruction we do must eventually be followed by reconstruction—reconstructions.

That's what's happening both in the trajectory of emptiness exploration, of exploration of fabrication and ways of looking that I outlined. One deconstructs—less and less fabrication, one learns how to do that. And eventually, having reached the unfabricated, then seeing the emptiness of fabrication, because time is empty, and what is fabricated is empty, and the elements of fabrication are empty—then that opens up this non-duality, as I mentioned, between the unfabricated and the fabricated, and it legitimizes and sacralizes fabrication itself. There's no duality. The unfabricated is not better than the fabricated in any way. It's not more holy. It's not even more real. And so that legitimizes, opens the door to, opens the gate to the possibility of skillful fabrication—and part of that can be soul-making fabrication.

So on the trajectory of deepening exploration of emptiness, fabrication, ways of looking, and also in the practices of sensing with soul, which include the flexible, temporary adoption, entertainment, trying out, playing with, experimenting with, constructing, and then brushing aside or adopting conceptual frameworks and brushing them aside, adopting another one, deconstructing them, reconstructing something different—logoi, ideas, conceptual frameworks. Both in the emptiness trajectory and in the sensing with soul practices, there's this indispensable element that involves deconstruction and reconstruction many times, with endlessly variable possibilities.

Sometimes what happens—I want to linger with this business about conceptuality because I think it's so important and so subtle—occasionally, I've encountered a student who is practicing with emptiness and practicing quite creatively with emptiness, deeply, and sees, glimpses the non-truth of all concepts, as I said earlier, in different ways. But then after that, picks up on teachers—for instance, ancient or translations of ancient Zen teachers from centuries ago—who seem to be saying, "Drop concepts," or "Just sit quietly and do nothing," or "Just be simple," or that kind of thing. And this person who has actually glimpsed the non-truth of concepts through practicing with

fabrication and ways of looking and really contemplating conceptuality and perceptuality tries to adopt this kind of teaching, or believes that their realization of the non-truth of all concepts issues in this teaching of "drop concepts, just be simple, just sit quietly," and doesn't realize that this is a concept.

It's not just a concept, it's also a psychological style. It's one style of soul, one kind of archetype. It's the archetype of the simple man, if you like, or the natural man, or whatever. So to settle or fall back into that without realizing that conceptuality is actually operating and supporting such a stance, and without recognizing the pull of an archetypal image or fantasy, that's not liberation.

One has seen something deeply, yet remains caught in subtle conceptuality that's operating there, and in a kind of predilection for a particular archetypal image. It's like walking into a prison cell that happens to have a sign hung over the door by some long-dead inmate from centuries ago reading "Liberation, Nirvana and Freedom." You walk into that cell, sit there, shut the door, and just because of the sign, believe yourself free. Yet actually, one is imprisoned both in terms of soul—because of the limited archetype—and in terms of not realizing the subtle conceptuality that's involved.

When we talk about the sense of what awakening might be in a soul-making paradigm, it includes this deconstruction, reconstruction, involvement, experimentation, fracturing, breaking open, stretching, forging ideas and conceptual frameworks. So there isn't this stasis to it. It doesn't get stuck with a certain conceptual range or conceptual idea. Or if it does, that's only temporary, because soul-making will keep pushing and breaking whatever vessels at some point. Pushing on and breaking whatever vessels.

Do you remember Carl Jung's observation about the scientific revolution around the time of the Renaissance and the Western Enlightenment? He pointed out that it was this newly won rational intellectual stability of the human mind that came with the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. It managed to hold on against the older ways of thinking of the Middle Ages and medieval thought. It managed to hold on and penetrate further into the depths of nature, further even than earlier ages had considered possible.

Then he writes: "The more successful the penetration and advance of the new scientific spirit proved to be, the more the latter, as is usually the case with the victor, became the prisoner of the world it had conquered." In other words, that whole brilliant opening that happened around the time of the Scientific Revolution and the Western Enlightenment in Europe—that whole brilliant opening, the conceptual framework that crystallized with that—over time, over some hundreds of years, developed and also

became a prison, became hardened. As Jung put it, the victor—that conceptual framework won out over the medieval ways of thinking. It was a victor, but then it became the prisoner of its own system.

The soul-making paradigm of awakening would, in a way, if it's working, not allow that. Inevitably, in the vortex and the movement and the expansion, the widening and deepening of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic that soul-making involves, that cannot happen. As I said, we will break out of any conceptual framework, break out of any kind of rigidified structure of conceptuality and spirituality.

Very easily for us, awakening, liberation, nirvana, enlightenment can become what Ari Kobach calls an idol in distinction to an icon. An idol is something taken to be real and has a kind of limit to it. Sometimes people have said, "You're such an iconoclast, Rob." I'm not sure that I am, but I think what I'm interested in here is more smashing idols or exposing what we might call idols and idolatry. And along with that deconstruction, creating icons.

The difference between icon and idol—I'm borrowing this distinction from Henri Corbin and also from another French theologian-philosopher called Jean-Luc Marion. The icon possesses infinite depth because it's imaginal. So it might be a form there, but remember the elastic soft edges being one aspect of the imaginal? The imaginal form might be really vivid as a sensible form, as an aesthetic form, really vivid and sharply defined, but the being of it has soft and elastic edges. It has this capacity through soul-making, through the erotic relationship with it, to be perceived with more and more depth, more and more dimensionality will be perceived as part of it, as an aspect of it. It will open up a sense of itself having more dimensionality, more depth, more possibility, more divinity.

Soul-making is possible in relation to an icon. But when soul-making gets hold of an idol—something rigidly, solidly defined and believed in as real, with tight, rigid boundaries, not soft, not elastic—then soul-making will make those boundaries of an idol elastic and soft or smash it and expand it or replace it until we have an icon. Soul-making needs icon, not idol. And there won't be an end to that.

So an icon is something with this potentially endless possibility of dimensionality and divinity and depth, soul-making potential. In questioning typical ideas of awakening that have actually become what we could call idols—solid, unmoving, rigidly and tightly boundaried, fixed and limited forms and depths—in questioning in that way, and opening up instead new possible visions or ideas of awakening, where awakening is not limited either by an end point or in terms of direction, that converts the whole process, converts idol into icon.

Soul-making has gotten hold of the notion of awakening and creates, discovers its own meanings of what awakening is and involves. It stretches whatever original concept, image, idol we might have started with. With an icon, as I said, it's not limited, its being isn't limited in that way, because of these soft elastic edges.

We will, Eros, in relation, soul, in relation to an icon, discovers, creates more and more dimensions and depths. And in that way, eros doesn't collapse then. It doesn't run out of space, of beyond, to long for, to move into, to create, discover. It has—eros in relationship to awakening doesn't collapse, because it has an infinity of possibility in which to move. Infinity of possibility for the expansion of psyche and logos. Understand?

So the title of the talk is, What is Awakening? What is Awakening? And we could hear that in: what is awakening? What is awakening, as in what awakens or who awakens.

If we answer it's what awakens, what is awakening, who awakens—if we answer it's soul, it's soul-making that awakens. That is what is awakening. That is, if you like, the subject of awakening. That is who is awakening. It's the soul and soul-making.

Then that implies in our definition that there's this infinite possibilities that come with the soul-making dynamic, with the involvement, fertilization, insemination, widening, deepening, expansion of the eros, psyche, logos. And that means, that implies this open-endedness, same thing.

Important note in relation to that: when we say infinite, there can be an infinity of possibilities, an infinity of potential, and even infinity of actualizations, but infinite doesn't mean all possibilities or every possibility. So this doesn't mean that awakening means everything. It means every possibility gets actualized or is even a potential direction.

So, for example—if that's a hard concept—imagine, let's say, a circle, which is like the face of a clock or a watch. And you could say, these directions—the 12 o'clock, the 3 o'clock, the 6 o'clock and the 9 o'clock, directions on the face of the clock—they are not directions that soul-making awakening will pursue. It just won't pursue those directions. That won't happen in the possibility of soul-making. That still leaves an infinity of other directions just on that circle, because you can divide up the areas that remain—say between the 12 o'clock and the 3 o'clock, or the 3 and the 6, and the 6 and the 9, the 9 and the 12—you can divide up those areas infinitely. So infinite possibilities of direction doesn't mean all and every direction will be viable or is open as a direction of soul-making.

Sometimes when this question is put, what is awakening? And one can hear that in two ways. So as I just alluded to, what is awakening? The question can be heard in two ways. What is awakening? What does that concept mean? And we've talked about that a lot and the possibilities there.

But as I said, it can be heard in a second way. What is awakening? Or what awakens? Or who awakens? Who is awakening?

Regarding the question when it's heard that way, one could give—or there are certain answers to the question that way that are quite popular in kind of Neo-Advaita circles or whatever. And the answer given is, who awakens or what awakens? No one. The answer is no one awakens. Or awakening is awakening. Or the universe is awakening.

So answering that question, what is awakening or what awakens, answering it in that kind of way helps take some of the restriction, imprisonment, weight or burden out of a desire for awakening when it's coming out of ego, when it's for the sake of ego or self-measurement or in reaction to the inner critic or it's trying to—this desire for awakening is trying to prove myself to myself or to the inner critic or to my parent or parents or my teacher or teachers or to the world. We've touched on this.

So this notion—no one awakens—it does have a certain unburdening effect, so it can be useful. But there's something about such an answer that in insisting on a kind of non-definition or nebulous, vague kind of openness, that kind of answer, those kind of attitudes or conceptions—and there is a conception involved there, or conceptions involved—those kind of stances, they might be forming their own strange kinds of prisms.

In that very non-definitional vagueness. Why? Because there's not much fertility or movement possible within that view. Something about the vagueness doesn't allow me to actually posit and work with different concepts within that, or answers to that question, and work with different conceptual delineations, perspectives, and ideas.

If you contrast this—"What awakens? Who awakens? No one. No one awakens"—with, for example, the conceptual frame we're trying to encourage, you'll notice something different. This is a conceptual frame that itself allows, encourages, and actually expects soul in the process to notice, to discover and create ever more delineations, concepts, and perspectives. Create and discover all that in time regarding what awakening is and regarding who or what is awakening.

Do you understand the difference? In this paradigm, none of those delineations, concepts, perspectives regarding what awakening is, or who or what is awakening—none of them are clung to as truths or reflections of reality. Nevertheless, they can be entertained and lived and practiced with, and they can bring all kinds of fruits and results and openings, none of them being regarded as final.

Like we said when we talked about what is soul—if I say "sensing with soul," that begs the question, what is soul? Remember that? We said we can say something about what soul is, but we want the concept of soul to have these soft, elastic edges. It's not a rigidly fixed and limited concept, so it can stretch.

What awakens? Soul awakens. Soul-making awakens. What does that mean? There's not the shunning of concepts—"No one awakens"—but rather the using of concepts. And then those concepts get enlarged, broken. New concepts get forged.

Sometimes the answers we give to these questions—what is awakening, what awakens, who awakens—they help in certain ways, but they also limit the possible fertility for the being, for consciousness, for the sense of existence, for soul. They don't stimulate and support the creation and discovery of further delineations, further discernment, more and more aspects, facets of self, soul, being, others, objects, world, awakening.

Again, in this soul-making paradigm, we're really not shunning or disregarding discriminations, discernments, delineations, and concepts. We're using them for the sake of soul-making. And the soul-making process will actually stimulate more of that as part of its endless possibility of riches.

So again, this question: What do you want? And is that what soul wants? Or is what comes through and seems to be my desire actually driven by something else—ego or measuring up? Or is it that what I want is culturally influenced or indoctrinated, or I've taken a certain idea or fixated image of what the tradition is? Or is it that what I want—the "I" there—is actually quite a limited self-image? I'm not imaginably open. The self is not imaginably sensed in the "what I want."

What is the relationship of who desires or has eros for awakening to who awakens? Again, what is the relationship of who desires awakening to who awakens? You may have heard answers to that kind of question, for instance, in certain so-called non-dual teachings or according to classical Buddhist Abhidharma psychology. What would a soul-making answer say to that?

What is the relationship of that which, or the one who, desires awakening—the relationship of that to the one who awakens? The relationship of the desire for awakening to the awakened?

What awakens is what has wanted awakening. What awakens is what has the eros for awakening.

Fantasies, images, and ideas come in—all kinds of fantasies, images, and ideas—and influence the fantasies, images, and ideas we have of awakening. Some of those can be what we call fixations, or not, or more or less so. And some of them are fantasies and images and ideas of self and also of the world. The fantasies, images, and ideas of self and of the world condition the fantasies, images, and ideas we adopt of awakening.

I wonder if this has occurred to you—do you realize that when you or I choose or accept a notion or vision of awakening or enlightenment, in doing so you are essentially signing up for, plumping for, choosing a worldview, a cosmology? It's not just a view of awakening. In choosing a view of awakening, in adopting a certain view of awakening, I'm also choosing and adopting a certain cosmology at the same time. They go inevitably together.

So for example, if I have the cosmology of endless rebirth, then the vision of awakening as ending rebirth brings with it, goes with, a cosmology of rebirth. Or the vision of awakening as somehow bearing up to, putting up with our existential predicament as tragically impermanent and frail in a kind of essentially meaningless cosmos—the image of the liberated one, the awakened one, as one who is willing to confront that and be with the tragedy of that, open to it, and still lives their life creatively. This image of awakening, this idea of awakening, brings with it, goes together with, a certain cosmology.

And in the soul-making dharma, it's exactly the same. The soul-making awakening vision that we're perhaps opening up, or possibilities that we're opening up, goes with a certain cosmology, which includes possibilities of cosmopoiesis and participation and all that—divinities and dimensions.

So when we choose or adopt an idea or an image of awakening, we're actually also choosing and adopting ideas of world. Self and world. And the causality—who knows what's going on there?

So again, the question is why? Is it really the cosmology that I'm attracted to? Am I just set on that cosmology and insisting on that cosmology, and it's working that way around from the worldview to the view of awakening? Or how much is self-view wrapped up in that?

The choice of cosmology may in fact be the primary reason for you or I choosing or accepting a certain notion or vision of awakening. You understand? That may be actually what I long for more—a certain cosmology, a certain worldview. It's all wrapped up together. And the self-view or the ego-view. If it's regarding measurement or proving myself or achieving or failing, that can come into it like we've talked about before. Or it might be that there's a certain soul-making or self-image in relation to the worldview cosmology that's coming in here, that's being chosen.

We're choosing a package. So for example, bravely and honestly facing up to the tragic existential predicament is one self-image, and it may be soul-making for some people to a certain extent. Or the self-image of what a human being is—a human being opens to all kinds of dimensions. Human beings participate in the cosmos, in the divine, in the creation and discovery of all this. It's a very different sense of self and image of self, an idea of self.

But again, back to this question—why am I choosing or adopting a certain idea or image of awakening? What's involved there? One of the things that's involved is cosmology and self-sense, or you could say anthropology.

I've pointed out in this connection several times before that the contemporary dukkha, the dukkha in contemporary times, may well involve kinds of dukkha that are prominent in what we deal with or have to face that weren't there at other times. So for example, our modernist notion of self brings with it, as much as a lot of possibility, a certain kind of dukkha. I'm not talking about how busy we all are and how we're harangued by mobile phones and emails and text messages and all that. I'm talking about just the modern notion of individuality and the culture of individuality and the pressures and expectations that brings alongside the possibilities. And I'm talking also about our very sense of our own psychological complexity and interiority and also responsibility.

Michel Foucault, one of the things he did was trace, in regard to sexuality, how through the tradition of the Catholic confessional, and then later through the very similar and connected tradition of the psychoanalytic confessional, which became the psychotherapeutic confessional, there was actually a broadening, a stretching of what the individual was then deemed responsible for. So at first, with regard to sexuality in the Catholic confession, it was just around the ethics of that and the way you're responsible for good or bad behavior sexually and thoughts and all that. But through that process and through the pressure and minutiae of that, this got expanded. And then through psychoanalysis and through the sexual revolution, the responsibility of sexuality was not just ethical, because now we're supposed to—there's a kind of responsibility to be

interesting sexually or this or that around our sexuality. Sexuality has become, not for everyone but for a lot of people, in some ways part of identity and part of my responsibility for my individuality and what I am or have achieved or am okay with or have liberated or whatever.

Someone in the time of the Buddha in India didn't have this kind of complexity, didn't have that culture of individuality, didn't have that kind of responsibility in regard to their sexuality, of being interesting or this or that, or individual in that sense.

So there are certain dukkhas around self that go with contemporary cultures, contemporary society, and also certain dukkhas around the world. And again, I've mentioned this as well—the disenchantment of the cosmos, the meaninglessness of the cosmos, that is the kind of pervasive backdrop, if not foreground, of our worldview. And that is certainly characteristic of our modern culture in differentiation to earlier cultures in some ways.

But if you also think about the whole notion of rebirth that's in the Pali canon, in some ways it presents an enchanted cosmos with devas and celestial realms. Yet in other ways, it's a frightening cosmos—again, essentially meaningless. It depicts a meaningless predicament that one must find a way to escape. One is essentially just flotsam and jetsam on the ocean of endless cosmic rebirths and deaths, tossed this way and that by waves and tides. It's a rather terrifying cosmic picture.

Nevertheless, there are certain kinds of disenchantment and meaninglessness that plague and pervade contemporary society. Along with the problematic complexity and individuality of the modern self, this serves up a more difficult—or at least different—kind of dukkha in relation to both self and cosmos.

As I mentioned recently, we are becoming conscious, some people are beginning to be conscious, of the moral and environmental implications of perceiving and conceiving the cosmos in a disenchanted, flattened way—especially given the consequences in our globalized world. There is a sense, for some people now, that we need a different view, a different worldview. We need the different visions being offered to us—a different picture, a different concept of what existence is, both for the self and for the self in the cosmos, and what the cosmos itself truly is.

In this possible understanding of what awakening might be—in a way that includes the soul-making process and dynamic and movement—such a view will include more and more facets of our being. Simply because of the way the soul-making dynamic works, it will draw in, involve, and begin to relate to all these different aspects of our lives, dimensions, and facets of our being. It will create and discover such facets of our

existence and make them objects of eros, imaginal objects. They get drawn into the whole soul-making process, and in so doing, they get drawn into the awakening process itself—the movement of awakening. They become included as directions and expansions and unfoldings of awakening.

This process will continue creating and discovering—not always at some uniform rate, of course. There will be stops and starts and stuck places. But potentially, at least, that is the movement. It's open-ended and multiple and multi-directional.

Some ideas we encounter of awakening, or even what's communicated to us sometimes by people who claim awakening in certain traditions or communities—certainly ones I've encountered—can be more stagnant than the kind of dynamic, endlessly enriching, dividing, branching growth of a living organism that I've tried to describe.

In some traditions and sanghas, it's relatively common for people to consider themselves awakened. But as I say, often there's a kind of stagnation with that awakening. We can look at that stagnation from the paradigm of the soul-making logos and recognize that either there is not enough eros—for instance, "I'm awakened, and yes, there's definitely a certain amount of happiness, a certain amount of freedom and ease of movement, liberation from the inner critic, a certain amount of peace, even-keeledness." But it's just kind of stagnated there. "I've been awakened for X years, and now what?" Until one begins to teach or write a blog or hold darshan or whatever it is. But something is actually just stagnant.

There's perhaps not enough eros to open up further territories and possibilities for consciousness, for questioning, further liberations, explorations. So either not enough eros to stimulate and push that whole soul-making dynamic in a way that opens up further territories, or the logos is blocked—stuck in some conception, for example, that awakening means this particular thing. "This is what awakening is, and I now seem to have achieved that," or "awakening means X," or "I am awakened."

Here it's not so much the "I" that is the problem. Some non-dual people will be quick to say that's the problem—"I am awakened," that's the problematic view. "There is no one, there is no I who awakens or is awakened, there is just awakening." But that's not the problem I want to pinpoint right now. The problem lies in the reification and limitation of the vision and idea of awakening—of what it is, what it involves, and where it goes.

So either there's not enough eros, or the logos is blocked and stuck in a conception of awakening—in some particular narrow conception of awakening, despite the relative ease and happiness and spacious existence. Or logos is stuck in the sense that we're trapped in a conception that conceiving itself is bad, not spiritual, and so forth.

Either way—whether it's that there simply isn't enough eros, no more fire, no more flow of eros to the extent that really pushes things and continues to expand, or the logos is blocked in some way regarding awakening—the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, is arrested or at least limited. And because of that, no further or greater or wider awakening can open.

Just to share one more thing to finish. In the book of Genesis, God said to Abraham: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you. Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go to the land I will show you."

Actually, I prefer that old-fashioned translation—I don't know if this is King James or something similar: "And the Lord said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee." This is a very crucial passage for those familiar with the Old Testament.

The Hebrew is *Lech Lecha*—leave, go from here. Actually, it can also mean "go to you"—*lecha*, go to you or go for you. But let's say "go from here."

We could hear this in a very historical, literal sense. But what's perhaps the more poetic meaning here? The soul meaning. Go from here—go from bondage to liberation, go from non-awakening to awakening.

Certain teachings, perhaps certain so-called non-dual teachings, might say: you're always here, or you're always there, you're always in perfection. There's nowhere to go, nothing to do. Awakening is just realizing that there's nowhere to go. But there in Genesis it says, *Lech Lecha*—go from here. Beautiful. I love that.

Let me read it again: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee."

A soul-making Logos might interpret that passage differently. Go from what? Get thee out of thy country, away from here, away from thy kindred, away from thy father's house. Go from whatever is not soul-making anymore, into new, expanded, expanding, deepened, deepening soul lands. To the land that I will show you—the landscapes that open up with soul. The land that I will show thee—new pastures, new fields of Eros-Psyche-Logos for soul-making.

This is always a possibility—this leaving the stagnation of structures that we know, of beliefs, the limited fixated images, the rigid concepts, beliefs, assumptions. It's always a possibility, since the possibilities for soul-making are infinite. So wherever we are, there's the possibility of more at some point.

It's hearing that passage—God's commandment in Genesis, God's calling, the call to Abraham—as God's call to us. We can read it in this very historic, literal, flattened way, and then it becomes all about territory and land and literalized nationalism. Or you can hear it as something speaking to you—God's calling, and it's eternal, it's always now. Always now. *Lech Lecha*, go. Go from here. Be ready.

Or if you say not eternal, perennial—perennial is maybe a better word. Again and again. The soul-making dynamics, as I said, are not always on the move. There are times of consolidation, of getting used to new structures, new landscapes, new visions, new images, new sensings. But perennially, again and again, there's this movement, this expansion of the soul-making dynamic. And with that, the whole territory, the whole land that we perceive ourselves in expands.

So again and again, forever, whenever, God calls, the divine calls, the Buddha nature calls, soul issues a calling to soul: "Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house"—the father's house, the way tradition has rigidified—"unto the land that I will show thee." The land that soul opens up. The land that Eros-Psyche-Logos opens up as the soul-making dynamic calls.

I'll just finish now. I said that sometimes people ask me what my position is on what awakening is, what stream entry is, what I think about this or that idea of awakening. I've shared a good deal in this talk, but actually, following from what I've said, my position is that I actually adopt and move between different conceptual frameworks.

And that feels to me right now as the most beautiful and viable and, if you like, true way of orienting and relating to this whole question, this whole notion of awakening. And it is possible to do that—to pick up and put down and move between different conceptual frames and do that relatively freely, dependent on who I'm actually talking to and what they want or need at a certain time.

You could say there's a kind of, or there's the possibility of a kind of—you could say freedom from awakening. But I think better: a freedom in relationship to the whole notion of awakening. Freedom in relationship to the whole notion of awakening. That's a freedom in relationship, not throwing it away—freedom in relationship to the whole

notion of awakening. Freedom in relationship to the whole notion of freedom. Someone can actually know the emptiness of it all and know and play with the poetry and the possibility of it all.

The whole notion, idea, sense of awakening can be opened up.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 128

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h30

In this opening talk of a series, Rob Burbea examines the profound ways that ideas and concepts shape all perception and experience. He traces how the scientific revolution's legacy—including beliefs in singular objective reality, Cartesian dualism, and reductionist materialism—continues to influence our contemporary worldview, often limiting our freedom to engage in sensing with soul and imaginal practices.

Burbea discusses how quantum physics has fundamentally challenged classical scientific assumptions, yet these older paradigms persist in our cultural 'bedrock,' creating what William James called 'vicious abstractionism'—the tendency to reduce rich phenomena to narrow concepts. Through examples including a practitioner's relationship with the moon, he shows how epistemological doubts can undermine confidence in soul-sensing experiences.

The talk weaves together themes of ontology, epistemology, and hermeneutics, examining how the dominance of scientific materialism has created an 'epistemicide'—the invalidation of other ways of knowing that include emotions and imagination. Burbea argues that even within Dharma contexts, reductionist views can imprison our practice, limiting our understanding of concepts like eros and soul-making that are essential for a complete theory of spiritual motivation and awakening.

I hardly need to point out that much—perhaps most—of what we are referring to as sensing with soul, most of the range of sensing and perceiving and sensibility that's involved in sensing with soul, is really not very usual in our culture, in our time. These kinds of perceptions, these kinds of openings and sensibilities, and also the ideas that undergird them and support them, are not conventional ones. They're not commonly found in our culture or commonly sanctioned.

For that reason and for others, this sensing with soul—that whole opening of that possibility—needs perhaps for many of us, not for all of us, but for many of us, a bit more grounding. We will need to feel that it makes sense, that it's grounded, that it's legitimized. Even if one is very attracted to these practices, and even if one has been prac-

ticing them already, there will very often be a nagging doubt creeping in for people, or a tendency to want to dismiss at times the perceptions, the sensibilities, the senses that have opened up and the experiences there and the whole approach.

So I feel it may be valuable, perhaps for many and perhaps at different times—not necessarily just at the beginning of one's explorations—to see if we can give a bit more ground, theoretical ground if you like, to what we're doing.

Another way of understanding or conceiving of what's needed here is, as I've said before, to elbow a bit more room, to create a bit more space, to be free to practice in this way without being hemmed in, crowded in, imprisoned by the conventional view and the dominant paradigms. To create a bit more space, to find a bit more ground, to give the whole thing more legitimization in one's mind.

Partly our freedom to practice this way is impinged on, or we feel a little bit reluctant. Sometimes that's because sensing with soul opens us, and that can be tricky. It's tricky to be open, and opened in different ways. The heart is opened, or sensing with soul involves an open heart, and it may open the heart further. The soul is opened. There are demands on us in terms of attention, attunement, humility. The sense of self and the sense of world is opened. And there may be a sense of responsibilities that come with all that.

So all this sometimes makes us a little bit ambivalent about treading this path, or even in any instance about entering into sensing with soul or opening a certain sensing with soul. Partly the demands are, if you like, on the emotions and the responsibility in the heart and the soul in that sense. But partly, the ambivalence that we have is also partly as a result of ideas—ideas that we have, that we have usually absorbed from somewhere or other: a teacher or teachers or teaching or tradition or the wider culture or this or that subculture.

Those ideas that we have shape our worldview, our *Weltanschauung*, and our sense of what we are, what life is, existence and all that. And those ideas can either give us confidence and a sense of legitimacy to this kind of practice, to sensing with soul, and support our freedom to practice that way, to sense with soul—or they can undermine our confidence, undermine our sense that this is a legitimate way of engaging with the world and with ourselves and with experience, a legitimate way of experiencing, and cramp our freedom, the freedom we feel to do so.

In this talk—or group of talks, depending on how you count it, I'm not sure how many parts there will be—I want to weave a few things together if I can. One is to open up some very specific practice possibilities that we'll get to, that may then suggest avenues for you or things you can experiment with or kinds of directions. That's one thread of what I want to do in this talk.

A second is actually to look at the place of ideas in those practices that I want to talk about, but also in the larger opening, and as I said, the legitimation, the ground, and the creating space for sensing with soul—so the place of ideas, and weave that together.

I will say something right at the beginning and say it again. I've said many times and I've written about it: that ideas or concepts are present in all and any perception, all and any experience, all and any experience of appearances. Ideas and conceptions are present in that. Moreover, they shape our perception, our experience. They shape appearances. They limit also what an experience is, how it is formed. And they're part of the fabrication of all and any perception, experience and appearance.

The only experience—in inverted commas—where that is not the case is the opening to the unfabricated. And that's an experience that I'm not even sure we can actually call an experience or a perception. But all and any other perception, experience, appearances involve intimately and fundamentally all kinds of ideas and conceptions.

Now, I can just say that and say it emphatically—and I'm aware that's how I'm saying it—but if you're not sure about that, then investigate. Find out. How are you going to find out if that's true or not? One way of finding out is by exploring this double intertwined path of exploration that explores fabrication of perception and ways of looking together. In the course of doing so, as things begin to unravel, so to speak, or fabricate less, one will see that this is the case: no conception, no perception. No conception, no fabrication of perception.

What we perceive, what the experience is, and what the appearance is at any time is, as I said, shaped, fabricated, limited, constructed by the idea or ideas, concepts present in consciousness at that time. One can also experiment with entertaining different ideas and concepts and seeing—letting them, entertaining them in a way that they're actually translated practically into ways of looking—and then seeing how the ideas are formed, shaped, limited, fabricated, dependent on that conception, in line with that conception, determined by that conception.

So any and all experience, any and all appearance, perception, ideas, concepts are present in a fundamentally formative way. When we come to sensing the soul and imaginal perception, those kinds of sensing, those kinds of experiences and perceptions also include ideas. And as a subset of the kind of ideas, they also include values. And I'll come back to that, the idea of this or that value.

The Greek word eidos is where we get our English word idea. And actually, eidos in Greek has a kind of double meaning. It means shape or form or vision or image. And it also means idea. The verb form reflects this kind of double meaning. So the verb form in Greek from eidos means I see or I know. As we say in English, I see, meaning I understand, not just I see visually. I understand. I grasp the idea or what.

So there's a way in particular ideas are central aspects that we can kind of tease out or focus in on within sensing the soul, and I hope to come back to that.

But really what I want to do in this talk or group of talks is weave together a few things. I want to talk partly about the ideas that influence us and influence our perceptions, then our experience and what appears to us in our contemporary culture. The ideas in our contemporary culture, you and I are influenced by certain ideas and that influences our very experience. So that's one theme.

And woven in as well, secondly, about ideas specifically in or involved with sensing the soul or images or imaginal perception. And that latter thread I want to use to open up some meditative possibilities of things that it is possible to explore, to experiment, perhaps that will suggest certain experiments or explorations or practices for you.

Among those, some of what I want to at least touch on or draw out the possibility is that it's actually possible to meditate on an idea, not in an intellectual sort of thinking way, that's possible at all, but what I really mean is, if you like, the essence of an idea. And it's a kind of very beautiful and soulful meditation on ideas that I hope to outline as a possibility in several different ways.

But more generally I want to also talk about some possibilities in practice, possibilities for imaginal perception, sensing the soul, specific possibilities that might easily be dismissed or closed off to us as possibilities because of the ideas that influence us in our contemporary culture, or in some subculture that we move in.

So, partly, as I said, what I want to do is, as I mentioned at the start, is to help legitimize those kinds of sensings with soul, those kinds of practices and directions. And part of that, it will be important to talk about ideas. And ideas includes ideas of ontology, that is, what we believe is real and what we believe is not real, ideas about epi-

stemology, what we consider a valid way of knowing things or knowing what is real, cosmology and anthropology, what is the nature of this universe that we find ourselves in, and what is the nature of a human being.

And all of that, interrelated with all of that, is hermeneutics, which is really the philosophy of interpretation, if you like, originally applied to sacred text, the interpretation of the Bible or the interpretation of some other spiritual text and some other tradition. But more widely in philosophy, it's come to the interpretation of existence as well.

So existence, this world, ourselves, if you like, is a kind of text, albeit not necessarily primarily linguistic, and we are involved in interpreting that, whether we realize it or want to admit it or not. We are involved in an interpretation of existence or interpretations of existence. So all this sensing with soul has also interwoven with all that and interwoven with all this business about ideas is just generally hermeneutics and what are the possibilities or the limitations on our kind of lived hermeneutics. So of tradition and what comes to us through tradition and texts and teachings, but also of existence itself.

So I want to try and weave those themes together in this talk or this group of talks.

To start, I want to try a little bit of a historical perspective. I'm talking about the ideas that influence us. Why? Because those ideas have a huge effect on what we consider real, on what we consider knowledge, on our sense of existence, of ourselves and of the world, and therefore what's legitimate or not in practice.

So a very brief, necessarily oversimplified historical perspective. You could say that medieval culture was actually very, in Europe, was actually very sophisticated, in many ways, and particularly around religious thought and theology. And somehow coming out of the intense and brilliant religious and theological kinds of debates and writings and thoughts and ponderings, coming out of that, in a kind of strange way, emerged the scientific revolution and the Renaissance and the Western Enlightenment.

Actually, it wasn't at a certain point. It was a graded transition, a scientific revolution, and the Renaissance. Well, this didn't happen just one day. It's now the Renaissance, or it's now the Scientific Revolution. Even the ideas that were at the fundament of the Scientific Revolution took several hundred years for the culture to really digest them fully, so that it became everyone's basic point of view, or at least it heavily influenced everyone's basic point of view.

So I want to draw out three strands or elements of the classical scientific view—in other words, of the view that emerged with the scientific revolution in Europe after the Middle Ages. I want to draw out three strands, not that these are the only elements, but just for our purposes.

The first aspect that gradually came to dominance was a belief in a singular and objective reality. Objective meaning it's real—things are this way whether or not I choose to believe them. This reality exists independent of how I tend to look at things, what I'm feeling at any time, or what my imagination is doing. So with classical science, in time, with the scientific revolution, emerged this worldview that held there is one reality. That reality is independent of the way of looking, independent of mood, independent of my emotions, independent of my point of view, independent of the observer—basically, independent of the subject. It's singular and objective and real.

The second element that emerged was what we can call Cartesian dualism. René Descartes divided the world basically into res cogitans and res extensa—mind and matter. They're just very different, two different things or realities in the world. There was that division, a dualism between mind and matter. You can see how this objectivism, the subject-object distinction of that first element—the singular objective reality—has a link with the distinction between mind and matter, subject and object.

The third element grew somewhat more than was originally intended. Originally, with the scientific revolution, the intention was to disregard anything that wasn't empirical—anything that couldn't be sensed with the senses or verified in experiment. There was a kind of anti-metaphysical trend there, starting with attention to what was visible or sensible, what was empirical.

But as science developed and discoveries were made and theories formulated, there was a growing structure of what was in essence behind appearances. The empirical inclination was to pay attention to appearances, to what can be sensed, and not speak of anything that can't be sensed. But as science probed deeper, it went behind appearances more and more.

For example, an electron—I mean, atoms were once an idea behind appearances, but electrons, even today, are still behind appearances in the sense that no one has ever witnessed an electron. An electron is a theory. It works very well. Actually, there are different theories of the electron, quite different theories. But as physics in particular developed, there was more behind the appearances.

Another dimension behind the appearances were physical laws. Again, no one has actually directly witnessed Newton's law of gravity or Maxwell's electromagnetic laws. They are, so to speak, behind appearances. No one sees F equals GM_1M_2 over R squared. And quite different laws, like Einstein's law of gravity, can be applied behind the appearances to explain them.

So in the movement of science, with its progress, the initial anti-metaphysical emphasis and attention to appearances and the empirical actually opened up more and more behind the appearances. This behind-the-appearances was partly what some people at the beginning of the scientific revolution—for instance, Francis Bacon and Locke—actually wanted to do away with.

So these three elements I want to draw out: the belief or assumption of a singular objective reality; Cartesian dualism of mind and matter; and the inclusion of what is actually behind appearances in the form of subatomic particles, which are not directly sensible, and physical laws themselves.

There was a wonderful and just staggeringly breathtaking expansion of scientific knowledge, with all its brilliance and creativity, until early in the twentieth century, when some discoveries were made, some experimental results came out that called everything into question—the very basic fundaments of that classical scientific worldview. What emerged was relativity and quantum mechanics, and they were an absolute revolution.

Those three principles were affected. Those three elements of the classical scientific view were affected. There was a huge shaking up—in fact, complete fracturing or dissolution of the unanimous belief in a singular objective reality. It was found that many of the properties of subatomic particles and fields and waves were indeterminate—they weren't this way or that until the observer came into the picture.

It was no longer objective or singular. Things themselves—until an observer actually conducted a specific experiment in a particular way—existed in an indeterminate state. We couldn't definitively say whether what was happening was a wave or a particle, where it was located, how fast it was moving, what its mass was, or what size it possessed. All these fundamental constituents or aspects of reality that were previously conceived as objective and singular were now severely called into question, thoroughly undermined.

Before observation, a thing exists in what's called a state of superposition. It is simultaneously both particle and wave—neither here nor there, neither this fast nor that fast, neither this mass nor that mass, neither this size nor that. Some physicists are even

beginning to question whether temporal sequence itself—the notion that things happen before or after one another—actually applies at this quantum level. Everything gets called into question.

What exists is this state of superposition—wave and particle somehow coexisting at the same time in a completely illogical manner. Statements about where a thing is, how fast it's moving, how heavy it is, or what energy it possesses become meaningless. What actually takes the place of any singular, objective reality is a waveform.

Before we make a specific measurement, we can think of a subatomic particle as existing like a probability smudge—quite probable that it's here, somewhat less probable that it's over there, even less probable that it's somewhere else entirely. This probability is smudged across an area rather than existing in one discrete location. What we have is an equation that describes this probability distribution for various fundamental aspects of reality.

Heisenberg, one of the founders of quantum physics, initially tried to explain this through his uncertainty principle by suggesting that observation itself disturbs reality. He theorized that when we look to see where an electron is, we need a photon to bounce off the electron back to our eye—and in this process, the photon moves the electron. But he later admitted this was an oversimplification, even a mistake.

The more accurate explanation has nothing to do with measurement disturbing an otherwise determinate reality. In itself, the electron or subatomic particle simply does not have any particular velocity or position. It exists more as what's called a wave function—an expression that describes a probability smudge distributed across space and time.

This collapse of belief in a singular objective reality was one revolutionary aspect of quantum physics. The second was a shaking—though less complete—of Cartesian dualism, the separation between mind and matter. Some physicists desperately wanted to preserve this division. Others moved toward materialism, insisting that everything, including mind, is ultimately just matter. Still others—perhaps a minority, though I'm not certain—suggest abandoning the mind-matter duality altogether and developing a physics that genuinely includes consciousness.

What emerged was a thorough questioning of the mind-matter divide, without any definitive conclusions. But certainly the observer appears to be involved, and the act of measurement seems integral to reality in ways that cannot be radically separated from what we then perceive as real.

The third classical principle—that behind appearances lay discoverable, concrete realities—also underwent profound transformation with quantum physics and relativity. The laws governing reality, and even our concepts of subatomic particles, became extraordinarily abstract. These governing principles became so removed from direct experience that they're utterly dependent on appearances for their meaning. An electron is not an electron without the laws that explain it, yet I cannot see those laws directly.

This entire dimension of what lies "behind appearances" became so abstract that the human mind cannot conceive of it except through highly sophisticated mathematics. That probability smudge I mentioned is actually an equation existing in multiple dimensions—potentially fourteen dimensions or more, depending on how many particles are involved. When you square the solution of that equation, you get the probability density of this probability smudge at any given location and time.

Really abstract. Or consider Einstein's general theory of relativity about the curvature of space and time. This too exists behind appearances, so to speak. But particularly with quantum physics, the dimension of reality that lay behind appearances grew larger and larger, becoming increasingly abstract.

Wolfgang Pauli, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, wrote in a letter to a friend—this was from 1948, though he could have written it earlier—"When the layman says 'reality,' he usually thinks that he is talking about something evident and well-known. By contrast, it seems to me that it is the most important and exceedingly difficult task of our time to work out a new idea of reality." He goes on to say something we may return to at the end of this talk: "What I have in mind concerning such a new idea of reality is, in provisional terms, the idea of the reality of the symbol. The reality of the symbol."

This Nobel Prize-winning physicist later in his life became a patient of Carl Jung, the analytical psychologist. Only for a short time—Jung actually passed him over to someone else because Jung was deeply interested in Pauli's ideas regarding the cosmos, mind and matter. Jung and Pauli developed a long and fruitful correspondence and friendship over many years, developing what some people call dual-aspect monism.

What this really involves is, again, a singular view of reality—but reality as something that's neither mind nor matter, neither psyche nor physis, from the Greek word from which we get "physics." Rather, both mind and matter are different aspects of an underlying reality that coordinates with itself in various ways. That reality is, so to speak, beyond mind or matter. It's neither mind nor matter, but something from which

mind and matter emerge epistemically—meaning in our consciousness when we experience, in our knowing, this singular, transcendent reality. This monistic structure, this one kind of thing, splits into subject-object, mind and matter.

So again here, in what Pauli hints at and worked out, there's something behind appearances—a singular idea. It's not entirely objective because he's tying together mind and matter in terms of what gets experienced. He had to do this because he was at the forefront of the quantum physics revolution and could not completely believe in purely objective perception of reality.

Notice he also spoke of "the reality of the symbol." For him, symbols were archetypal—this is where his interest with Jung and the unconscious and psyche emerged. But also mathematical symbols. He did fascinating work tracing archetypal ideas in the evolution of scientific ideas, particularly with Kepler, the beautiful astronomer who developed mathematical theories of astronomy. Pauli showed how driven Kepler was by certain religious and archetypal ideas—that Kepler actually discovered his theories based on archetypal images and symbols that shaped those theories.

One of Pauli's key points concerns "our time." He was writing in 1948, and now, seventy years later, it's still our time. These conundrums, this situation of what influences us, what has evolved in science—no one has really gotten their head around it. Quantum physics has made tremendous inroads into technology and culture, but not into how people actually conceive existence and sense experience.

So it's still our time. The sense of reality remains—what were his words?—"the most important and exceedingly difficult task of our time to work out a new idea of reality." We haven't worked that out in a way that really shapes our perceptions.

I want to highlight and draw attention to some of our legacies—the legacies we inherit that influence our thinking, our beliefs, our assumptions, and our experiences, and then what we dare to do in life and how we relate to life, but also as practitioners.

Now, this is an oversimplified story, but one important thing to acknowledge is that the legacies we have are complex and contradictory. Let me pull out a few threads here.

I was reading Christian Fuchs, another physicist—a contemporary quantum physicist interested in quantum Bayesianism. He was discussing Richard Feynman, whom I mentioned the other day, another Nobel Prize winner in physics. Feynman was quite a character, and some of his interviews are famous. He once said something like: if there was a massive catastrophe—he was probably thinking of atomic bombs or atomic warfare—and everything of culture was destroyed...

little snippet of wisdom that I would hope survives and that would be the basis to then build everything worldwide—I'm paraphrasing him—would be the statement that, the nugget of knowledge that everything is made of atoms. That is the key hypothesis. So this is what Feynman said. Once you just pick up that hypothesis, everything else follows. He was more interested in science than anything else.

Christian Fuchs wrote, "The problem is the imagery that usually lies behind the phrase 'everything is made of.'" I'm going into all this because I'm really interested in the ideas that influence and limit us and direct and shape our experience, both meditatively but also just our life experience.

So Fuchs writes, "The problem is the imagery that usually lies behind the phrase, 'everything is made of.'" And he cites William James, the philosopher and psychologist, who called this problem "the great original sin of the rationalistic mind."

Then Fuchs quotes William James from his book *The Meaning of Truth*. This is William James now: "Let me give the name of vicious abstractionism to a way of using concepts which may be thus described. We conceive a concrete situation by singling out some salient or important feature in it and classing it under that. Then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privately"—I think what he really means is singularly. "Reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestion of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of nothing but that concept"—that's the key point, nothing but that concept—"and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged."

"Abstraction, functioning in this way, becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought." It's stopping something. It's limiting something. "It mutilates things," he continues. "It creates difficulties and finds impossibilities. And more than half the trouble that metaphysicians and logicians"—but I would say human beings, scientists, Buddhists, whatever—"give themselves over the paradoxes and dialectical puzzles of the universe may, I am convinced, be traced to this relatively simple source. The viciously private"—again, maybe it's a historical thing, but I think the word singular would be better—"the viciously singular employment of abstract characters and class names is, I am persuaded, one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind."

So, in other words, and this is really key: Feynman says the key thing is everything is made of atoms. And then what creeps in for us as that view—and that view that emerged with the scientific revolution—really gained hold as the fundamental view, the fundamental take on what is real. What's real? An atom is real. Or he could have said a

subatomic particle is real, getting more, quote, fundamental. I think what he means is if you think everything is made of atoms, then you ask, well, what is an atom? And you'll get beyond what we nowadays call an atom to the fundamental particles. Everything is made of fundamental particles, is probably what he wants to say.

And then what creeps in as a kind of axiomatic dogma of our present culture is that this becomes a dominant view: Everything is really only made of the meaningless movement and combination of material particles.

So, we have here an instance of what Jung described—how the victor of the scientific worldview over the kind of medieval religious worldview actually becomes a prisoner because, and this is quite subtle, it's subtly present in the background of our thinking about the world and of our opening or closing possibilities for perception and interaction and relationship with the world. Undermining subtly—subtly present and subtly undermining a kind of ground for meaningfulness, for soul and sensing with soul—is this kind of dogma of what William James called the vicious abstractionism of "everything is made of."

In other words, it's really, A, the realism, and B, the "only." It's really only, and only what? Particles. What Feynman really meant to say: Everything is really only meaningless movements and combinations and interactions of atomic particles.

So whatever we engage in as human beings, and even if it's spiritual work or soul work or psychological work or whatever, there's somehow pervading in the kind of groundwater of our mind this: "Oh, but it's really only..."

Now, sometimes that comes to the forefront, and for some people it's really at the forefront all the time, and for others, it's just there in, as I say, the groundwater. It's in the bedrock, and it exerts its influence. This vicious abstractionism, which is one of the problems that grew out of the success of the scientific revolution, became scientism. It's "nothing but." That's the only thing that's real. Everything is that.

So hooray for William James to point out this vicious abstractionism. He was actually a scientist himself, which makes his critique all the more valuable.

Let me share an example that illustrates how this epistemological narrowness affects our capacity for soulful perception. Someone told me recently of a beautiful soul-sensing experience with the moon. She was sitting outside on her back step some months ago when the full moon suddenly began talking to her—speaking in a very personal way, with tremendous love and tenderness. She opened to that communion and entered into a whole series of meditations, sensing soul and relationship with the moon. This

profoundly changed and opened up her perspectives on matter, soul, life—all kinds of fundamental questions. It was very moving and deeply soulful, genuinely important for her spiritual development.

This is not someone ungrounded or disconnected from ordinary life. She pays her bills, maintains functional relationships as well as anyone I know—in all practical ways, she's thoroughly integrated into daily existence.

Recently, near another full moon, she found herself again within sight of that luminous presence. Similar experiences began opening up for her—that same personal love and intimate relationship, the moon speaking to her personally with great tenderness. There was quite a richness to these encounters that I cannot fully convey here.

What I want to emphasize is that while the first experience flowed quite naturally, the second time she noticed some hesitation—the kind of ambivalence and reluctance to open to soul-sensing that I mentioned at the beginning. She experienced doubt.

Part of this reluctance arose from very practical considerations. She recognized that sensing with soul demands a high quality of attentiveness—a refinement of sensitivity and openness that can be quite demanding to sustain. It requires being truly present and available in ways that ask a lot of us. We have to be genuinely prepared for such encounters.

This mode of perception also demands sometimes inhabiting a certain vulnerability. As I've mentioned regarding the necessity of open heart and humility, we sometimes need to really connect with what's emotionally difficult and remain present with that discomfort. In this case, there was a particular vulnerability she had to actually inhabit—and that's genuinely challenging. We must be willing to do this inner work, and soul-sensing might open us even further into tender places.

When we're truly open as human beings, we often equate openness with vulnerability because we're not protected, not walled off, not defended. So there was understandable ambivalence arising from these factors.

She also experienced hesitation because of what she called "the current drama"—the immediate life situation requiring attention. This wasn't papañca, mere mental proliferation, but genuine relational and work issues that needed addressing. The soul-sensing with the moon relativized this current drama, placing her immediate concerns within a much larger context.

But this relativizing doesn't happen through transcendence or dismissal, not through aloof disinterest or detached equanimity. Rather, the view opens and the whole sense of existence expands, contextualizing whatever is occurring in one's immediate experience. This opening of perspective can feel threatening because we become accustomed to certain views of existence. When we suddenly see that our current situation is only part of a much vaster landscape—a soulscape with tremendous panoramic depth—that expansion can be unsettling.

But beyond these understandable sources of ambivalence, there were also intellectual doubts—and this is what I particularly want to emphasize. These doubts were partly epistemological in nature. How can I trust this experience? What gives it any sense of reality or validity? Can I call it genuine knowing, or is it merely a strange delusion?

She was also dealing with flu at the time, which created additional doubt. Flu brings an extreme assault on the physical system and a corresponding emotional vulnerability that accompanies bodily weakness. Understanding how body and mind affect each other, she wondered if her vulnerability was creating this experience—fabricating it in the problematic sense of fabrication because she was ill and needing comfort.

Drawing on psychological knowledge, she thought this might be a kind of regression to early narcissism, when the vulnerable infant believes everything speaks personally to them. Perhaps her perception of the moon as personally concerned with her could be explained away as emotional and physical vulnerability creating need, which activated strategies from infantile narcissism.

This brings me to what I've discussed in the Eros Unfettered talks—the epistemicide that has occurred in the name of the scientific method. With the global dominance of modern Western culture, there has been both a tremendous liberation from superstition and dogma, and simultaneously a devastating narrowing of what we consider valid ways of knowing.

in our place geographically and also in other places geographically in the world, there is the insistence, or at the very least the sort of strong insinuation and superciliousness regarding the classical scientific method and its assumptions as the only valid way of knowing. It's the only valid epistemology. That combination of rationality and empiricism, that particular combination of rationality and empiricism, with all the reality assumptions woven in there.

As I pointed out earlier, what happens then is there is an invalidation in this epistemicide—in this killing off of other kinds of epistemology, of other possibly valid ways of knowing, other ideas about ways of knowing reality and realities. In this killing off, in

this epistemicide, only the scientific method remains valid, which means disregarding, preferably getting rid of one's emotions and one's imagination. The invalidation of the emotions and also the imagination in epistemology—in what we regard as knowing.

So you don't want to be swayed by your emotion. It's better that knowledge is what happens when you have put emotions completely aside, when there is no emotion, or when you kind of discount what emotions are present.

Contrast that with a possible epistemology which actually includes the emotions as a range of different perspectives or doors, if you like, to reality. So including difficult emotions of vulnerability and grief—these emotions become valid, valuable, valid different lenses or perspectives on reality. An emotion like the kind of vulnerability my friend was feeling, or like someone else wrote me an email describing very deep grief at the death of her mother and another death of someone close. And that grief opening up a whole perspective, a whole soul, sensing the soul.

Could we have an epistemology that actually includes emotions, including emotions that are vulnerable and grief and whatever, as valid different lenses or perspectives or ways of knowing? In other words, including the emotions in possibilities for ways of knowing. They open up our sense of things, our senses, in ways that might not otherwise be possible.

Again, talking about the kinds of ideas that have just kind of got into the bedrock of our psyche, conscious and unconscious minds. And they really have an influence and an impact—in this case, doubt or that kind of ambivalence or hesitation or reluctance, or in some cases just actually cutting off a certain door or gate or avenue of sensing, of experience, of validation of experience and perception.

But it is complex, I think. As I said, we receive multiple legacies from our cultural past, and it's complex. So despite this kind of vicious abstractionism lurking in the bedrock of our psyche, especially regarding matter, it's also true in the complexity of things that we don't, generally speaking, most of us don't completely believe that kind of what's called scientific materialism or reductionist materialism, or physicalism is probably a good word—that kind of physicalism. Everything is really only this meaningless movement, interaction of material particles.

Some people want to kind of go that route. You know, Descartes, at the beginning of the scientific revolution, started, you could say, with a three-part division, not just a two-part, a dualism of mind and matter, but also there was God. And so you had God, mind, and matter. It didn't take very long for God to—actually, it was Descartes who

partly was responsible for sort of demoting God as a sort of... He did the creative work and then he just sort of steps back and sort of looks on at the machinery of the universe and the machinations of mind and matter.

So God was kind of demoted right at the beginning and then just gradually more so and more so until there was no real need for a view of God. It was thought and so what we just had was left with just mind and matter. And then within that, there's even a strong movement, and some people are loudly insistent that actually it's all just matter. So mind is just what's called an epiphenomenon. It's just a kind of emergence out of matter. It's just one of the clever things that matter can do is be conscious, be cognizant, be aware of other matter, if you like.

I don't think we live that way. Even the people who really try and push that quite loudly in our culture, that kind of radical physicalism, that particular vicious abstractionism of physicalism, of scientific materialism—I don't think even they really live that way.

If it were the case, this kind of fundamental materialism, scientific materialism or physicalism, then it would mean that our mind contents are essentially matter, they're material. Your happiness or your suffering or your perception of beauty or whatever, or your meaningfulness, or your being in love, or whatever—really, they're just certain neurons firing, or certain chemicals, chemical molecules or atoms reacting in the brain, or electrical impulses just matter. Essentially, that's what they really are.

So your falling in love is just the movement of certain particles, material particles, and their interaction, usually considered in the brain, sometimes considered in the whole body. And then your falling out of love and your suffering there is also just matter doing different things, being in different places or moving in different places or different interactions between matter particles in the brain.

So in that sense, the suffering of falling out of love or the suffering at the loss of some beauty—that too is just illusion. It's really just atoms or particles or molecules moving or combining. That's what the universe is: the movement and combination and interaction of particles.

Amazingly, leave this matter in the universe alone long enough with the physical laws, and you get life. Out of life emerges consciousness in some forms, and eventually the extraordinary consciousness of human beings. But essentially, what's really happening is just particles moving.

Yet even those who push forward such a view don't actually live or think that way. We don't run our societies that way. We take human suffering very seriously. We try, for the most part—or at least some human suffering—to address it in law, in morality and ethics.

But this view of radical physicalism or vicious abstractionism that extends to scientific materialism and scientism—if we're going to say we do take suffering as real, that we consider it real as something meaningful, then we don't live in a way that regards suffering as merely the movement of atoms in the brain or electrical impulses.

So if suffering is real, though it's built or fabricated as a mental construct from matter, then so is happiness. And so is beauty. As we say, beauty is in the eye of the beholder—it's not in the thing itself. And so is love. And so is meaningfulness, and so is soulfulness, and so is the sense and perception and conception of divinity.

All these are as real or unreal as suffering or pain—even physical pain. Physical pain is, if you like, mental. Atoms or particles themselves don't experience hurt. Pain is a mental experience, not a physical one. Emotional pain, definitely; physical pain also. All are merely—can be regarded as—the movement and interaction of material particles, which are not immediately perceived or conceived as such.

When we move in the world, we don't live in a way that reduces something like suffering or pain to this view of radical physicalism and its vicious abstractionism. But actually, happiness, beauty, love, soulfulness, meaningfulness, and the sense of divinity are all just as much mental constructs as suffering.

So you could say: if you're going to respect suffering, all these others are equally worthy of respect. Or if you're going to disrespect suffering by holding to that radical physicalism, then you have to actually disrespect suffering—probably a lot of suffering—and make a case for respecting only certain kinds.

But if you reduce everything to this physicalism, you circle back again to a possibility—you open the door again for the respectability of soul, soul qualities, and soul experiences. All of these are equally worthy of respect or disrespect. All have equal value. So the perception of divinity, beauty, even the sense of the ideal—the idea of beauty and essence that we'll return to—soul, all of it, as much as pain, as suffering, even as physical pain.

Even in that radical view, it's complex. We don't actually live that way in this vicious abstractionism, but it nags at us. We're pulled in different directions.

There's a rabbi—I think he's still alive—called Adin Steinsaltz, somewhere in the States, in New Jersey. He points out another example of how we're influenced by contradictory ideas that shape our sense of existence, right and wrong, value, and meaning.

He observes that one of the most obvious things in the world is that all human beings are not equal. It's obviously not true that human beings are equal. There are vast differences in all kinds of ways between this human being and that one—better at this, not so good at that, more developed here, stronger there.

But democracy—our institution that we respect so much, although I sometimes wonder myself—theoretically, at least, democracy and the humanism that underlies it enshrines as law the principle that everyone is equal.

That the opinion—everyone's opinion is somehow equal. And he said, because it's obvious that you just have to look at human beings or pay attention to what they do and what they say and how they think, their acts and what they're capable of, it's obvious that humans are not equal. So our institution of democracy is kind of assuming soul, he would say. We're assuming something that we can't directly see that has some kind of universal value in everyone. And it's somehow inviolable, no matter what the apparent differences in human beings, the apparent inequalities between human beings.

So again, you get a whole other kind of influx into our modern worldview than this vicious abstractionism of scientific materialism or reductionist materialism. It could be—I mean, I'm not sure about what Steinsaltz says there, because it could be that our enshrining of a kind of equality between human beings is just silently acknowledging our postmodern uncertainty or agnosticism regarding what is of value. We are so confused about values that we can't say or declare, and so we just say, "Everyone's equal." I don't know, and actually there are other ways to look at all that, but I think it's an interesting point that Steinsaltz makes, and possibly that really is coming in, that sense of soul that's sort of hiding behind. Again, it's somehow worked its way into the bedrock of our worldview.

But as I said, we are heirs to a complex legacy, a legacy that is a complex of contradictory influxes of ideas, and in a way it's confusing. We are confused. But still, there's a way in which, as I pointed out, I think what Jung said is true: the scientific revolution's way of thought was a victor at that time, but the victor slowly becomes the prisoner of the world that it conquered. And so, for example, we find ourselves not entirely free to pick up that exploration of the range of possibilities that we call sensing with soul, because we're a little bit imprisoned, or a lot imprisoned, by these influxes of ideas that

become dominant ideas and become—they won in the cultural debate, but they become, we become their prisoner, or it becomes, that view becomes imprisoned itself, it can't move out of itself.

So ideas, as I said, shape and limit our experience. They shape and limit what we consider worthy of practice or legitimate practice. They shape and limit our perception of self, other, world. They shape how we sense existence in terms of life and death, and also they shape and limit what we do in the world, our acts and what we devote our energy to and our intention.

Now, can you see that this will still apply in terms of practice, in terms of Dharma practice? So for example, and you've heard me allude to this several times over the years, we can get a kind of reductionist Dharma. So oftentimes Abhidhamma teachings are reductionist. They reduce things, again, to atomic units—both matter and mind, atomic units—and then these discrete atomic units working in a kind of process. And the practice is shaped in accordance with that idea of what reality is, and so one goes for this kind of micro view that will expose this, that will actually experience this atomic reality or as close to it as possible. One works towards experiencing that.

And then that whole process, that whole approach reinforces itself. I believe this, I look for that, I believe this, I look in a certain way, I see that. My seeing that confirms my view of it as a reality, as a truth, rather than as a perspective. A microscopic view, a narrow focus of awareness, a very sharp attention or mindfulness is a perspective. And that view of atomism is a perspective. It's part of the idea that influences the perception. It's a perspective. It's one perspective among many.

Sometimes a person's Dharma practice and understanding and whole trajectory is imprisoned in a kind of reductionist view of different kinds within the Dharma. Perhaps also you can be aware of sometimes when I refer to the epistemology, the dominant epistemology or the epistemicide that does away with or disvalues emotions, devalues emotions as having a place within, as opening up ways of knowing, as opening up perspectives, and strives even for a kind of emotion-free state. You can also witness that in certain kinds of Dharma approaches very easily.

We conceive of an ideal state of certain emotions, particularly equanimity. And the common view of equanimity is that somehow in equanimity everything's calmed down and we're just really seeing clearly without any distortion of any emotion because we're just really steady. The lake is clear and we can see clearly. Or, as I said, certain emotions. Or, with mindfulness, the idea is that a certain emotion might be there, but if I keep practicing mindfulness, actually there's a quieting of the emotional state. But when I'm practicing mindfulness, when I'm mindful, even if an emotion's there, I've

somehow got some distance on it so that I'm not so much seeing through the emotion as I'm devaluing what it tells me because there's an epistemic devaluing because of the kind of aloofness or distance we have, or perspective actually we have, on emotions. So that can creep in as well.

So this reductionist view and the atomism there was exactly one of the things that, if you like, Nāgārjuna as the father of the Mahāyāna, or one of the fathers of the Mahāyāna, was exactly what he took issue with. And you can read his whole body of work as really picking holes in that reductionist dharma, that kind of atomic realist view.

Or, again, so I'm talking again about ideas that limit our experience. In this case, what about Dharma ideas or the ways that this limitation that comes from certain ideas happens within a Dharma context? So another one, again, we've touched on it either directly or indirectly, is the absence of the concept of eros and soul-making, the concepts of eros and soul-making. If you just consider the concept of eros...

And the absence of that concept doesn't allow, for me, doesn't allow enough differentiations of desire. It will lead to certain blind spots. It will lead to certain gates closing, not even witnessing, oh, that's a possible gate. It will lead to a certain very tightly circumscribed notion of what awakening is or could be.

It will lead also to, because of the way eros will stimulate the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, and that stimulates and stretches and expands and deepens our ideas and perceptions of things in sensing with soul, the absence of eros will also lead to a kind of rigidification and a narrowing, a narrow rigidification of what, for example, matter is. Matter is this. It's the four elements or whatever. Mind is this, in some view of what mind is or what mental elements are. Awakening is this.

So there isn't, because of the absence of eros, there isn't the possibility for the eros-psyche-logos dynamic to really get going and stretch and expand and add dimensionality and open up the view and open up the ideation.

And then a further problem or limitation coming from the absence of the concept of eros comes from, for me, if we don't have the idea of eros, then we actually don't have an adequate understanding of our motivation or our desire in practice and how it works. Without the concept of eros and soul-making, we don't have an adequate or wide enough or rich enough complete enough understanding of what is motivating us, what are we actually desiring when we practice and when we practice consistently and with a lot of love and dedication.

There's not therefore an adequate understanding or model or theory of our motivations and desires as they already exist. It's already driving us. Someone who loves practice already has eros and soul-making involved in that love, in that dedication of practice. As I said, where we love, where we're dedicated, where we're devoted—I don't mean just devoted in a typically religious sense, I mean devoted, just devoted to something. You know, devoted to doing, devoted to practicing, for example, devoted to awareness, whatever it is. Where there is love, dedication, devotion, there is eros and a sense of soulfulness and soul-making in the ways that we would use them. It might be limited, but they're still operating there.

So with the absence of the concepts of eros, ideas of eros and soul, we don't actually have an adequate or rich enough, complete enough theory of what motivates us, what we desire, and how that actually works to propel and prolong a life of practice.

I'm going to stop here for today, but I want to continue just on this theme. I'm reluctant to rush through it because I think it's so important and it's also opening up things from a slightly different perspective than what I've done before. So I'm hoping that not rushing will be more helpful.

So let's do the second part of this business about ideas tomorrow.

CHAPTER 129

Between Icon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h38

In this continuation of his examination of image and hermeneutics in meditation, Rob Burbea delves into Western philosophical traditions that can support soul-making practice. Drawing on phenomenologists like Husserl and Dilthey, he explores how our cultural inheritance of ideas forms a psychological bedrock that may unconsciously imprison or liberate our capacity for sensing with soul.

Burbea examines the limitations of phenomenology's attempt to investigate the "life world" of appearances, showing how even "bare attention" and mindfulness are themselves ways of looking embedded with metaphysical assumptions. He explores how different philosophical attempts to question established epistemologies and ontologies often fall short because they remain influenced by the very limited thinking they sought to transcend.

The talk emphasizes how all perception depends on ways of looking and includes metaphysical concepts - ontological beliefs about what's real, epistemological assumptions about valid knowledge, and cosmological views about the nature of existence. Using the Jewish Midrashic tradition as a model, Burbea presents an alternative approach to truth as multiple, contextual, and requiring passionate engagement rather than detached observation. This passionate participation in questioning our conceptual frameworks can itself become soul-making, opening space for the fertility of imagination and the sacred dimensions of existence.

We started this talk by pointing out that for many people, even when there's considerable interest and attraction to practicing this way and exploring this whole realm and the possibilities of sensing the soul imagining and perceiving, there can still be a kind of force or pull from the culturally dominant view that is entrenched in our psyche and exerts its influence—its stern judgment on what we might be thinking or how we might be practicing, sometimes in very quiet and subtle ways.

It may be that for many people, the practice of sensing the soul and that whole orientation needs some support through intellectual exploration of ideas and concepts that might be inhibiting it, preventing it, judging it, dismissing it. By being aware of these ideas, looking at them, questioning them, and seeing if there are other possible ideas that can give this opening legitimacy and support, we can feel space in which to

explore. Can we pry open this space by considering the influence of ideas, questioning them, and finding ideas that will open up space and provide ground and legitimization for sensing the soul and all the possibilities that brings?

As part of this work, we are heirs to a complex and confusing legacy of ideas coming to us through culture and history, forming something of a bedrock in the psyche. In recognizing this fact and being aware of what exactly these ideas are, where they come from, what influence they have, we can begin to question and poke at that bedrock and the rocks that make it up, so that imprisonment doesn't happen automatically and unconsciously. Perhaps we can then turn the soil, to use a different metaphor, of the ground made up of these clumps of ideas and rocks. In looking at and working that soil, we can turn it so it becomes a different ground—soil that now supports fertility and fecundity for imagining, perceiving, and sensing the soul.

At some point, for some of you, this very questioning and consideration of ideas and playing in the realm of ideas as they relate to, inhibit, support, or open this whole direction of practice may itself become soul-making. One's sense of being at a certain place in a certain culture with certain needs, perspectives, and dominant trends, and one's whole participation in the culture and the evolution, contest, or conversation of worldviews within a culture as it moves forward in time—that whole vision and sense of engagement with different ideas can become soul-making.

In the first part of yesterday's talk, we looked at some threads we can identify within the legacy from the scientific revolution and the classical scientific worldview overstepping its boundary into scientism, including what William James called "vicious abstractionism." We explored how this comes into our life and gives rise to doubt, inhibition, hesitation, or downright forbidding of certain orientations in practice, certain directions, devaluing certain perceptions, experiences, openings, and aspects of our being.

Alongside the scientific legacy, we can consider the Western philosophical legacy—a complex and rich interweaving of different philosophical traditions in dialogue with science. I'd also like to weave in some attempts within Western philosophy to open up and question the established epistemologies, ontologies, and worldviews that became entrenched with the Western Enlightenment and shaped what some call the modernist worldview. These were attempts to challenge the domination of scientific thinking.

As we examine some of these attempts, we should also notice how they often fall short of what we might need to support our work, how some fall short because they remain influenced, often unwittingly, by some of the limited thinking they sought to break free of. Hopefully we can consider where they might be expanded, added to, or themselves challenged and opened up in different ways.

I'd like to pick up this story in the early 20th century. There was the evolution of science I talked about, the First and Second World Wars, and obvious concern about values, morals, and where humanity was heading. Several people pointed out the divorce or disconnection between scientific exploration on one hand and the human context in which it happens on the other, including consideration of moral values and other values. Science tells us nothing about value, certainly not moral values.

Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher, wrote a book called *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. He was living in Germany after the Nazis rose to power, and part of his concern was pointing to science and what he called "the positivistic reduction of the idea of science to mere factual science." Positivism basically holds that if something isn't material and measurable, it's nonsense.

This idea of positivism started to take over in certain philosophical lineages and more widely in sociology and as a life view. Husserl points out that the positivistic reduction of science to mere factual science means that science has nothing to do with human values or questions of human freedom. It "excludes in principle precisely the questions which humanity, given over in our unhappy times to the most portentous upheavals, finds the most burning"—questions of the meaning or meaninglessness of the whole of human existence.

Can we not say something similar in our time?

This way of thinking had forgotten about or devalued the human context, treating it as something material and measurable, applying classical scientific methodology to human sciences and the study of humanity, leaving very little to say about values and human life.

One of Husserl's responses was to focus on what he called the "life-world." This concept...

If you're somewhat interested in these ideas but don't want to dive deeply into reading volumes of philosophy, there's an excellent introduction to many of these philosophical concepts in David West's book *Continental Philosophy*. I think it's really accessible—not too long, and you can dip in and out of it. If you find yourself drawn to these kinds of ideas, it might be an interesting book for some of you. I'm paraphrasing a bit from what he said there.

Husserl responds to this kind of crisis, partly, with his idea of the life world. He wants to explore this life world, which is basically our sense of life as we live it. It's the ordinary context—the conventional presumption that I exist and you exist separate

from me, that I'm in my house right now, that the table is in front of me—just the conventional view of the world. This life world forms the context and the basic presupposition of all thought and action.

It's almost like giving a context to science and philosophy, understanding them as practices that take place within the life world and derive their power through the life world, through our culture, through social networks, but also through what Husserl called "an unquestioned ground of presuppositions." This is really important—an unquestioned ground of presuppositions, a background of unreflective assumptions, values, and practices that make up the life world.

Husserl says that in all scientific inquiry, philosophical inquiry, and so forth, "the everyday surrounding world of life is presupposed as existing. The surrounding world in which all of us, even I who am now philosophizing, consciously have our existence... here also the sciences as cultural facts in this world with their scientists and theories. In this world we are objects among objects in the sense of the life world, namely as being here and there in the plain certainty of experience before anything that is established scientifically, whether in physiology, psychology or sociology. On the other hand, we are subjects for this world, namely as the ego subjects, experiencing it, contemplating it, valuing it, related to it purposefully."

There's a lot in that dense quote, but one piece I'd like to highlight is the emphasis on the life world. His philosophy then emphasized and limited itself to the investigation of the appearances of the life world—this idea of staying with appearances, the appearances of life as we experience it in everyday existence that we take for granted, containing all these unreflective presuppositions and assumptions.

This wasn't a completely new word or philosophical direction, but in a way he gave birth to or started the phenomenological movement, although Hegel and Kant had used this term before. But phenomenology as the study of—the limiting of philosophical investigation to—the appearances that are part of our everyday life, inner and outer. And so this phenomenological movement was born in philosophy: staying with the appearances of the life world.

You can hear, if not the exact language then at least some of the tenor of this in many of our current explorations of Buddhist practice, insight meditation, or mindfulness. People use slightly different emphases, but there is also in contemporary dharma this emphasis on attention to and investigation of the appearances of everyday life—the experiences and appearances of our lives. Can we bring attention to that with mindfulness? Can we bring bare attention to that? These are common themes in contemporary dharma teaching.

But again, even though science started with "let's give attention to the appearances," both the presuppositions that exist there and the ways these practices develop bring new appearances as I'm investigating appearances. It moves out of the life world. In other words, we start with appearances, but either we're approaching with a certain network of ideas that become concepts that influence the way of looking and thus what is experienced—as I'll return to shortly—or we're simply saying, "Give really close, bare attention to my experience of the world and my inner experience right now, the life world."

What happens is that the attention starts to deconstruct one's everyday life world experience. Then, as I mentioned before, there's a kind of reductionist paradigm or deconstructionist and then reductionist paradigm operating. "Ah, you see, when I look closely, this is what I find—that must be reality: these atomic units of perception, sensation, vedanā, consciousness, and so forth."

Sometimes this kind of phenomenological intention in mindfulness and bare attention actually pushes and opens up this sense of the range of what the life world is, and sometimes it declares what it experiences through a certain lens as reality.

But let's stay with Western philosophy a little longer. We'll return to dharma shortly.

Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo makes a point that I really want to highlight. Husserl, with his idea of bringing it back to this basic sense of existence and the basic experience we have of life—world, inner, outer, and all that we take for granted wrapped up in that experience—had a really good idea. But there are problems with it, quite a few problems.

One is, as Vattimo points out, there is no "phenomenological analysis of experience."

So this is what Husserl wanted to do—a phenomenological analysis and description and investigation of experience. But Vattimo points out (he's a much more recent philosopher) that there is no "phenomenological analysis of experience," and he places "phenomenological" in quotation marks deliberately. The quotation marks cannot be avoided here. There is no phenomenological analysis of experiences that is not conditioned—that is, made possible and qualified by the fact of belonging to a tradition.

In other words, everything that Husserl wanted to see as a kind of universal of human existence was actually how everyone in his society at his time, within a certain tradition, sensed existence. How different it would be if we talked about a phenomenological investigation of, say, a tribe in Papua New Guinea or the Amazon that had never

had contact with Westerners. Their experience, their—phenomena means "appearance" in Greek, by the way, so it's the investigation, the logos of phenomena, of appearance—their world, their life world, would be completely different.

So Vattimo is pointing out that we're always belonging to a tradition. It's not as though there is an experience, and then after that, we add intellectual abstractions to it. Vattimo goes on to write: Is not this fact of belonging to a tradition—which colors, shapes, limits our phenomenological analysis as well as actually being part of the fabrication of our life world—is this not a situation familiar to hermeneutics, familiar to this whole branch of philosophy that deals with the interpretation of texts and of existence? That one who is dominated by prejudices cannot recognize and thematize them as such. Something Nietzsche pointed out even before Husserl was writing.

So the life world is something that exists for a certain history, for a certain historical cultural context. And then the analysis of that life world is also an analysis dependent on a historical cultural tradition, philosophical tradition, and context.

One of the things Husserl was famous for saying was "to the things themselves." In other words, let's put aside metaphysics, let's put aside this kind of positivism of science, and go directly to the things that present themselves to us. But when we consider the historical cultural context and what we bring to that investigation—and also to our experience itself—that rallying cry for phenomenology "to the things themselves" seems rather naive. This becomes clear once we've seen the dependence of any perceptions of things on the way of looking in the moment (which I'll return to) and on the concepts entertained within the way of looking at any point (which I've mentioned and will come back to).

Those concepts that operate in us will include scientific and other ideas for us now—different from what they would be for someone living in exactly this spot where I am now in England, say, hundreds of years ago in medieval times, before the scientific revolution. The very way we perceive "the things themselves," so-called, would be colored by—or rather, implicitly, almost tacitly colored, infected, shaped, and limited by—a scientific worldview that we've all been educated in, along with other ideas.

So actually it becomes hard to separate phenomenology from science, or rather it becomes hard to separate a phenomenological investigation from being infected with ideas from science.

More generally, we see that a person's experience of phenomena is hugely conditioned, shaped, determined, allowed or disallowed—this or that sense of things, this or that experience—by the current worldview, the *Weltanschauung*, in the culture in which they live.

But even this is not quite right; it's a little too simple. Heidegger, or some interpretations of Heidegger, stressed what's called a kind of historical "thrownness" into a zeitgeist. In other words, I am born at a certain time in a certain place in history; I'm thrown into a cultural worldview. And that's part of the problem that needs to be realized. This changes over time.

But even that is not universal. Not everyone thrown into—let's say, like I was born in England in the 1960s and then lived through that, spending some time in the States and coming back—is going to have the same worldview, or even the same set of influences, strands of influences. The currents in history now are broad, so it's not universal. Even the influences operating for someone in a certain location in time and space, thrown by their birth into that location, vary considerably.

For Westerners living today, there is no longer just one common worldview or way of experiencing the life world. So this historical thrownness, or what's called the zeitgeist (the spirit of the times), is not an objective fact, a reality, what some philosophers like to call a "facticity"—something that's just there and you can't do anything about it.

There are lots of different influences of ideas, and it varies from individual to individual and subculture to subculture—which influences are dominant, how they are valued, and so forth. Even the whole movement of history is shaped by perspective: the victors of a war, even if it's only a cultural war, write the histories. Some of you might know Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States*—a history of the United States that doesn't get taught in high school. It's history from the perspective of Native Americans or African American slaves. Who writes the history books?

So there are many histories and many influences of ideas, given different weights and different influences in shaping, limiting, and fabricating the worldview—and then the analysis in what we might call attempted phenomenological analysis of that worldview. All this needs to be taken into account.

Sometimes with insight meditation, we might be tempted to assume that we are employing an attention or mindfulness that reveals what things are, the way things are. If we employ an attention that "reveals"—and I'll put that in quotation marks—an atomistic world of sensation and experience, we might be tempted to think: "Oh, that's a phe-

nomenological approach because I'm just looking at my experience, looking at the appearances, taking them as I find them, investigating them carefully. I don't have any presuppositions."

Then what we see reveals—depending on how you're applying mindfulness, and that's the key point—perhaps an atomistic view. And we think: "Oh, so this is the phenomenological approach. When I employ the phenomenological approach, this is what I see."

And then I'm corroborated by certain texts. I say, yes, there are just... The self is the five aggregates. There is just this... and so forth—atoms of vedanā and sensation, moments of consciousness, and so on. So there's that approach in philosophy and there's sometimes that approach within Dharma where we think, oh, that's something like the phenomenological approach.

There was another German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and in some ways he could be regarded even more than Husserl as the grandfather of the phenomenological movement in the twentieth century. He really didn't like this kind of reductionism in psychology or philosophy, and so he was rather scornful and pointed out that—I'm quoting now—we live and move not in a sphere of sensations, but of objects presenting themselves to us. Not in a sphere of feelings—sensations and feelings are in inverted commas here—but of value, meaning, and so on. In other words, we can deconstruct appearances, but in deconstructing we also miss something. It's like not seeing the forest for the trees.

To me, neither perspective realizes fully enough the dependence of experiences on ways of looking, nor how broad and diverse is the range of ways of looking, and therefore of experiences. In other words, when I look in a certain way, I get this experience—and it might be an atomistic sense of appearances, appearances as atoms. When I look another way, I get very different experiences of objects and values and meanings, and so forth. And the range extends way beyond all that.

So insisting that one or the other is the real way we experience things just misses the whole dependence on ways of looking.

I want to challenge the typical conception of phenomenology as a kind of investigation and uncovering of the universal human experience of a life world or *the* life world. There are lots of problems with that approach. What I would like to stress and open is a conception of what I call the phenomenological approach—as far as we're concerned, what I have been calling the phenomenological approach in previous talks over the last few years—as an investigation of how experience of the life world, or how appear-

ances, vary. They vary in a historically contingent way, as Heidegger emphasized, and also depending on mood, or what we could call mind state in Dharma language. But far more widely than any of that, and subtly—the gradations are extremely subtle—they vary depending on what I've been calling the way of looking in the moment.

There's another philosopher, Richard Palmer, who wrote a book on hermeneutics in philosophy. He writes about Wilhelm Dilthey's thought: "Experience is precisely the reality of what is there for me before experience becomes objective and therefore admits of a separation from the subjective." Palmer is emphasizing that idea of Dilthey's, that his fruitful insight—again I'm quoting—is "in seeing experience as a realm before subject and object."

This is quite a common theme or emphasis of some phenomenologists: saying that actually, experience is—when we really look at our experience—there is no subject and object. That comes later. That's some kind of intellectual superposition or superimposition. When you investigate experience, experience is just before subject and object division.

Continuing with Palmer writing about Dilthey: Dilthey's "fruitful insight lay in seeing experience as a realm before subject and object, a realm in which the world and our experience of it are given together. He saw with clarity the poverty of the subject-object model of human encounter with the world."

I personally have problems with this, and if you've done enough practice in some of the ways that I've suggested, you would have problems with it as well—you should have problems with it. Because the sense of subject-object split that I or you experience—the sense of them being split, that there is a subject and there is an object, they're somehow loosely connected but they're really split, or them as being kind of poles of a polarity, or the dissolution of that polarity in some kind of oneness or unity or whatever—varies in experience dependent on the way of looking. The very sense and experience of subject and object and their relationship, or what they are in relationship to each other, varies dependent on the way of looking.

So yes, there is a poverty, as Palmer points out, to the subject-object model of human encounter with the world. But it's not because the reality of our basic experience is devoid of the subject-object split. A model that insists that experience is always pre-reflectively devoid of, or that pre-reflective experience is always devoid of or before subject and object, is equally poor. The idea that this is how it is, and then we add something—the idea of subject and object based on intellectual ideas or whatever—that's equally poor.

To insist on the reality of subject-object split, either implicitly or explicitly, is as poor a model as it is to insist that always there is no subject-object split, that it's only added later by the intellect or whatever.

The sense of subject and object—and I mean the pre-reflective sense, not the intellectual—depends on the way of looking in the moment for its intensity, its vividness, and the degree of its separation. Where and how much of a duality or polarity or oneness or total alienation exists between subject and object depends entirely on the way of looking in the moment. A meditator will see this very clearly.

What's more, the state or perception of the subject-object polarity in our experience is affected by the very investigation of it. In investigating, in giving it careful attention, in paying attention to it with curiosity—"Let's see, where's that subject-object split now?"—that paying attention itself is a way of looking, and it changes everything. The attentive curiosity toward the state of the subject-object nexus or gestalt affects the state of it, and therefore the perception of it, just as Heisenberg pointed out with the observation of matter. His uncertainty principle became a fundamental tenet of quantum mechanics: the observation itself depends on the way of looking.

What's common to many of these endeavors is perhaps just a human tendency—maybe part of what the Buddha called basic avijjā—this need or want to say, "This is how it is." So Dilthey says this about subject and object, someone else says that. "This is how it is." And "this is how it is" means this is how it is independent of the way of looking.

Historical context serves as a conditioning factor in what appears to us in our sense of the life world. That historical context isn't even universal for everyone alive today. And even more than all that: dependence on ways of looking.

Ways of looking can be deliberate, consciously played with, manipulated, experimented with. But they operate anyway—there's always a way of looking when there's any experience, any appearance, any life world at all, any perception. That way of looking includes concepts, even if we're not conscious of them at the time. They're implicit, tacit, very subtle.

When I refer to the phenomenological approach in our work, it's really the investigation of how different ways of looking affect or fabricate appearances differently. How does the world, inner and outer—how does experience, appearance, perception—get constructed, built, experienced differently, dependent on the way of looking in the mo-

ment? What's involved in that? What's the possibility there? Is there some stance or perception or appearance that we can say is not dependent on the way of looking? Find out.

The phenomenological approach, when I borrow that word from philosophy, really means the investigation of how different ways of looking fabricate differently.

In that context, bare attention or mindfulness are ways of looking. They're not revealing any kind of objective reality. They're ways of looking. What we see with any kind of mindfulness, bare attention, or this or that is what we experience and sense through that particular lens at that time. Involved in that are concepts, and involved in that is metaphysics.

I really want to insist on this. What do I mean by metaphysics? It's actually a big, problematic, and contentious word. I'm going to say that it includes ontological beliefs and assumptions, epistemological beliefs and assumptions—in other words, beliefs and assumptions about what's real and about how we know or what constitutes valid knowledge concerning what is real or not real. It also includes a whole cosmology: what is the nature of this world, and of a human being.

Metaphysics exists anytime there's any belief or assumption—conscious or unconscious, implicit or explicit—around ontology, epistemology, or cosmology. These aren't just abstract concepts; they're commitments we have. They shape what we value, how we practice, what we intend, how we invest our energy, what we devote ourselves to. They also shape how we move in the world and how we talk to each other. Ontological, epistemological, and cosmological commitments, beliefs, and assumptions are wrapped up in perception—any and all perception.

But metaphysics has also come to be very contentious as speculation about anything that's behind appearances.

So if you talk about gods or souls or any kind of mysterious energy or something like that, this is regarded and dismissed because it's metaphysics. And modern people are not interested in metaphysics, so the sort of thrust goes.

But as we pointed out when we talked about science, even fundamental particles are something behind appearances. They're not immediately discernible to the senses. And they're not even discernible with high-powered instruments. An electron microscope still can't see an electron, let alone a quark or whatever. So assuming that there is a reality behind our everyday appearances—the atomistic reality or atoms of matter or

atoms of sensation and consciousness—assuming that's the reality behind appearances, that too is a metaphysics. And as I said, even physical laws are something, so to speak, behind appearances. It can be extremely abstract.

We might say, "Ah yes, but scientific laws are at least amenable to empirical checking through experiment and whatever, and we can kind of hone in on the truth there." Not so simple, that distinction. Spiritual laws, if we can even use such a term, psychological laws, soul laws—if we can use those kinds of ideas—are also testable and can predict what happens.

But anyway, there's metaphysics as ontology, epistemology, cosmology. There's metaphysics as the postulation of what is behind appearances as a reality. And then there's also a very important aspect I want to draw out. It's kind of wrapped up in those other two definitions or aspects of metaphysics. But there's also what I would call the metaphysics of objectivity. And that is the assumption of a singular objective reality that it's possible for us to know. "This is how things are."

So that metaphysics of objectivity, it's all over the place. Even when people say, "I don't believe in truth" or "the Buddha wasn't interested in truth" or this or that, it's hiding in one's approach to existence. This metaphysics of objectivity—an assumption of a singular objective reality that's possible for us to know—actually is an ontological, epistemological belief, assumption, or commitment, as I said in the first aspect.

But these metaphysical concepts and ideas are wrapped up in perception. They walk around with us and they shape things for us. So sometimes it's possible to just get rid of metaphysics, dispense with it, put it aside, cut it out. And that's often the rallying cry of people who have a more existentialist bent.

But I'd say we can truly avoid or dispense with metaphysics about as successfully or to the extent that we can truly avoid or dispense with experiences in the six sense spheres. In other words, where there is sensing, where there is sensation, there is metaphysics. There are ontological beliefs, assumptions about what's real, about what experiences we can trust, about what constitutes knowing something—all of this and more. And also the sense of something being, so to speak, behind that we don't have direct experience of, but we can trust and it's part of reality.

So cut out the metaphysics, throw it away? Great. You can do that about as easily as you can get rid of all of your sense experiences in the five sense spheres and the mind of thought and imagining. I think it's important to point out: we can't just pretend that

we don't have ontological, epistemological, cosmological commitments. That's actually where we invest our energy, our time, our dedication. And also what we trust, what we rely on, and what we value.

One of the even more interesting things about all this is that epistemology is the kind of ideas about or beliefs about or exploration about what knowledge can we trust concerning what is real. But when you really probe and ask questions epistemologically, you will inevitably come to some kind of answer that you realize rests on some kind of other assumption, and that assumption, whatever it is, is actually ultimately unprovable.

In other words, if you really probe: "Well, how do I—okay, I think this is real, how do I know?" "Well, because I value this kind of way of gaining knowledge and that kind of way of gaining knowledge. I don't value that one and that one." "And so why do you value that?" And then you keep asking, "Why? Why? Why?" You'll come down to some kind of assumption that you then can't prove.

This is a really important thing to acknowledge. So as I said, a lot of this ontology and epistemology operates wordlessly and unconsciously as logoi in the perceiving consciousness, so to speak. Any moment of mindfulness has some metaphysics with it. And you can see, again, if you've done a lot of more intense mindfulness practice, you will see how, for instance, the sense of materiality varies. Once there's a lot of momentum to the mindfulness and close mindfulness, the solidity of things, of materiality, actually starts to unsolidify. And so the separation between mind and matter begins to—the subject-object separation between mind and matter also begins to kind of loosen or melt a little bit.

Depending on how much and what kind of mindfulness one is applying. When that dichotomy between mind and matter begins to melt a little bit, when the split between subject and object eases and the polarity softens, something profound happens. The two poles—mind and matter, subject and object—begin to melt together. At that point, the mindfulness carries with it a different ontology and epistemology than it did when it started, if one really goes with it and into it.

Even with just the instructions of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, the experiences that open up when applying different mindfulness practices bring with them, or carry with them, different ontologies and epistemologies that then unfold. Mindfulness is actually not one way of looking—it's many ways of looking.

Consider the instruction to imagine your corpse disintegrating and falling apart in a charnel ground—this is one of the contemplations in the Satipatthana Sutta, in the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness. That's a certain way of looking. The experience of sitting in a very calm state and contemplating mind states, or contemplating the presence and absence of the seven factors of awakening—this is a very different way of looking.

Any moment of mindfulness carries with it a certain set of metaphysical assumptions, a certain metaphysics. Our lives are lived and experienced with, or from, whatever constitutes our habitual set of metaphysical ideas, beliefs, and concepts.

Heidegger wrote: "Metaphysics is not something which can be put aside like an opinion, nor can it be left behind us like a doctrine in which we no longer believe." So this whole idea of putting aside metaphysics, cutting it out, just not engaging in it—when you actually understand what's involved there, you realize we can't do that. We carry it with us. What we can do is explore different metaphysics and see how different metaphysical concepts affect our experience.

There was a phenomenological current in Western philosophy, and from a whole other direction, we have someone like Richard Rorty, an American philosopher who died not too long ago. He was quite influential and wrote about two other philosophers: Wilfrid Sellars and W.V.O. Quine. They were what are called analytical philosophers—very different from the philosophy we discussed earlier with Rousseau and Dilthey. This analytical tradition focuses on analyzing human thought, theory, and the elements of reality, examining how we can form scientific opinions about things.

Rorty investigated all this and came largely from that tradition. He said: "I interpret Sellars' attack on givenness..." Sellars had addressed our idea of what is given to us by experience—this notion of basic givenness, that life simply gives us this or that appearance, and then we do something with it. But Sellars demolished that idea.

Quine, another analytical philosopher, became famous for concluding after his investigations that "all so-called raw data are already theory-laden." This echoes Sellars' attack on givenness and resonates with what we've been exploring about emptiness and ways of looking. The very attractive idea of getting to basic facts without adding anything more to them doesn't hold up under scrutiny. After all his scrupulous logical and philosophical investigations, Quine concluded that all so-called raw data are already theory-laden. We're already bringing concepts into the ways we look at experience. There is no raw data that we can have. There is no pure givenness.

Rorty explains: "I interpret Sellars' attack on givenness and Quine's attack on necessity as the crucial steps in undermining the possibility of a theory of knowledge"—in other words, epistemology. "The holism and pragmatism common to both philosophers are the lines of thought that, when extended in a certain way, let us see truth as, in William James' phrase, 'what is better for us to believe' rather than as the accurate representation of reality."

What is better for us to believe? This is profoundly dharmic, at least as I would present the emptiness teachings. What is better for us to believe—or perhaps more precisely, how is it better for us to look?—rather than seeking what we usually think of as truth: the accurate representation of reality. We often approach meditation with the assumption that we can look in a certain way and see "how it is"—the accurate representation—especially when we're super equanimous, very calm, unruffled, unemotional, or deeply mindful.

Or to put the point less provocatively—though I think this is more provocative anyway—they show us that the notion of accurate representation is simply an automatic or empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do.

In other words, we call real just what we want to call real. It's convenient to call something real depending on what we want to do with a certain point of view or a certain assumption about reality. It's a little unclear from that quote what he means by what we want to do. He might mean whether we want to apply technology or whether we want to build up a relationship with someone.

But there's a quote from Nietzsche—and Nietzsche is so much the forerunner of this kind of thinking in philosophy—though I can't find the exact reference. He said something like, people select their philosophy about reality based on what kind of freedom their soul wants. In other words, if they want to set something free in themselves that they really care about, set their soul free in relation to that, then they adopt a philosophy and therefore a whole worldview and sense of existence and real and unreal, dependent on just what the soul wants.

What do we want to do?

When we're practicing mindfulness, mindfulness is also wanting something. It's set in and determined by a context of desiring that is shaped by the Four Noble Truths. What do I want when I'm mindful? I want liberation. I want ease of dukkha. I want to move towards the Third Noble Truth. What's that? Well, I have to understand the First

Noble Truth. Mindfulness is also set in the context of the Fourth Noble Truth—the Eightfold Path—and a certain understanding of what gives rise to dukkha in the Second Noble Truth.

So it's set in a conceptual context, but it's also wanting something. There's a desire there. What we want to do, says Rorty. What do we want to do? Letting that question actually shape our ideas of what truth is and reality—what we might loosely now term truth or reality.

Collectively, this is interesting because of our global crisis now—the crisis of the species and the earth and the climate. What do we want to do? We want to solve those crises, I hope. If we want to solve the crisis by purely technological thought, technological thinking, technological perceptions—purely an issue about carbon dioxide levels, and if we can get some technology to remove the carbon dioxide—great, really important. But is that the limit of what we want to do? Solve our crises by those kinds of ways of looking, those kinds of value systems, ontologies? Nature as machine and commodity might have been part of how we got into this mess in the first place.

What do we want to do?

And in caring for people, what does that mean to care for people? What do we want to do? What is a human being? What is a person? Are we caring by giving so much attention to the GDP and relentlessly being entrenched in the view of growth economics? What do we want to do, and what's the relationship between what we want to do and our views of what's real and what is the case—what a human being is, what nature is, what the world is? And what do we want to do together as a society? What do we want to do as individuals? Because individuals have very different directions of their desire, of their longing, of their aspirations.

One of Richard Rorty's main concerns was actually social. He was famous for saying—I can't remember the exact quote—but his basic intention or the point of all his philosophy was just to keep the conversation going. In other words, he wanted this idea of non-truth, his statement about why it was important, so that we can keep talking to each other, so that there is this kind of conversation that's possible between different points of view.

I don't know all his writings, but I read some. What seems strange to me is that he kept saying this thing about the basic point of all this is to keep the conversation going. There's a social concern there. But I'm not aware of him actually engaging in much conversation about different points of view in a way that was really productive or changed

anyone's mind, or brought anyone into at least being able to experience someone else's worldview and what opened from that. Is the conversation ongoing? I'm not sure, in our wider culture. Did he take part in that? I'm not sure.

And if so, how much power and significance? Because if it's just an intellectual conversation, it actually doesn't enable one, as I said, to really open up the sense of existence and the worldview. The playing with ways of looking, the flexibility with ways of looking—that's what I call meditation. And that actually allows an altering of view, meaning experience, meaning appearance.

This idea that Rorty actually at least said that he felt was important—to keep the conversation going—as a model of that or an example of that kind of social opening up and social cohesion and openness of conversation and openness of relationship with truth, as a model there is the Midrashic tradition in the Jewish tradition. Midrash is a kind of commentary or interpretation of the whole set of sacred scriptures.

Now I'm paraphrasing another philosopher called Gerald Bruns, who writes about hermeneutics, but in this chapter, he's writing about the Midrash. He's talking about people going to study in the Beit Midrash—the house where this kind of hermeneutics of the Bible is studied—and there are these fierce debates going on. But fierce as they are and polarized as they are in terms of the difference of opinions, they don't split the community.

So there are polarly opposite opinions on the interpretation of this passage or that passage. This rabbi says this, the other rabbi says completely the opposite. A student asks, "How can I study in such an environment? What is this? It's chaos—this chaos of opinions and contradictory viewpoints. One guy says this, the other guy says the opposite, a third guy says a third thing. What am I supposed to do with that?"

And the idea is that this is exactly the perfect environment for studying, for relating to, for opening up and being opened up by the sacred text. As I said right at the beginning of this talk, let me remind us that hermeneutics means the interpretation not just of texts, but also of existence.

Here's a social situation that took place—ongoing for hundreds of years in Judaism, I'm not sure if it's still going—of this kind of openness to different points of view. Multiple interpretations were viable. An infinity of interpretations was conceivable, and there was this great fecundity of different viewpoints, different chewings over, different reworkings, different connections made regarding any passage from any sacred text, and regarding the whole thing as well.

In this social context, those engaged in relating to—in this case, the Torah or other texts—this way, we see that they imagine themselves as part of the whole, participating in Torah. Torah is the Old Testament in Hebrew. Participating in Torah rather than operating on it at an analytical distance. Participating in it.

So it's not something that I look at from a cold distance. I'm actually somehow part of it in my engagement with it, in this whole tussle and multiplicity of opinions and interpretations and slants and elaborations and connections. That actually is part of it. I'm participating in it. We are participating in it. This conversation is participating in it. This social scene is part of it.

From that idea of participation, it follows that the words of interpretation cannot be isolated in any rigorously analytical way from the words of Torah itself. In other words, where does the Old Testament end and the interpretation of it begin? It's all Torah—all of it is this whole. The subject and the object, the way of looking and what appears, the concept brought to bear and the world that opens up there—it's all Torah. You cannot separate the text. You cannot separate existence. If we elaborate what's said here in terms of text and extend it to include existence, you get this understanding.

Again, in other words, the Torah is constituted as an open canon. To be sure, the letters of the original scriptures are fixed, but they are not dead. So there's something alive here. Openness here has to be construed as the openness of what is written—that is, its applicability to the time of its interpretation, its need for actualization. We'll come back to that point shortly.

Now you must picture the text not as a formal object—so many fixed letters—but as an open canon whose boundaries are shaped and reshaped by the give and take of midrashic argument. Here's this whole community of passionate debate and creativity and probing and wider study and elaboration and contextualization. And that is something that shapes and reshapes the boundaries of, in this case, the scripture, the text. And we can also, again, say this about existence.

Those who study in this way—with passion, knowledge, and deep elaboration—make the text what it is. Above all, they make it open. They open it to the present and the future. The Torah, the text, or existence itself emerges as what it is and comes into its own only in the dialogue it generates. Only by entering into this dialogue can one enter the Torah, enter the text.

Now this is a social situation, which I'll return to, but we can also translate this to our own individual experience—if we can even conceive of the individual as truly isolated. We're always influenced by ideas we receive from the past and our contemporar-

ies, as much as by what emerges fresh for ourselves today. There's this dialogue, this flexibility of interpretations, elaborations, contextualizations—and multiplicity, a rich multiplicity of interpretations.

This would be an example, socially, of the kind of thing Rorty claimed to be interested in. But it's more than what Rorty was getting at. It's a different notion entirely. Because of this idea of participation—there are those who study, who passionately engage with the text, or reality, or the sense of existence itself. They're participating. They see themselves as not separate. This isn't the kind of objective stance we find in scientific epistemology. This is participation—participating in the text and participating in the holiness.

So this whole view, very different from Rorty's, presents a vision of a social situation, of a conversation that keeps going, of an openness regarding notions of truth. But it preserves holiness.

I think with Richard Rorty—quite an influential and popular philosopher in some circles—I really get the sense from reading him that he had a hidden agenda and a hidden dogmatism of physicalism. Despite all his talk about open truth, he often lets slip statements or passages that sound like his basic view is one of atomic, meaningless movement of physicality—meaningless material particles in a meaningless universe. This was a kind of bedrock he couldn't shake, a hidden dogmatism that spread through his writings and created a hidden agenda that favored that particular metaphysics, that ontology and epistemology, over and against any kind of religious or spiritual view.

But again, this midrashic example—this passionate give and take, this complexity and variability and vastness and multiplicity—was actually creative. I'm not sure if it's still ongoing or came to a halt perhaps a few hundred years ago, but it was a creative, ongoing debate that worked its way into people's psyches and then into their actual views and how they lived their lives. In other words, it was an actual conversation that affected perception, senses of existence, commitments, practices, devotions, orientations—all of it.

Let me quote from Rabbi Efraim of Sudolkov, because he points out something crucial. We're talking about hermeneutics now—the interpretation of usually sacred texts. But as I said, I want to expand this to the interpretation of existence itself. The interpretation of texts and teachings, yes, but also of existence. Using this model that's quite alive and insisted upon in the Jewish tradition—this multiplicity, this non-singleness model, this non-objective status of truth. Truth as something multiple, amenable to multi-perspectives, infinitely variegated, infinitely mineable, infinitely fertile, and dependent on our participation—dependent on all kinds of things.

So Rabbi Efraim writes: "Until they had interpreted it"—and he means the people who are engaged wholeheartedly, passionately, with integrity and commitment in this interpretation of sacred text, of Torah—"the Torah was not considered complete, but only half finished."

Again, it's not a thing existing by itself. It depends on my participation. The wider point is the same with existence, the same with Dharma. "Until they had interpreted it, the sacred text was not considered complete, but only half finished. It was the rabbis, through their interpretation, who made the Torah whole."

He continues: "Such is the case for each generation"—and its leaders or explorers —"they complete the Torah, they complete the text. The Torah is interpreted in each generation according to that generation's needs."

Nowadays we say the needs are diverse. That's part of what some people call the postmodern condition. We have different perspectives and different needs. But the point here is, again, this non-fixity of truth, the amenability to different situations, different interpretations, which are also historically contextualized.

"The Torah is interpreted in each generation according to that generation's needs"—which we might add now today are multiple and varied—"and according to the soul root of those who live at that time." That may be an idea we return to. "God thus enlightens the sages of the generation in the interpretation of his holy Torah."

He who denies this is as one who denies the Torah itself. God forbid.

You could read that as a kind of attempt at consolidating rabbinic authority, but actually it opened up. It was part of a movement that kept open and insisted on keeping open this multiplicity of interpretation. It kept open not just the possibility, but the fact of interpretation evolving and changing over time, dependent on the historical cultural context.

Isaiah Berlin, some of you will have heard of him, was another philosopher. He wrote extensively about Gian Battista Vico, an Italian philosopher who lived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Vico wrote about history and had quite revolutionary ideas for his time on history, culture, and worldview.

This is a passage from Isaiah Berlin, writing about Vico: "Vico's importance in the history of the Western Enlightenment consists in his insistence on the plurality of cultures and on the consequently fallacious character—the mistaken character—of the idea that there is one and only one structure of reality which the enlightened philo-

sopher can see as it truly is and which he can, at least in principle, describe in logically perfect language." He describes this as a vision that has obsessed all kinds of thinkers, then names various philosophers.

There again, we see the singular objective—the notion of a singular objective reality that's universally true for all people, all times, all cultures, and all situations. How endemic that assumption is, whether or not you're a philosopher or consider yourself an intellectual. It creeps into our dharma practice, it creeps into our everyday discourse, it creeps into all kinds of things.

Berlin continues: "For Vico, humanity asks different questions of the universe and their answers are shaped accordingly. Such questions and the symbols or acts that express them alter or become obsolete in the course of cultural development, in the course of history. To understand the answers, one must understand the questions that preoccupy an age or a culture. They are not constant, nor necessarily more profound because they resemble our own more than others that are less familiar to us."

Different questions. Back to this question I posed earlier: What do we want? Rorty—we were left hanging with his quote about what we want. And Nietzsche's quote that I couldn't remember—we actually have different questions that we bring, and we want different answers, or we choose different answers depending on what we want, depending on the worldview that we want to support because it supports something in our soul.

Different questions. When we talk about all this in relation to practice, that's why I emphasize the passion and the involvement of the midrashic context—that kind of heated debate and the endless, soulful investigation and probing and teasing out of text. It matters.

For all this that I'm saying to make sense, it makes sense in the context of it being passionately important. Something in us is important to us. If someone was just listening to this and they just weren't interested in opening up a sense of existence or what truth was or any of that, none of this would matter. It would be completely ridiculous to be hearing it and would just sound like a bunch of words that's perhaps mildly interesting.

Mattering matters. When we talk about hermeneutics, when we talk about the sense of existence, what we're bringing to it and how we can see or sense existence and how we can legitimate this or that—it matters that it matters to us. When we talk about the way we sense existence and when we want to open up those possibilities, we're talking about something that some level of our soul, its passion, is connected.

Again, Gerald Bruns points out that an interpretation, whether it's a sacred text or whatever, it has to matter. You can't have a good interpretation by anyone of anything when that thing—text or sense of existence—doesn't really matter to them.

Quoting Gerald Bruns: "Say that interpretation, hermeneutics, is an act performed by a person to whom things matter, not by a consciousness primed to produce pictures of how things are in the world, or in the text, or in whatever state of affairs is put before it in analysis." This is different than the picture of cold scientific epistemology that we talked about—the absence of emotion.

He continues: "The Torah is a text that makes things matter. It preserves the smallest details of life from inconsequence and triviality." If you know the Torah, there are hundreds of pages about every little minute detail of life, bringing all that into the realm of mattering passionately and bringing all that into the possibility of being made holy, being sacralized, being sanctified.

Again, Bruns: "Mattering at all events is what the Midrashic text I have been quoting from presupposes with respect to interpretation. Midrash is not a formal operation, but a form of life lived with a text that makes claims on people. A text that makes claims upon people turns them into respondents. They are answerable to the text in a way that is qualitatively different from the answerability of disengaged observers to the scenes they wish to depict."

Now we could substitute the word "existence" for "text" and talk about what we are exploring now—this whole investigation of ontology, epistemology, conceptuality, and opening up the sensing with soul. This whole probing of ideas and the possibilities in sensing with soul is not a formal operation, but a form of life lived with an existence or perceptions of existence that make claims on people.

That kind of sense of existence that makes claims on people turns them into respondents. They are answerable. We are answerable to existence in a way that's different from someone who's just coldly, aloofly, analytically describing it.

So we're talking, again, notice there: desire, eros, this longing to understand, this passion connected with what I want to open up and how I perceive existence and what is legitimized or not and what senses are valued or not. There's passion and there's desire and there's eros in that investigation, in that debate that we're talking about. There's emotion there.

So desire, eros, and emotion—because they're necessary for the kind of hermeneutics that we're talking about and the kind of debate about hermeneutics that we're talking about—they are necessary, they are included in the epistemology. We're not talking

about: "Now I'm in a neutral mind state, now I don't want anything, therefore I see clearly." Nor: "Now there's the quietening of emotion and a calm, equanimous mindfulness, therefore I trust what I see." Nor the kind of scientific epistemology that I pointed out devalues or tries to put aside emotion or any kind of wish. It theoretically pushes that aside, though it doesn't really.

Desire, eros, emotion—necessary and included in the kind of epistemology that we're involved with and trying to open up, and in the whole debate around that.

So it needs to matter. You wouldn't be listening, I presume, at this point, if none of this mattered to you. It needs to matter passionately. We need to be involved, engaged. Our lives are on the line. Our sense of existence is on the line. It needs to matter for us, and it matters also in what comes out of it.

It matters because, as Moscovici wrote and pointed out, questions of epistemology are also questions of social order. Questions of epistemology are also questions of social order. We might say pecking order.

So I've talked in the past about epistemicide, epistemic cleansing, epistemic colonialism. In other words, the dominant worldview of epistemology—secular modernism—taking over other cultures and disregarding, devaluing, dismissing, putting aside, sometimes even outlawing their worldview, their ontology, their cosmology, their epistemology.

Questions of epistemology are also questions of social order, questions of hierarchy and pecking order within a culture. Whose voices get ridiculed? Whose voices just become the entrenched, dominant, unquestioned, accepted view of what reality is? And therefore policy—political, economic, governmental, social, environmental policy—is based on certain worldviews which are based on certain epistemologies. Certain cosmologies are based on certain epistemologies.

So this needs to matter to us, and it matters in the world. And then, again, does the victor—the cultural victor, or the epistemology that is a cultural victor—become at some point a prisoner of that very epistemology, of the very rigidifications and entrenchments of whatever epistemology one is in? The victor then becomes the prisoner.

CHAPTER 130

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 57 min

In this profound exploration of epistemology and meditation practice, Rob Burbea examines how our philosophical commitments fundamentally shape our spiritual experience. Drawing on Nietzsche's perspectivism, he argues that all knowing is interpretive and influenced by our desires, affects, and cultural positioning—including mindfulness itself. Burbea critiques both reductionist approaches that atomize experience (as found in some Theravāda teachings and Marcus Aurelius's Stoicism) and existentialist dharma that merely copes with obvious truths. He questions whether accomplished practitioners become prisoners of limited worldviews, unable to access the full spectrum of spiritual sensing. Through examples of sensing with soul—like perceiving the sacred intelligence of stone or the subjectivity of celestial bodies—Burbea demonstrates how different philosophical frameworks open or close possibilities for practice. He advocates for philosophical pluralism not just for social harmony, but as a more rigorous understanding of how reality appears through multiple valid perspectives. This teaching challenges practitioners to examine the epistemological assumptions underlying their practice and consider how soul-making offers an alternative framework for spiritual development beyond traditional liberation paradigms.

So what if, instead of one worldview, reality view, ontology, epistemology, cosmology being declared the singular truth over another or others, instead of that kind of cultural war? What if we opened up to the idea of pluralism? Not just because we think we should be nice to each other—and we should—but actually on philosophical grounds, because we realize the mistake in insisting there is a singular reality, a singular truth, approached by a singular epistemology.

Again, so much at the forefront, ahead of his time, Nietzsche points out how much what's going on for us emotionally, our affects, actually affect the perspectives we have. Let me read a passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Let us guard, he says, against the snares of such contradictory concepts as "pure reason," "absolute spirituality," "knowledge in itself." These always demand that we should think of an "I" that is completely unthinkable, an "I" turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces through which alone seeing becomes seeing something are supposed to be lacking. Those kinds of ideas about pure knowledge always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspectival seeing, only a perspective know-

ing. And the more affects, the more emotions or emotional drives we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we use to observe one thing, the more complete will our concept of this thing, our so-called objectivity, be.

So, plurality. More affects equals more perspectives, more eyes. And then, if you like, reality or a thing—as I said, text or existence—being multi-aspected, amenable to multiple perspectives, rather than just one.

So that our knowing is always—it's always got, as I said, a desire. It's interested in something. We've always got some kind of affect going on, some kind of mind state and some kind of drive or intention. And so it's always situated. The knower, the seer, the meditator, whatever it is, is always situated. There's an entwining of our desires, our drives, our thought, our concepts, our affect, all of that.

A writer named David Owen writes about Nietzsche: our consciousness is neither disembedded from all of that, and from culture, nor disembodied. Knowing, like seeing, is an activity which attends the embedded and embodied character of human subjectivity. So whether it's perception or conception, it's influenced by desire, affect, perspective, body, all of that.

Nietzsche talked about knowing as interpreting. All knowing about the world is necessarily an act of interpretation, a selection of certain features and a disregarding of others. All knowing about the world is necessarily an act of interpretation, of hermeneutics—a selection of certain features and a disregarding of others—and that's exactly what science does. We only know, quote, "according to our point of view, our particular cognitive and affective perspective."

I'm actually quoting now from Christopher Hauke, who wrote a book about Jung and includes discussion about postmodern thought and Nietzsche. So we only know according to our point of view, our particular cognitive and affective perspective. And no knowledge, including that of so-called science, can be exempt from this. Moreover, we select according to our interests. So we're back with this: what do we want? And can we actually admit that what we want is influencing our concepts, worldview, perspective, interpretation, slant, perception, conception?

There is no disinterested knowing, and Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "It is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds"—he wrote this at the end of the 19th century—"it is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds that physics too is only an interpretation and an arrangement of the world according to our requirements, if I may say so, and not an explanation of the world."

So the affects, what's going on for us emotionally, and our intentions and our desires affect our perspectives. Knowledge is perspectival. The ideas—in other words, the ideas and the perception, the conception and the perception, all our cognition—are dependent on what's going on emotionally and what our desires are. Knowing is interpreting, which involves selecting, emphasizing certain aspects, disregarding others. Interpreting is another word for hermeneutics. And our interpretations depend on our interests. It's wrapped up with our desires. What do we want?

As I said, mindfulness too is not divorced from desire. Mindfulness wants something. What does it want? Always our interests, our desires are wrapped up in our perspectives, which give to us then what we see and what we think.

Then there follows this David Owen, who's writing about Nietzsche, talks about pluralism. So this is what I wanted to emphasize: that an interpretation about the world—in this idea of pluralism, this idea of interpretation that Nietzsche had—does not exclude the truth of other interpretations of the world which serve other interests.

It is an important feature of perspectivism, this idea that reality and existence is open to multiple perspectives. It is an important feature of perspectivism that it rejects the idea that the truth about the world could be exhausted by any single description of it. So there's actually an insistence on pluralism, not just because we need to get on with each other—which is important—but also on philosophical grounds. Actually be honest, be rigorous. Look what's happening in perception and conception, belief and assumption and mindfulness and philosophy and science and all the rest of it.

So the truth of a certain interpretation, of a certain hermeneutics, of a certain perspective, doesn't imply the lack of truth of other interpretations. Again, Isaiah Berlin, writing about Vico and talking within the context of pluralism, says: "I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There's no more to be said." That is relativism. So that's not pluralism. It's just, I like this, you like that. We have different tastes, that's it. That's relativism.

Vico's view, Berlin writes, is not that—it is what I should describe as pluralism. That is the conception that there are many different ends that human beings may seek and still be fully rational, fully human, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other. So it's not an exclusive singular truth. There are different takes, different perspectives, and they can all have truth. They can all be true. They can all be rational because they serve different ends. In other words, what do we want? What's our interest? That will shape the perspective, that will shape the interpretation, that will shape the perception and conception. And all wrapped in that is the epistemology, the ontology, the cosmology, the metaphysics, and all that.

So we human beings have different ends and we may seek different ends and still be fully rational, fully human, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other. So again, it's a social concern. But for me it's more than just a social concern—it's a philosophical concern as well.

So we have, in our soul-making logos and practice, the end of soul-making. That's the ends to which we're aiming. And aiming it at that is different than aiming it at an objective truth, or saying this is true and that other thing isn't. So we're employing rationality. Some of this logos employs rationality in the service of the end of soul-making, the goal of soul-making.

We come back again and again to this question: what do you want? What do I want? What do you want? Of course, that changes at different times. In some situations, I want this or that, and I have this perspective or that perspective. What do we want now?

I heard two stories about a Burmese Sayadaw. And these are secondhand, but... One said that he must have ordained as a monk after he had children—or a child or something—and he had been practicing as a meditator before that. Otherwise it doesn't quite make sense to me. He says he was present at the birth of his child and lifted the child as they were born and held the child. And then he said, "I looked inside myself and there was no emotion. There was no emotion." And this was described as a triumph of Dharma practice. This was the fruit of his Dharma practice: that here was his own son or daughter lifted up from the birth and there was no emotion. This is a triumph of practice, or being portrayed—or conveyed, as I understood it—as a triumph of practice.

And the person who conveyed this story to me said she was... horrified was not her word, but she was saying, "Boy, is that what I want?"

I have questions about this approach.

Another story involved this same Sayadaw walking in the beautiful hills of Burma—I've never visited them, but apparently they are exquisitely beautiful rolling green hills that fade into the blue of the sky. The monks were walking mindfully through these hills, and this person who shared the story was a monk at the time, serving under this Sayadaw.

At a certain point, the junior monk stopped, completely overcome by the beauty of the environment around him—these hills, the sky, the nature there. He stood in rapt awe for a minute or so. The Sayadaw, who had been walking in single file, came up behind him and simply said, "What is beauty? It's just form and color."

This junior monk thought to himself, "I don't think you and I understand each other." He didn't say it aloud, but that was his inner response.

So again, the question arises: What do you want? What kind of sensing do you want to open up? What kind of emotional life do you want to cultivate? Where is your practice headed? Where do you want it to go?

I read about another Burmese teacher who described what he conceived of as the Arahant experience. It basically sounded like an impersonal machine, simply aware of atomistic processes unfolding in time. This, according to him, was the fully enlightened being's experience of existence—a kind of ticker tape of life and being.

So does the victor—Arahant, by the way, means victor or foe destroyer—does the victor become a prisoner? A prisoner of a certain mode and direction and scope of sensing, perceiving, believing, and conceiving?

It's a whole other question whether these descriptions really represented the totality of these monks' experience. Was it really true that he always had no emotion regarding his children? Did he always perceive beauty only to deconstruct it as meaningless shades of form and color that we can only get attached to in problematic ways, and therefore must see through? Does the Arahant really experience only that atomistic process and its impersonality?

Or is it that the conceptual framework doesn't allow them to articulate different experiences and different dimensions of being? Is it really that they've created such a prison that they've completely cut off certain kinds of sensibilities and experiences? Or is it simply that they lack the language and conceptual structure to articulate, give value to, or even admit experiencing something different?

This connects to what I used to call—and still call—"dot-to-dot meditation." I taught this in the context of emptiness practice, and it's quite an easy meditation to do with basic mindfulness. It involves a kind of reductionism. Instead of allowing experiences to join up into one big problematic thing, or something lovely—perhaps anticipating a fantastic experience where the mind has joined together these atomistic dots—you deconstruct that, seeing the dot-to-dot nature.

I called it that because of those drawing books I had as a very young child, where you have numbered dots and you draw lines between them with pencil or crayon, and suddenly you have a complete drawing from these separate atoms. This meditation involves seeing a certain level of fabrication in experience, so you can unfabricate by becoming aware of that process. There's a reduction involved, and a reductionism in the view that follows.

There is indeed a strong strand of reductionist perception—reductionist ontology and epistemology—in the Dharma, something I've employed myself. Interestingly, you find this in other traditions as well.

I was reading about Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor who was also a highly respected and influential Stoic philosopher. Through Michel Foucault's analysis, I learned that Marcus Aurelius describes three types of practices: exercises decomposing the object in time, exercises decomposing the object into its constituent parts, and exercises of reductive disqualifying description—all very Dharma-esque approaches.

Foucault gives a striking example involving musical notes or dance movements. Marcus Aurelius's philosophical instruction is: pay attention to music, but when you're around beautiful music or dance, pay attention in a way that atomizes the experience. Focus just on this note right now, not the whole sweep of melody or the flow and integrity of the dancer's movement—not the gestalt or wholeness of the motion.

Why? Marcus Aurelius explains that this approach allows you to "scorn a delightful song" or dance. He advises: "Always remember to go straight for the parts themselves and by analysis come to scorn them"—to look down upon them.

The reasoning is clear: if we experience a dance in the continuity of its movements, or hear a melody in its unity, we will be carried away by the beauty of the dance or the charm of the melody. We will be weaker than it. But if we want to be stronger than the melody or dance, if we want to prevail over it and retain superiority—if we don't want to be weaker than the wholeness of the melody—we must dissect it instant by instant, note by note, movement by movement. When we do this, we realize at once that there is nothing good in these individual notes and movements.

This text on musical notes and dance concludes with Marcus Aurelius saying: "Always remember to go straight for the parts themselves and by analysis come to scorn them"—though he does make an exception regarding virtue and morality of the self.

And now, apply the same procedure to life as a whole.

So this analytical deconstruction of the perception of continuities extends to life itself. This approach was very popular in Pali Canon Buddhism and other Buddhist traditions, particularly in Theravada, as well as in different kinds of spiritual traditions that mirror this methodology.

But what's particularly interesting to me here is that the very examples Marcus Aurelius uses are music and dance. This is exactly, I think, the sort of thing that Nietzsche, were he aware of it, would howl at with outrage and his own kind of scorn.

When does disenchantment become just silly? When does reductionism become silly and serve only limited ends?

We can end up applying this analytical approach to life as a whole and then actually clinging to the view, the interpretation, the hermeneutics of reality that ensues. Why? Again, it's because then we will conquer. We will be stronger. We will not be weaker, we will not be attached.

And again one asks: is the victor, the one who is stronger, actually imprisoned by the limitations of the worldview then? The limitations of what's allowed by a certain philosophy?

Beauty in art or in nature, music, emotions, narratives, selves—if we're always going to deconstruct these things, the beautiful, the artistic, the lovely music, the emotions, the narratives, the selves, if these are always deconstructed, that is silly. I think that's silly.

Sometimes we have other ends. We have other wants, other desires. We want our sense of whatever this thing is to open up differently rather than just that we don't feel weak in relation to them, that we don't feel attached in relation to them. We want, for example, a sensing with soul, with everything that comes with that—the meaningfulness, the beauty, the dimensionality, the divinity, the duty, all of that.

Not too long ago, I was practicing with a friend, and this perception opened up somehow of interstellar rocks, or the kind of fragments of rock that you might find in Saturn's rings—little lumps of everything from granular molecules all the way out to little rocks. And that vision, and then of my body and her body as made up of stone, if you like. So it was a sensing the soul into the earth element, into the element of solidity.

Usually when that meditation on the four elements is given in a Theravada context, it's for the sake of deconstructing the body and making us unattached, or in the service of less attachment to the body and the physical form of the body and what happens to the body. So again, it's like Marcus Aurelius—we don't want to be weak in relation, we don't want to be overpowered by an attachment to that, so we reduce, we employ a mode of looking. That's the four elements meditation found in the Satipatthana Sutta, but usually the way it's taught, it disenchants and unattaches.

This sensing with soul of this cosmic earth element and the stone element in me, the earth element in me and in my friend, was not, however, lacking in holiness. It wasn't flat. There was a dimensionality there. And I stayed with it—I was really struck by it. It was as if the stone had its own soul and it had its own subjectivity and it had its own intelligence.

If you've listened to the Eros talks, I think I described how that kind of intersubjectivity and recognition of soul in the beloved erotic object will open out to a sense of soul there, a sense of subjectivity there, a sense of intelligence. There's a particular kind of intelligence and a particular kind of seeing. What is it to see and to sense existence as the stone senses it?

The holiness was there, the dimensionality was there. It wasn't a flattening and a deconstructing that took away that enchantment. So there's something similar there perhaps to some tantric or vajrayana meditations on the elements—very different meditations, very different orientation and relationship with the earth element or the water element or the fire element. Its holiness is there. Its holiness is amplified. It's more than just flat.

So sometimes we might want to be, as Marcus Aurelius puts it, greater than something, not weaker than something, not attached to something, not subject to something so much. But sometimes we want sensing with soul. And sensing with soul, as I pointed out at some point near the beginning of this course, sensing with soul involves humility. It's not about being greater than, not being weaker than. There is a sense of this thing, this beloved other, this thing that I am perceiving, sensing, is somehow bigger than me. Sometimes we want that.

Again, we're talking about the ways that we can very easily become imprisoned by certain ideas, certain teachings, certain traditions, or takes on teachings, or takes on traditions. And some of this happens in really gross ways. I've heard about certain teachers or authorities in some situation being really quite aggressive and angry even with a student, perhaps in a one-on-one situation or in a small group or in a group of teachers, really aggressive in a kind of anti-religious way, or certainly what we might call anti-soul or anti-spiritual, anti-transcendent kind of approach.

thrust, and I wonder why the aggression, why the anger in this insistence that anything called the unfabricated is rubbish, or that it only confuses people, or that there's just this world, just this flat materiality. They wouldn't use the word "flat," but it's what we might call flat. Why the anger? Why the violence? Why the aggression?

Sometimes what's communicated is conveyed in a very aggressive way, with the throwing around of power or the exertion of power. As we said earlier, questions of epistemology, as Guy Moscovici wrote, are questions of social order. Questions of epistemology, ontology, and cosmology are questions of social order and hierarchy.

So sometimes there is this very obvious use of one's power position to insist on this or that take on epistemology, ontology, cosmology, reality. What's going on there? Is it a personal thing or an ego thing? Like one feels lacking? I don't know. Lacking because one hasn't had certain experiences that other people have? Or is it something else—this kind of grasping at a certain world, a certain cosmology, which is actually more important than anything else, more important than freedom itself? One is grasping at cosmology.

So I'm curious: what goes on? I don't think it happens that much, but when it does, why the anger? Why the pushiness? Why the throwing about of one's power? Why the aggression?

Most of the time, the ways we are affected by these ideas are much more subtle, and the ways we become imprisoned are much more subtle. It's simply that we haven't considered the ways those ideas are influencing us. We haven't considered them fully. We haven't questioned them.

For example, when I was discussing science and its attitude toward emotion—the way emotions were devalued in that epistemology—I contrasted it with my friend's experience of sensing the soul of the moon in an emotionally vulnerable state. That kind of epistemological idea that we absorb, either from science or sometimes from dharma contexts, or the notion that imagination plays no role and has no epistemic value, contrasts sharply with Pauli and Jung's conversations and their beginnings of a theory that actually gave place to archetypal imagination in epistemology and the construction of reality.

But the point is, these ideas work subtly. We don't consciously trace the fact that we tend to dismiss a perception that happens when we're feeling, say, a lot of grief, and we don't give it epistemological validity. We don't trace that dismissal back to the scientific revolution. But it's quite subtle, the way that works.

We've been talking about atomism as well. We may have imbibed that from the tradition. But you might be a practitioner who is not really into a kind of dharma practice and meditation that has any atomistic, reductionist, process view. That's not how you view things. You may be more of a practitioner who's into a warm, kind, open being with the emotions in the body and the connection there. Regarding that: this is what is happening. This is what I'm asked to be with, to meet, to see as it is, to open to.

This is what is happening. This is what is arising for me now—these emotions in the body, this mind state. And then being with the breeze on the cheek when walking outside, or the taste and sight of food. And then maybe there's an opening to nature connection with the food, the soil on the carrots and all that. And all of this is conceived of as what is. All of this is what is, and what one needs to address.

And still the question remains: why limit the life world? Why limit that as the range of what one pays attention to? Why is that worthy of attention or considered real over and above, say, my friend sensing the moon in a certain way? You understand? This is real because it's real—it's an emotion, probably connected with my history, and I feel it in the body. The soil is real, and the carrot and potatoes, and the breeze is real as a sensation.

There's a limit to the life world, a limit to the appearances and experiences that are worthy of paying attention to. Implicit in all that is an epistemology and an ontology. These are considered real, these are considered worthy of attention, and this is how I can relate to them and know them.

That's much more subtle—where we've got that kind of limitation in terms of the scope of the life world, the epistemology, the ontology. It operates more subtly, and we're not even quite sure where we've gotten those ideas from. Often what happens is there's a combination of influences into how we practice, how we think of practice, and how that affects our life. There's the encouragement to deconstruct in this reductionist, atomistic way that we described. There's the absence of any...

There's the absence of any conceptual place for or encouragement of eros, or even the discerning of eros. There's this notion repeated over and over about "what is" and being with things as they are, or being with what is. All of that together may then have, for example, an impact on how we might relate to something like music and the arts.

With this emphasis on deconstruction and no notion of eros, when we're simply concerned with the idea that "what is" is important, we might listen to music, we might even enjoy music, but there's not really a conceptual opening out of the possibilities for music or art. There's no positive place for art or music in this framework. Music might even be regarded dismissively—perhaps new age music is acceptable because it's calming, and maybe that can serve some purpose. But what's the real point of music if we're buying into, or if we've got the constant pull in the background of this emphasis on deconstructing, reductionist, atomistic worldview, with no place for eros and this emphasis on just "what is"? What can't really open now are all the arts.

I'll return briefly to Michel Foucault, who points out quite interestingly in his book *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* that we can say we enter the modern age—the history of truth enters its modern period—when it is assumed that what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject's access to the truth, is knowledge and knowledge alone. Truth becomes simply something you either know or you don't. If you acquire the knowledge, then you know what's true.

As he explains, this occurs when the philosopher or scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth, can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself through his acts of knowledge alone, without anything else being demanded of him and without his having to alter or change in any way his being as a subject. What he means is that it used to be that to have access to the truth, you would need to engage in spiritual practices. You would need to purify your being ethically, intentionally. You'd need to purify your mind. You'd need to work on yourself and your capacity, your ability to actually know the truth. Then something happens and we enter the modern age when it just becomes about whether you know or you don't. You don't need to work on yourself in any way.

This is also interesting in how it translates to Dharma. For a kind of Dharma that essentially—what I might call existentialist Dharma—equates practice with coping with the tragedy of the real world, the impermanence, our existential predicament, Dharma practice essentially becomes coping with that. That's the view of Dharma. There's very little truth to be discovered or ascertained or arrived at that we don't already know, that's not already obvious, and certainly none that requires a difficult course of practices, purifications, and spiritual exercises. Just what we see—for the most part, maybe the self is a process, everything's connected to everything else, but it's not that hard to see. Mostly it's just this existential predicament that is said to be obvious to everyone, and that's what you practice: coping with that in some way.

Truth is still assumed here as the evident reality that one must relate to and cope with. It's just evident what truth is. I would read the Pali Canon as insisting rather that the Dharma is predicated on the difficult practice of gaining insight into reality and truth. That's what the Buddha means by insight into the nature of reality—it's a long journey, it's hard, and it's rare for someone to really go deep in that. Some modern interpretations of the Dharma simply say no, Dharma practice is just coping with this obvious reality of impermanence and the toughness of our existential predicament.

So we have one perspective that has truth with some kind of metaphysical status of objectivity—we can do all these difficult spiritual practices and gain access to the truth that's hard to see, that's concealed from us by our *avidya*, by our impurities. And the other view is that truth is obvious and practice is learning how to relate to that, how to cope with that.

What happens, I want to ask, what happens to either of these perspectives when truth, or the idea of truth, loses its metaphysical status of objectivity? There is no objective truth that I'm going to arrive at, either because it's pretty obvious anyway and it's just what everyone agrees on in our modern world, or because it's some kind of transcendent, unfabricated reality. What happens to either of these perspectives when the idea of truth loses its metaphysical status of objectivity? And what happens, too, to the notion of care of the soul? This is actually what Foucault's book was about—how knowledge and care of the soul go together so that if we have knowledge of the truth, we're caring for the soul.

In the kind of existentialist, coping approach that I just described, which is quite popular these days in some circles,

What does care of the soul mean? It means learning to cope with the obvious truth. If I learn how to cope—developing the attitudes, reflections, and stances that allow me to navigate this obvious truth and the difficulty of our existential predicament, the tragedy of impermanence—then that learning to cope becomes caring for the soul, caring for the self.

In the transcendent or spiritualist approach, care of the self includes practices that allow the discovery of liberating truth. Because in that view, when I see that transcendent unfabricated reality—that truth which is obscure and requires difficult practice to perceive—when I see that truth, the knowing of it serves to care even more deeply for the self.

So there's care for the self in coping, and that's the limit of self-care in one paradigm. In the other paradigm, there's some coping and development of various capacities, but then seeing the truth becomes the ultimate care for the self. Because that truth liberates me and takes care of me. Or rather, knowing that truth takes care of me—the wisdom that emerges from it, the attitudes, the non-attachment that flows from it.

So I want to ask: what happens to either of these perspectives when truth loses its metaphysical status of objectivity? And what does care—self-care—mean when the self is realized to be empty and not knowable as it is, but dependent on the perspective and way of looking?

We're not saying there is no self. We're saying there are multiple perspectives on what the self is. And what is this self that I'm caring for? Is it the soul as we're discussing? Is it a process? Is it the frightened human being daring to look at the existential predicament and its facticity?

How do these conceptions of Dharma transform when we realize the emptiness of truth, the plurality of truths? And when we also realize that no self-view—no particular conception or perception of self—is ultimately true?

This whole question about knowledge and what it means to care for the self is what Foucault's book traces through history. These are things we care about, wrapped up in Dharma practice. What does it mean to know? What does it mean to care for ourselves, to care for our life? And what does it mean when we open up the notion of truth, see its emptiness, and embrace a plural understanding of truth? When we see that any particular self-view won't be the real, ultimately true take on the self?

To me, when we're no longer gripped by the view of singular objective reality, and when we're no longer caught in believing there's a particular view or conception of self that is the real one, then possibilities open up. The whole realm of our possibilities for practice, for thinking, for perception, for sensing, for exploring becomes available.

One way we can think about care of the self is as care of the soul—in our sense of the word—which means soul-making, because that's what the soul cares most about. We can view care of the self in this way, and we can view knowledge and truth as participatory.

Can we be aware of and understand how ideas of the real—ontological and epistemological assumptions, beliefs, commitments—come into our practice to shape, limit, and direct it? How they influence what practice can be, where it can go, what it can do for us, and what it can open? How they enter our life and experience?

These ideas shape and influence our experiences, our very sense of things—of world, self, others, existence. In that shaping and influencing, they either limit or open, or they limit in certain ways while opening in others. Can we see, recognize, be aware of, and understand this influence of ideas regarding reality?

Jean Baudrillard, the modern French philosopher, said, "The map precedes the territory." Our conceptual frameworks, our ideas, shape the actual landscape we create—the territory we then find ourselves traveling through and experiencing. I can go with that, though it might be somewhat extreme as a view.

There's another writer, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who writes about epistemic colonialism and epistemicide. He says: "Let's enlarge the present and the space of the world. Let's travel with crude maps. Between theory and action, there may be correspondence, but there is no sequence."

Between theory and practice—between our ideas and conceptual frameworks and how we practice, how we experiment with perception—there may be correspondence, but there is no sequence. He's not as extreme as Baudrillard's "the map precedes the territory." There's a give and take in our practice of sensing the soul. Ideas shape perceptions, shape the sensing.

The sensing that we experience also calls into question ideas, opens them, expands them, suggests new ones.

Isn't that exactly what we're talking about when we describe the soul-making dynamic as the mutual involvement and dialogue and enriching and interpenetration and impact of Eros, Psyche, Logos? Enlarging, being enlarged. The logos—the idea, the concept, the ideas, the conception—influencing the perception, the psyche, what we call the image of things. And the images, the perception of things, the psyche influencing the logos. Included in that is our affect, our emotions, and how they color and push and influence and open different doors, shining different perspectives. The desire and the eros—all of that is included in the way this works, in the way that the territory then opens up, in the way that we discover the territory and construct our maps as we're going. So that could be what Boaventura de Sousa Santos writes—could be a kind of metaphor or encouragement for what we're doing as well.

I haven't focused too much on the direction in relation to all this from the emptiness point of view. But either with—or both with—understanding emptiness very deeply for oneself in practice, the emptiness of all phenomena, and actually that understanding being digested, going deep, maturing and affecting one's outlook and gaining confidence in that perspective. So either with that, or both with that and with this brief sort of questioning or poking a little bit or critique or opening up of these perspectives—ideas that have influenced us: epistemological ideas, ontological ideas, metaphysical ideas, hermeneutic ideas, both socially in terms of their social aspects and their philosophical aspects.

Either from what we've been talking about over the past few hours, or from the emptiness perspective, or even with both—hopefully, or my hope is—that will help create a little more space for us, and a sense of freedom, possibility, legitimacy, to explore

this sensing the soul and the range that's possible there. And create, also discover, a kind of ground—a different ground philosophically, in terms of our beliefs and thoughts and ideas—on which it can rest, this sensing the soul.

From here, I hope that some of that is helpful, or at least sprinkles some seeds that may be helpful later on. And then we can go on now to look at specific practice possibilities and the relationship with ideas and how they open up the possibilities in practice.

Let's stop there for now.

CHAPTER 131

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 4 - The Three Characteristics)

Rob Burbea · 1h03

In this fourth part of his series on ideas and hermeneutics in meditation, Rob Burbea examines how Buddhist concepts must become "ways of looking" rather than remaining abstract ideas. He explores the three characteristics (tilakkhana) - dukkha, anicca, and anatta - showing how they can function as meditative lenses that fabricate less when skillfully employed. Through deep practice with these ways of looking, practitioners can discover their radical emptiness and even their apparent opposites: bliss, eternality, and selfhood become available as equally valid perspectives.

Burbea demonstrates how concepts like dependent origination (paticcasamuppada) can be translated from intellectual frameworks into subtle, fluid ways of perceiving that liberate through unfabrication. He emphasizes that these traditional Buddhist categories are not ultimate truths but skillful means - rafts to be used and eventually transcended. The talk reveals how deep emptiness practice or sensing with soul can make perception malleable, allowing dukkha to be seen as perfection, impermanence as eternality, and non-self as divine selfhood. This points toward a more comprehensive understanding of perception as gift and grace, work and opportunity, participation in the divine mystery of incarnation in all appearances.

Our larger theme at the moment is ideas and concepts, and particularly the implication of ideas for sensing with soul—how the ideas we have influence our experience. We talked about how the ideas that we inherit often operate unconsciously and influence, limit, or open certain directions of experience and understanding, affecting whether we sense the soul or not. Ideas unconsciously have that power, and consciously too, of course.

So we want to be talking about what it means to incorporate an idea so that it influences the sensing or opens the sensing, making this or that possible in sensing with soul. Part of all that I'd like to weave in is the relationship between ideas and images, between eidos and ikon, and the place of ideas in sensing the soul. Over the course of the next few talks, I also want to explore what it means to meditate on an idea or with an idea—what that might look like and involve for us.

I want to point out certain specific possibilities and discuss them. We'll start with what will probably be relatively familiar for many of you, but before we even get going, it's important to point out that when I'm using the word *idea*, sometimes people very easily take that to mean something only or mostly abstract—a certain thought that happens in your head in a way that's abstracted, taken away from the world or particularly the world of perception.

Unfortunately, the way we tend to think about ideas and ideation in our larger culture is not a way that allows them to translate easily into actual ways of looking, into meditations, into perception, into sensing. But that is what I'm really talking about. I'm not particularly interested in ideas that remain purely abstract. What I'm wanting to point to is that ideas can, and in our case should, translate into actual ways of looking that operate in the moment to open or shape the sensing in particular ways.

This skill—to be able to translate ideas into perception, to hold them subtly at the back of the mind so that they become ways of looking—is such an important skill as a human being, especially in terms of practice and what can be possible in practice. Sometimes I think I slightly overestimate what's involved in making that transition, or in people understanding that's what we're talking about. So right from the start, when we say *ideas*, it's for the sake of their implementation as ways of looking to open up a whole sense of existence—as an actual sense, in the actual senses, not abstracted.

It's interesting—I was thinking about the word *reflection*. That word also suggests that through an idea or concept, the looking occurs, and what is perceived in the looking is reflected according to that idea or concept. We say "I reflect on an idea" or "I reflect on this or that," and we tend to think of mental cogitation, but the word reflection may have intimations of this idea of reflecting—how the world is reflected through an idea or ideas. The idea is part of what forms the way of looking at any time, and we want to be very agile with that, nimble and facile and dexterous.

There's obviously a limitation to using that word reflection, because it implies a world that's independently existing, that is then reflected in this way according to this idea, or in that way according to another idea. Our logos, our larger conceptual frame, is more in favor of the create-discover model. But that works too, this idea of reflecting.

So when we talk about ideas and concepts, we're talking about something that needs to somehow become a way of looking, needs to be translated into and incorporated literally into a way of looking. And then that way of looking can refine and deepen. This goes for any way of looking. When we get to talking about meditation on ideas, just like any way of looking meditation, they need to move from the clunky and gross into the

more subtle. They need to be able to refine, deepen, become more subtle and involve more and more of the being and the levels of the being and the levels of perception. That's the possibility of meditation—to deepen, to refine.

For example, one could have a practice of giving my aggregates to the divinity—to a god or the gods or the divine or the Buddha nature. Perhaps one is tired at the time of doing that practice. So including the tiredness as part of the aggregates that are present, one gives that to the divine. When the sense of self, the *I* that is giving in that way and that is experiencing the tiredness, when the divine and when the tiredness itself are all somehow seen as empty, or more empty, or less substantial, or more transparent, or void—in some way through some way of looking that sees their emptiness—there's a larger practice there of giving the aggregates to the divine, perhaps back to the divine.

But part of that is that self, divine, and aggregates—including perhaps what everyone is struggling with or feeling joy over or enjoying—all are in some way seen as empty. So there's a larger way of looking and another way of looking, the seeing of emptiness to some level, that's wrapped up in that larger way of looking. You could say it's an amalgamation of a few different ways of looking.

It's actually gone to another level by virtue of some degree of emptiness perception being involved in the giving, in who's giving and what's being given and who it's being given to. When that's the case, then the whole movement, the whole gesture and the whole sense of that idea of giving my aggregates to the divinity deepens. It's deepened by that. It actually becomes much more freeing and much more beautiful and will feel more sacred, generally speaking.

The point really, I could have picked any example, is that there's always this kind of possibility for any way of looking—whether it seems obviously to involve an idea or not—to deepen, to refine, to become more subtle. And also to become more comprehensive. This is possible for most meditations, any way of looking, meditation on an idea, meditation on an image.

If we talk about incorporating emptiness into it, there's a spectrum of how much emptiness is included, or how deep it goes, and anywhere on that spectrum is available as a sort of variation on the larger way of looking. Similarly, we could say if the whole thing is seen as image, imaginally, and there's the middle way of the imaginal where neither real nor not real operates, it will function in a similar way to the emptiness—allowing more beauty, more sacredness, becoming more freeing—in that example of giving my aggregates to the divinity.

I think I've mentioned this before on retreat, perhaps on the re-enchanting retreat: if we were meditating with receiving love or light from a divinity, I would say that rather than being more interested in incorporating more emptiness into the whole gestalt of the view, it's actually quite important to explore all the positions on the self-spectrum. A very solid, contracted, reified self-sense—it's really important that this self-sense (because it's often quite a suffering self-sense) puts itself or feels itself in the stream and bathed in the stream of the divine light and divine love. That's very useful to include, that more solid self-sense and views, but also the less solid senses of self. It's all important.

But generally there's this possibility in any way of looking for it to refine and deepen and open up in that way.

Wrapped up in what we just said is this idea that when we're talking about ideas, they need to come into the way of looking. For that they need to be a bit more subtle. They can't be too gross. For the way of looking to be agile and actually to be able to work in the moment with different conditions and to go deep, the way the idea is incorporated has to be quite subtle.

Sometimes, as an example, we could take the whole idea or conceptual framework of dependent origination that the Buddha came up with—twelve links, or sometimes ten links, or sometimes thirteen. But let's say twelve links. That whole conceptual framework is really a network of ideas. What I've noticed teaching this in different situations with people is that oftentimes people really seem to enjoy the categorization of their experience.

Sometimes I'll do this with a group: sort of look back on some whole scenario of dukkha that transpired perhaps in a social situation or work situation, and use that grid of concepts and the dependent origination, the twelve links there, to file things or categorize things. When that happened, that was a saṅkhāra in the form of previous belief structure or expectation or conditioning. When that moment happened, it was the shrinking of the consciousness. When that moment happened, that was the aversion to the unpleasantness in the contact.

People seem to really quite enjoy doing a bit of a post-mortem on some kind of suffering, or even just a categorization of some made-up situation. There's a way that's helpful because it helps digest that conceptual framework and the concepts that make it up at a certain level. But that, to me, is not full enough understanding.

We can have a feeling—I've touched on this before—we can have a kind of enjoyment that many of us have as human beings when we've fitted this experience to that concept, and we've broken things down, found a way that we can file all the words of what we find in the text and what the Buddha is talking about. We file it: it means this, and that translates as this, and in that situation it meant this. There's a kind of relatively neat filing away of all the concepts. We can sometimes enjoy that and mistake it for the kind of level of understanding that's really going to be liberating, which goes beyond that.

Certainly not just post-mortems on our suffering that has already transpired—that's not really going to help that much. But nor is this just the satisfaction of neatly putting concepts in boxes and neatly mapping them to circumscribed experiences or movements of consciousness in our life.

It can be useful, but actually, what we need to do is live an understanding of dependent origination in ways that liberate. That means translating it to actually become not just a way of looking, but lots of ways of looking in the moment. There is a whole network of concepts there, all the links and all the interconnections. So many, many possible ways of looking are available there from that classic Buddhist teaching of dependent origination.

Again, if we take that map of dependent origination, that network of concepts, a conceptual framework, what can often happen is that someone doesn't just stop at a kind of relatively gross intellectual categorization of what might happen. They don't just stop even with a relatively gross labeling in the present moment of what's going on: "Ah, yes, there's aversion here. Ah, yes, there's selfing here." That kind of observation will be helpful if I catch it in the moment. That's going to be relatively helpful—just there's enough mindfulness there to not get completely sucked into something. It may create a bit more spaciousness, a bit of a breakup of the momentum of the saṃsāric flow.

But there's the possibility of much more: a subtle wielding of the concepts involved, much more subtly incorporated into ways of looking in a much more fluid and agile way. Someone might take it to another level and, for instance, look at the link between vedanā and taṇhā—vedanā and craving—and have a practice derived from that map of dependent origination. From that particular link between vedanā and craving, have a practice of stationing the awareness on unpleasant vedanā, or pleasant vedanā, whatever...

and stationing the awareness on the vedana and observing moment to moment the rapid changing of the vedana itself, or just being with the vedana.

In that kind of intensity and acuity of attention on the vedana, there's a marked slowing down or attenuation of how much craving the vedana then gives rise to, either in aversion or desire to have more or to hold on. So it's a very specific way of looking: stay at the vedana, focus on the vedana as they're happening right now. That very focusing—even if it doesn't have a contemplation of impermanence, just seeing pleasant, unpleasant, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant, whatever it is—will attenuate the craving that comes out of that.

I've talked and written about this in the past. It's a very skillful practice, stationing the awareness on the vedana. Some people, though, take that as the pinnacle of what's possible as a way of looking that might come out of the twelve links, the map of the twelve links of dependent origination. There I would say that actually a lot more is possible, a lot more subtle than that and a lot more liberating than that.

Some people even would say that this is what the experience of an arahant is—that vedana arises, unpleasant or pleasant, whatever, and there is no craving. This kind of practice that we can do of stationing the focus of attention on the vedana, thus having the craving attenuated through the intensity and steadiness of that gaze on the vedana—some people would say that's practicing the way an arahant would see anyway, the way an arahant would experience anyway. That's practicing a state of liberation or arahantship.

But then what can often happen is quite a lot gets clung to in there. One is the view of what awakening is, and the other is just quite what is possible through the translation of those concepts of dependent origination that the Buddha outlined into ways of looking. One limits because one's stopped somewhere—that's it, that's what I need to see now, everything else, there's not much more there. One has stopped the possibilities for this translation of concept and idea into a way of looking.

One of the things I feel is very important as a general statement is that all these Dharma categories—for example, those twelve links of dependent origination: avijja, sankhara, vijnana—delusion, fabrications, fabricating forces, consciousness, perception, all the rest of it, craving—to me, and to many, or at least some Dharma teachers and Buddhist teachers in the history of the wider tradition, they are not truths. They are not ultimate truths.

These categories, these Dharma categories—the twelve links of dependent origination, the three kilesas, the five aggregates, awakening, whatever—all of them, first of all, we can notice how they've been translated and shifted and given different interpretations at different points in the history of Buddhism and different locations in the dissemination of Buddhism over the globe.

But more importantly, they're also empty. We can realize that they themselves do not have inherent existence. So they are not truths. These twelve links, these five aggregates, these three kilesas—they're not ultimate truths.

Even in the Theravadan tradition, Ajahn Buddhadasa used to say everything that's involved in the Four Noble Truths is a relative truth. The twelve links of dependent origination are the Buddha's long-hand version of the second noble truth, the causes for the arising of dukkha. Craving being the shorthand version, clinging being the shorthand version. But the long-hand version is dependent origination in that model. And Ajahn Buddhadasa says this is all relative truth. When you take the raft of the Four Noble Truths and that teaching of dependent origination, you go beyond it.

To me, there's a whole other level here, way beyond that stationing of the attention on vedana, where all the links of dependent origination begin to melt through actually contemplating the very mechanism of dependent origination and what it is. You take that teaching to a deeper and deeper and deeper level. I used to say it's like a snake swallowing its own tail. Maybe better to say is they melt—those concepts melt under the gaze of the understanding of dependent origination, which is the understanding of emptiness.

So they're not truths, they're rafts, they're part of the raft of what the Buddha talked about. They're skillful means, they're relative truths that can be helpful when they are translated into ways of looking. The worst thing would be to cling to them intellectually as truths and statements about "this is my philosophical position on what life is," when they haven't actually become really fertile and really taken this journey into depth and radicality that they can when they're translated into ways of looking that bring levels of freedom dependent on the levels in which that translation has actually been worked by the practitioner.

So as an example—and I don't know whether I've mentioned this anywhere else in a talk—the three kilesas were picked out, the three defilements. The Buddha used to say these are three fires you have to put them out: greed, aversion, delusion.

In a way, he was responding to the spiritual culture at his time in India, which was dominated by the Vedic teachings and the Brahminical teachings. In the Vedic and Brahminical religions, they used to burn three fires, and the idea was to keep them burning. The Buddha came along and said you've got to put them out.

Now, we could say, well, if he happened to be in a different spiritual culture or time where they had, say, four fires or two fires, would that have shaped his teaching of the Dharma? Would he say there are four or two kilesas? Because he was really spinning something taken for granted in people's spiritual understanding—he was just spinning it the other way, the way Jesus would do things.

When he says, in different teachings, it's a kind of, "Hey, think about this." So you see the historical conditioning even of the original Buddhist teachings there.

From many angles, we can see these dharma concepts are not an absolute ultimate truth. They're for the sake of becoming ways of looking. They're optional lenses that we can put down, pick up, and go for a ride on. Sometimes I call them avenues, which is something I'll come to in a minute.

We use them so that they become ways of looking, ways of sensing. Something like the teaching of dependent origination with those links—as I said, there's a whole plethora of potential ways of looking that can be extracted or constructed from those concepts. They are taken at different levels.

Actually, that leads me on to something else. I said I would start with some familiar ideas, and so we touched on dependent origination. I didn't really mean to go into that so much, but what about the three characteristics? *Tilakkhana* in Pali, *trilakshana* in Sanskrit.

The three characteristics, sometimes called the three marks of existence, has become quite a common Buddhist category. So *dukkha*, *anicca* and *anatta*. *Dukkha* meaning suffering or unsatisfactoriness really. *Anicca*, impermanence. And *anatta* either usually translated as not-self, or not belonging to a self. Sometimes it's translated as "there is no self," and occasionally it's translated to refer to what I would call the emptiness of inherent existence of phenomena.

What I would like to open up—and some of you will be familiar with me saying this from before—is just to point out that we can relate to these three characteristics, three marks, as facts, as realities or truths. The truth of everything is that it is *dukkha*. So even if something is pleasant, it's not going to be finally satisfactory, and hence it's unsatisfactory. The truth of anything at all is that it's impermanent, and it's not self, or it doesn't belong to myself.

So we can take them as facts, these three characteristics, and make that either just an abstract philosophy or a kind of attitude to life, or take them as facts and plug them in as meditations and go a bit deeper than just a general life attitude. As facts, they're part

of what some modern philosophers call the facticity of our existence—the sort of unavoidable, hard realities of our existential predicament. Unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and this absence of a kind of self-essence to ourselves.

So one can look at them as facts and part of the facticity of our existential situation, or one can pick up these three characteristics as ways of looking. And then they have to be meditative lenses, meditative tools, and it will turn out, meditative avenues.

I've pointed out elsewhere that oftentimes they're given or referred to as *anicca, dukkha* and *anatta*—three characters, three marks. *Lakkha* or *lakshana* in Sanskrit. But sometimes the Buddha referred to them, or when he was talking about them, he talked more in terms of what I would call a way of looking. So he talks about *dukkha, anicca* and *anatta saññā*—perception, perceiving, perceiving in those terms. Or *dukkha, anicca* or *anatta anupassanā*, which means a kind of observing, looking at, contemplating, considering or viewing. *Passanā, anupassanā,* is to view, which would translate very well to ways of looking.

So *anicca* as a way of looking—what does that mean? Probably familiar with my teachings about this, it's like looking, plugged into, focusing on, attentive to, interested primarily in, in that moment, the impermanence of things, and just sustaining that as a lens. All I'm interested in now is the impermanence. It might be long-scale impermanence—the impermanence of vast stretches of time, or ordinary time scales, or very, very micro time scales—but all I'm wanting to see, over and over, when I've got that way of looking, those lenses on, is impermanence.

Or *anatta*—just not self, not me, not mine. I just sustain that for a period: half an hour, ten minutes, an hour, whatever it is. And what happens? Where does it take me? It's a way of looking rather than a truth. As I employ it as a way of looking, I let it unfold. I don't *a priori* fix a limit on what I will see or what that lens will reveal to me.

Similarly with *dukkha*—it's just unsatisfactory. And there's another way of doing it I'm not going to go into now.

Then the question becomes: when I look this way, what happens to my experience? What happens to appearances? What happens to perception?

Here we find ourselves with a choice. On one side lies the possibility of taking these three characteristics as facts. And what will happen if we follow this path? If I plug them in as established truths—not leaving them abstract, not employing them as ways of looking but deciding they are facts—I've already placed a limit on them. There will

be some degree of less fabrication, certainly less clinging, because when I see things are unsatisfactory, I naturally let go. I'm moving through this very quickly, as I've explored these territories elsewhere many times.

There will be a little less clinging, perhaps quite a lot less clinging, and less fabrication of perception. But when I leave these characteristics more open-ended and employ them as ways of looking, something far more profound can unfold. There can be actually a lot less fabrication. I embark on a genuine journey with these ways of looking.

Because I've adopted what we're calling the phenomenological approach, I'm positioned differently. I'm actually looking for the effects on perception and the effects on fabrication. So I begin to really notice—oh, with these ways of looking, there is less fabrication. What I perceive, what appears, depends on the ways of looking. These ways of looking fabricate much less.

How much less? I simply keep going with them. And I discover that with anicca to some degree, with dukkha more so, but with anatta even more profoundly, these ways of looking can take me deep into an unfabricating state of much, much less fabrication. Because I'm connecting fabrication and ways of looking, I begin to understand that phenomena are empty.

I develop this skill, expanding my range with these three ways of looking. I see more and more phenomena dependently arising—empty of inherent existence. What this accomplishes is a kind of coming full circle in understanding. I began with ways of looking simply as an experiment, agreeing that yes, we can look at things differently. But because I see their radical and total emptiness, I return to ways of looking in a way that validates the entire idea and practice at a completely different level.

Because things are thoroughly empty, we're left with nothing but ways of looking. Phenomena don't exist independent of the way of looking. I look this way—a phenomenon appears like that, then disappears. I look that way—it disappears, something different emerges, through all the gradations in between.

This whole journey into emptiness liberates and legitimizes and opens up the entire possibility of conceiving practice as a playing with ways of looking.

Let me explore this more specifically. Either through developing some understanding and practice of emptiness, or through developing jhana practice—even just the first three or four jhanas—if one gains some mastery in the jhanas, something remarkable becomes possible. Where there is pain in the body, you can simply decide to see it as bliss, as happiness or pleasure. And the perception, the appearance, the sensation of the vedana actually changes.

So either through moving toward mastery of jhana practice—and not everyone will teach what I'm discussing now—or through some understanding of emptiness, you come to realize just how malleable perception is. This malleability is intimately related to ways of looking.

Here's pain in my knee or back. This transformation doesn't happen every time, isn't possible all the time, but just the fact that it's possible quite frequently can profoundly impact both understanding and being. You come to see how malleable the perception of vedana truly is. So dukkha—what the Buddha calls dukkha-dukkha, the dukkha of plain pain—begins to become relativized. Is it necessarily that? No. I can look at it and see it, feel it as something different, as pleasure, as bliss, as whatever arises.

Moving further into understanding emptiness, one begins to see the emptiness not just of phenomena but of all phenomena—anything, even micro-phenomena, mental phenomena, momentary phenomena. One sees the emptiness of all phenomena and also the emptiness of time itself.

Seeing all this together, understanding it, feeling it, sensing it in one's practice—where does this leave the notion of impermanence as truth? Where does it leave that characteristic? If time is empty and things are empty, can I really speak about the impermanence of things? Even micro-phenomena, even a moment of vedana—it no longer stands up as ultimate truth.

As we take these whole ways of looking—these three characteristics—deeper into practice, extraordinary fruit can emerge if we truly take our time to develop them, cultivating the art and everything they can involve.

Through the profound emptiness understanding that can emerge, or through what we've been calling sensing with soul, something remarkable becomes possible: we find ourselves able to regard phenomena—even what would typically be classified as dukkha—as perfect. I spoke of this when discussing my illness and cancer, the possibility of dying, and how sensing with soul revealed the whole situation as perfect. This arose directly from sensing with soul, but we can also arrive at this understanding through emptiness practice, because of the malleability that emerges—the capacity to see phenomena as bliss. Those familiar with Vajrayana teachings will recognize this seeing of all phenomena as bliss, though there are different levels and colors of meaning here that I won't explore right now.

Consider what I call the dukkha of finitude. Things feel unsatisfactory because they're finite and limited—finite in time, so impermanent, but also bounded in scope. We sense things, whether outer or inner, subtle or gross, as having hard edges, rigid

boundaries, as sharply defined. This characterizes our habitual perception. There's dukkha simply because things have finitude in time—they're impermanent—and because they can't ultimately satisfy. I'll outgrow this thing, desire something different, seek what lies beyond its limitations.

Yet through sensing with soul or through deep emptiness understanding, we begin to see and sense things as infinite. Remember that soft edge, that elastic boundary of how things appear when we sense with soul? Through the soul-making dynamic—eros pushing further into the image and logos, expanding the psyche and logos of any phenomenon—it's no longer finite. It becomes infinitely expandable, infinitely dimensionalized.

When we see the emptiness of phenomena, those hard edges that seem to separate one thing from another, from us, from all else, reveal themselves as illusory. Because a thing can be seen as no longer carrying the unsatisfactoriness of finitude, we can look at it and declare: this is not dukkha, this is perfect, this is bliss, this is divine.

Similarly, while we can certainly see a thing's impermanence, through seeing the emptiness of time itself, or the emptiness of phenomena, or through sensing it iconically—sensing with soul and touching that timeless, eternal quality—we can just as validly see the opposite. Yes, it's impermanent, but it's also somehow eternal.

Just as we can see something as dukkha or as the complete opposite of dukkha, we can see it as impermanent or as eternal, iconic. These ways of looking become available to us. The very characteristic flips into its opposite.

With anatta—not-self—having seen the emptiness of all phenomena and the emptiness of all self-views, we become free to entertain, to play with, to enter into any self-view whatsoever. Everything becomes available because it's all empty. It's not that one self-view is acceptable—say, seeing self as process—while another is illusion. Any self-view becomes workable. We can move from anatta to atta, from no-self to self, and we're simply playing. Ways of looking open infinitely.

So these characteristics function as doors or gates rather than ultimate truths or final goals. They are doorways to that avenue of less and less fabrication, to the radical understanding of emptiness that emerges from such investigation, and to the liberation that flows from that understanding.

What exactly is liberated when we see the profound emptiness of things? We can still employ these characteristics in their more conventional meanings and applications. When I contemplate impermanence while simultaneously knowing that time isn't ulti-

mately real, the practice can actually deepen in terms of liberative efficacy. Impermanence itself isn't real, yet I'm still looking at impermanence—and this takes the investigation to an entirely different level.

Or I can veer away from impermanence altogether, focusing instead on eternality, or total emptiness, or any number of possibilities.

One possible meaning of lakshana is "the act of aiming"—not the goal or target of aiming, but the act itself, the dynamic process rather than the static endpoint. I'm not interested in playing etymological games or insisting on particular interpretations, but I view etymology poetically, as something to explore creatively.

In this act of aiming, it's possible that the arrow takes us on a journey, emerging eventually in what appears to be the very opposite of what we originally aimed toward. This kind of reversal of original teachings appears frequently in Vajrayana traditions—like discovering treasure in the kleshas, as we've seen with the three characteristics here.

Lakshana in Sanskrit can also mean the sign or line that one draws—that one creates—on ground prepared for sacrifice. Again, we can understand this as creation rather than discovery of pre-existing reality. It's a way of looking rather than a facticity, a creation designed to open or discover holiness.

I'm not claiming this as historical etymological fact, but these meanings resonate with our exploration of the characteristics as creative, liberating tools rather than fixed metaphysical truths.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 7/8). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So, with these three original characteristics—dukkha, anicca, and anatta—it's almost like they can become their opposites. Again, not as truths, not as ultimate truths. Rather as weighted looking.

When we're talking about ideas in the bigger picture, we can also explore what ideas we have about perception itself. What are our ideas about perception? How much do these ideas shape our experience? Often they remain unconsidered, inherited from the legacy and influence of dominant culture or historical conditioning.

What are our ideas, or what are the possible ideas we might cultivate if we become more conscious and till that soil, turn that soil as I've spoken of? What are the possible ideas we can have about perception?

We can have perception as simply factual—the idea, either unconsciously or deliberately embraced, that perceiving means you just perceive what's factually there. You perceive the truth of reality out there in the world. Remember when I spoke about different skillful modes of sensing? There's an overlap here. That's one skillful mode of sensing. When I need to accomplish something in the world, I sometimes enter this mode—it's factual, functional. It's not merely automatic, but deliberately engaged.

But I could hold another idea about perception: that its purpose, aligned with the ways of looking, is to deconstruct. This is what the Buddha was pointing toward. Deconstruct. "You should smash, destroy the aggregates," he says. Deconstruct them through the way of looking so that there is eventually an opening. So there's less and less fabrication and eventually an opening to the unfabricated. One goes beyond the world, so to speak.

This represents a wholly different idea about perception—that perception is a delusory construct, or certainly a problematic construct, and one can break free of it or see through it, going beyond this world of avijja and fabricated perception.

Or, touching again on what we've explored, one could say that perception serves the function of operating in and coping with the world. Or the idea about perception is that there's a play that's possible, an art that's possible—the creation and discovery of all kinds of landscapes and vistas, appearances, perceptions, experiences. For what? For the sake of soul-making. This would be another view.

There are many possible views, ideas, concepts about what perception is and what it's for. One possibility is playing with perception in service of creating and discovering what opens soul-making.

Contrasting what I just described—one whole attitude and idea related to perception being that it's simply reality, flatly perceived truth and fact that one copes with skillfully—there's another possibility. In Jewish mystical tradition, there's the concept of tikkun olam, healing the world, or restoration of the world. This can also mean restoration of the universe. We hopefully engage in acts and service and speech and behavior that heal the world.

But there's also the level of healing the perception of the world—redeeming it from soullessness, flatness, lack of divinity, lack of beauty in perception. So yes, hopefully we make beautiful things in the world, offer beautiful things, speak beautiful things, sing beautiful things into being. But also in the eye of the beholder, in the creation and discovery of soul-making perception, we can create beauty and heal the perception of the world.

I want to explore different possible ideas about perception, or ways of understanding and conceiving what perception is. And by this, I mean not just abstract concepts. One can actually have a sense, a felt sense and conception of perception as gift and grace.

By this I don't mean only the passive receptivity of sense organs to impinging vibrations of air creating sound, or photons and waves of light on the retina—that simple receptivity. I mean gift and grace as all the fullness and open-endedness of what that might mean when infused with soul. Something we're receiving. Sometimes it feels like the soul has designs for us, gives us something.

And we receive a certain perception from soul. Some experience opens up, some way of relating to the world is given to us. So there is that real felt sense, a conception wrapped up with a felt sense of perception as gift and grace that's possible.

Or one can put the emphasis more on my work, if you like. So gift and grace—a second possibility of conception and a felt sense of perception is as work. Because of the potential malleability of perception through ways of looking, I can work in the moment, and practice is possible. Work is possible to fabricate or unfabricate or shape perception of self, other, world, etc. And again, what for? What for? What's the end there? Always back to this question, what's the end? What do you want? And that might vary in different situations. That's part of what a larger view of skill might mean.

So gift and grace as a conception, a felt sense of what perception is. Work—perception as work, something that I work at, something that I am working at, something that takes a bit of effort. But also as opportunity, as a third possibility. And opportunity comes etymologically from porta, which means door. So perception as a door, as we said with the three characteristics, doors to possibilities. Now that's implicit in the whole idea of working and maybe even in the idea of gift and grace, because there's an opportunity to know perception as gift and grace, as participation in the divine.

That's another sense of perhaps a refinement of the gift and grace idea—we're participating in the divine through our perception. I've touched on all this before, I'm not sure when, but this sort of participation in the divine in our existence is through, certainly through embodied action, but it's also through our perception and our experience itself.

A teacher, ancient teacher from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Maximus the Confessor, his name was, wrote: "God, the divine logos, wishes to affect the mystery of his incarnation always and in all things." The divine wishes to affect the mystery of its incarnation always and in all things. And we can hear that and take that word incarna-

tion loosely, or with a lot of breadth as to what it might mean. And part of that is we can hear the divine wishes to affect the mystery of its appearance, of its appearing always and in all things—always and in all things.

Whatever the perception is, there's this possibility through our participation, through all this—either the gift and grace or the opportunity or the work of perception. Through our participation, we participate in the divine which wishes to affect the mystery, to appear, to incarnate, always and in all things.

And in a way, that's, one could say, the whole point of tantric teachings. The whole point of Vajrayāna is, from a certain point of view, you could say, to see appearances as divine, which is how a Buddha sees them. To become a Buddha, which means partly to see appearances as divine. It's just in the Vajrayāna tradition, as we've received it, it may be that they're kind of relatively circumscribed, limited and generic kind of options for what that actually is then experienced as, what that divinity, how that divinity is experienced, or the kinds of experience of divinity. And in the work that we're doing, Sensing the Soul, we're actually opening up more possibilities, potentially infinite possibilities.

So when we talk, if we go back to the three characteristics, we can consider them as fact. We can consider them as kinds of ways of looking that are in the service of and for the sake of deconstructing, unfabricating. And the question is just how deep do we go down that avenue? How deep do we go with those ways of looking into deconstruction, into unfabrication?

And there is the possibility to go very deep with that or just a kind of very limited depth of unfabricating. And we can go so deep with them that they begin to deconstruct themselves. Impermanence begins to lose its meaning. It begins to be revealed not as an ultimate truth, etc., and the others too. And then they themselves, those three characteristics, are kind of loosened as concepts.

And here we have again an instance where a journey of deconstruction, a movement of deconstruction, can then, when it goes deep enough, then makes available the opportunities for reconstruction as perceiving of divinity, of sacredness, of bliss, of perfection, of eternality, etc. Those kinds of opposites which are very commonly found in Vajrayāna teachings.

CHAPTER 132

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 5 - Bodhicitta)

Rob Burbea · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk from The Mirrored Gates series, Rob Burbea examines how fundamental Buddhist ideas shape our practice and perception. He critically explores the popular notion of 'living life to the full' as a practice goal, questioning whether conventional mindfulness approaches truly encompass life's dimensionality and infinite potential for meaning.*
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> *Burbea then turns to bodhicitta - the aspiration to attain awakening for all beings - investigating how this Mahayana ideal functions both as devotional practice and imaginal engagement. He explores the rich ambiguity of Tathagatagarbha (Buddha nature), showing how different interpretations can become ways of looking that transform perception of self and others. Through careful analysis of Sanskrit etymology, he demonstrates how 'all beings are tathagatagarbha' can mean we are Buddha's womb, hidden treasure, or born from Buddha - each offering unique contemplative possibilities.*
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> *The talk distinguishes between generic spiritual ideals and the deeply personal process of individuation, drawing on Jungian concepts and philosopher Nikolai Hartmann's insights on personality development. Burbea emphasizes how authentic spiritual development requires personal resonance with values and images, leading to one's unique 'angel out ahead' rather than universal archetypes. This exploration reveals the intimate relationship between eidos (idea) and icon (image) in transformative practice, showing how soulful engagement with concepts can open infinite dimensions of meaning and beauty.*

So three characteristics—a kind of classical Buddhist teaching that many of you will be familiar with.

If we briefly move to a much more modern kind of idea and vocabulary, consider the concept of "living life to the full." I've heard that a fair amount, and sometimes it's conveyed as the point of practice—that the point of practice is to live life to the full.

I heard this in a talk one time, years ago, and someone was describing a walk that they'd done when they were on retreat at Gaia House. He was describing how something had been going on in his mind in preparing for this walk. Perhaps it was towards the end of the retreat and it was a longer walk, and he was trying to arrange the perfect experience or day as he was transitioning out of retreat. In doing so, he actually missed

the opportunity to be present to the trees and the breeze on his walk, because he was busy figuring out how he was going to have the perfect day. This was in the context of explaining and emphasizing living life to the full as the aim or purpose of the path in practice. I've come across that idea in quite a few places.

Again, it's an idea. There's quite a lot involved in it. Maybe just to say a few things about it: Is that idea of living life to the full, as it's commonly conveyed or commonly understood—because a person might mean a certain thing by it and someone else understands something differently—but as it's either commonly meant or commonly understood, is it actually living life to the full?

It's quite a big phrase, living life to the full. What might be missing? What's involved in that phrase and what's left in that idea and what's left out?

If this person had been walking and perhaps consumed in thinking or outrage at some political injustice, or trying to understand something in the Dharma, would that be disqualified from living life to the full because they were really wrapped in that? Or is it dependent on how mindful one was of the experience? Like, "I really know now I'm doing this thinking," versus just being lost in it. Does that influence whether we consider it as living life to the full or not?

If one was walking and lost in nature, is that living life to the full or not? It's somehow wrapped up in the way we hear it or the way it's communicated—somehow being related to mindfulness in a modern sense. But it's not quite clear, to me at least.

What is clear is that the more usual notions of being present or being mindful do not imply or include a sensitivity to or a perception of anything more than what we've been calling the flatly material in nature, or an attention that is more than flatly sensual. There's a kind of uni-dimensionality, or very limited dimensionality, to the sensitivity and the perception.

Although there is awareness of mental movements that might be happening at the same time, or awareness of how one is interacting with the experience—with aversion, with craving, with thinking, with planning—dimensionality in that kind of presence or awareness or mindfulness, as it's commonly understood, is missing or limited. Sometimes it's even construed as an awareness that excludes or shaves off any sense of dimensionality. We're just cutting off and being really simple, focusing on the bare actuality of it all.

One could say—and some people would want to be all-inclusive and open and say—"Oh, but seeing or sensing the dimensionality and divinity of things can be or even is included in that mindfulness and in living life to the full." But the fact is, however it's

not mentioned much at all. We don't really have that language yet in the wider culture. It's not mentioned much about dimensionality and divinity in the wider culture, but also in our teaching culture.

When we use common phrases like "being present to the moment" or "the touch of life" or "the breeze on the cheek"—we use those phrases quite a lot as teachers—if we only use those phrases and talk that way, then it may be that those phrases carry with them, in the minds and souls of the speakers and the listeners, all kinds of fantasies and ideas, cosmologies and visions of awakening. Again, sometimes they're spelled out and sometimes they're not. Again, I'm talking about how pervasive and subtle can be the ways that ideas come into the way we communicate, the way we think, the way we listen, the way we speak.

But I would say that probably the more dominant interpretation or framework underpinning and connected with that kind of language—being present to the moment, being open to the touch of life, being present to the breeze on the cheek and all that—is more implicitly materialist, simply sensual in the sense of truncating or cutting off any kind of dimensionality in the way that we would use that word. It's what I would call a modernist understanding. It's shot through with or undergirded by a modernist understanding. Or sometimes a simply unitive understanding—some kind of mystical oneness is going on—even if the speaker is meaning something different, a person hears it that way.

These are the common ideas that influence this kind of language or the concepts that we often use when we're talking about mindfulness, the phrases that we often use when we're talking about mindfulness.

Someone who is listening from the perspective of those more common views won't have their perspectives and ideas challenged or expanded if we just stick to those same phrases. Someone who might be open to perceiving dimensionality is not really having that openness and those ways of looking supported by the teachings unless it's explicitly mentioned, unless it's drawn out, elaborated on, filled out, pointed out.

Usually the sensing of dimensionality—that level of experience and that potential function of mindfulness—is not being drawn out, not being legitimized, not being given value, not being prioritized, amplified, explained, or understood more widely, because it's not being articulated. The ideas don't get a chance to function as seeds because it's not being drawn out in the communication.

And as I said, some people would say, "Well, good, because that kind of business about dimensionality doesn't have any place at all in the Four Noble Truths." And then we're back to this whole debate about what is awakening and what are the Four Noble Truths and where does soul-making fit with them. I've been through all that.

But we could ask, living life to the full—come back to that, living life to the full. Am I living life to the full if the soul dynamic of eros-psyche-logos and its mutual insemination, expansion, and so forth is cramped and blocked? How full—whatever that means—how full can such a life be? That soul-making dynamic is a part of life. Even if we've never heard of it, even if it's only functioning in a limited way, it's part of life. It's part of how the psyche works, we could say.

And as I've pointed out before, without the expansion of psyche and logos, then the eros and the pothos can only expand outwards, horizontally, at the same level, and flatly, unidimensionally, to more and more, trying to get more and more experience at that same level, or of the same kind, or whatever. So then living life to the full becomes about, "Now I'm going to bungee jump," and what are they called—bucket lists, and all that, and travelling more widely. Or it becomes an endlessness of this kind of one-dimensional mindfulness, flat mindfulness, so-called presence to a so-called or so-seeming reality that's actually limited in depth.

Actually, what happens—long-term practitioners of mindfulness or presence or whatever, as it's so conceived—many of them begin to want more than that. I'm talking about people who have been practicing really for some years. It depends a lot on the soul type as well, on the eros, and I've talked about that elsewhere. But many long-term practitioners who are practicing in that kind of way—where the mindfulness or the present or whatever you're going to call it doesn't have a dimensionality and that ongoing opening of the neurofantasy is not supported—they begin to want something more than that kind of mindfulness and presence.

So in most cases, in a lot of those cases, they'll begin to explore other paths. Either they'll change paths or they'll use other paths that have a bit more psychological richness or a bit more allowance of something a bit more erotic or whatever it is, or devotional or this or that. Or they get into more study. "Let's say I really want to study mindfulness." And again, without being aware that study itself is imbued with fantasy, that one is soul-making in the study. It's not just "I want to kind of intellectually understand more" if the study is really rich. But there's often a blindness behind—there's not the questioning or realizing fully what is behind this movement to want to expand from just this flatly conceived sense of presence or mindfulness.

So in this idea of living life to the full, which can be, for some people, quite a commonly used idea—question: How do I know it's full? What does that mean? Full means it's reached its maximum. Living life to the full—how do I know that you're... How do you know that it's full, that it's reached its maximum? How do you know that more is not possible? What does it mean? And I don't just mean more flatly, horizontally. How do you know that more of even what life actually means is not possible? So what is included in this fullness that one alludes to, if one's using that phrase or hearing that phrase?

Fullness, to me, must include meaningfulness. And as we touched on earlier, much earlier in this course, meaningfulness means more than only actualizable meanings or purposes. So they're important in our life too. I had this purpose, I achieved it, or whatever, and that's a meaning for me. But meaningfulness must actually be something infinite and not ever finally achievable. It always is bigger than what I can achieve. And wrapped up in meaningfulness or wrapped together are meaningfulness and fantasy or image. And as we said, that also has a beyond to it.

So, but even still, it's like living life to the full—if it includes meaningfulness, then wrapped up in meaningfulness with something of fantasy and image, and then it's no longer that flat thing anymore. And we could also ask, you know, really what we're saying is, what is life in this version? Living life to the full—what is life? What's included in this vision or idea both of full and life? And again, what is not included or not even intuited as a possibility, not even admitted as a possibility.

So one of the things with that is the whole notion of what life is, and related to what life is, is what is the world? Because we live life in the world.

So this "living life to the full" takes its place in a particular historical context, and you can hear it resonating with our contemporary sensibilities. It's not something you would ever encounter in the Pali Canon - this notion of living life to the full, tasting life fully, or anything resembling that. It's fundamentally a modernist conception, and that's precisely why it feels so comfortable to people and makes such immediate sense. "Oh, that's what mindfulness is for," they think.

This stands in stark contrast to the traditional understanding, where mindfulness serves the purpose of ending rebirth, of transcending all fabrication of perception, unfabricating completely so that one might know the transcendent unfabricated. The ultimate goal was to reach a point where one would not be reborn into the world of fabrication at all - not into any perception whatsoever. This is hardly a common modern aspiration.

Wrapped up with this "living life to the full" is a particular relationship, view, and stance toward the world - both in terms of how we relate to the world and how we understand practice in relationship to the world. Embedded within it, I believe, is a massive toning down or outright reversal of any kind of aversion to the world, any anti-eros toward the world. Instead, there's a modicum of allowance for, or inclusion of, a certain amount of what we might call relish or juiciness with regard to the world.

This is what makes it attractive to us, because in modernist times, most people don't really embrace this notion of getting beyond the world. There's something present here - we could almost call it eros, though in quite a limited sense. There's a view and relationship with the world, a certain stance toward the world, that's more common and therefore more easily popular these days.

So while it's not quite eros in the way we would fully understand it, there's some kind of mild erotic connection between self and world, between life and world. But if the eros is really large - and I've spoken about this before - if it grows bigger through the fertilizing of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic in the ways we've described, then one can have, and will have at some point, both an eros for the world and an eros for the beyond, the transcendent, the unfabricated.

The eros for the world, when it becomes wrapped up in and allowed to invigorate and catalyze the soul-making dynamic of eros-psyche-logos, will begin to reveal dimensions to the world, to ourselves, to others. A kind of divine immanence will come forth through, in, with, and as that dimensionality - not as something beyond the world, but in, through, and with the world itself. Simultaneously, there will be eros for the transcendent.

When a person has big eros, or when their eros is allowed to become large and is worked with so that it grows, there won't be merely this attitude of mild erotic connection with something called "life and the world." There will be something much fuller than that. There won't be just that mild eros for life and the world coupled with an abhorrence for a beyond, a transcendent beyond. Instead, there will be, in some mysterious way, what Bella might call both world rejection and world affirmation - both erotic thrusts, both erotic openings and desires.

As I've said, when eros is allowed to stimulate and then become involved and enriched and deepened and widened in the soul-making dynamic, life and the world begin to gain dimensions. They begin to be perceived imaginally, as image in all that this means, and they become infinite in this way. This happens precisely for the reasons I

mentioned when we were discussing dukkha - because things don't have sharp and hard edges. They possess this infinity of possible dimensions and soft, elastic boundaries.

Life and the world become infinite in this manner, and we find ourselves attracted to that infinity there. In this context, fullness is not something static or achievable. But it's also possible that there's eros for the unfabricated, and then there's that particular kind of fathomlessness and infinity - if we can call it that - belonging to the unfabricated. Both are possible.

So loving life comes to mean more and more - it comes to embrace more and more. I don't simply mean embracing more and more experiences because we learn to be mindful or present to a greater range of experiences. It certainly comes to mean much more than vivaciously enjoying good times and the sensual and interesting pleasures and experiences available to many human beings today, provided they're affluent enough.

That kind of loving life—the zest some people have for going to parties and dinner parties and skiing and going to beaches and wild water swimming and fine dining—can mean way more than that. As it becomes ensouled, loving life means something much more expansive. It may come to mean being deeply and widely and reverently attuned to the beauty and to the mystery of being. It may mean endlessly discovering and creating an infinity of dimensions of beauty and mystery in life.

Yet it's so deeply profound that it's not only life, but the whole of existence, to which one is keenly, profoundly, devotedly receptive. In the sensing of the soul, in the movement and love of soul-making, and in that whole relational stance, attitude, and poise that it favors and opens up, this becomes the inclination. One is attuned to the whole of existence in this profound and devoted receptivity, openness, and sensitivity.

That whole of existence includes death. So that in loving life so deeply, one is not afraid to let its appearances fade. One is not afraid to let go into death. Loving life, if that really opens for us, means loving life and death. It's more than only accepting death we're talking about, because a true love, a soul love, ensouls all that it embraces, all that it touches. So death too is ensouled—it becomes image, becomes deeply and endlessly beautiful, a deep and endless mystery. All of this is opened again by the journey into deep unfabricating and by the sensing with soul.

We get these ideas, and again they influence us and may limit what our practice is, and also how we sense existence, and then how we live our life. Another idea that many of you will be familiar with is mostly used in the Mahayana traditions—it's

spreading now, though it originally came from the Pali Canon. This is the aspiration of bodhicitta. That can actually be delineated as having two aspects: there's an ultimate bodhicitta and there's a relative bodhicitta. The ultimate bodhicitta is actually the realization of emptiness. The ultimate Buddha mind is bodhicitta—the ultimate awakened mind is the understanding and the perception of emptiness.

Relative bodhicitta is what most people are more familiar with: the aspiration to attain awakening, to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings, so that one can serve them. Certainly the relative bodhicitta—and in some meanings also the ultimate—is based on the notion of Buddha nature, or tathagatagarbha in Sanskrit. It's because we have Buddha nature that there's the possibility we can become awakened and become Buddhas and serve other beings. But this tathagatagarbha, this Buddha nature, has really widely different meanings. It's used in very different ways across even just the Mahayana traditions.

What I'm interested in with this idea are a few things. One is: how does this work for us? This aspiration, if it's something that's alive for you—this bodhicitta aspiration, if it's actually part of your practice. For some people it will be, and for others, not really, and that's fine. But if it is, how does it function?

Here I think one of the things going on worth pointing out is the involvement of idea in image, or sometimes the possibility of them being interchangeable. In aiming at or aligning ourselves with or being devoted to something more than this life—usually the bodhicitta aspiration is viewed over lifetimes, the notion that I'm on a track that will ripen in awakening and Buddhahood in future lifetimes—is that aligning, is that aiming, is that devotion to something more than this life living life to the full?

If I don't think of it in terms of future lives, then just the value and the ideal of that kind of self-giving, that kind of outpouring, that kind of serving and dedication, that kind of goodness—there's a kind of ultimacy, a kind of ultimate value, an ultimate ideal there. If that's what's going on in the aiming and aligning and devotion, that being meaningful to you, then again, is it living life to the full? Because it's more to do with something that either ripens beyond this life, or that in the very ultimacy of the value and the ideal, it kind of is beyond what can actually fully be reached ever.

I mentioned—I think I mentioned, but I'll come back to it because I feel it's an important thread to weave through—goodness, beauty, love, whatever, these values have kind of no limit to them. They always have a beyond. They're always transcendent of wherever we are.

To aim at, to align oneself with, to be dedicated to and devoted to those ideals that are wrapped up in the bodhicitta aspiration—to be moved by them—this must be reflected in my life. It's quite possible that someone could simply mouth the bodhicitta aspiration and then live a completely unscrupulous life without any dedication to other beings. But it needs to translate into something real. We're talking about that which moves my heart, moves my soul, something I can feel my being aligned with.

I practice bowing to that, aligning my being, sitting in the dedication, sitting in the devotion, kneeling toward that ideal, feeling the reverberation of my being, my heart, my soul, my energy body with this ideal of bodhicitta aspiration. I can feel the meaningfulness of that, the beauty of it, the effect it has on my soul, on my energy body, on my heart.

This must translate somehow into life—into how I choose to live, what I choose to do, in the widest possible way. Or there must at least be attempts in one's life to live in the direction of that ideal. But it is just a direction. Either because it cannot ripen in this lifetime—I cannot possibly become a Buddha in this life, especially if I hold a Mahayana conception of Buddha—or because, being primarily a conglomeration of values and thus an idea, it has something that is beyond. Values always have a transcendent dimension. We cannot possibly fulfill these kinds of values. However good I am, it's possible to be better. However loving I am, it's possible to be somehow more loving. However beautiful something is, it's possible somehow for it to be more beautiful. At least one might conceive of that possibility. There's always a transcendent beyond to values.

As I mentioned earlier, this is one way that values as ideas—goodness, beauty, whatever—relate to and have similarities with images. They overlap and bear on images through this shared quality of transcendence.

But in the fact that it's somehow beyond this life, does this relate to what we were discussing—this third idea of bodhicitta aspiration to the second idea of living life to the full? Is it somehow more than living life to the full? Because I cannot actually achieve it—the fullness, the ripening is beyond this life, or exists in the ever-transcendent. The value is somewhat achievable, but it will always have this transcendent dimension.

Consider when the bodhicitta aspiration manifests as an image through, say, a tantric deity embodying or representing that bodhicitta aspiration. The aiming at and aligning with and devotion to becomes directed toward an image. Image too, in the way we've been discussing, creates this erotic imaginal quality that always has more and beyond. It's part of what we've explored—part of what eros creates and discovers. There's always a beyond.

So as an image—if there is an image of Tara, for instance, that condenses the bodhicitta aspiration for us—there's both eidos and icon present. There's icon in the sense that it's imaginal, an image that has infinite depth and potential to open. And there's eidos—it's idea as well, this conglomeration of values. Something exists here about how image and idea relate, but there's something about being more than living life to the full. It's beyond living life to the full.

This word for Buddha nature that I mentioned, Tathagatagarbha—Tathagata has its own etymology, but we could simply say Buddhagarbha, since Tathagata is another word for Buddha. Garbha is the interesting word here. Garbha can mean a womb or a matrix. It can also mean an embryo—that which is in a womb or emerges from a womb. I'm drawing this etymology from a passage by Shenpen Hookham in a book called *The Buddha Within*, which is quite interesting.

So garbha in Sanskrit means womb or matrix or embryo or, for instance, the gold that is in a gold mine or the diamonds that are in a diamond mine. There's quite a range of what it can mean. Garbha can also mean "born from."

Partly because of this variation in what garbha can mean, and partly because of the way Sanskrit works in creating compound words that you stick together, you can relate the two words of the compound—buddha and garbha, or tathagata and garbha—in different ways to each other, generating different meanings. It's an inherently ambiguous language, or rather a language amenable to multiple interpretations, very commonly.

For example, when it's said that all beings are—and often there are no verbs in Sanskrit sentences—so this is "all beings buddha-garbha." All beings are the buddhagarbha, or all beings have buddhagarbha.

That much is ambiguous, or open, let's say.

I'm mentioning all these because there's a possibility of meditating on bodhicitta as a meditation on an idea, a set of values, and as a devotional meditation that really involves the energy body, the soul, the heart, the being, the focus, the surrender, the intention. And there's a meditation that can be more on an image.

If we talk about the notion of bodhicitta as an idea rooted in, or dependent on, the notion of Buddha nature, tathagatagarbha—if we go through the different possibilities of what tathagatagarbha might mean, and then this idea of all beings tathagatagarbha, all beings are the Buddha nature, or all beings have the Buddha nature—I'm going to go through some different possible variants of meaning it could have for that common

Sanskrit phrase in the Mahayana tradition. And hopefully what you can get from this is it generates different meanings, and each meaning can be an idea that can be converted to a way of looking.

So, for example, all beings tathagatagarbha could be all beings are a womb of the Buddha, or all beings are the womb of the Buddha, or all beings are a womb of the Buddhas. And even then, a womb of the Buddha could be the womb that gives birth, or that holds the Buddha before a Buddha manifests. Or it could be the womb of the Buddha could be the Buddha's womb. So you have to play with this. You actually have to think about it a little bit.

All beings are the womb that give birth to the Buddha. So that means you are a womb from this idea, which can be translated into a way of looking with a little playing with it, and then meditated on. All beings are the womb that gives birth to a Buddha. You are a womb, a matrix, that gives birth to the Buddha. To a Buddha. And what does that do? Your body, your soul, your psyche, your practice.

And again, one can actually take that in quite a flatly conceived way: "Ah yeah, so that means if I really practice hard, then I'll, you know, become a Buddha." Or, you are the womb that gives birth to a Buddha. What might that mean? Sensed more with soul, felt sensed into more imaginably. What might that mean for this moment? Not just as a future potential that tells you to hit the cushion again, practice harder.

Or they said, you are the Buddha's womb. All beings are a womb of the Buddha's. And again, play with this. Turn the phrase over. See that each one of these can have different directions of meaning. And they can become temporarily crystallized as something to meditate on, an idea, and then through which you can see another, or see yourself, and see beings.

And again, because garbha can mean born from, all beings are born from the Buddha. What does that mean? What might that mean? All beings are born from the Buddha. Can you feel into that? Can you sense into it with soul? So there's a kind of soulful thinking that has to go on a little bit. And kind of hearing it poetically. All beings are born from Buddha. What Buddha? Where? How? What does it mean? What might it mean?

Or, again, it could be all beings are tathagatagarbha. All beings are the Buddha's hidden treasure. Again, it's the Buddha's hidden treasure. So that, again, has this one possibility. There's a corollary: We are the hidden treasure of God. We are God's necessity. We are the divine's necessity.

We are the divine's treasure, if I participate in it, if I see it a certain way—and it means me and you and my life and my perception. All beings are the Buddha's hidden treasure, the diamonds, the gold in the mine. We belong, you know, that corollary with this idea of belonging to the divine or having our roots in the divine. How is that communicated to us? How is that felt? And maybe it's communicated and felt through other images.

Again, in Tibetan, which is mostly where we get this Tathāgatagarbha—well actually also Zen, but when we get it through the Tibetan at least, it gets translated in a certain way. Apparently in Tibetan, I don't know Tibetan, but all beings have the essence of the Buddha. That could mean all beings have the essence that the Buddha is. Or all beings have the essence that becomes the Buddha, have an essence that becomes the Buddha.

So again, if you're listening to this, you'll probably have to rewind. If you want to get into this, rewind and just write these down and then take individual ones and meditate on them, which means playing with them as ideas, very lightly, very poetic ideas. And then when something feels, oh yeah, that's lovely. And then it's like, okay, can I sit with that and let that idea kind of percolate down into the soul and infuse the sensing—the sensing the soul of oneself, of other, of life.

Again, essence in Tibetan apparently has the meaning of some kind of good stuff that's extracted by purification from something else. So for example, gold from gold ore or sesame oil from sesame seeds. All beings have that essence of Buddha. So there's actually many possibilities here. All beings, Tathāgatagarbha.

And one can see the flexibility again. Plurality, flexibility. And there's a lot of beauty here. And a lot of art possible. And we can get quite adept at translating this kind of thing into a way of looking, or letting it translate into a way of looking. Sensing with soul, sensing self, sensing others, as I said.

I just want to finish today with one other thing to point out about this bodhicitta aspiration. It may well be that in more—if you're used to this bodhicitta aspiration and from some Buddhist tradition or other, it may well be that it functions through an image, say an image of Tārā, or even a kind of more vague internal image that you've come up with of what a bodhisattva is and what a bodhisattva does, etc.

But it may well be that that image is kind of universal and, let's say, generic. We have a kind of universal, generic image of a bodhisattva, either because it's one given to us, say, Avalokiteśvara or Tārā or whatever, or just operating for us in our psyche, whether it's kind of perceived vividly, clearly, or more vaguely. It may well be kind of universal and generic.

It can, in that becoming image or being given an image, it can lose the particularities of one's own personhood. It can lose the kind of particular ways of this infinite echoing and mirroring of my personhood. So it just becomes a vague sort of—a vague image of bodhisattva, you know, being a bodhisattva or moving towards Buddhahood or whatever. Do you understand? So that's quite common in a lot of these traditions.

Again, we've touched on it so many times, to lose the particularities and to lose or erase or make more vague the personhood and the particular ways the personhood is echoed, mirrored—my personhood, your personhood—in all this. So we're somehow just aiming for a universal, generic, or somewhat vague bodhisattvahood.

Contrast that with a too sharp delineation of exactly what I'm going to be and what it's going to look like and how I particularly will do this. Too tight, too rigid boundaries as well. The Jungian concept of individuation is quite an interesting concept, or at least can be molded to be something more in line with what we might be interested in. It's a moving towards or a growing towards and a groping towards my individual sort of blossoming, but that blossoming has no end.

And so it's personal. In Jungian therapy, I think it would be, and certainly in the way we're talking about it, it's mediated or supported by the imaginal. So that in Jungian therapy, one would be looking at one's dreams and images and things that came up for at some point beginning to give us the clues as the analysis matures, to give us the clues of the threads of the individuation for me. My individuation is different from yours, different from the next person.

So it's very personal and very unique and retains my particulars and maybe even my particular difficulties are redeemed and transformed, not erased necessarily. So that's more akin to the kind of work we're doing. And if it's mediated and supported through images, this movement to something beyond, this angel out ahead Henri Corbin talked about, then it's my angel out ahead.

There's a difference between that idea—what's the angel out ahead for me, or the angels, because sometimes it's plural, oftentimes it's plural—but then it's individual. It's not just Tārā, or it's not just Avalokiteśvara or whatever. It's unique to me, individual. There might be a few different angels calling me, and that's also interesting as well. But that becomes my movement, let's say, towards something like the bodhicitta aspiration, or I might give it a different name.

I might just say it's the images that are calling me, the angels that I'm moving towards. It's the process of my individuation. Whatever language, it can be more inclusive of and richly fulfilling and attentive to and involving my personhood, your personhood and all the particulars of that.

But the angel out ahead is image, is icon and therefore infinite and unfathomable and always having a beyond. It's always out ahead. We never reach that angel out ahead fully. We never, if we move towards it, it takes a step back. But we're always in connection with that. There's always that erotic relationship and coupling. It's with us. There's the eros both ways. There's the togetherness. But we never become it fully.

My process there, if that's what I've got, my soul-making journey or opening, is also then based on my image and on my values. So we can talk about values like compassion and goodness and love and generosity, but there's perhaps a need for them to be translated personally. When one really starts to attune the heart and the soul with ideas and ideals—ideals are ideas and values are ideals are ideas—the particular way generosity speaks to me, the particular feeling and soul opening and resonance I get with that, which is also mediated through images and stories and examples. But again, it's a combination of eidos and icon that we're talking about here. But it has to be personal. It's got to be a really personal connection.

There's a philosopher I've just discovered very recently that I'm really starting to get very interested in, Nikolai Hartmann. And he talks about ethics a lot. He talks about a lot of stuff, but one of the things he discusses is personality and the development of personality. How do you develop your personality, your particular personality, your unique personality? You can't just copy someone else you admire. You can't imitate because that would just be a lie and you won't be true to yourself, true to the image that wants to come through you, the ideal, in a more Platonic sense, you that wants to come through.

I would actually insert that although we might not imitate someone else, they can become image for us. And that my being with that meditatively and resonating with it and being moved by it is part of me developing, let's say, developing my personality. I think he means that in a much broader sense than some of the more tight and shallow meanings that sometimes get used.

But one of the points he tries to make is you can't imitate someone. You can't just kind of chase personality itself, chase this development of—we could say, what's the particular way that your bodhicitta will come to fruition? The particular personal way your bodhicitta will come to fruition. If we take this original idea of the bodhisattva and

bodhicitta which was there in the Pali Canon actually and then Mahāyāna really amplified it and we kind of take it and open it up according to some of the ideas that we've been discussing, what might it do?

But Hartmann says you can't just kind of make personality happen by focusing on personality. Personality comes—he says, "Personality as a value is never by its nature actualized in reflection upon itself, but in reflection upon other values." In other words, it's through meditating this devotion to, this feeling the effect of, putting myself in relationship to, in soul relationship to, in energy-body relationship to, in heart relationship to, in meaningfulness relationship to, the ideas and the values that touch my soul. It's through that and through choosing and committing to act on them and it's through that that my personality is forged. It's through that that I move towards my angel, let's say.

So one's personality—you have to follow your own feeling of value, your own kind of, which is an idea, and this soulful meditation on ideas. And no one can kind of give you your particular kind of value resonances, the particular kind of distribution of emphases and resonances that your soul has with different values at any different time. And that happens also in and through meeting life and the complexity of life and the joys and the ups and downs and the difficulties and the ethical ambiguities and choice moments, et cetera.

So these ideas have to be obviously connected to life, but they also, again, they have this kind of beyond dimension always.

We'll stop there and then as I said, starting with more familiar ideas and just trying to open them up, offer some different possibilities for practice, and then we'll gradually get into more probably for some people less familiar ideas and less familiar practices.

CHAPTER 133

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 8 - Talking with Trees)

Rob Burbea · 1h55

> *In this profound exploration of sensing with soul, Rob Burbea examines our capacity for deep relationship with trees and the natural world. Drawing on the understanding of body and earth as sacred texts open to infinite interpretation, he investigates how we can communicate with trees through reverence, touch, and even speaking words of love. Burbea explores the participatory nature of knowing, comparing how lovers know each other's love to how we might sense and receive communication from trees.*
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> *The talk delves into the role of speech in opening perception, examining how right speech affects our being and sensitivity, and how speaking to trees with love can create openings for deeper connection. Referencing philosophers like Goethe ("A human being does not begin to understand anything unless he loves it") and Nikolai Hartmann's concept of personal love, Burbea distinguishes between universal metta and the particular love needed for imaginal perception.*
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> *A significant portion addresses the epistemological challenges of sensing with soul, drawing parallels between the difficulties of knowing aesthetic and moral values and the challenges of imaginal perception. Burbea explores how values are woven into soul-making perception, examining antinomies (contradictory values) and the transcendent nature of values that always point beyond any particular manifestation. The talk concludes with reflections on environmental ethics, the "age of loneliness" from disconnection with nature, and the duties that arise from sensing the earth with soul.*

In the last talk we were discussing ideas of the body and of the earth, looking at some examples of sensing with soul the body and the earth and the possibility of approaching them with the sense of body and earth as sacred texts. In that way, they are open to possibly infinite interpretation and hermeneutics. We discussed a few examples, a few possibilities of the way ideas of the body come into sensing with soul and expand, open, and deepen the perception and the sense, as well as the idea and concepts of body and earth. We could have given many examples, so we just chose a few.

For example, what is it to sense, to perceive, to feel and to conceive of the body in the present moment—not abstractly, but with a felt sense, with a heart sense, with a soul sense—as somehow rooted in divinity? This body as a unique expression, a unique gift from the divine. Perhaps a theophany, the body itself as theophany.

With that iconic perception or perception of icon—body as icon, my body, your body, this body—there is in the nature of the iconic perception, in the nature of sensing with soul, that sense of perfection. But perfect doesn't mean perfectly healthy. It doesn't mean perfect looking, whatever that might mean anyway. An icon that is chipped or old and somewhat worn, or perhaps not exactly geometrically balanced, can still have all the power and depth and beauty and perfection as an icon. It can have the same perfection as a less worn, unchipped, more perfectly geometrically balanced image. Same with the body as icon. Same with the body when it's sensed with soul.

The perfection of the body—this sense of this body somehow being rooted in divinity—isn't because it's a perfect feat of biological engineering, marvelous as that is. It's a perfection of a different order, a different sensibility. Can one feel and sense oneself and one's body as holiness, as a holiness, as in holiness or as holy gift? The holiness there doesn't necessarily at all go with a more ethereal range of the bodily perception or image or energy body feel. The holiness is not only in that upper, less substantial range.

When there's the sensing with soul, when there's the openness and the fertility of the intellect and the concepts and ideas that are operating, there can be a sense and an idea of a kind of plurality of worlds that are somehow harmonized with each other—a spectrum, as it were, of worlds at different levels. I mentioned that yesterday, and we talked about it on the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat and several other places. It's quite a common idea in different traditions.

There is this plurality of worlds, and the world I see, the world I sense, is dependent on the way of looking. Part of the way of looking involves the concept—concepts of body, earth, world, and of course wrapped up in that, the ideas and the senses of matter and things.

I meant to include a brief anecdote regarding matter and things and this perception or sense and idea of a kind of plurality of worlds that are harmonized with each other. This is an account by Henri Corbin of attending a meeting in 1954 in Switzerland. There were many people there—Jung was probably there—and also D.T. Suzuki, whom I mentioned the other day in his description of the Dharmadhatu in the Avatamsaka Sutra.

Corbin and a few others were asking D.T. Suzuki about his impressions and what he knew about Western spirituality. They learned that he was interested in Swedenborg and other things. Later they asked him what homologies, what similarities in structure he found between Mahayana Buddhism and, for example, the cosmology of Swedenborg, in respect to the symbolism and correspondences of the world.

Corbin says, "Of course, we expected not a theoretical answer, but a sign attesting the encounter in a concrete person of an experience common to Buddhism and to Swedenborgian spirituality." He continues, "I can still see Suzuki suddenly brandishing a spoon and saying with a smile, 'This spoon now exists in paradise. We are now in heaven,' he explained." Corbin notes this was an authentically Zen way of answering the question.

So the things and the elements, the material elements of this existence can be perceived—this material existence can be perceived—as we are already in the pure land. This is the lotus land if I look the right way, if I sense with soul. There's the possibility of this appreciation or sensing and conception of a spectrum of worlds, worlds at different levels, somehow harmonizing, echoing, mirroring each other, so that all this exists in different dimensions.

Much earlier in the retreat, I talked briefly about loving trees and feeling loved by trees or particular trees. I think it was in the talk on sensing with soul. And so how do I know that this tree I love loves me? How do I feel? How do I sense?

How do I receive that communication from the tree, which includes the communication of love? I think I said I know like lovers know. I know as lovers know. And the communication is the communication of lovers.

How do lovers know that the other loves them? How do they feel that love? How is that communicated? One possibility for human lovers, but also between tree and human, is through touch. This tree that I love communicates to me and communicates its love also when I touch it with love, with reverence, with openness, with a refined attention and sensitivity. Just placing the hand on the limb or the trunk, hands there, touching it with love and feeling that love—somehow it's communicated to me.

If another person were to touch you with love without moving their hand, and just place their hand on your arm or your shoulder or your back, without moving, in the same way that the tree doesn't move when I touch it—there's no movement of my hand either—is it possible to feel the love through an unmoving human touch? Can you feel when you're touched with love?

Is that scientifically measurable? You can measure how hard or how soft or how much pressure there is in the touch, how much humidity perhaps. But can you sense—is that possible for human beings to sense love through touch? And what actually is communicated this way between lovers or when there's deep friendship between human beings in that touch? Or in the silent gaze of eyes? Or in the communication of bodies that aren't even touching? How does it carry? And what is communicated?

Communication—we tend to think of information. "Ah, sweetheart, I left the tofu casserole in the oven. Would you mind turning the oven off?" That kind of communication contains information. Maybe that's involved, but there's a whole other kind of communication that's not information in that sense. It cannot be translated so much, perhaps, into linguistic ideas or syllogistic ideas.

Perhaps you could say it's information that there is love there, that I am receiving love, that there's love flowing both ways. It's information that there's some awareness, some intelligence, some mutual awareness of other, some mutual intersubjectivity. This is a kind of information. But what is communicated? How is it communicated? How do we feel it? What happens between humans when there's deep love there?

When we extend this possibility for communication and for receiving love and feeling love and sensing love and knowing love from, for example, a tree—for some of you, that idea is already quite familiar, and you're quite comfortable with it, and you perhaps already practice that way, live that way. For other people in our culture, probably—certainly for the majority of people in our wider culture—that's going to sound like a very strange idea. But with all this talk about sensing the soul and the ideas involved and the ways of looking and perception and all that, even if it's strange, you may want to try.

Put yourself in a mode of practice, in a mode of humility and openness, and just try. And like all practice, we develop it. It gets refined, it deepens, we discover things, we find our own way, our own ways.

What would it be? If you feel—and you don't have to do anything, of course—but if at some point with all this business of sensing the soul, you feel that's a possibility of something you want to experiment with, what would it be to approach a tree with that openness, with the willingness to experiment, the willingness to discover, and take in the tree with your senses?

Perhaps sight. You can touch the tree with your hands—and how are you touching it? How are you sensing into that contact, the hands on the bark, or the leaves? Perhaps smell. Perhaps even the sound of the wind in the leaves. Bringing your senses there with openness, with the poise of sensitivity.

Touching the tree, looking at it, open to it with your senses. And what if one were, as much as possible, to, through the openness of the senses and the contact, make oneself available or support a sense of your appreciating that tree, that being? Deep appreciation. Honouring it. Revering even. And what if...

What if that's possible to actually bring that attitude, or just try to move toward an opening of those kinds of attitudes? And what if you were to actually speak to the tree and say hello, and say, "I love you. I love you."

Perhaps you can be aware and feel, be conscious of the way the tree is connected into the soil and the earth and the sky and the air and the light. And your body, if you're standing, touching the tree, your body is parallel with the tree and the whole body can be open to the tree. Whole energy body in relationship. Knowing the tree with your whole body and that openness and attunement and delicacy and sensitivity of the attention and the openness of mind.

And what might you notice? Who knows?

And perhaps some of it, if we talk about the character of this tree and perhaps the mood of this tree in that specific moment and how it feels about the encounter and what's being communicated there, perhaps all this might be very subtle. You might need that sensitivity and subtlety of attention and the kind of ability to tune in and focus on a certain wavelength or frequency of, let's say, energetic vibration or communication, similar to the way one focuses on frequencies or wavelengths in working with the energy body in jhāna or more widely in jhāna anyway.

So these are some possibilities to try, and if you feel called to, as I said, you don't have to do anything, but just in the spirit of openness, in the spirit of experimentation. And one could start something like what I just suggested, but as I said, all practices will develop in time and they become personal. We need to make any practice that we do personal. We discover, we create the practice and we find in responsiveness to what feels like it's working and the threads that are suggested to us.

So in this, a tree that we love, that we're approaching that way, might communicate something verbalizable, so to speak, some information or something visualizable. And it may be that the communication and therefore the sensitivity that I bring has to be open to a certain, let's call it a range of wavelengths that's more dark and more dense, very different than a typical human conversation, typical human communication.

Now, of course, some people will hear this almost certainly and say that's just crazy. Crazy. Tree huggers. Mark Twain, with his sharp brilliance, wrote: "It is just like man's vanity and impertinence to call an animal dumb because it is dumb to his dull perceptions."

Again, it's a matter of the refinement, the sensitivity of the perceptions and the openness of mind and sense. So what he says about calling animals dumb and that being vain and impertinent—same we could say of the earth, of the trees, of the forests, of the stones, of the rivers, of the stars.

I think I said already somewhere or other that we bring so much cultural conditioning to ideas that we hear and suggestions and to our perceptions. And that limits and conditions them. And in some cultures and times, and maybe in our culture, in these places where we are today, where you are today, in the future, whether or not we call that the same culture or not, because this is quite a considerable shift—but in some cultures and times, they would consider crazy our assumptions and our inability to feel, sense, respect and revere the tree's fullness of being, its particular intelligence, its kind of loving, its communication. Why are you so stunted? Why are you so stuck on those assumptions? And they might think we have some kind of mental disability collectively, a bit akin to, I think someone used the example of autism.

Autism is an interesting example. One theory of autism is that it's diagnosed when there's an inability to sense that another has a mind. It's called the absence of theory of mind. I think it's in severe autism—it's that absence of the ability to sense another mind in another person. And we regard that as a kind of problem of deficiency and incapacity, generally speaking, in the way the dominant culture diagnoses mental health issues and mental capacities.

Maybe those of us who now laugh at the idea of relating to nature this way, who might pour scorn, as I said, on tree-huggers or whatever they would call them—maybe there's something lacking there. Maybe we're not as superior in intelligence as we assume ourselves to be. And again, why are we so convinced of that? Is it really that we're such radically independent thinkers that question and deep questioning led to this be-

lief about trees? Or is it actually really just the product of how we've been, what's been communicated to us through the culture, a kind of indoctrination? It's not really that one is so clever for believing that that I love loves me. I can feel that. I can know that.

I read a little while ago that a medicine man or woman, a medicine person from the Lakota tribe, a Lakota medicine person, speaks to a stone and calls it Tunkashila, which means grandfather, this stone, for example. It's a completely different relation. It's more than a metaphor. I call you grandfather because you've been around a long time because stones really last a long time. So it's a kind of like, it's a flippant metaphor. There's something else going on there of a very different order, a very different dimension, a very different attitude.

Some of you know St. Francis of Assisi, that beautiful, beautiful spirit.

Father Sun, Sister Moon, speaking to the birds, and so forth. Here we see a different relationship altogether—a sensing with soul, a fundamentally different understanding of what is happening, what is real, what is true, what is worthy of respect, what deserves our attention. This transforms the very nature of speech itself.

I deliberately suggested speaking to a tree and saying "I love you"—to say hello, to express love, and as much as possible, to try moving in the direction of actually meaning it. Just try it. This aspect of speech fascinates me deeply—this quality we find in the Lakota medicine person, in St. Francis. Let's dwell on this a little.

You know that the Buddha taught right speech as part of his ethical training, as part of the precepts and the Eightfold Path. Here's something important to realize, and I hope you've noticed this about right speech: when we gossip or talk behind someone's back, or generally don't maintain the precept of right speech, can you notice—do you notice immediately in that moment and in the moments afterward—the effects in body and mind?

Even when it's subtly wrong speech, not quite right speech, it's noticeable immediately. The effects in body and mind create a slight toxic feeling, agitation, contraction, a subtle dis-ease. All of this may be very subtle, and again, it requires sensitivity. Without sensitivity, I won't even notice.

Part of the function of ethics actually works in a kind of loop. As I practice right ethics and maintain the precepts, it clears the coarse vibrations, because these vibrations of toxicity, agitation, dis-ease, and contraction actually block or hinder my sensitivity. So one function of ethics is this: as I engage less in behavior that agitates me and creates dis-ease, toxicity, or contraction, I actually become more sensitive. It's like the

surface of a lake growing calmer—I can see more, and I can pick up more subtle vibrations. I become more attuned to how it feels when speech is not quite right speech, to the vibration that sets up, and to the actual effect in heart, body, mind, and soul.

Sometimes, curiously, it's a little harder to notice the converse, but we can feel the positive and beneficial effect of wholesome, kind, insightful speech. There's a huge range in what I'm describing here. When we speak beautifully, there's beauty in the being—we feel that. It's clear and open, and it harmonizes something. The opposite creates the converse effect.

This is a big range, but again, we're talking about language as spell, with what we could say are almost magical effects—though it's not really magic. When facing a tree, being with a tree, touching it and approaching with reverence, humility, appreciation, gratitude, and love as much as possible, and saying out loud "I love you" or addressing it as "my love"—this speaking has an effect on you, on your body, mind, heart, and soul. It opens you. It opens heart, body, mind, soul.

With that openness, one becomes more able to tune in to the tree's being and the tree's knowing. The speaking of love has an effect on your being, and that enables a greater degree of sensitivity—just as when we speak to another human being, whether it's right speech or wrong speech or somewhere on that spectrum.

We can also receive and feel ourselves receiving something from the tree—what we might call love, energy, wisdom, goodness. The body, the whole energy body, can be open to receiving this.

As I mentioned, we tend in our culture to assume that only humans and perhaps some animals have intelligence. We have a very narrow idea of what intelligence means—we think of IQ tests and such. But what is this tree being? What is its intelligence? And again, I don't mean this as a metaphor for the passively endowed biological function of photosynthesis conceived mechanistically, as we learned in school biology.

Another piece here is my mind and its ideas, your mind and your mind's concepts and assumptions—epistemological, ontological, cosmological, the metaphysics involved. If those ideas absolutely rule out any intelligence or consciousness in a tree, or in inanimate matter, stones, plant life, or some forms of animal life (because we tend to draw a line, don't we? Perhaps only cats and dogs because they're common pets), then if that idea is locked in, I'm unlikely to develop the kind of sensitivity that would enable me to perceive and even dimly sense or intuit such different kinds of intelligence.

It might be quite dim at first, very vague. And again, there's that doubt: What's going on here? Am I imagining it? Like all practices, especially the soul-making practices, doubt is fine.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 5/14). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

It's a part of it. It shows your critical intelligence is working. But reverence, love, respect, gratitude—what is it to be grateful for this tree? Humility. As well as that delicacy and subtlety of attention. And a kind of training of the attention there. Again, with practice. All that will help. All that will help the consciousness, the citta, the soul to become more sensitive. And reverence is a part of it.

Speech might be a part of it. In the Jewish tradition, in the Pirkei Avot—which I think means the sayings of our fathers, or the proverbs of our fathers—it says somewhere, "If there is no reverence, there is no wisdom." If there is no reverence, there is no wisdom. And with all these things, there's a mutual dependency, so we could also flip it around and say: if there's no wisdom, there's no reverence. Where there's wisdom, there's reverence. Where there's reverence, wisdom. And this wisdom will come.

There's something about speaking we mentioned. And it's interesting—when we conceive of speaking, we spoke a little bit about language and communication and sound last night. But typically we believe that when we speak or share or voice something, we're expressing something that already exists as something that's, for instance, true to me. So there's a truth in me or for me which is then somehow expressed in speech.

Sometimes I feel like I'm not even aware of or clear about what's true for me until I start speaking and express it. And then I kind of discover—some people, their minds work that way. But even if we chose not to express it, if we wanted to hide it or to mute it or to speak contrarily, opposite to what was true for us, we typically assume the truth—my truth—pre-exists the expression.

But if we are open, if we are sensitive, or when we are open, sensitive and attentive, we can also notice that what we voice poetically can become a truth, so to speak, for us. What we voice poetically can become a kind of truth for me. The verbalization, the writing, or sounding, or gesturing comes first sometimes. And then through that, the creation and the elevation of its value and status as true for me, for us. It's like in the speaking we're creating something, and we create what becomes a kind of truth for us. There is a way that this can happen in the poetry of things. But as I said, attitude, ideation and attitude and poise here is crucial.

So again, I'm picking up and repeating—and I think it's so important, it's worth repeating—something I must have said at the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat, but I'll say it again. We talked there about fullness of intention being one of the necessary aspects for the fully imaginal or genuinely imaginal, authentically imaginal. And fullness of intention, part of what that meant was that I am engaging with this image, I'm seeking it out, I'm practicing with it, I'm sensing with soul in this way, not primarily for myself, even for my spiritual growth, psychological process, and so forth. So the emphasis and the intention is more for the sake of the divine, for the sake of God, for the sake of the divinity. And there's a kind of—it's not that it's not for myself, but there's a relative weighting towards—it's for that, it's for the divine, it's for divinity, it's for God, it's for soul-making, not for me.

And this applies also when we're talking about the enchantment of things and objects, as well as the enchantment of self. But if we stay with the enchantment of objects and things in the world, like trees or whatever—if the intention, conception, aspiration is more about self, then the enchantment of things, of objects, can tend very easily to go into, for example, a kind of infatuation or superstition with lucky charms or amulets.

We're talking now about sensing the soul and the enchantment of things that comes through that kind of perception. But there's what we could call an immature enchantment. I believe if I hang on to this—whatever it is, piece of stone or a bracelet or necklace or whatever—it's a lucky charm and it will mean I will be lucky and I'll be safe and I'll be rich or whatever it is. The whole thing, that kind of immature enchantment is partly immature because it's reified in too narrow a way, and because it's about the self. It's for my sake. So we're enchanted with this amulet or little statue or whatever it is because we're seeking good luck for the self or protection or something.

Compare that with seeing things as theophanies—opening up a sense of beauty, of meaningfulness, of divinity, of sacralization. And the whole soul-making dynamic, the mutual insemination, widening, enriching, deepening, complicating of eros, psyche, logos—that whole dynamic of soul-making is involved, which it very rarely is with something like an amulet.

Or, you know, I've read about someone suggesting approaching trees in order to get the sustenance of their energy or for them to heal us, and so forth—all of which may happen in the encounter, as I'll touch on. But there's something about the intention and the emphasis of the attention and what's primary there.

As I've already mentioned, we may feel like we receive, for example, from this stone, from this rock when I'm sensing it with soul, from this tree when I approach it in that manner and sense with soul, interact with soul—we may well receive something there.

But I would still say primarily that in order to receive energy healing or whatever from a tree, I would focus more on the tree in appreciation and love rather than on what I can get, what I can receive, and me focusing on even trying to open my energy body so I can receive something there.

But here, in soul-making perception, in sensing the soul, we are appreciating the particular. We're loving the particular, and it's through that love of the particular that the understanding opens. It's through the love of this particular tree, with its unique form, its specific presence, its individual character, that understanding deepens and soul-making occurs.

So I was mentioning that this angel approves of me and gives me something of itself. And actually, when we go deeper into imaginal practice, into the sensing of soul relationships, we realize that this giving and receiving is actually mutual. There's a mutuality there. Something is given to me from this imaginal figure, from this tree, from this stone that I'm sensing with soul, but something is also given from me to it.

This is quite important to understand. It's not a one-way street. It's not that I'm just receiving energy or healing or whatever from this being. There's actually a mutual exchange happening. And in fact, we could even say that what enables the reception is often the giving. When I offer my love, my attention, my appreciation to this tree, that very offering opens me to receive what the tree might offer in return.

And this gets us into some very beautiful territory that I think is quite profound and moving. When we approach a tree, for instance, with this quality of soul-making perception, with reverence and love and openness, we're actually participating in what we could call the tree's awakening. We're participating in the tree's own journey toward its deeper nature, its fuller expression of what it is.

In other words, through my perception of it as beautiful, as sacred, as meaningful, I'm actually helping to awaken those very qualities in the tree itself. My seeing it as divine helps it to realize its own divinity. My appreciation of its beauty helps to actualize its beauty. This is the profound reciprocity that happens in soul-making perception.

Now, this might sound quite strange to our usual way of thinking. We tend to think of trees as just sitting there, being what they are, independent of our perception. But in the world of soul, in the realm of the imaginal, perception is creative. Perception participates in the very being of what is perceived.

And this is why I emphasize again and again that this is not mere projection. This is not me just projecting qualities onto an inert object. Rather, it's a co-creation. It's a mutual participation in meaning-making, in beauty-making, in the revelation of the sacred dimensions of existence.

We don't see this idea that the one who loves is the only one who sees, while those without love are blind to this personal love. We don't recognize this because we have too narrow a conception of knowledge, as Chiriakaki observes.

It's wrong, in this larger view of knowledge, to limit our understanding to thinking, reflective, or rational consciousness of an object. Hartmann calls this "valuational knowledge" - knowledge of the individual and unique that is based on feeling, on a sharpened and sensitive intuition for the richness of values. I'll return to this question of values shortly.

Personal love makes possible the participation in each other's souls. It makes possible the intuitive vision of the best and the highest in another as another.

In this connection - and I think I mentioned this as an aside in a previous talk - I would say that skill in human relationships requires more than what we typically discuss. We talk a lot about bringing kindness, about right speech and how to communicate what's difficult, how to negotiate and empathize emotionally with what's happening. But I would say that our skill and capacity in human relationships needs our sensing with soul.

For the fullness of human relationship, I need to see you, I need to sense you with soul. In our relationship, we need the imaginal perception to be present - the sensing of soul has to be connected, has to meet somehow on that level.

There will be times when we feel we haven't been fully related to as human beings, because this person is not sensing us with soul, is not seeing our dimensionality, our divinity even, is not seeing us imaginally.

We can have all kinds of theoretical frameworks about what constitutes skill and capacity in human relationships, about what it means for there to be fullness in our connections. But I would, in slightly different words, echo Hartmann's insight about the unique way that personal love reveals what would otherwise remain hidden.

The human is not other than the imaginal for me. The imaginal includes the human; the human includes the imaginal. Sometimes it's the image—tuning into, speaking, recognizing, or including the imaginal sense of the other, of oneself, or of the relationship—that allows the relationship between two human beings to open up, to flourish, to be healthy, and I would say to be fully human.

When we talk about sensing with soul—just sensing with soul, sensing anything with soul—there's a beautiful teaching from Abraham Abulafia, the Kabbalist I mentioned the other day. He works with gematria, that numerical manipulation and playing with the numerical equivalence of letters that make up words to generate other connections of idea and meaning, and to generate, in our language, the soul-making of perception of divinity, other senses and ideas of divinity.

He says that in Hebrew, the word for love is *ahava*. When you write out the letters and count them up, it adds up to thirteen. Thirteen plus thirteen—in other words, two loves—is twenty-six. And twenty-six is the numerical equivalent for the name of God, for one name of God: Yahweh. So two loves make up God. Do you understand?

The love that I feel in this love for this tree, in this love for this beloved, erotic, imaginal other, and the love that I feel from, and know, and sense and receive from this beloved, erotic, imaginal other—these two loves make up, give us, or we could say *are* divinity, are God somehow, are Buddha nature. What I want to say is they *make* that. They make divinity. These two, this reciprocity of love that we have, make divinity.

But Abulafia adds something else. He says the word for "one" in Hebrew is *ehad*. When you add it up, it makes thirteen. So again, two thirteens—two times thirteen is twenty-six, the same name of God, Yahweh.

So two ones make God, make the Divine One. Two ones and two lovings in the mutual autonomy—in the autonomy that we talked about as a necessary aspect of the imaginal, the autonomy of the beloved erotically imagined other and the autonomy of myself in that interaction. Those two ones, loving with two loves back and forth, that eros there—the two ones and the two autonomies of eros. Remember, eros needs that autonomy. It needs the two-ness. We could say they make God.

There's a different interpretation I'm giving to that than Abulafia's, a different direction in terms of the numerology. But this is part of what's happening when we sense with soul—we're making the divine. And making has to do with that create-discover-create. The affinities are with art. We've touched on this before over the years. Art has the truth of art. In our making, we're participating in art. We're making art. And art has a certain kind of truth—artistic truth, poetic truth—that is powerful still.

We said earlier that we somehow create what's true for us in speaking, in verbalizing, whether we write it or articulate it with our voice. So there's a creation, an artistic creation in speaking. But there's also a...

We can draw fascinating parallels here, dwelling a little on ontology and epistemology. When we talk about appreciating art or even studying it, sometimes we discover something in a piece that's genuinely there—a kind of deep structure in the symphony, the novel, the painting. We perceive these deep structures through our engagement.

Yet some of what we perceive, we cannot be certain is objectively true. We create meaning through our study, through our interpretation that matters to us. We cannot be sure these structures are significant. We cannot be sure that the author, composer, or artist actually knew about them—perhaps they emerged unconsciously rather than through intention. We cannot be sure the creator felt they were significant, or how significant.

And yet these patterns might still be difficult to uncover, challenging to perceive. They might indeed be deep structures in the artwork, though we can look at this claim of depth less as an ontological assertion—that something really exists in some deeper dimension—and more cautiously, more conservatively, as simply an epistemological claim. It's hard to see, hard to sense, hard to notice or recognize these structures. They're not obvious. They're hidden in the deeper texture of things, in the larger framework or trajectory of the art.

We could also say they're deep epistemologically because they require a certain kind of attention and training. Not everyone can hear the subtle layers in a symphony without extensive training of attention and ear. The same applies to visual art. There's a way of thinking about what we perceive in art that makes not a truth claim, but simply recognizes an epistemological distinction, a spectrum of accessibility.

The same applies to the hermeneutics of existence. Returning to our parallels with making—we're making divinity, creating God in some way when we're soul-making. Taking that word "making" seriously, acknowledging it as art, we recognize the parallels between art and soul-making. We can make distinctions that are epistemic, epistemological—this is harder to see without certain sensitivity or training—but we still don't know if they're true structures. Do they have the composer's, artist's, or author's intent, or even awareness? Are they significant, or is it merely our interpretation that makes them so? Can we trust our sense of the significant?

All this applies equally to our hermeneutics regarding art and to the hermeneutics of existence.

Many people today recognize that the audience—the viewer, the reader—is granted a degree of creative status, perhaps even equal to the artist, writer, or creator. The participation together of composer and audience, of artist and viewer, is creative, co-creative.

Again, opening up these ideas about epistemology and ontology, we can take a quite cautious, relatively conservative position, or we can take bolder positions. But there's also a parallel between the epistemological difficulties regarding art and the difficulties regarding sensing the soul. This relates to a larger issue of epistemological difficulty—the challenge of saying "I know"—with regard to values, whether aesthetic values like beauty, or moral values.

To me, this is quite an interesting parallel. We're in a similar situation regarding the epistemology and ontology of sensing the soul as we are regarding aesthetics and moral values. There are parallels here.

Moral knowing—"I know this is good, I know that is bad"—and despite all the relativistic postmodern discourse, something in me, something in you says, "I know that is good and I know that is bad," whatever that bad might be. Similarly with aesthetics, when I compare the Smurfs to Beethoven or John Coltrane, Keith Jarrett, or Rothko.

Moral knowing and aesthetic knowing are participatory. Unlike, or at least much more so than our conventional knowledge of material facts—"I know the lamp is on the table, I know the microphone is on"—these forms of knowing require our creative participation.

Whatever.

The moral knowing and aesthetic knowing involves much more participation. We usually don't think of our conventional knowledge of material facts as participatory. That whole theory of knowing established with the scientific method that I talked about in an earlier talk on this course—that conventional knowledge of material facts is not supposed to be participatory.

But when we come to aesthetic knowing, we say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And with moral knowing there's a similar parallel in that they share this participatory nature.

Our souls resonate with goodness. And that resonance—we resonate with goodness—that resonance is part of how we know, and we need to participate in that to know. And with a moral value like kindness. And also with beauty. We resonate, so to speak, with beauty. We participate in the perception of beauty. We participate in the perception of goodness, in the knowing of goodness.

The knowing and the actuality of the object is created and discovered in the subject-object interaction. Whereas classical scientific method presumes and actually strives for a kind of independence and non-participation of the subject in the object or with the object.

So this participatory knowing is a fact of aesthetic knowing, so to speak, and moral knowing. And yet, as I pointed out when I talked about this some days ago at the beginning of this course and just now, to say it's all in the eye of the beholder—that there really is no difference of aesthetic value between the Smurfs and whatever it is, John Coltrane or Messiaen—that sits wrong in the soul. And I think that's true of everyone. No one really believes that statement that it's all completely just participatory. Both are involved.

Similarly with moral knowing. It's participatory. Both subject and object are involved. There's a resonance there.

So values are part and parcel, are included, are woven into sensing the soul. When we sense the soul, we also sense and attune to values. We've talked about meanings being wrapped up in and implicated in images, but we can't reduce this imaginal figure, or what I've sensed with soul here, to one specific meaning. Similarly with values. Values are wrapped up and implicated in an imaginal figure, in images. But an image is not reducible to that value or those values.

If we do reduce an image to a certain meaning, or even a few meanings, or certain values, it will kill and truncate the depth and the vitality of an image. Remember we talked about this from the beginning. When we try to reduce them in that way, they do include values, and they do include individual meanings, but when we reduce them to those, we will kill something in the image, we'll flatten it. Or it will die, let's say that.

I think it's important to recognize that when I am in erotic, imaginal relationship with an image, that image is shot through with values for me—values that are alive and meaningful and important. But it's also that there's a plurality of values and also meanings, as we said, implicated, wrapped up in an image.

Sometimes the values in an image are kind of opposite, antinomic, it's called. The difficulty we have epistemologically and ontologically with values is replicated in sensing the soul. Part of the reason is because wrapped up in sensing the soul is a sense of values. And values are often multiple. They're wrapped up in this image and it's multiple values. And sometimes they're contradictory values.

There's something about values—they're always beyond what could possibly be instantiated or brought to bear in manifestation as an example. So any example of goodness could always be more good. So the value of goodness is a kind of—it's always got this beyond to it, always beyond any instantiation of goodness, is just goodness, kind of the value of goodness.

We have to recognize and understand something important here. We can't reduce an image to a representing of this and that value, or this and that meaning.

But it may be that values—which are ideas, the idea of goodness, the idea of beauty, the idea of love—represent a different perspective on something than looking at it imaginally. So there's a kind of ideational perspective and an imaginal perspective.

As I said, images include ideas; they're woven together, and we can focus on one or the other—on the ideas in the image, part of which will be the values, the moral and aesthetic values wrapped up in this image that it somehow expresses, that it channels. Another perspective on something is the purely imaginal, where that sense of value is not so much brought to the fore, but where we're still tuning to it without reducing something to those values.

Both ideas as values—or values as ideas—and images have always a beyondness, a mystery, an unfathomability. And that's why we can have eros and soul-making with respect to ideas as well.

Let me expand this and explain it a little better. I mentioned the word "antinomies." Part of the reason why clear knowledge or truth claims—"I know this, this is true"—are difficult to justify with respect to soul-making perceptions of the world, with sensing the soul, is exactly the same reason why such claims are also difficult to establish with respect to moral and aesthetic values and virtues.

The set of values that we actually value involves ultimately irreconcilable antinomies—contradictions, principles that are in opposition or contradict each other or are paradoxical with each other, if you like—when it comes to any instantiation or example of anything.

Courage and prudence, for example, could be called antinomical. In other words, the fullness of courage is in opposition, perhaps, to a fullness of prudence in any situation. Or a kind of sharp, discriminating discernment—that kind of prajñā—compared with or in opposition to a kind of accepting inclusivity. Or simplicity and complexity in an aesthetic object.

What we have as human beings is that we encounter disputes about value. Partly it's because we focus on a certain value and we value it, and then we disagree with someone who values something that is in opposition to that. Both people could say, "Well, this has value," or "This has more value," and the other person says, "No, this has more value." And those two things cannot exist together. We can disagree with each other. We can also disagree with ourselves at different times.

This thing, this object, this person, in any instant, cannot exemplify and instantiate both of those contradictory antinomical values at the same time. It cannot instantiate the fullness. It can instantiate a partial kind of compromise between them. Or if it instantiates the fullness of the one, we feel that it's lacking because it doesn't have the other.

So, for example, an utter fullness of courage might also be a lack of prudence. Utter simplicity and the value of simplicity might be a lack of complexity. Or utter complexity in a work of art might be a lack of simplicity. Or love and justice. Dynamism and stability, or innovation and tradition, or altruism and self-care, or being responsible for caring for oneself. I'm so altruistic that I neglect myself to the extreme. When it goes to extreme, it sounds like either it's idiotic or fanatical—there's something wrong. Yet if I make a balance there, then I'm not really living out the fullness of altruism and perhaps not the fullness of self-care.

Some people make an antinomy of what they call brotherly love—in other words, love of one's neighbor, the people, friends and family that one is in immediate contact with, particularly family—and on the other hand, love of the remote person, which is such an important value when we talk about mettā and universal love.

But what happens when we talk about love involving generosity, and it's the remote of future generations? That kind of love is one of the issues at stake when we talk about climate change and species extinction and resource depletion, environmental degradation. Because the absence of that love, or that kind of even consciousness of future generations, love of the remote future generations and those far away on the globe, on the one hand, and love of one's children on the other—the fullness of one, some people say, is antinomical with the other.

Maybe pride and humility—I don't know if those are quite the right words—but pride in its good sense, and humility. So change and variety on the one hand, and constancy, steadiness, uniformity on the other. Harmony and conflict, et cetera.

So there's a difficulty here. As I said, cultures as a whole tend to—of this, what Findlay and Hartman called the value firmament, the sort of ideal existences of these different values—we tend to narrow down on certain values at different times in history or different times in our individual lives. Or we have value disputes with others, we disagree, or we change our opinion all the time.

And what that means is that because these values exist in these antinomies, any instantiation of a value in practical life or in an image or in a sensing with soul is always open to be viewed from the perspective of another value's primacy. That soldier image that I've shared many times is not a pacifist. If I take non-harm as a primary value of pacifism—I mean it's just an image—but then I lose the value of the courage of the soldier willing to battle and do what it takes and take affirmative action.

So the problem here with epistemology is that we change our mind, cultures change their mind, and people disagree. So it becomes very hard to say, "I know this is valuable like that." Same in aesthetics and morality. And because values are wrapped up in the perceptions we have when we're sensing the soul, we have the same issue there.

So it's hard to have that kind of firm sureness of knowledge that we have in respect to more simple material things. We can't sometimes even agree with ourselves from one day to the next on the truth or reality of our perceptions of value, let alone agreeing with each other.

So when we sense with soul, when we have imaginal perception, values are woven in. And values, one of the difficulties there is these antimonies, the cultural uncertainty of our epistemology regarding values, our ontology regarding values. All of that.

So values—goodness, beauty, love—are essentially transcendent. There's always a beyond to them. One reason is because they're infinitely perfectible, as I said. However much love is possible in this instance, in this person, in this person's doing this, in this moment, it's always possible to have more love. However much goodness is possible, it's possible to have more goodness in any instance. They're infinitely perfectible.

Any instantiation, any manifestation of a value, one can always conceive of a beyond to it, of a more, a better. And in any instantiation, it calls in this whole field of what some philosophers call antinomies—values that are in opposition or contradictory to this one.

So we say, ideally, all of these values—for instance, love of one's family, immediate family, and love of the remote; dynamism and stability; altruism and self-care—ideally, if we say, they will all be fulfilled, they will all be at their maximum together. But that's actually impossible. It's impossible for them to manifest together that way.

But we have a love—well, let's say most human beings have somewhere in them a love for values, a devotedness to values. We have even eros for values. It's the beyondness in values that again forms, offers itself as a beyondness which is needed by eros. And the eros, again, will create more beyondness. So values, again, they share something in common with the imaginal—this dimensionality of beyondness that is so necessary for the pothos and the eros and the whole soul-making dynamic.

Because we—something in us, something in most human beings—love certain things. I love, I have a love, a devotedness to goodness. I have a devotedness to kindness, to beauty, to altruism, whatever. That devotedness—we also mentioned the other day when we were talking about bodhicitta—and the eros there allows us to have soul-making with respect to values. And values, as I said, are ideas. So there can be soul-making with respect to the ideas that are values.

And as I said, sensing the soul involves values—that imaginal figure's goodness, or that thing, that being's beauty, love, courage, nobility. Sensing the soul involves a perception of values, even if it's not clearly articulated. And often they're mixed up, and it's mixed in with the sensing. But that value, the love and the eros and the devotion we have to values forms part of, constitutes part of the eros to what we sense with soul.

So when I say we love and we feel devoted to values and they can be soul-making with respect to values, and eros with respect to values, I think that's really important to acknowledge, just psychologically, certainly in terms of soul work, but also in terms of when we think about ethics. We tend to only consider the question, "What to do? What should I do?" And "What's the effect or the result or the practical outcome of my action or non-action or whatever it is."

But when we consider them as values, as ideas, then we recognize this beyondness that they have. They're always going to transcend any instantiation. And that beyondness, as I said, can constitute an erotically attractive dimension or region or field for the eros. And it brings also, constitutes eros and soul-making in relation to, say, goodness and beauty, and so forth.

I can't remember if I've told this story before, but it always touches me. And when I talk to people who are in a conundrum about certain ethical situations and what to do and what not to do, or what they should do, and they feel like, "Even if I do this, it's not going to help, for example, climate change."

I heard that when the Titanic was sinking, and they evacuated all the lifeboats they could, primarily women and children first, and there were—I don't quite know the story, it might have been there was some other stuff going on about who got to get into the lifeboats. I don't know. I didn't see the film either, so I don't know if this was in the film. But those who didn't get into the lifeboats were on a clearly sinking ship in freezing cold Arctic waters. And they knew they were going to die in moments, and they began singing a hymn. Or hymns. And you think, "Well, what's the point?"

You're going to die soon. But there is an orientation there to something greater, to the soul-making, to the dimensionality, to the beauty, to what is of value. It doesn't make any practical difference.

I think I talked about in the Ecology of Love talks how we can discern two different kinds of activism, whether it's to do with environment or whatever it is—a kind of instrumental attitude, let's say, which is very focused on achieving certain ends, practically making policy changes. It's so important. Of course that's important. But there's also another kind of activism that has more to do with soul-making, and if you like, the health of one's soul as well. But it's more to do with a reverence for, an eros for, a devotion for, a love for values.

Now, it can't be only that, out of connection with what actually changes in life and trying to affect changes that are ethical and helpful. We can't only be focused on this transcendent beyond of the ideal values. Things—goodness, beauty, love—need to manifest. And we have to make practical choices in our living. But they can be both, I think, and to me a fullness of ethical sensitivity includes an attention to both and an awareness that both are operating.

We actually need the impossibility of perfection and completeness of values. There's something about that beyond that we need. There's something about that kind of impossible idealism that the soul needs. The always beyond, always more. The infinite for the eros and the soul-making. So just like anything imaginable, there's the immanent and the beyond that's also the transcendent that sends through the immanent.

One other thing to say about values is that there's something about useless values in soul making. Sometimes it's the useless values that feel—I think I mentioned this in an earlier talk—that feel for the soul somehow the most important, the highest, let's say, the highest values.

So, if we touch again on environmental ethics—oftentimes, in fact, I saw half of a program the other day on the BBC about trees, and again, it was someone trying to share their love of trees, but it was all explained in scientific terms in one sense. That actually wasn't what she most loved about trees. She was relating to them as persons. But there just wasn't the language and wasn't the conceptual framework to open that up and explain it. So in the programme that was made, in the explanation, it all got put in terms of, again, photosynthesis and the way that sap is sucked up, the fluids, the water is drawn up from the roots, and how clever that was. But one really got the sense that that was not to the point of why she actually loved trees so much.

Or when people make environmental appeals for the fate of the Amazon, and more generally of trees and forests on the planet, on the Earth. "The trees are the lungs of the planet," they say, in a kind of metaphor to explain and to persuade. They purify the air, they provide tranquil refuge and pleasantness. But when all these are regarded as elements, flatly regarded, when those "lungs of the planet" and the purification of the air, the services, the sort of environmental services that trees provide—and then sometimes that even gets given an economic fiscal value—it's all being perceived flatly, conceived of as elements of a flatly materialist interconnected system. It's still a sense of regarding trees as commodities. It's a commodity somehow.

And soul-making, sensing the soul and eros depend a lot on the uncommodified and uncommodifiable dimensions of beings and things. And also, as we said before, it's not being for me, this image, this sensing the soul, this thing that I love, this tree that I love, whatever, and this forest that I haven't seen but I love—it's not for me. It has a worth independent of what it gives humanity, independent of the economical, so it's independent even of the tranquility or whatever, or pleasantness, if we grasp them again flatly. It's not commodifiable. It's useless in that sense.

One could make parallels with falling in love. It's full of a sense of value and imaginal perception. Unless you really believe that the function of falling in love is—and you conceive of it as just a biologically driven illusion that creates a tendency to procreation, a kind of evolutionary advantage—if you really want to conceive of that soul opening and movement of falling in love that way, then it becomes merely functional. If you conceive it other ways, it's useless. It's a useless value.

And there's something about useless values that the soul thrives on, needs, creates even. I think—I'm not sure, but there's this phrase, "the age of loneliness." I'm not sure if it was George Monbiot who coined it.

And I'm not sure quite in what connection, but I think he was talking about, for instance, the decline in species and actual numbers—not just species, but individual animals and birds. Just in the last five years, almost 10%, 9 or 10%, just in the last five years, of the number of birds in Europe. Not so much species, but the actual number of birds. Five years, 10% less.

As I mentioned in one talk, that's actually noticeable at Gaia House. If you've been in one place for a long time, I notice a lot less birds, a lot less foxes, a lot less deer, a lot less badgers. George Monbiot wrote about the age of loneliness—human beings living at an alarming rate toward an absence of other life forms, of other species, of friendliness with animals, of connection with animals.

Could it be that the absence of sensing the soul, the absence of the vocabulary and the conceptuality and the conceptual architecture and frameworks to even support the views that would bring us out of flatness and into deep connection and reverence and care—that actually, out of the conceptual structure comes the perception, out of the perception comes the lack of affect and the lack of connection, and then we don't care? And so we make choices prioritizing profit, convenience, comfort, security—because those are the values that we end up centering on, because we don't have the apparatus to sense the other values and the love of them.

We don't have the apparatus to sense with soul and the much fuller connection and reverence and care that brings in conception, through perception and through action and behavior, attitude, poise, listening, receiving also. So the age of loneliness, the disappearing of both species and individual animals and trees, and other life forms, corals.

I want to add to that: could it also be that even in the presence of nature—one could be driving by a forest or walking somewhere—because there isn't the openness to sensing the soul, we don't feel the connection? The magnificent, glorious theophany is there of the trees, of the animals. And we're lonely because we don't have the apparatus to sense the deeper connection. Even when it's still there, before we've destroyed it or neglected it so much, prioritized something else, that it disappears. Even when it's still there, there's the loneliness because we don't have that capacity to connect.

I think it was in the Awakening talk, but I talked about that passage from Genesis where God calls Abraham and says, "Lech lecha. Go, leave this place, leave your family, leave your father, leave your household, leave the lands that you know. Go to the land that I will show you." Lech lecha—go from this country.

I would like to, in the spirit of play and openness and creation discovery, add something, a possible gematria there, a possible amplification of what's involved in that, what I call the perennial call of soul, the perennial call of the divine to the soul. Lech lecha: Open to the soul-making dynamic which will open your soul landscape. Leave behind what is not soul-making. Move on. Things may break. Things may stretch. So this perennial call lech lecha.

I'm reading the biblical text that way more timelessly as a soul narrative. There's a possible gematria here in Hebrew: lech lecha, if we take the individual letters there—lamed kaf, lamed kaf—adds up to a hundred, which is the face value of the letters. Another word whose letters add up to a hundred is *al*. And *al* can mean height, as in the supernal, the divine, the heavens. In our translation, it means the dimensionality, the height, the depth, the divinity. So *al* has the connotation of divinity.

The same letters, but with different vowel inflections, *ol*—also a hundred, because it's the same letters—means yoke. Not an egg yolk, but a yoke as in, as Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." What you put around the neck of an oxen or a horse to pull the plough. Yoke.

So in the soul-making, in the lech lecha, in the call to the soul to move on, to expand, to make soul, the call of the divine to make soul, there is the opening of the divine, the dimensionality—this we know. But there is also the duty, the yoke, that comes with it.

What is the yoke now? What is this duty now? What are our duties? In opening up the soul-making with respect to earth, with respect to trees, with respect to existence, we open up the dimensionality and we're given—perhaps it brings duties or duty. We could also say it is a duty. The soul-making is a duty.

Go. Go from what you know. Go from the familiar. Go from the stuck places, the small circumference that is no longer soul-making. Let the dimensions open to your senses. There's a duty in that, and it will bring duties. It will bring duties.

What are the duties to that which we sense with soul, to the earth, to the trees, to the animals, to existence?

CHAPTER 134

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 7 - The Scripture of Body and Earth)

Rob Burbea · 1h29

> *In this seventh installment of The Mirrored Gates series, Rob Burbea delves into the profound relationship between ideas and soul-making, particularly focusing on how our conceptions of body and materiality shape and are shaped by imaginal practice. Drawing from hermeneutical philosophy, he explores how the body can be approached as a sacred text open to multiple interpretations, moving beyond conventional Buddhist frameworks that view the body merely as an object for detachment.*
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> *Burbea discusses how energy body awareness can transform our understanding of materiality, opening possibilities for sensing the body imaginally - not just as flesh and bone, but as light, cosmic elements, or healing presence. He shares a detailed practitioner report illustrating how imaginal practice can heal grief and expand devotional capacity. The talk examines how different conceptual frameworks - from Theravāda contemplations of the body's impermanence to tantric visualizations - create entirely different experiential possibilities.*
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> *Weaving together insights from Heidegger and Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy, Sami yoik traditions, and Mahāyāna teachings on the three bodies of Buddha, Burbea demonstrates how sensing with soul naturally expands our ideation about reality itself. He explores how sacred texts can be 'heard' not just in scripture but in wind, birdsong, and the very fabric of existence when approached with the proper purity and devotional stance. This teaching reveals how imaginal practice opens us to a pluralistic understanding of truth while maintaining the healing power of praise and eros.*

So we've been talking about ideas and concepts and the way they impact the possibilities for sensing the soul. We talked about the different ways that we receive a legacy of ideas—a mixture of ideas from the past—and the influence that has on possibilities of our experience and our conception. We talked about the possibility of other ideas rather than limited ones, and we talked about the possibility of actually questioning ideas to open the realm of possibilities for us. We talked about certain ideas that we can open up a bit more to expand the range of possibilities available to us.

We talked too about the possibility to listen or read—to listen for ideas. This isn't some big intellectual exercise. There are ideas flying around all the time. And listening for ideas and then lingering with an idea if it feels like something about it speaks to you, speaks to the soul—that lingering, listening and lingering, gives those potential seeds of ideas a place in the soul womb, a place in the soil. It's planting them in the soil, and perhaps reflecting on them is turning that soil to nourish the seed more so that it might give rise to, might suggest, might open out into a way of looking or a range of ways of looking and sensing the soul.

We also mentioned the important place for the emotions in all this. When we're talking about ideas and the place of ideas in sensing with soul and the importance of ideas in sensing with soul, those ideas are, again, not abstract. They are connected to, informing and informed by, shaping and shaped by, and grounded in the emotions that are in our heart. So there's a necessary place and necessity when we talk about ideas giving rise to or helping seed sensing with soul—emotions are included, wrapped up, interwoven with that.

We talked about, for example, emotions like devotion and devotional yearning and just the general fact of it needing to matter. This idea needs to matter because this way of sensing matters to me, to my soul, right now, to my sense of existence. So that sense of mattering—we could say that's an affect, partly, an emotional condition. It's also a soul condition. But that water of the emotions is like we're watering the seeds so that these seeds can come alive, the ideas can come alive again and spring forth, suggest sensing the soul.

And, of course, implicit in a lot of what we've been saying is that practicing sensing the soul, opening to those kinds of experiences, also opens our ideation, it opens our conception, it expands our ideas about things and our conceptions of them. It gives rise also to new ideas—new ideas, different ideas that we haven't had before, sometimes we've never heard before. The very perceptual experience, the very sensual experience of sensing the soul gives rise at times to new ideas or expands our range of possible ideation in regard to some aspect of existence.

Now all that is implicit just because of the way the soul-making dynamic works. We've talked about that. In the interfusion, the interweaving, the inter-insemination of the eros, psyche, logos elements of the dynamic, the enriching, deepening, widening, complicating, and making manifold of the image—of the psyche aspect, what we're calling the psyche aspect, the image, the sense of something—in the expansion of that, after some time (as we said, the logos is a little more slow to move generally), as that keeps happening, we keep opening up to different images and different aspects. That whole

imaginal range, the range of sensing the soul, the perception of things, all kinds of things, starts expanding more and more. It impacts us, it impacts the soul, it registers, and this feels important, and this feels beautiful, and this feels meaningful, and this gives another dimension.

And we sense a kind of truth in that, a kind of truth. Anything and everything—this sensing the soul can touch. And so the idea of any and everything will be gradually expanded, gradually filled with new possible ideas. Not, again, in a narrow conception, but in a wider conception of possible plurality of truths, perceptions of the truth. So not "this, only this, and not that," but "this and that." This way of seeing, this way of conceiving, and that way—an embrace of a pluralistic understanding, the generosity of a pluralistic understanding of truth.

But sensing the soul will begin to impact our conceptions of what is real and what is true. Over time, it expands that. And part of—so that's a really important point. That's a general point that I want to make today. And part of what it means is that the sensing of soul will impact the ideas, expand the ideas of any and everything that gets involved with soul, that becomes an erotic object, an erotic imaginal beloved—anything at all, whether it's part of us, or material, or someone else, or whatever.

Included in that fertilization and expansion of ideas about what things are includes ideas about the earth, about where we are, about these surroundings, and ideas about nature, and also ideas about body and materiality.

Now we've placed—so this is where I want to start—ideas about body and a little bit about earth and nature. But we've talked a lot about body, placed a lot of emphasis on it, a lot of emphasis on practicing with that kind of sensitivity to the whole energy body. And we've stressed as one of the aspects of the imaginal that might help to move things along, to open things out further along the spectrum of what we might call the spectrum of the imagination towards more fully, authentically, genuinely imaginal, we've pinpointed one of those aspects being the whole energy body awareness—that kind of poise and sensitivity and consciousness that pervades the body that way.

And one of the things we said at some point, probably a few times, is that doing that is one of the things that can help transform, transmute craving into eros.

So there's this transformation from the problem of craving into the gift of eros, the bounty, the opening of eros and the gift and the opening of what it brings.

With awareness of the whole energy body, this becomes a constituent of the wider approach that is a necessary element in supporting the soul-making, supporting and sensing the soul. As we become aware of the energy body in this way and the sensing

with soul opens in any moment, lingering with that awareness, one of the things that happens is that as the sensing with soul begins to spread or to include and embrace and touch more aspects of our experience in that moment, it can and will start to include the body as an imaginal body.

We begin with energy body awareness, which is a way of paying attention to our body. As the sensing with soul gets established and opens out, in its opening out, the body then becomes imaginal. And what does it mean to sense the body imaginally, the imaginal perception of the body? This will have all those aspects that we outlined in the first talk of this course.

Sometimes we can actually start with deliberately imagining the body alongside the energy body awareness. We can start with a deliberate imagining of a body, even if it doesn't feel imaginal at first. It might become imaginal when we have the energy body awareness and we just start to get into that image.

For instance, one could sometimes ignite an opening into the imaginal, an opening into a wider sensing with soul, by just settling into the body—being with the felt sense of the energy body, and then maybe lightly, with that sense, deliberately imagining the body in a certain way. It could be anything: a body of blue light, for instance, with the contours that this body has, but made of blue light with that texture and that substance and that appearance. It might be that as I resonate with that deliberately imagined image, it becomes imaginal, and I can support it in that way. In that opening, then, the world and the sense of self, and perhaps others as well, will become imaginal in the usual way that the cosmopoesis spreads when there's imaginal perception.

This is worth trying—actually deliberately imagining the body a certain way, and seeing if it becomes imaginal. Because once it becomes imaginal, as I said, the impactful experience of the imaginal in general, sensing with soul, eventually, with a slower pace and tempo, begins pushing at the edges of our logos, of individual things and our wider logos, our wider conceptual frameworks, and stretches them or breaks them open or enlarges them.

This little suggestion of deliberately imagining the body is interesting. When I said "a body of blue light," that already implies a more ethereal register on the spectrum of the energy body from very solid to very ethereal. For many people, it will likely be easier then. Things are more labile, more easily moved, less tending toward a heaviness and stasis with the imagination and with the whole sense of it. So it might be that for many people it's easier when the body is perceived deliberately and lightly that way, for it then to open into the imaginal.

But it doesn't actually have to be that way. We've stressed this several times, and I want to re-emphasize it. Just as we can have a sensing with soul of the body—as I think I shared the other day—the body sensed in, tuned into the earth element. This earth element is stone. It's hard. It's dense. It has a kind of darkness to it. It's somehow related to the cosmic stone that's around planets or on planets. It begins to have this cosmic earth element. It begins to have its own personhood and its own way of perceiving and sensing its own kind of intelligence—very different than typical human intelligence, of course.

One could start, then, this deliberate imagining with a much more solid, dense image that's much more solid and dense on that register—lower on the register, so to speak, less ethereal. Play with all of this and see what happens, see what's possible.

Would this little exercise work if one is perceiving one's energy body ecstatically, in the original sense, meaning not in the same location, in the same space as the physical body? Sometimes I've described how I might feel my energy body joyfully turning cartwheels as if it might be ten yards away. I'm still very aware of the physical sensations and where the physical body is, but it's as if I have two body awarenesses at once—flying or dancing or whatever it is. Will this work if one deliberately imagines the energy body outside, deliberately dancing or deliberately doing these ecstatic somersaults?

Which is easiest? Whenever I talk about the body outside, I don't think one ever loses touch with the sense of what's, conventionally speaking, where the material body is. But you can experiment and see. Is it easier this way or that way? Or both? Or only one?

I mentioned at some point in this series that when we talk about any kind of body awareness, any kind of mindfulness of body—whether it's energy body awareness as we've been discussing, or just mindfulness of the body or awareness of the body—usually wrapped up in what we're calling mindfulness of the body, awareness of the body, are three aspects or dimensions. One is the physical sense of the body. What I really mean by that is the kinesthetic sense. What's the felt sense of this space? What's the felt sense of the body? We can call that kinesthetic.

As a second aspect, we'll also have some kind of image of the body—some kind of mental representation. It may be imaginal, but it may not be.

Just sort of seeing or imagining my body in space—even if my eyes are shut—how it's positioned, what posture it's in, all of that. And as a third aspect, it has an idea of what body is. There's some kind of logos operating there.

Now usually we don't give this much attention; we're not even that conscious of it. As I said, a lot of logos, a lot of concepts and ideas are subliminal, really. They're below the radar of our consciousness and they're unquestioned a lot of the time. But there's always, with any moment of bodily awareness, these three aspects: a felt sense, a kinesthetic sense, some kind of image, and some kind of idea.

The body is... for instance, my idea might be that the body is made up of meaningless matter in some kind of very impressive arrangement that allows all this material matter to function together as a sort of very complex unit. But it's essentially flatly conceived material matter—even if we look at it in terms of systems theory, if some of you know that, which gives it or generates a sort of higher level organistic unity, organic unity. It's still flat from our perspectives in terms of what we're talking about.

But there are always these three aspects with any bodily awareness. An important point I want to make is that one of them is the idea of the body—the ideas about body and matter, the concepts that are operating which we may not be aware of at the time. And that's included any time we... as one of those three aspects, whenever we pay attention to the body, whenever we're aware of the body, even when it's not a deliberate mindfulness thing.

So, just to recap something—again, I'm recapping quite a lot in this talk, but that's important. Why so much emphasis on the energy body? Sometimes I know people have asked me, and even though I know that I've said it before, even though I've told them, it's very easy to forget.

So one reason is just that the practice of the energy body in the way that we're talking about it gives so much help to practice. We can use it as a resource through the cultivating of samādhi, the harmonization, the alignment, the opening that we might feel, just dwelling in that. And really feeling this body, this physical space that I inhabit is, a lot of the time for me, a resource, a source of nourishment, a source of well-being that's immensely useful.

But it can be a resource—this energy body awareness and energy body practice—in other ways, helpful in the deepening and also the navigation of other practices. So, for example, mettā. How do I know what's helpful right now in the mettā as I subtly weave my mettā practice and respond to what's going on? The energy body is telling me. Similarly with samādhi or compassion or emptiness practices and imaginal practice. Remember, that's one of the indicators that we're on the right track with an image, even if the mind is telling us, "Well, I don't know, this is kind of crazy." Also very helpful with emotional awareness practices, the cultivation of positive emotions and also the working with difficult emotions. So all of that is just very practical help.

But implicit in what I've said so far tonight is another aspect of working with the energy body: that again, over time, experience with the energy body and with that kind of attunement and sensing the body that way will begin to re-enchant the body. And through the body, the self. The body is always primary, at least connected with the self, whatever one's conception of the self might be.

So involved in energy practice over time, one of the things it starts to do is re-enchant the body. Through that sense, which as I said, can make a felt... that felt sense makes a deep impression. And we get the sense through energy body awareness, through paying attention in certain ways, we begin to get the sense or the impression of the body not as essentially just flat matter, just a product of its genes, just a bunch of complex molecules kind of swarming around in interaction with each other.

Yes, one can, as I said, in the spirit of plurality, in the generosity of plurality, entertain that conception and go along with it. So, you know, I take my medicine. That says enough. But not just that.

Over time, having paid attention in a different way and been impacted by these experiences and just the repeated sense of... well, a different sense of the body. So we can sense the body, not just as flat matter, but also somehow resonant, somehow having a spectrum of subtleties of vibration going into what we might call the more ethereal, as well as the more dense, somehow connected with light even, somehow—more importantly—connected and integrated with the cosmos, and not only in material ways.

We get the sense, through the sensitivity to the energy body, we get the sense of this body, this energy body—meaning this body, meaning just this one of the dimensions, or the range of dimensions of this body—is somehow integrated into the cosmos and connected with the cosmos, but not only in material ways. And that sense of deeper and more beautiful and richer weaving in becomes more prominent. It's a sense, it's an impression, and it begins to be an idea.

So over this whole range—light to ethereal to dense, whatever—this paying attention that way opens up the sense of the body. And as the body through this starts to become more imaginatively perceived, as I said earlier, then it can also start... it's as if body and the matter of the body and the organism of the body starts to have its own soul.

We can be in erotic relationship with this body, this body as beloved other. And in being in soul that way, there's the intersubjectivity and the autonomy, and it starts to have, we start to sense that the body has its own intelligence, its own perception. Again, by that I don't just mean, "Wow, isn't it clever the way the body transports nerve signals from the brain to the end of the fingers, or transports... interchanges oxygen and car-

bon dioxide in alveoli in the lungs." Yes, that's pretty smart, but we're talking about a kind of its own subjectivities, its own dimensions and kinds of knowing. That starts to open up.

So in all this, as practicing the energy body, as the body becomes imaginal, partly supported through energy body awareness, the idea of body opens up. The idea of bodies opens up. So experience influences idea. But as we've pointed out a lot, idea, conception, logos, influences experience and opens it or shapes it or directs it or limits it, colors it, closes off certain avenues. And the concept, logos, idea of the body and materiality certainly affects our range of experience and perception of body.

So I shared that little anecdote about being on retreat in the woods for ten days in complete solitude, really practicing a very fruitful but very narrow Theravadan avenue of practice, going deep into the jhanas—very lovely and very fruitful, as I said. But also implicit in that Theravadan logos was a Theravadan fantasy in the background. I didn't have the words for it at the time.

All that, implicit in that Theravadan logos and fantasy, is only a partial interest in the body, only an interest in opening up certain perceptions of the body, and only for the sake of letting go of attachment to it. So the body as foul and full of unclean substances and parts, the body as a corpse—potential corpse, future corpse—the body as just the four elements, a kind of deconstructing to nothing but the four elements.

This whole conceptual framework of narrowly conceived Theravadan Buddhism frames and has an idea of the body a certain way, directing the attention in a certain way to the body. And indeed, that shaped my experience of it, my perception of it when I caught sight of myself in my naked body in the mirror in the woods there.

We can have, of course, all kinds of ideas. So the mass-produced and mass-proliferated relationship to the body that's pushed in a lot of popular culture these days—where it's a kind of obsession but also a kind of worry about one's appearance. It's got to look this way or that way, and there's very easily judgment, self-judgment, other judgment coming into that, and all the problems that brings. What's the conception of body? And again, it's set in a wider cosmological conception, as is the Theravadan one—conception of body and attention to body.

This conception and attention to body in popular culture in our society is also set in a wider cosmological context. Ideas again are connected—they nestle in each other, they feed each other back and forth, they support each other.

Another conception of body could be, as some of you might know, in tantric dharma and the practices they have there with their channels and drops and inner winds—it's a very different conception of body, or the kind of alchemy of those tantric practices, or a shamanic conception of body in some cultures, or indeed any indigenous culture. It's a very different, wider cosmological conceptual frame, and different conception of body and materiality. And that will affect the experience.

We could give so many examples, but there's an experience shaped by the way of looking—part of the way of looking is conception, whether we're aware of it or not. Again, I'm just saying in other words what I've said before, but there's really this possibility, seeing all this, to open up the sense of the body and therefore the idea of the body. "The body is like this. It's like this. This is the reality." But is it? Or is it only that? Are there other ways of experiencing and other ways of thinking?

So back to hermeneutics—the interpretation of matter, the interpretation of body as part of the interpretation of existence. Remember, hermeneutics originally meant the interpretation of sacred texts. But as philosophers went deeper into all this, they realized, well, actually, we're talking about everything. So ideas are connected. We actually interpret our cosmos all the time. All the time. And hermeneutics, to me, is a really interesting subject. What happens in that interpretation? What is possible in that interpretation? What am I not aware of in the hermeneutics of my existence?

One of the people who explored this was Heidegger, the German philosopher, who wrote in his famous text *Being and Time*: "An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us." If, when one is engaged in a particular kind of interpretation, one would like to appeal to what is "just there," what is "standing there," then one finds that what stands there in the first instance is nothing other than the seemingly obvious, undiscussed assumption of the person who does the interpreting.

He's just saying in different words what I've been exploring for quite a while.

But we see our seemingly obvious, undiscussed assumptions. We perceive—that's what we, so to speak, interject into our perceptions, or let's say that's part of the fabrication of our perceptions.

So the hermeneutical circle—I talked about that once, I think, though I can't remember on what retreat—the hermeneutical circle is never purely philological. Let's skip a bit and say it's not simply a movement between the parts and the whole of a text or what is presented in existence before us as an object. So we figure out what this means

in relation to a whole because we figure out the whole, and there's a kind of mutual fitting together of the whole—or an attempt at mutually fitting together the whole and the parts and what they mean.

The hermeneutical circle is the problem of: I can't interpret the parts unless I have an overall idea of what the whole means. But I can't interpret the whole until I've interpreted the parts. Whether that's a text or parts of existence or whatever.

But Heidegger is saying here, it's actually more than that. It's more than a kind of scientific jigsaw. It's what he calls an ontological movement between the text or the object and our situation as interpreters of it. And this was all elaborated by another philosopher called Gadamer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, which again I find really interesting and really important.

We bring ideas to objects. We can't help but do that. But in experiencing and in opening up our experience, the objects that we have brought ideas to, the perceptions that we have brought ideas to, the sense of things that we have brought ideas to—they open up our ideas, give us our ideas back, generate ideas back. It's not really that dualistic, but we throw something in and something is thrown back at us.

Can we see body as in the realm of hermeneutics like everything else—as an object for interpretation, an aspect of existence that, like a sacred text, is open to interpretation? And like we've talked about in the hermeneutics and the midrashic condition and all that, it's open, it's flexible, it's multiply interpretable—if it matters, if it matters to you, if it matters to the interpreter, if it matters to the one who is sensing.

Body as sacred text. What might that mean? Body as amenable to this kind of infinite richness of sensing and interpretation and dialogue.

I got an email from someone I'd like to share with you. It's a report about her practice and it's really rich. Partly why I'd like to share it is because of what we're talking about right now, but there's so much in it—so much in terms of describing really skillful, responsive practice. I'll highlight some of that.

So she wrote—she was on retreat and this is a kind of report post a fairly long retreat. "I was sitting doing the releasing clinging practice." Okay, you've heard me talk about that again and again. Noticing clinging, releasing it, noticing clinging, releasing it. I think I call it the Dukkha method too. And it's a very lovely practice that opens up the unfabricating and understanding of emptiness and brings with it real softness and loveliness and healing.

"So I was sitting doing the releasing clinging practice and sat for the forty-five minutes without moving and felt very still and peaceful and comfortable. So I continued to sit. And when most of the people left the hall, I had this kinesthetic sense of a field of energy, a kind of net or of soft web-like material that covered me and the hall, and all the people in the hall."

So already we're in the realm of energetic energy body, and experience, and image of materiality, if you like, on the edge of all that.

"I could feel it," she continues, "but I knew it was so light that it was only because I was very sensitive that I could feel it." She's aware of the mind state, and there's this real sensitivity there. "I could feel it glistening," she says. "It was gossamer, very delicate, but very potent, sublime and powerful. It felt really special. I was a bit taken aback by it, but then I felt a very faint kinesthetic sense that I had a nun's habit on."

And then she has pasted in a delightful picture of a nun. I've no idea what order that is or anything, but it's a very pretty, far-out-looking nun's hat. And it's just something like that with the picture, which really surprised her and amused her because of the funny hat. I'm not even going to try and describe the hat, but it was rather beautiful, she says.

"Along with the feeling of being a nun was this complete devotion to you." She's writing this to me, and she's explained that I am—she has many, many images, lots of rich images. Some of the images that she has, some of the imaginal images that she has are people that she knows, like we've explained as a possibility. So I'm one of those people. And in relation to me, she has quite a few different kinds of images, very different.

"And so there was this feeling of being a nun and this complete devotion to you, the image of you." She's very aware of image as image. There's not this kind of reification or concretization or grasping or clinging there. It's an image and it's just something that's possible in that it possibly gives rise to the soulfulness and the soul-making with the awareness of the imaginal way and all that. She's made very clear and she's very aware of it.

"This is the image of you as Buddha. And she says, I'm sure you remember, I have several images of you, and one is of you as Buddha."

This image is wrapped up in your Dharma. So when I say I'm devoted to you, she says, it is to you and all that you are for me in this way. You represent practice, soul-making, and so forth. She's explaining that. I know obviously that you are more than that. She's not reducing me to this. She knows that I have a human side and all that, of

course. She's not identifying me with this Buddha image, thankfully. I know obviously that you are more than that, and I have several images of you, she repeats. But this one is very prominent at the moment.

She continues: So it felt like you were there in the hall, sitting at the front by the statues, but you weren't a visual image at all. Again, all this has so much possible teaching in it—not a visual image here. What kind of image? It was like an impression of you, like the space had your imprint or something, your essence was there. It was really ethereal, but at the same time very powerful, strong and tangible. It didn't make sense at all, but it did make sense.

Can you hear how much is here just in the words that she's using to describe this experience? How many elements of what she describes are things we've touched on in the teaching? It doesn't have to be visual. There's going to be some doubt sometimes. It kind of makes sense and it kind of doesn't—all of that.

My devotion was coming out in a strong feeling of energy leaving my body and going to you, and it was delightful and energizing. I really enjoyed giving my full devoted energy to you. It was as if there was a space left after giving all my energy that was very quickly filled with a sublime warm love, an unconditional love, and then the sense was of devotion and compassion. It felt sacred and very special and divine. I was divine.

Again, there's this inclusion, this spreading of the soul-making dynamic, of the sensing with soul to include self and other. Importantly, as I said, for the balance and the health here, it's not just that she's seeing me as divine and not herself. As things evolve, there's the "I was divine, you were divine." And it felt as if our divines were in communion, our divinities were in communion.

Now she's describing something that took place over several days. Then she went for an interview with a teacher—in this case, Kirsten—and she said: Then I explained the bit about the nun to Kirsten. And Kirsten asked lots of questions. And in my explaining, it came out that I felt my hands had some sort of healing power.

So again, sometimes talking with other people, sometimes in the temenos around images, it can draw out the power of the image, ignite it further, help it to become fully alive, and actually give birth to or create/discover other dimensions or aspects of the image. So partly she also expressed her appreciation of the skillful way that Kirsten was asking, and particularly when she was trying to explain something and making a gesture with her hand and Kirsten pointed out the gesturing. So what does that gesture mean?

She says: It came out that I felt my hands had some sort of healing effect. Like if I cupped my hands around someone's face, like you might imagine a nun doing to a small child, it would make them feel better. That in the touching, there would be some tangible love transmitted.

Then again—this is over some little time on retreat—then I had a wave of several, or several waves of hindrances: restlessness and aversion. Then I read the bit in your book, and to my great surprise, they went away easily, the hindrances. But then came a huge wave of grief for a relative that had died recently, and my mom, who had also died a few years ago, and the life I've wasted. It felt as if the grief was right behind the hindrances, as if they were connected.

And this is my first question: Do you think they were linked? Do the hindrances often mask something else? And yes, they do. Sometimes, indeed, they mask deeper emotions that we're not quite in touch with yet—we're holding back a little bit. Sometimes the hindrances are masking a deeper emotion that's calling for a different kind of attention, connection to and opening with and healing.

And so then this grief came. And then in the sitting: I very softly wiped away the flood of tears with my hands. And my hands became the nun's hands. And I cupped my face. So she's actually doing this in the sitting. She's moving her body out of the still meditation posture and cupping her face with her physical hands, but they're the nun's hands.

I cupped my face with the healing that comes out of them. I cupped my face, and then this crack appeared. It was like there was a sliver of space that allowed the love to come in—the love from her hands, the love to come in so that there was the grief and the love existing together. The love for lost ones, including myself. And I could hold this deep loss and the love together. It was really special and wonderful.

So again, there's so much here about dukkha and soul-making. We've talked about how healing images can be. In this case, it's a kind of level of grief that the image, and particularly the bodily images here, and the ideas of the body that are implicit in all this—this was what allowed a kind of level of healing to come in and start a level of healing, or perhaps, who knows where it will go.

And then she said, "I've had trouble making my mum an image, as it's difficult to bring her to mind without being overwhelmed with grief." Because her mum died, as I said, a few years ago. But sometime after this, she spontaneously came as an image and helped me when I was feeling doubt, giving me encouragement.

So again, this person, like many of you listening, is someone who has doubts. And doubts, as many people do, doubts about their practice and themselves, and all kinds of doubts. So I'm partly pointing that out—say, if you're listening to this and think, "Well, that sounds amazing, I'm sure she's like this or like that." This is someone who has doubts as well.

So the image of her mum as well was kind of enabled through the healing that came out through the other image that involved devotion and also the different sense of energy and different sense of body. And then the image of her mum was sort of brought alive and able to kind of communicate with her.

Then she says, "Later I did your practice of Eros and the Brahmaviharas with a difficult person and I chose my mum as the beloved." Again, I don't need to repeat it, but I'll say again, Eros doesn't mean necessarily sexual. So there's an erotic connection because her mum is image, is imaginal. And with the imaginal wrapped up in that is Eros. So her mum is the beloved as image, and then she's having this difficulty with someone, and there's aversion, and all kinds of things—fear and judgment, whatever.

And so the erotic beloved imaginal other, in this case her mom, came and she used that in a Brahmavihara meditation which helped to open and support the metta and compassion to this person that she was struggling with. So one image has brought another—the image of her mom—to life. It's enabled it to come through where it wasn't so able before and it's given it life and potency. And she said, "And that broke the spell of the ill will that I hadn't been able to shift. It shifted like magic," she said.

So, as I said, there's a lot there in terms of just so many aspects of working this kind of way—in terms of the willingness to experiment, the flexibility, the responsiveness, the care, the sensitivity of attention, all kinds of things. Very, very rich and beautiful report.

But implicit with the images that she describes and the sensing with soul that she describes are ideas. Ideas about bodies, hands that heal—her hands, her physical hands touching, that can heal on different levels. Ideas about energy and this kind of net of energy that's kind of touching and connecting everyone in the whole.

Ideas also about the locus of personhood. So one of the things about the body is that we tend, very understandably, to consider it that that's where someone is, and that's kind of where their consciousness is, and sometimes we say it's in their brain, or whatever, if we're getting quite narrowly material. But in that image that she had of me, it was not a visual image. It wasn't that I was there. It was like a presence was there.

And it was somewhere near the front of the hall. But it was there. Where is the personhood? She knows that I wasn't there. But it was like I was there. Where is a person? Where is a consciousness?

There are other ways to open this up. One of them is through the sixth jhana. If you spend a lot of time with that, the whole notion of where consciousness is and whose it is gets really opened up in terms of the potential ways of perceiving and conceiving of that. But also through sensing with soul, imaginal practice. Body as locus of personhood. Or locus of personhood not necessarily being limited to a physical material location.

There's also ideas here about communication. Communication that can take place between me and her and between her mum and her. So again, regular experiences of sensing with soul—it wouldn't happen if it was just one, one or two, but regular—it starts to open up the sense of the body, if we're staying with body right now, and matter, and then the conception. It gets pushed on, it gets questioned, it gets expanded.

And it gets made plural.

Again, pointing out that wherever there's image, there's idea involved. So the ideation, or the concept, is an element of the sensing of the soul, because it's part of the eros-psyche-logos structure of soul-making. Ideas are wrapped up in images. They go with images. That's something I want to stress again.

So what is it to approach or see the body as hermeneutically and with the spirit of, in the poise of disciple, if you like? Someone to whom the interpretation of this text matters. Body is sacred text and it matters. I'm not just approaching it with cold, so-called objectivity of science. Body and world are sacred texts.

We've talked about texts a little bit last night, with the potential richness of meanings—again, plurality of meanings—and playing with words, and playing with etymologies, and playing with sounds, and text as sacred sound, and the numerology and all of that. We talked on the previous retreat, I think it was the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat, about giving attention to the mudra, hand posture, and general body posture, and movement of the body—to enact movements of the body and postures of the body, and to sense those movements and postures of the body with soul. Sensing the holiness there in the multidimensional aspect of that.

Body and world are sacred texts. And in the spirit of participation, the interpreter's participation is part of the text. It's participation. So moving the body and reading it this way, sensing it with soul, is part of creating, discovering what the body is, what the body can be.

I think it was the same retreat where we talked very briefly about language and we had a guided meditation with the Om Mani Padme Hum mantra, actually starting to perceive those syllables of the mantra as if they were infusing the fabric of the cosmos—a jewel-lined world of these radiant, mystical syllables of the holy mantra that is the fabric of the world at one level. Primordial sound, divine and cosmic powers in the sound.

Could we not just practice chanting that way, with everything that came out of that—if you remember that guided meditation, the meditation moved beyond sound to just an all-embracing perception of things. But could we actually practice listening this way? Listening, and what are we listening to? I'm listening right now, I'm listening to the words, I'm trying to understand what you're saying. But could we listen to speech and perhaps hear and understand, and also listen to the sound?

What is communicated? Is it just information? One person tells the other, "The salt's over there," or something very complicated, or "I feel good, I feel bad," or "Yesterday I did this," or "My story is this." What is communicated? There are so many different levels, so many different dimensions of what's communicated through speech, potentially, what's heard through speech.

Can I practice, perhaps practice with another, practice with another consciously, deliberately, or practice with whoever one is listening to, practice hearing the meaning and the divine music? The mantra? As I said in Tantra, hear all sounds as divine speech, as mantra. Hear all sounds as mantra. It's a Tantric instruction. Can you actually practice listening that way? Whether it's to your friend, whether it's to someone else. Mantra, divine speech, incantation. Hearing the music in things. Hearing the prayer in things. All sound is prayer.

I touched on this again on a past retreat—I think it was, again, the Re-enchanting the Cosmos retreat. What does prayer mean? Because that's another instance where we can have an idea of prayer and it's quite narrow: I'm asking for something from some kind of bigger power or higher power, and I hope that they give it to me. Prayer can mean that, but it has a real range of possibility. It's a word that, once that word starts getting involved in the soul-making dynamic, really opens up. Prayer becomes something limitless in its possibilities. Prayer as blessing. Every prayer is a blessing.

And so, if this is what I'm hearing in speech, but maybe also in any sound—the wind, the birds, even right now the sound, maybe you can't hear it on the recording, the sound of the electrical hum from the heater beside me in this freezing house. Divine music, divine speech, incantation, spell, music, prayer, blessing.

What is blessing? What does that mean? If it's the divine blessing all creation, that includes me. That includes everything around me. That includes this room, this space. That includes you. These sounds now are the sounds of the divine blessing all creation. It's the prayer of the divine.

But all creation is not other than the divine. So the divine is in some ways blessing itself. And even blessing is blessing. Blessing is blessing. When there's a sense in the soul, when there's that kind of opening and attunement, you can hear this in everything. You can hear this way as a practice.

So there are ideas too of language and sound. We can open those up. What is being communicated? What is language? What are these sounds that I'm hearing? What are they? What's going on there?

I learned recently about something called Yoik. I think that's how you say it. Anyone know what that is? It belongs to the Sami peoples. The Sami peoples are indigenous to Lapland, northern Finland, Norway, parts of Russia—those very northern peoples. And they sing Yoik.

But in singing a joik song, it's not that they... so they might sing a joik song, and if there are lyrics or whatever, it's the story of a wolf or it's about a wolf. But when you understand, when you ask what they mean by it or what's going on there, it's not that they sing about this or that—about an animal or a person or a place or the land. It's rather that they conceive it—their idea with Yoik is that they sing the land. They don't sing about the land. They sing the land.

Remember that image I was sharing—the bird song was singing and weaving my energy body, my body in some kind of very healing way. The birds were singing me. And so the Yoik sings the land. It invokes—or rather than evokes, if you like—it invokes the land. They sing the land. With their song, they weave its being.

So there, when they have that kind of space in their logos, then entering into that and singing that way and having that ideation, there's a deep sense and concept there and framework there of participation. They're singing. They sing the land. They sing the animals. They sing being. They sing things into being. They weave into being—participation of their own creativity, if you like, or their own voice in manifestation, in cosmopoiesis.

So there's a kind of intimacy there supported by that and involved in that. It must be more than just, say, another idea, which is a recognition of material equality.

It's earth element, I'm earth element, and earth element is perceived flatly, or it's atoms and I'm atoms. There's an intimacy there that's got a whole other richness to it.

And then the land, or whatever they're singing there, that land and the animals, must surely appear in certain ways to them. Again, dependent. The perception is going to be dependent on the way of looking, and on the ideas in the way of looking. Actually, even in their very conception, it's already conceived of as not simply and objectively pre-existing. The land pre-exists, and then we may or may not sing this song or whatever. It's already implicit that somehow I'm participating in this land, but the participation is at a whole other level than just "I farm the land" or "I breathe the air."

And surely such a view and such a practice makes the kind of perspectives and intentions that would lead to, say, strip mining or any kind of disconnectively extractivist orientation impossible.

Apparently this Yoik, the oral traditions of the Sami people say, was learned from or given by the fairies and the elves of the Arctic lands, who gave Yoik to the Sami people. So it's a very, very old musical tradition, probably one of the oldest living musical traditions in Europe. When the Christians came there, they condemned it as sinful, prohibited it, perhaps because it had some kind of association with shamans and pre-Christian mythology and rituals. Also because Yoiking was said to resemble magic spells.

And you can see that it has some of that quality of magic, of spells, of incantation, invocation. So in creating and discovering sacred sound there, nature is made sacred in a whole different way. And there is magic there. So wrapped up in that, there are ideas of earth, of song, of sound, and again of communication. Ideas of communication.

Some of you will have heard of the three bodies of the Buddha. It's a very common Mahayana teaching: the Dharmakaya, the Sambhogakaya, and the Nirmanakaya. I'm not going to go too much into that now. I've touched on some of it just a little bit in the past, I think.

That word, nirmana, of the last one, nirmanakaya, means actually a magical creation. Sometimes it's given a very idealist slant, non-materialist slant. So a magical creation is something that has no material basis. So this is one of the bodies of the Buddha. In Mahayana teaching, it's like the Buddha is really the primordial Buddha who is manifesting a body that we perceive as physical at some point in history and manifesting that—it actually is not material, it's a kind of magical emanation. Some Mahayana teachers would explain it that way.

But the word nirmana means forming or making or creating or creation or building or a composition like a musical composition or something like a work, like a work of art. And also a transformation. So the nirmanakaya can mean the body of transformations, or the body of magical transformation.

When we translate, when I have touched on these three bodies of the Buddha, of the primordial Buddha—Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, Nirmanakaya—they can be seen as, especially the Dharmakaya and Sambhogakaya, pervasive. In a way, they're non-spatial. They're not really anywhere in space, but they pervade everything and all space.

So the Sambhogakaya is, one way I translate it, the mundus imaginalis. It's that whole body in the sense of collection. We talked about kaya, remember, in the talk on what is awakening at the beginning of this. What does kaya mean? It can mean physical body. It can also mean just a collection. And so the Sambhogakaya is the world, really, the collection of things, the mundus imaginalis, and with the energy body and all that. And the Dharmakaya, again, has a lot of different meanings, but is something, in some sense, kind of pervasive. It's, in some sense, everything is the manifestation of Dharmakaya.

Nirmanakaya is often conceived more in a certain locus of personhood, a historical Buddha. But we can also hear it or interpret it as equally pervasive, like the other two kayas. So that nirmanakaya, and if we translate kaya more pervasively as the other two kayas, then it becomes this world of material appearances. And that can be the nirmanakaya, and the parallel I'm making is the world, this world of matter as the world of magical transformation, the world of magical creation. The world of magical transformation.

I talked about Amitabha the other day and how he represented in the five Buddha families—he represents or is connected with the aggregate of perception, the third aggregate. There's another Buddha, Vairochana, in the five families of Buddhas in the Mahayana. And Vairochana is another kind of primordial Buddha. And he represents the bodily perception, the aggregate of the body of rupa. But in a way, it's the purified aggregate of bodily form. So when we're talking about in the primordial Buddha sense, it's this level of the aggregate that goes with it. It's another dimension, put it that way.

And in some ways it's the idea or the principle of spatial extension, or of space as the precondition of all bodily existence. So what does that mean? It means this space that we're in can be sensed into, conceived—again we're kind of injecting an idea—that this space is somehow a manifestation of a primordial Buddha, of the primordial Buddha. The space where bodies exist and seem to move, where matter exists, is the body, if you like, or the essence. Its essence is Vairochana, the primordial Buddha, Vairochana.

Sacred text. The body and the world are sacred texts. What is a sacred text? The Pali Canon suttas and the Mahayana suttas all begin—and some tantras as well, Mahayana tantras—begin in Pali: "Thus have I heard." In Sanskrit: "Thus have I heard."

So what is it again? What is it to hear a sacred text? "Thus have I heard." Can I hear that "thus" that I've heard? Can I hear that poetically? We read it as a kind of formulaic introduction to suttas in Buddhism. "Thus have I heard." "Thus am I hearing." "I."

It might be that someone, let's say, in a state of consciousness—we could say, or let's say this—what qualities need to be present in the soul for me to, let's say this as a poetic phrase, to hear sacred texts? What needs to be there to hear in this way, that we hear sacred texts? And "hear" actually might be more than just the auditory sense, to interpret sacred texts. We already said mattering. Something about purity, I think, as well.

So someone in a certain state of consciousness—one could say purified, but we can ask, what does that mean?—they may hear teachings imaginatively, or see an image, or behold a story, or a gathering of angels, or bodhisattvas, as are described in Mahayana texts. All of that. But these teachings may also be—one hears them in the wind, and they may be non-verbal. So in the sensing with soul, it's as if the wind can be, at times, the wind or the birds are teachings. Their sound is sacred text, is scripture.

But again, it might not be that what's translatable there is in the form of information, like when you read a sutta—the Buddha said so-and-so, and this happened and that happened. The teaching can be non-verbal. It's not a matter of bits of information being communicated. But something about purity needs to be there to allow us to trust this as teaching.

What does purity mean? One possibility is that one is purified by insight into emptiness. Actually, it's interesting. When one's insight into emptiness is very deep, there is at that time a feeling of purity in the energy body. It's one of the things it does. One may purify or feel oneself pure, or another pure, in a moment where there's this seeing all appearances as divine, in a kind of mimicry of a Buddha's ultimate gnosis, a Buddha's jñana. But knowing that the subject and object there—the appearances that are divine and the consciousness that senses that way and perceives that way—neither have inherent existence. And they're non-dual, they're connected. And one can, if you like, mimic that Buddha's jñana gnosis.

Or, again, those elements that move the imagination more into the realm, in the direction of the fully imaginal, authentically imaginal. This also is purifying, partly because it brings in this imaginal Middle Way and the non-clinging, and the craving goes to eros, etc. And it's not so much about myself. There's that what we call the fullness of

intention. All this renders the soul at that time, in different ways, renders it what we might call pure. Pure to hear in a certain way and to trust a certain teaching that one might receive on the wind, through the land, through the birds, whatever it is.

Sometimes when we hear "purify the mind or the heart and then you perceive something," and then the purity allows you to perceive what is true, that purity allows you to attain to the truth.

If you remember what we talked about with Foucault pointing out that that's what changed with the advent of modernity, is that we no longer have that notion about truth, that it takes the purification of the subject. But it might be also that purity could be itself a purification, mean a purification or involve a purification from all attachment to any notion of truth. So that one is free to play with perception and with perspectives and ideas and ways of looking in this kind of pluralistic understanding we've been talking about.

And in a way, why shouldn't the teachings that are the sacred text heard, the sacred text heard in this way, in that sort of state, be trusted and given, if you like, authority as much as another text? They become iconic for us, and it's part of their imaginal nature.

As I said, hearing a sacred text, a one maya shurtam, involves sensing the soul sometimes through the synesthesia that I talked about. So there's a fusion of different senses or interconnection of different senses. And sometimes I feel like I'm hearing through my eyes, so to speak.

I'm aware of the dangers in all this, of course. This person says they heard this teaching, and they translate it into some kind of information that they then want to persuade others of the truth about, and then they claim a power position in a hierarchy because of that, and there's all kinds of abuses of power. We are the ones who have access to the truth, etc. But if the whole hermeneutics of this kind of thing remains open, like the Midrashic approach to the Old Testament and the other sacred scriptures, or like reading Tantra, sometimes it's quite open, then we're in a different situation.

So all these practices that I've touched on, and all of this sensing the soul, involves the sense of the middle way, this imagined middle way between real and not real, neither real nor not real, and or a sense of the deep emptiness of it all. Sometimes that kind of ontology shifts a little bit, opens a little bit more to a sense of the plural nature of things, the plurality of truths through participation.

But it's as if, as I said at the beginning of this part of the talk, the sense of what is real, the conception of what is real and what is true gets opened. It's impacted through sensing the soul. But in some way or other, it's either this middle way, neither real nor not real, and or the sense of the plural nature of truth, truths, of realities.

There's one more thing I'd like to touch on before finishing, is that there's this plurality or middle way understanding that's infused in all these possibilities and experiences and practices I'm talking about, but also infused in all these approaches and possibilities is eros. And love. And grace. As three, for example, three elements of aspects of the imaginal that we touched on that will be there with all these experiences. But also one that perhaps I haven't mentioned so much: praise.

And the attitude of praise also, one of its elements, is humility. I will have an organic, natural, spontaneous humility in relation to what I'm praising. We talked about humility before. But in all this hearing sacred texts or singing the world, the earth, the animals into being, singing the animals, in all this listening to the divine speech, the divine mantra in sound—all of this praise is infused in it. It's infused with praise.

And praise is healing. Praise is healing. So again, this is not abstract. We're not talking about ideas that are abstract. There's something that really touches the soul here.

You know the word paean—it's not that commonly used in English. P-A-E-A-N. Paean means a song of praise. It's a song or an ode of praise. And it's originally a song of praise to Apollo, because paean was another name, an epithet of Apollo. And Apollo was a healing god, among other things. So paean is a poem or a song of praise.

And it's related to another word, peony. P-O-E-N-Y. Which is actually, some of you will know this, a plant with beautiful crimson flowers. And the word peony, the English word peony, is from French by Latin, apparently, pionia, P-O-E-N-I-A, which means healing, because the plant was thought to have healing powers. So Paeon, Apollo, was the physician of the gods.

So a paean, a praise, what we utter in praise—and utter might be through our speech, but it might be through our gesture or our being—is healing. It's a kind of healing. Certainly healing through the praise, we talked about the tikkun olam, the healing of the world through my perception, through my action, through my articulations. And praise is also a healing of the praiser, the one who praises. Praising heals the one who praises.

So again, ideas that we're talking about infused in all this, and they're getting stretched in all this, we're not talking about them abstractly or as abstractions. They bring ways of looking, and those ways of looking involve our soul, they move our soul, they open our soul. They open our hearts, they involve our hearts, they demand our hearts.

And in opening up the sensing of soul, they are soul-making. Anything but abstract.

When the soul senses soulfulness in things, when it recognizes and resonates with the sacred dimension of existence, something profound occurs. This recognition itself becomes an act of creation—soul-making in its most fundamental sense. We are not merely observing soulfulness from a distance; we are participating in its very creation through our perception, our attention, our capacity to see and be moved by the sacred that permeates all existence.

This is why these teachings, these ways of looking, can never remain merely intellectual exercises or abstract philosophical concepts. They demand our full participation—heart, soul, and being. They ask us to risk being touched, to allow ourselves to be moved, to open to dimensions of experience that transform not just our understanding but our very way of being in the world.

Through praise, through the recognition of beauty, through allowing ourselves to be moved by the sacred wherever we encounter it, we participate in the ongoing creation of meaning itself. We become co-creators in the great work of soul-making that is always happening, always inviting our participation, always offering us the possibility of deeper seeing and more profound engagement with the mystery of existence itself.

This is the gift and the responsibility of human consciousness—to be the place where the world comes to know its own soulfulness, where the sacred recognizes itself through our eyes, our hearts, our capacity for wonder and praise.

CHAPTER 135

Between Ikon and Eidos: Image & Hermeneutics in Meditation (Part 6 - Amitābha Buddha)

Rob Burbea · 1h23

> *In this profound exploration of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna imagery, Rob Burbea examines how traditional Buddhist concepts can open new possibilities for soul-making meditation. He investigates the etymology of Amitābha Buddha - traditionally 'limitless light' - revealing alternative meanings like 'limitless appearances' that connect directly with imaginal perception and the mundus imaginalis.*
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> *Burbea discusses Amitābha's consort Pāṇḍarā (Rāgarati), the embodiment of passion and lust, and explores how their erotic union represents the balance between imaginal perception and discriminating wisdom. He outlines three levels of deity practice: supplication, harmonizing with qualities, and union with the deity. The talk weaves together Kabbalistic gematria, Christian mysticism (Maximus the Confessor), and Buddhist pure land concepts to demonstrate how ideas can become seeds for sensing with soul.*
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> *Drawing connections between the Western Paradise, Garden of Eden, and dharmadhātu, Burbea shows how devotional yearning opens perception to sacred dimensionality. He emphasizes the importance of poetic listening and flexible practice, allowing traditional forms to serve contemporary soul-making rather than rigid visualization. The teaching culminates in understanding how this very world can be perceived as the pure land through appropriate ways of looking, supported by both emptiness understanding and devotional attitude.*

So we're looking and discussing the effect of ideas on the possibilities of sensing the soul, the impact there, the place really of ideas and concepts in soul-making meditation. Unfolding, wanting to unfold, open up and discuss several practice possibilities as we go.

And so I want to begin to look at, just a little bit, at a few ideas and images and practice possibilities from the Mahayana tradition or the Vajrayana traditions as well in Buddhism.

But just to say, just as a general point, as well as elaborating on and hopefully suggesting and making available by opening up and looking at these different practices and ideas and images as we discuss them, as well as the ones that we dwell on a little bit. As I'm talking, and this applies to the past talks as well, there's actually, depending

on how you listen, there are actually many possibilities, many practice possibilities implicit or available to be drawn out from ideas that I may just briefly mention or just touch on or just as an aside.

So just from the last part of this talk, for example, I quoted the Eastern Orthodox teacher, Maximus the Confessor, and he wrote or said, "God, the divine Logos, wishes to affect the mystery of his incarnation always and in all things." The divine wishes to affect—meaning with an E, affect—God, beginning. So the divine wishes to manifest, to bring into being the mystery, to make apparent the mystery of his incarnation, always and in all things. Actually, to affect means to make, not just to make appear, but to actually make. See, back to that Hegelian notion, or similarities to the Hegelian notion of God needing something to manifest and needing perhaps our participation.

But the point I want to make right now, the main point in regards to this is one could take that sentence from Maximus the Confessor and if there's any hearing it, so listening with a receptive ear and heart and soul, so if there's anything that resonates in that phrase. And I don't even know what he means. But something just touches. I can sense it touch. I can listen with a more poetic hearing. Perhaps reflect a little bit. Let it land in the soul. And the soul can hold it for a while in its womb. And it can just stay there, maybe just for a little while.

And out of that idea or the ideas that are encapsulated in that one sentence from Maximus the Confessor, for example, may, with a little reflection, with a little poetic hearing, actually generate then the possibility of all kinds of shifts in ways of looking that we can then actually practice and experience and implement and see what happens. And that might happen very spontaneously, organically, without much effort on our part, or it might be that, as I said, we have to reflect a little bit, let it just stay in the soul womb, so to speak, but one has to listen poetically for this to be able to translate, to be implemented, so that it delivers or opens up for us some possibility or other, or maybe many possibilities from that one sentence of sensing with soul.

So there is the possibility here that's very rich in terms of different possibilities that we can hear, that we can open to hearing in a certain way, and they offer or suggest possibilities, or the soul converts it, in a way, to possibilities of sensing the soul.

And again, we can combine ideas so that we hear that sentence from Maximus: "The divine wishes to affect, to manifest the mystery of his incarnation always and in all things." And we may combine that with other ideas that we have digested or beginning to digest in the larger logos of what we're talking about. So for instance, as I mentioned, perhaps it needs our participation, this effecting or manifesting or making, bringing

into being of this mystery of the Incarnation always and in all things—perhaps it involves our participation. So we're emphasizing this participation. Participation of what? Of my mind, of my poetic hearing, of my listening, of my heart, of my sensing.

Perhaps I hear that and in order to liberate the potential there for sensing the soul I actually have to combine it with some understanding of emptiness that I have. And so perhaps the divine is empty or the incarnation is empty or whatever. So there can be a very creative combining of ideas to generate this kind of potentially infinite range of possibilities for sensing the soul.

But we have to hear poetically. Words can be stretched from their kind of narrow, rigid meanings. So something like incarnation, depending on your background, you might hear that in such a sort of literalist manner. And maybe that works for some people, but we can really expand a lot of the words in that sentence as an example if we allow ourselves to enter into the poetic sensibilities. Or as I said, using the phrase from a talk, I think it was "The Path of the Imaginal," the midrashic condition, meaning the condition of this open, pliable soul listening and soul reading and soul fertility that's open to multiple, possibly infinite interpretations—the midrashic condition of one possible sentence.

So as I'm talking, or as I have done, you can go back and—perhaps this has already happened to you—listening and one phrase or one sentence jumps out, or even go back and listen for those odds and ends that are interspersed in what we're talking about and perhaps pause with one. And what is it to enter into that logos, that idea that's expressed in some idea that's just briefly talked about? What is it for that logos, that seed to enter into the womb of your soul? Takes a certain listening, takes perhaps a little pausing, takes a little, as I said, turning the soil in the soul, the soil of the soul and a little bit of working and receptivity.

Or as another example, I mentioned, oh, perhaps we can say there are different ways of ideas we can have about perception, different ways of conceptions we can have about perception, and that we can conceive of it as a gift and a grace from soul, from the divine, from a divine, and we can conceive of it instead as work or as opportunity. And again, here are three conceptions, for example—not at all that they are, that's an exhaustive list—but here are three conceptions, three ideas, and what would it be, again, to let them enter the womb of the soul as seeds? These ideas, these logoi, these conceptions are seeds, and they're sort of mulled over, or turned, planted in the soil, and that soil is turned, and then they can generate ways of looking, or suggest ways of looking and sensings with soul.

Or some etymology or other, I might just throw out, oh, by the way, in Latin that means that, or in Greek this means this, or Sanskrit, or whatever it is. You know, partly the reason I'm doing that...

In fact, the only reason I'm doing that is really to suggest things poetically, to open up possibilities by these seeds of logos, these seeds of ideas.

So one can, as you're listening, if you want—or if you're listening a second or third or however many times—you can pause, extract something and linger with it.

Okay, as I said, really what I want to do—that's just a sort of note, a general point—but what I'd like to do is look at some Mahayana ideas, images, practices, and Vajrayana ideas, images, and practices.

If I start with the Buddha Amitabha, he was the Buddha of the Western Paradise, of the Western Pure Land. In Mahayana, globally, this is a very popular Buddha. There's a lot of orientation towards this Buddha and his Buddha field, his Pure Land, in all kinds of ways, in different Buddhist cultures still today. Some people will pray—it's quite common. There's a prayer to Amitabha, a prayer to be reborn in the next life or in some future life in his pure land. And there's devotional practices and all that.

So I'm interested in how we might open up that idea, that image, and what that might suggest to us for possibilities of practice linked in with this sensing the soul.

Actually, let's start with some etymology here. Amitabha. Amita means—amita in Sanskrit—is to measure. The "a" before means it's a negation, so unmeasured or measureless or boundless or infinite. So infinite what? Abha, which is from the verb abha, bhati, which means to shine or blaze towards, to irradiate, to illumine, or to appear or become visible or apparent.

So usually, the translation we get for Amitabha is limitless light. Amitabha, limitless light, or something like that. Or limitless radiance. But it can also mean, because abha is to appear, to become visible or apparent, it might also mean limitless appearance. It can also mean—abha, that verb—to look like, to resemble.

Abha as a noun also can mean splendor or light or flash or color, again, or appearance or beauty or a reflected image or an outline, a likeness or a resemblance. Again, so usual translation of Amitabha is limitless light, the Buddha named limitless light. And that's very lovely, and that can open up its own direction, absolutely. But it tends to suggest, for instance, a kind of infinite oneness, some kind of infinite oneness, which is wonderful, and we've been through all that.

But if we take a slightly different route with the etymology, a different possibility offered by the etymology there, then we might get something like infinite appearance or limitless appearance, limitless resemblance or appearances or images. The Buddha of infinite appearances. What does that sound like to you? Doesn't that suggest the Buddha of the world of soul-making, of sensing the soul, of the infinite possibility that's generated in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and that potential open-endedness there? And the generation of sensing more dimensions, more aspects, generating, creating, discovering more images. Amitabha in the pure land, in this land. He goes with his cosmos, if you like, his land, the pure land of Amitabha, the land, the mundus imaginalis.

So we can potentially open up a slightly different meaning for Amitabha and that Buddha and that pure land.

Amitabha is also used interchangeably—he has another name, so to speak—Amitayus, which translates... Amita is the same, limitless, measureless, or boundless, or infinite. And then ayu is the word for life. But ayu can also mean a living being or a person. So it could be limitless persons, something like that, or limitless living forms, which again might suggest—it's a little less strong, but it might suggest something of this infinite possibility of images to be created, discovered.

So there's a possibility there. What does it mean then to meditate on Amitabha? What does it mean to pray to Amitabha and to pray to be reborn in that pure land?

Before I get to that, maybe you can already guess a possibility there, or your soul suggests possibilities, but these primordial Buddhas in the Mahayana have consorts. So they have a male and female—generally it's portrayed as a male and female counterpart—but they're actually not really separate buddhas. The female consort or counterpart is said to be the prajna of the Buddha. Prajna—some of you will know, panya in Pali is the word for wisdom. So this female, it's really the female aspect. It's the same essence as the Buddha, and it's called the prajna of the Buddha.

And so Amitabha's prajna, Amitabha's female consort—and they're depicted in yab-yum, in erotic sexual embrace, in sexual intercourse. They're actually depicted as one Buddha, depicted as two in union.

So you could say self-other-world is right there—some erotic union and a world that it generates, a pure land that regenerates.

Amitabha's prajna, Amitabha's consort, other half, so to speak, is same in essence and is Pandara, Pandaravasini actually, which means literally "white-robed"—one who is white-robed. So she wears a white robe but she's actually red in color, as is Amitabha. And in being red, she is the embodiment of the fire element and also the embodiment

of passion or lust. So this Buddha's consort is the embodiment of passion and lust and the fire element. She is also called Ragarati, which literally means passion and lust. And she holds a lotus in her hands.

Now some Vajrayana texts say when the passion or lust that are defilements is transmuted, it becomes the wisdom of discriminating awareness. We could actually keep—and some Vajrayana traditions as well keep both. Keep the passion and the lust, but transmute it through the erotic imaginal, so that it's not reified, it's not concretized. It becomes imaginal. It becomes full of dimension, full of beauty, full of divinity, shot through with the imaginal middle way—neither real nor not real. We can keep the passion and the lust transmuted that way through its imaginal transmutation, transfiguration, transubstantiation maybe a better word, and we can have the gifts that it gives, which is the wisdom of discriminating awareness, or distinguishing wisdom, sometimes it's called.

So Amitabha goes with the aggregate of perception, and that perception in its—let's say its enlightened form, its primordially enlightened form—is the gateway, or is transubstantiated in its primordially enlightened form to intuitive vision. Again, what does that mean, intuitive vision? It might mean, or we could interpret it as meaning—we could take that one direction of the etymology. Intuitive vision may be imaginal perception. The transformation of the aggregate of perception into imaginal perception, into intuitive vision, imaginal perception.

And the distinguishing wisdom there—to distinguish means to keep separate, to keep things separate. So again, here, it's not a kind of wisdom that dissolves everything into oneness. It's an intuitive vision, an imaginal perception that retains discriminating awareness, distinguishing wisdom. There are all kinds of other possibilities that we could have—tracks through the etymology that open up different directions. I just want to open up this one now because of the obvious connection it has with the work that we've been talking about with sensing the soul.

But distinguishing means perception does not melt into less fabrication, a state of less fabrication, some oneness or other. That's fine for some other Buddha. This Buddha, Amitabha, opening up the distinguishing wisdom and the imaginal perception, the intuitive perception—this limitless appearances of his name.

And so again, here, remember the corollary that we established: Eros needs twoness. It doesn't collapse into oneness. Even when it knows oneness, it doesn't end there or collapse there. It needs twoness and it also creates and discovers twonesses. The world of imaginal perception, the world of sensing the soul, for the most part needs twonesses.

So this transubstantiation of the perception into distinguishing wisdom goes with the eros that is the appropriate kind of—one of the appropriate affects or kinds of desire—in the mundus imaginalis, in the pure land of limitless appearances.

Let me throw something in here that I think I've actually touched on in another retreat, and I can't remember which one. But when we talk about these Vajrayana deities, or primordial Buddhas, when we talk about tantric deity yoga, or even in repeating a mantra that's connected with a tantric deity, like Amitabha or whoever, we can delineate—and I think it's really important to delineate—various, if you like, stances, relationships, attitudes, poises, which we could conceive, which we could inhabit at any time. We could conceive of them hierarchically, but we also don't have to.

But we could say hierarchically: One is, let's say, a mantra or a prayer or something. It's an invocation that is a kind of supplication and an opening to the other, to this deity, and a surrendering to what is bigger than me, bigger than you and more powerful. There's the humility there and a heartfelt opening. But it's me and the deity, with the beauty of the humility, the supplication, the opening, the surrender.

A second level, if you like, is more of a kind of harmonizing of the consciousness and the psyche and the soul and the whole being and the energy body—harmonizing with the qualities of that deity that is invoked by the mantra or focused on in the meditation. So the mantra or the prayer—and if it's a visualization or whatever—it's just a sense, invoking these qualities and involving those qualities. So for example, Avalokiteshvara's compassion or Christ's mercy or Yamantaka's fearless power to destroy what needs to be destroyed. And in meditating upon them, in reciting the mantra, in prayer, in just soul resonance with them, there's a kind of harmonizing of our being with the qualities, if you like, of the deity's being.

And that cultivates something in our being.

A third level we might talk about is a kind of union with, or fusion with, a becoming. One's self becomes the deity. The energy body becomes the body of the deity. There's a kind of fusing or unity so that we actually experience our body as divine. We sense the world then—if one opens one's eyes or even listens—we sense the world and others with the senses of that deity, through their eyes, through their ears, with their vision, with their kind of knowing, their kind of sensing. And their feeling for things, their erotic relationship with things, their love relationship with things, their compassionate metta relationship with beings and the world.

In that way, there's a kind of cosmic transubstantiation—a transforming transubstantiation of the cosmos. So there's a kind of fullness there in that union. It's more than simply imagining you're the deity. We actually enter into the deity's experience of body, of matter, of world.

So we could conceive of these hierarchically as three levels: a definite division in the first one between self and deity, but with an attitude of supplication, surrender, humility; a kind of harmonizing energetically and psychically as a second level; and a third level of union with a becoming, and the transubstantiation of the world that's involved there.

But I would like to retain the openness to all three. Yes, you could say the third one is more complete or advanced, if you want to use that word. But actually there's beauty in that first one, in the two-ness, in the separateness. Just as Buddha taught eight jhanas, but didn't then say, once you've learned all eight, just practice the eighth. He kept all eight open. They're all valuable, even though you could talk about a kind of hierarchy there. So I would really like to keep all of those open when we talk about these kinds of practices, these soul-making practices.

When we come back to Amitabha specifically, it's traditional, very common in the Mahayana world, to pray to be reborn in the western paradise, in Amitabha's pure land. But now, when we've opened up the etymology and the idea of what Amitabha could be by looking at those different connections, all kinds of possibilities open up.

We could conceive this prayer to be reborn in Amitabha's pure land as a focusing and harnessing of the aspiration and intention to enter now into the mundus imaginalis. So one's praying, one's really opening in humility and intention and orientation and eros and devotion, one's asking and orienting and intending to enter now into the mundus imaginalis, into the world that's sensed with soul, which means to perceive imaginally, to sense this world or another world as sacred, beautiful, multidimensional and profound, meaningful, divine, empty—meaning neither real nor not real.

That could be a sense of another world that's not this world, or it could be this world perceived now, sensed now with soul. In praying for that, to enter into Amitabha's pure land here and now—not in a future life, but here and now—in praying for that, one is, in the act of prayer, in the stance and the poise and the attitude of prayer, acknowledging the necessity of grace, of humility, and that the soul and the divine are greater than my ego, my will, my skill, my mastery.

So that prayer has, or the attitude of prayer, the gesture of prayer, the soul movement of prayer, this idea of grace, attitude of humility, attitude of soul and divinity being much bigger than self, not completely available to my technical mastery and my will, also bigger than my current experience and conception of them. All of this includes ideas of grace, humility, receptivity.

Some of you may have been aware that people pray to be reborn in Amitabha's pure land, but we can open up other possibilities for what that means in practice, for our practice, in very beautiful, very potentially fertile ways.

While we're on the subject of tantric deities or primordial Buddhas and meditating or praying with them, I want to say something that may be a reminder, but it's an important one. Oftentimes, the way this is taught, or at least what many people pick up from the teachings about meditating on Vajrayana deities or primordial Buddhas or bodhisattvas, is a kind of emphasis and necessity of capturing at one time in the meditation all the details of the image that is prescribed or described.

So Amitabha needs to be this color, and he's wearing this, and he's holding this in his hand, this in his other hand, and his feet are positioned this way, and he's got his hair like this, or he's got so many arms, and there's this in one hand, and this in another hand. There's a lot of detail in some of these icons, and sometimes a practitioner gets the idea that I've somehow got to develop the skill of holding all that together in the meditation, which alone becomes a kind of feat of visualization and memory.

But I want to say that in practicing this, as with all things, we need to make it work for us at any time. And make it work means make it soulful—that you can feel the energy body opening, harmonizing, coming into alignment. You can feel the soul resonances. You can feel those qualities, the aspects of the imaginal start to ignite, start to open up. That's what it means for a meditation to work.

What it takes for a meditation to work—any meditation at any time—varies. It's not simply a checklist or formula that works identically every time. So again, we need to be sensitive and responsive. What actually gives me a sense of soulfulness and soul fecundity right now? What opens something authentic for me in this practice?

Often it's the case that including all the prescribed or described details of a deity, icon, or mandala isn't necessary—not at one time in meditation, or even at all in a single session. It's far more important to support the possibilities of experiencing resonating soul-making in the energy body, in the emotions—devotion to some degree, perhaps, or some kind of shade or color. Sometimes this is very subtle.

We're not necessarily looking for fireworks. Devotion, for example—eros, as another example—can be extremely subtle. This doesn't mean things aren't working. We need to be attuned, alert, receptive to, and open to a range of subtlety and intensity in sensing what's actually effective.

So it's more important to support the possibility of experiencing soul-making resonances—energy body openings, emotional connections, meaningfulness, and all that. This might mean really slowing down. If you're familiar with these kinds of visualizations and meditations in Vajrayana practices, it can be worth dwelling with perhaps one aspect, or two aspects or facets of this deity or mandala—perhaps even the relationship between those aspects. This is really, really helpful and necessary to build that foundation. It's not necessarily the case that including more aspects at one time makes the practice better.

For example, Amitabha is often positioned in a mandala opposite the Buddha Akshobhya—literally meaning "indestructible" or "immutable." When you become somewhat familiar with each one individually, you can meditate on their relationship or interplay, exploring the resonances and effects of contemplating that dynamic.

If we interpret Amitabha as the Buddha who opens the world of limitless appearances—the mundus imaginalis—what does it mean to place this in relationship with Akshobhya, the Buddha of the immutable? What is immutable? The unfabricated, perhaps, is immutable, being beyond time. Emptiness is immutable, unchangeable. What is it to place that world of imaginal perception opposite or balanced by the wisdom that knows the immutable, the wisdom that knows the unfabricated, the wisdom that knows thorough, deep, radical emptiness?

You can include these two aspects and meditate on their balance, connection, or interplay. But if you're opening to two, it should feel doable—returning to what I said before. Again, it should feel soulful, fertile for the soul, for the heart, and all the ways we can recognize that: in the moment, alive, resonant, workable, approachable.

You might work first with one aspect and build it up over time. It's not necessarily true that doing more is better. As always: what actually works right now? What is helpful in this moment? That's always the essential question in meditation.

As another example, you could meditate on the erotic embrace—the sexual intercourse, the yabhyam—of Amitabha and Pandara, the goddess of passion and lust, in union with this Buddha of the imaginal realms, this Buddha of limitless images. There are countless possibilities, especially if you've been introduced to these kinds of practices, mandalas, and contemplations.

One reason for this approach is sometimes to bring more balance. As I mentioned, Akshobhya—this Buddha of the immutable, something like the diamond, the vajra—is also immutable, indestructible. It is positioned opposite Amitabha, balancing it in the mandala. Mandalas are often quite balanced structures, frequently organized as crosses with something in the center—very geometrically balanced.

What is it to balance the emptiness with the imaginal? The knowing of emptiness with the perceiving of the imaginal? The knowing of emptiness with the sensing of soul? You place these elements in counterpoint, in relationship and balance.

Excuse me.

Or perhaps one does the same thing with the emptiness and the deity of passion and lust, Ragarati. And what does that mean? Emptiness and the erotic icon.

I should also add that all this is very amenable to flexibility, to finding ways that work for you right now. So it might be that you feel, "Well, I've done a little bit of emptiness, but I hear some things that you say, or another teacher says, and I think I'm not there yet, at that level." It doesn't matter.

Take the realization of emptiness that's infusing Akshobhya in this example—the Buddha of the immutable, the indestructible. Whatever realization of emptiness makes sense to you. So it might be something like the unfabricated. It might be more something like a big awareness. And that's what you've opened to so far in a way that makes a difference for you. You're equating emptiness and vast awareness. And you might have heard me say, "Well, that's not really the final deal there." No problem. Just be flexible.

Take that level of understanding that you have digested and absorbed, and that's what's embodied by Akshobhya in that example, to balance the imaginal, the mundus imaginalis, the sensing of soul. Or it could be a really deep understanding of emptiness, the dharmakaya as the non-dual Buddha's gnosis, which includes appearances. Some of you have heard me talk about that.

Sometimes this might be that we just vaguely sort of... it's just a Buddha who understands emptiness, and we're aware that this Akshobhya... we're aware that we don't quite understand emptiness, but this guy does. And it's a vague concept or image, really, of this Buddha that embodies and is the consciousness that thoroughly knows all emptiness.

It can be sometimes, in doing that—even when we don't quite know what it means and our conception's a little bit vague—that somehow, magically, or by some kind of magic invocation, we actually experience a deeper understanding of emptiness than we knew we had, or that we were conscious of, or had realized consciously until now.

What's going on there? If you stay around the Dharma long enough, as a teacher I know there are all kinds of instances of this, where people experience something not in a linear way that's way beyond where they think they are. I touched on this when I was talking about maps and trajectories in the talk on awakening.

So in this instance, let's say we're just talking about meditating on Akshobhya, balancing or opposite or in soul dialogue with Amitabha, the Buddha of the imaginal perception, the deity of the imaginal perception. And we just... emptiness, I don't even know what that means. And it works some kind of magic. What is that?

Does your intuitive wisdom already know something? Is it the power of images? Is it the collective unconscious of Jung? Is it the power of poetry? I'm just mentioning that as a possibility, again, in this whole realm of the place of ideas in sensing the soul. Sometimes the idea is vague, and the conception is vague, and sometimes we get—it delivers something beyond where we are. Or we can plug in something that we already know, and that's really, really great. It doesn't have to be the final deal or whatever.

The Zen master Hakuin wrote "Song of Zen." It's a very beautiful, splendid text, not very long, and the last three lines read something like: "Nirvana is right here before our eyes. This very place is the lotus land, this very body, the Buddha." Nirvana is right here before our eyes. This very place is the pure land, this very body, the Buddha.

The text up to that point, in Hakuin's "Song of Zen," is a lot about emptiness. And it's not very long, so I'll just allude to it. But emptiness is one of the ways that make possible that kind of way of looking that he's talking about—this very place, the pure land; this very body, the Buddha.

Sometimes when we talk about the pure land—as I mentioned, the pure land of Amitabha, the pure land of limitless appearance, and the eros implicit in that with his consort Ragarati—sometimes we have a sense of a world beyond this one, as an imaginal perception or event happening in that world. But there's also the possibility, as I alluded to, of that pure land being here—this world, transubstantiated. And that's what Hakuin is alluding to in those last three lines there.

One of the things that makes that possible is a thorough knowledge of emptiness, a thorough understanding of emptiness. This makes possible ways of looking that see the way that he is describing—see the here and now in that way—becoming something akin to the mundus imaginalis, this world sensed with soul.

But also, if we think about what gives rise to this perception, this possibility, this range of possibilities—these ways of looking, of seeing, of sensing the world in this way—there's also the possibility that devotion gives rise to it. Or devotion has its place in sanctifying a relationship with this world that takes care to sanctify the things of this world and the relationships of this world, through prayer, through blessing, through ritual, through whatever it is. And generally speaking, through sensing with soul, this kind of sensing is open, that Hakuin is alluding to—this pure land of the Buddha.

I mentioned earlier, when I was talking briefly about that passage of God speaking, calling Abraham, how we can hear or read what's in certain texts—for instance, the Old Testament or the New Testament or whatever. We can hear them timelessly, eternally, understand them as giving an eternal and timeless teaching about soul, about spirit, about divinity, about humanity. Not so much as a literal text about the history of a certain people or nation, avoiding the problems that come out of interpreting scripture in such a literalized, concretized way.

There was a Jewish mystic, a Kabbalist, in the 12th century, called Abraham Abulafia—very influential, somewhat controversial. He interprets a passage in the Old Testament, a passage from Deuteronomy, and I want to share his understanding of it because it relates directly to this idea of the transmutation or transubstantiation of the perception of the world so that it becomes the pure land of the Buddha.

It's a passage where God talks about the holy land. God says to the people: keep my commandments so that you will long endure on the land that God swore to your fathers that He would give them and their offspring, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Abulafia says this actually refers to the supernal land which is exalted over all exalted lands. "Supernal" means the higher, the transcendent. So he's saying this refers to the holy land not as a geographical earthly place, but as an imaginal perception. The supernal land is potentially this land where I am now, sensed with soul.

Abulafia makes the point that there's a whole other level here that needs attention, that needs opening up, beyond the concrete material level. He points out that in the passage he's referring to, there's the word "today." And when it says "today" in the Old

Testament, he says today means eternally. Today means now, which means timelessly, which means always. So this whole thing is to be interpreted out of time. This is not a historical report of some event in history—certainly not only that.

Another passage that Abulafia quotes is from the Old Testament: "You who cleave to the Lord your God are all alive today." You who are in intimate relationship with God are all alive today. And again, the "today" gives the sense of eternality, of timelessness.

So he writes: "From here we gather that one who does not cleave to God does not live in eternity." That doesn't mean live forever in heaven. It means live with the sense of the eternal—have that timeless perception. When you're out of relationship with the divine, today is the always present. "For this reason the verse adds the word today. So too in all instances where the Torah refers to the constancy of something, it uses the word today, or heaven and earth, or sun and moon, or another of the constant forms of the world."

Again, he's pointing to a whole other way of reading and listening and interpreting scripture, in this case the Old Testament. Let me read that whole passage, and if you listen to it this way—again, not as a literal history with all kinds of nationalistic implications, and not just as metaphor. We're talking about something larger than what we commonly mean by metaphor.

If you hear it, and you have experienced the kind of cosmopoiesis or sensing with soul and the kinds of things we're talking about in different ways, you can hear it with the ear of that experience, those experiences and that knowledge and how that's touched your soul. It's possible to hear this as much more than a metaphor—more than just saying, you know, if you keep the commandments, then you'll feel good and things will seem nice. Can we hear it in a different way, in line with the level of what we're talking about?

So God says, in this passage from Deuteronomy: "Keep or observe all the commandments"—all the mitzvot, all the rules of the law that sanctify every element of existence, the different blessings or prescribed behavior or attitudes. Keep all that. Observe all that. All those practices, basically, that help to sanctify the elements of your existence. "Observe all those that I'm giving you today, so that you may live long in the land that God swore to your fathers that he would give them and their offspring."

A land flowing with milk and honey. Can you hear this poetically? Can you hear it speaking of this? What happens when we sanctify this world and all the things of this world? Then the world, the land opens up. A land flowing with milk and honey - not

like the land of Egypt from which you have come, the land of bondage, of slavery, of limitation, of burden and imposition. Heaviness. But a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. A land your God cares for.

Can you hear all this translated into the terms that we've been talking about? A land your God cares for. The eyes of your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.

So if you faithfully obey the commandments, these rites and rituals and laws and practices of sanctification, if you faithfully obey the commandments I am giving you today, to love your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. Then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grains, new wine and oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

Can you hear that with the richness of the depth and dimensionality that we've been talking about in these teachings? It's certainly way more than literalistic, concretized, and then therefore nationalistic, and much more than what we typically call metaphor. Can you hear it that way and hear the sense of the world opening up that way in that beauty, in that dimensionality, in that holiness, and in this text, in the poetry of the text, the richness of it.

This kind of thing is common in different traditions. Henri Corbin quotes from the fifth imam of the Shiites, of the Islamic Shiites. This imam lived in the first and second centuries after Muhammad. He said: "The sacred book, the Quran, is alive. It will never die. Its verses will be fulfilled among the people of the future as they have been fulfilled among those of the past."

Corbin's point about this is that the Quran, the Old Testament, the New Testament - they're not to be interpreted historically, certainly not only historically. Usually people come and they trap, they make the significance of the sacred book, Corbin says, captive to the date of its material composition, stifling any potential for a significance that goes beyond the past.

What he wants to open up is that rather than these kind of historical interpretations, there is the idea of the presence of what he calls spiritual universes that symbolize with each other by means of a comparable architecture and in relation to which what we call history is a history that is a mimesis, a mimicking, an echoing, a mirroring.

What's he saying here? He's saying that this world that everyone takes for granted - the conventional perception of a historical material world and written history - has parallel universes. We've touched on this before in previous retreats, of levels of worlds

that echo, mirror, in some ways kind of interpenetrate this world. So that this moment right now, and this event right now, whatever it is, is both echoing and echoed by a similar event in a world at another level. They symbolize with each other by means of a comparable architecture, a mimesis, as Corbin says.

This is a matter of perception. It's a matter of sensing with soul, as we said.

If we come back to Mahayana teachings, there's this notion, actually in all the yanas of Buddhism, called dharmadhātu. Some of you may have come across this word. It is a word that's inherently ambiguous. We can identify quite a number of interpretations, but you could divide the interpretations loosely among the different yānas - the Hīnayāna, the Mahāyāna, and the Vajrayāna.

Taking the word dhātu, which itself has a number of different meanings, it can mean āyatana, and āyatana means something like sphere or dimension or world region. So the dharma dimension or something like that.

In the first turning of the wheel, what the dharmadhātu might refer to when it's used might be the unfabricated. If you remember that āyatana, that dimension should be known, monks, where there is no sight, smell, sound, taste, touch, and thought, and mental imagery. Remember that quote - the Buddha's pointing to that unfabricated, that dimension, that āyatana, that dhātu needs to be known, must be known, should be known. So in the Theravada teaching, it might have that level of meaning or interpretation, this dharmadhātu.

In the Mahāyāna teaching, the word is used more often than in the Theravada. It has a range of meaning, but it seems to take on more of the meaning that dharmadhātu is the emptiness of inherent existence, or is the emptiness of the inherent existence of things, of dharmas. That's one of the most common meanings in the Mahāyāna. It's not then totally transcendent of appearances and perceptions as the interpretation of dharmadhātu as unfabricated, where there's no perception, no appearance. Here we retain appearances, but it's the...

Here are the appearances that are empty. The Dharmadhātu is the world of emptiness and appearance fused together.

In the Vajrayāna, in the third turning of the wheel, one of the meanings that Dharmadhātu can sometimes carry is the Buddha realms—the pure lands. It might be something somewhat akin to the mundus imaginalis, the world of divine appearances, or the sambhogakāya, the bodies of the Buddha.

D.T. Suzuki, a Zen master, describes the Dharmadhātu in his commentary on the Gandavyūha Sutra. "The Buddha of the Gandavyūha lives in a spirit world which has its own rules," he says. "There's no time continuity there in that world. And the Buddha in the Gandavyūha thus knows no time continuity. The past and the future are both rolled up in the present moment of illumination.

"As with time, so with space. Space in the Gandavyūha is not an extension divided by mountains and forests. You have here, rather, an infinite mutual fusion or penetration of all things, each with its own individuality, yet with something universal in it. To illustrate the state of existence, the Gandavyūha makes everything transparent and luminous, for luminosity is the only possible earthly representation that conveys the idea of universal interpenetration.

"There are rivers, flowers, trees in the land of purity, hard to describe. And the clouds themselves are luminous bodies, inconceivable and inexpressible in number, hanging all over the Jetavana, which is Jeta's grove, of the Gandavyūha. This universe of luminosity, this scene of interpenetration, is known as the Dharmadhātu in contrast to the Lokadhātu, the world of this usual world.

"The Dharmadhātu is a real existence and not separated from the conventional world, the Lokadhātu, but is not the same as the latter when we do not come up to the spiritual level where the bodhisattvas are living."

So the point is: when we come up to the spiritual level where the bodhisattvas are living—you could say when we practice emptiness, when that opens the doorway to sensing the soul, or when we just sense with soul, even if our emptiness meditation is not fully realized—then this world is perceived as the same as the Dharmadhātu. Dharmadhātu is right here, but it's become perceived, transubstantiated. Do you understand? The Dharmadhātu in the sense, in the interpretation given to it in the Third Turning, in the Vajrayāna.

So it's the state of the soul that allows this kind of perception.

Henri Corbin writes again: "Inasmuch as the place of a spiritual being is his internal state, the garden or paradise"—and now we have a different metaphor of the Garden of Eden or the paradise as this Dharmadhātu, as this holy land—"is therefore the celestial man himself, is therefore the soul himself, his internal state. The trees of the garden are all his possible perceptions of love and intelligence, of the good and the true."

So the availability of sensing ourselves in that paradise, in the Holy Land, in the Garden of Eden, comes from the state of the soul. As William Blake says, "As a man is, so he sees"—in the moment, I would add.

But again, then the question is: what enables us to open up these perceptions, this sensing the soul, this sensing of the pure land, the lotus land, the garden of Eden, the paradise, the holy land?

I go back to Abraham Abulafia again. And he has what I think is a wonderful passage, which is going to take a little bit of explaining. So he's interpreting a passage from scripture, and there is the word in Hebrew, v'hakosef, and that word means "the one who yearns for," "the one who yearns."

Now I have to explain something called gematria. So gematria is a Hebrew word, and it means the manipulation of the possible numerical values of letters. Hebrew is a language where the letters of the alphabet, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet, also are given numerical equivalents. So if we had it in English, we'd say A is 1, B is 2, C is 3, D is 4, and so on—E is 5, like that, and then you get hundreds.

So what you have then is a sacred text becomes interpretable in so many different ways by virtue of the meditation on its individual letters and the words. And some of that is through the numerical equivalence. So you can, for instance, add up the numerical equivalence—so if we had, like I just went A, B, C, D, E, if I took "bad," B, A, D, what would that be? It would be 2 plus A, 1, plus D, 4, which is 7. And then maybe I had another word that also makes up seven. And there would be some kind of connection or equivalent or interchangeability or use of interpretation of those two words in relationship to each other. And then there are all kinds of other numerical manipulations that you can do.

So the whole thing becomes really quite a creative interpretive endeavor. I'll give an example in a moment.

Now, we could hear that and just say, "Well, that's just nonsense, and it's silly, and it's kind of crazy." But what if we're actually using that to enter into an ideation, a concept, a logos, where that's available to us, and the ideas that that spawns and the connections it makes of ideas again become ways of looking for the sake of soul-making, for the sake of the sense of holiness, for the sake of opening up different understandings of divinity, of existence?

So let me give this example from Abulafia.

He's talking about this word, *hachoshek* - "the one who yearns." When you take away the letters and reconstruct them, parsing the word, you discover three smaller words that each add up to 26, 65, and 86. Twenty-six is numerically the same as the word for

Yahweh, or God, which also adds up to 26. Sixty-five equals Adonai, another word for God. And 86 corresponds to Elohim, the third main word for the divine in the Old Testament.

Somehow in this single word that means literally "the one who yearns," you discover the three names of God. Is it pointing to something - a clue for practice - that in the very yearning lies the opening of the gates? And even at three levels, three dimensions of the divine. The one who yearns has the key to the doors. In the yearning itself, in the movement of devotion, comes the opening of perception.

When you add up the numerical equivalence of these three names of God - 26, 65, and 86 for Yahweh, Adonai, and Elohim - you get 177. This number equals *shalosh seudot* in Hebrew: *shalosh* meaning three, *seudot* meaning meals - three meals. Actually, this is 1,176, but 1 plus 176 equals 177.

Now this can sound completely crazy. Already, ascribing or making connections through language and its numerical equivalents can sound bonkers. Add these twists of numerology, and it seems even more bizarre. But the point is, it can open up meditations. What is a meal? Some kind of nourishment, something we receive or prepare, something we digest - somehow connected to three levels of God.

If we hear this just abstractly as some clever number manipulation, putting two seemingly unrelated concepts together, it will sound bizarre and make no impact. But returning to what I said at the beginning of this talk: if we linger, if we let this work poetically, if we place these concepts or images in relationship to each other in our meditation - just as we did with Amitabha and Akshobhya - then what happens? Some kind of alchemy or fertility or connection or opening becomes available to the soul.

So this slightly more complicated transformation: 1,176 can be construed as 1 and 176, which returns us to 177 - back to the three names of God. Or it can go further. This 177 can become *Shalosh Ma'alot* - three levels, three qualities. *Shalosh* again meaning three, *ma'alot* meaning levels. So three meals - whatever meals mean poetically to you - three levels of the divine, all connected with or opened by the one who yearns.

This can also be equated numerically to the word *tzillah* - silence. The connection comes through the numerical equivalent of 87, and 8 plus 7 equals 15, which equals 1 plus 1 plus 7 plus 6, taking those individual numbers from earlier.

There's one more: the Garden of Eden, *Gan Eden*, also totals 177. So one of Abulafia's students, Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, declares: "The incantation of the language is the secret of the Garden of Eden."

And finally, *yomam valaila* - day and night - which also equals 177. What might this mean poetically? Day and night.

So you have this extraordinary connection: one who yearns, three words for God, three levels of God, three meals, three worlds, silence - mystical silence - Garden of Eden, day and night. A Kabbalist practicing this tradition would juggle, manipulate, play with the holy letters of scripture, taking things apart, putting them together, connecting words with other words, then meditate on that connection, on the idea-connection or image-connection that opened there.

The three names for divinity in the Old Testament hold the secret of the stages of the spiritual ladder and are called by the general name of Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden. For by means of their grasp, one enters the Garden of Eden while alive.

Does this make sense? It's going to sound completely bonkers if you don't hear it with that poetic sensibility, with that openness to the soul possibilities, with that letting these kinds of things be—the seeds of these kinds of ideas planted in the soil. So as I said, we can hear it that way, or we can hear it as what one is doing is using ideas creatively, or letting ideas, letting the soul suggest ideas that can be converted to ways of looking. The one who yearns somehow connects with the Garden of Eden, opens the Garden of Eden.

This brings us back to that point I mentioned the other day—hermeneutics, interpretation. This is what this involves: interpreting scripture through these kinds of arcane numerical reconfigurations and then meditating on the ideas that suggests. And I said the other day that interpretation in this sense—the interpretation of text, of holy text, and the interpretation of existence—needs to matter. Otherwise it would just be silly. It would just sound silly. But when it matters, when the soul is on fire with it, when the soul cares and is passionate, something comes alive and possibilities open. Doors open, gates open.

But also in this particular gematria, you hear "one who yearns." The one who yearns. It's not just an intellectual exercise. By that very word, the one who yearns, by the meaning of it, the heart is involved—the yearning. So the very gematria doesn't lose track of the heart. The heart needs to yearn, it needs to be open, it needs to have that attitude of humility that we talked about.

Yearning has that eros and that devotion in it. And it has, if you remember, we were talking about the different kinds of desire and discriminating, discerning between them. And devotional yearning has a sense of dimensionality of what it yearns for, the object that it yearns for, the other that it yearns for. There's a sense of the dimensional-

ity, the unfathomability, and the soft and elastic edges of that object. So all this is implied in that word, "the one who yearns." And the fact that it matters and matters to the soul—it includes the heart and soul and it matters to the heart and soul.

And that allows a fertilization. It's like water on these clumps of soil that are numbers and ancient words in a strange language or whatever. The heart, the moisture, the waters of the heart are like pouring water on the soil, and then we turn the soil. One turns the soil by means of these manipulations or letting these ideas come into contact with each other, and all manner of imaginal perception opens, all manner of sensing the soul, all manner of soul openings. So many possibilities there.

What is it that Hakuin said again? "Nirvana is right here before our eyes. This very place is the pure land, the lotus land. This very body, the Buddha."

CHAPTER 136

Elements of the Imaginal (1 - 2)

Rob Burbea · 36 min

> *In this foundational talk from the 'Tending the Holy Fire' retreat, Rob Burbea begins mapping the territory of imaginal experience by introducing 28 elements that distinguish authentic imaginal encounters from ordinary imagination or papañca (mental proliferation). Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's death contemplations and mettā practice as examples of skillful imagination, he establishes a spectrum from contracted fantasy through mindful imagination to the genuinely imaginal.*
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> *Burbea presents these elements as a 'lattice' or constellation of interconnected aspects that must be present for an experience to be truly imaginal. Rather than rigid categories, he emphasizes these as practical keys for opening into imaginal dimensions - aspects like energy body awareness, love, eros, beauty, trust, soul-making, dimensionality moving into divinity, beyondness, and reverence. He explores how practitioners can notice these elements already present in their experience or deliberately activate them as doorways into deeper imaginal engagement.*
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> *The talk focuses particularly on the first two elements: the lattice itself (recognizing the multi-aspected nature of imaginal experience) and energy body awareness. He explains how opening energy body awareness can transform craving into eros, supporting the emergence of erotic-imaginal relationship. This systematic approach offers both conceptual clarity for understanding soul-making dharma and practical tools for cultivating authentic imaginal experience in meditation and daily life.*

One of the things we'd like to do on this retreat is trace or unwind a certain thread—outlining, touching, or pointing to what we might call aspects of the imaginal.

There is imagination, and there is what we're calling the imaginal. We want to highlight and point out: What are the aspects of the imaginal? What is the imaginal? What does it involve? Over the days, this will form probably the main thread of the teaching of this retreat. I'll explain why we're even doing this a little later.

For those of you who've been quite into this work and listening to the recordings from the last few years, a lot of this may be quite familiar. Some of the vocabulary might have changed. Other aspects might be less familiar, or you may not have quite noticed them in your practice. Some will be familiar, but it's a slightly different angle—as I said this morning, a slightly different way of opening things up.

We have this word imagination in English. All human beings know that when we get into what Buddhists call papañca, it usually involves imagination. I'm caught up in some kind of fantasy in the fixated sense, in the small sense. I'm contracted around it. I'm dragged wherever it's taking me. That is a use of the imagination that we can say is not very helpful, not very skillful, and certainly not what we're going to call imaginal. But that exists in the spectrum of what is possible for the human imagination.

Then we can get into the realm of mindful imagination. For example, in the Satipatthana Sutta, in the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness, there's a whole long section on death contemplation in the section on mindfulness of the body. Some of that uses the imagination. Imagine your body decomposed. If you can't actually get to your local charnel ground, actually imagine it—imagine rotting corpses, your body become a corpse in various stages of decomposition, being eaten by vultures and so on. So it's actually a mindful use of the imagination, for the sake of renunciation, for the sake of letting go, on the path to that kind of liberation.

Or when we practice metta, or compassion, or mudita—here's this being, and I'm imagining them. Maybe I don't have a clear visual sense, but I sense in my imagination somehow their particular being, and I wish them happiness, peace, etc. These are skillful uses and mindful uses of the imagination.

With all that, as we talked about in the Q&A today, I might actually employ a real embodiment. I really have the mindfulness of the body and the image of the other, and it's a skillful, embodied, mindful use of the imagination. It may or may not be imaginal, but it's helpful. We can have healing images of all manner—again, mindful, embodied probably, not necessarily imaginal. They may be imaginal, they may not be imaginal.

Towards the end of this spectrum, somewhere along that line, we say there is the realm of the imaginal. These kinds of images, or this experience of images, is what we're calling imaginal.

Some of you know this word imaginal is actually not that old in the English language, but it's getting quite popular in different circles. You may have come across different authors or people speaking about it. What I want to say is that the way we are using that word imaginal—it's not to say our way is the right way or the only way or the true way. There are similarities, overlaps, and differences between the way we are using that word imaginal, unfolding these kinds of teachings, and what you might have read in Hillman or Jung or Corbin. Overlaps, but some real differences.

We want to outline and highlight different aspects or elements of the imaginal. We can talk about when these elements are there—we could say something like, "This experience now is authentically imaginal," or "This is now the genuine imaginal," but very, very lightly with that.

We could run through a list, and in fact that's what we're going to do. I'll go through it very quickly tonight and begin to touch on the first couple of elements. As we go through the week, we're going to go through this list, highlighting these aspects or elements of what's involved in imaginal experience.

Before I even do that, I want to ask us all to consider and open up our attitude and our relationship with lists like these and teachings like these. They can get, sometimes, for some people at different times, very dry or dogmatic or very rigid or very tight or very right or wrong. I'm really not a big fan of that. But there's something about highlighting distinctions that actually will serve the soul-making and serve the practice.

The list is not even exhaustive. It's not complete—that's it now, full stop, that's the testament of the soul-making gospel, it's finished. It's not even an exhaustive list, but what we're trying to do is open up the attention in a way that can open up and deepen and make more full the practice. So not dogma, not to be held too rigidly or too tightly, and not exhaustive.

As I proceed through this list, I want to emphasize that I'll be moving quickly through all twenty-eight elements. Some will be familiar to you, while others may seem completely foreign at first. Think of this as seed-planting—I'm simply scattering concepts that we'll cultivate and explore more deeply throughout the week.

So, aspects of the imaginal—twenty-eight elements, at least. Remember, this isn't exhaustive. One crucial point we'll return to repeatedly is the relationship between different elements. Some overlap and naturally imply each other, while others create a kind of tension, pulling in seemingly opposite directions. There's a dialectical relationship at play here, which we'll unpack as we progress.

[Brief interruption about lighting]

Alright, twenty-eight elements for now.

The first is the very fact of the lattice itself. I use this word deliberately—these elements form what we might call a constellation or lattice of interconnected aspects. Picture a three-dimensional structure from high school chemistry—those molecular models with balls connected by rods, or think of scaffolding, or even a chandelier. It's a network where elements connect and support each other in complex ways.

This is crucial to understand: when we speak of the imaginal, we don't simply mean *that* image—whether it's a scene from Lord of the Rings or the figure of Dumbledore. Dumbledore isn't necessarily imaginal unless these elements are present. To the degree that these elements manifest in my relationship with Dumbledore, to that degree the experience becomes imaginal for me in that moment.

The lattice itself—this first element—points to something involving both the object of perception and the subject perceiving, and most importantly, the relationship between them. This might be the most abstract concept on our list, but it forms the foundation.

The second element is the energy body, which we've already discussed extensively. When the imaginal emerges...

For something to be imaginal, there has to be energy body awareness present.

The third aspect is love and being loved. An imaginal image loves me, loves you, and I love it. We're going to go into more detail on all of these.

Fourth: eros.

Fifth: beauty. Imaginal images are beautiful. The scope of that beauty might be much broader than a narrow conception, but there's a sense of beauty there.

The sixth is trust. There's a relationship of trust with an imaginal image. Some of these nodes are not obvious at first, and this is the point—to highlight them, to draw our attention to them.

The seventh is that it's soul-making. An imaginal image actually brings a sense of soulfulness. It opens up the sense of soulfulness. It *is* soul-making. The eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the dynamic of soul-making, gets galvanized and moved into action. So an image that doesn't do that, for me, right now, is not imaginal.

The eighth is a sense of dimensionality. There's more to it than just the flat surface, the flatland materiality of things. That dimensionality moves into divinity. So we could call that two different aspects or nodes of the lattice, or just one: dimensionality shading into divinity. Something that feels sacred and divine about imaginal images.

Related to that, the ninth is a beyondness, an unfathomability. There's a sense of something more. This image has something more, some mystery beyond that I can't quite capture or put into words or get my head around—and actually that's unfathomably deep, that beyondness. It's right there in and through the image, but it's got a beyondness to it.

The tenth: an imaginal image has soft and elastic edges. Its boundaries are indefinite. Even if in my mind's eye, if it's a visual image, I can see every little micro hair and it's sharply delineated visually, it's got soft and elastic edges. We'll come back to what that means. The boundaries are indefinite.

Eleventh: eternality. Timelessness. Again, some of you may have noticed some of this and some not. An imaginal image has a dimension to it that feels eternal, timeless.

Twelfth: there's a sense in the relationship with an imaginal image of reverence. The heart, the soul has a reverent relationship with the imaginal.

Thirteenth: there's a sense of grace. Something is given to me, something is visiting me in this image, through this image. This image is a gift from the divine.

Fourteenth: humility. This is a subjective note that the heart, the soul feels humble—we'll explain what that means—humble in relation to this beauty, this image.

Fifteenth: not reduced.

The image, I'm not reducing it to "this is" or "this means this." This is a representation of this aspect of my mind or soul or my history. This represents something in my history—when this happened, or that wounding, or this quality of compassion, or this power. It's not reducible. It cannot be reduced to "it means X or Y." It's more than that. Or rather, it doesn't only mean X or Y. It can have those individual meanings, but it's always more. Not ultimately reducible.

Number sixteen: autonomy. The image is not simply part of me. I'm not sensing it or conceiving it as just some element of myself—a sub-personality or some aspect of my psyche. It's its own being, in the same way that Joel here is his own being. He has his autonomy. There's a sense that the being has its own autonomy and in a way can act independently. But I also have my autonomy. So the autonomy is double—of self and other, of self and image.

Related to that is seventeen: there's twoness. I realize I'm going very quickly. I'm just casting out seeds right now. There's this sense of twoness that we've worked so much with. There's the image and there's me. There's twoness. It doesn't dissolve into oneness.

There's a quality of theatre—number eighteen. This is somewhere between real and not real, the imaginal middle way. It has that quality to it.

Nineteen: we recognize that we both create this image and discover this image, or somewhere in between creation and discovery. That's part of the gestalt of the whole constellation of the relationship.

Twenty: what we're going to call the concertina. We'll explain what that means. There are other images waiting in the wings of the theatre. This isn't the only image.

Number twenty-one: there's slightly less fabrication. There's this fluidity that we touched on in the Q&A. A little less clinging, so things become less fabricated, more fluid, more malleable.

Number twenty-two: an imaginal experience is not a non-conceptual experience. Logos is involved. Concept is involved. An imaginal experience is not a non-conceptual experience. Concept is involved. We also touched on the energy body in the Q&A. We'll go through all of this again. I'm aware how fast I'm going. We're going to go through each point. I'm just sprinkling some seeds right now.

Twenty-three: what I want to call fullness of intentions. I'm not trying to get something from this image. I'm not primarily trying to get something for this image. I'm certainly not trying to win the lottery or even trying to empower myself, for instance, or my psychological process. I've got a fullness of intention. I'm in it for something bigger. My intention is for God, for the divine, for the soul. Not just for me, not primarily for me, so that I can be better at this, so that I can develop this or that. Fullness of intention.

Twenty-four is a sense of duty. Where there's soul-making, there's a sense of duty. Somehow it comes into my life with a sense of asking me something. It's a subtle one. We have to be careful with that.

Twenty-five is meaningfulness. So an image is pregnant with meanings, plural. I cannot reduce it to just several meanings. It has a kind of infinite cloud of meaningfulness, which I might not even be able to isolate. It means this or that.

Twenty-six, and I'm not really going to explain this right now, is there's an infinite echoing, an infinite mirroring between the imaginal image and my life. They mirror each other like two mirrors facing each other and just mirroring each other endlessly in a subtle way.

Twenty-seven is an aspect of what's involved in the imaginal: our values. Aesthetic values—that's in the beauty—but also moral values. So things like goodness, kindness, nobility, courage, even cunning, these kinds of things. An image, if you like, embodies values. It's not reducible to values, but values are involved.

And lastly, a sense of deep participation. That's twenty-eight.

That's a lot, and you might be feeling like, "Oh my goodness me." But these are things to notice, and we're going to go through them, and a lot of them are already there in your experience. It's a matter of kind of naming and getting familiar with them. So, just rattle that through to plant seeds.

What we want to say, because we really don't want to be rigid with this: there's a spectrum here. All these aspects, from papañca on one side, and then all these aspects, and so on. At what point is the cut-off point to what we're calling imaginal? We could put it anywhere. Am I going to get upset about where it is? There's a direction that we can open up further as more of these aspects get involved, rather than someone saying, "That is or that isn't imaginal." Do you understand? We don't want to get self-judging or quibble too much about it.

Is this making vague sense? Yeah, good, good.

So we're talking about a spectrum, not an on-off switch or black and white or something I've failed, I haven't—you know, it's a movement, it's an opening, it's a direction.

Why are we even talking about this? One reason is just for the sake of clarity and for the sake of clarity in terms of what we mean when we use that word "imaginal," which is, as I said, different than what other people might mean in some respects, but also clarity in terms of understanding the whole kind of conceptual framework of what we're creating and discovering here with this soul-making dharma. That the more I get clear about all this stuff, the more it will help me get clear about the whole vision and the whole of what's involved and the whole concept of what's involved in this kind of path. So that's one reason: for the sake of clarity and understanding and the conceptual framework.

The second reason has to do with actual practice and the art of practice. Becoming familiar with these aspects, they begin to function as kind of keys. So this particular key of any one of these nodes, when I activate it, when I turn that key, it opens the door into the imaginal realm. Or if we take the lattice or the network image, igniting one node can then ignite the whole lattice so that one moves more towards the fully imaginal, the authentically imaginal, the genuinely imaginal.

So, for example, I could pick any element there, and let's say that aspect of timelessness. I'm with an image. It doesn't quite feel imaginal and deep and that whole kind of richness there. And then I begin to pay attention to the quality of time in and around that image. And I notice, "Oh, it does have this kind of strangely timeless dimension,

hard to put it into words." We'll talk about it. And noticing that illuminates that particular node, that particular element, that particular dot in the lattice, and it's like it ignites, it comes on fire, and then that might ignite the whole thing.

Does that make sense?

So, one mode for practice is just to notice, just to notice these elements. You're not so much making them happen as notice what's already there, that at first the consciousness doesn't quite realize. I don't quite pick up on these elements.

As I look a little closer, I see—oh yes, oh yes—and then I dwell with that and resonate with that element. Something comes alive, ignites in the whole lattice.

You can also wiggle or jiggle one of the nodes, deliberately activate it. For example, the energy body: making that more open, pervading the awareness there activates that node, and that might help us move more into the imaginal.

Or you can deliberately start with something accessible to you. Perhaps you're simply sitting, feeling your life and being in the moment, and you sense a vague reverence. You don't even know exactly what you feel reverent toward, or perhaps there's a sense of humility in relation to who knows what. Some sense is there, or it's accessible to you. You can find your way into a sense of humility or that vague reverence. So you deliberately activate that node, deliberately ignite that, open that—and this can open the door to the larger network of the imaginal.

It might be the middle way sense that was one of the nodes I outlined, this quality of between-ness. If you're familiar with emptiness practices and you practice some kind of emptiness meditation where there's a sense of all things being empty, well, that's close enough to the imaginal middle way, and then it becomes much easier for the imaginal to get ignited and opened up. Or the energy body, or time, as we discussed.

So that's the general concept. As I said, we'll go through and cover this again. I'm hoping and trusting that even if it sounds a bit overwhelming and dense right now, you'll actually get the hang of it and it will be quite helpful in practice and understanding.

Let me touch on the first two elements briefly: the lattice and the energy body.

The first aspect of the imaginal is the very fact that it has different aspects, that it has different elements. The lattice itself is an aspect of the imaginal—realizing that, sensing that, knowing that. The network, the fact of its multi-aspected constitution. This imaginal is a multi-aspected phenomenon.

What this means is that image is in the eye of the beholder. We say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Beauty and the imaginal have a lot in common—a great deal in common. The more you understand imaginal, the more you understand beauty, and vice versa.

So we say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and image is in the eye of the beholder. This network of relationships—the nodes and the lattice—needs to be there. It's dependent on that for something to be imaginal. Some of those elements are just here, like energy body awareness or humility. They're part of the subject, nodes that belong to the subject as opposed to the object. Something like the dimensionality of the image or the divinity of the image is part of the object, the imaginal object. My humility in that moment is part of the subject.

So Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter—all that mythic material with kings and warriors and queens and wizards and dragons—is not inherently imaginal. It might be when that relationship, when the nodes of the lattice come alive. Or something mundane, like the hair on my arm—it's not usually imaginal, but it can be if that aliveness comes into the relationship.

It's not inherently just in the image. It's dependent on that aliveness and fullness of relationship as well.

That's the first element. The second one we've touched on already—energy body awareness. This is part of the imaginal constellation. When there's craving in relation to something, even in relation to an image, the energy body contracts and I tend to lose energy body awareness and its largeness. Craving contracts.

When I open up the energy body in relation to someone or something or an image, it helps to transform, to transubstantiate the craving into eros. When I open up energy body awareness, craving opens into eros.

And then I have an erotic relationship with this image, with this other, with this thing. And the eros opens up the imaginal. So that if I can come into full energy body, can I be in relationship to this thing, to this person, to this image, to this tree, to whatever it is? Can I be in relationship with my whole energy body? Can I see it with my whole energy body? Can I see with my body?

The more I do that, the more I'm activating, igniting this particular node of the energy body, and the more chance there is of the whole relationship becoming erotic-imaginal.

We touched on this in the Q&A, so in a way we're opening up the sense of what energy body can mean. It's the felt sense here of texture or vibration in this space, but it also involves image—the image of body—and also the concept of body. So that's all involved in the energy body.

The concept of body that's involved in the energy body is not limited to our usual ones. You see this body: Am I attractive? Am I not attractive according to whatever is the current human fashion in my culture? I've got a concept of body that way that's not going to support soul-making. Or a purely, flatly materialistic view—just a bunch of molecules that are hanging together for a while in some kind of way that they produce organic life. That's a concept that's not going to support soul-making.

So the concept that's active with energy body encompasses, includes, but is broader than our usual concepts of body and matter.

And lastly—and we've said this many times—energy body has a huge range in terms of that felt sense. It can be dense and dark, like the roots of a tree, like the roots of an oak tree. It's dense and dark, or like stone, or like sand, or like liquid, or water, or like air. The texture can feel that way, or like light, or like space. The range is huge, absolutely huge. All that is the playground of energy body.

That's the general concept and the sprinkling of the seeds of the twenty-eight aspects and the first two, just briefly. Does it make sense?

So this will be one of the main threads. We'll just go through and touch on a few nodes each day and just kind of illuminate them so they can serve to germinate in your practice.

"I have a question."

"Would you like me to lift your name?"

"I think so, if that's okay, Simon. I think there's just been quite a lot of talking today, so that'd be good."

"Let's have a little quiet time."

CHAPTER 137

Body and Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 32 min

> *In this Q&A session from the "Tending the Holy Fire" retreat, Rob Burbea addresses student questions about the relationship between energy body awareness, jhāna practice, and soul-making. The discussion begins with exploring how different organs and areas of the body can have their own forms of consciousness and intelligence, emphasizing that the energy body is an infinitely expandable concept that becomes more complex as it becomes "in-souled."*
>
> *Burbea explains how clinging and resistance shape our fabrication of experience, while relaxation of clinging creates more fluidity and opens possibilities for imaginal perception. Students share diverse experiences of energetic fields - from intense sensations around the head and spine to subtle awareness extending beyond physical boundaries. The teacher clarifies that all these experiences fall within the vast scope of energy body practice.*
>
> *The conversation explores the relationship between jhāna (meditative absorption) and soul-making, explaining how the first four rūpa jhānas involve the body becoming fields of rapture, happiness, peace, and stillness respectively. Burbea outlines multiple purposes for energy body work: cultivating samādhi and well-being, developing emotional sensitivity and care, navigation in various practices, and as a foundation for imaginal soul-making when body images become soul-nourishing.*

We may have a Q&A session each day, depending on how it unfolds. The timing might remain at this pre-tea period or it may shift. These sessions are entirely optional, so I encourage you to check in with yourself each day around this time. What would feel most helpful? Sometimes you have a question to ask. Sometimes simply listening to someone else's question or witnessing an interaction can be profoundly beneficial. And sometimes you may prefer to turn toward innerness and silence.

These sessions are being recorded, as people have found them quite valuable to revisit later. However, if you prefer that your question not be recorded, please let me know and I'll pause the recording. The choice is yours.

This is truly an opportunity to ask anything you wish—whether about the practical nuts and bolts of practice or broader understandings, anything arising within the full spectrum of what we're calling soul-making practice and all the various practices it encompasses.

Question from Anna: I was wondering about consciousness in relation to other people, but specifically about multiple consciousnesses within the body—like different organs having their own distinct consciousnesses.

Rob: Absolutely, yes. Let me emphasize something crucial here: virtually any concept we engage with—and the energy body is indeed a concept—is infinitely stretchable. These concepts have no fixed boundaries; they can diversify endlessly, gaining dimensionality, opening up, and revealing new aspects.

We might begin with a fairly narrow and simple sense of what the energy body is. But as we practice more deeply, as this bodily sensitivity becomes in-souled—meaning it becomes enchanted for us—this awareness of the body gets woven into the soul-making dynamic. It then begins complexifying, becoming more intricate, more profound, more multi-faceted. And exactly what you're describing represents one such possibility.

It could very well be that you sense a particular organ possessing its own kind of intelligence, its own sensitivity and receptivity, its own distinctive ways of knowing. This is entirely within the realm of possibility.

What I want to stress—and I'll touch on this more tonight—is that the concept and experience of the energy body is inherently growable. This kind of awareness can absolutely come alive in the ways you're describing. If it feels helpful in the moment, if it feels beautiful, if it feels opening, then you're on the right track. Something genuine is happening—something good and soul-making. You can recognize this by the beauty, the sense of sacredness, the sensitivity, the harmonization that accompanies such experiences.

The possibilities are truly endless. When we speak of the energy body, we're working with a deliberately open and expansive concept. I might say, "This field," and I'm attending to the feeling within this field—but it's simultaneously an idea.

We always carry some conception of the body. One model might be scientific materialism: "My body is a collection of organic, carbon-based molecules arranged in synergistic combination." Another might be: "My body is a field of light with its own intelligence." Still another: "My body is diversified into multiple individual intelligences." These are all concepts of the body, each offering different possibilities for experience and understanding.

And senses of the body, and images of the body. So all that is wrapped up in the possibilities of what energy body can be.

Does this make sense? Any more with that?

"Because you then get resistance in a certain area of the body. And I guess the nature of awareness and of energy and how that locks into things become resistant and how that creates experience, and how when you kind of give some space to it you get that opening out and sort of healing."

That's a really good insight. Let's just repeat it for everyone. Anna's saying that it's interesting, paying attention to the experience of body as a human being and the range of experiences involved there. And what we notice, as Anna points out, is when there's resistance. In Dharma language, resistance is a form of clinging. It's "I don't want" or "I contract around" or "I want" or something like that.

There's the contraction of clinging, and that's wrapped up in the fabrication of experience. That clinging, that aversion, that resistance, that grasping—whatever it is that I don't like, I wish it was better, it's not good enough, whatever it is—all that's just varieties of clinging, and that will shape the experience that I have of anything in that moment: of body, of self, of other, of world, all of it.

So clinging is involved in, as you say, the fabrication of our experience, the fabrication of our perception. In the moments that I relax clinging—as you say, I just create a bit of space around it, I ease something with it, I bring a bit of love in. Love is the opposite of clinging, a bit of softness. All these ways of relaxing clinging in the moment—it's like the experience that then we're in relationship with, whether it's an experience of my body, my health, my self, whatever it is, it becomes less solidified, less rigidified as an experience, less painful, actually.

And in that relaxing of clinging, we say in technical language, it's fabricated less. The experience is fabricated less. It becomes more liquid and more amenable then to imaginal perception, to seeing it this way or that way. There are more possibilities. Clinging contracts the possibilities. "This thing, it's real, it is what it is, and I'm stuck with it," versus what happens when there's—and there's so many different ways of clinging, and there's so many different ways of relaxing clinging. There's a whole art.

When I do that, things become more fluid, more liquid, and more open to possibility, to magic in the perception. Does that make sense? So that's a really important insight.

Good. Also about the energy body. So, I suppose my question is, I suppose I've got two different energetic things going on, that I think are probably both, you could call them energy body. They feel quite different from each other.

The strongest sense that I have is around the head, and it also goes down my back a little bit, sort of down to the waist. And that field, when I'm practicing regularly, it's there quite a lot of the time when I'm not practicing as well. I can feel it now. And it's pleasant and if I tune into it, it sort of goes out more as well and goes more down my back a bit.

And then the other field of energy that I feel is, it's a bit like, if I experience my toes I can experience my toes as a visual picture, and I can see in my imagination, I suppose, see my toes wiggling, and connect that with my body as it were. Or I can feel the felt sense, what I think is the felt sense, which is almost like going into the inside of my toes. And when I do that, I can't really find toes as such. I can just sort of find this kind of toe-ness. And then beyond, so that's another sort of sense of energy, I suppose. There's an energeticness around that.

And then there's a sense that, so if I feel into that now, it doesn't stop there. The energy doesn't stop at the sense of toe-ness. It's as though it slightly keeps going underneath me a bit, not very far, but a little bit. But it's a very different feeling to this strong, quite strong energetic feeling around my head and my back.

And I just wonder, why? Is one not the energy body and one is? Why are there two fields? And I kind of feel like what I should be doing, as it were, is to strengthen one around my head and bring that more around my body.

And bless you, I forgot your name."

"Rowan."

"Rowan, that's right, yes."

So Rowan is reporting two seemingly distinct experiences and wondering what their relationship to each other is, whether one's the energy body or they're both energy body, and what to do with each of them. One is an experience that's over and all around the head and then down the spine, and it's quite pleasant. The other is actually different experiences of the toes and around the toes. Some of those experiences...

"Everywhere in the body."

Oh, everywhere in the body. Okay. Well, I can sort of tune into it. I can feel it in my hands.

Okay, so an experience of body parts, where sometimes the form of the body parts is retained in the imagination, and sometimes that kind of dissolves into just a vague sense there, and sometimes it extends beyond the body, beyond the confines of the physical, the outlines of the physical body, but it's not as pleasant or as intense as the first experience.

"It's neutral."

It's kind of neutral, okay, yeah. And it's much less strong.

"Yeah. The thing around my head is very strong."

Okay, yeah. So, I would say it's all energy body, okay? Energy body, I sort of... If I could press rewind, I might have chosen a different word. Because it's really a kind of... It's such a huge scope, you know?

What we're talking about with energy body is a whole range of experiences that we can have of this space. And that might mean it retains the contours of my physical body. It might mean a very subtle experience. It might mean a really intense experience energetically. It might be very pleasant. It might be very ethereal or very dense, like dense as stone, you know. All of that is energy body. It's just the range of what's available.

So what we're interested in, in the broad reach of, let's say, soul-making practice, what we're interested in is opening it all up for investigation, just opening it all up for experience, just expanding the range of experience and familiarity and what we're comfortable with and what can kind of get ensouled.

If you had a different question, for instance, "I'm interested in energy body, but right now I'm interested in that kind of direction of energy body that's about developing the samadhi, developing that well-being and moving into jhana and all that stuff," which I know that you've explored a little bit. Then I would say, okay, of these two experiences, I would lean more into the exploration of the first, because it's more pleasant and more vivid.

And your job then, if you're in your gear of, "Right now I'm just into developing this well-being in the energy body. I'm not so much in the emotions, I'm not so much in the image of the body as soul manifestation. I'm going for the jhana thing, the yumminess and the nourishment there." Then what you want to do without grasping at it is to let what's pleasant be where your attention goes. And in time, and with a little kind of gentle kind of tending, let's say, that kind of pleasantness will begin taking over the whole body. It will spread, as I think it already is a little bit. And you can encourage that with the awareness in different ways, and we can talk about it if you want.

But you would focus on that one just because it's more pleasant if you wanted to go and really develop the sort of samadhi side of things with the energy body, the samadhi direction of the energy body. But it's actually all of that whole range is energy body.

So in terms of the actual image that's involved, it can be, yeah, it keeps the contours. There are countless images that we can have in any moment of the body. Some of them will be imaginal, and some would just be like, I shut my eyes and I kind of see my body sitting here, and it's not imaginal. Sometimes it dissolves in light, and you say there's no image. Sometimes there's just space there. All of that is energy body. It's all in the range of the playground.

Does that answer it?

"Yeah, that answers it."

Yeah, okay, good, thanks. Is that Sandy?

"Yeah."

That opened up the question I had about the empty body, though you've answered that to a certain extent. The way I'm understanding the energy body, based on my experience, is that it does take the dhyana experience in that way or more. But then, with soul making, where do those seeds emerge and grow?

"Emerge, yes," I clarify. "Okay, so just to make sure I understand this correctly, Sandy. Sandy's asking—so far her experience of the energy body is very much related to dhyana or jhana, Sanskrit or Pali respectively, which refers to absorption, meditative absorption, that the Buddha talked about. We discussed this a little with Rowan about that kind of..."

I see it really as a spectrum or a trajectory—this movement into more and more well-being. This field here, this space here, becomes increasingly a field of well-being in those moments when we're entering samadhi. There's a range of experiences we can have here. The Buddha demarcated eight jhanas, but there's actually a really wide range if you look more closely.

So the question is: how does all of that relate to the soul, the soul-making, and the soul enchantment of the experience of the body? It's an important question.

Let's take the jhana piece first. Jhana means absorption—Sandy was using the Sanskrit dhyana—or something like that. The Buddha talks about eight jhanas, and the first four are called rupa jhanas, where rupa means body. One way of understanding what the Buddha's getting at there is in this kind of... One way of seeing it is he's really

interested in: can you make this space here a field of nourishment, a field of deep yumminess? Not all the time, but having access to that in your life. You can basically train that—train it so that there is nice, deep, yummy nourishment in the body.

It doesn't mean I never experience anything difficult. It certainly doesn't mean that I'm not in touch with my emotions—I'll come back to that. But at times, one has the capacity to dip into different wells of well-being and bathe in them and be completely saturated and fed by them.

The first four rupa jhanas are, you could say, different experiences of this space. In the first jhana, the body has become—instead of the usual "I'm sitting here and I feel my sensations and I have the usual image of my body"—the experience of the body has become piti, has become rapture, the kind of pleasure associated with that. The experience of the body is suffused and saturated, as the Buddha says—it's become a field of that kind of physical pleasure.

In the second jhana, you could say the body has become happiness. If you stop someone on the street and say, "What does it mean for your body to become happiness?" they'll think of chocolate or something like that. But we can actually experience the texture of the body where this space becomes joy, and one is drinking that joy, drinking of one's body.

In the third jhana, the dominant texture of the rupa, of the energy body, is peacefulness—a really exquisite peacefulness. In the fourth, stillness. In the fifth jhana, this space here just becomes space—the bliss of empty space, really refined.

So one way of understanding the connection between samadhi and energy body is basically we can use energy body awareness to cultivate well-being. That well-being has a certain continuum or spectrum to it, and the jhanas demarcate certain places on that spectrum. Does that make sense?

There are many reasons to incorporate energy body awareness. Another is emotional awareness and emotional sensitivity and emotional care for ourselves. The emotions play out in the body, and we can develop a real sensitivity to the nuance of our emotional life and ways of caring for them—all here.

It's all here. So that's a really, really good skill to take care of oneself. And I would say that's part of soul-making practice.

So you've got kind of two directions here. They overlap, actually, because joy is certainly an emotion. The joy of the samadhi is an emotion. But what about heartache? What about sadness? What about longing? What about anger? What about brokenness

of heart? We really want to develop the art of being with, noticing, caring, with all of that, including the really unremarkable sets of emotions. I want to be sensitive to how that feels also.

Then you've got a reason to be with the energy body that has just to do with navigating practice - for example, emptiness practices or different practices. As I mentioned with Anna, when you're on the right track in any practice, whether it's an emptiness practice or a metta practice, the energy body tells you. Here I am doing metta: may you be well, may you be happy, may you be peaceful. And I'm sensitive to the energy body and I notice this time around - when I say "may you be peaceful," I feel that peace here. Okay, let me slow down with that word "peaceful" and say it again and ride that wave, catch that current in my sail, let it feel the energy body, resonate with it. So the energy body sensitivity is working to help me sail in different practices.

There's all that, all those different aspects, and then when it comes to soul-making, we've got also a navigational sense. When an image is potentially soul-making for us, the energy body is one of the things that tells us. There will be an alignment, a harmonization, or something. I'm giving you more than you asked for in the question, but I think it's important. It's part of the navigation.

Then we get a whole other level, which I don't think I've really talked about so much, and it's what we mentioned with Anna. When we say energy body, what we've mostly been emphasizing so far is the aspect of the felt sense. What does this space feel like? But there is also at any time an image of the body. That image can be not imaginal. I just shut my eyes and I can see the configuration of my body right now. But sometimes what happens with the image of body is it becomes imaginal, becomes a soul-making image. And as I said with Anna, there's an endless possibility there.

This morning, I can't remember at what point - it was maybe after Catherine did her instructions - I was just sitting with you, we were sitting together, and I actually had the sense of your beauty, all of you, and the beauty of souls here. A vague image arose. In other words, it was more the sense of a rosebush woven around a trellis and reaching out with lots of budding roses on it. And my body became that rosebush. It was also you. Or that rosebush became my body.

At that point, I've got a choice. I can go into the image of that, or I can... That image itself, just the initial arising of that image, had a certain perfume and opened the energy body a certain way. So I can lean more into the image, with some energy body awareness, or I can take the perfume and the way that's opened up the energy body and just lean into that as a more energetic sense. Or I can walk that middle line between and have the best of both worlds. It's not that there's a better or worse; there

are just different ways you can sail. But there's a sense of the body had become flowering roses, beautiful pink flowering roses, and it was really gorgeous. So there was an image of body and the energetic body sense, felt sense.

There's felt sense, there's image of body, and that can become imaginal soul-making, and then there's also the concept of the body. What is a body? What is matter? We go to high school and you get taught: matter is this, and it's made of atoms, and it functions like this, and it doesn't mean a damn thing, and it's random. That's just the typical scientific materialist view. And then there are all kinds of other views. Matter is love. Matter embodies itself, forms itself as angels.

Here, this very moment, this body exists within a constellation of possibilities. We hold concepts of matter and embodiment that may be more or less soul-making. Does this make sense?

When soul-making unfolds, all three dimensions participate simultaneously. I need not engineer this process so deliberately. Rather, this becomes something to notice: there is usually a subtle concept that nourishes, supports, and stimulates the soul-making. There is usually some image involved of the body, and there is the felt sense. As these elements—particularly the image and concept—begin opening more fully and supporting the soul-making, this is how that aspect of the practice develops. Does that make sense?

This overview speaks in general terms, though naturally the art lies in all the nuanced details. Is that sufficient for now?

So what exactly is soul-making? For the most part, when soul-making occurs, when soulfulness arises, it involves image. That image typically dominates the experience—it is the primary element. Sometimes, however, it can be secondary.

Consider this example: you might be deeply in love with the Buddha's path, devoted to practice, cherishing the Sangha and all that this encompasses. You may never have encountered imaginal practice or soul-making teachings. Yet I would suggest this can still be soul-making. Your love of practice, your devotion to Buddha-dharma, and that sense of tradition—these carry profound meaning.

We rarely recognize this because we lack the language, both in Buddhist culture and in the wider culture. When you love something in this way, when you engage with such devotion to practice, there exists—whether realized or not—a subtle fantasy operating, a delicate image of the whole: the tradition, the Buddha, the lineage, the teachings, the

Sangha, yourself upon the path, the beauty of that journey, even its struggles. This functions as a kind of background cloud of fantasy, in the most beautiful sense, feeding inspiration.

Most often when we speak of soul-making, we refer to something truly imaginal that captures our attention, something we recognize consciously as image. Yet there exists another dimension of soul-making that operates as this background cloud of fantasy. We might stretch the term in other directions as well.

For instance, when consciousness, when the soul opens to something it discovers anew—you mentioned the jhanas—when you traverse that process for the first time with its sense of wonder, moving through the second jhana with real discovery unfolding. That opening into new realms carries beauty and meaningfulness.

This doesn't primarily involve image—in fact, it represents the opposite. Imagery grows quiet in the jhanas, usually. Yet this can still be soul-making because of the opening itself. Ideas expand, the sense of things deepens, the sense of existence and selfhood and consciousness transforms. That opening, that discovery, that beauty and meaningfulness—all of this belongs to the package of soul-making. But primarily, no image exists at that point because the jhanas involve the quieting of images.

Does that make sense?

Let us have a bit of quiet time.

CHAPTER 138

Trusting in Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 34 min

> *In this Q&A session from the "Tending the Holy Fire" retreat, Rob Burbea addresses practitioners' questions about the soulmaking path and its relationship to traditional Buddhist practice. The discussion explores how different aspects of being—samādhi, emotional awareness, desire, emptiness, and the imaginal—work together as mutually supporting dimensions of soulmaking dharma.*
>
> *Burbea addresses practical questions about accessing the energy body through movement, sound, and kinesthetic awareness, explaining how concepts can function as "sparks" that ignite soulmaking perception. He discusses the importance of two-ness in imaginal perception, distinguishing it from experiences of mystical union, and explores how eros maintains creative tension even within recognition of oneness.*
>
> *The conversation touches on the relationship between soulmaking and traditional Buddhist teachings, particularly emptiness practice, while acknowledging the challenge of articulating these teachings with clarity. Burbea emphasizes trusting one's innate compass for soulmaking—"soul loves soulmaking"—while gradually developing conceptual understanding. The discussion reveals how precision and open-ended flexibility must coexist in both practice and teaching, maintaining the fertile ambiguity necessary for continued soul-nourishment.*

Just to say again, you probably all have realized, the way we're conceiving of what we're calling soulmaking and the path of soulmaking dharma or practice, is really quite wide. Do you get the sense how it can actually involve the whole of our beings, more even than the dimensions and aspects of our being we're aware of at the moment? It can grow and it can move in different directions. And these different aspects and parts of the path kind of support each other.

So the well-being, the samadhi—it's an important part. The working with difficult emotions, the being able to tend to, notice, to be aware of, to care for what's happening emotionally. This is a really important part of soulmaking, of the whole frame. And desire and being able to open up desire in different ways, being able to let go of desire, emptiness, imaginal, etc.

So in terms of Q&As, please consider all that fair game. All of that's part of the package. Any aspect of that that you're working with or wondering about, or you have a question about—whether it's a difficulty or a loveliness or a curiosity or the conceptual framework. It's really open.

As I said yesterday, we are recording for the benefit of everyone, hopefully, and other beings elsewhere. But if you don't feel comfortable with your question being recorded, just say so and I'll press pause. That's completely fine.

Andrea: This is more of a surprise. It goes to Catherine as well, because you both said it in different ways yesterday, but it was the concept turning into percept. I think it was Catherine who said it that way. When we did the sound together this morning, it was a combination of all the sound that we were making in the room and then the suggestion from Catherine with what I felt was kinesthetic language. That was huge in unlocking the energy body, and then later in the exercise with moving the way your soul wanted to move.

So I guess my wondering is about different ways in to the energy body, particularly with—you know, I would have said I'm purely kinesthetic, but obviously the language makes a huge difference to getting in. Other times when I've just tried to work with the energy body and just bring the attention there, it's just not happening. But it was so easy and so effortless. There's other modes, so the question is: can you give more suggestions, or is it just kind of play around?

So if I understand the question, Andrea's reporting that in both—I don't know what to call it—when we sounded together yesterday, which I also found really beautiful, there was a way that the sense of the energy body just really opened with the sounding and through the verbal suggestions that Catherine was making and the kind of language in there. And then also when we did the moving to the urgings and the promptings of soul, the connection there, whatever was said, also stimulated a kind of opening and awareness and connection with the energy body that can sometimes not be so available when we're just sitting down thinking, "Right, okay, energy body, let's open it up," and working with it more technically.

Energy body is part of all this business. And all this business—meaning the opening of soulmaking, including the opening of the sense of the energy body and that liquidity and the dimensionality of the very sense of the body—all of that opening can be ignited. It's really like, if we use the analogy of fire, it can be sparked actually by anything.

There's a way that we could say that all this business of soulmaking is a kind of grace. We're given it. We receive something. We receive a spark into the soul and something ignites. So that spark could be a line of poetry. It could be a certain way of languaging that connects certain elements of our being or aspects of our being that we don't usually connect. For instance, movement or resonance, a sound and energy body. It could be an idea, as you say, a concept. A concept functions as we could say a spark into the soul or a seed in the soul. When there's soulmaking, when there's imaginal perception, when there's sensing with soul, all this is going on. Body is involved.

There's a felt sense of the energy body that is different or expanded—not just spatially, but in terms of dimensionality and richness—than our usual way in our culture of feeling our bodies. There's concept involved. There's some sense of poetics involved, poetry. All this comes together.

So it's a bit like... we're open, receptive, sensitive, and sparks are given to us from teachers, from language, from reading, from listening, from poetry, from music, from life, from all of it. And the whole thing just gathers more—I don't want to push the image too much—but readiness to ignite. So that means you can then take something into practice.

A line of poetry, a word, a connection between two dimensions of being, like sound and energy, for instance, and just take that as a seed and you drop that seed into the soul. You cast that spark into the soul. Does that make sense?

There's always a range with all practice. When we talk about emptiness practice or samadhi, there's always a range between active and playful and deliberate and receptive. And for me, that whole range should be available. Whatever practice I'm doing—metta, emptiness, samadhi, jhana—there's always this range. I would like everyone to feel really comfortable with that whole range. I'm not just stuck, always just waiting and hoping, or thinking whatever happens is fine. That's a really good mode, that extreme of sensitivity. But also there's the capacity to play, to engage in the art, to know things to try, and to respond to what's going on.

Like an artist—when you talk to someone who's really into their art, there's that range. Where did this come from, that music? Where did that come from, that poetry? I don't know. It was a gift. There's a receptivity. But there's also this working of the elements.

Someone was thinking about categorizing people as more kinesthetic or visual, placing them in categories for what sparks work for some that might not work for others. I think it might be that people are more kinesthetic or more whatever it is. But again, if

we're talking about soul-making, what happens as the thing gets going is that it starts to reach out and involve every aspect of our being, and actually even create and discover more aspects.

Someone who, for instance, hasn't been very kinesthetic or hasn't felt the way soul can move in the body—after a while of soul-making, they don't need to force that. It might be that they go in via the concept, but they're working with the energy body. At some point these sparks will connect, this spreading of—it's a good image—the tentacles of soul-making will start involving all these different dimensions and aspects of the being so that they start to come alive even when they haven't been alive before.

But we don't need to force that. We can just go where there's soul-making. You invite it into this field, soul-making, and you just are there in the ways that we're talking about and work with it—it will spread. It will spread into other perceptions, will open other aspects and dimensions of sensitivity of the being. And you'll still have people who are more like this or more like that, and that's fine, but there's this kind of multi-dimensional, multi-aspected reaching out and evolving and growing.

Hannah asked about twoness, particularly about how she finds her way into images very sensorially, and it's easier when moving. Because of that, it feels like she embodies the image, and it feels soulful, but there's not so much twoness there.

That's a really good question. A lot of the time the way that images come alive or the way of entering and engaging with images is through the kinesthetic sense, through the body and sometimes through movement. And the image becomes soulful, but you feel like you're embodying the image, you're becoming that image in a sense, perhaps. So then the question is, where's the twoness there?

One thing I could say is if you just let that happen, let that embodiment happen, let yourself become that and just feel that out more and more. And one possibility is what happens is that you then, others or the rest of the world becomes consonant with that image. In other words, let's say I become a dancing deity and I'm some kind of dancing deity and I'm really embodying that and I'm in that...

And then the world around me, in what we call cosmopoiesis, becomes an other to that deity in some other way, or other beings. And that deity, as I am, is in relationship with other. But that might emerge in time as you just let yourself embody the image more. So that's one possibility.

Another possibility might be—you know, it's strange. If you think about, or if you consider the ways we're aware of body, it relates to all the aggregates: body, aspects of mind, feelings and vedanā and perception. I can feel like they're me, or I'm looking—so I'm looking at my hand, and there's a kind of two-ness now between my sense of me and my hand. But at other times, there's a sense of I am my hand.

So even when you're embodying something like that, it can move between a sort of vantage point of being inside and being identified with and a vantage point of some objectivity or two-ness. And that's just normal to perception, even in terms of our own bodies and minds. You say, "strange thought I had"—it's like it's something else, other. From another perspective, it's not other at all. It's me. Who else am I apart from all this stuff? And I feel that I'm that.

So what happens is—and that's just the basic way identification works—it moves between two-ness and identification. So if you just hang out more in the experience, there'll probably be a couple of ways that you'll start to notice two-ness, different ways. Does that...

"I wonder if it's important to emphasize the two-ness at all? Like, try and encourage it?"

Hannah's asking, so I'm just repeating so that people can hear. Is it important to emphasize the two-ness?

Two-ness is one of the nodes, one of the elements that we're going to go through. And what I would say, more than that—or rather slightly differently—is these nodes are things we can notice. So I would put it there. It's less pushy at first. As I said, the more you hang out in these experiences as they open up, with all your sensitivity and all your enjoyment and all your curiosity, it's almost like your eyes get used to the dark and you start to notice, "Oh, there is two-ness here. I hadn't noticed that." And that noticing ignites it.

So I don't need to do anything so much as just notice when it comes. Some of it might be quite subtle. Two-ness can be really extreme, or really alienated from something, or it's much more subtle, the sense of two-ness. But the noticing it brings that sense of two-ness alive, and that helps the whole thing become, as I explained last night, more fully imaginal.

What we might say is, I would make a distinction between experiences of oneness—like melting into union with something, which is really important as a mystical direction or spiritual direction. It's important in the whole soul-making business. But when we talk about imaginal perception, sensing with soul, there's more this two-ness. So

oneness is great, but if you find yourself—after all these years of practice, and this may not be the case with you—after all these years of practice, having a tendency to melt and find, or melt into different kinds of oneness: a oneness of light, or a oneness of love, or a oneness of awareness, or whatever it is, a oneness of materiality—it can be lots of things. Then it would be more, let's find the two-ness, let's retain the two-ness.

I could stop there, but when there's eros in relation, when there's—in this case, your embodiment, that movement—and if it is like a deity moving through, or a goddess, or whatever it is, then the body can become your beloved other. So then there's an erotic relationship between... This body, as it's felt right now in whatever is happening, becomes the erotic imaginal other, becomes the beloved other. And eros retains a sense of two-ness, even when it knows oneness. I know this is one. I know we are one. Some part of my mind knows that. But it preserves the erotic tension of two-ness and actually creates even more bifurcations and things—but I'll just throw that out as a seed. How does all this sound?

I was thinking today about something else entirely, about emptiness. There's a phrase—I don't know who said it originally in the Dzogchen traditions—"Trust your experience but keep refining your view." And to me there's so much wisdom in that. When we talk about, okay, what is natural, what's not, is this right, is there enough of this or that in these nodes that we're elaborating, it's to say things can unfold more, richer, more soul-making. But we have to trust our experience and go with that. So in terms of what's unfolding, you can really just—if it feels soul-making, you're on the right track.

I don't know where else. I'm not aware of other traditions exploring this territory, certainly not in the way we're talking about. There's, of course, as you mention, Indo-Tibetan sadhanas and vajrayana practices that employ the imagination with the concept of emptiness and all that. There are overlaps there, for sure, but I would say it's a little different. There are definitely overlaps, though.

The curious thing here—and this might frustrate or confuse some people, while others might find it liberating—is that if I just answer personally, I feel like I can conceive of it in different ways. I can conceive of what we're doing and map it in different ways, mapping its relationship to different Buddhist traditions. And for me, that flexibility of conception is also part of the soul-making process. It arises out of soul-making. And actually, it's also part of emptiness, in some ways construed.

One of the things it's saying is that things are not tightly definable. They're not findable. They're not rigid like that. Our concepts don't reflect some kind of ultimate truth. So when we say emptiness is form, form is emptiness—mostly in my teaching I tend to avoid the Heart Sutra because I think it can be interpreted in so many different ways, which is great.

So if I turn and ask you a question: what do you feel you need right now with this? Because different people will need different kinds of working answers or working hypotheses about this relationship between Buddha Dharma and soul-making at different points, depending on their personality and history. So if I give it back to you for a second, what would you say you need right now?

"I think for me the question is whether there's something I can say that other people understand."

Sure. If I, at the risk of being irritating, push the question one stage further and say, why? What's going on? And what's going on for you perhaps emotionally with that?

There's no right or wrong answer here. It's just that what goes on for me in my relationships to the concept—or the concepts that we're unfolding and exploring, actually creating and discovering—the whole meaning set of concepts, but also the affect and love and reliance and community of Buddha... that's quite a lot involved.

Well, I think that's a big question, but maybe you have an answer right now. There's heart and soul and idea, and there's quite a lot involved. Do you see what I'm getting at?

"I started thinking, but then you just went on and on."

Sorry. Okay. The short question was: why?

Yeah, okay, so your turn.

I think because—gosh, I don't know whether I've got it or not—it's not just going to peter out completely. One thing is I find it very uncomfortable sitting with uncertainty, which I'm kind of recognizing, but actually that's fine. I can come into a sort of familiar relationship with that, and that's okay.

But I think in terms of communicating to other people, there's this funny tension. Some people need clarity and need to know that there's a way to go or something to do, and other people are maybe happy with the uncertainty. And I think I'm struggling sometimes—I just think I sound incredible to people who want clarity. I think it's easy for people to get lost because, like you said, there's no single answer. It can just go any which way. It's so vast.

And so you gave two parts of an answer, and the first one was saying about being comfortable with not knowing. Not knowing what?

I think not having the comfort of "oh, this is definitely the right way to go." For yourself.

Yeah, yeah. It is around clarity, actually. I think the question is just around clarity, around how difficult it is to have clarity in this area, whether for myself or for other people.

Yeah, okay, very good. Should we just take a couple minutes? I feel this is really important.

So let's start with what you said last—the business about clarity. For yourself, I would say something brought you here. Something brought you, as you said, after years of Buddhadharma, to end up in the imaginal. Why? How? You don't need to answer that now, but if I might offer an answer: the soul loves soul-making.

Soul loves soul-making. Actually, you could say that's a core concept, and everything follows from that. Soul loves soul-making—all the conceptual framework will come out of that. Soul loves soul-making, and you have a compass for soul-making. All of us do. We can feel when something is soul-making. You're going on and on—what the hell are you talking about? I'm not quite clear.

Don't worry so much about the clarity just yet. Or rather, I would say you can trust navigation even when things are a little bit foggy. The compass says go that way. I can't see more than ten yards ahead, but the compass is saying go that way. So that's the inner sense of soul-making. And you feel it in the energy body, you feel it in the heart, you feel it in ways that you couldn't even actually describe. That's where all these aspects come in.

So I would say soul loves soul-making. You have an instinctual, visceral, mental, emotional, soulful sense of what soul-making feels like. And you can trust that as a barometer.

I do think clarity is important, but it will come. The other thing I want to say about all this—it's complex. We're building or discovering or uncovering or whatever you want to say, a kind of complex structure of subtle and sophisticated ideas that all support each other. So that journey to clarity and precision and understanding how it all works together will be gradual for everyone—everyone, okay? Even the brightest person, it's going to take time. So that's okay.

I think the conceptual aspect is part of soul-making. The soul loves concepts as well—concepts that feed soul. It likes the intellect. It wants to include that as one of the aspects of being that can ignite it. So that's important too. But let it feed the soul, and let it come gradually, and ask questions. At this point, there's actually loads of material available, and there's another forty hours or something about to come out.

Just warning you. So you know, it's a lot. It's sophisticated. But you have a compass anyway.

The other thing about clarity I want to address—and this will come in our explorations of the aspects—is that there's something, as I said, kind of contradictory about the whole endeavor. Precision is beautiful and fertile. I understand the concepts. It's clear. And yet the very concepts we're using also have these shady boundaries of unclarity to them. Why? Because that's part of their fertility. Without that, they won't be soul-making.

If I start putting something in a rigid, tight box—"I feel, phew, I understand it"—poof, goes the soul-making after a little while. So there's this strange tension between clarity and precision on one hand, and open-ended, fuzzy-edged, elastic understanding on the other. I'll talk about this again.

Later in this retreat, we may bring up this question that several people have raised: "Oh, I want to teach this material." And so we may discuss amongst ourselves where we all are with that. What feels right or ready? What's a good idea? And what's maybe, "Hey, let's just wait a little bit."

I'm not sure how else to answer this question about speaking to others and teaching, because if it's not clear for you, it may just confuse other people. Or you might find that you can make little poetic suggestions which open things up for people without explaining a whole structure. Does that make sense? You can actually introduce... there are all kinds of possibilities. You're just throwing out poetic sparks, like that, until you're ready to say, "Now I'm clear how it all fits together." How does that sound?

These are actually big and important questions. Again, they're multi-aspected questions that involve the whole being, all of this. Is that okay for now?

Okay, let's have a minute of silence together.

CHAPTER 139

To Sense with Soul

Rob Burbea · 12 min

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses a common misunderstanding about imaginal perception and introduces the concept of 'sensing with soul' as an alternative framework. He clarifies that imaginal perception is not merely about interior visions or fantasy images, but encompasses a way of perceiving the ordinary world—people, trees, roses—through all six senses (including mind as the sixth sense in Buddhist understanding) with added dimensionality, richness, and soulfulness.*
>
> *Burbea explains that sensing with soul means perceiving the same conventional forms that everyone would agree upon, but filled out with imaginal dimensions—seeing a friend as an angel, sensing a tree's love, experiencing the world as transubstantiated through the alchemy of perception. He addresses potential concerns about using the term 'soul' within Buddhist framework, explaining that soul can be understood either as shorthand for soulfulness (a texture of experience) or as an empty entity—the organ or instrument that perceives soulfully.*
>
> *The talk emphasizes that soul-making practice involves fabricating soulfulness while simultaneously building one's capacity to sense soulfully. This teaching offers practitioners an accessible way to understand how contemplative practice can transform ordinary perception into something rich with meaning, beauty, and sacred dimension, while remaining grounded in direct sensory experience of the world.*

Tomorrow we will resume this elaboration of the aspects of the imaginable—what we're calling the aspects of the imaginable, these aspects or elements of what makes an experience imaginable, the constituents of that constellation. We'll resume that tomorrow. We just really got going, but we'll pick that up tomorrow.

I just want, for now, a very short sort of interruption to that, also for the purposes of clarifying or fleshing something out, hopefully in a helpful way.

Briefly, this word "imaginal"—several people told me they just don't like the word. They don't relate to it, or it's a funny word. It also can tend, because of the word "imagination" in English and how we think of that—really how we conceive of imagination in our culture and its place in our whole implicit philosophy—the word "imaginal"

tends to suggest something that's happening inside me or inside you, so-called intra-psychic. That's a word I really don't like, "intra-psychic." It implies that the psyche is somewhere in here.

But the word "imaginal" can suggest to people something, so I'm sitting with my eyes shut and a pink dragon comes. And that pink dragon, that imagination figure or imaginal figure, has very little to do—it's not something anyone else can perceive, it has very little to do with the world of the senses. Or perhaps there's some kind of relationship, but it's not of the world of the senses.

So the word "imaginal" can suggest that to people, but that's not what we mean. Or rather, it includes that kind of thing, the so-called intra-psychic images that come up. It includes that, but it also includes, another word I don't like, "extra-psychic." In other words, it includes—we can say, I perceive an imaginal pink dragon, I perceive you guys imaginally. I perceive these roses imaginally. These are things of the world, objects or beings of the world, sensed with the senses that everyone would agree on their form. They are white roses, whitish roses. They agree on the shape, etc. I can perceive them in a conventional way that everyone in our culture would agree on. We all see the same thing.

The conventional perception is just to see, you know, they're pleasant looking, very nice, they smell nice, etc. They're a biological organism, so that's about it. Conventional perception.

I want to introduce another term for the sake of having done with this misunderstanding of assuming—that sometimes happens to some people—of assuming that "imaginal" refers to something purely interior. So the phrase I want to introduce is "sensing with soul." Sensing with soul. I'm not introducing anything different, I'm just introducing a new vocabulary, or a possible new vocabulary. We don't want to replace, we just add. So some people, and I want to use them almost interchangeably, say "imaginal" or "imaginable perceiving" or "sensing with soul." Pretty much the same thing.

For some people, the word "imaginal" will imply this more interior arising of an image. The sensing with soul, to me, the words, because we tend to think of senses as meeting the world, opens up or suggests a different direction. But really, they're interchangeable, pretty much.

So, the things, the objects, the beings, the world itself—the things, the objects, the beings of the world, and the world itself—when they, in any moment, to my perception, to my senses, to my knowing them through the senses, when they start to come alive with those aspects of the imaginable that we're going through.

When I sense a person, or a group of people, or my body, or the tree, or the sky, or my friend, and I see my friend—I see her, him, them, as angel. Same form. They look the same. Everyone would agree it looks the same. But there's the added imaginal dimensions. It's filled out. Do you understand?

Or this tree. Everyone would agree on the shape of the tree. Somehow I feel, I sense this tree's love for me. And most people think that's bonkers. Trees can't do that. But when the sensing with soul preserves the form and adds the dimensionality and the richness and the multi-aspectness and all the beauty and the eros and the love and all these nodes that we're talking about.

So it's a transubstantiation of the world in the alchemy of perception, sensing with soul. So that implies sensing.

We have at least five senses, right? Sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing—plus the mind. In Buddha Dharma, the mind is a sixth sense. The mind that thinks, the thinking as a sense, or the perceiving of thought, the sensing of thought as another sense, and the sensing of image, an intra-psychic image. So it spans all that—imagining, thinking, smelling, seeing, tasting, touching, and hearing.

Generally speaking, when we sense with soul, we encounter the same shapes, colors, or forms as conventional, socially agreed-upon perception, but it has that filled-outness. It has the same shapes, colors, or forms as conventional perception, yet it possesses that quality of being filled out.

Catherine, you may not have caught it—it slipped out a couple of times, I think, in the opening talk or something—but we wanted to introduce "sensing with soul" as an idea. For some people, it will be more helpful. They'll think, "Oh yes, that's what we're doing." It's not just this. We actually don't mind what words you use. This is really all for the sake of understanding.

When you say "imaginal," people ask, "What do you mean by imaginal?" Of course, if you say "sensing the soul," that would also beg the question, "What do you mean by soul?" We could be here a long time, but I don't want to be.

So sensing the soul means all that. It means sensing in a way that soulfulness is happening. In other words, all those nodes, or some of those nodes, to some degree—that movement into that activation of those nodes is happening.

What is soul? You could say soul is just a shorthand for soulfulness, for that constellation of experience. Then soul, in that way of conceiving it, is not a thing. It's just a kind of experience—soulful experience—which means all that we're elaborating.

In English language, mostly the word "soul" has the idea of an entity: my soul, your soul, the soul does this or does that, or whatever. In Buddha Dharma, we're a little bit shy of some entities. And typically, soul would be one kind of entity in Buddha Dharma that we're really shy of—really, really shy of. Self is bad enough. But people still use the language of self, and we need to. I would say it's more than a conventional shorthand. You know, I say, "I feel sad." We need to care for the self. It's an experience we have that's a valid, important, deep dimension of our experience, or direction of our experience—the self. Same with soul. Same with divinity, or deity, or God.

We can entertain the sense of these things as entities—self, soul, divinity, deity. I know it's empty, but I can relate to it as an entity because I know it's empty. Do you understand? I don't have to be afraid of these words. I use them, actually—show me something that isn't empty. We use words and concepts all the time. It's a pen, it's a rose, it's a candle, it's a chair. Buddha Dharma, with the teachings of emptiness, says all this is empty. There's none of that stuff, really. So why all this allergy to words like soul and divine?

So we can use soul as just shorthand for soulfulness, which is just a kind of texture, flavor, richness of experience.

And we can use soul, I think, with the implication of entity, if you like, knowing it's empty. And what kind of entity is soul? Soul is the, we could say, the organ, the instrument that senses soulfully. So the whole definition, that's fine. Deep definitions do that. They go around in circles.

So where is this organ? I can't find it. And it's empty. It has no inherent existence. But I can talk about an instrument or an organ that can sense with soul, that does sense with soul.

When we talk about soul-making, we say I'm making soulfulness. I'm fabricating—in technical Dharma language, I'm fabricating a sense of soulfulness. Or there is the fabrication of soulfulness. I'm soul-making. What am I making? I'm making soulfulness. I'm also making or building that organ, that instrument. I'm building my capacity through practice to sense soulfully. Do you understand?

So soul-making. The more I sense soulfully, the more accessible it becomes to me. So I'm actually making something. I'm making my instrument. It's being made. I'm participating in the making, in the fashioning, in the forging of this organ, this instrument of perception. Wonderful thing.

Do you understand? So the main point I just want to say is this: we'll start using these words freely. Sensing the soul, freely and interchangeably. Sensing the soul, imaginatively perceiving, imaginal—it's all pretty much the same.

So far?

CHAPTER 140

A Temenos Exercise (in fours)

Rob Burbea · 1h04

> *Rob Burbea guides participants through an innovative three-stage group exercise designed to cultivate what he terms 'soul relationships' through shared contemplative practice. Beginning with mettā (loving-kindness) meditation to establish connection and goodwill among group members, the exercise progresses through structured rounds of sharing immediate energy body experiences, emotional states, and finally soul-making moments or images.*
>
> *This temenos exercise—drawing on the Greek concept of sacred space—invites participants to explore multiple modes of expression: conventional descriptive language, poetic or imagistic expression, non-verbal sounds, and bodily movement. The practice emphasizes both authentic self-expression and deep witnessing of others, with particular attention to how sharing and receiving affect one's energy body, emotions, and perception of self and world.*
>
> *Burbea's guidance integrates principles from his broader teachings on soul-making dharma, encouraging participants to sense one another 'as angels' and to notice the reverberations of authentic expression in consciousness. The session concludes with the traditional Pāli blessing chant 'Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu' (may all beings be happy), weaving together individual exploration with collective well-wishing. This exercise offers a unique approach to dharma practice that honors both personal contemplative development and the relational dimensions of spiritual awakening.*

Feeling rooted in the moment, in the body. And then from that sense of contact, that sense of connection with ground, with earth, opening up the space of awareness to fill out with that bright sensitivity, that delicacy of attention to the whole of the energy body experience.

Whatever that is right now. Just noticing what's happening in the energy body experience. Whatever it is, it doesn't need to be this way or that way—dramatic or remarkable or unremarkable. Filled out with presence, pervaded by bright sensitivity and awareness.

When you feel ready, you can keep your eyes closed if you want, or you can open your eyes and look at your fellows in the group. A bit of both is fine too. Just spend a little time wishing them well, including yourself in there. You're wishing the other three

well, wishing all of you well, directing metta to your companions. You may know them—some of them very well, just a little bit, or not at all. May you be well. May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be at ease.

Wishing them well-being, health, peace. It's really fine to make eye contact or not, to look at them and get a sense of being in loving relationships. As you keep intending loving-kindness towards members of your little group, as you keep wishing well and emanating metta towards them, recognize—if it hasn't dawned on you already, if you're not already aware of it—that at this moment, while you are giving metta, you are also the recipient of metta from your fellows in the group. You are giving and receiving.

Again, you can make eye contact or you can just look, or you could sense somehow the presence of the others. They are wishing you well, looking upon you with kindness—at least the aspiration, the intention towards unconditional acceptance and goodwill. Sense yourself both giving and receiving.

Then gently, when you're ready, let the metta go—the awareness of the metta, the intention of the metta—and just be in your experience, in your energy body experience, with a sense of the others and the togetherness there, the connection there.

This exercise has three stages. I'll explain at some point later on why we're even doing this, in case it's not obvious. So again, I have to explain a little bit of the choreography. You stay still—well, actually, you may not. What we're going to do is Catherine will ring the bell when we start, and then ring it at every minute interval for eight minutes. So there'll be eight rings of the bell, starting at zero and then at one minute, two minutes, and so on.

What you can do in that minute—you go around the circle, you can decide who starts—and all you have to do is the person whose turn it is for that minute checks inside, feels inside, and the question is: what's happening in the energy body right now, right now in this moment? So you can express that. You're sharing it with the others in your little group. You can express that very briefly in a few words. So most of your time could be spent just feeling inside and trying to connect and developing that sensitivity. And then maybe you express it in words.

Maybe at first—I don't know, actually. I'm not sure. That's part of the experience. I don't know what's happening here—and it's fine. Or maybe I look and I say something like "agitated," "fluttering," or "fizzy." Or I might look inside and look and look and get a sense and then maybe say "warm" or "soft" or "velvety." So it could be really anything.

It's not like it should be like this or like that. One's just expressing it. Or there's a contraction in the solar plexus area or the throat area. That's fine. That's what's going on in the energy body right there.

So you can express it in simple, descriptive words like that. You could have quite a lot of words or very few words, but you have a minute to do it. You can also express it, if you want, in a more soul sense or in imagistic or poetic language. "There's a spiraling of golden light. My body is a spiraling of golden light." Or "My body is an endless spiral staircase." Or whatever. So you can express it in very simple, descriptive, conventional language, or you can express it poetically, if you want.

You can express it with your voice, but not with words. How would I express what's happening in the energy body? What does the energy body sound like when given voice? It could be a grunt, a moan, a sigh, a roar. And the last option is you can express it in movement, nothing to do with your voice.

So in the eight minutes, basically what's going to happen is we're going to go around twice. Each person has a minute. Remember, some portion of that minute could just be checking inside and tuning in, seeing what's there, and then expressing it in some way. It doesn't have to be verbal, and it doesn't have to be rationally verbal if it is verbal. Do you understand?

I might just offer a few words as we're doing this to help and support. When it's your turn, the others' job is simply to witness and to notice what happens for you. A person is speaking and sharing their experience, and the others are silently witnessing—but with their energy body, with their sensitivity, with their heartfulness, and with that kind of possibility of soulfulness.

Are eyes open? Yes. You want to take in the other person with your senses. You're sensing—at least we're opening the door for the possibility of sensing with soul in every way. You may want to experiment with different ways. There are endless varieties and possibilities. We have quite limited time, but there are endless possibilities.

So the people listening or witnessing, when it's your turn, you're also asking: How does this resonate? This person has just expressed this, whatever it is, and how does my energy body resonate with that? What do I notice in my experience, in my energy body, in my emotions, in my sense of myself or sense of them, sense of the world? You understand? But you don't share that. It's just one person sharing. Is this clear?

Oh, one last thing. What is the intention? We're not trying to impress each other. We're not trying to entertain each other. We're not trying to get it right. We're not trying to make sure that we don't make a fool of ourselves. I mean, all these are very normal human intentions, at least in our culture, so that may well come up. Can I just let go of that?

This is an exercise for the possibility, towards the possibility of soul relationships. So it's very much the beginnings, the preliminaries of opening and setting the supports for that kind of thing. You might notice thoughts arising like, "I just want to say something so I don't look like an idiot." And see if you can just let that go. It's just an exercise. Can I just let that arise and pass?

I've talked for a bit, so why don't we just take another moment to settle. Again, grounding, connecting. The whole energy body changes—energy body changes, moves from moment to moment. And then just touch in again on this metta, giving and receiving metta to your fellows. You're the recipient of goodwill. So that connection through metta.

Just letting that gently go. Come back to your energy body. And is there a way of deciding amongst yourselves who's going to start?

Continue beautifying this talk (part 3/5). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Someone will volunteer from each group to start, and then we'll proceed clockwise from there. Catherine will ring the bell to begin, and then every minute to signal transitions into the second round. Is that clear enough?

Take the full time you need within each minute. Remember, the others are witnessing—taking you in, receiving you, being sensitive to your presence. Whatever is there is perfectly fine. It's simply what exists in this moment.

Thank you. Take your time, there's no rush. And if you're witnessing, if you're hearing, engage all your senses while noticing what's happening in your energy body in the process of listening, of receiving, of sensing.

That was stage one. Stage two will happen by tomorrow morning—there are three stages total, so this is the second of three.

The choreography remains the same: rounds in two circles with one-minute intervals, just as we practiced. But this time, what you're sharing—what you're expressing in some way or another—is what's happening emotionally right now. Remember, it could be descriptive adjectives or words, a poetic phrase, movement, gesture, or non-verbal sounding.

This connects to the energy body, but it's another level—what's happening emotionally in this moment?

Again, take your time. You can express in these different ways. And the witness—at times looking directly at the person sharing, truly taking them in and observing what happens through all your senses. Sometimes you can simply keep your eyes open, sensing their presence. Other times, you can fully engage all your senses with the person who's sharing.

So again, take time to settle. We move through these stages quite fluidly now. There's the grounding, the inhabiting of posture, the releasing of rigidity. There's the whole energy body. And there's the sense of connection—kindness, well-wishing, goodwill—both giving and receiving with your fellows in the group.

Just touch into that metta feeling, that metta intention, for a few moments. Then gently let that go. We'll begin when Catherine rings the bell.

Some of it can be silent time, just feeling. It can be simple conventional language, poetic language or imagery, gesture, movement.

If it's not too much while you're speaking, sharing, expressing—consider: Who is listening? Who are these beings witnessing me, receiving my expression? Who is listening?

Can you play with the idea that these are angels listening—angels of witnessing? If it's not too overwhelming, if it's not too strong.

Now, I'm aware of time, so let's make this final stage optional. Let me describe what it involves, but perhaps not everyone feels called to be the person sharing. It might be that in every group, only two people want to participate while the rest witness. It might be that everyone feels drawn to it—in which case we'll see what we do with time.

Same format: one person speaks in descriptive words, poetic words, or through movement—body posture, gesture—or sounds, vocalizes, to express and share in whatever way feels called for something that is or has been soul-making for you. Something that has touched your soul and spoken to your soul.

So it might be you're sharing an image. It might be the very sense of what's happening right now, sitting in this little group and perceiving the others as angels. It might be anything whatsoever—the sense of what's coming through itself, something that happened before the retreat, something from earlier in the day. Something that feels like it's spoken to your soul or moves through your soul in a soul-making way. And if we're still not sure what that means, then just something that has filled you with a kind of resonance with beauty.

Does that sound okay?

There might be constriction of time, we can be flexible, but it also might be that, sorry, I'm not quite ready to do that. Not in an order. We could start with maybe two volunteers in each group, and the same thing—the others will witness and listen and take in with their senses and the possibility of sensing a soul, the other whom they're witnessing and hearing and regarding.

The person has five minutes if they want. Again, a lot of it could be quiet to share. And everyone tracks in themselves what's the experience when this person is sharing and I witness them and I sense them as soul. What happens in my energy body? What happens with my heart, my emotions? What happens with my sense of me, my sense of them, my sense of this, and my sense of all of this?

Basically, noticing what happens when I'm speaking, when I share, and when I witness. Do you understand? So it's just the same thing taken to a slightly richer or more involved level.

So let's do this. Three minutes each, and we'll do all four. We'll go round again. But this time, instead of ringing the bell after one minute, Catherine will ring it every three minutes, and that's the next person.

Let's again just root, sensing the contact, sensing your sitting, your body sitting. Sensing the connection with the earth, opening up to the whole energy body. Just noticing what's present in the energy body right now. What's present in the emotions right now. Connecting again to that intention of well-wishing, the emanating of kindness to your fellows, your group. Aware that in this moment you are the recipient of metta, of kindness. Giving and receiving. Touching into that as a foundation.

Energy body, experience, presence, sensitivity, as much as possible. And then, again, I'm thinking about three minutes. So you can voluntarily start to go in the same order.

So let's just pause now, and before we go on to the next person, just take your time. How does it feel to have shared that, to have expressed whatever it was? What effect does that have in your sense of things, of these others, of this room that we're in, of yourself? Perhaps it's even possible, it's not too much of a stretch, to actually be aware of that as one is sharing. So I'm not just explaining or recounting.

Again, if it's not too much, who is listening? Who is listening to me with so much interest, so much delight, so much celebration? What passes through the emotion, the energy body, the sense? Sensitivity is multidimensional. It's a possibility of multidimensional sensitivity. This possibility is possible. Just gently expanding into that possibility.

Just again, pausing, coming into a little bit of silence together. Noticing what moves in the being, in the energy body, in the heart. Listen to your sense. Listening or sensing —take your time. It's fine to have a lot of words; it's also fine...

So again, just taking a few moments to notice the echoes, the reverberations in the being, in the body, in the heart, in perception—in the sense of self, other, even in our world. It doesn't have to be anything in particular.

Everything is dependent arising, everything has an effect. So again, all we do here is just taking those few moments to pick up on the after-echoes or the resonances, reverberations in your being of having expressed, having shared, or having witnessed or heard what has been shared.

In this part, you may want to open your eyes, because it's about both the self and the other, and the world. You might not notice anything, or it might be something difficult that you're noticing. Whatever it is, it's completely fine. Totally fine. It doesn't have to be this way or that way. But it's interesting.

Whatever is the experience, whatever is the sense of things, come back to that foundational intention for kindness to the others in your group. Wishing them well. Wishing them ease, joy and peace. Right now you are a recipient of that, as well as a donor, a keeper.

Catherine will join us in that chant again together. Feel free to harmonize or whatever. This is Pali, and it really means "may all beings be happy." So it's a metta chant. It's a blessing, a blessing with the sound, a blessing with the voice and intention. Just for a couple of minutes. To your group, to all the beings in this room.

Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu
Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu
Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu
Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu

May all beings be happy. May all beings be well. May all beings be free.

CHAPTER 141

Transformation in Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 36 min

> *In this intimate Q&A session, Rob Burbea addresses profound questions about the relationship between psychological healing, Buddhist emptiness teachings, and imaginal practice. The discussion begins with exploring how different approaches to selfhood—from constructing a solid sense of self to deconstructing it through emptiness—can all serve the soul-making process. Burbea explains how imaginal practice gives dimensionality and divine rootedness to our unique manifestation, suggesting that our individual journey, including difficulties and tragedies, can be sensed as having sacred meaning.*
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> *The conversation delves into how challenging emotions like anger and grief can be transformed through soul-making practice. Rather than simply transcending or eliminating difficult emotions, Burbea demonstrates how they can become gateways to archetypal energies and divine imagination. He illustrates how anger might transform into wrathful deity energy that carries both power and sacred duty, while maintaining kindness rather than cruelty.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that soul is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic capacity for sensing the world with dimensionality, divinity, and meaning. He explains how any practice can become soulful through the quality of relationship we bring to it, though practices with rigid conceptual limits may eventually constrain soul-making. The discussion highlights the importance of maintaining flexibility and avoiding fixation on any single approach to spiritual development.*

So again, please let me know if you'd rather your question or the interaction wasn't recorded. Just let me know. I'll press pause.

"I'm getting really interested in images of selves and in the interest of healing. I'm getting really interested in this interface between what I take to be my everyday self—the self that apparently needs healing because there's a lot of suffering—and the imaginal self. There's really no self, emptiness, and I was thinking that I could get around it that way with practice and healing. But now it feels like with the imaginal, it's really amazing—everything's sliding a bit and morphing, and I'm not really sure what it is that's being healed."

Let me see if I can summarize that. You're getting very interested in the interface between the senses or the images of self and healing the self and the emptiness of self, and the different pathways that are offered through that mixture. Would that be a way of rephrasing what you said?

In some Buddha Dharma, for instance, there's this teaching that the self is empty, but it has this connotation that it's kind of almost not worth bothering about—in the sense of the richness of the personality or the depth of the personality. It's just a fabrication, it's just a construct, it's just an illusion. And we're opening that out to other possibilities.

"What is being healed? What happens in your experience when you start working with imagining yourself in the interest of healing?"

So in a way, there's one pathway that says just let go of the self—it's irrelevant, just deconstruct it or see that it's empty. Then there's this psychological dictum or maxim: well, you have to have a self before you let go of it. So one builds that solid sense of self and a sense of self-identity, and then maybe you do the emptiness work. Where does the imaginal come in?

You may pick up something common in the answers I give, which is: yes, it's all good. It's all available and helpful—the different angles on things.

"It feels like sometimes that's the way to go. Sometimes, some days, that is the way. I'm really wondering what happens to the self when you start working with the deeply imaginal self."

Well, it gets given dimensionality, and it gets given a rootedness or a sense of origin in divinity, for a start. And that's huge. That's absolutely massive. That's not the typical Western sense or idea of self. We tend to be suspicious if someone has that kind of sense of themselves—that somehow they're rooted in divinity. Not just in a universal sense that we're all rooted in, we're all children of God, we're all part of the universal oneness of whatever that universal oneness is.

But in the very particular sense that you, with the uniqueness of your manifestation, the uniqueness of your personality, the uniqueness of even the difficulties that you encounter, and the story of your life, and even the tragedies that you're handed—that this is somehow given from the divine or given to us in our uniqueness. Our uniqueness, our unique journey is actually rooted in God, has its origins in the divine. Use whatever language helps you here.

I am an angel. You are angels. All of that, and the journey that I'm on, or what's handed to me in my life—this cancer that I might die of—this is somehow necessary to the divine. Now, I'm not going to reify that and cling to it, but there's a kind of...

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view and actually a sensing with soul that I can enter into with something like this.

This is a part of the narrative of my life. It's a fact. But it's multidimensional and it has its given place, given meaning, given depth, given divinity, given a sacredness that pertains to its uniqueness, your uniqueness. Do you understand? That's healing at a whole other level, a whole other level.

And so it's like—I'll talk about me. Let's say I die from the cancer. There's a healing that happens at a whole other level whether or not I die. Do you understand?

Some of the less socially sanctioned corners and angles and protuberances and ways of our personhood might be, sometimes the healing is to soften them, to change them, to make them less dukkha, and sometimes the healing is at another level. So-and-so is still arrogant. So-and-so is still belligerent. They're always fighting for this cause and being on the edge of being obnoxious or whatever it is. What does healing look like? You sand everything down so it's all polished and kind of bland and beige? Or is it that there is an angel in that very difficulty somehow?

And then the question is an open one: how much does it need, A, transforming, so that I'm not just stuck in something that's actually not soulful? So that's always the thing—what's soulful? But also it's just not pointless dukkha. How much does it need to be transformed? How much does it need to be blessed by this other sense of it? And the healing is in that. And also how much freedom is there?

Because the other aspect of healing might be—and this may be also where it ties in with emptiness, is emptiness of self—to see that we're multiple. That's why I said you're angels, you're not just one. And so there's not so much rigidity. You see how my personality or the patterns that I manifest in my life, in relationship, in thinking, in expression, in my work, in the way I move my body—they can get very rigid. It's just like, okay, that person just always does things this way, and I realize I don't even realize that I'm stuck in it, or maybe I do realize.

So one of the things with soul, and we've kind of implied this in what we've been saying, is that there's a certain freedom in just having more range and having the flexibility. I can have the light and I can have the dark. I can have the raging God and I can have the God of infinitely soft benevolence. All as me and into me and through me, I

can have, as we said today, the stillness and the movement. Do you understand? So I'm less fixated on one self being how I am and I open to the—Hillman would call it the polytheism, the multiplicity of the angels that come through me, come through you, that speak to you, that want something from you.

And so there's something that's liberating in the sense of breaking out of a rigidity and an enclosedness in recognizing the multiplicity of what's coming through me and what's being asked of me and what my soul relationships are—angels, divinities, images, etc.

Where that ties in with emptiness, again, this is a little bit related to what I said this morning, is that, again, with a certain kind of—I would say—not fully deep understanding of emptiness, then we say, oh, the self is empty, therefore it's worthless, therefore we just kind of would be better off without it somehow. And we have this image like a liberated person sort of doesn't have one, or they're kind of—so what, what is that? And is that even something that I want?

So there's a kind of just—it's always put down and put aside or it's tolerated. We tolerate, you have this personality, Keval has this personality. It's okay. It's just personality. It's just form. And we don't get too hung up about it. So it's kind of neither particularly attacked or celebrated or seen as divine, the self and the expression of the self.

If we go deeper into emptiness, like I said this morning, you see that the very fact that any self construction at all is empty means that I'm free to construct the self any old how. And if I'm strictly in a Buddha Dharma gear, I'll say the constructions of self are for the purpose of reducing dukkha. If I'm expanding that a bit more—and there are all questions here about paradigms and where they fit—but if I'm expanding that a bit more, I could say the constructions of self at any time, the images of self, can be in the service of soulfulness.

And that may overlap completely with the quieting of dukkha, the dissolving of dukkha, or it might be—it's not quite that simple.

But the very fact of the emptiness, of the thorough, complete emptiness of self, totally—any conception of self is empty—allows us to fabricate and the self to be fabricated in different ways. We see it's all play, it's all theatre, and we can be moved by theatre and play. Do you understand? Does it make sense?

And like you said, there's always this gear too. We're not emphasizing it so much on this retreat—on the last retreat, partly because we called it "Of Hermits and Lovers: The Alchemy of Desire." So we didn't want everyone blowing fuses and things. We just spent a day talking about letting go. That's a gear too. And this gear of shoring up the self and

getting a really solid sense of self and where my boundaries are and who I am—going back to what I said right at the beginning—it's like, all good. All these directions are good.

Sometimes I think, as a general point, the only mistake we can make is to be stuck in one way of seeing things. One way of thinking about the self or relating to the self, for example. Whatever that is. Without that flexibility, that malleability, that fluidity, that range that is, I think, a result and an expression, an embodiment of freedom—range, flexibility in thinking, in acting, in relating, in meditating. So I'm just echoing what you said, that actually they're all good. And then the art is like, when? When is what helpful when and in what ways?

So basically, Nick's saying that even if she's in the mode or the thinking of shoring up boundaries and shoring up the self and really setting boundaries and being clear about that—something that is maybe more typical of modern psychology in the West—even that endeavor and even that way of viewing things can be, in the language we've been using, sensed with soul. So that whole idea and that whole movement and that whole endeavor and everything that's involved in that can have all the dimensionality and all the divine referencing and context and blessing and sacredness and divinity and all the other business. It's the same thing, but it's seen with, it's sensed with soul.

And there's a big difference between that and seeing it more rigidly—which can still be really, really helpful—seeing it more flatly, if you like.

Robert had his hand up before, so I'll come back. "I'd be grateful if you could explain how strong emotions other than love relate to sensing the soul."

You mean more difficult emotions? So the question is how strong emotions and more difficult emotions like anger or grief relate to sensing the soul, emotions other than love.

The first thing to say is love can also be soulless, relatively—or everything's a spectrum. So I can love something and it doesn't have that dimensionality and divinity. Love is an aspect of sensing the soul, but it's not by itself enough.

Anger, for instance. Are you saying how would you work with it, is the question? Or just how does it fit conceptually?

It relates to Nick's question a little bit. It's like whatever is coming through can be spun off into papañca, can be ignored, dismissed, ridiculed, transcended somehow, or related to in a way that opens up soul movement. So we participate in everything.

Here's the anger. We'll weave in the practice and the concept. I'm sitting. Maybe I don't even realize I'm angry at first. I just feel hot and bothered. Or maybe I feel depressed.

Actually, it's something about just like, you know. And then I say, okay, the emotional awareness is absolutely indispensable. It's like an absolute part of the foundation of the practice. So I feel into this depression, the kind of heavy cloud of it—and I'm just making this up as a possibility. I feel that heaviness, and it feels like something's pressing me down, and I'm with it, and I'm just like, man, I feel like I've been pressed down a lot in my life. And then it's like, you know what? I'm really pissed off at being pressed down. I get angry at the depression, for instance. And then I'm with something slightly different. The depression has maybe got both depression and anger. I'm just making up a possibility.

And I say, okay, that's interesting. Let me feel into the anger. Energy body—what does it need? Maybe it needs love. Maybe it needs metta. That would be one approach. Maybe I just need to kind of let that anger be in the energy body and see what it does. And so there's kindness in the approach, but I'm not trying to change it. And I'm not either just watching it as sensation.

So I've got energy body, I've got this—maybe it feels like there are these glowing embers in my belly and I can feel this and it's mixed with frustration and it's confusing, etc. I'm just with it and I'm holding it and I'm letting something emerge in the energy body, in the emotionality, in the way I'm tending to it.

And then there's a lot of energy wrapped up in anger, a lot of emotional energy and a lot of psychic energy wrapped up, and also in some depressions. It's actually a kind of energy that's just trapped and either attacking oneself or just locked. There's not all depression, but a lot of depression has a lot of energy. When I start relating to it in this way and being with it in the energy, when you're being sensitive to it and allowing it, but in a very intimate way, then the energy, the psychic energy in the emotion may liberate an image. It may generate an image.

So it was maybe just embers, and then out of the embers comes some kind of fiery, wrathful deity stomping around and roaring, and he's got a trident and a nine-bladed sword and all that. And maybe I'm a little bit scared of this. And maybe I feel like I've become that. Or maybe he's looking at me and engaging with me. Then I'm in the realm of the imaginal.

Now, with that, as one of our nodes or business, is a sense of duty. So I'm going quite quickly here. But I then would engage this figure, or either feel what it feels like to become that figure, or engage him in relationship. I'm in meditative, mindful, sensitive energy body emotional awareness to the resonance, relationship, or how does it feel to become this deity and to see the world and to feel the world and what does the body feel like and what do I feel like.

At that point, when it has become imaginal, to the degree it has become imaginal, there's something felt. The anger could still be there, but it's transformed—but not so much into love or softness or equanimity. It's become a kind of wrathful deity. It's become a creative anger. There will be a feeling of liberation.

Before—I mean, certainly in the example I just gave—I started depressed. I felt so... Then when I feel angry, I start to feel a bit bigger, but I still feel caught in the anger. So usually we have an unskillful relationship with anger. We just feel tied up in it, knotted in it. When it becomes soulful and imaginal, it doesn't feel like a problem anymore. And it's not that we just kind of give ourselves license to buy a shotgun and kill whatever, and just shoot our mouths off. Something's changed in the whole nature of what it is and what it feels like.

And maybe there's a situation. Maybe I have felt depressed because I'm in a situation or I have been a long time in a situation where the rules of engagement in the organization or the family or the relationship or whatever are actually constraining me. So I've got a situation that I'm actually angry about as well.

Now the imaginal, we have to be very sensitive and very attuned here and also careful. It might give me a duty and a perspective in relation to that situation. Do you understand?

And that might look like I say something and it has not unkindness. There's a difference between unkindness and wanting to hurt. The Buddha says non-cruelty is one of the three primary intentions in the Noble Eightfold Path. But it can be sharp and it can be cutting and it can be strong and it can be powerful and it can be angry. But it's a very different thing. And the purpose of it and the sense of it and the purpose of it and the whole experience of it is much expanded and again given dimensionality and a rooting in divinity.

Some of you know this. I wrote a letter some years ago to the Insight Meditation teachers, and it was about climate change and what we're doing, or actually what we're not doing in relation to that. There was anger in it, and it was obnoxious, or it would be easy to read it as obnoxious, and I could certainly see it that way, and I think a lot of people found it that way. And it certainly pissed people off.

Now, I could be completely off here, but I don't regret doing it. And with all whatever consequences it made. And I think I will feel that till I die. There was something right about it and right about the tone. And there was something, to my sense, kind of archetypal coming through. I'm not saying that's the only answer. It was maybe part of a beginning of something that needed lots of other energies. But it felt at the time like there was anger there, there was frustration. And there was a kind of calling that actually in this case needed to manifest.

Now, if we go back to the example that we said before, it might be that the duty involved in this image is just that. I've just opened it. I've just got a different sense of the situation. And I find that something's liberated. There's still the heat and the force and all that. But I don't feel I need to do anything. I could, but I'm not being asked to do anything or manifest or speak. And other times we do get a sense of some kind of duty that's involved. Does this make sense?

So it's not so much that anger itself would be a node as much as, again, anger, like anything else, is something that can be related to with more or less soul-making.

I'm visited by a couple of images whose beauty and divinity seems somehow dependent on anger and grief, respectively. And regardless of how long I spend with them...

Yeah. Right. And so, you know, is that not a part of life? There is tragedy in life and one can look at and conceive of tragedy in lots of different ways—as a kind of flat existentialist, "well, that's life," or given soul. So again, it's not that somehow the child miraculously comes back to life and everything's rosy and happy forever and ever. There's something in that particular image that you're describing, that there is this holy grief, there is this redemption that happens without transformation. It's a transubstantiation more than a transformation.

So I don't, you know, it may be they change, and images can sometimes change, sometimes over long periods of time, long, long periods of time. But it may just stay that, and there's something iconic for you in those images, and they've got something for you. They're teaching you something. They're part of the soul-making.

And the mind can't quite wrap it. This is really important. If the mind feels like it's figured it out, it's always got this part of the beyondness.

It's got this quality of beyondness—there's just something I get, sort of, but I don't quite grasp completely, and yet it speaks to me profoundly. It does something. You understand? So your job is opening to that, resonating with that, following that thread of sensibility and sensitivity.

Did you have your hand up, Jim? Okay, should we do that? Okay, last one.

"I have a quick question. I think I'm not the only one that's relatively new to this, but I'm beginning to feel things start to coalesce. May I ask a simple question: what is soul? I know you probably talked about this in other courses."

So Jill is saying she's a beginner and... I'd say we're all beginners, actually, and I definitely say that about myself. And the question is, what is soul?

The first thing to say, just following on from what we said to Robert and what I touched on at some point, is that there are some really deep ideas in life that we will be poorer if we put them too much in a box and get too polished, rigid, tight definitions around. So it's like the concept has to have these elastic edges that I was talking about, and it has to have some mystery, and that's where its fecundity comes from. So soul is a kind of nebulous concept at one level.

Having said that, we could say soul is actually just shorthand for a kind of experience—which is all this business that we're talking about. So that's putting it as though it's not a thing at all. It's just a way of experiencing. That's one conception.

A second conception is, without giving it inherent existence, we say the soul is some kind of entity or belonging to my being or given to me or bigger than my being. Some kind of entity that operates by seeing and sensing in these ways that we're talking about. Now that instrument or organ can get really shrunk. It can get atrophied. It can lose its blood supply so that it barely functions in our life. Or it can grow and get powerful and gain more facility and accessibility at sensing that way.

How does that sound?

"That sounds good. That sounds very good. So I'm assuming that all practices can be soulful?"

All practices can be soulful. Yes. Yes, all practices can be... because the soulfulness is in the relationship to something, okay? So anything can be soulful.

However, if there's a practice that has built-in conceptual limits—that, for example, disallow imagination, disallow any kind of... they just have a rigid conception of how things are—then they will be soulful up to a certain point for you. If they're new to you,

they're all very exciting. So, for example, I trained a lot in a kind of atomistic Mahasi style—look at the moment-to-moment sensation of everything. It's moment-to-moment viññāṇa and consciousness and all this, and the body is just atoms and all that. At first, that's all very new, and it's exciting, and everything explodes into this mist of atoms, and it's all really fast, and it's thrilling.

But then when the implicit or explicit teaching is, "This is reality, that's it, anything else is delusion and nonsense," then the soul has kind of... it's been stretched up to that point. It's like all this is new. There's the expansion of soul-making there—the expansion of new vistas, new senses of things, the excitement of the eros. But then when it's been there for a while, there's no more soul-making.

So there's something dynamic in soul-making, something expansive, and if it reaches a wall, either it pushes that wall outwards so there's more territory—new discoveries, new ideas, new perceptions, new senses of things, new sense of self, new sense of the world—pushes it, usually quite slowly. Or it just blows through the damn wall, and I've talked about breaking the vessels. It just shatters things. And that can be a bit like, "Whoa." And then maybe you build new ones that are bigger. They've got more range in them.

Or the walls are stronger than the dynamic of soul-making. And the psyche and the life just stay within those walls. And then what happens? Well, it's stuck, or something gets... it just grinds to a halt. Yeah, the soul-making dynamic does... And then we feel that in our life.

But because we don't have that language in our culture, we cannot articulate what's happening—or more precisely, what's not happening. Without this context and vocabulary for soul-making, we remain unable to recognize when these dynamics have stalled or ceased altogether.

So oftentimes in our lives, we encounter what we might call wolves—those challenging forces that confront our established ways of being. Even when we're not consciously aware of it, we carry walls: walls of habit, walls of energetic patterns, walls of conception, walls of emotion that block our soul-making. This is completely normal.

The question then becomes: what does this situation need? Will these walls stretch smoothly, organically, slowly over time? Will they need to be burst through more dramatically? Or will it require some other kind of work—a deliberate examination and engagement with these walls themselves?

When we can recognize these dynamics, when we can see the interplay between the soul-making impulse and the structures that both support and constrain it, we gain a different kind of navigation system for our lives. We begin to understand when stagnation arises not from external circumstances alone, but from the way our inner walls have become too rigid, too small, or simply inappropriate for the soul's current needs.

This is the gift of developing this language, this sensitivity to the movements of soul-making. It allows us to participate more consciously in our own becoming, to recognize when we need to tend these dynamics with care, and to trust the organic intelligence that knows how to grow beyond our current limitations.

CHAPTER 142

Soulful Movement and Elements of the Imaginal (6-10)

Rob Burbea · 43 min

In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea opens new possibilities for practice by exploring movement and sound as pathways to soulful engagement, moving beyond the cultural dominance of stillness and silence in meditation retreats. He demonstrates how the energy body can move imaginally even in apparent stillness, and invites practitioners to discover what it means for movement and voice to become deeply soulful.

Continuing his detailed exploration of imaginal elements, Burbea examines trust as a crucial node that can be both noticed and deliberately cultivated - even "a grain of trust" can activate the entire imaginal field through dependent arising. He illuminates how images inherently possess dimensionality and divine qualities, with soft, elastic boundaries that allow for the expansion of soul-making dynamics. The sense of beyondness and unfathomability in imaginal perception creates allure and eros, yet remains present in and through appearances rather than transcending them.

Burbea contextualizes this work within broader Buddhist approaches, distinguishing between practices aimed at the unfabricated, mindfulness of "things as they are," and imaginal engagement. He argues that deep understanding of emptiness and fabrication ultimately legitimizes skillful, soulful fabrication, freeing practitioners to participate creatively in the discovery of being while maintaining the refined discernment essential to soul-making practice.

The possibilities of soul, the possibilities for soul, are endless. They're endless. And that endlessness is also endless in different directions. Soul opens up in different ways, can open up in different ways, in different directions, at different levels.

We discover a lot about all kinds of things, but also about soul through stillness and through silence. Sometimes, for many of us, stillness and silence can become a kind of habit. We spend a lot of retreats where there's a lot of stillness and a lot of silence. In a place like this place this week, or a Gaia House, stillness and silence are the cultural dominance. If someone were to come in this hall and see a bunch of people sitting still and silent in funny postures, they would consider it quite strange.

So we discover, we can discover a lot about soul. We will discover a lot about soul through stillness, through the depth of stillness and silence. And yet there's also a direction through movement and through non-silence, through sound.

Sometimes what happens, and many of you will have experienced this and I've talked about it before, one is sitting still and silent in meditation aware of the energy body. Maybe there's an image or something going on, and one can actually feel the energy body moving, but to an outside observer, it would look completely still. It looks like this—I'm just sitting in silent meditation—but I feel, and there's an imaginal sense and an energetic bodily sense of the body dancing or moving, or turning cartwheels, or whatever it is. So this is a really, really fertile area of meditation, to open up that way.

Or again, an image, and there's a roaring coming through the image. No one can hear anything. It's, if you like, purely in the image, if we say it that way. But because it's imaginal, it's soulful. They go together. So I don't know if some of you have had this kind of experience.

Then of course, we can actually move. And we did a little bit of that in one of the sessions. And I've talked about this in the past as well. So, what is it, if I put the question to you rather than say what it is: What is it to practice moving and practice sounding and can that be soulful? What might that mean? What might that feel like?

We might have a practice of tai chi or qigong or something—there's movement involved. Is that soulful? How can it become more insouled? So there's a direction here, a possibility.

This came up—Andrea asked in the vigilantes—we have a culture of stillness and silence. Could it be that we open up the sense of practice to include movement? And then this question, not so much a koan, but an ongoing investigative, explorative question for you: What does it mean for movement to become soulful, to become more deeply soulful, more fully soulful? What does it mean for sound, for voice, to become more soulful, more deeply soulful?

And a lot of it is about cultural dominance. Because I've said this a couple of times on retreats, and it can be strange, because everyone says, well, here, it's where we sit, and we're still. And it looks a bit, maybe the person thinks, oh, I look a bit weird if I'm the only one sort of moving. See how influenced we are by culture around us.

So I'd like to open that up again as a possibility. Movement can be very, very subtle, really subtle. The hands are moving, or some movement, and it can feel completely soulful. Or the sounding can be really subtle. What matters is the soul-making, not what the movement looks like to another person, or how much movement, or what it is. So we're just opening up a kind of possibility, a level of practice, if you like.

So we have sitting period, walking period. You could say sitting period, moving period. It might look absolutely like walking up and down in a delineated form. And again, there's so much to learn from a circumscribed walking path. You walk between two points and it's very contained and very, well, contained in lots of ways. There's a lot to learn that way. But it might be sometimes that you want to explore something different. There's stillness, sitting, and then there's movement.

And what is that with the energy body, with the imaginal, with the possibility of soulfulness? Some of you have movement practices, exercise practices, and still I put this question: what does it mean to deepen the soulfulness, to open the soulfulness in relation to yoga, tai chi, if you're following prescribed forms? It's an open question for you to find out, for us to find out.

So I want to return to the nodes, the aspects of the imaginal, and pick up where we left off. I don't know if Catherine's already addressed this—are they in the book? Somehow some of you are taking notes, and that's fine, that's actually great. We will try to put the list of these nodes, these aspects, up on the board at some point today.

Again, why are we doing all this? It's a lot. We're actually zipping through, and today I'm going to zip through. Really, it's like a high-speed bus tour. Partly it's to highlight, to draw your attention to certain features. What's the point?

Partly, we're interested in discernment. This whole movement of meditation—whatever the practice—is a movement into more and more sensitivity, more and more subtlety of awareness, more and more refined perceptions, ability to discriminate and discern this and that. All that is part of the beauty and the art of the unfolding. So putting all this out is really just to throw some seeds out. What's that? Can I notice that? Can I discern this and that? Making distinctions or recognizing distinctions in perception—this is all really important in soul-making. So it's for the sake of that kind of refinement and enriching of awareness and attention and sensitivity.

It's also, as I said when we introduced it, for the sake of clarity. There's a whole conceptual framework here, and understanding the different aspects of it will help bring that clarity of understanding. But it is not—at least I hope it doesn't become—a kind of canonized dogma. Not a soul-making catechism, "I believe in the twenty-

eighth..." You know? Where it gets very rigid like that. It's more like seeds. It's like, "Oh, what's that?" And even the words we use—they're maybe words that we're very familiar with in English, but they kind of have different possibilities when we use them. They're like poetic seeds. You understand?

So can there be this kind of straddling of an attitude that's both very precise and interested in refinement of discrimination and discernment, and also loose and labile, fluid enough and flexible enough?

The third point about why we're doing this is because, as I mentioned earlier, there's a possibility in recognizing these nodes in the moment, in practice, that something is activated in the whole process. For example, Catherine talked yesterday about one of those: loving and being loved. Some images, it's very obvious—they're love images. It's palpable. It's the most obvious feature of that image. Other images—and I've described these in other talks—where that's not an obvious feature, but it's there.

What can happen is I begin to notice that feature or that element, that aspect, that node. For instance, being loved. It's like this image, whatever it is, is very stern and seems a bit forbidding or maybe a bit scary. But as I pay attention more closely, I notice there's this unusual kind of loving that this—if it's another imaginal figure—has for me. And that noticing, the very attuning of the attention to that node or that element, ignites that element of feeling loved further. And that ignition of one part of the lattice ignites—the ignition spreads, so the whole thing comes alive.

So one way this all works is via noticing. We just notice—that's why we're throwing out these things. Can you notice this? Some of them are a lot easier to notice than others; there's individual variation. But the noticing ignites or activates something, and the whole thing can become, let's say, more fully imaginal.

There's the capacity to notice what's already there that we hadn't fully noticed in the field of the imaginal. It's like there is this thing that we're calling sensing the soul or imaginal perception, and we're kind of discovering what it is. So I think, "Oh, there's that." And it was just dimly in the awareness. So making it more obvious in the moment ignites something.

That's one possibility. A second possibility, which we touched on, is to be more deliberate with the nodes. Take the energy body node, for instance. I can notice what's happening in the energy body, or I can also deliberately emphasize that node and activate it. Let's say I'm in relationship with a tree, or with another being, or with a so-called internal image. Can I bring my whole energy body into relationship with that tree, with that being, with that image? I sense it with my whole body, not just with my eyes, not

just with my ears, but with my whole body. Or I just start to deliberately activate more of that energy body sense. So I'm turning up the dial, if you like, on the energy body node. And that, again, can activate the whole lattice, ignite the entire network.

The sixth element is trust. This is an example of one that could work both ways in terms of noticing or activating. Sometimes we're with an image and maybe to the mind it seems a bit untrustworthy or pathological or violent or strangely amoral or immoral even. And then we can notice sometimes that—hold on—there's something in me, so to speak, that trusts this. So we notice the trust. But trust is an element of the imagination. It's one of these elements of the imagination. Sometimes we can be more deliberate with trust.

I presume that we wouldn't be here—no one would be here—if you didn't sense that in the imaginal, even in the weird images that one might get, you'd be a little tentative about sharing them with many people. This is a strength; there's something to trust here. It sounds weird, it looks weird, it smells weird, but there's a treasure here. We sense there's a treasure here.

Now, sometimes what you can do is just deliberately—I use the phrase—just a grain of trust. It seems like a strange image. It seems like a strange experience or sense of the world that I'm having right now. Can I just sprinkle a grain of trust into the mix right there? Just a little bit of trust can be enough for the alchemy to start happening. Without that trust, everything just gets limited. It can't enrich and deepen.

All this is dependent arising. In other words, if there's not trust in this so-called subjective pole of the whole field, of the imaginal field, then everything either grinds to a halt or stops or gets limited. My lack of trust, my distrust, my suspicion, my fear, colors the image. The image is a dependent arising. The sensing of the world is a dependent arising.

Like in a nightmare—if you've ever had this experience—you've been chased by the monster, and I'm afraid of this monster chasing me. It's getting bigger and bigger as it's chasing me. If you've ever turned around to face the monster and give yourself to the monster, what happens? It transforms. Why? Because the relationship with it has transformed, because the whole thing is a dependent arising. I participate; we participate in the co-creation-discovery of what we sense, whether we're talking about intra-psychic images or sensing the soul.

So if I can just sprinkle that little bit of grain of trust, then I'm participating in the creation of this image in a way that allows it to open. I don't know about this, but I can trust just a little bit.

So let me just create a little frame. I can allow myself to play with trusting this, experiment with trusting this image or whatever I'm sensing right now for ten minutes, or twenty minutes, or five minutes. In that way, I'm not saying I have to sign up to a lifelong marriage with this weird monster or whatever it is. I can just create a time frame, and at the end of that time frame, I can step out. This can be a helpful approach.

In terms of trust, there's also trusting a particular sense that we have, a particular image. There's also trusting the whole process that we're engaged in—all this business of soul-making and the logos. There are different kinds of trust. If we can find a way in practice of just allowing or encouraging a little bit of trust, that helps the dependent origination in the process. It helps things become more fertile, to open up.

Let me move through some points very quickly—just sprinkling seeds.

The seventh aspect is that images, by definition imaginal images, elicit, open, nourish, support, and ignite soul-making. Something is not really an image unless it has that quality—unless we recognize the resonances, all the different kinds of resonances that it has in the soul. So the sense of soulfulness is a characteristic aspect of imagining.

There's another part of this which I'm just going to mention because I've talked about it so much before in previous series of talks and retreats. An image stimulates, opens, supports, grounds, and nourishes soul-making. What is soul-making? This is why I'm not going to explain so much. Just to say, soul-making involves what we've been calling the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic and the way they weave into each other and inseminate each other and open and expand and deepen and enrich and complicate each other. I'm not going to go into it right now. We can talk about it if you want another time.

Soul-making has this quality—something expands in soul-making. There's a sense with soulfulness of something stretching the psyche, actually, if you like. Stretching the sense of things, the idea of things, the perceptions of things. That stretch can happen very quickly, very suddenly, or more gradually over time. The arising of soulfulness, the supporting of soulfulness, is an aspect of the imaginal.

And soulfulness is more than heartfulness. Heartfulness is very important. Heartfulness is a part of soulfulness. But soulfulness is more than heartfulness in many ways.

I'm going to just flip the order because I'm moving through quite quickly. So I'm going to jump to what was the tenth on our list and then come back to the eighth and ninth.

The tenth was that in the imaginal, with the imaginal, the boundaries are elastic and soft. The boundaries are not definite and fixed—the boundaries of self and the boundaries of other, the boundaries of the image. This elasticity is related to what I said about the soul-making dynamic, the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, having a tendency to expand.

So here's this image, for instance, or here's myself as image. The sense is—here's what I thought it was, it seemed like it was, but as it gets caught up in the soul-making dynamic, the sense of what that being is, and what the self is, and even what the world is, expands. The idea—there's Robert, there's Natalie—the sense of what's involved in a Robert or a Natalie, who they are, what they are, grows, gets more complex, gets richer, wider, deeper. So we could say elastic edges. Things can expand and move. This applies both to concepts and to images.

Soft edges means—just right now, try two things.

First, think of someone—actually, someone you love. Consider them, and get a sense of their being if you can.

Now, you might have a really sharp visual imagination. You might see every little hair of stubble on their chin, or whatever it is. So in that sense, the image may be very visually precise as a form—it may be very sharp-edged rather than soft-edged. But I'm talking about their beingness, their essential being.

So this person that you love—get a sense of their beingness. Does that beingness of this person, their kind of essence, does that have an edge? Does it have a sharp edge?

I mean, maybe it has some edge. There's a sense of "Well, Mark is over there and I'm over here. Mark is over there and Eamon's over there." There are edges there, and that's fine. At another level that doesn't exist, but that's fine—we're retaining a certain level of those edges.

But there's a feeling to Mark or a feeling to Eamon that there's no sharp edge to a person's being. Do you understand? You get a sense of that immediately. That's how persons are. When we put sharp edges to a person, people say, "Whoa, buddy, back off." We don't like it if people do that to us, or if we do it to ourselves—we don't feel well.

An image is the same. Whether it's a tree that I'm sensing the soul of, or a flower that I'm sensing the soul of, again, it doesn't have a sharp edge. This soft-edgedness is part of the sense of an image. Do you understand?

So that's the tenth aspect: elastic and soft edges.

Related to that—and many of these aspects overlap, while some point in different directions and are even a little contradictory to each other—is the eighth aspect: a sense of dimensionality. This is also somewhat implicit in this soft-edgedness business.

When I think of my sense of Robert, in that blurriness of his edges, first of all, I wouldn't want him to have sharp edges. I lose something of his beauty, of his mystery, of his essence if he's got sharp edges. Do you understand?

Now, in the blurriness, as it transitions into the vastness, we could say there's a kind of dimensionality. It's like sensing into Robert, sensing into this tree or this flower. When I sense it with soul, it's as if there are other dimensions that we sort of pick up on or intuit or dimly sense. Sometimes we clearly sense them.

So it's like I sense Robert and I sense him as the angel there. Now, I can see Robert, and I see his striped shirt, and I see him sitting in his form, and I know a little bit about his history in the human realm. And there's another dimension—the angelic dimension. Actually, there are multiple dimensions. Some of them will be clear to me, and some of them kind of recede into this blurriness.

I just got muddled because you were talking about Robert, and for a minute I thought you meant yourself.

Oh no, sorry, I meant him. Well, I could mean myself. So thank you for saying that, Ron. I could mean myself, so I'm also a Robert. But in this case I meant that Robert. But it doesn't matter, because whatever we sense with soul—whether it's Robert Broderick, whether it's Robert Verbeer, whether it's the rose—whatever we sense with soul will start to come alive with dimensionality. We will start to notice the dimensionality, the angelic dimensions. So whatever it is, really. Does that make sense?

Now, we could say, so we're still on this eighth one of dimensionality, and we could kind of separate it out and say, okay, now we can separate out something called divinity. Or we could just lump it together and say this dimensionality kind of shades into a sense of the divine and of sacredness.

Now, divine is either a word that means absolutely nothing to people or it's a word that we have bad history with. Or it might be a very rich word. To me it's actually an infinitely rich word. We can never exhaust what the word divinity means, what it represents, what it holds. It is itself an infinite concept, infinitely rich with possibility. Dimensionality, shading into a sense of divinity.

Sometimes that divinity is very clear. That's a very palpable sense. Sometimes we're even quite clear what we mean by divinity or the concept. But some or other concept or sense of divinity, clear or kind of vague or obscure, is an aspect of the imaginer. Is that okay?

One of the characteristics of divinity is, as I said, whatever we say about it, however clever we are at theology or philosophy or whatever, we're never going to—it's always going to be bigger. There's always going to be more. There's a kind of infinity of beyondness to divinity. And that ties in to the ninth aspect.

As I said, these are kind of implicit in each other, but with an image—it could be my self-sense, I've become, I'm just sensing into, I'm sensing myself with soul, I've become a deity, it could be the rose, it could be another person, it could be an intrapsychic image—there's a sense of beyondness. So there's a kind of—we said, "I perceive this. This is what I perceive," whatever it is, and maybe that has some dimensionality, but there's a sense of, there's more, there's more. There's more that I can kind of intuit, and that's attractive. That beyond has an allure, and that's partly what's related to the eros.

So we get this sense of there's a beyondness to an image. It's not just a form, a flat form. It's got this, again, dimensionality to it. And that beyondness is unfathomable. There's not a sense, again, "I can reach the end." So images, the imaginal, what we sense with soul has a sense of unfathomability to it.

But the dimensionality, the beyondness, the divinity, the unfathomability—with the sensing the soul, with the imaginal—it's not something that loses the appearance. I just want the unfabricated, the quieting of perception, the fading of appearances, the blurring into oneness. That's all really good and important. With imaginal perception, with sensing the soul, this sense of dimensionality, beyondness, unfathomability, divinity, is in and through as well as behind the appearances. Does that make sense?

No.

Okay, so, in a way you have to give some context, so it's good that you asked. Certain kinds of meditative practices came up a little bit with Maitri Devi's question last night, which I didn't actually pick up on last night. She said a lot of times in Buddhist teachings, a lot of what you get in Buddhist teachings... I could talk a long time about this, let's see.

It's worth saying again. I've said it before, but it's worth saying again. We could divide the thrust or the intention of the range of Buddhist teachings. We could divide it into three, okay, in terms of what gets sort of taught and what gets emphasized.

So one is, and this is the more traditional Theravadan way, is that there is basically—here we are in the world of complexity and appearances and all the tussle of that, and we practice, and we practice seeing emptiness, and we practice letting go, and we're basically letting go of appearances.

A quietening emerges—a blurring, a gentle fading of perception, a melting away. Eventually, some kind of sense of oneness begins to dawn in our awareness. There unfolds a spectrum of this fading of appearances into different kinds of oneness—love, awareness, pure being. Ultimately comes what we might call dissolution into emptiness, or dissolution into what is sometimes called the unfabricated or the unconditioned. It is simply the complete relinquishing of all appearances, a profound letting go in relationship to the world.

This movement—a transcending of the world, of appearances in the world of complexity—receives tremendous emphasis in some traditions. I think it is indeed very important, but I don't think it constitutes the whole story.

Other Buddhist traditions, especially more commonly in different cultures, emphasize what we could call simply being with things as they are, or mindfulness. Rather than attempting to go beyond or through into realms of emptiness, the focus becomes this world, this moment, this sensation. There develops a quality of just being with this, just with this, as it is. Don't add anything. Don't try to eliminate anything. Simply meet the facts of existence as barely as possible. Practice becomes about dwelling with that reality—a approach extremely common nowadays in certain cultures and streams of Buddhism.

Now there exists a third way, which we could call the imaginal—engaging with appearances, but without believing so firmly in the notion that there exists some fixed way things are. If there is no singular way things are, then I cannot simply "be with things as they are," because there is no such fixed reality. We participate in the creation of things. We participate in the very sensing of things.

This understanding opens the possibility of imaginal perception. As I mentioned, I can be present with Robert over there, and then allow an angelic perception of him to emerge—an image that we can acknowledge as fabricated perception. It is not unfabricated; I am allowed to play with these perceptions.

The appearances become important not merely as flat facts, but because of this fertility of the imaginal and because of the divinity that dwells within them. The divinity is not only beyond appearance—it is in the appearance itself. The dimensionality is in the appearance.

One way of understanding Buddha Dharma is recognizing that it is fundamentally about understanding fabrication. Fabrication means: what is being created in perception? What is being woven in the realm of our experience? How does experience actually come to be?

As I understand this more deeply and begin to release the clinging that creates experience—that fabricates experience—awareness moves increasingly toward the unfabricated. I cling less, release identification, let go of all the grasping and pushing and pulling. Things simply fade more and more.

When I realize, going deeply enough into this process, that everything is fabricated—absolutely everything, without exception: not the fabricator, not the mind, not consciousness, not time, not space, not things, not nothing—all of it fabricated. Diving deeply enough into this recognition, I see that the whole notion of fabrication itself is empty, because there is nothing that is actually fabricated, no time in which fabrication occurs, and no fabricator.

Taking this process deeper and deeper reveals that if I go only a little way into it, I think, "Okay, there is something that is fabricated. This particular thing is fabricated."

That leaves a duality between fabricated and unfabricated. But once I start going deeper, I eventually come to a point where it's all fabricated. There's not even an unfabricated, because there's no fabricated. There's no fabricated, really. Fabrication itself is empty. Therefore there's no unfabricated, really. So the whole duality of fabricated and unfabricated collapses.

Where does that leave me? I'm free then to play with different ways of looking and participate in the creation—or discovery—of being, of forms, of phenomena, including the imaginal. That understanding of emptiness at this level starts freeing things up. What it does is legitimize what we could call skillful fabrication or soulful fabrication.

This makes sense when we consider those three ways that Dharma gets taught. You have the approach that's all out for the unfabricated, for oneness, for going beyond appearances. You have this legitimization of fabrication that we're discussing. And that middle approach—the mindfulness one—when I believe "this is what things are," doesn't legitimize the imagination.

Someone who believes in the reality of bare attention and mindfulness would see imagination as exactly the wrong thing to do. It's exactly nonsense, exactly non-reality, exactly a waste of time, exactly what's going to get you into trouble. Because Dharma, in this view, is about being with something called "things as they are," or the facticity of things, or bare attention.

Once you expose the myth of that, then you realize that this mindfulness business is really good as a kind of stream. We don't want to lose it. But if I say that's the only thing, then it leaves me straitjacketed. And this whole business would be just utter delusion—we'd be spending a week in complete and utter delusion.

Delusion is a Buddhist word, though—avijjā. At a deep level, delusion means this non-realization that everything is empty. So to the degree that I'm deluded is the degree that I believe in mindfulness as more than just a tool. You can do nothing without mindfulness—it's really important, it's crucial. It's just how it gets framed and believed in and rigidified, as if it has become an ultimate truth. Even if people aren't using that language, there's this wall and absence of questioning.

So we're doing a bus tour here. I've talked longer than I intended, but this is just a quick tour through these aspects to prick up your ears and senses. You can start noticing: "Oh yes, there is this sense of dimensionality. Maybe that word doesn't quite work. Or maybe the word divinity—I thought it meant this, or I made it just mean this." You have to feel your way into these concepts, sense your way into these nodes. Let them come.

Discover them for yourselves. Do you understand?

Let us now rest in some quiet together.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 143

Elements of the Imaginal (15 - 18)

Rob Burbea · 31 min

> *In this teaching from the "Tending the Holy Fire" retreat, Rob Burbea examines four crucial elements of imaginal practice. He begins with non-reducibility - the understanding that imaginal images cannot be flattened into mere psychological representations or material explanations. When we reduce an image to "only" representing empowerment, childhood experiences, or subatomic particles, we kill its soulfulness and dimensionality.*
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> *Burbea then explores autonomy - how imaginal images possess their own personhood and intelligence, existing as both self and other simultaneously. This includes the practitioner's autonomy to assent to or refuse the imaginal opening. The third element, distinctness (or "twoness"), maintains erotic tension and particular differentiation even within unity, preventing collapse into undifferentiated oneness while preserving the dynamic relationship between perceiver and image.*
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> *Finally, he discusses the theatrical quality of imaginal perception - existing in a middle way between real and unreal, similar to powerful theater that transforms despite being "just a play." This poetic truth carries immense liberative power while maintaining its neither-real-nor-unreal status. Burbea emphasizes how these elements work together to preserve the soul-making capacity of imaginal practice, preventing it from being reduced to conventional psychological or materialist frameworks.*

Good evening. There's been quite a lot of talking today, and some of you at least may feel quite full with words and ideas and sharing and listening. So I'm going to try to walk a line between not talking too much or too long, and on the other hand talking enough to at least do a little justice to the themes I want to cover. Hopefully that will be a compromise.

I'm going to talk about four more nodes in a minute, and just a few general things before that. Given what I've just said, you'll quickly see that as we go through this list—and it's all really quick, actually, like a high-speed bus tour—some of the nodes we linger on longer. For instance, today with Eternality, Humility, Reverence and Grace, we spent time exploring those for ourselves and sharing in the exercise. Some we'll just touch on to point to them, and some get full discussion.

Before I get to the nodes, let me start with some general things. First is actually an announcement: every day from now on, the lounge will be a designated space and time from the period after the morning session in the hall—after the morning teaching—from 10:45 or 10:50 until 11:30. This is designated space for silent, free, soul-making movement. Or soul-making free movement.

What does that mean? Well, find out what it means. Create, discover what it means. The question I would put to you is the question I posed when I talked about movement the other day: what does it mean for this movement that I'm doing right now, or this stillness, or this gesture, or this posture—what is it for that to become soul-making? What does that feel like? What does it look like in this moment? What supports that to be soulful?

So it's open-ended and it's an investigation. It's free and it's silent. You can walk or stand during that period as well, but during that time every day, that will be a designated space to explore that.

Sounding is okay, actually—not talking to each other with words, but if it feels like some sounding is supportive and you feel okay with people around, whatever. Not talking, unless you're talking in tongues. So it's not talking to each other with words, but if some sounding supports the soul-making, that's fine.

The thought I had was that if you go in there, that's your practice. You're not going in there to regard or watch others. This is really about soul-making. That's the thing. Is this soul-making? It's an ongoing exploration: what is it that supports or ignites or nourishes soul-making, both generally speaking and in this moment? Intention has a lot to do with that.

Now, some general things. If it's not clear—and perhaps we didn't stress or emphasize this at the beginning of this retreat as we did on other retreats, but it's worth saying again—sensing the soul is not something that's going to be happening all the time. It's not even a possibility of a constancy of experience there.

This is partly related to one of the nodes Catherine talked about this morning: grace. Something is given to us, or from a certain perspective, something is given to us when we're sensing the soul. There's this inexplicable, unexplained gift.

And so it comes and goes. It might not be very dramatic, but in some ways we could say that just relative to conventional perception, it's something extraordinary to a certain extent. If it was all the time, it would quickly become ordinary. And A, it doesn't work that way, and B, we wouldn't want it to become ordinary. So we're not really try-

ing to kind of hang on to some particular experience all the time. It comes and goes. Part of it is gift. That's part of the very sensibility of it. That's why we gave that grace as a note.

But what that also means, practically speaking, is that in the day, there's a kind of wide palette of practices you can move between. And you can be quite fluid and quite responsive with that. So to try and do imaginal practice all day, I think would be too much. It would somehow imbalance the being. So you want some of that. And then when is it time to kind of go more into relatively unfabricated practice? Calming, simplifying, gathering, nurturing energy in the energy body, or just being with one's emotions in a healing way, or metta, or emptiness, or working with desire, as some of you will know we've worked with on other retreats.

So there's a necessity to move between different practices, and the possibility of this kind of skillful, responsive, sensitive navigation to when and which. Do you understand?

Before I get on to the four nodes I wanted to talk about this evening, just briefly, again, if it's not obvious, there's something about the relationship between these nodes, between these elements and aspects. There's not a linear relationship there. It's not like first this one and then you get that one. We could say there's a sort of commonality of ones that are maybe more likely to be noticed later or earlier. We could say that, but actually there's no order, and it's not like in any practice. First you do this, and then you do that.

We are emphasizing the energy body, but actually any node, the ignition of any node, can then ignite any other node. The causality is every which way in this lattice. And also in terms of the relationship between them, you know, I've said this before, but again, it's worth saying. Some of these nodes are sort of implicit, or this node is really a shade of that node, or a reflection of it, or an aspect of that other node, or it's already implicit in that node. So what would an example be?

For example, when we talked about dimensionality and divinity and beyondness and unfathomability, these are concepts or senses that kind of dance around each other, weave into each other. Other nodes have a kind of polarizing quality—they move in opposite directions between a certain pair, or they're a bit contradictory or almost paradoxical.

What would be an example of that? Well actually, in a way, you know the node of grace that Catherine talked about this morning and the very idea implicit in the whole idea of the lattice that you can kind of ignite a node and then it becomes more imaginal

—there's this important embrace of the receptive and the active, the technique and the mystery of grace. Do you understand? And so that somehow seems really part of the art of this whole practice. It's neither always one or the other, and the balance between the two can be very fluid.

So I'm going to speak about the next four nodes on our list, and I'm going to endeavor to be brief. Just a few points and suggestions and articulations.

The fifteenth one is the non-reducibility of what is sensed with soul. So what does that mean? It means that in the imaginal constellation there's a relationship with an image or with a sensing the soul, a sense of the soul. There's a relationship with it that the concept and the sense of it is not reducing it. This only is this. It only means X or Y.

So, for example, we can reduce things under the kind of rubric and the gaze of scientific materialism. I look at the tree, or the rose, or the curtains, and I just see flat, meaningless, the dance, random dance of flat, meaningless matter according to certain physical laws. That's a kind of reductionism. Everything is made of little subatomic particles that move meaninglessly. Do you understand? And you say, now, we can view that way, but if we only view that way, that flattening, that reduction, will flatten the sense in the soul. That's one kind of reductionism.

Another is a kind of, well, different kinds of psychological reductionism. So, for example, this image represents my empowerment.

my power, my self-empowerment in life, and this will give me that. Or this image represents my compassion, or some other brahmavihara, or some faculty of the mind, or something like that. That's what this is. In that reductionist view, it's a representation, it is this, and implicitly it's that it's only this.

So it's okay that we view it as, yes, it's matter, we can understand matter in that sense, but not only. And it's okay that we could say, this is a representation of empowerment, but not only. And compassion, but not only. Do you understand? It's the "only" that's the killer, that's the flattener.

Or, again, we can have an image and say this image is arising because it's representing, it's re-presenting something from my psychological history, something from my past, something from my family. And yes, it may be related to that, but again, it's the "only" that squeezes the soul out of it. You understand? It's only—I'm having this image because it's because, and only because, X or Y happened to me when I was a child, and this is representing it.

In the scope and complexity and richness of images and sensings with soul, that can be part of it. That can be part of why that image is coming up, but only one level of it. The "only" is reducing, and that's what will kill the sensing soul. It will literally squash the dimensionality and the richness and the complexity and the unendingness and the mystery and all of that, the multifacetedness.

So we touched briefly in the Q&A and also in one or two interviews—this image may be related to my past, may be related to some character in my family, my father, for instance. The image kind of echoes that. It's not just a representation of my father and how he was tyrannical with me, or whatever it is.

And then there's this possibility—a reductionist view would say the image is caused by what happened to me in my life, and it's representing it now as a psychic image, and that's what it is. So the causality runs from real material event in the past to image now in the present. You understand? The causality is conceived that way. If it's only, that's where we lose the soulfulness.

There's another way of thinking that images are actually primary. I've touched on this on other retreats. Images are what drive. They drive our lives. The image that I've shared in the past, the image of a solitary warrior, soldier, or the image of the lonely wanderer, the solitary wanderer—I can see that that has been generative in my life. It's like the image comes first, not so much first in time, but it's primary. It gives me my life. It shapes my life. It shapes my perception of things.

So we can conceive the causality going that way instead, or we can conceive it as coming from a whole other level, as I mentioned briefly in the Q&A. Soul, the mystery of soul, gives me, offers me, my images and the events of my life. It's another level of possible conception. But reductionism will kill, in one way or another.

Related to this, that's the fifteenth, related to this is the sixteenth—what we were calling autonomy. So, again, if I consider this image is a part of me, then it's not autonomous. It's just a part of me. Now, in certain psychological languages, I'm projecting this image, and maybe I project it onto a friend or a lover, I project my mom or dad or whatever. But then the image doesn't have autonomy. It's somehow part of me, which is projected as an image.

Versus the image is both me and not me. It's something beyond me. It's something—it has its own personhood. Like a person that we know, a flesh and blood person that we know. So, again, these nodes, you can notice them. And people reporting, it's like, after a while you start to notice, oh, this image has its autonomy. It really feels like another being.

We're talking about... You understand? Or the tree that I am sensing the soul has its kind of personhood, if you like. And so that's another aspect of autonomy. Again, we could have separated and made another node of personhood, but that's...

In considering the movement between self and image, we find what we might call the node of **twoness**. When I encounter an image that possesses genuine otherness, the eros flowing between us doesn't simply collapse this relationship into some universal unity. The image doesn't melt away into undifferentiated oneness.

Instead, there's an attractive pull, an erotic tension that maintains the distinctness between myself and this beloved other. The differentiation is preserved—not dissolved in some white light of unification or absorbed into a blissful melting union. This is essential: the erotic tension sustains the particularity of both self and other.

Even when I become an image—when the boundaries shift and I find myself inhabiting its perspective—differentiation remains. Perhaps twoness isn't immediately obvious in such moments, but distinctness of particulars continues to be preserved in soul-making perception. We're not moving toward some undifferentiated oneness, but rather maintaining the fertility that comes from the dance between separate and connected, distinct yet related.

This differentiation can manifest in various ways. There might be the image and the world in which it exists—each with their own particularity, their own texture and qualities. Yet alongside this differentiation, there often exists an implicit sense of underlying oneness. The image and its world are separate, yet in some mysterious way, the world *is* that image. They are the same thing, but this recognition doesn't collapse the relationship or melt away the distinctness.

The modes of relating to an image are fluid and dynamic. You might sense it as completely separate at first, then find yourself becoming it—fusing with it, entering into its experience, seeing the world through its perspective. Then the relationship might shift again, returning to separation. This fluidity is quite normal and part of the natural rhythm of imaginal engagement.

If you notice your relationship with images tends to follow only one pattern, you might deliberately experiment with different modes. If an image always remains separate, you could explore: What would it be like to be this monster? What is it like from the inside to be Aslan, to inhabit his fierce tenderness? Allow yourself to discover what emerges when you shift the quality of engagement, when you consciously explore different ways of meeting the imaginal.

The last mode I want to explore tonight is the eighteenth: what we call the theatre, or the imaginal middle way.

This quality emerges naturally when we work authentically with imaginal images. If you ask someone deeply engaged with an image whether it's real or not real, they'll likely find those categories inadequate. There's something that exists between real and not real—a different kind of reality altogether. This is something we can actually notice and cultivate when we linger with images.

Sometimes Catherine and I explore images together, and we've learned to distinguish when our practice shifts into different territories. One of the hallmarks of imaginal work is this sense of theatre—this quality of being neither real nor not real. To me, it's profoundly beautiful, liberating, and potent.

We might call this the imaginal middle way—the middle path between real and not real. Consider the experience of truly excellent theatre in an intimate setting, where the actors are close enough to touch. You know it's play—literally a play, not real in the conventional sense. Yet it can be utterly vulnerable, powerful, and transforming. The imaginal realm carries this same theatrical quality.

This is what it means to recognize artistic truth or poetic truth—a different kind of truth with immense power, yet distinctly particular in its nature.

People sometimes ask in our sessions whether all this emptiness work is necessary—the gradual reduction of fabrication until we reach the unfabricated and see its emptiness. It's an open question. I don't believe it's strictly necessary. Some people naturally develop this middle-way perception through emptiness understanding. Others access it through their artistic sensibility or poetic understanding of reality. Still others simply notice this middle-way status of images, this theatrical quality they naturally possess.

Consider the eternality we explored today. Is an image real or unreal? The most obvious truth about images is their impermanence—they come and go, just as the sensing soul comes and goes. Time's passage and change are completely apparent. Yet simultaneously, there's often a sense of timelessness, of something always already happening. The image becomes iconic rather than narrative, existing as an eternal presence somewhere in the vastness of psyche.

We can be sensitive to this quality of timelessness and eternality while never losing sight of impermanence. Bodies are impermanent. Lives are impermanent. Everything is impermanent, and images certainly are impermanent. When we see both truths simultaneously and hold them together, we avoid landing in either camp as ultimate truth.

Each of these modes contains profound depth, richness, potency, and liberating efficacy. Entering this particular node of theatre liberates something essential while retaining the power of poetry, art, theatre, and the middle way itself.

All the nodes possess tremendous depth and richness, along with potency and liberative efficacy. When we enter into some of these nodes—like this theatre of perception—something genuinely liberates. It truly releases something within us. This power endures: the power of poetry, the power of art, the power of theatre, the power of the middle way.

These are not mere intellectual constructs but living doorways to freedom. Each node offers its own particular gift, its own way of opening the heart and mind to what lies beyond our usual fixations. In the theatre of perception, we discover that we are both the actors and the audience, the dreamers and the dream, participating in a drama that is both utterly real and completely insubstantial.

The middle way shows us that we need not choose between these apparent contradictions. We can hold the fullness of experience without grasping, witness the play of phenomena without being caught by it. In this way, the very impermanence that might seem threatening becomes our greatest teacher, pointing always toward the freedom that lies at the heart of all experience.

Shall we sit?

CHAPTER 144

Soulmaking Rivers (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 51 min

> *In this wide-ranging Q&A session from the 'Tending the Holy Fire' retreat, Rob Burbea skillfully navigates complex questions about soulmaking practice and its relationship to traditional Buddhist teachings. He addresses a practitioner's visceral reactions to religious language like 'God' and 'divine,' explaining how these concepts can be understood as pointing toward mystery, ultimate value, and meaningfulness that transcends conceptual capture - qualities that connect to the Buddhist understanding of Buddha-nature.*
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> *Burbea explores the fundamental question of fabrication versus reality, drawing on emptiness teachings to show how our usual assumptions about what is 'real' versus 'made up' require deeper investigation. He explains how soulmaking deliberately emphasizes fabrication as participation in creation and discovery, rather than mere invention to comfort ourselves against meaninglessness. The discussion touches on how imaginal practice can naturally lead toward unfabricated states similar to jhāna, while maintaining the particular essence of images.*
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> *The conversation also addresses practical concerns about cultural diversity in imaginal practice, the role of community in sharing images, and how personal and collective soulmaking intersect. Burbea emphasizes trusting one's authentic sense of soul-making while remaining open to healing old wounds around spiritual concepts, offering both direct inquiry and indirect approaches through what naturally resonates.*

Maria raised a question about God that had been troubling her since the beginning of the retreat. She noted that the dharma talks had been particularly focused on divine language—terms like angel, sacred, reverence—and while this vocabulary drew her to soulmaking, it also triggered a visceral reaction due to her difficult religious history.

"I have a very tight relationship with God historically," she explained. "When I hear language like angel or sacred, reverence, I kind of feel..." She paused, describing an immediate, gut-wrenching response that bypassed rational thought—decades of conditioning from a religious background creating an automatic recoiling.

Maria mentioned that certain ideas had been helpful, particularly the concept that God too is empty, just like everything else. But the physical reaction to these words remained challenging.

When I asked if there were alternative words that might work better—sacred, holy, angel, divine—she responded with the same resistance. "All of it," she said simply.

So let's approach this conceptually for a moment. When someone is comfortable using words like God, sacred, angel, or divine, and you ask them what they actually mean by these terms, they often struggle to articulate anything concrete. This difficulty in capturing meaning is actually one of the most significant aspects of such language—these words are inherently open-ended, carrying an essential mystery.

"How's the word mystery?" I asked, clarifying that I didn't mean Agatha Christie.

This points to something crucial: these terms carry an unfathomability, a sense that there's something present that can't be fully grasped. It's not that we can't say anything about the divine, but whatever we do say won't completely capture it. Wrapped up in this mystery is a deep meaningfulness that we can't even fully articulate.

So we're speaking of something we'll never completely understand intellectually. We might offer concepts and descriptions, but somehow it remains of utmost value despite—or perhaps because of—this uncapturability. There's a cluster of qualities here: ultimate value, essential undefinability, profound meaningfulness, and mystery.

you could make up a word or words and translate as we go along. But that's really where we're heading.

What may have happened in the past is that these words have become associated not just with certain punitive or restrictive measures. I was also brought up in an orthodox environment, which I really didn't like for the most part. And it's almost as if there's something about this whole business—which we touched on yesterday—that will break vessels, including what any concept means, like divine, or God, all of that.

So it's almost like if you know that's where you're going, then at the moment there's a kind of encrustation based on the past about what these words mean—not just the emotional, relational associations with them, but also what they actually are. I was brought up with a very strangely narrow conception of God, as this kind of judge who was somehow separate from me. And at some point, that has to get stretched or broken. Maybe I'm just confused for a while. Maybe there's a not-knowing phase. But at some point, either that word or other words can come back to point toward and suggest—they function really as much as anything as poetic words, poetry words that suggest into the soul something of this mystery that's ultimately valuable and ultimately meaningful in a way that I can't quite capture.

There's something else worth saying about the notion of divinity. Some would prefer Buddha-nature, and there are certain streams of dharma where the idea of a kind of ultimate cosmic deity and certain ideas of Buddha-nature are pretty much the same. So there's this value, this benevolence—that's not really the right word, but something like that—wrapped up vaguely in the concept.

There's also a way that it's not separate from me, and I think that's very important as well. Again, I was brought up—if I just share about my background—with no indication that the divine or God or whatever is not separate from me somehow. It was always portrayed as something other that would judge me or discern where I would end up or something like that. There was this kind of separation there. So non-separation is also woven into this concept, along with this endlessness, this kind of endless reverberation and unfathomability and all that.

You can hear in the words I'm using many of the other nodes. They kind of imply each other. But that's the kind of thing we're going for. So it's much more open.

Does this make sense? So that's one way of just knowing that actually, this is completely normal. It could be around this concept, it could be around something else. It could be around body, it could be around emotions, it could be around relationship, it could be around what the cosmos is, it could be around what matter is. There are certain ways we get—we touched on this yesterday—things frozen by ideas or things that have happened to us or our personal history or our energetics or the way we relate to our emotions. All kinds of ways something gets stuck.

If I can find ways of entering into what we're calling soul-making—any way in—so you don't even have to go in at these words that feel difficult. Find something that does relate, and if the alchemy of that vessel... it's like yeast rising, something expands in the kneading of the dough. Something expands and it starts to gather into it other aspects of the being that aren't yet included.

Now here's the issue. There are two ways of approaching it. Here's the difficulty: we can approach it directly and inquire into the difficulty. I'll come back to that in a second. You can also not bother too much about the difficulty and just go in with whatever makes sense and resonates with you out of what's being said here and what's being taught. Go in where there's a feeling of soul-making, where there's that sense of soul-making, and just get into that. Let that speak to you, let that resonate in the being, in the psyche, and it will start doing its alchemical expansion process in its own time. Eventually, other aspects and concepts of the being at different levels that at the moment are outside of that process will get included, subsumed into that process.

So you can just trust what works and trust that we're going somewhere that is going to be—whatever words you end up with, whatever works for you as concepts—quite different from what your background is. In a way, you don't have to... it's good that you recognize there's a problem there, but you don't have to bash your head against it.

So it could be anything. Maybe something else just works for you. Or you could ask: which bit does work?

So in a way, you don't have to—it's good that you recognize there's a problem there, but you don't have to bash your head against it. So it could be anything. Maybe what actually works for you is something about—I'm making this up—or you could ask yourself, which bit does work?

"Sure."

Yeah, okay, beautiful. So nature—there's a sense of soul-making in nature, and you can sense nature with soul. You go that way. You trust that, and something happens that expands. What these words that we're using—and you might replace them with other words—but that kind of concept and idea and intimation that we're pointing to will come out of that soul-making where it works for you. You understand?

So this is a general rule. And at times you may want to, for instance, inquire into the particular kind of pain in relationship to these words. So it's actually like, you know, in a safe space—maybe with someone you trust, maybe with a teacher, with a friend—actually drop those words in and just notice: what is it? I get angry. What is it? I feel oppressed. I feel... And just notice what happens. And then what does that mean?

So as always, there are different directions in. It's really helpful to look at what's difficult and explore what's going on there. What are these walls that I have? And what do they need in terms of healing or opening? And sometimes we don't need to go towards the difficult. You can go the other way and trust this rising of the bread there, this alchemical presence, where it works for you—which is what you're saying in nature.

Does this make sense? Yeah? How does that sound for now, Mary?

"Yes. It's helped me to take away all the pressure."

Yeah, absolutely. There's no pressure. First of all, we're going very quickly through this material. And some of it just won't make sense. Or there'll be reactions—all kinds of reactions. It's all fine. It's all part of the working of the process, the turning of the soil.

And you can really trust your sense of soul-making. That's like a golden rule—go with that. And at some point, there might be some really interesting kind of heartful investigation of these wounds, basically, around these ideas and those relationships.

"Just going back to the thing you were saying about trusting, so there's also a part of me that thinks—just as man kind of fabricates God to be like me—are we fabricating soul-making to give life meaning?"

Yeah, thank you. So the question is, man... well, some people would say man fabricates God to give life meaning. And the question is, are we fabricating soul-making to...

So we could say yes, but the usual way we then understand that idea is like a certain level of understanding. We say life is ultimately meaningless. And the reality is there is no God. And then what we're doing, because we can't handle that—we're a little morally weak—we invent things that make us feel a little bit better and more comforted.

That's based on a certain kind of "this is real." Meaninglessness is real. Soullessness is real. Godlessness is real. You understand? So oftentimes in the framing of that kind of question, there's already a reality assumption there.

I think partly where I want to tie all this with emptiness is—if we start with the idea of fabrication. We fabricate, we make up stuff, or stuff gets believed in or perceived or created. Then I have a question to investigate, and it's a very deep thread of a question: What's not fabricated?

So I can see, for example—and everyone in this room knows—when you experience papañca, and you're just lost in some blah blah blah, and you come out of that and you think, "Huh, that was fabricated." You gain your sanity again. So I know, okay, at that point, that's fabricated—all that nonsense, papañca and that kind of mess that we get into.

And this is real, the hard reality of that, and I can settle with that. But what if we don't stop the investigation of what is fabricated right there? What if we keep going? I've seen that papañca is fabricated. What else is fabricated?

One way of understanding what Buddha Dharma is, that journey, is to keep open that question. What is fabricated? How do I know? How can I investigate and see? So this sense of self, most people take completely for real. And then you start going in and out of different states of meditation. You start looking at what is it that makes this sense of self feel so convincingly solid and fixed, and then at other times not. What does it

depend on? And then at a certain point you realize, goodness me, that sense of self is fabricated. And then maybe an even more subtle sense of self, and so on. And the same with other realities.

Now that's a long and profound journey, but at the end of it, let's say, one realizes it's all fabricated. So there is no "life is like this, the universe is like this." There is godlessness. Meaninglessness is an existential fact. And we're just fabricating on top of a basic reality to kind of paint things pink. It's actually that it's all fabricated. That's an extremely deep insight.

But I'm not asking anyone to believe that insight. Some people will just have an intuitive belief in that insight and that's fine. But what if I'm actually, if I'm really ruthless and rigorous and I say, let me find out what is fabricated and what is not fabricated. And then I just keep going with this question. I don't see, for instance, that papañca is fabricated or that meaning is fabricated. I follow it and I go even deeper. Meaninglessness is also fabricated. Godlessness is fabricated.

So that's one way of going through. We have chosen the word soul-making because it emphasizes the fact of fabrication. So it's actually, yes, we're fabricating. Yes. And then it's like, why is that not justifiable? And actually, is that something beautiful? So participation is a much deeper, more fuller word. We participate in the creation and discovery of all of this, all of this.

So it's really good to be skeptical and doubtful. But if you're going to be skeptical and doubtful, be vigorously, rigorously skeptical and doubtful. That is, to everyone. Do you understand? You've got this question. It's like we settle so easily for answers and we rest in assumptions as human beings so easily, sometimes without even recognizing, oh, I don't know that. It's just an assumption. So what happens if we just keep this? It's a bit like what Catherine said today. It's like "I know what reality is." Can we keep that open as an exploration? Do you understand?

There's another thing that reminds me. The other thing that we assume is that the generator or the fabricator, me, or whatever, is a real thing. So it's like this self is fabricating soul-making. Actually, again, when we go deeper and deeper, you start to realize that self, too, is empty. The fabricator, the mind, the soul, they're all empty. And that's like there's no ground to any of it.

And it might sound a bit, I don't know how it sounds now, where it lands in different people, but the deep felt realization of that is something truly magical.

It's something wondrous and mystical. It's not something like, "Well, that was a drag." It's something—it's hard to convey in language—but there's this thrill of that journey as well, of simply keeping this question open: What is fabricated? Is there something unfabricated? Is that real? There's an integrity and power and beauty to that thread of questioning itself.

And to me, it doesn't come out somewhere nihilistic at all. It comes out somewhere magical and mystical, with so much blessing to it. But maybe those aren't nice words. So, yeah.

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This is still forming, but I've been reflecting on what's alive—these layers of personal soul-making, this collective here, and then, if you could imagine, the soul of the universe soul-making together, and thinking about that in relation to social context.

The other day you used the word temenos, I think, as a vessel or sacred space. Over the last few months of doing these practices, it has felt to me that what you could call my "image library"—just to simplify it—is shaped to some extent by dominant culture, both personally and collectively. In some of my work, talking with other people and hearing their images, I've realized... A colleague was giving an example—he's Afro-Caribbean—and he was talking about the Juba dance, which arises from this collective archive of trauma. It's performed and then it disappears, and it's always new every single time. That was really rich for me, and I would not have known about that.

I think, but I'm not sure, that temenos is also meant to include all archetypal, cultural elements—that it spans cultures, that it's not just specific. So I guess I was wondering how... you've elegantly woven us together in community, and you even talked a little bit about the environment. Thinking about this group—it's not hugely diverse, so if we were in Ghana we would be having very different images—is there a way, or is it important to think about, how could we collectively contribute to a kind of "image library"? We can read about things, but even hearing yours and Catherine's, it's like, "Oh, this is..." I forgot about that, or I've never been exposed to that.

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I was using the word temenos only occasionally so far to mean a kind of... It's as if when there's an image, whether it's just on my own practicing or whether I'm practicing with others—like when we did the sharing practice yesterday—there's such... We need an alchemical vessel. It needs a vessel or container. When there's eros, it also needs a vessel, needs a container and a boundary, without which the soul-making can't happen. It doesn't really catch.

Some of you might have noticed already—you're in a group, or you're in one of those fours or in a dyad, and someone says something, or Catherine or I share an image in a talk, and that image lands in your soul and functions either as a spark for other images or becomes an image for you. Do you understand? Or someone becomes an image—Catherine or I or someone here or someone you know becomes an image for you. Or, again, you hear images. So there's a way that happens, but it needs a kind of temenos to happen.

There are different aspects. Part is just sensitivity, presence, care. I think formalism also helps.

In terms of the conceptual framework, what we're trying to do is a little bit what you could call a meta-framework. In other words, we're not so interested in gathering together around a certain image. For instance, in Christianity, the cross is one very potent image, or the body of Christ, or all kinds of things. And there's a gathering together around a certain image—community around an image, a commonality of people resonating with the same image, maybe in different ways and at different depths.

We might do that temporarily. Even when Catherine laid out those artifacts today, we're sharing an image for the space of a ritual. And some people will feel it more or less. But we're not choosing certain images and then making a religion out of those.

Maybe it's something to do with Western culture. Maybe it's something to do with our personalities. I think what we're aiming for is this sense that images are infinite in possibility. What we want to do—the business of this work—is the question of what's common to the whole process and the experience and the constellation around any particular image. Do you understand?

So that's what we're teaching - principles you can take anywhere and use in relation to any image or sensing of the soul. We're exploring what's common to this whole process, the elements that help this work flourish.

This approach may partly respond to our time and place in Western culture - a culture of individuality that we cannot now erase. This certainly brings difficulties: the alienation so common today, the loneliness, the persistent self-judgment and social anxiety. *Do I look okay? Am I okay? Do I measure up? Am I good?* All this is endemic in Western culture, arising from the birth of the Western sense of self centuries ago through slow, gradual, complex processes.

This inheritance brings challenges, yes, but also gifts. It offers the possibility that any one of us can receive images in any direction suitable to our soul. We can be fed by anything at all, following our own unique path.

Perhaps this reflects simply my inclination, Catherine's inclination. Or perhaps something in Western culture at this time needs this kind of openness, this deeper legitimization. Not only in Buddha-dharma, but in our larger culture, we lack real, deep legitimization of the imagination. Maybe what's needed is a structure that legitimates, supports, and deepens practice while remaining much more free and individual.

Regarding what you're calling the library of meanings - absolutely, you have to discover what works. In talks over recent years, I've tried offering a whole range of images: some ethereal and blissful, others seemingly violent, devouring, bloody; some very sexual, others peaceful; some unremarkable, others incredibly dramatic. The point is to show the range - it's endless, infinitely possible.

Sharing images or receiving them from other cultures could seed ideas for you, for others. We can do this with each other. But what really helps seed images... when I open a book of mythology, I often get bored quickly. Yet when someone tells me an image that's alive for them, or when a writer writes with that aliveness, something about the soulfulness, the soul-making spark in another, travels and plants a spark or ignites something in me. That may then become soul-making. We could create a library, but perhaps we also need that spark of ignition - we must receive the soulfulness, not just *this is what it looked like*.

About limitation and shaping - as the soul-making process unfolds, everything eventually gets woven into this vortex of soul-making. Even difficult things that happen to me, the events of my life, both beautiful and challenging, are sensed as given by soul, felt as part of the grace even when tragic.

This understanding expands further. What's given to us culturally - in both personal and cultural history - comes from the world soul, the *anima mundi*. There's an intelligence, alongside the deep non-intelligence, in our culture's unfolding, in the images and difficulties we face: environmental, political, social challenges. These are given by soul to us collectively. This is what we're faced with, our soul food - what we need in the dough for soul-making to occur.

Any situation can remain just a difficult circumstance, or a wonderful cultural gift, or it can be transformed into soul stuff. This offers an entirely different view of what gives us both images and our history, this culture and its challenges.

Again, the concept, the *logos*, expands into such a view. Then we receive a completely different sense of what life is, what the cosmos is, what's actually happening and unfolding. Am I trying to convince anyone or argue this as absolute reality? No - it's a poetic idea that can have tremendous power, beauty, and possibility to open the soul. While the whole question of ontology is vast, this view can have real soul power.

So there's that journey, and there's the possibility of the fullness of that journey, then emerging through different states of unfabricating into the unfabricated itself, opening to that. Some people would stop there. Some people would stop before that. Some people would stop there. But it's possible then to go even beyond that.

Because when you go that far, then you've got the unfabricated and the fabricated. And there's a kind of duality, which some Buddhadharma is very dualistic about. This is all—it's just the realm of samsara and dukkha. It's really not worth much. It's only a place to get out from, not to be reborn in. It's not popular teaching these days, but it's quite classical. There's a duality: the unfabricated is good and the fabricated is not.

One can go—Mahayana picks up and goes beyond that and sees even, we might say, the emptiness of the unfabricated. I'm just touching on this very quickly to get to something else. And then what that does is open up the possibility of fabrication, because fabrication is holy too. It's sacred-making. So there's no duality.

Now, the imaginal practice—as I think about it and as we've been exploring it—is fabricating. It's creating images. It's imagining. It's making more complexity, not less. So it's moving in a completely different direction than those three paths I mentioned: the insight into emptiness, the metta path, and the samatha path, which all move toward less fabrication.

The imaginal is moving toward more fabrication, but it's doing so in a way that's conscious and artistic and soulful. It's sacred fabrication. And when one has gone through that whole journey I described—into the unfabricated and then beyond that duality—then fabrication becomes possible as sacred art, as sacred creativity.

So in that sense, the imaginal practice is not a path to the unfabricated in the way those other three are. But it can be a path of sacred making, of holy creativity, of soulful fabrication. And that, in its own way, is just as sacred, just as valuable, as the journey into the unfabricated.

This is why I say soul doesn't want a full stop. Soul wants the endless creativity, the endless making of meaning, the endless weaving of images and stories and possibilities. Not because it's running away from the unfabricated, but because fabrication itself can be holy.

It all becomes the possibility of all becoming sacred. Is this okay so far?

With the imaginal, in a way, it's interesting. We could go around and ask everyone—we won't, but we could—how much or what kind of permission and legitimization do you need to get into imaginal practice or sensing the soul? For some people, it will be exactly related to this question of fabrication. For some people, it will be related to where it fits in the context of Buddhadharma. For some people, it will be something about, "Well, isn't it dangerous?" For others, it will be, "What about all that eros?" People will need different kinds of permissions and legitimizations.

But there is a legitimization that can come strictly from that kind of really deep understanding of emptiness that liberates the possibility and legitimates the possibility of fabricating beautifully. Why? Because fabrication is empty too. There is no duality with the unfabricated. One has sensed the equal holiness and non-duality of all things. So that legitimizes it.

A lot of people—there's probably a real minority in this room right now of people who've actually practiced all that way with emptiness in order for it to liberate the permission for the imaginal. That happened to be my path, but it's not common. Other people need a different approach. I'll talk about this tonight just a bit. What we need, though, is this sense of neither real nor not real with the imaginal. And that can come through art, through that sensibility, through poetry, through literature. We have that sense there. But I don't need to necessarily go through all that practice with the emptiness. Do you understand?

Some people approach the imaginal—they're attracted to it and start practicing with it before they've done all that emptiness business, so they've only done a little bit of it. And they find that, for instance, like we were talking with Nick yesterday about one of the things you might see with the self-view is just this multiplicity of self-sense. And you live it and you feel it, and so it brings with it this kind of "Which one is the real me?" And it brings a loosening of the self-sense, for example, and can bring a loosening and a liquefying of the world-sense and the other-sense. So there's a way that something similar to the emptiness process—the loosening of that, the un-reifying of that, de-reifying that—can happen through imaginal practice. So that's more emptiness, in this understanding of the non-inherent existence of things.

In terms of the unfabricated, this actually relates to a couple of the notes I had. So what can happen? A couple of people mentioned in their notes—meditating on an image. In this case it was infinite Aslan space. Do you know who Aslan is? The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. It's the lion. When I first read it, I thought it was infinite Asian space. Anyway, it's infinite Aslan space.

So, in other words, she's got—Aslan is an imaginal figure for her with a history. And what can happen sometimes is the image, the form of the image fades and we kind of get to the essence. So it wasn't just space or just infinite space. It was space imbued with the essence and the character of Aslan and what everything—all the richness and the unendingness and the complexity of what Aslan meant—but without the form. You understand?

Now there's another one here which is a lot more complicated, and I think I'll maybe talk to the person if I can just extract a couple of things from this. This is a person—it's a complement to what I've just said about the Aslan. So that's something very beautiful, goldenness, and it's the kind of simply pure, noble, etc. Everything that Aslan would kind of represent and more.

I'll have to move through this next example quickly because it's complex, but it's really fascinating. This person had more complex images involving destruction, death, and suffering. They had an image of a skeleton that had been around for a long time, and then the skeleton dissolved. This was quite surprising. What was even more striking was that there was huge love and joy emanating from the image, yet the practitioner was plunged into sadness.

So unlike what I'm guessing was the Aslan image—quite lovely, radiant, noble, and uplifting—here was a more complex, emotionally nuanced experience. When the image faded, there was a space filled with what they described as "liquid light slash love slash limitlessness" but also sadness and grief. Something had happened. This image hadn't quite captured the essence of that original form, but it had transformed and gone into a kind of boundless samadhi space, similar to the boundless Aslan, which captured certain values and emotional resonances.

This isn't on the Buddha's map. But what you find if you really delve into jhana practice and explore it extensively is that the Buddha outlined one path, but there are all kinds of cocktails, mixes, shadings, and variations—a whole realm of infinite possibilities.

So occasionally, this is possible: the form of an image fades and its essence remains. It could be an essence of loveliness. Perhaps there's a goddess, or a friend whose angelic form I'm meditating on—their particular loveliness. Then the form fades, and I'm left with that loveliness. But it's particular, carrying the essence of that specific character. Do you understand? It's not just universal, generic loveliness. It could take another step toward universal loveliness, but then we'd have to say we're no longer doing imaginal

practice because the image is gone, the particularity is gone. Yet it might still be soul-making because, as you said, "wow"—there's something the soul is expanding into and learning.

For those experiencing this, the sadness is fine. This practitioner continued: "I have leaned into it, stayed with it. It is not a sorrow that contracts." Here's a clue—there's something soul-making and beautiful happening. "It is as expansive in the energy body as love and very beautiful. The sorrow was beautiful." This is characteristic of soul-making; we can recognize it by these qualities.

Returning to your original question, I view it all as one integrated practice. Whether it's samatha moving toward the unfabricated, metta, emotional awareness, psychological healing, imaginal practice, or emptiness—it's all part of this big mandala, this vast range of interconnected practices, and it's all important.

There are ways of entering the imaginal that loosen our understanding of emptiness. There are ways of entering the imaginal that reach this essence and then move toward unfabricating, toward the fading of perception—like the jhanas, but different. With practice, you can learn to lean one way or another.

For example, taking the simpler Aslan case: here's this infinite Aslan space, and it's genuinely lovely. Within that mixture, there's probably some fundamentally jhanic quality—let's say equanimity—mixed with all the qualities that Aslan represents. I could lean toward that, find it in the mix, attune to it, and it will amplify out of the mixture. If it's equanimity in that mix, I just tune more to the equanimity, and it will move into classical equanimity of the fourth jhana. Or I can stay tuned to the Aslan quality itself, and it remains a variation. Or it can move somewhere more universal.

There's also a way it can move toward the unfabricated, though this is quite rare. I wouldn't recommend pursuing this all the time because if it becomes too universal, you're losing the richness of the imaginal practice itself.

It's great, but if you do it all the time, then you're losing the particularity of the imaginal practice. So it's there. There are so many tributaries. It's an endless world of wonder.

So you can do that. If you do it all the time, it will take it a bit out of what we're calling imaginal. Or you can stay with the essence at times, but you have to make sure that it's got this particularity to it. So that would be the same as saying an image could be very vague. I have the vague sense of a presence. I don't see it visually, but it's something quite particular and it's speaking to me with all those particular resonances. Okay?

Great. One time... This is super quick. It's completely related.

Is the phrase "to see or think this image" equivalent to the phrase "to see or think with this image"? Or are they kind of two sides of the coin?

It's not quite equivalent, but they're related. Maybe we can pick that up. Maybe I'll pick it up tonight.

Let's just have a bit of quiet, then the tea wash rappers will go, and we'll all meet back at 8:15 instead of 8. Is that okay?

All right.

CHAPTER 145

A Temenos Exercise (in threes)

Rob Burbea · 1h23

> *In this experiential dharma session, Rob Burbea leads participants through a structured group meditation exercise called a 'temenos' - a sacred container for spiritual work. Working in groups of three, practitioners explore multiple dimensions of awareness and connection through progressive rounds of sharing and witnessing.*
>
> *The session begins with establishing energy body awareness - that spacious sense of presence that extends beyond ordinary body consciousness. Participants then engage in mettā (loving-kindness) practice while maintaining eye contact and sensing each other's presence, learning to hold both self-awareness and awareness of others simultaneously. The exercise unfolds in three rounds: first tracking and expressing energy body sensations, then exploring emotions, and finally sharing what touches the soul - those deeply meaningful experiences that resonate with imaginal and sacred dimensions.*
>
> *Burbea emphasizes the interdependent nature of expression and witnessing, noting how speaking and being seen creates a 'rolling dynamic of sensitivity.' The witnesses practice whole-body listening, bringing their energy body awareness into relationship with the speaker. The session concludes with chanting the sacred syllables 'Om Ah Hum,' representing the body, speech, and mind of primordial Buddha nature that encompasses all aspects of experience - light and dark, harmonious and discordant. This practice demonstrates Burbea's distinctive approach to soul-making dharma, where meditation becomes a vehicle for sacred psychological and spiritual exploration.*

Setting again, really grounding in the sense of sitting—the sensations of sitting, the sensations of contact with the floor, with the earth, the backside, the sacrum, the legs. Even that grounding, even that connection with the earth can be multi-leveled at times. There's the simple mindfulness of sensations in their so-called bare actuality. There is the energy body connection. There is the imaginal sense of the body—this body, how it's perceived sitting on the earth.

Opening up the awareness to the whole body, a little bit larger—what we call energy body awareness, which really means the whole range available of what that space might feel like. It doesn't mean any particular kind of experience—bright, sensitive presence through the whole space of the body, a little bit larger. Again and again it will shrink, it will collapse, and again and again just inhabiting that whole space, opening up again the awareness, the presence, the aliveness through that whole space.

When you're ready, move the eyes open. What happens to the energy body awareness when the eyes open and you take in that you are with two fellows? What happens to the energy body awareness? What happens to the attention? Does it go all over there? Does it withdraw? Does it go somewhere else entirely? Just noticing.

Is it possible to have both in the awareness—both the sense of one's own presence, one's own space of energy body, and these other beings, these two beings? A sense of an attention that can hold and embrace both particularities.

Let yourself make eye contact. You don't have to. Sensing each other, opening to the presence of each other. Beginning to wish well, to radiate towards your two companions goodwill, blessing. May you be at peace. May you be happy. May you be at ease.

There's so much about you I don't know. So you've got your energy body, the sense of the others, and this goodwill, this repeating of the intention of metta—just the intention, perhaps the energy of metta. Awareness has all three: energy body, other, and metta, blessing, wishing well.

Again, in this moment, you know you are being wished well. You are the recipient of metta, of loving-kindness, of goodwill. Can the attention hold all of it—the energy body, the heart, the other, the giving and the receiving in loving-kindness? You are bathing others in loving-kindness.

There may be eye contact or there may not be. You can actually do this with the eyes open, with the senses open, sensing other. Sensing when we get lost in the other or in ourselves by withdrawing. There may be eye contact or there may not be, but the senses are open to the other—giving and receiving.

Really just letting that intention for metta flow, the awareness of the metta flowing. It remains as a foundation for everything, in the background, always ready to be activated consciously if necessary, but it's a basis—energy body awareness and the sense of other, others, and the sense of the senses in relationship.

Similar to what we did last time, the first stage of the exercise is just someone's going to go first and we'll go around.

And this time you have somewhere between two and three minutes. Somewhere between two and three minutes each to express or share: What's happening in your energy body right now, in this moment?

In those three minutes, it's going to change. Some of that might be quiet, some of it might be "I don't know," some of it might be "I feel numb." Some of it might be "I'm tingling" or "I feel electric" or "something's tight in my belly" - whatever it is. It will go through its own journey in the three minutes.

So you can be tracking that inside and expressing it. Again, you can express it in conventional descriptive language. You can express it in poetic language. You could express it in movement or in sound.

Sometimes the sense of the energy - we're opening up the meaning of this word energy - sometimes it actually involves an image of the body. We're sensing the body as image. So if that's there too, you can find a way to express that perhaps in words, describing not just the feeling in the body, but the image of the body, if that arises.

Does that make sense?

The job of the other two in the group, while one person is speaking, is to bring all your senses into engagement with the other, with the one who is speaking. So you're looking and you're listening. And what is it to bring your whole energy body to know the other with your energy body, with your whole body? Not touching, not intruding in any way, but my whole body might be sensitive, open to the other.

Is that clear?

So perhaps someone in each group could volunteer to go first. It will be somewhere between two and three minutes, and the witnesses remain silent. You're not saying anything or feeding anything back. Your job is to track your own process and your emotions or your mind as you're witnessing and opening, sensing the one who's communicating.

Do you understand? So you have a job too. You're receiving, but you're also tracking your own process.

Someone asks: "Can we still stay with the metta while we're listening?"

You can if you want, but if it feels like "Oh, it would be really good to go to the metta now," I wonder if it can be there in the background. Otherwise, your job as witness is to really just be as fully present in all the expanded meaning of what we mean by fully present on this retreat. Sometimes it might be "I need to do metta," but I would probably view that as just - we're setting it up, and then we're letting it go, and it's the basis.

Catherine will ring a bell to start us, and then we'll ring a bell to stop. Again, it will be just a short pause, and then the next person.

Eye contact can come and go. For the witnesses, what I'm asking you to do is really bring your senses into relationship with the other, which means eye and ears, and actually - what does it mean to bring my whole body into knowing, my whole energy body into knowing the other? We don't really have that in our culture; we don't think of that, but I'm suggesting that as much as possible too.

The person who's speaking sometimes will probably want to close their eyes to track something and can make eye contact or not, or look away. That's just natural in human psychology.

Is that good?

So just in the pause between turns: What's happening in the energy body? What are the echoes, the reverberations? Having spoken or expressed and having listened and sensed and seen - it doesn't need to be anything at all. Then the bell will ring for the next person.

Perhaps go around clockwise as if you were looking from the top.

And just to add, if it wasn't clear - as the person's speaking, you might say something, but do you notice there's an effect of speaking? There's an effect of speaking and being seen, and everything's dependent arising. So part of what you can track and then also express somehow is this very process itself.

The effect of having said what I just said, or shared or expressed, or of saying it right now. Do you understand?

So that's part of what you can include in your awareness and in your expression—this kind of rolling dynamic of sensitivity and expression. Checking out the echoes and the reverberations, whatever they are. Whatever they are.

Again in the silence, in the pause, noticing any reverberations, whatever's moving in the energy body, also in the mind, in the emotions—the sense of things.

Let's return to the metta. So again, taking in with your senses. Don't do this just with your eyes closed. Take in each other. See who you are offering metta to. Sense their presence, their beingness. Wishing well, emanating kindness, goodwill to your two companions.

With your energy body awareness. Maybe eye contact, but it doesn't have to be. It might come and go.

And know—be aware, recognize—that you are receiving that stream of kindness and loving kindness right now. You are giving and receiving the blessings. What is happening for self in the body, in the emotion, in the mind? Whatever is happening for other—wishing well, being wished well, however transient this flow of experience, just wishing well, bathed in kindness.

And then gently letting the active intention and awareness of metta go. Letting that form a basis or background, and aware again of yourself sitting and aware of your two companions.

Is there a kind of attention that can embrace both self and other in the particularities of each?

Again, for the second round, I will include emotions. Emotions are the primary thing now. Any mode of sharing or expressing emotions could be through gesture, through movement, through speech, through conventional use of language, through sound, poetic language, image language.

And again, the witnesses—just witness, bringing the fullness, as much as possible, of the being, of the attention, of the senses into taking in the other, receiving the other, attending to the other with the fullness of one's body and senses. And the witnesses track what's happening in the emotions and in the energy body—in their energy body.

And the person sharing is sharing or expressing what's happening emotionally right now. And again, it could be that now having said that, or as I'm saying that, I notice this—and sharing that. So is it possible to track the effect, both in the emotions and in the energy body, of the one who's speaking? Energy body and emotions are very connected, of course. But to share mostly about the emotions, but to notice all of that. Does that make sense?

Catherine will ring the bell again, and we'll have three minutes to go around.

Pausing again and, of course, sensing the heart, the emotions—what's there right now? Actually, the whole energy body is implied in the emotions as well. Whatever it is, whatever is reverberating in the emotions.

The heart is right now, over the gentle intensity, that knowing—inform and pervade the energy body, letting the energy body and the heart be involved in that knowing, be touched by that knowing, be shaped.

Gently letting the metta go into the background to form a basis.

Again, with the third round, each turn will be a little longer—about five or six minutes perhaps. You may not feel you want to, and it's okay to just say, "I'd rather not."

But the same as the other night, if you want to, and if it feels okay—so check in—is there something that has touched my soul? Something that feels soulful, something that has those resonances, feels deeply meaningful? It could be an intrapsychic image, could be a sensing in the soul, could be a relationship, could be something happening in this moment. It could be the very fact of sitting here, the very fact of sharing this way, the very fact of being together, the very fact of what's passing, what's arising in the senses right now.

If you want to, and if it feels okay, share that similarly, expressing it in any of those ways we've described. And again, the witnesses—your role will be to take in through the senses, to be clearly present with whole body and heart, and track what's going on in oneself, in the energy body, in the emotions, in the sense of things.

If what we're sharing isn't six minutes worth, can you share more than one? Share whatever you want about what nourishes your soul, and it might evolve in real time.

The person sharing might also—it might feel like too much of an ask, but it might be possible to, as you're sharing, again notice: How does this sharing affect me now? What do I notice in my energy body as I share this? What do I notice in my heart and my emotions? What do I notice in my mind, perhaps in terms of commentary or thought or perception of this very situation, of my sharing right now? What's my sense of myself and how it is to sit here right now? There's quite a lot there to be open to and sensitive to.

If I could add one more small element—it's nothing new: Who are these witnesses? Who am I sharing this with? Who am I voicing this with?

If you don't feel like participating, you can just sit quietly. Otherwise we'll go round again. It could be whoever wants to go first this time.

So again, perhaps begin with that real fullness of being, and everything that has come to mean for you over these days with these teachings. Take your time so you can track what's arising—you don't have to be speaking all the time.

Whatever is arising, whether you are the person expressing or a witness, notice what is arising right now in the energy body, in the heart, in the emotions, in the mind. Whatever you notice in your sense of self, sense of others, sense of how it is to be here right now with these companions. What does it look like? How does it feel? How is it sensed?

Catherine will ring the bell in a moment and we'll move to the next person around the circle. Again, how much can the senses and the sensitivity and the awareness be engaged, be involved, whether you're sharing or witnessing?

Whatever is reverberating right now in any of the aspects or dimensions of being—including the sensing—whatever it is, it's fine. Whatever it is teaches us something, something to learn. It's not to be judged, not to be dismissed or ignored or improved. It's something to learn from—all these things: emotion, thought, assessment, perception, inner and outer.

As we ring the bell to move to the third person, if that person doesn't want to share, then just hold that silent space, either with the intention of metta, or simply with the senses open, seeing what arises in the senses.

Bring the whole of the being, the whole of the attention, the whole of the body into relationship, into engagement with what is arising right now. What is arising includes what's happening in the body, what's happening in the heart, what's reverberating, what's arising in the mind, and the sense of this moment in this place right now. Where are we? Where are we?

Where are we? Where is the energy body, your awareness of your own experience, and also the sensing of your companions?

Beginning again to resume conscious active intention and metta—wishing well, wishing well-being and ease. Include your senses. Sense the moment as well as yourself, embracing both, knowing and recognizing that you too, again, are receiving right now. You are the recipient, the object of well-wishing, of kindness, of benevolence, of mercy. You are being looked upon in this moment with eyes of mercy.

Who sees me? Who listens to me? Who celebrates?

Before we finish this session, we'd like to do one more thing together. You can stand up if you want, or sit down, or even move. You can move if you want while we're doing it.

It's a really simple chant: Om Ah Hum.

These are seed syllables—magical, mantric syllables that have, as usual, multi-dimensional, multi-aspected meanings and resonances. One of the levels, or one of the multi-levels, is that they're the Om Ah Hum—body, speech, and mind of the primordial cosmic Buddha.

Soul makes things manifold. You start with one Buddha, you get more. The Buddha starts getting more complex with more aspects, more and more and more, in the realization, in the liberation through soul-making.

These primordial Buddhas have every possible aspect, every possible feature, every possible demeanor, every possible expression—light and ethereal and wrathful and dark and raging with holy rage. They include suffering, and they include bliss, and they include equanimity. They're still and they loom. They're silent and they sound. Everything is in there.

The actual basic chant is very simple, but you are free to stand up, sit down, move, and sonically embellish in any way you want. Sometimes when we chant, we all try to find the same pitch or we find nice harmonies, so harmonize to your heart's content—make little trills and counterpoint and all that. Sometimes we always go for the pretty harmonies. If you feel moved to and you want some dissonance—Om Ah Hum. Because it's the primordial Buddha, it's everything: including the dukkha, including the light, including the dark, including the pretty, including the seemingly ugly, including the rub, and including the smooth.

Om Ah Hum...

CHAPTER 146

Destiny, Autonomy, Love, and Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 39 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea addresses deep questions about the relationship between duty, destiny, and personal autonomy within soul-making practice. He explores how the sense of duty arises naturally when working with images and soul-sensing, explaining that this duty can manifest in various ways - from simple reverence and beholding to more concrete life expressions. Burbea emphasizes the participatory nature of this work, where we both create and discover our sense of purpose through the middle way ontology.*
>
> *The discussion delves into challenging territory around dark or seemingly 'evil' images, clarifying that darkness in soul-making can carry profound beauty and meaning without necessarily being pathological. Burbea explains how images arise through dependent origination, influenced by our conceptual frameworks, trust, love, and other factors. He addresses the autonomy of images - how they can feel like they're asking something of us while we retain our freedom to respond or not.*
>
> *The conversation concludes with an exploration of how we can recognize being loved by images or soul-objects, from obvious communications to increasingly subtle forms of reciprocal relationship. Throughout, Burbea weaves together the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic, showing how conceptual openness allows images to expand in dimensionality and come alive with soul.*

Just a reminder: if you would like to ask something or share something and you'd rather it wasn't recorded and made public, please let me know and I'll press pause.

Karen has a multiple-part question about duty—specifically how to relate to duty, how it intersects with emptiness, and how to relate the understanding or experience of emptiness to image and to duty itself. She's also wondering whether duty shifts over time, if it changes, and how all these elements seem to coalesce around this central theme.

Let me start at the end of your question and work backwards. The nodes of the lattice reflect each other, imply each other, contain each other, and also complement each other. Some of them are almost like different sides of the same coin—they draw each other in. So when you have a sensing of soul, everything you described I would expect. I would expect exactly these questions and this kind of unfolding.

The word *destiny* comes up, though we haven't mentioned it yet, but I would expect it to emerge. Something happens when we work with an image, with this sensitivity, with enough openness of logos that Catherine was talking about, enough conceptual framework—it starts growing. It starts expanding. More and more elements of existence, not just of ourselves but of existence itself, get woven in and sensed with soul and caught up in that whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

Wherever there's image, in some way or another, there's a sense of duty. Actually, wherever there's any soul-making, there's this quality. Let me give you a brief example of something that's not image. Consider jhana—the quieting of images. When you first authentically open to jhana, it's very rare for someone to simply say, "Well, that was nice." It comes with a sense of duty. It's like, "Wow, look at what is possible. Look at this vista that has opened up in terms of a realm of consciousness." At minimum, the duty might be something like: I need to explore this more, I need to practice more, I need to find out more. Maybe I need to go beyond this. Maybe I need to share this with others.

Anytime there's a stretching of the psyche in a way that feels meaningful to us, we have some kind of sense of duty with it. With an image, as you said, this can manifest in different ways.

This is really important—all the parts of your question truly do intersect. The danger in duty, of course, is the fundamentalist religious terrorist, isn't it? Someone who says, "I have this vision that sounds divine, and I'm on fire with it, and my duty is to kill"—or whatever it might be. What's missing completely—well, quite a lot actually—but one of the things missing is this: we participate, we assent, there's this create-discover imaginal middle way.

When I think about instances of duty that I might feel in relation to something soul-making or some image or sensing with soul, it can feel like the most important thing in my life, that duty. But it still feels real-or-not-real. It still has that amplitude, that breadth of the middle way ontology. For me, that's really key.

This is something we notice, something important to think about and discuss conceptually.

But I think one of the things I'm emphasizing about these recognitions is that we actually notice them. You start in whatever order it comes—you notice a sense of duty, but then you'll also notice this middle way, if there's sensitivity, if there's delicacy, if there's the energy body present, if there's openness, all the rest of it.

We can have this notion of duty, and then something gets cut off, and we engage this question about duty on a purely intellectual level. That's important—part of what I'm saying is that everything gets subsumed into soul-making, including the intellect. I point up here, but it's not really up here, is it? Intellect is everywhere. So including conceptuality, but you can also use your body and your sensitivity, your mindfulness and attention. You will discern this sense of duty that feels so touching to the soul, so calling.

I say again, for me it feels like the most important—these duties are what feel like the most important things in my life. I've said this somewhere before, but one of the things that brings me deep equanimity in relation to possibly dying soon from cancer is the sense that I'm on track with my duty. I have tried to do my duties, plural. That does something to the whole sense of existence, life and death. It's not everything, but it's immense—to die with that sense. Do you understand?

But I would never try to convince anyone else that what I sense as my duty is some kind of independently objective fact in the universe. It's something I participate in. To go back to today's framework, I create-discover that duty. And yes, it can change over time, curiously.

I can think of certain images I shared recently in a talk—longtime images that in the dance of life and image, in the infinite echoing and reflection of those, have transformed over time. So the duty is different. But that wasn't something I decided to change. It was something that evolved in this dance, in this mysterious, infinite echoing of life and relationship and that image. The sense of duty began to change naturally. It's like the same image evolved in the process of soul-making, not because I decided it would be better, or I'd have less *dukkha*, or it would be an easier journey if I changed the image and the sense of duty with it. Does that make sense?

So yes, it can evolve like that. Yes, there's always this sense of participation, and yes, there's always this sense of free will. I was speaking quickly about autonomy earlier, and one of the things I was trying to stress is that we always have a choice with soul-making. It cannot happen without our conscious participation, without some sense of my autonomy and freedom to say no—I'm not going to do that duty, I'm not going to engage this image, I'm not going to follow this eros, I'm not going to listen to that calling. Or I am.

So there's always this sense of both the autonomy of the image and my autonomy. Something is asking something from me. Something calls me, wants something from me. A lot of psychology would approach imagination asking, "What can I get from it?"

That's part of it, but there's a whole deeper, more beautiful dimension—territories, landscapes, vistas that can open when we also ask the other question: "What do you want from me?"

In a way, it's a bigger ask. This autonomous image—it's me, but it's not me. It's part of me, but it's beyond me. It wants something from me and from my life. But I always have my autonomy. So not only am I not going to be possessed in some way, doing some zombie thing, but I can also say no.

Let me just... Yes. And there was something else.

Okay, so the destiny... Oh, I know what it was. So two things. Yeah, destiny. We'll hold on to that for a second. And discerning what the duty is.

A lot of this work, if I think back on my journey with this kind of exploration, at the beginning it was all very clunky. Describing it to others might have sounded quite dramatic, you know—pretty dramatic images with this journeying process in a landscape with dragons and all that kind of stuff. As it progresses, and this applies to other meditations as well, like emptiness, everything gets more subtle. We grow in sensitivity and delicacy.

So the question of duty—take that religious fundamentalist terrorist. It's anything but subtle. Blowing yourself up in a bus station is not a subtle gesture at all. But the duty with an image can be all the way to just: my duty is to behold it and to be touched by it and to be open to it and to have that sense of mystery. In my heart, even though I might not physically bow, something is bowing. Something has that reverence. That's the duty.

Sometimes it's just that, and no one else knows anything about it, and no one else can see any obvious manifestation in your life. You've just been touched by the poetry of something, and it's between me and the image, me and the divine, me and existence. Other duties manifest more concretely in life, but I would be a little suspicious of ones that reflect too accurately the image.

For example, and I've shared this in lots of talks, one image for me is this kind of solitary soldier. That's one of the ones that's changed—it's really not that present much anymore. But for a long time it was there. Now the last thing I would want to do is join the army. Really not my cup of tea. I was never into fighting. I didn't even like rugby and all that stuff.

But I can see in my life how combative I am when I need to stand up for something or some vision or sensibility that feels encroached, or some kind of care that feels encroached socially, politically, or in a certain scene. So there's a kind of reflection there, but I'm certainly not driving spears through anyone. There's a kind of reflection, but it's not literal. Do you understand?

How to discern? I don't know that I have an answer to that, really. But maybe it's something to do with this other note of the infinite echoing and mirroring. There's a sense of my life, my choices, my actions, my behavior, and the image, and they mysteriously echo each other, so that as everything gets more and more subsumed in soul-making—which means everything: my body, my intellect, my sense of my journey, my dukkha, the cosmos, the sense of God or Buddha nature, materiality, relationship, everything—then more and more we get this echoing sense, this infinite mirroring.

As I said, I'm not sure when it was yesterday, we can conceive... A normal way of conceiving images in our wider culture would be something happens in my life or something exists in my psyche and the psyche generates the image of that. It's a result. It's a representation. We can play with a conception the other way around. My life is generated by the images. The image is primary in that sense. Does that make sense?

This begins to raise the question: what's my destiny? Is my destiny somehow—and tie this in with the autonomy—not given so much as I'm offered something? I'm offered something, and that thing might be a really difficult thing. It might be really...

But it comes, so I have to say yes to that. This cancer could just be cancer. It could just be death. It could just be pain. It could just be ordinary suffering, or it can be sensed with soul. It can be transformed. So that's not a destiny so much as an offering: Do you want to pick this up and sense it with soul? And then it becomes a destiny. We make it. We soul-make. Do you understand?

So again, even the sense of destiny is created, discovered. We participate in it. We retain our autonomy, and yet there's something possibly calling us. And all of that is both a kind of concept and an image, really—of life, sensing the soul of life—but also conceptual ideas that arise out of the alchemical process of soul-making. I would expect these things to emerge. Everything, everything, everything will get woven in. Soul wants to grow. Soul, as I said sometime, loves soul-making and will just reach out and draw in everything into that process. Do you understand?

Participant: How's that for the first part? The other question I think is quite a big one and it sort of shades into some of what you just said. It's about evil.

Rob: Evil, yeah.

Participant: I wonder if other people would... I'm not sure about... I don't know what to do. Okay, so it might be a much shorter one, actually. It's just about... So I get that sense in some images that it's really dark and that sometimes I have had that experience of being quite terrified. But also there are feelings that are in the dark space, the loving that you have in the cross. And there's a kind of... And then, so I just kind of wonder about, and I'm thinking about a particular person, whether that's the same thing or, you know, then obviously there's like a whole area of mental health...

Rob: Sure.

Participant: Sorry, that's a little bit...

Rob: Yeah, so the questions about evil and images that feel evil, and then images that are terrifying or dark but not necessarily evil. And how does it fit in with mental health and other cultures where they're much more comfortable? People believe in spirits and spirit possession and that sort of thing.

I can just say for me, I can't say about your friend because they're not here and I haven't met them and I don't know. If I'm with someone who's agitated in some way that maybe suggests something like that, I guess I, for me as a teacher, have a certain sense of whether there's a possibility there to convert an image, even if it seems evil and terrifying, for that to become imaginal. We talked about this spectrum. On one side, *papañca* and that kind of reification, the clinging, the terror of that.

So sometimes people might come with something that's really disturbed them, but there's something in what they're saying that shows me a possibility. And then we can work together with a lot of skill. And other times—and I can think of several examples—where a person wants to work with the imager, but I can see they're really not ready. They don't have that capacity yet. And so I would say, absolutely not. Not for you.

Not for you yet. And they might need other kind of help first.

Part of our conceptual framework is that the image is a dependent arising, like everything else. So it arises according to conditions—how the image appears, whether it seems evil or, as you say, dark. This is really, really important if you haven't grasped this yet: an image can be dark and involve dukkha, but yet have that love in it somehow, and the beauty, and it feels soul-making. Really, really important to know that.

There's the light side and the ethereal side of soul, and there's the dark side, and there's not any greater beauty in one or greater soulfulness. This is really, really important. So there's that range of what an image can be—the tonality of an image, let's say, in terms of light and dark in the broad sense of what those words mean.

But in our conceptual framework, in our logos, the image is always a dependent arising. That's partly what the lattice is saying. It's saying that the image does have a certain autonomy, but at the same time, when we talk about the imaginal, or what's imaginal, we're talking about the whole thing—the whole mix, gestalt, of all the lattice, some of which seems objective, and some of which seems part of me, subjective.

So when we talked about trust, it's like if I can just sprinkle a grain of trust there, the image changes. The image will become less threatening because I've now put something into the alchemical vessel called trust. I've put this substance called trust into the alchemical vessel, and the alchemy of what then happens is changed. Do you understand?

What Catherine mentioned today—logos is also one of the nodes. So what actually arises depends on the conceptual framework. In a culture like Thailand, for example, they live and breathe a conceptual framework of spirits and ghosts and possessions and all kinds of phenomena. When they have a certain experience, they are bringing—even the least intellectual person there—that whole logos, not as a big articulated philosophy, but just kind of implicitly. And that colors the experience too.

Now, if that's not shiftable—Ajahn Chah is not going to sit down and teach them about dependent arising and all that necessarily—but he will introduce something like love. And so, again, the node in our language, the node of love, is something I notice, but also something that I can bring. My loving the image—it's like the trust—starts to change something.

This works because the image is dependent arising, but also the conceptual framework. So again, if in my conceptual framework there's the idea of it as a dependent arising, there's just for a little bit entertaining the idea that soul has treasure for me, that there's something redeemable in what appears dark and what is dukkha. And redeemable doesn't always mean making what's dark light. It means seeing the beauty and the soul in the dark. Do you understand?

But that's part of the conceptual framework. The idea of dependent arising is part of the conceptual framework. So in some situations, you simply can't change the conceptual framework. It's too big a job. Someone asked me, "Can you recommend some talks that explain the conceptual framework?" Well, yeah, but they're quite long. The thing about conceptual frameworks is they're quite heavy machinery. A lot of it's unconscious.

But eros is something that can flicker up very quickly and die down very quickly. Image can flicker, but tends to stay around a bit longer. Logos is slower. And some of the logoi that we have are really entrenched. We don't even realize we have them—like about what matter is, or about what the universe is. We've inherited that from hundreds of years of Western culture. So that's the slower piece in all of this, which is why it's hard to sit down with someone and just get them to change their conceptual framework.

After a while with this kind of practice, you can actually just go into seeing things with this conceptual framework. When soul, when concept and conceptuality and the thinking mind and logos gets involved with soul, then it ignites it, it fertilizes it, it makes it active. It will push out, it will expand, it will gain complexity and also gain flexibility, so that it becomes quite possible to just change a conceptual framework right in the moment.

I just see it this way. I just conceive of it that way. So going back to your thing about duty, I just conceive of it as given to me as destiny. Or I'll conceive of it as, no, I'm completely autonomous. Or something else. So that becomes, with practice, really quite flexible. You can just step in and out of different conceptual frameworks.

But the main point here is that the image and the tonality—in terms of evil, good, benevolence, dark, light—the image arises as a dependent arising, dependent on concept, affect, trust, sensitivity, energy, body, awareness, love. We participate. You can't not participate. And it's just a matter of realizing the full beauty and extent and depth of the participation we have.

Let me turn to Jill's question about loving and being loved—how that works, especially the being loved. When you ask how does it work, Jill, do you mean what's the conceptual mechanism there, or how do I recognize it?

Let me take the recognition part first. Some images are just obvious because it's a grandma that's hugging you, or some actual images just tell you, "I love you." And again, we said, what does the image want? It wants you to know that you're loved. It wants to communicate this love. And your duty—if we can link it—my duty is to see that and recognize it and let that in. So that's very obvious, and it could be sexual, erotic love. But it could manifest in all kinds of different forms, more or less obviously.

But if we can link it to something we said with Gareth, a lot of what happens is the whole feel of things can expand its range to include what's much more subtle. So it's interesting—I'm with this tree, or whatever it is, maybe it's a real tree, a physical tree, or I have an image of some kind of stone. How do I recognize this more subtle communication?

I have to be very delicate in my attention. It's not obvious. It's not going to do something obvious in terms of its communication.

It might, actually, because the tree could speak or something. But sometimes the range of things just gets more subtle. So that means we just have to be quite delicate and open about how we might feel that.

One interesting thing is if you—so everything's interconnected, so it might be some other node that starts to ignite this node, but it might also be that this node's really a pair: loving and being loved. So if you communicate your love somehow or other—in words, in gesture, in image—it might then, in the reciprocity of things, in other words, your love ignites its love, and then it becomes more visible. So sometimes the communication acts as a kind of alchemical spark. So I don't think there's an exact answer so much as just to know that it can get really, really subtle.

Does that make sense?

The conceptual mechanism... I mean, in a way, it's part of the sense of the autonomy of the image. So, in other words, this image has personhood in the sense that it has soul. So it has its own sensibility, its own way of knowing, its own intelligence, its own affect, its own love, its own eros. It desires you. So there's... it's totally... yeah.

So again, this is something that we could have played another game on this retreat, which is just given some instructions, and I could have had a sealed envelope, you know, like they do on some game shows or whatever, and it would have the nodes in it. And you would each have a sealed envelope. And I would just wait, if it was a longer retreat, just wait in interviews for you to come and report which node. So it's something that you'd notice, right, in the mystical unfolding. But it's something we can also activate as well.

How does it happen? It happens because... let's relate it to what Catherine shared about the soul-making dynamic, this Eros-Psyche-Logos. Here's an image, which we call as part of psyche, as image. And that image has something beautiful and attractive to it. And in—feels like here—arises my eros. There's something, I'm drawn to this image, or

I want to fill out in it, or there's some kind of dynamic that wants to kind of be more intimate with it, inhabit it more, or touch it more, know it more, or, you know, that's what we could call eros.

If the logos decides that, well, an image is just a—you know, for example, it's just some brain neurons firing, it's just some nonsense—nothing's really going to happen with that. It might give you an idea of what you might chase in life, but you'll have to go looking for it out there.

If, though, the logos and the sensibility allow a kind of expansion, what happens is the image itself starts to get more rich and more deep and more imaginable, more multifaceted, and it starts to come alive, really, through this kind of dynamic of eros, which is looking for more. Eros is always looking for more—not in a problematic way, if it's allowed to expand, if the image is allowed to expand.

And as the image expands, it begins to feel like some of these things, it begins to feel like it's asking me something and it's loving me and it's got this dimension and that dimension and this aspect and that aspect. Do you understand? So the wanting more, it's like it inseminates something and it starts to expand. And because the logos allows it to—because the logos we're starting with, the logos saying, "Just maybe there's a treasure here, maybe imagination has something, the imaginal has something of value, and maybe there's something to discover here." So that, and then the logos can expand even more to... you know. And so the image gains dimensionality, aspectedness, complexity, multifacetedness, all character, personhood.

Does it make sense then? It's got... because, like a person, you then are in relationship. And just as with a person, you wouldn't say... You know, you would grant them full personhood. You would only—someone with some kind of cognitive incapacity would not be able to sense the personhood there, the fullness that there's eros there, there's love, there's intelligence, there's a kind of knowing, even if it's very different than what we're used to.

So this image of a stone, it's like, how does this stone that has come so alive with soul, how does it know? It knows in a very different way than I know. It doesn't have all these fancy ideas and doesn't talk for hours on end.

Yes, precisely, it communicates exactly, yes. So there's a resonance and again there's this kind of mirroring—infinite kind of mirroring of you and the stone, for example, or whatever. And it's very multi-leveled.

Rather than getting simpler and simpler, it gets more and more rich, more and more complex and diversified and multi-dimensional, multi-aspect. And then because of that, there's more for eros to fall in love with. And it's more. And there's a sense of, I see more and I sense even more that I can only dimly... and that attracts the eros even more. So the eros kind of wants more, things expand more and more and more. And that's actually infinite. And then everything starts getting, as I said at the beginning, caught up in the soul-making dynamic: self, other, sense of world, sense of eros itself.

All of it becomes imbued with soul—given this quality of holiness, dimensionality, depth. Everything is sensed through this lens of sacred meaning.

And so we come full circle. The soul-making dynamic reveals itself as this infinite spiral of deepening perception and expanding love. Each moment of recognition calls forth more Eros, which in turn reveals more beauty, more mystery, more of what calls to be loved. The self that perceives, the other that is perceived, our sense of world, even our sense of Eros itself—all become woven into this sacred dance of meaning-making and love.

This is the gift of the imaginal—not as escape from reality, but as a way of seeing through to the soul of things, to the inexhaustible depth that lies waiting in each moment, each encounter, each breath. When we learn to see with these eyes, everything becomes a doorway, everything becomes an invitation to fall more deeply in love with the mystery of existence itself.

Let us rest now in this understanding, letting it settle into the spaces between thoughts, into the quiet depths of our own being. May this exploration of soul-making continue to unfold in your practice, in your relationships, in your daily life—revealing ever more of the sacred dimension that is always already here, waiting to be discovered anew.

CHAPTER 147

Discernment in Soulmaking (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 57 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea addresses several nuanced questions about soul-making practice. He explores the relationship between different approaches to working with images - comparing James Hillman's archetypal psychology with the specific framework of soul-making dharma. Burbea clarifies that while everything can be seen as image or perception (leading to spaciousness and liberation), soul-making requires a particular conceptual framework and sensitivity that allows for the unfolding of what he calls the 'lattice' - qualities like eternality, duty, and love that characterize imaginal figures.*
>
> *The discussion moves through practical concerns about balancing active and receptive modes in imaginal practice, using the metaphor of right effort from traditional meditation. Burbea emphasizes that soul-making is fabrication, and explores how experiences at different levels of fabrication can be soul-making depending on their capacity to stretch and expand one's sense of existence. He addresses the role of eros and sexuality in soul-making, explaining eros as a movement toward intimate knowing of the beloved other that drives the entire soul-making dynamic.*
>
> *The session concludes with challenging ontological questions that naturally arise from this practice - particularly the uncanny experience of being 'created-discovered' by imaginal figures. Burbea suggests that rather than seeking final ontological truths, we can engage in 'ontologizing for the sake of soul-making,' allowing our deepest conceptual frameworks to remain malleable while seriously entertaining radical shifts in our understanding of reality.*

So I'm struggling with a message I'm trying to figure out why, and I think I've started to distill that. A phrase came to me today, which I think is from Kevin, but I haven't checked it out: something about how you don't do justice to the image if you require it to have meaning. I was extrapolating that further—you don't do justice if I require it to have eternality, or for it to love me, and all these things.

I think my logos, my understanding of the imaginal, comes a lot from here, is that image is primacy, and you can come to understand the psyche in this wholly different way—that everything within the psyche is imaginal. So that memory that you have of your mother, that you thought was a representation of the factual account of what happened to you when you were a child, is in a way an imaginal memory. That figure of

your mother is an imaginal figure, and you can be in relationship to that. In becoming in relationship to that, something can happen—I mean, you know something can happen, but something can happen.

What came out of that is I realized that actually a lot of my relationship to the imaginal is just coming to view my psyche as imaginal. So if you take the mother example, I come into relationship with the imaginal figure of a mother. But that figure doesn't have eternality. When I work with it, it doesn't love me necessarily. I don't feel a duty to it. I'm going between the images all the time, in a way. I might see that there's an imaginal element to that—it's got this constellation of qualities and images around it—but it doesn't have all of these things that we're talking about.

It's like this dichotomy is forming in my mind between all of that and then this other thing: these images that fit into the lattice. Actually most of my images don't seem to fit into the lattice. They don't have this eternality. Does that make sense? What is the relationship between these two different things, or two different practices?

Yeah, so I'm not one hundred percent sure it makes sense to me yet. If I try and summarize what you said, and then maybe we can see where I'm not understanding, or maybe I have understood...

Iona is sharing that she's having problems with the idea of the lattice as any kind of map of what imaginal might be, and certainly as a demand of what imaginal might be. Rather, her sense of imaginal, which she thinks she's getting from James Hillman, is more that anything that arises in the psyche is image. When she pays attention to her experience, a lot of the images don't seem to have these qualities that we're identifying in the lattice. To require that of them would feel wrong.

I didn't invent the word "imaginal." It was actually Henri Corbin. Hillman got it from Corbin. Corbin meant something quite different from what Hillman meant, and quite different from Jung. In a way, I would say what we're unfolding here is different from Hillman as well. There are overlaps between all that, and I would say that certainly Corbin really didn't like Jung and probably didn't like Hillman as well. Hillman had huge respect for Corbin. People borrow, because you borrow authority—so and so said this because it lends weight.

So basically there's this word, and what do we do with the fact of two things? First, that people are using it in different ways—there are more ways than that. Now it's become, as I said right in the beginning when I introduced it, quite popular, this word, in

certain circles. People mean quite different things by it. Some people are not quite sure what they mean by it, or it's very, very loose or whatever. That's just a kind of fact—a social fact, a linguistic fact.

What do we do with that? And then what do we do also with the fact that all four—Corbin, Jung, Hillman, and what we're doing here—would discern a difference in quality or kind of images? They're not just different contents. You can have an image of your mother, you can have an image of your father—different contents, but they're really different ontological status, whole different kinds.

We somehow have to either just say everything is image in the sense that everything is perception, therefore it's image. That's an important point, dharma-wise.

And people mean quite different things by it. Some are not quite sure what they mean, or their understanding remains very loose. This is simply a fact—a social, linguistic reality. What do we do with that?

And what do we do with the fact that all four approaches I mentioned—Corbin, Jung, Hillman, and our work here—would discern a difference in quality or ontological status among images? These are not just different contents, like an image of your mother versus your father, but genuinely different kinds of being. We somehow have to navigate this territory.

We could simply say everything is image in the sense that everything is perception. Dharma-wise, this is profoundly important. Having this view—that everything is perception, everything is image—already brings a certain kind of liberation and spaciousness to all experience. This is wonderful and valuable.

But in itself, this won't unfold what we're calling soul-making. It will move in a different direction, toward more spaciousness and equality of things. What I'm trying to communicate is not so much a demand as an understanding of the imaginal as dependent arising. Perhaps in time, these aspects will be noticed naturally.

A mother image, if I linger with it and bring all my sensitivity, and if it's not constrained by a particular conceptual framework, will probably unfold these soul-making qualities. Let's call this a postulate, a thesis to be discovered, rather than a demand.

I don't know anyone who's mapped out the complete territory of possible human images—what constitutes psychic phenomena, ESP, or other experiences. Maybe someone has attempted it, but if so, at some point in human history, it will never satisfy everyone completely.

If we step back and ask what we want—if we want that expansive, liberative freedom and spaciousness—then we can practice seeing everything as image in the sense of perception. This creates its own kind of beauty and limited soul-making, but more specifically spaciousness-making and liberation-making.

If we want what we're calling soul-making, then a certain conceptual framework and attunement of being, sensibility, and attention will help that unfold. What arises in perception—whether imaginative or otherwise—is always dependent arising, partly dependent on our conceptual framework. Even our idea of what soul-making is will unfold in different directions based on how we conceive it.

Rather than making an absolute ontological claim, I'm suggesting this as a possible unfolding that some people may find deeply valuable.

At the end of the day, I retain my autonomy—it's up to everyone to decide what they want. If I decide I want this thing called soul-making, then these ideas, sensitivities, attunements, and conceptual framework might serve that in a sustainable, ongoing way. If I want something else, then I need a different approach.

As a human being, I can actually move between these orientations. From one moment to the next, I could shift into seeing everything as image for spacious liberation, or relate to my mother conventionally for psychotherapeutic reasons, or simply think I should call her because we haven't spoken recently. I can move fluidly between these rather than adopting a rigid posture or conceptual framework.

I encourage everyone to have this kind of autonomy. I'm not interested in imposing anything on anyone. Find your own way, what you're drawn to, your own range of options at different times. This feels really important to me.

The question you're raising touches on soul-making, fabrication, levels of fabrication, and complexity. You're describing a particular experience that feels relatively unfabricated—very body-based, visceral, primordial in quality. Yet the state itself and the movements arising from it feel important to your being, to your soul, even though they feel very different from imaginal images with their depth, resonance, mirroring, and complex layers.

You're wondering whether that experience in itself constitutes soul-making, or whether it becomes soul-making through how you relate to it and integrate it into your life. This touches on something quite

Both really, but the question is about whether that rhythm - the metta, the gentle inquiry, checking with the energy body - would be a model for engaging with soul-making ourselves.

Yes, absolutely. And you've identified something really important there. What's happening in those exercises is exactly what we might call a soul-making approach to relationship, to encounter with another, and to encounter with experience in general.

So when you're offering metta, you're creating a certain quality of space - a kind of tenderness and care that allows things to unfold rather than forcing them. The gentle inquiry is this willingness to be curious, to not know in advance what's going to emerge, which is part of that sense of discovery that's so central to soul-making. And checking with the energy body keeps you rooted in the felt sense, in the embodied knowing, rather than just staying up in the head with concepts.

And yes, that same rhythm, that same quality of engagement, is exactly what we want to bring to soul-making practice more generally. Whether you're working with an image that arises in meditation, or you're engaging with a difficult emotion, or you're exploring some complex situation in your life - that same quality of tender curiosity, that willingness to feel into things rather than analyze them to death, that checking in with how things are landing in the body.

It's like creating the optimal conditions for soul-making to happen. Because soul-making, as we've been saying, is partly about discovery - and discovery requires this kind of open, receptive, curious stance. It can't be forced or manufactured. But we can create the conditions where it's more likely to emerge.

Does that resonate? Have you found that rhythm helpful in the exercises we've been doing?

Or in yourself? Like, yeah. I mean, not the complete thing, but just... Yeah. In a way, yes.

I don't know that it needs to be quite so linear. In this retreat that we may be doing in June, I think it's called Foundations of Soul-Making Dharma, and partly it's a double meaning with foundations. It partly means what are the personal prerequisites that you need to have to make this work, without which it's not really going to work.

One is, I would say, awareness—bodily awareness, energy body awareness, emotional awareness. And also emotional ability to care, you know, and to handle well what arises. Without those two skills, and also without the kindness. So if I don't... if I'm regarding what happens in myself with judgment and unkindness and dismissal, it's not going to be... it's not going to be the capacity for soul making, you know.

So there are probably just... those are three, right? Energy body, emotional—let's call it awareness and skill—and just, you know, kindness with one's own psychology and being. Those are three out of more we could enumerate, kind of prerequisites for doing this kind of practice.

Eventually, it's a bit like when we did the metta in those exercises, and I kind of said, okay... you actually asked, it was you, Bo: do we need to keep doing it when we're listening? Do you remember asking that? And in a way, I think there's a way you can kind of, when these things are established as more just almost easily accessible and almost habitual, then you can kind of let them go a little bit, especially the metta, because it's just there. And if I need it, I can bring it as a kind of... but it's kind of there as a backdrop. So right now, I just feel confident that there's metta here, you know, and I don't have to kind of keep... I mean, I could, but it's just there as a kind of...

Yeah. And then rather than doing it linearly with the emotional awareness and tracking and the energy, it's more like it's concurrent as we sort of build up to that exercise. Can you share... it's really hard to speak and really be... did you notice this... and be aware as you're speaking of what's happening? So it's one thing to listen—even that can be quite hard—to listen to another, take them in with the senses as fully and track your own process. That's already quite a skill. To do it yourself, you know. But eventually we want this to be concurrent. So if you're working on your own, yeah, the whole kind of... the whole multi-faceted process is going together.

If we separate them, it's an exercise. So we're practicing this foundation and then that foundation. You could isolate something—it's like when you practice, you know, in music or something. You want to... this thing, you isolate it and you develop it, and then you put it back into the mix. Does that make sense? Does that cover what you... yeah, okay.

Oh, Andrea. Yeah. This may or may not be quite long, so do you want to ask? Okay, it might be short. This is kind of what Katherine covered with active versus receptive when you're working on the image? Create, discover?

Well, no. It's more how... I think I put it in as another kind of spectrum that they relate to. Yeah. How active you are in that thing versus just kind of receiving it. And I just... The examples obviously can't be concrete that you give us because with an image or I'm bringing an image in, and there's a sense of I'm moving this thing and I'm not giving it autonomy, but it's too active. And so then I try to pull back into the receptive or discovered thing, and it doesn't quite manifest there. I'm checking the energy body the whole time to see what's alive there, but I didn't know if...

I remember you talking one time about John Coltrane and where he appeared in the room, this particular place. I sometimes think of that when I'm thinking of where this image wants to be—do they want to be behind me or in front? So I didn't know if that's something that comes with time, just dexterity, working with images.

So Andrea's asking about... if I can understand the sort of this range that we have in relating to any practice, actually, not just imaginal—that can kind of lean all the way to the sort of very active end and all the way to the very receptive, just let it happen. Yeah. And so what's the question? Can we develop more...

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So this is really, really common. And again, I'm not just talking about imaginal practice. I'm talking about any practice. We try to be active, and it gets really clunky and forced and too pushy, too much efforting, too tight, and then sometimes even a whole other level of judging oneself that one should be able to do this and that. So I think to me, even outside of the realm of imaginal practice, this is part of the sort of right effort, that balance thing.

And I would say instead of like one point on that spectrum, one point where we just kind of reside and that's where we do our practice—I'm always kind of entirely receptive—I would encourage that the whole spectrum, the exploration of the whole spectrum. And to develop skill, I have to know what it is to make too much effort and be too active and know what that feels like. The thing is, every moment is different.

So it's like... you know... Again, I shouldn't give surfing as an analogy because I've actually never been surfing. But I think what can happen in time is that the doing—we learn how to do really, really subtly.

So if we relate that then to what we're talking about this week, sensing the soul and the lattice, one of the things is just noticing. I'm not actually making this thing happen or demanding it. I'm just noticing—what can I notice? And the very, very delicate attuning of the attention to some aspect or other that's maybe just a little bit kind of... I can't quite make it out. And then just that aroma of it.

This is really, really subtle. It's just a noticing. It's just an inclining of the attention to notice something. That noticing something brings it alive, and then something emerges.

When we talk about doing, it can be really, really gross. You know, like when you're nodding off in meditation and someone says, "Can you do something? Go do some walking meditation, take a brisk walk, open the eyes, cold water on the face, stand up, breathe deeper." That's a really gross doing, and sometimes there are times when there's a real place for that.

And then it might be the same experience—almost the same degree of sloth and torpor another day—that needs something so much more subtle. I just realize, oh, there's this tiny bit of resistance to something I'm not even sure what, and I just soften that. Something gets clear and emerges maybe in the heart, and I pass through that, I work with that, and then I just hold that maybe. Not even that—I just hold that. And then the energy comes back.

Part of the art of all practice, I think, is this willingness to try different things, to develop different ranges and not to know in the moment, not to have this formula of "this is what I do and it's always going to be like this."

[Responding to a question about John Coltrane]

There's something about when you say you can bring an image up. As a writer, you're asking, "Where do I want this figure?" And then, oh... Two things: one is that "where do I want this figure?"—who is the "I" asking? The autonomy is there, but maybe it gets...

If we go back to Hillman, he would jump at and flinch at any kind of practice of the imaginal or active imagination that seemed too deliberate. I would say something slightly different. It doesn't matter how much huffing and puffing and deliberate intention and activeness there is. What matters is the sense of soul-making.

I'm sure many of you have had this—you think, "I just made that happen." And then you think, "Oh, that's the ego. And the ego is bad. And it's bad in Buddhism, and it's bad in other spiritualities, and it's bad in Hillman."

What I would look for more is this responsiveness. Maybe it was my ego, whatever that is. Maybe it was coming out of excessive yanking. But then maybe it suddenly becomes soul-making. And then we sense when something's soul-making. So it doesn't matter how it got there. It doesn't matter at all. It's not this principle of "this is good and that's bad." It's just that if it's soul-making, you can feel those soulful resonances and trust it at that point.

The thing with John Coltrane—I've moved, I don't live at Gaia House anymore, so we can't be in the same place. We have a different room. But he still comes sometimes. When he comes, actually he and another figure—this kind of Sufi teacher or something—they sit at the end of the bed. And they both share the same spot. And it doesn't matter. It's not that it has to be or not, but it just might be that I can't even tell: do I put them there, or do they just like that spot? It doesn't really matter. It's like, trust the sense of it. If something doesn't feel right, you can—I would use the word *play*. You can just play very delicately, but sometimes play just means: what am I attuning to?

It can be so subtle and so unpressured and unforced. When I go back to what I said this morning, it's like: don't force a sense of soul and don't imagine that it's going to be there every time. There are plenty of times where nothing really works, and that's fine. Not too much pressure.

There are two questions here, so I won't get to these unless someone else has one live. No, it's very long, and it's already... Well, actually, I'll do these. Is that okay? Sorry, yeah. I'll take it back.

So this is from a few days ago, which I didn't get a chance to respond to. You spoke a little last night—so this is already some nights ago, I think—about what people need for permission to work with the imaginal. And when you said eros, that really hit a chord for me. So I was wondering if you could speak or write a little about why it is important, why sexuality is important in soul-making, why it is necessary.

Like all these things, once we go into it with soul, it just becomes huge. So what's the involvement of eros and sexuality?

The way we're using the word eros is more than to mean sexuality. Sexuality is one manifestation of eros. Actually, you can have sex without eros in our book. But eros is this movement or some kind of movement or desire towards the beloved other—some kind of movement to know them more, to be more intimate, to touch them more, to be touched by them more, to enter or fill out or open. That's what eros is. It's a very simple definition.

And Eros has within it this other Greek god called Pothos. And Pothos is always looking beyond. He always wants more, always more. So that creates a certain dynamic. Eros wants this intimacy, enjoys the intimacy, and wants more, more.

Part of that can be sexual, but that whole movement of the psyche—that movement of eros—is something that drives this whole process with the eros-psyche-logos in the way that we described. On the abstract level, it functions as a concept that really holds

everything together and is the catalyst to unfold, the catalyst for this dough, the bread to rise. Does that much make sense? I said it quite abstractly, just as a sort of bare concept.

We've covered that a lot. But to me, that whole eros-psyche-logos business is really one of the linchpins of all this work. Understanding it can really... understanding it and getting familiar with it can itself be soul-making and will be part of what really galvanizes the whole process of soul-making—is understanding that eros-psyche-logos, what we call the soul-making dynamic.

So sexuality, sexual longing, sexual desire, sexual energy is one manifestation of eros. It's a kind of eros. And within it has a huge range. Sometimes in the being, or even if we're doing imaginal work, there's so much eros that it kind of has to become sexual—not necessarily in any act, but in the image itself. It's holding a kind of intensity of eros, which is part of the depth and the richness of the psyche. Is this making sense?

But then also, turning it around a little bit—if we're going to have the fullness of soul-making, we need to have the fullness of our eros. And our eros needs to be able to manifest how it wants to at any time. So sometimes it's very, very subtle, not at all sexual. Sometimes it's very, very strong and dramatic and forceful and not at all sexual. And sometimes it's subtle and sexual, and sometimes it's intense and sexual, or in the imaginal realm.

From the other perspective, I said that as the soul-making dynamic gets more into our life and our life becomes involved in that, more and more aspects of our being and our existence get drawn into the soul-making dynamic. One of them will be sexuality. In other words, sexuality gets made soulful.

It might already be quite a lot for many people in our culture for sexuality to be heartful—and let's not underestimate that. But for sexuality to be soulful, what does that mean? And again, this might be the actual physical sexuality, sexual acts, but also just the whole realm of sexuality. Part of that will touch on the body—to be ensouled, to become subsumed, to be given dimensionality, to give this sense of sacredness. And it doesn't mean just light—it can be dark as well. Body, sensuality, the senses, sexuality—they become drawn into and ignited in the soul-making dynamic.

It's necessary in the sense that it's necessary to the fullness of the process of soul-making. It's necessary that it spreads out that way. And eros is fundamentally necessary to soul-making. No eros, no soul-making.

There's an energetic dimension to this that's crucial to understand. What often happens when there's sexual desire is the desire and the energy get cramped somewhere in the body. They're not given space, the energy itself. And this relates to the question: can I bring the whole energy body in? When the energy gets constricted, it becomes hard to tolerate, and I feel I have to act immediately.

There's also a deeper level involving the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. If everything is just flat, flatly material, and just what it seems to be to conventional agreed perception, then the pothos in the eros that wants more can only go in one direction. When we're talking about sexuality—though this applies to any area where there's craving—the eros wants more, but where can it go?

It has to go into material manifestation, and then I'll get bored of this particular material manifestation, this particular partner or whatever it is, and I'll seek another one. Because it can only go horizontally. I refuse dimensionality because I'm not engaging the sensing with soul. And so the eros that wants more can only seek another high, another experience.

But if I allow the eros to inseminate psyche, to fertilize psyche, then—to use an image—the dough rises, and it's allowed to become imaginal. Then the more that pothos and eros warms, it gets more by virtue of the dimensionality, the complexification, the multi-aspectness, the divinity. And actually it doesn't need the endlessly horizontal satisfaction of craving.

Eros, this wanting more, can either go into craving—and it just demands more and more. It's insatiable, as the Buddha said, this unquenchable thirst, tanha. But it can only go horizontally when I refuse to see, or I'm not encouraging a sense of dimensionality.

If I do allow dimensionality, then things can get what they need in the dimensionality itself. There's more, and it grows more dimensionality. So there's an energetic pressure, and there's also a kind of psychic pressure, but it's getting more space to be, to get its needs met, its desires met.

We have so much good stuff in our culture—so much sexual liberation and sexual possibility that perhaps wasn't there in different places at different times in history. And we have many other positive developments. But we also have a lot of difficulty with that freedom sexually, and we're given different challenges.

Like so many other things, from a certain perspective, they could use being more ensouled. And this is not to say it's always easy at all—not at all to imply that. But one can have choices, and the imaginal amplitude that fills things out gives one more choices.

And it's not to say you should or shouldn't, you know, within the limits of ethics, but there's space there that can be filled in.

There's a question here about reality and ontology. I've resisted asking a question about ontology because I imagine it would take too long, but if somebody else... Let me say something very brief. I'll read this note and then say something very brief, because part of what I want to say is that ontology is endless.

Does everyone know what ontology means? It's the branch of philosophy that deals with the question of what is real, what reality is. So this comes up because of what we're talking about. We have a typical kind of cultural norm of what's real and what isn't, and imagination is definitely in the "not real" category in the typical cultural norm. When you start doing this kind of practice, it starts to raise some of those questions.

This person wrote: "Sometimes I have the perception that I am autonomously creating/discovering an image, but at others I perceive the image to be autonomously creating/discovering me. This is quite uncanny. Given the equal emptiness of all things—i.e., our equally insubstantial claim to inherent existence—truly mutual perception in co-creating/discovering each other raises some perplexing ontological questions. I would be grateful if you could clarify."

I'd be grateful if I could clarify! So let's just see. What's important here? A lot.

I find this is part of the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic. This is exactly this thing happening—when I start to practice this way and when I move this way and I have repeated experiences, it pushes on the Logos, part of the conceptual framework. Part of that is: "Boy, is it real?" So that's part of it expanding and pushing on the logos. We would expect this kind of process.

When we see that everything is empty, that functions in one sort of very basic way in relation to this work, and then possibly other ways. But one of the basic ways it functions is this: if for someone who really goes into the emptiness teaching and the fabricating and unfabricating and understanding all that and that whole depth of that journey, and you see that absolutely everything is empty—as the note says, what we can say about everything is that fundamentally they're equally empty.

What that does is... one of the things that does, one of the most basic things that does, is it relaxes a kind of objection in the consciousness that says, "That's not real." And it came up in another Q&A. Implicit in that "that's not real"—of whatever experience I've

had—is a hidden whole set of assumptions about something else being real. Once you see everything's empty, then that whole... whatever I'm thinking is real gets relaxed. So the whole dichotomy of real and unreal just gets loosened. Does this make sense?

So what that does—it's a slightly different thing to say everything has exactly the same reality status than to say everything has the same kind of emptiness status. So that's an important point.

And as I said, going back to I think it was Iona's question, I don't know anyone who's mapped out all this ontology, or it could never be mapped out to everyone's satisfaction. One of the interesting things I find about ontology, which really is a important subject to me, fascinating, etc.—there's a movement in modern Western philosophy of people who say: Because we can't arrive at any final position about reality and unreality, let's just drop the whole ontological business. It's just a waste of time.

I find that not very soul-making. And what you'll notice in certain philosophers that do that is exactly an absence of soul-making. And also a default fallback. So they might say, "Yes, yes, yes, we can't say what's real." But in their lives and the way they live and their commitments, they're falling back to just the conventional modern Western view of what's real. That giving up of ontology—it might be quite fashionable in certain modern philosophical circles, but it's actually not a deep giving up. It's just a kind of shrugging and going back to how one lived before anyway.

I don't think humanity—however long, I don't know how long humanity has been around, and all the different cultures and all the different histories and all the different thinkings and perceptions—I don't think that because we haven't arrived at any conclusive ontology... I mean, we have certain ontologies that people favor at different times, but in the sense that modern Western philosophy says we can't... I think it's endless. This ontologizing, thinking about these things and changing our perceptions and adopting different conceptual frameworks about reality and non-reality—that's endless, and it's part of soul-making. Does this make sense? It's part of the logos getting caught up and activated in the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic.

Now there's one more thing: Why am I ontologizing? Or why do we do ontology? Oftentimes it's because I want to arrive at the truth. What if I was ontologizing because I want to soul-make? It's a different purpose. What's the purpose?

Do you understand? And so that's quite a radical difference of intention. I'm not going after some kind of finally objective truth that humanity will then embrace - like we've done that, tick. Rather, maybe the nature of reality will remain an endlessly fertile mystery that we can participate in, in that creation-discovery of the reality of reality. And that's part of the whole soulmaking journey.

If we hone in on this note a little bit, again, I would expect this kind of experience in the very unfolding of the imaginal work. Because of the autonomy, there's this kind of flipping - it's still create-discover, but it's just flipped around. And then what is it to be able to seriously entertain that conceptual framework that I am being... I and my life is being created and discovered by some image that in some sense has, you could say, more reality than me. But I'm not settling on that as something that I'm going to then argue about or convince others of. Do you understand?

So there's this malleability of the deepest level of conceptual framework. But again, the question is, what happens?

I didn't know what the word uncanny meant, because what does canny mean? It means knowing. So uncanny means not knowing - weird. It is weird, certainly weird compared to most modern Western ways of looking. There probably are other cultures that may have something like this.

What I would prefer in terms of practice is when someone has arrived at this complete flip of experience and conceptual framework has emerged out of practice in, I think, the most beautiful way. Is that fair to say? And it's startling and opening and radical. Rather than then look for another culture or philosophy - because I might think, oh, is it like it's all Vishnu's dream or something like that? Does that exist somewhere? Yes, that exists. I could go and find that. But something might die for me in the aliveness of that very experience and the way it's unfolding in my practice.

I'm not demanding anything. It's emerging. And then what's my own personal ontology, if you like - my own conceptual framework - what does that do to my soul? So there's ontology for the sake of soulmaking and the experience, inhabiting that experience. What does it do to my sense of existence and life and my journey when I have that sense? And I don't need to make it a gospel truth, you understand? But I can have a real kind of entertaining, a real seriousness about it in terms of its reality status.

So that's all I'm going to say about ontology for now.

CHAPTER 148

The Rhythms of Soulmaking and Elements of the Imaginal (23 - 28)

Rob Burbea · 40 min

In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines the natural ebb and flow of soulmaking practice, emphasizing that sensing with soul comes and goes dependent on conditions - inner, outer, past and present. Drawing on insights about dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda), he explains how soulfulness cannot be forced or summoned on demand, but requires careful attention to conditions while avoiding excessive pressure or judgment.

Burbea completes his exploration of the elements of imaginal practice by discussing nodes 23-28: fullness of intention, duty, meaningfulness, infinite echoing and mirroring, values, and participation. He emphasizes how these elements can deepen to make experiences more genuinely imaginal, and how they interconnect with each other. The talk addresses the tendency for inner criticism to construct itself around any emphasized practice quality, and encourages practitioners to maintain imaginal practice within a larger palette of dharma practices including mettā, emptiness work, and energy body cultivation.

Throughout, Burbea stresses that this work involves everything - the soul wants all aspects of experience to be touched by soulmaking. He presents these teachings as an invitation to adventure rather than demands, encouraging practitioners to work with whatever arises in their journey of sensing with soul and participating in the larger mystery of the mundus imaginalis.

I want to try and say a few general things that I hope will be helpful, and also try to finish touching on the rest of the notes—the rest of the aspects that we haven't touched on. Time is limited, so there will be a brief touching on these.

I don't know if you've noticed something about practice in general, whatever the practice. If you've been in an environment, in a climate, in a community of practice—on retreat or off retreat—where some particular practice or quality is emphasized—mindfulness, metta, focus of mind, ability to stay with the breath, or whatever it is, or soulfulness—what can easily happen is this: through the repeated emphasis on that particular quality, which is a lovely and important quality, whatever it is, the self-judging tends to construct itself in relationship to how I am doing and how I think other people are doing in relation to that quality.

The same happens with soulfulness. This is really, really important to just know—the sort of wily patterns of inner critic self-judgment. It's a dependent arising. If we were here emphasizing something else, it would construct itself in relation to that quality. So this can happen in relation to anything.

Soulfulness, soul-making, the sensing with soul comes and goes. We've said this. It really comes and goes, and it comes and goes dependent on conditions—inner, outer, past also. Our conditioning, the way we have been formed and cast in all kinds of ways, all levels of our being—mentally, emotionally, energetically, relationally—all that feeds into what happens in this moment or what can happen. Inner, outer, past and present—all those conditions matter.

If we were on, say, a jhana retreat, at some point it would occur to us: oh, a jhana arises when the conditions are there. It's less something to judge oneself about. So we can sometimes put too much pressure on ourselves to have experiences of soulfulness and to be sensing with soul all the time, or this or that.

Can there be a kind of attitude—again, somewhere in the middle way—between an over-pressuring or an over-forcing for something, and kind of not taking care of the conditions that we can take care of, not nourishing, not feeding in those conditions? Being soulful in our culture—soul, soul-making—is unfortunately not a habit for us. We don't... we might have that experience, but we don't tend to sense with soul by default unless it's supported by listening, by reading, by conditions, by practicing, by attention to the kind of things that we're talking about. So there's this kind of balance: something needs nourishing and practicing, taking care of all the different conditions, and I can't force it, I can't pressure it. Soulfulness on demand is not really possible.

So related to that, again, I just want to emphasize that what we're doing here—we're talking a lot about imaginal practice and sensing the soul, etc.—but it's within a larger context, with this larger palette. You know what a palette is? Like a painter's palette with different colors, different kinds of practices, all of which kind of help nourish the being, but also nourish the sense of the soul.

So imaginal practice sits alongside gathering the nourishment in the energy body and the harmonization, the well-being. It sits alongside taking care of my heart and the woundedness or the pain that comes and goes there. It sits alongside metta practice and emptiness practices and working the desire and letting go—letting go of desire, dropping whatever involvement. All of these are part of the colors of our practice palette, the colors of our artist's creation toolkit. So you can really think about moving fluidly and kind of balancing between these practices, different practices—really important.

The palette, the palette of practice. A palette can become a palace—a palace, a house of soul-making with many mansions.

Sometimes when I'm on retreats, I've got a week and I really want something to happen this week. These are teachings to take away—everything we're talking about is something to kind of digest, rather than trying to pressure some kind of experience arising for the week. So it's takeaway.

Soulfulness, soul-making, sensing the soul arises, like all things, dependent on a whole host of conditions coming together in the moment—influences from past, present, inner and outer. And it happens not in a linear way, not in a smooth way. In other words, what we experience is some kind of opening—you know, sensing the soul, some kind of sense of soul-making—and inherent, intrinsic to that process of soul-making, or that sense of soul-making, is this expansion we talked about. The vision, the senses are expanded in some way or another, the energy, the mind, the sense of what is perceived, etc., the ideas.

And then what happens—or that alternates with periods where there is no soul-making, or it doesn't feel very soul-making. Something is just not being fed into the conditions, or we meet some kind of limit or block.

So this could be ideational. We talked about the eros, psyche, logos dynamics. Sometimes there's an idea—sometimes we're not even conscious of the assumptions we have about ourselves, about what we're sensing, about reality, about all kinds of things, about path, about liberation, about whatever it is. These assumptions exist usually, at best, semi-consciously in the psyche, and they form kinds of limits or walls. At some point the soul-making bumps into them.

But there can be other kinds of walls, or limits, that kind of lock the soul-making for a time being. For instance, there may be some kind of block or limit in how much the libido, the life force, is allowed to move in the being and flow and open things up. Sometimes, for all kinds of reasons, the flow of the life force is blocked in our life or blocked in certain areas.

It could be just an energetic thing or just in terms of our enthusiasm, our love. Something arises and it quickly gets quelled or shut down. Sometimes it's so quick that we just have an instant, a flicker of liveliness, and then something gets shut down. That can be energetic, it can be psychic, it can be all kinds of things.

Or sometimes in relation to the eros, we're a little bit suspicious of that much eros, especially if it's sexual. And that suspicion or that prevention of the flow of eros and the fire of eros also forms a kind of limit, hopefully temporarily.

Or the psyche can be blocked in the sense of the images we have. We're fixated on certain images. So all this is very delicate and it needs a lot of care, a lot of discernment.

So we talked a bit about duty yesterday in the Q&A. We can have the duty of an image that goes with an image, the duty of the image. But there's also the image of duty. So this node, for some people, which I'll talk about just briefly now and a little bit more later—the image of anything that could be soul-making, that image of that thing might be locked. Perhaps from our past, and for all kinds of reasons, the notion of duty is, or any other notion, or the image of relationship, or the image of self, or some image that I associate with my history gets locked. Do you understand? So the image, the psyche then, is not allowed to expand.

What happens in the life of soul-making is that there are periods, long or short, where there are different kinds of walls that are met. Lock, lock, lock. So we don't expect this kind of incredibly smooth, endless, endless opening of soul-making. It has this stopping, starting, stuttering, coming and going rhythm to it. Really natural, really important. The whole shebang is what we're interested in. The whole picture.

And as I said, sometimes those walls, those blocks are just shattered through. They're just broken in what can sometimes feel very dramatic, but also quite difficult—what I call the breaking of the vessels, borrowing a Kabbalistic term. And sometimes it's just very gradual, something stretched. And sometimes we're locked and we don't even realize we're locked and it's going on.

So all this is interesting to us, and to be expected, rather than not having any soul-making today, or it feels flat, or whatever. The question is, what is there, and what can I work with, and what can I become aware of, and to expect that kind of pattern.

Okay, so let's just visit a few notes. I think we're on twenty-three, which is the fullness of intention.

Again, to think of these as really, rather than on-off switches, each node is perhaps a sense of something that can be deepened or filled out, become richer in meaning. And as that happens, we can say the experience becomes more genuinely imaginal, something like that, or fully imaginal.

So it's very natural as human beings, and also as suffering human beings who want to grow, who want to develop in certain ways that we see this quality is lacking in me, or I miss this in my life. It's very natural to want to appropriate any practice for the sake of that self-development, and for the sake of that easing of dukkha. Of course it's normal. And so I think what we're saying is not that that shouldn't happen. Of course it's going to happen, and it's healthy, and it's normal.

But at some point, maybe you've had this sense already, you can kind of glimpse a bigger vision of intention, a bigger possibility that somehow in this image, or with this image, with this sensing the soul, with this practice, what I'm wanting, more than this self-development, more even than just the ending of this dukkha that I'm feeling right now, or the development of this pattern, of that quality or whatever, is: I want soul-making. That becomes the bigger thing, a bigger vision of serving, a bigger reason of why we're doing this.

I think that's quite a rare thing. So again, it's going to come and go, and you can get glimpses of this. What is it to practice for the sake of soul? What is it to engage in one's meditative work and one's investigations in other language for the sake of the divine? Doing it for God, not just for me. What does that even mean? It's one of those concepts that can just, like all of you, there's no end to this idea.

Also, what's wrapped up in that is sometimes—and I think maybe all of you have tasted this, otherwise you wouldn't be here—this work, these kinds of practices, they can be very thrilling at times.

At times.

And sometimes we find our vision of what soul-making is getting a little smaller. We're just chasing that sense of vitality, or that sense of connection, or that sense of thrill. Again, very normal, very human, but soul-making involves everything.

Sometimes, for instance, the soul knows that it wants, as Catherine said yesterday, to fall in love with *logos*, to fall in love with ideas. Are they being left out of my whole vision of what soul-making is? The soul wants everything. It wants everything to be touched and involved and drawn in and contaminated and infused with soul-making.

So the fullness of intention also means I'm not just dwelling in "I love it when that flow of vitality comes and the energy, or I love the love, or whatever"—but it's the whole, the whole, it's the possibility of it. But again, sometimes you can't force this so much as you might notice this at times, or you might just gently remind yourself of the possibility, and then something opens up more, more imaginable, so to speak.

The twenty-fourth node is duty, and we talked quite a lot about that in the Q&A. It's interesting, again, if we think about connecting nodes with each other. So there might be a sense of duty in relation to an image that seems to communicate to me or hand me this sense of the possibility of picking up and engaging and assenting to the possibility —the invitation, not the forcing, the invitation to assent to some kind of sense of duty. Part of my job is discerning what that is.

If we pair that duty with, for instance, the node of divinity, then it has a certain flavor to it. If I pair the node of duty with the node of creation-discovery and emphasize the creation, then it modifies the relationship, the other one, the connection we've made with divinity. Do you see? Because oftentimes with divinity, what tends to happen for human beings is it gets very rarefied, very solidified.

Duty is a loaded concept for many people. It's not an easy one in our culture. There's probably historical and social reasons for that. So sometimes people can hear the word duty and it's a bit like—well, there were twenty-seven, there were twenty-eight, but I only seem to remember twenty-seven. That could happen with any of them. Sometimes, some people just relate to it completely fine.

What I was trying to say was that we can think of duty on its own and we bring our history to that. As I said earlier, we bring already an image of what duty is, and I might have gotten that image from who knows where. And that can be constraining. If I connect nodes, and I remember, "oh, divinity," then in relation to the notion of divinity, my sense of duty can get very hard. And that's why we talked about that fundamentalist terrorist—it's all very hard and rarefied sometimes.

If I connect the node of duty with the node of creation-discovery, then the whole sense of duty becomes less rarefied because it's got that element that's like, you know, I'm participating in the creation of this duty. It's not just some absolute objective truth. So there's a way that these—not just the nodes, but also the interrelationship with nodes—as I said, sometimes they are aspects of each other and sometimes they kind of balance each other.

I'm not sure what else to say about duty. We talked about it a lot. I think I'll leave it.

Related to duty, actually, one duty could be seen as an aspect of the next node, which is meaningfulness. This is twenty-five. Meaningfulness. So I use that word—I hope I'm using the word correctly in English. Meaningfulness means more than meaning. In other words, an image or a sense that we have might mean something to us. For example, it might reflect something in my life, or it has this meaning or that meaning, or reflect something in my history, or this duty, or this teaching.

It might give me a teaching. It's telling me something about how I tend to approach something. It might be telling me something about how I tend to approach practice. And it gives me a teaching about how I might do things differently, for instance. But that teaching is one meaning that the image is pregnant with—an infinite possibility of meanings. And some of those meanings are not discernible yet.

So this again relates to the beyondness and the kind of hazy edges. Sometimes very clear—yes, I recognize that meaning, I recognize that teaching, I recognize whatever it is. And then I have a kind of vague sense of other meanings, and the knowledge, or the even vaguer sense, of just a kind of inexhaustible richness of meaningfulness.

This relates to the 26th node, infinite echoing and mirroring, which I think we touched on yesterday. This quality is easier to discern with an image, with an intra-psychic image, than it is with sensing the soul. But there can be a sense to be noticed that this image echoes my life.

I see that lonely, solitary wanderer image that was, for a long time, very important to me. I could see how that image echoed my life in many ways. But I could also see that my life echoed the image. Do you understand? There's a shaping each way. Some of those echoings are obvious. But again, there's this kind of haze of dimly perceived echoes and mirrorings. I don't quite know what they are, but I just sense this depth of echoing, a bit like when you—I've never been to the Grand Canyon, but if you shout there, I assume it just echoes, and if it's one of those echoes where you don't really hear the end of the echo, like it just... Is that how it is? The kind of echoing where it shades into infinity.

There can be that kind of sense with an image. My life and this image and my story and my pain and my duty and my calling and my passions—there's this echoing that happens. Again, sometimes we get locked into thinking this is related to causality: my life causes this image. The events in my life, the history, what I've been exposed to, what I've been subject to, creates the image. It's a representation. You can also view it the other way, and there's a possibility of just seeing two mirrors facing each other. Again, you get this infinite kind of mirroring. Where does it stop? You can't actually discern the end of it, but there are these discrete, connected, infinite mirrorings.

So I mentioned that lonely wanderer image, and I can see there's this relatively obvious way that has been mirrored in my life, and that my life mirrors that. And there are all these subtler ways. The image related to that of the outcast. Sometimes we identify too much with something in our life. I am the outcast. I feel like the outcast. I am the lonely one. I am the lonely wanderer. I am broken. I am the broken person.

This infinite echoing also implies separation. I am that and I am not that. It is other than me. When we have that separation by echoing, by interconnected echoing, there's more possibility for it to become imaginal, because I'm not just stuck in "I am broken. I am outcast. I am the one on the edge."

In the beginnings of my trying to experiment with imaginal practice, I used to have an image of being in a prison cell, like down in a dungeon somewhere and left there alone. It was actually lovely. It became, for a while, a kind of fertile place where images would come into that space. But there was something in me and in my life that—I could feel that echoing. There's something about being a solitary prisoner in some kind of dungeon that just echoes something. And yet it's a prison, but there's beauty born in that prison. There's fertility and richness in the darkness there.

Because they're separate, there's this echoing of two things—the image and the life. There is the possibility of fertility. But if I'm just identifying with being imprisoned, or outcast, or the lonely one, or broken, or the sacrificed one, or the victim, or whatever it is, the identification doesn't allow the thing to become rich in the imaginal. Do you understand?

These images of ancestors—they are other, and I am them. I am them, and I am not them.

I am in the lineage of those ancestors, and I am not in the lineage of those ancestors. I am heir to them, and I am not heir to them. There's something in this together—connected, but separate, echoing, mirroring, and the mystery of that in the infinitio. And again, a lot of this is subtle, so it's more like we just sense that possibility. It might be quite dim, but that can be enough to ignite that node and allow the thing to become more imagined.

It's a little trickier to see with sensing with soul, but actually a couple of people, even on this retreat, have alluded to it. Again, relating to a tree or sensing a tree with soul or whatever it is. And there's a way that my energy body experience and my psychic experience starts to mirror that of the tree. I come into some kind of resonance, also of sensibility and of energy body texture, the solidity of—the way that the tree knows is echoed in my being. Possibilities there.

The twenty-seventh has to do with values. When we are sensing with soul, when there's an image, there's value. What is valuable is implicit in that. Now that's also part of meaningfulness. In other words, this pregnancy of meaningfulness includes values. So beauty is also a value, but goodness or nobility—that's a value. And it's part of the meaningfulness of when we sense with soul. Does that make sense?

So I'm sensing something with soul, and there is a mix present for me in that experience. Sometimes just noticing that—we could say a whole lot more about that, I don't want to right now—but sometimes just noticing can ignite something. Sometimes you might bring to mind someone you know and love, or something you know and love,

and bring them to mind and steady the attention on them, and open the energy body, and tune in to what you value there. And that can begin to open up, make that thing, that person, that being, let it become image for you, become imaginable.

There's also the possibility—the person who wrote the note mentioned this—Aslan from The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, this sort of lion king, really. Somehow meditating, finding themselves in a kind of quasi-jhanic space that was imbued with the particular character of this Aslan without the form of Aslan. There's an image—we could say that's still an image. Without the clear form, it's still an image.

But it's possible at times to even extract the value from an image. So I wouldn't do too much of this, but for instance, within one of the qualities of Aslan—I would say, maybe the person would say differently, but just for the sake of example—there's nobility. Aslan's a very noble being. And so nobility is a quality or a value. And it might be that here I'm meditating on Aslan, and it's a form, and there's the sense of the lion, and then that may go to some kind of space of Aslan-ness, and within that one may tune into the nobility. And then it's like the essence of that value. One can meditate on that. I really wouldn't recommend—I'm just mentioning it as a possibility, but it's mostly not what we're doing.

Or beauty. This is interesting, because one might be sensing something with soul, or it might be an internal image, and it feels very beautiful. Maybe it's connected to a feeling. I'm hearing music, and actually it came out of some dukkha in relation to music and no longer being a musician, etc. And then I heard—I let the mind spin this music, create music, improvising music, and let myself be touched by that music. And then there's a possibility of saying, oh, there's beauty here.

I'm just mentioning this as a possibility. It's possible to extract the essence or let the essence of beauty extract out of that, but it's no longer even tied to a form. The music has faded and it's just kind of pure beauty. Just mentioning it as a possibility without wanting to suggest that too much as a line.

And the last one is participation—the twenty-eighth node. In a way, sometimes I think this feels like the hardest one for me to articulate, or one of the hardest ones. And I have a real sense of it as being something that can just get deeper and deeper, the sense of what that means.

Partly, with the emphasis on ways of looking and fabrication, we can get very much into the idea and the insight—the emphasis on the insight—that what we perceive, what we sense, depends on the subject's way of looking, depends on the way of looking. To me, the word participation kind of fills it out with the other side. It doesn't neglect

that there's some sense of an objective pole there, some kind of objective pole of value, of sacredness, of reality. So it kind of holds both. It's a bit like create-discover: we're participating in both sides of it.

To me, also, that word participation—it preserves my autonomy.

You think about the word - I participate in this, or this participates in that. It preserves the autonomy of the participator and that which is being participated in. So it preserves a sense of autonomy with also a sense of non-separateness, which to me is very valuable in giving a sense of what we have when we're sensing the soul.

So I participate, I have a sense of participating in that archetypal image of the lonely wanderer. It's something - again, it's me and it's not me. It's something I mysteriously participate in, this thing that is bigger than me somehow, holier and bigger. My life somehow is participating in this image, or the outcast, or the lineage of ancestry. We participate in an archetype, in a divine archetype. We participate in the mundus imaginalis, as Catherine referred to, the world of the imaginable. We feel that we're participating in that. We're not outside observers. We're somehow our life and our perceptions participating in all that.

As the soul-making really starts involving every element of our being - also our eros - my desire, my sexuality, my eros in the much broader sense than sexuality, we start to feel that as not just mine. Whose is it? We start to sense this eros that I'm experiencing right now is participating in the divine eros, the eros of the Buddha nature. The whole other sense of one's existence in participation, in a mystery of participation.

Our soul-making is participating, is necessary to, is adding to the soul-making of the world, the soul-making of the world soul, the anima mundi, the soul-making of the Buddha nature, the soul-making of the primordial Buddhas, the soul-making of God. It's not just me doing my soul-making. There's a sense of something, some much vaster, more unfathomably mysterious participation.

I invite you to view all this as a journey, as an adventure rather than a demand, rather than a list of what should be happening or evident right now already - an invitation to an adventure, the coming and going of things and the coming and going of soulfulness. Whatever is arising right now, whatever is here today is really, really fine. It's part of that journey.

Let's have some quiet.

CHAPTER 149

Nothing Happens By Itself

Rob Burbea · 8 min

> *In this profound teaching, Rob Burbea examines how soul-making, like all meaningful spiritual processes, requires intentional cultivation and supportive conditions. Drawing on the Greek concept of temenos—a sacred, protected space or vessel—he explores how both solitary practice and relational work need careful tending to allow the 'holy fire' within us to flourish.*
>
> *Burbea addresses the practical aspects of creating conditions for sensing the soul, emphasizing that this work doesn't necessarily require extensive samādhi or lengthy meditation sessions. Instead, he points to the importance of sensitivity, awareness, openness, and attunement to the energy body. He suggests that even brief encounters with meaningful images can have profound effects when the right conditions are present.*
>
> *The teaching particularly focuses on soul-making in relationship, acknowledging that much of this work happens through connection with others. Burbea explores the delicate art of sharing images and soulful experiences, emphasizing the vulnerability inherent in this sharing and the need for formal, honored spaces. He addresses the complexity of human relationships and how unresolved issues can affect the sacred vessel needed for this work, inviting practitioners to explore what supports and what hinders soul-making in both solitary and communal contexts.*

Thank you to all of you for being here, for participating, for the fullness of your practice and your willingness to explore, to question, to open. It's very beautiful. I really appreciate it. And thank you to our wonderful team of managers and to Mark for everything he's done in the lead-up to this.

Nothing happens by itself. And the same is true of soul-making. It doesn't just happen by itself. It needs our participation, it needs our care, our support. That fire, the holy fire we feel within us and without us, needs tending, needs attention, needs fuel, needs support, needs conditions.

We've used this word temenos—it's a Greek word meaning an enclosed, protected and sacred space, a vessel, an alchemical vessel. We can see that in one's own practice, the conditions need to be right in our solitude in order for sensing with soul to have the right support and conditions and vessel in which something can unfold, and actually the unexpected can unfold as well.

We've touched on many of what those conditions are: the sensitivity, the awareness, the openness, the energy body, the emotional care and responsiveness, the attunement. All this creates, in any moment, in ourselves, so to speak, a temenos in which there is the possibility of unfolding, of blossoming, of flowering, of the fire stimulating the alchemical process. And that comes and goes, and there's a kind of grace in that.

I was talking with someone yesterday about this. As you leave here, if you're interested in exploring this kind of practice, I don't think it necessarily needs a lot of samadhi. You don't need the mind to be really quiet, really still, or to do hours and hours of sitting. My guess is you'll discover that's not actually necessary. I mean, it's fine if that is there. But sometimes an image arises just for a couple of minutes and it has potency, and its fragrance, its perfume and its effects permeate the life. It makes an impact on the being. So it doesn't always equate to deeper meditation, calmer states, longer time, etc. This sensing with soul, when the conditions are there, is accessible. It's there for us in our life, in the way we sense ourselves, the world, each other.

It may well be the case that a lot of soul-making, perhaps for most people, most soul-making happens in relationship with others. There's this magic of a spark here igniting a spark there, and some reciprocal feeding of flame and of poetry and of beauty. But that too needs a temenos.

Some of you will want to share this with others and will want that support, that input, that flow, that meeting. But there too, if you're in twos or a group, a temenos is needed, especially if you're sharing images. Images, sensings with soul, soulfulness needs this care.

What does it mean to create a temenos in relationship? If I just casually mention an image to someone that's been meaningful for me and it's the wrong moment—it might be the right person but the wrong moment, the person isn't really interested, or you haven't taken care of how to be present with each other—maybe you haven't even created a formal space where that can be held, where that vessel will support. So that in itself is a creative exploration. This question: What actually supports soul-making? What supports soulfulness?

Images can be very vulnerable. Even if one would write the image and wouldn't think there's anything vulnerable about that, there's something about the sensing with soul that touches us so deeply. We don't just put that out willy-nilly anywhere. It's something precious and something—not necessarily to be hoarded, but to be honored.

Sometimes the formality really helps. To honor something as if it were divine will allow it to become divine. But part of what happens in relationships is all the messy complexity of human relationships. If you're sharing images with another person and there's something left over between you from yesterday, last year, that has nothing to do with any of this, that complexity can interfere with the sacred vessel needed for soul-making to flourish.

It's going to be in the field, and unless it's addressed, opened, and explored, it's going to affect that vessel, that *temenos*.

There's much we're not going to explore right now, but there are many skills, arts, and prerequisites that enable this kind of vessel to be created between human beings. Can we see that—I invite you, if you're interested—as an exploration, an experiment?

Why is it that whatever we're doing—whether it's solitary practice, whether it's moving together, whether it's sharing images or something else, or even studying together—becomes soul-making? There's plenty of material now to study and contemplate, to digest and assimilate the ideas. But what makes any of that soul-making? What supports that? And what prevents it? What gets in the way? What doesn't help to provide that vessel?

It's a question—a creative, open-ended question to explore.

CHAPTER 150

Opening Talk ('To Kiss a Falcon')

Rob Burbea · 27 min

> *In this opening talk from the 'Foundations of a Soul-Making Dharma' retreat, Rob Burbea establishes the conceptual framework for understanding soul-making practice as both art and spiritual path. He emphasizes how all traditional Buddhist elements—mindfulness (sati), ethical conduct (sīla), concentration (samādhi), wisdom (paññā), and the divine abodes (brahmavihāra)—serve as foundational supports for this approach to practice.*
>
> *Burbea explores the delicate balance between precision and elasticity in conceptual understanding, suggesting that the willingness to question received teachings and assumptions is itself part of the foundation. Drawing on poetry and contemporary cultural critique, he addresses how soul-making practice might respond to what he calls the "anthropological crisis" of our time—our limited understanding of what it means to be human.*
>
> *Central to this talk is the invitation to approach practice as creative art rather than mere technique, emphasizing experiential discovery alongside intellectual understanding. Burbea introduces the concept of "eros-psyche-logos" dynamic, suggesting that genuine soul-making involves a passionate engagement with ideas, discriminations, and the ongoing refinement of perception that reveals ever-more facets of experience and being.*

That's beautiful to hear what people were sharing there. We've called this retreat "Foundations of a Soul-Making Dharma," and I want to say a little about that word "foundations." In a way, it implies that we're going to try not to introduce any new material—some of you are probably quite relieved. There's already a lot, and it's time perhaps to consolidate, to digest, to establish those foundations.

What may be a little different are some of the relative emphases between different elements of this teaching, this path. That may shift somewhat—we'll see. But we're emphasizing trying to condense or distill the teachings and material down to basic building blocks. What skills are involved in practicing this way? What kinds of qualities or attitudes serve these kinds of openings, these directions and avenues? What kinds of understanding—so what kinds of skills, what qualities and attitudes, and what kinds of understandings, plural—are part and parcel, are the bones and flesh of this art, this practice.

We're going to try to condense and distill and present all this. I should say right from the start that we're not trying to be exhaustive—this isn't about creating canonical lists or anything like that. There are also great individual variations. People are, of course, different in their constitution, personalities, inclinations, where they're gifted and where they're more challenged, in their history of practice and what teachings they've been exposed to. All that needs to be acknowledged and brought into the mix.

But the foundations of this art include everything you already know from your practice of Buddhadharma, particularly from insight meditation. All the mindfulness, all the sīla—the emphasis on goodness, ethics, and virtue—the samādhi, paññā, insight, mettā, the brahmavihāras. In a way, all of that forms the foundation for what we're discussing. So everything you know comes into it, and probably more than you already know in terms of other possibilities, other ways of doing things, other ways of conceiving and looking at things. What you know, plus probably a bit more.

And also, I would say, the willingness to question what you know—to question ideas we have absorbed or arrived at at this point in our lives. Ideas from Buddhadharma, ideas from insight meditation culture, ideas and assumptions from the Buddhadharma, but also about the Buddhadharma. That's actually all part of the foundations. It's a kind of shaky foundation—the foundation that shakes, that questions, that dares to question what we've received and arrived at.

This includes what we've learned from psychotherapeutic investigations or practices, or what we might have encountered from exposure to words like "imaginal" and "soul-making" and "eros." Or what we might have found in similar or overlapping paths—shamanism, energy healing, and such. A lot of the language is quite similar.

But part of what we're interested in here is—well, Mary mentioned breaking through, and while I don't want to tell you what you meant, one way that could be interpreted is that breaking through is very much part of what happens when we let soul-making get going. Stuff gets broken through.

So that willingness, that courage, that boldness is actually part of the path—along with refining clarity alongside that boldness and willingness to question assumptions. That's all part of it.

It's asking a lot. It brings in a lot. Actually, it will involve and bring into the mix everything—all the elements, all aspects of our life. And within that asking a lot, we have to bring wisdom to questions of pacing and digestion. When am I ready for this?

When am I ready to question that? That's all part of it, and there will be huge individual variations that need to be respected. It's part of the maturity, part of the care, part of the wisdom.

So we're going to try to communicate in ways that hopefully support you in gaining a sense—really a sense and taste—of what we mean when we use words like "imaginal" and "soul-making" and "eros."

and also to try and open up and get a taste of what that implies, what that unfolds, and what that indeed opens up in terms of the possible visions, ideas, and senses of what it is to be a human being and what a human being is and what the world is.

There's something about this that's going to—has the potential to just really open up and give a sense of where this is all going, and the possibility of that being opened up as well. Awakening or the goal of the path or whatever—this all again comes into the mix, gets metabolized in the soul-making.

Someone said, "What brings you here?" Someone else said, "Beauty." And I used the word art before, referring to this as an art. Even just those two ideas there, beauty and art—what might that do to your whole sense of what the path is about and how we conceive of it and the kind of language we use and the kind of either clear or vague ideas of where we're going?

Some of you have been practicing a long, long time, and it might be interesting for you to just question: Where do I think I'm going with this business of awakening or enlightenment or liberation—give it any words? What do I think that is? Where is it going? What is it that I actually really want? Am I using the right language and the right ideas to support the truth of what my soul wants?

And some of you have been practicing not that long, perhaps, and that might be an interesting question to introduce.

So I used this word art, and I didn't want to mean it in a kind of facile way, where it's very easy to talk about the art of this or the art of that or the art of whatever, and to imply in that word art something like, well, it involves a skill, but there's also kind of an intuitive element, and some people can get really good at that or whatever.

All that, I suppose, is the case. I don't know what it means to be really good at soul-making. But I think I mean the word art in a slightly fuller and potentially more radical way. When we really think about art, making art, and great art, it's like—what's the pur-

pose of it? Why art? Why do people make art? Why do we love art? What is it that we're after? Where does the process or the engagement with either making art or loving art—where does it lead us? What's the goal? What does it serve?

Some may not relate to the word art. It's just one way of conceiving what we're doing. And if that doesn't really relate to you, there are other ways of opening up the sense of what this might all open out to. And there might be another fantasy rather than that of art. But also in relation to art, there isn't really—I think we're trying, but there isn't really—a dogma here, much as there isn't with art. And it's not really a question of truth in the usual sense we think about that.

Some of you have heard teachings around soul-making and stuff we've talked about before. So there's a kind of—if you like—a particular relationship with notions or ideas of truth and reality. There's a particular relationship that we're interested in. We'll talk about this as the retreat goes on, if some of you have heard this before. But it's that particular kind of relationship with the whole idea of truth and reality that opens things up in certain ways that they wouldn't otherwise get opened up, opening up a different domain and range of experience, and giving us a different sense and idea of everything—everything.

Actually, if you linger with this idea of art, I think—even when it's not obvious, when it's not spelled out in words or pictures that make obvious sense—I think that all art that I would call wonderful, beautiful, meaningful, soulful art is, even if it's not in an obvious way, it has an ethical dimension. It has a dimension that addresses us in terms of value, that touches our sense of value, makes us want to live differently somehow, makes us want to be alive differently. Someone—you know, you guys know I like John Coltrane—is just playing some sounds. There's nothing in the title, there's nothing, and it does something to the sense of existence, and there's goodness and ethical values wrapped up in that. Art touches on that. So I use the word art in relation to the practice that we're doing in all those senses with all those implications.

Someone sent me a lovely poem, a really touching to me poem, not too long ago, a week or two ago. And she said in introducing it—this is not someone I know yet—"Yesterday was my birthday, and I have a tradition of getting up early and writing a poem on that day." It's a nice way to spend your birthday mornings. And then she said, "I think you'll find the teachings, the soul-making teachings influencing here."

So this is the poem:

"This year, a Syrian girl gifted me a red poppy.
This year, the sunflowers grew as tall as the roof.
This year, Annette's son died a week before Mother's Day.
This year, I kissed a man who was also a falcon.
This year, I was a cloud, and when I rained, she cried."

This year, the long-tongued deity taught me wild equanimity. This year, I prayed naked, and the gods loved it. This year, on winter solstice, we laughed so hard we peed off the edge of the mountains. This year, I traded babies with a miner to our mother. This year, I was a gazelle eaten by a lion. This year, children reminded me that you can become a robot when it's pretend real, that we can share mermaid dreams with the dog, and that kings make bad fathers when they've lost their bones. This year, the electronic billboards lit snowfall in Nanjing. This year, a pair of cranes landed on a river when the sun fell. This year, Steve and I were still learning to dance. This year, I played peekaboo with a blue-eyed spider. This year, an insane amount of people decided to keep loving me. This year, a few decided to stop. This year, the crow finally flew from that windowsill and we became each other.

And she continues, in this birthday writing: "I am not being abstract. These things happened to me. But I'm also not claiming that any of it is real or not real. It's just that life whispers in many tongues. My dear Western culture, my darling inheritance, in all your brilliance and brutality, this year I've come to realize that you've forgotten many secret languages, especially the ones that make us most human. The 'let me create you and you create me' love languages. The languages of belonging. Let's keep remembering, shall we? This year I discovered how to belong."

Beautiful. So "let me create you and you create me" love languages. She mentions in there this inheritance that we all have of Western culture and its brilliance and brutality. And there's so much gift in terms of science and social infrastructure and that kind of way of thinking that we are heirs to, that we benefit from.

And I think it's become clear—it's becoming clear—that the culture, the intellectual inheritance and the inheritance of sensibility and outlook, metaphysics and all that, has a brutality to it as well. It comes with a cost. We see every day there's something in the news. Unfortunately it's usually way down in the back pages, but every day there's something of some kind of ecological, environmental crisis somewhere. We are living through multiple environmental ecological crises that are somehow the result of our vision, our brilliant and brutal and limited vision.

We're living through environmental crises, ecological crises. I think we're also living through anthropological crises. What is a human being that we look on each other these ways? Anthropology means the logos, the ideation of what a human being is, in one sense. In a way, humanism that came with the Western Enlightenment—there's a kind of crisis in it, you could say.

Now, I'm not saying, and I don't think Catherine would say either, that what we're doing with soul-making is the solution, and absolutely not. There's plenty of people addressing these questions and there are many possible solutions. But what we're doing and what we're wanting to bring into this, and the way practice opens up the being—it does address those issues of what it means to be a human being and what the world is and what our relationship is organically, naturally with other human beings, ourselves and the world.

So, as I said, in our time, there are many views and ancient traditions and practices and epistemologies and ontologies that are resurfacing or being resuscitated to address some of these questions. And there's so much of value there, so much of value. And there's so much need for it and so much hunger for it. All this stuff comes up and in a way then it lands on the table. And gradually, gradually, we can start to sort and sift what's there—these different ideas, these different practices, these different understandings and outlooks.

And I really absolutely don't want to say this one path is better or this conception is worse or that way of practice is more advanced or anything like that. But they are different. There are differences there. And to sort them, to understand what's been brought up, resuscitated and brought to the table in attempts—multiple attempts—to address these kind of predicaments that we globally face now. I think making delineations, making discriminations and discernments between these different ideas and practices and outlooks is quite important.

Actually, some of you might know already or have heard us say that this making of discriminations is actually an element of soul-making. The more on-fire soul-making is, the more discernments and delineations and proliferations and complexities and faces of things open up. We will explain this. It's what happens when what we call the eros-psyche-logos dynamic gets going. All these differences and different aspects and faces—worlds upon worlds—open up. And part of that is delineation and discrimination. And in all that, there's a maturing of understanding and of practice that's possible.

So that one element—certainly not the be-all and end-all, but quite central in this whole soul-making process—is the realm of concepts and conceptual frameworks. There's a dance here, I think. A dance to be witnessed, to be entered into: a kind of

middle-way dance between precision of conceptual understanding and precision of conceptual delineation on one hand, and elasticity on the other—fluidity, flexibility, capacity to stretch.

In all that, what can be allowed in this dance between precision and elasticity is the creation and discovery of more and more facets of soul, more and more worlds, more and more dimensions, more and more realms of being—a proliferation of richness that happens with the whole soul-making dynamic. This feeds and requires developing sensitivities to make these discernments and differentiations.

We're talking about what you could call a soul intelligence, which is not just an abstract, intellectual thing. It's lived, it's felt, it touches the soul with beauty. It involves a great deal of present-moment, alive flexibility of conception and ways of looking.

So eventually—for some of you it already does—this soul-making dynamic will involve eros for ideas, eros for the conceptual, eros for these differentiations. Some of you might find that very hard to believe. But everything gets subsumed. Everything starts to burn, come on fire. Everything. Even more things than you can think of when you hear the word "everything," because in the process of create-discover, we discover more things that we didn't even know were there that come alive, that come into the dimensions of our being.

I'm highlighting one element tonight, not at all to say it's the most important one. The conceptual is part of it—part of what will be involved, part of what will be swept up into the flames and the flowering of soul-making. In that, you will come to love that ongoing refinement of ideation and conception and ways of looking. Your love, your care for these kinds of discernments and discriminations, because you realize it's part of the creation and discovery.

If we just throw everything together and say it's all one, it's all the same, all paths are the same, I don't know that this reflects the utmost care. Someone who really cares about cooking—a really top-notch chef—doesn't just say, "It's all good." They relish the subtleties of discrimination and the nuance of tastes and aromas and the visual. It's a sign of their care.

I'm not talking about something that's an intellectual abstraction. I'm talking about something that opens up awareness and avenues of experience and practice and sensing—actually sensing. So I really want to encourage you to play and experiment and have fun with this: first-hand experiential understanding, first-hand experience of the creation and discovery that's part of soul-making.

Experience and idea, praxis and logos—they can unfold, they can open, they can be enriched together. There's tremendous beauty in all that. Tremendous beauty. Riches.

Finally, practically speaking, I wish sometimes when teaching retreat that there would be some way of instantaneously downloading all the teachings in one go. Samsara being what it is, that's not possible. Things have to happen in a certain order. But the order we do things in doesn't imply any inherent sequence—first you need to do this, then that. They all feed into each other. Given the limitations of how time is structured, we're going to try to build things so that what comes later builds on what comes earlier, so it can make sense that way.

You've heard us emphasize this quality of play and experimenting and letting yourself taste what opens up when you bring those attitudes. So I really want to encourage that.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 151

Growing the Energy Body (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 35 min

> *In this Q&A session from his Foundations of a Soulmaking Dharma retreat, Rob Burbea responds to practitioners' questions about working with the energy body. He explores various approaches to accessing energetic awareness, from the simple 'body bubble' technique of expanding awareness beyond physical boundaries to more sophisticated practices involving light and breath work. Burbea addresses the balance between staying with familiar practices versus experimenting with new approaches, emphasizing that different methods work for different people at different times.*
>
> *The discussion delves into the relationship between energy body work and samādhi development, clarifying how tuning to specific qualities or 'vibrations' can support jhānic states while maintaining the neither-real-nor-not-real perspective characteristic of imaginal practice. Burbea distinguishes between using the energy body as a navigation tool in emptiness practices versus its role in soulmaking dharma, where it opens to subtler qualities like meaningfulness, sacredness, and mystery.*
>
> *The session also explores collective energy body experiences, acknowledging how groups can share energetic fields during ritual or practice, while maintaining important distinctions between imaginal work and paranormal phenomena. Throughout, Burbea emphasizes patience with the process, encouraging practitioners to trust their experience while remaining open to the gradual expansion and refinement that comes with sustained practice.*

And so today, just as much as possible, if there are questions about what we've been talking about—the energy body, what that is and how to practice with it—then this is a good space for that.

Jill asked about something she had learned ages ago called the "body bubble," wondering if she had her concepts right, whether the body bubble could be one of the things on the spectrum of ways of working with energy. I'll repeat because usually people can't hear: Jill is asking about what I must have called the body bubble, which is really similar to what we talked about this morning in terms of expanding the space of awareness just a bit bigger than the body. That whole region becomes sensitized to as a field of energy or vibration or texture. Is it right to view that as one way of working with the energy body?

Yes, absolutely. For a lot of people, it will probably be the easiest and most efficacious way in. Something just happens when you open up the awareness, just like we did first thing this morning. Open up the awareness, just hang out there. Sometimes you don't need to do the breath or lights or all that stuff—it's just, oh, actually it's already a field of energy. Not for everyone—everyone's different—but oftentimes that is the easiest way to start getting familiar with and sensitized to a certain way of feeling this bodily experience. And then from there, it can expand to all kinds of other things.

To clarify, she's used it to check in, and also to infuse the space with quality—peace and so on. Either of those approaches works beautifully. With this body bubble way of working, one way is to just check in: how am I doing, what's going on? The second way is to deliberately infuse that space with a certain skillful quality—what the Buddha would call a skillful quality like peace or happiness.

With the first approach, the checking in, that's what I was talking about this morning a little bit. This way of paying attention becomes a really fine, potentially very fine discrimination of what's going on, particularly emotionally. Or as I said, checking in with an image—just the sense of, my mind doesn't get this yet at all, but I can tell there's something here for me just because of what happens in the energy body. So I'm checking in almost as the thing's going on, and it can tell me an awful lot. We can get really quite refined, developing a refined sensitivity to that.

The second thing, infusing a quality, is more what I would associate with working in certain ways when we develop samādhi. One way of understanding what samādhi is: you're really tuning the whole being—the energy body and the mind and the consciousness—to a certain quality. You can think about the jhānas that way. With the first jhāna, the quality that you're plucking out of the ether, if you like, of the space—resonating to and absorbing into, getting into—is this kind of rapture or pīti. With the second it's happiness, and so on. There are many more than just the eight jhānas. You can be quite creative and make all kinds of cocktails and combinations.

Basically this idea of tuning to certain vibrations or qualities is really skillful. It's very helpful for samādhi. It's also part of what goes on in imaginal work, because what's happening when an image gets going is that there will be a whole constellation with it—partly not just one emotion, but several emotions: love and eros and maybe grief or tenderness, all kinds of things. You can tune to that whole constellation or different elements within it. All this develops with time.

Jill mentioned feeling quite relieved to find that she can actually do something worthwhile. As I said last night, what we're laying out is a lot, and you'll be drawing on everything you know—mindfulness, mindfulness of body, samādhi, and all this stuff.

This also relates to something else Jill was intrigued by from what Catherine said today. There are certain approaches that feel really aversive—she doesn't like the idea of them at all. Yet when she went outside and felt the sunshine, when she put her feet on the ground, that felt like something she could do, rather than some other way that felt a bit dark. So there's a question about the balance between trying something new and what feels comfortable.

Certain things to try with the energy body feel really easy and comfortable and familiar—they work, and immediately you get a sense that this is helpful.

And there are other things which really don't. So the question is partly like, what's that balance between trying new things and actually just staying with what you know works?

Personally, I don't think there's one answer. We have to try new things. Otherwise—well, you're free not to, of course—but there's a way that we won't expand beyond what we already know. Catherine and I were just mentioning earlier, talking with each other, how easy it is to get into meditation habits. And even of posture. You see, I sit a certain way, and it's fine. And it works, and I can be mindful, and I can know what's going on emotionally. But it's actually not quite fully open and upright, just the posture. And you know what happens? The whole energy state, the whole... well, energy, but also then the experiences that open up will be limited by, in this case, a postural habit, which turns very easily into a meditation habit.

Similar thing with ideas or attitudes or stances or what we're trying to do. It's so easy. Everyone here has done plenty of meditation experience. So it's just human. But within those habits, we've got lots of good habits, lots of really good habits, and lots of good things we know how to do. So you don't want to throw that out. That's part of your bank of resources and your tool set and your skills. Lovely, yeah?

And for me, a lot about this practice is about just this attitude of daring to experiment and try things. The thing about experimenting in this situation is it's perhaps not just completely like a science experiment where you try something, it doesn't work right, so you just throw it out. Because what you try one day might work—you know, might close right there and then, nothing happens. And then, you know, two hours later, it's actually perfect. So there's this whole quality, there's this whole fact of the kind of fluidity of our energy experience, our whole being, and a necessity to respond to that. Do you see what I mean?

So I'm not quite sure about this. But let me just say something. So was it something one of us suggested?

"Yeah, okay. And so what did the ray of light have?"

"Well, it's just I've tried to do several times over several years to do this rays of light going into different parts of the body."

Okay. Something goes... Yeah. So... Maybe leave it, you know. But if you're talking about light and energy body, then there's plenty of other things, you know, plenty of other ways. Like, in a way, the light is all around, or the light's coming from inside of you, or what I mentioned briefly—this body is, that bubble is a bubble of light that you talked about. All these things. And it might be that in time, that opens up further possibilities, which at some point include this. But, you know, it doesn't really matter at all. It's not like... Boy, you're not really getting this until you can get that death ray started. Or whatever it is. It's not a fight. You know. Okay? Yeah? Beautiful. Okay.

Okay, good. Yes, Dave, please.

"It's sort of a similar question to Jill's in a way about that balance between doing what sort of flows more easily. But rather than balancing that and trying something new, the balance between that and working on those bits that through discrimination you've picked up—okay this feels important and it's something I'm maybe avoiding or not paying attention to because it's easier to follow another route. So specifically with the energy body I find it a lot easier to almost start with image. And something I've noticed in this retreat is a sense that it's important to find a way to, especially in practice, Catherine was talking us through with, you know, having you first before you then go into tuners."

Perhaps what's happening is, as you're working more with bringing sacredness to the breath or the energy body, you're learning that sacredness itself actually supports samadhi. The sense of the sacred—even without elaborate imagery—can create a quality of reverence and devotion that naturally deepens concentration.

So one possibility is that you're discovering something quite beautiful: that when we approach our practice with a sense of the sacred, it actually enhances rather than hinders the samadhi. The reverence, the sense that what we're doing matters, that it's holy in some way—this can create the conditions for deeper absorption.

Now, regarding fabrication: there are different kinds and levels of fabrication. The classical teaching is that as samadhi deepens, fabrication lessens. But what you might be discovering is that initially bringing in a certain kind of fabrication—the fabrication of sacredness, of devotion—actually creates the platform for less fabrication later.

It's a bit like using a ladder to get up to a roof, and then you can put the ladder away. Or like using a raft to cross a river. The initial fabrication of sacredness helps establish the samadhi, and then within that established samadhi, there can be less fabrication.

Another way to think about it: there might be a difference between effortful fabrication and what we could call natural fabrication. When sacredness arises organically in practice, it doesn't feel forced or constructed. It feels like you're discovering something that was already there. This kind of fabrication might actually be more aligned with the natural movement of consciousness toward absorption.

Does that resonate with your experience? When you bring that sense of divinity to the breath, does it feel effortful or does it feel like you're uncovering something inherent?

You understand? So I would say, with just pure jhānas—without the imaginal—it's an interesting thing. For myself, definitely, sacredness starts to really come in at a certain point. As you get deeper into the jhānas, it's characteristic of that. They can be more or less infused with sacredness, depending partly on how much you tinge it with image or some kind of conception.

So for example, here's this bliss, and I regard it in that moment as some grace from the divine. Now, the Buddha doesn't talk that way, but the same experience will just be infused more with that characteristic.

So you can—again, this fork business—you can peel off and kind of emphasize different aspects. So it might be interesting, if you want to, to start with image as you're doing, start with whatever kind of mystical ideas of sacredness, kind of semi-imaginal mystical ideas, open up the samādhi. Then if you want to—it's not that you have to do this, but if you want to, just for the sake of your exploration—you could stay with that mix.

Again, it can be the whole constellation: mystical imaginal idea and sacredness and whatever the samādhi quality is—bliss or whatever—all mixed together relatively evenly. Or I can start to lean a bit more one way or another.

Within that mix that you're describing, you could lean just into the pure sensation of—let's say it's *pīti*—just the pleasantness, and kind of let the mystical idea or the image be very secondary or even fade out. What you pay attention to will filter out of the experience and grow.

Again, I don't think it matters too much about order. Samādhi, I would say, is dependent on happiness and inspiration. You can nail your attention to your nostril tips and not blink for a microsecond, but if it's lacking in juice and inspiration, you're not going to get into any jhāna or nothing at all. Jhāna is dependent on a certain kind of happiness and inspiration.

Now, if it takes something imaginal to open that up for you, great, so be it. But once that's there, then you can kind of play with the relative weightings through the attentions. Does that make sense?

Padmasuri asks: "I wonder about individual and collective energy body. Like Catherine yesterday sort of set us in tension with the Avalokiteśvara mantra, and all of us go into the same space and sort of form a collective energy body. Could you see it like that?"

Yeah, absolutely. So thank you for mentioning that. No question about it. Energy body experience can be individual or collective, and so can image. People can enter into a collective image with another person, or a group of people.

This is what starts to happen when you start practicing in these ways—and now we're talking about energy body, but also with image. You start to have a certain range, and then you get into practice, and then it's like, "Oh, hold on, this is a whole other thing now." Collective energy body sense. Could be in a dyad, a triad, could be a whole group of people.

And then there's also the possibility of collective imaginal sense. What I was saying was the possibility sometimes of when a group shares a ritual—you're often actually, it probably won't be everyone, but there's a kind of collective entering into or sharing of a certain imaginal sense.

There's something to repeat again: the nature of these kinds of practices is that they start expanding in all kinds of ways.

They start growing. I hadn't even thought of that as a possibility. And then you go, whoa, this is what Catherine will talk about. Eros, Psyche, Logos starts expanding and breaking into new territory. And part of what becomes interesting, if it captivates you, is the question: what supports that? What supports that?

So if you and I—we haven't talked much about live dyad imaginal practice, like in twos—but if you and I were practicing in a certain way, what allows us to feel a shared sense of energy body, and what gets in the way of that? All kinds of things can get in the way. There are psychological hang-ups and clinging and just not paying attention. We could list countless conditions that allow that coming together, that opening out of the experience of a collective energy body, and countless conditions that close it or make it unavailable. The same applies to a shared imaginal sense. Does that make sense?

So yes, thank you for saying that. And it's something that Catherine and I work with, but we haven't really put it out there yet. But absolutely, if you sense that, then that just becomes part of your experience, and if it feels comfortable, go for it.

One more question. You said today that you would like to download the information to us, but that's quite difficult. But if you have this collective sense, would information be able to go through?

Sometimes I feel yes. And there's a level where perhaps that can feel extremely mysterious or uncanny. It's almost like... Catherine and I were talking about this a while ago. It's almost like when you have electrons in an atom and they orbit the atom and they jump—it's called a quantum jump. Do you know this? The electrons jump from one state to another. Sometimes what can happen is the field jumps together. So one electron jumps, you jump, and I just find myself jumping with you, or vice versa, and you can't even say who started that.

When there's a lot of openness between people, when there's a lot of sensitivity and attention—again, we could list these conditions—when there is this kind of sensitivity to these things, that sort of occurrence can happen. But we could make this into something grandiose.

Two things about that. First, just think about sharing a joke or you saying something or us cracking up about something together. What is going on there? There's something of the same kind happening. We understand something. How are we going to put that into words, and what happens in the field? There's something magical and mysterious about that, and a similar kind of thing is occurring. This is an everyday thing, hopefully. So this is not something so strange.

Second thing to say, and it relates to what I was saying about realism: I don't know how to say this. I'm really not sure how to say it, but I think the distinction or the mapping out of what we're calling imaginal and, say, ESP or remembering past lives or seeing ghosts—there are distinctions there and some overlap.

For me, it feels—and I'm not at all suggesting that you're doing this—but if we get a little bit interested in the paranormal sort of thing, it might be fascinating and interesting, but it won't be the same as opening up the soul-making. And again, this goes back to the intention. There's a way we grasp at the paranormal as something real. It's unusual and interesting, but it's real. The imaginal leans more towards the neither real nor not real. And that opens up experience in a very different way, with different kinds of sacredness and blessing that other approaches won't offer.

So there's a subtle distinction.

And yet there are relationships and overlaps between these domains. Not that this was implicit in your question, but just as a general clarification. Does that distinction make sense? Good, thank you.

Sampo is asking about his experience working with emptiness practices where the energy body is involved, but primarily in two ways. First, it serves as a navigating mechanism—registering whether I'm on the right track, sensing whether there's letting go happening or contraction arising, and if there's contraction, finding ways to release it. Second, there's what I mentioned earlier as the fork in the path—you can be doing an emptiness practice and move into samadhi with the energy body.

But all of this, as you point out, even including the different tones of samadhi that can arise, represents a much smaller range than what I was describing earlier and what you're alluding to—the full spectrum of what's involved in soul-making perceptions and what becomes available through the energy body.

So yes, much can be more subtle. I'm not sure about the "not bodily" aspect you mentioned. Perhaps what you're referring to is that many of these qualities—meaningfulness, the sense of soul-making—are what we might call mental qualities reflected in the body, or they're not as tangible in the usual sense. If I'm understanding you correctly, then yes, basically I agree.

Again, it's a matter of having been comfortable with this particular range of practice, and now it's opened even more. There are all kinds of colors and shades, directions and possibilities, and we're slowly getting used to that, becoming comfortable with this expanded territory.

Is there a question in this, or are you simply sharing your experience?

Ah, perhaps what's challenging is that it feels like a new kind of sensitivity is required. Sometimes there's a sense of numbness, as you mentioned—the qualities we're especially looking for, the sense of being, sacredness, or soulfulness, aren't as immediately apparent as we might expect.

This relates to some of the earlier questions we explored. You don't need to push too hard on what feels like it's not working or not as vivid as you imagine it should be. If there's an image present, a sense of soul-making and meaningfulness, and you're registering that somehow—even if it's not quite as vivid in the energy body as you might wish—it doesn't matter. Simply enter into it and enjoy it.

Recognize that sense of soul-making, tune into what feels soul-making, and just register that. From this engagement, the experience naturally enriches and expands. We become more sensitive, as you noted, but without forcing what feels underdeveloped.

For navigation, you don't have to rely solely on the energy body aspect. There are other qualities available—mystery, for instance, or unfathomableness. Consider sexual desire: when it becomes contracted and small-minded, it loses that sense of unfathomableness—of the object, of the subject, of the eros itself. It misses the mystery, the dimensions of beauty. Some of these qualities you can recognize anyway as indicators, without requiring immediate reflection in the energy body.

You understand? So trust—it's already there for you. You trust these other indicators, and the other elements of the experience will begin to fill out and come alive slowly.

Very good. Let's have just a bit of quiet before we end.

[Brief period of silence]

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 152

The Energy Body (A Little Bit of What, Why, and How)

Rob Burbea · 49 min

> *In this foundational talk from his Soulmaking Dharma series, Rob Burbea explores what he terms the 'energy body' - a specific mode of attention that perceives the body as a field of energy, vibration, or texture rather than through conventional mindfulness of discrete sensations. He offers both narrow and broad definitions: the narrow definition describes a receptive awareness that encompasses the whole bodily space, while the broader definition includes felt sense, conception, and image of the body across an infinite range of possibilities.*
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> *Burbea explains why this approach serves multiple purposes: it naturally inclines toward deeper samādhi states and jhāna absorption; it enhances mettā practice by grounding loving-kindness in embodied experience; it provides crucial feedback for insight meditation by reflecting the felt sense of letting go; and it supports imaginal practice by helping transform craving into eros and mental proliferation (papañca) into soul-making imagery. The energy body serves as both indicator and foundation for these practices.*
>
> *Throughout the talk, Burbea emphasizes a phenomenological rather than realist approach - the energy body is understood as dependent on ways of looking rather than as an objectively existing subtle body system. This philosophical stance opens vast territories of embodied experience, from conventional physical sensations to imaginal transformations where one might experience the body as fire, music, or geometrical constellations. The practice requires patience and gradual development, ultimately serving not just personal healing but what he calls 'fullness of intention' - practicing for the sake of soul-making and the divine rather than limited personal goals.*

In a way, I wish this retreat was maybe two weeks long. When we think about building blocks for this practice, there are some essential things we need to cover, offering what everyone might need given their different background histories. The consequence of this means that the first couple of days—today and tomorrow—will be probably a little more dense with teaching than as the retreat goes on, just to get a certain amount of material out there so that you can start playing with it. There'll be a talk this evening, for instance, and tomorrow there'll be talks in both the morning and evening. I hope that's okay. It's obviously in the service of getting things across.

What I want to talk about now, hopefully in just under an hour, is this term "the energy body" that you've heard about. I want to say a few things about that. Again, as Catherine probably mentioned, consider what you need—where's the consolidation for you, the reminder, and what's the next thing for you?

I should mention at the start that I already somewhat regret this term, "the energy body." It got coined in my mind somehow some years ago in the context of different practices, but I can't really think of a better one that's not an enormously long mouthful. So I'm staying with this for now.

I want to talk about this and introduce it as part of the practice. What are we talking about here? I want to explain why—why this particular way of paying attention to the body? You have mindfulness of body as the first foundation of mindfulness, and if you practice insight meditation, you're saturated in that. So why this approach? I want to address that question and talk about what it is and how you can work with it.

If we address the "what" first, there are perhaps two levels of definition or description: a narrow one and then a larger one.

In the narrow or smaller definition, what do we mean by the energy body? I would say it's actually a kind of attention. I'm putting it more in the subjective rather than in the object—you understand? It's a range of ways of paying attention that feel or sense the whole bodily experience as a kind of field of energy or vibration or texture.

When I pay attention in a certain way to the space of the body, it opens up differently to this sense of a field—of energy, vibration, texture—which is slightly different than if I pay mindful attention to, say, the sensation of my knuckles. We're all used to that. So we're talking about something different in this smaller definition.

Let's play with this a little bit. Come into a meditation posture. With the energy body, posture is actually quite important at first—it will help you access this sense initially. Later it becomes less important. Find a posture that's comfortable, relatively relaxed but upright. Already in the posture itself, there's a tone and energy reflected in the physical posture of openness, relative energization, uprightness, and balance. Find a posture right now that has those qualities inherent in the physicality of it.

First, you can connect with the sensations of contact, of sitting, in the usual way. Then, when you've established that connection, open up the space. Open up the space of awareness just a little bit bigger than the whole space that your body occupies—the whole physical space that your body occupies. Rather than paying attention to one point or several points in the body, we're opening up a whole space of attention, just a little bit bigger than the body space.

What happens if I just dwell with that more open, spacious awareness—or relatively open? I just feel: what does it feel like in that space? The attention is kind of light and receptive, a delicate attention. What is the experience? If I use words like vibration or texture or energy, sometimes just doing this—just opening up the attention this way—I already have a sense of something. It's somehow related to the uprightness of the body, the symmetry of the body, the openness of the body. So it can be quite subtle when we talk about energy.

Now what happens—and this will happen a gazillion times—is that the awareness, the attention, will shrink from this relatively open space. It does that for lots of different reasons: often when we get distracted, when there's contraction, just out of habit. So expect it to shrink, and then just open it up again to that same size and remain sensitive to the feeling in that space.

It's okay right now if you don't actually feel anything, but just inhabit that space with awareness, with sensitivity, with receptivity. Keep opening it, keep stretching it, because it will collapse many, many times.

What happens right now if you sit a little more uprightly than you usually sit? You're not forcing anything, but you're opening the body so the spine is erect. There's almost like a line you can imagine of energy from the base—the tailbone, or even beneath the body—up through the center, perhaps out the top of the head.

And you're attentive to the whole space—very delicate, receptive attention to whatever is going on there.

What happens now, if you feel okay with it, gently beginning to breathe long and slow, deep breaths without moving a lot of air. So actually you don't have to take huge gulps of air with this, but just let the breath be long and slow and smooth, and let it fill that space.

Find a long, slow breath that's comfortable, and how does it feel? How does it ripple through? How does it expand or contract, or what happens in the space of the body when you do that with the breath? How does the energy, how does the felt sense, the vibration move or change or is informed by this long, slow breath? Opening up the body with the breath and opening the awareness to the whole body, that whole space.

So let the breath be long and slow but still comfortable. And if you want, what happens if you imagine—or feel even—the breath coming in at the solar plexus and entering the body instead of the usual way we think about it, through the nostrils and the mouth? Coming in at the solar plexus, and then—it's really okay to imagine this and just

see what happens—the breath going both up and down the body at the same time, coming into the solar plexus and moving up and down in two lines from that solar plexus: up into the head, maybe even out the top of the head, and down to the feet.

And with the out-breath, it retraces those two paths and out of the solar plexus, out of the front of the body. Keep opening the awareness and feeling in. Long, slow, smooth, comfortable breath. We're feeling, imagining the breath energy in the whole body space, radiating out from this point at the solar plexus where the breath energy comes in, radiating out up and down, and then reversing out with the out-breath, opening the body, letting the energy open up the sense of the energy body.

So I'm moving very quickly here just to give you a little taster if possible. You could keep the breath if you like, or you can let it go at this point. What happens if you imagine this space that we're calling the energy body a little bit bigger than your physical body—that whole space—what happens if you imagine it as a cloud of light?

And if you're not visual, that doesn't matter either. It's just a cloud of energy that's somehow radiant. Use your imagination, but you're feeling into it as well, feeling into what that imagination does to the sense of the body, the sense of that space. Here's my body as cloud of light—perhaps white or gold or any color that feels right for you.

And again, stretching the space when it collapses, opening up again and again and again. Opening, opening, opening. Mind has a habit to contract, so just opening again and inhabiting, filling that whole space with delicate, sensitive awareness. Bright awareness.

Whatever you experience is really fine. No pressure here. But if we again move on a little bit, and if you have been using the breath, let it go now. You're still attentive, stretching this whole space.

And what happens if this space is imagined as the source of loving-kindness, the source of metta? So perhaps with that light, perhaps just with the sense of the space, and it's bathing, bathing all parts of itself and radiating out goodwill, metta, loving-kindness—the energy body as radiant metta, source of metta.

Keep opening that awareness, that sensitivity to the whole space. And when you're ready you can open your eyes.

So as I'll explain, these are just some of the things you can play with—just a small few ideas that can help to open things up or get a sense of it. The energy body will also, if you like, express or reflect the emotions. So sometimes it doesn't feel like a radiant

cloud of metta. It doesn't feel open, energized. It feels there's a twist in it or it's contracted. This is completely normal. This is completely what we expect. Absolutely. This is really important to see.

Actually, another reason—we'll talk about it more tomorrow—for emphasizing the energy body is it's a really good place to become aware of and to work with emotions, both lovely emotions—metta and joy and peace and appreciation—and also the difficult emotions where we get contracted. So as you pay more attention to this, you'll become aware of different flows of energy, of different kinds of texture, and different kinds of blocks and contractions. It's all just part of the everyday life of the energy body. Absolutely. So come back to that later.

So that's, if you like, the small description. It's just, as I said, this kind of attention that feels, if you like, in terms of a field of energy, of vibration or texture.

Why? Why do this? As I said, that's a question I wanted to address. Lots of reasons actually, but just to touch on, list them very briefly. When a meditator enters into deeper states of what we call samadhi, or like jhana, or that kind of real harmonization, collectedness, unification that the Buddha talked about in absorption, it's basically a state of the energy body.

This is essentially what the experience entails. One becomes fused with that state, open to it, relishing it, enjoying it, intimate with it. So this way of working is almost like gently moving in that direction anyway. It establishes an inclination, a natural leaning toward these deeper states.

This approach proves very helpful in developing samadhi—cultivating well-being in this field, right here in this body, as a source of nourishment and resource.

It can also be extremely useful in metta practice, either as a source of the loving-kindness itself—doing metta more from the body and from the energy rather than from phrases—or as an indicator telling you when you're on track with practices like metta. You'll sense, "Oh yes, that's the attitude, that's the intention," and recognize when you're less aligned.

This kind of attention to what we're calling the energy body becomes extremely helpful in insight practices as well. It serves as an indicator here too. When there is letting go—which is the very function of insight practice, to let go right here, right now—you feel it in the energy body. It's reflected there. So you can discern, "Oh, what I'm doing right now, this way of looking, this is helping. I can feel it. I feel it viscerally in the field."

As I mentioned, this sensitivity also applies to working with emotions. They're reflected and expressed in the space of the body. There can be tremendous subtlety and skill in working with this, which we'll explore more deeply another time.

Regarding imaginal practice, opening to this kind of sense of the body helps the experience become, instead of mere papañca or daydream or obsession or fixation with a certain image, what we call erotic imaginal—which moves in the direction of soul-making. It's one of the essential ingredients. This kind of attention and sensitivity to the body helps the experience open up to become more soul-making. It helps what could be craving transform into eros.

If I have cravings and bring my whole energy body awareness to them, it can help the craving become eros. It can help what we might call papañca become imaginal. So it serves as a really helpful ingredient.

Again, it's indicative. Pay attention to this body—it tells me when there's a sense of soul-making occurring, and that becomes my guide. An image might seem like a waste of time to my mind, but my body says, "Hmm, I can feel that doing something," and I trust that sensing.

The energy body possesses this sensitivity that serves as a helpful indicator. When there is an imaginal image, it's very quickly reflected in the energy body. There comes a kind of coherence, a harmonization, an organization, an opening and an energizing. When something is truly imaginal, it has an immediate effect on both the energy body and the mind. If the mind was scattered, something shifts and settles.

What this means is that paying attention in this way to the field, to the energy body, supports the imaginal. And conversely, the imaginal opens up the energy body and helps it. They feed each other mutually.

You'll also discover at some point that images can arise through the energy body itself—rather than the image being something out there that I am looking at, this body actually becomes image, or the image bursts through the body. I become an image via the bodily experience.

So this addresses some of the "why." None of this will be possible—or would be much less accessible—if we don't first hold the body still and pay attention in this particular way. None of these indicators would be available to us.

There are some practices where one lets the body move spontaneously in meditation with a flow of energy. I was involved in such approaches many years ago. But if you do too much of that, then none of these indicators I'm describing—none of the help for

soul-making, the indicating function for samadhi—none of that will happen. It may be wonderful as its own practice, but if we want to develop soul-making and related practices, I would encourage not pursuing that approach.

Instead, the body remains still and poised with this sensitivity, so I can feel the flows or expansions or whatever is happening energetically. We'll talk about movement and soul-making as the retreat progresses, but for now, keeping the body still and developing this sensitivity rather than engaging spontaneous movement would be tremendously beneficial.

One implication of this is that when you're doing imaginal practice, working with images, because it harmonizes and opens and energizes and creates coherence in the energy body, you might find yourself working with an image when it's as if a fork presents itself on the path right there in meditation. Here's this image with a sense of soul-making, and simultaneously there's a sense that the energy body feels quite lovely—coherent and aligned and harmonized.

So the fork in the path becomes: I could, if I choose at that point, lean toward emphasizing more the feeling of the energy body. I could actually put more weight there and let the image either dissolve completely or recede into the background.

And I'm more getting into this sense of harmonization and good feeling and well-being in the energy body. Then I'm going more in the samadhi direction. Or the other fork is I prioritize the image and I'm just enjoying and noticing and being aware of how the energy body feels, but the image and the soul-making sense with the image is what's priority. So there's a choice—a little bit this way, a little bit that way. And you can develop control over all this.

I'm going to say something for some of you who are already quite experienced with all this. I was talking to someone a few weeks ago and she said, "Well, this image comes and often what happens is I just spontaneously go into this kind of space of lovely energy oneness and the image just disappears." So there's a kind of habit there of moving towards this really lovely sort of melting into oneness, a kind of samadhi state with this person. It's not wrong, but it's just a certain path. If that's the only thing that ever happens, then that's going to be problematic.

So what happens if an image arises and it gives rise—births together with it—a sense of nice energy in the energy body, and then instead of just melting into that, we actually let the energy itself become image for the self? So we have an image then—it's this twoness. We're not melting, we're not unifying, which would be the usual direction of samadhi. We're actually keeping a twoness. There's this energy, and there's the sense of

self. And that can become image. It's like, what's the sense of the blessing of this energy in relation to the self? What's the imaginal sense? A bit like we did with that chant last night. Then the whole thing can become imaginal and not just collapse into a samadhi thing.

One more thing. For those of you who have a lot of experience with this, it may not make sense to some, but what is it to take the whole thing to another level and sometimes see the energy as imaginal? I'm not even going to explain what that means. I'm just throwing it out there. What does it mean to actually relate to the energy as imaginal? This perception is imaginal.

So there's a little bit of the why, and I gave the more narrow definition. If we say what would be a broader definition—which I'd like to open up now, just for the sake of making more sense and more space in the teachings—in the larger description or definition of what we mean by energy body, you could say there are three interrelated aspects to it.

Again, energy body means a kind of poise of attention, a kind of attitude, a way of looking and of conceiving. That, number one, feels—just as in the more narrow definition—feels the body as a field of energy, of vibration, of texture. So that's the first aspect. Same as the smaller definition.

Second is a conceiving right then of the body that does not limit it to the usual modern Western conception of body, which is either a kind of scientific materialist conception of molecules and atoms and tissues and all that, or the usual sort of "I'm too fat, too thin, too ugly, too this, too that"—the kind of way we appraise the body fed by the more superficial levels of our culture. So there's a conceiving going on. It's part of what we talk about as energy body, but it's not a limiting conceiving. Within that, you can have all kinds of different conceptions of the body. We're not limiting it to this or that.

And the third aspect—so you've got the felt sense, the conception, and the third aspect is an image of the body. So right now, even if you shut your eyes, it's not necessarily an imaginal image, but it's just, well, in my case, I've seen my body and I sort of see a shape. I can see I've got these maroon trousers on, I've got my legs—it's just a shape. There's an image, there's a form sense of the body.

So these three aspects of what we could call bodily awareness—felt sense, conception or idea, and image or form sense—what I want to do is say all that opens hugely wide. The conception we usually have of what a body is, we don't narrow it down to any one conception. At any moment, it might be anything. And the image one might have of one's body and the felt sense—the range there is huge.

And what I really want to encourage, when we say energy body now, what we mean is the opening of that range of experience and sense and conception and image of body. Does it make sense? It's a much bigger definition. And suddenly the whole territory is vast in terms of experience. So that's really what I want to encourage.

Now, whatever nice nugget of a term someone can come up with—let's say energy body for now. Someone asked me a few months ago, "You talk about energy body and it's great and I really like it, etc. Why do you never mention the chakras? I've never heard you say anything about the chakras." And someone might be hearing all this energy body thing and think, "Okay, I get all that."

If you investigate the teachings of chakras, you'll see that systems vary quite significantly—the colors, how many chakras there are, where they're located, what geometry accompanies each one. When we use the term "energy body," the experience we have of body is dependent on the way of looking, just like anything, actually. The experience we have is dependent on the way of looking.

We're not talking about energy body as some kind of independently existing objective reality—as if it's like this: if you get it right, you'll see this, and then the next stage is, you understand? It's a different conception entirely. This underpins everything we're doing. While this might sound a bit abstract right now, this understanding will open up the territory enormously—the territory of experience. What we call energy bodies are dependent on mind in many, many ways.

In philosophical language, we're talking about a phenomenological approach, which means I go by experience rather than preconceived ideas. It's a certain stance that allows a much wider range, opening up whole realms of experience, of possible experience, including in the imaginal sense of the body.

When I first introduced this term "energy body," I was really trying to help people move toward samadhi. For that purpose, it points toward more etheric, open senses—very light, tingly, that sort of thing. Energy body is quite helpful for pointing in that direction because it naturally implies those qualities. We're including that, and we're also including the normal, humdrum, everyday experience of the body as just one particular window in the whole range of wavelengths available to us.

I could be sitting here having an experience of the body as dense, hot sand. There's an image there, a very particular idea of body, and there's a felt sense of that heat and density—and it's blissful in its own way. I could be a pterodactyl in flight. There's an

image, obviously, so image and energy and felt sense all wrapped up into one, carrying with it a certain experience. I might be sitting here—no one else can see the pterodactyl—but it's an alive energy-body-imaginal experience.

My body might become fire. My body is fire. My body might experience flows and lines of energy of all kinds. My body might be just a field, a relatively amorphous field of energy. It might somehow become a geometrical constellation of mystical primordial elements—earth, air, fire, water. How does that feel?

What about if the image I have is: I am music. I am music. If you ask me who I am, what my deepest identity is—or yours—I am music. What does that image sense, this strange image sense, do to the sense of body?

I think I shared once how the birds outside my window felt like they were weaving and healing my energy body. That's a particular kind of idea, a particular kind of image with a particular kind of felt sense that accompanies it. Or perhaps a flock of ravenous wild birds devouring my body—it's an image sense that comes with a whole feeling.

Or my erotic, imaginal beloved is there, looking at me. We're looking at each other and she's breathing, and where her breath comes toward my body, flowers grow out of my body. The exquisite bliss of that, the exquisite tender healing—this is all energy body, image beginning to amalgamate, concepts stretched.

All of this includes, as I said, felt sense, implicit idea or concept—what we're calling logos—and imaginal sense, image sense. Sometimes it won't be imaginal. There's an infinite possible range here—infinite, endless. Endless creation and discovery in this felt sense, what we might call an expanded version of mindfulness of the idea and the image of the body.

As I said, this includes the very normal sense, the very conventional everyday sense. It includes the modernist, scientific materialist idea—absolutely, why not? It's just part of the whole range, along with an image of the body that, as I mentioned, is not imaginal but just a kind of internal picture of this form.

When we talk about energy, and indeed when we talk about images, human beings often seem tempted to bring in very quickly a kind of realist perspective. "Aha, this is now the truth, this is a certain deeper level of truth, or this is the reality." And then we bring to the whole endeavor the usual tendency to seek social agreement. We look for corroboration. Who sees this energy body experience as I do? You've got these chakras, you've got these phenomena. This is the way we usually think about reality – it's real if we all agree, or if enough people agree. The outliers can be dismissed. If enough people agree, then that's a validation. We think, okay, this must be real.

But I'm not interested in that approach. It's a different thing we're talking about, and a whole range of different possibilities will open up because of that shift. We're not interested in social corroboration of so-called independently existing realities. If we bring that realist perspective, if we stay too attached to it, somehow this whole practice we're doing, this whole art, will get off on the wrong foot. It will prevent things from opening up as much as they could – certainly with the energy body, but also with the imaginal and the soul-making practices.

This means certain experiences won't open up, certain senses won't open up, and certain whole conceptual possibilities won't emerge. As I mentioned last night, our very ideas of the self, of the world, of the mind, of the goal – where are we going with all this, where can we go – if there's too much attachment to realism, the whole endeavor gets constrained. There will be some attachment to realism – it's just part of being human – but if there's too much, it's like we get off on the wrong foot and the whole thing doesn't open up sufficiently. What we're talking about – this whole soul-making dynamic, certain kinds of sacredness – won't be as available.

Let me pull out again one element of what I said. There's an idea, or we could say we use a certain language, a logos or concept of the body that is often implicit at any time – an understanding of what the body is. There's an implicit idea we carry, often without thinking it consciously. It's an element of the energy body experience.

So yes, if you know certain systems, we can experience the meridians, the acupressure and acupuncture meridians. If you know that system, we can experience chakras, we can experience certain kinds of sheaths of the energy field that many people call the subtle body or the etheric body. All of this is often connected with healing paradigms and certain kinds of healing work. That's all wonderful and valuable. We can experience all of that.

But in this kind of approach, in this pushing the boat out, we're not taking any one of those systems as an objective, independent truth – nor the scientific materialist view either. There's something about the whole underpinning idea of this soul-making work that allows concepts and ideas to expand their range and become enormously flexible. Eventually, we can simply decide to have a very different idea about this experience right now. You can see it in the conventional way, you can see it in all kinds of ways.

What emerges is an enormous flexibility with the kinds of ideas that actually shape perception, that direct and open or close or limit our experience. That's part of where we're going with this. The beauty and facility of being flexible with ideas is fundamental to this work. It's part of what we're calling the phenomenological approach.

So back to the question of purpose. I touched on this earlier, but the purpose of practicing with the energy body is not to try to achieve a state where the energy body always feels open and harmonized and pleasant and bright and energized. That's not the purpose. It won't happen anyway – it's impossible – and it's not what we're doing.

To take this further, the main point of this kind of practice with the energy body, or imaginal practice, or emptiness practice, or samadhi practice, is not healing – unless by healing we mean something much, much wider than we usually mean. What does it mean to heal perception? If healing means opening and not being rigid about "this is reality," if soul-making means healing and healing means soul-making, then perhaps. But conventional healing is not the primary thing we're doing here. It might be part of what we're doing – absolutely, and at times there may be more emphasis on that aspect – but there's something else at work.

If I use the phrase "fullness of intention," part of what really galvanizes and opens this whole practice is not limiting our intention for what we're trying to do or why we're doing it. Soul-making will, to borrow Mary's term again, break through whatever intentions we have for this practice – whether it's healing, getting the energy body just right, or whatever else. It will expand beyond those boundaries.

There's something profound that happens when I come to these practices with this fullness of intention. The intention is not for personal growth or development. It's not even to have less suffering. What happens when I have a real fullness of intention – and is that even possible? It's not that common, not that easy.

What does it mean to practice not for me? What does it mean to practice for soul, for soul-making, to practice for the divine, for the sake of the divine? So there's a possibility here of opening up the ideas of why we're doing this. Yes, healing can happen. Yes, a kind of beautiful re-visioning and re-feeling of my history and my hurts and my difficulties—all that can happen. Something more opens up if there's the fullness, if there's that openness of intention.

We really want to encourage this. We said before, if we talk about energy, we're really talking about a huge range—actually an infinite, endless range of possibilities. That's what we would like to encourage: this openness to possibilities of sense, of experience, of conception, and also of intentions.

This takes time, everything that we're talking about. Even just this felt sense—and you might have sensed, "I'm not sure I feel anything, I don't know," when we did that little exercise just half an hour ago—it takes time. And expect it to take time. And that's really, really okay.

So people have different backgrounds with this, and as Catherine said, different kinds of tendencies or whatever. I think it's really, really worth it. It takes time, but it's such a wonderful investment to develop these kinds of sensitivities and awarenesses and skills. It will really help imaginal soul-making practice, as I said, and other practices too.

Is it necessary? I actually don't think so. Jung and people like James Hillman—I don't think they had a clue about this kind of thing. It wasn't integrated into their way of working, and probably you'd never hear them talk about their bodily experience when they describe their work. Lots of soul-making going on there, in certain directions and stuff. So I don't think it's necessary.

And of course there's loads of Dharma that doesn't do anything remotely like this. It's really about very different kinds of sensations that we all know about. But if you want to—and we are encouraging it as part of this kind of art that we're trying to open up—then the development of that, the journey, does take time. It's a journey of opening up this range, opening up the range of experience.

And part of that range will include what I alluded to earlier: the relative sense at any time of solidity or density of the body and ethereality or insubstantiality. So normal for Western people is not to feel any kind of sense of ethereal lightness. For some people here, it might be the more normal one, and it would be good to explore the more dense, solid range. But really we're talking about the whole thing opening up.

One last thing. So opening up that range is part of the journey—opening up the range in lots of different ways. But also opening up, and again gradually in time when we feel ready, how much energy we can experience. So it's not at all to say more is better, or the direction is we're going towards kundalini explosions or anything. Not at all. It's just that sometimes a person has developed in their life, in their personality, and also in their bodily experience, where the range of energy is actually quite limited. They're completely normal, well integrated into society, have a very functional and beautiful life, lots of sensitivities, but actually the range of what can be felt here, how much energy, is actually limited. And that has all kinds of knock-on limitations.

So sometimes, you know, this little exercise we did with the long breath—that's one of the ways of actually experiencing more energy in the body. Sometimes people are very resistant to it, partly because it takes a little getting used to, but partly because there's a resistance to feeling more energy. Actually, you're opening up the body and just...

So I put that out as well in the mix of what might be involved in the gradual path of opening all this up and developing. And then the skills to work with the energy body and open up things and that sort of thing.

Okay, so today, I think if we can, in your practice, as you move through the day, you can lean more towards the intention for samadhi, for well-being. So it's working with the energy body as primary, but the real kind of gentle intention is just to feel this space here as a kind of space of well-being, of energization, of harmonization, and just dwelling with that and enjoying it. Does that make sense?

Now, images may arise, and that's fine, but if you can just hold that very lightly as a kind of background emphasis of attention for today. As I said, even if an image arrives, you'll notice that there's the sense in the energy body of the harmonization, etc., that comes with something when it's imaginal. And then you can just be aware of that, include that. So we're developing familiarity, awareness, sensitivity with this kind of attention.

And we're also developing the skill in a certain direction. That's the emphasis.

Through this gentle cultivation of samadhi, we begin to recognize how the energy body responds to different qualities of attention. We develop sensitivity to the subtle shifts that occur when we orient toward well-being, toward harmonization, toward that spacious sense of vitalization that emerges naturally when we allow it. This is not a forcing or a striving, but rather a patient development of familiarity with these more refined dimensions of our experience.

As you continue with this practice, notice how this quality of attention begins to inform other aspects of your day. The same gentle intention that brings harmonization to the energy body can be carried into your interactions, your work, your moments of rest. You're cultivating not just a meditation technique, but a way of being that recognizes the possibility of well-being as an ever-present potential.

This development of skill moves us gradually toward greater ease, greater capacity for presence, and deeper access to the nourishing dimensions of consciousness itself. Through this patient cultivation, we discover that samadhi is not something we achieve, but something we allow—a natural flowering of awareness when the conditions are supportive and our intention is aligned with wisdom.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 153

Trust, Ethics, Image (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 34 min

> *In this Q&A session from his Foundations of a Soulmaking Dharma series, Rob Burbea responds to profound questions about navigating difficult energies and ethical concerns in imaginal practice. Participants ask about working with aggressive impulses that feel uncontrollable, the fear of energetic impact on others, and engaging with images that seem to contradict personal ethics—particularly those involving desires for worship or power.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that the very presence of ethical concern and intelligent doubt signals spiritual health. He introduces the crucial concept of the "middle way of the imaginal"—understanding that images are simultaneously "me and not me," "real and not real." This neither-nor quality creates spacious possibility rather than narrow constraint. When aggressive or sexual energies become truly imaginal rather than merely imaginative, they gain sacred dimensionality and mystery, requiring less compulsive acting out.*
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> *Central to this teaching is developing trust in the imaginal process through attention to the energy body's responses rather than initial mental judgments. Burbea explains how soul naturally seeks to see and be seen as sacred, making apparent ego-inflation actually an expression of divine recognition when held imaginally. He advocates for patient cultivation of this trust, allowing grace to unfold rather than forcing imaginal development, while maintaining ethical sensitivity and care for one's spiritual development.*

Very violent things emerge, and in some way I can deal with it through the spirit of metta. Often these energies overflow into something that feels uncontrollable or uncontrolled, and I can get back to center—I can inhibit and work towards metta again. But I'm wondering how to play around with this a little, because it feels somehow like not inhibiting at times might allow the energy to flow more freely. Yet there's some fear. And also, sometimes it feels very real, like with people around. Sometimes I see things when things happen—I'm not sure.

"You see things where things happen?"

Yes, I see things in my imagination—streams of energy that push somebody in a direction, and suddenly they'll start walking and do something. But I don't know if...

Let me see if I can summarize and capture the gist of what you're asking. This is about aggression and perhaps relates to what we explored with movement and what I discussed this morning. There's concern and fear because you recognize a lot of what

feels like aggressive energy inside, and you're unsure whether it's controllable. So there's a wanting to inhibit it at times, and a wanting to practice metta as an alternative to divert that energy.

And then the last part—sometimes you're unsure if your state of consciousness and energy is affecting other people in a real way.

Yes, particularly with respect to that aggression, because I wouldn't want that to have a negative impact on people.

Thank you. These are really important questions. The first thing to say is that the very fact of you asking and having this concern is a really good sign—a sign of health. This kind of intelligent doubt indicates that these are things you care about. You want to do what's best, what's healthy, what's right. That in itself I read as a very good sign. It's a good way to approach any of this work—with a dose of healthy, intelligent doubt and discrimination.

If that concern wasn't there and you were reporting all kinds of uncontrollable aggression, then something else would need to come in. But the fact of doubt and concern is a really good sign.

This, and probably sexual eros as well, are two areas where we understandably have a lot of concern. There are many answers or responses we could explore outside of the soul-making paradigm—practicing metta and all kinds of other approaches. But I think within the soul-making paradigm, this becomes more nuanced to realize.

When the sexual arises—when I have attraction to someone and it becomes very real—it's definitely possible to work with this within the soul-making paradigm, but not necessarily easy, especially at first when you haven't fully grasped what it means for something to be imaginal. I know what imagination means—I can feel energy in my body and all that. But as I said this morning, this word "imaginal" has quite a richness and dimensionality to it.

When that dimensionality begins to open out—that fullness of what it means to be imaginal—it's almost like it opens up more space for something. For instance, aggression can become imaginal and holy. And the more imaginal and holy it becomes—or sexual eros, attraction to someone who's unavailable or simply the wrong person to be attracted to in the wrong situation—the more space there is.

The normal impulse we have as careful, sensitive human beings is to try and rein all that energy in. That's a valuable avenue, and we need to be able to do that. In time, with these practices, there's the possibility of letting the thing become more imaginal.

In the case of aggression, oftentimes it's structured as "I" as subject—the person with physical power and intent to destroy something. With sexual eros, we can let the object, let that person, become more imaginal. What does that mean? They become more than flatly human. They become full of dimensions, complexities, mystery, an unfathomable beyond. As all that begins to fill out, it creates more folds and spaces in which the eros can be contained.

If the eros is not contained, it has to spill out into action—we have to have that person, we have to concretize some kind of relationship or sexual action. I'm not saying that's wrong or right, but when there's not that amplitude, that dimensionality of the imaginal, then the eros or aggression or energy has to act out on a flat material level.

This is not a basic teaching at all. I have to say, I think it's really possible, though not necessarily easy. But the more we get a sense of what it means for something to be imaginal—what is that constellation of qualities and aspects and relationships—the more we trust that wherever there's dukkha, it can be made holy by becoming imaginal, by being sensed with soul. Wherever there's eros and attraction—"I want that person, I need to have sex with them"—it can also be held. It doesn't have to be acted out.

Similarly with aggression—it has, if you like, a holy dimension that we're not really taught about in this culture, whether with aggression or with sexuality. But it becomes accessible more and more. And when that space opens up, it's like more space, less pressure. You understand? Like a gas—there's more space, there's less pushing that it has to do something constantly.

But as I said, I don't think this is certainly not what I would—that's not a beginning sort of practice at all. It takes quite a lot to do that. And there are plenty of people in this room who have a lot of energy and have a lot of eros and have a lot of—you could say, from a certain psychological perspective, which is not the normal sense, the gods are knocking loudly, asking for something from them. And there's no conceptual framework to hold or to even regard that energy that moves in any kind of way that gives it any more sanctity or depth. There are many people in this room right now who have that kind of psyche. And it's difficult. It's an art, really, to learn to open that up to different possibilities.

So I definitely don't think it's the easiest thing, but I do think it's possible. And probably the way it comes is really, as I said, just getting more and more of a sense gradually of what it means for something to be imaginal. What's that experience? What's that relationship? And slowly we begin to trust that more and more.

In loads of interviews, someone presents something and there's just so much difficulty there. By this point, it's not that I would always use the imaginal as how I relate to looking at something, but I have, by this point, a trust in me that whatever it is, there is an imaginal way. There's a way it can open up imaginally that will redeem it, that will give it these holy roots, that will create less difficulty with it.

What to do right now, I don't know, because we haven't so much spoken about practice, so I don't know quite where yet. But it might be more a matter of leaving that aggressive thing aside a little bit, and concentrating more on just what ways the imaginal does come, and what ways you can get a sense of it.

Probably if you have a lot of aggression—or a lot of people with a lot of sexual eros or whatever—it might be that you see this is characteristic of images that arise for me. So I've shared in talks that I used to get a warrior image or different kinds of soldier images. And I can really see I have that in me—I'm a warrior, but not on a physical level at all.

Once that becomes an image and I kind of sense the holiness in it and the sense of what my duty is to that and the sense of it being neither real nor not real—that's really key, the reification piece—this is neither real nor not real, and it gets refracted into my life, not in an obvious way. So the warrior, for me, manifests in all kinds, has manifested in all kinds of ways. I've never hit anyone, I'm not interested in physical violence, etc., but it manifests. It refracts in a not obvious way, and part of allowing it to do that is getting a whole sense of what it means for something to be imaginal, which also includes this neither real nor not real thing.

So it might be just growing more in the sense, getting more accustomed to the sense of what it feels like and what the experience is of something being imaginal, and you begin to trust it more. But I would probably guess that in the process of that happening, some of the images that come will involve power or aggression or that kind of thing. And you will see in meditation, the mind goes, "Oh, I don't know, this can't be right, I don't trust this." Very normal, and again, good response, healthy response.

This is where I go back to things like trusting more the energy body sense. So let's say I have an image of some stomping warrior-like figure, or something, who seems full of power and energy and ready—he could destroy anything, it seems. "I don't trust this, it doesn't feel very peaceful," etc., is what my mind says. But I check my body, and lo and behold, there's this kind of alignment. It doesn't feel agitated in any way, it feels open and harmonized. I trust that more than my initial mental response.

And then I pay more attention with just openness. And I was saying to someone earlier, you can put a ring fence around it. I'm just going to give this five minutes of trust. And after that, I'm going to go back to being suspicious of it. I'm just playing, because trust is one—and we'll talk about this—trust is one of the key ingredients in the relationship with the imaginal.

So I can just put a ring fence around it, trust it a little bit. And in that five minutes, slowly, you'll start to pick up on the soul-making, the sense of soul-making. There is something mysterious about this. Yes, there's clearly power and physical power and a capacity to destroy. Plenty of people have realized you can't create without destroying. Destruction is not as simple as it seems.

But I start to get a sense that there's more to this than what my little mind thinks it is. It's got, as I said, an inexhaustibility of meaning, an unfathomability, a mystery. There's a curious beauty to it. When these qualities are there, they're part of what it means for something to be soul-making and imaginal.

And slowly, slowly, I learned that I can trust these dimensions of experience.

When I was first exploring and developing all this, I used to have images that were sexual, or at least offered the possibility of sexuality. I had a dream where a woman was trying to seduce me. This was some years ago, when I was just beginning to explore the imaginal and discover what it might mean. My tendency, given all my practice history, was to think that can't be spiritual, so we won't engage with that.

It took me probably a few years to trust this kind of material. In this dream—or perhaps it was later in morning meditation, I can't remember—I was being my monkish sort of self, and she looked at me with tremendous love and said, "You're kind of stupid, aren't you?" She said it with such love: "You don't really get it, do you?" There was something about the way she said it, as if she were teaching me something.

So I gradually let myself trust that and realized that what appears as hindrance or defilement in the usual spiritual framework actually opens up to something much vaster when we approach it through what we mean by the erotic-imaginal. Yes, it includes the sexual and all that, but it encompasses so much more than we typically imagine.

I would say the same is potentially true of what you're calling aggression or power. But it emerges through relationship, and we have to discover it. That takes time—all of this takes time.

With all this work, you have to ask yourself: What am I ready for? What's my edge? What feels okay? What do I need to have in place? Some people just jump in at the deep end and start swimming, and that's fine. But I have to be responsible to this being and care for myself and my pacing with this material.

There was a reason—beautiful reasons—why I was so cautious. Partly it was spiritual indoctrination, but there was also, just as in your question, a concern that reflected love. It reflected my willingness not to just follow what feels good. There was much more care involved.

My hesitation came from devotion—devotion to whatever the deepest truth is, whatever the fullest spiritual learning might be. If that meant not simply indulging in something that might feel good, then that's what I would do. So my concern, my hesitation, my slowness was actually a beautiful thing. And she had to teach me in this particular way.

I don't know what the exact journey will be for you, but there's something in what you're touching.

I would never say everyone needs to do this work, or that it's the only way to address aggression or sexuality. It's just one possibility. But some of you—perhaps you already sense this—will feel a certain suspicion, a sense that you don't quite understand everything being said here, yet you feel drawn to it. You have an intuitive sense that somehow, even though you don't understand how it will work, this might be your thread. You follow that, and it does start to unfold. You begin to really trust, and the fullness and richness begins to blossom there.

Andrea asked about navigating images: "After that session, I went outside for standing meditation. At one point, with hands on my belly, an image came of a complicated pregnancy. The image was immediately beautiful as a concept—as a poet and writer, it touched me—but it wasn't fully imaginal. I just liked it.

"I tried to resonate with it, but the liquidity wasn't there. There wasn't a softness, and my relating to it still felt like relating to a concept, something rather dry. So I stopped—partly because, as a writer, I didn't want to tinker with something, didn't want to kill something that had beauty. If it's not ready to be written, it's not ready to be explored.

"Later, while walking and thinking I would ask you this question, I felt very soft and open out in the fields. Then there was a slight resonating with..."

And how a complicated pregnancy sparked something - looking at the loss of a possible unfathomable beauty that you don't yet know yet, and then immediate tears and immediate soulfulness, meaningfulness in that moment.

So then there was a knowing that something had aligned, and then a continued walking trying to almost resonate more or pull out more dimensionality. And they're wondering, oh, should I just have left it alone and stayed with that sense of just that beauty? So I guess this is just to express that the navigation of these things is - I seem to have a sense when it charges or when there's that feeling of soulfulness. But then it feels very clumsy, the trying to draw out more and more dimensions.

Can I briefly sum it up? Drez is asking - sometimes, in this case, what happened was a concept arose, or just words in the mind, and they seemed like they were full of imaginal potential, or even creative potential as a writer. But it wasn't really going to that kind of juicy, full, resonant sense. But later, the added idea or sense of not just a complicated pregnancy, but of a mystery that could have been born but then was missed and not accessed, not opened to - and that idea touched a lot and felt full of soul. But then wondering if you tried a little too hard to kind of put the foot on the accelerator and extract more juice.

This is really key, I think - not to put pressure on the psyche, really, and not to put pressure on images. One of the characteristics of the imaginal is a sense of grace. Grace means receiving for some unknown reason - not deserving, nothing. It just comes, it's given. So it's not the whole truth of what it means to be imaginal - it's one aspect. And sometimes with that, there's the attitude that fits a recognition of grace, which is understanding that it comes and it goes, and it blows in and out. And we're given a whole thing or half a thing or a glimpse of a thing.

So I think sometimes that attitude is really important. That relationship with a sense of grace, recognition of grace and relationship with it, is already something soul-making, potentially, and already an ingredient that, if something is ready to come, it might help.

On the other side, there are different aspects of the imaginal. And sometimes, slowly, slowly, you can get a sense of - it's a matter of noticing something. And that noticing of a characteristic there. In your example, it may be the love - love for this unborn or this loss, and maybe some mysterious love of this that was unborn for you. Maybe that love is an aspect both ways of the imaginal, or this sense of grace. You begin to slowly get a sense of what are the things I can notice here. They're already there, they're just not obvious to me yet. And that noticing draws them out, and that allows the whole thing to come alive.

But in terms of pacing, sometimes it's hard to tell. Certainly what happened was there was this initial thing that didn't seem to go. Then there was this middle stage, and there was some juice. It's a bit like what I said this morning - there's some soul-making right there in the richness and the juice of that, and maybe to linger there and let that do its work on the heart. Heartfulness is part of soulfulness, definitely. So let that do its work on the heart and the energy body without rushing to ask, "Okay, what's next?"

There was already plenty of juice there. It's a matter of resonating with it, and that's a big part of what I said this morning about tuning and resonating and letting something work on you as opposed to you working on it. Sometimes there's - none of this is fixed. Sometimes it's "let me work on it" - more active. And sometimes the poise has to be, or the tendency has to be corrected a little bit in someone to be more receptive.

So it could be that in that middle stage you're describing, there could have been more of just hanging out with this and letting it reverberate and ricochet in the being and feeling it and recognizing the beauty in that and being touched in that. And if it wants to go to another level, it will.

My question builds on the first one. I work more with images that don't share the ethics of my own life—images that act in ways I wouldn't act. This connects to something I explored a little yesterday. I feel strongly pulled to certain energies that come up frequently for me imaginally, but I'm afraid. I have a fear that as I work more with those images, when there isn't the strength of the imaginal container, that energy is strengthening in my life outside of it in ways that are totally not what I'm trying to do with my life. I'm feeling in the midst of that and curious about it.

So, energies or images?

Images. There are often images where the imaginal self is wanting worship or wanting to be worshipped. That's one of them.

Thank you. That's beautiful, and I'm really glad you said that. There's a tension between our usual culturally dominant ego psychology—our regard for what is a healthy ego and what's too much ego—and some of the things that soul-making opens up, some of the things that images open up.

When an image arises, even if I feel like I'm inside that image or I am that image, even when I'm identified with the image, there's still a sense of, well, it's me and it's not me. This is really, really important. It's part of what I meant to say this morning but didn't have time—what I call the middle way of the imaginal. It's real and it's not real, it's me and it's not me. That sense is crucial.

Even when the image is other, it's not me and it's me somehow. Tuning into that sense amplifies it. The more I notice this—that it's me and it's not me—that's part of what I call the middle way of the imaginal. It takes its place between real and not real, between me and not me.

At first it feels like walking a tightrope between those polarities. As I get more of a sense of this neither real nor not real, me and not me, this tightrope becomes actually a wide open boulevard. It feels like the most spacious place to be—in that neither real nor not real. It opens up doors. What was a narrow entranceway or pathway actually becomes huge.

Again, as we said with the bodhisattvas, it's a matter of getting a taste for this and beginning to trust it more. So it's me and it's not me. And who's the not-me part? Part of the not-me is—pick your language—the divine, the Buddha nature, the angels. Or it's soul.

It's me and it's not me, and the part of not-me is its divinity. It is soul. And I would say soul wants to be seen. Soul wants to be seen as sacred. And soul wants to see as sacred. So the wishing to be worshipped, or recognizing that worship is appropriate, or that sense of devotion—it belongs to the nature of soul sensing.

This is a very heady idea, but the more I sense this, the more comfortable I become in this me and not-me, and it's the divine. What soul yearns for mostly is to sense with soul. Soul yearns to see and be seen, to show itself and reveal itself in images, and to have the soulful response to images.

That's what soul wants. You, unfortunately—as we all are—are just instruments of soul from a certain perspective. We're vehicles for this process, amazingly delicate and very unique instruments for this process to happen.

Is this making sense? It's a very different conceptual framework, a very different way of understanding what's going on. If it remains abstract, it just doesn't make any difference. But there's a way in the practice, in the thick of the practice, where you can get the senses of these things.

Related to the earlier question, the more I sense this, the more I sense that I can trust this. It looks like something we would be suspicious of in our usual psychology—whether it's aggression or sexuality or what appears to be some kind of ego amplification. But something potentially much deeper is being played out there in the theatre. As you get a sense of that, the ego doesn't tend to identify with it so much. It doesn't need to have the thoughts of superiority or whatever, because we're tasting what is superior—we're tasting it and getting the blessing of it, but not as "me" in the usual ego sense.

Again, this might all sound very far-fetched, but at this point I absolutely trust that this is what will happen if one goes into it with all the sensitivity and care. This is what will open, as opposed to becoming more egotistical or demanding that everyone bow at your feet.

This business of trust is hard, but I think it's probably the case that most of you have this glimmer of trust in something. We tend to think from one level out—these images are mine, they reflect me, they're expressions of me—as opposed to recognizing that you are an expression of an image. Actually, you are an expression of many images, some not yet born. Your life is that. Turn everything upside down.

I'm not saying this is the truth—it's a concept. And that concept itself is a potentially soul-making concept. It's rich, it's beautiful, and it does something to the ego needs. It just does something.

Certainly there are other ways of working with ego, and Buddha Dharma is full of them, and that's great. But there's also this soul-making approach which looks like it's going in the wrong direction. But it's not, because things get filled out and amplified, given their archetypal roots, given their dimensional scope and their sacredness—and that changes everything.

It becomes about divinity, if you use that word, and not about me, or only about me insofar as I wish to somehow live and express and sense divinity. This business about fullness of intention—why am I practicing? Why am I doing this?—eventually becomes more about that level. It's what soul wants, or it's what the divine wants. And that becomes the primary reason, as opposed to me and my personal development, or anything even more grubby than that.

These things take time. It might help, me saying this, but it's really in the sensing... We're talking about ideas now, but you can sense these things in practice, and slowly, slowly, it's like: ah, there's a freedom here, a whole other dimension of freedom and possibility that we wouldn't have otherwise discovered. You have to taste it for yourself. It usually happens gradually.

Let's have a bit of quiet here.

CHAPTER 154

Voice, Movement, and the Possibilities of Soul (1)

Rob Burbea · 1h10

> *In this innovative dharma talk, Rob Burbea introduces movement and vocalization as integral aspects of soulmaking practice. Moving beyond traditional sitting meditation, he guides practitioners through embodied exercises including warrior movements, subtle gestures, vocal expressions, and partnered witnessing practices. The teaching emphasizes two primary intentions: developing the capacity to perceive everyday movement, gesture, and voice as expressions of soul, and opening new channels for soul's manifestation through the body.*
>
> *Burbea explains how the energy body (kāya) and physical form are interconnected - when bodily channels remain closed or habituated, certain images, emotions, and spiritual experiences cannot arise. Through playful yet mindful exploration of movement and voice, practitioners begin loosening crystallized patterns that may limit the range of possible soul expressions. The session includes partner exercises in witnessing and moving, emphasizing the balance of attention between self and other while maintaining loving-kindness (mettā) as a foundation.*
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> *This approach represents a significant departure from conventional insight meditation, integrating the body more fully into contemplative practice while maintaining careful attention to intention and sensitivity. The teaching is particularly relevant for practitioners interested in expanding their spiritual vocabulary beyond traditional sitting and walking meditation.*

I want to experiment a little bit. In the past, some of you may have encountered it on the web or in person, I've talked about movement and its relationship with soul and the imaginal, and also about mudra and gesture. I gave some instructions and was encouraging the inclusion of that exploration in the larger scope of the practice we're doing here.

One of the things I said, and I want to offer it again as an instruction, is that sometimes you're practicing and there's an image. You're with that image and connected to that image and moved. The soul is moved by that image. Sometimes the image is in motion. For instance, recently I've had some images of dancers, so the image is one of movement. Or the image might not be in movement, but you feel a sense of something moving in the energy body as part of the interaction with the image.

An instruction—a totally valid, kosher part of our practice now—is that you can let it move the body, in here when we're sitting, as long as it's not too noisy. So that's a part of the practice. Or our walking periods—we could now call them movement periods. They may look like walking up and down slowly, as it usually looks in our culture, or they may look like something very different. You're letting the image be embodied with all the same sensitivity and care and mindfulness and relational nuances.

A second option, which I also mentioned when I introduced this, is that sometimes it feels more fruitful. The same thing is going on, but the physical body is completely still, and the dance is still going on. The energy body feels two things at once: it can feel this body sitting still and it can feel the movements of the dance or whatever. So the outer, so-called body is still, but the energy body is moving, and that's part of what you're paying attention to.

If you want to explore this in practice sometimes, you can do it in two ways. I would encourage you to actually do it, not always one way or the other, just to see, to experiment.

Sometimes the image is other. I have an image that I'm in relationship to, and that image is other. It might be that the movement—that image is not a moving image, it's a still image—but maybe I feel devotion, for example, towards that image. Maybe the movement that I then embody is a devotional gesture or something like that, or a gesture of receiving somehow. It could be anything.

Or sometimes when we're working with an image, you become the image. I am that dancer, or whatever it is. Then I might move in relationship to the world—the image in relationship to the world.

I want to reiterate and open up that instruction, open up that possibility. As I've talked about this in the past, I want to see what happens if we put a bit more emphasis and attention on it now and explore it a bit more.

One of the things I think I've already said on this retreat: when the soul-making gets going, it's like a fire. It will reach out and catch everything—not necessarily all at once, probably not all at once—so that different aspects and domains of our being get drawn in and involved in the soul-making. They become soulful, they become infused with eros and that whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic. One of them will be body, one of them will be movement, one will be gesture. At some point, if you pursue this kind of thing, it will start to involve every aspect of the being. Voice as well, which is something we'll play with a little bit.

When I introduced this before—I can't remember when it was, maybe two years ago—I talked about mudra, these subtle hand gestures, and I think it was perhaps not so attuned as a teaching, probably just too subtle for where a lot of people were at. That's fine—it's there floating around somewhere. Now I would like to do it in a way that's not just subtle, but also some really not very subtle stuff.

Also, and I did mention this before, it would be great if we could normalize this in the culture. When I introduced it, it was interesting how few people seemed to pick up on it. I think one of the things is just social pressure. It looks a certain way. Again, we're back into meditation habit and meditation mindset and attitude and conception, so that generally what looks normal in here is this.

Of course, when the postman comes, after all these years he thinks it's pretty weird that people are walking up and down like that or sitting still like this. So it's like how much we're shaped and constrained by culture, and can we actually start to normalize this kind of what we might call the soulfulness direction in movement? Can we normalize that in this culture? Sometimes we feel a little bit shy or it's not okay. So there's a desire for that.

Why are we doing it? What's the intention here? Actually, I would say two things primarily. I want to point this out because it can be quite easy to grab hold of these kinds of things with all kinds of other intentions, which is fine and great, but I'd like to highlight some possibilities that are a bit more honed in terms of what they're intending, what the purpose is.

One is—and I think it's really, really important, although not so dramatic—to sense and see, to have the capacity more often, more available, to sense and see everyday movements: your everyday movements, your friends' everyday movements, and gestures and voice. The capacity to sense that as soul. Moving my hand or the voice, the sound of the voice and the fact of the mystery of it—what is it to perceive movement, gesture, voice as soul? To have that as just part of the healing of perception that we're trying to open up: to sense with soul and as soul. So that's actually primary.

The second intention here is to open up the range and the channels of soul. We're not trying to—and we're going to do some exercises in a minute, movement stuff—we're not trying to kind of develop into these sort of movement artists, just able to do amazing stuff and kind of channel their soul in their movement in some wonderful way. I mean, fantastic when you witness something like that, it's just gorgeous. But that's not what we're aiming for here. If it happens, great. But it's more these two other intentions: to sense everyday movement, voice, gesture as soul, and to open up the range and channels of possibility for soul.

When we start to do this and we talk about this, it's quite a lot. Some of this, in different ways, might be a stretch for many of us in this room. So really, with all this stuff, think of it as a kind of gradual evolution. People are in very different places—their relationship with their body, their relationship with movement, all that. So it's very normal and it's really okay.

If we think about it, it's quite a big deal just to be mindful of the body, isn't it? And to be in the body and aware of what movement feels like. Most insight meditation, most of the training is either sitting still or walking up and down. So what is it to do other kinds of movements, still just have that really basic mindfulness? So that's one level. It might be that's actually the level I'm working on right now. Super, absolutely super. I just have to pitch where my edge is, where my growing is.

Then we've talked about energy body. So it might be actually to be aware of the more subtle energy body effects of certain movements. It's a slightly different thing than just the mindfulness of sensation.

Then there's a whole issue—another kind of stage or aspect of this—just what about self-consciousness and social anxiety if you have to wiggle in a certain way in public or whatever it is. So that's a whole territory or level that might be an edge and might be just, "Oh, this is what I'm looking into with this."

Just having a connection between self and movement—I don't know if you can see this—for some people there's a very direct connection with self-movement; for other people it's much more blocked, it doesn't flow, there's something a little constrained there. Wherever we're at with this, whatever reasons and history, it's really fine, but these are all different aspects of what we can be slowly looking at, opening up.

Another aspect is the freedom to move, the fluidity. Again, you can see sometimes it's really there—a person is very fluid in their body and free to move in different ways—sometimes they're not there. And it's really perfect, whatever it is, and there's room to grow.

And what is it to be able to express with movement and through movement? There's starting to be more of a connection with soul there. And then as I said, what is it to sense with soul and as soul? To actually sense movement imaginatively—my movement, your movement, whoever. And there's a possibility of becoming soul movement artists or something. That's not what we're aiming for.

I really want to say, so it's kind of like there are pitches here. Everyone's different. We've all got very different histories with this, different practices. So wherever you are, it's good.

It's really okay. There's going to be something for each of us to learn and explore, wherever we are in our practice.

So why don't we play with this a little bit? I should mention that I'm not going to be doing the movements myself—I've done something to my ribs and back and need to be really careful at the moment. But in a way that's a teaching, because for anyone who feels that certain movements are not okay for your body, just either don't do them or find a movement that somehow seems related or similar that works for your body. Really don't damage anything.

And also, if something feels like just a bit too much of a stretch for the soul, that's okay too. Either leave it for now or come back to it later, whatever feels right.

So why don't we start by moving the mats to the side again, and then we'll see what we can do here. If we can be somewhat spread out in the room—given the number of people, just the maximum possible space between us, which isn't very much, but still. You'll have to excuse me; I'm just going to either sit or stand for this since I don't feel my body is able to participate in the movements at the moment.

Let's start with just feeling the connection with the ground. Feel the whole body. Is there the possibility—feeling your body—to feel your body is blessed, whatever the condition of your body: health-wise, appearance-wise, skill-wise? You sense your body is blessed.

Maybe begin by doing a few of those sort of tai chi twists, where you swing your arms. They don't have to be wide swinging—just to loosen the body a little bit. Then whatever movements your body needs to do right now to loosen up, bring mindfulness there. Let the whole body be filled with awareness, just feeling what this feels like.

There's always some problem or other with the body, so it's never going to be perfect.

Exercise number one—or rather, game number one. You're drunk. You're completely plastered, off your rocker. And you're walking around the room. This is actually just a bit more of a loosener. See how much you can give yourself to being totally blotto. How does that show itself in the movements? Just get into it as much as you can, wandering around, using the whole space. Take care not to harm each other.

Can drunk people get excited about something? At least for as many moments before they forget what it is they're excited about. How would such a person move?

Beautiful, beautiful. And now—with the magic of the mindfulness bell—this drunken lout is transformed into mindful stillness.

Beautiful. That was really great. Let's take just a few breaths.

Hard work being drunk.

Let's take just a few breaths. Feel the feet. Feel the whole body. Let the breath come and go, animating the body, giving its blessings to the body, receiving breath. Can you feel this body is blessed? Can you know this body is blessed?

Now for a second exploration. I might need someone to demonstrate this. What is it to engage in a movement where the body expresses something or is carried by something where there's ferocity, power, courage—all the energy and intention flowing through the legs? Squatting, connecting with the earth. There's power coming from the belly and from the root. There's strength, and the body is expressing this courage and ferocity and power.

That's good. It's actually scary, you know? It's intended to show—it's a warrior. Maybe that's a way of putting it. The whole body expresses this. It's a lot in the body and the hips and the belly, feeling that connection, that power. It's really about power and strength and this unmovable warrior determination.

It also comes out through the mouth. The tongue comes out like those gargoyles or tantric wrathful deities—in the tongue, in the voice, the throat, everything's coming out. The chest, the whole body is involved. And the eyes—can you see that? The whole body is channeling something, embodying something, expressing something.

You can do this in cycles—do it a little bit and then pause, then do it again. If you feel more comfortable doing it facing a wall, just do it that way. You might prefer not to have anyone watch you, or you don't want to see others—that's perfectly fine. Just face the wall.

So let's try this. You are some kind of wrathful deity or warrior. Just do it in your own rhythm, in your own time.

Now we'll add the other levels of this awareness. Going back to what I was saying before, there are different levels of awareness or sensitivities as you're doing this. The body is doing something, and then the awareness can pick up all kinds of things. One thing can simply be: what does it feel like to stand like that?

What does it feel like in the throat? What does my face feel? Just simple mindfulness of sensations. But then there's also what does it do in the energy body? And then there's a whole other level of sensing the soul, possibly.

So it's not like there's a right or wrong. It's more like what can I notice here? And it may be that the whole thing, if you like, becomes image a little bit. Does that make sense if I say that? The sensibility, the sensitivity picks up on different aspects or nuances of the whole experience. Like, what do I notice here and at what level? And any of it is good.

So let's do another round of that. You can do a few. Probably some of you will hurt your voice if you just do it continuously. Do it in rhythms and see what happens.

Fabulous, okay, good. It's quite tiring, yeah?

Why are we doing this? So, why are we doing this is a good question. Well, it says here. So the purpose here is not to prescribe a kind of soul expression. Now you all need to—this is what all of you need, or this person or that person needs. Nor is it the kind of—sometimes what you get is like, oh, we're supposed to kind of balance our archetypes. So I have my, whatever this screaming warrior is, and then I have my, I don't know, little angelic cherub sort of image or whatever it is. In this system, we're not aiming for some kind of wholeness as a balance or a complete set of archetypes that are all in perfect balance. Some systems do that. That's not what we're going for.

It's rather to open up the channels of possible soul, images, energies, movements, postures, expressions. The emphasis is on possible, so that if soul at any time wants to flow that way, it is available. It's not a no entry. So that certain images can constellate. You know, the mind affects the body, but the body affects the mind. And if the body is not open in a certain way, sometimes the mind won't open in certain ways. It won't go down certain... Certain things won't arise. Certain images, certain energies, certain expressions, certain characters. Does this make sense?

So, if soul wants to or has a sort of momentary impulse to go in a certain direction and it's blocked or it's rusted or broken, then that thing cannot manifest—it cannot, either internally or externally. Mind and body mutually dependent, so they feed each other.

I mentioned this this morning: we're not aiming for some kind of catharsis, like I'm really angry and if I kind of bellow in this way then it will be out of my system and gone and purified. We're actually more trying to loosen, loosen possible channels, if you like, or avenues of expression, an embodiment in the body, in gesture and movement, in en-

ergy, and therefore in psyche, so that they become an available color, an available style, an available resource, an available image or archetype. Like when we talked about frustration and dynamism this morning.

One more thing and we'll try something else. And I mentioned this too—you know, for many of us, we're creatures of habit. The mind is, one way of understanding what the mind is, is a set of habits. And the body is also a set of habits. Like we get energy and expression, gesture, get crystallized into certain habits.

And sometimes what happens is there's a habit of the energy body and even the amount of energy to be limited. And as I said, sometimes it's not obvious. It's not at all obvious in a person, unless you're really thinking this way and kind of attuned in this way. And the person doesn't even think, realize that or notice it. Everything's fine and functional, but there's actually a limit on what manifests in terms of how much energy, what kinds of energy, what kinds of images, and what kinds of then mental and experiences in consciousness.

So partly, one of the things we're doing is getting used to just having more energy and more energy flowing.

And sometimes that can be really challenging - oh, I'm just not used to this. I think I mentioned, you know, just on a much more subtle level, that long breath that we played with very briefly on the opening day - that also gives more energy. And sometimes people spending more time with that practice need to get used to having more energy.

When the energy is limited in different ways, when the energy body is limited, then also the emotions and the images - everything can get limited and constrained.

Okay, so let's try something else. This is jumping from something quite gross that we just did to something much more subtle, okay?

Catherine is going to demonstrate. So you can see Catherine. Just standing - yeah. Maybe if some people sit down near the front, then the others can see. Good idea, thank you.

So, feet are sort of hip-width apart and loose at the knees. And really, really subtle movement, really not dramatic. The head is just tilting up and down, repeated tilting, slowly tilting up and down. That's it. Actually, that's one part of it. And, if you want, the arms can outstretch. The arms are outstretched, and the head tilts up and down.

So already she's noticing something - I don't quite know what yet, but this noticing could be at any level. So of course you move the head or you hold the arms and there's just physical sensations, and we all know that from mindfulness. But there's probably movements in the energy body. There's probably some kind of subtle emotion being constellated by the movement, and possibly an image, an imaginal sense constellating of that body in movement.

You don't have to share, but do you want to say a little bit or not?

"The first sense I have is a heart sense of a kind of tender... assent means to say yes to something."

So you can already hear in what she's saying, there's already a sacredness there. She's tuning the level of attention - not that this is right or wrong, but she's tuning right to a soul level with the emotional level. It's all quite subtle.

Do you want to say more, is that good? Have you got more to give? Don't have to.

"There's a shyness... some kind of become more humble."

Okay, beautiful. Thank you very much.

So it's not like this is exactly what's going to happen if you stand like this and wiggle your head up and down. It may. It might be something completely different. What's important is the sensitivity and the particularity. And particularity means individuality. And it might be, okay, not much happens, or I don't notice much apart from the bare sensations, but there's a direction here. And as I said, wherever we are is just completely fine.

So should we try this together, this one? Yeah, just enough room. Come into the space a little bit, yeah.

And so the arms are outstretched, and the palms sort of facing forward. And there's not an exact posture. So just find kind of what feels somehow like it's a fruitful or helpful one in whatever ways that is.

And then very slowly, and again at whatever pace and whatever range of movement, both feels doable and comfortable and not harmful to your body. And also somehow right. You're moving the head, tilting it up and down.

And bringing this receptivity of sensitivity and fine noticing to that. So actually the key thing is not the movement. The key thing at this point is the sensitivity.

And that can be at all different levels. So where's your playground of discovery for this particular exercise? What level or domain of attention and sensitivity? And if it's simple basic mindfulness, then that's beautiful and wonderful. And if somehow the movement itself becomes imaginal, becomes image, that's also beautiful. Your experience, your body, your care.

When you're ready, just come the arms down to the side and bring the body to stationary stillness. Feel the contact with the floor, feel the air on the body. Is it possible to know this body as blessed? Mystery of movement, the mystery of a sensitive body, a sensitive soul, all kinds of sensitivities. Can you know this body is blessed?

The next exercise—some of you may be familiar with it. Again, it's quite a subtle one, reasonably subtle. It's just a small smile. Eyes shut. And just as much of a smile as feels natural happening. What happens? Again, bringing the sensitivity there. What do you notice in the whole body, in the consciousness, in the soul, at whatever level, in whatever way? Just a small smile.

And then you might let it go and rest for a while, then bring it back and just notice the ripples from this tiny movement. The ripples in the energy body, in the consciousness, in the being. Allow your whole body to be open to whatever reverberations of such a small movement. What effect does that have on the heart, on the soul? Maybe it becomes imaginal in some way. Maybe not. It's all fine. What can I see? What can I sense?

Some people call it a half smile. You just play with how much and what it does.

Okay, and then letting that one go. Again, just coming into contact with the floor, the sensations of the feet on the floor.

This next one is a vocalization, and we're going to hiss. And you can try it two ways. Try it just with a sssss, and that might have all kinds of emotional flavors with it, so you see what that is. Just with the voice, and then do it sometimes with the voice and anything the body wants to do with it. Does that make sense? In your own time, in your own space, in your own rhythm with this as well.

So hissing. Hiss. And again, find the pitch of the attention and sensitivity. Whether it's simple mindfulness or energy or image, or emotion, or some or all of those. Sometimes just the voice, and sometimes the voice and the body, however it wants to be. And again, the key is sensitivity as much as anything, and noticing. And if it doesn't feel right for you, if it feels like just a step too far, any of this, remember you don't have to do it.

Last few seconds of hissing.

And then let yourself again come to stillness. A sense of contact with the floor, a sense of the whole body. Opening your eyes, taking in the room.

The last little game is optional, as all these are. And I think actually, Catherine and I will demonstrate, is that okay? This, yeah, well, we can sit and do the cushions. It's in pairs, so if you don't want to be in a pair and if you don't want to do this, then while the people who want to do it in pairs do that, you can just move however you want your body to move and let the attention be on yourself and what that movement feels like or what you want to do, okay? But it is in pairs and what we would do, so some people sit so we can see.

You can find partners in a minute, don't worry about that yet. But if you're working with someone in a pair, then either both stand or both sit. Do you have a preference?

Okay, so we're going to both stand. In other words, we're at the same level. So we're going to face each other, probably two or three feet apart, something like that. You can decide whether you want to sit or stand.

Having played with the balance of attention, then one of the pairs will move—can move in any way they want to move. And the other is still and witnessing. Both people are paying attention with all the sensitivity to what happens.

So if Catherine will move, my job is just to witness. I'm bringing my whole energy body into relationship, into the witnessing. I'm knowing with not just my eyes, but with my whole body. She might move and move... You'll be conscious of it, but primarily you're just moving how you want to move, though you'll feel me in relationship.

My job is to notice how her movement impacts my energy body or my soul or my emotion or my mind or whatever it is. Again, there's a pitching of the attention to what feels most fruitful. Some might be hard to articulate. When you do it together in pairs, you don't have to report "I felt this" or anything. You just notice, and then you'll swap.

So eyes are optional—contact or not contact, or you can go in and out. Sometimes when we do this pair work, I think there's a bit of pressure like "I have to lock eyes and if I don't I'm a sissy," and we stay there thinking "Oh my god, when are we going to ring the bell?" But that's actually not how human interactions are—at least not healthy ones.

So let it be. Sometimes there's already something when we make eye contact. There's a lot here just in the contact itself. I can feel it in my heart, in my energy body. There's a lot of possibility here for sensitivity, but neither of us have to remain glued with eye contact. We can, or we can go in and out, or not, or whatever. But obviously I need to have my eyes open to some extent to see her move.

So I'm completely still. I'm not doing anything. Occasionally a bit of a smile comes or whatever, but basically I'm not moving. She's moving. We did this a couple of weeks ago just as an experiment, and the movement was much more elaborate. But in a way it's really great—there was very little this time. It was quite subtle. But again, if I'm attentive, I can see that with each movement of her eyes, there's just a change in the direction of her eyes.

I feel it in my energy body.

This is not about what you do, it's simply an exercise in developing sensitivity in different ways.

You don't have to do this - you don't have to do any of it. I mentioned this at the beginning. But if you want to play, then find a partner. If you'd rather not, then perhaps find a space where you can explore your own movement just for the period of this exercise, focusing on yourself.

If you're with someone, you want to stay really close to them. Like Catherine - you can see she moved over there, which she didn't when we practiced this at my house, but that's fine. I mean, if she went way over there, it would be a bit much because you'd be wondering where your person went amongst all the others. So keep it in a fairly tight orbit if you're going to move at all.

So if you want to play, if you want to see - find a partner. And if not, as I said, just find a space where you can explore your own movement. I'll guide you because we're going to work with the balance of attention as well.

First, simply close your eyes and ignore the other person. Come into your own space, into inhabiting the fullness of your experience, your energy body right now, whatever is happening in that space.

Then, if you're not already, without opening the eyes, just become aware of the fact that you have a partner in this exercise sitting in front of you, standing in front of you. Let that into the consciousness, into your awareness. Just notice what happens with the attention. Does it go all into that fact of someone there, or do you find yourself having to keep reminding yourself that someone's there because you're mostly with yourself? Just notice the tendency.

Really bring a lot of kindness to this, whatever you notice. This business of two-ness of attention is not easy. You'd think it was, but it's actually not very easy at all for most people.

Remain aware of your energy body, your emotions, and just gently, gradually open your eyes. You don't have to make eye contact, but you're bringing more fully the other person's presence into the possibility of your consciousness.

Now let's try this kind of proportion of 80-20. Eighty percent of your attention, if you like, is with your own experience, your own space, your own energy body. And twenty percent with the other. Sometimes for some people it's easier as a fluid going back and forth - eighty percent of the time with yourself and twenty percent with the other. But there's enough rapidity to make it stay in touch.

Most of the attention on your experience, your energy body, your space, your emotions.

Then, is it possible to play with 50-50? Again, either spread in a kind of whole space of attention, or a fluid back and forth fairly rapidly between the two of you, so the attention is balanced between both of you.

It's not an easy exercise. You'd think it would be easy. It's not that easy, and that's really okay. We get better at it.

Let's take a few moments to radiate metta toward your partner. You may know them, you may not know them. Just wish them well. Wish them peace and ease, well-being and health. Maybe there's eye contact, maybe there isn't, comes and goes - it's all fine.

Now, as you're giving the metta, can you also be aware at the same time that you are receiving metta? Again, there's a kind of balance of attention there. You are the recipient right now of goodwill, of well-wishing, of kindness.

Giving and receiving both.

Now perhaps among you, if you can fairly—without too much fuss—decide who's going to be the first mover and who the first witness.

So the job of the mover is to move in whatever way they feel moved to, within this space of staying in relationship or even in one spot. It's a movement that's still somewhat in relationship with your partner. And you can move however you want to move. It could be really subtle, it could be quite expressive.

The job of the witness is to simply witness. And of course the mover will also notice what happens as they do this—how do they feel, what happens emotionally, what happens in the energy body. What images arise? How does it feel to be witnessed like this?

The witness stays stationary and just notices what the effects are in the body, in the energy body, in the emotions, in the soul—at every level.

When you're ready, mover number one, you'll have probably somewhere between one and two minutes, so don't think you have to choreograph a whole ballet. When you're ready, please begin.

[Movement period]

The last ten seconds or so... gradually coming to stillness again.

Just checking in, each of you—what's reverberating in the body, in the heart, in the mind, in the soul right now?

And offering metta to yourself, to this mystery that you are and this mystery of body and sensitivity. And then including your partner in the reach of the metta, in the sphere of metta, so you're offering metta to yourself and to your partner both—wishing well, wishing ease, wishing happiness.

And again, recognize that at this moment you are the recipient of intentions of well-wishing, of metta, of kindness. They are being directed, beamed your way.

Gently letting the metta-intention just drop to the distant background. It's always a base of what we do, but not so conscious.

And when you're ready, mover number two can begin. Again, let your movement be at least somewhat in relationship. Be conscious of the relationship as well. You're moving in relation to.

And the witness—with the whole body, the whole senses, all the senses and all the sensitivity—witnessing, sensitized, open, noticing.

[Second movement period]

Again, last ten or fifteen seconds of moving and witnessing... and gradually coming to stillness.

And again the metta—starting with metta to yourself. Metta for this body, this instrument. Metta to this heart and mind and soul, perfect where it is, how it is. And then adding, including your partner in the sphere of metta.

And recognizing the giving and the receiving simultaneously. You are giving and you are receiving. You are the object of loving-kindness in this moment.

Bowing to your partner, or some way of thanking them—whatever feels right.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 155

Heart Art and an Introduction to Image

Rob Burbea · 56 min

> *In this dense and rich teaching from the Foundations of a Soulmaking Dharma series, Rob Burbea covers two essential areas: advanced energy body work with emotions and an introduction to imaginal images. He begins by expanding on energy body practices, showing how to work skillfully with both pleasant and difficult emotional states. Rather than only seeking samādhi or the four brahmavihāras, he introduces the radical possibility of sanctifying seemingly unskillful emotions—rage, hatred, madness—by allowing them to become imaginal and finding their archetypal roots.*
>
> *Burbea demonstrates through personal examples how emotions can give birth to images when felt as dynamism in the energy body. He shares the profound image of an old king losing his powers with a baby monkey offering pure love—showing how dukkha can be transformed not by elimination but by gaining new dimensions of meaning and sacredness. The second half introduces imaginal images as distinct from ordinary mental imagery, characterized by qualities like beauty, eros, meaningfulness, autonomy, and soul-making. He emphasizes that the clarity of form matters less than the sense of soul-making that arises in relationship with these images. Through various practical approaches—from liquefying practices to working with dreams—he opens doorways to a dharma that includes rather than transcends the full spectrum of human experience.*

Good morning everyone.

So this morning there are actually two areas I want to try and cover in this session. It's quite a lot—as I said, it's perhaps a little dense in terms of teaching at the moment. I can share a few things about these two areas, and some of it will be in the form of simply: there's this, this, this, this, and this—not necessarily elaborating so much on each point, which brings me back to something I'll address at the end of today.

The two things I want to discuss are: first, taking the energy body teachings a little further, specifically with regard to working with emotions; and second, beginning to talk about images.

Yesterday we introduced the idea of the energy body and the practices of the energy body with a particular orientation towards developing and moving in the direction of samadhi—cultivating a kind of well-being in the energy body through integration, harmonization, and energization. We emphasized that direction of intentionality.

Within that framework, when there is anything at all pleasant or comfortable or even lovely in the energy body—or in the emotions as well, such as joy or peace—these will reflect in certain textures and energies, certain wavelengths, if you like, in the energy body. When anything like that is present, there is the possibility of leaning, inclining the attention towards resting in that, enjoying it, developing it. This is a direction towards what we call samadhi.

So here's this—maybe it's just a kind of light sense of open peace, but I can feel it harmonized throughout my whole body. Well, I can open to that. I open my body to it, I open my consciousness to it, I open my awareness to it. I endeavor to be intimate with it, to really get close to this texture, to relish it, to taste it, to know it—really touch it, touch it with the body, this loveliness, whatever it is. It could be extremely lovely, mind-blowing, or it could be quite subtle. But the intention is to nuzzle into it, rub yourself in it, open to it like you're sunbathing. Become intimate with it and basically enjoy it. Yes? "Thou shall enjoy"—it's the first commandment of samadhi practice.

Work with the whole energy body. It's really about turning on a hedonistic attitude and getting into it, bathing in it. Involved in that is what we could call a tuning. We're tuning, as I said, to a certain wavelength of energy. Let's say the wavelength of this kind of peace, or this kind of lovely tenderness, or this kind of effervescent joy. In energetic terms, it's a certain wavelength. And I'm tuning to that wavelength with my attention—but actually with my whole being, with my body, with my focus, with my mind. Everything's tuning. That's the wavelength of that particular loveliness that's available right now. Like tuning a radio dial, you're tuning to this.

As I said yesterday, the energy body will not be—cannot be—lovely all the time. It cannot be open all the time. It's just not the way it works. So within the intention of developing samadhi, within that track, there is the possibility when the energy body is not so open—when it's a bit twisted or contracted, when something's a bit tight, or when it's just not really available, when it's a bit agitated—there is the possibility to gradually develop skills to work with those difficulties and knots and contractions so that they open up and the whole system moves back towards some kind of loveliness.

This is a whole art in itself. I've talked about it elsewhere, and you can certainly ask about it. I'm just mentioning it now. So there's actually skillful relating to this difficulty with intentions like: "Okay, how can I maybe finesse it or nuance it to open up, to soften, to move basically towards something more comfortable, more pleasant, more characterized by well-being?" It's a skillful, deliberate intention. It's not a grasping or a forcing.

So that's all available. But as well as that intention towards samadhi and working with the difficult, there are other intentions. One might be: "Well, here is this difficulty, and maybe it in itself has a certain kind of intelligence. Maybe there's something in the middle of this difficulty that I need to honor, that I need to open to and be with, and it can somehow teach me something—I don't know what. Maybe it has a treasure in it."

This opens a whole realm of possibilities in itself, this slightly different attitude. What is it to relate skillfully in that sense to what is difficult? The intention here is not so much to change it, but to somehow honor it and see what might be learned, if anything. Or just to be able to be with it. That's all. Just to be able to be with, to bear with, to hang with the difficult.

So there are lots of possibilities, and I'll just offer a list here. One possibility is actually learning to focus. Here's this tightness in my throat—I'm not sure, is it an emotion?

Is it a grief? I don't even know yet.

Okay, it's possible to very delicately focus the attention right on those sensations and just train them there. And then the question is: how much? Laser beam or really delicate? What does it need?

And within that, I'm letting it be what it is. This moment and the next moment, I'm not saying, "Come on, I can just nudge you so you can be nice." That's fine. That's not like, it's not Buddhist to do that. It is Buddhist to do that. It's just different options, different orientations.

But in this mode, it's just allowing it. It's like, just like that with the hands, a little bird can land there and then it can fly off and see what's next, and it flies off. This is the atajas, a very delicate allowing and holding. That's one possibility.

Another possibility might be, again, to bring in the whole energy body. But the energy body, the space of the energy body, forms a context—a space, really—for this difficulty. So here's, let's say, I don't know, I've got this tightness in my belly or solar plexus, and again, I'm not sure: is that—am I anxious? Or—don't know yet. Well, maybe I do know.

But I can then open up the energy body awareness and let this difficulty sit in the middle of this—Joe used the word "body bubble"—this space of the energy body awareness. It gives it a different context. Do you understand? It puts it in that awareness. And oftentimes there is, in that larger awareness, there's a certain kind of—sometimes there's a certain kind of okayness. So it kind of holds it in a certain way.

We can—third option—we can learn to hold the difficult in love, to bring in or, let's say, access a quality of metta or compassion or tenderness or holding, again, around. So this difficulty, this contraction, this hardness, whatever it is, this knot—again, it's almost like it's held in a bath of something else, some warmth, some tenderness, some care. So this painful shard of rock is touched by something different. And you're just letting those two things come into contact with each other, the difficulty and the lovely warmth. And you just put them together without forcing anything to happen. You understand?

I should mention—I mentioned it somewhere or other, but I can't remember when—but for those of us who've done a lot of training in mindfulness, it's often the case that when we come to work with emotions, we use a very skillful approach, which is: "Okay, let me find—I see my mind is blah, blah, blah, all over the place, and there's all this stuff going on. Let me focus"—again, I tune the attention to the sensations of the emotions. So I say, "Oh, here's this heaviness in my chest or whatever it is. And I say, can I, in my mindfulness of the emotion, can I just look at the level of sensation?" And in a way, everything simplifies. You familiar with what I'm talking about? Yes? Wonderful.

And sometimes what can happen is that a person who does a lot of mindfulness practice, insight meditation, actually that becomes almost their only option. It's like one mode of relating to the emotions. What's it missing? One thing it's missing is it's missing self and story, right? Because part of the whole idea of mindfulness is let's just kind of leave that out, okay?

So for some of you, it might be interesting to introduce, again, open up the concertina, the fan of options. So what is it to be with this emotion in this kind of bare mindfulness, supposedly bare mindfulness way? No story, no self, it's just these sensations happening in the moment. Great, one option.

What would it be, though, to let it—to bring yourself in contact with that whole constellation of emotion, including the self? So it's not just sensations and just emotion, it's me having the sensations. And that's important. Catherine talked about yesterday, a practice with "no self, no self, no self. I just want to kind of ignore or get rid of the self." It won't be full enough, rich enough, juicy enough—just psychologically, let alone soulfully. So sometimes we go into a mode—we open to a mode that includes self, and that might include story.

And then there's further differentiations. What kind of self are we talking about? A reified self, or a self that I also know is empty? A self I see as image? Do you understand? There are different kinds of gradations of the mix one can put into this, if you feel ready to explore that kind of thing.

Dependent on that—dependent on what kind of self and how much self, if you like, is there, and how much story, and what the attitude to the story is—the experience unfolds differently. Is this the reality, this story? Or does this story also have the liquidity in it to be sensed as image? Dependent on all this, the experience unfolds differently. It's dependent arising.

All that is in the beauty and the art of what we can explore with the difficulties. Slightly different emphases and angles, and different experiences open up. Different kinds of healing are available. Sometimes healing won't just happen from looking at those sensations all day long. Actually, something is not getting healed because there's not enough self in it, and there's not enough story, or the story is too rigid. So again, there's no right answer, no right way to do it. You can't just do this one thing for the rest of your life and expect everything will be fine.

Sometimes, as another option, we can bring an image to meet the emotion—just as we bring the metta, for example, tenderness to sit around the difficulty. We can bring an image. Maybe you have imaginal figures that you already sense love you and you love them. So you can bring this image. What does this image perhaps communicate to you in your difficulty? It witnesses you there. It sees you. How do they see you? Can you see how this image is looking at this dukkha? Can you see and feel how you are being gazed at?

Again, there's a kind of alchemy that happens when I put the difficulty in contact with something. Just rattling through a list here.

Another option is turning the allowing dial up to eleven, as they would say in Spinal Tap. Meaning, here's the difficulty, and I'm not just kind of letting it be in the usual mindfulness sense, which is great. I'm totally—the thing I'm completely interested in is how much can I allow this? How much can I let go of completely, even the smallest trace of aversion or resistance? That's what I'm mostly interested in. That's a very skillful way of being. Some of you know what happens when you do that. It's an extremely interesting thing to try.

Again, rattling through the list. Sometimes, in fact often, an emotion—difficult and lovely—has a kind of dynamism in it. It's a vortex of moving energy, if you like. Because of that, you can feel that dynamism in the energy body. This rage or this frustration or whatever it is—you can actually feel a kind of power and dynamism in the energy body that's related to the emotion.

Because of that energy, it can give birth to an image. Sometimes this is extremely gross—the dynamism and the power that is associated with this emotion I feel in the energy body, and lo and behold, then I become a fire-bellowing dragon. Wonderful. The whole thing has moved. Or it can be much more subtle.

I'll give you a little example. Catherine mentioned that I've been—I don't know why it's arisen, but I've got all kinds of problems with my hormones now, different hormone levels. I can't remember if this was before or after I started the medicine, but either way, I've been feeling pretty strange lately. So let me just share this with you.

So I was meditating in the morning, feeling utterly confused and discombobulated, lacking in mental capacity recently. It's possibly a consequence of a thyroid problem—question mark.

Sitting this morning, I felt into the difficulty. This is what's happening, and I feel this difficulty, this whole gestalt of the difficulty. It's mental, it's physical—everything. I feel the difficulty of it. I feel it as difficulty. I see there's some aversion to it—subtle, but definitely there. I sense the contraction, subtle contraction in the energy body in relation to it. It's in my chest, in my throat and chest that accompanies this.

I tried to work with it in different ways, but the mind was not very focused, which was part of the original problem. Then somehow, out of my willingness to be with it and to be intimate with the difficulty in this open way, suddenly an image came.

The image was of an old king sitting in a room alone—well, almost alone—sitting in a room that looked very much like the living room in my house, which I wasn't in at the time. He's alone in that room, except that there's this very small baby monkey with him.

He has on this mauve velvet cloak, he's very old, and he wears this mauve velvet cloak and a crown, but the crown is really not very fancy. He's lost his powers—he's lost his powers. He's really old, and his mental and spiritual faculties are compromised. He's pretty confused as well; maybe he has dementia or something like that. He's completely lacking in energy.

And he has to see something now. Despite his state, he has to get clear about something, or gain some kind of clarity about something: that his kingship is not his. It was given to him by the divine, by the earth, by the Buddha nature. And nor are his spiritual or mental powers his. They're not his. They never were.

If death is coming, this is a time of relinquishment. Somehow his heart needs to understand, his soul needs to understand—a time of relinquishment, anatta, and seeing: this is not self, this is not mine. And in a way, entering the very simple state of the erasure of one's mental and spiritual powers. The simple state—just all that goes. And the erasure of these qualities and the gifts that were bestowed on him.

The little monkey, this little baby monkey, climbs onto his chest. You know how they do. So he's very lost and doesn't quite even know where he is, confused. And this little baby monkey climbs onto his chest and presses itself—the way very young babies can, when they're old enough to communicate love, their love, not just receive it. They can communicate this love.

So it presses itself against him like a baby, with a very young child's loving—very pure, very innocent, very sweet.

This is what I tune to. It's that interaction. It's one of the things I tune to. And it's something very lovely. You can hear it's sweet and soothing and pacifying. It brings a lot of tenderness and another level of okayness with what's happening.

I give you this example for particular reasons. Sometimes when I choose examples, there are different motivations. One is that the dukkha is involved. This wasn't an image that just went around the dukkha or ignored it—like, "Oh, that's all right, but look at this wonderful thing that's happening here." The dukkha is involved. It was part of the crucible that gave birth to the image. And it was still there at the end of the image. It wasn't like the monkey climbed onto his chest and suddenly transformed into some handsome young prince ready to rule another kingdom.

The dukkha stays. It receives other harmonies with it, other dimensions.

It's one of the reasons I'm choosing this image. It's more than simple anatta practice—more than simple "not-self, not-self." Beautiful, wonderful practice though that is, there's something more here. It includes that, but it's more.

The self—and you can obviously see the parallels there—the self becomes image. There's a real, I felt, a real relationship between me and this king, my state and this king. The self-sense moves towards an imaginal self-image. Do you understand?

We can say there's letting go, but in a way there's more than what we traditionally understand by letting go. As I said, it's got whole other levels of dimensions and echoes and juiciness around it. These are some of the reasons why I choose this image to share.

This soul-making conceptual framework includes many possible angles and approaches and intentions and directions within it. Like we said, I can do samadhi, I can be with difficulty, I can look for image—all kinds of possibilities.

When we talk about emotional awareness in this larger soul-making paradigm, the purpose of our emotional awareness is not only to reach peace. It's not only to reach peace. It's not only that we work with our emotions so that they can purify and the only emotions we end up having are the four brahmaviharas. I'm not saying it's not that—I'm saying it's not only that.

There is also in this process, in this journey, the movement towards the invitation to sanctify what we tend to regard as unskillful or impure emotions. What does it mean to sanctify rage? What does it mean to sanctify fierceness, to let that become image and holy, to find the holiness, the holy roots of these kinds of emotions?

Hysteria. Hatred. James Hillman said, "You've got to hate something." Actually, on a soul level, there's something very wise there. Gotta hate something. What does it mean for hatred to be given these extra dimensions?

Roaring. What is holy roaring? Madness. What is holy madness? The sanctification of being also madly in love. Priapic—the eternally horny. What is that? What's the holiness in that to be found in the echoes there?

These things can become image, can find their archetypal roots. And it's not that then we identify with these things, but it's that something is opened in the range of soul-making, something is opened in the soul-making with them. And the range of—this is so important—the range of our sacredness is opened, the range of our senses of sacredness is opened, the range of our images and the range of beauty and duty is opened. Beauty and duty.

So it's not only in this framework that we're saying, "Have your feelings, be connected with your feelings, be mindful of your feelings on your way to peace." There's a bigger invitation here.

Sometimes a person is working very diligently, with a lot of care and goodwill with their flow of emotions. Often with this typical sort of mindfulness mode where you're focusing on the emotions almost as sensation without so much story and self. But it's just going on, and the person is tracking their emotions, and it's actually not very fruitful or helpful.

I don't know if some of you have ever had this kind of relationship with difficulty, where it's just, "I'm aware of it, I'm aware of it, I'm aware of it, I'm aware of it." So there's a certain clarity there, and certainly a certain mindfulness, but there's no—going back to what I used to say—there's no dynamism. Nothing's happening. It's not going anywhere in that process. Something is stuck, and the wheels are kind of going round and round in this difficult emotion.

Sometimes—I'm mentioning this because maybe four or five people have mentioned something similar to me in the last month or so—sometimes with all that, there's actually frustration at the whole process. "I'm not supposed to be frustrated because I'm supposed to just be okay with what is." No. I'm fed up.

Maybe I need to feel the power and the dynamism of feeling fed up. So I'm concentrating on everything else, but I'm feeling the fed upness. It's there. I'm somehow not clocking it. It's somehow not allowed or what? Or just I'm not used to feeling it. So maybe I need to feel that and allow it and allow its energy. Or sometimes maybe I need to vocalize. What does that sound like when I let my body express that frustration? Or again, feel it in the body.

Sometimes this tuning into the dynamism and allowing the dynamism—or even allowing yourself to express it—gets things moving. It loosens things. I'm not talking about catharsis. I'm not talking about getting rid of, purifying. Here's this emotion and if I kind of primal scream or whatever, then it is released. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about loosening something so that an alternative flow or an alternative circuit can be found or introduced.

So sometimes working with difficulty—and it might already be, there's already an image or it might be without an image—at some point it's like, can I sense where is the dynamism in all this? What is it? Where's the point where there's power and movement in potential? And actually tune into that and allow that to move things.

Again, we're not trying to get rid of. We could say in a certain language, we're tuning to and supporting a kind of native intelligence in the difficulty. I'm not buying the dynamism so it will kind of bugger off. I'm actually... there is an intelligence here in this frustration, in this whatever it is. And so in this way, possible flows of energy and emotion are opened by feeling it in the energy body in this way and allowing it, feeling it to its power, the movement there, the dynamism. Different than this "allowing on 11" practice that I talked about before. That will actually do something different.

So sometimes feeling the emotion as energy, and the energy moves, and when the energy moves in the energy body, the self-sense moves. Energy body, self-sense—all these things are connected. I let the energy move, the sense of self will change. And sometimes when the sense of self changes, an image can come, sometimes.

So I use this word "dynamism," not that all images are something so dynamic, like that image I shared of the old king and the monkey. But out of the sense, in that case, of weakness, of lostness and loss of power, an image was born. There was something liquid in going to the image.

End of part one. Is that okay? I said there's a lot to get through. Is that okay? All right, part two, about image.

We use this word "image," and so if you just imagine right now... imagine, just however you are able to imagine, don't worry, you don't have to get in the lotus posture. Just imagine a toilet that you know well. At home, or where you've been staying regularly, or even upstairs, or wherever it is. Imagine a train station or a bus stop you can imagine well. Imagine maybe someone who would be a neutral person in the metta practice would fall into the neutral category.

So these are all images, you could say, they're imaginary, even if it's not visual, you have a sense of something. Actually, there's a way in which we can call any perception an image, any perception at all, in a certain way of using language as an image. So you just looking at me right now or looking at your hand or the room or whatever.

What do we mean when we use this word "imaginal"? What's an imaginal image? There's a problem with language here, but just because it's a mouthful to say "imaginal image" every time, mostly when we use the word "image," we mean imaginal image. Occasionally we don't, just to keep you on your toes.

So it's actually—there's quite a lot, it's quite a lot of richness involved in what does this mean, this word "imaginal," in the way that we are using it in these teachings. So for us, there's a gradual evolution, a gradual development of understanding what's involved in the richness of that idea.

What we mean when we use this word "imaginal" is far from a simple black and white determination of whether something is imaginable or not. Probably the toilet wasn't imaginable, but rather than making such stark distinctions, we can speak of a spectrum. Things can be more fully imaginal or less fully imaginal, instead of simply asking "have I got it or have I not?"

Part of what we mean when we say imaginal is that certain qualities are endemic or intrinsic to the imaginal. Beauty is there. Eros is there. There's a sense of meaningfulness that reaches beyond just a meaning or even several meanings. There's a kind of inexhaustibility to imaginal images—I cannot reduce them to just this or just that, or even to a handful of discrete things. There's a sense of dimensionality, of unfathomability.

Love is present with the imaginal, flowing both ways. An imaginal image is sensed as autonomous at a certain level. It's not just a part of me, nor am I in control of it like manipulating a puppet. Often there's a sense—we could even go a step further—of personhood to an image, even if it's not depicting an animal or human. It has its own kind of personhood.

Humility emerges as part of this constellation. When there's an imaginal image present, there's a sense of humility in the relationship. I am somehow humble before this image. And duty arises—in some way, I owe something or am being asked something by this image. With all this and much more, there's a profound sense of soul-making occurring.

So when we use the word imaginal, it encompasses all of this and more. These are qualities that arise in relationship—it's not as though the image by itself possesses these qualities in isolation. The humility resides here in the subjective pole. The beauty feels like it's more over there in the image. But the imaginal speaks to something about the relationship between my experience and this phenomenon, whatever it may be.

Let's consider humility more closely. Here's an image—perhaps fantastical, with dragons and all manner of extraordinary elements. But something about it lacks juice, fails to touch me deeply. There's not this sense of profound soul-making present. Perhaps, and I offer this tentatively, one element missing is humility. I check and discover I don't feel humble before it. I lack that sense of reverence. Sometimes simply noticing this absence allows something to shift. Something changes in my relationship because now humility enters the dynamic, and the whole experience opens up and transforms.

When we speak of the imaginal, we're truly speaking of a relationship, an entire constellation of relational dynamics. This means that something can begin as fully imaginal—rich with all this juiciness and depth—but if I'm not careful with the relationship, it collapses and becomes flat. Whatever eros was present transforms into craving and clinging. The whole experience becomes brittle, one-dimensional.

But the opposite movement is equally possible. Here's something that didn't begin with much juice or soul-making potency. It felt rather flat. There was definitely a good dose of craving present rather than eros. Yet as I attend carefully, working subtly with

the relationship, the craving transforms into eros, and the papañca—the mental proliferation and flatness—becomes imaginal. This is part of the art and the alchemy involved.

The imaginal quality depends entirely on the relationship, the conceptual framework, and the way of looking present at any given moment. Today I want to explore what we might call intra-psychic images. But we should recognize that we can sense the tree outside, this very moment here in the hall, or even our own body in imaginal ways.

The senses can be sensed imaginatively. The world can be sensed imaginally, and others can be sensed imaginally. We could call that extra-psychic. Right now, let me say a little about intra-psychic images—those that are apparently more internal.

After a while, this whole distinction will lose its meaning: intra-psychic, extra-psychic. Everything gets sensed with soul. Everything becomes—the world becomes imaginal, potentially. But for now, let's make that distinction just for teaching purposes.

When I say "image," it's not necessarily visual. There's a problem in language. In English, we say "image" and you immediately think visual. It's not necessarily visual. It can come predominantly through any sense, or a combination of senses, or sometimes in ways where I can't quite locate the sense, or there's a kind of synesthesia involved. All these are possible.

If it's visual, the visual detail is often not very important. If it's aural, sometimes the sonic detail is not important. So the clarity of form of an image is not the most important thing. We're not doing visualization concentration exercises. What's important? Soul-making is. The sense of soul-making.

Sometimes the image is very vague, but the soul-making sense is there. So it's not like I have to get clearer about what the image is, or see it clearly. Do you understand?

Let me give you an example. This is another hormonal one. I was struggling with the effects of hypothyroidism—not sleeping, a very unpleasant buzzing energy in the body, heart rate really fast and thumping. In all that, it was hard for me to get a sense of my depth of resources, or even depth of perception. I felt somehow thin, spiritually thin, not easily settled, not much calm.

So I focused on the sensations and sensed the dukkha—this is just what's going on. I recognized this dukkha and opened to it. Eventually, after a few minutes, I decided to play with seeing it as empty, and me as empty—some *anattā* practice. It fragmented into aggregates and sense elements, and I mixed that with a sense of the emptiness of time.

Then there was a sense—one of the possibilities—where my whole life became like slides, like film stills. The whole thing was there all at once: frozen, timeless moments of perception and experience. The perception of it and me was empty in this way, at least at that level. It helped ease the dukkha. There was considerable release and some quite pleasant space opened in the experience.

There was a sense of the possibility of some *samādhi* because of this softening. But actually it didn't feel personal at all. What I had done was look at something in a very universal way, moving toward a universal experience of the dukkha. There was a kind of universality, and the space that opened was a kind of universal space.

Then my mind wandered briefly. I remembered that I'd moved house recently and found a box of old tapes from years ago—some from when I was a music student. I had put some on, and it wasn't very good. Anyway, my mind wandered in the meditation to that memory from two days ago. Then my mind drifted again. There's a reason I'm giving all these details.

My mind drifted off again to hearing some music internally—improvised jazz lines that I could see, given my musical training, as melodies on the guitar manifesting immediately. There was a kind of fluidity in all of this. Actually, it was a kind of daydream; I was just drifting off into a little reverie. But with it came this fluidity of improvisation and way of being, and because there was a relaxation of mind and focus, it was actually really lovely—this quality of free-flowing music sort of in the ether, if you like.

Then something shifted. I sensed, it just came: I am this music. I mentioned this the other day—I am this music. I am the music I make. My being is, my person is music. I am played. I am being played. My life is music. It's really hard to articulate in words. My essence is music.

And it's personal because it's this music. At that point, the music I was hearing was not that clear. The soul-making sense was in this different—I don't know, is it an image? Because it's not clear what sense it's in. It wasn't like I really hear this music clearly at this point. The image sense is there's an image of self, really an idea of self, but there was the soul-making sense.

This is where the juice is. This is where the soul makes itself. So I allowed the perfume of that to move through my being and allowed myself to be touched by it. And it's personal because it's this music—a particular music, as if my life is these sounds, these melodies, these harmonies, these rhythms happening in time and eternally. Given to me

as me and created by me, given to me and made by me, and created contingently on, dependent on, in interaction with the circumstances of my life—the situations, the events, all of it.

So the emptiness sense I had worked on a few minutes before was still there, but now it was added to by this very personal poetic sense of this existence—this existence in this very different sense of it. Including the dukkha and including the challenges—they were part of the music. You understand? All of it, all of it. And there's this tremendous beauty here, and a big relief of the dukkha, like a whole other level.

The sensations are still there. I'm not going for some fade-out where the sensations disappear and everything. It's not doing that. It's taking it in a certain direction where the dukkha stays, but it's made holy.

Again, why this example, when we could choose how many others? Because the form of the image is not clear. I could have chosen to really hear that music clearly so maybe I could write it down later, whatever. No, that wasn't where the soul-making was. It was in a much more amorphous sense of things.

I choose this example as well because, again, it came from dukkha and it included dukkha. It included a couple of moments at least of the mind wandering. And you know what?

It's okay. There was the opportunism. The mind wandered, it was like, whatever. It's not a problem. What it wandered to became image, became fertile soil. There's an opportunistic responsivity in the practice. It's not about "Can I just really stay with this one thing?" Again, there's emptiness, but actually it's more than emptiness that we're talking about. Again, the self has, in this case, very much become image, but it's not clear what's the—it's not a visual image, it's not particularly an aural image.

And also, this example, because implicit in that, or actually more than implicit, is a whole kind of, if you like, a kind of anthropology and cosmopoiesis. Say to a scientist, "I am music." They say, "Well, I'll put you under a microscope. I don't see it. I can't hear it." There's a whole implicit kind of poetic anthropology. What is a human being? What is this cosmos? So eros is wrapped up in the whole imaginative sense.

The soul-making sense is what's important. When I first started teaching imaginal practice, I think I gave a series of talks somewhere and then someone came to me and they said after a few talks, "Oh, I know what you're talking about. You're talking about ghosts." And I was like, "Wow."

So on the last retreat we did—some of you were there, not at Gaia House—I was in bed at night and suddenly someone came into my room and I sort of sat up and turned around and it was this little old woman. We sort of looked at each other and she just turned and went out. And afterwards I said, when we were packing up, the people that were helping clear up, who worked there, they said, "Oh, did you see the ghost?"

And I was like, "Oh, it's funny you say that," because now that instance, there was nothing soul-making in it at all. There's an image, if you like. It was weird. Slightly. It was kind of, yeah. But there was no soulfulness there. It's not imaginal. It's something else, okay?

We were here once in a teacher meeting and someone took a photo of one of the teachers—it doesn't matter who. And I guess it must have been on a digital camera or something, but they saw the photo right then. And it had, in his chest, it had a kind of ball of white light. And some people were like, "Oh, something refracted wrong in the light." And other teachers were like, "Oh, a deva."

Now, probably for the people who said it's just light got in the camera somehow, it's not soul-making. But some of the people who said, "Oh, it's a deva," it was like, "Oh, it's a deva." It wasn't soul-making at all. It's just like... So it's the sense of soul-making that matters. Actually, either one—the mystery of light and refraction could be soul-making. It's not in the thing, it's in how we relate to it and what happens in that moment, whether it's soul-making or not.

Let me zip through some practice possibilities. I'm talking about intra-psychic images. How can we work with them? How can we kind of support contacting them, etc.?

Number one: play with any practice that liquefies—any practice like samādhi or emptiness practices that you know or mettā. Actually, what they're doing in technical language is they're fabricating less. And in that less fabrication, there's a kind of liquefying. So you do that and you enjoy it. And then after a while, you can kind of just come out a little bit, just relax the attention a little bit. Everything has got kind of liquefied and that can be a very fertile kind of ground out of which images may arise.

Second, I've already touched on, is an emotion that's there.

Whether it's difficult or whether it's beautiful, has enough energy in it that if I feel it in the energy body, it can give rise to an image. It's got some generative energy in it. So through the emotion, emotion has energy wrapped up in it. That energy felt in the energy body can give rise to image.

Third, I used to, when I was first trying to explore all this, what I found really helpful was imagining, actually deliberately imagining going to certain places. And there were places where I would just wait and an image would arise. After a while—one, I don't do it anymore, but one that became quite common for me was somehow a prison cell down in a basement. And I would go down and I would be in this prison cell as the prisoner, usually, and then different images would come. But it might be under a big tree or down another staircase somewhere. It might be a certain place that you go that just becomes the place where you can meet images.

Fourth, you already have plenty of images or potential images in your life—people, historical figures, places. Gaia House might be an image to you, or certain teachers, or memories. There's lots in your life that's already potentially imaginable. Sometimes you can deliberately bring that. I never met John Coltrane—he's an imaginal figure for me, or other musicians, loads of people. They're historical figures, but they function in my psyche as potential imaginal images. So you can bring them.

Fifth, might be you've worked before with an image and it felt fruitful, and you can deliberately bring that back.

Sixth, a dream that feels like it's really touched you in some way—potentially you can bring that and work with that dream image.

And seventh is a prescribed image. Sometimes we're teaching and we just pick up on an image or offer an image or an image from somewhere else, a tantric deity or whatever. That's another option.

In working with an image, the awareness—you want to keep including the whole energy body and the emotional state and the fluidity of that. It's okay, as I said, you're going to lose focus. It's fine, you just come back. No big deal.

And what we're really tuning to is the sense of soul-making. That tuning to the sense of soul-making—implied in that is that mindfulness and sensitivity are very much part of this practice, very much. And again, there's a sense sometimes of which direction in this image, which direction or what aspect of it gives the soul-making. So if I go back to that music image, I could have gone more clearly to hearing the music more clearly, but that wasn't really where the soul-making was at. So it's a sense of guiding that way.

You guys look tired, so I'm going to stop, although I have more to say. No, there's seven, but there's other stuff I was going to say. I mean, it could be that you're not, and you're just looking that way. Let's somehow find a time later to finish this. We'll jiggle things about and I'll find a time to say the rest of this.

Let's just sit just for a minute or so together.

CHAPTER 156

Towards the Imaginal

Rob Burbea · 1h02

> *Rob Burbea offers a comprehensive exploration of what makes an image truly 'imaginal' in the context of soul-making dharma. He presents a detailed constellation of 28 interconnected qualities that characterize imaginal experience, including love, eros, beauty, trust, dimensionality, unfathomability, and the crucial 'middle way' of neither real nor not real. Drawing from his understanding of dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda), Burbea emphasizes that the imaginal is fundamentally relational - not just about the image itself, but about our way of looking, conceiving, and relating to what arises.*
>
> *The talk addresses practical aspects of working with images, particularly the common arising of doubt and the importance of judging by the 'fruit' of soul-making rather than initial mental reactions. Burbea explores the sophisticated balance required in imaginal practice, including the expansion of the middle way concept beyond the traditional Kaccāyana Sutta teaching to include ranges of energy body experience and openness to both luminous and difficult (dukkha-laden) images. He emphasizes the gradual maturation possible in this practice and encourages experimental, embodied exploration of how subtle shifts in view and intention can dramatically alter the texture of imaginal experience.*

Okay, so, yes, just to pick up on and add a bit to something Catherine said in the opening talk. There's a lot of material here, and of necessity, some of what we present we will just touch on and mention, while others we will elaborate more fully. That's simply the nature of the limits of time, and not wanting to talk at you all day long.

This connects to what Catherine said in the opening talk about listening in a proactive way. There's a way of listening which is to simply sit back and let things come in or drift through—which can be a lovely style sometimes. But for many different reasons, it would be good to listen more actively: "That piece there, I don't understand it, but I'll bookmark it for later and then I'll chase it up after the retreat or I'll ask questions." So you're listening with a kind of self-reflective, critical attitude—what are the pieces that I personally am needing or missing or not quite getting, or that I can shelve for later?

I want to pick up where I finished the other morning and go through that material with you, then add a bit more. In terms of meditation instructions, at this point they're fairly open. We've touched on several approaches. We spent the first day emphasizing the intention for samadhi—for gathering a sense of harmonization and well-being, just leaning towards that. So that's always an option, always a gear you can go into.

We also talked about the energy body as a way of working or opening various ways to work skillfully and carefully and with compassion with what's going on emotionally, whether it's lovely or difficult. So that too is a gear, an option when it feels time to do that.

Then we started to introduce the idea of images—intra-psychic for now, more inside, so to speak. So there are those three options, plus going into basic mindfulness or metta practice, if you see fit.

It's quite open—there's no prescribed order here. It's not like first I do this, then that, then this other thing. You can be very flexible with all of this. Consider it like an open buffet: if you want your dessert before your mains, it's completely fine. You can't be practicing with an image or images all day long and not doing anything else—it's not in balance and won't be helpful. So you want to be gliding in and out in response to what's going on between these different kinds of practices: being with the emotions and caring for them in the energy body, cultivating samadhi, working with images, maybe some other practice that you already know that seems helpful right now.

Just to reiterate, we're introducing the possibility of moving—not just walking up and down, but actually moving the body in here or outside. So the walking period is now called a moving period. You can move in relation to an image or to energies, primarily an image, if that feels helpful for you.

Now, a little bit about some practice things. Doubt—this is really, really common. It's common anyway on the path, as you know; it's one of the hindrances. But in relation to this kind of practice, it's extremely common. There are different kinds of doubt and different aspects we can be doubting. Very often, a couple of moments after an image might arise, the first thing that arises afterwards is doubt. It's often something like: "That's probably not significant," or "It's not very interesting," or "It's not as bizarre and weird as I hear other people say," or actually "It's a bit too weird," or very commonly, "I made that up—that's just my ego, I made that happen," or "It's just a random daydream."

These couple of moments of doubt are really, really common. Expect them. They're just part of the process. But so often, despite that mental reaction of doubt, it's still worth gently persevering with a kind of gentle attention to what's just arisen. You can be aware of the doubt without having to buy into it.

If you stick with it, what you will often notice is that what seemed insignificant or just a kind of ego projection—if I tune to it, if I work with the energy body—actually does start to gain imaginal flesh and richness and depth and beauty, and becomes soul-making. What seemed insignificant is actually potentially fertile and important.

So let the judge be not that moment of mental doubt, but let it be the sense of soul-making. Stay with something, play with the different approaches we'll describe for relating to images, and let the sense of soul-making be your judge of whether something is worth sticking with or not. Judge by the fruit, not by the initial idea of how the image arose.

Whether an image is fruitful depends on the relationship with it. In some of the examples I gave, mine started as daydreaming—I was daydreaming some music or whatever. It wasn't particularly amazing in the first instance, didn't seem that significant. But in developing a relationship with it, it became much more fertile and meaningful.

But just nuancing the relationship with it, something becomes more imaginable. It's in the relationship.

Related to that, I think we don't want any kind of dogma or rules necessarily, but to prioritize a kind of sensitivity to the sense of soul-making, to trust that in the moment with an image. It may be that it comes through one very specific aspect of the image, or it may be in the whole gestalt of it. But this will be the most fruitful thing. This is what my nose is following. This is the thread, the sense of soul-making that will bring things alive and be most fruitful.

It may, as I said, as we both said now, include and even come through, arise from dukkha. So that's also part of just being aware of that.

And again, I've probably said this, but not to prioritize, and the implications are not to prioritize how clear is this image, the form. So we're not doing visualization meditation or exercises. Not the clarity of form so much is important. Occasionally it might be, because that clarity of form might actually help soul-making. But the sense of soul-making - which is often a more nebulous, hard-to-pin-down kind of quality, but you can recognize, you get better and better at recognizing when that whole soul-making dynamic is going on, when there's soulfulness.

Implicit in this, and I'll come back to this hopefully this morning, very easily we can relate to an image and say, "What is the guidance for me in my life here? What's it telling me to do? Maybe I have a job choice or a path. Should I go to India? Should I..."

whatever it is. And we want the image to come as a guide: "You should do this," so clear. Sometimes that happens, or sometimes we get encouragement or whatever from an image.

But again, it's about intention. If I prioritize this, something closes down. It's not that it doesn't happen sometimes. So can I not have my primary intention in relation to this image be "Guide me" or "What is the guidance for me?" Rather, tuning into and staying with what gives the most soul-making sense, what gives the most soulfulness.

And in a way, that's a kind of experiment. So I see - well, we'll elaborate on it starting this morning, in fact. But see, find out for yourself what kinds of attitudes, relationships, concepts, stances support the soul-making to open and what tend to close them down. Be your own researcher. We will certainly put some teachings out about that. But this is a much more interesting question.

And all meditation is like this. Right now, what's helpful? The question is, for each practice, what does helpful mean? So in this practice it means what's most soul-making. There's just a gentle sort of responsive, artful responsiveness to what's going on. I'm sailing this boat in response to the different currents and winds that are around.

And it can all be very beautiful, very subtle in the relational field between, let's say, self and image. Let's say that. So that it's better to focus on qualities of the beauty, the kind of beauty that an image seems to have for you in the moment. And it may be very vague - and Catherine talked about it last night - the sense of divinity that seems to inhere in this image, or the sense of grace, or mystery, or my sense of humility in relationship to it. All this can be very, very subtle, but these are all part of what it means for something to be soul-making, all these qualities. Focusing on that will be much more helpful for the whole process as we are outlining it and what it opens up to than looking for guidance or trying to get visually clear or whatever. Okay?

All right. Now, in a way, I've said a little bit already but started to say the other morning and implied a little bit in what I've already said is this question: we use this word "imagine" a lot. A lot of people use it - not a lot, but quite a few people and different schools and things use it this way - and what does it mean, or what does it mean as we are using it here? And we want to kind of convey and open up - there's quite a lot involved in it. It's a rich concept. It's not like a simple thing. It's rich and it's almost paradoxical and nebulous in some areas by necessity. It's a necessarily partly nebulous concept. Usually we like things to be really clear.

On, off, black, white, is it this or is it that? And this whole, the art of this is not—we have to be okay with the kind of nebulousness and elasticity of definitions and descriptions and concepts and all that.

So, having said that, we could—we have in other situations asked: What does it mean for something to be imaginal? What does that mean? What is an image? And actually delineate or point to a whole cluster of qualities or characteristics or attitudes or perceptions that are there that kind of constitute what it means for something to be imaginal.

And so we can call that the constellation of the imaginal or the lattice of the imaginal or something—all these qualities. Some of them, we're just mentioning this, some of them we're just going to kind of throw them out and list them, and some on this retreat we will go into a little bit more detail. But the idea is that, again, this is not such a black and white thing. It's more like a spectrum.

So if we go back to me asking you to imagine the toilet that you're most familiar with, and there's imagination involved in whatever way, maybe visual or some sense of that toilet. But it is possible that that could be imaginal with all the beauty and divinity and everything, if you spend a lot of time like I do. But probably not. It's a use of the imagination. It's an image in a certain sense of the word. But it's probably not in this fully fleshed out, soulful, multidimensional way. It's probably not imaginal.

So again, rather than saying on, off, have I got it, have I not? Do I understand what they're talking about, do I not? I think everyone else has, but I haven't, I'm not getting—my experience can't be. Let's just think of it more as a spectrum, as a direction. And as more of these qualities that we'll list, as more of them get lit up, the whole thing we could say becomes more imaginal, more fully imaginal.

So there's no point in this kind of spectrum that we can say, you got it, you haven't got it. You can say to yourself, but we're thinking about the kind of possible fullness and richness of it. Does this make sense as an idea? Yeah. So just watch the mind that gets into black and white thinking. And then particularly, you know, the ego and the self puts itself in relation to that black and white thinking, usually in the negative light. I'm really not getting it.

Okay, so it's a direction. It's an aspiration. It's a possibility of fullness, of further riches, of further beauties. We can talk about what it means to be more fully imaginal in the way that we are using it in these teachings.

So why talk about this constellation or lattice or these elements? Two reasons. One is in order to get clearer, because I said it's a subtle, rich, complex concept in our teaching, what it means for something to be imaginal. It's not like you can just go boom, it means that. And people often ask me, can you just—some, well, maybe. So, but partly we want, we would like you to get clearer, to form a bit of a, to kind of get more and more internalized, this almost intuitive gut sense of, oh yeah, that—now something illuminates and you get a sense of the richness.

So partly just for the sake of clarity. What are we talking about? What kind of possibilities of soul and psyche and consciousness? What kind of experiences are we talking about? What direction? What realm? So that's one reason, for the sake of increasing clarity and understanding.

And the second reason is that it turns out that this kind of knowing about this constellation of different elements of the imaginal, it turns out that that's actually really helpful in practice. So sometimes, for instance, something arises—that toilet or whatever, or just a daydream or something—and it's an image and it's there, but it's not particularly imaginal, it's not particularly rich and unfathomable or inexhaustible or mysterious or all these other qualities.

And one of the things that's possible is there are elements actually—let's say, not immediately sensible in the imaginal experience, in the image experience, in that moment—that my noticing of them illuminates them, it draws them out. So for instance, and I didn't plan to talk about this one, it's the one that's coming to my head right now. There's often love between—love is one of these elements, it's characteristic of what we call the constellation of the imaginal. Love both ways. I somehow love that image. I might be a little suspicious of it. I might be scared of it in some way. I might be questioning, what does this mean?

But there's somehow some love there. And there's somehow some love of the image for me. This image loves me. And again, a lot of this work is about expanding ranges. So very often I say love, and we tend to have quite a narrow idea of what that looks like or what constitutes love. Sometimes with an image, the kind of love is not the kind of love that we're used to. So something is happening here also to open up our sense of what love can mean and can look like.

But the noticing of the love—I haven't noticed it at first, and so I just look and I begin to see, oh yeah, there's a kind of love here. I can feel that. Wow. It might be subtle at first. My noticing of it draws it out. In the attention, it illuminates that star in the galaxy

or that star in the constellation of what imaginal means. And the illumination of that quality starts to illuminate other things. So the whole thing starts to come alive, get illuminated.

So not just saying all this for the sake of clarity, we're saying all this as part of the art and the subtlety of being able to support something to open up in soulfulness and soul-making. Sometimes also, you can deliberately introduce one of these elements. I'll come back to that. So not just noticing it will amplify it and draw it out and illuminate it, but actually I'll say, oh, let me deliberately introduce one of these things. And that, again, ignites the whole, or potentially ignites the whole lattice.

There's not an order through these. So we could list them. A few things about this whole concept of this constellation, or lattice, or whatever we want to call it, is that it's not an exhaustive list. If I go through it, you could say, well, what about such and such? It's not intended to be exhaustive. It's just to begin to open something up. We could have sliced up the elements slightly differently. So in other words, some of them overlap with each other, some of them kind of pull in different directions. They seem a bit in a kind of tension of some contradiction between each other. And there's not an order here. So it's not like first this one, and then number two ignites, and then number three ignites. It's all a web of mutually dependent potential illuminations.

So I said some we're just going to list and mention and some others we'll elaborate on just because of time on this retreat. And again, if this sounds interesting to you or if some of you either have already or will fall in love with this whole thing—you'll fall in love with this soul-making business—and if that's the case, then chase it up. This material is already out there on the web. Ask one of us, talk with each other. Learn from each other. But again, going back to that proactive listening possibility. And some of you won't, and that's fine. It's not quite for me. But if you want more, then take that into your own hands a little bit. Ask. Seek out.

So, I don't know whether to go through the list now. Just the whole thing? You want to hear the list? All right. I'll just name them, and some of them won't mean anything to you at all at this point, and that's fine. I'm probably going to go through it too fast to write it down at this point. Well, you can try. It depends how fast you write. We can have a race.

Okay, so, not in any order. This is the important thing. This is, again, mutually... this is the thing about dependent arising. There's not like cause and effect. There's a mutual arising and the mutual fading of things.

So we have 28 elements, and as I said, it's not exhaustive. Some of these elements imply each other or overlap, while others might even seem opposite. This reflects the nature of the imaginal—it's not a neat, linear system but a living constellation.

The first element is the lattice or constellation itself. The recognition that we are working with a constellation is fundamental, because it tells us that nothing is imaginal by itself. An image isn't imaginal simply because it appears mythic or fantastical. You might see a griffin or some other mythical creature, but that alone doesn't make it imaginal. What makes something imaginal is the relationship, the whole constellation of which it's part.

An image exists as much in my way of looking, my way of conceiving and relating, as it does in what appears before me. Some elements of this constellation are more subjective—they characterize the practitioner, the one relating to the image. Others are more objective—they characterize what appears. Together they form the imaginal constellation.

The second element is the energy body—the involvement of and sensitivity to the entire energy body. This is clearly a subjective element, something happening here in the practitioner.

The third element, which I've already mentioned, is love and being loved. The two-way flow of love is inherent in the imaginal.

Fourth is eros, which includes love but extends beyond it, as Catherine pointed out earlier.

Fifth is beauty. Something in the image touches us with a sense of beauty, though this may not be conventional beauty. The soul finds its own sense of the beautiful in whatever arises.

The sixth element is trust. This operates in multiple directions—I trust this image, even if it appears violent, disturbed, or utterly strange. I also trust the process itself, the whole practice we're engaged in. Without this trust, the imaginal cannot open fully.

This trust is essential because, as we discussed with doubt, when trust is absent, the imaginal closes down. Each of these elements works this way—their absence contracts the imaginal, while their presence allows it to flower.

It will just stay as an image, a bit more flat. But if I can introduce some trust, just a grain of trust—this thing is not what I'm used to, this thing looks like it's defilement, this thing, whatever it is—if I can introduce that, then that trust, again, in the dependent

arising of things, it's like I put a grain of some kind of alchemical elixir in. Just some trust. And that does something, as it always does. It opens things out. Without the trust, it won't open out.

And of course, human relationships are like that as well, aren't they? But basically, dealing with images is a lot like being in relationship. One way of saying what we're saying this morning is that the whole thing is relational. We're talking about relationship in lots of different ways.

So sometimes this is hard, the trust thing. It's not like, "Oh, this is really easy," for lots of different reasons. But I think I said it in the Q&A yesterday afternoon—you can sometimes just put a ring fence around it. Five minutes, I'm going to play with some trust. I sprinkle that—you don't really sprinkle, Alexia, do you? Poor Alexia—a grain of sand of trust, whatever it is. Five minutes, I ring fence it, and afterwards, thank you very much, that was my little experiment in trust, and I can go back to holding it at arm's length or being slightly suspicious. So don't push yourself. But you'll probably notice something, as I said, that in that five minutes, the trust has a certain effect. It has to have an effect, because the whole thing is dependently arising, relational.

So seven is that an imaginal image in our sense is soul-making. In other words, there is a sense of soulfulness. It's partly circular, implied in all this—all the beauty and the love and the depth. And soul-making means that the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, what Catherine referred to the other night, is active. It's kicking in. All these things are opening each other and creating more complexity and beauty and all that. And soulfulness is more than heartfulness. It includes heartfulness, but it's more than heartfulness.

Number eight is a sense of dimensionality. This is not easy to put into words or even sometimes pinpoint. But that dimensionality—it's as if this thing is not flat. It has the vague sense of other dimensions to it. And these dimensions kind of move forward into divinity. Or rather, they recede into divinity. The divinity is implicit in this direction of dimensionality.

Connected with that is number nine. Images have a sense of something beyond, beyond just the surface. There's a beyond that I don't quite understand yet. In fact, they have a sense of unfathomability to them. I can't quite get to the bottom of them, just as actually a human being does, just as you do. When I don't feel my own unfathomability, I don't feel very well. There's something that's not right. Maybe some people are kind of stuck in that—you know, it would be difficult. You think, contemplate another human being, there's a sense of their unfathomability. An image is like this, unfathomable in lots of ways.

Number ten is related to this—the boundaries are elastic. This is actually soft and elastic. This is really important, because oftentimes what happens with perceptions, or we relate to an image with a certain idea, like it's this, and it just has kind of rigid edges. And again, like a human being, you think about your sense of self, or you bring to mind someone you love. Where are their edges?

Their edges are soft. You can't quite find where they are. And they're elastic. They move. They expand. I'm talking about the edges of being—the edges of who a person is, what an image is. It's soft and elastic.

And also, the concepts that we use in this whole paradigm are soft and elastic. They're precise, but they're also soft and elastic. And that's very important.

Number eleven: an image has a quality of eternality to it, of timelessness. Catherine used the phrase, "It's always already happening." So it's not so much a narrative, like I go on a journey and first this, and then I slay the dragon, and then I rescue the princess, and then we get married. This is not so characteristic of the imaginal. It's something—or if there is that narrative, that whole narrative is somehow always happening at the same time. So there's some sense of timelessness, eternality to the imaginal.

Number twelve—and again you can see how all these implicate each other or invite each other—is reverence. In the face of eternality, of timelessness, a natural response of the soul, if we allow it, if we don't get in the way, is reverence.

Number thirteen, which I've already touched on, is a sense of grace. There's a sense in which, with all the art that I can muster, and finesse and subtlety of altering my responses or changing my attitudes or the emphasis of energy and body and all this, and the art of how I can be active in relation to an image—there's also a very real fact or necessity to realize that an image is a grace. It's somehow given to us inexplicably from beyond. We don't control this thing.

Number fourteen—again you can see how connected these are—is humility. This is really important. In relation to this image, somehow I'm not regarding it as just mine, like a little puppet I can do what I want with, or that I can control, or that it's part of me. It's somehow bigger, and I am in the presence of something beyond, bigger than me, something I don't understand in some way. In some way divine, and therefore humility is again a very natural response if it's not blocked in us for some different reason.

Number fifteen: we're not reducing. This image doesn't mean just this. This image is not referring only to this thing that happened in my childhood, or this image means exactly and only this for my guidance. It doesn't only mean anything. You cannot fully capture an image or the implications of it or reduce it to something. It's not reducible to anything at all. It has this beyondness to it.

Sixteen is autonomy. The image is—again, it's not part of me. I don't own this image. It's like a person. It has, oftentimes, a personhood, and they have their autonomy. They do things. Images do things or say things that will surprise you. They're not in your control.

Now, in a way, they are in your control and you're creating them and it's a dependent arising, etc. So this is part of the art. I realize that, in a way, I grant an image its autonomy or the idea of its autonomy through my concept, my implicit concept at that time. You understand? So there's a dance here of—yes, it's autonomous and it's dependent arising. There's a very sophisticated sort of balance there in the art.

Seventeen—and with the autonomy, I'm explaining them all now—you don't ever lose your autonomy. This is another part of it. You don't lose your self-will. You're not going to be taken over and possessed by something so that you lose the ability to make heartful, rational, sensible choices. You have your autonomy. You need to assent. You need to participate.

So there's autonomy on both sides. And I think Catherine already alluded to this—there's two-ness. So it's not so much about dissolving in oneness. For soul-making, we retain a two-ness. Eros wants to retain two-ness. It wants to retain two. It needs that polarity between maybe me and the image—that two-ness is necessary. Well, let's say differentiations and particularities don't all dissolve. Maybe that's another way of saying it.

Eighteen—I will come back to this—it's theatre, or what I might call the middle way of the imaginal: neither real nor not real. It's really important. We get that sense. Oh yeah, someone asks you, "Would you say that's real?" Not quite. "Would you say it's not real?" Not quite. It's somewhere in between. I'll expand on that in a minute, hopefully.

Number nineteen, and related, is we realize that this image is created by us, we might say, but also discovered. To discover means it's already there. We create it and we discover it. And there's not really a word, in English at least, for getting that combination—that it's both created and discovered, or neither, or somewhere in between.

Number twenty is what we call the concertina, which means that when I'm relating to an image, I'm not shrinking it down. There's always a sense implicitly of other possible images. They might not be at all clear, but vaguely, it's like this is just one image of many possibilities. So it's not like this is the reality. This is one—there's a sense of there's more theatre possible. This is just what's happening in the play right now. But it could be different.

Twenty-one is in the imaginal sense is slightly less fabricated. I'm not even going to say anything about that right now.

Twenty-two is that concept is involved, even if it's implicit. A logos, some kind of idea—as Catherine was saying, some idea of what my suffering is, or something about suffering, some idea of anything at all. Ideas are actually implicit or explicit in the imaginal sense. We're not talking about a non-conceptual experience at all.

Number twenty-three is fullness of intention, which I've mentioned already and I'll come back to shortly. That's a very beautiful one—fullness of intention.

And twenty-four is duty, not beauty—duty. And that's, again, quite complicated. We'll come back to it. There's some sense of "I have a duty to this. I have a duty to this image." It's often not so literal. So it gets refracted into our life and into the way we live, or some attitude or something—what this duty is, or what's involved in that.

Twenty-five is an image is meaningful, which means it's full of meanings, and full of meanings that we can't even quite know what they are. So yes, they might have specific meanings. I can relate this to my—I mean, clearly that old king thing that I shared the other day is clearly very related to my situation, etc. But there's more. There's meaningfulness, which is different than meaning. "It means this," or even "it means these three things," or whatever it is. It's pregnant with a kind of infinity of meanings.

The twenty-sixth is—I just mentioned this now without even explaining—there's a kind of infinite echoing or mirroring between your life and an imaginal image.

They echo each other infinitely. They mirror each other infinitely.

The twenty-seventh element is that implicit in images are values, virtues, or ethical and moral dimensions. This is part of the meaningfulness. What's meaningful is wrapped up in an image—something of value that we find noble or beautiful, or important in life.

The twenty-eighth is participation. There's a sense of participating in something, and we may fill that out. That's quite a complex one, or quite a rich, profound one. We're participating in something much bigger than us. And yes, as was just mentioned, sacredness is absolutely implicit—divinity, holiness, something like that. Again, that has a very broad range of meaning, really broad. Some would be used to thinking of divinity this way or that way.

Alright, so that was the list. Let me reorganize here and say a few more things. I want to expand on one of them that I talked about—the middle way of the imaginal.

When I first thought about this phrase, there's a sense of theater. Like theater, you know, if you see really good theater—I have lots of friends who are very involved in theater, and I would go to performances where some theaters are really small. You're sitting right there with the actor and it's really intimate. You feel kind of naked there. And you know it's not real. But like all really good art, its power is potentially immense.

So there's something about this with image. It's not real. It's not not real. It's got this artistic or poetic truth to it and all the power that comes potentially with poetic or artistic truth.

But this is a tricky element, this neither real nor not real. I'm really not going to get into this now, but ontology is the fancy word for thinking about what is real and what isn't real. So the ontology, I think, is really interesting. And I would like to view it more as an open-ended exploration, a questioning of possible conceptions of reality and not reality, and that fine distinction of being right there in the middle. This relates to emptiness and all this, which also very much addresses the question of ontology.

So it's complex. It's infinitely rich. Humanity will never figure it out as a final answer. There's a whole history of it. It will continue as long as humanity is around, this whole philosophical endeavor. And it's variable—it's part of what can be variable in what we bring to the imagination, our whole concept of the reality status of things.

But what I would like to say is there's something about this paradigm that we're trying to unfold and open up: if we don't start with this imaginal middle way—neither real nor not real—as much as we can, just holding that in mind, if we can't quite get a sense of it, it's as if the whole thing gets off on the wrong foot a little bit.

If we can start there, it will be that the whole thing starts to, or can, draw in or expand the range of our notion of reality and bring in other things that we would have considered not real. It can expand the range there.

But there's something about starting with this middle way intention, as much as one is able. I know this is a really difficult one for people. But just as much as you can, it's almost like letting things unfold from there. If I start with some reality assumptions, it probably won't get so loosened, the whole thing. And again, actually, the range of experience and beauty and soulfulness that will open up will be less.

The middle way of the imaginal extends far beyond our initial understanding. While we typically encounter the middle way in dharma as the path between asceticism and sensual indulgence, there's another instance in the Pali Canon where the Buddha uses this term differently. In the Kacchayana Sutta, which Catherine referenced, the middle way becomes the middle way between reifying that something exists and asserting that it doesn't exist. This middle way refers to emptiness—neither existence nor non-existence.

Remarkably, about half of the entire Mahayana tradition bases itself on those two brief lines of dialogue between the Buddha and Kacchayana in the Pali Canon. The whole elaborate, beautiful, rich, deep, complex, and exquisite investigation of emptiness in Mahayana philosophy springs from that brief exchange.

Now we have a third meaning: the imaginal middle way of neither real nor not real, with all the theatrical quality and power that this encompasses. But I'd like to expand this understanding even further by adding two dimensions we've already implicitly explored.

The middle way of the imaginal isn't so much about static points as it is about balances and ranges. The first is the balance of range in the energy body's sense of density or insubstantiality. Sometimes a person experiences only a very ethereal sense of the energy body. But perhaps the imaginal middle way means having access to the whole range—sometimes dense and solid, sometimes very ethereal. One becomes free to move within that entire spectrum.

The third aspect involves dukkha. Again, this isn't a static point but an openness to the full range of imaginal experience. Some images are luminously glorious and free, while others—as both Catherine and I have shared—actually involve dukkha and pathology. The lame man as divinity carries his pathology. Hillman emphasized that all images must have pathologies, though I would disagree with that absoluteness. Can we simply open to the full range?

The imaginal isn't always triumphant, radiant, or glorious. Sometimes images involve dukkha, but the dukkha carries its own divinity and beauty. I've shared many such images, as has Catherine—the lonely wanderer, the soldier, images of old lonely

men. Even when something appears very angelic, like the angels who came to kiss my heart and minister to me while I was struggling upstairs writing a book on emptiness, the luminous and angelic quality existed in relationship with the dukkha. The angels didn't dissolve everything with a triumphant "yippee, all is fine now." The dukkha remained part of the image, part of its beauty, humanity, and divinity.

Given all this about range, it's worth examining our tendencies. Does my imaginal experience tend always toward the ethereal and free of dukkha? Or does it always involve dukkha and solidity? Simply checking our range reveals our patterns.

Yet we must also acknowledge individual soul styles. Some people's energy body experience tends more commonly toward the ethereal. Others have what I call a darkness to them—images that tend to involve more pathology or dukkha. We need to respect and account for these individual soul styles rather than expecting everyone to be perfectly balanced around some midpoint.

The images that arise in this infinite echoing naturally reflect our lives. When I was struggling with writing that book, of course some images reflected that challenge. If we're moving through something difficult, that difficulty becomes woven into the imaginal fabric, not as something to be transcended but as an integral part of the sacred drama unfolding.

Expanding the idea of the middle way of the imaginal, one other element I want to pick out for now is this fullness of intention. I've already touched on this in various ways. Even when we have an intention for healing—and many people come to Dharma for healing in the broader sense, psychological healing, healing of the past, healing of dukkha—even this intention for healing may be something less than the fullness of intention. While most people come to the Dharma seeking some kind of healing, we're suggesting that even this doesn't quite reach the full scope of possibility here.

What fullness of intention means includes healing, yes, but extends to soul-making itself—the intention for soul, the intention for serving soul. We might not even fully understand what this means. This is a tricky territory, not perhaps very common to really explore, but I'm mentioning it as an important possibility.

Going back to what I said earlier, there are times in life when we need to seek guidance, listen for practical guidance about choices or difficulties. Sometimes, as I mentioned, an image will offer guidance: stay with what you're doing, you're doing good, this is beneficial, invest in that, do this. Sometimes this happens in different ways.

But more often, I think—and here's the crucial question—is it possible for the predominant intention to be for soul-making rather than for guidance? The fullness, the open-endedness, the sacredness, the partly incomprehensible nature of soul-making, of eros, of beauty. You can never fully understand beauty. Human beings will never get to the bottom of beauty, or eros, or many of these profound dimensions. They're fathomless.

Somehow, my assent and opening and intention for the fathomlessness of all this—this becomes more full as an intention. I think that relates to Lauren's question in the Q&A.

Sometimes, as I've mentioned this morning as well, you can simply play with a kind of inversion of concept. This image is bigger than me. It's greater than me. I am derivative of this image. Turn everything upside down.

You can hear, I think it's obvious, there's a kind of maturing that's possible over time with all this—with understanding what on earth this is all about, understanding in practice. It's definitely available, this possibility of maturing in understanding and in practice, understanding in relation to these elements and practicing with these different elements. That takes time. And that's really okay.

When I first started exploring some of this and trying to work with it in practice, figuring out how to approach it—if I think back to some of my old notebooks—the images there were much more narrative and complex, with casts of thousands, characters, all kinds of activity going on. Now, as I practice, there's something more distilled. An image emerges—not much happening, but possessing this eternal quality and something condensed within it. My sensitivity has grown much greater, my intuitive sense of attunement and skill.

Or when we introduced movement yesterday, there's a real possibility of gradual maturing and growing in the possibilities of movement in relation to soul. Or the logos Catherine was speaking about, the conceptual framework—this too takes time. Even just conceptually, what we're discussing is sophisticated. It's not simple. There are many shades to it.

At some point, as Catherine was sharing, something turns on and there's eros for logos. We become excited about it. This happened on the other retreat—someone was listening to an interaction in the Q&A and right then, something shifted in her relationship with concept. It became illuminated, and now there's added eros, there's soul in concept for her.

All this takes time. This business about the middle way, about not reifying, the fullness of intention—these dimensions are full and rich and subtle. They take time to grow and grow into. Know that.

Teaching for me is always contextual and always responsive. Especially in one-to-one work—I find teaching groups rather an impossibility, to be honest.

You're all so different and have different inclinations and histories and all the rest of it. If I'm one-on-one with a person, it's different.

So I might say to someone in regards to the neither real nor not real thing, "You're not really a dragon. Do you realize that?" Or to the same person at a different time, or another person: "Do you realize you're more really a dragon? You're more really that dragon with that dragon's mission than you are a human being in the way that you usually think of that and your story and all that."

So for me, this is part of the dance of the middle way.

What would be wonderful and what I would like to encourage and invite you to is: can you begin to explore and begin to feel, to notice, to live the effects of subtle shifts of emphasis or subtle shifts of view or the conceptual frame?

So, for example, what happens if I can shift with that real, not real thing, just micro-shift and actually see, "Wow, that's quite a different texture and flavor and sense of experience that opens up"? You have to feel this, notice it, live it, be impacted by it. We could talk all day long about real and not real and all that. There's something—if you're attracted to it and you begin to play with this, you will see: wow, it really does make a difference in the dependent arising of things.

Or with this fullness of intention—what happens when that opens up to another fullness? Oh, that also changes the whole image. All this is dependent arising.

So experiment, play, find out, know for yourself. Know it. You know it in the body. You know it in the kind of beauty and richness of the experience.

Oftentimes, without even really adopting a conscious position, we take one position. And we're kind of attached to it. And there isn't this kind of flexibility or skill or willingness to experiment and see what's the difference. We just decide—it's not even conscious usually—this is how I look at things. This is how I look at this. And we don't realize that actually it's a kind of attachment to one view or one emphasis.

So with all that, it's really okay. Wherever any of us are with all this, it's a journey. We're journeying in this most wondrous, rich, truly amazing landscape. And it's okay, wherever we are in that journey. Gradually we can explore that territory, it can become more full, and we can understand it, make it our own.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 157

Sensitivity, Receptivity, and Respect in Soul Work (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 1h05

> *In this Q&A session from his Foundations of a Soulmaking Dharma retreat, Rob Burbea addresses practitioners' questions about working with images in meditation. He explores the crucial distinction between narrative images (which unfold in time and often center the ego) and iconic images (which possess an eternal, timeless quality that opens deeper soul-making possibilities). Burbea discusses the autonomous nature of imaginal beings, emphasizing that images deserve respect as independent entities rather than ego projections to be manipulated. He examines the relationship between eros and inspiration in practice, explaining how soul-making naturally spreads from object to self to world when not obstructed. The teacher addresses common challenges including intensity-seeking, the proliferation of shallow images when tired, and the surprise that often comes when images don't conform to our expectations. Throughout, Burbea encourages experimental engagement with images while maintaining sensitivity to what genuinely opens soul-making versus what merely serves ego gratification. He touches on the mystery of participation in imaginal reality and how both practitioner and practice can become imaginal objects themselves.*

We've covered quite a lot of ground already, and as you can see, there's much to this work. You've thrown yourselves into it, so I welcome any questions or reflections you might have.

Lauren's Question on Narrative versus Iconic Images

Lauren asks if I can say more about the difference between narrative images and images that are more—what's the word I use more often? Images that stay with something that's not so narrative.

Yes, I have mentioned this distinction, probably not for a while. I call one type a "narrative image." At first I wasn't sure about the terminology, and I actually spoke to a friend who suggested these words.

A narrative image is something that moves in time—it moves from a beginning, from a situation, through a series of events in time to some kind of resolution or conclusion. Often it stars guess who? And that's part of the problem.

In contrast, I call the other type an "iconic image," which is more eternal. This relates to that element we discuss—eternality or timelessness. But I really want to get away from dogma and give this back to you as an exploration. See what's the difference in your experience when you entertain narrative images and stories in meditation, with all the sensitivity we've been discussing, compared to an image that just sort of—either it doesn't really go anywhere, it's almost like a timeless snapshot of something, or a little period of something. Or it may be a narrative image, but there's this sense that it's always happening. In other words, the beginning is happening at the same time as the end, and it's not really moving toward some catastrophic thing or triumph.

The reason for this distinction is that often narrative images star "me" and work in a way that builds and solidifies the self-sense, the ego-sense, not making it so imaginal, not making it so "neither real nor not real." They tend to get reified—to be about me and about my life and about what I'm going to achieve. Not always, but this is the tendency. There's a quality of happening over time and space.

An imaginal image, by contrast, tends to be more—not static, but as I said, eternal, timeless. There's something condensed or distilled about it, some important essence that carries messages more than could be conveyed in a narrative, more than could be conveyed for a self that makes this journey and then achieves something.

Does that make sense? Again, I would give it back to you as an exploration. Open it and see if you can feel the difference and the difference in effect. My sense—I don't know what you'd call it, my positing—is that there will be a kind of richness and depth and mystery in the more iconic images. They will touch you deeper and be an unfathomable resource in ways that extend beyond just yourself, giving more of a sense of what we call soul.

On Meeting Imaginal Beings

You mention characters on a journey that you meet at different points—the same character doing different things in different situations. That sounds wonderful. It's all really fine. Again, I would just give it back to you: What feels soul-making? I know we're explaining it has this quality or that quality, but what we really want is your firsthand experience of feeling that difference. You might not be able to articulate it, or maybe you can now with some of this language, but it simply has a different sense.

I would wager that you're going to prefer that sense to anything else, even if the other kind makes you more assertive or efficient in life. There's going to be some attraction to this soul-making quality over and above anything it gives you on a practical level. You can just follow that.

In terms of the images you're describing—meeting characters in different situations, having different kinds of interactions with imaginal beings—that sounds great.

When the Mind Creates False Narratives

I'll add one more thing: sometimes an image is actually not a narrative image, but the mind makes it into one, or thinks it is. I can only think of one example right now. I was walking on Dartmoor, near where I used to live, and the earth reached up these tentacles toward me with a kind of desire toward me. It was a wonderful image, really beautiful. But that was it—a brief snapshot. The mind could add extra elements, like "it pulls me down to what?" But that addition would be unnecessary. The power was in the iconic moment itself.

To dissolution, to union, to something. But actually it didn't. It was the moment of reaching, you know. Does that make sense? It's like, I was thinking, "Oh, this is an image about union," but actually it wasn't, because it never got to union. The image was preserved the *tunas*. Sometimes the mind jumps to a conclusion that's not actually there in the image.

How does that relate to the concertina? The more imaginal any image gets, the more this quality of timelessness is apparent, and it becomes almost a way we recognize an image. All the images in the concertina—it's like they're just there in the shadows. Usually you can't even make out what they are. Sometimes they may be related to this person in front of me.

I'm looking at my friend, my beloved, sensing her with soul, with imagining, and I can sense that there's almost like a selection of images available, kind of like a halo or cloud of available images. But any one of them is always already happening. It's going to be eternal.

For instance, here I am working in this dyad and looking, and there's the Eros, and I sense her as the cosmic mystical queen—whatever—and I might be in that image. I start to get involved as the cosmic mystical king, and there's this dyad there, and it's beautiful. That's one image, but it's always happening, and whatever they do is always happening. It's almost like you're tapping into something that's always happening.

But in relation to her as an object in this example—or it could be a tree or whatever—there could have been other images. These are what's waiting in the concertina. They will probably also have this sense of always already happening. It's as if you're tapping into some kind of more eternal level of things.

So Zazie is asking about an image that came on the last retreat—the most profound experience of your life—an atomic bomb, all the nodes, all the elements going off, tremendous opening. Since then, nothing has quite lived up to that sort of technicolor extravaganza experience. There's disappointment and comparison and craving, wanting that kind of intensity of opening again.

This is really important. An image is autonomous. It's like you're in relationship with a being. It's really helpful to think of it this way: this is another being that I'm in relationship with. Imagine if you and someone else were close friends or lovers or whatever, and you just had this amazing experience.

If you treat them with respect and care, you receive one response; if you approach them with demands or manipulation, you encounter quite another. This is simply the natural way of dependent arising in the imaginal realm.

So yes, that intensity was wonderful. It might have been exactly what you needed at that particular moment, what your soul required then. But that doesn't mean it's what's needed now. Further deepening, further opening, further refining and nuancing and widening—all of this may not come through intensity at all.

This points to something important about practice in general. Sometimes we become tremendously impressed by intensity, mistaking it for the measure of profound transformation or opening or learning. Sometimes intensity does indeed catalyze deep change, but often it simply remains just that—intense. We can fall into seeking intensity as a marker of significance when it may indicate nothing of the sort. This is precisely where wisdom must enter.

The second consideration involves the relationship between jhanic experience—mystical experience in general—and imaginal experience. Often, when someone practicing jhana and deep samadhi breaks through to a new state for the first few times—perhaps their first jhana or whatever territory is new for them—the experience feels like a dam breaking. It seems completely effortless and utterly mind-blowing. This might happen several times. And then the real work begins.

It's rather like falling in love, where everything feels magical and effortless for the first few months, and then the deeper work of relationship begins—or doesn't, as the case may be. That's where genuine depth can emerge.

In jhanic experience, what happens next is that the feeling of complete effortlessness gradually shifts. You begin noticing incredibly subtle differences and discovering subtle ways to shape the experience. This is where the real learning and authentic relating unfolds. The same principle applies to working with images.

Again, it's worth contemplating this quality of autonomy and personhood—and sometimes even recognizing that this is bigger than me. Therefore, I might ask: am I subjecting this being to my ego's demands? If I do, there will indeed be consequences. This doesn't mean that if I don't make such demands, the intensity will necessarily return. Rather, it's about entertaining a different conception, a different way of playing with relationship.

Consider this possibility: This is bigger than me. It contains more than I can possibly understand. It's both grace and mystery. I will never fully comprehend it with my ordinary mind. How would you relate to such a phenomenon? Certainly not by trying to make it serve whatever small, self-centered ends you might have.

Does this make sense?

Within the larger scope of practice, you're going to open and learn and grow and change through various means—sometimes through intensity, sometimes through one image repeated many times, sometimes through countless brief, one-time images. All of these contribute to your unfolding.

How does this sound? Rather than simply putting down that seeking quality, can you pick up something else—a more skillful way of entering into relationship, not just with that particular image, but with all images?

There's something here, I think, about a very common misunderstanding regarding intensity. Sometimes people fear intensity entirely—I don't sense this is your issue, but some practitioners need to learn: Can you bear a little more intensity? Can you open to a little more energy? But making the mistake of equating intensity with liberation or transformational experience—that assumption definitely needs questioning.

"Great, thank you. Chris, yes, please."

"Good afternoon. Thank you." Chris pauses. "So this happened before we even mentioned anything about pilgrimage."

"Oh, that's interesting as well, isn't it?"

Chris shares that just yesterday, completely spontaneously, an image of three pilgrims appeared in consciousness. There was a kind of halo around them, and they were carrying shepherd's staffs with curved hooks. His mind immediately judged this as "a

bit hackneyed, a bit clichéd," leaving him uncertain how to proceed. When the pilgrims began to move away, he wondered: Should I engage? Should I follow them? Or is this just my ego creating fantasy?

"There are several things to consider here," I respond.

I don't even want to use the word mistakes, but we've got to be free enough to just try things and see how they feel. So if you hear me giving examples where I say, "Oh, then I tried this, no, that didn't feel right, that wasn't helpful," so I revert, or the image changes, I try something else and it doesn't work. It's okay to feel like, "Oh, that wasn't quite the right thing," or "I'm putting too much pressure on it."

I think you've got to feel free to just see what happens, play and see what happens.

Some of you may not feel this at this point, but there's a kind of superabundance of images. If you feel like "Oh, I missed it with that one," it's okay. On the other hand, maybe bringing it back deliberately and just hanging out and seeing what resonates with you—maybe walking with them, maybe just whatever it is—you can find your way back more deliberately to that and just try and see what happens.

But I don't think there's a kind of right and wrong. One of the things I'd really like to communicate on this retreat is the willingness to experiment without a sense of right and wrong and just see what happens. I think the key word there for me is experiment, which implies doing a range of things.

Sometimes what happens is a person might show up, and I've been working with images for ages—it's what I do—but there's actually a fairly fixed way of relating to them, and there isn't that experimentation there. There are different images, but how they relate to them is quite fixed. Does that make sense?

So this is the thing: don't be afraid—I don't even want to call them mistakes—don't be afraid to just try different things. You'll get a feel for what feels more soul-making. We learn in comparison to what doesn't. So in a way, maybe you have to go on a narrative and then make them do stuff and push them around and then realize it doesn't feel right.

On the other hand, as we said in some exchanges, it's not as a rule that me making stuff happen means it's not going to be soul-making. It might be. So it's not like anything can happen, but I'm going in there with a sense of "Well, let's see, let's play a little bit and use my intuition as to what might feel soul-making."

And then it's interesting—the fact that you had that image and then Catherine introduced that thing last night, and several people have said that they have an image and then the world seems to do something very similar. Great. That opens up all kinds of questions, which is beautiful, and I'm not going to say much more about it.

"I feel really at home in the imaginal. I feel very excited about all the images. There's something about inspiration—I can't quite put my finger on it, but I kind of feel the world of possibilities."

About eros and inspiration? They're definitely connected. There's no question. We haven't talked a lot about eros on this retreat—we have in the past in other retreats, and we could talk endlessly about eros and beauty and what it does. But eros, by definition, is a kind of alive state. It's a state of ignition and awakeness and interest and fire, illumination, all that. So all those qualities go with a state of inspiration. There are just those parallels.

But I think more than that, a state of inspiration or artistic inspiration has eros in it. There's a sense—I'll say this from my experience artistically, and if it doesn't fit yours, that's fine—but when you're inspired with something, you're kind of in love with this thing that you're doing.

Someone asked Stravinsky, the very prolific composer, "What's your favorite piece that you've written?" He said, "The one I'm writing right now." In other words, it is part of the creative process to have eros about this thing. It's got this mystery and this attraction for us. You understand?

And I would say—we've mentioned this but not fully explored it—that when there is eros for other, whether it be a piece of visual art or whatever it is, or an object in nature or an internal image, if we don't get in the way, at some point the self becomes imaginal as well. And so the artist at work, or that meditator inspired, has an image going on, a fantasy of themselves doing the work, doing the practice, dedicating themselves. Do you understand?

To some people that sounds like ego, that sounds like, "Well, I'm not concentrating on the thing because I should be lost in the object." No. There's actually—this is what happens, and we may talk more about this on the retreat—the eros spreads. And you'll notice when you're really inspired, then you go for a walk or whatever, and how does the world seem? The eros, the soul-making, will spread: self, other, world, everything. So everything becomes imaginal and becomes an object of eros, infused with eros.

So then I, as the image of the artist painting or whatever it is, I become an object of eros for myself. I become image for myself. And this to me is absolutely beautiful. So all that goes on in inspiration. Inspiration, I think, is full of eros.

We haven't lingered on it too much, but there's—Catherine talked about it—this idea of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and how it works together, but that we can get in the way of that in many different ways and stop it from doing its thing. So sometimes what happens is we stop it from coming back to ourselves. Catherine mentioned this: we stop—the other is divine and imaginal and we're not, for instance. And that's kind of lopsiding the whole process, and it doesn't move so well. It doesn't deepen and grow so well.

So there's all that. And then we can talk about eros in terms of fire analogies, also water analogies. It's a very juicy state, you know. And you'll feel that in the experience as well.

But I'm not sure if this is what you're after. Okay, good. So is there more there? Yeah. Where is it going to stop? Right. Yeah. So the question is, where is it going to stop? Is it a question of curiosity? Is there concern? Or is it not really a question?

But that's—in the conceptual framework that we have, that's a central principle: that if we don't get in the way, it won't stop. What does that mean, it won't stop? It means, similar to what I just said—okay, I start something, whatever thing it is, a piece of art that I'm doing or someone else's piece of art or a tree or a person or an internal image as an object of eros. It might start there. It could start with the world though. It could start at any place.

And then that becomes erotic, imaginal, other for me. And in the process, in the—I don't know what you call it—the movement, the involvement, the dance of eros-psyche-logos, it starts to involve me, as I just explained, and then the world, and then other objects, and then even aspects of me.

So then it's like, then even—for instance, my eros becomes, not just me, but aspects of me. Like for instance, my eros becomes an erotic imaginal object for me. My eros is seen and felt imaginarily, and with all that it starts to have dimensionality and divinity. My eros—is it mine, or is it God's, or the Buddha nature's, or whatever.

There's something—it will keep finding new faces of belovedness and new aspects and new complications and new folds in whatever it is. And if we don't get in the way, it won't stop. So there's an endlessness that's possible here.

[responding to question]

That's really important. So Maisie is saying, particularly towards the end of the day, mind just starts whirring up images, lots of images, very quickly, one after the other, and none of them seem particularly deep or anything. They're sort of interesting at a certain level, but not particularly soul-making or interesting.

To me that sounds like a particular type of mental tiredness, which I also get. Some people, when they get tired, everything just kind of stops in their mind. And other people, when they get tired, it gets a bit faster, this kind of thing. So it sounds a little bit like that, towards the end of the day.

It might be then there's a time to kind of let go of those images and come back to body and something much more simple and nourishing. And your mind might still wander—it's a bit tired—and just see if you can work with that kind of gathering the energy rather than trying to figure out now which one of these images and why aren't they meaningful and that sort of thing. Does that make sense?

So sometimes you get a sense, despite what I said about doubt and everything, sometimes you get a sense that this thing or that thing is not really worth particularly following. It's just sort of flotsam and jetsam of the mind that's floating around because of tiredness.

[responding to another question]

So if I understand it, Nicole's asking that there's a lot of eros that's comfortable and lovely and all that. And the question is about eros in regard to long-term projects, which there's a sort of personality inclination to want to commit to and to stay with, or long-term relationships or whatever. And is there something to be said about eros in relation to long-term projects?

I think there's something again about including the dukkha. I'm tired tonight so I can't really think of examples, but you gave an example of me writing my book, and several aspects became image there. Again, the book itself became image at a certain point. And then the writing of the book, including the difficulty of it and the isolation and things like that.

It might be that you're not looking for something that doesn't have dukkha in it. The image of the one who perseveres, the one who trudges endlessly through deserts or whatever it is, the one who shows up no matter what—all this can become image.

The way we're using it, imaginal image and eros, they kind of imply each other. Where there's eros, if it's left to do its thing, images are born and get deeper and get more varied. And images by their nature elicit eros, evoke eros, and so the whole thing starts mutually inseminating.

But it might be that there are images of whatever they are for you—for this long-term dedication, this willingness to be there when it's dry and when it has a cost and when you'd rather be doing something else. All that can become image. It might be an image that's other, or it might be you as image, or mixtures of all that.

And the other thing—it's a little harder to articulate—is that you can't have images all the time. That's part, for me, that's part of the grace aspect, so that we feel we're given an image or we have access to something and then it goes. If it was there all the time it might just get a bit ordinary, you see.

We can—it's as if, let's say, taken as an image of the long-term sort of commitment—someone who just has got to trudge, she has got to trudge through this desert to get to wherever, and they just need to walk. But there are little oases on the way, and sometimes the connecting with an image is like hitting an oasis for a while. It kind of can hold you more firmly. It's not going to be all the time necessarily.

Does that make sense? Is there a piece missing? Are you sure?

So if... I actually do work in my life. I do. It's not a problem that I have, but I guess it's like—I don't know if this is a correct concept—but if there is a love or something...

The question is: when we love something, is there always an image underpinning it?

It depends on how you mean "always." So I would say yes. When we really love something and we're devoted to it—maybe those two words, love and devotion—there's an image there. And I think that's part of... There's an image operating and driving that. You could say the drive for it is coming from the image as opposed to being a result of the love. That's a certain way of looking at it.

I would say to realize that is a certain level of psychological awareness. It's not an awareness that everybody has or that society kind of realizes or whatever. I would say that. However, so that's the "always" in that sense. In every instance there is. However, at times we lose contact with an image. And then there's just the dryness and the slog or whatever it is. And that's where these oasis businesses come in.

Yeah, and that can even form another level of image. Again, if you go back to the timelessness, it's like looking at your life from beyond death. You look back at the totality of your life—these periods of long dedication with periods of aridity and periods of inspiration and periods of non-inspiration, and the willingness to continue in the periods of non-inspiration. Do you get what I'm saying? That can become image. It's like a different vantage point on the aridity. Aridity, aridness, whatever.

So that's also connected to this time thing. And actually, just as a general point, that's sometimes a really skillful thing to do: to come out of your life and look at the totality from after death, so to speak. You see the totality of your life, and it can become image. You become, again, you become image for yourself. Your life becomes image, becomes pilgrimage, becomes image of devotion, etc. Hopefully, depending on how we live and all that.

I can't see. Is that Mewa? Okay.

Yeah. So if I try to understand, other retreats where there's a lot of intensity to the whole process and the images and things, and this retreat less intense but perhaps more subtle and more, getting more nuance. And then when Catherine did the seven steps exercise, was it that lots of different images were coming out very rapidly?

No. Okay. I missed the last bit. Another logos once.

Yeah, yeah. So, if I understand you right, following Catherine's instructions this morning and what we played with there, there felt the sense of trying that with different images and a sort of losing the sense of grace and the sense of replacing that with a sense of, "Oh, there's a kind of automatic process here that I can sort of do," and that lost the sense of beauty and specialness and mystery and grace. Is that?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So, I mean, a couple of things.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 8/11). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

One possibility is that Catherine and I were just talking briefly—it's not really a formula so much as an invitation to recognize something almost miraculous. Rather than a series of steps, consider this: can you see the beauty in each element itself? For instance, the practice that really struck me this morning was asking forgiveness—saying sorry. That deeply touched me, this offering of apology on behalf of the human species, certain cultures, and myself.

Rather than approaching this as step-by-step instructions—one, two, three, seven, ignition, takeoff—these are invitations to learn about practice and the mystery of participation in the imaginal. When my humility and willingness to say sorry becomes genuine, that act itself can become image. Rather than a technique, it transforms into something imaginal.

Your identity as soul-making practitioner can become image as well. This isn't a technique of mastery but a mystery of initiation, involving both art and grace, where you yourself become image. Your participation in something utterly mysterious—the profound levels of what participation means—can become imaginal.

The wonder lies in recognizing that everything can potentially become image. Within that recognition, you as practitioner, you as participator, can become image. This business of participation—the final node we've explored—remains the most mysterious of all the elements. The meaning and profundity of our participation in reality, truth, perception, in what things are and what opens up—sensing and feeling into that can become soul-making. This differs entirely from having a set of techniques and tricks to switch things on. It operates at a completely different level.

Let me check how we're doing time-wise. I'm tired, but not in a way that prevents continuing—more that I recognize I'm not quite as sharp as I usually feel. I'm comfortable with that if you are. Should we continue with a few more questions?

Matt asks about our use of the word "image," which we've employed in various senses without careful distinction. There's image in the usual sense—like the tentacles emerging from the earth I mentioned earlier. Then there's the sense of something becoming image, which carries different meaning entirely.

For something to become image means it begins to be perceived imaginally, sensed with soul. Many of you have experienced this arriving at Gaia House—something here was initially just a something, and at some point it begins to be perceived with beauty, dimensionality, mysterious depth, and all the rest. This could happen with a person who starts as simply a person you like or dislike, or relate to functionally, but then becomes imaginal for you. There develops an eros toward them—not necessarily sexual—a profound beauty, mystery, unfathomability. Rather than just a person, they become imagery, meaning something you can never quite articulate, carrying resonances in your soul with beauty and depth.

Roxanne raises a fascinating question about expectations in practice. She notices that when working with images toward soul-making, things never unfold as expected. She might begin with heartbreak, wanting to visualize something dark like a monster to match her feeling, but instead a beautiful image emerges—not something she was reaching for, but what naturally comes, offering profound meaning.

This points to something essential about imaginal practice...

That's what elicited and opened the soul-making—the image that actually came to you, rather than the image you thought you wanted. Is that so?

"Yes, and it seems I keep encountering this. We were going through the seven stages, and I was practicing, and I just thought of an image..."

Is there a problem here? In our logos, the images are autonomous—they're like people with their own intelligence and sensibility and care. All of which sounds like what you're experiencing. To be surprised, I think, is part of the territory. So it sounds great.

I think in different ways people will be surprised, and recognizing the autonomy—this is why we make that an element, recognizing the autonomy of the image. Look, if I could make everything do what I think I want everything to do, it wouldn't be very fulfilling or rich.

In relation to the first thing you said about feeling—was it sadness? Grief, okay. Grief and heartbreak. And then the image that arises is beautiful. But if we go back to what we said with Gladys, I can also become image in relation to the image that arises for me. So I am heartbroken and a beautiful image might then touch my heartbreak. The whole thing becomes the image, rather than just that part. You understand? You can begin to feel that actually what the image is, is that beauty in relationship to your heartbreak, in contact with it. The whole thing is image. Does that make sense?

"Yes, yes."

So again, not thinking, "Oh, that doesn't seem right." It's the two together. It's great.

Okay, maybe one last question.

"It's something about the way in which the image has more tolerance—that's clear. Yet sometimes, particularly when that image arises from a personal experience of suffering or whatever, there's a sense in which it's arising from the ground of my own experience. The image is arising with its autonomy, and yet I'm also there. I guess the confusion is about the connectedness between the image and myself. Sometimes the image

might seem something totally separate from you. But it also always feels very personal. That raises the question about what you said before about the image—there's a sense that it's always been there. That's the thing. It's always been there, and yet it's wisdom from this personal experience."

So if I understand, Margaret is asking two questions. There's a sense in which an image feels autonomous, and yet it also seems like it's part of me. That's one. And the other is about images being timeless, while I can also see that they arise from personal experience.

All these are true. An image is me and not me. That particular sense of it being me and not me is more characteristic of images than either "it is me" or "it isn't me." There's some quality—it's me and not me. So that's exactly right.

When we say autonomy, it's almost like you can lean on that element a little bit to grant the image more space, to stop it collapsing into being just me. But it's never to the point where it feels like this has nothing to do with me. Actually, sometimes there is that sense, but usually that's where the infinite echoing and mirroring comes in. Usually there's some sense that this image, strange as it might seem, in mysterious, infinite ways, echoes in my life and my life echoes the image. The image echoes my life and they mirror each other.

So it's about subtle leanings. As I said, some of the elements in this lattice, this constellation, feel like they say the same things in different words or overlap.

And some of them feel a bit contradictory, you know. So does that make sense?

Similar with the timeless and the reflecting—usual modern psychology holds that an image arises because it's reflecting something that happened in the past. I think what's really potentially exciting and a beautiful thing to play with is: what happens if we turn that upside down? My life is a reflection of image.

The causality is—we're so used to thinking of causality in a certain way. It comes out of this scientific way of thinking: the past causes the present, and something that happened externally will cause an internal image to arise. What if we just play with that?

There's this Greek word called *telos*—it means the cause comes from the end. So this, if you like, the angel out ahead or something, the future causes the past. We can say, "What's all that?" But what if we can just play with that as a poetic idea and see what

happens? So that my life is an expression of certain images. Certain things happen to me, certain choices are made, certain things are expressed because I am expressing certain images. I can say more than that—I am called on to express certain images.

Now, if I say "that's the truth," then maybe that's a little too tight. But you can play with turning things upside down. Do you understand? And I would say, if you can play with that, it's quite a different sense of things, and something very beautiful opens up. We can keep the other one too, and go back to the traditional or more common way of thinking about causality: "Yeah, this arises because of a cause in the past," etc.

Is this making sense to people?

And of course, traditional dharma understanding involves understanding causality in the present—my relationship with what's happening makes something arise right now in the present. So causality is really interesting. Most of us find it really, really hard to shift our concepts of causality from this kind of linear thinking where past and external events determine everything. For instance, "the events of my childhood caused this." It's not saying they didn't, but it's just saying there can be tremendous liberation, tremendous healing, and a tremendous soul adventure to sometimes play with turning that on its head.

Just play with that as a concept and see what that idea, very lightly, does to my imaginal sense, to my sense of existence, to my sense of what this life is, to my sense of—for instance, what Nicole asked about—dedication to something. All of that.

I can see my life is caused by—it has divine roots, it grows from the divine, the images of the divine, the gods, the deities, the daemons, and they express through me. They want something through me. Something to play with.

"Can I ask another question?"

"Sure."

"Which is around the me in the image. So I'm hearing—every time I go to the image, I become part of the image. Is that...?"

So the question is, every time you've had an image, somehow you enter the image.

"Yeah, so the imaginal other is related to me in the image. It's not necessarily related to me. There's an image of you in the whole... Yeah, so is that right?"

Yeah, all kinds of things can happen in terms of the self-sense. So it could be—just to delineate a few—it could be exactly what you're saying. Here's this imaginal other, and then I get an imaginal me interacting with the imaginal other. One possibility. Fine, beautiful.

Or that image is relating to me sitting here, as me. Or, as someone was reporting earlier, it's just that image—there's no me. And that image is just doing their own thing in their own world, doing their own thing. And that's where it's a bit more subtle. It's like, "What's this got to do with me?" Sometimes it's just not that apparent.

And sometimes those are oftentimes the most inexplicably beautiful images as well. This is where this infinite echoing and mirroring—it does have something to do with me.

Again, it's me and not me. And in some mysterious ways that image is refracted into my life and my life echoes that image. So that's a possibility—all kinds of possibilities. I don't think there's a fixed way that this happens.

The beauty lies in remaining open to these endless reflections, these infinite mirrorings that connect us to something vast and mysterious. Whether the images arise as clearly connected to our personal journey or appear as strangers living their own lives in distant worlds, they each carry something essential. Each reflection, each echo, offers its own teaching, its own invitation to see more deeply into the nature of experience itself.

This is the profound intimacy of imagination—how it weaves together the personal and the universal, the familiar and the strange, the self and the not-self. In these quiet moments of receptivity, we discover that the boundaries we typically maintain begin to soften, and we find ourselves participating in something much larger than our ordinary sense of who we are.

Let's rest in this understanding together, allowing whatever wants to arise in the silence to simply be present with us.

CHAPTER 158

Voice, Movement, and the Possibilities of Soul (2)

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this continuation of embodied dharma exploration, Rob Burbea leads participants through a series of movement and vocal practices designed to open new dimensions of awareness beyond traditional stillness meditation. The session begins with participants choosing between silent practice or continued movement exploration, emphasizing the importance of discerning genuine guidance from habitual patterns.*
>
> *The teachings move through several distinct practices: channeling uninhibited movement (the 'drunken dancer'), warrior postures that ground power in the lower body while connecting to earth energy, expansive breathing movements that relate self to space and cosmos, throat-based vocalizations, gentle head movements that attune to stellar and terrestrial forces, and pelvic rotations with sound. Each practice is offered with multiple variations - allowing movement to lead awareness, or having imaginal images guide embodied expression.*
>
> *Burbea emphasizes developing sensitivity to energetic, emotional, and imaginal dimensions that arise through these practices, while maintaining connection to both intimate bodily awareness and vast cosmic space. The session concludes with participants working with personal images in either still or moving meditation, exploring devotional relationship, identification, or energetic exchange with imaginal presences. This approach represents Burbea's distinctive integration of embodied practice with his soulmaking dharma teachings, opening practitioners to dimensions of experience beyond conventional mindfulness approaches.*

I'm very confused. It's hard to tell for me right now what's needed.

I had planned to continue our exploration of movement that we started the other day and do some different things with that. But I just can't tell if it's the right thing. Maybe it's the right thing for some of you and not for others. So I'm going to give you the problem instead of me.

What do you feel would be helpful now? Would it be helpful to continue your practice in silence? This is a question for each of you rather than coming to a committee meeting decision together. Would it be helpful to continue in silence and more stillness? Or would it be more helpful to continue exploring that thread of movement that we started the other day?

Asking what is helpful sometimes is not easy because sometimes we have a certain inertia or a habit pattern in one way or another. We tend not to like to move because we're just used to being still, and sometimes there's just sluggishness or a habit of being still. Or sometimes we want to move because we don't want to be still, and it's just a kind of reactive thing.

I don't know. But if we give each of you the choice, then for those that want, we can continue to explore the movement as we began two days ago. For others, we have a kind of free schedule this afternoon. You can walk or move outside or practice sitting outside and come back later. How does that sound?

Let's just take thirty seconds together and see what the kind of guidance is, which is different than just habit. You understand? There's really no right or wrong or better or worse option, just see if you can get a sense of what would be fruitful for your practice at this time.

The mats are going to be cleared, so whether you're staying or going, perhaps if we could move the mats, and then those who don't want to stay can have a free practice period outside. You can sit in the lounge if you want somewhere indoors to sit in meditation. Some of it was a bit intense for some people last time, so it won't be so intense today, just so you know that.

So if we move the mats and make your choice, and then we'll see who's left.

Okay, so again, if we can spread homogeneously through the space so each person has some room. Two things, as before: it's all optional. The whole thing is optional, as I just pointed out, but also any part of it is. I've done something relative to my back and ribs, so I'm not going to be hardly moving at all. So if any movement doesn't feel right, don't do it, or just adapt it to what your body can do safely for you right now.

Let's just start again feeling the contact with the floor, feeling that rootedness, feeling the uprightness of the body. There's the gravitational pull and there's also a line of energy up from the earth, and the body gathers, organizes itself around that vertical with the sense of contact. Then the whole body as a field of awareness, a field of bodily texture, vibration, energy.

Taking just a minute to move your body however you would like in a way that just feels like it helps to loosen it up a little bit. So whatever that is for you right now.

Great. And feeling the contact again.

Now, the other day you all channeled with remarkably intimate insight this state of a drunken person. I was really, really impressed. This same friend of ours has been invited to a disco party—a seventies disco party, not trance techno. And they're even more plastered now. They're a really bad dancer. They have no idea that they're a bad dancer. They're loving it. They're totally into it.

Just for a couple of minutes, channel the boogie. You're really, really uncoordinated. It cannot possibly look good. You can hardly keep balance. There's not a trace of self-consciousness.

Yeah, okay, that's great. That's superb. You guys really know this. Wonderful.

Now, last time we did this thing with the fierce warrior, I want to tone that down a bit or take a different approach. Actually, I think it's better for this if, as much as possible, we arrange ourselves so you're facing the wall. So you're really doing this in your own space, kind of toward the wall, rather than in other people's faces. Perhaps we could form two ovals—if people face the wall, then it might leave people in the middle forming a smaller oval. Maybe I'll go into the middle to help with the arrangement.

Now we're going to do this two ways. There won't be any vocals with this one like there was last time with the screaming. So it's just with the body.

Catherine, can you demonstrate that? Yes, so this time it's like that—not like Gandalf. Again, it's this warrior who's got tremendous power in their legs, in their hips, in their pelvis, drawing energy down into the ground from the earth and down into the earth. But they're expressing this—I'm not going to do it myself—by stomping.

Catherine will demonstrate in a minute. But again, if you have any physical fragility at all, just temper your stomping. You've got to stomp, though. You can have a staff if you want. You can embellish this as you like.

Let me explain the two ways we'll approach this. The first way is to let the movement lead. So you do the movement, which is basically stomping with as much energy and awareness and intention and power and force in the lower half of the body. Then see what that brings up or what you're aware of energetically, or perhaps imaginatively. The movement leads and the awareness notices. Does that make sense?

What's that? Perhaps people don't know what stomp means. Do you want to show them?

[Catherine demonstrates]

So that's quite a vigorous stomp. My vertebrae would probably just crumble if that happened, but temper it to what your body can actually do. That's great. And you can do one after another. So just something from the body and let the soul be aware of what happens through the body. Does that make sense?

So let's go with that. When you're ready. Take your time as well. You can pause between stomps. There's the energy body awareness, there's imaginal awareness, simple mindfulness, emotional awareness—just see what you notice. And then maybe you want to stomp and let it resonate after the stomp in the stillness, and see what you notice resonating in the stillness, if anything.

Please respect your body.

[Practice period]

Okay, that's wonderful, thank you. Now, slight variation on that.

Yeah, take a moment to let your body rest a little bit.

Now for a slight variation. This time, an image leads, but it's a deliberate prescribed image of some kind of warrior, as I was describing—someone who embodies this quality. How does that warrior move?

You have a small space to work with. How do they exude and demonstrate the ferocity and power and strength that they have? None of this means badness ethically, or evil, or any of that business. So it might come out something very similar to what you just did, or it might come out different. Maybe your arms are involved, maybe your mouth is involved, but we're not vocalizing at this point.

You understand—the image leads, and see how the body enacts that image. When you're ready.

Perhaps there's a kind of feedback loop between the gestures that you make and the movements, and then the effects of those movements in the psyche. And that shapes the next movement, or what you want to do, or whether to be still. Do this in a rhythm, at a pace that enables you to also be sensitive to the effects and the feelings—emotional, sensational, energetic, imaginal.

How does your belly feel, your lower belly? What is the sense of the vertical alignment of the body? And also the alignment of the intention?

Now one more variation. Let the space of this hall that we're in, allow an awareness of that, and how does that influence the movement, influence the expression or transmission or enactment, embodiment? So there is a wider awareness—yes the body, yes the emotions, the energy, perhaps an image—but somehow it's connected to this space and the physical dimensions, geometries and actuality of this space.

You might have no idea what that means, but just what happens if you include that in the awareness? Stay facing the wall. You might want to glance at the room, just remind yourself what it looks like, but you probably know by now. And anyway, if it's an imaginal space, that's also fine. See what that does.

Again, in the time, the tempo, the rhythm that allows you to notice as much as possible as well. Same warrior, but in a certain space to which the senses are open. There's some kind of intimate connection, almost a physical connection between this warrior, their movements and the walls and the space of this hall. Some mysterious, almost physical, energetic, imaginal connection. They are two and they are one.

In the last few seconds for this warrior to exude in the body their essence, their being, their duty.

Lovely. Thank you.

Take a breather, maybe just a little bit of loosening of the body after those jerky motions, whatever needs to shake and loosen. Some breaths.

The next one—many of you will be familiar with this kind of movement. This one I can actually do. The hands come to the lower belly, like that, however that feels right. And then with the in-breath, they expand out like that. And with the out-breath, they come back in. See—big. Simple as that.

Your legs probably hip-width or even wider apart. Some of you will be familiar with this movement from certain other practices. For those people, I wonder—it would be really interesting to not just go straight into the usual way of seeing it or conceiving of it or interpreting it. That might be quite interesting. Can this become a movement that's open to other ways of sensing it, other ways of imagining it?

So it's really just that. And you can, if you like, feel yourself again really rooted with the floor, the connection with the floor, and perhaps centered, as if the center of your body is the lower belly, if that makes sense. And then you're breathing from there out into the world, or breathing in the world and then out, something like that.

Good enough? In-breath, the arms come out. Out-breath, they come back in.

If that feels wrong, switch it around. Just see. There's not like a right or wrong here. We're just partly developing different kinds of sensitivity. So play, yeah? Okay? Ready when you are.

And like with all of these things, there's the possibility of pitching the sensitivities, the noticing, the awareness at different levels. No right or wrong. So it might be simple mindfulness, just the sensations, contact with the floor, of the arms, of the breath. It might be energy flows or movements. But it might open up, could be emotional awarenesses, could also be imaginal awarenesses. This body with these gestures, these movements, this flow.

Again, when you feel ready to add to it the dimension of the awareness of this space, the geometry, the physicality, the corners, the ethos of this space. So the gesture, the movement and the space are connected, somehow mysteriously intimate, reciprocal, in relationship. They are two and they are one. They are one and they are two. And see what helps. Eyes open, eyes closed. It could be sensational, emotional, energetic or imaginal. What you notice. There's no right or wrong.

What is this body? Is it really just what I think it is? What I'm used to thinking it is? What I was taught it is? And what is this space we are now in together? What can it be?

Again, when you feel ready, adding, opening up just a little bit further, not just to the room, but to the world. The whole world. The earth with all its beauty, all its creatures, all its craziness. Maybe even the cosmos—the stars, the galaxies, the interstellar reaches. See how wide. If it feels better, just the earth, just the world, or even wider.

But this movement is in relationship somehow—self and world, body and other bodies, other forms, space. What can happen in your sense of this movement, in your sense of what it is, what it does, what you are doing, what is being done through you?

Just last few seconds of this one. Taking your leave of this particular window, this particular contact, this particular love. A little bit of wriggling, shaking, just to loosen things up. However you like.

The next one is vocal. And again, we'll do it two ways. Firstly, just the vocals, and then secondly, the vocals and how does your body want to move with those vocals. I don't know, it's probably got a name, someone might know, but I'm just calling it a throat hiss. So that's it.

You can just be still and do that, and again, you can see what's the most helpful. Right now, for me right now, what's the most helpful pitch of the awareness? If it's just, okay, so there's some sensations in my throat, it's good to be aware of. Does it do something emotionally or imaginatively or energetically?

And then let's just do that with just the voice. You get this? Throat hiss? Make sense? Sure, it's a to the wall one, yeah. But be aware if your mind puts this in a box or an ethical box. And again, let the rhythm be so that you can also pick up on any resonances or anything you notice in the body, in the heart, in the image, in the energy.

Okay, wonderful. And now we'll add the possibility of moving in any way that feels right, which might be you stay completely still.

Just as it was just now. But how would the body or how does the body want to move? Perhaps in conformity and expression of an image that goes with this, or just the energy or something. So this time you can move your body as feels somehow like it goes with these vocals. If there is an image, let the image lead.

Ready when you are. And again, maybe there's some echoes when you come to stillness and quietness, and then you can do it again. So if that helps, that kind of rhythm helps to see the reverberations, the resonances before you start again in your own rhythm, whatever feels helpful.

Just a few more seconds on this one. Thank you, that's great. Just coming to stillness and let your body relax. Stillness and relaxation.

Next one. Very, very subtle. Very, very simple. Again, it's okay if your body is just rolling the head. That's it. Standing and just... I would probably do this with the eyes open. It's just that—one way or another rolling the head, but how much in the simplicity and the smallness of the movement can you see how delicate the awareness can be? What you might notice in the sensations, in energy or an emotion that might go with it, or image.

Aware of your whole body, aware of the whole energy body. There's no particular thing that's supposed to happen. Who is it who is moving their head this way, whose head is moved this way? Who is it in response to the universe?

And very gently, can you bring this movement as you continue to do it into relationship with the molten core of the earth and with the stars? Somehow standing on the earth, the body upright and open and sensitive, between the mystery of the stars and the heart of the earth. And you and this body plunged into mysterious, inexplicable manifestation in this cosmos.

Just noticing what you notice with all the sensitivity, all the care of sensitivity that you can bring. And then coming to a close of this particular movement, taking your leave of that particular window.

And the next one, Catherine, do you mind demonstrating? So if you can all see Catherine. Oh, if big people need to crouch. So legs are going to be hip width apart, something like that. And the movement is just centered at the pelvic floor, or definitely the lower belly or even lower, and it's just a rotation. Either way, whichever feels right.

And at the same time, there's a vocalization, just R. But the R... Can you do it? And I'll talk as you're doing it. So the three parts: pelvic rotation, R, and then whatever feels the right thing to do with your arms.

Yeah? You've done it before. You did it at my house, yeah. So that's where it gets... See if it can start down where the movement is coming from. So it's really quite a low R. But as you're doing it, it might feel like actually it feels more right for it to come somewhere higher up in the body. So just kind of see what's right. And the arms can do whatever they... when they feel it. A steady pitch. Yeah, probably a bit more in the hips, like a bit...

That's a good point. So now, I'll just speed up the process.

Thank you to Catherine from Croydon.

So, just one more time. Let me explain this clearly. Got it? And then I'll throw in just a few little variations. Is that okay?

So, basically, from the pelvic floor, as low as you can get, there's this kind of rotation. What kind of rotation? A really subtle one or a really big one? A fast one? A slow one? What feels right? What pitch feels right?

Try first as low as you can go with the sound, like it's really coming from the belly, but maybe later it doesn't feel right. What kind of arm movements do you want to do? It's okay?

So, when you're ready, just play with it and experiment and see what feels right. Whole body awareness but almost centered at the hips, at the pelvis, pelvic region, belly, lower belly.

What do you notice in the sensitivity? Sensitivity. That's wonderful. Thank you.

So let's try one more thing, but it's a solitary, still meditation. Actually, I'm wondering practically about how long it will take to get back the cushions. Well, we're going to need to do it anyway, so why don't we do that now? See if you can do it with the whole mindfulness of the energy body, so don't lose the holding of that awareness as we put the room back together.

Once you're settled, just come into your meditation posture and the meditative awareness with the energy body, with the poise of mindfulness and sensitivity.

I'm going to give you a few options—you've actually heard them before. We'll just spend a few minutes on this. If we had longer, you could probably go through each of the options. But just explore what you feel drawn to of these different variations.

With all the energy body awareness and the sensitivity and in your posture, you bring, you call up something that either has been an image for you, or is an imaginal image, or that has come, or one that has touched you, or something that you have felt that imaginal connection with, as Catherine was talking about—the sensing the soul. It could be something out in the garden, it could be this place, it could be this hall right now, anything like that. Deliberately summon, invite this sense of that presence.

Then the options are to keep the physical body still and see how the energy body might move in relationship to this image—this might be a tree or whatever it is. Or you can actually, in your place, move a little bit. So instead of keeping the physical body still and just feeling that kind of imaginal movement and energetic movement, you can actually move a little bit. So that's two options.

And then it might be that the image is other. How do you move in relation to that image? So it might be a kind of devotional or some kind of erotic dance, or you might be receiving something from the image. Or you might enter that image and, so to speak, become that image. So it's no longer other. And how does that image move?

So there are a few different options. There's no right or wrong—they're just different variations of possibilities.

It's just that—and we'll spend a few minutes together opening up that option—there's a deliberate instruction here, so don't just sit and watch your breath or something like that.

So let's try that together. Does it make enough sense? Good.

First you have to invite the image with respect and come into relationship with it, just with sensitivity, with care.

Sometimes it's a fuller, richer experience if the physical body is still. It's interesting. And sometimes the opposite—fuller, richer if the physical body actually moves and enacts something.

Allow whole body awareness. Sometimes the movements that the energy body would make or is making are not actually physically possible. They don't even make sense anatomically. So be open.

CHAPTER 159

Sailing the Oceans of Soul (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 33 min

> *In this Q&A session from his Foundations of a Soulmaking Dharma series, Rob Burbea skillfully navigates practitioners' questions about the delicate balance between emptiness practice and imaginal work. He addresses the common challenge faced by experienced emptiness practitioners who find images dissolving due to habitual non-clinging and contemplation of śūnyatā (emptiness), offering practical suggestions including working with eros as a form of skillful desire that can sustain and complexify images.*
>
> *Burbea explores the fluid spectrum between form and formlessness, drawing parallels to tantric practice and the classical jhānas while expanding beyond traditional categories. He discusses how images can transform - from particular embodied forms to universal archetypal figures like Guānyīn, to essence-qualities that permeate space, to energetic resonances in the body. The talk emphasizes the crucial skill of discernment (viveka) in recognizing these different states and learning to navigate consciously between them.*
>
> *Practical topics include working with movement, sound, and concepts as gateways to soulmaking; the importance of articulation in refining awareness; and how anything - from abstract ideas like respect or evolution to physical sensations - can become infused with imaginal depth. Burbea concludes by affirming that 'sensing with soul' may be a more accessible term than 'imaginal' for some practitioners, emphasizing the inclusive nature of this dharma path.*

The momentum of my practice is very much rooted in emptiness practices. When I'm working with an image, it can be challenging to preserve its appearance without it fading into a kind of equality or pure awareness. Sometimes I feel like I wish there was a sustain pedal I could press to keep the image alive.

One approach I've been experimenting with involves playing with lines from the Heart Sutra—you know, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form"—and changing the word "emptiness" to "imaginal." So we have "form is imaginal, imaginal is form," and so on. I found that this helps somewhat in keeping the imaginal quality alive in what I'm experiencing. I'm wondering if you have other suggestions around this challenge.

That's a really interesting question, thank you. Let me explain a bit for everyone's benefit. You've done extensive emptiness practices, and when you meditate on the emptiness of something at any level, what begins to happen is that whatever the object

—a pain in the body, a form, or whatever it is—it begins to actually dissolve. This occurs because the appearance of anything is dependent on reifying it, on having an unconscious concept that it is something real.

When we look at something with a view that knows its emptiness to some degree, or contemplates its emptiness—and there are many ways of doing this—because of dependent arising, because the appearance of anything depends on avijjā, the fundamental delusion that reifies things, the object fades. Another factor that keeps an object in form is a degree of clinging. When we relax clinging, the form also fades.

So you're saying that you want to be with the imaginal, but having done extensive emptiness practice, when you work with an image, it starts to fade, and you wish you could lock it into staying formed. Your experimentation with reframing the Heart Sutra —"form is imaginal"—recognizing that images have forms, seems to work somewhat, which is excellent. You can certainly continue with that approach.

I think there are several possibilities here. One thing that might happen is that things become less fabricated—which is actually one element of the imaginal—but they might simply lose some substantiality and become more liquid rather than completely losing their form. It sounds like you're experiencing them actually losing their form entirely.

It might be valuable to identify what's operating in your perceptual lens that has become such an ingrained habit. What in your way of seeing is causing this dissolution? Is it reduced clinging? If you really decrease clinging, does that cause the fading? Are you automatically contemplating the emptiness of something in the background? If you can identify what's happening, you can ease off that particular approach somewhat.

It may also help to tune more into the sense of eros, because eros is, in a way, a kind of clinging—it's a wanting, a form of desire. If you tune into the sense of eros within you, the sense of desire for this figure, or beauty, or attraction to it, then noticing and nurturing that can actually increase the eros, which will reform and strengthen the image. In fact, it will create more elaborate forms and increase complexity rather than simplification.

Another consideration is simply what you're tuning into. What we pay attention to often emphasizes or draws out that particular quality. So if there's an image of some kind of being, what are the specific particulars that attract you or feel soul-making? Perhaps it's the way they move—with a certain elegance or fluidity that touches you. By tuning your attention both to that particular quality and to the way it's affecting you, to the soul-making sense it evokes, this honing of attention will tend to draw out and strengthen those very qualities.

These are a few approaches to explore, but I'd also encourage you to discover your own methods as you continue working with this dynamic.

This is one of the arts, actually, especially for people who've done a lot of emptiness practice. You learn to modulate the fading. And that's in my book somewhere. So you can practice so that things really just disappear and fade, and you rest in deep emptiness. But what becomes even more of the art, once you've done that, is learning to just take the foot off the pedal a little bit.

In a way, that's what tantric practice is—playing at this edge of form and dissolving of form in emptiness. It's really a matter of learning to hold it right there in the middle, where everything is super insubstantial and holy, but formed, yet very insubstantial and translucent. So that's a real skill, to hold it that way.

Having said all that, let me add something completely different. I don't think this is quite what you're talking about, Padraig, but I'll mention it anyway. Sometimes what can happen when working with an image is there it is, very formed and beautiful and everything. And then, for all kinds of different reasons, the image sort of dissolves, but we're left with the essence of the image.

So, for example, in that vague example I gave of an imaginal being or figure or angel or whatever, it's the way they move with such elegance and fluidity. Whatever it might mean to the perception for the figure to fade, the essence of elegance remains. So one might then be in a completely empty space that's condensed the essence of that image. There's not a form there, but there's a particular quality that one is then resting in.

I don't think that's quite what you're talking about, but I'm just mentioning it to everyone. I wouldn't do too much of that, but that's one of the possibilities that might happen. In a way, then, what that means is there's a sort of quasi-jhanic state—a jhana on elegance, whatever that might mean. It's the essence of elegance without a particular manifestation of elegance that belonged with the image.

So what this means, again, is that there's infinite possibility here of different states that can open up. The Buddha outlined eight jhanas—the very classical ones. Now, you might find yourself sliding into some of them with practice, because of what we said about the energy body harmonizing and samadhi being available.

And so you might find something like what I've just described, a sort of essence of some quality—could be nobility or courage. What does that mean? It's just space. There's nothing but space, but it's permeated with this essence of some value or virtue or something like that.

So that's a possibility. There's the retaining of the form with all its particulars and complexities and nuances and subtleties. And then there's another possibility where there's an imaginal being, but it's a more universal being. So, for example, Quan Yin. Sometimes there might be a figure and it turns into something more universal. It's still a figure with a form, but it's Quan Yin.

What you find with, let's say, Quan Yin, is she doesn't have that much of a personality. She's compassionate and she's beautiful and divine and all that. But some of the particulars have faded. So not just with the emptiness thing, but there are different kinds of ways that things can sort of relatively fade. All those would be fruitful meditations—all those categories, whether it's jhanic, whether it's this essence of a quality, whether it's a sort of universalized deity in figure, or whether it's a really particularized, very unique image.

This is some of the ways things can open up. What we're focusing more on is the first one—just the sort of what we've been talking about with images, with particulars and uniquenesses.

"Can I just add something to what you said? Because it might be a universal image that becomes particularized for you, so I just want to include that."

Yes, thank you. So there are all kinds of shades here, aren't there? Even if you go into the jhanas—the eight—and it's really good to get them really clear, then you realize actually you can mix them in ways that seem to contradict the rules. You can bring in other qualities and mix metta with the sixth jhana and stuff like that.

So things are never as discrete as they appear in textbooks. All kinds of fluidities can happen.

Because it might be a universal image that becomes particularized for you, so just want to include that.

Yes, so thank you. There are all kinds of shades here, aren't there? Even if you go into the jhanas—if you really go into the jhanas, the eight—it's really good to get them clear. Then you realize actually you can mix them in ways that seem to contradict the rules and bring in other qualities, mixing metta with the sixth jhana and such. Things are never as discrete as they appear in textbooks. All kinds of fluidities can happen.

I think one of the arts of practice, though, is to know what is happening and make that differentiation. It's not so much that this should happen rather than that, but "Ah, this is the flavor now," like that chef I was talking about. When I add that spice, then... aha, that's the difference. When I add it then, it's different. Or now this mixture is just like this. That's part of the art—this refinement.

Anyway, that's more than you bargained for, but please.

"Could a shade of that or one of those things... I sometimes feel like I can feel that sometimes an image shows up more as its particularities and then it fades more to its energy body. So I'm feeling my energy body and it's..."

Yes, so you're saying that sometimes working with an image, there's a sense that the image fades a little bit, but what's left is the sense of energy body, either just in oneself or the relationship of energy bodies. The energy body is still distinct. So what's imaginal has gone to energetic.

That's fine and lovely. I think if that's always what happens, you're going to... it won't have the full richness of possibility. So again, you get this kind of navigational possibility at any time. You can even—you'll probably find in time—sometimes just lean it that way if you want. Let's go to just the energy of what's happening and kind of resonate with that, or feel the mutual effect of energies or the mutual interaction of energies or what it does here.

That's fine. It's a conscious navigating, conscious leaning. It's great. But in that, a lot of the other particulars have gone from the image—the particular kind of beauty, for instance, or what touches you in the soul. It touches you in the energy, maybe, but shades of emotion, etc. So it's a choice, and it's great, and it's a great thing to kind of play with. But in the context of what we're doing, if you want the whole availability of everything, I probably would make sure I'm not doing that kind of thing all the time, or even most of the time. It's just one of the possibilities.

Does that help? Great.

"Yes, a follow-up question to what you were saying about discerning different states or different qualities. I find I can discern them as like A, B, or C, but I don't know what they are. Is that just a question of patience?"

Which different states are you talking about, then?

"I cannot articulate it even to myself. I just know, oh, that's interesting, that's different, and I'm having a really hard time..."

But are you talking about something with images or something where the images have faded and it's more of a sort of space or a state?

I don't know how important it is for everyone to be able to put everything into words—or as much, you know. Maybe that's just people who try and teach or something like that. But there is something about trying. I remember being in group interviews and people just in a state—just a lot of rapture or the first jhana or something. "It's impossible to describe. It's impossible. There's just no words for it whatsoever."

And it's like, "Oh, go on, just try a little bit." Once you start just throwing some words at something, you'll get some that's not quite right, that's right... "Oh, that's right!" And then someone might help you: "You mean..." "Yeah, yeah, that's good." And it starts to crystallize.

What we want is—part of the trying a little bit, you don't... it's not like the be-all and end-all—but the actually trying starts to... here's the mystery of it: the actual trying starts to shape things more. It starts to... they start to contrast more and you get more refinement of distinction and discernment.

"I find that's what I've been doing, different words and seeing what they resonate. And sometimes I think, oh yeah, that's that."

That's beautiful. There's an infinite number of words. There are, especially if you start adding Greek and things. So I wouldn't tie yourself in knots about this. It's not so much "Am I able to describe accurately?" It's more like "Can I refine my capacity to differentiate and discern?" That's actually part of this practice. It's a part of any practice, whether it's emptiness, whether it's jhanic, whether it's imaginal.

Sometimes what happens, let's say in an emptiness practice, what I've described with Papañca...

Things fade, and because there isn't yet the discernment, everything fades. It feels like nothing is happening. But actually, there is something still happening. What is this something that continues? Well, space is still here, for example. So there is indeed something that's happening. Or perhaps space fades. Well, what's still here then?

Why am I emphasizing all this? Because this capacity to discern is actually crucial. If I can't discern—let's say at that level where everything fades—then actually I won't be able to go any deeper. I just get stuck in a kind of pretty nice soup, but I can't take it any further. I won't reach the unfabricated; I won't discover other realms. I know people who hang out in that state for years and years and years. I mean, that's a choice or whatever, but partly it depends on this discernment that allows further movement.

Now, if we talk about eros, part of what eros does in relation to... I realized this morning—sorry, I realized that I didn't finish a sentence earlier. So there was a smaller definition of eros, and the larger definition encompasses much more.

That smaller definition is just the beginning. But once eros is allowed to do its thing—which means impregnate images and generate and create, discover shades and push the logos—once it's involved in the eros-psyche-logos dynamic and that movement is happening, then all of that is implied when we say "eros." You understand? So when we speak of eros, this entire process is contained within that word.

Part of this eros-psyche-logos process, as it unfolds, is making more and more discernment. Here's my beloved other, my image, and as I said, the eros wants more. One of the ways it finds, creates, discovers—creates slash discovers—more is actually by making more discernments and delineations.

Instead of seeing just "oh, it's just a human being, you know, just another one of those," there are infinite discernments and shades of the imaginal faces you can embody, infinite theophanies—faces of divinity that you can be. So there's something about discernment and differentiation, both perceptual, sensible, and conceptual, that goes hand in hand with eros. It's part of that whole unfolding, part of revealing the beauty of what's happening.

One more little thing. I was talking with someone today about whether we need to be able to describe everything. Sometimes you don't need to. And sometimes with images... well, part of the inexhaustibility of images is that you won't be able to describe them fully. The very process of differentiating and describing is part of what generates more. So you're never going to reach that point where you can say, "Now I've summed it up completely."

And part of what's actually beautiful that can happen between human beings—relating to Roxanne's question the other day about working in dyads with this kind of material or with others—is when you have an image that you begin to share. Maybe you feel, "I've just been completely inarticulate about that, I haven't captured it somehow." But there's a magic in human communication, and in the imaginal as well. You can start to say something in the most clumsy, inefficient way, and I sense the image—I pick it up, or it sparks an image in me. So don't worry too much about perfect articulation.

Have I answered your question? Okay, very good.

"I was just wondering, in the same way that we're talking about articulating different states, I was just wondering about movement."

"Yeah, sometimes I definitely feel like moving."

Several people have expressed this same question: can a concept become an image? This is a really important inquiry to explore.

Let me address this directly. Yes, absolutely—a concept can become an image. In fact, this is one of the beautiful possibilities we're working with. A concept might begin as something quite abstract, quite mental, but through our engagement with it, through our sensitivity and openness, it can transform into something much more rich, more multidimensional, more imaginal.

Think about how this might happen. You might start with a concept—perhaps the concept of compassion, or freedom, or even something like justice. Initially, it might feel quite dry, quite intellectual. But as you stay with it, as you open your sensitivity to it, it can begin to take on qualities that move beyond the purely conceptual. It might develop a sense of presence, of energy, of particular qualities that you can feel in your being. Colors might emerge, or textures, or a sense of movement. It might even begin to take on a more personified form.

This is part of what makes the imaginal so rich and accessible. We don't need to wait for dramatic visions or elaborate mythological figures to appear. Even our most everyday concepts can become gateways into the imaginal realm when we approach them with the right kind of sensitivity and openness.

The key is in how we relate to the concept. Are we just thinking about it, analyzing it, staying at that mental level? Or are we allowing ourselves to feel into it more deeply, to sense what it might evoke in terms of energy, presence, and meaning? When we make that shift, when we open that sensitivity, concepts can absolutely blossom into images that carry all the transformative power of soul-making.

So yes, definitely explore this. Notice when concepts arise in your practice, and experiment with opening to them in this more receptive, more feeling way. You might be surprised at how readily they transform into something much more alive and nourishing.

Absolutely. Or another way of saying it is a concept gets soulful for us. It could be beauty—again, it's a kind of abstract thing—or it could be just a logos, a conceptual framework. Several people have mentioned this, and I can't remember some examples now, but absolutely, it's possible.

Someone was talking about the concept of evolution, biological evolution of species, and how that as a concept actually can become very enriched and multidimensional and very fertile. So a concept can, absolutely.

"Because when I was working with... I had the concept of respect, because that's something very important. But then when I wanted to work with it, it would be helpful to choose an object, an image of a physical object, a tree or something, to work, to deepen it."

Maybe and maybe not, you know. So again, I would let the soul-making be what navigates you. So it might be, I just have this idea of respect, and I don't really have any particular image or object that goes with it, but I can feel it working on the soul. I feel the resonance, the beauty of it, and that's working. I don't need to do anything—I just let that stew and let myself be touched by it. If images come, great. If they don't, great. It's already become a soul-making object, you might say. So that's really wonderful.

"Actually, it relates to what she was saying about the movements. I was thinking about sound. We were playing with freaking sounds in a hall, and we don't usually do that outside, like holding or making noises. But I wonder if you can use that in the same way that you use movement, or listening to sound, too, to create the soul."

Absolutely. Again, there's just not time. That was one of the things I was thinking of offering you, is that kind of thing. We may or may not get to it. But yes, anything can. Basically, anything at all can become infused with soul, can become sensed with soul.

So it's making sounds, listening to sounds, and there's a whole mystery here. Look, we have a voice. What happens with our voice, what gets communicated, all the mystery of communication and kindness and insight and ideas and beauty and connection—it's happening through the larynx and the throat, and there's mystery there.

So even just the sense of taking up the mysterious sense of this vocal capacity. And again, maybe it's vocalizing that allows you to connect with that. Maybe it's being quiet, just similar as not moving and letting the energy body move that puts you in touch with that. Does that make sense?

But yes, try it. Try all of it. And sound, certainly—I've shared lots of images where birds and things become infused with a soul-making sense, and the sound becomes imaginable in all kinds of ways, interacting with the body and beautiful things.

So the possibilities are literally endless, I think. Just open the doors and play, and see.

"Just a simple question..."

Did you consider using the term "icon" for an imaginal image instead of "imagination"?

Yes, I have used it. I think I mentioned it once in the hall, in contrast to narrative image. Essentially, it's the same thing. An icon is an image, and anything can become an icon in the sense that we're using the word "imaginal image." Absolutely.

There's actually a whole set of talks newly on the website—eight or nine parts of one really long talk called "Between Icon and Idol," using Greek terms again. It's just another way of saying image.

Is that somehow related to French theology? Jean-Luc Marion?

Yes, the way he uses it—as far as I can understand him, and some of these French theologians can be quite challenging—there's this infinite depth of the icon and our participation in that. Absolutely.

I perhaps avoid the term because of the word "iconoclast." Some people who consider themselves iconoclasts are actually... Marion contrasts icon with idol, I-D-O-L. We're interested in destroying what's reified, flat, lacking depth. Some who call themselves iconoclasts—or maybe not iconoclasts so much as just anti-spiritual or anti-sacred, opposing imaginal figures that are sacred—are actually setting up other idols under the name of iconoclasm, without realizing it.

What would you say about destroying the idea of an idol?

Iconoclasm can become a cultural term for someone who has the courage to crash through things that have become ossified or falsely holy. But some people who might see themselves that way, or are seen that way, might actually be setting up idols under the name of iconoclasm. They're setting up other idols—things that don't have depth or sacredness, but to which they're still attached.

I have a related question. Catherine mentioned yesterday that you don't really like the word "imaginal," and you prefer "sensing with soul," which is a new term. I find it very helpful because, as you've said many times, it's not just about images. But images get so emphasized here that I got confused—I'm more tactile. When I tapped into sensing or embodied awareness, my whole body became alive, without trying to impose the need for an image, even subtly.

Absolutely. As I said at the beginning, if there were a way to instantaneously download everything, you could have used that right from the start, and probably others could as well. It's wonderful that you've got it—that opening of possibility. It's a matter of timing when there are so many different people at different places.

Even though we try to say an image doesn't necessarily mean something visual, it's embedded in the word and hard to escape. Maybe another retreat will start with that idea—sensing with soul—and take it from there.

I think we need to end. Let's have a bit of quiet together.

CHAPTER 160

Wisdom and Desire

Rob Burbea · 52 min

> *In this profound exploration, Rob Burbea examines how our relationship with desire is perhaps the most significant force in determining our being, life, and experience. He challenges the traditional Buddhist approach of simply letting go of desire, asking whether we can truly live, love, or create without it. Drawing on his soulmaking dharma framework, Burbea distinguishes between craving—which contracts and causes suffering—and eros, a desire for greater contact, connection, and intimacy that can open into imaginal realms when met with wisdom and skill.*
>
> *Burbea argues that most practitioners are drawn to the dharma not merely to reduce suffering, but by love for the beauty, mystery, and sacred dimensions of practice itself. He introduces the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, showing how skillful engagement with desire can endlessly create and discover more beauty and depth in what we love, rather than seeking satisfaction through horizontal accumulation. The talk offers practical guidance for transforming craving into eros through working with the energy body, expanding intentions, recognizing the imaginal nature of experience, and cultivating humility and reverence.*
>
> *This teaching is part of Burbea's radical reimagining of Buddhist practice, suggesting that the ultimate goal is not the elimination of desire but the opening of "gates of sacredness" through skillful relationship with the full spectrum of human longing and love.*

There is nothing more significant, more powerful, more central in the determination of our being, our life, our experience—nothing more significant, powerful, central—than how we are with desire.

How we are with desire, our relationship to it, our ideas about it, our logos about it, our skill or lack thereof, shape our self. They make us, they shape us this way or that—how we are, what we do, how we seem, the very sense of our being. They shape our life. That relationship shapes our life and shapes our world, opening it or closing it, coloring it this way or that. Desire is a maker of worlds.

Whenever there is perception, whenever there's experience, there's actually desire. We can't get away from this forever. We're always making something because there's always desire. What, though, are we going to make? What can we make? What freedom do we have to make this or that?

So this whole question of desire—what does it mean to open this up as a question, as an exploration, and bring wisdom in relationship to desire? Sometimes we're a bit too simple with this. So desire is something just to let go of, to get rid of, the quieting of desire, and that's what the path is about.

Can I do anything, anything without desire? Anything at all? The simplest: can I go to the toilet without desire? Can I practice the path? Can I live my life and have a full life? Can I love without desire? Certainly, can I be in an intimate sexual relationship without desire? Can I work well without desire? Is there art, is there creativity without desire?

On every level of our being, from the most complex and involved to the most subtle, I cannot get away from this, and I cannot get away from what it's asking of me. I can try to bring a simplifying answer to it, and maybe that reassures something in my heart and my mind. But if I'm awake, I very soon bump into the rub that that simple answer or conceptual structure doesn't actually fit my life. It doesn't actually work with the range and the power and the subtlety that we need.

So what is your relationship with desire? That's the big question. What are your ideas about desire? Maybe some of them will be conscious, some of them will be unconscious.

Sometimes in Buddha Dharma we can have this view: desire is not good. The path is to end desire somehow. And desire is always connected with vedanā. So desire is always kind of chasing pleasant or trying to get rid of unpleasant. But is that really the limit of what desire is? That it's something in relationship to the tonality of pleasant and unpleasant, either chasing the pleasant or avoiding the unpleasant? Certainly sometimes it is. Does that really capture the fullness of the human psyche's relationship and motivations of desire?

Is the only desire that's kind of acceptable a desire for a decrease in suffering? So how are we thinking about desire? How are we delineating desires in our understanding? We've got to have some desire because otherwise we wouldn't come to retreat, wouldn't book a retreat, wouldn't come. Maybe the only desire that's good is the desire to end desire or the desire to decrease suffering. So we can kind of have some discernment about desire, but we put it into two camps. And everything else is—it would be better if I didn't have it, but somehow I do have it, and I kind of arrange my life with it.

Do we live like that? Do we really live, if I look at my life, do I live in a way that follows this discrimination of "the only good desire is a desire to decrease my suffering or the suffering in the world"? I mean, there is that desire and that might have a lot of

power, but is that really—are we really living like that? I'm just talking about honest and discerning self-reflection now. So I might have an ideational structure, I might have got it from Dharma teachings or somewhere else.

Is that really what's going on? Is that really what's happening in my life? Is there some kind of cognitive dissonance here? Do we need a bigger and perhaps more complex psychology around this thing called desire, this force called desire?

And what are the asks? What are the demands? We are born with this force called desire operating in our life. What is being asked of us here? Is it just the quietening of that? Is it just to put everything else aside as much as we can and just have the desire for the decrease of suffering?

Can we begin to discern different kinds of desire and different kinds of relationship with desire and different kinds of ideas about desire? So we talk about—I'll get back to this soon—but we talk about craving and eros and discerning between them. And can we discern between those two? Can we guide, if we're stuck in craving and the contraction of that and the pain of that and the tightness of that—can we actually, is it possible to allow that to open up, to skillfully guide it so it becomes eros, something much more beautiful, fruitful, open-ended, not contracted, fecund, in the best possible way? Do we have that skill?

So there are questions of discernment here and questions of skill I want to come back to. But let's again pause on the discernment thing.

Most of you here, after you've been—if you come to more than, I don't know, three retreats in your life—you probably love something about all this path and practice. What is it that you love? And what is it that you want? And is it really, again, is it really just to suffer less?

In a way, it's a little ironic or paradoxical or perhaps not fully honest that we have a terminology that talks always, with all its brilliance through the Four Noble Truths, about reducing suffering. And so we've probably got—my contention is we have all kinds of things going on that we desire and what we really love and why we show up here and are willing to sit through all the difficulties and walk through all the difficulties. Is it just because we want to reduce suffering?

There are plenty of people who relate to meditation like that, but usually they go to an evening course and learn a few techniques to suffer less. And that's great. And that's really important. Learning how to suffer less is really important.

But what is it that you're really wanting now? I mean, it includes that. But what else? What draws you here? Not just to this retreat.

Is it not that you are in love with a kind of beauty about all this? There's something about sitting this way and doing what you do that is beautiful to you. That you are in love with some mystery, some perfume of mystery that comes with all of this. And that in itself is not really about reducing suffering.

Is it not that you love love? And you love the goodness of heart and the beautiful qualities of heart. It's not just a functional relationship. When we're in love with practice, it's not just a functional relationship. "I come so that I can learn some things to reduce suffering." Yes, but more.

How many people have told me over the years, "Boy, when I heard the Heart Sutra for the first time, I didn't know what the hell it was talking about, but something—it's like, I want that." There's something ignited in the heart.

Many of you have this or talk about emptiness. "I don't quite understand." What's attracting you there? Is it just that, oh, that sounds like a very good idea that I could reduce my suffering by understanding that? Good, okay. That's not what happens. Something else comes into flame.

And I would contend, actually, the way I think about emptiness is you can understand it at lots of different levels. The beginning levels of emptiness, or the less profound levels, are very much about different ways of seeing that reduce suffering. As it gets deeper, it becomes much more about mystery, and I would say sacredness. There's a kind of beauty and mystical sense that opens up in the deep reaches of exploration of emptiness. Yes, that has an effect on suffering, but that's almost not what's driving a person to practice at that level and to be drawn at that level.

And yet somehow we don't quite acknowledge that or recognize that fully and give it its due and its place. And we just keep talking about reducing suffering.

Do you recognize that when you show up here and practice diligently, devoting yourself to practice over the years, you inevitably develop fantasies—multiple fantasies woven together—of practice, of path, of yourself as practitioner? These fantasies encompass the devotion to the tradition you walk in, the stream that supports, nourishes, and inspires you. They include practice itself, awakening, the Buddha, the teachers, the lineage of teachers. All of this has become imaginal for you to some degree.

And all that is beautiful. All that is, to some degree at least, erotic for you. There's image already there. Yet somehow we don't really acknowledge this. We don't say, "Hey, maybe this is significant." We don't have words for it, don't point it out. We just keep talking about reducing suffering.

So there are differentiations here—we'll return to this. And with these differentiations come the asks: What are the skills and arts that I can develop? What can I open up in relation to this whole complex mystery of desire?

Can you let go? Have you practiced that? This thing you're obsessed with, this papañca, this person you want who maybe doesn't want you—whatever it is—can you let go? We talk a lot about this in Buddha Dharma: let it go, drop it. How's your skill at doing that? Can you let go of those big attachments? Do you have enough practice with that? This is one of the foundational skills of all soul making. If you can't do this, perhaps developing this capacity needs to come first for many people.

And then, what about letting go at much more subtle levels? Yes, there's the big papañca obsession—this thing you want, this person you want. But then there's the whole possibility of letting go in meditation at increasingly subtle levels. Things you wouldn't even consider as objects to release, wouldn't even recognize as craving. The beauty of this movement into more and more subtle letting go, and what it opens up—yes, freedom from suffering, but much, much more. The beauty and mystery that opens up in relation to emptiness and fabrication and the unfabricated.

How is your journey with that subtlety, with letting go at increasingly refined levels? You might be listening and thinking, "That's so much to work on." How about seeing it differently: there are treasures everywhere. You are in the middle of the most glorious banquet buffet, and you say, "Oh, it's terrible. There's all this food I have to eat." Someone tells you, "It will be there. This buffet will keep getting replenished longer than you live." And you respond, "That's just terrible." But it's beautiful! I will never get to explore all the possibilities—partly because the territory keeps opening up more and more from a neuropsychological standpoint. And that's wonderful.

So there's that journey: letting go of gross attachments, then this exploration of increasingly subtle levels of meditative inquiry, revealing exquisite beauty and profundity.

Then there's another ask: Do you dare? Do you dare to follow the desire for what you love, even if it brings dukkha? This again relates to shaping our life. What happens to me, my life, my very being, if I don't? If I close that down and say, "Oh, that's dukkha. I might start judging myself if I don't get it, or I'll probably get hurt." What happens to my personhood, my being, my life?

Think about the Buddha's journey in that mythical story—prepared to endure tremendous suffering. Again, it's spoken of and conceived as his wanting the end of suffering. Or think of an artist's journey, the dedication, the frustration. Do you dare to follow the desire for what you love? There can be dukkha in that. Actually, there will be dukkha in that.

This is the question at the heart of it all: what is our relationship with desire really about?

There's a vast range of skills we could explore here, though we don't have time to cover everything now. We've discussed much of this territory before. In fact, we devoted an entire retreat called "The Alchemy of Desire" to exploring these different aspects of desire. That material is available on the website, along with another extensive series called "Eros Unfettered," which delves deep into these subtleties.

One practice we developed that surprised everyone with how accessible it was, we called the OCD practice—short for "opening the current of desire." Without going into detail now, this isn't about eros as we're discussing it here, nor even primarily about the imaginal. It's about the energy of desire itself and how we can cultivate a different, more skillful meditative relationship with that energy. This approach opens desire in completely unexpected ways, bringing fruits we never could have imagined would flow from such a relationship. The possibilities are endless, and while that material exists, we don't have time to explore it now.

But here's the crucial question for our work with the imaginal: We have this phenomenon we're calling eros—a particular kind of desire that we contrast with craving. Can I recognize the difference? Can I discern when something is craving versus when it's eros? And further still—is it possible to learn how to transform craving itself? Can I open up that pain, that contraction and constriction, that sense of being blocked, and allow it to flower into eros with all its inherent beauty?

This is a genuine skill, and like all skills, it must be learned through practice. How do we learn it? By making mistakes, as we discussed in Chris's question last night. We have to fall down. We have to get burnt. How else can we truly know the difference between craving and eros until we actually experience getting burnt? "Oh, that's what happens. Ouch." But it's okay—it's all part of the learning.

We're playing with fire here. If you want to engage with this territory, you must understand that you're playing with fire, and yes, you will get burnt. That's perfectly fine. You'll survive. We all can.

There's tremendous skill possible in all of this, and so much depends on developing these capacities. This is why I keep returning to this fundamental point: so much depends on our relationship with desire—our capabilities with desire, our ideas about desire. This particular fork in the road between craving and eros is especially crucial, because it determines what worlds are born, what selves emerge, what experiences become possible.

We can learn enormously. We can develop real mastery in this art. But we will never be complete masters of eros. It's bigger than us, like all the gods—always bigger than us. This calls for a particular kind of humility.

So yes, there's mastery to be developed, artistry and subtlety that are genuinely important. And simultaneously, there must be humility in our relationship to these forces. Eros, emotion, the imaginal—they're all larger than we are. And thank goodness for that! Would you really want to master all the mysteries completely? Would they still be mysteries if you were their master? Don't we always want something bigger than ourselves? Something we can never fully wrap our minds around?

Eamon and I were talking last night, and he made me laugh when he said—I don't know if he got the same response from the group when he mentioned it—but he observed, "Eros Psychologos... no one talks like that." And it's absolutely true.

Why all this Greek terminology? Yes, it's true—what the hell are we doing? But that's precisely the point: no one talks like this, or rather, no one thinks like this. We have a poverty of differentiation, a poverty of discernment. When we don't discern something called eros as separate from craving or other kinds of desire, we lack the language and conceptual framework to guide and support this endless and amazing opening. We keep putting everything back into the same box: "It's just desire. I like it. I want it." This doesn't open the avenues.

I don't know why the Greek emerges—I have no idea. But the differentiation itself is part of the world birthing, part of what supports that. Again, we're back to logos and all that. So yes, no one talks like that, but that's part of the problem: we don't have the language.

As I've said, look—it's already here. In the Dharma, we have this very simplistic way of talking about desire and letting it go and what the path is about. But just look, take some honest self-reflection as I talked about before. Is that really what's going on? Is there not already eros and already the imaginal air? And yet we don't have the language. That's why the language matters. This language will help to support and make sense of and open up these worlds.

We want differentiations, discernments, subtle nuances of recognition and ideas—and therefore words to communicate with each other—that support soul-making. We don't have that in the culture, in the wider culture and even in the Dharma culture. You might say, "Oh, that's fine, I'm not really interested in soul-making, that's fine." But there's a cost.

Consider how we think about desire in this simplistic view. We think it's either just ego or just chasing the pleasant on one hand—that's unskillful, and we try to get rid of that—or it's skillful, it's kusala, which would be like desire for metta and desire to end suffering. And that's it. There's this kind of bifurcation. With the skillful desire, we can say, "Hey, don't overdo it, don't push too hard." That bifurcation is actually great, that differentiation. But do we not need some more?

If I make just that bifurcation, those are the choices presented to me in my life. Either I'm just saying, "Yeah, I can't really hack the whole path, otherwise I'd be a monk or a nun. So really I'm kind of making a pact with—or just putting up with the fact, the recognition—yeah, I have some ego, and I kind of laugh at it. Self, ha ha ha, self does the silly stuff. And yeah, it would be great if I wasn't so into the senses and sense pleasure, but, you know..."

That conceptual structure—that over-simplistic conceptual structure—gives me choices that don't even make sense of my life.

So, eros. Catherine already defined it. Like I think I did with the energy body, maybe we can make a kind of narrower definition and a wider, fuller definition.

Catherine already gave the narrow definition. Among desire—which is a big, big complex thing—we make one delineation of this thing, this kind of desire that we're going to call eros. Then we make a further delineation between what we might say is just the basic narrow definition of eros, and then we'll open that up.

Basic narrow definition of eros—a small definition, if you like. Catherine already said it: any desire or wanting for more contact, connection, intimacy, opening to and opening and touching something—the beloved, the erotic other. Any wanting more of that.

So that's it. It's a very basic definition. The thing that's so significant is what happens to that wanting more. This arises for us as human beings.

We want more contact, more intimacy, more touching, more opening. But what happens when this natural desire meets our limited perceptions?

If I remain trapped within a narrow view of the beloved—this thing I desire and want more contact with—then it becomes flat, defined, confined to a box. This real self wants that real thing in a real world in real time. I want more of it. And I'm stuck in that conceptual prison, unconsciously assuming this is simply how reality is.

When this rigid conceptual framework doesn't budge, when I want more but see only flatness, then I must either suppress the desire—take the proverbial cold shower—or pursue it compulsively. I might pressure the other person, disregard the consequences of my pursuit, or endlessly chase similar objects horizontally. Flying from holiday to holiday, consuming more and more, regardless of what it does to the earth. I remain trapped in flatness, where more can only mean more of the same. The more is only horizontal.

But what if I'm not stuck? What if intelligence awakens? What if the imaginal opens up?

Then this eros wanting more begins to discover more by creating and discovering richness within the beloved itself. The desire starts to perceive not just this flat, boxed thing, but multiple dimensions. If the eros includes the imaginal sense, then this wanting more begins to create and discover depth in what I love. It becomes richer. I perceive more faces, more dimensions there.

You—if it is you I love—become alive to me with multiple images and depths and beauties. What a profound difference this makes! I receive the more because more is genuinely there for me. More delight, more wonder, more mystery, more faces, more complexity, more beauty. I get the more.

But then eros wants even more. And if this movement isn't blocked, the sense of the beloved grows exponentially—more faces, more dimensions, more mystery. If blocked, I'm forced back to horizontal seeking. If unblocked, the sense of things simply opens up, revealing inexhaustible depths.

This is such a crucial pivot. If I cling to the idea that imagination is mere nonsense—that I might have an image of someone, but that's not reality, this person is simply like that and that's it—then even when the imaginal arises from the power of my eros, my logos rejects the imaginal perception. I'm thrown back into prison, and the energy must go somewhere else horizontally.

But when this repeated opening happens, beauties upon beauties and mysteries unfold gradually. Not necessarily all at once, but through this repeated expansion of my sense of the beloved, something profound begins to occur.

As I move in and out of these wondrous, beautiful, touching perceptions—so different from conventional seeing—this flowing movement gradually transforms something deeper: my thinking about reality itself, about what a person is, not just who this particular beloved is, but what a human being truly is.

In this questioning—who am I, what is my perception, what is this eros—the world begins to look different. Through this repeated movement in and out, this continuous striking of the soul, something fundamental shifts. My soul is touched deeply, and at some point within this process, the logos itself—the very idea of what the world is, what reality is, what the cosmos is, what the self is, what humanity is—begins to open.

So the logos grows, not just the eros. Not just the psyche in terms of imaginal perception expands, but the idea grows as well. And as the idea becomes richer, the sense of things becomes richer. Eros becomes even more inflamed, and the whole dynamic can simply flourish endlessly. This is what we call the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—potentially infinite, endlessly fertile, endlessly creating and discovering more beauty and more wonder.

As this process unfolds, if we return to Amon as our example, more elements of the lattice become illuminated. More and more aspects of the constellation light up. The experience itself becomes more fully imaginable. This dynamic ignites those different elements we've been discussing, but it also requires them to support the entire process. It needs a sense of beauty, it needs ideational structure, it needs all of these components working together.

We need sensitivities, permissions, understandings, ideational structures, openness of perception, awarenesses—we need all of this to support us in not becoming trapped in the belief that a real self desires a real thing in a real world in real time, with all the havoc that such entrapment creates. In our globalized world, with the technological

power we possess and the spread of consumerist culture alongside a flat metaphysics that doesn't allow for this kind of opening and depth, we see enormous havoc being created.

People are taught they can have their desires, they're given economic opportunity and availability, yet there's no metaphysics or conceptual structure that supports anything beyond the rampant destructive consequences of endless consumption—because the worldview is flat and can only lead to more, more, more in a very real way. What we observe personally in individual relationships, we can see mirrored globally.

I don't know that we need to become Greek, but I think we somehow need these concepts, this understanding.

Practice-wise, everything feeds everything else here. Once again, everything is dependent arising. Here I am—perhaps in meditation or in daily life—and I keep receiving images of someone I really care for. I want that person. There's eros present, and they come to me through images. This could be any imaginal figure or any object in the world where eros exists in the small sense.

At this crucial point, eros in the small sense—this desire for more—can move in either direction. It could become craving if it gets stuck in certain ways, or it can open into the larger sense and ignite the whole imaginal constellation more and more. So what supports this opening? How can I help it move toward eros rather than collapse into craving, open into eros rather than contract into craving?

One key insight is that all these nodes, all these elements feed each other. The more fully I bring my whole energy body into relationship with whatever I'm engaging—whether it's a person, an object, or something in my imagination—the more this supports the opening from craving into eros rather than remaining stuck in craving. This is genuinely good news, because it means there are many things we can do.

Generally speaking, what happens with craving is contraction—contraction of the mind around the object, contraction of the self-sense, contraction in the energy body. This is not so with eros as it opens in the full sense. Because everything is mutually dependent, we can work with opening the energy body more fully, engaging the whole body in relationship to this image or whatever we're working with.

What does this mean practically? It means knowing this object, being in relationship with my whole body, my whole energy body. This kind of embodied engagement supports the opening of eros rather than the collapsing into craving.

Now, this process will happen many times, and inevitably we will fall off the bicycle, we will get burned. But there are always ways of reopening, of returning to this dynamic. That's one approach.

Another support—and we could probably list countless others—is this fullness of intention.

"I want you. I want us to be in relationship. I want to have a baby with you. I want to go on holiday there. I want this. I want that. I want it to happen." And yes, very often that want can become oriented toward a real self in a real world. What happens if maybe that intention is there—there's a kind of small intention—but can I open up to this fullness of intention?

When I want you, or I want anything to happen in a relationship, what is it that I most deeply want? What if that could actually be—what I want is the soul-making? It seems to be you, but what I most deeply desire is the soul-making and the sacredness and the endless opening of that. Does that make sense? This isn't necessarily easy. But what happens if I can open up the intentions? What do I really want?

Sometimes people say, "I want—okay, it's not that thing or that person, but what I want is the aliveness or the juiciness that happens in their presence." Great, but I would say don't even stop there. You actually probably want something even wider and deeper than that. You want the fullness of soul-making, and that can be an intention.

This middle way of the imaginal again—where a real self wants a real thing in real time, real world—can I see that this that I'm wanting, or this that I have an image of happening and then think I would really like that to happen, is already happening? It's already happening. We are already making love in the imaginal realm if that's what I want. It's already, always happening.

And that recognition—that's actually to do with the eternality, sorry I skipped that—but that does something. I don't need to make this happen; it's already happening. It's a part of the imaginal sensibility. I recognize something, and that does something different to the nature of my desire. It opens up craving to eros; it helps to do that.

The one I meant to say was this "neither real nor not real." Can I find ways of playing with that? And again, actually get the sense. So it might come from emptiness. It might come from just, again, with these elements, we notice things. So if you look at—it's almost like you notice the fact that an image is neither real nor not real. It's not that you have to make it that. It's like if you just pay attention, you see, "Oh, yeah." Or when it's

reified, you just remind yourself of that possibility, and then it has that quality of feeling neither real nor not real. That does something to how much we need to concretize this desire.

Is all this making sense?

I mentioned last night in the Q&A—there's lots of expansions potentially happening here. The expansion of all the elements in what we're calling the lattice or the constellation, to more or less degrees. The expansion of eros, psyche and logos. And the expansion of the imaginal sense from just the object, or expansion to self, other and world. So again, if it's just the object and not the self that's imaginal—the real self but imaginal object—that also causes problems, causes contraction. So is it possible to actually just check: where has the imaginal sense gone and the eros gone? And actually, is it possible to just allow it to include self and world? That more space takes the pressure off, allows more fullness, more beauty, stops the concretized "I want this, I need to get it."

Another one: grace. Just recognizing the grace in the sense of the erotic imaginal starts to open the hardness of the craving. It's hard to feel grace and feel contracted in craving for something.

The ideas—again, if I'm stuck with a certain idea of "desire is bad," then there's going to be all this dissonance in my sort of "want it and it's bad" and I don't have any kind of idea or conceptual framework about what is possible here with this desire. And maybe there's self-judgment as well and it's like, "I shouldn't be having this." Mess, contraction, not desire. So what's the logos that's operating? Can I check that and see if it can open out in some way?

The sense of eternality—that's huge. I mentioned that just now. Always already happening.

Humility and reverence. These are challenging territories. Humility—for most of us, it's a charged word, or we carry only a small understanding of what it might mean. But if that starts to fill out, here's another expansion. Each of these ideas, each of these elements can also start growing in our soul. What is humility? What does it feel like? What does it look like? I might begin with only a small idea of that. As soul-making takes hold of the idea of humility, that starts to become rich and wide. And as that gets going, again, it becomes very hard to have a small, tight, rigid craving. Something is softened, something is opened.

Now, here's a slightly different tuner. Sometimes there's this desire for something, and that desire starts to collapse in a kind of union. In other words, we desire something, we move towards it—even in our imagination—and then we just melt with it,

which can be really lovely. That's a real option. But at that point—and some people define eros this way, as the desire for union, the desire towards oneness—that's not how we're defining it.

Many of these words are used in different ways, in different circles. We're saying eros preserves and needs a sense of twoness. It's in that erotic tension between the two that the whole imaginal can be born. If I collapse into it, it's wonderful and great and certain colors can open up, but it's a different experience than the erotic imaginal. There's something about preserving the twoness.

So it might be that what collapses the eros is simply a habit—perhaps a meditative habit or tendency—to just go to oneness. But eros needs two, and it actually creates more two. The same with the example of Amon—it will create more faces of the two. It preserves, creates, multiplies.

One last tuner for now. It's implicit in all I've said: the beloved other has elastic edges, soft and elastic edges. That's part of their mystery. It's part of their capacity to stretch. And because of that—because of both that sense of mystery and beyondness and their stretchability—that lets everything else be elastic. That's part of what eros is and does.

Someone wrote a note asking: Would you at some point specify what you mean by the fullness of image, or something being fully imaginal? Is the fully imaginal the goal of our practice, and what would be the other end, opposite of that range of more or less fully imaginal?

I don't know if the answer is already clear from what we've explored, but let me say a couple of things. Basically, eros and all these other elements—if eros is allowed to do what it wants to do, it wants to impregnate the psyche. It wants to enrich and complexify and deepen and widen what it beloves, its beloved other, and everything else, eventually. If it's allowed to do that, then what will happen is the object, the thing that we desire, will become more and more fully imaginal—by which we mean more and more of those elements will start igniting.

I didn't want to make it too much like "it is imaginal or it isn't"—too much of a black and white. Then people go, "Have I got it? Have I not got it?" Think of it more as a direction. You understand? Things can be more and more ignited because they're becoming more and more fully imaginal. Then we don't get so on-off about it.

Why? What is the goal of our practice? Is it for everything to become fully imaginal? Not necessarily. It's a mode of seeing. It's a mode of being in the world that comes and goes at times, I think. What's the point?

If you ask me to sum up in a sentence what's the point of all this, I would say: to open up the gates of sacredness. To open them wide and far and deep, more and more to expand the senses, the sense, the felt sense, the experiences of sacredness in our existence, in everything, any possibility. That's the point.

Now, we can do all that by, as Catherine was saying the other day, letting go of all desire in relation to objects. "I don't want anything but the unfabricated, that which is beyond all sense experience." There can be eros for that, and there can be a desire for that, and there's a certain kind of holiness that goes in that path. We can have that, absolutely. It's not either-or. You can have that whole movement and that kind of sacredness, and it's awesome.

But there are an infinite number of other kinds of sacredness that have to do with things and particulars—not the fading of things and particulars into universals, but things and particulars and angels and the world becoming angels. And that is endless.

So it's up to us what we want, but the purpose is this opening up of more and more of a sense of sacredness. And why? Well, either you want that or you don't, or you could say it's what soul wants. Soul wants to sense that way. That's what soul's about. And the range of that—whatever sense we have, "this is sacred"—it just opens that up more and more and more: the colors, the dimensions, the folds and angles of what that means. That's the point.

And for that, we need to speak in funny Greek words. No, we don't. But we need these discernments. No discernment, no opening of certain gates. So we need to make these differentiations of desire, differentiations, recognitions of how I'm thinking about it, what I'm allowing to be possible, making the discernments, and developing the particular skills or arts in relation to all these different avenues, doorways, and discernments.

CHAPTER 161

Soul Making Dharma (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 41 min

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea responds to foundational questions about soul-making dharma and its relationship to traditional Buddhist awakening. He explores the paradoxical nature of "create-discover" in imaginal practice, where experiences are simultaneously created by the practitioner and discovered as gifts of grace. The discussion addresses how soul-making practice relates to dukkha and healing, particularly the contemporary suffering of soullessness in modern life.*
>
> *Burbea examines different historical conceptions of awakening across Buddhist traditions, noting how each vision of awakening implies choosing a particular cosmos and understanding of self. He discusses the concept of "soul" as the organ of perceiving soulfully, capable of growth through practice. The session covers practical aspects of imaginal practice, including the delicate balance between intentional effort and receptive openness, and the role of the energy body in supporting soul-making experiences.*
>
> *Key themes include participation in perception, the elastic nature of concepts in dharma practice, and how soul-making addresses levels of suffering not fully addressed by traditional mindfulness or emptiness practices. This teaching offers both theoretical framework and practical guidance for integrating imaginal work with contemplative practice.*

Naomi began by raising a question about fullness of intention and working with all the elements that have been taught in this paradigm. She wanted to understand where this approach sits in relation to awakening - how it fits and how participation relates to awakening. She noted that there were aspects of what had been experienced that felt like what some people describe as aspects of awakening, though she understood that the logos of awakening is also fascinating territory.

Another participant wondered about the dynamic between creating and discovering in this work, and about the role of Logos as one of the stars in the constellation. They had a sense that there were times when something felt soul-making without having all the explicit frameworks in place.

There was also interest in the word and idea of "soul" itself - a request for some near synonyms or poetic alternatives to help understand this central concept.

One person shared that while they didn't have distinct memories from previous practice, they recalled moments when something really worked or clicked for them. They were aware of the emptiness of perception, of how it all works, yet these moments felt very much like what was being discussed. They sensed implications in the teachings about connecting experiences, but weren't quite grasping the full question they wanted to explore.

The inquiry touched on how we're naturally drawn toward moments of beauty and the sensing of the autonomy of another, even when we don't have these frameworks or vocabulary to understand what's happening.

Andrew raised a question about engaging with the energy body and working with the imaginal in practice. He drew a comparison with metta practice, noting that we don't simply wait around for loving-kindness to arise spontaneously. There's intentional cultivation involved, an effort required in practice. He wondered about this same dynamic with imaginal work - the balance between effort and settling back into simplicity. While the teachings mentioned we can't do imaginal practice all day long, and he'd noticed times when practice needed to settle into something more simple, he sensed that intentionality was still crucial. It's not just a matter of waiting passively for an image to arise.

Finally, there was a question about the teaching that "you love the image and the image loves you back." This reciprocal dynamic wasn't quite an exchange in the ordinary sense, but the questioner hadn't quite gotten their hands on what this mutual love actually meant in practice.

These questions wove together themes of intentionality in practice, the relationship between this work and traditional awakening, and the mysterious reciprocal dynamics that emerge in authentic imaginal engagement.

So where shall we begin? Perhaps with James' question about using the word "soul" and whether I can offer a poetic image for it. Actually, I would prefer not to, and there's a reason for this reluctance.

In this paradigm, in this teaching, we're not so much prescribing images. Whereas in other traditions or religions, you receive prescribed images—the Eucharist, Christ on the cross, whatever it might be, which is beautiful in its own way. But there's a kind of meta stance here, where images will be individual, created, discovered.

So while concepts, although an image will also be elastic and will evolve, for me, I feel tentative about prescribing or offering out images. Concepts seem like looser pointers in a direction that can then evolve.

One of the fundamental concepts about all this is that concepts need to be loose. They need to be elastic. There's a real tension between defining them too tightly and rigidly so that they can't grow, can't gain depth and meaning and width, on the one hand, and on the other hand, not bothering to delineate precisely and with discrimination between concepts so that there isn't much fruitfulness. There's this dance and tension between these poles.

Soul, almost more than any other concept we use, falls right in this space. But we could offer circular descriptions. Soul is, in one way, simply shorthand for a sense of soulfulness, with all that implies. But another way is to point to it in a more subjective sense, as it's usually used—you have a soul, or the soul has you.

What might it mean there? Again, it needs to remain very open, but circularly speaking, soul is the organ or the instrument of perceiving soulfully—perceiving in ways that are soul-making. The more we do this, the more that organ grows in its powers, its range, its capacities.

Seeing in ways that feel soul-making means engaging the eros, the beauty, the meaningfulness—all that eros-psyche-logos dynamic. Sensing in ways, whether internal or external, thinking in ways, relating to the body—the whole instrument becomes an organic, alive, multifaceted organ for soul-making perception in more ways than we're going to discover.

This leaves it very wide for me, but gives a sense of what it might be.

James offered a slightly cheeky follow-up: "If the word 'soul' didn't exist, do you have a sensible word you might use instead?"

Psyche.

Now, what happens in this growing of range and the kinds and depths and even modes of perceiving soulfully is that they are created and discovered. We discover them. Something happens.

There may be a word in English that means something like both created and discovered simultaneously—not partly created and partly discovered, not this bit created and that bit discovered, but something that somehow means both completely, in one. I don't know if there's such a word. Magic, perhaps, or I simply use "create/discover."

What this does for me is reflect the actual sense we have. Much of the language we use gives words to things that, if we just let this process happen, we'll naturally sense. A bit like the real/not-real phenomenon. Sometimes you ask someone working with an

image, "Does it feel real or not real?" And they'll say, "Well, kind of neither and both," and that's just natural—a natural evolution of the soul-making process. It's what we begin to notice and sense about soul-making perception.

The same is true for create-discover.

Because there's a sense that I am doing this—I am creating this. But there's also a sense that I'm discovering something, stumbling across something. Something was given to me.

This element, create-discover or magic, reflects both, or is designed to reflect both. As you practice, you'll notice this—and there's a word or phrase for it. Oh, this is characteristic of soul-making experiences, characteristic of sensing the soul. It's got this strange amalgam of the two.

But it's also intended as a guide or balance point. When I remember that this is an element, then I remember something of my participation in the creation and the discovery. This has to do with participation. And that does something that's connected to neither real nor not real. It does something to my whole relationship with what I'm perceiving, whether it's something in the world or another or something purely internal.

At first it seems to narrow things because we're saying, "Oh, not that, not that, this thing in the middle"—create-discover, or neither. But it's like the old phrase: narrow is the gate, narrow is the path, but then it opens. By virtue of going on that path, just for a while, it might feel constraining. "Well, what are they talking about, and why do I have to constrain it to that, and why can't I just feel it this way or that way?" It's all good, but there's something about this narrow gate in a lot of these things that then opens up way wider than either of the other two—which is "just what I create" or "just what I discover."

So it's something to remember occasionally in practice, and that remembering starts to shape my sense of what's going on. My sense of what's going on shapes my relationship with what's going on, and that determines what then is possible.

Some of these concepts are tricky. Like I said, there's not really a word in English because a lot of the way we think in English about reality and about self and object is dualistic. And when we go to non-duality, we just kind of go to a kind of all-one soup or something like that. And this is neither. Both of those are great—it's fantastic to perceive and conceive dualistically at times. It's really important. And it's a lovely range of experiences and really important mystical experiences that happen when everything dis-

solves in some kind of mystical soup. But there's this other thing, let's call it in the middle, that seems narrow at first and then opens up a whole other range of experiences.

We don't really have the language for that, partly because language is based on notions of subject and object, and the verb is this thing done by the subject in relation to the object. There's something curious about this certain range here that really is not well captured, certainly in English language. I don't know enough about other languages, but I presume not so well either.

So it takes a while, but again, a lot of these elements are things that we notice. We're teaching kind of from the front here, but we could just say: if you just keep doing this stuff, at some point, these are things you'll notice anyway, regardless of whether you've heard them. If you're practicing with enough sensitivity—what's going on, what's the feeling here—I think you'd have some kind of sense of things when it really feels soul-making that is exactly that. You might put it in your own words, but it will be reflecting the same thing.

And that's very related to participation, which is actually just part of fullness of intention and awakening.

There's so much to say about this one. I've talked a lot about it. If you're interested, you can hear hours and hours of me exploring this territory.

But yes, there are many, many hours exploring this. There's a recent talk called "What is Awakening," and there's a whole series—I can't remember the exact title—of talk segments in "Eros Unfettered." A couple of years before that, in what I think was the November solitary retreat here, there was a talk called "Questioning Awakening" with two follow-up parts: something like "Buddhism Beyond Modernism" and "In Praise of Restlessness." That forms a three-part set, and there are probably others. Maybe some of you can point to additional material, but there's extensive exploration available. This is really key.

I suppose what I want to say briefly about this is—again, this is actually one of those subjects that I think by definition I would like to approach as endlessly expanding. This is not typically how we think of awakening. We tend to think of awakening as: I've got it, or I don't, or I'm halfway there, or whatever it is. In this paradigm, the notion of awakening is actually ever-expanding. And that relates to this buffet of treasures that I described the other day—this glory upon glory of beautiful creation and discovery.

Having said that, just to make a historical note that contextualizes all this: if you're around enough, even just around Gaia House, let alone going to Japan and looking at the history of Dharma in different countries, and you ask teachers or retreatants, "What's your idea or image of awakening? What does an awakened person look like? Where is this all going?"—you're going to get, just from Gaia House teachers, just from the Gaia House teacher council, a huge range.

This is the historical state of Buddha Dharma. You could also say there's a reason why we have this range that has more to do with the nature of soul, but I'll put that aside for now.

So you ask people, and sometimes awakening means coping with the existential, obvious reality of a meaningless material world—your birth and death within that—and just bearing up with it. That's what awakening means: trying to be kind within that reality and trying to have the courage to face it. For some people, that's awakening.

For other people, awakening is just a moment of awakening—this fresh perception of things that doesn't seem to have much ideation or will to it. That's a moment of awakening, and there's no grand awakening beyond that.

For others, awakening involves this transcendent, unfabricated experience where one encounters in meditation the deeper and deeper fading of things, opening to a realm completely beyond anything we can put into language. This tells us something about all this—which might be a kind of rejection of it all. None of this matters; this is samsara, worthless, nothing. The best thing is to escape this and not be reborn again. The one who is not reborn is the awakened one. Stages of awakening measure how near I am to not coming back to this world of perception—just samsara, just worthless.

It could go on and on, the different shades of understanding. What does it mean? And then even tracking back: awakening relates to the third noble truth in relation to the first noble truth of dukkha. But then we ask, what is dukkha? What actually are we addressing when we say suffering? Some of it's obvious, but if you expand the range of what that can mean...

I find all this absolutely fascinating—and fascinating how easily we can become really closed around a certain point of view. What's the place of soul in that, whether we're conscious of it or not? Why does a person choose to opt for this vision rather than that one? It's not just because it makes sense intellectually, because I see how the pieces fit together.

When I choose a vision of awakening, I'm actually choosing a cosmos. I'm choosing a vision of the cosmos and a vision of the self in response to that cosmos. A person can choose a meaningless cosmos in which the nobility of the self is to show up and bear with that reality, to have that kind of dignity and bravery and openness. Or a person can choose a magical cosmos—layers and dimensions and the participation of the soul in the creation and discovery of perception.

Psychologically, I think it's an incredibly interesting question: Why? Why choose this one or that one? What's going on for this personality or that personality? Without any right or wrong, but just seeing the whole thing from a soul perspective.

We can look at what we're doing here, this "improper dharma," from the perspective of "proper dharma"—fit it into, okay, so there's a lot of papañca going on, clearly.

And clearly there's a lot of craving. And there's a lot of overthinking.

But one can also turn things around and look at certain other versions of Dharma from a soul-making understanding. Again, why is the soul gravitating towards that? What is it about? And again I go back to what I said the other day - when we're in love with the path, any of those versions, those people who have those different visions love it, and there's eros there. They might not have that language, but basically something has become an image and a whole set of concepts that are meaningful to their soul and attractive to their soul. So then you have a whole soul psychology, kind of not deconstruction but perspective on conventional approaches. There's all that.

So then there's this question of suffering and dukkha and how it relates to the fullness of intention. I can only speak from my experience of dukkha I meet and what I'm dealing with and have had to deal with in the past, and also working with people, working a lot, especially one-to-one, with abuse history, sexual abuse and trauma and all kinds of things with this paradigm.

What it seems to me at this point - I think I said it somewhere or other - at this point I just have an absolute trust that all kinds of dukkha can be healed through imaginal work. Not necessarily they will be in this session, or a person is quite ready for that, or even quite ready to look at things that way, you know, to bring that perspective. But I just have that sense.

If I'm working with someone one-to-one, is that doorway open? Can I sense that this may be available for this person right now? My experience is that there is a healing available through the imaginal that addresses hurts and pains and soul torments and

histories that other psychological paradigms - which I'm quite well versed in some - don't seem to do. And mindfulness doesn't quite do it. And even emptiness doesn't quite do it.

That was really interesting to me. I've seen that over and over again. It's to the point where I just trust it.

What makes that work better is this fullness of intention, kind of semi-paradoxically. Healing can be part of what I want - this ending of this dukkha. But if I can include a sense of actually, I want that in something even bigger, which is this fullness of soul-making and sense of sacredness. I want to ensoul my dukkha. I want to ensoul my history and the pain of my past and whatever it is. Somehow, if that fullness of intention can open up, then it becomes easier for this multi-spectrum, multi-level, far-reaching, far-penetrating sort of healing to happen.

Third thing - I mean, I could talk for hours, but I'm not going to. This is the last thing I'm going to say about this. I've shared this again in some of those recent talks, and I would say that - so again, what does suffering mean? We talk about awakening, the third noble truth, in relation to the first noble truth. What does dukkha mean?

It might be that different ages - certainly different people, but different ages, different eras, different cultures and different times have different kinds of dukkha. There probably have been in the history of humanity many cultures and societies and eras where a crisis of a lack of meaningfulness, or what we might call a lack of soulfulness, just wasn't a pain. It wasn't there, or rather it was very, very rare.

Whereas I think a key stratum of the dukkha of our society now, at this time, is the dukkha and the pain of soullessness.

One of the things I shared - I could again - one of the things I shared in those talks was about when I had cancer and was going to chemotherapy at the hospital in Plymouth. It's a huge hospital, and it was so hard for me. It was really on the edge of my practice. Yes, it was hard physically. There was an enormous amount of dukkha there.

But what was really hard for me was the soullessness of the place. Everything was plastic. There was this kind of cheeriness. Death was in the room, and people were sort of... and the way one is looked at by the medical system - basically, I'm a bag of chemicals with some really not very promising statistics attached to it. All of that, primarily the plastic and the lack of aesthetics, and despite all the physical dukkha and all the possibility of dying - that was the thing that was just on the edge of my practice. Some-

times it was really, really hard. I couldn't quite... while I was sitting there with these plastic pipes and poison being pumped into the body... that was the thing that was really hard.

There's a dukkha of soullessness.

That's a level of dukkha that, again, in the Dharma, we don't really have that language. We don't have these words to open up something. Look, there is a pain for many people at that level—the need for meaningfulness, soulfulness, and such.

So again, when we talk about awakening, in the third noble truth in relation to the first noble truth, what do we mean by suffering? What kinds of suffering are there, and what do they need? How will they be healed? This is some of what's in there.

The logos piece—is that okay? When we use the word *logos*, we don't mean anything necessarily obvious. Those two experiences you described in relationship and moving—there wasn't any kind of heavy edifice or machinery of philosophical structure there. But just the fact that you could say it felt soul-making implies that there's something like what we call soul-making, even though you haven't delineated it, and something of a soul and something of a value to that. So that's enough logos right there.

When we use the word logos or concept, we mean everything from something very complex, sophisticated, subtle, conceptual structure, all the way down to what I said earlier today: any perception whatsoever of subject, object, and time. That's already concept. It's percept. So it could be just the most bare sense of momentary awareness with nothing happening. And that's what I perceive—nothing. And it's happening now, in this moment. That's already concept.

So we're talking about something really, really subtle. It doesn't have to be complex. And yet one of the possibilities is a kind of quietening of the concept, but there's still a bare concept there, subtle.

One of the other possibilities is that while we're working with an image and it's touching the heart and the energy body is responding and we're moved and the soul is resonating, the mind can actually be kind of intuitively flickering and getting insights and seeing how—I don't know if you've had this experience—how different elements fit together and how the structure works, how soul-making happens. So sometimes, in the process of soul-making, it really involves the intellect, just in a kind of very automatic way. So there's that possibility too.

Derek, I didn't quite understand the question, but let me say something to see if it's accurate. Maybe part of bringing out this vocabulary and making these discernments is to say that this kind of stuff is going on anyway. This is just what the soul does. Either we have so-called intrapsychic images arising in meditation, and it comes out. And people have told me, "Yeah, I've been meditating for twenty years, you know, vipassana, insight meditation, and I never tell anyone these things that happen because it doesn't seem like it's welcome." Maybe it's not welcome.

So the soul does generate, create, discover—it's part of what it does. There's that way, and then there's also the fact that if you love something, if you are devoted to something, it has become fantasy for you. It has become image, which means the sense of sitting there on a hot day and working and dedicating yourself, the sense of the Buddha, the sense of the path, the sense of *metta*. It's all part of the love and dedication and devotion and eros to the path, whatever it is.

Yeah, you've talked about that before, but it's just interesting for me to hear about it and to think about that perspective on the practice. That sense of that's already happening and then coming towards this and going, "Oh, okay, I have these tools for working with something that's already wanting to happen, a process that's already going in that direction."

Yeah, that's part of it, exactly. Giving us the tools, the concepts, the refinements of skill and awareness that can navigate that. But there's a second thing to me, which is also—and I think I must have said it yesterday morning when I talked about desire—when we don't have the words and no one talks about certain concepts, we almost blind ourselves to them. And so I ask you: is that really what you love? Is that really what you're doing?

Is it for just the decrease of suffering? That's what draws you to Buddha Dharma? It's almost like just giving us the concepts and talking about it makes us realize, I think in many cases, oh, there's more going on here—yet we haven't had the language for it. And when we don't have the language, it's almost like we can't fill out the psychological understanding and see what it needs. Does that make sense?

Which to me is an important part of just psychological awareness of self. Like, what's going on in my life? What is it? How do I operate? How do I get drawn to something and become galvanized and all that? And that's, for me, a really important piece.

So that's a crucial element. I would say all practice, or deepening in any practice—we could be talking about metta, samadhi, emptiness practice, mindfulness, or whatever—as it matures, the deepening involves a kind of learning to play with the gas pedal: a

little bit more, a little bit less. In the larger sense, as in deciding to take a break from retreating, or sitting late into the night. But also in the micro sense of how much effort, how much pressure, how much direct intentionality—the direction of intentionality and activity—is present in the moment.

And that's not an on-off switch. It can be really, really finely tuned in any practice. I would say that's a crucial part of any practice deepening—again, the sensitivity, the skill developing. And the same is true of soul-making and imaginal practice.

I think there's something almost intrinsic to soul-making. In the create-discover dynamic, right there you've got the "create" which is active and the "discover" which is passive. You've also got one of the nodes which is grace. The thing about grace is that it's inexplicable gift. It's just like, why was I given this? I didn't do anything. It just showed up.

And you've got the first node, the idea of the lattice, implicit in which is: hey, we can do subtle things that support soul-making. So right within those twenty-eight nodes, you've got the implicit dance of not just effort, but also attitude. I can see it as grace. I can see it as something that is an art for me that I can play with. You understand?

So there's effort, but there's also attitude and a kind of way of looking, a way of conceiving. And I think with a lot of soul-making material, it requires quite a delicate poise. So even just to have the intention to be receptive to an image—it's very different when you say, "Oh, an image will show up sometime. Maybe, probably not," with that kind of attitude, whatever.

There's a kind of real... there's already a kind of humility in the poise of "Let's see what comes." And in opening, I can feel there's already a delicacy, there's already sensitivity, there's openness, there's possibility, there's already humility of a kind. I may not even know to what—to soul, to psyche, to the divinity, Buddha nature, whatever. And there are the beginnings of all these qualities.

So that poise is a kind of place on the intentional spectrum, and that's very much part of it. It's much more delicate than, "Right, I'm going to..." whatever it is.

This is very, very delicate. Sometimes the energies that come and the eros that arises is really strong, but a lot of it is really, really subtle and delicate. And the kind of poise of intentionality or receptivity—it's the intention to be receptive much of the time, as much as anything.

So that poise is a kind of intention or a kind of place on the intentional spectrum, and it's very much part of it. It's very much more delicate than simply deciding, "Right, I'm going to do this or that." This is very, very delicate. Sometimes the energies that come and the eros that comes is really strong, but a lot of it is really, really subtle and delicate. The kind of poise of intentionality or receptivity—it's the intention to be receptive, as much as anything.

Does that make sense? And as always, it's not a fixed place. It's an arena, this whole thing. Intentionality, grace, receptivity, humility, activity, art—they're just an arena for us to play and experiment in and see what happens. It's never like, "Ah, nailed it, now that's it." Just as it is not with any practice. We can't just bandage the gas pedal in that position and leave it there. It's always very subtly modulated in the art of response.

One last thing about the energy body. Is there a kind of danger in alerting attention to the possibility of, for instance, breathing in certain ways where the energy body can have more energy? Potentially, yes. My experience meeting loads of people over the years is that most people don't have enough energy. Or rather, the energy is moving in their system in a way that it's just jangled and not really harmonizing in a way that actually creates a lot of available energy.

For most people, either the energy doesn't harmonize, or there's a kind of restriction on just how much energy they will allow—how much energy we're used to flowing in the body. So I think, if I'm not taking too much care to be completely comprehensive, I'll lean towards that side. You know, I go teach places, and I can just feel—there's every good reason for it, lots of reasons—but oftentimes people tend to feel quite chaotic and agitated inside when actually it's a state of not much energy. So if I haven't got much time, I'll lean on that side.

But yes, I guess there's a danger, though in that context I wouldn't harp too much on the possibility of too much energy. I feel very much that in a lot of cases when there is too much energy flowing in different ways, it's a lot easier to fix and liberate than a lot of people say. I don't tend to get too anxious about that stuff. For a person who has that experience with me, I know how to make it not so much a problem.

It's true there is a danger. Putting these teachings out about following imagination and eros—maybe some people would just take it and run with it, you know, make crazy choices. It's there. I think just the balance of things for me felt a calling that it was necessary to do it.

But it's also possibly a smoother path, isn't it? A smoother path in terms of both energy and ease. The way we tend to work with energy allows it to smooth more and not be so problematic. There are ways of working with energy body where you're just lighting fireworks to some kind of powder keg, and it's often not that helpful. So the way we tend to do it is much more organic, gentle, and things can open in a much more harmonized way.

I think it's a matter of just having that idea that it's possible for you to notice, but expanding the idea of what that could possibly look like or feel like or mean. When we think love, we tend to think, "Oh, it's going to look this way." But sometimes it can be fierce or very stern or whatever. So just expand the range and then just look. "Oh, yes, there's this kind, but I hadn't really thought of that as a kind of face of love before."

Let's have a bit of quiet.

CHAPTER 162

Sharing Soul Sense (A Temenos Exercise)

Rob Burbea · 1h15

> *In this experiential session from his Foundations of a Soulmaking Dharma series, Rob Burbea leads participants through a multi-stage relational exercise called a "temenos practice" - creating sacred space for sharing deep aspects of experience with others. The session begins with establishing mettā (loving-kindness) as the foundational container, then moves through three progressive stages: expressing real-time energy body experiences, sharing present-moment emotional states, and finally communicating what has touched one's soul during the retreat.*
>
> *Burbea emphasizes the development of refined awareness, sensitivity, and discernment - qualities that are both prerequisite for and fruit of soulmaking practices. Participants work in groups of three, learning to witness with their whole being while tracking their own energetic and emotional responses. The exercise demonstrates how soulmaking dharma extends beyond individual practice into relational dimensions, showing how we can sense and express the sacred through various modalities including words, movement, sound, and poetic language.*
>
> *This practice illustrates key elements of Burbea's approach: the cultivation of soul-sense, the use of image and imagination in spiritual development, and the recognition that anything can potentially touch the soul when met with the right quality of attention. The temenos framework provides safety for vulnerable sharing while developing skills essential for deeper soulmaking work.*

I'm certain you have gained a vivid sense of how much refinement of awareness and sensitivity and subtlety of attention and discernment is both necessary and a fruit of these kinds of practices—both a basis and a fruit. And that's part of the ongoing possibility of expansion. It grows in us. The more we intend to work in these ways, those capacities, those sensibilities grow.

Some of you may not have been there, but there was a question in one of the Q&A sessions a few days ago about whether it's possible to do this in relationship with another person. The answer is yes, and in quite a few different ways. There's a range of possibilities. So we want to do an exercise now, to play a little bit, that exercises our sensitivities and our skills with some of the elements of the soul-making practices in relationship—together.

This comes in three or four stages of exercise, but any part of it is optional. If you feel like you don't want to do something, you can just pass.

We're going to break into groups of three, and I'm going to ask that these groups of three be, as much as possible, with two people that you didn't know well before the retreat.

There will be a few stages, but I'll talk us through it. If you want to pass on a stage, you can, but you probably won't. Basically, we'll be exploring in the moment, in real time, the experience of energy body, the experience of the heart, and if you want to, sharing or expressing something that has touched your soul while you've been here. It could be in this moment or this week—an image or something you've sensed with soul that has touched your soul. That's basically what we're doing.

So find a posture that's comfortable. Begin with your eyes closed, and grounding. Sense of grounding—connecting with the sense of sitting, with the sensations of sitting, with the floor, the feet, the legs, the backside. Grounded. In contact.

Then, keeping that sense of contact, open up the whole space of the awareness of the energy body. You're really very much in your space, whatever is happening there right now, just in touch with the flow, the ebb and flow and movement, what arises, what passes, in the energy body, and also in the heart and the mind right now.

When you're ready, begin offering metta, offering the intention of loving-kindness to your partners. You can move between eyes open and eyes closed. You may make eye contact, you may not. You're just getting a sense of them, their being. Wishing them well. May you be peaceful. May you be filled with happiness. May you live at ease. Just returning to that intention, the gentle intention of metta over and over again, to these beings with you.

Is it possible, at the same time as you are giving, intending the stream, the flow, the bathing of metta towards your partner or partners here, that you recognize, that you become aware too, that at this very moment, you are the recipient of well-wishing? There is metta flowing towards you—goodwill, bathing your body, your being. You are wished well. A gaze of kindness focused on you, intentions of goodness and kindness. Aware of giving and receiving both—flowing in, flowing out, bathing all around and inside.

Now, the first round of this exercise will be that you take turns, and each person has roughly two minutes to in some way express or share—it could be in words, it could be in movement, it could be in gesture, it could be in sound that is not words—in some way to express what is happening, what the experience is in the energy body.

at the moment, as it's happening. And what you'll find is that in two minutes that might even change quite a lot. The fact of you communicating something in whatever medium or form actually has an effect as well. So you're simply somehow expressing out loud what is happening in the energy body through those two minutes, as much as you would like to.

What happens in the energy body can be anything at all, and there's no better or worse, no right or wrong. So it might be tracking into the energy body and discovering, "Actually, I don't even know. I'm not quite connected. Okay, give me a second." Or finding that it's numb, that there's not much going on there. That's simply what's happening in the energy body—it's neither right nor wrong, just what's present. Or perhaps going in and finding there's a lot of nervous excitement that's kind of unpleasant, but when I stay with it, I see that I can open to it and it becomes quite pleasant, like a fizzy fountain.

You can speak in conventional descriptive words, as accurate as possible, to describe what's happening in the moment. You could also speak in more poetic language, drawing on our expanded sense of the energy body that now includes the imaginal dimension. Perhaps the energy body right now is a volcano in the moment of its eruption, boiling luminescent lava erupting through the central channel out the top of the head. Or maybe the energy body feels like a cool stream of clear, pure water flowing in spring sunlight, this movement through the body. It could even be sensing that you're growing wings—huge, powerful wings that move the whole energy, whatever it is. No good, no bad, and you can describe in all kinds of ways.

Now, the witnesses are simply witnessing. You don't comment. But the job of the witness is to bring all your senses to the witnessing—eyes, listening, but your whole energy body. What is it to bring your energy body into openness to what you are witnessing and hearing? Your job is also to track what happens in your energy body when you are witnessing what you're witnessing, when you hear what you hear.

The intention here is purely for exercise. As I mentioned at the beginning, there are many skills involved in this work. We're developing these skills now in relationship. It's not that this or that should happen. I'm not trying to entertain or impress or prove myself in any way. It's purely an exercise. So check what happens in the intention sometimes when we come into relationship.

Take a moment now to decide the order you'll go in your groups. Remember, there's a range here. There's nothing one needs to impress. If I look inside and find there's just a knot in my heart and the rest is numb, and it feels really contracted, that's what's hap-

pening. That's what one expresses and shares in whatever way one wants. One could express that in grunts or any other form. Really, it's open. The experience is open and the range of expression is open, staying in your place and not touching each other.

Let's take a moment before we start to gather ourselves again. I probably should have done the explaining before—apologies. Just take that moment, connection with the earth, the grounding, and the whole energy body right now. Tap into the metta again, giving your partner or partners that flow of well-wishing, knowing that you are at this moment the recipient, the object of goodwill and kindness, of metta.

Then gently let the metta take its place as a kind of basis—not so much a conscious intention, but just a basis of everything that we do when we're in relationship. Just let it settle as the ground floor.

When you're ready, the first person has two minutes to speak, grunt, vocalize, move, express what's happening in the energy body right now. Both witnesses and communicator are tracking the effects of communicating in the energy body as well.

After each round, take a couple of moments to come back to your energy body. What's reverberating there now? What's the experience of either having witnessed or having communicated, shared, expressed? It doesn't have to be one thing or another. It's simply an exercise in developing awareness and sensitivity, in this case, in a certain relational context.

So that will allow other possibilities.

Again, just momentarily touching on the metta, bringing that up more consciously—the goodwill, the knowledge, the assurance, the recognition that you are receiving the intentions of loving-kindness right now.

And then the second person beginning in the same way, the witness completely open with the whole energy body and tracking their response at the same time.

And again, coming with the fullness of intention into your own sphere of experience of your own energy body. Just seeing what ricochets around there now, what reverberates, whatever it is.

In a minute it will be the third person's turn. But for those of you working either in pairs or alone, the pairs can just divide this time in half, if you like, as well as you can judge a half minute each, and just do that a bit more rapidly. And for those working alone, there's the possibility, if you like, of almost letting the soul come into two—a witness part of the soul and yourself as image, if you like, tracking the energy body.

Just again, just touching on, just opening the taps of metta, opening the waters, the flow of metta, just for a few moments—bathing the other in this stream of mercy, kindness, goodness, knowing that you too are right now likewise being bathed, gazed on with mercy, with well-wishing.

Letting that take its place as a quiet, tacit foundation, and the next person beginning.

Lovely. So that was round one, or stage one. The second stage actually adds a dimension, and the dimension that it adds is that of the heart, the emotions.

Pretty much the same thing, but what happens this time is each person expresses in whatever manner they like. It could be moving, it could be vocalizing without words, it could be descriptive, conventional use of language, it could be a poetic use of language. The energy body can become image, the emotions can become image. So all that is available as manners of expression.

And again, the witnesses are just silent with as much receptivity of their energy body.

So the person who's expressing expresses what's happening in the heart, in the emotions right now. And then the witnesses track in their body what's happening in the energy body and what's happening in their heart as they're witnessing, but they're not commenting. So the whole energy body, the whole being is really open and in relationship to what's happening. And you're just silently tracking your process as much as you're in relationship.

If you're a witness, maybe something like sixty percent with the person listening and forty percent tracking your own inner reverberations. So you're actually really quite aware of the reverberations inside you of what's being expressed or communicated. But for the expresser it's probably mostly inside, but really aware that this is happening in a relational field—I'm being seen, I'm being witnessed, opened to, listened to, very probably empathized with and gazed on with love and care.

So primarily it's emotion, but because that energy ties in with the energy body, primarily you're just sharing, again, in the moment—not "yesterday I was a bit down," but what's happening right now. And again, the effect of speaking itself, of communicating—everything's dependent arising. So you're just tracking the flow and expressing it.

One thing to look out for: In terms of patterns and tendencies, is it my pattern when sharing about where my heart is at to only describe what is lovely and the good feelings? Or is it my pattern to only share the dukkha and the difficult stuff? Just noticing that and seeing—maybe I want to experiment again with range. No force, no pressure, but just something gently to be aware of as well.

Is that clear enough for this round?

So again, starting with the connection—simple sensations of contact, grounding, earth, feet, legs, sitting bones. And again, opening the stream of metta, letting it flow—the gentleness, the well-wishing, the kindness flowing to your companion or companions, flowing to self.

And again, can you open up the dual awareness, recognizing that you are receiving right now? Right now these waters of mercy, the gentleness, the well-wishing, the radiance of kindness is washing over you, through you. Giving and receiving both, opening both ways.

And letting that metta rest as the background basis of what we're doing, not so conscious. And then the first person again beginning.

the stream of mercy, the eyes of mercy on the others, on self, on what you have just witnessed, on what you've just expressed.

Letting that recede to the background, the ever-present background of our intention, and then the next person beginning.

So as much as possible, what's happening now in the flow of the heart right now?

Again, taking just a few moments sensing your energy body, what reverberates, allowing, allowing, and gently supporting the flow of an intention, intentions of kindness. The beauty of metta, to flow from you to your companion or companions, and from them to you. Feel yourself give and receive, know yourself giving and receiving.

And again, if you're in a pair, you can try and roughly divide this into two, and the next person beginning.

Again, just settling, opening up the energy body, the awareness, the sensitivity to what's reverberating there and the intention of kindness in and through the energy body, out of the energy body and into the energy body, giving and receiving.

Eyes of mercy, the ears of kindness. It's a privilege to hear, to see, to share, to express.

Now in this part, stay for now with the eyes closed and with your own energy body, with your own energy body experience, and settling in the body, the openness of the whole body awareness.

And if you can, somehow bring into your awareness, bring up for your soul, remind yourself of what your heart longs for, what your heart may burn for. What brought you here? What brings you here? What brought you to this retreat?

That's what brought you into existence, to this life, in whatever way works for you to bring that up for the soul, in the soul, for the soul to behold, allowing whatever responses in the energy body, in the heart, in the soul.

Opening your body, opening the energy body to the effects, the reverberations of this that your heart burns for, longs for, loves. And then feeling yourself touched by this.

When the mind wanders and it slips away or it goes numb, sensing your devotion to this that you burn for, your alignment with, your desire.

Maybe it becomes image. Maybe you become image as the one who is devoted to that, the one who serves that, who wants to serve that. Maybe it's just energetic or emotional. Again, the awareness and the effects can be at any level, in any arena of our being, domain of our being.

And if you feel in contact with this, and if you want to, what is it then to stay in contact with this soul desire, the image of this soul desire, the image of yourself as lover of this, as seeker, as one who burns and serves, burns for and serves this?

To gently, if you feel ready, if you want to, to begin to open your eyes and sense from that place, from that longing, from that love, from that devotion, sensing self, your companion or companions.

Who are these who sit with you now, with your soul aflame, with your heart of devotion? Who sees you now? How do you see the world, this space, this moment, yourself, the others?

So at some point in this you may want to just at least make just a tiny bit of eye contact and see what the effect is to see and be seen. And by who? Who are these mysteries? Who are these angels that behold your fire, protect the burning of your love?

As much as possible, close to the fountain or the flame of what brought you here, what sent you here, what called you here to this retreat, to this life, to these difficulties, to these gifts.

When you're ready, gently letting that recede and again just coming to an awareness of whatever's happening in your experience right now. Your sense of energy, body, emotion, thought, also in the sense of what's around, who's around.

So the last part of this exercise - again, it's all optional, so you may feel like you want to leave this part, but please stay in your position. You can just wave with an eye, wave your part if you want.

There's a chance to, again, express in any way or combination of ways that feels appropriate or the right way for you - vocal, verbal, different kinds of verbal or movement or gesture - to express, share, communicate something, actually anything, that has touched your soul, has felt soulful to you.

It could be an image, it could be a way something here has been sensed with soul, has spoken to your soul. You can share, describe, communicate in some way or another.

And again, the witness is just witnessing, open to their experience, the whole range of their experience, which means, again, energy, body, emotion, heart. And also image. So what happens when soul hears image, when soul hears soulfulness or witnesses soulfulness?

You don't have to necessarily express or share the thing that feels the most intimate necessarily, but you might, absolutely. And if you don't want to do this at all, that's really fine too.

Does that make enough sense to you?

All of these exercises involve sharing, communicating, expressing, grunting, whatever it is, always has an effect. Everything has an effect. It's always a dependent arising.

And if you find that what you're sharing actually opens into something deeper, where this present moment is suddenly sensed with soul—this being here, this way, with each other, touched with soul—that's perfectly fine to share as well. Or it could be something from the week. Again, it doesn't have to be the most intimate thing, though it could be.

Each person will have around five minutes. Take your time.

What we call this exercise is a relational temenos exercise. Temenos means a kind of safe space or protector of what is sacred. So you're with good people, there's this soul gaze and metta gaze, and you take your time with all the sensitivity and care around what you want to communicate or express and how that feels as you do it.

You have around five minutes each, and you can move with a rhythm that allows you to be sensitive and respectful, noticing what's happening as you share.

It can be absolutely anything at all. As a piece of theory, anything can touch your soul. If that's what moves you to express, then let it be that. It could be an object, a thing, a person, a tree, an image—internal or external—an idea that's really soulful for you. Anything that touches you in this way.

Is that clear enough to begin?

Now, again, just that momentary connection—body, earth, energy body, presence, openness of sensitivity, and the love. When we speak soul, we are angels. The witnesses are beholding the angelic in one way or another, so there's the gentleness and beauty that goes with that, and the reverence.

When you're ready, the first person beginning.

Again, taking those moments in the silence to open that awareness, that sensitivity to the soul resonances and reverberations—sharing, witnessing, giving, receiving, beholding together. And all of this in love, in metta. The mystery of other, the mystery that you are.

When you're ready, the next person beginning.

Again, just allowing the attention to tune into awareness, noticing what you notice of what reverberates in actually receiving the gift, the privilege, the honor of witnessing soul. And what reverberates from sharing, from expressing what is intimate in a soul way. Kindness and metta for all of it.

Let those waters flow, let them bathe you in awe.

In just a moment the third person will take their turn, or if you're two, you can divide it again.

Remember that there is the possibility of witnessing at many different levels—energy body, heart, and also soul. What does it mean to sense with soul that which is being shared, or the one who is sharing, or yourself as expressing and sharing? So many things are possible. This moment, too, and this sharing can become image. All is possible. Nothing has to happen. You're just opening to the possibilities.

When you're ready, the next person beginning.

Hold that delicate poise of openness, of sensitivity, a certain stance of being open to your experience—what's moving, resonating in your energy body, in your heart, in your mind, in your soul. Whatever it is, we touch each other at so many levels, in so many ways. We touch and we are touched.

And then again, to end with metta—just opening that gate to allow the streams to flow, cool and gentle, bathing, touching, permeating self and other. Recognizing yourself in this very moment, bathed and touched and permeated by those very waters. Giving and receiving both.

Now opening your eyes if they're not already open, to thank and honor your partner or partners, or yourself if you've been doing this alone. Honor the privilege to share in this way, to be together in this way, opening up the dimensionality of what it means to be a human being, what it means to be together—who sees and who is seen.

Taking leave of your partner now, and returning to the call as it was, or to your places.

CHAPTER 163

The Spreading of Five Wings

Rob Burbea · 14 min

> *In this foundational teaching, Rob Burbea presents a framework for understanding the expansive nature of soulmaking dharma through five key domains of potential growth and extension. He emphasizes that this approach has an inherently organic quality—like a living tree that naturally wants to expand—and explores how practitioners can investigate their own patterns and tendencies across these ranges.*
>
> *The five domains include: the constellation of soulmaking elements (eros, psyche, logos, etc.), the axes of self-other-world-eros in perception, the dynamic interplay of eros-psyche-logos, the spectrum from apparent pathology to purity, and the range of energy body experiences from ethereal to dense. Burbea guides practitioners to notice where they might be limiting their range in any of these areas, whether through unconscious preferences, fears, or simply habitual patterns.*
>
> *This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners a way to assess their contemplative territory and recognize opportunities for expansion. Rather than prescribing a single approach, it invites gentle investigation into one's natural soul inclinations while remaining open to growth across all dimensions of practice. The framework serves as a map for understanding how imaginal practice can organically infuse self-sense, perception of others, and relationship with the world.*

Good morning, everyone.

You've probably got the sense already, the understanding or the feel, that these explorations and this kind of paradigm that we're exploring and presenting has as one of its key features and characteristics a tendency to expand and to want to expand into different arenas, domains, and reaches.

When there was a question and I said, "Well, in a way, if I had to sum up really briefly, what's the point of all this? Why are we doing it?" I would put that in the language of expanding, opening up further and further the senses of sacredness. So this idea of possible expansion, possible growth, is a feature characteristic—intrinsic almost—with possibilities of extensions, reaches, and ranges expanding in different aspects and domains. You've probably kind of got that sense already.

Soul is—you could say there's something very organic here. It's really like a living thing that wants to grow, like a tree or something else. And so this notion of, or fact of, wanting to expand, or at least the potentials to expand, is really key. So you've probably got that sense already.

This morning I want to draw together, under that rubric of expansion and range, five domains of possible expansion, possible extension of range. And then we won't have time to go into all of them, so we're just going to pick two to explore in a bit more detail. But let me go through them quite briefly. Actually, all this has already been said, but it might be good to think of this—put them all together as a list of five under the idea of possible ranges, and where am I with those possible ranges.

So the first is the whole idea of the elements of the constellation or the lattice. We might feel—you might feel—in your practice that so far you've got a really good sense of, or it feels like a very alive and rich sense of, some of those elements. They really make sense to you, you've experienced them, they've even opened up in ways that were unexpected. But others of them are a bit cloudy or even still relatively inert. Nothing has really happened there at all. They haven't really illuminated.

So there's no right or wrong in this, but there is this—let's call it an intrinsic potential or even an intrinsic eros that soul has—to reach out and open up and illuminate more and more of these nodes. So part of the investigation is, and we'll come back to this, where am I in my soul's opening out to a sense—an experiential sense and also an understanding—of these elements. Okay, so that's the first one in terms of a domain of possible expansion and increase of range in practice.

The second one—I could go in any order here, but the second one, again, I've mentioned all of these before, but just to collect them together from a certain angle in terms of this idea of expansion and possibility and where I am—the second one is the expansion along the axes of the soul-making beginning to involve, infect, infuse self, other, and world.

Actually, in any moment of perception, any moment of any kind of perception at all, there is always some sense, no matter how subtle or vague, of some kind of subjective sense, some kind of self-sense, some kind of objective sense, and some kind of world sense. And these three can feel very separate or very hard, or kind of much more connected and open, but still that triad is absolutely intrinsic to any moment of perception: self-other-world.

And the question for soul-making is: what are the perceptions of self-other-world at any time? But in terms of expansion, possibility and range, what do I notice here, perhaps? Do I have a tendency for the other—the object, for example—to be where all the erotic, imaginal coming alive is at, and not so much the self? Or I don't really let it spread to the world, or perhaps the other way around. I'm so taken with the way I come alive as an imaginal subject, and I can kind of fall in love with it. There's nothing wrong with that at all. It's really a question of balance. Are the waters of soul flowing in these three directions? Does it make sense? Or is one of them—does it tend to be a bit lopsided, and if so, which way? People will differ, and it differs over time.

But actually, I'd like to add one more element into that, which is eros. So self, other, world, eros. And you could say eros is a part of myself. It's an aspect or an energy or force in myself. But again, the question is: what tends to become quite fully and vividly and richly and erotically imaginal for me of those four, and which maybe tends to get missed? Like my own eros—has that become for myself an erotic, imaginal object at times? Can it? What would that mean?

Again, it's simply one way of thinking about territory and range and possibility—just examining my tendencies and patterns. What are the places where I might harbor an unconscious belief that it's somehow not good to venture there?

That's the second dimension.

The third involves the eros-psyche-logos dynamic itself. Here, when soul-making is allowed to unfold naturally, when eros is permitted to inseminate and fertilize and gather momentum, all these elements get drawn into the vortex of soul-making. They become involved, whirling around each other, reflecting one another, inspiring and inflaming each other further until the whole constellation grows richer, wider, and deeper.

The question for gentle reflection here is: What range is possible for me with each of these? For instance, am I somewhat reluctant to let eros become really strong? Perhaps it feels too intense and I'm uncertain about it, so my range of eros—from quite subtle to really intense and powerful—becomes truncated. Or perhaps it's not fear but simply habit; my energetic being and desire body haven't yet developed the habit of becoming inflamed, so eros inhabits only a certain range.

The opposite can also occur—where everything becomes super-intense all the time, like a perpetual raging fire. Yet eros can be extremely subtle. It may be sexual or non-sexual; sexual eros is just one variety. But is there a tendency or pattern, conscious or unconscious, toward only the intense side of eros's range? There's tremendous potential for working with really subtle eros—extraordinarily subtle.

The same question applies to logos and the full spectrum of their ranges.

These three together constitute the third dimension.

The final two dimensions relate to what we might call neuropsychological dynamics. The fourth involves the spectrum of apparent pathology, dukkha, madness, violence, or weirdness. This range extends from what most people in society would consider really strange and psychologically suspect—quite weird and dark—all the way to experiences that seem completely free of dukkha, obviously pure and light and sweet, traditionally angelic in the narrow sense.

Where do I stand with this spectrum? What are my tendencies? How open is this range for me? How comfortable am I with it? Do I relate to it with fear or preference? Or perhaps it simply reflects that souls are different, and images naturally reflect what's occurring in our lives.

This represents another possible range to investigate—simply noticing what arises when I consider these territories.

The fifth and final dimension concerns the range of energy body texture—the felt sense of the energy body from very ethereal, luminous, and insubstantial, with that lovely gossamer, filigree quality that's light and delicate, to something much denser and more solid. What are my typical tendencies or patterns here? What doors might I be closing on certain parts of this range for various reasons that don't accurately reflect my more natural soul expression? Or perhaps this simply reflects how my soul naturally tends to inhabit this range.

These five ranges offer territories to bear in mind and explore gently—examining responses, reactions, inclinations, desires, tendencies, fears, and uncertainties around each spectrum.

I should mention something about the second dimension—the self-other-world-eros dynamic—that's come up in interviews and Q&A sessions. For the self to become imaginal, it doesn't need to be a figure in an image. You might have an imaginal figure simply doing its thing,

their thing in their own world and a person thinks, well, shouldn't I be in the image as well? Not necessarily—maybe, maybe not. Maybe it responds to you in your meditation, maybe you enter the image and become a figure in the image, but maybe not. What will happen in the infinite echoing and mirroring, and in the way this image mysteriously speaks to you even if you don't understand, is that it starts to infuse into the self-sense. Either right there in meditation or probably in other ways. Then the self-sense in life can become imaginal.

We get the sense that images are asking. We are born from images as opposed to images being born from us. Images ask something of me. We play with the idea that my deeper identity is somehow from the image. From the image I am expressing an image or images. I am asked by images to be their face in the world somehow, and that face is usually not literal. It's refracted in very subtle ways. You understand?

So in terms of the self, other, world, eros dimension, don't put that—how that might open up the range in terms of self—it's not necessarily so tight and obvious. Okay? Is that everything?

Okay, so that's the general introduction. We're only going to have time, as I said, this morning to pick two of those and explore them. But bear them in mind, this list of five, if you go on with this kind of practice, as just something you might want to let yourself explore at different times.

So Catherine's going to introduce how we're going to explore two of those lists of five.

CHAPTER 164

Of Hunger and Humility

Rob Burbea · 16 min

> *In this closing talk from a retreat on the foundations of soulmaking dharma, Rob Burbea reflects on the natural unfolding of soul-making practice and the delicate balance required to support it. He emphasizes that soul-making is inherently natural to the soul—it's what the soul wants and does when we don't obstruct it. The talk explores the five ranges of experience that naturally expand in soulmaking practice: the lattice elements, self and world, eros and logos, energy and embodiment, and the spectrum from apparent pathology to wholeness.*
>
> *Burbea offers practical guidance for those drawn to this path, emphasizing two essential qualities: insatiable hunger for the dharma and careful humility in discernment. He discusses how easily soul-making can be diverted into familiar psychological or meditative paradigms, requiring skillful discrimination to maintain authentic imaginal perception. The teacher stresses the importance of daily exposure to beauty as fundamental to soul-making practice, noting that going deeply into beauty and going deeply into soul-making are essentially the same endeavor.*
>
> *The talk concludes with reflections on the fragile nature of the relational field (temenos) needed for soul-making practice, especially when practiced with others. Burbea emphasizes that this vessel requires careful tending through relational skill, honest communication, and sensitive responsiveness to conditions that support or hinder the imaginal dimension of experience.*

Can you hear me okay?

I think the first thing I want to say—we're not going to talk for very long now—is simply thank you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for showing up in the full sense of the word, in the ways that you did, for engaging, for playing, for working hard. Just thank you for your practice. It's very beautiful.

I'm quite aware that some of you will have come and thought, "Yeah, thanks, it's interesting, but maybe it's not really for me." And that's really important—to make that distinction, and make that choice, and have that freedom, and follow what calls you.

Some of you might feel that there are some things here you could use, and some of the ideas and probably more some of the practices we've been offering will be added to your repertoire of what you do in practice in a somewhat piecemeal way. And that's fine too, of course. You're very welcome to that.

And then there'll be some of you for whom there's just something about what we've been talking about and what we've been trying to unfold together here that feels completely natural. There's something—it's almost like putting words to something that several people have said—putting ideas and words and a kind of framework for what the soul does anyway, or was doing anyway, or was pulled to. And you'll be hungry for more and hungry for all of it, and hopefully there are teachings and practices that you can begin to get your bearings and navigate with in all this.

I would say that there is a way in which what we've been talking about is really natural. In our language we say soul-making is natural to the soul. It's what the soul wants. It's what it does. And there's a way in which the path of soul-making expands and grows very naturally. It's what it does if we don't block it, if we don't get in the way. So in a certain sense, what we've been doing is just highlighting some of the ways we can get in the way, and some of what can possibly unfold.

I can't even remember now—was it yesterday morning we talked about the five ranges? That list, which I think is now up there, which I just ran through very briefly—five possible domains in which the range of our experience and our openness can extend further. We talked about each of the elements in the lattice and the constellation, the lattice itself. We talked about its spreading along the axes of self and world. We talked about the range of eros and the range of logos, the range of ideas which we can even entertain or play with or allow—ideas of what a human being is, what existence is, what kind of world or cosmos we live in or create or discover, the whole edifice of flexible metaphysics. We talked about the range of energy-body experience and sense, and we talked about the range of what we might call apparent pathology to apparent non-pathology.

One thing about that process—and I didn't really say it, though I think some of you understood—is that those ranges will unfold naturally as well. That's just the natural movement of soul-making.

I hope you didn't come away yesterday with the idea that we need to force these, that we need to push. "Right, range. Let's push faster. If I'm a little bit scared of the dark end of things, or I'm really not sure about this apparently pathological aspect, now I have to

really try and have some really dark, weird images." No—it's just to be aware of what my tendencies might be, ways I might be closing, just even my conception of what's possible or available or right. Not to force, not to push, just to be aware.

Sometimes in this process of natural growth, there are periods where things just break open—they explode open, the vessels are shattered, and a whole new range opens up of experience, of perception, of energy, of idea, of eros, all of it. And there are periods where we're just at a certain place, a certain range, and we need to be there for a while. Maybe really a while. Just safe, consolidated—not really a plateau, but just at that range. So really not to force it. There's something very natural here that needs to be respected.

At the same time as there's a naturalness to soul-making and the opening of that perception, have you had the sense this week—and just even in your life, but also the experience this week—of just how easy it is and how common it is for us to get in the way of that natural opening of soul-making? So easy. Either through limited ideas, through limiting energy, through limiting eros, through limiting the possibility of image in any of these ways—how easy it is and how common it is for us to be working either in meditation or even intentionally with another person around soul-making with that intention, and how easy it is for it to divert very easily into something that's close, maybe something that's familiar to us about a way of practicing, about a way of thinking of practicing, about certain psychological ideas or ways of relating to dukkha or whatever—all of which are absolutely lovely and really valuable.

So there's this balance between what's natural and what might be asked if you're interested and have fallen in love a little bit with all this. There's the ask of this kind of respect for natural unfolding, and the kind of care of discernment—oh, when are we now actually in a different paradigm? When am I, in my experience, in my way of looking, in a slightly different paradigm? Not to say one is better or worse, but different. And there's a kind of care of discrimination that's possible there.

Also, when we're together in different ways—in groups or two people or whatever—and there's the intention for soul-making, how much of the potential there depends on the care of the relational field, and that something in the relational field can also prevent, block, divert.

So if we use this idea—I said it earlier in the retreat—rather than a black and white between it is soul-making or isn't, have I got it, have I not got it, it is imaginal or it isn't, hopefully there can be this kind of idea of like it's a direction. We can open up more and more what we might call the fully imaginal or the genuinely imaginal. So we avoid all this kind of judgment and we instead bring in a kind of care and discernment.

Soul-making, soulfulness includes heartfulness, definitely, but it's more than that. It includes love and metta, yes, but it's more than that. It includes certainly using the imagination, or being allowed to use the imagination, but it's more than that, it's more involved than that. And it includes being open to desire, but it's more than just that phrase.

And so there's a kind of invitation for those of you that are drawn or interested. There's the care of discrimination, not for the sake of better, worse, advanced—it doesn't matter. It's more this idea that something can seem a little narrow, but going through that narrowness just for a little while then opens up other reaches that wouldn't otherwise be available.

I guess this is true for this kind of dharma, what I'm about to say, but I'd say it's true for any kind of dharma that you love, whether it's emptiness or whatever it is. If people ask me, what advice can you give? What would be helpful? Two words: Be insatiable. Be ravenous.

Practically, you know, you guys have heard lots of advice about taking care of your practice outside and perhaps we'll talk a bit more about that. But in relation to soul-making, the importance of exposing yourself to beauty every day—in our culture, it takes the lowest rung in the pecking order above functionality, convenience, comfort, economics. Soul-making, you might also say going deeply into beauty is the same as going deeply into soul-making. It's the same thing. They can almost be interchangeable words—the fullness and the richness of what beauty really means to the soul.

There's something about taking care every day. What does that mean? Some exposure to beauty—art or nature or ideas or dharma or whatever.

And again, you might have sensed this already. I mentioned it just a minute ago. If it is soul-making that you're drawn to, and if some of your practice of soul-making is attempting to do that together—in groups, or two people, or whatever it is, in relationship—then how much that needs a kind of care and alertness and sensitivity and responsiveness, to care for the relational field, the temenos, in which soul-making can happen.

It needs a vessel, it needs a crucible. And this vessel, this crucible of soul-making—just even in ourselves, but even more so when we're with other people—is so easily shattered. It's a fragile thing. And it's asking a lot of us that care, relational skill, willingness to speak what's maybe difficult, speak one's honesty, work it through with another person.

So we have to be really interested. This question of—this was almost soul-making, or it was completely not soul-making, and what makes the difference? How? This is a question for discernment. We're really interested in, how do I care for, what are the conditions to care for that vessel? It's a living vessel, this temenos.

And so it can be really interesting, rather than judging myself—oh, I can't really—or judging another person—it's their fault, if they weren't here, it would be soul-making. Care. Care and discernment, and care in the discernment. It's a living, living thing, this vessel, this temenos.

Even this balance of attention thing that we just touched on so briefly—several people have told me we could have spent a whole week with that. How easy it sounds and how hard it is for human beings, especially in our culture. So actually, just even developing one's kind of sensitivity and skill with that is actually part of this vessel and how difficult that is, how challenging.

We'll talk more about that in a minute.

So if you're in love with this or some other kind of path of practice of Dharma, be ravenous. Be insatiable and be careful—the two together. And care means bringing all your intelligence, bringing all your sensitivity, bringing all your interest to discern what helps and what doesn't help and what are the conditions. And this is again, like all of this, it's an open-ended investigation. Bring your creativity, allow your humility.

So we can have both, and then the insatiability and this humility—which kind of contains the interest in learning to discern—they form two wings that balance each other. That balance each other. Something fierce almost in us, hungry, and something so exquisite and humble in its care. Hunger and humility, both.

And together, with these wings, the reach is open—where we can fly, where we can walk, where we can dig.

That's all I'm going to say. Thank you again for your practice, for your beauty.

CHAPTER 165

This Retreat

Rob Burbea · 1h02

> *Rob Burbea and Catherine McGee open this intensive soul-making retreat with remarkable honesty and care. Rob shares openly about his metastatic cancer diagnosis and uncertain prognosis, creating space for the sangha to process this reality together. The session begins with Catherine's powerful welcoming that honors all participants in their full diversity and particularity - welcoming LGBTQ+ practitioners, people of color, those with health challenges, and all marginalized identities often overlooked in dharma spaces.*
>
> *The teachers establish this as an advanced retreat where participants share responsibility for steering their own learning journey, focusing on long-term practice development rather than prescribed content. Rob emphasizes that all soul-making concepts - eros, logos, energy body - are ongoing journeys rather than fixed understanding, encouraging openness to deepening rather than binary thinking about 'getting it' or not.*
>
> *The session includes embodied practices of blessing and divine perception, with participants moving through the retreat space seeing themselves and others as angels, as theophanies - faces of the divine. These practices establish core soul-making principles: that we are not limited to conventional perceptions of self and other, that blessing is our birthright, and that practice involves daring to see poetically and imaginatively. The retreat opens with profound teaching about holding death and life, illness and practice, vulnerability and divinity as all part of the sacred terrain of soul-making.*

Good evening, everybody. Welcome. I see lots of really familiar faces, and a good number of people that I don't know as well. So welcome.

Rob is hopefully coming to join us tonight. I think you all know from either knowing him very, very well—which many of you do—or maybe knowing him less well, but from the letter that we sent out, that his health is variable. He'll say more about that. But he's in the loo right now, and that will be some of what happens during this retreat. It's quite challenging for him, as some of you know very well. But he'll come and join us.

Welcome, my siblings in birth, aging, sickness, and death. Hello. I want to welcome us here in this, our universal greeting. We set the table here. And maybe have a look around. This isn't going to be one of those eyes-down, all-on-your-own retreats. Do have a look around at your fellow siblings, sisters, brothers, siblings. These are the ones this

week we will be create-discovering with, learning how to make soul, how to expand and restore open senses of sacredness, learning how to engage perception in ways that bring more beauty.

Here we are. This is us. And welcome to all of you in all the ways that you know yourself to be—all the particularities, all your peculiarities, all your strengths, vulnerabilities, sensibilities, blind spots, gifts. As you know, as probably all of you long-term Dharma practitioners do, the Buddha Dharma has not always had an easy relationship with particularities. It's very, very good at understanding how we are the same.

Oh, welcome! I think people might want to say hello before I carry on. Welcome to Rob in all his particularities and peculiarities.

Yes, I want to welcome us in this too. And in a moment, I will hand over to Rob. But welcome in all the things that make you you. And I particularly want to welcome aspects or ways you know yourself that are not always guaranteed a welcome wherever you go—whatever they are, really, really welcome.

Whether they're overlooked or undervalued or actually oppressed here or in the wider culture: welcome to all members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer community. Welcome to all people of color. Welcome to people of all genders. Welcome to all people, whether visible or not visible, who are in states of non-optimal health. This looks like a pretty middle-class place here and is—welcome if you identify as working class. Welcome to those of us in this group who are at the very young end or at the very older end of our ages. All heritages, all first mother languages that are closest to your heart that we may never know a word of, welcome. All religious and ethnic groups, welcome.

And whoever I've missed, I'm sorry. Tell me after. Maybe you can call it out now, actually. Welcome. And to all of us in everything you bring here—all the things that make you you, your heritages, your gifts, your sensibilities, your aspiration, your courage, your nobility, your love of soul-making Dharma, your desire, because you wouldn't have gotten here without that. Welcome and bring it all to the table here.

We need for the soul-making dharma all our particularities, all of them. Let's learn to welcome each of them, even the ones in us that may not always look welcome, so that we can learn to make soul for whoever and to serve whoever and whatever you serve in your life, to see all of this in ways that bring more beauty, more richness, more meaningfulness, more sacredness. Let's do this together for whoever and whatever you serve.

Thank you for that beautiful welcoming, Catherine. Hi, everyone. I'm really happy to be here. It's really lovely and very touching. So I also want to welcome you in the fullness of your being, in all your beauty, your beauties. All the ribbons of your glory, even if they seem a bit tattered sometimes or like they've fallen off. All the colors of your soul, including the muddy colors, the shit, the difficult. All welcome and all can be made into soul.

So I'm really happy to be here with you. Really, really happy. It's like a real privilege. I don't know when Catherine and I started talking about this retreat and thinking about what we might do, but it was certainly some months before I got this new diagnosis, which I'll come back to in a minute, by the way. We were starting to feel and we wanted this retreat to be an opportunity and a space and a kind of crucible where in a way you could make it yours more. You can make it tailored to you and your needs and your soul needs and the trajectory of your practice, not just through this week, but with a long-term view in mind.

Some of you, not everyone here, but some of you here will be involved in these practices, these kinds of teachings and related teachings for maybe decades, really. What is it to think about that long-term trajectory? And what's needed? And what do I need? And where perhaps are my blind spots? Or what are the areas that need development or more understanding? It's actually, in my experience as a teacher, it's quite a rare faculty. It's a rare ability for a person, for a practitioner to actually be able to discern what it is that needs growing.

What it is that needs working on.

Sometimes we have so many ideas—"I really need to work on my focus. My mind just drifts"—and we buy into that. We simply believe such an idea, and it might be true. But it's actually quite a maturity, quite an ask to even have that kind of discernment. It doesn't have to be solely introspective; it can be in dialogue with teachers and friends. But to actually have that capacity—what's needed here? What's needed on this path?

I don't know about the word "advanced." I think we've used it occasionally. But certainly these soulmaking teachings ask a lot. They're demanding. They're subtle, deep, sophisticated, difficult, challenging, stretching. Definitely. And a lot is required. A lot of aspects need developing.

So the encouragement for this week—and I'll explain a bit more—is for you to really start thinking about that. We put it out in the application forms: start thinking about your process in this trajectory. Hopefully, in a way, you will lead the retreat. It comes

from you, and we'll be offering material, but we'll be responding. There will be interchange based on your sense of navigation, discernment, need. So that's already asking for a step up, and it was there in the application form. It is demanding.

There's an enormous amount to it. It's complicated. "What the hell are they talking about? All these words." Don't get overwhelmed. Really don't get overwhelmed. Think of it as a journey. Think of it as something that can and will happen gradually. It will.

All of this—every concept we use, whatever it is: eros, logos, humility—all of them are a journey. It's very easy to think, "I don't get that," as if it's an on-off switch. We'll talk more about this, but it's a journey.

If you can somehow cultivate this art of having that openness: "However much I know, there's more about a particular thing." Do I think I know everything about eros? Forget about it. Even the teacher doesn't know—get a better teacher, because I don't know. I know some.

What happens with soulmaking is that it opens more. It opens. The very thing that comes alive, that comes alive with soul, that is made into soul—whatever it is: eros, body, energy, emotion, relationality—all of that starts to unfold and become unfathomable. It becomes more, and it becomes a journey.

So please, when the inner critic just wants to give you a red cross marked "failed"—and sometimes we need that humility of "I don't quite understand that yet"—don't fall into extremes. On one side, not lumping things into "Oh, I know what that is because I took a course in shamanism a few years ago and it's just like that," or "It's just like whatever this or that." That would be one extreme. The other extreme is to simply say, "I failed. I don't understand this or that."

Every aspect of these teachings is a journey. Do you understand what I mean? If we can see it that way, it's a kind of middle way. There's something much more soft, much more open, much more of an adventure—and kind of unended, unending.

So certainly we think about what comes up this week, and of course we deal with that. But also, if we can start thinking about the long term. In a way, this gives—we're giving you a responsibility here. We're going to share responsibility.

This shift in responsibility creates something much more organic. Rather than me arriving with predetermined material, we're crafting this retreat together as it unfolds. It's your retreat as much as ours—perhaps more so.

We envision theme days emerging naturally—perhaps a day exploring the energy body, or diving into questions of Eros, or whatever calls to us collectively. You can leave written questions on the board, and we'll weave them into the teachings, allowing the dharma to respond to what's actually alive in our community right now. These themes won't be rigid categories—nothing in the dharma ever is—but fluid investigations that interpenetrate and inform each other.

This collaborative approach was our vision months ago, but it's become more necessary given my current medical situation. The combination of medications I'm taking has profound effects, not just physically but mentally. There are times when clarity simply dissolves, when I couldn't articulate a teaching even if I tried. So rather than preparing extensive new material as I might have previously, I'm inviting you to help steer our direction.

I want to be transparent about the practical implications. My treatment schedule means I have a week off chemotherapy during the retreat—a fortuitous timing that seems to repeat itself. However, I remain on other medications that create unpredictable fluctuations throughout each day. I may need to leave suddenly, perhaps even mid-teaching. I may not be available for interviews. The entire schedule will need to remain fluid, responsive to how I'm feeling moment by moment.

Please don't be alarmed if I simply get up and walk out—it's likely just a practical need, nothing dramatic. But I do feel some apprehension that my responses may occasionally be less attuned or clear than usual. My mind is sometimes affected in ways that concern me. I hope this won't be an issue, but I want to acknowledge the possibility and ask for your patience if my usual clarity wavers.

Since some of you may not know the full scope of my health situation, let me offer a brief update. After three years on low-dose chemotherapy and a period of remission, the cancer has returned extensively—what we call metastases, meaning it has spread throughout my body with multiple tumors in various locations.

In medical terms, when this type of cancer metastasizes, it typically signals that the end is approaching. Most doctors would say I'm in the dying process now. The timeframe remains uncertain—it could be months, it could be years. There's always the possibility I might die of something else entirely far in the future. The uncertainty is complete, which is both challenging and, in its own way, liberating.

That's it. Just in case people—it would be a bit strange if people didn't know that was the case.

Maybe let's pause here, actually. So it's a lot to put into the field. Let's pause with hearing this in this context. Even though this is probably not news, in this arena, it's news to be in physical community together.

So take a moment to breathe with your body. You don't have to close your eyes. You can still do what you need. See what needs to be tended to and cared for in your heart and soul right now. And you may still wish to be seeing Rob, or not, with your eyes open or closed, as you need.

Check you have your breath. And see if there's anything in your heart and soul that needs your tending, your tender care right now.

Maybe somebody might have just frozen a little bit. And if there's a freeze in your body and soul, tend to this. Wait for your body to breathe. Because we're here in this setting, and it's where we're practicing. You know, it was quite hefty to apply for this retreat—it was a lot of work. We love this work, we love this soulmaking dharma, this gift that Rob has brought forth for us. So tending to whatever the responses are in this context is part of tending not just to yourself—it's part of tending to the field of this retreat.

So now, or at times during the retreat perhaps, if this calls you—Rob, Rob's health, your relationship with this, his possible dying, his probable dying, his maybe not dying. Whatever it elicits: your heartbreak or your grief, your love, your commitment to practice, your steely determination, your inquiry into death. Whatever is brought forth this week, that's part of tending to the field of this retreat. It's part of tending to each other, actually.

Have you got your breath? And if we can care for this—if it comes up for some of us, it will be more intimate than for others. There's no right or wrong about that. We're all in different places in the constellation with this. But if we can care and tend, then we may be with these beautiful teachings, with the lenses that we're learning to see with and sense with—that maybe this news and this truth can become part of the soul of this retreat.

Learning to see whatever arises in ways that bring more sacredness, more meaningfulnesses, more dimensionality, more beauty. Because death and someone's death are absolutely the terrain of soulmaking.

So breathe with whatever's here and what we thought. Do you want to say anything else, or I was going to make a space where we could just be quiet? Do you want to add anything?

Okay. So let's just pause. And we thought that we would offer a couple of things at this point—that we can just be together in community with this, with Rob. Wish you well. And I'll offer a compassion chant. And if you know it, some of you will know it, please join in if you wish. It's not one that we've done before in this group. But join in if you wish and you wish to bring your voice to it. And let whatever is here for you just be here. And we'll meet together on this channel.

And thank you for opening with this, Rob.

Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum, Om Mani Padme Hum
Om Mani Padme Hum

We'd like to give you the chance, if you wish, for a few minutes to meet in a group of three. The thought was that you'll have two, three minutes with your two colleagues witnessing, where you can just say how you're doing tonight in arriving here. Express anything that needs to be expressed that may or may not have to do with our beloved friend and teacher. It may, but it doesn't have to. Anything that wants to be expressed in your soul to help you to arrive.

Rob's going to share—absolutely, anything that wants to be expressed in arriving here. I really want to get into this work, or gosh, I'm really—you know, whatever is here. I'm really excited to be here, I'm excited and I'm... et cetera.

So if you would like to do this, find yourself in a group of three and then just be silent, and I'll guide us into this exercise. If you don't want to do it, that's fine. Just opt out. If you do, turn around and find some others. So three, sit in a triangle.

And sit a little bit formally so you have access to your body and your energy body.

There's no right way you have to be here. You might be super excited and full of joy and enthusiasm. Please remember we're here in our particularity. We're not trying to see how it is I'm supposed to be. Really important.

The two witnesses will have your eyes open. And the person who is going first, you can have your eyes open too, but you don't have to lock in contact. But you are in relationship, right? So open your eyes, just see your two companions, say hi in that strange

way that it's tricky with three because one of you looks one way while the other one's looking the other direction. If you can do it easily without a major meeting, one of you willing to go first just raise your hand to the others. If you're willing to speak first, yeah. And why don't you nominate who's going to go second and then it's already sorted. And then that leaves the third, okay.

Be there with your eyes open for these two people. These people have filled in a hefty application form to come on this retreat like you. They know this work enough that they know what their weaknesses are and the places they want to move into more. These are people who love this work, okay? So I'll time it. I'll ring the bell and it's not a conversation—just bear witness to your colleague. Then I'll ring the bell after three minutes. Please begin.

[Bell]

Thank you. Thank your partners. Don't worry if you didn't say the definitive thing. It's okay.

So we'd like to do a little exercise also as part of arriving and setting up the retreat and being here in as full a way as possible. And it's going to involve us moving around freely in the hall. So we're going to need to move all the mats and the cushions to the side. We'll probably be doing this several times—well, we may be doing this several times on the retreat. Maybe there's a clever way of doing that. There is a clever way of doing this. I'm sure you know what that is. Yeah, so let's do the clever way. Let's really fill the room so we use the space.

Okay. Let's just start by feeling the connection with the earth, with the floor, in the feet. And keeping that root of connection, opening the awareness to the whole body. What is this body? We tend to think of the body in ways we've been taught to think of the body. What is this body standing here? Whole body awareness. Open to the possibility of the sense of the body, of the energy body.

Opening also to the space. Many of you know this place. Many of you know this hall. Many of you love this place. Many of you love this hall. It is already soul for you. It's already imbued with soul. What is it to stand here in the mystery of your body, the open-ended mystery of your body, the possibility, the poetic possibility of your body in this room with the magic of the room and everything that has transpired over the years in this hall?

The walls and the floor and the carpet and the space itself is blessing your body. There is some influx, mysterious influx, multidimensional, unfathomable. The floor is blessing you, blessing your body, blessing your arrival here, blessing your being, bless-

ing your practice. What does that mean? Your mind doesn't have to figure it out. Wishing you well, wanting you to know something about yourself, wanting you to open the doors to create and discover more about yourself.

And let yourself, with the body awareness, with the connection with the earth, with the connection with the space and the room and the history, also be aware of the others, your colleagues, your fellows on this week. Who are they? Let yourself move around the room in whatever way you would like. You can make eye contact as much or as little as you like, but be aware of each other.

What would it mean and is it possible to bless each other? We see, we think of human beings, complex certainly, but we limit what they are. What is it to know each other as angels? The mysterious roots of your being are in divinity.

Don't worry about getting it right. Let yourself move however you want to move. You may want to be still. You may want to walk. You may want to dance. Let yourself bless each other. Let yourself feel blessed, even if you're not even sure what blessing means. Let your body receive blessing. The mystery of your body receives the mystery of angelic blessing.

And let it pour out of you—pour out of your pores, pour out of your body, pour out of your gestures. And if that comes out in dance, let it be so. And if it comes out in stillness, let it be so.

And the land—the luscious, rich, fecund Devon countryside—blessing you too. There's an influx from the land, from the night sky. All of this pours into us in ways that we can only sometimes even vaguely get a sense of. Don't try to figure it out with your mind. Blessing each other and receiving blessings from each other—no such thing as doing it wrong.

If it weren't for these angels here right now in the room, we wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be here. This wouldn't be happening. Your practice, your retreat, is supported on so many levels by each other, by the hidden dimensions of each other's being.

Don't believe a thought that doubts whether you can bless. "Who am I to bless?" It's your birthright to bless and to be blessed. It's who you are—your roots in divinity. Each of us a theophany, a face of the divine.

Your whole life, your whole narrative—your birth, your story, your death—it's all here. It's all angels, all face of angel. Yes, impermanent, but eternal in some mysterious way. If none of this makes sense, just let it be poetic. Let it be poetic suggestion, imagination.

You know, playing with these perceptions of angel, of being angel, of blessing, of having one's roots in divinity—it shapes and informs how we see ourselves as practitioners. The sense of possibility, the sense of magic, of wizardry and witchcraft. Not just me trying to watch some sensations at the tip of my nose. Dare to see yourself poetically in that way, imbued with magic, with the divine, with the bigger nature. Blessing each other's practice.

So just coming into stillness for a few moments, again the feet and the whole body. And we'll talk more about this, but what do we mean by body? And aware of each other, everyone in the room, the space, the land, the night. All of it alive as theophany, as face of the divine, as expression of the Buddha nature.

And just silently welcoming, welcoming everyone here on the retreat, blessing their practice, blessing the possibilities of their practice, blessing the possibility of knowing oneself and knowing others as angel, as image, as divine. So in this moment you are seen that way, you are sensed that way by others, you are blessed and blessing.

CHAPTER 166

A Rite of Angels

Rob Burbea · 1h04

> *In this deeply moving dharma talk and ceremonial practice, Rob Burbea guides participants through 'A Rite of Angels' - a transformative exploration of recognition, blessing, and sacred perception. The session begins with acknowledging the foundations of our practice: Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha, and the gifts we have received from the tradition stretching back 2,500 years. Burbea emphasizes the importance of recognizing our own efforts and dedication in practice, countering the habitual tendency toward self-criticism and inadequacy.*
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> *The heart of the session involves a ceremonial practice where participants form concentric circles, with some moving through the center while others offer blessing and recognition. Through the chanting of mantric seed syllables - 'Oṃ Āḥ Hūṃ' (representing body, speech, and mind) and 'Amitā' (limitless, immeasurable) - participants explore seeing themselves and others as manifestations of Buddha nature or 'angels.' This practice works with multiple levels: basic welcoming and mettā, recognition of each person's unique relationship to dukkha and the world's suffering, and the profound seeing of Buddha potential and divine nature.*
>
> *Burbea skillfully weaves together themes of soul-making, the capacity to hold eros and intensity without discharge, and the transformative power of being truly seen and blessed by others. The practice offers both a remedy to self-diminishment and an exploration of how sacred perception can reveal the angel-nature inherent in all beings, supporting both individual awakening and community connection.*

Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. Time and the timeless—time past, present, future, and the eternal, that which is beyond time. Not lasting forever, but beyond time.

Like all these things that we dwell on and explore, these words are loose and elastic and unfathomable in their mystery. So we know what Buddha means, we know what Dharma means, we know what Sangha means. And we think we know what time means. But all of them have depths and dimensions and mysteries that we can open up and journey into and discover more.

Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, time and the timeless.

So there's kind of two parts to this tonight. And right now, a bit more stillness and meditation. Maybe settle into your body. And feel that connection with the floor, with the earth, with the earth that supports you and supports your life.

And here we have Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, time past, time future. And in your heart, in your being, in your body right now, can you bring to mind a recognition, an acknowledgement of everything that your practice has and does rest on?

Not just today, but through the years of practice that you've been involved and you've devoted yourself and all your efforts and everything that you've put up with and everything that you've explored and all the stretching and all the challenges and all the dedication and the showing up. What has that relied on? What has that rested on? What have been the bases that we have received through the generosity of others, through the Buddha and his teachings, through the Sangha?

Sangha means the tradition, the lineage from the time of the Buddha, 2500 years or thereabouts. That whole stream of teachings still alive, still healthy and flourishing today, an influx into your life, into my life, into our practice. That Sangha, the Sangha of the tradition of teachers past, some of which you never have heard of or don't even realize are inflowing into your practice, the possibilities that open up for you, and teachers present.

And just let yourself be aware of that, of the immense gift of that. And we rest on this. It supports us, it has supported us, it will support us.

And on that basis, is there the possibility in your heart, in your soul right now to recognize also the great efforts that you have made in your practice? Showing up time and time again on the cushion, in the walking room, in daily life practice. Intent on cultivation of what is beautiful, what is good, what is noble. Devoted to kindness. Yes, we fail every day at that. Devoted to ethics. Yes, we fail every day at that. It doesn't matter.

The intention has been picked up, lost and picked up again and again in your life. Your care and your efforts, how you spend your time in those micro moments of choices on and off the cushion. So easy to dismiss this, belittle it, not see it, look only at the negative, what's missing, what's lacking, what's not good enough.

Can you let the heart soften in the face of that recognition, that fact actually, that fact about yourself, about your history, about your life. Time past, time present right now and time future. What you are committed to be, devoted to, intent on, aspiring to, how much goodness there is there, how much beauty, how much desire and eros, how much hard work.

Let your heart, even just for a moment, soften to be touched by that recognition, by that awareness, by that appreciation of yourself for all of that.

So this Buddha, Dharma, Sangha and time past and present is what feeds us. In a way time future feeds us as well, what we aspire to, what we're drawn towards like a magnet with the eros, with what we love, with what we aspire to. Just let yourself align with that, to know that, to rest on that, to look to that, inner and outer, personal and communal.

Each of us will take turns—perhaps three at a time—entering this circular corridor between the circles, moving however we feel called to move. Those forming the circles will witness this movement, and here you can choose your own level of engagement. There's no right or wrong way.

At its most fundamental, this is simply about welcoming. We're at the end of our first day together—it doesn't matter where anyone is in their practice. This is about welcoming each person onto the retreat, into this space, into this land, into the temporary community we've created for this week.

For those witnessing from the circles, this welcoming can manifest in complete silence. It might express itself through the body—a gesture, movement, even dance. There's also a musical element I'll explain shortly. But the essential gesture is one of welcome.

Sometimes we forget these truths about ourselves—we lose touch with the facts of our history, what we love, what we do and have done, the care and dedication we bring. We need reminding. And sometimes it's others who remind us. Sometimes it's through the eyes of others that we learn to see ourselves more clearly, more truly.

Do you understand? When I sense myself being looked at in a certain way, I can take in that looking, receive it, allow it to inform how I see myself.

This practice, like all good dharma, has multiple levels, all of which are optional. We can engage as deeply or as simply as feels right. The basic choreography is what I've described, though we'll revisit and refine as we go.

The second fundamental element is metta—well-wishing. Who is this person walking before you? Perhaps you know nothing about them, or perhaps you know more than you care to know. Regardless, you wish them well. Whatever their circumstances, whatever their struggles, you extend metta to them.

This loving-kindness might manifest through your established metta practice, silently reciting the traditional phrases. It could emerge through the chant we'll engage in together, which naturally embodies and expresses metta. Or it might flow through your body—radiating outward through presence, gestures, or movement. The form matters less than the genuine intention behind it.

So those witnessing in the circles offer both welcome and metta to whoever passes through their awareness.

Now, Catherine has raised an important point about the intensity that can arise in these practices. Sometimes charge builds up—the heightened awareness of being seen, the social dimension, the sheer amount of soul present in the space. Soul can be difficult to tolerate because it carries eros with it, as we touched upon earlier. This intensity in the energy body and emotions can create impulses to discharge that charge somehow.

Let me be clear: no particular action or vocalization is inherently right or wrong. Please don't fall into that kind of judgment. What matters is developing an ongoing exploration of how you relate to the charge of eros, soul, and heartfulness. When intensity builds, what happens? Do you automatically seek to discharge it?

If you find yourself wanting to discharge that energy, that's perfectly natural. But consider this an opportunity to investigate your psychological patterning. Perhaps you might experiment with holding that charge a bit more, accommodating it rather than immediately dissipating it. This becomes a lifetime inquiry rather than a matter of correct behavior.

Beyond welcoming and metta, there are two additional levels of awareness for those witnessing.

The third level recognizes that each person moving through the circle carries their own particularities—their unique history, their personal dukkha, the specific shapes and colors of their psychological suffering. But more than this, they also bear the particular ways that the world's dukkha is held and refracted through them. Each of us feels what's happening to our planet, to humanity, to all species, in distinctly personal ways. We respond differently, bear it differently, struggle with it differently, and are impacted by it uniquely.

You may not know the specific details of how someone carries the world's pain, how they struggle to tolerate it, or what they manifest in response. But you can recognize that their journey is unique, particular, and unfinished wherever they currently stand. The awareness of this uniqueness opens space for blessing their entire path.

This level expands beyond the people in this room to embrace the whole of humanity and all species sharing this planet. Somehow, this broader community enters our ellipse of awareness and care.

This naturally leads to the fourth level—the possibility of seeing each person as angel. For those witnessing from the circles, you might sense the being before you with such depth that you recognize their angelic nature. What does this mean? Simply that their image, their very essence, is rooted in the divine, in Buddha nature.

We could say instead that we see their Buddha nature—for now, let's use these terms interchangeably, though I offer this as poetic seed rather than theological doctrine.

The term "Buddha nature" has been used across the tradition in many ways over centuries, so its meaning encompasses quite a range. At minimum, it refers to the potential for awakening that exists within every being.

And any human being has the potential to become awakened just by virtue of the fact that the mind is impermanent and malleable. So no matter how messed up I am now, in time and over lifetimes, that can change and I can become awakened. So that's the minimum understanding.

If that's what you resonate with, great. You're seeing the Buddha potential in this person. At the other extreme of what Buddha nature has come to mean is something much more mystical and cosmic and mysterious. This person already is the Buddha in some way. The essence of their being is the Buddha, is awakened, is the cosmic Buddha, is the primordial Buddha. If that doesn't resonate, leave it. Find your pitch with all this. It's not right or wrong. It's part of the tuning that we're talking about.

The musical part goes with this. So as we're moving, there'll be a chant. Catherine and Chris are going to lead this chant. It's fairly simple.

What it can mean is we are all emanations of the primordial Buddha, particular emanations. The primordial Buddha needs these infinite varieties of faces, of expressions that we each are. And we recognize that. That's a certain level of it, a certain way of sensing another person.

We could also say, back to the potential thing, that so often with these kinds of practices we've been doing, it's really difficult. It's really a stretch. It relies on a lot. You need this skill, that skill, that skill, that skill. Sometimes we can feel like, well, I'm not going to be able to do all that. I can barely sit still for ten minutes or whatever. So we get into a self-view of ourselves as practitioners that's very limited and limiting sometimes.

Again, sometimes we need the eyes of others and the blessing of others to remind ourselves of our potential as practitioners. You can be creative. You can be playful in your practice. You can be at ease and delight in the realms of subtlety and improvisation and playfulness. You can have that range. Sometimes it feels like, not me, maybe these other people. So this is also a way we are being seen as having this tremendous potential of creativity, of playfulness, of wisdom, of responsiveness, of subtlety, of improvisation.

All right. The musical part. Last piece before we do this. It has two parts—a high part and a low part. Just see which you want to join in and you can change. Chris, do you want to start the low part?

The lyrics are very simple. The low part, the lyrics are om ah hum. Om ah hum. And om ah hum are mantric seed syllables of the body, speech, and mind. Om ah hum of the human being, but also of the primordial Buddha. If we are manifestations of that, that means this person is the manifestation. What they manifest through body and the form of their body and the actions of their body. What they manifest through speech. What they manifest through mind and intention and thought and creativity and perception. Om ah hum. The forms that manifest in our lives, through our lives. Om ah hum.

When Chris sings it, it's quite chunky and delineated and stately, because that's what form is. Forms make distinctions.

And there's a second part, which Catherine will teach us, and the lyrics for that are *amita*. *Amita* is a negative in Sanskrit. *Amita* means something like limit or measure. So *amita* means limitless, without measure, immeasurable. And it has connotations of emptiness.

So form and emptiness together. Whatever manifests in body, speech, and mind must take form, but it's also empty, and we never forget that. And the primordial Buddha and the body, speech, and mind of the primordial Buddha which manifests through us—also empty, also malleable, also limitless in its scope. So these are just poetic suggestions. Find your way in to relate to this however you like.

Chris will teach us the bass part, and then we'll do Catherine's part, and then we'll try to put them together and then we'll nail it.

So there's this cloth here just in front of where I'm standing. When you get back to where you started, then you just join the circle, and then you become a blesser again—a blesser, a welcomer, a lover, an angel. You understand?

So Chris will teach us the bass part. The body, the speech, and the mind are the primordial Buddha. Your body, your speech, your mind—blessed, unfathomable, mysterious.

And so let the soul, as much as you want to, whichever level you're resonating as we do this, let it express in these seed syllables, in your voice. Let it come out.

Now if we just listen to Chris do the bass and Catherine will sing the treble on top of it, you can learn that for those of you that want to sing that part. So just listen to Chris and Catherine together.

You're radiating and emanating *metta* through your body, through your voice, through the syllables, through your song, through your gesture, through silence, through your intention. And the person moving is moving however they want to move and receiving, receiving that.

So as always, it's an exercise in perception as much as anything else. I mean, just playing with these poetic perceptions, these soulful perceptions.

So we might have two or three people in the circle at the same time. Let's say two. We might even go around again or something.

So two volunteers to start, to be in the circle. Should we just start and go for it?

Just once, but take your time. We want it to—I've said this so many times, it's hard to make soul. It doesn't just happen, okay? So that means this thing about: Am I discharging? Am I going too quick? Am I going too slow? What's my attention doing?

So let's do this. Just try to do it as an experiment, as always, in a way that you feel that it's soulful, that it's soul-making somehow or other. If you need to sit, it's fine. It doesn't matter if the people in the circle are sitting or standing.

There's no obligation to go. If you don't want to, you can just stay in the outer circle. Simply gauge what's happening, how busy it is in there. If there are collisions and multiple angel pileups, just gauge that and let's see. Let's try.

So let's root first. Feel again, whether you're standing or sitting—I think standing is preferable if you can, but do what's comfortable for your body. Feel this earth that supports you. Feel your connection with the earth, organic life and organic sustenance, solidity, ground, bounty, gift.

Already there's blessing. You can bless the earth in gratitude. The earth blesses you up through your feet. And again, this hall and the walls here can bless you, hold you. The deep, dark, velvet night has its blessings too, right now, on body, on heart, on soul.

Then we are aware of each other, of this temporary community of a week, of how we hold and support each other, care for each other this week.

Let's start the chant and just, before anyone goes, before the first people enter, we'll be with the chant and the multiple meanings and whatever it might mean for you. Make it yours. Let your body and voice and soul resonate with all the richness of possible intentions and meanings there.

So Chris, when you're ready... Let the blessings radiate through your voice, your whole body emanating the magic of mantra from your whole body. It's coming from you and from beyond you. It comes from the earth. It comes from the sky. It comes from the tradition. From all our teachers. From the unseen beings. It's yours and more than yours.

Beautiful. And then, whenever you're ready, you can lean into it now. Include your body, whether you're witness or walker, however you like. Dance, gesture, stillness, whatever.

Angels are seeing you right now, looking on you with love, sensing more in you than you can even know, seeing you as angel, knowing your potential. Let yourself be touched by and delight in their recognition of your beauty. Yes, let yourself receive. Soak it up.

These manifestations of Buddha nature—you, with dazzling and limitless potential as a practitioner, as a meditator, as a soul. You know that angels are grateful for human beings, for what they manifest. They are grateful for your past, for what you're manifesting right now, for what you will manifest, for the particular shapes and colors. And that includes your dukkha, your pain. What breaks your heart and what's hard to bear. They love you for this. It's unique. Only you can bring this into the world. Only you have the duty to be you.

So some more people can come into the circle. It can hold a few more, I think. However you want to move.

Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha.

It's okay if you forget your potential, if you forget who you are. These angels have your back. They see you when you can't quite see yourself. They know you when your vision is limited.

Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha. Om Amitabha.

Om Amitabha.
Om Amitabha.
Om Amitabha.

Whatever difficulty, limitation, or contracted self-view arises—it can all be redeemed in soul, made into soul. The view of the angel is patient, unswayed by the contracted mind. Welcoming, loving, seeing deeply, holding something for others when they can't hold it themselves. Reminding, blessing—animal, angel, human—that we are Amitabha. Amitabha, celebrating this particular being, their sensitivities, their stories, their struggles, their joys and gifts.

Feel free to embellish if you feel comfortable.

When we have shame, an angel is unflinching in their gaze of mercy—merciful eyes. Peace.

Om. Aum Aum Aum Aum Aum. Ah.

Angels know your depth. Aum Aum Aum Aum.

Oma Oma Oma Oma Oma Oma. Beautiful. Oma. Om. Om.

Aum Aum Aum Aum Aum Aum. OM AH OM OM.

So if you think you might want to move around the circle, I'd encourage you to take the opportunity. If you want to move in the circle, now's the time.

Om. Om. Om. Om. Om. Om.

There are these possibilities for ourselves in life—not all the time, in and out, in and out of the possibility of perceiving oneself as angel, as reflecting, informed by, emanating angel Buddha nature, and seeing others that way. Knowing that you are blessed and that you can bless.

Thank you for that, everybody. Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 167

The Imaginal-Energy Body (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 1h17

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea explores the sophisticated concept of the imaginal-energy body as a cornerstone of soul-making practice. He clarifies that the energy body is not a fixed experience but rather a poise of awareness that allows infinite expansion of three interwoven aspects: felt sense, image, and idea of the body. Moving beyond conventional mindfulness of body, this approach opens possibilities ranging from ethereal samādhi states to rich imaginal experiences where the body might manifest as fire, wings, or angelic presence.*
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> *Burbea addresses practical concerns about feeling overwhelmed by the teachings' complexity, emphasizing kindness and the understanding that these practices unfold organically rather than linearly. He distinguishes the imaginal-energy body from concepts like auras through its non-reified nature - experiences are created and discovered rather than assumed to have inherent existence. The discussion covers navigation through energy body states as indicators of clinging or openness, the relationship between jhāna absorption and imaginal practice, and how psychological patterns manifest energetically.*
>
> *Throughout, Burbea emphasizes that this work extends far beyond traditional vipassanā approaches, incorporating emotion, narrative, mystery, and relational dimensions. The energy body becomes a vehicle for soul-making when approached with fullness of intention, whether in formal meditation, artistic expression, or daily life encounters.*

I know I already said this, but I'll say it again. I'm really happy to be here. It was Catherine's turn to give teachings this morning, but if it was my turn, I just felt like saying, I really love you. We have so much appreciation and delight in you and the beauty that's here and the richness of your souls and your dedication and your complications and your wonderfulness. I really love you.

We've got a couple of practical things. One is about the culture and ambience here. A lot of you will be used to or somewhat used to these soul-making retreats and the kind of vibe we have. Some of you less so and more used to vipassana retreats or standard insight meditation retreats where you may have either received a direct instruction from the teachers or picked up pretty quickly on the sort of cultural norms—where you don't make eye contact, and you sort of shuffle down the corridor slowly so it looks mindful. And it looks a bit miserable.

That's an option. You're welcome to do that. Sometimes we need to be more inner, right? We need to be—something's going on, it needs my attention. I don't want to be pulled out and into contact. The attention needs to be here, and it's fine. So if that's what's going on, you go into that mode. If it's for five minutes, five seconds, five hours, it's fine. It's part of the responsibility, responding to what's needed. Similarly, if you see someone else doing that, well, they have their reasons to do that.

But on these retreats, we're trying to be more open in every regard. And that includes with regard to each other and the heart's connection, the soul connection with each other. You can make eye contact. You can smile. Careful what happens though, of course. As Catherine was saying, do I then have to show up in a certain way? Like, this person's coming down the corridor, I have to give them what I imagine that they want. Just that smile is going to do this or that.

So you can open up that way, make that connection. Let the body be open, let the soul be open, let the heart be open, let the eyes be open. Be with each other. It's so precious, the sangha. A lot of soul making happens in relation, not just verbal relation. So let that be here. Like everything, any choice you make comes with its risks and costs. And the risk of doing that is you smile at someone and they just stare at you blankly. And okay, then I have to handle that. I have to be okay with that, right?

The relational field is for us very much part of the practice. We're not just kind of diving deep into some kind of atomized deconstruction of this psychophysical experience. Sure, that's great, that's wonderful, and it's not the whole thing.

Second practical thing is we will start putting up some interview lists. There'll be groups and one-to-ones. So there'll be a couple tonight after the evening session at about 8:30. Have a look. Again, for me, I'm just not sure how things roll. So I will offer as much as I can. And when I can't, it's because I feel like something's going on in body and mind that makes it pretty much not going to be helpful for you, or I'm just struggling somewhere or away at a doctor's appointment or whatever it is.

If you would like to meet to work with an aspect of your practice in a one-to-one meeting, please print your name. So if you want a one-to-one, it's about practice, something about practice, which means this kind of practice—formal practice or informal practice or soul-making practice in life. It's not just because you want to say hi or hang out or whatever. So if there's something, an aspect of your practice that you would like to work with or talk through or get some guidance on, put your name down and we'll try to get to you. One of us will try and get to you and we'll let you know when.

But that gives you also your responsibility to think about what is it that I want to explore? What is it that I feel I need some help with? You want to be quite specific.

Catherine will also offer groups, providing opportunities for both one-to-one sessions and group work—a chance to explore together.

Now, thank you for your wonderful questions. There were many of them, and they're truly great. We probably won't get to all of them, and there were a couple I couldn't quite read as well, but even among those I could decipher, we likely won't have time for everything. I've arranged them in an order that seems to have a natural thread running through, so we can weave them together meaningfully.

The first one isn't really a question—unless something is missing—but it's important nonetheless. It says: "Sometimes it feels like there is too much on offer and I get a bit lost and overwhelmed."

To whoever wrote this: you are not alone. There is a lot on offer. There is too much on offer in terms of—what?—am I going to have it all figured out by the end of the week? By the end of the year? No. There is indeed a lot.

First, it's really important to recognize this reality. Second, it's crucial to be kind to yourself. When I feel lost and overwhelmed, when I'm not keeping up, what does the mind do with that? "All these other people know exactly what's going on and they're totally on top of it, and it's just me," or "I'm a failure"—the inner critic emerges. Please really take care with the kindness. This is so important.

There is a lot. It does demand a great deal. It's very sophisticated. It asks much in terms of foundational practices upon which to then build and extend. To say otherwise would be ridiculous. Each of us is on our own journey with these practices, and that's completely fine. There's no race, no timeline. Please watch what the mind does with this, what the heart does with it. We need the foundation of kindness and compassion.

All of this might be difficult, but it's also delightful and lovely. As I think I mentioned in the last retreat, it's like having an enormous banquet laid out and then feeling completely overwhelmed. You don't have to eat it all at once. This has a special kind of preservative—not bad chemicals, but good ones. It will keep. It's here.

Each person might also have their particular order in which they unfold. There isn't necessarily a "first you do this, then you do that." Sometimes we make it sound like there is because when you teach, you have to present things in sequence, but it's not ne-

cessarily like that. It's more like a ball of wool, and you just—well, here's this strand sticking out that seems to be in my face and looks kind of interesting, so I'll pull on that one.

After a while, as I get the hang of this, I see: oh, it's connected to this other strand. And that starts to unravel that one. All aspects of the teachings are completely interrelated.

My suggestion: please take care of the kindness. Watch the conclusions that the mind makes about yourself. Practically speaking, if this resonates with you, just choose one piece—either something you can't avoid because you keep bumping into it, or something that's actually interesting to you. Something where you think, "Oh, I had a glimpse of something with that," or "That sounds really intriguing"—and just go for it.

If the whole week is spent on the energy body, great. If the whole week is spent on the energy body around emotions, fantastic. It's one piece of the teaching, and it's priceless. Absolutely priceless. And the rest? It's being recorded. It's out there. Don't worry.

So be practical, and things will unfold. Does that make sense? Really, really important—take your time. I know this as a dharma practitioner myself.

I know it as a musician. Learning so many different skills involved in being a musician—whether as a jazz musician or anything else—can be completely overwhelming. Take a little piece, put a little box around it, dive in and get creative and practice. It will start to suggest other things and expand. That's okay.

One question here is quite direct: What is the energy body? It's actually not that easy to answer.

Let's go back to something we're all familiar with—mindfulness of the body. We're used to practicing with the body in a Dharma context, so let's ask: What is the body, and what is it to be aware of the body? Let's leave the term "energy body" aside for a moment.

When you're a Dharma practitioner being mindful of the body, there are actually three interwoven aspects of bodily experience. When I'm mindful of the body or aware of the body, there is first a felt sense of experience or sensations, usually in this location here. That's one aspect—the felt sense or the sensations.

The second aspect, not always so talked about, certainly in insight meditation circles, is the image of that body—the image of what it is that I'm paying attention to. When I shut my eyes and the teacher says to be aware of the sensations of the feet or the sensa-

tions on the bum on the cushion, subtly or less subtly, there's an image. It's probably not an imaginal image; it's just an image, some kind of representation of this body. Notice I'm looking at Mary right now, yet in the back of my mind, there's still a kind of picture of this body, Rob's body. It's just part of my awareness. It has a certain form. In usual consciousness, it has the form of two arms and two legs and whatnot.

The third aspect is the idea of the body, the concept or the logos of the body. What is a body? Most of us are totally saturated and indoctrinated with a Western materialist view of the body. Wrapped up there will be a whole bundle of ideas about atoms perhaps, or solidity, or what matter is, what a body is. Maybe mixed with that are ideas of what constitutes an attractive body and whether mine is one or not.

So there's felt sense, image, and idea.

When we start talking about energy body, we're simply saying: let's take those three aspects and open them way, way up, so that the possible range of felt sensations becomes infinite. There's no limit to what the felt sense of this space might be.

Usually you stop a person on the street and ask what they're aware of in their body. Of course, most people are not that aware until they hurt themselves or experience some intense pleasure. With practicing mindfulness, you become more aware—oh yes, the bum on the cushion feels neutral. There's warmth, pressure, maybe a little tingling. There's a certain expansion of the range of awareness.

As you practice, as you open that up, the range gets much larger. So it could be anything. The felt sense might feel like completely empty space, or dense rock, or a kind of warm field of ethereal energy. It could be anything, absolutely anything.

So when we talk about energy body, that range opens up. The image, too. When I first started teaching about energy body, it was really more about that felt sense. I gave it the words "energy body" and "subtle body" to help encourage the range of experience to move more into this open, ethereal, harmonized, energized sense that tends to occur when there's samadhi or letting go.

But actually, we want the range even more than that, so that the image, too, of the body starts to open. I don't necessarily have to have this usual form that everyone would agree on.

I could have a body of fire. I could have the usual form, but it's bellowing fire from my mouth. I could have wings or be made of water. It's infinite—the image of the body. So the body itself is given permission and possibility to become imaginal. The imaginal body. Does this make sense?

When I started using the words "energy body" in my teaching, it was in the context of teaching samadhi, jhana practice and samatha, and teaching emptiness. And that, as I said, tends towards a certain range of experience. Now we're doing soul-making practice. We keep all that as possibility and we add an infinite range, absolutely infinite range of the image. So we can talk about the imaginal body or the poetic body—those were two terms that Justin, who's not here, suggested a little while ago. The imaginal body or the poetic body. Does that resonate?

So there's the felt sense that has opened its possible range. The image of the body has opened its possible range. And the idea of the body has opened its possible range. Meaning I'm not—I include, yes, atoms and chemicals and biochemical processes, of course, all that that we're schooled in and used to, but I'm not limiting it to that.

In a way, the energy body is really an attitude more than an experience. It's a poise of the awareness that allows an openness, allows an opening of the range of the felt sense, of the image, of the ideas of the body. To include our usual conventional ones that everyone on the street would agree with and every mainstream dance practitioner would agree with. But it opens up beyond just that. Does this make sense?

So it's a curious thing. Someone asked why I mentioned before that I wished I had called "energy body" by a different name—what would I have called it instead and why? Well, a couple of things there. One is, actually not just with the word "energy body," but also with the words eros and image and soul—I don't know, any of these words we use. I wish if I could go back in time, we just had different words right from the beginning, because it's possible that someone has studied something, studied eros in a different context where it means something slightly different. It means something different than what we mean, or imaginal, or image, or soul.

So that's one of the reasons—it would be easy, and I think it's quite common, to just because words are the same assume that we're talking about the same thing. And then what happens is a certain direction gets washed over or diluted or mixed with other directions. Not better, not worse, but just different. There are certain possibilities that will open up through this path, where we're talking about the energy body, where we're talking about imaginal and soul, that won't actually open, whether you've done it in your psychotherapeutic training or shamanistic training or this or that, tantra, whatever. Not better, not worse. Some overlap, but different.

And so if we're not a little careful with words, there's a way it can all just be, "Oh, I know that." And something collapses and gets confused and diluted. So that's one of the reasons.

The other reason is just what I just said. I used the words "energy body" and "subtle body" originally because it was in the service of samadhi experience and unfabricating of perception, emptiness experience, which tends towards very ethereal, very open, harmonized, etc., and the kind of blurring of the form of the body, so that the boundaries dissolve. It's just a kind of field of light, for instance, or a field of pleasure. It's great as one portion, but if we want to extend the range into more the imaginal body and the poetic body, then we have to kind of stretch these words.

All these words that we're using—I've said this before—whatever they are, eros, humility, soul, they have to be loose and elastic. There's a balance between them needing to be very precise and differentiated, what we mean, and then actually stretching as our experience grows and they become infused with soul.

So back to what I said before. We could talk about this energy body as really "energy body awareness"—it's a kind of poise of the attention. A kind of stance or attitude or modulation of the attention that allows rather than shuts down the range of possibility. So it's curious. It sounds like it's a thing, the energy body, and it must be a certain experience. No, really it's more a kind of awareness. You understand?

So that's another reason why I use the wrong words sometimes. The energy body is more on the subject side of things, while the object side—the range of what can be experienced—can be huge. It's a poise, a stance, an attunement that allows an expansion of the range of sense, felt sense, image, and idea of what we call body. On top of that, it's also a poise that is more particular and that at any time attunes itself to what is appearing.

This is a little more difficult to describe, but it's almost like... you know, if I say I'm going to look at that notice on the wall over there—I can't quite see what it is—I put my attention in a certain location. But that's not quite an attunement. An attunement is something more to do with the modulation or delicacy of the attention.

Sometimes when you're listening for something delicate, it's not that you have to scrunch up and force your attention. Actually, you need to somehow make your hearing attention more delicate. Something similar happens with the energy body. There's a kind of poise that needs to be commensurate with, in tune with, what the experience is. If what's happening is I'm practicing and there's a lot of lightness and ethereality in this space, that actually takes a kind of delicacy of attention. It's a delicate perception which needs a kind of delicate attention.

When we say energy body, we mean this kind of poised stance that allows an open range—that doesn't box it into what we've been taught or what we're used to in terms of felt sense, image, or idea—but that also potentially tunes to what's happening now in a helpful way. Either helpful meaning it's supporting the samadhi, helping me navigate, helping me sense if I'm letting go or if I'm craving. And also helpful in terms of the soul-making. So tuned how? Well, tuned in a helpful way—either for soul-making or helpful in terms of letting go.

How has my experience of the energy body deepened over time, and what are examples of how shifting the experience of the energy body shifted the range of image? Well, maybe I'll pick up on what I said before. When I started with the energy body, I learned it from Ajahn Geoff—some of you know Ajahn Thanissaro—in relation to breath meditation. It was very much to do with samatha, developing samadhi and jhana. I also did a little qigong and sort of put those two together and just started experimenting on my own. But it was in the service of that.

So the range of experience that I had, because that was my idea and because those were my intentions, stayed pretty much within that realm of possibility. Ethereality, density, contraction, openness, harmonization, energization, and so forth. Once I started getting into imaginal practice and opening that, then these other possibilities opened up—of the body becoming image or energy becoming image, which is a slightly different thing.

You can feel, for instance, the energy between two people, and you think, "Oh, that's what's happening." But it can also become image as opposed to just a rarefied energy feeling. And so then all kinds of possibilities open up. There are fire bodies, fire bellowing. I've shared lots of these before. The body is here—it's almost like there are two awarenesses of the body at one time. I can feel the body sitting, the sensations. I can also feel the sort of energetic tone or texture or vibration of this space. And at the same time, there's some image or other, and I'm flying over there. And I have this double awareness at the same time. This is really sophisticated, but it just happens. And it can happen to you.

Not that it should or shouldn't, but it's a possibility. So there's this... Somehow my energy body is over there flying or turning cartwheels in joy or whatever it is. And I'm somehow aware of how that feels. And I'm somehow aware of how this stationary body that everyone can see and would agree on—Rob is sitting there—I'm aware of how that feels. It's a kind of... not splitting because it has negative connotations, there's a kind of double awareness. So that would be an example.

Let me share something that happened this morning on this note. Catherine did her lovely instructions and she said about touching the body. And so I, as you did, I started touching my body, and immediately became aware of the weariness and weakness and depletion in my body from illness and treatments. So grief comes.

So immediately see what's happening. There's certain instructions, very conventional, so to speak. And it might say, even with the intention of love. But I'm including the emotion. So that's already something bigger. There's story involved. So this is an option.

In other words, the narrative of my life, the narrative of the illness, the possibility of my dying, the probability of my dying—all that is there. Compassion. There was compassion for this body and for the trials and tribulations and what it has to go through, what I have to go through.

What happened to the self-sense at that point? It could be with the toucher. I am the one touching this body. Or the self could be identified with the touched, the one touched. I am the body touched and these hands are touching me. Do you understand? So this is normal about self. Self-identification will go here or there, or it can move around what it identifies with.

In this case, it just happened that I was, let's say, more identified with the body that was weary and wounded, et cetera, and being touched with love. And whose hands were these? Well, you might say, they're your hands, Rob. Don't be silly. But actually, no. I didn't know whose hands they were. They were angels' hands.

When we stopped touching, the hands were still there. And blessing and loving and tending to all that. And with the sense of it, I don't necessarily, I don't have to go into just sensation, no story—no, no, I could, that's a certain mode. And we're used to that from mindfulness, you know, get in right close to the so-called bare sensations, et cetera. But in imaginal practice, and when we talk about opening up the energy body experience, there's all kinds of possibilities.

So this included, as I said, the narrative of this body. Actually, I've been ill since my 20s, but the narrative of that—not just the bodily narrative, the narrative of my life. My death, my death has already happened. I'm already dead from an imaginal perspective. There's this... Some of you have heard me tend to, what is it to see, to sense things, to sense one's existence, one's life and death, from the perspective of eternity, from the perspective of beyond death, of the eternal. So that got mixed up with it.

Now you see how this simple bodily experience that could be as simple as I touch my chest and what do I notice? There's warmth and pressure. There's some kindness as well. Great, that's great, but it's quite a narrow range. Not good or bad, it's just that's a

normal narrow range for dharma practitioners. And this opened up to include and draw into it all kinds of other elements and aspects of my being that were becoming insouled. Is this making sense?

So the emotion was there, the grief, the bodily experience, the weariness, the compassion, the angelic nature of it, the self, the narrative, the life, the death, the eternality—all that was there. The mystery. Invisible hands kept doing that. It was very beautiful.

So there's, for example—and we could give so many examples—just one example of a way the bodily experience started to become more imaginal. And the idea of body, all that I said about felt sense, image, and idea, starts to expand, starts to draw in all kinds of other elements. It doesn't stay necessarily that small.

Now it wasn't that my mind was wandering and I'm just going blah, blah, blah. It's not that. There's quite a lot of stillness and containment, but the range has gotten wider and richer, more multi-dimensional, more multi-aspected.

So when Justin suggested these two words—a poetic body or an imaginal body—I really liked it. Everything has drawbacks. The drawback with "poetic body" is that for some people it will emphasize too much an idea of poetry without the felt sense. And for me, insight meditation is so rooted in the felt sense. So that was one reason for keeping the word "energy body."

How does energy body relate to the concept of aura? It will depend. It's not a word I use a lot. I don't have any problems with it. It's just that, in my experience, the word "aura" and the context in which it's used—let's say very loosely, it's what people talk about in certain circles, maybe certain healing circles or so-called New Age circles, perhaps shamanic circles. It's the perceivable energy field of human beings or trees or anything, and animals—a perceivable energy field. And it's usually perceived visually, perhaps with colors or certain levels, sheaths or something like that. Or maybe you see the chakras or something.

So it's really fine. One of the differences is in terms of reification, meaning that usually the context in which the concept of aura is used is a context where there's an assertion, either explicitly or implicitly: this is a real thing that we're talking about. And one day we'll be able to measure it scientifically. And if you can train your awareness, two people will read someone's aura the same way. It's objective, it's independent, it has inherent existence.

With all of these teachings, we're tending away from reification. So energy body is an experience that's created, discovered in the moment and is not postulated either subconsciously or consciously as real. This is the way it is. This is a truth. This has inherent existence.

I tend—this is a really, really important distinction. It's massive. It makes a huge difference. Huge, huge, huge.

Already in the aura concept, there will probably be some limit given by that concept and the context it's in, of those ranges of felt sense, image, and idea. There'll be some limit and it will be a rarefied one.

Second, I tend to be quite kinesthetic, which means that I tend to feel things in my energy body rather than see them. So if I'm working one-on-one with someone, sometimes I feel like I can feel what's happening in the other person's energy body. But some people are more visual. So you may actually find that's more your modality—that it's more visual.

I'm conscious of how much these teachings may be shaped by my personal proclivities to be not that visual and more kinesthetic. I don't know the answer, but that's a thought.

Aside from materialist and modernist logos ideas and concepts, what other common conceptions limit people's experience of the energy body? Well, one of them is just that one might be too limited in terms of the idea of an aura, for instance, or the idea of chakras and where they are. One has been taught a certain system: this is the energy body, it looks like this, this is in this place and that's in that place and that's how it is. And it just gets taken as a truth and reified and not understood and not participated in as something that is created, discovered. So that would be one way.

One could get equally trapped in that kind of logos, that kind of concept. But actually, any idea can become limiting.

If we return to the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic—which we'll leave for another day—the soul-making dynamic stretches things. It will stretch everything. It will stretch whatever logos, whatever idea, whatever concept, whatever belief, whatever experience in its time. As it ripens, if we do not get in the way, if we allow it to do its work and ferment things—like fermenting bread or fermenting yeast—it will rise, it will expand, and it will push against ideas, images, conceptions, beliefs, views, ranges of experience.

There could actually be absolutely any idea about the body: that the body is here and not there, that it's separate, that it's mind, that it's countless—you know, countless possibilities. There's something inherent in the soul-making dynamic that will eventually, if we let it do its work, push and either shatter or just stretch these conceptions.

So it could be anything.

*_Question_*: "When the energy body collapses, how do I discern between constriction of the energy body or a change or shift of my way of perception? Or are they both the same?"

They're both the same. The energy body is not a certain experience. I can sit here and be aware of the energy body and report that it feels contracted or tight or small or whatever it is, and I'm still aware of the energy body. If I make my awareness big, there's a difference in the awareness stretching.

If I open up the awareness to include, let's say, just this much space—sort of a bit bigger than my physical body, my obvious physical body—and if I just am sensitive, delicately open and attuned to the vibration, the texture, the felt sense there, the possible image (which may be completely conventional), and possible ideas (which again may be completely conventional at that time), then my energy body awareness is open. That's all I have to do.

So it's not a right or wrong experience. It will get contracted. If you're not seeing that the energy body experience feels contracted or constricted many times a day, in and out, you're not paying enough attention. It's just—whoever you are, even if you're a Buddha—it's going to do that. Maybe not a Buddha. I don't know about Buddhas.

The experience, the object, can have this huge range, but I can always just open up the field and just be there with this kind of open, delicate awareness. Everything is connected, though. You'll see that what the actual experience is in the energy body depends on the kind of attention I give it. It's not like I can separate this subjective and objective pole.

If my attention—if I keep opening the attention—the experience of the energy body will tend to open up. It will tend to lighten. It will tend to harmonize and energize. Because experience of anything is dependent on the way I pay attention. Not always, and it might take some time, but that's all I have to do. I don't have to say that this is the wrong experience, because it's not the wrong experience. It's more the poise, the stance of my attention.

But that poise—for instance, if I go back to the example I gave—if in my attention as well, either deliberately or by the grace of the angels and the divine and the Buddha-nature, some compassion, some love comes in, or at least any judgmentalism and reactivity lessens, then I've got a different kind of attention. And that different kind of attention, because everything is a dependent arising, will give rise to a different, will seed a different experience.

Everything depends on attention, on the kinds of attention, the modes of attention, the way of looking. Everything depends on the way of looking.

*_Question_*: "You have mentioned the energy body can feel twisted or negative. I only feel it when I feel expansive, connected, absorbed, not when contracted. How is that possible, or have I misunderstood?"

I wonder if that's connected to what we just talked about. The energy body is not just this kind of experience or that kind of experience. It's an infinite range, way broader than certainly most people in the culture will be used to—even the most insight meditation cultures will be used to.

So if I'm feeling whatever it is—depressed or angry or fearful or reactive or withdrawn—or if there's simply some clinging, I will notice that happening in the energy body. That's what the energy body is at that time. That's what it feels like. And I can give that more attention and see if I can take care of the kind of attention I give it so that it's helpful.

What kind of information can I read from a contracted or expanded energy body in the face of another person or event? And is intentional expansion always a skillful response—creating space internally or externally to receive further response options?

This question touches on both the balance of attention and two-ness practices, as well as the energy body itself. When the energy body is contracted, it means there's some clinging, some craving. When it's more open, it means there's less clinging and craving. That's the most basic information, and it's really, really important. Dharma-wise, this is fundamental navigation. Is there clinging and craving here? Because that's going to lead to dukkha. That's going to tie me up in *papañca* and reification and all that misery. Or is there less? Where is it moving? This is a really important read.

Following on from what Catherine shared this morning with the exercises involving another in relationship, in dyad, in two-ness, in the balance of attention—it's not wrong to sit down in front of another person, notice someone coming toward me down the corridor, and observe a contraction. Then it's time to get interested.

There could be all kinds of possibilities. It could be that I simply notice the contraction and find a way of opening it. Or I might become genuinely curious: What's happening here? Is there a specific fear? Perhaps I'm afraid they're going to judge me. Maybe I feel a bit dull today and think they're going to judge that. Or I feel not interesting, or ugly, or whatever it is. Or perhaps I really want them to see how handsome I am. All of this is good to know. "Oh, that's one of my patterns. I see this arising again and again." Now what does that mean? We don't know the answer because it's going to be specific, but this is really valuable information to be able to read.

When there's *eros* rather than craving, the energy body tends to open and move toward harmonization—more ease, more delight. So that's part of the navigation. "Ah, now there's *eros* here, or at least openness"—and that's good to know.

This also tells us when we're on the right track. If the other is an event or an image, this is *soulmaking*. It's part of how I sense that I'm on the right track in my practice—through reading the energy body. If I'm cultivating *samādhi*, the energy body tells me whether what I've just done is working. I give more intensity to the attention, really drilling into the breath or whatever, and then notice my energy body contract. That's telling me that perhaps what I've just done with the attention is a bit too much and is causing contraction. Or I do that and energy arises and there's openness—oh great, it's the right thing.

It's not always going to be the same answer. So you're always like a sailor at sea, receptive to how the wind catches the sail, feeling it in your whole being.

I can see it, I can feel it in my arm. So practice is like that—it's like reading the billowing of the sail. Whatever I'm doing, if it's samadhi, if it's metta, if it's emptiness practices, if it's imaginal practices, this energy body is one of the aspects that gives a really good read on navigation in the moment.

But in addition to that, there's a whole range of personal psychological issues and patterns that's so important. We talk about roots of soul. Catherine and I were having a conversation some months ago, and she reflected on how it's a bit like this: someone starts regular dharma practice, not necessarily because they want to get rid of suffering, but let's say this hypothetical person senses the possibility of the mystic, of mystical experience. Or they hear about the unfabricated—they don't understand what it means—or emptiness. "I don't understand it, but something of that pulls me, calls me."

So they book on a retreat, and that's their heart's desire—they want to know that, for example. And then day two, day three, that's not what's going on. It's their knees screaming and their mother and their father and their siblings, or whatever. They may have to work with all that stuff—heal it, understand it, make it into soul eventually. These are parts of the roots, roots of soul.

Now that happens again, not in a linear way, not according to some dogma of order. It's not like you first have to do this in therapy and then you can proceed—not necessarily. For some people it is. But these aspects of psychological or relational difficulty, they're part of the information, the kinds of information I can read from a contracted or expanded energy body. Where is my joy? Where are the kinds of ways I contract and what does that need? So a lot of this is just about psychological awareness and relational skills in awareness.

Question: I have noticed that my energy body has a dark side and a light side, changing at the midline. In vision too, one eye has warm light, the other more blue. Is this just an epiphenomenon, or can I use it for soul-making, even if it is just an epiphenomenon?

Wonderful! I've never come across anything like that before, but so what? Is this just epiphenomenal or can you use it for soul-making? You can use it for soul-making. Do you have to? Not necessarily, but it's possible. Exactly what that would involve, we don't know. Anything can be made into soul.

Now, if it turns out that they call you in for a brain scan and the doctors say, "Oh, Hazel, we found this curious thing in your brain that causes you to experience this," and they say, "That's what's causing this," and you say, "Oh, it has nothing to do with soul"—no! Because in soul-making we don't reduce to one causal explanation. Sure, I've got a funny thing in my brain and it might cause something from a certain perspective, but because soul-making involves our participation, we're asked to create, discover.

So anything, even if the doctors or whoever says it's because of this, can be made into soul. But you don't have to. You might feel drawn to, and then it's a question of being creative and playful and navigating and sensing: where is the soulfulness, where is the sense of soulfulness with this experience? How does it start to complexify? And you can follow your sense of soul-making and allow soul to be made through this probably somewhat unusual experience.

Question: At times I can get very high, manic even, especially when working with desire, with the heart's desire in the energy body. Can you say something about this?

I'd probably have to hear a bit more about the specifics, but first thing is not to—again, okay, so I feel manic and high. "Manic" already is a loaded word to me. It has a lot of negative connotations. So my first question would be: is it really, does it really have those negative connotations, or is it just an energy state that I'm not yet used to and that most people in the culture aren't used to and most meditation circles don't talk about?

So again, watch what the mind is doing. Because it might just be—and what will happen, and actually what needs to happen with some people—is the range of their capacities, energetic capacities, needs to grow. Without realizing it, the person is kind, is mindful, is calm and clear and knows the teachings and practices well.

Without realizing it, the energy and the range of energy that can move through that being is actually quite tightly limited. There is not the possibility of a lot of energy. And with that, there is not the possibility of a lot of emotion, and there is not the possibility of a real fecundity and richness of soul-making image.

Since nothing is a root cause, everything feeds everything else. But it might be that for some people, something does need to shift—I need to learn how to tolerate more energy, to allow more to come through, to be okay with that. It doesn't mean I have to have some bonkers Kundalini experience for five years and then melt down. Hopefully not. Having been through that kind of thing years ago, I don't recommend it.

But generally speaking, some people are unaware of the ways in which their whole experience—not just of energy and body, but also of image and emotion and therefore of self and life—is actually contracted. It's not at all obvious that there is a kind of lock on that, and actually there's a very minimal amount of energy being admitted into the system.

So one thing is to watch the judgment, the conclusions that are being made. Another, just practically speaking, if there is a lot of energy—and I'd have to hear more about the specifics there—is expanding the awareness, giving it more space. It's like if the container is too small, the pressure is higher. There's more air in a smaller space, so it's higher pressure, more uncomfortable. Just expanding the container and giving it some holes can help.

If it's really a lot, the energy may want to come out in certain ways. What does it want to do? Maybe it wants to shoot out the throat or at the back of the neck and the throat, or at the heart, or at the feet, or at the top of the head. Just let it do that. Let the imagination do that, so you're kind of modulating it that way.

It also depends how much skill—obviously I don't know who wrote the note and what experiences, what teachings they're familiar with—but if I reify it, if it's a real thing that's happening, this energy state, and I'm convinced of its reality and its concreteness, then that adds to its difficulty. So can I see it as theater? Can I see it as empty? Even if I feel I'm not very advanced in this emptiness business—see, it's theater. That tends to take some of the pressure off and release.

I think I would need more specifics before I could say more.

Another question: "I sort of think energy body plus the presence of the aspects of the lattice, the elements of the imaginal, in meditation is soul making practice. Energy body plus the presence of the aspects of the elements of the imaginal. What are your thoughts on energy body and presence of the elements of the lattice in singing, art, movement, play, anything? Would you consider this soul-making practice? Could you elaborate, please?"

It depends. It depends on a number of things. One of the things it depends on is what the intention is. Certainly, soul making practice is not confined to any posture or any activity. It could be anything at all—in relating, in making art, in speaking, in walking down the road, in whatever it is.

What does make a difference, I think, is the intention. We talked about the elements and one of them is fullness of intention—meaning that the intention is not limited to, for instance, me as an artist. An artist has specific intentions. My intention is to make this piece of art and to do it well, to find the right words or to find the right colors or whatever it is. So I'm tuned to the aesthetic product. I care about that. I have a responsibility to that as an artist.

If that takes over my intention, then it's art practice that may feel soulful, and it's great. Fullness of intention means that it's not just the product, it's not just the healing—it's the soul making that is also included in the intention. It's a full intention, a full range of intention. So that's probably one of the things that makes a difference.

As a composer and poet, sometimes the process just felt wild, crazy, very unmindful even, because I was so intent on getting the product just so. In creating that product, you might go in and out of a sense of soul making, but my responsibility as an artist was to the product, to the art, to the piece.

People have very different relationships with the artistic process, very different.

So I think you have to go with your sense. I'm a certain personality and a certain artistic personality, so I wouldn't want to put that on everyone. But going back to everything we've said about soul making, it's like keep it open. Whatever you know and whatever you experience, just be aware there may be more. There may be more at the edges that you've yet to encounter and come across. But I totally appreciate what you've shared, and I think that's important and right.

I would really love to do this next question. Following Catherine's instruction in the morning about ensouling the energy body work and the tunis exercise, could you say something about the possibility of letting the energy body move towards or move into jhana absorption within a soul-making framework?

On the one hand, in jhana there's meditative absorption in some kind of yumminess—and there are different flavors, lots of different flavors of yumminess. The Buddha outlined eight in particular, but actually there's more, and there are gradations. It's yummy—a Pali word. On the one hand in jhana, there's a desire and movement towards absorption and merging rather than two-ness. And I seem to remember Rob contrasting them on a number of occasions, jhanas and soul making.

On the other hand, on my personal retreat lately, I've been encountering the first jhanas and it felt related to imaginal work in various ways. First, the jhanas themselves appeared as many-faced others, and relationship with them felt rich and nuanced and highly erotic. Even when there was strong movement towards merging, there was still a sense of self as that which is merging into the other—so never fully one, but it might just be my inexperience.

Then also, each jhana had specific images that were felt as her emanations or manifestations, not fully imaginable in some aspects but richly so in others—like a condor gliding on hot air currents, or a human body floating at sea for first jhana; the scent of jasmine, or a deer drinking from a spring for the second. A fully imaginal image that's very dear to me of a young man looking for gold in a stream became linked to the second jhana, and each could lead to the other. The jhana could lead to the image, the image could lead to the jhana.

Lastly, various kinds of images seemed to tend to lead the energy body towards different jhanas—soulful sexual images or concepts charged with eros to the first jhana, images of non-sexual love-eros-metta to the second. And they could be held rather vividly throughout the first jhana and most of the second. Even when disappearing towards the deeper end of the second as I so far know her, their scent remained. Thank

you for creating this retreat where such a question can be asked. On rereading, this seems a rather dry list, but the experiences themselves aren't dry or clear-cut at all, but mysterious and constantly transforming.

Lovely. Totally what I would expect. Completely.

I think it's good to be clear about the intention and leaning at any time if this kind of thing is happening, or if it happens later on for you when you start getting into this kind of territory. Some of you have heard me use the analogy of a bird, like a bird of prey. If it just wants to change direction, just tilt the wings a little bit and ride that thermal that way. If you want to go that way, just tilt the wings and ride that thermal that way.

You can go deeper into a jhana and the image will fade. Even if a certain image might have triggered that jhana—at the beginning, for quite a while at the beginning of jhana practice, people often find certain images that either come up in the jhana that seem to express the jhana, or that trigger the jhana, that open the door to a certain jhana. A certain memory even, or an image brings delight, and then I can go with the delight and suffuse the body with delight.

So even if that's how I kick-started it, eventually one doesn't need any images. One can just remember a jhana and go into it. But that's quite a stage—of an image perhaps triggering. There can be all kinds of things. And of course the Buddha gives images for the jhanas as well.

So even if I started, I kick-started this pleasant state with an image, then my navigation comes in. What am I doing now? Where am I going to set my dial? Just fully into the nice feeling, the meanness, and just really get into that and let the image really go to the background.

Maybe I can use the image just like a glider aircraft - they get pulled by another plane and then you can let go of the rope, and then it can fly. I just don't do that indefinitely. Do you understand? So it's a matter of navigation and intention. There's not a right or wrong, but I'm clear about what I'm doing. What was my intention at any time? It's fine.

If I want to go more into the samadhi, I just steer that way. If I want to go more into the image and the soul of the image, then I may be aware that there's all this yumminess and lovely feeling, but actually I'm more focused on the nuance of the image and the soul aspect of it. Or I might be somewhere in the middle territory, and that's fine too. So it's really a matter of intention and clarity of intention at any time.

The jhanas are going to be rich and filled with eros, even if they're not imaginal. When they're new, the soul, the psyche, is opening to new territory. If you're doing jhana practice and you come to me saying, "I opened to the second jhana," and I ask how it was, and you say, "It was nice," I'd say that's wrong. Well, not wrong exactly, but you should be coming to me saying, "Oh my goodness, that was just the most fantastic experience I've ever had in my life!" It touches you to the core of being - the beauty of it, the loveliness of it. So there is eros. The soul is expanding, the psyche is expanding - the gorgeousness, the love, the attraction, all of that.

Even when there's a strong movement toward merging, there's still a sense of self as that which is merging into the other. There will be. There's less self-sense in a jhanic experience, but there is still self-sense. There is not complete cessation of self-sense. So there's still duality. No matter how merged and melted you feel, there's still duality. It's subtle. People don't notice it at first. After a while, your eyes get used to the dark and you think, "Hold on." Then people think, "Oh, I'm doing this wrong." They're not. It's natural. Only in a cessation experience is there the absence of any self-object duality.

Have I addressed the questions? Is there something I'm missing?

One of the aspects of jhana practice we can talk about is the degree of absorption. If I push on that pedal a little more into deeper absorption, then basically there'll be a fading of images and it comes more to this sort of amorphous, unformed experience of energy body or light or that kind of thing. But you don't have to do it. If you want to learn jhana practice, then you're going to have to do that sometimes. And that sometimes might be months and months - that's what learning how to do this involves. But there's no right or wrong. You can play with where you are on that spectrum.

Also, partly what I would expect - with the second jhana, the rapture in the first jhana oftentimes does feel very sexual. People say, "Oh, it's like an orgasm," or similar descriptions. So you would expect sexual images to accompany that. Oftentimes with the happiness of the second jhana, there's a lot of love in it. Sometimes people think, "Oh, the second jhana is primarily love, not happiness," but actually it's primarily happiness - it's just that sometimes there's a lot of love mixed in with it. So again, sometimes we'd expect the metta and the love to be blended with that. In other words, the kinds of images you're experiencing are exactly what I would expect.

Let's just have a few moments of silence before we close.

The kinds of images that arise are exactly what I would expect given the nature of this practice and these states of consciousness. The visions, the sensations, the qualities of experience that emerge—they all align perfectly with what we understand about the deeper movements of the heart and mind in meditation.

Does this make sense? Are we clear about this relationship between the inner landscape and what manifests in our awareness?

We really do need to bring our session to a close now. Let's just rest together for a few moments in silence before we part ways.

[A period of shared silence]

Thank you all for your deep listening and sincere practice today.

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CHAPTER 168

Dukkha and Emotions in Soulmaking Practice

Rob Burbea · 59 min

> *In this dharma talk from the 'Roots into the Ground of Soul' series, Rob Burbea addresses the intricate dynamics between dukkha and soulmaking practice. He emphasizes that working with suffering in soulmaking contexts requires an opportunistic, improvisational approach rather than formulaic methods. Burbea discusses how certain emotions may need basic psychological rehabilitation before they can become vehicles for soul, using anger as an example of how suppressed emotions can turn destructive when not allowed expression.*
>
> *The talk explores the concept of creating a 'crucible' for emotions - a particular stance and structure that allows dukkha to be transformed into soul rather than simply released or transcended through traditional dharma methods. Key elements include maintaining energized mindfulness that matches the intensity of difficult emotions, allowing some degree of self-sense and narrative (unlike traditional letting-go approaches), and cultivating humility toward forces larger than oneself.*
>
> *Burbea addresses practical questions about working with overwhelming dukkha, including ecological grief and trauma, suggesting that sometimes the imaginal work happens more through transforming one's sense of self in relation to suffering rather than the suffering itself. He concludes by acknowledging that soulmaking brings both profound freedom and certain inevitable costs - the 'polytheistic psyche' being pulled in multiple directions by different archetypal forces.*

Are you tired? Yes. Is there enough light then? No. When you're tired, it's important to do something about it. It's really, really important. It's not something to just put up with.

There's a whole interesting thing about why we feel energized sometimes, why we feel tired. It has to do with emotions, has to do with inspiration, has to do with eros, has to do with closing down, opening up. So it's actually a really interesting investigation. It's good to know how to galvanize the system, how to catalyze things, how to inject energy, find energy sometimes. It can change like that. If you don't know this, this is something we need to discover. Why does it suddenly change? It has oftentimes much more to do with the heart than we realize, or the mind—the mind in terms of certain ideas or reactivities. That's a whole other subject.

Having said all that, I'm extremely tired. I really didn't know whether I could do this right now, and I still don't. So we'll see how it goes. I apologize if I'm not firing on all cylinders and not so coherent.

We invited some questions on dukkha and soulmaking, and then it occurred to me that perhaps wasn't the wisest thing to do. From the way I feel about it currently, that particular nexus, that particular interaction of dukkha and soulmaking, is extremely complex. As if the whole thing wasn't complex already, this dukkha and soulmaking is really complex. As Catherine mentioned, there's already quite a bit out on the web. I think I gave a talk at some point that was thirteen or fourteen hours long on the subject of dukkha and soulmaking. So there's a lot, and we could say more, but it's complex.

More importantly, if I just speak for myself, when I'm working in an interview with someone and there's dukkha present, I don't feel like I have any kind of formula or pre-conception of how to approach it or what's going to happen or how it's going to unpack or unfold. To me, a lot of these kinds of practices, but particularly when it comes to working with dukkha, are very improvised and opportunistic. I don't know, either with myself or working with someone else.

It takes a while in an interview, if I'm in the teacher role, to let what needs to be heard be heard, to let what needs to be felt be felt, to see what the different aspects are —of body, mind, heart, situation, history, propensity, capability. And then what windows, what doors are open? To me, it's all quite opportunistic. And it takes time. Usually those kinds of interviews where we're working with dukkha in a way that's related to the imaginal, they're not quick interviews. They're an hour or something like that.

So some of the questions feel like I don't have nearly enough information on what's going on for a person or what's there or what's possible or the history. This makes doing this kind of thing right now a little bit difficult.

It's also the case for me as a teacher, when I'm working with someone and there's dukkha present, I don't automatically assume this needs to become soulmaking. It's one option that may or may not present itself as a window of opportunity at some point. But it might be that actually what needs to happen is some other approach that just eases the dukkha in some way. So it's not always, where there's dukkha, "Okay, let's make this soulmaking." There may well be other needs.

A little while ago, I was talking with someone, and there was really a lot of dukkha for them. Asking them a little bit about what was happening, there was clearly some rage, some anger at a certain situation that they were not allowing themselves to feel. What happened instead, as is so often the case—not always, but so often—when anger

is not allowed to be felt, it turns inward against the self and becomes a very nasty kind of depression, very self-destructive, very hateful, sometimes suicidal. So what's the need there? Not immediately to jump in and make this soulmaking. Maybe, maybe not.

But there's—let's talk about roots or foundations or bases or steps. There may be a gap, and I think I touched on this a little bit when we were talking about energy body—there may be a gap for some of us in relation to some emotions that we actually don't let ourselves feel. We do not have the permission to feel that emotion. In this case it was anger; in someone else's case it might be whatever. And sometimes it's even a positive emotion, sometimes even joy. It's not okay. It's not okay in our society somehow to actually feel deep joy. It's not okay to share it, whatever.

But the important point is that there's an intermediate piece there, and this often goes unrecognized. And of course, in certain contexts—for instance, a dharma context, where anger is basically... it goes in the box of "it's a kilesa, it's an affliction, it's a defilement." And so sometimes people talk about the Buddhist shadow or whatever—a person who actually doesn't really feel much anger. And it might look to their teachers like, "Oh, this is a good practitioner. Maybe they should be a teacher one day. Look how equanimous they are and how even," etc. They seem to have a good understanding, they're kind, they're mindful. It seems that way.

Something is not allowed, and the person doesn't even recognize that they're not giving themselves permission for this or that emotion. So when we talk again about these words—roots or foundations—sometimes there are basic kinds of emotional work, basic psychological gaps that need to be rehabilitated, drawn back into the fold and the field of psyche, drawn back into the hearth of psyche, and allowed and given a minimum degree of respect.

If I feel anger—it's partly why I said that thing about ranting in the popcorn thing today—something that looks like a defilement can actually be a signal of soul. It's the flame of soul. And it's coming up in a way that most people would be like, "Whoa, that's kind of not okay." I've come to recognize that if I can be a bit patient with this ranting mind, for instance, in terms of ecological crisis or other... I'll try not to go into that now, but there's actually a lot of soul there. And I feel like something comes through me. Of course, that could be a grand delusion, and there's always that danger.

The point is that even just for psychological health, before we even talk about soulmaking and its possibilities, there may be gaps that need addressing. There may be basic building blocks that need filling in and given some solidity. It might be, I need to give

myself permission. I need to allow myself to acknowledge, to feel, to maybe at some stage express in some way or another. And that's a whole journey if we're talking about anger. Something's dead in the being and it needs to be able to come alive.

Assuming this all makes sense... When we did on the last retreat—some of you were here—we did some of that movement stuff and there was some sort of ogre-ish kind of things. It wasn't so much... and I explained, it wasn't so much, "Oh now we're trying to cathart" (if that's a verb), "we're trying to release something." We're interested in opening up the pathways—neurologically, physically, energetically, emotionally, psychically, mentally, cognitively—that are closed, so that they can become roots. You think of a root of a tree as a living thing. Things flow through that root, those roots. And if they're blocked or if they're cut off or if they're starved or withered, you can't even have a healthy tree, let alone the blossoms of soul.

So it may be in some cases that certain basics, certain foundations need to happen first. What was interesting with this person was then talking actually over a couple of days. And so that was my immediate sense: "Oh, this needs to happen first. It doesn't need to become imaginable yet." And then they came back and reported already some images. And so the images were coming alive, and the images had to do with power and rage, and they liberated something.

So, you know, it's tempting to think: first this, then that, then that. Now you're ready for the image or the soulmaking. And oftentimes that will be the case. That will be so. I've talked a lot about this kind of thing. But I've been too struck by the kind of non-linearity of things sometimes. So what does that imply? I don't know.

To be open-minded. And again, opportunistic, improvised. Here's this knotted ball of string. What if I just pull on this one? No, wrong one. Okay, well, ah, that's a bit better. That starts loosening something. I don't know which one to pull on first necessarily.

But if we talk about basics, some of those foundations may, I think we said in the opening, take quite a while. If I think about my history working with anger, I was really some years in psychotherapy back in the late eighties and early nineties, really working with that and learning how to express it and getting it completely wrong and overdoing it or underdoing it or not being aware. So just that journey around anger—recognizing that I actually felt angry in some situations, learning how to tolerate it, learning how to understand it, learning what my needs were, learning how to express it—it takes a while, you know, just that. And we haven't even talked about soul-making possibilities there. So this is a long-term trajectory for all of us, really. And in that, there's open-mindedness and humility, and it may not always be linear.

So, on the theme of nonlinearity, some of you will know the teachings about the 28 elements or nodes of the lattice and all that business, and some of you may not. So we may get to it this week, but very briefly, there's a way of pointing to what's characteristic of what we're calling imaginal or soul-making or sensing the soul. But there's no order there. So it could be, if you go back to the knotted ball of wool analogy, that each one of those is an end of a thread of wool. And I may jiggle or pull or wiggle anyone and it starts unraveling the whole thing. Or if we use a different analogy, I ignite one and the rest ignite.

So again, what that means in terms of working with dukkha is there's this openness to which of those elements might be available and might be ones that actually can implement some leverage and start to move things and start to ignite and open things. And I do not know beforehand. I have no idea. I'm dealing with my own pain and situations and whatnot or with someone else.

So is that good news or bad news? While a part of us might like simple formulas, I think these kind of practices are too rich to be just formulaic. It's a bit like this thing that I said about you as a practitioner and your ideas. You can become a playful improviser, someone who has that confidence, someone who's just able to do that without a formula. In time, it will come.

So I don't always know in advance, but I do have the trust. At this point, I have total trust that—it might not be this person right now that this can be made soul-making—but I pretty much believe at this point and sense that anything can be made into soul. Soul can be made in relationship to anything, and that transforms and transfigures it. But that, in a way, there's thinking about those different elements and just kind of being with something and seeing which might suggest themselves or be possible.

And it might just be the energy body, just opening the energy when coming into a relationship with dukkha or whatever it is, already makes a difference, something as simple as that. But it could be something, one of the ones that we don't usually think about or something else. All kinds of things.

That word opportunistic—I think I said it once in a talk years ago—you know, the root is porta, which is a door in Latin. So to be opportunistic means to be on the lookout for what doors are not locked and one might just slip through, or what doors are open and just obviously beckoning us.

When some of these elements—which, by the way, I always forget what they are, so people say, "I'm not very good at number 18," and I think, "Number 18, what else?" Anyway. When some of them start to ignite, it's as if they already start to complexify what's happening in a good way. They give anchor points or vantage points or, you know, what's it called when you rock climb and you put one of those things in? Pitons, yes.

Well, you know what I mean. You know those climbing anchors that secure the rope - these things give footholds and vantage points. Another way of looking at it is they start throwing something out and connecting things. In that connection, it's as if a wire goes here and there, then another wire goes between here, then another wire goes. Soon you've got a kind of net and structure, and that structure can make a crucible.

Everyone knows what a crucible is? It's a vessel, I think, from alchemy, where you put whatever material you were working with and it gets heated in this crucible. When we come to talking about dukkha and soul-making, Catherine writes that in a way, what we want is for this here to be a crucible. But we could also say that we want our emotions or our dukkha to be in a crucible. We need to have a certain kind of stance, a certain kind of relationship with them. And all these other elements start forming a kind of structure that holds something in a way that the flame can come alive.

So in relation to emotions, part of what we want is that there's a crucible of emotions. In that crucible, with the fire - sometimes the heat and the painful fire of the emotions - image is born or soul-making is born. If we're relating to our emotion in a way that's not crucible-like, then it doesn't happen. We might either spin into some kind of meltdown of dukkha, some kind of craziness, or we might relieve the dukkha through the many traditional dharma pathways that are available and there's a dissipation of dukkha and letting go. But without the crucible, there won't be the soul-making.

So the golden question is: what makes the crucible? As usual, it's not so simple and not so easy to articulate. But partly it's these different elements of the imaginal - for example, humility, or as Catherine mentioned this morning, the idea. So often when there's dukkha, in the back of my mind or in the forefront of my mind, this dukkha is caused by this. It's because of this in my past or my parents or that person or me being a loser or whatever. It's got a cause. Explicitly or implicitly the mind is reducing it to one cause - even if I say it's craving because the Buddha said it was craving. I've reduced it to one cause, and that element of the imaginal, that node, is dead. It's not alive. It's a damp wick, and the closing down of that idea will close down the possibility of soul-making. Catherine already said this this morning.

Let's linger on this a little bit. I've dwelt quite a lot over the years on working with emotions in different ways, long before the soul-making teachings. It's so easy to be imprecise when it comes to emotions. We just hear a sort of vague feeling - oh, kind of be with it and try to be with your body and just be open to it and watch it come and go or something like that and try not to identify. Oftentimes what happens is a person then takes that sort of vague instruction back to the cushion and it just kind of stews for a while until something else comes along that gets their attention. It doesn't necessarily really become fertile.

Even within traditional dharma, I feel there's a real place for precision about what I'm actually doing in relation to an emotion at any time, whether it's a beautiful emotion of joy or love, or a difficult emotion - despair, hatred, whatever it is, powerlessness. If I can be really specific and try different things, that tends to open a lot more doors.

One of the things Catherine mentioned this morning is that when there's an afflictive emotion, there's often a lot of energy wrapped up in it. Even if it's depression, depression has an enormous amount of energy, but it's in lockdown with certain kinds of depression. Anger certainly, rage, grief - there's a lot of energy. What tends to happen is then we hear, "Oh, kind of be with it or just open to it and just soften or whatever." The mindfulness that goes with that actually doesn't have a lot of energy in it. It's not very specific, and the energy in the emotion is more than the energy in the mindfulness. You understand?

If I can find a way—and it's interesting we started with this energy thing—of really bringing an intensity of mindfulness and energized mindfulness to bear with this emotion, then something's shifted and the energy doesn't overpower the mindfulness and then things can start to move.

So in typical Dharma, or rather in mainstream Dharma practice, that would be one of my suggestions—a very sort of straight, normal approach among many others. In a way, we want the mindfulness, the awareness to be bigger, not just spatially (that's an option), but also in terms of energy levels, if that makes sense—bigger than the emotion.

Also in mainstream Dharma, what we tend towards is letting go of the story. And with that, letting go of the self, because self and story often go together. So you want a kind of brightness of mindfulness and a kind of diving under or letting go of the self and the story. Does that sound familiar? Really, really skillful, really helpful. So good to have that in your toolkit as something one can go into at any time.

Because dukkha is dependent on self-sense and identification, and in a way it's also dependent on an absence of mindfulness, or an absence of energy and mindfulness, when we bring the energy of the mindfulness up, and when we let go of some self-story and sense, well, the dukkha goes down. It's all swings and levers, dependent origination.

When it comes to soul-making, it's a little bit different. I gave the example yesterday of when Catherine suggested touching the body and I explained what was going on—look, there's self here, look, there's narrative here. So I'm not going "no self, no story." There's a certain allowing of some of that to some degree, because that might come into the constellation of what then can make soul. When there's an image and when there's soul-making, it tends to involve self-sense and some kind of narrative, and it's more complicated and more diffuse in the elements of its constellation.

So already there's a difference there. And some of us are thoroughly trained in Dharma practice—letting go of the self, just bringing the simple, bare attention, mindfulness, being with an emotion almost as bare sensation. We've kind of dived underneath the emotion and missed it. It's actually happening at this level and we've gone down here where it's just sensation. It's great. Maybe it just disappears. Helpful at times.

Again, there's this kind of modulation of the attention. Opportunistically, what actually feels soulful and soul-making here? But it may well involve—and again I've explained this before—when there's an image, the thing that is to become image or is in process of becoming image might be my dukkha, might be my body, it might be something else, it might be something in the world. There's an object there. The image is object. But as things become imaginal, the self in relationship to that thing starts to become image as well. And the world also. And my desire to—and in fact all the elements. So all these things start to become ensouled.

What that means practically is I don't always have to be fixated on the object at the expense of self and story and world sense. Any of these can be picked up first, opportunistically.

Whatever object we're working with—so it could be a dukkha or it could already be an image—in the process of something becoming imaginal, let's say this candle becomes imaginal for me. Well, if I stay with that and meditate with it as image and allow it to do its thing and allow the soul-making dynamic, at some point what will happen is the self that is looking at that candle becomes imaginal as well. Do you understand?

And then not only that—then it starts to spread and the blue velvet and the room and the light and the whole world becomes imaginal. And then elements of my being start to become imaginal. I recognize eros, and it's not just my eros—that eros starts becoming imaginal, in other words it has dimensions and divinity, etc.

That process of spreading out and making a more complex constellation is part of what happens with soul-making, part of what happens when something becomes imaginal in time. But what it means practically is that I don't always need to just focus on the object. I might start to include more of the self. Can that become more imaginal, for instance?

So sometimes, for example—we talked about the mindfulness in a sort of traditional Dharma—the mindfulness instruction, one of the instructions might be for the mindfulness to be, if you like, bigger in some way than the emotion. Sometimes, of course, we don't feel that at all.

We feel that this emotion is bigger than me. Now there's a way that can just be overwhelming and depressing. The mindfulness can't get around it—it's bigger than me. I'm sinking with the emotion.

But there's a way too in which the emotion can be bigger than me in a beautiful way, in a soul-making way. There's a humility that arises—and that's a loaded word for a lot of people. What does that mean? What's a fertile soul-making humility? It's one of the elements.

This grief, this pain—whose is it? And again, typical Dharma is it's nobody's. It's anatta. Soul-making Dharma might be it belongs to soul, belongs to the world soul. It's from the divine. This pain that I'm feeling, this sensitivity that I have to the pain is the divine sensitivity operating through me.

So already there's—you can see—well, that's an idea. Now it doesn't have to be a big thing where my mind is churning with all this intellectuality. It's just like a little grain of sand there of a poetic idea. And I just sprinkle it there and it does something. It's part of the alchemical process.

So in that case, the emotion is bigger than me. It's bigger than the self. I'm not even hoping to get bigger than it or handle it, but something has changed in my whole view of it and my whole relationship with it. Do you understand? So these little sprinkles of kind of alchemical tinctures or materials can make so much difference.

Sometimes one may be sitting, there's some dukkha or something, and there may be accessible just a fullness of intention, which means, sure, I don't like this dukkha and I want to get rid of it, but as Catherine was saying this morning, I want the fullness of soul here. I want what's right for soul. I want this to become soul-making in the service of soul-making, even if that has some cost to it, even if that has some bite to it, even if not all the dukkha goes. That's one of the elements as well, this fullness of intention.

And maybe with that, there's a kind of humility. And I might not even know in relation to what I feel this humility. It may be just some vague sense of divinity that if someone asked me, "Well, where exactly is it? Or what is it? Or certainly what's your theology?" I wouldn't be able to answer. But maybe that's enough. That stance of just the fullness of intention and a humility that I don't even understand and that isn't even that precise. And it fertilizes things. It softens and opens and fertilizes things.

How are we doing? Is it making sense? And are you still awake?

A lot of these words are—sometimes used sloppily by me and maybe not Catherine, but certainly by me. But sometimes deliberately ambiguously and sometimes to mean one or the other. So in that case, I meant both.

So, in other words, the concept of soul, like everything else, will itself become ensouled. All of these concepts—Eros, soul, image, you name it. So we start with some idea, or maybe like, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but it feels good sometimes, so I'm kind of hanging out." You know? And then maybe, let's say for someone, it starts with this idea, well, it's my soul, and then you have soul, and so on.

In time, because of the soul-making dynamic and the eros-psyche-logos, the concepts begin to get fertilized. They start to get worked and develop more windows, more shadows, more shadings, more complexity—more dimensions altogether. So for me, sometimes that word can encompass both those meanings and more, in a way that remains loose and elastic and open-ended and unfathomable.

The danger, of course, is that it becomes too sloppy and ultimately meaningless. So we're always treading this delicate line. Again, where do we stand? Where do we position ourselves at any given moment between precision and openness? Well, it depends what we want. If we want soul-making, then we need to sense in the moment: is precision what's called for right now, or is it the more open-ended approach?

In this kind of practice, the gauge is always what serves soul, and how do I know? It gives me those feelings—that sense of soulfulness. That becomes my navigation.

Sometimes when working with dukkha, a certain amount of letting go in relation to the suffering needs to happen before it can be made soul. And sometimes it's only through being made soul that certain dukkha is able to be freed up.

Recently, especially with some of the medications I'm taking and getting very confused and under-resourced, I've noticed something. Sometimes, after having many conversations and doing research about different possible alternative medical approaches that might help—of course, once you're engaged in that research, it becomes goal-oriented, which is not to die. You're in a certain relationship and on a certain track with the whole situation and with the information. You understand? That track carries the assumption that it's not okay if I die, because we're trying to accomplish something else—somehow miraculously survive.

Sometimes just reminding myself, "It's okay if I die, it's really okay"—just that much letting go makes all the difference. If I've been too caught up in "should it be this dose or that dose?" or whatever it might be, sometimes that simple acceptance, that okayness, provides just enough letting go that the whole situation can become soul-making again. You understand? It's not that I then think, "Oh, it doesn't matter," or become indifferent. But just that certain amount of letting go can liberate things, loosen them enough that they can become soul-making.

Some of you in this room already know that nothing else has helped with certain dukkhas—intractable, long-standing suffering and deep pains—except when they become imaginal and when they're infused with soul. Nothing else. Not any of the other practices. Not years of psychotherapy. So again, there's this opportunism and flexibility that's needed.

A little less fabrication is one of the elements as well. When I say "it's okay if I die," there's a loosening of whatever clinging had built up there, and that loosening represents a little less fabrication. Then some soul can be made out of the situation.

As I said at the beginning, some of these questions would require far more information. I would need to be with the person for a while to get a sense of what might be possible or what else is present in the field. But let me see if I can offer something helpful.

Having given all that introduction as context, let me address a couple of questions about the ecological situation and the tremendous pain of that reality. Is it even possible for that kind and level of dukkha to be soul-making, to be ensouled? Here's where I would tie it back to what I've been saying—there was a reason I offered all that introduction.

I wasn't just getting lost. So here's a situation where there's an object—unprecedented species extinction and the heartbreak of that. Not just that actually, because part of the object there is not just species loss, but also the almost complete absence of commensurate response from humanity in relationship to it. So the object's already a complex one.

And then if we go back to what I said before, so there's this object, and then there's also self in relation to the object. Now, it may be too much to ask—someone wrote a note, can the rape of a child be ensouled—and someone might think it's not your business to tell that child, "oh, come on, you can ensoul this." That would be ridiculous.

But it might be then that the imaginal and the soul-making goes more to the self sense. Who am I and who will I be and how do I sense myself with soul in relation to what's happening in the world? And that's—in this self-other-world constellation—where it starts.

And I might arise as the warrior. Or, like Joanna Macy talks about, the midwife of whatever might be new. Or the hospice worker. But these are imaginal roles. The self in relation. And then the question: can that fill out? And again, that's going to take a lot of emotional work and imaginal work. And then what does that mean in terms of my duty and how it manifests in the world?

Of this image—if my image is a warrior, what does that mean? How does that refract into my actions? Does it mean I then go become an eco-terrorist or something like that? Or does it refract in a more subtle way? But that image is driving me.

Another important point here is that images are eternal, they're timeless. And that's one of the elements of the imaginal as well, which means in relation to something like climate change or the ecological crises, it's natural to want to think about goals and time and ending. But in a way that warrior is always fighting, is always available, impassioned, dedicated—the imaginal warrior. Do you understand?

And that awareness of that eternality gives the whole thing another level of resource, less dependent on the temporal outcomes. You can still care. I probably said this in a talk before—I heard that when the Titanic was sinking and there weren't enough lifeboats, they really hadn't planned very well. A lot of people were left on board ship sinking into icy waters, all the lifeboats gone. They knew they were dying, and they started singing hymns.

This was not quite the complete eradication of any sense of religiosity in the culture. So they sang hymns. What the hell's the point? You're going to be dead in a minute. What good does it do to sing a hymn?

But it matters for soul. Were they singing hymns in the hope that maybe God will let them into heaven? It had nothing probably to do with that. It's like what matters—yes, of course it matters what happens with species loss. Of course it matters what happens with climate change. But there's something on another level that the soul needs. It will do, it wants to express, it wants to reflect, it wants something to come through.

Soul, if we go back to the bigger sense, is asking of the human being for something to come through that doesn't just have to do with outcomes and life and death. Do you understand? There are other levels to this, and sometimes, especially—I know there are a lot of activists in this room—it's hard to not get pared down to the concrete level only. To allow those other dimensions of soul can be immensely resourceful for that kind of thing.

But it might be more in the sense of self that the image arises, not in the sense of object, of the thing itself. Diesel pollution in the UK—is that a soulful thing?

I don't know. It stinks, you know, and it's really nasty. But in relationship to it, I can become something. It may be easier.

Also in a way, you know, the sense of the earth, the species as sacred, the responsibility of the human being to other species—that's already a view. That's a potentially soulful view. This is a sacred world. Can I prove that to anyone? No. It's a view. It's an idea. But it's a soul view. Again, if we talk about self or the world, I start perhaps with the world and the sacred world. And now this sacred world is being desecrated. And that can galvanize something.

I'm going to read this question. I've been working with a particular manifestation of dukkha today with two images which feel to be on the opposite ends of some emotional spectrum. The first has qualities of compassion, tenderness, healing and vulnerability. The second personifies a kind of transcendent not giving a fuck in a joyful divine punk kind of way. Previously, you've talked about bringing images into relationship with each other. I feel called to explore that here. Any advice would be appreciated.

Yeah, so again, I would need to hear a lot more here. My initial thought was that some images are not really in relationship with each other. So this is an interesting thing. Jung talked very much or seemed to stress very much in his teaching a kind of integration of the different archetypes and the different images with the self and with each other, so that they come into balance and into dialogue and they kind of harmonize with each other.

James Hillman, massively indebted and respectful of Jung, but kind of in the context of reacting to that a little bit, stressed this idea that we have a polytheistic psyche, which means we're called in multiple directions that often are not congruent with each other. They pull us in impossibly multiple directions.

So I think I've shared this before. I have a monk in me. I have a teacher in me. I have a musician in me. I have someone who just wants to serve. They cannot all exist at the same time. So that there's some impossibility there in terms of the soul's calling and being pulled and stretched in different directions. And there's some grief there. There's some dukkha.

A lot of the questions are about how dukkha can be made into soul and sort of help that way. But there's also a certain amount of dukkha that we're assenting to by saying yes to soul making. And if we're not up for that, then we're limiting the soul-making. And it's possible that if we're not up for that, it's just because we haven't fallen in love with soul-making yet. It's possible it's just not our path. But there's a certain amount of dukkha that soul-making brings.

And if I allow the fullness of these pulls, so I have this—it's like this god of music won't ever let me go. I haven't been a musician for years and years. It won't ever really let me go. And so there's grief sometimes with that. And I realize I can't do that and this. I'm pulled in two directions. And I can work with it imaginably and it can refract into my life and my practice and my interactions in all kinds of ways. But there's a certain amount of pain for me in that impossibility.

I'm being pulled by soul and by the powers of soul, which, going back to what we said before, are bigger than I am. This god of music is bigger than I am. The god of dharma is bigger than I am. The god of teaching is bigger than I am.

I'm being pulled by gods in different directions. I'm not even trying to harmonize them or balance them or live some kind of neat balance where I do a bit of this and a bit of that and it's all very nice.

So my initial thought was: I wonder if these two images that the person's alluding to need to come into contact with each other, or if there's simply a certain incongruence and tension there. And that's part of what Hillman would call the polytheistic psyche. It's part of the dukkha of soul-making.

There's an enormous amount of freedom that comes from soul-making, and as I've said, some freedoms that come from soul-making won't get opened up by any other way. But sometimes it comes with cost, it comes with pain, a price. Sometimes the price is in the duty. It might not be this pulling in different directions. It might be that this

image is asking something of me. People were alluding to this with the meaningfulness we shared earlier. And that duty takes its toll in my life. It means a sacrifice. It means I can't do this or that or the other. It comes with a cost.

But you have to decide what you want.

We should probably stop there. So apologies for the questions I didn't get to. Apologies if I wasn't so clear or bright, but hopefully it's helpful.

Let's sit for a moment together, and then Catherine has an announcement.

CHAPTER 169

On Practising with Images (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 1h10

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea explores key aspects of imaginal practice and soul-making meditation. He addresses how the self-sense becomes caught up in the imaginal process, explaining that recognizing oneself as image leads to a profound sense of personal divinity and dimensionality. Burbea discusses the malleability of images - how they can shift between imaginal and non-imaginal states within a single sitting, and offers guidance on working with dissolving or melting images. He emphasizes that what makes something imaginal is not the object itself but the way of relating to it.*
>
> *The discussion covers practical challenges like working with narrative elements in images, balancing particularity with unfathomability, and navigating feelings of unworthiness when encountering erotic beloved others. Burbea addresses concerns about working imaginally with real people, suggesting this can actually deepen relationships when practiced with proper care and the imaginal middle way. He encourages practitioners to trust their experience while refining their view, noting that encountering 'weird' content is natural in this work and can be redeemed through skillful practice. The session emphasizes the importance of attuning to what feels soul-making rather than getting caught in fixed ideas about how images 'should' appear.*

Sorry to be a little late. There's not that many questions, so let's see how it goes, but we could also open it up to live questions and comments if that feels good. I haven't even had a chance to really look at them or put them in a particular order, so let's just see.

The first question reads: "A few weeks ago an image came to me in which the other was me. Not in a sense that the image was me as witnessed by me interacting with another, but me interacting with another version of myself. In the image, I was standing on a landscape, vast and seemingly empty. I felt the soft caress of hands at my back, beckoning me to turn. When I turned around, I saw myself standing in front of me. There was still a self-sense and a sense of other, but also a jolt of recognition that this was me.

"The self I was beholding flickered in and out of being—each time she appeared slightly different, as though seen through a different lens or the way different people at different times might perceive me in daily life. The energy body felt very rooted during this image, yet at the same time a shock of surprise ran through me like a bolt of electricity, followed by joy washing over me and a slight indecision as to how to proceed next.

"I could feel a narrowing in me, a leaning toward the imaginal me, wanting to hold on to her. What felt most soulful to me right then was to bow to the imaginal self and gently turn around. As I did so, I could feel her arms sliding around my back and waist and holding me in embrace. Tears came at this point, as well as an intense sense of well-being and homecoming.

"This is the first time I have interacted with an imaginal version of myself and the surprise slightly interfered with my ability to practice with this image skillfully. Could you say something about this kind of image and pointers for practicing with it?"

Beautiful. In a way, not to set up expectations, but I would expect at some point or other this kind of thing to happen. Maybe to say it better in another way: in some way or another, working with images—and I think I said this at some point—the self-sense gets caught up in, invited into, roped up in, included in the soul-making process. It gets included in what becomes imaginal.

Sometimes it can happen in this more indirect way where we're working with an object. I gave the example of looking at, let's say, this candle flame that became imaginal for me. As I'm enjoying that and lingering with it and feeling the resonances, if I don't narrow my attention too much to the object, at some point I start to see: "Oh, hold on, the image here includes myself. The self pole, the subjective pole has become image as well as the candle." And then I can explore—I could lean my attention to exploring the imaginal self that is arising in relation to this candle. So that would be one way, and it's very common.

Another possibility is that the image somehow—even if it doesn't feel like at the time that I'm working meditatively with it, even if I'm not noticing so much of the self becoming an imaginal self in relationship to it—implicit in that element of infinite mirroring and echoing and duty and these kinds of elements, there's already implication for self-sense and the actual sense, view and images we have of ourselves in our lives. So it's not necessarily right then; it's more subtle and it seeps out into the life, into the being and into the sense of self we have in life.

And then other times, something happens much more like what's in this report—something much more direct, where we really feel or witness the self as image. This can happen in all kinds of ways, but sometimes it is quite startling.

In a way, I would expect, let's say, in time with imaginal and soul-making practice, I would expect the sense of self as imaginal. Going back to the opening in that ritual when I was saying you may not have landed then by saying "you are image"—what is it to know yourself as image? What is it to know yourself as angel? This is what I'm talking about.

Something happens and the self-view, self-ideation, self-view, self-sense, self-image starts getting infected, infiltrated, caught up in, involved in the soul-making. And so what happens when we become imaginal is that very self-sense starts to become imaginal with all the nodes. We start to have eros for ourselves. We start to love ourselves in a whole different way. We start to recognize our own dimensionality and our own divinity.

Of course, culturally, this doesn't fit at all. In the wider culture, to say that I sense my own divinity—I mean, divinity on its own is a problem. And then to say self, we get such limited and confused and confusing indoctrination about the self in our culture, in our wider culture. On one hand, it's a very egoistic culture, of course, that's very individualistic and kind of caters to and supports a very superficial kind of thinking about the self—a kind of ego celebration. And on the other, we kind of get shamed for that kind of thing. So we get—do you understand what I mean? You're not supposed to be egoic, and yet it's an extremely egoic culture.

We receive these confused and confusing mixed messages. The same contradictions plague our understanding of sexuality—everything is muddled and bewildering.

But at some point we begin to sense ourselves as image and we sense our own blessedness. We have a reverence for ourselves. We sense this dimensionality. We sense I am more than what I'm told I am. And that "more" is not just expansive horizontally—not simply that I could choose to become an airplane pilot or brain surgeon if I wanted. No, I am more not only horizontally, but vertically, so to speak.

We start to really receive a palpable and moving sense, a deeply touching recognition of our own divinity—that we are the face of, let's say, at least one angel. We are the representation, the emanation of angel in this life and may be tasked with sacred work. All of this neither real nor not real, this imaginal middle way.

Given the usual history we carry both personally and culturally in terms of how we view the self, this opening is oftentimes utterly startling. I was speaking with someone recently about this unfolding to a whole other level. This person had done considerable work on self, had been in the Dharma for years with the teaching of no-self, no-self, no-self—self isn't important. Then they engaged a Diamond Heart approach where there's

more emphasis on self, exploring and valuing the self, discovering who you are. And then came this entirely new dimension with the imaginal and the divinity of the self—the sense even of angels looking at the self, recognizing, being seen as angels, seen by angels.

If this becomes too rarefied, then the people around you are in for a rough time, and probably you will be at some point as well. But if we can stay somewhere within that actually quite wide range—the wide boulevard of the imaginal middle way—then there's so much fertility, so much joy, so much healing.

This transforms our sense of self and existence, our understanding of what we're doing here, our relationship to life and death. When I say I'm already dead, it's because I can sense myself as image and I sense that angelic mirroring or function or emanation. That recognition makes a difference to everything.

This journey into the self becoming recognized as image—with all the reverence and humility and beauty and eros—this is exactly the kind of opening that's possible. How rare is it in our culture to really know how beautiful you are? That's why I say it to you. We don't really grasp it. Our concept of beauty is so thin. When understanding deepens to another level, up-levels, there's no end to it. This is the kind of opening that can unfold, with such riches pouring forth.

If we know to expect this possibility, it might be less surprising and startling, which helps us receive it.

In some spiritual traditions—for example, the way Henri Corbin interprets certain Sufi and Islamic mystical traditions like Ibn Arabi—they speak of the angel out ahead. That angel out ahead is me. In that metaphysic, I have a kind of angelic counterpart. You have an angelic counterpart. We each have an angelic counterpart, and that angelic counterpart is the face of God for us. But it's us. We are the face of God. So we expect to encounter this if we're practicing well and if we're blessed with such grace.

Much of the soul-making work involves discovering how this natural dynamic is being prevented—how the natural expansion and fertilization and fermentation of the soul-making process is blocked by certain ideas or fixations or fixed views or certain images, whether cultural or personal, or in terms of our meditative capacity. Often the work is simply recognizing, "Oh, that's been a taboo in my mind," and acknowledging that, perhaps softening it. Or recognizing that I hold a certain view that's obstructing the process—some philosophical view about reality, among other things.

So it may be less about making this happen and more about noticing where something might suggest itself, and I might think, "Oh, I can't possibly do that." Or some kind of ideation might arise. As Catherine framed the question: Tell me an idea you have about sacredness that prevents the opening to more sacredness.

In terms of practical guidance for this work, the same principles apply: bringing the energy body there, bringing the heart, sometimes asking subtly if it wants anything—everything we've discussed regarding the imaginal.

This kind of opening might have quite an impact, because it's so profound. You have to be careful of the pacing. It may be that you want to linger longer because it's so rich or touching, so you take your time. You might want to deliberately return to this kind of image.

If this happens as a one-off experience, it might leave you thinking, "Wow, that was amazing," or perhaps "I couldn't quite grasp it." But a single experience may not be sufficient to truly begin changing the sense of self as it walks down Newton Abbot High Street or navigates difficult situations. It may require dipping in and out, returning to work with such images, and perhaps lingering in the post-meditative state as well.

I walk into the garden. How does the world look when I've just encountered that kind of divinity, self as divinity?

What's my sense of my existence, but also existence itself? You get a feel for how it spreads out and infects and involves everything else. That's one of the ways these images start to really seep down into the psyche. And it's not necessarily in the intensity of some moments of meditation, beautiful as that can be. It might be more in these moments of—I had it before in the meditation, now I'm just sitting waiting for my tea to brew or whatever it is. And maybe I can just bring the memory of it back, and again, the energy body, and just notice: well, how do I feel? How do things look with the tincture, with the almost homeopathic drops of that image coming in again and again?

The self-sense, of course, is one of the most entrenched things. It's why the Buddha and so many Buddhists give so much attention to the problem of self. So the more we shift it in imaginal practice—this way, that way, shift it, sit with it, see what the effects of that view are, come back to another view of self, etc.—the more we do that, the more malleable and open the whole sense of self becomes. And something like this, where we're really, in a very humble and touching way, recognizing deeply the holiness and beauty and divinity and angelic nature and function of our own selves—that's quite a

shift, as I said, from the usual view. And so repeating it, you know, again and again—it's not something you need to grasp at or try and hang on to twenty-four seven. No, it can come and go, and it starts to have its effect.

Is there any more with that? Is that okay? Very beautiful, and exactly the kind of thing I would expect—and incredibly important. Incredibly important.

Something is unclear to me about the possibility of the self becoming imaginal in relation to an imaginal other, and how it fits with the elements. For example, this morning I encountered an imaginal other person, but I was a bird of prey. My energy body was the bird's body as well as my experience of the other, et cetera. Should I have also retained a sense of my human self relating to both the bird and the imaginal person? It feels like that would have been a rather different image.

I think I understand. So with a lot of these things, I don't think there's a right or wrong. And one of the general things I would want to say—and I've sort of said it at other times or other talks or whatever, maybe other retreats—if I think back to when I first started playing with all this stuff and exploring it and trying to make sense of it all, the kind of images I had were quite different from the kind of images I have now. And they were kind of long sagas with casts of thousands and very complicated plots and stuff like that, and all kinds of things going on. Now I kind of feel like it's much more—what's the word?—condensed. What appears is what's important, and the extraneous stuff has fallen away. It's less complicated.

But I wouldn't necessarily at all go back to that self—whenever it was, four or five years ago, six years, whatever—and say, you know, that's wrong or something. I had to, and I really had to work on the trust. So often, every time there's an image, there's like: am I doing this right? This can't be right. Surely not that kind of image. Or maybe this is too this or too that.

So yes, we talk—some of you were in the explanation about the elements. Yes, we talk about okay, what do we mean when we say fully imaginal? And can we kind of support it there? But you also want to kind of trust what comes up. So less about right or wrong. And sometimes you just have to kind of go with what is and trust that as you attune to what's appearing and work with it as best you can and incorporate the teachings, the whole practice will evolve.

That's a general point. It's not necessarily pertaining just to this note. But there's something about just diving in and trusting, and not trusting the mind that says, "Nah, this probably isn't right. I'll wait for something better." I actually expect that thought to come up most times. I expect it. And the answer is: okay, thank you, and then just get on with it.

So encouragement to trust. And even if we're talking and saying, actually, to be fully imaginal is more like this, not so much like this—don't worry so much. Just dive in. Get wet. Get your feet dirty. Get your hands dirty.

Play with it. Be touched. Sometimes you'll feel like, oh, you did a session. It was like, well, I don't know. Was that worth it or not? It's fine. You're exercising a lot of qualities just by engaging and working and trying to tune and paying attention. Do you understand? So trust. Trust your process.

In this question, should I have also retained a sense of the human self? Because she had become this bird, this bird of prey, as well as some other imaginal figure. Relating to both the bird and the imaginal person, they're both options. In other words, you could let yourself be completely that bird of prey in relation to the imaginal other.

Actually, you won't ever be completely the bird of prey. There will always be some kind of sense of, I know that I'm me as a meditator sitting here. I'm not like, oh, goodness—you know, like in Kafka's Metamorphosis or something. It's like, what am I going to do now? And will they serve me worms and bird food? Don't worry about it. There's always going to be some degree of the meditator witness watching.

But the options—you have the option of just going fully into the self becomes that bird. And then you can trust that in the infinite echoing of things, it will spill over into one's life in time, in its implications. It will have multiple meaningfulness and multiple meanings in relation to one's life and all that. So that's one option. Another option is to take this seat more consciously and watch the two of them. So it's a double image and they're interacting. And it's not right or wrong. They're just both options.

This looks like the same person, so I'm going to skip that for now. In the artistic story of the seven stories, beauty as a way to draw souls to new vistas is mentioned. I presume this beauty could include grief, fervor, depiction of harsh realities such as in war, et cetera, thinking of artworks of the past. As a sister of justice and truth, could art also inspire souls to action? Many thanks to you both.

So can art also inspire souls to action? Absolutely. Yeah, definitely. And I think there's more than one question there, but let's just linger for a second. Yes, there is. So it's funny. I mean, again, I'll give my opinions as an artist, but they're just my opinion. So, you know, it's me with the mic on right now.

But I feel that's one of art's functions. Absolutely. But it doesn't need always to be so obvious or deliberate. So I listen to a lot of music that has no lyrics to it, no nothing. There's no programs. It's just abstract music or abstract art. You think about a Rothko or a de Kooning or whatever. It's just abstract art. To me, if the art is deep and if my engagement with it is deep and it's touching me deeply, it makes me want to live differently. It does something to my sense of values. It does something to my sense of self and what I want to manifest in the world and what's important. It heightens my sensitivity. It opens my heart and my care. There's nothing in a Rothko where it's got three slabs of color.

How is it that those three slabs of color do something to my sense of caring for humanity? What's going on there? To me, it's part of the mystery of art. And then, of course, you get art that's much more programmatic or deliberately depicting something that's clearly trying to inspire action or political consciousness. That's great too.

Art and imaginal—they're almost synonymous for me. They're the same thing. And so you're going to get the soul being touched at levels that, as Rilke said, you need to change your life. "I saw the statue," and this depiction of the statue, and suddenly at the end of the poem, "you need to change your life." To me, certain music—it's all the same. It has that degree of impact. So absolutely, either in an obvious way or a less obvious way.

There was a question in the notes: beauty could include grief for the depiction of harsh realities such as in war, et cetera. Absolutely. So again, all these elements of the imagination that we talk about—all these elements—they're open-ended. They're medicine, and I have to drink it.

Typically, we took the examples I gave—for some of you, for those who weren't in the lounge earlier—let's take two or three of the elements of the imaginal: the numinous, love, eros, and beauty. Very easily we can think, "Oh, love is like this. This is what love looks like. It manifests in this form or in this form." But you can get a very stern kind of love, or a harsh kind of love, or a fierce kind of love. Those are faces of love that sometimes we forget.

What happens with the imaginal is if we can hang out and—again, not just believe what the mind is saying immediately: "Oh, this can't be right," or "It's threatening me," or "Well, this image seems to want to stab me or devour me or chop off my head or eat my intestines or whatever it is. That can't be love." Check it out. You don't have to do anything. But if you linger a little bit, you'll start to notice, "Oh, that's weird. It's this expression of my intestines being eaten. It's a certain form of love that I haven't encountered before." You don't often hear it in pop songs and things like that. But actually you can feel it in your being.

So a lot of this has to do with sensitivity. It's like your eyes get used to the dark. "Hold on, wait a minute. There is a kind of love here." And then the sense of what love means and can look like—the forms and expressions love can take—grows. Same with eros, same with beauty, same with all of them, in fact.

So yes, beauty can be terrible, dark, violent, apocalyptic, grief-filled—all of that. Actually, I would say grief, when we're relating to it in a good way, in a way that's helpful, has a kind of beauty in it. There's something about the way the heart is holding and feeling that grief that allows grief to be beautiful. Actually, it's even possible with anger and things like that. But definitely, yes.

Is that enough about that question? There was another one: "Can you say more about boundary? My image sometimes has clear boundary and sometimes dissolves or partly melts. When it's distinct, it's distinct. Is that the imagination before it becomes imaginal? Can a figure be sometimes imagination, then evolving into imaginal and back in one sitting?"

In terms of this last question—can a figure be sometimes imagination, in other words non-imaginal image, then evolving into imaginal and back in one sitting? Absolutely. Again, an image or an object in the world is not inherently one thing or another.

What makes it imaginal is the way of relating to it, the way of looking at it, the way of being with it. So in one sitting, certainly, something could start off as complete fixation, for example—here's this person and I'm really attracted to them and I want them and I this or that or whatever. It's possible, if I work well, that the craving and reification wrapped up there actually gets softened and transmuted into eros and the sort of theater-like quality of the imaginal middle way. And then the thing can become imaginal.

Or, for example, I'm with something and it's already imaginal. Then I lose my energy body or I get a bit reified about it and it becomes a real thing. And then I can just sense that some of the depth and dimensionality and beauty and mystery has gone out of it. When I said it will happen, it absolutely will happen. Eros will go to craving many times, and there are degrees.

Something that's imaginal becomes flat. Something that's flat is allowed to become imaginal again. No problem. The task of practice is to just recognize that, expect it, recognize it. Oh, what does it need now? What does it need? But you start to get quite sensitive to when images are flat images and when they're more fully imaginal in our sense of the word. So absolutely. And it's just a matter of, okay, now what needs tweaking? What needs supporting? What needs help there?

In terms of the dissolving and melting images, Rowan is saying there was an image, an imaginal figure, and it just dissolved into sort of water droplets by itself. And that was beautiful. Now here's a question: Was the beauty a soulful beauty? Or was it just kind of, oh, that's pretty? It was soulful, beautiful.

I don't think there's a right or wrong here. What you may want to be interested in is if that sort of thing happens all the time, then you might be thinking, okay, well, let's sometimes see if I can keep it back as a figure. But if it happens sometimes, you can just go with it. The image has changed, but the soulmaking is still there and the beauty is still there. And that's really fine. So again, your sense of the soulfulness at any time can lead you. If it's soulful, if it feels soulful, if the energy body is involved, if it's touching the being and the soul, then just go with it.

Can I share about the Aslan thing? On another retreat, Rowan was sharing that she had an image of Aslan, the lion king from The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Sometimes in the meditation, what happened was that figure would kind of dissolve into a vast space. But that vast space was imbued by the character, the essence of Aslan.

This is, I think for now, I would like to keep as a sort of more rare option, but definitely I'm mentioning it as a possibility. It doesn't have—it's not a figure because the obvious form has gone, but it's still specific and it's still got the character of Aslan. So there's still personhood and particularity, even though it's not in the figure itself.

So if those things are there, you're still in the realm of the imaginal. It's great. It's just the form has changed. And so the job with the water droplets might be the same. Oh, is this now the same essence? Am I touched by it or is it a different one? Maybe it's a different one and that's fine too. Different feel, yeah. So then the job would be, okay, can I tune to that and get the sense of the soul of that and the practice would be the same.

Yeah, but you know those water droplets, they might then become alive in a way that water droplets are not usually alive for us. Does that answer?

Yeah, very good. So the question is, is it worth staying with a flat image and waiting for it to become imaginal or hoping or working for it to become imaginal? Or should you just wait for something that's obviously more imaginal? Experiment. I don't think anything other than experimenting. You need to kind of taste these things for yourself and taste what's possible and discover for yourself what's possible.

I guess there's a lot of stuff that moves through the mind that's just obviously flotsam and jetsam of the mind, but some of that, and as a technique sometimes, maybe as a last resort technique, but sometimes what passes through as a daydream, weirdly—you might be trying to be with your breath and then this daydream comes and it feels like that's just a waste of time—and then you start lingering with it, and it actually can become imaginal. So it's hard to tell in advance sometimes, but the more you do this, the more you'll get a feel of the potential of something.

Working with an image, I want to know more about it. This desire creates, discovers more details, texture, qualities of its particular face and manifestation. This particularity and its intricacy is meaningful, but sometimes ends up defining the image more and more, closing dimensionality and unfathomability. Still, the particular appearance feels precious. Could you say something about this balance, how to hold both?

I guess I wouldn't be from the beginning just convinced that it's necessarily the intricacy and the particularity per se that needs to somehow close the image or define it.

Let's just imagine I had a visual image and maybe it's a gate that opens, and I'm somehow moved by this gate. I don't even understand. There's something beautiful about this threshold and these gates. And then as I'm with the image, maybe the gates have those kind of filigree designs in them. And it's like, wow, like you get in some mosques and stuff like that. And it's like, wow, that's really beautiful.

The question really is whether the filigree itself feels soul-making or feels like a relevant, a soulfully relevant aspect of the image. So really what I want to navigate within an image—images start getting complex—and what I want to navigate towards is what feels soulful and soul-making. Everything else is kind of secondary.

Sometimes, especially if you're not used to working with the imagination per se a lot, sometimes the imagination is really not very vivid, and sometimes it's extraordinarily vivid. Like sometimes you could close your eyes and see every little hair on someone's chin, for example. Now, it might be that seeing those hairs is soul-making for whatever reason, but it might just be, yeah, okay, it's visually vivid, but so what?

So you have to kind of gauge what feels soul-making at any time. And that's what you kind of want to gravitate towards and linger with and resonate with.

But it might also be that the way that I start to pay attention to some element in an image or some particular particularity of an image is forgetting some of the elements of the imaginal, some of the nodes, or it's a bit too—I'm startled by the visual detail and I just kind of go like that. And then it becomes a kind of visualization exercise or a concentration exercise. Or it may be that in my relationship with it, it's a bit too craving. I now want something. Oh, yes, now we're getting somewhere. So there's something more in the subject pole rather than the object pole that's causing it to become flat a bit.

I often encounter images of a specific moment which has a quality of timelessness, but also encapsulates temporal circumstances. For example, two men drinking sake on a porch at night. I know that when they were young, they had some strong karmic connection, that they haven't seen each other for many years, and that something decisive is about to happen between them. Would you say such images have less soul-making potential? How to work skillfully with the narrative element which opens as I draw nearer such an image? Should such a situation be somehow personified so I can feel its love for me, for instance?

This is also important. Some years ago, I wanted to make a distinction between what I called an iconic image versus a narrative image. A narrative image is where you're going to do this, or this person does this, and then they do that, and then I'm going to do this—there's a narrative that usually goes toward either some great catastrophe or some great triumph, happily ever after.

I wanted to draw this distinction to point out that when we're practicing imaginatively, we're actually less interested in that narrative way that the mind uses its imagination—which can very often be like papañca, this kind of proliferative thinking, hoping, and so forth. We're more interested in images that have this timeless quality, where something is always happening.

However, what you often get are images with what I call a narrative backstory. This sounds like what's here—there's a scene, two guys on a porch drinking sake together, but there's an implicit backstory. That's fine. It's part of the richness of the image. That kind of narrative backdrop helps you understand something about what's already taken place or how it fits into a larger context. It's not a problem.

What's specific about this image is that it happens at this charged point—after many years apart, with their history, and before something else is going to happen. So the image is implicitly understood in a narrative context. The image is pregnant with this background narrative. It's contained within it, but it still has this quality of timelessness to it. This will happen quite a lot, and there's no problem at all.

Regarding whether such a situation should be personified so you can feel its love for you—I wouldn't rush toward something like that. Something's happening there. If it feels like there's some kind of soulful quality here, linger with it. You don't have to rush to think, "Okay, but where's the third node with the love and all that?"

Since you write fiction, this is the kind of thing I was alluding to earlier. There's nothing wrong with that—absolutely. It may be that your great masterpiece novel comes out of something like this. But when we're deliberately practicing imaginatively, we have a slightly different intention. We want to be guided and navigated by the compass of what feels soul-making. It feels like, "Oh, if I get too much more into the narrative, that's what I'm focusing on or interested in."

Then I feel it go flat a little bit. So, okay, what do I need to do? And sometimes it's just, okay, just that moment, just that. And what aspects of that moment—it's already quite a complex moment—what aspects of that do I need to feel the resonances with? And so much is about attuning, being attuned to the resonance, and then just lingering with those particular resonances.

So it's almost like just saying, put the brake on for now and just hover here. Like a helicopter or hummingbird or something, just hover. Like a hummingbird drinking—it's just hovering right there. And there are other flowers, but right here, this is where the nectar is. This is where the soul-making nectar is, and I hover with that.

And another time, you can have a very different intention, which is: now is my writing time, or I'm about to go to my writing desk, and let's just play and see and get the sense of what the story is.

Sometimes the shift is so subtle—it's a bit like when we were talking about the samādhi and that bird, that eagle. The shift is so subtle that it leans it one way, changes your direction one way or another, and changes actually the whole tenor and the whole feel of what's happening. So it's really, sometimes really subtle. We have to get quite subtle at this kind of really fine attunement to where the nectar is in any moment.

Question: "I have noticed that when working with an erotic beloved other, sometimes the image of self gets caught up in the soul-making dynamic, and other times it shrinks and solidifies and feels unworthy. In these moments, I have made the felt sense

of unworthiness primary, giving it the most attention with my energy body and offering warm metta. This is soothing, but I find it takes me out of relationship with the imaginal other. Suggestions for other ways of working with this—ways of igniting certain nodes that keep the tuning and soul-making with that specific beloved other alive. P.S. Upon writing this, I am thinking it would be interesting to focus on the loving-being loved and humility nodes. Can I sense the image's love for me? I will try."

Yes, very good. You answered it.

Again, we're either very—in our culture, in some way or another—most of us have been or still are pretty wounded in terms of the sense of self. Or if we're not wounded, we're limited by the cultural view of the sense of self. What can often happen is some kind of shame or unworthiness is a common feeling in life for many people, in relationship and in practice as well, and in relation to an imaginal other.

Sometimes, focusing on the node or the element of loving and being loved would be really helpful. In particular, sometimes I would suggest to some people with this kind of question: what does the image do in response to your feeling of unworthiness? How does the image relate to that unworthiness?

So sure, you can actually—this is fine. It's like: stop, do some mettā, bathe in warmth, let go of the image, etc. But sometimes, an image again loves us in specific ways that we don't yet know how to love ourselves in those ways, or sees us with eyes that we don't yet know how to see ourselves with.

So it might be: I feel unworthy. I feel shame. Actually, I feel like I can't bear being looked at by this image. The image is gazing at me, and it's just too much. Well, maybe I say to the image...

I can actually bring my unworthiness, my sense of unworthiness, deliberately to the image. Or my sense of: I actually can't bear your gaze. I crumble in shame, or I want to hide, or I want to bury my head, or whatever it is. And I might say to the image: "You look at me like that, and I have a feeling it's good for me, but I just can't handle it. Or I just want to run away and hide," or whatever it is, and see what its advice is.

So the image embodies soul wisdom and soul gaze and soul love in ways that are beyond what we consciously know. So that would be another option—doing something like that.

So it's 5:34. Should we do a few more?

Yeah. Any suggestions or things to be aware of when I've done imaginal work with someone in my life upon engaging with the real person? So far, I've only encountered very healing effects on relationships or an intuitive knowing of the difference between the imaginal figure and the real, but it can still make me nervous.

I wouldn't encourage nervousness, but care with this. We haven't actually put out teachings overtly yet about—I'm not sure who wrote this, but I'm wondering if they mean actually working in real time with the other person, each becoming image for each other in real time?

Sabra's clarifying that you're not talking so much about what I just alluded to—which we haven't really taught yet, where two people are practicing in real time, each becoming image for the other and sharing that. That's a whole other level of practice which I wouldn't recommend at this point, generally, because it can get supercharged with all kinds of eros flying around and consequences that are sometimes difficult to control. But it has tremendous potential as a practice, and perhaps at some point we'll put out clearer teachings about that.

You're talking about when someone who's an actual person has also become an imaginal figure, and you're working with that image privately. Should you be nervous about that or take care? Yes, but I tend to be, at this point, more trusting and less suspicious of that than many people would be who might hear about that as a way of practicing.

Particularly if we incorporate all these other elements—humility, the non-reification, the imaginal middle way, the theater-like quality, even just the energy body—all this will keep it from being a reified, fixated kind of craving fest that then impacts the relationship in problematic ways.

I might even go further and say that to have a really deep human relationship—even if the other person is dead or doesn't know they're an imaginal figure for you—it has to involve the imaginal dimension. This would be a shift from thinking the real thing is the human, and the imaginal is some other non-real thing. But I think more and more that a really deep connection with another, when we truly love and value and care for them, involves their image for us. We have to know how to relate to that and how to handle it.

But if we take care of the elements and the sensitivity and practice, I don't think it will be a problem. Actually, I think the opposite. Sometimes people are forced into that kind of practice in relation to a person because they're an object of craving and reified, and they can't get over that. Then as I actually let them become more image—in other

words, let them become more imaginal rather than less imaginal and more so-called real—as I let them become more imaginal, let it fill out and really work with that with the fullness of my being and everything we've talked about, they gain dimensionality and amplitude, and all the pressure comes off. The need for this or that to happen in the real dissolves.

It sounds like that's your experience, and I would say that's exactly what I would expect. Would I give that instruction to absolutely everyone? No, because I don't think some people are ready for that yet, and they don't have enough wherewithal practice-wise to navigate it. But it is absolutely possible. Sometimes it might feel a little hairy—if there's a lot of craving or desire for someone, it can get difficult. But it can be done, no question about it. And as you say, it can be very, very healing.

I would repeat: is that not the fullness of human relating and who we are? That we have these other dimensions—very different than how we usually think about them.

One more question. I was with the image of a gray-haired, kindly older woman who at first embodied sisterly and then more maternal qualities—this fierce yet tender, unconditional acceptance and love. After a while, I began to feel strong stirrings of sexual desire, maybe not directly towards her, but certainly in relation to her. This freaked me out, so I started to instead view her as a lover to avoid any Freudian monkey business.

I think we have a title for our next retreat: "Post-Radiant Monkey Business."

I have a sense all three women—older sister, mother, lover—are the same imaginal image, and yet I also feel they are distinctly different. Could this be the concertina node, or is this one image embodying all these qualities?

I don't know in terms of that bit of the question. What's important is experimenting, and also what's important is: where is the question coming from? By itself, it may not be that important whether they're one image or three images. You could try it one way, you could try another. It may be just a matter of hanging out with that figure or those figures, and in time it becomes clear whether they're one or three or both one and three.

I wonder if the question is coming from apprehension about Freudian monkey business. If so, that's where I would put the attention and say: don't worry about it. Freud's been dead a long time.

There's so much of this kind of thing—this apprehension, this hesitation—I've encountered it countless times. The mind that's been conditioned in certain ways can feel that such experiences are taboo, not okay, strange. "Maybe this will make me even weirder than I already am. Maybe I'll become dangerous to others." I don't think these fears are really worth our concern.

Again, if we can introduce even a little trust, just for a few minutes—the mother in the image is not my mother. Do you understand? She may look like my mother, may even be a motherly figure, but she's not necessarily my actual mother.

We tend to reduce everything to a particular kind of psychology, one heavily based on family dynamics in infancy. And while there's tremendous value in that work—starting with Freud and all that followed—it's also quite limiting. Once we enter these practices, we're stretching and opening certain boundaries.

Does the person want to say anything more? You don't have to, of course, but I wonder whether the question about whether they're one and the same is actually gaining its charge and momentum from apprehension as much as anything else.

If you do this kind of practice enough, you will, at some point, encounter something that's pretty weird by conventional standards. Some people encounter more unusual material than others, and that's fine—there are differences in personality. But we also need to check: Am I constraining myself? Am I shutting out certain possibilities?

This isn't to say, "Come on, I want weird stuff!" It's more about asking: Am I getting in the way of something here? Rather than steamrolling over fear, could I perhaps say, "All right, I'll play with this image for two minutes and give it enough trust. Maybe there's something here." I can feel that it's weird—okay. I can sense my apprehension, but there's also something soul-making in it.

If I can attune to that and decide on just a little trust—just two minutes of trust—and tune into the soul-making while working in the ways we've discussed, then what seems pathological or disturbing gets redeemed, becomes sacred. It might remain very strange from a conventional viewpoint, but you begin developing more trust in these experiences.

Well, it's 5:47. There's one more question, though I don't know what it says. We should probably stop.

What does it say? "There are three images that seem related and are arising together. I have played with treating each image individually, but the experience is much richer and deeper when taken as if forming a three-part harmony. The energy body feels more full and alive. One of the images is visual, the others are auditory. Is this an example of the concertina element coming alive?"

Maybe, but not necessarily. It may simply be a three-part image. Again, I would trust the sense of where the energy body feels alive and where it feels more soulful.

The concertina element is as much about the sense of pregnancy in an image—that there's this quality, in different ways with images, of more: more possibility, more otherernesses, more beyonds. So the concertina is, in a way, a pregnant sense of more possibility.

But simultaneously, the concertina is a kind of sense that this is not the reality. This image is not the one image, not the only image that can be presented. It's part of the loosening, non-fixating attitude that's present.

But it sounds like this is perhaps more like there's an image involving three figures, and they're in a certain kind of relation and harmony with each other—and that's the image. At least, that's how it sounds to me.

Yes, exactly. Very good. Thank you.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute before tea.

If you don't remember anything of the particulars of what we've said today, maybe just hold this—it's actually a phrase from a Dzogchen teaching: *Trust your experience, but keep refining your view.*

This applies to emptiness teachings, but it also applies to the imaginal. Trust your experience, even if it feels like "this isn't quite right" or "it's a bit different." Trust your experience and let your view refine with all this richness of teaching and sophistication and discrimination.

So trust, get in, get your hands dirty, play and trust—and refine in time.

CHAPTER 170

Eros and Desire (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 1h09

> *In this Q&A session from the "Roots into the Ground of Soul" retreat, Rob Burbea explores profound questions about eros and desire in imaginal practice. He clarifies the crucial distinction between eros and craving, explaining how eros requires twoness—a maintained tension between self and beloved—while union dissolves this creative polarity. Burbea addresses concerns about whether any object can become problematic in erotic relationship, drawing parallels with mettā practice to show how the issue lies not in the object but in how we relate to it.*
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> *The discussion covers the sanctification of selves, worlds, and cosmos through imaginal practice, which Burbea identifies as the primary purpose of this work. He explores how emptiness itself can become imaginal, the phenomenon of "walking in two worlds" where imaginal and ordinary reality interweave, and practical questions about sustaining imaginal experience. Throughout, he emphasizes that both eros and craving may share the same root—the soul's love of soul-making—but differ in how the lattice of imaginal elements is maintained or collapses into reification.*

So again, apologies—I didn't really have time to order these questions into some sort of logical thread. Let's see what we can do anyway.

The question begins: "Not strictly on topic, but I'd love to hear your thoughts at some point. You've both emphasized the importance of the two-ness. On many occasions prior to the retreat, an image of an adventurer or warrior or samurai would arise. There would be two-ness, but often at some point we would merge for a while. I would normally enter them, as it were, and then become very active—slashing, fighting, jumping—with lots of energy arising in my chest and through my body. At times I'd be fighting soldiers. We would then eventually unmerge. Any issues or concerns with this merging?"

No. It's always hard to find the words for the different elements of the teaching. There are at least two reasons why we go on and on about this two-ness business.

One aspect of what we call two-ness is really about the balance of attention when you're working with an image, but also in a dyad with another person. As we've touched on, as many of you know, what can often happen is that we're not very free or flexible within that dyad, within that balance of attention when there's two. This is particularly true in human relationships.

We haven't talked about it so much yet in the teachings—we haven't put this out there—but there's a whole body of teachings about practicing live in real time with someone else, becoming image for each other in the moment, with all the eros and sharing that, handling that very carefully in a very formal way with boundaries.

On this retreat, we haven't done much, if any, but the last couple of retreats, we were doing quite a few exercises where people were in groups of twos or threes, sharing in real time what was happening energetically, emotionally, and then also, if they wanted to, sharing an image—which might have been something that happened yesterday, an image that touched them deeply, or something that was actually present right then as they were speaking.

Part of the reason we harp on about this two-ness is that in those kinds of situations, it can be very tricky for us as human beings, in this culture especially, to be in that relationship, to be in that dyad or whatever it is, or with more people, in a way that's actually fertile, that's not closed down, that doesn't lose myself because I'm over there, or withdraw over here, or some other aspect of my experience just shuts down. It becomes inaccessible, short-circuited, something becomes hard.

One piece of what we're calling two-ness is about that skill in twos, or skill in relationship with other. And one of the basic skills of that whole range of skills is just: can I have both my experience and the experience of the other? How fully can I enter into the openness of relationship and relational possibility there? It sounds really basic, but actually most of you know how difficult it is. You know what happens, especially when the person is looking at you, to be seen so directly, so intently, so upfront like that.

So that's one of the reasons we talk about two-ness, or rather what we're pointing to with two-ness and the practice of two-ness. But it's not really what the note's talking about.

The other reason is that eros needs two-ness. Eros involves what we might call an erotic tension. Some people define eros as the movement or the wish to merge, to unite, to become one. In the Western canonical tradition, that's a longstanding definition of

what eros is. We're defining it somewhat differently, and it might all sound like nitpicking or quite subtle, but as I said, the differences in the realms that will open up are huge.

When we talk about eros, there is an attraction. There is some kind of movement towards, but the two-ness is retained. It's like two poles of a magnet that are attracted, but are somehow held apart. There's a tension there, and with that there's some discomfort. If the poles of the magnet collapse, you lose the tension. The physics analogy breaks down, but if you're in oneness, there are no poles of the eros. Do you understand?

What happens when there's merging and union is there's a dissolving, a dissolution, a fading of particulars. Everything merges into one something or other—whatever that one something or other is: one being with a capital B, one awareness, one love, one whatever. This is wonderful. Of course, in the range of mystical experience that's available to human beings, to taste that, to know that, to be comfortable with it, to dip in and out of that—priceless.

Most spiritual teachings will tend towards that, will point towards that and even raise it up as the highest possibility for a human being. I think what we want to say is that's great and wonderful, and we could talk a lot about that. You'll find many teachings about that that I've given and many other teachers have given. It's great, but there's a whole other avenue, a realm of possibilities that opens up when the two-ness is preserved and that erotic tension is preserved that would otherwise collapse or get dissolved in this oneness.

So when we come to that element of the imaginal, the two-ness...

I would also add the word particularity, or retaining particularities. So in this instance, the person, the meditator, is becoming the image. They think, "Well, where's the two-ness? I'm not two with the image. I've become the image. I've merged." This is not a problem at all, and it's quite a common way for images to arise. Rather than there being other, we enter them, or they enter us, and we become them.

What is still preserved, though, is particularity. It's not that in this instance the person enters this samurai or this warrior and then everything just goes blank. The samurai or the warrior still has particularities, is still differentiable from the environment, from the other soldiers they're fighting. They probably have certain characteristics, look a certain way, feel a certain way, have a certain character. So it's really that particularity we're pointing to.

The actual locus of the self-sense when we're practicing imaginal work doesn't really matter. There are no issues at all with this. Perhaps if you find in your practice that it's always "I am becoming image" or "I am entering an image," or if it's always other, then you might deliberately want to experiment with whatever the complement to that is. You could try retaining the image as other and play with being more deliberate about that just to see what happens. Or the other way around—if it's always other, it might be interesting to enter the image and become the image, to see the world through the perspective and experience of that imaginal being.

There are little tricks to facilitate this. I was talking to someone earlier—if the image is other, is sort of over there, sometimes looking deeply into its eyes allows you to enter it. You enter through its eyes. It's a little trick. And sometimes, curiously, feeling into what the small of its back might feel like is another way that can put you in its body. Why that works, I have no idea, but these are just little technical approaches. The main point is, if you find it's always one or the other, it might be interesting to explore.

We also had a question where there was this self and other, but they could become two others for a third that is the witness of that. There are all kinds of possibilities, and they're all good. You should feel free to explore.

"Is there any sort of eros in imaginal practice to be wary of? I am thinking of an image I had this morning that became eros for the self by the image of the self, if that makes sense. Is there any risk that this could become vanity or narcissism?"

So, no. We're probably used to feeling nervous about all this material, particularly about the object—what the object is. It's my girlfriend's mother, so that's a bit weird. Or it's myself, so isn't that egotistical? Or it's something that seems insignificant—how can you have eros for something that most people would regard as completely inconsequential? It could be anything, a glass of water.

We're mostly used to getting nervous about the object, thinking "that object's okay, but that one's not." I would say any object can become problematic as an erotic object, and any object can be entirely unproblematic. It's not in the nature of the object itself.

Is there any risk that this could become vanity or narcissism?

This follows on from other questions we've had, right? We talked a bit about this, and I would say no. We tend to get nervous around certain objects being taboo. In the Christian tradition, to have Jesus as an object of eros was completely taboo for most of the mainstream, but there were contemplatives who were deep into that practice of having Jesus as an object. It wasn't taboo at all for them.

If we take this question and replace eros with metta as a parallel question, what would you say? When I started insight meditation, no one was practicing metta in the 80s. All kinds of people, including myself, had apocalyptic, thermonuclear explosive experiences that were really unhelpful, and that actually lasted quite a long time. I moved out of the scene for a while—lots of therapy, other practices. When I came back, metta was a mainstream thing as part of insight meditation. People had realized, "Oh, this is really important."

In teaching metta, what they'd also realized is how important metta to the self was in the West. At that time, when people were introducing metta to the self, people were saying, "Well, isn't that a bit dangerous? Aren't you going to get self-consumed and self-loving? That's not a very good thing." Just the same. It's exactly the same. We're just not used to thinking this way.

As I mentioned before, we have a fractured, confused, ill-educated relationship with the idea of self in our society, so that something like this feels dangerous. Something about recognizing the divinity of myself in my particularities, my necessity to God, my necessity to the divine—it's not just that I am one drop in an ocean of divine light, just like every other drop. That is true; that's great, that's wonderful to be able to know and explore. But to know this being in my particularities as divine, as angel, with all the eros there—it's just not a concept that is supported in the culture.

The problem is not in the object of eros, whatever that object is. The problem is potentially when—if we translate it into the elements of the imaginal, the nodes of the lattice—it's when those switch off, or some of those switch off, and eros becomes craving and the imaginal middle way disappears into some kind of reification. When there's no humility, when there's no open-endedness, when there are not loose and elastic edges—that would be the problem.

In other words, it's not the object, any object of eros that's potentially a problem. It's, if you like, the kind of eros we could say. Or it's what's with the eros, what's in the field, in the relationship of that eros. Does that make sense? It's really, really important.

You will doubt all this stuff. Believe me, lots of doubt will come up. But something that may help is just making a parallel question with metta. So no, there's no risk—well, or rather there is a risk, but it's not because the self is the object of eros and has become a beloved, a divine beloved other. It's that the eros shrinks or something gets reified.

Would you say that on some level, the imaginal practice could be seen as a method of inquiry or contemplation and/or a way of gradually sanctifying selves, worlds, cosmos, thinking of the alchemical vessel and contemplation in mystical Kabbalah?

I would absolutely say that the whole point—the whole main point for me of imaginal practice, above healing, above reclaiming one's sexuality, above all of that—is as a way of gradually sanctifying selves, worlds, cosmos. That's absolutely the point. Anything else is kind of secondary, I guess is what I would say. I'm not quite sure what "a method of inquiry or contemplation" means specifically, but if that's good enough for now...

So absolutely, yes. That to me is the point. Of course sometimes the point can get lost because there's so much material and so much detail, and who knows what someone just glimpsing it from the outside might think. But to me that's absolutely the point—completely, one hundred percent. It may include lots of other good stuff on the way, but that's the main thing.

Lying out on the lawn earlier, my body and mind were full of knots and chaos and everything felt wrong. An image came of another me who was also my friend and also my lover. She picked up another different other me who was lying on some different grass in much the same state of unhappy contractions my physical self was feeling.

Now, I think I understand what's happening here. This person is lying on the grass, experiencing considerable difficulty. An image arises that appears to be herself, but this image is situated on a different piece of grass where another version of herself is lying, and the first image picks up this other version of herself.

She writes: "I'll call these two other me's—psyche—the landscape they were in as well." When we use certain words in this work, and I want to keep you on your toes here, many of them carry double meanings and are employed in different ways. The word *psyche*, for instance, we sometimes use interchangeably with *soul*, but we also use it to mean *image*. In this case, she's using *psyche* to refer to the image itself—two selves, both resembling her, along with the landscape they inhabit. That entire constellation forms the psyche, the image.

"The friend-lover me picked up the lying-down one tenderly, then threw her violently down onto some jagged rocks. She picked her up and threw her down repeatedly until every one of the thrown-down me's bones were shattered. I, the physical one lying on the Gaia House lawn, felt my energy body become the stage in which this all played out. So it was happening between them, those two other me's, but also to me and also inside of me."

This illustrates something crucial: it's not in the object itself. It's not in what the mind's first reaction to the object might be. The invitation is to hang out, to trust a little, to listen and feel and see what unfolds. If the mind jumps in too quickly—"Oh my good-

ness, now I'm going to start self-harming" or "I'm going psychotic" or "I'm splitting personalities—now there are three of me, one of them obviously a violent, raging psychopath and the other just a neurotic mess"—all of this is simply mind creating stories.

This is partly why we emphasize the energy body and sensitivity. When we speak of the nodes of soulmaking, one crucial node is that an image, an imaginal image, brings soulmaking. Partly implicit in this understanding is the invitation to bring all the sensitivity, as much delicacy and refinement of awareness as possible into being, into relationship. Because that's where you'll feel: Can I do this? Is this right? Should I follow this? You feel it in the body, you feel it in the soulfulness, you feel it in exactly what this person is describing.

Our minds have been conditioned in countless ways, and much of this conditioning operates beneath the threshold of consciousness, working in subconscious patterns.

"As I watched the scene unfolding, the physical and energetic knots and chaos I'd arrived with loosened and calmed. The more violent it got, the calmer I felt, and my energy started flowing more freely. I loved it." She continues: "I love them and I breathe appreciation for them, and my breath became like bellows fanning the flames of the scene, keeping it alive."

If I may extrapolate here, this person intuitively discovered a way to practice what I was describing earlier about attunement and lingering. In this case, it emerged through feeling into the breath as bellows, entering into relationship with the image through this physical, intuitive response. Now, I wouldn't necessarily have offered this as a formulaic answer, but she found it organically, somatically. "Ah, this is part of the tuning. This is part of sustaining and lingering with what wants to emerge in soulmaking."

Who could have predicted such a response? Perhaps it works every time, perhaps it doesn't. But one remains opportunistic, with as much openness, sensitivity, and receptivity as possible—all facets of one's being present and aware, ready and willing to be both active and receptive. And then magic can happen.

"It felt very personal—like who they were and what they were doing was meant just for me. And it is, it was. And the gift of it made me nearly cry in appreciation. There was an intimacy between us, me and the image, such that when the lunch bell rang and I opened my eyes, I felt I was kissing a lover goodbye. However, the image has lingered. I emerged into this lunchtime-at-Gaia-House reality, but I have not left the image behind, or rather it has not left me."

It still feels very close, and I can see it every time I blink or close my eyes. It's like I'm walking in two worlds. The imaginal one is somehow affecting this one, leaking into it, so that Gaia House and the retreat and all my anxieties and preoccupations are smoothed around the edges through having the image beside me, inside me, all around me like this. Our love—mine with the image—blesses everything else. Can you say anything about walking in two worlds like this, interweaving this world with the imaginal?

Again, all the details are necessary, but this kind of experience is exactly what I would expect in time. You could say that this sense of parallel worlds or realms have mirrors of ourselves and of this world. There's just one level of world that we usually share. So that tree exists in all the worlds, but at different levels. There are different levels of worlds or planes of existence or realms. So I would absolutely expect this kind of thing. Often it doesn't happen until a little further on, but there's no real linear order in this.

Immediately, you can hear in the very idea, in the very concept, in the very sense of it—there's all this dimensionality. This world suddenly just has all this implicit dimension. What that does to the world, to the sense of self, to the sense of care and sacredness—it's beyond priceless.

That as an idea, you will find throughout mystical traditions. You'll find it in mystical Kabbalah. You'll find it in some Islamic mysticism, this idea of levels of worlds. You'll get it in Buddha Dharma as well—talk about other worlds, other realms of being, the deva realm, this realm, that realm, and so forth.

The person isn't asking if there's a danger, but no, there's no danger. There's absolutely no danger. There's nothing in here that at all hints of "get away from this world, this world is not worth it, I'm off to that world." There's no escapism at all. Nothing like that. Instead, it does something—it fills out the beauty, the dimensionality, the sacredness, the poetry, the love, the eros for this world.

I don't know what to say other than just trust it, feel its beauty. There will be eros for this, tremendous beauty here, and how much it's touched the being. Because we love eros and all of that, you're going to want to linger with that sense. Sometimes it will come up very vividly for a long period of time. Sometimes—there's a saying I can't remember now—but you can bring it up deliberately, or it's just a hint, just the echoes of that experience.

But those echoes, those little moments, affect our sense of this world. And we can bring that back deliberately, just for a moment or two. It could be anywhere—you could be sitting on a bus, wherever. It doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be a formal practice.

Or it might just come by itself. But it's in the repetitions and those moments and those little tinctural exposures, and in the way we let them seep out—as in the note here, seeping out into the world.

So letting it seep out into the world, into the sense of self, into the sense of others, into the sense of not just the self right now, but also the narrative of my life. You understand? Remember, we're not shutting out narrative. We're not shutting out self in these practices. And what does it do when I then consider my death or the difficulty of my past or my problems or whatever, when I see it in the context of this multidimensional cosmos? Huge.

Another word we haven't used so much, but this would also be an example of cosmopoiesis in a way. There's an image, and that image begins, because of the way that it's working in the soul and in the psyche, to affect the self-sense. Obviously, there's an image there, so the image is already impregnated with soul. And then that seeps out into the very perception of the world.

When we talk about cosmopoiesis—poiesis is just a fancy Greek word for a kind of artistic creation, like poetry, like writing poetry. So poiesis. Cosmopoiesis means world-making, world-creating or world-discovering, cosmos-creating and discovering.

When an image becomes alive, sometimes it comes alive in a way that begins to spread into this world. The same world—with the trees outside, with lunch at 12:30 and dinner at 5:30, with everyone gathered here. Same world, yet also different world. This is cosmopoiesis. This world has been recreated through the power of the soul-making dynamic, through the tinctural power of that particular image. It spreads out into the land, into the grass, into the sky. Do you understand?

That's very, very beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. I'm not quite sure which to choose.

Can emptiness be imaginal? Yes. Does the person who wrote this want to say a bit more about their sense of what they might have been glimpsing or wondering about?

Karen is sharing that sometimes it's all a bit much to do imaginal practice—which is something we should have mentioned on that opening morning, but we said it this morning instead. Sometimes there's too much intensity, and we need balance. We could say imaginal practice is skillful fabricating, but what we want sometimes is skillful unfabricating. Samadhi practice, metta practice, emptiness practices—these are all unfabricating. They all quiet the perception, whether it's regular conventional perception or imaginal perception.

It's really important to move between these modes, in all kinds of ways. That movement can be very fluid, as we've touched on.

Sometimes Karen finds herself in imaginal practice, then goes to some kind of emptiness practice or contemplation, and finds at times that the emptiness itself becomes imaginal. There are actually many ways this can happen.

Let me share something from an interview, if you don't mind. I remember we were working with one of your particular figural images, and then it faded and there was just emptiness. There was a lot of bliss with that, and you dissolved into it—it was lovely. I said that was wonderful, and then mentioned there's another option: not to let yourself dissolve so much, but to step back a little and see the self in relationship with this emptiness.

By doing that, it's possible for a relationship to emerge between the emptiness and the self. The emptiness starts to feel like it's gaining personhood in a way, being in relationship to the self. The self too becomes an imaginal self. Does this make sense?

So that's a possibility—you're steering between pure emptiness practice and the quieting of fabrication back into something more imaginal. It's not better or worse, again, but I would consider things like: does it always tend toward that dissolution and dissolving bliss? If so, it might be good to explore something different. If it happens by itself, that's fine. If it always keeps happening that the emptiness fills with content, then I might think about how to keep it as a purer emptiness practice and go deeper with that.

The sense of emptiness itself becomes an object. If you love emptiness, it becomes a beloved object. Then there's a way of having an erotic relationship with that. If you preserve the self-sense a little—the twoness between them, the separateness—then that kind of thing becomes possible. All kinds of things can ensue from that.

So Karen is asking: is that a legitimate way to deliberately enter imaginal practice—via some kind of emptiness or quieting of fabrication? Absolutely. You'll find that in classical Buddhist Tantra, this is exactly how it's taught. You do the emptiness first, then you do your visualizations or deity yoga. We're a little more fluid in our approach, but it's definitely possible.

So any of those practices, because they fabricate less, they tend to loosen things. Now, if I go too deep, everything goes quiet—the imaginative faculty, everything, all perception will just go quiet. So it depends. Sometimes you can go deep and then come out. Sometimes you can go just a little bit if your intention is to do more imaginal work. But yes, that quietening loosens things, makes them more fluid. I used to use this

phrase: "don't proceed until everything has become liquid"—it's an alchemical maxim. And emptiness will do that, but so will samadhi and so will metta. So you dip in and it loosens things, and then in that looseness, something can arise. So it's totally valid.

There's one more possibility I should mention. For many people who love the path and love practice and love Buddha Dharma and love the promise of emptiness and the teachings of emptiness—even when they don't fully understand it or love whatever glimpses they have—when they start to practice with emptiness or even aspire to practice to some degree with emptiness, emptiness or the unfabricated becomes an object of eros. "I want that. I want to know it. I want to move towards it." And one loves it. So emptiness itself, or the idea of emptiness or the unfabricated, becomes an erotic, imaginal object.

But again, with that, what else will happen? The self will get involved, because it's not just object—it's not just other, but self as well. So the self as practitioner, as one who aspires, as one who's moving towards that realization or that mystical knowing, as one who is supported by, borne along, nourished by the truth—that self, and even the tradition, all this starts to become imaginal. We're talking about fantasies of the path and that sort of thing. Does that make sense? So that's another way emptiness can become imaginal, in a more comprehensive way.

A participant asks: "I have a technical, practical, and pedagogical question about the distinction between erotic or soulful desire and craving. In my own practice and the work I do with others, I find universally that both flowers share the same root. So both erotic desire and craving share the same root—it just needs trusting and following back down the stem, or the onion needs a few layers peeled, to mix metaphors. The sacred jewel is always there either way. So my question is: in practice, what is the scope of usefulness or effectiveness of this distinction between eros and craving?

"Two things I see are: one, labeling a desire as craving raises a flag that signals attention needs to be paid to the subjective pole—has it collapsed and tightened around the object? How is the integrity of the energy body? And two, if that way of working is beyond the abilities of the practitioner in that moment, then a new object should be chosen. Or is that too binary? Any clarification is much appreciated."

I think for simplicity, I'd agree—they have the same stem. So craving and eros may well share the same stem. They're stimulated by the same movement. We could actually make a very fundamental postulate and say the soul loves soul-making. It sounds simple, but actually a tremendous amount follows just from that. So the soul loves soul-making, and eros is a part of soul-making. The soul has a natural inclination and move-

ment toward soul-making and toward eros, toward impregnating things with its eros so that they can bloom, so that psyche can bloom, so that logos can get stretched—all of that.

You could put that as more fundamental than—just playing with ideas here—attachment theory or evolutionary theory about what's operating in a human being. I'm not going to argue about realities, but it might be quite interesting to actually place this as really fundamental: This is what souls want. And then what follows from that? What does it imply for developmental psychology, which operates from a very different set of assumptions?

But yes, for now, for simplicity, we could say the root is the same. What happens is we cannot sustain that—basically because of all kinds of reasons, but often because we're not taught how. We're indoctrinated in a way where we don't have these words. We don't have a word for eros; we just have words for craving or whatever. There are all kinds of taboos, all kinds of ideas about what's real and not real, limits on this or that.

So it actually becomes very, very hard for many reasons to allow the soul its love of soul-making and allow it to flourish—all kinds of ideas or energetic habits of constriction or short-circuiting or collapsing or non-attention or non-care. It takes so much. So many conditions need to be there to actually allow this soul love of soul-making to blossom into soul-making. But when it doesn't, we could say that one of the things that happens is it becomes craving—the eros becomes craving.

Now, where I would maybe expand a little on what this person has written: "Labeling a desire as craving raises a flag that signals attention needs to be paid to the subjective pole"—in other words, over here. "Has it collapsed and tightened around the object? How is the integrity of the energy body?"

I would probably point back to all of the elements. Particularly reification, and some of the ones that are more about the object as well. In a way, there's not really a difference, but it could be anything—anything at all in that sense.

But yes, a good working assumption, even if we take away the assumption that they're coming from the same root—and some people might think, "Oh, that's a bit much for me." I'm happy with it, but some people might find it a bit much—practically speaking, most if not all craving can turn into eros and be helped to become eros and open out into everything. And most eros can quite easily collapse into craving.

So the question as a practitioner becomes: Am I on the lookout for that? Do I recognize when that kind of thing happens? And do I have some things that I can do? One thing might be that all the elements of the lattice might be relevant—any of them.

Another thing—and I've said this before, but it feels important and relevant, so I'll say it again—relates to what we were talking about earlier in this session. Here's the beloved other, and there may be an enormous amount of eros there. So easily, all my attention and devotion and eros goes towards the other. And I unwittingly am not allowing the self-sense to be caught up in the soul-making process and not allowing the self itself to become an object of eros.

I think of this as a bit like some kind of circular tray or fountain. The eros is all flowing over there—the water is flowing all over there. If it's just flowing over there, it's going to tip the balance of this tray. It's precarious because it's all about the object.

If I allow—and to some people it doesn't even occur to them that actually the self can also be seen as divine—I'm so taken by the divinity of that beloved object. But if I can allow, and this may take some work, it may just be a matter of including the self in the awareness and remembering to do that—if I can allow the self to be caught up in the soul-making, in the imaginal, and actually allow the self to become an erotic beloved as well as the object at the same time, then what happens to this tray or fountain is the water is flowing on both sides and it's more balanced. It doesn't capsize.

Then if we extend that also—and this relates to some of the questions from before—if I allow it, it will also spread to the world. If there's eros for some beloved other, the self will also become—I recognize the divinity and dimensionality of self, the self becomes erotically beloved to me. And not with all images and not always immediately, but then that can also—I go out of the meditation, I open my eyes and just hang out there. How does the world look now when you've had a particularly beautiful or touching image? Check out the sense of self and the sense of world.

When you walk out into the garden after such a meditation, how does the world seem? This is another way in which this water actually wants to spread in all directions, and the fountain tray becomes much more balanced. Do you understand the point I'm making here?

One more element that can become caught up - and should eventually become caught up - in the erotic soul-making process is the eros itself. Self, other, world, and then also the elements of the self, including the eros.

So at some point, all this eros - whose eros is it? One looks through the soul-making lenses, through the imaginal lenses, and sees it was my eros, of course. But it's also divine. It's as if I'm somehow - I don't know what words we could use - the channel of God's eros, the divine eros, the eros of Buddha nature manifesting through me. And the eros itself, my eros, becomes erotic for me. Do you understand? All this is helping that fountain tray to become more rich, more full, more balanced, able to tolerate more flow and become larger.

But regarding the second point here - there are people I've worked with or known who ask me, "I want to do imaginal practice," and my sense is that they're just not ready. There may be mental health issues or all kinds of things, or a person simply isn't ready. Like when someone asks about practicing with someone as an imaginal erotic other - sometimes the person doesn't have the practice wherewithal to do this. It keeps getting rarefied and they have no sense of something that's not rarefied. Or they don't really have their energy body, or they can't tolerate much emotion. In such cases, it's probably not a good idea to try this practice. Perhaps another object would be better if one is attempting this work.

Catherine spoke about relating to one's own body as the beloved and an object of eros as part of the energy body practice. Could you say more about the fullness of this practice?

I'd probably want to hear more about what's prompting the question. Does the person want to elaborate?

When using the body as beloved, some of the nodes didn't really feel like they came alive. This will always happen with any object - there's really a spectrum when we talk about fully imaginal and not, and sometimes you don't want to get too hung up about that.

What I was thinking when I received this note was something I said the other day: sometimes what galvanizes and empowers imaginal practice is that we're dealing with something that really matters to us. If I just choose an object and think, "Oh well, I'll choose that. That's interesting. Let's see what happens," it might be that in that moment of relating to it, it's actually a fairly neutral object. You can do things and it becomes somewhat imaginal, but there's not a kind of soul need at that point for it to become fully imaginal.

So often, again, we go back to dukkha and soul-making. When there's some kind of pain - either physical pain or painful relationship with the body, whether it's about dying or ugliness or whatever it is - then there's enough in the crucible. And we still

have to make it crucible-like, but I have to really feel the pain of the issue. Or it might be the other thing - that I'm suddenly struck by the miracle of body and gratitude to my body. Again, there's enough charge to start with to galvanize a process, and then there's more likelihood that the nodes fill out that way.

I'm not sure what else to suggest, but is that okay for now?

I've been trying to find a female representation of the qualities that eros stands for. To have a female archetype, goddess, or whatever figure would feel very empowering. Do you know of any female manifestations of this desire, longing, passion?

I can't think of anything straight away, but there's Aphrodite in the Western canon. There are all kinds of goddesses if you look in actual tantra. Ragarati is a goddess of the Guhyasamaja tantra, and raga means desire or lust.

Jung introduced and popularized the concept of archetype, but for him, an archetype was not a form. Aphrodite is not an archetype, nor are Tara or Quan Yin. They are not archetypes themselves. An archetype is a forming principle—it has no form of its own, but it shapes and influences this or that, including human beings. It's like a program, though that word is too narrow. It's more a style of forming, an intelligence that forms things in certain ways.

What this means is that as we look around the world—going to movies, reading novels, walking down the street, meeting friends or teachers—we see people manifesting certain archetypes. They're probably manifesting a mixture of archetypes. But it may be just as powerful and transformative to start tuning into this directly. This person, that movie star, that character in a novel speaks to me in a particular way. They embody and manifest something that attracts me. We can follow that attraction: what am I attracted to? I'm attracted to the divinity, the goddess or god energy coming through them.

This approach follows your own attraction. There are certainly figures you could choose—I'm not sure what else to say about that at this point. Often these things are more powerful when they come either as spontaneous images for ourselves, which will have more power than someone like Tara or Ragarati, or when we see them in someone else. We start to really appreciate how that person moves, something in their being that emanates and communicates something that touches us.

Again, it might be outside the box of our usual sensibilities and conventional acceptabilities. We have to be alert for what doesn't quite fit. For something to come up spontaneously, there may need to be a certain amount of emotion—even wish for that to happen, distress that it's not happening, or frustration. All those kinds of emotions can sometimes function as generators.

You could try both approaches. There may well be figures available—the Guhyasamaja Tantra has Ragarati.

*_Student_*: The word eros has a lot of masculine connotations and it makes it hard for me to integrate it into my being and relate to it.

Is there a word you prefer? Do you want to try a Sanskrit or Pali word? Like raga? Ragarati, this goddess, embodies raga.

It may be that the word is important. But it may be less about the word and more about getting glimpses and trusting what glimpses you have. Even if it feels like some of what you're feeling surely isn't what we're talking about—that's fine. I return to what I said about trusting. Just get a process going by trusting. You'll increasingly differentiate in your own time between the different kinds of desire or whatever we want to call them. But you'll know it more from the inside, from those glimpses.

You might look around at women who seem to embody or express something that attracts you, something that you feel has that quality.

I think we probably need to stop—it's almost ten to six.

That's fine. I return to what I said about trusting—simply getting a process going through trust. You'll gradually differentiate more and more in your own time between the different kinds of desire, or whatever we choose to call them. But you'll know this more from the inside, through those glimpses, and proceed in that way.

It might be that you look around you—in this case, at women who seem to embody or express something that attracts you, something you feel has that quality. Maybe.

I think we probably need to stop now, as it's almost ten to six. I'm sorry I didn't get to all the questions here. Should we have a bit of quiet at the end?

CHAPTER 171

Image, Ethics, and Awakening (Q & A)

Rob Burbea · 1h32

> *In this Q&A session, Rob Burbea explores how ethics evolve within soul-making dharma practice, moving from foundations to organic roots that can grow and respond to complex modern challenges. He addresses concerns about consent in imaginal practice, explaining how the elements of the imaginal naturally create safety through sensitivity and the understanding that images are neither real nor not real.*
>
> *Burbea discusses the role of ritual in soul-making practice, describing how it extends sensing with soul to include body, voice, and worldly objects, sanctifying ordinary experience. He offers practical guidance for working with sexual eros, including techniques like expanding energy body awareness and viewing desire as simultaneously personal, impersonal, and divine.*
>
> *Addressing questions about meditation difficulties like 'dark night' experiences, he critiques approaches that prioritize rapid impermanence perception with narrow attention, advocating instead for the softer, more open approach of soul-making practice. The session concludes with reflections on the Bodhisattva path and authentic spiritual goals, emphasizing the importance of discovering what one truly wants from practice and life.*

Just before Rob comes, I'd like to let you know how we're thinking about the possible endings of the retreat. First, if you've put your name on the list for an individual interview and haven't had one yet—and there are a good number of you—we'll hopefully offer a couple more tonight and tomorrow. If you're able to stay after lunch, we can see some more people then as well. If you want to check in around that or let us know when you're leaving and you're still on the list, please let us know.

I mentioned the other day that people who haven't had a chance to express their love and thanks to Rob in an individual interview, or if you had one and didn't get to do that, we'll make time tomorrow semi-informally in the lounge after the closing session here at 11:30. That's also room cleaning time, so that still has to happen, along with the books and everything else in the library. But in the lounge, Rob and I will be there, and if you want to have a moment—a minute or two or three—to have a private word with Rob, that's how you can do it, coming in and out of that space. Bear in mind there are lots of people here as well, so it won't be a full interview, but if you want to make that contact, there will be a chance for that.

We'll also do some other pieces around ending, of course. That's where the more personal and private part can happen in that way, but we'll have other forms in the ending of the retreat as well.

Tonight, one of the ideas we had—on the night before a retreat ends, often there will be a dana talk. On our soul-making retreats, Mark has done a fabulous job of offering dharma talks, as he does. Not because he's not here, but we had another idea this time, which we'd love to invite you to participate in. I'll set it up tonight, if you're up for it, where you're all sort of facing into each other with a space in the middle, semi-ritualized in a way, but where the dana talk is offered by the community. In the way that Lee Brasington does it, or some other teachers do it now, and we've done this on our Buddha Dharma Sangha camp where there's a mature community of practitioners—let's say there will be twenty statements of dana made. One person stands up or sits down and offers their statement, whatever is on their heart to say about dana. When they're finished, the second person who is called upon to speak speaks in relation to dana for this retreat and the staff and the ensouling—all of it. Then the third person. When twenty people have spoken, or whatever number we decide is good, they're not each giving a dana talk. They're offering the part that's in their heart. When twenty, if that's what we decide is the number, are done, then it is complete. It's a really lovely way I've witnessed and been part of. Rob and I wouldn't be here for that part. This would be yours.

That's not the only thing we intend for tonight, but that was one idea. Then we'll have something else tonight, and then tomorrow morning, sitting before breakfast, Nick will offer our staff coordinators' closing information. In the closing session here, I think it's at 9:30 to 11:30, we'll have some formal ending together as well. I know there's a part where some of you have written notes and would like a place where we can bless Rob. We'll see if that's part of it too.

Hello.

Again, I apologize, I had a couple of points and didn't have time to collate them into a logical thread of order, but let's just see.

"Is there a reason you don't have a ceremony of taking some form of precepts at the beginning of this kind of retreat? I would find such a ritual very supportive in the creation of boundaries and safety within which this beautiful work can take place. Thank you."

Yes, interesting. You're probably not alone, whoever wrote that. All the retreats at Gaia House are run with the explicit understanding that everyone here will be keeping the five precepts. That should have been gone through by the coordinator before the opening. The reason Catherine and I didn't do it is just because often it feels like with these kinds of retreats, there's quite a lot that we would like to do on the opening evening. We're conscious that people have traveled and we'll run late anyway. So in a way, we're looking to minimize what we do. If the coordinators can do a bit in their opening, there's just a practical reason to hand it to them.

Of course, for some people, a coordinator sitting up here and just reading a list of the precepts doesn't carry the same impact on the soul, on the being, or beauty as a ritual might. So yes, we acknowledge that maybe it's something to think about.

But more broadly, people will probably differ. If I speak personally—and not to say everyone should be like this at all, people differ—some people, I have heard them say that at some point in their history of Dharma practice and exposure to Dharma teachings, they formally took the precepts with such-and-such teacher or in such-and-such a place in India. Of the people who say that, for some it's clear that was really a turning moment in their life and they took that very seriously, and perhaps their ability to incorporate that as a turning point was due to the ritual and the ceremony and the way it was set up. For other people who have reported that to me, I see that they took the precepts and it didn't make much difference. They're still not keeping this or that precept.

So the presence or absence of a ceremony in itself doesn't really do anything. Again, people are different. That's really important. But if I think back, I heard my first Dharma talk—I had never heard any Dharma at all. I think I was...

19 or something in college. Probably memory's a little hazy, but I seem to recall the teacher just sort of talked for I don't know how long and went through the precepts and the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path in one talk. I was like most other 19-year-olds—ingesting certain substances, partying, you know—and I heard this talk and I stopped smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol and everything, just there. I've practiced every day since then, apart from when I had that thermonuclear explosion thing when I was actually sent away from a retreat. But that wasn't for breaking the precepts. That was for being nuts.

So my point is that the presence or absence of a ceremony may help some people. It may do nothing. To me, the precepts are just a way to live. They're completely incorporated into my being. I would say these practices—any Dharma practice—totally rest on the precepts. That's what the Buddha talked about. We talk about foundations, bases, roots, and the precepts are a foundation. You want to start playing with all this super

fiery eros and things like that when you don't have a really rooted basis in the precepts? It's not going to fly. Things will break. The vessel, the ship will fall apart on the stormy oceans.

So to me, they're just completely integrated. Maybe so much so that it's a blind spot and we should emphasize them more because it might not be the case for other people. But for me, they're just how you live. They're not saying how you be on retreat or off retreat, or "now we're doing something special." It's just part of how you live, and that goes with a commitment to kindness and compassion and care and sensitivity and all the rest of it.

This isn't in the question, but I would just add—so they form a foundation. I think I seem to have been absent every time Catherine seems to have gone through this with you, but the difference between foundations and roots. You've said that. Yeah, physically absent.

So anyway, there's a foundation. And then what happens to the precepts as the soul-making Dharma goes deeper? Or we should say this: what happens to one's relationship with ethics as the soul-making Dharma goes deeper?

When I first started talking about soul-making Dharma—I hadn't even thought of that word back then—the first couple of talks I gave were actually about ethics. "The Meditator Is Revolutionary" and "The Necessity of Fantasy." They were about ethics, climate change ethics and image or fantasy. They were probably way too long and complicated, so probably most people just heard talks about climate change, which is fair enough and fine. But part of the point I wanted to make—and I still want to make it—is that it can be easy and maybe even common for some Buddhist practitioners to look at the kind of things we're talking about and doing and worry about the ethics there. Or maybe not hear so much about ethics and think, "You're talking about all this sexual stuff and you have this violent imagery that you're saying it's okay."

What I was trying to do all those years ago is actually say, "Look, we have all this talk about ethics and we have these ethical commitments in the Dharma. Are there not gaps in them?"

Image is operating anyway, whether we have even heard the word imaginal or soul-making. So oftentimes the image, the archetypes that are prevalent and dominant and influential for a lot of Dharma practitioners are ones of passivity and equanimity. You don't get—especially in Theravadan Dharma—you get the picture of the Buddha like

this: he's got his eyes shut and he's meditating. He's very, very peaceful and fine, thank you very much, while the world is burning. It's not at all to blame the Buddha or anything like that, but images operate for us. They're highly influential.

So what can happen—I'm not saying it always happens—what can happen is that then there are crises, and the range of responses or the range in which the self, the practitioner self can then manifest and embody forth or speak up or not speak up gets limited by the archetype that is unconsciously operating. Do you understand?

So what happens when we do soul-making Dharma? Everything gets stretched. The archetypes get stretched. There is the place of the troublemaker. There is the place of the person who will not shut up, who will rage, who bellows fire, who puts themselves on the tarmac and gets arrested—as some of you have been doing. It's just a different archetype. It's extended the range of archetypes, and in the extension of the range of archetypes, it's extended the ethical response.

So you say, "I'm okay because I'm following these five precepts," and there's actually very little engagement with ethics and very little kind of creative tussling with the wrestling—wrestling with the almost impossible questions and conundrums that we have in modern times in a globalized society.

I don't know where the hell this came from. What conditions was it made under? Who suffered for this and who profited? Yet I keep the five precepts. I don't have to say anything about sweatshops in Bangladesh or whatever it is.

I'm not saying there's nothing valuable in the precepts, but when the eyes awaken, we can see where there might be a kind of complacency. "Oh, I'm a good Buddhist. I follow the precepts." But there actually isn't that real wrestling with the deeper questions: What on earth are we going to do about climate change and species loss when there are seven billion people to feed? Most of them are in poverty. These are difficult ethical questions.

And if it always looks peaceful, if it looks okay, if it looks equanimous—maybe the heart feels a little something, but there's no real engagement—then we're missing something essential.

Soul-making, I would say, becomes the foundation of ethics. It becomes a root—something organic that can grow and nourish, like the root of a tree. But then that enters into difficult territory. I'm going to piss people off. I've pissed plenty of people off. I have to be okay with that and decide: Well, maybe it's the cost of the ethical—the price of pissing people off versus something else.

So that's one point. The second point is element number twenty-seven. This is actually one that I know—I think Marian will tell me I've got it wrong. Is it values? Yes.

So values, including ethical values and moral values, are actually implicit in images, interestingly. They're not immediately obvious, but they're there. Images make us ethical beings. Again, I was physically absent, but I think Catherine mentioned that when the word "justice" is spoken, more of the neural network lights up.

We have the human soul—the healthy human soul, let's say—and it has this love of moral values. I was planning to give a whole series of talks on ethics, but I got the metastatic diagnosis and have just been completely busy with that. I don't know if it'll be possible, but I hope so.

But the point is that values, including moral values, are actually wrapped up in images. They're there. And again, we can tune to them, turn them on, see what they say, get turned on by them.

And the whole question of values—look, humanity has been debating ethics and values since before written history. It's complex. It's one of these subjects that's so rich, it's unending and it's not comfortable. In other words, if you think you've found easy answers to ethics in your life, you're just not really engaging it as fully as it might be engaged. They're open-ended, ongoing, difficult questions that we wrestle with. And if there isn't that wrestling there, well, something else is going on. But it's not that full rooting or becoming root of ethics.

But going back to what I said before, the range is extended. So it doesn't just look kind of—speak softly and calmly and it's all very good at letting go and equanimity. It never says anything that might offend anyone. You think about Jesus or someone—of course it got him into a lot of trouble, didn't it? It didn't end so well. It depends where you put the ending.

But anyway, you get the point. To me, it's a really important area, and it's integral to what we're doing.

And if it isn't at the beginning, it will become so. It must, just because of how the soul-making dynamic works. It will pull these things in. They will become obvious. It will extend your range ethically and your ethical sensibility and moral sensibility, all that.

But yes, in terms of ceremony, we can certainly think about that.

Here's an interesting question. I actually don't know what... Well, actually, here's one that follows immediately. Can you see a place for ritual or a need for it in soul-making practice? And if so, where does it fit?

Absolutely. We usually have a few rituals as part of these retreats. Maybe less this time just because of my health and capacities and energies. But we're very keen on it. I think partly the function of rituals is, from a soul-making perspective, is that they start to... What's happening in ritual... Again, this is one of these subjects we could talk about a lot. But one of the things that's happening in ritual is that...

So when we meditate, it looks very still and the eyes are closed. And it's, you know, what's engaged? Mind, so to speak. And okay, experience of body, but action of body is not. It's still. And then typically when we meditate, we close the eyes. So there's a kind of shutting out of a lot of the sensory connection with the things of the world.

In ritual, one of the things we're doing is including the actions of body, the manifestations of voice, speech, as well as mind, and the objects of the world. And all that gets included, which doesn't usually happen when I sit silently with my eyes closed meditating on something.

So when we talk about sensing with soul and when we talk about this idea that the whole point perhaps, I mean for me anyway, the whole point of these practices and this teaching is to extend and expand the range of our senses of what is sacred, then ritual is very much a part of that.

I remember a beautiful ritual that Catherine led. Some of you were here. It was a few retreats ago. And I think it was this on the floor. And then she spoke a little bit about certain words and things. And we had these tangerines, if I remember. Were any of you here for that? For me, through the ritual, the tangerines right then, in that space of whatever it was, half an hour, they became sanctified. My sense of the tangerine was of sacredness right there.

So this is part of the function of ritual, that it starts to include the things of the world, the objects of nature and the senses, and supports and opens our capacity to sense them with soul, to sense them with sacredness, as sacred, including this self, other selves, bodies, the actions of body, the gestures, the movements, etc.

So in a way all the stuff we haven't done on this retreat, we did a bit of movement. I think we had three or four sessions of movement on one of the retreats. And again, the function is the same. It's really, look here I am fiddling with my hat or moving my hands. If I'm sensing with soul, this very movement of hands, it's just automatic when I blah, blah, blah. The very movement has this poetic sacredness to it.

So it's part of the function of ritual to make things like the ordinary movements or ordinary objects, food, tangerines, whatever it is, and sanctify them, bless the eyes, bless the senses that they can sense that way, sensing with soul. That's one of the functions.

So absolutely, I think there's a place, and I never used to be into ritual at all, and now I totally love it. Just, yeah, like I said, this retreat had to be limited, unfortunately, somewhat, but there's still time, so we don't know what might happen.

Here's the question I didn't quite know how to answer really, but I'll say it anyway and see what comes. Do you think any consent is needed before relating to someone as image live in the moment? For example, over soup yesterday I had a highly erotic encounter with the person sitting opposite me. My energy body was very alive and it felt soul making. Really, I'm very curious about what seeing others and self as image whilst interacting with them or live as it were in the moment can open up question mark the benefits, the risks.

Yeah, I don't know about the consent thing. I think that... So I don't know, that's my main answer is I don't know. But I can tell you the kinds of things I'm thinking is that if the elements are there and they're switched on, in other words, if it's really fully imaginal or towards that end, then there's no danger, there's no intrusion, there's nothing like that whatsoever. Why?

Because it's not real. It's neither real nor not real. And there's humility and there's the sense of divinity and there's love which implies a respect for the other person's being. And anyway, to perceive that way takes an extraordinary amount of sensitivity. So it's not that in the seat of that sensitivity one's going to be exquisitely sensitive to how beautiful they are and how much eros one is feeling and completely insensitive to another person and their space and what they might need. I guess it's possible, but it's highly unlikely.

So I think my answer is I don't know, but I would think that if all the elements are there, then actually it's completely safe. If they're not there—in other words, if a person hasn't really tasted it, if they just randomly pick a talk on Dharma Seed and start listening, "What the hell is this?"—and then they write to whatever the international Buddhist authorities are and say, "Do you know that there's these people in Devon?" That's all based on trepidation and fear, and the assumption that it must be unethical. But that's all based on just not having tasted it, not having understood. I think if a person really knows this work, then they'll recognize these elements and they'll recognize the non-intrusiveness of it.

One thing I've thrown out once or twice is this: when we talk about energy and energy body and the energy field between people, most spiritual cultures tend to think of that as a real thing. There are concepts like psychic vampirism—such things may well exist. But that's not what we're doing here. More importantly, I think when things really get going, the sense of the energy is neither real nor not real, not just the image, not just the object, not just the self, but also the energy. And that does something as well—it makes it unintrusive, uninvasive.

But if these pieces aren't there and you just hear a bit of this and then feel like, "Oh, basically it's just saying it's okay to do whatever," I would get a little nervous with that. So those are some of my thoughts about that.

A new question arises: "I am still very new to the imaginal practice. Could you outline very briefly again what it is that's important or necessary to pay attention to when just at the cusp of entering into a specific imaginal practice or when bringing in an image to be worked with? What are the important questions to be asked to oneself or the image? Is a certain amount of resonance, aliveness, or meaningfulness of the image a prerequisite to be able to work with it in the imaginal? Or can anyone be brought alive by slowly tuning into the elements?"

Again, the simple answer is I would point to the elements, and they don't necessarily have to be in a specific order. There are many examples where I might be sitting—maybe not feeling so well, maybe affected by medications, maybe not; it's kind of irrelevant. The point is that the mind drifts off whatever I was trying to do. There are bits of daydream floating around, and some of those daydreams initially seem uninteresting. But there are many times where for some reason I decided to take one of those daydream fragments and actually bring it in and work with it, and it becomes imaginal.

One that often works for me is music. There's just music going on, and then I work with that and very rich imaginal territory opens up with the musical daydreams that were happening. So it's not the object per se. It's more the way of looking, the way of relating. Everything that we've been talking about in terms of energy body and attention to the nodes, seeing if I can ignite this or that element, balancing, seeing if the self can get involved—all that will fertilize and support whatever is going on to become more fully imaginal.

As I said when I gave a short talk on the elements of the imaginal in that lounge, there's this tension, this kind of creative contradictory relationship between some of the elements. The very first element of the lattice is just the lattice itself. In other words, it's saying: look, it's not the object, it's the way of looking. Remember that. All these elements are part of the way of looking. Nothing is inherently imaginal.

Lord of the Rings movies are not inherently imaginal. I mean, they might be to someone, or they might be to someone in a certain state of mind, but they're not inherently imaginal. They have ogres and—I'm not really into them, so I don't know what else—princesses and wizards and elves and hobbits and this whole Middle Earth landscape. You might think it's totally imaginal, but it's not inherently so. Mythical content doesn't equate to imaginal. Imaginal in our language means the elements are coming alive, and the more they come alive, the more fully or authentically imaginal something becomes.

So what this means, in terms of this question, is that on the one hand you have this encouragement: it's up to me to finesse and work with and shape my way of looking, meaning my whole relationship with this object or image or whatever it is right now. Maybe in doing that, in that technical art—the art of the technique and the technique of it—it helps the most seemingly irrelevant thing to become fully imaginal. It was just this "blah blah blah" that went through my mind, but actually because the relationship has been worked, because I've done that actively, it transforms.

So you have that on one hand, the encouragement to be active, to say you can change the way of looking, you can play with the relationship. And if you do that skillfully and with art, you're going to create a kind of relationship in the moment that allows the image to become fully imaginal.

So you've got that on one side. On the other side, you've got element number I don't know which - grace - with the implication that, and maybe you've tasted this, a lot of these elements are to be noticed. So it's more like, it was a grace, it was a gift. I couldn't have made that up. I couldn't have choreographed it in the very precise way it mirrors my life or my dukkha or my situation.

So you've got this kind of inexplicable gift, grace, on one side, in a somewhat contradictory relationship with the encouragement to develop one's techniques and skills. But basically, I would point back to poise. There might be something in terms of that node of grace - a certain posture that's open to grace, that goes with humility and reverence. So a certain poise is very much part of these kinds of practices.

It's not all about "let's fix this thing," nor is it all about passive waiting. There's something balanced there. But if we're talking about grace, grace also requires a certain sensibility to open to it and to receive it. It's actually quite a delicate, beautiful, subtle poise of the being to be open to grace and to notice grace.

So there's a tension here. I wouldn't point to any one particular thing. It's often good to start with the energy body, but it doesn't actually have to be linear at all like that. I think that answers your question.

Now, someone asks: "How to deal with sexual eros in 'real' relationship after the retreat - for example. A bit of guidance is required." I have no idea what I'm trying to aim at with the response here without more specificity.

I wonder whether what's prompting the question is awareness that sexual desire can harm people. In fact, mostly when sexual desire is involved, at some point someone or other gets hurt in some way or another. And certainly there's the possibility of intrusive or unwanted or abusive sexual desire being acted out and being devastatingly harmful.

So I wonder whether the question is coming from a concern about that and therefore not quite trusting the soul-making practice and one's own capacity to tolerate eros, to be aware of it within this imaginal middle way, neither real nor not real.

Again, I would point back to more practicing and not encourage someone to practice with sexual eros if it actually feels like "I don't have the vessel yet to handle that." I wouldn't practice with it in meditation if it feels like I'm spending twenty-three and a half hours a day under the cold shower. You do need a certain capacity and therefore a certain skill with energy body, with view as well.

One of the things I mentioned in a talk was a list of things you can do when it starts to get really hot and it's almost intolerable, the sexual eros. One of them is expand the energy body. Why? Because eros is not a problem. What's a problem is craving. Craving goes with reification. Craving also goes with a contraction of the energy body. Every time there's craving, the energy body contracts. If you don't know this, study it until you absolutely know it for certain. A hair's breadth of craving and you can feel it in the energy body. Relaxing of the craving, the energy body opens. Open up the energy body and sometimes the craving soothes and that craving can then become eros.

So what often happens - it may happen more for men than women - is that sexual energy often gets contracted in a certain area of the body and then there's enormous pressure in that area. It can feel hard to contain and then we must act or release or this

or that. But a really simple thing: practice, practice, practice. The more space there is in the energy body awareness, the more that sexual energy can actually fill the whole space. And like a gas, when it has more space, there's less pressure.

Did they teach you this about gases? So more space, less pressure—that's one very simple thing.

A much more sophisticated approach in this list—which I cannot remember now, but is somewhere in the Eros Unfettered series—is available if you're able to do it. Again, this will only make sense or be accessible if you've already done quite a bit of soul-making practice and imaginal practice. The question becomes: this desire, this eros, this sexual energy—whose is it?

Of course, the normal human response is: it's mine. I don't even think it; it feels like mine. Either I feel bad about it or whatever, but it's mine. I'm identifying with it, just as we normally identify with anything happening in the body.

Typical—or rather mainstream—Dharma can ask "whose is it?" and answer that it's anatta. It doesn't belong to anyone. It's not yours. Don't identify with it. If you take something happening in the body—let's say sexual energy that's uncomfortable—and you decide to see it as anatta, contemplating again and again that it's not me, not mine, there is this energy, there is this sexual energy, there is this discomfort, rather than thinking it's mine...

You do have the idea that it's yours—that's just the normal human way of functioning. But in the mainstream Dharma approach, one of the contemplations called the three characteristics is contemplating it as anatta, as not-self, not me, not mine.

What happens when I take any experience and keep regarding it over and over as not me, not mine? I know you know the answer. Come on, humor me.

It fades.

The sexual energy will go away. At first, you have to develop skill in this—it's practice you gain facility with. Initially, probably nothing happens. Then if you stay with it, what occurs? There's a bit more space, a bit more relief. You have a bit more distance from this sexual energy. It's not so compulsive, not so painful and difficult and oppressive.

If you develop your skill with that anatta contemplation and keep practicing it—whether with sexual energy, knee pain, or anything else—it starts to fade. The perception itself begins to fade. And so bye-bye problem, bye-bye sexual eros as well.

This is really, really skillful, really wonderful to devote time to developing that kind of practice. But the main point is not the relief it can bring in those situations. That's actually completely secondary—way down the list. What's much more important is what this reveals about emptiness and dependent arising in the long run, and that view.

So there's the normal view: it's mine—of course, I don't even think it, I feel it, I identify with it. There's the possibility of a traditional Dharma view of regarding it as not me, not mine. And then there's the possibility of a soul-making, an imaginal view, which sees this desire, this sexual eros—however hot and lusty it is, however uncomfortable and forceful it may be in one's being—as mine and not mine and God's. It's the divine's. It's Buddha nature's.

It's not just what they call a non-affirming negation—"it's not mine" without saying whose it is, as you do with anatta. You're actually entertaining a kind of triple view at once. Mine? Yes, of course. Not mine? Yes. And God's.

In other words, through this—through my eyes, through my lust, through my passion, through my desire, through my body, through my libido, choose your words—the divine eros is operating, is seeing, is desiring.

Is that an absolute dogmatic truth? No, it's a poetic point of view. We're entertaining a logos, a certain logos. And what happens when we do that?

A whole other level of beauty and soul-making emerges, but also the pressure comes off because the tightness of identification makes it uncomfortable. When desire is seen as part of the divine or Buddha nature, the problem dissolves while the eros remains—unlike with anatta practice.

This is quite a sophisticated approach, but it exists as a possibility.

Regarding the question about how to navigate sexuality or relationship after the retreat—I'm not entirely sure what lies behind this inquiry. Perhaps it concerns a long-term relationship and the level of intimacy, with one partner feeling called to open to another dimension while uncertain if the other is interested. I couldn't possibly address this without understanding much more about the specific relationship and its possibilities.

Like all retreats, even mainstream dharma retreats, we must be careful about what we, in our enthusiasm, attempt to impose on others—particularly those close to us who may not be interested, ready, or wanting what we've discovered. If you suddenly start speaking Greek to them lustily, it may not be well received. They might wonder what you're even talking about.

This work, like any retreat experience, requires tremendous sensitivity and care—both for others and for yourself. You're going to be deeply sensitized, primed. Certain profound soul desires will awaken and ignite, and we're essentially saying: let yourself have that, let yourself open to it—it's part of who you are. Everyone else here seems to be allowing that. But then suddenly you return to the world where this isn't the shared agreement, isn't the prevailing view. You encounter the old structures again.

So we must truly care for our own openness, sensitivity, and vulnerability, as well as that of others. I'm sorry I can't offer more specific guidance without knowing more. There's always the opportunity to ask again or write if you'd like to explore this further.

Lauren, could you share your question about image-sharing?

Thank you, Lauren. Could everyone hear that? I think this is indeed important, and it feels like a natural outflow of the richness of practice.

We've done some formal exercises in recent retreats where images were shared—not necessarily seeing the other as image in real time, but simply sharing images. Those of you who participated, or who might explore this through recordings, can sense how potent this is. We're touched by the poetry of someone else's image. Images can be infectious, shared. Often in interviews, someone shares an image and I find myself living that image right there, as if my perception of it is as valid as the person's original experience. Or it stimulates another image entirely.

If we had more time and capacity on this retreat, we would have explored more of this practice of working with another person, seeing each other as image in real time.

Two considerations arise here. First, if you're already with your partner and there's established intimacy, then you're working within that existing container. This avoids the complications that could arise if practicing with someone who's married to another or bound by agreements that don't include openness—where eros might fly around without appropriate boundaries. That's a significant challenge to navigate.

One reason I'm cautious about sharing some of this material is that I feel these teachings are so new and need safeguarding. Even if three people went out and practiced with great enthusiasm, crossing established boundaries, upsetting others, starting rumors—this could affect the entire paradigm. Guhyasamaja House might question whether to allow another Soul Making retreat.

I feel extraordinarily sensitive to the various ways this approach needs protection, especially at this nascent stage. Unlike the Buddha's time, or even when insight meditation arrived in the West in the 1970s, we now have the internet. Someone says something here, it appears online, and someone in California is already doing something questionable with it.

I feel both responsible and hopeful. In many ways, I feel dependent on and vulnerable to you all—not just because I might not be around much longer, but because we're all responsible for safeguarding this work together. It's so easy for teachings to become diluted or misconstrued.

and acted upon, either irrationally or without care, creating ripple effects that influence other people in this room who may have no idea what transpired. This is one of the reasons I'm somewhat cautious about these teachings.

I can't remember my other concern now—apologies, my mind has gone blank. Perhaps if there's time, we could record some specific teachings about this practice. I think it simply needs tremendous care. I'm sorry, I can't recall what else I wanted to say.

How does that sound, Lauren?

[Response: "Yeah."]

Perhaps at some point we can explore this conversation further. Let's see how things unfold. Did you want to add anything?

[Lauren's response about the richness and intensity of the practice]

Yes, there's quite a lot to say. The remarkable thing about this kind of practice is that it's abundantly rich—not just in terms of erotic charge, but profoundly rich in multiple dimensions. It's like turbo-charging the entire process, though this isn't always the case since sometimes there won't be that particular spark between people. But when it's present, it asks a tremendous amount of practitioners. It requires the capacity to handle great intensity, both within oneself and within the dyad.

[Questioner asks about Jung, Hillman, Nietzsche and whether soul-making dharma offers a smoother path]

This touches on the difficulties that meditators sometimes encounter, such as kundalini experiences or what Jack Kornfield describes as "dark night" phenomena. These are enormous topics that could easily fill hours of discussion, so I'll be necessarily brief.

Something struck me about Hillman's observation regarding Jung's early explorations. When Jung began his investigations, the Jungian tradition—perhaps less so nowadays, but certainly for many decades—used language describing the unconscious as this terrifying abyss of darkness populated by monsters and unknown threats that might emerge to devour you. This became almost a preconception, and as Julia asked yesterday, when you operate with such preconceptions, lo and behold, that's precisely what gets created.

Hillman, writing decades later with his characteristic sarcasm, pointed out how the unconscious had essentially become domesticated—something people simply journal about, no longer scary or overwhelming. So what's the truth here? It depends significantly on the conceptual framework we bring to the exploration.

Nietzsche presents an entirely different consideration, and I'm not certain he was truly engaged with what we're discussing anyway. Let's not venture into Nietzsche territory right now.

Regarding whether soul-making dharma offers a smoother or safer path, particularly concerning phenomena like kundalini experiences or "dark night" episodes—some of you may be unfamiliar with these terms. Jack Kornfield's "A Path with Heart" and similar books describe or borrow the term "Dark Night of the Soul" from St. John of the Cross, though he meant something completely different—utterly, utterly different.

The modern interpretation within Theravadan Buddhist circles has come to mean that when you practice insight meditation with great intensity and begin penetrating deeply, profoundly uncomfortable experiences arise. Disturbing and unpleasant phenomena begin manifesting, perhaps creating a sense of mental instability, physical illness, cycling endlessly through these difficult states. People have adopted this borrowed term "dark night of the soul" from St. John of the Cross, who intended something entirely different. Similarly, kundalini experiences involve explosive energetic phenomena, resembling the thermonuclear dynamics I alluded to earlier.

I feel quite strongly about this issue. Looking back at my book on emptiness, I realize there was so much I thought would be obvious if stated subtly and gently, but clearly it wasn't obvious at all. I should have been much more direct and emphatic.

I believe these phenomena represent complete misunderstandings and mistakes. Why? Because everything arises through dependent origination. If I feel ill from practice, it's because of how I'm practicing. If I feel agitated, sense I'm losing sanity, or experience cycles of depression, it's because of how I'm practicing.

These phenomena—whether kundalini experiences or "dark night" episodes—tend to manifest when two particular factors are prioritized in insight meditation: the contemplation of rapid moment-to-moment impermanence combined with an extremely narrow focus of attention, attempting to atomize awareness as much as possible. So when there's pain in the knee, the instruction becomes...

How microscopic can I get into those sensations? And how fast can I see them change? And the more microscopic and the faster I can see it change, the better my practice and the, quote, deeper I'm going. And with that, there's a lot of intensity of effort encouraged.

Put those three things in a box. What do you get? A box of mad frogs. Not for everyone. It also depends on the psychophysical type.

If I think about my psychophysical makeup—look at me, I'm even thinner than I usually am—I'm thin, I'm kind of wiry and wired and sort of hyper alert. This is the wrong body and psyche type to do that kind of practice. You get thermonuclear frog parts all over the place. And it's almost like you can just wait for it to happen.

You put someone else in who their body type—it has words in Ayurveda, I can't remember what they are—but they're more kapha. They're more plump and more slow, more grounded. That kind of person can often, and also their mind is not so fast and intense, that kind of person can do that kind of practice all day. It's not a problem. It won't do anything to them. Partly it's to do with the psychophysical makeup.

But what's also happening there is it's prioritizing impermanence as the main one of the three characteristics. And it's seeing anatta, seeing not-self, through the approach of impermanence. There is no self because all I see in here is impermanent things. And there are other ways to do it—you can find it all in the book or in recordings.

Then the whole insight practice unfolds very, very differently. I'm saying it now—I think it's a little bit ridiculous, to be honest. A lot of people suffer a lot or get really proud that they're going round and round in these cycles of misery as if it's some badge of accomplishment. And I'm really near to throwing up because it's really, really miserable.

So to me, there's all kinds of problems with that. But one of them, and probably in a way the most serious, is that the deep insight isn't there. One's just seeing impermanence and things are exploding or disappearing or going nuts or energies flying all over, whatever it is. But where's the insight into dependent origination? Where's the insight

into deep emptiness? One has seen impermanence, impermanence, impermanence. It's not a deep insight. It's not the level of insight that I think is more beautiful, more mystical, more transformative.

When we come to our practice—and sorry, that sounds opinionated. I'm partly in response to, as I said, trying to say things so subtly and gently that it seemed like no one saw that they were there.

When we do this, we're emphasizing there's a lot of softness. Even when we say open the energy body, put the energy body in relationship with something, it's a lot softer than kind of burrowing my attention into some microscopic point and then just holding it there. So the whole inclusion of the heart and the sensitivity and this kind of encouragement to modulate and attune the attention—all this is soft and subtle and open. So that the path deepens in soft, subtle, and open ways for the most part, and it doesn't need to be all these explosions and difficulties and crazy, crazy-making stuff.

Is it safer? Heavens, why don't I just stop now while you're hanging around? Say yes.

Now, here's a question that went with a long question about the loving and being loved. Is it okay for the person if I read the longer note? How are they going to respond to that? Is it a yes? Yes, okay. So here's a longer version of it.

I partly don't know the answer to the main question, so that's actually interesting in itself. But it was such a beautiful image, and I just thought to share it. And I can answer some of it, if that helps.

"Late in the retreat, I know, so I understand if you cannot answer my questions. I feel moved to share an image anyway and trust that in its sharing, something will reveal itself. A logos of keeping what is sacred, safe and protected inside will be stretched by sharing this one.

"After the sharing last night, my energy body contracted in contact with the thought of Catherine and all the whispering angels' grief. This morning, an image arose of my sister, I think in part response to this, which touched me deeply..."

My sister is passionate, beautiful, with a soul that naturally loves soul-making. She is imaginative, highly sensitive—perhaps too sensitive and passionate for this world at this time. Since age eighteen, she has suffered from schizophrenia and is now completely housebound. The outside world is simply too impactful for her.

The image that arose: my sister lies curled on the floor of her flat. She is naked. Her features are not distinct, yet I know it is her. What strikes me most is the room itself—tall ceilings, a space that feels holy, sacred, like a chapel. The light is dim, yet there is luminosity. The colors are muted hues of brown.

Her body is twisted and contorted, indicating immense pain. But there is a sense that she is assenting to this pain, choosing to remain in this room, taking on the suffering of other souls who cannot or will not. Around her lies a chaotic collection of eclectic objects—crisp packets, popped balloons, rubbish, trinkets. I sense a bird building a nest around her, offering these objects to her. The bird is not visible in the image, just a vague sensing.

You see how much detail emerges here? You get the sense of an image, an aspect of an image, but it's not necessarily visual. It's all part of the imaginal. Don't get hung up on the visuals. The antennae are up, attuned to what's resonant. There's a bird, but I can't see the bird. I sense it, I intuit it. How do I know? I don't know how I know. It doesn't matter. What matters is the feeling of it and the sense of soul-making.

This image became like a holy altar. My energy body filled out fully, and inwardly I bowed. My heart center opened bright despite being moved to tears. Bearing witness to her suffering feels beautiful, despite—or even because of—the pain.

This image immediately opened my perception of the previous night and of all fellow retreatants as angels bearing their own particular joys and pains. The conception of individual suffering—theirs and my own, and what I and all of us have been asked to hold in this lifetime—expanded.

Already it's doing something to the heart, to the soul-sense, to perception. This is a new image, almost a snapshot in time, yet with a sense of the eternal.

My question is: where in this is the eros? Is it between me and the image, the holy altar? Or is there something in the bird's tendings and offerings that do not ease the pain and yet...? Or is the eros toward the poignant beauty in the image?

I would say all three. There is eros between the meditator and the image, toward the holy altar of this scene, toward its poignant beauty. But also within the characters of the image, there is eros. Most of the nodes are alight within this image.

But love and being loved? With a human or animal image, I understand this, but with a snapshot image—who is being loved? I feel love, but I'm sure I will figure it out if I stay longer.

I don't know the answer to that. There's definitely love in the image, and maybe you don't need to figure out where exactly the love is. It's so full of beauty, so much soul being touched. You can trust that. We don't have to think, "This is all going swimmingly, but there's just that one node," and then worry about it. It's working. Don't worry about it.

Maybe we'll receive some expansion of the teachings here that we haven't thought about yet. It's quite possible. As you say, you feel love there—there's somehow love present. There's love for your sister, so there's love that way. There's some portion of it already present, certainly between the characters in the image.

I don't know the answer actually, and I find that interesting. It may well be that as you hang out with this image, it becomes clear. I just wouldn't lean too much on that question, at the risk of disturbing the natural soul-making fermentation that's happening there.

Do you want to say more? It's beautiful.

It's ten to six. There are actually only a couple more questions. One asks: "What would you have called Eros Psyche Logos instead? Please expand a lot."

The notion that there might be a single word to replace these terms brings up something interesting. Actually, I'm not sure what I would have called them instead. The only issue I have with those words—I know some people resist the Greek terminology—but in a way, the Greek serves us well precisely because these terms are, to a certain extent, unfamiliar. This unfamiliarity prompts the question: "What is that? What do you mean when you say that?"

If we used words like "love" or even "desire," "passion," or "lust," they carry such common usage that we tend to think we already know what they mean, what their range encompasses. Giving these movements of soul slightly unusual names helps support that sense of inquiry—what is that? I don't quite know what it is yet.

I truly have no idea what I would have called them in retrospect. The only reason I sometimes wonder about using different terminology is what I mentioned the other day: these words appear in many different practices, settings, and traditions these days. As much as I understand about them, it's clear that we also mean something different by them. It's very easy, when using the same words, to assume the same meaning is intended.

This is less true with logos. Logos was once widely used in Western culture—it opens St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the logos," though it gets translated as "the word." That term carried rich meanings from Platonism and other traditions, but it's fallen out of common usage. The only place I encounter it now is in the Ridwan teachings, where they speak of "the logos of the teachings"—meaning the conceptual framework and paradigm of the practice.

So I'm less uncomfortable with logos simply because it's rarer and therefore less likely to be automatically categorized with what we might have encountered elsewhere. As for eros and psyche, I don't know—perhaps we could invent entirely new words, but I'm not certain it matters that much.

Regarding the lovely image of the sister, I don't think the question relates to the snapshot quality. That's simply a particular temporal style the image took. Some images appear as snapshots, while others unfold as narratives—like what Karen shared, where an image carried an entire narrative background. I don't believe this temporal quality relates to the question of love and being loved.

There's another question I didn't fully grasp yesterday, though the person asked again today. Let me read it, and perhaps you can help clarify: "To be willing to experience fully the grief of extinction of life on earth, of humans, of ancestors, and all the blessing of their particular lives or lines. To be willing to fully accept this also means to stay connected deeply to everyone else and their grief, rather than freedom from suffering. Isn't this the Bodhisattva path? I'm also referring here to the four-part talk you gave about awakening, asking what do you want."

Could you expand a little? I'm not sure I understand the question completely.

"There's something about when I've been in a very good place with positivity, I sometimes turn toward the suffering of the world. The myth of the Bodhisattva, as I understand it, is to not pursue full awakening—not seek freedom from suffering—in order to remain with the plane of the world, almost in solidarity with it, or in connection with it. What you described sounds similar to the Bodhisattva myth. When you asked 'what do you want,' what's important to me is staying in contact with myself. My sense was that's what you were doing."

Thank you, Ron. I appreciate that clarification.

I don't remember exactly what I meant in those talks, I'm afraid. But I do think one significant development has occurred since the Buddha gave his teachings. However some people might try to extract certain elements from the Pali Canon, the Buddhist

teachings remain deeply embedded in a worldview that assumes rebirth—the possibility of being reborn according to your karma, suffering repeatedly until you awaken and escape that wheel of rebirth.

If we take that out, and a lot of people no longer believe in such a cosmology, then we're left with fundamental questions: What does awakening actually mean? When you remove this ending of rebirth as the ultimate goal, what you get is a multitude of different interpretations.

I feel it's quite important to be on a path that feels authentic. You need to be on a path—I need to be on a path—that feels authentic to me, that makes sense, that I can really get behind in terms of what I'm trying to do and what the goal is. So I don't know what I meant in that previous talk; it was probably within a certain context, and I don't want to hazard a guess right now.

But this principle remains: What do you want? If your sense is that this is what you want from your life—to be in solidarity, not removed, to be available, to be in service to the world and the planet and its suffering—then you should trust that. The question becomes: How can I support that? What do I need? How do I make this a sustainable path and a beautiful path?

Historically, even the notion of the bodhisattva has undergone significant changes across different cultures and over time, particularly now in the West. If you went back and read Shantideva or some of the original teachings on the bodhisattva path, he speaks of wanting to sacrifice himself for all beings. He expresses this through very florid poetry of renunciation and self-sacrifice. Then you turn the page to the next chapter, and he's saying, "Right, let's get away from all these people and find a solitary place where I can meditate and become awakened, where there's no one around and I'm not disturbed by anyone."

This idea was wrapped up in what it means to be a Buddha. In the Mahayana understanding, a Buddha is someone who—and this is really complicated—is somehow a transcendent being but has emanations here on Earth. Whether they're actually suffering or not becomes a whole question in itself.

Somewhere along the way, the bodhisattva ideal came to mean someone who would postpone their awakening—though this didn't originally mean that. More recently in the West, it's come to mean simply someone who sees their path as much about service as about meditation, or even more about service than meditation. That's what they

want to do—they want to be in the marketplace, in the thick of things, in the refugee camps, or out on the pavement with Extinction Rebellion. And that's their path. There is a certain freedom in that—there can be.

So the word means something different now. But I think the more important thing is this: because the whole metaphysic is completely up for grabs these days, I would give the question back to each of us.

What do you really want? You don't know when you're going to die. You don't know how long you have. You don't know how long you're going to have your faculties and your energy. What do I want? Can I let that go deep and burn deep and stay steady with that, and have it translate into my life and make it a priority? That will be different from person to person.

We live in this predicament of postmodernity where there's no agreed-upon metaphysics. So you're free, basically. Now that it's not universally agreed that the end of rebirth is what awakening—full awakening, arahantship—looks like, the question becomes: What do you make of it? What do you want? What does it mean to you? What do you most deeply want for your life?

So I would give it back that way.

Just one very brief thing within that framework. You're going to notice—I noticed some years ago, this was more than twenty years ago, maybe around twenty years ago—I had been focusing a lot on jhana practice and really getting into it, making some headway and feeling super excited about that. I had been on retreat and was back home in my life rhythm, practicing. I would notice that on the days when the samadhi was really good, my heart didn't feel as tender and open as it did on other days. Sometimes when my heart was tender, those were the days when the samadhi wasn't so available—when the jhanic samadhi wasn't so accessible.

That really struck me. It's similar to what you're saying. In a way, we'd like to think there's this state of mind where you can just access everything and have it all right there, where everything's available and perfectly harmonious. I'm not sure that's how it works. It might be more fluid than that.

It's interesting to me that when the Buddha talks about right intention—the second factor of the Eightfold Path—he sometimes puts things in the negative.

He describes right intention using negatives - an intention for non-harming, an intention for non-cruelty. To me, this always implied the possibility that if I'm right there in the fourth jhana, I'm not actively doing metta. I'm not thinking about it. I'm not even that sensitive. But I'm in a state of non-harming and non-cruelty. It's an absence.

So I wonder whether he put things in the negative because he realized you can't be in any one state that's going to have all of that. What we want is a life that has access to these states - that they're never too far away, that you can fluidly move between them. If you're an activist, you need some deep resources. You need some recharging, some rest. And that samadhi, that experience of just being with yourself, is so helpful when you then go out and meet the suffering in the world, or when you want to do something courageous that takes a lot of energy and work. So the going back and forth becomes really skillful.

In a larger context, on a longer time frame, I look at my life and feel very called to serve in different ways. But I've also obviously been very called to explore meditative depths and that whole dimension. I've done long retreats. At one point I spent most of a three-year period on retreat. Even at the time, amidst all the joy and seclusion, barely speaking to anyone, it was always clear to me that this was a portion of a journey in the service of something that wasn't just about getting to feel good.

Some people have figured out a life that's kind of balanced, just balancing these things as they go along. If I look at my life - and I'm not saying there's a right or wrong, just different styles - I can see rhythms where it's much more contemplative and rhythms where it's actually a little bonkers, where I'm way too busy, but I'm in the flow of service or whatever. So I look more at that balance.

But anyway, if you're dedicated to serving and caring and compassion, to embodying and expressing that, you're going to need to take care of yourself as a minimum. So those periods when you feel a little less in touch - it's okay. When you're fast asleep, no one would say you shouldn't fall asleep. You need to rest. Things get turned off. The world gets turned off when you're asleep. We need that.

I would give you back the question: What is your vision of what's beautiful, what's noble, what calls you? What is the life that you feel, if you were on your deathbed looking back with a clear mind, you would feel you don't have regrets? Not that you achieved everything you wanted to achieve, but at least you went for it. That's important. And only you can answer that. I can't answer that for you. The Buddha can't answer it.

So that feels really important to me - to know that, to be clear about it, to stay close to it, to stay true to it, to live that with passion.

CHAPTER 172

Closing Comments From Rob - Soulmaking and Saṅgha

Rob Burbea · 18 min

> *In this heartfelt closing talk from the "Roots into the Ground of Soul" retreat, Rob Burbea offers tender guidance on transitioning back from intensive soulmaking practice. He addresses the unique sensitivity that arises from imaginal work - how the heart opens in ways that require careful tending, different from the sensory overwhelm common in traditional meditation retreats. Burbea emphasizes the sacred nature of soul-touched experiences and the importance of discernment when sharing them, noting how precious insights need proper conditions and receptive hearts to be truly held.*
>
> *The teacher reflects on his own journey bringing soulmaking teachings to Buddhist communities, describing how he would call upon "angels and demons, past present and future" - an imaginal lineage of beings who supported this sometimes controversial work. He expresses profound gratitude as he recognizes retreat participants as now embodying this supportive lineage themselves. The talk concludes with an invitation to those feeling called to engage more fully with soulmaking practice - both in solitude and through deep saṅgha relationships. Burbea stresses that both soul and spiritual community require careful cultivation, encouraging practitioners to support each other's understanding while remaining rooted in thorough assimilation of these sophisticated teachings.*

I'm not quite sure exactly what I want to say or what feels called forth. Thank you for being here. Thank you for your practice and all the beauty of your being that you've brought forth, brought into this space and shared together—shared with us, shared with everyone. We really deeply appreciate it. It's quite profound.

Just a practical thing about transitioning out of the retreat. These kinds of retreats have less silence and perhaps less of certain kinds of meditative intensity for most people, so that it's less the case that one needs to guard the senses and take care with sense contact and the overwhelm that you can get from certain forms of retreat practice.

But there may be other kinds of sensitivity. Some of you who have been on these soulmaking retreats before may have noticed that the heart and the being are opened in ways and available to be touched in ways that the world isn't so carefully set up to take care of or to acknowledge. So you may find emotions moving through, things might move you.

Just be aware of these kinds of sensitivities which are more particular to these kinds of retreats. If we'd done a different style of meditation, the sensitivity might be more sensory in terms of the intensity of contact. So really take care of the heart and the soul in the rest of today and tomorrow and in the coming days. What does it need? What kinds of contact does it need? What kinds of care? What kind of space? Maybe it needs solitude, maybe it needs certain kinds of sharing.

These retreats and their consequences in the being are a little different from other retreats you may be familiar with. So there's real encouragement to take care with that. There's nothing to be apprehensive about, but just care for the soul and the heart.

As I mentioned last night, there can be a great flush of enthusiasm for the whole soulmaking endeavor and your practice, and you may wish to share that with partner, family, spouse, friends at home. Again, just the encouragement to be sensitive there. What's right? What's needed? What does it mean to care for the other person and for myself?

We haven't done much sharing of images on this retreat together in the temenos space. Many of you will know that when something has touched the soul deeply, it needs care. You can't just spout it out to someone just because you have a history of a certain kind of intimacy with that person. The moment may not be right. Their state of being in that moment may not be right. They may not be that interested in that moment. You may be super interested and on fire, and they may not be. They may be polite and nodding their head with a modicum of interest. Take care.

When something is precious to the soul, it needs looking after. Even with someone you love, someone who has a history with you, or someone who's a fellow soulmaker—if we don't set it up right, the sharing, then it's like we're spilling our soul and it hurts. It hurts when that preciousness is not held in a temenos, is not met. There's no ill will, nothing like that, but when something feels sacred, it needs care.

So if you want to share, check the moment, check the conditions, including the other person. You can tell—just like a regular retreat—you can bounce in with your enthusiasm about wanting to share certain experiences or insights that you've had. Get a feel, sense whether this person is really interested. I mean, really interested. How is it being

held and how am I holding it in this sharing? You can feel it in the eyes of the other, in just how interested they are. People who are interested tend to ask questions, they want to know. You get a sense that they're interested. Really, just the encouragement to care for that with each other, with people who are not here that you love, with whomever.

Catherine and I were really touched hearing from just one or two people—of course it may not have been everyone's experience—how beautiful and moving your dāna ceremony and talk was. Of course we weren't here, but it was really lovely to hear that and to get an indirect sense of it.

When I started speaking about imaginal and soulmaking in Dharma talks here and other places, it was difficult. For me, it was difficult. I felt like there was a lot of opposition. Some of you were in certain places where I came and there were eruptions and fracas and protestations—placards.

What's that? Placards, yeah. Picket lines. Really nasty notes, all kinds of things. And no, seriously, it was quite difficult, I found. I felt it my calling or duty to push through that.

I haven't shared this with many people, but I started to get the sense—okay, this is going to be difficult, this talk I'm going to give. I can sense that some people are going to love it, and some people really not, and some people will get upset. So in the moments before going to give a talk, I would open myself, tune myself, make myself available to the angels, the demons, past, present and future that wanted it to be given, that wanted it to be said. And that was sort of an imaginal practice, a way of ensouling the whole thing and giving me a sense of being on track and having the support that I needed—or in a way, handing it over to them and to that lineage of soul-making beings, whatever dimensions we're talking about historically and whatever else, and feel in a way that they were helping to give the talks.

Similarly, when I became ill over the last three and a half years—almost four years now—sometimes so tired and I had to do something, a podcast or this thing or that thing, and felt so depleted, again I would call on or align myself with that lineage, a timeless lineage, imaginal lineage, and entrust the whole process to that when I felt very depleted.

One of the reasons, I think, hearing about last night and the dana ceremony, and then I know that some of you went to the church—I don't know what happened there, but whatever. Yeah, you were praying. That's right. There's a sense, indirect and maybe more tangible, that you are those angels now.

Some of you, or those of you who will enter this more fully and take it on and explore it more fully—there's a sense, for me, that you're supporting the whole thing now. Does that make sense? So that's very beautiful and I feel very grateful for that. I'm very touched. There's a lot of delight in that and a lot of beauty in that and a lot of gratitude. You are that imaginal community now. Some of you—no pressure. If you feel that in the calling of your soul, in your being, in your togetherness. So that's something very heartening for me, soulful for me. For us, I think, if I should say, if I can.

And so, a couple of things about that. We've, on and off on this retreat, kind of wanted to put the onus back to you, to pass the buck back to you. For those of you that think you'll be really into this, some of you will just take little bits of this and maybe use a little bit in your therapy practice or some other thing, and that's completely fine. And some of you will be much more holy and wholeheartedly engaged and committed and in love and on fire and hungry to fill out these teachings and let them fill out in these practices and explore, and in the fullness of time, having digested what is really quite complicated, quite sophisticated, profound and wide, will bring your own creativity and your own beauty and add to it or make connections—I hope, and I hope that happens. I hope if it does happen that it's rooted in a kind of really full assimilation and digestion of what we've been talking about, before just sort of tinkering with adding it to other things or mixing it.

But again, there's this encouragement from us to, if you feel the calling, be a little proactive with that—alone and together. What do I need to develop? What is it that I don't quite understand? What needs filling out? What needs to become a more firm base for me and come alive that way? Where are my blind spots? What are the things that I just need to develop in order for this whole vessel in my personal practice to really be shipshape and able to sail on rough seas and meet whatever?

So there's this encouragement to really think that way about one's practice. And we can do that together. So we can certainly do it in solitude, in one's own reflection, in one's own practice, but also together—sharing together, studying together, learning together, supporting each other. It may be that certain aspects are clearer to one person and less so to another and vice versa. So to have that sense, the sangha sense of really being really good friends to each other.

If you feel that calling, if there's that opportunity, then what does that need? What does it need? How do we take care of these relationships? I've said this before—soul doesn't just happen by itself. Soul making won't just happen. There's a lot of care and a lot of conditions need to come together for that to happen.

Similarly, for Sangha to flourish—for the sense of community and deep soul friendships to deepen—conscious effort is required. Of course, we are thrown together fortuitously and gratefully and miraculously with people whom something blossoms with, but still it takes considerable work, sometimes very hard work.

So what does it mean to care for each other, to be good friends to each other—deep, supportive friends who explore together and open things together? This is the question before us if this feels like your calling and what you would like to cultivate.

Thank you for your practice. Thank you for being here. Thank you for your beautiful souls.

CHAPTER 173

The Way of Image

Rob Burbea · 1h33

> *In this introductory talk from the "Four Circles, Four Parables of Stone and Light" series, Rob Burbea establishes foundational concepts for imaginal practice and soul-making dharma. He distinguishes between three types of relationship with images: fixated images (papañca), mindful observation of images, and truly imaginal images that embody the soul-making dynamic. Burbea emphasizes that imaginal images need not be visual, offering detailed examples of kinesthetic, auditory, and intuitive sensing with soul - from being kissed by an unseen presence to sensing oneself as sacred text. He clarifies how imaginal practice differs from shamanism, channeling, or energy healing, stressing the importance of the "imaginal middle way" where images are neither completely real nor unreal. The talk explores how foundational dharma skills like mindfulness, metta, and samatha can themselves become "roots" that grow organically within soul-making practice. Burbea discusses the spectrum nature of imaginal experience, where images can become "more fully imaginal" as practitioners develop skill with the twenty-eight elements of the imaginal lattice. He concludes with guidance on maintaining both precision and organic mystery in practice, trusting experience while continually refining one's understanding of what constitutes authentic imaginal engagement.*

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to this series of talks. I want to try and cover certain areas in this series. Given the quite challenging conditions at the moment, let's see what's possible.

I hope in this series, after a bit of an introduction this evening, to go into certain aspects or areas of the whole skill and art or alchemy of imaginal practice, sensing the soul, with a bit more subtlety and refinement. I want to focus on the whole teaching of the elements of the imaginal—the nodes of the lattice—particular elements, and say a bit more about some of them. Perhaps, if there's an opportunity, I'll say a few things about soul making dyad practice, practicing in twos. Maybe something about ritual. We'll see.

Hopefully I'll address again, going into a little more of the philosophical underpinnings—the metaphysics, the ontology, the epistemology that are involved and necessary, if you like, as a basis or to clear enough space for soul-making dharma. Then also perhaps some reflections on the Dharma itself, meaning the tradition and our relation-

ship with tradition and the history of that tradition, and how soul-making Dharma places itself or might be placed in relation to that tradition. And lastly, hopefully, something about ethics and opening up that area in relation to soul.

So let's see what's possible.

Tonight is basically an introduction. In a way, most of the principles I will talk about tonight are things you will hopefully already have heard, but they bear repeating, I think. Some of the examples may be new, but just by way of getting us going, placing us, situating ourselves again in the territory.

When we talk about the art or the alchemy of imaginal practice of sensing the soul, there's a lot involved in that. It actually presupposes in a way, or at least it involves, everything that we bring or learn in regular Dharma, mainstream Dharma. Everything we have to deal with as part of our Dharma practice is not outside of the constituents of soul-making practice.

Just as a person may be attracted to regular Dharma and come on retreat, for example, out of a deep attraction to the unfabricated—they may have heard something or read something, maybe not even using that language, but there's this pull, and that's the reason this particular person is practicing, that's the main pull in their soul, if you like—what do they find when they come on retreat and practice sincerely and wholeheartedly? They find they have to deal with, meet and work with en route to this realization and opening that they are longing for and enticed by. En route to that, they have to deal with, meet with and work with pain in the knee, monkey mind, their mother, all their psychological patterns and relational patterns. All that stuff comes up and it can't just be bypassed and avoided. It's, in a way, an integral part of the path.

Very similarly with soul-making dharma, we may have heard something about images or someone tells us something, or something attracts us, or we've tasted a little bit already and gotten excited and fallen in love with it even. But we still meet all these other, seemingly more mundane obstacles, difficulties, challenges, issues—areas of practice that need attention and care and exploration. So all this is, in a way, included when we talk about what's involved in the art and alchemy of imaginal practice, sensing the soul.

Recently we taught a retreat at Gaia House called "Roots into the Ground of Soul," and Catherine and I were talking a little bit beforehand about the difference between foundations and roots, since we'd had another retreat called "Foundations of Soul-Making Dharma" the year before.

If you think about the foundation of a building, it's something that's static—it doesn't grow, it's not organic, it doesn't itself provide nourishment. It's just there as a basis, basic to allowing structure and stability to whatever you want to build on top of that. So we can talk about various foundations of soul-making dharma: energy body awareness, basic mindfulness, certain insight practices, metta, samatha—the ability to calm and gather the mind and wellbeing—all these are foundations. Certain skill with the emotions as well.

Many of these, and even some of those difficult issues that I talked about—certainly one's mother or even monkey mind or one's psychological patterns, one's relational patterns, one's bodily difficulties—all of these too can become roots. A root is something that's organic. In other words, it grows. It's not a fixed, once-and-for-all structural thing. It grows, it changes. A root, if you think about the roots of a tree, grows, changes, provides nourishment. And roots are actually themselves part of the whole living structure.

So it's not necessarily that when we talk about foundations or basics of soul-making Dharma, you need this and then you can do the soul-making Dharma. Rather, all those elements, or most of those elements that seem like foundations, can then become themselves in soul.

It's one thing to be able to be aware of your emotions, to feel them in the body, to have some skill with them. All that's great and really indispensable, and we could say those are foundations. And at a certain point, if the soul-making practice is going and blossoming and enriching itself and filling out and exploring, those very aspects of emotional life, of the heart life, become roots. In other words, they become in soul. The whole way we relate to and conceive of and sense and work with our emotions and our emotional life and how that plays out itself becomes sensed with soul. Our emotions can become imaginal in the sense that they become images, they become erotic objects for us, if you like.

There's a lot involved in this, what we're calling the art and the alchemy of imaginal practice and of sensing of soul. We'll touch on some of this in a little bit more detail as we go through these talks, hopefully.

I think for everyone, actually, it's worth checking: just where am I with all these foundations? I've spelled them out before—the energy body skill and awareness, skill and awareness with the emotions, mindfulness, metta, samatha, and all this. Relational skills, just even emotional capacity—if we talk about emotional skill, many, many things

are foundational. It's worth checking, or periodically reviewing and asking oneself: where am I with all that? How solid are my foundations? Which ones are a little bit shaky or actually not even there—that brick is missing in the structural foundation?

Because it does demand a lot, these practices that we're talking about, this whole soul-making Dharma. It does demand a lot, it asks a lot. We might hear things and be attracted, but it won't really get off the ground unless many of these pieces are there.

So, awareness. And also realization that as we grow in practice, these very foundations can themselves become transformed, can grow, ferment, rise like bread with yeast in it, and become fuller, richer, more multidimensional, more beautiful—all of that—as they become ensouled and drawn into the soul-making practices.

Okay, so I said tonight in this talk it's really just an introduction, but there are some things that bear repeating and reminding ourselves of. So it's worth taking the time to do that.

We use a lot of words, some of which are familiar sounding but used in a different way, and some will be very unfamiliar sounding to many people. Even words that are part of somewhat of a renaissance—the use of the word soul, for example, or imaginal or eros, words we use a lot. And to recognize, I think it's really important to recognize that we are using those words, words we share in common with certain other traditions today, but we're using them in very particular ways. And being clear about those delineations and definitions is, I think, really important so that certain directions open up that wouldn't otherwise open up.

So some of these words, like image or imaginal in the way that we're using it—it's hard to sum up what that is succinctly. Even eros, we could give a little formula, but it's something that needs, yes, a careful definition, but also then the living of it and the noticing of it, and it growing in us.

When we say soul, we mean something... We could give a short definition, a succinct definition of soul, which I'll do in a minute, but also to say with any definition we give, or concept we use, that there's a sort of dance on a razor's edge between precision and clarity and differentiation from other closely related concepts or other usages of the same word in different traditions. So there's that on the one hand, this need for clarity, precision, differentiation.

And on the other hand, the concepts and the words we use need to be able themselves to grow. So we don't want to pin something down conceptually or by definition in a way that's so tight that it then gets restricted and cannot be organic. So a word like

soul has to retain a little bit of, A, space to grow, and B, a kind of fuzziness—what we call soft and elastic edges. So that's an element of the imaginal, one of the nodes you'll recognize, but it also applies to the concepts that we use as well.

So there's this dance on the razor's edge between precision, clarity, differentiation on one hand, and a kind of—let's call it mystery, an organic mystery, perhaps—on the other hand.

So, having said that, we could give a definition of what we mean by soul as something like the following: Soul is that which—we say looks, but really senses—that which senses in ways that are soul-making, or that increase soul-making. So soul is that which senses in ways that feel soul-making. And again, we'd have to explain what does soul-making mean. We've talked about that before—the resonances, the depths, the dimensionality, all that.

So soul, we're using that word loosely to mean that which looks or senses in ways that support and deepen and open and increase the sense of soul-making. And it's that which wants to look in these ways, wants to sense in these ways. So axiomatic to our whole paradigm is that the soul loves soul-making, the soul wants soul-making. And so when we talk about soul-making, it's that this organ of—it's an organ of perception, of sensing in the ways that are soul-making. And it's also an organ of desire. It wants that.

So we're including sensitivities and also desire and eros as part of this organ that we're calling soul. It's an organ of perception and an organ of desire.

So that's a fairly succinct definition, but it leaves quite a lot of room for growth, for different ideas and vantage points and angles on it.

So, for example, we can definitely conceive of my soul—that in me, if you like, that organ in me which senses in ways that open up soul-making and that wants to sense in those ways. Or we can talk about the soul. We could talk about a world soul or a cosmic soul that's operating in me or through me. There's different logoi, different ideas about whose soul is it, what's actually happening here.

Or sometimes, again, just to touch on dyad practice—and you might have experienced this either with practicing with a dyad or in a group soul-making practice—then actually there feels to be a kind of, if you like, soul of the dyad. And it's both independent and dependent of the two people that make up that dyad, or the people that make up that group. And this dyadic soul, if you like, is kind of a third. If you like, there's me, and this person I'm in the dyad with, and there's a third that seems to encompass us, but it's sort of separate, and sort of includes us, and we sort of include it—but that's where the soul is.

And again, we are, perhaps, as members of the dyad, constituent parts of that soul.

So there are different logoi—different conceptual frameworks—that we can bring to bear on how we're conceiving of soul at any time. These will either be opened up through practice, through experience, and also the different logoi, as we kind of take them for a spin a little bit, hold them, entertain them lightly, allow different kinds of experience to open up. So as always, there's a very intimate relationship between perception, experience, and conception. In this case, I'm drawing attention to how they influence each other. Perception influences conception. Conception influences perception. But actually, the intimacy is even deeper than that.

So we talk about soul, we talk about images. I'm going to speak about images tonight a little bit, but I'm not going to attempt some kind of succinct definition there. Let me offer just a few reminders of what we mean when we say imaginal.

We introduced the term "sensing with soul" as a sort of equivalent term or interchangeable term, but one that reminds us more of the possibilities that images are not necessarily just intra-psychic—something that happens with my eyes closed as some completely private object. So I could be looking at this lamp or this desk or this book, or my body, something that other people would agree is there in a kind of socially agreed upon perception. But the way that I am seeing it, I'm sensing it with soul. It has dimensionality. It has meaningfulness. It has beauty. There's eros toward it. There are all those other elements of the imaginal.

So when we say image, we mean intra-psychic, but also extra-psychic, if you like. I use "sensing with soul" and "imaginal" interchangeably, but the phrase "sensing with soul" serves as a reminder that we're not just talking about private intra-psychic images. We're also talking about perceptions of commonly agreed upon things—objects, situations in the world—which are sensed with soul, sensed in a soul-making way.

I'll leave aside trying to define eros for now. I've done plenty of that in the past. And there's a whole bunch of other terms, but tonight I think we just want to touch on image and imaginal.

Just to say that soul-making dharma also includes, as we've said, much that isn't obviously just image—all kinds of other aspects around that or that create a platform, a basis to allow that. And soul-making, in a way, also happens any time the mind, or the heart, the experience, expands its frontiers in ways that feel meaningful and enriching and deepening. Some of those might not be through images or sensing with soul.

Again, just some reminders, but I think they're somehow worthwhile.

So when we talk about image, mostly I use the word image to mean imaginal image, but I'll qualify that in a moment. When we talk about imaginal practice, despite some of the similarities, I want to really delineate it from shamanism, for example, and from explorations such as energy healing or extrasensory perception. There are overlaps here. The territory is not that cut and dry, but I really feel that it's worth carving out a very specific area that we're calling imaginal practice in differentiation from—despite some of the overlaps—these other areas. Because imaginal practice is quite rare, and it's rarer than those other areas. It's more likely that if we mix these areas of exploration up, the imaginal will be the first one that's lost, the first one that's diluted, and its power and its potential to open up certain doorways and directions gets lost because it's just confused with other idioms and traditions and explorations.

So despite some of the similarities and overlap—and I find these other areas very interesting certainly—I feel I have a duty to make clear what we mean by this particular area called imaginal practice in contradistinction to some of these others.

We're not talking about channeling. Imaginal practice is not channeling, it's not shamanism, it's not energy healing, it's not ESP, it's not seeing ghosts. It's not quite equatable with Buddhist Tantra either. Again, lots of similarities, lots of overlap, but not the same thing.

I'm not saying this imaginal paradigm, the paradigm of the imaginal, soul-making and that whole path is better or worse. I've said all this before; I'm just repeating. It's not necessarily more or less advanced or anything like that, but it's different in significant ways.

Again, if we assume that our soul-making, our imaginal path and practice is the same as any of those other areas, the particular avenues that come with the imaginal—the openings, the creation, discoveries—won't open. Because certain presumptions, whether they're implicit or explicit in the operating logos, in the conception of these other paths, even if I'm not conscious of them, will fabricate experience along different lines, along certain lines and with certain constraints. And in a way, we'll get off on the wrong foot or divert into some other area.

So like we said, there's a lot of overlap in words—soul and image and soul-making—but there are differences, especially in the philosophical view regarding ontology and epistemology and all of that. This imaginal middle way—neither real nor not real—is one of the key differences. And also the fundamental intention of soul-making practice and imaginal practice being what we call the fullness of intention: the intention for soul-making, if you like, above all else, including other intentions for healing and all

kinds of other things. But this primary intention for soul-making, or the fullness of intention to include everything but paramount is the intention for soul-making. These are fundamental differences among others.

These are important distinctions. I don't know whether you can sense that this matters or not, but to my mind it matters a great deal and will, as I say, determine or constrain or divert what unfolds and what opens from practice—or doesn't unfold or doesn't open.

Sometimes too, people assume that anything with any kind of seemingly mythical element equates as imaginal. It doesn't in our teaching necessarily. Or that typical archetypes must be imaginal, or limiting the imaginal to some predefined set of typical archetypes. Someone was saying, "I have four imaginal figures: the king, the jester or the trickster, the ascetic or the monk, and the lover." These are obviously very classic kinds of archetypes and tarot card emblems, but almost stereotypes mainly.

But if I do that—if I limit myself to these four, for example, or any other four or five or whatever it is—I'm limiting the whole logos. I'm limiting what I mean by image. I will end up limiting my practice, as conception affects perception. And if the conception, if the logos is limited, it will limit the experience. It will send the experience and the interpretation of experience down certain railway tracks with not much possibility, or much less possibility, of moving off those particular tracks and into other areas—more open areas, more fertile areas, more multi-directional areas.

So there won't be, in those cases, if I'm limiting my conception of what's involved in imaginal practice, the kind of infinite and endless possibilities for eros, psyche, and logos that we talk about when we describe the underlying workings of the soul-making dynamic—this idea of endlessness of possibilities, infinite open-ended possibilities for the soul-making dynamic and the fertility there.

I know I've said it before, but I think it's really, really important. Yes, I have to say, also given my health situation—I'm probably dying soon—it feels very important to me to make sure that all these rich waters of different traditions don't just get mixed. Because in that mixture, something will get lost, and probably the first thing to get lost, being as it is the rarest, I think, and in a way somewhat unique, will be the imaginal paradigm, or what we're calling the imaginal paradigm.

I think it's wonderful to explore all these other territories if one has the capacity and interest. But one can do that and at the same time be really clear about what makes what what. What are the distinctions? What are the differentiations? How does that affect things?

As I said, when we use the word image, mostly it's a slightly lazy shorthand for an imaginal image, and imaginal means all those elements are involved—the whole soul-making dynamic is involved. I'm going to talk a little bit more about it tonight, but we can, if you like, make distinctions.

Sometimes we have an image of a situation, but we believe that image is true or real—really how things really are. We might call that a fixation or a fixated image. To be more precise, I want to delineate three kinds of relationships with images which determine actually whether that image is imaginal or not.

We can have a fixated image. Something happens—a person looks at me in a certain way, I have an image of that person, if you like, a sense of them. We also call it papañca in the Buddhist tradition. So that's one type of image, or image gone down a certain track into fixation. It's become fixated, it's become a real thing. There's not a lot of depth in it. There's not all the elements and the soul-making dynamic and potential there.

There's also the case where something happens and an image forms—let's say this person that looked at me funny and now I think they hate me or whatever it is. There's an image or a story or fantasy that's running in our mind about the whole situation, or about my narrative or my life, or why does this always happen to me, or I'm like this, or that person's like that. But in this case, in the second case, we're mindful of the presence of this image. We're mindful of what it is and what's going on in the mind. And because of the mindfulness, there's just a withdrawal of the credit, if you like, and the credulity of it. We're not believing it so much.

Yes, I notice that the mind is spinning the story, but because of the mindfulness—just simple mindfulness that we've all been trained in—we're aware of what's going on. We're not believing it so much. There's less identification with it. We're less lost in it and less believing it's true. There's some distance to doubt it or to doubt that it's completely true. So we can call that mindfulness, mindful observation or awareness of an image.

And then there's the third category: what we call imaginal. An image that has become imaginal might have started as papañca. This is really important. So it might have started as papañca, but because of the way we skillfully related to it...

worked with it, it became imaginal and opened up all those beautiful and enriching elements of the imaginal, the nodes of the lattice.

So in that, again, one of the elements is this imaginal middle way. It's neither real nor not real. And that's part of what it means to be imaginal. We naturally sense that. Rather than completely believing it or just completely dismissing it as an irrelevant

daydream, just flotsam of the mind, there's this quite wide avenue of the imaginal middle way. And that's one of the characteristics of the imaginal. It's kind of theatre. And because of that, we're less lost in it, less believing it completely flat out.

So when we talk about freedom in relation to what comes up in the mind, certainly when there's mindfulness of an image and mindfulness of that tendency or the stirrings of papañca, there's a certain amount of freeing with respect to that image. But when an image becomes imaginal, there's also freedom, a certain freedom—much deeper, richer freedom in relationship to it. Whereas the mindfulness of an image disempowers the image, mindfulness of papañca disempowers papañca, when there's the kind of mindfulness that's involved in imaginal practice, when an image becomes imaginal, it actually empowers the image. So there's freedom, but the image is empowered, instead of freedom that disempowers the image.

There's also a way that mindfulness of an image in the second category tends to either disempower the image or just cut it, draining it of its life, or just holding it static. Whereas when an image becomes imaginal, it's allowed to be dynamic. And the whole soul-making dynamic with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic is allowed to infuse it and work on it and ferment it and expand it and deepen it and enrich it.

So we could make those distinctions in what we mean when we use the word image. But as I said, mostly when I say the word image, I kind of mean imaginal image—it's just a bit of a mouthful.

We also use the term fantasy at times. So how would we define a fantasy? Again, it's a loose definition. Sometimes I just use the words interchangeably—image and fantasy, imaginal image and fantasy. But in a way, I suppose I think of fantasy as something, an image that is a little bit secondary, if you like, or not so much in the main focus.

Usually when we're talking about imaginal practice, like, "Oh, this image came, this dancing ape," or whatever it is—this image, and that's an object, and so I'm focusing on that object in the practice, and I can decide how much or how little to focus on it. But fantasy is often something that operates more in the background. It's not the main focus. So fantasies inform our life, inform our sense of our narrative, but also our choices in life.

Where we love deeply, where we are devoted deeply, usually there's a fantasy there. We might not recognize it as a fantasy. In other words, there's this kind of imaginal sense of things and of oneself that's usually operating a little bit in the background until

we become aware of it as a kind of image that we call a fantasy image. And sometimes we almost catch these, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye. They're not often deliberate objects of attention unless we really draw attention to them.

So for example, when we gave those talks about fantasies of the path, different fantasies of the path, in a way what we were doing was naming something, addressing it, giving some possibilities, and then lo and behold, people start to become aware of, "Oh, I guess this was the fantasy that was operating, and maybe this one could operate, and this one wants to operate," or whatever it is.

But unless you kind of get imbued with imaginal practice in this whole soulmaking dharma, one doesn't often—certainly in a lot of mainstream psychologies or mainstream Dharma—acknowledge that element, that strand of our soul, of our existence, of our way of sensing life so openly. So once we become more involved in imaginal practice, we start to see and start to sense our whole lives that way and become more aware of the fantasies that are operating.

Okay, so if we're again just reminding ourselves of what we mean by image, imaginal image—it really seems worth repeating. I'm aware I've said it many times, but an image is not necessarily visual. So the word in English tends to connote some visual object usually, but when we use the word, it doesn't necessarily mean something visual. Of course it can, but all the senses are involved, and sometimes we can talk about something imaginable, but we're not even sure what sense it's operating in, which of the six senses it's operating in, or all of them, or none of them, or something else, some intuitive awareness of something.

So I'll try to give some examples. A person—I think I gave this example years ago, but a couple of people have mentioned something similar—just meditating or just on retreat or somewhere else and there's a sense of being kissed on the mouth, but I don't see who's kissing me. And yet the sense of that kiss is sensed with soul. It's pregnant, it's full of all the beauty, the eros, the meaningfulness, all the other elements of the imaginal that we've drawn attention to. So it's coming through the tactile sense, the kinesthetic sense, for example.

Or a person was describing they were doing mettā practice, using the phrases and repeating the phrases, "may I be well, may you be well." And then she felt like her hair was being combed, as if the mettā was sort of stroking her hair. The phrases of the mettā were stroking her hair. So something's happening already with the sense of the mettā there. Something's beginning to ferment, to grow, to expand. And this sense of the mettā stroking her hair, like combing her hair, that then became a kind of image of being attended to by a maid and sort of readied for a banquet, she said. But none of this

was visual. So it's just a sense. It's a sort of idea, but it's a lived, fleshed-out image, some of which is kinesthetic, and some is just a sense of an imaginal scene, if you like, of which one is a part, but it's not visual.

And in this sense of things, her heart is suddenly covered in armour. Numbness of heart had been something she had experienced and was actually concerned about recently. And so here, into the image, comes the sense of armour. And then, in response to that sense of the armour around the heart, the maid's hand came gently to touch the armoured heart. All of this non-visual, as an example. And again, the beauty there, the heart being touched, the emotional resonance, the meaningfulness, the echoing and mirroring of one's life—all these elements present without it being visual. The depth, the dimensionality, all of that.

Some of you might have been on a retreat at Gaia House—I think it might have been the Foundations of Soulmaking Dharma retreat. It might have been on the opening evening. We did an exercise, which I think Catherine and I led together. We were chanting the mantra of the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Some of you who were actually there may not recall this aspect of it, because at some point we also began milling around the room and coming into contact with each other, and of course in the context of silence and strangers and people you love, it can be quite loaded. So it might have been that the instructions I was giving at the time got a little lost. But I'll explain what I said and why it's relevant to what I'm talking about now—the non-visual aspect.

So we were all chanting and we were milling around. And then I asked, if I remember: whose is this compassion? Whose is it? We introduced the chant with the usual radiating of compassion and care to oneself, to others, and so forth. This mind, this heart, this consciousness has the intention of compassion, of soothing, healing towards others, towards all beings. It's the usual way we would conceive of that—it's my compassion.

But whose is this compassion when we're chanting the mantra? In asking that question—because it's always mine, but with the words of the mantra filling the room, the space of the room in which we move, in which we're standing and moving, is filled with these syllables, with these sacred syllables and chants—whose is it? Supporting a sense of the mystery of it and feeling it kinesthetically, that we're in something here. Something is coming through us. Something is touching us from the outside through the sound, through the energy body.

Then we can begin, or a possibility is that compassion itself can be sensed with soul. It begins to have more dimensionality, more unfathomability. Again, these are some of the nodes, the elements of the imaginal. It becomes—we sense it as more than what we have conventionally and habitually conceived of it, how we have conventionally and habitually viewed it as basically a human quality or intention. It becomes something pertaining to the fabric of the cosmos, something that's coming from another level—the divinity or the Buddha nature of Avalokiteshvara. It's not just mine; it's coming. It has this dimensionality, this depth. It has an unfathomability. It has a mystery. It has beauty.

It's not visual. It's coming through the sound, but the sound itself is enriched and deepened through the imaginal sense that's opened through being sensed with soul. It has autonomy. In other words, again, it's not just me deciding to do the compassion, to generate this compassion. Yes, of course—wonderful. But the syllables themselves, the sacred syllables of the mantra, the energy of compassion has its own autonomy. It has its own intelligence. It has its own will. It has its own presence and its own origin. And grace—it's coming. It's not just me intending it; it's gift. All of this, and it's mystery.

It becomes unfathomable in the sense that however I want to, or however I tend to limit—well, I think I know what compassion means: compassion means something that wants to alleviate suffering, an intention that wants to alleviate suffering. Yes, great, wonderful definition of compassion. But as we start sensing it with soul, the whole definition—again, it's the soft and elastic edges—begins to ferment, to expand, to grow, to deepen, to enrich.

And this is not visual, so it's felt with the body, with the energy body, in relation to the sound, in relation to sounding and hearing sound. It's an aural and bodily sense, not a visual sense. So that would be another example.

notes or people tell me, "Oh, I don't get images" or "I don't see this or that." It may be worth giving a few more examples just to fill out what we mean by image—not so much by definition, but by example.

It's a long story, I suppose, but I used to be a jazz musician, and then I gave up. I was a composer for a while. I gave up playing, and then I became a composer, and then I gave up. I threw myself into the Dharma full-time. But periodically in my life, there are times where I feel grief. I miss music. I miss making music, I miss playing, I miss that whole world. Sometimes what happens is I just get repetitive dreams of practicing guitar or playing guitar, and they just come and won't go away. Sometimes I start playing again and the dreams go away. Then I stop playing and they come back. This has gone on for years and years.

So this was one of those days where I had been practicing a little bit of guitar, just a little bit, and then stopped, and then the dreams resumed. Again, the dukkha that went with that—the grief, or the feeling a little bit torn between wanting to get back into music but having other obligations and other pulls.

I was sitting with that in the morning meditation. It wasn't particularly intense, but I let my mind—or perhaps it was already generating sort of music in my mind—improvised melodies and lines and a picture of a guitar, all with the difficulty of the situation and other factors. But I let myself listen to the music. I let the music play in the mind. There's a kind of looseness and fluidity, and it begins to feel wonderful. It's beautiful and there's something powerful in it.

So again, it's a gradual transition. Something that was actually a bit of a daydream, that actually was involved with some dukkha, begins to take on other dimensions. It begins to grow as I go into what seemed like a daydream and pay attention to it with a bit more respect and reverence.

Then, at a certain point, I get a sense of music as a god—a pitch black, featureless god like black empty space, but somehow with many long waving arms, the way Avalokiteshvara has. But again, it's not visual. I can't explain exactly how I get the sense of those arms. If that aspect of the image—the arms—was prominent at first, it soon faded very much to the background. What became the prominent aspect of the image, and the aspect that was at that time the most soulful, the most soul-making—this instruction to kind of hone in and tune to whatever in an image feels the most soul-making, we'll come back to this.

This god definitely felt masculine somehow, and it felt like he has a claim on me. This god of music has a claim on me, on my soul and my life. In recognizing this claim and surrendering to it, I feel a relief and a kind of understanding. It's like I understand something about my life, about my narrative. My surrender to it feels to me like a feminine mode—I'll put those in inverted commas—as if I'm being taken, I'm taken by this god. There is an awareness that he is greater than me, much more powerful than me, this god, as all gods are.

All that feels very beautiful and blissful in my whole body, and particularly in the lower belly. I understand with it—it's not so much that it has to manifest materially. I don't have to be a musician again. I seem in fact not to be one of those chosen for that fully, or throughout my life at least. But I understand that this god Music—infinite in his possibilities—has a claim on me, almost as if from behind, so to speak, in the sense that it might not be the principal thing I'm directly focusing on or devoted to or attending to

or working on. But whatever that principal thing is—Dharma or whatever—there will always be flitting in and out, with more or less intensity, the pull, the claim of this pitch black god.

Again, this teaching of the polydirectional pulls of the different gods and the impossibility of serving them all fully in the literal ways that might seem obvious to us.

So maybe it had just a suggestion of a visual element right at the beginning, but actually the sense of that—you could say what became image—I became image, or the sense of my narrative, myself, my narrative self became imaginal in relationship to this very powerful god of music. It wasn't really visual like that.

There was a time when these kinds of images around music and working with music—and the grief that I sometimes feel about leaving it—would appear quite regularly, and I'm working with it over maybe even a few weeks on and off. But it's quite hard to articulate how one kind of senses that. What sense is it being known through?

The claim of this god is like a kind of light or a shadow cast over my life—but I'm using those words metaphorically. It's from elsewhere, so to speak, permeating my life or like a canopy over it. The redemption, the opening up and the soul-making come in the relationship to it—in the recognizing, acknowledging, surrendering to it, seeing myself, sensing myself with soul, my narrative with soul and all that.

Some days later, there was another experience. I had alluded to it at the beginning of that description—there's a way of listening to music in my mind's eye, or rather my mind's ear. It's not necessarily crystal clear; it might be or it might not be. But then it opens up a realm of music, a cosmic realm, a space of abstract music—an infinitely fecund realm or world that is just music, just continual outpouring of music.

I've touched on this many times in previous retreats, this opening to an imaginal sense of a realm of music. Again, it's not visual here but aural, and even then sometimes the aural begins to fade and becomes even more abstract. Yet it's definitely music, definitely beautiful, and definitely a realm. This can open up a kind of cosmopoiesis in the moment with respect to the sounds that are actually around me—the birds, the wind, even the cars, people's voices. Very beautiful. The sensing with soul spreads to the whole environment.

Following on this series, some months ago I was driving to Gaia House, listening to music in the car. I wasn't particularly into what I was hearing; I found it boring and predictable. But something shifted, and I got a soul sense of my relationship with music—of music's claim on me, its power, its presence in, over, and through my life. I sensed it as refracted. Refraction is when light hits water and deflects, bending rather than fol-

lowing a straight line. Similarly, this music, this presence of music in my life, was refracted—not actual music so much as the image of music refracted or radiating into my life somehow. It was the image of music, not actual music itself.

Instead of feeling that subtle grief or disempowerment, that grieving for the impossibility of actual music in my life right now, there was an empowering emotion—as if this was exactly right, that I have other manifestations to steward, to give and receive right now.

Let me give a couple more examples of non-visual images. I had a dream about a dharma teacher colleague. All I remembered in the morning were fragments: the house where I grew up, something about the sun shining, a student of mine, and this colleague. She said, "You're going to die soon"—or relatively soon—"but you need to take care of your legacy, because there's a powerful possibility here that you need to tend."

Just these dream fragments. In morning meditation, I remembered them, then let them go. After they went, there was an imaginal sense of my dying soon, of not being here, being dead—not being present as a physical presence in the world. So there was a sense of absence. But this absence became a very powerful kind of presence or force in the world.

Again, there's no visual object at all. It's actually an absence, yet that absence had this imaginal sense to it. It was full of the elements—the neither real nor not real, the beauty, the infinite echoing and mirroring. For this to be imaginable in that moment, it had to connect with a recent decision and intention I'd made to study certain areas, including ethics in relation to soul and the nature of matter. Somehow that intention, that channeling of my will and energies, felt powerful in itself, but it fused with and impregnated with life force and direction that imaginal absence that comes from death. Again, not a visual image at all—very hard to articulate.

Here's another, quite recent—perhaps six weeks ago. I was being driven to the doctor on a sunny early spring day. I had my eyes open in the car when an image came of my chest opening as if it were a cupboard with two doors. But in the imaginal sense, it was more like what's called in Jewish tradition the ark, the Aron HaKodesh—a holy receptacle, a cupboard where they keep the Torah scrolls.

It was as if my chest was opening like that. I'm not sure it was really visual—more a kinesthetic sense with this association. It felt very open and blessed, with vague traces of the sense of my body as sacred text, like the Torah scroll. This is perhaps more idea than visual image, but it combined with a sense of straddling two worlds—the world of

life and the world of death. I'm not even sure what I mean by that exactly. A sense of different planes of existence, of this plane of obvious material manifestation being just one among other dimensions that perhaps have a different...

cast a different light on death.

So there was a sense of myself then, with this probability of dying in the near future, straddling these two worlds, being somehow in both worlds at once—the world of life and the world of death. And with that straddling, tremendous softness and surrender and letting go and peace increased. The gaze, the way that I saw the world around me and the situation—the fields and the trees and the sky—was infused with so much sense of mercy and compassion and beauty.

It felt in that moment that all and any kind of gross level of clinging to life was gone. So it was really a sense of blessedness and peace. And it also felt like blessings poured forth from my being, from my chest, from my eyes. Something very, very lovely.

So those were two aspects: the opening of the chest and the sort of sacred text, the place of the holy scrolls; the straddling of life and death with all the peace and beauty that gave to the sense of things, all things.

And then the third aspect was a kind of immediate cosmopoiesis. Right then, the sense of the land that we were driving through was perceived as having its own intelligence, its own life in a way which I don't think I'd experienced before. So something quite new. Again, very hard to pinpoint. This land has intelligence—something I've touched on before, but the particular experience there was quite new.

All three of those aspects opened simultaneously, actually, were experienced together. I had maybe touched on each of them individually in the weeks before in practice, formal or informal, but they came together then. The eyes were open, the land was sensed with soul, the sense of death and my life and narrative—they're all equally important integrated aspects of that image.

I don't know whether we'd call that an intra-psychic image or not, but partly I want to say that it's not visual, and partly I want to give a sense of how images can actually become quite complex constellations in very lovely ways, fusing together different aspects.

Okay, last example of something not visual: sitting in meditation and letting my body sense lead with the whole energy body and that awareness, letting that guide the practice and guide me. And I sense in the meditation then that I'm being tended to lovingly by angels. Tender presences—they feel very feminine, but it's not visual. So it's just something that feels feminine there.

I'm not seeing them, I'm feeling something, I'm sensing something, but I can't exactly tell you what sense it's coming through. It's probably more kinesthetic than anything else, but even that is quite vague. The sensual detail is not clear, not sharp, not distinct, but the imaginal sense is very strong. This is what's happening: tender, loving angels are ministering to me. It feels very beautiful and very delightful.

It's not clear whether they are tending my corpse after my death—this sort of transition to death—or whether they're healing my still living body. Something about that uncertainty, is it this or is it that? Is it healing, or is it actually a sort of image of the profound tending and ministering to a corpse that's been through the trials and tribulations and wearing difficulties of life and illness, and now receives these loving, tender, angelic ministrations after death?

That uncertainty, is it this or that? It seemed somehow necessary to it. The answer wasn't forthcoming. It seemed like it wasn't right to ask, so I let it go and just opened to the ministration. So much love there, so much love.

Again, a sense—perhaps at this point becoming slightly visual, but not predominantly visual—of water being poured on me, like anointed or bathed, again with tenderness, with blessing, my body being stroked, water poured on my head.

So those are some examples of images that are not visual. And just to labor the point and to open up in case some people are still stuck on demanding visual objects in their imaginal practice—if we again just linger a little bit, what do we mean by imaginal? I'm just filling out some things, not everything, just a few things tonight.

Obviously we can have image as other, like I said—here's this dancing ape I am looking at, or seeing this dancing ape, this image. So the image is an object there. But also the self can become image. And that will happen anyway, as we've talked about. I want to go into that in a little more detail in this series of talks—how the self can and should get involved in the imaginal sense and become itself imaginal. But it could be that the primary image is the self, or it takes place here as opposed to an object seemingly over there in the psychic space.

So, for example, I was sitting in meditation, and there were many things that had happened in the last few days—a lot of emotional resonances and stirrings still present in the heart from all these different events. Suddenly, out of the heart center or the solar plexus center, came this image of a bare-branched tree, like a tree in winter, almost black. It grew out of my chest, and suddenly it burst into blossom—beautiful, radiant blossom. I was that tree, or rather that tree was in the place of my body. The image there is the self becoming image, and the location in psychic space is here. My body has become the image, as opposed to being an object over there that I'm looking at. Both are possible.

Another crucial element we've touched on is this node of create-discover. Images are created-discovered. One of the implications of this element is that it's actually okay if you deliberately invoke an image or deliberately change an image or deliberately bring back an image that touched you before in another time. That's deliberate creation, yet it's potentially just as valid as an image that comes completely out of the blue, unbeckoned and fresh, where it seems I did nothing to create it.

We tend to think that if I made it happen, or if I deliberately change an image, it has to be ego—and ego is something other than the unconscious, something other than soul. I don't buy into that distinction. I would rather say either way is okay, whether an image comes unbidden and surprisingly, seeming like pure grace, or whether it seems like something I've generated, or even following a guided meditation, or resurrecting an image, revisiting an image, re-invoking an image I've had before.

What matters, rather than who made this, is: Is it soul-making? If it feels soul-making, it doesn't matter that I've made it, that I've created it, that I just added something to that image or took something away or changed it. What matters is the sense of soul-making. Even if an image comes completely unbidden with all the mythical qualifications—"Oh, this must be an image"—if it doesn't feel soul-making, it's not, in our language, imaginal yet.

What matters is the soul-making sense. That's one of the nodes as well, because soul-making is what makes something imaginal. This is what we should use to guide us: Are we on the right track? This is also part of how we support an image to become more imaginal and to deepen—by tuning in to what actually feels soulful, what are the soul-making aspects of this image. An image is a complex thing. What parts or dimensions of the image actually feel soulful? That's what we should gently tune into, linger with, feel, explore. So this notion that "I shouldn't make something happen because that's ego"—I wouldn't put too much stock in that.

A couple of last things for tonight. When we talk about the nodes or the elements of the imaginal—or can we call them aspects of the imaginal, aspects of the lattice—at times we've used those three words: nodes, elements, and aspects. When we talk about them, it's not that we're discussing something that operates purely as on-off switches, though they are sometimes that. A node suddenly fires. Suddenly there's a sense of divinity, or suddenly the eros is there. Like an on-off switch or on-off setting.

But sometimes they're more like each node itself, each element itself, is more like a spectrum or more like a dimmer switch. When it's an on-off switch, it can feel much more passive—something that just happened, something that happened to me, suddenly something ignited. This switch just got flipped into the on position. When it's a dimmer switch, there's actually the possibility of our intention turning the dial, turning the dimmer switch. Or if we use the analogy we've employed of fire—this flame igniting another flame.

A flame can also have variable intensity—you can turn the gas higher or lower, add more wood to the fire. Fire is not merely on or off; it too has a dimmer switch quality.

It's helpful to envision the model of sudden sparking—a sudden ignition of one node that, in its sudden sparking, triggers or ignites the sudden sparking of other nodes or elements. This model conveys something of the quantum leap quality that can often occur in imaginal practice, whether practicing alone or with another.

At other times, however, the experience of individual nodes feels more like dials or faders. We can turn any one of them up by simply noticing it, paying attention to that node. This noticing itself—this kind of delicate attention without pressure—actually begins to either ignite it or turn it up, amplifying that element in the experience. Then perhaps the whole lattice, the other nodes, gradually turn up, or they may suddenly ignite once a certain threshold has been reached with the first element. There are many possibilities here.

With practice—gradually, with the development of skill and art in this alchemy of imaginal practice—we may be able to guide the relative balance of the settings of any two or even more of these dials, these elements. For example, attention to the energy body is an element that might remain as background awareness. We can turn up that dial and become more immersed in the sense of the energy body. Perhaps it becomes very pleasant in a certain way and takes us into jhāna, while the image as object relatively recedes into the background.

We can begin to alter the relative balance of these different dials, these different flames. With emotion, it might come to the fore or fade; the sense of real or not-real can come to prominence, or we can bring it forward by turning up these dials through our noticing or through tweaking them in certain ways.

This takes practice and usually time to develop such skill. It's somewhat similar to how I would teach insight practice in relationship to samādhi. We might be practicing certain insight ways of looking, and because they bring letting go and ease in the energy body—a relative unbinding of clinging and the knots in the energy body—that starts to feel quite nice. We can lean a little more into the awareness and enjoyment of that pleasant feeling in the energy body, taking us in the direction of samādhi, giving less priority to the insight at that point. We can play with any kind of relative balance between the insight way of looking and the samādhi.

The metaphor I've used previously is of a hawk or any bird of prey riding thermal air currents. When they change direction, it's a very subtle inclining of the wings this way or that—even just a part of the wings—and it takes them in a different direction. It's as if they're picking up opportunistically on currents already there. We pick up on currents already present—flames, thermals, if you like—that are already there in imaginal practice or in insight-samādhi practice. With just the subtlest realignment through attention, we change the direction of practice.

I wanted to be clear about what we mean by "imaginal" by explaining the elements, the twenty-eight factors and so forth. But it's also important to recognize that it's not so black and white. We can speak of something becoming more fully imaginal or more authentically imaginal. Again, there's a spectrum here—from, say, fantasy on one side, through something having more and more of these elements, a richer and deeper involvement of each element, becoming more and more fully imaginal.

Partly this describes the unfolding experience itself, but I also say this for pedagogical reasons. Some people hear these teachings and think, "I don't know, maybe I've never had an imaginal experience." Another kind of person, or the same person at a different time, might automatically assume that any image they have is imaginal in the sense we're meaning.

So much about teaching is contextual and relative to each student or each student at a certain time. There's this middle way where we recognize a spectrum, where we can talk about becoming more fully imaginal. This means: don't necessarily believe, if you have a tendency to think, "I don't know what Rob and Catherine are talking about. I don't think I've ever had such an experience. I probably never will. I don't know this

and I can't do that," and so on. Trust that you're on a spectrum and you can grow. The experiences can grow; the explorations can develop more and more into what we call the fully or authentically imaginal.

For the other kind of person, these teachings about the nodes might be important to say: hold on, if you think something's imaginal, just check—does it have all these other factors, all these other elements? Because that's what we mean. What you're calling imaginal may not actually be fully what we mean yet, or what's possible in the directions we're discussing.

It's tricky as a teacher, obviously tricky as a student, but thinking of it as a spectrum is helpful in all kinds of ways.

There's a saying from the Dzogchen tradition: "Trust your experience, but keep refining your view." In the Dzogchen tradition, this relates to the view of Dzogchen or a certain emptiness view. Trust your experience, but keep refining your view. There's so much wisdom in that.

This goes for imaginal practice, it goes also for emptiness practices. We have certain experiences, a certain level of insight, and it may well be—it often is—that they can be deepened. That level of understanding or insight, that level of experience, if you like, can be deepened and enriched. So I'm not throwing out my experiences of images or imagination. I'm trusting that, but I keep refining my view. What else is there? What's different here? What might I not be seeing? What's possible? What are some of these other elements that I maybe haven't experienced or incorporated or understood yet? So trust your experience and keep refining your view.

I'm also reminded of Ajahn Chah talking one time. He said, you know, as a teacher, I'm like someone walking beside my students as they walk down the road, and there are ditches on each side of the road—trenches on each side of the road. And if I see a student veering too much to the left and in danger of falling in that ditch, I say, "Go right, go right, move to the right." And if that same student or another student looks like at a certain time they're in danger of falling into the ditch on the right-hand side of the road, then I say, "Go left, go left." So teaching is always contextual. It's always relative to the student, where they are at that time, what their mindset and patterns of psychology are—all of that. So each individual at any time needs a slightly different emphasis.

One of my teachers, Ajahn Jeff, Ajahn Ṭhānissaro, when I studied jhānas with him many years ago, said—I'm pretty sure he said, "You know, if you think you've had an experience and you think, 'Oh, that's the first jhāna' or 'that's the third jhāna' or whatever it is, just put post-it notes on it for a while"—those post-it notes, those sticky labels.

Because then what will happen is your experience will mature and it will change. So if you've had an experience of what you think was the first jhāna, you go, "Oh, that must be the first jhāna." But as you practice more with that state, it starts to change through practice. It refines. It matures. It grows. It starts to differentiate. "Oh, actually, that was two states, and I got them mixed up, and that one's that, and that one's that," as well as the experience itself changing. We could talk a lot in terms of jhānas—I won't talk about that now.

But I think there'd be some wisdom in saying something very similar for imaginal practice. Think, "Oh, this is imaginal" or "that wasn't imaginal." Just put a post-it note on it. Just be light with the labeling or the "have I achieved this or that." It's a real kindness and it allows things to grow as you grow into discovering more of what's involved and what we mean by imaginal.

The last thing to say right now is that all of the elements of the imaginal—so all of those twenty-eight elements that we've listed and outlined and talked about elsewhere—they all have, as I alluded to briefly before, soft and elastic edges. Each of them is unfathomably deep and infinitely developable. Each of them are created, discovered. So, again, what that means is humility or divinity or dimensionality or beauty, etc. Each of these might mean something to us at this point in time in our life and our practice. But because they have soft and elastic edges, they can be stretched. What does beauty mean? What does it encompass? What does divinity mean and encompass? What does humility mean and encompass? It can get stretched. Its meaning can get expanded, deepened, enriched, become itself multi-dimensional, multi-aspected.

As I alluded to right at the beginning tonight, things that are both foundations or roots or elements of imaginal practice themselves become ensouled, and we go on a journey with that, or they expand and teach us. They are unfathomably deep. We never come to the end of what humility means, certainly never come to the end of what divinity might mean, or beauty. And infinitely developable. And we're involved in that. So this is all part of, I think, what we need to bear in mind as we walk this path of soul-making dharma and practice.

Just helping in the sense of offering clarity and cultivating the right attitude. What kind of attitude nourishes the practice? What gives it space to grow, provides it with good soil so that it can be truly fertile?

This is the soil we seek to cultivate—one that allows our imaginal practice to flourish, one that honors the infinite depths we're exploring. When we approach this work with the right understanding and the proper attitude, we create conditions where the soul can unfold its mysteries, where the imaginal can reveal its teachings, where the journey of soul-making can proceed with grace and wisdom.

The path we walk is both ancient and ever-new, both grounded in timeless wisdom and responsive to the unique calling of our individual souls. It asks of us patience and passion, humility and courage, discernment and openness. It invites us into relationship—with the images that arise, with the depths of our being, with the sacred dimensions of existence that surround and interpenetrate our lives.

May this exploration serve not only our own awakening but the awakening of all beings. May the images we tend, the souls we nurture, the divinity we recognize contribute to the healing and transformation our world so desperately needs.

Thank you for listening, and for your willingness to engage with these profound territories of practice and understanding.

CHAPTER 174

The Crucible

Rob Burbea · 2h03

> *In this profound exploration from his "Four Circles, Four Parables of Stone and Light" series, Rob Burbea examines what creates the proper conditions - the 'crucible' or 'womb' - for imaginal practice and sensing with soul. Drawing on alchemical metaphors, he emphasizes that our relationship to emotions must fall within a specific range: neither dismissing them through spiritual bypassing nor being overwhelmed by them without mindfulness.*
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> *Burbea addresses fundamental questions about vulnerability in imaginal practice, distinguishing between genuine spiritual openings and fears of possession or loss of autonomy. He explores how images can arise from memories that become imaginal over time, sharing beautiful examples including a daughter's experience of her father's blessing kiss and his own encounter with angelic trees. The talk emphasizes the importance of an opportunistic, research-oriented attitude toward practice, trusting the soul's intelligence even when images seem initially unpromising.*
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> *Throughout, Burbea stresses that imaginal practice involves both art and grace - while we can cultivate skillful conditions, there remains an element beyond our control. He discusses practical aspects of tending to images, including questions about artistic expression of imaginal content, and concludes with reflections on the Neoplatonic concept of epitēdeiotēs - the soul's fitness or aptitude to receive divine forms.*

If you've had experiences of images that have affected you deeply, if you've had experiences of sensing with soul, then you'll recognize that using a term or describing it as a kind of alchemy is appropriate. There's a kind of transubstantiation of the sense of ourselves, of others, other human beings, of the world, of nature, of bodies, of matter. All these aspects of our existence and all these realms of perception are transubstantiated through the process, which of course is central to what alchemy is or was.

And so if we talk in those terms—the art of the alchemy of imaginal practice—then we can perhaps look into analogies of the alchemical vessel and the different processes. A kind of crucible is needed, or some kind of vessel. Actually, there are different kinds of vessels in alchemy. I don't want to stretch that analogy too far—there's a breakdown pretty quickly, probably.

Or we could talk about, if we're asking what is it that opens up the world of images? What is it that opens up the world to being sensed with soul? Using another analogy of birth: what kind of womb, what's involved in the gestation of those kinds of perceptions, those kinds of images, what's involved in caring for the birth and then caring for the tending to the image or the sense or the perception or the soul-making transformation that comes?

So we could use either of those metaphors, analogies—either the alchemy or the birth from a womb. But again, I don't want to stretch them too far. I want to say some preliminary things today that I hope will be helpful and then get into more detail about some of the aspects of skill and art in these practices.

One of the pieces that I really want to return to and emphasize is the importance of the relationship to our emotions. This relationship has to be within a certain range. If I dismiss my emotions, if I bypass them, if I deconstruct them, if I zap them with some emptiness way of looking, atomize them or whatever it is, spiritualize them away, then the crucible cannot heat up enough to ferment and to catalyze the alchemical process.

If, on the other hand, I'm just lost in an emotion without mindfulness, without any sense of a skillful relationship to that emotion, then that also will not be helpful. The alchemical process, the gestation, won't be served, won't be permitted, or is very unlikely. So part of that emotional relationship—I'm going to come back to this in detail, but it's a really important point—part of that range of helpful relationship to emotions that allows imaginal practice and sensing with soul has to do with sensing in the energy body. We've talked about this, and the energy body involves more than just emotions, but this is really important.

As I said, I'll return to it in later talks, but let me say a few things about that and about what are the conditions that support the birth of images, the reception of images?

In relation to emotions, actually someone a little while ago on retreat, who'd done quite a lot of imaginal practice and was really in his element there, asked me a question in an interview. He came in and reported that some images recently come and seem to last just a few seconds or a minute or two. "I can see that all the elements are there, all the nodes of the lattice are there," he said. "And they have a big effect, but then they're gone. Whereas it used to be that images would stay and I would be with them for one or two hours or more, the same image." He asked, "Is this just a natural change as imaginal practice develops, that images get shorter in duration?"

I thought, hmm, that's interesting. I don't actually know. But I don't think it's necessarily just a natural change as imaginal practice develops. What occurred to me were two factors that might be relevant there.

It may be that when there is not a sustained emotional challenge in one's life—for example, some kind of relationship crisis or even a marriage crisis, some long-term dukkha, a really challenging illness, or working on a project that's really stretching and challenging you in certain ways—it may be that when there is not a sustained emotional challenge in one's life, maybe the images don't actually need to last a long time. Let's put "need" in inverted commas. Images don't "need" to last a long time.

The emotional energy that is present is part of what gives birth to and sustains an image. We relate to those images emotionally, out of those emotions, and out of those emotions if we relate to that emotion in the right way. We don't need to be with them a long time necessarily. Some of them just do last a long time, some less, but it might be the ones that last longer are coming partly—or that duration is coming partly—out of the emotional ferment that's there, in something that's really challenging emotionally.

An exception might be the kind of beautiful cosmopoiesis that we experience when an imaginal sense spreads to the whole world, or to one's whole environment. There's a sensing the soul of one's whole environment, not just of one object, intrapsychic or extrapsychic. Or it could be one object sensing the soul—extrapsychic object sensing the soul.

But there, you know, for instance, the garden becomes a Daedalian realm, an angelic realm or something like that. Many of you have experienced that kind of thing. And that can be sustained from or with a kind of emotional well-being, some kind of quasi-jhanic state or well-being. And that is the emotion, so to speak, that's sustaining, that's part of sustaining, if we use that language, that perception.

So that was one reflection that occurred to me.

The second is, and again, it's something we'll come back to, but an image needs us to tune to whatever are its most soul-making aspects. So sometimes we get hung up on the visual and the clarity of the visual, or we're demanding some visual clarity or something like that. But that may not be at all what's most soul-making, really where the juice is, where the life of the image is and the vitality of the image is. But if we don't tune to what is most soul-making—and there's not a formula for what is obviously most soul-making; I have to intuit that, feel it, sense it in the moment without a formula—so my antennae have to be up, I have to be receptive and sensitive. But if we don't tune to

what is soul-making, if we're actually focusing on something else, some other aspect of the image, the image will lose its energy and its cohesion and, for instance, the mind gets distracted.

So emotions have a part. They're an integral part of imaginal practice and sensing the soul.

We could say, and I can't remember if someone suggested or asked, you know, is vulnerability one of the nodes, perhaps? Is it, for instance, a 29th node? So that, to me, is a really interesting question. Of course, we could put it there, absolutely. The elements are not rigid dogmas, or they're not engraved in stone on tablets. But let's explore a little bit this notion of vulnerability.

Vulnerability actually means, from the Latin vulnera, as a wound, as vulnerability able to be wounded. It's sensitivity, if you like, but also it's more than sensitivity. It's this capacity to be wounded. A vulnerable wound can also be an incision, which is also kind of opening. You know, when there's a cut in the body, there's a kind of opening there. But let's ponder this a little bit, vulnerability.

So some people might be nervous with respect to imaginal practice and believe or fear, be concerned that they're vulnerable to some kind of possession by an image or a kind of loss of control or loss of their autonomy. I do not think that is a real possibility, a real vulnerability of soul-making and imaginal practice. In other words, I don't think that's at all likely to happen. I've never come across it. It might happen in other circumstances, but not the way we're teaching imaginal practice.

A person might, however, carry that fear of being possessed as a sort of habitual pattern of expectation and behavior. And they might carry that into any relationships—fear of being taken over, of being dominated, of losing one's autonomy. Any relationship, human or imaginal, a person might have that concern or notice that pattern, actually do lose my autonomy or seem to. And that fear, if it's there, will hinder the soul-making. It will actually block the soul-making dynamic, the eros, psyche, logos dynamic, from expanding and deepening, widening, getting richer, more complicated.

Or one might have, for example, a tendency towards merging with another, and in that way kind of, not so much being possessed, but something like that. Or withdrawing—the opposite is sometimes what psychologists call a schizoid tendency, to withdraw, to split, to kind of hide back in oneself, so to speak, or even behind oneself. Or alternate those. There might be a pattern of I do this and then I withdraw. I merge and then I withdraw and I don't seem to have any control over that.

Either of these tendencies, the merging or the withdrawing, will prevent eros in our terms. It will block the eros. The merging, why? Because we've said the eros needs two. And when we merge, we've lost the two. And the withdrawing loses the vitality of the connection, the libido, the juices cannot flow between self and a potential imaginal object or a beloved other or whatever it is.

So a person might be carrying those patterns or those fears and they will have an effect, but in itself I don't think imaginal practice and sensing the soul has to it. If there are those fears or that one recognises I do have these patterns in any relationship—not just in a relationship with an imaginal object—then that's where we can train a little bit. That's why we've been doing those two-ness exercises or what we call sometimes the balance of attention either way. Actually, what is it to be with another? Whether that other is something from the natural world, whether it's a human other, whether it's an intra-psychic image, what is it to be in relationship with another where there's the two-ness that is connected and alive, that the eros can flow without collapsing into one, without emerging, without losing myself in the other, or without a withdrawing?

And so one can practice that, and I'll hopefully return to that a little bit in the series of these talks, how we can kind of fill out that practice a little bit.

Again, talking then about fundamentals, basics, or potentially roots of soul-making practice. There might be a kind...

I mean, actually, there certainly is a vulnerability to craving taking over, or something that starts as eros—some relationship which feels full of eros—and then that eros becomes craving at any point if we're not caring for it, if we're not tending to it well.

The expansion and the opening, the life-giving and dimensionalizing that eros supports, allows, and engenders, collapses when the eros collapses to become craving. And that's a definite vulnerability. Of course, craving is dukkha, is painful. So there's a kind of vulnerability to the wound of dukkha, of craving, at any point.

The good news is that all this is quite labile and quite amenable to our input, our responses, our careful guiding. We might be working with another human being in a dyad, we might be working with an imaginal object, we might be working with a human being who's not present for us but who has become imaginal. There's a lot of eros, and then that becomes craving—but it's very possible to reopen that craving so that it becomes eros again. So yes, there's a vulnerability there, absolutely, but it's not anything that one cannot, as one develops the art of practice, learn how to respond to skillfully and get back on track.

I suppose there's a vulnerability too with sensing the soul, with working with images. There's a vulnerability to my duty to an image, to the sense of duty that I might have to an image or to a sense of things when I sense with soul. Partly for a number of reasons, but one of the reasons is because that duty that comes from an image or a perception—a sense of something or things that has really touched us deeply in the soul—that sense of duty often wants to be seen by others. It wants to be expressed in the world and seen by others. Again, this is something I'm going to return to. And it wants to be valued.

Of course, that's dangerous territory, because it might be that we are blocked in one way or another, internally or externally, and not able to express it in the world. It's not seen by others. Or it is seen—we have expressed it, it is seen—but it's not valued by other human beings.

That's a vulnerability, and that vulnerability can never be entirely under my control or predictable. I cannot guarantee that what I find valuable and what I'm loyal to, a loyal servant of, in terms of discharging my duty from the imaginal sense, I cannot guarantee that will be received well, noticed, paid attention to, valued by others in the world. There's, of course, plenty of instances through history where people have done that and it hasn't been valued. Perhaps the value comes a hundred years after the person dies. Van Gogh—there are countless examples.

But there is that vulnerability. The duty is a kind of vulnerability, it's a burden, it's not a guaranteed success. We might have the pain of some kind of failure, the pain of some kind of incompleteness of human connection and a frustration of the soul's desire to be seen. Again, I'll return to this. This is quite important, and it's quite contrary to a lot of popular psychologies that would just put such things in the category of delusion. Of course, there is a danger of over-reification, or put them in the categories of ego: "Oh, why do you want to be seen? Why do you want to make such an impression on people?" We'll come back to this in later talks.

Sometimes, if we talk about vulnerability in relation to imaginal practice, I don't know that it will ever be that an image comes or a sensing with soul is there, and in that moment the very perception of the image blows us away in the sense that it's actually more than our circuits can handle. Sometimes it's the case that the eros can feel more than we can handle, but I've talked about how to work with that skillfully, and that's a really important part of the art: how to handle a lot of charge, how to develop one's capacity and skill handling eros so that it stays productive and doesn't shrink into craving and doesn't just feel too much energetically to tolerate.

I don't know that the emotional impact of an image can actually be—I doubt that we're ever given more than we can actually handle in the moment. But sometimes the duty aspect may seem to us to be more than we can handle, more than we can take on or do. We're asked to do something that feels really at the edge of our capacity or capabilities. It may seem that way.

I was thinking about Mary, Jesus' mother, at the Annunciation when the angel Gabriel came and announced to her that she was pregnant, pregnant with divine life. In the first chapter of Luke, if I remember—probably in the other Gospels as well—she responds to the angel Gabriel when he comes to announce this at the Annunciation. She says, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." It's beautiful, the humility, the openness, the willingness, the surrender there. "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." And then the duty that she has as a mother...

Her duty as a mother was not easy at all. They had to flee from where they were living and escape Herod's persecution of newborn infants and his murdering of them. Her son Jesus, as you may know from reading between the lines in the Gospel, was regarded as a bastard. There was uncertainty about who his father was. Was Joseph actually his father? Don't think so. And of course, in that time and culture, this carried a huge negative stigma. To be a bastard, not to have a father, not to know who one's father was—Mary, as well as Jesus, had to deal with that. That was part of her duty in raising a son who was regarded in the community as a bastard and ostracized for it. And then, of course, Jesus is put to death and crucified, with Mary at the foot of the cross, losing her son. So the duty that she assented to, that she opened herself to—"may it be to me as you have said"—came at a cost, really stretching her in human terms.

We can also turn this around, though, this question of vulnerability in this story of the Annunciation from the Gospel. With all these things, the Bible and all that, can we hear it with a kind of imaginal poetic sensibility and allow its dimensions to open up for us instead of just regarding it, reading it completely flatly? Because of course, when heard that way, it just sounds ridiculous to our modern sensibilities and assumptions.

What if we hear it imaginatively? What if we bring our imaginal sensibility, our poetic sensibility, our religious sensibility, and all the openness that this means for the heart, for the soul, for the being? All the hermeneutic, the interpretive, the infinite interpretive possibilities that such stories open up—they really become, when we relate to them as images, unfathomable. They take on those nodes, they become unfathomably deep, unfathomably always harboring more possibilities for interpretation, for touching us, for angles of perspective on that story.

If we read and listen this way to this beautiful passage from the Gospels, you can also say that actually, God is vulnerable here. It's not just Mary who's vulnerable—God is vulnerable here. Because Mary may say no: "I don't want this child. I'm going to have an abortion. I don't like it. What will people think?" Perhaps that's why, from a certain angle, her words in response to the angel Gabriel's Annunciation are recorded. It's not just her humility, but God's dependence on her assent and her attitude and her relationship and the beauty of that.

God depends on human assent, human perception and human action. We've touched on this in a number of talks over recent years. There's a Zoharic teaching of how we create God, how God needs us, how somehow our perceptions, our intentions, our actions, our thoughts, our conceptions are part of allowing, supporting and engendering a harmony in the Godhead. And even further, sometimes it's as if we create God through our attitudes, perceptions, conceptions, acts.

There's also that puzzling passage in the Old Testament where Jacob, as he's traveling on a journey, encounters an angel in the night. Jacob wrestles all night with the angel, and he wins. Jacob wins, but he's wounded. And he carries a wound—the angel wounds his thigh. The vulnerability, the wound, the capacity to be wounded again.

What would happen if we read that and sensed into those kinds of stories imaginatively? If we don't hurry through that story of Jacob and just fill out a couple of other elements that are relevant and resonant to our paradigm of soul-making and sensing the soul and imaginal practice and this issue of vulnerability—the angel and Jacob, and sometimes it refers to the angel as God. So it's either an angel or God or the angel is the face of God. They wrestle all night, and in a way, the angel couldn't completely overpower Jacob, but wounds him at the hip and thigh, and also blesses him.

Those two go together in that story—the blessing from the angel, the blessing from the divine, and the wound go together. The angel then, in blessing him, gives Jacob a new name. He gives him the name Yisrael. There are different interpretations of what Yisrael means, what Israel means. Philo, the ancient Jewish Platonic philosopher, interpreted the meaning of Yisrael—El is God, Yisrael is "he who sees God," one who sees the divine. Corbin, Henry Corbin, also follows that interpretation for the meaning of Yisrael.

So this angel and Jacob, they wrestle all night. In leaving, the angel wounds Jacob at the hip and blesses him at the same time. And in blessing him, gives him a new name—one who sees the divine.

Again, what happens if we hear such a story with our poetic sensibility, our imaginal sensibility?

We could say that vulnerability is an opening to the imaginal in certain ways. Certainly sensitivity is indispensable as part of imaginal practice and sensing the soul. We need to be able to be impacted, and we need to be able to develop our subtlety of sensitivity.

Sometimes what can happen—if we talk again about the vessel or the gestation of images—is that something touches us in life: some sense or perception of things, or even physical touch. At the time we register it and interact with it or whatever. But later on, maybe a little while later, or sometimes even months later, the memory of it becomes image. This can happen in all kinds of ways and through any of the sense doors.

Sometimes it can happen, for instance, with sex. There's some kind of sexual lovemaking or interaction with someone, and at the time maybe it's enjoyable and lovely and wonderful. But sometimes later, something in the soul is metabolizing or digesting that experience, and the memory of it becomes image—the memory of that touch, the memory of that kiss, the memory of that togetherness.

There's no reason why whatever that was can't be sensed with soul right then in the moment, during that touch or that event. But sometimes there are other things going on in the heat or the complexity of the moment, or the difficulty of the moment. All kinds of other considerations and factors prevent it from being sensed with soul in that moment. But later it can come back and be very beautiful, very fertile, very powerful image.

Someone shared with me a very beautiful story—I asked her permission to share it. It's not sexual, but it illustrates the same principle of a memory becoming an image.

This person's father was in a coma in a hospital in another country. He was in a coma for a long time—two months or more—and she went there and got an apartment near the hospital. Every day she was basically living in the hospital, and maybe sleeping in the apartment, or sometimes sleeping in the hospital.

Eventually, after a few months, he came out of the coma. She didn't know—and I didn't know either—that when you come out of a coma, it's a very gradual process. It's not just suddenly you wake up and everything's how it was. It's a really slow process of regaining your faculties, and they control that gradual emergence with drugs and other interventions.

So he was coming out of the coma very gradually. He couldn't speak at first. He had a tube in his throat, and his arms were tied down in the bed—part of this controlled emergence from the coma that they try to guide.

One evening she was washing up, getting ready to leave him for the night. With his arms tied down in the bed, he beckoned her over with the minimal motion that his wrists were capable of—repeatedly making a gesture: come over.

She was about to go, but she went and put her head close to him to see what he wanted. When she did that, he kissed her on the forehead. And that was it.

She was recounting the whole trip to that city and hospital. It was very stressful dealing with the hospital and the family and the apartment where she had to scramble to get a place—it had lots of problems. She was completely exhausted when she got back home. The whole memory, the whole trip was just very difficult—a whole difficult period that she got through.

Then, really some months later, she was doing walking meditation at Gaia House. The memory of that kiss to her forehead suddenly came as a primarily kinesthetic memory—not necessarily visual. She kind of felt it on her forehead again.

In that moment, months later, she said it felt like a kiss of blessing from God. This gentle, loving...

blessing, probably grateful kiss from a father to his daughter. And so she calls the image God's kiss. And with it, that kiss, a grace that opened a door to a whole other sense of the whole time, the whole period, that whole stretch of months just had a whole other sense to it. So much meaningfulness, so much beauty there, a completely different view moved her to tears.

And just to be clear here, in becoming for her the memory of that kiss, in becoming for her God's kiss, as she called it, it's not then in that image divorced from the father's kiss. It's the father's kiss still, but it's gaining the dimensionality of the divine. It's not now something other, and the father's kiss is forgotten. There is a growth, an extension, an enriching, a complexifying, a dimensionalizing of the original experience and of the memory and of that event.

So, if we talk about gestation, there's also this possibility, and again, some of you will recognize this kind of thing from your experience: there's also the possibility of something happening in life, something impacting us, and at the time we don't even recog-

nize the impact, or it actually doesn't have the impact, it doesn't seem to have the impact at the time. A little while later, it's the memory of that exchange, event, touch, whatever it is, that sense, impact comes back and it becomes imaginal.

And sometimes that can even be—images can come from life, like I've just described, also from art. And again, it might not be in the moment that something in a book or a movie feels like it's imaginal and impactful at that level. But something goes into the soul, the soul metabolizes it, digests it, and makes image of it. It creates, discovers image, imaginal image from this thing.

So I remember I saw this movie. I don't know if some of you have seen it. I saw actually, I don't know if it was the second half or some portion. I definitely missed a big chunk of the beginning. So I couldn't quite figure out what on earth was going on, but it might have also been just that kind of movie. It was called, I think it was called Cowboys and Aliens.

Anyway, I won't try and explain what it was about but these cowboys were sort of battling these bad aliens and there was, it turns out at some point, a good alien amongst on the cowboy side. And so I was just kind of watching this, I think I must have been a little bit drugged on some medication or something, but I was kind of watching it somewhat bemused. And there's a scene right near the end where the good alien woman crawls into the core of the bad alien spaceship with an explosive device, clasps it with crossed arms to her heart center. This is a gesture. Can you see that? Crosses her arms, clasps this sort of small bomb, obviously a very powerful bomb, to her heart center, closes her eyes, and blows herself and the bad alien spaceship up in an act of self-sacrifice for the sake of her people and the humans on Earth.

And I didn't think that much about it at the time, other than what an odd movie this is, with cowboys and aliens in it, doing battle. But that image came up for me several times over the next few days, and it became imaginal for a few days. I sensed somehow a kind of—I sensed it somehow mirroring or mirrored in a way of relating to my life. Again, here's that echoing, infinite echoing and mirroring part of the meaningfulness. A way of relating to my life with the possibility of dying soon. And this was actually some months before I found out about the metastatic metastases.

Somehow there was something mirroring my life, the possibility of dying soon, my illness, a dedication to my work, our work, my sort of time and purpose and possible sacrifice for the sake of—and there's where the openness—but it had that openness, that infinite echoing of possibility there, for the sake of what? But it was powerful in its effects, this sort of image from a funny movie, extracted from a funny movie, in the energy body, in the sense of alignment, in the resonances, in the sense of my existence.

So her suicide in the movie, her dissolution in sacrificial explosion, seemed somehow to open up a kind of space of time, if you like, for my sense of a life dedicated to my soul duty, with all the kind of specifics of that, and the nebulousness of that, and the open-endedness, and the fuzzy edges, the soft elastic edges, and the individual meanings within an infinite meaningfulness, all of that.

But I choose that partly because it was such a sort of—seemed odd place for an image, a potent image to come from, but basically art can spawn images in us.

If, again, if we talk about the vessel or the womb in which images might take birth, I recall—sometimes I have to remind myself of this now. In the beginning, the initial stages when I was beginning to explore imaginal practice and how sort of completely opportunistic I would be, which I think is—what I'm trying to say is that's a really good thing. There was a huge willingness to go with the slightest kind of clues or sense of possibility of something becoming an image, the slightest cues. And that attitude, I think, is really helpful. It's part of a helpful vessel.

So sometimes we're too—I've talked about this again before. Sometimes doubt almost always comes up. "Oh, I don't know if that's a worthwhile image. That's probably just rubbish in the mind," whatever the doubt says. "Oh, that's too weird. That's not weird enough." Whatever the doubt is.

But that attitude of just being willing to go with something, work with it, see what happens—this is essential. And of course, sometimes you feel like, well, that wasn't very fertile, maybe that was a waste of time. But you can only learn something in the process.

I think at this point, for you, it might be a little different, because back then for me, there was no one telling me this is what should happen, or this is what you're aiming for, not this, or that's the path, these are the teachings. There wasn't that. I had read some Hillman and some Jung and some other material that didn't really touch me, and in a way, I was just exploring a whole territory of possibility and seeing what could be made of it or what felt helpful, what felt important, what ways of working were helpful, what ways of conceiving were helpful.

That's a little bit different from you maybe listening to Catherine and me saying it's like this and an image is this and not that. But still, what I want to emphasize right now is there's something about having a really "just go for it" sort of research attitude. Not prejudging whether we think something is going to be helpful or not. You'll learn a lot that way, and a lot that seems really unhelpful to start with can actually become potent image.

That's why sometimes when I give examples, I actually include those moments—oh, and the mind was drifting, and then there was a daydream, and I thought I was ignoring it and kind of putting it to one side, and then I decided to turn towards it, and that very daydream that seemed unimportant became really fertile.

So I want to encourage that kind of attitude of opportunism, research, just trying, just going for it. This is really important.

And then as one works with an image, of course, because it's so dependent on the way of looking and the way of relating, when we can start to tweak and change the relationship we have with an image and respond to what's happening, something that may have seemed very inconsequential or irrelevant or just silly can become image.

Related to this—and I've shared this before—I remember back in the initial stages when I was exploring this, the images were really quite different than they are now. And I look back and think, well, that really wasn't imaginal in the sense that we have, but it doesn't matter. It's part of getting the feet wet, working out, getting practice, getting skill, getting facility. And then you can steer that process guided by what feels soul-making, what feels beautiful, as it goes, rather than being too quick to judge, oh, that's not right, oh, that can't be, and then dismissing things. Nothing can get going that way.

I've put out in the past, in the imaginal talks and maybe in some other talks as well, a whole list of possible techniques—I don't have to call them tricks, but techniques—to see if one can kick-start the imaginal process or at least receive some images that can then become imaginal. I'm not going to list them again, but sometimes—and this might be something I've said before, but it's worth saying again—sometimes we put too much pressure on demanding an image.

No one's going to have images all the time, all day long, in any way. It's really important, as we've stressed on retreat, to move between imaginal practice and other practices, like just being with the emotions, or being with the energy body, or exploring that. But sometimes we might be trying too hard to get or receive an image, and it may be that we need to actually be more sensitive or attentive to, in an unpressured way, sensitive and attentive to the pain or lack or confusion we are feeling. Or, as I said, veering. Don't put too much pressure on that. Just do some practice with the energy body or with the emotions as I said, or samādhi, or emptiness, or metta, or whatever it is.

Sometimes—and again, partly why I include the fact of, oh, in this image there was some daydreaming or the mind kept drifting off or whatever it was—it may be actually that we need to loosen the mind and let it drift a bit sometimes. And out of this, somehow, an image will constellate.

But if we go back to what we were talking about in the definition of fantasy yesterday evening, sometimes we need to stop putting the pressure on the meditation. The image may already exist for us in our lives and how we see our lives at times, as fantasy or as a being or event in our life that either is already somewhat imaginal or certainly has that potential. And it can be picked up on there outside of formal meditation quite easily and then perhaps brought into the meditation if one wants.

It's interesting with some Dharma practices, and certainly with imaginal practices, if we think just a little bit about, for instance, the way mindfulness is often taught—just to make a distinction, a difference. With mindfulness practice, the instruction is repeated so often it becomes kind of implicit in the contemporary definition or understanding of mindfulness. It's a whole question whether that's actually what the Buddha meant by mindfulness or his intention. But the instruction is repeated so often, the instruction being: it doesn't matter what experience arises. Mindfulness is not about this or that experience, but it's a way of being with or a relationship to any experience.

So most of you will be familiar with that kind of way of understanding, a way of practicing mindfulness. So it becomes possible to practice mindfulness every day, formally and informally in life, and sort of put the time in to practice without any real possibility of failure, because it doesn't matter what experience arises. And if you forget to be mindful, you just remind yourself again, you get back in the saddle.

With metta practice, or breath concentration practices, or other more popular practices, this same idea is taught, that actually it doesn't matter what the experience is. But usually in those contexts of metta and breath practice, it takes a little longer for the student, the practitioner, to catch on that it doesn't actually matter. Usually it's, I'm not feeling any metta, or I was feeling it, now it's really dry, or the breath... I'm not having any great experiences.

And again, usually it's taught or we do teach that in a way it doesn't matter when we're talking about working with using the breath as an anchor or doing metta practice. But once that coin, that penny drops for the practitioner, that maybe it doesn't matter, then similarly to mindfulness practice, the student can put the time in and just return over and over, return to the phrases, just keep going, just come back to the

breath, it doesn't matter. And not concern themselves with the need for any particular experience to arise, with doing it wrong, with the whole notions of failing or succeeding at practice.

So all that's actually really good and really helpful as a teaching, as an emphasis, especially for our modern culture of individualism where there's also the concomitant pandemic of self-criticism and inner critic and all that. So it's good, it's skillful teaching. It's really important.

It also, though, has its potential pitfalls. Sloppiness and even incorrectness or unhelpful practice can become a kind of unquestioned and unquestionable norm. So the conscience is soothed by a kind of blind faith: "I'm just doing this over and over." But it may not be that this way of practicing, or this way of regarding practice, is actually the most helpful.

Sometimes what happens for some people, or even in some sanghas, is that practice and the path can become devoid of any sense of progress or goal. In a way, there's a kind of merciful release in that because one does away with the pressure or the danger of feeling like a failure. But it can also mean that practice delivers only a pitiful fraction of what it otherwise might.

When we think about different practices and the attitudes toward getting certain kinds of experience—if we consider emptiness practices, for instance—I would teach that they actually are supposed to yield certain openings or experiences or shifts of perception. But there's also a way that such practices can be regarded as simply engaging repeatedly in this or that way of looking, eventually subsuming everything else into that way of looking, just as mindfulness as a way of looking or stance can subsume any experience, even after the fact. "Oh, now I notice I've been lost. Okay, that noticing I've been lost is a moment of mindfulness, so it's okay, it's good." You're probably very familiar with hearing that kind of teaching.

But if we translate that to, let's say, anicca practice or anatta practice—as I would conceive them, where one deliberately sees things as anicca, as impermanent, or as anatta, as not me, not mine, not self—and the mind wanders while one is trying to do that practice, then one can decide to see the actual wandering of the mind as impermanent, or the staying focused as impermanent. So everything can get subsumed in those practices, anicca, anatta. Again, it helps loosen and soften the brittleness and danger that can come with over-emphasis on "Am I succeeding? Am I failing? Am I getting the experience I'm supposed to get?" Even when the mind wanders, it's just anicca.

The focus of the mind is anicca. The stability of the mind is impermanent. Or that drifting of the mind is not self—it's just the mind doing its thing. It's what minds do, and then later they do something different.

What about, though, if we ask the same question regarding imaginal practice or soul-making practice? This is a little more complex because an image is a certain experience, and an imaginary image is a certain experience. Sensing the soul is a certain realm of experience that's not run-of-the-mill, ordinary experience. So what can we say about this?

One thing is—remember, as I stressed yesterday—there's always the possibility of practicing what we might call foundations or fundamentals: the energy body awareness, the samadhi, the emotional awareness and skill, practices like anatta, the tuning and the balance of attention. All these are part of soul-making practice. So it's not probably wise or even possible to do imaginal practice all the time, but one has a much broader palette of practices to dip in and out of.

When an image is not arising or seems difficult to sustain, one can always move into these other practices, and we're still taking care of the foundations and roots of imaginal practice. As we said, you can always revisit a previous image or a prescribed image or a kind of conventional image, or one can entertain a deliberate idea. Remember—I'll come back to this both tonight and in future talks—one can entertain a certain idea, and that idea, because conception influences, shapes, opens or closes perceptions, can be transformative. Entertaining, lightly holding a certain idea about the cosmos, about self, about matter, about the world, about one's personal history, about dukkha, about anything—that entertaining of that idea deliberately, lightly, skillfully, becomes like a seed or yeast that opens up the perception to more sensing with soul.

So there are all those possibilities when it seems like certain experiences—imaginal images—are not occurring immediately. Sometimes an image isn't arising; it seems a bit barren. But we can try to adopt, just gently, skillfully, a stance of humility and openness—openness of the energy body, openness of the heart, of the being, of the soul, in relation to one's life. That might be in relation to the whole narrative of one's life, the span of one's life, in relation to a dukkha, even a trivial or relatively trivial dukkha. Is it possible to find my way into some kind of stance of humility and openness with regard to all of that?

Perhaps in relationship to some vague sense of divinity—and that is not formed as an image. So I have a kind of beginnings of humility, beginnings of openness, or I'm attempting to support a gentle openness to all that, to the dukkha, to the sense of life and being and soul. I have some vague sense of divinity—it's not an image—but all that is

soul-making practice because we're dealing with the elements there that are roots, fundamentals, aspects of images. Even if an image doesn't arise from that, it's a beautiful space to be in.

It's a beautiful posture, a beautiful poise of the soul to inhabit and to practice. And it's possible that it will be very fertile. That out of that humility and openness in relation to dukkha and in relation to some vague sense of non-imaged divinity, something may emerge. The self, or one's life, and one's narrative becomes image, arising from that soil, that fertile soil, the material in the alchemical vessel, from the womb that's being created there.

As I said before, imaginal practice is partly art and partly grace. There is an art to it. That's why we talk about all these elements. That's why I'm giving all these talks and saying you can do this, you can do that, or emphasize this more, draw that out, pay attention to this. There's a lot of art—sophisticated and subtle art that we can develop—so that we are tending to the conditions that support the possibility of images arising and touching us and moving us and becoming soul-making.

But it's art and grace. There's always going to be an aspect of imaginal practice that is beyond our control, that's not in our power, never completely within our mastery. There's some kind of... we are given images. Sometimes images arise—if you've been practicing soul-making Dharma for a while, you'll recognize this—sometimes you have an experience, or you're with someone who's reporting an experience, and you wonder: how could it be, given everything that was going on, this particular dukkha, and that particular history, and that particular view, and this difficulty, that some image arises that one never could have predicted? And yet it somehow carries with it the soul's intelligence of perfectly addressing and perfectly opening up in the most beautiful ways, in the most particular ways, the most particularly attuned ways, everything that was involved in the constellation of difficulty or situation or perception just beforehand.

It's a gift from the depths of soul. It's grace. We couldn't have conjured that, couldn't have figured it out. "Oh yes, I think I should imagine this." So part art, partly grace. And that's really good to remember with imaginal practice.

Yes, we are interested in certain kinds of experiences—sensing the soul and imaginal experiences. But I'm really talking about attitude. Attitude is part of the vessel. The attitude is part of a healthy, nourishing, rich womb.

Sometimes it's good not to put too much pressure on the visual sense. Even when a person knows and has understood that images are not necessarily visual, or that's not the most important thing, sometimes there can just be a subtle habit or tendency to expect or demand some kind of visual experience.

In the last week or so, I've found a helpful phrase for myself: let the body lead. Let the body lead. This of course means the energy body and the whole awareness and sensitivity to the whole energy body. It's as if that has a kind of intelligence. That becomes a factor, one of the elements, but as an element it ignites and is part of the alchemy. It's part of what allows the alchemical process, because then something comes through the body, or the body senses, and the body leads the way to an imaginal sense, which may then involve something visual, or may not—instead of almost unconsciously putting just a little bit too much pressure on wanting something visual, some visual experience or transformation of a scene. Let the body lead. Just check, take the pressure off any visual expectation or demand for visuals.

And notice the heart and the emotions. Sometimes it's about relaxing with that and finding or tuning a certain poise. So much of imaginal practice and sensing the soul is really about poise—finding, being responsive and tuning, discovering the right poise of being, poise of attention, poise of heart, poise of intention, attitude. All that is part of the poise that will vary from time to time. What is the poise that allows image to come forth, if it's given by the grace of the gods at that point?

A little while ago, on a spring evening with beautiful light through the young green leaves and the translucence of the foliage and trees, I let the body lead. I was in a car, relaxing the body and being aware of the whole energy body. What came first to awareness was the sense of being loved. It wasn't something visual that came first. There was this poise, played with a little bit in relaxation—take the pressure off the visual, be with the whole body, let the body lead, and notice.

I noticed there was a sense: I'm loved. It wasn't visual. That's what came first. And that's a node, isn't it? It's one of the nodes: loving and being loved. So it was part of one of the nodes that came first, not any kind of image, not sensing the soul in the more obvious sense that we might commonly expect. And being with that very lovely feeling—subtle but lovely feeling of being loved—I wasn't quite sure who was loving me here.

And then slowly, gradually—it happened over a minute or two, I think—all the trees began to reveal themselves differently. There was a sense, and again it's quite vague, and I'm pointing out the vagueness so that you will recognize that sometimes you have a powerful imaginal sense and there are aspects of it that are vague, and it does not matter.

So either the trees were angels, or they were somehow associated with angels—angels I could not see, again, not visual. I sort of heard them; that's the closest I could come to it. And these angels that either were the trees or were associated with the trees, resonant with the trees somehow, they were loving me. And that was the image sense, the imaginal sense—that was the sensing the soul. But it was probably allowed by taking the pressure off, this really subtle and unconscious demand for a visual transformation, a visual experience.

Again, by the way, this points to something important. When we talk about an imaginal image or a sensing the soul, we're talking about a confluence of elements: energy, body, poise, attitude, love, being loved, and so forth.

Just lingering on that example a moment longer—there's again this kind of opportunistic attitude. It's as if, as I said, the antennae are open and working without pressure, just ready to receive, ready to tune. They're sensitive, tuned to receive anything that could be or become soul-making.

Actually, what's also interesting here—this is a different experience, but somewhat similar that I had—the being loved came first, and then an emotional awareness came of grief. So what does this imply? It implies that in this confluence of elements that we call an image, an imaginal image or an imaginal constellation, there's not always a linear or predictable progression of the ignition of the elements of that imaginal constellation or of the lattice.

So in this case, it was, as I said, the love, being loved came first, then the emotional awareness. Oh, there's an emotion there that was kind of liberated to be felt more clearly and more helpfully and more deeply. Now we could ask—this is by the by—was that emotion, was that grief there already, so to speak, waiting to show itself, to be felt when love was present? Or is an emotion anyway always a dependent arising, so that it doesn't, like anything else, pre-exist this or that condition that's part of it? So there was a certain emotion that arose with love that wasn't there first. That's by the by.

Again, talking about what can help us to receive, to open to images, for them to be born, for the transubstantiation to happen in our chemical vessel: sometimes we might be feeling quite flat in the sense that our perception is quite one-dimensional. We might feel unresourced or unanchored or overwhelmed, and so on. Taking that into the meditation, including that into the meditation—and I've talked about this, I think, in the *Dukkha and Soul-making* talks—there might be a way of gently regarding one's life and oneself from the perspective of beyond death, so to speak, *subspeciae eternatis*, from the perspective, from the view of eternity.

As if you see your whole life, your whole narrative, however long that is, however long it's given you on this earth, in this form, in this manifestation—you see the whole thing as if from beyond time, like a tableau, a snapshot. And that move, that perspective, if you can find your way into that perspective, including all the difficulty that's going on, all the challenge that's going on, it can—that very move itself can allow and support a sensing the soul of oneself.

One senses oneself with soul, one's narrative with soul, and then also the world, and so forth. And it may not be that an intrapsychic image arises from that. It may just be that that's the imaginal sense of myself, of my life, of my journey between birth and death, of this whole movement of the narrative with all the difficulties and the challenges and the duties and the beauties there, and the particularities.

So again, when I say this from the point of view beyond time or beyond death or from the perspective of eternity, I don't mean a kind of view that goes into a perception of it all being one in some vast awareness. That's great—it's a wonderful mystical perception, really helpful at times—but what we're talking about includes and retains and gives import to and significance to the particularities of our soul, our lives, our journeys, our narratives, our difficulties, our *dukkha*, and so forth. Rather than dissolving them in some kind of equality of oneness—wonderful as that is at times—this is a different kind of leaning.

But there's a change in perspective there that allows self and world to be sensed with soul. So that kind of thing is very potent and important too.

Another example: Catherine and I were talking a little while ago, and she was sharing something—which I won't explain from her angle—but one of the things she shared was an idea, the idea: "I am soul." It was just a piece of what she was saying, and she had taken it and was taking it in a certain direction. But that idea, that phrase stayed with me: "I am soul." And I began over a few days practicing with that idea. It became quite potent for me.

So there was this idea which she shared—it was just a part of something she was sharing, an exploration she was sharing with me.

But somehow that idea landed in my mind and heart, and I began using it as something in my practice that helped to engender sensing the soul. So "I am soul," in a way. What it really was, or part of what it was for me, how I used it, was this kind of movement of identification away from a sort of maybe typical or default modern view of who I am or what's the essential reality of a human being. And it was coupled with this idea of the Buddha nature or God participating in my soul. So "I am soul" is also that I

am soul—I am part of God's soul or part of the Buddha nature's soul. My soul participates in God, in the Buddha nature. So all that was part of this loose idea. It was fairly loose, but potent, in that it relativized the relationship with the body and matter, and relativizes also the ontological status of the body. I am soul. I am not just body.

Again, this wasn't filled out as an idea in all its details and all its philosophy. It was reasonably loose. But with that relativization of the ontological status of the body, it's a bit like seeing the emptiness of something—of the body and matter. And so perception, there was a degree of less fabrication, just some, and it kind of loosened and liquefied the perception of self, body, world, matter. We talked about this importance of liquefying, loosening through slightly less fabrication.

With that, there was the element of the fullness of intention—the intention for the fullness of soul-making. So not just "I intend to" or "I hope that I survive physically somehow miraculously, I hope that this body survives this illness, some miracle happens with matter." Sure, I can hope that—that may be part of an intention, even in prayer, even in imaginal practice—but the fullness of intention goes beyond that and includes as more paramount this wanting to serve soul.

So with those elements there—the loosening, the liquefying, the sense of participation, the fullness of intention—then the world around me, my body, my illness, my life, myself, matter, the interaction of body and soul, all of that was open to sensing the soul. Very, very beautiful and fertile opening that happened.

One of the more general principles in what I've just shared is the fact that there's an idea—and even when the idea is not that clearly spelled out or worked out, "I am soul"—and it became associated with other ideas and might have been a little bit different, or even quite a lot different from what Catherine meant originally. It doesn't matter. The principle is: an idea, as I mentioned earlier, can be taken up and function as a kind of soul-making seed, a seed for soul-making, a yeast, something that fertilizes and opens the sensing the soul and the perception of anything, really.

Again, I don't want to stretch the analogies of alchemy or womb and birth too much. But if we talk about how to take care of images once they're there and how do we take care of them—here's a birth and how do we tend to that infant? Again, I don't want to stretch the analogy too far, but I want to share something from a yogi who gave me permission to share this. Just to emphasize this point: when an image is partially formed, our attunement, our kind of sensitivity to what is essential here—in the sense of what feels, what aspect of it feels soulful, feels the most soul-making—and it might be an idea, or it might be an aspect of the image, or it could be anything. But that attuning helps to nourish the image and allow it to become more fully imaginal and potent.

So this person was sharing with me a while ago—more than a year probably—sharing that the painter Egon Schiele, a Viennese painter at the turn of the century, some of you will know, Egon Schiele the painter, and also Bach's music are often imaginal figures for her. Not so much Bach the person or the composer, but Bach's music, and Egon Schiele the painter. So these two were images.

And she shared an image with me—the image of Schiele painting her portrait. I'm not sure if she was posing naked for it, but that was the image. And having heard the teachings that I gave on eros and sexuality, and also having felt like there was a certain aridity in general in her practice, which she thought might be blocking her eros—because she felt no opportunity to express or share eros, share her eros sexually or romantically in her life, and so that she was blocking her eros, and that caused a certain aridity in general in her practice—so she was wondering about that and kind of thinking, well, if that's the case, maybe I should steer the image towards something more sexual. But it didn't feel right.

So it's not the fact of having thought "maybe I should steer it this way" and then steering it that way. That in itself, as I said last night, is not a problem. It may be a problem, but we ascertain: oh, it just doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like that's what needs to happen. Or that doesn't actually feel soul-making. Partly what was happening here was that there was a limited idea of what eros is.

But the not feeling right, she tried something, tried to steer it towards an image of sex with the painter, but that didn't feel right. And that not feeling right is an indication and a sense to trust, just as the feeling right is also an indication and a sense to trust, conversely.

But again, going back to the point about eros, it's worth stressing again. Eros in our language is not necessarily sexual. There can be eros that has no sexual element in it at all, and sex can certainly be without eros in our language, in our sense. But anyway, eros is not necessarily sexual.

So perhaps she also had a kind of limited idea of eros and also what needed to happen in her life. So I was responding to this and suggested that there was eros in the being painted. The painters had eros for her body and for art and for the making of art, and she could perhaps get a sense or an experience of that kind of subtle, if you like, more subtle, at least non-obviously sexual eros, through his being in the image.

In other words, tuning into, here's the image of him painting me, what's his experience of eros? And not confining it or expecting it to be sexual. It might be other than sexual - for art, for body, for beauty, for whatever. And in his being and in the whole

scene, there might be eros also in the sense of being painted, of being looked at like that, of the body being an object of the regard, of the reverential artistic regard, an object for the perception of beauty.

And maybe that, again, who knows what would happen, I didn't hear back from her after this, after that interview, but it might be that then eros comes in her life for her own body in different ways, all kinds of possibilities from that seed.

But again, it's this necessity to tune into actually, in this case, where is the eros? Because with the eros will be the soul-making sense, right? They go together, of course. So where is the soul-making? Where is the soulfulness? What's the aspect or strand of this complex image? Already I've got someone painting me. It's already complex as an image. It has all kinds of things in it. What of that... where do I kind of hone in on what's soulful and soul-making? And this is a way we tend to, we care for an image, we nourish it, we allow it to grow.

Same person shared another image, which was actually a passage or a scene from Bach's St. Matthew's Passion. Some of you may know it's a great piece of music. And the centurion at Christ's crucifixion, centurions are guarding or watching Christ's crucifixion, in Bach's piece, says or sings twice, "Truly thou art the Son of God, truly thou art the Son of God."

And she said, reporting this, that passage moves me to tears every time. All of it, the music of it, the theatre of it, even though she said, "I'm not, and I never have been, a Christian." It's just something in there moves me. It was, again, inexplicable. The soul is touched inexplicably there.

And again, my question was about eros. So, again, there is eros there. It's in the centurion for Christ. He, in looking that way, he didn't expect to have that experience. "Truly thou art the Son of God." His feelings and gaze towards Jesus are more than just metta, and certainly more than some kind of coldly logical conclusion about Jesus's ontological nature. "Oh, you are divine." There is, carried by the music in those words, "truly thou the son of God," there is more than metta and more than a sort of deduction of some kind of fact, existential fact.

And unlikely in her image that the centurion has got some kind of sexual attraction to Jesus. I mean, there's no reason why that might not be part of it, but it didn't sound like that's what was going on. But this gaze and this relationship in that moment of the centurion, in his feelings, there was eros there. They're erotic in our sense, in touch with, attracted to, drawn to, sensing the beauty and mystery and dimensionality and divinity of Jesus.

And so, I'm looking for the eros and the eros goes with the soul making. So tuning into that in the image, relaxing the usual preconceptions, in this case about eros, and tuning into, ah, there's the eros.

How does that feel? What kind of quality does that have? Can I let my soul resonate with that? In this case, the centurion's imagined experience, or imagination of the centurion's experience, our sense of that, our receptivity to that experience—that's where the soulfulness and the soul-making is.

So sometimes it's just a more subtle receptivity and sensitivity to notice and tune to where the eros and soul-making is with an image at any time. This is very much part of what allows an image to have its vitality and allows us to nourish it, to feed it.

And again, if we talk about tending images, some of you may have noticed this, but sometimes images happen in a series. Sometimes you get the same image coming back deliberately, or it just comes back for a while or long stretches of time, or periodically over sometimes years. But sometimes you get images that seem to express a similar theme or have a similar kind of object, but they're actually different. We can see that sometimes images are happening in series like that. There's a series of images, which is important.

I remember about a year ago, I had an image of a dervish—the Sufi dancers, beautiful dancers, mystical dancers, out of divine love. It's actually not so important what the image was. What is important is that, again, it wasn't very visually clear. It didn't even have, this particular image didn't even have, at the moment of arising and working with it in meditation, a very strong impact. And I think the mind was actually drifting quite a bit. It was at a time when I was struggling with certain medication and not sleeping because of a thyroid condition. So the mind was drifting. It didn't have a strong impact, and it certainly wasn't very visually clear.

A little while later, though, I was on a train platform going to see a doctor, and the train was late, so I just took the opportunity to walk up and down the platform. And the body felt so open and free, and I might say naked, but again, it was a very particular kind of feeling of openness, freedom, and nakedness.

What had happened before that dervish image was that there was this whole series of images related to body. A few of them had to do with sensing my body as an instrument. And that came out of a little bit what I shared last night about the grief in relation to music and giving up the instrument that I used to play as a jazz musician—guitar—and working with it over a period of time in the meditation and actually seeing, sensing

my body as a kind of instrument, to be played or for me to play or both. And so that was a certain sensing with soul of the body. And that was, I think, some days or maybe even weeks before.

But images may come in series to affect this or that, to make soul—the organ of sensing—the soul, in this case sensing the body with soul. Each individual instance of an image in that series, sometimes we might not even connect them, and then you look back and you see, "Oh, there's a connection here." Each individual image may not always be powerful, or you might even think, "Well, that was kind of neither here nor there, it's not one to write home about." But cumulatively, something is being worked on in the soul.

Again, the soul's intelligence is operating, in this case, in a series of images of different perceived impacts and importance at the time, but somehow the soul is stitching these together over time with gaps in between. And in that walking up and down, that sense of the body, which is also a sense of self, sensed as—again, it went into a kind of cosmopoiesis in its connection with the surroundings, but very particular, particular to that image, particular to the kind of nakedness, a sense of nakedness and openness and freedom that came into the body with that.

The point is about the series, and somehow, again, attitude, trust, not dismissing something because it may be part of a bigger picture which we don't grasp yet, we don't glimpse yet, because we haven't stitched those things together. Something is operating below the radar with an intelligence that is beyond us. And it's only after the fact, or after a little while, we say, "Oh, there's a process there."

There's also, you know, I've sort of said this, but it's worth just making it clear—some images are very slow to become fully imaginal, for all the elements to sort of ignite. Sometimes that happens over many sessions, sometimes it's gradual, sometimes they don't seem promising at first.

So this, again, I think I alluded to it or spent a bit of time talking about it, the whole question of pacing in the path of the imaginal talk, and a kind of sensitivity or achievement or wisdom to the pacing that is involved in any kind of imaginal birth and imaginal tending, or tending to the imaginal path. Do I need to stay with this for longer, or move on to another image, or whatever it is, or let something develop, even if it seems not so promising?

So this is all part of, again, whether we call it part of the womb, or part of the tending, or part of the birthing. The analogy breaks down, it doesn't matter, but I want you to understand the point there, really about attitude to practice and what actually can support more helpfully the opening up the world of images and sensing the soul.

Sometimes a person, following this theme a little longer, sometimes a person has an image and wants to write a poem about the image. So this is, again, something for you to find out and do your own research. I have periods in my life where I write a lot of poetry and it's something very important to me. But I don't actually, for myself, tend to write poems about images that come in imaginal practice. It feels like that does something. It takes away—for me, it takes away some of the potency and the possibility of that image.

So again, I don't want to set down rules, but it's something to be careful about and to investigate whether you want to, or if someone wants to paint an image, you know, or sculpt it. Now Jung, I think, insisted that when patients could, that they painted or sculpted or rendered materially manifest some image that came to them or a dream or something. I'm a little more cautious, and I think, again, here's one instance where perhaps our practice forges a different path, goes in a different direction.

When I contemplate creating something material from an imaginal image—writing a poem, painting, sculpting—I encounter a delicate consideration of timing and intention. If I move too quickly to artistic expression, it may diminish the potential development and fullness of the image itself, potentially detracting from our relationship with it in its purely imaginal dimension.

This isn't a categorical prohibition, but rather an invitation to careful investigation. Does artistic expression enhance or limit the soul-making potential of a particular image? To truly understand this, one must experiment thoughtfully—working with some images through artistic expression and allowing others to remain in their imaginal form, then observing what unfolds.

If we do choose to create artistically from an imaginal image, we must consider when, how, and what needs to be involved in that process to preserve the image's soul-making potential. There may indeed be artistic potential in such creation, but this may not overlap with the soul-making dimension—they might be entirely different aspects.

As an artist or poet, one naturally has other concerns: form, rhythm, balance, sound, visual composition. These require careful attention and tuning, but they are not inherently imaginal. However, the engagement with art itself can become imaginal—the self as artist in that process may become imaginal. This differs from the image itself being imaginal in our relationship with it.

For me, these represent divergent directions rather than the same path. I maintain a soul-making relationship with writing poetry, composing music, and crafting dharma teachings. But this differs from allowing a specific image to be fully soul-making, to work completely in the soul and catalyze the soul-making dynamic in relation to that particular image.

While Jung and Jungian approaches tend to emphasize the materialization of images through painting or sculpting, I believe our practice materializes images differently—through the energy body, through emotionally sensitive relationship, through refractions into duty and infinite mirroring. These constitute genuine forms of materialization: the image materializes in the body, in emotions, doing its transformative work and shaping our being.

This process, along with the refractions into duty and the infinite echoing mirroring in our lives, demands great sensitivity and attentiveness. When our sensitivity becomes occupied with artistic intentions—with form, color, shading, balance, or rhythm—we engage a somewhat different intention than pure soul-making in relation to that image.

Similar considerations apply to expressing images through movement and dance. Again, I don't wish to establish rigid laws but rather encourage careful exploration. If you choose to investigate this territory, do so with integrity, discernment, precision, and open-mindedness. You may discover you can maintain both artistic process and soul-making relationship—perhaps it's a matter of timing or approach.

In our retreat explorations of movement—whether with others or alone, in groups or individually—we've touched on movement's relationship with soul-making and image in various ways. The potential here is genuinely exciting, though we must remain alert to whether movement diverts, hinders, or limits the soul-making potential of particular images.

Several practitioners have shared that dance and movement powerfully stimulate images and provide the most fertile ground for image generation. This may indeed be true, and individual differences certainly exist—what renders the imaginal impossible for one person may be profoundly generative for another. These possibilities encompass both personal propensities and capacities that can be developed through practice.

The crucial question becomes: are all the subtleties of imaginal practice accessible while moving or dancing? They might be, or they might become accessible through dedicated practice and training. Yet by the very nature of movement and dance, we might limit how delicate and sensitive we can be in relationship to an image, potentially constraining the fertility, depth, richness, and potency of soul-making with that image.

This remains territory for exploration, experimentation, and research—for myself, for others, for all of us drawn to these possibilities. I want to ensure that this teaching doesn't simply reflect my own tendencies or capacities at the expense of different capacities others might possess. The logos must remain spacious enough to embrace diverse ways of engaging with the imaginal while maintaining the precision necessary for authentic soul-making.

So we can talk, and we have been talking about, what is it to take care of the ground of images and the ground of soul? What is it to have a good working alchemical vessel? What is it to take care of the gestation, the birth, and the aftercare of images—to have a good womb and to have the possibility of the birthing of images and the tending to what is born there?

There was a great pagan philosopher and Neoplatonist called Iamblichus who lived many centuries ago. He's not that well-known actually, but he talked about pagan rituals and the relationship with the gods, using a certain Greek word: *epitediotis*. What he really meant was the kind of fitness or aptitude to receive a form—to receive, let's say, an image for our purposes. In other words, the care of the vessel, the care for the womb and the birth.

This *epitediotis* is this fitness or aptitude. It came to be used by Neoplatonists to explain why there were different kinds of experiences in ritual—different mystical experiences. Iamblichus used an image which parallels some of the Buddha's teachings: just as dry wood provides the capacity, the fitness or aptitude for fire to manifest, to be actual, similarly, the purity of a soul provides the capacity for a god to become manifest.

Plotinus as well, the founder of Neoplatonism, accounted for different experiences of souls in the presence of the holy ideas as being due to differences in the fitness of the recipient, the quality of the vessel at that time. We don't have to say that this person or that person is always more fit—it's not who they are. Rather, at one time, the vessel is like this; at another time, the vessel is like that. Plotinus compared it to the reception of light in clear or muddy water—how that water holds or reflects or carries the sunlight that falls on it differs greatly depending on whether it's muddy or clear.

For Iamblichus, it's interesting that his teaching puts everything very much in the passive voice—it's the gods doing things. When we talk about the element of autonomy, that the image has autonomy, meaning personhood and intelligence and will, Iamblichus very much emphasizes that as being more important than our ability to control what happens, what experiences occur, or what mystical openings unfold. So he talks very much about the fitness, the *epitediotis*—the aptitude of a passive element to receive the influence of an active one, in this case, a god.

Purifications—and this is a loaded word, I know, but I'm going to try and give it a certain slant—are necessary for every soul. Iamblichus says that the time one spends in prayer nourishes the intuitive mind and generally enlarges the soul's receptacle for the gods, the soul's readiness for divine transformation. He's talking about this aptitude, this fitness. It describes conditions of the soul that are fit to receive the god, a kind of cleansing of the soul that makes it fit. The soul itself was a kind of receptacle of the god, the soul itself is the alchemical vessel.

In our paradigm, in our language, then, all the elements of the imaginal—all those twenty-eight nodes we've talked about, and maybe more, such as vulnerability, certainly humility, certainly the imaginal middle way, the theater-like quality, the neither real nor not real, certainly the openness to duty, certainly reverence and love, fullness of intention—all of these we could say are part of the *epitediotis*, the caring for the aptitude, the fitness to receive image and to receive divine image. They're part of the purity.

You can hear the humility, the reverence, the willingness, the openness to duty, the love, the fullness of intention. These all have to do with purity of soul at that time. And they allow the image to become fully imaginal and the sense of divinity. And also, as we said before, the relationship with emotions—this is all part of the fitness of the vehicle, the aptitude, the caring for the vessel at the time.

Okay, so we're going to go into quite a bit more detail on some of this, but I just wanted to give some hopefully helpful pointers today.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 175

Opening the Sense of the Energy Body

Rob Burbea · 1h17

> *In this foundational talk on imaginal practice, Rob Burbea presents a comprehensive exploration of energy body awareness as essential to sensing with soul. He defines energy body through three interconnected aspects: felt sense (the texture and vibration within the body's space), image (how we picture the body), and idea (our conceptual understanding of embodiment). Drawing from both conventional materialist views and alternative healing paradigms, Burbea emphasizes the primacy of felt experience while remaining open to the full spectrum of bodily possibilities.*
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> *Burbea offers practical guidance for 'bringing the whole body into contact' with imaginal figures, sounds, or natural objects, describing how this creates synesthetic perception where the entire energy body becomes an organ of knowing. He discusses the crucial skill of opening the energy body through practices like long breathing from the Ānāpānasati Sutta, connecting this capacity to broader spiritual development including samādhi, generosity, and devotional opening. The talk concludes with advanced teachings on perceiving energy itself as imaginal rather than merely experiential, demonstrating how this shift can transform both individual practice and dyadic work. Throughout, Burbea emphasizes experimentation, sensitivity to what actually supports practice, and the interconnection between physical openness, heart opening, and spiritual freedom.*

As I mentioned in the introductory talk, a significant portion of this series will be devoted to different aspects of the skill or art of sensing with soul in imaginal practice. My intention is to share quite a few things I haven't presented before, though there will inevitably be some repetition, which is beneficial. Hopefully there are insights here that prove helpful regarding different areas and strands of the weave of imaginal practice and sensing with soul.

There's no necessarily obvious order in which to present this material, and there will inevitably be some overlap between the different areas and strands, but I'll try to present each strand despite that inevitable interconnection.

Tonight I want to explore energy body awareness. There's no particular reason I've placed this first, but we do emphasize it considerably, though actually everything is important. We're talking about developing skill and artistry in energy body awareness—that kind of sensitivity, the possibilities that exist, and the capacity to work with it skillfully and artistically.

Let me begin with a review of what we mean by "energy body." We could say it's actually a kind of awareness more than a thing itself—a particular kind of experience or poise of awareness. We can break this down into three interwoven and overlapping aspects.

The first aspect is the felt sense. When we speak of energy, this is crucial—the felt sense of the space that my physical body inhabits, the space outlined by my physical body, perhaps even extending slightly beyond it. What does that feel like? What is the texture, the vibration, the experience there? The tightness, looseness, energization, harmonization, or whatever arises. This is one aspect of the energy body.

The second aspect is the image. We don't necessarily mean an imaginal image, though it may be one. There is usually some kind of image of the body present. I might close my eyes and have a vague image in the back of my mind of my body sitting here, wearing what it's wearing, with limbs in their relative locations—very conventional. Other times in meditation, perhaps in the first jhana, the image I might have of the body could be simply a diffuse cloud of white light corresponding with the felt sense.

The third aspect is the idea or concept of the body. In our Western society, we typically hold the idea that the body is composed of cells organized into organs and systems, with cells made up of smaller components extending down to molecules and atoms. Through the exchange and interplay of molecules and atoms at the cellular level, the body is structured, formed, and functions either healthily or unhealthily with various capacities.

This is essentially a reductionist model. There's nothing inherently wrong with it—it's simply one view, the dominant view of our modern Western worldview. This perspective holds that fundamental truth lies in basic building blocks that are purely material, existing as material entities functioning according to known physical and chemical laws. From this foundation, the body as a complex organism with its appearance and capacities arises.

A different idea, more popular in certain circles throughout history and present in some healing paradigms, New Age circles, or shamanistic traditions, takes more of a top-down approach. This view suggests the body has different levels of being, different strata to its existence. For instance, there might be an astral body or various sheaths—perhaps seven or nine in different systems. The astral body, as a level of higher energy, might function as a matrix that forms, shapes, and directs the material physical body. Rather than being reductionist and bottom-up, this approach suggests that higher energetic levels of the body inform, shape, direct, and in some sense care for the physical, material body that is obviously manifest to most people.

Of course, there are infinite possible ideas about the body, just as there are infinite possible felt senses or images we can have of the body. Some will be common, depending on culture, upbringing, and personal propensity, but the range remains open.

All of this together—these three aspects—defines what we mean by energy body. It's a poise of awareness, a poise of being. We might more accurately call it "energy body awareness"—the kind of awareness, attention, or way of looking that remains open to all possibilities within the range of these three aspects.

In some senses, the first aspect—the felt sense—is experientially primary. We want to be anchored, very conscious, and intimately in touch with the felt sense.

I've probably suggested this a few times in guided meditations or thrown it out as a possibility: imagining, as you're sitting in meditation, three lines of energy that course through the body. Two lines flow down each leg, meeting and centering in the very lower belly, while a third line rises vertically upward, perhaps even extending out through the top of the head. There's a kind of convergence—triangle isn't quite the right word—but three lines meeting at a point and radiating outward.

Recently, someone came for an interview while working on samadhi, though I can't recall their main focus at the time. They reported trying this practice, attempting to imagine these lines in close detail. Perhaps having heard elsewhere that energy tends to spiral into or out of the body—as in chakra teachings—they were trying to visualize each line as a detailed spiral. It wasn't particularly productive for them. "I'm trying that," they said, "but it doesn't really do anything."

To me, this missed the point of my intention in sharing this practice. Again, it's not so much about the visual details, which may or may not be important. Here there was a certain preconception about what was significant and how energy actually moves—that it spirals, for instance. This isn't to say that sometimes seeing or imagining energy spiraling in the body can't be extremely helpful. The question is: Is it helpful at that particular time?

The main thrust of what I intended in sharing this practice was really about structuring the body or energy body awareness. Once you place those lines there in imagination, something happens to the sense of alignment, openness, and harmony in the body. It's about the geometry of those three lines in the space the body inhabits and what that does to the sense of well-being, the sense of the body, the sense of posture, and also the possibility of samadhi. It's more about the geometry and structuring of the body sense that emerges from this visualization.

Again, what I'm emphasizing is that the felt sense is primary—really, really important. We don't want to lose the felt sense because we're chasing some kind of idea about the energy body that isn't actually fruitful.

When we speak of image and idea as aspects of the energy body, all three elements—felt sense, image, and idea—are intimately connected. If I'm playing with a certain idea, like spiraling, I need to check the felt sense and notice what impact this has. If it's an idea that doesn't bear much fruit in terms of energy body awareness at that time, then it's not particularly helpful.

Another key principle to extract from this incident is the importance of experimenting, improvising, playing, and feeling and noticing. When I do this, when I imagine that, when I think this, when I conceive that, when I do this with awareness—whatever "this" or "that" might be—what happens? If you're cultivating samadhi and something feels good, feels right, then you go with that. This experiential approach—experimenting, improvising, playing, and feeling, noticing in the moment what results from each particular experiment—becomes crucial. How does it feel? What do I notice? Is it helpful?

Stepping back to a more general point: in practice as a whole—any kind of practice, any direction whether samadhi, emptiness, contemplating vedanā, mettā, imaginal practice, ethics—there's something developable here. Some people have more of a natural gift initially, but it's definitely cultivable. It's like developing what we might call a nose for what's important.

So often I hear long-term practitioners getting caught up in certain differentiations or ideas about this or that practice or teaching, when it's actually irrelevant. They could spend considerable time pursuing various approaches that don't actually make much difference. The importance, really broadly speaking about any practice, is developing a sense of what's crucial. What goes to the essence? What's to the point? What matters?

In this student's case, trying to imagine spiraling in detail almost missed the point entirely. I could offer countless examples across different areas of practice. This is a very general principle: Can I develop this intuition, this sense and sensitivity, this nose for what is significant? What actually is the nub of what's important in whatever practice I'm engaging? What am I trying to accomplish? How are the pieces working together, and which ones matter? Which ones are secondary or irrelevant, or at least more irrelevant?

When we do imaginal practice—when we're sensing the soul—there's an instruction I often give that I consider almost universally beneficial. Whether you're practicing with an intra-psychic image, working in a dyad, or sensing the soul of some being in nature, I generally encourage bringing your whole body into contact with the sight, sound, or whatever you're encountering. Sense it with the whole energy body.

But what does this actually mean? Let me break this down into several aspects.

First, it means spreading or balancing the attention or awareness to include the object, the other, and the self, along with the sense of the energy body. As we do this, we begin to see that the energy body might start to include the other—as if there's a larger energy body, a larger sense of energy encompassing both. Certainly awareness spreads to one's whole energy body, but then that energy body is brought into connection, into contact with the sight or sound or whatever we're encountering. This opens the possibility of sensing energy as encompassing the two together.

The second aspect concerns the center of knowing or perceiving. Our default is usually the head—our sense organs are gathered there, so we tend to think of it as the center of knowing and perceiving. We're seeing with our eyes, hearing with our ears, and these are located in the head. But rather than this default center, we work with the whole energy body as center. For some, this may be felt at the heart center, the usual place for soul sensing to feel centered. For others, including myself, it's the whole body as a total field. This can vary. But the whole energy body becomes a center of knowing and perceiving. One feels it, senses it, imagines it, and in our language, creates and discovers it this way.

The default in our culture—really almost hardwired into our sense of things—is that the center is in the head. But what is it to actually feel, sense, imagine, create and discover the whole energy body as an organ of perception?

Sometimes this opens the possibility of synesthesia. With the whole energy body brought into contact and conceived as this organ or center of knowing and perceiving, the senses can begin to mix and blend. Sound and sight and touch become less separate. They weave into each other, imply each other, reflect each other, manifest across the boundaries between different senses. We hear with our body—not actually such an uncommon experience when listening deeply to music or birdsong, or even to a lawnmower's vibration. But there's rich possibility here for synesthesia, for the mixing of senses that can be very beautiful and fruitful.

A fourth aspect is that the energy body sense is open to the whole potential range of perceived substantiality, image, and idea. The whole range from very etheric and light to very dense, the whole range of imaginal possibilities and ideas. Bringing the whole body into contact means bringing the whole range of possibilities of the body—how I conceive it, feel it, imagine it, image it. The gates are open; the range is open. It's possible for the energy body to manifest anywhere along that spectrum.

Lastly, and overlapping with the first aspect, a connection—sometimes even a flow—is sensed between the energy body and the object. When I bring this sensitivity, delicacy, and careful mindfulness to the presence of another in a dyad, an intra-psychic object, or an object in nature, there can be a gradually discernible or immediately apparent energetic connection between the energy body and the other. They form a kind of unit, a dyad of connection.

So as I said, I've already touched on that in the first of the five dimensions here. But a unit of dyads means yes, there are two—I can definitely feel two here—but I also sense a kind of unifying energy, or at least an energy that connects us, flows between us, ties us together.

If we linger with this and expand some of what I've just said, again, we're so conditioned by the dominant materialist, reductionist, scientific and scientistic worldview of modern culture that it's sometimes hard for us to actually have certain experiences. The logos becomes so entrenched, so limited within certain circumscribed parameters, that it simply doesn't allow other ideas—and so it might also inhibit certain experiences. Just as we talked about the eros-psyche-logos dynamic that can be inhibited or blocked from its natural tendency to expand, it can be inhibited and blocked at certain times. One of the ways this happens is through a limiting idea that we're clinging to, and sometimes we don't even realize what it is or that we're clinging to it.

In our culture, the language and ideas and models we have for sensing and sensation aren't quite adequate for sensing with soul. For example, as I've touched on, where is the sensing? We tend in our culture to think and feel only that touch happens on the skin. At the end of the hand, I touch another person, I touch my beloved, I touch this tree—only there, that's where the touch happens.

But when we touch, for example, when we touch a beloved who is for us an erotic, imaginal figure, or we touch the earth as erotic, imaginal other, when we sense it with soul, or when we listen to sound—to music, to birdsong, to anything—we don't only sense or think of touch as taking place at the skin or with the hand, or hearing happening with the ears. Rather, we sense with the whole energy body, which is larger than and more than the physical body. We touch and sense with the emotions and heart.

Again, in our culture we tend to separate these: body is one thing, sensory contact is one thing, emotions and heart something else entirely—which again in our culture might reduce to some kind of chemical process. But when we begin sensing with soul, these things come together. I touch it with my heart. I touch it with my emotions. It touches my emotions. We have that word already in the language: I'm touched by something. It's touching my heart. The heart also touches, and the soul resonates. All this is involved—receiving, resonating, shaping and touching the object.

So again, there's this much richer and more comprehensive and multi-dimensional sensing that happens when we sense with soul. The whole idea of this body and the instrument it is, its capacities and how it works, its sensitivities and sensibilities—all of this gets expanded, enriched, complexified.

There's a sense, then, that we can talk about opening the energy body. What we really mean is opening the idea, opening up the range of possibilities, opening up what we imagine the body to be and what we actually experience. Opening up that whole range, as we said.

There's another sense in which opening the energy body is actually quite important—for all practice and actually for living well, but certainly for practices like samādhi and imaginal practice and sensing with soul.

I think I might have said this before, but it bears repeating because sometimes when a teaching is really relevant to oneself, one hears it but doesn't really take it in. It doesn't land. It's almost like I'm so caught in a certain pattern or idea about how things are or what I need to do that I don't recognize that this strand of teaching is actually significant for me—I'm so set on something else being more important.

I would say—and I want to tread carefully here in this portion of the talk—but sometimes a person may well need to develop the energy body awareness and the skill to really allow imaginal practice. We have placed it, and will continue to place it, as something quite fundamental and indispensable and integral to sensing with soul, to imaginal practice, and the whole soul-making dharma. But for some people—some of you might be interested in images, you like hearing about sacredness or whatever it is—but there really isn't that basis. We're back to foundations now, or foundations that can become roots, as we'll see. And there really isn't that developed basis of either awareness of the energy body or skill within. They might need to work and practice in different ways that really focus on that for a while.

Sometimes what's a factor here as well is that a person's not used to opening the energy body in the sense of having a lot of energy and openness in the energy body. We can feel the energy body at different times as being more or less energized, of course. For a lot of people, there's a whole range of holding and having energy course through the body, or the sense of the body being filled with much more energization than one is used to. For many people, that whole range of having more energy in the energy body, or the energy body being opened by having more energy, is just not an experience that they're used to. Many dharma practitioners as well.

So for some people, one piece of their developing the awareness and skill with the energy body is actually becoming used to having more energy.

One of the ways more energy flows through the energy body is through the long breath. In the Anapanasati Sutta, the Buddha begins with breathing in long breaths—the practitioner knows they're breathing in long, then breathing in short as the second instruction. Many times this simply gets ignored. It becomes just "okay, know whether your breath is long or short." But even that receives little attention, as people focus more on sensations at the abdomen or nostrils.

I'm not insisting on any particular interpretation. I don't really mind what the Buddha meant—it doesn't matter. My point is that one could read this as an active encouragement rather than just passive noticing. Actually breathe long for a while. Fill the body, the space of the body with prana, with the chi of the breath, with that sense. What this does is open and energize the energy body if you stay with it for a while.

Sometimes this proves quite unusual, and in being unusual, quite uncomfortable for people. They resist for all kinds of different reasons. Sometimes it's simply unfamiliar. Sometimes it's frightening. Sometimes there are other aspects of being that become attached or consequential when there's abundant energy. When there's much energy and openness in the energy body, it's hard for the mind not to open. It's hard for the soul not to open. It's hard for the emotions not to open. It's hard perhaps for certain psychological structures not to open or be revealed or changed.

The person may, consciously or unconsciously, feel some resistance to all that. There are countless possibilities for what may be happening. Sometimes one needs to explore those reservations or concerns, going into the psychology and working with it gradually and caringly. Other times, one doesn't. One simply needs to practice the long breath, for instance.

I gave some retreats on samatha and the art of concentration in 2007 and 2008. There's guidance there if you want it, and you can find it other places as well. But opening and energizing the energy body with that stage of breath practice is one example. One becomes accustomed to feeling it, used to the body being open and energized, having more energy. The capacity of the energy body grows.

I've tried to explain why this is relevant, but often a person simply doesn't see it as relevant anymore. They think other things are important, that something else is the issue. I'll return to that.

I've been lingering on this point of opening the energy body for a while. This openness of the energy body—you know, the energy body opens and closes all the time. It's doing that all day long in different stages of openness and closure for many different reasons. Practicing the long breath tends to open the energy body. When there's craving, it tends to contract the energy body. When there's eros, it tends to open the energy body, and so forth. There are many factors that influence the state of the energy body at any time.

But the capacity or accessibility or even the habit of opening the energy body may prove quite significant in the long term—certainly in one's practice and the direction of practice, and in one's life as well. Opening, opening. The openness of the energy body is not divorced from many other factors, as I mentioned a few minutes ago.

For example, radical generous courage—radical, courageous generosity—is also an opening of the being. You can see that. It's like the fist is closed, clinging onto what I've got: my coins, my pension, whatever it is. And there's an opening of the being. I have to open the fist to give.

So generosity is an opening, radical generosity that is almost courageous in how much it's giving. It too will have an effect. Everything's connected. The dependent origination can't get away from it. That opening of the being radically in radical generosity will open the heart, open the energy body, open the sense of self, opening all kinds of possibilities.

You can see, for example, sometimes a person's been practicing Dharma for thirty years, but they've never really practiced generosity, or the level at which they practice generosity is quite limited. I'm talking about all kinds of generosity here. There remains a sort of contractedness, a stinginess of being, just holding, holding oneself in, holding—almost like making this gesture, holding the energy body in. That's what happens when I'm not generous. And the opposite happens with generosity.

So you see some people, as I said, practice for thirty years, go all over the world, check this teacher out, check that, read this, read that, do this practice, do that practice, and something's still contracted. There's still this kind of almost perpetual tightness there. I mean, yes, some other things change, but still you get a sense of their being—there's something still kind of tight there.

Other people have been practicing much less time, but are willing to experiment with a kind of radical generosity of being and the courage that takes. And you see all kinds of consequences: an openness of being, openness of heart, ability to let go.

So there are a lot of factors—a lot of capabilities, readinesses, tendencies—that may be related to things like the ease of samādhi. I don't think we ask enough: How much is my openness and generosity connected with my capacity for samādhi? I would say a lot. Why? Because, again, they're both opennesses. Samādhi is a state of the energy body being open and a kind of surrendering to whatever—again, if we talk about the first jhāna, I'm surrendering. Part of it is, as much as I penetrate the pīti, the rapture, the bliss there, I'm also surrendering to it. I'm abandoning myself to it. I'm opening my energy body to that and letting it fill.

So this capacity, this readiness, this willingness and tendency to open in different ways is all connected. Again, a person might be practicing for twenty years and say, "I really need to work on my focus. My mind just wanders. I really need to just come back to the breath again and again and develop my concentration." And they're sort of interested in jhāna, but they've basically given up, and they keep trying to develop their concentration, convinced that if only they can just keep the mind in one place, nail it to whatever it is—the abdomen or the nostrils or whatever—that they will develop samādhi there. "My mind just keeps wandering. I just need to keep doing this."

And they don't see that actually their lack of opening to the loveliness of samādhi and the possibility of jhāna may actually be much more related to the openness of the energy body and the unfamiliarity or disinclination to open it, as we said before, with the generosity, with the long breath, whatever.

Sometimes one might hear this kind of thing and not even think it's significant, because they know what they need to do is just nail their mind, their attention, to the tip of the nose or whatever it is. And of course that is an aspect—that ability to stay focused, to concentrate in that narrow sense of the word, is a factor in the development of samādhi. But it's often just way too overemphasized. A person doesn't grasp the broader set of often much more significant conditions and factors that come together to allow deepening, allow opening to jhānic experience and that kind of thing.

But this openness in the energy body, and for example, what I'm calling radical generosity—that whole exploration and lovely territory—may also be related not just to the ease of samādhi that a person experiences, but also to their ability to let go in general. In other words, to their freedom. Again, you can see it in the analogy of opening the fist in giving, in generosity.

It might also be related not just to the ease of samādhi and the ability to let go in general, but also to one's capacity or propensity for religious feeling, what we might call —for devotion, for opening, for surrender, for a sense of divinity and all that. I'll come back to that in a second.

I'm not saying this is the only factor. There are lots of factors involved in developing samādhi, involved in our ability to let go in life and be free, and also lots of factors that feed what we might call religious openings, religious sensibility, religious devotion and attunement. But these factors that I'm pinpointing right now, coming out of our discussion about opening the energy body, they may be much more significant than we realize.

I have a colleague, Suvadharo—some of you will know him—and I was sitting in on a talk that he gave at Gaia House some years ago, and if my memory serves me, he said something I thought was great. He was talking to a room full of people about meditation, and he said, "You know, some of you would be actually much better served by opening your house to a refugee family than by sitting on a retreat."

That's a bold thing to say, and it probably startled quite a few people, I imagine. But again, it comes back to this radical generosity idea and the opening that comes from that and then what that sets in motion, or what it opens in the being, and the ramifications for letting go, for freedom, for opening sensibility, for samādhi—all kinds of things.

So there's a lot to consider here. All these things, as I said, will be mutually dependently arising. It's not that one thing comes first and then another. Any of them can feed the other.

A devotional experience will tend to open the energy body. Generosity will tend to open the energy body and potentially serve as one of the supports for the capacity for religious experience, for sensing the soul, all kinds of things.

Sometimes in relationship to practice, a person has been practicing for a while and encounters all this talk about letting go and craving and freedom, and they say, "I should let go of craving and aversion and fear." But it might well be that practicing, for instance, more generosity, practicing surrendering and abandoning in relationship,

opening in relationship to the energy body and the sense of energy there—that may be much more helpful in supporting the ability to really let go of craving, aversion and fear, rather than simply saying, "Oh, I should. I've been practicing so long and I should."

These factors feed each other. I want to draw out one strand and repeat it: the capacity to open the energy body and the being in surrender to something higher—some kind of sense of divinity in the loosest, broadest sense. This opening of the energy body is related to our capacity to surrender, and not just to a jhanic experience or a dissolution of the self and the space that opens up there, but also our ability to surrender in devotion or have a devotional sense. It's the same kind of movement—there's a lot of overlap between what is actually happening in the soul, in the energy body there.

All these factors are tied together in a kind of mutual dependent origination. I'm hoping to offer in these talks certainly tips and techniques, but also things to consider and reflect on or to question, whether or not they might be relevant to you at any time.

When we talk like this, we want to really steer clear of a tendency to view myself, to view oneself in a certain way. So back to non-identification, anatta. "I am like this. I'm just closed. My heart is closed. I'm a miserable, stingy person. My energy body is closed. I'll never feel devotion. I am like this." As opposed to understanding the mind, the heart, the body, the energy body, the attention—all of this we could see, and I think it's very skillful to understand all those aspects of our being as habits. As habits, they're trainable, they're malleable, they're shapeable. They're not fixed in stone.

Yes, we can talk about habits of energy patterns. You can see it or sense it in people's bodies—there's a certain habit this way or that way. But it's not who I am. This is really, really important if you're listening to some of this and there's some kind of contraction of identification and either praising yourself or more commonly beating yourself up or despairing. It's really, really important.

At the same time, we can also talk about styles of soul, soul personae, if you like. Souls are different. They're still trainable and shapeable, but we're also born with different souls, different soul styles and different soul personae. There are these two balancing considerations when we're really looking at the whole thing. Yes, we have individual soul styles and soul personae that we seem to be thrown into this world with, or as. And all of it is trainable and malleable.

Just another brief point to consider is that the kind of dharma that one might gravitate towards might also be determined by, amongst other factors—and it's not going to be just one consideration—but it might be determined amongst other factors by, for instance, this capacity: How do I have the capacity to really open the energy body? And

then related with that is the possibility: Is it possible for me to feel devotion? Is it possible to have a sense of divinity and dimensionality without which devotion remains fairly flat?

All these factors will contribute to determining what kind of dharma one gravitates towards. If there isn't the capacity to open the energy body, there might not be the capacity to give oneself in devotion in a really deep way that feels deep in the sense of permeating the levels of the soul and the body and the heart. And so one is less drawn to a dharma, for instance, like soul-making dharma that tends to talk in religious terms and soul terms, and devotion, and divinity, and all that. One may avoid samadhi practice in the sense of jhana practice, etc.

But it might be that these factors, our capacities here—or our trainings here, maybe that's a better way of saying it—our training of our capacities here may well determine our direction, not just in practice, but in life. That's not to say that any one dharma direction is better or worse. That's just a completely irrelevant thing to try and measure —soul-making dharma better than this dharma or Mahasi. It's just not interested in such comparisons.

But there are different styles, and different souls will be called to different styles. The question again is: am I permitting my being, my life, my soul, my practice to be called where it is truly called? Or is it constrained by just habit—for instance, the energy body not being open, which then limits my sense of capacity to open to any sense of divinity, making me uninterested in certain paths?

It's great if it's intrinsic to my being that I choose this path over that path. It's less great if I'm propelled in one direction rather than another only because my choice of direction is limited and constrained by habit, indoctrination, fear, or whatever it might be.

I'm reminded of an aphorism that Nietzsche wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "The degree and kind of a man's sexuality reaches up into the topmost summit of his spirit." In a way, he's talking about the same thing. How we are with the body and our capacity or ability to open that body in surrender, in abandon, in connection—to tolerate a lot of charge, a lot of energy—all that's intimately related with how we are sexually.

This is obviously fraught territory, and there are all kinds of wounds people carry. But again, sometimes we can talk about different soul styles, different sexual styles that are more or less intrinsic. Sometimes we're talking about the result of wounding or indoctrination or intimidation. But there's a connection here between sexuality and what spiritual path and spiritual possibilities actually open up for us.

I know this is loaded and can be tender territory for people, but I hope you can understand the point I'm making without any temptation to judge yourself. Again, these are things to consider, things to reflect on. Is it relevant for me?

Let me say this again: it's not that one path is better or worse than another. What I want is this: am I free to choose? Am I free to choose according to what I love and what my soul feels drawn to and what makes sense to me?

First point. Second point to repeat: Yes, I think we can talk about different soul styles, different soul personae that we are born with, that we are given. I'm given my soul. How did it come to be that I'm like this? I'm given my soul, and it's a certain way, and it has certain tendencies and certain capacities, while other capacities are more limited, other tendencies are less developed.

So yes, there's that. We can talk about being given a certain soul intrinsically, and we can talk about the trainability and malleability of our capacities, tendencies, inclinations, and what's available and accessible to us.

There's another sense that we can talk about opening the energy body—meaning opening up in particular with regard to the image and the felt sense of the energy body. I've put this out recently, but I want to emphasize it to really make sure people get this development or furthering of the teachings and the possibilities in this teaching of the energy body.

We can, as I said, experience at any moment—whether we're with another or with an object in nature or just with ourselves in meditation or going about our day—we experience the energy a certain way. The energy of this body or the energy between bodies. There's a felt sense of that. There's also an image of it, as part of two of the three components of the energy body.

But it's another step to then see or sense that experience of energy at any time, to experience it as imaginal. So often when people talk about energy body or subtle body, there's either an explicit or implicit tendency—we're talking about something real here. Maybe not everyone can perceive it. Maybe scientists would quibble with it. But we're talking about something real. The energy is like this. My energy was like that.

That's all good and fine, but there's a kind of reification there. This is how it is. What happens when the felt sense of energy—well, when the image of the energy—is actually seen, sensed, conceived of, and felt as image? There are all kinds of possibilities here.

When this shift occurs, what needs to be present? The energy must become neither real nor not real, taking on that imaginal middle way quality with its theatre-like character. There's a recognition that this energy, this very sense of aliveness and connection, is itself a kind of sacred play, a divine imagination expressing itself through our embodied experience.

This transformation from ordinary experience to imaginal perception can be quite profound. What was perhaps initially felt as simple sexual attraction or energetic exchange suddenly opens into something more mysterious, more pregnant with meaning. The energy itself becomes a character in the sacred drama, neither merely physical nor purely conceptual, but occupying that fertile middle ground where the imaginal dwells.

Sometimes practitioners report that when they make this shift - when they consciously choose to see and feel the energy as imaginal rather than simply as experience - the whole quality of the encounter changes. There's often more space around it, less of the compulsive quality that can sometimes accompany strong energetic experiences. The energy becomes more workable, more fluid, more available for the deeper transformations that imaginal practice can offer.

This principle extends far beyond dyadic work, of course. In solo practice, one might experiment with seeing whatever energetic experiences arise - whether it's the simple aliveness in the hands during meditation, or more complex energy body experiences, or even difficult emotions that carry their own particular energetic signature - as imaginal rather than just as experiences happening to us.

The invitation is always the same: can this energy, whatever its flavor or intensity, be held and perceived and related to as imaginal? Can it participate in that sacred theatre where meaning and transformation become possible? This doesn't diminish the reality of the experience - quite the opposite. It opens the experience to depths of significance and possibility that purely literalistic perception cannot access.

What emerges from this way of working is often a much more fluid and creative relationship with the whole spectrum of our energetic life. The body becomes a space of sacred imagination, and our various energies become the very medium through which the imaginal expresses itself.

What factors need to ignite to make that shift? And again, with that transformation, the whole texture of the experience, its range and dimension, and what opens in the entirety of the experience might change.

For instance, where I was imaged but the other wasn't, and there was just this sexual energy that wasn't quite imaginal, both might become subsumed. Self and other might become imaginal. The eros itself, the sexual image, the images, the energy and desire—all of that might then ignite. The sense might arise of participating mystically in some kind of cosmic sacrament, again with that participation and cosmic dimensionality.

This attraction here, this sexual image, reveals other dimensions—cosmic dimensions. It becomes a holy sacrament that has its roots, its origins in the mundus imaginalis, in the world of images. Everything becomes imaginal there. So that's one example of the kind of opening that might occur.

I'll give one more example to end tonight, again speaking to the impact of that shift. I was practicing in a dyad, and the person I was practicing with was gazing at me and describing her experience. Almost all of what she described was energy body experience. I was very sensitive to her gestures, felt very sensitive to her words and her energy. The concertina opened for me.

As we've discussed, concertina as one of the elements, one of the nodes, refers to the spread of potential images, the incipient or inchoate images waiting in the wings around a central perception. They're not fully present or fully dominant there, but nothing really ignited to become fully imaginal.

As I was there and she was describing her energy body experience, and I was there with that sensitivity and the sense of the concertina, something felt slightly blocked in the process, despite my partner having strong energy openings which she was describing to me. There was a lot of energy, and she was being very careful and mindful in attending to it and opening to it and sharing it.

Then I asked her at a certain point, "Is that perception of energy, is it an imaginal perception?" She got it immediately and it shifted as a result of my just dropping that in, or rather she did something inside to shift it to an image of energy. The energy openings she was feeling and sensing were regarded as imaginal.

The point I want to make is partly about the effects of that, but partly about dyad practice. When she made that shift, I felt my experience open up to image. What I'd felt a little blocked in my experience from my end—like the whole thing wasn't fully imaginal, was just sort of potential there in the wings, the concertina, but something felt like it wasn't quite igniting—that's really interesting. Her experience changed, and my experience changed.

This is fascinating to me, again about the effects of what we call a shift of level—of sensing energy as image, as imaginal image, and the capacity to do that, and what happens when we do that. The second point is how interesting this is regarding dependent arising of experience in a dyad. My experience depended on a subtle shift in how she viewed her experience.

Something happens in one person, in one component of the dyad, and something correspondingly is then allowed to open in the other and in the dyad as a whole. So yes, there's the significance and power of the option of sensing the energy body or the energy field between two people—of sensing it with soul, rather than just as plain experience or fact, which is the default and implicit way we tend to sense energy, if we sense it at all.

But secondly, there's this fascinating and mysterious sense of what happens between two people when one person has a certain shift, or makes a certain shift in their experience—in this case, viewing the energy as imaginal rather than just as energy—and how that then affects the dyad, affects the other person's experience, and affects the whole range of what then becomes possible.

I think I'll stop there for this evening.

CHAPTER 176

Heat and the Material

Rob Burbea · 1h58

In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea delves into the complex relationship between emotions and soul-making practice, addressing how our cultural conditioning shapes views of healthy psychology and emotional life. He explores how emotions can function as "heat" in an alchemical crucible, allowing psychic material to ferment and give birth to imaginal images. Burbea discusses various approaches to working with difficult emotions—from mindful pacification to creating supportive containers that allow emotions to transform rather than simply dissolve.

The talk examines why some practitioners struggle to access intrapsychic images, often due to habitual patterns of dismissing or atomizing emotional experiences. Through detailed guidance and case examples, Burbea illustrates how emotions like anger, when properly contained and respected rather than immediately dismissed, can become foundations for soul-making practice. He emphasizes that emotions may need to be felt within a certain range—neither suppressed nor overwhelming—to support the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

Burbea also explores the mutual dependent origination between soul-stretching experiences and image generation, suggesting that moral challenges, heart stretches, and conceptual breaking can create particularly fertile conditions for imaginal practice. The talk concludes with practical navigation principles, including working through the energy body and recognizing dynamic elements within apparently static images.

This evening I'd like to speak about emotions and the relationship with emotions—the conception of emotions and skill with emotions in the context, mostly, of imaginal practice and soul-making.

One really general thing I'd like to say right from the start, and actually emphasize because I think it's quite important: when we talk about anything at all, but certainly when we talk about emotions, and we're being perhaps a little prescriptive in the sense of "try and do this with the emotions," or "this is what's good with the emotions," or "this is what's healthy," or "this is what a healthy psychology is"—certainly when we talk about our views about emotions and psychology, I think two things are really important to say.

I don't think human beings will ever come to the end, reach some final understanding of emotionality and emotional life and everything that's involved there. It's one of those rich, endlessly rich, endlessly fertile mysteries of human existence and of the soul. So that puts us in a relationship of necessary humility, inquiry, experimentation, open-endedness with regards to emotion and also psychologies. That's not to say that we then throw out any exploration or throw out any conceptions or ideas or conceptual frameworks or approaches—not that at all. But we hold them in an awareness of an ongoing exploration that I don't think we'll ever finally figure out. And hooray for that, I say.

The second thing, and it's related, is that when we talk about emotions and human psychology and someone puts forth certain kinds of ideals or divides what's a healthy kind of emotional life or approach to the emotions from an unhealthy one, we need to really be aware that those kinds of views are enormously culturally, historically situated and therefore conditioned.

It's easy for us to read a contemporary psychology book that says something about emotions and psychology—how it works and what they are and where they come from and what they need to be and what a healthy emotional life looks like—and kind of assume that, oh, that's right, and perhaps other periods in history or other cultures are engaged in repression or hysteria or whatever it is. I think there's an arrogance in that, and we, all of us, including myself, need to be careful about that kind of thing.

You only need to look around in contemporary cultures, cultures that exist in the world, and even subcultures—like this particular Dharma culture, or that particular Dharma culture, this religious culture, or that secular culture, this group, that group, let alone nationalities and ethnic heritages—to see what a huge range there is of what's regarded as healthy, appropriate, helpful, normal relationship with and conception of and attitude to emotions.

So I'm going to say some things—some things to reflect on, to consider, to work with perhaps with regard to our soul-making paradigm. But the whole thing has, if you like, a huge caveat that we can all remember about the cultural historical situatedness and therefore contingency of views and psychologies around areas like emotion.

Actually related to that, it's interesting that it might be, given perhaps certain contemporary views about healthy psychology and healthy emotional life, that some of the people who are attracted to the soul-making dharma and this kind of paradigm are people who, let's say, tend to be quite passionate, tend to love deeply. There was that psychology book from the eighties—what is it? *Women Who Love Too Much* or some-

thing? I never read it. I actually don't know what it said, but such people might be seen by others as having a style of loving that is hysterical. There's something unhealthy, out of balance there, just a bit off or too much or whatever.

Or it might be assumed that this person is that way—they tend to be overly passionate or love too much, whatever that means, or too deeply or whatever—because of some early lack rooted in their upbringing, in their childhood, probably their family, the mother, the father, whatever it is. And what's really driving this, quote, "loving too much" or being so passionate is some kind of neediness, some kind of clinging, a tendency to papañca, some kind of hysteria.

But to some of those people, the soul-making dharma will be very attractive and make sense. Yes, for some people, the way passion moves in them, the way emotion moves in them, the way love moves them, it may move them to certain manifestations of clinging, of papañca, or a kind of craving that becomes a neediness. But it may not always be because of some cause in their personal history. It may not just be a defilement that's driving them, a kilesa.

But it may be actually for that person that there is already a lot of eros and tendency to image in their soul. That's the soul that they are, the soul that they were given, that they were gifted with. And it's a lot to learn how to handle such a soul that has a lot of eros, that has a tendency to image. It's like being given a gift of a powerful horse, and you actually have to learn how to ride that horse, and that takes some time. It's very different if someone gives you a gift of a little pony.

So some people may have such souls—such rich, deep, fiery souls, lots of eros, lots of tendency towards image or inclination towards image, ease with image. But there's very little help or guidance in the culture in being able to ride that, relate skillfully to that soul so that this tremendous gift can actually flourish. Without such guidance, one gets thrown out of the saddle, trampled on, starts galloping away in this or that direction completely out of one's control.

There's very little help or guidance in the culture to allow that soul to make soul, to engage in soul-making, for the eros-psyche-logos dynamic to expand and enrich and deepen in the ways that we've talked about. So in the absence of that help and that guidance and that ability to learn, that support in learning that, it does go towards craving. The eros does become craving. What could have become imaginal does become papañca, unfixated image.

So for some people, with that kind of style of persona, of soul, it may be that part of what's happening is they're attracted to the soul-making teachings because they recognize something there. It's not just a cheap kind of legitimization of their quirky foibles or pathologies. There's something deep there, but you need to learn how to relate to this—how to ride and befriend that horse. So it really can be a gift, a powerful gift.

Of course, not everyone attracted to the soul-making dharma has that kind of soul style or psychology. There's a big range, and some tend toward much more apparent equanimity, calmness, steadiness. Some have a range, so I don't want to restrict it to that style, but just in terms of cultural views around emotion and what's considered healthy psychology.

Following on from this, I said recently in the Roots into the Grand Soul retreat that for a large portion of imaginal practice and soul-making practice, especially when there's dukkha, we have to realize that our relationship to the emotions needs to fall within a certain range in order that they can ferment the soul-making process, fertilize, and give rise to images. I think I used the analogy earlier in this series of talks of a crucible, an alchemical vessel. And if that crucible doesn't do its job of containing the material and tolerating the heat, allowing the contents to ferment and undergo the soul-making dynamic, then images won't arise.

For some people—and again, there's so much that really needs to be individually tailored in these teachings—part of the reason they might say, "I don't get images, I don't get intra-psychic images. I can kind of sense a sacredness in the environment of a certain kind, but I don't tend to get any images, or very, very few"—for some of those people, it may be that there are certain habits in their ways of relating to their emotional life that mean the crucible is broken in a not very helpful way. The vessel doesn't conduct heat, however we want to stretch this alchemical analogy.

In alchemy, sometimes what the alchemical material needs is heat, and that's part of the process. You put something in a vessel, a crucible, and you heat it, and that allows something to happen. Sometimes the material itself is generating heat, like compost or fermenting material. But there's a way that if we talk about heat as the emotional life, there's a relationship there. Not always—I'll come back to that—but for some people, without them really realizing it, the crucible around the emotions is not built well. It's not serving the purpose for imaginal practice. It might serve all kinds of other purposes in their life.

Some people are habituated to not actually registering or not even allowing certain emotions and certain emotional intensity, and they don't even realize that pattern. Sometimes that kind of pattern is actually sanctioned by role models these people may

come into contact with, or by the Dharma itself preaching this sort of even equanimity. So such a person—sometimes that's the reason, not always, but sometimes that's a reason or part of a set of conditions preventing the birth, the arising of certain intra-psychic images.

It might look from the outside like this person is a good practitioner, a good Buddhist. They're calm, reasonable, even-keeled, certainly warm and friendly. But the way they are with emotions, or certain emotions at least, doesn't allow the kind of heating up or galvanizing of the whole soul-making dynamic in terms of generating images.

There's another way where someone actually does have a lot of emotions, but for different reasons—either just a lack of training (that's why we call this skill with emotions and the art of being with emotions, working in different ways with emotions and having that range, different approaches in different situations and for different ends)—someone may not have had that training. It just wasn't really given. Or they may have a tendency toward a lot of emotions—they do tend to feel anger or jealousy or judgmentalism or huge passion, whatever it is (we're talking now about the more difficult emotions)—but they don't really have the training and skill, the art of working well with those emotions to create a kind of crucible.

Or again, they have a kind of unquestioned indoctrination from Dharma teaching where they know they're feeling something—jealousy, anger, whatever—but they also know from their Dharma teachings that it's really not good, not helpful, it's a defilement. So the way they relate to it leaves them caught between a rock and a hard place. It's going on, they're sort of entangled in it, it's got them a little bit, and at the same time they're trying to dismiss it and push it away, get beyond it or get over it. So it's not that the emotions aren't arising, but there's this arising accompanied by judging themselves for having it or trying to get rid of it or pre-deciding that it's unhelpful.

Now, of course, for some people and for any person at any time, images don't just arise out of the heat of emotions, and certainly don't just arise out of dukkha. They can come out of the deep cool of equanimity—the Buddha often talks about the coolness of equanimity, the depths of that equanimity. Because equanimity is very related to unfabricating, and in the coolness, in the equanimity, in the unfabricating, there's this liquefying that I talk about sometimes. The liquefying of things, and out of that coolness can come very beautiful sensing with soul and other images.

So if we talk about heat meaning emotion and the material, it's not always the case that we need a lot of heat, or even any apparent heat. Sometimes it will come from coolness. So again, you can hear how when I say something, there's a caveat—really this is... or there's an "in this case, in that case, on the other hand, it could be..."

So when you listen, please regard these as things to consider, and really to ask yourself, because oftentimes I see these kinds of things are going on for people, and they're just not aware that they're going on. They're just not aware that that's a pattern that they're in.

Now, of course, Eros is a form of fire and heat, and I think I used that analogy in one of the talks on another course. So we can include that. But when we talk about heat, we might mean the whole range—coolness, eros, the whole range of emotions. Seemingly pathological emotions, seemingly beautiful emotions, joy, love, all that.

But this is important, this factor: it may be the case with some people that the way of —or a certain range of ways of relating to the emotions—are just not accessible to that person. And so a kind of opening up, a self-awareness, an opening up and a training, an extension of one's habits needs to happen. All this is complicated and very individual, I think. So I'm making general points, but it's very individual.

Some people—I remember talking with someone not too long ago, actually feels a lot of different emotions, but not anger, this person. Didn't feel anger, and I think she was on the retreat where we did a little bit of movement and sort of careful—some were quite extravagant and energized movements, almost violent movements and soundings, and some were much more subtle. But she was on that retreat, and when we did certain movements that involved stomping and roaring and stuff like that, she just said it just didn't resonate at all. There was just nothing in her that felt any need for that or any place for that. It was slightly puzzling. I think a few people had different kinds of reactions because it was quite intense.

I'm talking about this person now. So lots of emotions were there to feel, but not anger. But this person also has a history of depression. And what's becoming clear is that in certain situations, when something feels unjust or she feels something that's angering her—what a person's doing or what a group is doing or some dynamic or something—that actually the anger doesn't even register. It completely bypasses the anger and instead it goes into depression, in this case a very, very vicious depression, very self-destructive.

Which is one of the—I've seen that before in both some friends and other practitioners. And again, it might be—I don't think it was in this case, but it might be sometimes a shadow of Dharma teaching that automatically puts anger in the category of defilement, kilesa, and something to be shunned and not allowed.

But in this case, there was a beginning to notice that link: "Okay, I feel, or I go into this depression when I feel somehow silenced or shut up." Now, maybe partly the external situation was silencing her to a certain extent, but a lot of the silencing was just internal. There was some mechanism operating below the radar of consciousness that just didn't allow the anger to be registered or felt or validated. And it went straight—the anger was turned on the self in a very deep and destructive way. Very, very painful. Paralyzingly painful.

So this pattern began to become clear. And it might be then that a stage of practice for that person is actually to realize that and perhaps replay a scenario—now I feel shut down, now I feel depressed—let's go back to that situation where it seems linked somehow and actually replay the scenario in one's imagination and slow it down a little bit. There, how do I feel about being shut up? How do I feel the frustration, the pent-up energy in that? How do I feel about what these people are saying or what they're trying to do or how they're manipulating, or how it seems they're manipulating the situation?

And not worry so much. So it's a practice. It's in a safe space. It's internal or with a friend or with a teacher in an interview, whatever it is. And actually slow it down. Not worry about: is this right? Is it wrong? Was it really the perception that they were manipulating, or am I just projecting that? Don't worry about that. Don't worry: am I going to then bite this person's head off? Don't worry. You just practice actually slowing the thing down and just—there, what's that feeling right there? It might start as frustration. It might start as just a feeling in the energy body, but we want to feel that energy in the energy body and have it be okay.

If we recognize it's anger, and you want to fucking kill that person, it's like okay—feel that, and really have that be okay. This doesn't mean you're going to kill the person. It doesn't mean you may or may not even say anything to that person—that comes later. But to actually feel it, give it some degree of respect, feel it in the energy body, give it some degree of respect—that's a huge step and hugely important.

So if we talk about—again, with all the caveats I said right at the beginning about cultural conditioning and views and being historically situated and contingent in that way—but it might be, speaking now in this culture and from the point of view of our paradigm and what we're elaborating in terms of soul psychology, it might be that this ability and willingness to actually recognize anger, feel it, contain it in the energy body, and give it some degree of validation in the sense of not just immediately dismissing it—at least that—may be what we call a foundational element of soul-making practice and dharma. It may be one of the foundations.

It may well be, again given all the caveats I said about culture and history, also one of the foundations just of psychological health. And it may be one of the foundations of healthy relationship, human relationship. But more than that, it may be one of the building blocks, one of the foundations of imaginal practice and soul-making dharma. This person could have lots of images, but it may be that in certain directions or certain possibilities of images never could arise.

Such a foundation, if it is a foundation of soul-making practice, might be, in the longer term, an example of a foundation that becomes a root, that then becomes something that itself is living and growing and nourishing. So this ability to feel anger, to tolerate it, to feel it in the body, to recognize it, to not dismiss it—yes, good part of emotional awareness, skill, health, etc. Yes, a part of what can then allow images to come. But it might be at a certain point that that becomes a root in the sense that the anger itself, to follow this example, the anger itself becomes imaginal. The anger itself becomes an erotic object.

Does that mean now I'm going to become hysterical and go out and buy a gun? No, of course not. We've talked about all this, about reification and literalization and the non-danger of that if one is really listening and following the teachings.

So there's one thing to have just a crucible that can hold material that can then ferment to create images. It's another step, perhaps, that that material itself becomes imaginable, that anger itself becomes imaginable, erotic. It starts to have other dimensions. It starts to have divinity. It starts to have even eternality. It starts to have theatros. It starts to have fullness of intentions wrapped in all that grace, even the grace of anger, participation in divine anger—all kinds of possibilities.

So there may seem to be an obvious progression here. First you develop the human psychological skill as a foundation that allows certain directions and openings of images that might not have been otherwise available. And then it may be in time that that kind of emotion or these kinds of emotions also become roots in the sense they become roots—like I said, alive, vital part, nourishing part of the actual structure of the soul-making, as opposed to just something on which soul-making is built.

And again, lots of caveats because there's so much individual variation. Sometimes things don't happen in the sort of obvious linear order of progression, of gradual progression—first this, the easy step, then the intermediate step, then the advanced step. Sometimes the advanced step, or what is apparently the advanced step, happens first, and everything happens in the reverse order. Sometimes divine anger opens up as an image, and that image itself then allows—in drawing on the image, being supported by the image, nourished by the image, bringing that image back in a kind of, as a tincture

into human situations, either meditating on it beforehand or in this almost homeopathic background way while one's in relationship—that the image itself then allows healthy human relationships at the normal, at the conventional level, etc. And it may change the relationship with the energy body and allow other possibilities in terms of opening up the energy in the energy body, etc.

Yes, we can talk about, "Well, generally this is easier and that builds on this and that builds on the second bit," etc. But sometimes things happen in very different orders and an image is given and everything shakes down or is informed by that image top-down, so to speak, from the divine to the human, if we use such language.

So there's something in here—you know, notice I said not dismissing it, a certain amount of validation—there's something similar, maybe some of you can recognize already, with a step in what we call the OCD practice, or the opening to the current of desire, a step of which is just to suspend the value judgment, the negative value judgment about what we're desiring. And just entertain the idea, even just for a limited time in practice, entertain the idea that there might be treasure here. Possibly there's treasure in this thing that I've been taught is akusala, that looks like a defilement, that's certainly difficult, that I'm a little bit wary of because heaven knows what might come out of my mouth or what I might say and do.

But there's something similar in terms of, let's just suspend that judgment and can I just drop in a grain of trust, maybe for a limited amount of time. Maybe there's a treasure here in this difficult emotion.

So there's a lot here. There's a lot about just healthy internal psychology, about human relationships, and certainly about working with images and the receiving or generating of images. And there's so much more to say. There's a whole step in learning how—and this is an aside now—but how do I express that anger in a way that's helpful and skillful? And the Buddha talks about our skill in communicating the difficult, etc. And that usually takes time. I have to say that usually really takes time to learn how to do that. But again, there are always exceptions.

As I said, some people may need to work more with their emotions. In some instances, there's apparent skill with certain emotions. A person might say, "I'm good with this kind of emotion, that kind of emotion." It looks like they're working with it, being present with it. But other emotions remain completely out of bounds. Again, there's tremendous individual variation here.

It might be that a person needs to allow or feel more, to get into or sit with particularly the difficult emotions. Sometimes positive emotions are equally hard to tolerate—a lot of joy or a lot of love. These aren't culturally normal, and we're not used to that intensity. But sometimes a person needs to actually be in that more and more inclusively, not refusing, not ignoring, not veering away from the emotions they habitually or dogmatically don't like, don't approve of, don't trust.

This allows the psychic energy in the emotion to form a kind of crucible and give birth to, ferment an image that is powerfully soul-making.

Having said that—again, a caveat—is this a universal truth? I don't think so. There are all kinds of other factors, as I mentioned earlier. This is just one factor, but it's really worth looking inside over a period of time, reflecting, asking questions. Maybe even ask a good friend what they think, because sometimes we can't see ourselves that clearly, or a teacher who knows you well.

So is it a universal truth? I don't think so. It may be that some people or some cultures—as we're talking now about what might inhibit the transubstantiation of psychic material into an image, the giving birth to images in the imaginal world—it may be that some people, some cultures actually need much less of the galvanizing that happens from emotions, much less of that kind of heat in order to give rise to images. And that may be for different reasons.

It may be that such a person is more accustomed to and more comfortable with a logos, a conceptual framework that supports the imaginal. So their default logos, or they can happily and fairly easily spend time entertaining a conceptual framework that's actually much more supportive to the imaginal. Someone else may be okay with their emotions, but there are certain concepts or conceptual frameworks that are just locked into place—again, maybe consciously, maybe unconsciously. And that's the reason.

Whereas the other person, as I said, is comfortable with a certain logos, and that logos is well-oiled. It's not like an unfamiliar, clunky, or rusty piece of machinery. It's quite smooth, quite ready, quite accessible. So that's a factor.

It may be, too, just what arises from meditation habit. One person might have much less of a habit of dismissing images in practice. They're so trained—as I was for many years—in dismissing any kind of image, just through the usual instructions of mindfulness. You might note something and put it aside, or you're concentrating on your breath, so images or whatever else are just irrelevant.

This might be trained over months, years, decades in some cases, like my own. And that actually means certain pathways have to get oiled, have to get smooth, have to be opened up, because there's such a habit of immediately dismissing any image that comes. "That's just a daydream. It's not what meditation's about." And that can become a deeply ingrained habit.

It may be as well, as I mentioned earlier, that there's just a different—and I think there is—just a different natural propensity in different souls to have more or less images, to have that more accessible.

And then, of course, there's cultural situatedness. There may be for some a kind of cultural affirmation and reinforcement of images—certainly deep images. So maybe in certain more religious cultures, or for a person who has had that background where deep images—by deep I mean not necessarily imaginal in our sense with all the imaginal Middle Way and all that, but deep in the sense that they touch the soul and they're designed to touch the soul. Not just an image of whatever—an advert for an SUV car or whatever—which interestingly try to touch something in us of our longing for freedom, mystery, beauty, autonomy, the image of the self. Well, the car ads are really about the image of the self.

Anyway, but in certain cultures where there's an affirmation, a reinforcement, a normality for deep images, and those deep images are public, shared, talked about, respected, venerated even—all that is also going to shape and support the arising of images for an individual person. Someone else is in a culture that dismisses or denigrates images that just don't have any place except at the most superficial level of adverts and consumer culture.

It might also be—again, we're talking now about what allows images to arise more or less easily—it may be for some people that emptiness practices and understandings have gone deep enough to liquefy and divinize all perception. So I outlined this in the book *Seeing That Frees*: emptiness goes deep, deep, deep into the unfabricated, and then, if you like, out the other end, where one realizes that sacredness is everywhere, not just in the unfabricated as opposed to the fabricated.

So maybe for some people, and for myself—I shared this before—I think that was my path to the imaginal. It opened up through pursuing emptiness deeply. But not for everyone. Yet for some people, that will be a very significant factor: there's often enough accessibility to that kind of liquefied and divinized perception of everything.

It may be, again, that the energy body awareness is just more readily and wholly available. So again, we're talking about what are the elements that need to be there? And we've talked so much in the past few years about how just opening up the energy body can help support the movement towards even the reception of images, and then the images becoming more imaginally alive.

So there are lots of factors here, but this business about emotions, as I said, is really worth considering and developing one's skill there, wherever one's at with it.

I've mentioned in the past when I talk about the breaking of the vessels and the Kabbalistic term *shevirat hakelim*. We could say something more general: the soul-making dynamic, or soul-making over time—not necessarily from any individual image, but soul-making certainly over time—involves and catalyzes a stretching, a stretching of our being, of our soul, of our mind, of our heart, of our energy body range. There may be a shattering, this breaking of the vessels, a certain kind of tension.

With all that, often some territories of unsureness, complication. In the very dynamic itself, we talk about how the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic complexifies itself so that the image becomes more complex. The ideas, the available ideas that are implicit as conceptions within perception, become more complicated, or as seeds for perception and reflection become more complicated. One's relationships may become more complicated.

Over time: stretch, shattering, tension, unsureness, complication, fertility, and ask—or several asks, challenge, duty. In other words, yes, tremendous beauty in the soul-making process, in the soul-making dynamic, but also difficulty as well, challenge and difficulty.

And so sometimes I feel when people only report loveliness from the whole imaginal and soul-making practices that it may be that they're missing something. Again, there's lots of individuality here, but it may be that a whole wing, if you like, is not being allowed, not explored so much.

I think I talked about that in the talk called "The Spreading of Five Wings"—that short talk is a reminder of what may need opening to and including and extending, what ranges may need extending as we grow in the soul-making. And again, given the caveat that souls are different, therefore the ranges are different—people have different ranges, maybe we could say almost intrinsically, and it can be trained.

But the point is that generally soul-making, not necessarily from any individual image, but generally over time, involves difficulty and challenge and stretch and the discomfort of that, as well as the beauty and the ease and the liberation.

Let's go back to that passage from Genesis that I mentioned the other day: Jacob wrestling the angel. The wound and the blessing came together in that case. And there's something, again, reading that story through the poetic lens of the soul-making dharma and the conception and the imaginal sensibilities—the blessing and the wound go together. No blessing, no wound. And so this is often the case with soul-making and the soul-making dynamics, certainly over time.

So this is interesting. Let me try and explain this. Having said what we just said, I want to talk about why it is sometimes, or why it may be, what might be the case for some people who feel like, "I don't get many images, certainly not intrapsychic images."

So it may be for some people that this is relevant: In imaginal images, if they're really allowed to galvanize the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic, as we just said, there will be an opening, a stretching, potentially a breaking—either a gradual stretching or a breaking of vessels—as part of the soul-making dynamic sometimes.

Now, here's what I want to add to this. So many things in the domains of psychology, spirituality, soul work, dharma, where there's a dependency one way—in other words, this stretching, this sometimes uncomfortable breaking of vessels and stretching with all the potential difficulties that I just outlined, where that's dependent on the soul-making dynamic—the dependency often runs both ways.

So when you see a dependency one way, where as part of the gift there can also be the challenge, the stretching, the breaking, where there's dependency one way like that, we can usually expect—it's usually really worth looking for—the dependency runs the other way too. Dependency is usually mutual, mutual dependent origination. This depends on that, but that also depends on this.

In other words, when we are opened up—mind, heart, sometimes body—when we're stretched, when we're broken sometimes, or there's a breaking of vessels, whether that feels like internal mental vessels and containers and compartments and understandings, whether it's relational, whether it's philosophical or emotional—when there's that, in the reverse dependency, that very opening, stretching, breaking can give rise to images and to eros.

So when we're in love, something is really opening and being stretched in us. And our whole perception, not just of the beloved, but also of the self and the world—something's really being stretched there, with all the craziness of falling in love. So it's not necessarily always just a stroll in the park, being in love.

When we're in a moral crisis, that kind of stretch—and I'm going to come back, as I said in the introductory talk, I'm hoping that I will have time and capacity to come back and talk about morality and ethics. But one of the things is, in a way, it's hard to be a sensitive human being these days and not feel some degree of moral crisis with the complexity of the world and the difficulty of what's going on globally.

But certainly when we're in moral crisis, that's also an opening, a stretching, a tearing of the fabric of the view, of the heart, of the inclinations, of the desires, of the will. Or when there's a moral stretch where we feel called to take a stand, to speak, to act in a certain way that may require all kinds of courage, stepping out of our comfort zones—it stretches us in some way morally, or a heart stretch, or our ideas of this or that, our conceptual frameworks, maybe a map of the path, or an idea of who we are, or what the world is.

When we encounter teachings or teachers that profoundly touch our soul, this too creates a sacred stretch. Our existing frameworks—what we thought we knew about healthy psychology, our conceptual maps of the spiritual path, our fundamental understanding of who we are or what the world is—all these may be broken open or expanded.

When ideas shatter in this way, when our familiar containers can no longer hold what we're experiencing, these become examples of being opened, stretched, broken—vessels breaking or expanding beyond their previous limits. When we're stretched in these profound ways, then again, because of mutual dependent arising, these become particularly fertile times for images to arise.

And the images that emerge can be deep, deep guides for our soul. They have everything to do with the angel out ahead. They have everything to do with what we feel called toward, what we want to move toward—with eros itself.

So by "stretched," listen carefully to the kinds of stretch I'm describing. I'm not simply talking about being busy. Most people nowadays are too busy—we're all too busy in that superficial way. Neither am I talking about mere ego concerns—worrying about giving a presentation and what others might think of me.

I'm talking about soul concerns. The soul being stretched by soul-making itself. This organ of soul that we've discussed—the one that senses in particular ways and yearns to sense in particular ways—actually grows. We make soul. We add to it. It becomes a bigger, more complex, more multifaceted organ. And when we're stretched, when the soul is stretched by deep soul concerns, then that becomes particularly fertile soil for images to arise.

One reason some people may not experience intrapsychic images—and I don't want to present this as a universal rule, but it's worth honest, deep reflection—is that they actually avoid moral stretches and crises. They may be busy doing good work in the world, but there's no genuine risk involved. There's very little breaking out of established molds, no truly courageous taking of stands, no extending beyond what has become routine, ordinary, or comfortable.

Because such a person is actually living in a constrained way—and they might not even realize it, thinking "I'm engaged in good work, I'm a Dharma teacher, or a psychologist, or whatever"—their soul isn't being stretched in certain essential ways. They're not placing themselves in situations that would create that sacred stretch, that would make things somewhat unstable, that would risk the kind of extension and perhaps even breaking that constitutes crisis.

I remember when I first began giving talks on soul-making and the imaginal—for a year or two, I think. As I shared in the last retreat, there was a real stretch for me. Even though some people had been quite hostile to emptiness teachings for various reasons, the level of hostility and anger from some people regarding soul-making and imaginal teachings was quite remarkable.

Going places to give talks, or even at Gaia House in some situations, I would feel: "Wow, this is a stretch." Not just the material itself—which by its very nature was stretching, even breaking, the Dharma paradigm, depending on your perspective—but also putting myself in situations where I could sense the hostility, where people would write notes or speak to me with considerable antagonism.

That stretch itself, knowing I was entering those situations while wanting to offer this material that felt deeply important to my soul, to soul in general, to the Dharma, to our culture—that required courage. I was taking a stand for something essential. And that was enormously fertile in terms of giving rise to images that echoed and mirrored that very situation, that very difficulty. Really helpful images, profoundly fertile ones.

Having cancer and probably dying soon—that's also a stretch. That whole strand of my life in recent years involves a kind of breaking: breaking of the body, breaking of life, breaking of one's continuities and relationships. This too constitutes a stretch of the soul and being, encompassing deep soul concerns.

The unfolding tragedies of climate change and ecological degradation, mass species extinction—these tragedies can be felt as something truly breaking in the heart, in our being, in the fabric of our civilizations. It's breaking the fabric of the only home we know in the universe, the fabric of nature in which we're so deeply embedded.

Anger, especially the righteous indignation we can feel in response to moral issues or regarding climate change and species extinction and humanity's insufficient response—that anger arising from deep soul concerns can also be ripping at fabrics and stretching things.

It might simply be being touched in our soul by a teaching, a teacher, or a tradition.

It might not even be our main tradition, but all these are examples of things that stretch the soul and open things up and maybe break things in us, break vessels in us, and that can give rise to images.

There's this mutual dependent origination between soul stretch and soul-making as part of what's going on in the soul-making process. We stretch the soul by what we're opening to, or opening ourselves to, or the situations we're putting ourselves in life. Stretch the soul in life, and there's soul-making that happens through that, very probably with lots of imaginal images being part of that process of soul-making. And where there's soul-making over time, there will be a stretch. So the dependency is mutual—it runs both ways.

In the opening talk of this course, I made a categorization into three modes. There's what we might call fixated images and papañca as one mode of the imagination. There is mindful awareness or deconstruction of images as a second form. And the third is allowing the images or supporting the images to become imaginal and soul-making.

Wrapped up in those three, we can also trace a corollary tripartite division of the relationship with emotions. In the case of papañca and fixated image, the emotions are usually unskillful. They're not helpful—they've got us in their grip, and we're being sent through the spinner. They've got us, and they're unskillful emotions. Even if there's love, there's a lot of grasping or clinging in it.

When we're mindful of what's going on—like there's some tendency to papañca, there's a certain image—and when we're just mindful of that, it tends to quiet, to pacify the emotions. That movement is actually part of a larger movement of lessening fabrication. So also the emotion itself is fabricated less, and we go towards a coolness, a calming, a kind of emotional neutrality. Mindfulness, as I've pointed out several times, is just a certain degree of less fabrication. So we're fabricating less story, less self, less image, less emotion.

In contrast, when we're on the imaginal track, then the emotions—we form a kind of crucible for the emotions so that the emotions can be integral and part of, and nourish the whole, giving birth to the imaginal. Then they tend to—they might still be intense, so they're not necessarily pacified, they might be intense—but they're transformed, or given other dimensions, or other roots, and they tend to be liberated in the best sense.

Just to linger on this tripartite division for a moment: there are ways of being with emotions. For example, in typical mindfulness instructions, we let go of the story, let go of the self. What that does is there is a little less fabrication that pacifies the emotions. And in so doing, it doesn't become soul-making. That's just a pacification. It doesn't become imaginal—there's just a pacification.

Those set of instructions I gave called "Working with the Emotional Body" from 2011—where I made the point about emotions being something we'll never get to the bottom of as a species, our understanding of them—there I gave seven guided meditations, instructions. They also will tend to pacify. They're skillful ways of working with emotions. So we're not throwing these out for good reason. We're not throwing them out once and for all. We want to keep that kind of way of relating to emotions—just a simple mindfulness, a simple lessening of the fabrication. And within that, there's a range of ways. There were these seven modes of paying attention and working with emotions. All of them are kinds of mindfulness, kinds of stances of mindfulness that would pacify the emotion and with that self, and the fabrication.

But if we want the imaginal to come from the emotion, then we need a kind of crucible. We need to let the emotions heat up in certain ways in that alchemical vessel. So in this tripartite division, we could make distinctions: What goes in each division? What kind of image? What kind of desire?

What kind of emotion? And what kind of fabrication?

With what we're calling papañca, or fixated image, well, that's the kind of image. It's fixated, it's reified, it's papañca. What kind of desire? Craving—the contraction of craving, and the dukkha of craving. What kind of emotion? Unskillful emotion. It's got us, it's tangled us, it's taking us for a ride, we're caught up in it. What kind of fabrication? Unskillful fabrication. The self, other, and the situation, the world, are all fabricated in ways that are bringing dukkha, that are not helpful, that are reified.

I see myself this way, clinging to that view. That's how I am. I see that person that way because they looked at me this way, or they didn't speak to me, or they did speak to me. I'm fabricating the perception of them in a very literalized, very reified way, and

usually in a way that brings suffering. And the situation, the world—maybe it spreads to everything. I see everything a certain way. So: fixated image, craving, unskillful emotion, unskillful fabrication of self and the world.

When we practice one of the skillful kinds of mindful attention that are more standardly taught—the kind that I and many other teachers probably put out—then again, we can go through: what's the kind of image, what's the kind of desire, what's the kind of emotion, what's the kind of fabrication?

There's a quieting, a pacification of the images and actually of perception in general. There's a pacification of desire, eros and craving through the simple, standard mindfulness and the deconstruction that brings. Pacification of images, pacification of perception, pacification of desire, to some degree or other, depending on exactly what practice one is engaging. There's a pacification of emotion, as I said earlier. That's the kind of emotion—this torrent of probably unskillful emotion is pacified. And pacification of fabrication. So we're somewhere there on the spectrum of unfabricating of self, other, world.

There's not no-self. In standard mindfulness, there's less story. There's less personality. But there's not no-self. There's just less self. Less self is being fabricated.

When we consider these categories in the imaginal domain, then we have an imaginal kind of image. The kind of desire becomes eros with everything that that means and the pregnancy of that and the impregnating faculty of eros. The relationship with the emotions is one of a crucible that allows the generation and the reception, but also allows the transformation of everything, including the emotion, sometimes.

Sometimes the emotion becomes another emotion, transformed through the alchemical process. Sometimes the emotion stays difficult. We've talked about this when we talk about dukkha and soul-making. It stays grief, or it stays whatever it is—anger. But it has other dimensions to it that make it much more liberating, much more liberating. Much more space is opened up in the emotion because, if you like, the territory of the dimensions of the beyond is opened up. There's more vertical space, so to speak, in the emotions.

And also it being sensed as rooted in the divine, if it does, gives it—we have then a healthy respect, reverence even, humility in relationship to the emotions, trust. That's all part of what is allowed because the crucible is there.

So imaginal image. Desire becomes eros rather than craving. An emotional crucible is formed and forged and allows all kinds of possibilities with regard to the emotion and the image. And there's skillful fabrication and there's soulful fabrication, soul-

making fabrication of self, other, and world. The self can become imaginal. It's not just me in the flat view way of regarding me and my psychology and my history. But included in that is the self can become imaginal.

So what might be involved, or what are some of the elements that might be involved in a more potentially soul-making relationship with emotions in this range of skills that we're talking about for being with the emotions? There are a few things we could point to, actually. There are many, but I'll just throw out just a few right now.

You know, as I wrapped up what I just said, a result of skillful imaginal involvement with emotions—or of imaginal images arising from right relationship with emotions—is that the emotion then feels as if it's not just mine in the flatly conceived sense. Rather, it has its own quality; in a way it's bigger than me, rooted in divinity.

So again, with mutual dependent origination, if the imaginal can open up that sense of the emotion, then if I can view the emotion that way, it might open up the image. We're playing with conception, with logos, with perception. I may be able to simply see an emotion a certain way, and that seeing it differently changes my relationship with it. In that shift, something in the jammedness of things shifts—like tectonic plates shifting—and something can move, and an image can arise.

Often in psychotherapeutic settings, and certainly in Dharma settings, we're taught either that the self, in a psychological context, is larger than this emotion—"You're bigger than this feeling"—and to cultivate that view over time as a helpful way of relating to emotion, so that we're not overwhelmed or driven by it. In the Dharma, we don't say so much that the self is bigger; we might say something like awareness is bigger than the emotion, or mindfulness can be bigger than the emotion. I've certainly taught that way, and it's very important as a view. Can we make the mindfulness bigger than the emotion? Can we have a sense of awareness being bigger than the emotion?

In imaginal practice, in soul-making dharma, these ways of looking where we or mindfulness or awareness are regarded as bigger than the emotion always remain available as modes we can move into at any time. But in addition to that, the emotion may be sensed and conceived as more than me. Actually, this thing that I'm feeling is bigger than I am—bigger than certainly my history or whatever. Why? Because it has a divine root. It's conceived, felt, sensed as having a divine root. It belongs to or originates in the angel, something more than me.

That view doesn't lead to an out-of-controlness where the emotion is bigger in the sense that it's completely tossing us about, putting us through the wringer, leaving us out of control and driven by something in a really unhelpful way. It doesn't lead to that

kind of chaos. It doesn't lead to unethical or inconsiderate behavior. But there's a flip in the view there. And again, with mutual dependent arising, this may arise as a result of the image bringing a different view of the emotion. Sometimes I can simply try to gently encourage a different view of the emotion that allows image to arise.

There are other factors we could point to. I'll amplify something I mentioned already. In some ways of skillfully and mindfully paying attention to emotion, what's really happening is we're atomizing the emotions—breaking them down into sensations, for instance. Whatever the emotion is, it's looked at with a kind of high-resolution lens in mindfulness. Instead of getting caught up in the story, we're going underneath the story. The story is a gross level of resolution. We're going beneath that: Where's the sensation? How closely, how finely can I look at the sensation? Oh, it's just pulsing or it's just heat. This anger, I experience it as heat, for example, or pressure, or whatever it is.

In that sense, there's a kind of atomizing of what was a complex, rich phenomenon—the emotion itself, and the emotion in the way that it tied into myself, my narrative and stories. We're atomizing that through the intensity and high-definition resolution of our attention. This will prevent images from arising. It's really skillful at times, really skillful. This is part of the whole art of navigation—when this approach, when another approach. But certainly if we atomize our emotional experience through the kinds of ways we're paying attention, that won't give rise to image.

So there are other ways of being with emotion that we need. We need to include some self-sense. Maybe I need to include a narrative. I might need to hold it a bit more lightly, a bit more spaciously, that self-sense and narrative. But it needs to be included in the kind of aura or nebula around what we consider the emotion, rather than diving in and atomizing it. And again, we talk about involving the whole energy body rather than zeroing in on sensations in one location at a very atomistic level.

I need to make sure that I'm not reducing this emotion to one cause. "I'm feeling this emotion because of this"—because that person said that, or because this can't happen, or because that happened when I was young, or I was treated this way, or whatever it is. That may be part of the reason. But for the soul-making dynamic to include the emotions, that reason—because my mother said this, or because my father didn't give me that, or because that person said this, or because whatever it is—may be regarded as one cause, but there are more causes, even if we don't know what they are.

We're just opening up the conception of causes. This is one of the elements—that we're not reduced to one meaning or cause or causal explanation. It's one of the twenty-eight elements. Not reducing to one causal explanation or meaning.

But again, it might be that in the mix of qualities that need to be there, I need to let myself be moved. That's the other one which we've touched on, actually. Being moved, being touched—that is an element of soul-making, as we said before. It's an element of the breaking of vessels, of the soul-making dynamic: that things are shifting, that we're touched, that we're moved, that it's meaningful. So we need to let that be the case. If we shut that down in relation to the emotion, or we limit what it can mean in relation to the emotion, then it's not so fertile for the images.

And the eros as well—maybe we're not allowing eros. If we talk about eros as more than emotion, it can be included in that territory. And again, trust, which I've alluded to earlier—just a grain of trust here.

Not narrowing down the values. And again, values are one of the elements of the imaginable. So if I've, in a predetermined, preconceived way, narrowed down my range of what are acceptable values or what is valuable, then that too can limit the trust and limit the possibility with regard to emotions, as touched on earlier.

Sometimes an emotion is going on and actually we don't see—perhaps at the edges or underneath or around it—there is love there. We're somehow feeling loved, or there's love for something, or love for ourselves in allowing ourselves to feel this, or love for our sensitivity, or whatever it is. And maybe beauty. Sometimes we don't see those elements. And in seeing them in relationship to what I'm feeling right now, difficult as what I'm feeling right now might be, that also can allow more possibility, more fermenting of the material in the alchemical vessel.

Of course, seeing, sensing the beauty and the love may be easier if the emotion becomes the emotion of an imaginal other. Okay, so I'll touch on that in a moment. Yeah, let's come back to that.

So there are different—we could probably name some more, but these are some of the threads to consider in terms of what kind of—as I said, range. It's not really exactly this one relationship with emotions that's going to give rise to image, but it's a certain range. And in that range, there are lots of possibilities. There are lots of strands to follow. If it's a ball of tangled wool, there's lots of threads that we can pick up and just start following and see if it untangles or creates something more helpful, more beautiful, more soul-making there with regard to the emotion and also in regard to generating images.

So one of the strands there was this not reducing—not reducing, again, either consciously or unconsciously. So much happens unconsciously that we're not aware of that can actually limit the soul-making process. This is really good to shine the light on. Actually, am I doing this? How am I regarding X or Y?

So we just touched on not reducing the explanation of this emotion to one, to just one cause. Because if I do, that will tend to block the image, especially if that cause is a kind of flatly conceived cause without the dimensionality.

So let's just say something about that as well. You know, of course, just again to highlight this thing about unconsciousness—sometimes we don't think, "Well, I'm not thinking about causal explanation here," but actually at some level of our mind we are, where the mind has already kind of locked down on a certain explanation, a certain view of why I'm feeling this. Because this happened, or because I'm this way, or because I'm just no good at whatever it is. So it's really worth, as I said, shining the light to unearth, to uncover, to discover how we're viewing things in ways that sometimes we're not aware of.

But if we linger on this one about not reducing to one causal explanation: if we always or too often see interactions, relationships, certain effects of the past, of family—you know, my mother or father or whatever—if we're too often or always seeing certain effects or certain interactions or certain relationships or difficulties or emotions through the lens of this past cause—my family, my history, this or that event—it may many times miss, or such a way of viewing may many times miss or obliterate what we could say are more primary reasons and motivations for some affect, some emotion being there, for some response arising in us, for some relational choice or movement. I've decided it's because of this. And there may be something from a certain paradigm that's actually more primary, more fundamental.

So, for example, someone not wanting commitment in a certain relationship, or not even wanting intimacy in a certain relationship, or at a certain time, or more widely, just seeming to avoid that. And so easily a certain explanation comes: "Oh, you're afraid of intimacy," or whatever it is, and there's a kind of whole psychological paradigm that gets dragged in there. But it may be because of an attractive pull, a calling to the angel of purity, for example. Someone's called to a kind of purity that may involve, for instance, more celibacy for a period. Or it may be the pull of the angel towards certain kind of creativity or manifesting certain creative work. It could be many things.

In other words, it's not coming from an inhibition or a fear that's based on my past. There's a telistic, a telos operating here. We're actually called to something else. Yes, it has a cost. In this case, whatever—I'm not open to intimacy.

I'm not open to pursuing this relationship or making this commitment to this person, or whatever situation or project at work. You're not pulling your weight, you're a slacker. But I may not be a slacker. I may not be lazy. I might be pulled to something else. I might be called to something else. I might not be afraid of intimacy. I might not be afraid of commitment. I just have a commitment to something else. I feel called by some other angel.

Some duty or calling other than intimacy in the usual, commonly conceived, psychotherapeutically correct sense. A duty other than, a calling other than to family or to relationship or commitment, whatever beckons. It's not from the past - it's from, so to speak, the future, the angel out ahead calling us to something.

But again, if we're not open at least to the range of these possibilities and ideas and sensing and asking, "What's actually going on with me and my soul and my life and my choices and my inclinations?" - sometimes we lock things down. Everything gets jammed up and inhibited in the sense that certain possibilities that may be really rich and really soul-making are not possible.

So again, if we just linger with this question of what might be among the strands - the helpful strands of ways of relating to emotion that allow images to arise that are fertile, that are potentially imaginal. Sometimes, to add to our strands there, sometimes a slight regard of the emotion as anattā, as not-self. It's not me and not mine, this emotion.

If I lean too much on that regard for the emotion, that's a very, very powerful unfabricating practice. And if I really linger with it, then the emotion will fade. It will go into deep equanimity. And if I just keep going, even with the anattā, the equanimity, even that will fade and it will go beyond, towards the unfabricated.

Certainly with skill in development, with emptiness practices, but even before that, it might be just possible. Don't underestimate what's possible, even without certain trainings sometimes. It might be possible just to sort of slightly loosen the self's appropriation - or normal appropriation - of the emotion, normal regard for the emotion as being me or mine.

Of course it's my emotion, we assume, or we feel. Naturally we feel. Of course it's who I am, or certainly mine. It's just the default, normal way - even, again, not even conscious of, often not even conscious of viewing emotions.

Sometimes it's possible to just - can I just see it as not me, not mine? And that loosening, that slight loosening, again, it's like loosening the jammed elements, the jammed hardware, loosening the tectonic plates, so the waters of soul can start to flow, the waters of soul-making can start to flow, and images can be born from those waters.

Sometimes - I think I alluded to this a few minutes ago as well - sometimes we can say I'm feeling an emotion and it's a difficult emotion. Grief or anger or heartbreak or sadness or frustration. And sometimes it's possible, rather than just that slight loosening with the anattā, not me, not mine, actually going a step further and just creating, generating or inviting an image of another. In other words, an imaginal object who is feeling that emotion.

So who is it who's feeling that emotion? Tentatively, it's me. But what if we just allow it to constellate, to form, as if we were witnessing some imaginal other who feels that emotion? And then there's a witness, the self who's meditating, practicing and watching. Of course, the self will still feel some of that emotion. But allowing it to become other actually opens something up.

And then we might be able to have a slightly different regard for that other than we do for ourself. Maybe there's, for instance - I don't immediately get locked down into judgment. And I say, "Oh, there's a kind of nobility in them experiencing that emotion or bearing that emotion. There's a kind of deep sensitivity." And I sort of see - wow, how beautiful is that, the sensitivity of the soul of this imaginal other, that they feel in that way and that they're impacted in that way. Back to the vulnerability as being maybe a necessary element - they're able to be impacted. They're open to being sensitive and perhaps to being wounded.

But making it other just creates a bit more space sometimes, and that can allow a different relationship with the emotion. And it's already become image to a certain extent, and then it can become - that image can start becoming more imaginal, more complex, more rich, more deep, and reveal what it reveals to us, teach us in the way that it teaches, draw us on in the way that it draws us on.

Related to that, again, it's so worth repeating the sort of non-linearity, a non-formulaic nature necessarily of soul-making work, sensing the soul, imaginal practice. So especially when we were talking about the dukkha and soul-making, and Catherine and I talked about that, and we really stressed, and I'm stressing today as well, the importance of really feeling the emotions. And not just feeling them, but feeling them within a certain range or with these different strands and feeling them in a way that's supportive, but actually feeling them, being with them, allowing them, recognizing them.

And then out of that, as one supportive ingredient or factor or condition in the alchemical process, then an image arises. But again, the absence of formula or my suspicion with regard to sort of formulaic solutions - it's always like this, there's always an order you do it in like this, first the emotion and then the image.

Sometimes, as I've just alluded to a couple of times, sometimes an image comes or we generate an image and it leads to an emotion or it liberates an emotion - an emotion that was stuck or felt like it's definitely there, it's an emotion, but it's all a bit compacted or I'm just looping with it in a certain way. The image itself, of course, again, because of the dependent arising, because of the multi-aspected, multi-elemented nature of the imaginal, the image can give rise to emotion, can liberate an emotion, or can transform an emotion.

Something that can almost move to the opposite emotion, or move to the same emotion as I said before, but it's got dimensions now, and it's got space, and there's something beautiful and liberating about it, and we wouldn't want to trade it for anything, despite the dukkha that might still be in it. There's something sacred and precious, and feels really right, and feels really necessary for the soul.

So yes, very often emotion first. Make sure - am I allowing it? Am I recognizing it? Am I feeling it?

Am I relating to it in ways that are not blocking the soul-making process and the birth of images? Emotion first, then the possibility of image arises. Sometimes the other way around. The presence of an image, or the deliberate instigation of an image, or the recall of an image that's been helpful before, actually either gives rise to a certain emotion, or liberates an emotion, or ensouls an emotion, or transforms it. All of that.

Sometimes what happens is we don't actually realize an emotion is present and things are a bit jammed up, but again the way of being with the emotion can liberate an image that's helpful in the whole process, or an image comes and helps the emotion.

I'll give you one example. A person came for an interview and they were quite stuck —or I'd say more unsure than stuck. They were really unsure about their invitation to join a collaborative creative writing project. They also presented this image: the image was of a mule resisting with all its strength and determination, resisting the pull of a rope. You couldn't see in the image what the rope was attached to, who was pulling it, or why. It was just this mule with a rope pulling it one way, but doing what mules and horses sometimes do—standing in this way that they're actually unbudgeable. All its strength and determination were resisting the pull of this rope.

She was baffled by the image, but it felt important. Actually my initial response was, "Well, I've no idea," which is often the case. Sometimes people describe images or dreams and I'm initially just baffled and sort of daunted by them. But we were talking about it. She felt there was some connection between the invitation to collaborate on this writing project and the image.

But as I've said before, we have to be careful with literalizing and also with the scope of our intention. The fullness of intention means I don't just want to rush in to working with this image asking, "What does it mean? What does it imply? What does it tell me to do? Give me guidance." We can recognize such an intention because guidance may well be part of what's going on in an image—specific guidance in relation to a specific choice may be part of what's there in the imaginal. But if I reduce it to "that's what the image means" and relate to this image solely for the sake of personal guidance in my life, then that tends to shrink things and not allow the full blossoming of the imaginal and the soul-making.

So here's this image, and I guided her gently: "Is it possible to enter into the bodily experience of the mule? Here's this mule standing there, its feet planted and resisting with all its strength and determination. Can you meditate on the image and in this moment, with your energy body, with your bodily sensibility, can you feel the mule's bodily experience?"

In doing that, she began to feel the kind of strength and determination and alignment there, by almost putting herself or feeling into, sensing into the mule's body. So what happened was strength, determination, a sense of alignment came into her. I also sensed at that point something of the heart was involved here—it wasn't immediately obvious yet, but something of the heart.

So very gently: "Can you include the energy body experience and the emotional experience, the heart there? What's the heart feeling?"

And she said, "Oh, power. Power." And I could feel it. This is why it helped me guide the questions here. There's tremendous power here. Don't rush. Don't rush. Linger there. Let it fill. Let that feeling of power fill you, fill the energy body, fill the heart and the being.

Very often—and we're back to where I started—very often feelings of power are not common for people to actually feel. I don't mean power over another or bad power, just power in the being, power in the energy body, power in the soul. Power as the ability to do, power as a sort of gathering and harmonizing of one's energies. It's actually quite rare, and maybe sometimes even more rare in some Dharma cultures where power is

too close to the possibility of abusive power or anger. So very often people are not accustomed to allowing it, to letting it come into the being, to recognizing it, certainly not to lingering with it and feeling it and letting it coalesce and letting it shape the whole experience of body and self.

Because that was actually what I asked her next. Does the self become involved or become image?

So from the energy body sense or via the energy body sense, ignited by this unfamiliar energy body sense of power, an image of self comes up or is allowed. Instead of the usual range of how one feels and senses and conceives of oneself, because there's a different experience here—the experience that originally was not seen as mind because it was in the mule, and it seems like other—and then feeling into that, feeling it first in the energy body, lingering, slowing down, including the heart, including the body, letting it fill, letting it fill the energy body, the feet planted on the ground and the fullness of that, the beauty of that power, really. And then it's allowed, it's allowed then to ferment, to spawn an imaginal sense of self as, in this case, powerful, strong, and the words with so much integrity.

Integrity has a lot to do with power as well. When we're split, when we're not honest to ourselves, not aligned with ourselves, we lose our power. Power and alignment, harmonization, integrity—all these things go together. So much integrity. So again, this was, in some respects, in some domains, new experience of self.

To me, it looked very beautiful. There was a beauty in this. Again, in a way I pointed that out at that point, and that's not to praise myself—it's more to make the point of how so often we're so unaccustomed to all this that we don't see the beauty and specifically the beauty of ourselves, our own beauty, the beauty of this imaginal sense of self, the beauty of this new experience of self, and love there—love of this self.

And again, for so many, it's such a struggle to really love the self deeply and know deeply one's deep beauty, for the self to become a beloved erotic object for oneself. How rare, how very rare in our culture. So just gently pointing out: can you actually see, feel how beautiful this sense of self is, this imaginal self, yourself, and the love of this self?

So there's multi-dimensionality there, there's mystery, all that's wrapped up in it. And again, we're back to pacing, the necessity with these kinds of openings to really linger and go slowly, and particularly in this case with the elements that are new, especially the love and the self-love and the beauty of sensing the beauty of self.

Even in the process one can fall out of that—oh, the energy body awareness shrunk—oh, feet planted on the floor, and that connection. But there's a kind of mist or a constellation of all these beauties and all these qualities that coalesces there, condenses there, and one's sort of in that mist, that holy cloud, mystical cloud of all these elements of the imaginal, one's sitting in it, one is it, they're part of the fabric of one's being at that point.

And then maybe, and again, taking care with the pacing. What happens then if we introduce the notion of reflection and mirroring, the infinite echoing, infinite mirroring, and we introduce, put together this self-image, this imaginal self, with the narrative of your life, past and future? Because at that point, it was just me right now with this different sense of self. And it's not really connecting to the story and the narrative of years and decades, perhaps years and decades of difficulty and choices or feeling strange because of this or that or alienated or whatever it is.

What happens is, just very gently, we put—I don't know how to say it. It's like we put in neighborhood of each other, in the vicinity of each other, just gently this self-image, this imaginal self-sense, and the whole narrative of one's life, past and future. And of course the future is unknown, but just the sense of a narrative moving into the future. So that's a real possibility. Again, the importance of including the narrative sense in a lot of imaginal work. Not as a rarefied, fixated thing, but as something, again, that can be opened up, stretched, dimensionalized, divinized even, through the alchemical process of sensing the soul.

Then, you know, maybe we might introduce the idea or the possibility of this particular creative project into relationship with this imaginal constellation, energetic constellation, state of the soul, perspective on the soul. Introduce into the vicinity of that with the energy body sense, with the self image. And from that came a different relationship and a kind of freedom in relationship to this invitation to collaborate. Freedom not to participate, but also recognizing the beauty of it, the importance of it, the love of it, the duty perhaps. But it's coming from a very different place now with a different self-sense and the power and the integrity, this freedom not to do it, to be involved in that project, not to be pulled in an unhealthy, unconscious way, in a limited way, not to need to prove myself or to seem important because I'm part of such a project.

So there's an important navigational principle in that. The image allowing a certain emotion or opening up the possibility for a certain emotional sense, a certain self-sense and all that. There's another one which I'd like to point out regarding the art of navigat-

ing with an image or in the territory of the imaginal or sensing the soul. And it's the importance of going via the energy body, which we always emphasize, but here in particular.

Here's this puzzling image, and it's really a very, it looks like a very limited image. Where's the dynamic element in the image? Where's the power in the image? So at first —well, nothing's happening in the image, it's just static, it's stuck, it doesn't even seem to have a context. But how does the mule's body feel? In all its strength and all its determination, the dynamism was locked there. The power was locked there.

I think what's more important here is the dynamic element. Something that looks very static and very stuck, this mule just resisting a pull from an anonymous rope puller, actually had a lot of potential dynamism. And dynamism means that which can move things on. It's going in that way, sensing. And again, it's not formulaic. It was just an intuition in the moment. But we might raise it as something to consider.

Where's the dynamic? We say, where's the soul-making element? Where's the immediately soulful element? That may not always be obvious, but it might be that there's something that holds a kind of dynamism. And it may be locked. It may not be obvious or apparent at first.

There's a potentially dynamic element, and in going into it and feeling it, entering into it and lingering and allowing it, allowing the alchemical process to do its work with the appropriate sort of sensitive, responsive pacing, then actually that locked dynamism became dynamic and put into dynamic motion the whole soul-making imaginal process. Then things could move and the whole self-world could transform, as I've described.

This is different than asking, "What does this mule mean? What does this image mean? How can it guide me?" I'm actually going by something rather than... I'm going by what's alive in the image. And again, in this case, it had a lot of dynamism but it wasn't apparent.

It's different than asking, "What is this image telling me to do in this situation? What's the guidance here? What does this mule mean?"

These are things to consider, maybe to practice with, maybe to reflect on, to inquire into. Different pieces will be relevant for different people at different times, as always.

CHAPTER 177

Until All is Liquid: Emptiness and Sensing with Soul

Rob Burbea · 1h41

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines the medieval alchemical principle "don't proceed until all has become liquid" as it applies to imaginal practice and sensing with soul. He explores how unfabricating perception through emptiness practices creates the necessary loosening and liquefying that allows images to arise and empowers already accessible images.*
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> *Burbea discusses the journey of understanding emptiness (suññatā) as fabrication and ways of looking, emphasizing that this is not about complete dissolution but finding the middle territory where form remains malleable rather than solidified. He addresses individual differences in approaching emptiness - some practitioners need deep emptiness understanding while others can work imaginally through artistic sensibility or philosophical background.*
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> *Using personal examples including illness and potential death, he demonstrates how even intermediate levels of emptiness perception (like seeing experiences as "just appearances") can support powerful imaginal constellations. The talk explores parallels with Tibetan tantric practices and Jewish mystical traditions, showing how love of the unfabricated opens the energy body as "garment for the soul."*
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> *Burbea concludes by examining the relationship between the imaginal middle way and emptiness middle way, noting they're related but distinct. He discusses the spectrum of reification possible in imaginal practice and mentions experiences that may fall outside the imaginal realm entirely, such as encounters with other planes of existence that approach death might reveal.*

Over the last few years, when talking about imaginal practice and introducing sensing with soul, I've quoted an alchemical maxim or guideline from the Middle Ages that says something like: "Don't proceed with any operation, with any alchemical operation, until all has become water, until all has become liquid." Don't proceed until all has become liquid, until all is liquid.

We've adopted this maxim and interpreted it in line with our teaching around the kind of loosening or liquefying that happens when there's less fabrication, and the necessity of that in sensing with soul and imaginal practice. This is what I want to explore

tonight—this aspect of slightly less fabrication, this loosening or liquefying or degree of unfabricating of perception, self, other, world, and the elements or aspects of our existence and being.

Notice that the maxim doesn't say, "Don't proceed until everything has disappeared." Things are liquefied, but not completely faded. It's not possible to practice imaginal practice in the depths of fading, in the proximity of the unfabricated. That whole meditative journey and exploration into the deep end of fading towards the unfabricated, opening to the unfabricated—I think that's absolutely lovely and priceless for a human being, something amazing. If anything deserves to be called amazing, it's potentially liberating. It should be liberating if one approaches it the right way, understands it, and contextualizes it properly. Sometimes it's liberating for people even if they don't fully understand it or haven't arrived at it with proper context. So beautiful, lovely, amazing, potentially utterly transformative and liberating.

In the depths of fading, all perception disappears—self, others, world, subject, object, time, present moment, space. The whole show fades through less clinging, through the withdrawal of clinging. This whole experience and its beauty are really important. When we come to practicing with sensing with soul, though, we can't operate in those depths of fading and unfabricating. There is no sensing there, certainly not in any usual sense.

Sensing with soul needs this wide middle ground, this middle territory, middle region where selves, objects, things, materials, world appear and still retain form. Form is part of the perception of this or that, or this or that imaginal object sensed with soul. Some form is there. We're not going toward a dissolution of form through fading. There's a range where form is retained, but there's a kind of looseness to that form, a less reification. The territory for sensing with soul practice—a wide territory—operates where there's form, but it's loose and somewhat less fabricated. It's liquefied. It's malleable rather than rigid and reified, entrenched and solidified.

There's a kind of dance around reifying and non-reifying, but probably more important for now is this region of form but liquid form, form but malleable form, form but unreified form.

We've been talking about emotions and self-view and self-sense, and we'll return to self-sense as these talks continue. In order for powerful soul-making to happen with respect to emotion, image, dukkha, self-sense, eros and the sense of eros, these need to retain some form—emotion, image, self, eros, dukkha, whatever it is. We're not completely dissolving those. In that retaining of form, but liquid, malleable, unreified form, that's the region we're interested in—the region of quicksilver in alchemy, like mercury.

Tonight I want to talk about the place of that unfabricating and loosening and liquefying, and also the practices of emptiness with regard to that. If we talk about practicing with emptiness or emptiness practices and understanding emptiness, fathoming what that really means and the fullness and radicality and comprehensiveness and depth of what that means—I think it's a journey. It's something very profound, subtle, complex, really at the edge of what conception can articulate and then going beyond that edge.

That journey of exploration in practice and understanding takes time. Like any journey, it takes time. Generally speaking, maybe there are some people who just get the whole thing in one go. I've never met anyone like that. I've met people who think they have, but when I hear them speak or read what they've written about emptiness, it seems to me to be missing either some depth or some comprehensiveness or both.

For me, it's something—I'm saying this as a reminder to those of you interested in that journey into the depths of emptiness and the fullness and radicality of what that means—it's really a journey that takes time and work and play and willingness to experiment.

It's interesting that we're back to individuals and the variance between individuals with regard to so many different facets of what we're laying out and explaining, and with regard to emptiness too. Some people don't seem to have a need for any deep emptiness practice.

They can work well with images, they have a sense of the imaginal middleware, the theatre-like quality of them being neither real nor not real, and for sensing the soul in imaginal practice, they don't seem to need emptiness.

I would definitely acknowledge that possibility. Not everyone needs emptiness. I think I haven't put the full stop on that conclusion yet, but I think that may be a possibility. I haven't reached a final conclusion for myself on that possibility.

Some people, either because they have an artistic temperament, or because they've read deeply in modern philosophy about ontology and epistemology and cultural contingency—and that philosophy has not just been a superficial mouthing in academic circles but has actually gone deep, permeated their being—or because they have this kind of artistic, poetic sensibility that's accessible to them as part of the way they naturally see things, or for whatever other reason, seem able to engage the imaginal without needing emptiness practices.

Other people do, I think, need emptiness practice as part of what grounds sensing the soul and imaginal practice. Without it, there is too much tendency for reification. It takes practice out of the realm of what we would call imaginal practice. So emptiness practice grounds it or keeps one on the path, wide as it is.

In some respects, the emptiness practices help because there's a middle way there in terms of real and not real that comes from emptiness understanding and imbues one's sense of everything. As one goes deeper, one's perceptions, one's sense of life, one's sense of the world are all affected.

Some people approach emptiness with a kind of "should"—"I really should practice emptiness because Rob and all these other Buddhist teachers go on about how central and important it is." But there's no real eros for emptiness, no real attraction to the unfabricated, not really for the teachings of emptiness so much. The whole impetus to explore emptiness practice is coming from a should.

Generally speaking, my observation is that when any practice or aspect of practice comes from the motivation of some kind of should—because a person thinks they should—then there isn't the eros there, there isn't the juice, there isn't the libido and the lubrication and the aliveness and the fire. Practice explorations that are driven by some sense of should that's been imported from somewhere tend not to be very fruitful.

If that's the case, somehow, at some point—and it might be later on in one's practice—if one needs emptiness, that should needs to be converted to a real curiosity and aliveness of desire to explore, to understand, to play.

Of course, some people have a real eros—something lights up in their soul when they hear about emptiness or when they hear about the unfabricated or taste it, wherever they are on that journey. I alluded to this whole journey of unfabricating, but even more the journey into understanding emptiness, which is a bigger journey than just unfabricating. Wherever they are in that process, they love it, they enjoy it. There's just a desire, an eros, to want more. That's an ideal relationship with emptiness exploration.

Some people, it seems to me over the last years, especially when I've been teaching imaginal practice and contextualizing it with emptiness teachings, or letting the emptiness teachings inform and form a basis for the whole soul-making paradigm—some people take the emptiness on faith. They don't have a deep personal realization of emptiness through practice, through meditation. They don't fully understand it, but they understand a little bit. They understand, for instance, that there's no ultimate reality and therefore there are just ways of looking, and that legitimizes the flexibility of

ways of looking. In a way, they're taking that understanding on faith from me or another teacher, but it's enough. Or it's enough for a certain range and depth and fertility of exploration of the imaginal. That's quite interesting to me as well.

The full shebang with emptiness and the unfabricated and all that, and out the other side of the unfabricated, is really quite rare. I'd say unfortunately, but whatever—it's just how things are for different reasons at this time. But wherever one is, and this is one of the points I want to make, wherever one is in one's understanding or practice of emptiness, it can be really fruitful. That's one of the main points I want to make tonight.

It's interesting that sometimes a person hasn't got that personal understanding—meditatively based, experientially based conviction, understanding, realization of emptiness—but they've taken some understanding on board through faith in a teacher or teaching, or just a resonance with a teacher, just like "I know that's right."

I think back to myself years ago. I think I mentioned this in some talk—I had this intuitive trust in emptiness teachings, which I didn't understand and had limited sense of experientially. But something in me kind of banked on it, and then later explored practices and understandings more deeply to fill out and add to that intuitive faith. This is interesting to me: there can be something—an understanding absorbed on faith—that forms some degree of a basis, a platform to engage soul-making practices.

I will mention one thing here just about the strand of emptiness practices per se. It's not exactly what I want to talk about, but I'll say it anyway, because part of that journey—at least the way I would outline it—and certainly there's no way around this if you're wanting to experience and understand deep emptiness, involves the movement towards the unfabricated, the movement of unfabricating at different degrees and ranges and depths, the movement towards more fading. A person engaged in that direction of exploration and all the...

subtlety and beauty and rigor and enchantment of such a journey, that thread there of unfabricating.

It's almost... Everyone, in fact, I don't know that I've encountered anyone who's taken that journey who doesn't at some point get tight or pushy trying to achieve more fading. So there's a certain degree of fading of perception—of body sense, self sense, world sense, this or that vedanā, whatever it is—and one feels like, "Oh, this is going great. Now I've seen this much fading before. Let's just push for some more." And so it becomes a kind of task to achieve more fading, and one can get quite tight around that, and one can actually feel that tightness and that pushiness in the practice.

This is very, very common—this trying to achieve more fading, more fading than however much one has, unless it's a totally unfabricated experience. And then getting tight around that, stressed around that.

So a couple of possibilities here, just to put them out. One is that one can check one's intention. Notice that that's happening right in the thick of practice, in the subtle, delicate surgery of that movement. Recognize it's going on.

And actually just two things, two possibilities. One is just slightly shift the intention. Not so much to achieve this or that amount of fading, but the intention is a curiosity around dependent arising. I'm really interested in, I'm really curious about why there is this kind of appearance now, or this degree of fading, or this degree of solidity, substantiality, now. What is it dependent on? Clinging. What does that mean? Clinging, in the way I use the term, is a very big word. It involves a lot, at lots of different levels. But shifting the intention to curiosity about dependent arising takes some of the pressure of trying to achieve more fading. They're obviously connected as intentions, but an intention of curiosity is a lot less pushy and it's less driven toward the goal of achieving more fading. So that's one possibility.

A second possibility is actually to remember that insight, in the way that I commonly use the word, actually is what brings letting go. And in bringing letting go—so where there's insight, where there's an insight way of looking, where I'm looking at something with insight, sensing something with insight, with a degree of insight, understanding—then it brings letting go. It should bring letting go. Often it will bring letting go right there and then as I'm sensing this thing with that insight way of looking. And because there's letting go, there's ease now.

So that, again, the motivation, for example, for doing a practice like a welcoming practice or relaxing clinging or anattā or regarding objects of perception as empty or whatever—the second intention, apart from curiosity, can be actually ease. It should bring ease now. And so I'm practicing this with an intention for ease. So again, that shifts the intention out of the tightness or crampness of clinging to the possibility of achieving more fading.

So in that second one, even then, even the striving to achieve more fading is let go of as it's perceived as dukkha. It's a kind of clinging, right?

Another point in relation to this journey into the depths of unfabricating is not to worry if not everything fades. So yes, there's that possibility that all perception, every element of perception disappears, fades, gets unfabricated, is not fabricated at that time. But in a way, it's okay if, and it's quite common for, say, most of the body is gone,

but everything is gone except my teeth, or... And then what can happen is that we say, "Oh, that's not faded yet." And then one gets pulled to focus on trying to get that thing—my teeth or whatever it is, sounds or a certain realm of sense perception or a certain object that doesn't fade. One gets pulled into an intention of focus on trying to get that to fade. And that actually becomes a kind of obsession. Again, it's a clinging and aversion.

And clinging and aversion, if we understand dependent arising deeply, are exactly what will fabricate an object. So if I'm aversive to this object, essentially, because I want it to fade, because I want complete fading, I want to get rid of that remaining thing, it's a kind of aversion, and that keeps fabricating the object, so actually it won't fade.

Some partial fading, some only partial fading, can often be enough for a practitioner to intuit the universal truth of the insight regarding clinging and dependent arising and fabrication. In other words, yes, not everything fades or the experiences in that sense door or this object or whatever it is doesn't fade. But there's enough moving up and down of this spectrum of fabrication and experience and understanding the relationship with clinging—clinging again in the broader sense—that at some point, up and down, up and down, I see it: let go, let go, let go, everything fades more and more, even if it doesn't completely fade into a total experience of the unfabricated. At some point, the sort of intuitive wisdom grasps something, it gets something, and it gets the truth of that insight regarding clinging and dependent arising.

Conversely, some people actually have a total experience of the unfabricated, as I mentioned earlier, but they're not understanding it at all in terms of clinging and dependent arising. They may not gain any liberating insight, or they may certainly not receive the full possibility of liberating insight there. What's more important is the insight and the understanding. This can be grasped by the intuitive wisdom faculty even when there isn't complete fading.

I put this out for those of you who are perhaps exploring this movement into unfabricating as part of the larger weave of soul-making dharma practices, or who are taking time out from soul-making to go deeper into emptiness. And what do we mean when we say emptiness? I hope to return to this in another talk, but if you've been around the dharma for a while and are listening and reading carefully, you'll see there are many different interpretations of what that means. So I hope to explore that variety and the implications of those choices of interpretation.

What do we mean when we use this term? Well, in answer to the question "What is the basic reality?" we could say emptiness is the basic reality. Then a follow-up question: What is emptiness? Emptiness is no basic reality. Emptiness is the reality of no

basic reality. So in a Zen-like nutshell, that is what we mean when we use the word emptiness. Emptiness means there's no basic reality. Emptiness is the basic reality, and that basic reality is that there is no basic reality.

Wrapped up in how we talk about emptiness are two central concepts you'll hear me use often: fabrication and ways of looking. We've already touched on fabrication—this meditative, experimental exploration and curiosity about the fabrication of perception, not just of the self-sense and personality, but of self at every level, all objects, all phenomena, the whole world, time, space, and so forth. As I said earlier, this involves developing skill in certain practices that fabricate less, understanding how the mind fabricates more at times, and then understanding that the mind itself is fabricated, awareness is fabricated—so really there is no basic reality there. Time, space, the whole show.

This notion of fabrication is central to how I would teach emptiness, explain emptiness, and encourage someone to explore it. There are other ways too, but they all come back to fabrication.

Implicit in this is the second idea: ways of looking. This means that consciousness, when perceiving anything, is always engaged in some kind of way of looking, way of sensing, way of relating. I use "ways of looking" as an umbrella term for all that—way of sensing, way of relating to whatever it's perceiving.

Through playing with different ways of looking, we discover that some ways of looking are more fabricating than others. They fabricate more dukkha, more self, more solidity, more subject, more object, more sense of time, and so forth. So we play with different ways of looking, seeing their effects on fabrication and dukkha and all kinds of other things. There's the possibility of taking this all the way into the depths of unfabricating, opening to the unfabricated, and then realizing that in a way there's nothing but ways of looking. They're empty too, but we're just left with ways of looking.

And the possibility of looking, of sensing in this way at times, in that way at times, in this other way. This is happening automatically anyway, and we have certain default habits of looking, of sensing in this way or that way. But through practice, we begin to loosen the rigidity of entrenched pathways of ways of looking that tend always to solidify this or that, or reify the self, or reify time. All that gets loosened up, and we can begin to explore: here's a kind of way of looking that loosens things in this way, loosens dukkha, loosens self; here are these kinds of ways of looking that loosen self to a certain extent but allow some skillful fabrication—the whole range there.

So emptiness, fabrication, and ways of looking are completely tied together. That there are only ways of looking, and that no way of looking reveals an ultimate truth to how a thing is—this is an understanding of emptiness. That's what emptiness means. It's only ways of looking. No way of looking is the ultimate truth of this thing or that thing.

Now again, regarding the eros that might be involved in such exploration, I think it's important that this whole idea of ways of looking—this logos of ways of looking, the possibilities of ways of looking, this conceptual framework—really comes alive. The logos itself, the idea of ways of looking as I've briefly outlined and much more elsewhere, needs to become imaginal. It needs to become poetic, beautiful, powerful.

In other words, that creative-discovery possibility that's implicit in the whole idea of ways of looking—that the way of looking creates the appearance, shapes, informs, fabricates whatever appearance—this...

The magic of things, the groundlessness, the sense of possibility of viewing oneself as an artist of perception, as a magician, as a sorcerer—all this may be woven into falling in love with the whole idea of ways of looking. As opposed to it sounding like some abstract concept—yes, sure, ways of looking, you can look at things different ways—or just some intellectual philosophy. So we end up bowing to all that in some way.

This whole idea of ways of looking and everything involved in it becomes imaginal in the sense that it becomes dimensionalized. The self, other, world, the idea of ways of looking, the self that relates to ways of looking, and the world that it opens up—all of that becomes taken up by the soul-making dynamic, all the elements, the *eros-psyche-logos*. So the whole relationship or conception to that idea is not a kind of anti-libidinal or deflationary idea. It's not "oh, it doesn't matter" or "it's just a way of looking" or whatever, as if we don't care. There's something very beautiful.

And if one goes deeply enough into it—I think this is important—if one goes deeply enough into it, that the whole idea and practice, when we've absorbed it in the heart of ways of looking, that whole conceptual framework and the exploration of it, reveals and opens us to a really profound mystery and sacredness about consciousness and the cosmos.

So at one level it might seem, yes, we can have a way of looking that sees sacredness, or we can have a way of looking at another time that decides not to see sacredness or doesn't see sacredness or whatever. And that's true at a certain level. But as one goes

deeper into this whole exploration of ways of looking and that whole *logos* there, in practice, it reveals the mystery and the sacredness of the indissoluble entwinement of consciousness and cosmos, the poetry of that, the beauty of that.

So in that sense, emptiness and ways of looking has everything to do with participation as well, which again is one of the elements. So there's a relationship there between the whole idea of participation, the mystery and depth of that concept, and also the whole teaching of ways of looking.

So when we can fabricate a little less through whatever means—there's all kinds of ways of doing that—when we can allow things to become liquid, when we can liquefy and loosen things, then that allows image to arise. There is the possibility in the loosening and unbinding to some degree of perception of this or that. There is an increased possibility of image arising in practice, of sensing the soul.

Actually, I should throw in one more discrimination there, or a related point, slightly different. Liquefying things, loosening things with a taste of deep emptiness, unfabricating, not only allows the possibility of image, opens up the possibility for the birth, the reception of an image. It also may empower, give power and depth to an image that is already accessible.

So I think on the recent retreat we did, Roots into the Ground of Soul, I shared at some point that sometimes before, for instance, giving a talk on the imaginal soul-making, especially when it felt like there was a chance of a difficult audience and hostility—but actually any time, really, in the past, and I still do it—calling on the imaginal soul-making lineage, beings, historical and angelic, if you like, of the past, of the present, of the future, imaginal beings and calling on them for help, for support, recognizing myself as wanting to serve that lineage and support it and move it on and be part of it and conceiving of myself imaginatively as part of that tradition, that lineage.

So yes, before any time, really, often I talk about soul-making, certainly before a difficult talk, or when I'm very tired, sometimes from illness, and I think I mentioned our podcast was scheduled and I was really struggling with health and fatigue, and didn't want to let the side down, so to speak, didn't want to let this lineage down, this tradition down for whom I'm one of the temporary spokespersons, perhaps, imaginatively.

So then, imaginatively, prayerfully, aligning myself in the imaginal realm with that imaginal lineage and devoting myself to that, putting my intention in alignment and devotion to that, and calling for help. What I failed to mention on that Roots into the Ground of Soul, just in the moment of it, was that what I often do with that is have a few moments of really deep emptiness perception beforehand. So I go, just based on

past practice and all the work I've done, very deep into some unfabricating of all things, and then coming out of that, dipping into that, coming out of it with that powerful liquefying and unfabricating, then engaging in this prayerful, devotional, dedicated relationship with the lineage and asking for help.

And that dip into deep emptiness and that deep unfabricating, even just for a few moments, lends that whole imaginal sense of the lineage of myself and what I'm serving and what I want to serve—gives it much greater power. It's already accessible as an image, it's something I can generate and call on and call back, but the power and the soul-making power of that is amplified, I think, significantly, through that dip into emptiness, deep emptiness.

So yes, deep emptiness can empower images that are already there, already accessible, and it can also, the unfabricating, the loosening can support and open the possibility of an image appearing, coming, visiting, being received.

And in regard to that latter possibility, we have to point something else out. As always, there's a mutual dependent origination. So yes, dependent on fabricating less and liquefying is the arising of image, but as always, the dependency runs both ways. There's a mutual dependent origination, which means that when we sense with soul, when there's an imaginal perception, there is some degree of loosening. There is some degree of less fabrication.

So I sometimes give the example of, especially recently, you know, challenged with health stuff and sensing that, sometimes I describe going into a mode of sensing my life and death from the perspective of eternity, *spesiae eternatus* in Latin, the sort of bird's eye view from beyond death or beyond time. And in a way, what that's doing is stimulating or igniting the node of the element of eternality, of the 28 elements. Seeing my life, my death, my narrative from that perspective ignites, turns on the eternality node. And then myself and my life and my death and my journey through life to death, from birth to death, becomes image. And in that, there's a certain loosening, unbinding, fading of perception to some degree. To some degree. Which is exactly what we're talking about.

This alignment brings energy and integration, harmonizing all the elements together.

Returning to the alchemical maxim: "Do not perform any operation—do not perform any alchemical operation, do not begin the work—until all is liquid." Yes, this principle holds true. But it also works in reverse. The arising of an image, to the degree that it's

truly imaginal, will also liquefy things. It will certainly liquefy the sense of that image, but also the sense of self, the sense of world, the sense of time—all of that dissolves and softens.

I want to stress this non-linearity of all the elements that comprise the imaginal. Yes, this liquefaction—this unfabricating to some degree, this loosening and unbinding—is an integral part, a necessary component of what happens in imaginal practice. But it might not always proceed step by step. It's not necessarily: first you do the unfabricating a little bit, then you can have an image. The elements might arise in any order.

There's something important to be aware of here, because I know some people might hear teachings on emptiness—whether independently, in the context of an emptiness course, a book, or within imaginal practice—and feel somewhat daunted. They might think, "I'm so far from those kinds of experiences you're describing. There are so many different practices, and they all seem quite advanced." I want to address this concern directly.

What I really want to convey is that any degree or depth of loosening, unbinding, unfabricating—any bringing in of emptiness, however slight—is generally going to be helpful with imaginal practice, with sensing the soul. The exception would be if one has the foot rammed on the accelerator with emptiness contemplation, really leaning into and emphasizing that understanding of emptiness as a way of looking at all perception. In that case, everything will simply fade. As I mentioned before, during such intense emptiness practice, there won't be any image, there won't be any perception. You can dip into that state and emerge from it, and things will be loosened afterward. But not during the time of full-throttle emptiness contemplation.

Most importantly, whatever little bit of emptiness or liquefying or unfabricating we can bring to bear can be tremendously helpful.

Let me share something from a few months ago. I was struggling with aftereffects of treatments, quite tired and physically uncomfortable, with different bodily systems taxed by medication. I sat to meditate and almost immediately, a soulmaking constellation came together. I use that word deliberately: constellation.

I can't remember the exact order of appearance of the various elements, but one was the idea—really just a word initially—of stamina, forbearance, patience with suffering and difficulty. But that word was lit up in a certain way. It had a sense of significance, of depth. It was woven into the imaginal tapestry.

Another element was both an idea and then the experiential sense, the meditative sense, that all experience—including and especially the dukkha of the pain I was feeling, the discomfort, the inconvenience, the frustration with medical matters and doctors, the whole situation of being very ill and the likely movement toward dying—all of this is just appearances.

Some of you familiar with emptiness practices will recognize this as a certain level of emptiness perception. Whatever I regard as "my body"—it's just an appearance. This thought—just an appearance. Even the perception of this desk—just an appearance. Time itself—just an appearance.

One can choose to employ this as a way of looking: just appearance, just appearance, just appearances. These can be very beautiful and very liberating practices. It's not the deepest level of emptiness perception—it's one of a whole range of practices, a certain level among many. But in this case, it arose almost by itself, something I had practiced extensively in the past.

Though not the deepest level, it was enough to completely transform the relationship at that moment with the whole health predicament, with dying itself.

And like all emptiness practices do, as I said earlier, it should release aversion. It should be a letting go. It should release clinging and aversion. And in so doing, it releases dukkha. And also then allowed a sense of stamina and the kind of ability to persevere with strength, with steadiness, with a sense of uprightness.

So there was this idea of stamina that came, alive with imaginal import and portent. Then there was this certain emptiness perception at a certain level—not the deepest—which from past practice I'm quite used to. It just kind of came by itself.

There was a third element to this imaginal constellation, which was a kind of Middle Eastern man in a black robe. His features were not visually clear, but his energy was quite stern, and he was encouraging me to stamina. He was standing and sort of dancing opposite me, quite fierce, with a tremendous amount of energy—as a kind of tough love, I suppose, he was teaching or communicating to me. He somehow communicated, not necessarily in words, that my illness and possible dying may be for the sake of more than me. I had certain associations with that regarding the Sangha and things like that.

That piece I checked out. I'm always a little bit cautious when something in the imaginal practice has to do with self, and I check it out. And it's like, yes, it had the imaginal middle way. I wasn't reifying that as some kind of self-glorification or something like that. So that put me at ease with that aspect of it.

So these three aspects came together: the word stamina, the idea of stamina; then the sense of all experiences as just appearances; and then this Middle Eastern, stern, fierce teacher who was communicating to me as he danced. And I felt better immediately, just very, very quickly. The body softened, the energy body opened, the energies opened and were enveloped in a warm light, I felt. I could feel that as potentially healing if I wanted to, so I lingered there a little bit.

So several points here. One is, by way of illustration, notice the complexity of some images—that they actually involve several elements in combination. I identified three in this case.

Second, as I said, and this was the main point that I wanted to communicate right now: the use of emptiness perceptions and practices to loosen things, liquefy things, and to aid in that way the imaginal possibilities is really important. So this "just appearances"—this attitude, way of looking, of regarding all experiences, especially the difficult ones, as just appearances—was really an integral part of what opened up here and of supporting that possibility of opening.

But, and this is the point, they don't always have to be the deepest emptiness practices or perceptions one knows. In this case, I've spent a lot of time exploring emptiness, and there are much deeper emptiness practices than this "just appearances" view. But it didn't have to be the deepest one. So really, wherever you are in your exploration of emptiness and loosening and liquefying and unbinding, unfabricating things, that's going to be helpful. And if you've gone quite deep with these things, then anywhere along the range of what you've explored up to that point will be helpful. You don't always have to go to the deepest level of emptiness. I mean, that can be great and helpful too, but it's not always necessary.

So that was the main point, but let's just say a couple of other things. The facets of the imaginal constellation there, those three facets, affected and transformed each other. They were mixed up, involved in each other, affecting each other.

What happened as the thing became more imaginal was that the emptiness perception—that emptiness way of looking of phenomena and experience as just appearances—also became more soul-making than it would be in a purely emptiness practice that wasn't imaginal soul-making, because it was affected by, wrapped up in, in dialogue with and informed by the other more imaginal elements that were going on: this idea of stamina and this stern, fierce teacher in a black robe.

So "appearances"—the word "appearances"—came to me and also gained range and dimensionality and depth and fullness and richness. It meant, it included certainly my illness, the dukkha, dying early. That was appearance, with all the freeing ramifications of that. But it included more also—the narratives of my life, again. And even more than that: these appearances, the narrative and the experience and the illness and the dying and all that—they are me and they are not me, of course. But they are me and not me. They are my soul.

So this was an intuitive, imaginal soul-making understanding: these appearances are my soul. Now, of course, other times I can have a completely different way of looking—appearances, experiences, my narrative, none of that is me. In this case, because of the flexibility of ways of looking, there's a possibility, and this just happened organically in the imaginal mix of things in the constellation there. There was the opposite view: they are my soul. And that...

That sense of that narrative and the early death and the illness and all these experiences, and even the things that I was looking at in the room—the sofa, whatever was there, the table—they are my soul. And all of that—the narrative, death, illness—formed an image. And there was awareness that this image is not just for me, but it's also for others.

There was awareness of self being an image for another, of course, which we can be, and I think we should be in the fullest and deepest and most beautiful human relationships. We become image for each other. We become imaginal image for each other.

The emptiness perception itself, the emptiness way of looking of just appearances, as I said, also took on this quality—became dimensionalized in becoming imaginal itself.

There's a way of using emptiness practices—I'll come back to this in another talk—but there's a way of using emptiness practices at times that kind of denigrates experience and the phenomena of our experience, internal and external. Because it's in the service of letting go, it's like, "Oh, that doesn't matter, that doesn't matter, it's empty, it's empty." And there's a kind of letting go, a holy disinterest, I've called it sometimes. It's almost like saying, "It's nothing, it's empty." And that's very valid at one point, but it leads beyond the world, so to speak. If I just keep regarding things that way, it will take me to the unfabricated. Of course, it could get hijacked with aversion and, as I said, with anti-libidinal tendencies and deflation and all that.

But in this case, the notion of appearances that got opened up and filled out in both a liberating way and an imaginal way was not a kind of denigration or degradation of appearances.

I was reminded of a passage from Henri Corbin, where he in his lifetime was accused of being a docetist. Docetism was regarded at some point by the church authorities as a particular kind of heresy. What it means—D-O-C-E-T-I-S-M—is the view or philosophy that Christ was not truly human, but was an appearance. And some of you will know parallels of that with certain teachings about Buddha nature, that actually the Buddhas that appear in the world are appearances. They're kind of appearances projected forth from another level—the Dharmakaya and Sambhogakaya.

Corbin, in his teaching about the Abrahamic traditions and his interpretation of those stories and teachings—that they would be more helpfully regarded as appearance—was accused of heresy. And he replied, "Yes, I am, but it's a docetism that is far from degrading reality by making it appearance. On the contrary, by transforming it into appearance, by transforming seeming reality into appearance, it makes this reality transparent to the transcendent meaning manifested in it."

Do you understand? It's not just appearance as a way of just letting go—"Ah, it doesn't matter." And then usually there's something that's real, and this is just appearance, and I want that real thing. But he's saying no: in making it appearance, by transforming it into appearance, it makes this reality transparent to the transcendent meaning manifested in it. In other words, when we sense it that way, what it means to be appearance is that it's illuminated, it's translucent, it's transubstantiated into the theophany or angelic manifestation or radiation of divinity—it's perceived that way.

Similarly, what happened here in the weaving together of these different imaginal elements—a certain emptiness mode of looking, way of looking that could be denigrating of appearances—was actually then woven into something that was much more sacred and beautiful and soulful.

There's a relationship—you can recognize some of what we're talking about in this—a relationship between unfabricating and sensing the soul and the opening up of the imaginal. You can recognize some of that in other traditions.

Certainly in tantric teachings, as I've pointed out many times, they're actually premised on understanding of emptiness. One is usually instructed to meditate on emptiness for a certain amount of time and then engage in deity visualization.

I'm going to quote something from the Jewish mystical tradition. This is from Shneur Zalman, in a book called Likutey Amarim, sometimes called Tanya, and he said: "Love derived from the understanding and knowledge of the greatness of the blessed Ein

Sof..." Ein Sof means literally "without limit," but when you read the explanations of how that's used in the Jewish mystical traditions, the Kabbalistic traditions, it really means a kind of nothingness. So it's something akin to the unfabricated.

"Love derived from the understanding and knowledge of the greatness of the blessed Ein Sof, of the unfabricated, let's say, is called *cheshek*"—which means heart's desire. So in other words, when we love that experience and the understanding we get from it, we love the unfabricated. There's that movement. That love is called the heart's desire.

"And from this heart's desire is produced a garment for the soul in the world of Beriah." There's a lot of Hebrew technical terms here, but that world of Beriah is one of the strata of many worlds. This world of physical manifestation is just one world. There are other planes of existence. Beriah also means the world of creation.

So this love and desire, this heart's desire for the unfabricated—from that heart's desire, from that love, is produced a garment for the soul in the world of creation, which constitutes the higher Garden of Eden.

Here's a love derived from knowing the unfabricated, a heart's desire for the unfabricated and for all that that implies. And from that heart's desire is produced a garment for the soul in the world of creation.

And that world of creation constitutes the higher garden of Eden.

In our language, we can understand this more directly. The heart's desire based on knowing itself means the eros based on knowing emptiness and the unfabricated. When we translate these terms, we find that the eros based on knowing emptiness and the unfabricated—that eros, as being eros—if it's allowed to do what it does, will impregnate and deepen, richen, complexify, expand the psyche and the logos and the whole sense of things, so that the energy body and the imaginal body and the whole world open up and become imaginal and become dimensionalized and become divinized.

This garment for the soul is in the higher garden of Eden, in the garden of Eden. You understand? So this love of emptiness, this knowing of emptiness and the unfabricated, that eros does something, based also on the experience of emptiness. It opens up the energy body. That energy body becomes a garment for the soul. The energy body experiences a garment for the soul in the garden—in a world transformed, dimensionalized, divinized, eternalized, given meaningfulness, beauty, resplendent with all the elements of the imaginal.

So that whole indispensable place for emptiness, unfabricating, and the love of that too, the eros for that too, and what it can open up—it has parallels in Buddhist tantric teachings and also, as we just quoted, in certain Kabbalistic teachings from the Jewish tradition. And we can understand that with our words.

So I hope that makes sense. Emptiness is powerful, you know. Going back to what I said earlier, people have different relationships within, different degrees of desire and curiosity, but it's powerful in terms of what it can deliver for our dharma practice, for our lives, and definitely for imaginal practice.

Lingering on tantric parallels, some of you will have heard of tummo, the practice of inner fire, the inner heat, that famous practice among Tibetan yogis. Lama Yeshe has written about it, and Geshe Kelsang and others—you can find books about it.

What it involves is visualizing the channels of the energy body and visualizing certain things happening in those channels and in the central channel, the vertical channel of the body, of the energy body. In a way, a byproduct of that practice is the generation of internal heat. The purpose of the practice is not so much to keep you warm in the snow, but rather that in working with the channels of energy in this way, a very deep perception of emptiness comes about. So rather than through some kind of analytic meditation or other playing with fabrication, one actually works with the energy body and that delivers a deep understanding of emptiness.

Again, mutual dependent arising—things work both ways.

You will notice when you're contemplating emptiness, when you're engaging in emptiness practice and it's working well, there is an alignment, harmonization of the energy body, just as there is when we do imaginal practice and an image is becoming imaginal. But this can go very deep.

When we have a deep moment of realizing emptiness—and it could just be a moment—you will feel something quite dramatic. That's not really the right word, but there's a real sense of the energy body and the whole bodily experience being cleared out and purified, as well as being aligned and harmonized.

So the work with the channels and visualizing can lead to a sense, an experience of emptiness in the Tibetan teachings, but also the other way around. Emptiness practice, emptiness experience will purify the energy body and the channels there, and you can actually feel that. And it will liquefy and unfabricate to some degree all perception.

I want to say something else about that. At a deep level, that's quite a dramatic, palpable experience, but even a little bit, you'll notice that. Something happens in the energy body because it's untangling the knots and the contractions that clinging causes.

As I said earlier, with regard to its place and its use in imaginal practice or alongside or supporting or opening imaginal practice, there are all kinds of ranges of the kind of depth and power of different emptiness practices. And they're all going to be useful and helpful. So don't get hung up that it has to be this really deep thing. Sometimes it can be really deep. And these things can, with practice, become very quick. That usually takes quite a bit of time of developing emptiness practices, but there's always individual variation.

Sometimes what's very powerful, for example, in opening up, sensing the soul, is just a few moments even of contemplating the emptiness of time. Now, for those few moments to be powerful, they will depend on probably quite a lot of practice and familiarity, developing familiarity with contemplating the emptiness of time or ways of looking that unfabricate time or realize its emptiness.

But if that's the sort of thing you're interested in, or if it's the sort of thing that's available to you, or if this is relevant later on, sometimes this can be very powerful—few moments perhaps only of some way of seeing the emptiness of time, and then turning the attention to anything. It could be the body or something else. Anything that appears in time and changes in time, which is all things that we know in the world of conventional experience.

So some contemplation of emptiness of time meditatively, and then turning the attention that's imbued with that understanding of the emptiness of time, just turning attention to something which appears and changes in time, and the sense of a timeless dimension will be allowed, will be supported and made manifest there. And again, that being one of the...

nodes of eternality, timelessness, there can be then the perception of that thing, whatever thing it was—the body or whatever else, the body, the world, whatever—that can be sensed with soul, because we've ignited one of the elements of the imaginal, one of the nodes.

But as I say, things can... any kind of emptiness practice or any level, don't get—please don't get—daunted or self-critical or despairing if you hear about practices that you haven't approached yet or that seem a long way off for you. I mentioned, I think, in one of the talks already on the retreat, how just a little bit of anattā practice of regarding something that we would usually identify with or take as me or mine, and engaging

a way of looking that regards it as not me, not mine, very lightly. A degree of that anattā practice can allow the self to become imaginal. The sense of self becomes an imaginal sense of self.

Why? Because anattā practice is one of those unfabricating practices. When we regard things as not me, not mine, it's actually very, very powerful, potentially. If we can, it's really worth developing as a practice, if you can, if you're interested. So some—not the whole, again, not the accelerator, the gas pedal rammed down full throttle, because that will just fade everything, and then you'd have to come out of that, and that still might be helpful. But just a degree of anattā, a sort of light touch, liquefies things. It liquefies, in this case, the sense of self.

And in a way, anattā practice is also stepping out of the normal self-sense. So the normal, habitual, mostly unconscious kind of program for consciousness is to appropriate this or that as me or mine—body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, intentions, consciousness itself, etc. And so by engaging the anattā way of looking, with respect to some of that or all of that, you're actually stepping out of the normal self-sense enough. And in stepping out of that normal kind of entrenched self-sense, then there's actually room, space for the self to be viewed in other ways. So a degree of anattā practice doesn't have to be—like I said, the whole hog—can be really helpful in liberating the possibility of sensing an imaginal self, rather than just the locked-in, conventional, reified, solidified sense of self.

I want to mention another possibility here, that again, I feel very strongly that emptiness can and should be in the service of love, certainly, and the brahmavihāras, and not just liberation, not just personal liberation—emptiness in the service of the brahmavihāras, but also in the service of a sense of sacredness and senses of sacredness.

So what you can notice sometimes is that opening to more emptiness or deeper emptiness at some time can actually open up and support a sense of prayerfulness. Or it might be that we feel moved to adopt a prayerful stance with respect to something or some situation, or just with respect to the cosmos, and not really prayer as supplication, as asking, but just a prayerfulness. But very easily for us as human beings, that prayerfulness can feel blocked at times, or limited, or stuck in some way.

Of course, when we're asking for things, when there's a supplication, oftentimes it's because there's something we want or feel we need and the self wanting that is reified. And that reification of the self actually limits the sense of the prayerfulness and the openness of the prayerfulness. It doesn't feel so alive or so rich or so deep or so beautiful when the self is reified.

So, seemingly paradoxically, when there's, so to speak, less self, when the emptiness of the self is seen, or we're engaging a way of looking that experiences the self more emptily, that actually opens up and fires and supports a deeper, wider, more beautiful and richer, more soulful quality of prayerful supplication. One still might be in the level of prayer of asking, of supplication—if that's the right word, I hope it is. But the whole thing has become looser, less solidified, less contracted. There's still a self that's praying in the asking sense. That's one level of prayer. But that self is kind of see-through. It's looser, just because it's seen as more empty.

So the emptiness, just as emptiness opens up and should open up the brahmavihāras, and support the brahmavihāras—I've talked about that in the past—so also the emptiness can open up the prayerfulness and enrich and deepen it and make it more beautiful. And it might be, unless you're used to this, that that seems paradoxical. The self is asking, if I see the emptiness of self, why would I ask for anything? Because self is empty, it doesn't need anything, there's nothing to need. But actually it's not—yes it can go to that level, but we're talking about sort of the more subtle play of the pedals here, some intermediate territory of emptiness that opens up the richness and the breadth and depth and beauty of soul-making perceptions, of sensing the soul.

We talk about the imaginal middle way, the theater-like quality, neither real nor not real, being one of the elements of the imaginal, of sensing the soul. But that doesn't really equate completely. So the imaginal middle way is not the middle way of emptiness that Nāgārjuna and others talked about. Not exactly.

So I want to come back to this later, but, you know, all things are empty—at least in my understanding of emptiness, and I think Nāgārjuna's and other people—all things are empty. So that means something that's, an imaginal perception is empty, but also a conventional perception is empty. And a deluded perception is empty. All of that is empty. All of those perceptions are empty. All things are empty. But still, although all things are empty, they're not...

Partly, things are empty in different ways. At the deepest level, they're all empty in the same way. For instance, everything is empty—all things are empty because time is empty, and anything that exists must exist in time. So everything is empty at that level. At other levels, there may be more: some things are empty in certain ways that others aren't. The stock market is empty because it's just a social convention that people get very het up about, but it's merely a social convention.

At a deep level, all things are empty. But still, as I've said before, there's an ontological difference in status between an imaginal object and a conventionally perceived physical object. To say that they're all the same because they're all just empty—there is a difference in ontological status there.

So when we talk about the imaginal middle way, we're not talking about exactly the same thing as emptiness. I want to come back to that in another talk, hopefully. But what I do want to say right now to finish is about the degree of latitude or flexibility or range with how much we reify at any time in imaginal practice.

We really emphasize this neither real nor not real, theater-like quality—imaginal in a way. But maybe there's a rightness to relating to certain images where we are reifying to certain images. And in that sense, those images are empty, but just empty in the way that a person is empty, or any conventionally agreed-upon physical entity is empty. So there's more reification going on than what we mean with the imaginal middle way. Or within that imaginal middle way there's a range, and we can reify a bit more or a bit less at different times, perhaps. Maybe there's a rightness in all that.

I've said before that I think it will be, in the long run, much more fertile to be quite diligent and curious about that sense of the imaginal middle way. It's really a certain flavor, this theater-like quality, and give that quite a lot of importance to begin with. "To begin with" might be for years in imaginal practice. And then, based on that experience and feel for that—it's really a certain feel, it feels very different than other experiences—based on the familiarity and experience with that, then we might start exploring more possibilities of more reification with certain experiences, certain images, certain senses. I feel that will be much more fruitful.

It will also preserve, as I said, the territory and the domain of imaginal practice from just getting mixed up with other stuff and its particular fruits being lost, its unique fruits being lost. So my request and encouragement is to lean on that for a while. I know it challenges people or even irks some people, but I do feel it's important.

Having said that, there might be at times and with certain experiences, certain images, the possibility of reifying a bit more and maybe even the necessity or the appropriateness of reifying a bit more. Some of that might be just to do with a person's own growth of their soul or psychology. So for someone it might be good for them to pray to a personal God, asking for help for themselves, humbly and reifying self, situation, and God. It might be that a person just jumps too easily to this non-reification and there's not with it enough of a certain kind of traction in the being, in the psychology, in the soul, in the heart. So it might be for personal reasons.

But it's a tricky one in teaching. Also emptiness, middle way. It's really tricky, and it's something that really, in the journey of understanding and practicing with emptiness, refines itself and gets more and more subtle and more and more precise—what it really means to say things neither exist nor not exist. Things neither do exist nor don't exist—this emptiness middle way. It's really a part of the journey, and one wobbles back and forth either side of that middle way as the understanding hones in on what it really means intellectually, but also really intuitively and experientially.

Similarly, with the imaginal middle way, it's a tricky teaching, it seems, for people. On the other hand, like I said, it has a certain flavor to me. And I can tell when I'm working with someone whether they're in that or not, and they recognize it if I point it out often—not everyone, but if there's enough sensitivity and familiarity, it's palpable. You're in a different realm there when there's not the reification. So I think it's sometimes really palpably obvious, and it seems to be something that many people struggle with for different reasons.

But I was talking with Catherine as well, and we realized that we don't want to get attached to a position of non-reifying. There may be a spectrum of reification in imaginal practice which we are free to move along at any time, more or less, and maybe for different reasons at any time that it's more right to reify, more appropriate, more helpful for whatever reason we have in mind.

So it might be, as I said, something to do with a person's personal growth, something to do with the fullness of their being. Or it might have to do more with the experience itself and the image itself—that there are whole categories of being, categories of experience that share a lot of aspects with imaginal experience, but they're not imaginal. We're talking about other things. We're talking about opening to different realms as perceptions that are as real as anything else, as real as seeing my friend walking down the street or having a cup of tea or whatever. It may well be—my inclination is to say there are many kinds of realms of experience and being.

And in those cases, to adopt a non-reifying stance in the imaginal way may not be attuned or appropriate. So it's complex—really complex. But it feels important to mention that there are certainly realms beyond the imaginal.

There's a whole spectrum of psychic phenomena—ESP, shamanism, energy perceptions, aura perceptions, and all that. This is all important and significant, I think. Again, I wanted to differentiate it from the imaginal. But I've also heard accounts of people in the process of dying reporting as they're on their deathbed perceiving angels, perceiving other planes of beings, knowing things about friends or relatives on the other side of the world without any communication—all kinds of extraordinary phenomena.

Since my diagnosis of the metastases and the high likelihood of dying soon, there are times when I also feel as if other planes of existence are opened up to my perception. I shared this very briefly in another talk the other night. Sometimes it's almost like the perception of the angel, or the angelic dimension of a human being, is weighted more heavily than the perception of their ego or human aspect—if we can even separate those two.

This has a different quality than what we're calling the imaginal or the imaginal middle way. There is really a sense of opening to something that has the ontological status, the degree of being and reality, equivalent to any human perception or any physical perception.

I just want to mention this. It's obviously a huge subject. I don't have it figured out at all, and I don't know anyone who does. But this business of the importance of the imaginal middle way—it's not quite the same as emptiness. It's quite a wide middle way, and we might have a range within it of more or less reifying. Again, it's quite individual when to lean toward less reification, more fluidity—"Can you notice that theatrical element?"—and when actually to lean toward more reification, even if it's imaginal. Sometimes this sense of your soul may be more real, this imaginal sense of yourself, this imaginal sense of the angels or the angel, more real, more important, more significant, more central, more of a solid pillar and guide in your life than anything which conventionally, socially agreed-upon perception would sanction.

There are individual differences at different times, certainly in teaching, but we also get a feel for this ourselves—moving within that range of the imaginal middle way. And there might be a whole gamut of experiences that fall outside of the imaginal altogether, and therefore the imaginal middle way doesn't pertain to them so much as the emptiness middle way pertains to them, as it does to any object, physical or otherwise.

I just wanted to mention this as the teachings evolve and to point that out.

Let's stop for tonight. I will hopefully say more about emptiness in a later talk.

CHAPTER 178

Daimon, Refracted

Rob Burbea · 2h08

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines how thorough insight into śūnyatā (emptiness) paradoxically opens up rather than closes down possibilities for conceiving the self. When we see that all views of self are empty of inherent existence - whether personality, the five khandhas, or cosmic oneness - we become free to explore the full range of self-conceptions as legitimate theatrical costumes.*
>
> *Burbea introduces the concept of daimons (interchangeable with angels) and explores how the self can become imaginal through various practices: externalizing aspects of ourselves that love or desire, working with images that feel like "me and not-me," and allowing apparently impersonal images to dimensionalize our being. Drawing on Henry Corbin's notion of the "angel out ahead," he presents a revolutionary view where we don't just represent angels - rather, we as earthly beings represent and typify celestial existence.*
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> *The talk offers practical approaches for working with challenging patterns like the inner critic, demonstrating how frustration and anger can become alchemical heat in the crucible of practice. Burbea emphasizes the importance of balance - ensuring that self, other, and world all become imaginal rather than remaining stuck in flat conceptions. Through guided meditation on the voice and embodiment, he illustrates how any aspect of our being can become ensouled, spreading to transform our entire sense of self into something sacred, dimensional, and mysterious.*

If one's practice and understanding of emptiness, shunyata, goes deep enough and wide enough, radical and thorough enough, then we see, amongst other things, that any view or sense of self is empty. Any self concept is empty of inherent existence. It is not an ultimate or basic truth.

In that fuller and more radical understanding of emptiness, it is not the case, for example, that the personality is somehow illusory, but what really constitutes the self is just the process in time of the five aggregates of consciousness, physical materiality, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, intentions, and so forth. Nor is it the case, if one goes that deeply into emptiness, that self is an illusion but some kind of oneness is a basic reality. All these views, all views of self, are seen to be empty.

Where that leaves a practitioner who has seen this, who has understood this, is not with a sort of impossibility of using the language of self or using the views of self and a nowhere-to-go situation in their life regarding self and anything else. Because everything is empty and there is no hidden, basic, building block reality or fundament that is not empty, where it leaves a person seeing that is: it opens up any and all views of self as legitimate views and concepts to play with, to entertain, to put on the way an actor would put on different costumes.

So there's the legitimizing through deep insight. There's the legitimization to see and conceive and perceive self in different ways at different times in the whole range of views of self. Yes, I can practice at times seeing or conceiving of personality being empty, ego being empty, but all there is is this process of the aggregates in time, for instance. This is a legitimate view, very helpful, quite freeing, quite simplifying at times to a certain level. Or a view of just cosmic oneness of one kind or another, where the ego or the separate self is an illusion. Yes, beautiful, lovely, liberating to a certain extent at times.

But it also legitimizes seeing, sensing oneself as angel-like, or the self of another as angel, as theophany, as having a duty to one's daimons, which we can actually use interchangeably with angel, for now at least. The deep emptiness seeing, the radicality, the thoroughness, the totality of that legitimizes and opens up all kinds of possibilities, in a way an infinite range of possibilities, rather than closing down all these possibilities. We're free to conceive and perceive and talk and entertain any sense of self. We're free to move in that whole range, knowing all the time that whichever costume one puts on, whichever way of conceiving, sensing, viewing the self is empty, as empty as any other.

When we talk about the imaginal middle way—not just the middle way of emptiness in the Dharma, what Nagarjuna calls the middle way—we're not talking about simply a dissolution, a melting of the self, a dissolving, a disappearing, a fading of self or other objects of the imagination. To be an object of the imagination, it must be formed in some way. It must retain some degree of form, this form or that form. And again, there's the infinite range there.

The imaginal is formed, but it's theater. If you've been to good theater, it's powerful. You know this is not real, what's happening in front of you, but it affects you. And it can effect a transformation in your being, a transformation in your life, heart, in your soul, in your view of things, in your aspirations, in your desires. Theater needs forms. But knowing that it's theater doesn't take anything away from the power that these different forms of self, the different senses of self, can wield.

There's this kind of dance across the range of the imaginal middle way. The imaginal middle way might seem neither real nor not real. It can seem, just like the emptiness, like a very narrow path that requires a kind of razor's edge of precision in terms of reification and non-reification. But actually, it's helpful to conceive of this middle way as more of a broad boulevard. We have this possibility to reify less at times or more at times across that range that still constitutes basically a sense of theater with regard to an image or a sensing.

In the last retreat we did, *Gaius, The Roots into the Ground of Soul*, I tried to give an analogy for the necessity, if you like, for soul, of the imaginal sense beginning to involve and enliven and dimensionalize the sense of self. Oftentimes we talk about image as other, as the image feels like it's other—though not always. The image is other. It's an object. But in time, it might become important that the self becomes an image as well. This might not happen immediately with a certain image, and with some images or some experiences of sensing the soul, it's not always important that the self becomes an image.

Of course, we've touched on that. The image is other. It's an object. But it's important in time. It might not happen immediately with a certain image. And again, back to questions of pacing, etc. But to look... And with some images or some experiences, sensing the soul, etc., it doesn't always need... It's not always important that the self becomes an image. It might be just fine for this other to be image and the sense of the imaginal doesn't spread to involve the self sometimes.

But if one looks over time at one's sort of tendencies or patterns with regard to imaginal practice and sensing the soul, and one notices that, for instance, oh, I'm always—it's the other that's always divine. And I don't tend to sense my own divinity because the sense of self has not become imaginal. If one senses, if one recognizes looking back over a stretch of time with many images and says, oh, that's really quite rare, then one might be recognizing there an imbalance.

So I gave this analogy, as I was saying, on the last retreat of a fountain. So you can imagine like a fountain, a stone fountain in one of those squares, you know, in a city or a village, in a piazza or wherever it is. So if you imagine this fountain, and the water shoots up out of the central nozzle, and we could say, in this analogy, that's kind of Psyche's creations and discoveries rising up from the central nozzle, this sort of infinite and endless outpouring of the inclination to make soul, the desire to make soul and the raw material of soul.

And so the water comes up out of the central nozzle and then, as it does with fountains, it falls back down. And that central nozzle is central in a stone tray, maybe a circular stone tray. And in falling back down, if the water just falls back down on one side of the fountain, and not around the whole area, around all the different sides of that circle, then if the stone is not too heavy and there's a lot of water—again, analogies get stretched—then if it just falls on one side, that basin and the whole fountain is going to tip over. It's going to be made lopsided and eventually kind of lose its balance, fall, maybe shatter if it's lopsided.

If the water is falling down equally or relatively equally over the different areas of the circumference of this circular basin, then there's more balance there. So when we talk—I've put this out there a few times now, but I'm stressing its importance—so self, other and world want, soul wants self, other and world to become image.

So where there's, let's say, an image that's an other, like an erotic object that maybe I'm sensing as divine, etc., there's a natural tendency, and again it might have its own, let's say, natural pace, if we can even use such terms, for the sense of the self also, and then the world in cosmopoiesis, to also become image. So the initial image might have been an image of another, and working with that, and if we don't get in the way, if we allow soul to do what it wants to do, which is to make more soul, then self and world as well as this other will become soul.

So I hope that makes sense. Without that, as I said, there will be a tipping over. So there will be, for instance, very little equanimity if just this other is divine but I'm not. Especially if that other is a human other whose divinity I am sensing because I am sensing them with soul and I am not. I remain flat or lacking in divinity, etc.

So, this, when we talk about self, other, world becoming image, or soul wanting self, other and world to become image, then we also have to point out it doesn't have to happen in any order. I have been sometimes sitting, for instance, teaching a retreat, and the yogis, the sangha, become image for me first. And then it might spread to the world and to me, include the imaginal sense, the self gets subsumed, involved, needed in to the imaginal soul-making and the creativity and discovery of that. So it can happen in any order.

It might start with a cosmic vision. It might start from some lovely sense of nature opening up, some imaginal sense, some sensing of soul, either of one object or of the totality of one's environment. And then move to the self. So any order is possible. But over the long term, we want to get a sense that the waters of soul are allowed to flow always, all those three ways, self, other, world. The order is not important. So that's something to check.

And what I really want to talk about tonight is the self becoming image. So that's a general point in terms of contextualizing it. We could go further with that and actually delineate other aspects of being, of experience, that also will tend to become in-souled if we let the soul-making dynamic and process do its thing, if we don't get in the way or block it or inhibit it in some way.

So we could say also that eros will become dynamic. Our own eros will become an erotic, imaginal object for us. And in fact, any aspect of our being that sort of comes into the orbit of our attention will—if, when the soul-making is happening, at a certain point it will become, it will get drawn in to the soul-making dynamic and hence become imaginal. So, self, other, world, other aspects too, but it's important that self also becomes imaginal at some point. Or sometimes, at least. And that can happen in any order.

So, in a way, like I said, we could say this is just what soul will naturally do, left to its own devices, if it isn't blocked. But still, we can investigate that whole movement a little bit more, and at times we can encourage or help it, and that's quite interesting to explore that.

So I think I already mentioned, I didn't really fill it out, you know, sometimes what happens is we're dealing with something that's touching the heart, maybe touching the heart in a difficult way, whatever this issue is, or a very lovely way. But we see that we desire something. And maybe that desire is already eros, maybe it's a painful kind of desire, or it's stuck in a painful place. One possibility sometimes, again, quite deft in the touch here, and delicate in the sort of maneuvering rather than formulaic and sort of yanking things around. But one possibility then is to...

almost like externalize the self who loves this or that, the self who has desire for this or that, or has eros for this or that.

So once feeling it in oneself, and even getting to that point, it might be that that was a journey, even to recognize, oh, I have desire for this, or wrapped up in this complicated dukkha that I feel afflicted by right now, or lost in, actually is part of the whole constellation of dukkha, there is desire. There will always be desire when there's dukkha, and that goes back to the teaching of the OCD practice, the opening to the current of desire. But often there's love too. I love this or that. It's wrapped up with desire, of course. I love this or that. I have eros for this or that. I have desire for this or that.

But externalizing the self. So we say, here's all this complex dukkha. I recognize that one strand of it is my love for this or that, or my desire, or eros for this or that. And externalizing it means let that, let the one who loves this or that, the one who desires

this or that, let that become image. She, he, they who love this or that. So almost putting it in the third person and letting it constellate as an image, which then obviously has echoing and mirroring and kind of maybe feels a bit like myself, but is also other.

Sometimes that's a really skillful move. Again, if it's deftly and delicately done and handled without too much pressure or clunkiness or demand or formulaic sort of going through the motions. She, he, they who love this or that. She, he, they who love, who desire or have eros for this or that. And then being with that image, it might be that one actually recognizes, oh, one has eros, or there's an erotic relationship with that self that we've just externalized.

So let it be other. But it becomes imaginal. It might start as just a sort of more flat image, but as one recognises the eros, as one recognises the beauty there, it might become image. And sometimes it's easier to have that sense of eros and beauty when it's externalised like that. For all kinds of reasons and social taboos and cultural conditionings and whatnot and contractions of being and psychology, it's harder to have that, to recognize the beauty and the dimensionality and to have an erotic relationship with oneself. So one kind of externalizes it by just making an image. Don't worry if it's not imaginal at first. It can very soon become imaginal, more fully imaginal, with the eros there.

So, the one who desires and loves opening, the one who desires and loves to be touched, one recognizes that becomes an image, and one sees, as I said, the beauty, the dimensionality, the eternality. There's eros there, there's reverence, and one recognises the echoing, the mirroring. It's me and it's not me. But that might have come, this imaginal sense of she who, the one who desires and loves opening, one who desires and loves to be touched, or someone else said the one who is faithful and devoted to beauty. All these, these are actual examples from interviews, but they came out of a condition of being that wasn't at all clear to start with. It was just a contracted sort of tangle of lots of different painful elements, history and psychology and situation and self-view, etc.

But as this image was sort of supported to come to birth and to emerge there, then it reflects back on the self in the infinite echoing and mirroring. One recognizes something. One recognizes something about oneself. And oneself has become image. Although there's this kind of other, it doesn't matter. Some magic, some alchemy has happened in the sense of self. So it might take a little while to get there, because one has to deal with the tangle of dukkha sometimes. It might not be that tangled, it might not even be dukkha to start with. But then if you like, I don't want to make it too formulaic, then the beauty is revealed, the eros is revealed, the whole self-sense can open up.

So this is important. And there's so many possibilities, you know, working with image of the way the self gets pulled in, dynamic pulled into the imaginal sense, how the imaginal sense spreads to include the self.

So someone on retreat at Gaia House was sharing with me, this is a while ago, they were in the garden and a blackbird flew into a window of Gaia House and was wounded, fell to the ground and was wounded. And she heard the sound, saw it, found the blackbird in the sort of undergrowth and in the flower bed or something. And it was clearly wounded. And so she just sat with it and she stayed with it in its wounded condition, in its suffering and stayed there with compassion, with care, with concern, but also with, you know, a troubled heart. And there was quite a lot of papañca at first with that situation, despite the compassion, etc. There was, you know, what should I do, and quite a lot of, the being was stirred up, partly in a not very helpful way.

But then, as she sat with it, or later actually, the whole thing became imaginal. Like the whole scene, and the blackbird, and the wounding there, became imaginal, and in our framework, when something becomes more imaginal, actually a lot of the unhelpful complication and proliferation that we call papañca diminishes. So as the imaginal grows, the papañca diminishes. As the papañca grows, the imaginal diminishes.

So somehow in being with it and being with it later in her life, back in her room, the papañca declined, peace came and a healing sense came, something that was healing in the soul. She went back in the morning to check on the blackbird, but it was gone, so either it was presumed dead or a fox got it or something.

The next day, the image returned. And she was reporting this in an interview. I asked her, in the image, is the bird alone or are you in the image sitting with it? And she said actually the image was of her sitting with the bird, rather than the bird alone. Actually, both would have been fine. It was more I just wanted to get a sense of what the actual image was, what it included and what the possibilities were. But there was something, I think, a particular possibility or direction gets included if she was in the image. It's not better or worse, it's just a particular possibility or direction gets included when the image is the wounded bird and the self there.

Sometimes in a kind of simple way, this works. It's almost like I'm then implicit in that image. I didn't actually linger on it. I kind of said very little because I wanted to let the process work by itself without me leading it or suggesting too much a direction or what needed to happen.

But one of the sort of basic possibilities of working with image in this way is that sometimes we don't see things about ourselves. And sometimes some aspect or quality of our being comes more clearly to be recognized. But it's not just that. There's more to it than that. In this case, her natural goodness, deep, natural, innocent, almost childlike care for beings. Something that, in my sense, was very natural to her soul, part of her soul.

So we recognize something—recognize our own positive qualities—but there's more to it than that because the whole thing can then become dimensionalized and divinized, which is different than just recognizing "oh I'm good at this and I have that quality" and that sort of flatly conceived psychology of self-esteem or whatever. That's maybe one level. But then there's the possibility when things become imaginal, with the dimensionality, with the theater, with the eternality, with the divinity and theophany, that it can become more of that.

Still, that basic level of recognizing certain qualities of oneself through an image is important. As I said, sometimes it's easier when it's externalized like that.

I'll give you a couple more examples. Someone a while ago came into an interview and reported two images and was actually interested how to connect the images with the self and with the particularities of herself. So one image was a kind of dramatic image of a queen with a long robe, and the robe was trailing blood. So she's leaving this trail of blood in her long robe, from her long robe.

So that was the main part of the image. Who is this queen? What's her story? So I can't remember if I asked that. I think I did. Or she might have wondered, or she might have just offered the background story. And she was concerned in offering this background story that, oh, but I thought images were not supposed to be narrative.

We touched on this, I think, in a Q&A in the Roots of the Groundless Soul retreat. Sometimes you get an image which it's not so much a narrative image as much as it has a kind of backstory. It has a kind of imaginal background, so one understands almost actually implicitly—not like watching a series of events, but one understands implicitly the story or the narrative, in this case, of this queen or whatever the imaginal character is. So in a way it's part of the image, it's just more in the background and intuited implicitly, but it has a narrative structure and still the whole retains a sense of eternality, of always already happening, of timelessness.

So that's actually not a problem with images, even if they're narrative, sometimes it's not a problem. And getting a sense of this queen trailing blood and her poise and strength. So I think, again, it's almost like I might have had to ask questions to tease out the character and the quality and maybe a bit of the backstory of this queen trailing...

And so again, I asked, "Do you notice—" as she was sharing this image, the image became alive for me. We were entering into it together. I felt like I was perceiving the image just as much as she was. It became, in a way, a common object between us, which is a very lovely thing to happen, as many of you will know.

When I asked, "Do you notice her wisdom?" This queen has a particular kind of wisdom, a shrewdness, but without any of the negative implications of that word shrewd. There's a kind of practical wisdom, a diplomatic wisdom. "Do you notice her kind of attuned, appropriate, measured responses to her subjects and to the people in her court?" "Do you notice her dignity, her nobility?"

All this was, to me, pregnant in the image and needed a little bit of teasing out to become more palpable, to become more recognizable, and to be recognized, to be witnessed, to be made clear. And then it's possible, again as a stage of practice, to resonate with her qualities. So poise, strength—each one of these: dignity, nobility, wisdom, attunement, appropriate response, measured response—all these individual and connected qualities can be... Take your time in the meditation and just be with them and witness them and put the energy body and the soul and the heart and the sensibility in touch with them.

Just by virtue of opening to them and witnessing them and appreciating them, one opens one's being to those particular qualities, and the being, the soul, the energy body, the emotions, start resonating with those qualities. In so doing, we absorb those qualities. We absorb, if you like, into our life in ways that can actually then become manifest, practically manifest, really manifest in our relationships over time. We absorb those qualities.

Now sometimes people practice with images and that's the total scope of the intention. Sometimes people even practice Vajrayana practices to do that. It's great, and it's a very powerful way of practice. Sometimes people practice metta just by imagining Kuan Yin, Avalokiteshvara, or Jesus, or whatever, and their love, and just beholding that, opening the being to that. Through that there's this resonance and this absorption, and it begins to ignite and empower those qualities and those capacities in our heart, in our life, in our relationships. That's wonderful.

In our paradigm, we're saying: yes, great intention and wonderful that that happened, but remember the fullness of intention. The image is not here just to serve me. I am serving the image. The fullness of intention means the fullness of soul-making here, rather than just becoming this or that quality, becoming empowered in this or that quality. Becoming empowered in my life and in my relationships, in my expression, in my speech, in my action—this may be part of serving the image, may be part of what the image wants from me, may be part of doing my duty to the daemon. But it's really helpful in our paradigm to remember the fuller scope, the fullness of intention—actually the fullness of soul-making. Included in that can be this absorption of qualities, this empowerment of different aspects and capabilities of our being.

We talked too about a situation back home with some voluntary work that she was doing and the relationship with that community and finding her voice there and being able to speak up with strength. She saw all that was relevant. There was this echoing, mirroring—again, part of the infinite echoing, mirroring—in its relevance and the echoing and mirroring to these particular situations with regard to community and how she manifested and spoke up there.

A second image that was shared was a naked goddess who lives in a tree, resides in a tree. One particularly salient feature of this goddess was that she has her legs open—her legs are spread. The yogi shared, "It's actually not sexual, but she's opening my legs too." So there's already a relationship of the self as meditator in relationship with this image. This image, this naked goddess living in the tree, is very gently opening my legs. It doesn't seem sexual. Something very delicate happening.

There was a little concern from this yogi. She said, "I'm trying not to become ethereal in the image, and I'm trying to retain my particular self." Again, her initial question with these two images was: what's the relationship between these somewhat puzzling images and the self? She couldn't seem to connect them or ground them. In this image, she said, "I'm really trying not to become ethereal and to retain my particular self."

You don't have to always do that. Even if you become ethereal, it's not a problem. To become ethereal—we've talked about this—how does the energy body feel? That range from insubstantiality, ethereality, to dense and substantial and everything in between is one of the ranges of the energy body perception. It's all open.

To become ethereal is not a problem. It's simply what's happening with this particular image at that time. It might be very appropriate for this particular image. I think in this case it was. And also, to become ethereal—if my energy body becomes ethereal—this is not the same as melting in union and losing the twoness, losing the differentiation between self and image, and with that the eros, and so forth. There will be the re-

flecting and the echoing in the life from the tunas. I don't have to become the image. Even when there's a sense of self and other, there will still be this infinite reflecting and echoing just because it's what the imaginal does. It's part of it.

Again, there was a sense here of the image being expressed and then shared as if I could sense it as well. I was living that image at the same time. We were living it together. But I was careful. I didn't want to—I always question my inclinations and responses and intuitions. So to me, it was checking it out. Is this right? Is that right? And to me, there was a real sense of exquisiteness. So this naked goddess had a real exquisite, refined, very sensitive, very delicate quality. And so I asked her if that was the case and she said yes.

Again, it's like sometimes: is it not part of your soul, this exquisiteness that you see in her, in this goddess? Is it not part of your soul? And your particular kinds of gifts in this life, your particular kinds of exquisiteness are being mirrored and echoed in this goddess. Or we could say, more powerfully I think, your life itself—your being, your personality, the way you are with your body, your sensibility—echoes and mirrors the exquisiteness, the particular kinds of exquisiteness of this goddess. There's a refraction there. They won't be exactly the same, but there's this emanation that then gets interpreted or reflected in our particular ways.

And might not this sense of exquisiteness also be part of what, so to speak, the gods, the daimons, the angels ask of you? So again, not to identify with it and not to make a rigid, tight ego belief, an ego view around it. So this is the delicacy of the middle way. There's a way where that can have all the power—witnessing that exquisiteness, conceiving of it and sensing, more than conceiving, sensing of it, having the heart and soul sense of our being and our persona and our narrative in this life being a very particular refraction or emanation of that particular exquisiteness of that image. And not to identify with it, but to feel the power of that.

And with that: is this not part of what the gods, the daimons, the image, the goddess, the angels are asking of you? So the image is brought into a very powerful relationship with the self. But it's got all the lightness, partly helped by the ethereality, but it's got all the lightness of touch, of non-identification—or not over-identifying, put it that way—and making a rigid ego identity around it.

So there's the duty wrapped up in it and the sense of self and the way this image then informs and flows into the self. The self is—again, there are different levels of the way we can sense and conceive this. So there might be, with a lot of these images—again, whether they're images that are sensed as other or the self becomes image—there's this sense of gift but also duty, ask. And that's part of the deal. It's part of the

deal of the self, part of the deal of imaginal work as we conceive it, and part of the deal of the self getting embroiled, involved, worked on in the soul-making dynamic in the imaginal process.

So you can already hear beginnings of a different range of views of self and conceptions of self and psychologies about self than are perhaps more common or dominant in contemporary psychology.

Someone asked me a while ago—I feel like, so they're talking about themselves now—I feel like I want to leave an impression. I want to make an imprint or leave an imprint, I think she was saying on me, but she was also thinking on others, on the world. And she was very skeptical about this desire. So why do I have this? This person had done a lot of practice, a lot of mainstream Dharma practice and Advaita and different things, non-dual practice and that kind of thing. And so she was very wary of this desire, impulse and intention and desire that she noticed within herself, wanting to leave or make an imprint on others, or on a particular other or particular others. So why? And she was judging it.

And it's easy to assume under the rubric of many psychological, spiritual, conceptual frameworks that this is ego. Why do I have to impress people? Why do I have to try and make this imprint? Why do I have to be important that way? Et cetera. But we were talking about this and you can actually ask: who wants this?

Her tendency was to be very suspicious of it. Because she had practiced so long in paradigms that put aside the self, moved towards dissolving the self and dissolving it in some kind of ultimate oneness, there was this suspicion. So it can only be an ego thing. It was troubling her, really, like some kind of itch that she wanted to get rid of.

But we can ask, and I said, we can ask, who wants this? Who wants to make an imprint? Maybe it's what the soul wants. Maybe it's the way it communicates with other souls, if you like, or we could say amongst its parts, if we're part of a world soul, if we're conceiving of the soul that way. The way it communicates amongst its parts is by making impressions on the other parts. One soul communicates with another by making an impression, and that's what the soul wants to do.

You know, if I think about John Coltrane, Jimi Hendrix, Beethoven, Peter Maxwell Davies, James Hillman, Etty Hillesum, friends who I love deeply—these are all, for me, in my life, deep, beautiful, precious imprints on and in my soul. They are my soul, or they're part of it. My soul is informed, has the impression, has the stamp of these deep

soul images. Coltrane, Hendrix, this friend or that friend, et cetera. And I treasure that. I treasure that. I want to be impressed upon in that way. I want to be impressed upon. Don't we as souls want to be impressed upon by soul and by what is soulful?

In that desire to imprint on others, I think, is actually the nascent sense of an imaginal self. So it's not necessarily the ego. Again, it's the soul. And soul expresses itself in images to a great extent. It's not just the ego self that wants to make an imprint. It's the soul self and the image, the imaginal self or the imaginal selves, the budding sense of that that wants to make an imprint on others—a deep soul imprint on others.

And that imaginal self, again, it's me and not me. It's neither real nor not real. But somehow it's very profoundly me. Somehow it's very profoundly me, maybe more profoundly me than anything else. The self needs to become image; it wants to become image. Soul wants to make things imaginal, to discover their imaginal dimensions. And it needs to imprint. It wants to express itself. It wants to connect with other souls. This is how soul grows. Soul making is being impressed upon. Sense of soulfulness is to be impressed upon.

If we don't allow the imaginal dimensions of self, et cetera, then that impulse to imprint stays as ego—in other words, flatly conceived self. And not eros, but craving. And the only recourse then is to try to live that out, trying to impress people from this flat level, trying to make an imprint, an impression on people, but it's all flatly conceived. And that's going to be misery for everyone, probably.

Or the only other recourse, if we're inhibiting or disallowing or dismissing the possibility of this whole soul dimension of self, is to dwell in no-self, whatever that means, and try and live one's life with this kind of ideal of no-self—whether that's I'm just this process of aggregates or I'm just love or whatever it is, I'm just awareness or I'm just cosmic consciousness or whatever. Again, in the way I would understand, that's great. Those particular views of no-self are wonderful to move in and out of, but to try and live a whole life with all the complexities and demands and particularities of our ways of loving and our creativity and our duties, et cetera, doesn't really work.

So without the imaginalizing, the dimensionalizing, the divinizing, the theophanizing of self, our possibilities are very limited and they don't really work. So in a way this person was bumping into repeatedly the failure of a paradigm of no-self to comprehensively address the totality of our being and her needs—spiritual, soulful, et cetera.

We're just so used to a certain idea of this is right, this is spiritual, this is psychologically healthy or whatever. And just something else wants to happen. And partly what allows it to happen is to conceive it in a way that gives it some respect and believes there's a treasure there, believes there's a necessity of soul there.

So self, other, world—maybe also one's desire, one's eros. There might be eros to imprint on others, this desire to imprint on others, on the soul of others.

My soul desires deeply to make this impression, and there's not craving, not even just desire, but eros there. But self, other, world, eros need to become erotic, imaginal objects for us. Then there is unfathomability, sacredness, beauty in these—in the self, in other, in world, in desire, not only beyond self. The unfathomability, the divinity, the beauty—it's in them. They are expressions of it, broadening expressions of it.

I think I touched on this very briefly in an earlier talk in this series, but if we allow this and begin to sense it or allow ourselves to sense it and conceive of it as a soul desire—it's not ego, it's soul—then, if it's allowed to do its thing, it can be soul as opposed to ego. If we can conceive of it the right way, it can be soul rather than ego.

But of course there's dukkha there if it seems like we're not making an imprint. The angels want to make an imprint. They need to—it's what, one kind of conception is, that it's what we're here for. It's what human beings are here for: to express the divinities, the divinity, the angels and their particular faces, the faces of the gods. We are here to express the faces of the gods, and the angels want that, and they want that from us.

So the dukkha of feeling like I'm not imprinting, there is no connection there in what I'm trying to put out or communicate of my being—the dukkha might not even be an ego dukkha, primarily. It might be the dukkha of that whole sense of "this is what the angels want, and this is what I'm here for," and it's frustrated, it's blocked. There isn't the reception.

We could say, if we just play with this idea, that the ego's desire to impress is a kind of contraction of, or a dim echo of, the soul's desire to impress. So again, we could make a whole psychology of this idea, kind of premise or maxim: the soul wants soul-making, the soul loves soul-making. And that's the urge, that's the fundamental movement in life. And everything else can kind of shape down from that.

And what happens sometimes, if we play with this conception, is that that soul's desire to impress gets shrunken or flattened or tightened or contracted. And so it becomes a contraction or a dim echo of the soul's desire to impress. And it just manifests as ego. And it feels like ego. Something's got shrunk.

So that kind of conception is quite a different conception of self and reading or interpretation or hermeneutic of what we're doing in us, what we're trying to do. Or what, if you like, the angels are trying to do through us. My daimons, your daimons are trying to do through you, with you, as you.

There was, you know, some of you will have heard this story from Oscar Wilde, where he was travelling between countries and the customs officer asked him, "Do you have anything to declare?" And he sort of said, "Only my genius."

And it's funny—sometimes I've shared a few quotes of Oscar Wilde before, and sometimes it seems to me, I don't know if it's the case, but it's almost like you can hear these little witty quips that he has and these little retorts that he has to certain situations on two levels. So at one level it's just a funny sort of self-aggrandizement kind of thing, declaring that he's a genius in the way that we usually understand that word.

But that word genius actually originally referred to something like a daimon. So it wasn't that a person was a genius; a person had a genius—so a particular genius, like their, if you like, angel or their spirit or their daimon.

So: "Do you have anything to declare? Are you bringing anything with you through into this country, through customs?" "Am I bringing anything with me? Only my genius." So you can see I have nothing here, very few bags or whatever it is, but I'm bringing this invisible daimon that you can't see—like illegal goods might be hidden. So he's declaring that.

So I don't know if that's what he meant, but as I said, a lot of times I get these kind of double-leveled interpretive possibilities, possibilities of interpretation of things he says. And then the relationship with that could be very different than the first interpretation of just a kind of ego thing, "I'm a genius, I'm declaring my genius, I'm a really smart guy," or whatever it is. Not ego—it could be the conception of that daimon, of that genius in the original sense. It's him, not me. And so there's a relationship of humility with that.

But this has really gone out of fashion. If it was ever mainstream in any culture, I don't know, but it's certainly gone out of fashion.

I remember in a music history class studying about Stravinsky, the famous, brilliant twentieth-century composer. He wrote The Rite of Spring, as some of you will know. And he was being interviewed by his assistant, Robert Craft, and they recorded it at one point. And they were talking about the composition of The Rite of Spring back in the early twentieth century, and this was much later.

And Robert Kraft got him talking, and at some point Stravinsky said something like, "I was the vessel through which the Rite of Spring was born, through which that music was born." And then a little while later, Robert Kraft quoted him back as saying that. And Stravinsky said, "I never said that." And Kraft said, "You did, it's on the tape recorder."

It's a kind of slightly taboo topic because I think, like so many other things—sexuality and all kinds of things—we have such a confused notion of what we're allowed to think and say and how we're allowed to view self and what's taboo and what's regarded as ego. So in the flow of the conversation, he was expressing perhaps a certain natural perception of being in service to something. In this case, the service of the angel was a piece of music. Étienne Souriau, the French philosopher, sometimes talked about "the angel of the work." So this composition, this 20th century composition The Rite of Spring, it was or had an angel, and that angel wanted something out of Stravinsky. But then he said, "I never said that." "Yes, you did."

So we're constrained and confused by the mixed messages we get about self. In so many ways we live in a very egotistical culture, but we also view that badly and we judge ourselves or others when it looks like they or we are being egotistical. There's nowhere else. There are no other conceptual levels. The conception is so thin and so limited, and we're just shunting back and forth between a rock and a hard place there. Either ego—because we have no other level to think of—and so we pursue things out of a sense of ego aggrandizement, or the judgment and denigration of that in ourselves and others. There's nothing else, because the wider conceptual frameworks in the culture offer nothing else. All the dimensions have gone, all the possibilities have gone, and there's a real impoverishment there.

So Corbin, of course, talked a lot about—I shared before—talked about the angel out ahead. He's almost like a counterpart of ourselves, a second half of our soul, if you like, and our relationship with that through the imaginal and the importance of that to the sense of who we are and the direction we have in life and our duties to that angel.

Just paraphrasing a passage from one of his books, Temple and Contemplation, I think the book's called—you know, so in this case he's calling it the "person archetype." He said that's not a symbol of something in me. Rather, it is the earthly human person—it's me—who by gravitating towards this spiritual person, this angelhood, I represent and typify something. A hypostasis means an existence, a being of the angelic world. You understand? So the usual way of seeing it is, "Oh, this image is representing some aspect of me." We've talked about this before. It's representing some aspect of me. The image is a representation.

Turning it around. No, I represent and typify this angel of the angelic world. And he continues: the human being is called upon to answer for it on earth. So again, there's his way of saying this sense of duty. Everything's reversed here.

He's actually talking about ritual in this passage, so it's how the ritual relates to these kinds of ideas. He says human gestures, human representations and imaginings are so many methods whereby a human being can be led to typify and exemplify in themselves a celestial existence. By celestial existence, in our language, it's other dimensions of being. So there's that dimensionality node here.

And again, he's talking about ritual, but he says if a celestial person, if an angel is represented by a particular gesture or word or phase of the ritual, then to observe these is already to exist in the manner of that transcendent person. It's a very different, back-to-front, upside-down view of reality, of self and reality.

And so, as I said, that brings dimensionality into our being, and not just the dimensionality of, let's say, Freud's unconscious—a sort of deep, dark well of shameful secrets and inclinations or whatever. This dimensionality, all kinds of dimensions there. And yes, divinity, sacredness, theophany. Self is dimensionalized, divinized, recognized as sacred, or allowed to flower in a sense of sacredness. Self as theophany, or as potential theophany.

So this angel out ahead, or what he's calling in this case the celestial person, is eternal. Our selves—our human selves—don't seem to be. Sometimes when Corbin—I'm not an expert on Corbin, his writings are sometimes very dense and he was very prolific—but sometimes it sounds like he's talking, when he talks about the angel out ahead, as if there's just one angel out ahead, or one genius, or whatever.

In the soul-making Dharma, there's not necessarily just one. So going back to the beginning, we're free. There are many images, what Hillman calls more polytheistic psyche—images that sometimes, imaginal beings, angels, that sometimes are kind of in conflict with each other, or at least move, pull us, draw us, beckon us in different directions, ask of us impossibly divergent things.

I mean, it may be that they all refer to some kind of more fundamental, higher dimensional archetype, if you like—I don't know—but in some of these paradigms. An archetype, if you remember when I talked about that word, I think it was in Path of the Imaginal—in the original meaning, it meant something without a form. It was rather the principle of forming. Forming like this or forming like that. So that which is not an image but forms images.

So it might be, if you think about it that way, that it generates many images.

Now, of course, sometimes what we encounter in or with the sense of self doesn't feel divine at all. It doesn't feel sacred. If it feels eternal, it's more just a sense of seeming to go on forever with its afflictive gestalt or constellation.

Sometimes, for example, we struggle—especially in our culture—with the inner critic. This is very, very common, partly as a result of our culture and its limited ways of understanding and conceiving the self, but also as a result of social fragmentation, individualization, individualism—all kinds of things historically.

I've talked about working with the inner critic in the past. Many years ago, I gave some talks on it and offered a whole set of approaches or things one could do in meditation, both when the inner critic is active and present, and also when it's not active. Some of those approaches involved working with the imagination with regard to the inner critic and relationship with the inner critic. But that wasn't imaginal—it was working with imagination, not imaginal in our sense. However, it might be that we can actually allow things to become imaginal with respect to the inner critic.

Some of that might start with just a more deliberate imagination. Let me give just a couple of possibilities to start our exploration.

Sometimes perhaps the inner critic could be seen as part of the self, part of the psyche, which among other things has become the sole locus of power. When the inner critic is badgering us and taking over and hounding us, all the power, or most of the power, has gone there. There is this psyche with its complexity, this self with its complexity, this soul with its complexity, and all the power of that soul seems to be gathered under the purview and domain of that inner critic. The rest of the being feels weak, collapsed, lacking in power. But actually, my psyche, my self, my soul is part of that.

So, a couple of possibilities. Sometimes, maybe, feeling one's frustration and anger at the inner critic. We're back to this crucible thing and the emotions and where the emotion is, and where the point of entry is that can allow things to start to become dynamic and galvanize a little bit in terms of liberating process, but maybe even soul-making process.

Feeling one's frustration, one's anger—one can be so fed up with this inner critic. Instead of getting dragged into listening to the inner critic, what else is there? I'm feeling really fed up. I'm feeling actually really angry at the inner critic. The heat of that emotion—I have to sit with it in the energy body, have to kind of tease it out of the afflictive mix that's happening at the time. But in being with it, in holding it, in being with

it in the energy body and recognizing it, actually letting it heat up, letting that frustration and anger—recognizing there may be a treasure here in the frustration and anger, which I usually would see as a defilement, as a kilesa, as something that's not helpful.

Letting it build up in the energy body, in the alchemical vessel, in the crucible, and out of that, an image might arise out of the heat of the frustration and anger at the inner critic. An image might arise and that may well have power in it because frustration and anger have a lot of potential power wrapped up in them. And so another part of the psyche is empowered and it changes the relationship with the inner critic.

Another possibility is to go ahead and deliberately imagine—it might not be imaginal at first, don't worry. It might never stay imaginal; it might still be liberating. Go ahead and deliberately imagine, for example, destroying the inner critic violently. Whatever it is—smashing it to bits, clunking it on the head, whatever. That deliberate imagination may not be imaginal, and it may be liberating without this ever becoming imaginal, or it may become imaginal. Then that actually going ahead and deliberately imagining destroying the inner critic violently may actually liberate the feeling of anger.

In the first approach, it was: can I feel the anger first? Can I feel the frustration first and let that constellate an image? Or it might be that I'm actually playing with the imagination and that liberates the possibility of feeling that emotion. And in that anger is power. The third step there would be to actually—can I almost filter out the sense of power in the energy body from the feeling of anger?

Those are some possibilities. Again, in that last illustrated thing, putting those two together—there's non-linearity here. It's a tangled ball of wool. I pull on this and it might be that this loosens as well, this other thread.

There's also a slightly different possibility. The inner critic tends to arise in relation to something we are deeply longing for or that we actually have eros for. Someone was talking to me about the inner critic, and I asked her when it comes up—is it there all the time or in certain situations? It was coming up in relation to or in the context of certain kinds of public speaking situations where she really cared about what she was communicating or teaching. For a lot of people, it comes up in relation to practice and wanting to practice well.

So this is interesting, you know, I'm not saying it's always the case—sometimes there's a more pervasive, low-grade sense of inner critic, of course—but oftentimes it's actually coming up in relation to things that we really care deeply about, or that we really long for, or that we have eros for.

So rather than getting caught up with the inner critic and what it's saying and what it's doing, et cetera, again, it may be possible to let it do its thing, but can I kind of contact the eros or desire that's there? Because I want—I'm judging myself for being a bad meditator or whatever—but actually, can I contact the eros and the desire to meditate well and deeply and discover and play in that way?

The inner critic is still doing its thing, but I'm kind of just honing the attention, directing it to other elements, other aspects of the tangle of what's going on. And with that desire, again, as I touched on earlier, might be wrapped up the dukkha of the frustrated desire. You know, I really want this thing and I'm just frustrated. I'm not making any headway, or I really want to be able to communicate well in a teaching situation or whatever, but I feel like I'm not doing well enough.

So there's the dukkha of the frustrated desire might be part of what I come into contact with when I'm looking for the eros or desire underneath, underpinning or associated with this inner critic. And that's okay, you know, because frustration also has this heat element and it's very close to the desire, the eros. But again, out of that crucible, out of that—I'm directing the attention to some elements of the being, the eros, the desire, or even the dukkha, the frustrated desire—there's heat there, and there's potential dynamism there.

And out of that crucible, if I can relate to them and hold them the right way, an image might arise in relation to the self, or the self might become image. And one might have a very different sense of it all, even a different sense of the inner critic, different sense of self that's healing there, etc.

What was interesting when this person raised this with me was she was taking a public speaking course to try and develop her skills as a public speaker. When they were given certain exercises and things like that, but in this case I don't think—or it may not be that—the underlying desire, the deep longing comes up in the context of those public speaking exercises. There might still be self-judgment, but the desire won't be there. But when it came to teaching or speaking in public about what she really loved or what felt really important to her, then there will be the desire.

The other things were kind of just giving exercises or techniques that you can do to improve as a public speaker. All really important. But it wasn't just that she wanted to be a good public speaker just for the sake of it. There were things that she wanted to communicate, that she deeply wanted to communicate and communicate well. So you have to look for the desire in the right place if this is the case.

And we'll hopefully come back to this, but there's a way—and I know some, probably at this point, maybe most of you know this—there's a way that we, as one of the knows, loving and being loved, we can feel loved by an image or images in ways that heal so deeply. And so sometimes connecting with an image and recognizing, feeling, opening to its love for us—it's so tailored and so tailored to our being and our particularities and so attuned to us and empowered by the dimensionality and the divinity and the beauty, et cetera—that in a way that kind of love, the love that images have for us, profound and almost mysterious, mysteriously attuned love, it can heal the inner critic and that whole painful constellation almost more powerfully, I think, than anything else.

So if we just lay out some possibilities with regard to the self-becoming image, the self-becoming imaginal, soulful sense of self, soul-making sense of self. There is, as I said at the beginning this evening, there is the possibility of externalizing, so to speak, the self that loves this or desires that or feels this way or whatever, and letting that become image, letting it become other, and then that becomes imaginable. And that starts to then echo back and change our sense of self and dimensionalize it, et cetera, and allow it to become more imaginable soul-making.

Then there is also the possibility of an image that is already other, but we sense it's me and it's not me. It's not me, it's other, but somehow it echoes me. And in Corbin's language, we recognize the angel out ahead. It has something profoundly to do with me and my soul. Somehow it's profoundly me and it's not me. And so that becomes, if you like, part of our sense of self, part of our soul sense of self, part of our sense of soul.

There's another possibility that I haven't really touched on, where an image can arise and it's sort of apparently impersonal. It seems like it's not to do with self, it's not an image of self, but actually it's doing something that's allowing the self to gain dimensionality and become image. So there's images that are apparently impersonal that don't retain particularities.

So, for example, I've been reading in the last few years at different times a little bit about what's called the Ten Sephirot. So it's a Kabbalistic teaching. There are ten—you'd call them aspects of the Godhead or aspects of God or aspects of the way God emanates from the sort of unfabricated, dark mystery of the innermost being of God emanating in these ten qualities. And so love and strength and wisdom and etc. And there's all kinds of literature on this and ways it's interpreted, et cetera.

And so I was meditating one day with this, having read about this, and then with the idea that my being contains or expresses these ten sephirot, these ten aspects of God. Our beings do. Everyone's being does. So they themselves are part of and rooted in the divine being. And our emanations are set at different levels of the divine or the Buddha nature, if you prefer that word.

And again, in Dharma language, Dharmakaya actually means the body of qualities of a Buddha. That was one of the original meanings of it. And it came to have other dimensions of meaning. So there's a similarity there between the teaching of Dharmakaya and Sephirot. But then was added to in my meditation with this idea that my being contains and expresses those ten aspects of the divine, of the Buddha nature.

And meditating in that way, they remain impersonal, but the self begins to be given a kind of dimensionality and divinity, and it's complexified in that way. Because of that, the self begins to become imaginal. And then, as I said right from the beginning with the fountain basin analogy and also then the world in cosmopoiesis, the world starts to become imaginal as the self becomes imaginal, or it might be that the perception of the world is conceived of and sensed as self—that kind of way of looking.

But in that meditation, you can hear that it all sounds quite universal and impersonal in a way. Although the self is involved, it seems to be being seen as just a universal kind of manifestation of God, of the Buddha nature, with these ten qualities that everyone has. But there was a way of doing it where my particularities were retained—they weren't dissolved. I wasn't dissolving the sense of self or omitting the sense of self. My narrative, my struggles, my joys, all that was included in this meditation on the nature of God and the nature of the human psyche—a human being—and the continuity of that in terms of the Sephirot, the human being as emanation of the Sephirot, but without dissolving the particularities, without omitting me and my narrative and struggles and all that.

So there's the particular, unique way these ten Sephirot manifest and express through me. Something that can start as an apparently impersonal image, or even sound like it, actually can be—by including the narrative and the particulars and the uniqueness—rendered more unique, retaining its particularities, retaining its personal personhood and uniqueness to self. There are all kinds of possibilities. I'm just throwing out a few here.

But if we linger for a moment with this particular area of senses of self that are apparently impersonal, then it's worth mentioning—some of you may know this—in some of the Buddhist tantras, the tantric texts, the elements, for example earth, air, fire, water, sometimes space, sometimes consciousness—either four or five or six elements—

are, you could say, personified or associated with certain divinities, certain bodhisattvas or Buddhas or goddesses. You could say more than that. You could say that the elements are the refractions of those goddesses.

For instance, in the Guhyasamāja Tantra, the four goddesses: Māmakī, who is or is behind or emanates or symbolizes liquidity, the water element; Locanā, who symbolizes, who represents, who emanates, who is the element of earth, of solidity; Pāṇḍarā, who is or symbolizes or emanates fire, warmth element; and Tārā, who manifests or emanates or is the goddess of air, the air element.

And so for some tantric practitioners who base themselves, for example, on the Guhyasamāja Tantra, practicing that way, that would form part of their mandala and part of their meditation. And there are different ways you can do this. Some of it will be very prescribed, but there's no reason why one can't improvise with it a little bit. So sometimes one may be meditating outside with a sense of the elements in relationship to one's body, and there's a sensing with soul of, for example, the four elements. And one plays with that, one encourages it, or it just opens by itself, and one senses them as divine, maybe as goddesses, personal divinities in this case, or one's following this prescribed image.

So that's all lovely, and we could include that in soul-making dharma and that kind of thing in imaginal practice. There was once—maybe it was on the Foundations, I can't remember, I think it was in a Q&A—someone asked me, and I responded to, categorizing the different kinds of image that can arise that aren't... You know, there are the imaginal images and the way that we talk about them for the most part, but then there are other variations where you can kind of get this formless space that retains the essence of the particularity of the character of whatever imaginal figure one was meditating on, but the actual sensible apprehension of that imaginal figure has gone. It just retains their character. An empty space with their character can be very beautiful, very profound. That's a possibility.

There's also a whole possibility of what often tends to happen with more prescribed images or archetypes—Guānyīn or these four goddesses from the Guhyasamāja, for instance, or Tārā—where it's almost like one's working with an imaginal figure, but that imaginal figure is kind of, in a way, semi-universal. And that's fine, that's a very popular form of practice of using the imagination and visualization, especially for Vajrayāna practitioners. And it can stay there, like this goddess Tārā, whoever it is, doesn't really become a fully particularized character the way imaginal images, in the sense that we mostly are talking about them, tend to. But it's still really valid and can be really fruitful.

And of course, an image may start that way in a sort of more universal archetypal sense of this image, Tārā, or this goddess, or whatever it is, and then become more particularized with practice. Not that it should or shouldn't, it's just a slightly different realm that one's in, a slightly different direction.

Or again, it could be, for instance, in practicing with sensing the elements with soul, the four elements—earth, air, fire, water—and letting them become divinity as goddesses, like that. Again, then, as one meditates, it may be, and one might be able to steer it this way, or it might just happen this way—it's not better or worse—that they become particularized, these goddesses, or their relationship with this body, this self, and the elements in relation to these more universal archetypes. That relationship relates to this particular self.

And again, as we said in the introduction, for example with the practicing of the ten Sephirot, the particulars of this self and this body and the way the elements have manifested in this body and in this life and in this narrative and do manifest right now and will in the future—that's where the particularity is kind of not just retained, but also then involved and highlighted and amplified even in the practice.

So they remain kind of somewhat universal, the elements and the goddesses behind them in this example, but it starts to become more personal through the relationship. How do those elements, how have they been incorporated into my life, this life, this narrative, this being, this self, this body? So that's a possibility.

There are a couple of possibilities there: letting it be more universal archetypal, and it becoming less so through the particularization, the uniqueness of the self; or, through the particularization and gradual particularization and uniqueness of these divine figures, they become more particular, more like proper characters.

So you can see there are all kinds of tributaries of possibilities here. But even if something starts apparently impersonal, it can stay impersonal and still be very soul-making, very beautiful, very fruitful kinds of practice.

Or there are ways that it can be apparently impersonal and then gain more personal relevance and particularity, either in oneself or in the image.

So just throwing out some different possibilities here. I mentioned we're talking about what can support the sense of self becoming imaginal and the sense of then dimensionalizing the self and sensing the self as having divine roots, as being theophany, as having its origins in other dimensions.

And I mentioned several times now ways of practicing where one has a kind of panoramic view or bird's eye view of the whole of one's life, as if from the other side of death, beyond death, after death, seeing it all at once as a tableau—the birth, the life, the narrative, and the death—from the perspective of eternity.

One can just play with that. It may take a little practice, but it's just using the imagination a certain way. But in gaining that perspective on life, then it can be that the eternality element, the node of eternality is triggered, is ignited, and that can allow the sensing of one's life, of one's birth, narrative, and death from this perspective, from the eternal perspective. And the whole thing can be sensed with soul. It starts to flesh out and come alive in the soul. One sees it, one senses one's self, one's life, one's journey, all of it with soul.

So I've mentioned that a couple of times, but actually there's all kinds of possibility when we get into the domain of time and timelessness and perceptions of time and eternality.

I don't know if you've ever experienced this, but sometimes in your love for someone—a human, other, a beloved other, of course maybe an animal even, or a tree or something—where there's love, sometimes it's possible, because of the love and because of the eros, that the perception becomes soul-making. You actually sense them with soul at times, this beloved other.

And sometimes it's possible, I find very lovely perception, to perceive this other, this beloved other, or oneself even, as the sort of contemporaneous totality of the temporal slices of their life. In other words, one can see plainly there—I'm with them and it's now and they are X years old, whatever that is—but somehow I'm seeing not just that, but I'm seeing them when they were a little girl. I'm seeing them when they were a baby. I'm seeing them when they were a teenager. I'm seeing them in the full bloom of adulthood. I'm seeing them when they're an old person. I'm seeing them when they're very old. All those kind of temporal slices exist at once. All those ages exist. And one loves them all, and one perceives them all at once in the being.

Again, in the sensing with soul, there's the, through the eros, inseminating psyche and logos, inseminating the imaginal object, the beloved other, and it complexifies, it diversifies, it presents other faces, more and more faces, more and more dimensions. And so that's one very lovely way of perceiving either oneself at times or someone you love.

All kinds of possibilities when we get into the realm of time and the perception of time.

Another possibility, and last one for now, is meditating on an aspect of your being. So it could be the body or anything. It could be the voice. And meditating on it in a way, sensing it in a way that allows it to become ensouled, allows it to gain dimensions and significance for soul and the elements to come alive with respect to that aspect or area or domain of our being. And then, maybe from there, it spreads to the whole sense of self.

I could give an example of this, but you might even try it as a guided meditation if you feel like right now, just very briefly to give you a sense of what the kind of possibilities are.

So if you're listening and you want to engage and put your body into a posture that's comfortable and appropriate for meditation or helpful for meditation, whether it's standing or sitting upright or whatever it is, take some moments to actually sense the body, just in the simple way of sensation. And the energy body, and expand that awareness of the energy body.

But include in your awareness, as we've touched on—this always has to be the case—but for right now, let the sense of self, which includes your narratives, let that be there too. It doesn't mean getting lost in it. It doesn't mean going off on a distracted tangent or fretting about this or that. It just means having a sense of the body, how the body feels, how the energy body feels, its presence right now, its material presence, its energetic presence and feel. But also of yourself. There's a self sitting here, so to speak. That self has a narrative and that can be included in the larger scope or background of the awareness.

And just gently, very gently, suffuse your body, yourself, your narrative with metta, with loving-kindness, with unconditional love. Every part and aspect of your body, as the Buddha would say, leaving no spot untouched, totally permeating and saturating your body with the healing balm of friendliness, of kindness, of love and well-wishing. Let that metta include yourself and your narrative and narratives. Very gentle, very light touch here. Aware of the body, aware of the energy of the body, aware of the energy of the metta, touching the body, permeating the body, surrounding and suffusing the body.

And you can let the metta be somewhat there as a sort of implicit background or basis of this short guided meditation. So let that go into the background, but still be there, underpinning everything.

Aware of the body again. Aware of certainly the energetic field, the energy body, but also aware of the materiality of the body, the physicality of it—sinews, muscles, nerves, fibers, skin. Your body. Yes, it's not yours, but let's say it's yours right now. It's you. It's not you, and it's you.

Just checking that the metta is still there, sort of implicitly in the background—warmth, kindness, well-wishing. If that needs a little boosting, just give it a gentle shot.

Seeing if you can dwell with this sense of body, the mystery of embodiment. The mystery of you having this particular appearance, this kind of form, this kind of body. The miracle of that. The gift of that. And yes, all its particular quirks and all its particular ways it doesn't work so well, maybe failing in this way or that. It's still an amazing thing. It's a beautiful body, totally a miracle. And there's no other body like it. And it's tied in to your being, your soul.

Then within the scope of the body and the bodily functions, let's just focus in on the voice. As far as the body is concerned, we can identify maybe three or four regions or centers of voice production in the body that are involved in vocalizing and making sound.

There's the chest—the air in the lungs and the whole resonant cavity of the chest. Just be aware of that as part of the instrument, part of the miracle, part of what allows you to sing forth, sound forth, communicate, reach out, touch other people through your voice, to express your uniqueness, your point of view. Let yourself be aware of your chest in the context of the gift of voice, the mystery of voice.

There's the throat and the voice box or the larynx, also obviously integral to the production of sound, our voicing in the world—part of the gift. And the mouth, the malleable cavity of the mouth that can shape itself as a resonant chamber in all kinds of ways, all kinds of amazingly precise ways to really shape sound very precisely, very uniquely. And then there's the tongue and the teeth, which are also included in the instrument, part of what shapes and supports, forms the voice, the sounding.

So this miracle, this gift of embodiment—and part of that miracle, that gift of embodiment is this particular set of areas, regions, centers of the body that are involved in vocalization and voice.

As you are with your sense of the body and with the sense of these four areas or regions or centers of voice production in the body, begin to include in the awareness, in your meditative awareness, what comes through the voice, what can come through, what comes through of soul—through the voice, through your voice, through our voices. What comes through as soul through these regions, these centers of the body.

Kindness can come through. Love can come through. Humor—mystery of humor. Flashes of intelligence and brilliance come through, articulated. All these aspects of soul, your soul, coming through, being given life, manifestation, embodiment through the voice, through this physical entity, through this miracle of body. Your perspective, the way you see things, the way you sense things.

Fire can come through—fire in the voice, fire in the perspective, fire in what's articulated. Struggle, story—we can convey our story, our struggles, our difficulties, our pains, the sensitivity of our heart. All that manifests from and through these regions of body: the chest, the throat, the voice box, the mouth, the tongue and teeth.

Poetry can come through, either literal poetry or just poetic speech. You don't divide them. You can say body is the instrument of soul, the gift of body in the service of the gift of soul to you and from you into the world and to other souls.

In the voice there's obviously the possibility of carrying verbal communication. We communicate ideas and feelings and requests and all kinds of things as I've elucidated. There's also the sound itself, the music of speech. So often when we listen to someone speak or we speak ourselves, we're concentrating on the words and their meaning. But there's also the parallel, intertwined, ongoing music—the sounds, the syllables, the mystery of that. And somehow this too is part of the communication of soul.

Of course it's there when we sing, but it's there when we speak—this music. Right now as I'm speaking, you can listen to the words, the meaning, what's he talking about, I'm trying to follow these instructions. But there's also a music in the sounds of the spoken voice. And it doesn't necessarily mean anything. It's music. And it has dimensionality and it has mystery, if we can hear it in a certain way. It has beauty. All this comes through you, comes through the gift of body, is embodied through body.

What happens right now if you just experiment in this meditative state, in this soul sensitivity, as much as you can encourage it gently right now, with the full awareness and the sensitivity of the resonances and the ripples in the heart, in the soul, in the energy body, perhaps even in image...

You just let yourself make certain sounds that are not words. Maybe certain syllables. Puh. Puh. And listen. Listen to the mystery of it. You are part of that mystery. Listen to the music of it. It doesn't mean anything. It's full of meaningfulness.

The mystery of this ability to vocalize. Doesn't matter what sound right now, what syllable. If you want to, you can press pause and for a few minutes just play with that. Let yourself vocalize meaningless or apparently meaningless sounds and hear it as music. Sense the mystery there. It can be in the vocalization, in the sound, in the rhythm if you string syllables together. There's music there.

What happens now if you say "I"? I. This time with the implication of the meaning of I, the self, the mystery of that I. What happens when you vocalize that I? What happens when you vocalize "you"? So really as delicately sensitive and open and alive to anything that you notice, anything in the nuance of reverberation, of resonance, of mystery, of beauty.

When you're ready, coming out of that particular meditation, whenever you're ready.

Maybe that gives you an idea—you could take any area or aspect of being, as we did with voice, or it could be body or whatever, and meditate on it in a way that supports or opens the possibility of sensing that domain of your being with soul. And from there it can spread to the whole, the self, and perhaps even into cosmic consciousness.

So like I said, these are just some possibilities. The possibilities are infinite, really, for the ways that the self can become imaginal and gain that dimensionality and divinity in our sense of it.

Really, we might turn it around and ask: what actually gets in the way of that happening? What prevents us from sensing the self with soul?

One is, of course, as usual, a logos—an idea, a conception that disallows it. For example, the example I gave earlier: this wanting to make an imprint or this wanting to make an impression, I just assume that it's ego and it's not okay, and I judge it. There's a logos there that's actually limiting my sense of things and my understanding of myself and my impulses and the movements of my being. So very often, a certain logos gets in where we don't even realize it.

Or, as I said at the beginning of the talk, not noticing the possibility that in working with an imaginal other or an imaginal object, the self too can become infected, caught up, involved in the soul-making dynamic. The self-sense can become imaginal—either not noticing it or not allowing it for whatever reasons. Maybe I don't even know the reason; it just feels blocked. So that's going to get in the way, obviously.

Of course, the opposite can be true, as I touched on. It's always myself that's imaginal, and I fail to allow the world or others to become imaginal, to sense them with soul. That's also a possibility, and it would be a problem.

What else gets in the way? Over-identification, over-reification of the sense of self—any sense of self, even if it's a beautiful one. It feels like, "Oh, this is what I am now." If it's too reified, problem. If I'm too identified with it, problem. It will squeeze the soul out of it, like squeezing the juice out.

Or, on the other hand, I just dismiss it: "Oh, that's crazy, that's stupid, that's not real." Over-reification or under-reification, in a way. Like I've said a couple of times, we're dancing on the breadth of this boulevard—the imaginal middle way with respect to reification, how much, how little, at different times.

Sometimes, or with some people at some times, it's important that they view or that they are encouraged to view: "Do you realize you're more really that? You're more really or more primarily angel than you are what you appear to be in the conventional sense, in the conventional view." Sometimes, of course, a person's gone the other way and they've identified too much with that angelic dimension or the imaginal self and need a bit less reification.

But our culture doesn't really support that view of the dimensionality of the human being, of the imaginal self, of the angelic refraction. So because the culture doesn't, we might need to lean on it a bit more to re-legitimize it and reinstate it and open up that possibility. But it's also very individual and it can vary at different times and different situations.

But there is the possibility of sensing the self with soul, sensing the self as a temporal emanation of what is timeless, the angel, a theophany. We hold it lightly, and in that light holding of it, as I said, can have enormous power, bear enormous fruit. Something very, very beautiful.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 179

Dimensionality, Humility, Duty, and Love

Rob Burbea · 1h43

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea delves deeply into four crucial elements of imaginal practice within his soul-making teachings. He begins by clarifying the dual purpose of understanding the 28 elements of the imaginal lattice: both for conceptual discernment and as practical tools that can be deliberately activated in meditation.*
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> *Burbea explores dimensionality (or depth) as the sense of 'more-ness' and multiple levels of being within images, using the metaphor of humans as refractions of angels existing at other dimensions. This dimensionality provides a profound anchor for the soul, different from temporary mindfulness practices. He examines humility not as self-deprecation, but as a beautiful receptivity before mystery and unfathomability, requiring a lighter sense of self-fabrication.*
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> *The discussion of duty reveals how imaginal figures make claims upon us, wanting something specific that reflects their own nature. Burbea suggests that imaginal figures themselves may have duties they're aware of, creating corresponding duties for practitioners. Finally, he explores love as a particular rather than universal force - imaginal figures love our uniqueness and potential, not unconditionally like metta, but in ways that call forth our deepest essence. Drawing on philosopher Nikolai Hartmann, he describes how this love penetrates beyond empirical personality to the ideal image within, creating transformative recognition and inspiration for actualizing our angelic nature.*

This evening, I'd like to make a few brief general points about the nodes of the lattice—about what we call the elements of the imaginal. Then I want to move on to explore some ramifications of what we discussed regarding self, self-sense and imaginal self, self-becoming imaginal, examining how this relates to some of the nodes of the lattice, some of the elements of the imaginal.

First, let me offer a few brief general points about the nodes of the lattice, about these twenty-eight elements of the imaginal. Some of these I've mentioned before, but they bear repeating.

First, remember what the point of this teaching of the elements of the lattice is. It has two main purposes. One is discernment—clarity about what is or isn't imaginal in our sense, or what constitutes an image or a sensing with soul becoming more fully imagin-

al, more authentically imaginal in our language. This serves to aid conceptual understanding, but also helps in the navigation, in the steering. What openings am I trying to encourage or lay the conditions for?

The second purpose of these teachings of the elements and imaginal nodes is that they can be used in practice. By noticing a certain element—for example, the sense of time or the sense of ontic status, the reality status—and actually paying attention along the lines of a certain element, that element can be ignited. We can notice something there, and that noticing and attention can ignite that element, thus allowing the image to become more imaginal.

In igniting that element—whether it's the element of eternality in terms of temporality, or the element of theatros, or imaginal way, or whatever it is, or love, or beauty, eros—that igniting can ignite other nodes. Sometimes it's simply a matter of paying attention and noticing: "Oh, I am loved here. I didn't notice it before. It doesn't fall into the usual appearance of what I tend to think love looks like, but there is love there. Let me pay attention to that and feel that." It might be quite subtle, a really different manifestation. In the noticing, it brings it more alive, becomes more prominent, ignites, and then the other nodes follow.

But it's also possible to deliberately ignite a certain node just by deciding to or by jiggling, wiggling it in a certain way. For example, with energy body awareness, we can always reopen that, spread that with awareness in the space and environment of the body, fill that with sensitivity and presence, and notice if there's an image of the body. That's actually deliberately igniting that node, and that can have an effect. So sometimes through noticing, sometimes through deliberate tweaking, jiggling.

This teaching serves a double purpose: conceptual clarity and conceptual differentiation from other experiences or paths that may overlap or be similar—the conceptual understanding, understanding the conceptual framework and logos, and the navigation—and secondly, that it's actually helpful in practice, either by noticing an element or deliberately doing something there.

Just check in yourself if your understanding or your relationship with this teaching of the elements has only included part of these purposes. Either you've forgotten that one can actually use it in practice as part of the art of practice, part of the alchemy, and you're thinking more in terms of definition. Or sometimes a person reports, "Yes, I've had that one, I've had that one," as if they're things to collect as opposed to engage and work with.

My second point is that there's no real order, no uniform and regular order in which these nodes or elements ignite. What this means is that in the art of our practice, we can be opportunistic. Which ones can I notice? Which ones may be available to my engagement, to my activity, to my subtle responsiveness, to my turning them on? But it might happen in any order. There's no linear, predictable, formulaic order in which these nodes need to be engaged or noticed or played with and in which they tend to ignite. Anything can happen in any order.

Another point: they're all connected. All these elements are connected. It's hard to start talking about one without it beginning to spill over into talking about another one, or a group of them tend to go together. So they're all connected. There is overlap. They're concepts with soft and elastic edges. They're fuzzy. They're interconnected.

The nature of that interconnection is sometimes one of tension—not paradox so much as opposition. They're pulling in different directions. For example, the autonomy of an image may be...

pulling in a different direction than the fact of it being created, but that we're engaged in creating, partly. So sometimes there's a kind of opposition, but they pull in different directions. And that's part of the tension or maybe paradox or mystery of the imaginal—this sensing the soul.

Sometimes two nodes overlap or seem to imply each other so that they are close in meaning or overlapping in meaning. Dimensionality and unfettered mobility, for instance—not exactly the same, but they relate very much. Eros and beauty... we could analyze them all and look at the kinds of relationships between the nodes, but there's a general point there.

I want to take this opportunity now to make a couple of corrections or revisions to the list of the elements. One has to do with "not reduced to one meaning." I would like to add: not reduced to one meaning *or one causal explanation*. We've touched on this before, but if I tend to think, "Oh, this image is here because of A, or because B"—because it's representing my personal power, or my compassion, or some wound from childhood—that may be part of an understanding of the causal explanation of why this image is arising.

But if we reduce it to just that causal explanation, whatever it is, then we're limiting the image, limiting the possibilities of the image, and amputating parts of it. It will lose some of its life, depth, breadth, resonance, and power. So that element we can now say is: not reduced to only one meaning or only one causal explanation.

The second correction has to do with two-ness, which we could expand to say: two-ness, differentiation, or retaining particularities. Sometimes the image arises here, in my body—I become, my body and my sense of self become the image, like the tree that I shared as an example briefly in one of these talks. It might then be that my sense of self as meditator splits out from it as image. That will always be there to a subtle sense because awareness is always in a dualistic relationship with its object.

But even more significant is the fact that it retains particularities. There's a particular tree with particular qualities, this tree—particular colors, particular shape, particular geometry, particular feel and aesthetic presentation. Retaining particularities also means it's not moving towards dissolution, melting, oneness—a kind of loss of features, loss of form, fading and loss of features and form.

That is certainly part of soul-making in the larger sense, in terms of the beautiful directions that the soul and consciousness can experience and explore. But in terms of imaginal work, mostly we say it retains particularities, differentiation, and sometimes the sense of two-ness.

Those were the brief general points about the nodes, about the elements. As I said, I want to pick up some of the threads of what we were talking about in relation to self-sense and self as image and self-becoming image, and unfold some of the ramifications there with respect to some of the other nodes.

Implicit in, or even obvious in, a lot of what we were talking about regarding self and angel out ahead and daimons is a sense of dimensionality. It's interesting hearing back from people which nodes make sense to them and which make sense much less. Sometimes someone reports, "I don't really understand this dimensionality node." Actually, a couple of people reported that.

So it may be that a better word is *depth*. When I hear "dimensionality," I think of an x-axis, a y-axis and a z-axis, or length, breadth and width—as if there's some kind of rectangle there at right angles to each other. So maybe a better word is depth, in the sense that the image or the sense of this object has a depth dimension. It has a sense of more-ness to it, of beyonds, of other levels of being, other planes of existence in it, other mysteries within it that are either directly connected or intuitively sensed, dimly, vaguely sensed.

Someone else wasn't quite sure what dimensionality meant, and they found it helpful when I explained one way you can understand it: the idea or concept of the image of, for example, a human being or an action as being the projection or emanation or refraction of the image of an angel. This image is a refraction of an angel, or this human

being that I'm seeing now is an emanation, a projection, a refraction of an angel—the embodiment of an angel who exists at another level, so to speak, with another dimension.

Within that—and I'll come back to this—to realize that the human or the self or the action or the duty that's involved can never be a perfect or exact replica of the angel. That's why I use the word refraction, which means when light hits water, it's slightly bent a certain way. It's the same ray of light, but it's given a kind of spin by the water. So the angel is given particular spins by the human being, or the image. It's not a perfect one-hundred-percent mirroring.

That's an important point we'll come back to in other contexts and to make other points in terms of implications for our life and our sense of what we value and what we're aspiring to. So a human being—we can have a sense of a human being as refracting an angel, as a refraction, a projection, an emanation of an angel. And that whole idea, just because the angel exists at another dimension, gives a sense, or is an example of a sense of dimensionality, or depth.

An intrapsychic image also can be the image of such an angel. And then the dimensionality is there. The more-ness is implicit in the whole space between the image and the angel. So this image maybe is not the angel—it's the refraction of the angel, it's an emanation of the angel.

The more-ness and the dimensionality is also in the kind of bottomlessness or unfathomability of the angel. And that's where the image gets its unfathomability from. It's connected to the unfathomability of the angel. And as we mentioned, a person, for example, can be the projection, the emanation, the refraction of many angels.

Contrary to some of the writings of Henry Corbin—and sometimes it's hard to say when he writes whether it's his teaching or his interpretation, a refraction of the teachings of these different Islamic mystics and scholars through the ages—some of what he writes makes it sound like there's one angel for each human being. We're saying yes, it might be one, it might be many more than one, with all the added richness and complexity and sometimes difficulty that brings. But Corbin was very prolific and was probably reporting on different traditions and teachings, so sometimes it might be this and sometimes that. It's not important for our purposes.

A person, we would say, can be the projection of many angels. For some people, just that idea might begin to give some entrance into the mode of dimensionality, some sense of beginning to understand that possibility. Of course it can open up in different

ways other than that and more than that. But this is absolutely crucial, for many reasons. The sense of dimensionality so much rests on this. Again, we'll come back to it, and hopefully, if I get a chance to do those talks on ethics, we'll return to this.

But why is it important? If things are just flat, if things are all the same in terms of the level of their being, it doesn't feel very soulful, for one thing. It doesn't feel very rich and deep, because the depth or dimensionality is not there. But it also doesn't enable us in our life to have an anchor that's deep.

An anchor for our being when things are difficult or confusing, when we've lost our bearings—like a ship at sea, if the anchor that it puts down does not reach and find traction and connect with something of another substance other than water, the ship just drifts. It's the same for us as human beings. Without a sense of something of another level, of another dimension in all kinds of ways—existentially, psychologically, spiritually, soulfully—we drift. We lose our bearings, we lose our sense of meaningfulness, orientation, steadiness, courage, all kinds of qualities.

Sometimes some ways of relating to the Dharma want to pin so much hope on mindfulness and the practice of mindfulness. There is a kind of anchoring as we come back to the breath or mindfulness, as awareness is different than its objects. But mindfulness is not really an anchor at another level. It doesn't have so much of a sense of dimensionality. Even if awareness is larger than objects and experiences, mindfulness is impermanent. It comes and goes. It exists in time.

An image or a sensing with soul has this implicit dimensionality, as we're teaching, that we can get a sense of. We can begin to notice it, begin to feel it, begin to feel its import and how that sense of dimensionality actually touches the being. The dimensionality there is something of another level. So when we need an anchor—when we're lost, when we're confused, when we're agitated, when we're unsure morally, when we're in some kind of crisis, when the wind's blowing and swelling turbulently around our ship—then we need some sense of something of another dimension.

It's curious because the normal contemporary, the dominant contemporary way of understanding things is to try and find an anchor in some kind of solidity, some kind of obvious assurance or investment in money or house or this or that, a relationship. And of course, that does provide an anchor to a certain extent. Correspondingly, the dominant contemporary mindset and worldview would dismiss images and sensing with soul as being way too insubstantial, unrealistic, not really there to provide any kind of anchor.

But actually, because there is this sense of dimensionality, and that sense touches the soul—it touches the heart of the soul—it provides a better anchor because it's a different level. It's a different substance. It's not just water. It's something of a different material and a different level of being.

Of course, there are many kinds of anchors of a different level of being. The experience, for example, of cosmic or universal love—not so much my love, my metta, my self-love, but the sense of the universe and the cosmos being made out of love, being shot through with love, love being woven into the fabric of the cosmos. That's a perception of a different dimension of being than the usual habitual flatland view.

Similarly, the meditative sense or opening to a cosmic or universal awareness—not just mindfulness, but a universal cosmic awareness that holds everything, or that things really are in the depths of their being this awareness, this cosmic awareness. Both those examples, the awareness and the love, when you have the cosmic sense of them, there's a dimensionality and, as I've said many times in explaining things in these talks, there's usually for people some kind of sense of divinity with them. A practitioner opening in those kinds of ways starts to use the language of divinity very often, even if they've never felt comfortable with it before.

So the dimensionality and divinity are there in those experiences. But neither of them, neither the cosmic awareness nor the cosmic love, include the personal—the necessity of my particularities and my unique personhood.

So there's something about an anchor, about the kind of anchoring that images offer us—that is both a powerful anchor because it has another dimension, another level of being, another kind of substance to it, but also an anchor that includes the necessity of my unique personhood. It speaks to me uniquely. It's relevant to me. It includes my particularities and is resonant with and attuned to and tailored to my particularities.

But this principle of dimensionality and anchoring is very, very important. It makes such a difference in life, or it can make such a difference if the sensibility is allowed to open to it, if it doesn't dismiss it out of hand, close the eyes and the senses to that possible sense. If the sensibility is trained, it's right there.

As I said, these elements of the imaginal are really things to notice. It's almost like you just hang out and you start to notice, "Oh yeah, there is that sense, oh yeah." And these words that we're putting out for the elements are just sort of best efforts at kind of pinpointing or naming these aspects of the imaginal that are there waiting to be more clearly discerned and noticed.

The importance of this dimensionality struck me particularly while practicing in a dyad a little while ago. As I mentioned in the beginning talk, I hope that I can say a little bit about dyad practice. Dyad practice has all kinds of levels. So far in the recorded teachings, we've just put out very basic dyad practice or triad practice—this very basic sort of almost exercise-like aware of the energy body, aware of the emotions, speaking that and receiving it, then sharing an image, maybe seeing the other as angel. But people have really loved it and gone for it.

Hopefully, we'll return to dyad practice and add a bit. People have asked me, and I think I've said in response, there are other levels where the dyad itself can be full of eros. It's implicit in seeing another as an angel, in fact, and being seen as an angel. The other person can become image for me right now, and I can become image for them right now in the present moment, and that's what we're practicing with, what we're engaging together and sharing together and talking about together and opening together.

Sometimes that eros can be non-sexual, and sometimes it can be sexual. We've expressed caution about doing that kind of practice just because of how much eros can arise, and sometimes how much sexual eros can arise, and the necessity to be a little bit careful. It's like, okay, what are the conditions of my life? Do I have monogamous obligations here, that there's so much eros in this dyad now that I'm a little bit in danger of acting out in a certain way, which will also potentially break the eros in the dyad anyway? All kinds of issues that cannot even handle that energy.

So we've been deliberately holding back about those kinds of teachings, or that level of teachings of dyad practice, but it's there, and maybe at some point we'll release more teachings about that.

Anyway, that was a long prelude and caution to say that I was practicing in a dyad with someone, we were looking at each other, and there was a lot of eros there. There was romantic eros, if you like, in the imaginal, the erotic imaginal. And the image of us as mystical husband and wife echoing, mirroring the emanation, the refraction of a kind of cosmic husband and wife. Very, very beautiful, and the sense of all the elements were alive as it became fully imaginal.

But what struck me at this point was the sense of participation. There was a sense of this experience now, and this image now, or this sensing with soul now—so my sense of her, my sense of us—being retained. The forms were retained, but there was a sense of these being echoes, refractions of us at a higher level, an angelic level, a cosmic level, whatever language you want to use. And of course in that, then this level, this human level and the sense of it in opening to that kind of sensing with soul is that we are participating, participating in the image which has higher roots, roots in divinity.

So the element of participation was very strong, and grace and eternality—this cosmic husband and wife and their eros and their love and their bond, always already happening. And the human experience can open to that, enter into that, and participate in it.

This element of participation, I think, is one of the deepest and most important of the imaginal. But with that sense of participation and grace and the eternality was a real sense of privilege that really touched my soul. And in a way, I felt that very often, but it felt more clear to me, and partly perhaps because of my health situation, my probably dying soon, that all three of those nodes—the participation, the grace, and the eternality, but particularly the participation and the privilege of participating—privilege of participating in this cosmic image, of somehow being part of that, participating in a theophany, in a face of divinity, in something, in an image that has roots in divinity.

And that privilege gave me, really, I could feel it, its impact on the sense of dying and on the relationship to death. So that when there's that kind of sense of privilege, even if it only lasts a few minutes or seconds even, something is touched so deeply and so one really recognizes, "I've drunk from a treasure here. I've drunk from a deep and infinite well. And somehow I am part of that. I've recognized that I am part of that."

It changes the sense of one's being.

So this enormous sense of privilege and recognizing, changing the sense, the relationship with death, recognizing—you know, a long life. I still feel quite young. If I die soon, I'm dying young. But recognizing with this really profound sense of privilege touched my heart and soul so deeply, a long life is not so important. A long life without that sense of privilege and participation and how that touches the being and what it says about one's being and about one's existence, even if one struggles to articulate that—a life without all that is not so great. A short life that includes times of touching or opening to those kinds of perceptions, those kinds of elements and senses, is worthwhile, is very okay.

I'm reminded of the Buddha, who said: better one moment of knowing the unfabricated than a hundred years of life without knowing the unfabricated. It's akin to that. So it really relativized the whole relationship with death at that time.

It's not just that the eternality element was turned on, and therefore there's a different relationship with death, because death obviously is an ending in time, and where there's a sense of eternality, it sort of transcends that, or relativizes it. So this sense of

dimensionality, participating in other dimensions, and the privilege of all that, the grace of all that—so potentially profound and impactful in our relationship to all the vicissitudes of our existence, including dying.

Now that's an example from dyad practice, but it might be all images and all sensing with soul actually have that same kind of opportunity in them—in the sense of dimensionality, in the sense of participation, in the sense of grace and eternality. There is this sense of privilege and it can really... there's potentially a sense of liberating, beautiful, fulfilling, meaningful.

That was an example from dyad practice, but maybe any image, any sensing with soul. It may be extra powerful when it's in relation to an actual physical human other, because then there is this kind of transubstantiation or filling out, dimensionalizing of this level of existence. It goes right to the core of our humanity. But I think it's there as a possibility and a potential opening, glimpse, taste in any sensing with soul. So you can hear that dimensionality is implicit, and sometimes we make it explicit in some of what we were talking about with regard to self the other night.

But let's follow on and touch on a couple of the other nodes.

Humility.

Humility, as we are using that word—a couple of things. Like I've said before, each of these nodes will expand in time as we experience it, as we fill it out, as the soul-making dynamic does its work and the dough gets kneaded and the fermentation happens and the richness and the complexifying and the deepening. Each node itself will also grow. Our sense, our understanding, our range of experience—each of the elements themselves will also gain dimensionality and meaning.

In our paradigm, when we use the word humility, it's in relationship. Humility is in the face of. It's humility before. In other words, in relationship with mystery and love and dimensionality and unfathomability and divinity.

More commonly in the dominant secular culture, humility just means a person doesn't think too much of himself, or maybe just daunted by something that they feel incapable of addressing or carrying out or understanding or whatever it is. It's a relative size thing, but it retains just a flatland dimensionality.

I was talking and listening to someone a little while ago about climate crisis and things like that. And it struck me a little while later, as I was thinking about the soul-making teachings, that although she had a sense of "I don't understand the complexity of this problem"—which is, you know, an appropriate response. It's so complex psycho-

logically, economically, socially, politically, probably even complex in terms of the Earth's geo-weather systems and all that. Or, you know, "What to do? What do we do about climate change? What can we possibly do? I'm just one person. It's such a huge issue. We're just such a small minority who seem to really want to engage and do something about it."

And so there's a kind of—we could call it humility there, but what was missing was, in the whole relationship, there was not the mystery, there was not the unfathomability, there was not the dimensionality and the divinity there. So I'm not even sure I would use the word humility in that case. But that too, you know, I felt like potentially there were whole other levels and possibilities and breadth to her whole relationship with the climate crisis that might be able to be opened if some of these other more imaginal elements can be opened, and particularly the sense of dimensionality, divinity, etc., which then would allow a different sense of humility in relationship to it.

So self, dimensionality, humility—these are all really, really key elements, and very much you can see how they kind of, as I said, they're connected. They have implications for each other. They weave into each other.

When we're talking about humility, it gets a certain spin sometimes in our contemporary secular culture, in the dominant culture at least, and it can be a kind of self-denigration or self-effacement or that kind of thing. So again, I hope this is obvious anyway, but the way we're using it is much more to do with, or much more includes a sense of healthy self-esteem. It's not in any way in opposition to that.

So that one can feel this kind of deep humility, a beautiful, rich, soft humility that, as I've said, is a humility in relationship to mystery, to love, to unfathomability, to dimensionality and divinity. And none of that has any implications or any offshoot into self-depreciation, self-denigration, self-worthlessness, and all that kind of stuff at all, so that we can even be proud, in the good sense, of our being and our direction and what we've done and how we are and what we're oriented towards and all of that, at the same time as we're humble. They're not in any way contradictory.

To quote Nikolai Hartmann, who I'll come back to several times—a German philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century for the most part—it would be a mistake to suppose that genuine pride, which he points out was for Aristotle in the ancient Greek teachings, the Hellenistic teachings, part of the makeup of a great soul, would actually have a healthy pride. There's nothing in that that excludes a genuine humility. The person who is justified in being proud will always, if they see themselves clearly,

have something before which they humble themselves. But the humble person must always have something in himself which he prizes, if it's going to be a healthy humility and a genuine virtue.

I might have pointed this out before, but again, it's worth saying again, because we're talking about self and self-sense. So again, words like humility and even grace—they're often loaded words for us in this culture. And they can mean different things or be dependent on our past conditioning and our past associations with such words. They can be loaded problematically sometimes in different ways.

But with regard to sensing with soul in imaginal practice, those words and those attitudes, like humility—the attitudes to which, the poise, let's say, an attitude to which those words refer—

They can't be too self-weighted in the sense of being too focused on self, and certainly not on sin. This is one of the unfortunate associations or spins that such words as humility and grace have been given through what I would call a narrowing of Christian teachings over the millennia. Sometimes when people think of those words, they associate them with a sense of sin, worthlessness, feeling bad—and it's very selfie. The self that has them is a kind of very solid, heavy self. It's contracted, dense, and there's a tight fabrication of self there.

In our usage of those words, it's almost more fertile if the self-sense that feels humble is actually much lighter. Perhaps it exists in a certain region of the spectrum of self-fabrication. The self that's fabricated at the point of feeling the kind of humility that will be fertile as an element of the imaginal won't be a heavy, solid, weighty, contracted self that's somewhat self-obsessed. There's a certain region where there's a lighter self-fabrication. Again, this ties in with the node of slightly less fabricated.

In that region, the self-sense can still feel humility. There's a self-sense, there's form, but it's light, it's malleable, it's liquid. And in that region of lighter self-fabrication, there can still be a very poignant and moving and beautiful softening humility that is fertile in terms of the whole generation and reception of images. Outside of that range, there may not be that fertility. The imaginal perception won't work; the sensing of soul will be much less possible.

Again, we talk about self as possible refraction of angel. We talk about dimensionality, divinity, we talk about humility. But all of this actually needs to rest on or rest in a certain spectrum of self-fabrication that's not too heavy, too dense, too tightly fabricated. The order isn't necessarily linear—it's not that I have to lighten the self first. It might be that I lighten the self-fabrication, and then all kinds of possibilities open up

imaginatively with the elements of the imaginal. Or it might be that they open up, and automatically in that there's an igniting of the slightly less fabricated node, and the self-sense lightens. So it's not necessarily linear, but wrapped up or implicit in our understanding of humility is, generally speaking, a slightly less fabricated sense of self.

I can't remember if I mentioned the possibility of actually starting with humility—starting even with the sort of light intention to be open and receptive to images, should they come, should they be born, should they be given. Actually starting with humility, where there's no image there yet. But still, if the self is not too solid, not too densely and tightly fabricated, and if my sense of other or object is not yet a formed image or a clear image, it can still be within that sense of a less solid self.

With that sense of a less solid self, there can be a sense of other, beloved other, that may be very vague. Some sense of the more-than-me that's unfathomable, that has mystery and dimensionality. That may be it—just some vague sense of other that's more than me, that's unfathomably deep, that's pregnant with mystery and dimensionality.

Just that stance, that poise, that openness with the self less rarefied, with a vague sense of other that's already pregnant with those more mystical and soulful qualities, and a relationship or poise of humility from the self in relation to that, in the face of that, before that—that may be, in a way, igniting the element of humility. Out of that beautiful crucible, an image may arise. And even if it doesn't arise, just to hang out in that space with the self not so solidified, just with a vague sense or mystical sense of the other that's more than me and unfathomable—that's a really beautiful place to hang out.

I don't have to demand an image. I don't need a clear visual image. It may come, it may not come, but just to be in that space is doing something to the soul. It's soul-making. We could say it's already imaginal just by virtue of those elements being alive in the vague sense of other. There's no clearly sensible image there, or delineated, or discernible, but in that vague sense, we could say that's already image.

Whether we call it imaginal or not, in terms of the soul and what it's stretching and opening and nourishing in the soul and the soil, the way it's enriching and caring for the soil, changing the soil of the soul—this is going to be very beautiful and soul-making and beneficial.

Again, if we just linger on this need for the self to be not fabricated as much or in the ways that it usually is, in relation to humility and the more-than-me and divinity.

I touched on one level of prayer being—I think it's the right word, I should really look it up in the dictionary—but prayer as supplication. I'm using that word to mean prayer as some kind of ask or request. People pray, humanity has done this forever: I pray to this god or that god for this or that, for the rains to come, for protection, for whatever it is, for healing.

It's interesting. Sometimes, and I think I pointed this out maybe in the Eros Unfettered talks, I can't remember when, but sometimes that very stance of asking for something—this self asking another, in this case God or the Buddha nature or some divinity or angel or whatever, asking for, wanting, hoping for, desiring something, maybe in my case desiring healing or whatever—

But the desire itself can be—can be, not always, but can be—a slightly problematic element. Because of dependent arising, we know that desire tends to fabricate. And it can fabricate more sense of self. So that the self-sense that's asking can actually feel, starts off already as feeling separate. I want—I as separate self want something from this separate other, or hope for something, or ask for something.

And because of the desire implicit, and the sense of separation, and the desire, the self-sense actually becomes, through the action of prayer, actually becomes more separate from the divinity. You understand? Because it's fabricated more, and partly what's fabricating the sense of self is a sense of separateness.

One of the possibilities in that kind of situation, if you're engaged in that kind of practice—you know, the beauty of prayer, and there's so many possibilities when we talk about prayer—but one possibility, if we've noticed that kind of thing happening, is actually to introduce a subtle idea, very, again, very delicately introduced, a logos, that my wanting, my asking, or let's say my desire, is actually part of the divine desire.

So that my wanting, whatever it is, healing or this or that, that's not just mine. I'm already introducing a conception of it as part of the divine desire. Again, I'm participating in the divine desire. This desire of mine is somehow participating in the divine desire, in a divine desire. In introducing that logos, again, where we're not exacerbating the sense of self, we're changing the relationship and the conception with desire, and we're igniting the element of participation, among other aspects.

And then the whole sense of prayer can be a real, much more soulful experience and can open up in different sensings with soul, etc. The prayer itself, and of course that can spread to what's around you, or your sense of yourself, all of that.

So, less separation, because we're relating to the desire in a different way, instead of exacerbating the sense of separation and solidity of self, which can kind of frustrate or block the sense of prayer, actually, or block its deeper possibilities, deeper soul possibilities, let's say, in the soul sense of the prayer. Less separation when you introduce that kind of logos, that kind of subtle idea, and you introduce it subtly.

So again, these things are not to be clanked around with or kind of rammed in there or shouted in the mind, etc. There's really quite a delicate touch that's needed, especially in the realm of conception and logos, when we're working with that in the soul-making.

But because the sensing with soul then gets ignited more, then there's just much greater beauty. Beauty in the sense of prayer, beauty in the sense of self, beauty in whatever's around you, beauty in the sense of the divinity or the Buddha nature to whom you are addressing the prayer, with whom you are in relationship, etc.

But again, you can hear in all this, this dance that I was mentioning the other day, this dance of how much reification, how much fabrication to the sense of self. And we can play with it at different times. If it gets too solid, too tight, too real, too dense, too contracted, too fabricated, the sense of self, it will cut off the possibilities. If it gets too unfabricated, it will also cut off certain possibilities.

So if we want the soulfulness of prayer, for instance, in the sense of supplication, we need to dance in that middle ground with form and the liquidity. If we want the angelic dimension, the sense of refraction, projection, emanation from angels, the sense of participating in that, again, we need to dance in this territory where there's form and emptiness together.

Related—again, implicit in some of the ideas that we were putting out the other night about self and its relationship with angel, the angel out ahead, wrapped up in that, again, sometimes more implicitly, sometimes obviously and explicitly—is also duty and necessity or rightness.

So someone was sharing with me an image, and the image was of a hysterically grieving woman. It was a very powerful image, obviously with a lot of energy in it, with the hysteria, etc. When we were talking about it, and I think it was obvious to her, even before I talked, or we drew it out in the conversation. But here's this hysterically grieving woman, and it does not feel right to imagine bringing her a cup of tea or a blanket or calming her down or giving her a Valium or whatever.

In some modes of working with the imagination, psychotherapy or perhaps other spiritual paradigms, I don't know, there is that sense of wanting to kind of rectify and normalize the image along the lines of the normal conceptions and assumptions and models that the normal level of mind has. But it absolutely—again, you just have to hang out with the imaginal to get the—to kind of don't buy into that immediate sense, oh, this is a pathological image, there's something wrong here. If there's something wrong with her in that image, it must mean there's something wrong with me, etc. Those kinds of immediate, often pre-programmed reactions and assessments of the mind just let that be and you get another sense that maybe less obvious at first but then comes more to the fore as you get used to it: no, there's something right about this and to step in and fix her you really recognize that that feels wrong.

So there's a rightness to the image, and sometimes with the rightness to the image, it's connected with our sense of duty. So duty, again, we touched on it in the talks about self, and the angels want something from us. And there's a whole range of what they might want and what that might imply for our lives, of course. But the rightness of the image has something to do, is connected with the duty, often. Or the duty, again, because implicit or explicit in some of those ideas about self and its relationship to angel or daemon is a sense of duty.

The particularities of an image which seem or feel important or the ones that feel soul-making, again, they often harbor or sometimes hide or sometimes indicate more obviously the sense of duty.

So there was an image that Yogi shared with me of a woman in the process of giving birth, of birthing, on a completely dried up, devastated landscape, a sort of almost apocalyptically barren landscape. And she was lying there and giving birth, birthing. And we were talking about this image, talking—I was asking her, is there... There's a two-ness there. Is it between... Well, perhaps the... She was asking me about the two-ness.

I can't remember how it came up, but anyway, is the two-ness between you and her, as it often is? There's the image as other, and there's a sense of self in the two-ness. Or is it between you and the landscape, or her and the landscape? Or, as we mentioned as one possibility the other night, can you see her as the woman so that the self and the image separate? Can you actually introduce that? Or is it the woman and the baby or the child inside her? Is that the two-ness?

The person's answer was very immediate, very quick: "No, it's the woman and the birthing itself." There's the sense of the two-ness there—the significant two-ness, the woman and the birthing. When she said that, it immediately gave me the sense that the woman knows that birthing is her duty.

So wrapped up in the sense of what felt like the significant dyadic relationship there—the woman and the birthing itself—and that immediately gave me the sense that this woman in the image knows that birthing is her duty because of the desolate, destroyed land. And it's her duty with all the dukkha it demands. She goes through, puts up with, meets and includes. Gently pointing that out to the practitioner, she recognized the soul relevance, the soul truth in that. It was very touching for us both.

In this case, from that sense of duty, then it might be that the sense of dimensionality and divinity opens up from the sense of duty. It can be. So as I said, all these elements are connected.

If we actually just linger a little bit on this question of duty, I started to wonder: does each imaginal figure herself, itself, himself—whatever—have a duty it's aware of? So we've talked so far about the duty being our duty in relationship to the imaginal figure, our duty given, if you like, by the angel, refracted into our life from the angel through our participation, through our interpretation, through our choices, because we retain autonomy.

But I started to wonder: does each imaginal figure themselves have a duty that it is aware of? And that duty of the imaginal figure is then refracted into a corresponding duty for the soul-making practitioner. And if that's the case, is it also that it's only more obvious with images that express in some ways a pathology or a dukkha?

So those solitary wanderers that I've shared and other people have shared—similar kinds of images of solitary wanderers—there's dukkha there, but they seem to have a duty to keep wandering and to be solitary to some extent or to a large extent. Or the images that I used to share: the evangelist, the soldier. Again, there's dukkha there—the burden of the battle, the difficulty, the relentlessness, the fatigue, the danger. Or the hysterically grieving woman, or this woman giving birth in a wrecked landscape.

I don't know. Perhaps every imaginal figure's duty is to be itself fully and somehow express that. So I'm just wondering about these things. I don't know.

And if we're talking about nodes and this sort of thing around duty and different aspects, someone asked—is necessity a node? I can't remember, or I was wondering. Maybe I was just wondering. I don't remember if someone else asked or if I was wondering. In other words, that this image feels it has to be this image. It's necessary.

I don't know the answer. Is that a twenty-ninth element of our lattice? I'm not sure. Perhaps. If it were, it would be paired—we talk about the relationship between different elements—it would be paired in opposition to the self's autonomy and the create as-

pect of the create-discover relationship. So "it's necessary, it has to be this" is in a slightly paradoxical relationship with the sense of "well, I'm creating it," or acknowledgment of creation.

I don't know the answer. We could perhaps include something like necessity as a twenty-ninth node, or it might already be woven up implicitly in the node of soul-making—that an image is soul-making. And for soul-making, it has to have those resonances that are particular and, as I said, attuned, tailored to this particular soul and what's meaningful, what's right on the money, with this intelligent sort of addressing and speaking to my situation, my particular soul, my makeup. So perhaps necessity could be conceived of as part of the node of soul-making and soul-making resonances.

While we're on the subject, someone was asking about recognition, which again may be related to this necessity. Is recognition possibly an element? You know, sometimes, for instance, in that image I shared of the claim of the god of music on me, there's a kind of recognition. I recognize something that makes sense of an aspect or strands of my life and my struggles, my aspirations, my inspirations, et cetera. But again, recognition will then be related to infinite mirroring, to meaningfulness, to also humility, and perhaps also values, in a way, perhaps.

So I don't know about that. I'm not sure it's necessary to include or add another element. It seems to me implicit in the infinite mirroring and meaningfulness, and so forth.

Vulnerability was another element we suggested—I think I suggested it the other day, or perhaps someone else might have. It could indeed be an element. We talked about it the other day.

Or significance was another one—again, I don't remember if someone suggested it or if I thought of it. It doesn't really matter. There's clearly a sense of the significance of this image, the significance of this sense. But I don't know whether we need to add that to the list necessarily, because again, it's implied in the node of meaningfulness, it's implied in the node of infinite echoing and mirroring—that's why it's significant—and maybe implied in the node of duty.

I'm not sure. We wouldn't want the list of elements to get too unwieldy—twenty-eight is already a lot. On the other hand, as I said, I don't particularly want these teachings to be engraved forever in stone without the possibility of creative discoveries by others at some point.

But if we talk about humility and if we talk about duty, then, as I pointed out earlier with humility, and as I hope you get a feel for when we've been talking about duty over the years, that includes love. So again, there's this overlap or implication between the elements of the imaginal.

Let's talk just a little bit right now about the element of love. Love—loving and being loved—we said was one of the elements of the imaginal. One of the things that's important to realize is this love is not metta. Or rather, it's not just metta.

The love that imaginal figures have for us is not a universal love. It's particular to us. It may include metta, which is a universal love—metta is a universal love for sentient beings, universal in the sense that all sentient beings are included no matter what. Whereas the love that imaginal figures have for us might include metta, but actually, it's not universal. Rather, it's a kind of love of our uniqueness. They're rejoicing in, if you like—they're delighting in, they're loving, they're celebrating and expressing gratitude for our uniqueness and some particularity in us. And that's different than metta.

In metta, it doesn't matter how this person is different from that person, or even whether this person is in some ways more developed or better morally, or kinder, or more beautiful, or wiser, or more intelligent, or less. It doesn't matter. But a significant characteristic of the love that imaginal figures have for us is different—it is particular. It's not universal. It's not metta; it's more than metta. It may well include metta.

Neither is it an unconditional love like metta is. Metta is to all beings equally. No one deserves more or less metta. So it's universal in that sense. It's also unconditional, as what I was explaining before explains the unconditionality of metta as well. It doesn't matter. It's not dependent on, it's not conditioned by this or that quality in the being, or this or that behavior. So a pathological serial killer is worthy of as much metta as a Buddha in the teachings of metta.

But the love the imaginal figures have for us is not universal, and it's not unconditional love either, like metta is. Rather, the imaginal figures' love for us is, to some extent, contingent on us being a certain way, or acting, or choosing, or feeling, or intending, or sensing in some particular way which is dear to and somehow refracts those similar dispositions in the imaginal figure. Do you understand?

We could say the imaginal figure loves our potential, our kind of ideal being. This is significant because it's connected to duty, isn't it? They want something from us. They have an ask, a demand, a duty, and the love that they have is wrapped up with that. Sometimes they just celebrate our being, our sensibility, and sometimes they want us to be a certain way in the world.

And that way is somehow connected to their way, how they are. This is important to realize when we talk about love of imaginal figures for us, of being loved. As we've pointed out—and actually earlier even in this talk—that love can look really quite different from whatever perhaps more narrow models or ideas of love we have.

So it can look quite stern, quite fierce, quite demanding or taxing or all kinds of things. We've given many examples over the years, even the devouring, what seems violent. An image that eats me up and devours me, or cuts me up into little pieces. All this can be love, if I don't get pulled into my immediate, indoctrinated assumptions that my mind has. I start to see, "Oh, there is a kind of love here, and it's not the usual kind." But I have to train my sensibility, opening my sensibility and receptivity and my discernment to the range of what love can mean.

The love is not metta, it's not universal, it's not unconditional. I mean, it might include that as a stratum, but it's more than that.

I mentioned Nikolai Hartmann briefly. I want to return to him—if I get to do the talks on ethics, I will return to him. He talks about what he calls personal love, which is different than... He really means love of the being because you sense the image. You sense him, her, them as image. That imaginal level of the human being that you love, he calls the ideal, the personal ideal. I hope to explain that language a bit more when we get to the talks on ethics.

So there's what he calls the empirical personality, which just means what you actually sense, what you see. You see this form, you see that action, you see them be grumpy, you see them snap at someone, you see them be lazy or whatever it is at times. The empirical personality, he says, never strictly corresponds to its own ideal value, to the image.

When we love really deeply, we have, if you like, the imaginal sense of the other. Now, he tends to think there's just one imaginal sense—let's go with that for now, a bit like some of Corbin's interpretations of certain teachers. He calls that the ideal personality.

Since the empirical personality never strictly corresponds to its own ideal value, to the image, but love—in his sense, personal love—looks exclusively to the latter, to the image, to the ideal. The ideal is not some preconceived notion of how this person should be. It's a sort of intuitive sense of the angel that they're refracting, if we put it in our language. He's putting it in different language, different concepts. He doesn't use the language of images or even the idea of images.

So it adheres in the essence of personal love to pierce through the empirical person to his ideal value. You see through the everyday foibles and failings of this person. You also see the wonderful things that they do and their beauty, but you pierce through the empirical to the ideal value—meaning to the image, to their angelic nature and what they're refracting in their being there. This is at least its tendency, he says. Its commitment is to the ideal of personality, to that image.

"It lets that stand for the empirical individual, accepting him as equivalent to his highest possibilities, as raised to a power above his actual being. It loves in him what inheres in his essential tendency, the axiological idiosyncrasy of his ideal."

That fancy language just means his particular unique set of values and sensibilities that reside in his image. We are like we are—we have these kinds of values, these kinds of sensibilities, these kinds of directions, aspirations, propensities, the deep ones—because of the image that we are given, the image that we are refracting, the angel that we are refracting, that we are the refraction of.

"Not as an ideal, but as a trend towards actuality, just as if it were already actualized in him. For it, for this kind of love, the man as he is, in the trend of his, the preference of his ethos, of his being, is accepted as a guarantor of a higher moral being."

Again, he's using the word "moral" in quite a wide sense, but let's not go into that right now.

"Which of course he is not, but which only in him and nowhere else in the world finds something real that approximates to its own value."

So only in us, only in you, is there anything that's approximating that angel. Unique. And that's all we can do—that's the closest we can come to that angel, if you like, through the human. It's the closest it comes.

Personal love—meaning this fuller, deeper love that sees, that senses and loves what he calls the ideal person in the other, or what we might call the image person—"personal love lives by faith in the highest that is within the loved one, which despite its inadequacy, love senses prophetically. Such love is ethical divination in the preeminent sense of the word," he says. The love of the ideal of a particular, meaning the image of a particular individual.

And he continues: "The distinctive power of all love which enters deeply into one's personal life is that it brings to light the otherwise hidden and neglected essence of one's individuality."

So this is a long passage and I'm taking my time reading it, but I'm mentioning all this because not only is this relevant to human-to-human relationships where we allow them to become intimate, to be enriched and to open out to the imaginal dimension—I've said this before, I think real love, deep love of another human being, includes them being imaged to us, and the love of that image, so that we're loving the whole spectrum of their being, the whole spectrum of the dimensionality of their being.

So he's talking about love of human to human, which I want to include, but right now I'm talking about the love of images for us. Because images love us in that sense—in the sense that he's talking about. "And the distinctive power of all love which enters deeply into one's personal life is that it brings to light the otherwise hidden and neglected essence of one's individuality."

It's as if these images, they look at us, they witness us, and they know us sometimes better than we know ourselves. And in their gaze and in their love, what is sometimes hidden and inaccessible within us is brought to light through their gaze, through their love. They know something that perhaps we're not in contact with. And it starts to activate and actualize those aspects of our being, if you like, the inner core of our being, the imaginal dimensions of our being, the images that we are, that we are refracting, that we can potentially refract, that we can choose to engage with more fully.

It brings to light and to life, I would say, the otherwise hidden and neglected essence of one's individuality.

He continues: "That this revelation can be achieved only in a life of another order than that of the empirical is because of the gulf between him"—between the empirical man and the ideal of himself and the image. So there's this separation. The image—that's why I use the word "refraction"—it can never be, as I said before, a complete one hundred percent faithful replica of the angel. He calls it the gulf between the empirical man, the actual manifestation, and the ideal, the image.

And then he continues: "The loved one feels the power that upholds him." So think about this. I hope some of you will have tasted this already with images. Something about the way they love us. Of course, you can taste it, you can feel it and taste it when you're related to with a certain love by another human being—again, when they're opening to and allowing the angelic, the imaginal dimension of your being. They're allowing themselves to witness that, to open to it, to sense it, to relate to it, to love it.

"The loved one feels the power that upholds him." I hope you've felt this. I hope you have tasted this with images, also with other human beings and practitioners. "He feels that the loving glance penetrates his empirical being and points beyond it. Thus he is aware that for the one who loves him, he has become transparent. It exalts him above himself." This exalts him above himself.

"And he feels also that which shames him for not being in actuality as the other sees him. But instead of feeling that he is misunderstood, he has rather a sense that he is known to a preeminent degree."

So even when there's a sense of the image and the ideal of the image, and we feel we're not living up to it, and the image knows that, we still feel deeply understood, deeply known.

"And at the same time, he's forced to be what the other sees him to be."

So there's something again in the alchemy of images, of opening ourselves to the gaze of an image, to the sense and the conception of the imaginal in the way that we're talking about, that will galvanize all this. It changes our life. It directs us. It gives us power and also gives us courage and inclination to follow a certain direction, or calling, or action, or manifestation in our life.

Something very beautiful here. I want to talk about it in both domains: the domain of regarding an image or sensing the soul, something we're sensing the soul in the way that it loves us in this way that he's talking about; and or the human relationships, actual human relationships, when they're allowed to open, when we don't disallow that kind of opening to those imaginal dimensions.

Now, of course, some of you from the dharma background will get pretty nervous at this kind of language when he talks about one kind of ideal of a person. So we're using that—his language, as I said, the ideal of a personality is roughly akin to our language of the image of the self-image or the image that the other is seeing in us or we see in another, or the angel out ahead. We can just, for now, just lump them together.

[Continue beautifying the talk part 12/13]

This imaginal love is not only a disposition or an emotion or striving, but also a kind of knowing—a cognitive element always contained within love. Anyone who equates knowledge solely with thinking, reflective, rational consciousness of an object will naturally find contradiction here. But this represents an untenable idea of knowledge that neither science nor life would admit as adequate.

There exists a knowledge based on feeling—an intuitive knowledge. When we love this way, implicit within that love is that we know something profound about the person, or the image knows us deeply. As Hartman writes, "In a certain sense, the popular saying is right: love is blind, insofar as it does not see what is before its eyes. More correctly stated, it sees what is not in front of its eyes—what is not really at hand. It sees through."

This is the transparency—love's glances possess the nature of divination, seeing through to the ideal essence behind the actual person. To this love, the ideal essence behind the actual human is the person proper. Again, we're invited to play with this conception of ontology, to explore this range of the imaginal middle way. Who is the real being here? Is the image more real than the flesh and blood human manifestation?

"As regards personality," Hartman continues, "he who loves is the only one who sees, while he who is without love is blind." He begins with the phrase "love is blind" but actually turns it around completely. If you don't love deeply in this way—if you don't include the imaginal dimension—you're actually not seeing properly. You're blinded by a certain level of what's obviously palpable, sensible, and agreed upon.

This gaze and this kind of love discovers the ideal in the empirical. It discovers the image in the human manifestation. And that love, within the limits of its power, creates it in the loved one. There's a kind of intuitive understanding that, through love and relationship, fertilizes and allows that seed to germinate, permitting it to actualize and come into being. This constructive work of love follows after its discernment, yet there remains a penetrating knowledge within this intuitive love.

Returning to epistemology—this way of knowing that Hartman describes represents a step further epistemologically than merely a way of looking. He's actually claiming this constitutes genuine knowledge, that there's truth to it. He very much belongs to that philosophical camp, and we want to open up that territory because there's such a tendency to dismiss these kinds of knowing in our culture.

The question then becomes: How far are we able to unite the life of the ideal with a sober view of the actual? It's not that we don't see the actual life—

It's not that the image doesn't see the actual in us, it's not that we don't see the actual in another person—their humanity, their faults, their foibles, their failings, their fallings. So how much can we unite the actual life with the ideal vision?

That combination, he says, need not be a compromise. The whole art of love consists in retaining this high point of vision as a perspective and remaining under its spell. Now he's talking about human relationships, but we might also translate this to the

realm of imaginal relationships. We have to retain this openness to the image that loves us in that way. We have to let the image, as it naturally will, retain that high vision that it has of us, that perspective. And we are under the spell of that vision.

All that is implicit as part of the possibilities of what we can sense in the love that images have for us—the beauty of that, the way the soul is touched by that and opened like a flower opening, and guided and inspired and anchored.

CHAPTER 180

The Invitation of Otherness (Autonomy, Eros, and Intentionality)

Rob Burbea · 1h32

In this profound exploration of imaginal practice, Rob Burbea delves into the essential dynamics of relationship with images, focusing on three interconnected elements: autonomy, eros, and fullness of intention. He examines how the autonomy of both self and imaginal other creates the necessary 'two-ness' that allows authentic eros to flourish, distinguishing this from union states where erotic tension collapses. Burbea carefully unpacks what autonomy means in imaginal practice - not alienation, but the retention of choice, discernment, and the capacity to assent or dissent to contact with images. He explores how recognizing the image's autonomy - its own intelligence, desire, and will - paradoxically deepens relationship rather than creating distance. The talk addresses common concerns about being 'taken over' by images, emphasizing that healthy imaginal practice maintains the practitioner's freedom while honoring the image's otherness. Burbea also examines the concept of anteros - the returning eros from image to practitioner - and how opening to being loved erotically by imaginal others can be profoundly healing. He concludes by exploring fullness of intention, arguing that approaching imaginal practice with the primary intention of soul-making (rather than narrow healing agendas) paradoxically allows the most profound transformation and healing to occur. Throughout, he weaves together practical guidance with deep philosophical insights about desire, cultural conditioning, and the nature of authentic spiritual practice.

We've been talking about various aspects of the relationship with images—possibilities for how we can sense and conceive of this relationship, our relationship with them, their relationship with us, their gaze, their love. I want to continue expanding and filling out some aspects of the possibilities for relationship with image, weaving this into some of the nodes, the elements.

Of course, all the twenty-eight nodes are, in a way, various components, characterizations, or qualifications of our relationship with images. The imaginal itself is more a relationship than a thing in itself. But relationship obviously implies two things, two entities—two subjects, really. This immediately connects with our element, our node of two-ness, which we expanded to two-ness, differentiation, retaining of particularities.

Eros, we have said many times, in the way that we're defining and conceiving of it, needs two-ness. So there's an erotic tension between two—between this subject and that subject, essentially subject, because what we are in erotic relationship with, we soon begin to sense as subject, as other, if we're not already sensing it that way.

So eros needs two-ness. Where there's a collapsing into melting, into union—lovely as that can be, and it can be very lovely and fruitful sometimes—with regard to the eros between those two objects, it collapses at that moment. The fertility of the eros in terms of its insemination of the soul-making dynamic, its beautiful proliferation of life, also collapses when the two-ness collapses into union, into oneness, important as that is as a kind of experience at times.

We could also say, and we have said in the past, that eros will create and discover more differentiation, more particularities, more otherness in a way. We have to be careful what we mean by that. A sense of otherness, a sense of an other, a relationship with an other, a two-ness—otherness is already a given for us most of the time. The way consciousness works and the constitution of experience entails, involves a sense of otherness, even when we know and perceive our fundamental oneness with all things.

That mystical sense, that important, beautiful mystical sense of knowing and really perceiving this fundamental oneness with all things—phenomenally, meaning in terms of appearance, others still appear to us. Even when I know deeply my oneness, I can still navigate in the world, go to the toilet, make my breakfast. This involves some degree of perception of other. The breakfast is other, the toast is other, the toilet bowl is other. So even when we know oneness, phenomenally, others still appear to us. Perception, in the way that it works, delineates self and other.

Eros, though, we say, creates and discovers more otherness. But what do we mean when we say that? We don't really mean that it creates a greater distance between self and other as a kind of alienation. Rather, eros will create and discover—there'll be ongoing discovery and creation of more and more dimensions, particularities, aspects, images—within a beloved other. So that beloved other has more faces of otherness, more kinds of otherness. The othernesses there become plural and richly complexified.

Two-ness, otherness, particularities—all of that. Wrapped up or very much connected with this element of two-ness is autonomy. We talk about the autonomy of self and other. Let's take just a little time to unpack some aspects of that.

When we're meditating with an image, when we're in contact, in dialogue, in relationship with an image, we'll probably or likely have a sense—again, it's something that we begin to notice when it's pointed out—that the image, or even just an aspect or a

quality of that image, is somehow both me and not me. It's both mine and not mine. That's related to its infinite echoing and all kinds of things. So this sort of double sense—it's kind of me and it's kind of not me, it's kind of mine, or this aspect that it has is kind of mine, this quality that it has is kind of mine and really kind of not mine.

This double sense is part of the sense of its two-ness. It's also part of the image's autonomy, the imaginal figure's autonomy, and maybe also part of the imaginal middle way—me and not me, real and not real. But because of that sense of two-ness and autonomy there, that can support a sense of other elements. As usual with all the elements and their interconnectedness, the way they ignite and feed off and open each other up, turn each other on—with the autonomy of the other, the otherness of the other, the two-ness there, there can be a sense of grace, of gift. We're receiving something. Love also between the two. Sometimes we love them more when we recognize their autonomy.

Beauty, mystery, unfathomability, dimensionality—all of this is supported by that sense of otherness in many ways.

In discussing the element of autonomy of self and other, we've also mentioned personhood as possibly wrapped up with this—not just a sense of the autonomy of the image, but a sense of the personhood of the image. Sometimes I think we've put that out as part of the teaching. That's perhaps a little more questionable, or maybe not—it could be included, though I'm not sure.

I think autonomy, the autonomy of the image, is always there. That's a crucial aspect of an image becoming fully imaginal. It's not just a part of me. It's not completely under my control. It's like a being. It is a being. It has its own autonomy, its own intelligence, its own will, its own perception, its own desire.

Personhood is, as I said, a little more uncertain. Definitely, of course, sometimes we have the sense of personhood of an image. We might even have a sense of personhood of a tree, for example. We don't usually think of a tree as a person, but we can feel its personhood as well as its autonomy when we're sensing it with soul. But a lot of these things depend on where we draw the line with definitions.

I think at one point, and I mentioned it the other day, I delineated four kinds of domains or kinds of experience that can open up from an image. If I remember, the third one was this kind of space of the essence or the character of an imaginal figure. Someone was asking a question about Aslan—they were meditating on Aslan, the lion from The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe from the Narnia tales. At some point, the perception of Aslan as a form faded and went into a vast empty space, but that space

was imbued with the essence, the character of Aslan. A very beautiful possibility that can happen sometimes. I'm not sure it should go there all the time, but still in the domain of the imaginal and soul-making, definitely.

We mentioned the other night the sense of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and them having the dimensionality, divinity, mystery, unfathomability, and the way they connect with your body and the possibility of meditating that way. But they may or may not have personhood. If they get connected with those four goddesses, then they can begin to have personhood, but they may or may not. Still, though, they might have this autonomy. Again, it depends on definitions, how we're going to draw the lines between these words.

When we talk about the autonomy of self and other—that element of the imaginal, the autonomy of both self and other, both self and the imaginal object, the beloved other—let's just linger for a while on the sense of the autonomy of self. This is quite an important one and sometimes a tricky one for some people at different stages in their life and in their practice.

An integral and important aspect of imaginal practice is that the self retains a sense of autonomy. We're not being taken over or possessed or losing our sense of choice or will or discernment by the image. Nothing like that is certainly not being encouraged. Nothing like that is really going on.

When I talked about anchoring the other day—that an image has this sense of depth, that sense of possessing other levels or emanating from other levels, and that being able to provide us with an anchor and so keep us stable in regards to the vicissitudes of life. The anchor is like a kind of root as well, like a tree. Part of the function of the roots of the tree is to keep it stable, to keep it upright, to stop it getting blown over by the wind. So we can talk at times, and I have used the phrase at times, of being rooted in the divine, or rooted in the angelic, rooted in that dimensionality, rooted in the angelic dimension or in the archetype.

But that root, or being rooted that way and anchored that way, doesn't mean an inflexibility there. We're not pegged to the spot and immobile while something else has the autonomy and the mobility and we are being done to solely there. We still retain the autonomy of self there. That means freedom. Our freedom is there to a large extent, meaning we can choose how to practice, when to practice, when to get up from practice, what to do in practice, our pacing, our pausing. We're not stuck somewhere in this kind of anchoring and rooting.

There are all the gifts of a kind of anchoring and rooting, but not a kind of frozen subjugation, immobility, imprisonment. As I said, this is quite important for some people, perhaps given their history, given their psychology, for all kinds of reasons.

What do we mean? People use that word autonomy in terms of psychology. They use it in different psychologies quite differently, in different ways. I think in imaginal practice, autonomy, what we mean is—as I said, it's related to the two-ness, so it involves some sense of the distinctness, the two-ness, the differentiation of self and other, self and imaginal object, self and beloved erotic other, whatever that is, human—

divine or whatever. So it is based on that differentiation, but also, as I said, the autonomy of the self—some sense of the distinctness of self and other at a certain level, at least even if one knows the oneness—and an ability of the self to assent or dissent to contact.

With the image, we can refuse contact at any point if we want. We can stop it, we can turn away, we can do something else, we can engage in another practice, we can get up. So the ability of the self is retained to assent or dissent to contact or engagement with an imaginal figure, or to the duty.

This is an important fact as well. Duty often comes—we talk about it—there's a limit to the kind of freedom that we get with the imaginal because of the burden of duty. But the duty is also something that we retain autonomy with. We can say no to a duty. We can say no to part of a duty. We can say no to a certain manifestation of a duty. So this retention of our capacity to discern and to choose, to assent or dissent—this is what we mean by autonomy in the context of imaginal practice.

Autonomy is with respect to the aspects of relationship with the other which feel or are soul-making. So it's very specific. We're talking about what's the relationship with not just the imaginal figure, but particularly those aspects of the image that feel or that are sensed as soul-making. And there's autonomy in relation to those. So we're not just swept up and kind of catapulted willy-nilly and beyond our will into some possession or imprisonment.

Sometimes in modern psychology or some spiritual circles, autonomy is used in a much more absolute and general way. So we're being quite specific here in what we mean by it.

But just to make a point about the way we can be influenced by—I touched on this the other day—the way we can be influenced by what are the current popular or dominant psychological paradigms. So when we think about what does it mean to have, in general, a sense of healthy autonomy of self, I wonder, or I want to point out again, that

that sense or model of what is a healthy autonomy of self is culturally and historically contingent. It's an idea, in a sense, a model given to us by whatever culture or subcultures we move in.

And you only have to look back in history or look to other contemporary cultures or even subcultures to see that what perhaps you and I might share as a kind of almost automatic sense of what's involved in a healthy autonomy in our psychology is very contingent. The whole way we tend to feel ourselves or the way we kind of conceive of the self and feel it. And included in that is our sense of what it means to be a healthy self psychologically.

There's a case, and it has been made by others, there's a case that self—the way we feel and conceive it now, and the emphasis we give it, and the models we have of what a healthy one looks like—is actually a kind of secular, liberal, capitalist, Western, modern construction. What happens if we acknowledge that? Can we bring that acknowledgement into our understanding of soul-making dharma? So we're not assuming a kind of unquestionable truth about self in general.

As I said, just have to think back or do a little research into the self-concept or the idea of self in, say, medieval Europe before the Protestant Reformation, before the rise of capitalism and individualism and all that, or in aboriginal cultures, or Japan, even in the first half of the twentieth century. Very different, and with that a different idea about autonomy and psychological health and relational health. What is it to have my autonomy in this relationship? And some of that, we have to say, is culturally conditioned. Some of that cultural conditioning, of course, will creep into the soul-making dharma. Of course it will.

It's interesting to track Sartre's development of his thinking. In his late thought, he had this Marxist ideal of merging, the individual merging into and identifying with the group. So it was almost like losing one's autonomy. And that was his ideal there. So all these different ideals. And what is autonomy in a consumerist world of saturation with advertising? Am I really autonomous when I'm being fed all these messages that I can't help being influenced by?

So that's a little bit of an aside, but we're mostly wanting to talk about autonomy in a very specific way in regards to images and working with images and soul-making practice.

What does this mean, autonomy? We could almost say it overlaps with the element of twoness. But the word itself—autonomy—is from autonomos, two Greek words. So auto meaning self, and nomos meaning law. So it means self-governing and self-choos-

ing. We retain this, or we develop this capacity if it needs developing, but actually we retain it—this autonomy, this capacity to choose what we do, when we do, how much we do.

in imaginal relationship.

So it's possible to exercise this capacity of our own, of the self's autonomy. And for some people, that's actually a really, really important stage. There might be all kinds of wonderful images flying around and visiting, all kinds of openings, and it's not to say one can't go with that and explore those, but again, it doesn't have to be linear. Somewhere along the line, for some people, there needs to be a kind of shoring up and reassuring oneself of the aspect of the self's autonomy.

So, for example, within an imaginal relationship, within an imaginal constellation, what do I go with? My sense of—I can—I need to have a sense that I can choose what aspect to go with, that I can say no, that I can slow the whole thing down and go at my pace or go faster or whatever, that I can pause the whole thing. And so actually practising that with an image—with some people I've worked with, it's helpful for them for me to kind of help them do that as we work with an image until they internalize it a bit more. In some instances, the image is actually helping them do that, interestingly, very beautifully.

That practice, of course, one can do in a retreat, in a soul-making retreat. And of course, going back, despite what I said about cultural conditioning, we could say, we could adopt the view—the popular view—that's actually part of healthy and fertile human relationships, to retain that capacity, to do all that in relationship, in the moment, or at least after a little bit, say, "Oh, hold on, I lost my autonomy there, or I wasn't in touch with what I wanted or what I needed," and to point that out, go back and redo something.

Sometimes it's a question of exercising it. I don't think I'll speak about it now, but maybe when, if I talk about dyads, I will say a little bit, I hope, about the actual practice of what we call tunas, or sometimes we call it balance of attention, because that's very connected with this, obviously. And there's some—it's a really helpful practice for many people, and quite, despite how simple it sounds, it's actually quite challenging. And there's some things that can help there. Really, really worth practicing with that, what we call tunas practice or balance of attention practice. We'll come back to that later.

But one can exercise in the ways that I just described. One can also just recognize that one's autonomy is still there. So even, as I said, when it seems like an image is very powerful or kind of exerts a kind of claim or gives us an honour or gives us a duty, we can actually, even within all that, at the same time, almost paradoxically perhaps—not quite a paradox, but—we can recognise that we still have autonomy.

So, for example, when I gave that example of the claim of the God of music that it had on me, the power that it had on my life. There's that vulnerability there. There's the recognition of that claim and the autonomy of the image and the power of the image in my life. But I still have autonomy. I can choose what to do with that claim and that pull. I can choose how to relate to it. I can choose how much to explore it and in what ways to explore it.

So sometimes we shore up and, as I said, reassure ourselves of our own autonomy, of ourselves' autonomy in relation to an image, just by recognising it. Again, there's so much about imaginal practice that's—it sometimes needs doing this, doing that, pulling this here, yanking that, make more of this, open that. And sometimes it's just a matter of recognizing something. And in recognizing, in noticing some aspect or some element, it amplifies it. And that's the case too with our own sense of our autonomy.

But this tunas, and also the double autonomy of both of self and other, this allows and opens the eros. As we said, eros and tunas, they're going to be connected and implicit in each other. And as we've said right from the beginning in all these soul-making teachings, the eros inseminates, it fertilizes the psyche, meaning the whole sense of the image, what we're sensing with soul, and also the logos, the ideation that we have, the concepts that we have. So the tunas is important to allow the kind of—I don't know if we've got the principal sort of driver or catalyst or spark or engine of the whole soul-making dynamic, the eros.

So let's say a little bit about that connection there.

Someone came in for an interview some time ago and reported an image of a big woman, a huge, large woman. I think she had lots of arms, I can't remember. Like Avalokiteshvara, like Kuan Yin, well, Avalokiteshvara. And the image was of this yogi sitting in this big woman's lap. And she asked herself, she was reporting on her practice, and she said, "What kind of—" so she was experimenting and exploring the elements, the nodes a little bit, and she said, "Well, what kind of love do I have for her? What kind of love do I have for this big woman who's holding me in her lap, I'm resting in her lap?"

And the answer came: lusty love. And so there was lust, in this case, the sexual eros there. Remember, eros doesn't necessarily need to be sexual. Our definition is broader than that, but it includes sexual eros. So in this case, lusty love. And the yogi went with that a little bit and started licking the goddess's belly, and then her breasts and sucking her breasts. And there was a lot of sexual energy that came with that.

At that point she got a little worried. There was considerable sexual energy present, and it concerned her somewhat. We're not accustomed to such experiences, certainly not within a meditative context where we're often taught that such energies represent defilement. We've explored these themes many times before.

So she became concerned and pulled back. Then, with wisdom and skillful practice—recognizing the concern, exercising the self's autonomy—she paused. She chose to return in her own time, but with a slightly different attitude, a different intention.

She returned to the goddess and sought out the divinity and duty present there. In other words, she focused on other nodes rather than becoming swept up in the growing sexual energy. This was a very skillful response and an exercise of her own autonomy.

In sensing the goddess and exploring the divinity and duty, she noticed that the goddess wants to and does nourish. That's what the goddess does—it's her fulfillment. This goddess exists for the sake of nourishing. So in a way, part of the duty becomes opening to that nourishment, opening to the suckling nourishment from the goddess.

I asked her in the interview if the goddess could be present now, and she could. Then I asked how her body feels, how the practitioner's body feels, and she said, "Very open in the chest." This was all quite clear—you could sense that openness.

Then I asked, "Can you experience the goddess's experience of her own body? Can you enter into, get a feel for the goddess's experience of her own body?" She could, and she felt the openness of that body that was open to give, to nourish—where the milk could flow, the nourishment, the elixir could flow, the giving could flow. The openness, the fearlessness that the goddess felt in herself, in her body, the joy, the abundance of her generous nourishing of others and of beings. The goddess was full of these qualities, and by entering into that experience, feeling into it, resonating with it, the practitioner got a direct taste of that.

I sensed with this yogi that those qualities—that openness, fearlessness, power and joy and generous, abundant nourishing of others—might be mirrors of this yogi's being that were perhaps only inchoately, only vaguely, only dimly sensed, or only in their ini-

tial seed phase. Part of the duty here for this yogi might be to mirror and echo that goddess in her life with all that abundance, power, joy, fearlessness, giving, nourishment, openness.

A kind of angel out ahead then, calling this practitioner to manifest something, calling them to echo the angel, calling them to that refraction in one's life and finding what that might mean—creating, discovering what that might mean.

So I lightly suggested something like that, but in different words. Sometimes you feel it's better for people to discover things themselves. Sometimes it's okay to point things out. Sometimes there's a middle way.

But again, we have the eros fertilizing this whole process. That means we have to tolerate eros and be okay with eros. In this case, tolerate and be okay with and respond wisely and creatively to sexual eros and sexual energy that was quite intense and full.

When we talk about the autonomy of the image—so there's the autonomy of the self, and there's the autonomy of the image, this double-aspected element—the autonomy of the image is not in contradiction to a sense of interconnectedness and even a knowing of oneness.

I have a friend who, for quite some years now, senses her ovaries with soul. There's a sensing with soul of her ovaries. They become alive, dimensional, with their own intelligence, with their own desire, with their own sensibility. They become autonomous. We've talked about this. She's reported it in different ways. I'm sure I've only heard a fraction of it.

She has a soul sense of her ovaries as deities. They have their own sense of things as autonomous entities—how do they experience things, what's their response to things, what's their sensibility. They know their own autonomy, and they know their own power. Power and autonomy are related, of course—we go back to the autonomous as self-governing.

But they know that, her sense was, they know that at the same time and naturally mixed with their knowing of their embeddedness.

So the autonomy is not, as I said, in contradiction to their knowing their embeddedness, their interconnectedness. When we were talking at that time, she was talking about their sense of the ovaries existing in a kind of ocean, an imaginal ocean. And so they had a sense of their own power, their own autonomy, but also their embeddedness and interconnectedness within that imaginal ocean. And also their interconnectedness with what they are in relationship with, whatever that is at the time, sensing this, sens-

ing that. They are organs of perception, instruments of perception, soul instruments. And, for example, their dependence on sperm if there wants to be conception, etc. So autonomy of image is not in contradiction—it can include, just like self's autonomy can include a sense of knowing oneness at the same time. We don't lose that autonomy. Neither does the image.

One aspect of the autonomy of the image, if we're relating it to eros as well, is that there is this anteros—A-N-T-E-R-O-S. I think I mentioned it maybe in one talk; I can't remember when. In classical Greek mythology, anteros is one of the erotes, this gang of semi-divine beings. Eros is the principal one. Pothos we've talked about as part of our definition of eros. Himeros and anteros. Maybe some others, I can't remember. But anteros is the god of requited love. In other words, the returning of love. So, actually in our definition, he's the god of requited eros, the returning of eros.

So that's the point I want to make: that there's not just love and being loved; there's eros and being the object of eros. We have emphasized more in the teachings the eros from the self to the beloved other, to the imaginal object, to whatever we're sensing with soul. But again, as you get used to the imaginal terrain and the eyes, the sensibilities get enhanced to notice more there, one will begin to recognize: oh, not only does this imaginal other love me back in very particular ways that I may need to get used to or may not notice at first, it also has eros for me.

And that's eros, remember—so the love might be bigger than we usually think of love, but when we talk about eros, our definition, our conception of eros, it's more than being loved. It kind of may be implicit in it, the love, but it's more than that. So the eros flows both ways, and we can recognize ourselves as objects of eros, gazed at, related to with eros by the imaginal other, by whatever we're sensing with soul. And we can open to that. And what is it to feel oneself as beloved erotic other for this beloved erotic other?

So that eros is not necessarily sexual. It might be, but it might be just eros in a non-sexual sense. Either way, it's going to be healing. I think I mentioned this—I can't remember the context—on the last retreat, the roots into the ground of soul, to really know oneself as a beloved erotic, an object of beloved eros, does something to the being and to the soul sense and to the way we relate to ourselves. We can start relating to ourselves with eros. And that's more than love, which is more than metta. So all these are important: metta, love, and eros.

But one of the implicit dimensions of the autonomy of the image is the anteros, the fact that they can have their own eros for us. And in recognizing that, in tuning to it, in opening to it, in assenting to it over time, that's going to be healing the soul at all kinds

of levels. Healing is not even the right word—opening the soul, opening the sense of self, opening the sense of existence at all kinds of levels. Maybe sexual, often not sexual; doesn't matter.

And if we come back to this relationship of eros and desire and autonomy, and we talk about the self's autonomy here—again, I really want to just keep mentioning this caveat about cultural views—but we would tend to think of an autonomous self, someone who has a sense of their own autonomy, as also included in that means a relationship with their own desire, so that they know themselves with respect to desire and their eros.

Now, old maxim from Athens or whatever, the ancient philosophers, maybe even before that: know thyself. Included in that must be the knowing of oneself in relationship to desire. So again, that's quite a popular cultural view nowadays that may not be shared by all cultures, but certainly for the soul-making dharma in the larger sense, it's important—this whole journey and exploration and opening to desire and beginning to understand it more, beginning to unpack some of the constrictions or shapes from other factors and relational factors over the years with it, beginning to unpack that and understand it and validate our desire and discern different kinds of desire and healthy desire.

And that's part of knowing oneself and the importance of that. So if I don't know what goes on for me in terms of regarding passion, desire, longing, goals, wishes, my relationship to them, my view of them, how or whether I can give myself to them fully, what is ego, what is deeper desire, then I don't really know myself. And my life—because I don't know well, I haven't opened out and explored and questioned those areas and those thrusts of my life, my heart's desire and all that's involved with that—I don't really know myself. And my life will be prevented from being as full as it can be.

Or the gifts that I potentially can put out into the world, bestow, offer to others through my being, through my actions, through my speech—they also won't be as fully able to be born into the world, to be given into the world. And what else are we here for? What else are we here for but that?

But this is hard, in the sense that some proportion of people, and even some proportion of people who are attracted to soul-making dharma, all that has gotten very jammed up or confused or limited or constricted or it's painful. And sometimes people have told me, "Whenever you ask, 'What do you want, what do you really want?' or that kind of question, it just freezes me, drives me crazy." As I said, there might be real

cultural conditioning going on. Certain cultures, even contemporary cultures, don't put a lot of emphasis on individual desire, personal desire, knowing that, differentiating it, pursuing it.

Of course, that's changing with the sort of westernization of global culture. But still, that cultural conditioning operates for many people. And there's dharma conditioning as well, which we've talked about before—conditioning that tends to denigrate desire, or at least doesn't really explore its full range of colors in the psychology and in the being, and the ramifications of all that.

So yes, this work with desire is really important, and it's part of our autonomy as human beings. There are all kinds of cultural factors and individual factors and conditioning at play. When we explore this aspect—our relationship with desire, beginning to understand our desire—that whole realm is huge. We're really talking about a vast subject, one that forms a large strand, a weave of threads within the whole subject of our sense of our own autonomy.

There are certain things worth pointing out and exploring in this relationship with desire. When we talk about desire, it's always connected to other things. Obviously it's connected to an object, but it's always situated in a field of conditions that shape the whole field of that desire and our relationship with it, influencing what then ensues.

Let me mention four aspects. First, a desire is what we might call open-ended or not open-ended. "I want to eat dinner" or "I want to eat an apple" is not open-ended. If I can find an apple and dinner, I eat them and it's done. But when we've opened up the notion of the path and awakening in soul-making dharma as being open-ended, then the desire for soul-making can be open-ended. The desire for awakening becomes open-ended. It's not the case that I reach something and it's finished—it continues to unfold.

Whether a desire is open-ended or not makes a big difference to how we feel about it, how we relate to it, how we situate the self with it and view ourselves in relationship to the desire. It affects the whole energy we bring to it, the stamina, the pacing, all kinds of things. The whole way we see our life and our narrative. So it's quite an important distinction.

Second, a desire exists in a context or field of conditions, inner or outer, that make it feasible or not, likely or not, to achieve whatever that desired goal is, or to move toward that desire. What is it to have a desire that's actually achievable? What is it to have a desire that's not achievable? How do we relate to these two differently? What's wise there?

Third, a desire meets an internal pattern. This is complex and often tricky and often not fully conscious. For example: feeling lack or a habitual sense of lack, expecting disappointment, expecting to be frustrated in one's desires, quickly disallowing or not allowing desires, judging desires—or the opposites of all those patterns. These conditions around the desire have a huge effect on what unfolds.

If I have a desire and almost subconsciously I'm expecting disappointment, or I'm judging it, or I don't even allow it to become fully conscious and experience it, that shapes everything. It has a huge effect on what unfolds and whether the desire is felt or experienced as clarifying, empowering, healing, freeing. We touched on this when we talked about the opening to the current of desire practice—a lot hinges on the conception of the desire, and whether I can shift that conception if needed, out of perhaps my habitual way of viewing that desire as suspicious.

All these internal patterns are usually habitual and will influence greatly what unfolds around the desire, with the desire, from the desire, in relationship to desire—whether it all becomes dukkha in various ways. This is part of understanding ourselves: What's around the desire? What assumptions, conceptions, inclinations, inhibitions? Which of those are habitual patterns and which pertain just to this situation, this desire? It's all part of this journey of understanding, of knowing oneself in regard to our desire—if you like, healing our relationship with desire.

Fourth is whether a desire is authentic or not. Sometimes people say, "I want to practice emptiness, I need to practice emptiness." But actually, to realize emptiness is not really a soul desire for them. It's not really coming authentically from the depths of their soul, as a soul longing. Rather, either they've been indoctrinated that it's important, or the relationship with emptiness practice becomes just an attempt by the ego to measure up, to prove itself, to succeed, not to fail, to achieve this or that stage of practice. That's a very different thing than a soul desire—the ego's desperate, miserable attempt to measure up is very different from an actual soul desire.

So again, part of knowing ourselves, which is part of...

knowing that, recognizing that, discerning that. It's really, really important.

But this journey with desire, this journey of healing our relationship with desire and eros, is fundamental to soul-making dharma. It's really important. And sometimes complex.

Sometimes people hear these teachings on eros, perhaps references to sexuality, and they hear just a fragment. They might approach me and say, "I want to heal my eros, I want to heal my sexuality. In recent years I've shut down my eros, my heart, my sexuality. I hear you speak about eros and sexuality in relation to imaginal practice. I want to use imaginal practice to reinvigorate and resurrect my sexuality."

But this approach can create too much pressure. What's often absent is the element of fullness of intention. They've heard talk about eros and sexuality, and that becomes their sole focus. They may even have preconceived ideas about what healed eros and sexuality would look like. But they're not approaching soul-making practice and imaginal practice with the primary, full intention of soul-making and everything that includes—which may include healing, and often does include healing in sexuality, but encompasses so much more.

When the intention shrinks to "I want to heal my sexuality," something goes awry. The person approaches imaginal practice with this narrow focus. An image arises, and they try to be sexual with it. But then something unexpected happens—again, this is part of the image's autonomy.

I'm trying to work with this single view, this single intention, not the fullness of intention, not the fullness of the scope of soul-making with all its range and depth and meaning. And the image simply won't cooperate. Perhaps the image pulls out a sword and plunges it into her heart, shocking the practitioner and throwing them completely off course.

Better, I think, to let the emotions of the dukkha—the feeling of being shut down, the worry that perhaps my eros is gone forever—be felt fully. That sense that something which used to be alive, which I used to enjoy, that sexuality and heart connection which once flowed like water into my life, lubricating and moistening my soul, may have disappeared forever. To feel that dukkha of dryness, of closure, that sense of concern.

Be with that. Be in the crucible with that suffering and let the image arise from there. The image that emerges may not be sexual at all, but it addresses the more pertinent issue. It might be sexual, but often it's not. It's arising from that sense of dryness. What image emerges from that dukkha when I can be with it in the right way?

Or if you choose to deliberately explore a sexual image, again, let the sense of soul-making lead you and respond to that. Stay and linger with what feels soul-making, not what the mind thinks needs to happen for healing. So much depends on not buying into what the mind habitually thinks and assumes, and instead trusting the soul read, the

soul sense, the soul resonances in the energy body—those feelings of resonance and mirroring and echoing and beauty. Linger with that and resonate with that, rather than getting too narrow with healing intentions.

There can be such profound healing that emerges from soul-making practice and imaginal practice, but it needs to be approached in the right way. Then it's included as part of something much bigger—that fuller intention, that element of fullness of intention.

It's interesting—sometimes someone comes for an interview and they're very clear about their intention for healing their sexuality, perhaps because of abuse or trauma or various aspects of history. And sometimes that opens up beautifully and proves very healing through the imaginal. They come with clear intention for healing that aspect of their being, and it does work.

And in other instances it really doesn't work as I described just now. What's the difference between—why does one person, bearing that intention for healing her sexuality, why does the work with image that comes out of that become fruitful, both soulful and healing areas of her sexuality, and another person not?

I wonder about this, and I'm thinking of two specific examples. I won't go into the details, but with the example where it worked, I feel that in part it worked because her intention to heal her sexuality was really set in a much larger intention for soul-making, unlike the first person where it really didn't work—it just jammed up and weird stuff happened that threw her off. She didn't have much experience with soul-making. She just heard a little bit about it, thought, "Oh, this sounds kind of familiar. I recognize this." But she hadn't really taken on the whole—which I realize is an elaborate and complicated and very wordy set of teachings.

Whereas this second person actually had worked with image and sort of fallen in love with imaginal practice and soul-making dharma, and had so much richness there. She loved soul-making and was aware of that. So even when she came and said, "I'm bringing this thing about my sexuality and something needs healing there," explaining about past trauma, her intention to heal her sexuality was set in this much larger intention for soul-making that had become kind of implicit for her, or kind of normal for her over her years of practice with soul-making.

It was also the case with the second person where it did flower beautifully in both a healing sense and a soul-making sense, that she had already had access to a particular sexual image of a feminine being she gave a certain name to, and this image had visited her, and she had worked with her very beautifully over a couple of years, I think. So

that image was easily accessible, and the elements were easily activated already there in relationship to that image, and that helped her meet the pain and the wounding around sexuality, whereas the first person I referred to actually had no such image or imaginal experience to call upon, nor really an understanding of or working familiarity with the whole imaginal paradigm.

But it's tricky, all this, because I certainly think—if I think about what's my intention when someone comes for an interview and there's some dukkha—and it's often the case that I have an intention for healing. So sometimes it seems that it works relatively well to seek out an image with the intention primarily of healing something. As I said, even when I'm working as a teacher in interviews, someone might come with something and we're working imaginally, but we're really addressing dukkha, and I can tell that my intention is to some large extent to heal whatever pain they're in or whatever pattern of contraction or confusion or whatever it is through the image.

So, helping facilitate or create a space where, for example, the self can become image, as we talked about, the self almost becoming other, and then in relation with her now—that self-image as other—then in relationship with the self, being slow and patient and carefully working on being seen by that image, not forcing to be other or different. The appreciation, the love from that image can also become eros, as we talked about, the eros from that image towards her, even towards her sense of contractedness, towards the contracted self, towards the frozen or jammed up self, towards the withdrawing self, the fearful self fearful of how things might—how she might sabotage, or this incapacity or confusion or contraction might sabotage a new relationship. And the image coming into relationship with that fear and that contraction and that self.

And so there's the imaginal work, but I can tell that in my mind, at least, a large portion of the intention in that moment is for healing and relief of dukkha. Healing, I would say, is a better word in this instance. But again, I wonder if it's okay and helpful only when there is already some degree of experience with imaginal images and a larger commitment to soul-making—that is, the fullness of intention—as a context in the one intending or leading the practice. In that case, me, if I'm guiding someone. Or the second person I referred to before in relation to her sexuality, in her kind of being with herself and leading her own practice.

But it might also be that, if we're talking about teaching now, it might also be that the one being led needs to have some love of soul-making, some experience with imaginal images and soul-making. But even that, I'm not sure. All kinds of things are possible. But as a general rule, I think healing goes better when there's the fullness of intention. It's more powerful, richer, more multi-dimensional.

So I guess we're on to that element of fullness of intention now. A really, really important element. Strictly speaking, I think when we say fullness of intention, it means the intention for soul-making is paramount. It's the most primary intention. But the phrase "fullness of intention" means it can include other intentions. So it can include, for example, the intention to heal this or that aspect of my being or history or whatever it is. But in a way, the intention for soul-making is in itself the largest intention.

Intention for soul-making. Because we've said that soul-making is in the service of expanding our senses of sacredness, a person might think, "Oh, an intention for sensing sacredness is actually the same as the intention for soul-making." It may or may not be. But it may be that an intention for more sense of sacredness may kind of unwittingly, subconsciously imply a kind of uniform and universal perception or sense of sacredness. Maybe a person doesn't even realize that. And that uniform and universal perception or sense of sacredness spreads to more and more things or activities. That's different than a potentially endlessly expanding range of kinds and flavors of sacredness.

Do you understand the difference? I might have a sense of, "I see everything as God," or "I see everything as holy awareness or cosmic love or whatever it is," and I want to see if I can kind of spread that over everything. But that's different than the range of kinds and flavors of sacredness endlessly expanding, endlessly proliferating, subdividing, complexifying, becoming, showing varied faces.

Sometimes when we have an intention to be mindful everywhere, for example, which is a great intention, and to be mindful everywhere and in all activities—so whether I'm going shopping, whether I'm shitting, whether I'm surfing the internet or whatever, can there be mindfulness there?—but the perceptions that that will allow, just being mindful in all those activities and kind of spreading the sense of mindfulness...

they will be conditioned to arise by that attitude of mindfulness, and they will be limited in terms of the range and diversity. So yes, you'll begin to see impermanence, you'll begin to see a certain level of not-self, you'll have the kind of perception of "this just as it is"—just this thing or that thing or that experience just as it is. You'll have the experience of sensations, the atomistic nature of things, and so forth. But the range of kinds of experience are limited. Certain experiences simply won't open up from there.

In a similar way, if I narrow down my idea of what sacredness is—often unconsciously limiting what kinds of sacredness are available to perception—and that becomes my intention for more sense of sacredness, then that's a smaller intention than

the intention for soul-making. Soul-making, by virtue of the way the dynamic works, will constantly show us ever more kinds and flavors and faces of sacredness, rather than the same sacredness in more and more places.

So there's a kind of openness to surprise in a way—to new kinds of experiences—in the fullness of intention that goes with the ride of soul-making, that goes with the process, that goes with the assent to the soul-making dynamic.

Sometimes I've wondered whether this element of fullness of intention is actually quite rare. It seems to me quite a rare thing to come across in someone—not only as a way of conceiving and really feeling or intending the totality of one's path and practice, but also at any kind of juncture or moment or stretch of practice or path.

So often the wish is just to be rid of dukkha—very understandably, really understandably. So often this wish is given ascendancy, gains primacy in the face and the flow of life and relationships and friendships and work and our psychological patterns. And of course, sometimes there really is a lot of dukkha, and it's totally understandable. Sometimes that dukkha feels like it has a really long and seemingly intractable history, and it's difficult to bear.

But even when there's actually not that much great suffering, it still seems to be quite rare for this fullness of intention, rather than a kind of more narrow intention to be rid of dukkha. So I don't know if that's the case, but I sometimes wonder about it.

The good news, or a piece of good news, is that we can always—like the other elements—ignite this one, support its opening. We can just remind ourselves: can I open to a fuller intention, a wider intention, a more unfathomable intention? Because part of the surprise of the journey of soul-making is its unfathomability. I don't know where it ends. I can't even peer into its depths and its distant possibilities. I don't know what's going to open next.

But we can remind ourselves, we can support—as I said—support the ignition, the opening, the activation of that node. And that really makes a big difference. So it might be rare, but it's a very powerful thing when it comes online, this fullness of intention. It makes a big difference.

And as I said, it's labile—it's stuff that moves and that we can have a say in as part of our autonomy in deciding: can I support something different here? If the intention has—I recognize the intention has got locked or closed or narrowed or fixated—can I wield my skill and responsiveness and exercise my art in practice to actually allow a fuller intention? That's always possible because these things are malleable and labile.

It was a while ago I was working in an interview with someone—I can't remember if she realized it or if I gently pointed it out, but not important—but at some point she realized that she was intent on what she wanted from the image. That's why right at the beginning of teaching imaginal practice, I stress this thing: "What do you want from me?" Asking the image, what do you want from me?

So often in so many psychologies and even spiritualities that use imagination, there's a sense of "what can I get?" We do get lots from the image, but when we're talking about relationship with image, it's a very different relationship when we're not primarily relating to the image as "what can I get from it."

So she realized at some point that she was so intent on what she wanted from the image that she forgot to ask what the image wants. And in recognizing that, in realizing that, she actually felt some guilt—which is interesting. But luckily, there wasn't too much reified self around that guilt. Guilt can get very stuck and very jammed up, and it involves a quite solid, contracted, reified sense of self. It was more what I call remorse. There was a softness in it, and the self wasn't so reified.

But actually it was still important, I think—again, back to these issues of pacing, autonomy, and so forth. In this case, I was just encouraging her: "Okay, don't rush at that point. Don't rush. Can we linger and feel that remorse? It's not really guilt—it's remorse about being so intent on what I want that I forget to ask what the image wants, or find out what the image wants. Linger without rushing. Linger with that sense of remorse."

Feel it in the heart, feel it in the body—and she felt it behind her eyes, she said. And as she did that—so we're back again to the importance of the crucible, of being with the emotion, especially if there's a difficult emotion.

It needs addressing, it needs including, it needs working with, it needs a certain kind of relating to. And in so doing, everything softened. The energy body softened, but it softened everything in the imaginal relationship, including the perception of the image and the whole constellation.

When she was able to do that, then the self actually became an image, as we've talked about. Remember, self, other, and world all start to become involved in the imaginal constellations. We talked about that with the fountain image—the stone fountain, the stone basin. Instead of a real self in relationship, or a reified, contracted self in relationship with the imaginal other, the self became image as well. That's part of the softening, the liquefying of the whole process.

Then, interestingly, in relation to her eros and desire, the imaginal self's eros and desire was recognized as divine. As I mentioned, you don't have to rush this or make it happen or force it or push something onto the next stage, but this is exactly what I would expect. There's an inevitable, organic unfolding—in its own time, in its own pacing. Naturally, if we don't get in the way, there's a natural inclusion of the different elements of our being. They become imaginal. They gain dimension, they gain divinity.

So the imaginal self's eros and desire was then sensed as divine. And of course, the imaginal self is me and not me. The qualities and aspects of the imaginal self are me and not me. So it's not me, but it's also me. So it's my eros and desire that also begins to feel and be sensed as divine. She had a sense: "I am participating in divinity and in the divine eros."

With that, then, the craving that she felt before in relation to the image—which was also related to a craving in life—the craving subsided because the eros was allowed to flourish. In this case, the eros itself was allowed to become an erotic imaginal object, with the sense of divinity and the whole constellation feeling very soothing. So there's eros, but there's a different sense of the eros, a whole other dimension to the sense of the eros. We've touched on this before, and the importance of this. The agitation and contraction that she felt earlier was soothed.

So there's a kind of healing, if you like, in that moment in relation to what was going on. But more long-term—probably even more significant, definitely even more significant—is that we could say it is a part of insouling our eros and desire. The deepest healing is an insouling. Her sense then—it might have been the first time, or it might be the first time in a whole series of experiences—where she gets to taste the divinity, the dimensionality and divinity of her desire and her eros. Her desire and her eros become ensouled. That is a profound healing of one's relationship with one's eros and desire, and with oneself, with one's own mind and heart and soul.

So as I said at the beginning, you can get a sense from all this—and probably most of you at this point have your own practice—of just the gifts and the beauties and the surprises that open up when we take care of the relationship with images and with what we sense with soul. When we open up those possibilities, when we care for the relationship and we care for the elements and all that's involved—so much gift, so much blessing, so much that is wondrous.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 181

Logoi and Leanings

Rob Burbea · 1h45

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea offers guidance on navigating both within and between different practices in soul-making work. He explores the art of steering between imaginal practice, samādhi, mettā, and emptiness practices, using the metaphor of an eagle subtly adjusting its wings to glide on thermals. A key teaching addresses the common fork that arises in imaginal practice: when lovely feelings emerge, practitioners can either lean toward samādhi (enjoying and absorbing these qualities) or maintain focus on the soul-making aspects of the image itself. Burbea emphasizes that always choosing one direction limits the unfathomable treasures available through imaginal work.*
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> *The talk extensively examines the indispensable role of concepts (logoi) and conceptual frameworks in soul-making practice. Without appropriate ideas supporting the work, experiences may feel therapeutic or interesting but won't fully realize their imaginal potential. Burbea discusses how limiting concepts—such as reducing an image to a single causal explanation—can block soul-making, while opening up conceptual ranges around causality (past, present, or teleological) can enliven perception. He shares personal examples of working with germinal ideas like "I am soul," showing how concepts can function as subtle seeds that contain powerful subtexts, orienting consciousness toward soulful perception without heavy intellectual processing.*

This evening, I'd like to offer a few pointers, reflections, and things to consider regarding both navigation within imaginal practice or sensing the soul, and navigation between practices. So some thoughts about steering within practice, and secondly, some reflections on concepts and ideas and their place in practice and sensing the soul.

With regard to what we might call steering or navigating in practice—someone who's doing soul-making practice must understand that we're not just talking about imaginal practice or sensing the soul alone. Those practices, which are themselves very rich, are nestled within or part of a much larger practice framework of related practices. They need those other practices at times to support, nourish, consolidate, and balance what's going on in the imaginal practice—to give relief, take the pressure off.

As I've pointed out on retreats, it's probably not wise, probably not even possible, to try and do imaginal practice all day long. It needs the balance of samadhi, of emptiness, of metta, of emotional work, working with the energy body. A person engaged in soul-

making dharma is actually moving between different practices at different times. And as always, there's an art to that, a playfulness, but also a kind of wise and attuned and sensitive responsiveness that's necessary.

Then there is, of course, the navigation and steering within practices. A lot of this steering or navigation—sometimes it's quite clunky, a move from one thing to another, but often it's much more subtle, the way we can shift between practices.

I've given the image many times of an eagle or a hawk soaring on the thermals, the warm air currents. If it wants to glide to the right, it's just a very subtle leaning, an inclination of the tilt of the wings—the left wing upwards, the right wing downwards, and vice versa. The art is in the subtlety, oftentimes. Or if you're riding a bike, sometimes the steering happens more by the leaning, or a motorbike or bicycle. If you've seen people sailing in relatively small boats, they lean over one side, pulling the sail.

Sometimes that's quite dramatic and vigorous, but a lot of this navigation is really quite subtle. As things develop, as our artfulness in practice develops, we can find that the whole movement between emphases, between directions in practice or between practices gets correspondingly subtle and more subtly attuned.

The general point, which really bears repeating: sometimes we wonder, when should I do this and when should I do that? When should I just be with an emotion and when should I try and drop it or see the emptiness of it? I don't think there's necessarily a mistake in each instance, or that one should fear making a mistake.

Let's say we're talking about emotions and something's coming up emotionally that's difficult, and one decides in that moment to steer away from it: "I'll just come back to the breath. I'll just regard it as a bit of papañca, or I'll just see the emptiness of it and let it go." Now, of course, that may not be the most helpful decision, either at the time or in the long run. But I don't have to fear so much about it. If that's the case, it will tend to come back and keep knocking at the door, or something will feel like it's dried up or not working. We'll get the cues and clues and indications in our practice and in our life that we need to go back to that and explore it.

Conversely, a person might decide to go with emotion and be with it and explore it. But after a while, again, the cues, the clues, the indications tell me, "Actually, I think I'm just creating a lot of mud here. There's nothing really deeply authentic or real in this particular emotion. It's just the mind spinning and making a mess," as it has that tendency and habit.

So in each instance, don't get paralyzed thinking, "Should I do this, should I do that? More samadhi, less samadhi. More imaginal practice, or should I do an emptiness practice?" We can go with something, but if we stay sensitive and receptive to the cues that we're getting back from our experience in relation to whatever choice of direction or leaning we've taken, then we can read that feedback and always change something.

I don't think fearing making mistakes in the moment is really justified or helpful. What may be a mistake—or what I sometimes tend to think is perhaps the only mistake in navigating between different practices—would be to always do the same thing. Only one thing, only one of two choices. So always be with an emotion, or always drop it and return to the breath. Either one of those "always" approaches is going to be problematic. I'm not going to learn nearly as much in terms of the total territory of what we can learn and discover and open up in practice if I just do one or the other.

Some practices, some traditions in Buddha-Dharma teach to always work with microscopic attention—always boring the attention into something, atomizing experience. In that system, this is held to be the way you're going to get insight. So the attention is always trying to work in this atomizing, microscopic way.

Other traditions, either within insight meditation or borrowing from Mahāmudrā, Dzogchen traditions, sometimes Advaita traditions, always work with a wide awareness. Again, one will almost certainly be missing quite a lot of insight by just doing one or just doing the other. All kinds of things won't become apparent, won't get absorbed.

We'll have partial insight. And there are also other reasons—energetic consequences from doing just one or the other in terms of how the mind feels, how the energy moves in the body, and so forth.

So sometimes I like to say to people: don't fear so much the mistakes in the moment. Look at this kind of overview of your practice, or look at it over time. If you're always just doing one thing—always just one kind of approach or one kind of response to some particular area of experience that comes up—that always doing one thing, I think, would be a mistake.

So less fear, more openness to the possibilities and the diversity and the range and the flexibility of approach, of direction, of way of looking, of practice. But that then invites the question of discernment, brings that question in, and so we have to address that.

One of the possibilities that can arise both in metta practice, in emptiness practices, and in imaginal practices is that in the opening that happens in any of those practices—in the letting go, in the beauty that we're touched with—it's possible that lovely feelings arise, lovely experiences in the energy body arise. And it's as if the path then forks, potentially it forks.

So one option is to lean into those lovely feelings and pay attention to them with the intention of enjoying them, of spreading them, of absorbing into them. And if we lean that way at any time, then we are moving down the samadhi route—the pervasion, the permeating of body and mind with whatever quality of well-being is present or has arisen as a result of our practice, or just spontaneously, or whatever.

When we're doing imaginal practice, that's a common occurrence. When we're doing emptiness practice, that would be a very regular occurrence. Or when we're doing metta practice... well, with each of those three practices—metta, emptiness, and imaginal—the instructions would be slightly different. I don't want to particularly go into those differentiations right now.

But the samadhi qualities, if you like, or ingredients that come from working with an image—an erotic imaginal image—will arise quite regularly. People have found this is related to the way the image opens up our energy body and aligns and harmonizes our energy body. Openness, alignment, harmonization of the energy body are all absolutely characteristic of certainly the first four jhanas, but in a way we could say of all jhanas and all samadhi. It's central to what I would take samadhi to mean.

So when we do that, or if we always do that—whenever the kind of loveliness in the energy body and the emotional qualities of joy and peace, ecstasy, rapture arise—if we always lean into them and go into samadhi, we'll, in a way, only gain a portion of the imaginal's immense treasures.

I'm saying this partly because someone was reporting this to me indirectly. She didn't kind of realize she was listening to talks on soul making and playing a little bit, and discovering that often these samadhi qualities came up and they were quite new for her. So she was leaning repeatedly into the samadhi, almost like using the imaginal to then get these lovely qualities in the energy body and the heart, and then kind of honing in on them, opening to them, absorbing them, leaning it towards the samadhi and towards jhana.

But if we always do that, as I said, you're going to miss a huge portion of the unfathomable and diverse treasures that are there in the imaginal. It would be a bit like someone making a profound and beautiful work of art—maybe it's made out of a pre-

cious substance, bronze or gold or whatever—and you melt it down and extract the bronze or gold because that's worth something, it's valuable. The work of art, though, will be worth more. If it's a great work of art, it's going to be worth more than just the value of the material it's made from.

So financially it's worth more, but existentially even more so. It will keep on giving if it's a profound work of art. It has that unfathomability, which profound works of art have—closely related, or if not the same thing, as imaginal images. They keep on going. They have that unfathomability, that inexhaustibility. They can touch your soul endlessly.

So to always go towards the samadhi, take the samadhi fork, is going to limit actually how much we open to recognize and receive the gifts—the diverse and profound gifts—of the imaginal.

But sometimes it's a really helpful thing to do. Here's this image, and there's loveliness coming up because of the eros or whatever, and the beauty there, and the opening in the energy body. To decide to let the image be secondary, and those lovely qualities in the energy body, in the mind and heart, be primary—joy, peace, whatever they are, ecstasy, rapture, even if that's quite mellow—to hone in on them, to open to them, to absorb into them, to really get intimate with them, developing the samadhi... that's really, really helpful.

As I said, partly as a balance to the imaginal practice, because it would be too intense and too probably unhelpfully entangling to do imaginal practice all day long. Partly because we rest well there, we get nourished and resourced, which influences our view on all kinds of things. There are all kinds of other things to learn in samadhi practice.

And part of the kind of—I almost want to say the witchcraft of samadhi practice, the wizardry of it—is we learn a lot there that bears fruit in all kinds of areas, including imaginal practice. So sometimes doing that is really valuable. Always doing it is we're really going to miss this treasure—just like if we melted down this amazing sculpture that was made from bronze or whatever, just because we want the bronze. We've missed the art. We've missed the profundity of the art that would feed our soul.

But this is one of the kind of common and classic possibilities of forks when we're doing imaginal practice—forks in the path where we can lean one way or another. And it will arise quite regularly, I think.

What makes the difference is... because sometimes what we get is the image is there and the lovely feeling is there.

And so I kind of have to decide where am I leaning exactly? Am I leaning primarily to the lovely feeling in the energy body and the mind and the heart? Then I'm going towards the samadhi. Am I leaning primarily towards the soul-making aspects of the image and resonating with them and opening with them and the eros and so forth? Then I'm doing imaginal practice—then the image is primary. Am I balancing the two?

You know, what's the relative degree of balance between these? So all this can be played with. And it could be that one lets the image completely fade, or it just goes to the background, while the samadhi qualities are most prominent, or vice versa. The samadhi qualities, I kind of let them really go to the background while the image comes forward, or I hold the two in relative balance. But I should be familiar with moving and working along that whole range again.

We're talking about ranges, flexibility, making sure that when we talk about these different ranges—as we did in that talk on the "Spreading of Five Wings"—that the whole range is available to us and we're not kind of always hanging out or preferencing one area of that range.

So in moving between samadhi and image, or actually in moving along the spectrum between pure samadhi and pure imaginal practice, the key factor is intention. For example, when I'm leaning in the samadhi direction, my intention at that moment is to support, to stabilize, and to enjoy the factors of samadhi—pīti, sukha, or whatever. That's my intention. It's the intention that makes the difference, because the intention directs and primes the attention. And when I'm trying to enjoy something, it shapes—it not just directs the attention, but it shapes it or flavors it or conditions it in a certain way.

An intention that's trying to enjoy has a certain kind of morphology to it in the sense that it's open, it's tasting, it's penetrating, it's relishing. All that is wrapped up in the attention, but it's driven by, it's programmed by the intention. This is what makes a difference.

When my primary intention is to go down the imaginal practice path, and I'm leaning that way, then my intention is for soul-making. That's why it's important. What nodes need lighting up? Where's the soul-making factor in all this complex image or imaginal constellation where the self and other and the world are involved? Where's the sense of soulfulness right now? Can I tune into that? So again, the intention is for soul-making and that directs and shapes, informs the attention.

So there might be working with an image and there are all kinds of lovely feelings going on. The body is in complete rapture and it's dissolved into whiteness, etc. But it still might be possible, despite the intensity of that lovely feeling—which could easily go into jhana—my intention at that moment may be towards soul-making. The image is still there. I'm aware of what's going on in the body and mind and the loveliness there. But my intention is towards the soul-making.

So the intention is the primary thing that kind of determines which of these forks we're going down at any time. And that's an important thing to bear in mind.

Again, I'm offering these as reflections, things for you to try out in practice and get a feel for them yourselves, make them personal. I know what that feels like, I see, I get the feel of that kind of leaning, of that kind of steering. I get the feel of how this or that emphasis or intention or whatever we're talking about makes a difference. So everything we're talking about is there to be incorporated, discovered in your own practice, or deliberately incorporated, tried out, experimented with until you get taste for it yourself and you make it your own. You understand it, you've absorbed it.

So there's this, as I said, this possibility of emphasis or leaning between imaginal soul-making emphasis, imaginal practice, and samadhi. And within imaginal practice, I've already made this point, but again, it's worth repeating: with the elements or the nodes, we must remember that there's not a kind of formula for the order in which they go. There's not a predictable unfolding. First this element lights up, first I do this and then that. It's not so linear like that.

Again, what that means for practice is it throws us back into a kind of openness of possibility. We don't exactly know what will light up first. It means my antennae have to be primed. I have to be receptive. I have to be delicate and sensitive in my attention so that I can notice: where is the soul-making? What's igniting right now?

What would be helpful? What's possible right now out of all the different elements that we can give attention to, begin to notice, or begin to deliberately ignite, tweak, play with?

As I've already mentioned, there are different starting points. I gave examples where sometimes the sense of being loved came first, then an emotion, then the imaginal sense of the trees. We often begin with instructions about the energy body, but it doesn't have to come first.

You will find—and I've pointed this out many times—that when an image is imaginable or potentially imaginable, has meaning for the soul, meaningfulness for the soul, is potentially soul-making, it opens up the energy body. It harmonizes it, aligns it. The

other way around also works, and we've emphasized this many times. Sometimes you're working with something that's not really imaginal, there's not really the sense of sensing with soul there. Open up the energy body, inhabit the energy body, let the body lead. Bring that whole sensitivity of awareness to the entire space of the energy body, and that allows something to become more imaginal.

So the imaginal opens up the energy body. Opening up the energy body, inhabiting the energy body, can open up the imaginal. There's not necessarily a formulaic linear order.

Again, from some examples I've given in this series of talks, one might choose deliberately to focus on the sense of timelessness or eternality and gently open that out or shift it—perhaps in a more sudden quantum leap in different ways. In doing that, it allows one's self or some aspect of one's existence or what one is sensing right now, internally or externally, to be sensed with soul. It allows the whole thing to become more imaginal.

Correspondingly, of course, because timelessness and eternality are elements of the imaginal, when we are sensing with soul, when something does become more fully imaginal, we will notice—or at some point—the eternality element will switch on, will ignite.

Just remember this and what it means in terms of our poise, our stance, our openness, our need for sensitivity, receptivity, opportunism. This is very much part of navigating within imaginal practice.

When we talk about navigating or steering, we're also including this aspect of pacing, which I've touched on over recent years. But I want to say one more thing about it with regard to eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

When we defined eros, we included the *pothos* element in the definition. Eros wants more contact, more connection, more touching, more opening, more intimacy with its beloved erotic other. That "more" was a key aspect that drove the whole movement of eros and its stimulation of the soul-making dynamic.

But if you pay attention to your experience, you will notice that eros doesn't always want more right now in this moment. Often it does, and there's that sense of more pushing into creating, discovering more of the beloved other, the beloved imaginal object—creating more faces, more aspects, more dimensions, more images within the image.

But sometimes the "more" that eros wants may simply be to linger. Right now, with the loveliness and delight of whatever perception is there—the loveliness and delight that are part of the subjective experience of eros—rather than wanting to reach, penetrate into, open to beyond, wanting to see more, or wanting the image to complexify or to create and discover new faces, new aspects of the beloved. Sometimes eros wants to linger longer. The "more" is in the more time. It wants to linger for more time with the loveliness it has, with the delight it has, with the sense of the beloved that it already has right there.

Again, we have to be respectful, sensitive to and respectful of what does the eros want right now? What kind of more? Often it is that more that will naturally create and discover more faces, more dimensions, more beyonds, that wants to penetrate and open those beyonds and that unfathomability. But sometimes it's not. It pauses for a while and lingers.

This has to do with pacing—the pacing of the whole movement of the soul-making dynamic, the whole movement of what's happening, what's opening, what's moving, and how and when and in what kind of rhythms it moves when we're working with an image, with sensing with soul.

Eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, have rhythms. They're not necessarily gradual or smooth. If you perhaps got that impression from descriptions we've given in the past of the way eros works and the way the soul-making dynamic works, just bear in mind that the rhythms there may not be gradual or smooth. They may be more step-like rather than a smoothly linear graph.

That step-like rhythm might be more obvious with the logos in general, which tends to move the ideas of things, selves, objects, world, reality. Logos—our ideation, our concepts and conceptual frameworks—tend to move and open at a slower pace than eros or psyche or image.

I'm saying this partly because I don't think I've spelled that out clearly in talks before, and perhaps I've given the impression that it's always in motion with the soul-making dynamic, that eros is always wanting that kind of more. It does generally, and for the most part, but as I said, there may be rhythms. The river is flowing, and then it comes to a place where it's relatively still and pools for a while, enjoying that stillness and pooling, and then it moves on.

Again, the need for withholding a kind of imposing of formulae, the need to listen, to be sensitive, to be open and receptive to what's happening and to respect that—or at least be open to respecting it. Because sometimes we need to respond to what's happening and make it different.

Help it to become something else.

And sometimes we need to kind of impose a sort of slowing down or a kind of stasis in what's happening, in what's unfolding. Sometimes this is for the sake of stability and equanimity in the being.

It can happen—I'm not sure how common it is, but some people might be, for different reasons, more predisposed to it than others—that something opens up in the sensing with soul. And there's a lot of excitement. And that excitement is, of course, part of the eros. But sometimes the excitement can fizz in the being, in the energy, and in the mind, and in the heart in certain ways that just actually mean that what could be absorbed and learned and opened to is not so well absorbed, learned, and opened to. Maybe the being just gets agitated in a way that's not that helpful. Maybe something in the whole stance and structure of the being gets thrown off balance in a way, again, that's not that helpful.

Of course, at times, being thrown off balance is extremely helpful, despite the fact that it might feel difficult. We've talked about that—the stretching, the breaking of the vessels. But sometimes it can be wise to introduce something or lean in a certain way or navigate within the imaginal constellation that's happening, within the sensing with soul that's happening, so that we kind of balance things out, balance the being out, which allows more absorption of the illumination of whatever we're sensing with soul and allows more illumination of the soul and more digestion for the soul of that illumination over time.

So going back to this teaching about the fountain and the basin of the fountain and that needing—the waters of soul needing to kind of balance out, the waters of what becomes imaginal needing to balance out and at least include self and world. Not with every image, of course not, but again over time.

And sometimes within one image, again, we might find something's out of balance here, something doesn't feel quite right, or I can't quite tolerate this. For instance, the eros is so much leaning towards the other in its gaze, in its belovedness, in its erotic charge and directionality. And that's tipping the being over in some ways. So we can counterbalance that—not diminish the eros, but actually in a way add to it by allowing ourselves or helping ourselves to become an erotic object for ourselves. The self be-

comes imaginal. So that the eros can flow both ways. There can actually be more eros, but it's balanced. The eros flowing towards the self balances the eros towards the other, and the world.

Included in the world also, we might say, what's the sense of the world right now? What kind of world? What kind of cosmos? What's the cosmopoiesis here? What's the perception of things? And included in that is the perception of time. So again, one might balance things out by just paying attention to what kind of perception of time is happening right now. Maybe the perception of time—time begins to get sensed with soul. And again, there's all kinds of possibilities there in timelessness or the kinds of perception with time. And that allows the eros and the soul-making to flow in that direction, fill out in time. And that also balances out the flows of water here so that there can be enough equanimity, enough stability in the moment and over time in practice that things are digested, absorbed. They don't just get bowled over by some amazing experience that was—I can't decide whether it was more amazing or just more agitating.

Sometimes what happens for some people is that the whole sensing with soul brings one into sensing something in nature or some kind of universal process—the arising of appearances or something about the cosmos, something about consciousness. And the whole sensing with soul, it's hard to say what's sensing with soul and what's insight. Maybe there isn't a boundary there. And again, with the insight, there can be a lot of excitement and a lot of turbulence sometimes.

So going back to different teachings we've given, perhaps there might be certain of the elements at that point. If that's what's happening, I don't want to throw the whole experience out. There's a lot of insight here. There's a lot of opening. There's a lot of beauty and amazement in this sensing with soul. But perhaps if I just noticed, for instance, the sense of grace, and I give that a little bit more attention, or the sense of being loved—there can be soothingness in both those qualities. We're pervaded by this grace, we're held by it, we're given something. Or being loved—usually there's something soothing about being pervaded by that sense of being loved.

So just some attention—doesn't have to be all the attention, but some attention to those kind of qualities, or as I said, maybe that eternality can kind of soothe things and allow things to be more stable, more sustaining, more digestible, and in that way, more fruitful, more soulful, more fruitful for the soul.

And also the balance of attention, as we said, with self, other, world—where can I play with this balance of attention and actually feel more the sustainability and stability come into the experience right now?

Of course, one has to remember sometimes—I don't know how common this is, but sometimes if there's really a lot of excitement that's happening with a certain experience, the excitement means we can't remember so well. But I do think this kind of thing is very possible.

I've seen it to be so, and in interviews, just guiding people gently, it's very possible. It's part of the art of steering.

When we're still talking about steering now, and steering for the sake of soul-making, of course, or if I'm steering in emptiness practice, it's steering for the sake of those insights making a difference. So something to bear in mind is these two factors of energy body and also ideas or conceptual frameworks and how significant they are.

They're the primary factors that allow soul-making practice and also we could say emptiness practice as well, to realize their full potential.

Energy body, we've talked about—it's involved in the steering. It tells me when something is potentially soul-making, even if my mind is objecting or horrified by something or thinking, "Oh, this is not very interesting or boring or it's probably rubbish, it's probably irrelevant." The energy body can tell me. I can read the energy body and with this harmonization, alignment, opening, it's telling me I'm on the right track here, no matter what my mind is saying. And I can go with it and trust it.

So it's part of the steering. But it's also part of what allows the digestion, the chewing, the absorption of the soul-making experience. It allows us to open to it more. It allows the sensing the soul, whatever we're sensing, the imaginal object of the eros, to penetrate the being, to touch the being. It's working, it's kneading the dough of our body and our being, and not just our body, but through our body, our consciousness and our soul.

That's part of, as I said, also with emptiness practices, because we feel in the body the release that a certain emptiness way of looking or insight way of looking brings. And that allows us to really absorb that insight and to feel the freedom of it and to feel the liberation of it right then and to absorb it more long-term.

So energy body is involved both in steering and supporting the soul-making and emptiness practices to realize their full potential.

But also the ideation—the conceptual framework or the ideas supporting soul-making and imaginal practice, or if we're talking about emptiness practices, the ideas that are underpinning them, supporting them, those are absolutely key.

We can have an experience in either one of those practices, either imaginal practice or emptiness practice, and the experience itself, if we can even talk about an experience itself as if it's separable from other conditions and the surrounding factors. But we might have some experience, and that experience itself may be therapeutic to a certain extent. It may feel therapeutic. It may feel healing. It may be interesting. It may be amazing in either of those two practices, soul-making or emptiness.

But it might not be either fully imaginal or soul-making or delivering of liberating insight into emptiness. Because the ideas that are supporting it are not—ideas are excluded, or they're narrowed down, or they're not conscious enough.

As you can tell over the years in the talks, there's a lot of ideas that support the whole soul-making logos. And if they're not operating in a way that—in the time of practice, it doesn't necessarily mean they're at the forefront of my mind, but if they're not operating in ways that support the practice, then yes, I might have something that feels, to a certain extent, healing. I might have something that's, wow, if I tell my friends about it, it might be something that's really interesting. But there won't be the fully imaginal, fully soul-making potential there. I won't receive that.

And similarly with the emptiness. Something might fade through some practice, but if I haven't got some portion of my mind understanding the idea of why that fading is significant—it fades when I do this, or when I drop that, or when I don't do this, and that's teaching me about dependent arising. So yeah, sure, if there's some painful papañca, painful story, painful history, body pain, and it fades, we feel great, that was really helpful, amazing that it faded. But if I'm not linking it up, if it's not undergirded by certain, again, lightly held concepts and ideas that are appropriate, that are the ones that are helpful, well, it won't be helpful, that experience. Or rather, the help of it will be limited. And I doubt I will have any kind of long-term benefit from it.

So, energy body, but also very much ideas, concepts, logoi, conceptual frameworks—that I want to go into, offer a few things, reflections and considerations about tonight.

The importance, certainly, of conceptual frameworks, but also of individual concepts. We use this word logos for either one concept or one idea or a much larger frame of ideas, framework of ideas. Like, for example, the Soul-making Dharma is a whole conceptual framework, or the way a certain tradition practices Theravādan insight meditation is also a whole conceptual framework—a whole network of related ideas that together form a kind of hopefully coherent framework and helpful framework.

So by logos, I can mean either of those, either one idea or a whole framework. We've stressed the importance of this and how a kind of limited logos or inappropriate logoi, or narrowing down or rigidification or holding on to some logoi can block and inhibit the whole soul-making process.

But let's consider the possibility of even more flexibility around causality. What if we could hold, at times, multiple perspectives simultaneously? What if this dukkha arises from the past AND is conditioned by my present way of looking AND is pulled into being by some future angel, some calling from ahead?

This multiplicity of causal understanding - rather than limiting us to just one explanation - actually opens up the dimensionality that allows for sensing the soul. When we can hold these different causal frameworks lightly, when we don't rigidify around any single explanation, then something much more alive becomes possible.

The image can breathe. The dukkha can reveal its deeper nature. Instead of being flattened into one causal story, it becomes multidimensional, richly textured, imaginal.

So we might say that a skillful relationship with causality involves this kind of conceptual flexibility - not abandoning the notion of cause and effect, but expanding our repertoire of how we understand it. Sometimes the most healing perspective might be historical. Sometimes the most insightful approach is to see the dependent arising in the present moment. Sometimes what's needed is to sense the teleological pull, the way this experience is actually serving something larger, something that wants to emerge.

Each of these causal frameworks can be valid and useful. Each can serve the soul-making process in different ways. But when we get stuck in only one, when we insist that this is THE way to understand what's happening, then we've moved into the kind of conceptual rigidity that blocks the very aliveness we're trying to cultivate.

This flexibility around causality is just one example of what I mean by logos serving soul-making rather than inhibiting it. The concepts become tools in service of opening rather than closing, of dimensionalizing rather than flattening. They help create the conditions where images can emerge, where soul can be sensed, where the whole dynamic can unfold more freely.

Or this angel is grieving the plight of the earth, and the grief feels so deep, whatever it is.

So this third possibility, teleological causation, there's a telos there—something, a goal, something, an end, the angel out ahead, something we're being propelled or pulled towards.

Again, is it possible to open up that range, that range of possibility, and to exercise some flexibility in picking up and putting down, including focusing on these different causal explanations and trying them out? And they will make a difference. They will make a huge difference to how something is sensed, what the experience actually is that unfolds.

So again, we could add that to our list in the spreading of five wings. I can't remember if that one was already in there, or we can certainly add it. So just like the range of perceived density or substantiality, or insubstantiality of the energy body as a range, or the pathologizing or non-pathologizing images, there's this openness to the range of causal explanations right now. And sometimes these are just unconscious, so you can actually make them more conscious and deliberately play with them.

But there is that possibility—opening up the logos away from the typically narrowed, constricted range of causal explanation that goes with our contemporary culture, or the dominant culture at least. There's the possibility of that flexibility, that openness, that playing, that investigation. Really important.

In a way, the causal explanations also have to do with the nature of time. How can you have a cause in the future? That doesn't work, we would tend to think. But there's something here to open up.

There's a lovely passage regarding the conceptions of time from—well, Henry Corbin is reporting it. I can't quite remember where he's reporting it from, so forgive me for that. But he talks about it in his book *Temple and Contemplation*.

Some of you will know the story from the Old Testament of Moses as a baby. The pharaoh of Egypt had a premonition or an intuition or a rumor that a son would be born to the Jewish people and would be destructive for the Egyptian people—something like that, I can't remember exactly. It would be a threat or would liberate the Jewish people from their enslavement and their utility as a workforce for the Egyptians, for the Pharaoh. And so he received this warning somehow, and he tried to kill all the male infants to prevent this prophecy or whatever it was from unfolding in those ways—retaining his free workforce, essentially, and his power.

What happens is Moses' mother and his sister hide Moses in a little kind of wicker or woven willow cradle or crib or basket, a little ark that floated, and hid him in the bulrushes on the Nile, on the river Nile. So this little cradle was floating there on the bulrushes out of sight. The story goes that his sister Miriam was working as a servant, I think, for the Pharaoh and found the cradle, and they adopted Moses for Pharaoh.

But of course, if Moses had stayed there in the water, then he would have eventually sunk and he would have drowned. What Corbin reports here—and I'm not sure where it comes from—is that one of the symbolic properties of water is to typify the sense of time and of engulfment in time, according to some kind of system of symbology. That means engulfment in the inexorable movement of past, present, future—the usual linear sense and interpretation of time, the usual interpretation and reading of history, of past, and of events in time.

"Pharaoh's aim," he continues, "is to make all male children sink into time, sink into water, succumb to the indifferent uniformity of all that is encased in time." So this indifferent uniformity of all that is encased in time is just to sink in flatland, basically—to be engulfed by a flat perspective on everything. Time is just what it seems to be to the flat view.

And Pharaoh's aim is to prevent them from rising to the height of the worlds, of other worlds that can be revealed. In other words, the worlds of the angels, of the demons, the worlds of the archetypes and the myths, the worlds of the angel out ahead, the world where everything is, this is always already happening. The worlds of eternal time, hierophantic times. Pharaoh's aim is that they are to drown in the waters of secular one-dimensional history—one way of reading events.

It's also what Corbin's main point here is about—one way of reading the Bible or sacred literature as just a historic document, a collection of stories, some of which may be true, some of which may bear some relevance to so-called fact, some which may be made up, but they're all taken as literal rather than as symbolic and multidimensional and endlessly open to interpretation, to infinitely fertile hermeneutics.

They are to drown in the waters of secular one-dimensional history. And so in this little ark, this little ark preserved Moses from the flux of historical time—we should say from the perspective of that usual flux of historical time. What Pharaoh wanted was that only normal man should survive. So he was afraid, according to this interpreter, he was afraid of someone who could see more than just the linear, flat view and interpretation and sense of time. What Pharaoh wanted on the other hand was that only normal man should survive.

The man who conforms absolutely to the norm of a world which, he says, does not wish to know that it is in exile, but also does not wish to know that there are—what he really means is that there are other dimensions. That there is hierophantic time. There is the sense of the eternal and a whole perspective that, instead of regarding the eternal as just unreal imagination, recognizes that what is eternal, what is timeless, actually emanates or projects this world.

The events of this world, the events recorded in time, stories of scripture or whatever, are potential symbols opening up this other world, and the power of that, and the beauty of that, and as I said, the anchoring of that, the rooting of that.

So again, there's this causality which is obviously tied into our notions, our views of time, and the possibility of opening that up, shifting it, not dogmatically replacing one with the other as if there is no causality from the past. Of course there is. As if events don't happen in linear time or can be sensed that way and it makes sense to understand them that way. But that's not the only way we can sense things. And if it is the only way, then we're impoverished by that. We are limited by that. Our soul and our soul-making is grossly limited by that.

But more widely, we can again stress the real indispensability of concepts and conceptual frameworks for soul-making. You know, an imaginative experience is not a non-conceptual experience. There are concepts operating there. They may be subtly in the background. They may be at the foreground. They may have initiated the whole process. They may result from the process. They may be just woven in with the whole thing. The concepts are operating.

And more widely, as I said earlier today, the whole conceptual framework is necessary for a certain kind of fertility of imaginal practice. It won't really be that soul-making without a conceptual framework that supports it.

I remember talking with someone who reported in an interview that she'd been practicing with the imagination and being with images for years, but it all kept kind of collapsing into a kind of unfertile soup. She would be drawn to it and then the whole thing would seem ridiculous to her, or she would just get very confused, or it would all really stagnate. Nothing really blossomed much at all despite years of good intention and practice and curiosity.

As we were talking, it became clear to me that there was no conceptual framework supporting the imaginal or supporting a really fecund and rich working with image and sensing with soul. Rather, she had been a long time in the Dharma, in a certain tradition, and so the conceptual framework that she was bringing to meet the experiences of images was actually a much more typical Dharma conceptual framework. For example, everything's impermanent, as well as typical modernist views about reality, what's real and what isn't.

And there was also mixed with that a certain "loyalty"—I'll put it in inverted commas—loyalty to Buddhadharma, loyalty to being a Buddhist or identifying with being a Buddhist. The absence of a really coherent and supportive conceptual structure for the

imaginal and to open up the imaginal and the sensing with soul, together with this kind of infection or infiltration with just typical Dharma conceptual frameworks about whatever it was—impermanence and death and the meaningless of the existential fact of impermanence and the pathos of that, that kind of secular existentialist dharma, together with modernist views about what was real and not—all that led to this stagnation and kind of circling in doubt for years.

So it's so crucial, and I know that some people struggle with the conceptual piece or it seems a bit heady or whatever, but again, see for yourself. Without it, the sensing with soul, the imaginal practice will either lack a lot of dimensionality and power, a lot of range, a lot of depth, and possibility of what can open up. Or it will kind of veer into a path that looks ostensibly similar at one level—some kind of shamanism or energy healing or whatever it is. All of which is fine if people have their choices of what they do, but if we actually want to really support what we're talking about by sensing with soul and the imaginal and those words, then the conceptual framework is crucial.

Same with emptiness practice or whatever. The conceptual framework makes a huge difference. People can have all kinds of experience. As I said, I mentioned someone could have an experience of the Unfabricated. Everything fades completely. There's a complete disappearance. And I've met several yogis who've reported to me in interviews something like that, but they don't seem to have got any liberating insight from it because they haven't tied it to a conceptual framework that understands emptiness and dependent arising.

Sometimes fortuitously they do. There's the opening of a mystical experience and it does something to their sense of this world and this self. Other times it doesn't. It's not helpfully underpinned by a conceptual framework that allows this opening and absorbing of things, their place and their power. So this is really worth bearing in mind.

And some of you may have had this experience. You can see just how important conceptual frameworks are. Sometimes when you're working in a dyad and doing soul-making practice, for instance, sharing an image or working with an image together, you can notice, or you will notice, how a limiting conceptual framework, even if it's held unconsciously by only one of the people in the dyad, by only one of the pair, is amazing. Two people are working. One person's conceptual framework is more full and more supportive of the whole sensing with soul paradigm, and the other's is not. There's some limits to it, or it's very partial, or it's not really there at all, but they like images and they like hanging out and they like the sense of intimacy or whatever it is.

Something in the magic of dyad practice and the mysterious nature of connection reveals just how powerful our conceptions and conceptual frameworks truly are. When only one person holds an unconsciously limiting view—perhaps not even realizing they're constraining a particular logos—it limits what can arise as image and energy for both partners, even though this view hasn't been spoken aloud and may not even be consciously held.

This suggests it may not be wise to engage in soul-making dyad practice with someone who doesn't share or understand the conceptual framework. While you can certainly practice many forms of dyad work together—balance of attention, sharing feelings, insight dialogue—attempting soul-making dyads without shared conceptual grounding will likely fall flat, feel limited, and prove frustrating or even painful for one or both partners.

I'm not suggesting this because soul-making is some kind of religion requiring adherence to a particular credo. Rather, I'm pointing to something fascinating: the profound power of concepts and conceptual frameworks to either limit or open, inhibit or support and deepen soul-making perceptions. This is crucial to understand for one's own practice, and dyad work provides additional compelling evidence of these dynamics.

So here's some practical advice worth considering: it may prove unsatisfying and unfruitful to attempt soul-making dyad practices with someone who doesn't share or know the conceptual framework. I understand the impulse—when this material feels exciting and transformative, you naturally want to share it with friends who are good practitioners or skilled at intimacy. But it may not work without a genuinely shared and supportive logos.

This consideration touches on questions of temenos, caring for your soul, caring for soul in general, caring for practice, and caring for your relationship with that person. If you feel frustrated and unfulfilled, they may sense this and feel rejected or somehow inadequate, which serves no one.

The importance and centrality of logos—concepts, ideas, and conceptual frameworks—cannot be overstated. They are indispensably crucial to soul-making practice.

Now, let me say something about how this can actually work. When I've explained the Eros-Psyche-Logos dynamic—and Catherine has offered some lovely explanations as well—we've often presented it as if eros comes first, inseminating and fertilizing psyche or image. As psyche and image expand, open up, and diversify, our sense of

things in the world or aspects of ourselves opens through the experience of image. Over time, logos expands too. We begin questioning our views of reality, considering that maybe things could be seen differently, that there are other ways of understanding.

So the sequence appears to flow from the initial impulse of eros, through the expansion of psyche, to the expansion of logos. But it doesn't have to work in this order.

There may be eros for logos itself. Perhaps after years of resistance or wanting to push away conceptualization and intellectualization for various reasons, a person begins to fall in love with logos—with the whole realm of concepts, potent ideas, poetic ideas, and their transformative power in the soul. This might manifest as love for one particular idea, for the entire conceptual framework of soul-making, or for logos in general.

When there's eros for logos, the logos itself becomes ignited. Instead of eros inseminating psyche, the logos becomes image—an erotic, imaginal, beloved other. Logos is ignited through eros's passion for it, engendering more creation and discovery of other concepts and conceptual frameworks. Rather than logos always trailing in third place, expanding last as a result of eros and psyche, eros can directly impregnate logos with passionate engagement, igniting logos and giving birth to more creation and conceptual discovery.

The entire soul-making dynamic—the whole Eros-Psyche-Logos interplay—might be stimulated into expansion when logos itself is directly impacted, stretched, shattered, or ignited. You might read something, hear an idea in a talk, encounter a concept someone shares, or have a thought arise spontaneously. The mind of the soul becomes impacted by this idea, something breaks open in the entire realm of ideation, logos expands, and from there eros and image can emerge.

So there are all kinds of possibilities in this dynamic interplay.

And I gave some examples in this series already. So if we go back to that example of me reading about these ten sefirot—the teachings from the Kabbalistic tradition about, well, some would say the inner nature of the Godhead. Some would say the teachings are actually about the emanation of God or the energy of God, the manifestations of God, either way.

And the possibility of regarding them too, because, to quote the passage from the beginning of Genesis, humankind made in the image and likeness of God, that our human psychology, our soul, also has refractions, mirrors that structure of the ten sefirot that the Buddha nature has, that the divinity has. So that there's a kind of parallel process or even a connected process there.

Well, all that's an idea. It's quite an elaborate idea. And one can take that idea and begin with that in practice. One is actually deliberately taking an idea that's attractive to one and putting it in the gun chamber, so to speak, and seeing what comes out of that, what shoots out of that in the looking.

So that's an example of quite an elaborate idea. It might be a much less elaborate idea. There's all kinds of possibilities. And I'm sure over the years I've given many, but that's one from so far in these talks.

Or I also shared another one where I said I was talking with Catherine and we were talking about, or she was sharing with me this idea of "I am soul." And she was sharing what that meant to her and how that stimulated a certain direction of exploration in her practice. And I was listening to that, but I was left with this phrase, "I am soul." And I worked with it myself, but it took me in a different direction than what she was talking about.

So there's this kind of germinal idea, this seed of an idea: "I am soul." And I think I was even interpreting it—even though what those three words mean—it was taken up in my soul, in my mind, in my being and practice, with a different interpretation than Catherine had elucidated to me and explained to me about her practice.

So there's this—like seeds in nature, they float from one flower or plant or tree to another resting place and they give birth there. And the form that they give birth to might be slightly different. Just so we share ideas and we inseminate each other and we are inseminated by the ideas of others. But what arises from those sort of little germs or seeds might be quite different than what had transpired or arisen in the source of those ideas, where we heard them from, where we read them from.

So I'd shared this "I am soul," this idea, this phrase really that I got from Catherine, and how I'd shared it only partially about that, so I want to say a little bit more about it. In a way, there were a few ideas wrapped up in it, and that's partly what I want to emphasize.

So the "I am soul"—as I think I already explained when I mentioned it first—it kind of relativized the relationship with and the view of the ontological status of body and matter. So "I am soul" made the principle, the sort of weight of the principle identification—if you say that, I was playing with a different identification, "I am soul." And soul as this, as I said, loose definition, this organ of perceiving in soulful ways. This instrument that wants to perceive and does perceive in ways that are soul-making.

But that kind of then relative diminishing of the ontological status or the primary reality sense or degree of reality of, say, body and matter, did something to perception which became less substantial. In other words, it was fabricated less. It was fading to a slight degree. It loosened and liquefied the whole of perception. And then with that other elements came in like the fullness of intention, et cetera. And so there was a real malleability with regard to perception.

So that was one—one in these three words, "I am soul"—an idea that Catherine was communicating to me, it was picked up differently, and it also kind of became a constellation of ideas, a constellation of logos. It's not quite a framework, but it was more like a few ideas were sort of coalescing together, stitched loosely together in a way that was very fertile.

Because the second one—I can't remember if I shared this the first time round, but was that "I am soul," and what is the nature of soul? It's that there is an open two-way participation between God or Buddha nature and my soul. That God, Buddha nature participates in my soul, participates in that sensing the soul, in that organ of soulful perception, that instrument of soulful perception. And two-way, my soul participates in God, in the Buddha nature.

So that was a second idea or a kind of double idea, the double participation that wove its way into this and mixed with this other idea that kind of relativized the ontological status of soul and body and matter. So they became mixed together.

But then actually a third idea was woven in with this idea that I, and all that is happening—meaning my narrative, and I think at the time I was doing this was particularly prominent, was the sense of my illness and dying, et cetera—so I, and all that is happening, my narrative and all that, and all I perceive, including others that I was looking at and the surroundings, all of that is soul. I could say my soul, I could say the soul.

So you get the sense how there's all these kind of sub-ideas that are wrapped up in a kind of loose and light ideational structure. There wasn't a great deal of intellectual grinding and pondering and heavy, "Okay, let me really focus on that idea." It was all very light, very delicate. They're like little drops of tincture in the waters of soul, and they—

things and alchemical reactions start happening from dropping this tincture in or dropping a seed into the water or whatever. Things start flowering.

But actually it's a kind of mix, a loose mix of strands of ideas. In that last sub-idea, the perception of sensing the soul there is kind of similar to emptiness practice perception of self and other not being separate. Some of you who have done some emptiness practice know that as a kind of staging post or important perception or way of looking at certain levels of self and other subject and object not separate. So it's akin to that. It has some similarities.

But here, the difference is, in that sub-idea, the difference from the emptiness idea is, it's not universal. Again, the particulars are retained and important. And even more than that, they're necessary to soul. The particulars, my particulars, my narrative. It's not just that things get equalized and kind of universalized and a little bit faded in the non-separateness of subject and object, of self. Rather, all these particulars are retained and sensed as necessary to soul, necessary to Buddha nature, necessary to God.

Necessary to God, this dukkha, this narrative, maybe even this tragedy if one looks at it a certain way. Retained and necessary, but somehow beautiful, precious, ensouled, divine, and lighter for that view. There is a relief of suffering with it.

So again, there's even another aspect to the idea. As I said, all these kind of seeds begin to coalesce a little bit loosely and give rise to the perception, the sensing of soul.

So you can, if you go back to the original, I am soul. So I wasn't so much thinking all this in some kind of mental verbal process. It was just, I was holding this idea, I am soul, and that three-word phrase, really, you know, short words, I am soul, it's almost as if it functioned as a kind of orientation and a stimulant to the sensing with soul, but it contained as a sort of silent subtext all these other ideas, these sub-ideas, subtexts, they're kind of written in small print, so to speak. They're implicit, but powerful.

So when we say idea, we don't necessarily mean, again, we don't necessarily mean some kind of slow, laborious cranking of the mental cogs with a lot of wordiness. They can be really, really subtle. They function like little seeds or germs or like a yeast or something. Poetic ideas, poetic seeds, but they include subtexts that slant and direct the sensing and the opening in different ways.

Some of those ideas, when this works, and again if you try it out, some of the ideas will still be very powerful even when they're very vague. They're not completely worked out ideas or completely coherent or I'm not really clear about exactly what I mean when I say that, but it still has that power. The ideation is functioning enough to have power, but not so much that I've worked everything out and certainly not so much that it becomes this kind of overly clunky, laborious pondering or cogitation or thinking through something. Not that that might have its place at other times, but when we're ac-

tually engaged in practice or employing ways of looking, then the ideation, this goes for emptiness practice as well, the ideation needs to be very light, feather light, really like little drops of tincture or seed or something.

So there's subtext, there's coalescences of sub-ideas. They may be vague ideas and concepts, and they may be illogical. It may be that they don't make logical sense. You know, there are some philosophers of science who are wanting to open up different kinds of logic just because of what's been discovered in quantum physics and with subatomic particles. So usually logic would say a thing cannot be A and not A. It's called the law of the excluded middle. Either it's A, either it's this, or it's not this, but it can't be both at once.

But when physicists look at the behaviour of subatomic particles, sometimes even molecules, so larger than atoms, and they see actually it's somehow, it's called the superposition principle, it somehow seems to be in a state where two contradictory states or conditions are existing at once. And so that needs... That's one example, but other findings as well suggest a need for a new kind of logic. Other people, like the philosopher J.M. Findlay, just in a kind of phenomenology of everyday experience, and in his kind of like, look, even everyday experience doesn't really add up and needs a different kind of logic to kind of understand it better or feel out better what's going on.

But, as I said, there's subtext, possibility of vague ideas, and possibility of ideas that don't even seem logical.

This idea of subtext is also common in emptiness practice. So, I think I might have mentioned in this series already, like the way of looking that sees just a perception, and looks at things, decides to look at everything, it's just a perception, it's just a perception. Actually, there needs to be a consciousness of what is the subtext for what I mean by just a perception. Because it could mean something like, it's not solid, it's just of the nature of awareness. That would be one possible subtext for the emptiness way of looking, just a perception. Or it could be, it's just a perception. In other words, it's fabricated by the way of looking, by clinging. And that's a slightly different subtext. And they will have different deliverances and different degrees of liberation. They will take you to different depths, the second being deeper than the first.

So this idea, when we're talking about ideation in practice and incorporating concept into perception, into ways of looking, again needs to be very light. And the subtext needs to be conscious, but not too heavy that it's clunky. We need to retain a kind of agility with it.

But these ideas, like I said, they flow between human beings, what we read, what we hear, something in conversation. Sometimes even mishearing something or misunderstanding something ends up implanting some misinterpretation that becomes a very powerful and fecund seed in one's consciousness.

Sometimes people - someone said to me the other day - "You know, I can't get on with guided meditations or people suggesting do this, this, this, but somehow I listen to you talk and you share this or that and I somehow absorb a certain idea. I adapt that idea and try it out in practice, and it opens up sensing the soul."

So formulae for using certain ideas might work, formulae for guided meditations might work at times or for different people, but there's also this possibility of more opportunistic seeding and stimulation of ideas between people.

As always, we create, discover. We create and discover these possibilities, sensitive and responsive to the soul-making resonances and the sense of soulfulness, and that allows us to navigate.

So an idea - we might discover it, and so it's given to us. We might create a certain idea. We might meld, as I gave that example with the "I Am Soul," bringing together in this very gentle weave, very light touch, bringing together certain ideas and seeing what alchemy happens when these ideas are lightly entertained and then allowed to shape and influence and determine and fabricate the perception, the sensing.

As always, the navigation has to be in response, in sensitive response, to what actually feels soul-making right now, what feels that it's opening that. All these possibilities, and many more obviously, are there, just to give you a little idea tonight.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 182

Soulmaking Dyad Practice

Rob Burbea · 2h39

> *In this comprehensive teaching, Rob Burbea provides extensive guidance for practicing soulmaking dharma in dyadic relationships. He outlines different levels of practice, from foundational exercises like balance of attention and three-part temenos work (energy body, emotions, images) to more advanced imaginal perception between partners. Burbea emphasizes the extraordinary sensitivity and potency of dyadic practice, requiring significant relational skills, emotional awareness, and mindfulness as prerequisites. He explores how partners can fabricate different senses of self and other - from conventional human perception to less-fabricated awareness to fully imaginal sensing - and the healing possibilities that emerge when one person's imaginal perception affects the entire field. The talk addresses practical considerations including boundaries, the importance of shared conceptual frameworks, and the careful navigation of eros when it arises. Burbea warns against premature practice without adequate preparation, stressing that the intimacy of sharing soul-level perceptions often exceeds even psychological vulnerability. Drawing from Rumi's mystical poetry, he concludes with the profound sense of privilege in participating together in the mundus imaginalis, the imaginal realm where tender perceptions between souls are 'stored in the secret heart of heaven.'*

This evening, I'd like to offer a few pointers and guidance for working and practicing in soul-making dyads—practice in pairs. This is a vast subject with countless possibilities and dimensions to consider and explore. I want to touch on some of these pieces and possibilities, highlighting things to look out for, consider, and practice.

Over the past few years, we've worked in twos and threes through various guided meditations that we call temenos exercises. We've introduced exercises typically with a human other, though they can also be done with an imaginal other, an intrapsychic imaginal being, or with objects and beings in nature—a tree, a flower, whatever calls to you.

The foundational exercise we explore is what we call the balance of attention or twoness. This forms a basic practice, a foundation for soul-making, imaginal practice, and sensing the soul. We might regard this as preliminary to soul-making and imaginal practice in dyads.

The other approach we've developed, which we specifically call temenos exercises, involves a three-part structure practiced in twos, threes, or sometimes fours. Participants take turns checking in with sensitivity and expressing what's happening in the energy body to the other or others. The listeners witness with full sensitivity, receiving and truly seeing the other person. The second round focuses on emotions, and the third explores sharing an image or something that recently touched your soul.

I encourage revisiting those recorded exercises from the past few years, as there are many nuances in the instructions. Even if you participated and enjoyed them—which most people seem to—and feel you understand the practice, listening again can be valuable. In the flow of Catherine's or my guidance, there are subtle details: little things to introduce, considerations to incorporate, ways to deepen the practice.

I've described this as somewhat like practicing scales. It's artificially contrived to separate energy body, emotion, and image into three distinct tiers practiced in sequence. But like musical scales, you separate and isolate elements to work on them specifically. When you later play the piece you actually want to perform, the ability to play scales well feeds into fluency, fluidity, capacity for improvisation, responsiveness, and the subtlety you can bring to the real music, so to speak.

These represent two foundational levels we've offered: the balance of attention exercise and the three-part temenos exercise. Within these, there's the possibility of sharing images with each other, which some people are already exploring. We also encourage tracking the effects of what is shared—the perceptions, experiences, and responses that arise—and voicing these effects when appropriate.

When someone shares an image or expresses what's happening in their emotions or energy body, notice what arises imaginatively for you. Consider the possibility of bringing that into the dyad, into the crucible of shared practice through careful, sensitive tracking and respectful sharing of these effects—essentially, of what is happening right now for both people. This can take various forms.

There's another level where each person becomes image for the other, or the dyad itself becomes an image. This involves sharing the perception of this meeting, of self and other in this present moment, when sensed with soul. This too can take different forms and represents another depth of practice.

There's yet another level where significant eros flows between the participants—the two elements of the dyad. I won't explore that level extensively tonight, but when substantial eros is present, the whole practice becomes turbocharged. The inseminating quality of eros makes everything very rich while requiring tremendous care and skill. All these levels, in fact, demand considerable care and skill.

Let me address several aspects of these different possible levels of dyad practice, along with some general considerations.

First, I want to emphasize how potent a dyad can be—or working in triads, or sharing images with another in that kind of intimate, open rapport. Some of you know this potency well: how all kinds of things can be sparked and ignited, sometimes yielding very beautiful soul-making perceptions, and sometimes triggering difficult reactions or contractions.

As an entity or crucible for practice, working in relationship is a very sensitive container. Little changes can make big differences. This sensitivity exists when practicing solo as well—eyes open or closed, sensing the soul on your own. Solo practice is potent and highly responsive to all our responses, relationships, manipulations, leanings, and navigation. The dyad may not necessarily be more sensitive, but it's definitely a sensitive space where everything responds: energy, emotion, heart, perception, soul, mind.

Just as we've emphasized certain prerequisites for imaginal practice, sensing the soul, and soul-making dharma over recent years, it would be wise to consider what skills are needed for dyad or triad practice to work well—to be fruitful, soul-making, safe, and beautiful; to avoid harm and prevent increased contraction and confusion.

Many skills are required here. We could outline some of them, but I want to pause with this recognition: for most people interested in soul-making, much of this work happens in relationship with other human beings. At the very least, considerable eros and image can be activated in these relationships.

And the question is, as I've just been saying, whether the initial spark that feels soul-making can actually sustain its generativity, sustain its fertility, sustain the soul-making dynamic—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—deepening, widening, enriching both the soul and experience. Or whether that whole dynamic, and perhaps even the relationship itself, breaks in some way, short-circuits, blows a fuse, or backfires. This is really a crucial question here.

Part of the way problems can arise, and the soul-making dynamic—the eros-psyche-logos dynamic—can get disrupted, is in and around the times of relating, but also around the times of relating with another. Being conscious about boundaries, respect-

ing boundaries—depending on people's situations, whatever their relationship commitments are and other considerations. There are all kinds of boundaries, in fact. Being conscious about boundaries, respecting boundaries, ethical considerations in some cases, being conscious of energy, emotion, psychological patterns, relational and communicative patterns and skills and possibilities. As well as handling skillfully erotic charge, desire, image, and the inevitable slides at times into reification or dismissal, or eros sliding into craving.

Noticing all this reification, responding to all that, developing one's skill and art—this is really important. A certain amount of skill with all that, and other elements too, as prerequisites for fertile and sustainable soul-making in relationship with other human beings and fellow soul-makers.

We haven't talked too much about that and given too much guidance. There's more I want to say a little bit tonight, but even what I say tonight is somewhat limited. Part of why I'm going into it is just that I'm aware people are practicing in dyads and noticing, as I said, the potency, the sensitivity, the care that's needed, and maybe getting a sense of some of the caution and skill and art that's needed. So it seems like it would be good to say a few things about that.

Again, not to underestimate how intimate it is to share in this way with others in a soul-making dyad. To share one's psychological history or one's difficult history in life, of wounds and patterns, is intimate. There's something about sharing images that are really soul-making for us, that really touch us, that feels even more intimate than, say, sharing history of being abused or something like that, or just sharing a difficult emotion or a lovely emotion. There's a certain vulnerability to that.

There's something about the level of intimacy of sharing soul, sensing the soul, sharing image with others that tends to even surpass those kinds of sharing—of revealing psychological history or emotion in the present moment. And it's curious. I've pointed this out before. It's curious—this thing, from one respect, isn't even real. It didn't even really happen, and yet it touches my soul, and it's important to my soul in ways that are so profound and so meaningful and so central that it's really an intimate space to enter into with someone. That needs a lot of respect and care, and a range and pitch of skills are needed to sustain it.

So don't underestimate the range and pitch of skills needed to sustain it and to enable it to be soul-making. Because we will need, in these kinds of practices, to be able to work well and skillfully with difficulties and relational problems when they arise. That's part of being in any healthy relationship, and it can very easily arise in these kinds of relationships when you're doing a dyad and something difficult comes up.

If we just think for a moment about prerequisites, it comes to mind: do I have, have I developed a certain amount of awareness of my emotional life? That doesn't just mean the difficult emotions. It means also the subtle movements—slight boredom, slight excitement, slightly wanting something. Do we call that an emotion? Yes, we could in the broader definition of emotion. These are all kinds of colors or leanings, inclinations, states of the mind-heart and consciousness at any time.

To be aware, to be able to notice these movements of the heart and changes in the heart, is really crucial. The more of that there is, the better placed one is to be able to do these kinds of practices. Some people, you could say, are just not quite ready, in the same way they're just not quite ready for imaginal practice, really.

Do I have skill with my emotions? So this is happening—this difficult emotion, or this lovely emotion—can I tolerate it? Can I be with it? Can I give it what it needs? Because I may not be getting that from another person, and I may have to give it what it needs. Can I slow down, if necessary, whatever processes in the mind and the impulses that emotion has kick-started? There are all kinds of skills involved, and that's why we put a lot of emphasis in Soul Making Dharma on emotional awareness, emotional skill, working with the energy body, and integrating those.

All that would be prerequisites. Really, as you're listening, ask yourself: how well developed are those building blocks for me? Basic mindfulness—if I can't be there and be present and sustain my attention to some extent, sustain my focus on what's happening in this dyad, in my experience, when the other person is sharing or the sense of the field...

without a sort of basic training in mindfulness and that capacity to remain engaged and plugged in and alive, present, sensitive to what's going on, attentive, alert, the crucible is cracked. There's no possibility of it holding its material and holding whatever fire is there.

Energy body skill and awareness we already mentioned. Where am I with the whole middle way? The whole imaginal middle way or the emptiness middle way? Either one would help when there's reification. I start believing this image of self or other or the couple or whatever in a way that's too tight, too literal, too solid, and usually will ensue either right then or in the course of time with some kind of problems or not-so-wise choices.

Where am I, again we're talking about possible prerequisites, where am I with the fullness of intention? When I enter into these kinds of spaces, formal space of working and soul-making, what am I really wanting there? And how easily, of course, for us as

human beings, the intention can contract to something smaller, less open to possibility. Something sneaks in—sometimes we're unconscious of it—I'm actually trying to get approval, respect, a good feeling about myself, some kind of... maybe I actually want to pursue a relationship with this person, which may or may not be fine. But am I clear about what my intentions are? And can I open up that field of intention to the fullness of intention and that element of the imaginal, that node?

So all these and more will be prerequisites. And really to ponder for oneself how developed they are and whether they need more work. And if so, you might want to pitch the dyad practice so that it's not further ahead than you're actually equipped for, so it's not more advanced than you actually have the tools to cope with and the resources to cope with.

If we go back to what I said at the beginning, we talked about the balance of attention exercise, the three-part exercise—energy, body, emotion, image—and sharing it. Spending a while with those before opening up to other possibilities or other forms may be really wise, depending on where you get the sense of what's the appropriate pitch. In general, it may be actually, for a while now, I just need to practice the balance of attention thing. That's really what will serve me and serve my soul, and not be in such a hurry to go into imaginal practice.

So balance of attention is not necessarily... it's not really a soul-making practice in a sense. It's a preparatory exercise, but it's so important—so important for a healthy relationship, so important for a soul-making dyad, so important for imaginal practice. So there's this possibility of pitching, and again, the wisdom, the listening, the discerning, and getting a sense of where does it need to pitch right now? What do I need to... what's my pitch right now? What's my level right now? And that right now might be for a while, it might be right now in this moment, this afternoon, whatever it is.

Because actually just being opposite another human being and sitting a few feet from another, bodies in a way open to each other, looking at each other, for a lot of people is pretty damn intense. And for some people, it will be soul-making. It won't necessarily be imaginal, but it will be soul-making just to be in relationship, in dyadic relationship or triadic relationship. It's not imaginal, but it's soul-making in the sense that, remember, the imaginal is, if you like, a subset of soul-making.

So it might be soul-making in the sense of it's stretching one's soul's capacity and one's learning things that feel meaningful to the soul. It's not yet imaginal, but the soul is growing. So there's a kind of *hiero-psychologos* dynamic unfolding there. For many

people just to be in relationship that way—so deliberately, so carefully, so openly, so present to each other and so intimate—will feel soul-making, and that's great. And so one should not hurry through just that level of it.

So yes, the being looked at, just being an object of someone else's gaze, a few feet, and they're sustained looking at you, they're sustained taking you in. The charge of that often, for many people in our culture, the whole complication and difficulty that can go with being seen. And then the sense of openness, perhaps in sharing whatever one's sharing, or just in being present with the body, open to another in that way. The intimacy that involves, being honest with another, learning, for example, developing the skill with this, playing with the balance of attention, playing with the sense of two-ness.

All that is really, really important stuff and may itself feel soul-making and it's not imaginal yet. So really to get a sense of the different pitches that you can play at and exercise at and what might be appropriate there rather than just, in some cases, trying to do something that's really beyond you just because it sounds like the most exciting or sexy thing or whatever. So the careful discernment there, the questioning, the openness.

If we just spend a few moments talking about that balance of attention exercise—as I said, there's quite a lot to this in the sense that it sounds really simple, but actually many people find it quite difficult. So you could very much just sit down with someone else with that intention particularly. Let's play exactly just with that, with the balance of attention, with the two-ness.

And one thing you might do if you decide to do such a thing or at another time in the context of some other dyadic practice—one thing that's really important is to notice the tendency of your attention. What do you notice over time is your kind of habit when in close relationship, when confronted with another and that kind of openness?

Is it, for instance, to somehow lose yourself? I'm so attentive to the other that I don't even notice what I'm feeling or sensing or what I need or want or all of that. Is there a kind of merging? And sometimes it actually feels like a person sort of... their attention almost goes into the other person and there's no attention in their own locus, in their own space.

So just to notice... not to judge, and this is really, really important. Can I withhold the judging?

There are going to be tendencies we notice—perhaps to lose a self, perhaps to merge, perhaps to kind of... I notice that in relationship, and it gets even more clear when we're sort of face-to-face like that, there's a kind of perhaps subtle, perhaps grosser way

I kind of comply with what I think or believe or presume or perceive the other wants. I find myself bending to that, and I haven't even decided to do that. It's an unconscious bending to fit usually some idea of what the other person wants, which of course may not even be actually what they want.

So I might notice something like that. I might notice that I need to somehow entertain the other person. I need to look good. I need to perform. I need to perhaps be a certain way, whatever that way might be. They need to see love coming through my eyes. They need to think I'm attractive, that I'm deep, that I'm intelligent, that I'm this or that, that the Holy Spirit moves in me, that it's obvious that I'm an angel, whatever. It could be all kinds of things.

But one possibility is just to sit down and practice balance of attention or be in a dyad. What's my tendency right now? And then over time, one might say, "Oh, I have a kind of irregular tendency" or "It's quite common for me to take that shape or to morph this way" or whatever it is.

So really, really important—if you're doing just that level of exercise, is it possible to just notice? There is certainly the possibility of bringing different responses in, bringing wisdom or compassion or soulful responses in many different ways to open it up, to free it. But actually one really useful thing to do is just to notice and see if I can just notice... also, what the effects of that on my being are.

Now, of course, we might notice effects in the dyad that are quite complex, but we might also notice just that there's some judgment of it, or we're impatient with ourselves, or whatever. What if we just notice that? I notice this tendency, I notice the judgment, and just create some space around that. So the exercise at this point is not trying to do anything else other than notice and create space and feel the effects of this pattern. It may be that within that then some compassion for yourself comes in, and that's going to have an effect. So that's important too.

So that's a very, very important level of exercise, but also potentially really helpful. You could say quite basic, but really, really, really helpful for many people.

Then there are other possibilities that one can explore. For example, some practices, like in some Mahamudra or Dzogchen practices, they encourage meditating with the eyes open, but relaxing the gaze. Usually what happens, the way the eyes work, the way the visual senses work, is the eyes and the eye muscles actually focus on something. And for that, the eye muscles have to kind of hold themselves in a certain focus. And there's a kind of intentness and intensity in there—it's quite subtle.

But it's quite a different mode to open the eyes and relax the gaze. So they're actually not focusing on anything. And so you can try this just... it doesn't have to be in an actual dyad, but you can just try it. What is it to open the eyes and relax the gaze? You will notice actually the rest of your body relaxing as you relax the gaze. It's like the eyes and the visual focus is not singling out and focusing on any one object. It's just open to a field of visual form and color and perception there. It's a more general field.

And in that then, in terms of the balance of attention, we could say the attention is not going out so much to this object—it's in a more receptive mode. So as I said, in some practices, some Dharma practices, some Dzogchen and Mahamudra teachings, they will practice that a lot, a lot, a lot, and really develop that practice and take it in a certain direction to do with the nature of awareness, etc., as they would see it.

But doing that just on your own in a room, doing it on your own outside in nature and getting used to that shift of being able—and then go back to focusing on something, that tree or whatever it is—really, really skillful, noticing the effects. And then for a while you could practice that in a dyad with someone. So what is it? I'm sitting opposite someone and I relax the gaze. And in that, actually, my visual field opens up to the whole space.

Now, this person might be talking and I can still hear what they're saying. I can still take in what they're saying. But I'm not focused on them as an object. It's much more that they become part of the space—they're embedded in the space and much less prominent. They're still going to be prominent, obviously, but much less so.

If there's a tendency to focus too much on the other, practicing in this way is really, really helpful. It relaxes that intensity or forward thrust into the other person, which is quite a common thing. It's possible then, within that receptive awareness, to also just be aware of one's own experience at the same time—what's happening with me emotionally.

For instance, if you do that, you'll be aware: oh, as I do that, the shoulders relax, and something in my belly relaxes, and the heart—something softens in the heart. Then one might notice other emotions. But correspondingly, the gaze doesn't need to be so penetrative to one's own experience. This is, again, part of playing with the balance of attention there.

I hope that makes sense as an option. Another possibility, if you've done a fair amount of metta practice—and especially if you've done metta practice the way I would teach it, which is intimately connected to and involving the energy body—is to use the

imagination to kind of see and sense a metta-bubble or a metta-field that encompasses you and the other person or persons in the dyad or triad. So that becomes part of the awareness as well.

There's a sense of us sitting, not me necessarily giving metta to them—I mean that's fine too—but us sitting in a field or a bubble, a cloud of metta. The more one can imagine that and get a sense of it and feel the softness and the care in it, the holding of it, and feel it also in the energy body to some extent at least, that's going to really help. It addresses what can sometimes be a problematic intensity or fear in a dyad, but also the balance of attention, because there the attention has gone to the field as well, as a total space, rather than just that person or just contracting into my experience.

What we've done in the last couple of years, when we introduced this exercise with the balance of attention, is play with: Okay, can it be 100% my attention is with my experience? So I'm maybe aware that there's a person there, but I'm really just attuning to my energy body, my emotions, my thoughts, my experience here. Can it be 20% with the other person and 80% with me? Can it be 50-50? Can it be 80% with the other person, 20% with me? So that kind of very deliberate exercise.

And you see, this gear is a bit jammed. It's hard for me to get into that gear. Or for someone else, that gear is quite normal and easy—it's the sort of default that just keeps slipping into that gear and it's hard to get into another gear. Again, we're interested in range and flexibility and freedom across different ranges. So that would be a really good exercise as well.

The other possibility, which I mentioned when we talked about the energy body in this series of talks, is rather than to see the other person with the eyes, rather than to conceive that one is seeing and sensing the other person primarily through the eyes, to play with the energy body awareness and bring—again, same as we do in imaginal practice—inhabiting, filling out that whole region, that whole space that we call the energy body.

How often, if you're paying attention, you will notice, either in your own practice, in your own times, in informal practice, but also in relationship, in a dyad or triad relationship, how easy it is to lose the energy body sense. Or it shrinks, or it's like, well, I've got my top half, I might have my heart, but where's everything from the waist down? It's just kind of a dead zone, or we're just not aware of it there.

Don't underestimate how often that happens and how helpful it is to keep checking in with the energy body and keep opening it up, opening up, filling it with that awareness and stretching it that way. So it's really like the whole sensitivity pervades that

whole space. Again and again, it's going to be really, really helpful. And one should notice the effect that has on working with an image, as we talked about, but also sensing the other with soul and the capacity to handle certain things in one's own experience or handle what's happening in the dyad.

As I mentioned in the talk on energy body in this series, there's the possibility of not conceiving or sensing that I'm just looking through the eyes. What is it to get the sense of the whole energy body as an organ of sense, as an organ of sensing? So I'm somehow seeing the other with my whole body. I bring that whole body sense into relationship. The center of knowing or perceiving is not simply in the head, the eyes or the ears. It might have a center of the heart or the solar plexus or the belly, or it might just pervade the whole space like that.

Really, really important. And then, as I said when I talked about the metta possibility, the metta field, there's also the possibility that the sense of the energy field, the sense of the energy body begins to spread to include the other and the self and one can develop a sense of the energy field between two people.

I won't say more about that now, but just how important that is and how helpful that can be when it feels like either there's a tendency to withdraw in a dyad, to sort of go back into oneself, perhaps to go too much into the other person, to merge or lose one's own sense of what's going on. Just how helpful it is to bring the energy body into play, to open up that awareness—really, really, really helpful.

We've used this word temenos a number of times, and it's another one of those Greek words. It's related to the word temple or sacred space or the boundary that protects the space and encloses it and protects it from intrusion.

The temenos is about creating sacred, protected space for this profound work. As I've mentioned, when the imaginal touches us so deeply, it needs to be respected and protected—cared for—and part of that is setting up the conditions where that care and safety can exist, so that the crucible can be there. The crucible can sustain whatever's happening without being easily shattered or broken.

When we come to practicing relationship in dyads, triads, or whatever it might be, formal space and time are really part of—can be really helpful in—setting up the temenos, the sense of a safe space, a fertile space, a special place. To share images more casually, when it's not the right time for the other person or for you—when they're busy, not completely attentive, the space isn't conducive, there are distractions, or something else is going on—none of that will be helpful at all. It will feel disappointing,

even painful: I haven't been received here, we didn't meet, something felt important and it got dropped on the floor. Setting a formal time and space is actually part of the temenos. Just the formality of it helps create a sense of container, of crucible, of safety.

Posture too—to sit upright in a more meditative posture will really help. It enhances the whole capacity of attention, sensitivity, receptivity, openness, energy, engagement. All of that is actually part of the temenos. The attention—the quality of attention, the brightness of attention, the softness of attention—these are all part of the temenos. The sensitivity, the metta is part of the temenos, as we've stressed. The intention. Again, if I have the fullness of intention, it really helps the temenos. If my intention or the other's is something different or less than that, it's also not really conducive to forming a strong and soul-making temenos.

But the posture also gives a signal to oneself, to another: This is something—now we're doing something that takes all my capacity, all my sensitivity, all my care and attention. It gives that signal to oneself in all kinds of ways, and both beings actually respond to that. So there are many components to the temenos.

I'm really happy to hear recently from a number of people in the Sangha that they took it upon themselves—saw the necessity after some experiences of really exploring this area, this domain—of exploring temenos amongst themselves, thinking creatively about it and what it needs, exploring the sense of it when it doesn't work, and expanding really the teaching. I'm happy, first, because it's an important area, and second, because as time goes on, those who are deeply interested in soul-making dharma absorb the teachings, digest them, learn and develop their art and skill. Then they may be ready—some people may be ready—to begin to be creative in what they discover and what they add potentially to soul-making dharma, how they can extend it, how they can make connections with other paradigms.

Not prematurely, before one has understood and digested and gained fluency in this paradigm, in these practices. But in time, that's part of what makes a really alive, creative tradition—that it can be added to. That there's a dialogue, a digestion of what has come before, and then a dialogue with that, and a possible extension, new angles. So I'm doubly happy, feeling really heartened and encouraged and touched by those people taking that on together as an exploration.

One of the things they came up with was a new concept, if you like, of the temenos tail—T-A-I-L. In other words, here we are, perhaps working in a dyad or a small group or a three, and we take care of the temenos there. But what happens afterwards? What happens in the hour afterwards, in the week afterwards, in the months afterwards?

There can be so much intimacy and so much sense of being deeply touched in a soul-making dyad—sharing images together that touch the soul deeply—that then two people or more people go their separate ways, and they meet again in some other situation. Just because one has been so touched, or that dyadic encounter and exploration made so much impact on the soul, it can be very easy to assume certain things about that relationship—what one expects, what one is owed, what kind of interaction should then ensue or be committed to. Not to say any of that's wrong, but what is it to care for that tail end of the temenos? We've cared for it in the formal practice. What happens afterwards? So that's also a consideration and exploration that's opening as well.

I mentioned the need to share a conceptual framework. In order for a soul-making dyad to be really fertile and soul-making—and not frustrating or limited or limiting—it's important that the two people share the conceptual framework that actually supports soul-making. Part of that is sharing what we could call ontological commitments—a kind of sense of what is real, or what is to be respected as real. We could put it in the negative: what's not to be dismissed.

You try soul-making with someone who just considers imagination a kind of random nonsense—they don't have the same ontological commitment to the sense of the imaginal and whatever ontological realm or position that holds for soul-makers. For them, it's just rubbish. Correspondingly, if one is...

So if someone ontologically views whatever comes up in imagination that touches the heart as "real"—too real—that would also be an example of a kind of ontological commitment that's actually not going to be helpful for the diet. One person will occupy or have within their range certain ontological commitments, certain senses of what's real, what's to be respected, what's not important, and the other person holds something quite different.

I would extend this to say I wonder whether deep friendships actually often need, amongst other things, shared ontological commitments. How deep can my friendship with someone be? I can be friendly and we can have a laugh. We can share heartache and respond with kindness and engagement in all kinds of ways. But how deep can the sense of friendship be if there's not enough common territory in what I'm calling shared ontological commitments?

People don't often say this, or maybe it's regarded as slightly taboo. Even at Gaia House, when people want to establish or support more of a sense of community among the many staff, the assumption is: just give them some time together, have some practice together, meditate together, put them in a room and they'll start making deep con-

nections. But it won't happen unless there's a certain overlap of ontological commitment—and also, I don't know if this is taboo or not—a kind of either shared eros or passion, or at least commensurate levels.

Someone who has a lot of eros, who's really on fire with eros, probably won't be that close with someone who just doesn't have much eros or it's not going on for them at the same level. The souls won't resonate with each other. I don't know—is that politically or psychologically incorrect to say? I'm not sure, but it's important. Even more so, the whole conceptual framework needs to be shared enough for soul-making relationship to really flourish and not feel frustrating.

This is an important consideration. If you want to share this wonderful new paradigm, this new practice you're into—you did this diet with someone and it was wonderful and soul-making—so you take it to another friend. You know they're heartful, interested, open, maybe open-minded, but there isn't that shared conceptual framework. The whole thing—again, the crucible is not there. This can be painful and frustrating for both people.

Even when one person is holding a conceptual framework that's limited or limiting from the soul-making point of view, and they're not sharing it—maybe not even aware they're holding it—somehow in the mystery and magic of that connection between two people, it actually ends up limiting the experience for both. What arises for the other person, whose conceptual framework may be more open, is somehow limited by the silent and even unconscious limited conceptual framework of the other person.

Again, this should suggest some caution in trying to engage in soul-making dyads with people who don't really share the conceptual framework and haven't understood or absorbed it to a certain extent.

Let me very briefly outline some of the avenues or ways of practicing—some of the possible approaches that this form can offer or allow—and with that, some things to bear in mind and consider.

If you're practicing in a dyad or triad, it's probably a good idea if you're at home to have some little gap or separation of that practice period from other activities. It's natural to do this if there's some sense of the sanctity of it, the form of that temenos.

Sitting down together—and of course you could stand or be moving, there are so many possibilities here—but let's say if you sit down together, it may or may not need some sort of settling time, meditating in silence. Don't assume that it does. Find out. See what you need at the time.

Sometimes just being opposite each other in a formal ritual space will already support some kind of gathering and energizing, coalescing of attention and being, some quieting, some heightening of sensitive awareness. Of course, it might be that for some people or in some situations, coming into a formal space with the anticipation of doing this kind of practice actually brings up mild panic or self-consciousness or inadequacy or some other agitation.

But generally speaking, you'll probably find that just being together opposite each other in that space brings a kind of gathering. If it doesn't, then what's needed? Either a little quiet time together—meditating, being with what's going on, being with the energy body, the emotions, the breath, or metta—or bringing that difficulty you're experiencing right into the diet when you start practicing. That's what's present. Let's practice with that and see: can soul be made from this? What does it need? Maybe it doesn't need soul-making. Maybe it needs some other kind of exploration or attention or response.

The temenos is crucial, as we've mentioned. If you listen back to those recordings from two, three, four retreats ago—I can't remember—

Mostly we call them temenos exercises, I think. You'll hear that we have a stage of metta there, and I would say this is really quite important.

If you listen again, you'll notice there's the giving of metta and the consciousness of receiving. So to consciously feel oneself as an object of metta, as being permeated by metta from the other or others, as being wished well, as much as giving. Both the necessity of having access to and registering both those directions of metta—the giving and receiving.

Then the metta can kind of go to this bedrock of the whole exploration. It never really goes away, but one isn't necessarily consciously, formally practicing the metta. One can rely on it as an intention, rely on the knowledge that the field is pervaded by that, that it is the intention, that it is part of the intention of both parties.

Only if you're really sure that it's there as a bedrock and it is unshakable—both your sense of receiving it and your giving it—only if you're really sure would I recommend skipping that step of just lingering with the metta and establishing that. Dependent on all kinds of factors, you can skip it, but be sure. Or, you know, it's a lovely thing to do. It certainly can't hurt to start that way and include that. And as I said, that's part of the temenos, part of establishing and caring for the temenos and for each other, obviously.

On those recordings that we did previously in the temenos exercises, as I said, they're kind of like scales—practicing scales. We somewhat artificially divided it into three levels: the energy body, the emotion, and then perhaps sharing something that felt soulful. We separated those out in time, and people took turns. This remains, I think, a really useful exercise to gain the facility, the skill, the fluidity, the familiarity with all that and those dimensions of practice and of being.

In time, you then might begin to include a tracking and a voicing of those three levels or elements of being: the energy body (remember, energy body also includes imaginal body now, and we've expanded the sense of what that means), the emotional level, and then the level of soul or image. So one can begin to, rather than separating them out, include them in real time in a kind of fluid real-time tracking and voicing, taking your time to feel. You don't have to be speaking or communicating all the time. You can track and then voice.

Again, we emphasize the voice and verbal communication, but it could be other kinds of voicing too. You might sing or sound, or you might gesture, or you might move or dance. Obviously the voicing, the verbalizing will be most common for most people, but there's all kinds of possibilities here. What matters is its soul-making.

So one can begin to include all that in a more fluid, real-time tracking and include with that a tracking of and voicing of how either the perception or thoughts about the other's expression—their presence, their attention, their gaze, their energy—how that's affecting, right now, my energy body, my emotion, the emotions that arise, what's happening in the heart, and the imaginal sense, or sensing the soul.

So that one's potentially including then the image of this moment, of the other, of the sharing, being seen, heard. This very being seen, being heard and being witnessed can become image. So that would be another level of domain of possibility, another avenue —just extending the exercise a little bit.

And this, how am I being affected, that latter part of that avenue and level—sometimes it doesn't make much difference. I share something and it's just how it is, or I share something, it wasn't particularly soulful, and then when I share it in a dyad or triad or whatever, it's the same. There's not much impact of that situation on the sense of soul-making or the energy body or whatever.

But sometimes the sense of how we are being listened to and looked at—including the imaginal sense of it, and of who is listening, looking... In some recent retreats we talk about being witnessed by the angel. So actually having a sense of the other as an-

gel, as daemon, as having their roots, so to speak. One can deliberately instigate or ignite that perception of the other, of who is listening and looking at me, or it might just arise by itself. All kinds of other possibilities.

In the imaginal sense of who is listening or looking, there may be a much greater sense of soul-making. An image that originally didn't feel so soul-making, a little bit, but the effect of the potency of that situation and the sensitivity of that situation makes that image—almost in retrospect or as it's resuscitated there and re-communicated—it allows much more soul-making with the same image.

Conversely, of course, we might be sharing something, an emotion, an image, something that's in the energy body, and the partner or whoever it is in the dyad—someone was sharing, and they looked away. They told me, and I don't know why they looked away, but they just... I was sharing an emotion, and they looked away and sort of stared into space for a few seconds, and that just threw me. I felt disconnected and I stopped sharing the emotion. I was halfway through and I just stopped.

But here it's also possible then in the kind of flow and give and take, of course, to just recognize what's happening and ask: do I want to voice that, that effect on me when you just looked away like that? I don't have to blame or be aggressive, I'm just saying, oh, I notice I'm a bit thrown here by that.

And it's possible that the other person just witnesses that and tracks their response in silence to what you're sharing about that impact of whatever it is—them looking away. Anyway, if they don't say anything, if they're just taking it in in silence, there's a communication through the eyes and through the energy body.

Or it might be that they respond either there and then, or if you're taking turns in a more formal structure—now my turn, now your turn—then in their allotted time. And that response they give you will of course have an effect on the sense of connection and on what is shaped, what can arise, what can come into the field. So the whole thing can become much more fluid and responsive at times.

The point here really is to begin to notice and include and express—at this stage of the exercise, if you like—the effect of the sense of how I'm being looked at or listened to. Sometimes that's very gross and sometimes it's extremely subtle. If you're really sensitive, sometimes you can feel someone just blink or notice the slightest movement of their eyes, not even away in distraction or anything like that. And one can actually feel one's energy body impacted by that, affected by that. It's quite possible.

So there's a whole range here of what can be noticed and what can be included, of that crucible and the potentiality and sensitivity of the dyad or triad or whatever it is.

After that sort of three-tiered exercise, after you've maybe gotten used to that—and I think some people are very used to it by now, some much less so, so you'll have to see where you're at and what you need—then you can include the experience of this now, this sharing now, and this being seen, being heard by you right now in real time. So the whole thing gets a little more fluid and inclusive.

Another avenue or level of possibility here—they're not completely separate; you'll realize this very quickly, it's hard to actually cleanly separate these different avenues and levels—but another possibility is to deliberately take the other as an imaginal focus. That is, to sense them with soul. And to voice that—again, voice is a euphemism for a much larger range of communication, expression. It may include movement, gesture, verbal or non-verbal vocalization, all kinds of things.

And then the person responds, if necessary. Maybe they feel, "Hold on, this is a bit something or other." In a way, that's a kind of slightly contrived level and maybe a little awkward, with one person just telling the other about how they sense the other with soul. But see what works. It might be you take it in turns or whatever.

I would also recommend that if you're doing that, to again include self-other-world—to include not just your sense of the other, sensing them with soul, but also take in the space that you're in, the environment that you're in. If you're inside, the room that you're in; if you're outside, wherever you are—what's the environment? And let, or at least allow the possibility of the sensing with soul to spread to the world. So other, self, and world can be sensed with soul.

And that spreading to the world—sometimes we've called it cosmopoiesis when it starts from an imaginal sense of another—but that's part of the soul-making process, and as we've pointed out, probably very helpful at times for the whole balance of the process. And there'll be a lot to learn in that triple object, if you like—self, other, world—for sensing with soul.

And then again, another level or avenue of possibility would be to open to responses, optional responses from the other. Either you take it in turns and then the person responds after you've shared for a certain time or whatever, or just in the natural back and forth. So non-silent witness—if they're responding, especially if it's more in the fluid back and forth and not so formalized, separate "now my turn, now your turn," it's less of a witness, it's just a partner or whatever in the dyad.

And what are they responding with at this level? They would be responding what arises for them in the energy body, in the emotion, in the imaginal sense, in the sensing with soul.

What they're not doing at this level is critiquing what you've just shared or your perception, or giving guidance or feedback. That may have a place at a later stage. In other words, you can decide—and I think you should formally decide if you're going to do that thing. But I would say hold off from that for a while, because obviously it brings all kinds of other complications, potential complications into the dyad and would need even more care and sensitivity and intuitive awareness.

But as I said, the partner voices their response, their experience, either in their allotted time, or in just the open, natural back and forth and flow of things. So what arises in listening, in witnessing, in looking, in receiving the other?

I guess I should point out that sometimes you'll notice that you do, or your partner does, intuit or know things about what's going on with you. In other words, they can get a sense themselves of your energy body experience or your emotional experience or something else. But if you're sharing at this point, to really be careful with the assumptions of being right there. I think it's really important to always respect the autonomy and the mystery of the other, and their sense of their experience, and if there's a place for privacy, boundaries here also.

So yes, that kind of intuitive sense, empathic sense, of course can go on between human beings, and the range of that is a lot larger than the usual meaning of the term empathy—in terms of "I can see that you're sad" or "I can see that you're happy" or whatever it is and resonating with that. The range is larger than that. But still it's really important to respect, as I said, the other and to tread carefully with that kind of thing. If you're going to share it, you can check it out, you can say it lightly, you can say "I'm wondering if..." etc.

And it's also possible—and I've mentioned in this series of talks—that there can be a real sense of entering into and sharing an image with someone else. Sharing a sensing with soul of the environment you're in, of each other, of some other intrapsychic image.

One of you might have voiced that image first, and then both of you can enter it together. Sometimes this happens naturally, sometimes not. Don't put pressure on these possibilities to unfold. Sometimes one person simply shares an image that impacts you deeply, even though it hasn't yet become a living image for you. But the possibilities are certainly there.

With these various avenues or levels of practice, take your time to find the right pitch for you. This might vary from day to day, or you might simply feel curious about what happens when you limit the practice in this way or that way. The composer Strav-

insky used to say that the most terrifying thing is an empty sheet of paper. Once he gave himself certain constraints in the creative process—arbitrary limits to what he could do in a composition—then he began discovering and creating abundantly.

Similarly with these exercises, you might think you want to jump immediately to the most advanced level, where fireworks are going off and everything is available. But you may well create and discover much more fertile ground by exploring what might seem like the earlier or simpler stages of these practices. They will lay the foundation for truly fecund, rich, and expansive practices—an opening out of experiences, insights, and sensings with soul as you continue in the whole practice, not just in dyads, but also in your solitary work.

Don't get too caught up in hierarchy or in needing to reach the maximum level. All of this asks a great deal and takes time to develop the sensitivities, skills, and artistry involved. There's tremendous depth here.

Let me mention some other possibilities. You can deliberately decide together on a theme you want to explore. The process might be the same—involving the energy body, emotions, sensing with soul, sensitivity to each other and your own experience—but you're exploring something specific together. Rather than simply sitting together openly to see what happens, you might be exploring a particular image you want to open out and investigate more deeply. It might be a certain kind of cosmopoiesis you've perhaps glimpsed or sensed is possible. It might be a particular form of dukkha you want to bring into the field for potential soul-making.

The temenos itself might be your theme. A couple of people told me about exploring the whole area of temenos in a group over time, including the temenos tale I mentioned. They discovered it was possible to sit down in a dyad and take the idea and sense of temenos right here, between us or around us, as the theme itself. They found this remarkably lovely and fruitful.

Your theme could be one of the elements of the imaginal, one of the nodes you particularly want to explore. It could be this dynamic relationship between self, other, and world—how they ignite each other, what the tendencies are. It could be something as fundamental as the nature of matter, which I believe is a profound and important investigation, especially in our time. We live dominated by a reductionist, scientific, materialist view of matter—wonderful as that perspective is in terms of what it has given us, but also carrying massive consequences for how we live, how we treat the earth, how we treat other species.

You might deliberately enter an image together, or one person might bring an image simply to share and see what unfolds. You could even deliberately enter into an image of each other. The possibilities are limitless.

In the practice, you'll notice many of the same larger considerations about navigation and responsiveness that arise in individual, solitary practice. Sometimes the concertina opens—that node, that element expands, especially when there's a lot of eros present. And again, this isn't necessarily sexual eros. But the degree of eros, the energy and force of it, can present many imaginal possibilities all at once, numerous sensings with soul as simultaneous possibilities. Then the question becomes: which do we choose? How do we choose? Why are we choosing this one over that one? This becomes quite fascinating.

The issue of pacing arises again—where should we linger, where should we slow down? As I've mentioned so many times, the importance of energy body awareness becomes particularly evident, sometimes even more so when working with others in dyads, triads, or quartets. The energy body awareness might shrink, or you might only be aware of part of your body, not really inhabiting or filling out the whole energy body space. So it's helpful to keep checking on this, to expand the awareness, to allow it to expand, to include whatever areas of that space are not being engaged at that moment. This becomes part of the ongoing sensitivity, responsiveness, and care for the practice.

There are so many aspects of experience in any given moment, just as in individual practice—so many facets of the complex experience arising. You can focus on the totality, the whole gestalt, or you can attune to any one or two particular aspects of this complex experience happening in the dyad or triad, deciding to explore that specific dimension.

And because this is life, things are impermanent. The attunement between two people, or even one person's relationship with themselves, comes and goes. That's perfectly okay—it's simply the nature of impermanence. Sometimes it feels like you're exquisitely attuned to each other. Sometimes one person might feel that the other isn't quite attuned to them in terms of sensitivity and attention, or that you're pulling in slightly different directions regarding what interests you in the moment, which affects the quality of attention.

All of this is completely normal and acceptable. Perhaps it calls for a moment of checking in—"Hold on, let's explore something here." Sometimes it's simply about recognizing this shift and knowing it's okay, that the attunement will return, the alignment and sensitivity will come back. You can simply wait for it to return.

But to expect that, of course. And sometimes if you do a lot of this kind of practice, you'll notice that sometimes there's an exquisite and profound and profoundly touching sense of connection and soul-making, igniting, etc., and other times less so. And, you know, that's again just like practicing on your own. So to be a little spacious and equanimous around that. Yes, we take care as best we can of the conditions and the art of it, and there's an element of grace here—it's not completely in our control. So that's important too.

I want to pick up on what I mentioned about what I'm calling the sensitivity of the dyad and just recognizing how... yeah, I think that's the best word—how sensitive that whole space is and that whole crucible is, so that little things, little gestures, little moments or movements of mind or energy or intention can really affect, sometimes quite dramatically, the sense of what's unfolding.

Remember the other day I shared about the yogi who came to an interview with the image of a really big woman, and she was resting her head, lying and resting her head in the lap of this big goddess woman. And then it became sexual, etc. Actually, when she came in that time, it wasn't the first time that she'd shared that image with me. When it first came up, it was a very brief image that arose as she was getting ready for bed. So it wasn't even formal practice. She was on retreat, getting ready for bed, and this image just came up very briefly. Then she did a dyad practice with a partner and shared that image. Quite unexpectedly to her, tears came as she shared it, when she was sharing this image. It moved her at a whole other level. Whereas when it had come up the first time, just briefly going to bed, it just sort of made an impact, but there wasn't that level of emotional and soul response.

So again, the power of soul-making in relationship where there's temenos. Something happens—some alchemy happens to an image that is possible for the soul-making associated with that image, and even how imaginal it is—to go to another level by virtue of the crucible of the dyad, by virtue of the temenos, by virtue of the space we're in and how we're being attended to. Or even the soul sense of the dyad itself. All of that. Again, this thing ignites that thing. And sometimes this can be quite unexpected.

Of course, it's sensitive, as I pointed out before, both for better and for worse, so to speak—in ways that are helpful to the soul-making and in ways that can end up shutting down the soul-making.

Someone shared with me that they were remembering an old relationship, a past relationship with a lover, and there was still some pain and grief around that relationship that hadn't completely been resolved or let go of in them. Then they worked with it imaginatively, feeling the pain, holding that in the crucible of one's being, with the energy

body, with the emotions. And it did become image, or an image came in relation to that. It's not important what the image is, so I won't share it, although it's quite interesting. But it was a sort of baffling image to her, and even more baffling was why it seemed to help and exactly what way it was relevant to the pain or meaningful, and how it was healing. So there was this, these memories, the leftover pain from quite a while ago. It became an image that puzzlingly was healing and touching the soul and very pertinent.

And then she was doing a soul-making dyad with her current partner, her current lover, and decided to share that image—the healing image with respect to the old lover. But in sharing it, unlike the example I gave before where something didn't feel that soul-making and then one shared it and it suddenly was soul-making and touching at a whole other level, this fell flat. She shared the image which had felt meaningful and profound and healing and touching when worked with on her own. Now in sharing it, it just goes flat. Why? What's going on here?

Well, perhaps there was some fear of her current partner's reaction. Why are you thinking about that? Or why are you thinking about him? Or whatever it is. And this fear perhaps led to her leaving bits out of the sharing. So because of this subtle fear, she didn't share fully, and the whole thing wasn't really allowed or supported to become fully imaginal.

Now, that could have been done differently, perhaps, in various ways, but the point I really want to make is just about the sensitivity of this space. Again, on our own, in a large group, in small groups, in dyads, you probably will have seen this now. And as I've pointed out several times, soul-making doesn't just happen by itself. We have to really care for the conditions, the temenos, all the different aspects that allow it to happen.

And sometimes that is not just a default of the being. There are all kinds of other things that can happen, and just pull the plug out of the crucible, or just shatter it a little bit, or leave the lid off, whatever analogy we want to use. Soul-making is a really very sensitive business, and the dyad or group soul-making is also extremely sensitive in the ways that things catch from one person to the other. This is very important to be aware of, to take care of, and to be interested in, actually.

I shared this before, but it's worth repeating on the same theme. I was working in a dyad, and the person I was working with was describing her experience. At that point it was really almost all about her energy body experience. I found myself very sensitive to her gestures and her words and her energy, and I could feel the concertina was opening for me—the sort of spread of potential images, potential images waiting in the wings, their beginnings there.

But despite that concertina and the sort of potential there and the relative fecundity of that, nothing was really igniting to become imaginal fully. Something felt slightly blocked somehow, despite my partner having quite strong energy openings, which she was very in touch with and very mindful of and describing to me quite articulately.

At a certain point I asked her, "Is it energy perception, or is the energy perception an image? Are you perceiving the energy imaginatively?" As I said when I shared this the first time, she got it immediately. Then it shifted to—it's an image of her energy. And immediately I felt my experience open up to image right then, the imaginal perception, the sense of what was happening in her and myself. I just opened up from that shift.

Two points here. One is, again, the significance and the power of the option of sensing the energy body or the energy field imaginatively—sensing it with soul, rather than with the kind of usually not quite fully conscious implicit reification that we have when we're relating to energy and our perception of energy. But more importantly right now, just how sensitive the dyad is and the fact of the subtle dependent arising of experience in the dyad. My experience depended on a subtle shift in how she viewed her experience—just a subtle change from reified to imaginal in terms of her experience, and my experience changed. Again, there's some kind of magic connection that can be there in these kinds of processes that make it very, very sensitive.

I'll share something else. I was working also with someone in a formal dyad practice, and she felt stuck, and she also felt willfully stuck. Something in her wanted to be stuck in some way. I actually felt quite spacious despite the fact that she felt stuck. I was sort of metaphorically tickling her—being a little light and humorous—in the hope and the attempt that it would help. But she felt that my tickling, so to speak, dissolved her will. She was willfully stuck; my tickling dissolved her. And that touched an even deeper pain.

It was a pattern reminiscent from her childhood with her siblings. With her siblings, there was a particular dynamic—they would ridicule and she felt humiliate her when she was hurt and she wanted to kind of gather her will. When she wanted to gather her autonomy or her will, when she was hurt or crying, she would be ridiculed and humiliated. This really was quite a deep pain that was still echoing substantially years later.

We were exploring that and talking about that in a way, and it was good and helpful and honest and open, but it wasn't imaginal. Then suddenly I was able to see her and our relationship imaginally. Again, it's really to get a sense—I hope you can get a sense over time as you practice more and more—of what that territory is of the imaginal and how it feels, its particular flavors and qualities. That's partly why we elucidated the

twenty-eight elements. It does feel quite different. You can be talking about the same thing, paying attention to the same dukkha, even using the imagination in working with that dukkha, but it's not imaginal.

Anyway, at that point, suddenly I was able to see her and also our relationship as imaginal. I shared that I sensed myself imaginatively as mystical husband. We've touched on this before, this particular dyad. From there, from that imaginal sense of being her mystical husband, I said, "I will protect you. I won't ridicule or humiliate you." But then it opened up for her, and that changed something for her. The whole kind of stuck grip dissolved and she felt empowered and much better.

What's going on here? Again, the sensitivity of the dyad. One person moves into the imaginal, takes a quantum leap into the imaginal, and senses it, maybe shares it—in this case I did share that particular sense in the soul—and it opens her up and heals something in her. She caught the soul sense from me. One person catches the soul sense from another, is ignited.

by others. We could view it that way, though it might also be that the image and the imaginal is, so to speak, in the field, and one person is simply articulating or experiencing it, allowing the whole field to make a quantum jump. In other words, it's there already—the field is pregnant with it—and it just requires one or both people to become aware. It exists in potentia, so to speak.

This is really interesting: the way a sudden shift into imaginal perception can then affect the whole field. Particularly fascinating here is the fact that it affected in a healing way what was happening with the other person. So one person's imaginal perception in relation to another heals what was conceived of and felt to be real, non-imaginal dukkha. To me, this is really significant.

I would venture to go a little further and say that sometimes when that kind of thing happens, it heals more than, let's say in this instance, an actual guarantee of so-called real protection. If I had just said to her, as a human being, as a conventionally conceived human being, "I will protect you," or "I won't let that happen," I don't know whether it would have had the same effect.

This is curious, because we usually—the normal view would conceive of the imaginal as not being real. Of course you want real protection. Here's what is, in a way, non-real, imaginal protection, yet it has more power. It has more healing, penetrative power for the being that feels in need of protection—vulnerable, unsafe.

Very probably this kind of thing happening imaginatively in the dyad would also be more healing than, say, just her mindfully imagining someone protecting her, or trying to use the imagination when it's not really imaginal. Similar possibilities exist with all kinds of realms of human need and pain and experience. Someone might need to feel respected or appreciated. Again, it might be that when that comes from an imaginal level, it actually wields a power and has an effect that is not available from more conventionally conceived human communication or relationship.

So I find this very interesting. It's partly a point about the sensitivity of the dyad—how things can shift very quickly when one person's experience flips into the imaginal or opens up to the imaginal—but also about what is going on in terms of dukkha and image, dukkha and the imaginal.

What exactly is the relationship between experiencing the need to feel the dukkha as real and linger there with that pain, and the opening up of the imaginal around and in relationship to that dukkha? Again, there may be different orderings. Sometimes—we've talked about this with dukkha and soul-making—you really need to be with the dukkha, experiencing it, taking it as real, feeling it. Then from that ground, from that soil, from that opening, an image can come. Sometimes it's the other way around: the introduction or reception, the birth, the opening to an image actually does something that allows the dukkha to be experienced more fully and to heal.

Is it that different dukkha, different situations need different approaches? Do different people have particular preferences in terms of the order they follow? I don't know. But the same choices, questions, and possibilities that arise in solo practice with dukkha and the imaginal also arise in the context of the dyad. The same kind of sensitivity, care, openness, and curiosity in navigating all that is required in a dyad.

I mentioned at the beginning—and possibly you can begin to hear as I share some of this—just how much this kind of practice demands of us good relational skills. On the last retreat, someone asked me about dyad practice, and one of the things I said in response was that it's really important to have the ability and willingness to "kiss and make up."

In other words, of course people bump into each other. Of course there are misunderstandings, conflicts of interest, things said that weren't so sensitive that cause pain and spin off, carrying residue, making impact, creating closing. Of course all that happens in human relationship. And in a dyad, working in this very intimate, very open, very sensitive and deep way with another person—it's a very sensitive field. So yes, expect that. Expect there will be things that happen that need attention and require considerable skill in repairing and taking care of.

I made that point on the retreat, and Yasmin picked it up in the closing circle—quite rightly, and I'm glad she said it—because "kiss and make up" sounds kind of superficial and flippant. It wasn't how I meant it, but it does sound something akin to brushing difficulty under the rug: kiss and make up, get on with it. That's not what I meant, and I'm really glad Yasmin pointed this out.

What I really mean is the willingness, the ability, the care, the carefulness, the precision, the patience, the humility, the openness, the flexibility, the love, the equanimity—all that is necessary, plus the sheer hard work sometimes of addressing difficulties that come up, whether in a dyad between two people, with one person in the dyad, or in a group.

Are you able to do that? Do you have that range of skills? They're not that common, actually. Certainly not commonly exercised in our world. There's not a lot of training in this—not even in the Dharma. But to be able to do that, I would say, is necessary to this kind of work.

So again, if we go back and talk about prerequisites, we really need to think: do I need to develop this if I want to pursue this practice? If I kind of like the sound of it, or I've had some times where I've practiced dyads or triads and it felt really beautiful, and I want to pursue it further?

Okay, but check your relational skills. Maybe they need some work, some exploration, some cultivation. Perhaps that can go on in parallel—maybe you take a little time and just develop that. Sometimes this needs to happen in the moment, in the fluidity of the back and forth of a dyad, in the give and take of real time. Sometimes something happens and people separate, then three days later they say, "Well, hold on, I really need to tell you something that happened the other day—I just feel really shut down." Then you talk about it after it happened. That's really important. But also in the moment, in the fluidity of the moment. So relational skills—really, really important. Indispensable.

One will also notice in practicing in dyads and triads and larger groups with soulmaking that you're going to notice all kinds of relational patterns. You'll notice your particular poisons, stances, contortions, inclinations in relationship coming up and hopefully beginning to be made conscious in the dyad. There are all kinds of possibilities here for what you might notice.

It might be the patterns of the way your energy is, or the energy body—there might be a certain contraction of the energy body, or a certain kind of brash throwing it out, or domination, or being dominated in ways that may be fine in some respects, even

soul-making, but in other ways they manifest not so fine. It's a kind of habit, unconscious, not desired, and not very soul-making. You start to notice that one person or the other is doing most of the talking, and you think, "Oh, that's a pattern."

It might be patterns of the balance of attention—we talked about that. It might be a pattern of being more interested in one's own experience than the other, or vice versa, or not noticing the environment. It might be something quite subtle to put into words, not quite the balance of attention, but it might be that the gaze tends to be more penetrating of the other, and one person might have the pattern to be more penetrated, so to speak. I don't necessarily mean sexually, but there is that as well. It's more the intensity and intentness of the pattern of gazing.

All kinds of possibilities. I'm listing just a few general areas that one might notice patterns in. What gets really interesting is seeing and working with the subtleties of each individual and their patterns in terms of energy, emotion, psychology, relational patterns brought into the dyad.

We will notice all that. Sometimes these patterns will just change by themselves in the context of doing dyad practice. Because there's the natural expansion of the soul-making dynamic, of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, with all the change in perception and perception of self and sense of self and sensing the soul and sensing of other, sensing of relationship—all that naturally expands and can at times break certain structures, the breaking of the vessels. So sometimes these things change by themselves by virtue of the usually gradual alchemy that's happening in that particular crucible.

It's also really fine and available to notice certain patterns you observe about relational dynamics coming up in the dyad and decide deliberately to experiment with doing it differently. For instance, letting oneself be more the penetrated one, so to speak—more the gazed-upon one, more aware of oneself as object, as erotic-imaginal object for the other, rather than aware of one's erotic-imaginal gaze and attention penetrating the other. One decides to do it differently, or it might just change by itself.

Deciding deliberately to experiment with changing something—not changing this forever, but just trying to do it differently now, deliberately—again, that could be a theme. Remember, that's not ego. Just because you decided deliberately to experiment with something and do something or make a change in practice right now—just as in imaginal practice, when I decide to introduce something into the image or change the image or bring this image into relationship with that image, or bring this image into relationship with a certain dukkha—just because I decide to do that doesn't make it ego and thus not soul somehow.

The question, as always, is: Is it soul-making? Does it feel soul-making? Did I make this happen or did it happen by itself? It could be either. It's irrelevant. What matters, what's relevant, is: Does this feel soul-making right now, in whatever is happening, whatever direction one is exploring, whatever thread one is following?

Now in relation to all this—relational patterns, relational skills, the sensitivity of the dyad—I want to touch briefly on what we might call the different kinds and levels of fabrication that can happen in a dyad, specifically of self and other, but really anything. Specifically self and other, the different levels and kinds of fabrication of self and other in the dyad.

In soul-making dyad practice, we can welcome, expect, and be interested in and become familiar with and skilled with and get clear about whole ranges of the senses of self and other.

So we could divide that into, let's say, four right now.

One is what we might call the normal self-sense, the conventional human self-sense. Two normally conceived, conventionally conceived human selves in relationship, in conversation. So even though I'm sitting down to do a soul-making dyad, that level of perception, that level and type of fabrication—in other words, just the usual, normal, most popular level of fabrication—is just to fabricate the usual conventional sense of self and other.

That level is important and never just—even though my intention is to do a soul-making dyad, that doesn't leave that out as a possibility. It doesn't shut the door on that possibility. And often, this particular, this kind of conventional self-sense, if you like, is a really important stance when there's difficulty or relational stuff to talk through together or negotiate. So I'm sitting in a soul-making dyad, and it might be that actually for our whole time or some portion of the time, we're actually just talking as two human beings to each other on that level, working through a difficulty, whatever. And there's the kind of normal range and the normal type of the fabrication of the perception of self and other.

A second possibility is what I'm going to say in inverted commas is "no-self." And I'm putting that in inverted commas just because it's so common for people to report, "Oh, no-self, there was no-self. I was sitting with so-and-so and we were doing this or that soul-making dyad or whatever and there was no-self." I would say actually this refers to a range of ways and degrees of less self and other fabricating. So there are so many possibilities here.

We could feel like everything, including you and me, is all one awareness, one cosmic awareness, one cosmic love, as classic examples. There could be just the fading of personality. So my usual self doesn't arise and I'm not even really framing the other person in terms of their personality or their usual personality that I'm used to or they're used to. It may just be the fading of a kind of gross reactivity. So there's a really deep equanimity and quieting of the push and pull, the rub, the reactions of the being to whatever is happening. It could be very light experience. There are just five aggregates here, and there are just five aggregates there. And then all kinds of deeper perceptions of emptiness.

All of these involve some degree of fabricating of the self and of the perception of other, but less than the normal one that we usually are used to. So that's a possibility too. The normal self-sense, number one. Number two is just, let's say, not no-self, but less self in all kinds of different ways.

Third possibility is soul-making, imaginal perception, the sensing with soul of self and other. In other words, the self that I feel myself to be right now, and or the other. It's not the normal self-sense. It's not the conventional self-sense. Neither is it particularly unfabricated, like far down that spectrum. But it's an imaginal perception. It's a sensing with soul of the self, and other. And again, world and eros and whatever. And that would be the third possibility.

The fourth, which I can't remember if I've mentioned yet, is a sense of a third. Sometimes what can happen in dyads is this: I sense you, I sense me, and then I sense we, I sense us, and that us feels like not so much an independent soul entity, but it feels like it's a kind of soul. Somehow it includes us, somehow it's separate from us. So there's a sensing with soul of the dyad itself as a soul, if that makes sense. And that can arise in addition or at the same times as the sense of self and other. So that would be a fourth kind of sense of self and other that we could delineate there as possible, something to look out for.

This arising of a we—well, maybe I'll let you explore it, but it's potentially very significant. And I remember an interview with James Hillman that I read some years ago in a book of interviews. I found it a very interesting read. He said, he was talking about love, and he said, "Love needs a third. Love needs a third." So two is not enough to sustain love. There's I love you, you love me, wonderful. And for that love to be really—for it to be fertile, and when it is fertile, there's the arising, the sense of a third. And that the two, each both together, are in relationship to that third.

And if that third also becomes sensed with soul, if it has soul significance, soul resonances, if it's an imaginal perception—I don't just mean an intrapsychic, but if it's sensed with soul—then that allows... It's another level of, again, anchor for the relationship, another kind of influx or nourishment or service for the relationship.

So I'm reminded of a friend and her parents, sounds like, stayed in love with each other right into their very old age in what sounds like quite a delightful way. And partly, I wonder, unlike some other relationships that I can think of where that withers or something happens to the love there, her parents were actually both very committed Catholics, but also their Catholicism had a sense of depth and soul meaning for both of them.

And so there was this third that they were kind of in service to through their marriage, and they were in relationship to it. But there are many possibilities for this sense of "we." It doesn't have to be quite something like that Catholic example.

It could simply be the sense of we two sitting here. I can see that you're separate, and I feel separate to a certain extent. And yet there's this sense of a third that we can both access—not quite an amalgam, because the separateness, the two-ness, is retained within the we. But the we forms itself as a kind of third unit. You could say we're in it; you could say it's separate from us both. It's hard to articulate, but there are many possibilities.

I mention this as something that's possible to open up and discover.

But let's go slowly here. If there are all these different possibilities for the self-sense and the other-sense—in terms of whether they're imaginal, whether they're less fabricated, whether they're conventional—again, we're potentially faced with choices of navigation. How much conventionally human perception versus more fully imaginal at any time? Where on that spectrum toward the fully imaginal, fully authentic sensing with soul and eros—on that whole spectrum from the conventional to the fully imaginal—what's right right now? What feels right? How am I going to decide? What determines that?

And there's the possibility of steering it. Sometimes when things are really imaginal, we're not so interested in our personal stories, in the conventional human personal stories. We're almost other beings relating to each other. Sometimes the personal stories are then viewed imaginally, and they're sensed with soul, so there's not necessarily a separation there.

Sometimes attraction might come up of different kinds. Maybe there is eros; maybe it's sexual; maybe there's a sexual image and sexual energy arises. Or maybe there's sexual desire, but it's not really eros in the full sense that we mean it—in terms of impregnating the imaginal. There might be imagination there, but it's not really imaginal. Then the question becomes: is that okay right now, or do we want to steer away from that in different ways? Can I, for instance, see this human as divine manifestation—this human or that human as our portal into the divine? And that will do something to the whole sensing, the whole perception. Or I may be able to see and sense my human eros as the manifestation of divine eros.

All this range is possible, and all this navigation is possible. And again, the question is: what's right right now? What's necessary even?

What can also happen sometimes is that if you consider the self and the other, and also the world or environment, each of those—and the couple, the two—can be perceived either conventionally humanly or imaginally, or somewhere along that spectrum. What that means is you have four elements: self, other, the couple (the we), and the world. Each of them can be—let's just put it in binary terms—either imaginal or conventional, with all the different permutations of that.

So in one example I could give: there might be an imaginal self relating to a conventionally conceived human other. They might sense themselves conventionally in this conventional human sense, not imaginally. I might sense them that way. Or we both might be imaginal. Or of course, both can be conventional. Or it can be that my partner is an imaginal being—we're both perceiving her imaginally—but I'm still in my usual conventional sense of self, and she is looking at me from that imaginal perspective and talking to me. Maybe even that kind of gaze and that kind of relating from an imaginal to a conventional is healing.

You have all these possibilities there, with all those different elements, each of which can be in any position. You have to be a little careful if one is an imaginal other speaking to a conventionally conceived human self. I'm a little cautious about New Age channeling things and such. So all of it's imaginal middle way. All of it's with the fullness of intention for soulmaking.

But again, there are all these possibilities and directions that can suddenly find themselves in a certain constellation of these different permutations. Or deliberately, you're aware of it and you're actually cultivating a certain relationship between one kind and another. But all these are possibilities of what can open there. And healing is relevant—all that is relevant to healing sometimes—but again, fullness of intention, not just for healing, although that's in the bag of gifts.

But again, the question of what feels right here, what feels the most soulmaking, maybe at times what feels the most healing—how do we want to navigate? How do we navigate with that?

So in a way, what we could also say is that all these kinds of realms and possibilities of practice demand of us a great sensitivity. We could say, just in relation to what I just described, it demands a kind of triple sensitivity and triple capacity, at least:

One is sensitivity and capability of skillful relationship to the human level of the other—regarding them, relating to them, respecting them in the conventional human sense. Is that there? To what degree is that there? How can I cultivate it more?

Second sensitivity and capacity needed is to my human level—my conventionally human conception, sense of myself. Actually being sensitive to "Ouch, that hurt when they just said that," or "I need this right now," or whatever it is.

And thirdly, sensitivity and capability of skillful and artful relationship with an image that's present.

So the needs and requests of all three—conventionally human other, conventionally human self, whatever images are present—they determine together what is then appropriate.

I hope all this makes sense in terms of possibilities and things to look out for.

Now, I said I wasn't going to talk much about Eros, or rather, I'm not going to talk much about when there's really a lot of Eros between the two members of the dyad. I'll say just a little bit, but I won't really go into it and that whole realm level of possibility.

Just to be aware that in some instances, or with whatever, when there's a certain spark, or just the conditions are supportive, just how much eros may arise for the other. And then, you know, this brings the questions: Can I contain it? Am I okay with that? Are they okay with it? Can we hold the boundary, whatever the boundary is, if there is a boundary? Can I handle all that eros, all that desire, all that sexual energy, if that's what's arising?

What about the boundaries, but also what about just the inevitable slips of eros into craving, the contraction into craving, of the imaginal into some kind of reified perception? Does my art extend to the ability to notice when that's happening? Because it feels very different. I notice when that's happening and I can open things up, I can change things, I can support the movement, the expansion of craving into eros and of rarefied perception of fixation, fixated image into imaginal image.

And again, what else am I bringing in? Do I need to feel attractive here? Because that's not the fullness of intention, is it? As always, checking: okay, there's a lot of sexual energy, there's a lot of desire, whatever, it's definitely got some eros in it. Is it soul-making? And as always, letting that be the guide.

Some people will be practicing this kind of dyad where, this situation, either they are already in a romantic sexual relationship or they want to be and it's fine, there's no other issues, there's no boundary issues and it's all, it's kind of open territory. And they might be open and okay to having, you know, sex or some degree of sexual intimacy.

And it might be that in the course of working in a dyad, there's a lot of sexual eros that arises, and people decide to be sexual together. So as I said, that's grown-ups consenting adults. It's their choice, of course, and that's available as human beings, as long as it's okay with the other people.

But just a word about that. Careful, if I'm interested in the soul-making dyad, careful about the intention. It may be that actually having some physical, actual sexual contact may be soul-making. Or you may find, if this is your situation, this is what you explore as part of your larger explorations, you may find that being sexual in a soul-making dyad or kind of a soul-making dyad leading into that may actually squander the erotic charge and the erotic tension necessary to sensing the soul. The two-ness collapses, the sexual energy and charge collapses in different ways.

Now, that in itself is fine, but it's a certain choice and it's something to be aware of and something to decide: is that what we want right now? Or it could be that you decide to be sexual and physically sexual. And what is needed if we want to allow that and support that sexual contact to be sensed with soul, to be soul-making?

So remember, soul-making is more than heart. We can have our lovely, heartful, making love or whatever. It has a whole range, but soul-making means more than heart and more than a lot of other things. So what might be needed? If that's what we decide in this instance or whatever, that we're going to be sexual, we're going to make love or whatever it is, have some kind of sexual intimacy, actual physical sexual intimacy, and we want it to be soul-making, then what supports that?

Does it have to do with the intention? Does it have to do with attention? What kind of attention? Does it have to do with the pacing of the whole unfolding of the process? Perhaps. So I don't think there's any formula here, but you'll have to, if this is speaking just to those where this is relevant to at the moment, you'll have to kind of feel: okay, well, how does that happen?

You can have a lot of sense of soul and sensing the soul at one moment, and then it suddenly collapses. Like I said, you can't assume that just because I had it now, now we change to this activity, mode of behavior, whatever it is, we're going to have sex, and I assume that the soul-making sense continues. Maybe, but often not. It needs a certain kind of care. And what does it mean? I have to kind of experiment and find out, perhaps.

Or it might be that you decide: okay, there's a lot of eros, there's a lot of charges, maybe you're talking about it, maybe you're including it and working with it, but you keep the formal time, whatever that was that you decided to devote to soul-making dyad practice, you keep that formal time for practice and that formal space, and you let the eros channel into the sensing with soul without acting it out during that time. And afterwards, you know, your mobile phone timer goes off, right, the dyad's over, then you can do whatever you want, you know.

But these are choices. Again, it's not for me to set any rules or whatever, but again, just to point out how much, how sensitive the whole thing is, how sensitive the sensing the soul is, how sensitive the dyad is, how sensitive we are as creatures and as souls, and what care is needed and to find out and to experiment.

A couple more things. I mean, sometimes, and again, depends on the situation, depends on the actual relationship between two human beings who are in a dyad, etc. But it may be that one feels lots of sexual desire, sexual eros for the other, and lets the other know. So person A feels a lot of sexual desire, etc.

And person B actually feels it and is aware of it and lets person A know that they can feel it and can feel it flowing toward them. And actually they appreciate it and that it's lovely. And then it may be more bearable energetically in and for person A. Is it just because they shared it that it's then spread, so to speak, to be held in a larger field of the dyad? So there's less pressure, more space, and they're not just carrying it themselves? Or is it the fact that in knowing that it's okay and being reassured that it's okay for that degree of eros and desire and sexual energy to be around, that the other person doesn't feel threatened by it—that they feel less need to button it down and repress it or hide it?

So again, depending on the relationship, depending on the trust, depending on the context, including these things and talking about them and being careful how you hold them together, what you do with them, how you decide, how you sense them, how you relate to them—all of this is really, really important. But there's so much potential here in diet practice.

I'm not, as I said, just mentioning a few things about when the sexual eros gets really quite strong and intense, but really when there's any eros between human beings—not even working in a diet, not even sexual eros. That eros, as we've pointed out so much over the last few years, is a key and a galvanizer of the whole soul-making dynamic and therefore the sensing with soul and what that can open us to and bring to us and give to us.

There's a couple of lines from Rumi in this regard. I don't know where it's from, but I'm assuming it's a poem that he wrote to Shams, his mystical lover. And it says:

"The tender words we said to one another are stored in the secret heart of heaven. One day, like rain, they will fall and spread and our mystery will grow green over the world."

We could hear that—I don't know exactly what Rumi's whole philosophy was, despite the beauty of the poetry—but "stored in the secret heart of heaven," the tender words we said to one another, stored in that realm or dimension of being of eternality. They're stored there at that level in the angelic realm when our tender words are spoken out of sensing each other with soul. When not even just words, but those perceptions, that sensing itself is stored somehow eternally.

And you have, again, eternality as one of the nodes, one of the elements of the imaginal. There is that sense that they exist somehow. They make an imprint, an impression, and somehow they're eternal. Of course it's impermanent, but in some other way, this profound sensing with soul has touched my being, touched my heart and soul. It feels to be eternal. I sense it as eternal, stored in the secret heart of heaven, in the mundus imaginalis.

"One day, like rain, they will fall and spread, and our mystery will grow green over the world." It's like a kind of cosmopoiesis. Those words, that gaze, that sensing with soul will spread and its mystery will grow green over the world. It changes our sense of the world that we're in.

And as I said, I shared in an earlier talk on this series, sometimes there is a sense with any image, intrapsychic or extrapsychic, but perhaps more keenly I wonder when we're working in a diet or when we're sharing this sense of participating in an imaginal sense, participating in an image with another—that sense of participating, the privilege of participating in that dimension of being, in that, whatever we want to call it, the mundus imaginalis, the angelic dimension, can be felt to be such a privilege, such a grace, to participate in the eternal that way, and in the divine that way.

This can be sensed and felt in the depths of the depths of one's soul as perhaps one of the greatest privileges of human being. And to taste that, even if it's only for some moments or a few minutes, can change the whole tenor and outlook and relationship with existence, with life and death. To taste that for a few minutes, to taste that for a few moments even, changes my relationship with dying. Changes the way I sense myself, my human being, this particular other, but human being in general. Changes my sense of the world.

So that's there with all images, intrapsychic or extrapsychic, all sensing with soul. But I'm wondering whether there's something about sensing oneself in relationship with another actual human being that way that can bestow this gift and this grace and this sense of profound privilege.

Anyway, so much is possible. So much awaits discovery and creation.

CHAPTER 183

The Phoenix of Metaphysics (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 2h30

> *In this opening talk of a series on metaphysics, Rob Burbea examines fundamental questions of ontology (what is real) and epistemology (how we know). He traces how the classical scientific worldview of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton - viewing the universe as purposeless matter moving according to physical laws - became dominant yet has been profoundly challenged by quantum physics and relativity theory.*
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> *Burbea discusses how quantum mechanics reveals that observation affects reality, particles exist in superposition states, and the past itself depends on present measurements. He explores how philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn showed that paradigms shape perception, and how even rigorous scientific method involves unproven assumptions and hidden motivations. Drawing parallels with emptiness teachings, he examines how our conceptual frameworks and ways of looking fundamentally shape what we perceive as real.*
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> *This investigation has crucial implications for practices of "sensing with soul" and imaginal perception. Burbea argues that questions of epistemology are also questions of social order, affecting what we respect and value culturally. He introduces the possibility of an "imaginal middle way" - a poetic sensibility that holds images and soul-perceptions as neither ultimately real nor unreal, allowing for duty with freedom, sacredness without fixation, and endless creative interpretation.*

I'd like to talk, as I said in the introductory talk of this series, about metaphysics - really, ontology and epistemology.

Ontology, loosely speaking, is a philosophical term for the exploration or study of what is actually real and what is not real. Epistemology is the philosophical term for the exploration of how we know - how we know what's real or not real, what kind of knowledge about the world, about ourselves, about anything can we trust, what constitutes knowledge and what does not constitute knowledge. These two areas, ontology and epistemology, are intimately woven together. They kind of really imply each other, and traditionally they form part of what's called metaphysics.

I've talked about this a fair amount over the years, woven into the emptiness teachings certainly, but also woven into the soul-making teachings. Perhaps there are slightly different openings into the territory tonight.

I'm supposing that some people will listen and feel a need to hear this kind of material - this kind of exploration, these kinds of questions, the history of our culture's thinking and explorations in philosophy and science that has gone on over the years. There will be a need for that both in terms of legitimizing for themselves practices of sensing with soul and the imaginal, but also how one relates to existence. Of course that's not different - that's not other than the practice of sensing with soul. Sensing with soul has implications about how I live and how I see and how I feel the world.

Some people will feel a need for this and others will just be interested and find it fascinating - there's some degree of eros in the exploration of these kinds of ideas and hearing about them. Other people will maybe neither be interested nor feel a need. All of that variety in where it lands with you is, to me, interesting. I hope to weave in the fact of that variety and that range of relationships to these kinds of explorations and questions into the points I'm trying to make.

But as I've already alluded to, why is this important? Why are the questions of what is actually real and what kind of knowing, what constitutes knowledge, what constitutes knowing, what kind of knowing and sense of things and sense of truth are trustworthy or valid - why are these important questions?

Well, you can, I hope, guess the answer already: all that has implications for how a person will regard or value the whole domain of practices that we're calling sensing with soul. If I've decided that this kind of thing is real and that kind of thing is absolutely not real and therefore worthless, not valuable, not valid, and if the kinds of perceptions and senses involved in what we call sensing with soul are in that category - not real, worthless - then those kinds of perceptions and what they bring to the soul and the heart and the action and the speech and the aspiration and the dedication and devotion in human life is also relegated to the pile of rubbish, unworthy, not valid.

Conversely, though, if we can open up at least the possibilities of ontologies and epistemologies that justify and give value and validation to sensing with soul, that undergird those kinds of practices and support them, then that has big implications - not just for individuals, but culturally, for our relationships to ourselves, to other human beings, to other species, to the planet, to the world, to our desire. All of that - how we view all of that and how seriously we take it and how powerful the consequences of such practices can be.

So I think there definitely is a case for saying this is important territory. And yet still, as I said, that range and variety of how much people feel they need to open this area up or explore it or hear about it and how much they're even interested - that variety itself is also interesting and something to consider and reflect on.

But in line with what I just said, someone called Moscovici wrote: "Questions of epistemology" - questions of what constitutes actual knowledge, what constitutes knowing, and not just illusory fantasy - "are also questions of social order." We could add: questions of ontology are also questions of social order. As I said, epistemology and ontology go together, involve each other.

Why are they questions of social order? Because of what I just said - because of the fact that what we consider real often forms the limit of what we genuinely and deeply respect. So if, for example, the kinds of senses of things and perceptions, the kinds of knowing that we open up to and support with sensing with soul, if that is considered not real, we won't respect it. We'll only respect something else called real. All that shapes what a culture does, what it prioritizes, how the economy is geared, where taxes go, what people invest in, how they measure progress and well-being.

There are also issues of power involved on top of that. As Foucault points out, knowledge and power are inextricably related. When a culture as a whole, either openly or more subtly, decrees "this is real and that is not real, therefore this is worthy of respect, that is not worthy of respect," then that also automatically brings into play a hierarchy of power, of social relations and social structures dependent on which camp one falls into. If unhappily one falls into the camp of sympathizing with and finding beauty and import in the kinds of sensing with soul, for example, and they're not respected, they're not in the dominant paradigm, then they get - either subtly or openly - pushed down the pecking order in the hierarchy.

Of course, all that can happen even ostensibly in a democracy where there's free speech, or in our culture where many people are still frightened or it's taboo - even for completely irreligious and secular people, it's still often taboo to discriminate against people who have certain religious views. And yet still there might be more subtle hierarchies of power in all kinds of ways.

So I think all this is important, and I want to trace a little bit of history, lay out how things have somewhat unraveled, at least at one stratum of society - maybe a more intellectual stratum - and also at another level.

and what that might open up, that kind of unraveling, that kind of... the place where we've arrived in relation to these questions about truth and reality and knowledge. Because many, many of us will actually be ignorant about all this.

There have been certain developments in philosophy but even more so in science in the last 120 to 130 years that really open up and challenge and shape the very foundations of these questions of ontology and epistemology, and yet very little of that has trickled down to the person on the street.

So, just very briefly, historically: following the scientific revolution some hundreds of years ago, and the fathers, if you like, of that revolution—Galileo, Descartes, Locke, Newton—what came slowly, gradually to dominate... and that's an important point as well, that this revolution, like many revolutions, wasn't something everyone said, "Oh yeah, of course, that's right, I get it now, how stupid we've been." It was something that was very gradually brought into the mainstream and gradually adopted by most people unconsciously through a kind of indoctrination to become the dominant view.

What Galileo, Descartes, Locke and Newton and others instigated or brought about—we can call that the classical scientific worldview. And that has become, as I said, the dominant worldview, probably for most people on the planet right now. So that even when a person feels allegiances to other contradictory views, there's still a lot of gravitational pull towards this classical scientific worldview. I think it was Charles Taylor who noted that one of the marks of a secular age is that no one can completely, naively believe certain beliefs anymore that don't fit the classical scientific worldview. There's always a kind of pool of doubt there because of the weight of it and the entrenchment of it.

And also, because it's been so successful—and that's partly how it grew to dominance—it wields great predictive power, for instance, about where a cannonball will land or a rocket or an engine or whatever it is, and great power in what it has enabled humanity to build technologically. Hugely helpful and hugely problematic as well, but enormous power, both in terms of its predictive power and its technological power and its power over nature.

And with all that—because of its predictive power and its technological consequences or spawnings—it has come to be regarded as true. It's the truth. It's how things are. Which, strictly speaking, doesn't follow. And if we care about these things, that's a point worth noting.

But what does that classical scientific worldview, the dominant paradigm of scientific materialism, what does it hold? It holds that the universe is made of little bits of stuff. We call them atoms, but we might be, in that view, loosely referring to subatomic particles, although that would be a mistake. But loosely, the world is made up—everything is made up—of atoms, and these atoms are set in motion and then follow

their motions according to certain physical laws. And they bump into each other and interact with each other according to certain physical laws. And the whole thing runs like clockwork.

So there is no divinity present in the workings of that. And the whole thing is purposeless. The purposeless movement of atoms. It's not moving towards anything, any purpose. There's no meaning to the universe, to the movement of matter.

In its extreme form, it reduces the whole of the universe to just matter functioning like clockwork and somehow producing consciousness as well. And in fact, the clockwork analogy is interesting because it was a deliberate analogy, I think, on the part of Descartes and other people. And it was just that time in history where clocks were either becoming more prominent or had just been invented. So the idea for the philosophy and the vision of nature was given a little bit by what was present as a new technology and a prevalent technology that one encountered in the world.

It's interesting now, if you read reports on current scientific theories, how they don't talk about clockwork anymore—they talk about information, and the whole universe is just information, or the whole universe is a supercomputer, or even there are theories about the whole universe being in fact a computer simulation. The point is that it's interesting to note how the worldview can just be conditioned by what's prevalent in terms of the technology that we encounter.

But all of that either has nothing to say about meaning or, taken a little bit further, actually postulates dogmatically or posits dogmatically a meaningless universe, a meaningless cosmos. It has nothing to say about ethics, and correspondingly, in the strict view of that scientific materialism, there is nothing to say about ethics, as ethics are not integral to the universe.

It's also what we might call a kind of flatland view in the sense that it lacks meaning, it lacks divinity, it lacks a lot of dimensionality. And again, that word's a little tricky, dimensionality, but partly what we could say dimensionality is like depth. It's like what's not immediately apparent.

So actually, that scientific worldview, that classical scientific worldview, only allows certain kinds of dimensionality. For example, the mathematical laws—whether of gravity or electrons or whatever—are a kind of dimension of the being of matter. So there's matter and a deeper strata that's not separate from matter. It's part of matter, but it's a deeper dimension, if you like—the laws that matter obeys, the various mathematical equations and laws. And so it admits only that kind of dimensionality, and all the time it's supposed to keep the view that all this is subject to experimental proof. So if a law

gets disproved or improved upon, or if a deeper strata of reality—a more fundamental particle, a smaller particle that makes up larger subatomic particles—is discovered or proved not to exist or whatever...

This view represents what we might call a flatland world—a flat universe without dimensionality. Yet depending on how we use that word, we can say that certain kinds of dimensionality are allowed within this framework. All of this, as I mentioned, came over time to be regarded simply as common sense—what everyone would agree upon as the truth of things. But it didn't start that way at all.

This worldview took considerable time to evolve into the dominant paradigm, where everyone would simply accept that this is how the world is, how we think about it, how we relate to it, and indeed how we actually see it.

This world, to specify some more of its components, is a world of what Newton called absolute space and absolute time. Space is conceived as pure, empty space—absolutely still and forming a kind of backdrop for all this purposeless movement of atoms according to physical laws. Space is simply neutral, a receptacle, a backdrop. Time, too, is absolute—the same for everyone anywhere, simply trundling on regardless of what is happening or what is present.

Also wrapped up in this framework is the element and postulate of cause and effect: this effect is due to this cause or these causes in the past. Central to the conception of this cosmos, both in the idea and theory of it, and importantly in what observations for a long time seemed to verify and validate, was that the universe is made of things that are clearly this or that. It's a wave, or it's a particle, or it's this kind of particle as opposed to that kind of particle—made up of clearly differentiable things with clearly differentiable properties.

For example, the position of a particle, its speed or momentum, its energy, the time at which a certain event happened in the life of that particle or collision—all these are clear and clearly measurable things. Accurately, definitively measurable, at least in potential. They all exist independent of the observer and independent of the way the observer chooses to observe, the mode of measurement or observation, the way of looking.

These clearly differentiable entities that this cosmos is made up of are also only influenced—their behavior and manifestation dependent only on obvious interactions they have had in their vicinity. All of which became, as I said, the common sense view. If this particle possesses this property or manifestation, it's because of this interaction or whatever, which we can trace to something in its locale.

After a few hundred years of this, however, experimental results came in that started to shake up this entire worldview and caused a great amount of commotion and agitation and debate and brilliant and bold investigation and discussion and innovation. This resulted in the double revolution of Einstein's relativity theories and also the quantum revolution of quantum physics.

It was really a shattering of that whole worldview—its very foundations. Its foundational assumptions were rocked and broken and brought into question as if the rug had been pulled out from under the whole sense of the cosmos and the ability to even make sense of the cosmos.

Some of you will know some of this, but for example, classically light was regarded as a wave, and then it was seen to be able to manifest both as a wave and as a particle. What it manifested to us—whether it manifested as a wave or as a particle—depended on the kind of observation we made. These are two complementary, or actually contradictory manifestations, contradictory attributes. To be a wave is something very different than to be a particle. A particle is a small thing in a fixed location, and a wave is not—it's spread out. What's the reality there?

There's a term called superposition. In quantum physics, this refers to something being in a kind of hybrid state of two complementary or contradictory states. For example, when we measure it this way, we see a wave. When we observe it that way, we see a particle. When we're not measuring it, it's neither one nor the other. The wave and particle states are superposed.

If that example is not that radical for you, consider also the example that's central to Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, where a radioactive particle is in a state of being both decayed and not decayed, or neither decayed nor not decayed. This radioactive decay—has it happened yet or has it not happened yet? It's said to be in a state of superposition, where it's both decayed and not decayed at the same time. But what that actually means is something very abstract.

With this superposition principle, recently in the last few decades, they've observed it in larger and larger objects. There can be a tendency for some people—and I think this is interesting when we talk about the psychology of epistemology—to hear some of these remarkable, mind-boggling results and facts about the quantum world and kind of relegate them: "That's all for very little stuff which I don't really encounter." They go about their everyday life with a view of reality that's essentially unchanged, that has absorbed that common sense, classical physics worldview and takes that to be the way it is.

But this superposition, this baffling, indescribable—at least indescribable in language or concept—coexistence somehow of this state that encompasses two contradictory states, this superposition has been observed more recently in larger and larger things. Where's the boundary?

Can I really just relegate all this, all these discoveries and conundra of the quantum world? Can I really relegate that to something that bears no relevance for my life?

As I said, these are contradictory states that are somehow existing together—even if we say "existing," I'm not really sure that's the right word. But there's a contradiction of the law of the excluded middle. If a particle has decayed, it can't be not decayed, and if it's not decayed, it can't be decayed. And somehow, before observation, that particle is said to be in a superposed state. It's neither decayed nor not decayed.

When we talk about an individual particle, physicists speak of the wave function of that particle. This really describes a sort of smudge of probability, a probability cloud of where that particle will be and how fast it will be moving and all those other properties that were thought to be independent of the observer.

One realizes that what happens when we're not observing it is all we can talk about is this abstract mathematical function in many-dimensional space. When you do a certain manipulation of it, you get the probability of finding the particle over there or the probability of finding it over here. In other words, before we observe it, it doesn't have a definite position. It doesn't have a definite velocity. It doesn't have a definite energy. It doesn't have a definite time at which a certain interaction happened, a certain event happened in its life. It doesn't even have a particular property of being, let's say, a wave or a particle.

This is radical. The whole world of discrete, clear, independently existing phenomena was decimated and was replaced with something that really the conceptual mind struggles to understand, even though quite sophisticated and very accurate mathematics has come out of it. We can make these predictions of the probability that we'll find the particle decayed, or the probability we'll find it over here as opposed to over there. But what actually is going on, independent of the observer, remains something that the conceptual mind really struggles to understand. Yet it's clear that it's not how we usually think of the world, and it's not the picture painted by classical science as developed by Galileo, Descartes, Locke and Newton. It's clearly not that picture that's reality.

Bohr coined this term "complementarity"—wave and particle as complementary views of something. But as physicist David Bell pointed out, that's not really the right word. Complementary is when you look at the backside of an elephant and see a tail

and a bum, and you look at the front side and see a trunk and big ears. Two people who can't see each other, on either side of the elephant, get those two views. If they get a few more people and put those views together—the side view, the front view—then they'll get a composite picture of complementary perspectives on the elephant. They can put that together and make sense of it. It fits together.

David Bell pointed out that actually Bohr should have used the word "contradictory"—or rather, that's implicit in what he means by complementary. I wouldn't go so far as what David Bell said; he had a particular agenda. But really inherent in what Niels Bohr meant by complementary was contradictory. These are not commensurable pictures. We cannot put these pictures together—wave and particle. You cannot put the picture together of "it's decayed" and "it's not decayed" for this radioactive atom.

As I said, the whole idea of inherent existence, an objective existence of phenomena independent of the observer, independent of the way of looking, independent of the way of measuring—that got fractured, it got broken in a very profound way. It became clear that what we see depends on how we look, depends on how we measure. What manifests depends on how we observe.

This was also found to extend to the past. We think, okay, what manifests now depends on how I observe. But what seems to go even further—what does go even further—is the fact that a measurement made now seems to determine what happened in the past. So in other words, was this particle a wave or a particle? Did it manifest as a wave or a particle in the past? It can depend on a decision I make about how I look at it, how I observe, how I measure it, actually billions of years later. So how the Big Bang was in its details, for example, is something that depends on how we look now.

This was originally an idea proposed by physicist John Wheeler, and recently it's been corroborated in the laboratory on a smaller scale, but the principle remains. How we look now determines the sense we have of what happened in the past, what was actual in the past. There is no inherently existing past. It also depends on how we look.

You can hear, I hope, just how radical some of these findings are. Victor Mansfield is a physicist and also a Buddhist practitioner who has written a couple of books on this kind of material. He basically reports that we have an idea that a particle goes from here to there and we can trace its route. This is the flight path, so to speak, from A to B. And we can presume it took that path or we can observe it taking that path. And actually, that's not the case.

He says, "Our conception of nature is at fault. The natural yet incorrect assumption that the photon or electron or whatever has a well-defined trajectory, a well-defined path, as it works its way through the instrument in the laboratory or whatever it is, whether or not we look and whether or not we know that trajectory—it must have had one." So that's wrong. It's simply wrong to imagine that the past already exists in full detail in the present. So now he's talking about that absence of inherent existence of the past as well.

Light, and indeed all matter—electrons, protons, and everything else—does not take on either a wave or particle nature until we decide at the last possible moment whether to measure its wave or particle properties. Prior to our choice, its nature remains fundamentally ill-defined.

The profound implication is that the history of the universe is not written out in full detail. Such a fully defined and explicit past is an imaginary construction, a theory, a mental imputation—what Wheeler calls "a giant prejudice." While we can normally get away with believing in an objective past that exists in complete detail in our everyday lives, quantum mechanics reveals that at the deepest level, we must actively participate in defining the universe. Reality is not sitting out there, fully objective and independent, waiting for us to reveal its pre-existent, well-defined, intrinsic nature.

The parallels with how we teach emptiness and the radical dependence on ways of looking should be apparent. Wheeler continues: "Quantum mechanics demands that we abandon some of our most cherished beliefs about the world. Particles and waves do not exist simultaneously in some definite way, only waiting for us to call one of these properties forth. Prior to our measurement, prior to observation, the system is truly indefinite, lacking in independent existence."

There's also a complete collapse of our conventional notion of causality. Since causality requires definite objects exchanging energy or exerting forces on each other, is it any wonder that independent existence and causality fall to the ground together in quantum physics?

These ideas about the lack of inherent existence of the past were further developed by Richard Feynman and his colleagues Murray Gell-Mann and Jim Hartle in what became known as the consistent histories approach—different ways of understanding this fundamental absence of inherent existence, not just in the present, but in the past as well.

We could catalog countless such findings and observations—startling, radical, mind-blowing discoveries that shatter our conventional assumptions. Many of you are familiar with Einstein's relativity theory and the fact that time itself, the measurement of simultaneity between events, depends entirely on the observer's frame of reference. There's no absolute simultaneity independent of perspective—it all depends on relative motion. The same applies to distance: lengths contract, space and time become relative rather than absolute.

But it's not just time and space that prove observer-dependent. Mass—how heavy something is—and the energy of an object all depend on motion and perspective. These seemingly fundamental properties that we assumed were inherent and absolute have been systematically fractured and decimated as coherent, independent notions.

Even more startling is a theoretical prediction that, while not yet directly measured, has strong theoretical support: when someone is accelerating—whether in a rocket or simply being pulled by a rope in the vacuum of interstellar space—their measurements reveal a completely different reality from that of a stationary observer. Where the stationary observer sees empty space devoid of particles, the accelerating observer measures space filled with a hot gas of particles. What's there or not there, the very existence of matter, depends entirely on perspective and way of looking. Temperature, the presence or absence of particles—all relative to the observer's state.

This catalog of baffling results continues to grow. Many quantum physicists simply get on with their work—calculating atomic decay rates, building computers and electronic devices, even constructing weapons—while essentially shrugging off these profound implications. They can achieve remarkably accurate calculations and successful engineering without grappling with the deeper questions: What is actually going on here? What does this do to our fundamental sense of reality?

For some physicists, this entire quantum revolution strikes a deeply wrong note. Something must have gone awry somewhere; there must be some fundamental error. Among that relatively small portion of physicists who actually care about the implications for ontology and epistemology—for our understanding of reality itself—there remains significant controversy.

Let me share another perspective from physicist Marcus Appleby, whose language echoes remarkably the terminology we use in discussing emptiness: "In quantum mechanics, what you see depends on how you look. Make one kind of measurement on the electromagnetic field and you will obtain results consistent with it being a smoothly varying wave. Make another different kind of measurement and you will obtain results

consistent with it being a collection of discrete particles. Which of these pictures is the true one? Quantum mechanics declines to say, just as it declines to say what is going on in a physical system when no one is looking."

The fact that the outcome depends on the observer's decision as to which measurement to make casts doubt on the assumption that physics passively records events that would have happened anyway in the absence of experimental intervention. Again, there's this parallel with our perception as human beings—is it a passive receiving? Is there even such a thing as bare attention? I'm not equating the two, but there's a parallel there.

He says this represents a subtle—though I don't think it's subtle—departure from the Cartesian ideal of total objectivity: the Cartesian ideal of the world trundling along like clockwork, independent of the observer, where potentially one can gather facts about the status of all things.

Marcus Appleby reflects on the history of physics since the quantum revolution in the early part of the twentieth century, noting that some, including Einstein, really objected to all this and said something must be fundamentally wrong. They tried to build alternative theories that were more congruent with the idea of things existing objectively and independently. But he goes on to say that no one can say for sure that Einstein's hopes will not be fulfilled at some time in the future, but it does seem that the effect of eighty years—probably more than eighty years now—of theoretical work has been to make these hopes look increasingly forlorn.

His feeling is that an adequate understanding of quantum mechanics ultimately depends not on sophisticated technical developments—not on new formulae or theories—but on some simple conceptual shift, something like the perceptual shift which occurs when one looks at a diagram like the Necker cube. You know those diagrams—drawings of cubes on a piece of paper where you can see the cube in three dimensions, and then you look again and the whole cube has flipped, as if you're looking at it from a very different angle. Or the duck-rabbit picture—those images where you look at it one way and see a duck, then look at it another way and what was the space around the duck now looks like a rabbit. Or those Escher paintings where there's a complicated scene that can flip in your vision to reveal a different scene where everything has a different context, geometry, and shape. But in all these—the Necker cube, the duck-rabbit, the Escher paintings—what you can't do is see both at the same time.

Then he goes on to say that quantum mechanics is not intrinsically weird. It only seems weird because we insist on looking at it through Cartesian spectacles—the spectacles we've inherited and absorbed almost into ourselves from the legacy of Descartes,

Galileo, and Newton. Mind is separate from matter. Matter exists objectively, independent of consciousness, of the way of looking, of the way of observing, of the mind. And it's possible to get objective—at least in theory—measurements of the factual status of things at any time.

He says the problem is that Cartesian assumptions have become so deeply ingrained in our thinking that it's hard to find the right non-Cartesian spectacles.

So here's someone who isn't shrugging and just saying, "Well, whatever, I don't know, but I can get on with my mathematics and my calculations and my building computers or bombs or whatever." He's not saying he objects to these findings. He's saying what we need to object to is our insistence on our inherited and indoctrinated worldview about mind, matter, and how the cosmos is.

As these results presented themselves gradually over the years and decades in investigations in physics, at some point—stimulated by those puzzling results and by the wrestling of physicists with those findings and observations, but also by other factors—philosophers of science also began to question the whole conceptual underpinning of the scientific endeavor and approach itself. They questioned whether it might be not quite what it was racked up to be in terms of this notion—ranked up to be as an endeavor where the whole scientific enterprise was an approach to truth, a discovery of truth independent of any biases or fashions or ways of looking, independent of the conceptual framework.

Gradually, over the twentieth century and continuing still, many philosophers of science from different angles began to question the whole basis of the scientific method and what its relationship was to truth and its own kind of integrity.

Victor Mansfield offers a nice analogy here. He says the scientific method, with its demands of reproducibility, completely controlled environment, and quantitative measurement, is only one way of interacting with nature. Science is not a pure revelation of nature in isolation, but rather nature's response to our particular form of questioning. Exploring the issues of measurement in quantum mechanics leads us to realize that science is in part an expression of a unique interaction between nature and ourselves. In quantum mechanics—to our great distress, or to our great joy, I would add—we cannot say what nature is like independent of that interaction.

The scientific method has often been likened to a fishnet that captures certain kinds of aquatic life but allows many interesting forms to pass right through it. Because an extraordinarily beautiful little fish or alga escapes this net, should we deny its presence or reality in nature's ocean? Such elusive life forms might hold the key to a great deepening of our understanding.

He continues: if we do not understand the limits of the scientific method, then we are doomed to apply it where it hinders our understanding rather than enhances it.

He is a scientist, and I'm certainly not saying that science is rubbish or that it has no applicability, no use, no domain of relevance and import. But it often gets overextended. There is an overreach of the scientific method and project in what I've talked about before as scientism—believing that this scientific method and the worldview that goes with it, which is actually an archaic worldview at this point belonging to the mode of classical physics, can explain everything in the universe.

But it may very well be that this whole conceptual structure, this whole paradigm and the scientific method and approach, actually, as Victor Mansfield points out, only reveals certain things. Other aspects of reality, other phenomena in the universe, will simply not be picked up because you're looking with the wrong paradigm, with the wrong lenses.

As I said, how would we ever ascertain meaning in the universe or meaning to the cosmos? Right from the start, such things are barred from the scientific method. It's a methodology of approach that has at some point surreptitiously become a conclusion and is claimed as a fact. It has overextended its reach.

What we see depends on how we look.

What we see, and part of how we look, is the whole conceptual framework or paradigm. Thomas Kuhn, the famous philosopher of science, wrote that paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself. This means that we're always approaching phenomena —whatever phenomena—with some kind of conceptual framework, informed by some kind of history of what it's important to look for. What are the important questions? What are the salient features here? And our whole gaze, our whole perspective is engineered and conditioned and limited and empowered, both, by that paradigm, whatever that paradigm is. What we see—perception itself—depends on that paradigm to a great extent.

As I said, there is quite popular now a certain current, both among certain scientists but also among many lay people, this kind of overreach of the scientific method and an over-claiming of its conclusions. One unjustifiably makes certain conclusions about

what is established fact in the scientific world. This is quite common with some neuroscientists or with people who are hovering at the interface with the world of neuroscience—some psychologists and different kinds of people—when they claim that mind and consciousness arise from matter. They say it can be explained purely in terms of neurological or electrical impulses in the neurons and synapses, as if that was an established fact and conclusion that had been proven. But it has not. It absolutely has not. But again, there's this kind of creep of claim.

There are, as I said, limits to the scientific method that some people are becoming aware of or have written about from all kinds of different angles. If we take that example I just talked about—this idea that actually there is only matter in the universe—it can be called a philosophy of materialism or, less ambiguously, a philosophy of physicalism. But it actually doesn't explain and cannot explain—there's a kind of quantum leap, metaphorically, between matter and mind, between the properties of matter and the properties of consciousness, and no one has bridged that gap yet. Is it possible? I don't know, but it's not an established fact.

It also leads to certain strange paradoxes and contradictions. For example, just reflecting on this: if we go with this, entertain this idea of a sort of fundamental physicalism—in other words, there are just material entities in the universe—and what happens in consciousness, or the fact of consciousness itself, and the contents of the mind in consciousness, they're essentially just material, because that's really what's real: matter. If we follow that a little bit, then mind contents are essentially—some people actually think this way or articulate this way—"I feel happy, it's just some chemicals and some neurological synapses firing. There's no inherent happiness. It's just a kind of illusion, because all that's real—self isn't real, emotions aren't real—there are just states of material particles."

What that means is that something like suffering is an illusion as well. It's just atoms and molecules moving in certain ways, interacting in certain ways in the brain. But actually we don't live or think like that. Even someone who claims allegiance to that idea as a philosophy doesn't actually live like that or think like that. And we don't run our societies that way. At least we try to, or say we do, take human suffering seriously in law and in ethics.

But if we really hold to this kind of project of proving everything is just the movement of atoms and material particles and their interactions, then it brings some strange conclusions that aren't actually congruent with how we actually live and view the world.

We can go a stage further and say: if you say suffering is kind of real, or at least respected, even though it's fabricated or built as a mental construct from simply matter—it's really in its essence just matter, there's no person suffering, there's no actual suffering, it's just some neurons creating a certain impression, but all that is just matter—if you say that, actually, then so is happiness, and so is a sense of beauty, and so is love, and so is soulfulness and meaningfulness, and the sense, perception, and conception and thought of divinity. All that, actually, is in the same category, if you like, as suffering. They're all kind of illusions based on, fabricated by, built by some kind of constellation or state of purely material elements, particles.

So all that—happiness, beauty, joy, love, soulfulness, meaningfulness, the sense of divinity—are as real or unreal as suffering and pain, even physical pain. Atoms don't hurt. They're just atoms in combinations. All these things, then—happiness, beauty, love, suffering, soulfulness, meaningfulness, sense of divinity, the perception of divinity—all are merely the movement and interaction of material particles or atomic particles that aren't immediately perceived or conceived as such. There's a conception of them as something different, there's a sense of them as something different, but really what they are is just that.

What that does, if I take this strange philosophy of physicalism to its extreme, is that it actually ends up inverting itself and kind of legitimizing all these areas of experience that are so important to us: happiness, beauty, love, meaningfulness, sense of divinity, soulfulness—legitimizing them just as much as we legitimize our suffering and our need to care for suffering and our respect for it. All are equally worth respecting or disrespecting. All have equal value: perception of divinity, beauty, soul, as much as physical pain.

So it's a strange philosophy. There's a kind of hurdle—would be an understatement—an abyss to straddle, to find the connection between mind and matter.

This kind of overreach and overclaim by those who profess allegiance to total physicalism—that material particles are all there is in the universe—leads to some strange paradoxes and conclusions.

In the world of philosophy during the twentieth century, partly instigated by the puzzling and shocking results from quantum physics, philosophers and philosophers of science in particular began to re-question the whole relationship between science, the scientific endeavor, and truth itself.

Marshall Walker states that no claim is made about the reality of a scientific model. I want to share a few quotes with you from Joel Weinsheimer's work. Walker continues: "The sole criterion is successful prediction from the simplest, most convenient, or most satisfying model"—successful prediction rather than truth, from the simplest, most convenient, most satisfying model.

As Larry Loudan observes in *Progress and Its Problems*, theories are just as modest as models. "One need not," he says, "and scientists generally do not, consider matters of truth and falsity when determining whether a theory does or does not solve a particular empirical problem."

But philosophers, he points out, even if scientists are not concerned with truth—at least don't claim to be concerned with truth—philosophers have been. "The preoccupation of classical philosophers of science has been with showing that the methods of science are efficient instruments for producing truth, high probability, or even closer approximations to the truth. In this enterprise they have failed dismally."

So the criteria of science shift radically. Thomas Kuhn wrote a very influential book in the 1960s called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. He suggests that we may have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth. The whole idea of science marching onward, closer and closer to the truth, with occasional shifts of conceptual framework—like the transition from pre- to post-Einstein theories of relativity—and the assumption that such shifts bring us closer to truth, is very questionable to him.

Imre Lakatos explains most clearly how "the sure and steady advance of science toward the truth suddenly degenerated into a rout." He writes: "For centuries knowledge meant proven knowledge—proven either by the power of the intellect or by the evidence of the senses. The proving power of the intellect or the senses was questioned by the skeptics more than two thousand years ago." This goes back to the Greek skeptic philosophers who questioned these foundations. "But they were browbeaten into confusion by the glory of Newtonian physics."

As I mentioned, this revolution—the scientific revolution—was so dazzling in its power to predict, build technology, and gain mastery over nature that the philosophical skeptics were essentially silenced. Lakatos continues: "Einstein's results again turned the tables. And now, very few philosophers or scientists still think that scientific knowledge is, or can be, proven knowledge. But few realize that with this, the whole classical structure of intellectual values falls in ruins and has to be replaced. One cannot simply water down the ideal of proven truth."

Something very fundamental has been decimated; some vessel has been broken in the whole structure and idea of what science is doing, how it's progressing, and what its venture is in relation to something called truth.

The clearest example of how this whole notion of truth was brought into question emerges from the history of Newton's theories of gravity and mechanics. They were immensely successful and very accurate in their predictions and power. Then Einstein came along, particularly with his general theory of relativity, offering a completely different idea of what gravitation was—a completely different understanding of space and time. Together with this came mathematical equations describing that theory and carrying its predictive power, regarded as fundamental and universal laws of the cosmos, that were very different from Newton's.

The two theories had different ideas and models of gravity—what was happening, what it was, how it worked—and different equations describing that process mathematically. Some calculations about observed measurements will be just slightly different coming from Einstein's theory, but the fundamental edifice and ideas of what is actually occurring—in other words, the model of the universe, the model of reality—is radically different in Einstein's theory of gravity.

As Lakatos observes, "Newton's theory, the best corroborated of all scientific theories, turned out to be at best incomplete and at worst false, because it was superseded by Einstein's theory." It remains questionable whether Einstein's hypotheses might also become superseded or contradicted in the future. Even if they are corroborated, they should not be called true, because one never knows when an entirely different model or theory might emerge. Again, it might have only minutely differing predictions in some contexts about what we would observe, but the whole model of what is actually happening could be radically different.

All this calls into question: What exactly is the relationship between scientific theories—even when they seem to have been corroborated by experiment and observation many times—and truth and reality? This questioning remains very much alive in the world of philosophy of science.

Again, to quote Thomas Kuhn: "The developmental process described in this essay has been a process of evolution from primitive beginnings—a process whose successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature. But nothing that has been or will be said makes it a process of evolution toward anything."

The evolution of science, in his view, is not an evolution toward something called truth or a truthful representation of reality. He calls all of this into question. "Inevitably, that lacuna, that gap, will have disturbed many readers. We are all deeply accustomed to seeing science as the one enterprise that draws constantly nearer to some goal set by nature in advance. But need there be any such goal? Can we not account for both science's existence and its success in terms of evolution from the community's state of knowledge at any given time? Does it really help to imagine that there is some one, full, objective, true account of nature, and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal?"

So you can hear how radical these questions are to those of us who have grown up with a certain view of science, and that includes our contemporary culture.

There's a philosopher called Jean Grandin who talks about a conception of truth in philosophy which is different from the normal conception. He writes: "In dialectic, in that kind of philosophy, thought continually takes up new forms without there being postulated unconditionally a process of successive approximation to truth." This is the same thing that Thomas Kuhn is saying.

But then Grandin adds: "In philosophical hermeneutics" — in that branch of philosophy, that approach to philosophy — "this infinite process is designated as 'truth.'" So truth becomes, the whole notion of truth becomes, in these philosophers' approaches, something very different from a kind of fact which one either arrives at or doesn't, represents accurately or doesn't. It's a process, and it's infinite and open-ended. A very, very different conception.

There's another related debate about the nature of scientific theory and truth. Among others, there are two theories of truth, if you like, or theories of theories of truth. One is called the correspondence model. The correspondence theory says this theory, in what it depicts and the model it lays out, corresponds to reality. In other words, reality is like this, and the model mirrors it. And that's what truth is — that's what truth is in science, that's what truth is in theory or anything else.

In competition with that theory, there's what's called a coherence theory of truth, which abandons the idea of this possibility of ascertaining whether we have an accurate representation — an accurate and final representation of truth, or even if we're moving towards that accurate and final representation, as someone like Karl Popper would claim — and replaces it with the coherence theory of truth. What that really means is that the different components of this theory, whatever it is, this model of the universe, they cohere, they make sense together, they fit with each other, and they fit with other things that we know or other models. If you have a coherent theory, or the

more coherent the theory, the more we are entitled to call it true. But that's a different claim than saying it corresponds to some reality — that this is now an accurate replica of reality or representation of reality.

All this has gone on in twentieth century and twenty-first century philosophy — the whole notion of truth, and in particular of science's relation to truth, has been called into question, decimated, opened up. Over the twentieth century and beyond, partly stimulated by findings in physics and the theories of quantum physics and relativity, the whole revolution in physics that happened in the twentieth century. Partly stimulated by that, with the suggested implications that there is actually not an objective, independent existence of things, of matter or anything.

Partly also, reflecting and stimulated by those findings, there were philosophers of science who began questioning the limits of the scientific method, but also, even more fundamentally, science's relationship with truth per se, and what truth actually means. Does science in fact reveal or even approach, approximate truth?

There were also other movements in philosophy that had, on the face of it, nothing — they weren't propelled by scientific discoveries. There were other considerations: political considerations, purely philosophical considerations, linguistic considerations, cultural considerations, historical considerations. Certainly in the twentieth century, even before that, starting with Nietzsche, into Heidegger, Derrida, but you could say even back to Kant — Immanuel Kant questioning the possibility, questioning that it is possible for us to have access to an objective, independent truth, and questioning the kind of hubris that would assume that we either do or can.

So there's a whole current in Western philosophy that questions that — depending on where you start that current historically doesn't matter — but it kind of reaches its zenith in maybe the eighties or nineties, where sometimes if you pick up any article, whether it's philosophy or articles on comparative religion even, or all kinds of things influenced by that trend in philosophy to denigrate any assumption of reaching some kind of objective truth about anything, and to denigrate even the possibility of doing so. Sometimes it's almost comical picking up some articles — they seem to sort of start with "I'm on the right side, I don't claim anything about absolute truth, and of course I wouldn't say anything like that" — a kind of "don't shoot me, I'm on the right team" thing.

There's that whole current, but again, what's interesting to me is that one of the things that's interesting is even with those philosophers who say that there is no access to truth, or there is no truth, or we don't presume that, it's not possible, we don't postulate any kind of realism — how easily and surreptitiously it sneaks back in, or it is

sneaked back in, or it's actually never really been abandoned. The philosopher or whomever has not even realized that they haven't abandoned the notion of a basic reality or an ultimate truth in this or that area or domain of being or existence.

That definitely applies to some physicists who work in the area even of quantum physics, as I mentioned earlier, but even more so the philosophers who sort of tend to emphasize this point or this disclaimer and judgment even on the notion of the possibility of some kind of access to an ultimate truth or a principal truth. Still, it sneaks back in, or it actually was never really abandoned in some area or another.

If we go back to the philosopher J.N. Findlay, who is a very interesting and unusual character in twentieth century philosophy in that totally against the stream and almost in isolation, it seems, he did postulate ultimate truths, kind of mystical absolutes. There are some parallels with what we might call emptiness, but it's really something different. I may hopefully come back to this later in this talk. So he was criticized by anyone who bothered to pay attention to what he was proposing and writing about, working as he was very much on the sidelines of the academic world.

But he was criticised for these reasons, with people saying that what he was proposing was meaningless or self-contradictory or problematic in various ways. In response to these criticisms, he wrote something quite profound. Whether or not his ideas were indeed self-contradictory and empty notions—which was partly what he was being accused of—he observed that "self-contradictory and empty notions play a vast part in human experience and attitude."

There's tremendous wisdom in this observation. Self-contradictory and empty notions play a vast part in human experience and attitude. This is certainly true of humanity's limiting notion of absolutes. As I mentioned, he was interested in a certain kind of absolute, a mystical absolute. He continues: "Even philosophies which repudiate absolutes in their logic and have professedly built up radically contingent, value-free systems generally smuggle in absolutes of some sort—matter, logical space, the totality of atomic state of affairs, and so forth. The paradoxicality and ineffability of mystical absolutes is simply a logical consequence of there being absolutes at all."

Two crucial points emerge here. First, that self-contradictory and empty notions play a huge part in human experience and attitude—a very important recognition. Second, as I pointed out earlier, even when people claim they don't believe in absolutes or ultimate reality, they usually do so implicitly. Whether that absolute is matter—probably the most common choice—or the totality of atomic states of affairs, they maintain some notion of basic reality.

This pattern appears extremely commonly, not just in academic philosophy but across all kinds of contexts. Sometimes when I teach about emptiness, someone will respond enthusiastically, saying they really appreciate the teaching and find it sensible. Then they'll mention something about the brain and how it aligns perfectly with what I'm presenting—how the brain processes information to create different perspectives, or how neurological processes explain perceptual illusions, or they'll try to account for fabrication from a neurological standpoint.

What's virtually explicit in this approach is that brain and neurons and matter are more fundamental than emptiness or fabrication. They become the agents that fabricate, that create perceptual illusions. This establishes a causality resting on neurons and neurophysiology. But as I mentioned earlier, no one has actually proved this causality. It may be that neurological networks are an indispensable part of perception, mental functioning, and mind, but what's been demonstrated so far is merely correlation. There's corresponding neurological function that may be necessary, but not necessarily sufficient for mind.

More importantly, there's a kind of smuggling back in here. One hears teachings about emptiness, reads about fabrication, and then reintroduces a supposedly more fundamental notion of brain, neurophysiology, and matter. This approach forgets that matter itself is empty—whether we arrive at this understanding through physics or through deconstruction based on emptiness. Matter itself is empty. Time is empty. Space is empty. And without time and space, as we discussed earlier, there can be no notion of causality. Causality depends on time.

In the teachings of emptiness that I favor, fabrication itself is not ultimately true. You cannot explain perception at an ultimate level. At a conventional level, certainly, you can explain perception through fabrication and examine how this works phenomenologically. But it's not an ultimate truth because causality is empty and not ultimately real. Time is empty, so the temporal framework in which fabrication occurs is empty. What is fabricated is empty, and what fabricates is empty.

Any model or proposition that retains neurophysiology or matter as a fundamental basis is insufficient, in my view, because it fails to account for the emptiness of time, matter, space, and causality.

This represents just one common instance, but even among professional academic philosophers, it's very frequent for ontological commitments and allegiances and preferences to leak out despite their professing that there's no ultimate reality, no realism they're postulating, no privileged point of view—no privileged way of looking at things, no single correct perspective.

Take Richard Rorty, for example. He would frequently say and write such things, then let slip something like "the universe is just made up of purposeless movement of atoms." It's almost caught in the cracks of his argument—he's too sophisticated to state it directly, but when he's perhaps not paying sufficient attention to his writing, it tumbles out. That's actually the underlying view.

Or consider Michel Foucault, who wrote: "We should not imagine that the world presents us with a legible face. We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things." We must conceive conceiving as a violence we do to things. But how can we do violence to things unless things exist in a certain way in reality prior to our discourse, prior to our conceiving? Do you see the contradiction?

So the whole notion of doing a violence to things presumes that things already exist in a certain way that we can do violence to. It's built like this, and we smash it or we distort it by our discourse, by our conceiving, by our perspective. So even these champions or apparent champions of non-realism are often betrayed by their allegiances, their predispositions, their preferences and, if you like, agendas are betrayed in the cracks of their writings and language.

As I said, all this talk of non-reality and this kind of dismissing and pulling, tearing down assumption of the attainment or even the possibility of attainment of some kind of privileged perspective or ultimate truth about anything at all reached its zenith—that whole movement in philosophy—perhaps in the eighties and nineties following the writings of Derrida and others in what was called deconstruction in philosophy. Cyril O'Regan wrote about this and pointed out, I think, really importantly, that the art of deconstruction—that whole movement to deconstruct arguments that propose or that seem to propose some kind of privileged perspective or truth about anything at all—is "a serious play that shows, unveils, uncovers the hubris of a discourse that would be complete."

In other words, you can get this complete perspective, whether it's about anything—a scientific perspective, a perspective on matter, on mind, on philosophy, on psychology, on culture, on ethics, on whatever. O'Regan continues: "Taken at its word, deconstruction cannot indulge in statement, meta-description, and, least of all, in prescription." In other words, if you really trust what deconstruction is proposing and attempting to do, then it must deconstruct itself. And it can't then offer a prescription—you should look like this, you should look without positing an ultimate reality. That would contradict itself. Or to consider itself a more privileged perspective would be to contradict itself.

So he continues: "That despite itself, it manifests a tendency to do so"—to indulge in statement, meta-description, and prescription, being prescriptive—"is evident." And then he cites a deconstructive philosopher, theologian Mark Taylor, saying that a particular work called *Erring* "clearly indulges in an evaluative language of prescription and proscription, recommending this and prohibiting that."

He says you don't—I'm paraphrasing that a little bit—he says you don't find that so much in the work of Derrida, though even in Derrida's case "it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he considers his own proposal to be right in the way the onto-theological tradition is not."

So onto-theology—I think it was Heidegger's word, or maybe Derrida's; I can't remember where it started—this postulate of: this is real, this is true, and this has privileged, almost divine status. *Onto* from ontology, *theo* from God. This perspective, or this statement, is true, is real, is privileged.

So Cyril O'Regan is pointing out, even in Derrida's case, all of these thinkers, they think that their proposal is right in the way that other proposals—say, for example, the philosophy of Hegel, which O'Regan is actually writing about in this case—is not. And then he continues: "Openness"—this openness of point of view—"is a prescription, a metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical recommendation. Closure"—the opposite, to say we've arrived at a truth now, this is now the best perspective we know, or whatever it is—"closure, a proscription, a prohibition, a quasi-metaphysical no-no." The deconstructionist use of the antithetical pair "closure" and "openness" has to be seen as "thoroughly evaluative."

So there's a kind of self-contradictoriness that runs through postmodernism and that whole philosophy, among other problems.

What is going on here? Why is this so? I think this is really interesting, and again, if we come back to John Findlay and something he wrote: "However much we may affect interest in the architecture of nature"—in other words, in science—"or its various departments, or in the various detached systems of ideas which proliferate abundantly in their glasting compartments"—in other words, in philosophical ideas—"it is plain that we cannot achieve clarity in regard to any of them without achieving clarity as to our empirical, conceptual and linguistic approaches to them. Without due study of these, we are more than likely to see our own thought habits and speech habits and problems merely written large on the cosmos. And there is, in fact, no easier way to fall victim to what is arbitrary and personal than to set out uncritically to be objective and impersonal."

So again, he's saying something about the whole approach—that we have to actually become more conscious of our whole way of approaching these questions we're investigating, whatever areas we're questioning. And without that consideration of our approach, our leanings, our frameworks—empirical, conceptual, linguistic—we're just going to project our habits onto the cosmos, inner and outer.

So our approaches, our frameworks constitute, in a way, or at least shape a part of what fabricates what we then conclude. Our approaches and frameworks, our paradigms—as Thomas Kuhn said, "A paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself." We can broaden, as we explore this more and more, we can broaden his statement beyond perhaps the limits of what he initially meant by it. And then, of course, whatever we're already assuming and what we might call ground assumptions that sneak in.

So I mentioned that René Descartes is regarded as one of the principal founders of the scientific method, and one of his main ideas, which many of you will know of course, is the question: Is it possible to place our method of inquiry and method of investigation and our reasoning on a really solid, clean foundation? A foundation we can trust, but also a foundation that doesn't drag in distortions, assumptions, that kind of baggage that would prevent a clear and objective seeing of the truth.

And so that was the idea. And then he postulated, well, what's the one thing I can trust? And he dismissed this and this and that and this. And he came down to this: "I think, therefore I am." This is the one thing I can trust, because he might very much question his conclusion there. But these are the principles: There's one thing I can trust. And on that one foundation, supposedly, I then proceed. And whatever follows from that is acceptable.

So it's what he would call radical doubt that underpins the so-called Cartesian method, the scientific method. You start with this, radically doubting everything. Is there one thing that's beyond doubt? And then build things on that foundation. And that's supposed to be as pure and clean and objective, distortion-free, value-free, assumption-free, desire-free method to follow.

However, as a number of philosophers have pointed out since then, there's something a little fishy here when you read his work and regard his opus. There's more than one thing, but one thing I'd like to focus on right now is something Charles Peirce pointed out.

Charles Simon Peirce was a quite influential American philosopher. Quoting Weisheimer again, Peirce observed that no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied unless he has formally recovered all those beliefs which he has given

up. In other words, someone professing to follow this method of radical doubt and that kind of antiseptic cleaning of all the mechanisms of inquiry and cogitation and deduction and observation will try to recognize what they believe and sweep those beliefs to one side. But then, actually, there's something operating that won't ever be satisfied unless he has formally recovered all those beliefs which he has given up. You have a process where what you're trying to do is recover those very beliefs that you had made a big deal of putting aside.

Weisheimer goes on to add to Peirce's comment: "It is not by accident that in matters of faith, for example, however heretical the Cartesian method, its results were quite orthodox and traditional." Here's this very heretical and radical methodology of inquiry and epistemology, but he ends up with—in certain areas at least—exactly the conclusions that were already there, the assumptions that he was already bringing to that inquiry. They were quite orthodox and traditional. The method itself seems a circular detour, less an exercise of self-sovereign reason than of rationalization.

There's a big trumpet blowing that we're going to be completely independent in our reasoning and observation, independent of any influences and conditionings and assumptions—distortions, wishes, desires. That would constitute so-called self-sovereign reason, if there even is such a thing. But the point is, actually, he's just rationalizing what he already was taught in childhood and had believed. Weisheimer goes on: "Descartes himself does not so much make a radical beginning as justify the beliefs that he had accepted as true from an early age."

Peirce made that observation, and Heidegger, in his *Being and Time*, reached the same conclusions about Descartes. Little time passes and other thinkers look back on that proclamation of Descartes—"this is what I'm doing, this is how it works"—and shine a light on it, and it doesn't look quite as spick and span clean and pure as Descartes presumed it was or claimed it was. He's dragging back in assumptions—or really, they were never removed in the first place.

Then there's the whole question, which I've touched on before, about motivation. What is actually guiding us or pushing or pulling us, propelling us in one direction or another in regard to questions of ontology and epistemology, of reality and knowledge? It's almost like we bring back in a consideration of psychology. What's happening psychologically for this person or that person that they're actually looking to make a certain conclusion, and indeed they do make a certain conclusion? They end up with the conclusion that they had been wanting to make anyway.

There was a man called Fiertz who wrote a biography about Newton, the physicist Isaac Newton. He points out—I'm quoting from an article by Christian von Baeyer—"The source of Newton's deepest ideas about nature, Fiertz found, were his religious beliefs." Absolute space, for example, is a manifestation of God's ubiquity—God just being everywhere, totally everywhere, equally and totally everywhere. Absolute time is an expression of God's eternity. This suggestion is not introduced idly or speculatively, but explained explicitly and in detail in the *Principia*, Newton's great work on physics.

In Newton's words, translated from the Latin: "God lasts forever and he is present everywhere, and by existing forever and everywhere he has established duration and space, eternity and infinity." What's more, the idea is supported by biblical references. For example, Newton quotes St. Paul in Acts: "For in him we live and move; in him we exist." God is space, in other words. What could be plainer? This is actually an old Jewish tradition—the word *makom* for space is one of God's names in the Jewish tradition. While God's nature appears as space and time, his dominion appears in the form of natural laws. And the most obvious effect of his actions is gravity.

Christian von Baeyer goes on: "It seems that for Newton the purpose of physics was not at all to reveal the mechanism of the world, as his followers down to our time imagined; rather it was to demonstrate God's influence on the world. Since God is utterly incomprehensible to us, the laws of nature, such as universal gravitation, are incomprehensible too. Anything we can say about God is merely symbolic, and therefore the laws of nature are symbolic too."

You can point this out for other physicists like Kepler and others. What's driving the motivation here? Contrary to what many people suppose, it was actually a religious sensibility and a religious agenda. He wanted to prove something about God. Newton was actually clear and explicit and very open about that connection, about what drove him, about his reasoning.

What's much more problematic and insidiously dangerous is when both the assumptions of reality and the motivations are not explicit, when they're actually implicit. This is what we get a lot today, particularly in the discourse and philosophies of the secular worldview. Many of the assumptions, conscious or unconscious, on which the conceptual framework and worldview—the Weltanschauung—of secular modernism rests are not made explicit. In a way then, the assertions and the views are dogmatic because they're not explicit.

If you lay something out, there's a way that it's less dogmatic. People can say, "Well, I disagree with that bit." If you hide it, consciously or unconsciously, it becomes a kind of dogma.

It's not quite clear what things are resting on or what to question. And then even more so with the motivation.

I've picked up this point before in the past. Why is it that I'm presenting a picture of the cosmos like this or like that? Why is it I am so keen to insist on a meaningless cosmos as almost a dogmatic point of certainty, or as if it's been proved somehow? What's going on for me psychologically? Why is it that I desire that kind of cosmos?

Now this applies also to any other view. So this question about motivation and underlying assumption and approach—I'm going to say three considerations. Three considerations. That applies also to the view of radical emptiness. It applies if we are kind of in favor of or trying to present notions of spiritual absolutes or metaphysical realities or whatever.

So I think it's really important to realize this—the place of agenda and motivation, which is very often certainly not made explicit and very often not even conscious. I've talked about this before. What kind of self and world do I want to kind of paint for myself and then inhabit? What's my predisposition? So yes, what are my assumptions that I'm not questioning and I'm not even sharing with others? I'm assuming this and this. What is in the whole framework of the way I'm approaching things linguistically and conceptually, and what's going on in my motivation about how I want to conjure the sense of the stage, the theatre of self and world?

So really important, I think, to realize this—all of us, all of us, whatever our inclinations and hopes and allegiances are—to realize this and to admit it, bring that into the discourse. Then it's almost like a whole other level of honesty, transparency, but also range and openness and complexity comes into these kind of debates and arguments and this kind of discourse and thinking.

To throw in even more jittery-making considerations and observations into the mix—things that shake us up a little bit and shake up the ground, make it all a little bit less certain, certainly more complex—is also, I think, to point out that epistemology is personal, it seems to me.

So I've noticed, particularly in the area when teaching emptiness to people or talking with them about emptiness and about if they're on this journey of deepening understanding and exploration of emptiness, what is it that actually gives a person a deep conviction in emptiness? And what's interesting to me is that it varies, so not everyone will be convinced by the same either meditative experiences or reasoning underpinning meditative experiences or philosophical analyses or whatever it is. It's quite individual.

What makes this person convinced at a very deep level of their being—that they would build their life around it and stake their life on it and that it affects their life deeply—what makes this person convinced deeply, let's say, about emptiness is very different than what makes this person deeply convinced about emptiness. And yet they both have a deep conviction, a deep, ingrained, passionate and powerfully effective and liberating conviction in emptiness.

This, I think, again, just observing over the years from teaching, is really interesting. For person A and person B, in those examples, what was convincing for person A is totally unconvincing for person B, and vice versa.

So there's a kind of... And when it comes down to how we're going to live, how we're going to orient ethics, how we're going to make choices in our life, what kind of liberation we're living out, then epistemology has to be personal in the sense that I have to trust it. I have to trust this knowledge or this insight or this reasoning or that perception or whatever it is. It has to be personal.

And when I observe what makes a difference for people—that actually they have this personal sense of something that they can trust—it really varies quite a lot. So I think that's very interesting.

And as I pointed out, I think, in one of the earlier talks in the series, it might be for some people, if we just talk about emptiness for a second, that they are in fact taking the teachings of emptiness and the conclusions of emptiness and the ontology of emptiness—they're taking it on board out of trust for some authority or a particular teacher, or sometimes it's me or whoever else, or some teacher from history.

What's interesting in Tibetan Buddhist teachings is they have a whole—it goes back to Mahāyāna Indian Buddhism—there was a whole exploration of these questions of epistemology. What knowledge can we trust? How do we... If you have a certain experience in meditation, how do you know whether you can trust that experience or not? If you're walking down the street, how do you know what you can trust in terms of your perception? If you're reading spiritual scriptures or whatever, how do you know what you can trust?

And so they really try to explore and expound and expand this whole area and these questions of epistemology. And one of the categories of valid epistemology is scriptural authority. In other words, you can trust this because it says it in that book, and that book's a good book.

So it might be easy for us sometimes, for some of us, to kind of poo-poo that. But again, what's interesting to me is just what a range there is in personal epistemology. In other words, what makes a difference for different people?

What really makes a deep difference so that they build their life, their choices, their risk-taking on a basis that's personal for them? It has to be personal to have that kind of faith in it. Because when we talk about epistemology, we're talking about what knowledge can I trust - it's a foundation. I dare to put my foot there because the ground is solid. That kind of knowledge.

Most of us, in a way, have that kind of trust of authority, even though some might hear what I just said about scriptural authority and think of the more familiar Buddhist teaching of "don't trust anything, come and see." The Dhamma is ehipassiko - to be seen for oneself, come and see for yourself. But actually there's this whole other teaching of scriptural authority as well. Most of us have this relationship with authority and trusting knowledge - with scientific authority, medical authority, and these kinds of things. Even if you might be suspicious of scriptural authority, we rely on it in many areas of life. We have to, because there's too much knowledge for one human being to master.

Sometimes people practicing sensing the soul and imaginal practice don't feel any need for ontological or epistemological explanations, clearings, groundings, or legitimizations. Someone might say of those people, "They're just willy-nilly trusting these images and these strange spiritual or so-called soulful perceptions. Why don't they question the reality of that? How do they legitimize that? Are they being lazy or sloppy?"

Perhaps someone would think that from the outside. But if you stand back and look at the whole picture, maybe they're not any more lazy than most human beings who have heard or read about the radical ruptures, conundra, and shifts of ontology and epistemology implied by modern physics of the last 120 years. As I said, we hear about all this from physics and what it implies, but it doesn't seem to affect many people deeply - not even the physicists themselves most often, and certainly not lay people. For some physicists, as I pointed out, there's not a vigorous and energetic pursuit of these questions of ontology and epistemology. So someone who has an affinity with sensing the soul and wants to explore that path might not be being any more lazy than the rest of us who don't pick up these other questions and conundra of ontology and epistemology that are actually the heritage, the legacy of our Western culture at present.

When you really start to think about epistemology, you realize that all and any epistemology - any sense of "I know this" or "this is knowledge I can trust" - is always, at some level, resting on assumptions. At some point, you'll reach an assumption that's ba-

sically unproven. If you say to someone, "Why do you believe that about what knowledge you can trust or what's real?" and pursue that question - "Why do you believe this?" "Because of that." "Why do you believe that?" "Because of..." - at some point, they'll just have to say, "I just believe it." Whatever reason they give, you can ask another question, and eventually it reaches a bedrock of unproven assumption.

All and any epistemology, any choice about what knowledge we can trust - whether conscious or unconscious - and by implication the ontology as well, the notion of what's real, rest on unproven assumptions at some point. There's a parallel here with the situation in philosophical hermeneutics and the hermeneutics of literature.

We cannot get to the bottom of this. All and any epistemology rests on unproven assumptions. Can we realize this? Can we admit it? Do we even admit it to people we disagree with?

It's complex - all the things that come in here historically, psychologically, conceptually, philosophically - to actually stay true, to have integrity and thoroughness and steadiness and comprehensiveness with that assertion that there's no privileged perspective, that one is not asserting any ultimate truth or that it's not possible to do so. That's actually very difficult. There are slips and distortions and blind spots that come in for all kinds of reasons. Gaps, lacunae, shaky foundations, questionable building structures. Sometimes it's just lack of self-awareness; sometimes it may even be lack of honesty - self-honesty and honesty with others.

The position of what we might call deep emptiness - that there really is no ultimate reality, that there is no privileged perspective - is difficult to realize and difficult to sustain.

This position is also not as simple as it might sound. The fact that there is no real way something is, independent of our way of looking—that how it appears depends on our way of looking, and that it's not a something at all independent of our way of looking—these are all conclusions of the kind of deep, thorough exploration into emptiness that I would teach.

Yet all this does not equate to or allow us to say that all ways of looking and perceptions have equal epistemological and ontological validity, or that they are all exactly the same. There's something deceptively simple-sounding about the emptiness teachings, and it's possible to be a little lazy with them, a little sloppy.

What I said about epistemology resting on unproven assumptions applies also to the epistemology of emptiness. How do I know emptiness is true? How do I trust that insight, that perception? That trust—in other words, that epistemology by which I trust this insight, this knowledge, this understanding about emptiness—must also rest on unproven assumptions.

What do we do with all this? Sometimes what seems to be quite a common reaction is just to shrug and get on with things in the way that we're used to, which is basically the way we've been indoctrinated by a culture or subculture, or the way we're simply predisposed. But what ways are there—is there a way we can keep it all alive, creative, and still discover, so that there's some rigor, some integrity, some honesty, some challenge, some journey to all these questions?

For some people, given all this that I've shared—the revolutions in physics over the last 120 years, what's opened from the considerations of many philosophers of science regarding science's position vis-à-vis truth, questions of epistemology and ontology, what's been shown as the limitations of the scientific method, the calling into question of what we mean by truth—when we start to realize that we actually bring a whole package to these questions: conceptual baggage, linguistic baggage, methodological baggage, tendencies of perception and observation, habits, motivations, and this recognition that epistemology is both personal and must at some level rest on unproven assumptions.

Is there a way we can take all that earthquake, all the fracturing of the ground that we have become used to over hundreds of years—and actually more than hundreds of years, because before the scientific revolution it was just a different kind of solid ground in terms of epistemology and ontology that everyone believed in, at least in the West—can we take all that fractured ground from those multiple earthquake realizations and honest admissions and actually retain something that has creative tension in it? Something that doesn't just end up with us shrugging and things going flaccid and sloppy and lifeless and uncreative?

Remember Stravinsky's insight about how when there are constraints, it's actually a more creative process. When he had restrictions on what kind of shape or rules the music he was composing had to follow, then it became a much more creative prospect. If anything goes, then actually we get a kind of flaccidity, sloppiness. There lacks the tension in the wire, in the material, in the soil for creativity—in terms of perception, in terms of how we relate to the world, in terms of sensing the soul, in terms of how we relate to ethics.

So looking at all this fractured ground, admitting all that, taking it in—are there ways to relate to it that still have some integrity, some rigor, some challenge, some possibility of direction and journey and following a thread, rather than it just disintegrating into some kind of wobbly, sloppy blanc-mange where everything is just okay? Because then it will correspondingly lack power.

With all this, some people—I have no idea what proportion—are able not so much to sidestep, but to find a particular avenue with all these questions of epistemology and ontology, and move in and out of the mode of what we might call the imaginal middle way, or a poetic sensibility, a poetic view of existence and experience, certainly the kinds of experience we talk about in sensing the soul and imaginal perceptions.

The poet W.B. Yeats wrote something—someone was obviously asking him about these matters—he said, "Some will ask if I believe all that this book contains, and I will not know how to answer." I don't know what book he's referring to, but the important sentence is the next one: "Does the word belief, used as they will use it, belong to our age? Can I think of the world as there and I here judging it?"

Does the word belief, used as they will use it, belong to our age? In other words, does it make sense anymore, given everything I've said? Can I think of the world as there, as independently existing, and myself here judging it as an independent, objective observer of an independent, objectively existing world? Of course, he was a poet and had access to that poetic sensibility, that imaginal middle way.

I came across an article in The Guardian by Stephen Tompkins that pointed out there's nothing in the Bible, Old or New Testament, or in the Quran, that states these texts should be read literally. There's nothing there saying you should believe all these stories and statements literally. This is something Henri Corbin emphasized over and over again—it was really a big part of his agenda in his representations of various Islamic teachers from history: we're not talking about a collection of facts when we talk about the Quran, the Old and New Testament. We're talking about a symbolic opus.

The stories, the narratives, the parables—all of it, the whole thing is parable in the sense that it invites interpretation. And not just allegory in the sense that allegory means this represents that—where I figure out the code, so every time I read that, I understand this, and then the truth, the interpretation, the hermeneutics stop there. Not where I could rewrite the whole thing, substituting word X every time there's word Y.

So not allegory, which has a limited sort of "this means that," but what Henri Corbin calls *ta'wil*, from the Islamic tradition—this kind of open hermeneutics, open interpretation that holds the infinite possibility of interpretation, an infinite depth. Again, in our

language, infinite unfathomability. I cannot box it in, I cannot reduce it to one meaning, one cause, one explanation, one representation. There's this endlessly fecund space that scripture—in this case the scripture of the Abrahamic religions—invites us into, and it behooves us to participate in that interpretation. It's something we meet, again create, discover. There's that possibility.

This is also a teaching you get in the *Zohar*, the Jewish Kabbalistic mystical text—a huge book from, well, depending who you believe, let's say the Middle Ages. And again, they're quite denigrating of people who just consider the Bible a collection of stories and historical data about whatever it is—the history of the children of Israel or whatever. While they might believe there's some truth in there, it's not just the Bible, not just the reports of those stories, whether they're factual or not, but also the events themselves that have this infinite hermeneutic. So there's again this idea, this possibility of infinite hermeneutic, this invitation to an endless interpretation.

So there is, certainly for Corbin, also in the events of life, what we would call the possibility of sensing the soul. It's not just what it seems. There are dimensions and possibilities there of imaginal middle way, this kind of poetic sensibility, this kind of openness and engagement in the endless and infinitely fecund possibility of interpretation, of hermeneutics, of image and symbol. That's one kind of stance with all this, one kind of thread of navigation with all these questions.

And again, I may be repeating myself, but I think it's important, so I will say it again. With regard to magical practice and the perceptions we have of the world through sensing the soul, given what I've said, it may be that humanity will not ever arrive at a fully complete and conclusive answer or truth regarding the ontic status, the reality status of imaginal images. So this philosophical question, again, can go on forever. And I think, rather than shrugging, I think it should. I think it's beautiful to engage in these questions with some rigor, with some integrity. What is true? What is real? What is not real? What knowledge can we trust? Even though we might never reach an answer, again, there's an infinite process there that's possible—not just unconstrained and not in relationship with the need to be coherent and to correspond with our experience and our discoveries. But we may not ever reach an end there.

But phenomenologically, with regard to practice, we can notice that adopting or finding ourselves in the imaginal middle way—in other words, sensing images and soul-making perceptions and sensing the soul as neither real nor not real, as we talked about, this kind of theater-like quality—automatically that stance of the imaginal

middle way, automatically and often effortlessly, allows us to have and feel, with respect to an image, a sense of duty with freedom. We can have duty with freedom, and we can have relative non-attachment.

So there's this imaginal middle way—again, it's between two poles, real and not real, two extremes, as they would say in the Dharma: the extreme of reification, the extreme of nihilism. And the imaginal middle way, in being between those two poles, also delivers a kind of middle way, that we can have a sense of duty and the power and the way the soul is touched by a sense of duty and the alignment that gives, and the devotion that gives in life. We can have a sense of duty with freedom and autonomy and relative non-attachment.

So again, the imaginal middle way delivers something between two extremes: a duty where there's no freedom and just attachment and no autonomy, or freedom and non-attachment and autonomy but no sense of duty. And that stance delivers that, as I said, automatically and effortlessly—this poise of the imaginal middle way, phenomenologically speaking, experientially speaking, in practice.

Similarly, we can have a sense of sacredness and meaningfulness without fixation or tightness. We can have a sense of depth that is open to more discovery, so it's not a depth and now this is finished.

So there's something about this poise in the imaginal middle way, experientially, that is very fertile. It gives us a lot—it delivers a lot of power. Not power over, but power into our being. Power for the journey, power for creation, discovery, power for navigation in life, power for meaningfulness that actually works in life. So the imaginal middle way is a very helpful, very powerful, very fruitful perspective. And it's important to notice that—that we get these gifts with it: freedom, energy, wonder, beauty, joy. They all come out of that imaginal middle way.

Conversely, we can see and notice and feel—and this is an invitation to actually, as I said, see, notice, feel what happens, what dies, and how these gifts are unavailable. They shrink, they close, they become unavailable when an image is reified or a sensing of the soul perception is reified or literalized. So again, we can look to the effects to inform our choices, our stances, our attitudes, perspectives and conceptions.

So there may be this endless, endlessly open and difficult philosophical journey to go on regarding ontology and epistemology. And there is this possibility of the stance of the middle way, the imaginal middle way, at least some of the time, much of the time, and this poetic sensibility. And this, phenomenologically, we notice yields really good results. We can trust it.

We can trust what comes out of that stance, what emerges from this poetic sensibility and the imaginary middle way.

So that's one avenue of possibility out of this fractured landscape, this apparent fracturing of foundations regarding ontology and epistemology. There's also another territory I'd like to explore—one I began opening up toward the end of the Myriad Gates series, I think in the talks called "Icon and Eidos." There I pointed to the possibility of allowing a bit more reification, leaning somewhat more toward the reification pole within our spectrum of possibilities.

Is there a possibility of not being quite so strict or tight with the range of the imaginary middle way? Could we actually allow ourselves to lean more toward a kind of reification, permitting a kind of trust in the reality of certain perceptions and senses we have of things when we sense with soul? I'd like to explore that possibility as well—as another option for navigating this territory.

When we sense with soul, when we open to those deeper dimensions of perception, there arise certain knowings, certain senses of the nature of things that feel profoundly real and trustworthy. Perhaps there are times when we can honor that sensing, when we can allow ourselves to trust in the reality of what reveals itself to us through these deeper modes of perception, while still maintaining our awareness of the imaginal nature of experience.

This represents yet another way of working with the fundamental questions that arise when we begin to sense more deeply, when the soul's perception opens new territories of meaning and significance in our lives.

CHAPTER 184

The Phoenix of Metaphysics (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 2h15

In this continuation of his exploration of metaphysics, Rob Burbea examines multiple philosophical approaches to questions of reality and knowledge. He discusses how the dominant scientific worldview has shaped our understanding of epistemology and ontology, while exploring alternatives including the deep emptiness teachings of Buddhism, the imaginal middle way, and various metaphysical frameworks that postulate higher dimensions or mystical absolutes.

Burbea addresses the grief that can arise when practitioners worry that sacredness becomes merely a "way of looking" rather than an inherent quality. He explains how deeper investigation reveals that both subject and object, consciousness and appearance, are mutually fabricated together - "two vacuums leaning on each other." This profound emptiness paradoxically resurrects sacredness through the mystery of participation between awareness and world.

The talk examines how contemporary physics itself relies on metaphysical speculation, from string theory to multiple dimensions, showing that the boundary between physics and metaphysics is less clear than often assumed. Burbea suggests that just as Newton's "false" theories of absolute space and time enabled tremendous scientific progress, we can build fruitfully on unprovable ideas that support soul-making. He concludes by advocating for an expanded understanding of epistemological categories beyond simple "knowing" and "believing," suggesting that imaginal experience works more like art - providing profound meaning and orientation without fitting traditional categories of knowledge.

Just to very briefly recap, we've been talking in particular about epistemology and ontology as the areas of philosophy that explore the whole question of knowledge and what knowledge is trustworthy. Ontology is the area of philosophy that explores the question of what actually is real and what is not real.

We described briefly what came gradually over years, centuries really, to become the dominant worldview given to us by classical science. We described that we're very much believing in an independently existing reality and the possibility of objectively, clearly, fully even knowing that reality, that truth. There was a growing tendency to regard that world or sense that world as definitively and provenly meaningless, purposeless, lacking in divinity and dimensionality, and composed only of materiality. Those are some of its drifts and more extreme but still common tendencies.

Then we described very briefly the revolutions in physics at the turn of the 20th century, particularly relativity theories and quantum physics, and how that really severely brought into question the whole idea of an independently existing reality which we could know clearly, definitively, objectively as it is. This stimulated certain reflections on the nature of science in general, but particularly on the limits of the scientific method and also the relationship of science with truth—that whole endeavor.

There were other critiques of, or rather other reasons for the critique or the questioning, really, of science and its relationship with truth. There was a whole philosophical movement—or we can trace a whole philosophical movement—that again questions the possibility of knowing reality, of having a privileged perspective, or attaining the perspective, the way of looking, the way of conceiving, that achieves reality in postmodernism and other philosophical trends.

On top of all that, we pointed out that even though many philosophers would profess allegiance to that kind of non-realist stance, what leaks out very often is some or other kind of realist stance. Very often a secular existentialist and materialist view of reality, somewhat in some senses nihilistic, leaks out despite their positing and claiming to not have a position about reality or a claim about reality or the possibility of attaining truth.

Unpacking all that is the need to realize that what we bring in terms of framework, approach, language, history, culture, assumption and motivation—why I want this thing to be true, why I want the universe to be this way, why I want human nature to be like this—all those considerations need to be brought into this whole difficult soup, really, around epistemology and ontology. That applies whatever one's inclinations and wishes are.

We pointed out further that, to a certain extent at least, epistemology is personal. What convinces one person and what leads them to trust certain knowledge, certain insights, is different from another person who gains conviction by another pathway or another revelation or another consideration.

We also pointed out more generally that if you keep asking questions about epistemology—well, why do you trust that? Well, why do you believe that then? Why do you believe that?—and you just keep going, eventually asking questions, eventually one will come to the fact, one will realize the fact that we're all holding, whatever one's position, at some point we recognize that we hold some kind of unproven assumption. We're basing our epistemology and ontology on something that can't be proved.

Whether we consider all this a kind of cataclysmic earthquake in the whole enterprise of human understanding, a fracturing of the vessels that hold that human enterprise, or if one thinks such language is much too hysterical and views it much more as some difficulties here where we have to tone down our claims a little bit regarding truth—however one regards it, one still has to open to these considerations and digest them and respond to them. Of course there are many possible responses.

The realization, the deep realization of radical emptiness, the thorough and comprehensive emptiness of all phenomena and all things at all levels, is difficult to attain, difficult to hold onto, and quite sophisticated and subtle as a knowledge. Even that has its own epistemological blind spots and assumptions. Even that insight into emptiness rests on certain unproven assumptions—it has to, whatever they are. But that's one option here: to develop that understanding of emptiness and hold that stance of the middle way of the Buddha Dharma.

Another response, of course, is just to shrug and ignore all this debate and all this fracturing and all this rug-pulling that developed certainly over the 20th century, and just get on with things and ignore it. What that usually entails—and it's important to point this out—is that when we shrug, and it's a position that's popular in some Western philosophy, contemporary philosophy starting in the 20th century, we effectively say, "Well, this is unprovable. Ontology and epistemology will come to no end, won't come to an end, and therefore we're not going to indulge in them. Any indulging in those kinds of areas of exploration, and certainly any claims, all of that is a kind of human hubris and arrogance."

But effectively, practically speaking, often—I'm thinking of philosophers like Richard Rorty—what happens in such a statement is it effectively manifests as a kind of shrug, and in that shrug, one goes back to one's default positions. Hence, as we pointed out with Rorty, the leaking out of a quite secularist anti-religious agenda. So all this talk about no privileged point of view, but there's a denigrating of the religious that leaks out at the sides of his writing. What also leaks out is this belief and assertion that the fundamental reality of things is the purposeless movement of atoms in a meaningless universe.

We can say, "Oh yes, the philosophical problems here are too enormous. There's too much arrogance involved in claiming any progress towards truth or understanding ontologically, epistemologically. We put it aside and we regard ourselves as liberated from all that." But what often happens is that there is a kind of deflation of the being, of the soul in some ways. What was supposed to open up more territory for conversation actually ends up shrinking it. The default views, the indoctrinated views, the dominant,

common views of whatever society end up just keeping their reign. Nothing has really changed there. But that's—I don't know if we call it an option, but it's certainly a choice that some people make in regard to all this, either consciously or unconsciously.

A third option we talked about is the imaginal middle way, that kind of poetic sensibility. We talked about Yeats and the open-ended, infinite, hermeneutic possibilities that Corbin emphasized in his reading of the imaginal.

both Abrahamic scriptures and sacred books, but also of this world and the events in this world and the events in history, and similarly in some Kabbalistic teachings and the Zohar.

I should point out—I'm pretty sure I've said this before, though I'm not sure when; it could have been just a couple of talks ago—but it strikes me as so important because of the pain it can cause in some people's souls from not understanding it, that it's worth repeating. Sometimes when I teach about deep emptiness and the whole notion of ways of looking, and there are just ways of looking, some people feel a great grief. They're attracted to that teaching, they explore it to a certain extent, often a fairly deep extent, but they reach a point where it seems to them: "Okay, so the sense of sacredness is something that I get just when I look in a certain way that sees sacredness. And I can look in another way that doesn't see sacredness. So sacredness takes a secondary status to the mind that sees in this way, that adopts this way of looking as opposed to that way of looking."

In that, as I said, there can be a lot of grief because the person—something in the soul—wants that sacredness and wants it to be something trustworthy, something less manufactured by the whims of the observing mind.

But going deeper into this whole process of exploring fabrication and ways of looking—if we just talk about emptiness right now—one actually realizes that the mind that looks, the mind that chooses to look in this way or that way, or is adopting this or that way of looking, the consciousness and the conceptual frame of conception, none of that awareness has inherent existence. It too is fabricated in the fabrication of the world and the fabrication of perception.

So subject and object, consciousness and appearance, awareness and world mutually entail each other. They mutually involve each other. They're fabricated together. Neither one, in a way, is more fundamental. They both melt into each other and rely on each other—two vacuums leaning on each other. Empty, empty, empty. They participate in each other.

That seeing, to me—that level of seeing—opens up in the breakdown of concept. We can't really, it's hard to even talk about or explain it in some way that logically makes sense or causally makes sense. But with it, there is an insight, a felt insight into the participation of self and awareness and consciousness and mind and way of looking. In that participation, the mystery, that participation, there is, to me, a profound sacredness. I would say to anyone who really tastes that deeply, it can't help but resurrect—if one has dismissed or let go of a sense of sacredness—it can't help but resurrect it, reestablish it, bring it back to aliveness and to the fore in some very deep, mysterious way.

So that position of deep emptiness also entails sacredness. It implies and involves a sense of sacredness in the deep mystery of what it means. Similarly, I would say that what we were calling that poetic sensibility or that imaginal way also implies sacredness. This is there in all the elements of the imaginal that we talked about: the divinity, the dimensionality, the eternality, the reverence, the grace, the humility—all these and other elements are part of the sense of sacredness.

So both the profound and radical middle way of Dharma teachings on emptiness and the imaginal middle way involve and invoke and elicit and open us to a sense of sacredness. Of course, there are some people who talk about artistic sensibility and poetic sensibility, and they're using it in a different way, and it perhaps doesn't, for them, involve sacredness. It certainly did for Yeats, whom we quoted, and it does in the way that we're using those terms.

So, three possibilities: shrugging; the penetrating into deep emptiness and the sophistication, subtlety and profundity of those insights; and the entertaining and exploration of the imaginal way, that poetic sensibility, the opening up of perception in sensing the soul.

Another possibility that I mentioned at the end of the last part of the talk was that with the imaginal way, there is room—we could say there's room—to move towards more of a stance of reification, more of a stance of believing or holding something to be a reality. And there are many different ways this can happen. As I mentioned, I started opening up that end of things in the final talks of the Mirrored Gates series.

But there are other ways, and there's one I just want to focus on right now—another subset of ways that would fall into that category of, rather than holding this precise middle way line in one way or another, actually falling into a category of entertaining the possibility of more reification. And that is to intuit or posit or deduce or entertain

the idea of some kind of higher truth that integrates and makes sense of the paradoxes that we experience in our phenomenal world in the normal state of consciousness, and makes sense of what seems nonsensical there.

For instance, some of the quantum physics observations: the seeming impossibility of knowing objectively how a thing really is before we observe it, the problem of our observation always seeming to be determining what happens, and the apparent emptiness of things. All that could be made sense of—and those paradoxes and gaps and fractures in our knowledge or our different perspectives can be made sense of and integrated and made whole at a higher level of truth.

I've touched on this briefly—I can't remember where, just very briefly—and I gave the analogy of those old disco balls. I can't remember if they have another name. Some of you will remember. They're three-dimensional balls hanging from a dance floor ceiling, and they've got little tessellated pieces of mirror on them so that when the dance hall lights shine on them, they sort of iridescently radiate in different directions.

So that truth is really like that, or this higher truth, or this more absolute truth, is really like a disco ball in the sense that it exists as a real entity in itself, in this three-dimensional way, but we're only able to shine certain lights on it from certain angles at certain times, for the most part, in our usual state of consciousness and understanding. And so it will just reflect at different times this color light in that direction, that color light in the other direction. But in itself it is a reality. So there's a kind of emptiness there, but at another level it's not really empty.

The metaphor of cartography offers another illuminating perspective. Different map-making systems—I can't recall their exact names, though I know one is called MacArthur—reveal how we might understand this phenomenon. When you examine various maps, you'll notice that the relative sizes of countries appear vastly different across different projection systems. On some maps, Africa appears absolutely enormous compared to Europe, while on other mapping systems, Europe appears much larger in proportion. The distances between countries vary dramatically as well.

The fundamental challenge here is again dimensional. The three-dimensional Earth —the actual globe—exists with its true relative sizes and distances. But when we attempt to represent this spherical reality in two dimensions, we must inevitably make compromises, sacrificing accuracy in one aspect to preserve it in another. Neither style of map construction is without fault; both are, at best, partial representations, and in certain ways, misleading. Yet the reality remains what it is. These maps represent our best attempts to capture in two dimensions what actually exists independently and objectively in three dimensions.

Both metaphors come from Sanford Drop's writing, though I'm uncertain of their original source. Such ideas suggest that reality might indeed function this way. Perhaps through philosophy, meditation, or scientific progress, we can discern, extrapolate, or conclude something about the nature of a reality that, in our ordinary state of consciousness and understanding, we cannot directly perceive.

This kind of thinking appears with some frequency. I was recently reading something by Ouspensky that addressed the fourth dimension in mathematical terms. Though I didn't read the entire article, he made a fascinating observation about spiritual phenomena. When people conduct séances, attempt to contact spirits after death, or report ghostly apparitions, they invariably assume that these spirits, if they exist, inhabit the same temporal dimension we do—the same framework of time that we experience as moving from past to present to future.

Ouspensky suggested that a spirit or being after death might exist or experience time in a fundamentally different way, not belonging to the same temporal dimension we inhabit. He illustrated this with the analogy of a flat world—imagine a completely two-dimensional realm, like the surface of a piece of paper or a lake, inhabited by flat beings who can only move, sense, and conceive in two dimensions.

If a three-dimensional being were to dive into their lake or pass a pen through their paper world, these two-dimensional inhabitants would be completely baffled by the sudden appearance and disappearance of phenomena that seem to violate all their laws of physics. Picture someone diving through the surface of a lake—as their body passes through that surface, the cross-sectional shape would constantly change: wider in some parts, doubled with arms and legs, then singular again, expanding and contracting. All these transformations would appear inexplicably mysterious to the flat-world beings.

Yet from a three-dimensional perspective, everything makes perfect sense, following ordinary three-dimensional laws. For beings who have grown up inhabiting only a two-dimensional world, equipped with only two-dimensional apparatus, such phenomena would be utterly incomprehensible.

The implication is that higher dimensions might explain all kinds of phenomena we experience as problematic, paradoxical, nonsensical, partial, or contradictory. This idea is actually implicit in our dharma discussions, though perhaps I haven't emphasized it sufficiently. When we speak of sensing the soul, or when we explore eternality, we encounter something similar to what Ouspensky described.

The angel is eternal—timeless—occupying an entirely different dimension or realm of time. As we've established, these realities are always present, always occurring.

This imaginal sense, it's always already happening. Or as Salo said, it never happened, but it always is.

So the angel is actually eternal. The appearance is, if you like, a refraction of the angel into time, into our experience, our dimension of temporality, our dimension of anything else. Or the appearance in time is a kind of echo, an imperfect echo, or let's say a three-dimensional echo of something that's four-dimensional, but take that very loosely—an echo, a manifestation in our limited sense of dimensions, a manifestation of something that has more dimensions, including that different temporal dimension.

I mentioned the philosopher J.N. Findlay, who would undertake a careful, phenomenological look at our reality—our reality of seeming to exist in a world of solid objects that we can't walk through and that behave in certain ways. He would look at that whole experience of ours and pick up on the places where it doesn't quite make sense, where it doesn't quite add up, or where different perspectives that are contradictory and paradoxical seem to both be right somehow, and neither completely right.

In his careful, rigorous phenomenological analysis of everyday experience, he draws out those paradoxes and then proposes that they are resolved with the solution of other worlds that exist in other dimensions, so to speak. Here we don't just mean physical dimensions—length, breadth, height, or time. We're really talking about other levels of worlds. And then, as I mentioned when I quoted him the other day, this exploration of the idea, or deduction of the idea, of what he would call a mystical absolute world in which all these paradoxes are kind of integrated and made sense of.

So these worlds that he proposes—and I've talked about this before in the context of Kabbalistic teaching or some Dharma teachings or other teachings from mystical Islam—this idea of levels of worlds, multiple worlds at different levels, is quite a common one. These worlds are in a sense tiered and represent different degrees or stages between our sense of things at our level, at our limited dimensionality, in stages between that and this more mystical absolute that kind of unifies, integrates, makes sense of all these paradoxes that we encounter.

All of those that I've mentioned—also, like the deep emptiness, like the imaginal middle way—they are characterized not just by an implication of sacredness, but by a sense of sacredness. There's something intrinsically sacred in those notions of other dimensions and what they explain there and how they relate to ours.

But of course, also many of you will know from modern physics that beginning with Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity in 1905, the idea of four dimensions being the more accurate, more useful model of things rather than three dimensions became really prevalent. So physicists almost always talk about space-time as opposed to three dimensions of space and then time. It's put together in four dimensions.

As the twentieth century went on, there were all kinds of other theories, and certain developments invoked multiple dimensions. Nine, ten, eleven, thirteen became a very popular number, and then I just read about twenty-six dimensions. So this whole idea of other dimensions, the postulation of other dimensions explaining and making sense of what we experience—in this case through experiments in science—is common in physics as well. It holds sway in physics as well, though how many dimensions exactly and how they work is a different story. But the idea that there are more dimensions is pretty mainstream.

Can we prove that? Is that provable? We're back to that question of epistemology and ontology again. The answer, having said what we said before, is never finally. Because just like Newton's theory, which worked so well and seemed to be proven by its predictive power, its efficacy, its correspondence with observation, was eventually, after a few hundred years, dislodged completely—to be regarded as at best incomplete, at worst just wrong—by Einstein's theory.

So if that can happen then, it can actually happen with any physical theory, no matter how well it ties in to observed experimental data, no matter how many predictions it makes that turn out to be true when we do experiments. There's always the possibility that one day another theory will come along that will make a prediction that initial theory didn't make, and it will turn out to be validated, and it will have a very different idea of what's going on, and very different mathematics, and very different laws.

So can we prove that about other dimensions in physics? No, never finally. But what they seem to offer, and again why they're so dominant and popular and established in physics, is that they do provide beautiful, elegant and coherent explanations of phenomena that we perceive in our world and in our laboratories. Or they almost provide those explanations, because none of them have been completely worked out. There are many of these different kinds of theories.

I suppose that you'd have to ask a physicist whether they consider that sacred or not, and I'm sure you'd get probably a mix of different answers. I read recently about something I barely understood, but which was intriguing to me. Again, this was reported by Lee Smolin in his book, I think it's called Three Roads to Quantum Gravity. It's something called the anti-de Sitter space-time or the scale-invariant conformal field theory.

That's a bit of a mouthful. I don't really know what it means. But as I understood it, it involves basically the idea that there are other dimensions of space-time that obey certain geometries—so more than just the four that we're used to, there are higher dimensions that obey certain geometries.

The intriguing thing to me was the correspondence between those two different dimensions. There is a physicist Juan Maldacena and lots of other people exploring this. So this other higher world, let's say, with these other dimensions—he says that in some cases, quantum phenomena in the original theory, in the theory of our dimensions, translate into gravitational phenomena in the higher dimensional space. In other words, there's some kind of mathematical correspondence between these two kinds of world. One has more dimensions and a certain kind of geometry, and the other one is our world, or a certain take on our world.

Two theories which so far have been extremely difficult to unite—both extremely successful, quantum theory and Einstein's theory of general relativity, the theory of gravity—physicists have struggled to unite those two theories. They seem contradictory, attempts break down. So there's a lot of work going on into uniting those two theories.

What's interesting with this postulation and this mathematical model of another world is that these two seemingly incommensurable theories kind of mirror or correspond to each other across the dimensions. Solutions to Einstein's equations in the higher dimensional space-time give approximations to quantum phenomena in the lower dimensional space-time. Even something like heating up a gas of particles in the lower dimensional space-time corresponds to forming a black hole in the higher dimensional world. Pretty far out.

I don't understand it, and he gives some other examples, but it doesn't really matter. The point is this attempt to make sense of, make coherent and integrate things that don't seem integratable at our level of perception, level of understanding, level of conception and reasoning.

There's been quite a lot of objection in physics over the last hundred-plus years that some of these kind of really outlandish sounding physical theories—and we could string off a whole list, including the one I just briefly mentioned—are not remotely testable. There's no way one could come up with an experiment that would test whether it's possibly true. There's no way to find out is reality like that or not. Testable experimental predictions seem nowhere on the horizon at the present time.

So a sharp criticism that comes from some quarters—some physicists and some non-physicists—is that this isn't even science anymore. You do all that and you make your neat, lovely, beautiful, elegant mathematics work and this implies that and that fits together with this and that resolves that problem. But it's not science if it's not testable. That's not science, it's metaphysics. And here that word metaphysics is used in a very derogatory way to mean abstract speculation that is not subject to empirical observation, not subject to being able to be perceived and verified that way.

But if you think back over the history of both philosophical ideas and then scientific ideas, there were many, many theories that were untestable at the time. Many theories that became testable sometimes many years later, maybe sometimes hundreds of years later. At the time when they were proposed and considered and explored and put forth, there wasn't any hope that they would ever be testable, and they were just regarded as metaphysics. But what was regarded as metaphysics became actually the bread and butter of experimental science.

So are these physical theories that postulate other dimensions and all the rest of it that don't seem remotely testable—are they metaphysics in that derogatory sense, or are they not metaphysics?

In relation to the whole area of metaphysics, again Joel Weinsheimer, in this book on Gadamer, reports a sort of development in the twentieth century where there was this denigration of metaphysics and ridiculing of metaphysics in that sense. There was this movement towards what's called positivism—where you only trust as knowledge or only even waste your time thinking about and working on understanding what can be empirically observed, what's open to perception or obvious logical deduction.

This grew to its heights in the early twentieth century with the philosophies of positivism and logical positivism. Positivism is the kind of philosophy that all knowledge must be based on perception. It rejects any claims of metaphysical speculation. Knowledge is only empirical or, as I say, very simple logical deduction, which is almost tautology at times. For example, "all bachelors are unmarried"—correct. We can approve that as knowledge. So it's in support of what they call the positive sciences over things like metaphysics, religion, which they dismissed as just nonsense and a waste of time. This pursuit and claim of attempted dominance of what they would regard as definite certain knowledge arrived at in those ways.

But Joel Weinsheimer has a short passage in the book just tracing the history there. In the 1920s, with what's called the Vienna Circle in philosophy, really this kind of positivism reached its height. But he said time went by, and by 1975, he said, philosopher John Wisdom can speak of positivism only as a dead horse. But he dates the demise of this anti-metaphysicalism thirty years earlier.

This animosity against metaphysical meaninglessness, he writes in a book called Philosophy and its Plays, "had very many eminent followers, but they had all given up these extreme positions at the latest by about 1945." I remember Hempel, this philosopher, in the mid-thirties reporting it was customary in the Vienna Circle to interject "metaphysical!" if any member lapsed into a meaningless statement, a so-called meaningless statement, and that this happened so often it had to be shortened to "M." So you can imagine sitting around talking philosophy and then sort of pouncing on each other with "M, M," by virtue of someone believing that someone else had sinned by saying something or suggesting something that was possibly not strictly positivist and therefore metaphysical.

But he goes on: by 1945 this was a thing of the past. There was a cooling of this anti-metaphysical passion and a discrediting of some of the fundamental ideas and suppositions of the Vienna Circle and that whole positivist philosophy.

Charles Taylor, the philosopher, wrote: "Once we awaken from our positivist slumbers, we realize that none of these features that pertain to areas of our experience that are not strictly in the realm of natural science and physics—we realize none of these features, absent from the human sciences, hold of natural science either."

Let me explain this, because part of the agenda of the positivists was to reduce all knowledge, or the range of all knowledge, to the scope and model of physical science. That was their template. Everything had to conform—sociology had to replace religion, for example, and even sociology had to be modeled on the physical sciences. This remains a strong current today. The idea was that natural science—meaning physics and related fields—constitutes the only valid knowledge, the only kind worth pursuing. Anything that seemed absent from these domains, including many psychologies, some sociologies, and certainly religion and spirituality, was relegated to the rubbish heap of nonsense and uselessness.

But Taylor observes that these different domains "turn out to be methodologically at one, not for the positivist reason that there is no rational place for hermeneutics, no rational place for this kind of open interpretation of things, but for the radically opposed reason that all sciences are equally hermeneutic." As we explored earlier, this stringent idea of direct correspondence between scientific laws and truth has collapsed,

or at least opened up and been shaken loose. We begin to realize that in all domains and directions of human endeavor for knowledge, for truth, to contact and represent reality involves some kind of epistemological and ontological latitude, some element of interpretation.

By the 1980s, those who would dispute the universal scope of human hermeneutics found themselves on the defensive. There was truly a turning of the tides—though it might turn again at some point. This marked the demise of anti-metaphysics.

Interestingly, if you read about the processes, aspirations, and guiding principles of leading physicists, you find that many of them—often the most prominent, forward-thinking, and successful—say they trust and encourage others to trust the beauty in mathematical theory to lead them. Rather than following laboratory observations and trying to piece them together sensibly, they follow their intuitive sense of the beauty of mathematical concepts, the elegance within them, trusting this to open new ideas, conceptions, and models.

Dirac famously said, "It must be beautiful"—speaking of whatever theory we develop to describe nature. The mathematics must be beautiful. If it's not, it can't be right. You can hear in that intuition the eros for beauty, for elegance, for simplicity and coherence and integration and innovation. There's a soul calling, the eros of the soul for that beauty, which mirrors our movement of soul-making. As we've said before, beauty and image go together. Beauty and soul-making are so intertwined we could almost replace one with the other—the same principles would apply in terms of what it is and how we respond to it.

Einstein shared this perspective. At a lecture in Oxford in 1933, speaking quietly and confidently, he urged theoreticians not to try discovering fundamental laws simply by responding to new experimental findings—the orthodox method—but to take their inspiration from mathematics and beauty.

One of the threads running through this talk is opening up our conception and approach to epistemology and ontology, examining what might be possible there. We're looking at the scientific method with all its gifts and what it has enabled for humanity, considering how it was initially conceived and presented, and the picture of it that we largely bought into. This was a picture of both science and the scientific method as a kind of pristine, untainted model of epistemology and ontology. That model came to dominate and influence all thinking, even our intuitive sensing of questions around ontology, epistemology, cosmology, and metaphysics generally. Science and the scientific method came to be thought of as the pinnacle of what represents a good, solid, clean, sensible approach to knowing, knowledge, and reality.

But as we unearth what's actually involved in the scientific method—as different philosophers and scientists have examined it throughout the twentieth century—we get the sense that it's not quite what it seems. We come to realize that questions of epistemology and ontology are actually more complex than they might appear, more complex than perhaps has been handed to us as the legacy of classical scientific method.

In its dominance as a model of good epistemological approach, other approaches were denigrated—they either fell by the wayside, were overpowered, or were openly ridiculed and dismissed. Among them was this whole idea of metaphysics in the sense of speculative, abstract thinking or conceptions that cannot be tested by replicable experimental observation.

But perhaps metaphysics never really went away. Perhaps it's been resurrected. Where, anyway, is the boundary between so-called metaphysics and physics, between metaphysical thinking and methodology and the methodology of theoretical physics?

When we examine it more closely, we can see that science—both in terms of its method and its aims—is not quite what many of us grew up believing it was or were taught that it was. It's not as unscrupulously clean or pure or tight as a method. Its conceptual foundations, the ways of thinking about things and building upon those foundations, are not always as clean-cut as presented to us.

None of this is to deny the benefits, wonders, and gifts of science, or to banish it somehow—if that were even possible. It's simply to point out that the scientific project, in both its methods and aspirations, involves elements that we might not have fully recognized or acknowledged.

methods and its aims and goals is not quite as simple or clear-cut or clean as it was taught to us that it is, and as many people would like to still believe that it is or still do believe that it is.

And this has implications—all this has implications on how we think about knowledge, how we conceive, again, of ontology, epistemology, of what is legitimate, for instance, with regard to sensing the soul and imaginal practice and other areas of human exploration. All this has implications on our sense of ourselves, our sense of things, our sense of what avenues are open to us and what kind of bases they need and how trustworthy they are.

So one of the really interesting things to me is the fact that so much that is helpful, interesting, and generative of further exploration—further noble exploration—can actually come out of what is not true. This is evidenced many times in the history of science.

So, for example, going back to Newton again, he forged ahead with his explorations of mechanics and gravity, and he based it on those dogmatic, essentially dogmatic assertions and assumptions of absolute space and time. His colleagues, his contemporary colleagues, thought he was bonkers. And they objected to these two ideas of absolute space and time. They thought it was completely absurd. And yet, based on those assumptions, he built his whole edifice of Newtonian mechanics and the theories of gravitation. And they were immensely, as I said, successful in terms of their material predictions and very helpful in all kinds of ways.

Later, as I said, they were proven untrue by experiments. Absolute space and absolute time are not held by scientists to be realities anymore. Yet, based on those false assumptions, dogmatic assertions, basically, that turned out to be wrong, this whole incredible opening up and blossoming of human knowledge and human capability came. Einstein's theory came as the two relativity theories undermined the ideas of absolute space and time once and for all, and then even more at a whole other level since then with quantum theories of space-time. It's a whole other level of kind of exploding the notions of an absolute space and absolute time.

But, as Lee Smolin points out in regard to that interesting historical trajectory there with those notions, he says absolute space and time was what was required to make progress at that time in history, at that time in Western history and the history of thought. And to see this was perhaps Newton's greatest achievement. And he brought in these notions. They were unpopular. They were regarded as ridiculous. They turned out, way after his death, to be not true. But based on these untrue, unpopular notions, all kinds of benefits and discoveries emerged.

Now, this to me suggests a parallel or analogous kind of legitimacy and usefulness of, at times, adopting in soul-making practice various assumptions or working logoi or conceptions that are either definitively not true, unproven or unprovable. So again, it's like the whole way we're working is not closed as tightly as the usual image that's presented to us of scientific methodology would seem to indicate.

Again, the fact, with regard to Newton, the fact that Newton's theories proved so accurate in their predictions and helpful made people assume that they were true, that those assumptions of absolute space and absolute time were true, and that the whole theory was true, until several hundred years later and those experiments and results around Einstein's relativity theories. So there's an assumption of truth just because of efficacy and predictive power and helpfulness. But the truth wasn't there, and yet all this could come out of it.

So with regard to the soul-making logos or different logos, different conceptions within the soul-making paradigm, different perceptions that we have, what does that imply? Might there be, as I said, legitimacy and fecundity and usefulness sometimes in just entertaining certain ideas, or building ideas, drawing ideas together, as I described in some earlier talks? Some of them may be definitively untrue. Some of them may be just—who knows—they're kind of in the realm of kind of metaphysics that's just about speculations, unverifiable, and yet can be immensely fruitful in what they open up, what they lead to, just as Newton's conceptual notions would form the basis of his whole architecture were.

Again, I'll just add those couple of sentences from J.M. Findlay: "Self-contradictory and empty notions play a vast part in human experience and attitude." And we might add, given what I've just said, that false notions, unproven notions, unprovable notions, can all actually be very fruitful in all kinds of ways.

And maybe, and I've said this before in the past, maybe we need ideas, we need concepts, we need conceptual frameworks. They orient us, they shape experience, they inspire us, they open avenues of sense and sensibility and perception and concept. In other words, ideas spawn other ideas, just as these ideas in Newton of absolute space and absolute time—on top of those ideas, with those ideas as a basis, further ideas came which were fruitful. And concepts and conceptual frameworks, no matter, as I said, whether they're sometimes untrue, unproven, unprovable, can in themselves be soul-making, or can be generative and supportive of soul-making.

Perhaps we need that kind of speculation, we need that kind of freedom with ideas. But ideas and conceptual frameworks are indispensable. It's part of humanity's soul to reach out, to grapple, to build, to speculate, to construct, to demolish, to sculpt these structures of ideas. And for our purposes, on that, or in that, wrapped up in all kinds of soul-making, all kinds of beauty, all kinds of opening for the soul.

Harold Fish wrote, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by the language which he discovers for signifying what is otherwise unsignifiable." Man does not live by bread alone, but by the language which he discovers for signifying what is otherwise unsignifiable. So in the face of the endless mystery of being, of the cosmos, of human being, what is otherwise unsignifiable—in the face of that, we live by the bread also of, he says, language. I would widen it to concept and conceptual framework. These nourish us. They open out possibilities. Like a scaffolding allows us to reach, to build things and to climb and reach places that we wouldn't otherwise be able to reach—vantage points. I can imagine going up a scaffolding and you can see you have a different view from that height.

So there's this need—I think there's a soul need—and soul-making needs conceptual frameworks. The question of what kind of ideas and where they stand in relation to truth or falsity, or proverness or unproverness, maybe that latitude may be wider than we have been taught to believe, have come to believe through this dominance of the classical scientific paradigm and its presentation of ontology and epistemology.

There's this need for the soul, for soul-making. There's a need for conceptual frameworks and ideas like that. But again, as I mentioned before, we need ideas. Maybe they don't need to be true, or maybe they're unprovable. Some of them, what we bring into the cauldron, the crucible of soul-making...

But still, I would say that although there might be this latitude, there is some constraint on it. Or maybe there needs to be some constraint on what kind of ideas and what their relationship is to ordinary perception, to our usual notions of reality, to what we take as truth or untruth. So that there is some rigor to a certain extent to the material in the cauldron. Or to the cauldron itself has some rigor—maybe that's a better way to say it. Some resistance, some constraint of solid material, if you like.

So that the ideas that we entertain, the conceptual frameworks in terms of soul-making, they're not just willy-nilly ideas. They're not just random ideas. A, they need to be generative of soul-making, but B, they're wrestling at least a little bit or somewhat in relationship with what we take to be true. They have some relationship with notions of truth. They're not completely divorced from that.

So they do have a connection with our experience and what we observe phenomenologically. There is some kind of connection with correspondence with what might be truth or reality. There is some kind of coherence of these ideas. So if there's more resistance there in the ideas, so it's not just willy-nilly, it's not just like moving air, there's some solidity and resistance so that this crucible is like molding clay. There's some solidity there, and in molding that solidity again, there's a kind of middle way there—more latitude than we might think with concepts and ideas and conceptual frameworks, and yet not completely so free as to become kind of just whimsical, ungrounded, airy, because then out of pure air a crucible cannot be built.

So again, there are two extremes, and somewhere in the middle, which is quite broad, there's fertile ground. Part of the fertility comes from a certain tussle and resistance, a kind of obligation to tether our ideation and what ideas we're experimenting with—tether it to notions of reality and truth, no matter how problematic the whole areas of truth and ideation are; to tether it to some kind of epistemology and ontology,

no matter how open and complex and puzzling those areas are. It doesn't mean necessarily working it all out completely in some very finished product of philosophy—after all, no one has done that yet with any ontology or epistemology.

But I hope you get this point about this middle way that involves some sense of resistance while still having much more range and latitude and possibility than we might have thought if our thinking was completely dominated by what was presented to us as this model, this best way of thinking, this only way of thinking about ontology and epistemology and ideas that are entertainable.

So, for example, in the soul-making paradigm, some of the ideas that we've put out there, suggested or mentioned, alluded to at different times. For instance, the very—or the seemingly simple, most axiomatic proposition—the soul loves souls, taking that as a sort of very basic foundational idea which generates, spawns really a whole structure, a whole conceptual framework of soul-making. Or ideas like the possibility that our soul-making is God's soul-making, that we participate in the soul-making of divinity.

These are ideas that, again, they may not be proved, they may not even ever be provable, but they may be very fertile in different ways. Or as a variation on that, the idea I just mentioned, that our soul-making may be at times regarded as a kind of infinite jñāna. Jñāna—this word for gnosis. Buddha nature's ultimate knowing. A word that was amplified a lot in Mahāyāna, and particularly in Vajrayāna context.

What it implies, that word, or what it can imply in some circles, is that it's a kind of knowing that's able to fully see the emptiness of all things at the same time as it perceives appearances. And the subject and the object are not separate. The world that is perceived is not other than the mind, the Buddha nature mind, Dharmakāya that perceives it. They're all part of the same thing. And in the perception of the world, the temporal world, the perception is of divinity. So this Buddha nature perceives divinity everywhere. But in one and the same knowing, it can both know the unfabricated, the timeless, that which is beyond concept, the thorough emptiness, and the forms, the divine forms, and the temporal.

And that knowing might include embodied kind of knowing, other kinds of knowing, desire, the whole soul-making process. Our soul-making is a participation in that soul-making of the divinity, in the divinity's infinite jñāna, which is not a final process. It too is organic and grows with the soul-making dynamic. In that way also, our soul-making includes both this love and eros and attraction that we can have towards the unfabricated, as well as towards the perception of forms, this world, the world of matter.

An idea like that can come, or will come, I think. Some kind of idea like that will come, I think, just inevitably at some point, organically, out of the whole soul-making dynamic. As the eros with regard to our perceptions is allowed to infuse and inseminate them, expand the perception, expand the ideation, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, we will begin at some point to experience the divinity of our own eros, of our own psyche, of the ideas that move in our mind, of what we see. And then an idea like I've just described—that our soul-making is participating in the infinite jñāna, or the soul-making of the Buddha nature, or of God, or whatever—that idea will arise naturally. I mean, I've mentioned it quite a few times over recent years.

Conversely, that idea might itself form a seed that stimulates the possibility, and opens, supports the possibility of that kind of perception of our process being divine that way and participating that way. And that idea and that perception together then may fertilize the whole soul-making dynamic further, crystallizing or growing, fermenting around that seed idea, and all kinds of other possibilities open.

So these ideas can be fertile, generative, opening. The whole idea of an angel out ahead, to borrow Corbin's phrase that we use quite a few times—of some image that is intimately related to me, sort of other than me, sort of part of me, me and not me, calling me, a telos, calling me, pulling me, attracting me, itself somehow timeless. Or the idea of eternality itself.

and timelessness as an element of the imaginal. All these ideas can be profoundly fertile. And they are, as I've mentioned, ideas that can come to us from our experience, or be suggested by what you hear one of us say, or read elsewhere, or hear someone else articulate. But importantly, they also arise from experience itself. In doing so, they can open up soul-making and support its deepening.

Conversely, these are precisely the kinds of ideas that, if we don't obstruct the soul-making process, I would expect to arise naturally—variations on these themes gaining substance and power in consciousness, in the soul. Through their relationship with our experience, you can see what I mean by the openness of ideas. We need not wait for something to be proven truth or reality, just as that example from physics with Newton's ideas demonstrates. Immense progress, opening, discovery, and technological creation—creations both material and conceptual—emerged from two ideas, absolute space and time, that eventually proved untrue.

Yet there remains some rigor involved in determining which ideas merit our engagement. While we needn't wait for them to be verified as true, these ideas must maintain some coherence within our larger conceptual framework. They must also remain con-

tingent on our phenomenological observation—what actually occurs in our experience. Something unfolds in our process, in our perception and meditation, that suggests these ideas.

Consider, for instance, an idea that may have originated with Pseudo-Dionysius. He writes: "For this beauty, this ideal beauty, causes the existence of everything." In his metaphysical and spiritual system, there exists a transcendent absolute ideal of beauty, and he declares this beauty the source of all things. From this ideal emerges the existence of everything—beauty as source, as cause of all things.

He continues: "It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty. And there it is ahead of all as goal, as the beloved, as the cause towards which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being. It is a model to which they conform."

This presents a radically different understanding of causality than we typically encounter today. Yet perhaps this idea, even hearing this brief passage written centuries ago, stirs something in the soul and speaks to something deep within us. The idea itself, topsy-turvy as it appears compared to our usual thinking, can attract the soul and prove fertile in terms of what it accomplishes when we take it on, when we entertain it as a concept of causality.

On a human level, we can employ this idea in soul-making, as other paradigms do—for example, the Diamond Approach. The Ridhwan School holds that even the apparently ugly manifestations of our human nature, our choices and behaviors, are actually rooted in impulses toward beauty that have become distorted. Our pathologies, our kilesas—greed, aversion, and the rest—are actually grounded in the soul's deeper love of beauty. That was the initial stimulus, the seed, the original momentum. Only through conditions and the soul's avidya, its fundamental delusion, do these impulses get directed toward distorted manifestations of beauty, toward fixations of imagination rather than the truly imaginal.

We can entertain this more limited psychological idea about what actually drives our motivations, choices, and perceptions. But what would it mean to allow this idea to expand through the opening of soul-making to encompass the whole of nature, the entire cosmos? Is this possible? Through rigorous wrestling with ideas, could we allow this concept to open for us—even if unprovable—and become generative and powerful in the soul?

Or perhaps through meditation itself, through sensing the soul and allowing the soul-making dynamic to unfold in practice, our seeing and ideation naturally open until this perception of beauty-driven causality becomes something we actually sense. It becomes an immediate, tangible, palpable, striking sense of the universe and the cosmos we inhabit.

We could continue with countless other ideas—I've merely outlined four or five that readily come to mind. Over the years we've offered many possible ideas and concepts, and there are many more. But the essential point is this: it's possible to build upon ideas that are unproven, unprovable, and that may someday prove untrue. This happened in physics and likely continues to happen in physics and science generally. It certainly can occur in the realms of psychology, spiritual work, and soul-making.

These ideas can be fertile and supportive of soul-making without necessarily being true. Returning to the larger questions of ontology and epistemology, and dipping again into contemporary physics... Lee Smolin, the theoretical physicist working on quantum gravity and theories integrating gravity with the quantum world, reflects on recent decades and...

And voices a realization that dawned on him and other physicists over the last thirty years or so. Looking back, he says, it is clear that the assumption that a unified theory of physics—a unified theory of everything, or even just a unified theory of quantum physics and gravity—would be unique was no more than that: an assumption. There was this idea that if we could unify these different theories and arrive at a grand theory of everything, then that must be true. That must be it. Because there would probably be only one such theory.

But this notion—that there would be only one—he's realizing is merely an assumption. "There is no mathematical or philosophical principle," he continues, "which guarantees there to be only one mathematically consistent theory of nature." This returns us to the coherence principle: just because you can find a coherent theory, it doesn't mean there's only one of them.

For hypothetical worlds having one or two spatial dimensions rather than three—this is what physicists sometimes do, reducing their theories to make them more manageable mathematically—"we have constructed lots of consistent quantum theories, including some which have gravity, a fact which should lead us to doubt the assumption that mathematical consistency in itself allows only one theory of nature."

Elsewhere, Smolin introduces what he calls the hypothesis of duality. He presents this in the context of different theories—string theory, which posits that the ultimate building blocks of matter are strings rather than particles, waves, or fields, and field theory, which presents ultimate reality as electromagnetic fields, gravitational fields, or some kind of unified field of which all forces are manifestations.

"There is a possibility," he writes, "that both the string picture and the field picture are just different ways of looking at the same thing. They would then be equally fundamental and no experiment could decide between them. This possibility excites many theorists as it challenges some of our deepest instincts about how to think about physics. It is called the hypothesis of duality."

He emphasizes that this hypothesis differs from the wave-particle duality of quantum theory. It's a scaled-up version applying to whole theories and conceptual frameworks rather than just one kind of entity. Instead of asking whether something is a wave or a particle, we're considering whether whole theoretical edifices might be different ways of looking at the same reality.

"Like the principles of relativity and quantum theory," he explains, "the hypothesis of duality tells us that two seemingly different phenomena are just two ways of describing the same thing. If true, it has profound implications for our understanding of physics." He suggests that by embracing this hypothesis, several problems that have clouded physics for almost two centuries may be resolved, and this idea remains a major driving force behind current research.

No doubt some physicists find this exciting while others find it deeply disturbing. But again, this brings us back to these different meta-strategies and meta-conceptions regarding ontology and epistemology—how knowledge should proceed and can proceed.

When Smolin suggests there's no guarantee of only one consistent theory of nature, when he introduces this hypothesis of duality—that two different theories might be different ways of looking at the same thing—this could be akin to what I mentioned earlier regarding mystical absolutes. Consider two different cartographical representations of the globe: the Mercator projection and the polar projection. Because of our limitations in representing three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional map, these systems offer different ways of representing the same globe, each with their strengths and limitations.

Similarly, our normal three-dimensional perspective trying to capture multi-dimensional reality in physics might require these multiple mapping systems. The globe itself, reality itself, nature itself, the cosmos itself exists in a certain way. Or consider those disco balls I mentioned, or the Necker cube—those two-dimensional representations that flip between different three-dimensional perspectives when we perceive them.

But here we're discussing whole conceptual structures, whole conceptual frameworks that, like the Necker cube perspectives, cannot be entertained simultaneously but between which we can flip. This goes beyond single ideas to encompass entire worldviews.

An example of contradictory single ideas would be our approach to sensing with soul: the perception that we project images—that images emerge from our minds, that we create them—versus the idea that the image projects us, that we are in fact an emanation or projection of the image. This latter idea is much less popular, but these two contradictory concepts can be held together. In the Soul-making Dharma, we speak of "create and discover," the imaginal middle way, attempting to harness the complementarity and paradoxical nature of these opposing ideas.

But they're single ideas. Here we're talking about whole frameworks, whole conceptual frameworks.

So these ideas that Lee Smolin is discussing for physics—that there's no guarantee of only one consistent theory, and this hypothesis of duality with regard to whole theories—do they imply this notion of similarity between maps trying to represent something at higher dimensions that actually is real in higher dimensions? Or do they represent a manifestation of the whole emptiness, ways of looking paradigm, where ultimately there's this profound mutual involvement, profound mutual participation of subject and object, mind and matter?

It may be that many physicists don't like that idea because their whole project from when they were young was to try and discover what reality is in an objective sense. So the idea that mind is involved in that way may not sit well with their inclinations.

It might be that these two ideas—the one of the absolutes and the one of emptiness, ways of looking—there are ways of conceiving where they're not actually that different anyway.

If we expand this consideration beyond the realm of just physics and again extend to include other antinomies—meaning insoluble dichotomies that are part of our experience of the world and our consideration of the world—and open up the philosophy of that without shirking from them as Kant did, and Hegel and J.N. Findlay and many others.

For example, the whole antinomy or paradox between free will and determinism. We sense that we have free will as human beings. And at the same time, we can also sense and see and understand, and in many cases seem like we can prove or show that our responses and our choices are determined biologically, culturally, in terms of conditioning.

How do we integrate those two positions—the belief in free will and the belief in determinism? If I just choose one over the other, I lose quite a lot. If I really just believe in free will, it doesn't leave much room for compassionate understanding—for instance, crimes or what's motivating a criminal, or when we fall short of our ideals ethically. When I just believe in determinism and leave no room for anything else—everything's just biologically conditioned or culturally conditioned or whatever—it leaves no room for free will.

What does that feel like? What kind of life does that form a basis for? What kind of sense of life? Kind of soulless, with actually very little meaning possible in life. Very little nobility. In that way too, also lacking in compassion. Lacking in wisdom as well.

Or the whole conundrum of mind and matter—how does consciousness meet matter? How does consciousness know about matter? How is there this quantum leap between that which doesn't have awareness and that which does have awareness? How can they contact each other? How can one arise from the other? Are they two? If they're two, how do they connect? If they're one, how is it possible that this one came out of that one?

As I said, there are these different approaches. We have the approach of emptiness, ways of looking. We have this approach of the mystical absolutes, akin to the analogy of the different cartographical representations.

You get certain philosophers who fall in one camp. For example, Hegel and J.M. Findlay, Samford Drob, who favor the idea of a real or true mystical absolute. It exists as it is. We cannot normally intuit that mystical absolute because our conception and perception doesn't tend to work at that level for the most part. We cannot see in those extra dimensions. We cannot think and conceive in those extra dimensions. But it is a real and true thing, and sometimes through reasoning and careful thinking and deduction,

we can intuit that mystical absolute, that real truth in super dimensions. Or through meditation, we can intuit, open to, get a glimpse and a taste of that real, true mystical absolute.

In that absolute, there is a kind of coincidentia oppositorum—the Latin phrase with a long history in Western philosophy and alchemy. The idea of the coincidence, the kind of interdependence and interpenetration of things which seem opposite to each other. So for example, free will and determinism, mind and matter. There are philosophers that favor that approach and that whole idea, working toward that postulate.

Then there are other philosophers, probably much more common these days, who favor a kind of ultimate truth of things as a fractured, incomplete finitude of our human being and our human knowledge and the world itself. Slavoj Žižek has this notion of the parallax gap. Parallax is two perspectives on the same object. Actually there's parallax between your two eyes. If you close one eye and then close the other eye, if you look at an object a few feet in front of you and just close one eye and close the other eye, you'll see it moves. The apparent placement of the object moves when you close one eye compared with the other eye. So each eye is getting a parallax view.

Rather than, as happens in our biology, the brain integrating those views when we have both eyes open, he, along with many contemporary philosophers in the postmodern vein or stimulated by postmodern thought, suggests there is no ultimately reconcilable view.

There is no absolute that synthesizes this kind of coincidentia oppositorum. There's just parallax. We live in a fractured world. We are incomplete. Our knowledge is incomplete. Our vision is incomplete. It is that way. There's this gap between different perceptions, conceptions, and conceptual frameworks. There is no hard reality to which they refer. There is no truth. There is no synthesis. There is nothing in another dimension that we can hope to mystically open to.

But again, going back to something I talked about earlier, I would ask: what's the psychology that's going on underneath that kind of position? When someone insists on either one or the other—that there is this mystical absolute or there isn't—what are the motivations?

So what is going on in Slavoj Žižek's soul, if you like? What are his motivations for insisting on that position? And that kind of finitude—to borrow a term that I think came from Heidegger—that kind of fracturedness, he talks about a kind of nothingness, and

that nothingness is, in a way, the ultimate reality. There's just this gap, this parallax gap. If I quote Sanford Robb writing about Žižek, he said: "Reality for Žižek is the irreducible gap between oppositions. They're the incommensurate views of his parallax."

And again, what's going on psychologically? What's the motivations for wanting this kind of world, this kind of postulate about reality? Because he's still making a postulate about reality. There's still a metaphysics there. He's saying the truth is there's no hard reality and there's just this fracturedness, this gap, this nothingness, this irreconcilable difference. What's fashion? You know, how much human beings are conditioned by fashion. As I was mentioning when I talked about reading some of the philosophy articles and books from a certain period in the late 20th century and how they almost start with what reads like an almost fearful proclamation of one's sort of guilt-freeness with regard to... What's fashion? What's intimidation? What's career moves? What other kinds of motivation are more to do with the way we want to fabricate self, other, world? Why? What's going on?

So these are all, to me, really interesting questions. And not that we can ever always get to the bottom of that, because whatever system we have for deciding or looking at the questions of motivation, psychology, and soul, they're also going to be based on other concepts and assumptions and systems—systems of psychology, which are very, very different. You know, what motivates people from the point of view of Freudian is very different than what motivates people from the point of view of a Jungian or a Skinnerian or whatever. Or from our point of view, for that matter.

So I don't know Žižek's work intimately at all. Sometimes when I read a little, it sounds a little bit similar to the emptiness, ways of looking thing that I've offered and laid out, but I don't think it is really. Again, as with several of the other philosophers I mentioned, there's very often a sort of hard reality being smuggled back in one way or another. And again, there's a difference in tone and the kind of world painted and the picture of humanity painted by that whole view of reality.

So it has the flavor, to me, what Žižek is propounding, has the flavor of that kind of tragic existentialist view of reality. But for him, that tragic existentialist view is, he would say, necessary for society to get on and live together and prosper and to have human freedom, etc. There's an argument a bit like Richard Rorty. He said we need to keep the conversation open and keep it happening.

But, as I said, so often that kind of view itself, rather than opening things up for people, there's a way that it can actually harden. There can be underlying agendas and opinions about reality and there's a way that the whole thing can become just a kind of shrug with regard to truth and with regard to the possibility of passionately pursuing questions of ontology and epistemology and truth.

So I don't know if I'm reading it rightly, but if you compare that kind of tone and feel and direction and kind of soul-scape, cosmos-scape, if you like, with what it does potentially to that passion, to that eros, with regard to ontology, epistemology and truth—if you compare that with a quote from Goethe, which I'm really, as I said, not sure if I'm interpreting it right, but I'll read it anyway.

People say, he says, that between two opposed opinions, truth lies in the middle. Not at all. A problem lies in between—invisible, eternally active life contemplated in peace.

A problem lies in between two opposed opinions. Invisible, eternally active life contemplated in peace.

Might he mean that in regard to these seemingly irreconcilable differences of view, of theory, of conceptual framework, of these lacunae and problems in our whole approach to and wish for and relationship with truth and reality, that there can still be a kind of open-ended eros and inquiry regarding truth and reality? Contemplate it in peace, so we don't need to start wars over this kind of thing.

Maybe—again, I may be stretching what he says in a direction he didn't mean it—but that peace can also include agitation. Just as the artist in their creative work can be okay with what Picasso called "the anxiety in the creative process and the agitation in the creative process." Maybe also as thinkers, as philosophers, as explorers of truth, as wanderers in both spellings of the word—with an O and with an A—wanderers in the cosmos, our peaceful contemplation of these things can be filled with eros and passion and agitation.

There's a certain level of stirring up the soul. We want to know, we're gripping, we're following threads, we have to hold on—it's complicated, it's confusing. So there may be a certain agitation there at times. At other times there can just be very easeful, fluid exploration of these things, fluid moving between considering and entertaining different conceptual frameworks.

But perhaps in what Goethe is saying is: no cheap answers, no cheap shrugging. In the face of no cheap answers, perhaps this open-ended eros and inquiry is possible for us. Perhaps the cosmos itself is beckoning us to that, ongoingly, forever.

I remember learning to swim. My father teaching me to swim. He would, in the shallow bit of the sea, stand sort of ten feet away when I was young—my brother and sister as well. And he'd say, "Swim to me." So we would swim. And he would—I'm pretty sure, though he would absolutely deny it—I'm pretty sure then he would just slowly walk backwards, so that I just had to swim further and further and would sort of improve my swimming. I kept saying, "You're moving backwards!" He said, "No, I'm not, I'm not."

But maybe there's something of that in the cosmos—the cosmos itself as meta-angel out ahead, in its mysteries, in the conundra it presents us, in what it allows us to glimpse, in what it reveals, and then that presents other conundra, other problems, other seemingly irreconcilable dichotomies and paradoxes. And we're drawn onwards by the cosmos, by our eros, by our love, by our curiosity, by our soul.

Maybe too—just adding a piece to something I mentioned earlier—maybe in all these questions about, considerations about ontology and epistemology and metaphysics and what's justifiable and what's legitimate and all that, maybe we also need to expand our notions and categories of epistemology, our notions and categories of ontology.

Usually, if you just think about it, when we think about epistemological categories, we think about either you know something or you believe something. In other words, in terms of ideas and perceptions that we can trust. So generally, epistemology: either you know it or you believe it.

We notice with the imaginal how much it can give freedom and strength. I've given a few examples—how imaginal images and the way they calm and touch the soul and open the soul can give great freedom and profound freedom and strength with regard to, say, dying young. But that whole category of imaginal experience doesn't really fit simply into either of those categories of knowing or belief.

I have some image of something or some sense of sensing the soul of the cosmos. And am I then insisting on that as a truth in the way that we usually consider the word knowledge—I know this, this constitutes knowledge, it's a truth? No. Neither is it belief in the usual sense.

So usually we have these two categories—knowing and belief—when we think about epistemology, when the layperson thinks about epistemology. The knowing category is further categorized into either correct knowing, accurate knowing, or incorrect—you're deluded. And then if there's not knowing, there's belief. And either when there's knowing or belief, that can give you power.

For the soul, it can give you a sense of something that the soul is trusting. And that thing and that trust has tremendous power and gives the soul, in this case, lots of support.

It may be that, wrapped up in the imaginal, the whole coherence of the conceptual framework may be a factor in the epistemological strength and efficacy of the image. I've alluded to this again as well—how important the conceptual frameworks are, that they are coherent, supportive, rigorous, that they make sense, that they lead onward, meaning they lead to more soul-making, and they're also in contact with our experience and with the rest of the ideations.

Or it may be that the whole imaginal perception, what comes to us through the imaginal, is more like art. The whole relationship is more like art.

Someone might say to me or to someone else, "Oh, you had an experience, you had an image or you had a vision or whatever it is, and that makes the difference. That's why you feel peaceful with dying young or okay with it or whatever it is." But underlying their comment is probably an assumption that because of that experience, you now think or believe you know something. You know something about reality that makes your dying or death in general okay, or that you believe something.

Again, they put it into those two more common epistemological categories, even though they don't think this way—those two epistemological categories that have become the only ones left to us in the current dominant worldview. But the effect of the imaginal experience is actually more like the effect of art. So it's neither knowledge in that limited usual sense, nor is it belief. It's a third epistemological category, most akin to the way art works when it profoundly moves us, when it profoundly touches the soul, gives us reassurance, gives us orientation in life and meaning, something we would stake our lives on, even though it doesn't fall into these two currently more usual epistemological categories: knowing or belief. It's something else.

So again, we go back to that Yeats quote about belief, and whether that's really the appropriate word, the appropriate concept for what happens with regard to poetic sensibility, artistic sensibility, and imaginal sensing—sensing the soul.

Finally, can all these possibilities remain open? The possibility of some kind of mystical absolute that's real and true, but exists at levels or dimensions beyond our usual conception and perception. The whole emptiness ways of looking idea. The whole imaginal middle way. The pursuit—the erotic pursuit in science, in philosophy, in psycho-

logy—our erotic pursuit of truth. The idea that we need to step back and actually think about other epistemological categories beyond the ones that we've just been handed by history and by our culture, by certain developments of Western culture over the years.

Is it possible that all these possibilities remain open, that they remain viable, that they're avenues we can walk down, travel down, explore? Open roads that we remain alive to, and they remain alive as directions, frameworks to entertain and explore?

I'm not suggesting this openness because I'm a nice guy and I don't like argument and I'm trying to appease everyone and have everything be really calm and peaceful. That's not why I'm saying that. All of them involve problems, involve limits, involve danger—if that's not too dramatic a term—intellectual danger.

There's a line from Leonard Cohen: "There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." And we can apply that to conceptual frameworks. All these conceptual frameworks have cracks, for many of the reasons I've traced in this talk. But there's always a crack. There's always a hole in the foundation that's sort of patched together. There's always a crack that will appear. It's where the light gets in. It's where the growth gets in.

I would say the problems with regard to ontology and epistemology are ultimately insoluble, many of them. Humanity will never reach some final conclusion that's proven and satisfying, that doesn't have a crack in it. But those cracks in conceptual frameworks, those holes, those patchings over—that's actually part of the deal and partly what spurs us onwards, what draws us onwards, what allows other containers, which too will have cracks, so that there is growth there. There's a dynamic that's possible if we can relate to this in the right way.

It needs our openness—openness of mind, openness of heart and soul. It needs our eros, it needs our participation. We need to participate in this whole conundrum.

Something I've mentioned before: we tend to relate to these questions of ontology and epistemology in terms of wanting to know the truth. And I think that remains an important motivation and stimulus for that movement. But given everything I've said in this talk and previous talks, it may be that our eros and inquiry into truth and reality may not actually yield truth—yield some kind of final truth that we have then finished with, for the reasons that I've said. It may not deliver us to that truth.

But it may open up for us and yield all kinds of other gifts, some of which will be enormously helpful in different ways, all kinds of other discoveries and creations, just as with the example of Newton and his theories. And it may lead to soul-making.

So our inquiries into and wrestlings with ontology and epistemology can be considered not just in terms of the goal of truth, but of soul-making too. You understand? Why choose this ontology? Why even wrestle with these questions? Yes, in regard to truth, but also because of the soul-making.

So an individual idea, an individual logos or concept may itself be soul-making or supportive of soul-making. A whole conceptual framework—out of many different conceptual frameworks we can entertain—may or may not be soul-making. And the whole movement of inquiry into ontology and epistemology and truth, the legitimization of metaphysics or not—that whole inquiry itself may or may not be soul-making depending on how we're approaching it.

But we can expand the consciousness of our motivations so it's wider than just wanting to know the truth. We can actually realize that part of what's wrapped up in this is what delivers soul-making and what doesn't. And of course that may change not only in different periods in history and culture and place, but also right now in my practice.

Not everyone is going to get really passionately interested and even obsessed with these kinds of questions of ontology and epistemology. There are huge differences in souls and what they're drawn to and what they're drawn to at different times. But still, if I quote Harold Fish again—or actually expand on his quote, alter it slightly—you know, remember he said, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by the language which he discovers for signifying what is otherwise unsignifiable."

So human beings do not live by bread alone, but by the concepts and conceptual frameworks which they create and discover for signifying what is otherwise unsignifiable. That they create and discover to represent, to navigate, to orient, to open, to explore, to make coherent sense of the mystery of things—the mystery of being, the mystery of reality, and a human being's relationship with that in terms of epistemology and all else.

So this is something—whether or not we become really involved in the nitty-gritty of these philosophical questions, some will, some won't—still the importance of conceptual frameworks that have some rigor, some constraint, but also that we're open to create and discover. And mediated by that is the soul-making, or really as part of that is the soul-making. That is part of soul-making.

Again, to repeat something I've said in previous talks: to think that I can just throw away metaphysics, throw away and ignore, shrug and walk away from ontology, epistemology, metaphysical speculation—to think that I can avoid that in some kind of pure, non-conceptual relationship with the universe, with existence, to think that I can rid myself of all that—that's delusion.

It comes in, and we don't necessarily need to buy the limited old model that went with classical science and scientism. There are a lot of holes in that. There's an expansion possible there. And to enter into and open up to that expansion will support and nourish and give lifeblood to the whole exploration of sensing with soul and to our whole sense of existence.

CHAPTER 185

Dharma(s) Discovered and Created (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 2h24

> *In this opening talk from the series "Four Circles, Four Parables of Stone and Light," Rob Burbea undertakes a deep examination of what constitutes a spiritual tradition, particularly focusing on Buddha-dharma and its relationship to soul-making dharma. He explores the essential elements of a living tradition: shared values, practices, texts, and beliefs, while questioning the tensions between authority and autonomy, unity and differentiation.*
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> *Drawing on philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's insights, Burbea argues that healthy traditions are "partly constituted by continuous argument" about their core values and purposes. He examines how cultural influences inevitably shape traditions, citing examples from Jewish Kabbalah's integration of Neoplatonism and Christianity's incorporation of Greek philosophy. The talk addresses the role of mystery and incomprehensibility in keeping traditions alive, contrasting clear, rational presentations with more poetic, mysterious texts that invite ongoing interpretation.*
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> *Burbea also considers "creative mistakes" - how misunderstandings, mistranslations, and misinterpretations often contribute to a tradition's evolution. He references suttas like the Alagaddupama Sutta (MN 22) to show the Buddha's concern for protecting authentic dharma while acknowledging the inevitable diversity within traditions. This reflection is essential for anyone devoted to dharma practice, as our love for the teachings necessarily involves fantasies and images of tradition that shape our spiritual journey.*

As I mentioned earlier in this series of talks, some of what I want to speak about is really for the sake of bringing things to our collective attention—your individual attention, our collective attention—for consideration, for reflection, certain aspects, certain elements, certain strands, certain dimensions of things. That reflection and consideration obviously involves the mind, but also the heart, and even more so the soul. What does it mean to hear something, to ponder it, to mull it over, to digest and let it sink in, not just to the mind, not just to the heart, but also to the soul?

One of those strands or elements or aspects that I would like to bring into the light, to shine some light on, is the whole question of tradition, or the whole concept of tradition. I really mean mostly what we might call religious or spiritual traditions—even if you don't like either of those words, religious or spiritual, you know what I mean.

Perhaps that might strike some of you as a slightly strange subject for a dharma talk—to talk about tradition, or traditions, or what a tradition is and what's involved in tradition. I'm not sure. Of course, some of you might think, "Well, Rob, at this point, they're all pretty strange, the dharma talks." So either way.

But I'd like to reflect a little bit on tradition, sort of lay things out, unpack things, open them up and kind of look at what we've got there. Within that, particularly, I'm talking obviously about the tradition of Buddha-dharma, the Buddhist tradition. And within that, as part of what we want to look at and consider as well, is the place or how we might conceive of the place of, say, soul-making dharma with respect to Buddha-dharma. What's that relationship there? How do we conceive of soul-making dharma? How do we place it with regard to the tradition of Buddha-dharma? And what would it mean to talk about or to consider a soul-making dharma tradition?

It's too early to say anything like that, but if there were such a thing to evolve in the future, or a feeling of such a thing, a perception of such a thing among certain people, what might we unpack, lay out that would also have relevance to that kind of situation, that kind of sense of tradition, or a tradition like that?

Some people would say, well, we're at a point in history, humanity is at a point in history where it's important to reflect on traditions for all kinds of reasons. Yes, that may well be true—after modernism or in the throes of modernism or the dying throes of modernism or post-modernism or whatever. It might be true that we're at that juncture, at that point in history.

But one could ask: is the whole notion of a point in history really a reality? That's something I'll come back to. Is there really a point in history that we can agree on? We are at this point of history. This is what characterizes this point in history, this juncture. These are the salient features. This is what's important. This is what constitutes that juncture or that point.

Some would say it's important to talk about tradition and our sense of that, our expectations of that, our views of traditions, our relationships with traditions because of where humanity is at the current time historically. But I would say perhaps more importantly: if you love practice, and if you are devoted to practice, and if you love the teachings, then—as you've heard me point out before—where there is that kind of love and devotion, there is fantasy in the soul-making sense of the word.

There is a kind of narrative image that potentially has all the qualities of the imaginal, all the elements of the imaginal filled out with beauty and dimensionality and eros. So if you love practice and the teachings, if you're devoted to practice and the teachings,

there will be, wrapped up in that love and partly supporting that love, a fantasy of practice and yourself in practice and the teachings. That will involve fantasy of the tradition—an idea of the tradition, a sense of the tradition, a relationship with the tradition, an image of the tradition.

That fantasy also feeds your love. So there's again a mutual support, a mutual reinforcement, a mutual nourishment, a mutual dependency, if you like, of the love and the devotion on the one hand and the fantasy on the other. And they're not really even separable. So if you love practice and the teachings, and if you're devoted to the teachings, there will be the fantasy and there will be a sense of tradition as part of that larger fantasy, and you will care about these kinds of things that we're talking about tonight. You'll care about this question of tradition and what it involves and what to expect from it. It won't be abstract. It will matter to you. It will be of more than somewhat academic interest.

Not too long ago, I was speaking with a colleague, Stephen Batchelor, and was asking him how it was going with Bodhi College. He was telling me a few things, and one of the things he said was that they had put together a course and advertised it online about the Buddhist roots of mindfulness—really looking at the origins in the Buddhist teachings, in the Pali Canon, of contemporary mindfulness practices and teachings. He said that surprising to them was the fact that virtually no one registered for that course. There was very little interest from people who were either mindfulness practitioners or participants in mindfulness courses or mindfulness teachers or therapeutic mindfulness workers or whatever. And they were surprised by that.

On reflection, in a way, I'm not that surprised because it may be that in the way mindfulness is promoted in some circles these days and the way it's practiced and related to by many is really as a technique, or perhaps a set of techniques, for the alleviation of suffering—so that one lives one's life as one lives it, and one just incorporates these techniques as sort of useful and helpful strategies to reduce stress, anxiety, suffering, and dis-ease.

As such, as just a technique that has some utility in relieving stress and anxiety, pain for example, it remains just that—a kind of utilitarian technique. And it rarely, or for many people, it won't ever become more than that. They may practice mindfulness every day for the rest of their lives with a certain kind of commitment—let's not call it devotion, let's call it commitment. A certain kind of steadiness of commitment is important to them, and it's really helpful, and that's great.

But it's never more than that. It's never more than a technique for reducing suffering, so there isn't the kind of falling in love with practice and the ethos of practice and the rich constellation of dimensions and aspects and elements that gather around and make up something like a Buddhist practice.

For a person who's simply relating to mindfulness as a technique that's helpful in their lives, that's wonderful, that's great. But there won't be the falling in love. There won't therefore be the fantasy. And there won't be the sense of caring much about tradition and therefore caring much about the past and the stories and the history.

So in a way, on reflection, I wasn't too surprised to hear that from Stephen—that there was very little uptake or interest in such a course. If you love, and I'm assuming most people who listen to this talk will be people who love practice deeply, who have deep devotion to practice and to teachings, there will be a fantasy, there will therefore be implicitly some sense of and care about and kind of fantasy of an eros for tradition and everything that's implied in there.

Like I said at the beginning, I just want to bring some things to light, bring some of the aspects of this question of tradition to light, lay it out. I don't want to conclude too much from that. It's almost like just, as I said, laying out some things on the ground together. We can have a look. I don't want to impose any conclusions that I might have on that kind of laying out of material and considerations. I would more give it to you to perhaps make your conclusions, but also, as I said, to ponder, to reflect: How does this sit with me? How do all these considerations or these aspects, when we lay them out and look at them and say, "Yes, there's that and there's that and that and didn't think of that"—how does it land with you? How does it sit in your heart, in your soul, in your mind? What's the response of your being? And what's the responsibility of your being? Again, the responsibility of your soul, if you care deeply.

If you love deeply, again, it goes with duty. If you love deeply, if you're devoted, there's image around, there's eros around. Things are on the verge of or on their way to being fully imaginable, and part of that will be duty, and part of the duty will be to the teachings, to the tradition.

So in laying all this out, again, I don't want to force any conclusions that I might have or any perspectives that I might have too much. Some of that will be inevitable just in the nature of the situation—it's me talking, I'm in the role of the teacher here, some authority with that, some clout with that—but really I'm more interested in the process of how it sits, how it's digested, how it's related to and held in your heart.

Certainly my intention is not to be primarily deconstructive or destructive of loyalties and notions of tradition. Some might say, "Oh, you're saying some dangerous things." I'm not sure. I don't know about that. I think it's just a matter of maturity and honesty and consciousness and openness of mind. And then what do we do with this? How do we assimilate it, consider it, reflect on it? Where do we move from here? How do we look towards the past, towards the present, towards the future, inwards and outwards, at each other?

So it's really for you and about your process. And as much as possible, I just want to lay some things out for that kind of heart, mind and soul consideration.

If we just bring up the word tradition and immediately consider what comes to mind when we think about tradition—what is a tradition? What do we mean by tradition? And even more pointedly or relevantly, what do we mean or what's involved, what needs to be involved and included in a healthy tradition, if we might use such a term, or an alive, a living tradition? What elements and constituents might be necessary to form a healthy living tradition that retains some coherence and some vitality?

If we just think about it briefly—and I don't mean at all to be comprehensive, I just want to throw some things in a pot right now. But some of what I want to throw into that pot may not be immediately obvious when we think of what's involved in tradition. I don't intend to be comprehensive at this point, and actually through none of this talk am I intending to be comprehensive. There's other material that I've explored before around these subjects, so I don't want to repeat too much. But I do want to unearth or bring to light some elements to consider that, as I said, might not be obvious to many of us at first.

So what do you think of when we say tradition? What do you think is included or implied? If we just think almost off the top of the head, tradition implies a community for a start. So tradition has to be more than one person. And that community has to be spread, if you like. It has to exist in the present, so to speak. There's a community that extends in the present between people. And it also has to have a tie with the past, a flow from the past, and hopefully into the future.

So it's a community in the present with a past, with a connection, a feed from the past.

And that community—what's included? Again, we're just kind of throwing into a pot: what's included, what's necessary for a healthy living tradition? That community that constitutes a tradition needs to have certain things shared. So one is values. There needs to be a good degree of shared values. Some of what we can put in that part of val-

ues is the goals—what goals, what aims, what ends are considered valuable? And so there has to be a kind of common ground among the members of the community, extending both from the past to the present into the future, and also in the present among constituent members of that community, of that sangha.

There needs to also be shared practices, shared rituals or customs. Actually, let me open this up as a question rather than insisting there needs to be. I'd rather put it as a question. Does there need to be, or to what extent does there need to be in this community shared values, shared goals, shared practices, shared rituals, shared customs?

To what extent does there need to be shared stories—anecdotes from the past of characters, beings, teachers, disciples, practitioners from the tradition? To what extent does there need to be a shared history of that tradition? This is the history of our tradition. To what extent does there need to be a shared vocabulary, where certain words become meaningful, important, charged, rich, and also function powerfully as shorthands that people perhaps know what you're talking about when you say "Four Noble Truths" or "mindfulness" or whatever?

So shared vocabulary, shared beliefs. Again, really asking: to what extent does a healthy, vital, and living community need to share beliefs? Need shared beliefs, shared conceptual frameworks, logoi, and shared ontological commitments, which in a way are partly beliefs—what I talked about in one of the earlier talks.

Somehow, if we're going to feel part of the same community—me and this person, whoever it is, me and this group—do we actually have to share ontological commitments, a sense of what we believe and feel and invest in as truth? Including the truth with implicit epistemological considerations of what we believe are the ways to come by knowledge of the truth?

Does a living, healthy tradition need shared texts? So what is handed, what comes to us—agama in Pali and Sanskrit is often the word used for the texts, the suttas. It means literally "what has come," what has arrived, what has been received. So there is some body of received text—it could be oral, it doesn't have to be written—and that body forms a focus and a reference point and hopefully rich material for study. So there's a possible process of getting more acquainted with, more steeped in, developing understanding of this material, this agama, this text or received teachings.

But not only study—also for veneration. We can put that in inverted commas. So that might have a very obviously religious character where a piece of text is venerated to the extent that it's put in a stupa and people circumambulate the stupa or kiss the text or bow down to the text, even if they're not practicing it or don't even understand what

it says. It could be that kind of religious character of veneration, or it could just be veneration in the sense of respecting the authority of that text. And it holds a certain kind of immovable or unbudgeable power. One has to reckon with what's written in that text.

So text, received teachings—oral, written—for study, for veneration, and also for interpretation, or interpretations, plural. This is where I really want to come back to this: to what extent does there need to be some focus material that is, or does it need to be, to what extent does it need to be open to interpretations, interpretation and a plurality of interpretations? So that it's not just one-dimensional, one unilinear text or material. Is there something in the vitality and health of tradition that actually needs root texts, core texts, canonical texts to have a certain openness to them, or to be related to them as if they had a certain openness?

I'm going to come back to this, but there's perhaps a certain tension between latitude of interpretation and the letter—if that's the right way of putting it. So that there's the letter, there's the text, there's the teaching, there's the recording, there's the oral transmission or whatever. And then is there a latitude of interpretation? I want to come back to that point later.

Or another way of saying it might be: does there need to be something in the tradition—not necessarily someone, but something—that is regarded as authoritative somehow? The authority resides in that text, if not in that person or persons or body or hierarchy or whatever. In that text, does there need to be something that's regarded as authoritative? And in that way, functions as a kind of immovable anchor, something one needs to reckon with.

But is there a tension between that need for something authoritative—and I'll put that word "authoritative" also in inverted commas—on the one hand, and also a need for some autonomy of the individuals who are involved in that tradition, who are members of that tradition? Is there some kind of tension? Are both these elements needed?

Something needs to be authoritative - perhaps someone, but maybe just something like a text. And there needs to be some autonomy allowed, some wiggle room, some latitude of movement, interpretation, and practice. Maybe both elements are necessary.

How much diversity does there need to be? Is there a minimum amount of diversity required in the tradition? Is there a maximum? What kinds of diversity are we talking about? Diversity of all kinds - not just personalities, ethnicities, gender, and sexual orientations, but all kinds of diversity.

Consider, for example, diversity of directions within the tradition. There are suttas in the Pali Canon where the Buddha describes his disciples gathered in Jeta's Grove or some other location. He points out that in one corner of the field or forest, there's a group of monks sitting with Moggallana, one of his two chief disciples, interested in developing their siddhis - their supernormal powers, their psychic abilities. Over there are monks sitting with another teacher, developing something else. In yet another area, monks sit with Sariputra, focusing on jhana or some other practice.

Within the larger community and tradition, there existed this diversity of directions - what people wanted to develop remained available as a range of choices within the community.

To what extent does a living tradition need to include both people who are further along the path - more advanced, more senior - as well as those who are newer, more junior, just beginning with the teachings, not yet developed in their understanding, practice, and knowledge?

You can already hear in what I've been saying that none of these elements is actually simple. We might think we can just define tradition as involving "this, this, and this." While I'm not trying to be comprehensive here, none of these aspects are simple when you pause to consider what's involved, what might be involved, what's healthy, what becomes too much, or what's not enough.

One question I want us to consider - and if you love practice and teachings, these questions will be important to you, if not now, then one day - is this: We've been discussing shared elements that need to be present for a living, healthy tradition. If we turn this around and ask what differences, what absences of shared ground become fatal for a tradition - fracturing it too much, rendering it dead or lifeless or stagnant, or causing it to explode in some way - what would those be?

At this point in history (if we can use that word, that idea of a time in history, which is itself questionable), this strikes me as a particularly interesting question.

For example, as I mentioned in another talk, if you're going to practice soul-making dyad or triad work - any group doing soul-making practice together - and there's not a shared conceptual framework, it might not work. It might prove frustrating and disappointing.

There's also this strange necessity, even for deep friendship, to share ontological commitments regarding the world, cosmology, and the nature of human beings. Would ontological commitments be an example of an aspect whose absence as shared ground becomes fatal for a tradition? When ontological commitments aren't shared or don't

overlap enough, relationships can't really flourish because the difference is so basic. One set of ontological commitments versus another creates such a fundamental difference that it forms a fracture, an abyss. Two camps within a tradition hardly constitute a coherent tradition anymore.

All these considerations go into the pot, and very quickly we realize that none of these elements is actually simple. They all bear further reflection, further consideration, further opening out and feeling into.

Some aspects of what's involved or necessary to include in a living, healthy tradition might be less obvious than the lists I've just gone through quite quickly. And some things might be far less obvious.

So I have a question: Is it necessary for a living, healthy tradition - a vital tradition - to include some element of mystery or something mysterious, perhaps even to the point of relative incomprehensibility? This could range from the more poetic to the almost completely opaque.

Does it need some element of mystery, of something that's not clearly comprehensible? There's a question. That element is, to me at least, less apparent in, say, Pali Canon Buddha-Dharma as it's come to us, certainly in the West.

In some living traditions in, say, Southeast Asia—in Thailand and Cambodia—the actual tradition of Pali Canon Buddhism is so wrapped up with other influences. For example, in Cambodia, there was actually Mahayana at some point in history for a while. So there's a lot of Mahayana teachings wrapped up in Cambodian Buddhism. The vestiges of that are still alive and color and shape and influence the tenor and thrust and range and quality of Cambodian Theravadan Buddhism, so-called.

In Thailand, if you talk to people who've been monks and nuns there—Westerners—it's totally imbued. It's still retained, for example, the belief that you find all over the Pali Canon: the belief in devas and angels and wood spirits and the spirit of this tree and the deva that lives in that forest. And that's very much part of the whole tenor, flavor, range, color of that version of Theravadan Buddhism.

But as we've received it in the West, it's less apparent, this element of mystery. It's become more a kind of presentation of something that's more clear-cut, rational, it seems to me—though it may still be there.

If I look in other traditions, this actually occurred to me because I was reading the translator's introduction of a book called *Gates of Light*, *Shaare Orah*, by Joseph Gikatilla, who was a medieval Jewish teacher. The translator, Avi Weinstein, was com-

menting that this book was written at around the same time as the Zohar. Zohar sometimes means something like Book of Splendor or Radiance. It was written around the same time, this book by Joseph Gikatilla called *The Gates of Light*.

But there were differences, and those differences were very influential in the subsequent histories and receptions of those two books—the Zohar and Rabbi Gikatilla's book, *Shaare Orah*, *Gates of Light*. Just to name three of the differences:

One was that the Zohar was actually written in the thirteenth century in Castile, Provence, that area, but was presented—it was faked, if you like—ostensibly to be a rediscovered text that was written in the second century, hundreds and hundreds of years earlier. It was presented as... scholars are now pretty unanimous it was definitely written in thirteenth century Provence, Castile, Catalonia, but it was presented by its author, or main authors, as being an ancient text that was unearthed.

Secondly, it was written in Aramaic, which was no longer a vernacular, no longer a current language, and it was written in a fairly abstruse Aramaic, in a strange kind of version of the language.

And thirdly, it's a very opaque text. What does this mean? What are they talking about? It's full of poetry and symbolism that one's not quite sure what they're referring to, with multi-layered densities of allusions. It's a very mystical, poetic text.

Gates of Light, on the other hand, Rabbi Gikatilla's text, was written in contemporary language, easy to understand, a clear exposition, taking one through stages of what was ostensibly similar material in terms of Jewish mysticism and mystical teachings in Kabbalah.

Ironically, perhaps from a certain point of view, what happened historically was that *Gates of Light*, this clear text written in contemporary language, designed to be easy to understand, became not very popular at all. Not that many people read it. Whereas the Zohar became an incredibly popular text—venerated, studied, commentary upon commentary written upon it. It became almost canonical, not without some contention, almost canonical in the tradition, in the Jewish religion, and garnered great respect and veneration there, despite the fact—or perhaps because—it remained baffling to many people who could not understand the language, the Aramaic, and certainly by many people who, even if they could understand the Aramaic, found it pretty mysterious what it was talking about.

You could also say it was open because of its poetic nature, because of the mysterious language, because of the mystery of what it meant. Because of all that, it could become an object for eros. It could contain within its depths and mysteries and darknesses and allusions and poetry a wider latitude of interpretation, an infinity of interpretation.

It could become, because of its depths and mysteries, because it was kind of unfathomable, because one couldn't simply reduce it, because it had the beyonds, an object of the erotic imaginal. One could have eros, and it itself becomes an imaginal object —the Zohar, this book, this teaching, this tradition.

And because it was ancient, or because it was presented as ancient, it could quickly accrue the kind of eros for the ancient, because ancient implies tradition. And as I said, where there's love, the fantasy of tradition—the self in relation to the tradition and to the history in the past, the fantasy of the past, the fantasy of the characters in the past.

Partly the Zohar involves passages relating the wandering through Galilee of a small band of mystics, visiting different places in this beautiful land and discussing different mystical interpretations of Torah. So again, in the fantasy of tradition, if I have a love of a tradition, it involves characters from that history, from that tradition, becoming imaginal characters for me, that I have eros towards, that are important to me.

So because it was presented as ancient, because also of the relative obfuscation and opacity of it, because it wasn't clear, it allowed more interpretation. It had these dimensions of unfathomability. So it's interesting, also in the language, in the poetic language and the lack of clarity in the language.

Here is the continuation with the same tone and style:

Very interesting. I have this question: Does a living, healthy tradition, if it wants to have rich soil, need elements that are mysterious, even incomprehensible, certainly poetic?

This is less obvious, certainly, in some of what we have come to receive in the West as Pali Canon Buddhism. Maybe less apparent there. But certainly, if you look at Mahayana Buddhism as it's practiced in the West, or Vajrayana Buddhism, absolutely. The original Tantric texts are so baffling to us. If you pick up the Guhyasamaja Tantra or something and read just a translation of it, it's pretty out there and baffling. What are they talking about? Why are they talking about this? How am I supposed to relate to all this?

What's very common in the Vajrayana tradition is for people to read less of the texts in their original form, but to read commentaries on the texts, and even commentaries on the commentaries. This has become much more usual. The commentaries them-

selves become rich. There were actually two Chandrakirtis, two famous Chandrakirtis in the history of Buddhism, and the second Chandrakirti was famous for his tantric commentaries, particularly on the Guhyasamaja Tantra. There, as in the Jewish tradition, there are four levels of commentary. Each sentence, even each word, is given four levels of meaning. Similarly, in Kabbalistic interpretations or commentaries on the Bible, they speak of the obvious meaning, the hidden meaning, the symbolic meaning, and so forth.

The text itself, because of its strangeness and mysteriousness and partial incomprehensibility, its poetic nature, lends itself, offers itself as soil for image, for eros, but also for the proliferation of growth out of that soil—further interpretation, the richness of interpretations, commentaries upon commentaries, multiple perspectives. And the mystery never goes, because the core text remains mysterious and open.

Consider Christianity. Of the four canonical gospels, Saint John's Gospel is really the odd one out. It reads so differently. It's so mystical in its flavor and in what it says. Even the opening sentence is very famous: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the darkness did not overcome it." The mystery of that kind of text raises the question: How necessary is that kind of strand and text within the body of a healthy tradition?

Or again, in Christianity, the whole theology that accompanies the Trinity—Trinitarian theology of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It's mysterious. What you get is lots of interpretations, lots of rational explanations, but it remains at its core a kind of mystery that retains its mysteriousness, its unfathomability, its beyonds, its poetic nature at minimum, its mystical impenetrability at maximum.

So that's a question—something in this consideration, this laying out, this unearthing and bringing to light that I would like to explore together with you.

It's obvious to say that a tradition is embedded in and part of a larger culture, and that it contributes to that culture. Sometimes it contributes in very obvious and large ways, sometimes less obviously. Even if the tradition is very much a fringe tradition and very much against the stream of the larger society and culture, it's still embedded in that culture, part of it, and contributes to that wider culture.

But the opposite is also true. The culture contributes to tradition, whatever that tradition is—the tradition of teachings or practices. The culture, the contemporary culture and the history of that culture, contributes to and forms part of, and certainly shapes and informs, the tradition. This is probably obvious, but can we unpack that a little more and amplify our considerations of that fact and our awareness of it?

If we look at other traditions, consider Judaism. There was the importing, the confluence, the inclusion, the integration, the digestion, assimilation, the reckoning with Greek philosophy, principally Plato and Aristotle, into the body of the Jewish tradition. As far as I understand, the first person to do this was Philo of Alexandria. He's not well known, but he's beginning to attract more attention by virtue of the fact that he was the first person to consider the whole of Jewish teachings and traditions and the Torah in the light of Plato's teaching particularly, and to try to present the Jewish teachings to Greeks and Greek culture in a way that would be understandable to them.

He was quite a significant figure because he was the first person in Western history to do that. This movement of integration of either or both Plato and Aristotle as thought and philosophy and views into Judaism, into Christianity, into Islam—it was an undeniable fact, an important event, an important process in all three of these traditions. And he was the first person to do that.

Then, successively, there were different periods in history where even further integration occurred. Looking again at the Zohar and the blossoming—or birth, if you like—of Kabbalistic teachings in Judaism during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in southwestern Europe, these developments were very much influenced by Neoplatonic teachings.

There was really—and "influence" is even an understatement—a marriage, an integration, a mingling, a birth, a co-opting of those Neoplatonic teachings within Jewish thought. This represented a reconfiguring, a representation, a rethinking of Jewish mystical teachings through the incorporation of Neoplatonic philosophy.

A little later, somewhere in the Middle Ages, Maimonides—the famous and very influential Jewish teacher and rabbi—favored more of Aristotle's teachings. So what you also find in the three Abrahamic religions is a wrestling with, or contest, or dispute between two different influences from Greek philosophy: one camp more influenced by Plato, one camp more influenced by Aristotle.

To complicate matters, there were texts believed to have been written by Aristotle that were actually Platonic and had been misattributed. So people were quoting Aristotle—or thinking they were quoting Aristotle and claiming they were—when it was actually Platonic teaching. But all this material was worked into the clay, into the fabric of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In Christianity, I'm not entirely sure where Augustine of Hippo stood on this relationship. He grew up in pagan culture and would have been very familiar with Platonic teachings before converting to Christianity. Exactly how he viewed that relationship, or

whether they were integrated in his thinking, I'm uncertain. But certainly Pseudo-Dionysius, whom I mentioned earlier, was very Platonically influenced, and his teachings became enormously influential in the Church—I believe he's from the fifth century.

Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages was enormously influential and very consciously borrowed from and worked with Aristotelian philosophy, relying on Aristotle's teachings for his interpretation and remodeling of Christian theology and philosophy.

All of this represents an enormous integration, influence, and incorporation of Platonic and Aristotelian thought into the three Abrahamic religions. For me, I almost try to imagine those religions without these influences, and it's difficult. They would be so different. My gut reaction is that they simply don't attract me without these more sophisticated developments and integrations of thought—of Plato's teachings, for example.

To add to this complexity, people traveled, talked with each other, and met across traditions. At some periods and places in history, interreligious dialogue was very open, encouraged, and fertile. What historians and academics are now tracing shows that there was Sufi influence—certain practices or views came into Jewish mystical teachings via the Sufis. There was obviously some meeting, dialogue, and mutual learning between Jewish Kabbalists and Sufis, with influences likely flowing both ways. When you get to Christian Kabbalah, it's rooted in Jewish Kabbalah, and so forth.

All of this exists as an inevitable part of history—the history of a tradition where culture contributes, sometimes in ways that are absolutely fundamental. It can almost change the constitution of a religion and its fundamental tenets. The whole thinking behind it, the conceptual structures, can become different, even though it may be wrapped up in the same vocabulary.

What I'm partly asking is: what are the implications of this fact?

Don't think this only applies to non-Buddhist traditions in the past—it's still happening today in the Abrahamic religions. You need only look at modern Western Buddhadharma, I think. Our contemporary Western Buddhadharma—the insight meditation tradition and other modern Western Buddhist traditions—includes so much of what has become commonplace, accepted psychological concepts, notions, beliefs, and aspirations about what constitutes health versus illness.

When we talked about self, the whole notion of self that we not just believe and think about, but actually feel, is culturally conditioned. What we regard as a healthy self, what constitutes a healthy relationship—all of this is very much given to us by contemporary Western culture of the last 120 or 150 years, since Freud and everything that emerged from that development.

This cultural influence is, for the most part, really woven in. Sometimes it's more apparent when a teacher consciously incorporates considerations from mainstream psychology into their Dharma teaching. But even when it's not explicit, it's there in the background, influencing and informing, being incorporated.

Modern Western Buddhadharma also commonly includes elements of what is really Advaita Vedanta. You can locate passages in Buddhist texts that seem to say something similar, but you can also make a strong case that this isn't actually Buddhist teaching—it's something else entirely. Yet this has become absorbed into the presentation of modern Western Dharma in many contexts.

I'm uncertain whether the Diamond Heart teachings or the Ridwan teachings are being incorporated and mixed in by some teachers in ways where you can no longer see the seams and divisions—where they become part of what the Dharma is understood to be.

Neuroscientific notions, beliefs, points of view, and models increasingly permeate our dharma understanding. Sometimes this integration appears quite explicitly—a teacher will present neuroscience as parallel evidence or explanation for jhana states, or describe how mindfulness functions in the brain. Other times, these scientific frameworks operate quietly in the background, forming an underlying belief system about what a human being fundamentally is.

This contemporary influence is already deeply embedded in our present dharma tradition. The contribution of culture—its mixing, infiltration, and shaping of contemporary dharma—represents a powerful formative force. Cultural conditions, artifacts, and trends all participate in molding the current state of our tradition.

Consider the development of Buddhist Tantra, once popularly dismissed as merely co-opting Hindu Tantra—supposedly an assimilation of alien, impure elements contaminating Buddhism from Hinduism. More careful scholarship reveals this characterization as inaccurate. Buddhist Tantra actually proved highly influential on Hindu Tantra, and over time, they undoubtedly influenced each other reciprocally.

Sometimes this cultural exchange occurs through simple osmosis, while other times it represents deliberate, carefully worked-out integration. In Jewish history, for instance, the encounter with Neoplatonism produced sophisticated syntheses in Kabbalah, Philo, and Maimonides. Similarly, Christianity's engagement with Greek philosophy flowered in Aquinas's systematic theology. These represent very deliberate, careful integrations driven by a sense that these developments needed inclusion, that traditions must grapple with and consider new influences.

But sometimes the process resembles unconscious osmosis—almost blind absorption of surrounding cultural currents.

As we examine this dynamic more closely, what does it imply? What does it ask of us? How do we feel about this reality? What stance should we take toward these formative influences?

Contemporary culture functions as a formative condition even when tradition founders actively oppose it. Opposition itself creates influence—the contemporary culture becomes a foil, something to contrast against, thus exercising formative power through negation.

I recall learning about the ancient Vedic practice of maintaining three sacred fires—whether in homes or temples, I'm uncertain. These fires held profound significance in Vedic religion and ritual, connected to creation mythology. By keeping them burning, practitioners sustained the cosmos's functioning and order—ensuring tomorrow's sunrise, seasonal rains, the universe's continued operation. The fires represented or even constituted elements of the Vedic creation myth, so maintaining them meant participating in the ongoing recreation and life of the cosmos itself.

The Buddha encountered this widespread practice and turned it completely around. Rather than keeping three fires alive, he taught extinguishing three fires. He identified these fires with three kilesas—three defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion. The goal became extinguishing these fires completely, preventing their return.

One etymology of nibbana points to this very image: blowing out a fire. Full awakening becomes defined as the extinction of greed, aversion, and delusion—the complete extinguishing of these fires.

The Buddha took something prominent in contemporary consciousness—a practice with significant cultural influence and popularity—and opposed it directly. Instead of creating more, the path aims to end creation, to escape the wheel of birth and death, to step off the cycle of rebirth entirely.

This example illuminates how profoundly the Buddhist teachings were conditioned by their cultural context, even through opposition. It raises a fascinating question: if the Vedic creation myth had featured two fires instead of three, and Brahmin practice had involved maintaining two or four fires rather than three, might we have developed a dharma teaching about two kilesas or four kilesas instead?

This conditioning through cultural context—whether by embrace or opposition—shapes even our most fundamental spiritual categories.

I mean, certainly a case can be made to reduce the kilesas to two anyway, because one could say greed and aversion are simply two sides of the same coin. When we're aversive to something, we're actually greedy for something else. When we're greedy for something, we're actually averse to its opposite. When I'm aversive to pain, it's because I want pleasure or neutrality. When I'm after whatever has a pleasant taste, I don't want the absence of pleasant taste, and I certainly don't want unpleasant taste.

But my main point is really about the cultural conditioning—the formative influences of culture, even when they operate through opposition.

Something similar is true about the twelve links of dependent origination. These links, so central to the Dharma alongside the three kilesas and their extinguishing, were also twelve aspects of a Vedic creation myth. Again, the Buddha was in a culture where that was the belief, the dominant paradigmatic presentation, and his teaching was formed as he wanted to differentiate it from that, to spin it a different way.

The creation myth was saying, "You know what you're creating with those twelve links? You're creating dukkha. That's what you're creating. Let's not create—let's stop creating. Let's stop those twelve links." And they have pretty much the same names, even, I think, for the most part, as those twelve elements of the Vedic creation myth.

I have a strong suspicion—I don't know, but I have a strong suspicion—that the same is somehow true of the five aggregates. I'm not the first practitioner, and certainly not the first teacher, to comment that they're kind of a strange system when you look at the aggregates. It doesn't really fit together as a sort of human psychology—why those divisions? What a strange thing.

Is it just the case that these were the primary elements of human being that were, at the Buddha's time, popular appropriation points for the sense of self? So that people would either claim that they were the body—there was certainly a philosophy that "we are the body" that existed. I know another philosophy that existed at that time, another teaching, another religious tradition, was "No, your true nature is bliss"—in other words, pleasant vedanā. Or obviously consciousness, or intention, which might be closer to some contemporary cycles. "You are your mental formations and your intentions." Or even perception. People would have certain jhanic perceptions—for example, one would come to the seventh jhana of nothingness, and one would take that to be who one was.

These were extant teachings, current contemporary teachings in different spiritual traditions and philosophies around at the time of the Buddha. So I wonder: did he originate the teaching of the five aggregates, or did he just look around him and see,

"Okay, so this school is identifying with that, that school is identifying with that—claiming that to be the true self—that school is identifying this to be the true self," and simply collect them together for the purposes of saying, "You know what? None of these are the self."

Again, it's a Dharma concept that was formed, or perhaps was formed in opposition, but still culturally conditioned.

But if all that is the case, then we must ask: how real are these things? I mean, we can see they're not real because of emptiness and the kinds of reflection I mentioned—like greed and aversion being two sides of the same coin. There are many other ways they're not real. Any of these links, and deep practice into emptiness, will show exactly that. There are no aggregates, really. There are no links of dependent origination, really. There are no kilesas, really. They don't form clear-cut, demarcated things. They have no independent existence.

But we can add another level of emptiness and say: they're also culturally conditioned. How real are they? So easily in our minds, they can become dogmas or truths as if they're referring to real things.

The larger point here is that cultural conditioning can happen via opposition—via a tradition wanting to demarcate itself, differentiate itself from what is around it, or wanting to push off in a different direction. This can happen in all kinds of different ways.

Just the other day, I was talking with someone whose job involves working with the Dalit Buddhist communities in India. As you probably know, Dr. Ambedkar was a Hindu who converted to Buddhism. There's a movement of untouchables—if you know the Indian caste system, there's a gross injustice there. There's a tiered hierarchy of castes and classes in India, and the lowest class—even lower than the lowest class—is untouchables. They're outside caste altogether. This whole thing is very much drawn along ethnic lines, so it's basically a metaphysically backed institutional racism and social injustice that has gone on for centuries.

So centuries, millennia. And in converting some of these people—in some of these untouchables converting to Buddhism—they then fall outside the scope of the Hindu caste system. This person was telling me that in working with those communities, he thought of me because a lot of the Buddhism they propagate in that Dalit community of converts is a kind of rational secular Buddhism. He said, "I thought of you because I know you've contested the whole premises and objectives of secularism and even secular Buddhism."

But I thought immediately: it's all contextual. And we spoke about it. It's all contextual. I've said this before—I see whatever I teach as utterly contextual. What I say, what emphasis I give, what direction the teachings evolve in, depends on the context.

I find myself speaking almost exclusively in the West, to people who live in a predominantly secular culture of secular modernity, in a situation where that kind of ideation—both within and outside of Buddha Dharma—has enormous clout. In a way, much of the soul-making Dharma teachings are placed in that context and in response to, in dialogue with, the dominance of secular modernity thinking.

Were I or we in a situation like the untouchables in India, where one is actually being subjected to great injustice—unthinkable injustice—based on some kind of metaphysical mumbo-jumbo and the hyped-up, mysterious authority of a certain spirituality and cosmology, might the soul-making dharma actually be given quite a different spin? Might it have a whole different element because it would be responding to that context and the dominance of that paradigm?

So, laying some things out. Where does it land? How does it sit with you?

All kinds of influences come through integration, but also through opposition—integration through opposition, if you like—from culture. Again, if we cast our eyes about us in contemporary Buddha Dharma, or even wider than Buddha Dharma, we see the prevalence of mindfulness teachings, which is wonderful in the West and is doing so much to help so many people. There's a whole range in how it's presented and the context in which it's presented.

I know only very little about it because I'm not really in that world. But there's some kind of more popular end of things—pop mindfulness—where mindfulness is defined as non-judgmental awareness. That definition has actually become quite prevalent, sometimes even feeding back into Buddhism itself and what might be called Buddha Dharma as well as secular mindfulness. Not everywhere, just certain strands.

Defining mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness can be enormously helpful. Why is it helpful? It's helpful partly because of our culture of judgmentalism. Again, even that formulation of the tradition was formed in a context.

But if you study the Satipatthana Sutta, the original discourse on mindfulness, you realize that this definition of mindfulness as non-judgmental awareness or presence, as well as the range of those teachings, leaves out so much of what's in the basic fundamental discourse on mindfulness, which is only a few pages long.

Completely gone are, for example, the death reflections and the vivid imagination of one's death and one's rotting corpse. The whole section on foulness of the body. What seems to be gone sometimes is the whole fourth foundation of mindfulness. So there's non-judgmental awareness of body sensations, non-judgmental awareness of feelings and pleasantness and impulses, non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, moods, mind states. But the whole fourth foundation, which has a slightly different kind of tack and flavor, is often gone.

If I read about the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, a lot of it is exactly what would be called, by some teachers of modern mindfulness, "discrepancy-based processing"—which I've touched on before in the Eros and Feta talks. That phrase, discrepancy-based processing, was a kind of foil to the presentation of mindfulness.

Discrepancy-based processing is when I'm in this moment feeling there's a discrepancy between what this moment is and what I would like it to be. I'm processing or relating to or viewing, sensing the moment through a lens that's based on that discrepancy and wanting to move towards what I think or feel the moment should be.

The teaching is: that's fine sometimes. When the tiger is chasing you, it's fine. When you have to catch your train on time, it's fine. To a certain extent, some of that is important in life. But mindfulness is something different. Mindfulness is non-discrepancy-based processing.

Yet reading the fourth foundation, it's hard to take that conclusion away from it. The Buddha talks about feeding the seven factors of awakening.

What feeds the seven factors of awakening? What starves them? The Buddha instructs us to feed them and to stop starving them. The same applies to the hindrances—these are all categories in the fourth foundation of mindfulness.

Very much the thrust of that teaching in the fourth foundation is about feeding and starving. It's about doing. It's about discrepancy. Why do I need to feed the factors of awakening? Because there's a discrepancy between the current state of how active and alive and well and flourishing my factors of awakening are, and where they could be or where it would be better if they were. The same applies in reverse with the hindrances—there are too many hindrances, and it would be better if there were fewer. There's a discrepancy between where things are and where it would be better if they were.

So one is looking in terms of discrepancy and then instructed to act on that discrepancy in the direction of the desired outcome. Many of the other concepts in the fourth foundation are really what I would see as ways of looking, or lenses—looking in terms

of the aggregates, looking in terms of the six sense spheres or sense modalities. This isn't bare attention; it's attention through a certain lens. Why? Because that lens is liberating. Because it's a way of looking that liberates. It's a seeing that frees.

So this whole presentation that we sometimes get in mindfulness as "non-judgmental awareness"—I think I know where it comes from. So many people struggle in our culture of fractured communities, ego psychology, and individualism. There's so much pain that comes from judgment and self-judgment, judging oneself and one's experience and where one is. So it's understandable that mindfulness would be given that kind of—I say spin, but it's more than a spin. It's a kind of truncation, if you like.

Yet when we compare it to what we have of the original discourse, it's like, wow, it really is a truncation and a partial view at best. As I said, the fourth foundation does have the encouragement and directive to discern, to notice the difference between what is and what could be, what is and what would be better, and to direct oneself towards that—to cultivate this, to cut that, to remove it, to strive to engender this or that.

Now I'm not saying this as a criticism of that kind of mindfulness. I'm really, really not criticizing even popular mindfulness approaches. I don't myself have much enthusiasm for this sort of attempted project of "what the Buddha really taught"—this looking back in history and trying to shave off everything, trying to find the original teachings pure from any accretions or cultural conditionings. I don't subscribe to that project. I think it's not necessarily helpful, or rather it can be held in a way that's not necessarily helpful and not that interesting.

I've said this before, but Nietzsche has a phrase—I can't remember the German, but it translates as something like "the fantasy of origins"—this belief that the original thing is better than what developed over time. Of course this is absolutely commonplace in the way most people in a religious tradition think of that tradition. Of course the Buddha's the real deal. Of course the origin and the start is the real deal.

But might it be that the real deal is something that's grown into over time, like a human being, like anything else that can grow? That the better or fuller or certainly richer—almost more real—thing is more in what it moves towards over time rather than at the origin? Anyway, this whole project of historicizing or historiographing is exactly that—it's a project.

I would say, along with a number of other contemporary philosophers, that in the project of history we project backwards. We can't help but bring our agendas, our spins, our perspectives, our contemporary perspectives, which are influenced by all kinds of cultural conditions, cultural valuings of what's important, what's significant, what's rel-

evant, what's not relevant. Our own personal psychology is woven into all this, our motivations. So what we select as a central thread or central teaching, or what we dismiss as "just a cultural accretion" or "an impurity"—that's all very much conditioned by our own contemporary culture and by our own psychology. And we project that back.

So history, in a way, is not one thing. Referring back to what I said at the beginning of the talk: is there a point in history that we can say, "This is the point in history we're at now," and we can all agree, "Oh yes, that's the point in history we're at"? There are histories, there are versions, there are spins, there are perspectives, there are stories woven, all coming, in each case, from a different set of conditions that form that perspective, those agendas, those spins, those selectings of certain threads.

There's a quote from John Snyder from an introduction to a book by Gianni Vattimo called *The End of Modernity*. He writes: "The work of such theorists as Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and Hayden White on the rhetorical and literary elements present in historical writing has belatedly led to a widespread recognition of the narrative and therefore fictional basis of a unified image of history. History appears today, rather, as a kind of writing which persuades its readers through the use of carefully chosen rhetorical strategies of the 'truth' of its account of events"—truth in inverted commas.

I remember—some of you will be familiar with it—there's a book by Howard Zinn, a U.S. historian, called *A People's History of the United States*. It asks: what if you write a history of the United States that they don't teach in schools?

A history written from the perspective of First Nations or African Americans who were slaves reveals a very different narrative entirely. There are multiple histories, multiple stories, and the idea that there exists one definitive history that we can somehow distill down to find the pure truth of what existed at the beginning - I would question that assumption. And even if we could achieve such distillation, is that necessary? Might this too be just another fantasy of origins, this pursuit of "the true thing" or "the real thing" - the real Buddhism, the real Dharma?

This was slightly a tangential point, but my intention is not so much to criticize what we might call "pop mindfulness" - though the very phrase sounds inherently critical - but rather to illuminate the culturally conditioned interpretations and presentations of Buddha Dharma. These conditionings are unavoidable. We exist within that soup. As Heidegger observed, we are "thrown" - thrown into a particular historical context, thrown into specific cultures. This thrownness inevitably influences and shapes how we see, how we relate to phenomena, how we interpret teachings and experiences.

I'm simply wanting to bring certain elements, aspects, and considerations to light for your reflection and contemplation. So what does all this imply for you? What are the implications? How does it land in your being? How will you hold all this in your mind, in your heart, in your conceiving, in your view, in your fundamental orientations? What is your relationship to these questions? How does your heart respond? And what shall we do with these insights as we move forward in our practice?

Some practitioners may identify as purists of sorts, seeking the Buddha's original teachings stripped of all subsequent additions. You might find yourself drawn to this fantasy of origins, unconsciously buying into the entire historical project without recognizing the projections involved - what Nietzsche called the fantasy of origins. But I would ask: is it even possible to not be thrown? Is it possible to somehow divest oneself completely, to scrub oneself clean, to cut off and sunder all those cultural accretions, indoctrinations, and learned perspectives, views, and values that we inherit from our culture? Can we transcend this thrown state - thrown into a specific time in history, a particular place, a distinct culture?

Is such divestment actually possible? Can we truly have a perspective that isn't culturally conditioned? Or when we attempt such purification, is there actually just a selective relinquishment occurring? We selectively abandon certain cultural influences while remaining blind to others that continue operating, driving us, shaping our view, determining what we pay attention to and what we fail to see entirely.

This leads to another crucial question: might it be that some of these cultural conditionings, accretions, integrations, shapings, and influences are actually improvements? How would we determine what constitutes improvement? What loyalties are operating within us, what hidden drives are at work?

These questions ultimately transcend mere mental inquiry - they are certainly not abstract or academic pursuits, not even purely intellectual. They penetrate the heart and affect the soul directly.

Opening this entire constellation of elements even further, laying them out more completely, we might ask: to what extent does a living, healthy tradition need to embody those characteristics I enumerated earlier - shared values, beliefs, ontological commitments, texts, and so forth? To what extent and in what manner should we hold the inevitable conditionings and shapings from both historical and contemporary culture?

Here's a fascinating new question: to what extent is conflict actually inevitable within a tradition? Might such conflict be a necessary component of that tradition remaining healthy, alive, and vital?

This inquiry strikes me as profoundly important. I want to quote from philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who I believe is still living. In his well-known book *After Virtue*, which explores ethics - though I'm not entirely enthusiastic about the work, it contains some interesting insights - he addresses how discussions of tradition often become polarized between conservative political theorists and their opponents.

And so there's a way that they look at it that's a little bit misleading because of their ideological agenda. MacIntyre writes, "Characteristically, such theorists have followed Burke, Edmund Burke, in contrasting tradition with reason and also the stability of a tradition with conflict." So the contrast of tradition with reason—in other words, tradition is just received stuff that hasn't really had the scrutiny of rational thinking. And the stability of tradition, on the one hand, with kind of conflict. Conflict does not go with the stability of tradition.

But as MacIntyre continues, both contrasts obfuscate. They just confuse things. They hide a reality here. "For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition." All reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought. So he says this is as true of modern physics as it is of medieval logic.

"Moreover, when a tradition is in good order, it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose." I'll say that in other language in case that's a little difficult. So in other words, a healthy tradition, he's saying, when a tradition is in good order, part of what makes it healthy and in good order and alive is that it involves an argument. It's constituted by an argument about what? About the things that are valuable in that tradition, that give the tradition its point, its purpose. So what is awakening? What are we trying to do? Where should practice lead? What does a good practitioner look like and do? The argument, rather than being something that's anathema to tradition, is actually part of a healthy tradition.

So he continues: "When an institution—a university, say, or a farm or a hospital—is the bearer of a tradition of practice or practices, its common life will be partly, but in a centrally important way, constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university

is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is." Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict.

Indeed, when a tradition becomes Burkean—in other words, when there is that dichotomy between, okay, if it's a tradition, there's no reason, and if it's stable, there's no conflict—when a tradition becomes like that, it is always dying or dead. A living tradition, then, is "an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition." In other words, what's valuable to that tradition, and for that tradition.

This, to me, is—oh, yeah, right. It's partly sort of semi-consciously obvious, but actually one needs to think about it a bit more. Oh, yeah. That's actually really part of the weave, the tapestry of what makes that a healthy tradition, a vital tradition.

John Anderson said, "Don't ask of a social institution"—in other words, an embodiment, instrument of tradition or part of a tradition—"don't ask of a social institution what end or purpose does it serve, but rather ask of what conflicts is it the scene?" Of what conflicts is it the scene?

Now, that can, when you first hear it, sound—well, that's pretty pessimistic or even cynical. But seen in the light of what we've just been talking about, what Alasdair MacIntyre was explaining, the need for, the necessity for conflict and argument in a tradition, it's not necessarily pessimistic or cynical at all. And actually the philosopher A.N. Whitehead wrote something like, "A clash of doctrines is not a disaster, it's an opportunity." A clash of doctrines is not necessarily a disaster; it can be an opportunity.

Of course, we could go a bit further and say—but what happens when, I might ask, what happens when all that remains of tradition, of a tradition, are words and names? So if we talk about Buddhist tradition, the word awakening, the word suffering. But the divergence of interpretations of what those words mean has become so wide as to be an abyss. People are talking about completely different things when they're talking about what they think awakening is meaning, or what suffering means to them, what the goal is. What you're relating to and trying to overcome.

So when that divergence of the beginning becomes so wide that it becomes an abyss, and attached to each interpretation are more fundamental metaphysical and cosmological views and fantasies, I would say this is the case among certain, definitely certain ones I know, contemporary traditions of Buddhadharma. Actually, some of the rifts there, conceptually, have become close to too wide to navigate, in some cases.

So what if that abyss renders argument—the kind of argument Alasdair MacIntyre is saying is important—what if it renders argument either impossible, it's become too wide, there's almost very little common ground even to have an argument that's fertile? Or at least seemingly, if not actually pointless.

Or another possibility—and it may come out of the situation or the perception of the situation that I just described—another possibility may be that someone or some subgroup within a tradition either suddenly or gradually stop caring about their identity, or stop identifying with that tradition so much that eros has gone for the tradition, and so the fantasy of the tradition goes as well, because eros and the imagination and the fantasy go together.

And in not feeling so identified with that tradition and not really investing it with eros and imaginal perception, fantasy perception, they actually don't have the energy or the will or the desire to engage in the conflict, engage in the argument. And not engaging in the conflict and argument atrophies the tradition. Their withdrawal, their non-engagement in the conflict actually ends up lessening the tradition or impoverishing it or weakening it or sometimes just killing it.

Let me read another passage by Alasdair MacIntyre from a different book, from an article. He's elaborating on this point that overlaps here, but I think this point is really important. This is from an article called "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science."

He writes: "The connection between narrative and tradition has hitherto gone almost unnoticed, perhaps because tradition has usually been taken seriously only by conservative social theorists." Again, usually the people that talk about tradition are those with a vested interest or certain spin on tradition and what it needs to be and what it means.

But he continues: "Yet those features of tradition which emerge as important when the connection between tradition and narrative is understood are ones which conservative theorists are unlikely to attend to."

This is the important point: "For what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations."

Let me read that again. What constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition—a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. In other words, not just the interpretation of the tradition and the text, but also a conflict about how to read the history of that conflict. Even the whole argument can be seen from different perspectives, the history of that argument.

Then he continues: "If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew." I actually think a better example would be Buddhism. And then he says: "Suppose I'm an American. The tradition is one partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be an American and partly by a continuous argument of what it means to have rejected tradition. If I am an historian, I must acknowledge that the tradition of historiography is partly but centrally constituted by arguments about what history is and ought to be."

He writes—this is a very important point: "Notice that all three kinds of tradition, religious, political, intellectual, involve epistemological debate as a necessary feature of their conflicts."

So we're back to what we talked about in the last talk and the centrality of epistemology. What was that phrase by Moscovici? "Questions of epistemology are questions of social order." When we differ about epistemology, in our views of epistemology, in our leanings there, that might be healthy to a certain extent, but it's part of what gets argued about. And again, the abyss can become so wide that it's unbridgeable.

"Notice that all three kinds of tradition, religious, political, intellectual, involve epistemological debate as a necessary feature of their conflicts. For it is not merely that different participants in a tradition disagree; they also disagree as to how to characterize their disagreements and as to how to resolve them. They disagree as to what constitutes appropriate reasoning, decisive evidence, conclusive proof."

Remember what epistemology means: How do I know? What is appropriate reasoning? What is decisive evidence? What is conclusive proof? What are the bases of my knowledge? So epistemological differences are quite fundamental to this. They're wrapped up in the kind of arguments and conflicts that a tradition has to have as part of its health—conflicts about epistemology.

But again, I would add: What happens when they get too wide? What happens when the rifts over epistemology are more like abysses? All these questions are for you. I obviously wrestle with them as well. But as I said at the beginning, I want this to be yours.

What else can we unearth here? Part of the conflicts within traditions and within the institutions that embody or transmit or carry traditions are between what we might call the conservative tendency and the innovative tendency. You just have to join a board of some institution to see that this will be the case. I would actually view that conflict as a kind of archetypal tug of war between the conservative tendency and the innovative tendency. There's something archetypal about it. There's something actually inevitable about it.

I just want to point out also it's not so black and white—in other words, what's conservative, what's innovative. But also it's not that we can point a finger and say, "Oh, that person's always conservative and that person's always trying to break new ground and be radical." Anyone, any one person can manifest both tendencies with respect to different aspects of Dharma or Buddhadharma, if we're talking about that as an example. And obviously that's the one that's going to be mostly relevant to most of the people listening to this talk.

So the same person at different times, in different arenas of discussion or debate, could manifest either conservatism or a kind of more radical innovation. But my main point is that it's inevitable. There's something archetypal and therefore inevitable about it. The whole point about Jung's teachings on archetypes is these things will occur. They're patterns that occur inevitably in human being and manifestation, inner and outer.

So there's an archetypal tug of war between, let's say, conservatism and innovation. And therefore we need to expect it within a tradition and within institutions that try and promote and nourish and sustain and support and offer a tradition in the world. Expected, but also, I think, regarded as a creative tension.

So again, back to Alasdair MacIntyre's points—the argument and conflict are actually healthy. And here there's a tension between two seemingly opposed tendencies, conservatism and innovation. And there's something in the difficulty of that, in the rub of that, that we should not just expect, but actually perhaps we can regard it as a blessing, difficult as it can be at times. That conflict of opinions that pull in two different directions, two different perspectives—actually out of the friction and the ferment of that is a kind of creative tension that can be fertile.

So again, there's an analogy here between what I was talking about in the talks on epistemology and ontology between the latitude of logos, the latitude of concepts and conceptual frameworks which we can include in our practice, in our explorations. If we talk about soul-making dharma, in our remit and range and furthering and growth of

soul-making dharma, there's a creative tension, I pointed out, between the latitude of the logos that we entertain on one hand and what we might call the resistance or the constraint of the material on the other hand.

If you remember, I was talking about that with regard to science and with regard to epistemology more widely. The constraint of the material is through, well, something has to tally with my experience, with my phenomenological observation of things. I can't disregard that. That forms some kind of constraint on the kinds of conceptual frameworks and concepts and ideas I can entertain. Something, again, has some kind of authority, which again forms, to some degree, some kind of constraint on the latitude and range of the logos, the concepts, the ideas that I build on.

Things have to be somewhat at least coherent between all the different elements of ideas and practice and what I've received from authority and whatever. Something has to, in my phenomenological observation—principally the ideas themselves—something has to be coherent. So that need for coherence or that demand for a certain amount of coherence also forms a certain kind of constraint on the range and latitude of logos.

So there's an analogy there. Out of that tension between the need for latitude and the permission and the legitimization of a certain latitude of logos, the tension between that and the constraint, the resistance, the solidity of the material, that it's not, as I said, just thin air. There's something that I need to work with and partly against to shape this crucible, to mould this crucible.

So there are parallels there now, again, between the considerations of epistemology, ontology, and what we can build conceptually and therefore what supports and opens further soul-making, and this whole notion of creative tension in tradition—the resistance of conservatism versus the latitude of innovation.

And again, I'm putting this out to you as many of you will probably already have deep love and commitment and devotion to the soul-making dharma. All this applies to soul-making dharma as well. If we can talk about it as a sub-tradition or tradition or whatever, everything that I'm saying applies to that and needs to be considered—maybe now, maybe in due course, maybe whatever. It all applies, because I'm talking generically about traditions.

So to be loyal to the logos of soul-making will include, I think, a healthy loyalty, an alive loyalty, a vital loyalty, will include elements that are conservative. What was actually said here? What's actually the... Can we be true to what was said and not just go off on any whim of direction because it feels good or feels exciting or whatever? It will in-

volve that. It will also involve, I hope, innovation in time and integration and connections with other traditions, with other influences, with other considerations, with other concepts, practices.

So to me, being in a tradition—I very much feel this in terms of Buddhadharma—that I am, we are, we can be in dialogue with the tradition. It's a two-way thing. Actually, maybe it's more of a polylogue, if that's even the word. It's a multi-personed, multi-pronged conversation. And that's part of what makes it healthy, that there's some rub and resistance and tension. It's part of what allows the friction that allows things to ignite in a good way. And of course, that ignition can ignite so that things burn and something is burnt to cinders and fire goes out. There's nothing left to burn. All is to consider.

Let's add something to the pot or drag something up from the bottom of the pot for our consideration to add to all this. Pierre Hadot is a writer—maybe some of you know him—who writes about philosophy and different religious traditions.

In his article "Philosophy, Exegesis and Creative Mistakes," Pierre Hadot explores how interpretive practices on authoritative texts—those considered canonical within both philosophical and religious traditions—often generate all manner of mistakes. He provides numerous examples and writes: "It frequently occurs that exegeses, interpretations, construct entire edifices of interpretation on the basis of a banal or misunderstood or mistranslated phrase."

He continues: "The modern historian may be somewhat disconcerted on coming across such modes of thought so far removed from his usual manner of reasoning. He is, however, forced to admit one fact: Very often, mistakes and misunderstandings have brought about important evolutions in the history of philosophy"—and I would add religion and spiritual traditions. "In particular, they have caused new ideas to appear."

In other words, some of what gets integrated into a tradition, some of how a tradition grows, doesn't come through the very careful, conscious deliberation that we might consider Thomas Aquinas to have engaged in during the Middle Ages with regard to Christianity and Aristotle. Instead, it actually comes from misunderstanding, mistranslation, scribal error, complete misconstruing—and one isn't even aware of it. Yet again, paralleling the story we told about Newton building his magnificent edifice of Newtonian physics on two ideas later proved invalid—absolute space and absolute time—similarly, in traditions, all kinds of errors and mistakes can come in that actually end up proving very fertile for that tradition.

One of my teachers is very dear to me. His teaching is very dear to me and hugely influential. I remember years ago hearing him talk about his teaching of the Buddhadharma, sometimes telling stories about the monastery he was in and the teacher there, the abbot. Then I read the abbot's teaching from a more direct source—a more direct quote, an extended interview with this abbot—and I was completely struck. How on earth did my teacher get his teaching from this abbot? How could he interpret this abbot as saying the things he then reported him to say?

The whole flavor of it, the whole thrust, direction, ethos—the feel of it, the scope of it—was so alien. For one, I feel extremely glad that in his situation—because he was in Thailand not speaking Thai—he kind of had to piece things together. Occasionally he had translators giving him little bits of the teaching, but the rest he had to figure out with maybe pidgin Thai, getting the general vibe. I wonder whether he came away with something completely different.

But I'm extremely thankful that was the case. His not knowing the language, not being very gifted with languages, whatever he brought in terms of his predispositions—I think this gave birth in him to a dharma that was extremely influential and inspiring for me, beautiful, and very much opened what the Dharma could be. I don't know whether I would have been very taken with his teacher's dharma, the abbot's dharma, had I just heard it translated by someone completely fluent in Thai.

So we add to our mix the possibility—in the past, recent present, even now, and certainly in the future—that there can be what Hadot calls "creative mistakes," unwitting errors of all kinds happening. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations, mistranslations, misconstruals that actually end up being formative and constitutive of a tradition's trajectory. This too is something we have to recognize as fact.

And again, the question is: How does it land with you? What are we going to do with it? How are we going to view it? How are we going to relate to it? What are our responsibilities there?

There are all kinds of tensions here. I was hunting for a sutta I couldn't find earlier—but there's a sutta somewhere in the Pali Canon where the Buddha hears that a monk is teaching something about the nature of consciousness in a certain way. He basically tells the other monks, "Go get that monk, bring him here." He sits this monk down who's teaching something about consciousness that the Buddha did not agree with, and he basically publicly humiliates him. From our modern reading, that's what it really sounds like—really scathing in front of the whole assembly of monks: "That's absolutely not what I'm teaching, that's not how to regard consciousness."

I couldn't find that passage, but I think it's mirrored in another one I did find called "The Water Snake Simile" in the Majjhima Nikaya 22. Just to listen to some of the language to get a sense... In this case, the monk in question had certain views. He would say: "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, those acts the Blessed One says are obstructive when indulged in are not genuine obstructions."

So the monks told the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "Go get him." Again, he was placed in front of the assembly of monks and basically humiliated. Let's see what the Buddha says, just to give you a bit of flavor of this.

And the Buddha asked him, "Is it true that you've said that?"

And he said yes.

Then listen to what the Buddha says: "Worthless man. Worthless man." This is in front of a whole assembly of monks. "Worthless man. From whom have you understood that Dharma taught by me in such a way? Worthless man. Haven't I in many ways described obstructive acts?"

And then he explains his actual teaching. But you, worthless man, through your own wrong grasp of the Dharma, have both misrepresented us as well as injuring yourself and accumulating much demerit for yourself, for that will lead to your long-term harm and suffering."

And then he turns to the monks that are gathered there, and he said, "Then the Blessed One said to the monks, What do you think, monks? Is this monk, whose name was Arita—is this monk established in this doctrine and discipline?"

And they say, "How could he be, Lord? No, he's not."

And it says, "When this was said, the monk Arita sat silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding at a loss for words."

The Buddha doesn't even stop there. When he was sitting like that—silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding at a loss for words—the Buddha continues: "Worthless man, you will be recognized for your own pernicious viewpoint. And then I will cross-examine the monks on this matter."

My point is just this: the Buddha is not saying, "Hey, it's cool, everything goes. People can have their different points of view. We're all happy family here. Let's not get entangled in arguments about what is the true teaching, the true dharma." He's quite

scathing and not afraid to publicly—again, what we would read as publicly humiliate. And he's very protective of what he sees as: this is the dharma. This is the dharma that I have set in motion. And that, whatever that is, is not.

As I said, there was some sutta that was quite similar in terms of its social playing out, but it was more about something about consciousness. But here, I found that one.

Another time, it's from Samyutta Nikaya. On one occasion, the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, in Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Then Venerable Mahā Kassapa, who was a senior disciple of the Buddha, went to the Blessed One and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. Actually, all this is quite instructive about the social aspects of tradition. And again, this question: what's needed, what's necessary, what's not.

And he says, as he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: "What is the cause, Lord? What is the reason why before there were fewer training rules and yet more monks established in final gnosis—in arahantship, enlightenment? Why before there were fewer training rules and yet more monks established in final gnosis, whereas now there are more training rules and yet fewer monks established in final gnosis?"

And the Buddha says, "That's the way it is, Kassapa. When beings are degenerating and the true Dharma is disappearing, there are more training rules and yet fewer monks established in final gnosis."

This is within the Buddha's lifetime. This is his perspective. As time goes on—I don't know how many years this is after his original enlightenment—he continues: "The Buddha, there is no disappearance of the true Dhamma as long as a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has not arisen in the world. But there is the disappearance of the true Dhamma when a counterfeit of the true Dhamma has arisen in the world."

So in other words, there's false Dhamma. He's pointing out there's a counterfeit Dhamma. There's false teaching being put forward as true Dhamma, but it's counterfeit. And he's saying when that's the case—boy, watch out. There's the disappearance of the Dhamma.

And he continues: "It's not this or it's not that that makes true Dhamma disappear. It's worthless people who arise right here within the Sangha who make the true Dhamma disappear. The true Dhamma doesn't disappear the way a boat sinks all at once."

And he continues: "These five downward leading qualities tend to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma." So he's obviously been thinking about this. "Which five? There is the case where the monks, nuns, male lay followers and female lay followers live without respect, without deference for the teacher. They live without respect, without deference for the Dhamma, for the Sangha, for the training, for concentration."

Interesting. These are the five downward leading qualities that tend to the confusion and disappearance of the true Dhamma. But these five qualities tend to the stability, the non-confusion, the non-disappearance of the true Dhamma. Which five? There is the case where the monks, nuns, male lay followers and female lay followers live with respect, with deference for the teacher. They live with respect, with deference for the Dhamma, for the Sangha, for the training, and for concentration. These are the five qualities that tend to the stability, the non-confusion, the non-disappearance of the true Dhamma.

So he was very much concerned, and yet was not able to completely stop in his lifetime this proliferation of what he called counterfeit Dhamma—watering down, mixed teachings, mixed confusions, misrepresentations. And he was really quite strong about it.

You get that whole tension, and that whole kind of what seems almost—may seem like harshness to some people's ears—may seem like harshness and rigidity and a narrow-mindedness and an attachment and an anxiety on the part of the discoverer of the Dhamma.

Yet at the same time there's another story—and I can't find it again somewhere in the Pali Canon—where after the Buddha's death, as they were trying to codify and collect the teachings and canonize them with the help of Ananda, they found this Arahant, this old practitioner who was still alive some years after the Buddha's death and had lived when the Buddha was alive. They presented to him what they had codified so far, and he said, "Well, okay, that's fine. If that's how you heard it, if it's okay with you, I prefer to stick to the Dhamma that I heard myself from the Blessed One's lips, from the Buddha's lips."

It touches me when I say that.

They said to him, "Okay, since you heard it from the Buddha's lips," and he was an Arahant, so he had the certificate of acceptability and authority. They said, "Okay, you go with that."

There was this agreement to have this diversity of Dhammas there. Actually, they hadn't heard his version—it wasn't part of their codified version. And he wasn't really familiar with theirs. And he was like, "Well, okay, we'll just be divergent like that and it's fine," and there was mutual respect and mutual allowing and inclusion.

So there's this tension between constriction, constraint, authenticity, and latitude.

I heard also something quite interesting to me—that as the tradition went on in early Buddhism, and this again may have started with... I'm not sure how much the seeds of this were in the Buddha's direct words, but that differences of Vinaya, of the monastic discipline and rules and ethical precepts, were actually more significant than differences of interpretation of doctrine and teaching. I don't know if that's true, but I heard that somewhere.

This is quite interesting as well. Again, within the body of tradition, what latitudes are more acceptable than others? Somehow, somewhere along the line—again, maybe seeded by something the Buddha said, contrary to some of the other passages I've just read—it's okay if people have slightly different doctrinal interpretations, or maybe even quite different doctrinal interpretations. But really differing over interpretations of the Vinaya, the monastic discipline, the laws and guidelines of behavior and speech—that's a big deal.

Why is that? Maybe because the monks and nuns needed the laity's respect. They were dependent on them for alms. They needed to be regarded by the laity as being noble, upright, strict and rigorous in their observance. So maybe there was a practical necessity there for the tradition. It's also the case that when ethics gets neglected, all kinds of fractures will almost inevitably follow in a community.

I've also read—just putting these almost divergent pieces of a puzzle together—that at the beginning of the Mahayana, when the Mahayana began to grow and flourish in India, it was quite common to have monasteries where some practitioners were overtly Mahayana practitioners, openly Mahayana in their thinking and aspirations, and some practitioners were Hinayana practitioners. They coexisted in the same monasteries very amicably and peacefully, simply agreeing to have different views and directions.

To me, this is really interesting. It doesn't happen now. When that stopped happening is an interesting question. Why it stopped happening is also an interesting question.

How much that original amicable cohabitation was just a result of the fact that at the beginnings of the Mahayana, maybe a Mahayana practitioner was just someone who had a slightly different aspiration? So back to shared goals. All the understanding was the same, but there was simply the view that it's possible for some people to aspire not

just to Arahantship, but to Buddhahood, which was much more demanding and difficult to attain. But the whole conceptual framework, the ontological commitments—they were all the same.

At some point later in history, the beliefs, the conceptual frameworks, the teachings, the ontological commitments actually became more divergent. It was no longer possible for those people to consider themselves as really part of the same tradition.

All this is interesting to me. What's involved here? What goes on in traditions? What's necessary? To what degree are different elements necessary?

To what degree are divergent elements necessary? Is there even—last thought for now—is there even a kind of higher-level tension that is necessary for a vital, healthy tradition? Is there a tension, maybe not at a meta level, but at a higher level, between unity or harmony—better yet, unity, a sense of unity—and also differentiation?

We can be in a tradition with the view that "it's all one, we're all saying the same thing, we're all agreeing." Sometimes to me that's just baffling—it's obvious that people are talking about different things. Sometimes I say something and someone interprets it just according to what they already believe, convinced that I'm saying the same thing they are. This is interesting, at least. Actually, quite frustrating.

But we need some sense of unity—at least harmony, but even more, unity—since this does form a cohesive tradition. And there's a tension between that unity and harmony on one hand, and differentiation on the other hand.

As I've pointed out—and I've spent a long time talking about this in the *Eros Unfettered* teachings series in "Dilemmas and Delineations," and maybe some other talks—it's through careful differentiation, careful discernment, that we recognize: actually, that idea is different from that idea. That conceptual basis is different and will lead in a different direction. That word is being used in two different ways, or four different ways, whatever it is. Actually discerning between them, differentiating between them—because out of that differentiation can come greater efficacy, greater power, greater precision in terms of where we're headed and our ability to actually get there.

By power, I don't mean power over—because that's another thing we haven't really touched on that goes with traditions and hierarchies, where this person or this group has hierarchical power over another person or group within that tradition. I'm really talking about power as efficacy—efficacy of an idea, the power of an idea, the power of a certain practice or certain way of practicing, a way of thinking, or whatever it is.

That differentiation, careful distinction and demarcation, delineation of ideas, concepts, practices, is actually necessary for a practice, for an idea to have power. So maybe there is also this need for careful differentiation, and there's a need for harmony and unity. And so maybe there's a tension between those two as well within the tradition.

Let's stop there for now. There are other aspects I want to also bring to light to consider.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 186

Dharma(s) Discovered and Created (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h17

In this second part of his exploration of what constitutes a healthy spiritual tradition, Rob Burbea examines how personal inclinations, cultural conditioning, and fundamental world-views inevitably shape our understanding and practice of dharma. He presents four distinct cosmological frameworks - physicalist/materialist, transcendent/unfabricated-only, non-dual consciousness, and soul-making - showing how each generates entirely different approaches to practice, suffering, and awakening.

Burbea pays particular attention to varying interpretations of emptiness (śūnyatā) within Buddhist traditions, from Gelug preservation of conventional reality to radical views that see all phenomena as thoroughly empty. He argues that our choice of emptiness understanding profoundly affects whether we open to imaginal practice, sensing the soul, and cosmopoiesis, or remain limited to reductive materialist frameworks. The talk emphasizes the need for honest self-examination of our deeper motivations - whether we truly seek freedom from suffering or are actually disciples of beauty, truth, or meaning.

Throughout, Burbea addresses the crucial tension between autonomy and authority in spiritual practice, advocating for skillful inquiry that neither over-relies on external authorities nor prematurely concludes based on limited experience. He demonstrates how cosmological and anthropological views are far from irrelevant philosophical abstractions but rather primary determinants of what we consider authentic dharma and genuine awakening.

All right, just to recap very briefly, we've been asking the question: what is involved, what is necessary, what are the needed ingredients and constituents of a healthy, vital tradition? We've been looking, obviously, particularly at Buddha Dharma and also soul-making Dharma, and as part of that unearthing, opening out, shining a light on some aspects or constituents that may be less obvious, or that some implications of those certain aspects may be less obvious to us.

Part of what we wanted to acknowledge and bring more into consciousness was just how much cultural conditioning plays a part—how contemporary cultures, places and histories influence and shape and condition the tradition, the dharma, whatever it is at the time in that place. We also mentioned the unavoidable fact that creative mistakes creep in and sometimes can actually be very fertile in what they contribute to the tradition, to the Dharma, and how things get built on those mistakes, on the basis of those mistakes.

We're also opening up again the recognition and the pondering of the fact of the presence and maybe the necessity of a certain amount of conflict and argument that constitutes the tradition and shapes the community relations and the relations of ideas within that tradition. That's part of its life. So with all this, there's a whole other level of question: how much, how little, what kinds of tensions actually serve a creative function—perhaps even surprisingly—and at what point or what kinds of tension serve to actually fracture something, perhaps irredeemably? To fracture a tradition, to splinter it, to kill it?

All these factors are part of what shape Dharma, the Buddha Dharma, a tradition, any tradition. What are we going to do with that? How does it land with you? How do we orient towards that, relate to it? Where do we move forward in relation to that?

I want to add into that mix, into that sort of cauldron of ingredients, something I've emphasized many times before: the personal inclinations we bring as human beings into our choices, our preferences, our leanings, our openness or closeness with respect to this or that that we might hear or read or that's presented to us in the Dharma as a practice possibility, as a teaching possibility, as a concept, as a direction.

Personal inclinations—meaning soul styles, wishes, desires, fears—we cannot but bring that, and we must acknowledge it, we must be honest about that. There is a certain not just cultural, but personal element in all this that comes into the equation, comes into the mix, and shapes and directs our choices, blinkers us, opens certain avenues, closes certain avenues, makes certain possibilities just unthinkable or not even noticed. We just don't hear them. They just do not register.

In some ways we choose a Dharma. An individual chooses a Dharma to some extent based on their personal inclinations. And if you like, the sum or total of the individual choices will also shape the larger tradition, or sub-traditions. The Dharma that we choose—"I want this Dharma, I want the tradition to be this, I want to see the tradition to be this," or "I choose this kind of Dharma"—these choices and the wishes there, and the soul styles, are often with regard to worldview and the view of the human being. More than anything else.

What is it that determines these? What are the foci of determination? What is it that leads me to choose this kind of presentation of Dharma or this tradition or that picture of the Dharma, that model, that conceptual framework over another one? The most salient features there are actually the worldview and the human view. I've mentioned this before. In a way, when we choose a certain dharma, choose a certain image of awakening, we're actually choosing a certain view of human beinghood, humanity. So all this comes into it and we need to acknowledge it.

If we consider, for example, four different logoi or models, if you like, or beliefs about the world—and implicit views about the world is also views about what is real, so ontology—you can't get rid of it. You can't throw metaphysics out. You cannot burn it up so that it disappears and is gone once and for all. The metaphysics will come back. And it's central and basic, in fact.

So if we compare four views, four beliefs, four models, four logoi, really, of the world—pictures of the world, and implicit in that, pictures of what is real—and then see how each of them, in a way, orients the one who subscribes to that view of the world, that cosmology and that ontology. Each one of those orients the practitioner in a particular way and shapes the Dharma in a particular way relative to that worldview.

For example, if we believe what I was calling the physicalism or materialism view—in other words, there is really only matter, and there is this movement of particles, essentially purposeless, but somehow they have developed consciousness with all its complexity. But really what's there is that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of matter, and consciousness at root is just the movement of matter, of particles in neurology, and it's just a matter of time until we figure that out, how that works. But that view—there is only matter—then the whole Dharma, as one view, the whole Dharma that comes out of that is what we might call a kind of secular existentialist view of Dharma.

That's the real condition of things. There is only matter. Any sense of depth is in a way an illusion, of dimensionality is in a way an illusion. Certainly divinity and all that, and my freedom is really to be... The concepts of suffering and freedom are to be framed by that worldview, by that physicalist worldview, and my orientation then must be framed from that. The primary thing that I relate to is this strange existential situation that I'm in, to find some okayness with that. So that gives a whole picture of the Dharma, a whole basis and picture and limitation and trajectory and orientation of the Dharma.

Compare this with the first view. The first might be a very conscious view, or it might remain unconscious, yet it will still operate to shape and inform what Dharma one gravitates towards.

Consider a second view: that in fact, only the unfabricated—that which is wholly transcendent not just to matter, but to all perception—is real and good, and perhaps sacred. Then this life has very little inherent value other than as a stepping stone to getting out of this life. This perspective appears quite commonly in certain sub-traditions of the Dharma and remains quite popular, as is the first view I mentioned.

But then you can hear how that orients, shapes, constrains, and limits the entire Dharma—what situation we're addressing and what we're trying to reach. What do we mean by suffering? Suffering is basically being born into this existence. Suffering is the world of phenomenal experience. Life is suffering. And freedom from suffering means getting out of it—realizing the unfabricated so thoroughly that one is not born again. To speak metaphorically, though imprecisely, one dissolves into the unfabricated, and that's the end of it. The end of dukkha. The end of rebirth.

So again, there's a worldview and an ontological view about what's real, about what the world is and its ontological status, and also what's valuable relative to that. This shapes the whole Dharma and its direction.

A third view: All manifestation is equally one and divine. It's all the same divine substance, all the play of divine awareness, the play of consciousness—*lila*, the play of consciousness. Or it's all love, or whatever it may be. What kind of Dharma gets built up around that worldview?

Again, what's our predicament? Our predicament is simply not realizing that. We just don't realize that it's all one. We think we're separate; we think things are separate. When we realize it's all one, that's the end of suffering. Nothing is more or less divine than anything else. Nothing in particular is special because of its particularities, what it is, and its uniqueness. It's only special and valuable because of the substantial equality and essence that it shares with everything else.

The fourth view would be more in line with the soul-making perspective. Those first three are actually quite popular. I don't know how much you've explored this—talking to people after retreats or with Dharma friends about what view actually underpins their whole Dharma practice and therefore shapes it. Those first three are really quite common.

The fourth is more congruent with what we might call the soul-making Dharma, and perhaps less popular in the wider world of contemporary Dharma. In that view, all manifestation is divine—but not only because it shares a universal divine essence. There is that. There is the place for that perception and that kind of liberation and that kind of beauty and that kind of eros for that universal divine essence, or essences plural. I've talked about this extensively in the soul-making Dharma.

But not only because of that. All manifestation is divine, and each thing's particularities are divine and necessary to the becoming of the divine—the manifestation in time of the divine, or the Buddha nature, if you prefer. Rather than equalizing and therefore,

in a sense, obfuscating and ignoring the particularities of the things of the world and of ourselves, each particularity is divine and divinely necessary, necessary to the divine, to the process of the divine. This includes your dukkha, your foibles, your madnesses.

How many things are there? Potentially infinite. Why? Because when the soul-making dynamic gets going, when the *eros-psyche-logos* dynamic is ignited, it will create and discover more and more aspects of things, more and more objects of eros. So there aren't a predetermined number of objects or phenomena in the universe, in ourselves, or even in this particular object I'm looking at. There's an infinite and potentially endlessly growing amount.

You can see what this view does, what this logos does to one's sense of the Dharma—what my job is, what my orientation is, what I'm moving from and towards. What is suffering then? How is suffering defined? What is its scope? What is awakening?

What is the scope of awakening and where it's leading?

So just for an example there, we could probably list more, but four logoi or models or beliefs about the world, or cosmologies if you like. Implicit in that cosmology are four ontological views about what's real. For example, only the unfabricated is really real; everything else is kind of illusion in the second one. All this phenomenal world is illusion. All this is illusion.

But these four logoi then bring four orientations, four ideas of jobs and work to do and scope and what the path is. Four dharmas, essentially, and implicit in each dharma is a kind of awakening.

How influential—what are we really choosing? I've made this point before in those talks on what is awakening, I think they were called. What are we really choosing when we choose a certain vision of awakening? Are we not both influenced by, but also choosing, really as perhaps primary, a certain model or belief or conceptual framework?

Again, if we're thinking really about what shapes a tradition, these different logoi of world and reality, different cosmology, different ontology, will shape very different dharma trajectories, very different dharmas, essentially. And what is it that predisposes us, or why do we choose one model, one idea, one belief about the world and about ontology over another? What's going on there? It's so basic in its implications, so basic in the way it creates divergent paths with all kinds of implications.

I was talking a little while ago, just as a chance conversation. I bumped into someone who was studying philosophy and had also been studying, I think, a couple of Jewish philosophers. I can't remember if it was Maimonides or Spinoza he was talking about. So we were having a conversation and he was a little bit familiar with the teachings about the imaginal and soul-making teachings and was reading his philosophy. If I understood him, he seemed to be saying that someone—I can't remember if it was Maimonides or Spinoza or Abraham Abulafia—regarded images in a similar way, as at best transitional objects.

That's a phrase from D.W. Winnicott, the psychologist and child psychologist. A transitional object is something like a blanket or a teddy bear that the child supposedly uses in the process of weaning themselves towards more independence from the mother, towards more autonomy, towards more self-sense, towards healthier relationships. In that process, they invest the transitional object, the teddy bear or whatever it is, with a kind of imaginary full beinghood, personhood, and then gradually wean themselves off the need for that imagination.

So he regarded images as at best transitional objects, which are eventually let go of to meet God directly, to know God directly, or to meet God's intellect, God's active intellect directly. Active intellect is a term, I think it originated with Aristotle, but it became quite influential. But the point is really that images are just stepping stones. Some people will need them as stepping stones for a kind of imageless, transcendent, direct participational melting into the wordless, unconceptual, non-representational, unformed sense of God.

Whether you call it unfabricated or the active intellect or whatever—different versions, it doesn't matter. So I wasn't entirely surprised to hear this kind of thing because that would again be quite common as a way of viewing these things.

It's also sometimes the way Dzogchen is related to: all these divinities and deities and visualization practices. A lot of people want to kind of bypass that or skip it over or view it as a transition, a stepping stone to actually the real deal in Dzogchen, which is the nature of mind, which ends up tending to be this kind of vastness of awareness. That's the real McCoy. The deity business is probably just some cultural accretions from the Tibetans, a bit backward. We don't really need that. We want to go for the pith, the essence, the real high deal.

But actually, if you read closely Dzogchen teachers—I'm thinking of Nipam Rinpoche and others—the nature of mind and the more formless teachings are just actually on their way to an even greater liberation which sees divinities everywhere and sees all things as divinities and does not relinquish the formed in favor of the formless.

As I've stressed in other passages in different traditions, in Ibn Arabi and others in the Islamic tradition and certainly in Buddhist Tantra: can it not also be the other way round than this person was construing? Can it not be that knowing the unfabricated, for example, knowing the formless, knowing the transcendent, that which involves no fabrication of image or perception, can in fact open the door for some people to imaginal practice?

Certainly understanding—if the understanding of emptiness deepens far enough, it provides the legitimization for some people for imaginal practice. We've talked about this in several talks over recent years.

But you can hear in this person's presenting it like that, and it does, I think, have roots in, for example, Abraham Abulafia, the Jewish Kabbalistic mystic, who very much thought that way: about letting go of images to be able to participate in the active intellect of God. Very influenced by Aristotle, and you get it in different traditions.

So there is that spin on it. But this person's idea then, or construal, presupposes a certain aim of, in this case, Buddha Dharma or Judaism, or whatever. It presupposes that the aim is to reach the unfabricated, and all else is either a hindrance or something that's a stepping stone, in his case. That's how he was viewing imaginal work, as just the transitional objects. They can help you get close to God, but the real deal is the unformed, no image.

So it presupposes a certain aim of Buddha Dharma or Jewish mystical practice or whatever, and it presupposes or assumes a limited nature of what images are, and it presupposes a certain psychology or makeup of the soul. All these views can't help but shape and orient us, and create a kind of Dharma, and then really create different subtraditions, or maybe actually divergent traditions, where the differences I point out become too different from each other to really feel like they cohere in one tradition.

I was talking to or hearing from a practitioner, or reading something—and it's not that uncommon these days, certain philosophers, maybe Thomas Metzinger, I'm not that familiar with his work directly, but maybe others—but their construal of what is really happening in awakening, in talk about nirvana or stream entry or arahantship or liberation or whatever, what's really happening is a neurological change in the brain. Maybe the brain and the whole neuronal system in the whole body. That's what's really happening. That's what really one is affecting through practice, through diligent practice.

One is rewiring or retraining something—the neurons. And that neurological change short-circuits the neural networks that have, up to then, been perceiving a separate self.

So here's a view then. You can hear how much, again, is wrapped up and implied by such a view. The experiential effect of that kind of neuronal change that comes from practice is the collapse or non-arising of a certain... well, this person was saying of the self or the self-sense. I would say of a certain range of self-sense. And there's the ensuing relative ease and peace and relative—I would say—liberation that brings.

But really, in that view, really there was only a neural network processing sense data in a way that produced the illusion of self-sense. So you can hear how much is, again, wrapped up, how much is implied, and what directions come out of that.

My question, or one question I have here, is about the anthropological and cosmological view that is either implicitly or explicitly wrapped up or stated along with the experience and along with the teaching of that kind of view of what's happening in awakening and what awakening is. And my question is: what effects will that kind of anthropological and cosmological view have in terms of the ethos, the flavor of being, the range of being, the sense of meaningfulness or the possibility of a sense of meaningfulness, of the sense of beauty, senses of beauty, of eros, of soul-making? What does it do to all those possibilities?

So what is the result, again? Relatively, at some levels, similar practices, but they're all undergirded by certain anthropological, cosmological views. In this case, a kind of physicalist, neurological view—a neurologically based anthropology and cosmology. What kind of awakening does that give rise to? What kind of human being does that give rise to? What kind of possibilities does it open? What kind of possibilities does it close?

I might also point out that what is wrapped up in that is, I would say, a more limited view of what emptiness is and what realization involves. So there is, in that view that I just presented, a basic reality, which is material, which is physical, neuronal. There is a neuronal network. It can either work like this or it can work like that. If it works like this, you get certain suffering, the self-illusion. If it works like that, you don't—that self-illusion is no longer in the program. The software has changed.

But the basic reality is the neurons exist, the neural network exists, the biological functioning exists, and so on. And the only real scope of what's seen as empty is the self, the illusion of the self, and it's that that goes. Versus a view of emptiness that I would prefer and find much more interesting, exciting, much more challenging, more radical, deep, wide: that everything is empty. Neurons, matter, process, time. You've heard me say that many times, read about it.

So there are two things there. What is the scope of the emptiness view? And is it as deep and as thorough as it might be? And what is the ethos that is implied both as a basis but also as a result in that kind of view? What's the ethos of the awakening of the soul that comes out of such a view?

If we linger a little bit on this whole question of—the whole fact, actually—that there are, if we look at Buddha Dharma, we can notice that someone interested in these things should notice quite rapidly that there are quite a few different versions of what emptiness means. Everyone using the same word, mostly emptiness, and the range of what's implied, wrapped up in that term, varies hugely.

So it's certainly true in the Tibetan traditions, if you even just think about the four main Tibetan lineages and compare, say, the Nyingma or the Kagyu traditions with the Gelug tradition. The Gelug tradition was founded by Tsongkhapa in the fourteenth century, if I remember, fourteenth or fifteenth century. And I don't quite know the background, but they put a great emphasis on preserving the reality of conventional perceptions—preserving conventional reality.

I think part of the reason for that was because Tsongkhapa looked around him at the time in Tibet and saw a lot of people using the language of emptiness as a kind of excuse to justify behavior that wasn't ethical. So perhaps his thinking and his solution or his perceived need there was to lean more towards not espousing a view that conventional appearances were in fact thoroughly empty.

So you get a strange—to me, strange—teaching in the Gelug tradition which says this thing, whatever it is, is empty of inherent existence. It's not empty of itself. And there's a lot of debate that came out of that that mostly Westerners have not really come across because they're sort of spared that for whatever reasons. But it's there in the hundreds of years of tradition—quite strong argument from different teachers. Certainly Mipham Rinpoche was very keen to point out the problems with that view, and the different Karmapas as well.

But that would be one version of emptiness that really, it's almost like you say things are empty, but it almost...

The danger in preserving the reality of conventional appearances and insisting that they are not empty, that conventional reality is not empty, is that emptiness just becomes... it has no effect. It's sort of just a kind of intellectual thing, but everything remains the same. That's one of the dangers.

Then you get different views of emptiness where again, the thrust or the aim—and often it's not made explicit—seems to be a kind of crusade against sacredness. A crusade against what we might call spirituality. And so again, what's happening in that choice of what emptiness means? Emptiness means don't get your hopes up. Emptiness means there is nothing sacred. Emptiness means there's nothing special. Emptiness means that the self with a big S is an illusion. Soul is an illusion, God is almost certainly an illusion, anything like that.

And that view of emptiness and that scope of emptiness, again, uses a lot of the same language—there's a lot of overlap—but it's got a certain purpose, and it's got a certain prescribed range and intent and scope to it, and goal to it, and vision of what awakening is.

In that, as I've pointed out, it also ends up casting the self in a certain light. So again, if I view the reality of things as this difficult existential situation—we are thrown into this world of purposeless matter in an inexplicable way, in an inexplicable universe of harsh impermanence and meaninglessness—then to see that as the reality, and then we have to find a way to face up to that reality and be okay with it, it's also casting the self as a kind of existentialist hero.

So the whole theatre of things—it's not recognized as theatre because there's presumed this is the reality—but there's a kind of theatre and one has cast oneself as practitioner. In my brave honesty I can face up to this reality which other people perhaps don't have the courage to face up to, this grim, difficult, existential meaninglessness and limitation of our existence, our finitude as human beings. But there's also a construing and a casting of the self in relation to something, as a real self-view in relation to a real reality. That's also part of what one is choosing.

There are views of emptiness that are just about simplifying things. Emptiness is really just the fact that all there is is processes. There is no mystery or depth to the whole notion of emptiness. It's just the fact that there are processes—there are atomic processes, there are neurological processes, there are mental processes that happen in time, this moment of consciousness, that moment of consciousness, that moment of awareness—and they're chained together in cause and effect. And our job is to see that's just a process. Don't make a big deal of anything. Don't make a big deal about the self. Don't make a big deal of anything else. Just this process is kind of atomizing and stripping down.

Some people will choose a version of emptiness that is based on what they can tolerate in terms of the fear that might come up for them. So they might hear about radical emptiness, that everything is empty. There's not even atoms, there's not even a process,

there's not even time, there's not even space. Not just self is there as a kind of process in time. But a person might land on that view for lots of different reasons, one of which might be fear. When I hear or read about an emptiness that's even deeper than that, saying, well, it's not even a process, then the ground feels like it goes... Just hearing that, the ground seems to go from under my feet, and I'm afraid. I don't like that. So sometimes a person is choosing emptiness or a version of emptiness—and again, when I choose a version of emptiness, then my path, my tradition or sub-tradition will come out of that—and it might be based on fear.

Sometimes it might be the case that one is committed to or invested in one version of emptiness over another and wants that to be the truth of emptiness, might be partly based or conditioned by one's experience. There's maybe very little mystical experience, or one is afraid of those kinds of openings and pulls back from them in meditation. Or they're just very rare, those experiences. And actually what's happening there is a movement of, well, I don't want to think that I'm a failure. I don't want to think that there is some experience that perhaps other people have had, but I, maybe after years or decades of meditating, I've never had. And so the fear of seeing oneself as a failure actually is what conditions why one is committed to or invested in or wants this version of emptiness to be true over that version.

So partly it's based on what it delivers in terms of the possibilities, ranges, and limits on the worldview. Partly it's more to do with self—the self-view that's already existing, or fear of a self-view, or wanting to cast the self in a certain way. Or it's a commitment to a certain view of emptiness because of what we want, because of what we gravitate towards in terms of the possible ranges of self-view that we want to open up and experience, and a sense of the cosmos, and perhaps a sense of sacredness and divinity.

Someone also, conversely, might find that ego slips in because they might feel, "Well, I've realized emptiness, and there's nothing more for me to realize there. My version is complete." They consider themselves an arahant and declare, "I already know. There's nothing further for me there"—that familiar arahant stock phrase. So one becomes invested, for a slightly different ego reason, in whatever level one has reached in terms of a view and understanding of emptiness. This too is possible.

And then there's the view that I would favor, wrapped up in the soul-making Dharma perspective. What's the leaning there? What's my inclination? What's my personal soul star? What is it that I wish for? What does my soul long for? Yes—to open up the possibilities of self, to open up the possibilities of experience. A huge range is what I

want. To open up the possibilities of sacredness, to open up the possibilities of how I can sense and conceive of the cosmos. I want my emptiness to be integrated into those kinds of possibilities, to support those kinds of possibilities.

If we linger a little longer with this emptiness business, I can point out a few more things in relation to the different views and soul-making Dharma's relationship with emptiness and imaginal practice's relationship with emptiness.

There are, as I've said, many different kinds or interpretations of emptiness despite the same word being used throughout the Buddhist tradition. Some are intended from and in the direction of a kind of anti-sacredness. In those construals, as I was pointing out, one's existential plight and material existence are real, and anything else is not. There's a kind of anti-spiritual agenda there.

As I've pointed out elsewhere, I would say that for many people, the very hearing about emptiness is already wrapped up with mystery and sacredness. It's not just a strategy or tool or concept or set of practices that liberate, that reduce suffering. Certainly it's that. But people love to hear about emptiness and they're drawn to explore it because of the mystery and the sacredness. My leaning and favorite inclination is to say that this is part of what we are wanting from emptiness. And I would say it's part of what comes when we explore emptiness deeply. As I've pointed out before, it's not just what we desire—it's also what the emptiness delivers at a very deep level.

Some people hold what's quite common—this process view. For some, their view or understanding of emptiness involves a certain reification of something or other. For example, the aggregates. For example, time. And for example, the process of aggregates in time. That would be a very common one: the self's not real, but what is real is this process of aggregates in time.

But again, just as in the secular existentialist version, this view of emptiness and understanding of emptiness actually implies that certain things are still real. And it also implies that images are not real. The imaginal is not real and not valuable because only this process of aggregates exists, which we can arrive at and perceive if we just train bare attention. We'll see that's all there is—just aggregates. That's the view there.

Therefore, the imaginal is not real because it's not that atomistic process. The options, certainly for the imaginal and imaginal perception, are not opened up. Only the self is impermanent; the phenomenal world is not. And there's not really this possibility of sensing the soul, of cosmopoiesis. There's not really the possibility of legitimizing

that through that version of emptiness. It absolutely does not legitimize it, because what is true is atomistic process in time. Images and all that are just papañca in that view.

What's also implicitly true in that view is that impermanence is real. Sometimes emptiness comes almost to be synonymous with impermanence. But again, in the view that I would favor, the understanding of emptiness goes deeper than impermanence. So yes, definitely things are impermanent. But actually, as Nagarjuna and others have stressed, things are neither impermanent nor permanent. They're empty. Time is empty.

Thing is empty. Impermanence is not the ultimate truth. Permanence is not an ultimate truth. And I think when we really go deep into practice—really working with the teachings and the practices around clinging and subtle clinging, letting go at subtler and subtler levels of clinging, seeing how that's tied into unfabricating and how that allows an unfabricating of the whole realm of perception—we actually see: no clinging, no impermanence. Without clinging, there is no impermanence, because there's no thing at all. There's no flow. You can't talk about flow or process. You can't talk about sense data. You can't talk about atoms, whether they're material atoms or mental atom-moments. There's no time. There's no present moment.

So again, very different versions of what emptiness means, with hugely divergent implications for what they open up, what they call us to, and what they limit or not. As I said, emptiness in the way that I would favor understanding it, conceiving of it, exploring it and presenting it—it will open up sensing the soul. As I perceive the world more through the lens of emptiness, I come out of that a little bit, then inevitably, if the emptiness understanding is deep enough, the world becomes sacred, and all kinds of possibilities for sensing the soul are opened.

Emptiness also, in the way that I would conceive it, helps support the stance of the imaginal middle way—so crucial to the fully imaginal experience, the opening of the fully imaginal. So imaginal perceptions are neither real nor not real. They're like theater. And I've said before that the ontological status of images and conventional, what we might call conventional worldly perceptions, is surely different. They're both thoroughly empty at a deep level. There's something about deep insight into emptiness that just, for many people—not for everyone—helps support that stance of the imaginal middle way.

In our view as well, understanding emptiness actually legitimizes, for some people, imaginal practice and sensing the soul. I mean, it was my way, as I've shared before. I wasn't particularly drawn to images. I didn't have a lot of images. It had been, if you

like, practiced out of me over the years. But because there's no comparison of an image to something that's supposedly real, the ontological status of the imaginal doesn't get denigrated. If I've seen the emptiness of everything, there's nothing that I can harbor as "Yeah, but that's not real, but this is real." So in that sense, there's no reality or pure perception that I can compare an imaginal perception to.

As I said, some people will need that deep emptiness to really purge themselves or divest themselves of that lingering belief that's fundamental to avijjā, to ignorance—that there is something real, whatever that something is, and that we can know that. Some people don't need it, as I've said before, because they're already in an artistic, poetic relationship, so to speak, with existence and perception, or their reading and research into some modern philosophy kind of legitimizes it, etc. Maybe some from their research into modern physics.

Just while we're on the subject, and again I've said this before as well, but it's also true that the influence can go the other way, the support can go the other way—that imaginal practice, when repeated and over time, can actually bring insight into emptiness, can open the insights into emptiness. And there are a few people, definitely more than a few, who the directionality of support is more that way. With the coming and going of all these images, many of which are kind of surprising, one begins to question the reality of this or that view of the self, for example.

I've said before, again, just talking about emptiness and its relationship or place in the whole practice of soulmaking—and it will have a different place for different people, as mentioned—so I've said, you know, careful not to be sloppy or lazy with the understanding of emptiness. There's a way it can be a bit glib and easy, rather than, for me, what's actually really quite sophisticated and subtle and profound understanding. That the view of deep emptiness is really radical in the sense of really absolute—cuts to the root of all things—and wide, comprehensive. So all that is possible is something that's really quite a journey, as I said when we talked in the series about emptiness.

There is the possibility for some people to explore the practices and understandings of emptiness in ways that are enormously sophisticated and subtle, go very deep and very, very wide. And at the same time—perhaps here's another tension—I acknowledge too that we each perhaps have a personal relationship with emptiness, if you like, and with epistemology, as we mentioned. Epistemology is personal, I said in the talk on epistemology. And epistemology of emptiness is also personal.

So on the one hand, don't be sloppy, don't be lazy. There's a possibility of really, really refined, careful understanding with regard to emptiness. And at the same time, acknowledge that there are different personalities here, different soul styles, different soul needs, and personal relationships with emptiness, personal relationships with epistemology, or personal epistemologies almost to a certain extent.

So you can hear just how complex all this is. Certainly complex if we're, again, thinking about what's in this pot that we call tradition, what contributes to a tradition, to our sense or to anyone's sense of what the dharma is—what are the rival or competing directional pulls, the assumptions, the inclinations, the cultural factors, the personal factors.

And you can hear when we talk about personal inclination - just how much care with regard to honesty and awareness is asked for. To be aware, to be conscious and honest about our wishes, our desires, our motivations for this or that version of this portion of the Dharma or the whole Dharma or the trajectory or the tradition. This is asking us to admit this, to be honest, to be careful, to open things up and to really be aware.

What can happen - and I realize I may be repeating something from earlier, but this feels so important - is that when we look at Dharma culture, sometimes it's hard to step out of it and actually see what's going on when you're immersed in something, when you're inside it.

Certain words and ideas - liberation, awakening, freedom, depth - are actually quite vague in their meaning to a practitioner who might be hearing them frequently and using them extensively as orientation points. They get spoken by authorities in Dharma talks and writings, repeated by teachers, repeated by practitioners themselves. And actually, aided by their vagueness, supported by their vagueness, they become charged for the practitioner in the context of Dharma practice - doing retreats, hearing this language, repeating it for oneself. They become charged, they become orientation points and goals.

But if you actually ask two questions: First, what exactly do you mean by liberation, awakening, depth, freedom? And second, is that what you really want the most? Freedom from suffering gets repeated so much, we hear it constantly, we repeat it ourselves constantly. The very vagueness of the idea almost contributes to a lack of clarity, a lack of full honesty about whether this is actually what we want and what we even mean by it.

For some people, as I've pointed out before, it may actually be beauty that they have longed for in their practice, that has kept them on the path all these years - a love of beauty, an eros for beauty. It may be the beauty of goodness, of the profoundly good heart. It may be the beauty of truth, certainly. But it's never only freedom from suffering. Not for someone who really loves the path. Can I see this? Can I admit it? Can I see that there's not a problem with it? Can I see that it's right?

The person may find - and this is probably quite common - that if they're really able to pull aside the veils and scrutinize what's going on with all these words buzzing around, all this charge, all this repetition, they may feel that what they want is beauty. They long for beauty, they're devoted to beauty more than they're devoted to freedom from suffering or reducing their suffering much further. Sure, at times they want less suffering when suffering coalesces in certain ways. But actually it's something else.

What if there's the possibility of seeing oneself as a disciple of beauty? Not primarily as a seeker of liberation or any reduction in suffering. But because that's the paradigm, and that's what gets repeated - liberation from suffering, which can sometimes just mean reduced suffering - that's how one tends to think of what one's doing, what one repeats to oneself and to others.

What if you actually broke out of that? Or just experimented: Why don't I relabel myself, reconceive myself as a practitioner on the path? I'm a disciple of beauty. I'm devoted to beauty. My eros, my longing is for beauty. What would that do?

Honesty and consciousness is asked for here. And in acknowledging this need for honesty and self-awareness, in acknowledging the inevitability of how different soul styles or different soul desires and inclinations come into a person's perception of the Dharma, their choice of a Dharma tradition, their contribution to it - in acknowledging all that, it also brings up the whole question of autonomy and authority.

If we admit and are honest that we actually desire this - that what we really long for is beauty, and sometimes when push comes to shove, we'll choose beauty over a reduction in suffering - then that invites the question about autonomy and authority. Am I going to trust that desire over and above the language that is promulgated, the common language, what the teacher is saying, what I read? That's part of the question of autonomy and authority.

But there are other aspects. Within a tradition, what is my relationship with authorities in terms of how much can I have my own investigations, my own lines of investigation, my own criteria for what satisfies me in my investigations?

Sometimes a person ends up asking a certain question of either a teacher or a number of different teachers over and over, sometimes for years, but there's not much movement there. What's happening? Sometimes what happens is they have several authorities. They're giving all the authority to those authorities, those teachers, and then they can't decide between them. Because this person says this, but that person says that. Or I read here, but I read over there.

How will you resolve that question, whatever it is? It could be a question about any aspect of Dharma. How will you know? When will you be satisfied in that question? How much are you actually living that question in terms of tailoring and shaping and directing your practice to go into the depths of that question so that that question can be opened up and answered? Or is it just, "I'm practicing how I usually practice, but I'm asking these questions to different authorities and getting contradictory answers"?

So this whole autonomy of investigation—in practice, in experience, in meditative experience, in thinking, in reading and listening—becomes crucial.

Again, there's a tension here because sometimes what happens is a person has given all the authority to other people and they're not, if you like, living their own questions and self-determining. There's not enough autonomy in their own investigations, their own inquiries.

So I ask: What is involved in a really powerful investigation for a human being? What's involved in the art of inquiry for oneself, so that one knows, so that one arrives at a place where it doesn't matter what this person says, because I have satisfied myself. I've seen for myself. I've understood for myself. I've made sense of it myself, questioned for myself in a real, alive way.

Sometimes what happens is the other side of the spectrum. A person has a certain experience and decides that, "Oh well, I've reached the end." So whatever you're saying, Rob, or whatever this other teacher is saying, "I don't think that's true because I've seen this"—a certain experience.

So, for example, a certain level of unfabricating where the personality goes very quiet, but the world just feels very vivid and bright. And it seems like—the sense of the understanding, the sense of that experience is "I'm just experiencing things as they are without the self." And one stops there. And one has decided, based on that experience, that that's the end of it. That's the understanding of emptiness. Anyone who says other stuff just can't be right. All this business about complete unfabrication or cessation or whatever.

To me, that would be a bit like journeying, taking a car to the south of England and going to somewhere like Dover, the Cliffs of Dover, where there's the sea, and just deciding, "Right, that's it, that's the end of the land, that's the end of terrestrial Earth. There is no more land after here." Versus getting in a boat, going across and seeing—after a little paddling, you'll get to France. And sometimes you point in the right direction. And so, there is more land. There is a deeper unfabricating than what I've experienced.

So the question becomes: How much am I over-concluding? Am I concluding my investigation too early? Am I over-trusting my experience, even though that experience might be limited, and I'm deciding it's ultimate?

There's that phrase from the Dzogchen tradition: "Trust your experience but keep refining your view." So yes, if that kind of relative unfabricating where the personality goes very quiet and the world just opens up very vividly—not much thought, etc.—it's great. Trust that experience. In my map, it's a relative unfabricating. But keep refining the view. Keep refining the practice. Keep refining your understanding of what's happening there. How do I frame that experience? Is there more that can be unfabricated? What would that be? How would I get there?

And also, part of the art of inquiry is a kind of structural awareness of the levels of ideas.

So how things kind of fit together - how conceptual frameworks fit together. What's a relatively small fry contention or quibbling? I think I mentioned this before, so forgive me if there's repetition: people arguing whether there were two or three types of vedanā. You can see it both ways - does it really matter?

Sometimes we don't recognize what are the more significant levels of ideas. Sometimes people hear about the ways of looking paradigm, for example - that whole conceptual framework - and it just doesn't register how radical and important in its implications such an idea is. It's a kind of meta-level idea that just doesn't register: you can look at things in different ways. One hasn't grasped its structural place, hasn't grasped the edifice of ideas, how ideas are actually... one can create a hierarchy of ideas. What's more or less significant? What's a real basis, a real meta-ideal, a pan-ideal, and what's just a relatively insignificant piece in the structure and conceptual framework of a particular dharma?

This relates to what I mentioned - I can't remember in which talk - developing a nose for what's significant and what's not. This strand of investigation, this piece, this understanding, this discernment - that's actually significant. This one is not so important. There's a lot involved in what I would call artful inquiry, or the art of inquiry.

All this is necessary if I'm going to have a degree of autonomy in relationship to whatever authorities exist in a tradition. So important. And again, this question of the tension between autonomy - do we need a necessary or healthy... or I'll put it as a question: does a tradition need a degree of healthy autonomy for its members, for its sangha, the individuals? And does it need authority? What's the balance of those? What's the tension? That's the range of tension there that's necessary to a healthy, alive tradition.

We see in all this - I've touched on this, but I want to draw this point out - there are many things being said. Just how... views about the world and views about the human being, what we might call cosmologies and anthropologies, views about the cosmos and beliefs about the cosmos, pictures of the cosmos, pictures, models, beliefs, views about what a human being is and what constitutes a human being - they are not irrelevant.

It can be fairly popular to say, "Ah, the Buddha was a genius because he just sidelined the whole cosmology that was around at the time. He took the teaching and made it purely psychological and therefore universal and not dependent on some kind of cultural accretion or cultural fashion of a view of cosmology and anthropology."

But you start to see when you consider all these things I've said that actually, that's not irrelevant at all. Those views of cosmology and anthropology may be much more primary, and may be much more primary in their significance and their determination of what the Dharma is - what we believe is the real Buddha-Dharma, or that we choose. And as I said, as part of what is the Dharma, what is our notion, what is our sense, what is our image of awakening - views of cosmology and anthropology are not at all irrelevant. They are extremely significant.

CHAPTER 187

Dharma(s) Discovered and Created (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h34

> *In this third part of his exploration, Rob Burbea examines how our contemporary cultural context—a hybrid of modernism's belief in universal truth and postmodernism's challenge to privileged perspectives—influences dharma evolution and understanding. He considers postcolonial critiques of Buddhism's potentially "male" archetypal emphasis on transcendence and renunciation, questioning whether teachings like the Four Noble Truths represent universal truths or cultural products.*
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> *Burbea reflects on the dead-end reached by postmodern philosophy and proposes viewing dharma as art rather than truth-pursuit, allowing for endless creative possibilities within constraining structures. He presents three ways of understanding soul-making dharma's relationship to Buddha-dharma: as contained within traditional Buddhism, as containing Buddha-dharma within soul-making, or as part of dharma's current birth in Western culture.*
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> *The talk addresses the complexity of soul-making teachings, explaining how sophisticated philosophical frameworks support practices that may seem alien to mainstream dharma. Burbea emphasizes that recognizing these cultural and philosophical influences represents psychological and spiritual maturity, opening possibilities for more nuanced engagement with tradition, innovation, and the ongoing evolution of contemplative understanding.*

If we return to consider a little bit more the influence of contemporary cultural context on the tradition—on the evolution of the tradition, on the Dharma, the shaping of the tradition—and we look at the current cultural context, one reading of our current cultural context, the larger cultural context, is that we're in a strange sort of hybrid time in a way.

We had the rise of modernism or modernity, if you prefer, with the Western Enlightenment, the scientific revolution, and one characteristic of modernism philosophically is the belief, the view, the hope that humanity can lay hold of the truth—the truth—capture it in a clear, unmediated way. A single truth that can be known. And so, of course, the science and the scientific revolution encapsulated, embodied really the central thrust of that belief and idea and hope. And, of course, there were other movements in philosophy that captured that as well.

So the legacy of modernism is still very much with us, it's still very much alive. At a certain point, as I chronicled, through reflections on science and the history of science, through philosophical considerations, other factors, political and anthropological considerations, looking at studies about cultures, there was a kind of rise of a collection of related movements that we can loosely bundle together under the term "postmodernism," loosely.

And postmodernism very much aggressively challenged the belief and the idea that there could be a direct perception of truth, that there is one privileged perspective which reveals the truth or reality—whether it's scientific or philosophical or social or ethical or whatever. And so there was a rise of postmodernism, particularly in intellectual circles, but some of that spilt into non-intellectual circles, the person on the street, the everyday person who's not in academia.

So one reading of our contemporary larger cultural context is that we're living in a sort of mixed time, where to a certain extent what is still very much dominant as the mainstream cultural paradigm is essentially modernity: that there is one truth, that science can lay hold of it. Mixed with that is a kind of filtering into the common consciousness, if you like, of a kind of postmodern reservation, objection, hesitation to that proclamation or that idea of there being one truth, one reality, one privileged perspective which we can come to or which this person or that person or this culture or that culture has over and above another culture.

So these two kind of opposed ideas or opposed views about reality and truth and epistemology—and as I said, it covers all kinds of areas of human existence, not just science—they coexist in the common consciousness in a strange way, so that there is a reluctance to close down the possibility of people just having different opinions and different views and takes on reality or perspectives, at the same time as there is a kind of dominant view of this is how reality is, and it tends to adhere to the classical scientific materialist and secular view. So that in itself is a strange mix of postmodern philosophy with the dominance of more modernist views. They mix together. It's a strange combination.

And what does that imply? How does that play out in how we view the Dharma, sense the Dharma? What influences will that have on the Dharma, but also on how we view dharma?

So one of the traits or thrusts of postmodern thought and philosophy is this objection to any claim of reaching or knowing a universal truth, and any claim that there is such a universal truth, or that one can hope to arrive at a perspective which will reveal that

universal truth. And rather, truths or reality perspectives or worldviews or even morality views—under the rubric of the postmodern gaze, the gaze of postmodernism—are viewed as just so-called truths. They are viewed more as just cultural products.

And so one of the constituent or related movements of postmodernism is a kind of postcolonialism. So academics and others looking at the influence of the aggressive colonialism of Western European countries, but you might also say the US, on indigenous cultures and other cultures around the world, imposing their views of reality. It's happened in all kinds of ways: imposing aesthetic, imposing reality views, imposing legal views, imposing sociological, economic modes of thinking and action. And wishing to recognize that and reclaim some of the indigenous power from those oppressive impositions spread through colonialism.

Part of all that study brought the view that there are no universal truths, there's just different cultural views. Now, of course, even among modern philosophers, this is not a simple fait accompli as an argument. There's nuances to this. It's much more sophisticated than I'm presenting here. However, that objection or nervousness when anyone claims a universal truth, any person or any culture or any religion, is part of the thrust of postmodern philosophy that has, to some extent, filtered down into our ordinary culture.

So I heard from a colleague who was teaching with another teacher, and the colleague of mine played two pieces of music in the meditation hall one evening. And her co-teacher afterwards said, well, she should be careful, she shouldn't assume that those pieces of music will be universally felt the same way by everyone in the hall. So I think they were two pieces of music by basically two white men—I think it was George Harrison and Leonard Cohen. And this co-teacher was saying, well, careful of the colonialism there, supposing that music by two white men will be heard by everyone the same way, will land in the same place as my colleague was hoping it would to communicate a certain point or create a certain atmosphere.

So, fair enough. Good point, perhaps. But at the same time, this co-teacher was probably, I would guess, overlooking the presumption of universality in the Dharma itself. In other words, the Dharma tends to proclaim, and most dharma practitioners presume, a universal truth—that the Four Noble Truths are universal truths, or certainly universal. That the pith of the Four Noble Truths, that craving brings suffering and releasing craving brings a reduction in suffering, just that much—this is assumed to be a universal truth.

This may or may not be explicitly trumpeted as such, but I wonder whether most dharma practitioners, people who are steeped in the Dharma, actually just assume that universality. Now, most Buddhists don't try to enforce their view or their way on others. They would acknowledge and allow any person's freedom and autonomy to choose their path, their religion, their conceptual framework. But perhaps, just like a fundamentalist Christian who is not evangelical might believe that those who don't choose Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour will not go to heaven—they might believe that, or even believe such a person will suffer in hell for eternity—without being aggressively evangelistic about it, they won't foist that on others so aggressively, but they're still harboring a certain view.

Is it the case that people who are steeped in Buddhism or consider themselves Buddhist assume, without aggressively foisting it on anyone else, that those people who choose differently—who don't practice a relinquishment of craving and other aspects of the Buddhist path—will suffer, and do suffer, because of their kilesas, because of craving? This is an interesting question to me. Do we assume that Dharma is universal and proclaiming, and the holder of the repository of universal truths, at least some of them?

Culturally speaking, there's a good case to look at Pali Canon Dharma teachings and that whole thrust towards transcendence and solitude and renunciation with regard to relationship with senses and sense pleasure, and regard that as, in quotation marks, "male"—as a kind of style where the thrust of Pali Canon Dharma is quite male. I think that case could be very validly made to a certain extent. It's certainly been a very patriarchal structure.

One of the related movements within postmodernism is feminist studies and gender studies. One can very easily imagine that kind of critique from the perspective of a feminist thinker, looking not just at the patriarchy through a couple of thousand years of Buddhist history in its power structures, but also at what could be seen as a typically male flavor and range and leaning in the archetypal style of its aims and its methods. To remove oneself from the world, to not be reborn, to transcend the world, to regard sense pleasures as something to be renounced, the emphasis on solitude—all these things.

How much is universal truth in there? When we talk about different worldviews spawning or setting up different dharmas, the view of the round of rebirth being equated with suffering, and then the release from suffering—liberation, nibbāna—coming from not being reborn again into the world, into any world, if that is central, then we're not just talking about cosmetic differences here. We're talking about something really fundamental.

Is that very transcendent movement away from the world, away from sense experience, something that is created by males, colored by males, reinforced by males, and reflecting a male archetypal style? The language is fraught here, so I'm certain to tread on some toes. I apologize, but I hope you get the basic point I'm trying to make.

Several practitioners have told me, "I'm actually not interested in the unfabricated. I care more about relationships and the beauty in relationships." A woman practitioner told me that. Is that just because she's deluded, or is she actually holding on to and trying to preserve and create space for something that's been sidelined and denigrated by a male-oriented and male-shaped teaching and thrust?

Do we assume the Dharma is universal and the repository of universal truths? And if we don't, then what? The same question applies to soul-making Dharma. Do we assume the soul-making conceptual framework is universal, reflects some universal truth, with all these ideas we're putting out?

One of the, hopefully, strengths and sophistications of soul-making Dharma is that, as I've mentioned a couple of times, the whole idea of breaking of the vessel—*shevirat hakelim*—is integral to the whole conceptual framework, including with reference to conceptual frameworks themselves. Part of the whole conceptual framework of soul-making dharma is the fact that conceptual frameworks need to be stretched, need to be soft and elastic, will shatter at certain points, will have holes in them, will have certain inevitable incoherences that may fracture and may break and may need to be expanded, rebuilt.

Sometimes I wonder, and Catherine and I have touched on this several times—how much of soul-making Dharma is a reflection of my personal dispositions, my history, my preferences, my blind spots, my views, my style of consciousness, my soul style? Even things like the emphasis on fine discernment, subtlety of awareness with regard to emotions and energy body—this is just part of how my soul and my consciousness tends to work, or how I've developed it, how it has been developed over practice. It's something that Catherine shares to a huge extent and has similar tendencies of subtle discernment. How much of that is necessary and how much is, as I say, the teachings themselves actually just a reflection of my style and not necessarily necessary?

These are questions. What do we do with all this? If we stay with this strange amalgam, this uneasy, relatively incongruent amalgam of modernism and postmodernism, modernity and post-modernity in our contemporary wider culture?

One of the other aspects or faces of postmodernism, in terms of the arts—someone told me that the whole postmodern movement actually started in architecture and some of the other arts—is the introduction of pastiche elements. Elements that belong to different artistic styles were placed and juxtaposed in the same building or piece of artwork, so that pastiche, that kind of, from a certain perspective, incongruous juxtaposition of different elements and styles and traditions within one piece, is also characteristic of postmodern art to a certain extent. This is all grossly simplified, but it doesn't matter for the points I'm making for now.

And over the years when I would see her, she would make statements that seemed to me to be taking concepts and insights from her years of insight practice and then sort of grafting them onto or projecting them into the images and the cosmology and the theology of this other tradition she was now practicing in.

So the concepts seemed to carry more weight for her than the images. The insights she had developed through insight practice were being mapped onto very different religious imagery and framework. Which is interesting—what happens when we take the conceptual understanding we've developed through one tradition and apply it to the images and stories of another?

This raises fascinating questions about what we're actually relating to in spiritual practice. Are we relating primarily to concepts, to insights, to ways of understanding? Or are we relating to particular images, particular stories, particular cultural frameworks? And how much do those images and frameworks actually matter versus the underlying conceptual understanding?

I think this connects to something really fundamental about how we approach dharma practice. If I'm identifying strongly as a Buddhist, what exactly am I identifying with? Is it the particular cultural forms—the statues, the chanting, the robes, the Pali terminology? Is it the philosophical framework? Is it the community? Is it some combination?

And this matters because it affects how we relate to teachings that draw from multiple traditions or that use unexpected images and examples. If my identity as a Buddhist is primarily about loyalty to Buddhist cultural forms, then I might feel uncomfortable when a teacher uses Hebrew mystical concepts or Christian imagery to illuminate dharma points. But if my identification is more with the underlying commitment to freedom from suffering and the cultivation of wisdom, then perhaps I can be more open to teachings that draw skillfully from various sources.

This question of identity and allegiance in spiritual practice is not trivial. It shapes how we receive teachings, how we practice, how we relate to other traditions and practitioners. And it's worth examining honestly what's actually motivating our preferences and reactions when we encounter teachings that don't fit neatly into the boxes we've constructed.

And then she was telling me that she felt drawn to Buddha Dharma again and was explaining that this draw was because she had felt Kuan Yin calling her home to explore some of her presence as a figure in her own right, as a presence within herself.

So this reconnection with Buddhism came through the sense of Kuan Yin. My question is—and I don't know what was the case with this person—but my question is really: is it just an icon, in this case Kuan Yin, typically conceived and labeled as Buddhist, or is it something more? Because if it's just the icon, where is the Buddha Dharma in that?

Actually, representations of divinities throughout history have passed, they've moved, they've been traded, they slip and are shared between one culture and religious tradition and another—countless, countless times. Academics have traced that in all kinds of ways. So just because it's Kuan Yin, and Kuan Yin is regarded as a Buddhist deity, Bodhisattva, etc., does that make it a return to Buddhadharma? If it's only that it's a typically Buddhist deity, if there's nothing more than that, just the borrowing of a deity and a relationship with that deity—perhaps through visualization, perhaps through image, etc.—where's the Buddha Dharma there?

Similarly, I heard that when Christian missionaries went to Tibet, they started trying to teach the Gospels and teach about Jesus and teach the theology of Christianity, they actually had very little impact and very little influence because the Tibetans heard the stories about Jesus—the beautiful healing stories and his sacrifice and all of that—and just heard it and said, "Oh, he's just a Bodhisattva that we'd never heard of before." And so he was just easily, without any friction at all, accommodated into their already large pantheon of deities and Bodhisattvas. And they completely missed the essence of Christianity. And certainly missed any differentiation between what they were believing and thinking in their conceptual frameworks, explicit and implicit, and the Christian ones.

So again, when we talk about traditions and eclecticism and borrowing and referring to all that, what are we actually talking about? What actually has the clout? Is it just a kind of representation, or is it more the deeper, essential conceptual framework with the delineations and things? So there's a lot of considerations in here, I think, to reflect on.

I've made the case before, and I get the impression I'm not the only one who feels this way, but in many regards, the postmodern movement, philosophically at least, kind of reached a dead end, or has come to a dead end in a certain way. Partly it was supposed that in the attack on any proclamation or hope or idea of a universal truth that could be arrived at by adopting the perspective that reveals that truth would open up the ground for more fertile cross-pollination and conversation.

I don't think that has happened, or it doesn't seem to have happened very much. It certainly hasn't happened much in philosophical circles, as far as I can tell. And the whole thing kind of got, well, died, to some extent. And I mentioned someone, for instance, like Richard Rorty, who made such an insistence in his very smart critique of truth claims and privileged perspectives on reality, and deconstructions of even the attempt at ontology and epistemology. And then was hoping that this would, in his words, open up the conversation. That was the most important thing, to open up the conversation, keep the conversation going. But very little came. Certainly in his writings, there's very little conversation happening. And it didn't seem to spawn much or open up much of a conversation or much fertile creation and discovery, either in terms of ideas or anything else.

And I made this point before, but partly the problem is that a lot of the academic philosophers lack any technology in the sense of any meditative technique and capacity and developed practice to actually shift ways of looking, to move in and out of different ways of looking, so that their very sense of reality, their very sense of cosmos, their sense of human being, their perception of things, actually changes. Of course, that's the central thing, as I would say, we practice in Buddha Dharma, at least as I tend to most commonly present it. And that takes practice.

So I can have the idea that there are the possibility of different perspectives. But if I can't actually engage different perspectives, it just stays completely at the level of the written academic word or debate. Nothing is really affected in the being and there's no real exploration of new ground, of different perspectives, no real creation and discovery happening. So that's maybe one reason why the whole postmodern philosophical movement kind of just sort of died or petered out, lost its life.

A second is, and again I've pointed this out before, that often many of those philosophers espousing the impossibility of seeing truth or arriving at the existence of one truth or arriving at one preferred perspective on reality, most of those philosophers espousing that actually had a hidden agenda. Sometimes it might have been hidden to themselves, I don't know. And that hidden agenda involved a kind of strongly secularist, almost nihilistic, materialist stance. That was their basic ontological commitment. And

on top of that, they might have even had an agenda to cut down, to denigrate, to make impossible, to bar from the conversation anything that reaped to them of more spiritual views, more ennobling views, other dimensions, divinity, etc.

So, saying one thing, but actually blocking the discourse from opening up in certain areas. This also just closed the discourse so it ended up atrophying and nothing really new came into that plot other than people repeating over and over, "There's the absence of truth," and bashing each other, slapping each other's wrists when it seemed like this person or that person was claiming some kind of privileged perspective, usually without realizing it.

Now, I'm sure that in recent years and even the last couple of decades, I'm sure there must be thinkers and burgeoning movements that I'm just unaware of. Someone was talking to me even just the other day about metamodernism and saying that this was the beginnings of a philosophical movement that had something in common with what we were teaching and may provide part of a way forward out of this sort of dead end or lifeless pool left over from postmodernism and this strange mishmash of the dominant modernism with sort of filtered down postmodernism.

But at the same time, soul-making as an art preserves its own irreducible mystery and unfathomability that cannot be fully captured or explained by these other purposes, no matter how noble they might be.

This understanding of dharma as art opens up tremendous possibilities while simultaneously providing the necessary constraints that make meaningful exploration possible. When we conceive of our practice this way, we're no longer bound by the rigid truth claims that can become so problematic in both religious and scientific frameworks. We're not required to defend absolute positions or universal truths in the same way. Instead, we're engaging with something that has the fluidity and creative potential of artistic expression, while still maintaining depth, rigor, and transformative power.

This artistic approach also allows us to embrace what we might call "multiple truths" without falling into the relativistic trap that postmodernism sometimes creates. In art, we don't say that all artistic expressions are equally valuable or meaningful, but we also don't reduce them to a single measure of truth or beauty. There are qualities, there are depths, there are resonances that some works have and others don't. There's discernment involved, but it's a different kind of discernment than purely rational or empirical judgment.

The same applies to soul-making dharma as art. We can discern between practices and approaches that seem to generate more soul, more depth, more beauty, more meaningfulness, and those that don't, without having to resort to absolute truth claims. This discernment itself becomes part of the artistic sensibility we're cultivating.

When we view our spiritual practice through this lens, we're also freed from some of the cultural constraints that might otherwise limit our exploration. We're not bound by what's considered culturally acceptable or intellectually fashionable in quite the same way that we might be if we were making scientific or religious truth claims. Art has always had a certain license to explore territories that other domains might find too controversial or uncertain.

This doesn't mean anything goes, of course. As I mentioned, the constraints and resistances are crucial. They're what give the artistic exploration its power and depth. But these constraints come from the internal logic of the practice itself, from what actually works to generate soul and meaning and transformation, rather than from external cultural pressures or intellectual fashions.

The intellectual component is certainly present, but in a way, soul-making will always have these beyonds that deliver and open up—domains whose purpose transcends the merely moral, cognitive, or utilitarian. These elements are there, but soul-making will always be more. And as such, one might ask, "Well, what's the point? What's the use of it?" The answer is simply this: soul-making is the use of it. It stops there in that kind of circular, self-proclaiming declaration.

If we linger a little longer with this whole idea of postmodernism—and I'm sure I'm not the first person to point this out—when you ponder it deeply, you can realize something quite striking about one of its central tenets. Characteristic of postmodernism is this idea that beliefs and worldviews emerge from or are constituted by historical and cultural context. They're not universal truths, the argument goes, but are simply conditioned by particular historical and cultural circumstances.

This is the typical postmodern critique or analysis—really, an explanation of ideas, views, worldviews, and beliefs. But one could point out that the very idea or belief that views emerge from historical and cultural context is itself a view emerging from a certain historical and cultural context. What does that do to our understanding? The idea that ideas are culturally emergent is itself a culturally emergent idea. Again, we can point back to Heidegger and others who explored this recursive dilemma.

Does this relativize the postmodern claim as truth? Does it mean that this very idea about cultural conditioning and contingency may not be ultimately true? And what does that do to our sense of possibilities?

There's often an agenda in this typically postmodern assertion—sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit. When postmodern thinkers insist that ideas and views come from culture and don't reflect any universal truth or movement toward such truth, there's usually an implicit prohibition. What's being forbidden is the notion that cultural conditioning itself might represent something like divine movement—the life of world soul intelligence, or something of that nature.

This would be a definite taboo for most postmodern philosophers. Yet one could retain the insight about cultural conditioning while suggesting that the conditioning itself reflects something larger being worked out through humanity, through world soul—a movement of the divine, of Buddha nature. This idea, which in a way sanctifies cultural contexts and movements, is too reminiscent of Hegel for most contemporary philosophers.

Hegel, who was enormously influential before becoming almost the focal point of vehement philosophical attack, had this notion of absolute spirit—that culture, society, religions, philosophies, and art are all part of a wider movement and evolution of spirit. One of the problems with Hegel was his proclamation that this process of spiritual growth through cultural evolution had reached its zenith in his own philosophy—which is, of course, problematic for obvious reasons.

But we could entertain—neither as truth nor untruth, but as a perspective, a conceptual framework we're free to move in and out of—a very similar idea. We could see cultural conditioning and context as part of a divine movement of world soul intelligence, using whatever words feel appropriate. The key difference would be regarding this movement as open-ended, rather than having already arrived at its summit or moving toward some future peak where we'll all recognize perfection.

We could regard this divine movement as open-ended, just as we regard soul-making as open-ended. The awakening that soul-making opens and delivers would be endless in its possibilities, endlessly fertile, and still—still a divine movement.

As I said at the beginning, there's a great deal here to unearth and illuminate. I want to hold back as much as possible from imposing any conclusions I might be inclined to draw from all this, and simply expose these considerations for our collective contemplation.

When we put all these pieces together—the considerations about history, cultural context and conditioning (past, present, and future), and the place of our personal inclinations, desires, and soul styles—it becomes possible, given everything we've explored, to conceive or situate soul-making dharma in at least two ways regarding its place vis-à-vis mainstream Buddha dharma.

Given all we've discussed, it's possible to write this history—remembering that history is fiction—in at least two ways. One possibility is that soul-making is part of Buddhadharma. As such, it exists within the perimeters, boundaries, and scope of what we understand as Buddha Dharma. It certainly evolved from Buddha Dharma insight meditation as its foundation, utilizing many of the tools, concepts, and meditative techniques that are part of Buddha Dharma practice and teaching.

Soul-making emerged very much from deep exploration of emptiness, as I've explained. We can—as I have done in certain talks, perhaps including "What Is Awakening?" and others—trace these connections and demonstrate this continuity.

rethink or better expand our sense of the four noble truths, expand our sense of what do we mean by suffering and what do we mean by awakening, especially now if we cannot assume that everyone believes suffering is just being in the realm of rebirth from life to life and liberation is getting off that wheel of rebirth and not being reborn again. Then the whole notions of suffering and awakening become more open to different interpretations.

And it's possible to expand what we mean by suffering. We talked about including the suffering of soullessness and the awakening of soul. So I've explained all this at much greater length. But then we're really using the framework of the Four Noble Truths and expanding its range. And certainly there are other elements of Buddha Dharma that we could say in soul-making Dharma are the same concepts—they're just expanded beyond maybe what many proponents of mainstream Buddha Dharma would put out there.

So, for example, we talk about in the Dharma: Sila, Samadhi, Paññña—ethics, samadhi or meditative absorption and well-being and concentration, and paññña, wisdom. So you can see that when I touched on yesterday the relationship between emptiness and image, we're really opening up the range of insight regarding emptiness and its implications.

Or, for instance, when I mentioned that the truth of anicca—perhaps not an ultimate truth, as many Buddhists would consider it, the ultimate truth of impermanence—we're actually expanding the insight and saying, well, actually time is empty too, and all

things that exist in time are empty. And so with the emptiness of time, the door is opened to a perspective of timelessness, eternality. So it's almost like more insight, deeper insight, widens the range and the scope of what's actually possible. So there's paññā there.

If we talk about samadhi, I've talked a lot about, for instance, the fluid back and forth between samadhi states and working with an image. The reality or the experience of wherever you are working in meditation with an image—there's a fork. You can go into the samadhi more, you can go into the image more. I've delineated four or five kinds of realms or experiences that one can be in with an image or with the essence of an image. And so this is also extending—alongside the eight classical jhanas, we can extend the range of what kind of states it's possible to settle into and regard as realms, meditative realms, states of relative meditative stability. So again, all the samadhi is there, all the paññā is there—it's just stretched a little bit.

If we talk about sila, about ethics—actually I hope that I will be able to talk about that after this talk. So again, I would urge the view that what's happening in soul-making dharma is actually we're expanding the ethics. We're certainly not getting rid of the ethics. So again, our practice is based on ethical care and ethical attention. But it perhaps widens it.

I've talked about sometimes, in talks like "Meditator's Revolutionary" and "Necessity of Fantasy," the almost unconscious limitation on our ethical sensibilities and our ethical stands and actions—the limitations imposed by a limited range of archetypes that we inherit or that are the legacy of mainstream Buddha Dharma. And so soul-making dharma might open up the ethical range more because it opens up the range of archetypes through which one can sense and tune to the ethics of the situation and then respond as well. So I'm going to elaborate on that in the talks to come.

Or even dana—we're very much rooted in the practice of generosity in all kinds of ways, and I've talked about that when we talked about opening the energy body, the importance of that, and radical generosity. But it's also possible to say that in soul-making, in some of the particular elements of soul-making, dana is implicit. In duty, for example—duty that, in relation to an image, has to spill out somehow into the world. Somehow, even if it's actually purely intrapsychic, duty in relation to an image, there's some kind of dana, there's some kind of giving of the being that is expressed through that duty.

One might also say, regarding dharma, that the soul is intrinsically and naturally generous, that it wants to share itself, to display itself, to show and manifest its gods, its daemons, to mirror and echo infinitely in life, in body, in speech, in perception, in

mind, in art, in work, in so much. It pours itself out endlessly. It wants to impress in that good sense that I was talking about. It wants to connect. It wants to share. Soul wants to reach out to soul and impress and be impressed upon. There's a generosity in that.

You could say soul serves itself, but from another perspective, soul is more than me, or certainly more than ego. It's always at least tied to or tending toward the social and the community, the earthy and the cosmic, the hidden worlds as well. It serves all of that. In its service and devotion to soul-making, it serves all of that. It doesn't—again, because of the intrinsic tendency to expand, it expands into all these domains as well. So there are all kinds of directions, aspects, levels, dimensions of generosity wrapped up in soul-making Dharma.

The one view is that soul-making Dharma is just within the scope of Buddha Dharma. It's just one sub-tradition, much as Vajrayana is, or Insight Meditation is, or whatever, within Buddha Dharma. And really what's happening is we're just expanding the range of what we mean by Dharma, Sila, Samadhi, Pañña, without

without letting go of any of what we already meant by dhana sila samadhi pañña. We're just expanding it.

But a second way of writing a story, or seeing it, situating it, conceiving of it, is that actually, Buddha Dharma is in soul-making. It's a part of soul-making. So why? How could we say that? Because soul styles and soul desires, as we said and emphasized, they direct and determine what kind of Dharma I want, because what kind of world I want to sense myself in, what kind of vision and sense of humanity, what kind of liberation, what kind of flavor of being.

And so the soul style, whether it's conscious or not, the soul wishes to feed into determining the Dharma. And again, we could regard that as a movement of the world soul, in a more global sense, if you like. So that Dharma itself is an expression of soul, of soul-making. And as such, it's a dynamic, evolving, moving, volatile, and multi-faced, multi-aspected, multi-directional movement of soul-making.

So one view is soul-making Dharma is within the Buddha Dharma, and another view is the Dharma is in soul-making. Buddha Dharma is a movement of soul. Was, is, will be a movement of soul. It's conjured forth from soul. It's built by soul. It's shaped and determined by the desires and the movements and the inclinations and the processes of soul-making. So we could look at it two ways.

Somewhere before, I can't remember, and it was probably in the context of saying something else, but I think I said actually you could see it three ways. You could make a claim that soul-making Dharma is well within the scope of traditional Buddha Dharma,

and maybe even stretch it and claim that the Buddha did teach soul-making Dharma, etc. So that's very typical in religious innovation, is to claim the innovation, paint it as an original teaching.

So then you get the stories of the Vajrayana was proclaimed by the Buddha, by Siddhartha Gautama in his lifetime but just to a secret set of disciples or just in secret to a select set of disciples, for example. It's always been there and then it was only revealed gradually over time. Similar with Mahayana, etc. So there's a painting of something—again to do with fantasy of origins, it's to do with the way religions think backwards to the founder and the truth being behind me, truth that I'm trying to replicate. But one could paint it that way.

As a first option, one could perceive soul-making Dharma that way. One could perceive it as completely having broken out of the bounds of Buddha Dharma and being something else. A vessel has shattered, it's open, and now it's outside of the perimeter.

Or, a third way, one could regard soul-making Dharma as part of the expansion of Buddha Dharma in the West. The current birth, actually, of Buddha Dharma in the West. Buddha Dharma very young in the West. And that we are involved, and not just people involved with soul-making Dharma, all of us, anyone, are involved in that kind of meeting of cultures. Just as when the Buddha Dharma went to Japan or China or Tibet, and it met with indigenous cultures, the cultures and religious thought and conceptions that had been there for a long time, and sensibilities and styles of being and soul styles, and it had to kind of marry the two, and it did, so that Japanese Zen is much of it grossly different than, say, Tibetan Buddhism or Theravadan Buddhism, etc. It's taken on, it had to be expanded and shaped in the context of that meeting of cultures.

So that would be a third way of regarding, a third story about soul-making Dharma in its relationship to traditional Dharma. Actually, part of that expansion is happening right now. So that movement of the Buddha Dharma meeting Western culture at this time, and we're in that process. And that's where soul-making Dharma sits, as one of the discoveries, creations, fermentations, explorations of that meeting.

So there's three options there. And I think I pointed out whenever I mentioned this before that, and then of those three options, which do you prefer? How would you like to see this? And how much, again, is it just a kind of archetypal or soul style that determines the story that we, or you, tell yourself? In other words, do you want to see yourself as a renegade revolutionary, breaking out, starting something new? Do you want to see yourself as a midwife, a part of the gentle care of birthing new life and new

growth? Or do you want to see yourself as loyal and traditional within an already established range of what's already agreed upon as this is Buddha Dharma? And maybe which story I choose depends on soul style.

So, I don't know how you feel now. Maybe that's just a few too many groundlessnesses in there for you. I don't know. With all this reflection and all this, what we've sort of exposed in the pot, how does this land with you?

And if there's two ways of spinning a story, soul-making Dharma is in Buddha Dharma, or the Dharma is in soul-making, Buddha Dharma is in the soul and is part of soul-making—might that also be a version or an instance of what Lee Smolin quoted about the hypothesis of duality? Two very different ways of looking at the same thing. They seem completely incongruent, but they are merely two ways of looking at the same thing.

The Buddha Dharma is a part of soul-making. So I don't know how this lands with you—whether it agitates you, makes you nervous, makes you angry, or if it excites you, baffles you, perplexes you, or even depresses you.

I wonder whether part of opening to all this and reckoning with it—acknowledging it, pondering it—is actually part of a kind of psychological and spiritual maturity of soul. To ignore all these considerations would be somewhat immature, like saying, "I don't want to acknowledge that, I don't want to think about it—it's a bit too much."

Perhaps looking at what we've got here, admitting this mix and the nebulousness and groundlessness of it, is asking something significant of us psychologically and spiritually. To be able to do this, to be willing to engage with this, requires a kind of maturity of soul. And is it possible to open to all this and assimilate it, digest it, relate to it in a way that's actually fertile for soul-making—helpful, beautiful, expansive?

Someone once asked me, probably more than once: "Why is soul-making dharma so complicated? You've got all this stuff going on, all these words." It's a good question, and I'll offer a few reflections in response.

Partly, it's because supporting and justifying what stands other than our culture's dominant, taken-for-granted, habitual default views requires a complex movement. It's difficult to do that kind of work. Owen Barfield offers a helpful metaphor: the movements a hand makes when you untie a shoelace are actually very complicated movements, but the resulting state is relatively simple when the two sides are untied. That state is simpler than the knot itself.

It may be that untying—if you like, recognizing, exposing, untying—a lot of the deeply ingrained assumptions, perspectives, conclusions, and views we typically hold because we live in this culture at this time and have been saturated in Buddha Dharma, may actually require quite complicated movements, like untying a shoelace. But then things become more open.

A second reason for the apparent complexity is simply that logos and intellect are part of the soul-making dynamic. They're part of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic. The soul wants and needs complexity, not only simplicity. Yes, the soul wants simplicity at times—it wants a kind of spiritual simplicity, and it also wants simplicity when overwhelmed with dukkha. But it doesn't only and always want simplicity. It also wants complexity, interesting and fecund terrain, materials and challenges.

As we've pointed out in the soul-making dynamics, the soul itself will complicate and complexify, as well as simplify at times. In the movement toward the unfabricated, there's a progressive simplifying—simpler than anything we usually consider simple, simpler even than oneness. But the soul also wants complexity. Working with images and sensing the soul tends to complexify, tends to add more and more faces, aspects, dimensions.

Both movements are part of soul-making—the imaginal complexification and imaginal practice in general are only part of the larger potential range of soul-making, which can involve both movement toward simplification and movement toward complexity. The soul wants both. The soul is hungry—infinitely hungry, infinitely thirsty.

The third possible reason for complexity is that we need a sophisticated and robust philosophical framework—conceptual framework, ontology, epistemology, psychology—because much of what we're discussing will be quite alien and perhaps even shocking to many people who hear it, many dharma practitioners who hear it. This work has received and will receive criticism, ridicule, dismissal from some people who are very influenced by or attached to mainstream views and beliefs.

Therefore, it needs the surety, stability, and robustness of a more sophisticated philosophical, conceptual framework and psychology. And that means more complexity, more detail, more going into things at a deeper level, more drawing on a wider range than usual in our considerations.

We could say more as well. If we're going to acknowledge that stretching of conceptual frameworks—or breaking not just conceptual frameworks but perceptions, heart ranges, and all kinds of experiential ranges—if that kind of breaking of vessels is an inevitable part of either gentle stretching or the shattering and rebuilding of vessels in an expanded way, then shattered again...

If this whole movement or cyclical, spiraling growth of breaking vessels, stretching and breaking vessels, is an inevitable part of soul life and soul growth and soul movement, then we actually need a conceptual framework and a logos that includes and accommodates the possibility of breaking vessels in its very conception, and that is wide in its possibilities.

So if you just make a dharma that fits, that becomes a vessel, and then something in the soul pushes out and expands through that, the vessel was too small. The vessel has to be wide, and so there's more in it. That more can also be a little overwhelming or complex sounding to some people.

Sometimes people say to me, "Soul-making dharma is what the world needs now. It's exactly what we need in this time of crisis, and it's almost as if it's the one thing that's going to save humanity." I would be much more humble, I think, in an assessment and say it's one possibility. Soul-making dharma is one possible dharma for our times.

It does seem to me to have certain strengths, certain assets. It includes the personal, the particular. It does not just dismiss the self or reify the self, but offers an infinitely expanded range of possible self-expressions, self-theaters, self-explorations. It has, I think, the advantage of not being a realist framework or realist philosophy, which is problematic for all the reasons I've mentioned over recent years and even in this set of talks. It's more congruent with developments in thinking about science and philosophy from recent years.

It allows and promotes, as an integral and inevitable part of its movement, the ability to sense the world with soul, to sense the earth with soul, to sense each other with soul. The reverence and the sense of divinity, dimensionality, beauty, humility, care, eros come with that. So we sense the earth that way. We sense each other that way. We sense ourselves that way. There's a framework, both of ideas and meditative art, that supports that.

Again, you could say that's a really helpful possibility at this time. It allows a potentially much deeper care. It gives ground and ongoing support and range to the kinds of care we have for the earth, for each other, for ourselves, including ways we can think about activism and engagement as part of that. Of course there are other ways, but within the soul-making dharma it seems to offer all that.

It also recognizes the importance of choices about anthropology and cosmology, and recognizes how much those visions or views of what is a human being, what is the cosmos, how is the cosmos, what kind of cosmos do we live in—how that will affect what kind of dharma we have, what kind of sense of tradition, path, and goal. Recognizing the central, basic influence and import of anthropology and cosmology on the vision of the dharma, the sense, the scope, the version of dharma and awakening. Recognizing that and actually accommodating all that.

We don't have to insist on this kind of anthropology or that kind of cosmology. Actually, we can accommodate more coherently, more integrally, all these different views. We understand where they come from. There's a soul need for this or that view, and it will spawn this or that direction, this or that sense of the path, this or that sense of the goal. Rather than assuming that we're all talking about the same thing just because we're using vocabulary in unclear and not very well-defined ways, we recognize, acknowledge, accommodate and explore the diversity in a larger range of whole conceptions of the dharma. So all that can fit in too.

But in response to those people—actually they're not that many—who are attracted to soul-making dharma teachings but struggle a little because it's too much, too complex, there are too many possibilities for practice, too many new words and ideas: I have to say that some of it, I don't know if I would have put it out there at such a rate over the last four years were it not for my health situation and having obviously a very difficult prognosis and the possibility of dying at any time. It felt important to me to get the material out. I didn't want to feel like I died without trying to put that out there.

There's no need to digest it all at once. Hopefully these teachings are there for a while and you can return to them and pace yourself.

One extreme reaction would be, "I need to eat all this now, I need to digest it and understand it right now," and kind of over-consume or consume at a pace that not just your mind, but also your heart and your soul and your life and your relationships cannot accommodate.

Another extreme would be just to throw it all out because one is maybe attached to simplicity, for example.

But a middle way would be to take your time. Again, it's so much a matter of responsiveness, attunement, care, listening, attentive calibration of your soul and your soul's needs—how's it landing, how's it going, how is the assimilation going.

Culturally, I would say we need at this point other options rather than just the dichotomy, the split between rampant consumerism and greed and craving on the one hand, and an over-simplistic view of desire on the other—that desire, unless it's desire for compassion and liberation from suffering, is basically bad and not trustworthy. That whole third possibility or middle ground, a more complex, more nuanced exploration of eros, of desire and psychology and the soul aspects and dimensions and considerations of that—that's also necessary. So that's in the mix for some of you who are wondering.

Okay, let's stop there.

CHAPTER 188

Sīla and Soul (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h46

> *In this introductory talk on ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea maps the intricate terrain of our contemporary moral landscape. He traces how Western practitioners inherit a complex mixture of ethical frameworks: the Judeo-Christian heritage of good and evil with its accompanying guilt and fear of punishment, the Buddha's reframing of ethics as kusala (skillful) and akusala (unskillful) in service of alleviating suffering, the modern emphasis on releasing self-judgment, and the postmodern suspicion of universal moral claims.*
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> *Burbea draws on philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's work to show how the meaning of 'moral' has narrowed over centuries, and how modernity's project to rationally justify ethics apart from theology ultimately failed, leaving us in a confused state where law has partially divorced from its ethical foundations. He examines Richard Rorty's pragmatism and finds it lacking—without some sense of deeper dimensionality or 'higher' orientation, ethics loses its grounding and passion.*
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> *The talk addresses concerns about whether imaginal practice might be amoral or dangerous, clarifying how the elements of the imaginal lattice—including the imaginal middle way, fullness of intention, energy body sensitivity, and values as inherent elements—actually safeguard and enrich ethical sensitivity. Burbea suggests that soul-making itself may constitute a moral value, and that the cosmopoiesis arising from practice naturally cultivates reverence for self, other, and world. This serves as groundwork for deeper exploration of how soul-making Dharma might address the gaps in our collective ethical framework.*

Alright, so I would like to speak about ethics—the loose translation of the Pali *sīla*. Ethics and morality.

Perhaps the first thing to say is that I think it's an endless subject. So this talk certainly will end, I hope, and I'm sure you hope. But in itself, I don't think humanity will ever get to the end of its exploration, consideration, and inquiry into ethics and that whole subject. It will never be finished for us, complete, all figured out. In that way, it's a subject like, for example, emotions—human emotion—which I've said before I also don't think humanity will ever reach a complete, final understanding of. Or a subject like healing, or psychology in general, or certain philosophical subjects like ontology.

These unfathomably deep and rich domains of our concern open themselves up endlessly. They're endlessly fecund for exploration, endlessly complex, endlessly open to different and competing perspectives and interpretations, views and opinions, theories, frameworks. There are all kinds of problems involved, all kinds of difficulties and challenges. But at least the way I relate to those kinds of subjects and that endlessness which they seem to open out to or contain within themselves is that rather than walking away from the complexity, the problematic, the endlessness of it, it actually invites us onward. We have a certain calling or duty or destiny to take those explorations further, as much as we can, in our generation.

So it's important to talk about these subjects because they need us, in a way, to keep progressing the discourse, the consideration, the problematic inquiry—to keep wrestling, to keep experimenting. It's not easy, but it's endlessly fertile.

One implication of this is that whatever I offer here in this talk is going to be incomplete. It's incomplete because of what I've just said about the nature of the subject. So it's appropriate that it's incomplete. I mean, it's also incomplete because of lots of other reasons, but there's a fundamental reason why it's incomplete, and it's completely appropriate that it's incomplete, because that's, I think, the nature of this subject, of this realm of inquiry, this realm of concern.

Okay, so ethics. I should say right at the beginning that I'm going to use the words *ethical* and *moral* interchangeably. I know some people make distinctions in how they use those words, but for the purposes of this talk, I'm going to use them interchangeably, at random. They mean the same thing, as far as I'm concerned, for now.

What I want to go into is, a little bit at least, and open out for reflection, for consideration, for possible avenues of practice and conceiving: the relationship of soul and ethics, soul and *sīla*, soul-making dharma and imaginal practice and ethics, and Buddha Dharma and the wider range of Buddha Dharma in its relationship with ethics. And then even wider—the wider culture, our contemporary, practically global culture now and ethics. I want to include particularly the need, I think, for a sort of expansion of our ethical thinking to consider our ethical relationship with the Earth, with the planet that we come from and that we live on, that is our home, and with regard to such pressing issues as climate change and species extinction.

A big subject, and way too big really, but let's see what we can do.

I should point out that tonight is really just an introduction to this larger talk on ethics—just the introductory part. So many of the pieces I touch on tonight I will hopefully pick up later as we go through on future evenings.

To begin, let me repeat a few things I've said before regarding the wider culture, our wider cultural inheritance around morality, and Buddha Dharma. Just a few brief things. Generally I don't like repeating, otherwise the talks would really go on forever. But I've said this before—I can't remember where, perhaps in *Necessity of Fancy*, perhaps a few other places.

In the West, in the modern West, we have a complex inheritance, a complex heritage flowing down to us from the Judeo-Christian outlook on morality, on ethics, and even more the Islamic outlook—the Abrahamic religions. Their view with regard to morality seems to most people to have the flavor of good and evil, right and wrong. There is in all that a fear of punishment, a fear of everlasting punishment from God, and a kind of guilt that accrues with that.

Actually, I think there's a lot that's extremely beautiful in those traditions. I'm just pulling out some salient features for our purposes right now, in a grossly oversimplified way—apologies for that. But a kind of dualism between good and evil, right and wrong: it's framed that way. And with that can go this fear of punishment, which in many cases can be really quite severe, and guilt that can also be really painful.

Of course, as individuals, how this complex heritage from the Abrahamic religions filters down into each individual life or the context of each individual life varies widely, depending on all kinds of conditions and factors in upbringing and personality and situation and education. But as a society, that's there in the soup, in the mix.

By contrast, to a certain extent, Buddha Dharma—and if you know Buddha Dharma, especially from the insight meditation tradition, but really right from the start—the Buddha framed his ethical teachings more in terms of what's *kusala* and *akusala*: either skillful or unskillful. Sometimes it can be translated as wholesome or unwholesome. But basically what that means is what leads to suffering, what perpetuates suffering, and what alleviates suffering.

So the whole thrust of the ethics and the ethical training in the sila is in the service of alleviating suffering, and is less cast in terms of good, evil, right and wrong.

Even that statement, even that contrast, is actually not so black-and-white true. But generally speaking, most people who come to Buddha Dharma—if they've had a painful history with notions of good and evil, right and wrong from the Abrahamic religious heritage, and the fear of punishment and guilt—find some more spaciousness and softness, some comfort and relief, in the Buddha Dharma's presentation of it as we inherit it in the West, but certainly also from the beginning with the Buddha.

Coupled with this is the fact that Western Buddha Dharma, a lot of Western Buddha Dharma—certainly the Insight Meditation tradition—has a large component of its offering that tries to address and alleviate self-judgment, the pandemic of self-judgment in our Western culture. So both the emphasis away from good and evil, right and wrong, onto the relief of suffering or the complication of suffering, and the softening of self-judgment, means that for many people the approach to ethics, the way it's presented and laid out in the Buddha Dharma as they come to it, is more spacious and palatable.

Not for everyone. In fact, as I said, it's not that simple, because if you take on board the Buddha's teachings of rebirth and karma, then if you do something in this life, you can pay karmically. I wouldn't call it a punishment—that's not the way karma is thought of—but it has karmic effects that are effectively similar to a kind of punishment, except they may not be eternal. They may still last a long time. But since a lot of modern Western Buddhism doesn't really buy into that whole paradigm of rebirth and the karmic consequences there, most modern Western Buddhism just focuses on attention to and interest in how we compound suffering in the moment, in our lives, as patterns of psychology and behavior—action, speech, and thought—and how we can alleviate that. And the ethics is generally set within that framework.

But right from the beginning, the intention of the sila, of ethical training, was really in the service of simplifying, calming and simplifying the mind. Even the third hindrance, restlessness and worry—one of the meanings implicit in that is the putting down, the release, of the kind of worry and restlessness that arises in the mind, in a being, when they're worrying about what they've done wrong, about who will find out what they've done wrong, or regret, or remorse, or guilt.

So even that, in the context of the Buddha's threefold training, the sila has this thrust toward enabling a simplifying of the mind, enabling a relative amount of peace, which then opens the doorway for deeper samadhi, for jhana, which serves insight, which delivers liberation and the end of rebirth.

The five precepts, as they've come to us over history—five precepts for lay practitioners—are in a way in the service of simplifying. They're a minimum. And one way of approaching them is not to think about it much. Just keep the precepts and then don't worry about it. The whole purpose is not to worry. So if you keep within the parameters of those five precepts, then just forget about it. Don't really trouble the mind and trouble the being wrestling with complex ethical issues, because the function of the ethics is to simplify and to calm. They serve as a kind of minimum. Certainly in the presentations of Theravada, one isn't really invited into a kind of deep pondering and grappling with ethical issues in one's life.

In some modern presentations—I'm thinking now of Thich Nhat Hanh—the Buddhist ethical precepts, the five precepts, are expanded to include their positive manifestations. So not taking what is not given extends to include practicing generosity. Again, that's something I'll come back to—the practice of virtues. Some people within the Buddha Dharma still are drawn to or feel compelled to grapple with complex ethical issues. So there's a sort of minimum given the five precepts, there's a sort of extra when we add the positive manifestations and the positive directions that Thich Nhat Hanh points to, and then some percentage of people is drawn to really ponder and grapple with these issues.

As Western Buddhists, if you like, we receive a very complex inheritance around ethics. Because even if we may have never been subject to heavy-duty presentations of Abrahamic religion in our personal lives, in our family, in our upbringing and education, it still, as I said, filters into the culture and forms part of the fabric—the sort of, I think, almost fraying fabric—of Western cultural thinking and feeling around ethics. We carry that inheritance with us to some degree or other. And then we also have this inheritance from the Buddha Dharma and this other way of thinking. They're mixed. These two are mixed together. I think it's hard for anyone in the West to completely remove themselves from that Abrahamic inheritance. So we get this mixture somewhere in our psyche, in our minds—the mixture of what we've received from Buddha Dharma and the Abrahamic religions.

Throw into that mix the rising modernist inclination, the tendency of individualism—that I can think what I want, I can do what I want, I can choose what I want—which also extends to some extent into the choices and opinions about right and wrong. But this culture of individualism, for the most part in our culture, and maybe it's a necessary evolutionary step—I think it is—but in its more immature aspects, which to some extent one has to decide how widespread you think that is, in some of its immature aspects, one can wonder how deep and authentic is a person's autonomy here. How widespread is it? Are we talking about most people? I don't know.

Is it just my right to pursue pleasure? And that's my individualism and my autonomy? Actually, it's not really autonomous at all. I'm just pulled like a puppet on a string toward pleasure. And I now have enough elbow room in society's thinking to insist on my right to pursue that pleasure, no matter what—or as far as I can until the law stops me, or it just seems outrageous in terms of its effects on other people.

So we've got this double inheritance from the Abrahamic religions and Buddha Dharma, and then the emphasis also in modern Western Buddha Dharma on letting go of self-judgment.

They're mixed. Throw into that mix a kind of individualism and a sort of invitation to think for oneself. One questions how deep and autonomous that thinking actually is. One also has to throw into the mix the flip side—the shadow side, if you like, maybe that's not the best word—the flip side of the kind of individualism that is for the most part prevalent in the wider society.

And that flip side is the inner critic. Living in a world where we conceive ourselves individually and less communally, despite some of the rhetoric that goes in newspapers, where there is this emphasis on "you can choose, you can have what you want," and all this array of choice in so many areas, with a degree of alienation from community, from earth—the flip side of this individualism is the inner critic, and the pain that it can bring. Some of that can attach to anything in one's being, but some of it can attach regarding ethics, and of course that can hook up with the heritage of the tendency to a kind of narrow and unhelpful guilt that we get from the Abrahamic religions. Actually, I'll come back to guilt in later talks, because I think guilt is interesting and not so simple.

But the inner critic can often be, is often, the flip side of a kind of individualism. And at its worst, it can actually be quite incapacitating, quite debilitating and limiting in what it does to our ethical capacity, our ethical sensitivity, our ethical range and courage. We can become too self-preoccupied, and the inner critic is a state of self-preoccupation, self-anxiety. That can block our ethical sensitivity, which becomes too concerned with our self and our own pain, too contracted that way.

So you've got all these factors in the mix. I can throw in a couple more. On the one hand, you've got a wider culture that celebrates a certain level of individualism, which we might say, certainly from the perspective of Soulmaking Dharma, is still a kind of immature individualism, an immaturely enchanted individualism. And at the same time, what you've got in some, maybe most Dharma circles, Buddha Dharma circles, is a kind of anti-individualism, because there's all this talk about the emptiness of the self. Again, we get a little confused about what that means. Am I trying to tone down my personality, or erode it, or hide, or not stick out like a sore thumb, or not be too colourful?

So you get these conflicting heritages all mixed together as part of our collective inheritance, impacting each of us very uniquely and differently. But this is all in the mix, and to some extent, all of it will impact all of us.

And then lastly—and again, I've pointed all this out before—what you have is an inheritance in the Buddha Dharma, certainly in Theravādan Buddha Dharma and the Insight Meditation tradition: certain images, stories of a certain archetype of what awakening looks like, that tends to be quite limited in its range, and is not recognized as

an archetype, as a fantasy, as an image, and therefore has a kind of insidious power over us. Because the Buddha statues are there, the stories are there, the tone is there, the presentation styles are there. Something is communicated: this is what awakening looks like, feels like, how it expresses itself. And the archetype of that is quite limited. It looks peaceful, equanimous, unemotional, except for perhaps some measure of compassion. It doesn't have a lot of wrestling with complex issues or difficult moral problems and situations. There is this simplicity of being that's part of the archetype. And there isn't, for instance, the ferocious warrior, certainly not in the Theravāda and Insight Meditation traditions.

So all that is part of the heritage we receive, in that case less verbally—or as much non-verbally as verbally. I do think, even in recent months, certainly in England, that this is beginning to change. There's a wider exploration of archetypal expressions, which I think is wonderful.

So, as I said, I may come back to all of this, but the point now is just how complex this inheritance is, how multi-directional, how self-contradictory it is. And there are other issues that I haven't perhaps touched on as much that I want to begin to open up.

In regard to our contemporary culture, it's worth pointing out something about the trajectory of our relationship—if you like, our collective relationship, because there's always going to be individual variations—our collective relationship with morality, with ethics. Borrowing again from Alasdair MacIntyre and his book *After Virtue*, which I mentioned in one of the recent talks, he looks at the history of the word *moral*. Interestingly, he says *moral* is the etymological descendant of *moralis* from the Latin, but *moralis*, like its Greek predecessor *ethikos*—from which we get the word *ethical*—means "pertaining to character." It came into the Latin from the Greek. So *ethos* is the character, the flavour of either a person's character, or the character of an institution, or the character of a society. We talk about the ethos, and that's where we get the word *ethical*. And the word *moralis* from Latin, from which we get the word *moral*, also means "pertaining to character."

MacIntyre writes that a person's character is nothing other than their set of dispositions to behave systematically in one way rather than another, to lead one particular kind of life. So it's really the quality, flavour, tenor, character of the whole set of dispositions that pertain to a person or an institution or a society.

But he goes on, and this I think is interesting, to trace a kind of narrowing of the meaning of the word *moral*. It is in the late seventeenth century, he writes, that it is used for the first time in its most restricted sense of all—that in which it has to do primarily with sexual behaviour. So there's a word that was quite wide and then some-

how got squeezed tighter and tighter and ended up having to do mostly with sexual behaviour. He asks: how could it come about that being "immoral" could be equated, even as a special idiom, with being sexually lax?

One of the important points is that with the Western Enlightenment, there was a divorce of morality from theology, aesthetics, and law. This was part of the separation of religious concerns and issues and concepts and assumptions from other concerns that were more based on the Western Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, and so forth. And because morality as a sphere of concern got separated out from religion and theological concerns, it needed its own justification. It was no longer justified with regard to divine law or religious proposition. So the attempts to provide a rational justification for morality in that historical period—and he traces it from around 1630 to 1850, that period of the Western Enlightenment and the beginnings of modernity—

That's when it acquired a sense at once general and specific, he said. In that period, morality became the name for that particular sphere in which rules of conduct—which are neither theological nor legal nor aesthetic—are allowed a cultural space of their own. It is only in the later seventeenth century and the eighteenth century, when this distinguishing of the moral from the theological, the legal, and the aesthetic has become a received doctrine, that the project of an independent rational justification of morality becomes not merely the concern of individual thinkers but central to Northern European culture.

In other words, with the Western Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, and to some extent the Renaissance, there arose this endeavour to remove the dominance and infiltration of religious dogma, assertions, and assumptions—to separate that out from the rest of human life and inquiry, from society, science, law, and morality. Religion was separated out from morality, and morality was separated out from religion. And because it was now separated out, it needed its own rational justification. Rational justification was exactly what the Western Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution were about. So this sphere, now distinct, required its own rational foundation.

And so enter the different philosophers: Hume and Locke, Hobbes and J.S. Mill and Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant and later G.E. Moore. What is interesting is that this project—to deduce or derive or elucidate a rational justification for morality—was attempted by all this series of great Western minds, and they failed. There was no answer that was completely satisfying to everyone in terms of rationally justifying morality. So the project of modernity with regard to ethics had, in a way, a very shaky foundation. Foundations were attempted, were built, but they never really got built very well.

And as time went on and modernity segued, or disintegrated, into postmodernity—if we can even use those terms—it became more explicitly voiced by some thinkers that actually any insistence on a unifying morality, on a universal morality, was inappropriate, impossible, for the same reasons we talked about when we discussed postmodernism the other day.

Now, of course, this is only one sector of thinkers, and of course, in many respects, despite all this, you could say that in some respects there has been—if we can even say it—great progress morally over the last few hundred years. There has also been completely not. One only has to look at the twentieth century, or look around us these days, to see the gaps, the problems, the shakiness, the uncertainties, the confusion and contradictions. But some postmodern thinkers at least ruled out the possibility of any kind of universal ethics. And so what entered the field was a sort of relativism with regard to ethics and morality.

Now, that wasn't received without a sense of problem. People said, this is a problem, somehow we need to fix this. But it seems very unclear how to actually move out of that kind of confusion and quagmire—where it's kind of taboo to insist on a universal morality, and yet complete moral relativism is also felt by many people to be problematic. So again, we're in a kind of conundrum at the present, in a cauldron of mixed pulls in different directions, of confusions, of gaps and contradictions.

And it may be that we can look around us and say what we have now—and I'm thinking of UK society and the US—is, to a certain extent, a very confused state of affairs with regard to ethics. In some respects we have law, a system of law that is in many ways supposed to be based on ethics, but has actually been divorced from ethics. Or another way of stating the problem: the law is supposed to apply to everyone, supposed to be universal. Everyone is subject to the same law, allegedly. But underpinning that, or supposedly underpinning that, is ethics—and there is not a universal agreement on a universal ethics. So there is a mismatch.

And to some extent from that mismatch, the law unmoors itself from an underpinning in ethics. It exists as something to respect, to preserve supposedly the stability and integrity of society. But in many ways it's not always rooted in concern for ethics or in something deeper. Obviously it's not a complete divorce between law and ethics; much, I'm sure, of the original intention behind laws, and how they get updated in legislation, is related to ethics. But there is a partial divorce, a partial disconnection, because there isn't the universal agreement on the ethical foundation of law. There's supposed to be, and sometimes it's assumed that there is, but actually it's not completely congruent.

Two things about that. One: I'm thinking now of the Extinction Rebellion protests and the clamour of objection and opposition to protesters. Some voices would say, "Don't you care about law and order? You're throwing that out the window by disrupting with your protests." But that kind of statement presupposes, implicit in it, that law and order in themselves are ultimately valuable, or more valuable than some ethical consideration—which to me is ridiculous. One only need go back to certain societies: South Africa, Nazi Germany, and you could mention many others, where law and order might have held sway, been kept in place very well by the government and most members of society, either directly or indirectly complicit. And yet it was holding up, was part of the fabric and structure of a fundamentally unethical system—apartheid, Nazism.

And the second thing in this confusion is that, in a way, what we have as part of the situation now is strident ethical cries from different perspectives that often conflict with each other, but carry this very strident tone.

So you often only need to read headlines in some newspapers, whatever, and in some areas or from some perspectives shouting very loud with a sort of presumption of moral righteousness, and at the very same time, huge areas of complete lack of concern or sympathy around other moral issues. All this is part of the mix of confusion, the confusing mix in our contemporary cauldron.

I mentioned Richard Rorty the other day and sort of used his thinking as an example of some of the lacunae, some of what's missing in our contemporary thinking about all this coming out of postmodernism. He used to often repeat that the most important thing is to keep the conversation going—that we should prioritize, over epistemological and ontological inquiries and approaches, continuing "the conversation of the West," as he phrased it. This was part of his concern with what he called solidarity and morality.

Now, as far as I know, he didn't actually write much about morality, and part of the reason, I think, is because his approach left him with very little to say about it. We could ask: why is it good or important to keep the conversation—whatever that means, "the conversation of the West"—going? Why is it good or important? Surely such a question leads, perhaps via more questions, to some assertion, some belief in some fundamental principle or principles which need dogmatic allegiance or some epistemological or ontological support. In a way, his philosophy was a refusal of any inquiry into ontology and epistemology apart from deconstructing it, and yet there was this insistence on keeping the conversation going. But when you start to ask why, there's nothing underneath.

As I said, I don't know his writings encyclopedically at all, but from what I've delved into a little bit, he does seem to have very little to say regarding ethics and values. The question I have is: do those areas regarding ethics and morality need some kind of underpinning and orientation? An underpinning at another level to explain, to give us a sense of their import? An orientation to what we call higher or more fundamental ideas, principles, values, psychologies? Could it be that the reason someone like Richard Rorty seems to have so little to say about ethics is because he absolutely refuses any kind of underpinning at a deeper level, any dimensionality, any orientation to a sense of what is higher?

I'll come back to that in a moment, but we might also ask again: what if this conversation that he's referring to gets really silly, or becomes a waste of time, or is itself a distraction from other issues and demands? And when does, for example, hate speech and stupid conversation—what do we do with that? There's this problem of the question of free speech, and so forth.

But principally, as I said, his insistence, his project and his insistence within his project on what he calls—he wants to get rid of what he calls "numinous notions." Numinous is another word for divine notions. Any notions of some other deeper dimensions, some higher sense of things—he wants to get rid of that. So he just wants to say morality simply *is*. "We need to think of our distinctive moral status as just that, rather than as grounded on our possession of"—and then he gives a whole list of other things. "All these numinous notions are just expressions of our awareness that we are members of a moral community, phrased in one or another pseudo-explanatory jargon. This awareness is something which cannot be further grounded. It is simply taking a certain point of view on our fellow humans. The question of whether it is an objective point of view is not to any point."

So he really has this insistence on removing any kind of deeper level of grounding or anchoring or dimensionality. We might say he absolutely refuses it. I guess part of what I want to say through these talks on ethics is: is that not exactly what we need? Without a sense of dimensionality and reference to something higher, a sense of something higher in which to ground our ethics, we're just at sea in this quagmire of potential relativism.

Again, what you sometimes find in Richard Rorty's writings are these slips where his language kind of betrays him. He talks, for instance, about how "we hope by acting this way in a certain situation to decrease our chances of acting badly." But the question is unexplained: what does "badly" mean, and why is such an act a bad act? Where does he get the moral rules from? On what are they grounded? He's insisting on not grounding

morality on anything, and yet he's insisting on morality—but what morality? Where does it get its sense of import? Where can we even find a passion in relation to morality?

Similarly, when he talks more generally in epistemological terms, he says someone might have "a good account" of why they think this or believe that, why they explain their own ethical behavior this way or that way. They might have a good account, or they might not. But again, what does he mean by "a good account"? If he's refusing any inquiry into epistemology apart from a deconstruction of it, any inquiry into ontology, what do these words "good" and "bad" mean? How do we decide what's good and bad? They slip into the writing, and again, to me this indicates, it betrays gaps, lacunae, a lack of consideration, a lack of adequate explanation and adequate grounding.

Just one more quote from him: "There is no inferential connection between the disappearance of the transcendental subject—of the human being as something having a nature which society can repress or understand—and the disappearance of human solidarity." In other words, his idea is that any kind of depth to a human being in the sense of dimensionality, which could be understood or which could be blocked or repressed by society—any notion of that, the disappearance of this notion of a human being having those transcendental dimensions—there's no inferential connection, he says, between that disappearance in our time and the disappearance of human solidarity.

So solidarity is the word he uses a lot, overlapping with morality. And then he writes, "Bourgeois liberalism seems to me the best example of the solidarity we have yet achieved." I'm not sure about his phrase "bourgeois liberalism" — he uses it quite a lot, and my suspicion is that he uses it slightly provocatively. But I don't know. Can bourgeois liberalism, whatever exactly he means by that, be separated from capitalism and democracy?

One of the things I think is problematic right now is capitalism. I'll return to that in a moment. But the other thing that's happened with postmodernity is this separating out of ethics from law and theology — the sort of atrophying of theology — and from aesthetics and from other concerns. With the postmodern objection to, and hesitancy about, coming up with a universal moral code or understanding of morality, what also goes with that is a kind of suspicion of power structures, a suspicion of hegemony in terms of who's deciding what is moral and what isn't. This suspicion is, to some extent, well grounded in the history of abuse from religious institutions over the years.

With that goes then the promise of democracy as a sort of equalizing force, where everyone with their different opinions can have their say. And of course, that's a very wonderful thing in democratic countries — a real evolution in humanity. But recently, in the last few years, much as I'm a believer in and lover of democracy, I sometimes wonder whether I still believe in it any longer. I mean, I do really, but I have some questions. I doubt I'm the only one.

I'm not sure that I believe in the immunity of the people to various forms of manipulation, whether gross or subtle — manipulation by those in power, manipulation by those with wealth and certainly excessive wealth, by the interests of corporations, by the runaway juggernaut of corporate interest. Or simply whether the people are immune to manipulation by the popular dominant view of things, of values and ethics. Let alone manipulation by Russian cyber hackers and so on.

And also what we've been reading in the news in the last few years about social media — the fact of infiltration in social media, but also the kind of closed social media circle. You tend to get feeds into your Facebook or whatever it is that are selected based on what you like to look at. And someone with very different politics, very different views, will get a similarly closed feed and be involved in a similarly closed social media circle — but espousing very different views, very divergent versions of the news. So people are seeing and receiving and sharing quite different versions of reality.

Democracy is then trying to function in a world where all these problematic issues of manipulation and distortion and alienation are coming in — through power, through wealth, through corporate interest, through just the dominant view that has its entrenched sort of power and influence. Heaven knows what's happening with Russia and all that. And then this strange phenomenon of divergent closed social media circles, where we receive and share pictures of the world, implicit in which are values and ethical systems that are really quite divergent, without much actual dialogue or meeting or opening out of views there.

In that whole quagmire, that confusion, that whole mess, democracy is trying to function, and it's pulled a couple of pegs down from the ideal of what democracy can be. So when Rorty talks about bourgeois liberalism, can that be separated from capitalism and democracy — and democracy now with fake news and all the rest, as I've just been discussing?

If we linger on the situation in our contemporary civilization, our contemporary societies, there is this issue from the beginnings of modernity — stretching through quite a while — tracing the history of the attempt to ground and make sense of and make rational justifications of morality in different ways, and how those attempts have failed.

There's the opening up of the postmodern sort of anti-universalism and anti-truth, if you like, and the danger of the quicksand of total relativism there. And this appeal to democracy, wonderful and yet increasingly evident that it's also problematic these days.

In all of that, we live as well — we're considering our contemporary situation — we live in an increasingly globalized world, a globalized society. So when we consider ethics, the immediate thing that should hopefully be obvious is simply that our actions have consequences today; our actions locally have consequences globally. What we buy on the high street — certainly, you know — or what we buy from the internet, how we get our energy and heat our houses, all this has consequences across the globe.

We can no longer, as did the Buddha in his time, think of ethics as just pertaining to me and whoever it obviously involves — these two parties. If I lie to this person, if I cheat this person of something, if I harm them in some way, it affects me and it affects them. But we are living in a globalized society, and that makes the whole ethical consideration almost infinitely more sensitive a system. What we do here has repercussions that we're beginning to learn more and more about, but even that understanding is only a drop in the ocean of the actual repercussions. There's an immense complexity in that. It's very challenging.

Part of globalization is also globalized capitalist thinking, a globalized economy based on a capitalist economy, with all the problems of the idea of infinite economic growth on a finite planet with finite resources. There's also the problem with globalization of a decrease in diversity — diversities of all kinds, in fact. The ethos of Western free market capitalism, and all the fashions and aspirations that pertain to that culture, that way of life — increasingly this has been globalized as well. So there's a displacement, a disappearance of more traditional cultures, traditional values, traditional ways of life, traditional outlooks and aspirations. All kinds of decreases in diversity go with that globalization, because what gets globalized is a certain outlook on life, a certain way of going about life, a certain ethos. And with that, a certain ethics.

All this implies that humanity needs to rethink and perhaps expand and deepen our moral considerations. Or try to. I don't think that's easy at all. And some of that might involve looking at ontological considerations, because I don't feel, for example, that what Richard Rorty has written or said on the subject has done much at all, really, to help things. So it might involve further considerations of ontology.

If we linger just a little bit longer on our contemporary predicament in the wider culture, one of the things that's interesting to me is that at some point along the way, we seem to have lost the ideal of moral education. The development of character, especially

in relation to moral values and aspirations, has disappeared, it seems, mostly from Western society. You see it in religions and spiritual institutions and schools, and only there is it deemed okay to instruct or direct or reprimand or encourage a person above, say, eighteen years old. There seems to be this cutoff point around eighteen years where you can subject someone to the order of the law, you can put them in prison or whatever, but there's not really this idea of moral education.

As I said, law has, in some respects, trumped or replaced ethics as a foundation. But what is the law founded on? Partly it's founded on ethics, but partly it becomes this free-floating thing that is its own raison d'être. And something happens around eighteen years where it's considered a bit taboo to educate someone outside a very specific context. To direct or reprimand, instruct, or encourage a person above about eighteen years on the path towards what we might call higher and nobler and fuller and more sensitive and wise values and aspirations—somehow it's not okay.

It's okay, perhaps, where there's some agreed-upon goal or aim to strive for. If you're in a football team, for example, or if you listen to how football team managers talk about their players or the players talk about each other, or in a military unit—there, the whole idea of character is something whose development is encouraged. Remember that the word "character" is related to the words "moral" and "ethical." So talk about giving everything for the team, or courage, or "ran his heart out" and all this. Only in these enclosed circles where there's a very specific goal or aim is it understood: if you're in this team, if you're in this military unit, this is what we're trying to do, and therefore we can use ethical language, we can use moral language, we can value people dependent on their development in those moral areas, and we can instruct and reprimand and so forth.

But in those limited contexts, ethical development is only really encouraged or spoken about to the degree of breadth, height, and depth that reflects the conception of the goal. If it's a football team, it's just about the football.

Even prisons, as far as I can tell—and I'm not really in that world—but even prisons, certainly in the UK and the US, don't seem to prioritize moral development. There's punishment, and there's maybe the opportunity to educate oneself in different ways. But the idea of moral development doesn't seem to be on the agenda. I could be wrong here, but there seems to be some kind of taboo around it that relates to this confusion around morality and the reluctance to impose any moral system, even in an educative way, on someone else.

Part of the wider confusion: some people do pass judgment on others' lack of moral sensitivity or moral refinement, evolution, and aspirations. And other people would view that judgment or opinion as snobbish. But as a society, we don't really have anything other than the law to indirectly, and only hopefully, teach and encourage moral values. This is part of the lacuna and paralysis left by postmodernism, or really the drift into postmodernism from the incompleteness and failings of modernity. And all of that is part, of course, of why some people turn to religious fundamentalism. What they fear and abhor is this lack of moral concern, this drift into ungrounded relativism, and the absence of what we could call the nobility and uprightness of moral education.

There are all kinds of other gaps in our moral outlook, specifically with regard to the earth and nature and species, which I want to come back to later.

If you're listening to this talk, you're probably already involved in the wider tradition and context of the Dharma, where we do talk about ethics and values and what's noble, and about developing the citta—developing the mind and the heart and the soul and the sensibility. But in the wider culture, it seems something of a taboo.

In fact, even in the Insight Meditation tradition—one of my teachers was teaching on the West Coast, I think, somewhere in the States. I heard this secondhand, but they gave a Dharma talk one evening and made a comment about how the car park at the retreat center was full of SUVs, with their gas-guzzling and diesel emissions. That was woven into the Dharma talk, and then my teacher received an angry note from a retreatant saying, "I came here to learn to meditate. I didn't come here to be lectured about this," or something to that effect—which I'm sure got an answer in no uncertain terms. But since the Insight Meditation world is an open world where anyone can walk in and walk out, what they think they're walking into or signing up for may be much more limited than what is actually on offer, or part of the deal as I would see it.

So I wonder about this possibility of lifelong development—of sensitivity, of aspiration, of attunement, of consideration with regard to ethics and values and virtues.

And it might still be, of course—and here again may be a very politically incorrect thing to say—but it might also be that there are differences between human beings. Differences in what we talk about as soul style. Maybe the moral character of souls also differs. I realize that's perhaps a very unfashionable thing to say, politically incorrect to say it at the moment.

So it may be that even if we have an idea of what might be involved in opening up this notion of open-ended development through one's life—of the moral sensibility, the moral courage, the moral discernment, and all that—if that's there, and at the same

time, like in any other endeavor of training, whether football or music or whatever, we recognize that people also have different capacities. Of course, that gets very dangerous. What does that then imply about things like democracy?

Again, I'm not involved in the Dharma world, so I don't know quite where it's at now and what sort of regulations have come in. But there was, just a few years ago, some concern among Dharma teachers who were involved in that world, and concern from others as well, that mindfulness was being taught in a way that was really uncoupled from its basis and root in sīla, in ethical concern and action. There were some examples of mindfulness for soldiers—in the job of killing people, how can that be done more mindfully and to make that more efficient? People were trumpeting mindfulness as a kind of solution for all kinds of problems, but in a way that was really trying to shave off as much as possible of anything that had to do certainly with Buddhism, but also the wider concerns and teachings such as ethics.

That might be different now; I don't know. But I remember thinking back then, you know, I'd rather somehow we taught about Jesus in schools rather than mindfulness. Of course, that's going to land in a funny way, potentially, but there's a kind of—there are stories there, if we take that example of Jesus. It doesn't have to be Jesus, of course, but stories that illustrate radical goodness and compassion, that teach and touch the being through those kinds of narratives.

But that's not really possible, certainly not with Jesus. Religion, or imposing any kind of religious education like that—again, it doesn't seem very PC, and it would lack credibility these days. Christianity is kind of old hat. In mainstream society, it's lost any of its capacity to shake things up, to be vital, a vital infusion, to stimulate a vital reconsideration. And as I said, we can't actually teach ethics, or it seems like we can't, because there's no agreement on its basis.

But sometimes I wonder, in the sort of dominance of non-religious secular outlooks, if something is also lost ethically.

I really don't want to make generalizations here, but Nietzsche, when he was writing just before the turn of the twentieth century, poking fun at and deconstructing what had become then a sort of empty Christian morality—part of his objection, at least, was that people were just doing what they were told without considering it morally, keeping a moral code that was more about manners and appearances. It was empty of any real vitality or life of consideration deep in the being. And so he poked fun at the vacuousness of that, and with that, the shallow morality, the lack of courage, the lack of independent thinking.

But sometimes I wonder if the objects of ridicule and complaint that he found there in the superficial religiosity that was dominant at that time—and it really was superficial, because by then modernity was well along in its secularizing of things—I wonder sometimes whether those kinds of objections actually apply now less to people who are religious, in the sense that they really have chosen religion and it means something to them. Because religion is now not dominant, one actually has to choose it, to enter into it, to make a connection with it, to actively aspire to something there and find something important—as opposed to it being just given by the culture, by the family, where one simply trembles along in this appearance of propriety.

So I wonder whether actually now the people who have chosen religion may have more among their ranks of those who are actually passionate about morals, who live morality, who live more radically on fire in relation to ethics. And conversely, whether those who have inherited and go along with the atheism and secularism of modernity have among their ranks more of those who share the characteristics that Nietzsche was poking fun at: the shallow morality, the lack of courage, the lack of independent thinking.

Sometimes, just coming across people and the whole way they might relate to moral questions, or even questions of life and death—which of course are not divorced from moral questions—it sounds so flaccid, so flabby, so lacking in depth and passion and integrity and oomph and vitality. There's something just a bit bleh about the whole thing. Or on the other hand, they might be very bold and strident in their rhetoric of secularism, but somehow when you look at the life, it's not very inspiring. It's not very noble. It's not very beautiful.

So somehow it could be that this pervasive secularism has just replaced the pervasive and somewhat lifeless pseudo-religious, superficial religiosity that used to be there. But again, I want to be careful about making generalizations here. This is partly tied into the larger point I hope to make over these talks.

It seems to me, to some extent—or to a large extent—there's this loss of the ideal of moral education. Certainly, even in schools. I don't remember in my secondary school ever being taught anything about moral living or nobility or anything like that. And that loss of the ideal of moral education is part of our wider conundrum, the difficulty of our wider situation.

The word vinaya that some of you will know—the Pali word vinaya—is the word for the monastic discipline, the set of rules, the precepts that the monks and nuns keep specifically. And actually its etymology: vinaya means to lead away from, or lead apart. So it's very much...

Related to our word "education," Vinaya—the monastic discipline—is itself an education. *Educare* in Latin: *ducere* means "to lead," and *e-* means "out of." So they have very similar roots. It's an education. And for the monks, that Vinaya is a part of their larger moral education. So it's there in the tradition, this idea of the possibility of moral education. We seem to have lost it.

Anyway, in these talks, I just want to try a little bit to open up, to have a look at this wider situation. I don't think there are any easy answers, and I certainly don't have any, nor any simple prescriptions. I'm aware—and you've probably heard it already, I feel conscious of it already—that at times I may sound like an old fuddy-duddy. I may sound somewhat judgmental about some of these things. I may even sound conservative, which is somewhat surprising to me. And I may sound elitist. That last one, I can't hide the fact: I unabashedly admit that I am an elitist in all kinds of ways.

But I'm going to take that risk. I do think it important just to start a widening of this conversation. Hopefully others will pick up these larger considerations around ethics, soul and ethics, and the wider global situations. So I'm going to take that risk just in terms of stimulating some conversation.

Actually, maybe the first thing to do before we continue is just to clear a little space with regard to the imaginal, imaginal practice, and ethics. As I remember, much more particularly at the beginning—it doesn't seem to happen much now, but that could be I'm just not hearing from certain people—but certainly at the beginning of my teaching of the imaginal, a number of people voiced concerns. They were attracted to the imaginal but quite ambivalent, voicing concerns about the seemingly problematic ethical implications that might be wrapped up in imaginal practice.

So I'll just take a little time. It's probably not necessary at this point, but I will take a little time anyway to do this. Or it may not be necessary for most of you, but some of you will be in conversations with other people, or someone else might hear something. So it's worth addressing, because the imaginal, for me, is certainly not immoral, and neither is it amoral in the sense that it doesn't have any regard for morality or any connection with morality. It is neither immoral nor amoral.

Someone asked me, really at the beginning of my teaching in the imaginal—she was quite taken with it and had quite a few experiences, but kept struggling with different kinds of ambivalence, one of which was with regard to ethics. She said to me, "Well, you know, a lot of what you say about the imaginal could refer very easily to some kind of fundamentalist religious terrorist or something. So, what about that?"

Let's just pause for a little bit and address some of those concerns and issues. We have these teachings of the nodes of the lattice, the elemental aspects of the imaginal. And we can look at that and say: with regard to elements like duty and trust and other aspects of the imaginal, we could actually discern several crucial differences between a practitioner practicing with the imaginal and, say, a religious fundamentalist terrorist.

This terrorist conceives God as separate from themselves and therefore as an objective reality. In contrast, the way we talk about divinity in the paradigm of soulmaking and the imaginal is not as separate from ourselves—certainly not completely separate from ourselves—and not as objective, because we participate in the creation of the divine. We've talked about this. So that would be one difference, and that's a really significant difference.

We could add more. By engaging, for example, in a terrorist action, that terrorist might believe or think they are participating in "God's plan," but they don't conceive or sense that they are participating in God's *being*. Do you understand? There's a big, big difference there. "I'm participating in God's plan, who wants the whole world to be this religion and other religions to be eradicated and non-believers to be killed," or whatever it is. And that's "God's plan"—so the story goes, so the belief goes. But they're not participating in God's being. There is also no sense or conception of being involved in creating the sense of divinity. And that is not separate from that. So there are very different ontologies going on.

There is no unfathomability and no meaningfulness or mystery. On the contrary, this terrorist person is certain. They know and are clear about what their duty is: "My duty is to kill these people, blow up such and such," whatever it is. There's a single meaning—not meaningfulness, not this infinity of potential meanings, but a single meaning, or at best a small finite number of very clear meanings, rather than meaningfulness.

And we could continue if we consider the elements. The boundaries of self, other, and divine are not soft-edged and elastic at all. These things have hard boundaries—self and other, divinity.

And there's no concertina of images. There's just a single image, whatever that is, of the divine, of my role, and so forth. And it's regarded as reality—regarded as a reality, rather than the imaginary middle way.

The sense of duty there is not refracted in any way. It's just literalized. The echoing, the mirroring—again, it's all very literalized. So there are many differences there. We can point out more when we just slow down and consider.

Many of you will know Viktor Frankl, who was the founder of logotherapy. You probably know him more from dharma talks, actually, where sometimes I and other teachers have quoted a beautiful passage from his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, which is partly a chronicle of his time in Auschwitz concentration camp. He was imprisoned as a Jew, survived, and came up with this kind of psychotherapy that he called logotherapy—which is basically, he would say, healing through the making of meaning, giving your life a meaning. So it's a meaning-making therapy.

It got questioned on a number of fronts. One was whether it was actually—he said that, the quote that you probably know is something like, "We who lived through the camps can remember those who were able to choose their own way, to give away their last piece of bread," for example. He said it much more beautifully. And his conclusion was: this is testimony, we bear witness, and they bear testimony to the fact that you can take everything from a person except their right and their capacity to make meaning and to choose their own way. He said that the people in the camps who tended to survive the ordeal and torment and tribulations were people who had some meaning, something worth living for that was meaningful to them. And so he said the camp was the crucible in which he came up with this logotherapy, this idea of meaning-making therapy.

Afterwards, over the years, decades later, it was questioned and attacked on a couple of grounds. One was whether he hadn't actually come up with this theory beforehand rather than in the camps, and whether his report of what he saw wasn't actually true in terms of who survived and who didn't. But secondly, several people pointed out, well, that's actually an amoral therapy. There's no morality there. This meaning-making could be equally applied to, say, the Nazis, who found meaning in exterminating Jews and homosexuals and gypsies and communists and political opponents.

So again, there can be this concern, and it's an understandable concern, that if you put something like the imaginal or soulmaking to the fore, what about ethics? Or if you put meaning-making to the fore, what happens to morality? Does the meaning-making trump the moral? Does it make it irrelevant? If I just find meaning in something, does that mean I can do whatever I want without any regard for morality? If I have some image, does that mean I can then disregard morality?

But again, there's a not-full understanding or not-full consideration of what we would mean by those elements, an inclusion of what we would mean by those elements of the imaginal. So there are twenty-eight elements, or maybe more, depending on how you count them. When they're taken into consideration, you start to see that when I'm following an image, working with an image, inspired by an image, receiving a duty

from an image—all those elements together make it very different than this idea that anything goes, for example a Nazi finding meaning in exterminating Jews and homosexuals. That's not going to have those twenty-eight elements illuminated and ignited. It's simply not.

So I don't know about Viktor Frankl, but if we just take it at a sort of simple explanation—all you need to do to find fulfillment in life is find a meaning, make a meaning, and then follow that meaning—just that as a simple strap line would not include the depth and richness and other aspects of, for instance, the imaginal that we've talked about.

So we have concerns as human beings. Obviously we have ethical concerns, and most practitioners, of course, should and will have concerns ethically about their behavior. How to discern what to choose, what to do. How can I trust this desire? I want this —is it okay ethically? Can I trust it? How do I know?

Sometimes I ask people in dharma talks, different dharma talks over time, I might ask, "What do you want? What is it that you really want?" And someone was saying to me that she was listening and moved by the question, just by me asking. In that context, the question went very deep in her. It touched her very deeply, but it brought some agitation and confusion as well, because she wondered: how does one discern? I have this want or this desire or this eros or whatever—how do I discern what is conditioning and what is indoctrination or what is just ego?

We were talking about it, and I suggested that it might be better to look at, rather than trying to discern where it's coming from—oh, can I see that it's coming from ego, or from conditioning or indoctrination—that might be very hard to discern. But what you can look at is the effect. For example, the effect on the sense of soulmaking of different desires, or different answers to that question of what I want.

So if I just drop that question into a meditative space – I can't remember the exact context she was speaking about – and then perhaps I get an answer like, "I want to be rich," for example. But that answer, if I look at the effects, the resonances in the being, rather than trying to find whether it's just conditioning, just ego, or fear, and actually trying to discern where it came from – what's easier to observe and probably more helpful in discerning is the effects on the resonances in the soul, in the being, and the effects on the sense of soul-making.

So, "I want to be rich," if that comes as an answer – she didn't say that, but it's just an example – that may not feel as deep, as soul-making, as opening of the devotional sense, as rich in the soul sense, as beautiful, as moving, as another desire might. So what do I

trust in terms of discerning between what may be more petty, more self-concerned, more fear-driven, more just an indoctrination and therefore not so authentic, more just conditioning? It may be that in looking at the effects in the being of the sense of soul-making, I start to get a feel for what are the deeper currents of my soul and my being, what are the deeper soul desires.

And those currents – there will be the encouragement from me, I would say, to trust in that soul-making sense and the fullness and the multidimensionality and the beauty of what that means to the being. And I trust that ethics will be implicit in that, partly because, remember, values, which includes ethical values, are an implicit element of the soul-making dynamic, an implicit element of the imaginal. The imaginal middle way is there, so there's not this tendency to just literalize, concretize, reify in that way. There's also the fullness of intention as one of the elements. And so again, it's not just about me and what I can get. There's a fuller intention there. All of these elements and aspects tend to not just safeguard ethics and preserve it, but actually enrich the ethical soil of what is happening, what is involved, and what's moving in the soul.

And of course there's the energy body as well. We talked about that. We could go through it in a lot more detail than I'm doing right now. We talked about how the energy body can be a guide, or what to trust as well. Again, I don't think the energy body will open up with that same beauty and same harmonization and energization as it will if the ethics aren't there. It's one of the reasons the Buddha said he doesn't teach jhāna with an unskillful object. I can't remember the exact words, but he might also have said he can't teach jhāna with an unskillful object because the mind doesn't tend to settle down, the energy body doesn't tend to open up in the same way when something's really unskillful, when there's craving. When there's craving in that way, as we've talked about, it agitates and closes and contracts the energy body, it ties it in knots. And some things are unskillful ethically – it's all related. So the energy body opening, harmonizing, aligning, being part of the imaginal – it's also a safeguard of the implicit ethics, the implicit beauty of values there.

Still, sometimes people get nervous. It hasn't happened recently – people haven't asked me this for a while – but back a few years ago: "Isn't imaginal Dharma crazy or dangerous? What about ethics? Shouldn't you place ethics first? Shouldn't they be given priority? And then you can have imagery – just safeguard the ethics first, and then have your imaginal, or whatever."

But as I've just said, because values are an element of the image, ethics are included in an image, implicitly or explicitly, and in imaginal practice, and in the duty that comes out of it. Also, I have to say – and this is partly what I want to elaborate on in these talks

– placing ethics as primary, as this person wanted or was concerned about, saying, "Why don't you put that first?" – putting ethics as primary is a deceptively simple idea. Because despite the kind of soul-stirring allegiances that ethical talk and talking about those kinds of things can stimulate in us, the actuality of moral life entails all sorts of confusions and difficulties, antinomies – meaning pulls in different directions. I want to care for this ethical value, but at the same time in this particular situation I'm also pulled toward this other ethical value, and my choices offer me a contradiction. I either preserve this one or preserve that one. I either emphasize this one or I emphasize that one. I'm going to elaborate on this, hopefully, as the talks go on.

But that's the actuality of our moral life in all kinds of ways. So placing ethics as primary, as I said, is deceptively simple. It doesn't tell us or instruct us or guide us with regard to these kinds of difficulties, challenges, confusions, antinomies, incompletenesses, and also ultimate impossibilities. I cannot fulfill, I cannot care for this ethical value and that ethical value in this situation. It's actually impossible, because I can only choose one thing. All those complexities and confusions and impossibilities and contradictions and incompletenesses – they are unavoidably part of moral life and choice, especially today. And in a way, that's mirrored in what Hillman would call the polytheistic psyche, the multiplicity of images which also pull our life in different directions toward different imaginal characters and their particular beauties, their particular domains and concerns, and their particular duties as well.

So it's understandable that people, some years ago, voiced these ethical concerns when they first started to hear about imaginal practice. But it's more complex, I think, than those initial concerns really understood.

Just to repeat before we go further: I would say soul-making and imaginal practice are ethically oriented, and not just because values are an element of the imaginal, but also because of aspects like cosmopoiesis and the sensing with soul – sensing self, other, world, eros, all these things more and more conceived and sensed, actually sensed and felt, as sacred, divine, worthy of our reverence.

So as we've explained with the soul-making dynamic, that's part of what happens. Not just because values are an element—they are an element—but when there's the cosmopoiesis, when there's a sensing with soul of the self, of other human beings, of the world around me and the world of nature, even of my desire, then the very way that I sense and conceive and think of those aspects of being, those aspects of existence, my relationship with them becomes very different. It becomes sacralized. It becomes imbued with the sense of holiness, the sense of reverence implicit there. And out of that,

we start to have a different relationship. We start to live and choose differently. And of course, it comes with that respect and care, all of which are foundational and implicit in ethics.

There are also other ways, of course—and I've touched on these and will return to them—in which soul-making is ethical, and even, I would say, an expansion of our typical range of ethical practice and perspectives. In those talks I mentioned the other day, *The Meditator as Revolutionary* and *The Necessity of Fantasy*, I was speaking about the range of archetypal models that we receive through the Dharma being a little bit limited. The Buddha—not so much an activist, quite given to equanimity and inwardness, and with a kind of danger of letting the world burn, so to speak. The range of archetypal characters of response is quite limited by what we receive through image and story and modelling from teachers and other students in the Dharma world, or certainly in the Insight Meditation world.

So there is a certain unwitting limitation on the scope of what moral care and expression looks like. Through expanding the self-sense and the imaginal sense, being open to more images, receiving imaginal images, we discover how they open up the scope and range of what our moral care and expression may look like—the fantasies of how that might be embodied, how it might express itself, look, and sound.

In addition to all that, it might also be that we can—and I'll come back to this later—talk about soul-making itself being a kind of moral value. Perhaps even a kind of relatively new moral value.

But I want to expand and elaborate and consider a lot of this further, particularly the lacunae, the gaps and holes in the fabric of our conceptual framework of morality nowadays. What are some of the needs there? What's the relationship between soul-making and all that? I want to explore the notion of values and virtues, and something of the psychology and philosophy that might be wrapped up in all of this.

Okay, let's stop there now, just for an introduction. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 189

Sīla and Soul (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 2h53

> *In this profound continuation of his exploration of ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea critically examines two dominant paradigms of personal development—psychotherapy and Buddhadharma—investigating both their gifts and their potential blind spots regarding moral growth. He observes how psychotherapy, at its best, can free the psyche and open the heart to ethical care, yet at its worst may foster self-preoccupation that contracts ethical sensitivity. Similarly, while traditional Dharma includes sīla explicitly and offers teachings on emptiness and the brahmavihāras, certain framings—such as viewing saṃsāra as ultimately worthless or limiting concern to the Four Noble Truths' focus on suffering—can inadvertently narrow our ethical range.*
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> *Burbea proposes that imaginal practice and what he terms the 'ideational-imaginal' offer crucial expansions to these paradigms. Through examples including a student's encounter with a renunciate monk image and another's relationship with the Black Madonna, he demonstrates how sensing with soul can transform our relationship to ethical questions. The image becomes primary—not just illustrative but foundational to our emotions, choices, and commitments. When we ask 'whose grief is this?' about ecological devastation and recognize it as divine care moving through us, the very organ of the heart gains dimensionality and empowerment.*
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> *The talk addresses urgent contemporary concerns—climate change, species loss, ecocide—arguing that our usual sense of self and world may be inadequate to these challenges. Burbea discusses emerging legal recognitions of personhood for rivers and mountains, noting how these rest on expanded ontologies that indigenous cultures have long held. He suggests that soul-making Dharma, with its emphasis on beauty, sacredness, eternality, and the infinite echoing of images into life, can provide platforms for the expanded ethical sensibility our times demand.*

Let me pick up on something I mentioned in the talk the other evening about the fact that it seems to me, at least, that there's almost a lack, if not a kind of taboo, on moral education in our society, especially for people beyond eighteen years old. Even younger than that, it's rare to find an overt emphasis and thrust towards ethical education of human beings in our society.

Of course, there are paradigms and programs, visions and frameworks of personal, psychological, and spiritual development and growth that would pertain to adults, and traditions of that. As part of the whole consideration here, I wonder if we might look at a couple of those paradigms and examine the tremendous gifts they bring, how they support our growth, and how they potentially support our ethical growth, our growth in terms of our relationship with morality. We might also look at some of the potential lacunae, gaps, blind spots, and limits that such paradigms, traditions, and frameworks might have—lacunae and limits regarding the relationship with morality and moral development of the human being, but also, because it's related, how one conceives of and senses oneself, other human beings, and the world.

I don't want to replace such paradigms or declare them wrong. But in shining a light on them, or on certain aspects of them at least, is it possible that something can be added? What might be added to them? Perhaps we can consider some of the usual ways we think about and approach development—psychological, spiritual, and personal development—and where these are limited, and then what might be added, what might be complementary. Not so much replacing what's already there, but extending what's already available.

The two principal possibilities I want to offer through these talks for that sort of addition or extension will be, first, imaginal practice. We want to include imaginal practice as one possibility of potential extension. That includes how we sense the self, others, world, and also our desire—really the whole sensing with soul avenue.

And secondly, and related, something I'm not quite sure what to call, but something like the ideational-imaginal, or the ideological-imaginal, or imaginal ideas. I've touched on this briefly in the last few years, but I want to say a little more about it, particularly regarding the ideas of value and virtue—values and virtues—and their relationship with soul-making. So principally these two: imaginal practice as we've talked about it so far, and then also a kind of extension of imaginal practice into what we might call the ideational-imaginal, or imaginal ideas, or ideological-imaginal.

Now, all these strands or areas are not really separable. It would be nice to go through these talks and do a chunk on this and then a separate chunk on that, but I don't think that's really possible. I'm going to try and separate them a little, but some interweaving is just inevitable, so that's part of the deal.

The two paradigms I would like to consider, very broadly speaking, are psychotherapy and Buddhadharma. Of course, these are two extremely broad categories. We're not talking about one thing when we talk about psychotherapy, nor are we talking about one thing when we talk about Buddhadharma. There are many different kinds.

So in what I say in terms of considering the gifts and the limitations of what might be involved in those paradigms, there's a danger of generalization, and I apologize in advance for that. If I qualify everything, the talks will go on forever. But I hope you get the general drift and the soul's intention behind what I'm saying, and that this can be an inquiry grounded in love and care.

We're not really talking about either of these things as one thing—psychotherapy or Buddhadharma—and certainly there are many different kinds of each. And of course, there will be individual differences among people who are part of a certain sub-tradition of Buddhadharma or a certain kind of psychotherapy. There will be individual differences in how they digest, assimilate, respond to what they take or leave, how they relate to those particular teachings or invitations or trainings.

We can see, very broadly speaking, that psychotherapy at its best has the promise and potential to free a human being up from too much torment of the psyche and of the person—the kind of self-hatred or incapacitating inner critic, and so forth—and to open the heart and, in so doing, develop empathy and emotional skill and capacity of the heart, and also relational skills. All of that is possible. And in that freeing up, in that opening of the heart, in that development of empathy and emotional capacity and relational skill, this can open up and support the capacity and tendency for ethical care. So at its best, that would be a fruit of psychotherapy: it really works on the heart and the relationship and the being and the psyche in a way that makes it more possible to be more open with regard to ethics, to be more sensitive, more caring, more discerning, more courageous—all these things.

At its worst—and again, this is too general a statement—but at its worst, people can be in certain psychotherapies, or relate to certain psychotherapies, sometimes for many years, and it may be hard for them to realize it from the inside, but what can develop is a tendency to actually become a little more self-preoccupied than they were before. It can feed and form an ongoing state of being, of self-preoccupation. The gaze is turned inward, concerned with my process, my growth, my neurosis, my patterns, my family, my this, my that.

And there's a kind of contraction of the being and a lessening of the availability for ethical sensitivity and openness and care. The antennae are not so tuned that way because they're self-preoccupied primarily in certain ways. And perhaps also certain psychotherapies, or certain ways of relating to certain psychotherapies, may breed a kind of attitude of entitlement—that one looks at one's past or family or upbringing and feels, "I never got what I needed." And so one thinks one is justified in compensating for that in one's life and in one's choices and in one's relationship to society. Again, that

movement there may not allow so much of an opening and a care for ethics. So that would be at its worst, I suppose—some of what's possible in some kinds of psychotherapeutic paradigms and relationships or trainings.

When it's gifts, we can see that the Dharma would have similar potentials and promises: to free up the psyche from a kind of torment that incapacitates it in terms of its care for others and its ethical care and concern; to release from the inner critic; similarly, to open the heart and the capacities for empathy and the capacities of the heart in general. And there is, in addition, in the Dharma, of course, this emphasis on *sīla—sīla, samādhi, paññā*. And so the ethics is right there to some extent or other, right from the beginning. It's not ignored. Some psychotherapies will not even mention ethics unless it's a legal matter where the therapist then feels obliged to tell the police something or is torn in some way.

There's also in the Dharma the teachings of the emptiness of self, so at least theoretically there's the possibility of, or there's the restraining of the possibility of, endless self-preoccupation. And of course there's the encouragement and the teachings for the cultivation of *brahmavihāras*—of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy.

But a few things about practices in general, whether it's the practice of psychotherapy as a client or as a therapist, or the practice of Dharma, is that practices can evolve in unforeseen ways. Once one gets into a practice, it's like sailing a boat—you start dealing with what's coming up in practice and what life throws at you and how practice says to respond to it through the lens of certain teachings or paradigms or frameworks. And the fact is, as one gets into practice and into that vocabulary and that way of looking at things and the techniques and the approaches, it can evolve in unforeseen ways, so that from inside of that practice, inside of that trajectory, we're not always clear—it's not always clear if we're off balance. We're dealing with all this stuff through whatever it is: this stuff coming up, this stuff from my past, this stuff in my family, in my situation, in my work—through certain lenses. And in the very close dealing with it through those lenses, sometimes we can get a little off balance. It's almost like the lenses are a bit like horses' blinkers. They are blinders. They may close our view in certain ways. And in that, we can get off balance in ways that we don't even realize. And the whole practice can evolve in unforeseen ways. And sometimes you step out and you think, "How on earth did I get there? How did I get there?"

In addition to that, it's really important to point out as a general point that any conceptual framework will bring limitations. Any conceptual framework—any idea, any concept, any *logos*, whether it's a Dharma logos or psychotherapy logos, whatever it is—brings with it automatically its own set of limitations. It sets us up to see and to

ponder and to respond and to process things in certain ways. It opens the eyes to certain factors and closes them to others. It opens the consideration in the heart to certain things and closes them to others.

That inherent fact of limitations that go with conceptual framework also goes with the soul-making paradigm. Any conceptual framework. So I don't want to replace psychotherapy or Dharma with soul-making at all—in part just because soul-making Dharma will also have its limitations and its blind spots and its dangers. But it's a really important point of wisdom and maturity that's necessary to emphasize: any conceptual framework, to do with anything, will bring its limitations.

So when we talk about psychotherapy or this psychotherapy or that kind of psychotherapy, or this kind of Dharma or that kind of Dharma, it will bring its limitations. And with that, there's the possibility of limited and inadequate views, responses, capacities—inadequate with respect to the kinds of moral challenges and situations that humanity faces today. So there is that possibility that some of these paradigms and trainings will be, or possibly that all of them will be, limited in some way. It kind of behooves us to have a look: What are the possible limitations? What do I need to look out for? When I see a possible limitation or inadequacy, how can I expand it? What might be possible?

The kinds of things we want to consider—they do not apply to everyone. And again, there's danger of overgeneralizing there. Of course they won't, because as I said, people will be within a certain—two people in the very same paradigm or teaching or training will take it in differently and respond and digest differently.

The second thing I should say, as a sort of caveat to all this, is that certainly from where I sit right now, everything seems to be changing very fast in the Dharma world. Now, I hardly go out anymore because of my illness, so I'm at home, I'm not out there talking to a lot of people. But it seems to me—and maybe it's just my friends and students I do still see and mix with and hear from—but it seems that there are very quick and sometimes surprising changes.

Sometimes I look at people who, for instance, with regard to climate change and species extinction, for years haven't seemed interested in that at all. And then very suddenly, on fire. On fire and deeply, deeply committed, investing a lot of time, energy, taking a lot of risks, working very hard in those areas. Something has happened, perhaps with the explosive growth of the Extinction Rebellion movement, particularly in England, and perhaps other factors. Some of those cases were really surprising to me, and it was a really pleasant surprise. I'm not sure how widespread it is, but certainly it's becoming much more widespread.

And in a way, what that indicates to me is that whatever I might say regarding ethics and Dharma—the need to consider expanding our Dharma to expand our ethical sense and deepen our ethical sensibility—whatever I might say here is only going to be one factor in the mix of what galvanises and supports and allows and opens that kind of expansion.

It might be, for instance, with the Extinction Rebellion movement, which in the UK has really taken off. I'm sure there are many people in our UK society who've never even heard of it, but for others it's really become a thing—mainstream news and so on. And it might be that one of the factors is just the fact that when more people are brought together and there's this kind of safety and support in numbers—something I want to return to—and the kind of platforms and mechanisms are made available, then that kind of ethical stand becomes much more possible. Whereas if one was alone in that, without the supporting structures, then one would be just relying on one's own penetrative ethical alignment and devotion and discrimination, and that's a lot harder.

But anyway, what that very pleasant surprise and the suddenness of all that points to is that whatever I might say in these talks about ethics and Dharma and opening that up is just one piece, one factor.

And the third thing to say, related to what I started this ethics talk saying—that I regard ethics and this whole investigation as endless, potentially endless—a corollary of that is that there's always more growth possible in our relationship with ethics. Always more growth possible.

So if, in trying to open up this subject and elucidate, we look at this tradition or that kind of teaching or this paradigm, and we say, "Oh, that could be limited in this way, that could be limited in that way," that will always be the case. Because limitations will go with any conceptual framework, and there's also this endlessness. However unlimited we get, we can get even more unlimited—even more growth with regard to ethics, even more sensitivity, even more discernment, even more range and depth and height.

So that means, really, whoever—me or anyone else—saying, "Why don't we think about it this way, or we could think about it this way," there will still be more growth possible, and therefore considerations to point out: "What about this? What about that? Is it possible to do this?"

So let's consider a couple of things about psychotherapy.

I was talking a little while ago with a student in the States, and she was reporting to me that she was working with a therapist regularly and for a while. There was some situation—I can't remember exactly how it arose, but it might have had to do with

where she was living in relationship to her workplace. At any rate, she was considering buying a second house or property, and she was starting that whole process of looking and investigating and going to see places.

At some point in this process, she became really concerned whether it was the right thing to do for ethical reasons. A second place would mean a lot more driving, and she was concerned about carbon emissions. Also the sort of just having to buy more stuff—more furniture, more clothes—if you've got two places. And she was talking about this dilemma and her feelings about it with her therapist.

Part of her process, woven into this whole consideration and difficulty, was also an image. She was beginning to explore a little bit of the imaginal, and one of the images that came was a monk, this imaginal monk character, who had as part of his mode and calling a movement towards renunciation. She was trying to explain to the therapist her feelings and her unsurenesses, her seriously considering giving up the whole idea of buying a second property and regarding it as an act of renunciation. She felt moved by that, and there was a sense of almost devotion tied in with this imaginal monk character.

The therapist, as she was trying to explain all this, just started shaking her head and tutting, and regarded this whole movement as some kind of denial—that she was in denial about the pain of having to give up this second property idea, the denial kind of wanting to avoid feeling the grief.

So she dismissed the imaginal figure of the monk and the renunciate as not real, as delusional, as a delusional protective mechanism against this grief of not buying a second house. I can't remember exactly how it transpired—perhaps the client had already decided not to buy a second house, or was explaining the process. But basically the therapist heard it through a certain lens: this is a protective mechanism against grief, and all this monk business and the devotion about renunciation is just a kind of unreal, delusional, protective mechanism.

What's then clearly not on the psychotherapist's map at that point is the whole idea and territory of a kind of ethical passion—of the soul's care for virtue, for ethical virtues. Not on her psychological map of what it means to care for the self, of what it means to heal, of what human growth and purpose involves.

This struck my student very strongly, and it really didn't sit very well with her. We talked about it. I don't think this is an isolated case, and I wonder—I think part of my larger point is—do therapists and psychotherapeutic paradigms need to expand their vision and their logos to include the psychological trauma and pain of ecological de-

cline, for example? And the psychological trauma and pain—I'm using those words deliberately, trauma and pain—of not choosing in one's life in line with loving the earth, or in line with what speaks to one's soul more nobly in terms of virtue? So that it may then become part of how people think and feel and choose and what they respect.

Psychological thinking, psychotherapeutic thinking, has a lot of clout in our culture. It has spread from the confines of Freud's couch in Vienna all those years ago to become woven into our normal ways of considering life, human being, self, and our relationship with existence.

Just as childhood trauma and the feeling that "my needs were not met in childhood" have become normalized in the wider culture through psychotherapeutic paradigms—through the normalization of these paradigms and their airing through media and all kinds of phenomena—they have become normal ideas. Childhood trauma wasn't a concept before. "My needs are unmet"—these are very specific contemporary cultural points of view, manifestations, ways of understanding and conceiving and sensing and feeling ourselves in life.

And just as self and self-expression, creativity of the self, the individuality of self—these too, partly through psychotherapeutic thinking, have become very normalized. They're part of what we consider our right to address and to heal and to include, part of what we consider as healthy visioning and sense of one's existence, our normally accepted goals in life.

Or again, human relational intimacy. It wasn't that normal a few hundred years ago to think about human intimate relationships in the way that we do now—the vision we have of them, the hope and the goal. "I want to work towards that kind of relationship, that kind of vision of intimacy." This has all come about partly through various factors, but the way psychotherapeutic thinking spreads out from the counselling room into society means that in the wider culture, certain ideas with corresponding goals and rights become normalized.

So does there need to be an expanding of the psychotherapeutic paradigm to include, as I said, the whole realm of psychic trauma and grief and pain and rage at ecological decline, and also the grief and remorse of not choosing in line with that deep care—either deep care for the earth or deep care for one's ethical sensibilities?

Some of you will be familiar with the term "spiritual bypassing." This is quite a common accusation by psychotherapists, and it definitely has some ground, implying a kind of bypassing of psychological and emotional wounds through spiritual thought and practice. One gets involved in a spiritual practice and then starts having spiritual ideas

and a spiritual paradigm and a spiritual outlook and practice. And wonderful as that can be, it can also be a kind of bypassing of what needs looking at in terms of one's psychological patterns and wounding.

What's also important to point out is that often what might also be bypassed are political, social, and environmental wounds and callings. So you can look at spiritual paradigms and say there can be spiritual bypassing of psychological wounds. There can also be political, social, and environmental factors and wounds and callings that are bypassed.

But as much as we talk about spiritual bypassing, is there not also the possibility of—what would we call it?—psychotherapeutic bypassing? That is, concentrating on one's personal psychological healing and wounds from certain perspectives. Everything is always from certain perspectives; I can't get away from that. Whatever I look at, whatever I relate to, whatever I try to heal is looked at through certain perspectives. They're either conscious and considered or they're not. But concentrating on one's personal psychological healing and wounds from certain perspectives may not be addressing or responding fully, or very much at all, to the soul, to the spirit, or to the social and environmental. So yes, you can talk about spiritual bypassing, but we need to add to that the possibility of psychological bypassing.

Not long ago, someone wrote me an email, a student I hadn't been in touch with for a few months. I think the last interview we'd had, there was a lot of anxiety and torment and real difficulty that they were experiencing. They wrote me recently and said, "By the way, a lot of that difficulty I was experiencing—I now realize I was not letting myself open to the magnitude and the depth of my torment and my feelings and my grief and my pain about the wider ecological devastation, climate change, the future even of the next few decades and how that hangs in the balance for humanity and for so many other species, the massive species loss and the toll, the impact that had on the psyche."

And he said, "I was trying so much to look for a personal reason, looking at my past, working in therapy, doing this and that. It was coming into my practice, and I was trying to understand it. I was looking at it through the lens of a certain paradigm, a certain narrow paradigm. And then I realized, actually, this is something else. And in realizing it was something else, I could begin to open to it. I could give it its place and give it its due and begin allowing the heart to feel it, to respond to it, to care for that." He said, "It's a lot, but I feel much better. It's now not sabotaging me in ways that I just could not get a handle on and could not understand."

One more piece here, and it's not small but large—I'll just mention it briefly and I hope to return to it. I mentioned that we have what we might call a pandemic or epidemic of the inner critic in our culture. It partly goes with a culture of individualism, a culture where there's less community, more alienation from society, from each other, from wider social networks, from the earth, from society—and this emphasis on individualism in what I was calling an immature way. One of the flip sides of that, one of the shadow sides, one of the inevitable costs is a rise in the inner critic and the afflictions of that.

Sometimes that's a lot of what people will bring into not just a Dharma context, but a psychotherapeutic context as well. The inner critic—some people call it the superego, which is a word that Freud coined. And I'll just quote from Alasdair MacIntyre again, from *After Virtue*.

Important was Freud's presentation of the inherited conscience as superego, as an irrational part of ourselves whose commands we need, for the sake of our psychic health, to be freed from. Now, I actually think that's an oversimplification of Freud's views, but it serves for now. What Alasdair MacIntyre is saying is that Freud presented this sense of superego as a kind of irrational part of ourselves that we need, through psychoanalysis, to liberate ourselves from its oppression. It's not really something to be respected so much—and that's where I think MacIntyre is simplifying a little bit—but rather something for us to work through and be liberated from.

MacIntyre continues: Freud, of course, took himself to have made a discovery about morality as such, and not just about what morality had become in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Europe. Again, this cultural and historical contingency. Freud was dealing with such a limited range of population at a certain time in Europe—northern Europe, in fact—and then generalizing from that subset of the population to make universal truths, not realizing the historical contingency. But actually, the point is more that morality then, in a way, gets relativized as something irrational. Conscience, rather, in a way, gets relativized. And that portion of morality that has to do with conscience gets undermined or put on shaky foundations when it's regarded as just an irrational part of ourselves, something oppressive that we need to get rid of.

What I want to ask, or throw into the mix here, is: now, at this time in our wider culture, what do Dharma practitioners and teachers, or Diamond Heart practitioners and teachers, or psychotherapists—either as those psychotherapists or their clients—believe and disseminate about conscience? It's not a word we hear that much anymore, is it?

We certainly hear "inner critic," and if you're in, for example, the Ridhwan school, they talk about superego. But conscience is not a word we hear much anymore. At least, I don't hear it much.

So in other words, is that word "conscience" getting eclipsed, or put into the bag of our superego, our inner critic? And is there something that's actually necessary in our moral development, our moral capacity and sensibility, that's then getting regarded in ways that make it irrelevant? Do you understand? What does it do to our sense of morality when we lose that word "conscience"? When our only relationship with guilt is afflictive? And when things are just regarded in inner critic terms or superego terms?

Actually, maybe that word "afflictive" doesn't really capture what I'm trying to say. Perhaps a better word would be "immature," in the sense that if our relationship with guilt is immature, it might be trapped—either trapped in the whirlpool of self-recrimination, looking back at the past in a way that's very contracted, very solidified, very painful, not actually very helpful, not productive, and not orienting or leading onward in terms of future action. That would be one kind of immaturity. Or perhaps at other times, there's a kind of shunning of guilt, a refusal to feel it, an avoiding of it—just wanting to get rid of it. So there's nothing seen as positive or redeeming or helpful in guilt. That, too, would be a kind of immature relationship with guilt. Either on the one side or the other, the relationship with guilt can be immature. And maybe—we'll come back to this—maybe there can be other relationships with this whole notion of guilt and conscience that are more helpful.

Let me pause for a moment and recap what we're doing here. We're looking at the whole area of ethics, of course, and trying to open up an interest in the relationship of soul with ethics and ethics with soul. As part of that, we're shining a light, in a really over-generalized way but hopefully a little bit helpful, on some of the paradigms of growth and development that we encounter, that are around at the present time. We're seeing where they might have holes, gaps, blind spots, and in the process wondering what we can add to that. Beginning, as I go on, to add considerations and possibilities in terms of what we know of soul-making practice—sensing with soul up till now—and then perhaps there are others. As I said, when we talk more about values and virtues and other ways of thinking about ethics and so-called personal development, and the growth of our soul, that might augment the range of possibilities and perspectives.

So if we turn now to Dharma, to Buddha-Dharma and that wider tradition, and try to shine a light there... Again, just pausing briefly: it can be hard sometimes, for lots of different reasons, to shine this kind of spotlight on one's own tradition—if one feels one

loves a tradition, or is identified with a tradition, with belonging to a certain tradition. It can be hard to critique it, to question it. It can be hard to even spot what's wrong, or admit that there may be something missing.

But maybe if we love a tradition, we have a duty of love to that tradition. And part of that duty is to care for it—like we care for, I don't know, a car or a musical instrument that needs repairing, that has a hole here or there, whatever it is. There's maybe a duty of love if we love a tradition and a body of teaching. That's part of what I was talking about earlier: What is it to be in dialogue with a tradition? Maybe, as Alasdair MacIntyre was saying in those passages we read about when we talked about tradition, for a tradition to be healthy, to be vital, it needs some strands of conflict, of argument, of debate, of dialogue—to keep it healthy. That's part of what a living tradition is. To be someone who is living a tradition, I would say, should be in dialogue with that tradition.

Another reflection here that might be helpful: always to be aware that whatever light we shine on anything, whatever way we look at anything—if that's in the context of a practice and its paradigm—will tend to look at whatever it is, self and the elements of existence, from certain perspectives.

They frame it along certain lines, within a certain scope, in a conceptual framework. They look through certain lenses, shine light from certain directions. And that's part of what makes a body of teaching, or a tradition, or a practice what it is.

If you think in that sense, then there's always going to be shadow. Shadow will always be there. We will never get rid of shadow. And I'm using that word *shadow* in a very specific way. It's come to mean something quite narrow. I think Jung was the first one to introduce it, and it's come to mean something more and more narrow—just the sort of shunned parts of oneself, the ignored, the unconscious parts that are negative or destructive, usually rooted in some pain in childhood or in one's development.

I want to use it in a much broader sense. Imagine a light shining on an object, any object. That light shining on that object, that whole gestalt of light and object, will cause a shadow. On the opposite side of the object from the light, the side that's not being illuminated, there will be a shadow of that object. And if I turn the light, shine it from a different direction, a different angle, a different perspective, the shadow will be different. It will be shaped differently, or fall in a different area.

So basically, any time we shine a light on anything, any time we look in a certain way, any time we frame our vision and our gaze and our practice and our thinking and our conceiving in certain ways, there will be shadow associated with that. It's just the way consciousness works.

Again, it's not to single out this or that tradition or practice—psychotherapy or Buddhadharma, this kind of therapy or that kind of Dharma—and say, "Oh, that's bad or rubbish or incompetent." A more mature understanding is that whatever practice we do, whatever conceptual framework, whatever tradition we're in, it will have its shadows. And we're never going to get rid of shadows. As long as there is light, there is shadow. You understand?

So, for example, Jung, who coined the term *shadow* as far as I know, often gets critiqued for not including so much developmental psychology and ego psychology in his whole framework and paradigm. And then, of course, we can look at those who emphasize childhood wounding and the development of the child, and, as we've done already, touch on some of the ways there will be shadow cast from that: missing the socio-political, the economic, the environmental effects; missing soul or spirituality. And spirituality may have the shadow of spiritual bypassing. So wherever we shine the light, there will be a shadow. Whenever there's light, there's shadow.

Another related reflection, and we'll come back to this, is that part of the problem here in discussing ethics—if we put our finger on a central element of the diagnosis of the whole situation—is that all these different traditions, you might say, shine light from different directions. But another way of saying it is that there are different weightings and prioritizings of different values between traditions, practices, and frameworks. In the whole range of different moral values, using that word "moral" really widely, we can emphasize this one or that one, this one above that one, this one to the extent of almost ignoring that one, and vice versa.

So partly what's happening here, and partly what happens in a lot of the superficial and often loud and strident arguments and hecklings in our society, is there's simply a discrepancy between the relative valuing of different moral values between two parties. We'll return to that. But all this is just to say, again, we're not singling out any one tradition for criticism. It's really part of the whole endeavor of looking at morals and moral considerations that these shadows and differences in valuing will be inevitable. As I say, it's part of the duty of love to look at that and to question. It's part of the honesty, part of the integrity, part of the rub of true relationship with the tradition, with the body of teaching that one loves, with the Logos.

So if we turn our gaze just briefly—and again, in too speedy and superficial a way—onto Buddhadharma and the different kinds of Buddhadharma, we can see where some might have gaps, lacunae, limitations with regards to the kinds of openings of morality I think are needed in our day and age.

When we look at traditional Theravāda Buddhadharma, I remember staying at a monastery for a while. It was wonderful in so many respects—the meditation teaching, the opportunity to practice undisturbed in a lovely setting. But one day I was struck. I was helping out in the kitchen, clearing some things, and I asked, "Where do you keep the recycling?" And the answer from the monk was, "We don't recycle here." I was kind of shocked. He said, "This is all just saṃsāra. All this is saṃsāra. Why bother with it?"

That pained me. I felt it was really an inadequate point of view. There were so many wonderful gifts from that monastery and the teachers there, but set in a very traditional context of Theravāda Buddhadharma, where the aim is to get off the wheel of rebirth, to get out of saṃsāra—saṃsāra being phenomenal existence, the experience of life and death, perception, experience, appearances. The whole thrust, the whole movement of meditation practice, is to sever that link, to not be born again. And what one's leaving behind is just saṃsāra. With it comes the sense that it's illusory.

You can see, if we tie that to what we were talking about in the talk on ontology and epistemology—where I laid out four worldviews, four ontological views—one of them was exactly this: only the unfabricated is really real; all this fabrication is not real, it's saṃsāra, it's worthless, and we're trying to get out of it.

And so, again, the shadow side of that is that we end up not caring, or it's possible that there's an attitude of simply a lack of care about this so-called samsaric realm, about the world, about the earth, and about, in this case, something like recycling. This would be an example of a kind of blindness coming out of shining the light in a certain direction.

Now, actually, nowadays that kind of orientation in the context of Buddhadharma is quite relatively uncommon. Not that many people are actually practicing that way—really trying to think in terms of rebirth and ending rebirth and severing that link, with the fabricated realm being, in that sense, illusory and to be relinquished. But rare as that is, and precious as it is for what it offers, it also has this inevitable lacuna in it, this inevitable limit, when it comes to relating to the world.

And then, if we just look briefly at this, we see certain teachings—I don't know if they're more pop teachings or what—where a practitioner has sort of got the idea that they're trying to move towards some kind of awakening that has no desire in it, that the eradication of desire is where they're headed and what they're aspiring to. We don't have to linger here very long, but what would a life like that even be like? How would I relate to the difficulties in the world and to what the world needs without some kind of

desire there? So that kind of gross oversimplification of what one thinks one's doing often leaves a lot lacking, leaves a lot missing in terms of the larger life and the larger possibilities of ethical response.

Søren Kierkegaard, the philosopher, wrote a book called *Enten-Eller*. I'm mentioning this because, in a way, there's something he talks about there that bears a similarity to certain popular notions of mindfulness, or perhaps pop non-dual teachings, Advaita teachings—not really what I would say the fuller teachings there represent.

In this book, there are three characters. There's character A, who recommends what he calls the aesthetic way of life. There's character B, who recommends what he calls the ethical way of life. And then there's a third character called Victor Eremita, who sort of edits and writes notes on the papers, the academic papers, of both.

Alistair MacIntyre writes about this, so I'll read a short passage from him. He says: "The choice between the ethical and the aesthetic"—two styles of life—"is not the choice between good and evil. It is the choice whether or not to choose in terms of good and evil." A subtle difference, but really, really important.

"At the heart of the aesthetic way of life, as Kierkegaard characterizes it, is the attempt to lose the self in the immediacy of present experience."

Doesn't that sound familiar from certain kinds of teachings?

"The paradigm of aesthetic expression is the romantic lover who is immersed in his own passion. By contrast, the paradigm of the ethical is marriage"—a state of commitment and obligation through time in which the present is bound by the past and to the future.

So he says each of the two ways of life is informed by different concepts, incompatible attitudes, and rival premises.

Sometimes, when there's too much emphasis on living in the present and dissolving the self in the present, in the moment and in present experience, being one with what's happening—that sounds very reminiscent of what Kierkegaard's calling the aesthetic way of life. And in its highlighting and emphasizing the present moment, the shadow there is that it misses the future and what's necessary in terms of commitment to the future. Where does that fit in for our soul, for our spirit, for our practice, for our conceptual framework?

This is one style of thinking about practice. It's quite popular. To me, it's a truncation of larger bodies of teaching. But there's something about future commitment that is really important and is missed. So I want to come back later and talk about soul-making and future commitment and how that relates—what their connection is, what's the notion of future commitment in soul-making.

If we look at my own tradition, the Insight Meditation tradition—and again, I want to say that it's changing very rapidly now, or it seems to me that things are changing quite quickly with regard, say, to something like climate change. A little while ago, some years ago, people might mention it, and some teachers and some people involved in Insight Meditation would say, "Well, that's a political issue. Climate change is a political issue and we don't do politics. We try and be apolitical, non-sectarian."

I think this is less common now, but it still bears mentioning and considering, again, if we're thinking about traditions and the life of traditions and what goes on for us in terms of our relationship with ethics and morality, and what goes on in our mind when our tradition and our commitment to a tradition meets the wider moral landscape.

Because one could say to that response that used to be relatively common, "Well, was the Holocaust a political issue or was it an ethical issue?" The Holocaust was perpetrated essentially by Nazis who were democratically elected in 1933. Therefore, you could say, "Well, the whole thing is just political, just a matter of policy—whether they want to exterminate Jews and gypsies and communists." Does that make it just a political issue? Or is it an ethical issue?

Well, that's different than something like climate change and what to do about climate change, because the Holocaust involved intentional murder. The concentration camps and extermination camps involved intentional murder. But actually, only some proportion of concentration camps were deliberate extermination camps, where they actually put people to death deliberately—like in Auschwitz, for example. Others, like Bergen-Belsen and the ghettos where they imprisoned Jews, there was just a level of deprivation and conditions that happened to result in many, many deaths, which the Nazis obviously didn't mind.

Now, that attitude of "well, that's just how it is for these people, and we're not actually deliberately killing them"—but in a way, one's setting up the conditions or not taking care of the conditions so that death becomes relatively inevitable—there's something like that attitude in many corporations' approach to climate change. It's all a kind of collateral damage.

So the notion that something like climate change is a political issue doesn't really fly. It's one of the ways we can squirm out of opening up to, facing up to, a difficult moral situation and what it asks of us.

Or again, in some Buddhist circles, particularly in Insight Meditation, one used to come across this response with regard to something like climate change: "I don't have an opinion"—as if having an opinion about climate change or about what should change or what to do was all part of views and opinions, which are to be transcended, let go of, because they're a fetter. But to say "I don't have an opinion" and to live a life where, for example, one is flying an enormous amount and generating a huge amount of carbon emissions—way more than one person is entitled to—and not speaking about it, that's actually expressing an opinion, even if I'm saying I'm shunning opinions.

Again, what would it be, for example, in apartheid South Africa, or on the US slave plantations, or next to gypsies and homosexuals and Jews being deported or gassed to death, to say, "I don't have an opinion"?

So there's something in the situation with certain issues like climate change or species loss that allows us to distance ourselves, to use mental mechanisms that distance ourselves from any sense of engagement or culpability or moral responsibility. That it's political, that it's a matter of views and opinions. This is happening, thankfully, much less now. But I'm mentioning it partly because these are the kinds of things that can arise in tradition. Whenever there's the light of a tradition, the light of a practice, a conceptual framework, it will bring with it certain shadows and certain directions.

And again, sometimes in certain Buddhist circles, I wonder about the dominant ethos. Remember, the word *ethos* is related very closely to the word *ethics*—the flavour, the character, the personality, either of individuals, or prominent individuals, or of the whole sangha, or of the whole flow of a tradition. And so, again, sometimes with all the emphasis on non-harming and gentleness and kindness and softness—particularly nowadays in Western Buddhadharma, some Western Buddhadharma, particularly the Insight Meditation tradition with its emphasis on softness—sometimes one almost gets the sense that in the dominant ethos, the most important thing for a teacher or anyone else is not to offend anyone. That actually almost trumps anything else. And if challenging students or retreatants or people one's communicating with might be deemed by them offensive, then it's important not to challenge people, and one doesn't say something or backs off.

So this ethos of non-offending, which in itself has a certain moral value—but when that moral value trumps the necessity or the possibility of actually challenging people's behaviour or moral outlook or choices, getting them to think about it, it could be said something's gotten out of balance here from a certain perspective.

So again, I remember—I think I shared this already—Suvacho, a colleague, a Gaia House teacher, teaching a retreat at Gaia House and saying at some point to the yogis there, "Some of you—maybe even a lot of you—will be much better off taking in a refugee family into your home rather than coming on retreat." Quite a challenging thing to say, and perhaps it ruffled a few feathers. But sometimes this ethos of gentleness or non-judgmentalism—which again, with all the pain of the pandemic of the inner critic, has become so emphasized in the teachings, and in a way importantly so, rightly so, helpfully so—but sometimes the question is, can they be overdone so that they begin to eclipse other considerations? They trump other considerations.

So there's always this need to be gentle, to be perceived as gentle, so that, for example, protests in the street are not considered gentle. People are shouting, or it's loud, or it's against the law, as all the XR protests were. And that contravenes a sort of unwritten law about gentleness, or the dominant ethos about gentleness. What's in charge here? How conscious are we about it? And how wide is the range of our consideration?

Or non-judgmentalism, as I mentioned. Again, that can have a shadow side when it's overemphasized. There is a difference between discernment on the one hand and judgment on the other, and it involves whether you're judging people or actions or speech or behaviour. But I read a passage the other day—a couple of passages—where the Buddha is really quite judgmental. There's enormous loving-kindness, enormous generosity and compassion coming out of the Buddha. And at times he sounds, or is, extremely judgmental, harsh, critical. The same with Jesus. Such mercy, such compassion, such beautiful love coming out of that heart and that being and that life and that sacrifice.

And at times, it's fire coming out of them now—the fire and the blade of judgment.

Another issue I think to look out for is just how easily—and it's related to what I just said—but how easily within a tradition or in a sangha or community there can be a kind of coalescence, a streamlining into a certain range of common behavior and common views. One is in the tradition, and so one goes along with that, even if one is not quite conscious of going along with it. One gets a little bit swept up in the stream of that tradition and contained within the family affiliation and loyalty of the community, and may not be conscious of it at all. And so one comes to act in certain ways or have certain views—or rather, certain ways of acting become the norm in that tradition and are

just unquestionable. It's just what people do. Certain choices, certain ways of doing things and behaviors, certain views. And in that, there can be a loss of the individual's autonomy, making their own decisions about behavior and about views. Certain behaviors and certain views can become very normalized.

So I've talked in the past, I know, and written about, for example, how normal it is—and again, I hope this is beginning to change; there are signs that it might be—but how normal it is in the Insight Meditation tradition to really do lots of flying. This is just an example of a kind of behavior that can get very normalized, because it's what everyone around me is doing, and we kind of think that we're good people because we're Buddhists and we're interested in less suffering and we're spiritual people.

So the issue is not really about flying, and I've talked about that enough. Let's say the issue is really about, for example, how am I relating to my carbon emissions? And one way of thinking about climate ethics is to calculate—and people have done this—how much carbon emissions, even if we shared them equally, in order not to heat the planet over, let's say, 1.5 degrees or 2 degrees. Then you work backwards from that: this is how we need to limit the carbon emissions, and that works out as such and such a quota, so many tons of carbon emissions per person per year. That would be one way of thinking about it. And in a way, that's a very reasonable way of thinking about it. It leaves aside climate justice and who owes what from the past, but just as a start, that's one approach.

So the issue really here is: how and when and why does it become normal for so many of us to blatantly and unthinkingly use up more than our fair share of carbon, and so add to the global warming and the misery that will come from that disproportionately? What's going on there? As I said, in certain traditions—I mean, the Insight Meditation tradition is just a reflection of the wider society, where it's very normal for people to fly loads and loads and not think about this potential way of contemplating climate ethics. Actually, it's only right that I have an equal share to everyone else. And what do I think I'm doing when I just extravagantly consume much more carbon, put into the atmosphere much more carbon?

So again, what gets normalized? In the wider society, absolutely, certainly. Just recently, Extinction Rebellion was planning a disruption of Heathrow Airport in protest of the planned building of a third runway. And it was pulled, retracted, the plan for this disruption. I don't know the ins and outs, but I wonder whether it was just because the public outcry would have been huge, because it's so normal to think, "I am entitled to fly on holiday. I'm entitled to fly somewhere for some pleasure, and maybe several times a year." And if that doesn't happen, it's an unthinkable state of affairs. I don't

actually think this, but something gets normalized in the larger culture and also in the Insight Meditation culture, for example. I'm sure it happens in lots of other cultures—corporate cultures and all kinds of things. But something's getting normalized just because it's normal in the subculture, and it's normal in the subculture partly because it's normal in the wider culture.

So again, what's the responsibility of a tradition to really wrestle with—I mean really wrestle, really question—the dominant values in the wider culture when it's necessary to do so? You can pay very easy lip service to anti-consumerism: "Oh, that's greed, it's one of the kilesas," and so forth. But to really do that.

So if we think then about what's a fair share of carbon dioxide as one way of thinking about climate ethics, some of you will have heard of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. It's a kind of rational formula that he came up with for an egalitarian ethics—very much in line with what I'm just saying. We have to regard everyone equally. Everyone gets equal respect and equal share, so to speak. But this categorical imperative is a way of thinking about one's action and testing it by the standards of this rational idea, which says that one ought so to act as to be able to will that everyone should act so.

So what that means is, if I want to use up three or four times my fair share of carbon for the year, can I really wish, can I really will that everyone does so? Because I know that if everyone uses three or four times their share, then the whole ship sinks. If I use that measure, that rational measure, Kant's categorical imperative, it puts certain constraints on the choices I have to make. Maybe I do use three times my carbon share this year—somehow I have to justify that, or I have to offset it, and I don't just mean planting trees somewhere. I have to consider whether there are cases where, in the larger scope of taking care of everyone equally, within this equalitarian ethics, it actually is justified, it does make sense.

So how do I decide? If, for example, I really feel that my flying—let's take flying, just because I can't think of anything else right now—that my flying back and forth, many flights a year, if I really think that there's so much good coming out of that, that it's so necessary, then maybe the balance of that good outweighs the harm of putting all that carbon into the atmosphere. How do I decide? It's not that easy.

When I used to talk about this and write about it, it was hard to make prescriptions. But at least what I wanted to feel and to see was that there was a wrestling with these issues, that they weren't just easy. Because as I said, when it gets normalised—when, for example, flying a lot to go on retreat, to teach a retreat, to visit a certain Buddhist tourist site—that last possibility gets much easier. If I'm flying a lot anyway to teach

retreats, and I'm not really thinking about it too much, I'm not really wrestling with it, then that other flight to go on holiday or do something even if it looks vaguely Buddhist, it's part of just what gets swept up in the normality. It's just normalised.

What I was hoping for, I think, was a sense of people wrestling with these choices, which I really hear is beginning to happen nowadays, and I'm thankful for that. So again, two poles. One pole would just be the inner critic: "Oh, people will judge me if I fly a lot." And the other pole is just going ahead because it's normalised—I'm not afraid of judgment because the normality in my tradition or my culture is not to be judged, so I just do it. Can there be a middle way where there's actually a wrestling with it, a questioning—how do I decide? If I'm using Kant's categorical imperative, and I'm not suggesting that's the only way of doing things, how do I actually weigh up the relative amounts of suffering or the relative help, whether I fly or I don't fly, whether I take those emissions or I do fly and help whatever that situation is?

And again, swept up, caught up in the homogeneity, the stream of a tradition and its way of thinking and its accepted behaviours—what would it be to actually be more independent and wrestle more independently? Or together, the Sangha together, people within the Sangha actually really wrestling with these questions? There's something for me about the wrestling which shows an aliveness ethically. It shows I'm willing to not be peaceful. I'm willing to put up with the agitation of this and the lack of simplicity of it. Some of these choices are really not simple. There's something about assenting to and opening to and putting up with and confronting and entering into the difficulty, the wrestling. It's not peaceful. It's not simple. It doesn't fit that shrunken range of Buddhist archetypes of peacefulness and simplicity.

You can imagine if that way of thinking—from considering how we divide up a fair share of climate emissions per person, per year, for the whole of humanity, connected with Kant's categorical imperative—became normal. You can imagine saying to someone, "Oh, I'm going off here or there, I'm going for a holiday," and they say, "Really? Wow." Well, you can imagine having some kind of document, some need to justify it. The person asking, "Where's your LEAFSAJ?"

What's a LEAFSAJ? L-E-A-F-S-A-J: "Lethal Emissions in excess of your fair share Allowance Justification." LEAFSAJ. Or your HEAFSAJ: "Harmful Emissions in excess of your fair share Allowance Justification." That actually becomes the normal way of thinking about it. It's like, "Whoa, you're doing what?"

So a lot of this just is a matter of what's normal. Because when we talk about carbon and climate and also species loss—these related issues—the threads of cause and effect are so much more complex. It's not like stabbing someone to death, where it's very

clear what's the cause, what's the effect, who's the culprit. With something like climate change and carbon emissions and seven-plus billion people, plus government policy and all that, it's actually quite hard to trace the threads of cause and effect.

But in a way, again, we can very easily let that complexity and the difficulty of tracing cause and effect obfuscate and eclipse our sense of moral responsibility. So it's not too far from that attitude of "I don't mind killing and stealing as long as no one finds out." No one's going to find out because the threads of cause and effect are too complex. These are hard issues, I think—hard to think through, hard to face up to.

I did hear about several—that's what I alluded to earlier—I did hear about several, I don't know what to call them, Buddhist sightseeing trips, really. They get billed as pilgrimages, but... flying to Bhutan or India or wherever to go to some Buddhist temples and such. And so again, what if we took, for example, Kant's categorical imperative or this idea of a fair share of carbon emissions? How would I justify that? What would I say on my HEEF SAG form? What would I say to that family in Bangladesh who have almost no food because of floods and no house? Or to those dying of dengue fever that has expanded its territory with climate change and global warming? Or those whose livelihoods, health, and homes have been destroyed because of years of drought? Already people are in that situation—human beings are in that situation—and in the future, because of these excess emissions. What would I say? To really actually contemplate that conversation. Imagine yourself, imagine myself there with them, or here with them.

If you make it simpler, sometimes it's easier to see. Imagine you're on a ship, I'm on a ship, with ten people or a hundred people even. And I have to, I want to explain to them why I'm allowed to eat more food than them, to shit on the deck, and they're not allowed. And maybe I'm a Dharma teacher and I'm explaining, and I give them a Dharma talk—that would be an interesting thing. My Dharma talk to these ten or a hundred people justifying why I deserve that special allowance, because I do very special work, you know.

Sometimes we have to, because of the complexity of the situation, actually make it a bit smaller and say, hold on, what actually is the difference? It's a difference of scale. But to be in that situation in the boat, in the middle of the ocean, with nothing else around, which is the situation of our planet, and then decide that I can emit more, not care about my waste, use up more resources—what am I really going to say to them? How am I going to justify that?

So again, what's normal? Imagine, if we take a different moral issue—I might slip out easily saying, "Oh yeah, I'm off to wherever it is to see some Buddhist temples, and I'm going to fly there, and then I'm going to fly here," whatever it is. What if I just mentioned to someone, "Oh yeah, well, my slaves are going to help me out with that"? People would be like, "Your *what*? Your *slaves*?" It's just—it has become not normal. There's, you know, not to underestimate the power of just what becomes normalized through the body and the flow and the range of a tradition or subculture or wider culture. So if I... Everyone, I think, would object to slaves. And very few people would raise their voice around, say, using up more carbon. Or flying a lot.

I mean, that's partly being a little bit tongue-in-cheek. But if we're just talking now, before we even get on to the soul-making possibilities, just in terms of more mainstream meditative possibilities, it might be interesting to, in stepping up and opening out to the whole range of difficulty and depth and complexity of the moral challenge here, actually engage in certain meditative exercises—for example, to really let these issues go deeper. Because I think what can happen is that they don't really register in the heart and the soul and the being. There's a way they can kind of stay at arm's length. And so we're not really dealing with that.

So, for example, as I was a bit tongue-in-cheek before, but what about imagining a family in Bangladesh or Jakarta or in sub-Saharan Africa who find out that the floods there or the drought and the threat from these floods or drought or whatever to their lives are made worse and more probable through climate change, so that their house and fields and whatever it is become unworkable, uninhabitable? They become a refugee or die, or their relatives or family die. They're cast into abject poverty. Very little hope of getting out of that. And they learn somehow that this is related to something called climate change, and there's the education there. And they also learn that climate change is caused by CO2 emissions, mostly, and most of the CO2 emissions come from rich people. Most of whom, these rich people, know about climate change and its connection with CO2 emissions. And these people in this family in wherever it is—Bangladesh or Jakarta or somewhere in Africa—they hear about that. And they also hear that actually these people don't need to fly. These rich people don't need to fly. But they like to go on holiday or whatever it is because it's a pleasant experience.

Again, what would I actually say to them to justify my choice to fly on holiday, or to eat red meat, or to drive an SUV, or whatever it is? Or even just to choose a slightly cheaper energy company? Or even as a Dharma teacher, if I fly to teach a lot, again with the easy assumption that because I'm a Dharma teacher, my flight and my life and my

efforts must be decreasing suffering. Would it be possible to actually have that imaginary conversation in meditation, to really be with the whole emotional range of it and the sensitivity and difficult feelings?

Within that, there's the possibility of cultivating a real sensitivity to discomfort, to when things feel out of alignment, but also when they feel in alignment and when there's a sense of integrity. These experiences are reflected in the heart and the energy body. They actually feel different. This might be an interesting practice—to use the imagination in meditation. Not imaginal practice, but imagination. Put yourself in relationship with those kinds of human beings whom we, in the rich West, don't often come into direct contact with. Actually have that imaginary conversation with all the availability of the heart and the energy body, taking the time, listening to the mind, watching what the mind does, watching what's happening in the body, feeling it, and developing sensitivity to where things lack integrity in ourselves, where there's this kind of squirming, and where they are in integrity and in alignment—the whole range of emotion there.

Part of what ethical practice asks of us, and even more so nowadays with all this complexity and globalization and the situation of climate change and species loss and environmental degradation and destruction, is not just sensitivity in all these kinds of ways—sensitivity empathically, sensitivity to ethics and morals, which is something I'll return to. It also asks us for a great capacity emotionally. Actually, can I tolerate the grief here? Can I tolerate the remorse? Can I be with that? Can I let it be in a crucible so that something redemptive, helpful, onward-leading, ennobling comes out of it? It's asking quite a lot. But that might be an interesting exercise.

Sometimes what can happen is that certain priceless elements within a tradition or a teaching can actually become things we hide behind in certain ways. For example, the Four Noble Truths can become, at times, something of a delusional trope or delusional rhetoric. I'm off on a sightseeing trip to Tibet or Nepal or Bhutan or wherever, and it's kind of Buddhist. As a Buddhist practitioner, I feel myself, or I want to think of myself, as having this commitment to decreasing suffering, my own and the world's. And yet I know, or I should know, that making that choice—what's essentially an unnecessary trip—will increase suffering. How do I square my devotion to and commitment to the paradigm of the Four Noble Truths and decreasing suffering with the suffering that, although difficult to trace, will result from my choosing to go on that particular trip and fly?

What's interesting about that kind of thing is that one goes perhaps on these Buddhist pilgrimages or sightseeing trips, and you can sense from the soul-making perspective what's wrapped up in there—something inchoate as an image. It's potentially an image. Ladakh or Bhutan or Nepal or Tibet carries this whole sense, almost not quite imaginal, but there's the image of Tibetan history, Tibetan Buddhadharma history, and all the color and richness and beauty of that. That's a potentially imaginal image in the psyche. But if I don't have a way of relating to it where it actually becomes authentically imaginal, then the only way I can relate to it is as something concretized and literalized. I need to go there. Without the soul-making paradigm, without an actual imaginal practice understanding how there doesn't need to be literalization, any duty I have to that image has to be literalized. Without that soul-making paradigm, this incipient eros for this fantasy or non-imaginal image of Tibetan Buddhist history has to be concretized.

If one has practiced more with the imaginal and soul-making paradigms, I actually don't need to go there. I'm not going to get actual teachings there, or it's very unlikely I'm going to get actual teachings there that I wouldn't otherwise get if I stayed here and got on the internet or found them in a book or from a teacher here. I'm not going to get actual teachings there that would make a real difference to me or my teaching. I might, but it's pretty rare these days. With imaginal practice, it's actually possible to enter into an erotic-imaginal relationship with that whole region, with that whole lineage, with that whole beauty. And it's just as alive and fecund in my soul and psyche, just as beautiful and rich and onward-leading and opening, just as soul-making—maybe more so than if I went there and actually concretized the whole thing.

What's the difference between a fixated image and an imaginal image? Without the imaginal sensibility, without a sense of what it means for something to be imaginal and how to practice, without the taste for it, things get concretized. And the concretization has a cost—to others and to myself.

As I said, there are possibilities here, and it's really not to say one tradition or practice is better than another. But there are possibilities to expand some of the ways we relate, or fail to relate, ethically. Some of the ways our ethical consideration and behavior fall short, our ethical vision and sensibility fall short—it's possible to expand from different perspectives. One of them is the soul-making paradigm as we've taught it, with image and all that.

If we think about what traditional Buddhadharma—and again, I'm mostly thinking of insight meditation Dharma, though it probably applies to other sub-traditions—what the typical limits on ethics and on ethos there might be, on the character or flavor of practitioners and how the whole thing gets shaped and limited, the whole tenor of that

trajectory with regard to activism and the possibilities of activism, specifically activism around climate or species loss and mass extinction. If we analyze it for a few moments, in traditional insight meditation or Buddhadharma, there are certain limits on the ethics and on the ethos, because those two go together, and therefore on the possibility of activism, because there's limited possibility for the sense of different aspects of our existence. And oftentimes these limits are unconscious.

So, for example, with regard to the self, there's this inherited archetype of the peaceful, detached Buddha. This is what an awakening person looks like; this is the flavor, the ethos of their being. They're peaceful, they're simple, they're detached. They don't get upset, they don't shout in the street, they don't break the law.

So in terms of the scope of the ethos, and therefore the ethics of the self, and how it might be supported or not to engage in activism—and maybe even civil disobedience—there's a limit there because of the ethos, which isn't hardly recognized as something that's handed to us and makes an imprint on us. It's not talked about as an image. It's not talked about as an archetype. And because it's not talked about and recognized as such, it has more insidious clout. So in terms of the self, there would be one kind of limitation there.

In terms of other—so we can think about self, other, world, eros, and time, those five categories—in the way that I've just explained, with regard to others and other human beings, again there is perhaps a tendency to not want to create a duality, certainly through judgmentalism. There's no place for an image of war, of battle. We can't have opponents. There's not scope for it in terms of what we're given in terms of image and thinking. That's got to be on its way to hatred; the defilement of hatred is the usual assumption. It's reified.

But can there be the theatre of war? The image, I mean, of war. The image of opponents. The image of battle. It's not reified, but in the theatre of things, it can have that power without it being reified into the defilement of hatred.

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org and a long-term environmental activist—actually, I think he wrote the first ever book on climate change—at one point, a few years ago, he actually came out and said, "They are the enemy." Who? These big oil corporations, these big fossil fuel corporations. He actually started talking in those terms. Now yes, we can reify that and get into all kinds of problems and defilement, but we can also use that as an image. And the self can be cast as a warrior, for example—theatrically cast, imaginally cast as a warrior in relation to this enemy. So there's a limitation on self, limitation on other, on the sense of self and the sense of other.

The world too. Self, other, world. The world tends to be—if we just speak about Insight Meditation Dharma—tends to just receive the same view of the world as the dominant view in the culture. It's a flat world, so to speak. It's not dimensional. One subscribes to the scientific materialist view, maybe with a few magical notions bound in there or floating around. The world itself is, in many respects, just... it may be beautiful, but it's a kind of irrelevant and purposeless backdrop for the project of my own liberation, my practice.

Again, some of this is not conscious, but because it's the dominant worldview in the culture, it seeps into the subculture and just becomes part of it—unless it's actually questioned, unearthed, reworked, opened up, considered differently.

Self, other, world, eros. My passion, my love, my tears. So again, in traditional Buddhadharma, either they're mine—and that would be an unskillful way of looking at them—or they're not mine, they're anattā, and that would be a skillful way of looking at them. There's no other option. It's just either mine or not mine. My rage, my eros, my love, my grief.

Or in terms of time—self, other, world, eros, time. I'm putting those five together because they kind of go as a bundle of fabrication. They tend to get fabricated together: self and other and world and time and some kind of desire. And so how they get fabricated matters a great deal, as we've touched on in these talks and beforehand. They tend to get fabricated together as a kind of bundle—not always exactly in the same moment, but they're related.

So with the fifth one, with time, again the usual approach in the Insight Meditation tradition would be that we only have the notion of impermanence, that things are impermanent. That's the way we relate to time. Or that we can take practical measures for the future, of course, and those practical measures may either succeed or fail. What's missing there? It's impermanence and working practically for the future, and that future—whatever projects we have for the future, whatever hopes—may either succeed or fail. What's missing there?

There's no eternality. There's no sense of the eternal life.

Let's linger on some of these a little while. In terms of the self, and also the attributes or the range of self-sense and self-expression, again, oftentimes what's missing – so the warrior is missing, but also the kind of place for wrath. We have it in the Tibetan deities; at least you have the image of it, the wrathful deities. But it's still somewhat problematic how that is supposed to translate into one's life. Is there a place for wrath? For righteous indignation, for moral indignation? Does that have a place in our moral life?

Is there a need for that? Is there a maturity in allowing that place? Of course it goes with shadow. Of course it goes with potential dangers and misuse and delusion. But is there a place for that? Oftentimes, again, in the usual range of what we receive as the ethos, and therefore the ethics, of Buddhadharma, that has no place.

Nikolai Hartmann is a philosopher I've mentioned before in other talks, and I'm going to come back to him and talk quite a bit, I think, about some of his work. He pointed out, surveying classical ethics with Aristotle and Plato and the like, that Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* names the virtue of *praotēs*. At first sight, it seems to mean something like gentleness. So that's a moral value, a moral virtue. But when he looks into it closely, it actually seems to mean equable temper more than gentleness. What it really means is something between violent temper on the one hand, and on the other hand, an incapacity to feel righteous indignation.

So with regard to mildness of temper, with regard to this *praotēs*, a special merit lies in the view that not only easy excitability to anger, but also complete incapacity to feel wrath, is a moral defect. This is Nikolai Hartmann writing about Aristotle's ethics: "A special merit lies in the view that not only easy excitability to anger" – that's the one we'd all very easily recognize as what he calls a moral defect – "but also complete incapacity to feel wrath is a moral defect. The presupposition of this view is that anger in itself is something valuable, therefore indirectly that in general there is moral value in emotion. It is evident that here a far deeper appreciation of emotion is expressed than we find elsewhere among the ancients." He's talking about the Stoics and people like that.

And of course we can translate that to our contemporary age, just in terms of Buddhadharma, the subculture of Buddhadharma. Even within the Insight Meditation tradition, you see quite a range in the emphasis of different teachings on the importance of emotion and appreciation of emotion – what's the range of importance, what's the range of emotion to which importance and place is given. But here, this incapacity to feel wrath is a moral defect, as much as being too quick to temper and to anger. So again, we're talking about where things get limited, just by virtue of being in tradition, in the run of accepted ways, accepted modes of thinking and regarding.

If we come back to this point about time – I mentioned time as one of the elements there: self, other, world, eros, and time – in terms of this bundle that tends to get fabricated together in both conventional perception and in imaginal perception. Altogether they go together as aspects of fabrication.

Sometimes when I'm talking to people who are trying to work towards solutions with regard to climate change, or they're activists, they use the word "story." We need a new story. We need a new narrative. And it can sound like we're talking about the same thing when we talk about image or fantasy – as if story and narrative are similar words, just interchangeable words for that. But when I listen to them, it's clear that we're actually talking about different things.

Yes, I think we do need a plan, or plans, about what we're going to do about climate change and halting species loss and that kind of thing. We need concrete plans and tools to implement those plans and legislation and all that. But some of these activists and people concerned, with a lot of care and heart – and again, it's not to say this is wrong, it's just to add to it – talk about story and narrative and the need for a wider story and narrative in regard to climate, and particularly how we will face the likely mayhem and catastrophes that many people consider likely in the face of climate and environmental breakdown.

The story and narrative as it's used by some of these activists – because it's a story, it brings a kind of binding to the future. It actually connects with that passage we read from Kierkegaard about not the aesthetic way of life, but the ethical way of life.

Marriage as the paradigm of that ethical life—marriage being a commitment in time to the future, through the past and into the future.

So this idea of a new story, a new narrative, or new stories and new narratives—they seem to bring, and may indeed bring, this binding to the future. But of course, what if that future does not turn out at all as the story hopes or plans? You can have a story for how we're going to build resilience or human community and cohesion, social cohesion, when there's food scarcity or water scarcity, or when disease is rampant and social breakdown occurs. But what if that future does not turn out at all as the story hopes?

An imaginal image, in contrast, in the way we're using that term—because it's eternal and timeless, as we've discussed, that being one of the elements of the imaginal—it seems not to imply a future binding. It's just eternal. So it seems, if it's not quite the aesthetic way of life, it's neither the ethical way of life as Kierkegaard was describing, because it doesn't have this binding to the future.

So it seems that because of the eternality element, the timelessness element... but actually it does bind us. It has a bond with and commitment to life. For example, an image of oneself as an activist or a warrior for the earth, a warrior for species, or whatever it may be—that image needs to be eternal partly because in being eternal it

doesn't then depend on what happens. Whatever happens, that soldier will fight. There's a kind of endlessness to the problems we face and to what we need to address and what we need to combat.

So those images I used to share years ago—one of my recurrent images of this solitary soldier fighting. One of the things that's interesting is he's always fighting. And there's a kind of endlessness to him. He rests and then he gets up to fight. And then he rests and he gets up to fight. And there's not an end to that. So there is actually a future bonding—as I said, a bond with a commitment to however that pans out, however that plays out, however that's refracted into life. A commitment to acting, speaking, expressing, fighting, seeding, giving birth in whatever ways are helpful or necessary or part of that whole duty of the image. Ongoingly, no matter what. It doesn't depend on achieving a specific outcome.

So certain movements of activism will go on forever. There won't be an end to them. The revolution, if you use that word, goes on forever. There's always something. And in a way, that part is wrapped up in a more imaginal way of sensing the whole thing. And there's of course the duty there, and the infinite mirroring and echoing as elements of the imaginal.

So that image, in our sense of imaginal image, is slightly different than story and narrative. And it does bring, if one has an image of oneself in that way—as an activist, as a warrior, or whatever it may be, perhaps a midwife, perhaps healing the planet—whatever the image is, it doesn't actually stop. Both the image in itself and also the reality of the situation is not going to stop. But there's duty coming through, refracted from the image into one's life, into one's action, speech, and more.

So if you go back to Kierkegaard and his distinction between the aesthetic way of life that has no commitment to the future and just wants to lose the self in the present moment, merge with the present moment—no self, just this moment—compared with the ethical way of life and its sober commitment to the future, what's missing in that distinction is the psychological awareness of what we might call soulfulness. Each of those modes, what he calls the aesthetic and the ethical, may have that quality. But the main point here in relation to time and the future is this: the allowing of more imaginal dimensions, more imaginal filling out of the ethos and of the possibilities and the ethical sensibility and the sense of self, other, world—in relation to time, we then get this whole other dimension of eternality. That eternality binds us to the future in a more endless way, not so tied to a certain outcome. So there's actually an extra duty there to a certain extent, but there's also a liberation, because we're not so tied to achieving this or that specific outcome. Yes, we want that. Yes, we hope for that. But on the imaginal

level at least, it's endless, it's eternal. And there's a duty there, and that duty binds. It's like the duty of marriage, the bond, the commitment to that endless refraction in time of the life of that image, of the duty of that image.

Later, as I mentioned very briefly, I want to come back and talk about values and virtues as a different way of talking, both about ethics and about soul-making. I will hopefully say much more about that later, but just to see something now and to tie it to what we just discussed: if we think about virtues, human virtues and ethics, the development of those virtues becomes one possible way of thinking about the kind of moral education or moral development I was describing. There don't seem to be many programs for personal development beyond eighteen, let alone moral development. Thinking about the virtues is one way of approaching this. We'll come back to that. And that approach is open-ended—unlike the story or the narrative, the sense that we need a new story, a new narrative, that seems to...

Sometimes when I hear these friends and colleagues and other people—activists or people talking—it seems to involve a trajectory in time that will arrive at a certain place. The story or this narrative that one tries to introduce into society ends in time, with the hope that there will be a collective buying into this story and narrative that will steer us all in a better direction.

If we regard the program of development or the invitation to develop human virtues, our moral virtues, as part of the possible development we can have as human beings—what we can cultivate—then that can actually be open-ended. It's never perfected. It's never ever finished. So there's a similarity in terms of the open-endedness that goes with imaginal ways of sensing one's relationship to the whole of ethical issues and with thinking about it in terms of virtues. We'll come back to virtues later.

If we just stay with what we know so far about the soul-making paradigm—and I probably don't need to say this, but I'll mention it anyway, just in case someone raises it as a question—the idea of theatre, or the idea of emptiness of reality, the imaginal middle way and all that, bears no similarity at all with what's recently been coined as post-truth politics and fake news and Donald Trump and others spinning fake news or turning stories on their heads and promulgating all that. It doesn't start with him, of course.

There's a very basic difference. If we say everything is empty or there's no ultimate truth or reality, that doesn't invite what I don't know what to call—this misdemeanor of post-truth politics and fake news. As we said, emptiness doesn't mean all things are ontologically the same, that everything's kind of untrue so therefore anything goes.

How should we put our finger on what's different here? One way is looking at the intention. What determines the choice of speech or action or view if there's no ultimate truth? In so-called post-truth politics, what's determining why a certain politician says this thing or presents a certain view which is clearly not the case and convinces people that it is? What's determining it? Well, it's things like ego and greed and fear. And the ego there, the self, is reified. So in this kind of "it's all whatever, truth has lost its place," actually there's a reification of the self, and certain objects get reified for the purposes of greed or in relationship to greed.

And also some art that's influenced by post-modernism—now thinking of art that's, I don't know what to say, at its worst—again, what's choosing, what's determining the choice of putting this out or presenting this or that? Sometimes it can be ego: the artist wants to be famous, wants to make money, wants to appear clever. And there's a reification of nihilism there, of meaninglessness.

In soul-making, rather, what determines our choice of what we put out there—of speech, of action, of view—if it's not some ultimate truth? Well, it's the sense of soul-making and all that that entails, including the fullness of intention, including beauty, including love, including reverence. All that is there. So if anyone gets nervous with these notions of emptiness and the imaginal middle way and the theatre-like quality and the possibility of using image—"but image isn't real"—it's very clear where the intention is coming from, what determines choices.

If we touch on the Four Noble Truths, again for the sake of asking: are there ways in which certain central paradigms, normalized paradigms, can actually unwittingly become limiting for our relationship with ethics and moral questions?

One area I think is quite enlightening to consider in this regard is litter. It strikes me as quite a good example of something which isn't obviously related as an issue to the Four Noble Truths, for the most part. Caring about removing litter—you can't really say that's going to lead to less suffering, except in some instances. It can't really be looked at convincingly in terms of the Four Noble Truths paradigm. And because the Four Noble Truths is so central and so determinative of the direction, and therefore the gaze and the outlook—the moral outlook and gaze and action or non-action within the Buddha Dharma—there may be limitations coming from that.

Whereas with the soul-making paradigm, we're actually including other ways of looking where the sense of soul-making, the sense of sacredness and beauty, are given weight—as much sometimes as a reduction in suffering. So that something like litter becomes part of a larger, let's call it a moral issue, and what we do about litter becomes part of ethical concern.

In itself, litter—yes, in some instances, of course, it's plastic in the oceans and the impact on marine life. That's becoming really broadcast as a problem just recently, in the last year or two, and more people are cottoning on to that. But there's still a difference in the reason for concern: "This turtle or these seabirds will die, and therefore there's concern for the suffering of those marine animals." There's a difference between that kind of concern and the concern that it's beauty being destroyed, or that it's literally trashing something sacred—the earth and the natural world. You understand? So the Four Noble Truths, when it becomes a normalized paradigm, can limit the range of our concern, of what goes into what we might call ethical concern in terms of how we live and how we relate to the earth.

Air pollution as well. In England and in certain countries, many countries, it's really a big issue, especially with burning diesel, diesel cars. But the focus is often on health—understandably, especially the health of children. That's obviously a real concern. But there's still a difference in the range of care and the actual object of what's cared about. I care for the health of my children—they might get asthma or some organic problem—and that's why I care about air pollution.

Versus, is there not just, from a certain perspective, from my soul, the sensitivity of my soul, there's just something *wrong* with air smelling that way—smelling of diesel fumes, smelling of coal fumes? There's something sacrosanct that is being tarnished, that is not being respected. Beauty—the beauty of just simple fresh air and the fragrances of life—is not being respected. It's a different concern.

And in England, I don't know if they're still around, but certainly I remember from my childhood the slogan "Keep Britain Tidy," asking people to pick up litter and put things in rubbish bins. I notice a couple of things about that. One, it doesn't say "Keep Britain Beautiful." There's not, in the larger culture, this kind of respect for beauty. Beauty doesn't have the same place, the same kind of depth that it could have—the depth that it does in the soul-making paradigm, for example. And also, this is "Keep Britain Beautiful" as opposed to "Keep the Earth Beautiful." A slightly narrow, nationalistic view there.

So there are ways that—again, we're just talking about the insight meditation tradition right now, mostly, or Buddha-Dharma—there are ways that, with all the gifts and all the bounty and benefits that it can bring, it can also be limited, like any perspective, any tradition, any conceptual framework, any paradigm of practice can be limited, will be limited. And if we expand the scope of Dharma to include more soul-making

Dharma ideas and perspectives and paradigms, then with that there's a corresponding expansion in many different ways, many possible different ways, of our ethical range, sensibility, concern, and action.

Let me point out another difference, or a few more differences actually. I used to talk a lot about the image being primary. People used to ask, "What do you mean when you say the image is primary?" So I was talking with someone the other day, and she had a very beautiful image, a very touching image for her, of just the feathery breast of a bird coming into contact with her heart and pressing up against her. There was a tremendous amount of compassion wrapped up in that image—very, very beautiful. And it opened the floodgates of love and some grief in a very healing way.

But she said to me that she realised the grief she had been feeling prior to that image—there was some grief, but she was saying, "Is it this? Is it that? What's the grief?" None of the reasons she was giving, that the mind was giving herself for what the grief was for, none of the explanations the mind was landing on, seemed quite adequate. And then she recognised that actually it was grief at being out of contact with this angel. So it wasn't caused by this or that in the life, or this or that happening, or being lost. There was actually, in the contact with this image, the recognition that the grief that had been there in her heart was grief at being out of contact with an angel.

In other words, the image is primary, and in this case, its absence is the primary cause, if you like, or condition for grief to arise, rather than something in the life. So our emotions, in this view, are coming more from the image. Our actions, our choices are coming more from an image. And sometimes we're not even quite conscious of what the image is. The image is what's primary. The image is what drives us. The image is not primary in time so much as primary in fundamental importance.

Again, we're not stating this as a kind of dogmatic assertion, as in some way finally or ultimately true. It's a way of looking, a way of conceiving. It's a certain logos that we can move in and out of. But actually it has a lot of both explanatory power and also soul-making power when we start to see our lives that way—not just our emotions, our minds, our inspirations, but as I said, our actions, choices, our sensibilities, our love. The image is primary.

I'm mentioning it now partly because this person was also relating to me, over a period of time, a great deal of concern—very beautiful concern—with different social justice issues. And sometimes she would feel herself really in a quandary, torn between: "How should I choose? How should I present this social justice issue? What's my re-

sponsibility here? If I do this, then I'm failing on that. If I do that, I'm failing on this." Really trying to do the best that she could in relation to these difficult, ongoing, larger social justice issues.

And an image came to her of the Black Madonna, and this image was very connected with her care, her deep concern and commitment to working on social justice issues. And she started to realise, in working with this image, that her primary duty was to this Black Madonna.

And this Black Madonna, as I said—or let's put it this way—her dedication to social justice, to addressing issues of social justice and voicing them and working towards better solutions and opening them out, her dedication to social justice issues was an echo, was part of the infinite echoing and mirroring in her life of this Black Madonna image.

And in a way, what she came to realize was that her primary duty was to the Black Madonna, and the refraction of that primary duty into her life was the expression of her work on, her care about, these social justice issues. This is rather than the typical way of thinking, which is the other way around—that her primary commitment is to addressing this fact or that fact of a social situation, or this person or that person. In seeing it this way, that the actual primary duty was to the image, in this case the Black Madonna, that in some way encapsulated and echoed and held and illuminated and was related to with care these social justice issues—in realizing that the primary duty was to the Black Madonna, the kind of unhelpful agitation that she was feeling around what to choose in terms of how to act, how to speak, when to say this, what to do in this situation, around very specific things which you don't need to go into, her unhelpful agitation just subsided. Her whole relationship to that whole set of issues and what was coming up in the community context she was having to deal with became much more workable, much simpler. All the depth, all the passion, all the beauty of her involvement and commitment was still there, but without the kind of unhelpful agitation that went with it.

So again, we've been talking really about the ways that imaginal practice as we've discussed it so far can augment and expand and supplement the ways we already have of relating to ethical issues. If we keep going, another one I've already touched on, but I'll say it again because it's so important: Whose grief is it that I feel in my heart for the earth? For what we're doing to the earth—massive, massive changes on geological time scales. Whose grief is it? Whose rage? Whose outrage? Whose indignation? Whose love for the earth? Whose rage at species loss?

If I'm relating to the whole thing in a way where I'm sensing the whole thing with soul—sensing the situation, the plight of the earth, the plight of the species, the plight of humanity, and my heart and my emotions—if I can find a way to sense all that with soul, then what passes through my heart, whether it comes from an image, from an intrapsychic image, or comes more globally from sensing the whole situation with soul, I start to feel that those aspects of that whole situation that I call my emotions, that are my emotions, my heart—they start to be sensed as divine.

Whose grief? Whose rage? Whose love? Yes, it's mine, of course. Yes, it's anattā—it's not mine, of course. Both perspectives valuable. And a third one: it's the Buddha nature's. It's the divinities'. It's God's. It's coming through my heart. My heart, my grief, is an instrument of the divine care. And as such, the divine, the Buddha nature, needs me to feel this grief.

Sometimes that's what it can feel like—that the scope of the problems is so huge, just on a planetary scale, but also on a soul level. It's bigger than how we usually feel ourselves to be. The emotion there is bigger than mine.

Now again, of course there's the possibility of delusion with all that, especially if I take any of those—my rage or grief or eros—and I just rationalize it by calling it divine, and then that makes excuses for me to either indulge in it or sink in it or act out or whatever. Of course there's a possibility of delusional rationalization. But again, if we're talking about authentic sensing with soul, or at least moving more in that direction, the authentic imaginal, then this will be more authentic and genuine.

And it adds the whole dimensionality to the very organ, the very instrument of the heart, and to the very difficult feelings we're going through—whether they're grief or rage or whatever, moral indignation, that kind of passion. It adds the dimensionality and the divinity there, and that gives space, and it gives an anchoring in something beyond. It's enormously liberating and helpful and empowering and soul-making and beautiful.

It's in all these areas—self, other, world, eros, time, and other aspects, beauty. We talked about sacredness. We can expand them all with the help of soul-making dharma paradigms and what they bring in to flesh out and enrich and dimensionalize our sense of ethics and the whole movement of the moral life within us—what we respond to, what we see, what we care for, how we act, how we choose.

So I think there's a case to be made that the usual ways in our contemporary society and cultures that we conceive of and sense the self and also the world—both the self and the world—are not always, but for many of us, not quite adequate to the complex-

ity and the difficulty and the demand of the challenges that we face, especially with regard to things like climate change and species loss and those kinds of huge moral issues. And it might also be, as I was saying, that even within certain subcultures like the Dharma or Insight Meditation tradition, the usual ways of sensing and conceiving of the self and of the world are not quite adequate—not for everyone, but for many people. They need some other ways to open out the sense of self and world, and those ways, those other ways, might become platforms of support for opening up the moral sensibility and the power to act, the capacity to act, the potential.

So it's interesting—if we talk about climate change and species extinction, it's hard to imagine a Hollywood movie about that which would really galvanize things, in terms of speaking to people. It's not really a personal story in that sense. You can get earthquake movies and volcano movies and so forth, and the focus is on the individual hero and maybe his or her family and what they go through, and it gets shrunk down to a personal—I don't know what they call it—action movie or catastrophe movie or whatever. But something like climate change and species loss is much more than a personal story can ever really get hold of. It's not really on that level.

And yet in our society, because of the culture of individualism, that becomes a kind of dominant way that we think about things. It becomes the easiest way for people to get moved and galvanised and relate to something. But the contemporary sense of self may not be adequate. It's not personal in that way.

A worldview that all is one also may not be adequate. Or, say, a certain kind of dharmic practice where the story and the self is atomized into sensations and mind states—that kind of lens also won't be very helpful when I look at the whole issue of climate change. It's too microscopic. It's missing the bigger ethical issues there. I mean, it might be helpful in part in terms of navigating some emotions or getting clear about what the values are, as a stepping stone.

So in all kinds of ways—different self-sense, different world-sense, different emotional sense, sense of the emotions—in many cases these need to be brought in, need to be allowed and included to allow a more appropriate response. Do we need to expand our sense of self, our view of self, beyond what I call the immature individualism of our larger contemporary culture? Do we need an expanded worldview, given more dimension, given a different kind of ontology?

And these things are hard to shift. I don't know quite how they shift. It was interesting—I watched a video of an interview with Polly Higgins, who died recently. A very wonderful woman. She was a lawyer campaigning for many years. She was only forty-nine, I think, when she died. She was campaigning for many years to try and get eco-

cide—in other words, the destruction of ecosystems—recognised as a crime by the UN and by international law. That was her project as a lawyer. She was a really lovely woman, and she did tremendous work in that area. She died just a few months ago, in fact.

But I was watching this interview, and she was being interviewed by someone who was extremely sympathetic to what she was doing. What struck me was, as the interview went on—it wasn't that long—almost immediately the explanation of why it was important, why getting a law on ecocide was important, sort of slid. It slid from this idea that nature itself needs to be respected, that ecosystems are sacred and need to be respected and need to be given the same rights as we give humans legally, to a different rationalisation. The reasoning underpinning this attempt to get an ecocide law passed became that ecosystems support us—they support humanity, we rely on nature, we rely on the bees pollinating the plants and the flowers so that we can eat, we rely on the water to drink, all of that.

I'm pretty sure that wasn't the only reason, and maybe not even the main reason, why she was campaigning for it. But in the conversation—two sympathetic people who cared about this issue and wanted to support it—the dialogue slipped to a language that made human beings' practical needs for health and livelihood the most important ones. It struck me how it just slid like that, almost naturally.

But this whole movement that she was trying to support, to get a law passed by the UN against ecocide and to actually frame it as a crime that people understood—it raises interesting ontological questions. We can't get away from ontology and metaphysics with all this. And I don't think there's a way of talking about ethics deeply without talking about ontologies, but we'll come back to that.

So this idea about an ecocide law via the UN raises, to me, interesting ontological questions as much as ethical ones. Because if you think about it, such a law and the ideas underpinning it would be different than a law for animal rights, for example. Or choices like vegetarianism because of reasons of compassion for the suffering of individual animals—I don't want to eat meat because that involves that animal suffering when it's slaughtered or how it's kept.

But when we talk about something like ecocide, we're talking about an ecosystem. That's not an individual animal. It's not even a collection of animals. It's not this animal, it's not that tree—it's the system. In a way it has life, I suppose, and you could even talk about it in the way that a system of cells in the body can be alive, even while maybe individual cells are dead or dying. But a system is something different. Caring for an ecosystem, recognising rights for an ecosystem, and then implementing in law rights for an ecosystem because we've recognised morally those rights—this implies a kind of re-

spect and reverence for the order and harmony and integrity of nature's functioning, its life process. And inevitably, such an idea rests on or draws in a kind of cosmology, anthropology, and again, metaphysics.

So grief at species loss, or plummeting numbers—many bird species, for example, or insect species are hugely reduced in numbers, although the species itself is not technically critically endangered yet. But the grief, the heart's response to that—is it a different grief resting on a different sensibility? It's a particular ethical care that is different, though not contradictory to, a care for the suffering or death of an individual animal.

That orca mother carrying around her dead calf for days or weeks in the oceans—it was in the news a little while ago. A lot of clicks on that piece of news, because there's the empathy with that individual orca mother and her calf, the suffering there. But grief at species loss seems to me a different kind of sensibility. Something slightly different is happening in the heart, in the soul, actually. And as I said, it calls forth or involves or demands a different kind of ontology and metaphysics, an expanded ontology and metaphysics for us to actually respect that. So all these issues are tied together. They're not actually that simple.

Now, some of this is already changing. I don't know if you knew this, but a corporation actually, in law—in most countries, or even in international law—has the same status for legal purposes as a person. So a multinational corporation, ExxonMobil or whatever, these large corporations, technically and legally have the same status as a person, the same legal rights as a person. That's been the case for many, many years.

A river, for example, does not have legal personhood for the most part. But this is starting to change – or rather, there are a few instances where it's starting to change. If you just think about what's going on there, it again raises the point I made at the beginning of this talk: what's the relationship between law and ethics? Originally there was supposed to be a very close, tightly-knit congruence there, but in many ways they seem to have drifted apart.

What are the ethics about the law that turns away refugee boats? I mean, it's a law. One can make a link with ethics, but it becomes increasingly tenuous. Or protecting corporate rights over their responsibility to take care of the environment – you can trace an ethical reason. You can rationalize that kind of law ethically, or that kind of limitation on law ethically. But the connection between law and ethics has, I think, become increasingly tenuous, increasingly divorced.

Some of this is starting to change. New Zealand, for instance – the Waikato River was given personhood legally, which is anyway how the indigenous Maori culture views it. They view it as a living being, as a person, because they sense it with soul. In some regards there are going to be differences, of course. And they say, "I am the river, and the river is me. How can the river look after me if I don't look after it?"

Also Mount Taranaki, in New Zealand, and the Whanganui River. Just recently, in the last couple of years. Mount Taranaki and the Whanganui River are both sacred to the indigenous peoples there. And actually earlier than that, in 2014, legal personhood was granted to the Te Urewera Forest and gave the local Maori tribes shared guardianship of that forest as part of their sensibility and their sense of duty and responsibility anyway.

In India, the Ganges and the Yamuna, partly legally stimulated by what happened in New Zealand, I think, because it's all Commonwealth and therefore bound by similar laws – there's some kind of legal structure that binds New Zealand and India as Commonwealth countries. The Ganges and the Yamuna were granted personhood status legally.

So there are the beginnings of changes here. And in Toledo, on Lake Erie, residents were petitioning to sue polluters on behalf of the lake and for that lake to be recognized with legal rights, as a person would be. I'm not sure if the argument in Toledo was again to do with the effects on humans and children's health from polluted lake water. So it's still really great and wonderful, but it's slightly different. Again, ontologically it's slightly different, or actually significantly different.

So there are the beginnings of change here, but really, what do we need? An expanded ontology, epistemology, metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, self-sense – all of that. And again, not everyone is going to need this. It won't work for everyone. But for many people, that might be a really significant support, that kind of expansion.

Remember that Moscovici quote: questions of epistemology are also questions of social order. And therefore questions of ontology are also questions of social order. And it's increasingly and glaringly obvious now with the tragedies unfolding around us.

So how can we begin to sense and think and feel in different ways, in ways that do expand the ontology, the epistemology, the metaphysics, the cosmology, the anthropology, the sense of existence, the sense of human being, the sense of the life and the being of the earth and nature and the species? Again, I wouldn't say it's the solution. It's one possibility. Sensing the soul is one possibility, one kind of paradigm that can open

up that kind of expansion and change. And then on top of that change and expansion in the ontology of all that comes a change in sensibility, and therefore a change in view and action and law and human choices. One possibility.

CHAPTER 190

Sīla and Soul (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h50

> *In this third part of his exploration of ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea delves into what he calls "ideational imaginal" practices - approaching moral values and virtues as having independent existence that can be contemplated and embodied. Drawing extensively from philosopher Nikolai Hartmann's work on ethics, Burbea examines how we perceive moral values through intuitive rather than rational means, and how these values may actually "make the person" rather than being created by individuals or cultures.*
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> *The talk explores the relationship between Buddhist pāramīs (perfections) and classical virtues, noting important differences in their ultimate aims. While traditional Buddhist teachings direct all dharmas toward transcendence of saṃsāra, Burbea suggests that virtues can be valued for their own sake as expressions of human beauty and nobility. He discusses the tension between virtue ethics (doing what is right regardless of outcome) and consequentialist approaches focused on efficacy, using examples like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance to Nazi ideology.*
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> *Burbea proposes that ethical action involves "double intentionality" - care for others combined with care for one's own moral development and the cultivation of a beautiful life. This self-reflexive dimension of virtue parallels the structure of consciousness and eros. The talk emphasizes how devotion to virtue can constitute soul-making practice, contributing to our telos as fully realized human beings called toward lives of profound beauty and meaning.*

I said that I would talk about two ways in which soul-making or imaginal practices can augment or expand our consideration of ethics. I briefly touched on how imaginal practice, in the ways that we've taught it so far, can come in and enrich, dimensionalize, give added range and also depth and strength and possibility to our ethical consideration, ethical action, and ethical stance in life.

I mentioned a second possibility in addition to the standard imaginal practice. I mentioned what I think I called the ideational imaginal, or the ideological imaginal, or imaginal ideas. So I'd like to talk a little bit about that, introduce it as a possibility, and there's probably much more that can be explored here.

I've touched on it in the past. I don't think I've used those words before, ideational imaginal. I think I've just mentioned it very briefly over the last few years. For instance, in the possibility of meditating or finding an opening in meditation from some sensible

perception, for example, of beauty, or some inner image of something beautiful. I think I gave the example of some beautiful music that was playing in my mind, and sort of traveling from that to a more, if you like, pure essence of beauty in itself that is not so coupled with, hinged on, or related to an instance of beauty—this or that beautiful thing, music or object or whatever it is.

I think I've just mentioned it a couple of times. We haven't really amplified it and I don't remember if anyone's really picked up on it that much, but I want to talk about it a bit now. I want to talk about it in the context of discussing ethics, and particularly in the context of introducing the ideas of moral values and virtues. This is to do with a kind of ethics—sometimes people call it virtue ethics—a kind of approach to ethics that is one possible way of considering sīla, one possible way of considering ethics and how we weigh up what's important, what we prioritize, in our approach.

So, introducing the ideational imaginal in the context of introducing the ideas of moral values and virtues. There's ideational imaginal that doesn't so obviously overlap with this area of ethics, and of course there are ethical considerations that don't necessarily overlap with ideational imaginal. Some—in fact quite a lot—of where I draw my inspiration from in this regard is from the philosopher Nikolai Hartmann, who has a massive tome called *Ethics* that really touched me when I read it, in the way he opens this out and how he talks about it. I feel there's a lot of relevance to the soul there, and therefore to soul-making.

As we go through some of this material, I want to sometimes draw connections to Buddhadharma, and also to soul-making dharma, and also to draw out some of the implications in thinking of things these ways and approaching them these ways.

I might start with a more general introduction—just the idea of these ideas and the sort of theory of it a little bit. I really hope that you'll immediately see, even though I'm talking in generalities at first, that it won't feel abstract to you, that you can sense immediately in your heart and soul how these things matter to our lives, matter for society, and matter to the soul.

Values and virtues—let's start there. This word *value*, particularly with regard to moral values, is a word that in English has replaced what used to be the more common word of *the good*. *Bonum* in Latin. So we have this word *goods*. Goods—you're shipping goods here or there, you're paying for the goods, you're selling goods or whatever. So it's related. What's goods and good is a value. Something valuable.

Just for example, health is something valuable. Food, nutrition is something valuable, and property is something valuable. Happiness, consciousness, life—these are all kinds of values, in one sense. When we talk about values, and obviously there are many, many more, most values are valuable because they enable something else that is, if you like, more ultimately valuable. So for example, health is valuable in that it allows one to have the energy to live and to do and to experience this or that, or to do and experience more widely. So health in itself is valuable because it allows us to live and to do and experience.

We could also not stop there. Why is living or doing or experiencing—is it in itself valuable, or is it that doing is valuable and experiencing and doing are sometimes valuable if they're enabling something else, if they serve something else? So one question—we may come back to this, we will come back to this—is what are more ultimate values, if you like?

Just to point out that most values are valuable because they enable something else which is more ultimately valuable.

When we talk about specifically moral values, we mean something morally good, something morally valuable. So justice, for example, is a moral value. Honesty, courage, trustworthiness. We're talking about here in the larger things—institutions, actions, organizations, things in themselves, as well as inner attitude, dispositions, etc. Actually, we'll come back to that in a second.

When we speak of moral values, they pertain specifically to human beings—to our acts, personalities, and dispositions. Morality has to do with humanity. We judge human beings, human institutions, human actions, and human personalities in terms of their moral value, but not objects in themselves. A lamp or a carpet, for instance, possesses no inherent moral dimension.

When moral values become embodied as dispositions of a person—the dominant tendencies that constitute one's character—we use the word *virtue*. Remember, *ethos* means character: the essential set of dispositions that define a person. Virtue refers to this constellation of moral qualities that shape our being and guide our actions.

Let me offer two important observations about the nature of moral values. First, moral values often depend on non-moral values in significant ways. Consider the precept not to steal, or its positive expression, the practice of generosity. These moral values depend upon and assume the worth of what might be stolen or given. The moral dimension only has meaning if there exists something of genuine value to be shared or

protected. Similarly, the moral imperative not to harm another person assumes the inherent value of well-being, the value of health that enables other valuable activities, or simply that health itself possesses worth.

Second, and this you've likely encountered in Buddhist teachings on *sila*, the moral value of an action depends fundamentally on intention, just as virtue depends on disposition—not merely on results. The classic example illuminates this clearly: imagine two people who cut into another's flesh with knives, and in both cases, the person dies. One commits murder, perhaps motivated by theft. The other is a surgeon attempting to save a life, but the operation fails tragically. Identical outcome—death by knife—yet morally they couldn't be more different because the intentions were entirely different.

This principle reveals how moral values depend on intention, and virtues depend on disposition, not simply on outcomes. Yet even this raises fascinating complications. Practical wisdom itself—the keen discernment to anticipate the likely results of our actions—is itself a virtue. So while results aren't everything, attention to consequences isn't entirely irrelevant either.

When we speak of virtues as integral parts of one's *ethos*—those dominant tendencies that shape character—we can identify qualities like empathy, sensitivity, faith, loyalty, and what Hartmann calls different kinds of love: love of one's neighbor, love of the remote person far away in space and time. We might include self-control, courage, humility, wisdom, strength, nobility, gentleness, trustworthiness, generosity, and the capacity for self-sacrifice. The list could extend much further.

Naming, listing, and mapping these virtues proves to be an extraordinarily complex undertaking. Perhaps we'll return to explore that challenge more fully. But even from this limited selection I've mentioned, can you sense the profound effect that would follow from the higher development of these qualities? Can you feel the *ethos* that would emerge from dedicating oneself to cultivating empathy, sensitivity, the various forms of love, faith, loyalty, courage, generosity, the capacity for self-sacrifice, wisdom, strength, and nobility?

Consider this question: What arises for you when you hear the phrase "a beautiful life"? What range of phenomena would you consider meaningfully worthy of the term "beautiful"? We've explored beauty in other retreats and talks, but does it include the virtues? I used to speak of "beautiful qualities of heart."

Can you sense right now that a life lived with keen sensitivity to moral values—devoted to cultivating and expressing virtue, committed to these qualities, standing by them, making them a genuine priority—might be as beautiful, or perhaps even more beautiful, than other ways we typically consider a life beautiful?

What does it mean to live a beautiful life? And are we called as human beings to the possibility of a beautiful life, of sculpting, of crafting, of making an art of our life into something beautiful? If so, what is the place of virtues—as we're talking about them now—and this sensitivity to moral value? Does the development of all that, the prioritizing of all that, the commitment to all that, have its place in creating beauty in our lives?

Can you get that sense? Or does something else arise for you?

This is complicated territory, and this whole conversation on ethics I realize is very touchy, very sensitive, and one has to be quite careful in wording. I was almost a bit reluctant to even start talking about ethics, as it can be loaded in all kinds of ways.

So what arises for you when we think about the meaning of what is a good life? What does it mean to lead a good life? "I'm living a good life"—what does that mean if we go deeper into the levels of possible meaning, into what that might actually look like and be? What does it mean to live and lead a beautiful life? What might it mean, and what arises for you just when you hear those words or when I put them in connection with this concept of moral values and virtues?

Now some of you who are familiar with your Buddhist lists will immediately perhaps think, "Ah, the ten paramitas," or sometimes what's called the ten perfections. In Theravada Buddhism, sometimes Mahayana Buddhism lists six, and Theravada Buddhism lists ten. Are those paramitas or paramis not virtues? Are we talking about the same thing here?

Yes, there's definite overlap. The ten Theravada Buddhist paramis are generosity, sila itself—ethical care—renunciation, wisdom or better insight, energy (sometimes translated as courage), patience, truthfulness, determination, metta (loving-kindness), and equanimity. In the Mahayana, they are generosity, sila, patience, energy, samadhi—meaning meditative depth and range and skill—and wisdom or better insight.

So there's a definite connection, parallel, overlap here. But there are also some important differences, at least in the way that I would like to open out the subject of virtues and values, and that territory of those lists of paramitas in Buddha Dharma.

Firstly, there are many more than ten. If we open out the consideration of virtues and values, there are more than ten—certainly more than six, more than ten. As I said, listing them, or even identifying all of them, and how you break up the list becomes quite a project, but certainly more than ten.

Second, and also very significant, is that the word parami, paramita, can be translated in two ways, and they're related. One, I think the most common, is perfection. So prajna paramita—the perfection of wisdom—is a translation. Paramita means perfection. It also can mean transcendent or transcending, which I'll come back to.

But if we just stay with this translation, this meaning of paramita as perfection—the Buddha's teaching is that there are ten perfections, ten qualities you can perfect. But the word perfection implies that something, one can reach the end of a certain development. One can complete a process. That possibility is there to reach—"Right, I've completely achieved final excellence with patience or renunciation or whatever it is, truthfulness."

One of the important points I would like to make about the virtues is that they don't have an end. They're infinitely developable. They contain and unfold their own beyonds, their own infinite reaches of depth and flourishing and range. So there's a difference there.

Related to that is a third difference. The Buddha, somewhere in the Pali Canon—I don't know exactly where—says that all Dhammas converge in the deathless. All Dhammas converge in the deathless. Now Dhamma is one of those words that has at least two or three meanings in Buddhist teachings. But one of its meanings is teachings itself. So a dhamma is a teaching—a teaching on generosity, a teaching on the paramitas, a teaching on renunciation, a teaching on equanimity or whatever. It can also mean mental quality.

So again, the quality of patience, the quality of generosity—a kind of disposition, if you like. And so this phrase of the Buddha's, "all dhammas converge in the deathless," could mean that all the paramis and other qualities the Buddha referred to actually serve merely to help you transcend—to help you transcend the realm of fabrication, the realm of the formation of appearances, the realm of perception and experiences, the realm of birth and death of life itself—and transcend that to reach the unfabricated and to end rebirth.

So all dhammas converge in the deathless. They all point towards and lead to their fruition in this transcending and escaping from the realm of form and appearance and experience and perception. That would be one meaning of this "all dhammas converge in the deathless."

In other words, as I've said before, the whole thrust—as I read it—the whole traditional thrust of Pali Canon Buddhism is to get off the wheel of rebirth, of life and death, of birth and death, and to dissolve into, disappear into the unfabricated, beyond all appearance, beyond all experience. And so everything else in the Buddha's teachings, in the Dhamma of the Buddha, serves that end and supports that end and works together. All these factors—the wings of awakening, the paramitas and all that—they serve to support each other in a synergistic way that propels the being and aids their release. To use the Buddha's word: release and escape from samsara, from the wheel of rebirth, into not being reborn again, the end of the rebirth of experience, into the unfabricated.

But that phrase of the Buddha's, "all dhammas converge in the deathless," could actually have another meaning. The deathless there could mean the dharmakaya. So all dhammas converge in the dharmakaya.

Now dharmakaya is a word with a very interesting history in Buddha Dharma. One of its original meanings was really—kaya means a body, like in a way, like a body of water. So a collection of dharmas, dharmakaya. Collection of dharmas means collection of qualities. Now dharmakaya is an aspect of Buddhahood, it's an aspect of Buddha nature. In the first teachings about, or expression of, what actually is a Buddha, what is Buddha nature, dharmakaya meant the collection of the Buddha's qualities—the collection of a Buddha's qualities, the mental qualities, including their virtues, the dispositions of a Buddha.

So "all dhammas converge in the deathless" could mean all dhammas lead to, all paramitas and all teachings and trainings lead to this collection of qualities that adhere in the Buddha mind, in the Buddha being, if you like, in the Buddha nature. But that actually is a more Mahayana idea.

So it's probable that when the Buddha said "all dhammas converge in the deathless," he meant this: they serve to support that traveling towards transcendence, towards release, escape, removal from the realm of fabrication, the realm of appearances, experiences, phenomena, and rebirth, and ending there.

So again, virtues as such, paramitas as such, in that teaching, take a secondary role. They are for the purpose of serving release. And this is one way of saying: What are they for? What's their worth? What's the worth of moral virtues?

But as Nikolai Hartmann points out—I'll read you a little quote from him—in the way he would read it, because it's not at all a life-transcending philosophy that he espouses. In some ways he's very not religious, in other ways I think he is religious without realizing it. "What is morally good is good in itself." It's not for the purpose of something, and certainly not for the purpose of removing oneself from the realm of appearances and experiences, perception and phenomena.

What I want to read to you is this from Nikolai Hartmann: "The useful is never the good in the ethical sense. We say that a thing is good for something, but that is not the moral meaning of the good. The moral meaning of the good reveals itself only when one inquires after that for which anything is good. If one traces the 'for which' back to what is no longer good for anything else but is good in itself, one has reached the good in the other sense, which contains its ethical meaning. The morally good is the good in itself. Therefore, not to be good for something else is of its very essence. According to its nature, it is never the useful."

I might qualify that a little bit and actually say the morally good is useful. It's useful for other people. Sometimes it's useful for ourselves. If I'm kind, maybe people are going to be kind back, or there's more chance that they'll be kind back. If I'm kind, my kindness is often useful to them. And if I'm generous, my generosity is often useful to them, and if I'm generous, maybe some people will be generous back, reciprocally or out of appreciation or whatever it is.

But I would qualify a little bit what he's saying, and say that in its deeper essence—well, there's a dimension, there's a level in which the morally good is not just useful for ourselves or for others. It's not good for something.

It's not useful. It's just good in itself.

And this, in a way, relates very much to what it means to live a beautiful life, to lead a beautiful life. It's something that's good in itself. It has no other purpose than because it's beautiful, because it's good, because it touches the soul in that way.

If we stay with Hartmann a little bit, he has a particular kind of ontology that he developed in his philosophy, which I find quite interesting and very thought-provoking. One question concerns the ontology of moral values. Do they have independent, inherent existence? Or are they, in a way, created by humanity or by a person or by a culture at a certain time? Are they dependent, contingent in that respect?

Now, he was writing mostly in the first half of the 20th century, and that book on ethics, I think, is from the 1920s. But already by that time, there was the awareness in philosophy, in moral philosophy, that ethics—what's considered valuable morally and

the whole notion of ethics and what's ethical and what isn't—varies when we look at the history of different cultures and places. What is regarded as morally valuable varies with time, with place, with culture, with person. So it's quite individual as well.

But he makes the point that, yes, agreed, that's obvious, that's a fact historically, but that need not imply that they don't have independent existence, that moral values don't have independent existence. Because he says that what happens in the realm of moral values is that we tend to have movable fashions and a kind of partial blindness that goes with those fashions.

So this is akin to when we talked in this series on ontology and epistemology about ideas, for example, of the disco ball—those things that radiate light from different sides. You can't actually see it all at once, and you can't get the light reflecting from it all at once to your eyes. You have to look at it from a certain vantage point, from a certain angle, so you're only seeing part of it. Or when we talked about the different ways of creating maps—the cartographic and the polar—two different ways of creating maps that give different pictures in two dimensions of a really existing three-dimensional globe, so that the truth of things is somehow hard to grasp all at once. But when we look at it, we look at it partially or with a partial blindness.

So Hartmann talks about what he calls a value firmament—a value constellations in the sky of values. But he says we, at any time, are looking at it as if with a small beam of light, like with a torch. So our torch light can only illuminate certain areas of that value firmament, certain values. And when we do that, others slip from our consciousness. We don't notice them, or we relegate them, or we just don't consider them—we're oblivious to them.

So this is quite an interesting ontology and relates to some of what we said before. He does say values are still subjective in one sense, in that they are values only for human beings. But he says even that doesn't take away from their independent existence, because he points out that geometrical laws, for example, the laws of geometry, or mechanical laws—the laws of objects in motion, like footballs and cannonballs and rockets—or physiological laws, the laws that living organisms are curtailed by and abide by, these only apply for limited categories of beings.

So geometrical laws are for spatial figures: triangles and squares and lines and points and polygons. Mechanical laws are for solid bodies. Physiological laws are for organisms. So it's subjective in that sense. And moral laws, moral values are only for humans. So it's subjective in that sense, that they're for humans. A moral law doesn't apply to a triangle, for example. So it's limited and subjective in that sense—it's for humans. But that doesn't imply, in his thinking, that they are therefore created or they can be

done away with. They're just relative to certain kinds of being. All those four kinds of laws that I enumerated are each of them relative to a different kind of being. And he says that they are actually unconditional.

How do we know and perceive values? How do we get our sense of values? For him, it's not a cognitive process. It's not something we think about rationally and ponder and deduce from logic. Immanuel Kant is often labeled as someone who has that kind of idea of morality and the approach to morality, wanting to find a rational solution. But whether that's actually true of Immanuel Kant completely, I don't think so, based on the little that I know. I think it would be an oversimplification.

But Hartmann's point is that we have an intuitive sense and an emotional sense of moral value. It touches something, he would say, in the heart or the intuition. I would also say in the soul as well. And that's how we perceive values and we know values.

He also says—and again, this may be an unfashionable point these days, because of some of what I laid out in the earlier talks on ethics—

But he also says—and again, this may be an unfashionable point these days because of the reasons I laid out in the earlier talks on ethics—that not all persons have an equal capacity to perceive moral values, to know and sense moral values. There are differences there. There are differences in what has been developed. This person has developed that sense, that intuition, that feeling to perceive and know moral values more than this other person. Or this person has been educated in some way, helped, trained to become more sensitive to perceive and know moral values. And there might be just innate differences—aptitudes where this person was simply born with a kind of soul that was sensitive in the realm of moral values or sensitive to certain values. So there are differences there, and that has to be acknowledged. Again, that might be somehow a taboo thing to say, but he says actually it's just like insight into mathematics or the truths of mathematics or mathematical laws.

They are true. They are independent of whether two people, A and B, can both grasp that mathematical law. Perhaps person A has a particular aptitude with mathematics. Perhaps they have particular training with mathematics. And they can read some mathematical equation or formula or postulate or truth, and actually grasp it, understand it, know it, sense it, sense its validity. And person B just doesn't have that mathematical sensibility in their mind, in their soul, or they haven't been educated in that way. So he says it's just like that. It's the same with moral values.

And he says something further that—and this, again, is very interesting, I think, in terms of how I want to link all this up to soul and soul-making. So as you're listening to this, there's partly all its implications for how we consider—implications for our consideration, our approach to ethics—and then there's also our consideration of how it impacts and what it implies for our consideration of souls and soul-making and all that.

A further thing he says is that values make the person. The person doesn't make the value. So again, this is still in the area of talking about their ontological status. Do they have independent existence or are they merely created by the person or by a culture? He says values make the person, not vice versa. And he gives as evidence for that the fact that when we feel guilt, we're actually feeling or sensing our own failure to live up to our values, to live up to our ideal self, if you like. And to him, this implies the *a priori* nature of values. In other words, they come first. Values make the person.

So a person has these values that exist in the value firmament. These ones are important to them. They have this kind of sensitivity to these values, less so to these values. And that sensitivity, derived from or in relationship to the values, makes the person, shapes the personality, as opposed to the person shaping and creating the values.

So I think that's a very interesting thought. To me, it's a little bit one-sided as an explanation, as a postulate. I'm not entirely convinced by that. And in fact, there's quite a lot in Hartmann that I'm not entirely convinced by, but I still find it very touching and very beautiful and very thought-provoking as a philosopher.

There might be more of a consideration of dependent origination and the various factors that contribute to make the person and contribute to make the values to which they are sensitive. So yes, we could say the person makes the values, absolutely, and the culture makes the values, and the culture makes the person who makes the values, in indirect and direct ways, and reactive ways, and proactive ways, and consonant ways, and dissonant ways—in opposition, in congruence, etc. But we can also say that the values make the person, along with Hartmann.

Or at least we can say, again, if we take one of the principles of soul-making, that we don't have to decide on an ultimate truth here, but we can entertain the idea, entertain the logos, put it in the soul for a while and see what it does if we entertain the idea that values make the person. The values kind of exist in some independent way, at some level where we can't completely grasp all that there is to know about them—their whole range, how they relate to each other, their hierarchy. We can't grasp all that. We get a one-sided, movable sense of them. But we can entertain the idea for a while, not

as an ultimate truth, but entertain the idea that they do exist in that way. Not as a final position, but we entertain that. We play with that idea in a way that becomes powerful for the soul.

And I think that idea that values make the person, rather than the other way around—if we lean that way for a while—there could be a lot of soul-making coming out of that. I don't know if you can sense that as I'm mentioning it right now. And it also has many implications for our ethical life, and again how we approach, how we consider ethics, what we deem as important when we approach ethical situations, and the very lens through which we see all that.

But as I said, he was writing in the early twentieth century, and with the rise of modernism and certainly into so-called postmodernism, there was perhaps, I think, generally speaking, a kind of waning of interest in values and moral values as a way of understanding ethics. And especially with postmodernism in the sense of, well, how can you claim that they have independent, objective existence because nothing does?

Everything's culturally conditioned. And alongside this came a corollary waning and lack of interest and lack of esteem for the notion of virtues and that kind of understanding of humanity and approach to ethics.

For myself, I place these ideas about values and virtues into the realm of what I might call religious sensibility, in the larger sense. And so, because that too wanes very much with modernism and post-modernism, part of what occurs is a disennobling—a removal and depletion of the potential for what can serve to nurture and be part of a sense of nobility in human beings. This also is one of the losses of modernism and postmodernism: that whole conception becomes too close to the noble and the religious, and so it goes out of fashion.

I want to read you something from Alasdair MacIntyre in this regard. He's commenting on this development through modernity. He writes in *After Virtue*: "Without allusion to the place that justice and injustice, courage and cowardice play in human life, very little will be genuinely explicable. It follows that many of the explanatory projects of the modern social sciences—a methodological canon of which is the separation of 'the facts' from all evaluation—are bound to fail."

In other words, this idea that I can separate the facts out from any value, any evaluative statements or lenses I bring to bear on those facts—this is an idea you'll recognize from when we talked about the history of science and classical science. It's an axiomat-

ic principle of the classical scientific method, or even the modern scientific method: one tries to remove any kind of evaluation or evaluative tendency that might distort or subjectivise the so-called objective facts.

With modernity comes the rise of this classical scientific method, and this spreads to domains other than the core sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology—into the modern social sciences. People try to apply that same kind of pared down, austere, supposedly objective scientific method to social sciences like sociology and psychology. But MacIntyre is saying that actually, if you take out notions of justice and injustice, courage and cowardice—in other words, values and virtues—it becomes very difficult to explain anything with just these so-called facts.

He writes: "For the fact that someone was or failed to be courageous or just cannot be recognised as a fact by those who accept that methodological canon based on classical science and its belief in the possibility of total objectivity." Do you understand? So that whole waning of interest and the progressive unesteeming—not completely, but for the most part—of that entire realm of values, moral values and virtues, actually accompanies modernity to a certain extent. Because it's intrinsically evaluative, and that's what we're trying to get rid of.

If we return to this question of how do we perceive values—and again, it's still related to perceiving moral values and still relating to their ontological status—in the English translation of Nikolai Hartman's book, there's a very good introduction by Andreas Kinneging. He writes something worth considering: "It is impossible to observe values empirically." In other words, you can't see a value itself. Only acts, things and events are perceived empirically, perceived with the senses. You can't see a value itself. You can't sense it directly.

"To know the value of what is observed empirically is possible only if one has already comprehended the relevant value in abstracto, in the abstract, and can use that knowledge as a standard to assess what has been realized. Knowledge of values is a priori knowledge"—like knowledge of mathematical and logical beings. In other words, we just have an intuitive knowledge of values. We have a kind of abstract knowledge, an inherent sense of what's good, what's kind.

It's not that we see certain acts—a hundred acts—and then deduce from those different acts some conclusion about generosity. We don't make an inductive conclusion about what constitutes generosity or kindness or courage based on empirical observations of a hundred acts of different people in different situations. Rather, we have an a priori knowledge, an intuitive, instinctive, inbuilt knowledge that corresponds, in the subjective domain, to their objective, independent existence. And it's with this that we

measure an empirically observed act—we measure its correspondence with our intuitive sense, whether it tallies, whether it's congruent, whether it chimes with and fits our intuitive a priori sense of this or that value.

And again, to repeat what he said before: not everyone has the same capacity to sense values, and not everyone's capacity is equally well developed. Hartman writes: "There are such things as education and lack of education of the sense of values, talent and lack of talent for the discernment of them. It is here just as it is with mathematical insights. Not everyone is capable of it. Not everyone has the eye, the ethical maturity, the spiritual level for seeing the situation as it is."

Nevertheless, he continues, "the universality, necessity and objectivity of the valuational judgment hold good in abstracto. For this universality does not at all mean that everyone is capable of the valuational insight in question. It only means that whoever is capable of it—that is, whoever spiritually gets hold of its meaning—must necessarily feel and judge thus, and not otherwise."

And just read a little more of this, because he writes—this is Hartman now—he says value blindness is quite a common phenomenon. So a sense of, or rather, a condition of just being insensitive to certain values. In extreme cases, it brings about a complete loss of meaning of life in the world. "He who stolidly passes by men and their fates, he whom the staggering does not stagger, nor the exalted exalt, for him life is in vain, he has no part of it. The world must be meaningless and life senseless to one who has no capacity to perceive the sense of life's relationships, the inexhaustible significance of persons and situations, or correlations and events. The outward emptiness and monotony of his life are the reflex of his inner emptiness and his moral blindness."

The real world in which he exists, the stream of human life which bears him up and carries him along, is not without manifold wealth of content. His poverty amidst abundance is due to his own failure to appreciate life. Hence, for the moral nature of man there is, besides the narrow actuality of action and ought-to-do—so we ought to act in line with certain virtues or moral values—for the moral nature of man, there is a second requirement: to participate in the fullness of life, to be receptive to the significant, to lie open to whatever has meaning and value.

I find that a beautiful passage, and a very important passage. One of the points there is that it's possible to be value-blind. Again, I want to come back to that later. But the sense of seeing values, of perceiving them, of intuiting them, is what he calls, in philosophical terms, a priori. It's an a priori judgment.

One more thing from Hartman, while we're there, if I can find it... So when he considers... He says there's something very interesting about the human capacity for moral action, for moral sensibility, to sense moral values and to bring them to bear and express them in one's life and to choose that way. He's adopting a certain framework of the world, where man—excuse me, let's say human being—in comparison with the whole of the cosmos, is a speck of dust, an ephemeral, a negligible phenomenon.

There's a certain cosmological context in which humanity, in the scope of things of the vast reaches of the universe and the vast spans of time, is really just an insignificant little speck. So the interesting thing about—well, one of the interesting things about ethics and humanity is—again, excuse the gender-biased language, he's writing back then—"Man, a vanishing quantity in the universe, is still in his own way stronger than it. He is the vehicle of a higher principle. He is the creator of a reality which possesses significance and value. He transmits to the real world a higher worth. Nature is bound down to its own laws. Man alone, humanity alone, carries in himself a higher law, whereby he, or more correctly, the law through him, creates in the world, or from non-being, from non-existence, brings forth into being, into existence, that which was prefigured in its ideality"—in other words, these ideals of moral values and virtues.

Despite being insignificant in the context of one's actual existence in the vast spans of space and time in the universe, human beings can do this thing where they can axiologically—in other words ethically, in terms of values—they can do something that's extremely significant. "We may name this rehabilitation of man the miracle of the ethical phenomenon. It is the sublime in him, that which verily lifts him up above his own mere existence in the world."

Yes, physically and in terms of the transience of our existence, we're ephemeral and insignificant and small in the context of the large universe. But there's something amazing that we can do: bring forth from this kind of ideal realm of values, something from non-existence into existence, which, other than through us, cannot come into existence.

I don't know how all this lands, or how it really lands in your soul. I don't mean just whether you kind of agree or not agree—and there are many complications, some of which we'll pick up on and go into later. But I really mean in the soul, in the heart, how does all this land?

I've been talking quite generally now. But as I asked before, can you get a sense—perhaps, I don't know if you share this sense—that devotion to cultivating virtues, to expressing them in one's life, to standing in them and standing by them and standing up for them, a commitment to them, a prioritizing of them, constitute and form and be an essential part, perhaps the essential part, in what we might call a beautiful life?

And as such might be something for which we could say in soul-making Dharma terms, there is a telos—there is a calling to that. Yes, each in our individual particular ways, we create, discover what it is for me or you as a unique individual, our own, with our own soul if you like, what kind of beautiful life there is, what's the flavor of that beautiful life. But can you get—I don't know if you share that sense—of the beauty of this, the nobility of it, the calling of it, the possible logos that might regard that as a telos? This is what we're called towards. We're called towards a beautiful life, living a beautiful life, creating a beautiful life. And the place of virtue in that is central.

If we look into the etymology of that word virtue, I think it's quite interesting. The word itself is virtue, from the Latin virtus, which means manliness. But let's play with that a little bit. I should say humanity—i.e., being fully human in non-gender biased language. So to care for the virtues is to become fully human. The more we care for the virtues, the more fully human we become.

And if I don't, am I actually a human being? I might have DNA and I might have that form and two ears and a nose and eyes and a liver and a spleen and whatever. Am I human just because, you know? So it's related to that word, to being fully human.

Again, we could regard virtue more teleologically if that's helpful—as a movement, something we're called towards. We're called towards our full humanity, and the virtues are perhaps an integral part of that calling.

This relationship to humanity is also connected to the word courage. The Pali term *virya*, which can be translated as energy, can also be translated as courage, and it too has a relationship with the Latin *vir*, meaning man. So virtue is related to courage, to being fully human.

Virtuous also means efficacious and potent—that's a rather archaic meaning. And virtual comes from the Latin *virtualis*, which means effective. This too derives from *vir*, with its root meaning of man. So when we consider virtue, there's something about our efficacy, our potency—how efficacious our being and action and speech and ethos in the world are. This forms part of what it means to have virtue.

We also have the English word virtuoso, which also comes from the Latin root *vir*. To me, virtuoso captures the whole sense of virtue when we consider and open up the soul meaning, the soul sense of this area of virtues. Virtuoso implies something important: there's skill and art here. This whole consideration of virtue, of living a virtuous life, of living a beautiful life, of the sensibility and commitment to moral values—there's something of skill and art in that.

In fact, virtue (sometimes spelled with an "i," sometimes with an "r") also means a taste or love for works of fine art, connoisseurship, and the quality of being rare or beautiful. Can you sense how these different etymological components actually feed in organically to fill out a richness and multi-dimensionality, even multi-directionality, of what we mean? All these words are etymologically tied together.

But I don't want to stop there. There's a researcher named Paul Kugler who wrote a short book called *The Alchemy of Discourse* about twenty years ago. In that book, he explores a piece of research that Jung did early in his career. It's related to archetypes, but it concerns phonetic similarities, phonetic relationships between words that are different from etymological relationships.

Etymology means you can actually trace different words—like virtue and virtuous and virtuoso and virtual—back to a common root and see how meaning develops from that common root through history over time. But Paul Kugler, following Jung's early research (which Jung never really returned to, and as far as I know, no one else has really explored and developed—though I think there's tremendous potential here), suggests that words are connected not just etymologically, but phonetically. In other words, through relationships of similar sound.

Jung's original research is quite interesting. He gives examples of words that are not etymologically related—carnation (the flower), carnal, and carnage, for instance. What Kugler suggests is that, in Jungian terms, the unconscious puts those words together, associates them together. They touch the soul in similar ways, or hearing one word actually ignites for the soul a kind of intuitive, perhaps dim association or sense of those other words through sound. It's not related through etymology, through meaning, but through sound. The words have very different meanings, but there's a relationship through sound that stimulates in the unconscious a kind of archetypal complex through which all those words are related.

He gives another fascinating example with Latin words: *liberalitas* (generosity), *liberatio* (from which we get liberation, meaning setting free or deliverance), *liberi* (children), *libet* (it is pleasing, or I desire), *libido* (lustfulness or desire), *libation* (to pour or make an offering), *Libitina* (a burial goddess), and *library* (a case for books). Through their sound commonality, these words—many of which don't seem to have anything to do with each other—point to a common archetypal complex also related to Dionysus: libido and desire and freedom, libation and drinking (since Dionysus is Bacchus, the god of wine), and his relationship with death (Libitina). Curiously, even books fit this pattern—we actually get our word "book" from the word Bacchus.

These words are phonetically related, connected through the deeper currents of sound and meaning that flow through the unconscious.

So these words are phonologically related and they speak to the soul that way - they trigger each other, they're related to each other, they're constellated together, they're ignited together for the soul. I'm partly mentioning that because it seems to me no one else has really picked up on that line of research - just a short book by Kugler. Maybe someone hearing this at some point will like to pursue, in a small way or a larger way, that kind of line of inquiry and exploration in terms of soul-making.

That's why I explained all that. But if we go back to this word virtue, and we talked about the etymology, what about phonetic virtue? Or perhaps archetypally tied to the word virtue - maybe the word vertical. It's a different root, or vertex. They're both from the Latin *vertex*, which means to turn around, like around a point or a place where planes or lines meet. Or in astronomy, it's a point in the sky towards which a star stream appears to move - the vertex - and vertical, and upright.

And so being upright is the name of Rev Anderson's book, I think, on ethics. And so uprightness and virtue and all that. There's rich, rich meanings and phonetic relationships in that word virtue. Really what I'm after here is the soul - filling out for the soul, amplifying for the soul the range, the meaning, the dimensionality of those words, of that word virtue, both through etymology and through this phonetic correspondence or association for the soul.

And it's interesting - again, something from Alasdair MacIntyre here - when we consider what we actually think virtues are in terms of our anthropology, what's our take on human nature. He makes a very interesting point regarding if we consider human beings as innately kind of selfish beings, then that places the whole idea of virtues, the whole teaching of virtues, in a certain light relative to that selfishness. If we think human beings are naturally, or deep down they are good, their true nature is good, then that casts a different light on what the virtues are.

Leading up to it, he talks about a specific Aristotelian understanding of virtue. But let's leave that for now and just take it from where he leaves that off. He writes, "...one distinctively new way open to understand the virtues once they have been severed from their traditional context in thought and practice is as dispositions related in either of two alternative ways to the psychology of that newly invented social institution, the individual."

Basically he's saying: look, in classical times, in the time of Aristotle, there was a very different understanding of things. The social context, the structure of society was very different, and the whole notion of virtue was bound up with that, in many ways, simpler society. And the idea of the individual was also very different - although the self-sense, as I've pointed out, was very different. This is now - that whole traditional context is gone, and we've got this new prominence of this new notion, a new sense of ourselves as individuals, as selves, in this kind of modern sense that we feel intuitively. It's not just an idea.

So he writes: either the virtues, or some of them, could be understood as expressions of the natural passions of the individual, or they, or some of them, could be understood as dispositions necessary to curb and to limit the destructive effect of some of those natural passions. And then he continues, "It was in the 17th and 18th centuries that morality came generally to be understood as offering a solution to the problems posed by human egoism, and the content of morality came to be largely equated with altruism."

So you don't find that in Aristotle, for example - this idea of morality and altruism somehow being almost synonymous. You've got this idea that human beings are - there's this dangerous human ego, that idea rises to the fore, and with it this idea of morality and altruism. He continues, "For it was in that same period that men came to be thought of as in some dangerous measure egoistic by nature."

I wonder if that's true in the East. I've no idea. But it's interesting - if you read Śāntideva, who wrote in the 8th century in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, the Bodhisattva way of life, or however you want to translate it, it's there a little bit, this kind of intense suspicion of the human tendency of the self-sense in the human being, and of egotism and selfishness, therefore. You don't find it, as far as I know - I don't really find it in the Pali Canon. The Buddha doesn't really talk about self, but not really in this kind of way we've come almost to associate this danger of egotism and selfishness there. And nor, as far as I'm aware, do you read it in Nāgārjuna, who was writing in, let's say, the second century of the Common Era.

So I don't know if it's true in the East, but Alasdair MacIntyre is saying that about the West in the 17th and 18th centuries. And he writes, "And it is only once we think of mankind as by nature dangerously egoistic that altruism becomes at once socially necessary and yet apparently impossible, and if and when it occurs, inexplicable."

So the whole question of what are the virtues: are they natural things that are, if you like, our true nature, that just need to be supported and encouraged and nourished and expressed? Or are they rather qualities and elements of being that we can train and cultivate that actually, as he says, curb and limit our more natural passions, dispositions, which are more selfish and egoistical?

That distinction, or those two possibilities, mirror distinctions I think you can sometimes hear in, or read in Theravadan Dharma, where, for instance, in the Pali Canon, the Buddha often talks about three *kilesas* as being kind of natural to human beings: greed, aversion, and delusion. And much less does he talk about Buddha nature and your intrinsic goodness and that kind of thing, which we hear in the Mahāyāna and even more so in fact in a sort of modern Western spin on Mahāyāna teachings about Buddha nature. And this is very contemporary.

Again, is it a response, a reaction to the pain, the affliction of self-criticism, inner critic, etc., that we need to kind of promulgate and promote teachings that teach us about our inner goodness, our natural, deep-down inner goodness, versus teachings on original sin, or that basically you're just a fountain of three *kilesas*, and that's kind of your basic nature, which needs to be trained out of?

That's kind of interesting as to the nature of the virtues and how that relates to our anthropology - basically, our framing and view of what a human being is.

Either way, though, we could see them either way. We could see what the virtues are in relation to human nature in either of those ways. And either way can be supportive of our *sīla* and our ethical consideration, and can also be soul-making. So from a soul-making Dharma perspective, it actually doesn't matter too much. There'll probably be more of a leaning in time towards this intrinsic nature related to the divinity, etc. But actually it can go either way.

But again, I want to just linger with the sense of - I hope you get the sense that this is an abstraction - how important and how beautiful this notion of the virtues is, and how beautiful they are, and what that has to do with leading a beautiful life and our invitation, our calling to our *telos*, our destiny, if you like - a possible destiny if we choose it, if we support it - towards a really beautiful life, a profoundly and widely beautiful life.

Plato in his *Crito* says, "If you cannot live virtuously, there is nothing to be gained by staying alive."

Life itself has no value for you.

And Socrates somewhere said: "A person ought not to consider their chance of living or dying. They ought only to consider on a given occasion whether they are doing right or wrong."

Strong teachings, strong words. Again, I'm sure the Buddha somewhere says, "Better one day lived with sila, with moral virtue and uprightness, than a hundred years lived unethically, without sila."

So can you get a sense of the soul's love of moral values? And perhaps the soul's telos, our telos as human beings, our destiny, our calling—that towards which we are invited, the magnetic pull which we are potentially growing towards. We can just care for that growth.

In the context of talking about ethics, there are all kinds of systems of moral philosophy, all kinds of ways we can consider or approach the whole realm of ethics in our lives—how we think about it, how we look at it, what we consider a priority or important. Of course, we tend to think about efficacy. What's the result of a certain action? What's the result of my kindness or generosity? In regard to situations like climate change, we often tend to think about what's going to make a difference. That's really important, the efficacy.

But in a way, that's only half of ethics. The soul's love of values, love of virtues, the soul's telos, its calling, its invitation to become fully human, to live that beauty—this is perhaps the other half. So you have this balance of efficacy and virtue.

There was a German theologian, a Lutheran theologian called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born near the beginning of the twentieth century and lived in Germany, where he criticized outspokenly the Nazi philosophy and program, what they implemented and their acts. He remained completely outspoken in his criticism. He would not shut up. And he knew what this would cost him—that he would probably pay for it with his life. He could have, along with so many others, kept quiet. But he chose to just keep telling the truth as he saw it, standing in, standing by, standing for moral values, living and creating virtue, committed to it, prioritizing it—more important, as Socrates taught, than life or death.

Was his speaking—almost a lone voice, not quite, but almost a lone voice in Germany—was that ever going to change things? Was his speaking going to topple the Nazi regime? Were they going to say, "Oh yeah, Dietrich, you're right. How stupid we are. We'll change our ways"?

That outspokenness, that courage, that commitment, that firmness, that resolve, that purity, that boldness—it wasn't going to change things. He wasn't an idiot. It was unlikely to change things, and much more likely was that it would cost him his life.

So unlikely it was going to change things, but was it beautiful? His outspokenness, his courage, his speaking out, his standing in and for moral value, the good—was it beautiful? Was it noble? Was it brave? Was it inspiring? Does it remain a model to be respected and honored and aspired to, that he chose and acted and spoke as he did back then, even at the cost of his own life?

And in the end, that's what happened in 1945.

They hung him alive in a basement with six other people and executed him from a meat hook in 1945. But he had done the right thing, no matter what. Sometimes virtue matters more than efficacy.

I think of the Titanic when it was sinking. There weren't enough lifeboats for everyone on the ship, so the rich got priority first—women and children—then the remaining women and children. But there were still women and children and some men left on the ship as it tilted and went down into the icy waters, abandoned, knowing they were going to die. And they started singing hymns—hymns to God, hymns in praise of the divine.

What's the point? But to me there's something beautiful there for the soul, something noble, something of virtue and value for the soul. They were going to die anyway, so what was the point? Yet there's something that transcends mere efficacy.

In my talks on "An Ecology of Love," I've explored how there are different kinds of activism. One type is very focused on practical results—this is crucially important. But there's another kind that has to do with really doing the right thing, standing up for the right thing, saying the right thing. It may not be so focused on efficacy; it's more focused on what we might call the soul sense of things. One participates in an action, stands up for something, takes a risk for something—really for the soul's sake. It's doing the right thing, embracing virtue, even if it doesn't lead to effective outcomes, even if its effects are limited.

Virtue and soul are not always synonymous, but there's a relationship. Just as on the sinking Titanic, there's something one does regardless of the outcome.

These two perspectives on ethics—virtue and efficacy—they're not separate. They're two ends of a spectrum of activism and ethical consideration. But as Alasdair MacIntyre points out, virtue has almost completely dwindled and been eclipsed by the efficacy approach in our modern culture's worldview and anthropology. Yet they're both important pieces of a larger puzzle.

At our current point in history, in our culture and wider society, there's a strong case for the resurrection of virtue as a primary consideration in our relationship with ethics, choice, and action.

Take climate change, for example. Many people involved in climate activism or research—looking directly at current scientific data, facts, and trends—feel like we've already gone off the edge of a cliff. What's the point? Humanity is likely already locked into three or four degrees of temperature rise, almost no matter what we do now. The likelihood of collectively curbing our carbon emissions or addressing these issues seems relatively slim.

Yet we can become too dualistic about climate change or species loss, as if it's simply black and white. Three degrees of warming is much better than eight degrees; two degrees is better than three. There's never a cliff beyond which everything becomes completely pointless. There are gradations of catastrophe. When we look closely at scientific data and larger socioeconomic trends, we can fall into despair and black-and-white thinking. But it's more nuanced—1.5 degrees is definitely better than 2 degrees, which is better than 3 degrees, which is far better than 8 degrees. All will be challenging, but there are degrees of difficulty.

But there's another consideration here regarding "what's the point"—one that has more to do with doing the right thing, with what is virtuous, with resonating with and aligning oneself with what has moral value. In this relationship, even if we are going off the edge of a cliff, even if we're all going down with the Titanic, even in tragic situations where nothing can be redeemed—this virtue ethics, this idea of doing the right thing regardless, introduces another dimension beyond practicality and measurable results.

It invites consideration of what we might call ideal values—and I want to return to that word "ideal." It opens us to divinity, to the ethos of human beauty and potential, to this invitation to the fully human being. It invites that whole other dimension regardless of the actual practical result.

I hope you're listening with your soul and hearing the implications for your soul in all this.

This applies not just to seemingly hopeless cases where our efficacy is very limited, but also where efficacy is uncertain or complex—when the effectiveness of our actions or choices is unclear or appears diluted in the web of conditions and the effects of others' actions and choices. Climate change is again a perfect example.

What's the point of me choosing this or that difficult choice of renouncing whatever it is—eating meat or flying too much or whatever—what's the point of me doing that if all these other people are just going ahead anyway? My flight is going anyway even if I don't get on it. My contribution of emissions in the totality I can't trace, as we outlined in one of the previous talks on ethics. I can't actually trace my exact carbon emissions and what exact result that will have, unlike if I shoot someone with a gun where it's very obviously me that did that.

So exactly these situations where the efficacy of our actions is uncertain, of our choices, or is diluted in the whole complex web of conditions or of the effects of other actions—that might be also where the virtues aspect should be more prominent in our thinking and a guide to our moral choices.

If we just think in terms of efficacy, we think, yeah, the flight's going anyway. I only ate a little section of the butt of that cow, or whatever. The cow is going to be slaughtered anyway, etc. There's a whole other side to this, and that's the virtue perspective.

Now we should point out that while we're focusing on efficacy and virtue, there are other considerations as well. Let's just keep it at those two for now. Too much emphasis on virtue over and above efficacy of action wouldn't be a virtue, right? If I'm so unconcerned and unattuned to what has potential efficacy and I'm just focused on my own sense of virtue, that's going to be not very virtuous. That itself constitutes a kind of failing in terms of virtue. It's not a moral value to do that.

For example, someone might be extremely courageous in some situation—let's say soldiers at war defending something—and a soldier is extremely courageous and doing something gets themselves shot and killed, but not for any good purpose. It doesn't help his fellow soldiers. It doesn't protect anyone else. It doesn't have any effect in the larger scheme of things. They've just done something extremely courageous or brave without any consideration of the relative efficacy and how that weighs up in the larger equation. And if there were other choices where there was some efficacy of an action, then doing that extremely courageous action without efficacy—I don't even know if it qualifies as being courageous. It's not a virtue. Too much emphasis on virtue over and above efficacy is itself not a virtue.

Let's say a couple more things for now. Hartman makes a point that when we act virtuously, when we act in line with a moral value or aligned with or devoted to a moral value, we're actually not concerned with ourselves, so to speak. We're concerned with how that affects another person. So my kindness towards someone else is for that other person. I'm not thinking about me and kindness or generosity. I'm not thinking about me and how it affects me. I'm thinking about them and the effect on them.

But I wonder whether it's that simple, especially when we get conscious of this whole area, or when we've been exposed to certain teachings. I wonder whether ethical actions and intentions can actually be regarded as kind of double intentions, having a double intentionality, contrary to what Nikolai Hartmann says.

So they are aimed at the good of another, or the good for another. My kindness, my generosity, my concern, my justice, my dispensing of justice if I'm in that position, is aimed definitely at the good of another, but also at one's own virtue, at one's own being resonant with and sensitive to one's own sense of virtue, one's own building of virtue, one's own telos as a human being, the demands of one's conscience. So there's a kind of double intentionality—towards the other, but also towards one's own being, towards one's own soul, towards one's heart and the development of one's life and that sense of fullness and the beauty of life.

So that double intentionality is actually, in a way, analogous to consciousness, which is aware of and directed to an object. That's how consciousness functions. It's directed to an object. It's aware of an object. But it's secondarily, if you like, aware of itself. Usually, there's a secondary awareness of awareness for itself. It's awareness of itself. It's not usually amplified to the subject. It can be amplified with practice though, and some of the emptiness teachings we've put out there involve amplifying that, getting a sense of the awareness of awareness.

It just goes naturally with any awareness. I'm aware of the clock, I'm aware of speaking, I'm aware of the words that I'm listening to, but I'm also aware that I'm aware. It's just implicitly bound up. It's part of what makes up awareness. And that sense of that can be amplified.

So it can be amplified with practice, with regard to awareness. But I wonder if awareness of virtues and an aspiration, a passion, a love for growing virtue can also be trained.

So I think, contrary to what Nikolai Hartmann says, there's a double intentionality there. We are concerned with our own soul and our own being. There's a kind of self-reflexive intention. Sometimes people talk about the self-reflexive nature of awareness,

which just means that awareness is aware of itself while it is primarily aware of other objects. But that self-reflexive awareness that's intrinsically wrapped up and part of awareness can be amplified, as I say. There's a self-reflexive intention in ethical action as well, when we choose in this way.

So Hartman, let's just quote from Hartman then: "the object of the high-minded or loving person is not to be high-minded or loving, but that the other person to whom something is given or whom he makes glad may have the gift or the gladness."

In his inquiry, he distinguishes between the primary intention toward others' well-being and what seems to be absent - any consideration of our own moral development. "He gives out of love," Hartmann writes, "but not for the sake of being a loving person. He is concerned not at all with his own moral being, but with the being of the other person, and indeed by no means only with that other person's moral, but with his whole being. Bodily as well as mental. That is to say, with conditions that are valuable for that person."

But I wonder if this account is really complete or true. As I've suggested, is there not also a certain kind of joy or delight, a fulfillment, a sense of beauty in exercising virtues? And is this self-reflexive, self-directed strand of being virtuous perhaps akin to the self-reflexive nature of awareness, but also to the auto-eroticism we find in eros?

When we were unpacking the nature of eros, particularly in the Eros Unfettered talks, we explored how auto-eroticism is actually an aspect, a component, a dimension of eros itself. When we have eros for something else, we're also enjoying our own eros. More significantly, we become an erotic object for ourselves - ourself becomes an erotic object for ourself. This is perhaps clearer in sexual eros, where when we're finding another erotically attractive, when we're engaged in intimacy with someone, there's also this finding ourselves erotically attractive. And this is actually a necessary component - not egoistic, but a necessary part of how eros constellates.

So we see these parallels - a kind of self-reflexive intention operating within awareness, within eros, and within ethical action. All of these self-reflexive intentions or attitudes are usually relatively obscure to consciousness. They remain secondary, and we may not even notice them at first. And certainly, if any of them dominate too much over the more natural primary intentions - whether virtuous behavior toward others, awareness directed toward its objects, or eros toward an erotic object - they will create a kind of imbalanced self-centeredness, leaving us unattuned and insensitive to others and to the world.

If in sexual eros or lovemaking I'm more turned on by myself than by my partner, something is clearly out of balance. If I'm generally more aware of the awareness itself than of its objects - apart from specific practices moving in certain directions - that's not very helpful. Similarly, if I'm more concerned with my own moral development than with the actual effects of my kindness on this person, or the impact of my generosity, then something has shifted out of balance.

But still, these remain elements of our lives, of our minds, of our being. Don't we sometimes aim at the image of a beautiful life? Isn't this part of what calls to us? And again, with respect to climate change or species loss - situations where the effects of our choices and actions are largely invisible to us, where it's difficult to see the impact due to the complexity of globalization - isn't this love of virtue, this sense of our human telos toward the beautiful life, even more important than in other ethical situations or trans-actions?

With regard to soul-making and the importance of these considerations for soul, this double intentionality - this self-reflexive intention that forms part and parcel of our engagement with virtues and moral values - relates to our sense of the beauty of those virtues, to the potential for soul-making they contain, and to the eros we have for values themselves. This connection between eros and values is something I want to return to, as it opens yet another dimension of how our ethical life participates in the deepening and beautification of soul.

CHAPTER 191

Sīla and Soul (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h14

> *In this fourth installment of his series on ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea delves deeply into the philosophical foundations of values and virtues. Drawing on Hartmann's phenomenology and Platonic philosophy, he explores how moral values might exist as 'ideal beings' in a realm beyond space and time, similar to mathematical entities like pi or imaginary numbers that govern physical reality without perfectly manifesting in it.*
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> *Burbea examines how values like metta (loving-kindness), justice, and compassion exist as transcendent ideals that call forth human participation and actualization, even though we can never perfectly embody them. He explores the crucial role of human beings as the bridge between the temporal world of physical manifestation and the eternal realm of moral ideals. Through personal examples, including a profound moment before surgery when he aligned himself with metta, he illustrates how values can serve as spiritual anchors that provide meaning and direction.*
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> *The talk addresses the impoverishment that occurs when values lose their dimensionality and transcendent quality, becoming mere social conventions rather than sacred ideals. Burbea connects this philosophical framework to practical concerns around guilt, ethical action in the face of uncertainty (such as climate change), and the cultivation of faith and hope in pursuing ideals we may never see fully realized. This exploration reveals how the ideational and imaginal dimensions of values are essential for soul-making and authentic ethical life.*

Let's try to elaborate a bit more on some aspects of the connection or potential relationship of soul-making practices and these ideas of values and virtues, connecting them through this notion of imaginal ideas. Let's try and unpack that a little bit, unfold it, explore it.

There are probably different orders we could go through this. We could approach it from different directions, different orders. But I think I'll start by saying a bit more about the ontology of values, actually taking a certain view of the ontology of values, somewhat similar—in fact, very similar—to Hartmann's.

Now, there are other ontologies we could adopt or take, entertain, with regard to values. In fact, a whole spectrum of ontologies. But I want to dwell on this one, partly because nowadays it's unusual, and it opens things up in a certain way. It's less explored, and hence the soil there may be fresh and fertile and offer new possibilities.

Again, Hartmann made the point that values are not created by a culture or a person. They're not cultural, personal creations. They have a kind of independent existence. They're real existences and exist independently of our desires, of what we want to be the case, and also of our consciousness—so whether we're aware of them or not, they exist. But they exist in a particular way in what might be called the realm or the sphere of ideal being.

That word *ideal* is important. It's related to the word *idea*, specifically, but also *ideal* in the sense of when we have ideals and what's ideal—as in what's the best possibility. So there's a lot wrapped up in that word *ideal* and *idea*. There's a long history there. That sphere of ideal being—the realm in which values, for instance, among other entities exist—has its own ordering, its own structure, its own laws.

This notion of a sphere of ideal being goes back to Plato, maybe even before that—I don't know—but as far as we know, it goes back to Plato, who talked about the realm of ideas. And Aristotle as well, with variation, talked significantly about *eidos*. And the scholastics in the Middle Ages, the Christian scholastics in the Middle Ages, also talked about *essentia*, essences. So there's a long history, a long pedigree, and it tends to be very out of fashion these days. It went out of fashion, but it had a lot of fruit and implications in the history of Western philosophy and thought and the way we look at the world for many, many years.

Before we get into that just a bit more, again, we could adopt the stances, the perspectives of various other ontologies with all this, and we don't actually need to adopt Hartmann's kind of postulate of an existence completely independent of consciousness. Remember we talked in the past about how it says in the Zohar that we create God as much as God creates us. And this whole notion of participation that we have in the imaginal soul-making teachings—that somehow, mysteriously, soul and its beloved, erotic other, or soul, consciousness and its object, mind and matter, they participate in each other, they co-create each other in a way that transcends or complicates, takes to another level the division between consciousness and object, between subject and object.

But that notion of participation is actually very much one that Plato talked about in explaining ideas. And he said that the things of this world participate in the ideas. So the kind of existence, particular to an idea, is that kind of existence through which everything participating in it is just as it is. That's a quote from Hartmann. In other

words, when we resonate with a certain moral value and when we act in alignment with that and inspired by that, we're participating in the moral value and we're participating in that level of being—or when an object in the world that's circular or triangular is participating in that ideal geometrical structure of circularity or triangularness.

That notion of participation was always a bit mysterious to people, what Plato meant by that. And it's still a little mysterious, but that notion of participation is key to this whole idea, this whole notion of the realm of ideal beings, of ideal existence, of ideas.

So values are one subset of ideal beings, ideal existences, or ideas, or *eidos*. Others might be mathematical entities and laws. This was originally where Plato, probably through Pythagoras, perhaps got the idea of this whole realm of ideal being, and it remained central to Plato's thinking and a kind of basis and model for his whole thinking.

Mathematical entities and laws, mathematical laws like the laws of geometry and entities like pi or other mathematical entities, don't have spatiotemporal existence. They don't exist in space or time. I cannot come across them. I cannot lay my hand on them. They don't exist in the way that we tend to encounter other existences as existences in space or time. My body, this book, whatever exists in a certain space at a certain time or for a certain time. But mathematical entities and laws—you know, a certain mathematical equation doesn't exist in space and time, yet it has an ideal reality, a reality in the realm of ideas, in this realm of ideal being.

It's not impermanent. It doesn't arise and pass. It's not like this mathematical law comes to an end or gets created. But the mathematical entities and laws actually pervade the world of, say, real things—let's say physical things. They manifest in them. Those mathematical entities and laws are actually part of the principles of reality. So this is one area, perhaps the only remaining area, where this whole notion of a sphere or a realm of ideal being, of the existence of certain ideals...

On a more abstract level, this notion remains current among certain thinkers, scientists, mathematicians, and physicists. However, it's not at all popular when we come to ethics and discussing values as possible kinds of ideal being, as species of ideal being within this realm.

I mention mathematics because perhaps you can get a sense, even from what you might know about mathematical principles, of this possibility—that there might indeed be such a stratum of existence as this realm of ideal beings. It's not something that can simply be dismissed or ridiculed as a silly notion.

When people introduce teachings on Plato, they often talk about the ideal horse or the ideal dog existing somewhere in this realm. That approach has always struck me as unhelpful—it almost sets up Plato's entire philosophy for ridicule. But if you sophisticate that understanding a little more, it becomes quite workable and certainly not ridiculous.

Mathematical entities and laws should, for most people, more easily strike one as genuinely interesting. They seem to have this existence in another dimension. They're real. They're not mere creations of human thought. We can't simply get rid of them. As I mentioned, they pervade the world of physical things and manifest within them. They are the principles of that reality.

To quote either König or Hartman: "Things, acts and occurrences in the real world, in the physical world, necessarily comply with the principles of mathematics." When I drop this pen, it moves through the air toward the ground in a trajectory based on mathematical principles. The way it holds together depends on forces governed by mathematical laws—the molecular bonds, the relationship between circumference and diameter. All these mathematical principles shape and govern physical actuality.

But there's a crucial difference when we consider values as species of ideal being. Values differ from other kinds of ideal being, such as mathematical entities, in that values don't automatically shape real things or physical phenomena. They may be realized, they may be actualized in physical existence—we may act on a value, express it, and manifest it—or we may not.

The physical world, what most people call the real world, may not correspond to the ideal world, to the ideal being of a value. Unlike mathematical laws, where correspondence is necessary, physical things must conform to mathematical principles. But as Hartman explains, values are not inviolable determinants to which everything physical is subordinate.

So the notion is that there are real entities existing in this ideal sphere. They're not creations of ourselves, not merely human constructs. But unlike other entities and laws existing in the ideal sphere—mathematical laws, for instance—everything in physical existence doesn't have to conform to them. Values may shape physical reality, or they may not.

Values have a particular mode of being, Hartman says, in relationship to the physical world—a mode of "ought-to-be." They ought to be. Value is what ought to be. There ought to be justice. There ought to be kindness. There ought to be mercy. There ought to be truthfulness.

When the ideal finds itself in opposition to the real—when there isn't justice, for example, in the physical world, so the ideal of justice stands in opposition to what König calls "the real"—when it remains unrealized, the ought-to-be becomes actual. The ideal itself becomes stimulating. The ideal "calls out," as he puts it, to be realized.

So values are not automatic determinants. They're not necessarily present in every case, but there's this quality of ought-to-be that accompanies them.

As we discussed in the last part of our exploration, humankind—human beings—are the point of contact between the physical world, the world of perishable things, of impermanence, of coming and going, birth and death, and the imperishable, timeless realm of moral values, of these ideals. Human beings have access to and contact with the ideal world, particularly that portion concerned with values—that section of the ideal realm.

Human beings have this crucial linchpin function. Everything depends on them. In Hartman's view, human beings are the only beings capable of grasping values, sensing them, and acting upon them. Only they can convert the ought-to-be into physical reality—transform the ought-to-be of the ideal into actual manifestation. Objects and other beings cannot do this.

König writes, really in summary: "The rest of existence is dull and dead to the call of the ideal. Man, humanity, is the guardian of the ought in the world of physical being, in the world of what he calls real being." In human beings only, the ought-to-be is transformed into the ought-to-do.

The ought-to-be that forms the core of moral value in the ideal realm, in its relationship to the physical realm, transforms into the ought-to-do. Humankind—this person, that person, I, you—ought to do this. As he writes, "In man only the ought-to-do is transformed into a moral act."

We've touched on this before, and we've also explored the fact that this knowing of the elements of the sphere of ideal being—this knowing and perceiving of what we might call ideas—is intuitive. It's what philosophers call a priori knowledge. It's not a deduction. I grasp it intuitively, and that goes for values as well as the laws of logic and mathematical laws. They're intuited, and we know something with immediacy and a kind of certainty. We recognize that it's a necessary and general truth.

One difference between Hartmann and Plato concerns the question of what is more substantially real, more true: the realm of ideas, the sphere of ideal being, or the realm of physical being. Plato considered the realm of ideal being and the sphere of ideas as

having a more fundamental and truer kind of existence. The instances in the world were reflections or shadows of that truer, more fundamental existence of ideal things, of a realm of ideas.

Hartmann inverts that. He says this "nimbus of loftiness surrounding Platonic ideas" Hartmann rejects. Ideal being for Hartmann is a thinner, floating, insubstantial being—half-being, so to speak—which still lacks the full weight of proper being. He criticized Plato, along with many others, along the lines that if one gives primary reality to the sphere of ideas and to that realm of ideal being, one denigrates and devalues the things of life, the things in the transient world of physical existence.

I don't know whether that's actually true. And certainly whether or not that was Plato's intention—you could read it both ways, and probably different traditions arose out of Plato's thinking with different emphases. But anyway, Hartmann makes that reversal. I'm not sure it follows that if you give primary reality to the realm of ideas over and above the instances and reflections and instantiations of those ideas in physical reality, whether that corresponds to or leads to a denigration, a disinterest, a rejection of the world. But Hartmann thinks it does, along with many other people. That's a main criticism of Plato through the centuries, for this and other reasons in terms of his larger system of ontology.

Hartmann rejects that idea and inverts it. So the realm of ideal being for Hartmann is something that has less reality, but is still real.

In the centuries following Plato and years of neo-Platonism and Christian thought, this realm of ideas was quite central. There's a long thread of development of that whole notion, exploration of it into theology, into philosophy, into all kinds of areas. As it came into different kinds of theology, these ideas, this sphere of ideas, was considered sometimes a part of divinity itself. In other words, they were aspects or attributes of the divine, sometimes even names of God. So in the Islamic tradition and in the Jewish tradition and also in the Christian tradition through Pseudo-Dionysius, they talk about the names of God related to this notion of the ideas.

Or sometimes they are conceived of slightly differently, as if they are almost angelic existences close to the divine. They're the first sort of orbit of being, created being, around the divine—the first kind of rung of an existential hierarchy. There are many different variations, or they're emanations or expressions of the divine. So as this notion of the sphere of ideal being filtered into history, got digested, assimilated, worked on, taken up, pondered upon, reflected upon, it took slightly different forms in the way it was worked into different philosophies and theologies, with great consequence and a lot of fecundity over the years.

Now I want to pause on this question about which is truer, which has the more fundamental kind of existence: the sphere of physical things, of physical reality—which would be the view of most people nowadays and for quite a long time—or the sphere of ideal being.

I'd like to talk a little bit about mathematics. At this retreat, I know some of you are very traumatized by mathematics classes in school or poor mathematics teachers or whatever, but I just want to linger on something as a way of expanding this territory perhaps. So breathe—it won't be terrible, I hope.

There's something in mathematics called an irrational number. It has a very specific definition, but for our purposes, we're going to define it in a slightly imprecise way as a number whose decimal points go on forever. So it's a very loose, imprecise definition—it's not actually the definition of irrational numbers, but it goes with being an irrational number.

You know that number pi that's involved in geometry and circles, with the Greek letter π, is an irrational number. What is it? 3.1415926, and then it just goes on. I don't know the other digits, but those decimal places go on forever. They never stop. And that's bound up with what it means to be an irrational number.

Apparently, the existence of irrational numbers was discovered by a guy called Hippasus. The story goes, he was on a ship with some Pythagoreans, some followers of the philosophy of Pythagoras. Now, they too believed in the kind of divinity of numbers and the fact that numbers were mystically woven into the cosmic fabric, the fabric of the cosmos. So he was on a boat or ship or some kind of maritime vessel with a bunch of Pythagoreans, and on the deck, with the help of geometry and some sticks and stones, he was explaining to them about his discovery of irrational numbers and proving to them how they must exist, for which he got very little thanks.

In fact, they were completely outraged and threw him overboard. So I hope that they were in a small boat on a small pond and that he could swim and just swim to shore and was safe. I don't know. But it so offended their system of philosophy and their sensibility, this idea that a number could be irrational like that, could not be specifiable, its decimal points go on forever. But there are the existence of these irrational numbers.

So pi, as I said, is an example of an irrational number. What is pi, if you remember from school? If you measure the diameter of a circle, then you can say that the circumference of the circle will be of a length of pi times the diameter, or two times the radius times pi. And the area of the circle will be pi r squared. Again, there may or may not be pain associated, but I'm sure you remember this from school.

But pi is an irrational number. So is—and this might have been what Hippasus was showing—the square root of 2. So that, again, if you have a right-angled triangle with its two shorter sides being each one unit in length, then the hypotenuse, according to Pythagoras' theorem, is the square root of 1 squared plus 1 squared. One squared plus one squared is one plus one, which is two, and so the hypotenuse is the square root of 2. The square root of 2 also turns out to be an irrational number—1.414 something or other. It goes on forever.

There are many other numbers like this. Famous numbers, but there are all kinds of numbers like this. There's Euler's number, the natural logarithm. In fact, all square roots of natural numbers other than perfect squares—like 4 and 9, which have square roots of 2 and 3—all other square roots, like the square root of 6 or the square root of 8 or whatever, are also irrational numbers.

So there's this strange class of... I'll explain why I'm talking about this in a second. There's a strange class of numbers called irrational numbers. There's also a whole class of numbers called imaginary numbers. And again, some of you will know this from slightly higher mathematics. They are called i or j—the square root of negative 1. So when you multiply negative 2 times negative 2, you get 4. What that means is two numbers are the square root of 4: negative 2 and positive 2.

What you can't get, usually, in the usual way of thinking, is the square root of, say, negative 4. I can multiply 2 by negative 2, and I'll get negative 4. But if I multiply 2 by 2, or negative 2 by negative 2, I get 4. So the square root of negative 4 seems to not exist. So mathematicians at some point just made an imaginary number called i, which is the square root of negative 1. It's sometimes called complex numbers. So there's a whole other class of numbers that kind of has a strange existence.

But these numbers, as I said, turn out to be fundamentally woven into the governing of the universe in mathematical laws, but also in physical laws. So they govern the geometry of things in terms of the fact that the circumference will have a length of pi times the diameter. The hypotenuse of that triangle, if it's one unit and one unit, will have a length of the square root of two, an irrational number. All kinds of physical laws, especially when we get down to quantum physics, include this imaginary number of the square root of negative one, and numbers like the natural logarithm, Euler's number e.

When we think about this, this is quite interesting. So numbers like pi and i—this imaginary number, imaginary square root of negative 1—and numbers like the natural logarithm e, are fundamentally wrapped up in physical reality. They are, if you like, di-

mensions of physical reality. They govern physical things and the laws that pertain; they're part of the laws that govern physical things. Yet they never manifest themselves precisely.

Why don't they manifest precisely? Because for an irrational number, imagine this circumference is exactly the length of pi times the—let's say the diameter is 1—is exactly the length of pi. Well, the hypotenuse of that right angle triangle is exactly the square root of 2. So that means if I try to make a triangle with that size hypotenuse, or I try to make a circle with that size circumference, I cannot do that. It cannot exist because the actual length of it is infinitely specifiable.

In other words, I get it to 3.1415 and just a little bit more because it's 3.14159. And then I go to that—it's just a little bit more: 3.14159262. And then this will just go on forever. We'll never reach the exact length there of the circumference. The circumference can never be that exact length. It's always going to be a little bit more, a little bit less, because I can always go to the next decimal point.

So here are these things, here are these entities—pi, i, e.

They're fundamentally wrapped up in physical reality. There are, so to speak, dimensions of physical reality. They govern physical things. They're involved in the laws that govern physical things. Yet they never manifest exactly or precisely.

And if we're talking about abstract imaginary numbers, like this imaginary square root of negative one... it never manifests. How can it manifest? How can I have it? I can have one apple, I can have five apples, I can have eight apples, I can have half an apple, but I can't have i apples. I can't have the square root of negative one apples, or the square root of negative nine apples. It's, in a way, abstract and imaginary. It manifests in this indirect way. It itself doesn't manifest, but it governs manifestation.

Actually, there are also quantum mechanical reasons why a perfect circle can never physically manifest. In other words, that circumference can never exactly be pi times the diameter. This has to do with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in terms of measuring the actual location of something. If you get down to the atomic level, where actually is that atom? We can't locate it precisely. So if we measure the length of this piece of string or piece of wood, actually it doesn't have a determinate length. It doesn't have an exact length that we can know exactly.

Maybe there are also issues at an even deeper quantum level about the quantum nature of space and time so that even when we consider this atom might not be here or there, or we can't determine exactly what distance it is from something else, but space itself can have a distance—but actually recent quantum theory more and more starts to dispute that.

Why am I going on about all this? Some of you might be wondering. It's certainly not for intellectual titillation. It's certainly not to intimidate or to confuse or to re-traumatize anyone. That's not the point. That's not why I'm going into this. It's not that it's merely kind of, oh, that's interesting. How interesting. Nor is the point to induce in you a kind of genial bafflement at existence, which sometimes seems to be, for some people, the point of emptiness teachings, as if that itself were some kind of achievement or goal, to be sort of puzzled by the mystery of existence. That's not the reason.

But there's something about this parallel with certain mathematical entities, and this notion that there might be a realm of ideal being, a sphere of ideas—eidos, idea—that pertain not just to mathematical entities, but also to things like love, beauty, goodness, and so forth, that can never perfectly manifest. But still, they shape, govern manifestations, they direct manifestations, and they exist, kind of, in this other realm.

So there's a parallel here. Actually, there's another class as well of these kind of abstract or ideal entities. One is these irrational numbers, like we talked about pi and e. One is these imaginary numbers, like the square root of negative one, i. And another is the entity that's called the wave function in quantum mechanics. It's also called Schrödinger's equation. It's actually an equation that's a sort of fluid mathematical entity, if you like, that exists in an abstract, multidimensional mathematical space.

When you square the solution of that equation, you get the probability of finding a particle here or there, or with this velocity or that velocity, or whatever, at a certain time. So the actual existence of it is this fluid mathematical entity that exists in a kind of abstract, multidimensional mathematical space. What kind of existence is that? The mind can hardly get around what it means. It's an ideal kind of existence, very abstract, and yet it bears a direct relationship with the shaping of our physical world and reality and what manifests on the physical plane.

So two points here. One is not only might there be this realm of ideal being, which we can see more clearly and more obviously for most of us in the realm of something like mathematics, but it might also apply to the realm of values. Point one.

Point two is this question of which is more real? Which is more real? Is the law more real that has the number pi in it, even though I can never manifest that number? Is the law more real when it has the imaginary number, even though I can never manifest that imaginary number itself? Is the wave function more real that exists in this kind of ideal, abstract, multidimensional, mathematical space? Is that more real than the physical manifestation? Which is more real? The realm of ideal being, or the realm of physical instantiation of ideal things?

As I mentioned, this realm of ideas was often considered divine, as part of the divine, or very close to the divine. And I wonder whether, with regard to values and virtues as species of ideas, whether they too we might consider them divine, just like Plato's ideas. They have this kind of infinite beyondness to them, yet they are also immanent.

They manifest in shaping and manifesting physical realities. We can have, just as with divinity, this infinite beyondness and imminence, this transcendence and immanence. Just as with divinity, we could have a clear concept of what that divinity is, or a vague and more obscure concept or idea or notion. There can be, just as with divinity, something divine and soul-making in relation to that, or they can become image.

Regarding their not having spatio-temporal being, we could say the same of images. An image doesn't really have spatio-temporal being. It exists, as we say, timelessly with this element of eternality. We could say, as Corbin suggests, that images happen in hierophantic time, in the *mundus imaginalis*. Perhaps that's the same thing—this quality of eternality.

Koenig observes that ideas or the elements of the sphere of ideal being don't have spatio-temporal being, but they're attached to and carried by spatial and temporal being. So again, there's this notion of participation in the Platonic sense.

We're exploring how we might possibly conceive of what kind of nature, what kind of ontology these values possess. There's something important in this kind of leaning toward such possibilities that opens up profound avenues of understanding.

Let me offer another example in the realm of values as ideal being. Sixteen or seventeen years ago, I had an operation in the hospital. They gave me a general anesthetic, and just as they were about to inject it, they said, "Okay, in about ten seconds you'll start to feel sleepy and then you'll lose consciousness." They were preparing me, which sometimes they don't do, but in this case they did.

I was aware of the possibility—however small—that I might die in the operation, that those seconds might be my last seconds alive. As they told me this, with only about ten seconds until I would lose consciousness, I instinctively and spontaneously said to myself: *metta*. *Metta*. And I put my faith in that—that was what I aligned myself with.

I didn't think much about it at the time, but several correspondences made me reflect on it recently. I wasn't practicing *metta* at that point. It wasn't that I was generating "may I be well" or an intention of loving-kindness toward other beings and myself. That was tangentially implied, but I wasn't actually practicing that. I certainly wasn't making some kind of rebirth wish for myself—you know, hoping that having *metta* in my consciousness when I died would ensure a good rebirth. I wasn't hoping that somehow *metta* would magically protect me from death and harm, as the Buddha sometimes describes in his teachings. Nor was I dissolving my being into the feeling of *metta*.

Looking back, I wonder: could it be that without realizing it at the time, I was orienting myself to, giving myself to, somehow viewing my life and death as given to, as participating in, as devoted to, as in reverence of *metta* as a kind of idea in the sense we're discussing—as a kind of *eidos*?

We've talked about the need for anchoring and how human beings need anchoring, especially when things are difficult. We've noted that anchors work best when there's an anchoring in something other. An anchor for a ship floating in water needs to be made not of water, and the anchor itself needs to have contact with something that's not water—something that has more steadiness, that's of a different substance.

For us as human beings, this is profoundly helpful. If there's something we can find to trust that can serve as a spiritual anchor, an anchor for the soul—I'm not speaking of an anchor for attention, like a mantra or breath or body sensations or even *metta* as an anchor for attention, but something, so to speak, on another plane that we can trust.

Even if our sense of that is vague, something that, like in the example I'm giving, if I knew I was dying in the next minutes, I could give myself to. I would give myself to that, abandon my being to it, see my whole life in the light of that—not hoping it would somehow save my earthly life or cure disease, but something I would want to give myself to, give the gift of my being to.

There are many possibilities here, and obviously we each must find what works for us as an anchor. This isn't a prescriptive formula. But there's something in the notion of the realm of ideal being, and in certain elements of that realm—for instance, values—that might function in this way.

If I'm going out of existence right now, if things get really difficult, what do I trust giving myself to? What do I bow to? What do I trust bowing to? What do I pour my remaining being out to? It's not really for me, even. It's not for anyone specific. It could be love, goodness.

These are vague notions, you know. It could be a notion of a deity—Kuan Yin, God, the cosmos if it has a kind of soul sense, or the earth, or Buddha nature.

As I said, we're not talking about practicing metta or mantra continuously for the sake of an anchor in difficult times or whatever. Obviously that's helpful. There are times when that is helpful. But we're talking more like a devotion of the heart and soul, a devotion of the being—some kind of fundamental statement or orientation from my soul to existence, to being, to the mystery of things, to the cosmos, to the divine, to the Buddha nature, about what I want my life to be and to have been about.

Even—and this is important—given the fact that for anyone orienting this way, giving themselves in this way, aligned in this way, devoted in this way, their actual life will have come up short from that idea and that ideal in so many ways. Of course. But what we're talking about here is getting in touch with a sense of another level of things. And it might be this kind of—what I'm talking about—it may be only a moment here and there. But what may come out of that can give this other dimension of anchoring. And then that gives a different perspective on our life, a different perspective on what happens.

So there's a possible kind of meditative journey there. It's hard to put this stuff into words. There's something mysterious in it, for sure. But it's also hard to articulate, and it's so foreign to our usual way of thinking of things. Because it sounds quite abstract. Sometimes when I try to explain this, I get the sense that the person thinks I'm talking about something material. It's hard to grasp, or it's hard for people to sometimes get a sense of something that's not material, that's timeless.

And this notion of giving myself to that ideality, to that eidos, to that idea—it's not only a kind of actual giving myself to it in life. So my metta and your metta and anyone's metta will never be perfect. It will never be constant. It will never be complete. I will always fall short of the ideal. So this immaterial, timeless, ideal existence that I give myself to—but in ways that giving, like the existence of the eidos, the giving and the existence have other dimensions to them, beyond the actuality in life. It includes the actuality, but the actuality never really measures up.

But this notion of eidos—they're like images. They're not material, they're timeless. And they have this beyond to them. They have other dimensions, and that is what gives them traction as anchors for us.

It doesn't imply that our actions and choices and how they mirror or refract the ideal or the image is irrelevant. So an idea or an eidos is only abstract if how we are in the world and how or whether it instantiates is irrelevant, if we don't pay any mind. Then it's abstract. But there's something here—this ideal being, this strata of existence, these ideas, this ideational, imaginal.

It's something greater than this impermanent phenomenon that I am, or I appear to be. It's something also beyond me. And in the case of that example of the metta, before the operation, that something beyond me is not the fact of all beings, metta to all beings. Sure, that's beyond me. We're talking about it's beyond me in a different way—something deathless and timeless, as I said there, greater than this impermanent mind-body practicing metta and then extinguished by death, for example.

But we're not talking about something that goes on forever. Neither me nor my metta go on forever in time. The deathlessness, the timelessness is of the order of eternality. It's the non-spatiotemporal being of this realm of ideas.

But back then, I didn't really understand, I didn't really have this language for it, but remembering back, oh yeah, beauty was there in that orientation of my being in those seconds before going unconscious. And a vague sense, very vague at the time, of the kind of particular ontological category or kind of being, the kind of truth that such ideas have, that such values have as species of ideal existence. Trust was there. Trusting somehow in that. Little as I could even articulate or conceptualize or delineate what it was at the time that was exactly going on there.

And there was eros in relationship to it, and dimensionality. So you can see how many of the elements in the imaginal—trust, beauty, eros, dimensionality. We're talking about something, we could say it's a kind of imaginal. Ideas become imaginal, or the ideational imaginal—how much it overlaps there.

But we need, I think, this kind of sense of beyondness and of other dimensions, and we need it for our soul. We need it also in our ethical orientations and considerations. There's something that underpins our ethics. That's why someone like Richard Rorty finds it so difficult to talk about ethics—they have very little to say because they absolutely refuse any sense of dimensionality.

Without a kind of beyondness or transcendent element, without this dimensionality shading into divinity, without that aspect or those dimensions in relation to the virtues and values, those virtues and values that we still somehow in our society honor and enact to some extent become perhaps just a pale ghost, almost a charade of what virtues and values can truly be. We still kind of go along with certain values and virtues—perhaps that's the dominant view—but without that dimensionality, without that beyondness, without that transcendence, without that dimensionality shading into divinity, they lose their transformative power.

What happens to eros when it's not allowed dimensionality? We've talked about this before—how if eros is not allowed dimensionality, it has to go horizontal. But right now I want to explore something different: what is the flavor of it when it doesn't have that dimensionality, when it's not allowed those dimensions?

Sometimes people spend enormous amounts of money on weddings, for instance, which is a kind of celebration of love and eros. But how often does it have that real dimensionality to it? There's this celebrating of love, this making a big thing of it, but it might also be limited in these very important and fundamental ways.

Consider the value of determination—the passion of footballers and football teams. But what's that determination in service of? Again, there's a lot of hoopla, a lot of investment in it, but it's not seen in this light that allows its dimensionality to be sensed. We're caught in some kind of in-between place, perhaps.

Or sexual enjoyment—when there's no dimensionality allowed, what does that become? It's a pale ghost.

Or individuality. We tend to celebrate and respect and value that. It's considered a virtue. But why? Without the dimensionality, it's not any kind of manifestation of an echoing or mirroring of divinity through and in my personhood.

Or dynamism, restlessness as values—deep restlessness, dynamism, but without any deep purpose. It becomes just a kind of reactive busyness.

Or peace, in contrast. Without the dimensions of depth or sacredness, it becomes just about relaxation and de-stressing.

All these values—peace, dynamism, individuality, sexual pleasure, love, eros, determination—they all become atrophied or have had their dimensions amputated in many cases. Or perhaps people are still unconsciously responding to a sort of implicit

sense of the dimensionality in them. I don't know. But there's potentially a kind of poverty in our life and our society without them, and also poverty when we then come to consider and ponder the realm of ethics.

The notion of values as having ideal existence, as existing in this sphere or realm of ideal being, gives them a certain dimensionality. And again, dimensionality shading into divinity, which we'll return to. This does a tremendous amount for the soul. It's necessary for soul-making, and it's necessary for soul-making in relationship to values and virtues and ethics.

Remember I mentioned working in a dyad and being struck by the sense of participating in the image of myself and my partner in the dyad, and the grace of that, the privilege of that—the privilege of participating in the image which has these higher roots in divinity and eternality. All of that, just a little glimpse, gave a different sense of the relationship to death. So touched, so blessed, so graced, such a privilege to touch and to participate in, to be graced by and to participate in something which has these higher roots in divinity, which has these other divine dimensions.

But might the same be true also of values when we sense them that way? When they're dimensionalized, when we open to the sense of participating in their ideal being, participating in these other dimensions of being, shading into divinity, they give our life meaningfulness. That's what gives our life meaningfulness. That's what touches us. That's what makes a difference.

I'd given the example previously in the talk on *dirti* practice, I imagine, but it could be with any image. And now I'm saying as well with values: when we sense them in this fuller, richer, more soulful way, there's a privilege and a beauty there, and a grace in being touched by them, in being called by them, in participating in them, in being aligned with them, in sensing them.

Even in sensing them, the soul receives, graced with a sense of meaningfulness and beauty, loftiness, aspiration.

So there's a lot shared here between what we're calling values when we give them—when we allow them to have this ideal level of being, this existence at the level of the realm of ideas, just like images, just like imaginal images. And with all that, there comes the eros, the beyondness of them, the dimensionality shading into divinity. It calls our eros. Our eros also will reciprocally create more of that beyond. Hartman wouldn't like that, I suppose, because he just leaned on the discover side rather than the create side. But we can have an erotic relationship with values. And in a way, they have this unfathomable, inexhaustible dimension.

Just like pi and e, those mathematical examples. And just like images, where our life echoes and mirrors and refracts an image, the image refracts into our life—it won't be 100% identical. There's a kind of unattainability. We cannot attain a perfect instance of living out an image or mirroring an image, or a perfect instance, a complete instance of this value in our life, this or that value. There's a certain impossibility, unfathomability, unattainability, inexhaustibility to values when they have this sense filled out, when we fill out the sense that way, when we perceive them that way.

I'm going to read you a passage by Hartman. It's quite an interesting passage which we could use and take in different directions—also regarding climate change, particularly when the outcome is uncertain or even likely that we're going to fail to avert tragedies. So with regard to action of faith and doing the right thing with respect to climate change, but also in regard to this beyondness of ideas. They have dimensions of beyondness.

And so he writes—again, pardon me for the gender-biased language—"It manifests itself in a capacity to detect what is good and genuine in another's disposition amidst less worthy tendencies, and to seize upon the good, to have faith in it, even to draw it out and develop it by the influence of one's trust. But beyond this, there is still a higher ethos of faith."

So he's actually talking about the value of faith. That's the context of this passage.

"Beyond this, there is still a higher ethos of faith. In the vision of the great moral ideals of life, which the individual person does not actualize, and in the vision of the great upward strivings of humanity, distant goals and vast enterprises require a different kind of faith, a faith which temporal unattainability does not stifle."

The fact that I will not reach that goal, or this goal, this ideal, will not be reached in time or in my lifetime even—in my lifetime even, or even in time—it doesn't dampen the faith. It doesn't dampen the devotion and orientation.

"It inheres," he says, "in the essence of all such outlooks upon life—and these are those which lend its highest meaning to our existence—that the non-actuality of the goal does not prejudice the reality of the undertaking."

So the fact that we may not actualize the goal does not stop us from undertaking that venture and that aspiration and acting on it.

"Herein the potent moral element of not seeing and yet believing"—I think that's a reference to doubting Thomas and Christ—"attains its culminating point."

So I haven't seen the fruition of this. I will not see the fruition of this. It will never be perfect. It will never manifest completely, certainly not in my lifetime, and yet I have the faith, I have the devotion, I have the alignment. I can instigate action. I can devote and commit my being to that ideal.

"For it is the high ideals," he writes, "which man never sees actualized. It is the high ideals which man never sees actualized. To this lofty spirit of faith corresponds hope, a valuational sense of a distinct kind. It is not properly a moral value like faith. It is not a new virtue, but only an accompanying emotional factor, the form of happiness which accords with faith and which anticipates its contents."

So this faith and hope in an ideal context, and in working towards and trying to manifest an ideal, even knowing it won't manifest completely or in my lifetime. There's a lot here that's related to the movement of eros. And eros, remember, will always create more beyonds. The angel is always out ahead.

So especially in the higher ideals, in the higher values, there is a kind of impossibility that goes with them, that pertains to them. The image, or the idea, the ideal, is the impossible. Actually, there's a whole other reason why values have a kind of impossibility to them, related to their antinomies, their oppositions between contradictions, between values. But I don't want to complicate things, so I'll come back to that later. But an image is an impossibility in terms of its manifestation, its full, complete replication, echoing, mirroring in manifest physical reality in our lives. So the image and what we're talking about, these ideas or ideals, are the impossible.

But the impossible is, if you like, the milk, the sustenance, the seed of the possible. It points a direction, it inspires, it emboldens, it roots us, it anchors us. But there's always the beyondness. As we said when we talked about images, the angel is always out ahead. It's moving away from us, but beckoning us, and we're pulled as if by magnetism —we move with it. Our life moves with it.

Now, there are all kinds of implications here, so very much to do with eros and soul-making, of course, but just to touch on one briefly right now, regarding guilt and healing.

Sometimes we feel great dukkha when we have, or we believe we have, acted in ways we don't respect. And it's easy or common then for that to become a kind of quagmire or storm of repetitive papañca and self-judgment, and that whole nexus and difficulty of guilt. In all that though, there is probably something—a value, a moral value—that we are or want to be devoted to. In the middle of all that mess, self-recrimination and self-obsession, there is actually a value that we are or we want to be devoted to.

And that value may become clear to us as an idea, as an ideal, and or as an image. Remember, values are an element of the imaginal. So it may become clear as a value idea itself, or it may become clear as an image or both. So that's quite important. Within all this storm of papañca and guilt, the swirling vortex of that, it's possible—it might be possible, with a little careful discernment and work in meditation—to find, amidst all that, what is the value that we're devoted to. And either it comes in image form, or it comes in this ideal form, in the form of an idea of a value itself.

And having contacted this sense of and clarity about the value, then a couple of things might be really helpful. We can meditate on that value itself in a way that our devotion to it, our love for it are felt deeply. So I get clear what it is and then I feel my love and my devotion to it. I feel it deeply in the heart, in the body, in the soul. So obviously again here the energy body is going to be very important. The sense of alignment, of energization, of harmonization are integral to that sense of devotion and necessary.

And then within all that maelstrom of guilt and self-obsession, etc., we can find the value. We can meditate on it in a way that we feel that devotion and allow that sense of devotion and love for it to align the being, the heart, the body, the energy body, the soul. And dwell there. Stay steady with that alignment and energization. So that something beautiful and positive comes out of the mistake, the shortcoming, the ethical transgression.

But a second piece is important here, related to what I was saying just before. It's important to recognize that both values and images have always some portion of them that is transcendent in the sense of beyond—beyond what we can ever perfectly mirror or manifest. We can never perfectly mirror that image or manifest perfectly that idea. Their beyondness, their transcendent dimension is necessary if they are to remain always erotic objects for us.

So eros needs this beyondness. It needs something to be able to move into. It also creates that something, that beyondness. So we can live and try to speak and act and feel and think in service and devotion to these values and images as much as possible, as much as possible, but that will always fall short of their ideal or imaginal fullness. Accepting this and still striving and devoting oneself in the gaze and in the act is a kind of soul wisdom. And it relates to that passage from Hartmann that we just read.

And the residual dukkha there, from the awareness of their forever beyondness—remember with the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the sense of the erotic object will always grow and deepen, always the angel out ahead, no matter how much we grow—but that residual dukkha from the awareness of there forever beyond us is just part of our existential situation as souls, as human beings.

Sometimes people have told me, oh, this happened in a relationship with someone and I was like this or I did that or I didn't do this. Some people are just spinning and spinning in guilt about that. And very painful. But is it possible to go right to that dukkha? Right to that painful spinning? And the pain is telling me about my love. It's telling me about my devotion. Find what is this devotion to, and can I feel that devotion, can I let it align me, and also do I realize that I cannot perfectly mirror, echo, replicate that image in my life.

So sometimes people are, for example, in a romantic or sexual relationship, kind of inspired or led by a certain image of themselves as lover, or relating their relationship and how they are to an image, a potential image of lover. But it will fall short. And that doesn't mean that we don't aspire to that, we don't have that magnetic pull, we don't have that devotion. But there's a wisdom in knowing, yeah, I'm never going to completely replicate it.

Okay, I want to say more about this relationship of soul-making and values, virtues, and the ideas-imaginal. Let's stop there for today.

CHAPTER 192

Sīla and Soul (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 2h06

> *In this profound exploration of ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea examines how moral values can become 'erotic images' that stimulate soul-making dynamics. He discusses how this relationship with values as ideational-imaginal objects brings nobility, strength, and the capacity to choose what is difficult but right. Drawing on philosophers like Nikolai Hartmann and Platonic cosmologies, Burbea explores how crises and conflicts serve as opportunities for moral growth, and how the absence of values paradoxically has value by allowing our moral being to engage and develop. He addresses the necessity of healthy guilt or remorse, the complexity of choosing between competing values, and how soul-making practice can deepen our relationship with virtue. The talk includes guidance on three approaches to meditating with moral values: through imaginal figures, through the essence that remains when figures fade, and through direct meditation on ideational-imaginal values themselves. This practice naturally leads to sensing oneself as participating in divine ideas and experiencing the nobility and grace that comes with this recognition.*

So it's possible in life, and even among the complexities and difficulties and the busynesses of life, that we at some point start to feel an erotic attraction. We have eros for values, for moral values, and that eros allows, instigates, stimulates soul-making in relationship to those values. In the dynamic, in the process, in the journey of soul-making, at some point moral values begin to come alive, begin to be swept up into, included, involved in the soul-making dynamic.

As such, either way, the values become for us erotic images. This value, or that value, or values as a whole, moral values as a whole, become erotic images, become ideational images. The ideational, imaginal sense of values can begin to open up. With that, implicit in all this, is the sense of these moral values as ideas, ideals, having ideas pregnant with meaningfulnesses and gracing us with a sense, an expanded sense of meaningfulness. All this is part of what happens as soul-making starts to involve values, as values start to stimulate the soul-making and the eros. They complicate, enrich, deepen, strengthen the relationship with moral values in this sense. Of course that affects our choices in life, affects our perspectives on life, our sensibilities in life, and our choices.

So it becomes easier to choose that which is not easy—to make this ethical choice, this sacrifice, this renunciation, this involvement in activism or protest. We're not so limited that we are pushed and constrained to choose just what is easy or what we

think makes us happy. We can talk more about the joy of this kind of relationship. Joy for me is a richer word, is a more soulful and spiritual word than just happiness. And part of that whole relationship is the capacity to be challenged and the willingness to be challenged, even the desire to be challenged by and through the calling and the beyondness of this sense—a capacity, a willingness to be stretched, to stretch oneself. Aspiration grows. Nobility, dignity comes with all this.

A capacity, an ability, a strength to abide and choose independent of the dominant view, the common view of those around us in the wider society or in our particular subcultures or sub-traditions. Beauty in all of this, devotion and meaningfulness can all come once the values in this sense start being incorporated, worked on, fermented in the soul-making dynamics. And that will, of course, like working with any image, working with the ideational imaginal in this sense, start to include the perceptions of self, other, world, and the eros itself—our love, our passion for the values themselves. All those aspects—self, other, world, eros—start to become imaginal, start to gain all this dimensionality.

So there's a lot of power in this, in the best sense, a lot of enriching and deepening. And strength comes, and capacity and willingness comes, as I said.

A little while ago I was on a panel about climate change responses in religious groups. One of the other panelists was George Marshall, who some of you will know. He's based in Oxford and does research in sociology and psychology on messages about climate change—how they impact people, and what basically works to make a difference, to engage people, and what doesn't work.

While we were on this panel, one of the things that struck me in what he was sharing was that he'd spoken to Islamic communities and asked them about their response to the challenge of climate change. What struck me was that they said, in terms of how they want to respond to the challenge of climate change, that they want it to be a jihad—a holy war. Take away all the craziness that goes with that word, unfortunately. Jihad means holy war, holy engagement in a noble struggle. So they didn't want to just remember to put the recycling out or something like that. They wanted something that was really genuinely a stretch for them. They want to feel like they're engaged in that way.

So there is both a certain soul stance of the religious orientation and sensibility that actually wants that beyondness, wants that stretch. It's related to all this business about dimensionality and beyondness and meaningfulness. But there is also, as I said, once the soul-making starts involving the values, once the values become erotic objects, then

also the willingness and the capacity to stretch and be stretched are there. And the strength to undertake all that starts to come. As I said, we can start more and more to stand in our values, for our values, stand by our values.

I remember being part of a Dharma group talking about climate change and trying to make different creative responses to it—the Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement. One evening we were in a group and a couple of the people were saying that they were a little aversive to protests and engaging in protests around inaction against climate change and for action against climate change. The sense that they had of protests and why they were a bit aversive and disinclined was that for them a protest seemed to be a negative thing, protesting against this or that. They didn't like that negative connotation, which had to do with anger.

But actually, the etymology of that word protest—protest means pro is for, and test is related to testify or testament. From its Latin roots and through the French, it originally meant something much more positive.

Protest, I testify for something, I bear witness to something. I make a declaration, a testament for, pro something. And that was the original meaning. It had a much more positive connotation.

Implicit in that bearing witness for something, or to something—I bear witness to something—only as a consequence of that particular orientation and commitment is one bearing witness against something else. So I bear witness for, I take a stand, I testify for the need and the importance of immediate prioritizing of action on species loss or climate change or whatever it is. And as a consequence, I'm bearing witness against inaction—the laissez-faire, the empty words.

So all this moral strength, moral courage can come when the relationship with values opens up. And we said the importance of anchoring, and the anchoring needing to have another dimension, a beyond to it. And so when there's difficulty—whether difficulty in terms of personal renunciation, difficult choices in one's life because they're the right thing to do, because they're ethical, but there is cost involved—or whether it's the difficulty of being in a protest or an action of some kind, an activist action of some kind, we need that strength, we need that steadiness, we need that anchoring. We need that courage and that largeness of soul.

Or when it's difficulty in terms of—as many people are increasingly, I hear many people who are doing research—predicting that species loss and climate change is happening so quickly that there will be all kinds of breakdowns in terms of social structure and our larger structures of civilization in the not-too-distant future. I don't know if

that's the case or not, or to what extent it's the case. But then there's difficulty on a massive scale, not just personal difficulty, not just difficulty in this situation, but a much wider social difficulty.

But it's interesting—the word crisis is at its root from a Greek word, I think, which means decision. So crises are often decision points, points of decision, moments, times of the necessity of decision, this way or that way. And crises, difficult as they are, challenging as they are, costly as they are, can often also be doorways, opportunities. In fact, that word—as I've mentioned, I think, several times in different talks—opportunity is, its root porta, which is door. So a crisis is a time for a decision, but it can also be door, opening a door that goes through this door or that door, and a door to what? It's opportunity to practice in the deepest, fullest, widest, and sometimes most challenging sense of the word.

And you can see this relationship between crises and opportunity—not that we wish crises, not that we want them to come—you can see this relationship in its extreme form again, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as I mentioned in the talk. Very extreme crisis situation, and it brought out such courage and such moral integrity and steadfastness. Or, as mentioned also in a previous talk, Viktor Frankl reporting on those among the starving concentration camp inmates at Auschwitz—those few who would give away their last piece of bread. An intense crisis situation. And it brings out something so profound in humanity, something so beautiful in the soul.

In that desert, in that ravaged landscape of flower blooms. And we can enjoy and be touched by its fragrance, its perfume, its color, its beauty, years and years later. And it makes a difference to us.

So it might be crises at different levels, as I said—personal, or in the middle of a difficult situation like a protest or an action when it gets a bit hairy, or much wider with climate change and species extinction, the possibility of social collapse, societal collapse, the collapse of certain structures that we've become very used to in our civilization. These might also—they present themselves as crises, but they can also offer doorways.

So in the midst of the most difficult situation is the possibility of the most beautiful soul expression, the most beautiful soul allegiance, the most beautiful and deep and touching and far-reaching soul stances.

So, again, I want to quote from Nikolai Hartmann, who points out, quite interestingly, that—I have to preface this because he uses the word reality and I think we should better use the word real and reality. He uses the word for—we can, because I'm

confused about ontology there with different systems of ontology—we can substitute the word actuality. So, in other words, when a value is actualized, we talk about the reality of that value, when it's actually present, manifested, chosen.

So, the value of that actuality of a value is immediately evident. In other words, when there's kindness there, when there's justice there, clearly it's valuable. We know that. We feel it as a value wherever that is the case.

However, he continues, the non-actuality of values also has a value. In other words, the absence of a value, the blocking of a value, the pervasive blindness to a value that may be around us—the non-actuality of values also has a value. This becomes perceptible as soon as we consider that active intended realization is possible only where a value is non-existent. And that in addition to that, it is active intended realization in which the higher moral species of value is realized, is actualized.

In other words, in a situation where there is no justice, to work towards pointing that out and supporting the possibility and the actuality of justice to come there—that

That initial absence of justice was a value in that it enabled the values of sensibility, choice, action, and actualization. All of these—sensibility, choice, and actualization—together make a moral value. In other words, that active engagement, that doing, that choosing by a human being is itself valuable.

This reveals a strange fact: the absence of a value has value because it allows our moral being to engage, to work, to grow. Hence, the value of attaining something in the world stands in opposition to the value of attempting the effort, even if the goal is not attained or not even attainable. Again, we return to that quality of beyondness and to this question of intention being central, as the Buddha pointed out in his teachings on karma and sīla.

So strangely, crises, absences, immoral situations—situations of immorality—are potentially valuable because they allow us to exercise our moral being, through which we grow, through which the soul grows. This echoes teachings from the Zohar, which offers a curious observation: "There is no good so perfect as that which issues out of evil." This poetic line can be interpreted in multiple ways, but perhaps it relates to this point about crisis as opportunity and the non-actuality of a value having value.

There may be a relationship here with our emphasis in the soul-making dharma on being with dukkha, working with it, having this crucible-like relationship that allows soul-making. Sometimes the profundity of the soul-making that emerges from dukkha is truly worth the effort. Whether the best kind of soul-making always comes from dukkha, I wouldn't necessarily claim, but there's something significant here.

Adin Steinsaltz, commenting perhaps on that Zohar passage, writes that it is only in a world on the brink of disaster—one where the potential for evil, suffering and ignorance is always at hand—that such values as kindness, compassion, courage and wisdom can be actualized. A paradise, a Garden of Eden world, he suggests, would afford little or no opportunity for the exercise of values and for the development of character.

Nikolai Hartmann offers another perspective on conflict and situations in life—not just wars or arguments, but the complexity of different choices, different parties wanting different things, values pulling in different directions. He writes that we can speak in a certain sense of conflict as a value. In the domain of knowledge, problems correspond to this principle. As in knowledge, a problem is a basic value, although it is the opposite of insight.

We want the insight, but a problem—difficult and troublesome as it may be—is actually a basic value because it's an opportunity, a doorway into insight. It's something we must work and wrestle with, digest and assimilate. Out of that compost, something beautiful can grow.

So as in the realm of knowledge, a problem is a basic value, although it is the opposite of insight. Similarly, in ethical life, conflict is basic, although it means incompleteness, disharmony, indeed a lack of indubitable value. Yet conflict is that which keeps discernment and the feeling of value alive and opens up new vistas.

As much as we might want simplicity and peace, thinking we'd prefer everything to be perfect and uncomplicated, there's something strange about this realm of saṃsāra. Conflict keeps discernment and the feeling of value alive and opens up new vistas, partly because of the complexity of our lives and situations, especially in this age of globalization.

Hartmann continues: "Moral life is, in general, life in the midst of conflicts. It is concentration upon them, a constructive solution of them through the commitment of the person." He uses strong language for what happens when we avoid this reality: "All ignoring of it is a sin, an irrevocable injury to ethical being, even to that of one's own personality."

To withdraw, to put on blinders and ignore the complexity of a situation—the conflicts inherent in it, the obscurities, the incompleteness, the differing demands within oneself and between people—is to injure our soul. We somehow wound our ethical being when we choose to ignore conflict and complexity for the sake of simplicity and peace.

As all this works together, there's nothing that really comes first, reflecting the nature of the dependent arising of things.

They're all pieces that feed each other. The values becoming erotic and caught up in the soul-making dynamic, the dimensionality, the beyondness, the meaningfulness, the willingness and capacity to be challenged, stretched, to aspire, the strength, the courage, the devotion. Crisis as opportunity, conflict and absence of value—also as the ground, if you like, of our moral being, the soil out of which our soul grows, our moral being grows. All these factors can feed each other.

And with that expanding, enriching, deepening, widening of our soul's relationship to values in this sense, there will come, in the dimensionality, in the sense of beyondness, there can come a sense of the divinity of values, the divinity of these ideas as I touched on in the last part—that possibility.

It's interesting, going back to Plato, when he writes about virtue. I was reading an article by Julia Annas, and she points out, she traces through his works over many years different positions that Plato took, or presented, with regard to the relationship of virtues and divinity. It's quite interesting in that we see similar positions in different traditions of Buddha Dharma.

One, in the Phaedo for instance, there's a teaching there, a thrust to the teaching there, that is really about the practitioner, the philosopher, dying to the world, detaching themselves from the everyday concerns and the everyday desires and beliefs. True virtue there does not actually deal with the concerns or the events or the matters of everyday life, but actually true virtue, she writes, consists in an escape or purification from them. Socrates in Plato's text of the Theaetetus says, "Human life must unavoidably contain evil, so we should try to flee from here to there, to the divine realm, away from life, ending rebirth. So we should try to flee from here to there as quickly as we can. And flight is becoming like God to the extent that we can. And becoming like God is becoming just and pious with wisdom."

So there's one teaching here, one thrust through the writings of Plato, that's this very world-escaping, ending-rebirth kind of thrust in which virtue has its place either as a stepping stone to this escape from the world, this removal from the world, or virtue is identified with being exactly that removal from the world. So there is this kind of going hand in hand of the movement of transcendence and the opening to what is transcendent to the world that goes hand in hand in that particular thread of Plato's teachings—that transcending and opening to what is transcendent to our world goes hand in hand with this kind of regard for our world and the affairs of humanity as insignificant.

In later dialogues of Plato, a different position is presented. The idea of the individual's becoming like God is framed as the divine has, if you like, operates with goodness and as goodness and wants goodness, so that when we see aright, when we act and choose and sense in line with goodness, we're actually putting ourselves, so to speak, in the service of, or we become part of the unfolding of the divine goodness and the unfolding and the enactment of the divine's intention for goodness in the world. So you get that in the Philebus and the Timaeus and sometimes in the Laws.

"The work of the divine reason is to organize things for good," Annas writes, "since the divine is good and seeks to spread goodness in the way it orders things. Becoming like God thus comes to be construed as aspiring to identify with the goodness-producing works of the divine, which makes it less surprising that this is a characterization of virtue. Virtue continues to be seen as imposing rational order on potentially refractory materials, like our desires and our obstinateness. But this is connected with the divine."

So one is a world-transcending movement, which regards virtue as either a stepping stone to that transcendence and escaping and disregarding the world, or identifies virtue with that very escaping and disregarding the world. And then in the later dialogues, there's more a sense of virtue, our virtue being, if you like, almost an identification with or an instrument of the divine virtue.

Can you hear already there's parallels between the sort of classical Pali Canon thrust, which I mentioned, I think, near the beginning of the talks on ethics—to end rebirth, to transcend, to be removed from the world, and whatever care we take with paramis and other dhammas and cultivation of sila is really secondary. It serves the purpose of a springboard or an enabling of that transcendence; that's the primary purpose of them. Versus other interpretations or spins that you get in Mahayana Buddhism, for example, where it's possible that the Bodhisattva or the Buddha, certainly a Buddha, certainly, but also Bodhisattva or practitioner, through the Buddha nature, is expressing, manifesting, radiating, if you like, the Dharmakaya, the body of beautiful qualities, of virtues of the Buddha in this world.

Of course, if we practice soul-making in relation to all this, and as we've said, in the context of soul-making Dharma teachings, in a way both of those options can open up for us. But we would certainly expect the second option to open up. Why? Because as something gets involved in the soul-making dynamic, as something becomes an erotic, imaginal object for us—in this case, the ideational imaginal, or through an imaginal figure, the values become erotically imaginal for us—then the self-sense is subsumed into that, becomes imaginal, the world-sense, all of it. Our eros itself, our passion itself becomes imaginal. And in that, it gains, all that gains dimensionality and divinity.

So again, with the soul-making dynamic, there's a possibility for us to see our virtues—the virtues that our life enacts, plays out, our sensibility to them, our choosing them, our courage to enact them in body, speech and mind—is actually the experience in this world of the Buddha nature's virtues, of the Dharmakaya, of God's goodness, of the attributes of God. We would expect that perception to become available, that conception to become available as something we can entertain. It's just a sense and an idea that arises naturally through practice. And with all that, other possibilities start to offer themselves, become available.

Again, I want to read you a passage from, I think it's from Hartman. Here he writes—he's talking about how we sense values—and he says, "Grasping a moral value is sensing it, or more precisely, being gripped by it."

Grasping a moral value is sensing it, or more precisely, being gripped by it. I was struck, reading that, by how interesting I found his choice to put it in the passive voice. We are gripped by a moral value. For us to grasp the moral value is for us to be gripped by it. The ideal moral value, the ideational-imaginal moral value, has some agency on our psyche—just as we speak about with images. They have autonomy and agency. That's one of the elements, isn't it?

This being gripped by a value, by the angelic quality of a value, by its autonomy and its independence—this being gripped by is the crucial thing for effecting change. Perhaps the strength of that grip and the number of people who are gripped in that way is significant in terms of developing a current, a wave, a momentum for political or social change.

Again, we relate this to the elements of the imaginal when we speak about autonomy of image and of self. We never lose our own autonomy, and I think it's important to realize we can grasp a moral value. It grips us, but there's still an element where we remain free to choose in that direction or not, to be in service to that moral value or not.

Is it the case that there is no free will here? That the moral value utterly determines my will and I have no choice but to realize it? Or do I retain some autonomy, some freedom of will? This is a related question, a whole question of freedom of will. But we can begin to sense more and more this autonomy and agency of the imaginal as potential.

All this, again, is part of the enriching and deepening, dimensionalizing and divinizing of our sense and concept of this ideational imaginal, of the moral values.

It's interesting to consider: is it the case that the higher values and virtues, the ones that are more redolent of divinity, are in a way more easily disturbed? They're weaker. Hartman would say they're weaker—they're higher, but they're weaker. They're less popular, less commonly realized. But at the same time, they also seem to be the ones that elicit the most profound dedication and sacrifice in the relatively fewer people who are devoted to their actualization. Those values that seem more noble, more divine, give rise to the most profound dedication and sacrifice in those who are sensitive to them. Could this fact be significant when we speak of potential systemic or political change, social change?

Think about figures like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and Mandela—three almost iconic figures, completely devoted to justice, or at least a huge part of what they did was this devotion to justice. They were powerfully influential figures. But I wonder whether they had something about their person as well, about their own ethos. They were rarely explicit about it or trumpeted it, but it was there. Something of their ethos had something of the spiritual and the holy and the noble in it. They had what Hartman calls radiant virtue—this radiancy of being that bestows a spiritual light on those around one.

Did they exude or transmit or communicate in their being and in their rhetoric something more than merely the values of justice? They're talking about justice, they're working for justice, but there's something else going on here. In contrast, there are other situations where there's a need for social justice, other social justice movements where the higher imagination, the sense of higher values, has somehow not been ignited. That higher imagination, the imaginal, hasn't been captured there.

Many issues contribute to this predicament, partly because they might lack a person who, in their being and in their speaking, communicates that, exudes that radiant virtue. But is it possible that with the values, when there's a sense of more divinity, there's a deeper and fuller, more intense devotion to and dedication and willingness to sacrifice for those values?

This can come through the value itself, or it can come through a person who, in a way, is a channel—whose being, as we discussed when we spoke about the self, is a refraction of a daemon that embodies that value, or a reflection of that. They're refracting an angel, or they're refracting an idea, an ideal, in this sense that we may know.

With the sense of divinity somehow present around that issue, it becomes part of what people are actually dedicated to. It's more than just the plain issue of, say, social justice, in whatever context it is. It includes that, of course. It never removes itself from that and completely transcends that.

But it has other dimensions because other, even higher values are wrapped up in it, exerting an attraction on the soul and a loyalty in the soul that is sensitive to them—devotion, dedication.

So with all this dimensionality, this sense of divinity opening up in regard to values, there is also the possibility of the sense of divinity in the values themselves being opened up. And then that has an effect, again, on choices, on stances, on sensibilities, on capacities.

This dimensionality is actually, in certain ways, part of different teachings and different cosmologies. There are some Islamic cosmologies that present a kind of three-tier picture of the universe, if you like. I want to read you a passage from Henri Corbin, who is writing about the works of a Shiite philosopher, Qadi Sa'eed Qummi, but it describes a certain cosmology. What he's describing is actually quite a common cosmology, again, coming out of the original Platonic ideas and Platonic maps and notions and cosmologies and through the Neoplatonic and into Christianity and Islam and Judaism and all kinds of other philosophies.

He says there are three categories of universe. First, there's the phenomenal world, a realm where things are perceptible to the senses. So that's the world that everyone would agree on. But then there is the supersensible world, the world of the soul or angel souls, commonly designated malakut, the place of the mundus imaginalis, the world of the imaginal, whose organ of perception is cognitive imagination. And then thirdly, there is the intelligible world of the pure intelligences or angel intelligences, whose organ of perception is the intuitive intellect.

That three-tiered cosmology was, as I said, very, very common. The second two tiers are alien to our normal, dominant Western outlook. The second of those—the world of the soul or angel souls, the place of the mundus imaginalis—is, of course, one way of framing what we've been talking about a lot with the soul-making teachings. And now when we talk about the ideational imaginal, one way we can think about it is as corresponding to this third tier, this third level of cosmology.

It's such a strange concept and language, it almost doesn't resonate for most people, I would imagine, in the modern Western world: the intelligible world of the pure intelligences or angel intelligences, whose organ of perception is the intuitive intellect. So our intuitive intellect can perceive these ideas, these ideals, this ideational imaginal. And these intelligences or angel intelligences that exist there are also said to be—and they are unified with their object of intellection.

This is all strange language. What it means is that the angel or the intelligence, the mind, if you like, the consciousness in that realm is united with its object. And so, for example, the intelligence that knows and meditates on in that realm, let's say, justice or kindness, is itself one with the kindness. There's a unity of subject and object postulated there.

Interestingly, I'll just read a bit more because I find it very interesting. Our philosopher—he means this Qadi Sa'eed Qummi—relates these three categories of universe to three categories of space and three of time. There is the obscure, dense time of the sensible world, so our usual sense of time. There is the subtle time of the imaginal world, of the malakut, of the mundus imaginalis, and then there is the even more subtle time, the absolutely subtle time of the world of the intelligence, the world of the ideational imaginal.

It's quite involved—he says a bit more—but all of them come from, all these worlds open up from the energy which is sometimes designated as nafas al-rahman, the breath of the merciful one. The breath of the merciful one, Allah, is what opens up and keeps in existence these levels of world. Sometimes it's called that, the breath of the most merciful; sometimes it's called the primordial cloud, amma.

And then he writes: Having established this initial schema, our philosopher is now in a position to conceive the reality of events and forms, which, while not ceasing to be events and forms, possess a time and a space that are in no way those of the sensible world to which we are accustomed exclusively to relate our notions of event and form.

In other words, we usually think of event and form as being in our world, and we say this happened on June the 14th at this time over there, and this form—I saw this form or this event happened or whatever. But with this scheme, there's then the possibility of events and forms that happen at other levels, in other times, in another time frame, if you like, another dimension of time, another kind of space than what we're used to in our sensible world.

So again, there's this dimensionalizing that doesn't—there's not just a duality between form and formless. There are different levels of formation.

Actually, I'll just read a bit more, because: There exists between these three categories of universe a certain number of essential relationships in that each higher universe is the cause of the one below it, and contains, in a manner more subtle and elevated, the totality of universes below it.

So, in some way, the mundus imaginalis contains and corresponds—has correspondences between the mundus imaginalis and our world, that everyone would agree on, the world of sensible physical phenomena.

Moreover, he continues, while thus containing and enveloping the totality of the universes below it, each higher universe is also the esoteric aspect, the hidden aspect of this totality, its hidden inner aspect or centre.

So the esoteric, hidden aspect of this world is the world of angels, of the imaginal. As we say, we look at this beautiful flower on my desk, and it's gorgeous in its form and color, etc., in its materiality, and it's also refracting, reflecting, echoing, mirroring, expressing, corresponding to something on another level in the mundus imaginalis, as is myself and yourself. Daemon refracted. We echo, mirror, refract, reflect, express, manifest something in the angelic realm. And the whole world is like that.

There's a complication here that I think is important, and I won't go into now in that —well, two things actually to say. One is that in the particular cosmology he's talking about, it's almost like each person has or creates their own universe. So the mundus imaginalis has this objectivity to it, and yet my mundus imaginalis is different than yours, and correspondingly with the others.

So there's a personal nature to this cosmology. It's almost as if different universes are opening up with each person at their center. And yet there's still an objectivity there. That's the first point.

The second point is that usually, or often, what goes with that kind of three-tier cosmology is a hierarchy. And some of the dangers we talked about and what that can do in terms of attitudes to the material phenomenal world. I'm not sure that danger is automatically implied or consequent, but it might be there or not there, even if there is postulated a hierarchy. In other words, the level of the ideas, the intelligences and the objects of intellection is higher than the *mundus imaginalis*, which is higher in hierarchy than the phenomenal, sensible, physical world.

Even if that hierarchy is there, it may or may not lead to denigration. It may actually increase the veneration, the devotion to the sense of beauty of the phenomenal physical world. By giving it that dimensionality, by giving it that rootedness, by giving it that beyondness and mystery, all that. Or it may not.

We're also free to entertain a conception that doesn't hierarchize, if that's a verb, doesn't place those three levels in any kind of hierarchy. So it's almost like we can regard—what we're trying to open up now is the ideational, imaginal—we regard that whole realm or sphere of ideas, ideals, as not necessarily higher than the world of

images, the *mundus imaginalis*. We could regard them as non-hierarchical realms that open up for perception, for experience, or we can regard them hierarchically. That's part of our freedom of conception, freedom to entertain different conceptions.

But where there is soul-making in relation to values... where the soul-making dynamic, as I said, starts to open, starts to subsume and draw into its process the whole realm of the ideas, of values, and values as ideas, ideals. Where there's eros of values, something like these kinds of senses of the values, of the moral values as divine ideas. I use those words, as I said, interchangeably, as they have been in history.

Something like those senses, something like that will emerge out of the sense of dimensionalizing. Some kind of sense of their autonomy, some kind of sense of their agency, their pull, their demand, their call, our duty to them, etc. All that will open up. The possibilities are the particulars of the possibility, the way it opens up for each soul, or different times in practice, etc., in life. That might vary, but something like this, I think, will be inevitable once the values are caught up for us in the soul-making dynamic, once we have a soul-making and erotic relationship with them.

And then we can sense ourselves in our meditations, in our life, in our being, in our sensibility, in our acts and choices and stands as participating in that divine sphere realm of ideas. And in participate, we participate in this or that value. Like this or that moral value. And there's a nobility that comes with that. There's a grace and a privilege. It gives our life a sense of beauty, nobility, along with everything else.

Nobility is a word we may come back to because Nikolai Hartmann uses it in a particular way and that's not the way I'm using it right now. So we may come back to that, what he means by that, because it's quite interesting. But I mean more that the participation in values in this way, the sense of participation, comes with the soul-making participation being an element of the imaginal, an element also then of the ideational imaginal. And it brings with it, among other gifts, among other graces, a sense of nobility.

Noble is also a word, of course, that we have in the Dharma tradition. Noble truths and noble ones, etc. *Arya* is the Pali. And I don't know, there is some relationship between *Arya* and Aryan and somehow the peoples that traveled over to India, emigrated from India, from Iran. And perhaps it might have had some ethnic or even racist implications as they were purer or better, I don't know. And in our culture, in English, nobility also has a kind of class association with it. But I mean it more in its soul sense, in the nobility of a being, of a soul, of a disposition, of an ethos.

And to me that's very much part of the territory that opens up for us and the flavor of soul that opens up in our self-sense as we allow the soul and encourage the soul to engage with higher values, moral values in these ways.

I remember teaching quite a few years ago with a teacher, a colleague, and she was giving a talk and I was obviously there present. Some part of it, she started talking about this word noble, as in noble truths and noble ones, etc., that the Buddha used quite a lot in his teaching in the Pali Canon. And she said, "I just can't relate to that word." And she seemed quite embarrassed about it, or embarrassed even about talking about it, or imagining that it might be something that had anything to do with herself, or that she might grow into. I can't remember what the larger point she was making was.

But I was struck by that, because for me it's a very beautiful word. It captures quite well certain qualities of soul, and directions and alignments and devotions of soul and ethos. And I think where there is soul-making, it will bring a sense of nobility. And where there is this kind of soul-making relationship with the virtues and with moral values, with the ideation of moral values, it will bring that, inevitably. It will weave it in.

So all this asks quite a lot of us, as is often the case with soul-making teachings.

And as I mentioned earlier, there's often—not always, and the relationship is complex, so I don't want to oversimplify—but there's often a correlation between how entangled we are in the pain of the inner critic or anxiety about what others think of us. There's frequently an inverse relationship between the strength of this self-anxiety and inner criticism, and our capacity for virtue and for developing sensitivity to moral values, especially the more elevated ones.

I remember seeing a television advertisement for some car. Like most car commercials, it featured someone driving, presenting that person and their driving experience in an almost fantastical way—as if this particular car would transform you into someone wonderful, make your life extraordinary, allow you to experience yourself in this elevated manner simply through owning it. The soundtrack included the line "dance like no one is watching," which I believe was from a popular song.

The entire tenor and thrust of this advertisement centered around a woman driving alone, emphasizing themes of independence and freedom—freedom to be herself. The marketing strategy relied on the allure of individual self-expression, assuming that our attraction to this concept would, by association, create desire for the car itself.

But "dance like no one is watching" is actually about self-acceptance and relief from anxiety—specifically, relief from worrying about others' judgments. If the advertisement had presented this more truthfully, it would have acknowledged the real question: why do I care if someone's watching? It's because I'm concerned about their opinions, anxious about their judgments of me.

This self-anxiety is, at most, a lesser concern than authentic individual self-expression. The latter sounds more noble, appears to be a worthier value. But the advertisement was conflating these two very different things. This conflation reflects our problematic conception of and relationship with individuality—individuality as a diminished value in our broader society, precisely because we lack a deeper, richer understanding of what true individuality might be.

Wrapped up in our current understanding is social anxiety, the inner critic, the persistent concern: do they think I'm okay? What will others think of me? As I mentioned, there's a relationship between this anxiety over self-appearance and a diminished capacity for virtue. It's a reciprocal dynamic: the more self-anxiety and inner criticism we carry, the less we tend to care for virtues in their full breadth and height.

When the inner critic gains a strong grip, it can actually prevent ethical sensitivity from developing. But the reverse is equally true. When we begin cultivating this ideational, imaginal sense of values—when we develop a soul-making relationship with virtue, giving attention to these qualities so they can grow within our soul—the self-anxiety often diminishes naturally.

This happens partly because the self becomes subsumed into the soul-making process, and we begin to sense ourselves as image. Social self-anxiety is related to not sensing the self as image, to lacking a sense of dimensionality, divinity, archetypal or imaginal roots and origins to the self.

Catherine shared that Ruth King, an African-American Dharma teacher, had observed that many Westerners seem to have very little roots at all—virtually no sense of grounding. There are complex social and historical reasons for this phenomenon. She was speaking particularly about white people in the United States, though this might extend to Europe as well.

But there's the possibility of cultivating an entirely different kind of root system—roots in sensing oneself as connected to the divine, having imaginal origins and foundations. Without this deeper rooting, we have no anchor. We're blown about by every wind, desperately vulnerable and fragile in the face of others' opinions.

We live within a culture that promotes an impoverished, shrunken, narrow and shallow form of individuality. It has no roots, or very poor roots planted in depleted soil —flimsy, dry earth that cannot sustain genuine growth. But we can open up and deepen those roots, which gives us tremendous strength and capacity.

There's this reciprocal relationship where causality flows in both directions—an inverse correlation between care for ethics and self-anxiety. Part of what emerges from that strength, from that deeper rooting, from the involvement of values in the soul-making dynamic and the corresponding recognition of self as imaginal, is what allows us to experience what we might call healthy guilt, or what I prefer to term remorse. I use "remorse" to distinguish it from guilt, which, as I pointed out in earlier talks, is usually unhelpful.

Nikolai Hartman makes this point quite emphatically—that healthy guilt and remorse are actually necessary for our moral being. So again, let me share a passage where he articulates what's demanded of us in our relationship to values, in our exploration of morals, for cultivating a wide, deep, rich and beautiful relationship with moral being. He also illuminates what might grow from soul-making that includes and involves moral values.

He writes: "There is a will to responsibility, even to guilt, as regards one's own conduct. There is a repugnance to the presumption of exculpation, of being rid of guilt, as implying a repudiation of guilt. It is not as if one wanted guilt as such; one would be glad not to have it. But once we are laden with it, we cannot allow it to be taken away without denying our selfhood, our personhood. A guilty man has a right to carry his guilt."

He must refuse deliverance from without. To retain his guilt is valuable for him despite its oppressive load. It signifies for him the retention of his personality, of his personhood, the preservation and recognition of his freedom—his moral freedom, his freedom of will. With his guilt, he would lose a greater moral good: his manhood. In other words, if he lost his guilt in that way, if he just ignored it or zapped it, he would actually lose something else. He would lose his personhood.

"In taking upon himself his own deed and his guilt, in asserting his responsibility, in his sincere willingness to carry it, there is a moral pride in the free deed which speaks out. It is the majestic right to manhood"—let's say personhood. "It is the majestic right to personhood, the foundation upon which all moral being and non-being rest. To surrender it is moral meanness, betokening incapacity to be free."

He continues: "The presumption in washing away guilt, in discharging it, the admission of 'mitigating circumstances,' is at bottom a moral disenfranchisement and a degradation of the man."

So it's a strong teaching there. And again, it's difficult for us in our culture of inner critic and the pain that causes—the pandemic of that. It's difficult for us to recognize the place and the necessity, perhaps, of guilt or remorse. I admit that I acted poorly there, that I chose not in line with my highest aspirations.

He also makes the point that "a conflict of values inheres in the concept of guilt is not to be overlooked." Basically he's saying guilt is an interesting phenomenon, because "guilt is and remains a disvalue in man. No one, so long as he is guiltless, could wish for it. But the astonishing thing is that when a man has once burdened himself with it and bears it, it gains the character of a value which contradicts the value of innocence."

So there's something—no one would want guilt. It's a disvalue, something we don't want. But once it's there and we can open to it in this way—what I prefer to call remorse—once we accept it, hold it, work with it, and take on its lessons, are taught by it, it actually has the character of a value. We become more mature; our moral being grows through it.

So is there a necessity for the self, for the soul, for a certain kind of relationship with guilt or remorse? Might it also be a necessity in our relationship with such difficult and fundamental issues—issues that question our fundamental orientations, priorities, and perspectives on almost everything, but fundamentally on the world and on humanity's place in the world? Is there a necessity for remorse and guilt in our relationship with issues like climate change and species extinction?

Just as there is—and many people have pointed out—a necessity for grief. And some people, myself included, would say there's a necessity for anger, righteous indignation. Maybe there's a necessity for guilt.

I remember Catherine leading a guided meditation on one of our soul-making retreats. She had seven stages, I think. We had to choose something to become image for us—maybe it was on Sensing with Soul. Something in the world that we would then... She was guiding us through ways we could support the possibility of sensing that thing with soul. I chose an apple tree in my garden.

One of the stages she went through—I can't remember how she worded it—had to do with either asking forgiveness for or feeling remorse for how we have looked on that thing in the past without soul, and so not seen its holiness, not conceived of or sensed its divinity, its dimensionality. That particular strand at that point really touched me in what she was guiding us through.

Even with this apple tree, which I very much enjoyed and loved, I could feel pregnant in that stage my own and also humanity's impoverished, shrunken, narrowed, and shallowed relationship with nature, with the things of the world—and allowing my heart and my soul to be touched by it. It felt very beautiful, very important.

But in relation to issues like climate change and species extinction—massive, massive issues, fundamental issues in so many ways—might grief, anger, and also guilt, in the sense that Hartman is talking about, remorse, be part of healing? Part of allowing us greater strength, greater uprightness, greater capacity for courage, for action, and a greater capacity of heart to hold all this, the depths of emotions?

If we think about the actuality of our lives and their complexity, whether in a much wider social or global sense or just even in a personal sense, sometimes the structure of situations creates or presents to us choices between what basically, if we look at them in terms of values, are choices between different values. If I do this, I'm prioritizing and validating and choosing in line with this value, but I'm neglecting this one and transgressing, if you like, a commitment to that other value.

Opposing values present themselves to us and we have to choose. So it might be just in a very personal situation where it's a matter of truthfulness to a beloved one, but one knows that truth will hurt them. Notice I didn't say harm, which is one of the Buddha's stipulations about right speech—that it's not harmful. But hurt is not harm.

That a person might find this truth that I'm sharing or telling them about, or whatever, they might find that hurtful, may not be harming to them. It might just hurt. Life hurts sometimes. Truth hurts sometimes. But it might be that kind of choice. What's my loyalty to in that kind of situation? The truthfulness or the non-hurting? The kindness? The compassion?

There's not a formulaic answer to that. Each situation is different. Each situation is new, has a different subtle particularity and nuance to it.

Or it might be in a wider social situation. So, for example, with the Extinction Rebellion actions, they disrupt, to a certain extent, the business-as-usual functioning of at least portions of a city or society for a certain amount of time. It blocks traffic. Some

people can't get to work. Some people are trying to go here or there. They're delayed. Or if you want to disrupt Heathrow's functioning in protest at the building of a third runway, it will disrupt and it will upset a lot of people.

And so one has an allegiance to a certain extent to not wanting to cause upset, not wanting to inconvenience. And on the other hand, one has an allegiance to the need for action and waking up with regards to climate change and species extinction. And so these two values are in opposition. And myself and some friends as well, when we were considering getting involved in Extinction Rebellion actions, this was part of what came up. Certainly it came up for me and I think for others as well. I'm not sure about upsetting people. I'm not sure is it ethical to do that? Let alone the possibility of a kind of backlash for upsetting people.

So there's no real escape from this in life, this fact that we will be culpable in one way or another in situations. Even when we're choosing a certain value, we are often culpable because there's another value in the situation that in choosing whatever we choose, we're neglecting the other one. So that happens often.

Let me read a passage by Hartman on that very point. So he's talking about this kind of thing, these kinds of situations: "It is inherent in the essence of such moral conflicts that in them value stands against value and that it is not possible to escape from them without being guilty."

Here it is not the values as such in their pure ideality which are in conflict. That's something we'll come back to. But he says, the conflict arises from the structure of the situation. This makes it impossible to satisfy both at the same time.

Important point, important for our moral maturity, also our moral intelligence. We have to realize this is the case. If I'm trying to wend a line, to travel a path where I'm guilt-free, maybe that's a pie-in-the-sky delusion. I will be confronted very often in life, in small ways and in large ways, with situations where I have to choose one thing over another. Not to choose is a sin, in Hartman's words. It's a withdrawing of my soul's engagement with life, with the sphere of morality. It's a refusal to participate in life, in values. It's a refusal to grow my soul.

But to engage and think I can be guilt-free is also just lacking in a kind of mature understanding of the nature of our life, the nature of samsara, if you like, the nature of moral situations.

So, it's asking quite a lot. We can be given quite a lot through the soul-making process and dynamic, as I said, as it starts to subsume and involve values, but this is asking quite a lot, as does all deep and wide practice, and certainly soul-making practices.

And is part of what's necessary also the kind of training in regard to our heart and our emotional capacity and our emotional awarenesses we put so much emphasis on in the Soul-Making Dharma? Is that also a kind of necessary prerequisite or at least part and parcel of our ethical training? So the ethos and emotional training are linked.

So as I said, our capacity to feel certain emotions and difficult emotions, like guilt, like grief, like anger. And sometimes, particularly with grief, it can be heartbreaking. Do I have, is the heart big enough? Have I made my heart big enough? Have I somehow opened the capacity of the heart that it can hold all that? Am I able to discern and disentangle the different strands of emotion that might arise as what feels like just an overwhelming and confusing emotional complex?

Can I see, oh, there's this emotion, there's that emotion. Can I just see, ah, there's a few different things in there. And can I focus on perhaps each one in turn as well as on the whole complex? Do I have clarity as well as capacity?

This development of emotional skill takes real dedication to cultivate. Do I have the ability to prioritize certain emotions, for example? Can I focus on my love for a particular value and prioritize that? Can I stay steady with this strand of emotion, dwelling in that deeper current of devotion and alignment, that love for this or that value, as we discussed earlier regarding guilt?

All these aspects of what we might call training of the heart—our emotional awareness and skills—may well be necessary prerequisites for our further growth in terms of our ethos, our relationship with ethics. And all this takes tremendous sensitivity.

The soul's sensitivity to values and virtues is something that, as Hartman noted, varies among individuals. Not everyone has equal sensitivity to moral values, to the range of values, or to certain higher values. But we can care for our soul's sensitivity to values and virtues. We can nourish it and seek to support its growth—its widening, deepening, and heightening.

Our sensitivity to values and virtues allows our participation in them to flourish. The degree of our soul's sensitivity is the degree to which our participation in them is supported. It begins with sensitivity—with the soul being stirred, feeling resonance and beauty. Through the natural eros present there, we are drawn into participation in these values.

This soul sensitivity to values and virtues, in their breadth, height, and depth, is itself a virtue. Sensitivity to virtues is itself a virtue. When we survey the world around us, we might notice that some sensitivities appear much rarer than others. The sensitivity

to not killing, for instance—while there are many forms of killing in the world—represents a fairly common ethical sensitivity. Not stealing, similarly. But other sensitivities seem far more rare, much less commonly encountered.

Consider, for example, that moment in the Polly Higgins interview when something shifted in the flow of conversation—the perspective that valued the earth in and for itself, not merely as support for human survival and prosperity. That value in itself seems far rarer. Are there indeed higher and more rarely sensed values? I believe there are.

How much of this rarity regarding certain values and sensitivity to them results from historical conditioning and the partiality of moral vision in any culture? How much is trainable, and how much is innate to particular souls? These are fascinating questions to consider as we explore what it might mean to reopen avenues of moral education that seem to have vanished from our culture.

Caring for and valuing the ethical rights of the earth, of species, of ecosystems—this involves a different ontology altogether. In terms of ethics and ethical sensibility, this may be more rare and relatively unusual. Several factors may contribute to this rarity: the dilution of our perception, the dispersal of effects from our personal actions and choices within the vast web of others' choices, and the decline in recognizing virtue itself as important alongside efficacy in ethical life, especially when situations become complex or appear hopeless.

Related to this is the rarity of a metaphysics that supports recognizing the earth, an ecosystem, or a species as valuable in itself—over and above the sum of its individual members' suffering. Why do some people seem more aware, steadfast in their commitment, and attuned to certain moral principles than others?

I was struck by Greta Thunberg when I first read about her solitary vigil outside the Parliament building in Stockholm. Her lonely determination, her steadfastness, her will impressed me deeply. The article mentioned that she had Asperger's, placing her on what's called the autistic spectrum. This led me to wonder about something: one characteristic of Asperger's, as I understand it, is that someone with this condition may not be as relationally empathic or sensitive, not as attuned to or impacted by what another person is feeling or expressing through facial expressions, gestures, or emotional tone. They don't pick up on these social cues as readily or feel such sensitivity to them.

Setting aside the pathological implications of the term "Asperger's," someone who leans more toward principles and abstractions might, in the absence of such pulls from others' opinions and emotional cues, be able to remain more steadfast and clear. They

can keep their sight fixed on principles and what might seem like abstractions—virtues and values—that exert a felt demand of duty stronger than the emotions of people directly in front of them, who might be angry about blocked traffic or upset by challenging statements about what humanity needs to renounce.

For most people without Asperger's, while there remains some sensitivity to the impact and demands of abstract principles like values, they are more impacted by, sensitive to, and swayed by other persons' emotions. They feel more empathy toward other people. This suggests that for some individuals, the path into soul-making with regard to values—this whole approach to ethics—may lead more naturally through relationship with an imaginal figure who is a person. Through this relationship, they implicitly connect with the values embodied by that figure.

Remember that values constitute an element of the imaginal. This way into soul-making—through an imaginal figure with its implicit or explicit values—may prove more powerful in affecting moral allegiances, choices, and behavior in actual life.

So there may be differences among people in whether one gravitates more easily toward principles, ideas, ideals, values, and virtues, or toward people—imaginal or actual. This difference may have implications for the possibilities and particular path of moral training and moral development.

Consider how much of Jesus's moral power and influence comes from the stories in the Gospels rather than from Christian dogmatics or theology. There's something deeply touching in the personhood revealed through those stories of Jesus, which for many people carries the moral power and influence of the Christian message.

But there exists this possibility for everyone—though perhaps with personal predispositions—that relationship with what may seem to others like abstractions—values, virtues, beauty, ideals—can be genuinely soul-making, as we've been exploring.

Is there, then, a kind of pull in opposite directions between ethical ideas on one hand and relational empathy on the other, between principles and personal sensitivities? It's not simple, of course. One could imagine someone with very little empathy for persons yet maintaining allegiance to some principle or order. This still needs directing in the right way.

But for most people, there's probably this double possibility—both through the imaginal and through the ideational imaginal. As part of the complexity of our moral life, there's often a call, a tug from both directions. So there emerges a kind of fluid and sensitive balance, a conversation of allegiances to principles and to immediate empathy.

Consider again the example of participating in an Extinction Rebellion action while people around you grow upset. Maybe both these capacities—principled commitment and empathic sensitivity—are part of a good life, a beautiful life. They're both virtues.

Obviously, if we were completely without empathy or sensitivity to others, to whoever stands before us and how they're feeling, that would not be virtue but dis-virtue. But this possibility to widen, extend, and heighten our sensitivity to values, to grow in our relationship with moral values by deepening our commitment and prioritizing of them—this is both possible and deeply beautiful.

Let me read another passage where Hartman describes a kind of maturity and depth of relationship with moral values. He writes about the wise person:

"To the wise man, the domination of values in their ideality—the domination, in Platonic phrase, of moral ideas—is something natural. In this sense, Plato was right when he joined this virtue to the beholding of ideas, and indeed in such a way that a man returning from the vision of ideas sees in their light everything which appears to him in life. The wise man carries into all the relations of life the standards of value which he possesses in his spiritual taste."

So you meditate, you have that direct encounter with what might seem an abstract notion—this ideational, imaginal moral value. One carries that back into life where it colors and shapes our perspective, our perceptions of our lives and relationships. It orients us.

"He saturates his outlook upon life with them. This domination of values does not come to him by way of reflection or through knowledge of commandments, but is an immediate, intuitive, emotionally-toned domination, which from the centre of moral perception penetrates all unobserved and impulsive excitations, and is therefore already alive in them."

There's something very beautiful in this description. It's not something we arrive at through logical deduction. We're not simply obeying commandments or following the five precepts. Rather, there's something immediate, intuitive, emotionally toned. Something in our heart and soul is touched, comes into contact with the ideational imaginal of a moral value. This spreads out into our life, our sensibility, our perceptions, our choices and actions.

With all these possibilities and relationships, Hartman writes something crucial: "Man, as the product of conditions, is neither good nor bad, however much disposition, upbringing and milieu may smooth or make difficult the way to moral goodness. He can only become one or the other, become good or bad, insofar as he enters the conflicts of life and makes decisions in their midst."

And then there's a third possibility, which is meditation on these ideas or ideals that we've been discussing directly - not through an imaginal figure first, but approaching them straight on. We can take the idea of justice, or compassion, or courage, or beauty, or truth, and work with these directly as meditation objects.

This requires a different kind of approach than we might typically think of when we consider meditation. We're not working with the breath, or with a visual form, but with something more subtle - with the very essence of a moral quality or value. Yet this can be profoundly nourishing and transformative for the soul.

We begin by bringing the concept to mind - let's say justice. But we're not approaching this intellectually, analytically, trying to define it or think about it. Rather, we're opening to it imaginally, allowing ourselves to sense into what justice feels like, what its essence is. We might sense into its qualities - perhaps there's something of equilibrium, of rightness, of restoration, of fierce clarity.

As we open to this ideational imaginal object, we can feel our whole being - heart, body, energy body, soul - beginning to resonate with this quality. We might feel our posture naturally adjusting, our breath changing, our energy reorganizing itself in relationship to this value. There's something happening at the level of being, not just thinking.

And as with the other forms of meditation we've explored, eros can arise - a deep love for this value, a longing to embody it more fully, to serve it, to let it shape our life more completely. This eros then becomes part of what feeds and sustains the meditation, creating what we might call a virtuous circle of aspiration and realization.

Through this kind of practice, these moral values begin to work on us, to shape us, to become part of the fabric of our being. They're no longer abstract concepts but living realities that inform our perception, our choices, our way of being in the world. This is how we participate in that "building of moral being" that Hartman spoke of - not through mere intellectual understanding, but through this deeper soul-work of imaginally engaging with the highest human values.

these moral values directly.

Actually, a sense of justice, or the idea of justice, or beauty—if we say that. Okay, it's not strictly a moral value, but it almost is for me. But anyway, one can get a sense of, in meditating on that, get a sense of that idea.

I'll come back to that in a second, but in any of these ways—any of those three ways—in meditation, in just being sensitive to, in developing and allowing our sensitivity to, our allowing ourselves to be touched by these values, in feeling our devotion to these values, and in the choices of our actions, of our speech, of our thought, of what we cultivate—all of that, the meditation, the sensitivity, the feeling of our devotion, our actions, our choices, all of that feeds our virtue. It grows the virtues in our soul and grows our soul. It's part of our soul-making. And it starts to seep out, to extend to our whole life.

And in all of those ways—the meditation, the sensitivity, the devotion, the feeling of the devotion to the choices, the cultivation—it's possible to sense or conceive the self and the soul, as I said, as participating in that. If we use that phrase from the Korban passage, the angel or intelligence whose object of intellection is one with it. We sense ourselves participating in these divine ideas—the divine, ideational, imaginal of the values. And there's a privilege, a grace, a beauty in that, a strength, there's meaningfulness in that. We can actually sense it and we can conceive it, this kind of participation in that level of being.

In the third possibility, just in that little list there, so it's possible to take an idea—it might be a certain kind of, as I said, it might be justice, it might be beauty, it might be a certain kind of love. So we may come back to one of the kind of loves that Hartman talks about: love of the remote, love of those in the distant future and the noble soul. One can orient towards that kind of love, or the idea of that kind of love.

And, you know, it might start with reflecting on how I am with that in my life, and sensing my life, and sensing perhaps, maybe I do orient that way, or I don't, and what would open that up, what would make that beautiful for me? Or as I said, I see it in my life, I sense, I'm already touched by that value. I'm already devoted to that value. I can see it in the kinds of choices and sacrifices I make. So again, allowing oneself one's story into it, and then it can kind of crystallize down to the purer idea, the purer ideal. And that can become a meditation object, and we can become kind of absorbed in that sense.

So I'm not talking about a lot of thinking at this point. It's really a kind of a space with the essence of this ideational-imaginal in it.

But in that process, in that meditative process that's possible there, it's, again, at some point it will be inevitable that we will notice, just as in meditation on an imaginal figure, an imaginal other, that self and the world become involved, become implicated, become infected in that meditation, in that opening up of the soul-making sense. So that there starts to be a corresponding sense or image, sense of the self and of the world that is part of the larger picture, larger dynamic, larger actuality of meditating on that ideational, imaginal object.

And the same principles of meditation apply. Here's that beloved other. In this case, it's an idea—moral value, as idea, as essence. But as we meditate, as we meditate and get absorbed in it and feel it with our whole energy body, etc., and that sensitivity and the attunement, the resonances, we start to notice, we will at some point start to notice that self and world are also become caught up. The soul-making sense expands to our sense of self and world. And that's actually, again, part of the deepening and the stabilizing of that kind of meditation.

And there may be, if you do pursue this kind of thing, there may be too, at certain points, a kind of quantum leap. So at first, as I said, it might start—one's actually sort of kind of reflecting on that value or kind of just holding it a little bit in mind and there's thoughts around and then maybe, as I said, a sense of one's life and what the status of one's relationship and orientation is with regard to that ideal.

But as one practices with it, it might then take a kind of quantum leap to another level where there's a sense of another realm. One really feels, "Oh, I'm in another realm here." There's a kind of beatitude there. The pure essence of the idea. And that kind of quantum leap—may or may not, it might be gradual—but there's the possibility of a quantum leap and the possibility of, let's say there's a gradation of possibility in this kind of meditation.

So sometimes you get these quantum leaps in a kind of jhanic meditation, suddenly—I mean really, now I'm in the third jhana, it's really a different realm. It really feels I'm in a different realm here. And so something similar may happen. We enter the sphere, the realm of ideal being, the realm of the ideational, imaginal. And in that, as I said, there is great beauty. There is a beatitude.

So those are possibilities to explore, and certainly in meditation, but also in the wider range of what I've been saying here. So if you want, you can explore that. Perhaps some of you will even develop these ideas and these possibilities and these connections more than I have as time goes on.

Again, with soul-making, there's the opening, the complexifying, the enriching, the extension of the reach, the drawing in of more and more areas of our being, of existence, of our lives, the creation and discovery of different, more and more erotic objects for us, erotic others. And so endless possibilities. That goes with the soul-making dynamic.

So that's here, and it can open out, and perhaps, as I said, some of you will also get likewise interested in this as a certain kind of area of potential opening and exploration for soul-making.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 193

Sīla and Soul (Part 6)

Rob Burbea · 1h08

> *In this sixth installment of his series on ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea delves into the fundamental question of moral ontology: do ethical values exist objectively or are they merely cultural constructs? Drawing on philosopher Nikolai Hartmann's assertion that moral values exist as objective realities in an ideal realm - similar to mathematical truths like pi or the square root of negative numbers - Burbea explores how we might approach ethics with greater philosophical sophistication.*
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> *The talk examines the relationship between free will and moral responsibility, noting that without some notion of free will, the entire foundation of ethics collapses. Burbea discusses how practitioners can work skillfully with guilt - sometimes opening it through seeing conditions, other times maintaining a sense of responsibility that serves moral development. He introduces Hartmann's conception of 'the good' as always choosing the higher value in any given situation, while acknowledging the complex value conflicts we inevitably encounter.*
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> *A key insight emerges around the complexity of individual virtues: even classical virtues like self-control (sophrosone) or gentleness (praotes) require counterweights to remain healthy. Altruism without healthy self-regard becomes tyrannical; loyalty without justice becomes blind. This points toward virtue as synthesis rather than singular qualities, suggesting an ultimate unity of values that remains tantalizingly beyond complete rational comprehension yet available to contemplative insight.*

I'd like to discuss some of the complexities involved in the whole arena of moral values and that kind of consideration of ethics, along with some values and areas that are often not brought to light or talked about. But before getting onto that, let's rummage around just a little bit more in our consideration of the ontology of all of this, partly recapping what we've already said, probably adding a little bit that's new, before moving on.

Reflecting just now, it may be obvious at this point—I don't feel like I have any answers to all these questions that arise in this area. Certainly not any easy answers. And at this point, I'm not sure even how much I'm adding that's original to what's already out there. But as I said, I do want to perhaps shed some light or open up certain areas

that are often less considered when we think about ethics or we approach our moral life. And perhaps someone else or others will pick up some of these threads, some of this material, and take it forward, develop it at some point.

Let me begin again with a little recap about the ontology. With the heritage of modernity and postmodernity, many people—perhaps most people in contemporary culture—have either a conscious position or an aspect of their position vis-à-vis ethics that moral values are subjective. They're contingent; they depend on and arise out of culture, place, and the conditions of history here or there. That would be the dominant view, or at least a significant factor, a significant strand of most people's views nowadays.

I do wonder sometimes, though, if one has a long-standing Dharma practice and has heard lots of teachings where moral values and ethics are not seen as culturally contingent so much—what happens in the psyche there between the pull of the contemporary view of modernity toward regarding them as subjective and contingent, and the Dharma view of laws of the cosmos and of the psyche? What happens to a Dharma practitioner in the contemporary world inwardly in regard to all this?

In contrast to that contemporary view, Nikolai Hartmann asserts and posits that moral values are objective. He certainly admits that historically, in different places, at different times, in different cultures, and also in different persons, the range of values—of what he calls the moral firmament, the whole edifice or structure of the totality of values—that range is limited in the consciousness, in the moral consciousness of a certain culture or a certain person at any time. And that is limited and contingent depending on the culture. But just because our torch beam shines only on a small portion of that firmament at any time, it doesn't actually mean that the firmament itself is subjective. That's his position, and to me it's a very interesting position.

What he offers as proof—the fact of guilt, the fact of an intuitive sense of ethics—to me I'm not sure that they constitute enough evidence to be called proof, strictly speaking. But that's his position, and it's certainly tenable and valid and interesting and powerful.

He also, interestingly, talks about not just the objectivity of values, but the objectivity of the hierarchy of values. So here's the collection of values—these are objective—but also their absolute scale, their arrangement on a hierarchy he would regard as objective.

Let me read a passage where he says that: "Thus much can be said for certain. The rudiments of an absolute scale of values, or this hierarchy of values—which is a higher value, which is a lower value, and where they stand on this sort of ladder—the rudiments of an absolute scale of values are contained in all moral feeling for values. It is clear, even to a very primitive moral sense, that honourableness takes precedence over outward advantage—that honourableness is the higher value than outward advantage. That doing one's duty goes before pleasure." So certainly outward advantage and pleasure have value, but honourableness and doing one's duty have higher value. "The same holds good as a whole of the more obvious gradations in the scale, for instance, in the general preference for moral worth before goods values." In other words, getting rich is not as high on the scale as acting morally, choosing morally.

"In any case," he continues, "so far as a feeling for the values themselves reaches, a sense of their relative importance usually accompanies it." In other words, intuitively we actually have this feeling of the relative importance of values. "The closer the values are in grade—the closer they are in that hierarchy—the less clearly can we discern the order of their preference. Thus the inner situation approaches a conflict of values which actually exists objectively only where values of equal rank stand against each other." So we'll come back to that last point.

And he talks about, in his words, "an astonishing infallibility, a strength of conviction in the sense of relative grade," or intuitive sense of where things stand on this hierarchy, "is enough to justify the old belief in a moral organ"—someone called Hemsterhuis coined the phrase—"an order of the heart, from Pascal, or a logic of the heart, as Scheler said." So these philosophers are talking about the organ, the instrument of moral sense in a human being.

"It is a unique kind of order with its own laws which cannot be proved intellectually, but which equally scorns every intellectual argument brought against it. This is well enough known in the phenomenon of conscience, as in the unerring imputation of guilt, in the sense of responsibility and in the consciousness of guilt, but no less in the infallibility of the prohibitive shrinking from a deed beforehand."

"Certainly this sense of grade varies," he continues, "both in scope and in discrimination, exactly as does the sense of each value. There is also such a thing as blindness to the rank of value, just as there is blindness to material things. And there is perhaps even a perverted or a quite dead valuation of sense. But this is no objection to the certainty and real a priori of the sense of rank, where and insofar as it is present. Exactly the same is true of all genuine a priori"—for example, mathematical truths are a priori truths.

Its universal validity is independent of how many people have the insight. Even if only one person—or no one—actually possesses it, the fact remains that whoever is capable of such insight necessarily has it just as it is in itself and not otherwise.

So there is, according to Hartmann, the objective nature and truth of values, and also their hierarchy. What he offers as proof seems very suggestive to me, pointing toward the objective existence of this hierarchy. But strictly speaking, from a logical standpoint, it doesn't really constitute proof in my mind. The fact of guilt and conscience, the sense of responsibility and consciousness of guilt, the shrinking from doing what we think is wrong beforehand—these constitute important evidence, but fall somewhat short of definitive proof.

If we want to lean more toward the idea of cultural contingency and relativity of values—as many contemporary people do, especially in the wake of postmodern philosophy—we encounter a different problem: Where do we find someone or some group of people who don't have culture? What we witness, what we encounter, are always cultures. We come across nothing else. We encounter ethical or unethical behavior always within the context of human cultures.

As Alasdair MacIntyre points out, human being qua animal—that is, considered purely as animal—prior to or without any particular culture, is a myth. This is myth in the poor sense of the word, in the worst sense. Sometimes people hold this myth of wanting to reduce their understanding of human being to the animality of humanity, as if that were more basic, more true, more real than any cultural accretions or distortions or influences. But that's a myth in the sense that it draws life from a proposition for which there is no evidence. It's not possible to actually encounter such a being.

MacIntyre continues: "Our biological nature certainly places constraints on all cultural possibility. But man who has nothing but a biological nature is a creature of whom we know nothing. It is only man with practical intelligence"—and that, as we have seen, is intelligence informed by virtues, in this case virtues embedded in culture as part of how he defines them—"it's intelligence informed by virtues whom we actively meet in history."

So the proof from the other side—that moral values are only culturally conditioned—is also an impossibility.

But we also spoke briefly about mathematics as a possibly similar set of ontological structures that can exist in ideal form, in the realm of ideas, and that moral values might have a similar ontological status. We discussed the mathematical number pi, an irrational number that can never be precisely instantiated in the world of physical ac-

tuality. And the number i, the imaginary square root of negative one—an imaginary, abstract mathematical construct. These manifest, as does pi, indirectly and very cogently in the way they shape and form manifest physical actuality, but we don't actually encounter them directly.

The same applies to a whole host of other mathematical laws, equations, entities—and also to the quantum Schrödinger wave function, a fluid abstract mathematical entity existing in abstract multidimensional mathematical space that bears a very close relationship with what actually manifests at a certain time and in a certain space. But in itself, we can't even really wrap our usual discursive minds around what it actually is, where it might exist, and what exactly constitutes its ontological reality.

So moral values may have a similar ideal existence—an existence in the realm of ideal forms or ideas. Again, this isn't conclusive, but the fact of the demand for some kind of ontological positioning or categorization of things like mathematical laws and mathematical entities—the fact that most people who reflect on these things feel some need to give them a different reality status than the usual things of physical actuality—opens the door to possibility and legitimacy in other realms too.

There are similarities in the area of logical rules, and possibly also in the realm of moral values as ideal realities. There are differences, which we've talked about briefly, but this doesn't constitute proof so much as it opens a window of possibility, a window of potential legitimization.

In regard to soul-making practice, we have this principle carved out through hard work, careful consideration, and meditative exploration: we can move flexibly, fluidly, agilely, and carefully—with deep attunement and practical significance—between different logoi, different conceptions. In this case, we can move between different ontological frameworks regarding the realm of moral values.

So at times we can lean into entertaining that logos, that conception of moral values having their own kind of real existence in the realm of ideal forms, ideal essences—the sphere of ideas. We can entertain this, place that conception in the soul, in consciousness, for a period of time, for a period of practice, and see what happens. See what unfolds in our meditation, in our outlook on life, in our perspective on different situations, in our sense of our existence and our journey.

Certainly there is the meditative possibility of meditating on these ideal forms—meditating on a certain moral value at the level of an ideal form, in the realm of ideas. When we engage in that meditation and explore that possibility, we're not talking about meditating on a rational definition. We're not defining kindness as this or justice as

that, then meditating on that rational definition or mulling it over. That might have its place—logically arriving at a rational definition can be helpful for some people—but we're really talking about something that goes beyond discursive thought.

That process of pondering logically and rationally and arriving at a rational definition may have its place, but it can never capture the idea in its fullness, in its transcendent essence—for various reasons, some of which I'll explore more as we continue.

Yet it might have its place.

Nor is that kind of meditation—meditation on an idea—really meditation on an instance, on a particular instance of justice that we may have read about, remembered, or imagined. Again, and perhaps even more so than with rational definitions or pondering, an instance—the memory of an instance, the imagination of an instance, the hearing or reading about an instance of justice or kindness or whatever value we're contemplating, whether faithfulness, loyalty, truthfulness—the instance could serve as an entry point to these more transcendent realms, transcendent of the instance, of the particulars of any given instance, this or that particular instantiation of beauty, this or that manifestation of justice.

So an instance could, in meditation, be a starting point and entry point, a springboard if you like, to this other level of the essence of the ideational. But I also want to say that I don't subscribe to the view that the ideational imaginable—as I've mentioned before—or the realm of ideas is necessarily a better kind of meditation or level of meditation than meditation on an instance or an image. We don't have to subscribe to the hierarchy that existed in the metaphysics and cosmology of ancient and medieval times, between the world of physical actuality, the imaginal actuality, and then the higher level of ideational existences, the realm of ideas.

We could, at times, move into that understanding, or some people may subscribe to that hierarchy. Of course, everyone's free to do that. But there's no a priori reason why we have to subscribe to that hierarchy of idea over image. Both can be available as ways in, as important resonances and meditations with regard to our ethical life, and also just with regard to our soul. Both may be helpful in building our moral being, as Hartman says, and in soul-making.

There's also one other reflection—again, one we've touched on before—the possible idea, the possible logos and concept that the very shifting of cultural emphases and perspectives and the shift of the scope, the range of each culture's beam of light, their torchlight within the whole range of values in the vast firmament, that this very shift-

ing could be seen as, could be conceived as part of the world soul's soul-making. It's a movement of soul that's much bigger than an individual and that moves through history, in history, with history, is history.

And in a way, as it shifts—these cultural emphases and perspectives and their scopes, their individual ranges—what gets expressed is what can't be expressed or made manifest all at once. It is actually impossible, just as in some of those mathematical analogies—it's impossible to capture or to manifest and express at the same time, all at once, the whole range of values. It's impossible to live them out. It's impossible even, perhaps, to see them all and hold them all in consciousness at once. Perhaps we'll come back to that later.

But that's an idea that then takes in the notion of cultural relativity and contingency, but casts it in a different light, gives it a different basis, even in conception.

And in this old debate between subjectivity and objectivity—does the mind create the values, or are they objective and the mind just receives them, witnesses them, notices them?—again, there is another level that's possible to us in our sense of it, in our conception of it, which has a non-separation between soul and world, between soul and its objects, its beloved objects, between soul and, in this case, moral values. They are not really separate. They participate in each other. And that's part of the sacredness and mystery.

So the whole dichotomy between subject and object has some mysterious, more mysterious kind of transcendence or synthesis, coincidence of the elements of that dichotomy at another level. And we can, again, get a taste of that in our practice, in our sense of soul-making, and we can entertain it as an idea.

Also in regard to ontology and this whole question of what is real, what is true, we need to consider the whole question of free will versus determinism. This is obviously a really important question. Without a notion of free will, the whole subject of morality just goes away. It has nothing to stand on. We can't talk about morality and what's ethical and what isn't if everything is determined.

If everything is determined—whether physically, because we do this because we're programmed or hardwired that way from biological evolution, or because we trace it to the way neurons work, or whatever physiological impulses, or social determinism, where these conditions in the society, in the culture, in the upbringing caused this act to ensue—and there's no room then for anything but that determinism, if that's the case and there's no space for free will, the notion of free will, then the whole contemplation of something called morality just has nothing to stand on. There's no basis for it.

So this is really quite interesting, and again, we have this question: which is real, which is true?

We can have, again as Hartman outlines—and we've touched on this a couple of times at different points—this whole area about guilt. And we can obviously have two views regarding guilt. We've explained how Hartman is, in a way, a sort of champion of guilt. He won't give it up as something important to our moral growth, our moral being, to our soul. It's wrapped up with our sense of personhood and autonomy. And it's a corollary of free will. If I have free will and I chose something morally questionable, then I am culpable and I have guilt in relation to that. So that's one view, as Hartman outlines it and we've mentioned a couple of times.

The other leaning here would be just to open things up and see more in terms of conditions. And there's an assuaging of guilt there and the dissolving of suffering where there has been this tight grip of guilt and the kind of self-contraction and self-obsession that often goes with that, and the contraction and spinning only around a view of the past, kind of stuck in a whirlpool, a vortex, looking at the past, looking at the self. It's all very contracted. Nothing can come—just like in a whirlpool, it's almost like nothing can come out of that whirlpool at its worst.

And so I've talked and written about working with that kind of contraction of guilt in other chapters, and seeing the freeze and unending blame in other places and talks. It's really skillful, really helpful to be able to open out and see in terms of conditions and less in terms of self. But actually both are important.

And there's a way of opening the guilt out when it's just gotten too problematic. It's actually not helpful at all. It's not doing what Hartman thinks, or what Hartman claims—I think helpfully—that it can. It's not helpful.

It's unhealthy guilt. It's doing nothing helpful in terms of our orientation and our attitude towards future behavior. It's completely wrapped up in looking at the past. It's not serving our moving forward in a richer, deeper, more ethically upright, more sensitive, more careful and attuned orientation to the future and future choices and our future taking responsibility.

So actually both are possible. There is a way that we can—we need to think in terms of self. The Buddhists go on and on about no-self, but actually self is important. And even if you read carefully the Buddhist passages, there's lots of teachings that have to do with self, that rest on self-view. And there are the teachings of hiri and ottapa—shame, in terms of what others think of us, and in terms of our conscience. There are teachings around self and plenty of other teachings that have to do with self.

So we can't throw the baby out with the bathwater and lose a sense of responsibility. And for that it's the self that needs to be responsible. So do I buy into that as an ultimate truth? No. It's a certain truth that I can move into and out of, and sometimes it's really helpful. And at the same time, or at different times, I can see less in terms of self, or in terms of not-self, or just in terms of conditions.

So there's the kind of balancing of them, but there's also, even more skillfully and helpfully, the teaching that we can move flexibly between these two views. Sometimes I can look, and it's important to look, in terms of self. I was talking with someone the other day—so many people practicing Buddha Dharma or other related traditions in Advaita—I think the whole movement is towards dissolving the self, dissolving the self-sense, and liberation is living in this dissolved self-sense.

And I would say, no, that's only a relative truth. Self is so thoroughly empty that we can pick it up again, knowing that it's empty, and we can put it down. We can be liberated to such an extent that self and the arising of self is not a problem. We don't have to be stuck in some kind of no-self view or trying to attain some kind of ongoing state of no-self. We're so free from self. We're so free in relationship to self that it can come up, it can arise, and we can put it down, both.

So extending that into its moral implications—responsibility and free will and the determination by conditions in the environment, in the history, in the upbringing, biological, and so forth. To only—even just reflect for a moment—to take only one of those positions: there is always free will and there's always responsibility, or everything is determined. To take only one of those, you can feel how brittle it is. And just a little bit of reflection—to me it just sounds silly. Either of those options just sounds silly. Really silly. Silly in that they don't really reflect truth, and silly in terms of what it then implies in terms of how we live and how we consider ourselves and how we judge and discern morally and consider other people.

So the flexibility of view again. And as always, why? Why this view now? Why that perspective at a different time? As I said, it might be sometimes that I'm so caught up in a tight whirlpool and vortex that's not constructive at all. It's just suffering, and I need to ease that suffering, I need to loosen something. So I adopt a certain view of, for instance, reflecting on conditions, and I can do that very carefully, as I've outlined elsewhere, develop skill that way. Or, at other times, I can feel, painful as it is, that I want to keep my sense of guilt and responsibility here. I want to look in terms of self. Because, as Hartman says, that's part of building my moral being. And it might serve soul-making.

So, as always, the question is, why? What's the intention? What am I trying to serve or support or open when I adopt one possible way of looking over another in the range of flexibility of ways of looking?

Let me read you one passage from Hartman because he says something that struck me as very interesting when I read it with regard to free will and this whole question and its ontology. So he writes: "Freedom"—so he's talking about free will—"freedom is the rising of initiative above the blind happenings of the world." So a human being can take an initiative and not just be determined by the kind of random or purposeless movement of atoms or wider social forces. "Freedom is the rising of initiative above the blind happenings of the world. As such, this is a value. It lifts a human being out of the connections of nature in which he is rooted. It allows him to tear himself away, to rise into the second realm."

He means the second realm ontologically. Lack of freedom is total determination from outside—the serfdom of a human being under the universal course of events.

This is the bit I found particularly interesting: "The profound struggle of human thought to attain a metaphysical proof of freedom of the will is a witness to its worth." In other words, so much intellectual energy has been expended throughout history trying to prove that human beings have free will. None have succeeded so far, but consider how much humanity has tried. And that effort, he suggests, is itself a witness to its worth.

"However desperate the problem may look—the problem of trying to prove that freedom of will exists—however violently all psychological theories deny it" (and he was probably thinking particularly of Freud, as he was writing around that time), "man cannot and dare not permit himself to be robbed of it. He struggles with all his might to retain his belief in it. He has even a deep consciousness that he is free."

So we feel somehow that we are free. "He feels that even if he be not free, he ought to be. For he ought to be a moral being, a person." So for Hartmann, personhood and moral being go together. Without moral being, we're not really persons. "The will to be unfree, or even to renounce without a struggle the consciousness of freedom, would be a renunciation of his selfhood."

So again, there's perhaps the impossibility of proof of that kind of metaphysical idea, that kind of anthropological idea that we have free will. But there's something in the fact of our humanity's struggle and striving to try and prove it—our wanting to retain that sense and that notion of free will. That itself tells us something. So again we see the

distinction between orientations towards truth and reality and proof about truth and reality, and orientations that have more to do with soulmaking and what the soul needs. Of course they overlap.

But extending that a little bit, could we not say the same thing with respect to ideational forms—these ideas, for example, of independently existing moral values? There has been, I think, a failure to furnish proof of independently existing moral values, that they're not just culturally contingent. So far, there's been a failure, philosophically, throughout the history of humanity. But the failure doesn't prove that they don't exist. It just says, well, so far we haven't found conclusive proof.

Again, we could adopt a position of the viability of different logoi, different ideas and notions, different conceptual frameworks about ontology, and we can enter into different conceptions. For example, a conception of a realm of ideas, sphere of ideal existence—and we can also even entertain the idea of a moral absolute, which I'll come to later, some kind of synthesis of all moral values. I'll come back to that later. And so we can enter that and receive the perceptions that follow, that come out of such a conception.

And we can do that, as I say, flexibly, temporarily, lightly, experimentally. All that is available to us, I think, as human beings, as thinking beings, as meditators, as soulmakers.

One of the things Hartmann ponders—and it's partly a legacy from the history of philosophy—so he ponders, like all moral philosophers do, the nature of the good or the nature of goodness. And that phrase "the good," I think I mentioned earlier, is part of the heritage from Plato and perhaps even before: the good.

Surveying different moral philosophies over the course of history, he says oftentimes what different systems of morality do is they take one value, whatever it is depending on the system, and they say that is the highest good, that's the fundamental good, and then they try to derive other values from that or place them in relation to that.

So he writes: "All recognized moral systems speak of the good as of something known, but by it they always mean only one certain special value which they hold to be the only one and the highest. And according as they regard pleasure, happiness, collective unity, justice, love, and so on to be 'the good,' the various types of morality are distinguished." Even this diversity itself shows that in reality none of these values is the good.

Now, historically there was another solution to this which came from Plato, which is the idea of the good. So in the realm, in the sphere of ideal existence, there's a sort of absolute synthesis of all the values, and that is the good.

And so he writes about this: "But if, like Plato, one sets over against such limitations of content"—in other words, some specific views about this or that value being the good—"one sets over against that an idea of the good and places it above the virtues, even then one doesn't get a definition of its content." One still doesn't know what exactly that is—the good. It sounds so abstract. "The idea remains empty."

He mentions also Leibniz and a concept of perfection, and he says that comes perhaps a little nearer to this goal of what we're trying to get a sense of—the good. Again, remember we talked about pāramīs, and one of the translations of pāramīs, the Pali word, is perfections. And I pointed out that would be a problem, because in a way these virtues and values are not perfectible in instance and in physical actuality and manifestation.

But the idea of a perfection that's out of reach to manifestation, that can never itself be completely manifest, may work as a translation of pāramī. And he says it has something to do with what Leibniz is talking about.

So there is historically, I think, starting with Plato, this idea of the good. Over and above any virtues, there's the good, which isn't a virtue itself. It's this kind of mysterious, absolute synthesis of all virtue that is the origin or the pinnacle, and it exists at a different level.

Hartmann dismisses any kind of belief that we can think our way to some premature synthesis of what that might be—what such an absolute might be—through dialectical philosophical reasoning or whatever. He says that's a kind of pipe dream.

Whether or not there might be a sense of that in a more meditative consciousness is, to me, a different question.

At any rate, Hartman defines goodness and the good in a different way, which I found quite interesting. He writes: "In all morally positive conduct, there is found a trend not only towards values, but towards what is always the higher value." So that to him is the good. It's situational. There's a choice between different values, and what constitutes goodness, or constitutes an instantiation of goodness, is the choice and the preference and the alignment with, based on sensitivity to, what's the higher value.

So to choose something, for example, to choose my own comfort rather than my kindness to another, or convenience or pleasure rather than some kind of altruistic expression, or to choose my security at a certain level—whether it's financial or some kind of existential security—over truthfulness or justice, these would be examples of choosing what's lower: comfort, convenience, pleasure, a certain level of security over what's higher or more noble. That wouldn't constitute goodness.

But if I choose the altruistic, if I choose the higher, the more noble, if I choose justice, truthfulness over my comfort, my convenience, my pleasure, my security, then I'm choosing the higher value. There's a trend going towards the higher value. And that is goodness. So the good is that higher value in any situation, and goodness itself is my capacity to feel that and to orient towards that and to choose that.

Sometimes those kinds of choices are very simple, very obvious. It's clear in a certain situation what the different relative heights are, and there's nothing except our own fears and self-contraction that's preventing a manifestation of goodness, preventing this sensibility to orientation and choice of what's a higher value.

But actually in life, our free will meets and has to negotiate, has to choose between various kinds of value conflicts. So we come across situations that are complex, either in the structure of a situation, or actually there's something even deeper—there are conflicts between different values themselves.

We've given some examples of different situations where the setup of the situation means that I have to choose between an allegiance to this value over an allegiance to that value. And I might feel torn and have to accept the guilt that comes with choosing one and neglecting to choose, neglecting to support and give life to the other value. Some of those are really simple and kind of everyday encountered situations. But others are really quite profound and difficult.

I'm thinking, for instance, of Nelson Mandela and the risks that he took for the sake of justice—risking his life, certainly, when the sense was it was probable that he would lose his life, or certainly face a long, long time in prison. And risking that, along with his obligation to his family, his moral obligation to be there for his family, for his wife and his children. That's a moral value, as a father, as a husband. That value came into conflict with the claims of his conscience regarding justice and a wider sphere of love to encompass the non-white South Africans, not just his family.

Now, if the situation in South Africa at that time had been such that there were two democratic parties vying for office and one could simply stand in allegiance to justice—racial justice or ethnic justice, social justice—simply by walking to the polling station

and casting a ballot, and one had a sense that the success of the party that wasn't trying to institutionalize racism was very possible, that would have been a very different situation. The situation then would not have presented an opposition, a choice between being a father, being there for my children as they grow up, supporting them with the livelihood that I earn, with love, with contact, and the wider set of virtues demanded by my conscience with regard to wider social justice.

So there was something very, very difficult and pressing—and that's an understatement—in the structure of that situation. But there are countless examples where our life presents us with situations where something in the structure brings these two values together and I have to choose between them, or several values, and I have to choose between them. And it's given by the situation. It's not inherently a problem in the values themselves.

But as we go into this—and this is one of the things I was trying to say—it's not often that the complexity of values is reflected upon so openly or carefully. This is one of the things that Hartman stresses, and I want to pick up on this a little bit. There's a complexity not just from situations that we encounter in our life, but also among and between values themselves and inner value itself. They are more complex than we might at first realize.

At some point Hartman, in his big tome on ethics, talks about some of the classical virtues—the virtues that, for example, Aristotle would write about. There are some Greek words here—you don't have to remember them, and I'm not even sure if I'm pronouncing them correctly, but the point is a more general one.

He writes: "In juxtaposition to sophrosyne stands akolasia and anaisthesia." He's talking about the virtue of sophrosyne, and he says that actually, you have to consider these other two disvalues as being important constituent elements, somehow, of this value of sophrosyne.

"Only in contrast to the former, to akolasia, is it properly self-controlled." So sophrosyne usually gets translated as self-control. He's saying that actually, it's only in regard to akolasia, which is something like being completely out of control, that we understand what self-control means.

"In contrast to the latter, to anaisthesia, sophrosyne is the fully developed capacity to react emotionally, to live in the affections." So there's something in this virtue of sophrosyne that's not just self-control. It's self-control, but within a fully developed

capacity to react emotionally and to live in the affections. In other words, we have to draw into this consideration of this one virtue, sophrosyne, self-control, another virtue —aisthesis, as opposed to anaisthesia.

And then he talks about another one: "Seen against orgilotes, praotes is mildness." So he's talking about the virtue of praotes, the classical virtue of praotes, which often is translated as mildness or gentleness.

But seen against Aorgesia, it is the capacity to be righteously indignant. So this gentleness, when measured against Orgilotes, can indeed be called gentleness or mildness. Yet when measured against Aorgesia, it reveals itself as the capacity to be righteously indignant.

This brings us to several crucial points. First, what does this imply about our full ethical response to situations like climate change and species extinction? Second, what does it suggest about the sometimes one-sided prioritization of gentleness or equanimity that we often encounter in Buddhist traditions? Certainly in the classical texts, and to varying degrees in contemporary interpretations, there's an emphasis on equanimity —what we might call sophrosone, self-control and equanimity—without the supportive counterweight of a fully developed capacity to react emotionally, to live in the affections, this esthesia.

The more pertinent point right now is that virtues considered singly may be problematic. We must actually examine constellations and syntheses—perhaps virtues need counterweights.

Consider altruism, or what Hartmann calls brotherly love, a virtue that burst into historical consciousness with the emergence of Christianity. It was emphasized strongly by Jesus in his teachings: "Who is near me? What do they need? Put them before me. If a centurion asks you to walk with him half a mile, walk with him ten miles." This turning of the other cheek represented an eruption into human consciousness of brotherly love and altruism toward those around us. Yet this can become almost tyrannical and dangerously unbalanced without a counterweight—perhaps a healthy egoism, a healthy sense of self.

Or consider loyalty—loyalty to one's community, teacher, or country that operates beyond considerations of justice. This would be deeply problematic. Similarly, a loyalty to truthfulness that remains insensitive to other values and their demands for allegiance becomes tyrannical.

There exists a potential tyranny of individual values. The consciousness or soul, in its fervor, love, and particular direction of soul-making, can elevate one value while neglecting others, establishing it as the dominant thrust at the expense of a fuller moral vision.

This consideration led Aristotle to propose that perhaps a virtue is actually a synthesis of different values rather than a single value. Returning to those Greek terms: sophrosone, proper self-control, is actually a synthesis that includes not only self-control but also the fully developed capacity to react emotionally and live in the affections. Similarly, priotes is gentleness, but it includes the virtue of righteous indignation. Mildness, yes, but also the capacity to be righteously indignant when circumstances demand it.

Aristotle suggested that maybe virtue is actually synthesis itself, and any of these seemingly individual virtues are potentially problematic when isolated.

Let me read a passage from Hartmann about this: "In this sense, it may be said that every moral value has a point in it, not indeed in itself, but for human beings, where it becomes a danger. There is a limit beyond which its dominance in consciousness ceases to be of value."

Imagine taking any single virtue—altruism, loyalty, truthfulness, even courage. If it lacks balance, if it has no counterweight, if it dominates consciousness and moral sensibility too completely, problems arise and it actually stops being a value, becoming instead a disvalue.

Hartmann continues: "Only a sense of justice which is at the same time loving. Only a brotherly love which also considers the far distant. Only a pride which would likewise be humble could be valid as an ideal of moral conduct."

Every value reaches true fulfillment only in its synthesis with others, and ultimately, only in its synthesis with all. There's an intuitive sense that some possible synthesis exists in the ideational realm—a synthesis of all these virtues that seem to need each other despite sometimes pulling in different directions. Yet this intuitive understanding of synthesis remains out of reach, elusive.

"Every single value first attains its own full character through its axiological counterweight in the synthesis." (Axiological simply means pertaining to values.) "Even in itself, it is incomplete. It is even threatened in its valuational character without its counterweight. Whether this consists in a single specific countervalue or in a larger series of values makes no difference. The synthesis may have any degree of complexity."

When we reflect on this deeply, it becomes quite fascinating. We may have various responses in our souls. One response might be almost dismissive: "Well, everyone knows that."

"Yeah, well, you know, moderation in all things." And there's a kind of flaccidity of the mind, of the heart, of the soul in relation to this complexity and also in relation to values. "Yeah, yeah, sure, yeah." You can hear the lack of vigor, the lack of vitality, the lack of attunement and readiness and poise and energization and wrestling with this problematic. But that's one response. "Too much of anything is not a good thing." But it just becomes a kind of truism. And really all it's doing is not disturbing us. All we're doing is adopting a posture or a kind of non-posture of flaccidity, of non-vigor, of non-vitality, non-keenness in our moral sensibility, so as to remain undisturbed, so as to remain a little bit asleep. The soul not on fire, not churning with the difficulties of the challenges of the soul, making the process of the eros, of the breaking of vessels, of the questioning.

But that would be one response. Maybe it's most people's response, I'm not sure.

Another response to all that complexity and this sort of pulling in different directions of different values would be the kind of postmodern insistence on and relishing of our finitude, our fragmentation—stressing the futility of trying to understand values or trying to propose any kind of higher anchoring of the moral values and of our ethical sense. Ah, see? But again, one question I would have, if that's the kind of outlook with regard to this particular problem, is why? Why are you relishing that picture of our fragmentation, our existential fragmentation, our impossibility, our finitude, the futility of nobility? Why do you emphasize that? What's going on there psychologically?

Another possible reaction or stance in relation to this problematic is with some even dimly intuited sense of a beyond of values—the beyond of the realm of ideas, of the sphere of ideal existence. Impossible as it is to instantiate, as we said with the mathematical analogies, exactly, fully, completely, just as images are impossible to fully, completely instantiate, but also impossible as it might be to come up with a kind of logically coherent, discursive, rational definition of what that synthesis in the beyond might be.

So yes, our finitude, yes, our fragmentation, but there can be with that finitude not a kind of futility or flaccidity, not this hanging on to a certain limitation and blocking of our opening in nobility, but a finitude that gazes also to the horizon, looking at the horizon, almost groping, feeling what might be beyond that horizon, over the horizon.

And there are other possible reactions as well. Let's pause there for now before I go into some more about the complexities and antinomies, oppositions, contradictions between values.

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CHAPTER 194

Sīla and Soul (Part 7)

Rob Burbea · 1h20

> *In this seventh part of his exploration of ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea delves into the complex reality of moral antinomies - situations where genuine values conflict irreconcilably. Drawing on philosopher Nikolai Hartmann's work, he examines how virtues like kindness and loyalty have obvious opposites, but more problematically, how values like acceptance and decisive action, or love of the nearest versus love of the remote, can pull us in contradictory directions.*
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> *Burbea challenges the classical view held by Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas that virtues cannot truly conflict, arguing instead that such conflicts are inevitable and even necessary for moral development. He explores practical examples from meditation practice, noting how qualities like bright samādhi and tender-heartedness might be antinomical, and considers how the Buddha's own choices - like leaving his family to seek awakening - illustrate these impossible moral dilemmas.*
>
> *The talk addresses critiques of mystical traditions' moral claims while proposing that apparent moral failures might reflect the complex, polytheistic nature of the psyche rather than simple ethical deficiency. Burbea suggests that recognizing these antinomies doesn't lead to moral relativism but rather to a more mature engagement with ethical complexity, where we must choose according to our deepest sense of values while accepting the inevitable guilt of neglecting other legitimate claims. This acceptance of moral complexity becomes itself a virtue essential for soul-making.*

Let's go into this issue of the complexity of values and the conflict between different values, the oppositions. Let's go into that a little bit more.

In a way it's obvious that every value stands in oppositional relation with its opposite, with a disvalue. These are obvious oppositions. So, for example, kindness as a value is in oppositional relation with unkindness, which we call a disvalue – an absence of a value, something that has negative moral weight. Or loyalty with disloyalty, honesty with dishonesty, and courage with cowardice. Those kinds of oppositions are obvious.

Although they present challenges – the choice towards a value may ask a lot of us in different situations – still, that opposition is relatively straightforward and not complicated, not essentially problematic or theoretically problematic.

But there are others, and we've already touched on them or thrown them out as examples at different stages of the talk. There are other oppositions, other conflicting duties and allegiances and relationships between different values that are more problematic. Hartmann uses this word – I'm not sure what the German is, but in English it translates as "antinomy," or "antinomies" in the plural. It's philosophical jargon for this kind of oppositional relationship. "Anti" means against, as we know, and "nomi" is from nomos, which means law. So two laws that pull in opposite directions – antinomos, antinomy, antinomies.

As I said, we've touched on a few of these, mentioned some in passing, some in a little more detail.

There is, which I've already mentioned, the antinomy – the curious antinomy – between the actualization of a value and its non-actualization. Obviously, when a value is actualized, that actualization is valuable. But there's also value in its non-actualization, because its non-actualization, its non-presence, its non-existence allows us, in our being, in our moral orientation and moral will and what we bring of our soul to a situation – that non-actualization of a value in a situation allows us to rise up morally, to discern, to cultivate our sensitivity, to choose, to gather our soul, and to grow morally through our intention, through our will.

So this curious oppositional relationship between the actualization of values and their non-actualization – in a way both are valuable.

If we look at this even more closely, when we have the non-actualization or only partial actualization of values, we have there the values beyond us. The beyondness is what's not completely actualizing, what's not completely manifest. And that's valuable for our soul-making purpose. The eros needs those beyonds. It creates those beyonds. It discovers those beyonds. It needs those beyonds. And those beyonds are part of this non-actualization. Those beyondness are also part of the dimensions, the unfathomability and the divinity and mystery of a value. And as such, they are valuable to us because of that soul sense that they give.

So there's an oppositional relationship between the values beyond us, so to speak, and their manifestation on the other hand.

There's also then the value of our moving towards something – as I said before, our engaging of our moral capacity, moral sensitivities, moral will, a whole organ of ethical sensibility and choice. There's a value in our moving towards something, our striving to actualize a value, and there's a value in our achieving it, our having actualized something when there's no more striving there.

There's an antinomy perhaps between acceptance – the value, the virtue of acceptance on one hand – and the value, the virtue of decisive action or effort towards a goal.

There's an interesting antinomy between, as Hartmann points out, what he calls the grade and the range. So I have to explain what those mean. The grade is another word he uses for the height of a moral value. One can pursue single-mindedly and devotedly a single moral value. One can be absolutely devoted to one moral value and accentuate one's efforts towards that, one's sensibility towards that, one's cultivation of that value, whatever that is. And in a way, there's value in that. There's value in that single-pointedness, in that effort, in that singling out and streamlining of one's being and one's will and effort towards that one particular value.

Hartmann points out that many of the extraordinary achievements of not just individual human beings, but also the cultures or traditions that they found, follow from that kind of singleness of moral vision, singleness of moral emphasis – really being able to develop one virtue to a great extent, often at the expense of other values, a wider range. So this is grade versus range. There's an antinomy there, because there's also a value in encompassing, being sensitive to, taking care of a broad range of values. It's depth versus breadth, something like that.

Related to this, there are antinomies between simplicity and complexity. We can even talk about some of these in relation to aesthetics and art. Both simplicity and complexity have value. Unity and uniformity have a value, but also diversity has a value – again, whether we're talking about a single person and their ethos, or a community or structure or institution.

The perception of unity—the capacity to see oneness and not focus so much on differences—has great value. But so does, conversely and simultaneously, the perception of diversity, what we might call discernment or differentiation. Constancy has value, as does stability. Whether we speak of a person's ethos, an institution, or a community or tradition, constancy and stability possess undeniable worth. On the other hand, change and dynamism also carry value. These are opposing, antinomical values.

There is value in harmony, and there is value in conflict. We can speak of harmony within oneself—not being pulled in different directions in a way that creates disharmony—or harmony within a community. Yet we've already touched upon the value of conflict in various ways and areas.

Let me read again a short passage from Hartman about this. He cites Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher, on what Heraclitus called the cosmic war—*polemos* in Greek. What Heraclitus called the cosmic war and regarded as the father and king of all things

exists also in ethical actuality. That element of restlessness and flux which carries all things, that inexhaustible productivity of new and ever new relations, situations and demands with their endlessly new conflicts and puzzles—this is what constitutes the infiniteness of content in ethical being, its wealth, its eternal freshness and abundance. It is no exaggeration to speak in this sense of conflict as a value.

Hartman gave that example we discussed before of a parallel in the domain of knowledge or research or theoretical understanding or insight, where a problem itself becomes a value. He continues: "Conflict is that from which decision, intention, action are born. But the values of intention are the ethical ones. Conflict is that which keeps discernment and the feeling of value alive and opens up new vistas."

So again, there's this antinomy between the value of harmony and the value of conflict. I'm moving through these quite quickly, though they all bear considerable meditation and reflection. They differ from one another—some are obviously related, some are antinomical in slightly different ways. For those interested in this exploration, you can take these themes and delve into much greater detail and richness.

There exists also an antinomy between our duty to ourselves as individuals and our duty to the community, whether a small community or the larger society. All kinds of fascinating tensions and pulls can arise from this antinomy.

There's also an antinomy between what Hartman calls "love of the nearest"—those closest to us—and "love of the remote." This particular phrase comes from Hartman's friend and philosophical predecessor Max Scheler, who also wrote extensively about ethics. This phrase "the remote" is quite interesting to me, as it highlights certain issues around the complexity of ethics and the difficulties we encounter.

Love of the remote involves devotion to and service of those in the distant future, those far away whom we will never meet. It particularly encompasses those we regard as—and this language is somewhat problematic—the best types, those on whom we pin our hopes for humanity, for a tradition, for certain deep understandings, or for extraordinary development of soul, insight, heart, or courage.

Some people dedicate their work now to future beings they will never meet, never knowing if their efforts succeed, if their contributions land, if they're received, assimilated, digested, and used as platforms for support and inspiration. In this devotion, this love of the remote, there necessarily arises some degree of pulling away from, or neglect of, the love of the nearest—those around us. Perhaps I'm not as available as I could be as a friend, not as present for everyday socializing, less available to family or chil-

dren, because my soul's eye holds a sense of duty and dedication to those I may never meet, whose fruits I may never see ripen, whose harvest I will never enjoy because it exists after I die.

Is there an antinomy between love of the nearest and love of the remote? Hartman would say yes, and I tend to agree. Perhaps there's a similar antinomy between the love one has for family and children—the devotion to caring for them, making them happy, being interested in their lives—and the value of universal *mettā*?

There are others, many others. This represents a truly rich and important area for exploration, both in terms of the general principles implicated and in the specific details. As I've mentioned, I've simply rattled through a whole list here, and there are many more worth reflecting upon, investigating, feeling into, becoming sensitive to.

I'm not certain whether Hartman was the first to point out this fact of antinomies between moral values.

I'm not sure. But certainly going back to Plato, his consideration of virtues and ethics was founded on the idea that a virtue cannot be in conflict with another virtue. This was almost axiomatic to his entire philosophy. There cannot be "rival goods at war with each other," to quote Alasdair MacIntyre's phrase describing Plato's position. Aristotle, his somewhat student, somewhat successor, somewhat foil, held the same view—that virtue cannot be in conflict with virtue. Later, Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages took a similar stance. While there are differences between Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas, they shared this view that there cannot be real conflict between one virtue and another. Virtues cannot pull in different directions.

Furthermore, they believed that all virtues require each other. This returns us to what we mentioned about Aristotle and his idea of synthesis. Sometimes he calls it the mean—like an average between virtues—where one virtue actually needs a counterweight in another virtue so that the true virtue is some kind of synthesis of two lesser or incomplete virtues. All virtues require each other in that system.

In some understandings of the Dharma, there's a similar principle. All the wings of awakening that the Buddha spoke of—all thirty-seven wings of awakening—work synergistically and may, to some extent, require each other. This was quite a common ancient view, probably present in the Buddha's teachings, certainly in Plato and Aristotle, and in many ways in Thomas Aquinas.

Alasdair MacIntyre reflects on this and writes that Aristotle's moral psychology led him to misread Sophocles—and really the whole genre of tragic theater, which was a significant artistic direction and manifestation in Greek and Hellenistic times. Because of his moral psychology, Aristotle simply couldn't understand tragic drama. It made no sense to him, or very limited sense.

"For the conflicts of tragedy," MacIntyre writes, "certainly may in part take the form that they do because of the flaws in this or that character. But what constitute those individuals' tragic opposition and conflict is the conflict of good with good embodied in their encounter prior to and independent of any individual characteristics."

In other words, it's not really that this person is flawed in this way or that person is flawed in that way. The tragedy is rather that this person is pulled between two antinomical values, torn by their sense that their allegiance belongs to two opposite directions. They are in a way torn apart, forced to choose by a situation or by the deeper structure of the antinomies between certain values.

MacIntyre continues: "And to this aspect of tragedy, Aristotle is and has to be blind. The absence of this view of the centrality of opposition and conflict in human life conceals from Aristotle also one important source of human learning about and one important milieu of human practice of the virtues."

This is a point I want to emphasize. This is part of our life—these inevitable, unavoidable conflicts that arise either from the structure of the situation or from the deeper nature of the complexity of virtue itself. Remember that quote when we were discussing traditions and the necessity of conflict and argument within traditions? John Anderson urged us not to ask of a social institution "what end or purpose does it serve," but rather "of what conflicts is it the scene?"

So in a way, Aristotle is missing something of the complexity—and also the reality—of our moral life. Perhaps this is even more so in a modern society where there is wider divergence in our very sense of life and what it's for. There isn't a unified idea that life is for this, that this is how it serves, this is what it serves, this is the direction. We cannot unite all our soul's energies and our intellect and our ethical aspiration into that one stream which everyone agrees upon.

There is that view that a synthesis is possible and virtue cannot really conflict with virtue. But again, I would ask: even if one might have that sort of integrated view over time, where values work together, might it still be that on one occasion, or simultaneously, or in one situation, we're pulled in different directions?

I'm reminded of something that came up in response to a question on the last retreat. I remember a period when I lived in the States, shortly after the jhānas were really opening for me quite a lot. I had been on a solitary retreat and was practicing a great deal at home afterward while working. What I noticed was that there were days when the samādhi went really well, and the mind and being had this kind of jewel-like radiance to them—very bright, very sharp, very clear. There was a pristine, beautiful radiance to it.

On other days, that was less present. The samādhi was there, but not to that pristine depth and fullness. But what was sometimes there instead was a kind of tender-heartedness—a real soft pliability, availability of heart, tenderness, tears in a good sense, being easily moved in a beautiful way.

What I noticed was that on the days when the samādhi was really bright and radiant—when the mind was like a jewel—on those days there was less of this tender-heartedness. And vice versa: on the days where there was tender-heartedness, there was less of this jewel-like, bright, almost diamond-like radiance of the mind.

Are these antinomical values?

This quality I'm calling tenderness of heart, and that bright samadhi mind-heart—they didn't seem able to exist in their fullness at the same time. The being, the consciousness, would move toward one or the other on any given day.

Now, within the Dharma, you do encounter teachings about balancing different qualities. In the teachings on the seven factors of awakening, for instance, there are three energizing qualities: *dhamma vicaya* (investigation of Dharma or investigation of mental qualities), *viriya* (persistence, effort, determination), and *pīti* (rapture). Then you have three pacifying qualities—calming in their affect and effect: *passaddhi* (tranquility), *samādhi* (which we could translate as concentration), and *upekkhā* (equanimity).

The Buddha gives teachings that say: pay attention to this balance. Where am I right now with the seven factors of awakening? When he presents this teaching in the fourth foundation of mindfulness as one of the framework lenses, he says to notice the balance. What do I need—more of these energizing qualities or more of the pacifying ones right now—in regard to dispelling the hindrances and cultivating the whole movement toward awakening?

So you get that guidance partially, but I don't know if this quality of tenderness of heart—which isn't quite compassion itself, but perhaps more akin to empathy—is antinomical with the brightness and adamantine quality of samādhi. This quality of tender-

ness isn't really highlighted in the Pali Canon teachings. So is there an antinomy between a value that many people nowadays, certainly those in meditation traditions, would place great importance on, and other spiritual qualities? Might there be a kind of inevitability to our having to negotiate, to choose, to deal with these complexities, these conflicts, these antinomies, these impossibilities?

In Mahāyāna teaching, the Buddha nature is said to have three bodies, three *kāyas*. Though there are infinite hermeneutic possibilities here, let me give them some narrow interpretations for the sake of the point I'm making. A Buddha has three *kāyas*—three bodies of their being, of their essence, of what a Buddha is: the *rūpakāya* (the body of physical manifestation), the *saṃbhogakāya* (sometimes translated as the bliss body or enjoyment body, also akin to an imaginal body with its associated imaginal realm), and the *dharmakāya*.

We've touched on this word *dharmakāya* before, and it has had a wide range of translations in the Mahāyāna tradition—very fertile, with hermeneutic possibilities opening in all directions. One translation, perhaps one of the earlier ones, is "body of teachings" or "body of *dhammas*"—meaning body of attributes, mental qualities, or virtues. *Kāya* means body, as in body of water, but here body of *dhammas*, *dharmakāya*.

The Mahāyāna Buddha is a transcendent entity far beyond anything we encounter in typical human lives. So one translation of *dharmakāya* is as a body of qualities, a body of virtues, which actually cannot manifest all at once because of their antinomical values—because they embody antinomical values. This points to a kind of beyond, a synthesis, an absolute that synthesizes in a way beyond our grasp, beyond our ken, beyond our completely discerning or understanding mind.

How can a Buddha, who in Mahāyāna teaching has mysterious qualities—for instance, being able to see thoroughly the emptiness of something while simultaneously perceiving its form—embody such paradoxes? There could be a parallel here between the notion of *dharmakāya* as part of Buddha nature—as a body of qualities including antinomical values and virtues that cannot all instantiate at once in human beings—and this transcendent absolute.

As I mentioned, you find teachings in the Abrahamic religions about the names and attributes of God. They speak of balancing mercy with judgment, judgment with mercy, and so forth. But certain attributes cannot manifest simultaneously.

When we consider this fact of conflicts, complexities, counterweights needed, antinomical relations between different values, and the unavoidability of this, it might prompt us toward considering the possibility of some kind of absolute—one we cannot know rationally or see directly, but can perhaps intuit, can have a sense of its beyondness. It is transcendent.

Perhaps we might construe the Buddha mind in its ineffable transcendence, in its forever beyondness—what a Mahāyāna Buddha truly is—as embodying in the *kāya* that kind of transcendent absolute, that transcendent synthesis of which we can only get partial glimpses.

Remember the analogy with maps: neither the Mercator projection nor the polar projection can capture in two dimensions the reality of the three-dimensional globe. Something gets distorted, something gets shrunk, something gets expanded. This is one solution, one way of thinking about it, one way of tying it in with Buddha Dharma and notions of Buddhahood—that beyondness we aspire to or hold as inspiration. That of Buddhahood, that of the *dharmakāya*.

Listen to what John Findlay says about absolutes: "The absolute is not to be conceived as something which instantiates or exemplifies the highest values, since instantiation is necessarily one-sided and imperfect, and since the highest values also lie in different directions and cannot be instantiated altogether"—a point often stressed by Nikolai Hartmann.

The contemplative traditions, he suggests, have indeed converged on certain ethical insights and the transcendence of self-centeredness, yet this convergence itself may be more constructed than discovered. As Kripal observes, it becomes remarkably easy to curate a selective anthology of mystical exemplars who conform to our contemporary moral sensibilities, while conveniently overlooking or dismissing those whose conduct challenges our assumptions about the inherent goodness of spiritual realization.

This circular reasoning—declaring mysticism inherently moral and then cherry-picking evidence to support this declaration—reveals something profound about our relationship to spiritual ideals. We are, perhaps unconsciously, engaged in what Kripal calls a "creative revisioning and reforming of the past" rather than an honest reckoning with the historical record in all its complexity and moral ambiguity.

The traditions themselves, as Kripal unflinchingly notes, have often served as "elaborate and sacralized techniques for dissociating consciousness"—methods that, rather than fostering genuine integration and ethical maturity, have frequently enabled spiritual bypassing, authoritarianism, and the very dualistic thinking they purport to tran-

scend. The shadow side includes patriarchy, sexual repression, rigid hierarchies, and what he terms "transcendentalism"—that flight from embodied existence which we've been examining throughout these talks.

Yet there's something crucial that Kripal himself may be missing in his otherwise penetrating analysis. His conclusion—that "there is no shared ocean of emancipation in the history of religions"—may itself reflect the very postmodern skepticism that, while valuable as a corrective, can become its own form of dogma. When he speaks of privileging "the ethical over the mystical" and insisting on "human wholeness as human holiness," he's making what is essentially a mystical claim about the nature of authentic spirituality.

What if the question isn't whether there exists some metaphysical ocean of liberation that all traditions access, but whether there might be something in human consciousness itself—call it Buddha nature, call it the imaginal, call it the creative principle—that tends toward both transcendence and integration when properly cultivated? The ethical convergence that Ferrer notes, even if partially constructed through our interpretive lens, might point to something real about human potential rather than mere wishful thinking.

This brings us back to our central theme: the relationship between the absolute and the relative, between transcendent ideals and embodied existence. Perhaps the very tension Kripal identifies—between mystical aspiration and ethical grounding—is itself pointing toward a more sophisticated understanding of awakening, one that neither dismisses the transcendent dimension nor allows it to become a refuge from the complexities of human existence.

The Dharmakaya, in this light, is not some metaphysical absolute existing independent of our experience, but neither is it merely a projection of our desires. It might be understood as that dimension of consciousness which, when touched, naturally expresses itself through wisdom and compassion—not because we've constructed it that way, but because that's how consciousness moves when freed from the contractions of ego and the distortions of spiritual materialism.

Indeed, from many of our own modern perspectives, the waters of the past are barely potable, barely drinkable, as what most contemplative traditions have meant by emancipation or salvation is not at all what we would wish to imply by those terms today. It is, after all, frightfully easy to be emancipated from the world, or to become one with a deity or ontological absolute, and leave all the world's grossly unjust social structures and practices—racism, gender injustice, homophobia, religious bigotry, colonialism, caste, class division, environmental degradation—comfortably in place.

This is a long passage, but I think there are important considerations here for the very reason I was discussing ethics in the first place. Yet it may be, given all that he has said, that Kripal is missing something of Nikolai Hartmann's insights about the nature of the realm of values, or what Hartmann calls the firmament of values. One key point is that humanity is only capable at any time of shining a light and illuminating a certain narrow radius of this vast firmament—we can only discern, see, sense, focus on and emphasize a limited range of all the values that exist. Secondly, there are antinomies between values—inherent contradictions and opposing pulls.

In a way, though I'm not certain this applies to Kripal, it could be that he's operating from a somewhat naive or oversimplistic view of values. Not in much of what he has said, but it could be that lurking beneath is that kind of narrowness and naivety. Because one might interpret things differently—that it is not that emancipation, liberation, or awakening fails to bring moral purity automatically. Rather, our idea of morality may not take into account the moral antinomies that Hartmann draws attention to.

Awakening could, I would say should, bring with it a moral devotion. Moral devotion is both part of the road to awakening and should issue from it as well. But such moral devotion and faithfulness can never be devoted simultaneously to the totality of moral archetypes, or to all the figures of what we might call the moral zodiac—those imaginal figures embodying different values, different moral orientations.

There is either a soul element or a cultural conditioning element, or both, involved in determining one's moral orientation, one's moral compass and bearing. And whatever that bearing is, that orientation will likewise be evaluated by others who do not share it—those looking in different directions, evaluating different values differently. If no one is aware of the complexity and multi-directionality of this moral value firmament, then we have only one way of talking about what is moral, one standard, one true north. In that case, Kripal's conclusion becomes inevitable—that there is no morality issuing from mysticism, no connection between mystical insight or awakening and morals. But this might be based on assumptions that are not fully explored.

Regarding ethics and morality, something in us often wants simple, unitary answers—if not to the complex particularities of ethical life and actual situations, then at least to the theoretical understanding and scope of values. We want simplicity. But partly due to the transcendent range of values relative to our human capacity at any given time, and partly due to the antinomical structure existing between values, that simplicity may not be possible.

There are also considerations about the nature of the soul and psyche. James Hillman speaks of a polytheistic psyche, a polytheistic psychology. Each individual being has a range of moral allegiances that differ according to the ethos of the imaginal figures that call to us, that speak to us, to which we have duties. If we have duty to just one or few imaginal figures as central archetypes—a calling to, rapport with, duty to those few—then over a lifetime, a person will display corresponding moral lacunae, gaps, neglects, and transgressions in their behavior.

This is not at all to condone the instances we have all read about or encountered of gross, inappropriate behavior by some teachers and so-called liberated beings. It is simply to suggest that this whole consideration may be more complex in ways that Kripal does not consider.

If we recognize that we have a polytheistic psyche, as I have discussed before, I am pulled in different directions with different senses of duty that I cannot possibly execute simultaneously. I cannot possibly fulfill all those duties in my life, certainly not at the same time. I have spoken before about the calling or claim that the god of music has on me—I cannot fulfill that while simultaneously being a Dharma teacher, among many other duties.

This is part of our existential finitude and fragmentation. But to me it has a noble tragedy and beauty. It retains a sense of beyondness, as opposed to a finitude and fragmentation that tends to flatten and render the sense of beyondness, nobility, and beauty—how these can flourish and grow.

I find all this fascinating. You can hear the different tendencies in how different people think about this, how they seek solutions. It is certainly theoretically possible, if one wishes or if it feels soul-making at any moment, to retain the notion of some transcendent synthesis among these antinomies. I cannot quite understand how it would manifest, but it is possible to retain that—to have an even prayerful, meditative, contemplative, intuitive glimpse or sense of that—while simultaneously recognizing the impossibility of instantiation in certain situations due to their structure, due to these antinomies, these inherent, polarły opposite, differing directional pulls between values. And to recognize the impossibility due to the structure of our psyche being, as Hillman would say, polytheistic in nature—polydevotional.

Polytheistically devotional. Polytheistically called. Different angels pulling us in different conflicting directions, demanding different things of us. It's not actually possible for this human life to perfectly, adequately encompass all that, hold it all together at the same time.

So there's something really important in all this, I feel. Again, it matters what our attitude to it is. That attitude would also be part of what would constitute a virtue. It's one thing to be conscious of these different impossibilities. It's another then to let them touch the soul and the mind and the heart in ways that are ennobling, in ways that are vitalizing—difficult as that might be, challenging as that might be, complicating as that might be. There's something, I think, necessary for the soul there, to some extent. But attitude matters, and attitude to this very situation is, or is not, virtuous.

Let me read another passage from Hartman. He's talking about the antinomy between love of the nearest and love of the remote, and he criticizes Nietzsche actually, who in his devotion for love of the remote, kind of poo-pooed and neglected—also in his life, I think—love of the nearest, to some extent. And he also makes the point that it sometimes falls to the founder, the discoverer, the adventurer, the one who opens up new territory first. It sometimes falls to them, or goes with that role, unfortunately, to be a little one-pointed and therefore neglectful.

We talked about this in Hartman's antinomy of grade and range—this concentrating on one ideal value and the development of that and the manifestation of that to the neglect of others, and sometimes putting others down. So he criticizes Nietzsche for that. He's talking about this antinomy between love of the nearest and love of the remotest, criticizing Nietzsche for praising love of the remotest at the expense of almost total neglect of love of the nearest.

But there's a general point about antinomies. Hartman writes, "The fact of their antinomy does not release us from the task of blending two values. In itself, love of the nearest, for example, is right and must not be discarded." So I cannot completely... I have to give some care, some attention for those that are near me—my circle of immediate friends, the people I run into every day, my family, etc. I have to have... I cannot discard, as Hartman said, that value.

"If precedent should be given to a higher value, the lower at most should be restricted in its domination." In other words, we don't totally neglect it, totally disregard it. We just restrict it at most. "The conflict, the antinomy, leads to a reciprocal restoration of both values. In every synthesis, the conflict must on principle be retained."

So retaining that conflict means retaining the sense of the conflict, retaining the sense of being pulled in different directions. I'm sure there's some mythical figure that was pulled in different directions—I can't remember who that was. So there's a tension here. There's an inevitable challenge, an inevitable tension, an inevitable difficulty of choice that we encounter regularly and in different ways and in all kinds of levels of ethical life and all kinds of gradations of difficulty in our life.

And we want, we need to keep that conflict. We can't just choose completely in favor of one versus the other. But neither is it this flaccid, dull and a bit soul-dead kind of middle-of-the-road tendency. I've got to live with and have the capacity for and the maturity for holding and navigating this conflict, holding this tension.

When we talked about eros, this is a very different kind of tension, but we talked about eros needing to maintain the two—not collapse into oneness. Merge. A tension needs to be retained with eros, an erotic tension between the soul and its beloved soul. And there's a different kind of tension here, but again, for our soul's growth, for the building of our moral being as Hartman has it, for our creativity and discovery, that tension needs to be maintained to some degree.

So often we want simple answers, as I said, and a simple code of ethics. And when you start to go into it in more detail, things are more complex. Things are not so easy. Not so facilely unifiable.

Again, passage from Hartman: "Goodness consists in selecting values according to their relative height."

from among the diversity which is always met with in any given circumstance.

So remember we said that was his definition of goodness - it's like the tendency to choose the higher. And this selection of the higher, the relatively higher among different values, is a selection, he says, which cannot be made *semel*, which just means just once in a lifetime. You cannot just say, "Okay, I've made that decision now, and that's done." It cannot be made purely theoretically either, he says, once and for all, but must be made anew each time from the very foundation, out of an ever-living sense of value.

There can be no diagram to assist us in this, no help from precepts or rules of life. It is selection not by way of contemplative deliberation - he means not by way of rational thinking - but through the intuitive element in our impulse towards the higher, an element which is always generated in our actions, our dispositions, desires and behavior, or, on the other hand, is sometimes lacking.

So we are forced to live ethical complexity. And that's hard. It's hard.

We do have precepts. We have commandments. And an interesting point is that they often refer to a kind of simplifying, and that's why a lot of people can find the precepts or the commandments very helpful as codes of life. But they are simplifying. In the Jewish tradition, you have Ten Commandments and then volumes and volumes of small

print, if you like, regarding the nuances and different situations that come in the Talmudic commentaries - encyclopedic volumes. The commandments themselves are very simple.

But this kind of simplicity is only possible for what Hartman would call the lowest values - lowest in the sense that they form the basis, they form the minimum. So, much as we would like, or sometimes we would like to just think, "I'm just keeping the precepts, that's it, that takes care of things." And in a way, as I said at the start of this talk, they function for the sake of simplicity. Those precepts and the whole movement of *sīla* in Buddhadharma were originally taught because they simplify our life and purify us from the negative consequences of contravening those precepts, which would obviate and obstruct our path to liberation.

But actually, they're a minimum. And those commandments are a minimum. The Ten Commandments - or the last five commandments, which deal with human beings' relationship with each other - those last five are a kind of minimum. But as a minimum they form the basis, they form the kind of minimal allegiance we must have. And is it enough? Is it complete? Is it too simple?

So again, I'll read you - I'm reading a lot of Hartman, but he's talking about justice, though the point is similar. He's previously said that Socrates and Plato put justice as the highest moral value, but he says actually among the virtues proper, justice is to be classed not as the highest but rather as the lowest.

"This is seen in the fact that injustice that ought to be puts forth not the maximum of moral demand but quite evidently the minimum. Its claim upon a person's conduct is purely negative: not to do injustice, to commit no transgression, not to encroach upon another's liberty, not to injure another or anything that belongs to him."

And same in the last five of the Ten Commandments: not to murder, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to bear false witness or covet what is not yours.

And he says, "If that is the whole meaning of morality, its tendency is merely conservative, not constructive. The one concern is the protection, the conservation of the lower, the elementary goods" - in other words, life, property, family, etc. If that is the whole of justice, then it is only a means to those goods values. If that's the whole of ethics, then it's only a means to those kinds of things.

But that, he says, doesn't exhaust the essence of justice. Because, in the first place, behind those goods values is hidden something of positive moral value: the sphere of personal freedom. Justice merges into respect for this, he says, but beyond it there arises something still greater.

"The higher spiritual, the communal and cultural values, one and all, can flourish only where body, life, property, personal freedom of actions and the like are secured. There only is scope found for the higher purposes."

So in other words, we need these basics - body, life, property, personal freedom of action to a certain extent - and where they are there, then on that basis the higher purposes of life, the more beautiful reaches of ethics are based. But they bring with them complications.

"Justice, then," he continues, "makes room in the sphere of actuality for the higher values. The more diversified moral life cannot begin till the simple conditions are supplied. Justice is the moral tendency to supply these conditions. It is the prerequisite of all further realizations of value. Justice is the minimum of morality that paves the way for all the higher forms."

And when we get into those higher forms, again, that's where a lot of the complexity comes in. And a lot of these antinomical relations come in.

We encounter these moral complexities and must grapple with them directly. We must choose. When a situation forces a choice upon us—when we are presented with genuine alternatives—we can attempt to avoid that choice, but such avoidance is not virtuous. It represents a kind of moral cowardice.

When we find ourselves in situations where either the structural nature of circumstances or the actual antinomial relationship between values demands a response, we inevitably choose one side of a pair of conflicting values over another. This cannot be avoided. As Hartmann observes, someone in such a situation cannot avoid making a decision. Every attempt to remain neutral only makes the difficulty worse, for in doing so, one violates both values.

To refuse to make a choice—to do nothing, to withdraw, to shrink back from the situation—means that when two values stand in opposition, we end up manifesting neither. We thereby violate both values. The attempt not to commit oneself is fundamentally moral cowardice, reflecting a lack of responsibility and unwillingness to assume it. Often this stems from moral immaturity or fear of others' opinions.

How frequently are we paralyzed by concern for what others might think? But there is also the deeper fear of consequences—the recognition that in devotion to one value, we must relatively neglect another, potentially valuable response.

What should a person do when confronted with serious conflict fraught with responsibility? Hartmann suggests we must decide according to our best conscience—according to our own living sense of the relative height of the respective values—and accept the consequences, both external and inward, including the guilt involved in violating one value. We ought to carry this guilt and, in doing so, become stronger, learning to bear it with dignity.

Real moral life is not such that one can stand guiltless within it. Each person must, step by step through life, settle conflicts that are theoretically insoluble—conflicts that cannot be resolved to satisfy both demands of antithetical moral values. That each person must navigate these dilemmas through their own free sense of values and creative energy should be regarded as a feature of the highest spiritual significance, representing complete humanity and genuine freedom.

Yet we must not make this into a comfortable theory, as the vulgar mind does with permissible lies, imagining that one incurs no guilt in offending against clearly discerned values. Only unavoidable guilt can preserve us from moral decay.

So even a Buddha must choose. Even an awakened being confronts situations where one value receives emphasis and care while an opposing or conflicting value is necessarily neglected. Both possess legitimacy, both have valid claims, but choice remains inevitable, and consequences follow.

Perhaps when Siddhartha Gautama, at twenty-nine, left his family—his very young son and wife—to strive for awakening, he was choosing the value of spiritual liberation over the virtue of being a loving, responsible husband and father. The possibility of awakening that he intuited took precedence over conventional familial duties.

Sometimes we long for a once-and-for-all answer to resolve these complexities. We desire simple codes, rational frameworks for navigating moral terrain. We want clarity, simplicity, guiltlessness. But these comforts may not be available to us.

There are additional elements to consider in all this, which I will explore when we meet again.

CHAPTER 195

Sīla and Soul (Part 8)

Rob Burbea · 1h54

> *In this nuanced exploration of ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea navigates the delicate territory where universal moral values intersect with individual soul callings. He examines how life inevitably presents us with antinomical choices between competing values, requiring us to develop our unique moral personalities while maintaining fidelity to foundational ethical principles.*
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> *Burbea introduces three potentially controversial but soul-relevant concepts: Hartman's notion of 'nobility' as the pursuit of uncommon values that pioneer new ethical territory; the transformation of hatred arising from blocked soul-making into imaginal engagement; and 'love of the remote' (Fernliebe) - a duty to future generations and higher human potential that may require sacrificing immediate concerns for the nearest.*
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> *Throughout, he emphasizes that while universal values like the basic precepts form an unconditional foundation, the soul's particular callings and the development of one's 'ideal personality' constitute genuine moral duties. Drawing on MacIntyre's concept of narrative unity, he frames the moral life as an open-ended quest where virtues find meaning within each person's unique journey toward understanding goodness. This teaching challenges conventional approaches to Buddhist ethics by incorporating the necessity of individual moral genius and the soul's duty to its own authentic development.*

So we've been saying that inevitably in our lives we're going to find ourselves in situations where the structure of the situation demands a choice, a moral choice on our part between two values, or of one value out of maybe more than two. At other times, it's not so much a specific situation as general directions in life where we need to choose, preferentially, one value that's perhaps in an antinomical and oppositional relationship with another value.

This doesn't arise only from the structure of the situation. It arises from the complexity of individual values and virtues implicating and involving others, needing counterweights, and values themselves being in antinomical relationships. Life asks us to do this. It presents us with these situations. Sometimes the choices are relatively simple, but when there's this antinomical relationship between values, it's not always so simple.

We can try to avoid this, but that's hardly a solution—not very ennobling, not very helpful for our soul or the growth of our moral being. And so we incur a certain guilt with the responsibility that comes as we make those choices in life, as we navigate our path through situations and in the general directions of our life.

One factor to consider here is why one person, given a choice between two values, chooses to prioritize and invest in and care for and express and manifest one value, while another person chooses a different value. There's a consideration of personal differences here that I think is really crucial—a difference in souls, in soul styles, in soul callings. This must come into a mature consideration of ethics.

There are moral duties that we have to the collective. I have a moral duty to the groups around me, the communities, the larger society. And I have, you have, each person has likewise a moral duty to one's own individual soul. There can be a tension here between them, and it's not always easy.

No one can flower fully as an individual. No one's soul can flower fully without drawing sustenance and all kinds of support from the basis of the collective, from what's around them. The individual rises up out of that to whatever extent they rise up. But likewise, the collective, the community, the society is dependent on the individuals. Actually, a really healthy community has individuated individuals. It's not a collection of replicas of unindividuated individuals.

To the extent that the individuals that make up a community or society are true to themselves, listening to their callings, their soul's promptings and callings, caring for their duty to themselves and allowing that to shape the flourishing of their being, the full flowering of their being, to that extent a community is strong, is robust. So there's a kind of reciprocal dependency and reciprocal need between the collective and the individual. And in terms of the moral duties, there's a kind of tension there.

But how does the personal—what Hartman would call the personality or soul style, the individual duties of a soul, soul duties that are individual—how does that come in, flow in, and influence and affect this whole discussion of ethics, especially where there's choices to be made between values, as there always will be?

Some of what I want to explore a little bit here or open out may sound to some people perhaps a little provocative, maybe controversial, maybe contentious. I'm not sure—maybe not at all to some people, maybe so to others. I'm certainly not seeking to provoke or to be controversial for the sake of it. I get absolutely no kick out of that kind of thing.

But I do think it's important to try to open up this area, which is tricky, delicate, needs careful consideration. Can we begin, just begin right now, to open this up, open up the whole field for a kind of wider, deeper discussion? Some more careful considerations regarding ethics and soul, especially as some of the things I want to go into now are areas that are not usually considered when we consider ethics.

But they are pertinent, and particularly they're pertinent if we're interested in soul-making. Axiomatic to soul-making is the principle of the necessity of my uniqueness and my particularities and my individual soul—not at the exclusion of everything else, but that's a part of it. So these areas that I want to talk about are pertinent when we talk about sīla and soul, ethics and soul. I hope I'll do my best not to be clumsy. I'm sure inevitably I'll be a little clumsy in how I phrase things and treading in this delicate territory, but I'll do my best.

There is this whole range of values, whole range of possible choices that we have, either in terms of the larger currents of our life or in specific situations. We need to make choices. To not make a choice is also a choice, but not ennobling, not soul-making. We need to make choices. And part of what comes into making our choices, part of what forms and shapes and directs and inspires different choices by different individuals, is those personal soul styles, personal inclinations or callings or duties of the soul.

Hartman points out—and this really is important to say—that the universal values, in other words, not the personal values, but those basic precepts that we get in Buddha Dharma, or the basic sort of last five of the Ten Commandments, and that kind of thing, the universal values such as justice—they need to form the basis, and in a way they have unconditional precedence. They are chiseled in stone. They form a platform, a foundation, on top of which, on the basis of which, the more differentiated personal values can be built and raised.

Everyone has an obligation to these basic universal values and to the precepts organized around them. But on top of that foundation, all kinds of choices present themselves in terms of the variegated emphases on different values that one can have, the differences that can exist between human beings. But that foundation remains essential.

Now, in a way, this sounds like a relatively simple formula in the abstract. And sometimes it is very simple. You choose this, I choose that. You prefer this, I prefer that. I prefer developing this, I prefer investing in that. As long as we're both maintaining the universal values, keeping a care for them, then all's well and good. So sometimes it's that simple, but sometimes it's not. It's a little more tricky, a little more nebulous and ambiguous.

We draw into our evaluation of others and self sometimes what's just indoctrination or fashion or the dominant view of the culture. It's not necessarily such an open-eyed, unblinkered view of the moral landscape.

Some souls, as I see different people, read about different people, know different people, may have a kind of soul calling to express or manifest what might be quite extraordinary virtues—not so commonly found virtues. A kind of boldness that's out of the ordinary, a moral courage that's out of the ordinary, for instance, to speak the truth, to stand up in truth despite threats and possible dangers. In their soul style, they might express and manifest what Hartman called this radiant virtue—the German *strahlende Tugend*. I asked Kirsten and she said that's not a good translation, but I didn't ask her what a better one would be. She said it would be difficult to find words.

But this radiant virtue—there's something in the being, it's like sunshine, spiritual sunshine just pouring out of them, radiating to those nearby. Sometimes it communicates non-verbally and indirectly, sometimes through direct interactions. That's not a common virtue. It's an uncommon virtue.

Or a person may have a capacity for a kind of radical generosity—how they are with money, how they are with their possessions. A kind of magnanimity, a largeness of soul, a big spirit, a big heart. An adventurousness of spirit that's quite rare. Some people may have those kinds of more extraordinary virtues, and that's their soul style, that's their soul shape, that's what they're called to manifest in this life. It's part of their ethos, their soul, their personality.

And sometimes what I notice is that this manifestation, this soul style, may come in a package where other virtues are relatively neglected. We've touched on this before, or even contravened, or at least not developed so much. For example, they may not be gentle of speech. They may be at times quite harsh, even insensitive, judgmental. Or they just seem to live in a way that keeps quite different sexual mores. They may be quite promiscuous, and other people might be looking and judging that promiscuity. Maybe that goes with the kind of liberality and freedom of soul.

Oftentimes, those particular neglects of whichever virtues are relatively speaking neglected may be judged by others in the society, in the wider society. But those others may be relatively or even completely insensitive or blind to the particular set of virtues that this person is expressing. They're blind to the radiant virtue. They're blind to the radical generosity. They're blind to the moral courage. Or they don't value it so much. They evaluate it differently.

And the others who are judging this person—I'm thinking of several people now—might also be blind or insensitive to the very idea of duty to one's soul, to one's *daimon*, to one's angel, to what Hartman calls the ideal personality.

So this is tricky. The universal values must be a foundation, must be a common universal foundation. But on top of this, there's this space, this amplitude for personal variation and disposition and inclination and the callings of the soul. It sounds simple, but it can be very tricky here. Because what exactly are those universal foundations? Where are the boundaries?

Consider Bob Marley, whose being exuded magnanimity, largeness of spirit, radical generosity, and openness. He radiated spiritual sunshine and beneficence, embodying boldness, adventurousness, and courage while bestowing his creative gifts artistically to humanity. Yet some criticized his sexual promiscuity and infidelity to his various partners.

This raises profound questions: In the particular personal, relational, marital, community and wider social context of Jamaica at that time, where exactly lay the boundary of universal values regarding sexual behavior or monogamy? This complexity illustrates how tricky these considerations become.

We encounter multiple tensions here: the need for faithfulness to individual soul callings and the virtues that grasp us, alongside duties to both collective well-being and universal values. Yet these universal values don't always have clearly demarcated edges. Moreover, people with certain kinds of spirit often face judgment from those blind to particular virtues or to the duty each soul has toward its own unique callings.

I tread carefully here, offering this as something to consider rather than providing definitive answers. These tensions arise from different pulls and demands—duties drawing us in various directions.

Hartman speaks of developing personality toward what he calls the ideal personality. Each person possesses this ideal existing in the realm of ideals. Though we never completely manifest or express it fully, it constitutes, in some ways, our more real essence than what we actually demonstrate. This ideal resembles what we've discussed as the angel out ahead or the daemon refracted.

In Hartman's language, developing our personality toward this ideal—listening faithfully to its callings, shapings, and promptings—constitutes virtue itself. Can we include this in our sense of values: the value of our individual personality, of listening to and caring for those unique soul callings and our soul's growth?

This developmental process includes each individual's unique weighing and differential emphasis between different values. How I weigh competing, oppositional values in situations differs from how you or another person might weigh them. This differential weighing becomes part of shaping our being, part of soul-making.

While goodness involves choosing the higher value, this principle alone doesn't provide sufficient clarity about what to do, nor does it offer a complete picture of what's involved in the choices presented to us as souls. Yes, we choose higher, but combined with this principle, we have the possibility to choose in different ways as part of developing our souls.

This faithfulness to our own soul's particularities and individualities—because our ideal personality itself constitutes virtue—creates an ought and duty to this unique, irreplaceable, once-in-a-cosmos soul. This unique, irreplaceable personality represents a moral demand, a moral value, perhaps a very high one. However, its value plummets if we contravene universal values in pursuing it.

This duty to the unique and irreplaceable once-in-a-cosmos soul that you are proves difficult to find in teachings—certainly in Buddha Dharma or in various emptiness teachings or oneness teachings. Generally, they lack this recognition. It's quite unusual even in moral philosophy to acknowledge this duty to what Hartman calls ideal personality, to our individual soul. Though I'm no expert in the range of moral philosophy, aside perhaps from Max Scheler, I'm uncertain where else such considerations appear among moral philosophers, who tend toward different approaches.

So within the realm of this consideration of what constitutes an individual calling and our duty to that calling, I want to explore three particular and somewhat unusual manifestations. Again, for the sake of opening out what is less commonly examined, and for the sake of understanding what has quite a lot to do with soul in particular ways.

The first is the virtue of nobility, as Hartman uses that word. I tend to use it in a slightly different way, but that's not important here. I want to talk about what he calls the noble—a possible kind of virtue or value, or rather orientation to value, that is rarer but may have its place when we consider the callings of individual souls.

For him, the noble is the opposite of the common. This has nothing to do with social class or money, nothing to do with aristocracy in the usual sense, nothing to do with ethnic or racial divisions. It is simply the opposite of the common, what he calls noble.

Because in a way, he writes, goodness can sometimes be commonplace. There is such a thing as hackneyed virtue, ignoble contentment, narrow-minded virtue and righteousness.

Now, he's not saying that all goodness is like that—that would be neither accurate nor kind. And even when there is hackneyed virtue, it doesn't make it bad; it's just common, just what everyone does or most people do.

This nobility he speaks of is actually not everyone's concern. Goodness—what it means to be good, to practice being good, to invest in goodness, to care for goodness—that's everyone's concern. Nobility is something particular to some souls. It is uncommon. It is always uncommon to few, he says. Its opposite is the common, the usual, ordinary, the well-worn track upon which both goodness and badness can be found.

By its very nature, the noble is not everybody's concern. So even among the good—those who are good or who care for goodness—there are the noble and the not so noble. He says it consists in nothing but an aristocracy of disposition.

What is he talking about? In any culture, there is a generally accepted morality—in most cultures at least, certainly throughout history, perhaps less so nowadays. We've discussed this historical fact of shifting moralities between cultures, different times and places in history, different communities. But this search for what is not yet in the range of accepted morality—this is a noble search.

Some people are sensitive to groping for, intuiting at the edge of, grasping and being grasped by a value or set of values that are out of the ordinary for their context, for their social context and its accepted morality. There's the prevailing view and whatever that morality encompasses. It can be extended upwards into higher reaches of the development of certain values—one way of grasping what's out of the common range. But it can also move laterally, not just upwards toward higher values or more extreme reaches of a certain value, but into different values that are not even on the radar of an accepted morality.

He says it is to this also—as well as to the height of moral values and extending the highest—to this wider range, this moving into new territory, this sensing or opening up of a novel ethical sensibility, that the searching glance of nobility is directed. Progress in selecting values, even within the range of goodness, is itself a function of the noble. For nobility of character is the pursuit of the uncommon.

What he's describing are pioneers in any given time and place, whose antennae, whose soul receptors are sensitive to what is uncommon, what is beyond the scope of usual sensibility. In opening up that sensibility, they break new ground. But in time,

that new ground comes to be shared with the larger part of society. Those perspectives, sensibilities, and priorities come to be shared more widely. What was cutting-edge new territory becomes relatively common. Then the process must start again, historically. Now this range is common, and some people will be sensitive to newer values, to the uncommon.

The content of nobility changes, although its direction toward the uncommon remains the same, he writes. And he continues: in the historic process of the displacement of values from area to area within the whole range of the scope of the firmament of values...

In the historic process of the displacement of values, the essence of nobility is the perpetual anticipation, the searching and testing, the moving forward which transforms the ethos of an epoch. Its content at any given moment must therefore be the moral claim of the uncommon. Without the noble, the process must need stagnate, and since to stand still is an impossibility, become retrogressive. On the grand scale, nobility is the onward-striving life of the historical ethos. In the individual is the spirit of the pioneer.

Again, I don't know where this lands in you. Some of this sounds so elitist, and it's a certain view of history, but to me, there's something worth considering here. I just want to open out some territory for our consideration. It doesn't mean we have to buy these ideas wholesale, but there is something here, rarely considered in moral philosophy, that has importance for our considerations of soul-making.

He says that as regards its content, the higher development of the human type always depends on the actual tendency—not perhaps the conscious aims—of the noble. It necessarily clashes with the interest of those who are accounted "good," and is always to some extent aloof from the community at large and stands in open opposition to the universality of their standards. So again, we get this sense of people who would judge this prioritizing of virtues to which they are blind. There's a kind of clash between the normally respected members of society and those with this noble character—a clash of interests and moral values and vision and sensibilities. And so there's a kind of separation.

An improvement in the standard is made possible by concentration of energy upon a narrower sphere. Again, there's this principle we touched on before: how progress is often made, new territory is stretched into, by focusing and getting interested in something particular and really heightening our focus, our work in that direction. Hence the necessary remoteness of the selecting group from the general public.

He writes quite strongly: "The noble man hates all compromise as to values, even those that are wise and beneficent." Can you get the sense of the kind of soul character he's describing? A pioneer who is at odds with the entrenched, ordinary, common, respectable way of being. They are reaching out, listening to some kind of sense of something else that is possible—some extension that's possible. And there is in that character a kind of dislike of compromise. They tend to be very uncompromising.

"His salvation lies in another direction, in the exclusive fostering of the value which he thinks should be preferred, even at the expense of all others." This kind of character can often seem to others a bit out of balance. They're pressing on into the future, into unexplored territory. As such, they can be leaning forward into that in a way that others would regard as being out of balance. Perhaps it's part of the soul style.

Is it always a demand for the soul to be balanced? You get a lot of that in some interpretations of Jungian psychology—it's all about wholeness and balance. And yet there is a place for a lack of balance. Perhaps there's a place for this, perhaps there's a soul style that goes with that. And yes, it comes with costs.

This is an unusual consideration, an unusual way of thinking, perhaps controversial, but it might be relevant to certain souls. It might be relevant to the duty that certain souls have—the particular duties in the realm of values. They always go together, duty and value.

The expanding into new territory of valuational sensibility and the ethical side... we've talked about values being an intrinsic part of soul-making as one of the elements of the imaginal, and everything we're discussing about ethics and how they relate to values and how our relationship with values and virtues can be made soul-making. Some people have suggested something like this to me: that soul-making itself is a kind of value. We're valuing, we value soul-making. As such, that might be what Hartman would call a noble virtue, or one of the new virtues for our time—a relatively new value.

We value something because it's soulful. We value soul-making. We value that whole ethos and sensibility and sensitivity to existence, to self, other, world, to the elements of our psychology, to the cosmos. And that in our time, that might be an expansion into newer territory in terms of a new virtue, a new value. Soul-making itself.

The second area I'd like to consider—again, quite tricky territory, but we'll see how we do—is hatred. Hatred. I want to see if it's possible to shine a little light again from the point of view of soul and what it might have to do with soul—hatred and soul.

We value soul-making, that whole ethos and sensibility toward existence—toward self, other, world, toward the elements of our psychology, toward the cosmos. In our time, this might represent an expansion into newer territory, a new virtue, a new value that soul-making offers.

The second area I'd like to consider—though it's quite tricky territory—is hatred. I want to see if it's possible to shine a little light from the perspective of soul and what it might have to do with soul: hatred and soul.

So what do we mean by hatred? If you look it up in the dictionary, it simply says something like "intense dislike," which is good enough for our purposes. Different schools approach the psychology of hatred in various ways, defining it in more specific terms. But let's say this: intense dislike, and so to speak, making almost an enemy out of something.

It could manifest in a cold way—some people include in their definition of hatred that it has a coldness different from anger, which is hot. But I include both. So it can be cold, withdrawn and out of relationship, or it can be hot, ranting, whatever.

We should also say that hatred does not necessarily include ill will. Ill will means to wish harm on someone. So you can intensely dislike something, you can hate something without wishing a person or persons harm. It's not the same either as cruelty, which is inflicting harm and enjoying it—either inflicting harm or enjoying a harm that someone else is suffering. Those are, if you like, a whole step further from what I'm talking about here by hatred.

So we have intense dislike that doesn't necessarily include ill will or cruelty. Let's see if we put this in a soul-making context, bringing together these elements and shining light from the perspective of soul-making teachings. Perhaps there's something worthwhile to consider here that can help open things up.

I've said several times that perhaps a really fundamental axiom of soul-making dharma is: soul loves soul-making, soul wants soul-making. It sounds so simple—soul wants soul-making. And in a way, it might be possible to use that axiom very basically, taking it as a first principle and seeing what follows from it.

So rather than saying human beings want attachment, or human beings want pleasure, or human beings want biological survival—whatever the primary drives might be—what if we say, actually, soul wants soul-making? Just entertain the idea that this is the primary drive. Our primary drive as human beings is toward soul-making, and this

gets diverted, subverted in different ways. What might ensue? What might this imply when we consider our psychology and our needs as human beings, how we consider developmental psychology and all kinds of things?

Soul wants soul-making, which implies eros, because eros is an indispensable element of soul-making. And soul-making also involves, with the eros, that the self, other, world, and even our eros itself become imaginal. Soul-making also asks that the sense of self, other, world in our life mirror those imaginal things. So there has to be some refracting, some mirroring, some reflecting. And with the eros, there's always this beyond—always something to reach into, to grope into, to feel into, to sense into, to create, to discover into. There's always the angel out ahead.

Now, soul wants soul-making, but because of avijjā, because of the basic delusional reification of self, other, world, and elements of our psyche and psychology and being—for instance, eros—because of this delusional reification, because of cultural indoctrination, because of limited patterns or limitations on the movement and growth, the expansion of eros, of psyche, of logos, and also of emotional, heart, life, and energy in general, the soul often moves in a direction that is not soul-making.

Many people would contest this idea that the basic drive is toward soul-making, saying something like: before all this soul-making stuff, before eros for soul-making which is like icing on the cake, souls, beings, egos want to live. They want biological survival. They want to feel well. They want pleasurable sensations—the pleasure principle and all that.

But we're not clinging to this as dogmatic ultimate truth, this idea that what souls want most fundamentally is soul-making. It's illuminating, I think, and opens up different perspectives and avenues in our life. And you can look throughout history, even today in the West, at countless numbers of human beings who choose soul-making over and before pleasure, over and before even health, and sometimes even physical survival. Sometimes making choices in the service of something that's soul-making, despite the material cost, the hedonic cost—meaning it's painful, it's unpleasant—and despite physical cost.

There are countless examples that bear witness to this prioritizing of soul-making over any of these other drives that are usually considered more primary. Something can trump all those. A person can say, "It doesn't matter if I die. I sacrifice my health. I sacrifice my material well-being, my pleasure."

Let's play with this principle: soul wants soul-making as the fundamental drive, with everything that's involved in soul-making. Now, sometimes what happens is that soul-making is blocked. It's not possible, or it's blocked by some inner or outer obstacles. It's not possible for the sense of self, other, world and eros to become imaginal.

Either one has only literalized the desire, so there's desire present, but it's craving rather than eros, and nothing is imaginable for whatever reason—or in the blocking, one literalizes desire. This can go both ways. The literalized desire blocks the soul-making, or when soul-making is blocked in some other way, then the desire is still there and can only get literalized because it cannot get transformed and dimensionalized by the soul-making process.

Then a few different things can happen. One is we can try to have whatever it is—the object that we want. Hatred often arises when there's something we want but cannot have. Without eros being allowed to instigate the soul-making dynamic and allow things to become imaginal, to have dimensions and depths, this desire is merely craving, not eros. It has to move on a one-dimensional plane, flatly in the flat world, into a kind of greed for more and more things, or into consumerism.

Another possibility when soul-making is blocked and desire remains is a kind of collapse, a despair. The being collapses—you can see it in a person's body language and demeanor at a certain time, or as a more general trend throughout their whole life, because there's been a kind of habitual collapse of the whole soul, or a large portion of the soul. This happens because the eros, the libido, are not allowed to grow and extend things. Sometimes with that despair and collapse, there's a withdrawal—what some psychologists call a schizoid withdrawal. One retreats from relationship with the other or others.

What happens then to the eros or desire? A third possibility is that hatred ensues.

When we're frustrated in our desires, in the desires of our soul, we either reify something and move toward greed or craving on a flat level, collapse in despair inwardly in this withdrawal from relationship, or something gets transformed into hatred—or some combination of those three.

The hatred is particularly interesting because it often comes from a feeling or perception of powerlessness—the powerlessness of self in its desire with regard to something for the self, or its desire for something with regard to another, or its desire in the world, and not being able to have that. When this is intense, there's a feeling of powerlessness.

I want to focus on certain kinds of hatred—very particular manifestations of hatred. You can see this link with powerlessness, if you weren't already aware of it. Powerlessness and hatred often go together. If you find yourself in a really difficult contraction of hatred, one of the first things to do when working with it is to look for and ask: In what ways do I feel powerless? What is the particular kind of powerlessness I feel?

For example, sometimes someone who's a secularist—and I use that word in the sense of opposition to religious fundamentalism—may hate religious fundamentalists when they feel powerless in relation to them, either because they feel powerless regarding a group of terrorists or because they're living in a community or country with oppressive religious law. They might hate that because there's powerlessness in it.

Conversely, many religious fundamentalists hate secularists when they feel powerless in relationship to them. They may feel powerless with respect to the sweeping power of capitalist and modernist views, what they would regard as modernist immorality and amorality.

Hatred and powerlessness usually go together. The hatred often comes out of or from a feeling of powerlessness. This is quite important to be aware of and to explore.

But I want to talk about quite specific kinds of hatred—more narrow ones that don't just involve powerlessness, but powerlessness in relation to what may be soul-making. Where the soul wants soul-making and somehow it's blocked. And maybe it doesn't even realize that what it wants is soul-making. That's partly why I'm saying all this.

Actually, on the theme of power, there's a lot of energy, a lot of libido, a lot of life force tied up in hatred. It can feel completely frozen, completely contracted and imprisoned and not very powerful, but actually, because there's so much energy tied up in it, there's potentially a lot of power in it. So there's a possibility of liberating that power and energy.

Again, it depends on what we do with that power. It comes from a feeling of powerlessness, but it actually has in it the potential of tremendous power. That power can go in the soul-making direction—can kick-start, galvanize, instigate, open up, and give energy to the direction of soul-making, to things becoming images, to the imaginal sense of self, other, world, and eros.

Or it can get stuck in that withdrawal and despair. Actually, that tightness there, that contraction, has a lot of power. It takes quite a lot to keep the soul bound up like that, to keep the being contracted and withdrawn like that.

Or this potential power can move in the direction of literalized action—perhaps action to destroy the object of hatred, or to work towards what is actually desired.

There's potentially a lot of power in hatred. It feels, once we get under the sort of obvious feelings of hatred, then there's a sense of powerlessness, and underneath that is the potential of liberating power. And the question is: what will we do with that power? Where will it go?

So hatred comes out of, usually, a feeling or a perception of powerlessness of the self in relation to its desire for something regarding self or the world.

Now, an interesting thing about hatred—and this is the particular kind of hatred I want to talk about—is that oftentimes certain kinds of hatred arise for what is quite close or similar. So it's very common, for example, for people within a certain religious tradition to end up hating, intensely disliking, or opposing someone in the same tradition whose teachings are in some ways very similar—making a kind of enemy or polemic out of them. This happens in the realm of philosophy, in psychological schools, or whatever. This is quite interesting.

Why is it that certain kinds of hatred arise much more towards some expression or manifestation that's actually not too far from one's own position? If we think, for example, it's unlikely that someone in the Insight Meditation tradition would start hating the proponents of indigenous belief from Papua New Guinea or something like that—it's too dissimilar. But within that range of what is quite similar, let's say the Insight Meditation tradition or Tibetan Buddha Dharma, it can be intense and polemic.

The Insight Meditation tradition tends not to speak these things, but they simmer along there in the background, and you can hear them come out. You've probably heard it seep out of this voice at times. The Tibetans are much more open about it and engage in what I think is probably a much healthier open polemic that's quite cutting and intense at times.

So why the similarity? Is it something to do with the relationship between eros and hatred? Are there certain souls who might have a lot of soulfulness, a lot of disposition towards soul-making, towards image, towards eros, that may be in some ways liable to or prone to this kind of hatred for something that's actually quite similar?

What's the connection here possibly? Eros delineates. We talked about this when we went into detail in previous retreats. What does eros do? It complexifies, it creates distinctions, it creates and discovers more and more faces in what it loves and carves its

relationship with those particulars. Making those distinctions, discovering and creating those delineations, those different faces—this is part of the whole process. Certainly one can get attached to those.

But there's something probably more primary even than the attachment: the fear of the dissolving of the objects of eros that have been created, discovered through this process of fine delineation, of subtle discernment, discrimination, subtle kind of differentiation into different aspects. When another teaching or tradition or school of thought is quite close, it perhaps presents more of a danger to one's own objects of eros—what one has delineated and what one loves in terms of what's opening up for oneself.

Where there's less similarity, where the difference is huge, it's strangely less likely that hatred arises. Somehow the object of my eros, that which I love, that which I'm discovering and creating here in terms of thought and the direction of my eros and the whole sense of soul—carving that out in terms of self, other, world—if that's blocked somewhere or crowded out by something that's similar, but in the similarity tends to be heard or seen in a way that washes over all differences, then the hatred might arise. It's more likely to arise.

This is interesting. Is there a relationship between eros and hatred? Hatred in Pali, in Sanskrit, the word is dvesha. The root there is from dva, which means "two," "to make two." And of course, creating duality is part of eros as well. This is why eros can be dangerous, a double-edged sword, if you like. Is there some connection here—the need to differentiate, and the actual differentiation that comes with eros, and the tendency or the danger of hatred there?

Thinking also of James Hillman at this point, who said somewhere, "You have to hate something." If you read some of his books, and more and more in interviews, but it comes across in writings as well, he's quite polemic. What he would have openly called a hatred of different schools of psychology. Notice that his hatred was for psychologists—he was a psychologist hating different or varying schools of psychology.

For instance, there was a teacher of his at the Jung Institute called Marie-Louise von Franz, and she presented a certain picture of puerpyschology and other things which affronted Hillman's own soul sensibility and the kind of careful differentiations that his soul-making process made, that his eros and the eros of his intellect and sensibility made. So he, in a way, hated her teachings. He also hated what he regarded as the dominant psychology at the time when he was beginning to write—the dominant ego psychology or behavioral psychology.

So, in a way, the preponderance of these dominant paradigms, and the power wielded by Marie-Louise von Franz as an authority in the Jungian school alongside the established psychological frameworks, perhaps made him feel a relative lack of power. The danger, as I said, was that what he wanted to find out for himself, discover, create space for, and present—both to his soul and to the soul of the world and to others—these faces were in danger of getting covered over. In that situation, there was a feeling of relative powerlessness.

But what was interesting in that case, and part of what I want to convey, is that he was able to mobilize a power for himself in actuality by writing and speaking, and also by working with and supporting others whose work he sympathized with. In doing all this—beginning to write and speak and carve out this vision, this soul vision and soul sensibility, and present it as something different and differentiable to the world—he in a way became image for himself. His eros, all of it, was allowed to come into the soul-making process. Even the other can become a kind of imaginal other, in terms of the other as object of hatred, whether it's a school or a person embodying that school.

This is not actually, as I said, ill will or harm. But it can become imaginal and not reified. So faced with that potential obliteration and covering over, the loss of what his soul-making process was revealing and creating—the differentiations, the aspects of divinity, the aspects of soul—faced with the danger of that and the relative powerlessness or perception of powerlessness in that wider situation, he was able to act and move in a way that the whole landscape of that environment and all the constituents of that landscape in the world of psychology became actually imaginal for him. He himself became an imaginal character in that landscape.

Remember, the erotic imaginal always has these beyonds to it. So you get something similar with the warrior always fighting as image. There's not an end to this. It's not necessarily an end to some of these battles. Some revolutionaries actually need a constant revolution. The soul would not be satisfied with arriving at some kind of finished utopia. There's this beyond there.

Faced with this kind of situation—the desire, the frustrated desire, the incipient movement of eros, and the sensed powerlessness and danger with respect to what it wants—it could be anything that the soul wants. But getting what one wants, or what one thinks one wants, in some of these situations, may not actually be soul-making. That's a point to bear in mind.

One way out of all this, one way to dissolve the hatred, is to really let go in terms of what's taught in some of the classical Buddha Dharma teachings. Another is when the self actually manages to get some power and no longer feels so powerless—when

there's a decrease of the sense of powerlessness, and the sense of the self that's desired, whatever the other is that's desired, and the sense of the world that one's in that's desired are achieved materially or literally. That would be another way out of that hatred. But another is for something to become image—for self, other, world, eros to become image, or some combination of all these avenues.

It's worth bearing in mind that sometimes, as I said, getting what one wants—the literal achievement of what one desires—may or may not be soul-making. If the self, other, world, and eros don't open up to the imaginal, with this open-endedness and beyondness, the forever beyondness there, then that process may not be soul-making.

We've talked about this before on previous retreats: the need for boundaries, because boundaries make two. There's a boundary between this and that, between number one and number two. So boundaries, limits, actually form part of the crucible of soul-making. Sometimes, as I said, getting what one wants, if one's not careful, is not actually soul-making. If I get what I want, there has to be something more that I haven't got that I want. There's the extension into the beyonds of the eros, the angel out ahead, always moving ahead, the infinite growth of those beyonds. So there's still a boundary between what I have and what I don't have that can potentially allow more—allow a soul-making process.

I can end the hatred by getting what I want, but it might not be soul-making. What's the fundamental desire there? Is it to get what I want, or is it actually the soul-making? If I've sold it short by just getting what I want, I've flattened it.

So hatred will stay as poisonous hatred—and it really can be very poisonous and very imprisoning, toxic in the way it seeps out to other people as well—when self, other, world, and eros cannot become image. It can be transformed, it can dissolve when we let go, when we really fully let go in the usual dharmic sense, or when we get some power in terms of what we want, or when things become image and are really allowed to become imaginal.

I was struck—I don't know if you saw it—there was a video someone sent me sometime in the last three years.

And it was, I think, someone had posted on Facebook or something. It was a kind of selfie video that this young woman had taken. I think she was Swedish, but I can't remember. And she had boarded a plane—a regular airline flight to Afghanistan or somewhere—which contained an Afghani man that was being deported, probably facing great threat to his life back in Afghanistan.

She boarded this plane and took a selfie of herself standing up and refusing to sit down when they asked everyone to sit down so they could take off. She filmed it on her camera. She disrupted the flight and she and the Afghani man were removed. But I was so touched by seeing this video. I don't know if you saw it—I think it was quite popular.

She was in a situation where there was potentially a great deal of powerlessness, a sense of powerlessness. Yet she actually did something quite brave and extraordinary. I thought it very beautiful in the kind of grace with which she did it and the largeness of soul with which she did it. But it was self-empowering in the sense that instead of just feeling powerless in terms of that terrible situation, she did something which was self-empowering.

By empowering herself that way, I don't know if she would have gotten contracted into hate, but there was certainly much less chance. There was the dissolving of any chance of hatred through the self-empowering. And hatred often goes with this kind of hardness of heart, something really brittle and contracted there.

Part of what was really touching to me seeing this was just how vulnerable she could be at the same time. She was very strong, standing up, being very firm with those who were shouting at her and criticizing her and calling her names. She was very strong, very upright, very bold, very courageous, very clear, and at the same time very vulnerable. So she was crying and there was a richness of soul there. There was a breadth of soul. There wasn't any hardness there at all.

And it was interesting too—again, we're talking about ethics in terms of some of what people who didn't like what she was doing, some of the other passengers on the flight complained about the inconvenience. "What about, you know, there are children on the plane," they said. "You're upsetting the children." And again, you can hear there the sort of opposition of different value systems—I would say actually values of different heights in this hierarchy of values.

You know, inconvenience: how high a value, how important a value is convenience? And there's so often this trope of "upsetting the children" as if that's something that's kind of become something almost sacred in some people's outlook in our culture, so that those values like that become somehow more important or eclipse the value of care, of kindness, of compassion, of saving someone's life, of standing up to injustice.

And again, so we have to be very careful with hatred. I'm just talking there about certain manifestations of hatred that come out of—actually, at their root, there's a blocked soul-making. There's some soul-making and some direction of eros and image and soulfulness that wants to be allowed to flourish, wants to be given space to carve out a pathway for a soul, and it's blocked, and hatred can come out of that.

Sometimes we're just so in the hatred, we don't actually quite realize the different levels of what's going on, even the level of the powerlessness, etc. In some of those instances it's worth—it's not easy, but it's worth perhaps approaching it with this lens, to do with power and powerlessness and soul-making and what the soul might want there that's getting blocked and are there ways for it to open up the situation imaginally, etc.

So again, tricky territory, difficult, potentially contentious, but really important to consider if we want to bring in the reflections about soul and considerations of soul into our considerations and reflections on ethics and morality and also psychology more generally.

Okay, the third—again, example of a kind of unusual area that's unusual to consider, an area of ethical values that's unusual to consider, but that also might have something to do with what's a personal calling for some souls—is one I've mentioned before in one of the earlier talks in the talks on ethics. It's this love of the remote.

So I want to say something about that. I think it was coined by Nietzsche as an idea, but I'm not entirely sure. So what is this love of the remote? I've actually mentioned it earlier, but I want to go into it again.

There is for us a kind of bond with those that are nearest to us in the community. We have an obligation to them, etc. We feel that bond. We rub shoulders with them. We feel moral duty and concern in relation to them. Love of the remote has—one of its aspects is a love for, an obligation for, a moral duty, or it's a sense of love, a sense of obligation, a sense of moral duty to the future, if you like, to the following generation or following generations. That's one aspect of it.

I'll qualify a bit more in a moment.

So Hartman writes about this, and he says, "The responsibility which arises therefrom"—the responsibility which arises from this, the responsibility of this responsibility to the future, this particular kind of responsibility to the future—"signifies a solidarity of a newer and greater kind than that of justice, brotherly love, and faith. Like these, it is a bond, a fellowship, a pledge, a joint responsibility of person for person." But it's different, he says.

"In it, the man of today feels himself one with the man of the faraway future, though the latter will have forgotten him and cannot be of help to him. The temporal direction of cause and effect is not reversible. The influence of man on man, solidarity itself, is only one-sided. Only he who lived previously can be of service to him who lives afterwards. The successor bears no retrospective obligation. Instead, there falls to him a new obligation towards the generations coming after him. Solidarity is directed forward only. Its form is progress, not coexistence. Still, it is a bond which is great not only in extent, but great in the quality of its task."

So there's perhaps some overlap here with what he calls nobility. And again, we're talking about something that not everyone will resonate with. Not everyone will feel a soul calling and a duty in this direction.

He continues, "That it is a bond of a more fragile kind, that it is taken so much less earnestly by the living than is the solidarity of justice or love. This is not due to its own nature. It is due to the moral immaturity of the living, to their not having wakened to their greatest task. It is their lack of thorough self-conquest which transcends the sphere of the now and the near."

So again, it's quite strong language. But he's saying sometimes we get so preoccupied or so limited in our sense of the scope of our obligations that we forget that we might have a greater obligation to the sort of progress of humanity, if you like.

In German it's called *Fernsterliebe*, and it was, in fact, Nietzsche who coined the term. It's very characteristic of Nietzsche and something that he was perhaps the first person to promote—the first person to cotton on to and sense really keenly. He had an imbalanced relationship with it because he neglected its antinomical value in the love of the nearest. So Hartmann criticizes him for that, which I think is a good point.

But then I'm going to read another passage. He says, "Love of the remotest at first really requires an overcoming of one's commitment to the nearest." So this is interesting, and we're talking about values that have antinomical relationships.

"It is the same overcoming which generally inheres in the nature of a future intention. Everything which is dear and entrusted to man attaches to the immediate environment, usually. Here, an attachment of love to the remote is demanded." Somehow I have to feel this attachment, this moral obligation to the remote, the far future.

"Hence not only natural inclination but also genuine moral habit must be overcome," he says. "A valuable commitment, not acquired without moral struggle, is to retire into the background and give way to another ethos."

So we may have worked hard to practice love of the nearest, to practice altruism. And in a way, at a certain stage, maybe something else has to come in. And that love of the nearest has to kind of, relatively speaking, diminish in our hierarchy of priorities for some.

"So it's the conquering of a product of previous self-conquest. Love of the nearest, or altruism, went counter to self-love, to egoism. It was a tremendous extension of the sphere of life, efficiency, evaluation, participation. Now even this widened sphere is seen to be too narrow, to be a drag on the intention of love. Love of the nearest does not go beyond one's contemporary. Its effect does not endure. It dies with its object. It is not adapted to the continuation of its object, but to his present existence. Love of the remotest seeks a different measure of efficiency, an efficacy which will last."

Now, I should qualify what he means here, because he doesn't mean that some of you have heard of the need to consider the next seven generations in our choices now. That to me is absolutely critical when we're talking about things like species loss and climate change. We really need to bring that kind of thinking, this care for the future, this care for the next seven generations, seventy generations. In terms of the totality, everyone in those generations we need to care for. That's, to me, a given and just common ethical sense—well, it should be common ethical sense.

But he's actually talking about something different here. It's not obvious from the language of "love the remote," but he writes, "In love of the nearest, the energy of striving, as it has no choice, reconciles itself with whoever is accidentally at hand." It's just the practicing of kindness and concern and empathy and support to whoever's around one. It has nothing to do with whether that person is worthy or not, just as when we teach metta.

It's unconditional in that regard. So it's not interested in assessing whether someone is worthy or unworthy of that kindness, that love of the nearest.

With love of the remotest, though, it's different. And this is where it might sound somewhat contentious to some people. The energy of striving, he writes, "shall serve not the nearest, but the best, whom it will bring to further fruition. Herein, a selection of persons from the point of view of values is introduced, a selection which on its side does not refer to the given person at all, but to the type of man."

So there's this interest—in this kind of love that Nietzsche was promulgating and that Hartmann's picking up on, and I think Max Scheler as well—there's this interest in those in the far future, but specifically those who are the most morally ready people,

the most morally capable, what he calls "the best" in the future. So it's quite elitist and quite selective. And it does consider worth. It does evaluate in terms of values and virtues and moral capacity and sensibility.

This is probably not at all fashionable in many circles nowadays, given our current way of thinking in society. It's worth noting that in the Pali Canon, it mentions several times that the Buddha, when he was going to give a Dharma talk, would use his psychic powers, his *siddhis*, to survey the audience and find who was nearest to awakening. Not those who were already Arahants, not those who were at the beginning, but he would get a sense of where everyone was at with his psychic powers. And he would aim his talk, pitch his talk at those who were nearest to awakening. Not at the beginners, not at those far away, but those who were nearest to awakening. Again, he's aiming at the best. He's aiming at a certain capacity.

How rare that is for us to think that way these days. For many of us, it contravenes another kind of ethical law—this love of the nearest, which often goes with a concern for who's weakest, who's more the beginner, who's more in need. So there is this antinomy between these two valuational pools and duties. Hartmann criticized Nietzsche for being too one-sided and neglecting the love of the nearest. But there's this antinomy, this tension there.

Because it puts one out of relationship a little bit, or less in relationship with those around one, and the demands and the more immediate and obvious contacts that we have with those around us, this is a hard value, a hard virtue. And Hartmann writes, "The way of the creative spirit is hard."

There's something in this of the creative, because again, we're forging into new territory, giving a gift to those in the remote future who may be able to understand something that's not necessarily easily understandable now, who may be able to sense and who may have a capacity that's not readily available now. For the sake of some larger process of humanity, perhaps, and also because some people's souls are called to do that.

But this way of the creative spirit is hard. There's a creative spirit in this. And he says it is "as hard towards oneself as towards another. It's tough. It doesn't set much store by either. Both are means"—either oneself or another, regarding oneself as a means.

So in this kind of hard work, there's a tough love. One's hard on oneself. One's not soft and mollycoddling, giving in to what one needs, even though one might be isolated in that venture, in that endeavor, in that work.

"To be a means," he writes, "is what is hard for any man. All that is sensitive in him protests. Here that apriorism of sympathy must be silenced"—so even sympathy for oneself. "Another apriorism, which is also fraught with value, rises up against it: a prophetic sense of the ethical potentiality in man, his latent capacity, the future value which transcends his own person and his own environment."

I don't know if you can get a sense of the loneliness of that—the isolation, struggle, potential to be misunderstood.

There's maybe an overlap here in the realm of aesthetics. As I said, for me sometimes I'm not even sure I make a distinction between aesthetic sensibility and moral sensibility. I class them all together sometimes. But I'm reminded—if there's a similarity or overlap, I don't know—but I'm reminded of Beethoven in his late period, in his last years. He'd gone deaf quite a bit before that, but he was able to write quite brilliant music with no real loss to the quality, extraordinary quality of his music, even though he was deaf.

But in his late period, he opened out a whole new way of composing, a whole new way of thinking about music. And his contemporaries thought he'd gone mad, actually. They couldn't make head or tail of this new music—the late string quartets or some of the late piano pieces. And it wasn't that they thought, "Oh, he's gone deaf," because they knew he could write when he was deaf.

They thought he'd gone mad. They thought he'd just lost it. But he knew what he was doing, and something I think Mahler said as well, of his symphonies, when no one really listened to his music—both Beethoven and Mahler said, these are for other generations. They're for future generations.

So there's a solitude in that. There's a hard task in there, a hard duty, when your attachment, when your love, when your care is for those in the future, and the fruit of which, the thanks for which, you will never know. You won't even know if it will land. You won't know if it will be received. And in the isolation of that, there can be difficulty.

As I said, this is something Hartmann picks up on. It's a strange venture, this one, because we really don't know the future. When there's the love of the nearest, I'm dealing with these people around. I can see what they need. I can feel it. I know I'm addressing something real. There's a chance that it will... It's obvious to me that we're talking about real needs and they're reasonable needs. It's a reasonable outpouring of my love and my care and my concern.

But when there's love of the remotest, I don't know. I don't know what its actual effect will be. Maybe there won't be anything, and all this sacrifice is in vain. And not only is it in vain, but in so doing, in sacrificing, I'm actually sinning—to use Hartmann's word—against my contemporaries and those around me.

So in this respect, he says, love of the remotest is worse than any other virtue, but especially so in its damage to brotherly love, which is always sure of its immediate objects, and which, even when it does not achieve them, is sure that they are reasonable.

There's something about this—and I'll just read it again, another paragraph from Hartmann. Again, this really may not resonate with some of you, I'm sure it won't, but some of you will hear the kind of soulfulness in this, and the kind of beauty of this. And it may be for some of you that this kind of love is part, again, part of your personal soul calling. The way your personal, the way your personality, your ideal personality, your soul weighs up preferentially between different values.

This is love of the remotest nature: "Excels brotherly love and every other virtue, on certain accounts. Greatness of moral spirit, intensity of spiritual energy, which is required in the taking upon oneself of what is inherently uncertain. The venture is great. Only a deep and mighty faith, permeating a person's whole being, is equal to it. It is a faith of a unique kind, different from trust between man and man—a faith which reaches out to the whole of things and can do no other than stake all it has. It is faith on the grand scale, faith in a higher order, which determines the cosmic meaning of man. When it becomes active and carries out its schemes, its work is of historic importance."

And this energy is harmonious with a similar feeling, what he calls hope, when it is raised to its highest power—the basic feeling of ethical idealism, which bears all things and gladly suffers for an idea, with a capital I, so that transcendent moral value. Bears all things and gladly suffers for that sole sense of the values in their transcendent dimensionality, divinity, beyondness. It's love for them, never despairing. Hope—the peculiar assurance which takes hold of one who risks all on a single issue.

So again, sometimes we might find ourselves engaged in something we talk about our duty, our moral duty to our fellow human beings. Sometimes we're limited in our sense of scope of who our moral duty is. It's interesting reading moral philosophers how often they neglect the natural world and our moral duty to the natural world and our moral duty to animals. It's all very anthropocentric.

And then there's also the potential limiting just to the love of the nearest—just those who are around me now. And not so much the vision opening to this love of the remotest. And in a way we could also add, and maybe it's actually akin to, maybe it's a different name for the same thing—our duty to the angels.

Sometimes angels want something. They always want something from us. And sometimes what they want is quite hard. It's a big ask. And sometimes we're engaged in a work that it may seem it doesn't have any bearing on or effect on our contemporary life. No one else seems to value it. It seems like it won't have any impact. But there may be a duty to the angels. And maybe the angels are the face of the remote.

The face of those souls in the far future who will have capacity.

As I said, these are three or four potentially controversial ideas, but also potentially very relevant to our considerations of both soul-making and ethics. They speak to the way in which the needs of individual souls—that realm of ethics pertaining to individual souls and their need to find their particular callings, their particular duties, to manifest and realize their ideal personality in Hartmann's words—how all that mixes with and becomes part of the bigger vision of ethics.

Regarding personhood, personality, and soul, Alistair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, talks about this from quite a different perspective—not using our language or Hartmann's language, but from his own philosophical vantage point. He explores the potential for a kind of narrative unity for a life, for a human life. There's some sense of weaving together, creating, discovering—these are my words now—a kind of soul story, narrative unity in which our identity, our particular soul, the face of our soul, is bound. This has something to do with what Hartmann would call the ideal personality, though MacIntyre uses different language.

He writes: "In what does the unity of an individual life consist?" One reason he asks this is because one of his tentative conclusions was that it's only when there's a kind of unity of a life that all the virtues make sense and find their place within that unity. Whether we need to necessarily believe that, or whether we can also have what Hillman calls a polytheistic psyche, remains an open question. Even a polytheistic psyche can have a certain unity at another level. But for MacIntyre, this idea of unity is something which makes sense of virtues. Without a sense of unity to the movement and direction of one's life, all these potentially competing values can't be assessed, judged, or placed in relative order of duty and importance for the individual.

His answer is that "its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask 'What is the good for me?'—in other words, what is the morally good for me—is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest."

A quest for what? He identifies two key features of a medieval conception of a quest that need to be recalled. First, without some at least partly determinate conception of the final telos, the final goal, there could not be any beginning to a quest. Some conception of the good is required. Second, the medieval conception of a quest is not at all that of a search for something already adequately characterized, as miners search for gold or geologists for oil. It is in the course of the quest, and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents, that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education, both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge.

His provisional conclusion about the good life is that "it is the life spent in seeking for the good life." This quest intuits partially what it's looking for. It has some sense of what's good and valuable, some sense of its final telos, and is also in its process an education, both as regards the goal and as regards the self. The virtues necessary for the seeking are those which enable us to understand what more and what else the good life is.

This offers another way of thinking about the place of personality, personhood, self, and uniqueness in our moral explorations. This quest involves search, involves eros regarding values, involves stretch, involves questioning, and is potentially—as I read what MacIntyre has written—open-ended, as the whole soul-making process is. Perhaps our exploration of morality is inevitably, or should be inevitably, inherently open-ended. We will never finish with this area.

So one idea of what unifies a human life and gives it that stamp, that mark, that face of our unique soul is our unique quest for goodness—for moral goodness, for understanding values and moving towards those values, moral and aesthetic and all that, which speak to us, which touch us, which are necessary. As I've mentioned, this might vary from person to person to a certain extent, and it might be open-ended. I think it should be open-ended.

These are some perspectives and ideas to ponder, to think about, to reflect on. Some of them, as I said, are not easy, not simple. Some of them are relatively rare in what usually gets considered in discussions of ethics and soul-making.

Let's stop there for today.

CHAPTER 196

Sīla and Soul (Part 9)

Rob Burbea · 1h10

> *In this ninth part of his series on ethics and soul-making, Rob Burbea examines different approaches to moral philosophy, contrasting utilitarian ethics with virtue ethics. He explores how soul-making practice relates to traditional Buddhist emphasis on reducing dukkha, questioning whether the drive to end suffering is the only motivation behind ethical action. Drawing on philosopher Nicolai Hartmann's hierarchy of values, Burbea discusses how higher values like beauty and species preservation may be 'useless' in utilitarian terms yet essential for meaning and fulfillment. Using examples from climate activism and species extinction, he argues that both foundational values (basic human needs) and higher values (aesthetic, spiritual concerns) are needed to address contemporary crises. The talk challenges practitioners to consider what truly motivates their ethical choices beyond suffering reduction, suggesting that soul-making itself may be ultimately 'useless' yet profoundly meaningful.*

I'm pretty sure I said at the beginning of this talk that there are many possible approaches to ethics, many different perspectives we can bring to bear on that whole domain of our existence. There are different systems of moral philosophy.

For example, there's utilitarianism, which some of you will know originated with Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. In that kind of approach, the goodness or what is good is what has utility—in other words, what is useful. That's how you measure and adjudicate actions and behavior. So behavior and actions are chosen for the usefulness of their consequences. You have an eye to the likely consequence of an action, and you measure its usefulness. Usefulness in that system, utility in that system, is usually thought of as maximizing pleasure over pain for the greatest number of people—maximizing pleasure, minimizing pain, maximizing happiness (whatever exactly that means), and maximizing well-being of the greatest possible number of people. Note also, as in so many moral systems of thought, the anthropocentrism there: it is usually focused just on people and not other species.

There are variations within utilitarianism, different variations of that kind of approach. And like all approaches, it will have its particular strengths and weaknesses and its particular difficulties that it encounters. You could hear when I was describing

this how exactly do you measure happiness? What exactly do you mean by well-being? How do you try and assess these things? Also, what is the radius of concern in terms of which "greatest number of people" where and when?

For example, some of these Extinction Rebellion actions involve blocking roads or bridges. The traffic stops and people are held up who are part of the traffic, trying to get somewhere, go to work, or this or that. So there's a kind of inconvenience for some people, and for a certain number of people, there's an inconvenience and maybe financial loss, who knows what. Some people were critical: "Oh, you're being selfish by blocking the traffic that way. You're being self-indulgent," etc.

But widening the concern: there are these people in the traffic jam who have been inconvenienced, who may experience some loss of profit or some hassle or whatever, a decrease in their happiness for some time. One could widen that sphere to the whole of society, or the whole of humanity, or the whole of humanity including future generations, or including not just all that, but all species. And then when you start weighing it up that way from a utilitarian perspective, if there's some chance that that kind of action has an effect globally on government policy and corporate policy, then the net increase in likely well-being and happiness may be justified, may be measured to make it worthwhile. But you run into all kinds of difficulties in terms of measurement.

We have been approaching and discussing ethics and questions about ethics from, I guess, mostly what people would call the perspective of virtue ethics, where the emphasis is less on the consequence and more on the subject, the moral subject, the person themselves and their virtues and values and what they're investing in and what they're energizing and what they're working towards and what they're sensitive to.

Here, in that perspective, there's this shift of emphasis. Moral values, as values, are not regarded as dependent on or proportional to their worth. Their value is not proportional to, as John Finnis says in summarizing Hartman's approach, the amount or degree of the lower values they actualize or aim at. They're of a different, higher, better order than the lower values.

He gives an example: the value of active justice in a moral agent—a person working towards or implementing a situation of justice between two parties, people or communities or whatever. The value of that active justice is much higher than the goods value of the apportionments they affect. In other words, someone comes in—let's say it's a judge or someone else—and reapportions money or property or whatever according to measures of justice. However little or great the goods value of the money or the property they redistribute justly, the moral value of the justice stands above that. It's much higher. It's on a completely different level.

So it's a different emphasis. But I also said that we can think sometimes—and most people often nowadays, what's more popular, I think—in terms of the efficacy of one's actions, the consequences and what will work. When we approach something like climate change, species loss, these almost overwhelming problems and issues, crises we face, we think: yes, we need something that's efficacious, we need something that's going to make a difference. And of course, that's the case.

So there are two possible ways in: the way of emphasizing virtue or considering virtues and values, and the way of considering efficacy. I pointed out earlier that if there's too much of an emphasis on virtue, or only an emphasis on virtue, disregarding a consideration of the efficacy of our actions, then that over-emphasis on virtue is itself not a virtue. It's what you might call a disvalue. It's not a value, it's a disvalue. One has been, in a way, so narrowly concerned with virtue and neglectful of the efficacy.

So this whole approach of virtue ethics is one angle, one approach, and like all these things, we can have flexibility in how we approach at different times, or even the relative weight of consideration between, let's say, virtue ethics and considerations of efficacy. We don't always have to approach a situation—a moral situation, a moral crisis, a social or environmental situation—thinking predominantly about virtue.

But it can be part of our moral equipment, part of our moral calibration, our moral instrument. And we can move in and out of that.

Virtue ethics does lend itself, I hope it's clear by now, to a connection with soul-making in some of the ways that I've explored. But even when we consider soul-making, the intention for soul-making in life is not always going to be primary, and neither should it always be primary. There are other issues, there are other concerns, there are other demands in life. So we move in and out in our lives as practitioners, as soul-making practitioners, we move in and out of emphasizing or prioritizing an intention for soul-making. And that's appropriate. Flexibility—flexibility of way of looking, flexibility of approach, perspective—is really crucial.

When we consider values and virtues, there's this whole possibility of delineating and sensing a kind of hierarchy of values. There are higher values and lower values. To some extent that's possible to discern—where things stand, where two values might stand relative to each other on that hierarchy and what Hartman calls the scale of values. In his way of thinking, goodness is the inclination, the tendency to choose the higher values.

Sometimes this is obvious. It's obvious that this value is higher than that value among moral values. It's obvious that moral values are higher than goods values in that way of thinking. It's really a kind of sensibility—that sensibility to existence. In that sensibility to existence, that soul sensitivity, that sensibility to existence, moral values are higher than goods values. Some of those distinctions are obvious, some are much less obvious.

But I think it's important to realize that the rank, or what Hartman calls the grade—the place on the hierarchy of values—is not necessarily inherent in the value only. To some extent it is, but we also have these other considerations. For example, the fact that we might need to consider a virtue or a value as a complex of other virtues and values. With this notion of a counterweight needed, we're really talking about balances and spectra rather than single, cut-and-dried, black-and-white virtues. This already complicates the issue.

The second reason that the rank or grade or height of a value is not necessarily inherent just in the value itself is that when we consider it with more psychological breadth and sophistication, subtlety of discernment and awareness, we begin to realize that the citta, the soul, approaches the actualization or intention toward a virtue with all kinds of factors and perspectives. The mind, the heart, the being, the soul brings much to its moral intentions and to its working toward a value or the actualization of a virtue.

For example, it might be that wrapped up in the citta at that time is fear. One is actually intending a certain action, maybe even intending a virtue or a value, but it's coming out of fear. As such, it's more narrow-minded or reactive. Or it might be working against fear—one needs to overcome a certain fear to get behind that value and cultivate that virtue and instantiate it. We might say that when it comes out of fear, when it's prompted by fear and that kind of narrow contraction, perhaps it has less value, less height, than when there's no fear and it's a freer choice, a freer moral choice. It's coming more from the moral sensibility rather than from fear and reactivity.

Maybe—some people might say—it's even higher when one has to overcome fear in oneself. I'm afraid of the consequences. If I speak up courageously, I'm afraid of the consequences. I'm afraid of getting arrested, of getting a criminal record, of what people think, of getting ostracized. Perhaps that can be considered a higher value or virtue.

Sometimes our virtuous behavior and intentions come out of a narrow-mindedness. There's a kind of brittleness there, a narrow attachment to some code that's been handed down to us. Sometimes it comes out of habit—the almost mechanical churning of habit in consciousness. Sometimes a value takes much exertion to actualize, or asks a big stretch of the soul, of the being, or of the body even.

The whole way of looking at self, other, world, and our very intention, our will, our desire, our eros ethically—all this can vary hugely. We might say that there's a higher virtue when those ways of looking are richer, deeper, wider, more noble, more ensouled. All these other factors come in, and we might say that the height or grade of a value or a virtue depends also on those factors. What else is going on in the whole being? The totality—it's a function. If you like, the height, to a certain extent, is a function of that whole complex of intentions and ways of looking and factors, forces in the psyche.

With any virtuous intention or moral action, there can be a flat, ego-level version—a version based on some kind of fixated image, what we might call in our soul-making language an impoverished image. This version of virtue may look the same on the surface. Or it could be much more soulful, much richer, multidimensional, infused with a sense of divinity. There's a spectrum here—not black and white, but a whole range of possibilities.

Once we begin to attune and discern in this way, we recognize that this is quite a complex territory when it comes to judging the heights of values and virtues. Some care is needed in that assessment.

When we talk about climate change, and even more so about species extinction—the massive extinction occurring right now at the hands of human beings—I wonder whether this particular care for species extinction represents an example of a higher value. It's not the same as caring for the suffering of one animal or even a group of animals. It's something different, as I've touched on before. It's actually not just about suffering.

Let me return to this question: What's the relationship between care about suffering and our ethics and soul-making? What's the relationship in that nexus between reduction of suffering, care, ethics, and soul-making?

I remember some years ago reading something George Marshall used to publish, where he criticized many of the media messages trying to promote concern for climate change that featured polar bears. The earth is heating up, the ice is melting, the polar bears will suffer and may disappear. He was quite vociferous in attacking this kind of

approach because, he argued, it doesn't actually work for most people in terms of galvanizing a response to climate change. You get the cute polar bear, but polar bears live in the North Pole. Most people don't really encounter polar bears in their lives. Most people would look at an advertisement like that and think, somewhere in the psyche, "Well, it's not really my concern or my children's concern." Most people are concerned about themselves and their children.

There's some truth in that observation. But perhaps the plight of the polar bear and the possible extinction or decimation of that species—I'm not talking about the suffering of individual polar bears, but the species itself—perhaps the sensibility to that concern, the sensitivity to the tragedy of species loss and the crime of ecocide and species extinction, those crimes against life itself—maybe that kind of sensitivity is actually a higher virtue. It correlates with a higher value.

As we've said, along with Hartman, some people may have a greater capacity, a greater talent for those kinds of virtues, or perhaps for higher virtues in general, just as some people have more talent for mathematical ideas, or aesthetic or musical talent, or art. You can have a talent for values.

The question becomes: Can that be trained? Can we encourage this extension of moral sensibility in ourselves, in each other, in society, in schools? Can we support growth in the education of our moral capacity and sensibility, our sensitivity?

As I mentioned with Polly Higgins, there was also recently the UN Executive Director for the Convention on Biological Diversity—I've forgotten her name—who said that biological diversity, species diversity, the thriving of many different species, is necessary to maintain the natural life support systems on which humanity depends. She added that with biodiversity, unlike climate change where people might feel the impact in their everyday lives, the effects are not so immediately clear. But by the time you feel what is happening, it's too late for us. It will be too late when the bees stop pollinating because there aren't enough bees, and we suffer in our agriculture.

I've touched on this before, but to me it's an important consideration: Is there something here that asks for a different order, a different height of moral sensibility?

What if scientists discovered that a certain species was actually "useless"—that it didn't really provide anything essential for the ecosystem, that the ecosystem could function fine without it, and we could get on fine without it, and other species could manage without it? Perhaps it's merely beautiful, merely graceful, merely miraculous. Perhaps it's not even beautiful by conventional standards.

You know, is a haddock beautiful? We have a narrow sensibility when it comes to beauty, often. Polar bears tend to be—despite being potentially very dangerous animals—furry and cuddly and warm in our imagination. A haddock is cold and slippery and wet, and to most people's eyes, not particularly beautiful.

But then, if there was this useless species, would it then be okay, ethically, if our actions made it forever extinct? There's some other level here that I think is important, some other level of sensibility to make.

And, you know, is this an elitist sort of request, an elitist demand, an elitist aspiration? Yeah, maybe it is. I said right at the beginning, you know, I may sound like an elitist, I probably am an elitist. The whole movement towards awakening is a very elitist movement. It's not like everyone's really going to take that up, even in terms of how many Dharma people really take up seriously a real movement to deep, deep awakening and insight. So it's only a small portion of even Dharma people.

Soul-making asks so much of us in terms of our skills and the aspects of our being, the demands, the stretches, the know-how, the art of it. Samadhi, you know, even though I was a musician, it's elitist. Not everyone can do that or train that way to take that to a high level of art.

Again, I recall Hartmann's notion of the noble and his kind of insistence that it's through the noble few, those who stretch the sensibility, that humanity evolves spiritually—through their leading, their opening the doors through which more and more people then follow after them, are kind of converted or infected with that sensibility, that moral sensibility.

Of course, in that kind of care or respect for or sacred place given to species and ecosystems, we're saying it's a high value. It's not really a new value because indigenous cultures would be totally rooted in that. So it might be its resurrection is relatively new for our time. But still, there may be a big ask in this, and George Marshall may be right to a certain extent, that it's only some people who are going to be really moved by the plight of, let's say, the polar bear.

But still, if we talk about our life and our soul and the deeper and wider needs of the earth, of humanity, certainly of the species, there's this heightening of our moral sensibilities. And as I said, a species loss is not the same as concern for the suffering of individual animals. There's something else, there's some other sensibility.

And all this, what we've been talking about, begs the question to a certain extent of what then is the relationship of these ways of thinking about ethics and the whole thrust and intention, primary thrust and intention of the Dharma to reduce suffering.

So, you know, happily, our attraction to and need for moral values is often satisfied to a certain extent at least by our attention to and need for and pursuit of a reduction in suffering, a reduction in dukkha. But in most cases, it might not be enough to notice that there are, in fact, two directions of our desire there.

So keep the precepts, for example, as an ethical investment and commitment reduces some suffering. But again, there may be, as I said, two directions or two strata of our intention here.

So the love of higher moral values, the love, the attraction and the eros for a higher ethos or an ethos that encompasses the higher, that cares about the higher. The beauty of sacrifice, the images and archetypes and values bound up in a fuller and more powerful devotion to ethics, may well not overlap with the idea or the thrust, the intention for decreasing suffering, other than as a promise of reward, of a future rebirth or heaven or whatever you might believe.

Or if there are gifts and rewards from a devotion like that, a kind of deep, high, wide, very attuned moral sensibility and commitment. There are rewards from such a devotion in some cases. They are relatively subtle: the openness of heart, the seeing, the dependent arising of the perception of self-other-world. These are all relatively subtle gifts, if you like, rewards from that kind of devotion.

So there's some reduction of, certainly only some reduction of personal suffering. Maybe we can say in the larger picture, there's a reduction of suffering. But we're really talking about two strands of intention: the reduction of suffering and the love of moral values, and particularly of the higher moral values. And they may overlap to a certain extent, but they are also not completely the same.

And again, the question is, what do we love and what do we want? What are we devoted to? The decrease of suffering or the beauty and soul attraction of moral values? So as I said, they're not exactly and always the same thing. There's not a complete overlap between the two.

And we've said, because values are an element of sensing the soul, one of the 28 elements we've delineated so far, there is an overlap with soul-making. Many people, and I've said this before, many people, perhaps most people would assume at first that an overlap with decreasing suffering would be more likely to be the case—the overlap between the concern for morals and the reduction of suffering. And they would harbor some kind of suspicion of prioritization of soul-making intentions.

But, as we said, soul-making intentions implicitly or explicitly include a devotion to values, or rather to some or other values from the pantheon, the zodiac of values.

So I mentioned the Buddha and his choice to leave his family and generally considering his zest and devotion to know the end of suffering, to not be reborn, to teach others, perhaps his mystical hunger, his hunger to know the mystical. You don't really hear that one so much in the Pali Canon. And that devotion, that intention, trumped his sense of his moral responsibility to be there for his wife and his young son. So he basically abandoned them.

In this antinomy, in this conflict of values, he chose one. Now, you could argue that in his life he always chose what would maximally lessen the suffering for the totality in all time, which is, as we started this part of the talk, that's a version of utilitarianism. And that's how he was thinking. He was, you know, if I become a Buddha, I'll probably help more people than if I stay at home and become a world monarch and keep with my family. And so many people would kind of construe it that way. He chose that because in the totality of things, it would reduce more suffering and increase more happiness for more people over time than if he stayed at home and did other stuff, ruled a kingdom, etc.

But actually that seems to me, if I'm honest, and if we look and feel into it a little more carefully, a bit of a psychologically naive view. Maybe that's heretical. If you feel into the psychology there, is that really what's going on—that he was sort of weighing up, calculating probable amounts of suffering and pain that could be avoided, pleasure that could be increased? Or was his drive, his love, his devotion, his determination, his desire, his choice coming out of a richer psychology that had also to do with his soul, what was beautiful to him, what called him?

To say all this another way, or approach it from a slightly different direction, take metta, for example. It's regarded as a value in Buddha Dharma, but as a value it's subordinate to and dependent on the higher and, in a way, more fundamental, more central value given to reducing suffering—actually, the direction of ending suffering. Metta is one component, one element in that path that prioritizes the end of suffering. And its primary purpose is for that: ending rebirth. So metta is a value in that system of thought because it reduces suffering and leads to the end of suffering, which is its primary value.

Now, probably—to use philosophical jargon—on the margins of the text, sort of briefly alluded to with the perfume, if we were to deconstruct it, there'll be many messages, even in the Pali canon, attesting to the independent value of metta and sila. Primarily, they're given as stepping stones. Their function is to reduce suffering and actually, or primarily, as stepping stones on the path to ending suffering, to not being

reborn. But the beauty of metta and the beauty of sila are probably there already—they can't help seeping out and being there, sort of at the edges of the main point of the teachings.

So there's a certain way we think about the Dharma in terms of reducing suffering. Of course, the Mahayana extends that to include all beings. But there are also other factors, and I think it is important to be a little more psychologically sophisticated, a little fuller in our gaze at the psychology of all this. What's really going on? What really are we loving and wanting? What's really motivating us with all this?

Again, if I just look around me right now, it's interesting. So this question about ethics, the emphasis in Buddha Dharma on reducing suffering and that principle way of conceiving what we're doing—look around me right now, and certainly in Devon, where I live, there's very suddenly, really, a lot of Dharma people suddenly involved in, for example, Extinction Rebellion and actions on the streets against inaction. And more widely in the UK as well, something—suddenly there's been quite a dramatic change, almost black and white, among Dharma folks. Maybe in other countries it's starting, or there are the potential seeds, the potential rumblings of that. Maybe in the US something's starting. But certainly around here, it's a dramatic quantum leap, a sudden shift.

I think only some of that—I don't know what proportion, but only some proportion probably—is because of soul-making Dharma teachings. Somehow other conditions have come together for this sudden ignition of the wildfire in the Dharma community. Is it the last IPCC report that was much more stark in its warnings, much more grave, much more demanding in insinuating that rapid action needs to happen? Is it that most of these Dharma people who are getting involved now are actually looking at it through the lens of reducing suffering in the world and for others? Is it just that there's a kind of critical mass of enough people and something starts snowballing? And if three of your friends are talking about this thing and are being involved and sharing with you how it's touched them and how wonderful it was and how they actually survived an action fine, and how they're even thinking of maybe being arrestable or whatever, that has an effect on the people around them. So it's less a few lone voices crying in the wilderness.

So I don't know what all those conditions are. I think, like I said, the soul-making dharma is just one small piece that's relevant for some people. The question more for this fire of commitment and action and engagement that's struck up—the question is really, can it stay steady? Can it be mature?

Remember on one of the retreats, one of the series of talks we talked about the fire, mastering the fire and the way different soul fires burn, the way Eros burns in souls differently and at different times and depending on different conditions. And to have a fire that just flares up and then goes out may not be so helpful as something that's sustainable. You don't want something that gets snuffed out at the next little wind.

It may be, as I said, that for many of those people it's really just a utilitarian consideration—a weighing up of what's the net amount of suffering here—and that's what's galvanizing their response. That's what's framing their perspective and their conceiving of the whole issue and whether to get involved or not. And the commitment and the action and the engagement is supported by a whole web of other conditions.

But again, if we stay with this question of the relationship, the nexus between reducing suffering and soul-making and ethics and values—as I've said before, when talking about Buddha Dharma, talking about awakening, there's a kind of petering out of the whole notion of the cycle of rebirth. There are fewer and fewer people who actually—they may believe in rebirth, but that's actually at the core of their being. What they're aiming for is to end their rebirth. That's become, I think, in Western Dharma—certainly in the people I meet, get a sense from and hear from—rarer and rarer.

So that opens up the question: what are we actually aiming for when we're talking about the goal of the path and awakening, if it's not ending rebirth? It might be just this utilitarian working towards a reduction of suffering—maybe just my suffering, maybe much wider in the more Mahayana sense of all beings. But there's something else. There are other factors, as we've been saying.

And there's something about meaningfulness. As we said, that's an element of soul-making. It's an element of the imaginal. It's an element of sensing the soul. And when we take the consideration of meaningfulness and extend it to our whole life, it becomes deeply interesting to us. What gives us meaningfulness? Is it only a kind of utilitarian reduction of suffering? Yes, that has its place, absolutely. But there are other strata and factors that are part of our psyche, and we need to be more consciously aware of these when we look at what's going on for us and what renders life fruitful, fulfilling, meaningful.

Here's a quote from Predrag Čićovacki—I think I mentioned him before in another series of talks. He wrote a book about Hartmann that I found quite good. He says: "One of the central claims of Hartmann's entire philosophical opus is that it is precisely useless values that bestow meaning upon life. By uselessness he means neither fruitless-

ness nor meaninglessness. Uselessness only refers to the absence of any tangible purpose or visible end. It is on such useless values that we depend when we attempt to bestow meaning on our strivings and struggles."

He would also include in that—I'm pretty sure, and I certainly do—art as something ultimately useless. Beauty is totally wrapped up in the domain of the useless values. For me, there's almost no boundary between aesthetic concerns, the love of beauty, the care for beauty, and moral concerns.

So there are values that are, in a way, useless. They don't serve an obvious function in our life. They're not easily brought under a utilitarian framework. And these are often the higher values. The higher values are often useless. An aesthetic sensibility, for example, is kind of useless from a certain perspective. But as I said in the last part, these higher values need to rest on the lower values as a foundation. They depend on the lower. Without them, they are hollow.

So a care for higher values, a care for aesthetics that doesn't care for justice or kindness, that completely neglects those—this causes a collapse in the whole value of the aesthetic care.

Let me read again a few things from Hartmann here. The more elementary values, the lower values, the more negative commandments go with them—the prohibitions: thou shalt not steal, not murder, etc. When they're transgressed, the seriousness of that transgression of a lower value is much more serious than the omission or transgression of a higher value. So not to engage in a care for aesthetics, not to cultivate what Hartmann calls one's ideal personality, not to attune to that or listen to the duties of that—if a person neglects to do that or leaves that out of their aspirations, then the transgression is not as serious as killing or stealing.

He says you can't really command higher values, but you can make commandments for the lower values in the form of prohibitions. "Only brotherly love can be commanded of the higher values," he says, "and that, not in the strict sense." So "love your neighbor as yourself"—it's not really a commandment; it's a kind of aspiration. And personal love, what he calls personal love, which is the love of another in a way that—in our language—sees them as image, in his language, it's a love of another that senses and cares for and is attuned to their ideal personality, the soul essence, the image. Personal love cannot be commanded at all.

But genuine morality, he says, is built from below up. "Its essence is not the ideal self-existence of values, but their actualization in life." In other words, we have to act on these. "Only upon the actualization of the lower does the actualization of a higher value

rest solidly." These are just different words for saying what we just said. Without that, as I said, they're hollow. If there's a transgression of lower values while one cares for higher values, something's off. It strikes one as off. In transgressing against a lower value, it has more consequences.

It has consequences on a wider range of our existence. When we transgress against a lower value, the consequences affect not just ourselves but ripple outward. The consequences of one person not caring about this or that particular higher value are much more limited.

So the higher value, Hartmann writes, has a narrower field of activity, contains less palpable substance. Its existence for itself is more pronounced. What's the purpose of that higher value? It exists for itself - this concern with beauty, this concern even with my ideal personality. Yes, if I can actualize, if I can follow my soul's calling, if I can listen for the angel out ahead and do my duty, that will bestow gifts on the world. But in a way, it's just for itself. It's for the beauty of itself, for the soul-making itself.

Its existence for itself is more pronounced in the higher value. It stands and falls for itself alone. When it suffers injury, it injures little else, only what stands above it in order of rank. The basis beneath it remains intact. This becomes most evident in extreme cases like that of the dispensing of spiritual value - the sort of radiant virtue that I was talking about, which is altogether useless and has nothing further dependent upon it, or writing beautiful music, whatever it is. It's useless. Nothing else is dependent on it, or very little. It is similar with love of the remotest, personal love, and all the values of the individual personality, all these higher kinds of values.

The higher values possess their superiority in the conferring of meaning upon life and in its fulfillment. Those are the ones that really give this sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment in our life. For the meaning of the moral life, Hartmann writes, is no more to be found in the lower values than its foundations are to be found in the higher.

If we have only a concern for the lower values, then there can be a kind of impoverishment of our whole life. Our whole ethical life is impoverished by that limitation. We're just concerned with lower values, and it can be, as Jesus criticized, kind of low. There isn't this high nobility. There isn't this love of value and aspiration. Something's not stretching into the beyonds with the Eros, with the soul-making there.

So the higher values have beyondness, as we talked about. They have dimensionality. There's a sense of unfathomability there, mystery, irreducibility. And all this supports them, allows them to become erotically imaginal objects for us, beloved erotic imaginal objects. And to give, as I said, a sense of meaningfulness and fulfillment in our life.

Somewhere Hartmann wrote also something like: the aims of our life, of our moral life, should be placed so high that we can only just discern them. But their foundations should be laid as firmly as possible.

When we consider climate change and species extinction, mass species extinction, those two things are threatening the foundations - they're real threats to the foundations of many people's lives, certainly many animals' lives and many species' lives. But they also threaten the foundations of existence itself: that people have water to drink that's not undrinkable because the sea has risen and the salt water has gotten into the water; that people don't live in climates where it's actually too hot to cool the body at certain times of the year; that there's enough rain but not flooding. The foundations are threatened through this kind of unfolding and the lack of care with regard to climate change and species extinction.

These are issues of foundations, and thus they are issues that pertain to the lower moral values. "Thou shalt not kill"? Well, watch your climate emissions, or watch our climate emissions, or take care that the governments make sure that the governments and the corporations act - because we're not going to solve this just on the back of our individual efforts at lowering our personal emissions. Something much more systemic needs to happen. But yes, those issues touch on the foundations of human being - what human beings need for life: water, air, climate, food.

But they also - there's something in those issues that implicates, involves, touches on, asks for our sensitivity to the highest values and virtues. More and more now people are realizing that climate change, and to a lesser extent species extinction, does and will have a big impact on the foundations, the material foundations of human existence, for many, many people, and eventually for everyone. As such, it touches on, it implicates the foundational, the lower moral values and virtues and commandments. But there's also something here that touches on the highest values, that calls in, that asks for an extension in range, in height of our moral sensitivity.

If it's only a perspective of foundations, then some things in tackling climate change are just completely okay. The idea that many people have touted - and some people think will be an inevitable solution because humanity is being too slow at reducing emissions - is the possibility of geoengineering: putting certain particles into the atmosphere, spraying particles of some chemical into the high atmosphere so they will reflect back a large proportion of the sunlight. The Earth will cool instead of experiencing the warming caused by carbon emissions. So you actually keep the same amount of carbon, or even put more carbon in, and reduce the temperature of the Earth.

Allegedly the problems, it will only solve part of the problems – the problems of global warming by cooling the temperature. One of the side effects of that, apparently, is that it would make the sky white. So if there's enough of these particles in the atmosphere, the sky would no longer be blue, it would be white.

If we're only thinking from the perspective of foundations of human life and material needs and therefore the foundational or lower values, then that's okay. Because what difference does it make? Blue sky, white sky? Or if with noise pollution and light pollution, it's becoming difficult to find places in the world that are not full of the sound of mostly combustion engines burning fossil fuels. But noise and light pollution would be okay from that perspective of just addressing the foundational, just thinking about in terms of reducing suffering, just thinking in terms of the lower values, just sensing it on that level and addressing the foundations, the material foundations of human existence.

Noise and light pollution would be okay as long as we can't measure any effect on health, or pleasure, however we measure that, or GDP. So something, to me, something would be missing there. I don't know how it sounds to you, but it doesn't sound okay to me. My heart hurts as I'm saying this. To me, to my soul, something else is needed.

Something else is calling – a deepening, a widening, an ensouling of our ways of looking, of our view, our sense, our conception of ourselves, our anthropology, our sense of our individual self, our sense of our communities, but also our anthropology, our sense of what human beings are and what their place is in the cosmos. And a sense of each other and a sense of individual things and beings in the natural world, and a sense of the whole world. All this, something else is called, and that has to do with higher values.

They are necessary, they're implicated, as I said, in our concern for all this, when we look at the whole problem. It's a multi-level problem.

Some people, as I mentioned the other day, have said to me, "Ah, soul-making time – it's really what humanity needs right now. It's the new frontier," or, you know, in this time of sort of post-post-modernism, it's got all the aspects that are needed for taking us forward out of the sort of quagmire or stagnation that came with post-modernism and where we are now in our whole vision of ourselves and philosophy and all that stuff. And that maybe in that sense, in being a new frontier, it's what Hartmann would call one of the noble values of our time. And in his sense of word, remember, the nobility in his meaning is those that look for the new.

But nobility in his language looks for the new not only – it's got its antennae out for new sensibility to new unfamiliar values with respect to a certain culture, time and place – its prime motivation is not just to address the crises, for example the ecological crises it finds itself in.

So people say stuff like that, sometimes some people say stuff like that, but I certainly think that soul-making is not the fix of all modern problems. And whether it's noble in Hartmann's sense, I don't know. I'm not sure. People sometimes say, well, everything that involves soul-making practice – the flexibility and openness conceptually in terms of logos – that sort of is a way to move forward out of the limitations of postmodern philosophy which just, if you like, shoots down negatively different conceptions.

Actually there's a practical possibility of having some flexibility, some openness, and then the actual practical capacity to move between different conceptions, that and the kind of attunement that it asks for, the kind of reverence that it brings, the sensing the soul of the world, the re-enchantment of self, of the world – all these are necessary and new. I don't know. I'm not sure.

So certainly for some people, for sure, for some people, soul-making practice will kind of support and encourage and draw out and grow the virtues, the moral virtues. And for some people, it will – it already has – legitimized and supported their, for instance, their activism, their engagement. It's supported a growth in their care, and the sensing the soul that kind of underpins that will contribute, does contribute to material help with regard to these crises, and that's great and it's necessary and it's really important.

But, you know, on another level, soul-making perhaps is ultimately useless, we could say. What's it for? Yes, there are these fruits, and that's necessary, wonderful, and really important. But the soul loves soul-making. Period. Period.

What's soul-making for? Soul-making is for soul-making. Soul-making is the purpose of soul-making. In that sense, it's useless. It has nothing else that it's in the service of, primarily, or as its main reason. There are gifts, there are offshoots, there are bestowals, and it provides support for all kinds of things, including a reduction in suffering of self and others. But like all the highest values, so like beauty and art and all that, essentially it's useless, but in the best sense of the word.

Somehow it crowns our lives, blesses and anoints our lives and our deaths, our whole sense of existence. That is perhaps ultimately what it's for and ultimately what we care about and what bestows meaningfulness in life, fulfillment in life, beauty. It's what we love.

CHAPTER 197

Orienting to This Jhāna Retreat

Rob Burbea · 1h29

> *In this opening talk of a three-week jhāna retreat, Rob Burbea establishes the foundational view and approach essential for samādhi practice. He emphasizes that jhānas depend on happiness rather than rigid concentration, introducing the crucial concept of finding one's "playground at the edge" - working skillfully at the boundary of current capacity rather than forcing progress.*
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> *Burbea addresses the retreat's open schedule format, stressing the importance of personal responsibility in practice while maintaining non-brittle samādhi that remains open to sounds and community. He explores how to work skillfully with hindrances as "the dark, rich underbelly of jhāna practice," viewing them as life afflictions that offer their own gold when approached with wisdom.*
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> *Key teachings include the significance of mudita (appreciative joy) as the foundation for jhānic happiness, the balance between malleability and firm resolve in practice, and placing difficult emotions in the larger context of the spiritual path. The talk concludes with Sari and Kirsten offering reflections on the five precepts and noble silence as essential elements of the retreat container. This comprehensive orientation provides practitioners with both the practical framework and heart qualities necessary for deep samādhi exploration.*

Welcome, everybody—a really warm welcome to each and every one of you. I know some of you, and there are some I don't know and haven't met yet. I'm really looking forward to that, and especially welcome to you if you're new to Gaia House. So welcome to the retreat, welcome to Gaia House, to everyone.

I'm really happy to be here, happy to be able to do this. More than happy—I've actually been quite excited for a little while, so I'm really glad.

Let me please introduce Sari. Some of you will know her, but many of you might not. Sari is with us, and at the end, as you can see, is Kirsten, who some of you already know. You'll notice Robert is not here—I'll explain what's happening there in a moment.

I have wanted to teach a group jhāna retreat for, I think, about sixteen years. I've done a lot of teaching of jhānas individually, one-to-one, but finally some very strange conditions have come together to actually allow this to manifest. In a way, for many reasons, it's a kind of small miracle that this is happening.

So yes, many reasons make it a small real miracle that we have this time together and this opportunity and this chance for something that I think is such a beautiful realm of possibility for human beings and for meditation practice—such a treasure trove. So it's a really, really precious thing for me to be able to teach it, and I hope by the end you'll realize also how precious it really is.

It's partly a miracle because it's quite complicated for me health-wise at the moment. There's a lot I need to do just to be able to be here. I have many medical appointments over the time we have together, and there's a lot of practical stuff—just getting my medicines and gear. I don't need to go into all of that.

Originally, I asked Robert to come and assist us, and he said he'd love to but needed to check with his employers. They came back and said they wouldn't be able to tell him until—I can't remember when. So we said, let's just gamble; it'll be fine. It turned out they said no, he couldn't have that time off.

So Robert will join us later, and then Kirsten—who actually had this whole idea in the first place, so we have her to thank for the entire retreat—very kindly stepped in to take Robert's place. The retreat was her idea originally, arising from a strange set of circumstances. Kirsten had been planning to sit the retreat and have this time to nourish her practice, but she very kindly stepped in until Robert arrives in five or six days. At that point, Kirsten will be relieved of her teaching duties and be able to give herself to her practice, and Robert will step in. We'll obviously let you know, though you may not notice because you might be so deep in practice.

Another part of the small miracle is that Sari has a family and a lovely little baby boy, a toddler named Eliel. Because of his young age, she could only be here if he could be here, and that meant her partner, Hönger, needed to be here as well. So they are here as a family, and you will see them wandering in and out. You will probably see and hear Eliel playing in the Gaia House grounds—it's his playground, right? So that's part of the conditions that allowed this retreat, and I think it's actually a lovely, really delightful thing.

Please do ask the teachers—seriously. A lot about this practice is very individual. It can sound formulaic or technical, but there may be reasons why exactly that sort of approach at some point might be really helpful, and actually not so helpful for the same person at different times. But generally, he's going to be around. You'll see him, you'll hear him, and it's a delight.

Tonight I have quite a lot I want to get through, so I hope you all had a good rest and are feeling bright and refreshed. I want to say mostly things about orienting to this retreat and what that involves, and things to bear in mind during the retreat.

Originally, part of what allowed this retreat to come about—I can't remember exactly—was that Gaia House was going to shut down for a period for some major building renovation works. Somehow Kirsten had this idea, and then they asked me if I would do this while that was going on. Of course, I thought, "So Gaia House is going to be a building site, and you want me to teach a jhāna retreat?" And I said, "Sure."

Because, and I really want to emphasize this, it's okay to have noise. Right from the beginning, we approach this with a different attitude. We're not coming in here putting the blinkers on, putting the earplugs in, thinking everything is bothering us and we need to shut everything out. No, there's an attitude of openness and inclusivity. We do not want our jhānas, our samādhi, to be brittle. You know what brittle means? It means something that shatters very easily. We want our practice to be soft, pliant, open, open-hearted.

One of my teachers, Ajahn Jeff, some of you will know him, when he moved to Thailand to become a monk—he'd hardly meditated before—he was in a monastery that had just moved. In fact, they were building a new site for it. So where he learned to meditate initially was a building site. And it was just like, no one was like, "Oh, that's a terrible problem." It's fine. What's the problem? So we need a different attitude to all this that's much more about openness, not brittleness. And so Eliel, Sari's son, that's all part of it.

When someone asked the Buddha—or in the context of his teaching, I can't remember exactly, he said it a few times—what does jhāna depend on? What does samādhi depend on? He said, "It depends on happiness. Jhāna depends on happiness." Now he could have answered all kinds of things, and many of us would expect him to answer, "It depends on staying, really nailing your mind to something, and then you'll get to jhāna." That's the way most people think about it. Or "It depends on getting away from people who make noise and being in maybe a sensory deprivation tank," whatever the Pali for that is. But he didn't say that. He said, "Dependent on happiness." So that's interesting. That's really interesting to reflect on.

I have a sense that many of the things I will say tonight—it's possible that you may not realize just how significant they are. I know I haven't met some of you yet and I'm already insulting you, but somehow we have to get the view right. We have to get the view right. The view is the platform and the whole relationship right. So if I say something like that, or the Buddha said, "Jhānas depend on happiness," that should set you

thinking. I see some of you writing it down—it's important. Now I have to take that with me through the retreat because that has implications on a moment-to-moment level, on a micro-moment level, about your choices, about your attitude, about how you're relating to whatever it is you're paying attention to at the moment—the breath or whatever it is.

Do you understand? So what I'm saying tonight—what does it have to do with the relationship with practice and how important that is, and the relationship with this practice, and the relationship with the goal, and the whole conceptual framework? This is absolutely key.

So how are we going to listen? How are you going to listen to Dharma talks? Can you listen on your toes? Do you know what I mean by that? I mean just what I said. If something comes out like "jhānas depend on happiness," I can kind of let that wash over me, or maybe it barely registers. Or actually, that sets me thinking—maybe I should reflect on that and recalibrate and do something about it. So that's what I mean by listening on your toes. Does it make sense? I mean, obviously sometimes I'm going to unpack things and elaborate and explain, but sometimes a bit more work from the listener, a bit more activeness from the listener, is really helpful.

Okay, let's start with just a couple of practical things. The daily schedule, as some of you might have noticed, is pretty open. There's not a lot on there. I don't know if you've seen it, but it sort of says breakfast, lunch, dinner, I think. So what we're going to do is—what that means is this hall is open twenty-four hours a day for the duration of the retreat, and you can sit in here at any time for as long as you want.

Generally speaking, once you get into the rhythm, you might, for instance, be doing a walking period, and then it's twenty minutes before lunch, and you know you have to have lunch at a certain time because you're on lunch wash-up. So you can still come in here for twenty minutes, just whenever it is. If you have the time, though, and I'll explain this more as we go on, you probably want to give a sitting a bit more time to see what happens—a bit more than twenty minutes, forty, forty-five minutes, an hour or something—see what happens. But the basic approach is an open schedule.

People will be coming and going whenever, okay? Except—if I get this right, where is the schedule? Ah, thank you, Kirsten—except 6:45 to breakfast, everyone needs to be in here. You can arrive early for that sitting—5:45, 6:00, whenever. But once we hit 6:45, you can't come in or leave. It's basically a group sit. We want everyone here at that time just to cohere together as a community.

And the other designated time is 9:00 p.m.—same principle. Again, you can arrive early, you can stay much later, well into the night if you want. But during that core period, let's say 9:00 to 9:30, you wouldn't arrive or leave. Does that make sense?

For the teachings, we're aiming to have a block from 4:00 to 5:30 every day. That's the plan. But we may need to adjust this—either just slightly, starting at 3:45 or 4:30, or we might change it quite drastically, shifting everything to the morning. So you need to keep your eye on the notice board and just see what's posted.

If nothing changes, it's 4:00 to 5:30 as scheduled. But this flexibility is partly dependent on some new medications I'm adjusting to, and I'm not sure yet how that will affect things. So we'll work with what arises. The key is to check the board—any changes won't be posted until after 2:30 for that day's schedule.

This open schedule means the onus of responsibility falls on you. It's on you to find a structure—both temporal and in your practice—that works for you. The responsibility is yours to be responsive and sensitive to your practice, to the needs and ebbs and flows, the ups and downs. What is needed right now? Do I need to go out and do some walking? Do I need to sit longer with whatever is happening? Do I need to actually go for a walk, open my mind, touch the beauty and be touched by beauty? Do I need a cup of tea? All of that awareness is yours to cultivate.

Having an open schedule also means that people will naturally be coming and leaving at various times. So there are two responsibilities here. The job of the person coming or going is to try and be relatively quiet as you set up your cushion or pack up and leave. And the job of the person who's already here, when someone arrives or departs, is to be spacious with that.

This is actually part of the practice. We're not cultivating brittle jhānas. We're not developing brittle samādhi, you understand? It's beautiful—someone's coming to practice. How wonderful, right?

This point is really, really important. Don't underestimate how easily jhāna practice can get derailed into a kind of narrow tunnel of irritation, especially when you start setting rigid goals around your meditation. So the person already here has the job of openness, warmth, welcoming, non-brittle jhānas. The person coming or going has the job of being relatively sensitive—people are practicing here.

When teachings are happening and I'm talking about something that's not quite where you're at yet, you can listen and take notes if you want, but don't feel like you have to rush to get there. Don't feel like you're missing out or behind. This is really important—there's no race here, no competition. The jhanas are not a ladder you need to climb as quickly as possible.

Instead, listen with curiosity and appreciation. Think of it as getting a preview of where your practice might naturally unfold over time. But keep most of your actual practice energy in your current playground. This approach prevents forcing, prevents that brittle quality I mentioned earlier, and allows for a much more organic and sustainable development.

Similarly, when I'm talking about territory you've already explored, don't dismiss it. There's always deeper understanding available. The jhanas aren't just checkboxes to tick off—they're rich, nuanced states with many layers of refinement possible. So even if you feel confident about the first jhana, when we spend time discussing it, see if you can discover something new, some subtlety you hadn't noticed before.

This approach requires a certain kind of patience and trust. Trust that your practice will unfold at exactly the right pace for you. Trust that spending quality time at your edge, really getting to know that territory intimately, is far more valuable than rushing through multiple states superficially.

I've seen too many practitioners get caught up in jhana collecting—trying to experience as many different states as possible as quickly as possible. This usually leads to frustration, forcing, and ultimately a less fulfilling practice. Instead, I want to encourage you to become connoisseurs of your current edge, to really savor and explore whatever territory is naturally available to you right now.

This patience and thoroughness will actually serve your overall development much better in the long run. When you really understand one jhana deeply—its qualities, how to enter it reliably, how to sustain it, how to emerge from it gracefully—that understanding creates a solid foundation for everything that follows.

Does it mean you take notes about what might be relevant for you in four days or two weeks time? It's a little tricky. But basically you're going to get a lot of material, some of which is not relevant for you now. You can listen to the recordings later, or you could make notes. You can always ask, of course. But I don't know any other way of doing it, or any other way of doing it in a way that I would feel is fruitful. So everyone's going to have that issue at some point.

If you've done jhana practice before, as I know some of you have, and you think—or you have a sense—that your playground is second jhana, or sixth jhana, it doesn't matter, whatever it is—please, in the next few days, if you have a sense that you've really mastered all the rest and know where you're at, please check with one of us and get it confirmed. People mean very different things by jhanas and different things by mastery and where they're at. I will explain why I feel this is important, but just come and check.

We might say, "Great, okay, yeah, second jhana—about there. This is what you need to do now. This is your playground." Or it might work both ways. You might feel like you only know second jhana, or that your playground is sixth jhana, and actually we might think, "Well, actually in terms of the kind of level we're talking about, or mastery, I reckon around second is your playground." So just come and have that kind of dialogue with us.

Or it might be the other way around. You think one thing, we say, "Wow, no, that's cool. You've got that mastered. You can go on beyond where you think you are." Does that sound okay?

Just check, because this idea of playground is really important to how things are going to ferment in a way that's going to be fruitful, how the seeds are going to get planted so that they really bear lovely, nourishing, lifelong nourishing fruit. So that's why I'm emphasizing this playground business, and I'll come back to it.

You're mostly in your playground until you get mastery of that level, and we'll explain what we mean by mastery. You might do—let's say it was the third—you'll still spend a little time in the first and the second, if the third is your playground. And occasionally the mind will just open to something beyond it, and great, have a little fun occasionally. But mostly this is your playground. This is where it's delineated.

We're not going to teach like, "Okay, let's say it's the fifth jhana. Then every time I sit down, I have to go breath, one, two, three, four, and then the fifth." You can just dive right in. So most of your time is in your playground. And even if you think you're at a certain level, there should still be really quite helpful teachings pertaining to what seem to pertain to levels that are below where you're at. So everything we have to say about really basic practice—working with the breath or metta, whatever it is—that should still be useful to you, even if you've gone beyond that.

The way I see jhanas is they're potentially lifelong explorations. There's so much gift available there, so much profundity of resource and beauty, so much subtlety to explore. So much to explore that you don't find written. It's not in the suttas. It's not in a

lot of other material you find written. There are all kinds of possibilities here. So I'd like us—I want to invite you to have that really long view. And part of that long view is this playground business.

If you've been on retreat at Gaia House before or lived here, you might know that you can get to Newton Abbot that way, up towards Denbury on the lanes—it's south. You might also know that you can get to Newton Abbot that way, north. You can also get to Newton Abbot that way, east. And you can also get to Newton Abbot that way, west. It's just the way the lanes work around here.

Why am I saying that? Partly because I would say—first I thought, if you can get to the first jhana, then they're all open to you. But actually, I'd like to even modify that statement and say, if you can get pīti, if pīti can arise, if this well-being, this lovely well-being can arise, then the whole territory is open to you. The whole territory of the jhanas is open to you.

What that means, practically speaking, is what's really significant is how do we get that pīti to arise? Or how do we allow that pīti to arise—which is a better way of putting it.

The lovely news is that piti is just like Newton Abbot—though only in some respects. If you've been there, you might be relieved to hear that! What I mean is it doesn't really matter how that piti arises. Anything goes.

Any kind of concentration practice you might have heard of—or haven't heard of—could work. It might be an insight practice. It might be something else entirely. It might even be something that you describe to someone and they respond, "What the hell has that got to do with concentration?" If it gives rise to that piti, if it allows that piti to open, it's wonderful.

We'll give more details about what I'm saying now. There are all these different possibilities, and in the first few days of the retreat, I'm going to put out quite a few different options for what I call a base practice or springboard practice. This might be breath or metta or insight practices, or different ways of working with the breath, energy body, and so on—practices to work toward getting into the jhanas or springboarding into piti.

This means that for the first five, six, seven days of the retreat, there's quite a lot of teaching. There'll still be one session a day, hopefully, but quite a lot of material because I want to make sure that if someone finds one route to Newton Abbot doesn't work, they have another way. If you're not sure—if you've tried different approaches and you're uncertain—then you can try a few things. This is really important.

Among all that, there will be all kinds of other helpful information and teaching, but it will be more dense in terms of content in the first week or so.

Insight ways of looking can also give rise to piti. By insight ways of looking, I mean very specifically the practices I've written about in my book, *Seeing That Frees*. If you don't know what that means or aren't familiar with it, just forget it for now. We won't be giving extensive teachings about that, but I'm mentioning it now.

Insight can be used as an occasional unblocker—something that unblocks the energy, that unblocks contraction and clinging and allows well-being and piti and samadhi. That's one way of using insight practice. Some people use it as their main approach, the primary thing that opens up samadhi and well-being and piti. Insight practices unfabricate—they lessen fabrication, and that's very key. We'll explain that more later. If you're not familiar with what insight and ways of looking mean, just leave it aside for now.

Here's something important: if you already know that practice X, whatever practice X is, reliably and easily takes you into jhana or gives rise to piti that's stable and workable, stick with it. There's no reason to change. You already have something that takes you to Newton Abbot, so you're good. If you're not sure, then try some of what we'll be gradually offering in the next few days. But really, we want to settle on one base practice, one springboard practice.

The talks on this retreat will focus mostly on technique in the broader sense—the art of jhana practice, the art of samadhi. I'll also speak about view, relationship, and framework—how we're seeing these practices, which is so crucial. I'm talking almost entirely about that.

There will be no big new philosophical conceptual frameworks that blow your sense of existence. Unless some of you don't already know how I would put the jhanas into a framework and how I would see insight—in which case it might be surprising because it's quite different. But generally speaking, I'm not going to bring up really radical questions that get you agitated and turn everything upside down. This is mostly about the art of jhana practice.

What does that mean? It partly means that, in relation to what I've said earlier, you're responsible for your inspiration on this retreat. You're responsible for your sense of inspiration.

Because I'm not going to be telling any stories, there's no poems, there's none of all that. The Buddha said jhanas are dependent on happiness. Jhanas are dependent on happiness. Of course, jhanas give rise to happiness—tremendous happiness. Really, if

you've not experienced the jhanic realms, happiness, I think we can safely say that you will not have tasted something like that before. It's really, really extraordinary, something really remarkable that opens for a human being.

Jhanas bring happiness, but they also depend on happiness. You're responsible for your inspiration. You're responsible for your happiness as the basis of your jhana practice, without stories, without poems, without interesting philosophy. So how are we going to do that? Where does that kind of base happiness come from? I'll say a little bit now, I'll say a little bit later.

Appreciation. So much about this practice is really about taking care of your heart at every level and every direction. What does it mean to take care of your heart? And again, you may not realize just how significant some of this is. If you haven't practiced this way before, if you're used to very different ways of thinking of retreat, thinking what it means to be practicing, you may not realize just how significant this is.

What does it mean to be here in these days together in community in a beautiful place in the countryside and to make sure every day that the heart is encouraged to feel appreciation and to reverberate with appreciation? For your fellow meditators, for the Dharma, for the Buddha, for the beautiful nature, for the coordinators at Gaia House who set this up, for other helpers—I'll introduce them later—all the conditions that came together.

What does it mean to take care of appreciation, to be on retreat, orienting and supporting the heart to be in an appreciative mode? This is way more significant than most people would realize.

Gratitude is all part of the same thing. Taking care of inclining the mind and the heart to gratitude, to seeing what there is to be grateful for and to feeling that gratitude every day. You can do it formally, you can do it informally, it could just be woven into your natural way of being. It becomes that beautiful.

Beauty is so important. The heart, the eyes, the senses are open to beauty. Connection with each other, with nature. Openness—generally openness of being, openness of heart, love of the Dharma. These are the kind of things that nourish, that will allow that base level of happiness on which the jhanas can then be built or opened, whatever metaphor we want to use.

In a word, mudita is the Pali word. Oftentimes it gets translated as sympathetic joy. I would prefer the translation appreciative joy or spiritual joy. It's not just the joy in someone else's happiness. It is that, and it's all those things I just talked about as well. That's what mudita means in its broader sense, and that's, I think, how the Buddha meant it.

All that while at the same time your primary focus and your primary intention is spending most of your time doing jhana practice, working on that in formal practice. So yes, connection with nature, but if you then feel moved by the great Devon God of mud and rain to create a great mud sculpture outside to express your connection—no, not on this retreat. Another time, great. It might be really soul making. It's another time. Most of your time is in formal practice doing work toward the jhanas. But the heart is open and you're taking care of that nourishment. You understand?

Similarly with connection with each other—it's a silent retreat, as I'll speak about. So most of the time it's formal practice. Can I feel, can I have that openness? Can I have that connection with nature, with each other without having to act on it disruptively?

Openheartedness in a nutshell—the openness of heart, of soul, of being—easily outweighs, easily trumps focus or concentration in terms of its significance for jhana practice. Openness of heart, openness of being.

And it's not to say focus and concentration aren't important, but just their relative importance. If you're familiar with soul-making dharma practice, one way of adding to what we just said is that part of what makes you happy here, while you're on retreat, is that you have a fantasy of the retreat. If you're not familiar with soul-making, just forget about this. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to explain. I'm just throwing it out very briefly. Just don't worry about it.

You need a fantasy in the good sense of the retreat. You need a fantasy of yourself as a practitioner - juicy, soul-making, beautiful image, fantasy of yourself. Something that's operating in the background. A fantasy of the tradition. These teachings, these jhana teachings have been going for thousands of years, passed on from teacher to student. Thousands of years. There's a tradition of these arts, these beauties, these treasures being passed on. Fantasy of all that. Fantasy of the whole tradition. It's all part of it. That's part of your happiness and nourishment.

But on this retreat it doesn't become so dominant that you then go into a whole big imaginal practice about all that. Maybe occasionally if you need to recalibrate your whole practice - if you've gotten into a real rut or whatever it is, or you've gotten really tight - but generally not. So these fantasies operate in the background. They're almost

subliminal. That's what I mean when I use the word fantasy as opposed to image. They're almost subliminal. They're just kind of really nourishing and supporting our whole being, lubricating our whole sense of what we're doing, giving moisture there, giving beauty and depth.

So if you don't know what that means because you're not familiar with it, just forget about it. It doesn't matter.

But you're going to have to, because of the schedule, because of the teachings, because we're not going to be at the front a lot, we're not going to be doing every twenty minutes piping up and saying, "Can you feel your body?" or whatever - you have to generate and sustain the energy without the teachers leading a lot of meditations and with the open schedule. You have to generate the energy and sustain it.

What's really helpful also is to open your intention. Open your intention. Why are you here? What's it serving? Who are you serving? You're sitting, you're walking, you're standing, you're showing up consistently in the hall. People see you out there doing the walking meditation in the walking room. That's a tremendous gift to each other. It's so supportive when someone sees you showing up again and again and again. Inspiration. It communicates commitment. It helps. You're helping each other by doing that.

What's my intention? Open the intention beyond just me and my practice and how I feel. Why am I here? What am I serving? Who am I serving?

Don't assume you are irrelevant. How common it is - one of the pathologies in Western culture, mixed with its opposites often - is to just not realize how relevant we are, how we make a difference. Yes, you as an individual, your presence, your character, your soul, your vibe. Don't assume you're irrelevant. Don't assume you don't make a difference. Don't assume that in silence you don't make a difference.

So open up the intention. This is really important.

And again, it could be just a natural part. It could be something very brief. It could be something you do formally again and again. And then of course the intention for all beings. Why are you here? Who are you doing this for? Who are you serving? What are you serving?

Again, your happiness and your equanimity. You set a goal. I heard about these jhanas. I want to get them. And then it doesn't go so well. And then we need equanimity with that. That's the whole thing. We're going to talk about it. Part of what gives us equanimity is I'm not just doing this for myself. I'm showing up when it is going really

not well and it sucks and it's raining again in Devon and whatever it is. And I'm doing this for other people. That's part of what keeps you steady through the ups and downs. You understand? Open up the intention.

Does everyone know what the word inertia means? Watch out for inertia. How often, especially for many of you who have been practicing for years, if not decades, how easily we can kind of just do what we usually do. And we kind of avoid the effort or the discomfort or the disturbance of trying something new in practice sometimes.

So there's even a default way of working with the breath. I just always do it this way. Or a default way of breathing. It's unconscious. I just always breathe. I don't really pay attention to how I breathe. And it's a bit uncomfortable to try and play with the breath and make it different. Or which practice we do. I tend to stay away from metta or whatever it is. Or as I mentioned earlier, there can be inertia about how we listen to Dharma talks. So I maybe always go into this kind of letting it just wash right through.

So maybe if you're used to that, it might be to ask: what would it be to listen on your toes and really listen with a discerning mind? What does that imply? And what's the exact difference?

How is that different from what I've just heard compared to what I'm used to hearing or what I think I know?

So, jhanas—one of the fruits of jhanas is malleability of mind. Malleability, everyone knows what that means? It means shapeability. Actually, one of the most significant fruits of jhana practice—we'll talk about this—is malleability. Malleability of consciousness, perception, mind.

Like so many things, jhanas lead to malleability, and guess what? Malleability leads to jhanas. In other words, it's a condition for jhanas. So malleability is the opposite of inertia. You've got to get in there and try different things. In your playground: "Oh, I've never played on that whirly swing before." Well, get on it and give it a go. That might mean something very subtle about what you're doing, or it might mean a different practice, or whatever it is. Jhanas lead to malleability; malleability leads to jhanas. You won't access jhanas unless you're willing to be malleable and you play and you play and get into trying different things. You've got to be, in a way, practicing on your toes—ready, responsive. We talk a lot about this.

So malleability on one hand. At the same time with it, we want firm, clear, simple intention or resolve. So it's a kind of complement to malleability. In other words, we are here to do jhana practice. I'm very clear. That's my priority. That's what I'm here for. And that's clear. It's very simple. It's complex what it involves, but the intention is simple and it's a resolve and it's firm. It's clear, simple, and firm.

Again, this is immensely significant. It doesn't sound like a big deal. It will make or break your practice depending on this intention, if you're not taking care of that.

When I say jhana practice—again, I'll elaborate on a lot of what I'm talking about here—I mean including the hindrances, including working with the difficulties. So when I say jhana practice, I mean also working with the difficulties, the yucky stuff, the sludge and slogging your way through it. I mean also, when I say jhana practice, the whole relationship with practice, the whole view of the self doing the practice and trying to do the practice. I mean the whole relationship with goals and effort, the whole conceptual framework of all that, the self as meditator. All that is included in what I call jhana practice, not just the lovely bits about how to move from the second to the third jhana.

So malleability and clear, simple, firm resolve in doing jhana practice. What that means, practically speaking, is it's too much to then add, "Oh great, three weeks at Gaia House. Metta has always been easy and familiar to me. And when I've tried breath practice, I always get this kind of constriction in my throat. So maybe I'll use this retreat to see if I can clear up that constriction." No. I mean, it may happen, it may not happen, but don't make it an intention.

Go with—as I said before, or to say what I said before in a different way—go with whatever practice is easiest for the well-being, the pīti, to arise. Listen to what I'm saying. I'm not saying go with whatever practice you feel you can stick with the object the longest. Go with whatever practice is the easiest for the well-being to arise.

So I'm not trying to fix this constriction in my neck. I'm also not going to... "Oh, three weeks, I can also develop my yoga practice and get into that, or perfect my lotus pose, or kick my caffeine habit." All of these may be really good things, but once we start expanding the intention that way, it actually, in a subtle way, starts to fray something.

Okay. So I mentioned the hindrances. And I really want to stress this point—I'll say it over and over. I am including that in jhana practice. By jhana practice, I mean a very big picture, including the times when it's really not going well and those particular difficulties and how we relate to them and how we work with them. They are—sometimes I

call them—they are the dark, rich underbelly of jhana practice. The hindrances, the stuff we really don't like. They have their own gold. They deliver their own gold if I work with them the right way.

And I would dare to say, if you spent a whole three weeks and you never made it to any jhana at all, but you got wise in relation to the hindrances—and I'll explain what I mean by that—this retreat would still be worth its weight in gold.

These hindrances are not confined to our meditation cushions—they are life afflictions that permeate our entire existence. To truly understand how to work with them, to develop wisdom in relationship to them, offers tremendous benefit that extends far beyond our formal practice.

This difficult side of practice, these hindrances, carries just as much value as the loveliness of the jhanas. I am not speaking lightly when I say this—I mean it with complete conviction. When we can open up wisdom in relationship to the hindrances, when we can relate to them with skill, the transformation is profound.

Let me clarify what I mean by wisdom in this context, and I will return to this point repeatedly. Wisdom means, first, that we stop believing the hindrances. We no longer accept as truth the stories they weave. Second, it means we become comfortable with the arising of hindrances without taking them as commentary on our worth, our value as practitioners, or our spiritual capacity. We learn not to believe them and not to take them personally.

If you can move toward these two stances—not believing the hindrances and not taking them personally—this represents an absolutely magnificent transformation. It may not sound glamorous or spectacular, but in terms of what it delivers for your life, the impact is enormous.

All of this forms part of our framework here. And everything I am sharing implies something specific about your practice—about your intention, your view, your attitude. This understanding must translate into moment-to-moment differences in how you hold your stances, perspectives, relationships, attitudes, and heart qualities.

Do not let this remain mere conceptual understanding. Stay alert, stay engaged. You must translate these teachings into lived experience. What does it mean in this very moment to transform your entire view of what we are doing here?

Who among you has not heard teachings on the hindrances before? Who has not heard ten such talks? A hundred? What we seek is actual change, genuine transformation. And we will explore the hindrances more deeply as we proceed.

Now let me broaden our discussion beyond the hindrances to address emotions generally, particularly difficult emotions, within the context of this jhana retreat. Context is crucial here—I want to establish the larger framework of the entire spiritual path and locate this retreat within that expansive view.

I feel this is fundamentally important, and I hold this conviction strongly: Our entire spiritual journey—the movement, opening, learning, and development we cultivate throughout the path—must include a deepening of psychological awareness. Certainly in relationship to ourselves, but equally in relationship to others. This represents a vast subject, and to me, this psychological dimension constitutes an essential aspect of the path.

This is particularly true in our contemporary context, much more so than during the Buddha's lifetime. We inhabit different psychological landscapes. Our entire sense of self has evolved. This implies that liberation itself takes on different meanings in our time. While I will not pursue this tangent now, we can explore it further another time.

The implication for us today is that liberation must encompass a certain depth, breadth, capacity, sophistication, and sensitivity regarding what we might call psychological awareness of self and other.

The path as I understand and teach it must include emotional discernment as a fundamental component. This means developing emotional capacity—a heart that is vast and capable of holding immense range and variety. The awakened being possesses tremendous subtlety in emotional discernment and skillfulness in working with emotions.

The path must also include emotional healing. We are engaged in healing, we have experienced healing, we understand this process, and we develop capacity for working with healing in ourselves and others.

In our emotional work, we cultivate flexibility of view. We become perfectly comfortable regarding emotions as real entities with genuine causes, relating to them and caring for them as substantial realities. Simultaneously, we are equally comfortable understanding them as thoroughly empty, unreal, uncaused by anything ultimately real. This represents a range of skillful perspectives.

We develop proficiency in many different approaches and viewpoints regarding emotions. This, to me, forms the larger context for understanding emotions within the entirety of the spiritual path.

Now we're on a three-week, twenty-three day jhāna retreat. We're setting this retreat in context within that much larger framework where we want all of that range I just described regarding emotions.

For these three weeks, our first choice with regard to difficult emotions—with regard to joy and peace we'll discuss more as we continue, but with regard to difficult emotions—our first choice is simplifying, psychologically simplifying and letting them quieten, or encouraging them to quieten.

If someone did only this, if this were their sole relationship with emotions for their entire spiritual path, I wouldn't be okay with that. I really wouldn't. But if someone doesn't know how to do this and cannot move into this capacity, I'm also not comfortable with that.

When we allow difficult emotions to quiet, when we simplify all their complexity—and that complexity can be beautiful and very important at times—but on this retreat, this is what we're doing. This is our primary, our first-choice way of working, of relating.

When we simplify and quieten them this way, there's still care present. We're not being harsh or dismissive or brutal in any way. There's still care there.

So it's the first choice, not always the only choice. There are other options and second choices. It's a temporary preference set within a much bigger context. Do you understand?

Some of you, I know, have been working very hard recently as activists in different areas. Some of you in regard to climate change and all kinds of issues—Extinction Rebellion and such—climate change, species extinction, whatever it may be. And you may be, I don't know where you're at now. It's all very recent, all very much alive and in our faces. You may still be feeling that passion and that burning. And there may be grief. I don't know. There may be some grief around all that. It's present, affecting many people. I certainly feel it.

That passion and that grief are really important.

Some of you, certainly in this country and maybe in others, might be feeling grief, maybe even upset at the recent election here. You may or may not.

Some of you, and again I don't know, some of you may be feeling grief in relation to me and my situation—my health and probably dying, and so forth.

And of course there may be other things affecting your heart right now that feel difficult to bear—this sense of loss, of things falling apart, whatever it might be.

I want for you—related to what I said before—I want for you that you have a really very wide and deep range of approaches for your soul. I want that for your souls. So that you're able to open to grief and really open, but you're able to hold it and hold it well, hold it in a way that heals. I want that for you.

And I also want that you can decide sometimes not to pick it up and instead go for the positive, the joyful, the jhānic direction—the quietening of emotions, which happens in jhāna via joy anyway. You go through the bubbliness and the joy, and then things start to quiet.

So here on this retreat, although I want all this for you, here on this retreat, as I said, the latter approach is primary—the quieting.

This is a big deal.

There's no danger—I think if you're not sure—there's no danger of not being able to find the grief later. It's important to say this. If you have three weeks where you make a certain direction of choice, tend to make a certain direction of choice—not pushing it away, not shutting it down, just not so much going there—there's no danger that you won't be able to find it later on, if it's authentic grief or whatever, after the retreat.

There's no danger that you're going to get locked into some kind of mode of relationship with your emotions or your heart, locked into this mode of not feeling certain emotions. No danger at all. For three weeks you can practice this malleability. There's no danger of those things.

Again, we want the gift of flexibility, of range.

I don't know right now. Let's take a few minutes, shall we? I want to follow this up just for a few moments.

If there is something affecting your heart, something to do with loss—anything, it could be in relation to nature, it could be in relation to social situations, could be a personal relationship or whatever, a loss or impending loss—if there's some sense that something is falling apart or potentially falling apart, some grief, some overwhelm, if there's something like that, let's take a moment. Maybe come into a meditation posture just for a few moments together. I want to do something.

So it doesn't matter what it is. It also doesn't matter if there's nothing in particular, but it may be, as I said, that your heart is impacted, finding it hard to bear what human beings are doing to the earth, to our ecosystem, the planet that keeps us alive and sustains our civilization, what we are doing to the other species.

It may be there's a personal loss or the possibility of a personal loss—some relationship, someone you care about or love. There has been that loss. It may be that you're feeling grief or dismay or anger at some of what's going on, or what goes under the heading of political, but it's not really political—it's ethical. The rise of nationalism, racism, seeming corporate stranglehold on democracy, simply the prevalence of stupidity.

Just in your meditation posture, let the uprightness and the firmness of your posture help you. These are big deals. Big movements, big changes, asking a lot of us. Let your posture help you. Open, grounded, upright.

Bring whatever it is or whichever ones of those, bring them to mind, just bring them lightly to mind. You don't need to get into the whole story, just get a sense of what is happening, what might be happening and how it affects your heart, how it affects your soul.

Let your attention and awareness include your whole body, the whole space of your whole body. That's your base, that whole space. Open up the awareness. You're letting that whole space be in touch with these challenges, these difficulties, these happenings, these developments—upright, open.

Just notice how your heart is right now. Whole body. Keep that whole body space open. Keep opening the whole body. Don't let it shrink. It will shrink. Keep opening it. And feel your heart in response, or how it responds to these situations, whatever it is. Let there be a little spaciousness, a little softness around your heart's response, whole body.

But then, not so much emphasizing the spaciousness or the softness. Let that be there. But rather, how do I want to work? How do I want to live in response to this loss, this falling apart, whatever it is? How do I want to manifest in relationship to it?

I'm not talking about the practical details—I'm going to do this, I'm going to sign up for that, I'm going to get a job doing this. I mean just the quality of being, the stance of being, the relationship, the resolve. Heart, soul, being. Whole body.

What am I devoted to? With all this that I'm potentially facing, that we are potentially facing, what am I devoted to? It doesn't matter about the details. Can I get a sense of it in a way that makes a difference to my sense right now?

It might be the Buddha. It might be the Dharma. Maybe you use the rupa at the front of the hall of the Buddha there. It might be a certain image that you've worked with. That's what you're devoted to. It might be something a bit more abstract, like goodness or beauty or love. Get a sense of what you're devoted to.

So you're holding your body, your heart, the difficulty, and the sense of devotion. Can you sense that devotion in the body and in the way it shapes the body, in the way it energizes the body, in the way the body forms itself around it, in the way the body aligns with that devotion? Connecting body, devotion, heart, soul, body.

Can you get a sense of how the sense of devotion actually energizes the body right now in a stillness? There's a sense of resolve there. Can you feel it in the body space? We're not going into practical details. I resolve to do this every day.

I resolve.

More the energetic sense of resolve, of devotion. Can you feel in the sense of devotion, in the body, in the sense of resolve, can you feel that there's strength there? Can you feel it in the body? There's uprightness there.

I'm not suppressing anything here, but in this alignment of the heart and the mind, the soul, the being, the body, with what we're devoted to in relation to what is difficult, the resolve and the devotion, the energization, the uprightness—this becomes a kind of minimum base of happiness, a minimum base.

There's well-being in this state. There's equanimity here, well-being, uprightness, energy. In relation to what we said, certainly with regard to jhāna work, this kind of basis of strength, of stability, of very base level of happiness. And it transfers to our life, for our work, whatever we're doing. It expands our capacity to serve. Of course, the jhānas do as well.

You can just gently come out of that now. Do you get a sense of what I'm talking about here? Does it make energetic sense?

So that was very quick. There's one possibility with difficult emotions and so many other skills. But this kind of thing is important, given that some of you have come from a lot of busyness in activism or whatever it is right now and other things that are going on.

I also want to say a very warm welcome. It's really lovely to sit with you here. I'm so delighted that after nearly two years, this can happen. I'm really very touched and grateful and appreciative that Rob, after sixteen years wanting to teach this, finally has three weeks to do so. Really delighted to be here with you.

So here we are, landing together. What I would really like to speak about is how we create this container together. It's so lovely for me to sit in this hall and already have a sense of being welcomed in this vessel of Gaia House. The support it gives—something feels really welcomed. Can you sense this? I'm just arriving here.

I'm also really appreciating what Rob alluded to—that we all are participating in this. We are all contributing, we are all participating to enhance, to make this vessel even more beautiful. We all need, we are all needed in this. We are all active ingredients, important ingredients, needed ingredients, welcomed and appreciated ingredients. I really want to welcome you all into this.

I think one very beautiful ingredient is all those shared intentions of non-harming, this shared celebration of our moral sensibility, our ethical consideration. I think this is something uniquely human. This is something that makes us human. So really inviting the exploration, the examination of this territory of moral sensibility is a way to celebrate our humanness. It's a way to celebrate what is precious in the human heart.

Traditionally, of course, as you all know, these moral sensibilities, this intention of non-harming, is expressed in the five precepts. I want to just name them, to bring them into the room, to make them part of our mandala here.

And of course, you all are aware that these precepts are somehow just headlines or gateways to actually very powerful, very, very unfathomable explorations of what it may mean to be alive. And as Rob said before, when we were speaking shortly in the teacher wing, they are a great foundation for samādhi. Where we can appreciate our heart, we can appreciate each other, and where we give this precious gift of safety—safety to each other.

And thus they are. Listen. Step into it. Really see if you can step into this beautiful intention, or this beautiful pathway of the intention they actually evoke.

We together undertake the training to not intentionally harm or kill another human being. Let it resonate with the beauty of this intention, this point of reverence.

We together here undertake the training to not take what has not been freely given, and to respect each other's property and respect all that is given to us.

We undertake the training to not harm another with expressions of our sexuality. This doesn't mean make my sexuality wrong—it's not a moral statement. But we give each other the freedom not to look at each other in this way, so that we can be at ease with each other.

We undertake the training to not intentionally hurt ourselves and others with our words. And of course this might be mostly internal speaking. We pay attention—how do we speak in our practice to ourselves and to each other?

And we undertake the training—or no, we actually make the resolve. It's not a training so much. We take the resolve to not take any substances that cloud our mind, because we really want to explore the depth of what is possible for this human consciousness. We want to explore, we want to inhabit, we want to really know it deeply—what is possible here. And of course, this doesn't mean that you stop taking any medication. Of course, look after yourself.

So how does this ring with you? And when Rob was speaking, and I was just sitting here a little bit, first of all, to see already this appreciation in your faces. I don't think it's a project. Rob came in just with so much appreciation to be here with us and with him. And then also maybe having this sense for a moment to appreciate each other in our intention, in our precious gift that people can actually feel safe around us. This precious gift of the intention of non-harming.

And delighting to be welcomed in a community where this is a shared intention. But also I think really, really important to delight in the goodness of your own intention. To delight that your heart actually feels really moved to incline itself in this way.

Thank you. I'm really looking forward to practice with you. May you all have a wonderful retreat with delight and joy.

Hi, everyone. It's really lovely to sit here together, and I felt so much appreciation listening to Rob and being here together, starting and embarking on this journey together. A really warm welcome from my side as well.

And at the same time, with appreciation, I can feel a sense of little bit of wobbliness sitting for the first time on this side in the hall of Gaia House instead of that side with you. But seeing all your friendly faces brings so much encouragement, and I feel a

sense of support and friendliness and heartfulness in the hall. So I'm very much looking forward to our time together, journeying through the territory of jhānas and all the exploration and sharing and learning together.

And I was just wishing to say a few words about silence. Silence that is such an essential part of this retreat container, and also so much supporting what we are doing here together as we are exploring the mind. And as we are creating conditions for the samādhi, for the silence of the mind also to deepen.

And hopefully the silence can be also at the same time a resource for us that is really deeply nourishing our heart and mind—can be almost like a companion on the journey for us, hopefully. And this is also something that we are cultivating and creating and nourishing together, the kind of part of the container, that we can be offering ourselves the silence and offering each other the silence, the gift of silence.

This can really help ourselves and each other in becoming more sensitive. It's really so supportive. And hopefully, we can still enjoy each other and feel each other's support as it was talked about. That we can support each other in the silence and feel a sense of community.

It would be so much more difficult to do this retreat by ourselves at home. So we were thinking there would be a practical way to support our exploration, a practice of supporting silence.

We are offering this possibility and very much encouraging you to hopefully make use of it. We will be bringing here a basket where you are invited and encouraged to bring and leave your mobile phones for the duration of the retreat. You can bring your phone, mark it with your name, and we will take care of it—you will surely get it back at the end of the retreat. This can actually be part of this ritual of simplifying and renunciation and letting go, and also contribute to creating the conditions that can support ourselves and each other to make the most of this journey.

This basket will be available right after this session, and certainly until tomorrow morning. You are very welcome to bring your little technological friends there and leave them with us.

I am really, really happy and grateful to be sharing this journey together and to meet you in the interviews. I wish you all a very fruitful retreat.

We have already been sitting for a little while. I would like to do a guided meditation, but I think we probably need to move a little bit. So why don't we take two minutes and just move your body however you feel like you need—whatever's going to be good, because we will probably be sitting a little bit longer. Just shake, wiggle, stretch—whatever your body needs.

CHAPTER 198

An Introduction to the Jhānas

Rob Burbea · 1h10

> *In this foundational talk from his retreat series on practicing the jhānas, Rob Burbea provides an accessible yet comprehensive introduction to these profound meditative states. He begins by clarifying key terminology - distinguishing between samādhi as an umbrella term for harmonious well-being, samatha as tranquility, and jhānas as specific states within samādhi. Drawing directly from the Buddha's classical descriptions, he reads passages detailing the four form jhānas and four formless jhānas, emphasizing their extraordinary nature as "breathtakingly beautiful" experiences that should inspire genuine excitement.*
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> *Burbea's teaching approach emphasizes mastery over achievement, encouraging practitioners to develop deep familiarity with each jhāna through what he calls "marinating" - sustained practice that allows these states to transform one's being at the cellular level. He challenges common misconceptions about jhāna practice, questioning whether rigid definitions around factors like sensory withdrawal or unshakeable concentration truly matter, and instead advocating for intelligent discernment of what's essential versus secondary. The talk explores how different conceptions of insight shape our approach to jhāna practice, arguing that if we seek liberation including sensitivity, responsiveness, and understanding of emptiness, we must cultivate these same qualities within our samādhi practice. This sets the foundation for viewing jhānas not merely as concentration exercises, but as "perception attainments" that open us to the profound beauties and magical dimensions of existence.*

So we're not too pushed for time, but I don't want to be too long. I want to talk about just an introduction to the jhanas and a little bit of an overview. Again, a sort of "What are we doing here? Why are we doing it? What are we talking about? What's the area we're talking about?"

To start with a bit of vocabulary, there's this word jhanas, and I'll talk about that of course, but there's also this word samadhi, which many of you will know. There's also a word samatha. Samatha tends to mean calm or tranquility. Samadhi is more of an umbrella term, at least that's how I use it. I think that's how it was originally used in the text. Jhanas are a kind of subset of samadhi, if you like.

Samadhi is actually quite hard to define, but it's something like a state of harmonious well-being of mind and body. Mind and body are gathered, coherent, harmonious in some state of well-being. Actually, even that's not quite accurate. You can think, oh, in

the formless jhanas, is there bodily well-being? Well, there is kind of. You can still have pain somewhere, but it's not really overtaking. So it's hard to get an exact definition. But I use it as a kind of umbrella state.

There are lots of insight states we could talk about, for example, that are still states of samadhi. Because of the insight, because of the letting go, there's a kind of harmonization, a cohesion, a unification of mind and body and awareness and bodily experience. All that cohered, unified, harmonized in some sense of well-being. There are lots of different flavors of well-being as we'll talk about. That's what I mean by samadhi. The eight jhanas are a subset of that.

The Buddha described, he talked a lot about the jhanas—a lot, a lot, a lot. Way more than he talked about mindfulness, interestingly. So I'm going to read you quite briefly the Buddha's description. He's talking to a bunch of monks: "What, monks, is right concentration?" This is the Buddha talking.

"There is the case where a monk, quite withdrawn from sensuality, withdrawn from unskillful qualities—it's actually withdrawn from sensual desire, withdrawn from unskillful qualities, the Pali—enters and remains in the first jhana: rapture and happiness born from that withdrawal, accompanied by directed thought and evaluation, accompanied by thought. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and happiness born from withdrawal. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture and pleasure born from withdrawal."

So he describes it kind of technically, the jhana, then he gives a simile:

"Just as if a skilled bathman or bathman's apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together..." So in those days they had bath houses, and that's where you would go to have a bath and a wash. There would be someone there who mixes soap powder with water to make your personal bar of soap for your bath. This person, this bathman, has this soap powder and water, and it's kind of a skill to get it mixed right so that it's not just a liquid mess, but that it's got enough moisture in it that you can give it a good rubbing. So there's some skill in that.

"So this bathman, the bathman's apprentice, pour bath powder, soap powder, into a brass basin, knead it together, sprinkling it again and again with water so that his ball of bath powder, saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within and without, would nevertheless not drip. Even so, the monk permeates this very body with the rapture and happiness born of withdrawal. There's nothing, no part of the body untouched," et cetera.

So that's the first jhana. Basically you've got rapture—and we'll talk about this, piti—this really nice physical feeling that is not coming from sensual contact. I'll talk much more about this. And you've got happiness, and the mind is, that feeling is pervading the body, and the mind is really settling down there and feeding on it and getting into it and really alive to that. That's the first jhana.

Second jhana: "With the stilling of directed thought and evaluation, with the stilling of thought, he enters and remains in the second jhana: rapture and happiness born of tranquility, unification of awareness, free from directed thought and evaluation. And with confidence, with this internal assurance, he permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and happiness born of composure. Nothing in the body remains untouched."

Looking at this beautiful image of the lake with spring water, we must remember this comes from a hot country where such coolness is deeply appealing. The Buddha describes a lake with spring water welling up from within—having no inflow from east, west, north, or south. The skies periodically supply abundant showers, and the cool fountain of water rising from within permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills the entire lake with cool waters. No part remains untouched by these cool waters. Just so, the practitioner permeates this very body with the rapture and happiness born of composure, leaving nothing of the body untouched.

In the third jhana, with the fading of rapture—the fading of piti—the practitioner remains in equanimity, mindful and alert. This mindfulness differs from our usual understanding of the term. There's physical sensitivity to happiness as one enters and remains in the third jhana. The noble ones declare of such a practitioner: "Equanimous and mindful, he has a happy abiding"—a joyful abiding. The body becomes permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with pleasure divested of rapture, divested of piti, so nothing of the entire body remains untouched by this happiness free from rapture.

The simile here speaks of a lotus pond containing blue, white, or red lotuses. Some of these lotuses, born and growing in water, remain completely immersed, their petals never rising above the surface. They flourish while staying submerged, permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from roots to tips. Nothing of these lotuses remains untouched by cool water. Similarly, the practitioner permeates the body with happiness divested of rapture, leaving no part untouched by this pleasure.

In the fourth jhana, with the abandoning of both happiness and stress—this refined happiness and any remaining stress—one enters and remains in the fourth jhana: purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. The practitioner sits permeating the body with pure, bright awareness so nothing of the entire body remains untouched by this pure, bright awareness.

The simile describes someone sitting wrapped from head to foot in white cloth, with no part of the body left uncovered. Just so, the practitioner sits permeating the body with pure, bright awareness, leaving nothing untouched by this luminous consciousness.

These constitute the four form jhanas. Beyond these lie four formless jhanas, which we'll explore in much greater detail later. For now, I'll briefly share the Buddha's descriptions.

After the fourth jhana comes complete transcendence of perceptions of physical form, the disappearance of perceptions of resistance—of solidity—and the ceasing to heed perceptions of diversity, of manifoldness. One enters and remains in the sphere of infinite space: the fifth jhana.

In the sixth jhana, with complete transcendence of infinite space, consciousness becomes the focus as one enters the realm of infinite consciousness. The instruction emphasizes sticking with this theme, developing it, pursuing it, establishing oneself firmly within it.

The seventh jhana brings the realm of nothingness. Here, space itself has collapsed, leaving not emptiness within space, but pure nothingness itself.

The eighth jhana is called the sphere, realm, or base of neither perception nor non-perception. Here, there's not even nothing—we reach the very limit of perception's possibilities. This state transcends even the perception of nothingness itself.

These are the eight jhanas as the Buddha described them. Some descriptions remain quite brief, and we'll need to fill them out as we proceed.

Teaching, I find, is deeply contextual. What I emphasize depends on who sits before me, what I sense you need, your background, and what you may have encountered elsewhere. When discussing jhanas, I address assumptions you might carry from other teachings—assumptions that may not prove helpful.

I'll be teaching from my direct experience with jhanas and years of guiding others through them. I'll focus on what seems most significant: what opens this treasure? What treasures lie here? What makes a truly liberating difference?

I'll contradict myself frequently. I might say these eight jhanas must be very clear and discrete, with quantum jumps between them. Later, I might describe the whole journey as one continuous spectrum without sharp divisions.

So don't get too hung up on that. I might say that some of us—some of you, maybe most of you, and maybe most people—really need to forget the whole question that goes on: "Do I have it now? Is this it? Am I in a jhana or am I out of a jhana?" Focus rather on enjoying, on just really maximizing your enjoyment and getting the most enjoyment in the moment, developing what needs to develop to enable you to enjoy it more. Just drop that whole question: "Is this it? Where's the edge here? Do I have it?" Don't dwell on where that sharp definition is.

So I might say that. And then I might—and I will—also say something like: when we talk about jhanas as we're teaching it, we really mean something breathtakingly nice, breathtakingly beautiful, really a revelation. If you've not experienced the second jhana or even the third jhana, it's really a revelation. You might have had all kinds of happiness in your life, been very content, all kinds of wonderful things that you rejoiced in, lots of peaceful times and nice holidays and relaxing moments. We're talking about something of a whole different order. We're really talking about "wow, wow"—something very, very beautiful, something really exciting. And you should be excited. I like people to be excited about practice. It's a good sign, a healthy sign.

I can think of quite a few instances over the years where someone's come to me—they've been exposed to jhana teachings elsewhere or whatever—and they come into an interview and say, "I think I broke through to the sixth jhana yesterday." And I thought, "Oh, how was it?" And they say, "Yeah, it was nice." And I'm like, "No, that can't be. It absolutely can't be."

Now, either they're kind of faking a Buddhist equanimity—"I'm not supposed to be attached, so I'll just say it's nice," but secretly thinking "wow." But in this person's case, I genuinely think it just wasn't that big a deal. That's not what we're talking about.

So actually those definitions do become quite important. We're really talking about something—yes, it's really something else, you know? When there isn't the excitement, when there isn't that sense of "wow," it's not going to make a difference to your life. This person was describing something that might have been a relatively new experience,

but there was nothing in that experience—or having that experience—that was going to make much difference to her ability to let go, to her life, to her sense of existence, to her sense of herself and world. It was just, "Oh okay, that was the sixth jhana, tick."

I'm really interested in all this making a difference.

So I might say, "Look, it's important that we're talking about this territory," and I might say, "Forget about all that and don't worry about the definitions."

I'm going to contradict myself a lot, and I reserve that right. I might also say, on the one hand, "It's not about just focusing more intensely or nailing your mind, your attention to something for hours and then expecting something to happen. It's not about prioritizing the intensity or the steadiness of focus." And I might also say to the same person at a different time, or to another person, "More intensity—just more intensity to the focus. Energize that focus."

Most people, I think it's the first one—too hung up. I'll explain this as we go along today and other days. It's too much thinking in the wrong way about what we're trying to do. We're prioritizing the wrong things. The priorities we're making may not be that helpful, not that fruitful.

So why all this contradiction? Well, because the nature of all things is that we can look at them in different ways. That's partly what it means to say they're empty. You can look at it like this and it's true, and you can look at it like that and it's true, and those can sometimes even be opposites.

But partly also just because different people at different times—or the same person at different times—sometimes need to hear this, and sometimes need to hear that, regarding the same issue. It might be opposite. It's always the case with teaching. Always the case.

That's partly why it's interesting teaching a group. In a Q&A I might say something, but someone sitting next to that person might need to hear exactly the opposite.

Yesterday I used this word "mastery."

Yesterday I used this word "mastery." I just sort of threw it out there. It's a traditional word—I can't remember what the Pali means—but let me say what I mean by it. I said we're aiming, or I would like us to aim or to think about, kind of mastering each jhana.

What I mean by that has several different components. I mean a really thorough familiarity with all the jhanas, but if we're talking about any particular jhana—to say I mastered the second jhana or whatever—it means a really thorough familiarity and intimacy with all of its aspects.

A jhana actually can manifest differently. It has different aspects, different flavors and tones within it, which if I just dip in and dip out, I don't get to see. Oh, sometimes it's like this and it has that quality and that quality, and these different ranges of depths. So different levels within each jhana. You can divide certain jhanas into different levels, and they're almost discrete manifestations as well. I mean a thorough familiarity with all that.

I mean also by mastery—I'm including in that meaning—really a whole set of skills, a whole kind of artistry that's involved with regard to that jhana in terms of working with it.

I mean also, thirdly, that one can enter it at will. One doesn't need to go—let's say it's the third jhana we're talking about—you don't need to go number one, number two, number three, or breath, number one, number two, number three. You can actually just remember it. The cells and the citta just remember it, and you just have a subtle intention, and it comes back—or a second jhana, whatever it is. I'm just intending for it to come up, and there it comes.

So with a lot of practice, that's what I mean by mastery—that's included. You can go directly from nothing to any jhana, just with a subtle intention. It's not so much—it doesn't need to be so much like a big effort. It's probably more like a fader switch, more like a dimmer switch. But that's partly what I mean.

It doesn't need to be preceded by its preceding jhanas, doesn't need to be preceded by its base practice, whatever base practice, springboard practice of metta or breath or whatever you're doing.

I also mean that you can access and sustain that jhana pretty much in any posture and when you're going for a walk. It means you're doing a loop around here for an hour in the lanes and you can be doing that pretty much in the fourth jhana or whatever it is, if we're talking about mastery of the fourth jhana.

I also mean that a jhana—as part of mastery again—that you can really sustain it and remain in it. I'm going to come back to this. There's a word I want to use: marinate. You need to marinate. I'm going to come back to this. This is really, really important.

We need to sit in a jhana a long time. It's doing a lot of work on the cells, on the being, on the citta. It's fine to go through for two seconds onto the next one. That's all fine. But the real work happens when we really just get in and sit there for a long time and really let that change our habits—our mental habits and our energetic habits. It's doing something different to mind and body, and that takes time, and it takes putting myself in it and staying there for a while.

Mastery also means navigating. I can move from that jhana to any of the other jhanas that I already know, and I don't have to go sequentially. So let's say I'm working on my mastery of the third—then I can go from the third to the first, or from the first to the third, or whatever. So that includes what I call leapfrogging. I can leapfrog. This is partly what I mean.

Mastery might also mean that I can modulate. So again, if you go back to this idea that a jhana isn't really one thing, it's a territory, it's a realm. And like a lot of realms, it has different, as I said, flavors, aspects, regions, levels. And I can modulate, move between those different levels and actually eventually also bring in other qualities to mix with—like mixing cocktails. I can add a bit of this and a bit of that and get an even nicer cocktail or a different cocktail.

In that process of learning to master it, it probably will be the case that what I originally thought was, say, the first jhana—after I've gone through all that mastery process, by the time I've finished, the first jhana actually feels quite a bit different and I understand something different.

Ajahn Geoff used to say to me, "Stick Post-it labels on them at first." You know those sticky labels? They just come off. Don't erect a whole sign that says "that's the first jhana." Okay, I think this is the first jhana, but let's just put a Post-it label now and we'll go through this process and then they'll change over time as you work on them. They also change retrospectively.

Once I get used to the third jhana, the first jhana is transformed indirectly by my repeated experience in the third jhana. So we have to be somewhat easy and loose with the labels.

This mastery applies to all eight jhanas. As I said yesterday, we are where we are. Each person is where you are. What we're really interested in is your playground at your edge—because that's the big picture. Eventually I want mastery of all that. But we are where we are, and the way I'm going to get mastery is by playing in that playground that's on my edge. That's what's going to give me mastery of that playground. At a cer-

tain point, when I get that mastery, the playground just shifts—either by itself or I just have to shift it slightly—and then I'm in a new playground. That's my work, that's my play, that's my digestion. This is the way I would like you to think about this approach.

The Buddha has a sutta—I can't remember what it's called, but it might be called the Stupid Cow Sutta or something like that, the Foolish Cow. Very briefly, he describes a foolish, inexperienced mountain cow who's happily eating pasture in a field and looks up and sees another field over there. The cow thinks, "Oh, I bet the grass is nice over there. Let me go down there and eat some of that nice-looking grass." But because this cow is foolish and inexperienced, it tries to do that without being very sure of its footing, even where it's standing. The cow gets stuck in some ditch between the fields, can't get to where it was planning to go—that other nicer-looking pasture—and can't get back to where it was happily eating before. It's just stuck in this ditch. "Just so, monks," the idea is: wait until you master a place before moving on.

And now a contradiction. Sometimes there's really a kind of magic involved in all this. Sometimes you'll find—just try it. Just try something. You think, "I couldn't possibly get..." Just try it. Sometimes the mind will just do something that you think, "Wow, that's amazing." So yes, mostly this idea about mastery and playgrounds. And sometimes, for some people at different times, it's like: just try something that feels beyond you.

Once you really get into all this—if you have the patience, and really what it boils down to is the love and the desire, the eros—and you do develop this kind of mastery, then it really begins to feel like the jhanas are almost like dimensions of being. They're beautiful, amazing dimensions of being. Treasures, treasure realms, enchanted realms. They're there and they're available for us.

This becomes part of one's life and part of one's sense of what existence is and what the cosmos includes. They certainly give a sense of dimensionality to our own being, but they also become almost cosmic in a way. One gets to feel that there are realms that are already there. They already exist.

They really feel like realms that are already there, as if they just exist, like a realm exists. This begins to become obvious around the third jhana. It's much less obvious in the first or second jhana, but after the third jhana, you really feel this is like an enchanted, paradisiacal realm that's just there. I get the blessedness of being able to enter that and hang out in that and come out of that. It's only that we need to find them. They're there.

Or they're like radio stations—like frequencies. You get these presets, right? You can put in Radio 1 or whatever it is. It's just like that. Or the old style where you actually tune with the big knob and the little knob that was the fine tuner.

They're like radio stations. They're in the air anyway.

So it begins to be something like, I'm huffing and puffing to make this jhana happen. It's like they're there. And what we're doing is tuning to something that's already there. So we can have this sense of them, is what I'm saying.

Or I used to feel like it was a bit like a wardrobe. So it's like you've got your wardrobe of clothes and they're all just lined up there. And you can reach in, okay, today I want to wear my pink glitter onesie outfit. And it's right there. And I can just pull it and use it. They're all kind of just available. So we begin to have this sense of them.

If you come to me at the end of a retreat and say, oh, it's fantastic, I never had any jhana before, and I got to the eighth jhana, I'll say, oh, what a shame. Because, I mean, it would be good, obviously, but actually, there would be no way that you would have gotten into the way we're talking about with this playground and this kind of mastery.

And this is my opinion, my emphasis. This is what's really going to make a difference. This is what's really going to be a treasure that affects the being. Going too quickly through, we're not actually getting that treasure in the maximum value. It's a bit like a tourist going on holiday and you go and on your mobile phone you take the photo of whatever it is and then you send it on Facebook to your friends and they like and you like what they sent you. It's all like, okay, been there, done that, but it's not the same as really being there and living it.

So they're not kind of achievement badges. We really want something such a profound treasure. We want it to work on the being. So we have to linger. We have to live there. We have to, as I say, marinate. Absorb, not just get absorbed, but almost absorb the jhana itself into our being. Get to know it intimately so that the cells, the mind, the habit patterns of mind, and energy are affected.

In that way, it makes a really long-term difference to one's life, a long-term difference. I remember talking to someone reporting after another jhana retreat that they did, and it was their first time, and they say I had a great time and they just whipped through all of them. But it won't be—and this is a while later now and I can tell—this person, it hasn't become a profound resource. So they had a good time those ten days or whatever it was. Nothing has altered in their sense of existence. Nothing has altered from that jhana practice in their sense of existence of self and world.

Maybe they didn't want anything to be altered in their sense, because sometimes we get quite attached to our sense of how we think the world and the self. We're attached to a certain view, philosophy, whatever it is. This person had a good time, but so what?

So marinate means a long time and many times in one jhana. It's part of the mastery.

Some of you may not be aware of this. Some of you will be very aware of it or a little less so. There's all kinds of opinions and arguments out there in the Dharma world about how to demarcate. Is this jhana? Is that jhana? What did the Buddha mean? How do we define it? Some of you will be oblivious to all that. Some of you will be exposed to that. All kinds of opinions. Do I have it? Is this it? Different teachers saying different things, writing different things.

Who are you going to trust? And why? How are you going to, if you are exposed to that difference of opinion, who are you going to trust and why are you going to trust or which version, which definition are you going to trust? And more importantly, why?

Or if I change that question: what matters here?

What's important?

So we come to all this charged opinion about this stuff. What actually matters here?

One could say, well, if your experience matches the Buddha's descriptions—as I just very briefly rushed through and read out—if there is an extraordinary opening to well-being or different kinds of well-being, if there's a really deep sense of different kinds of beauty, if there's a really profound sense of resource that's coming from that, if the practice of whatever it is you're doing brings in an integrated way insight and freedom and it makes sense as part of the path in an integrated way, then if we need to make definitions and demarcations, that would seem pretty good to call that a jhāna, right? If it's all that. And I can still improve its quality. I can still say, okay, that's a jhāna, but I can still work on improving it.

So sometimes with all these opinions and what we bring to these questions, I have another question, which is: can I be more intelligent than I am being in relation to these questions? Some of you have not even been exposed to all this stuff yet, so why is he going on about that? But some of you will be. Can I bring more intelligence to these questions? I'll say what I mean by intelligence in a moment, but I mean more than scholarship.

So we're here, I'm teaching this, I'm giving a certain emphasis and a certain range. I would say, as I already said, I teach jhānas—or the jhānas that we're talking about here—as really breathtakingly extraordinary experiences. They lead naturally onwards. There's a way organically that one jhāna will just ripen and mature into the next, just like what the Buddha described. And one has that sense as one's going: oh, wow. Here I am two and a half thousand years later, 2500 years later, and my experience—I can really get the sense of what he's talking about there.

If there is a kind of strong and deep building of confidence through these practices and love of the path, if those are fruits too that you can feel, if freedom comes out of it and a capacity more and more to let go, to be okay with more and more, if transformation comes, if insight that liberates comes and the insight that comes is congruent and integrated into the path—all that, it's like that's the package that I want to encourage.

But also that there is, and again, here's that word again, responsiveness and intelligence. That's part of the deal too. Some jhānas, when some people describe them, are completely unresponsive states, where it's supposed to be so deeply absorbed one actually doesn't know where one's been and one can't make any changes or responsiveness within that state. I'm going to come back to this. Why would I want something like that? It might sound better—because it sounds better, doesn't it? Is it? Can we bring intelligence and boldness to our questioning? Something sounds better. A lot of people are saying maybe it's better. Is it better?

So by intelligence, I mean a certain boldness. I also mean—I don't mean, I mean much more than scholarship. Well, I go back to the Buddha and this Pali word means that. That's all good, but I mean more than that. I mean a wisdom to discern what is essential. Right now we're talking about jhānas, but this actually applies to the whole of the path. Can I develop a wisdom to discern what is essential? What is important? What's important to know? What's important to understand? What's important to develop? What is secondary?

Oftentimes this faculty is not very developed in meditators. People get emphasized, or in my opinion, I find a lot of students emphasizing what's kind of mistaking what's secondary for what's primary, emphasizing what's not so important.

Then what I said yesterday about listening on your toes—do you remember that? Everything that I'm saying, this should set you recalibrating, rethinking, reorienting. What does that mean? Please don't just be passive about it. This is actually quite a big deal. Do I have that wisdom to discern what's essential? What's secondary?

Do I have a nose for it? Do I have a nose, an intuition and intelligence? Can I develop a nose for it? Because sometimes these arguments I've encountered feel like quibbling over what's insignificant, what's secondary.

In the Anapanasati Sutta, it says parimukham. The meditator sits down at the base of the tree with the breath and puts their attention parimukham—around the mouth. The Buddha indicates this is the place to pay attention. Yet people argue about this. Does it really matter? Is it really important? Does it make a difference?

Does it make a difference if I keep the breath as my primary object? Some people say absolutely—you can't let go of the primary object. If you're doing jhana, you need to keep the breath, the primary object. We'll see actually that you can do it both ways. We'll come back to that.

Some people say it's only jhana if the senses close, if you can't hear anything. Well, the Buddha didn't say that. And does it matter? It sounds better, perhaps. If I make the definition "it's only jhana when the senses close," that sounds like a superior attainment. Most people would say it sounds better. I don't know if it actually is.

What I want to say is this: can we bring discernment and intelligence to these questions? Which are important and which are not? What's important? What's secondary? What fruits will I get from pursuing questions that are actually not that significant? I want to taste the fruit, be nourished by the juicy flesh of the fruit, and not worry about the pips and the pith of the apple.

These questions relate to our conception and emphasis. What is the main point of jhana practice? If you read certain texts or listen to different teachers, either explicitly or implicitly, you'll hear various views about what the main point is.

For some teachers, the emphasis is really changing the habit of papañca—mental proliferation. The primary purpose of jhana practice is to change and actually eradicate that habit of papañca. The whole thing is a movement to simplicity, developing a mind that's simple, that doesn't get complicated and embroiled in papañca. That's one view, sometimes explicitly stated, sometimes you discern it by listening to the totality of someone's teaching.

Another perspective: the point of jhana practice is developing a kind of power in the mind that, like a laser beam, allows attention to dissect phenomena. In dissecting them, that's what insight is—I examine things with incredible precision, seeing down to the finest details. The point of jhana practice is to develop this laser-like attention.

There might be combinations here as well.

Someone might say no. What we're developing in jhana is the ability to sustain unwaveringly the focus on something—to hold the mind or attention on something without wavering. The assumption there is that automatically holding the attention on something will reveal the reality of that thing, will reveal the way things are. If I can just stare at this thing long enough, it will reveal its nature, reveal the way it really is.

Sometimes this isn't explicitly said. You have to hang out with the whole totality of a person's teaching or a certain drift of teaching. That's the assumption. That's how it fits in with the whole path.

But is that true? If I stare at an atom—or let's say an electron—long enough, just staring at it will not reveal the nature of the electron or anything else, any more than if I stare at an egg long enough. I have to do stuff with something. And certainly in quantum physics, it's only when I start doing different things that I start to encounter what's most interesting about the true nature of the electron. I start to realize, oh, it's actually dependent on how I look—whether I look and what I do and what's around it. So it's not just staring at something.

Again, why am I saying all this? Because so much we arrive at situations like this with the idea that it's really about how long can I stay steady with my attention on something. I don't want to say that's unimportant, but I just want to shake up the sense of what we're doing and what's priority here and what may be important and may be less.

Another context might be someone saying very rarely, stage by stage, you go through eight jhanas and then you go to the next stage, which is the experience of the unfabricated. That's quite rare, but it's there.

For me, I would say, as I said last night, there are resources that come with the practice of jhanas that really enable, really help us to let go. We say let go, let go, let go. But once I'm this rich in this beauty, once I have these treasures available to me, it becomes much easier to let go. I don't need the food to be nice. I don't need this or that. I have—who cares? I have so much abundant well-being, oh my cup runneth over, so much overflowing delight and pleasure and happiness. I can let go of all kinds of things then. So that's one of the functions, this deep resource as I would see it. I can let go of clinging to things.

I also secondly begin to understand the whole process of fabrication of perception—how the mind can fabricate less and fabricate more. And in moving through the jhanas I begin to understand that. That's also one of the reasons, one of the points.

And a third reason is the mystical openings, the kiss of the mystic. For me, that's a really important point and reason. I want my sense of existence, my sense of world, of self, of other to open up. And it will be in the impress and the opening of these beautiful realms and experience. That's a point for me. That's one of the main points.

Jhanas alone will not liberate one totally. They won't bring you to the end of dukkha. And I think probably most Dharma teachers would agree on that. There may be someone who disagrees, but I don't know. But I definitely say most people agree on that. Jhanas alone will not liberate totally.

But I want to say, nor will insight alone. Nor will insight alone. Nor will both jhanas and insight, the combination...

Okay, let's end there. No, we need the combination. We need the combination. If we're really talking about big, wide, deep liberation, we need the combination of insight and samadhi. And as I said last night, we need the psychological work. We're a whole different species now than we were in the Buddha's day.

Yes, of course, there's much that remains the same, but the whole way we feel ourselves, our aspirations and what we consider normal in human relationship—with ourselves and others—and what we want from life has fundamentally shifted. I won't elaborate on this now, but there's an entire range of psychological work that, if we're speaking of liberation in our current context—for you and me—needs to include all of this.

So yes, samadhi; yes, insight; yes, psychological work; and yes, the cultivation of virtues and beautiful qualities—metta, generosity, compassion, all of that. Those four together, let's say.

So why the jhanas and why the mastery? Because it's part of that mix. That's one reason. And the jhanas, when they're mastered, will give more insight in relation to fabrication. They'll provide more resources. We open ourselves more to the mystic impress and the kiss of the mystic.

But there's something I really want to emphasize—perhaps a style or approach that I want to highlight. When I reflect on what I truly emphasize when I teach jhanas, apart from what I've just said, I would emphasize sensitivity: subtle discernment of different qualities of being, different qualities of heart, of energy, different frequencies of vibration and energy. Sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement, attunement. These are the qualities I would really like to emphasize, to bring into the picture of how I would like to teach and what I would like to communicate and transmit.

All those qualities—sensitivity, attunement, subtle discernment, refinement—are beautiful, beautiful capacities of the soul. These, combined with this framework I would like to offer about the jhanas, allow jhana practice to fit very easily and congruently, in a very natural and integrated way, into emptiness practices. They simply work together. We're speaking of the same thing.

Sensitivity, attunement, refinement, subtle discernment—we need all of this in emptiness practices and the way they deepen. In soul-making dharma practices, we need sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement, attunement, all of that. In emotional work, whether with ourselves or with another person, again we need sensitivity, refinement, attunement, subtle discernment. In healing as well—healing the emotions, healing the heart—those capacities are very much part of what I would regard as integral to healing. In relational skill: sensitivity, subtle discernment, refinement.

You see how these same developments are actually part of jhana, emptiness, soul-making, emotional work, healing, and relational understanding. There's something very integrated here.

But more than that, all this opens the jhanas themselves—in this approach and what I'd like to emphasize—to something concerning the beauty of existence. If you ask me what's the point of jhanas, it's something about opening more and more to the beauties of existence, inner and outer. There's something, as I mentioned earlier, of magic here. And that's what I would encourage: you start to feel yourself as something of a magician, a magician in these realms, a magician who can conjure these realms or who has access to these realms.

There's something of magic in the whole endeavor, and there's certainly something of art. This is the kind of flavor, orientation, scope, feeling, attitude, view that I would really encourage.

Those are some of the reasons why. Related to all this, you can see that a person's emphasis or definition of jhana practice depends on their idea of what insight is. If I have the idea that insight is a kind of drilling down through the strata or layers of rock of illusion or construction, then what do I need? I need a sharp tool, a laser beam. Then my conception of jhana practice aligns with that idea of what insight is doing—I view jhana practice as the development of super intense, super sustained focus. What I tend to emphasize then in teaching jhanas is intensity, sharpness, concentration, focus.

If I think of insight as seeing clearly—meaning seeing in more detail—then again I tend to emphasize something similar in teaching jhanas. Maybe I need to see in detail, for my insight, the process of aggregates in time. Perhaps that's what I regard insight as:

if I can see the momentary arising and passing of the five aggregates in time, that's insight. And so my jhana practice needs to set me up like a magnifying glass, very fine, so I can see that.

If that's what I think insight is, if that's what I think ultimate reality is, you see, we're working backwards here and it makes an implication on what we think a jhana is and then what we tend to emphasize within the jhana practice.

Or again, as I said before, if I think I can just stare at something long enough, the truth of it will be seen because I'm just staring at it plainly. If I think plain staring reveals reality, if that's what I think reality is—something that is revealed through plain staring, plain looking. Or I'm sharpening my mind, so I just zip through eight jhanas back and forth and then do some insight practice. I've sharpened my sword so I can kind of atomize things.

There's a relationship here between the way the goal is seen, the way insight is conceived of, the way jhana is conceived of, and then what we come to emphasize within jhana practice. That's why I said, but if I want a liberation that actually does have sensitivity in it and attunement and relational skill and psychological awareness and wants to understand something about emptiness as something very different to do with ways of looking and fabrication, then I'm going to have to think about jhanas in a very different way. Or rather, it's better, it's more congruent to think about them in a certain way.

I'm rushing through a bit, but this makes sense, right?

So it's true. You can pick up certain phrases where the Buddha says in suttas, "with his mind imperturbable" or "with the jhanas you can cut through a mountain" and all that. They're not that common. But they get extracted and then repeated over and over. And dependent on what you've been exposed to, you come to believe that's what's important—imperturbability, the unwaveringness.

Do you understand? And actually, the Buddha just said it in a little phrase once or twice in the whole Pali Canon. And somehow over history, it comes to get repeated by teachers. And that's what we think. Or no thought. We tend to think that's the most important thing.

I remember after I'd finished a year retreat and I went for a dharma yatra in France and they said, "Well, will you come and tell the people about your year retreat." And I said, "Sure." I think I just answered questions or something. I can't remember. But the first question was, "A year. Wow. Did you ever experience a time when the mind stopped thinking?" It was the first question. As if that was the most important thing.

And how much we, in our meditation, measure it by how much thinking there is. Is it going well, is it not? So these things are insidious, these meta-level views, and they get into the nuts and bolts of how I'm regarding this moment in the meditation. This moment, I'm thinking. Who cares if you're thinking? Does it really matter? Is the thinking making you miserable or is it the view about the thinking that's making you miserable? Is that thinking even getting in the way of samadhi and well-being and bliss and ecstasy?

These things are really, really important and insidious. Again, what does it mean to be bold? What does it mean to be intelligent? What does it mean to question these things?

So what happens if we start with the goal, start with the idea—now people will construe that differently—where we're going, what awakening is, but start with the idea: insight. Insight means understanding something about the emptiness of things. I'm rushing through this now, but there are only ways of looking. There's no way independently of a way of looking that something really is. There's no privileged way of looking. There's just ways of looking. Things are empty. Insight is the practice of ways of looking that liberate and ways of looking that fabricate less. I'm intending to talk about this in a lot more detail. I'm just going quickly now because I'm rushed.

What that means is that what we practice and what we're left with at the end of practice is malleability. Malleability of perception, malleability of view, malleability of way of looking. This is a goal and a starting point in practice.

More than agility, more than the ability to move quickly between the jhanas, we're actually learning to shape the view and let the view and the experience of things be shaped through a whole range, feeling the impact on perception.

The Buddha called the jhanas perception attainements. But we very rarely hear that because what historically gets emphasized is no thought, imperturbability, laser-like focus. Actually, just as commonly, he called them perception attainments. And what on earth is a perception attainment?

This I would like to emphasize: perception attainment. We're training certain perceptions, and to think of it that way more than "I'm training my concentration." Again, I'm going to contradict myself and say train your concentration, but what if we think about it as we're training certain perceptions? That has a significance regarding emptiness that I will come to.

So we're developing these resources. We're cultivating virtues. We're developing our psychological and emotional skills. And we're training certain perception attainments.

If I want my awakening, my liberation to include—and some people don't care, but if you want it to include—the beauties of sensitivity, attunement, deep intelligence, responsiveness, pliability, malleability, discernment, subtlety, how do we need to think about the jhanas and what we emphasize and how we practice them? If you decide that you don't care about all that, then that's fine. You can think about them differently.

Yes, definitely, we do want to increase and develop our focus and our concentration. But we also, and oftentimes more importantly, are interested in this development of deep, profound resources of training the perceptions, the relation of that with emptiness understanding, and the development of all these lovely capacities and capabilities of attunement, sensitivity, subtlety of awareness, beauty, magic, art.

We haven't talked about walking meditation yet. Again, I'll be very brief because you're all in different places with different histories.

If you're familiar with energy body, walking meditation is with energy body awareness. If you're already familiar with jhana, then you can start here: I'm at one end of my walking meditation path. I stand as long as it takes to get whatever it is—the piti or the well-being, the happiness. And I just hang out there. If it's nice, I'll hang out. I won't even walk. I'm just standing and I'm in that. That's quite an advanced stage already, if you can just get there.

If I do that, then I walk and I'm concentrating in the whole body space on the piti, on the pleasure. I don't care about my feet. I don't care about the sensations. I'm walking back and forth with the pleasure. That's what I'm concentrating on. If you're there already—most of you won't be—this is the approach.

If you know energy body already, same thing. I stand, feel my contact, and then open the space and just feel—what's the texture, what's the vibration of the energy body? Then I walk back and forth with that. I have to find the pace of walking that enables me to sustain that and get into that experience. So it might be really fast. It might be really slow. It might be in between. It might change as I'm doing the practice.

If at any point I want to stop and stand and just get it back again, I stop and stand and get it back again. I might spend five minutes at the end of the path. It doesn't matter. What helps me get that energy body awareness and helps me get into it and in touch with it?

Do you understand? If you're still not quite sure what the energy body is, then see if you can just walk up and down with a whole body awareness—just the sensations in the whole body.

In other words, in terms of our choices, the least preferable is focusing just on the sensations in your feet. It's fine, it's good, and if that's what you want to do or can do, that's great. But there's a kind of movement here with maturation. Does this make sense?

Now, one last thing: the rhythm in the day of formal practice—sitting, walking, standing. We're going to say much more about this later, but basically, again, it's up to you. What feels like it's helpful right now?

So if you're sitting and it feels good and you feel into it, sit longer. You don't have to sit for forty-five minutes. You could sit just as long as it feels like it's productive and fruitful and you're having a good time. If then you begin to not have such a good time, see if you can just work with it, play your edges, see if you can expand it. Basically, you're following what feels fruitful.

If you're out walking and you're just really into it and it's going really well, just stay walking longer—or standing, or whatever. There's a kind of rhythm that's individual and variable, and you're responsive to it. You have to be sensitive and responsive.

And then there's this—we talked about going for walks, and if you do yoga or qigong or whatever—there's also time to just chill out, have a cup of tea. The day needs to breathe. In this kind of practice, the day needs to breathe. So when we do sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk, it may not be that helpful. It might be helpful for other practices, but in this kind of practice, the day needs to breathe. We need to be responsive to different rhythms at different times. What's really working right now? What's supporting right now?

If this is the first time you've not had a fixed schedule, then set yourself a fixed schedule if you're really feeling at sea. Just go with that. But as time goes by, you'll begin to be more fluid and more responsive.

Let's just sit for one minute together.

Thank you, everyone. Enjoy tea. There's no need to rush because it's only you or whoever is doing the clearing up, so take whatever time you need. The whole thing just rolls—we're on an open schedule. The hall is open all the time, so enjoy tea.

See you tomorrow.

CHAPTER 199

A Hidden Treasure: The Relationship with the Hindrances

Rob Burbea · 1h03

> *In this profound teaching from the "Practising the Jhānas" series, Rob Burbea reveals the hindrances (nīvaraṇa) as hidden treasures rather than mere obstacles. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and Majjhima Nikāya teachings, he explains how the Buddha defined jhāna not through unwavering concentration but through "the abandoning of the hindrances." Burbea offers practical antidotes for each hindrance—from expanding energy body awareness for sloth-torpor (thīna-middha) to working skillfully with sexual desire by transforming its energy into pīti. He emphasizes that hindrances exist on subtle spectra and will arise even in deep samādhi states, requiring ongoing refinement of attention and relationship. The teaching explores how hindrances are fabricated (saṅkhāra) rather than solid realities, offering multiple ways of viewing them—sometimes as purification processes, sometimes as constructions to be seen through. Burbea's approach cultivates a non-personal relationship with these mental states, recognizing them as universal aspects of human experience rather than personal failures. This wisdom extends beyond meditation into daily life, transforming our relationship with emotions and reactive patterns. The teaching concludes with insights into how jhāna practice naturally filters away papañca (mental proliferation), gradually revealing hindrances in their purer forms.*

Actually, what I want to do is talk about the hindrances, but let me address a couple of things first.

As I mentioned yesterday, teaching this retreat is quite challenging. There's so much I want to communicate—so much that feels important to communicate—because you're all in different places with different needs. I mentioned walking practice yesterday, and Derek just mentioned metta. I see a few people are doing metta as their basic practice, and you seem comfortable walking with that practice.

What I want to say about metta—and I'll talk about this more tomorrow—is that I want to introduce doing metta with energy body awareness. This means that whether I have phrases, visualizations, or whatever approach I'm using, I maintain this whole-body space awareness and never lose that sensitivity. So when I walk back and forth, I'm walking in that kind of awareness with the metta, however I'm practicing it. I'll elaborate on this tomorrow.

The second thing I want to clarify: I was quite rushed in the latter part of yesterday's talk, so I want to ensure something was clear. When I was discussing why we practice jhana and how we conceive of our reasons for doing jhana practice—and therefore what we emphasize—I don't want to replace other emphases or what other teachers might stress, like simplifying, laser-beam focus, or unwavering mind. I don't want to replace those reasons, but rather add to them.

All those emphases are important and can be highlighted at different times. I simply want to add something that's not often discussed but seems really important to me: these qualities of sensitivity, attunement, and refinement. I'm adding this to the possible reasons we're practicing and the possible emphases, allowing them to become more prominent or even the most prominent emphasis. I didn't mean we're discarding everything else—it's more a question of emphasis.

Now, what I want to talk about are the hindrances. There are several important points here.

Sometimes in the suttas, it's almost like a definition: with the abandoning of the hindrances, the first jhana arises. It's almost as if part of the definition of jhana is the absence of hindrances. It doesn't say "with unwavering concentration on this or that"—it says "with the abandoning of the hindrances." This is quite interesting and important, with clear implications for how we think about what we're doing here.

Part of what I want to say about the hindrances is this: it might sound like working with hindrances applies only pre-jhana, and it certainly does apply then—right from day one of anyone's meditation practice. But not just then. Even once the jhanas, all eight jhanas perhaps, are accessible and become regular visitors or explorations—even once all that is up and running wonderfully—the hindrances will still arise at times. Absolutely.

What I want to add, and what's much less commonly discussed and acknowledged, is that they can arise very subtly. Subtle versions of them can arise in jhana as well. I use that word loosely, avoiding the silliness of an overly sharp definition of what is and isn't jhana. The point is about subtlety: even within jhana, subtle hindrances can be present. There's a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya where the Buddha is teaching super advanced meditators—people doing all this remarkable work with psychic powers and such—and he's still discussing what subtle hindrances arise in that depth of samadhi.

So we need to understand that the hindrances are part of the deal. They're part of the deal when jhana feels like a million miles away. They're part of the deal once we have extensive experience in the jhanas—they'll keep coming and going. They're actu-

ally part of the deal in subtle ways, even in jhana, and therefore part of the work, part of the play, part of the whole. So when I say "jhana practice," I mean including the hindrances and all of that.

First, I want to say something about insight in relation to the hindrances. But let me quickly run through some antidotes to the hindrances, since much of this is probably familiar to you.

Before that, let's be clear about what "antidote" means: it's something we apply with a certain goal in mind. We want to eliminate something, like an antidote to an illness.

Let's hope to get rid of this illness.

Now, there are ways of practicing insight meditation where, when a hindrance comes up, the view is: "It's fine. It's just here. I just watch it. I do the same with a hindrance as I do with a non-hindrance or anything else. I'm just watching it. It's not better or worse. It's okay."

When you're doing jhana practice, that's not the attitude. We want antidotes and we want to work against the hindrances. This is primarily—even in the Satipatthana Sutta—the instruction of the Buddha. He's talking about what feeds the hindrances and what starves the hindrances. And we're clearly really interested in what starves the hindrances.

There's been a slight kind of tilting over the years in modern mindfulness teaching, but that other approach is still a valid way of working at times. But in samadhi practice, no—we've got a different relationship, a different attitude.

Again, watch out for the inertia, watch out for the habit. If you have a habit of just, "Oh, it's just a hindrance. I'll just sit it out. I'll just watch it. It's okay. It's fine"—we want to shake up that inertia a little bit, galvanize it.

They are going to come. There is no way they're not going to come. If you come into an interview and report to me that you just didn't have any hindrances, I'd say you're not paying attention—because at least the subtle ones are going to come, no matter how much practice you've done. And usually, as I'll explain later, the not-so-subtle ones as well.

So, rattling through the antidotes. The two most common hindrances are probably—they're given usually in a certain order, but let's start with the two most common, which are sloth and torpor, and restlessness and worry.

I'm just going to throw out a bunch of antidotes. And if you think of one that I've forgotten that's actually really helpful, just shout it out. We'll put them all in a pot for everyone to use.

So sloth and torpor—getting sleepy is the extreme, the mind dull, the head nodding. But like all of these hindrances, it has a range: dullness, fogginess, sleepiness, lack of energy.

Expanding the awareness to the whole body. There's a reason why I say that over and over and over. It's so, so, so important. It will affect the mind. It's impossible—if you're really expanding the awareness and really filling it with attention—it's actually quite hard to be nodding. There's something about it that's the opposite movement. So expanding the awareness of the whole body and really filling it, again and again and again.

The in-breath has been mentioned as part of a couple of the guided meditations. The in-breath is naturally energizing. The out-breath is naturally relaxing. So if I need more energy, a bit more attention to the in-breath and a bit more attention to the energization of the in-breath is going to energize things.

A long breath—or longer breath or very long breath—will also energize. It will energize the body. You can think of it as oxygen or whatever, but if you think in energy terms, there's just more energy there, and that will energize the mind. So move to a long breath, if you're working with the breath, of course.

If you're working, let's say, with metta, then what's going to help? Could it be that going back in the categories to the easiest person might actually lighten things up, bring a bit of brightness just because the metta comes easily? Or might it be that going to the difficult person—because they're difficult and the challenge of it keeps you awake? Or might it be that expanding to all beings, partly because of the spatial expansion, which I'll come back to in a second?

So the question is: do I need to shift categories if I'm doing metta? And which way?

And it's not like it's always going to be this one that's going to help. So I have to have that willingness to respond and experiment.

More pegs. We talked about pegs in the counting. Bringing back those pegs really gives the mind something to focus on, keeps it busy. It literally keeps it up from sagging. With the numbers in the counting, they're like pegs. With the metta practice, if you're using phrases, the phrases are like pegs.

What can often be really helpful in the metta practice—so let's say your first two phrases are "may you be happy, may you be peaceful"—if the mind needs a bit more pegs, if it needs more energy, if it's getting lost, try "may you be happy, may you be happy, may you be peaceful, may you be peaceful." Each one twice. First one I'm not quite there, the second one I'm a bit more there. Small things like this can make a lot of difference.

You can also imagine your whole body filled with a bright white light, just like the sun. Really, really useful. Again, when the mind gets tired, it gets dark and foggy.

You can also open up the awareness very, very wide. So much wider than the energy body size, which is just a little bit bigger than the physical body. You can open it up to the size of this room—it's a lovely huge room—or even wider to the sky outside.

When we get tired, the mind shrinks. It's actually what we do when we curl up and go to sleep. The mind pulls in on itself in a way. So opening up that awareness—open your eyes, open up the awareness to have a sense of the whole room—you're encouraging the mind in the opposite direction from where it contracts as it falls asleep or gets tired. Tired mind is a small mind.

You can also sometimes just sweep through the body, paying attention to whatever sensations you feel there. Again, experiment. Is it more helpful right now with this hindrance to sweep really fast? Sometimes it is when we're tired. Just move the attention quite quickly. Maybe it's more helpful going up, or maybe down, or maybe both. Or maybe it might be helpful really slowly, really getting into the sensation. Again, you have to experiment.

Those are some antidotes for sloth and torpor. We really want to use these.

With restlessness—it's actually restlessness and worry, which refers to worry about ethical misdeeds that I'm worried I've done or someone's going to find out this or that, but we'll leave that aside for now—a lot of the remedies are interestingly quite similar.

More pegs can really help. If you're working with the breath, the long breath tends to really help with restlessness. Or it could be like we just did—there's a way, you find just a way of breathing or a way of construing the breath that just feels soothing. Maybe there's a place on your back and it's almost like someone just soothingly stroking your back, and that addresses the restlessness, it soothes the restlessness. So again, we can shape the breath with our imagination, the breath energy, and that can have a real effect on our energy.

Again, expanding the awareness to the whole body is useful for opposite hindrances. And again, the sweeping of the attention can be really helpful when there's restlessness.

One particular thing: if there's a lot of restlessness that is not so much mental but physical—in other words, it's not a lot of thought proliferation, but the body feels restless and the mind won't settle down with that—then what can be really helpful is a really large awareness, as large as you can open it out. But within that, you have a job to do. The job is you let go of your primary base object and you become aware of the sensations of restlessness—the actual prickly kinds of feelings that arise and pass in the body.

In this big awareness, your job is completely allowing them. There'll be moment-to-moment arising, passing, unpleasant sensations, and you're completely welcoming them. So actually, technically what we're doing then is switching to what I would call a particular insight way of looking. But if you stay with that for a while, actually, for reasons I'll talk about later, it can settle the whole thing down.

The whole system settles down because we're in a very different relationship with the restlessness. When restlessness comes up, we have aversion to the restlessness. It's unpleasant, the very sense of restlessness, and that aversion to the restlessness feeds the whole thing. So when you go wide like that and come into a mode of completely allowing, completely welcoming, you're almost by definition quieting the aversion. We're practicing a non-aversive relationship. Do you understand? And it's that combination—the allowing and the spaciousness—that will really help you.

Stick with it, again and again. Actually, I remember playing with this years ago at home—restless, restless, sitting up doing that practice—and actually ending up sitting for three hours because that very approach just allowed everything to calm down completely. So all these techniques are quite powerful if we find the right way to work with them.

Now, the third hindrance: sense desire. It's usually listed first, but let me address it third. Let's talk about one particular kind of sense desire—sexual desire. Okay, there's desire for someone, whoever it is. You could go take a cold shower or whatever, but I'd like to offer this as a real possibility, especially as one develops more in meditation experience.

Often what happens is there's sexual desire and it goes to an image of having sexual contact in some way with this person or whatever it is. That's the bit that's not so helpful for samādhi. But the desire itself and the energy—there's a way of working with it.

For instance, here's the desire, and we've gone to the image already. Is it possible to feel the energy of sexual arousal? So I've got desire, I've got an image there—probably not in the imaginal sense, but an image there—and I've got sexual energy or arousal. Of course they're related. We could say you've got three things.

Of those three, if I can focus on and open to the energy—most people, the desire comes up, then the image comes up, then the feeling, and I'm lost in the image. I'm lost in chasing this sexual fantasy, embroiled in it. If I can focus more on the energy and actually open to it, allow that actual energy in the space of the energy body—actually, it feels good if it's not too tight. I open to it and I enjoy it.

It's actually quite close to pīti. It's quite close to that kind of good feeling. Oftentimes when people first experience pīti, they say, "Oh, it's like an orgasm" or similar. It doesn't have to be that intense, but there's a similarity there.

So what you're really doing is approaching this more energetically, feeling it, opening to it, and kind of riding it in a way that allows it to shape into something that's a more pure energy, which is actually very conducive and helpful to where we're going—or similar to where we're going anyway. Does that make sense?

I wouldn't necessarily give that guidance to complete beginners, but you have had a lot of experience. So if that's the kind of desire coming up, that's one way of working with it. It can be very similar to pīti if I can filter things out and emphasize and open in the right way.

What about desire for food? Anyone have suggestions? Sitting here and you can't think of anything but lunch or tea—does that come up for anyone? Okay, not a problem.

Now, ill will and aversion. I split this hindrance into two parts. Ill will means actually getting really upset with someone, so much so that I wish them harm. For this, metta is the obvious antidote. Switch from whatever your base practice is—if breath is your base practice, just switch to metta. I need to deal with this ill will absolutely, because when that's there, it's really going to get in the way.

But there's another possibility within that category. When I have ill will toward someone or aversion toward someone—I just don't like them and the mind is in that kind of nasty state—what I can do is first think, "I'll give metta to that person," which is great. That might really help.

But there's a second possibility, which is to actually bring the attention back to myself without trying to change the ill will or how terrible this person is or those kinds of thoughts and feelings.

Bring the attention back to myself and actually notice and feel the dukkha of that ill will here. It's in my heart. There's a taste in my mouth. It's a flavor in my energy body and my consciousness. It's dukkha. It's painful. So I'm not trying to change the ill will. I just come back and feel what's happening. Don't judge. Just what does it feel like? Oh, it's dukkha. And feel the pain of it. I just have to let my consciousness touch the pain there.

If I'm doing that, if I'm just letting it touch it, then what can happen is when I touch that pain, when I come into contact, it turns into compassion for myself. Self-compassion. You think, "Yeah, but my problem's with the other person." It doesn't matter. Once there's self-compassion, there's compassion. It's a new energy in the system and it will soften everything. So my self-compassion starts changing my relationship with this other person. Do you understand? That's really useful as well.

What can also happen and what you will notice happening over the course of the retreat is that we get aversive at certain noises—the heating, or the birds in the rooks, which are a lot quieter than they used to be ten or fifteen years ago for some reason. It's like, "Oh those crows are so loud," or whatever it is. I'm trying to meditate and they're bothering me. Or this person—every time they get up, their bones creak, like my bones creak, or their breathing. Aversion at noise, which could include aversion at a person or another sentient being or whatever it is. This is going to be really common.

I have to remember the big picture, the goal. Where am I going in practice? I'm certainly not going towards more aversion. I'm going towards less aversion. That's what I want. It's not even jhana as my primary goal. It's less aversion, less kilesa, freedom from the defilements. Just to remind myself, I want to get to a place where there's less aversion, I'm less bothered by noise. I'm more open, there's more love, etc.

So again, what does that imply about how I should practice the jhanas? And what kind of way I'm holding and my view of the whole thing? Is it possible? Can I find a way of practicing the jhanas that is not so bothered—that kind of includes sounds and coming and going and noises? Not bothered, but not throwing out the baby with the bath water and saying, "Oh, I don't need to make an effort then." There's some attitude, view, or stance here that's really possible.

Sometimes what you can actually do is deliberately let the primary object go and open up more to sound and a sense of really including that. And that very action—again, I'm doing the opposite thing of aversion. I'm opening to sound and including it. I'm not saying that's other than what I'm trying to do. I'm opening to sound and includ-

ing it. Then that starts changing the way I feel about the sound and inside. Then within that, keeping that openness, I can reintroduce the primary object. I've got it in a much bigger space and a much bigger attitude, a much bigger orientation.

Technically, we'll get to this when we talk about the second jhana, but actually, technically, if in any moment you could just quite significantly turn down any aversion in the mind, you would come very close to the second jhana. Sukha would arise. Happiness would arise. With a lot of practice—well, actually, maybe this is one of those things: just try. Just try. Some people say, "Okay, just turn down the aversion."

What do you mean turn down? I don't know how to do that. Just try. Just try to turn down the aversion because turning down the aversion can then directly give rise to happiness, give rise to sukha.

Working with Doubt

Okay, last one: doubt. We can doubt the teacher, we can doubt the teachings, and we can doubt ourselves. There's probably lots of other stuff, but those are the three common ones.

So what's the difference between questioning and doubt? Doubt often involves an absence of questioning, in fact, or an absence of letting questions blossom and grow into an inquiry that's actually helpful. Doubt tends to paralyze. We get stuck in a kind of confusion. We're not actually questioning anything. The mind is just shuttling back and forth or going around in a circle.

Sometimes underneath all that, there's actually a question or two or three that need to get clarified and formulated and perhaps asked to oneself or to a teacher. But we haven't let the question form yet. And we're just stuck in this kind of unclear shuttling back and forth.

So is there a question there? Once we've got a question, it's no longer paralyzing. Even formulating it clearly will help. We'll feel unparalyzed. And then formulating and asking and engaging will be really helpful. But doubt paralyzes.

Just one thing to bear in mind is timing here. When am I going to wrestle with this either question or doubt? Outside of the meditation is the answer. In other words, yeah, there's something I'm really not sure about. I'm confused. I have a question. I can't proceed until I have an answer. This is my meditation time, so I'm just going to put that aside, but I promise you, mind, that I will get to this question and I will think about it,

I'll ponder it, I'll inquire, I'll ask someone later. So you make a deal with the mind. It's like, we're going to get to this. I'm not ignoring it, but it happens outside of the formal practice.

The Practice of Exchanging Happiness

How many people have heard of the practice of exchanging the happiness of self and other? Few of you. There's, again, a huge, huge practice, infinite possibilities. I think there's quite a large section about it in the book I wrote, *Seeing That Frees*. So at some point you can visit that.

I want to say it's a really, really beautiful practice. It's one of the most gorgeous explorations you can do as a meditator and full of creative possibilities and lovely, luscious possibilities of transformation.

In a nutshell: Here I am, pretty miserable from some hindrance attack or whatever, and I say to myself, you know what? I'll take this. I will take this because somewhere, someone else, maybe someone I know, maybe someone I don't know and will never know, somewhere else, correspondingly by magic, I'm taking their dukkha and they can have the happiness.

So again, technically you could say, well, what am I doing there? Instead of the automatic natural aversion to the hindrances, I'm actually saying, come, come, I take this, but it has heart in it. It has this: I'm willing to take this suffering right now. I'm opening myself to suffer for the sake of the release from suffering of someone else somewhere.

So it's a kind of magical thinking. It doesn't matter—using your imagination. There's all kinds of variations on that with emptiness and stuff, but that's the nutshell of it. It's a very beautiful thing.

Often what happens with the hindrances around is there's no heart as well. Everything's got squeezed miserable and there's no heart. So one possibility is bringing the heart in that very beautiful way.

So you could do that with physical discomfort as well. I can take this pain right now. I will take this pain right now.

I'm willing to take this pain for the sake of someone else's ease, someone else's well-being.

I'm moving pretty quickly here—is this pace okay for everyone? We need to get clear about several important aspects of the hindrances.

One crucial point is that there are subtle hindrances as well as the obvious ones. Most people are familiar with really gross hindrances—these are generally what we're taught about when we first hear about the five hindrances on insight retreats. But the hindrances also manifest very, very subtly.

There's a sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya where the Buddha discusses subtle hindrances specifically. He lists things like elation and inertia, fear, slight over-efforting, slight under-efforting—very, very slight forms. Desire, if it's not handled well. Perception of multiplicity and paying too much attention to different things. There's a whole list there.

The point is there's a complete range of subtlety. In a way, there's always something to play with and work with, something that can be tweaked a little bit. Of course, sometimes in jhana practice all of this settles and we're not actually aware of any hindrances—and that's fine. You don't have to go looking for them at that point. You just get into the enjoyment of it.

As you move deeper into jhana territory, you start to realize the more subtle hindrances that might be present at times—ones you don't initially notice. It's not that we're always looking for hindrances in jhana practice. We're actually inclining more toward what's pleasant and easeful and enjoyable. But they will arise subtly.

Are you okay for a bit more? Do you have the energy?

Let me point out something else that I want to return to throughout the retreat and emphasize quite a lot. It's something that becomes clearer through jhana practice than through insight and mindfulness practice alone—a very common micro-negativity of the mind.

You might be sitting there with a very nice energy body, with pīti, with whatever qualities are present. You might be quite used to it by that point, but it's still quite pleasant. Most people would give their right arms for what you're experiencing in that moment. But you've experienced this before, and the other day it was better than today. You know it can be a bit better.

In this very subtle way, the mind inclines toward what's wrong, what's not quite as good as it should be. Part of this is natural—it's part of the shaping process. It's like the potter with clay on the wheel, noticing where it needs adjustment and applying gentle pressure.

But when this has a flavor of negativity, when it carries that negative quality—we're talking about something that can get incredibly subtle. It's the glass half-empty rather than half-full perspective, but on a really, really subtle level. In this moment, there's something in the way I'm seeing and relating to this actually lovely experience, and I'm somehow spinning it with negativity, seeing it through a negative lens.

This is incredibly common. We might call it a really deep, almost base-level kilesa—a defilement of aversion in the mind. You'll notice this more and more as practice develops, and it's actually really important to address and work with.

The good news is that we notice this much more clearly in jhana practice. You might think you'd notice it more in mindfulness and insight practice, but you actually observe it much more in jhana practice. You get much closer to it, see it operating on much subtler levels, and you're able to do something about it.

What I want to emphasize right now—and I'll repeat this—is that we simply notice it. Expect it, notice it, then find the pleasure and get into enjoying it. Find what's nice and get into enjoying it. We make a micro-movement, a micro-shift of relationship and attitude. We're talking about countering a micro-subtle defilement with an equally subtle shift.

In a way, we could construe this pattern as a subtle hindrance in itself.

In terms of subtle hindrances, there are also two forms called sinking and drifting. I don't know where these terms originate...

I don't know if they're originally in the Buddha. I've never come across them in the Buddha, but I picked them up from, I think it was Kamalashila, I can't remember, but they're around now in Dharma culture.

So drifting and sinking, what does that mean? Drifting is a sort of subtle version of restlessness. Really what it means is the mind is still alive. You're still mindful. You're nowhere near jumping out of your skin or obsessed with worrying. The mind is present, everything's good, it's kind of with its object, but there's just a bit more tendency for it to drift off the object. Sometimes it manifests as a bit more thoughts and images in the mind and a little more tendency for the mind to get pulled off into them. So again, we're talking about something quite subtle.

Sinking is the subtle version of sloth and torpor. Again, nowhere near nodding or falling asleep. It's just a little bit of dullness comes in, a little bit of—it's not quite so present, so alive, so bright, so sharp.

These are interesting hindrances because oftentimes what they're most related to is effort levels. Again, we're back to this question, this issue of effort levels and the fact that I cannot avoid that issue. I cannot avoid that parameter of practice. As you get deeper and deeper in samadhi, a tiny bit too much effort, just a little bit too much effort, a little bit too little effort makes proportionately more of a difference and more of an impact. In other words, again, the deeper we go, the more sensitive the whole system is and a bit too much effort, a bit less effort actually gets in the way or has more of an effect at a deeper level.

So with these subtle hindrances, sinking and drifting, one of the things that's really worth paying attention to is just the effort levels and seeing: what is it just to back off the intensity? Or perhaps to move from, in my directionality, perhaps from more of a probing to more of a receiving?

What I wanted to say is either sinking or both sinking and drifting can arise from either too much effort—very slightly—or too little effort, paradoxically sounding. We don't know. What do you have to do? You have to just get in there and play. Play with that subtle effort: bit more, bit less, bit more intense, bit less intense, bit more probing, bit more receiving, bit more delicate, whatever it is.

Sometimes one of the ways I like to think about this is, for example, with the drifting —why is there more thought? Why does the mind go off? We're squeezing the mind too tight, and in a completely incommensurate image, it's a bit like squeezing a banana skin and the banana comes shooting out. Maybe that's not the greatest analogy. But again, going back to what we said before, the whole body can reveal the effort, even just the size of the attention can also affect this. So there's lots of things to try, but one main point to take is the spectrum.

When we're talking about hindrances, we're really talking about a spectrum, despite what the Buddha said: "With the abandonment of the hindrance, with seclusion from the hindrances arises the first jhana." Yes, that's true. And at another level, we're talking about a whole spectrum here that's not going to go away in one form or another.

Sometimes, even in jhana—again, using that word in a slightly loose way—you can be here with the happiness, here's the brightness, the luminosity and the happiness, and it's as if at the edges of that happiness and brightness, there's like a whole little pack of little terrier dogs yapping away. And it's not that they're in the middle causing mayhem or really loud, but you're just aware of them there.

Are you in the jhana? Are you out of the jhana? It's an irrelevant question. Where's the intelligence here? The question is: what do I need to do at that point? What needs to happen? What do I need to pay attention to?

Let's say here's this luminous happiness right there. Here are these little terriers yapping. I'm just going to get more into that happiness and illuminate it, open my body to it, open my mind to it. We'll talk about all this. Now, it might be that in doing that, the terriers nicely quiet down and fall asleep, but it might be they stay there and actually that's as good as it's going to get right now.

Okay, so I've got this really nice, lovely, yummy, juicy happiness, which the person who gave their right arm for would now give their left arm as well for. The terriers are there. It's not a problem. Just get into it and enjoy it. Don't worry about this in and out business. It's just how not to consume the mind with questions that are not relevant.

But also, sometimes the terriers are yapping, and I'm kind of into it. Let me go to the terriers, see what they need, and see if I can do something that encourages them to do something else. It's not like there's always a formula, but one formula is: it's okay. This is the deal right now. This is as good as it's going to get. Make sense?

Sometimes there are hindrances in different forms. Sometimes a hindrance arises—is it a hindrance? No, it's just that the energy body feels a little constricted or blocked. I'm not obsessed with this. I'm not thinking about that. I'm not lost in desire or doubt or any of that. It just feels a little bit blocked.

So we could call that a subtle hindrance if you want. Or it's just that the energy body kind of won't settle down or the citta won't really settle down. It's not even from gross distraction or thought. It's just something like a little agitation in the energy of the citta or the body.

That's a bit like the yapping terriers. Sometimes—and again, this is something that may be relevant for some of you now, or will be for some of you later—sometimes it's amazing if you have quite a lot of experience in and out of jhāna: you can just dive underneath something. Here it's blocked or it doesn't feel right, something's not settled. Like I said, it's a bit like the radio frequencies or the wardrobe. The jhānas are there anyway and you can kind of just point the mind to a level that's actually really peaceful.

Now, it might not be pristinely, wonderfully, radiantly, overwhelmingly peaceful, but there's something that you recognize: well, that's the kind of peace that belongs to the third jhāna, let's say. I recognize that peacefulness. And you point the mind—you just

dive underneath a little bit. It's there. And then I'm tuning to that. I'm not getting caught up. Yes, this part of the body doesn't feel quite connected or feels a bit constricted or the mind's not so settled. I'm just pointing to that. I dive into it.

And then what's my work there? I've dived in. Now I'm in touch with that peacefulness. Now what? Now I need to work with that, get into it, enjoy it, open to it, focus on it, etc. We'll talk about more of that.

So it's not really that the jhāna is quite there, but something of a doorway to that, something of a trail of that jhāna is there and you can pick it up and just kind of point the mind there and dive into it with practice, with time. Once you get that trail opening, then you work on staying there and stabilizing and absorbing into that, et cetera.

As I said, with jhāna practice, we really want this attitude of working with, working against, if you like, the hindrances. We really want this idea of antidote, but we also really want this idea of patience. So there's a battle. I'm patient while I'm working with. It's really important. I'm playing with and experimenting with all that. And I can use all my ingenuity and creativity in how I relate to hindrances or what might help. And at the same time, I have a firm resolve. I'm not just going to give up now. I'm not just going to get up and walk away or just sit through it and say, "Oh, whatever, who cares?"

So there's this combination of working actively, of being creative and ingenious, and a firm resolve and patience altogether. It's not that we want to get kind of locked into a grim battle for hours on end with some hindrance or another. At a certain point, it's like: all right, you win the battle. You're not going to win the war, but you win this battle. I'm going for a walk or I'm going for a cup of tea or something. Part of that is also just taking the pressure off and opening the mind. If I go for a walk, it's like the beauty, the air, the light, the spaciousness. I hope by the end of this retreat that everyone knows the beauty of rain, because you get a lot of practice with that.

There's no reason that so-called bad weather shouldn't affect your sense of beauty.

In a way, what we're doing is emphasizing the cultivation of well-being rather than fighting the hindrances. We're doing both, but it's a certain way of thinking about the balance.

For those of you who have accumulated more experience, after you've practiced across different jhanas, you sometimes develop a sense of what's possible in any given moment. Maybe you're working in the fourth jhana, that's your playground, but there are hindrances present and you find yourself stuck in the first or second jhana. You just

get a sense: "No, I can stay with this and shape it, and it will deepen." Other times you sense: "This is as good as it's going to get right now." After a while, you develop this intuitive feel. That takes practice.

Still, that's great. That's really good. Even if there's just a subtle hindrance blocking you from going as deep as you've gone before—no problem. You take what you can get, what's accessible, and develop a sense of what's possible in any particular situation.

To finish, let me share some insights about the hindrances themselves.

First, the hindrances exist on spectra. They're not simply on or off switches. Each hindrance has a spectrum ranging from really gross manifestations to increasingly subtle ones. Understanding this is crucial territory for practice.

This has several implications. The hindrances will be regular visitors, coming and going. If I hold the view that they shouldn't arise, or that they won't appear after a certain amount of practice, or that once I reach a particular jhana they'll disappear—that's the opposite of insight. That's delusion. True insight recognizes their spectral nature, which means in one form or another, at some level of grossness or subtlety, they will continue arising.

Second, the process isn't linear. Yes, the hindrances will come and go, and they'll continue appearing even after you develop access to whatever jhana becomes part of your practice. You might have a much harder time with hindrances later in a retreat than you did earlier. You might feel: "I've reached this jhana, everything was going so well," and then suddenly find yourself in what feels like a hell realm.

I've said this in many other talks, but if someone comes to me describing their samadhi practice as this smooth, uninterrupted ascent day by day into the heavenly realms—a linear graph of continuous progress—either they're not being truthful or they're really not paying attention. The actual trajectory looks more like this: up and down, with an overall trend perhaps, but full of peaks and valleys. Just because we've had wonderful experiences for five days with new territories opening up doesn't mean we won't fall into a hindrance hole tomorrow.

Third, we want to cultivate a relationship with the hindrances where we're not taking them personally. They're simply aspects of being human until, apparently, one becomes an arahant—fully enlightened. When I say "not taking it personally," I mean not thinking: "Oh, I'm a bad meditator," or worse, "I'm a bad person because I keep experiencing aversion or desire or greed."

The hindrances are facts of human existence. Their arising doesn't reflect on my capability as a meditator or my worthiness as a human being. This understanding is crucial. Jhana practice offers the gift of helping us see, over time, that these experiences aren't personal. We want to actively encourage this perspective of not taking the hindrances personally.

Fourth, we want to increasingly believe less and less in the stories the hindrances create. Over time, we become less convinced by their narratives. What happens is a hindrance arises and spins a story—convincing us that it's actually about this person, that they are the problem rather than recognizing it as our own hindrance pattern. Or it weaves stories about ourselves...

And then, and oftentimes it spins this whole *parpancha* thing—that whole proliferation.

Actually what's happening is a seed of a hindrance arose, which is what happens for human beings: hindrances just keep coming up. Defilement seeds, *kilesa* seeds—greed, aversion, delusion—in one form or another, manifest as the hindrances. They're little seeds. And then without wisdom and mindfulness, those seeds become huge trees, forests, jungles. Jungles, better.

We want to get in there and prevent what allows them to become jungle. Partly what allows them to become a jungle—those seeds—is believing them. Believing what they tell us. Believing the perceptions. Believing the stories that they spin.

This is so crucial. As I said, if nothing else happened on the retreat—you didn't have a millisecond of an ounce of a nice feeling—but *that's* what happened on the retreat, that would be really, really good. That would make a huge difference in your life. Huge difference.

And the fifth insight piece is that we get to view the hindrances in relation to what I just said. We actually view the hindrances—yeah, they're really unpleasant—but in a way they're kind of like gold dust or gold ore. There's something really precious here. I just need to find the right relationship with it. I can turn it into treasure if I find the right relationship with it in terms of view and wisdom.

So they're really like gold dust, like something unrefined and filled with all kinds of not so great stuff. But actually there's a treasure there.

Because as I said, hindrances will come up in life. It's not just something in meditation we think about. What about that creative project? What about that service project? What about your work? What about coming up in long-term relationship? Same things

arise, the same hindrances arise, and they will hinder. *Nivarana* is the Pali—it literally means something that's an obstacle, gets in the way of a going forward. They will do that in all of those other realms of our life. It's not just something about meditation.

If I can get wise to them, if I can learn how to view them in a way that they lose their power—they might still arise as seeds, but they lose their power—that's absolutely huge and absolutely precious.

Part of that is also I begin to understand something about emotions as well. This is really interesting: something that seemed like it's this emotion that I'm feeling, I actually see, oh, sometimes it's actually just a seed of a hindrance. And the mind has spun that into a story, and a certain emotion has arisen. But actually, in its root, it was just this hindrance, or mostly this hindrance, sometimes. So there's something about understanding the hindrances that is actually really important in understanding our emotional life.

The fact that they're spectra—there's a range—this is part of this development of subtlety, because I recognize they're going to get more subtle. My attention has to get more subtle to even pick up on subtle hindrances and then work with them.

When we talked yesterday about how I would say it's so important—this development of subtlety and refinement and discrimination—that also happens in regard to the hindrances. So in terms of our overall trajectory, this recognition and working with the subtlety of the spectrum of the hindrance is also part of that whole development of subtlety.

Yes, it's much nicer attuning and discerning to subtle differences of this kind of exquisite peacefulness versus that kind of exquisite peacefulness. But in terms of developing the whole subtlety again, which is so important for our emotional life and all the rest of it, that's important too. It's all subtlety. It's all discrimination. It's all attunement.

In terms of not taking hindrances personally and not believing them—can you hear that? That's about letting go. It's about having insight into what they are. I see what you are and I let go. I'm no longer dragged along by this story or this identification. There's a letting go.

This is insight.

One last thing. If you engage deeply with jhana practice over time, you may begin to notice what appears to be a kind of backlash. It's as if your practice is going really well—perhaps even opening into new territory. You enter a new opening, a new state, some wonderful development happens. You rest in this for a while, whether that's a few hours, half a day, or several days. And then all hell breaks loose.

Sometimes it can seem as though the very opening itself caused this backlash, as if there was some kind of reaction to the breakthrough. This isn't something to expect every time, but there does seem to be this pattern for many practitioners.

This phenomenon raises important questions. Should we expect it? Remember—don't take it personally. The path isn't linear. But is there some kind of catharsis happening here, some form of purification?

I know people who hold exactly this view—that jhana practice allows a kind of karmic purification of our sankaras and emotions. While I don't want to rule this out entirely, I would approach it more cautiously. I prefer to hold both views: yes and no.

If I step back from this question, what we're really after is range. Remember when I said I want you to have range? We want this range in relationship to our emotions—range in the ways of working with them, in the ways of viewing them. I would like you to have a really expansive range. "I can work with emotions in many different ways. I can view emotions in many different ways. And I have access to a whole spectrum of emotional experience."

However, with sustained jhana practice over time—if we allow this practice to give rise to insight—we begin more and more to recognize the fabricated nature of emotions. Yes, an emotion is a real thing. It arises by itself. It's there, and we must deal with that reality. But over time, it becomes almost undeniable that an emotion is a fabrication. Without us doing something—usually unconsciously—it cannot arise as that particular emotion. It cannot get fabricated, cannot get constructed.

So in the Buddha's words, we see a hindrance as a hindrance, not necessarily as an emotion. We recognize what's there. It's a fabrication, or in other language, it's actually empty. An emotion is empty.

But remember what I said on the first night—I can see an emotion as empty and I can see it as real. I'm not parking in either view exclusively. I have the possibility to shift between perspectives. To me, this flexibility is absolutely crucial.

Often people park in one view and that becomes their fixed position. For me, it would be catastrophic and tragic to only ever view emotions as fabrications. I would never want to be limited to just that perspective.

But when both views become available, then the view of catharsis—"Yes, something is purifying here, I may not even know what, but I sit through it as a purification"—becomes one possible stance and relationship. Or the view that it's not catharsis at all, that emotions are fabrications requiring investigation—this too becomes available. Both perspectives coexist.

Yet as we practice jhanas more and more, we begin to see a hindrance as a hindrance, as the Buddha might say. What happens is not linear—it's very much up and down—but there is a movement over time with jhana practice.

What might initially manifest as papañca—extreme agitation, complete lostness in story, believing everything, self-view and all that—actually begins to manifest less as papañca and more as pure hindrance. Over time, there's a kind of sifting away, a filtering out of the more papañca-generating elements of the mind. What remains is simply the hindrance itself.

And it becomes—it's still quite strong, I might be really quite restless in the body, but there's no story attached to it. There's no lostness. So what was usually papancha becomes more just—I'm just dealing with the hindrance now.

And then over time, even the hindrances themselves tend to become more and more subtle, though they're still there. So there is, over a long time of jhana practice, this movement of shaving away the gross, getting down to the hindrances and then even more subtle. But they stay—they're part of the deal. And we need to be okay with that, really up for that.

I was going to take some questions, but I think we already had a couple and it's probably enough now. So let's just sit for a minute together.

Thank you, everyone. Enjoy tea. Enjoy your evening practice. And I think there are a few interviews this evening, so just check that that's not you if you haven't already. See you tomorrow.

CHAPTER 200

Focusing on One Point (Intensity, Directionality, Subtlety) (Instructions)

Rob Burbea · 29 min

> *In this instructional session on jhāna practice, Rob Burbea provides comprehensive guidance for developing samādhi through single-point concentration techniques. He explores working with classic meditation objects such as breath sensations at the upper lip or nostril area, and the rising and falling of the abdomen, while maintaining background awareness of the whole body.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that developing concentration is not simply about unwavering focus, but requires cultivating three essential qualities of attention: subtlety (allowing both object and awareness to become increasingly refined), directionality (experimenting with both projecting attention toward and receiving sensations), and intensity (skillfully modulating the energy of awareness). He explains how these qualities work together as samādhi deepens, with particular attention to how the natural process of subtilization leads toward the pleasant energy-body experiences characteristic of the jhānas.*
>
> *This teaching offers practical guidance for meditators working to establish a reliable foundation practice for jhāna development, emphasizing quality of attention over mere duration of focus. Burbea's instructions help practitioners understand how single-point concentration naturally expands and evolves as concentration deepens, bridging toward the whole-body pleasant experiences that define the jhānic states.*

Teaching this retreat is a big stretch for me because of everything that's going on with my health and what that needs, what that requires. I had a meeting with a nurse this morning. As I said at the beginning, in a way that impacts the unfolding of the teaching. I have to be at the hospital at this time and all that stuff. Things are getting squashed together in one long session that otherwise I would have paced over morning, evening, and afternoon. So that's just part of the deal, which, it's not perfect, but it is what it is.

In my experience, retreats are often most fruitful for some weird reason when the conditions aren't perfect. The other thing about the teachings, and I said this again at the beginning, is that everyone needs different things at different times. So I feel quite concerned or anxious to make sure you all have what you need, but it's actually an impossible situation. We're just unfolding things. For some person, something that's said

on day five, it would be like, "Well, I wish I'd heard that on day one." So I don't quite know how else to do a group retreat. That's part of the territory here, part of the challenge here. But hopefully it still works and is helpful.

I want to divide the teaching today into three sections, and maybe four depending on how we do for time: instructions, a guided meditation, and a shorter talk.

Let's start with some instructions. Again, a bit of context that I was going to say later, but I'll say it now. Jhānas, by definition—you could say all the jhānas, but certainly we can say the first four jhānas—include, or even I would say what's really primary in them, is that the whole body, as I said when I ran through those descriptions that the Buddha gave, really feels very, very nice. Different kinds of nice. In a way, that's what characterizes each jhāna: the kind of nice that the whole body space feels.

So by definition, axiomatically, a really pleasant feeling, nice, lovely energy body experience is part of where we're going. Actually, you could say this is true in any of the jhānas—even the eighth—because the absence of any sensation at all in the formless jhānas is actually very pleasant in its acquired taste kind of way. The first four jhānas all involve a really nice energy body experience.

All the practices that we're doing are going towards that. That's what they're aiming for, just by virtue of the fact that we're aiming for jhānas. Which base practice or springboard practice—whether it's working with the breath like this, whether it's working with the breath like that, whether it's mettā, whether it's something else—they're all intended in that direction. That's what we're trying to get them to do.

For most people, the first port of call in the niceness will be what we call pīti and this pleasantness that I'll talk about as we go on. But basically what you want at this point is to be narrowing down into one practice, one base or springboard practice that you feel is the one that feels best for you and the most reliable or easiest for well-being to arise from—physical well-being, mental well-being. We keep that practice all through, even after you've got eight jhānas, because even when you know eight jhānas, there are going to be times when you need to go right back to your base practice and use that. So that's your thing in terms of jhāna practice. Later we can add to it and have others, but basically at this point, a lot of you—unless you're already well into the jhānas and know what works and you already know your base practice—you're still trying to find that and narrow it down: "Okay, that's the one for me."

Now, within that, because jhānas are by definition different kinds of really lovely states of the energy body, different flavors of really lovely states of the energy body, we can think backwards from where we're going. We're going to some kind of lovely state in the energy body. I can get there in two ways. We're back to the whole Newtown Abbot thing, kind of.

Either I say, "Oh, if that's part of where I'm going, why don't I start with that anyway?" Start with the energy body experience and just help it in creative, responsive, sensitive ways to become nicer and nicer. I'm starting with something that's very close to where I'm headed anyway. That's one way of going about things.

Another way is, for instance, taking one spot like at the upper lip or the tip of the nose or the abdomen and just paying attention to the sensations there and really, really paying attention. In time, other factors develop, one of which is the pīti, which can then be spread into the whole body. So this spot that doesn't look much like where we're going at some point expands to a whole energy body experience.

Not better, not worse—they're just different. Different people find different things work better. That's what we're doing: either the direct route or the more indirect route. The more indirect route is more common, but that's just how it is.

And why do I spend so proportionately more time teaching about the energy body? It's probably partly because there are more possibilities there. It's more unusual, so people need to hear about it. Most of you have probably spent a long time paying attention to the breath at the nose or the upper lip or the abdomen. The energy body is more unusual and there are more possibilities there—probably an infinite amount of possibilities in terms of how creative it becomes, how playful it becomes, how imaginative it becomes.

I find over many years of teaching that for a lot of people who've had very little development or opening or joy from paying attention at one point, opening up to the whole body is often a revelation and things really start to move then. As I said though, it's not the case with everyone at all. So we really want to find what works for you. This is so, so important.

Now, for the first section of today's teaching, I want to talk about taking a narrower spot. Classic spots, rather than the whole body, are the upper lip—somewhere between the top of the lip and the beginning of the nose, so that whole area there—or the tip of the nose just inside the nostrils, anywhere around there. It really doesn't matter. The question is: when I pay attention to that location, where can I most clearly feel the sensations of the breath as they come in and out?

There will be sensations of the breath—the friction really of the breath moving across the skin or the tiny hairs there. There will be sensations of temperature: the in-breath is slightly cooler than the out-breath because the body has warmed the out-breath. You must have heard this a million times.

Another classic spot is somewhere down in the abdomen. What you're paying attention to then is naturally when we breathe in, there's the expansion—really the rising of the abdomen as you inhale—and the falling back of the abdomen as you breathe out. It's that sensation of the movement of the abdomen, those sensations that go with that movement, rising and falling, that you're paying attention to. People feel it in different places or it could be a slightly larger area. It doesn't matter. But what you're really paying attention to is more gross physical sensations at first than what we're talking about with the energy body.

So those are the two classic places. Instead of primarily having this wider space of the whole energy body, we've got a narrower space—a narrower spot.

If I think of the word concentration and automatically think of a narrow focus, this is just prejudice and indoctrination. It does not necessarily mean that at all. It cannot possibly mean that in Buddha Dharma. Fifth jhāna is infinite space—I'm concentrating on infinite space. That's the exact opposite of a precise point. So concentration cannot mean narrowness. It might be helpful for some people at some time to choose a small point, and then it goes through a whole process. But that's not what concentration can mean. It's not like concentrated laundry detergent where I've got this much in this amount of space—it's a complete misconstrual. So maybe helpful to work with a small focus, maybe not helpful, but it does not mean what samādhi means at all.

So there's a small focus and it may be very helpful, but you've heard so much about working with the breath this way, I just want to throw out three or four things.

Even though we have a narrow spatial focus, I would suggest it will be very helpful to have a background awareness of the whole body. Some of you are far away—can you see my hand? Can you focus on my hand, even if it's not that clear? Can you focus on my hand and still have a background awareness of the whole room behind me, what's also in your visual field? Can you switch those so what's in the background is more in your foreground psychologically? That's all I'm talking about.

When there's a small focus, it's really helpful to have the whole body sense just lightly in the background. Not fifty-fifty, maybe ten percent or five percent. So primarily I'm really getting into this one spot wherever it is, but I'm always maintaining this whole body background awareness.

Why? Partly because when I have a bigger space that way, it's a bit like a table. If a table has one leg and it's a narrow leg, it's hard for it to balance. With three or four legs spread out, it's much easier. So something spread out helps to balance the concentration. That's one of the reasons why sometimes the energy body works better.

Rather than thinking of developing concentration, samadhi, or jhana as simply staring really hard at something with unwavering intensity—believing that enough force and steadiness will bring jhana—we need to understand that this approach falls short. Without openness of heart, even excellent stability with an object won't lead to jhana. You might develop strong concentration skills, which is helpful, but jhana requires something more.

Instead of this forceful approach, I want to emphasize three qualities of attention. You could summarize this as prioritizing quality of attention over quantity. By quantity, I mean how long you've stayed with the breath without getting lost in thoughts, sounds, or other distractions. Often we fall into this quantitative mindset, with part of our mind constantly checking: "Have I had a thought yet? How long has it been? Have I been distracted?" We might find ourselves counting breaths and monitoring our performance.

While duration isn't unimportant, can we reorder our priorities? I believe quality of attention matters far more. This means asking: "In this moment, with this particular part of this breath, what's the quality of my attention?" What do we mean by quality? Many things are involved, but today I'll focus on three: intensity, directionality, and subtlety. Let me explore these in reverse order.

As I mentioned yesterday, we tend to think about jhanas and samadhi in certain ways. But undeniably, deepening in samadhi—and certainly progressing through the eight jhanas—represents a movement toward increasing subtlety.

I cannot get away from that. Each jhana is more subtle than the last one. Each jhana is more refined than the last one. The whole deepening of samadhi, even before you reach jhana, needs to be a deepening into more and more subtlety.

It's not the case—and you might sometimes hear this—that each jhana finds the mind more unwavering than the last one, as if that were the primary thing happening. This simply isn't true. You could have fifth jhana where you're not quite used to it yet and you're wobbling out of it, while having a second jhana that's much more stable for you. Or perhaps the breath is much more stable and you're just learning the second jhana, and it wobbles out.

Again, let's clarify our conceptual framework. What's actually happening here? What's important? Therefore, what do I need to emphasize, work with, and pay attention to?

So subtlety is a key element. As you practice with the breath—whatever way of working with the breath or wherever you're paying attention—as practice continues and the mind settles down and the body settles down, the breath becomes more subtle. It should become more subtle.

This applies to other practices as well. If you're practicing metta or compassion, sometimes when you start practicing compassion, there are all these tears and it's up and down and you feel the world's suffering intensely. This expansive opening of the heart is important and necessary. But as the practice settles down and deepens, actually the compassion gets more subtle, and the metta gets more subtle—less fiery or intense in its emotional quality. The whole thing becomes more refined. Likewise with the breath or whatever object you're working with.

So there's this natural movement into subtlety. The object is actually perceived more and more subtly. As I mentioned, we can interfere with this process either by holding certain ideas or by doing something physically, like repeatedly doing ujjayi breathing. There are many ways we can block this natural process of subtilization.

When the object becomes naturally more subtle—and for the samadhi to develop (which already means some samadhi is developing, as this cannot happen without it)—then the attention, the quality of the attention, has to get correspondingly subtle. If the object—whether breath or metta—is going down in subtlety, then the attention has to match it in subtlety. The attention needs to become more delicate.

This process of matching, of following the subtlety down, where the attention quality matches the object quality—this process is one of the most central things happening as samadhi develops. And as I said, the jhanas themselves, the eight jhanas, are a spectrum of increasing subtlety and increasing refinement.

Let me address directionality—I'm not sure if that's the right word, but something like this. Let's say you're working with the breath at the upper lip and nose. Very easily as human beings, we can construe the attention in a particular way—having a sense of the attention here somewhere, oftentimes in the head, going toward the object. Whether it's a visual object or these sensations, there's this sense of attention moving toward them, probing them in an investigative way—not attacking them, but going toward them.

But we can also construe—and by construe I don't mean just as an idea, but as an actual sense, a perception—we can sense ourselves receiving the breath. In one way, of course, the body is receiving the breath as air comes in. But the mind can also feel like the sensations are being received.

This is something we can play with—the directionality of attention. And this is something you can actually experiment with. All this boils down to what's helpful right now. It's not the case that one of these directions is always going to be better than another. The whole thing is a dance. The whole thing is like riding a bicycle. You wouldn't say it's always good to lean to the left on a bicycle.

No, it's good in certain situations to lean to the left. In other situations, it's good to lean the other way or right in the middle or whatever it is.

So all this, again, it's stuff for you to play with moment to moment, to have this sense of—you're the artist, you're the improviser, you're the person with your hands on the clay, on the wheel. You understand?

So we have subtlety, directionality. The other one is intensity. This is kind of a hard one, but I think it's really important. It's like, can you get a sense—let's say pay attention to X—but can you get a sense of actually dialing up or down the intensity, the energy of your attention?

You might think of it like that probing gets more. That's one way of thinking about it. But it might also be just like a lamp going up or a sense of energy. It's dialing up. There's more energy. I'm really present. I'm really alive there.

But again, you might think, oh, well, more is better. Not always. It's an interesting thing.

If we take all these factors together and you think about subtlety—what allows a subtle attention? Sometimes it's a delicacy of attention that allows us to go into subtlety and not so much intensity.

So if you think about—and I know there are some fantastic chefs in the room—let's say someone's cooked this amazing meal and it's exquisite and you're tasting it. Each mouthful kind of reveals—you know, sometimes when you put food into your mouth, the flavors reveal themselves not all at the same time. Have you had that? Sometimes some of them are mixed at the same time.

What kind of mode of attention do you go into if it's really exquisite? And especially the chefs there want to know what you think. There's a kind of delicate poise in relation to the taste attention, to the gustatory attention. This is delicacy. I can't go in there ramming. You understand? It's not the right kind of attention that will reveal those subtle, exquisite qualities, if it's one of those really subtle dishes.

Or listening, when you listen for something, a sound that's faint amid background noise. There's a quality there. You're not squeezing something. You're not squinting. You're not pressuring something. It's more like there's a kind of poise and you're attentive in a way that your antennae pick up something.

If you just pay attention to how you pay attention in these kinds of situations, we might learn something about what I'm talking about here.

What's also interesting is that when the breath becomes, for example, if the breath is the object or the metta is the object—as the object becomes more delicate and subtle, it can actually become more delightful. The delightfulness of the object often goes with the delicacy. But I would certainly say that the delightfulness of the attention increases with the delicacy of the attention.

In other words, I think as human beings, we like paying attention in a delicate way. We actually like that. It feels good. As that begins to happen more and more, part of the job here is to enjoy that. It might be very, very not a big deal, but that's part of—can I get intimate also with this delight? Can I include it? Can I enjoy it?

Which is, again, a very different thing. Am I still thinking? How long have I gone since my last distraction?

Okay, that's the first block of today's teachings. A smaller point. When you're using a smaller point like that, there are a few things to bear in mind. There are a few things you can play with.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/6). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

There's more to explore, but this foundation is sufficient for now. I mentioned earlier that we're moving toward making this whole body space pleasant in different ways. Yet we can still work skillfully with something that doesn't initially appear to match that description—we can use a small point. For some practitioners, this focused approach works best.

As you settle into this one small point, you'll notice it tends to expand naturally. This expansion is actually one of the signs that the practice is deepening. You might find that this upper lip area begins to feel as large as your entire head. This is completely normal—it's part of the natural progression. The point grows organically, and in many ways, this expansion is part of the whole process moving toward awareness of the entire energy body.

I wanted to mention this natural evolution so you know what to expect and can work with these changes rather than being surprised by them.

I think that covers what I wanted to share about this particular aspect of the practice. Let me pause here and move on to the next teaching.

CHAPTER 201

Q & A

Rob Burbea · 12 min

> *In this Q&A session from the 'Practising the Jhānas' retreat, Rob Burbea addresses key questions about developing jhāna practice. He explores the essential qualities of sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, and refinement - explaining how practitioners can notice subtle emotional and energetic changes during mettā practice and other meditative states. Burbea discusses the art of working with increasingly subtle meditation objects, such as when the breath becomes barely perceptible, and how attention must correspondingly become more refined to match the object's subtlety.*
>
> *A significant portion addresses working with physical pain during jhāna practice, particularly when pīti (rapture) is present. Burbea offers practical guidance on spreading pleasurable sensations to areas of discomfort, using adhiṭṭhāna (resolve) skillfully, and knowing when to take breaks. He emphasizes how insight practices like anattā (not-self) contemplation and allowing/letting-be approaches can support the arising of pīti through the release of clinging.*
>
> *Throughout the discussion, Burbea highlights how the entire jhāna spectrum represents a movement into increasing subtlety - from the first jhāna through to the formless attainments. This understanding of progressive refinement is presented as more crucial to samādhi development than counting breaths or maintaining rigid postures. The session offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners practical wisdom for navigating the delicate balance between effort and receptivity in concentration practice.*

Danny asked about expanding on the different words: sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, and refinement.

Let me use the example we were discussing with Jason. Here's metta practice: I'm practicing metta and noticing the different flavors emotionally and in the energy body at different times. Here's happiness, here's peace, here's something that I don't even have a word for, but it just has a certain kind of emotional quality.

Sensitivity is noticing all that and feeling it.

Refinement is the recognition that these are probably quite subtle things. They're not big or in your face—I mean, they can be, but as the whole thing deepens, things tend to get more refined, meaning more subtle. They're not big explosions necessarily. Part of what I would want to include in pretty much all practices is that willingness to pay at-

tention, an ability to pay attention and be sensitive to what is refined, and also knowing the possibility that things can get more and more refined—not necessarily more intense, though they can also get more intense.

Responsiveness really is just that. For instance, going back to Jason's example: I'm saying "may you be happy," then I say "may you be peaceful." I notice that when I say "may you be peaceful," there's a little something there—maybe happy was just okay, nothing particularly happened, but when I said "may you be peaceful," there was a little response. Maybe it was a feeling of peace or something, and I actually felt that in the energy body and in the heart. So I'm sensitive to it. It's maybe quite refined, but I'm responding to it by noticing it. Then maybe my response is to repeat that phrase a few times, and then I'm riding the thermals, as I mentioned.

That's responsiveness. But there are all kinds of responsiveness. Even at a macro level—I've been sitting, working with this hindrance, and it's just time for a cup of tea. That's responsive. I'm making a responsive decision. In terms of how gross or refined responsiveness can be, it goes over the whole range.

Attunement would be this: going back to the example, I've just said "peaceful" and there's that energy or emotional feeling to it. I'm kind of listening to that and feeling it. Of everything that's going on, I'm singling in on that. I'm not losing the whole background of my whole body sense, but I'm tuning my receiver to that particular wavelength. I'm just kind of resonating with the vibe and feeling it.

That's attunement. And as I do that, as I said today, the very activity of attuning amplifies that particular wavelength, or tends to. It's like when you tune a receiver—there's all this static or other radio stations, and you're just finding that one. You're dialing in, and there's that one. I'm tuning. It's literally like that. I'm tuning to it. And then it's like, okay, now I'm enjoying this radio station. I'm really feeling it. The feeling it and the enjoying it is part of the attuning, as well as the focusing on. It's all part of the attuning.

A question came up about subtle objects. What happens when an object gets subtle? Let's say the breath gets subtle. It's very common on retreats for people to say, after a while, "The breath just gets—I can't feel it anymore," or "I'm paying attention to the rise and fall, but I can't feel it anymore." It's become a subtle object.

And in a way, we could say yes, it's inviting the attention to become more subtle. But sometimes what happens is the object becomes so subtle and we don't let the attention become correspondingly subtle. We just say, "I can't feel it," and then we space out or lose it or get frustrated and declare that it doesn't work.

But what we can do instead is recognize: "Ah, the object is getting more subtle. Great. How interesting." And then comes the art of just letting the attention correspondingly match the subtlety level of the object.

This process—I would say this subtilizing, if we make it a verb—is more central to what's really going on as samadhi deepens than something like counting breaths. This process of subtilizing is what allows things to open up moment to moment in a sitting.

But if we look at the whole scale of what the jhanas are, they are movements into more and more subtlety. The nothingness of the seventh jhana is an incredibly subtle state. The neither-perception-nor-non-perception of the eighth is unbelievably refined. Even the peacefulness of the third jhana is less subtle than the seventh, and so on—the whole spectrum is actually a movement into greater subtlety. Understanding this has a lot to do with what we're discussing about perception attainments and the whole view of practice.

But at a moment-to-moment meditative level, when the object gets more subtle, it's like asking: "How can I let the attention get more subtle? How can I let it settle down like that? What do I need to do?"

Let me address Marco's question about dealing with pain when pīti arises. There are unfortunately several different options here, and I'll talk more about this later, but let me say something now.

It might be that you're sitting, pīti arises, and then at some point pain arises somewhere in the body. What you can do is get more into the pīti and keep the pain at bay. I would really recommend that as the first thing you do. It's almost like your priority is the pīti—enjoying it, absorbing into it, getting more into it.

Sometimes what helps is not just concentrating on where there's pīti, but seeing if you can spread the pīti into where there's pain. Sometimes what was painful actually becomes pleasurable as you spread it. What I think you're still working on is really learning the absorption into the pīti, so we don't want to get too distracted by getting into the whole pain situation at this point.

But there's also perception at play here. What was unpleasant can be perceived as pleasant—something quite amazing. Sometimes see if you can spread the pīti there, just imagine it going there, or decide to see the pain as pīti. There are several things you can play with.

At some point this might work once or twice for some minutes, but then you can't do it anymore. On this retreat, at this point, that's the time to get up. You're out of batteries, and it's time to get up and have a cup of tea, go for a walk, or do some walking meditation. You could stand up and continue meditating if that's pain-free.

Marco is asking about something from his experience on the last retreat—sometimes he sat with real firm resolve, adhiṭṭhāna, sitting through the pain, being there. It was difficult, but when he came back after taking a break, that's when the most pīti built up and broke through. So he's wondering if maybe he should do that for the sake of the pīti breaking through later.

This brings up something I want to talk about, maybe starting tomorrow. Pīti arises in two ways. One is this kind of just keep showing up with intensity and working until it erupts through.

And the other way is, no, here's a little bit of *pīti* and we're coaxing it, we're building it, we're adding to it more. So they're just different ways of working, really.

But I'm partly wanting to ask you, what were you doing in those times when you were really just with your firm resolve? What actually were you doing with the mind at that point? Because you could sit with pain and actually just end up a contracted, miserable, crumpled mess if the relationship is wrong with it. So you were probably doing something. You must have been in some mode of way of looking or relationship with that then that was part of the effect. The resolve will build energy and energy is related to *pīti* so it can erupt that way. But there need to be other factors there as well that have to do with the way of looking and relating. So do you remember what they were?

Very good. So when I asked him that, Marco says it's a combination of the allowing, letting be practice—insight way of looking—and the *anattā*, not-self practice, both of which I would regard as insight ways of looking. And what they do is when you're doing those, so you're not just building *adhiṭṭhāna* and energy by staying still, you're actually opening the energy body and opening and letting go of clinging, and that's having a big effect as well. When I say openness of heart, openness of being, I also mean just openness from release of clinging. So all this.

Pīti also comes from release of clinging. But a lot of factors, a lot of things need to come together for the moment of *pīti* to arise. But can you see how that would be significant? Because if you'd sat there just gritting your teeth, it wouldn't have given rise to *pīti* later. Does it make sense?

So as to what to do, in your case here, do both. I don't think it matters. But again, know what your playground is in terms of what exactly you're trying to achieve at this point. What are you trying to learn? What are you trying to gain mastery of? And that might be—I'm not sure—but it might be really absorbing into the first jhāna. And so if that is, what do I need to do? How do I need to relate right now and practice right now? But I have a sense that's what I'm trying to, that's my playground. Does that make sense? Does that sound relevant?

I think we probably need to stop now. Let's have some quiet together.

CHAPTER 202

Attitude, Effort, Achievement, and View

Rob Burbea · 1h10

> *In this dharma talk from his jhāna retreat series, Rob Burbea examines the fundamental importance of view (diṭṭhi) and attitude in meditation practice. He begins by exploring the etymology of samādhi—noting its original meaning as 'agreement' or 'harmony' rather than mere concentration—and how this understanding transforms our approach to practice. Burbea addresses common obstacles in jhāna development, particularly the tendency toward excessive pressure and achievement-oriented thinking that creates suffering rather than the harmonization samādhi actually represents.*
>
> *The talk covers practical aspects of effort regulation, from gross to extremely subtle levels, emphasizing quality of attention over quantity. Burbea discusses the art of working toward goals without rigid timetables, and how expanding our view of what we're developing—beyond just concentration to include patience, resolve, mindfulness, and the letting go of self-judgment—creates greater stability in practice. He offers the radical reframe of understanding jhānas as 'perception attainments' rather than states to achieve, connecting this perspective to the deepest teachings on emptiness and the fabricated nature of all experience. This conceptual shift, he suggests, integrates jhāna practice completely with insight into the fundamental nature of reality.*

I would like to talk now about effort and achievement, attitude and view. Much of what I'm going to say will maintain its relevance and should be applicable whatever level you're at, whatever stage of development you are through the jhānas. As I said, the effort aspect never goes away—it just becomes more subtle. But the attitude and the whole view are so important, and this should apply to any level we're discussing.

I meant to mention this the other night, but I'll include it now. It's interesting to look up the word samādhi in a Pali dictionary and then a Sanskrit dictionary, because it's actually a Sanskrit word, and see some of its historical uses.

Samādhi almost always gets translated as concentration, and I hope you can sense right now that I feel this is a rather impoverished translation. There are problems that come with that translation—a kind of implicit and then repeated and then entrenched indoctrination. We tend to think of it as meaning something quite rigid and forceful.

If you look up what the word actually means, it means agreement, or like a reconciliation—when a group of people agree on something or two people become reconciled. Or harmony, like harmony in a village or something like that. That's one of its principal meanings. What does that imply about that word? What does it imply about your view? What does it imply about your conception? What does it imply about what you emphasize? I won't elaborate further, but again, this is the invitation, the reminder to think on your feet, to listen actively.

Effort is a constant question. We can talk about it at a very gross level, at a macro level, a micro level, and at extremely subtle levels. I want to explore effort, attitude, and view together.

Sometimes what happens—often what happens—when a person loves the path and loves practice and really has a good desire and eros for all this, is that in the course of a retreat, in the course of practice, it becomes very easy to put too much pressure on ourselves. Too much pressure on the practice, too much pressure on ourselves. Sometimes there are people who would do better with a bit more pressure—they're just a bit casual, thinking "it's cool, things come and go, whatever"—and could actually benefit from turning the heat up a little bit, working harder, spending more time on the cushion. But very commonly, especially in this kind of retreat, somewhere along the line it gets a bit too pressured. We put too much pressure on, and a lot of that is unconscious.

So how can we take pressure off, if that's the case, in different ways?

One thing I want to reiterate: the body needs to be relatively comfortable, certainly at this point in your journey in jhāna practice for most of you. We don't want to put too much pressure on the body by thinking it's better to stay cross-legged for hours and hours, sitting through the pain, and so forth.

The first many years of my vipassanā practice were mostly spent looking at, being with, tolerating, and working with physical pain as best as I could. Sitting after sitting, hour after hour, month and year after year of retreat. I would say that developed a lot. I look back at that younger practitioner and think there was quite something to just putting up with all that and being willing to do all that. A lot got developed in terms of patience and will and resolve. I'm not sure how much insight—some insight, but I wouldn't say that was the primary thing.

At one point, my teacher Yanai Posner said—I can't remember the context, whether we were discussing this or a retreat I was attending—"It's great, and it's great that you're able to do that, but your practice might be getting a little narrow." Because if you asked me about the exploration of emotions and all kinds of other areas, or samādhi, it was mostly just being with the pain.

As I mentioned, Christina Feldman suggested, "Why don't you try alternating postures?" It was at that point that something opened. The pressure was taken off the body and the samādhi could really develop.

So first: pressure off the body. Another way is through the view of what we're doing and the idea of what we're doing. This is so much of what I want to talk about.

Sometimes, of course, we think, "I'm going to a jhāna retreat. I want to develop the jhānas. I want to develop my concentration." Sometimes we have to reflect—or maybe oftentimes we have to reflect—on the bigger picture of what we're developing here.

I mean, what you are developing just by trying to keep your attention at the tip of your nose—when you think "I'm failing because I got distracted in thought again"—this becomes a view that generates a whole cascade of emotion and papancha and dukkha. This arises from too narrow a view of what you're actually trying to develop.

So, as I said, if I include the fact that the hindrances and their arising hold all kinds of potential for insight, that becomes part of enlarging the scope of my view, my picture of what I'm trying to do. This makes a huge difference. When the hindrances are present, I'm not upset. It's not a failure. I don't judge myself as a failure as a meditator or whatever. I'm developing sensitivity and all this. And maybe that's more important than focus and concentration. I'm developing all these resources, as we said.

A lot of this is not black and white. Sometimes another problem with view is that we make everything so black and white. But where is the black and white when it comes to the resources we're developing—wellbeing, patience, or whatever it is? I am developing concentration, but even that's not black and white. Patience, as I said, resolve, responsiveness, discipline—all of this is in the big picture of what's being developed. When it's not going well in terms of how well I'm sticking to these sensations, I need to open that view. Or at the beginning of a sitting, I really need to have a sense of the bigger picture of what I'm doing, what's being developed here. This makes a big difference.

I'm developing mindfulness, of course. Every time the mind wanders off, it's mindfulness that notices the mind has wandered off. So it's a moment of mindfulness, and I have to see that. That's also part of what I'm developing. Don't let the view get too nar-

row. Because like we said with the table analogy, too narrow is not enough base and things will capsize very, very easily. The wind blows a little bit, things get a little difficult, and we get very dejected if something falls over.

Hopefully I'm also developing—or over time letting go of—judgment. So every time the mind wanders, I judge less. And not only am I developing concentration, but maybe I'm taking care of working on that too, just as an integral woven-in factor. All of these things are really, really important.

For some people, the development of patience, the letting go of self-judgment, the development of discipline, the development of resolve—all this is actually going to be more important, more significant for your liberation, the healing of your heart and your life, than attaining some jhana. I really mean this. For some people, it's like, "Yeah, jhana, great, but what about this? What about that self-judgment? What about whatever it is?"

I mentioned yesterday this kind of micro habit. Remember this subtle pattern of "oh, it's not quite as good as it was" or "yes, it could be better." That's also in the bigger picture of what's being developed. The influence of that kind of subtle, micro-level aversion or negative viewing—its influence on our lives is huge. And so if that's part of our bigger picture of what we're developing, that also expands the container of what we're doing, the view of what we're doing, and hence the stability of our vessel.

So one more thing about that micro habit. Can I learn to let go of that micro habit of "it's not good enough" and still work and play in the moment? They're not contradictions. How can we have a direction that we're working or playing towards and yet not have that negative "not quite good enough" attitude, or not let that kind of thing run the show, cast its pallor and its flavor over the whole of the proceedings?

When is that a hindrance? When someone says, "it could be better"—when is that a hindrance? And when is it actually just a wise discernment that's part of this opportunism? When is letting go of this "it could be better" attitude a skillful shift in attitude? And when is it just laziness and inertia? "That's okay. I'm just putting up with something," but it's coming out of laziness and inertia. This is a really subtle question, really subtle inquiry.

Doing a jhana retreat or practicing jhana long-term, developing that—it's going to really develop our steadiness, our capacity to stay steady long-term with whatever we're committed to, whatever we care deeply about in life, the projects we want to see

through, the service we want to give, because we have more capacity, more resource. We're also training this moment-to-moment steadiness, of course, but it takes a lot of steadiness to just keep showing up and keep intending to do samadhi practice.

So the steadiness you need to show up and to keep putting your mind in a certain direction—you're actually cultivating the kind of steadiness it takes to be there for your long-term intentions and stay steady with them, your goals and projects and what you really care about and want to manifest in your life in a way that works towards that.

And where does the tightness come in? Maybe that's a better way of approaching it—knowing that if you love this practice deeply, you will encounter suffering. If you don't care enough to suffer, you probably won't experience much difficulty at all. But when you truly care about this path, you're going to meet suffering. The Buddha spoke directly about this reality.

So steadiness—that capacity for unwavering presence—is certainly a fruit of jhana practice, but it's also a cause, part of the very conditions that support the cultivation itself. This understanding needs to be held within the larger picture, because when our view becomes too narrow, we find ourselves miserable far more often, caught in self-judgment and constriction.

Now, let's talk about taking the pressure off. The beginning moments of sitting often present interesting opportunities. Sometimes you settle right in, immediately engaging with the work or play of practice—just diving in with "let's go!" But sometimes there's value in simply arriving and hanging out for a while, just sitting with light mindfulness. What you're actually doing in these moments is relaxing, checking that you're not holding too much tension around the whole endeavor.

For some practitioners, especially dedicated meditators, simply adopting the meditation posture can automatically trigger a whole constellation of views and tightness. These associations—with entering the meditation hall, sitting on the cushion in a particular posture—can carry subtle or not-so-subtle psychological baggage. In these moments, it can be genuinely fruitful to simply hang out, relax, look around. This is taking the pressure off.

Often in this relaxed settling, the energy body is allowed to become more harmonious naturally, organically, because the pressure we bring—frequently unconscious pressure—actually constricts the energy body in ways that don't serve our practice. The squeezing effect of this tension works against the very ease and flow we're trying to cultivate.

As I mentioned in the opening, sometimes it's helpful to open our intention: Why am I here? Practice can become so centered on "me and my practice and my achievement and my progress," then spiraling into comparisons with others. Can I actually keep opening this up, so that I'm not doing this solely for myself—perhaps not even primarily for myself? This kind of shift can be extraordinarily significant, genuinely pivotal in terms of its effects on practice.

Consider this: whether you're on a three-week jhana retreat, a weeklong retreat, a month, or even a year-long practice period, we often—consciously or semi-consciously—develop timetables of achievement. "I figure by the end of the second week, I'll be accessing the jhanas." Or with longer retreats, "Surely by the three-month mark..." These timetables are genuinely unhelpful. What they excel at producing is suffering.

If you want to suffer, give yourself a timetable for achieving what you hope to accomplish, what you're certain you'll accomplish, or even what you're intending to accomplish by specific deadlines. This becomes a form of hindrance. Let it go. Instead, simply work and play—whichever resonates more deeply with you.

But what does it mean to work toward something? So often in spiritual contexts, there's tremendous pain around the very idea of goals, achievement, or attaining this or that state. This becomes especially acute for Western practitioners, leading them to simply discard the whole framework. Then we receive teachings of "nowhere to go, nothing to do"—as if it's either rigid goal-orientation or complete aimlessness.

But our lives aren't actually like that. There are places to go in life, meaningful work to accomplish, things we genuinely care about. We need goals and direction. We need to engage and manifest what matters to our souls. The question becomes: How do I relate to working toward what I love, what feels genuinely important, playing in that creative space, while simultaneously releasing timetables and not becoming tight around the process?

This is an art—having a goal and working toward it while remaining aware of where tightness arises. Perhaps that's the more skillful way to frame it: the tightness will come if you truly love this practice. You will encounter suffering on this retreat in precisely this way, if you care deeply enough. If you don't care sufficiently, you probably won't suffer much. But authentic caring inevitably meets suffering—and the Buddha spoke directly to this truth.

It's the distress of the contemplative, he calls it. If you're not experiencing this distress, something is wrong. Something, I would say, is wrong in your larger view and your attitude.

So this suffering will come. Then part of the art is recognizing—ah, there it is. And noticing, even at really subtle levels, what's feeding it? What view is feeding it? What way of going about things is feeding it? This awareness is part of the art.

Related to this achievement orientation is another familiar question: "Is this it? Have I got it? Is this the first jhana? Am I in it? Have I achieved it? Have I got it?" This is, of course, connected to the question I've discussed several times: What qualifies as a jhana? Have I got it? Is this it? The answer depends on how I define it, right?

So again, this question of what actually qualifies as the first jhana, what qualifies as any particular jhana, what qualifies as jhana at all—it's often posed in ways that could be more intelligent, more fruitful. Oftentimes it's not.

What is important? What's important? Don't lose sight of this. Let your questions and your emphases and your attitudes and your practices—let everything come from what is important. What do I want? Where am I actually trying to get to?

It's interesting when you think about the tension and tizzy and fuss around what is and what isn't a jhana, either internally for a person or in terms of polemic and argument. If you consider something like mindfulness or another factor on the Eightfold Path, do we have the same kind of fuss about that? Or the seven factors of awakening? Most people, with all those other practices, don't get caught up this way.

What is mindfulness? Is this mindfulness? Is it not mindfulness? It's not so black and white. Metta is an even better example because we were talking about it before. Yes, we have to acknowledge it's helpful to define metta. What are we talking about? We're not talking about conditional love—"if you don't love me back, I'm going to jump out the window." That's not metta.

So it's good to define what metta is: it's unconditional, it's non-attached, it's universal, it's wishing for well-being. This is helpful. But the practice of metta—sometimes it's stronger, sometimes it's weaker. As we were just saying, it has all kinds of sub-emotions or flavors. It's a complex of many differences. Sometimes there's no emotion there; it's just an intention. All that is metta.

Sometimes, at different times, it's more or less purified of its near enemy, attached love. It's a spectrum, and all of that is included, and all of it counts as metta. It should.

Why are we thinking about jhana—first jhana, third jhana, whatever it is—as something fundamentally different? Why has this one word become so charged? As I said, I simply put this question: is it possible to think and relate to all this with a little more intelligence?

Sometimes it's better to just drop that question if you find yourself fretting about it. This fretting can be completely non-verbal—you might be anxious about whether you're "in" or "out" without even thinking those words. Just get into the practice. Just enjoy it. Work with it, play with it, seek to maximize your enjoyment.

Again, regarding view and attitude and emphasis: did I say yesterday "quality over quantity"? Yes, I did. So oftentimes—mostly, I would say—it helps to prioritize the quality of attention over the quantity of attention. By quantity I mean how long you can sustain attention before getting distracted. Duration is still important, this ability to sustain and hold attention on something. But I would say most people do much better putting that secondary in importance to quality.

What do we mean by quality? Wholeheartedness is part of quality. How wholeheartedly, in this moment, can I open to and give myself to whatever I'm paying attention to? Can I become intimate with it, interested in it? This is one of those things—it's really important on a micro level in practice, and it's also really important in life. The capacity, the ability, the willingness to be wholehearted—sometimes that's what's missing in a person, not just in their concentration practice, but in their life as well.

How wholehearted can I be in this moment with this thing, with this person, with this passion, with this issue, with whatever it is? This is crucial.

Quality means wholeheartedness, but also some of the things we talked about yesterday—this modulation of intensity. Quality doesn't just mean keeping the intensity at eleven all the time. It means responsive tuning of the attention's intensity. I'm actually not sure I can explain what I mean by intensity, but I can feel it.

I encourage you to experiment with this, play with it. Get a sense of shifting gears, of turning the dial up and down on the intensity of attention. Because again, back to this issue of inertia—sometimes I'm paying attention, I'm paying attention. "Okay, there's nothing to talk about. I'm paying attention." Are you with your breath? "Yeah, I'm paying attention to my breath." But the inertia there lies in not taking the trouble to actually play with this, to explore what it feels like when attention is intense versus when you back off the intensity. Sometimes we just haven't explored this because of inertia. We think of attention, of mindfulness, as just one thing.

Delicacy and lightness of attention are all related—we talked about this yesterday. The relative spaciousness is also part of quality. What kind of spaciousness of attention helps? Back to when we talked about peripheral awareness earlier today—which mode works best? This is all part of quality, being willing to play with the relative spaciousness of attention.

Just to throw out another element: sometimes, at certain points, there's really a place for a kind of poetic or even imaginal sensibility in relation to whatever you're paying attention to—the breath, for example. We tend to have most beginners on most retreats pay attention to bare sensations: "Don't imagine, don't think anything." Then when we introduce the energy body, we say it's okay to imagine—it's not really about sensation, or it's a different kind of sensation.

But what if it's neither just sensation nor just energy body work? What would it be like sometimes on this kind of retreat? It's like adding a spice to the meal. What is it to breathe the breath of the All-Merciful?

Allah. What is it to breathe God's breath? Now I just hold that view lightly in relation to the breath. What happens?

Of course, that might not work for you at all—there's no formula here. The point is about the ways of sensing whatever it is you're sensing, whatever it is you're concentrating on, and sensing it with more poetic or imaginal sensibility. The breath of the beloved, the breath of the divine, the breath of Buddha nature. These are just examples. Or the breath tinged somehow with breathing mercy, breathing in and out compassion—whatever it is.

For some of you familiar with imaginal practice—I'm not going to explain it here—it may be that the whole sense of self becomes imaginal at that point. That may be okay. Again, we return to intention. What's my primary intention here on this retreat?

We don't really want to get into a whole imaginal exploration, but it's almost like titrating how much of that imaginal sense or poetic sensibility is in the mix of what's going on. Just a little bit of this spice can ignite something. There's a humdrum quality, nothing's really happening—and a little bit of that can change the whole relationship.

Why? Go back to what I said before. What's most primary in pīti arising? Openheartedness. Openness of being. That's actually what makes the most difference.

Years ago, Kirsten and I went to visit a friend who's a scholar in Berlin. He was teaching me Sanskrit, and he gave me these texts from caves in Afghanistan—Buddhist caves containing Sanskrit versions of the Ānāpānasati Sutta, the Buddha's mindfulness of breathing. But they had all kinds of things like imagining breathing a blue breath, with color and imagery woven throughout. I lost them, unfortunately—they weren't the originals—but that sort of thing is in the tradition.

So a little bit of this, a little titration, a drop of this essential oil can spark something—a dash of spice in the meal. But it's all very delicate, very subtle. Sometimes when people talk about tonglen, breathing in and out compassion, their practice becomes very heavy, very clunky and gross. I'm talking about something much more subtle here. It's really like a little drop of something into a mixture.

Okay, back to this—I probably won't belabor it much after this talk. But again, so easily we come from our past, from our indoctrination, thinking about what we're doing here: developing focus, developing concentration, or somehow trying to be in a state where there isn't thought. Then we measure the whole thing by how long we've been on this object, how much thought is arising, and so forth.

Could that view be part of our inertia? Could we have inertia around that very view?

As I said, some of those things that get emphasized are actually, if you look at the whole totality of what the Buddha said about all this, just a phrase here and there. Somehow they've gotten extracted, repeated, emphasized, indoctrinated.

What would it be to emphasize at times—or instead, or even primarily—this idea of actually seeking to cultivate and maximize pleasure and enjoyment? The exploration of subtlety. The exploration of these whole territories—just exploration and love of exploration, love of what opens. What would it be if those were the primary intentions and emphases, rather than focus, concentration, being thought-free?

Earlier I said that some people might do really well to drop the whole jhāna framework—if you've done enough, depending on your experience. Some people at certain points in their practice might benefit from dropping the whole jhāna framework, the whole conceptual structure of jhānas, for a while.

Maybe just think about insight practice and samādhi practice. And the intention with samādhi practice is not so much focus and concentration, but as I said, this well-being—cultivation of well-being, pleasure, enjoyment.

Go back to what samādhi means: harmonization, agreement, reconciliation. What does that suggest? What does it feel like?

In dropping the whole jhana framework, we're also letting go of this persistent question that can plague practitioners: "Is this it now? Have I got it?" Sometimes that very question creates a subtle overexcitement in the moment, or a grasping, or a snatching. The Buddha actually says in the suttas when he describes the jhanas: "without snatch-

ing at the first jhana, without snatching at the pīti." But this snatching arises from a certain attitude, from a certain view, from a certain mind state. It's something that happens in the moment that emerges from our view. Do you see how important view is?

In dropping all that systematic framework of the jhanas, we encounter less self-judgment because the self doesn't have this whole scale, this ladder by which to grade itself and measure its progress. We release the entire achievement mentality. Many of these views actually work against the samadhi deepening and against the jhana coming together or opening.

So sometimes, for some people at certain stages of their practice, it's beneficial to drop the whole framework of eight jhanas and simply split the practice in two: insight practice and samadhi practice. Samadhi is about having a really good time. Actually, insight is as well—the way I teach it—it's just slightly different how you go about it.

In insight practice, it should be really nice. It should open up into a really good time, because in insight practice what we're doing is letting go of clinging in the moment. It's clinging that causes dukkha. An insight way of looking—in my definition—is something that releases clinging. It therefore should bring relief and release, and it feels nice.

But what we're primarily interested in when we're doing insight practice is that whole process: Where's the clinging? How do I let go of it? What ways of looking work to release clinging? And what happens to my sense of self, world, dukkha, and reality when I let go of the clinging? All of that—it's definitely a good time, but it's a certain kind of good time.

Samadhi practice is more about this: here's this lovely quality that's arisen—and there can be many different ones. Let me really nuzzle into it, or open myself into it. Let me really get into that. And I'm less concerned with these other questions, primarily about clinging and reality and all that. So they're both—you understand—they're both nice.

If a person lets go of the jhana framework for a while, they can begin to notice gradually the different shades in their experience. Just thinking about samadhi and these lovely qualities and enjoying them, slowly, slowly I begin to discern between these different shades and qualities and frequencies. Then at some point you can reintroduce the jhana framework in relation to that—with post-it notes.

Other people, as I said, really need to discern more. It's the time in their practice where they need to make more discriminations, more discernments between "this is this kind of pleasure, this is this kind of realm, and this is that." How is it different? What are the different territories? What are the sub-territories there?

Let's return to this question: What's my playground? What does it mean to develop mastery? If we don't discern among all these territories, the fruit we get out of it will be much, much less. I know meditators who can get well-being and they can sit in that well-being for hours—and they've been sitting in the same well-being for about twenty years. Not without interruption, you know, but twenty years of their practice, because they didn't want to discern when they could have discerned, when it first came up, between say pīti and happiness, or the different shades of happiness.

What happened was that over time, all these qualities got mixed together. It was a nice soup, but it was just a soup. Here at Gaia House years ago—I don't know if it was during your time as a coordinator—but they used to have leftover soups. Basically, all the leftover lunches at the end of the week would get mixed into a pot, heated up, and that would be the meal. Of course, it didn't taste of anything. It just tasted of nothing, really. People would still be very appreciative, but it was nice without being able to differentiate any flavors in there.

If we don't discriminate, the real danger is you're left with a soup of niceness that never really develops. It never develops and brings the liberation and the opening of certain territories.

So again, I contradict myself. Different people have different needs at different times.

With regard to effort as well, in relation to everything we're saying, sometimes less effort is more productive. I'm actually backing off—that's implicit in much of what I've said. Sometimes even a slight over-efforting can disturb things in different ways. Sometimes that disturbance can be extremely gross when the effort is too much. We'll maybe talk about that sometime soon. And sometimes the disturbance can be just really, really subtle. But over-effort has an impact.

If we go back to this analogy of a potter crafting a vase or a pot on a wheel—sometimes with the hands, you're going to press with more pressure and sometimes with less pressure. That's what's appropriate to what I'm trying to shape right then. In a way, the hands are always pressing. If the hands on the clay is the analogy of attention, the attention is always there, but how it's pressing affects what arises. How much pressure affects the shape that's created. And that's responsive and variable and improvised.

It might also be that—again, stretching the analogy a little bit—the size could vary. I could have my whole span of hands shaping this big vase, or focus on this particular area where it curves, or maybe there's a certain area where I just want a little place

where it narrows and I just put my fingers there. So again, the size, the pressure—all of this is going to shape what arises, and all of it's improvised, responsive, sensitive, variable.

The Buddha gives several images. He talks a lot about right effort, balanced effort. You probably know these similes, but I'll mention them again. He talks about trying to hold a quail, which is a very small bird, in your hands. Too loose, it flies away. Too tight, and you're going to crush it. Or another analogy he gave to a musician, a lute player: it's like tuning the strings. Too tight, you snap the string. Too loose, you can't play anything—you can, but it's going to sound not very good.

So there's always this question, and it's not a fight. I've said this before. It's always a kind of sensitive, responsive question: what's the effort?

If we talk about effort, as I mentioned a while ago, we can talk about a kind of micro level of effort, which means in this moment, what does the intensity need? What does the delicacy need? All that. But also the view in this moment.

So let's talk about view. What I really want to communicate is that whatever view you have about the big picture of practice and where you're going inevitably filters down—or its implications filter down—to your micro moment-to-moment decisions in practice and navigations and what you do. We want to see this and understand this and understand the power of views.

So part of the micro level effort thing is also the sensitivity and the playing with: what view am I having right now about what I'm doing, what I'm emphasizing? My attitudes.

And there's a macro level—the question of effort on a macro level. That means: do I get up and just go for a walk now? Is it enough? Do I need a rest? How many hours a day am I engaging in formal practice? Is it too much? Am I squeezing too much? Or actually, could I do more?

The halls are open really 24-7, and the walking room as well. So you might have—everyone else is on breakfast wash-up, and you could do a number of things there, but you could come and either sit or walk. Sometimes we just get into habit: I'm used to being on retreat and I sit this much. Actually, it might be that more would be helpful.

So this whole macro level of effort: do I need to back off?

Do I need to do more?

And again, the larger view is part of the macro level as well. In my description of what mastery involves, I mentioned that at a certain point it also involves being able to walk around in a jhāna—or at least practicing doing that.

This is an interesting practice because when you reach that point, you might decide to walk around for twenty minutes or an hour while maintaining the jhāna. You might find yourself thinking, "Wow, that was great. I was really there, present in this state of wellbeing, right with the energy body. That was my primary focus, and the feet were able to just find their way."

Then you come back with the expectation: "This sitting is going to be amazing now." And it might be—it really might. I'm not speaking cautiously about this in the way you usually hear on insight retreats. I'm not saying "be careful of that." Rather, I'm pointing out that we don't always know, because it's an energy question.

The fact that you've been in jhāna might indeed create a different kind of springboard for your next sitting or formal walking period. But it also might be that having done that actually takes a lot of energy. You might come back and realize, "Oh, I'm a bit tired now," or find that the mind doesn't quite have the energy.

It's still worth experimenting with when you reach that point—being able to do that and practice it. But it's fascinating: jhānas bring energy unquestionably, but they also take energy. It's a lot of work. You're putting in tremendous effort again and again, working and playing in these ways.

This is part of the whole art of being on retreat and the whole art of practice—getting wise and sensitive to energy levels. It's not always possible to predict when there's going to be a dip or when you're actually tired from the work you've done and need rest. Sometimes the mind truly needs to rest from these kinds of efforts.

Here's another interesting phenomenon you might encounter once you've had considerable experience with different jhānas. Sometimes you're in a jhāna and lose it a little, or space out for just a few moments. When you bring the mind back after those moments of spacing out, it returns at a deeper level.

This offers two conclusions or ponderings. First, maybe spacing out isn't necessarily always a disaster. If I'm too quick with self-judgment, perhaps I should pause and see what unfolds rather than immediately assuming the worst.

Second, if this deepening happens, might it indicate that I was subtly over-efforting in the first place without realizing it? When I spaced out, perhaps what actually happened was a loosening—the effort relaxed, and it was that relaxation that allowed the deepening. I don't know for certain, but this seems very worth contemplating.

It might be an indication that should inform my practice. Perhaps I should try going back in with a little more looseness in terms of effort, a little less pressure on the effort pedal.

This probably applies more once you've had different experiences with jhāna, though it might also apply to working with energy body experiences. Sometimes what can creep in is an expectation to be able to access this or that experience, jhāna, or quality of energy. In a way, this expectation is actually good—it's fine and beneficial. It's part of practice maturing when one can have reasonable expectations of certain experiences arising and being able to enter them.

But easily this expectation can become a kind of subtle demand for this or that to arise, or to be as good as usual, or as wonderful as yesterday. There's a subtle stance that might not involve any thought—just a quiet demand or expectation.

Again, this calls for a slight, subtle shift of view. Rather than operating from demand, why not think about picking up on, noticing, becoming sensitive to, and then attuning to whatever frequencies are actually present in the mix—in the energy body, in the emotional landscape, in whatever loveliness is there? This creates an entirely different orientation.

So it might be a slightly different mix today than yesterday. But the question becomes: what is actually here? What can I attune to, rather than making a demand?

The very tuning to frequencies in the energy body mix, the very tuning to frequencies in the mix of the citta, will amplify that frequency. I have to notice it first, which takes sensitivity. I have to be willing to tune into it—that's the responsiveness—and then I have to attune to it. The attuning itself will amplify. This is fundamentally different. I'm not demanding; I'm seeing what's here, what's possible here, what actually is here, and then attuning. This differs entirely from demanding something. That demand, as I said, can be exceedingly subtle.

Returning to what I said about piti, which actually applies to the different factors among the primary factors in the first four jhanas—perhaps all the jhanas—in the meditation, part of this work and play we've discussed, part of this maximizing pleasure, this licking the honey out of the cup, you could say in soul-making terms, there's actually an eros for that quality. But it's eros in the small definition—this wanting more

contact, wanting more intimacy, wanting to penetrate, wanting to open. For those familiar with soul-making dharma, you recognize this as eros, but eros in the small definition because we're not yet letting it expand into too much image or into the whole bigger dynamic where it expands to psyche and logos and everything.

Outside the meditation, you can have eros with the fantasy, with the image—eros in the bigger definition, eros that is allowed to stimulate psyche and logos and the whole soul-making dynamic. If that doesn't make sense, forget about it. It doesn't matter. What matters is right now, in the moment-to-moment meditation, it's the seeking of the pleasure, the enjoying it, the getting into it. Get into it.

In the larger view, outside of the meditation and actually in meditation both, the view of the self on the path is absolutely crucial. What's my view of myself as a practitioner, as someone walking the path? I've known people over the years with all kinds of actually deep experiences in meditation, and something's not right in their view of the self on the path, their view of self as practitioner. Very little liberation comes from it. The whole way their psychology is construing or holding the self as meditator and this experience, that experience—understanding ideas about emptiness, having even experienced certain fadings. Something's not working. Some connection is jammed the wrong way.

Sometimes in relation to jhana—and I don't know if I've said this in a talk before, though I've certainly said it in interviews—we can get so tight around the achievement-oriented aspects and then self-judging. One way I take the pressure off is to say something like this: What we're doing here with the jhana business and the piti and the pleasure and all these different wavelengths of pleasure is something akin to this—you're tired and your back hurts, and at home there's a sofa with lots of cushions on it. You're just arranging these cushions so that they feel as good as they can feel. "Oh no, if I shift this one, that's better. That's better." That's what you're doing. Are you going to get into a big self-judgment thing about that?

That's essentially what we're doing. This is one way of thinking about it, taking the pressure off in the view. It's something we're just like, "Okay, here's this body experience. Here's this mind experience. Here's this energy body. What will help make it feel good?" It's just not a big deal. You play with that until it feels good, or to maximize how good it feels.

At another level, coming back to the eros dimension, the view of the self on the path—we do want that, or it's possible that it can become a real sense of blessedness, of gift, humility, desire, love. Image of the tradition, image of the Buddha, image of teachers, image of self on path—all this becomes imaginal in the fully soul-making sense of the

word. It will still, as the Buddha said, have pain at times. There will still be distress, frustration, disappointment, tightness—the distress of the contemplative, he calls it. But that can be there, and it's part of the cut of eros. It's part of the bigger soul-making fantasy.

But for those of you who know about soul-making fantasy, I'm not going to explain all that now. We need to have a sense of the self on the path, an image, a construal of the self as practitioner on the path in a way that's nourishing, in a way that really makes sense, that holds us well through all the ups and downs.

So all this that we're touching on today, all this is relevant to and even causes the different and various difficulties we encounter in practice. Again, we tend to have such a narrow view of what we need to do, but all this business is oftentimes actually causal of the difficulties and more causal than what we tend to think of as the problem.

Take inability to access jhāna. Again, I can think of one meditator—there's actually a few—meditating for decades, decades, decades, decades, lots of retreats, etc. She wants to develop her samādhi, which means for her concentration and focus. "My concentration is so bad," which almost everyone says. "My mind wanders and my thoughts come." Again, she's measuring in terms of exactly what he said. Maybe not put those things as priority. How much thought comes? Is my mind wandering? But she is measuring that way.

She says, "I need to really get into this before I can do any other kind of practice. I really need to develop my focus. I really need to develop my concentration." Now actually knowing her fairly well as a student, she actually needs, I would say, much more important than she needs to develop her focus and keep her mind steady on something and all that. Actually what needs to happen is an inquiry and exploration or a development in practice of being able to give herself fully to something. That's a very different thing.

What is it to really show up? I give myself, now there's a kind of—I give myself, I really care about this. There's a kind of macro and there's this micro level, like when I did the sunbathing thing. Opening, surrendering. The issue, I would say, is more with that. It's not about keeping the mind steady and her ability to do that. The reason she can't do that is because there's something in her that is holding back energetically, heartfully, in terms of her soul, in her life as well, in terms of opening and surrendering.

And so there's very rarely any kind of buildup of energy in the being. Something's just blocking it. Something won't open to it. Energy is not permitted to gather. And actually those are the primary issues. Those are the primary causes of inability to deepen in samādhi, access that. But just seeing in a very different way, so it's a different view.

But you can also see, one can also see, and we've talked about it, you see some of these very same issues manifesting in her life. It's not like, "Oh, that's just a problem of focus and concentration." It's this kind of issue about allowing energy to gather, about being wholehearted, about really giving herself, getting behind something, about really opening, actually manifest in her life too and cause all kinds of, let's say, limitations. So a shift in view, a shift in understanding, then a shift in emphasis of what am I actually practicing in? What would make a difference? What's important?

Again, sometimes, oftentimes human beings, it's the body isn't open. The energy body as a sort of habit is not so open. Most people wouldn't—it's not obvious when you look, I mean, you get people with really hunched over kind of contracted postures. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about something much more subtle that's just palpable, but not obvious to, let's say, most people.

And sometimes this has to do with trust. Sometimes it has to do with, and it's related to just also, sometimes you see, oh, the person might also, for instance, it's very hard for them to feel something like devotion. All these things are related. And it's about the concentration—it's maybe not about the concentration. It's about something else, about the heart and the soul and how the heart and the soul over time shapes or limits a certain kind of typical stance or typical way that the energy body is.

Energy body always moves. It's always opening, closing. But there can be sort of—typically it's just a little bit closed. So certain things just are not possible. And again, maybe to learn to practice trusting in the opening. Trusting and surrendering. Just slowly, slowly learning how to do that.

Practice with the energy, cultivating this capacity. Or, as I mentioned earlier, sometimes what occurs is that people develop quite a tightness or overexcitement, which might be very subtle, that creeps in right when there's actually tremendous focus, deep concentration, and plenty of pīti that may be right on the edge of the first jhāna—if we even speak of edges.

But what I want to emphasize is they're thinking too much about edges. This very view is creating problems—there's a black and white "over there." If I can just get over there, even if "over there" is metaphorically two inches away, that will be the jhāna. But

it's not. Again, this could be a verbal thought or a non-verbal thought. This black and white view is allowing tension to creep in, an impulse to snatch and grasp, which causes problems, creates tightness.

What about instead just getting into it? Getting into what is there that is lovely and enjoying that, not worrying about where the boundary is. Relishing, really relishing what's here versus the idea of attaining something and then measuring whether I've attained it. What I'm interested in is simply relishing that honey.

Last thing—we're doing well for time today. The Buddha sometimes talked about or described the jhānas as perception attainments. What we are doing, I would say, in the most fruitful, the truest, the most ontologically valid and most liberating way of conceiving this, is that we're playing with perception. In that playing with perception, certain perception attainments will be opened.

This way of viewing, I would say, is much more significant than thinking we're practicing unwavering attention, or practicing an intensity of laser beam intention that dissects or magnifies things—like looking at things through a magnifying glass—or that we're simplifying, or even that we're playing with energy.

I do talk a lot about energy when I teach. Sometimes, as I said, it seems helpful for many people. Some people really don't resonate with it at all—they don't get a sense of it. We can relate all this to qigong and such; it makes sense to talk about energy. But very often we can get locked into a certain view that we're really doing something here with the energy or with the energy body or with the body or with the chakras or whatever it is. We think we're getting the energy body to this or that state, and that becomes locked as a view: "I'm working on this contraction, I'm opening the energy here."

Sometimes that's really helpful as a view. We can talk in energetic terms about some of these examples of difficulties and how they relate to life. But sometimes a person has had enough of that kind of thinking, and it's not the final truth of what's going on. It's just a certain way of conceiving it, a way of construing it, a way of perceiving it.

This idea of perception attainment and the idea of playing with perception—that's the most radical shift of conceptual framework and the most important shift of conceptual framework you could make. Really understand what that means and use that in a way that's actually fruitful rather than just a casual "yeah, yeah, yeah." It has everything to do with a radical and deep understanding of emptiness.

The jhānas, what we're doing in the jhānas—I didn't explain this; I rushed through it at that point in the talk, but I'll come back to it. If I start to understand the jhānas as playing with perception, and perception attainments are opened through our playing with perception, this integrates completely into our understanding of the deep emptiness of all things.

That's the most important thing in the Dharma, I would say. The most important thing in the Dharma is perception—understanding perception and playing with perception. You can construe the whole Dharma as actually being primarily interested in that: playing with perception. Everything, even things that sound like they have nothing to do with that, you can understand the whole Dharma as basically an exploration of playing with perception and then taking certain conclusions and certain liberations from that.

What do I mean by perception? Perception—saññā is the Pali word, and often it gets translated as something like labeling. That's not at all what I mean when I say perception. By perception, I do not mean labeling: "green," "Sarah," "cushion"—which is not a cushion, it's a bench.

By perception, I mean it's an equivalent term for experience, or better, appearance. So I use these three terms interchangeably—phenomenon, experience, perception, appearance. Perception attainment is not a labeling attainment.

If I were to label Sari "banana" and Kirsten "pomegranate" and Julian "kiwi," I'm not playing with labels here. I'm playing with the fabrication of experience, the fabrication of appearance. Energy is a fabricated perception, fabricated appearance. It's not energy. It's a certain fabrication of appearance, experience. This kind of energy is this kind of fabrication, this kind of conjuring, this kind of weaving and sculpting of appearance and experience.

The first jhana is this kind of weaving, conjuring, fabricating of experience, appearance, perception. The eighth jhana is—actually, that's a bad example. We'll come back to that later. Papañca involves certain fabricating of experience. Just the normal everyday consciousness is a certain fabrication of perception, experience, appearance.

Life is the fabrication of perception, experience, appearance. Meditation is the exploration of the fabrication of perception, experience, appearance. Skill and art in meditation is skill and art in the fabrication and the various fabrications and what they lead to. And do they lead where we want to go? If I want it to lead to unfabricating or skillful fabricating or this kind of liberation or this kind of state or that kind of quality or that kind of energy or that kind of jhana—perception attainments.

And that has everything to do with emptiness, which basically is the fabrication of experience, the fabrication of the sense of existence at different times. So the jhanas are completely woven into the whole sense of what's most important in the path. It's most a way of conceiving the whole of the Dharma.

Seeing it that way with that kind of view is very different than other ways we can conceive of what we're trying to do here. And as I said, for some of you—I do talk a lot about energy and some of you are very happy with that language, but some can sometimes get too attached, as if it's a real thing.

What would happen if you're one of these people—what would happen to just re-think the whole thing? Rethink your practice, rethink energy, rethink jhana, rethink dharma in terms of perception? Which, as I said, doesn't mean labeling.

It's 5:45. Would you like to end now, or are there some questions that it might feel helpful to ask? Does it feel like there might be—just get a sense of who might feel like they might want to ask. Why don't we take just a few questions? This will be part three, and then yeah, let's see how that goes.

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CHAPTER 203

Mettā Practice, and a few things about Pīti (Instructions)

Rob Burbea · 26 min

> *In this instructional talk from the 'Practising the Jhānas' retreat, Rob Burbea provides essential guidance for practitioners using mettā (loving-kindness) as their foundation practice for entering jhāna states. He emphasizes the crucial distinction between practicing mettā for cultivating love versus practicing it specifically for samādhi and jhāna development, explaining how this difference in intention fundamentally shapes the meditation experience.*
>
> *Burbea offers detailed instructions on developing sensitivity, attunement, and responsiveness in mettā practice—qualities that bridge jhāna practice with brahmavihāra cultivation. He explores the skillful use of phrases, timing, and energy body awareness, comparing the practice to 'riding thermals' where practitioners learn to recognize and work with the arising conditions moment by moment.*
>
> *The second portion focuses on pīti (rapture/ecstasy), which Burbea defines as pleasant physical sensations arising from non-sensual sources. He outlines the various ways pīti can manifest—from tingling and warmth to lightness and electric-like vibrations—and explains how it can arise through concentration, energy body work, open-heartedness, or even appreciation of natural beauty. Crucially, he introduces three key techniques for working with pīti once it arises: spreading it throughout the body, using focused 'probing' attention to penetrate its center, and employing open 'sunbathing' receptivity. These complementary modes of attention help cultivate and deepen the jhānic factors while emphasizing the importance of fully enjoying and surrendering to the pleasant experiences that arise in meditation.*

So, which is my particular style of neurosis—my preferred neurosis—but I really fret a lot about wanting you all to have exactly what you need, exactly when you need it. Each of you, rather. And of course that's completely impossible. So we'll just do the best we can.

Today I'd like to divide things into two parts. The first part consists of two pieces of instructions, and the second part is a talk about view, effort, attitude, and achievement.

Two Parts of Instructions

The first instruction concerns using mettā practice as your base practice for moving deeper into samādhi and jhāna, or as a foundation for karuṇā (compassion) practice, muditā, or similar practices.

The first thing to understand is that when you're doing mettā practice with the intention of jhāna, that's a different intention than doing mettā practice for the purpose of cultivating mettā itself. This sounds obvious and perhaps not so consequential, but it's actually quite significant.

Of course, when you use mettā as your base practice—as your springboard practice towards jhāna—and that's your intention, you're going to be cultivating mettā. How can you not be? Even if you're practicing with breath or some other method toward jhāna, the jhānas naturally have mettā in them. They are naturally filled, imbued, pervaded by mettā. I won't elaborate on that further.

But if mettā is your base practice, then at some point there will likely be a fork in the path. You'll need to ask: Is it the love that I'm primarily cultivating now, or is it the sense of well-being, pīti, and happiness? There are grey areas in the middle, and you can mix these two approaches. But there is a kind of fork, and right from the beginning—or at some point fairly early on—you probably want to clarify your actual intention. Does this make sense?

Since you're on this retreat, as I mentioned on the opening evening, your intention is jhāna practice. That's your primary intention, which means that simply bearing this in the back of your mind has all kinds of effects and navigates your practice without you even being conscious of it. This is powerful. Intentions are extremely powerful things. Intentions create our worlds, and that's not hyperbole. So you want to be conscious about this and firm and clear about what you're doing.

At a certain point, for example, let's say you're practicing mettā and there's love, there's feeling, there are all kinds of shades of different feelings—which I'll discuss in a moment. But what you're looking for primarily is the pīti, the well-being. When that arises and comes up steadily and frequently, then that becomes your primary focus. The mettā is just a springboard.

Key Qualities in Practice

The way I teach mettā emphasizes the qualities and intentions of sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, and receptiveness—these are all key. Why do I emphasize these qualities in jhāna practice? When we practice jhānas emphasizing these qualities and recognizing their importance, notice how much overlap and significance jhāna practice

has for our emptiness practice, our soul-making practice, our emotional practice, and—I forgot to mention—our brahmavihāra practice. In the way I teach mettā, these are central qualities we're practicing.

There are different kinds of sensitivity and responsiveness. For example, with mettā practice using phrases like "may you be happy" or "may you be peaceful"—as we discussed before when talking about pegs—I might ask: Do I need more pegs here? Do I need to repeat that first phrase a second time, perhaps even a third time, before moving on? I'm being sensitive, attuned, and responsive to the situation, responding by adding more pegs. Sometimes this isn't necessary, but that's a relatively gross level of responsiveness to what I notice about my mind state and heart state.

Another aspect is how "loud," so to speak, I say the phrases internally. Sometimes the mind needs something really loud and clear.

"May you be happy," I might whisper, soft as a prayer. Other times the same phrase needs to boom through my being with crystalline clarity. I remain attuned: What does this moment require? Where should the volume be?

I also sense how sparse or dense the phrases need to be. Sometimes I find myself thinking, "May you be happy," and immediately needing another phrase because silence would invite distraction. The unsettled mind requires constant engagement, something to concentrate upon.

But once the mind has settled and the heart has opened, revealing those lovely heart frequencies, "May you be happy" can unfold into spacious silence. I rest in that resonance, feeling the heart vibrate with the emotional reverberations of the phrase itself. I cannot predict when the next phrase will arise—I simply remain sensitive to what the moment asks.

The whole practice becomes like riding thermals. When a warm updraft appears, I don't need to flap my wings. I glide, feeling how it supports me. When that thermal dissipates, I sense where to find the next one, perhaps flapping briefly to get there. But first I must learn to feel the thermal, to know what it means to ride it.

This sensitivity, receptivity, attunement, and responsiveness—this is what I'm pointing toward. I want to be fully aware of the effects and feelings in the energy bodies. As we discussed yesterday, the entire energy body participates in metta practice.

When I say a particular phrase—"May you be happy"—I open to the whole energy body's response. Then I move to the next phrase: "May you be peaceful." Suddenly I notice this phrase carries a distinct flavor, a deeper effect. I've caught a thermal with these very words. The phrase generates its own updraft in the citta-body system.

Without sensitivity in the energy body and heart, I would miss this entirely. So much of meditation involves this quality of opportunism—sensing which door stands open, which thermal awaits, what carries juice in this moment. I feel it fully, then work skillfully with what arises.

Beyond recognizing that certain phrases feel more alive than others, I develop sensitivity to individual words. Do I need the complete phrase, or can I simply drop in the word "happy"? This responsiveness reveals itself through practice.

As the energy body and heart become more sensitive, I notice that "happy" creates a different effect than "peaceful." These aren't static responses—the word "happy" doesn't always produce identical results. I attune to the precise emotional tones, subtleties, and frequencies arising in each moment.

The entire practice becomes an attunement to different frequencies, colors, vibrations in the energy body and heart. As I grow sensitive to these qualities—riding them, appreciating them, enjoying them all—despite their differences, I naturally begin radiating them outward. Here, I offer silently, you have some of this lovely happiness and peace.

Metta deepens through this process because metta isn't a single emotion—it's a complex of emotions, a symphony of the heart. As I radiate these qualities to others, I simultaneously bathe in them myself. I must ensure I'm truly enjoying this gift, not losing it in the act of giving it away.

If my intention remains focused on samadhi, all of this unfolds beautifully. But as I mentioned earlier, what truly captures my interest is the arising of piti.

So sometimes it's hard to distinguish what's happening—it gets a little mixed up—but actually we're interested in discrimination. I should qualify this, and this is one of those places where I'm going to contradict myself: some of us need to be really interested in discrimination, and some of us need to let go of discrimination for a while. But basically we're interested in discrimination.

If my priority is toward jhana, then I'm actually more interested in the piti—this real pleasure feeling, this well-being. I'll come back and talk about that in a moment. That's what I want to allow to dominate, more than the metta feelings. And that's what I'm writing about. Of course, it might be happiness and you're going for the second jhana, but that's it for metta for now. Is that enough to be going with?

The second thing I want to talk about—and I wasn't going to address it today—but from what I hear and from people I've spoken to in notes and conversations, saying a little bit now feels necessary. For many of you, you will need something like this. And in a way, what I'm going to say now will make what I say later today make sense over a larger area.

What I want to talk about now is piti, very briefly. I will say much more in the next few days.

So what is piti? The Pali word, P-I-T-I. Ecstasy, rapture, pleasant feeling, well-being. Technically, I would define it as pleasant physical sensations or pleasant physical feeling that arise from a non-sensual source. In other words, it's not like a pleasant taste in the mouth or someone touching you nicely. These are pleasant sensations arising from a non-sensual source.

I will talk more about this, as I said, but there are many manifestations. There's a big range in terms of how that can manifest—how intensely, what kind of experiences are involved, what kind of flavors. It can be a kind of tingling all through the body as rapture or ecstasy, a kind of almost electric-like vibration that's very pleasant. It could be just a sense of lightness. It can be a mixture of all these, and there can be a kind of warmth with it. But the key thing is that it's pleasant. The range of that pleasantness, both in terms of types of manifestation and also how pleasant it is, is quite extraordinary. I'll come back to all this—I'm just touching on this now to put a few things in place that some of you will need.

So piti was like Newton Abbot, remember? Or Newton Abbot is like piti. It arises anyhow—it can arise any which way. The important thing is for you to really learn how it arises for you. Is it going to be one way? Is it going to be many ways? Eventually it's just an intention.

So it may arise from really just sticking the attention at the tip of the nose or the upper lip and keeping it there, working with these other elements we talked about yesterday—the effort and the delicacy and the intensity. It may well arise. It may erupt into the body at some point from basically the focus and concentration, the intensity of energy.

It may arise from playing with the energy body, as we've done with the breath, and as we will touch on, you can also do it without the breath. So it arises from coaxing the energy body to be as nice, as comfortable, to have as much well-being as possible, and slowly, slowly, that just shapes and warms up into more and more piti.

It might arise from an insight way of looking. It might arise—someone was saying yesterday, and it's quite common for some people—from the nada sound. I'm not even going to explain that meditation. If you don't know what it is, it doesn't matter.

It may arise just from open-heartedness. Again, how often do we think of all this as arising from something called concentration, which means an intense focus and keeping my mind on something? People say to me so commonly: "I was standing outside, looking at a tree, appreciating, opening myself to the beauty of something in nature, and piti arose right there. I wasn't really concentrating on the tree—let me look at the bark."

Then you think, "Oh, but isn't that sense contact? The tree's sense contact?" Actually, your nostrils are sensation, sense contact. It's not the pleasantness of that sense contact of the tree.

So we have openness of being as the fundamental ground from which pīti arises most naturally. The person is simply present in nature or with whatever arises. The heart is open, the being is open, and the energy body is open, allowing pīti to emerge organically. In fact, with this quality of openness, pīti becomes something that is simply there—a natural condition you can tune into rather than something you must manufacture through effort.

Once pīti does arise, however, then we have what I could call work to do. I know some people resist the word "work," so perhaps we could say we have play to do. Though some don't like that word either. If neither appeals to you, then we simply have doing to do. And if you're uncomfortable with doing in meditation, you might want to examine whether this is the right retreat for you, as there may be some conceptual issues that need investigation.

Let me share just a small portion of what this work-play involves. I'll elaborate more later, but I want to give you a taste now.

Again, you're all in different places in your practice. The primary question right now is: where is my playground? Some of you might be exploring the fourth jhāna, others are still working with the energy body, and still others are developing concentration. It doesn't matter where you are. What matters is that you can discern your particular playground—what we've been calling your playground at your edge.

This is how we're teaching jhāna on this retreat, and there's a specific reason for this approach. I don't have time to repeat everything we've covered, but the essential question is: Can you identify your playground and spend most of your time there? Can you really marinate in it—whether it's the second jhāna or whatever level you're working with? This means spending substantial time there: hours, again and again, as much as possible.

Can you develop mastery? And what does mastery involve? The shorthand is simply: why bother? Because I believe this is how we extract the most fruit from this practice—more than any other approach. This is just my opinion, drawn from having worked through all of this myself.

So what does this work-play actually involve? Let me offer just a glimpse for now—three activities to explore.

First, see if you can spread that pīti or sense of well-being. As the Buddha described in his teachings, can the whole body be suffused, saturated, drenched, steeped with this quality? If you're in the second jhāna, it's happiness. If the third jhāna, it's a beautiful peacefulness. If the first jhāna, it's pīti.

So when pīti arises and sustains for more than a few minutes—if it doesn't sustain that long, it's not quite ready for this kind of work yet—then one exploration is to see if it can spread. Can the entire body space be contained within the pīti, touched by it, pervaded by it?

For now, I'll say it's perfectly fine if this doesn't happen. It's okay if the spreading doesn't occur. I'll add to and refine all of this as we continue. I just want to give you a small taste right now.

So the first element is seeing if the pīti can spread, if you can get your whole body involved, touched, and delighting in it.

The second and third elements involve what I call two modes of attention.

Let's say the pīti comes up and has spread throughout the body. I can then ask myself, "Where is it strongest?" Perhaps it's strongest around my throat. I might not even have a clear sense or image of my throat at that point, but it's somewhere in that region. I can kind of get that. I may have a sense of my throat, I might not, but somewhere around there.

So the first mode is like an arrow going into a bullseye. Right in the center of where it's most pleasant, I want to probe it with my attention, with a narrow focus. I really want to penetrate it, get inside it. Dive into it. You understand? Very spatially one-pointed.

But as I'm doing that, yes, I'm concentrating on it. Yes, I'm focusing on it. But I want to relish it. I want to maximize my enjoyment moment after moment. Where's the enjoyment here? Am I letting myself enjoy it? Can I enjoy it? Like nuzzling into it. Or putting your tongue in a little cup of honey and just wanting to lick every last bit of honey out of it.

I'm not kidding. Don't underestimate how much we prevent ourselves from enjoying at all kinds of levels through all kinds of indoctrination and psychological conditioning. But concentrate, yes—probe and really enjoy. Enjoy again and again and again. Find the enjoyment there.

The second mode of attention is complementary. Rather than being narrow and probing, it's open and receptive. It's more like—oh yes, just like you're sunbathing and your body is soaking up the sun, and you're opening, you're opening yourself, you're abandoning yourself. Or like you're in a really perfect temperature shower with the perfect water flow and just... yes.

So opening, receiving, surrendering. "Abandoning" is even not too strong a word. Abandon yourself to it. Surrender. Open your body to it. Open your being to it. Again, with the intention and emphasis to enjoy it to the maximum. How can I really drink the most enjoyment from this?

So there are two modes of attention, and we can alternate in a very relaxed, improvised way between this more probing narrow approach and the open surrendered sunbathing quality. There's no formula. Just move back and forth. The very moving back and forth is a bit like the bathman with the soap in the Buddha's analogy—you're working something. Part of how it works is through this going back and forth with the attention.

Not really fast, though. Not all nervous. And don't worry about, "Oh, is now the right moment?" It's hard to tell in advance. "If I move now, is that going to help?" Just be relaxed and play and move. In time, sometimes you do get a sense of these things. But the movement itself is shaping something. It's forming something. It's allowing something to coalesce and build.

So you could do any of these three things: spreading it or seeing if it will spread, and then these two modes of attention. You could do the "see if it will spread" first. I'm not going to talk much about that now other than to say it's fine if it doesn't. Just see if it will spread, imagine it spreading.

If it doesn't spread, no big deal—I'll return to that topic later. For now, let's say it's perfectly okay if it doesn't expand beyond its initial location. Even if the *pīti* remains localized—perhaps just around your heart area while your legs feel completely normal—you can still practice both the probing and the sunbathing with this smaller area of sensation. There's absolutely no problem with working in a more confined space.

You can alternate between these approaches, or you could try the alternating method first and then see if the *pīti* spreads afterward. The sequence doesn't really matter—follow what feels natural to you in the moment.

Does this make enough sense? I wanted to offer these possibilities because I suspect this will be relevant for some of you right now in your practice.

So that brings us to the end of part one of tonight's instructions. We've covered the fundamental approaches to working with *pīti*: the probing attention that investigates and plays with the energy, and the sunbathing attention that simply receives and allows. We've also touched on the possibility of encouraging the *pīti* to spread, though without any pressure or expectation.

These are the basic tools. In the remaining parts, we'll explore how to deepen and refine this work, how to navigate challenges that might arise, and how to integrate these experiences into the broader path of awakening. But for now, you have enough to begin this beautiful exploration of *pīti* as a doorway into deeper states of consciousness.

CHAPTER 204

Developing Pīti, Developing Focus, Developing Wellbeing

Rob Burbea · 1h28

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines the cultivation of pīti (rapture) as central to the first jhāna. He outlines two primary approaches: concentrated attention on a single object like the breath, and direct work with the energy body to coax and develop well-being. Burbea defines pīti as pleasant feeling felt physically but whose origin is non-sensual, manifesting in various ways from subtle warmth to waves of bliss.*
>
> *The talk addresses practical challenges including working with bodily constrictions, spreading pīti throughout the body, and handling overly intense experiences. Burbea emphasizes that pīti is fundamentally a way of perceiving the body—a "perception attainment" that demonstrates the malleability of experience. He discusses the relationship between the five factors of the first jhāna (vitakka, vicāra, ekaggatā, pīti, and sukha), showing how practitioners can work both forward through concentration and backward from available pleasant states.*
>
> *Crucially, Burbea frames jhāna practice as training in the flexibility of perception, which mirrors the awakened understanding of emptiness. This approach challenges common misconceptions about equanimity being the ultimate goal, instead pointing toward the liberating recognition that all perceptions are fabricated and therefore malleable through skilled attention and view.*

What I want to talk about now is pīti. Broadly speaking, we could say there are two approaches or two avenues by which a practitioner works and plays so that eventually pīti arises. These two are not so black and white—the distinction between them is not so clear-cut, and neither are they mutually exclusive. A person usually has predominantly one way or predominantly another.

The first approach involves working with the energy body and finding and encouraging any sense of wellbeing in the energy body space. As I said, coaxing it, tending to it. If it's an ember and I'm trying to get a campfire going, what do I need to do to nurture this ember? What do I need to put around it? Do I need to blow on it? Do I need to shelter it from the wind? Whatever it is, what do I need to do to get this ember to turn

into a fire, a campfire? In a way, what we're starting with is the energy body experience, and in any way I can, I get that experience and massage it, support it, shape it, encourage it, ignite it to move towards more and more pleasantness until there's pīti.

The second way is to choose something—choose an object—and just concentrate repeatedly on that object. If the concentration gets more steady and the energy accumulates there, then at some point pīti evolves in the experience, in the energy body.

What is pīti? I define it as pleasant feeling that's felt physically, but whose origin is non-sensual. For a meditator, this can come up in all kinds of ways. There are all kinds of flavors and manifestations of pīti. The whole body can feel like it's tingling, or parts of the body can feel like tingling. It can actually feel like an orgasm—some people say it feels just like that. It can feel like something much more subtle, like a kind of pleasant warmth or a pleasant lightness, as if one's almost floating. It can feel like waves of pleasant bliss or rapture or ecstasy going through the body. There are many, many manifestations it can have.

One of the interesting things about how pīti manifests is that it evolves over time, and it evolves in a couple of ways. One way is that as you get into, let's say, the third jhāna, the repeated experience of the third jhāna affects the way pīti comes up for you from then on. The third jhāna is very peaceful, incredibly beautifully serene and tranquil. It's almost like that does something to the whole energy body, or it does something to the whole citta. Thereafter, usually, a person's pīti is much calmer than it might have been in the beginning. So there's a kind of retroactive effect that deeper jhānas can have on the experience of the first jhāna, which is characterized by pīti.

What can also happen—and it's very individual—is this: one's meditating, let's say concentrating on the upper lip at the tip of the nose, concentrating, concentrating. Then I notice at times when concentration seems to develop, I notice what are almost like lightning bolts through the body of extreme pleasure. But it's gone—gone in two seconds or a second. Or it might be like a wave of bliss or ecstasy, or just a wave of pleasant feeling washing through the body. But again, it's gone in a couple of seconds.

This is, in a way, good. It's pīti. It's definitely pīti. It's great. Things are happening. Wonderful. When that happens, open to it, enjoy it. If you're still really working with the object and you're not ready to leave the main object, then you still stay with—if I follow my example—the breath. This pleasant experience remains in your background awareness. You're certainly opening to it and enjoying it, but you're not going, "Oh, let's focus on that." It's not ready yet.

It's not steady enough. It's just a passing thing. What we want, and what might happen from the beginning or might happen more with time, is a more steady pīti—something that's around for at least two or three minutes without disappearing. Once it's steady, and if you're sure this is definitely pleasant, then you're ready to work with it. I'll talk more about how to work with it as this retreat progresses, building on what we covered yesterday.

So we need to wait until it's relatively steady, temporarily steady. We want it to be steady, but actually, to be really clear, we want pīti and sukha. I remember, countless times over the years in interviews here, someone has come in and, in the course of whatever we were talking about during their retreat, reported that they were practicing—usually in Asia somewhere—and had experienced pīti and sukha, which means happiness from meditation. They reported it in the interview and were asked if it was pleasant and if they enjoyed it, and they said yes. Then they were actually shamed for having it.

The teacher, from what they told me, was quite severe, and somehow they felt shamed and quite hurt and traumatized by that interaction years later. Something in their practice and their whole relationship with practice had gotten quite twisted because of that. There was often, and this might be quite surprising, quite a lot of grief around it. Something that had touched their being quite deeply, that they were open about sharing—a lovely thing, not just difficult dukkha—was dismissed, and they ended up feeling ashamed about it.

So just to be really clear: we want pīti, we want sukha. It's a good thing.

How does it arise? How can we think of its arising? One way we can think of it is through two broad approaches.

If we're thinking about concentration—keeping the mind steady on the upper lip, the lower nostrils, and so on—as the mind keeps staying there, what's not happening is the mind squandering and dissipating energy through thought, through distraction. The mind is collecting its energy. In electronics, there's something called a capacitor—an electronic component that gathers electric charge. One way you can think about what pīti is, from the concentration point of view, is that you're simply not squandering energy. You're not dissipating it, and it begins to gather.

But it's not just nailing your mind to an object. You're also going to need the refinement, the subtilizing of the object if you're using the concentration approach. So pīti won't arise just from staring at something. It also needs this quality of attention and the subtlety of the object and attention in order for pīti to arise through the concentration route.

Pīti can also arise just from gathering energy, as in practices like qigong. You're actually gathering energy, and the qi and the pīti are very close—they're very close. Are they separate? Are they different things? Are they not different things? I'd say it's on a spectrum. As we gather the qi and begin to feel it more positively, we can call it pīti. It becomes pīti.

With insight ways of looking, there's a letting go, a release of clinging, and in that release, we fabricate less. There's less fabrication of the bodily perception.

Samādhi—I'll come back to this; it's such an important point that I'm going to return to as the retreat goes on. What samādhi really is, or perhaps the most fruitful, most helpful way of conceiving what samādhi is: as we deepen in samādhi, there is less fabrication of perception, less fabrication of self, less fabrication of dukkha definitely, less fabrication of self, less fabrication of bodily perception, and less fabrication of any perception at all. That's what the whole spectrum of the jhānas is—you can understand it in one framework. And that's the most important way of understanding it. This way of understanding will unlock all kinds of other doors in terms of the whole of Dharma practice and liberation.

So how does pīti arise? It arises through insight, through ways of looking that let go of clinging, therefore fabricating less, therefore less fabrication of body. Pīti—perceiving the body as pīti—is a less fabricated perception of the body. Or we could say another way is through the energy body, working with the energy body to shape it, to fabricate it so that there's pleasure and pīti there. Or, as I said before, it's just an openness of being, an openness of heart, and that allows pīti to flow. It's like pīti wants to be there, wants to come, and it's just the openness.

Once it's there, then we have work and play to do: I need to consolidate this, stabilize it, and absorb into it so that it can become the first jhāna—if pīti is what we're talking about, as opposed to happiness or something else that's central to other jhānas.

It's interesting—and none of this is again without exceptions—but it tends to be the case that when I'm using the concentration method and PT comes, it tends to erupt very suddenly and quite intensely. I'm concentrating, concentrating, and okay, I can defin-

itely feel like I'm in a deeper state of concentration. But when the PT comes, it kind of bursts through into the body, into consciousness. Or one might even find oneself already in a jhāna with everything there, not just the PT.

The other way—working with what I described as this ember that we try to kindle like a fire, working with the energy body—that tends to be, though not always, more gradual. The PT builds more steadily. So there's a more gradual movement into the full PT experience.

How many people have heard the term "access concentration"? Quite a lot of you. I don't use that term myself. The Buddha never used it—it's not a phrase the Buddha ever used. It comes, I think, from the Visuddhimagga, which is a commentarial text from about five hundred years after the Buddha, a text we may or may not come back to. I don't tend to use it because the Buddha never used it.

What does it mean? Well, it's kind of like when you can feel sometimes, if you're concentrating—let's say on the breath—there's a sort of quantum shift where you just feel like, "Oh, now the mind is really settled and really getting to settle on its object." Usually the breath is subtler at that point, for example. Usually things feel more harmonized. So you're not in jhāna yet—there's probably no pīti if you're using the concentration method—but it's just a kind of marking point of "Yeah, okay, we've settled a little bit."

You can use it if you like. I don't tend to find it that helpful really, but it's fine. Sometimes I think it's more the case that each jhāna has its own particular access concentration once you do a lot of jhāna practice, but it really doesn't matter. If it's helpful for you in terms of getting a sense of where you're at, go for it. But I don't tend to use it. It doesn't matter. I'm happy to talk about it with you though.

With the breath at one point, if it's that method, there can be these kind of quantum shifts at different points. So for example, I think I mentioned it already—let's say again, just to follow my example, the breath at the nose, at the upper lip. At some point, as it starts to go well, that area starts to feel larger and begins to feel like it's actually about the size of my whole head, or about the size of my whole body. This is a good development. This is a good thing. And that movement there is part of—it's on its way. It's, let's say, part of or an element of the whole movement towards whole-body PT, or paralleling that, or something like that.

Another analogy you could use instead of the capacitor analogy is like when you hold a magnifying glass and catch the sun's rays, focusing them on some dry leaves or something—it's going to make those leaves ignite, right? It's gathering the energy of the mind. That's a way we can think of it. It's gathering the energy of the mind until it ignites in PT.

But as I said, it needs not just that—it needs part of the gathering, part of the energizing to be the quality of the attention, more important than the quantity. We've talked about this now three times. Quality more important than quantity. Quantity is still important, but secondary. And quality, as we've already said, includes lots of different factors.

Andy asked a question yesterday. I want to see—I think I lost the piece of paper—but let me see if I answer it now in the flow of what I'm saying. And if not, we can come back to it.

So I talked about subtilizing—the sort of encouraging of making things subtle or allowing things to get subtle. When we're talking about concentration at one point, then the object—in this case the breath sensations at that one point—needs to get, or will get as part of the deepening concentration, more and more subtle. The attention needs to become correspondingly subtle. If I can even encourage all that to become more and more subtle, that's great. I certainly need to encourage the attention to get more and more subtle. So the object itself becomes more subtle and the attention becomes more subtle. I encourage that.

If I'm going by the other way—the sort of coaxing of the whole energy body experience gradually—then my experience of the different frequencies in the energy body will maybe include both subtle and gross frequencies. We want to be open to all of that. I want to be sensitive to both subtle and gross experiences.

But the experience of the energy body as a whole on its way to the first jhāna—unlike the experience of the breath which gets more and more subtle at one point—the experience of the energy body doesn't get more subtle on its way to the first jhāna. You're actually building more, so it's less subtle. You understand? There might be lots of different frequencies at first, but I'm actually building—it's getting less subtle. So don't confuse this.

However, as you go through all the jhānas, there is, as I said, a spectrum of subtlety over eight jhānas. The third jhāna is way more subtle than the first. The second jhāna is actually more subtle than the first, the third jhāna is more subtle than the second, the fourth is more subtle, et cetera. It's a spectrum of increasing subtlety.

So as I said, the eighth jhana is almost unspeakably subtle, unspeakably refined. There are different kinds of ways this word "subtle" applies. Does that answer your question, Andy?

So let's stay with this idea of subtle just for a moment. Sometimes I remember very early in my practice, in a very different tradition, hearing about the subtle breath and thinking, "What's that? That sounds interesting."

Partly what it means is simply this subtilized breath—this breath that has become subtle through the calming, or that one encourages to become subtle. In the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness of breathing, the first instruction is that the practitioner breathes long and knows they're breathing long, just as a turner—probably some kind of woodworker—turns something deliberately because someone is paying them to do that, and they know what they're doing.

This is oftentimes read passively, like "I know I'm doing a long one," as opposed to "No, now I need to do a long one, therefore I will do a long one, and I know I'm doing a long one." To me, it's more active: I will deliberately breathe long. Then the second instruction is I will deliberately breathe short. The shorter breath is already a calming, a subtilizing, generally speaking. So there's this natural movement toward the subtilizing of the breath, the calming of the breath, and the encouragement of that.

However, there's another possible meaning of this phrase "subtle breath." Sometimes you can notice that the breath can feel quite gross or stuck somewhere—you're sort of yanking it or heaving it to smooth through a constriction in the throat or something. Sometimes finding a way of breathing that's helpful and smooths it out is really beneficial, but sometimes, if I don't get too obsessed—and I'm using that word "obsessed" in a very subtle way, because we can get very subtly obsessed in meditation—then here's this breath that's actually a bit stuck somewhere, a bit rough, a bit gross, a bit uneven.

And actually, at the same time somehow, it's almost like there's another breath or another level of breath that's way more subtle and is already smooth—very, very subtle. But I need to be not so obsessed and a bit more spacious, a bit more receptive, my antennae a bit more receptive and subtle to even notice it.

I can sometimes find that breath and forget about the one that feels rough. It's almost like they're going on at the same time in some kind of way. As I concentrate on the subtler one, as I find it and attune to it—as we said yesterday, what happens when I attune to it? It amplifies it. It gets amplified. The other one just kind of fades away. I'm not worried about it anymore. It amplifies the subtle breath in my consciousness. That becomes what I'm concentrating on.

Again: sensitivity, receptivity, and opportunistic attunement. "Oh, there's something here that I hadn't realized." And then opportunistically, the door opens—let's just gently go with that. Find that. Go with that.

Sometimes this relates to another level of something I've already mentioned, which is in a way even more subtle and applies probably much more usually when you've already experienced quite a lot of jhanas. Again, the mind won't settle down. The energy body doesn't feel right. It's just not quite happening. But if I don't get too sucked into that problem—just spacious, gentle attunement—there's a level of the mind, let's call it, there's a dimension of the being, better to say, that's actually already peaceful, already imbued with a certain jhanic quality.

This is probably much more obvious once you're very familiar with that jhanic quality. The mind just won't settle down in this sitting or today or whatever it is, but with just a little spaciousness, opportunistically, my antennae are up and then there's something akin to the beginnings of the peace, the kind of peace that's characteristic of the third jhana. I'm just going to dive there. And in diving there, I attune to it, and in attuning to it, it amplifies, and the other stuff just kind of dissolves.

That becomes, that takes over my experience.

So this business of finding the second kind of subtle breath is akin to that. It's just the same thing at a different scale perhaps. And then we also mentioned that if you're going to use the imaginal poetic sense of the object, that that's really quite a subtle thing. It's really just a couple of drops of this magic essential oil or whatever it is that you're dropping in. Really quite subtle.

Okay, so there are two emphases, as I said, broadly speaking: concentration versus this kind of tending to, coaxing sensitivity to the energy body and developing that. Whichever way... how do I say this? At some point, whichever way you've gone into your jhāna or pīti or happiness or whatever it is, sometimes the emphasis is more needed—more concentration, more focus needed, more effort needed. For some people that's often the case: more effort, more concentration. For other people or other times, or even once pīti has arisen—and I'll go into this today and tomorrow—what do I need to do now that pīti has arisen? It might be more focus, more concentration, maybe on the original object, but then on the pīti itself. And that's what I'm doing.

Other times it's actually, as I said yesterday—don't underestimate the significance of this or the importance or how crucial it can be—other times the emphasis and the intention needs to be more on more surrender, more opening, more abandoning. So you can move emphasis, and you will, and I'll come back to this. It's not that you get locked

into one emphasis, but what's needed right now. And then generally, as I said, as a practitioner, as a human being over time, what do I need? Sometimes, as I said yesterday, sometimes a person needs more focus, more focus, more focus. It's not what you need. You need a bit more of the other, or maybe really to experience that, to gently develop in opening, surrendering, abandoning. Through that there's the deepening, the sort of progression, the consolidating of all that through this balance, this play.

I don't know if you've noticed already on this retreat or other retreats, but if your intention is focus, concentration—if that's your emphasis and if that's your conceptual framework of what you're doing, if that's your view of what we're doing here, focusing, concentrating—that very intention or emphasis has obviously a lot of good results, but it also has some negative results. So when there's noise or some disturbance—birds or whoever it is, someone in the meditation hall—with that intention and that emphasis, it's much more likely that the noise creates aversion. Has anyone noticed this? The intention—intentions set up the flavor of perceptions. If that wasn't my intention, I would not have aversion at that point. The aversion scuppers the possibility of jhāna. It takes away the possibility of jhāna.

So that's quite interesting. It's not that one shouldn't practice that way. It's just something to know. If I'm practicing this way, or rather, more broadly speaking, if I have this intention, it will have these consequences on my perception. It will likely have these consequences, whatever that intention is. We could speak lots on that.

So it's not that one shouldn't, but one should realize, oh, that's going to be part of my territory if I'm going for the concentration thing. Is it a little less likely that there's aversion if one's going the other way with the whole body and the coaxing of the well-being? If that's the conceptual framework, if that's the intention, if that's the emphasis? Because then really, as we played earlier today, any approach is available. So here's aversion—we can just put into the energy body some mettā. Whereas if I go to mettā once I'm focusing on the breath, I'm actually doing a whole different practice. Or I can relax the aversion with an insight way of looking, different insight ways of looking. And the whole thing becomes much more workable. And with the subsidence of aversion, there is the arising of happiness. With the subsidence of aversion there is the arising of happiness.

So it's not to say choose this one or that one, but it's to be wise to causes and conditions. And intentions are causes and conditions and they have effects, all kinds of effects—effects that we don't often anticipate or realize.

So focus and concentration are really important. Another way of considering those terms or what's happening with samādhi is words like collectedness or integrity. Remember that—I think I said it yesterday—the meaning of samādhi originally in Sanskrit was, maybe it still had that meaning for hundreds of years later, but it was more like agreement and harmony. Samādhi as integrity, meaning the elements of my being are in agreement, in harmony. There's an integrity to my being and a collectedness of energy, mind and desire. A collectedness and integrity of energy, mind and desire.

Now when I put it like that, that to me has a lot more implications for my life and my work and my personality and how I am in relationship.

Countless people in our culture struggle with concentration—ADHD is supposedly epidemic, and mobile phones, screen time, too many WhatsApps and Facebooks certainly contribute to this fragmentation. But I know countless people who are perfectly capable of concentrating very well on their work, in relationship with someone, in a creative project. They've never spent ten seconds on meditation because they don't know the first thing about it.

When we conceive samadhi differently—as collectedness, integrity of energy, mind and desire—these qualities become broadly relevant to life, to how I'm living, how I manifest my personhood. When there's that collectedness, integrity of mind, energy, desire, body, there's power. I don't mean power over—I mean power. The being has power. The person has power.

You can sense it in a person. You can see it over their life. Does this person have soul power—the power you sense in them, the power they feel or don't even recognize? Is it growing? Is it lessening? These questions become much more relevant than "How can I keep my concentration on something?" which for most people, beyond a certain point of basic human ability to focus, is hardly relevant.

But collectedness, integrity, soul power—these are important things. Then you start to relate that to daily life: yes, that little bit of alcohol affects concentration temporarily, but more significantly, it affects something about my personhood and my capacity to really cohere and show up with soul power, with the integrity of my being—body, mind, energy, desire—as a habit of showing up coherently, with energy collected and integrity intact.

Or consider people who have the radio just on, or the TV on, consuming a lot of television or radio. It's doing something to your soul. That's far more significant than how concentrated you can be in meditation.

Think of samadhi in these broader ways. I've talked about wholeheartedness and how significant that is for my life, personhood, relationships, work, the service I want to do. When there's not this capacity and practice of being really wholehearted, really gathered like that, one dissipates energy, dissipates mind, dissipates one's being habitually, probably in very small ways.

Over time, you get a sense that something in the being has gotten flaccid. The very personality is different. There's something flabby and flaccid in the soul, in the being. Sometimes you can sense this in people—there's just not much sensitivity there.

From this perspective, focus and concentration take on different significance. If we think about collectedness, integrity—this is very, very significant for the being.

Let's return to the energy body way of working. What's extremely common—it will happen every day to some degree, many times a day—is that something in the energy body doesn't feel comfortable. There's some constriction or block somewhere that feels located in the energy body. This is a really normal part of human experience.

The energy body isn't static. It blocks, unblocks, constricts. Yes, we can have very habitual constrictions, but even without these, there's a coming and going of constriction in the energy body in different places.

In meditation, what do we do with this? The constriction, the blockage won't feel good—it's the opposite of pīti. One approach: don't forget to open up the awareness, stretch it over that whole body space, a little bigger than the anatomical body. When there's constriction or something we don't like, attention shrinks. Opening it out again does something. There's mutual dependence here—constriction somewhere actually shrinks the awareness. Opening up the awareness can sometimes open up the constriction. That's the first thing.

Second: if you're working with the energy body through the breath, imagine the breath energy going right through, flowing smoothly right through that constriction. Just imagine that.

Or imagine a current of energy just flowing right through. So it could be with the breath, could be not with the breath. Use your imagination. It might want to flow through that. Let's say the constriction is in my throat. It might want to flow through the throat and up out the top of my head, or right down through the bottom of my body. Does it want to flow up? Does it want to flow down? Feel what feels like it's helpful.

Again, you're just using the imagination to shape, to fabricate, to open the energy body experience. Let's say I have a constriction in my throat. I can imagine the breath coming in and out, not from the mouth and the nose, but coming in and out directly from the throat or the back of the throat, the back of the neck. And I just imagine that. Does that help? Maybe it wants to go out the sides this way. That imagination can unlock something.

If you're practicing metta and you've got this constriction in the throat or anywhere where there's a constriction, what if you play with imagining the very place where there's the constriction as the center of the radiation of the metta? The metta is radiating from the last place you would think of, because it feels the worst and the tightest and the least like love. But just imagine it's coming from there and see what that does.

Another possibility—let's say, for example, I feel a constriction in my mid-belly somewhere. Let's say I feel a constriction around my heart, but my lower belly feels actually quite nice, or has some well-being there, or the other way around—doesn't matter. There's a place where it feels good, relatively good, and there's a place where it doesn't feel good. One of the things you can do is just imagine those places as connected. There's some kind of energy tube or something that just connects them. I'm not moving anything around. I'm not yanking. I'm just connecting them in my imagination—the place that feels good and the place that doesn't feel so good. And just see what happens. I'm just connecting two places in my imagination very, very lightly.

There's also the possibility of bringing an insight way of looking that you are already familiar with and looking at that very sense of constriction, that very sense of blockage, with that insight way of looking. In the context of samatha practice, jhana practice, maybe that's—unless the insight way of looking is your primary way of working—maybe that would be a kind of last resort. But those are extremely powerful practices. And so to look at this blockage that way, through that lens of that way of looking, will basically dissolve it, as long as you're not pushing it too much with "come on, dissolve, dissolve, dissolve."

Another thing to say, which is really important in the context of jhana and samatha practice, is: okay, here's this constriction, here's this block. I don't always have to focus on it. I can work to keep my attention where it's pleasant, where it feels pleasant, where there's pīti perhaps, or where it even feels just okay.

This is crucial. The tendency will be to get dragged into—either get dragged into where there's a difficult feeling, constriction or blockage, or to get dragged completely outside and start daydreaming. But if I can keep my attention—let's say in that example,

my belly feels good and my heart area doesn't—keep it in the belly. Don't get sucked into the difficult area. Or my knees are aching—don't get sucked into that. Just stay with where it's pleasant and focus there and enjoy that.

When I say "where," that might be a bodily location. It might be that the body has dissolved a bit and it's just a kind of spatial location—somewhere around there in space. But it also might be—I don't know if "where" is obviously the right word—but it also might be a frequency. This is similar to what I said before. Here's this discomfort, here's this constriction, this blockage. In energetic terms, it's a certain kind of frequency. Can I find another frequency that's not so much a spatial location as a kind of mental location, and then get into that, find it, dive underneath, get into that? Again, with more experience of different frequencies, certainly with more jhana experience, that becomes just a more and more common possibility. It's much more accessible.

Most insight meditators, most vipassana meditators, are trained either deliberately or just by default that when there's something difficult in the body, when there's dukkha, when there's constriction, when something doesn't feel good, when there's a contraction, the attention goes there. And we're encouraged to do that mostly in the way we teach insight meditation. It can become a kind of default: well, that's what we do. As soon as something's difficult, that's where the mind goes. It's not even a choice I make.

One realizes, oh, it's just a habit. I pay attention to what's difficult, where there's constriction, where there's contraction, where there's dukkha. It might also be the case that insight meditation attracts certain psychological types and inclinations. It might be, but it's also a kind of training that happens both directly and indirectly.

The willingness to do that—the willingness to go where it's difficult and to feel it and to open to it and to work with it—this is invaluable. It's such a precious thing. But willingness is not enough. I need to also recognize that the kind of mindfulness I bring matters. Because I can bring an attention there, I can bring a kind of mindfulness there, and it just makes it worse. I'm being a good meditator and I'm having the willingness, which is great, and a good intention, but my mindfulness has just a bit of aversion in it and it's making it worse. Or I can be with it in a way that just doesn't do anything to it. Or I can be with it where the attention, the mindfulness, has skillful qualities in it.

Mindfulness is never one thing. There's no such thing as pure mindfulness. Mindfulness always has views, conceptions, some kind of relationship with the object—a little bit of aversion, a lot of aversion, a little bit of greed. If we're talking really, really subtle, there's no such thing as pure mindfulness. What makes or breaks, what determines what happens, is what's with the mindfulness.

So it's great that we're willing to do that as insight meditators. We're all practiced in that, hopefully. Great that we're willing, but it also really matters: can I have the skill to bring what's actually a helpful mindfulness there, a helpful attention?

So that's all great. But now we also want—as I said to you, what we want is range. Range, range, range. Choice, freedom of choice. So sure, I can go where it's difficult. I'm willing to do that. I'm not afraid to do that. If it's a very little bit difficult, if it's difficult in this way or that way, if it's really, really difficult, I'm willing to go there. I'm able to work with it as time goes on and I get more practice. I'm able to work with it all kinds of ways, lots of ways.

But also I'm willing and able not to go there. I put the mind here where it's pleasant. I won't go there. I'm training the mind to stay with the pleasant. So when we open up to jhana practice, this actually becomes quite an important skill and quite something that one's working against the grain if one has done a lot of insight practice.

With training, we can have much more range and much more freedom of choice about what we do in regard to the difficulty. Remember when I first taught this here twelve, thirteen years ago—a summer retreat—and there were people that said, "But that's not proper meditation. That's not proper meditation. The best meditation is to be with what is. And so if it hurts, then I need to be with what is. And even if it doesn't hurt here, somehow the hurt is more what is than the place that doesn't hurt."

But despite that, or as well as that, again we have to ask about ontology, about reality here. Is it really what is? What am I believing about what is? Or is it a fabricated perception? The answer is yes. And I have to understand that not just intellectually—I have to actually get in there and work with things and play with things until I know in my heart, deep down in my mind, in my life, I know this is a fabricated perception and I know how to fabricate it differently. At least at times I have that capacity.

So we want to train to open up that range. And we want to understand there's so much about the nature of reality that's involved in all this jhana work. What does that have to do with insight? It has everything to do with insight. Is it really as real as you think it is? What is real? What is reality?

These are fundamentally important questions, and we get locked into certain views—sometimes views that emerge from our very Dharma listening and training and thinking.

So there will be times of discomfort and pain. As we said at the beginning of the retreat, you really want to not go there too much. I'll talk more about this tomorrow, in fact. But it's also possible to deliberately perceive the unpleasant as pleasant. Here's this pain in my knee, sitting in meditation, and I can deliberately play with the perception.

There's that key phrase: play with perception.

I can play with perception and perceive the unpleasant as pleasant. I might perceive this pain in the knee as pīti, with training. That's totally possible. I decide to perceive it as happiness. So the texture of my knee becomes happiness. My knee becomes happiness. I decide to see it with training as stillness, as a luminous stillness. My knee becomes—the pain has gone, the knee has gone, and what is there is a luminous, beautiful stillness.

Training, training through playing with perception.

So one way of doing that is you just spread the pīti and the pīti spreads over the difficult area—there's one option. Another is this more direct way where I'm actually looking at something and because I have enough familiarity with pīti and because I'm not locked into a view of the reality of this thing as "it's a painful knee." So there's familiarity with pīti and there's the absence of a locked-in view about reality, and then one just sees it as pīti and one therefore experiences it as pīti or happiness or stillness or whatever.

What did the Buddha say? Perception attainments. The jhānas are perception attainments.

What's the best way of thinking about this? Playing with perception. We're playing with perception. This is, as I said already, way more significant than the whole question of, "Is this a jhāna or is this not a jhāna? Did I achieve the third jhāna or the third jhāna?" So-and-so defines it. And that seems so relevant and so important...

What I'm just talking about now, this ability—not just the ability, the possibility, the recognition and the experience of the possibility of doing this with, for example, a pain in the knee—that's way more significant than whether I have achieved correctly the first jhāna or the third jhāna. It's way more significant.

Magic. We use that word: magic.

So this whole business about the question of reality, about emptiness—which has to do with what is the reality of things—about ways of looking, about fabrication, about perception. Again, that's the key word: about playing with perception. This is absolutely

fundamental to liberating insight. It's fundamental to the whole Dharma. It's fundamental to liberating insight. And it's way more important, as I said, than third jhāna, fourth—you know, whatever it is. Did I get it? Did I not?

So, pīti arises, and the Buddha says, don't snatch at it, and don't snatch at the first jhāna. So what does that mean? I've already said it in the insight ways of looking. Here it's arising, however it's arising, and I'm just letting it arise. And if I've got another object, like the nose sensations that I'm concentrating on, I'm just letting it arise, kind of at the side of my awareness. I'm aware that it's arising, because I've got that whole body background, right? I'm aware it's arising. Part of me is enjoying it and opening to it, but I'm still focused on my one thing. And then when it's ready—it means when it's kind of strong enough that it's definitely pleasant, let's just say that. But when it's sustained enough, then very gently, as described with insight ways of looking, very gently I can make that my primary object: the pīti.

And then we go back to what I said yesterday, these modes of attention where I really nuzzle into it, really go penetrate into it or really, really open myself to it, for example.

And I also said yesterday, so another job that we have to do, another work or play mission that we have to do is spreading the pīti. As the Buddha said in the first jhāna, it's spread. No spot of the body untouched, completely suffused, saturated, etc.

So how do we get it to spread? I mean, sometimes it will be spread already and that's great and then you don't have to do anything. But let me run through a list of possibilities.

One approach is when the pīti is localized—perhaps just in my face or head region—awareness sometimes actually shrinks because the pīti can be quite captivating. To help it spread, simply open up the awareness again, expanding it to encompass the whole energy body. Just this opening of attention to the whole energy body naturally allows the pīti to spread, like gas filling a space. Think of it like expanding a balloon—when you make the balloon of attention bigger, the gas will naturally fill that larger space.

Another possibility is mixing the breath with the pīti. You can imagine and begin to feel like you're breathing pīti, or that the breath energy is massaging and moving the pīti through the body. When you breathe in through the heart center, for instance, these currents of energy flow down through your body. The breath can massage the pīti through the rest of the body if it's concentrated just around your chest or elsewhere. This is all very playful and experimental—mixing the breath with pīti or getting the breath energy to help move the pīti to different places in the body.

Thirdly, you can simply imagine that it's spread. The power of imagination can be quite amazing. Just imagine the pīti filling the whole body, and you might find that this becomes your actual experience. Feel it and enjoy it.

You can also imagine the pīti mixed with white golden light, as if the pīti is white golden light itself. You can both feel it and see it. Imagine that white golden light filling the whole energy body space, and as you visualize this, it brings the pīti with it.

Another approach involves connecting different areas. If the pīti is around your face, head and throat—which is very common—but you don't feel anything in your belly, simply maintain awareness of both places: where there is pīti and where there isn't. Connect them with an imaginary tube. You're not forcing anything or imagining movement, just putting two places in the body space in connection with each other. See what happens.

Moving lightly and playfully between those two modes of attention—the penetrating narrow focus and the more receptive openness—might itself work the pīti and allow it to spread through the body space. This relatively slow movement between attention modes can be quite effective.

Eventually, every time you experience pīti, it becomes automatically spread throughout the whole body. There's so much in jhāna practice about the citta and the bodily experience simply getting used to something until it becomes completely normal. After a while, every time you have pīti, it's just automatic—never confined to one place, but always spread. While there are exceptions, this tends to become quite common.

Finally, sometimes the pīti simply won't spread despite all these approaches. Don't worry about it. Just enjoy it where it is and fully engage with it there. If it's just around your throat and head, and you've tried these various methods without success, simply get into it and enjoy it. Don't trouble yourself about it. This is actually really important.

Also, don't become overly concerned with the Buddha's description of "not one spot of the body" untouched. You don't need to mentally check each body part—"How's my little toe on the left side?" You don't need to get so consumed with anatomical precision. It's really more about sensing this whole space. Even if you still have a sense of separate toes, that doesn't matter, but you certainly don't have to. It's more like sensing the whole energy body space and allowing or gently encouraging the pīti to fill that entire space through these different approaches.

There is a movement in jhana anyway for the kind of dissolving of the form of the body. Now, people are different. For some people it happens—maybe this is, I'm not sure, percentage-wise—but for me, certainly it happens in the first jhana. That's part of

the characteristic of the first jhana, that the sense of the body just becomes a bit like what we said in those little games we played. It just becomes a sort of amorphous body of white light filled with piti. There's not such a sense of, "I could kind of find my toes and all the rest of it in there," but people are different though.

But anyway, there's a movement towards the dissolving of the bodily form, which means we don't have to worry too much about whether the piti is in my foot or whatever like that. It's more just a sense of, yes, it's really filling this whole space, this whole experience, the experience of the body.

Again, back to this perception thing. Really, one way of conceiving what happens in the jhanas is: in the first jhana, the bodily experience, the bodily perception becomes piti. My experience of my body is a body of piti, is a space of piti. In the second jhana, the body becomes sukha. The first four jhanas are called rupa jhanas, which means form or body jhanas. The body becomes happiness. And if you're still working with the breath, which is in a way an element of the body, the breath becomes happiness—breathing happiness into a body of happiness. In the third jhana, it becomes this kind of peacefulness. In the fourth, this kind of luminous stillness, and so on.

So the energetic space, the energy body space becomes that. The body becomes that. So there's a gradual—at some point, it's different—there's a gradual dissolving of the detailed sense of the form of the body. The body dissolves, we could say.

Okay, sometimes what happens for people—and again, individuals have a lot of different conditions and things over time—but sometimes what happens is there's too much, there feels like there's too much piti, or the piti feels too intense to bear. It's so strong or so pleasant.

There's one thing that's more important than anything else here: usually when that's the case, what needs to happen is more opening. It's the opposite. If I feel this is too much to bear, it's too strong, I can't handle this, then actually there's some contraction of the being, some aversion, some slight holding or pushing away, like I'm trying to push back the waters a little bit. It could be very, very subtle.

The thing, the primary thing we need to do when it feels or when you think this is too strong is: open. Open the space of the energy body, open to the flow of the piti. Oftentimes piti has a flow to it. Oftentimes it's an upward flow up the body. More opening, open even more, put your opening dial on eleven, one hundred and fifty percent—more opening, more surrender, more abandoning. It's the opposite of what you feel like doing when it feels like too much. You have to go to the counterintuitive energetic response.

Sometimes talking to people in interviews, piti can be a bit like—an analogy can be like water flowing down a mountainside, like making a river down a mountainside. And where it starts initially, sometimes it can be really fast, and then it encounters rocks as it goes down. And where it encounters rocks, you get all this whitewater, right? Rapids and froth and stuff.

Two things here. If I then put more rocks in the way, because I don't like it, because I don't want it to be quite so intense, what am I going to get? I mean, unless I actually put a dam there, but let's say you can't, and you just put some more rocks—what am I going to get? I'm getting more whitewater, right? I'm going to get more froth. I need to do the opposite. I don't put rocks—I open, surrender, abandon. Really like, okay, how much can I really open my body? It's almost like just opening up the chest, opening up, just completely letting it flow through.

And oftentimes it wants to flow right through, right up out the top of the head. Just open, open, open. There's usually at that point a subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, some degree of aversion and contraction, and that's causing the problem.

What it's also doing is slowing down the progress of this river, because this mountain river, as it goes down the mountain, as it winds its way, it's naturally going to find its way to calmer waters. As piti evolves—I've already said this in a way indirectly—as piti evolves, it naturally gets calmer.

So there are phases of practice when it just feels like this really is a bit much. It's too intense. But it's on its way. It's just a phase. What we want is: okay, well, how can I just help that phase do its thing? Aversion, contraction is not helping it do its thing. It's the opposite. I need to open, open, let it flow.

You might have to put up with what feels super intense. Again, someone else would give their right and left arms for this kind of level of pleasure. But that's why we have to open, open, open. Then it can just go through its process and naturally calm down.

Sometimes even the very opening in that moment makes it actually feel better, because the contraction is what starts to make us wonder, "I'm not even sure this is pleasant anymore." It's partly the aversion that's coloring the experience. So open, surrender, abandon. Really, what does it mean to do that? Find ways to embody this letting go.

And then look—find the pleasure in it, find the pleasure in it, find the pleasure in it. So two things: open, abandon, surrender, and find the pleasure. This will usually take care of it. It should help in that moment, absolutely, and it should also help the process unfold more freely without getting stuck in a particular place.

Sometimes a person finds that either the pīti is so strong that they're thinking, "I'm not sure it's actually pleasant," or it's not quite strong enough. When someone says, "I'm not sure it's pleasant," again we can play with perception. You can actually just decide to see it as pleasant. Just decide to see it as pleasant. Play with that perception.

We're back to this idea of malleability again, of playing with perception. In samādhi, in jhāna, the whole system becomes so sensitive, so responsive to these micro-shifts in ways of looking, in view, in effort levels.

Sometimes again, pīti is very strong, perhaps even over several days, or sukha, happiness, is strong. And the person might wonder: "Should I move the body? There's so much energy. Should I move it somehow? Should I dance? I just feel like dancing. There's joy and there's pīti and I want to dance."

The question is: Should I do that? Or when there's a lot of sukha and they find themselves just laughing and laughing and laughing out loud—should I not dance and not laugh so much and actually let something gather?

Generally speaking, I would probably lean toward no, let it gather. Let it gather. Because again, going back to what I said earlier, most of us as human beings actually haven't really allowed energy to gather, haven't really allowed happiness to gather. We don't know what it is to have the energy body filled this way with happiness and allow that to gather and intensify and do its alchemical work.

However, sometimes it is really helpful for someone to dance or move, for a number of reasons. Sometimes if you look at their life and their character, there's actually a habit of holding the body. The body's a little rigid or there's a certain inhibition around movement. Or regarding laughing, there's a person who actually doesn't laugh much. You'll never find them giggling. Something might be funny and they'll respond a little bit, but they don't really give themselves to laughter.

Why is that? Maybe sometimes it's a slight emotional holding, a personality thing. There's a slight rigidity or lack of fluidity. And so sometimes for a person, even if it's not the greatest weather, they need to go out into the fields and dance in the rain—if it needs to move wild, do that.

The danger, though, is that we squander the energy that's building. We squander the pīti and we squander the happiness that's building, and then it can never really mature into jhāna. So it can be a tricky question, but you can experiment with both if you feel this is relevant. For many people, it won't be relevant.

In the analogy I used before, if the capacitor doesn't gather enough energy, it never really allows you to access jhāna. We want to learn to allow and tolerate these energies to expand, to flow, to fill the being and do their work inside.

Again, staying with the theme of sometimes really strong pīti—what can happen for some people, a minority, is that the pīti becomes very strong or the energy gets very strong and the physical body starts shaking, tremoring, jerking, or moving involuntarily. This is quite an important point.

Now, some people hold the view, "Oh, that's catharsis, you're releasing something," and so on. Speaking as someone who got trapped in all that for quite some years, I feel this is really important. It's crucial to have the right view here and the right approach.

When the energy is properly allowed to move without encountering blocks or constrictions, then the physical body does not need to move so much or at all. This energy might want to fly upward, sideways, or in any direction - whatever feels right. What does it want to do? Simply let it do that. Imagine it doing what it wants to do, and it will naturally follow that movement. When the inner energy flows freely, the physical body doesn't need to compensate with outer movement.

Often this kind of physical agitation happens when there's even slight over-efforting. It's certainly more likely to occur if there's too much force applied. For certain energy body types, over-effort is quite likely to trigger these movements, while other people have different constitutions and can exert considerable effort without experiencing anything similar. But with particular types, as I mentioned, slight over-efforting can have massive impacts.

This slight over-efforting can create subtle effects in meditation - all kinds of delicate influences - but it can also produce quite dramatic manifestations. Sometimes this whole phenomenon of involuntary movement isn't catharsis or purification at all; it's simply that the effort is excessive. Nothing is being cleansed or released. The effort is too much and creates too much energetic pressure on the entire system, creating these effects.

What does this imply? Perhaps I need to experiment with the intensity. What does it mean to ease back on the intensity pedal? What does it mean to be slightly less tight in my approach, or to allow my energy body to be less constricted in meditation? This might involve cultivating a slightly more spacious attention, moving into a more receptive mode rather than a probing one. All these adjustments affect the quality of effort and involve subtly reducing the force applied.

And they will have an effect on all that shaking business.

Sometimes someone who's done a lot of insight meditation may have experienced other states of deep equanimity or vastness of awareness and then comes to jhana practice. They hear about piti and first jhana and second jhana with all this bubbly happiness and kind of think, "Well, why should I bother with piti? If equanimity is possible, as I know equanimity, why should I bother with piti?" They might think, "Well, equanimity is the point of practice, right? Why would I bother with piti and with sukha, the first or second jhana or whatever, because equanimity is where we're going."

Equanimity is not the goal. It's absolutely not the goal, nor should equanimity be mistaken for awakening. It's really, really important. Equanimity is not the goal. It's an important part of the mix of the range of what's available to a being, but it's not the goal and certainly not equivalent to awakening. Awakening does not equate to equanimity.

Awakening is, if we want to sum it up, realizing emptiness—realizing the emptiness of everything. And the implication from that is that we can then look at things in very different ways. Why? Because a thing is empty of existing independently of the way the mind looks at it. Therefore, one realizes that, and it liberates the possibility of a whole flexibility of ways of looking, which one can also train in and develop—that playing. You can play all these different ways, play all these perceptions. That's what awakening is. Awakening is not equanimity.

Therefore, practicing the malleability of the mind, the malleability of mind state, the malleability of perception, playing with perception—when we're doing that, we're actually practicing a path that resembles the goal, that resembles what awakening is. Because an awakened person knows the emptiness of absolutely everything, and all they're left with—and they know—all there is, is the possibility and the flexibility of different ways of looking. So by practicing that, you're actually practicing a way of conceiving of the path and practicing the path that looks like what awakening looks like, as opposed to just trying to practice equanimity—trying to be equanimous in relation to everything all the time. That's not what awakening is. And that's not even a healthy psychology, I would say.

There are also some who say, "Why should I bother with piti? Why should I bother with sukha?" Sometimes there are psychological tendencies, patterns, habits. Piti and sukha are quite—in a way they're agitating. In a way they're disturbing. They're not that peaceful. They open up things. They're exciting. They move around and they do stuff. Sometimes it's not even a particular dharma thought or one uses a dharma thought, but the reason one's using it is just because one's psychology doesn't want to be disturbed. "I just want everything to be calm. I want the emotions to be controlled and within a certain limit. I want to either present or feel only a certain range." And

that can become—or it can be—a habit or a pattern. That's all that my being knows. It's all my being allows is that range. And therefore all this kind of welling up of stuff—don't like it.

What's actually going on there? We can conceive piti as energy, so that when the energy body is unblocked—either through just the openness of heart, the openness of being, or when the energy body is unblocked because of the insight way of looking that is releasing clinging, and clinging causes contraction. So with the release of clinging, there's a release of contraction. So the energy body is naturally unblocked. When the energy body is unblocked, then naturally a human energy body system—because when it's unblocked—will naturally experience a pleasant flow of energy. We'll naturally experience piti.

So we can also conceive of piti as energy in the sense that, in a concentration mode, I'm not dissipating energy through distraction. The mind is not going here and there, thinking about this or that, getting caught up in this and that, this sound, that sound. Therefore the energy naturally gathers, like an electronic capacitor.

So we can conceive of piti as energy, but as I've said several times now, a better, more fruitful, truer, much more helpful way—and a way that's much more integrated with the rest of the Dharma—is to conceive of piti as a way of perceiving the body. It's not energy really. It's not to do with unblocking your chakras or energy channels. It's not to do with gathering energy. Piti is a way of perceiving the body. It's a perception of body. It's a perceptual skill. It's a perception attainment, as the Buddha might say. It's a magician's art. Piti is a way of perceiving the body.

Again, you may or may not quite realize just how significant this is, but I want to at least plant the seeds.

Last couple of things. Piti is central to the first jhana. It's the most important factor in the first jhana. The first jhana has five factors—I'm going to talk about this tomorrow. The first jhana has five factors: vitakka vicara, which when I read through the Buddha's list, I translated as thinking. We'll come back to that; it's a slightly controversial translation. But anyway, it has five factors: vitakka vicara—some of you have probably heard "initial and sustained application"—ekagata, a kind of one-pointedness (also a misleading translation), and the two other factors, piti and sukha. Piti we've talked about, and sukha means happiness. Those are the five factors of the first jhana.

Usually these are conceived, either consciously or unconsciously, with a causal direction through them. In other words, you work at your vitakka and vicara, you work at your initial and sustained application to the meditation object. Over time you get one-pointed or absorbed, ekagata, and piti and sukha arise as a result. So there's a movement from concentration factors to the arising of piti and sukha.

That's great. Sometimes we can work backwards. Here are these five factors—what's available right now? Sometimes people say, "Every time I think of this person, happiness arises." It's one of the factors of the first jhana. It's not even the primary factor—piti is the primary factor. But every time I think of this person, happiness arises. If you're skillful, if you don't snatch at it, you just linger with the happiness, and lo and behold piti is right there with it. Then you don't snatch at that, and the piti builds.

There are five factors. What's available? I can go in starting on any one really. I'm working backwards. This principle of working backwards—where am I trying to get to rather than deciding in advance what needs to be emphasized and therefore what's relevant? Which factor do I emphasize right now as a way into the first jhana? I can conceive forwardly in terms of causal connections there, or I can conceive backwards. I've got five factors. Let's see which of those I can access, ignite a little bit, stimulate, and from that, the rest of the five factors ignite.

In a way, working with the whole energy body from the beginning is an example of working backwards to a certain extent, because all four of the first four jhanas—what's called the rupa jhanas, rupa means body or form—all four of them involve, as we said with the Buddha's examples, leaving no spot of the body untouched by happiness or delight or pleasure, suffusing, saturating, drenching, steeping the whole body. All four of the first four jhanas involve the whole body, energy body awareness.

Each jhana simply carries a different flavor, a different predominant quality to that energy body awareness. When we begin with energy body awareness, we're also applying this backward-working principle—starting with the whole rather than a single point, since the practice will eventually encompass the whole anyway. Do you understand?

Let me return to something I mentioned at the very beginning: there are broadly speaking two approaches. Either you choose a small point, a specific object, and concentrate on it with intensity, delicacy, and directionality—essentially practicing steady focus on something stable—or you begin with the whole energy body and gather the pleasantness there.

But let me interject something important. Even if you're new to the second jhana, happiness is actually quite a subtle object. It can be intensely bubbly and energetic, but as things settle, it becomes quite refined and delicate. Even if your primary mode has been working with the energy body without thinking of it as concentration, you'll still need to practice concentration at times. Sometimes you'll need to learn how to remain steady and focused on this subtle object of happiness.

Your intention and emphasis will shift naturally. Sometimes you'll emphasize concentration; other times you'll focus more on spreading and enjoying, or on perception play as we discussed. At any point in jhana practice, your emphasis can appropriately shift. Sometimes when you say "I'm just practicing concentration now," it's not all you're doing—you're seeing concentration as one possible emphasis within a whole mandala of possibilities.

Does this make sense? The two broad approaches—concentration versus coaxing well-being through perception play—appear separate but aren't really. We move between them, and there are gray areas. We should move fluidly between them, recognizing that at any point in jhana practice, both will be relevant. They're not mutually exclusive.

I think we should stop here rather than take questions today. Let's have a bit of quiet together.

Thank you, everyone. Time for tea—enjoy it. There are some interviews tonight, so please check the board if you haven't today. Otherwise, enjoy your tea.

CHAPTER 205

Insight Ways of Looking, Other Energy Body Possibilities, and Summarized Instructions

Rob Burbea · 49 min

> *Rob Burbea presents the final teachings on springboard practices for jhāna cultivation, focusing on two main approaches. First, he explains 'insight ways of looking'—a method of actively applying insights (like not-self) as lenses to view experience, which naturally releases clinging and opens the energy body, potentially leading to pīti and jhānic states. This approach differs from passive mindfulness by deliberately using understanding to transform present-moment experience.*
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> *The second part explores energy body practices independent of breath awareness. Through guided exercises involving kinesthetic imagination—such as visualizing lines of energy, points of focus, and luminous qualities—Burbea demonstrates how subtle mental formations can shape bodily experience and generate well-being. These techniques show the fabricated nature of perception and offer alternative pathways to samādhi.*
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> *The talk concludes with essential summary instructions for those preferring simpler approaches: choosing a reliable base practice that most easily generates pleasant feelings, identifying one's 'learning edge playground' for sustained practice, and basic concentration guidelines including hindrance management and refinement through intensity, delicacy, and directionality. Burbea emphasizes that teachings serve both present practitioners and future students who may access these materials when ready for deeper understanding.*

I want to start today with what's really the last section about base or springboard practices—two pieces around base or springboard practices. You're certainly welcome to ask more and bring these topics to interviews, of course, but this will be the final bit about that from me at the front, so to speak.

There are two parts to it. The first part has to do with insight ways of looking. In a way, I mentioned this right at the beginning in the opening talk, and Marco also brought this up in his question yesterday. So what do I mean by this? I'm going to be very brief here, because this won't be really relevant for many of you.

Insight Ways of Looking

What does "insight ways of looking" mean? Usually we have—or perhaps a very common way of thinking about insight practice or insight meditation is—basically, one is mindful, paying attention, and paying attention as carefully as one can and as continuously as one can. In that careful and continuous mindful attention of watching one's experience, at some point one realizes something, one has an insight, one gets something. So that's one way of understanding what insight meditation is, and also what insight is. That's great.

There's a second way, which is perhaps less common but that I tend to emphasize quite a lot, which is more about taking an insight and using it as a lens—looking in certain ways, a way of looking. For example, if one realizes that body sensations are not self—maybe one has had that experience, maybe one hasn't—one takes that understanding and then starts looking at experience, at body sensations, and seeing them deliberately, over and over again, as not self. They're just happening, they're not me, they're not mine.

So it's more active, it's more deliberate. I'm not being mindful, waiting for insight to come. I'm looking at something in a certain way. There are lots of these possibilities.

What's key about them is that what I would call an insight way of looking brings letting go. And it brings letting go now, in this moment. In other words, here's this pain in my back, my knee, whatever it is. When I look at it with an insight way of looking, it's not just "Oh, that's interesting, it's not self." It makes a difference to the experience. The suffering begins to lessen or dissolve. The actual experience itself of the pain, or whatever it is, begins to change.

What defines an insight way of looking, then, is that there is letting go—it brings letting go in the moment. Another way of saying letting go is that it releases clinging in the moment. So this painful sensation—there's clinging in the sense of aversion, I want to get rid of it. There's also clinging in the sense that it's me or mine; I'm assuming this unconsciously without even thinking it. The insight way of looking dissolves those right in the moment. It lessens clinging, it attenuates clinging. So there's letting go and attenuation of clinging—two ways of saying the same thing.

Energy Body and Fabrication

Now we could say that when we cling as human beings, our energy body contracts. How do we know we're clinging to something? One of the ways is you can feel it in the energy body. There's some kind of contraction somewhere in the space of the energy body.

When we look with an insight way of looking—which organically, by definition, has in it the capacity and the mode of letting go of clinging—then one of the things that happens is that the energy body undoes. There is an undoing of a certain amount of contraction in the energy body. That's what happens, that's one of the things that happen when we look with an insight way of looking, sustainedly, deliberately.

What also happens with an insight way of looking, as I said, is that the phenomenon itself begins to change. As I get skillful in a certain insight way of looking, the phenomenon that I'm looking at with this insight way of looking begins to fade. Here's this pain, it's very intense. I keep looking at it—to follow the example—I keep looking at it as not self, not me, not mine, it's just happening.

If I slowly do that, the pain, the unpleasantness starts to get less unpleasant and even less unpleasant, until it becomes neutral sensation. If I keep looking at it that way, in the insight way of looking, actually the sensation begins to fade. There's no sensation there anymore. There's a space there, for example. Maybe it even goes via some pleasant sensation. In other words, what was unpleasant turns pleasant, then maybe turns neutral, or the other way around. But eventually there will just be a space. There will be the fading of that perception, the fading of that phenomenon, the fading of that experience, appearance, phenomenon, perception.

We say it's less fabricated, because what's central to an insight way of looking is that it fabricates less.

Less dukkha, less self, less object. Whether we look at it like we're undoing contractions in the energy body, or whether we say we're fabricating less solidity in the body—in the perception of the body—an insight way of looking does either of those, whichever way we're looking at it, and pīti will arise.

Pīti will arise as a less fabricated perception, or other jhānas. So an insight way of looking can open up the jhānic sense. Does this make sense? That was a very brief explanation.

When I go back to what I said in the opening talk, what I mean by insight ways of looking is insight practices—and sorry for this awkward phrasing—but I mean something quite specific. I describe them, for instance, in my book *Seeing That Frees*. So you might have done lots of insight practice retreats or whatever, you might have had insights into impermanence, but I really mean something quite particular.

If you're not familiar with all that, just leave all this. It's just an option that you can save for another time. If you are familiar with it though, what you can do is take one of those practices that you feel comfortable with, one of these insight ways of looking, and start using it. Start using it sustainably, just as sustainably as you would use concentration on the breath or whatever.

What you will notice is that as you engage with that way of practice, the energy body starts to feel good for the reasons I've just outlined. Either you can conceive it as getting its knots unknotted, getting uncontracted, or—more accurately and sophisticatedly conceived—the whole bodily perception is being fabricated less.

As you keep practicing the insight way of looking, the body starts to feel good, the energy body starts to feel good, with some kind, some flavor of well-being there. As the Buddha said, you don't snatch at that. So you're doing your insight way of looking, staying in touch with the energy body, noticing how it feels. Then at a certain point, yes, it's nice now.

You don't just snatch at that nice feeling—the pīti, or it could be a different flavor of nice feeling—but you keep doing your insight way of looking, letting the nice feeling build, noticing it as well. Maybe then your attention is balanced between continuing the insight way of looking and the nice feeling. At a certain point, just gently, you can maneuver your emphasis and attention so that the primary thing you're engaged with, the primary thing you're doing, is enjoying the well-being in the energy body, enjoying the pīti.

Is this making sense? So you may keep with the way of looking for a bit, but then at some point, if you're switching to samatha practice—and again, samatha is about the intention. That's what differentiates practice: the background intention. The samatha intention has this quality: "I really want to get into this enjoyment. I really just want to absorb and bathe and enjoy to the max." That's a samatha intention.

So at some point, what really shifts is your intention there—to focus on maximizing the enjoyment, getting really intimate with it, playing with those two modes of attention that we talked about yesterday, spreading it as well.

These kinds of practices are immensely powerful. They may take you well beyond pīti, in fact, and well beyond the first jhāna. They may take you into different formless jhānas, the last four jhānas. Where they take you depends partly on which insight way of looking you're practicing, partly on your previous experience. If there are certain realms that you've visited a lot, you've kind of got a groove in the mind and it might tend there. But it's partly dependent on which insight way of looking.

Again, what is your playground? What is your learning edge playground? If your learning edge playground is the first jhāna and you play with insight ways of looking and it takes you into the fifth or sixth jhāna, okay, that's maybe not what we want at this point because you've decided that the first jhāna or the third jhāna or whatever it is your playground, and that's shooting you way beyond it.

But it might be that as you do the insight way of looking, as things fade, you can kind of pick up on the point where actually it's just well-being now. It hasn't overshot into this huge empty space or whatever it is. Does that make sense?

Okay, so that's one other possibility for a springboard or base practice: insight ways of looking. It's probably quite rare as a way of doing samatha, but so what? It might be your main thing. There's a second way I want to come back to using it—not so much as a main practice—and I'll return to that a little later today.

The second possibility or group of possibilities I want to talk about today involves working a little bit more with the energy body. So again, responding to that question, I would view the energy body as a whole collection of possibilities. I'm just throwing out a bunch of possibilities. I'd count it as one sort of base practice.

But what I want to emphasize today is that so far we've mostly explored the energy body with the breath—the breath as something that stimulates, opens, energizes, massages, and shapes the energy body. What I want to do today is practice with the energy body without the breath, because that's also a possibility. We could make that a separate category, or you could simply include it within the broader energy body practice—it's neither here nor there.

So let's play a game, a meditative game. I'll review everything at the end so you can take notes then. For now, let's just take a few minutes to explore together.

Take that time—it's so worth it to just take a little time to settle into the posture. This posture has openness in it, so you need to be able to feel the openness in the posture. What do you need to do? It might be a micro-change in the posture. What do you need to do to actually feel it as open? To feel it as receptive? To feel it as soft?

At the same time, the posture expresses and manifests the citta qualities—the heart qualities, the mind qualities—of uprightness, wakefulness, alertness, resolve, energization. There's this complement there. Find a posture that expresses this coincidentia oppositorum, this amalgam of opposites. Find that.

Settle into the posture, which really means not just settle down, but open out. Open out the awareness. Settle out into the posture. Fill out the posture with that awareness. Fill it out.

Opening the awareness to the space of the whole body, the whole body space, opening to the sense of the energy body, the feel of the energy body right now. Doesn't matter what your breath is doing—just opening, opening to that whole space. Keep opening it.

You're just there, alive with the presence that's sensitive to the vibration, the texture, the feel, the energy, the tone or tones of that whole space. Keep opening. It's not that you open further and further; it's that you open again and again.

Just a little bit bigger than the physical body. That whole space, the whole energy body filled with bright awareness, bright presence, bright sensitivity. See if you can turn up the brightness right now—the brightness of your attention. How does it feel? How does that whole space feel right now?

Sometimes, as we just open to that whole space, we begin to notice that actually it's already a little bit pleasant. Maybe it's a lot pleasant, maybe it's just a little bit pleasant. There's some well-being somewhere or lightly pervading the whole space.

If that's the case, notice it, enjoy it, open to it—without snatching at it. Let it fill the space if it can. Just opening up the awareness to that space of the energy body again and again, and tuning to any sense of well-being or pleasantness that's there. Opening yourself to it. Opening your body to it. Feeling it.

That was game number one. No problem if there wasn't pleasantness there. Sometimes there might be. If there isn't, and you're working with the energy body, it's just a matter of staying with it, noticing what is there, maybe introducing some breathing or the metta or whatever it is.

Game number two has four little parts to it. Same thing—whole body awareness, stretch it out again. Get so used to opening up again and again; you're going to do that a gazillion times in your life. Again and again, open. Let that bright presence fill the whole space.

Within that whole space, let two points—while you're still aware of the feeling, the tone of the whole space—let two points in particular become more prominent, or focus on them while maintaining awareness of the whole space as well.

One point somewhere in the middle of your head, or the area where your head used to be. Another point somewhere either down in the middle of the body around the solar plexus, or even a little lower, just below the belly button, somewhere around there. You've just got these two points.

And simultaneously, you're kind of prioritizing a focus on both of them with the whole body. What does that do, this bi-focus, this double focus, with the background attention to the whole body?

What does it do if you imagine a line of energy or a line of light, say white golden light, between those two points with the whole body awareness included, but that becomes prominent—this line of energy connecting these two points. How does that feel?

Let that go. Find again, stretching out the awareness again and again, fill that whole space with presence, with sensitivity.

How about imagining three lines of energy? So these three lines meet somewhere in the lower belly, right in the middle of that kind of area. It really doesn't matter if your anatomy is not at all clear to you right now. It's fine if it isn't.

Three lines of golden white light energy or just a kinesthetic imagination of energy. One of them goes from that point in the lower belly around there right up the center of the body and out through the top of the head. Right out through the top of the head. And the other two go down, one goes down each leg and either out your knees or out your feet.

The important thing is the kinesthetic imagination. It's fine if it helps to be visual as well, but really what does it feel like to imagine lines of energy constituting, constellating the body—the body shaped around these lines of energy. How does that feel? What do you notice?

Open the whole space, open the awareness to the whole space. And within that, these three lines of energy.

You can let that go. And again, opening up the awareness, stretching it over the whole body space, inhabiting, really filling that whole body space with this bright presence, bright awareness, bright attention.

And now two lines—imagine two lines. Again, one down the vertical center of the body. And another perpendicular to it, at right angles, ninety degrees, across it, across, say, perhaps a little lower than the shoulders, like where the nipples are. It really

doesn't have to be exact. It's not about that. Nor is it about seeing clearly what these lines of energy look like. It's just a way of shaping the energy. Just a light imagination. Two lines there.

Now you tell me, or rather don't tell me, but just see—what feels better? If these lines of energy go out of the body, out, let's say, through the bottom, through the perineum, and out through the top of the head, and out through the sides, or if they stay within the body. Bright, white, golden lines of energy, but more important, the kinesthetic sense, the kinesthetic imaginations. Whole body awareness. What do you notice?

Last one of this—let that go. Again, whole body spreaded, and imagine your energy body, your whole body in other words, that whole space, your energy body, is a golden white cloud of golden white light. So its edges are not particularly defined, it's more cloud-like. It's filled with this bright, bright luminous light, gold and white. Again, stretch out the awareness. How does that feel? What do you notice?

You can let that go.

The third little game or exercise is, again, whole body, whole space. And if I say to you, imagine your body—imagine your whole body as radiant and empty. Empty in the Dharma sense, whatever that means to you. In other words, whatever level of understanding you have of emptiness or what that means to you, just plug that in. Imagine your body, your whole body as radiant and empty. Whole body awareness, whole space. Your body radiant and empty, luminous but empty. Whatever that word means to you, dharmically.

You can let that one go.

Last one, just for fun.

Same thing, whole body awareness, whole body space, whole energy body, filling out that space. This time we actually want to keep some sense of the shape of your body, of your anatomy. So you really want to stay, in this game, you really want to stay sensitive to how that whole body space feels, like where you're sitting right now.

But if I add this, can you imagine an energy body, colored blue, a lovely blue, in the shape of your body, that flies out from your body? Flying, it can fly. You remain sensitive to everything you're feeling in that space. But imagine this lovely light, luminous blue energy body flying out. Maybe it does these very free flying maneuvers somewhere in front of your body.

How does that feel in the energy body space? Does it loop the loops? What does it want to do? How does it feel? Really stay connected with the feeling in your space, your energy body space.

When you're ready, connected to your energy body space, you can open your eyes.

So, what have we got here in this little group? We've got just a few little games but really essentially what we're doing is going to the energy body experience and sometimes, without doing anything with the breath or metta or anything else, we notice there's already some pleasantness there and it might already be enough pleasantness to work with, enough to kind of coax and gather it into piti and well-being and focus on it. Don't need anything.

But it also might be we just play a little bit with the imagination and that starts to shape and fabricate the experience in certain ways. If it is already pleasant, then, like I said, maybe you can get into that. Definitely as you get more and more experienced...

Let me run through what I did. The first one is just open to the energy body. Forget about your breath, forget about metta, just open to the energy body, the whole space. See how it feels, without putting any pressure on it. There might be more there already than you commonly realize.

The second one is primarily a kinesthetic imagination. If the visuals help it, great. But primarily it's kinesthetic, in other words, the sort of inner tactile sense, energetic sense. What I actually started with was giving two points, two separate, spatially separate points within the energy body. It's almost like your mind is paying attention to two things at once, predominantly and equally, rather than just one point. Sometimes, if something does, it just opens things up. And it can also allow things to become more stable, because again, there's more of a base, a wider base.

Then there's also the possibility of using the kinesthetic imagination which may be helped by the visual imagination and imagining certain lines of energy. Really you can just play with whatever. So it might be a vertical line. It might be this vertical line with lines going down the legs. It might be other lines intersecting in different ways. It might just be this kind of slightly amorphous luminous cloud of energy. But the imagination shapes the energy. And then that becomes an experience. It's no longer imagination. I'm actually experiencing this thing. And for samadhi, that can become useful.

The other two are probably less common. You can imagine your body as radiant and empty, even if you're not quite sure what empty means, or you're using it as fairly fundamental. When you tried that, was that interesting?

Partly this is the point. Look, all this stuff is not necessarily so far away. You just do this little game for thirty seconds or something, and stuff starts to happen. And how much the whole thing is conditioned, the whole thing is fabricated.

The experience of the body is fabricated by the mind, and that's fabricated by what I put in the mind, or what ideas, or what views, or what ways of looking, or what imagination. And even when I don't quite know exactly what I'm talking about, or thinking, or what it means, there's a magic in all this. There can be.

And how about the flying one? Yeah, some people like that. Good. You know, these are just little trigger practices, stimuli. That's how I'm using this—to get a sense of how sensitive a system the energy body is. And by energy body I mean the experience. It's so sensitive, so conditioned and fabricated by the littlest thing, by the smallest thing, by the subtlest thing.

So basically what I'm saying is you can either go to the energy body directly, and it might already be ready to work with, or you can play with the energy body in ways that don't really include metta or breath. But metta or breath, of course, will also shape the energy body.

I've never taught a group jhāna retreat before. All the jhāna retreat teaching I did was one-to-one. In a one-to-one interview, the person comes in and they report an experience. And out of everything from my experience and my teaching that I know about jhānas, I just select exactly what I feel they need right now to frame what just happened to them and give them the next thing to work on. And they take that away and usually I see them either three days later or a week later or whatever it is. Then again they come in with something and I'll give them a piece. In that way they don't get overwhelmed at all in terms of information overload.

When it comes to teaching a group retreat, I have to think differently, and I do, actually. Almost every group, a little different for some retreats, but in these kinds of retreats, I think very differently.

I remember being very young and being invited to birthday parties in the neighborhood. This must have been a very alien sort of ritual to both of my parents, but for me it just became a thing. You would go, you would get birthday cake with the candles and all that, and you'd have a slice of birthday cake. Then when you went home—I don't know, do they have this in the States?—you'd get a going home present, which is usually another piece of cake.

I think of this as like there's a big slab of birthday cake that's a going home present for you. So I'm inviting you to think of it that way if you're feeling like, ah, this is way too much.

I'm sitting here teaching to you now. I'm giving you something that I hope will be useful for you now. And certainly in interviews, that's exactly what I'm doing. But I'm also speaking to you—I'm also speaking to another you, the you that's alive and still wants to practice in a year's time. And another you, the you that's still alive and wants to practice jhānas in five years' time or ten years' time. So I'm actually speaking to multiple yous. And between you, you can eat all that birthday cake.

I'm also—and for me this is actually really important—I'm speaking to people who are not in this room. All this is being recorded, if Nathan's doing his job right. And I've been very conscious of that for years. So I feel like I'm speaking to people I will probably never meet. I'll never know them, I'll never even know that they listened.

They may be somewhere, for all kinds of reasons, they're not able to come. It's not even just a matter of timing. Maybe they can't afford to come on retreat. Maybe they have a health situation that prevents something like that. Maybe they have family obligations or work, whatever it is. So when I teach most group retreats, I'm actually thinking of other people that neither you nor I—I mean you might meet some of them, I might meet a few of them—but there's people that we will never meet and they matter to me a lot. Not more than you of course, but they matter to me a lot, especially the people who would not be able to come and who are out there really nowadays with the Dharma and the internet in the middle of nowhere. They have very little sangha and they have very little direct teacher access and they can listen to this stuff on the web.

So I'm also, in a way, speaking to you, your future selves and these people. Maybe when you have more time and when you can take more time with this material. When actually a little later on, however later on, things will make more sense, some things will make more sense, when you will actually be able to realize—because of what's come in between, partly you've understood emptiness more, or something else, you've done other practices, or something in your conception has opened, or your practice has deepened—when actually you'll be able to realize more of the significance of some of the things that are being talked about.

You'll also maybe realize how it fits together. Sometimes it might just be, that and that and this, and what the hell's that got to do with other Dharma I've heard, and emptiness and all the rest of it. And also maybe sometimes where you will literally hear things that you're not hearing now. You think, well, I was in the room when they said that and I've just heard it now on the sixth time I'm listening or whatever.

So it could be you in the future with your daily home practice, off retreat and just giving yourself a period of time when you're really getting into jhāna practice. It could be you in some time when you've decided to do a three-year jhāna retreat just on jhānas. And why not if you want to? That would be a beautiful thing to do. And my hope is that the material in this retreat will serve you all through those three years.

You basically have what you need. That's how I'm thinking about it. I know that some of you are finding this no problem, but I also know that some of you are struggling with all this material. The way I get my head around it is to open the view—open it time-wise, people-wise, in every direction.

Someone said to me once, a year or two ago: "I hate it when you talk about sensitivity, Rob. And that word 'subtle'—it really winds me up!" *[Laughter]* With this person, I think the Pali was pushing against a self-view they held, that they weren't sensitive and couldn't access subtlety. I'll come back to that in a moment.

But first, let's get clear about the simplest big picture understanding you need. We've talked about a base practice or springboard practice, right? The criterion—the most preferable criterion we're adopting—for what should be my base or springboard practice is whatever makes pīti easiest to arise and most reliably. That's it. I choose my base practice based on whatever practice gives rise most reliably and most easily to pīti. Actually, let's not even say pīti—to feeling good in this space, to the body feeling good. Let's just say that. That's one large principle if you're feeling a bit lost.

The second large principle regarding the instructions—a simple global take on them—involves this idea of a learning edge playground. What is that? I want to find what my learning edge playground is and marinate in it. I want to hang out there. That's the place where I spend ninety percent of my time, if I can.

This marinating includes working, playing, and tweaking. It doesn't mean just hanging out there in some kind of stupor or non-responsive, non-attuned, non-active way. So what's my learning edge playground? I need to marinate there, which includes working, playing, and tweaking. I need to work, play, and tweak until I have mastered all the... what do you call the things in a playground—the slide and all those... the collective word? Equipment. All the equipment. That's somehow not a very romantic word, but I've mastered all the equipment in that particular playground.

I want to marinate there and master it, both of which require working, playing, and tweaking. If, as you're listening to this, you can already do A, B, and C of what I've listed regarding mastery—what's involved in mastery—but you can't do D, whatever that is, then D is exactly what you need to be working and playing with. That's where you want to fill out your sense of what mastery involves at that level.

If you can already do all the elements involved in mastery at a certain level—let's say with the first jhāna—then either it should be the case that naturally, organically, by that point, the second jhāna has already appeared just naturally, inevitably. That's usually what happens. It's already evolved to the next jhāna organically—the second jhāna from the first.

If that's not the case, if you've really developed all the mastery but it's still not happening, then it needs a little bit of wizardry, trickery—subtle little things you can try that just nudge and encourage it, that encourage that sapling, that sprout to come, the bud to unfold and show itself. That's what you need to bring to interviews, or if not, we'll obviously address it in the teachings.

When we talk about playground, it could be any jhāna. But your playground could also still be the base springboard practice. It doesn't matter. What matters is understanding these basic orienting principles.

Does that make sense? That's the big picture for orienting to these instructions.

I started to say before—if very little of this energy business makes sense, or this talk about sensitivity and subtlety feels foreign, or perhaps like that person I mentioned who said, "I really don't like all this talk about energy and attunement and subtlety and sensitivity"—if that's the case, and if you're not even sure which base practice, which springboard practice actually feels best, then just choose one.

Actually, I don't think this applies to anyone at this point in this room, but I'll say it anyway: just choose one. For example, just choose the breath at the nostrils or in the abdomen.

And if you don't like all this talk about sensitivity and energy, then just concentrate on that point. Concentrate on the feelings and sensations at that point. When the mind gets distracted, come back to it and concentrate on it again. And when the mind gets distracted again, return and concentrate without judging, without any to-do—just come back again and again and again. Return a googolplex times. You know what a googolplex is? It's ten to the ten to the ten—anyway, it's a lot. Just over and over and over. It's really basic instruction. Just do that.

To which we'll add two more pieces of instruction. One is: when a hindrance arises, do not sit there putting up with it. Do something about it. From that list we gave, just do something about the hindrance.

The second piece of instruction: can I learn to refine my concentration a little bit? This means playing with those three things I mentioned—intensity, delicacy, and directionality. In other words, play with those, learn to move the sliders up and down, turn the dials up and down.

So if you don't like any of this other stuff, just do that. Do that and trust in it, and it will deliver its fruit.

Okay, so maybe we'll stop there. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 206

Q & A

Rob Burbea · 20 min

> *In this Q&A session from the 'Practising the Jhānas' retreat, Rob Burbea addresses key questions about jhāna meditation practice. He clarifies that both pīti (rapture) and sukha (happiness) are present in the first and second jhānas, contrary to some interpretations suggesting one is primary over the other. Drawing from experiential understanding rather than strict canonical interpretation, he explains pīti as predominantly physical pleasure and sukha as happiness with many wavelengths.*
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> *Burbea explores the jhānic factor of ekaggatā (one-pointedness), explaining how according to Abhidhamma, it's present in every moment of consciousness but becomes particularly developed in jhānic states through increased absorption. He addresses practical questions about navigating between different meditation states, including how to work with experiences that include imaginal elements like 'the breath of God' while maintaining jhānic focus.*
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> *The discussion covers energy management in intensive practice, the role of supportive images in accessing different types of pīti, and how to maintain alertness with increasingly subtle meditation objects. Burbea emphasizes the importance of recognizing primary versus secondary factors in any meditative state and adapts his guidance to individual practitioners' experiences and intentions, whether focusing on jhāna development or other contemplative approaches.*

Yeah, so Karen's asking about the interpretation of piti being primary in the first jhana and sukha being primary in the second jhana, and also about the translation of those words.

As far as I know, that's not in the Pali Canon—that piti is primary and sukha is secondary. As far as I know, they're both factors of both the first and second jhana. I guess I'm just speaking from experience, also from how I was taught originally by one of my teachers. So I'm speaking from the way experience tends to mature. I think even for people who are not told what to wait for or don't even know what they're supposed to be looking for, it would just tend to mature that way.

As for the translations, yeah, it's interesting reading. Sometimes you get delight or pleasure or joy or all kinds of different translations. So I'm just speaking from experience about piti as predominantly felt physical pleasure, although it's a perception, and sukha is predominantly happiness, but it has a lot of wavelengths.

Boaz is asking, in terms of this word ekaggata, the way I translate it, what makes it special as a jhanic factor versus a factor that might be present in any insight practice?

Actually, in the Abhidhamma, which is very—I don't know what you call it—various sort of black and white definitions about factors of consciousness in Theravada Buddhism... Actually, Mahayana also has their own version. They say ekaggata is a factor that's present in every state of consciousness. So not even just in meditation or just in jhana. The mind always has one thing prominent to some degree.

So it's a question of how much is one thing prominent. Then you would tend to think, okay, well, the ekaggata of the eighth jhana must be better than the ekaggata of the first jhana, but not necessarily. It can vary. I would say it can vary, but basically it's just a factor. It's a fact of being conscious, of having a perception that there's one thing that's kind of more prominent in the perception.

So it's not particular to samadhi or jhana practice. It gets developed more in jhana practice. It becomes a kind of important... it becomes developed in a jhanic state or a samadhi state. But it's something that's there anyway, in any moment of consciousness. It means that it gets stronger and stronger or you make it stronger and stronger. So a jhanic state is very absorbed. There's really just one thing. It's like you're really into that thing more and more.

So the question is, I've been told to sort of stay in the first jhana as much as possible, but other states are coming up. And is it okay to go there? Should I go there and just trust them or not? And I want to go there. They're much nicer. Can you describe what they are? What's going on? What kind of?

Very settled. Okay. So you're describing a place where it is sort of like white velvet and very settled, and like the breath of God is there and very lovely.

Yeah. So, you know, again, it's about context. So you could, if we're looking at things from a jhana lens, of everything you just said, we sort of map that onto a jhana territory—which are the significant nimittas there and which are the less significant nimittas?

If we're doing imaginal practice, soul-making practice, then actually it's the breath of God that's the most significant thing there. And the fact that it's velvety is great and the fact that it's serene is great, but actually it's the breath of God that's most significant.

If you're doing jhana practice, then actually what's most significant is the serenity there. So it might be, from what you're saying—we'd have a longer conversation—it might be that the serenity there is something akin to something in the third jhana. It's much more kind of subtle and exquisite and lovely that way. It might be, we'd have to have a slightly longer conversation.

But if you want to go into that and explore it, it's almost like that needs to become the primary jhana factor—the serenity. And it might be that the sense of the breath of God and the white velvet support it for a while, but after a while, they'll become kind of secondary. You realize, oh, it's a territory that is characterized primarily by that kind of serenity. You recognize its particular bandwidths and those other factors become secondary.

But it depends what you want. If you want jhanas, then it depends what we emphasize, what we pull out of that mix of what's most important.

It's funny, I only know you really from imaginal practice, so I don't know what else you've done in terms of insight practice and all that. But it could be, like I said today, that for you, there has been a training where the mind goes a lot towards a kind of serenity, and doesn't really like all this bubbly stuff.

So again, either you decide, actually, I'm not really into the jhana practice—I want to make this an imaginal space. My request would be not on this retreat, but you can come back to that. You'll have plenty of access to all these kinds of things at other times.

If you do want it to be jhana, then the question becomes: which first? Which should I develop first? Or should I even develop these things in parallel? So demarcate, really get used to: okay, this state is definitely different than this one. I prefer that one, but I'm actually interested in mastering them both and being able to hang out with them both and finding them both lovely. Either you decide, I'm going to do this first and that second, or that first and this second, or I'm going to do them kind of in parallel.

Does that sound okay?

To me, there's nothing wrong with experiencing the breath of God there. It's just that if that becomes primary, technically speaking, it takes you in a slightly different direction, which is gorgeous and beautiful, incredibly fruitful, but it's slightly different than what we're doing. So it can be there as a support for a while, but at some point, you have to hone in on what's the primary factor in any state.

This is one of the things—it's hard doing a retreat over Zoom. What you need to do is come to an interview and describe in a bit more detail, and we could map the jhanas onto those. That will tell you what to make more primary in each state if you want to develop the jhanas. And then exactly the order in which you develop your mastery of those, if that's what you want, is partly dependent on your history and things like that.

This is one of the situations where you would need to have a bit of a map because there's actually an infinite amount of lovely states that a human being can find themselves in—infinite. When you start including soul-making stuff, it becomes completely infinite. It really depends. Certain honings or certain magnetism to this, or priority of this, will direct you in certain ways. If you ask me, is it better or worse? It's not really about that. It's just, what do we want to do right now?

I can't see who that is at the back. Is it Sabra? Is there a reason I haven't listed out the eight jhanas? I did in one of the first two talks, but very quickly. The way I'm thinking about it is, we're focusing mostly on pīti in the first jhana, and then I'll give more detail about each jhana. That's just one way of going about it. Probably because that's where most people will be.

I read them very quickly. Why would you want that? To give you a sense of whether you're slipping into something else right now?

It's interesting. I guess we could have done it that way. I would usually do that in an interview with someone, like I described, but it might be that it would take quite a lot of description from me for you to really get an accurate sense of is that it, or where is it? I'm not sure. Maybe one time—well, I probably won't get the chance—but that would be another way of doing it. But I think it would take really quite a lot of description because there's a lot of states.

When I talked about some people who have done a lot of insight meditation getting into a state of equanimity, I said I actually have to explain a few things about equanimity, because the Buddha talked about...

These different shades of equanimity require considerable explanation. The Buddha spoke of equanimity based on singleness, equanimity based on multiplicity, and equanimity in relation to the eight worldly conditions. Then there's equanimity as an almost jhanic state—sometimes based on multiplicity, sometimes on singleness. Without extensive description, it would be difficult for you to accurately locate yourself on this map of states.

In individual teaching, this approach is quite common for me. I listen carefully, pick up the signals, and ask clarifying questions. But teaching a group to practice jhana this way—with this whole emphasis on mastery and marinating—presents unique challenges. The subtle distinctions require careful explanation: "It's something like what you may have experienced, but actually it's quite different." Without that precision, I'm not sure what the purpose would be in simply listing states.

This whole practice demands tremendous energy—much more than you might expect. Even when you've established the pleasant feeling and are doing this subtle work of sustaining it, the practice simultaneously delivers enormous energy while requiring great energetic investment. It's a fascinating paradox.

When you find yourself getting tired, the question becomes: Do I need to return to the base practice, or is there a way to minutely adjust how I'm working that makes it more sustainable? There isn't always a black-and-white answer. Generally, if fatigue arises, it's either time to rest or perhaps time for the base practice.

But as your practice develops, you discover more options. You might be playing in the second jhana and feel tiredness arising, so you shift to the seventh jhana and return refreshed with abundant energy. Or you might be working in the fourth jhana, feel your energy flagging, and return to the first jhana to restore vitality—or even go back to simple breath awareness.

This practice isn't formulaic in that way. That's part of what I mean by the improvisational quality. Sometimes you can stay exactly where you are—with whatever pleasant feeling you're working with—and find a way to access more energy right there. Sometimes you need to shift to something different. The key is learning to feel your way into what's needed in each moment.

Nicole raises an excellent question about images that sometimes accompany different types of pleasant feelings—perhaps a snowflake or other visual forms that seem to support and even trigger specific pleasant feelings. Can we work with these images, or should we drop them as quickly as possible?

This phenomenon is actually quite common, and I'd say it's entirely a matter of intention. Images can remain present in the background, and as long as they're helpful—supporting the pleasant feeling and helping you access it more readily—they're perfectly fine. You can play with the balance: how much to emphasize the pleasant feeling versus how much to let the image fade. Sometimes an image might be quite primary initially, serving as a kind of launching pad, but the pleasant feeling must ultimately become the primary focus.

Eventually, you won't need these visual supports as much. As I mentioned, the pleasant feeling will simply arise when you remember it. What you're all discovering is an arsenal of little techniques for navigating these different stages. You'll learn various tricks for moving from first to second jhana, some from instruction and many through your own exploration.

After some time, you may find you no longer need these transitional supports. Other images might accompany your jhana practice for extended periods, providing ongoing support while remaining mostly in the background—occasionally moving more into the foreground when you need to amplify the experience.

Does that clarity help with your practice?

As we deepen our practice and progress through the jhanas, we learn to pay attention to increasingly subtle objects. We develop the capacity to sustain our attention on these more refined states. This is part of the art—at every level, your attention must be trained anew for each new degree of subtlety.

There's an art to remaining truly awake with something that becomes subtler and calmer. When the pīti becomes more relaxing and soft, your attention needs to change accordingly. Perhaps it requires a more subtle quality of awareness—a gentler way of enjoying that smoothness. You must discover the right stance to take with these refined states.

This might also signal that another state is beginning to emerge, where pīti is no longer the primary object. A different kind of body energy may be presenting itself. The question becomes: what does it mean to stay present with that? How can you remain fully alert with something so subtle?

All the principles we've discussed about subtle work and play apply here. When we talked about the hindrances, we noted that sleepiness represents a kind of closing down—comfortable, yes, but ultimately a shutting off of awareness. You might need to open yourself more fully, asking: "How can I enjoy this to the maximum?"

The key questions become: Is it more sustaining that's needed? More opening? More maximizing of enjoyment? Again, this returns to our fundamental inquiry of what needs emphasizing in this moment—finding what actually helps among all the possibilities.

It might be less about the drowsiness itself and more about opening and discovering the full enjoyment available. The state may be enjoyable, but perhaps you're not maximizing that enjoyment or opening to it in quite the right way. This incomplete opening is what tends to tip the experience toward sleepiness rather than deeper absorption.

Let's take just a little quiet time together now.

CHAPTER 207

The First Jhāna, and Playing and Working in (and out of) any Jhāna

Rob Burbea · 1h30

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Rob Burbea provides detailed instruction on the first jhāna and the art of working skillfully within any jhānic state. He begins by examining the Buddha's soap simile and the five jhāna factors (jhānāṅga), offering fresh perspectives on commonly mistranslated terms like vitakka and vichāra, and ekaggatā (often rendered as 'one-pointedness' but better understood as 'one thing prominent'). Burbea emphasizes that pīti (rapture/delight) is the primary factor to focus on in the first jhāna, not mere concentration techniques.*
>
> *The talk introduces the practical framework of 'SASSIE' - Suffusion, Absorption, Sustaining (both attention and the primary factor), and Enjoyment - as guidelines for deepening jhānic practice. Burbea addresses common obstacles like difficulty allowing full enjoyment due to psychological or religious conditioning, and provides guidance on transitioning between formal sitting practice and daily activities while maintaining jhānic qualities. He emphasizes the importance of 'marinating' in states rather than quickly moving through them, and discusses the development of mastery through patient, playful engagement with these refined states of consciousness. The teaching balances technical precision with practical accessibility, making these profound meditative states approachable for sincere practitioners.*

So today I was planning to talk about the first jhāna and then tomorrow discuss playing and working in any jhāna—but also out of any jhāna, or playing and working in and out of any jhāna. But then I decided to combine these two themes since they interrelate: the first jhāna as well as playing and working in and out of jhāna in general as one talk.

After this, the teachings will get a lot less dense. There should be much more breathing room in terms of how much material is coming at you. This is slightly complicated by the fact that I have a hospital appointment tomorrow, and I have no idea how long that will take. I hope it won't be complicated—that I can go there, come back and finish the second part of the talk if I don't finish today. Maybe we'll finish today. Maybe we'll have to get bumped until the day after tomorrow. Maybe I can come tomorrow. Let's see how we do.

So, first jhāna and playing and working in and out of any jhāna.

For the first jhāna, the Buddha starts with a simile: just as a skilled bath man or his assistant, kneading the soap powder which he has sprinkled with water, forms from it in a metal dish a soft lump so that the ball of soap powder becomes one oily mass bound with oil so that nothing escapes—so this practitioner suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates their body so that no spot remains untouched.

Fills and irradiates their body with what? With the pīti and sukha born of detachment. Detachment from what? Detachment from the hindrances. That's what detachment means in this case. With this pīti and sukha, born of detachment from the hindrances—sometimes called seclusion from the hindrances, or withdrawal from the hindrances—she so suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates her body that there is no spot in her entire body that is untouched by this delight, by this pīti and sukha born of detachment.

So the soap simile is really a simile for what we do with the pīti and sukha: suffuse, saturate, steep, drench, irradiate, pervade, permeate—all these words. We do that with the pīti and sukha.

Pīti and sukha translate best, I think, as happiness. In the first jhāna, the pīti is the primary quality. I'm going to come back to this. The sukha is there and one is definitely not unhappy. One is conscious that one is happy, very happy, but actually even the consciousness that one is happy might be a little bit in the background. One is more taken by, captivated by, and should be concentrating on the pīti. The pīti is what is foremost in consciousness.

The Buddha describes the jhānas through similes like this, and at other times in terms of their factors—what are called jhāna factors, jhānaṅga in Pāli. So pīti and sukha, these two Pāli words, are two of the five factors of the first jhāna.

Another factor is ekaggatā, and actually it's a factor of every jhāna—ekaggatā in Pāli. This usually gets translated as one-pointedness. I've already touched on this. It absolutely cannot mean putting the mind in a small spatial point. Now, you might do that. In fact, you probably will do that at times in a jhāna if you're playing with this probing, receiving, open, directed shifting of the modes of attention. But it cannot mean one-pointedness in a spatial sense because it's a factor of the fifth jhāna, which is infinite space. You realize there's a complete contradiction if you take it as a spatial point.

So what does it mean? Eka means "one," agra (with ta as just a suffix) means something like a mountain peak or a prominence. Of course, some mountains are quite pointy like that. But what's best translated is something like "one thing is prominent"—eka-prominentness. One thing is prominent.

What is that one thing that becomes prominent? People argue about this. Is it the original meditation object? Is it the breath? Is it the body that becomes prominent, the sense of the body? Or is it the pīti?

I would say that in jhāna what happens is they all get mixed together. I'm breathing pīti. If you're still with the breath, if the breath is still there, or the body has become pīti, or it's just the pīti that's prominent. I would say the pīti is what's prominent. In a way, it's the most significant factor of the first jhāna. Let's say that. So pīti is the thing that's most prominent to consciousness. It's not that other things, other aspects, other dimensions of the jhāna won't come into consciousness—they will. But the most prominent thing, and what should be the most prominent thing, is the pīti.

So pīti and sukha, two factors. Ekaggatā, a third factor. I'm not saying these in the order they're usually presented. Then there are two more factors which get to—in Pali—vitakka and vicāra.

Now most of you, if you've heard these terms before, any translation, will have heard the translations "initial and sustained application." Who's heard that before? Really, really common. Certainly what I was taught for many years. One of my original meditation teachers—I was originally taught by a group of teachers—one of them was a professor of Pali, is a professor of Pali. So not a professor of Buddhism, not even a professor of Theravadan Buddhism, but a professor of Pali. That's his thing.

He said that's not what it meant at the time of the Buddha. At that time, that's not how those words were used. Vitakka and vicāra just meant something like thinking. In English, do we have a kind of double verb? You always say this and this. No, but I mean, as a phrase, it doesn't matter. So it was a stock phrase in Pali, and it just meant thinking originally.

About 500 years after the Buddha, in Sri Lanka, a monk called Buddhaghosa wrote a book called the Visuddhimagga, which translates as "the path of purification." In some Theravadan countries, it's regarded as a Bible. They really revere this book. And in some countries, much, much less so. The story goes that actually it was a compilation—what he did was interview lots of meditation masters, take what they had—I heard this obviously secondhand, I wasn't there—take what they gave him, throw out what he didn't like, although he himself was not much of a meditator, throw out what he didn't like, burn what he threw out, and keep the rest. I don't know if that's true, but I've heard that.

Anyway, I think, if the history is right, he translates it in Abhidhamma, which is a kind of technical, psychological bureaucracy of Theravadan Buddhism, also translates it as "initial and sustained application." But at the time of the Buddha, that's not how those words were used.

These are okay translations, actually, to a certain extent. At a certain point in your practice, if you keep those translations, it should occur to you this doesn't really make sense once you get into the other jhānas. But it's okay. And at a certain point, they stop making much sense. But to a certain extent, it's really okay.

So initial application means bringing my mind to whatever it is, the breath. I bring the mind. Initial application. Sustained application means, in the sense, I stay there and I probe it and I become intimate with it. That's usually the explanation that's given on Vipassana retreats and on, I guess, quite a lot of jhāna retreats.

One of my main teachers, Ajahn Geoff, translates them as "directed thought and evaluative thought." It's a very different translation. And what he means really is attending to whatever the object is and thinking about it. So this is in the first jhāna—thinking about the breath, thinking about the energy body, thinking about the well-being or the pleasure. What would help right now?

What would be helpful? How should I shift my emphasis? How should I view the breath? What way of looking should I play with?

He relates the word *vichara*, the second of those terms, to *dhammavichaya*, which—some of you will know—is the second factor of the seven factors of awakening: investigation. So there's a kind of investigative thinking about what's going on in the first jhana. At least, I would say, at least sometimes.

So we have, for these two terms, three possibilities: the most popular translation and interpretation of initial and sustained application; the second, which is simply thinking; and the third, directed and evaluative thinking, which really means this kind of creative questioning—what's helping right now? How should I play with this?

Which shall we choose? What are we going to do here? Do you want to know what I think? I think forget about it. Forget about those terms anyway. Just throw them out.

Of course you're going to apply initial and sustained application—of course you are. Just don't worry about it. If you're thinking about the meditation, great. We've talked about that. If you're working with *pīti*, great. It's fine. I think all this argument and tussle about these terms actually isn't that helpful. Again, what's actually important here?

I could say that at times the first jhana can include thinking about how the meditation is going, what's helpful, and so forth. But it's not the kind of thinking where you tell yourself, "I suck at this. I bet everyone else in here is in the eighth jhana. I should just go home." Not that kind of thinking.

If there's thinking, it's about what's happening—a very subtle kind of responsive, intelligent, connected thinking about the practice. People ask me as a jazz musician, "Do you think when you play? You're improvising—do you think?" Well, yeah, but it's a different kind of thought. I'm not pondering long sentences. Or consider a painter really in the flow with their art—are they thinking or not thinking? Well, there may well be a certain thought, absolutely, as part of the flow.

We'll come back to this later when we talk about deeper jhanas, because one question we have is: what is a thought anyway? We'll return to that.

So for what it's worth, my two cents on this is: forget about it. Just get into it. Get into it, and this whole question of "what does that mean?" will take care of itself. Just get into the *pīti*, in this case. Enjoy it. Get intimate with it as much as you can—the fullness of connection with it, spreading it, really opening to enjoying it, seeing how much you can enjoy it. If you just do that—don't worry about whether there's thinking—just get into it more, and it becomes a non-question.

Even in the second jhana, as you move to the second jhana, one of the factors is the dropping away of thinking. So it's a kind of factor of absence, if you like. But if I'm checking—"Am I thinking? Have there been any thoughts yet?"—or if I'm measuring how long I've not been thinking, or whether there's been thinking, or if I'm trying not to think—this I would say is not such intelligent practice for a number of reasons. One of which is that I'm putting my emphasis on the least significant factor, the least helpful factor of the second jhana.

I'm going to come back to this obviously when we talk about the second jhana.

I think I've said already—it seems from my experience teaching that if you can get to the first jhana, then actually all the jhanas are available to you with a lot of work. So if you can get to the first jhana, you can master—in the sense that I mean it—you can master all the jhanas.

It will take a long time and a lot of work and a lot of dedication, but it's possible if that's the sort of thing that you want. I actually would like to revise that statement. I mentioned this briefly before, but I want to say instead: if pīti can arise, you can do all that. If pīti can arise, there's no reason you can't attain the first jhāna and then have access to all the jhānas.

So actually, the arising of pīti should give you tremendous confidence. It's saying the road is clear—it's open. All you have to do is walk. Yes, it might be hard at times. It's a long way. You're going to need a lot of ingenuity and dedication. But the path is open. There's nothing in the way for you. That road is available.

Who's heard another Pali word: *nimitta*? Do you understand by nimitta something in the context of jhāna practice—something like the appearance of a visual, luminous form with some detail in it that you can then concentrate on that will take you into jhāna?

Again, the Buddha never used that word in this way. He uses the word nimitta, but never in that context. This understanding comes from the Visuddhimagga and later texts. In English, it's often translated as "counterpart sign," at least in the older translations.

In the Pali Canon—meaning in the words of the Buddha—he does use that word, but more as "object of perception." Any object of perception in meditation is a nimitta. Sometimes he uses it in a way that would translate as something like "theme"—a theme of meditation.

In the Mahāyāna teachings, it's the same word in Sanskrit, but it has the additional meaning of "ground" or "base," connected with emptiness teachings and teachings about groundlessness. So it has quite a different emphasis in Mahāyāna teachings.

We can use that word—I don't mind using it, and I don't mind if you want to use it—but I would like to use it in a slightly different way: as "sign." That's usually how nimitta is translated—it means sign. And it's a sign that the samādhi is deepening. Any sign that samādhi is deepening.

So the arising of pīti is a sign that samādhi is deepening. The arising of sukha, of happiness, is a sign that samādhi is deepening. The arising of a really otherworldly, pristine, pure, luminous stillness is also a sign. The arising of the perception of space as a very clear perception is a sign at different levels that the samādhi is deepening.

Some people also get, for instance, while meditating at some point it's almost like a white-golden light—this is very common—like white-golden suffused light or a kind of cloud of light in the mind. Sometimes a person's not sure if they're meditating and they wonder, "Did the sun just come out?" because everything's just become very bright. This too, that white light, is also a sign that the samādhi is deepening.

But the primary nimitta—again, the most important thing to put the attention on and the most important thing around which the whole practice converges—in the first jhāna, the primary nimitta is the pīti, if you want to use that word. In the second jhāna, the primary factor is the sukha, the happiness. We'll come back to that.

So in the first jhāna, pīti has arisen through one way or another, however it has arisen. In order then to consolidate it and move into an absorption in it, which is the first jhāna, what needs to be there and what do we need to do? These are some of the things I want to address. What kind of work, what kind of play?

How strong does the pīti have to be? I think I've touched on this already. There's a huge range in terms of the intensity of the pīti that's possible—a massive range—but it does need to be strong enough. It does need to be strong enough that it's definitely pleasurable before I can start working with it and trying to take that pīti and mold it, shape it, allow it to open and take me into the first jhāna. It needs to be strong enough, which doesn't necessarily mean "blow your head off."

It also needs to sustain long enough. I think I mentioned this yesterday. So it needs to be around for, let's say, two or three minutes at least without going away. Two or three minutes, strong enough that it's definitely pleasant—then it's ready. Then I can decide to take that as my primary object and really get into it and work and play, and there's the possibility that this moves into the first jhāna.

In the first four jhanas—called rupa jhanas, which translates as "form jhanas"—something fascinating unfolds. Rupa has various meanings, but here we can understand it as "form." What's happening as we progress through one, two, three, four, is that our perception of the body becomes increasingly subtle.

The happiness of the second jhana might be super intense—perhaps a happiness we've never experienced, more joy than we've known in our entire life. Yet as an object of meditation, it's still more refined than the piti. Piti is, relatively speaking, gross—a coarse object, like rough cloth compared to really fine silk. This distinction between intensity and refinement is crucial to understand.

In the third jhana, the particular kind of peacefulness that arises is extraordinarily subtle. That's part of its beauty. It's more subtle than the happiness of the second jhana. As we pervade, saturate, and suffuse ourselves with these experiences, something remarkable occurs: these primary factors—the piti, the sukha—become the body itself.

What is my body now? I no longer sense organs and solidity in the usual way. The ordinary solidity we normally experience—hard bones, organs, and so forth—is more gross than the refinement of the piti, which is itself more gross than the sense of solidity in the happiness state. Can we even call it "solidity" at that point? There's a spectrum here of increasing refinement or subtlety in our perception of the body.

Having drenched, suffused, and saturated myself completely, my body has become piti. My body and breath have become happiness, and there's this spectrum of ever-greater refinement. When we reach the fifth jhana, any sense of form or body disappears entirely—it's just space. In a way, that's ultra-refined, almost nothing at all.

Piti is important in many ways. I want to emphasize how crucial it is to keep it around, maintain our access to it, and continue considering it lovely and resourceful, even when our playground has become the seventh or eighth jhana. Sometimes we enter those formless jhanas when that's our focus, then want to return—to skip back from the eighth to the third or fourth. But we can't find the body vibration of stillness characteristic of the fourth jhana, or the peacefulness of the third.

The whole perception has become so ultra-refined from the deeper formless jhanas that we cannot locate what we need to enter the third or fourth jhana—we need that particular vibration, that specific bandwidth of refinement. What really helps is going all the way back to piti, the first one, getting that established again. Then the third or fourth becomes more accessible.

What I'm sharing today isn't just about the first jhana—it's about working and playing in general. Much of this will be relevant whatever stage you're at, will remain relevant years from now.

Sometimes piti is an acquired taste. We might not be sure how keen we are on it initially. This is definitely possible, actually with any jhana. We might fall in love immediately, feeling its loveliness as a resource, becoming super excited about it. Or it might take time to appreciate.

An interesting phenomenon occurs with the majority of people when they start working on the third jhana—that very peaceful, exquisite serenity that's one of its main characteristics. When they return to the first jhana and all that piti, it feels so coarse. One becomes a bit of a jhana snob: "I don't want anything to do with that." Relatively speaking, it is quite gross compared to the third jhana.

Still, in the context of whole jhana practice, we want to keep it. We might need to rediscover our enjoyment, re-feel it as enjoyable and pleasurable. It's quite interesting.

Sometimes—and this is actually quite common—if a practitioner has done extensive insight meditation practice, the order in which they experience jhanas is not one, two, three, four. Most insight meditation teaching follows a pattern: be mindful, things arise, watch them, let them go, watch them, let them go. In this aware, mindful letting go, what are we cultivating? A kind of equanimity.

After many years of insight meditation practice and retreats, one develops a groove in the citta toward equanimity. Maybe not a jhanic state of equanimity, but some kind—I'll need to explain different types of equanimity later. Basically, equanimity becomes a common resting place for the mind trained in insight meditation.

Then what happens? One attends a jhana retreat wanting to learn the jhanas...

But what might happen is the mind just goes straight to something resembling the fourth jhana, or one of the formless states—though these might be quasi-formless states where the senses remain open. These are states that feel like infinite space or infinite consciousness, but they're actually not those jhanas. The senses are still somewhat engaged—I'll explain the difference later—but there's something akin to the fourth, fifth, or sixth jhana.

It becomes quite difficult for that person to access piti, because again, piti is too agitated, and the mind has developed this groove toward equanimity. So they find themselves in some state that may not be the fourth jhana exactly, but close enough that—and this is the sort of thing I usually work out in an interview with someone—maybe it's skillful if we start with the fourth jhana. We take that stillness you've cultivated and really hone it, making it very consolidated, very bright, very powerful. Master that, and then go backwards.

So the order of mastery doesn't necessarily happen one, two, three, four. I feel like I've expressed that somewhat clumsily, but does that make sense?

Many of you have done extensive insight practice as well, and this dynamic is quite interesting. There can be this genuine habit toward equanimity—sometimes this habit is both entrenched enough and powerful enough that you keep finding yourself in territory closer to the fourth jhana.

Sometimes a person skips the second jhana, which is characterized by abundant happiness. There may be various psychological reasons for this, or perhaps there's some resistance to piti. We touched on this yesterday.

Regarding the arupa jhanas, the formless jhanas, the progression doesn't necessarily follow five, six, seven, eight either. For me, if I remember correctly, the sixth was easier than the fifth, and I found myself learning them both simultaneously. Certain minds, depending on their inclinations, experience, and training, will find different formless jhanas easier than others. Perhaps it's acceptable to follow the order in which things naturally open up for you.

But I retain my vision of where we're going with this. Imagine a sort of checklist grid for mastery of each of the eight jhanas. Can I really dwell and sustain? Can I marinate? Can I access it at will? Can I move fluidly between states? Eventually, I want to look at that grid for each of the eight jhanas and all those mastery skills and have them all accomplished. The order in which that completion happens perhaps doesn't matter so much. You understand?

So it depends on the individual. I haven't heard this particular pattern from anyone on this retreat, but I encounter it quite commonly as a teacher. Past tendencies and experience in meditation very much affect what opens up when and in what order.

But we do want this differentiation. It's absolutely crucial. This is this, and that is that. This is the second jhana, and that's the third jhana. This is the first jhana, and that's the second. This is piti, and that's sukha—whatever the distinction may be. This differentiation is part of cultivating and developing sensitivity.

Without that differentiation, as I mentioned, something will grind to a soupy, undifferentiated halt at some point. It will be pleasant, but the possibility of really deepening insight will be limited.

Each jhana to the next represents a kind of quantum leap—it's as if I'm in a different realm entirely. Mostly, this is the actual experience. Do you know what a quantum leap means? It means there's nothing in between. Here's one state, and here's another state, and there isn't anything bridging them. I'm simply here, and then suddenly I'm there. A quantum leap.

Mostly, that's the experience of moving between jhanas.

They're discrete, quantumly differentiated states. But sometimes it will seem to you as much more of a spectrum—no, actually it is a continuum. Sometimes it will be experienced that way, and we can also view it that way. But I would say it's really important to have this discrete sense of quantum leap, quantum leaps between states.

One really large point, which I mentioned in one of the first two talks: rather than "Am I in or out of a jhāna?" can I just be thinking about jhāna practice? It's quite a different shift. So that means, for instance, the hindrances are part of jhāna practice. The place when I'm not sure whether I'm in or out—it doesn't really matter. The place where I said those terriers were yapping, maybe they do feel distant, they're on the edge of consciousness—it's still jhāna practice.

If I have that view, it's going to be much more fruitful, much more intelligent. So I have this view of a big picture of jhāna practice, which includes a huge range of territory of experience—not just these sharply defined so-called eight jhānas, but the whole territory: the grey areas, the "I'm clearly in a hell realm now," whatever. Even the way I walk around outside between formal sittings—it's jhāna practice because I'm walking around in a different way than I would if I was doing a Mahāsi retreat, a Goenka retreat, if I was just hanging out, if I was on my way to work.

So this is huge, actually, this view. What that means is there's work—or play, depending on your favorite word—in and out, on and off the cushion, but also in and out of a jhāna.

What's quite common the first time you enter what's a new jhāna for you—let's say the first time you hit the first jhāna or the second jhāna or whatever—what's quite common is that it seems completely effortless, at least the first maybe few times in that new realm. You've made that quantum jump and it seems completely effortless. The idea of working there or doing something or playing with something seems just a million miles away. It certainly won't even occur to you if you haven't been told about it.

But if you're really marinating—if you're just skipping through jhānas really fast, you won't notice this. You'll miss almost 99% of what's valuable about jhānas. You're just skipping right through. It's like skipping—"I've seen the Taj Mahal. I went there and pointed my phone at it while I was looking at something else."

If you hang out, if you really marinate, if you really start working and playing and bringing all your sensitivity and intelligence and awareness and openness and getting really intimate and getting to know them, after a few times at a new level that you've broken to, you start to realize: oh, there is work to do here, or there is play to do. There's lots to do, but it's very, very subtle. We're talking about very subtle work-play, mostly.

If you still feel it's a completely effortless state where you can't do anything, it's actually that you're in some kind of unconsciousness. And it's not going to be very helpful in your life.

So sometimes, then the work begins. I've had my little holiday at this new level, and then the work and the play begins. I get used to this—but what is it for the mind to really work in the most delicate ways, to really play in the most delicate ways, to learn about this jhāna, to consolidate it, to deepen it, to learn about its different spaces, levels, textures, aspects?

It can also be the case, and it commonly is the case, that when consciousness reaches a new level, when the citta reaches a new level, it's a bit like a dam bursting. Again, the first experience—the first jhāna, the second jhāna—it's as if a dam has just broken apart and the water is just gushing through. It can be very, very intense. And then again, as I get used to that jhāna, it seems to get less intense, or it often can.

So what work, what play, what's involved there? The principle of moving between these modes of attention—the probing, the receiving, the wider, the narrower. That's part of the work. Again, it's quite subtle, but it's part of the work. There's something active in a jhāna. There are other modes of attention that are possible. I could wrap the jhānic quality around the body and dissolve it in, or dissolve my body out. There are many things. Play. Find modes of attention that work. Creative.

Even if I say savor whatever is the primary nimitta, the primary factor of that—like the pīti in the first jhāna—to really relish it, to really savor it, actually involves a kind of active work. It's not just—if I really want to relish it to the max, I actually have to play with how I'm relating to it.

So there's an acronym that some of you who've met over the years with me individually have heard.

What do I need? When I'm in a jhana, I need to know what I need to do now. As I said, at first I don't do anything. I'm just there. It's going along. I'm going along on this momentum of the water through the burst dam. I'm not doing anything. I'm just like, "Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow." After a while, you see, "Oh, hold on, there is work to do."

What's the work that I have to do? What's important and what's not important? Because what's important tells me what work I have to do. What's not important is not part of the work that I have to do.

So there's an acronym: SASSIE. S-A-S-S-I-E. I'm not just sitting there—I'm doing something. Don't just sit there, do something. Sometimes you can go into non-doing, but again, that's really just a mode in the larger context.

So SASSIE. The first S stands for suffusion, as the Buddha said—suffusing, saturating the whole body. This is one of the things I'm working towards. Once the pīti is there, I'm working towards making sure—can I encourage, can I help the whole body space to be completely homogeneously suffused and saturated by the pīti? At some point it will be suffused and saturated. It's just done. Then that job is done. There's nothing more to do. What else am I going to do? It's suffused and saturated. So it's done. And we've talked about ways of playing with that and what to do when it doesn't quite work.

The A in SASSIE stands for absorption. Sometimes, I don't know if you've had this experience, but sometimes it's almost as if the pīti can feel—or whatever it is, the happiness or whatever—can feel almost like it's in front of you a little bit. You've got your citta and body here somehow, and it's kind of in front, or something like that. We're aiming to... Can I get more absorbed in it? Can I put myself and put the citta more inside it so I really feel like I'm in something? To me, I would say that absorption has no limit to it. There's no limit to it.

Let me say something else about the suffusion, then come back to the absorption. When I'm trying to suffuse, I'm not looking around my body, feeling which spaces don't have pīti. That's almost like turning your attention to the negative a little bit. It's more like just... Don't take it away from the pīti and obsess with what's wrong. Just let the pīti spread. Spread it out like you're spreading jam on toast, rather than attending to the negative. Remember that subtle inclination of mind towards negativity, towards what's wrong, towards not quite good enough.

Eventually, as I said, when we become more and more familiar with pīti and more and more familiar with moving in and out of the first jhāna, the pīti will be spread every time.

It's just normal.

And eventually when we're more and more familiar with it, with the pīti, as I mentioned yesterday—and I put a lot of emphasis on this—we can start, if we want sometimes, to see pain, to play with perception so we see pain as pīti. That painful area in the body, I see it as pīti and it's therefore pleasurable. You can do that all the way through the jhānas. So I could see the same painful spot as happiness or stillness or nothingness or whatever.

Now, when I say that, what's the point of that? It's not like, "Oh, that's a pretty handy thing. That can come in useful if you're uncomfortable on a long bus ride or whatever it is." Yes, it might, but that's not really the point. And it's certainly not the point to try and think, "Oh, now I can do that. Then I can live a pain-free life." That's not the point either. The Buddha had plenty of pain. I have plenty of pain. That's not the point.

The point is it's telling me something about the malleability of perception. It's telling me something about the dependence of appearances and experiences on the way of looking. Dependent on the way of looking, there's this experience. Dependent on another way of looking, there's a different appearance, a different experience. When I understand the emptiness of all things—in other words, that all appearances, all experiences do depend on the way of looking—when I really understand that, it empowers, or rather it tells me about, that means that perceptions are malleable and it empowers my ability to be malleable with perceptions.

So I said—I think it was yesterday—I said this is the most significant thing. This is the most significant thing in the Dharma. This is the most significant thing, or it's more significant, I think I said, than "Is this a correct jhāna? Am I in or out of that jhāna?" I said that, yeah? It's the most significant thing, but it's not our primary emphasis or intention on this retreat. So as a practice modality, it's secondary. In other words, just play with that a little bit once you're familiar with pīti and another jhāna factor. It doesn't become like the main practice.

So philosophically, in terms of its implications for our life and our understanding and our liberation, it's the most significant thing. In the context of jhāna retreat, it's a secondary practice, just something you can play with now and then. Do you understand the difference?

Back to the absorption thing. Can it be the case that we can be so absorbed that we don't hear sounds, for instance, you don't hear the birds chirp or sing or whatever it is, and the sense doors close? Again, the Pali Canon, the Buddha doesn't describe the first four jhānas that way. The Visuddhimagga does, I think. Sometimes in the Pali Canon, the Buddha says that happens in the formless jhānas, in jhānas five to eight. But other passages, the Buddha doesn't say that. He describes them with the senses still open.

So obviously, the Visuddhimagga is an improvement over what the Buddha said, right? Well, hold on. Make sure you don't have a notion of heresy. Or do you have a notion of heresy? Because some people approach Dharma axiomatically from the beginning—whatever the Buddha said is true and right and the authority. There's actually probably, I don't know what percentage of Buddhists approach Buddhism that way. So how are you doing with that one?

Is it possible that someone who lived after the Buddha could improve on the Buddha's teaching? I would say exactly the same thing. Why not? But I really mean that as a question, an actual question. If you think it's not possible, why? Why is it not possible? How are you thinking about the whole thing that something like that becomes not possible?

In every other field of human endeavor, there's the possibility of improving. So Einstein improved on Newton, who improved on Copernicus. At the moment, there's maybe something wrong with Einstein's theory.

We're going to need to improve on that pretty soon.

This raises an interesting question that I won't delve into fully here—I've discussed it elsewhere—but let's consider: if we accept that the Buddha's teaching is complete and perfect, then the question becomes straightforward. Do the senses close in jhana or not? Do I hear the birds or do I not hear the birds? If you decide the Buddha is right, then you hear the birds. End of discussion.

But if you think it's possible that someone could improve on the Buddha's teaching, then the question becomes more open. If you ask me whether anyone in the history of Buddhism has improved on the Buddha or on certain aspects of his teaching, I would say yes—I think Nagarjuna did. He took what the Buddha said somewhat briefly and didn't fully expand upon. If you know the Kaccayana Sutta and its teaching on the middle way between existence and non-existence, it's all there in the Pali Canon. But Nagarjuna took it, really expanded it, worked with it, explored its implications—to me, that's a genuine improvement. I'm not imposing this view on anyone, but that's my assessment.

So how are we going to decide about this question? Is the Visuddhimagga's assertion that your senses close and you can't hear the birds an improvement or not? Certainly, we're talking about deeper absorption, more intense absorption, because you can't hear anything. That must be better, right? More is more. More is better.

Again, I'd like us to use our intelligence here. If we're going to say it's better, why is it better? Why is deeper absorption necessarily better? This connects back to what I was discussing at the beginning: How am I thinking? How am I conceiving of the jhanas? How am I conceiving of awakening? And how am I understanding the place of jhanas in relation to awakening?

Why would deeper absorption be better? You have to explain the whole framework—what are we doing? Where are we going? What are we doing with jhanas? You can construct a conception that views jhanas as requiring laser-beam attention—that deep-

er absorption must be better because insight arises from this laser-beam attention that can dissect momentary reality, perceiving the super-fast arising and passing of the aggregates. This becomes "ultimate reality," seen through laser-beam attention. If I think that's the ultimate insight—well, I've been through all this before and won't repeat it all—but is more necessarily better? What is the actual fruit of that deeper absorption?

You can turn things around and investigate this directly. Spend time with people who have that degree of absorption, or who claim to have it. Learn about how they are, how their life unfolds, what their insight is like. Talk with them about deep insight questions. Does it bear fruit? What kind of fruit does it bear?

Absorption, I would say, is potentially infinite. However absorbed we are, the question remains: what work am I trying to do in practice, in this moment, in this jhana, or with this quality of awareness? Am I trying to get more absorbed? I can never reach the end of that continuum. Someone says, "Oh, I didn't hear the birds." Another person claims, "Well, someone could have been sawing off my neck with a chainsaw and I wouldn't have felt anything." Okay, that person might seem "better," but it doesn't matter. What's the fruit?

In terms of the relationship between work and play, absorption gives us a direction. However absorbed I am, I can always be more absorbed, but I don't need to worry so much about it. It's just a little bit more. It's not a question of "Do I have it or don't I have it?" "Is this real jhana because I can still hear the birds?"

It's not that question. It's just it gives you a direction that's open-ended. And that, in a way, takes the pressure off. And it avoids this whole question of do I have it, do I not have it? Do you understand?

So the work with that one, when you're suffused in the first samādhi, it's just done. I've done it. Okay, I don't have to bother about it. With this one, it's just a constant kind of part of the creative working and playing. Is it possible to get more inside it? Is it possible to get really, really into it? And it's open, so it's a direction that invites subtle work and play, but it's not something I'm going to fret about. One day might be better than the other, it doesn't matter.

Two S's in the middle of "sassie." Sustaining the pīti, or in the case of the first jhāna, whatever is the primary nimitta of whatever jhāna you're working in, and sustaining the attention on that. These two as well, I would say they're infinite and they're infinite in their possibilities. So however much we sustain, we can always increase the sustaining.

And if you look closely enough—and I don't want you to do this at the moment—if you look closely enough, you can see that there's micro nanoseconds, even if it's so sustained, the attention is so, so sustained. I just have to look at it in a certain way and see that there's micro nanoseconds where it wasn't. But don't do that. And I'll explain why at the end.

But it's a direction. I'm working towards, okay, this is right now what I need to work on. Really sustaining, really keeping the mind on this subtle object, on this refined object. Or if it feels like there's gaps in the pīti, again, or the happiness or whatever. If I look at it closely enough, I will see gaps. So again, it's something to bring a little more discernment, intelligence to, and it's just, however sustained those things are, they can be more sustained.

So I'm working, they're a direction of work, a direction of play, as opposed to an achievement thing and a definition thing. I define it as, it wasn't a jhāna because it was all going great and then I heard one bird chirp. So at that second there I was out of the jhāna and then the next second I was back in. It's all just—it's not that helpful to think that way. Just work on more sustaining.

S-A-S-S-I. The I is for intensity. So in this case if we're talking about the first jhāna it's the intensity of pīti. And I would say that actually doesn't matter. So again, the very common tendency would be like, well, it must be better if it's more intense, right? No, it actually doesn't matter. It has to be strong enough that it's pleasant. And that's it.

The intensity will vary over time. You will notice. You will also notice if you play with certain things, sometimes there's things you can do that build the intensity. Over time with the first jhāna—like, I mean, you know, a lot of time in and out of the first jhāna, a lot of marinating, a lot of experience and skill developing with it—the intensity will actually get less intense. It's like that mountain river that I was talking about. That's the direction of maturation, not more and more intensity.

So there's a certain way that the intensity of the first jhāna, A doesn't matter and B will anyway in its own time get less intense.

S-A-S-S-I-E is for enjoy, which sometimes I find myself having to say to people, it's almost like you want to meditate with a flashing neon sign that says enjoy, enjoy, enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. Sometimes it's almost like you say, you know, it may be that if you just really seek to maximize enjoyment in the moment over and over with whatever ingenuity and creativity and play you want, that that will basically take you where you

want to go and whatever needs to happen will happen just from the intention to maximize enjoyment. It's very different from is this it, is this not it, am I doing it right, et cetera.

But how many times have I heard from retreatants practicing jhāna, how difficult it is to allow oneself to really enjoy, to fully enjoy. And how so often we notice there's something holding back or something blocking or preventing. Sometimes it's a verbal—we actually say, this can't be right, this can't be, I don't know what they're teaching here, but it's not proper Dharma or whatever it is. Sometimes, or more often, it's actually more an energetic thing. We actually just feel ourselves holding back or preventing and then doubt comes, is this really okay, et cetera.

Sometimes it's because of one's past, maybe particular kinds of religious upbringings that kind of stress that anything spiritual or religious can't have enjoyment, have anything to do with it. Sometimes it might be our Dharma background, our Buddhist Dharma background that has again encouraged a sort of snobbishness around enjoyment.

Again, all because of certain views around where we're going and then certain views that get entrenched in terms of persona and all the rest of it. So this is so common. This is really, really common.

What needs to happen with this? Sometimes a person needs to actually inquire with themselves or with a friend or with the teacher. Actually, what are the views and what am I believing here? And what's actually at the root of this psychology, this belief?

Perhaps more often though, it just gets fixed without a big psychological process. It just gets fixed moment to moment. Okay, I notice I'm a little bit holding back the bliss. Can I just enjoy it? What would it be like—can I just this moment—can I just find, can I just really savor it and relish it? Can I just really open to it? So you're just moment to moment encouraging the enjoyment, and that is changing the psychological habit patterns, deeply entrenched psychological habit patterns around enjoyment, around spirituality.

So more often I've noticed it can be healed, that pattern, that holding, that prevention can be healed just by moment to moment, again and again. I don't have to have a big psychological process about it, but sometimes some people do. It's really helpful to inquire into that.

The work, the play, it's very labile. It's very responsive. It's very agile. What is the work play right now? What do I need to do right now? And sometimes it is: enjoy what you have. Enjoy what you have. Maximize the enjoyment. Again, how powerful that "it's

not quite good enough. It's not as good as it was yesterday. It's not as..." And that micro tendency of the psychology to poo-poo what we have or to find fault—to look actually what happens is, of everything we could pay attention to, something nice is going on, something that could be better, we pay attention to the thing that could be better. It's an inclination of attention even more than it is of actual thought. "No, this really isn't that good"—that's quite a gross level. Sometimes it's just where the attention goes. I'm fussing over what's not quite right.

So if I just enjoy what you have, enjoy the good thing. Sometimes that's the emphasis that needs to be there. Such a great gift in terms of re-educating, reprogramming the psyche over and over. These micro moments bring psychological change.

And other times, you know, it's pleasant, it's nice, it's good, it's going well, the mind is definitely stable, good feeling, whatever it is—pīti, sukha, whatever—but there's just a slight, very, very slight dullness to what's happening. Not falling asleep or anything. It's just... it could be one needs to actually bring more presence. We're talking very subtle now. Bring more aliveness. Bring more alertness. One needs to actually exercise more experimentation and play rather than just sit there and say, "It's okay. It's good. It's fine." Probe more, whatever it is. Play with the intensity up and down. Play with the modes of intention.

So sometimes something's pleasant, we say, "Oh, that's good." But actually what we need to do, for example, is: now can I really ramp up the intensity of the attention in this moment and really penetrate that? So often, as I said, this business of intensity of attention—many people are not familiar with this because you don't get taught that in school. So we need to familiarize ourselves. What is it in this moment? What does it feel like?

How do I do it? Turn the intensity up, for example. But that will take me in some moments to another level. At other times it will be more just the receptivity. At other times it will be don't fuss with trying to make it better—just enjoy it.

So what we need to do at any moment is a constantly shifting ground, kaleidoscope. What's quite common, I mentioned for instance this experience of white light or golden light—that's pretty common. I call that a secondary nimitta. It's a secondary sign that the samādhi is deepening. The primary one again, if we're talking about the first jhāna, the primary one is the pīti.

So what can happen is the bright light starts to get very interesting and the pīti is there as well. This is quite important. Can I blend them? Because the light is good and it's helpful and it's a sign, but can I mix them so they're almost like two aspects of the

same thing, two facets of the same thing? So that if I'm probing the pīti, it's the same as probing the light. I have the experience that probing the pīti is probing the light. And if I'm probing the light, I can probe the light as something that will take me deeper into the pīti. In other words, they're just aspects of the same phenomenon.

If I can't blend them, then I have to be really sure what's primary and what's secondary, and the light is secondary. Just leave it. It's fine—it's a good sign, but it's not the primary thing. The primary thing is the pīti, and that's what I'm trying to really get into. But oftentimes it is possible. Do you understand what I mean, mix them together? It's almost like visually entering the light is the same thing as entering the pīti.

The two kinds of sustaining—they're both referring to steadiness. One is steadiness of the attention and one is steadiness of the primary nimittas, the steadiness of the pīti. In other words, it doesn't go away for a second or whatever and come back. Or if it's the second jhāna, it's the happiness or whatever. So two kinds of sustaining.

We use this term mastery, and all this is part of developing mastery. Mastery is not about measuring the self and getting brownie points and ego stuff. It's about working with the jhānas in a way that they're going to really be most fruitful.

So what happens here: I am meditating. Now I've gotten into the first jhāna and it's trundling on very nicely. And then something happens—I've just been thrown out of that realm. I'm not even sure what happened. I've just been ejected. Or it was beginning, it feels like it's losing power a little bit, and then it's gone.

After that happens—actually you can try this from the beginning once you feel like, okay, this must be the territory of the first jhāna—when that happens, when you lose it, see if you can just remember it. Just remember back the first jhāna or whatever it is. Just see if you can do that. It was a recent experience. It was alive. Just remember it back. Just summon it back. It's a very delicate, light movement.

Of course, sometimes you won't be able to, and you'll have to go back to your base or springboard practice. Or if you're in another jhana, you might find a jhana lower down or whatever. So these are all things you can try.

Towards the end of a sitting, if you're not completely out of energy, you could practice just a couple of minutes or whatever - two or three minutes, five minutes. You could practice deliberately going from, let's say you were in the first jhana or thereabouts, deliberately going from there to a kind of more normal consciousness. You just drop, just come out of it deliberately. Spend some time there, a few moments, and then see if you can come back to the first jhana. Just jump straight back into the first jhana. So you're more deliberately jumping.

All this - what I'm going to give you ideas to try - it's all very light. It's just fun and games. It's just play. I mean, it is part of mastery, but you have to have a very light attitude to it. You're just playing with perception, basically, playing with consciousness, playing with realms.

Now, we talked about walking meditation instructions, right? Should I just briefly go through that again? Again, all this applies to where is my learning edge playground. Let's say I'm now getting used to the first jhana, I've been in and out and it's super exciting and I'm into it. When I go to the walking period, I stand at one end of my walking path, and I just see - can I go to the energy body? Remember back the first jhana? And I just stand there, maybe piti comes, and I just stand and get into the piti and work with it, suffuse it, et cetera - the same deal. And I stand there as long as it takes or as long as I want to.

So I could spend the whole walking period just standing there and it becomes a standing period - it's fine. Or after some minutes when I feel like, "Okay, there's the piti and I'm really into it, whole body, everything," then I can begin to walk. And the question is, can I keep that focus? Can I keep the primacy of the piti around as I'm walking? And how fast do I have to walk to do that?

So the interesting thing is I might need to walk really fast or I might need to walk really slow. I have to be really responsive to find what is the pace. All of this is responsive, sensitive and responsive. I can stop anywhere on the path and get into the piti again, go to the end, take my time, however long I want. Basically I'm walking up and down in the piti and focusing on the piti, in that bubble and enjoying and opening and probing that bubble. That's basic walking instructions.

Now, some of this - what I'm going to put out now - actually, you have to be a little careful with the pacing of when you try it. But after you've had enough experience or familiarity with the first jhana and the piti, then let's say you're in the lunch queue and it's not your turn to dole the food on your plate. You're in the lunch queue and - can I be there in the lunch queue and just remember back the piti and maybe even the whole jhanic state? And maybe you get it back and then can I get into it for thirty seconds, a minute? If it's a really slow lunch queue, however long.

Or you're having a cup of tea in the lounge or the library. Just let me see - can I find the piti? Is it there? Can I summon it? Can I remember it and then get into it? Or you're walking down the corridor here. Let's just see, I walk down the corridor. Let's see if I can walk down the corridor in the piti. I'm just remembering or summoning it very, very lightly. Or you're sitting on the toilet or you're lying down in bed before - whatever.

So what you're really doing is deliberately remembering the state, deliberately remembering the perception actually, and the subtlest of intentions, the subtlest of intentions to recall it. You have to have enough familiarity with the piti and the jhana to begin to try this. You don't want to try it too early because it would just be a bit frustrating.

Sometimes a little whisper, a silent whisper in the mind - for instance, "rapture," which is one of the translations of piti, or "bliss" or whatever, or "piti" if you want Pali - just like a grain of something into the citta and it does its magic. The mind, as samadhi gets deeper and deeper, the mind becomes more and more suggestive. Very, very subtle suggestions actually work their magical power. But this needs enough familiarity. You don't want to try it too early or put too much pressure on.

This is the sort of thing that in one-to-one interviews, I might wait until I suggest this to a person. You get the sense - and sometimes I find myself more aware that it's available. It's almost that you can feel it in them, but the person hasn't realized that it's just available yet.

Sometimes a teacher might suggest to you, "Why don't you try this?" Eventually you can begin your sittings the way I described in the walking period. You can actually begin with piti, begin with the first jhana, or if the third jhana is your learning edge playground, you begin with the third jhana through this very, very subtle intention.

Of course, sometimes while you're still working on that, sometimes you'll try it and think, "Okay, rapture. Come on now." Give it five or ten minutes maximum. If it's not igniting, it's not igniting. Fine. Return to the base practice. But in time, this becomes more than anything else the way you get into jhana. You just remember it. You just have this subtlest of intention. This is part of the elements of mastery.

We have to be careful with energy here because one of the functions of the base practice or springboard practice is that it actually gives energy. You build energy through it. So if you just start right away with the piti, sometimes it will go for a little while, but the whole sitting will run out of steam sooner. The analogy I sometimes use is like a long jumper who needs a run-up, though that analogy doesn't really work perfectly when you think about it, because some long jumpers don't always need run-ups.

The base practice functions sometimes as that energy builder. We might find the piti right away—great! But then fifteen minutes later, it's all dissipated. We didn't have enough energy built up from the base practice. It's still worth playing with though. At that point, simply go back to the base practice. What's more important here is the malleability.

When you reach that point—and again, don't hurry any of this—some people hear all this and want to try it immediately, but it's too soon. Other people think, "I could never do that. It sounds completely advanced and outlandish," when actually they're ready for it. So talk with teachers about it. Try a little bit. Keep it all very light, but probably wait for these developments to unfold naturally.

At first, not every time, just occasionally try beginning your sitting with subtle intention. Eventually it becomes possible to do this consistently. But what do you do when you're sitting and it's all going really well? You sit, and you sit more, and you sit more. You basically sit as long as it's good. "Good" means primarily as long as this jhana is beneficial—marinate in it.

There's a place for moving quickly between jhanas, but it has a very minor role. Much more important is to marinate. Sit as long as this jhana is sustainable and feels beneficial. This marination is so important. We want to work toward a minimum capacity—let's say being able to sit in really nice piti, really absorbed, for an hour, if you don't have work obligations or other commitments.

If you're zipping through one to eight, racing through all the jhanas and then coming back down from eight to one as your practice, ask yourself honestly: Is that making much difference to your life? What difference is it making? How much difference? If it's not making a significant impact, why practice that way? Maybe someone taught you that approach, maybe that's your understanding of the texts, but why continue if it's not transformative?

The point of all this is to make a difference—a real profound, liberating, beautiful difference, a whole depth of resource and all the other qualities we've discussed. So the marination is one of the primary things that will really make the difference.

I'm sitting as long as I can within my playground—let's say that's the pīti of the first jhāna. Then at some point I start to run out of batteries. My energy goes down a little bit. Either the pīti begins to subside and the mind starts to get more distracted, or areas of the body start to get uncomfortable with pain or whatever.

Is it possible to resurrect it? I've run out of batteries, but sometimes it's almost like you get a little emergency supply somewhere that you can tap into. I just resurrect the pīti, find a way, and it comes back for some minutes perhaps. This is all very variable—maybe you get a couple of shots at an extra five or ten minutes just by resurrecting it. The fact that it disappeared doesn't mean you can't somehow find a way to get it back. Maybe that involves going back to your base or springboard practice.

But at a certain point, it's like okay, there's no more juice in the tank. It's not going to come back. Then it's time to do something different. Either you get up and do walking meditation or standing meditation, or you just go have a cup of tea. Go and relax, rest the citta, appreciate, look at the beauty outside. Put the mind in that restful, open, light gratitude. Maybe it's time for your yoga practice or whatever it is. Maybe you go for a walk.

There will be times in this kind of practice where you need to rest—you just need to rest if we're doing it this way. You actually need to rest and recharge rather than just sit, walk, sit, walk, sit, walk continuously. Again, you have to be careful about the pacing of when you begin to try this.

But eventually, as I mentioned, part of mastery is that you can go for a walk—not just walking meditation, but you can go for a walk in your bubble of pīti, giving that the primary attention. Or you can go for a walk in your bubble of peacefulness of the third jhāna or stillness of the fourth jhāna, whatever. Your primary focus is on that quality—that primary quality of stillness, peacefulness, pīti, whatever it is—and you're really enjoying it. You're not really having to worry about where the feet place themselves.

So when is it time to introduce trying to play with this? You can talk to us and find out, or just try it. You don't want to put too much pressure on yourself, and you have to be careful with the pacing here. At first, it's all just games. Okay, let's see if I can walk from here to that tree over there in pīti. Maybe it's fifty yards or whatever—it doesn't matter. Gradually you can extend that. But this is part of the fun, part of the playing, and part of the mastery. No pressure. Very light. It's really just playfulness.

Let's say you're sitting and it's time to come out of the jhāna. The lunch bell goes and if you're into it, it's like, who cares about lunch? That's actually a very healthy response. Then you remember, oh, I have lunch wash-up to do, so I need my lunch. Okay, I need to end.

Coming out—sometimes at first, coming out of a jhāna, you need to do it quite slowly because it's really quite an altered state. If you just open your eyes and jump up, it might be disorienting or jarring. So when you're new to certain states, I would suggest coming out quite gradually.

But secondly, as part of that, sometimes see if it's possible to keep the jhāna quality around. Keep a connection with that and have it even be the primary focus. So okay, I'm going now to lunch or whatever it is. I'm sitting. Open the eyes. As I open the eyes, I'm

still really in touch with the pīti if we're talking about the first jhāna or whatever it is. As I get up, still. As I move, move out. Maybe as I move out, I begin to lose it. So I just stop a little bit, see if I can get it back, and move again. Again, it's all playfulness.

I'll say this again: when we get to the higher jhānas, you don't need to come out in sequence. Right now we're talking about the first jhāna. Let's say you're working on the third jhāna. When you come out, you don't need to go, "Okay, three, two, one."

You don't need to do it. Just as you don't need to go 1, 2, 3 to get into the third jhana. So sometimes you can do that just because that's the game you've decided to play that day. Otherwise you could do 3, 1, 2 and then come out or whatever, or 3 to 0 or whatever. But you certainly don't need to do that.

A couple of things that are in a way implicit in what I've said, but so important: patience and perseverance.

The more you do this practice, the more you realize that the state of the citta and the perception can experience quantum jumps in a split second. Often unexpectedly—nothing's really happening, nothing's really happening, and suddenly there's an opening.

If I'm getting dejected and despondent when nothing is happening, if I'm getting impatient and kind of giving up the alertness and refinement of my antennae, that very attitude will prevent these quantum jumps from happening because I've turned something off. But if you can keep them alive—in other words, don't get sucked into impatience, don't get sucked into a view of "I'm terrible" or whatever—then you're entirely there. And it's really quite remarkable how quickly things can shift. There's just a quantum leap and suddenly a door is there and you can go through it.

So that's patience and perseverance because that kind of thing is possible. But patience and perseverance with playfulness—really, really important.

This means: Do I need to be a bit more active here? Do I need to bump up the sense of presence, the aliveness? Do I need to make sure my antennae are attentive to subtleties? Do I need to try different things? Do I need to play with the subtle effort levels—a bit more, a bit less? So patience and perseverance, but with playfulness.

And always this question: What needs emphasizing? What needs prioritizing right now? Right now in this moment, what needs emphasizing? What needs prioritizing?

Is it that in this moment, or for this little stretch of time, the concentration—the stability of attention on the object, on the breath or the primary nimitta, the pīti, or whatever—is that what needs the emphasis right now, the priority? Or is it the subtlety of attention that needs the emphasis and the priority now? Or is it the surrendering? Or is it the spreading? Or is it the maximizing of the enjoyment moment to moment?

These are all different emphases. "Okay, now for this little stretch in this practice period, that's what I'm emphasizing. Or that's what needs emphasizing." This is what I mean by a kind of playfulness, agility, responsiveness, willingness.

Some of you might have heard the instruction to review a jhana after you're out. Has anyone heard that before? So this gets interpreted different ways, but I'd say one of the things is, one of the questions to ask is: Was there anything new that I learned there? Was there anything new for me? Anything helpful that I learned? In other words, something happened that felt like it was an opening, an improvement, a deepening or whatever in some way. Was there anything different that I did perhaps? Anything at all. And just to remember it at that point before you get up and try it again. And it might have been a coincidence. It might not have been that thing, but it might be—yes, it was that thing that you did or did differently or a different weighting or emphasis or whatever.

In the larger scale of things, you might want to check: Am I neglecting the first and second jhana, for instance? So it's more of a macroscopic checking, reviewing.

Sometimes what you often hear is that part of reviewing a jhana after a jhana is to review the fact of its impermanence—lest you mistake a jhana for a permanent thing. I find that a little puzzling because it's completely obvious, or it should be completely obvious, that it's impermanent. It should be completely obvious, or it becomes much more obvious with time, that it's also not an achievement of the self. Jhana is dependent on certain causes and conditions coming together. And the more you practice, the more that should become glaringly obvious.

There's actually very little danger of getting attached to expecting a jhana to be permanent, and also very little danger of the self getting grandiose, I think. So it's dependent on causes and conditions. A jhana is also—so it's definitely impermanent, it's dependent on causes and conditions, it's also empty. In terms of the deeper levels of its emptiness, don't do that yet. Don't contemplate its emptiness yet.

Even some of you won't quite know what that means. But if you're familiar with emptiness practice, leave that aside. It's something we'll come back to later as an option. And that's not part of reviewing a jhana.

And also, don't contemplate its microscopic impermanence. Don't do that either. That will not be helpful at this point. We don't want to deconstruct jhanas too soon. We want to let them construct. Deconstructing a jhana too soon is really like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I've actually missed the point. We can always deconstruct later. What we want is actually to consolidate, to see it and experience it as something continuous and homogeneous, not impermanent with lots of holes in it and not full of its opposite.

Outside of Formal Practice

Outside of formal practice, when you're doing your work or just having a shower or whatever you're doing, there are times when the citta needs to rest. You really need to not put too much pressure on it. But there's a spectrum there because still you can have quite a light contact or light presence, light sense of the presence of the primary jhana factor, the pīti or whatever.

The whole flavor of that can vary. Either you can completely rest, just let the whole thing go, or you can be like, "I'm moving down the corridor really in this pīti," or going for a walk in this pīti, or you can just be moving around with just a light sense of the flavor of the primary jhana factor, whether it's pīti or sukha or whatever it is.

Generally speaking, the whole tone and tenor of the practice outside of sitting should be really quite light, really quite easy, open. Just this light mindfulness, open, light, easy. That's the vibe of things.

We also, outside of formal sittings—and again, remember all this is jhana practice, all of it—we also want to be vigilant to the coming and going of the hindrances. And not take them personally, if that's possible, and not believe them. But we're aware because they come and they're like poison darts. The hindrance comes and it spreads its poison into the citta, and then it starts coloring the view of the self. It starts coloring the view of other people. It starts coloring the view of the perception, the view of the retreat. Hindrances are like poison darts. We need to be really quite aware when they're around, not believe them, not take them personally.

So that's good. We got through what I was intending. What that means for tomorrow is I may well be in, or depending on what happens at hospital, I may not be in. But at least we've done that. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 208

Q & A

Rob Burbea · 1h22

> *In this Q&A session from a jhāna retreat, Rob Burbea offers practical guidance for common challenges in concentration practice. He begins with essential teachings on the hindrances (nīvaraṇa), emphasizing the importance of not taking them personally and recognizing how they can poison perception through proliferating thought (papañca). The discussion covers a wide range of practitioner experiences: working skillfully with over-efforting, navigating the transition between jhānic states when absorption becomes too deep, and managing the excitement and creative inspiration that often accompanies pīti. Burbea addresses questions about maintaining jhānic states outside formal sitting practice, dealing with energetic blocks that arise during deepening concentration, and the relationship between different types of happiness - from excitement to the serene sukha of deeper jhānic states. Throughout, he emphasizes the malleability of mental states through different ways of relating, the importance of clear intention on retreat, and practical techniques like the 'sunbathing' approach to receiving pleasant experiences. His responses demonstrate the subtle art of jhāna practice, where micro-adjustments in attention and relationship can transform entire meditative experiences.*

Rather than give you more material today, we'll have some questions and responses. You've got enough to work with and work on for a while, and I don't want to overwhelm you further.

Before we open it up, let me offer just a couple of reminders. First, remember what I said about the hindrances—they're going to come, in case you hadn't noticed. They're going to come and go. The whole thing is like this.

What do we want in relation to the hindrances? We want to be working on them—antidotes, what can I try? The same creativity, the same responsiveness, the same awareness and sensitivity, working on them when they come. But we also want, in terms of wisdom, not to take them personally. It doesn't mean your practice has now forever fallen through the floor into the hell realms and you'll be stuck there forever. It doesn't mean you can't do this. It doesn't mean you're a failure. It doesn't mean any of that.

This is really, really important because when the hindrance is around, they're like little poisons and they poison the mind. The mind starts believing all kinds of things, particularly about the self, about one's practice. So we really need to keep the view screwed on right with them.

Recognize that this is a hindrance. Self-doubt is a hindrance. "I can't do this"—it's doubt. It's a hindrance. When they come, they make us prone to believing all kinds of things about someone else, about Gaia House, about ourselves, about the retreat, about life. They really are like a poison dart, and then it spreads in the bloodstream and everything gets caught up and toxified through that and the whole way we look at things. So not to take them personally and not to believe the stories they spin.

The hindrance in itself is more at a very base level—it's not at a complex level of the mind. It's a very basic level. When we're not careful, the complex story-making, world-building levels of the mind get infected by the hindrances. That's papañca. Then we go bonkers.

Over time, we learn to wean the papañca off, to refine it off the hindrances. The hindrance just becomes more and more like just a bit antsy or whatever it is—the basic energy of it without it proliferating, which is what papañca means, proliferating to these other levels. But they will come and go.

On the scale of things, how you feel right now—some of you will be flying and some of you will be really not flying—it's just part of the up and down. If you're up, guess what? And if you're down, guess what? And if you're in the middle, guess what? It takes a while to get used to this.

If you were to do a really long jhāna retreat, it becomes so obvious that our whole relationship to it becomes different—we have a much more spacious perspective. Of course we prefer the hindrances not to be there. Of course. But the whole added sense of "Oh, this is terrible, I'm terrible"—all that stuff goes more and more. That's what we're aiming for with the hindrances.

Let's open it up to some questions. Questions that feel relevant to your practice, wherever that is right now. Whatever you're working on, whatever you're learning—your edge, your playground—or something I've said about the bigger picture that maybe needs clarification or integration.

Now I can't see. Is that Lauren? It is Lauren. Okay.

Let me just repeat, if I understand it, that Lauren's noticing a sort of cyclic pattern of over-efforting, and when that pattern is there, it's very convincing to believe that you have a really major problem with getting stuck in over-efforting and that you need to back way off. What's the question then?

Okay, so needing some moral support and some skillful ways of working with it. Yeah.

For moral support—I don't know if it helps you, but it's certainly a pattern I can relate to. I can look back over the last thirty-six years and say, yeah, I've really been in that in different ways, in different modalities of practice and at all kinds of levels. I felt like I was stuck there or felt like it was a real personality problem and all that. So I don't know if that makes you feel better or worse.

I look back at all that and I feel like for myself there was a lot of cost to it in different ways, but there's been more blessing than cost. I'm glad that over-efforting may come from a really deep love and a really deep desire and a really deep yearning for something. These are all really beautiful qualities.

If you have something like that, then you have—sometimes I say to someone, I'm actually saying it to someone else who's here—it's like you've been given a really powerful horse to ride. And you have to learn how to handle that horse. You could have been given a little—I don't know if you've been to Dartmoor and seen those little ponies. They're very different kinds of animals, and handling one and handling the other requires different skills. So there's a tremendous gift here, but it takes longer to learn how to handle it. Does that make sense?

It really can be learned—how to harness the power of that and how to let that willingness to really give yourself an effort and apply yourself and bring your intensity and bring this cohesion of mind and energy and desire, letting that really gather power when we're talking about soul power and all that. It's a really great gift, and it takes time to learn how to let those things come together in a way that they're actually balanced and it works. So it's not a small deal, it's a big deal.

As I've said, the whole question of effort is going to be around in everyone's practice for the rest of their lives. For any serious practitioner, you bump into it. And I would say any really serious practitioner is also going to find it really painful at times. It's not just the effort, it's also the wanting.

So there's an energetic side to over-effort. If I think back to the late '80s, I had a really long period of being stuck in that shaking movement stuff, and it got incredibly wacky. It looked bonkers, and I was twenty-one or twenty-two. Of course, I was just really trying really hard. The teachers at that time had no idea what it was. It got really intense and very weird in terms of its manifestations. It went on for a long time.

Looking back now, I see that the principal causal factor there was slight over-efforting. So there's an energetic side of this and we really need to learn how to handle that. It can have very gross effects—you can just feel like something completely locks. Or it can look like you're a complete raving lunatic. But it can also have very subtle effects. As I said, it's just a little bit too much effort and it actually stimulates the mind to think more and to get slightly distracted more. It's a relatively subtle effect.

But anyway, everyone's going to have to deal with the question of effort. I remember being on long retreats here and just wanting something so badly and not being able to find the answers and finding that so difficult—in tears. I felt like I didn't have anyone to ask or anyone who would give me answers that would satisfy. So it can be intense when we really give ourselves to something.

To me, it's still a good sign.

So it's just saying, okay, you've got a powerful horse you've been given. Let's learn to ride this, you know.

I would have to hear a bit more, Lauren, about what's going on, what ways you're feeling stuck and what you mean by backing way off. When we talk about working with effort, we've got a huge range. One is backing way off, which means just stop meditating—stop whatever it is, sometimes it's fretting about questions, sometimes it's energetic. Just take half a day off and go for a walk. That's pretty rare, but that would be backing way off, for example.

Or backing way off can look like I'm just sitting here, but I'm going into a very different mode in terms of my relationship with whatever the principal object I'm working with, whether it's *pīti*, whether it's breath, or whatever it is. Or it might mean going to an insight practice for a while—but I've still got my mind engaged, I'm still doing samādhi. That's my intention. I'm just taking this kind of detour into a practice I know brings a lot more ease, and it's within a much larger context.

Or it could be finding an imaginal image that you've worked with in the past that has been helpful in this relationship. That's not... really, in terms of samādhi practice, again, it doesn't have to be just *pīti*—it can become whatever it becomes. There are lots of ways there. If it looks like, well, right now I'm headed in the wrong direction, it might look like that. But in the bigger picture, it's really not.

If you go into some imaginal practice that changes your whole relationship with being on retreat and what you're doing, that might be exactly what's needed. It looks like a detour. It looks like you've given up something—maybe you haven't. Some part of your consciousness firmly holds the intention and the navigation and where you're going in mind, and it's just very skillful to go off into something else for a while. Does that make sense? Do you want to say a bit more about the specifics, or is it better to work with this one-to-one in an interview?

[Response from student]

Okay, so there's fear in the larger picture that you've been asked or told to back way off, and maybe that same thing will happen on this retreat—maybe we'll say don't meditate, or maybe it's better if you go back home, or whatever at that scale. To address that first: I've very rarely done that as a teacher. I would be extremely surprised if that were my usual way of teaching. So I don't think that's going to happen on this retreat.

In terms of grabbing at the *pīti*—the other thing you mentioned—the fear is not a neutral factor. It's not like this thing is happening and the fear is there, but it's not affecting anything. When fear is present and when it's strong fear, it's doing something.

So when we talk about what look like detours, it might actually be working with the fear in different ways. We can talk about that in an interview. But it sounds like the fear at this point is strong enough and prominent enough, and probably having quite some effects, that it itself needs working with. It needs understanding. Something in you needs reassuring. You need to be able to diffuse the power of the fear—its energy and its contraction and the belief in the thinking. There are different parts to fear: there's energy, there's the cognitive component (what we're believing that we're afraid of), and the contraction.

One thing is to work with this—again, we can meet in an interview with one of us and really go into that, actually work in real time with the fear. Because as I said, it's not just happening to be there. It's not a neutral factor. It's doing something, and almost certainly what it's doing is not helpful in the mix.

In terms of *pīti* and grabbing at the *pīti*, this is really quite common to some degree. I think I mentioned it briefly in one of the talks. The Buddha took the trouble to say exactly that. Why would he say that? Partly because he must have encountered it a lot as a teacher, is my guess. So it's normal.

Let me just say two things for now, and then I think it would be good to meet one-to-one. First: is there access at times to lovely states—not necessarily jhānic, but lovely states sort of other than the *pīti*—that are much softer or warmer or a bit more expansive or something like that?

[Student responds: "Yes"]

So at times you're able to ask the question, what's pleasant, and find a kind of mild pleasantness. And does that mild pleasantness have a quality of softness to it? Because piti can sometimes be quite intense, and that's often part of the issue.

So that's good. The softness itself is not a neutral factor - it's softening something. That's the thing about jhanas. This whole marinating and resource aspect means that whatever the jhanic quality is, it then affects the citta and the body. So if there's something soft and warm and maybe even soothing that's lovely, then actually hang out in that. Take your time with this. Hang out in that. Feel that touching the heart, touching the body, touching the consciousness.

Sometimes you may want to then put the fear in that. Take the fear, the idea that you've had, and put it in the middle of that - whatever your language would be - of this soft, warm space, and just see what that does. Put the difficult and the lovely into contact with each other. Other times, and you don't need to rush this, you could see if you can hang out in that soft place.

The second thing I want to say about all this: snatching is this kind of movement that, although it looks like something I'm doing, feels to you right now that you're not in control of it. The mind is just grabbing beyond your will. Is it possible to spend much more time in that sunbathing posture? Both with the softness, and then practice that stance, that poise with what's lovely.

Over time that just becomes - maybe that resets the habit. The habit is not so much to immediately grab forward, but also to soak it up, which involves much less doing. So you're training the habit so that both possibilities become more equalized, and eventually you will have autonomy because they're equal - they're equally available possibilities. They've both been practiced equally, and therefore you can begin to choose.

And with that, then you can really soak up that soft whatever it is. Let's not even worry whether it's jhanic or not jhanic - it doesn't matter. It's a skillful state. You want to be tuning into the very softness, the warmth, the healing. There's something that reassures the whole system, the whole nervous system, the mind eventually. But you're really just lapping it up, like soft, gentle water just lapping over the being.

Then when you're used to that, at times maybe you can see if the piti can come up and you have the same stance, the same poise in relation to the piti. When it goes out of that, the mind might quickly want to panic a little bit - "Oh, here it is again, my overefforting" - and all that stuff very quickly gets ignited. But can I keep bringing it back to this more open, receptive, sunbathing, showering poise, this relationship mode of attention?

You also have to think about retraining the sankaras. That grabbing movement is a very base level mind movement. Retraining often happens just by over and over and over doing something different. When we notice it, diffusing that by doing the opposite. Partly just knowing that's what you're doing. It will come up. This habit will come up. You're going to encounter it so many times you can't count. Can I not freak out? Is it possible to just switch the mode in that moment?

Let's see how that goes, but bring that to the interviews because there are lots of details here. It gets very individual. So much depends on micro-moments and microchoices at a subtle level. But how does that sound for now?

Mikhail, yes? So Mikhail is asking - hadn't heard much about the absorption which I mentioned as one of the elements of this sassy, and thought he would try focusing on that. He picked the second jhana, as that's where your playground is anyway, and said, "Okay, let's see if I can get absorbed."

And then did indeed, after a bit of work, find himself very absorbed in this state, a very deep state. But the happiness, he noticed at some point, had gone. And also any sense of energy body experience. So if I ask you, what was prominent in your consciousness at that point? No happiness, no energy body—what was it?

This is definitely possible. There are two possibilities really within that. One is that what happens is the mind does get more absorbed, more concentrated, whatever we say, and actually goes beyond the second jhāna into a less fabricated state. I'm going to have to explain this at more length—I've mentioned it a couple of times—but there's no longer the fabrication of the perception of happiness.

So it might have gone into something like the fourth jhāna, where there isn't the fabrication of perception of happiness. And then it might have gone even beyond that. As you say, it's quite vast and empty. It might have gone into the beginnings of one of the formless jhānas—no body sense, no dominant emotional sense really, apart from a kind of stillness. Or it might have gone into something akin to that, that isn't strictly speaking one of the classical jhānas, but it's in that sort of territory.

It's very possible, but if you want to practice this or that jhāna, I need to know what's the factor in it that's the most important. And in the second jhāna, it's happiness. Unquestionably, it's happiness—for me, at least, that's the way I would emphasize things. It's not even the fact that there's no thinking or whatever; that's secondary. I'll come back to that when we talk about the second jhāna, but it's the happiness.

Now within the second jhāna, the quality of the happiness, as I said—jhānas are not one uniform experience. The second jhāna is not like this every time, where you could take a snapshot and it's just the same thing. There's a whole range within the second jhāna. So you get a very bubbly kind of happiness and a much, much stiller happiness. Part of the art of really learning the second jhāna is getting to know that territory, but also learning to keep the mind focused and fed by the happiness.

So what can happen? Because it gets more subtle within that range, the mind is actually not quite able to stay—it hasn't been trained in staying with that more refined object, that happiness. And it might, because of past experience, be actually more trained with staying with a big empty space, even though technically speaking that's even more refined.

So partly what you can think of as what you're doing in each jhāna is training yourself to really stay with and really absorb in the primary nimitta of that jhāna over its range. And then the other thing is that in the first four jhānas, that means—happiness is an emotion, it's a mental quality, but you really want to feel it in your body as well. So this double-aspected nature of the primary nimitta is actually quite important in the second, third, and fourth jhānas particularly.

If you stopped a guy in the street in Newton Abbot and said—I don't know, asked him to think of something that made him happy and then said, "Can you focus on that happiness?"—it would be the strangest thing. Most people would say, "How do I focus on happiness?" So we're actually learning to do that, and part of what helps, and part of anyway what is the nature of the jhāna because it's a rūpa jhāna, is that we feel the happiness and we focus—we feel the happiness in the energy body as well as in the mind. But what we're focusing on is the energy body experience of happiness, as well as the mental. That has to be there.

So if you're saying, "Okay, my job is, my playground is now the second jhāna," I really have to keep it within those bounds. And for all kinds of historical reasons, it might want to slip out of it. The mind wants something deeper. The mind is just used to going to big open spaces, whatever. But I have to keep bringing it back.

In terms of the happiness, the intensity of the happiness as well as its subtlety can vary. Sometimes in the second jhāna you're really talking about this upsurge of joy—it's almost overwhelming. Sometimes you're talking about almost like it feels like this underground spring that the Buddha was talking about is really the subtlest thing. It's the subtlest thread that you're paying attention to. And your job, if that's your territory, is: how can I keep paying attention to that? And by paying attention to it, I keep it in that realm.

How does this all sound? Exactly, yes. The subtlety of the attention was probably not enough to stay with the subtlety of sukha as it got more subtle. And you're probably more used to that silence a little bit in different forms.

Again, there's a habit of mine. It's just created a groove there. It's great. We're not saying you're never going to—we don't want you ever going there again in your life. We're not saying that. We're just saying, okay, this is my playground.

Eventually we want you to have everything—all the toys and all the swings and everything. But it takes a certain training: when the happiness gets subtle, can I keep it on that subtle happiness without it sliding somewhere else? And that's a training.

In terms of what you said about backing out—so you can back right out, open your eyes, that's great, well done, and then you come back again. In time, you can do it much more subtly than that. You can remember back a certain happiness that you can pay attention to and then just do it again. But you have to have enough experience with the happiness to be able to remember it back, call it back.

Or, if you're familiar with the first jhana, you can go back to the first jhana rather than opening your eyes and all that. Go back to the first jhana. There's definitely, by definition, the bodily experience in the first jhana that's more gross, because the first jhana is less refined, more gross than the second jhana. So you find that, hang out in that for a while, and then see if it goes again by itself, or you can just encourage it to go.

So this kind of maneuvering, as you meet different difficulties, that's all part of the art of it. Back up into a lower jhana, sometimes even go forward and then come backwards—which we'll talk about. But yeah, well done. That's great.

Let me read Andy's note. Is it okay, Andy?

"The citta wants to move towards peacefulness—a deep, delicious, beautiful, dark, juicy peacefulness—rather than piti or sukha, which have been around. I've been working with the peacefulness just as recommended, and will continue to do this as it feels like what the mind-heart really wants. There was such a sense of relief when I let it. Is there anything else I should consider or do on this front?"

Yeah, you know, just take these as well. So each is a part of the work-play you want to do—get used now to that peacefulness.

Actually, let me ask you a question first. Would you also say it's got love in it?

Okay. Love and grace. It has got love and grace in it. Would you say it has a tenderness to it?

Okay, it's got tenderness. Would you say it has a kind of emotional warmth—and almost by implication it does?

Yes. Okay, tick, tick, tick. Okay, good. So it sounds to me like we're in the right territory. Fab. Great.

So what you want to do is let yourself go. The mind really does—it's like it wants to go somewhere. And partly this is dependent on your past experience, you know, a lot of sitting in different places and all that. So yeah, let it go. Let that be your primary playground even now.

And your job then is to really know that territory inside out. And to me, there's quite a lot to discover about the third jhana. Things start to get really quite interesting then in terms of the different aspects and levels of it. So rather than me tell you what to look for, you just hang out there with the awareness, with the sensitivity, noticing what changes, and then you can report back and one of us can talk about it.

Second thing is there's also—what would you say—particular challenges, particular subtle difficulties that are particular to each jhana. And there's some that start to arise in the third jhana. Also, obviously some really beautiful stuff that starts there, but some particular challenges that arise. And again, rather than me tell you what they are, you'll begin to encounter them as well.

And that's exactly what I mean—this sense of where the mind wants to go is very much part of the territory of long-term jhana practice. Some people have a style of practicing jhanas where they simply sit down and see where the mind wants to go, then follow that. I'd say yes, that's wonderful, that's part of it.

But we also want to develop the other capacity. Going back to the horse analogy—sometimes you get on a horse and just see where it wants to go. That's certainly a possible relationship with a horse ride. But we also want the ability to say, "No, I want to go to the bingo hall," or wherever it is we need to go.

Often when people ask me "Should I do this or should I do that?" my answer is: yes, both. We want to have this range. Sometimes I let go of control completely, and sometimes I want to have choice and mastery.

Here's why I chose to read this question out—what might be needed here is recognizing that while in the long term you do want mastery of the first and second jhana, how you get there might be different. It might well be that taking the third jhana as your learning edge right now, really getting to know it and hanging out there, becomes your priority.

After you've been sitting in the third jhana and feeling really, really nice from it, then see if sometimes you can go backwards from the third. By that point the mind has gotten a lot of what it wants in that particular scene. It's drunk from that particular beautiful well, had its submerging, refreshing dunk in that spring. Then it's much more amenable to going back.

You might find—and you'll have to experiment—that maybe it goes right back to the piti, or maybe to the sukha. Going back to the sukha might even be easier because, as you pointed out, the third jhana has sukha in it. So it's easier to get a sense of the sukha. And secondly, the mind is just much more... well, here's where my horse riding analogy gets stretched—the horse has been given the right water to drink.

What's that? The right food to eat, yeah.

Once it has, it's satisfied and it will go. If it knows the food's that way—that it likes, the carrots are that way—and you want to go to bingo, and they won't let the horse in the bingo hall, then once you give it the carrots, it's happy to go to the bingo hall.

So that's one thing. It's also, as you said, the happiness is closer to the... Now, it might be that you just remember the happiness and it comes back. Another little trick you can... Well, actually, if the happiness is there, it's fine. Sometimes people can't get back to the happiness, and then we would offer something else, but I'll leave that for now.

And then from the happiness, you can just... Remember, in the second jhana, it has sukha and piti. In the first jhana, it has sukha and piti. So you're just in a way, slightly shifting what you're bringing out of the mix. But again, attuning to a quality in the mix

amplifies it. I amplify the sukha in the second jhana, I amplify the piti in the first. And then going back to that again will be much easier and the mind will be more amenable to that.

Does that sound okay?

Yeah, please.

Well, no, not in the next few days. Marinate in that. That's your primary playground. But as you've already tried, as you already reported, the happiness that's prominent in the second jhana is already available after you've marinated for an hour or two hours or whatever it is, right? So after you feel like I've had a good, long, lovely, refreshing drink of the peacefulness, then try to come back in the happiness. But at the moment, you can spend much, much less time in the happiness than the peacefulness. And let the peacefulness be really where you're hanging out the most.

I don't think there'd be anyone who said the first jhana is a better experience than the third jhana. Unquestionably, the third jhana is lovelier. Maybe there's someone, but it would be pretty unusual. So there's no arguing with that. But what we do want is a sense eventually that, gosh, they're all lovely. They're just lovely in different ways. And even the piti, which relatively speaking is gross, it's really a treasure.

Somehow, whichever way we arrive at it, we want to get back—or get, if you haven't had it before—a sense that, yeah, the first jhana is a really lovely place. The piti is a lovely thing. I have a really good relationship with it. So we're just finding which way will help you get to that being the case.

Does that make sense? Very good.

Anything, please?

Oh, should we try that? Yeah, let's try that. If you're happy to do that.

I've been on a bunch of insight retreats and never deliberately spent time cultivating jhanas. And I believe I'm one of a few people who've experienced third and maybe fourth jhana as a result of just relaxing in the midst of an insight retreat and the mind wanting to go to a very peaceful place.

In all of the experiences of jhana, on and off of retreat—first of all, I've never really verified this with anyone—but it tends to have a flavor of like the floor kind of goes out from under me and I drop into a place that's very different from normal. And sometimes incredibly peaceful, sometimes incredibly blissful.

So I guess my first question is... Well, you don't want us to ask, is that it? So I'm not sure if it's even necessary. I don't want to ask—like if I'm on the right track in those experiences.

Oh, you mean if they are the right experience? No, no, it's not that I don't want you to ask.

Let's take our time with this. I really think it's important to differentiate between genres. People can get so hung up on where the division is and "have I achieved it?" The relationship with that question is often not so helpful. But it may be really fine.

You need to map out the territory for yourself. There are certain ways that people can relate to this questioning that's quite common but really not so helpful. I would need to hear more about those experiences based on what you said. Bring it to our one-to-one interview where we can find out more about what's involved there.

What can happen for someone who's done a lot of insight practice is that one drops in because of the insight—mindfulness, letting go, letting go, letting go. Equanimity is a result of letting go. You get that, right? Equanimity can be defined as the relative absence, the relative attenuation of pushing things away or trying to grab on. In other words, it's a relative degree of letting go, and equanimity is a result of that.

Another way of defining equanimity is as a relative degree of letting go itself. If you just keep letting go—aware, letting go, aware, letting go, aware, letting go—you will end up in some state of equanimity. Equanimity will arise. Does everyone understand that?

Whether that state is a jhanic state of equanimity, well, technically speaking, equanimity begins in the third jhana and goes all the way to the eighth, actually. We'll talk about this when we get to the formless jhanas. The Buddha sometimes describes the formless jhanas as almost like perspectives on equanimity or things you do with equanimity.

So where you are, I'd have to hear more. That's one thing. The second thing is whether it's an actual jhanic state of equanimity. Again, relative to normal consciousness, any state of equanimity and stillness where the mind is quiet and peaceful is going to feel like "wow." We still don't know whether it's a jhanic one.

So we do need to map this stuff out. We need to map it out because it might give us information about how you need to move now. What do you need to prioritize? Where's your playground? How do we need to progress from here? A bit like with Andy—what order are we going to move in here?

"Bottom dropping out from you." Yeah, that can happen. One thing that can happen in the fourth jhana is there's a real sense of sinking—everything kind of goes down. In the fifth jhana though, the bottom can fall out in terms of the floor falls out. Because there's no solidity, it really feels like they've taken the floor away and there's just space, you know? So there are different kinds of bottoms falling out.

"That was sort of the setup for what's happening now. What's happening now is nothing jhanic, actually, on this retreat, as far as I can tell. Nothing like those experiences, in any case. It feels as though, at times, there's plenty of piti, sometimes plenty of sukha, less often. I will feel that kind of beginning of that dropping that I'm used to, and sometimes be able to even conjure it. It feels as though it's on the verge of entering a jhanic state. But what happens instead is that I'm confronted by more intense... I guess it sort of feels like energetic blocks in the body. So as the resolution is being turned up and the subtlety and the sensitivity is being turned up, that's what becomes prominent and it kind of pushes me out."

So you're turning up the resolution at that point? The sensitivity of the attention is going up—it's sort of like all at once goes up quite a bit.

When does that typically occur? This is worth mapping out. I suspect there are certain conditions under which the pleasant tears come versus the more neutral pīti. But even when the pleasant tears arise, you're still finding it challenging to move into jhāna?

Actually, let me step back. When you do get the pleasant tears flowing and you're working with them skillfully—letting them move through the body, opening to them, really luxuriating in that quality—what prevents the deepening? Is it still these emotional blocks or contractions that arise, or is it something else?

Because what I'm hearing is that the pīti can become quite strong and pervasive, which sounds promising for jhānic development. The key question is what's interrupting that natural deepening process. Sometimes it's simply a matter of learning to stay with the pleasure more fully rather than unconsciously pulling back from it.

There's often a kind of threshold where the nervous system wants to either fully surrender into the jhanic absorption or it reflexively contracts away from it. This can happen even when we consciously want to go deeper. The contractions you're describing—whether emotional or energetic—might be part of that protective mechanism.

So let's be very specific about the pleasant pīti experiences. When they occur, how long can you sustain them before something shifts? And when they do shift, is it always toward these contractions, or are there other patterns you notice? This mapping will help us understand what's most skillful to work with in those crucial moments when the jhānic factors are gathering strength.

And relative to the times it feels like, well, I'm really not sure I like this, what would you say?

I would say it's 10% incredibly pleasant, like 60% mildly pleasant, and then 30% not sure.

Okay, that's not bad. So I was just wondering about whether you needed to bring in some of those other experiences that you had in some of those other states that you've gone into on the insight retreats and actually let that help. But it doesn't sound like it. It sounds like the PT is fine. It's just sometimes getting into it.

Sometimes you want to be playing with the relationship with the PT. As I said, it looked a little bit like more opening would be the thing. And when I say more opening, you know, these things are really like—we can have words like opening or paying attention, but you're really kind of, like I said, dial it up to 11, you know, if we're talking about opening.

So really, really kind of—what does it mean to kind of maximally open my being and surrender and abandon? And just that relationship with the PT, you're in a different relationship. Everything is a dependent arising, meaning how we experience PT and what it does depends primarily on my relationship with it.

One way of thinking about what we're doing is we're playing with our relationship with the primary nimitta. That's all we're doing. We're playing with our relationship with other things which allow the primary nimitta to arise. Coming into a different relationship with something will shape the perception of that thing.

When we talk about this emptiness, dependent arising, playing with perception, we're talking about playing with the way of relating and noticing that the very experience, appearance, perception of this thing—in this case PT—changes dependent on my relationship.

It's not always the case that there's a formula. Okay, you always need to go into this opening mode. So what we need, again, is this kind of willingness to be responsive, to try this, to try that. Ah, that's better. Okay, or that begins to—oh no, or that suddenly makes it much better or just gradually makes it better.

But the very sort of willingness to be responsive and really try different relationships. So it might be a lot of the time that it's more of that opening, you know, really, really go into the opening mode. It might be that that's just sometimes and other times it needs something else, you know.

So how does that sound?

Yeah, but we'll still talk later.

Okay, great. Anyone need any help with the hindrances or anything?

Nicole, yeah. Is it okay to take it?

Thank you. I'm thinking of it as a hindrance. I think there's probably different ways to think about what happens, and it happens for me on every retreat. But for this one, it's really turned up, which is that I have a constant conversation, like I'm in an interview with one of you, about the experience as it's happening.

And in some ways, I really like it because it's kind of the way that I'm—oh yeah, you said this, so okay, I'll try that. So in part, it's quite a positive thing because it's a way that I'm experimenting and playing, but it also gets exhausting. There's a kind of neurotic tendency to keep doing that throughout the day.

So I've been, since it's on this retreat, trying to play with it as a kind of restlessness of the mind and open the energy body from the top of the head and see if it can get more space around it and also trying the breathing and the counting in relationship to add more pegs. And I also went on a walk and did a little inquiry around maybe some more psychological reasons why that might be. But it was really insistent.

Okay. And when you say it's a neurotic tendency, does that mean that you feel, for instance—well, one question would I have is, do you feel like the tone of it is quite anxious or for instance, are you saying I'm trying to impress or I'm afraid how they're going to judge me or what's the—I'm just interested in those words, neurotic tendency.

I suppose, just habit of mind.

Yeah. And maybe it's more of a habit.

Yeah, that's my sense.

So this is really, really common, just again, really, really common.

If it was more like, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to have an interview tomorrow with someone and heavens, what will they think?"—if it had that anxious quality—then we would need to unpack things more psychologically. But it sounds like there's sometimes even delight in it, so that's quite different.

If it was more of that worried, anxious type, then we would need to address it differently. But returning to Ajahn Chah's understanding of vitakka and vicara—this evaluative thought—it may partly be your way of processing and understanding your experience. There's some natural pondering and reflection happening, and that's not necessarily problematic.

So I personally wouldn't be too worried about it. What might help is actually writing down your questions very briefly. By doing that, you're telling the mind, "Look, I've got this handled. You don't need to keep rehearsing it. It's written down, and I'll take it to the interview or wherever it needs to go." That might help—just something simple like that to reassure the mind that it will get dealt with.

In terms of moment-to-moment practice, I really want to emphasize this: we can make so many things into enemies that don't necessarily need to be enemies. If I think meditation is all about stopping thought, then these mental activities will be regarded as enemies. I just wouldn't go there. I don't think it's a problem.

The only concern is when it feels like it's interfering with absorption. So what I want to point out on a moment-to-moment level is this: there's a difference between a thought arising and me being entangled in a thought. There's a difference between noticing "here's a thought going over there" and being dragged along with it, or willingly going along with it.

So if you're not clear on that distinction, that's something to notice. What's the difference between a thought arising and actually being attached to a thought so that we get dragged along with it?

You mentioned that often there's still physical tension while the thinking is happening, and you can focus on that tension. But you have a desire for the mind to be quiet so the physical work can be more prominent. I think this is totally understandable, but in terms of strategy, it's like when one of my teachers started meditating in a building site. I'm sure he had the desire that those demolition machines and all the construction noise weren't there, but that was just the reality. It had to be in the background.

Imagine we were sitting here and there was a radio playing. It's there. Or we're having a conversation with a radio in the background—we just deal with it. We don't have to get into this battle. If I get into too much desire of "I wish that would just shut up," then actually my attention is going over there in a very unhelpful way.

So if I can come into a relationship where it's simply "okay, it's just there"—like background radio—there may well be some useful material in it about processing the day or remembering things I need to handle. But you can take care of that practical aspect by making notes. And moment to moment, if you're working toward more absorption, just aim at what's most prominent and get more deeply into that.

The other piece to remember is what I said about "drifting"—it's a subtle manifestation of restlessness. One way it often manifests is that the mind has more thought and tends to follow those thoughts more readily. Sometimes that drifting comes from too much effort. Just a little bit too much effort can actually stimulate more thinking and encourage the mind to follow those thoughts.

So this could also be an effort issue. And if I get into too much desire for the thoughts to go away so I can absorb more deeply, that can add to the over-effort. The usual pattern is: there's more thought, so I need to try harder. That may be the case sometimes, but it may be exactly the opposite. When there are more of these mental threads unreeling, what I actually need to do is back off more, go into a softer mode, become more receptive.

So it could well be related to effort levels as well. And you mentioned you're also working with over-effort and finding the retreat tiring, and that you get most annoyed with the mental voice when you're tired. That makes perfect sense, and it's something for everyone to note.

This is hard work. Sometimes it feels completely effortless and wonderful, but much of the time it's going to feel like hard work for many different reasons and in many different ways. It might be that just a little too much effort accumulates to become very tiring after a while.

But as I said, it's not like, "When will this effort question go away so I can get into the real stuff?" That *is* part of the real stuff. It's not going to end. It will actually just become subtler and subtler, this effort question. So we really have to get our view right about that as well.

It sounds like not that you need to stop meditating and go for walks, but much more a question of subtle effort and learning to back off—which may be more about this opening, receptive mode.

Let me share a note I received last night. Someone wrote:

"I just wanted to share some practice. As I was listening to your talk yesterday, I kept noticing some contraction and dukkha in the energy body. Finally, as you moved into the Q&A, I decided to see if I could untangle or smooth out whatever was going on. Just a little reflection on emptiness and some long breaths opened up a beautiful, peaceful tranquility. It was time for tea, but I continued to sit till my bladder suggested it was really time to go.

I was inspired by what you said about carrying the jhana around, so I thought, why don't I try that now? I made it all the way to the loo, and after that, through tea, fairly slowly, and into the lounge. I kept working, playing and reestablishing the jhana—or perhaps more accurately, the connection to the sense of tranquility. It was so easy!

I've really had a view of not being able to carry this kind of mindfulness concentration outside of the sittings very well. And it has been a source of some measuring and self-judgment. I felt some of this heal tonight."

This is such a beautiful example of skillful working with something that was initially a contraction and then quite easily—this thing about quantum shifts—turned into something lovely. And there's this long-term view of being inadequate or measuring oneself as "not doing it right," and then suddenly something opens up and it's like, "Oh, actually this is possible for me. I can do this."

The content could have been different, but in terms of that general pattern, it's so important not to believe "I can't do this. I'm like this. I'm not built for this." In time, confidence comes. This confidence is really important.

There was something else—Boaz asked yesterday about *ekagata*, and I felt I could have said something more about that word. It's usually translated as "one-pointedness," which I said was a good translation. It's just that in English, most people thinking of "one-pointedness" would think of one narrow spatial point. The better, though clumsy-sounding translation would be "with one thing prominent."

Boaz asked why this is a significant factor in the jhanas. In the Abhidhamma, in Theravada Buddhist psychology—maybe in the Mahayana as well—they would say every moment of mind has something that's prominent in it. The difference in the jhanas is that a jhanic state continues. It's moment after moment after moment.

Jhana is related to the Pali word *jayati*, which means "to burn." People say jhana is like a candle burning steadily, or that jhana will burn up your defilements. But the point is it's something continuous. This *ekagata*—what makes it characteristic of jhana is that moment after moment, the same thing is prominent. There's a kind of temporal extension of what's prominent.

Yes, it's spelled E-K-A-G-G-A-T-A. In the first edition of my book, I completely mis-translated it, so I changed it in the second edition because I had missed the double G. I translated *ekagata* as "gone to oneness," like unified, but that's wrong. It's actually "due to one," one prominence.

Okay. Anything else? Yes—who's that there?

I'm noticing that I keep falling into some—I don't know if it's a jhana or not, but I find this very tiring and very intense. I feel I can't stop it. Right now I was kind of going... It's like a pulling. I get pulled into some states. I don't really know.

Yes, okay. So as we've been saying, that sort of thing can be quite normal. We can get pulled into a hindrance, we can get pulled into a jhana, we can get pulled into some other state that's more familiar because of our meditation habits.

Again, I would probably say come to a one-on-one and we'll really try to identify what those states are, because that identification will help guide us in terms of how you need to move from there. Sometimes it's not a bad thing—it's just, okay, now we're here a lot. How do we move from here? Other times it's like, okay, we need to help it not go there, in which case we need to try different approaches. But we need to probably hear more about what those states actually are.

This sounds quite helpful—to know what it is and then proceed accordingly.

Yes. So bring it to a one-on-one interview and we can really hear more about it—or them, if there's more than one—and get a sense of what it is. That will guide us in terms of how to respond. But that sort of thing is very normal.

Thank you.

Good. I think... Oh yes, I already said it, but just to reiterate—if the pīti is really strong and feels very sexual, like an orgasm, it's really, really completely okay. Just enjoy it. Really get into it.

You see what Robert's going to bring to the retreat.

No, it's really important because we have this feeling of "this can't be right," or we feel like, "Am I maybe emanating some kind of weird sexual energy into the hall that's going to pollute the pure, pristine atmosphere of renunciate celibacy?" It's completely not an issue. It's just a manifestation of pīti. Open to it. Enjoy it. The same approach applies. There's absolutely no shame in it. It's something to open to and get into. It's doing good stuff. It's really good.

I can't see who that is. Did Danny have a question? Okay, Sabra, please.

Just a clarifying question. I feel like I remember hearing you warn about elation, and I'm wondering about the difference between elation and excitement and happiness and sukha.

Yes, thank you. The difference between elation, excitement, happiness, and sukha. I don't know—for elation, I'd have to look up the original Pali and see what that refers to.

The Buddha was addressing a small group of highly advanced meditators who were working on psychic power meditation. One of their practices involved what we might call clairvoyance - a kind of seeing far away that occurs within meditation. And the Buddha noted that one of the subtle hindrances they encountered was getting excited about their ability to do this, or about what was opening up, or about entering new territory, or about what they were seeing.

I don't have the Pali term at hand and would need to look it up, but my sense is that what was being cautioned against is something closest to excitement. Excitement is quite fascinating in this regard. When there's too much excitement, it can lead to that snatching quality we've discussed. It also creates a certain agitation that disturbs the serenity necessary for these kinds of practices. For developing psychic powers and similar capacities, the mind needs to be extraordinarily still - super, super still. Any kind of excitement will make the waters turbulent and become a hindrance.

But excitement itself is quite interesting - it's almost like an energy. This brings us back to what I was saying earlier with Jason about how sometimes people come to me saying they have fear about this or that, and I find myself wondering whether what they're experiencing is actually fear or excitement. Often it turns out to be excitement, but the mind is relating to it in a particular way and labeling it such that it becomes an experience of fear. At its root - though that's not quite the right word - it's more naturally excitement. They need to learn to play with their relationship to this energy so it can become excitement again. And excitement can be energizing, empowering, galvanizing - it can give you courage.

But excitement can also wobble in different ways. An excited energy might become bubbly happiness or pīti. All these states are quite close to one another. The different modes of relating to something like excitement will shape the very perception of it, transforming it into something else through dependent arising.

Excitement and pīti, for example, are very close. There have probably been times in the tradition of translating Pali to English when pīti has been translated as excitement. They're intimately related. Part of the experience of the first jhāna, especially initially, is excitement - it's tremendously exciting for many reasons, both because of its energetics and because of the sense of "Wow, look what's happening!"

The key point is that we can come into different relationships with the energy of excitement, and because of dependent arising - because everything depends on the way of looking, because there's no independent appearance of anything - this can actually shape the experience. The energy itself is open to malleability. You can shape it toward pīti, perhaps even toward sukha.

I usually translate sukha as happiness, though I'm not sure what Karen had in mind yesterday when she asked about this. "Happiness" seems to me the closest English word to encompass sukha's territory. Looking back at English translations over the past thirty years, there have been all kinds of different renderings of both pīti and sukha. Some translations even reverse what each means, which I find baffling. I think as time has gone on, the translations have become more consistent.

But you'll notice that when the third jhāna opens, the kind of happiness characteristic of that state is still technically sukha, though most people will never have experienced that particular quality of happiness. It's supremely serene and feels almost otherworldly in its flavor and texture. I use the word "happiness" simply because it seems the broadest, most stretchable English term to cover sukha's different ranges.

"So that was actually helpful," someone responded, "because I've been experiencing a lot of that kind of excitement today - getting in the way of my clairvoyance!" They continued: "You mentioned that we need to train attention at each level of subtlety. I'm really noticing that with a lot of pīti comes a particular kind of papañca - very inspired ideas that seem really great, and I think they are, but they're a distraction from the practice."

When our base practice is metta and we encounter shifts toward greater subtlety, the habitual ways of practicing loving-kindness often no longer work in generating the qualities we associate with metta. This becomes an alive avenue of exploration: how do we practice metta at this level of subtlety? There may be moments of success, but sustained understanding—that sense of "I've got this now"—remains elusive.

Instead, there's often an abundance of piti, but it manifests as energy rather than the familiar warmth of loving-kindness. Sometimes this energy becomes more blissful, but it doesn't feel like metta. This raises a crucial question: if the traditional approach feels like trying to squeeze something that won't respond—like using a gross practice at a subtle level—should we abandon metta altogether and simply go with the piti?

Everything changes as practice deepens. Things naturally become more subtle, and we must learn to work with these different levels of refinement. Even on a dedicated metta retreat, we would expect this progression toward subtlety, requiring constant adaptation in our approach.

When abundant piti arises in the context of metta practice aimed at jhana, we have several choices. First, we can let the metta intention go entirely. If the piti is strong enough—definitely pleasant and stable, present for several minutes without disappearing—we can work with the piti directly and set aside the metta. The piti becomes the principal object.

The second possibility, more appropriate for a metta-focused retreat rather than a jhana retreat, involves allowing the piti itself to become the metta. The lovely sensations we're experiencing become what we want to share: "I'm feeling something beautiful here, and I want you to have some too." We radiate this energy outward while bathing in it ourselves—there's no scarcity when we're already immersed in piti.

The piti becomes the very flavor of metta. This is what we imagine radiating out. On a long metta retreat, everyone would eventually experience piti, sukha, and the rest of the jhanic factors. The practice adapts: "This is the flavor of metta right now, so this is what I'm sharing."

To radiate these qualities effectively, we must still feel them fully. Rather than mechanically reciting phrases, we recognize: "This is the flavor I want to share with you." Whether it's the energetic joy of piti or the subtle happiness of third jhana sukha, we feel our energy body radiating this quality from every pore, from the entire energy space. We can visualize it emanating from our hands, learning to integrate metta, piti, and bodily experience.

Sometimes we maintain the metta intention while working with piti; other times we simply surrender to the piti itself. The choice depends on our primary intention.

However, when the issue isn't abundant piti but rather subtle manifestations of metta that we don't know how to work with—when we can't conjure traditional loving-kindness and experience only general well-being without recognizable metta qualities—the guidance shifts. Interestingly, this same practitioner might find that informal moments, like holding a door open for someone, deeply touch the heart, even when formal practice feels disconnected from metta.

This points to the crucial role of intention. On a jhana retreat, if there's well-being present but not recognizable metta, we work with the well-being. The absence of traditional metta isn't problematic because our intention is to develop jhanic states. If this were a metta retreat, we would focus on rekindling loving-kindness. But remembering our primary intention—what we established on the opening day—guides our choices and prevents unnecessary struggle with practices that don't align with our current developmental phase.

It makes so much difference. Even a subtle bifurcating or shift in the emphasis of attention—"I'm worried about my metta now"—don't worry about your metta. You have plenty of metta. You can worry about that on a metta retreat, about developing that more and more. But first, it's not something to worry about for you, and second, it's not something to worry about on this retreat. So it's the well-being, and you can let that be more primary.

Does that answer the question? What about the subtlety business? I think you spoke to it.

In terms of the first thing, where there's pīti, there's often excitement and often all kinds of creative ideas about projects that I'm going to do and such. Sometimes there's even more than that—there's actual... I don't know what you'd call it—creative energy, not just the idea to do something, but actual poetry or music arising.

Second jhāna, for some people, even more. It's almost like this spring that the Buddha talked about can be a spring of inspiration and creativity. You can kind of plug into something. In a way, well, any of the first four at least, but this is a big deal.

Again, I hesitated to even say what I just said, but really my invitation and hope and wish to stress: we're on a jhāna retreat. At some point in your life, when you've developed a bit more of this jhāna business, you might decide to take a retreat where you

actually meditate for a bit, get in touch with that inspiration, write whatever is coming—poetry, whatever it is—go back to the meditation, do that, and actually do that. That's great. Doing that now will kind of pretty much abort your progress in jhānas.

My real hope is that you'll all keep the intention. Like that's why I'm here. That's what I'm hoping to serve and support. But you can, you know, if you get into this, there's no reason why you can't have another retreat at another time. You go somewhere and for a week or whatever it is, you're playing with that. But that's your intention. And then that's clear.

Here, if you really want these treasures to open up, you have to... it's what I said in the opening talk. There's something very, very powerful, much more powerful than we realize, about keeping the intention really clear and kind of single and steady. And you say metta's a great intention. Even creative—I don't know what it is—but creativity, they're all great intentions. But too many great intentions pulling in too many directions, you'll end up with not so much.

It connects to what you said, which I found really galvanizing, around this kind of soul—like gathering of soul power. Exactly. There's a lot of power in that gathering.

Let me just see... do I have anything else? No, I think that's okay.

So why don't we just have a few quiet moments together. Thank you all. Time for tea, and see you soon.

CHAPTER 209

Q & A, and Short Talk

Rob Burbea · 1h10

> *In this Q&A session from the "Practising the Jhānas" retreat, Rob Burbea responds to practitioners' questions about deepening jhāna meditation. Key topics include the delicate balance between probing into jhānic qualities and maintaining an open, receptive awareness - comparing this to tuning a radio receiver to find the right frequency rather than forcing concentration on a spatial point. Burbea addresses how to work with insight practices like anattā contemplation alongside jhāna development, emphasizing the importance of knowing when to shift from analytical looking to pure enjoyment of pleasant states.*
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> *The discussion covers practical challenges such as working with subtle hindrances like micro-sloth and torpor, the tendency for some practitioners to find jhānas becoming less dramatic over time, and dealing with dry samādhi states that lack the essential joy and happiness. Burbea emphasizes maximizing enjoyment (the 'E' in P.I.T.I.E.S.) as often more important than deepening absorption, and explains how the second jhāna's happiness is crucial for long-term insight development. He also addresses retreat conduct, explaining his approach to noble silence that allows eye contact and connection while maintaining clear intention for practice.*

Okay, so time again if there are any questions that feel relevant to your practice or to anything that's been said about the framework, or anything about the detail that we've covered.

I have maybe just a few things I'd like to throw in as well, but why don't we start with some questions?

Andy, yes. Why don't we use the mic, then it's easier.

Andy: This was a question, Rob, about the difference or the similarity and the contrast between tuning in to the nimitta or the qualities of the jhana, which feels to me like quite proby and sort of—you know, it's almost like keyhole surgery. It's almost like getting into the quality amid all the other stuff around it.

But also finding the need for something more expansive. I've been trying to play with it, almost conceiving it as listening to those qualities rather than probing in—a listening, a tuning. I think you said something about trying to hear a noise, a faint noise amid lots of other noise. Because it feels like I need to open more, and yet the very active kind of fine-tuning feels the opposite of that.

Thank you. So are you talking in particular about this space of peacefulness that opened for you?

Andy: No, but with the first jhana as well. Actually, probably more with the peacefulness.

More with the peacefulness. Okay, good.

It's both, you know. Sometimes the probing is a concentration thing, literally like how much attention can there be in a small amount of area? But then there's also the probing with the sense of, can I really get the sense of this?

And then with the opening, there's also, as you say—I don't quite know what would be the best analogy—that thing I said about listening for a sound, where there are lots of sounds and there's just some particular sound I'm listening to. Maybe that's a quality. You're actually not scrunching anything up. You're sort of opening more. It's like your antennae are just becoming more sensitive within that openness.

So yes, those two modes will be important and you can play between them.

What happens sometimes with the peacefulness is—I'll get into this when we talk more about the peacefulness—sometimes there's a very large peacefulness, actually, and it's even larger than the energy body size. Depending on where you are, we want to spend more or less time in that. But at the beginning of the peacefulness, it's probably more an energy body size, but you can still open up the attention wide.

It's really like, almost like imagine it's a kind of realm. It's a large realm where you're almost listening to the music of the realm. So there's very subtle, exquisite, quiet music there. This is a metaphor, yes. And that's more open and the whole thing can feel more open.

Other times you can, just as with the first jhana, pick a place where it seems strongest and you kind of burrow into it, probe into it.

But sometimes what else can happen is—and it might be after you've just lost it for a bit, or it might be as you're getting into it more—there's almost like a filament of something, a filament of that peacefulness. So spatially, it's relatively—you don't know where

you're going to find it in the energy body space, but it can tend to be more lower down in the body. It's a kind of filament, like some kind of organism that has these filament-like things. An anemone? Do they have them? That sort of thing. But it's physical.

The other thing to add here—and we'll get to it more when we talk about the third jhana—sometimes you're talking about a point in space that you're probing more. Sometimes you're more open.

Sometimes you're more tuning into the mental quality of peacefulness, and sometimes you're more tuning into the physical quality of peacefulness. Ideally, we want those two to blend. But what it means at any time in your responsive play and working is: what do I pick up here? If in doubt, pick up the physical one first.

And so that might feel like it's just a filament. It might be located—oh, it's located in my belly button or my kidney or whatever it is. But more likely it's just a sort of place in space, a region in space. And there's this kind of filament of that exquisite peacefulness. And that's what you're going with. So there's that as well.

The other metaphor I want to add is tuning the receiver. If we think about tuning a radio receiver, we're thinking about the wavelength changing—lower frequencies, higher frequencies. What you're doing in each jhana is tuning to a particular frequency as much as you're probing a certain point in space. Probing a certain point in space is very helpful, but that's not really what you're doing. You're really tuning to a certain frequency.

If probing a certain point in space or opening up wide space or working with a filament or whatever helps you lock in and get a sense of that frequency that's particular to that jhana—or that bandwidth of frequencies—then that's all good. But in a way, the primary thing you're doing is focusing on a certain frequency. As I said, the jhanas themselves are more and more refined.

So one of the things I forgot to ask you yesterday is: is this state of peacefulness more refined—let's use the word refined—than the second and the first jhanas?

"Oh, yes. Yeah, definitely."

Because that's also a signal. If you say, "Well, I'm not sure," then I wouldn't be so sure that you've moved into a deeper state. It might be peaceful, it might be very nice, but one of the real markers—apart from the other questions I asked you, maybe some others I can't think of right now—is the shift in refinement. And as you shift in refinement,

then you have to get skilled at tuning your receiver and holding there. How that happens might be through the probing, might be through the open space with the antennae up, might be through the sense of filament. You can play with all of that.

"That's really helpful. I think the tuning is so helpful. It's completely shifted my thinking about this whole practice, just this tuning of the dial. But it seems like when there's tuning, or at least I'm finding it difficult then to also incorporate the enjoyment. I'm tuning and then I'm like, oh no wait, actually remember to enjoy it as well. Any recommendations about how to make sure the enjoyment is there with the tuning?"

Well, if we turn it around and say maximize the enjoyment—that's the most important thing, the 'E' on the end of SASSIE—then you will inevitably find that getting your tuning right is part of maximizing the enjoyment. So it might be just reversing the intentionality.

I do think that so many people obviously think of jhana and samadhi as "I'm focusing on one point and it's a spatial point." Even if they don't think that consciously, that's what it becomes. But that's a very limited and actually limiting way of understanding what's happening. So I would rather go with this frequency thing. But in terms of intention, you can reverse that.

So just: I'm here with this thing. It's like I'm listening to a radio program and I really want to enjoy it—what is that music or whatever it is? I love it. Then I'm going to want to play with that dial just because I love it. I'm just following my enjoyment.

It's just part of like, well, I can play with the volume. I can shut my door so I don't hear my siblings arguing or whatever it is. But that's going to be just organically part of me being into it. Do you see what I mean?

So it might be part of it as just a kind of subtle reordering of the hierarchy of intention at any point. Like I said, sometimes I feel that all you need to do is trust this kind of wish to enjoy things to the max and really let that lead sometimes.

But let's see if there's anything else. It might be related to something I said earlier—the sense of tuning to the refinement might be helped at different times by tuning in more to the physical and, in inverted commas, the energy body frequency of that refinement, and sometimes more to the mental. But that shift might also help incorporate—literally incorporate—the enjoyment more. Does that make sense?

Julia, I have a question about using insight ways of looking in jhana practice. So I've been using them as a base practice and noticing that there's some anxiety about how indiscriminately or discriminately I'm using them, like remembering that part of the in-

struction with them in emptiness practice is to use them for everything—whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. But then some worry about using them to look at well-being, for example, like that will prevent piti from fabricating.

So part of what I've been playing with is just sort of using them indiscriminately for a little while, and then once a sense of well-being starts to open up, using them more discriminately. Like, I found using anatta can help relax some clinging around the well-being that's coming. But if you have any thoughts...

Yeah, really important question. Thank you. So it's a bit like—what's it a bit like? It's a bit like going down a water slide, you know, one of those theme park things. But imagine this water slide at certain points all the way down has turnings off it. So it goes, but every once in a while it has a turning off to the left, a turning off to the right. And you can just kind of veer, if you want, hopefully without slamming—it's not a great analogy. But you get the idea. It's got padded sides.

So what that means is, yeah, if you use it indiscriminately at first—everything that comes up, you said anatta—let's say we're taking that as anatta, anatta, whatever comes up. Once some well-being comes up, then if you keep—let's say if I just started with back pain, so I just did anatta, anatta, anatta to everything, including the back pain. What would eventually happen was the pain would attenuate, the body sense would start to dissolve, and at some point pleasure of some kind would come up. Let's say it was piti.

So at that point I've got—okay, I'm sliding down this thing, it's great, and I've got a right turn there that I can lean into, which means once the piti has built enough, I can then stop doing insight practice and just subtly or gently—let's put it gently—but completely switch what I'm doing to now I just want to enjoy that particular thing, which is the piti.

If the piti comes up—okay, back pain's gone to neutral, and then piti's come up, and then the body's dissolving, and then I say, okay, piti, and I keep doing anatta on piti, it will go beyond it. Have you found that already? Is that what's happening? Or you're worried that it might happen?

That's what I'm worried about. And so I find that I'm not even using it to look at the piti to begin—like as soon as something in the realm of pleasurable comes up, I just stop and then sort of things shut down.

Okay. So you need to find a kind of middle ground between being—you know, as the Buddha says, don't snatch at it. Okay. So that's really important. But you can also kind of relax.

Don't worry about exactly where you land. You might overshoot and find yourself in some other jhana, and that's perfectly fine. Either you can work backwards from there—and we can talk about how to do that—or you can hang out there for a while, get really comfortable with that state, and then work backwards. Or that deeper state can simply become your primary playground.

The important thing first is to feel confident that you can do this, to gain that sense of wellbeing where at some point you can steer your body into this beautiful state and just enjoy it. You make that shift. Exactly where it lands initially—don't worry about it. First, cultivate that confidence. That's really crucial.

Then we can map it out more precisely. We can see where you're actually landing. Maybe it turns out to be the fourth jhana, for example. Well then, let's learn the fourth jhana before we learn the first. This is what I mentioned about people who've done different practices.

I realize now we have a room full of practitioners with extensive experience, especially in insight practice. Things won't necessarily evolve for everyone in the traditional order of one, two, three, four. It may or it may not.

But once the piti has arisen, don't snatch at it. You may also find that piti is arising while you're doing anatta practice on something else entirely. That's another option. I wouldn't recommend doing anatta on the piti itself so much. As I mentioned, if you stay with those insight practices, they'll take you all the way into the formless realms, and that will probably be disorienting for right now.

How does that sound? I'm not giving exact step-by-step instructions here, but I think the most important thing is not to worry too much about precise placement.

"That's what I wanted to hear."

Good, that's really important.

"I'd like to ask about subtle hindrances—hindrances that seem to be somehow coupled with increasing subtlety. I was practicing the second jhana, doing the same thing I mentioned yesterday about really absorbing into it and trying to keep up with the subtlety of attention when the sukha gets really refined. What I've been noticing repeatedly is that after a certain point, when it gets really subtle, especially when it starts to lean more toward peacefulness and the third jhana, my attention somehow... there arises a bit of micro-level sloth and torpor, some micro-level tiredness. When it gets really subtle and moves toward that peacefulness, I just get tired somehow and lose my focus, and it falls apart. Then I have to reverse, come back. I might get some energy

from increasing the sukha or increasing the piti, and then again I go back to that level of very subtle attention, subtle nimitta, but then it falls into this tiredness. How could one work with this?"

As I'm listening, Mikhail, I'm wondering if you could consider two things. One is maximizing the enjoyment rather than maximizing the concentration or even worrying about the subtlety—although we talked about that yesterday. The other thing, mixed with that, is: could you keep it longer at a more bubbly level of happiness? Which technically is just happiness with more piti mixed into it.

Let it stay there much longer with the intention and attitude to really enjoy it, rather than thinking "now I'm refining my concentration, now I'm going deeper into absorption." These are all important factors, but it might be that what's happening—given your background and practice habits—is that the absorption and concentration are deepening faster than the enjoyment is deepening.

I find the Buddha's images so accurate in so many ways. His similes are remarkable. It's like really drinking that water from the spring. Really, truly delight in it. Because that's doing something important as well. It's giving you energy, but it's also transforming the way the state then moves deeper.

It can go deeper through this increasing subtlety, as you described, but sometimes it gets too subtle and we're not able to follow it. Sometimes that's simply not quite the right movement that needs to happen.

I'm going to talk about the second jhana tomorrow, but this is actually quite key. What's the most significant aspect of the second jhana? One might be tempted to say it's where thinking stops—the Buddha says that's where thought ceases. That's certainly a very significant threshold in terms of deepening concentration.

I'm going to come back to that. It's not as simple as we might think what that means. It is important, but I would say in the grand scheme of things, what's much more important is the happiness. Bathing in the happiness is doing something to the being. Knowing these different bandwidths of happiness is doing something to the being, marinating over and over again in that happiness, drinking your fill of happiness, is in the long term, in terms of its relation to insight, in terms of its work that it's doing, in terms of your capacity to let go, in terms of how it's opening the heart, in terms of what it's teaching you eventually about perception and malleability perception, emptiness, dependent arising. That's the key thing.

So yes, what's the work that needs to happen in this moment? That's a sort of very subtle question that's going on for any meditator in not every moment, but a lot of moments. And I can, one can say, oh, I really need to focus more. I really need to let it subtilize, you know, drop down with the subtlety and corresponding subtlety of mind. I want to be absorbed more. These are all valid choices at any time.

But it might be that just delighting in the happiness is actually much more significant. And as I said, it will probably deliver you to a slightly different place or a very different place. Even in terms of the third jhāna when we get to it, it's not... In a way, you can divide the third jhāna into three and all those levels are important. But going with the happiness more and really, really enjoying it might help steer you a little bit better.

Does this make sense?

Yes, indeed. To do that, it sounds like you already know, but just to add, I want to keep the happiness relatively gross. It's a little bit the opposite of the instructions I gave you yesterday. You can play between the two. Sometimes just keep the happiness more gross. How do we do that? It's part of this tuning. It's part of just an intention to keep it. I want to keep it in this ballpark, in this bandwidth.

But it's also, sometimes what you can do, it sounds like you already are doing it, is just mix a bit more pīti in if it gets too subtle, or rather if it gets too calm. If the happiness starts to get too serene, you just mix a bit more pīti in with it.

Eventually all these different bandwidths of the different genres become just accessible without having to do any tricks. You just kind of remember back to this and that level within it. But how does that sound?

Yeah, it sounds very good and you have been describing some of my experiences already and just wanted to add that I just realized that many times my second jhāna works better when I'm doing it in walking meditation. So it keeps on a grosser level just because of the movement of the body and coordination.

So that's great. And eventually what we want is that it's not so influenced by posture, walking, sitting, standing, but by intention and this kind of steering. It's all part of the responsiveness and creativity that we're talking about. And you can do it by just a little bit more, a little bit more pīti in there.

I have a couple of questions. Let's start with the first. I've been working on the first jhāna for a few days, and then it felt like I reached your mastery definition, and I moved on. But I kind of wonder whether it might have been too fast because it feels like

the access to all these different aspects of mastery is very dependent on the fact that I do it all the time. And what I would really like to do is to be able to practice jhānas back home on a daily practice, you know, just one hour a day or two, and with all the noise of daily life in the background. So I kind of wonder...

Yeah, probably, you know, access to jhānas is dependent on a million conditions, a lot of different conditions. Off retreat, on retreat, there'll be lots of different conditions which allow that each day, each sitting, you know. But one of them is just how familiar it all is, you know, how familiar that pīti is. So a lot of those aspects of mastery are just dependent on being so repeatedly soaked in something that it's just easy to summon it and etc.

So it might be, yeah, longer. Then how would, you know, just like spend more time with what already feels like familiar and stable work? It might be, but it still might be that you might have, because we talked about you having two or even three playgrounds. So that increasing familiarity, let's say, with the first jhāna might happen in parallel at the same time, in other words, on this retreat with the second and the third, you know, and you're just developing more and more of them like that together, right? In other words, you're still getting familiarity with the first, but you're still developing familiarity with the second as well.

I don't know. At a certain point, as I'll perhaps mention tomorrow, what will happen is it becomes almost a little difficult to stay in the first jhana. As Andy was saying, the mind so much wants to slide forward. It's almost got its own agenda and its own wisdom.

So it's a tricky question, but there's no reason why you can't just continue for a while with three jhanas and move between them. It doesn't have to be rigid—the next three days I'll spend in one, the next three days after that in another. It could simply be: today I'll practice all three, tomorrow I'll practice all three, and the day after I'll practice all three.

As to what happens in your daily life, it's hard to predict because a lot depends on circumstances. Go back to the Buddha's description of the first jhana—it's dependent on seclusion, dependent on withdrawal. But not withdrawal from people and things; rather, withdrawal from entanglement, seclusion from the hindrances.

Of course, sometimes in our daily life we're just entangled in stuff—relational difficulties, work pressures, this stress, that pressure—and the mind is actually more entangled. Then it's harder to withdraw internally from those pressures. Health issues and all kinds of things affect what actually happens. So it's really hard to predict.

My intuitive hunch is: why don't you let yourself just have three jhanas for now? Let them develop in parallel. So your day is moving between those three as best you can, maybe roughly equally though it doesn't have to be. This day might lean more toward one, that day more toward another. Just trust in all of that—it will bear fruit in different ways.

It's probably the case that whatever you can access regularly on a long retreat is further along than what most people can access in their daily life, but there's so much individual variation in this. So that's my intuitive sense. Does that sound okay?

"Can I ask one more thing?"

"Of course."

"So with the first jhana, it was very different than when I practiced it previously, in the ways you mentioned—less intense and all that. But it was also just less wonderful in a way. The first time I practiced it, about a year ago, it was really deeply affecting my whole being, very impressive, and produced a lot of faith in the Dharma. Now it's as if some parts of the psyche just aren't interested anymore. They don't get involved. It's not like the body is suffused with pīti, and even though consciousness can be full of the jhana, some parts seem to... So I wonder: is it important, and can I convince them to join again? Or should I just say okay, never mind, now they're in the second and third jhana? And will this happen with each of them?"

It's very normal—I think I mentioned this—to become much less interested in the first jhana after you've tasted particularly the third. It's very, very normal, and you can go through a period like this.

One thing to consider is taking a larger view: I'm really wanting all eight jhanas. It does get less intense over time, becoming more mellow, and that's partly due to opening to the third jhana and these more peaceful realms. So that's all normal.

Again, if you think in terms of direction rather than trying to achieve a certain amount of full involvement... Just think: here I am now, practicing the first jhana. Maybe it's a little less engaged than when I practice the second and third jhana. But when I go there, part of my intention is: can I find this really lovely? Can I actually get into it?

Rather than asking "am I or am I not," it's more a direction. Is it possible to find more engagement, more delight? Without the sense of "did I pass or fail that test?" It's a subtle difference—it's a direction of exploration rather than evaluation.

Does that make sense? I don't think it's about whether you pass or fail—it feels like some areas are just off-limits, not interested in this. Yeah, but your task is simply to give yourself to it more, to open to it more.

It may be that when you've had more to drink from the third jhana and perhaps deeper jhanas, your relationship with the first jhana becomes recontextualized. When it first comes, there's nothing else—just normal consciousness or papañca, and the first jhana. It's completely the most amazing thing, a signal to the being that entirely other states of consciousness are possible. Often it makes a dramatic impression.

As you progress, it takes its place in a much larger jigsaw puzzle or mandala of the eight jhanas. You still have a sense that this is really valuable. Part of your task is to find, within that larger context, "Can I really discover the enjoyment here?" You're working in that direction, though it probably won't be as dramatic as it was the first time. But that's okay, because it's just one part of a much bigger picture.

"Does the same thing happen to the other jhanas as well, or is it just the first because of the third?"

In a way it does, though there might be something particular about our relationship with the first jhana. You'll have to find out. I think once you've done more and have a whole context, you really start to—it's almost like having that context takes the pressure off, you know, removes the need for it to be a certain way.

Does that make sense, what I'm saying about context? It's like having a larger context just takes the pressure off. I also think if you spend more time in the third, the quality of the rapture becomes delicious in a different way. You have to discover, "Oh, it's a different taste than I was originally used to." And then, "Oh, that's actually really nice."

"Yes. Sometimes the samadhi is quite dry, actually. I recognize myself in what you're saying about people who've been on traditional insight retreats. For me, it's quite spacious, a lot of equanimity usually, but quite dry—no big deal, no big clashes. The energy body is quite light but not really pleasant, more like neutral. I've tried different things, like warming the whole thing up with metta, trying to find pleasure, but sometimes there is no pleasure. So, any advice?"

This is really important. This is why I said the movement to equanimity, or the tendency to find oneself in a sort of equanimous space, will be quite common for people who've done a lot of insight practice. The question for our purposes here is whether that equanimity is close to a jhanic equanimity—there are different kinds of jhanic equanimity, very big ones or smaller ones with the energy body—or whether it's just equanimity and not really close to jhana.

What you're describing doesn't sound like it's very close to jhanic equanimity. It's still a skillful state, much better than being in papañca, but not really close to jhanic equanimity. For some people, what they're describing develops into something like the fourth jhana as they work their way into it. But from what you're describing, it's not that close.

Rather than trying to go there first and convert that to a fourth jhana, try from the beginning to think more about pīti and sukha. What will ignite that? Are there ways that pīti and happiness can arise? If I asked you what would bring up pīti and happiness, what would you say?

In other words, not letting yourself go to that state, but cultivating something else from the beginning that would...

I mean, in the big picture, I'm moving between the third and second jhana quite easily throughout the day. It's not happening all the time, this dry samadhi thing.

Okay.

But it does occur.

Okay.

So I can just come back to the first...

I mean, I'm a bit snobby about the first jhana now, I have to say. I go easily to the second one. I really love to explore the different subtleties of this jhana, so I really love that one. It became sort of my base.

The second?

Yeah, the second one.

Good.

Yeah, good.

Okay, so it's only going to this equanimity place that's not very jhanic sometimes.

Yes.

Yeah, okay. When it goes there, bring it back. In other words, at the moment, it's not ripe enough. The others are not ripe enough to turn that into a jhanic state at the moment. You need more time in the happiness and the equanimity. As I said, it's not quite the same as Mikhail's question, but somewhat related. Then they will deliver you to a different kind of equanimity that's much closer to a jhana.

So when it goes there... Like I said, relatively speaking, it's a pretty skillful place to hang out. But it doesn't really sound like it's got in it what will, at the moment, allow it to blossom into an actually jhanic equanimity of any kind, really.

So when it goes there, fine, just see: "Oh, it's done that again," and do something to bring back—if you can summon it just by itself—the happiness or the peacefulness of the third. Great. Just go back. If you can't, then ask: "How am I going to get back?" If I can remember it, if I can add a happy thought, if I can just have a subtle intention, if I need to go back to the base practice, or whatever.

Yeah.

But I wouldn't hang out in that at the moment. I wouldn't hang out in that kind of equanimity too much.

Yeah.

So you're liking the second and third, and you just need more time there. It really works on the being gradually, you know, and it prepares something to ripen in its time. So this space that you're in now is more a result of your other practice rather than the jhana practice. Does that make sense?

Yes.

Yeah.

Okay. Great.

So is that Lauren?

Yes, please.

So I felt your suggestions yesterday were helpful, and I've today been able to work a little with piti—well, a lot with piti—and two questions about it that are coming up today, but also in the past when I've worked with piti.

The first one is related to some of these questions around enjoyment. Sometimes, especially if I'm working with the breath energy, there'll be a lot of pleasure. But if I let the breath go and bring the attention to what are like sensations of tingling and sort of an effervescence in the body—like compression, expansion—the energy body feels like it's harmonized, but there's not a lot of pleasure in it.

So that's one question.

And then the other one is that sometimes when that harmonized energy body coalesces even more, or there's a deepening of the samadhi, there'll be actually pretty frequently an immediate response where my mind will immediately pull back and be like, "No, don't go in there."

So yeah, those are two questions. Sorry, I'm struggling a little bit today with the medication and things.

So the first one, I just want to make sure I understand. You're working with the breath and the energy body, and piti arises. But when you switch to the piti, you find it's not really strong enough to work with. Is that correct?

Well, the pleasure.

Yeah.

So maybe there's a lot of sensation in the body...

There's a lot of tingling throughout the whole body, but it's not necessarily pleasurable—it's just kind of odd.

This is quite interesting. It might be that you need to spend more time working with the breath. You're working with the breath and energy body as your principal practice, yes? It might be you just need more time with the breath and energy body to allow that tingling to become clearly pleasant.

Or it might be that actually you turn your attention to the tingling and find that whether you perceive it as pleasant or unpleasant—I mentioned this briefly the other day—is actually something you can play with. You can just decide to see it as pleasant. It may be that that's the case.

It's a bit like when we talked about excitement. Sometimes it's kind of on a fence and you can flip it either way. It's just odd, or it's a bit unpleasant, or it's pleasant. And you can learn to play with the perception that way. Then it's like, okay, that's what I'm doing again and again until it is established in a kind of flow of pleasantness.

I would try both approaches: playing with perception—just decide to see it as pleasant—and also staying a little longer, or maybe even a lot longer, with the practice. Let the tingling build up and see if it transforms by itself.

And the second question was about when the samadhi starts to deepen, the mind pulls back from the felt sensations of the deepening or the experience of the samadhi.

What might be interesting is to get a little more specific. Is it fear arising at that point? If so, what exactly are you afraid of at that moment? Because samadhi deepening involves a whole bunch of different things happening, a whole bunch of interwoven aspects. So what exactly is it that you're afraid of? Do you have a sense?

That's a good question. You might not know now, so that would be something to take and find out. There are all kinds of things that a meditator can get a little bit afraid of at that point. The pullback may be coming from fear, so that would be just an inquiry to take into practice—really, really valuable potentially.

Find out what it is exactly. Then we can target more specifically what we might need to do, how we might need to work differently with that. Does that make sense? Why don't we just say that for now? Give it to you as an inquiry, as something to begin to discern a little bit more clearly.

Hannah, does it feel like your question can wait till tomorrow or is it better to ask now? It can wait? Okay.

Let me just say a few things that have come up in interviews that might be useful to everyone. First thing—I didn't mention this in the opening talk, but

I never said, and I never say on a retreat, don't make eye contact or that kind of thing. Some of you will be coming in from other retreats and other forms where that's what you're taught, and you're just plugging that in. As I said, I don't consider it a particularly helpful teaching to give or kind of guidance to give for retreat generally.

So you can make eye contact with each other and with coordinators and with whoever else, if you want to, when you want to. Again, can you be responsive to what you need at any moment? Because actually the connection with each other is part of the appreciation, it's part of the metta, it's part of the rich soil of what allows samadhi to deepen. It may not be that shuffling around slowly staring at your feet and being kind of insular like that—it may not open up much samadhi because something might get dry in the heart and feel not connected.

But you have to see at any moment what you need, because there might be moments where actually you do need to be a bit more inside. Something's going on in your experience or whatever, and you need to kind of—yeah, I'm not into that right now. You're not obliged to make eye contact. Eye contact gets very complicated psychologically, or it can on retreat. What's involved in eye contact or what it triggers or what it means or all this. What are my psychological patterns of avoiding contact or needing it or seeking it? We could probably talk for hours on this. I'm certainly not going to, but it's quite complex psychologically. But we say one thing: just what do I need right now? And I might need to be a bit more within and a bit more focused for whatever reason—maybe it's an emotional thing, maybe I'm just working with a certain energy at that point or whatever.

But correspondingly, if you make eye contact or smile at someone, they might be at a moment or a time when they need to be more insular. And so you might come at them with eye contact and a smile, without realizing that you're hoping for a smile back, and they just completely blank you. And if you're not careful, that can be kind of—I start to take that personally and I start to think, oh, they don't like me for some reason or whatever it is. And the mind just spins with that.

So if we're going to let ourselves at times make eye contact and be open, you have to be also quite spacious about: am I putting pressure on this situation or expecting or demanding something? Really respect other people's space and their rhythms and what they need.

In response to Karen's question, we're talking about when the Buddha says—he hardly ever says, I said this before, but I'll say it again—he hardly ever says, "Dependent on really focusing very hard and very steadily on the tip of the nose, the first jhana arises." He hardly ever says that. He says basically the standard formula is: dependent on withdrawal or dependent on seclusion from the hindrances, from entanglement, the practitioner opens and enters into the first jhana.

So it's not that we want to close sense contact. I mean that's one way of doing it, but you might be drying something else up inside. And I said how much the samadhi practice depends on open-heartedness and openness of being. So this is something—it can be quite subtle as usual, quite some responsiveness. It's dependent on open-heartedness, but not getting entangled, rather than just shutting everything down.

So that's part, again, to me, part of the art and part of the beauty of being on retreat: really sensing deeper levels of connection that we can have with each other. Deep sense of communion in silence without talking to each other or having someone listen to my story or whatever it is. You just get the sense of each person's being and the particularit-

ies and the uniqueness of each person's being, and it's just in the vibe. One's open to that and one's cherishing in a way, sensitive to each person's particularities and enjoying that. Sometimes we're a bit more like this and sometimes we're a bit more like this, but being open and feeling connected is actually quite important, I think, and it's part of the art. Does that make sense?

Some of you have probably never been on a retreat where anyone said to not make eye contact, but for a lot of people in the Theravada and Dharma world that's very, very common. So hopefully that makes sense.

If I'm going to be open, etc.—again, we go back to related to this in a certain way—I really need to keep my intention steady. My intention is jhana practice. And that's why we're here. That's what this retreat was set up for. So I can be open, et cetera, but my intention is steady. And that very steadiness of intention is what allows you to be open. Again, there's a difference between being open and getting entangled and then getting lost and my intention has gone somewhere else, versus I can be open partly because I'm just really clear about what my intention is.

So the intention is really for jhana practice, primarily. And then secondly, this intention: like what is my playground? So this should hopefully get, if it's not clear for you already, it should be getting very, very clear soon. Now some of you, like I said, when we responded to Karen, and I've said in interviews, some of you are going to have multiple playgrounds at once. So it's not necessarily it's the second jhana or it's the first. It might be. Some of you might be working on two or three at once, and partly because of how they interact with each other or what that enables. In other words, for example, like the third jhana might mellow out the first jhana. The first jhana is just too intense, and so the second jhana helps it a little bit. So yeah, it should be getting clear.

And if you feel it's really not clear where your learning edge playground is, let's try to get everyone clear with the three of us—with Sari and Robert—really what your playground is, within the next day or two at most. So you really know: oh, this is my learning edge playground, yes? And as I said, for some of you, because of your past experience, it will be a kind of multiple playground. That's completely fine.

This is different than teaching a retreat where people are just starting from the beginning in meditation. Does anyone who's quite familiar with imaginal practice—is anyone getting confused about what the difference is between imaginal spaces and jhanic spaces? Or is that okay? Good, so I don't really need to talk about that.

Now here's a funny thing. And again, everyone brings their own unique psychology to this. Sometimes we're too easily satisfied as human beings. A lot of people, what you're running into is too much pushiness—either "I want this to be better," which we've talked about, or "What's next? What's next? What's the next jhana? What's next? I'm ready for the next one."

But sometimes we're a little bit too easily satisfied with something that we can already do. And it's nice. So it's like, okay, well, I'll just stay here. It's so individual and it can change at different times. This is part of the art of the whole thing, and something to check out with a teacher.

I learn a lot about my life psychology here. You see it in the microcosm of something like jhana practice. Jhana practice reveals a lot because it's inherently kind of goal-oriented, and so we learn so much about our relationship with goals and all that. Some of you, or some of you in some moments, will be being too pushy—and probably everyone has encountered that. But some of you will be a little too easily satisfied with where you are, or where you've been for a while. Again, that's something you might want to bring to interviews and explore a little bit.

The interviews—yes, they're quite regular, aren't they? They're every other day for people. And really, I don't know if you've been feeling this, but there's no pressure on the interviews. Don't feel like you have to come in and say something super insightful or interesting, or have a big problem, or a really great question. I mean, hopefully you will have all of those things, but you don't have to.

Sometimes what happens in the course of a long retreat with jhanas is the practice itself is just kind of plateauing for a while. It's like something's gestating, and then at a certain point it'll just take a quantum leap. So if that's the case at any point—well, I'm going into this interview saying pretty much the same thing I said in the last interview, reporting the same thing—no problem. Just report it. Maybe the interview is a lot shorter and we're just checking how you're doing. Maybe the teacher will ask you a couple of things or find something to work with, but maybe it's just shorter. If you feel any sense of pressure for the interviews, you don't have to.

Something I've said before, but I think it really bears repeating, maybe in slightly different words. If we're talking about piti, we'll have a huge range of how strong it is, how intense it feels. And in a way it really doesn't matter. It's got to be strong enough to work with, strong enough to get into. But sometimes it can feel relatively weak—and especially, like I said, maybe that's compared to the first few times I experienced it or whatever.

In a way, what we want is to be okay with that whole range—okay when it's really very intense. Can I bear that? Can I open to it? Can I actually find that enjoyable? Can I really come into a relationship with it where that's fruitful, rather than kind of almost cringing in relationship to it, or holding back or contracting, which would be very normal for most people? But also on the other side, when it's relatively weak, it's fine.

It's okay. It's definitely pleasant, but it's definitely nothing to write home about. Can I still get into that? Can I learn how to work with that relatively unremarkable pīti and still really give myself wholeheartedly and see what's possible there?

It may not become more intense. I mean, it may become more intense, but as we said with the samādhi, the intensity is not so important. What's important though is here is this—in this sitting or this walking, whatever it is—is this pīti that's not so intense. It's still pīti. Can I stay interested in it? Can I work with it?

Maybe what has to happen is I have to actually increase the intensity of my attention—not the intensity of the pīti, but the intensity of my attention. And again, it's like, do I know how to do that? Do I actually get a sense of what it feels like to have a very intense attention and a less intense attention and a kind of medium attention? Do I recognize what that feels like? Can I turn the dial on that or the fader switch? Can I have an intense attention without getting a headache?

Or is it with this slightly weaker pīti that I actually need to go into the opening more? And that's what needs to happen. So can I open intensely? We tend to think of intensity as a kind of probing. What would it be to really, really intensely—that's why I use words like surrender and abandon oneself. So it might be that that needs to get more intense.

It's not the pīti necessarily that needs to get more intense, but I need to find the whole kind of—of all the aspects of attention, all the different dials there, all the different faders there, what's the maximal setting for each one? That's a way too technical analogy, but I'm playing with all these different aspects of attention, playing with all the possibilities there to really make this work, even though the pīti itself is not very remarkable. So that in itself is a really useful skill. It's a real part of the art.

I just want to throw out two things which I hardly mentioned, just in case people who haven't encountered them before are encountering them and are a little phased by them.

So one is, I think I mentioned it—did I mention the nāda sound? I just mentioned it, but I didn't really. So it's pretty common for some people in meditation, or common at certain stretches of their meditation life, when the samādhi deepens—in some degree it might be even not jhānic—to hear a kind of ringing in the ears, a kind of buzzing or

that sort of thing. It's very normal. Some people take that as a meditation object and there's a couple of different ways you can work with it as a meditation object. You can work with it as a concentration object. You can work with it in a way that is a kind of help, a platform in insight.

But really what I wanted to just say right now is just that it's normal and nothing weird is going on. If you hear a ringing in your ears that sounds like it's really loud even sometimes, you don't have to take it as an object. And if you're fine with whatever practice you're doing, leave it. Just let it be there. It's just something that's going on. It might come and go. It's not a big deal. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with your brain or anything like that at all.

The second thing that can happen—it happens a lot with insight meditation, and certainly if you're doing these actual insight ways of looking that Julia mentioned and I mentioned the other day, but it will also happen with samādhi practice—is that sometimes after a practice and you look around you or you're walking around, and it's almost like everything feels like you're looking at a wall and it just feels like it's made of paper or it's see-through or it's lost its solidity. Very, very normal. Not a problem at all. You're not going crazy. It's completely normal.

What's going on there is actually really interesting and is something I'll come back to when we really start to talk about insight and jhāna more. But I'm saying both these things about the sound and the kind of visual perception of sort of loss of solidity or that sort of thing just to reassure in case these things are opening up and you're not used to them.

I think that's it. I don't really know what to do about this note that I just got. I'm not sure if we should try and all decide, but it might be something we should somehow all try and decide together. This may not be wise to try and do it this way. We're all adults. The maintenance department have asked that we flag up to you the potential of setting off the fire alarm if there is much smoke from the Hanukkah candles in the dining room and to check that they are definitely not left unattended. I mean, for me, if I just say what I think and then you can tell me what you think.

I don't think it's a problem if a fire alarm goes off. It's fine. They know how to deal with it and they'll deal with it. It's probably pretty unlikely. So that's my inclination with the first bit.

The second bit about unattended—I don't know, how long do they burn for, do you think? Oh, is that it? An hour and a half. Okay.

So, you know, you can kind of get a sense if some of you are sitting there in silence with them and practicing. You can just, if you're the only one there, then sorry, you have to stay. If there's a few of you, then maybe you can just communicate where you're going now, and then, well, do you want to come back in fifteen minutes and do a rota or something? How does that sound? Anyone got any better ideas with that?

I'm glad it's only an hour and a half because it's not all night. Does that sound okay? So this doesn't have to be a big deal at all.

Okay, great. So let's have a bit of quiet to end before tea.

Thank you everyone, and now time for tea.

CHAPTER 210

The Second Jhāna

Rob Burbea · 1h31

> *In this comprehensive teaching, Rob Burbea examines the second jhāna through the Buddha's classical descriptions and practical guidance for cultivation. He explores how vitakka-vicāra (thinking and pondering) subside, giving way to inner tranquillity and unity of mind born of samādhi. The primary nimitta shifts from pīti to sukha (happiness) - an emotional quality that pervades the entire body like the Buddha's beautiful simile of a spring-fed lake.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes the crucial importance of discriminating between pīti and sukha, warning against stagnation that occurs when practitioners fail to make these subtle distinctions. He offers practical techniques for transition, including dropping light questions about present emotions and using suggestion when the mind becomes more malleable in deeper samādhi. The teaching addresses common misconceptions about attachment to jhānic pleasure, arguing that the Buddha encouraged pursuit of these wholesome pleasures while warning against sense pleasures.*
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> *The discussion includes the arising of mettā as a secondary nimitta, the confidence (ajjhattaṃ pasādanaṃ) that emerges from this profound happiness independent of external conditions, and how this transforms one's relationship with letting go and the spiritual path itself.*

Today I would like to talk about the second jhāna and weave into that, as usual, some things that apply much more generally to any jhāna or jhāna practice in general.

As I said at the beginning, the teachings will progress through the retreat at the pace that they do, dependent on a lot of factors. It's highly unlikely that your practice progresses at the same rate, and in fact, it's totally undesirable. At some point, you're going to coincide with the teachings—you may have already done that or maybe later—but what we're really interested in is your pace. That's really, really important. What's your playground? What's your pace? When is it a maturing or transition time?

Let me read again the Buddha's description of the second jhāna, of which there are two: a simile and a more technical-sounding one. A practitioner, with the subsiding of thinking and pondering—again, there's that vitaka vicāra, how different this translation from the more common these days "initial and sustained application"—by gaining inner

tranquility and unity of mind, reaches and remains in the second jhāna, which is free from thinking and pondering, born of concentration and filled with delight and happiness.

So again, filled with pīti and sukha. This translator is rendering pīti as delight. With the subsiding of vitaka vicāra, by gaining inner tranquility and unity of mind, one reaches and remains in the second jhāna, which is characterized by being free from thinking and pondering, free from vitaka and vicāra, born of concentration and filled with pīti and sukha.

Let me read another translation so you get a sense: Furthermore, with the stilling of directed thought and evaluation—again, quite a different translation of vitaka and vicāra—she enters and remains in the second jhāna. Rapture and pleasure, pīti and sukha, born of composure. The actual Pali word is samādhi, which the first translator rendered as concentration and this person has translated as composure. As I said, I would translate samādhi as quite a broad term: it's unification, it's harmonization, it's the agreement of the elements of being. Born of samādhi—a unification of awareness—free from directed thought and evaluation, free of vitaka and vicāra, internal assurance. She permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture, with the pīti and sukha born of composure, born of samādhi. There is nothing of her entire body unpervaded by pīti and sukha born of samādhi.

Basically, the vitaka and vicāra fade, and born of the samādhi is pīti and sukha, which is then spread throughout the body. A couple of other elements: that it's born of samādhi distinguishes it from the first jhāna, where the Buddha said it is born from withdrawal from the hindrances, or seclusion from the hindrances. So this is born of samādhi. Remember how rich that term samādhi is, how wide—for me at least, hopefully for you. What's this unification of awareness? The Pali is cetasso ekodibhāvaṁ—the citta, cetasso, the citta unified or raised to oneness. And then this word we'll come back to later: ajjhattaṁ sampasādanaṁ—internal assurance. Sometimes you hear the word confidence, internal confidence.

Then we have a gorgeous simile that I find absolutely beautiful: Just as a lake fed by a spring with no inflow from east, west, north, or south, where the rain god sends moderate showers from time to time, the water welling up from below, mingling with cool water, would suffuse, fill, and irradiate that cool water so that no part of the pool was untouched by it. So with this pīti and sukha born of samādhi, the practitioner so suffuses their body that no spot remains untouched.

Remember, we're talking about a very hot climate where that kind of image is going to be supremely appealing—unlike Devon in December. To me, that's a lovely, lovely image.

And I feel very much as you get more into the jhanas, some of these similes actually seem more accurate than the more technical sounding descriptions, which are open to all kinds of ambiguities over translations and terms and what they might have meant at one historical period and then another. To me, there's something much more accurate about the poetic translation than there is about what sounds more technical—the kind of descriptions and language where there are these five factors and there are these three factors, and we tend to think, oh, that must be the really accurate one. But you'll see how you do with it. See what you gravitate towards, what opens, what you learn as time goes on.

So these are the descriptions we have. They're pretty brief. Again, as I think I mentioned yesterday or another time, when the mind opens into new territory, a new realm, a new level, it tends to experience that level as effortless at first. It's just—whoa, we're suddenly not in Kansas anymore. We're suddenly, what is this? And you're just going along with the ride, it feels like, and it's effortless and wonderful. There are always exceptions, always exceptions, but it tends to be that that's the case.

Then at times after that, after those first few experiences where it's all just effortlessly kind of happening and you're almost just a bewitched witness of the whole experience, it might be that at times the relationship with the second jhana matures. And so at times we're actually practicing—we're conscious that it's not effortless anymore. I need to actually practice tuning to this frequency of happiness, which at times may be super obvious and kind of blow your socks off remarkable—like wow—and other times much more subtle and maybe not so remarkable. I need to practice tuning to that and steadying my attention on what is essentially a more refined object. The sukha is more refined than the piti.

As I mentioned, the jhanas are not primarily a spectrum of stronger and stronger concentration. The eighth jhana is not invariably a state of more immovability of mind than the fourth jhana or the seventh jhana or whatever. That's not necessarily the case. That's not the primary thing that's changing. It might happen that way sometimes, but it might happen completely otherwise at different times. Rather, the jhanas are primarily a spectrum of increasing refinement—let's say increasing refinement. I'm aware there's a bit of ambiguity between the word subtlety and refinement, so let's choose the word

refinement, the way that this cloth is a lot more coarse and less refined than this cloth. The texture of it is much more refined. They're primarily a spectrum of deeper and more refinement. They get more and more refined.

Technically—and we'll come back to this—there's a reason for that. It's because they're also a spectrum of less and less fabrication on the spectrum of the fabrication of perception. If you've never heard that term before, I'll explain it in more detail later on. This is really, really central and it's really, really important to understand that. In general, I would say, in terms of understanding what the Dharma is, where we're going, what emptiness means, what dependent arising means, what liberation means—it's a key concept. The jhanas too map onto that very key central concept because the jhanas too, in their spectrum of more and more refinement, are also, you could say, places or areas on a spectrum of less and less fabrication.

It's actually like this coarse cloth has almost more material to it. It's thicker and denser. And this fine cloth has less material to it. It's thinner with more filaments. So we're actually fabricating less as we go deeper and deeper into jhanas. We may or may not be aware of that, but to become conscious of it and to understand it and understand its implications is huge, is massive. In a way, I would say we don't really understand what the jhanas are, really understand how they relate to insight practice, or how they integrate into the whole practice. And we don't really understand what we're doing when we're practicing concentration—we don't really understand that until we understand this and its relation, the whole notion of the fabrication of perception: how one fabricates more or less at different times, how does that happen, and what happens when we fabricate more or less? We will come back to that.

However, having said all that, in the second jhana we've got "born of samadhi." So I think it's true to say that usually a state of second jhana is an improvement of concentration over the first jhana—usually. But that samadhi, again, it's a wider word—unification, harmonization, etc. A wider word than it usually gets translated as just concentration, I would say.

It may be that a practitioner is still at this point staying with their breath. The breath is the primary object and the piti has come up and they're really mixing that with the breath and getting into that, and then the happiness comes up. And one can, if one wants, stay with the breath. Or the metta might be the base practice and one can, if one wants, stay with the metta. But what happens is—or what should happen—is they get mixed. It must feel at some point that I am breathing happiness, or the breath has become happiness, or the metta has become happiness. I am radiating out sukha and happiness, or the body has become happiness.

The Buddha says, "no part of the body left unpervaded by this sukha and piti."

You have the option of keeping with the breath if that's your base practice and you want to, and that's what helps, or keeping with the metta. But these primary base practice objects—the metta or the breath—should completely integrate with the happiness. As I said, they just become happiness.

Or you can, as described with the first jhana, make the happiness the primary object and what you're primarily paying attention to. Then the breath or the metta may support that a little bit, or it's just gone—you're really not concerned with it. You have a bodily sense of happiness, an emotional sense of happiness, and that's what you're concentrating on.

If we were all to take a sort of school trip to Newton Abbott and each one of us were to stop someone on the street and say, "Think of something that makes you happy, and then can you concentrate on that happiness?" I think most people would just be baffled. It would feel impossible or very, very difficult.

For most of us, happiness as an object to focus on and steady the mind with is actually something we never do. We wouldn't know how to do it and we wouldn't be able to do it. So we're training that. We have to train that.

We're not concentrating so much on a spatial point. We're concentrating, if you like, on that frequency or that bandwidth of frequencies, which is happiness. That's really what we're doing. Within that, or within our intention to do that and our playing with that, there may be times when the attention is really steady and really focusing on a spatial point. But that spatial point is happiness, or it's the center of the happiness.

Again, what we're really doing is focusing on the happiness, and that's central. Rather than thinking of concentration as a focus on a spatial point—which may be helpful at times and at other times not what's helpful—we let go of the sense of the spatial point being so important. It's the frequency.

This word sukha, S-U-K-K-H-A in Pali, is an emotional quality, the emotion of happiness. I mean that word in quite a broad way. Technically in Buddhist psychology, it's a citta quality—a quality of the heart and mind. However, it's also physical, and this we really want to emphasize. You feel it as much in the body, and you need to feel it in the body.

This is partly why the person in Newton Abbott won't be able to do it—because it's just an extremely ephemeral, extremely wispy mental quality. They can't locate it in their body. Feeling it in the body, pervading the body with it, is exactly what enables us to really get into it and really stabilize with it.

When I say "in the body," I mean in the energy body, in the whole space, in the vibration tone. It becomes happiness. The vibration tone of the energy body space becomes happiness.

At the beginning, when you first open to this level—either the second jhana or just the emergence of the sukha—identifying it as an emotion is for most people actually quite a crucial distinction to make. The piti is a primarily physical quality. The sukha is an emotion.

Just making that distinction, although because of what I just said, it's actually not quite true—they're both energy body vibrations, different energy body vibrations—will really help you make the distinction, get a sense of the different playgrounds, get a sense of the territory, and actually build the whole thing if you recognize it and feel it as an emotional quality as well. That's what's going to really start to distinguish it from the piti.

Identifying it as an emotional quality versus a primarily physical quality, which we could regard the piti as—and the piti isn't just that either—makes things black and white. It's not this absolute division, but sometimes making things black and white is actually really helpful at a certain stage to make things clearer. Is it the ultimate truth? Definitely not. But just making that division at first is really helpful.

It will help to draw it out of the mix, to draw out that emotional quality of sukha from the mix. "Ah, this is the emotion. That's what I'm paying attention to at first." And to begin to distinguish: this is piti, this is sukha.

You really need to taste it—which really means feel it in the body and feel the different qualities and enjoy them—several times, perhaps quite a few times, to really get used to this. At first, it might be very, very obvious. If the second jhana just explodes out of the first, it's very obvious: I'm in a completely different territory now. But as time goes on, there might be a "hold on a minute, where's the division here?"

This distinguishing, this making discernment, is actually really key. This is what we're talking about when I emphasize sensitivity, attunement, discernment—it's all really key not just to jhana practice, but to what we said right at the beginning: the quality of your relationship with your own emotions and your wisdom with your own emotions, your sensitivity to all kinds of things in life, your capacity...

for relationship, the skill you can work with in emptiness practice, in soul-making practice, in brahmaviharas practice. That's why we emphasized it.

I would say—or rather a lot of people say, and I agree with them—that as the Buddha describes, piti and sukha are both present in the first jhana, and they're both present in the second jhana. But what's characteristic of the first jhana is that the piti is to the fore. We're entranced by that more, and maybe there's more of it in the mix. Then in the second jhana, that flips and the sukha becomes prominent over the piti. The piti is still there, but the sukha becomes prominent, and the sukha is our primary nimitta, whereas in the first jhana, the piti was the primary nimitta.

Karen asked me, "Is that in the Pali Canon?" No, I've never seen it in the Pali Canon. I mean, it might be somewhere—I very much doubt it, but I don't think so. Maybe it's in a commentary somewhere, I'm not sure. When I say that, I'm speaking from the teachers that I have really trusted and who have taught me jhana practice, or from whom I've learned jhana practice, and from my own experience. That's pretty clear. Is it in the Pali? I don't think so.

We get these very brief descriptions, and as we go into the further jhanas, the descriptions are even briefer. So we have to somehow discern and get a sense of what the territory is. But as I said—I think I've already said it twice and I'll say it once more—back to this distinguishing between piti and sukha, really making that distinction. What can happen if we don't is this kind of stagnation. It's the discernment that takes us deeper. It's the sensitivity that takes us deeper on the whole path, deeper on the jhana path in a full way.

I know practitioners who sit a lot, who did sit a lot, put a lot of work in, and they reach a kind of place that's around this area. It's a kind of a mix. They do not—either they do not take the instruction or they do not bother to make the differentiation. Twenty years later they're still pretty much hovering around in the same kind of soup. That might be completely fine with them, or they might want something different, but they're not going to open up anywhere deeper unless they make the distinctions, the discriminations, the subtle discriminations. It's nice where they are and they can sit for quite a while, but it hasn't gone anywhere and there isn't much new insight. So it doesn't just apply to the depth of samadhi practice—it applies to the insight practice as well. That all gets stagnated as well.

Sometimes, though, they're mixed. The piti and the sukha are mixed and it's hard to tell at the beginning. So there will be times, if you're new to the second jhana, when you're not quite sure. But generally speaking, we want to be clear: this is piti and this is sukha. Generally speaking, they do kind of separate like that. But there will be times when it's actually quite hard to tell.

What all that means is that part of the work—or play, depending on your favorite word there—part of the work and play at this stage is exactly that. That's part of your job. Can I really get used to what the differences are? Can I make the discriminations? That's really part of the work.

So how does the second jhana arise? What color is an unripe mango? Is it green? What color is a ripe mango? Is it kind of yellow, red? Let's say it's more yellow-red. Ajahn Jeff used to say, "Don't take a green unripe mango and paint it yellow-red and then call that a ripe mango." Don't take your practice wherever it is and try to do something and call that the second jhana. Don't take your first jhana and push it or put pressure on it or just do something that you're kind of forcing.

You don't force a mango to ripen. His approach was very much that these things will ripen in their own time. If you do it that way, rather than kind of jumping the gun or forcing anything or wanting to achieve something or having some kind of timetable, it will be much, much more fruitful. Again, generally speaking—there are all kinds of exceptions, and I'll come back to some of those exceptions.

So again, we talked about pīti—remember when we discussed it, we said that generally speaking, you could say there are two ways that pīti arises. One is I take an object—maybe it's a point in the abdomen or the breath at the nostrils, if it's the breath, maybe I take the metta, whatever it is—and I just work with that, work with that, work with that. I do not put up with the hindrances when they come. I really try to work with the hindrances, and I have this background awareness. I play with this idea of more intense attention, less intense attention, delicacy of attention, subtilizing the attention. If I do all that—those four things—then the way the pīti tends to arise is sudden and eruptive and quite strong after, for most people, quite a while.

Then there's another way, which is taking the energy body experience from the beginning and actually just kind of tending to the little ember of well-being there, fanning it when it needs fanning, protecting it when it needs protection from the winds, building in a way, coaxing it to become more of a campfire—the pīti. But that needs work and play: playing with the modes of attention, playing with very intense probing at times or intense attention, intense opening, radical opening, receiving. So I have to be

intense. I can't—at times at least—I have to be intense with how I'm coaxing this ember. Sometimes my intention and my attention and my whole work and play has to be quite intense without putting pressure or a demand on it.

When we get to the second jhāna and this happiness, it might be the case, as I said, that it probably relies more on its arising in a way that's helpful. It probably relies more on a really, very gratifying relationship with the pīti. The pīti—one is really into it and really enjoying it. So if the pīti is okay and it's kind of just okay, and then you think, "Maybe the second jhāna would be better"—that goes back to the foolish, inexperienced cow. Remember that?

So I have to—what does this mean here? It means then that again, with the pīti that's arisen, I have to work and play with that in these ways. I actually have to shape it. I need to really take care of it and take care of my relationship to it. The sukha of the second jhāna will only arise when I do that.

So if it matures—if the sukha of the second jhāna matures organically like this mango—it emerges through working and playing with the pīti, and through the pīti feeling really lovely, really pleasurable, really enjoyable. Then the sukha emerges in a much clearer way. It's like, "Whoa, this really is—okay, this really is something else now. Now this is really something quite extraordinary." And this is clearly what that word sukha means. It's clearly the second jhāna.

After that—to say in different words what I said earlier—after a few times of that, then you might find yourself needing to... In other words, after quite a bit of experience with the second jhāna, then you might find yourself needing to go back and work with a much more subtle and unremarkable sukha and build it up the way we built up the ember of well-being into pīti.

Does this make sense what I'm saying? It's like if I've got a pīti that's not that great, then my chances of taking a happiness that's okay and building it into the second jhāna are probably—there are always exceptions, and I'd be really interested if there are actually, to hear back just for teaching purposes—but it's more likely that the happiness that comes when the pīti wasn't that remarkable, and then the sukha is not that remarkable, it will be hard to get that to feel really gratifying and like "this is really something." Versus the pīti that can arise with patience and time from just working with the ember in the energy body.

With the pīti, we can go two ways. I take an object, I stick with it, but I have to be careful how I'm sticking with it and be intense and watch—be subtle with the attention and the delicacy and all that. I can do that, or I can just take the ember of well-being in the energy body and build it and build it and build it. So basically, I can get either of two ways to a pīti that's really nice.

When you come to the second jhāna, I'm just wondering whether the probability of coming to a sukha which is characteristic of the second jhāna that's really nice is not an equal probability. I can't start from a happiness that's not really that gratifying, especially if that was built on a pīti that never got really that gratifying. It's probably possible, but at first it's unlikely. With the pīti, I have to get really into the pīti. I have to really get that far and really enjoy it. And then it's more likely to succeed.

After a lot of experience with the sukha and the second jhāna, then you can take a really quite unremarkable happiness—you're already quite skilled and it's already quite familiar—and that can grow.

Having said all that, sometimes what happens—sometimes what I encounter in teaching—is someone whose first jhāna is just great and they're even getting all the elements of mastery. So it's usually the case that as a person really starts to gain those elements of mastery through practice with the first jhāna, the second jhāna is already kind of intruding, emerging, showing itself.

That's usually the case. Occasionally—or sometimes; I don't know what proportion of times—someone's first jhana is going really well. They're really enjoying it, they're really into it, and there are some of those elements of mastery, but the second jhana is not showing. It's not emerging.

Sometimes—this is not how Ajahn Chah teaches; he would say you never paint that mango at all, or you never force a ripening—obviously there are some things you could do, little tricks you can play with.

So one is: here's the piti. I'm really used to it. I'm really into it. It's going great right now—it's going great generally, I'm into it, I've practiced with it, I've gotten used to all that mastery, or a lot of the mastery. And then right now, it's going great in this sitting, walking, standing, whatever it is. When it's going great, I can just drop a question—just a really light question: "What is the emotion right now? What's the emotion I'm feeling right now?" And the answer should be happiness. It should be sukha.

A second possibility: again, here it is going quite well. (This is something that doesn't need to be going well—after a while, after a lot of practice, it doesn't need to be going well for this one to work. But here, let's say at the beginning when it's not quite happen-

ing.) Here I am, and I drop in the word—whichever word I prefer—just a whisper, a grain of magic, alchemical, chemical. Just drop it in, a drop into the citta: "happiness," or "joy," or "sukha," or whatever word you prefer.

As I said, the mind goes deeper in samadhi, becomes more and more suggestible, and potently so. More and more sensitive the mind becomes—sensitive to suggestion, sensitive, becomes more malleable in all kinds of ways.

Another thing you can try: you've probably noticed that most often piti tends to flow upwards in the body. One feels a sort of upward current of it. What you can try sometimes is just feel that upward current. Again, this is when you're really used to it and it's great and you're enjoying it. Then the upward current—imagine it shooting out the top of your head like a fountain, like a spout of a fountain. The water comes out the top of your head and then, like a fountain, it falls back down. Just imagine that; see what happens.

A fourth possibility—I'm not sure how much one might want to try this, but it may well be very useful for some people at some times: again, here's the piti. It's going well. I'm into it; my practice is right now. And just the memory—introduce, again, very, very subtly, just the memory of something that makes you happy, or a happiness. Just like a little tincture, a little drop of tincture into the citta, the memory of a happiness while the piti is there. Drop that in.

So these are all little tricks. In a way, the safest gamble is to let something mature and just get really, really into the piti. Find that enjoyment, find that intensity of relationship with the piti. Don't confuse intensity with this kind of forward-probing narrowing—that's one form of intensity. Another form is: how intensely am I opening? But an intensely enjoyable relationship with the piti, and it matures out of that in time.

If not, or if you feel like—or if the teacher says—well, maybe you want to try one of those tricks. If you're playing enough, you will discover your own tricks at this point, at this threshold, at this border between the first and second jhana. You should discover your own tricks and come and share them with us. There's all kinds of things that are possible.

Eventually you won't need any tricks, because hopefully you have mastery of the second jhana, which means you just have the subtle intention for the second jhana or for the sukha to arise, and it goes there. I can't even remember the tricks I used to use. This was all I could come up with because I couldn't remember. After a while, one just doesn't need them.

It's just from intention. But there is that point of learning new territory where you will be like, "Well, it's gone there before and how do I get it back?" Or if it needs a nudging, you know?

Going back to something I mentioned earlier, there's this phrase in Pali which means something like "with the subsiding, with the allaying, with the cessation, with the calming" of what? Thinking—thinking about vitakka and vicāra begins to not make much sense at this point. So what is that? This refers to what's characteristic here.

Vicāra, that word also has a particular meaning sometimes. So it's used as a pair. Vitakka-vicāra just means thinking. Vicāra has a particular meaning of a kind of discursive thought. What I mean by that is the mind getting hooked on a thought and following a thought for more than one moment. So this thought leads to that thought, or I'm following a train of thought. This is discursive thinking.

"Discursive" in English comes from the Latin curare, which means to run, to move, to move fastly. The mind is in a certain—you understand, it's hooked and it's moved. Does that make sense? The mind is moved with a thought. One thought follows another. So when we reason "this, therefore that, therefore the next thing"—that's also, in English, discursive thought. That's also one of the meanings of discursive thought: consequential movement of thought.

I would say that if you're careful enough in your attention, if you're sensitive enough in your attention, you will notice in the second jhāna that it may be that thought arises at times. This citta, which has infinite depth and subtlety—it may be that thought arises at times, but what there isn't in the second jhāna is any being hooked to a thought. The mind is not then moved off on a thought. One thought does not lead to a second thought. This follows that, or "I was thinking this." And the kind of thought that arises is probably very, very wispy, very, very subtle. It's not extended in time either.

So there's a larger point here, I think, just about—in addition to mapping out what actually is the range of experience of the second jhāna—and there's a larger, perhaps even equally important point. What is it to have a thought? We use that word so much. "I'm thinking," or "there was thought," or "there wasn't thought."

I would say the whole idea of thought and the whole experience of thought has an enormous range to it—from the mind shouting something and completely lost in a tangle of shouting at itself or whatever it is and very coarse thoughts, to extremely, extremely subtle, the kind of subtlety that most people wouldn't even notice. And we're not used to, we're not even aware that, oh, there might be this level there.

So an invitation alongside all this: to open up that investigation, to pay attention and notice, what do we mean when we say thought? And what does it mean when the mind gets quiet? Is it completely quiet? Is it quiet at a certain level? What kind of thoughts have gone? What kind of relationship with thought has gone?

So what has gone is that being hooked onto a thought, or rather more than being hooked onto a thought—one thought hooking us to the next, one thought being hooked to the next. That's gone. And also gross thought has gone.

Again, this is the sort of thing—it may take a while to notice this. And I really mean, again, this is also why I keep—and sorry to anyone who doesn't like this—but why subtlety and sensitivity is such an important part for me in the teaching. One begins to realize, oh, these things are not so black and white. And there's way more subtlety of range for most phenomena than we tend to realize at first, and we can develop our sensitivity and get aware of that range of subtlety. And that pays enormous dividends.

All this business about what is thought actually has huge implications for very, very deep insight. People talk about non-conceptual awareness and "the mind was completely non-conceptual," etc. And so what's the difference between a conception and a thought? And does a conception have to be verbal? Does a thought have to be verbal? I need to notice all this for the really deep end of insight, when you're talking about really deep unfabricating, or understandings of emptiness and the way certain words are used in texts and stuff like that—but we won't talk about that now.

So like I said, it may take a while to notice this. In a way, what happens with the samādhi of the second jhāna is partly what enables us, or should enable us, to begin to notice this a little bit. But as I said whenever it was—usually at first, a new level, when the mind enters a new level, it's like a dam bursting and the water is just gushing and you're just going along for this water ride. And it just seems like there's no thought happening. In time, it's like your eyes getting used to a darkened room.

You grow accustomed to this new territory, like your eyes adjusting to a darkened room. You say, "Oh, hold on a minute. There are some things here I didn't notice at first." But we're talking about something very, very subtle and a whole different relationship, a whole different level of thought.

So let's leave that aside for now. But this brings me to an important question I posed earlier: How wise would it be to use my perception of the presence or absence of thought as a kind of measurement of where I am in samadhi? To keep glancing there asking, "Has it stopped thinking yet?" I don't think that would be very helpful or very

wise at all. Given both the confusion about what vitakka and vicara actually mean and the subtlety of the range of what thinking might be, I can't see much value in this approach.

You will notice something in relation to thought if you're really getting into the second jhana. But don't make that the primary criteria.

As I said before, each jhana has a primary nimitta. And in the second jhana, the primary nimitta is sukha. That's the thing we're really making primary and really getting into. That's what we're really taking care of and really opening our relationship with.

Now there's what's significant in practice, but there's also why that's significant—why are we making that the significant thing in practice? There may be people out there with the idea that the most significant thing about the second jhana is the quieting, the stilling of thought. I would be very surprised if there aren't. But again, we have to think: Why do I choose to emphasize this over that? Of all the things I could emphasize in practice right now, of all the things I could make a priority, why this and not that?

Remember we were talking about how I think about samadhi and how I relate to samadhi in the present moment is connected to my big view. So we apply that here. Here's this collection of factors. Which is the most significant one and why?

I'm going to choose the sukha as the most significant one. Maybe there's someone who chooses the lessening of thought as the most significant one. But I would say the quietening of thought is not the most significant or transformative aspect or factor. It's actually an absence of a factor here, isn't it? It's the absence of two factors that were present in the first jhana.

I would say that's not the most transformative factor or aspect of the second jhana. I would say happiness is. It's the sukha, it's the range of happiness, it's the remarkableness of that happiness. It's the fact that it comes pretty much independent of someone needing to praise me or some sense pleasure or something—these are the things that transform.

If and only if I really marinate in it and really drink it lots and lots of times for a long time, then that happiness is really, really going to make a difference in one's life—a huge difference. As a resource, we've talked about this before, it's a tremendous resource. Just imagine several hours a day just drinking that kind of happiness, that depth of happiness, that beauty of happiness. Even half an hour a day, whatever it is.

After a while, just knowing it's there and that you can access it if you want to—the sense of what's possible is also really transformed by the tasting of that happiness. One's ability to let go becomes vastly expanded. That's part of the function of a resource in Dharma. This lovely, lovely feeling means it doesn't so much matter how much money I have, whether I get famous, whether I get rich, whether the food is nice where I'm staying or not. It's completely relativized by that kind of experience.

So one's ability to let go is made much more vast, much more steady, much more profound, much more wide-reaching because of the happiness. And it's the happiness that's pretty much independent of what someone is giving me or sense pleasures. It's massive, the difference—but only if we marinate for a long period of time with the happiness as what I'm drinking, drinking, drinking, slaking the thirst for what we're really looking for in chasing sense pleasures or praise or whatever it is.

I'm going to leave soul-making Dharma and sensing the soul completely out of this conversation for now, because some of you know that gets a lot more interesting and there's a lot more to say there. I'm just leaving it out for now not to complicate things.

If, though, I decide to say or to take, "Oh no, it's the quietening of thought..."

That's the most significant thing about the second jhana. My question would be why? Why do you think that is, and can you explain how that fits into and makes more sense in a bigger picture? Is it that you believe that when the mind is free of thought it's seeing things as they really are, or that thought creates a kind of smoke screen in front of reality? When I bring in this question, it's like: how does it fit? What actually is most significant? And why, if I'm choosing to emphasize this, or if a person's choosing to emphasize that, why is that significant? And how is that significant - for jhana practice, for what it's going to deliver, and in the whole path?

Sometimes what happens in practice is that a person is in the first jhana, and then they just completely leapfrog the second jhana and end up in the third jhana. That's the next thing that just emerges by itself. I don't know how common this is, but I've certainly encountered it quite a few times. This is quite an interesting phenomenon.

We have to think back: where are we trying to go? In this way of setting up where we want eventually to have mastery of the second jhana too, it becomes a question of: do we need to stop now and go back? Or should we let the third mature and really get into that, then go back?

It's also possible that practice might skip from the first jhana to a peacefulness that is not really akin to the third jhana. It's peaceful, it's relatively still, there's some equanimity there. It's certainly not unpleasant, but it's not really the third jhana.

This partly depends on background practice, and partly depends on one's psychological patterns. For some people, there's a kind of resistance to intense happiness for whatever reasons, however that came to be as a karmic formation, a sankara. Sometimes that needs a little unpacking, or the relationship with happiness and bubbly happiness needs a little looking at. But eventually we want to master them all.

We could say that each jhana delivers its particular insight - though more accurately, each jhana delivers something particular in relation to the ability to let go. That's what I would translate insight as. Insight has to be directly related to letting go. Insight is what allows letting go.

With the first jhana, it might simply be the fact that a whole other realm is possible. Other states of consciousness, other dimensions are possible when the mind is not entangled. Just that knowledge, that firsthand intimate experience and the intensity with which it impacts consciousness as something completely different than we have experienced before - that makes a big difference for many people.

With the second jhana, it's related to this happiness. In the very short Buddhist description, there are just two words: ajjhatam pasadanam, which translates as something like internal confidence or internal assurance. I think this confidence could mean one of three things, or two or three of them together.

It could mean confidence in the stability of the citta right then, in that moment. Because of the samadhi and the stilling of thought and the sense of integration, there's confidence in how stable this is. Instead of the first jhana's more active quality - the vitakka and vicara working like a soap mixer - here it's more still. There's a kind of confidence in that stability.

It could be confidence that comes from discovering such a profound and fulfilling happiness that doesn't seem primarily dependent on external conditions. Just knowing that, tasting that, drinking from it - that's going to give one quite a bit of confidence in one's life.

Or it could be confidence in the Dharma itself and in one's own ability to tread the path that the Buddha described. One really has a sense: here I am 2,500 years later experiencing these remarkable experiences that the Buddha described. He's got them in a kind of spectrum, and if I'm experiencing this and it has such an intimate sense of "this really is what we're talking about," then one's confidence in the Dharma itself and in one's ability to tread the path gets quite a support. Maybe I can do more. If I can do this, I can do more - all the way to liberation.

I don't know which of those confidences the term refers to, but confidence is part of the gift. I would emphasize the second one as primary, but I think maybe they're all there. I certainly remember the confidence it gave me in the path and that I was actually walking this path and it was possible. What the Buddha was talking about was real. It makes such an impact - much more than just being mindful and being a little calmer, or seeing impermanence. It makes such an impact because of the beauty and the depth and the remarkability of the experience.

It really gave me a lot of confidence in the path and that I was on the path and that I could do that because, look, I'm doing it. I feel it.

But I think probably for me, the most important one is the discovery of this kind of happiness—that we have access to this kind of happiness. It's open to us and it's not dependent on external conditions.

So I mentioned earlier, probably when we were talking about the first jhana, that each jhana has a primary nimitta in our language and a secondary nimitta, right? And I think I just gave one—I'm not sure how many examples I gave of a secondary nimitta in the first jhana. The primary nimitta is piti.

In the second jhana, the primary nimitta is sukha.

But in the first jhana, for example, or any jhana, you could have a secondary nimitta of, say, a bright white light in the mind or a cloud of light, that sort of thing. You could also, for some people, have something aural—they hear a sound or sounds or whatever it is. There can be different ones. Those two are probably the most common.

But there are also other kinds of secondary nimitta which are a little bit more, let's say, intrinsically important or valuable. And one of them is quite common at this stage, the second jhana, and then in a way even more differently so in the third jhana: metta is there.

So sometimes people are not doing a metta practice—they're just working on the breath and now it's open to the second jhana—and actually feel... sometimes people have come to me and say, "I think the metta is the primary thing, not the happiness." It's not technically—it's a secondary nimitta—but it's very valuable.

So automatically in a jhana, there is metta in it. It's kind of impossible to be in a jhana and have ill will or aversion, the opposite of metta. So it's more again back to: what will I become sensitive to? What can I pick up on? What's in the mix of frequencies here? And metta is especially noticeable in different flavors in the second and third jhanas.

So we can allow that. And sometimes you can focus more on that. You can lean your emphasis more into the metta there—again, it's a dialer. How much does it become completely primary? Does it become kind of fifty-fifty? Does it become just in the background? There can be, for a lot of people obviously, a lot of healing—a lot of healing with the love that's there. And particularly when we talk about the third jhana, but a lot of healing.

But we need to be clear: what's the primary nimitta? And that's the sukha, that's the happiness. So we're not leaning too much and too often and too long into the love over the stretch of our practice.

Why would metta come up at that point? Why would metta reveal itself, do you think?

"Because they're both unfabricated," someone suggests.

So if I say that slightly differently, if that's okay: when we're in a jhana, we're not fabricating. So I'm introducing more this conversation about fabrication, this teaching about fabrication.

When we're in a jhana, and more and more so as we go down the jhanas, we're fabricating less and less self and less and less of any kind of otherness—other person or whatever. So the duality between self and other gets less. And there's more sense of non-separation, more oneness. There's less like, "That's your space and this is my space, thank you very much," or whatever it is. Less judging or less irritation. There's just a tendency—self and other, both less fabricated, more non-separateness, less duality there and less polarity in all that and all the difficulties.

So in a way, there's a kind of natural arising of metta because of that, because we feel less separate. Afterwards, even the metta gets unfabricated, but we'll talk about that later. That's when we get into equanimity and things.

So if you're practicing in this territory—when you're practicing and when this territory opens up for you and it feels like, okay, now that's my playground and that's what I'm really exploring, and you're really into it and you've just spent a sitting period in the second jhana—whatever it is, and it's time to end because you have to go wash up or whatever, so you know it's coming up time to end, but it's still going well and there's still energy there, then you can spend a few minutes, if you want, just a few minutes at the end of the session playing what I call two games: ping pong and leapfrog.

For example, here I am in the second jhana, and then I go, okay, well, let's go to just normal consciousness. I'm leapfrogging the first jhana. Then I go from there to one, and then I'll go from one back to two, and then I'll go from two back to one, and then I'll go to two again. Then I'm ping-ponging: one, two, one, two, one, two, one, two.

I actually need to practice that transition both ways. So this is a minor part of our practice, but one of the elements of mastery. Can I really just move back and forth at ease between any jhana and its adjacent jhana? So if I'm practicing the second jhana, can I go to the first? And if I haven't reached the third yet, then second to first, to second, to first, to second. It's all very light. It's all just a game.

And then I can also practice leapfrog. Here there aren't too many leapfrog options because we've only got zero, first, and second jhana. So you can go from second to ordinary consciousness to second. There aren't many leapfrog options available yet. So you can just spend a few minutes of fun at the end of sitting playing ping pong and leapfrog. These are the elements of mastery. I would like to encourage this. I wouldn't spend a whole sitting doing this, but they're part of learning the territory, they're part of the discrimination, they're part of the mastery, they're part of what makes the mind and the citta really malleable.

So again, when we come to talking about mastery, we have to think about pacing. Is it not ripe yet to try this stuff? I'm just getting used to the second jhana and it's too soon to try going for a walk in the second jhana when I'm just getting accustomed to it. I need to be really, really familiar. And when I do try all that—like the whole practice and the whole tenor of the days here—we really want to encourage this kind of light playfulness. If I get too heavy and too tight and too pressured, it just squeezes the sukha out of things and then there won't be the fruit. So the whole thing is very light when it's time to play.

Okay, so I don't know where things are at in the dharma world these days. I don't get out much—it's actually true. But certainly, if I think back years ago, and I don't know, maybe this is a question for you: Who's heard from anyone, "Oh, careful with the jhanas, there's a danger you might get attached"? Some years ago, this would have been everyone. It would have been the default response. "You don't really want to be—A, what's the point? It's not insight. And B, there's really a danger there that you're going to get attached." And that's really pretty serious.

So, like I said, it's interesting. I'm not sure—maybe two-fifths of the people put their hand up. Anyway, half of you. If you go back to what the Buddha said, what did he say about all this? There is one occasion where I remember him talking about a monk who was very ill and because of the low energy was not able to access whatever level of

jhana he was able to reach before his illness or when he was well. This monk was having some dukkha about that. And the Buddha said, "It's anatta. It's anatta." You see it as anatta, both the jhana and the self. It's not-self. So there's that kind of attachment possibility.

But what the Buddha mostly said, a few times, is this: Talking about the pleasure of jhana, he said, "This, the pleasure of jhana, is a pleasure I will allow myself." This is someone who talks about the middle way in terms of renunciation and the senses, but basically relative to most of us, he's a pretty extreme renunciant. This extreme renunciant says: "This is a pleasure I will allow myself. This is a pleasure that should not be feared. This is a pleasure that should be pursued and developed. This is a pleasure that should not be feared. This is a pleasure that should be pursued and developed."

And when he talks about sense pleasures, he talks about them as a pit of vipers, a pit of—you know those elephant traps that old hunter-gatherers made, with these big wooden stakes, and the elephant or mammoth is supposed to fall in? That's the sort of image he gives for sense pleasures. It looks like a nice piece of grass or whatever is there, but actually it's a trap. So he talks about the jhanas in that way—not to be feared, this is a pleasure, I will allow myself this pleasure, should be pursued and developed—and he talks about sense pleasures with a whole list of pretty extreme negative similes.

Is it or was it the case that somewhere along the line modern dharma teachings have kind of reversed the Buddha's instructions regarding these kinds of pleasures—sense pleasure and jhanic pleasure—and reversed the Buddha's concerns regarding attachment to either?

I find this really interesting, both historically and psychologically, and how that may have evolved and why. It may be changing—it's definitely changing, no question—but the Buddha is pretty clear about this.

Again, I don't know if anyone is still unsure when the piti, for example, feels very sexual or orgasmic. Is that okay? It seems a bit much, or it can't be right, surely. Just to remind you again of the Buddha's words describing the jhana: piti, sukha, whole body pervaded, leaving no spot untouched. What he does not say is "the whole body pervaded except below the waist and above the middle of the thigh." He says whole body.

This is one of these things that's changing now, but years ago it was quite a pervasive belief that you really shouldn't mess with the jhanas—there's a real danger you'll get attached. Again, can we bring a little intelligence to this, a little questioning?

It seems to me there are three kinds of attachment that are potential with jhanas. One is attachment to the pleasure—that would be the most obvious one people would think of. After sixteen or seventeen years of teaching, I honestly struggle to remember one person who had experienced an actual jhana more than ten times who was attached to the pleasure there. Maybe other people encounter this a lot, but I don't. I don't think it's a problem for Westerners.

I just wonder what that attachment would look like. Is there some basement at Gaia House like an opium den with old yogis in the dark, getting older and not doing their work? What do we actually think it would look like? I think it would look like someone who's unwilling to explore or investigate the difficult. I think this is extremely rare. I've never encountered it. I really sit here struggling to think of anyone. I just can't.

After about ten times of jhana, you're not going to be attached to the pleasure in any problematic way. I just can't see it.

What I do see, and what we might recognize in ourselves much more commonly, is an attachment to looking at, obsessing with, prioritizing, attending to the difficult. I mentioned this before—sometimes that's a psychological tendency, sometimes cultural, sometimes dharmically trained. When I have the option of giving equal attention to the pleasant, I find that I can't. I'm so trained. Immediately there's a contraction in the body. Immediately there's some dukkha. The mind goes there.

That willingness is great, but if it's not balanced with equal freedom and willingness on the other side, there's actually an attachment. Sometimes that attachment is ideological because a person thinks this is where the real stuff is—that what's happening in a jhana is suppressing or hiding the difficult. What's dukkha is what's real. A jhana is a fabrication, a construction, a reality where you're stepping out of touch, hiding from the real stuff.

This can be extremely common and extremely entrenched. So sometimes as a teacher over the years, I have to be really delicate and careful how I bring this up, what I say to people, and how I might say it.

It could be an ideological attachment, or it could just be habitual—a tendency of personality, culture, upbringing, or dharma practice. In a way then, practicing the jhanas wholeheartedly and being open-minded will actually remedy that opposite attachment, which doesn't even occur to people as possibly being an attachment.

When I can keep both open, when I'm really able to do both, I'm really free to do both.

That's where we want to arrive—at range and possibility.

Second, what seems to me another way of getting attached to the jhanas is developing a grandiose self-view: "Look at me, look what I can do. I can reach this or that jhana." There's a kind of inflation of self-importance.

Again, I would say that after twenty experiences of a certain jhana, it should become really obvious to a person that the self isn't making it happen. This jhana simply arises when the conditions are present. When the conditions are there, a jhanic experience, a jhanic perception manifests. It depends on conditions—all kinds of conditions.

I mentioned that monk earlier. The Buddha also says at one point that jhana depends on digestion being neither too hot nor too cold. In Asian medicine, they speak of digestion in these terms. I certainly know that samadhi is greatly dependent on things like digestion and all kinds of other factors—energy levels, countless variables.

After twenty experiences, one really sees—it becomes almost difficult not to recognize—that it's entirely dependent on conditions. It's not something the self can feel grandiose or pumped up about.

What's actually much more common is a negative self-view in relation to not reaching jhana: "I'm not far enough along yet. I can't do it. I'm a failure. I bet everyone else is better. I'm progressing too slowly." Then what can happen is that a person thinks, "I want to attain this deeper jhana. I want to attain the jhanas or reach beyond where I am now." But actually, the intention is one of achievement for decorating the self-view and propping it up, or—this is a better way of putting it—addressing a negative self-view. "If I could just get that, then I'd feel better about myself, earn a badge, whatever."

Sometimes this intention isn't fully conscious. We don't quite realize what's mixed into our intention when it comes to practice. What's actually operating is a kind of avoidance of negative self-perception, an intention to sidestep a negative self-view. This can be quite subtle and operate very quietly.

Even here, the attachment is the opposite of what we tend to think. We imagine attachment looks like grandiosity and inflated self-view, but actually it's happening in reverse and often much more subtly.

Why not let the jhana give you the deepest things it can offer? The deepest gifts are the beauty of that happiness and the way it touches your being, the way it bathes the whole body and the entire citta. These are much deeper, more far-reaching, more lasting, and more impactful gifts than the ability to say, "I have achieved this" to yourself or others, or to feel included when others discuss their attainments.

Let the jhanas give you the deepest gifts they want to offer, that they can give you. This returns us to what's truly significant—what we're emphasizing when we speak about happiness.

Perhaps for me, the most interesting kind of attachment that might arise from jhana practice is attachment to view. For example, someone opening to the sixth jhana and experiencing this infinite consciousness—the Buddha's description is quite brief, but there's an experience of infinite consciousness that pervades the cosmos, or exists as a transcendent realm. It can be felt both ways.

It's possible that someone opening to this experience might think, "Ah, this is ultimately true. This is what they're talking about—cosmic consciousness," and decide that it represents ultimate truth, becoming attached to that as a view. To be attached to a view means truly believing this view, this perception, is true.

Here again, there's something paradoxical. I would say that attachment to such views—seeing this cosmic consciousness, this infinite awareness, this vast awareness as ultimate reality, the eternal backdrop of all things, the source of everything—someone is much more likely to get stuck in that view and believe it's the final truth when they haven't experienced jhanas five, six, seven, and eight.

So it's the opposite. Having the map of something that goes beyond this quasi-sixth jhana state of infinite consciousness—once you reach the seventh or eighth jhana, you see that the previous state was fabricated, merely a stage in the journey.

So it's actually the jhanas that help us wean off attachments to this or that as the ultimate truth. The concern, I would say, is actually the opposite. The jhanas are rather a remedy for certain attachments rather than a concern.

That kind of view of a vast awareness being ultimately real, cosmic consciousness, awareness being the nature of things, that awareness being eternal and unruffled—all that is much more likely to arise from standard insight meditation practice. It's a very common experience, really quite common in other spiritual traditions as well. But if we can go beyond that kind of experience, if we have the map and it places that experience in context, we begin hopefully to experience something beyond it. We can see that it's not ultimate because we've gone beyond it, and we begin to understand its context.

So what is that exactly? How did that experience of this vast, eternal-seeming awareness, cosmic consciousness, whatever it is—how did it arise? How did it dependently arise as a perception? We understand its context.

This understanding of its dependent arising and dependent ceasing is more than saying we see that it's impermanent as a view. A person can go in and out of the vastness of awareness or cosmic consciousness many times and think, "Yeah, my experience of it is impermanent, but it's not impermanent. It's eternal. It's just there and unchanging and radiant forever and serene and untouched forever, and it embraces everything and permeates everything." There are different variations of this. Even if I realize my experience of it is impermanent, I can either accept that my experience of it comes and goes, or I can just work towards making it more and more of the time that I'm hanging out there.

But that's not what I mean by understanding its dependent arising and dependent cessation. What I mean is: how does this perception arise and how does it cease? Not that it arises and ceases, but how? It's dependent on a certain amount of unfabricating, and if I unfabricate more, it goes beyond it. This is different than just saying, "Yeah, it's impermanent" or "My experience of it is impermanent."

So hopefully, if we have the right context for what we're doing in the whole of the Dharma, how what we're doing in jhana practice fits into that, this kind of attachment doesn't arise. Or we can get beyond it, to put it that way.

The more common danger here is attachment to what the Buddha would call wrong view or a misunderstanding—a limited and limiting view of emptiness, of the nature of awareness. If I think that's the ultimate nature of awareness, it's not ultimate. It's a perception. It's a relative perception. It's incredibly useful, incredibly healing and valuable and liberating to a certain extent. Is it ultimate? No. How am I going to find out that it's not ultimate? Through having the map, through going beyond it. Otherwise I might have a limited understanding or wrong view about what nibbana is and all this.

So the shoe is rather on the other foot, I think, in terms of attachment and jhana. They're actually very powerful in terms of weaning us off what can be really difficult kinds of attachment to sense pleasures, and in this case, to certain spiritual views.

This phenomenon I've just described—I said I couldn't really think of anyone who'd gotten attached to jhanic pleasure, anyone that I'd encountered as a teacher or heard about over however many years of teaching and meeting a lot of people. But I think in the first six months of teaching, I lost count of how many people I encountered who seemed to me actually pretty entrenched in some version of that vast awareness being ultimate. It's so common, and it can get very, very entrenched. There are people who remain in that kind of view for decades and never get out of it.

Sometimes the language that goes with it is very free and easy. It's very much like, "Well, awareness is ultimately there. I don't have to do anything. It's just there. Whatever happens, whether I'm aware or not, it's there. And everything's kind of equal within that." So it can sound very easy, and the person seems unattached, and it's all very free. It may even go with the view that there's no need to meditate because this is just there all the time. And actually, all that is hiding a really quite entrenched view that's very, very difficult to budge.

But one of the ways of going beyond this entrenched view is actually through the jhanas and with the jhana map—actually placing these experiences in their proper context. As I said, understanding their dependent arising and dependent fading, understanding the whole process, and then having this framework provides an entirely different relationship with all these beautiful and actually quite valuable mystical openings. We begin to understand their relationship with truth and therefore with liberation.

So I think that's all I wanted to say today.

Should we take a couple of questions, or shall we leave it here? Let's just sit quietly. I think that's enough.

Thank you, everybody. Time for tea.

CHAPTER 211

Q & A

Rob Burbea · 1h28

> *In this Q&A session from the 'Practising the Jhānas' retreat, Rob Burbea responds to student questions covering key aspects of jhāna practice. He explores working with the nāda sound (inner ringing) as both a concentration object and insight practice, explaining how to tune into higher frequencies while maintaining awareness of the energy body. Burbea clarifies the important distinction between subtlety, intensity, and refinement in meditation, emphasizing that the strength of pīti doesn't matter as long as it's pleasant - what matters is how we relate to it. He addresses common feelings of guilt around experiencing happiness when others suffer, contextualizing jhāna practice as developing inner resources for sustainable service. The talk includes practical guidance on working with the full range of sukha in second jhāna, the importance of being comfortable with both subtle and intense states, and a valuable technique for recognizing when mental proliferation (papañca) may have hindrances at its root. Burbea emphasizes the need for flexibility with effort levels and warns against rigid inertia in practice, encouraging students to experiment with different intensities of attention while maintaining the larger vision of where the practice is heading.*

We have gathered today for some questions, if there are any. I have a couple written questions and perhaps three little things I wanted to address. Are there any oral questions to begin with? I will get to all of these things, including the written questions, but perhaps we could start with an oral one.

Question: Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't recall you actually describing how one might practice with the ringing in the ears as a concentration practice. Did you, or could you?

I can, though I deliberately didn't. The reason I deliberately avoided this is because the more you pay attention to it, the more prominent it becomes and the more sustained it becomes. It's possible that further down the line you might decide you don't want it to be prominent and sustained. So I feel somewhat tentative about giving that as an instruction.

There are, I think, four ways you could relate to it. One possibility is that this is actually tinnitus, and I don't know if there's a medical solution for that. Another approach, which someone mentioned, is ignoring it—though I would frame this not so much as ignoring it, but as not getting into a fight with it.

So one option is this: whether it's tinnitus or simply the ringing in the ears that comes up as the mind gets still and energized for some people, you might decide this isn't something you're particularly interested in working with meditatively. If that's the case, then the best attitude is not really paying attention to it, and most importantly, not getting into an aversive relationship with it. What you're really watching then is your aversion in relationship to it. It's just some noise happening. It doesn't mean anything about you.

If I get into an aversive relationship with it, I make it unpleasant. I will perceive that sound as unpleasant. Then that unpleasantness triggers more aversion if I'm not careful, and it's perceived as even more unpleasant. The whole thing cycles around because of dependent arising—simply because there was even just a little bit of aversion at the beginning that I wasn't taking care of.

Do you understand that loop? It happens with any object of perception. There it is, and I'm in an aversive relation, even a subtly aversive relationship to it. It cannot help but color and shape and form the object of perception—in this case the internal sound—and it colors and shapes it negatively. It becomes more unpleasant. Then usually, without mindfulness, without care, without skillful relationship in the moment, what's more unpleasant just triggers more aversion, and the whole thing loops around. That can eventually become as maddening as it is for people who really don't like their tinnitus.

Whether it's organic in origin or whether it's this meditative phenomenon, if I decide I'm not really taking it up as an object, then I really need to just watch that aversion. That's one approach if I'm not really interested in it.

If I am interested in it—again, with the caution that this is why I didn't initially present it, because one might change one's mind—I explored it for a while, and it doesn't come up that much anymore. Enough time has gone by that I wasn't particularly interested in it. I didn't get aversive, and the whole thing died down.

But if one did decide to experiment with it, then broadly speaking, there are two ways. One is using it as a kind of concentration object. That would be like a samatha practice—the primary thing you're paying attention to. It's a sound, so when you get distracted, that's what you return to. As with working with the breath, it's about getting really intimate with it. Can I really listen in a very fine way? Do I need to play with the delicacy of my listening, the intensity of my listening? It's the same kind of approach.

What often happens for people who choose this as an object is that as they listen more carefully—or it might be obvious from the beginning—it begins to reveal that it's actually not so much a single tone as a collection of frequencies. There's a lower one, there's a higher one, there's content in the middle, and maybe they're slightly different. You can begin to discern these distinctions. It's almost like listening under a magnifying glass.

Everything is individual, but it's often the case that listening to the higher-pitched frequencies will bring more energy into the being.

Everyone's individual, but find the highest pitch in this kind of chord, if you like. The highest pitch in the chord—that's what you listen to. And that brings more energy and is, if you like, a more refined object.

So we were talking about the refinement with the jhānas and that kind of business. It's similar to that. It's a more refined object, partly because in a way a higher pitch sound, in terms of physics, is a more refined object. What can then happen is you tune into that higher pitch, the higher pitch, the higher pitch, and probably again, the background of the whole thing with the body. You really want to include the body as a bit like... It's a bit like the instructions we gave to Julian. If I paid attention to my upper lip here with the breath, I still want the body in the background.

Eventually what will happen with the sound or with the body is the body just gets integrated into, in this case, into the listening and one is listening with the body. Some people can start that already because they're familiar with kind of listening with the body. But at some point, just by including the body in the background awareness—this sound is a foreground, the higher pitch is foreground, background awareness—it starts to integrate. And the connection between that and pīti in the whole energy body can go.

And what happens is this higher pitch that I've been paying attention to, it may be that after a little while, that starts to kind of split into a chord. It was perceived as one pitch and then it becomes a chord. And again, you can go to the highest one. So that's a method. And for some people, it's really, really helpful for their samādhi.

But again, not to get confused what the primary nimitta is once the jhānic factors arise. So it might be that some people listen to that and they listen to that and that's the object and they're really, really steady and very focused and very concentrated, but they're not getting so much into the pīti or the sukha or the whatever. So again, in this way of teaching that we're exploring on this retreat, once the pīti or sukha or whatever it is comes up and it's very, you know, it's constant enough, it's strong enough to work with, it's definitely pleasant, then that becomes the primary. And then the sound is a bit

like the breath in the energy body. Is there a way that it helps it? Probably is because energy body in energetic terms—which remember is completely an illusion, it's a relative truth—but in energetic terms, in that language, energy body, we're talking about vibrations.

When I say pay attention to the energy body, I say frequencies, vibration, tone. This is all musical language. A tone is a note. A frequency, a vibration—that's all music. So it could be that the energy body and the sound are just kind of mutually vibrating like that and that's what allows the whole thing to grow in the samādhi direction if that's what I want.

There's another way of using it which is more—some people use it as a kind of insight practice. So then it becomes less an object of concentration in itself and more a kind of backdrop that relativizes the arising and passing of other phenomena. In other words, this sound feels like it's going on forever and it's just there, even though it's a bit like when I talked about a vastness of awareness. In fact, they're very parallel practices.

So this sound feels like—people who really get into it give it a kind of cosmic significance, like it's the primordial sound of the universe or whatever. The concepts and views wrapped up in there are that it's eternal. It eternally pervades the whole universe forever, maybe even before the beginning, before the end of the universe. It's just there. My ability to hear at any time might come and go. That's actually really important.

Is it an ultimate truth? I would say absolutely not, but it can be a really important stepping stone in terms of insight. So if I just, I have this sense of it as constant, eternal—not in the transcending time sense, but as in lasting forever—and I have that sense of it, then anything else that comes up, any other sounds, the birds, the heating noise, the voice, any other sensations, the pain in the back, whatever it is, taste, smells, touches, thoughts, all of that is given a constant backdrop with which to offset its relative impermanence and the fact that it's just coming and going and this thing just stays.

Do you understand? Does it make sense? So that's very similar to what people get into with the vastness of awareness. And what that does, because you've got something that's constant and you've got a little bit of a—like, I haven't got the view this is an irritating tinnitus sound. I've got the view this is something mystically, mystically lasting forever, and it pervades the whole universe. So it's less a thing that you're doing that to, more a thing you're kind of—it's a backdrop.

And that enables one, if it's working well, to let go in relation to the phenomena—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts—that arise impermanently, arise and pass, arise and pass, against the backdrop of that forever lasting... Does that make sense? So that would be a way of using it as an insight practice. And some people, either way, can find it really, really powerful.

The reason I didn't pursue that approach was because of what I mentioned earlier—some people end up genuinely irritated by this practice and feel somewhat trapped by it, not realizing that if they want to change direction, they actually need to work with the aversion itself to free themselves from that stuck place.

But yes, for many practitioners, this can be profoundly transformative.

The question I would still pose, however, is this: let's say you're an insight meditator practicing in that second way I described—wonderful, but then how do you transcend that? How do you go beyond it? I'm genuinely curious about anyone who has practiced this way for an extended period and derived significant benefit from it. By extended period, I mean probably months, though I know people who have been practicing this way for decades. Yet I haven't encountered anyone who has moved beyond it—not to say it's impossible, but the "how" becomes a real question.

Through this practice, you might establish your entire view of practice and its goal in a particular way. This comes with conscious and semi-conscious views that shape everything. Through all of this, you might set up your understanding of what practice is and what the goal of practice is in a way that actually prevents you from going beyond it.

So it's simply a question I'm raising. I'm not saying it's impossible—of course it's not impossible—but it would require a complete reworking. In that system, there's nothing integrated into the view that you can rely on to naturally carry you beyond that framework in time. Rather, you would need to re-examine the entire view and probably do something quite different.

Whereas there are other approaches to insight practice that I'd like to explore in this retreat—approaches that have within them a principle where you simply keep applying the same fundamental understanding, not necessarily the same technique, but the same principle. And it naturally goes beyond, beyond, beyond wherever you are. It will consume everything in its path. But that's an entirely different subject.

So there are different possibilities available to us.

Nick, thank you. Yes, an exploration has opened up over the last couple of days around the spectrum from subtlety to intensity of experience—particularly experiences of the energy body and of the nimittas. I feel like I've done most of this work within a soul-making context, and within that framework, I feel quite confident working with subtle energy body experiences, especially when there's image present as well.

But I've realized something here. Because there's this particular map we're working with, and there are these more universal qualities we're trying to access or these realms we're attempting to tap into and experience, I began to feel confused about what constitutes subtle versus intense experience, and whether subtlety might actually have some near enemies.

I had two really powerful *pīti* experiences in two separate sits, and then one that was much, much less intense—much gentler and softer. I found myself uncertain: was this subtle *pīti*, or was it somehow blocked or hindered? Then you offered the image of the glowing ember and fanning it gently to coax flames into being. It seems obvious that the ember represents the subtle aspect and the flames the intense aspect. But you can also have a really intense feeling of a glowing ember, or a very subtle experience of flames.

I've been reflecting on this quite a bit. I might be making too much of it, but it seems like an important distinction to feel into more deeply, to develop greater confidence. For instance, does one need to experience a quality like equanimity really intensely before being able to recognize it in its subtle aspects?

Let me respond and see if this addresses what you're asking, Nick.

I think the confusion lies with the word "subtlety" itself, which I've been conscious of when I use it. It's actually—what's the word when something has at least three meanings? Not ambiguous, but... well, it's potentially confusing.

We can speak of the intensity of the *pīti*—how strong it feels—and that's an element of the "S" in our formula, the *sukha*. As I mentioned, the intensity doesn't matter. What matters is only that it's definitely pleasant.

Over the course of developing jhana practice, you'll probably experience piti across the entire range of intensity. The crucial point regarding sassa (the first establishment) is that you don't need to worry too much about intensity levels. As long as the piti is relatively pleasant, that's sufficient. If it becomes so intensely pleasant that you're struggling to open to it—almost uncomfortably pleasant—then you may need to work with it differently. But generally speaking, you needn't be concerned about intensity.

Over time—and by this I mean initially with jhana practice—you'll notice variation in the strength and intensity of piti from session to session, regardless of whether you've approached through the ember method via the energy body or through the nostrils. This variation doesn't matter. Over much longer periods, once you've developed second, third, and fourth jhana, you'll realize there's been a gradual, though not uniformly linear, lessening in the intensity of piti over time. This simply refers to its strength.

But we can also discuss subtlety and intensity of attention—and I would question whether these even mean the same thing. What does it mean to turn up the intensity of attention on something? This is quite difficult to communicate if one hasn't experienced it directly. You could have a very subtle object while paying attention to it very intensely, absolutely, and perhaps in different ways.

A third term that gets mixed in here is refinement. As we progress through the jhanas, each becomes more refined than the previous one. Subtlety isn't quite the same as refinement, and subtlety of attention certainly differs from both. We're dealing with at least three distinct concepts that could easily be confused: subtlety, intensity, and refinement. Then we have these qualities both of attention and of the perceived object.

We could be discussing quite a few different things here. Are we talking about the attention? The nimitta? And are we discussing its subtlety, refinement, intensity, or something else? In some circumstances, subtlety and intensity might simply be opposites of each other, though this doesn't quite hit the nail on the head.

Again, we return to the big picture: What am I actually trying to accomplish here? In soul-making practice, we're not necessarily seeking more intensity of anything particular. What we're developing is sensitivity. Part of truly opening to an image and working skillfully with it involves having the art, skill, and capacity to notice—do I have sufficient sensitivity to perceive the different soul resonances and energetic resonances?

You're simply tuning in to what's present, what it needs, and what you can notice. With samadhi practice, it's more about what's needed to deepen the experience, to make it feel better, or to help you feel truly absorbed in it.

This is why, for example, the intensity element in sassa doesn't actually matter. What matters is how you're relating to it. If you have clarity about where you're going—wanting to deepen into a pleasant experience or help it progress to the next level—that guidance only becomes relevant at certain times, once the experience has truly matured and is ready to ripen.

As a general principle, if you can become accustomed to this big picture view—where am I going in this practice?—it helps guide you in moments when you won't have a teacher to consult. Consider where this practice is leading. The larger hierarchical view informs the middle hierarchy, which informs this present moment: what you emphasize in attention, what you attune to, what you amplify through attunement.

For a beginner just learning to work with piti, rather than worrying whether this is subtle piti or whether it's hindered or blocked somehow, ask instead: How do I make this feel better? How do I increase the well-being?

Moving in that direction rather than worrying about whether this is subtle or intense. Subtle and intense doesn't matter. It's simply about whether it's definitely pleasant, and knowing that it will naturally move across a range.

The question of whether something is blocked or hindered is different entirely. It's not a matter of thinking, "Oh, it's not so strong in this session, so am I blocking or hindering it?" No. If it's blocked or hindered, you will feel that as an actual obstruction—it will feel uncomfortable. You'll sense it as stuck somewhere, or as tension or pain in the body.

So I wouldn't worry about that. What you can always ask is: Can I get into this more? Can I enjoy it more? This doesn't equate to "Can I make it stronger?" Rather, getting into it more and enjoying it more might include playing with the intensity of attention, the delicacy of attention, different modes of attention. Am I opening? Am I going into it? Am I wrapping myself in it? All of these explorations.

But again, as a general principle, it's really helpful to think backwards. This is oftentimes what's missing in people's dharma practice—one hasn't thought through what the actual aim is of this or that practice, and then how everything acts to support that aim. We end up being quite unsure in any moment what to do, or unfortunately, because we've heard one teacher say this and another say that, we end up emphasizing something that doesn't fit into our paradigm or creates confusion between different approaches.

Does that make sense?

Good. So I have a couple of written questions here.

"Today I had a very strange meditation experience. I was doing formal sitting practice outdoors on a chair under my favorite tree. I was aiming at exploring the realms close to the first and second jhana. I had played with the nada sound—that's the sound Jason was just talking about—and played with connecting the sound and my left foot.

"I had moved on to metta as a springboard and felt the warmth and happiness and well-being of giving metta. In the scene, there was also the nada and light." So even though she was doing metta, there were still the sound and this light present as secondary nimittas.

Going back to the nada sound—it can arise for people as a kind of secondary nimitta, an indication that their practice is deepening in terms of samadhi.

"I was working and playing with expanding and enjoying that too. Then I sensed as though something was moving under my right foot. I had heavy trekking boots on. This felt very surprising and strange and caught my attention. After a short while—about five or ten seconds, it seemed—that subsided. Instead, I felt something trying to push my left foot up from the ground, as if it were in the way.

"I experienced this as very strange. First I wondered if the wind might be moving a branch on which maybe my foot was resting. The sensation continued, and I opened my eyes and saw my left foot moving almost rhythmically in pace with the sensation. I lifted my foot and boot, but there was nothing—no branch that could have been moved by the wind, no animal, no hole in the ground, only small pieces of branches, leaves, soil and mud.

"I perceived this as very strange. I put my foot back and went back to my intended practice, meditating in the playground of the foothills of the first jhana. To my surprise, the sensation of something trying to lift my left boot reappeared soon. This was scary. Was an animal trying to break into my boot or wanting to get it out of its way? Again, I opened my eyes, lifted my boot and looked carefully..."

I even poked around with a stick. Nothing. I was really puzzled.

Let me say that I don't think this is that common, though I can share that I've experienced something similar. In certain meditative states—maybe less in the deeper jhanas, but certainly around the first jhana territory as you described, in those rooms, those foothills around it—the energy, the piti, opens the body in various ways. One of the ways it opens the body for me is that my heels come off the ground. It's really not a big deal. They just slowly rise up off the ground, similar to the head tilting back that I mentioned earlier.

Maybe it's just you and me experiencing this, but I'm perfectly okay with that. It doesn't bother me at all. I understand it as simply a movement, an expansion of piti actually expanding the physical body, much the same way that the head tilting slightly back is. It disappears as the samadhi gets deeper beyond the first jhana territory, and even in the first jhana, it tends to quiet down.

So that's how I perceive it. I suppose it could move the other way—the feet could go to the side or the toes could lift up or whatever—but it's really just an energetic phenomenon. Nothing weird at all, nothing to worry about. If I look back at my list of things I might have done slightly differently, maybe I should have tried to keep more still, but it's such a non-issue for me.

How does that sound?

Just a couple of other things, and this is for everyone: When you've got a lot of secondary nimittas and things going on, really make sure what the primary one is. These are all secondary, and to the degree that you can mix them in such that they really feel supportive rather than pulling the attention in different directions—that's good. We can do all kinds of things with our sense of body anatomy. You mentioned connecting the nada sound with your left foot. You can do all kinds of things like that.

The direction we're moving is such that at some point in the jhanas—for some people quite early on—the whole body shape kind of dissolves from consciousness. So I guess we want to make sure that we're not perpetuating these phenomena beyond where they're useful. Does that make sense?

These are just things to check, but really nothing to worry about and very normal.

Before I forget, my interviews will move to seven o'clock, so that's an hour earlier, whatever your time zone. Please come an hour earlier.

Let me address another question that came in: "Working with pleasure, joy, love, et cetera, brings up a lot of guilt and a little sadness and even pain. Am I allowed to be happy and live my life joyfully if someone is suffering? Does my happiness cause suffering in someone else? I can sense the piti, the joy underneath something that feels like holding back and guilt. I want the joy and happiness so badly, but I also feel very sad that other people suffer and maybe even suffer because of me, and don't allow themselves to live their life or don't have the conditions to do so—race, social status, et cetera."

I feel I need to suffer with them to show some allegiance and solidarity. Focusing on that guilt and sadness takes me away from the pīti again—a habit that is there for too long now. Not focusing on it seems as if no one would hold that pain, and it feels as if the pain wants to be held.

This is quite important, and it's actually quite common. I've heard this kind of thing relatively often from students over the years.

"Does my happiness cause suffering in someone else?" Well, it might, but it might in two ways. Obviously, if you speak unkindly to someone—though that's not really your happiness causing the suffering. Your happiness in jhāna doesn't cause suffering to someone else.

People might experience this when considering retreat time: "I want to go away on retreat for this long," and family or friends respond, "I'll really miss you, it'll be difficult without you." Hard, tricky. Technically speaking, your retreat decision alone doesn't cause the suffering. Or if you say, "I really want to do this—this project is really important to me. I need to devote myself to this and therefore can't have time for this or that person right now"—does that decision cause their suffering?

If they're suffering over it, is their suffering dependent on your choice alone? Or is it dependent on many conditions: their psychological propensity, their background, the agreements in your relationship, other conditions, the way they're relating to their suffering?

This is quite important, this word "cause." Sometimes it's much more helpful to think about the coming together of conditions that gives rise to suffering, or the coming together of conditions that gives rise to happiness or whatever.

What happens is we get very easily caught when a person says, "You made me suffer." Now in some instances, that's actually a really healthy view. If I rob someone or I'm inappropriately angry at them or I punch them—yes, definitely. We can think very helpfully about a one-to-one causal relationship.

But in many situations, what's actually happening is a person is suffering, and that suffering they're experiencing in this moment has all kinds of conditions—often over many years of cultivated psychological habits, or what's been cultivated in their history, or in the agreements of your relationship, or a lack of clarity about relationships, or the absence of conversation about needs and supporting each other to have different needs.

I don't know exactly what the example is here, but I would caution about thinking that one's own happiness causes suffering. Yes, if I choose X, it may mean there are certain things that if I choose them, I effectively cannot choose Y, or I have to postpone Y. We really, really need to understand this.

Sometimes this becomes an ethical question. Even with something like flying—many people have heard me go on about how we fly too easily these days with the carbon emissions. But maybe someone is making an ethical choice between X and Y, weighing up what's the most ethical, virtuous thing to do. In making this choice, they can't do that other thing.

So either I go—let's say my grandmother is dying and she needs care and I have the time and we have a good relationship. If I go, I have to fly. If I don't fly, I can't go. There are a million examples—every day, little examples, and through our life, lots of big examples.

You cannot avoid, we cannot as human beings avoid those kinds of choices. With the best conscience and sensitivity and listening that we can muster, we have to choose. But we will always be choosing, in some ways, what we could call a moral shortcoming, an ethical shortcoming. Some kind of suffering may come out of that.

This is just part of what it means to be a human being. We have to recognize this, acknowledge it, open to it, and deal with it. Someone somewhere is going to get disappointed at some point with our choices. But the question is: what's navigating me and how am I relating to that?

Let's say I devote my life to serving others, to alleviating suffering in the world. I still have to make particular choices within that.

I cannot possibly address the whole of the suffering in the whole world. Maybe I work in human rights or maybe I work in racial injustice, whatever it is. In doing that, in order to give my energy to that, I'm neglecting something else. And let's say I choose one. I mean, I have to be conscious of this. I cannot possibly help everyone's suffering at the same time.

But even then, let's say I've chosen something, I'm aware of this—okay, I have to choose and that's at the cost of something else, of not doing something else. I still have to... I give all my dedication, it's my job, whatever, but even my job, half of my money I give back into that organization. I just live on the bare minimum. I'm still going to need to sleep and eat and rest.

In a way, what we're doing with jhāna practice particularly is really taking the time on a retreat like this to develop really deep sources of rest and nourishment, so that—and I've mentioned this a few times but not so directly—so that we can move out into the world if we want to and be that much more resourced.

One can stay with this service work in hard conditions, in conditions that are not in themselves very supportive or very nourishing, that might be quite difficult. One can stay steady with the flak and the eight worldly conditions—praise, blame, et cetera—that are there. One can keep doing that and one has those resources accessible to one.

So if you didn't, and you say, "I'm going to try and help, I'm going to go somewhere and help in a refugee camp or whatever," and I decide to do it without sleeping and eating, how sustainable is it going to be? So it's similar to that. If we want to really make our capacity and the possibility of our service very stable, very far-reaching, it's like we can stay steady. We have the capacity. We can keep showing up, we have the energy, we have the flexibility, we have the bigness of heart that can be close to really difficult dukkha, and something in the heart has grown large—and partly it grows large through jhāna practice, partly.

So all that... there's still that kind of question to kind of, again, understand what are we doing, what's the context of what we're doing here.

Again, I don't know how often, but it is really quite common. I have heard this kind of question quite a lot over the years. Oftentimes, it's just asking for a more thorough and careful, loving psychological inquiry into what's going on there for oneself. And because it might be we've been educated in a certain way to believe certain things that... as I said, around the first and second jhāna a lot of this comes up. Is it okay to experience this much pleasure? But also is it okay, just this, is it okay to feel this happy when other people are not?

So this is very, very common. And yeah, there might be all kinds of views that have been implanted in there socially, culturally, from the family, whatever.

Just in terms of the last thing in the note, I think it's quite important. So there's already a recognition in this note. There's already a recognition: focusing on that guilt and sadness, et cetera, takes me away from the pīti again. And the person who's written this has written, "It's a habit that's been there for too long now." So there's already a recognition.

Now there's something else going on here that needs some investigation: "Not focusing on it, not focusing on the sadness and the suffering in the world seems as if no one would hold that pain and it feels as if the pain wants to be held."

So again, if we're talking about world suffering or social injustice, I think we need to be clear that I'm not the only person in the world caring for this issue. Sometimes the mind just gets squeezed into sort of semi-conscious beliefs that obviously don't make sense. There are other people working on this. I can afford to take a rest for a few

weeks to do a retreat or I can afford to sit for half an hour in the morning or two hours a day or whatever. It's not really going to mean that that suffering is not attended to or goes unheld in the world.

If it's, for instance, there's one person that I know in my life and it really seems like they're isolated and they have no one but me to have a sense of holding with, I think that needs a larger conversation and a larger look at the situation and their situation and our relationship et cetera and what can be brought in there because that's also... maybe it's obviously not that helpful for them and it may not be that helpful for me.

So... but again I don't know the details here and the person hasn't signed it, but I hope that... at least there's something to this kind of thing. It's very, very common, so I'm glad... I'm glad to know it's really common especially around this territory with the pīti and the sukha, given, I think, some of how we've been educated in our culture.

Okay. I wanted to just throw a few things out there and then we'll see if there are any more. Are there any more questions? Live as well? Yeah. Please. Yeah, please, with the mic.

I started to practice the walking meditation—the walking around practice—and it was really lovely. I was pleased that it opened up and became very beautiful. It moved into a space that was similar to what I've experienced before when practicing metta and also in soul-making practices, where it feels like everything has that quality as I'm walking around the space. I was wondering, first, is that what it's supposed to be like? And second, it feels like when you focus on that nimitta and then enhance it, that kind of experience naturally happens. Can you do that with any object that has an open-hearted, well-being quality? I've done it with metta, though I haven't practiced jhana or soul-making formally, and I've never practiced things like the brahmaviharas.

Let's take the first question first. Walking around with this primary nimitta quality goes very well, and then you notice that basically everything is perceived almost as that nimitta or as if it's a manifestation of it. This is very normal, and I'm very glad that it happened. It's extremely important—extremely important. I'll return to it later, but basically it's the dependent arising of perception and has everything to do with emptiness.

If I experience this—let's say I experience it with something like metta—I might first experience metta as coming from me, something I generate and direct outward to another person or all beings. Then I begin to experience another sense where the universe *is* metta, or the universe is made of metta, or everything shines that forth, or that's its real substance.

If I experience that three or five times, it will be nice—a pleasant experience. But if I experience it five hundred times, really going back and forth between that perception of the world and our usual perception in Western culture—where of course the world is not love, this glass is not love but made of whatever chemical composition glass has, there's the water, and that's reality, and a being is made up of their molecules and is not love or a form of love or a spark of love—something begins to shift.

If I really start going in and out of these perceptions extensively, the very movement between them starts to relativize or dislodge this entrenched view about what is really real and what is just an occasional nice experience. I begin to wonder: which is real? Some people then conclude that the love perception is the real one. While it's very good to live there and even hold that view, perhaps for a long time, at some point I'm going to want to go even beyond that and realize something about the emptiness of perception, the dependent arising of perception.

As you move deeper into the later jhanas, this becomes an extremely important element of what is significant in jhana practice. Again, we return to this question: what's actually significant, what's less significant? For me, this turns out to be extremely significant, beautiful, and lovely. This theme we'll revisit at least once more.

For your second question about whether you can enhance any quality in this way—well, there may be qualities I could work with, but I wouldn't enjoy it. Qualities with suffering at their core, like hatred—well, actually hatred for something can be enjoyable to a certain degree for some time, but self-hatred probably isn't something I can get into and really enjoy. So the ease at the end won't be possible with such qualities.

But with skillful qualities, what the Buddha would call *kusala*—wholesome qualities—I would say yes, probably. In soul-making practice, different kinds of spaces open up and one can absorb into them more or less, and there's an infinite amount possible. So my initial response is yes, probably. But on this retreat, we're focusing on the primary nimitta—what's the primary thing we're doing this with.

Let me mention a few small points that refer to things I've said before, but perhaps saying them slightly differently will help them land better. With the second jhana, I'm not sure if I mentioned this when we discussed it, but with the *sukha* as the primary nimitta of the second jhana, we really want eventually to experience that whole range of *sukha*—really the whole range. It can become very ecstatically happy, bubbly, laughing on one extreme, and on the other extreme, it can become very, very serene.

It's nowhere near laughter. There's not much bubbles in it, and everything in between. As I said, maybe even with love or without love—that's a bit secondary. But we want to really know that whole range, that whole territory. That's what I meant about getting familiar with a jhana.

When we take the time to marinate and master, it's like really—I used to say to people, it's like knowing the library at Gaia House. I use that example because I spent so many hours in there doing interviews. You can put your head in the room and say "it's a library, it's got books in it" and then close the door. Or you can really know every square inch—it's a big room with lots of complexity. There's this little bit on the carpet here, there's this little angle where the windows meet, there's this bit of a bookcase there that's chipped. You can really, really know a place, a territory, or not.

We want to know the whole range. We want to be comfortable, actually—this is more what I wanted to say. We want to be comfortable with that whole range, enjoy that whole range, all of it. So we need to get to a place where the whole range is really comfortable for us and enjoyable, and we know and feel its value. Every place on that range we want to feel like "I love this, I love this."

It's like asking a musician or a chef or someone who's really into something: "What's your favorite food?" or "What's your favorite piece of music?" Someone who's really into something is not going to give you one answer. They're going to be like, "I can't, I can't." They're going to give you maybe ten options. It's the same thing with the bandwidth of happiness. "I love that, but I also love this. I love the bubbly, but I also love the really serene one. And that bit in the middle is pretty nice too."

So we really want to be comfortable with the whole range, enjoy the whole range, know and feel its value. And let it do its—this is part of letting it do its work on the being, on the heart, on the soul, and also on the body. Marinating with the sense of loving and enjoying and opening. It does work. It does work on the being. It does work on the heart.

What's common for probably any human being is that certain emotions are more frequently gravitated to. Of the whole emotional spectrum that a human being can have, there are certain ones that a certain personality tends to gravitate towards, and tends maybe, relatively speaking, to avoid the others. Some people gravitate towards a subtle kind of—well, whatever it is, could be anything. But oftentimes, for example, one might find themselves avoiding the really bubbly happiness. We're now talking about psychology and energetic makeup. What's my propensity, my habit of psychology?

Part of the power of jhana practice is, again, to open all that up and really have the whole thing available to us. That's part of—if you ask me what does it mean to be a free human being—part of it to me means having the whole range. Having the whole range, the whole playground, the whole delicious range, including the really difficult. I can experience really hard grief and grieve with the world, and I can experience this incredibly bubbly, giggling, laughter-like thing, and there's no either-or. There's an either-or in the same moment, but one is free and one's not scared of any of that or holding back. One's letting all that range work on the heart, work on the soul, work on the being. It ends up being wide, having that range and that freedom.

So that was one thing. The question is, is that also true with pīti? That's a good question. I don't know. I think I would be, as a teacher, less insistent about that with the pīti than with the happiness. Because I'm not sure if experiencing, let's say, the really intense... Let's turn it around.

What I am sure about is experiencing subtle pīti—going a little back to Nick's question—that that's important for everyone. That one needs to actually be able to even notice it and tune to it and be able to enjoy it. Why? I don't want to be always having really super strong pīti and then not be able to notice something that's more subtle, not be able to tune to it and kind of turn my nose up at it because that's that same kind of negative "it's not good enough" thing. So the subtle end of pīti, I would say everyone needs to explore. With the stronger end, I'm just not sure.

I don't know what the answer is. I feel less inclined to insist on that. It may be that intense PT is necessary for everyone, but I think it's more of a personal matter.

Stepping back from that particular question and thinking about human freedom and what it means to be liberated, I do feel that sometimes certain people are habitually holding their energy in or holding it back. They maintain a subtle energetic pattern where they don't allow things to build up, and oftentimes they don't even know they're doing this. It's become so familiar as a psychological and energetic habit.

I'm not just talking about in meditation—I'm talking about their whole life. For these people, to really open and surrender or to have a lot of energy is territory they don't go toward or don't allow to happen. They don't realize they're preventing it through this subtle holding. It's very, very subtle how that can get blocked.

Sometimes for some people—and I mentioned someone who's convinced that what she needs is to focus more—my opinion is actually that what she needs is to learn to let energy build and to open more. Does that mean she needs a super intense PT? I don't know, but psychologically, knowing her over some years, that seems to be what's needed.

But I would feel tentative about saying that about the PT in general, or for everyone. For me, with the intense end of the PT, I think it would be more an individual question as a teacher, and together we would sense it. For these kinds of things, it's also a matter of timing—is it the right moment to even bring this up with a student? At times, there's nothing they're going to be able to do with it anyway, and it's probably only going to bring self-judgment. There are all kinds of factors involved.

And also what they want, because at the end of the day, it's what they want. It's also their vision of awakening. If someone's view and vision of awakening is of people who are very, very even and equanimous, who don't show big eruptions of emotion or experience those—who are more "mature"—if one holds that whole view, whether semi-consciously or through verbal teaching, or just from seeing this repeatedly in the Buddhist world with people who are supposed to be respected, then they assume that's how a seasoned practitioner comports themselves.

If that's their view of awakening and they say, "No, that's what I want. I want to be like that," it's up to them. It's their life, their emotions, their body. It's not up to me to override that, unless they specifically ask—which is very rare for a student to say, "Tell me everything you think" or "What do you want?" I've only had one person say that to me, I think—Robert. It's very, very rare. Which I hope you still don't regret!

As a teacher, you have to respect people's choices and their views. In dharma talks, I do find myself shaking up those whole views—like, is that what awakening is? Are you unconsciously thinking it looks like this? But one-to-one as a teacher, I tend to be very un-pushy and very much oriented toward: What does this person want? What's the right timing? What are they asking for?

A talk is different, especially when it's being recorded. I feel I have a different responsibility when something's going out on the internet. Even though you're asking the question now, I'm answering it to people I don't even know. I'm answering you, but I'm answering people I don't know. Does that make sense?

So I think it's really important to acknowledge: I don't actually know the answer regarding the PT, or I feel unsure. But with the happiness, yes, I think I would be a bit more insistent on that in this way of teaching the jhānas.

Again, if I think of the jhānas as just getting more and more concentrated, more and more able to hold my mind, then none of this matters. It's just a matter of noticing that as you do that, you go through these different stages, but basically what's most important is: Are you thinking or not thinking, and how steadily can you hold your mind on an object?

But to me that's not—again, we're back to the larger framework and the implications that has for what I'm doing.

Returning to the effort question—as we engage in all of this practice, the effort question never goes away. It only becomes more subtle, if anything, but it's never something we should abandon entirely. We need to be willing to overshoot the mark of right effort at times, and to undershoot it. I need to be willing to experience both, to taste them and recognize what each feels like.

When I really overshoot, there might be a headache between my eyes or some other physical tension. When I undershoot, I might fall asleep or lose focus entirely—these are extreme examples, but even with subtle overshooting and undershooting, I really need to develop a sense of recognition: "Oh, that's what that feels like." To cultivate this sensitivity, I have to be willing to experiment—let's try a bit more effort, or let's try a bit less, whatever counters my habitual tendency.

This brings us back to the question of inertia that we discussed in the first couple of days. Do I have inertia with effort levels? The opposite of inertia is fluidity, malleability, ease of movement. Am I willing to slide that effort up and down fluidly and play with it? "Oh yes, too much. Oh yes, not enough"—whatever is needed in this moment.

Inertia creeps into our meditation practice, certainly into our jhana practice, and actually into our lives in countless ways. One ongoing inquiry is: where is there inertia for me? Where might there be inertia? This awareness is part of developing the skill and art of working with effort levels.

We're playing with the intensity of effort—up and down—the intensity of delicacy, all of that. Remember, there's intensity of probing, but also intensity of opening. We don't tend to think of opening, abandoning, or surrendering as something one can do intensely—or perhaps "radically" is a better word. We really want to develop a feel for the whole spectrum on these dimmer switches of intensity and learn to play with them deliberately. They're up to us. We can adjust these fader switches.

The third thing that occurred to me is a question—and again, this may or may not apply now, but it's something you can explore. It's a kind of mental exercise or thought experiment that I think might be really fruitful. It has several parts.

The first part involves entertaining an idea: whatever your mind is snagged on, if your mind is circling around some issue or feels held back by something—whether subtly or quite significantly—or if it feels dragged somewhere by something, in either a gentle or stronger way, what if you entertain the possibility that this issue and its effect on you actually has, as its real root and origin, a hindrance?

It's not about what I think the issue is, but rather—and this is just a game, a conceptual experiment—what if hindrances are actually more originary? What if they're the origins of things that we later don't recognize as hindrances? They're like seedlings that sprout, and then we see a tree without recognizing the original seed.

This relates to what I mentioned about hindrances becoming papañca if we're not careful. Papañca is the complete opposite of samādhi—do we all agree on that?

Yeah, it's completely the opposite of samadhi. This kind of circling around an issue or whatever—sometimes it can be a very noble issue. I'm not insisting that every time we're thinking about something or every time we're upset, we're just playing a game here, like a thought game.

No matter how noble the issue, how important it seems, how important to my soul—just play with that view. Maybe the true origin of this thing is a hindrance. What has happened is that hindrance has not been recognized as a hindrance and it's been allowed to grow up and become a poisonous papañca tree. Because without a lot of care and practice, that's what happens with hindrances. That's what they do.

This is part of why I said we get to a place where we don't believe the hindrance. It can seem so convincing, so convincing. Even being really upset about this or that political issue—sometimes what's happening there is aversion. A part of us obviously really cares about this, and sometimes it's just our aversion hooking into this particular issue. It can all sound very justified, but there's actually a mixture. At times it's more one or the other.

We want to encourage the quietening of papañca because papañca is the opposite, and papañca prevents samādhi. Where there's papañca, there's no samādhi. Where there's samādhi, there's no papañca. They cannot coexist.

What we're doing here, if we play this little game, is tracing back the papañca through the aid of entertaining a certain conceptual possibility—that it might have a hindrance as its root—and tracing it back to that hindrance. Then we can work on it as a hindrance. It may not feel relevant at all now, but it might actually turn out to be really helpful as an exercise.

One of the teachers I studied jhāna practice with made this their main teaching on jhāna practice. This is really the point of jhāna and samādhi. Obviously I've talked about it, but I want to emphasize it more now. I don't agree, or it doesn't appeal to me that this would be the main thing, but it's hugely powerful. There are teachers out there—and you may well encounter them—for whom this is the main thing we're doing. Watching out for papañca. Relating that to hindrances, dealing with the hindrances, allows the samādhi. That's actually the most important thing. I won't elaborate—this is that person's teaching—but I actually feel it was valuable. It's a very valuable teaching.

So just a game, just very light—play with it. You're not signing up to "I believe this idea forever about all emotions and I can never change my mind." You're just entertaining a certain concept and seeing what happens for five minutes or whatever it is.

Kirsten asked: "I started to do this a little bit, and sometimes I'm not clear what the hindrance is exactly. It might be a mixture, and then I might get lost a little bit in this. So then I might go to restlessness. I just want to know how accurate or how important the accuracy of defining the hindrance is."

That's really important. I had jotted down before coming in that it's probably more than one hindrance, because what we often get is multiple hindrance attacks. Yeah, it can be—in fact, maybe usually hindrances come in gangs. So it's probably more than one, and that's fine. Maybe you can split them, or maybe even just thinking of that—just see what helps.

Sometimes just the notion that it's a hindrance—that's what I mean. Sometimes the precision of the identification is not important. It's just, as I said, playing with a certain framework and actually reframing: "Oh, maybe this is a hindrance," and I don't even know what the hindrance is. It doesn't matter.

Just that simple recognition can be enough. Sometimes you might think, "No, I need greater clarity about which specific hindrance this is," but the true power lies more in the general conception rather than precise identification—though identification certainly has its place. You'll have to discover what works best in each particular instance. But I don't believe it's necessary to identify the exact hindrance every time.

Often multiple hindrances operate simultaneously—two or more ganging up together. This is perfectly normal and part of the territory.

Yogi Question: I've been experimenting with this approach throughout the retreat, and it's been tremendously helpful until yesterday when I fell down what I can only call a "hindrance cliff." When I found myself deep in it, I became so angry at even asking the question about hindrances. Eventually I recognized it was likely a self-doubt

hindrance cliff I had tumbled down. But I needed considerable time before I could engage with this framework again without working myself up even further. So I'm curious about timing—when do you know to stop playing this "game" and try something else? Perhaps the answer is simply that you know when it's making things worse.

Response: Thank you—this is a really important question. Several elements deserve attention here.

Everything I've shared about working with emotions on this retreat exists within a much larger context of opening, skillful engagement, and soulmaking with emotions. This broader perspective feels essential to remember. Sometimes for you or anyone, simply knowing this larger context can remind something deep within your being—and that recognition alone might be sufficient.

If our soul feels compressed into a box, it will naturally rebel, and it should. It absolutely should. Does this make sense? Sometimes it might be enough simply to remind myself—and for you to remind yourself—of the bigger vision you hold regarding human emotional life.

We're not exploring this extensively on this retreat, and I've explained why. I've led other retreats where the primary focus was working with emotions in specific ways, but always within the context of vast emotions. So if I tell my soul that this vastness exists and we're simply playing a particular game right now, that reminder alone might help.

Even so, there may be times when this approach isn't appropriate. The essential question remains: What helps? How long does it take to recognize when something truly isn't helpful? I don't know precisely, but you develop a sense—especially with emotions. This is actually a very common discernment we must make in any dharma practice.

You choose a particular way of working with an emotion, then after some time you must ask yourself: Is this genuinely helping or not? If it's not helpful—and while I can't say exactly how long "some time" is, certainly several minutes—then you need to step away and try something different.

Sometimes it's simply a matter of cooling off. During that cooling period, the hindrance might naturally abate, or you might somehow—even subconsciously—remember the bigger picture around emotions.

What I most want to convey is this: Do we have the freedom to view emotions this way sometimes? Do I possess a range of perspectives and approaches without fear? Some people become terrified of certain emotions, while others become equally afraid of letting emotions settle into quietude. Do I have freedom from fear on both sides? Do I have skill and flexibility in both directions? This is what we're ultimately cultivating.

Wisdom also includes recognizing that sometimes an emotion can genuinely function as a hindrance—and viewing it that way becomes the most helpful approach. Sometimes we become so immersed in our immediate experience that it simply doesn't occur to us to consider that what we're experiencing could be a hindrance. We're so accustomed to relating to emotions in other ways.

This is more about maintaining a broad perspective. There might be periods of practice where you lean heavily into one particular relationship with emotions, and other periods where you engage quite differently. When I reflect on long retreat experiences, this applies not only to difficult emotions but to beautiful emotions as well.

I remember two instances at Gaia House. One was a short-lived thing and the other was a more general realization.

The more short-lived thing was... I can't even put it in a context. It was probably that I was doing samadhi practice for a stretch, and I just either remembered by heart a Mary Oliver poem about an owl. I can't remember the context, but somehow I went for a walk while reciting that to myself and was really deeply touched by the beauty of it, and had kind of realized: my soul needs that.

My soul needs that—in that moment, that particular poem, but also just... it's weird, not just piti and sukha. It's strange. We have this banquet here that we're talking about, but actually, I think the soul is richer than that.

So that's one thing. It was also, I remember, near the beginning of retreat, so there was still a question for me, like: okay, was that restlessness just settling into this retreat? I don't know, maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. But I can also see that more generally, it's like... if you asked me, "Would you only ever want to experience piti, sukha, peacefulness, stillness, and all the eight jhanas, and that was your whole emotional range?" I would say no, I wouldn't like that. I would like the whole range, please, thank you very much—including, like I said, including the grief, including even anger and all that. To me, this is more soul-making, but to me...

So that was more a moment. I was still left—I mean, it all settled down—but I was still left afterwards wondering: hmm, I wonder if that was just not quite settled yet on the retreat. It was like day four of a long retreat or something. I can't remember, but anyway, that was a question.

The other thing, and I haven't mentioned this yet, is that for me... I can't remember exactly, but I was exploring—you know, again, for a long time—really, really marinating and making my intention very clear on, I can't remember how many jhanas, but let's say the first four. That was my territory that I was really working with, and I was on a long retreat.

And at a certain point, as wonderful as they are, I'm actually missing something more mystical. So that there are lovely experiences, and as we'll talk tomorrow about the third jhana hopefully, there is definitely the beginnings of a mystical sense, a sense of sacredness. But you can also very much practice those jhanas and not really have much sense at all of a mystical sense. And they're not, I would say, again, primary. So even if you're—like for me, my tendency is very much, my yearning is very much towards the mystical—but they're not really that primary in them.

And I know lots of people that practice those first four jhanas without any mystical sense. And again, that goes in... it's related to the whole big conceptual framework. What are we doing here? What's important, et cetera.

But I realized for me, I feel something missing here. Again, it was in the context of a long solo retreat and I knew that I had to keep my intention steady. We're back to that question about keeping intention. So I don't know, I think recognizing it was very helpful. I didn't then change what practices I was doing—I can't remember what I did, but whatever I did worked—but it wasn't a kind of radical shift or change of direction. It was maybe just including something at the sides a bit more or something like that.

Again, that's probably a much longer answer than you wanted, but does that make sense what I just said?

Maybe it was recognizing that, you know, I only missed the mystical because I knew the mystical. And, you know, maybe were it something that I'd never experienced outside, I would maybe have a sense... Let's say I was a soul that wanted the mystical, but I hadn't experienced the mystical, and there were four jhanas. Well, these are great. Maybe I would have had a vague sense of: I'm missing something. Wonderful as this is, absolutely wonderful as this is, I'm still missing something. Maybe I would have had that sense, but not quite known what it was I was missing. I don't know, but back then I'd had quite a lot of different, all kinds of things.

And I think a part of me, yeah, in the context... but recognizing: Yeah, I can go back to that. I'm not signing up to this sort of forever. I will stay in the four jhanas as long as I can and do nothing else. That was never in my... I never signed up to that. So maybe that, yeah, that larger context and a larger sense of possibility was helpful.

And I think a part of me recognized that, yes, I could go back to that state. I'm not signing up to remain in the four jhanas forever, doing nothing else. That was never part of what I committed to. So perhaps that larger context and broader sense of possibility helped sustain the practice.

Let us close now with a few moments of quiet together.

Thank you, everyone. Time for tea, and then I believe Zohar and Lauren will need to transition. I'll be beginning interviews at seven o'clock.

Thank you for your presence and attention throughout this exploration of the jhanas. May your practice continue to unfold with wisdom and compassion.

CHAPTER 212

The Third Jhāna

Rob Burbea · 1h22

> *In this dharma talk from the 'Practising the Jhānas' series, Rob Burbea offers detailed instruction on the third jhāna, emphasizing its primary characteristic of sublime peacefulness (sukha) without rapture (pīti). Drawing from the Buddha's beautiful simile of lotuses immersed in cool water, he describes how the practitioner 'permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body' with refined happiness.*
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> *Burbea outlines three experiential levels within the third jhāna: contentment/satisfaction, personal peacefulness, and entering a vast realm of peace. He provides practical methods for accessing this state, either by drinking deeply from second jhāna happiness until satisfaction arises, or by following the spectrum of increasingly subtle sukha as pīti gradually fades away. The talk emphasizes the critical importance of maintaining extremely refined attention while working with such subtle states.*
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> *A significant portion addresses the profound shift in perception that occurs both during and after third jhāna practice - the experience of 'one taste' where all phenomena appear pervaded by the same deep peacefulness. This points toward understanding dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) and the empty nature of all perceptions. Burbea explains how this peacefulness emerges through the natural attenuation of the mind's habitual pushing and pulling in relationship to experience, offering both dualistic (jhāna as escape from the world) and non-dualistic (one taste pervading all) perspectives as valid approaches to practice.*

Today I want to talk about the third jhāna. Remember what we were saying: the pacing of the teachings will almost certainly not be the pacing of your practice, and if it is, we actually don't want that. Your optimal pacing of practice for this retreat may intersect the trajectory of the pacing of the teachings at one point, but it shouldn't more than that. You're going at your optimum pace for marination, for mastery.

So, the third jhāna. What does the Buddha say about the third jhāna? If you get hold of the text of the Pali Canon, it's about a shelf load full of volumes. I don't know if anyone's counted how many times he talks about jhāna in there, but it's really, really a lot—so much so that they barely print it again. They just say "as before, as before, as before." This gives you a sense of how much priority he put on the jhānas in his way of teaching.

That doesn't mean everyone needs to learn the jhānas. Some people think that. One of my teachers said, "If there's no jhāna, there's no liberation." I'm not sure I agree—we tend not to agree—but it does seem, looking at the Buddha, that he put considerable emphasis on this practice. There are, I think, two suttas where he really talks about mindfulness. I don't know how many suttas are in the whole Pali Canon—does anyone know roughly? A thousand? So two of those thousand are about mindfulness, one of which you'll be very familiar with: the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And then there are a lot of suttas on jhāna practice. We've kind of inherited a sense of a norm that probably doesn't actually historically reflect the kinds of practice that certainly the monastics were doing.

Here he is speaking about the jhānas again, addressing a group of monks. He's just gone through the first and second jhāna, and then he says: "And furthermore, with the fading of pīti, with the fading of rapture, he—the monk practicing—remains in equanimity, mindful and alert, and physically sensitive to sukha. With the fading of rapture, he remains in equanimity, mindfulness, and physically sensitive to sukha. He enters and remains in the third jhāna. And of him, the noble ones, the enlightened ones, declare: 'Equanimous and mindful, he has a pleasurable abiding.'"

The monk permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the sukha divested of pīti—with the sukha, with the pīti removed, filtered out, gone from it. He permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with happiness divested of pīti, so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with sukha divested of pīti.

And then comes a really gorgeous, appealing simile: "Just as in a pond of blue, white and red lotuses, there may be some of the blue, white or red lotuses which, born and growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated and pervaded, suffused and filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those blue, white or red lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water. Even so, the monk permeates this very body with the sukha divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with sukha divested of rapture."

When we come to talk about jhāna factors, I couldn't find the sutta—it's possible that there are times when the Buddha actually says the first jhāna has five factors, the second jhāna has three factors, the third jhāna has two factors, and so on. But I couldn't find it. Anyway, most people agree that the third jhāna has only two jhāna factors: sukha and ekaggatā.

But this text I've just read from the Buddha says all this other business. It says, "With the fading of pīti, he remains in equanimity, mindful and alert." "Mindful" is sati, "equanimity" is upekkhā—in Pali you probably know those words. "Alert"—the actual word is sampajañña, which some people translate as "clearly comprehending." It goes a lot with the mindfulness language and is very prevalent in the mindfulness sutta.

So you've got these other elements or aspects that clearly the Buddha is pointing to, but they don't qualify as jhāna factors. I think there's something that—once you practice third jhāna, we'll see something similar in the fourth jhāna—there's something a little bit misleading about the Buddha's description. It's not at all the case that there isn't mindfulness and alertness and equanimity in the third jhāna—there absolutely is. But the primary nimitta is sukha without pīti, or actually sukha—pure sukha, if you like.

Now, pure sukha—sukha without piti—is actually quite a rare thing for a human being. Mostly, even in non-jhanic states, we experience happiness with a bit of that upwelling quality. Certainly when we're laughing or giggling, it has that kind of bubbling up to it, those proto-jhanic factors of piti and sukha within it. It's quite rare to have happiness without piti.

I use a word that I think is more accurate, speaking from an experiential point of view: the primary nimitta of the third jhana is peacefulness. And that peacefulness is almost unbelievably lovely. It is warm, tender, and very, very refined.

If you're ever in doubt—have I reached the next jhana?—one way of knowing is to ask: is it more refined than the jhana I've come from? You may have moved from something where the dominant element in the citta is happiness to a state where the dominant element is something like peacefulness. But if that peacefulness is not a total quantum leap in refinement, then it's unlikely you've moved from the second to the third jhana.

This is one thing to look for, and remember what I said: what's actually happening throughout the whole spectrum of the jhanas is this increasing refinement as we develop through them. That's one of the key elements.

There's something very lovely here. There's a warmth, a real tenderness. It has heart qualities in it, but in a very soft, undramatic way. Well, it might be dramatic when you first enter it—it really is breathtaking—but the way those qualities pervade the space is not dramatic in terms of the heart qualities.

There's an increase in refinement. It's a very refined state, and I would say it's very beautiful. There's something again almost breathtakingly beautiful about it. It feels very healing. There's something about that space—bathing oneself and dissolving one's body and heart and mind in that space—that just feels naturally, organically healing. Again, in a very undramatic, quiet, but very powerful way in terms of healing the heart.

There's love in it. There's metta in it organically. You don't have to make that happen. All these qualities are just part of the radiant glow of that space, of that jhanic territory.

So yes, there's mindfulness. Yes, there's alertness. And yes, there's equanimity. But we would expect mindfulness and alertness in any jhana. Here, they may be upgraded quite a bit beyond what most people experience, unless you've really gotten into momentum on a mindfulness retreat where there's a lot of mindfulness and alertness.

And yes, there's equanimity. But let's come back to that one because most people who haven't experienced the third and fourth jhana—what one will understand by the word equanimity, based either on daily life or on insight meditation practice—we're really talking about a different level here, a different flavor. That's why I said it can be a little misleading if we focus on the other words right now. There is equanimity, and I'll come back to that.

In my experience and the way I teach this, the third jhana has three levels. I did read a text somewhere, I think in the Visuddhimagga, saying different jhanas break into three levels or two levels, but I don't recall it actually describing what those levels are. Whether this division I'm making based on experience and teaching experience corresponds to the Visuddhimagga, I don't personally mind either way. I just find this very helpful, and so do many others.

The first level—following the Buddha's lovely simile of a gorgeous cool pond in a hot climate, near the top, as there's a descent through the jhanas and one feels them that way—is characterized by what I would call contentment or satisfaction, or perhaps fulfillment, though that's a more complicated word. Something like contentment and satisfaction. But the level of contentment, the fullness, the degree of contentment and satisfaction at the beginning of the third jhana is unlikely to be something we've experienced in daily life. It's really of a different order.

The second level, the middle level, is where the peacefulness comes to dominate. But it feels like my peacefulness. I'm peaceful, this space here is peaceful. It's not that I'm thinking "mine, mine" and hanging onto it in any way. I say this only in contrast to the deeper level, the third level, which feels more like a realm.

of peacefulness. One's in a realm, one's in a vast space—or one has a sense, that's a better way to put it—one has a sense of a space of peacefulness, a vast space pervaded by peacefulness, a world of peacefulness.

So at this point it really is—and I'll come back to this—it really is like I've entered a different world here. As opposed to first jhāna, second jhāna, where something extraordinary is happening in my body, in my citta, in my consciousness, in my energy body, here at times it can feel like I've really entered a different world.

So those are the three levels that I would demarcate and encourage people to find, but the order in which they will be revealed to you may not be one, two, three. In other words, you may find yourself first in the middle one or the third one. No rush. In time, they will all become apparent, and we want them to all become familiar. Just as we have mastery with regard to a jhāna—I can go there directly—you can also navigate within a jhāna. So if you wanted to, you can go from the fourth jhāna to the most superficial level of the third jhāna, that contentment. You can just jump to wherever.

No rush with that. It's part of the mastery. It's part of really knowing them. It will emerge just from everything that we've been doing—sitting with it, walking with it, being in it, but keeping the sensitivity, the antennae tuned, alive, alert, subtly discriminating, noticing and enjoying. And these things will get revealed.

So how does one access, how does one enter the third jhāna? One way is to just be in the second jhāna with the happiness, but really drink it. Really drink and drink and drink that happiness. Drink and drink and enjoy that drinking. We have a thirst we don't even recognize. And in a way we need to slake that thirst, just drink and drink and enjoy.

And at a certain point, one may realize, oh, the most prominent emotion has changed. It's actually gone from happiness to this satisfaction, to this contentment. Why? Because I've drunk enough. I've actually satisfied that thirst. And sometimes at first one may not realize that shift if it goes to that deeper level. But one way of moving here from the second to the third jhāna is really drink that happiness and really, really enjoy it and really open to all the things we've been saying. We need to really tune to it, really stay with it and take it in and bathe in it and enjoy it and drink it.

A second possibility, though, is that—as we've mentioned a couple of times, it's come up in questions—the happiness of the second jhāna has a range to it. At the shallow end, it's actually more rapturous. Technically speaking, it's got more pīti in it. And at the deep end of the second jhāna, it's got less pīti in it. The pīti is drained out. That's why the happiness there is more serene. That corresponds with the Buddha's description.

But in a way, there's a way of understanding the second jhāna as a kind of transition jhāna. Pīti and sukha in the first jhāna with a lot of pīti dominating. Less and less pīti all the way through the second jhāna until the pīti is drained out and you're just left with this purified sukha. That's one way of understanding it. There's a kind of spectrum of less and less pīti, and correspondingly there's a spectrum of more and more subtilized happiness.

So you can either drink your fill with the happiness or go with this, ride the spectrum down into more and more subtlety.

Eventually, like all the other jhānas, if we're talking about mastery, you can just summon it. You don't need to go from the second jhāna. You don't need to do anything. You just remember the third jhāna and call it back by a subtle intention.

If one is going through letting the happiness get more and more subtle, it's absolutely, totally crucial that the attention needs to get increasingly subtle with it, and that you need to get really into it. Again, if it's like subtle pīti, subtle happiness, it doesn't need to be strong for me to totally relish it and totally enjoy it and totally get into it.

So if the attention is not fully maximally subtle, and if I'm not fully maximally enjoying it, what I will end up with is a state of peacefulness—or perhaps I will end up either getting lost or falling asleep, or with a kind of state of peacefulness that is actually slightly dull, slightly insensitive. And the peacefulness will not be so alluring and so magical in that way.

But even these words "dull" and "insensitive"—again, to most people, they mean something quite gross. At this level, we're talking about dullness. We're also talking about really subtle dullness, really subtle insensitivity. So compared to our normal state of consciousness, they're not gross, obvious defects.

But if I'm taking that second method of going down in terms of the subtlety of the happiness, I absolutely have to really be on my toes with the attention, really subtilizing the attention, really getting into it, really making sure I'm opening, enjoying, penetrating. So there's a slide, but where that slide takes us depends very much on what the mind is doing and what the relationship with it is.

What this all implies to me is that the safest bet is actually the first way: just drink that happiness. Drink it and drink it and drink it, open it, slake your thirst. This avoids that kind of satellite, non-jhanic state of equanimity or peacefulness.

As we've mentioned several times, it can be likely that one goes there because of the habitual tracks and momentum of previous insight meditation practice. If you practice mindfulness, once that gets going you're basically practicing a kind of let go, let go, let go, and as I'll come back to at the end today, that will take you into some state of equanimity. It's a very okay state—relatively speaking, it's a skillful state—but it's unlikely that it's the third jhana. If it's just, "Oh, I recognize this place from before, this kind of quiet place I've gotten to sometimes on retreats," it seems to match. There's peacefulness, there's mindfulness, there's equanimity, there's alertness, but it's unlikely to be the third jhana. It might be, but it's unlikely.

Again, what this partly implies to me is maybe safest to go with the first approach: drink, drink, drink the happiness. See if you can keep it at a certain bandwidth where it's really obvious happiness and not something quite subtle.

It may be possible that that kind of non-jhanic equanimity, peacefulness state can get kind of nudged, maneuvered into a jhanic state like the third jhana. If you hang out there—this state you remember from insight retreats—and if you hang out there, but the attention has to be really, really alive, really subtle, and really maximizing the enjoyment. Really trying to find what's most pleasurable. It may be possible for some people that this more familiar insight state of equanimity, with very careful work and play, becomes the third jhana.

But you'll much more likely have more likable and much clearer experiences of the third jhana if you go through the second jhana in one of the ways I was talking about, more likely that drinking approach. You'll more likely end up in what's definitely jhana territory rather than a sort of relatively skillful but only relatively skillful peace or equanimity.

In relation to differentiating this third jhana from those kind of relatively peaceful states that we might know of equanimity or peace, what we might call satellite states: the third jhana is breathtakingly touching. There's something that touches the being, impresses on the body, the heart, the soul, very profoundly. It's really very touching. There's a beauty there. It's very beautiful, really an extraordinary state, and it really does impress on the whole being.

So yes, this differentiation between states—and remember I said I contradict myself many times, and sometimes we don't need to worry so much about am I in it, am I out, where exactly is the boundary. Instead, just work and play with this care, which gets very fine now. The work and play is still sassy, still sassy at this level. Rather than am I

in, am I out, just keep playing with the sassy and let your work and play be also quite subtle and intense, but in this very subtle, very gentle way. I have to learn how to work intensely without being too crude and too heavy-handed and too pressured.

I can't remember if it was in the Pali Canon—something the Buddha said—but it might be in the Visuddhimagga. There's a simile of a desert traveler, someone who's been walking for days and days across a desert, going from somewhere to somewhere. They're parched with thirst and weary and dirty, sand everywhere, staggering along. Then in the distance they see—or even someone tells them—they see an oasis. That relief and glee and excitement that they feel corresponds to the first jhana. It's not a mirage; it's an actual oasis.

The second jhana in this simile: they reach the oasis and flop down by the side of it on their hands and knees and just drink and drink and drink that cool water. Their thirst, which has built up over wandering the desert—samsara, basically—their thirst begins to be slaked. They need to drink a lot; they're pretty dehydrated. They need to drink and drink and drink.

The third jhana: at a certain point, they just decide, "I'm just going to get in." They just immerse themselves into this beautiful, cool, spring-fed pond with lotuses. They just dunk themselves and wash their body and submerge themselves and drink some more.

Like I said, the ordinary usage in English of words like happiness and peacefulness and equanimity doesn't really capture the kind of degree and depth and beauty and impact, the whole other level that we're talking about here with jhanic factors and jhanic words. And certainly when you get to the third jhana, that's the case.

A little bit about working in the third jhana. As I mentioned, the third level feels like a kind of sense of a realm, of a much wider, perhaps a vaster space even. But this is quite important: the focus within that sense of "I'm in a whole other world here"—the focus, the primary focus—needs to still be the whole body space, the energy body space. You can still be aware you're really in this other realm, but the jhana will only stabilize and deepen and you'll only get its maximal fruits if the primary focus is on the whole body space, just actually a bit bigger. So it might be as much as two feet in front of you, that sort of space around the energy body.

You work with the same—you might work with these two modes of attention, the narrow focus penetrating or the wide open receiving, abandoning, surrendering, or you might find others: wrapping around or dissolving into, all kinds. But basically the focus is the energy body and moving gently in a very unhurried way, playing with these different modes of attention. That's what's going to consolidate it, allow it to get deeper.

So in the third level, the sense of that realm, that sort of vast realm is still there, but it's not the primary focus. Yet we can still be touched by it, allow ourselves to have a sense of the appreciation of that lovely space, that larger lovely space. Appreciate it, be touched by it—that kind of otherworldly sense.

The sense of really visiting another realm, of being admitted into another kind of more blessed realm in a way. When I say the primary focus is with the whole body and the energy body, it doesn't mean that I'm still not aware of this realm and I can't still feel the beauty of that and the loveliness of that. One can kind of invite or imagine bringing in that sense of peacefulness from the bigger space, or just allow it in, opening the energy body space to it. In some way or another, all that lovely, lovely peacefulness from that space—you bring it into the energy body if you need to.

Sometimes what happens—and this should only be the kind of thing that happens and that you're playing with after you've had quite a lot of experience with the third jhana—is that it hasn't quite settled yet. It's not quite consolidated. I'm not quite into it yet, though I've had many experiences before of it. All I can find then is like a filament, the barest, subtlest sort of magical thread, very, very faint, very subtle, that has the taste of that peacefulness.

All I can find is one, and maybe it's in one place in my body. When I say body, it might be the anatomical body—in my belly, or whatever—or it might be the energy body, remembering that when I say whole body, it means the space, right? I'm not necessarily correlating it with any part of my anatomy. It's just somewhere in this space, but it feels like it's connected with my body. Usually things feel like they start getting lower down. The center of the attention starts getting lower down. Maybe even the place where initially, in this case, the peacefulness is stronger is lower down the body. That's common, but there are always exceptions. Eventually, obviously, we want the whole space to be filled with that peacefulness.

But sometimes what happens, with a lot of experience, and this session it's not quite going so well, but it's fine—I can tell I just need to play a little bit. All I can find is this one really, really subtle thread. I start to follow that. I'm tuning to it and I'm just enjoying that thread and attuning the attention to it and finding the beauty in it. Just that relationship with that thread, so to speak, that filament of it starts to allow the

whole thing to spread, starts to allow the peacefulness, the fabric of that filament, of that thread to spread throughout the whole space. Often by itself. You can still do the spreading stuff, of course, but often you'll find it just spreads by itself at this point.

Something similar can happen with the second jhana. If you've had a lot of experience with the second jhana, a really clear experience with it, going in and out many times, then sometimes again it's sort of, "Oh, today's not quite kind of got into it," or "It's there, but it's really not strong." It's kind of in boundary territory, in borderline territory. Again, sometimes it might be a trickle—I'm drinking from a trickle, just a little trickle from a fountain, but I'm drinking it and I'm really enjoying it. If I don't get into that "oh, it was better yesterday" or whatever, and I'm just really drinking, then that trickle—I follow that trickle, I tune to its qualities, I enjoy it, all the same things—and it can build from there.

In a way it's true for the first jhana because of how we've been talking about the two possibilities of pīti arising, that one of them is like the ember and glowing.

Sometimes what happens with, again, with quite a bit of experience with the third jhana already—remember, when you encounter a new territory, a new jhanic territory, a new level of consciousness, whatever you want to call it, a new state of consciousness, the first few experiences are often like a dam bursting. Everything is perfect and wow, and there's no effort involved, or very little effort. After a while, then it's like, "Oh, then certain subtle work, subtle play is obviously needed." It's not that one's gone backwards. This is just the natural maturation of things.

If one is not noticing subtle work and play, I would say I'm not sure that one is practicing what the Buddha would call right concentration, because there isn't that degree of sensitive, subtle discernment to actually notice, "Oh, I see, that's different," or this thing or that thing.

One of the things that one can notice after a while that can happen sometimes is that it's almost like there's a mental aspect of this lovely peacefulness, this gorgeous peacefulness, and there's, so to speak, a physical aspect of this gorgeous peacefulness—in other words, felt in the energy body—and they can become separated sometimes. The mental and the physical peacefulness can become separated. We want them integrated. We want the whole thing. Clearly jhanic experiences have integrated all these elements, so we want them integrated.

It could be that you've practiced really a fair amount with the third jhana, in and out, and you've really got used to it, and then you start to notice this sometimes. Occasionally you start to notice this. It could be that either of those comes first. I'm experien-

cing a mental peacefulness that I recognize from the third jhana but not the bodily, or the other way around. It could be either, but they're not integrated. One is present, one is not absent.

The breath can really help integrate them, or I suppose the metta at that point. But the breath, particularly if you've been doing breath practice, is something that the mind can follow—not just follow with attention, but the way the breath is tells us how the mind is. The way someone's breath is, you know this at a very gross level—the mind and breath are quite related. So bringing the breath back in, if you've been working with the breath, can be quite helpful at integrating the mental and the physical.

This is why this relationship between breath and mind is so significant. Mostly we're taught not to manipulate the breath in meditation, right? You just watch it. But how my breath is at any moment does reflect how my mind is at any moment. And so, in a way, the mind is shaping the breath. But it also—like so many things, if the causality seems to work one way, it often works the other way too. If I shape the breath, I can affect my mind.

That's why when we started with those really long breaths and with the energy body breathing—really long breaths—because we often need more energy. And that's why the Anapanasati Sutta starts with breathing in long, then breathing in short. To me it's deliberate because the manipulation of the breath manipulates the mind, which if you're trying to settle the mind is what you're trying to do anyway. So you actually settle the mind, shape the mind through playing gently, subtly, responsively with the breath.

The breath integrates or is a bridge that straddles body and mind. And so at this point, if the mental peacefulness is there but the bodily peacefulness is not, or vice versa, bringing the breath back in can help. It's one of the things that can help integrate them.

But really with these rupa jhanas, with these first four jhanas—body, body, body, body, body—it's maybe more likely for people to feel like they're experiencing a mental peacefulness but there really isn't the sense of that peacefulness pervading the body to that degree. So as I said, there may be a thread or just a place in the energy body. It's just a location in this space of the energy body. It may be very, very subtle. And tuning to that, focusing on it, following it, enjoying it can help.

Or it may be there's a sense of this realm. Maybe I've already got a sense of the third level, but it's still not integrated and settled. And I want to kind of immerse the body in that realm, immerse the body in the peacefulness. But I have to get the body involved.

Always you hear in the Buddha's description—he says it in each short paragraph, he says it twice—about getting the whole body involved. "No spot untouched, pervading, suffusing." Over and over again: body, body, body with these form jhanas. So I really have to make sure I work to get the body sense filled like that and really involved and really pervaded.

I can immerse my body in this space of peacefulness. I can dissolve my body out, so to speak. I dissolve my energy body out into that peacefulness, or I dissolve the peacefulness into the body. But so much has to do with tuning again. What's happening in each jhana is not that we're paying attention to one small physical location or keeping our mind fixed on one small location in space. We're tuning to a certain frequency, and the frequency that we're tuning to in the third jhana is very, very refined.

So it's really about tuning at this point—tuning to that radio station that has that really otherworldly, transcendently peaceful music. And I just want to learn to tune there and really get that fine tuning, and then pay attention, attune, and let things amplify from there.

Experientially, the third jhana is—there's a quantum jump in stillness from the first to the second jhana, and then there's a whole other quantum jump in stillness from the second to the third. So it's a very still state. And sometimes people's initial descriptions when they first enter it in an interview, they say, "Oh, it was really still." It is very still compared to what most human beings will ever have remotely come near experiencing. But yet there is actually a very, very subtle, gentle movement in it. It's possible that there are very, very subtle, gentle movements within it.

Almost—if the breath is your base practice—it's almost as if you'd forgotten about the breath and then it's almost like it can re-emerge at this point, but just really, really faint echoes of the breath. It's like one is almost not sure: is that the breath or is that me just imagining a very subtle breath? In a way, it doesn't matter, but there can be this very gentle breath or very faint echoes of the breath, whatever it is, and they carry this very subtle, gentle movement that's somehow there within the stillness.

It doesn't in any way disturb the stillness, this movement. So it's almost like the very gentle movement is somehow integrated into the stillness without disturbing it. The movement itself, this very gentle movement, seems itself—the very movement seems to

express stillness, which in English is a contradiction in words. But there's something very beautiful about the movement, so it seems to really manifest or express this lovely stillness.

The image I had, and I think I've shared it with a few of you, might be helpful as a gentle guide at certain moments. Imagine a lagoon or pond with fairly deep water, and beneath the surface, a few long strands of seaweed swaying really, really gently and slowly. There may be some movement in your experience that's akin to this graceful underwater dance. This movement might manifest with the breath or something else entirely.

As I mentioned, if breath has been your base practice, it may reemerge at this point and reintegrate naturally. After giving all your attention to piti and sukha, after all that delightful commotion and bubbliness, the breath begins to surface again—almost as if saying, "Oh, I can notice it again, and I can welcome it back." But it's very subtle, very delicate.

The breath has become peacefulness itself. Just as the body has transformed into peacefulness, the breath too has become peacefulness. This gentle swaying movement, like that underwater seaweed, expresses peace through its very motion. The movement itself manifests stillness—a beautiful paradox that transcends ordinary language.

Let's think about jhana factors as ingredients in cooking or alchemy, whichever metaphor resonates with you. Working backward from the Buddha's definitions: the first jhana contains both piti and sukha, with piti being prominent. The second jhana spans a range where both sukha and piti are present, but throughout this range, piti gradually filters out. The third jhana contains sukha without piti—the effervescent quality has been completely refined away.

This understanding opens up fascinating possibilities. When I'm established in third jhana, if I want to explore second jhana, I can simply take some piti from the shelf, so to speak, and add a measured amount. Depending on how much I incorporate, I'll find myself in different regions of the second jhana. A little piti takes me to the deeper end of second jhana; more piti brings me to the more effervescent, bubbly regions.

This is part of the art, the creative range possible in this practice—consciously titrating jhana factors to build or open particular states. The same principle applies to fourth jhana, where sukha too has dissolved. If I'm in fourth jhana and add sukha back, I return to third jhana. A whole alchemy of possibilities emerges—mixing ingredients, exploring the spectrum of consciousness with intention and skill.

As the third jhana deepens, you may notice something remarkable quite early in your explorations. If your senses remain open—and the Buddha is very clear that closing the senses is not necessary in the first four jhanas—you continue hearing birds, traffic, or other sounds. What becomes extraordinary is that all phenomena begin to be perceived as having one taste.

This taste pervades not just the inner landscape of jhana but extends into the world of the senses. Even unpleasant sounds—drilling, lawnmowers, harsh noises—begin to carry this same taste of beautiful, profound peacefulness. A cosmic deep okayness spreads throughout everything, and all of existence seems imbued with this singular flavor of peace.

This experience naturally extends beyond formal meditation. When you rise from sitting and move into informal practice—walking, having tea, simply being present—pay attention to what I call the aftereffects on perception. This is a crucial concept that probably becomes most clear here in third jhana and grows increasingly significant as we progress through the deeper states.

In these aftereffects, while remaining open, sensitive, and present, you'll notice that the world itself appears imbued with that gorgeous, delicious, almost mystical peacefulness. It's as if this peace is revealed as the very nature of things—not something imposed upon reality, but the fundamental fabric of existence itself.

Peace is the fabric of the cosmos.

This is pointing to what is probably the most significant thing in the Dharma. We have to pick it up though. We have to make the connections and we have to see it and understand it and see it many, many times through this kind of experience, through other related kinds of insight experience.

But it's pointing to the dependent arising of perception. The world, how the world appears to me, the very world that I live in is dependent on how I look at it. So everyone is living in the same world where we are, but we also aren't. Dependent arising. The world is empty of being this way or that way, ultimately. Any one thing is empty of being this way or that way ultimately.

And one way, and I think one of the most powerful ways and one of the ways I like to emphasize in teaching is seeing that through—again, we're back to—through playing with perception and seeing the effects of this way of looking on the perception of self, other, world, time, everything. And then playing with that way of looking and seeing the effects on perception of self, other, world, time, phenomena. And then another way of

perceiving, another way of perceiving. And actually one can integrate the whole of the Dharma into that exploration or even sum up the whole of the Dharma as that exploration. The most significant thing, dharmically, I would say.

So even something like generosity, we don't tend to think of that as playing with perception. But if you practice generosity and you pay attention and sometimes you practice a really radical generosity and see what happens to the perception of self, of other, of world. The whole of the Dharma, all the qualities that the Buddha is pointing to, can be seen to be integrated into a certain movement of exploration, which is this exploration of dependent arising through playing with perception. The appearance of the world, the whole world depends on how I'm looking at any moment.

So we could also say that's a teaching about karma. Where am I reborn? Do you understand that? Do you understand how that makes sense?

Another way of saying all this is a teaching on karma. If I, let's say... Let's take two things. Let's take two pairs. Kindness or unkindness and generosity or stinginess. Kindness or unkindness, generosity and stinginess. And I practice those things. I practice stinginess to different degrees. And I notice the effect on how myself feels. Not that I'm judging myself so much, but just how does myself feel? How does my energy body feel? How does myself feel more solid, more contracted? How does the world feel? Do I feel connected with the world or does the world feel somehow separate? Do I feel a kind of oneness or do I feel a separation? All these things.

Same thing with kindness. I practice unkindness or kindness or I practice generosity. So basically what you'll realize, what you'll come to realize, if you pay careful attention to these things, really go for it as a practice, is that the world I actually perceive that I live in can either be, if I practice a lot of unkindness and a lot of stinginess, I will perceive the world as a hostile place more and more. A cold, barren, hostile place. I have to keep looking over my shoulder. There won't be a sense of the world is a lovely place full of love and warmth and actually somehow we're all one despite the appearances of separateness. The energy body will feel brittle and hard and separate and cold and all the rest of it.

So these are just everyday examples outside of meditation. What happens in meditation is you're taking some of those kinds of things and just cranking them up to a whole other level of power where the effects on perception of self, other, world and all that just become way more powerfully obvious. Does that make sense?

So one way of understanding what actually holds everything in the Dharma together is that exploration. So we will return to this just because it's so important. And as I said, it's even more important when we get to the formless jhānas. But this whole shifts in perception with different ways of looking. We call it the dependent arising of perception, the dependent arising of the world, dependent arising of the self. I need to see that loads of times and let it really impress on the citta. So it's through repetition but also again through extending the degree of range of ways of looking, how many and also how powerful they are.

We can think of that also as a teaching about karma. I practice this, I do this or I think this repeatedly or I view the world repeatedly and I will end up being reborn.

I don't mean a thousand years from now, I mean now—and ten minutes from now, whatever—I would end up being reborn in a world that's colored a certain way. And if I practice kindness and generosity and all the other lovely, really good stuff, I'm reborn in a world. It's the same world, but actually it's very, very different. I'll talk about it again.

We need to see that so many times and see it over so many different kinds of ways of looking, really making the connection. Actually, I have to put this whole idea—I have to, in a way, load it in as a cartridge as the whole way I'm seeing practice, and then follow through with it and then see what it does. If I don't do that, it won't impress so deeply, and I have to do that many, many times through a range of different, variously powerful practice and a range of kinds of practice.

Until we get it and the heart, the citta, gets something really deeply and it's profoundly liberating, there's a mystical beauty and wonder that comes from that, from the kind of insight that comes from that. I would say an insight of a whole other level.

Going back to something I said before, there are three things we can extract out here experientially, and then relate them to insight.

Experientially, I can have—one can have—in the third jhana this sense of one taste. Either in the meditation or outside, everything has this one taste. And so there is actually less duality. Once one opens repeatedly to that experience, there's less duality between the jhana and not-jhana, or meditation and the rest of the world, or even the jhanic realm and the rest of the world. One sees that actually that's the nature of the whole world.

So there's less duality between a place I need to get to and the rest of the world, because all of it has this one taste of peacefulness. Does that make sense? So that's a certain opening and perception that we can have that's very fruitful. We could call it—let's just stick the label on it for now—kind of non-dualistic between jhana and the world, let's say. The jhanic realm and the worldly realm.

But sometimes we can have a much more dualistic sense of the jhanas. They are—and there's a passage, I think it's in the Majjhima Nikaya, there's certainly more than one passage, where the Buddha describes each jhana as an escape. Nisarana is the Pali. So they're realms of escape.

So this lovely, gorgeous realm of peacefulness is a realm of escape from the world. He's actually describing Sariputta meditating. I think it's Sariputta who says, "Actually there's a better escape than the first jhana—the second jhana. That's a better escape than the first jhana." Then in the second jhana, after a certain time, there's a better escape. The third jhana is a better escape from the world than the second jhana, et cetera, et cetera, all the way through.

Nisarana—now it's true that word can mean other things. It can mean things like just a sort of result, or when something issues in something else, like a result, or it can mean a flowing out. But it's also related to the word nis, which is a prefix that means "out" or "outside" or "going out," and sarana is a word you may know: "Saranam Buddhang saranam gachami"—what does that mean? Refuge or shelter. So a jhana as a refuge outside—outside of the world.

And experientially, to me, there is very much that thrust in the Buddha's teachings. Again, in the context of really looking at the Pali Canon and noticing how much he talks about jhana, how much he talks about not being reborn, et cetera. Let's not go there right now. It can also mean leaving behind.

But there's a case for—he's really saying there's this escape from the world. And there are other escapes from the world: the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth jhanas, et cetera. You could say they're also an escape then from the non-peacefulness that characterizes the world. They're an escape from the non-sukha that characterizes the body as it's usually experienced, and the mind as it's usually experienced, and the world as it's usually experienced.

There's quite a dualistic teaching. And it points the way, or paves the way even—each jhana is a step or a further escape. It paves the way for the total escape of the arahant not to be reborn into this world.

So we've got this non-dualistic teaching, or this kind of non-dualistic teaching—everything's all one taste, world and meditation. And then we've got this kind of dualistic teaching—meditation or jhana as escape from the world. And what I would like to stress is actually that we can have both of those as experiences, and they're both very valid.

And we shouldn't make a duality between duality and non-duality. To me, that's really, really important, because some of the most entrenched, unbudgeable, dualistic thinking people I've met call themselves non-dualists. To me, that's actually really, really important.

So both as experiences, both of these are blessings that we can enter this realm. You know, I've been very sick and in a lot of pain and just to be able to go into a realm where there's none of that, there's no discomfort—it's really a blessing and really a gift. But one can also have the other view. Everything becomes that. So they're just views. They're just views that we can move between.

What's the deeper view between, what's deeper than these two views, is this third thing that we were talking about: dependent arising. Because dependent arising, when I really understand that, legitimizes and opens the door for all kinds of different views. One can view dualistically and one can view so-called non-dualistically. One understands this or that perception arises dependently. It's empty and that gives me freedom.

There's no perception of anything that is not empty. Since all perceptions are empty, in a way, there's not a hierarchy. There's not an intrinsic hierarchy. There's a hierarchy dependent on what I might want at any time. I might want to reduce suffering, but then, okay, which way of reducing suffering right now helps the best? The hierarchy is not intrinsic. It's not, so to speak, ontologically intrinsic, but it might be practically. One might hierarchize practically, so to speak.

So a realm of escape, in this case, from the usual realm, which is non-peacefulness and non-sukha, and that's the world. And that's the world as we know it. So how does this peacefulness arise? How does it arise? Peacefulness arises from the quieting, from the attenuating of the push and pull of the citta in relationship to phenomena. We push away what we don't like. I prefer this thing to that thing so I push that one away and pull this one towards me, or I prefer this one and I don't want it to go away so I keep pulling on it so it won't go away.

Now we all know that happens at an extremely gross level. We literally—don't leave me—and pulling someone or whatever it is or literally pushing something or someone away. But the amazing thing is it happens more subtly as well, and more subtly and more subtly, and we can trace that investigation into more and more subtlety, into more and more subtleness.

Peacefulness arises from attenuating the degree of push and pull. And the degree of peacefulness will correspond to just how much push and pull we let go of. Equanimity also, which is a kind of peacefulness we'll come back to, arises from lessening the push and pull in the moment. I'm talking about meditation—I'm not talking about ways of living. Equanimity also, which is a kind of peacefulness, arises from an attenuation of the mind's habitual moment-to-moment push and pull with experience.

So, practically speaking, the question arises: how do we attenuate? How do we reduce? How do we dampen the push and pull? If dampening the push and pull gives such profound rewards, then I want to know how do I dampen the push and pull?

Well, in a way, drinking from the second jhana, drinking and drinking and drinking, as I described earlier, until satisfaction arises—in a way, that's dampening the push and pull, because satisfaction implies that I don't need to push and pull. If I'm satisfied, I don't need to change what's there. I don't need to pull this thing towards me. I don't need to push this thing away. I don't need to hang on to anything. I'm just satisfied.

So drinking the second jhana is, I don't know if it's officially the proximal cause of the third jhana, of the equanimity that the Buddha is talking about in the third jhana, that degree of equanimity. So the equanimity that Buddha's talking about in the third jhana—this is a little side note now—it's related to that kind of peacefulness and the sense of being in a realm that's just free of disturbance and kind of undisturbable, or that the one taste has spread everywhere and then it's just undisturbable. Undisturbable is another word for equanimity or imperturbable; the Buddha sometimes uses that word, not perturbable.

But one way that we might attenuate the push and pull is through just drinking and drinking from the second jhana. Another way, or actually a whole set of ways, is by deliberately practicing attenuating the push and pull. This is actually almost any insight way of looking—what I call insight ways of looking. Any insight way of looking is basically doing that. If it doesn't do that, it doesn't qualify for the name insight way of looking.

So there are loads of them and some of them it's very obvious that's what I'm doing. For instance, some of you will know this—if I'm working with what I call the second dukkha method, I'm actually feeling into the sense of pushing away or grabbing on or holding on. I'm feeling in, in the energy body, in the mind, in the subtle awareness to any sense of contraction, push and pull, and then I'm relaxing it.

And then I'm noticing another one, relaxing it, noticing another one, relaxing it. So it's very obvious that in a deliberate and sustained way, that's exactly what we're doing. And if we just keep doing that, a profound, lovely peacefulness will open up because the push and pull is being attenuated.

There's something else—practicing the view of anatta, of seeing phenomena as not-self, or practicing the view of seeing phenomena as impermanent, anicca. It's not often immediately obvious to people that that's what we're doing. When we see things as impermanent, moment to moment arising and passing, effectively what we're doing, as well as obviously seeing the impermanence, is that the result in the moment of seeing the impermanence—not ten years later, not even a month later, but in the moment—should be that because we see everything's flowing so fast, we just let go. We don't even have to think, "Oh, it's impermanent, therefore I should let go because I don't want to suffer a sense of loss." It just happens automatically.

It's like trying to catch sand that's pouring and pouring through a net with completely the wrong size meshing—it just keeps falling through. If you keep trying to catch it, you just haven't realized it's impossible. You don't have to think about it; it's just obvious. Similarly, when we're practicing with impermanence, effectively what we're doing is attenuating the push and pull. And the same with anatta practice—actually the same with any of what I would call insight ways of looking. It's a deliberate moment-to-moment sustained attenuating of the push and pull with all phenomena, or just a certain set of phenomena that you've pre-circumscribed.

So that's the second way. A third way is going back to this other element we've already pinpointed—the one taste. If everything has one taste as its most salient characteristic, I don't need to choose. It's all the same. It's like I'm not going to choose this molecule of water over that molecule of water to drink—it's all just water. And so what's my reason for push and pull?

Now, I'm not talking about living your life that way—that would be utterly, utterly stupid. Some people get the idea that Buddhists are supposed to have that attitude to everything. I'm talking about a meditation practice that one does for a period of time

for the sake of seeing what the results are, because it's telling. It's opening up a beautiful resource and space, and it's going to tell me something about emptiness and dependent arising, which is the most liberating insight or range of insight that I can have.

But if I, in some way or other, practice perceiving things with equality—there's equality, everything is the same somehow, either everything has the taste of love or it has the taste of this peacefulness, but everything is that—then just that perception, with no differentiation, there's nothing to hook any reason to push this away and pull that. Do you understand? That makes sense? So that's another way that one might practice in meditation.

In a way, those second and third approaches—deliberately practicing attenuating the push and pull and the one taste—are more insight practices. Primarily on this retreat, if we talk about how the push-pull gets attenuated so that the peacefulness can arise, it's primarily through the second jhāna and the satisfaction that comes there.

The same deal applies with the third jhāna, with mastery and everything we've been talking about. The different elements of mastery, which you already know, and the issues of pacing—when is it the right time for me to play with trying some of that? When is it premature? Am I being too heavy with it? Or can I keep it very light and very much like a game?

Now we've expanded our possibilities for leapfrog and ping-pong. You can jump—let's say you've been in the third jhāna and you can jump to the first, and then the third, and first. That's ping-pong: first, third, first, third. But it's also leapfrog, so it's a leapfrog ping-pong. Do you see? Or three, one, three, one, three, one, three, two, two... You get the idea. You start to move in any permutation and combination just at the end of sittings for fun. You're exercising the malleability of ways of looking, and it's an element of mastery.

So including going out of any jhāna at all—let's just go back to normal consciousness and then jump from there to the second or the third or whatever it is. These are little games you can have in the last five or ten minutes if there are batteries left, if there's energy left.

Okay, so let's stop there and have a bit of quiet together.

Thank you everybody.

These are little games you can explore in the final five or ten minutes of your sitting if there's still energy remaining, if the batteries haven't run down completely.

The invitation is to exercise the malleability of ways of looking—it's truly an element of mastery. This includes the capacity to step outside any jhanic genre altogether, returning to ordinary consciousness and then leaping directly from there to the second or third jhana, or wherever your practice naturally takes you.

So let us pause here and rest together in some quiet.

Thank you, everyone. As I mentioned, I'll be moving my interviews to seven o'clock. I strive to be as punctual as possible, though I hope you can extend a little patience if the timing isn't perfectly exact.

It's tea time now, so please go and enjoy your tea.

Thank you for your deep listening and practice.

CHAPTER 213

Q & A, and Short Talk

Rob Burbea · 1h44

> *In this Q&A session from his jhāna retreat, Rob Burbea explores the relationship between emotions and jhāna practice, advising practitioners to maintain focus on joy and pīti while acknowledging that emotional exploration can deepen in the broader context of practice. He clarifies his use of "radical" as meaning "going to the root" - whether in understanding emptiness or practicing compassion with complete dedication.*
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> *Burbea discusses the SASIE framework (Suffusion, Absorption, Sustaining, Intensity, Enjoyment) for jhāna development, emphasizing which aspects have goals versus infinite refinement. He addresses working backwards from higher jhānas when pīti proves elusive, offering practical techniques including attention to upward energy currents and imagination.*
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> *A significant portion explores physical and psychological "locks" - energetic contractions that may dissolve through jhānic absorption. Burbea warns against making bodily unlocking a primary project while acknowledging its value for understanding dependent arising and perception's malleability. He emphasizes that the deeper teaching is emptiness - how playing with perception reveals that no phenomenon exists independently of the way of looking. This understanding brings liberation not just from specific discomforts, but opens wonder and sacredness toward all existence.*

I think we'll have some questions today, if there are any. If not, I've got some that people have left in notes and also just a few little things that I wanted to put out there.

Question on Emotion and Jhana

"My question is around emotion and jhana. Emotion is going to come up in practice and in a retreat. The first day's instruction to put down the difficult and to tune into the joy and the beauty and the appreciation. There's a certain point where it feels like they're not mutually exclusive. So noticing sadness coming up and noticing the beauty of the sadness, for example. In the body, rather than necessarily getting into a story and a selfie around some sadness, actually noticing just the warmth in the heart around sadness and the beauty of it. Noticing the sensations of the eyes watering up and that being seen as deeply beautiful. And a couple of times noticing how actually those sensations can become piti. I was like, oh, this is interesting. This could actually become a springboard into jhana from the sense of appreciation of the emotional spectrum.

"And also noticing actually that the quieter the mind becomes and the more the sense of the body and the mind become collected, that when there are thoughts around the emotions, there's a much deeper sense of personal insight around what can be revealed from those emotions and how to work with them in the life or in the imagination or on the cushion. Similar things with anger, having flavors of less ill will and becoming more a sense of personal power and conflict resolution. That sense in the body of, actually this could be a skillful place to be in.

"So I wanted to ask you, specifically in terms of this retreat, what would be your guidance on working with emotions when they come up, whether to hang out with them, listen to them, explore them, cultivate them in a quasi-jhanic state, or whether to notice them, steer into the joy, and lessen the fabrication of the emotions?"

Context, context, context. There's the context of this retreat, and this retreat - or each person's version of this retreat - is in the context of each person's life of practice, larger practice, and each person's life.

This thing about anger, actually being able to transform it, kind of filter out the poisonous elements and transform it into something that's just power - not power over, but just power - the ability not to shrink, not to go crazy, not to spit poison everywhere, but just to be powerful and upright and do what needs to be done. That's a really skillful thing. However, it's not the primary objective and intention of this retreat.

It may be that in practicing jhanas, as you say, there's just more clarity, there's more sensitivity, there's more energy body awareness because of the way we're practicing the jhanas - or primarily because I'm emphasizing a lot about sensitivity and embodiment and all that. It could be that the possibility to make those kinds of transformations is actually increased on this retreat. A person sees, maybe for the first time, these kinds of possibilities. So that's great. And it's something to note. And on the course of this retreat, it still takes very much second place. So that when there's a choice, it's go towards the joy, go towards the piti, et cetera.

In the context of one's life, I will always say both/and. We want everything and we want to not be afraid of doing this because when I'm doing this, I'm not doing that, or doing that because then when I'm doing this, not be afraid of the territory there, be able to do both, have accessible to both and really just left with what would be skillful right now.

The kind of overriding determinative factor of this retreat is that if we want to do jhanas, like I said right from the beginning, the intention has to stay really steady. Otherwise very easily it gets into all these other explorations, wonderful as they are and really important as they are in the larger context. But for a jhana retreat - and this goes for a solitary jhana retreat or whatever it is - the intention needs to stay steady.

So I don't think I said put down the difficult in the opening so much as, again, this thing about context and let it take second place and what are we trying to do and can I see the context and see this retreat in that larger context, that larger freedom and range of possibility which I want and recognize, okay, but just for now I'm going to do this.

So you could, for example, just bookmark those possibilities that you mentioned. You could bookmark that and say, I'm going to practice that later. That would be the absolutely strict way of doing it. But of course you can have a little wiggle room at the sides of things. It's just if that gets too much, the whole kind of current of intention starts to fray. We really have to take care of the intention to cohere it.

You're absolutely right to reflect on that word choice. When the heart is deeply touched by beauty, the tears that arise are quite different from what we typically call sadness. They emerge from a place of profound appreciation and openness rather than loss or disappointment.

This capacity to be moved—to have tears come not from sadness but from being deeply touched by beauty—is actually a precious development on the path. As we grow more sensitive through practice, the heart becomes increasingly receptive to the profound beauty that surrounds us. This isn't a weakness or something to be concerned about; it's a sign of a maturing sensitivity that allows us to receive the fullness of life more completely.

Your exploration of this experience shows real wisdom. You noticed yourself investigating the secondary intention—being with the emotion—rather than staying with the primary intention of jhana practice. This kind of awareness is exactly what allows us to navigate skillfully between different aspects of our meditation. Sometimes we need to tend to what's arising; other times we need to return to our chosen object. Learning to discern which is called for in any given moment is a crucial skill.

I'm particularly struck by your question about the stamina for perceiving beauty. What a wonderful inquiry! How far can we extend our capacity to receive beauty before we're so moved that tears arise? This kind of experimental attitude—playing with the edges of our experience—shows a mature practitioner's curiosity about the workings of their own heart and mind.

And yes, noticing what happens in the body when we're moved by beauty, and whether that can be perceived as pleasurable—this is exactly the kind of investigation that deepens our understanding of how pleasure and joy manifest in our experience. These bodily sensations that accompany being touched by beauty can indeed become part of the pleasurable territory we're exploring in jhana practice.

This is all really wonderful territory you're mapping. The tears that come from being touched by beauty are not something to move away from or transform, but rather something to appreciate as a sign of an opening heart. This is quite different from anger, which we might want to transform using loving-kindness. Beauty-touched tears are already expressing something beautiful in themselves.

It hasn't actually occurred to them that there might be tears or something, or there's a quivering in the heart, and they assume "I must be sad or I must be upset"—but not necessarily. So that's actually a really important distinction.

When we talk about emotions generally, I would say, and I have said, that I don't think we're ever going to exhaust what there is to explore about emotions as human beings. You just rattle off possibilities: "Oh, I could do this. Where's the boundary? How much can I tolerate? What if I see it this way? Can it turn into this?" These are just one, two, three questions right there. There's so much more in terms of experience, but also in terms of just how we're conceiving emotions.

To me, the exploration of emotion, along with several other aspects of our existence, is endless—endlessly fertile, endlessly rich.

The fact that you're moving into different intentions—it's not right or wrong, but there is something, as I said, really important about being really clear and staying with a central intention if you want to do jhāna practice, if you want that to develop. But that's great. That's really great, Lawrence. Well done.

Yes, so definitely that being touched, because it relates to—or being touchable because it relates to—a kind of openheartedness or openness of being, which I said, actually, is more primary than anything else in the arising of *pīti*, more primary than sticking your mind, nailing your mind to the breath or whatever it is. So you can understand how that fits together, yeah?

And then to be able to kind of ride that and help it go to peace—that's wonderful, you know, all of that.

There was another question woven in there, right? I've forgotten what it was.

"Yeah, I think it was around whether or not emotion can be another springboard to jhāna. And I think you've kind of answered that with the openness. I think there was another one hidden in the middle, but it doesn't matter. We can do it another time."

Yeah. Okay, great. Very good.

"So my question is around the word 'radical,' which you use a lot. You've been using it more over the years. And you've used it in other contexts in relationship to ethics, insight. And you've also used it now in relationship to jhāna practice. What does that mean? Why is that so important? I mean, you know, I think about the middle way—it's like, well, it doesn't fit in a way. Of course, the Buddha was radical in many ways. So I'm wondering if you could just elaborate a bit more. Why is that so important? Why has that seemingly become more important over the years of your teaching?"

Yeah. So I feel like the word "radical" gets used in at least three ways in English. One is kind of just crazily extreme, you know, like a radical fundamentalist terrorist or something like that. One is just as a kind of euphemism for something unusual: "It's radical. Wow, what a radical idea. It's unusual."

But the third, and there are others, but the third way is the way I usually mean it. "Radical"—the word in English comes from *radix* in Latin, which means "root." To go to the root of something.

To me, radical emptiness, for example, as an example I might use, would be an understanding of emptiness that goes to the root of absolutely everything. In other words, you can't even go beyond it. If my understanding of emptiness just pertains to selves—for example, the self is empty, what there really is is aggregates—then to me that's not radical, or one could have a more radical teaching, because the aggregates themselves might be empty. You understand? And then the time in which the aggregates exist is also empty, etc.

So I tend to use it that way.

When I used it the other way, I think I was talking about radical... practicing exchanging self and other radically. I think there I again really meant a mixture in terms of what I meant. So radically as sort of something like more extremely than you might think of.

We can do a lot of practices a little bit, sort of just dipping our toes in a little bit or a little bit half-heartedly. What would it be to really—I'm seeing here with this pain and this, and whatever it is, I'm dying of cancer—what would it be to practice exchanging self and other with all that? And I really mean it.

I came to this meditation retreat and I wanted it to go well, and it doesn't feel like it's going well. And just to completely turn it around—really, what, in this moment, I give up my desire for that because I'm taking on this frustration, this misery, this failure, these hindrances, this not going well in the hope that there's some kind of reciprocal gift for someone else that I may never even meet.

In that sense, to really do that full-heartedly with the totality of one's being. And if you know that practice, you can get down to things like my very body, my atoms, my mind, this thought, that thought. So there's a radicality in terms of completeness to the fundaments of one's being.

I tend to use it that way, and sometimes it's a bit more just a sloppy word for more than you might usually think. Do I use it more over the years? Maybe, I don't know. It's a commonly used word now in the Dharma. So maybe I'm just upping the ante a little bit on what I mean by it. But I think that answers the question—it's just those two meanings.

And I had another question about the levels of mastery—which would indicate or at least assume that the next jhāna is sort of on its way, if not there already. On the other end, I'm wondering what would be some of the conditions or factors or indicators whereby we'd be spending too much time in a particular jhāna?

Maybe one might have very strong experiences of the next jhāna that just happens over and over again. That might indicate—it's not just, for example, in the second jhāna, it's not just happiness once in a while and a little bit, it just keeps going into the second jhāna. It's a very clear, very vivid experience where you can tick a lot of boxes.

And maybe if I've already got a lot of the elements of mastery of the first jhāna and I can already sit in there for hours, then am I learning anything new at that point about the first jhāna? That's another question. Am I learning anything new here? Of course, I may not be learning anything new because I'm not paying attention enough and I'm not playing enough, but I may not be learning anything new because I actually know that territory. That would be another criterion.

Shall I throw out a few things I was wanting to say? Some of them are quite little.

I made a couple of mistakes in yesterday's talk. The first is really not that significant, but just in case someone gets wondering and it gives them the wrong sense. In that simile about the wanderer through the desert—I said the desert represents saṃsāra. Actually, that can't be right because that would imply that the jhānas are nirvāna. Or

maybe it's an oasis in a desert. Anyway, maybe the desert represents the life run by the hindrances. Maybe it represents saṃsāra, and the oasis is not the end of the desert—it's just a respite, and you've still got to go further. Either one, but it doesn't really matter.

Second mistake, slightly more significant, or I don't know if it was a mistake or just wasn't clear enough. I said something like experiences of deep equanimity or fairly deep equanimity that come from insight meditation are often not actually the third or fourth jhāna where there's the equanimity coming in such a strong and beautiful way.

However, experiences like—some of you know the practice, the kind of group of practices that I call the vastness of awareness—actually as you get into that, there is a real mystical sense of wonder. It is very beautiful. There is a sense of sacredness there.

It does really touch you, and it is an experience of deep equanimity. However, those kinds of opening—what I call the practices of vastness of awareness—have a range of depths to them. So it's something that one can open up just a little bit and may not yet have that kind of almost divinity to it and sacredness to it and sense of almost the ultimate.

For example, at one level of depth, all phenomena seem to emerge out of that vastness and disappear back into it. It's like the womb or the source of everything. And that very seeing—it's a bit like when we talked about the nāda sound, how you can use it in an insight way—it's just a backdrop. Everything comes out of that, fades back into it. That level of seeing is very fruitful for the equanimity. It begins to have a kind of mystical flavor to the whole thing, a divine flavor.

As you practice more with the vastness of awareness and it goes even deeper, there's a sense where everything has one substance and that substance is awareness. Everything is awareness. So now we're really moving into a mystical sense of things, and that will have a lot of beauty.

When I said people have opened to equanimity through insight practice, I didn't really mean just basic insight practice. If by insight practice you just mean watching, just being mindful with that general encouragement to watch and let go, that won't take you to these deep levels of vastness of awareness. You actually have to direct it, do something more deliberate and change the practice slightly so that it goes there. Someone reported they got confused by that, so I hope this helps clarify things.

In other words, we make the vastness of awareness a practice in itself that's slightly different than regular insight practice. We have to change a few things in order for it to really go to these lovely deeper levels.

Now, a couple of people are struggling with working backwards—not being able to get the first jhāna, not even being able to get pīti or sustained pīti, but being able to get the happiness or something deeper. So I want to offer this in case it's relevant for anyone now or later.

There are a few different things you can try if that's the case. Let's say you can get the happiness and you're getting more fine with that, you're learning the happiness, but pīti just won't happen. If we think about the jhāna factors and everything we've said so far, we should be able to surmise these things ourselves.

Pīti and sukha are both energy body experiences. At first we think of sukha, the happiness, as a mental experience. But that's just initially—once a person has had the pīti and they want to make the distinction between pīti and sukha. Eventually one sees that actually they're both just frequencies of vibration of the energy body. Yes, they have mental components too, but really one could see sukha as just a more refined energy body vibration than the pīti.

So what that means, if I want to work backwards, is this: here I am in the happiness and it's going well and I'm in it, I'm stewing in it, I'm drinking it in. Then, listening to the mix of frequencies in the energy body, in the happiness, can I notice the coarser ones? Not the more subtle ones, but the coarser ones. And actually tune to them and find the enjoyment in them, because what I attune to is what gets amplified. We said that much earlier. Do you understand? So that might be a way of working backwards.

It might also be that—and probably most people, not everyone, but most people notice this—the pīti tends to have an upward current to it. It tends to move up the body. And in a way, when I say opening and surrendering, abandoning to the pīti, you're really opening the body to that upward current. That's what all this head tilting back business is, if any of you get that. The body is naturally being opened, or like we said with the question about the feet, it's naturally being opened like that. It's opening to what for most people primarily feels like it has an upward current in it. It can be really strong, can be really subtle. It can feel like the pīti is actually pretty stable, but within that stability, it has slight waves of upward waves.

Here's a side point I've just remembered that might be important to say, and I'll come back to what I'm saying and enumerate it so we won't get lost. Sometimes people say, "I thought you said the pīti had to be steady before we work on it, but I feel these waves, like it comes in waves."

Then I ask them: think about the sea, think about the ocean. If you think about a wave in the ocean near the shore, near the sand, that wave or that portion of sand has times when it has water over it—a wave breaks over it—and it has times when the water recedes before the next wave comes and it's bare sand or rock.

If you go to a wave a hundred meters out where the sea is deeper, then I still see there's a wave. It doesn't break necessarily out there, but there's a wave. There's that undulating motion of the water. But out far to sea there, you're never going to get—unless there's a tsunami or something—you're never going to get bare sand or bare rock. You're never going to see the bottom.

In other words, out there, the pīti, the water, is actually steady enough. But within that steadiness—in other words, it never disappears—within that steadiness, there are waves. Do you understand?

So it's not that the pīti has to be totally still. By its very nature, pīti tends to have currents within it. What we don't want, though, in order to be able to work with pīti skillfully, is a pattern where there's a wave and then nothing—bare sand—and then a wave and then nothing again. Does this make sense?

So that was a side point. But generally, pīti has these upward currents.

If I'm in the second jhāna and it's going well—I've learned how to make it go well, I'm enjoying it and really getting into it—but I can't access the pīti or I can't get the first jhāna, then what I can do is see if I can simply notice any upward currents in the energy body experience, maybe within the happiness or whatever is present.

They might be quite subtle at that point, so again I have to get my antennae out. I have to cultivate that delicacy of listening, that receptivity. Within that receptive awareness, I start to notice, "Oh yeah, there are some upward currents." Again, attuning to them, they amplify, and maybe that takes me to the pīti or amplifies the pīti experience.

The third option is simply to imagine upward currents. Don't be afraid to use your imagination in these kinds of practices. I imagine them for a little while, and lo and behold, the next thing I know, I feel them. And then I can enjoy them, get into them, and the whole experience transforms.

The fourth possibility: here I am in the happiness, it's flowing well, but I still can't get the pīti. Here I am in the happiness though, enjoying it, getting into it. I've been established there for a while—really some minutes upon minutes—and then I just drop in a

little magic formula, a little tincture. Maybe the word "pīti," maybe the word "rapture," maybe "ecstasy" or "bliss"—whatever your word is, in whatever language resonates for you.

The mind at these levels of samādhi becomes so malleable, so sensitive, so receptive that simply dropping in a word like this can have profound effect. This is a really skillful technique to master for jhāna practice in many different ways.

The fifth approach: generally, if this is the difficulty—I'm getting comfortable with the sukha and the second jhāna, but struggling with the pīti in the first jhāna—then you'd want to spend much more time in the really bubbly happiness rather than too much time in the more serene happiness. Because the bubbly variety, from our cooking ingredients exploration yesterday, has more pīti naturally present within it.

So there are five approaches you could try.

[Student question about experiencing pīti with breaks]

If your experience is feeling the pīti with these breaks—that there's "sand" between the waves—can you nudge it toward continuity? More often, it's a question of simply letting it ripen until that naturally occurs.

But having said that, like everything in this practice, it's not so black and white. There's an intermediate possibility: this choppy quality is naturally where it wants to go initially. Often the first experiences of pīti someone has are more like waves near the shore—coming and then going, coming again, without being sure how it's arising or what it even is.

In time, it naturally wants to mature toward that steady offshore quality. We can do things that slow down this maturing process, and we can do things to ease its passage. The best way to ease this passage is to ensure that when these waves come, I'm neither snatching at them—as the Buddha advises, don't snatch—but I'm truly opening to them.

Again, we return to this principle: if the wave comes, maybe it has a little afterecho, and I really want to open to that resonance. If I'm not fully opening to these experiences, that might be one thing actually slowing down this maturation process—preventing your jhāna boat from reaching those deeper waters.

Another possibility, without applying too much pressure: even if it feels like it's going badly and I'm believing the mind that's saying "I can't do this" or "I've lost it," sometimes it's worth saying, "What the hell? Let me just play with imagining my body full of pīti." Just a few moments of experimenting with that, even though it feels like it might be pointless.

So you have a whole range of possibilities and approaches there.

How are your hindrances doing today? Or actually, how is your papañca today? How's your papañca compared with yesterday?

How's the suffering from your papancha doing compared to two days ago? It's going to be up and down. So wherever you are at the moment, it's going to move, it's going to move.

And we're so interested in that movement over time—from this high amplitude up and down business where we're really believing something and everything's grumpy and we hate Guy House and all that stuff—with applying the antidotes, but even more importantly with the wisdom. Am I believing? Am I just a sucker for this thing? With this kind of questioning of what am I believing here, this high amplitude wave over time, over time—and actually it may take weeks or whatever—but this is where we want to get to: that this high amplitude wave becomes just a little sort of placid caterpillar wiggle. It's really just a sort of energetic movement.

And so much rests on the belief. So much rests on what am I believing here. Without care, there's a hindrance. I believe the coloring of perception and the thoughts that the hindrance stimulates. The coloring of perception and thoughts are believed, and then it becomes papancha, and then that just snowballs.

So doubt and aversion—for example, I was talking with someone yesterday—even subtle doubt and even more powerfully subtle aversion will color the memory of, for example, yesterday's wonderfulness or the joy that you experienced two days ago or three days ago. Aversion, like craving, like grasping, is incredibly powerful. It cannot be there without shaping, fabricating, and coloring whatever phenomenon is in consciousness at the same time. Whatever phenomenon—whether that's a memory, a sight, a sound, smell, taste, touch, the sense of self, whatever—any degree of aversion is going to color that.

So yesterday it was wonderful. Three days ago it was wonderful. And now there's a little bit of aversion in the mind and I look back and it wasn't that good. Or whatever it is. This is what I mean by developing some insight and wisdom in relation to the hindrances and papancha and what the Buddha calls the defilements, the kilesas—greed, hatred, delusion. I think aversion is a much better word than hatred.

The same thing with the rest of the hindrances, subtle doubt, et cetera. I can't remember what stage it was—probably sounds like it was getting into the first jhana and really doing that over and over. At some point, doubt comes. And it wasn't even really strong doubt. And I was sitting cross-legged a lot. And I thought, I'm probably just sitting on a nerve. I was sitting with my heel in my perineum. It can't be jhana. It's just some—I don't know—I'm pressing on my perineal nerve, is there a perineal nerve? It's probably a group of nerves. Whatever.

And then the mind starts. Just these little things. But aversion is a killer. It's a killer. It kills joy. And connecting again to what we were talking about yesterday with dependent arising and the teaching about karma: a little bit of aversion. What kind of world do I live in? What does my self feel like? What does my practice feel like? What's my view of things? What's my sense of where I am? Who I am?

So the second hindrance—I should look it up maybe later. They're usually in the order: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, doubt. The second one, ill will, usually means I wish someone harm. To me, that's a really extreme form of the hindrance. The killer at this point for you, I hope, will be aversion in a much more subtle way. It's not even toward anyone. You might get it toward yourself, but it's aversion.

Aversion will be the killer, and aversion can be to any phenomenon whatsoever—any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, memory, any phenomenon of experience, a situation, sensations, a state itself. We have aversion to a state. So this ends up being really like, oh, watch that seed, watch that seed, because it's extremely powerful. And it will either—that seed, like I said, will sprout and grow and it will be a whole damn forest if I'm not careful.

Or even in very subtle seed form, it already sends out its toxins, coloring the perception. Even if there's not a lot of thinking, we start believing what we're seeing, smelling, tasting, touching. We start believing what we're sensing, colored through the lens of aversion.

So there's something—again, so much of the gift of this practice is in relationship to hindrances and getting wise in relationship to hindrances. But this is a long-term lesson. It's not something we get just like that necessarily.

A couple more little things. I don't know if everyone needs this, but shall we very briefly review SASSI, not to get hung up on the wrong things?

SASSI—first S, suffused. I do want it to move towards suffusion. The whole body saturated and suffused, pervaded and permeated, steeped and drenched, and the whole body involved. Once I've got that, I tick it and I don't have to bother about it again. It's done. For that sitting, it's done. There is a goal there, and I try to move towards that goal.

Occasionally, depending on where you are in your evolution of practice, it won't spread everywhere. I've tried all my little tricks—it won't spread. Don't worry about it. Eventually it will spread. But there is a goal, and then I'm done with that job.

Whereas the A and the two middle S's—these are infinite. I will never come to a point where there's no more possibility. There will never be a moment in any meditation I ever do in my life where I cannot improve whatever degree of absorption I've had, where the object cannot sustain either longer in time—the pīti or the sukha—longer in time or with fewer nano, micro, pico interruptions. And the same goes with the mind, that the mind can't sustain either longer in time or with fewer kinds of nano, micro, pico interruptions.

So they're infinite. Now, what does that mean about how I relate to them if they're infinite? It does something to the goal-oriented mind and the judgmental and the measuring mind. Wherever I am, the direction is that way. If I feel like, "Wow, I'm so far gone that way. I've never gone this far before. This is amazing"—great, that's wonderful. And the direction is still that way. And if it's not going so well, the direction is still that way. There's nothing to judge here.

These things will vary from time to time. I'm gradually working at my skill, but because they're infinite, it releases me from any kind of success-failure notion. Do you understand? This is really, really important. Don't get hung up on the wrong things.

So this is why I give the SASSI part—what do I do now, but also what's important and what is not so important. What do I need to complete, like the suffusion, and what do I just need to—it just tells me what direction to go in.

When we come to the I, the intensity of—let's say the pīti or whatever it is—it doesn't matter. As long as it's strong enough, meaning it's pleasant, it's obviously pleasant, it doesn't matter. I'm not trying to make it more intense. It will get more intense or less intense. It's irrelevant.

That completely lets me off the hook of having to worry about it. However much I'm enjoying the pīti, I can enjoy more. So in a way, that's infinite. But part of the art of enjoying is not to pressure myself to do that—it's simply a direction.

These orientations are important for our micro-psychological well-being, which if we're not careful can unfortunately blossom like a poisonous fungus into our macro-psychological well-being. We get hung up on the wrong things and keep judging ourselves by what's actually not the right thing to judge ourselves by. Does that make sense?

This relates to what I keep saying about marination and mastery—these are really important orientations and aspirations for how we're practicing and how I'd like to communicate all this. Mastery includes trying to sustain longer, to sit longer with the pīti-sukha, so I can sit an hour or more with whichever jhāna. Marinating involves playing with the elements of sampasādana and exploring all this richness.

Mastery also includes times when it's not going so well today. Then I might emphasize in this sitting, or for the next twenty minutes, just my steadiness of focus—partly what I've been trying to de-emphasize. There are times when that's exactly what I need to do. Maybe I can do that with the pīti-sukha, which is quite a refined object. I feel like I need to understand how to pay attention to more refined objects. It's actually hard—most people wouldn't be able to do that. So I need to train myself to stay with subtler objects.

That's the micro view, the subtle view of what I'm doing and what my emphasis is in the next twenty minutes sometimes. Other times I'm working on the eighth jhāna generally, but actually what I need to do right now is go back to my base practice and work on my focus and steadiness there. All that's normal and available for someone who has the view that mastery is what I'm doing. It's wide, there's a range, and we're responsive to shifting emphasis at different times. It includes quite a lot.

So we have flexibility, responsibility, responsivity, and inclusiveness.

In relation to mastery, someone wrote a question. Let me read it: "We say that the arising of jhāna depends on causes and conditions. We also say that mastery of a jhāna includes being able to enter it at will, which could perhaps be understood as implying a

certain independence of at least some causes and conditions. So there's an apparent contradiction there. Could you please elaborate on how to relate to these two statements and how to skillfully relate to the notion of entering at will?"

Very good. This is exactly one of those things where I will contradict myself. But more importantly, it's an instance where we want a range of views and don't want to get locked into this view or that view.

For anyone at all, give them the right medical drugs and their ability to enter a jhāna at will will be severely compromised. If you've had enough general anesthetics, or have illness, low energy, fatigue, digestive upset—a million different things will at times mean that even someone who's a master will not on those occasions be able to enter at will. It's never going to be 100% of the time. Never. But still, it's good to aspire to.

This relates to the whole teaching about self and emptiness of self. To see jhāna as depending on causes and conditions is a way to conceive of jhāna without self—without the self coming in and getting all tight about "Can I do this? Am I failing? What badge do I get? Have I achieved?" It's just causes and conditions.

From the point of view of emptiness of self, seeing in terms of causes and conditions is seeing not in terms of self. Yet we can also—and need to in life and in the Dharma—see in terms of self: I do this. I choose this ethically.

I make this choice. I cultivate this. I cultivate metta, and so forth. I choose to cultivate metta. All of that is normal and healthy and skillful—a kind of view or conception of what's happening.

In other words, setting up mastery as a goal actually gives us a direction. If I never mentioned it, then people might be sliding around all over the place and not getting as much fruit out of the whole practice, because it wouldn't occur to them to try for certain things that fall under this umbrella of mastery. Do you understand? It wouldn't occur to you to try this or that. But if you say, "Oh, there's this thing called mastery—see if you can do it," then something opens up. And mastery depends on intention.

So you can say intention is one of the causes and conditions. Going back to what I said earlier, is intention ever a completely sufficient cause and condition? It's necessary but not sufficient. Intention by itself—give me enough drugs, give me enough of this or that, starve me, make me too tired, and so forth—intention itself is not sufficient. You understand? But I need to mention it because it actually is a very powerful ingredient among the causes and conditions. But it's never sufficient.

The larger point here has to do with teachings about emptiness. Again, I want the range of views. I want to be able to drop into different perspectives. Here's a situation. Here's something I have to do. Here's something that happened to me. Here's something that I did wrong. Here's something I succeeded at. Here's something I'm doing great. Here's something that people are praising me for. Here's something that people are blaming me for.

At times, I want to have available to me a way of viewing all that which deconstructs the self out of it. I see in terms of causes and conditions, and that can be extremely liberating and healing—taking the pressure off the self, the measuring of the self, the blaming of yourself at times.

But if I get stuck there and I say, "Well, that must be the right way to view things because that's Buddhist, right? Not-self, no-self, there is no self, and all that emptiness"—I think one gets stuck in a partial and incomplete view of emptiness.

The radical emptiness of self means actually that any view of self, even the view that there is no self, is eradicated, ripped up from its root. What that means is all views become available to us, including the view of self. So someone who's really understood the emptiness of things and the emptiness of self can move easily between views that look in terms of not-self and views that look in terms of self.

Is this making sense? This is really, really, really important. To my way of understanding, if one hasn't seen this, one hasn't really gone deep enough. It also just won't make sense in one's life.

Here, this collection of aggregates wants to marry that collection of aggregates. This collection of aggregates would like to have sex with that collection of aggregates. This collection of aggregates would like to compose this piece of music in praise of the collection of aggregates that is the universe, or whatever. If we just look that way, there are going to be enormous areas and dimensions of our being, of our lives, of our souls, of our existence that are not supported—and that's going to be a real problem. It would be a real problem for ourselves, it would be a real problem for our relationships, it would be a real problem for society and the planet.

Sometimes you get this shadow side of Buddhism that always wants to deconstruct things and see things that way, when actually I do need to be not just able to comfortably move into a self-view, but able to move into a self-view that's actually beautiful and soulful and enriching and gives meaning and all of that. I want both of those.

So these two seemingly contradictory teachings—mastery and at-will versus dependent on causes and conditions—yes, they're contradictory, complementary, but we want them both and they're helpful at different times. In a way, they're not completely contradictory. I suppose the truest one is dependent on causes and conditions, of which intention is one, but never completely a sufficient one just by itself.

Does that make sense? Is that okay?

Does that make sense? Is that okay?

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, thank you."

Marco was expressing gratitude to the jhāna practice for enabling him to see that there was a hierarchy of views happening. The perspective that "this is really just causes and conditions" was trumping the view that "I can do this with my intention." This recognition is really important.

If all these different views are available, the question becomes: why do I choose this one over that one at any time? If they're all legitimate, and I hereby give you permission to hold them, how will I choose between these different views? That becomes the criteria, and it's a really interesting question.

Classical Dharma offers a simple answer: What reduces the suffering here? We can get attached to a view of "it's really just causes and conditions" and "there is no self." There's a kind of attachment there, but if it comes in too soon, too quickly and too pervasively, it prevents a lot of other really good things from opening in our life. It blocks other views that might, in certain situations, deliver much more relevant fruit.

When someone is practicing the jhānas and starting to get grandiose—"look what I can do"—as I pointed out earlier, this is actually very rare. If they're real jhānas and the practitioner is going in and out enough, this grandiosity is uncommon. What's much more common is the opposite view: "I'm failing at something."

Then this view of "it's just something arising out of causes and conditions—when the causes and conditions aren't there, it's not there" becomes helpful for relieving the suffering and contraction of a certain self-view that judges oneself. I'm using it for that purpose.

But there might be times when someone adopts the other view—"I can do this"—and it actually feels like that's releasing some suffering or counterbalancing some history of being told "you can't do something." This could be anything. In classical Dharma, the framework is simply this: among all these views, which one do I pick up now to look

through, to perceive this situation in order to reduce whatever suffering is there, to heal whatever suffering is present? That's the criterion for adopting this view or that view.

This is really important. We can add to this framework and enrich it and make it more complex, but I'm not going to do that now.

This question about mastery is also quite interesting, because it may well be that—and this is something each person should check in the larger scheme of things—do I have somewhere, maybe consciously, maybe semi-consciously, a kind of philosophy or psychology, or a mixture of the two, that doesn't like the idea of mastery? Or doesn't even like the idea of the self's autonomy?

As if I much prefer the view of things just happening: "This thing opened up so I flowed with that, and then conditions were such that this thing opened up and I flowed with that." There can be a lot of beauty in that perspective, a lot of really lovely flow and even creativity and all kinds of things.

But behind it, usually semi-consciously, is a little bit of an entrenchment in a view that doesn't allow a notion of the autonomous self deciding and acting and choosing X or Y and perhaps even gaining mastery. Of course, one can be locked in the other view as well. But this tendency is quite interesting to check out, especially in spiritual circles.

Again, my opinion is: why can't we have both? Why can't we have both and explore the whole range? What might it be that we don't like that view so much? What's preventing us from seeing the beauty in the view of the self's autonomy and the self's power to choose and the self's decision to do something and work at something and accomplish something? Or vice versa, though this is much rarer in spiritual circles.

So explore what's holding us back, what we don't like about it, and actually liberate that resistance so both views become available to us. Why not?

These are subtle imprisonments that we can hopefully begin to see as we do more practice, whether it's jhāna practice or whatever. Jhāna practice, as I've mentioned a couple of times, ramps up our ability to see all kinds of really subtle locked places or defilements. People generally would have no idea that such a practice would do such a thing. You tend to think, "Well, insight practice where I'm just opening, or mindfulness where I'm just opening and being with whatever comes up and giving everything equal interest—that's where I'm going to notice these things."

But there are many hidden things that one cannot notice unless you actually try working in certain ways—for instance, with a goal, with the idea of mastery or this or that. That starts illuminating things, shining lights into hidden corners that we wouldn't otherwise have even realized were there.

To me, there are all kinds of secondary gifts to jhāna practice. Each of them is immense, though we don't tend to think that way or realize that at first.

Are there any other questions? Yes, is that Saber at the back?

Can I just say one more thing about that before you start?

So a very common experience as you develop jhana practice is that you almost feel like the mind has a momentum to go—let's say, to the third jhana. I was intending to go to the first jhana, and it just goes to the third jhana. As you practice more and more, that kind of thing becomes very common. I could just sit here and wait, and the mind will go somewhere. When we've done a lot of jhana practice, there's that propensity—it could be any jhana. It just wants to go, or I've aimed it there and it goes over there. This becomes increasingly common, so that many people actually end up practicing that way. If they've done extensive dedicated jhana practice, they simply sit down and see where it goes. There's not much intention at all. It's like seeing where I slide on the ice today.

I used to say it's as if the mind has a mind of its own. It really develops this kind of other intention. When you've done substantial jhana practice, this can be fine because they're all good places. But I would still balance it with the question: can I still retain some choice? Even if it wants to go there, can I still choose to go somewhere else at times?

So there's really this range. Sometimes you might need to let it go where it wants for a little bit—the horse wants to go to the carrot shop for a while, and then you direct it elsewhere. But this idea of keeping open the range of freedom, the range of possibilities, is something really important to me.

"It's a question about what you just pointed to regarding freeze-up, locked places. I've been seeing that process over the last couple days—psychological but also in the body. Places of deep, old, subtle holding and tightness beginning to move and open. There's so much beauty in that, and also it feels like it takes time. I'm curious about how to relate to this, because I see how my mind can keep sticking, going back to something I'm calling locked. Really it's opening, but..."

This is a really important question. Let me speak about three kinds of locks—to oversimplify for now.

There's a kind of mental lock in view, which is usually the hardest to even identify. Unless someone says something or you read something, you think, "Whoa, hold on." We don't even realize what views we're locked into. That's one kind of locking. Over the years, I've spoken extensively about that.

Then there's a locking in a kind of mental territory. Yesterday I was saying about the second jhana, for instance—don't neglect the really bubbly happiness, especially if that's alien to your personality. It's not congruent with the usual shapes the self takes. We can get locked into certain emotional bandwidths or territories. A person has a certain range, whatever it is.

Now, those first two—the locking in views and the mental territory locking—I would say regarding views, there are times when one has to be really vigorous and alert, actually trying to look, really trying to question things, to see where I might be locked and open things up that way. There's a real sense of actively trying to do this. One will never come to the end of that, but the intention can be quite strong and the action quite strong. I might start reading material about this or that.

With the second category, mental territory, there are also times when that becomes the most important thing in practice—actually the most important thing in one's life. It's looking at the views I have of all kinds of things: what the Dharma is, what awakening is, all manner of things. One needs to be active and vigorous in questioning and exploration, and that might mean wide exploration.

But the intention and the action can be quite strong.

In the second case—what I'm calling a lock into mental territory—let's say this example I gave: I'm very used to being quite peaceful and equanimous, but real bubbly happiness is kind of alien to me. Then I would say the middle version there is gentle unlocking. But the unlocking happens just by hanging out in that kind of happiness, for example. I don't need to put too much pressure on the whole situation or too much pressure on that pattern, on that lock.

If something is opening that is expanding my heart range—effectively my soul range—then I want to linger there and let it do its work rather than just say, "Yep, taste of that one, tick, because I've experienced it once," and then go back to a kind of equanimity which is supposedly deeper. It can kind of go under the mask of a deepening of practice. Does this make sense?

But the third one, the locks in the body, is in a way a little bit more delicate. So yes, as we practice jhāna, and to the degree in any formal session that there's real absorption and suffusion, those physical locks tend to dissolve. And that dissolution may last after the session. It may last—if it's non-habitual, if it was just locked and I've never had that particular lock before—then it can just go. That was it. It doesn't come back.

If it's a habitual lock, something gets unlocked when there's the jhāna or whatever, and that unlocking can last some degree of time afterwards. I would just be careful not to put pressure on it because it may well come back. There's a kind of bodily karmic knot there that is just a tendency to create that kind of lock. We can play with perception and see the knot as pīti, see the knot as happiness—all that's going to really help.

But I would be really, really careful about two things. One is making too much of a project of unlocking the body. And a lot of people get into this. It becomes really a big deal. If I see that as a long-term project, that's not Dharma to me. I may unlock this or that at different times through different practices, through different playing with perception, through different states. And that's wonderful and that's great. But if I make that—if I get a bit obsessed with that—then that's something else. It's not Dharma anymore. I've shrunken my view of what Dharma could be into something much smaller and gotten a bit obsessed about something, using something as a kind of measuring stick for how I'm doing.

So sometimes with a lot of practice or a little practice, things that have been habitual may go forever. It's just gone. And sometimes they may go for a little while and come back. Sometimes they may go for a long while and come back. But I really have to have my view there quite right. The Dharma offers us much, much more than just that kind of unlocking of energy patterns.

Another way of saying all that is just to be very, very light when you're playing with that and hold it in a much larger context. And even the way you're playing with it—in playing with perception or the state—to be really quite light about it. How does that sound?

There was another piece that I feel is really important. If we go back to this thing about playing with perception: you can get into this enough that here's a lock, here's a contraction, here's a pain—whatever it is, and pain in energetic terms is just a contraction of energy—and you can play with perception, see it as pīti, and it unlocks.

But what's most significant about that shift, even if it never comes back and it's been mildly bugging me for the last ten or twenty years—to me, what's more significant about that shift is the dependent arising of perception. For that coin to drop, it may well

come back. It doesn't take anything away from the insight if it comes back an hour later, ten minutes later. In the long run of things, the fruit of seeing that through playing with perception, what I perceive as a lock actually is liberated, is unlocked. Understanding then the dependent arising of perception, therefore the implication for emptiness—that is way more significant than "I've got rid of a discomfort that has been bugging me for twenty years."

Yeah, I think that's the power of what I've been playing with—really seeing this tendency to look at the problem and the training in widening back out again and coming back to the fuller fabric of the energy body, even whether or not the lock is unlocking.

Yes, exactly. So thank you.

That's a middle ground as well. So we've got, again, these three things that we need to hierarchize. You've got this knot, this lock that has been with me for twenty years on and off, and I just wish it would go away. And it does—it goes away forever. Versus what you just said: I've trained the attention and the citta so that when there is some discomfort in the body, I don't have to go there. I can actually put my attention elsewhere and be pretty happy, and there's this lock there. And then the third one, where one actually sees that the lock itself is empty, because when I look at it in a certain way, it dissolves.

If I had to put that in hierarchy of order of importance, I would put the disappearing of this bugging thing at the bottom, then what you said, and then the emptiness one at the top. So this training—thank you for saying that—it's so important. Again, it's really understanding what's the relative significance of different experiences that we have.

But this has everything to do with—and I'll maybe come back to this—why are we practicing? What are we practicing for? And how easily we can have... I'll say this again: it's up to us why we practice. It's up to you. You can have any reason why you practice. It's not for me to tell you why to practice. That's for you to find out—why do I want to practice?

But the range of possibilities of what we're looking for when we practice is huge. And sometimes a person very consciously just chooses something quite small in terms of the reason they're practicing. What also happens, though, is over time the reasons for practice shrink somehow or other, and that's quite interesting as well. Or we've just not been told what fruit there is on offer, and so we're operating under a limited menu of potential. So all this is actually really, really key.

Does that make sense? I'm going to stop trying to remember what the other thing I was going to say was. Does that feel okay for now, Sabra?

"Definitely."

Yeah, okay, good. Someone else? Is there anyone who hasn't...? Yeah, Mikael, just to give more people a chance. Mikael, please.

"I would like to ask in relation to this discussion about the malleability of perception in regard to pain. Because as you mentioned in some talk before, one can through this practice start to slowly notice that actually any vedanā, any experience, can be sort of looked at, can be seen as pleasant. If there is pain, one can sort of see and distill or somehow... What's the word you used? Filter out the pleasant out of the mix and just take that in. And once that really gets going, at least I got really excited about that. It was exhilarating—wow, this is meaningful, this is really deep.

And some intuition in me says that it's possible to go wrong, or it's possible to overdo this. If one gets first contact with such malleability of perception in regard to pain, one can get an impression that this is what freedom from suffering is all about, and then starts to apply this with almost like any experience, any pain, all the time—bliss, bliss, bliss, bliss—and it's wonderful for a time, for sure, but then an intuition in me says that that is not completely healthy in the long run, and there might be a sort of mistake or a risk of mistake in view. What would you comment on this?"

Yeah, trust your intuition. Absolutely. Because, you know, to me, if someone hears this idea—it came up recently on a seminar I did—someone can hear this idea and almost get the impression that, "Oh, if I just get really good at that, then I can have a pain-free life." And then they just start trying to do this everywhere.

That would be missing the point. The point is this ability to play with perception to the degree that something painful becomes something pleasant, for example, or becomes just an empty space or lots of other possibilities—or becomes the face of Buddha-nature or the face of God or whatever. This ability to play with perception, if I limit it to this pain-to-pleasure thing, and then I think, "Oh great, what a useful thing," and then I'm trying to live without pain—that's just, again, taking what's not... there's two gifts on offer and one takes the much, much poorer one, which is freedom from pain.

Now, that might sound like it's Dharma because the Dharma is about reducing suffering and all that. But that's not the real lesson here. The potential lesson from this experience—and it needs to sit within a context of other teachings on emptiness and different kinds of playing with perception—is that perception is malleable. Nothing exists as anything in particular. A thing is not fundamentally this or that, independent of the way of looking.

This eventually tells me about the emptiness of all phenomena. I begin to see this in many different ways, to various depths and degrees, through multiple directions. And this understanding starts revealing the emptiness of all phenomena: no phenomena whatsoever is fundamentally existent as anything in itself. It is this or that only dependent on the way of looking.

This is knowledge that can come not just intellectually, but into the heart. The knowledge that everything is radically empty like that liberates in a much grander way. It liberates independent of this pain or that pain. It liberates in relation to the whole of existence and all phenomena. Even more importantly, it brings an unspeakable joy and wonder and sense of mystery and grace into the whole fabric of existence at a very deep level. To me, that's the point.

Rather than simply becoming really good at getting through life without pain, which seems narrow to me, this understanding opens something vast. Yes, you can use these techniques occasionally when things are rough, but that's not the point. The point is what this is teaching us about the nature of existence itself.

If I experience this transformation of perception just once or twice, it might seem like, "Well, okay." But as I begin exploring perception in many different ways, at some point the coin drops about the nature of existence itself—about the way things actually are, the true nature of things, the emptiness and suchness of phenomena. Knowing this liberates in a much broader and deeper way than just dealing with this or that particular instance.

I can still experience pain, but this understanding liberates in relation to life and death itself. It brings a wonder and sense of sacredness that's almost impossible to put into words. To me, that's the real point.

And just like the mastery question we discussed earlier, no one will be able to do this all the time. The Buddha experienced plenty of pain in his old age, and only certain kinds of meditation would release him from perceptions of pain. I myself have struggled with pain quite a lot at times. Again, it comes back to discerning what's truly significant and what's not. Your intuition is spot on here. The real gift is much vaster in scale than just a neat trick that helps us feel better.

Thank you. Perhaps we have time for one more question?

[A participant asks about somatic blocks and locks in the body]

Yes, some locks might indeed suggest lifestyle changes. I used to have chronic cramping in my lower intestine for many years—a very common, uncomfortable sensation that felt like something was constantly locking there. It was a regular visitor in my meditation practice for years and years. I learned tremendously from it about clinging and perception and letting go, for which I'm deeply grateful. What had been an ongoing difficulty became something I learned from profoundly.

In hindsight, though, it was also related to having ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease. When I eventually found a certain probiotic and began taking it, that eased considerably. So yes, sometimes these physical manifestations do point toward practical changes we can make.

But I think you're asking more about psychological aspects—suppressed desires, projects we're not completing, things we want to say but don't. These may or may not express themselves as locks in the body. Often when someone suppresses desire or doesn't see a project through, there's no particular sense of bodily contraction. What's actually happening is they're not allowing energy to build up in the body, so they don't necessarily experience holding or contraction.

I'm hesitant to use bodily sensations as definitive indicators of psychological needs. At a very subtle level—and we'll return to this since we've already touched on it—the presence of any perceived lock or contraction in the body indicates that subtle aversion is present in the mind.

But that's more to do again with dependent arising and insight practices that can, when I release that aversion, lo and behold, the sense of the lock unfolds, dissolves.

So some of these more personality locks or patterns like that—they may or may not express themselves in long-term physical manifestations. Sometimes with people, they do very clearly, and it may or may not be related to these larger psychological issues. Sometimes they don't really express at all or in any noticeable way. And sometimes they express, but in a way that's not obvious to that person, even when they've practiced a lot with the energy body, but maybe obvious to someone else who's a bit more sensitive to that and used to it. The person doesn't realize they hold in a certain way.

And that may be to do with more psychological holding—they hold in relation to life or in relationship with someone or in relation to their self-expression, they're just holding back. Sometimes it's sensible to someone else, but they have no notion of it at all because it's actually quite subtle and there's no discomfort with it. Sometimes with these more civilized holdings, there's discomfort, and discomfort is like waving a red flag saying something's wrong here. So there can be the whole range there, really.

I think what's more important here is that if you look at your life and you feel like, "I am kind of squashing my libido"—in the larger sense, libido—"in a certain way, or I'm dampening my desire, or I'm not allowing... I'm in some way inhibiting either my desire to accumulate and burn or my desire to follow through or whatever"—that's extremely significant. I would say massively significant.

Again, all that can hide under a nice Buddhist facade of the well-behaved, equanimous yogi who lets go a lot very well. "Maybe you should be a teacher."

So this is a really, really important point, I would say. To take that up as an investigation, then you can see, okay, how much does that have to do with physical locks? How much are these physical locks really trustworthy as indicators of the relationship with desire? But probably if that's the kind of thing you're talking about—long-term projects and such—my guess is that the physical manifestations will only be partially helpful as indicators. There's a bigger thing going on, and your job will be to investigate that.

Going back to what we said in terms of the views as well—what views are operating? So in terms of those one, two, three that I mentioned earlier, what views am I locked into? Maybe a view about desire, maybe a view about self, maybe a view about Buddhist practice. It could be all kinds of things or nothing to do with Buddhism, but the views.

Then there might be—the other thing might be—the second one, it might be an emotional lock. That this territory of actually sitting with a really strong desire and everything I talked about the other day—if it's really strong, it will burn. And a lot of people say, "I don't like burning. There's a danger that I won't get that. I'll be frustrated. I'll fail. People will think this or I'll think this or whatever it is. Or I just cannot tolerate that burn. I cannot tolerate that much desire. It's uncomfortable." Or it can be uncomfortable sometimes.

And so it might be I just have kind of shut the door on that emotional territory. And then some of that—again, the boundary between what's emotional, what's physical, what's energetic, there's not a clear boundary there. But again, it might be that a person just cannot tolerate that much energy in their being.

So there are a lot of things here. I think it's immensely important, immensely important. And what does it mean to be a liberated human being? What does it mean in relation to this? Am I really liberated if I can't actually feel any desire or I can't follow through on desire? If my only option is to let go, is that really liberation? You're not saying that, but it's a larger question.

So to me, it's really, really important. The investigation of all that is probably not something that's—it depends how long this has been around, but it's probably not something that happens with an "ah, I got it now." There may be long-term habits here of thinking, of view, of energetics, of emotional territory, all kinds of things. So it may take a while. It may involve approaches from all different angles and levels and all that. But I think it's hugely important.

And again, you could decide to see that as an investigation that's outside of Dharma.

Or you can expand your view of what Dharma is, and that becomes an investigation that's really at the core of Dharma. In a way that's up to you—it doesn't really matter—but there are certainly ways of doing it both ways, in or out. So I think it's very important.

I'm not sure whether to read these notes. Someone's written—it's anonymous, I don't know if that was intentional or not—but it says: "You don't even need the jhana to be happy. I realized this today and it totally blew my mind, just wanted to share that."

Yeah, that's totally right. I'm just wondering if I've missed something here or if the person wants to say a bit more.

[After some exchange about using the microphone]

Yeah, so this is what I wondered. This is really important. Two things here. One is that as we practice the jhanas more, the jhana factors like piti and sukha—happiness—can come up outside of a formal session very, very strongly. Sometimes it's very obvious to see the connection with, for example, a sitting we've just had. We get up and we're in the lunch queue and we're just overflowing with happiness. But sometimes it seems almost a bit random. It's just like it wasn't going so well and then suddenly there's this eruption of happiness. So that's all very normal.

The jhana factor of sukha can come up even very strongly outside of an actual jhana, outside of the total absorption in it. There is still an important difference between absorbing into a jhana where everything is really collected and the happiness. But the happiness itself is also really a treasure. To savor it more, we marinate in it and sit in it. But this is really great.

But then also, as you said, it was a relief because—you know sometimes so much can happen—we say okay, this is the goal and there's these stages and there's eight of them and then there's this idea of mastery, and it's so easy for the self-measuring and the

critic and all that to come in. And then we get, you know, it's all very tight. Then we realize oh actually it doesn't need to be so black and white—have I got it, have I not. It can come up anywhere, and that takes some pressure off. So that's great.

And then thirdly, you know, which isn't what you were saying, but yeah, it should be obvious. There's plenty of people who experience happiness in the world who've never heard the word jhana and never had jhana. So happiness is just—this wasn't what you were saying—but we should realize that too, that we're not saying here that no one who hasn't experienced jhana can ever be, ever experience happiness. No.

But there is something about the degree of jhanic happiness that I think is sometimes there that is pretty extraordinary. But that, as you've found, can come off the cushion and say, "I've never been this sort of happy." So all that is great.

And on that note, I'll just read this. I don't know, again, depending on how your hindrances are doing and how your papañca is doing and all that right now. Should I read this? Leave it?

[After some back and forth with the group]

Dear Rob, in second jhana, I heard the central heating as happiness, and that pretty much blew the roof off. So again, it's playing with perception, or a perception was played with just by being in the jhana. More joy than I have ever felt ever. Then I came out of third jhana—this is someone who's spent a lot of time working on this stuff in the past, so it's not their first jhana retreat—then I came out of third to walk, and everyone seemed like these radiant, translucent Buddhas. Which is what you are, by the way.

Wow.

So it doesn't sound like there's a question there, but there's some beautiful sharing. We should probably end here, as my interviews begin at seven.

Actually, there's one other thing I wanted to mention... No, I think I'll leave it for now.

Let's just have a bit of quiet together.

Thank you, everybody.

And time for tea.

CHAPTER 214

Q & A

Rob Burbea · 1h30

> *In this Q&A session from a jhāna retreat, Rob Burbea addresses several important questions about practice. He explores the profound nature of desire and intention in spiritual life, responding to a practitioner's insight about how working toward jhānic goals requires letting go of clinging, aversion, and delusion. Burbea discusses the challenges of maintaining deep intentions in daily life and offers guidance on learning from moments when we feel we haven't lived up to our deepest desires.*
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> *The discussion includes detailed exploration of upekkhā (equanimity), comparing different translations and examining how it functions across different levels of practice—from the basic equipoise with worldly conditions to the profound equanimity that emerges through progressively letting go of subtler forms of clinging. Burbea clarifies the relationship between mental and physical feelings in jhānic states, explaining how sukha and pīti are experienced primarily as energetic vibrations throughout the body.*
>
> *For practitioners familiar with soul-making dharma, Burbea distinguishes between the erotic engagement with images (which maintains duality) and jhānic absorption (which moves toward dissolution of separation). He emphasizes the importance of marinating in jhānic states rather than moving quickly between experiences, and addresses concerns about spiritual bypassing, explaining how different practices serve different purposes within a complete spiritual life.*

Okay, so before we start today, I've got a request. You may or may not have realized, but we're not alone at Gaia House—there are other retreatants here on personal retreat and work retreat. There's been a request to please not talk outside of the Q&A period and interviews. I don't know what exactly is happening during your work periods, but for their sake, who naturally expected to come on a silent retreat, and also for your sake, we need to maintain silence.

There's this idea of actually letting things build, letting the energies build. When there's happiness and appreciation—very natural human responses—you want to share that or talk. That's important, of course; it's an important part of being human. But in this practice, we're also wanting to let the energies build and not squander them so much. There will be a chance to talk at the end, to share time together verbally at the

end of the retreat. But unless it's talking with each other about the work and what needs doing right then about whatever yogi job you're doing, just repeat the initial agreement to sustain silence together.

Can you feel together in that silence? Do I need to speak and be heard and exchange that to feel connected? One of the opportunities—I think this already somehow came up in a Q&A—is that as a retreat gets longer, we get more sensitive. Part of the gift of that sensitivity is that we can feel each other more deeply, more widely, more completely, more openly and sensitively, and we don't need to talk necessarily. We don't even need to talk to someone or hear their story or hear whatever to sense how they're doing and their personhood and the particular flavors of their being, and to sense that connection and the way one can feel very connected across space without all that.

I don't know the details, but the other resident teacher has obviously heard from some yogis or encountered something. There's a request to all of us to uphold, to revisit that commitment together and keep that. If it feels like, "Oh, but it's such a nice connection," then I invite you to remind yourself that you can have that verbal connection at the end of the retreat with each other, and to see how connected you can feel without words. This has to do with the same qualities that we're bringing to this kind of practice anyway, and to me, that are part of what we bring to any practice: sensitivity, openness, receptivity, attunement.

It's all the same thing. If a certain period is a time when you don't want to do that, then you just shift the balance of attention. So if you are feeling like you're really enjoying and appreciating each other and the connection, let that be more prominent. I'm washing dishes or whatever, and there can be eye contact and smiling if you want, without the expectation that it comes back. But the emphasis of attention is more on that sense of connection and appreciating it and feeling it with the whole body and resonating it.

You can get exquisitely sensitive. Some of you know this on long retreat. You might be sitting right here at the front, and I don't know how many yards it is to the back of the hall. Someone comes in quietly and you know who it is—how does that happen? If I'm just talking all the time, I won't develop that kind of sensitivity.

You can play with the balance of attention. If I want that connection, then I can be a little more open. If I want to be more inner—maybe I'm working with my primary nimitta, maybe I'm processing something inside, maybe I just need to collect my mind and be mindful, whatever it is—then the balance is more inside. Again, it's just context.

It's never the case that we want never to talk to anyone, although the Buddha seemed to recommend that almost as a preference for his monks and nuns. But we want to have this freedom and this capacity to do things differently at different times. This is a really important part of expanding our range and expanding our freedom. So we can just revisit that together.

Good. I have just a few questions from people, and we can take some verbal, live ones. Is there anything anyone would like to ask? I just saw Nicole first, so why don't you go ahead...

"So last night before sleeping I had a vitakka and vicāra attack, which is a great time to have right before you go to sleep. But really appreciating the whole jhāna system. A bunch of things you said all came into order, and I'm just really feeling like this thing is really brilliant. Particularly I've been struck by when you said the most important thing about the jhānas is working towards a goal and asked who actually believes me. I raised my hand, and then as soon as I raised my hand, I was like, 'If Rob asked me why, I would have no idea.' It was just this instinctual hand raising. So as it all came together last night, it was long and extended, but the short of it is basically the Buddha setting up work towards a goal, but the goal necessitates that you let go of clinging and aversion and even delusion and get more and more and more subtle."

So all the ways that you would naturally go towards a goal, you're asked to let go of in order to complete that goal. And then along the way, you make the world over and over and over again through dependent origination, and you see that—either through hindrances, where you create a hell realm, or through beauty. And I was like, mind blown.

But the thing that I'm grappling with: after you gave that talk about desire, it struck me so deep, I actually went to my room and I just wept for an hour. I haven't ever had that kind of response on retreat. I was disturbed—not necessarily in a bad way, but in this deep-in-my-belly kind of way—and went through a whole process. From one way of looking, I could see it as a sort of self-doubt, hindrance attack. But this other way of looking, it's like I felt how important intention and desire is.

I mean, I've been listening to you say it for years—"Desire is a maker of worlds"—and I'm like, "Yeah," but then I *got* it and I was like, "Oh." That's really where I'm struggling. I can see if I looked at it one way, it's amazing—like what can I do? But I'm actually just having this response of the gravity of like, can I live up to my desire and stick with that intention?

Being on this retreat, it's been so beautiful to have the intention so strongly held. And then I leave and it's a world where literally, on one level, your attention and your desires being grabbed at everywhere. So it's just, yeah, I'm just really wondering if there's words around the gravity of intention and grappling with that.

Rob: Thank you, Nicole. So do you mean—I just want to try and make sure I understand—so you mean in your life, the question is really about now that I've seen how important it is to honor my desire in the deepest sense of the word "honor," and to deeply honor my deepest desires, and I see how difficult that is to do in the world with different things pulling... What would support that? Is that what you're asking?

Nicole: Yeah, I think there's just a lot of self-doubt coming, like, just deep-rooted. Like, can I... My desire is strong and deep, and it's vast. Like, yes, I desire the jhānas, but way more than the jhānas. It's for mystery and beauty and these things that—do I even know the definition or the depth to which they go? No, I don't. And yet seeing how intention is going to make my life, I'm just feeling like, can I... like I want it, and can I do that? And there's just pain around that.

Rob: So the pain is around not knowing whether you can and the self-doubt with it.

Nicole: Yeah. Feeling the desire and not knowing about, yeah.

Rob: So I don't know you that well, but to the degree that I know you, it seems like you have done that pretty well in your life so far, but I don't know if you would agree with that. Like I said, I don't know you that well yet, so...

Nicole: Yeah, I guess I can see both. There's times that I've done it very well and times that I've failed. And I think the times when it fails is very painful. And not so much the not getting the thing, but seeing how I've let intentions fray.

Rob: Yeah, okay. So, you know, with something... I mean, there's so much to say about this, but I think what you just said is maybe the key thing. Rather than get into "I failed or I didn't fail," it's like, what just happened there? And what just happened there might be over the last ten years with a certain desire, or it might be in one interaction. I had a certain desire in a certain situation. Whoa, I just got completely sidetracked or blocked or afraid or inhibited or lost my risk-taking capability.

So to me, I wonder from what you're saying, whether the most important thing is learning from—one of the most important things is learning from when you feel like you haven't lived up to that. Is that... Just wondering if that's distracting people or not. It seems okay. It's really okay with me as long as it's not.

Here's the continued beautified version:

Perhaps one of the most important aspects is learning from those moments when you feel you haven't lived up to your intentions. When something happens and you sense you've fallen short, it becomes crucial to examine what exactly occurred. Was it fear? And if so, fear of what? What thoughts arose? What beliefs were you holding? Was there inhibition?

Desire has a profound relationship with risk-taking. How willing are we to feel fear and still take the risk? This might involve long-term visionary risks or immediate, moment-to-moment choices, depending on the entire context of our situation.

On a larger scale, I can recall several pivotal moments in my life where I took significant risks. I mentioned earlier the decision to pursue music—situations where things appeared very promising from a social perspective in one realm, yet I chose to venture into something that made others wonder, "What are you doing?" These represent long-term risk-taking. But there are also immediate moments when we're afraid to take certain risks. The key is identifying what just happened when you feel lost, when something occurred and you didn't live up to your intentions.

Another important element from what you shared is this sense of "I don't quite know what I'm desiring." To me, that's perfectly acceptable. If you're familiar with the soul-making teachings, this aligns with eros. Eros creates and discovers "beyonds" that are often completely nebulous. I might sense gorgeous, luminous divinities that I cannot articulate or even differentiate in my perception of them, yet they're pulling me forward. This is completely valid.

However, along the way to such nebulous destinations, this sensing wants to translate into practical action. A full spectrum of desire, a complete eros, encompasses both very clear choices it asks us to make here and now—or later—as well as more nebulous longings that extend into the future. This entire range is part of the fullness. Does that make sense?

There's also something worth considering: it's valuable to desire, to long for, and to risk something for goals we may well never achieve. So one important question becomes: Is it acceptable not to attain this thing, yet still give myself completely to it?

When we think imaginatively, wherever there's desire and eros for something, there will be within that constellation an image or images associated with that very desire—the angel who wants that, the self that's desired. From the very fire of desire and eros, other images should constantly arise, beckoning you toward what you love and long for, or emerging from it. These can take very potent imaginal forms, so allow them to do so.

This relates to another person's question as well. If you truly want certain things in life, you're going to disappoint some people and invite their disapproval. People will consider you selfish or criticize your choices. Depending on what you desire, some will wonder why you're less available to them, why you've become different for them in some way. This is simply part of what you must navigate.

You cannot satisfy everyone. Depending on your relational and empathic sensitivity—which you may possess to quite a degree—you're likely to feel the pain of these disappointed expectations acutely. It becomes very easy to feel guilty, to believe you must take care of this person or that person, to explain why you're not available or why you're choosing one path over another.

This is precisely how deep, strong desires often get derailed. We feel obligated to explain ourselves or to give others what they want instead of following our own path. It's challenging to be in the world with authentic desire, and even more difficult when people don't understand what you're seeking, don't value it, can't appreciate it, or consider it not worthwhile. They may doubt your ability to achieve it, among many other responses.

So that's quite hard. Someone who's more emotionally less sensitive, less pulled upon in relationship by others' needs and wishes and pain, actually has an easier time with that. I don't know, is any of this addressing what you're exploring? We could probably talk all day and night about it because it's a huge subject.

One more thing. So it sounds like what happened was potent. And in that potency, again, there are lots of different things going on. One of the things that was going on was this self-doubt. But I would wager there were lots of other things going on, and some of them were probably very beautiful and probably very empowering.

It's like, okay, all this is going on. You could actually visit every frequency and emotion that had been going on in there, but some of them, when you get to them, will be very potentially empowering. Here's self-doubt—obviously, that's potentially disempowering. It needs attention, partly for that very reason. I need to understand it.

But there might be within it, just for example, here's this thing I really, really want. And I feel that wanting. And in that wanting, another way of saying it is, here's this thing I'm devoted to. This devotion and this longing I can feel energetically. I can feel emotionally and energetically. That's something that I can really sit with.

Even if what I want is actually vague, I'm not yet clear, but the fire of it is clear, and the energy of it is clear, and the devotion in it is clear. So rather than worrying too much about getting the clarity right now about what the object is, I can come back and be with my sense of devotion. I might even get at first that it feels like it's just somewhere in the mass of burning and confused—somewhere in there is my devotion.

When I sit with my devotion, it naturally samādhi-fies the being around it. It harmonizes and energizes and I can feel that uprightness. I sit with that uprightness and that sense of devotion and I let it shape my energy body. That's a kind of prayer, even though I'm not clear exactly what I'm praying to. It does something to the body and the psyche, regularly sitting in that and feeling one's alignment.

So you can do that for a long time. You can do that for a short time. But it will do something.

That's a bit what happened. It was useful to look for the hindrance in it and then sort of tend to that, which I did by devoting this retreat to a teacher that I mentor who suffers from self-doubt a lot. So I bring her into the sits especially when that comes up and use that for that part of it.

And then a kind of fire of devotion. I was aware that once that was taken care of, there was actually—it was vague, but a sense of what I was longing for, at least just in the energy body. And that really kicked the practice into another gear the next day. But it came back last night as the sort of system of jhānas and what we're doing and maybe why you said that thing about why working towards a goal is so important. It wobbles.

What's wobbling? Going between feeling overwhelmed by the power of that desire and can I meet it, and just feeling the power of the desire.

Again, if we just talk about imaginal practice, the very doubt and wobble and fear and whatever it is—if I let myself go into that, out of that will come an image. The one who, potentially, in relation to what they love most deeply and long for, feels very unsure of themselves. The dukkha of that can take—you have to go into it though. You're not trying to pacify or talk your way or reassure it. You're actually letting that constellate as an image.

So yeah, it might get clear what I'm desiring, but it also gets clear just the desire itself. And I begin to trust that more and more, let that empower the whole being.

Okay, great. We could talk a lot more, but that's good. Some other people had their hands up earlier. Victor, please.

I wanted to tease out the term equanimity. I think you've mentioned it a few times, and I think you said the ordinary use in English of equanimity doesn't quite cover what happens in jhānic states. I was struck by how, from what I gather, Bhikkhu Anālayo uses the term equipoise as the translation of upekkhā. And I think because he says equanimity as a term can have a dampening effect.

Thoughts?

Yeah, thank you. I'm going to talk more about equanimity tomorrow, but we can say a few things now. So equanimity as a term in English—I'm not sure if I even heard it before Buddhist speak—but what's called the near enemy in dharma of equanimity is indifference. So that may be what Ānālayo is pointing to, something that can look like equanimity but actually dims the brightness.

I think he said it in the context that pleasure could be seen in the context of, "Well, there's pleasure here but dukkha is somewhere else." So it takes the brightness off the term equanimity compared to equipoise, which is sort of like a balanced stance.

I'm really happy with the word equipoise. I think, yeah, I'm not sure about the word equanimity. Equanimity—animus, you know—equal soul, equal animation is probably what it comes from. So equal what? Passion. So does that take the brightness off or does it not take the brightness off?

Equanimity is actually—we can talk about it very briefly, or we can talk really, really a lot about it. And it's actually, once we start inquiring, quite complex. I was trying to remember—I think upekkhā—I think somewhere or other I traced the word. I think in Sanskrit it's upekshā and the ikshā, upa ikshā, and I think that's to do with equal seeing. So seeing things equally.

So you could say it's equally poised in the sense of there's a balance between this and that, and even between pain and pleasure. And so at one level, yeah, that would be a good translation. Here I perceive pleasure, here I perceive dukkha or whatever. And the being is equipoised. It's not leaning towards the pleasure or away from the dukkha at one level. Yeah, that would be a good word. It's a balance of mind, something like that. And that's good at a certain level. That's really fine at a certain level.

I'm just wondering whether I should talk about this now or wait till tomorrow. I mean, for me the bigger picture is the effect of the term equanimity in Buddhist communities in relation to climate issues. That's the background.

I don't actually use the term much. I actually think equanimity doesn't really exist, which I'll explain, I hope. The other thing is exactly because of that—it very easily becomes a shadow for Buddhists. So that equanimity in relation to something like climate change very easily goes to a kind of indifference, you know, or to whatever social injustice, racial injustice, could be anything. So we have to be really careful. And of course, everyone—we all teach that the near enemy of equanimity is indifference. But it's still there as a really dangerous edge.

So there's one level of equanimity, as I said, which is an important but more superficial level. When the Buddha talks about equanimity in terms of the eight worldly conditions—have you heard that? It's praise, blame, success, failure, gain, loss, and pleasure, pain. And then we could put this word, this other translation, equipoise.

So a good practitioner at this superficial level of understanding views those things as kind of indifferent in the best sense of the word—doesn't mind if it's success or failure, doesn't mind if it's gain or loss, doesn't mind if it's praise or blame, at one level.

Of course, we can refine that a little bit and say, even with relation to climate change: yes, I care, and this is how it should be. Equanimity in the context of the brahmavihāra, equanimity in the context of really caring passionately, really with a lot of mettā, with a lot of compassion for what's happening in the world and the suffering that something like climate change is already delivering for so many people. There is the compassion, ideally. There is the mettā. There should also be the engagement as well. And it might be that the ship is sinking—and that's where the equanimity comes in. One isn't going to be incapacitated in one's efforts or totally incapacitated by grief and disempowered by grief or worry or fear. That's the best sense of equanimity at that level. Does that make sense?

But then there's a whole other level of equanimity, which I think maybe I'll speak about tomorrow, and that has more to do with this other possible etymology, upa-iksha in Sanskrit, where the iksha is seeing things equally.

We're getting into equanimity as we encounter it in the third jhana, which we already talked about, and then more fully in the fourth jhana, and then as we relate to insight practice. Let me say this very briefly for now.

Let's take this basic level, this polarity of pleasure and pain, or pleasant and unpleasant. In practice, the usual reaction to the pleasant is to want it and to try to hold it, to grasp it and bring it towards ourselves. And the usual reaction to the unpleasant is to

try to push it away. That push and pull of grasping and aversion—to the degree that they are present in consciousness at any moment is the degree to which equanimity is not present. You could define equanimity that way.

So as I practice, in one way or another, letting go—and this is not a way to live one's life; it's completely not a way to live one's life, but it's a practice—in the moment of letting go of any pushing away of anything that I notice at any level, and letting go or calming any pulling towards me or hanging on at any level, if I just practice that, and there are many different ways of doing this, I notice there's a calming in the being. That calming is part of what equanimity is and looks like.

But it doesn't stop there. If I keep doing it, I will then begin to notice that the very perception—which may be the iksha, the seeing—of the pleasant and unpleasant begins to change. The very sense of them begins to change. What's unpleasant becomes less unpleasant. What's pleasant may for a little while get more pleasant, and then it goes towards more neutral, until in the end, everything becomes a kind of neither pleasant nor unpleasant vedana.

But it doesn't stop there either. It goes even deeper. If I keep doing this, letting go at really deep and subtle levels of this push-pull, the actual sensation begins to disappear. So we've gone way beyond a state of calmness in response to, or a state of okayness in response to pleasure and pain. We're actually affecting or fabricating the very perceptions of pleasure and pain.

These are practices. I can say this a thousand times, but until you actually know how to practice this, put it into practice and see it for yourself... There's a whole range here. Eventually what happens is not just that pleasure and pain disappear, but the very sensations disappear. And then actually the very world disappears. Self disappears, world disappears, time disappears.

In that state, we're not talking about equanimity in relation to anything that's pleasant or unpleasant, but it's a deep level of equanimity. That's partly why I think equanimity is actually a thing that doesn't exist, because by the time you've got real equanimity, there's nothing to be equanimous about.

Equanimity is a big subject, complex, and very much interwoven with the territory we'll get into as we go on to the fourth jhana and the other jhanas and how that meets with insight.

But in terms of what you're saying about climate change—and I know what a concern that is for you and how passionate and dedicated you are, and also living in Australia where there doesn't seem to be much consciousness about it at the moment—it's really important that we don't use certain teachings, and it could be in any spiritual tradition, to brush over or hide our noblest responses.

"Thank you, Rob, for mentioning the push and pull, which you also spoke about when you described the third jhana. When you mentioned the third jhana, you spoke of something like peacefulness that arises from quieting the push and pull. I have a question regarding that, because if I remember correctly, when you read the description of the first jhana, there was something about being secluded from the hindrances. So I was under the impression that we were done with the push and pull in the first jhana already, because aversion and greed weren't present anymore, which are the push and pull. If we're already secluded from the hindrances, where is this pushing and pulling coming from? I'm confused."

Thank you, it's really important.

Thank you, Rob, for mentioning the push and pull, which you also spoke about when you described the third jhana. When you mentioned in the third jhana, you mentioned something like peacefulness that arises from quieting the push and pull. I have a question regarding that, because if I remember correctly, when you read the description of the first jhana, there was something in the lines of "secluded from the hindrances." So I was under the impression that we were done with the push and pull in the first jhana already because aversion and greed weren't present anymore, which are the push and pull. If we're already secluded from the hindrances, where is this push and pull coming from? I'm confused.

Thank you, it's really important. It depends... I use the word clinging, and push and pull is just another word for clinging for me. But I use that word in a very elastic way, so that there are very obvious manifestations of clinging—like the hindrances, for instance. But that's really just one level. As you say, when we let go of the hindrances, a certain amount of clinging, a certain amount of push-pull has gone from our experience. But it's enough that then the being, the energy body and the being feel really good. First jhana arises.

But as I use that word, it has all kinds of a range of depths and subtlety. Maybe in the dharma world, there's a lot of teachings that don't use that word so much—it stays like quite a gross thing. Either there is clinging or there isn't. And that often goes with teachings that either there is a self—the self was there or it's not. But I view all these words—self and clinging and all of that—as spectra. They go really, really subtle.

So by the time we get to the third or fourth jhana, the amount of push and pull is way less. But even there, and I'll repeat this as we get into more territory, it doesn't stop there. There's really, really subtle clinging and push-pull even in the fourth jhana. Now, I'm sure a lot of people wouldn't agree, but that's how I use those words.

Yeah, I understand. So it's really the degree of push-pull, where in the spectrum we are in the push-pull that becomes more and more subtle levels.

In a way you could say one way of understanding what's happening in the jhanas is that we're just letting go of clinging at deeper levels or to more refined things. How do you cling to consciousness? We tend to think of clinging, as I said, or in English and in a lot of dharma, as referring to something that's actually quite gross—clinging, craving, and all that. But I really mean them as open-ended terms. Let's just see where the limit is.

It's the stillness and subtlety of the attention that allows us to see where that clinging is more subtly. But it's also framing the teachings from the beginning in a way that doesn't define things in a limited way. If I define clinging as something gross, then I'm not going to look for any more subtle clinging. But if I define it in this more open way, right from the beginning, then it's a question of, oh, well, maybe there's more. I have to get still and sensitive. I have to get down to a certain level of very little clinging to see when there's even less.

That whole process, that whole investigation of letting go of more and more clinging, is what I would call an insight investigation. Like I said, any insight way of looking—which means any insight practice as I would frame it and teach it—is doing just that. In one way or another, that's the primary thing it's doing. It may look like it's doing something very different, but that's primarily what it's doing.

At certain points, you may just be able to follow the same practice into deeper and deeper, more and more subtle levels of clinging—deeper and deeper letting go. Or you may need to tweak the practice a little bit so that you can get into subtler and subtler levels of letting go.

The way we're practicing jhana at the moment is we're not really thinking so much about letting go of clinging and where's the clinging. But there is a way—and I hope to get to it on this retreat—there is a way of practicing jhana where that's actually how you move from one jhana to another. You identify the clinging and you let go, and you can just keep and let go, and that takes you to another level.

But at the moment, that's not really how we're approaching things. We're approaching more through just getting into it, letting it ripen, enjoying it, opening to it. In a way we're approaching more just trusting the samadhi intention of enjoying and getting into something and trusting that will naturally ripen in this process.

So when I mentioned the other day that the equanimity of the third jhana arises from attenuating the push-pull, in a way that's more just a "let's understand kind of technically what's really happening here." For most of you at this point, the methodology to get to the third jhana is actually more through just getting into the second jhana and really getting satisfied.

Now we could see that satisfaction as, because I'm satisfied, I don't need to push-pull so much anymore. So it's a deep level of letting go of push-pull, but it's not the end of it. There's more. It gets subtler than that. So that point was more just wanting to be really precise about understanding things and trying to weave things together in terms of understanding, less about the practice.

The second thing, I think, is investigating the very essence of a desire. When I compare my desire for awakening—or whatever words I might use for what feels most important to me—with my desire for, say, a particular food or even for a relationship, there's something qualitatively different about them.

There's a texture to the desire for awakening that feels less fabricated, less conditioned. It has a different quality of urgency, a different kind of pull. It doesn't seem to get blown out as easily by external circumstances. When someone ridicules my spiritual aspirations, that desire doesn't just evaporate the way other desires might.

So while it's absolutely true that desire is fabricated—we're constantly being shaped by what we're exposed to, by cultural conditioning, by spiritual teachings we encounter—I think we can still discern something about the depth and authenticity of different desires. Some feel more rooted in what we might call our deepest nature, while others are clearly more superficial fabrications.

The practice becomes one of learning to distinguish between these different qualities of desire, learning to sense which ones feel most true, most aligned with our deepest sense of purpose and meaning. This isn't about finding some inherent, unchanging desire that exists independent of conditions—that would be a metaphysical position that might not hold up under scrutiny. Rather, it's about learning to sense the difference between desires that feel authentic and life-giving versus those that feel more compulsive or driven by external pressures.

Does that speak to what you're exploring?

Two different things—and obviously a ridiculous example would be your desire to eat a certain food versus something else—you can actually feel when a desire is deeper in you. There is a qualitative and quantitative difference, but we need to really begin sensing into the differences there and learning to notice, tune into, and take care of the deeper desires. Introspectively, there should be differences that you can tell. But that's a short answer for now.

And there is really—and I was thinking very much because somehow it had come up between us at some point and I devoted a chunk of time to it on those recordings—the other thing with all this is that some people have patterns. In fact, it's quite common to have patterns that... This is a jhana retreat, not a desire retreat, but anyway. Because I have talked about it a lot and I think it's important, but I don't want to spend the whole time talking about it. But it's good to know oneself in relation to desire. And what I see is that that's quite rare as well—that a person really knows, "I know my patterns with desire." It's not that I know what I want, but I actually know what happens in me with desires.

So some people, the flame can't get going. Some people, the flame goes and they can't tolerate it. Some people get confused or distracted by other ignitions that get thrown from all kinds of other sources. Some people, the flame bursts up and then somehow they don't really follow through. Or they say, "I'm going to do this and I'm going to do that," and it doesn't really follow through. What's happened? What happened over those months or whatever it is that one isn't a person of one's word? So it's really good to know oneself in relation to these things. I think it's really, really important.

I really meant it the other day when I said, in terms of significance of teachings, this is a much more significant teaching than anything I might tell you about how to move from one jhana to another—maybe even than the jhanas themselves. In fact, I would say that. It's like really understanding ourselves and really becoming mature in relation to desire—it's huge. But there's a lot of aspects to that. A lot, lot, lot of aspects to it. And I've spoken about it a lot on recordings and things. Is that okay for now?

Thank you. Okay. I've got a couple of written ones. Should I do that or is someone else right now? I've got a couple from you here, I suppose. Let me do someone else's one and we'll come back.

"I'm exploring sukha and its different nuances—the buoyant and bubbly, and more recently its soft, gentle aspect. I'm enjoying it. I feel absorbed into it. But a question keeps arising for me again and again about the difference between a mental feeling and a physical one. What is a mental feeling or an emotion exactly? I thought that all feelings could only actually be felt in the body. I do have a sense of feeling the mental

aspect/emotion, but it's not really clear where in the body I'm feeling it. It just feels all over, so it's harder to probe than with the pīti. Yesterday you spoke about tuning into a frequency in the energy body, which I do, but isn't the energy body just imaginary? Maybe I'm just experiencing a hindrance of doubt. If you can distill this somewhat lengthy question and offer any answers, that will be much appreciated."

Yeah, this is important. Thank you. There's a few questions sort of woven in there. What is a mental feeling or an emotion exactly? It's a really complex thing, is what it is. So usually, usually I would say an emotion has several aspects to it. It usually has some kind of thought content or a type of thought content associated with it. Of course, once you get into the jhanas, then it's like emotions free of thoughts.

It also usually has a kind of texture of the mind. It's like the mind feels like it has a certain texture to it—agitated or spacious or calm or whatever—but even more subtle than that. But it also has a bodily aspect to it. So at least those three aspects, plus probably beliefs and the whole network of other things are a part of the complexes that we call emotions.

This business about sukha being an emotional thing and piti—two things about that. One is it's a thing from Abhidhamma, so I don't necessarily subscribe to that. Abhidhamma is Buddhist psychology and it tends to have a certain way of framing things that sometimes is useful and I find sometimes really not useful. So they classify things: when sukha is this or something like that, this is a mental feeling, this is a this, this is a that. They like putting things in categories and it's all very sort of black and white and very simple sounding, but there are lots and lots of categories of different things.

So an emotion to me is actually a complex thing. When we get down to jhanic emotion, like let's say the sukha, in a way you're talking about a simpler thing, but I would still say it's felt two ways. It's felt in the body and again in jhanic terms that's the primary thing because every time the Buddha says with the first four jhanas: "The practitioner pervades and permeates, suffuses and saturates, drenches and steeps their whole body with that quality."

Most people, I think, who haven't practiced meditation or energy body awareness would just be a bit baffled by that. What does it mean to have, let's say, happiness in one's whole body? I mean, some people might get it, but generally it's—and then to focus on that. But this is really the primary thing in jhana practice. It's the energetic vibration, the energy body vibration, so to speak, or frequency, which is an aspect of an emotion.

Now there's a mental one as well. Where is that mental one? Well, it's in the mind. But where's the mind? I don't know. It doesn't really matter. What matters in terms of practice is the primary thing is body, body, body, energy body, energy body, energy body—where it is in the body.

Once it's spread, let me backtrack and say one more thing about this piti and sukha. I've said it already. At first, when people are opening to all this, I will say something like piti is a physical feeling and then sukha is an emotional one. It's a white lie. It's just something that helps people differentiate those two at first. But after a while you'll be like well actually they're both kind of physical. They're just different vibrations physically or different ranges of vibrations physically. So it was just a little teaching device but basically they're vibrations in the body.

And then the second sort of piece of question here: "I do have a sense of feeling the mental aspect or emotion, but it's not really clear where in the body I'm feeling it. It just feels all over."

So that's perfect. You know, that's what we want. For me, it pervades the whole body. That's exactly what I want. I feel it all over, even homogeneously all over.

"So it's harder to probe than with the piti."

Not necessarily. So sometimes when the piti or the sukha, when it feels stronger in some place. So you've got three scenarios. You've got a scenario that hasn't spread yet and it won't spread this session. And then, okay, that's where I do my probing, obviously. I stop trying to spread it, but that's where I do my probing.

You've got a second scenario where it's spread, but it's not 100% homogenous. And then I take the strongest area and that's where I do my probing. Does that make sense?

And the third scenario is it's completely spread and it's completely homogenous. And then I just choose a random place. It doesn't matter if it's homogenous. And I just go into it at one point. It's like a person diving into a swimming pool. They're diving in at one point.

But once they dive in—or into a lake—once they dive in, then that very diving, that very penetrating might make them feel like they're in a different terrain. It might take them to another level in that process. So you don't have to worry about finding the perfect spot; you can just choose any place and do that.

Yesterday you spoke about tuning into a frequency in the energy body, which I do, but isn't the energy body just imaginary?

Well, the energy body is no more imaginary than anything else is imaginary. So again, it's one of those things—sometimes it's really helpful for me, I feel, or I sense for a particular person at a particular time to take the energy body as a real thing. And of course, there are loads of schools of yoga and healing and all kinds of things, shamanic healing that take the energy body as a real thing. They talk about subtle body or energy body and it's rarefied. That's fine, but I really think that has limits.

The thing about the energy body—or one of the things about the energy body that's really important to understand—is that it's very amenable to our imagination. That's not quite the same thing as saying it's totally imaginary, because when we say something's imaginary we tend to then dismiss it relative to something else. That's why I say it's as imaginary as anything else maybe.

But the energy body as we're playing with it is very sensitive and susceptible and responsive to our imagination. So if I imagine the energy moving in a certain way from my energy body, lo and behold that's what I will experience in the energy body if I keep doing that. Make sense?

And then with other people, or the same person at a different time, it's like, okay, enough now with this reifying of the energy body—you've been doing that for years. And again, the whole—it's a bit like what Jason was asking about, or someone else about blocks and unblocking things. One can get kind of obsessed about this, as if the whole of practice is getting my energy body to feel a certain way.

For those people, I might say, it's not a real thing. Actually, what's more deeply real or more usefully seen as real is just the idea that we're playing with perception. I don't think it's doubt so much as some clarity was needed there. Does that sound okay?

Very good. I think these questions are useful anyway for other people.

Which jhana does that second bright light nimitta appear in?

The bright light is quite common for some people—it can appear in any jhana or even before a jhana. It's what I call a secondary nimitta. It's just an indication that the samadhi is going well. So some people get it very associated with the first jhana, some people it only comes in the fourth jhana, some people it never comes, some people it's just their access concentration or whatever. So it's not particular to a jhana; it's just a secondary nimitta. In other words, it's not of primary importance unless we really mix it with the primary nimitta and get into it that way.

And second question: did you say that jhanas one to four had equanimity in them?

No, I didn't say that, but the Buddha said jhanas three and four had equanimity in them. But I was saying, well, hold on, that's a little misleading. So we really need to unpack, first, what's primary in jhanas three and four—it's the peacefulness, and I'll explain that about jhana four tomorrow—and unpack this whole idea of equanimity because, as we've been talking about a little bit today, it's actually quite a complex idea and we need to go a little more carefully.

From another point of view, relating to Monica's question, yeah, you could say each jhana has some degree of equanimity to it because most things are not on-off switches. It's not either you have equanimity or you don't—you have some degree of equanimity. So the first jhana, even when it's so intense that you have to peel me off the ceiling because it's just ecstasy like that, actually has some degree of equanimity in it in relation to other things.

So a lot of these things, a lot of dharma concepts are really not on-off, black or white—they're really spectra. And if we think of them as on-off, we're actually making the same mistake I mentioned about clinging or self. A lot of people report, "I was meditating and then there was no self." It's like, no, think about it more as a spectrum because what you're calling "no self" at the moment is actually just a much less fabricated sense of self. It's just lower down on the spectrum.

And if I have that idea of spectrum—repeating what I said before—in relation to equanimity, in relation to self, in relation to clinging, all these other words, then actually that's going to enable me to notice way more than I would have noticed if I just had a view of either there is self or there isn't self in a moment. Either self is being fabricated or it isn't. Either there's equanimity or there isn't.

So this idea of a spectrum, which just goes subtler and subtler, and it's part of the beauty and the art to trace it and understand it—that's really, really important.

I think this question is about territories and responsiveness. I've been trying throughout much of this retreat to figure out how to stay in one territory. I'm working in the third jhana space, and I'm wondering about what you said regarding contentment being one of the levels. I've been following this and notice there are edges where I drop out into another space. One of them is with contentment, and I'm really trying to figure out the edge of where that is—how far down to go in my experience of what's coming up in terms of contentment.

I notice in the middle range there's a very particular atmosphere, exactly as you described for the third jhana space, with contentment. When I go lighter, there's a kind of perfect contentment—quite light feeling. But then I notice I can go really very low with

the contentment and still have the qualities like the sukha and peacefulness. But the contentment becomes quite a lot bigger. It's more like a deep well of rich contentment feeling rather than the perfect contentment kind of feeling. I'm wondering how this is still within the range.

When you go deeper, the contentment is not perfect—is that what you're saying?

No, it gets more rich and deeper in my experience rather than quite light and gentle—not quite uplifting, but more light and gentle. But it still feels like perfect contentment.

Well, that's fine. The contentment thing is not the primary indicator. It's just me pointing out a bandwidth that, if you really want to develop sensitivity to all these different levels, is good to know and hang out with. Might it take different flavors and colors at different times? Yes. But the primary thing is the contentment, and it really feels extremely satisfying. Then you're still in the contentment.

I want to say a couple more things. Again, there's real encouragement to marinate. Especially if different things are opening, it can be very tempting to want to just slide around everywhere and check out what's this, what's that. But as we've been emphasizing right from the beginning, the fruits of this particular set of practice—what we call jhana practice—will come from marinating. This means many, many times over and over, just putting yourself, submerging yourself and holding, sustaining something for as long as you can: an hour, two hours, longer, three, whatever, four. Just sit in something over and over and over. That's going to do something to mind, heart and body that just won't get the chance to happen if we're sliding around too much.

If you've done a lot of soul-making and imaginal practice, oftentimes one doesn't actually... One of the amazing things about soul-making practice is just a couple of minutes sometimes with an image can be incredibly potent. It's also true that a couple of minutes with a jhana can be incredibly potent, but it's much more the case that if we really marinate for much longer in a jhana, it's going to do something that it won't do in just a couple of minutes.

It's actually quite rare for a soul-making practitioner or an imaginal practitioner to really spend hours and hours and hours revisiting the same image and just really being with that. At least I haven't put that out as an offering. I haven't heard anyone really do that. It's not really what we're doing so much with imaginal practices. There's a difference here.

I'm going to say this very briefly because I know some of you don't know this territory at all about soul-making Dharma, so I'll say this for those of you who do. In case you are a soul-maker and you find yourself taking the same kind of rhythms into jhana practice—just moving quite quickly with all these lovely amazing things opening up—

When we're with an image, when we're with an erotic imaginal image, when there's eros for an image—I don't mean by that sexual eros necessarily, though it could mean that—we're doing something different. We're resonating and being with it, but we want to maintain the two-ness. Remember this from soul-making teachings? Why? Because eros needs two-ness. Eros needs the polarity and the imaginal needs the eros. Without the eros, the imaginal folds, and without the two-ness, the eros folds and therefore the imaginal folds.

In jhana practice, actually what we're doing is, as much as we can—that's the 'A' of SASSIE—can I dissolve into this?

Can I kind of dissolve my body into the peacefulness or whatever it is? So it's almost like in imaginal practice, the duality is maintained, and self doesn't dissolve into its object. There's not that even intentional direction. We maintain this polarity, this erotic tension between self and imaginal object. Lovely as that is, but we're not letting it collapse into oneness. In jhana practice, the movement is actually to let it dissolve.

In imaginal practice, the self also might start to become imaginal. Here's this wonderful imaginal object and the self also starts to become imaginal. In jhana practice, the self should become less and less of a sense of self. Back to the spectrum of self, it's actually less and less of a self. It's more and more dissolved.

So these are really, really important differences. The movement is towards less—we could say less polarity, less duality in jhana practice. Whereas in imaginal practice, you're actually sustained—not always, but for the most part, you want to sustain some sense of duality and polarity. Sometimes you can let yourself go there, dissolve that way a little bit, merge, union and all that. But if you do too much of that, it will just dissolve the whole thing.

Do we ever reach a state of complete non-duality in jhana practice? No. No matter what it might feel like. Again, here's one of those spectra. It's a spectrum of less and less separation. Not necessarily as you go more and more from one to eight, but your experience of, say, jhana number four at different times might be more or less separate, dualistic.

It never becomes—in my way of understanding—because duality is also a word that I consider a spectrum. So it's very easy to say, "That was a completely non-dualistic experience and the self was gone." It's probably not. In fact, it's definitely not. If there's a jhana, in my way of understanding this, there's still some duality. But still, because of the A being open-ended in SASSY, the movement is towards less duality.

Does this make sense for the soul-making practitioner? So there's a difference. Just check if you're getting around too much—that's a different modality, that's a different rhythm. In the jhana, it's really towards dissolving, dissolving, towards dissolving. You will never completely dissolve. You will never, however absorbed you are, however great the A is of SASSY, there can be more.

So just to delineate between those two.

A participant shared: "I feel like I have a strong erotic relationship to the jhanas and I've had this since piti began to arise, so the way I experience absorption in the jhana is kind of a temporary absorption, but I also have this long-term relationship with the jhana which is soulful and erotic in a sense, and it's very central in my experience of them."

Yes, so I mentioned this very briefly one time. There's so much information, but let me say it again. If I understand what you're saying—in soul-making teachings, we talk about eros. There is this—we define eros as this wanting or movement towards more intimacy, more closeness, more touching, more penetration, more opening with whatever it is. That could be an image, it could be an imaginal person or whatever. But that definition is, if you like, the seed definition.

The larger definition of eros means that it is—okay, it does that, there's that movement—but in doing that, it ignites and stimulates the whole soul-making dynamic, which involves psyche and logos as well. When psyche and logos get expanded, the object becomes bigger and richer and more multifaceted and more complex, has more beyonds. And then the self becomes imaginal as well.

So outside of meditation, outside of jhana meditation, one might have—and ideally to get the engines really going and the whole relationship with it—one does have an erotic relationship. There is eros in relation to the jhanas in the bigger sense, in the wider sense. There's a whole image, there's a self image: me on the path, me and the history, me and the teacher, me and the jhanas, that territory, their mystical sense. But that's outside of meditation.

In the meditation, it's eros in the smaller sense. We're not letting it go to psyche and logos because it's a kind of proliferation. And we want it simple. It's this thing and I'm just dissolving into it. We don't let the self become imaginal. We don't let the thing become more complex in a way.

We actually want to get more into it like that. So it's a different approach - there's eros, but it's the small version, the seed definition. We can explore this distinction more another time, but I think it's quite important.

There are just a couple of other points I want to touch on before we end. Again, this relates to context. Right now we've been discussing soul-making practice, desire, and equanimity. Yesterday we talked about emotions. Sometimes you hear - perhaps less so these days - that jhanas are dangerous because what you're doing is suppressing emotion. You could be bypassing, engaging in spiritual bypassing, or suppressing emotions related to traumas that are really important to address.

I think as you do more jhana practice, you'll realize more and more that there isn't really suppression happening. The whole idea will become obviously incorrect, at least the way we're practicing it. This is not what's occurring here.

But the wider point is that there's no single practice that's complete and perfect. We really need to have this sense of a larger context. When we're doing jhana practice, yes, we do have a certain leaning or preference in how we relate to difficult emotions when they arise - as I mentioned in the opening talk. But then I have a second-order preference, a third, and a fourth. There's a certain leaning in that direction.

When we do other practices, we'll reverse that order. Is there a danger of spiritual bypassing? Yes, there is. Does everyone know that term? It's like avoiding some issue by hanging out in a nice space, in this case. But we can spiritually bypass through any practice, and there are other dangers. No single practice avoids all dangers or is without pitfalls.

If I never relate to emotions in the way we're exploring on this retreat - this inquiry into whether something might be a hindrance at its root, giving attention there and letting the mind develop its loveliness - what might I miss? Sometimes when you let the mind develop its loveliness, a difficult memory comes up within that loveliness. Very occasionally, you can place that difficult memory in the loveliness and see what happens. Sometimes it's very clear that I'm not suppressing anything - I'm actually placing it there, or it's arising naturally. There's no sense of blocking or inhibiting emotional responses.

There's something we can learn about emotions through jhana practice that's much more difficult to learn through other modalities or modes of practice. The danger of not doing jhana practice is that we don't learn those particular things about emotions. Are they the complete and final truth about emotions? No, they're not. They're just one perspective, one aspect. But to have this range of understanding, possibility, freedom, and skill with emotions - that's really precious.

We're operating within a certain context here. Of course, I could be in psychotherapy or working with emotions in other ways. Then at some point, someone might ask whether I'm engaging in sociopolitical or ecological bypassing - somewhat akin to what Victor mentioned. There's every possibility of that as well.

There have been critiques of all kinds of spiritual and psychological practices: that I'm getting so absorbed in this particular thing and believing in its reality that I've neglected something else. There's no one practice that will take care of everything. What's really important is the bigger picture - how am I seeing this within a larger mandala of practices that will do their best to cover the whole terrain of what it means to be human, seeing things from different angles and perspectives, working with things in different ways. That's really important.

One final point before we end. How long have we been here? I know it probably feels like decades for some people, but how long? Thirteen days? Usually, around the third or fourth evening of a week-long insight retreat, as I ring the bell for the final sitting, I would say something like: "Check in with how you're feeling right now. It's the end of the daily schedule, but maybe there's actually energy there and you're just going to bed out of habit. Or maybe you feel tired, but actually, if I look into it, it's aversion that's making me tired. Maybe I want to sit up and explore that a little bit."

There would be encouragement to see what's possible in terms of extending the effort on a macro level. So it's thirteen days now, and I don't know where each of you are - you're probably all in different places. But now I'll say this to everyone, though it's one of those things I should have mentioned at the beginning. I thought it was obvious from the way the schedule looked.

The rhythm of retreat extends beyond our formal schedule. While we gather as a group between 9:00 and 9:30 in the evening, the hall remains open. As retreats lengthen, practitioners often discover different rhythms emerging, with much more energy becoming available. Sometimes we find ourselves naturally rising or retiring at unusual times.

It's worth examining: how much of our daily rhythm stems from mere habit? Sometimes fear drives our choices—we worry about being tired tomorrow. Sometimes subtle aversion masquerates as tiredness. We think we need sleep, but actually we're pushing things away very gently, and the mind closes down. Going to bed becomes a way of avoiding what's present.

Similarly, the meditative day need not begin at 6:45. That may suit your rhythm, but I invite you to listen inwardly, feeling what seems possible and right, sensing your energy capacity. If you're uncertain, experiment a little. While the old practice of progressively reducing sleep has fallen out of favor—and I don't think it's wise—there is value in listening deeply, discovering your rhythms, and if you're unsure, genuinely experimenting.

All practice spaces remain available during morning work periods, at lunch, after lunch. We've been exploring effort on the micro level—that moment-to-moment capacity to lean back metaphorically into greater receptivity, or to intensify attention right now. This is crucial. But there's also the macro level regarding the rhythm of your day.

Your day can breathe naturally, yet we want to remain listening, responsive, stretching ourselves, experimenting. Sometimes we think, "I know I'm an over-striver, so I shouldn't stay up late or rise early or sit so much." But remember—opening the heart, which we've emphasized throughout this retreat, isn't mutually incompatible with spending more time in formal meditation or extending your effort. If you practice one, the other doesn't disappear.

This time is precious. I truly mean it when I say don't pressure yourself about these three weeks. Yet simultaneously, I hope you sense this preciousness. We're already thirteen days in. Time flies, circumstances change, and some opportunities won't return.

Rather than operating from "should," approach this with sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness, experimentation. How much am I sitting? How much am I exploring my edges? What habitual patterns emerge around formal practice, bedtime, rising time? How much stems from habit? How much from subtle fear? How much from gentle aversion?

Instead of formulas—everyone should sleep exactly this many hours—I invite you to extend that same sensitivity, attunement, responsiveness and experimentation to this domain as well. Play with it. See what unfolds, without any sense of obligation. But we must experiment to discover certain truths and recognize what's possible.

Let's rest together in some quiet now.

CHAPTER 215

The Fourth Jhāna

Rob Burbea · 1h31

> *In this comprehensive exploration of the fourth jhāna, Rob Burbea guides practitioners through the most refined of the rūpa jhānas, characterized by profound stillness and equanimity (upekkhā). Drawing from the Buddha's classical descriptions in the suttas, he examines how this state manifests as a translucent, luminous stillness that can feel like 'breathing the air of another world.' The talk addresses the cessation of breath perception, the phenomenon of physical leaning forward, and the subtle distinction between absence of emotion and the deep peace that pervades this state.*
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> *Burbea discusses the progression from third to fourth jhāna through increased refinement and the letting go of pleasure and pain, exploring the Buddha's somewhat puzzling descriptions of abandoning sukha and dukkha. He emphasizes the jhāna's qualities of purity, brightness, and imperturbability, while examining different levels of equanimity - from equanimity based on singleness versus multiplicity. The teaching includes practical guidance on cultivation through tuning to stillness within the third jhāna, dissolving body and mind into luminous awareness, and developing the subtle skills needed to maintain this extremely refined frequency of consciousness.*

So we talked about the third jhāna, which is characterized by its primary nimitta of that very exquisite, tender and lovely peacefulness. That's what's really characterizing it. I've pointed out at several stages now that this tender and lovely peacefulness and the exquisiteness of it is a very refined place—a very refined realm, a very refined state, a very refined texture.

Again, if you're not sure whether you've definitely reached this level—maybe you've been there before, maybe it feels peaceful and equanimous, maybe it feels very deep—the refinement is one of the things that tells you you've moved deeper.

Now refinement means more than just calming. Certainly when you move from pīti, which can have a lot of waves in it, to something like the third jhāna, there's a calming, and there's the peacefulness. But by refinement, I would use the analogy of different kinds of cloth. One cloth can be quite coarse—my jeans here, the cloth is quite coarse. A refined cloth actually has fewer fibers in it, less material, less substance to it.

This is trying to articulate what we mean by refined. It's almost gossamer-like in its refinedness at this level. Things are getting really, really refined. To say it's more refined is more than to say just that it's calmer. It is calmer, but its texture is very, very refined in that sense, like a refined material.

Some of you may know states of very deep relaxation. Some of you may even have experimented a little with sleep yoga practices, dream and in-between dream states. There are states that are very peaceful where really not much is happening, where the mind is not moving anywhere. But compared to something like the third jhāna, they don't have that refinement. They're thicker, more kind of velvety. They can be helpful, but when we talk about the peacefulness of the third jhāna, we're really talking about a very refined quality. That's part of what helps with the discernment.

But today I'd like to go on and talk about the fourth jhāna. Again, every time we move in the teachings or progress in the teachings, just a reminder about pacing. We're going on in the teachings to the fourth jhāna, but what's your pacing? That's the more important question. Where's your playground right now? The playground of your learning edge, the playground where you're spending most of your time marinating, exploring the elements of mastery. That's what will really help rather than zipping through at the pace that I'm going through, which will even get faster in the coming days because I've got some medical appointments.

So really, the encouragement to discern and attune your whole being and your practice to your sense of your own playground, your learning edge, in dialogue with us. That's where you hang out, that's where you have your fun, that's where you work and play and marinate.

But the fourth jhāna—let's go back to the Buddha. He's gone through jhānas one, two, three, with both their more technical descriptions and then each one with their simile, with the lotus ponds. After the third jhāna, he says: "And furthermore, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress—he enters and remains in the fourth jhāna, which is purity of equanimity and mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. He sits permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness so that there is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness."

His simile is: "Just as if a person were sitting wrapped from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of their body to which the white cloth did not extend, even so, the practitioner sits permeating their body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of their entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness." That's his description of the fourth jhāna.

Technically, the jhāna factors are just two now. Ekaggatā, which we've had in everyone—this "with one thing prominent," that's how I'm translating it. One thing is prominent; the mind is gathered around and in and with one thing prominent. And that one thing prominent is the primary nimitta, which is technically upekkhā. And upekkhā, as we've been talking about the last few days, is equanimity. So technically, at least in the commentaries and in the Buddha's teachings, the two jhāna factors here are ekaggatā and upekkhā—one thing prominent and equanimity.

We talked about equanimity a little bit already. We'll talk about it a little bit more today and perhaps even more as the retreat goes on. If I had to find what I think is the most helpful and accurate English word that encompasses the experience here and points us in the right direction, I would say stillness. There is equanimity and that's important, but I would say stillness.

What strikes one almost overwhelmingly is being transfixed in and by an extremely refined, translucent stillness. That's the texture and the experience. We talked about refinement with the third jhana, and it's even more refined here. This is a really important discerning factor: Am I moving in the right direction? Do I need to shape this a little more? Have I gone off on a sidetrack?

It's extraordinarily refined. The cloth is now translucent. It's so subtle, so refined in its texture—the substance of the space that one is in—that it's as if it's translucent. It's also a very bright space. Not for everyone, not always, but it's very common at this point to have a white light. And that white light is the stillness. The stillness is the white light.

Technically, I would call it a secondary nimitta. This white light can come up earlier, but here it's an almost breathtaking white light of stillness. Usually it's a secondary nimitta. Sometimes people can have it as very pitch black, but more commonly there's this bright white light as the stillness, mixed with the stillness. Technically it's a secondary nimitta, but probably by this point it's quite organically mixed so that it is the stillness. The light is the stillness, the stillness is the light.

This light—there's a brightness in the mind, and in a way that brightness is just a sign, signal, manifestation, reflection of the brightness of presence at that point, the aliveness of the mind. That's one way of understanding what's actually happening there. It's a reflection of the energy in the mind of being present, of being conscious.

When we read the Buddha's description, does it sound maybe less appealing than the other ones? A little less exciting than the lotus pond business and all the upwelling of happiness? But there's something—I want to translate it into experiential terms—al-

most stunning here, breathtaking. One feels this still light, this very, very refined still light. It's almost as if one is in another realm, breathing the air of another world, to quote an old poet.

In fact, somewhere in the Pali Canon, the Buddha gives it the synonym, the nickname, "the beautiful." It's called the beautiful. So hopefully this helps give a bit more sense than something that might sound disappointing. And again, like all the other jhanas, he refers to it as an escape, *nisaranam*. The Buddha talks that way about the jhanas at times, and this is also a sense we can have in it.

Once you're in this space, it really can feel like one is in another world. And that world is an escape from all the pleasure and pain and all the shakiness and all the complexity and difficulty of the world of the senses. So there is this way of experiencing it as an escape from this world in a dualistic relationship or comparison. This is a better place. And we can have that sense of being in this other realm.

But like with the third jhana we talked about, there's this possibility for the aftereffect of that experience to spill out onto the world and color our sense of the world, so that the essential nature of things, the essential nature of this world that we all agree on and feel that we inhabit, is perceived to be essentially stillness. It's the same process—where before it was perceived to be essentially peacefulness, now essentially stillness.

So there's the dualistic conception—a duality with the world where this is an escape and it's a much better place to be. There's that kind of thrust, both of teaching and experience. Then there's the thrust of: here's an experience and it opens my eyes, opens my senses and my felt sense of what this world really is and what the nature of this world really is. It's much less dualistic because then the world can be seen as being truly, in essence, this luminous transcendent stillness.

Much less dualistic.

And as we explore the third jhana, there's a third possibility emerging from the Buddha's teaching, where he emphasized all the jhanas as perception attainments on the way to pointing something out about the nature of perception—about the malleability of perception, about the dependent arising and thus the emptiness of all things.

So you could see it seemingly dualistically, seemingly non-dualistically, and in a way that transcends both because it understands the dependent arising of the perception of duality or non-duality, the dependent arising of this or that.

All this becomes really important when we come to understanding not just insight, but also where we're going with the path. What are we aiming for? What is liberation? And what does our path suggest about our relationship with the world? What kind of relationship and stance and view of the world does an awakened being have? A liberated being.

Do they see it as something to escape from, never to be reborn again into this world? There's a kind of dualistic conception, but there are other possibilities as well. It might sound like a technical point at this stage, but a lot ends up hinging on this—about how we want to live, about how we treat the planet, about our sense of awakening, all of that. We will return to this.

In the fourth jhana, the breath stops. One is no longer actually breathing, as far as one can tell. If you stay with the breath as your primary object all the way through, this will become very clear. The breath grows more and more subtle until eventually there is no breath. Or you might notice it, so to speak, out of the corner of your eye if you're doing another practice.

How is it that we don't die then? I don't know the answer to this. I assume we're breathing very, very subtly, and there's such stillness in the being at that point that we barely need to move any oxygen. Maybe others who know more about biology could explain it better, but that's my understanding.

One does continue to breathe, but technically the suttas say the breath stops, and most teachers would say the breath stops. You would be hard-pressed to find a perception of the breath there, even if breath was your main object. So the perception of the breath stops. My assumption is you're somehow still breathing, but because of the stillness and whatever is happening, the amount of oxygen actually moving to sustain the organism for sometimes quite long periods is very small. I don't actually know what's going on—it's neither here nor there, just thought I'd mention it.

The citta, though, is really captivated and transfixed by this translucent, very refined stillness—this sense of a beautiful realm of stillness. And again, it's still a rupa jhana. As the Buddha says, it's still pervading the whole body. This luminous stillness pervades the whole body. The body has become that.

So the citta is captivated and transfixed. And again, like the other jhanas, once you've gained quite a bit of experience with it, moving in and out of that jhana, you might begin to feel like, oh, now I actually have to learn how to develop the steadiness of my focus to stay steady on this really refined frequency, this really refined luminous tex-

ture. As always, sometimes at first it feels effortless, and then afterwards you start to realize there's subtle work and play to be done here. One aspect is simply learning to stay with this very refined stillness.

Another thing that can happen experientially at this stage is that the felt center of the citta, the felt center of awareness, can drop. It might have dropped already in the second and third jhanas. Some people experience the center of the piti often around their face or throat. Sometimes people experience the center of the happiness around the heart chakra. When you get into the peacefulness, it's sometimes lower in the belly, and with the stillness it can feel like it's even lower—if I'm sitting on a chair, somewhere under here is where the center of my awareness can feel like it is.

This is a completely secondary phenomenon, so don't latch onto that. For some people, this is what they notice, and then they use that as an indicator or barometer of which jhana they're in. Not a very good idea because it's a secondary phenomenon. It's not reliable. We want to be really clear, as always: What's the primary nimitta here? This is what's telling me where I am if I'm wanting to map it. This is what's discerning between the different qualities. That's actually quite important. I'm mentioning it as a thing you might notice in your experience.

If you don't notice it, no problem at all. It really doesn't matter. But if you do notice it, be careful that you're not latching onto that as your primary indicator.

I don't know what Jason was referring to, but I also find the Buddha's descriptions somewhat confusing and puzzling. He said something like... let me find it again. He described the fourth jhana as arising "with the abandoning of pleasure and pain" - you could also say sukha and dukkha - "as with the earlier disappearance of elation and distress." That's how this particular English translation renders it; the Pali terms are somanassa and domanassa. So with the abandoning of all that, but also with the earlier disappearance - if something had been abandoned earlier, the monk enters and remains in the fourth jhana.

I won't spend too long on this, but let me address it briefly. The "earlier disappearance of elation and distress" - what could that be? Why is it even coming up now? Something has disappeared earlier. It could be the earlier disappearance of piti and the hindrances - piti as elation and the hindrances as distress. The hindrances disappeared in the first jhana, the piti disappeared in the third jhana, so it could be related to that.

Or, probably more accurately with these Pali words somanassa and domanassa, they may refer more to the distress when one actually sees samsara - when one sees the fact that we're living in a world of impermanent things, and even pleasant things are imper-

manent. There's a kind of distress of the renunciate in that recognition. The elation comes when one realizes there's a path and has confidence that one can follow that path.

I don't know. I've never heard a meditation teacher dwell much on this, and I'm certainly not going to. When you go into the scholarly side, there's a bit of debate. What's he talking about here? Why is he suddenly introducing these terms that he hasn't used before? I don't think it matters too much.

The other phrase - "abandoning of pleasure and pain" - is slightly odd as well, because you could say "with the subsiding of pleasure and pain." But abandoning is something we do deliberately. The Pali word is pahana, which is also what the Buddha uses when you abandon unskillful ethical behavior. You abandon this or that unwholesome, unskillful quality.

I don't actually think it matters, but what it could be pointing to is what we talked about yesterday when this question came up several times about equanimity. If "abandon" means deliberately letting go of clinging to pleasure or pain - and clinging can be pushing away as well in my language - clinging, pushing away, pulling towards, or hanging onto pleasure and pain. In other words, if I abandon the push-pull, that's something I can do deliberately.

Actually, in this case, the way I would understand it, I'm not even completely abandoning it, because if you remember what we said yesterday, there's actually a whole spectrum here of really, really subtle levels of push-pull clinging. So if I abandon them a lot, but not quite all the way, then what I'm going to end up with, following on from what we said yesterday, when there's less push-pull, it attenuates the vedana. The very pleasantness and unpleasantness eventually just attenuate and become neither pleasant nor unpleasant. So the dominant vedana becomes the neutral one because I've abandoned not so much the pleasure and pain, but I've abandoned any reactivity - or I've abandoned a lot of the reactivity.

It actually gets, as you say, confusing. Why is he introducing this now? Because it seems to suggest another way of going into the jhana through playing with this push-pull dynamic.

So two things. One is about that - okay, so pleasure and pain decrease, pleasant and unpleasant decrease, and one is left with neither pleasant nor unpleasant. But what one can say about that "neither pleasant nor unpleasant" that one is left with is that it's very, very nice. And if it's not, something's not right. It's not the fourth jhana we're

talking about. It's very nice and very enjoyable. It's really, again, an improvement over the third jhana and is felt and experienced that way. And it's also somehow a kind of neutral vedana. So that's one thing to bear in mind.

The second, and possibly more important point, is this: all this talk about abandoning pleasure and pain and the earlier disappearance of elation and distress and the different possibilities of what that might mean...

There's a whole scholarly debate here about the precise textual interpretations, with scholars debating whether particular suttas contain mistakes, searching for Chinese parallels and engaging in extensive analysis. But ultimately, I would say it basically points to equanimity. And that's all we need to worry about, I think. That's probably what matters most.

Remember, we were defining equanimity yesterday during the Q&A as not an on-off switch—not black or white, where you either have it or you don't—but rather a spectrum. To the degree that there is equanimity, to that degree there is the reduction of push and pull. There is the reduction of clinging. So equanimity exists on a spectrum.

Another way of understanding this spectrum is that it represents decreasing push-pull, decreasing clinging. Does that make sense?

So I think that's all we need to really understand here. The fourth jhana is pointing to a state of deep equanimity. And as I mentioned yesterday, there are different ways and different contexts in which the Buddha talks about equanimity, and it's a really fascinating subject.

This fourth jhana is what the Buddha would call equanimity based on singleness. This stands in contrast to what he describes on other occasions as equanimity based on multiplicity. So we have equanimity based on singleness versus equanimity based on multiplicity.

What is this singleness and multiplicity of phenomena? Equanimity based on multiplicity means equanimity in relationship to many phenomena happening, many things occurring in the senses. But this fourth jhana is not that, because everything has pretty much disappeared. There is just this translucent, refined, beautiful white stillness—bright white light stillness. The body and everything else has dissolved into just that.

So it's an equanimity based on there being nothing else happening. It's just that single, unified state. Do you understand? This is versus equanimity based on multiplicity, which we touched on yesterday.

An example was when the Buddha talks about the eight worldly conditions: praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure, gain and loss. Victor was asking about the word equanimity in this context. We can have those conditions or those opposites, and we can have equanimity in relationship to those perceptions.

There's the perception of praise and blame. This person tells me I'm wonderful. Another person tells me I'm an idiot, whatever it might be. And the mind can have equanimity in relation to both. What that means at this level—which is very important but represents a more superficial level of equanimity—is equipoise. Equanimity comes from "equi-" meaning equal feeling toward both. I'm not getting super excited and glad when this person praises me, then super depressed or angry when someone blames me. There's equipoise—equal feeling toward opposites. It's not that I like this and don't like that, prefer this or get excited about this while feeling elated about this and distressed about that. This is equanimity in relation to the multiplicity of phenomena. Clear enough?

But again, as I pointed out yesterday in the Q&A, we can have deeper levels of equanimity. For example, following the example I used yesterday about the state of the vastness of awareness—when consciousness opens up and, because of the openness of consciousness and the way one is practicing, it's like letting everything just belong to the space, that vast space of awareness.

After a time it might seem like the bird that was just singing is simply coming out of that silent awareness, and then the sound just disappears back into it. One experiences this with body sensations, thoughts, and everything else. They're all just emanating from what starts to feel like a mystical, divine, forever-lasting space of peaceful, transcendent awareness. Things simply arise out of that mystical source and disappear back into it.

And then my job as a meditator at that point is simply to let them come and let them go back. Let them be. It's not mine. Let the space contain everything, and let all these phenomena belong to the awareness.

You can hear in what I've just described that there's a relationship. One is practicing a relationship of let it be, let it come, let it go, let it be. Can you hear that? It's a really beautiful way of practicing, an extremely fruitful way of practicing. There's tremendous potential there. It's not particularly difficult—just something that with the right setup of practice, staying with it again and again, practicing that relationship of letting everything belong to the space, letting it come, letting it go, letting it belong to the space.

The very mystical beauty of that space starts to help you let go. It's like the space itself is not doing anything, but the sense of it is almost as if it can do the work. It can do the work of just being there, holding things mystically, being a source—I don't know what you'd call it—a resting place of phenomena. It's almost like the space does the work.

Technically speaking, you're engaging a certain way of looking—an insight way of looking—which is just letting be, letting go, letting go, letting go. This technically means less clinging, less push and pull. Do you understand? Less push and pull. That takes the whole thing deeper and deeper over time.

It might deepen so that the ugly sound and the beautiful sound start to lose their associated vedanā. Exactly what I was saying before starts to happen. The pleasant and unpleasant begin to fade into more neutral phenomena. That neutrality may be impregnated with this mystical divinity, mystical silence, the mystical nature of awareness. But it's not in the particularity of an individual sound that it's pleasant or unpleasant. They've all got that quality, even the ugly sounds.

So the equanimity can deepen, and it can deepen to the sense of one taste, which I mentioned in relation to the third jhāna. Everything in this vastness of awareness—all the sounds, all the sensations, all the thoughts, whatever comes up—can begin at some point to feel like its true essence, its true substance is the same. And that substance is, in this case, mystical, divine, lasting-forever awareness.

So there's a kind of oneness of substance that emerges there. In contrast to a more superficial level of equanimity where we were equanimous in relation to two things that were opposite—praise and blame, pleasure and pain—because everything is one substance, the opposites lose their meaning. They're no longer opposites anymore because they're the same thing, the same substance. They're all, in this case, divine awareness, the awareness of God, whatever you want to call it.

There are many other possibilities that function in the same way, unfolding similarly. A similar thing could happen with a kind of mystical love or mystical compassion—all kinds of possibilities. Really, really lovely. Very available. We just need to set up practice in the right way and follow it.

Lovely as it is, it's still not the end of the road, nor is it the deepest end of equanimity. As I also mentioned yesterday, the ultimate limit of equanimity that's possible is when there are no objects arising anymore because the fading has not just faded the pleasure and pain, the pleasant and unpleasant vedanā—it's actually faded any sense of any object or phenomenon or sensation as well.

So in that ultra-deep equanimity, there are no objects, things, sensations, or phenomena in relation to which a person can be equanimous. There's a strange paradox in the depth of equanimity: the truest equanimity can't really be regarded as equanimity because there's nothing there to be equanimous about.

Here we have in the fourth jhāna an instance of equanimity based on singleness, in complement to other instances where the Buddha talks about equanimity based on multiplicity.

I think it's mostly true to say—predominantly true to say—that at this point in the fourth jhāna, if you check what's the emotion, the most likely and most accurate answer, the answer that's most prevalent, would be that there isn't an emotion. The emotions have been pacified in that state. There's an absence or a pacification of emotion.

Let me say a bit about that and come back to it, perhaps qualifying that statement. This is interesting, you know. This subject of emotion as human beings—I've said it's one of those subjects that I don't think there's any end for us. There shouldn't be an end for us as human beings of our exploration of emotion, even just in our conception of emotion, let alone what we do with emotions and how we relate to them.

Here, what happens—what can actually be quite common for human beings—is that we don't receive much cultural support for this reality: many people are genuinely afraid of their emotions. When a strong emotion arises, there's often a lack of confidence: "I'm not sure I can tolerate this or be with it. I won't end up as a puddle on the floor, or a nervous wreck, or completely out of control."

People relate to this fear in different ways, but it exists primarily because our culture rarely provides training for working skillfully with the heart. To me, dharma practice should be, over time, broadening and deepening the capacity of the heart. We can learn to hold tremendous emotion—we can hold intense emotion.

Consider the grief at what's happening in our world right now. This is genuinely hard to bear, hard to hold. It may be that for many people, this is one reason why—and I don't know if this is true, but perhaps—species loss and climate change and what I used to call species extinction (though I think a more accurate term might be species extermination, mass species extermination) represent simply too much grief to bear. So people avoid it. If you look at what receives the most views each day in newspapers, climate change articles rarely make the top ten.

The same pattern can emerge with personal grief, or even with joy. Sometimes—and we've discussed this bandwidth of happiness—for some people there's a sense of "okay, that's enough now. Can I move on to something else?" Can we hold that much joy? Can

we allow that much energy of *piti* to flow through us? Can we hold that much grief? Can we hold skillful anger or frustration when it arises in ways that are truly large and beneficial?

To me, a huge part of the dharma path involves actually broadening and deepening the capacity—the holding capacity—of the heart. We receive very little training for this in our culture.

But in addition to expanding our capacity for intensity, there's the possibility of developing through dharma practice what we've emphasized from the very beginning: this sensitivity and refinement. This extends not just our range of emotional intensity, but also our range of emotional types—emotions we become aware of, that we notice, that we can tune into. There's tremendous beauty in having this extended palette in our inner life, and then relating from that richness to others, to our beloveds, to the rest of the world, to ourselves, to art.

To me, this is also profoundly important.

But there is, as I mentioned, often a kind of fear among many people in our culture regarding their emotional life. "I'm okay with this range, but if it gets too intense in one direction or another, I'm really not sure I'm okay. I'm really not sure I will be okay."

Yet correspondingly, there can also be—for some people, perhaps even the same person at different times—a fear of the absence of emotion. So when we speak of an absence of emotion in the fourth jhana, sometimes that can sound unsettling. "I'm not sure I like the sound of that," or there might be an idea that this can't be healthy.

Sometimes these ideas about that state—and it's important to remember it's just a temporary state—arise from concepts woven into one's current worldview based on what one is working through psychologically.

I remember when I started meditating, I went a little nuts for a couple of years, as I mentioned briefly. Part of my rehabilitation involved psychotherapy and becoming deeply interested in—and receiving real help with—my emotional life, which had been either extremely volatile without my understanding it, or cut off from certain emotions entirely. I engaged in extensive exploration and opening with emotions, and this work was tremendously helpful.

But I could easily have swung into the opposite view: "If emotion is quiet, then there must be suppression. If emotions are quiet at any point, this must have unhealthy long-term consequences. Authentic being requires emotion—and probably difficult emotion, because those are the more authentic ones."

These kinds of views are actually not uncommon. So there can be, for some people, a fear of emotion. There can be, for other people or the same person at different times, a fear of the quieting, a fear of the absence of emotions. This is an interesting phenomenon to investigate.

Having said there's an absence of emotion in the fourth jhana, it's actually—like all these things—not quite so simple or black and white, because of several factors.

First, I would say the fourth jhana still contains happiness. It somehow still has happiness within it, but it's so almost invisibly woven into the texture, so impalpably woven into the fabric of the state, so subtle that it's implicit rather than explicit. It takes considerable time to even notice it.

This makes perfect sense, because this state was born out of happiness. Moving through the jhanas, the fourth jhana emerged from happiness—from the happiness of the second jhana and the refined happiness of the third jhana. But this happiness isn't something you notice initially.

I would say it's definitely present. And certainly in the beginning levels of the fourth jhana, it still contains what we might call the echoes or embers of the third jhana's *sukha* and peacefulness—that truly warm, gorgeous peacefulness.

The beginning of the fourth jhana retains these embers—those echoes and remnants from the third jhana's sukha and profound peacefulness. That warm, gorgeous peacefulness still lingers, casting subtle emotional hues and colors throughout this refined space.

Here again, I must contradict what I said earlier about the absence of emotion. The fourth jhana, like all the jhanas, contains metta within it—though now it remains hidden, deeply embedded in the fabric of the state itself.

I've always found it fascinating when the Buddha describes right intention, the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. What does he say these intentions are? He defines them as the intention toward renunciation, the intention toward non-ill will, and the intention toward non-cruelty.

Now, technically speaking, ill will is the far enemy of metta, and cruelty is the far enemy of compassion—they are direct opposites. So why didn't the Buddha simply say "metta and compassion" instead of "non-ill will and non-cruelty"? Sometimes you'll see it translated that way, but I think he chose these particular words deliberately.

He's making a subtle linguistic distinction that allows legitimacy for states exactly like the fourth jhana. Here we find deep equanimity where metta remains pregnant within the experience, but the state itself is characterized by non-ill will and non-cruelty. It's definitely free from these negative qualities, yet the positive emotions aren't necessarily in the foreground.

This careful language creates space for exploring states where everything appears to go quiet, where metta and compassion aren't always foremost, yet they remain woven into the fabric of the experience. So while the fourth jhana can feel like a pacification or absence of emotion, this isn't quite accurate. As always, nothing is as black and white as it first appears.

Several of you have shared how certain images sometimes arise—very briefly or much in the background—that help ignite a jhana or support access to the primary nimitta. These images don't appear as discursive thoughts but as something subtly supporting the entire experience, propping it up from behind the scenes.

The Buddha's image of being wrapped in white cloth has served this function for me—wrapped in a cloth of pure, luminous stillness. These background images work in that very tinctural way we discussed, in an extremely subtle manner. If I focus too much on the image itself, it becomes more like an imaginal practice. But when they remain very much in the background, they somehow help consolidate and deepen the entire experience, allowing the primary nimitta to become richer—not richer with more imagery, but richer in its essential quality.

One image I used to experience was lying at the bottom of a clear pond filled with lotuses. Picture crystal-clear water, perhaps ten or twenty feet deep, and I'm resting on the bottom, gazing upward at the light filtering down through the water. There's complete rest in this vision—the mind simultaneously so alive and so deeply at peace within this luminosity. Somehow I could breathe underwater in this imaginal space.

Another image that would arise made no rational sense whatsoever. I would feel as if I'd been "completely hung out to dry"—like hanging on a clothesline with pegs on my arms, just suspended there. This doesn't even sound comfortable, yet what it represented was the complete satisfaction that began in the third jhana, now ramped up beyond all conceivable limits. It was as if I'd been thoroughly wrung out, put through the washing machine of this entire process, and then simply hung there in complete fulfillment.

These remain very much secondary nimittas—subtle supportive elements that can help deepen the experience or provide gentle indications of the state's quality.

I believe it's in some commentary that mentions two levels of the fourth jhana, though I'm uncertain what specific levels they're referencing. I could certainly delineate two or even three levels myself, though the exact categorization doesn't really matter.

But what matters is, am I getting to know the territory? Am I getting familiar with the different ranges and substates and textures of this whole space?

So in a way that, yes, this thing about being hung out to dry, that peacefulness and complete contentment that was there at the beginning of the third jhāna, and the deepening echoes of the warmth and tender peacefulness of the third jhāna—they characterize, you could say, the beginning stages of the fourth jhāna. That may be one level we could talk about.

But as it deepens, even those things begin to fade, and they almost become indiscernible, and there's just left this kind of purity, this pure stillness, pure non-movement, pure absence of solidity—free of solidity—pure presence, pure awareness, pure consciousness. There's a sense of purity there that's very beautiful and that comes to predominate.

You could also divide it another way, again like we divided the third jhāna: there's the stillness here in the energy body space, but one might also, as it deepens, get a sense of a much larger realm of stillness. But again, as we said with the third jhāna, the primary focus wants to be in the energy body space. I'm not yet going out there—that comes later. I'm not yet exploring the far reaches of this realm of stillness. I want to be primarily here for the fourth jhāna to really consolidate and deepen and really bathe in its nectar.

You could make three levels or two levels—this two or that two. It doesn't really matter. For me it doesn't matter. I think the invitation though is again to discern more, to get to really know spaces inside out and get really familiar with them.

So how does it progress to the fourth jhāna? How do we do that? Well, mostly through the maturing of the third jhāna. Over time, long-term maturing of the third jhāna will just deliver the fourth jhāna—it should at some point.

Eventually, how do we get to the fourth jhāna? Well, the same way with all that mastery business. Eventually, it's just by subtle intention. Through the familiarity of going to this space, this level, the fourth jhāna eventually, we just remember that stillness, remember that state, remember that beauty and purity, and it can come back just from the intention.

What can help, if it's ready to mature, if it's maturing and just needs a little help—and sometimes you don't even need to do that little bit of nudging—but what can help is noticing within the third jhāna, noticing and tuning to, well, let's say two things: the stillness and equanimity in the third jhāna.

So third jhāna has peacefulness, but as I said, it also has a lot of stillness in it. It's not completely still, but if I tune to the element or the feeling or the sense of stillness, the frequency of stillness in it—again, that's going to stand out and it may help the whole thing deepen because what I tune to gets amplified. And in this case, the amplification is a deepening.

So tuning to the stillness, noticing and then tuning to, really tuning to the stillness or equanimity in the third jhāna. Or noticing and tuning to whatever the most refined frequency is in the third jhāna. Because again, as we move from jhāna to jhāna, there's an increase in refinement. So tuning to what's most refined is a general principle—not just applies to this—that will help take me to the next level. And the stillness of the fourth jhāna will begin to emerge.

I would say, again, that a bit like what we said with the third jhāna, the fourth jhāna will be better—it will feel better, more compelling, more clear, more clearly discriminated, more fulfilling and all that—when it actually has within it, and you can feel within it, some of that profound and beautiful, tender gentleness that goes with the third jhāna. In other words, the beginnings of the fourth jhāna, when they have that kind of experience, that usually ends up being a much richer fourth jhāna experience, even if later on they kind of refine out. They can get subtler and subtler and then they get purified out. There's this luminous stillness.

You can play with the same things really: opening the body and opening the mind to it. Opening, abandoning, surrendering, or penetrating—same modes of attention. Or you can think about dissolving, which I think I mentioned before, but somehow at this level, it gets really, really potent for me, this word dissolving. What would it be to dissolve my body into this luminous, beautiful stillness? Dissolve my body into it. The body becomes that, but the body also just dissolves in it. So there's a movement of intention there. There's a direction there.

And again, just as in the third jhāna, we said sometimes there can be a kind of felt sense of bifurcating or splitting between the mind and the body a little bit, just subtly. Again, at first, it's body and mind totally integrated—they're just really into it. And then with a lot of fourth jhāna experience, sometimes you can feel like, oh, body and mind. And then dissolving my body, and other times dissolving my mind. What is it to dissolve the mind into this luminous stillness and to play with that kind of intention.

So at times those feel like separate intentions, separate processes. Ideally they're one, but it doesn't matter. This is again—we're getting out of this thinking of a jhāna as a very neat, defined, black and white on-off switch or a box. And it's more just territory here. And okay, now I dissolve my body and then I dissolve my mind. Doesn't matter if they're separate. So jhāna practice is a broader thing, rather than worrying about those edges of "Is this it?"

Is it not it? Is it right? Is it wrong? But like always, we want to really penetrate and get intimate—really get inside and intimate with this luminous stillness. And remembering that the primary nimitta is this purity of refined stillness.

A funny thing can happen that you might have witnessed or experienced: sometimes in the fourth jhana, what can be quite common is a kind of leaning forward. The physical body actually starts leaning forward. This can be—I don't know how common this is—actually leaning forward, and it can be really, really extreme. Someone sitting cross-legged on the floor actually ends up with their forehead on the floor. Someone might think, "Oh, they're fast asleep." Or they see them going like this and think they're fast asleep. Far from it.

The nodding looks very different and feels very different. You can tell the difference between these things. They're quite—they both involve a leaning forward—but they're really quite different phenomena.

Ajahn Mahabua was one of the great—he died not that long ago—one of the great twentieth-century Thai forest meditation masters. He used to say in relation to this leaning forward: don't alter it at all. Don't mess with it. The process is happening; you let it happen. And if your forehead ends up on the floor, you let it end up on the floor.

I had a teacher who said, as soon as you start noticing that happening, stop it and just make sure you can sit upright. So there are differences of opinion.

I admit, over the years I've gotten into what I wouldn't call a bad habit, but a habit that I slightly regret. I do lean forward, and sometimes quite a lot. Looking back, it would have been better had I nipped that habit in the bud and not allowed it to develop, because it can be a little distracting as things go on. But it's certainly not a tragedy. However, I'm saying this now so that if you encounter it, you can perhaps nip it in the bud and make an intention to sit upright—stop it when it's happening. But even if it does happen, sometimes you can very gently sit up, keeping the meditation going.

What's happening here? I don't know. I'm not sure percentage-wise how common this is, but it's really not uncommon. Is it that we're conceiving of our attention as something that operates forwards? And so the stillness is in front of us, and we gener-

ally conceive of our attention—I know I can hear something back there, but because the eyes go that way and the nose is there and the mouth is there, the sense organs are in the head and they're pointing that way—is it that we just habitually conceive of our attention going forwards, and then we conceive of the stillness primarily in front of us, and that's why we're leaning forwards?

Do you remember, you can play with a few things here, and I think it's worth trying to nip this in the bud if it starts to come up for you. You can play with almost imagining the stillness 360 degrees, like the Buddha's analogy: wrapped around the body. So it's 360 degrees around—it's a scaffolding of stillness, almost. It's right around the body space, keeping it upright, because there's as much support, as much presence of the scaffolding in front as behind, as to the sides. Playing with that 360 degrees prevents us from the habit of feeling and sensing objects in the mind being somewhat in front of us. In a way, my attention is pulled equally, equanimously, in all directions. There's maybe less chance of falling over forwards.

Remember on the opening evening when I introduced counting with the breath and actually said to play with it behind? Getting used to playing with breathing in from the back, getting used to turning around in physical space 180 degrees—the sense of where we're paying attention and which direction the attention moves in can bear significant fruits later on when it comes to something like this.

So it could be something like that. It could also be—and I don't know, I've never really talked to anyone about this—that what starts to happen at this level is a significant degree of unfabricating. We've talked a little bit about that. Some of you are very familiar with this teaching, but it's related to what I said about equanimity. As we let go of more and more clinging in the moment, there's less and less push and pull, less and less clinging. Then we talked about the vedana—the pleasant and unpleasant are actually fabricated less. Less and less and less and less. So there's more and more unfabricating. Less and less fabricating of what? Well, of self, but also in this case of perception and sensation. Less and less and less, until at certain points the sensations don't even arise.

Less and less and less. There's more unfabricating. There's quite a degree of unfabricating at this point, at the point of the fourth jhana. Unfabricating is quite a degree of deconstructing or non-constructing going on.

Sometimes I wonder, is this sort of falling over just a kind of reflection in the body of the kind of unfabricating that's going on? There's less construction, because it also happens for me sometimes—and again it's a habit; if I could go back I would change—but it can also occur when you're deep in insight ways of looking and they're working

primarily with this unfabricating, working with deeply letting go, and a similar sort of thing happens. I don't know, I'm not sure, but it's worth knowing about and working with. It's part of the territory potentially here. And it may be something that comes to bother you if you don't nip it in the bud, or it may be like—I don't think it's that much of an issue for me—but for some people they feel like, oh, I really wish, et cetera.

Probably a more significant thing to look out for is that again, after many experiences going in and out of the fourth jhana and getting used to it—you remember what I said about a dam bursting when you reach a new level and it's just like, wow, it's just happening. I don't have to do anything. It's just perfect as it is. And then after a while, it's like, ah, now some more subtle work and play. I see the need for that and the potential for that.

So one thing that can happen, a kind of problem that emerges after quite a lot of experience going in and out of the fourth jhana, is that sometimes one's there and it's very nice, it's very still, the mind is definitely very mindful, very equanimous, very focused, but it's just a fraction dull. So there's no nodding, there's none of that. The whole thing is much, much more subtle. It's very subtly, very slightly dull at times.

This actually is an important thing to notice, to look out for and notice. It's still a state of equanimity, of mindfulness, of clear awareness and all the rest of it, of focus, of samadhi, but just relatively to what it could be, it's just a little bit dull. That's a really important thing to take note of. It's just gone into that slight dullness. Can I ramp up in this moment the sense of presence? Just turn up the sense of presence. I'm present to this primary nimitta, to this stillness. There's a presence there, a real aliveness of presence.

One of the ways you can do this is really come into the sense of now, now, now. It's now. This thing is now. This stillness is now. And really come sharply into the sense of now with presence. It's two ways of saying the same thing. And that allows it to become brighter and more alive.

There are many instances, like I said, where the Buddha talks about the jhanas in the Pali Canon. There are some instances where he sort of does it in a certain formula, and other instances where he does it in another formula, and other instances where in a third kind of formula or way of explaining. And there's one of these sort of stock, almost contrived formulas where he goes through the first four jhanas and describes them as we've just described them. And then he says, "Then the practitioner, then the monk"—he's usually talking about monks—"thus with mind," which means something like he, the monk, with a citta, with a mind-heart, with an awareness, thus meaning from the jhanas.

The usual translation you'll hear is "concentrated," but actually it means "samadhi-fied"—partly why I'm wanting to dwell on this. And he goes through a whole list. So what he's going to do is go through a whole list describing what the practitioner has got from their practice of the jhanas or the first four jhanas, and then describing what they then do with that, how they put that mind to work. And there are different formulas and different contexts, depending on who he's talking to and what he's describing.

But what's often translated, for example, after the first four jhanas is: "Then the practitioner, with a mind thus concentrated." So I'm just wanting to point out—we've dwelt on this a number of times—what's the difference if we translate samadhi as "concentration" or we leave it as samadhi? We talked about this, right?

So to me, samadhi is the richer word and I don't get narrowed into that view of what—because it's very easy to read these texts and take certain conclusions. And I want to actually take the time going through this and indicate how we can read these passages and the translations of these passages and just assume it means "with a mind very concentrated" and very stuck, very able to stay steady with one thing, and very like a laser beam. All these words are very easy to hear that way. I'm going to bother to go through the Pali and actually see how there are different ways we can open this out.

So that's the first one. With a citta, with a mind thus samadhi-fied, thus harmonized in agreement. To me, it's got a whole different range and richness of what's involved there, rather than just "concentrated."

Then he said, so with the mind thus samadhi-fied, and then he goes on to other adjectives: with the mind thus, not just samadhi-fied, but parisuddhe, which means "purified." What might that mean? Purified. Purified of what? Okay, but that should have come with the first jhana.

Of vedana, of hindrances—it could mean all kinds of things. What I'm pointing to is how easy it is to read these texts and listen to dharma talks already programmed to hear a certain narrow range of meaning which is not necessarily there. It could also be purified of relative grossness—when you refine something. I want to open up these possibilities.

Yes, hindrances and subtle hindrances. Yes, pleasure and pain. Yes, relative grossness. What is happening here? Because this is the point—the Buddha has gone through the first four jhanas and then explains to someone what the point of it is. Again, we return to this whole question we've explored so much at the beginning of this retreat: What's the point of this? Why are we doing this? What are we going to emphasize? What's important here?

So the mind could be purified of who knows what—grossness, subtle hindrances, pleasure, pain. But then the Buddha repeats this: parisuddhe pariyodāte, which also means pure. This word pariyodāta also means very clever or excellent or accomplished. Sometimes it's translated as bright. In English, that word carries the same ambiguity—"Oh, she's very bright."

As I said, there is this sense of visual luminosity there, but it's really a kind of brightness of presence. When we talk about a bright person, it's also that they're bright in presence. It's not just that they're very good at doing Rubik's cubes or whatever. The mind is bright with presence, but also bright with possibility. When we say someone is bright, there's possibility there.

This translation of bright points to a very pure realm of still light. The purity is interesting if we linger here, because it's also related to the stillness. Stillness itself is something pure—purity of push-pull, purity of equanimity.

Again, just expanding on the possible meanings. When you say a person has a really pure character, it's like saying they have a lot of integrity, which is also like saying they can't be bribed by something pleasant or blackmailed by the threat of something unpleasant. Do you understand? So the purity could refer to something like that—how is the mind in its poise right now in relation to the threat and the dangling carrot of unpleasant and pleasant?

Opening up meanings—it's so easy to hear and read just what we already know, what we've already been told. That's the most common way, unfortunately, for human beings to hear and read: to simply hear and read what we already know.

It could also be pure in refinement. If you think about something like gold—you mine gold, gather it, and it's got other stuff in it. To purify gold is also to refine gold. The mind is getting down to something of its pure, nearer to its pure natural nature. Words like pure can mean many different things, and I think the text is pregnant with all those meanings rather than being brought down to just one.

Then the Buddha continues with more adjectives describing this mind after meditation, after the fourth jhana: anaṅgaṇa, which is something like passionless or blameless or unblemished, and vigataupakkilesa, which means something like free, without defilements or obstructions. Mudubhūta, which means malleable, pliant, supple.

Later there are passages where the Buddha does this same description and really picks up on that quality, saying like a goldsmith who has this substance—now they've got their gold, molten gold—then they can shape it however they like. Malleable, malleable, malleable.

That may be, in my view, one of the really centrally important fruits of all this. I stressed it at the beginning of the retreat—malleability, that one of the main fruits of jhana practice is the malleability of perception.

So it's here now. *Kamaniye*, which means workable, able to be put to work or directed in a certain way. *Thite*, which means steady. And then the last one, *aninjapatte*, which means attained to imperturbability.

It's very easy, I think, to hear or read that in context and just read it very quickly, thinking, "Yes, it means the mind is now absolutely nailed to its object. It doesn't move. It's imperturbable." But does it only point to that? Might it also point again to equanimity, which we've been talking about, and the quietening of the push and pull?

Push and pull throws the mind out of balance. When you're exerting a thought, you're pulled by something or trying to hang on to something or pushing something away—it throws the mind out of balance. And so it could be that the imperturbability refers, or refers as well, or maybe even refers principally, less to a complete ability to fix the mind's attention on something unwaveringly and more to this capacity not to be swayed. It's steady, it's unshakable, it's imperturbable. I'm not swayed by my reactivity to any phenomenon—pleasant, unpleasant, or otherwise.

But really the point here is again just to illustrate, in a much larger context, how very easily we can hear and read and basically hear and read what we already know. And we're learning very little new. Things are not being opened up or challenged. In this particular case, to open up the view—and it's related to what are we doing here, why are we doing this, and therefore what's important of all the different things that are going on when we practice samadhi and all the different things that we could emphasize. And again, how much what we emphasize, how much the big picture view will end up directing us consciously or unconsciously, wisely or unwisely, in terms of our micro moment-to-moment choices.

And then he says *cittam abhinirati* and *abhininameti*, which basically directs or applies the *citta*, inclines or bends the *citta* towards. And then he gives a whole bunch of things that you can then do with the mind or direct your awareness to. One of them is vipassana practice or certain kinds of vipassana practice.

I want to point something else out about that sutta. Here he is speaking, explaining to someone, this person or that person. It's a kind of contrived educational situation, a contrived formula in a way. He goes through the first four jhanas, he gives the stock descriptions. And then he gives this whole list of "and thus the monk with the mind does this and this and this and this." The whole thing is a very stock, contrived formula.

But to me, it's important not to get misled by that contrived formula and actually see the sutta in context—that it *is* a contrived formula. It's a kind of educational heuristic technique he's using. It doesn't then mean that we should do jhana one followed by jhana two followed by jhana three followed by jhana four and then decide "okay, now I'm going to do this." Again, it's very easy to read a sutta like that and just take it without really understanding it as a heuristic tool, as an educational tool. It's a contrived formula. It doesn't mean that that's how we meditate. But there are some people who would teach that way because it says, well, one, two, three, four, and then you do this, then you do your vipassana. And there may be other situations where there's one, two, three, up to eight, and then you do vipassana. But these are just—do you understand what I mean by contrived? It's not really a strict instruction for practice.

A couple of things. If any of you, or any of your future selves, or anyone listening to this anywhere at any time, if ever you decide that you would like to really get deep into jhana practice and you find yourself in that territory and you want to devote some time to it—jhanas and how they work with insight so beautifully and fruitfully—once you got to this stage, it can be really helpful to almost make the fourth jhana your base.

I know a monk who teaches this. A famous monk from the mid-20th century in Thailand, a Thai forest monk, one of my teacher's teachers, said, "Make the fourth jhana your base." It's like a hub. And from there, you can go to lots of places. And it's this place of very bright, very steady, but not very warm awareness and consciousness.

I would like to say make the third and fourth jhana your base. If you ever get to that level of practice and you decide you're really into this, make the third and fourth because the third has such a lovely, warm, healing space. It's such a lovely, warm, healing space. So you make the third and fourth your base and then venture out backwards in the jhanas, forwards in the jhanas to different insight practices. And that becomes home base.

But having said that, as I mentioned, some of you will never want to do that. And you should never feel that you should do that. You don't have to develop jhanas to that degree.

You don't have to develop jhanas to any degree. Sometimes people say they need the jhanas—perhaps because I've emphasized something or they've heard something—they need the jhanas to get insight. I don't think it's true. There is a passage where the Buddha says, "Without jhana, there's no liberation. Without insight, there's no liberation." But I'm not sure about that interpretation.

You might have heard me say something that was simply contextual. When I first started talking publicly about jhanas here more than ten years ago, the context was much more anti-jhana—much more dismissive and poo-pooing, thinking they were a ridiculous waste of time or a dead end or dangerous. So teaching happens within a context. I might really emphasize their importance, but you don't need the jhanas.

Sometimes people think, because I emphasize their healing qualities, that they need the jhanas to heal. You probably don't. They can be very healing, but it's very rare that someone actually needs the jhanas to heal and couldn't heal in some other way.

However, having said that, what you may need to heal—much more than the jhana itself—is some of what we've been emphasizing in our way of working. For instance, when we talk about opening and really opening, really abandoning and really surrendering, that may be much more significant in a person's healing than the attainment of this or that jhana. Because that person may, for lots of different reasons, have quite a limited ability to really open, or they think they're really opening when actually it's only halfway, or to be really wholehearted.

These capacities—however they come—may be necessary. I think it's probably rare that an actual jhana is necessary when nothing else would give that kind of healing for a certain person. But to be able to open as a human being—I mean really open, open the energy body and open—that may well be quite significant because it has to do with much more than the attainment of a state in meditation. It has to do with one's relationship with life and existence, relationship with others, sexuality—all kinds of things.

Do you remember we talked about the cooking ingredients? Similar thing here. If you're in the fourth jhana and you want to go to the third jhana, what do you need to grab from the shelf and add? Yes, sukha. You just reach for your sukha and pour in the sukha, and fourth jhana plus sukha should deliver you to the third jhana. It's a handy trick, but again, part of the art of all this and the malleability of perception—the art of playing with perception.

I think I mentioned this already, but it's worth stating again: probably over time, through repeated experiences with the third and fourth jhana and the deeper jhanas—jhanas from three onwards—their increased refinement will actually have the effect of refining the piti in the first jhana. Not so much retroactively, but when you come back to the piti and the first jhana, they will usually calm it and maybe refine it as well. When you go to these other jhanas repeatedly and then come back, your sense of what the first jhana is begins to change. Again, that's part of why the post-it notes. This may happen with other jhanas, with the sukha, and so forth.

All the business about mastery applies here as well. All the elements of mastery—you can play with them here. They're just the same: ability to sustain, ability to summon at will, ability to ping pong, ability to go for walks outside, all the rest of it.

Because now you've got more jhanas to play with, there are increased leapfrog ping pong permutation possibilities. You can be jumping all over and practice that. Once you get to this point, you want to practice a little bit at the end—just having some fun at the end of sittings, moving around and seeing how rapidly you can move. But mostly you want to be marinating and really marinating in this. It does something very profound to the consciousness, to the being.

Let's have some quiet together.

Thank you, everyone, and time for tea.

CHAPTER 216

Q & A

Rob Burbea · 1h15

> *In this Q&A session from the Practising the Jhānas retreat, Rob Burbea addresses various questions about jhāna practice and related topics. Key discussions include understanding primary nimittas versus satellite states, distinguishing between pīti and sukha across the jhānic spectrum, and navigating transitions from second to third jhāna. Burbea emphasizes the importance of balancing probing and opening in samādhi practice, offering practical guidance on working with both pleasant and unpleasant experiences during meditation.*
>
> *The session also explores deeper territory, examining how different ways of looking (insight approaches) can be applied to jhānic states and painful experiences. Burbea discusses the dependent arising of perception, explaining how attention mixed with various factors (aversion, identification, views of self and reality) affects what we perceive. He offers a radical reinterpretation of the Bahiya Sutta and Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, suggesting these texts point toward understanding the fabrication and unfabrication of experience rather than simple bare attention or impermanence practice. This teaching bridges jhāna practice with profound insight into emptiness and dependent origination.*

Q & A

A period is open for questions if anyone would like to ask.

I have a question about primary nimittas, and you've talked about satellite states a few times. Last night as I was practicing with my base practice, it didn't feel like there were primary nimittas of pīti or sukha around initially. Then after a while I noticed a sense of physical well-being in the body, which didn't exactly feel like pīti as I'd been used to, and it didn't really feel like happiness either. It was more of a physical, gentle calm. But that was what was around, so I tried to absorb into it, and that worked to some degree. There was quite a lot of absorption into that state.

But it didn't feel jhanic in the ways that other states have felt before, and so then I started thinking, is this some kind of satellite state? Do all of the jhānas have satellite states? And then I also thought, perhaps this is another kind of pīti which I haven't encountered—a sense of physical well-being, but it just didn't fit the box of how I've conceived of pīti before.

I also have some questions around primary nimittas. You've encouraged us that the primary nimitta needs to be what we focus on in jhāna practice. And I began to wonder, why is that? If love is one of the characteristics of the second jhāna, for example, why do you not encourage people to focus on those aspects? And then also some questions around soulmaking, where you talk about an infinitude of qualities that we can theoretically absorb into. So it's not one question, but just an exploration of those themes.

Well, how nice was it?

It was nicer than any hindrances. It wasn't... I think it could have been a bit brighter, perhaps. It felt a little bit low energy, maybe. The pleasure could have been brighter.

Yeah, the pleasure or the state—the state itself.

It doesn't sound, again, it's like when to fuss over is it, isn't it? But that's partly what you're asking. So it doesn't sound jhanic. And yes, there are lots—the nature of the pīti will change over time and it will certainly change, as I said, after you've gotten more into the third, fourth, et cetera. They really have an effect on the pīti. But the pītis, they have an effect, but it's still really yummy. It's not just that they make it kind of bland. It's actually really nice. It's just different—it's mellower, but really, really nice.

And so yes, probably there are what we could talk about as satellite states or states in the neighborhood. I'm not sure I would call that a satellite state or state in the neighborhood. I'll talk hopefully in the next few days about different kinds of satellite states where there's this very clear, amazing state, and there's this very clear, amazing state, and there's this very clear, amazing state, and they have some things really in common as if they're part of a larger constellation.

In a way, what it sounds like you're talking about is something where some of the jhāna factors are a little bit gathered together, but not really in a way that they're blossoming. I don't know, strictly speaking, I would call that a satellite state, but it's in a certain territory.

The question practically then is, is this fruitful to hang out in? And obviously compared to papañca and compared to whatever else, it's skillful, it's fruitful. Is it going to be fruitful in the way that I can hang out in it and the way that I'm hanging out with it allows it to blossom into an actual jhanic state of, say, peacefulness or something like that? That takes... As I said when I talked about the third jhāna, it's a much safer bet to go through the happiness and really drink. It's not to say that it's impossible the other way, with just this kind of nice, calm feeling. It's not that it's impossible, and it's worth playing with and trying, but generally speaking, it will be more the other way, from a really ripe, full, fleshy satisfaction.

It didn't feel like how I would think the third jhāna would feel. It wasn't refined in that way. It was sort of the similar level of refinement as pīti but just without the movement and energy.

It doesn't sound at all like the third jhāna. So a lot of people—it would be very common, we've talked about this several times now—mistake a kind of sense of calmness, maybe even one that they're familiar with, deep peacefulness, very quiet mind, et cetera, for that territory.

But the question is whether the way that I'm being with it can refine it. So it didn't feel refined, but the question is: can I be with it in a way that refines it?

It is possible, but that's going to depend on a lot of things. Partly it will depend on whether I really have a lot of experience with the third jhāna, because then the chances of a state like that refining into the third jhāna are much higher. If I don't really have much experience of the third jhāna—and I mean the real third jhāna deal—then the chances of a state like that refining and ripening just through careful attention aren't impossible, but they're not very high. Rather, it's much more likely to ripen through the second jhāna and that real fullness and really getting into it.

As for the other secondary nimittas, none of this is black and white. Of course, there's a lovely love there. You're going to want to explore that. It's just that if you make that your primary thing, it will ripen into something else. It will go in a different direction. What we pay attention to is what gets amplified, and it also sets a direction.

If we were on a retreat about exploring metta and different heart openings and different kinds of love, then of course we would do that. But because we're on a jhāna retreat, it's really something to keep this intention—it's like, okay, this is my road. Yes, there are lots of interesting things at the side of the road, and I can explore all that, but I need to remember: this is my road if we want to develop the jhānas.

As to soul making, there's an infinitude of different states and lovely things and different openings. Yeah, I guess the question is that we're selecting in the jhāna path—there's a very specific trajectory that we've been talking about. And then there's a curiosity about the outcomes: How does it unfold if one begins to absorb into these other qualities?

Sometimes in the second jhāna, or just in the sitting, there's a sense of nobility, for example. That would be more of an imaginal practice of taking that as an object or feeling the resonance of that. Though it may or may not be a fully imaginal practice—it could just be an energetic practice.

We did something on the opening evening about getting in touch with the sense of devotion. Do you remember that? Something like that's very skillful. Lawrence mentioned working with anger, then it goes to power. Those things are emotional, energetic practices, transformations. They don't necessarily need to be imaginal. For something to be imaginal, it involves a lot of different things happening.

All of these fruits are there. But like I said, what do we want to do? And it's not better or worse, because for some person, actually being able to feel into their devotion that's connected with their desire that way and actually feel it in the energy body and let that empower—that's huge.

For another person, like what Lawrence was talking about, the ability to be with anger in a way that's not fragmenting the being, driving them crazy, hurting everyone around them, toxic, et cetera—to actually distill that energetically, emotionally, and find the power and strength there that everything coheres around, and then sit in that, and act from there, speak from there, be from there, perceive from there. That's huge.

Those things are huge. So again, we have to really get clear: what is the larger context of what we're doing here? To me, the larger context of what we're doing here, as I said in the opening, sits within all these other practices and feeds and complements all of them, and is fed and complemented by all of them. But it's also distinct.

If we're walking down this road, there's all sorts of "Look at that lovely pear on that tree. Oh, and look at that over there." And it's fantastic. In the context of our larger life of practice, yes, we can go to that. There's a side road down where the apple orchard is or whatever it is. Brilliant! But jhānas won't deepen unless that intention is really, "This is my road, this is my road, this is my road."

It doesn't mean you can't have a few apples and pears on the way, but there's something about keeping it that way to deepen in jhānas. There are more potential riches and openings than anyone can ever experience in their whole lifetime, whoever you are. And that's the thing, especially when you get talking about soul making.

There are things that are part of what I would call basic Dharma training—by which I mean things like working with anger that way, things like being able to get a sense of my nobility and have that energized in the heart and affect my sense of self and my life, things like being with the sense of devotion and letting that empower, things like working with the emotions, emptiness, all that. That's all a very large plate of stuff to get through in terms of basic Dharma practices—very possible.

But once you get to soul making, it becomes infinite. By the nature of what the soul making dynamic does, it will always create new openings, new states, new perceptions, new territory, new beyonds. It will create and discover new aspects of reality. So there's a distinction there.

I guess what I was calling the tray or the play of basic Dharma practice is probably quite wide compared to some other presentations.

Provisionally from a teaching point of view, if you think, "Oh, have I now gone into my first jhāna? Have I skipped ahead and I'm calling something that's actually the beginnings of the third jhāna the first jhāna? Am I still calling that the first jhāna and then calling the sukha something else?"

From my point of view, it doesn't actually matter that much. What matters is that you're exploring these territories with some kind of map sense, and you're getting familiar with different territories and different energies. The precise labeling of "this is first jhāna, this is second jhāna" - while it can be helpful - is not the most crucial thing.

What's more important is that you're developing familiarity with these different qualities of energy, these different textures of consciousness and embodiment. You're learning to navigate between them, to recognize them, to cultivate them. That's the real skill development that's happening.

So yes, I think you're very much on the right track. Keep exploring with that sense of curiosity and openness that you seem to have. The refinement you're noticing in what you're calling pīti is quite typical - these energies do tend to become more subtle and refined as we get more familiar with them.

And the wild, bubbling quality of what you're experiencing as sukha is also completely normal. Sometimes sukha can indeed be quite exuberant, especially when we're first getting to know it. As you spend more time with it, you may find it has its own range of expressions, from the more effervescent to the more smooth and flowing.

The key is to stay curious about both, to keep visiting them, and to notice how they feel different in your body and awareness.

I see what you mean. If that's a concern, though, I would check with the emotion, because the emotion in the sukha is going to be primarily this very warm, tender, exquisite peacefulness or satisfaction—whatever it is, depending on the level.

But you're shaking your head, so it sounds like it's not problematic.

"No, the emotion is clear. It's more the refinement that I was concerned about."

Okay. Yeah. So I don't know, other than just hang out in both—lots and lots—and hopefully it will get clear. It should get clear. But don't rush all these things. Probably everyone's got kind of post-it notes still at this point, and that's appropriate. Things mature, things change. We notice different territories. We notice more as time goes on.

So it's all basically really nice. You're enjoying it, and it's just asking you to get more and more familiar with it. And then it will get clearer.

"I have a question about going from second to third. Sometimes it feels like—especially if it's come from quite a bubbly end of second—when I get into third, it's like coming from a really bright place into a darkened room, where it's kind of hard at first to make out the nuances of third. Because it's like, okay, right, it feels peaceful, but I haven't yet seen the crystal clarity or the tenderness or the divinity or those qualities. And I found that sometimes I actually end up in a space a bit like what Juho was saying, which is not really what I thought it was. So it's like, okay, that's not quite the kind of deep, dark pool of third. What would you recommend at that point? Is it just better to go back or try and refine?"

You could go back, because probably that place you're describing that's not quite it is, as I said, one of these habit results of your insight practice over the years. It's a state of relative equanimity and quietness, and the mind has got quite used to that, so you're ending up in that.

So one thing you could do is come back to the second and maybe you could even start feeling the drinking of the happiness as satisfying, as a verb in present tense. You understand? And maybe that will take you to the satisfied. So you're tuning a little bit more to something more specific that's more related to the third. So that's one option.

Another option might be—and this should be possible with time—that you can, since a lot of this just starts to become memory and subtle intention, you're actually remembering the whole set of qualities of the third jhana. That whole gorgeous, realm-like, exquisite—we're using words like divine—you're actually remembering that flavor and you bring that. You actually go there, but try going there by memory of those things.

Does that make sense? So it's really a realm that you're remembering, almost, as opposed to just hanging out. Because you've been practicing so long, there's probably a lot of momentum and habitual momentum to get into these other states that are, as we've been saying, relatively skillful, relatively equanimous, relatively peaceful, relatively non-eventful. It's all good, but if you want to make sure you don't bypass the actual third jhana—which by this point you can see the qualitative difference is quite marked—then you have to aim a little more.

Either in the process of the second jhana with the satisfying, satisfying—you see what you're doing there? You're actually inclining the mind towards a certain emotion in the present whose fulfillment is the third jhana. Does that make sense?

Or, as I said, you're remembering a whole realm—other aspects of the realm apart from the fact that there's equanimity and peace there.

It may not be ready for that, but it may be getting there. We have to see. But that's part of the whole mastery deal. And you can maybe remember that when it's going well in the second jhana. You can maybe just lightly, subtly intend to remember that. Okay. Does that make sense?

Yeah, no, that's really helpful.

Good. I just want to ask one more thing about... So yesterday I was sitting with a really bright, bubbly, quite silly actually happiness in second jhana, just really enjoying it, and then suddenly this spontaneous "not me, not mine" came out of it just completely from nowhere. It was really surprising. And so then I had this happiness that wasn't about anything and didn't belong to anybody. And it had this kind of—it was just really wonderful, magical, just like, wow. And I just wanted to know whether there was anything worth exploring there or whether I should shelve that for later.

I think that probably, to some extent, to some degree or other, there is less self-identification with the happiness in the territory of the second jhana. So usually when we're happy, it's connected to a story and quite a more fabricated sense of self who is feeling very happy about something or other. And there's a whole projection in time and with one's life and all that's going—even if I'm not thinking, thinking, thinking, that's all there. It's all being fabricated to a certain extent: the self and then taking this happiness personally. Does this make sense?

In the second jhana, naturally—which I'll get to in the next couple of days—the self is, as we go through the jhanas, less and less fabricated. Maybe I'll modify that statement at some point, but it's less and less fabricated. So in the second jhana, there's very little personality. There's very little story. There's very little background history and where I'm going and what I want and the whole rest of it. There's even very little psychological history. It's just happiness. So already, to a certain extent, there's a kind of—to some degree or other, there's a sort of—it's not perfectly "not me or mine" in the same way that it would be for the usual sense of self. Do you understand?

So it might be just that you're—this is something we kind of notice as it goes on anyway. But because it's a little less identified, then it lends itself more to being seen as less identified. And you have a history of "not me, not mine" practice of anatta, of disidentifying. So it just kind of piggybacks on that.

Or rather, it's available as a practice. And again, I hope to talk about this at some point, and maybe even a few times on this retreat: we turn an insight way of looking onto a jhana. The jhana itself, or the primary nimitta, becomes an object for an insight way of looking. I wouldn't recommend that to anyone at this point. It's a whole other level of skill and art.

But one can then regard this or that jhana—the whole thing or one aspect of it—as "not me, not mine, not me, not mine." And that becomes a super powerful practice. You have to stay with it, stay with it, stay with it and see what happens. But I wouldn't do that before you really know that jhana inside out and it's really got established. Again, if you do that too early, so to speak, you risk being the foolish inexperienced cow kind of thing that the Buddha was talking about. It will probably just slide all over without kind of knowing where you are, and then you might lose control.

The jhanas themselves need to be consolidated, thoroughly familiar, thoroughly steady and established. And then for some people, they can start doing their insight ways of looking on the jhana itself. And that, as I said, is a both very lovely but super powerful way of practicing. But I will try and talk more about that another time.

Yeah. Thanks. Yeah. Good. Good.

I think Mikhail had one.

Yeah, thank you. I have a quick technical question about steadiness and enjoyment. What to do when it seems that when I emphasize steadiness, I start to lose somehow the capacity to enjoy, and when I emphasize enjoyment, I lose my steadiness and mind starts easily wandering. They seem somehow to close each other out to some extent.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/14). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So what could be the answer? What exactly happens when you emphasize the enjoyment?

My way to emphasize enjoyment generally is to open and open and open to the enjoyment and really let go—somehow fall into the lap of, say, happiness or pīti or something. I really like to let go and let the whole consciousness and energy body sense open, and I just fall somehow into the arms of the nimitta. I wondered if this really opening, opening, opening strategy is actually causing some... like I'm opening, it's kind of like too much.

Well, yes, thank you for saying that. This is so individual and can change with time. But just immediately when you say that, it sounds like you can't open too much, but what you can do is open too much relative to how much probing you're doing.

There's no end to how much you can open. I don't think there is. We're infinitely deep human beings. We can just open and open. But relative to how much penetration and probing you're doing, you can hear it in the way you language it, Mikhail. When you're doing that, you're kind of going into quite a passive mode. And that's the problem.

Whereas when you're penetrating and probing with the intention, the agenda of enjoying, then it's really like they go together. The enjoyment and the sustaining go together. You understand? So it sounds like for you right now, in the mix of things, upping the penetrative probing with the enjoyment—in the mix.

For other people, for a lot of people, it's more opening that needs to happen. I said this already—people can think, "Oh, but I am opening," but actually they're not. One isn't opening as much as one could. But one's so used to only a limited amount of opening in the being that one thinks, "Well, I'm opening." But actually there's more opening to be able to do there.

So all this is very individual. But if you keep in mind—you know, there are lots of modes of attention—but if you keep in mind these two principles, one's a bit more yang, if you like, and one's a bit more yin. One's a bit more active, one's a bit more passive or receptive. If you just keep that in mind and the necessity to play with both and to move around, then the question becomes: well, it may not be because it's all going fine, or it might be like, "Am I overdoing it a little bit right now on one or the other?"

And "right now" might be for the six months I've gotten into a habit of overdoing on one side or the other, or it might be just in this moment or this five minutes or whatever. Does that make sense?

So when you probe, there's no mutual exclusivity between enjoying and sustaining. If I'm probing trying to enjoy to the max, I will obviously try and sustain, of course. But if I go into too receptive a mode, then everything gets a bit loose and I'm not doing any work. I'm not really working there. I'm expecting everything to happen.

But again, this is an answer I'm giving you right now, and for someone else it might be that what's needed is the other one—oftentimes without realizing it or recognizing that's what's needed.

Thank you. Would you say generally that steadiness arises out of the balance of opening and probing? When it really hits the sweet spot of opening and probing at the moment, at the nimitta, at the context of the practice—that's where the steadiness arises?

I'm not sure. I feel a bit... I'm hesitant to say that. The probing and the opening thing is a very fluid, responsive, sort of unformulaic thing. So really we were just saying the most general thing, like don't neglect one for the sake of the other.

So I'm not sure there's a sweet spot per se, as much as just... that whole movement is not only going to help sustaining, it's going to help deepening, it's going to help absorbing, it's going to help all kinds of things.

If you go back to the Buddha's original image—or rather the image for the soap mixer with the first jhāna—it's quite active. You're kind of mixing something. There's something about moving between those modes that's also part of it, mixing. And in a way that applies to the other jhānas as well, in a way, or at a much subtler level.

So I don't know that it's just about sustaining as much as the whole show just works better. It's like kneading bread, working it in the flour.

Alright, thank you. Is that Nick back there?

It's just related to part of that question about the probing and the receptivity. You just called it passive as well as the more active being with the nimitta. Naturally, I'm just much more receptive. That's where the opening comes much more naturally.

With PT, it's really about opening to that experience. I've been working to develop a sense of what the probing is like, since it's unfamiliar to me. What I found is that several times when I've taken a part of the energy body that has felt particularly strong in PT and really put my concentration there to probe into that, what tends to happen is that immediately there's an opening.

The sense in the energy body then is that the probing goes almost immediately into an opening. It's like the sensation there just opens right up quite expansively. I feel like I've lost the probing already, and I don't know if this is just because I'm not very skilled at it yet or if that's something that naturally happens. When you probe into anything, there's space in there, and that's what you kind of fall into. So I'm a little confused about how to work with that.

Yeah, I think what you're describing is very normal. That's where the image of someone diving into a lake becomes helpful as a way to understand the probing movement. The body becomes streamlined in its shape when you're diving, not just splattering into the lake. If you're diving, there's this streamlined probing of one point in the water, but then very quickly you find yourself surrounded by water. You aimed at a point, but then it was like, "Oh, now I'm in a new territory."

So that may happen, as you're describing, very quickly, or it may happen at some point when you're probing. Very normal. But then you can just do the same thing again. So it's not like you're getting it wrong. You can just probe again, and again, and again. It's not like you need to rush—"Right, same again, immediately, quick, don't lose any time." The whole thing is simply: what feels helpful right now?

If it feels good, great. Then you may try doing it again and again and again, or you may at some point switch to a more open mode. It's not that we're trying to eliminate any gaps in the probing or any interruptions. If it's opening that way, something is working.

Does it mean that you can't sustain the probe in one area, that it just won't sustain, but you can go back a bit later and probe somewhere else? Or can you stay much more in the probing mode?

Let's take this person who dives into a lake. They dive and they dive, and then they're underwater and it's all around them. They could, if they want, just keep going in the same direction. They're in a bigger space now, but they could just keep going in the same direction. It's something like that. Their perception shifts—rather than a spot that they're aiming at, aiming to dive right on that spot in the water, their perception is now that it's three-dimensional around them, but they can keep going in the same direction. It's more like a direction.

I'm wondering about the spectrum between pīti and sukha, because I've been exploring the really, really subtle, fine end of pīti, where it's just these beautiful, tiny explosions, and I'm loving it. Then there are times—and I'm less familiar with the sukha—but there are times when I'm in that bubbly, really bubbly energy that feels like it has much more pīti in it than the fine end of pīti does.

I've been playing with cross-fading pīti and sukha, and it seems almost like pīti has this spectrum here, and then the second jhāna spectrum is here, as though you can almost go finer in pīti than you might at the top of the second jhāna.

Can I offer something and see if it helps? There is a spectrum of refinement across all the jhānas. The eighth jhāna is just unbelievably refined compared to any of the others, and certainly compared to the first.

So there's that spectrum of refinement.

Then there's a spectrum of refinement... Well, again, it's maybe these words subtlety and refinement that get a bit confused. So I would probably say there's a spectrum of... Let's use the word calming and refinement differently. What gets confusing is maybe the word subtlety.

There's a spectrum of calming sukha, for instance, through the second jhana. There's a spectrum of calming the peacefulness and the sukha in the third jhana as it gets towards the fourth jhana. In the first jhana, although piti has a large range, in a way it's not that the deeper end of piti has a subtler or more refined piti.

If I said anything, I probably wasn't that clear because I think these words are getting slightly overlapped and confused and I'm perhaps not being consistent with using them. The thing about subtle piti is just that if that's all there is, then we need to be good with that and be able to work with it. And really be okay with that.

"Yeah, I've been loving subtle piti, I feel. It's incredibly..."

Okay, can I just say one more thing? So that's all we need to do. If you're loving it and you can work with it and you can get into it, great, fine, tick. You've passed that particular thing.

And generally speaking, if I've got all the other elements of mastery of piti, then I really want to just be getting into the piti, no matter how strong it is, until it just goes to the second jhana, rather than keeping it at a subtle, or what you're calling refined state. Do you understand? It's like, let's just do this thing until it gives birth to the sukha. And then we're going with the sukha. Does that make sense?

"Yeah, that makes sense. It was kind of like a nerdy question more than a problem, really. I think that happened, and I can tell the difference of refinement and the quality between the piti and the sukha. The bodily sensation of them feel different, and that seems clear to me. It just seems like there's..."

There are probably all kinds of nerdy—your word—corners we could get interested in and all that. But in terms of what we want to do on this retreat, it may well be it's time for the second jhana and really, really ripening into that and really getting into that. And then maybe sometime later you can come back and explore this level, in terms of priorities.

So it may well be, and there are all kinds of interesting things, and that's great, but just in terms of setting our priorities, it might be that it's ripe now and this would be holding yourself back a little bit unnecessarily. We want to move on. Sounds like it to me.

"I've developed two habits in my working with piti that I wanted to check out with you and just make sure I'm not veering off course. The first is because I think I'm not so good at probing without probing too hard and kind of turning it into what was the word the Buddha used?"

Snatching.

"Yeah. I find myself kind of micro-probing just for a second. Like, pleasure over here, pleasure over there, pleasure over here. And what can the being do to maximize it just for a split second here or there? Does that feel like a suitable substitute? Should I work on the way you describe it more?"

My intuition would be no, it probably wouldn't really cohere that way and it would be much more useful—and probably useful in your life as well—to be able to really sustain a kind of probing intensity without it being too tight. It's not just jhanic skill here, but there's probably a mirroring on a life level of what it is to really be able to focus on something and sustain that effort and sustain intensity without it being problematic.

But really, having said what my intuitive sense would be, I should have first said, well, how does it work? Does it work well?

"It has resulted in jhana, first jhana a few times. It's probably the most useful thing so far, but I haven't had a whole lot of... I don't feel super successful about attaining jhana on this retreat compared to my expectations."

So you could do it sometimes and also think about developing the capacity to probe, be very directed, be intense without it being a kind of problematic grasping. View that as something that you could develop. But don't give up this because as you said, it's been successful sometimes.

In the end, we want to find out what works best for you. No matter what I say or anyone else, it's really what works best for you. But if you've got nothing to compare it to, then you're not actually going to know. Is this the optimal thing for me, this method? Or actually, is it second or even fifth best?

And there may well be - like many of these practices - when we talk about opening, when we talk about hanging out, there are fruits to developing certain ways of working that may be worth more than the jhana itself. In terms of life, in terms of desire, in terms of capacity to be intense sometimes in life and sustain that intensity. Some of these things are much more significant than whether or not I get into the first jhana or whatever it is.

Try a few things, and it may well be that what you're describing actually is your method and it works fine no matter what anyone else says. But you don't know yet because you haven't tried enough.

"And the other thing that I find myself doing - you've said maximize the pleasure. And I think because of all my insight practice, I noticed that my attention goes so easily to pain. Maybe it's just being human. What I noticed myself doing yesterday was, how could this not hurt? This place of pain? Because when the jhana comes, gross pain pretty much just goes away. And what I was finding yesterday was that focusing on a spot where there's pain, the pain would go down just from the attention. I guess there's a certain degree of letting go in the way the attention is. I'm not sure - it doesn't really seem synonymous with focus on pleasure or maximize the pleasure. I'm just wondering your thoughts on that."

Well, there are two things. First of all, I didn't say maximize the pleasure. I said maximize the enjoyment. They're very different, right? Pleasure is in the object. Enjoyment is in my relationship with the object. Do you understand the difference? That's really important.

Then just now you said "focus on the pleasure." And that was an instruction at some points. Because what we are trained in - maybe just as human beings, or habitually, certainly as insight meditators - is paying attention to the unpleasant and the difficult.

Mostly that's what most people spend most of their insight meditation retreats doing: paying attention to what's difficult in one way or another. And there's a real encouragement given for that and developing of willingness.

So when you come to jhana practice you realize that sometimes what you can choose to do is focus on the pleasant. When there's unpleasant and pleasant, you can focus on the pleasant. You can choose to do that, and in doing that you can learn all sorts of things - not just about the tendency of the mind. Actually, it's really hard because the mind keeps wanting to go to the unpleasant. Why don't you just stay there? It just will go there. There's something to learn about the tendency and habit patterns of the mind, but there's also something to learn about dependent arising.

Sometimes when I focus on the pleasant, that pleasant amplifies and it takes over and the unpleasant disappears. What's going on? What do I need to understand about perception there?

So there are at least two things to understand if that's the case. One is just a jhanic skill. If I want to develop in samadhi, there are many occasions when it will be more helpful to focus on the pleasant and not the unpleasant. There's a life skill in that, but there's also a samadhi meditative skill in that.

But then there's another level that has to do with dependent arising, dependent arising of perception. How is it that this pain that has been there for however long disappeared, was unfabricated when I looked at the pleasant? Really, really important.

Then there's a third option or third category which is, as you said, sometimes I bring the attention to the unpleasant and the unpleasant disappears. Just bringing attention to it makes it disappear. A certain kind of attention. That's the thing. It's a certain kind of attention because I can certainly bring... This is the thing. We talk about mindfulness as if mindfulness is just mindfulness and it's a pure thing. You bring mindfulness to this, you bring mindfulness to that.

We don't bring mindfulness alone. We bring mindfulness plus about a hundred other things—perhaps not literally a hundred, but we bring mindfulness plus intention, plus relationship, plus subtle aversion or grasping, plus equanimity, plus metta, plus self-view, plus reality view. All of this is present in a moment of so-called "bare attention." It's not bare at all. There's no such thing. Do you understand this? This is really, really important.

So what you find is that sometimes I bring attention to a pain and it makes it worse because there's more aversion wrapped up in it, or there's a certain view, or a certain time view—"how much longer?"—or whatever it is. All kinds of things get wrapped up in the mindfulness in that moment, and while I'm looking at it, this is actually fabricating more unpleasantness.

Other times one looks and brings an attention, and what's wrapped up in that attention—or what's absent from that attention—allows the pain to unfabricate. Still other times you bring attention and it just stays the same. Whatever's in the mix of mindfulness is holding it at a level point.

Two important things emerge here. One is to realize this fundamental truth. There's an old teaching—I remember a teacher saying that if you pay attention to a pain, three things could happen: it could go away, it could get worse, or it could stay the same. What's the insight there? The insight was: you can't do anything about it, just put up with it. In other words, you're not in control of pain. This isn't my teaching—have you heard this before? It doesn't matter anyway.

What we're exploring here is whether I can realize two things that are extremely significant. First, that there isn't such a thing as bare attention or pure mindfulness. And how do I know that? Because I start experimenting—I'll try to talk about this more tomorrow—because I start experimenting with noticing what else is in the mindfulness and then changing what else is in the mindfulness, playing with what else is in the mindfulness. And that equals playing with perception.

What is it to have a mindfulness that has much less aversion in it? What is it—going back to Andy's question—what is it to have a mindfulness that has much less "this pain is not me or mine," much less identification? What is it to have a mindfulness that has much less "this is a real thing" or much less time sense in it? These are all factors in the real sense of the word—from the Latin "to do"—so they do stuff, and we want to realize that.

The only way we can really realize this is by actually getting skilled, learning the art of playing with this. It's really, really subtle. And you start to realize: when I bring this kind of attention—let's say with no aversion—the pain will decrease. When I bring that kind of attention—let's say with more aversion—it will increase, and so forth with all these other elements.

Playing with this equals what I'm going to call insight ways of looking. I start to get really interested in how the way of looking affects the perception. In this case we're talking about pain, but it could be anything. That's the whole road of insight meditation, in my view. I start learning about playing with perception and its effects on the perception of anything—the dependent arising of perception.

This has to do with emptiness. I'll go into this more when I talk about it further. The meaning is that this pain does not exist as a thing unto itself. It's dependent on how I look at it. When I say "how I look at it" or "way of looking," I mean how I relate to it—everything that's involved in my sensing of it. This "way of looking" is just shorthand for what's in my sensing of it: my conception of self, of it, of reality, of materiality, of time, and also my relationship with it. A little bit of pushing away, or a little bit of "I need to hang on to this because it's important"—all of that is part of the way of looking.

The art is to really start exploring all that and really playing with it, eventually coming to the conclusion that this thing, and that thing, and that thing—everything, everything—no thing exists independently of a way of looking. Nothing exists by itself. And that's what emptiness means.

Everything is empty of independent existence, of an existence inherently independent of the way of being looked at in the moment.

So there's a lot here. At the moment, it sounds like what you're bringing is a skillful attention and it's disappearing. Now, what I'm adding to that is fantastic. And that little discovery there should pique your interest. There's a huge, gorgeous avenue of insight exploration that takes you to the most profound insights if you want to follow it and explore all that.

But in the context of jhana retreat, what order do we choose these approaches? So here's this pain. First thing is maybe don't focus on it. Just focus on the pleasantness. That's my first choice in the context of jhana retreat. I'm still learning about dependent arising there if the pain disappears.

But if that doesn't work in this context, then I can bring the attention to the difficult. Since you're doing metta as your base practice, I can work with it in two different ways. One is what we mentioned already: what if I make that very difficulty, that very unpleasantness, that stuckness or whatever it is, the center of the metta? In terms of attention, I'm bringing a certain kind of attention to it. I'm looking at it in a certain way. There's a certain way of looking that involves the imagination, where the metta is coming from. That would be a second choice way of working.

But a third choice in this context—in other contexts, it would be the first choice—is that you bring the attention to it, but you take care of what's wrapped up in that attention, primarily in terms of aversion and identification. There are lots of other possibilities. As we get deeper in this whole insight exploration, you also get much wider in terms of how many possibilities there are, and also the power of different ways of looking.

So just to finish, going back to what was mentioned: to view something as not me, not mine. This pain is not me or mine. The conventional view is that it's happening in my shoulder or whatever. So automatically, without thinking about it, we identify with it. It's me or mine. To bring in a view and actually practice this subtle view—it's not a philosophy. It's a subtly woven into the attention. Or you could say what we're doing is subtly taking out the habitual subtle me-mine. Rather than adding something, you're actually taking something out.

As you develop this more and more, there are more powerful ways of looking. To get to the point where you're sensing this pain and woven into the sensing is "it's not real, it's empty. It doesn't exist independently." That's an even more powerful approach that works even more powerfully to unfabricate.

You could flip it around in the negative. Actually, it looks like you're doing something extra. People say, "I don't like doing in meditation. I don't like doing. I want to just be." Well, we're doing plenty all the time with this unconscious habitual "me, mine, me, mine" or "it's real." Most people don't walk around thinking and obsessing "it's a real knee, it's a real pain" or whatever. There's just automatically, subconsciously, nonverbally woven into the way of looking...

that's unconsciously fabricating experience 99,999 times out of 100,000. These views of me-mine, not verbal, not conscious, and also views of "this is a real thing"—it's a real thing—are simply woven into our way of perceiving.

At first, of course, when you do these practices, it feels like you're doing something. "Oh, now I have to remember me-mine, me-mine. What a lot of work. I do this over and over," or "not real, not real, empty," and so forth. There are different variations of that. But actually what you're doing is taking away, in that moment, in those moments, a doing that has just become so habitual and so unconscious that you don't even recognize it's a doing. You understand? So you can view that as well as a kind of less doing.

So when Bahiya—who knows the story of Bahiya and the Buddha? Monarchy, surely you know the story of Bahiya. Yes. "In the seen, just the seen." What does it mean? What's the Buddha getting at? It's bare attention, right? In the seen, just the seen. You could read it that way.

You could read it as: "In the seen, just the seen. Let's see what else"—S-E-E-N, not S-C-E-N-E—"Let's investigate what else we're adding to the seen habitually, unconsciously, through avidya, through ignorance, that we don't even realize. And in the seen, just the seen—let's start taking those things away. See what happens."

And that's why the Bahiya Sutta ends with a description of the cessation of consciousness and perception, of the unfabricated. There's no air, earth, fire, water, no sun, no moon, no nothing. There's no form, no perception there. If it meant just bare attention—he's given Bahiya this instruction of bare attention, Bahiya has gone and done his bare attention practice—then what should Bahiya end up with? He would end up with some kind of vivid sense of this moment and its pristine sort of reality. That's what you get from bare attention practice.

But if you actually think about "in the seen, just the seen," maybe hidden in there is a teaching about what else is there. Can we remove those factors and then see what you get? And what will happen is all these factors are fabricators. Every time—to just say in different ways what I said before—every time we're sensing something with an unconscious me-mine or an unconscious sense of its reality, it's fabricating that thing. Start taking out those, and there's lots of hidden ones. Even the belief in a present moment—it's hidden in the conception of time. There's a past, there's a future, there's a present. It's so everyday woven in. No one's walking around saying, "It's a present moment." It's not at that level.

Start taking these things away—what's going to happen? You're going to end up unfabricating, unfabricating, unfabricating, end up in the place that's at the end of the Bahiya Sutta, which is "know this, know that"—disappearance of everything. That's why Bahiya became an Arahant. It's not because he... anyway.

Do you understand? So again, how we can read something or hear something a hundred times. I don't know, how many times have you heard about the Bahiya Sutta or read about it? Many. Yeah, it's very common. And we just read and hear, and we're just thinking with the same old—or reading and hearing, listening with the same old fabrication, same old view, same old box—and it filters out any possibility. Actually, maybe—and I don't mind—but maybe there's a whole other level here, and that actually makes sense of the two parts of the Bahiya Sutta, because otherwise they're very strange. It's an udana sutta. Udana means inspired utterance.

The inspired utterance in that sutta is not the familiar passage about "in the seen, just the seen" - which is what you often hear emphasized in teachings as if that's the golden piece, the instruction for attention. The inspired utterance is actually at the end, when the Buddha describes the unfabricated, the cessation.

If you take the whole sutta as meaning one thing, it becomes a very terse instruction. But if you read it that way, it completely disconnects the two parts of the sutta. They simply don't make sense together - they don't belong together. And the udana disappears. The inspired utterance vanishes, and this is significant. That's why you hardly ever hear it mentioned in the context of the Bahiya Sutta. Do you understand?

The principle here is really that there's a way of understanding what insight meditation is or can be. There's a way of framing insight meditation that keeps opening up deeper and deeper into this territory of emptiness, dependent arising. I would like to explore this further - understanding what attention truly is, and understanding these kinds of experiences you're describing. This is so, so important, potentially profoundly fruitful.

Andrew then asked about applying this same interpretive approach to other core texts: "I really enjoyed that exploration. I wonder if you could do the same thing for the Satipatthana Sutta and Anapanasati Sutta - the mindfulness suttas. Is there a way you can find clues to deeper insight within them as well? Maybe even find the jhanas in there somewhere."

Let me offer just one clue from the Satipatthana Sutta for now, and perhaps we'll explore more another time. Who remembers the refrain in the Satipatthana Sutta - the repeated chorus that appears after each foundation?

It describes what you pay attention to, then includes a refrain that's usually translated as something like "attending to arising and ceasing" with regard to vedana, or mind states, or whatever foundation is being discussed. We read this and naturally think it's an instruction about anicca, impermanence.

But the Pali word is actually samudaya. This is the same word the Buddha uses in relation to dependent arising and how suffering arises. When he presents the Four Noble Truths, dukkha is something that samudayas - it arises together, it co-arises. The actual phrase could be interpreted as: "pay attention to origination factors and dissolution factors, factors of arising and factors of ceasing."

To me, it's possible to interpret that refrain as saying: pay attention not just to the fact that things arise and cease, but to how they arise and cease. Coming back to your earlier question - here's a pain, and it arises and ceases. Yes, it's valuable to realize that pain is impermanent, and you can develop that practice by noticing more and more impermanence.

Or I could start getting interested in what we've been talking about—the fact that when there's this kind of attention, a pain intensifies or arises more. When there's that kind of attention, it fades. It gets fabricated more, fabricated less. And I start becoming interested in the origination and dissolution factors of vedanā.

Does that make sense?

There are other suttas—and they're kind of repeated, and I can't remember where—where the Buddha says, you know, how do you move from this level of awakening, I think it's to the final level of awakening, and the Buddha says a practitioner should train themselves to pay attention to the aggregates: vedanā and perception and body and all the rest of it—mental formations, consciousness.

The usual English translation is something like "and see, and pay attention, such as its disappearance, such as its arising, such as its disappearance." But I think the emphasis there is on the such. In other words, how? How is it arising? How is it disappearing? Otherwise, it's just a teaching on impermanence, rather than a teaching on this whole business of the dependent arising of perception.

Is this making sense?

This is what I tend to emphasize as being what I feel is the more interesting, profound, liberating and coherent view. Whether it's what the Buddha meant, I'm not particularly interested in that. It's what I tend to teach.

Now, of course, like I said, noticing impermanence is important. Just relatively speaking, the liberative power and the kind of radicality of what gets uncovered is of a whole different order. Because to say that everything's impermanent is—okay, you could say it's radical—but to say that nothing really exists at all as anything is a whole other level of radicality, to me. It's a whole other level of whoa—we've just gone to a whole shift in our reality view.

So this is, again, people will know that's what I tend to emphasize, but the impermanence thing is really important too, and fruitful.

Is that okay for now? I think we're definitely going to need to end, so why don't we have a bit of quiet together?

Thank you, everybody. Time for tea.

CHAPTER 217

Jhānas and Insight

Rob Burbea · 1h36

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines the deep interconnection between jhāna practice and insight meditation, challenging common assumptions about their relationship. Rather than viewing concentration and insight as sequential practices, Burbea presents them as part of a single spectrum of fabrication and unfabrication. He explores how awakening involves knowing the radical emptiness of all phenomena - including self, objects, awareness, time, and even awakening itself - and how this understanding directly relates to the cessation of suffering through the release of clinging to what we perceive as real.*
>
> *Burbea demonstrates how jhānas naturally lead to insight by unfabricating the sense of self, objects, and dukkha, while simultaneously showing how insight practice can open access to jhānic states. He discusses the crucial concept of 'ways of looking' (the manner of relating, conceiving, and sensing phenomena) and how skillful ways of looking reduce fabrication at increasingly subtle levels. The talk includes practical guidance on working with the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (paṭiccasamutpāda) as a framework for understanding how different levels of avijjā (ignorance) create varying degrees of fabrication in our experience.*
>
> *Drawing connections to advanced practices, Burbea explains how specific insight approaches correspond to particular jhānas, and how the 'after-effects on perception' from jhānic states can profoundly transform our ordinary experience of reality. This comprehensive exploration offers both theoretical understanding and practical direction for integrating concentration and wisdom practices into a unified path of liberation.*

Thank you.

What I would like to talk about today is primarily the relationship of jhanas and insight—something about that at least, quite a lot about that. In a way it's fortuitous some of what came up in the Q&A yesterday regarding some of the questions really elicited a sort of outlining, explaining of a kind of different way of framing what insight could be. So we've already made good headway with a lot of this, the insight part at least.

Some of you have heard or read many times this regarding the insight part, have heard or read this kind of thing many times. It's been framed to you many times. For some of you this will be really quite new. Fine either way. My experience teaching this

over the years is that to really fully understand what we're saying here—or rather this framework for an understanding of what insight could be or how we can understand the journey of insight and what we're doing and actually the journey of Dharma—so it's not just insight meant, it's actually how the whole thing fits together and can kind of fit together quite coherently in a way that it just goes really into the depths in a very coherent way and the whole Dharma coheres in that. That framework really takes a while to fully understand. It takes really a while to really understand the implications of it.

To me part of the reasons for presenting the Dharma this way or presenting insight this way is because the implications are profound and coherently profound. It's very, very rare for someone to fully understand this and fully understand its implications on two or three hearings or readings or something like that, or even sometimes ten. You may think you do, or one may think one does, but experience has shown me over some years of teaching that actually even when people think they do, there's more here to really grasp this.

So if it feels like, "What the hell are you talking about?" That's all fine and normal because this is a process of understanding something and it should be. If you feel like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know all that," then maybe that might be the time to sort of question a little bit. It takes time. It takes repetition. It takes pondering. And again, this kind of active pondering.

Someone told me they came, did a long retreat and we worked together. And then they went back home and very wisely, I thought, were trying to fit this framework that I'm going to explain about insight and that we've already touched on, were trying to fit it into frameworks of Dharma or insight meditation that they already knew. "It must just be aversion at that or whatever." And after a lot of hard thinking and a lot of intelligence, they realized that they couldn't. Actually, it was something quite different. But the point I'm trying to make is about the active pondering and the active wrestling with something and practice. So it's quite rare for someone to have done all that with this. So if you feel confused, there's good grounds for that. Hopefully not just because I'm completely incoherently babbling. That may be the case.

It's also, some of you will know, a lot of what I'm going to say today regarding insight and emptiness and that business forms really the conceptual foundation for soul-making Dharma and it's kind of what gives legitimacy to soul-making Dharma and doesn't just make you as a soul-making Dharma practitioner easily consignable to the fruitcake bin.

So, back to repeating. Some of this we've said already, either yesterday or earlier in the retreat, but still, because it's difficult to really see how it all coheres and really digest that in one's being, repeating a bit. And some will be repeat from, as I said, near the beginning and some perhaps from yesterday, but perhaps in different words, different approaches.

Perhaps most common in the Dharma world with regards to jhana practice is a kind of view: first you practice your jhanas and you get that together, or rather first in a session even, first you do your jhanas, then you do your insight. And if you're not into jhanas because either they're dangerous or taboo or they're ridiculously too difficult to reach, first you practice your concentration, you're steadying your mind, then you do your insight. That's a kind of normal way to come across that.

That's perhaps the common view. First the concentration, if no jhana or concentration, then the insight. As I pointed out in one of the other talks and I gave that example when we went through all those Pali words, to me reading that passage and kind of getting a sense of the context of it and similar passages in the Pali Canon, this is really a very contrived formula that the Buddha is presenting in a certain teaching situation. The whole thing is probably a contrivance. First you do jhana one, then you do jhana two in a session, then you do jhana three, then you do jhana four, and then you do vipassana or whatever.

If you kind of get a grasp of the session and who he's talking to, it's not really an instruction for the meditator who sits down and does this thing in order. I don't think you could, but to me it doesn't read—there's nothing convincing there at all to suggest that this is what you need to do in your 45 minutes of sitting or whatever.

So first the usual view: first your concentration, then your insight. And you can, one could look at passages like that and say, "Well, the Buddha's saying it, look at this." But I don't actually view such passages as actual meditation instructions really at all.

And again, repeating other stuff we've said, there's a view that when you're concentrating the mind, you're sharpening the mind, you're making it more pointy, its ability to point, and you're sharpening Manjushri's sword. Manjushri is the bodhisattva of wisdom. So really what you're doing in concentration, the most important thing that you're doing is sharpening the mind.

Making the cut so finely through its profound sharpness that it reveals the ultimately true atomic nature of things—the momentary arising and passing of the five aggregates through time, occurring with extraordinary rapidity. If I sharpen my sword enough, I can perceive this fundamental process.

Or again, as we explored earlier, one might hold the view that concentration practice essentially gathers the energy of the mind like a laser beam. This laser beam of intense energy becomes focused on something—directed at layers of rock. Because of its intensity, because of the power of this gathered and concentrated mental energy, the laser beam can drill down through successive layers: through rock layers of construction, through rock layers of fabrication, through rock layers of illusion, penetrating all the way down until it reaches something called reality.

Or there's the perspective that concentration makes the mind so steady, so imperturbably steady, that this unwavering gaze cannot help but see the truth of things. We don't perceive the nature of things clearly because our gaze lacks sufficient steadiness—it wobbles, becomes micro-distracted or hugely distracted. But if we can simply gaze unwaveringly at something, this will reveal how things truly are.

Another idea, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit in teachings, suggests that eliminating thought is the primary goal of concentration practice. In this view, thought becomes the problem, the enemy, the obscurer of truth. When we eliminate thought through concentration, we lift the veils concealing reality, because thought itself obscures our vision. We lift these veils to reveal the real world beneath.

These represent various explicit or implicit conceptions of what we're accomplishing and how concentration fits into our practice.

Then, perhaps more recently—though to some degree present throughout Buddhism's history—there's the idea that awakening doesn't actually involve any extraordinary or deep insight or realization. In this understanding, awakening simply involves an ordinary sense of things, the ordinary sense of the world that everyone would agree upon, but without the tendency toward gross papañca—that familiar pattern of becoming caught up, self-obsessed, and making mountains out of molehills. Just the ordinary sense of things, no extraordinary insight, without the tendency for gross papañca, and with a reduction of the three kilesas: the three primary defilements of greed, aversion, and delusion.

This raises the question: what exactly do we mean by delusion if there's no extraordinary realization involved? In some models, delusion and papañca become equivalent. Papañca, because it creates chaos everywhere, essentially becomes delusion—believing all kinds of nonsense, swimming in that murky, turbulent soup of proliferating thoughts and reactions. This is what we eliminate when we uproot avijjā.

Alternatively, avijjā might be more precisely defined as belief in a real personality—believing in the self as a concrete reality. In this framework, awakening doesn't involve any special change or insight about the nature of things, just the ordinary sense of the world with less papañca, less greed and ill-will, plus the end of belief in personality. Instead, one develops belief in the process of aggregates unfolding through time—understanding that the true nature of the self is this process of momentary aggregates arising and passing: five aggregates of body-mind arising, passing, momentary.

In this last system and its variations, jhāna practice may have no place at all. Why would you need jhāna practice if there's no extraordinary or deep insight or realization into the nature of things? It's just the ordinary sense of things with less papañca.

Perhaps jhāna finds its place precisely in this—as a kind of retraining of the mind into the habit of non-papañca. This is what occurs in jhāna: the papañca quiets significantly, and that becomes jhāna practice's purpose. You're simply accustoming yourself to less papañca until the mind is weaned off the habit of papañca entirely. So jhāna either embodies that state or somehow contributes to the lessening of gross papañca.

There are variations of this view to different degrees.

As I pointed out before—and this is absolutely crucial—all of these perspectives quite rightly need to situate the view of concentration, and thus of jhāna practice, coherently within a larger framework that must begin with the fundamental question: where am I going? What is awakening?

The view of awakening must be intimately connected with one's understanding of truth and reality. These go together—the view of awakening and the view of truth and reality are inseparably linked.

Someone may not have even thought this way, but it needs to be to some degree coherent this way. The view of awakening is tied in with what is the view of truth and reality. If I'm absolutely fixed on a certain view of truth and reality—this world as it seems to common sense post Isaac Newton and Descartes and all those people is the reality of things—my awakening or my vision of awakening has to fit into that view.

Whatever it is, the view of awakening tied in with that is the view of truth and reality, and drawing on that or emerging from that is the view of what insight is. Do you see how these fit together? View of awakening, truth and reality, insight. Insight is what opens up truth and reality, and that gives me awakening.

And then the last stage: within all that framework, I have to situate coherently what is my conceptual framework, what's my view of jhānas or no jhānas, jhānas, what for? And as we said before, what do I emphasize within jhāna practice? So what I emphasize moment to moment—am I really fussing over this, can I stay with the nostrils or whatever—how much I emphasize that and how much I even get upset or not at its success or failure in the moment is actually determined by this larger scale structure. How does my ability to stay at the nostrils relate to insight? What do I mean by insight? Is it related to what's my view of reality and truth? And that's related to awakening. You see how all this nestles together? It must.

Now, it needs to be to some degree coherent, but all this fits together in different models, different paradigms. What's also quite common is that if someone is supportive of jhāna practice, then jhānas contribute to insight—so jhānas lead to insight. Much less so the other way around. Insight is much less regarded as insight practice, as a process, or insight per se, having insights as something that opens up the jhānas or delivers the jhānas. So the causality is one way. And that's probably, again, what most of you have come across, right? Jhānas go to insight.

What we were saying here earlier in the retreat is that jhānas are not enough for liberation, which we said, but they have their part in what contributes to liberation alongside other factors—not just insight, but other factors that we talked about. So jhānas contribute to liberation, awakening. Jhānas are part of the pool of factors that open up liberation. Insight is a large contributing factor to liberation as well.

Jhānas can bring insight, absolutely. Jhānas should deliver insight. What we want to go into today is how. How do jhānas bring insight? But also I want to stress that insight leads to jhānas. So another way into jhānas is through insight. Or if you're doing insight practice in what I would say is the most fruitful way, jhānas are going to be very available on that road. And so insight leads to jhānas. And the question in both directions is how? How?

So, not wanting to dismiss any of these other conceptions at all, but really wanting to add to them. There are some modifications I would definitely make to some of them regarding views about what's ultimately true and what's ultimately real, but it's all good. There is a place for the laser beam. There is a place for all the rest of it.

But in addition to all those views, all those ways of conceiving with necessary ontological modifications, what we would like to say is that an awakened person knows something deeply. To know something deeply means not just as an idea, not just in the head,

but in the heart and in the being. They know something deeply and they can engage that knowing in their very sense of things. And they can engage that knowing deliberately in their very sense of things. It's a deep heart knowing.

And what do they know? They know the emptiness of all phenomena. That's what an awakened person knows. The emptiness, the total emptiness of all phenomena, the total radical emptiness of all phenomena. Which means a phenomena is empty and it doesn't leave any bit of itself or any level of itself that's not empty. That's what the radical bit means—it goes to its root. An awakened person knows deeply the emptiness of all phenomena. There is no electron, no basic unit of matter that is not empty. This happens to agree with current understanding of physics, but that may or may not change.

But there's no electron, there's no basic building block of matter that's not empty. There is no self or self-view or conception of the self that is ultimately true—or to say it the other way around, that's not empty. All conceptions, all views of the self are empty. This is what an awakened person knows.

The energy body is empty. Space is empty—and not just empty of having things in it, but empty of having independent existence, of existing independently of the way of looking, of having inherent existence. Awareness is empty. Awareness is not fundamental. Consciousness is not fundamental. It too is empty. Time is empty—not just past and future, but the present moment too, empty. Awakening is also empty. So this is what an awakened person knows.

And to say they're empty means, as we said yesterday, that none of these things, no phenomenon whatsoever, exists independently of the way of looking. It exists as this or as that, dependent on the way of looking. And it exists as anything at all, dependent on a way of looking. It does not fabricate as a phenomenon unless the way of looking makes it fabricate as a phenomenon.

So what's that got to do with freedom from suffering? Is it obvious what it's got to do with freedom from suffering?

As Derek said, we only cling to what we think is real. When I first started teaching this, and I realized I was going on and on about this stuff, some people would ask, "Well, why are you talking about this?" It was as if it was some abstract philosophy. But no, it's intimately, directly connected with suffering.

Suffering comes from clinging and craving, right? That's pretty much what most Buddhists believe. Soulmakers also believe that—we have something else called eros, but we're not going into that today. Craving and clinging are what cause suffering. Take them away and the suffering goes away. You should know this at some level, or you wouldn't be here if you didn't know it.

But we only crave and cling to what we sense is real. When we realize something is not real, we don't cling or crave. We don't try to get rid of it. So the sense of self, the sense of an object or other, the sense of time—all these things. Seeing the emptiness means seeing that they're not really real in the way that we thought they were. We say they're neither real nor not real. But that's enough to take away the sense of inherent reality that we usually have in relation to things, dependent on which our craving and clinging gets established, and dependent on that craving and clinging, our suffering.

Do you understand? This is really important.

How does an awakened person get to such knowledge, such a far-out-sounding understanding? Knowledge, again, is in the heart, in the whole being. One way is by playing with what we call ways of looking, which we talked about again yesterday and several other times. Way of looking means the way of relating, the way of conceiving, the way of viewing, the way of sensing—everything that's wrapped up in that relationship with any phenomena, any experience, perception, appearance in the moment. That's what we mean by way of looking. Everything that's wrapped up in there.

One can begin playing with different ways of looking and one starts to see, like a scientist—oh, well this way of looking, when I look that way, like when we're in the middle of papañca, when I look that way it actually fabricates more suffering. Suffering gets worse or gets locked into place. And it actually fabricates more sense of self. The self feels more solid, more separate, more contracted. It fabricates more of whatever it is that I'm tussling with or grasping after, more of an object and more sense of time. Time itself also feels heavier, more pressured. One starts to realize all this.

And because I'm playing with ways of looking, I also start to realize, oh, there are some ways of looking that do the opposite. They release suffering. They unfabricate the self to some degree. They unfabricate objects and things to some degree. They unfabricate—eventually one sees—the sense of time as well.

So those are the interesting ones.

Actually, it's all interesting. Those are the ones I want to follow and develop—the ones that unfabricate suffering, and with the unfabrication of suffering, they unfabricate self and the world of objects and eventually time as well.

One can grow into practicing this way, getting really interested not just in the art of it but in the freedom it delivers in the moment. The delight of practicing this way becomes palpable. Looking at this thing in this way means I'm relating to this thing in this way, and right there and then—I don't have to wait ten months or ten years—right there and then the suffering goes out of experience. The self is less fabricated. The object itself gets less fabricated. There's release, relief, ease, openness. All kinds of mystical states of consciousness begin to open because the self and objects and time are not being fabricated in their usual way. Other senses of things open. Delightful ways of practice.

One gets really interested in that and develops one's range of ways of looking, as well as one's depth. In other words, learning to—as we said yesterday—recognize that some ways of looking let go of a little bit of clinging, while some ways of looking that we can develop let go of clinging at a whole deeper level, a much subtler level of clinging. Because they do that, they have even more power in unfabricating, because it's the clinging—and I use that word very widely—but it's the clinging that's fabricating. It's fabricating not just the suffering but also the self, objects, the world, time, and so on.

So one develops one's range and one's skill and one's depth, going deeper and deeper into this learning to unfabricate more through the ways of looking that one is developing through practice.

We talked about, for example, pleasure and pain and equanimity, and said equanimity is a letting go of push and pull. In other words, it's an attenuating and letting go of clinging. As I just do that and do that and do that, the pleasure and pain get less, eventually. The pain might go to pleasure and then get less. I get left with neutral vedanā, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and eventually that fades. Eventually, as we touched on yesterday, eventually everything fades. No thing, no self, no consciousness in the usual sense, no time, no present moment, no space, no world.

The Buddha had different names for that: the unfabricated, the deathless, cessation of perception and feeling, the unborn—lots of different names. We can open to that something that's incredibly hard to put into language because language is based on a world of things and subjects and objects. But this is possible for us if we just take this one idea of ways of looking. Notice that some fabricate more and some fabricate less, get really interested in that, and just keep going. You can get all the way to the unfabricated just following one principle and playing—having a fun and delightful time doing it.

It doesn't stop there, I would say. Some people would say it stops there: "Now I've realized the unborn." I would say it doesn't stop there, because then one can also see that time is empty as well. One may have seen that getting there, and one may need additional little ways of seeing that. And also, what is fabricated is empty. Fabrications are empty. The things that are fabricated in this process—they're not real things either.

So if time is empty, the time in which the process of fabrication happens also is empty. That means the whole notion—and fabricated things are empty—that means the whole notion of fabrication is empty. So the very idea and thread that we were following, this idea of fabrication, ends up dissolving as well. It's empty too.

When one has reached the unfabricated, the unborn—whatever you want to call it; some people use the word nirvāṇa for that—there can be an extreme duality between that transcending of the world in the unfabricated and the world. The world of saṃsāra, the world of form, the world of struggle, this world that we all agree on. And then there's this that's completely transcendent. This is holy; this is essentially worthless except as a potential stepping stone to that.

Once one has seen that fabrication too is empty, then actually the whole duality collapses as well, because there is no fabricated, and without a fabricated, the unfabricated as an idea doesn't make sense. So that hierarchy of sacredness collapses. Everything empty, everything sacred. Unfabricated, fabricated—no ultimate truth, no place that has, ultimately speaking, more reality, no view that has ultimately more reality than another.

There are only left ways of looking. That's what we have as human beings, as awakened human beings. Only ways of looking.

A huge range and depth of ways of looking. Ways of playing with perception and the art of that. And we can do that then. An awakened person can do that for different ends.

In classical Buddha Dharma, of course, why do I choose this way of looking over that way of looking? It's because I want less suffering. So in this situation, I look at it this way to reduce the suffering. It's just basic Four Noble Truths in condensed version. When you get into soul-making dharma, actually you might choose other reasons for ways of looking that are not primarily the reduction of suffering. That's not really what you're going for. You're going for something else sometimes. There will often in soul-making dharma, of course, be an overlap—in other words, when we choose a view be-

cause we want the sacredness there, or the beauty, or the soul-making, that most often also reduces the suffering, but sometimes not. But classical Buddha Dharma, that's why we choose certain things. Everything's oriented to reducing suffering.

Practicing what was that word the Buddha used? Mudubhūta—the malleability of mind, the malleability of perception, the malleability of ways of looking, of views. Or we say playing with perception, meaning playing with perceiving. This is a way of construing what insight practice is: playing with perception and seeing, through playing with perception, what happens when I look this way, when I look that way, when I look a third way, when I look a fourth way, seeing what the perception is. I perceive a certain way, the perception is. The experience, the appearance, the phenomenon depends on the way of looking.

So that in a nutshell is what we could say insight practice is and how it all hangs together.

Now we can understand—and in a way we've hinted at this quite strongly several times already—we can actually understand the jhānas as doing that too. As well as being these really, really valuable resources in all kinds of ways that we've talked about, as well as being certainly the way we're teaching them here and the way you're practicing, as well as developing our sensitivity and our attunement and all the beauty of that and the gifts that gives in all kinds of realms of our life—relational, emotional, energetic, soul-making, et cetera—also for emptiness practices. But as well as resources and sensitivity and everything else we said about the jhānas, we can also view them as playing with perception and begin to understand actually there's one spectrum, one spectrum of more or less fabrication.

Of suffering—dukkha is a better word if we're really... suffering is such a heavy word in English, but dukkha. Sometimes you open to a new level and you wouldn't have considered where you were before has any dukkha in it whatsoever. And it's only when you go deeper that you realize, relatively speaking, the older level, which you've now transcended, had some very subtle dukkha in it. So I prefer the word dukkha because it's a foreign word, it can keep for us a much subtler range than we tend to associate with the word suffering.

But you realize there's one spectrum, one spectrum of dukkha. We can be fabricating a lot, really a lot, somewhat less, somewhat less, somewhat less, all the way down. But that spectrum of fabrication of suffering is the same spectrum as the fabrication of self-sense. They're just two threads of the same rope, of the same spectrum. When we're

suffering a lot, the self-sense is fabricated a lot—much more solid, much more contracted, much more separate. But so is the world fabricated. The perception of the world is correspondingly, it's just another thread of that rope of one spectrum.

Is this making sense? And so is clinging, if we use the word broadly enough. This end, the dukkha end, has got a lot of clinging and craving in it. And as I said, when you start engaging practices and really sustaining them and playing with them—practices that take away clinging, craving repeatedly, moment after moment—then we move down that spectrum. And as we take away more subtle levels of clinging and craving, we just find it's the same spectrum.

So this is a spectrum of suffering, it's a spectrum of self-sense, it's a spectrum of object-sense, thing-sense—because they fade as well: sensations, things, sights, sounds, all the rest of it, the world—also of clinging, and also of jhānas. The whole thing is just one... Do you understand? It's one spectrum. We're just talking about different, if you like, threads of a rope. Does this make sense? I'm going through it quite quickly.

A few little things I want to throw in at this point. A little bit came out of Andy's question yesterday, which I'm glad you asked. After a jhāna, in a jhāna, or kind of around the territory of a jhāna—and Andy was asking about the happiness and the sense of self in relation to the happiness—but let me say a couple of things. In the territory of the jhāna, after, in, or around it, sort of perijhānic, a few things happen in relation to classical insights, again, which is tied into what I've just been saying. We're more clear and we're more spacious, so that something like impermanence is just completely obvious to us.

It's just in that space it's obvious that things are impermanent.

Also, because of the yumminess of a jhāna—whichever jhāna—because of the yumminess, it's much easier to see the dukkha, the relative dukkha of other pleasures, or the fact that other pleasures are far less satisfying. When you've tasted a certain, let's say even just really strong pīti and you're truly absorbed in it, it would be hard to match that with any sensual experience, certainly in terms of happiness.

More saliently for what I want to say today—and these are all related because they all have to do with this unfabricating—is that in, around, or after a jhāna, it's much easier to see that phenomena are not self. They're not me, not mine. It's much easier to see. Why?

Tying it to what we just said about this rope, this spectrum of fabrication which has different threads in it—different aspects of the same process that are being fabricated together—the jhāna already is less fabrication of self. And so because the self is less fab-

ricated, what the self habitually does is also less fabricated at the time. One of the things the self habitually does is appropriate: me-mine, me-mine, me-mine, me-mine, without thinking about it. That's what the self does. The more self, the more me-mining, the more appropriation.

As the self gets fabricated less naturally in the jhāna, there's less me-mining. And because there's less me-mining, less appropriation, things are much more likely to appear to us as not me, not mine—anattā, as the Buddha said, not me, not mine. The transition from that point to deliberately viewing things as not me, not mine, is just a very small step because it's already moving in that direction.

So there is in jhānas this attenuation, this unfabricating of self, and that has all these factors unfabricated together. Self is one of them.

However, I want to read a note that I received. This is really, really important:

"You talked about resistance against the idea of having an autonomous self. I felt this was blocking the whole process and made me believe that I had matured in some jhānic states when actually this wasn't the case. Today it feels more like this belief of having matured took me away from actual learning. I then noticed that I tend to stay in a passive, receptive mode during meditation but also in life. When today I actually tried to play with active and receptive modes, finally a strong felt sense of 'I' arose. I am alive. I exist. I am here in this world. I can influence. I can be active. I felt very powerful. Now I can actually find my pace and my way of working. This psychological basis just wasn't developed. What a blessing and lovely fruit of this retreat."

This is really, really important because it stands in apparent contradiction to what I just said, but an important contradiction. I've just said jhānas are about fabricating less. And here a person was saying that actually, by the way we're practicing jhāna, it does invite the self to be active, to be more autonomous, to see itself and feel itself as more active and autonomous. That sounds like a more separate and more fabricated self, right?

This is why I said at some point in the last few days: careful. You may think, or one might think very understandably, "I need a jhāna to heal something." And it may be that it's not the jhāna itself that we need to heal something. For some people it is—they need to just really bathe in that third jhāna, whatever it is. But probably more often than not, it's something in the ways that we're adopting to work that heals something psychologically and has its mirror in life. The freeing and opening and reclaiming that's mirrored in life may be more significant than whether I have attained this or that jhāna.

When we talked about this, I mentioned the ability to stay and choose to be intense and choose to show up that way—me being intense, and the "me" can be quite a subtle sense but it's still there. I have to sustain something, or opening, really opening the being, surrendering, abandoning. Or what this person is sharing, or the happiness that's a kind of emotional range that I don't usually let myself experience. There are many examples, but here's a very important exception.

Can you understand what we're saying here? Everything's tied together—these threads of one rope.

So revisiting our idea of working with pain and being able to look at pain so that it unfabricates, or we refabricate an unpleasant sensation in the body as pleasant pīti or happiness or whatever it is—let me be clear about this, because someone might hear about that and think something particular.

When you're meditating, there's pain. But sometimes, because of the meditation, you're relaxing, and the relaxation allows the tissues—the muscular tissues—to relax and therefore expand. They're not squeezing on the blood vessels (excuse me if my biology is completely wrong), so I'm not getting pins and needles. They're taking the pressure off the system and the tension. Some pain disappears just because of organic biological relaxation reasons.

So yes, absolutely, there's a level that happens there. And to start talking about emptiness just for that would be a complete misuse of the word emptiness and would be easily dismissible. But there is some of that going on. There's an organic reality to it—we can explain it in real organic terms, in terms of real organicity.

Secondly, though, is the level of the energy body. So there's the level of physical body—muscles and blood vessels and nerves and all the rest of it. But then there's the level of the energy body. And the energy body changes. This was like a definition of the first four jhānas, certainly the first five jhānas at least—there are changes in the energy body, and the energy body becomes more homogeneous, more unified, and has a different vibration.

Another way we could understand what the energy body is: the energy body is a kind of reality that straddles the physical and the mental. It spans those strata, so that it is, for instance, susceptible to the mind state. The mind state changes, the energy body changes. Mind state is obviously a mental factor. It's extremely susceptible and malleable through the mind, and we've talked about using the imagination. Why? Imagina-

tion is in the mind, and the energy body experience—the way the energy body is, how the energy body is—will be affected by what's in the mind. If I imagine this, if I imagine that.

We don't tend to think in these terms anymore in our culture. Probably back in medieval times there were certain strata of reality, ontological categories that spanned both the physical and the mental. The energy body is one of them.

So there's that level too, and that's happening in jhāna and that's happening when a pain dissolves through meditation, through jhāna. And there's a level of playing with perception and the fact that actually the pain is unfabricating and it's empty and therefore malleable and therefore can be refabricated.

So there are all these three levels: a level of organic reality, so to speak; a level of energy body, which spans physical and mental; and the level of emptiness and playing with perception. They're all part of that experience.

Yesterday when we talked about Bāhiya and this idea of bare attention—which that sutta doesn't use those words, "bare attention," nor are they anywhere in the Pali canon, nor to my mind do I even know what the Pali would be for bare attention—but anyway, or even mindfulness, the way many people would understand what mindfulness is, or in the past have understood what mindfulness is (maybe it's changing now, I don't know)—it's still, despite not being ultimate, if we fit it into this whole idea of a spectrum of fabrication, then actually it just fits nicely at some point on the spectrum of fabrication.

When I'm engaging bare attention, there are certain things I'm not adding to the experience. I'm not adding a lot of papañca. I'm not adding a lot of views and concepts, and I'm not layering over that way. That's probably how you've been taught about bare attention, right?

So I'm doing a similar thing here. When we talked yesterday about taking things out of the way of looking that are automatically there—also in bare attentional mindfulness, the stuff we're taking out. So it's a relatively skillful way of looking. There's a modicum in it of unfabrication, or it involves a modicum to a degree where we're fabricating less. You understand?

The mistake would be to think that what we sense through bare attention is an unfabricated reality.

If I've approached this whole question of fabrication with a presupposition about where unfabricating stops, about what actually is real and what is not, do you understand? It makes a huge difference. I'll come back to this. The concept that I've started with was limited. It wasn't an open-ended investigation, despite whatever rhetoric might be dressing it up. I've actually limited something. I arrive at that limit and then call it ultimate reality. It's still very skillful though. On this rope of unfabricating, on this spectrum of unfabricating, it's still somewhere. It's more toward that end, but still, relatively speaking, it brings less suffering, less self, less of all the rest of it.

Thinking about the jhānas and their relationship to insight, I mentioned this phrase that I use—it must be a more elegant phrase, but what I call "after effects on perception." This, to me, is hugely significant: this idea of the after effects of certain states of consciousness on our perception. These after effects imply something about the dependent arising of experience, and correspondingly they imply something about the emptiness of our perceptions.

So these after effects, as we move through more territory jhānically and in other kinds of states, there's a spilling over outside of the meditation into how we sense the world. After effects on perception—out there on the lawn, on your walk, with the lunch bowl in front of you, whatever. They open new worlds and new experiences for us.

Usually this business about after effects on perception gets really potent with the formless jhānas. But I tend to think the first glimpses of it come with the third jhāna. I mentioned that world of peace and so forth. However, the other day I got a lovely note—actually from a few days ago. "For some reason I hesitate to write these non-questions, non-issue notes, but since you seem to enjoy the one from earlier, here's the epilogue." This is from our friend of the radiant Buddhas.

"Seeing everyone as radiant Buddhas was so lovely, so delightful that I was back in the second jhāna by the time I made it outside. I then spent forty-five minutes wandering around the grounds and marveling at how everything seemed shot through with joy."

So the after effect on perception is basically that the primary nimitta starts to color things. Things are colored, things are seen that way.

"I stopped in my tracks and mouthed 'wow' at the sight of the old fruit crates piled by the outdoor loo, the bins by the hermitage, the hedge by the nuns' graveyard, the dead leaves on the path—all of it radiant with happiness and light and something beyond, something blessed. And if that's not enjoyment... wow."

Sometimes this is subtle and sometimes very powerful. It can happen not just from jhānic states, but from all kinds of states. I said usually you get the first glimpse in the third jhāna—this person is saying no, earlier—but it gets very marked in the formless jhānas. It can have a very clearly, very profound and touching impression on the being, on the sense of existence.

If these experiences are repeated enough—if it's just a one-off, you tend to think something was weird in your brain, or you forget about it, or it becomes just this thing you don't quite know how to get back to. But if it's repeated enough, and they can come from lots of other non-jhānic states as well, other perceptions, other ways of looking, you're going in and out of normal perception and this kind of perception. For example, let's take from this person's note: in and out, in and out. Many times. At some point you start thinking, "Well, which is the real way things are? Which is real?"

Are things not shot through with joy? Is the universe just purposeless and cold, or very hot matter in the Newtonian sense? Or is there some way that joy is mystically woven into the fabric of the cosmos? That joy perhaps is the essence of things—the divine essence of things? Or that there's a joy that shines through things, a transcendent joy, and that transcendent joy shines through this world of appearances, this world that we call the world, this world that we've grown so accustomed to sensing in other ways, in disenchanted ways?

It goes back and forth, back and forth so many times. Which is actually real here? Which is real? How do I know? Which mind state, which way of looking reveals the way things really are?

Do you have that? Or lines, you know what lines are? Kidding. It's good that I've practiced a lot of equanimity.

Years ago, we did a retreat - I think three years in a row - called "Loving-kindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening," something like that. Maybe some of you were even on it. This was 2006, seven, eight, I think. It was a three-week or three-and-a-half-week retreat. First week we did metta, second week compassion, and by the third week, after people had developed this really quite strong current of metta and compassion - people would say you could walk into the meditation hall and it was like cutting through thick air, so saturated with love.

After they had developed that stream, I gave them a practice of deliberately directing that metta and compassion not to beings, self or others, but to phenomena. This sensation, this sound, this pain, whatever it was. I let them explore this for a while, then came back and asked, "Did anyone notice that when you were doing that, the phenomena you were directing metta to actually faded?"

There's almost a law here. That's what the Buddha calls it - dependent arising is the law. The word for Dharma is law. To trust this enough is like putting a cake in the oven. You set it, go away, come back, and this will have happened. For most people, yes. It's a law. They faded.

Then there's a question. Here was a phenomenon, a sensation, an experience, a perception. When I direct metta or compassion to it, it fades, it unfabricates, it disappears to some degree or completely. Amazing. Similar to the kinds of things we've been exploring.

Then you ask, "How much metta reveals the real thing? The real sensation? The real self? A little or a lot, because metta is a skillful quality? Somewhere in the middle - do we need exactly a medium amount to reveal the real way things are?"

Mindfulness, as we said yesterday, is actually a composite. It's all attention. Mindfulness is always with something else, with many other things. Those qualities, that composite of qualities, determine the fabrication, the unfabrication, the locking into a certain level of fabrication of whatever phenomenon the mindfulness is observing.

Derek might like to say, "Not mindfulness - equanimity," because equanimity gives this sense of balance. But we've already explored that. The more equanimity means the less push and pull. That's how we've defined equanimity. Less push and pull is the same as less clinging. If I just practice that, getting more and more equanimous, at a certain point the phenomena will fade.

How much clinging reveals the real object? Here's this phenomenon, this pain, even a sight or sound that's continuous. How much clinging reveals the real object? A lot? A little? None? If it's none, then where's the object, because it's completely faded? A medium amount?

This is what we mean by saying something is empty. I cannot privilege a certain amount of clinging or metta or equanimity. I cannot privilege any particular way of looking or any amount of what's wrapped up in the way of looking to reveal the real way something is. In other words, it's empty. It doesn't exist independently. There's no zero point anywhere.

When we get to the formless realms - although clearly someone has already had very strong experiences, maybe others as well - these aftereffects on perception start to go up a notch in their power. What they can deliver in the worlds they open up, these aftereffects and the sense of things, the way they influence the sense of existence, impact the sense of existence, open up the very sense of the cosmos.

An interesting thing when you get there is that the strength and even the impact of the aftereffect on perception is not actually predictable from the strength and degree of absorption of the meditation just before. I take that as good news. You might think, "Oh, I got a really strong seventh jhana, so I expect a really strong aftereffect." Maybe, maybe not. Or you got there sort of - it was in the neighborhood of the seventh jhana, but it wasn't really...

It wasn't really... I was not quite consolidated or deep or whatever. And I get up and afterwards, the after effect is really strong.

So it's telling me something: don't worry too much. It's samyojana all over again. Yes, I go for more absorption. Yes, I go for more samadhi, and so forth. But there's no end to that. And now we're adding, in terms of these after effects on perception, which again, in terms of liberation, the way I would conceive it - a whole different sense of the cosmos, a whole different sense of existence is what the awakened person knows - how absorbed I am at any time in any sitting may not relate to how much opening there is afterwards in terms of the after effect on perception and the world, the sense of the cosmos that opens up.

To me, that's good news. I don't have to worry about it too much. I've got direction to go in, but I'll be surprised by the fruits afterwards.

So we said one spectrum, one spectrum of fabrication - more or less, one way of viewing things. And in a way, like I said, you can actually put the whole Dharma in kind of... the whole Dharma can be seen as relating to or pertaining to or even emerging from that one understanding. Everything. We talked about generosity - same deal. Things that don't seem like they have to do with obvious ways of looking - same deal.

But to be less fabricated means less is getting fabricated, less is getting built. There's less there in the perception. So less solidity, less substantiality. Going back to earlier in the retreat, I was saying, well, it looks like things are kind of... almost like I could put my hand through the walls. There's a perception of less solidity and less substantiality also to the body, also to the energy body.

Another way of saying that is there's more refinement. We've talked about this word "refinement" and the refined cloth - less substance, less solidity - or refining gold or flour or something. There's less solidity, there's less substance.

Again, something I've said before: if I'm unsure with this new experience I've had, if I'm unsure, "Is that the next jhana? Is that the next deepest jhana?" One probably almost more important clue than any other is: Is it more refined? Does its texture feel more refined? Which isn't the same as "Is it stronger or calmer or weaker?" Is it more refined? Its actual texture is more refined.

I think I'll come back to this another time, what I'm going to say right now, but I'll mention it now. There are several suttas - I think I mentioned it yesterday, where the Buddha talks about establishing oneself, I did mention it yesterday, establishing oneself in a jhana, any jhana, and actually taking that jhana itself as an object on which to practice certain insight ways of looking. Let's come back to it hopefully later in the retreat.

In other words, you hold that jhanic perception in attention - the primary nimitta and everything else that's involved - and very precisely, in a very exact way, you start removing different kinds and levels of what I'm going to call clinging in relation to that jhana. I use that word "clinging" to include also appropriation, me-mine, or even me-mine of the attention - not just the primary nimitta, but also the attention being paid. That's also not me, not mine. So clinging is a big word. I use it to mean that and more.

But basically that's what you're doing. With the jhana - and it's helpful because it's a steady object, it's very, very steady - and then you start taking things away. So this is a kind of very advanced way of practicing, but it's actually very powerful and very available for people who want to go down that road and develop it.

What happens when I do that? What would we expect to happen if I do that on the first jhana? I think I'm hearing all the right things. It will fade. Piti will stop, or it will go to the second jhana. All of the above.

So it could just go to the second jhana. Why? Because the second jhana is a less fabricated state. If piti fades completely, something is fading and it will go to the third jhana if it fades completely. Or just generally speaking, it will fade.

But the spectrum again is all one thing. So it will go down the spectrum of the jhanas. But this fading business is unfabricating business. You know, sometimes it's like being in an elevator and it just... okay, stops at every floor. But sometimes you're just in an elevator and it just goes whoosh and you've missed all the floors.

It's just gotten like, oh, everything's gone now. But the point is that there's an unfabricating going on. And again, the jhanic spectrum fits into this spectrum of unfabrication.

Why do things fade with an insight way of looking? Why is there less fabrication with an insight way of looking? That's not entirely a fair question, because to explain something, you have to rely on something else to use it to explain it.

If we think about the twelve links of dependent origination, how do we explain fading, unfabricating, based on the twelve links of dependent origination? Where does that fit in? Where exactly?

Everyone's right. Nama-rupa is the fourth link. It's presented as if it's in order, but that's not a really helpful way of looking at it. Usually the first—but it's the first in terms of being the most fundamental—is avijja, which means delusion. The fourth one is nama-rupa, and nama-rupa, the Buddha says, involves different factors. It includes vedana and perception. The way I'm using the word perception, going back to the beginning of the retreat, is synonymous with phenomenon, experience, appearance, perception. They're all the same thing.

Clinging and craving come later, or they seem as if they come later when it's thought of linearly, but it shouldn't be thought of linearly. It should be thought of as a completely interlinked web that's not a linear process in time. And self seems to come really at the end with becoming and birth, right, if you think of the whole thing in a momentary way. But to think of the thing more, as I said, not as a linear process in time, not a process in time so much—when I'm engaging an insight way of looking, what defines an insight way of looking is clinging less, craving less.

So it seems to come afterwards. But if we don't think of it linearly, it basically has an effect on the fabrication of self, which seems to come later after craving, clinging, becoming, birth. That's where people usually put the self. So you can see that: less clinging, less self is fabricated, and then less dukkha and all the nasty stuff at the end. That bit's clear.

But it works, as I said, not linearly as well. So it will work back to this—what's actually the fourth link, nama-rupa—of which one element is perception and another element is vedana. So that decreasing clinging decreases—they're not on-off switches. Again, each one is a slider switch. Less clinging, craving; less self; less dukkha; less also nama-rupa, which means less perception and vedana, less experience and vedana. There's a fading, right?

Avijja is the first link, and as I said it's not the first in a temporal process; it's the first in terms of what the Buddha said: this is the fundamental problem. Everything rests on this in that sense. What's avijja? Avijja is a lot of things, or rather has a lot of different levels. When I'm engaging an insight way of looking, you could say I'm engaging a view that has less avijja in it.

So when I—going back to what Andy shared, this example of seeing something, sensing something as not-me, not-mine—to sense something as me or mine habitually, unconsciously, has more habitual ignorance, delusion, avijja in it than to sense it as not-me or not-mine.

Let's contrast two ways of looking. One is the normal way of looking that we have in 99% of our states of consciousness: something is always me-mine. This pain is me-mine, or this pleasure is me-mine, or whatever. It's always me-mine. I'm not thinking it, but it's just there—me-mine. That's one. The Buddha calls that appropriation. It's based on a self-view.

He calls it avijja.

When I engage an insight way of looking—for example, anatta—I'm actually looking at "not me, not mine." So you could say what I've done there is take away that particular element, that particular level of avijja, which usually sees things as me or mine.

So avijja, again, it's not an on-off switch. Less avijja in any moment, in a way of looking, means less perception. And it also means less clinging and less self. Do you understand?

So this is mapping this understanding onto the twelve links of dependent origination. They're not on-off switches. If you put a lot of avijja in your way of looking, you're going to get a much more fabricated perception, much more clinging and craving, much more suffering, much more self-sense. If I take away a lot of avijja—let's say I've got it half full—then I'm going to get less perception, less suffering, less clinging, less self.

If I get avijja really, really low, that's another way an insight way of looking can work. It's not so much by relaxing clinging, but actually by changing avijja. In the moment, I'm taking away—again, I think I'm doing, but I'm actually non-doing—I'm taking away the habitual avijja that's programmed in my way of looking at any point.

Does it make sense, how all this fits together with dependent arising? And this, to me, is what the Buddha is pointing at when he talks about dependent arising—what's the most important thing the Buddha's pointing at when he gives this teaching.

What one finds is that with a lot of this, and especially with the formless realms, a specific insight way of looking kind of goes with a specific jhana. If I practice a specific insight way of looking, it leads to a specific jhana, and a specific jhana opens me up to a specific insight way of looking.

A very good example of this is the seventh jhana, the realm of nothingness. After one emerges from the seventh jhana, if the aftereffect on perception is reasonably strong, one can be moving around and looking around and recognizing there are things, but there's a more compelling sense that these things are not really things. The thingness of them is an illusion. There are no things. So the jhana, in its aftereffect on perception, has delivered an insight that there are no things.

But one can also work the other way around. If in meditation I sit down and engage the way of looking—no thing, there are no things, everything is a dependent arising, everything is fabricated in this way—it will take me to the seventh jhana. So specific insights and specific jhanas correspond, and the causality, as so often is the case, works both ways.

Or the eighth jhana. One might emerge from that and one of the senses one can have is called "neither perception nor non-perception." One of the aftereffects on perception is "all this is just a perception." And again, one could take that view—just a perception—and engage it repeatedly in meditation, sustaining that view on all phenomena: just a perception, just a perception. It will take me to the eighth jhana. Specific insight, corresponding jhana.

"Is that true for someone who has spent no time in the jhanas?"

It gets qualified a little bit. If you've never spent time in any of those jhanas, but you really engage that practice—I could teach my little niece when she's five to just look at everything and say "no thing, no thing," or "empty of inherent existence." It's not going to take her to the seventh jhana.

But if you understand what that means and very, very delicately, very subtly—it's not a big cogitation thing; we're really talking about a very subtle, delicate, beautiful way of looking—if I understand what that means so that when I say "no thing," it's got all my understanding wrapped up in the way of looking very subtly, very agilely, even if I haven't gone to the seventh jhana, it will take me to the seventh jhana.

If I practice, let's say, anatta—not me, not mine—and I understand that one, I don't quite understand this nothingness thing, but I understand not me, not mine, I know what that means, I can make it work—if I do that and I've already been to the seventh jhana, then the not me, not mine may well take me to the seventh jhana. But if I haven't gone to the seventh jhana before...

It may well not. In other words, sometimes what happens is people open up from these practices as far as they can go. But with training—actually, you can kind of... If they go together, the jhanic training and the insight training, you can kind of stop the elevator. You press the button on the elevator: "I want to get off at floor seven," or whatever. Does that make sense?

So usually we think of insight as something we get. You're meditating, you're being mindful, and you receive an insight—suddenly you really understand the fact of impermanence at another level. And that's a good way of thinking about insight. But this way of thinking about insight is insight as ways of looking. Insight is something we do. We actively decide to perceive in a certain way, to look in a certain way.

Once it gets to a certain level, there's a way that what we're engaging is provisional truths, if you like—a certain degree of less avijjā. So even this thing about no-thing is not quite an ultimate truth. It's pretty deep, but it's still a provisional truth. And what you're really doing is engaging a provisional truth as a way of looking. Through the jhana, you're gaining access to that level of provisional truth, of skillful opening perception.

Jhanas, then, are—as we said—huge resources in all these ways that we've talked about before, as well as providing both indirect and direct insight. Even the second jhana—I think I mentioned earlier on the retreat—just to know and really know firsthand that happiness, that degree of happiness and that much happiness and that depth of happiness is available and is not dependent necessarily on getting something from the external world or from someone else. That's an insight.

We also talked very briefly about the relationship between letting go of aversion and the arising of happiness. So that's also part of the insight there. Or in the third and fourth jhanas, the fact that that kind of peace, that kind of stillness really happens when we let go of push and pull. So all this is this kind of insight woven into jhanic openings.

So jhanas—what can we say? They loosen attachments and they relativize objects for us, meaning our usual sense, our usual perspectives and beliefs about things in the world, about objects, about things that we can get. They certainly relativize, as we were

just talking about with the second jhana, they relativize the pleasure that we can get from sense objects. Leaving aside the soul-making teachings of sensing with soul, there's no way that one would get that degree of happiness that you get in the second jhana from any sensual object. It's just of a different order, as we said earlier on the retreat.

In time, or later on, or more and more in time, they relativize the nature of objects too—the relative nature of objects too. So all these perceptions open up, these insight ways of looking, these provisional truths, and we start to see: a thing is a thing, and it's also not a thing. So my very sense of something is different when I've seen that. So not just the relative pleasure of something, but actually the relative nature of something becomes more relativized.

Soul-making Dharma, just very briefly, is dependent—as I said right at the beginning—on this understanding of emptiness and the flexibility of the idea, the potential flexibility of ways of looking. That's at the basis of soul-making Dharma. And soul-making Dharma, for those of you who are into it, also leads to that. It opens up more flexibility and it calls into question the whole idea that there is a fixed way things are: "This is like this and that's like that and that's just how it is." Soul-making Dharma is another way you can pry that open, and it breaks open the whole idea that something is this way or that way in itself.

So both insight into emptiness and also the jhanas, in the way I would teach it, they depend on our willingness to play with perception, depend on our willingness to be malleable with perception. But they deliver for us, they open up for us a malleability of perception—both the insight work into emptiness and the jhanic work.

And we talked about that with pain, and some of you have been experimenting with this and been almost startled at what's possible with unpleasant sensations—that they can become pīti or happiness. What about the mind? Foggy mind, dull mind, agitated mind. To the degree that I know that it's empty, that's also a perception. I have a perception of a mind state. It's a perception. Everything's a perception—just a perception. And knowing that it's empty means, the implication of knowing that it's empty means that it's malleable. It's not a fixed thing. The mind state too.

So that's maybe at some point something one can experiment with too. I've seen it with physical things—pain, unpleasantness. Can I also see the mind state in that way? It's flexible.

And then shape it.

I don't know. I would probably say that all jhānas open up for us or deliver for us a kind of more intuitive capacities. Sometimes that's related to creativity—poems and music and whatever else. There's something in the jhāna, it's almost like they become sources of creative potential or become sources of creativity or creative openings. Intuition, let's say.

But also intuition regarding insight. One of the blessings of jhāna in regard to insight is that it opens up our capacity for intuition in the realm of insight—our intuitive seeing and grasping of things, insight.

I would still say though, other factors are more important. So no matter how much intuition seems like it's opening up intuition regarding insight from jhānic experience, I would still say that gets trumped by what our conceptual framework of the Dharma is and what our conceptual framework of insight is. That will be more important. And if that's limited, it will limit what insight is possible, no matter how much the jhānic opening and how much it feels like, "Yeah, I'm super intuitive and I must be really seeing reality and all that."

So the question comes back to: is my conceptual framework for insight—or of insight—is my conceptual framework of Dharma actually big enough, helpful enough? Will it lead me—because it should, the conceptual framework should actually lead me to more insights—or actually does it hinder and limit? And that will trump any sense of intuitive opening or whatever from the jhāna.

We talked about three ways it's possible to get attached to jhāna. This is the last point now. But when we went into those three ways—attached to the pleasure, attached to the sort of self-grandiosity, or attached to view—actually as we investigated each one, I kind of suggested that it's more likely that the jhāna experience, repeated experience of jhāna releases attachments, including attachments to certain insight views.

I gave the example of the sixth jhāna and just the fact that one experiences something beyond that infinite consciousness—one experiences the seventh jhāna and the eighth jhāna. Just that, and the fact that it's in the map. Both the map and the experience, the conceptual framework and the experience help me go beyond. So I don't get too entrenched and too attached to such a view.

If my conceptual framework—and I might not even be someone who thinks I have a conceptual framework because I don't like conception or I think it's intellectual or I think it's not the real deal or whatever—I do have a concept. You do. Everyone has a

conceptual framework. It might be conscious, semi-conscious, or relatively unconscious. It might be coherent or incoherent. It might be muddled or not. It might be mixed with whatever, but you can't not have a conceptual framework, I would say.

But if my conceptual framework, for example, says something like, "This vastness of awareness, that lovely opening that I was describing the other way, precious opening—that sounds like emptiness. When I hear talk about emptiness, it sounds like that. That sounds like the ultimate. When I hear talk about the ultimate, that sounds like the nature of mind. When I hear talk about the nature of mind as the sort of ultimate thing that one wants to open to, or the nature of awareness, that sounds like rigpa." If you know the Vajrayāna teachings, that sounds like when the Buddha talks about consciousness without limit, without feature, that sounds like the radiant mind or whatever that I've heard the Buddha talk about or other teachers talk about or read about.

Especially when we get into Vajrayāna teachings, the language can get quite confusingly similar and not differentiated enough, really, as signposts.

So if I've got that kind of conceptual framework and I experience this vastness of awareness and I've got no further or deeper experience than that vastness of awareness, nor have I got any way—any way—I don't even, not only don't have the experience, but I've got no way of going beyond that experience of vastness of awareness, no way of going further. I wouldn't even know how to try to go further. None of that fits into my conceptual framework, but my conceptual framework doesn't support any of that or doesn't suggest or suggest how. Then I'm limited and maybe trapped and maybe forced into a kind of attachment to a certain view—entrenched, to use the Buddha's words.

But that doesn't have to be the case, obviously. If I have a conceptual framework that actually can keep going beyond these things—and partly the jhānas can be part of that, and they're woven into the same conceptual framework—then, and this isn't for everyone, but some people will say, "Oh, that makes sense," and it allows more. There's more potency there, there's more distance, there's more depth potential there—less likelihood of getting entrenched in a certain view of anything as ultimate or of "this is how things are." This is the reality of X or Y. And that's what an awakened person knows.

Okay. Let's sit quietly together for a bit.

I don't know how all this lands. Don't worry if it doesn't all, as I said at the beginning, if it doesn't make complete sense right now. Maybe that's the case. But it may still be, even though it doesn't make sense, that there's some kind of sense of beauty there or something that calls you or draws you. Maybe, maybe not of course. Some perfume, some sense of possibility.

Maybe that's the important thing. If it feels like it doesn't quite make sense, maybe that sense of beauty, that calling, that possibility is still there—and perhaps that's what matters most.

Thank you, everybody.

Time for tea. Enjoy.

CHAPTER 218

The Fifth Jhāna (The Realm of Infinite Space)

Rob Burbea · 1h34

> *In this comprehensive exploration of the fifth jhāna, Rob Burbea delves into what the Buddha called the "realm of infinite space" (ākāsānañcāyatana) - the first of the immaterial realms (arūpa jhānas). Drawing from classical descriptions in the Pali Canon, he unpacks the Buddha's terse instructions about transcending perceptions of materiality (rūpasaññānam samatikkamma) and the disappearance of perceptions of resistance and diversity.*
>
> *Burbea offers practical approaches for accessing this realm, primarily from the fourth jhāna foundation, emphasizing the kinesthetic sense of non-solidity and the well-being that accompanies the absence of materiality. He explores alternative entry methods through insight practices (vipassanā) that see all sense objects as mere materiality - the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. The talk includes guidance on eyes-open practice, working with visual and kinesthetic senses of boundless space, and the profound after-effects on perception that reveal cosmic oneness and the space-like nature of apparent solidity.*
>
> *A significant portion addresses the crucial role of authentic desire (chanda) and intention in jhāna practice, arguing that understanding one's relationship to desire is more fundamental than technical mastery. Burbea emphasizes how different practitioners have different authentic styles of spiritual longing, and how this determines what unfolds in practice. For practitioners of soul-making dharma, he connects jhāna practice to erotic engagement and the importance of personal fantasy in sustaining path commitment.*

What I wanted to talk about today is the fifth jhāna. Actually, the Buddha never calls it the fifth jhāna, to my knowledge. He calls them the first, second, third, fourth, and then he calls them the realm of this, the realm of that. The fifth jhāna is the realm of infinite space.

I don't know how it is for you, listening to and hearing about things that you may not have experienced yet. For some people, it's super exciting and they want to jump straight there. For some people, it's just—what's that got to do with me?—and something turns off a little bit. For some people, the inner critic kicks in: "Oh, I'm not there yet."

It's always interesting, I've found over the years, talking about or possibly talking about things and areas and experiences and openings and insights where it's often the case that many or some of the people I'm talking to are not there yet, and how that lands. I've noticed that when talking about something, one person is totally transfixed and bewitched and enchanted, while another person is sort of looking out the window.

This is for you and it's for future yous—of which there are actually an infinite amount for each of you—and it's for other beings elsewhere now and in the future.

So, the realm of infinite space. I don't know, how does that sound? Big, yeah. Not a place where you want to lose your keys. Let's see what the Buddha has to say about that.

The practitioner is practicing and has reached a certain place in this very contrived exposition, contrived unfoldment. The stage-by-stage is a teaching contrivance. So they reach a certain stage in their samādhi, and they're sitting there or standing there, walking, whatever, and the thought occurs to them: "What if I, with the complete transcendence of perceptions of physical form—I'm going to come back to retranslate that because I don't like that—with the complete transcending of perceptions of physical form, with the disappearance of perceptions of resistance and not heeding, not attending to perceptions of diversity, realizing space is infinite. What if I then were to enter and remain in the sphere of the infinitude of space?"

Without jumping at the sphere of the infinitude of space, he enters and remains in the sphere of infinitude of space. He sticks with it, that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it. That's all the Buddha says about it. Actually, there's a bit more in other suttas—suttas that for some reason are very rarely talked about, but I'm very fond of them.

But that's one translation. I'm not particularly keen on a lot of that. "The complete transcending of perceptions of physical form" is translated by someone else as "bypassing entirely beyond bodily sensations." I'm not entirely happy with that either.

The Pāli is rūpasaññānaṃ samatikkamma. Samatikkam is something like transcending, going beyond. Rūpasaññānaṃ is just rūpa and saññā, both of which words you want to know. Saññānaṃ is the genitive plural of saññā, which is perception. And rūpa is rūpa.

But rūpa is an interesting word because it can mean body, and it can also mean form as in a shape of something. I think the least misleading translation here would be something like "with the complete transcending of perceptions of materiality." I think that would pinpoint it more easily.

"With the disappearance of perceptions of resistance"—perceptions, so the floor is resistant to me and that's why I can stand on it. The wall is resistant to me and that's why I feel it when I look at the wall. I sense that it will hurt if I run at it with my head first. There's a sense of it blocking something. Physical objects block something.

And "not heeding to perceptions of diversity" or manifoldness means not paying attention to the many things that make up the world of materiality. There's the clock, there's the lamp, there's the glass, there's the flowers, there's the shirt, there's the table, there's the person, there's the body, there's the cushion—not heeding all these separate things, transcending the perception of materiality and the quieting, the disappearance, or the setting down—which is really the Pāli—the putting down of the perception of resistance. It's another way of saying solidity.

And then again, without jumping at it, without snatching at it, enters and remains.

But then again, this sense of sticking with it, developing it, pursuing it, establishing it. So that's pretty much all the Buddha says about that. The descriptions become shorter and shorter, terser and terser. We'll return to another sutta where there is a bit more detail, but only in terms of how to reach this state.

In translations, you often encounter phrases like "thinking space is infinite" after the transcending of perceptions of materiality. This is a strange construction in Pali—common but slightly unusual. I'd prefer something like "seeing" or "sensing" or "perceiving that space is infinite." The word "perceiving" captures both a passive aspect—recognizing that space is infinite—and also an active dimension. As we've highlighted so much on this retreat, perception has this active quality. I actually tune the perception. I play with perception so that the infinitude of space opens up. For me, the word "perceiving" is better because it encompasses both that passive recognition and active engagement. I play with my perception so that the sense of infinitude reveals itself.

The first four jhanas are called rupa jhanas, and the last four jhanas are called arupa jhanas. The "a" is a negative prefix. Usually this is translated as the rupa jhanas and then the arupa jhanas as the "formless" jhanas. Again, I'm beginning to wonder whether a better translation would be the "immaterial" jhanas. And as I mentioned, the Buddha doesn't actually use the word jhana for these states. He uses the word ayatana, which means something like sphere, realm, or base. I prefer "realm." It's a world. It's a realm of existence—ayatana.

So these jhanas five through eight are really openings into other realms. We had a glimpse, a taste of that—the beginnings of this—perhaps in the third and fourth jhanas, but now we're clearly in other realms.

This business of realms is quite important because this entire range of jhanic experiences maps neatly and coherently onto a whole cosmology. In Buddhist cosmology, there are three worlds—tiloka in Pali, meaning three worlds or three realms, three planes of existence, three levels of the cosmos.

There is what we might call the form realm, the realm of rupa. It's sometimes called the desire world in Buddhist cosmology—kamaloka—but I want to point out that it's the world of materiality. It's the world of the four elements: solidity, liquidity, air (which really means movement), and heat—heat and cold. Earth, air, fire, water. It's the world of materiality. This is the world that we all agree on. We might slightly disagree or be more or less informed about current thinking in physics regarding the nature of the world, but it's the world we all experience—the world of materiality that everyone agrees upon.

Above this is a plane of existence that correlates with the first four jhanas, the rupa jhanas. This is the world of subtle form. All of this cosmology often gets ignored in modern secular Buddhism, dismissed as superstitious religious mumbo-jumbo belonging to ancient Eastern thought. But actually, when you start to really move in and out of these jhanic perceptions, transitioning between these different realms, you begin to think, "Well, maybe there's something to this." What appears to be completely irrelevant, abstract, and arbitrary metaphysics reveals its direct correlation with meditative experience.

The world of the four jhanas—the plane of the four jhanas—is the world of subtle form, the rupa jhanas. Again, I would say "subtle materiality." Consider what happens to the perception of the materiality of the body. In normal consciousness, I perceive solid bone, solid flesh—that's my body. Organs, all the rest of it. Even in the first jhana, the body becomes much more subtle in this cosmology. It's more refined, this perception of the body's materiality—it's subtle materiality.

Yesterday we discussed the energy body as something that spans physical and mental. This too would fall into the category of subtle materiality. This kind of cosmological thinking in relation to the energy body doesn't exist only in Buddhism. It also appears in Islamic mysticism, probably some strands of Jewish Kabbalah. It's a bit more complicated in Christian mysticism, but perhaps there as well. The energy body or subtle body belongs to that middle realm of subtle materiality.

And then you reach the immaterial realm.

in Christianity and also in Islam and maybe in Judaism, different levels of angels inhabit each realm, just as in Buddhism different levels of devas and gods inhabit each realm.

So usually translated as "formless," but "immaterial" may be better.

How do we get there? How does this open up? Well, probably in most cases it's going to first open up in a convincing and persuasive and deeply impactful way from the fourth jhāna. And then the fourth jhāna really needs a sense of being really deep and really well established.

Once that fourth jhāna is really established, then you can start almost feeling into the space of the energy body again, with a view, with feeling for the sense of the body space. And what you sense there is a lack of solidity, a complete lack of solidity, as if it's just empty space. And actually that goes with a subtle well-being.

So you could either tune into the—here I am in the fourth jhāna. It's not pīti, it's not sukha, it's something much more subtle, but there is a well-being there, despite this "neither pleasure nor pain" language. There is a well-being, but it's the well-being of non-solidity, of non-materiality. It's almost like you feel as if you could just put your hand right through this space here.

That feeling right there in this location, in the energy body space, in the energy body region—the kinesthetic sense of that lack of solidity and the well-being that goes with the absence of solidity and materiality—is very refined.

Again, if we think about the five jhānas plus normal consciousness: normal consciousness, it's just solid. It's not very refined at all. First jhāna, more refined. Second jhāna, more refined. We've said this before. Third, fourth. By the time you get to the fourth, it's very refined. By the time you get to the fifth, it's refined out of any sense of solidity. There's not even a sense of a kind of energetic substance or the stillness or whatever. It's kind of gone. Do you understand? It's just an extension of the same thing—the energy body sense of refinement.

So to really sense that, to really feel into it, inhabit it and stay with that—stay with that very sense of the well-being that comes from the absence of solidity and really focus on that. This is one approach.

And one might notice, actually there's no edges. This very absence of solidity has no edges. It's edgeless. Or one might notice that any edges that maybe habitually creep in—the assumption or even an imagination of edges that might creep in subtly into the mind—they just keep dissolving. The mind just sees through them. So they just become space.

In the Visuddhimagga, which is this commentary that I mentioned a couple of times from Sri Lanka, there is a technique where you use little discs. They're called kasiṇas and you focus on—they can be different colors. And that's one of the meditative techniques that's explained a lot and emphasized a lot in the Visuddhimagga. And then from that little technique, you deliberately try imagining a bigger and bigger disc until it's infinite.

But this way of doing it that I've talked about, I don't think you need to stretch anything. Just this absence that you're feeling, the kinesthetic sense of absence—you don't need to stretch anything. You don't need to push anything outwards or make an effort, kind of stretching space to infinity. Just hanging out there, after a while you just realize it just goes on forever. There's no end to this. And if there are, as I said, if there are edges, they just keep dissolving. You just keep kind of seeing through them.

For many people they have an internal visual imagination and there's literally the seeing of space. That can be really helpful. There's a seeing of this kind of infinitude of space. But we really also want to get a kinesthetic sense involved as well.

So it can feel as if one just was falling through space. I think it came up partly in a Q&A really early in the retreat—it can feel like they've just taken the floor away and it's as if there's just nothing underneath me at all and nothing above. So the visual and kinesthetic sense can very much work together and that will really help kind of empower the whole thing and consolidate it.

And there is a delight in this. There is something actually to enjoy.

So technically you're supposed to be beyond pleasure and pain, but actually there's a great delight in this very absence of resistance that the Buddha is talking about. The very sense of just infinite, of just falling through space or potentially being able to fall through space. Nothing there, nothing at all in the way, nothing at all that one could bang into or that would obstruct in any way.

So that enjoying is actually quite an important element. We'll come back to that. But really what one's doing is staying focused on the space, on the total absence of solidity or resistance, and not attending to anything else that comes up in the mind or anything else that one might perceive. That's the non-attending to perceptions of diversity.

And you keep doing that and the thing starts to get bigger, but also really, really consolidated. Sometimes people want to worry about how big it is. They sense space. It's definitely not solid, but how big is it? Is it infinite yet? I don't think we need to worry about that. It's the same thing. I don't need to worry about pushing it. It's more just one's sense that there aren't edges.

The Pali word in the suttas is ananta, which literally means without end or without a boundary, without edge. It's that absence of boundaries. And one just keeps any sense of wherever they could be—they just disappear and just kind of the mind falls through them. They just disappear. And then the sense just opens out, opens out. Keeping with the sense of space allows the expansion.

Sometimes, as we mentioned already, there's a kind of level of the fourth jhāna, which we could say is a slightly deeper level, like the third jhāna, where it opens up wider. But in the third and fourth jhānas, we want to keep the attention more in the energy body space. But there's a sense of a wider realm. So it could go from there. One starts giving one's attention to the wider realm rather than just keeping the energy with the energy body. But essentially, it's the same thing. You'll have to see what works better for you.

So, as usual, damn bursts at first, perhaps, and it just goes there effortless. But it might be in time and with enough experience in and out, in and out, that one time one's practicing this and body sensations start to come back, or even physical pain starts to come back. Either one then needs to go back to a lower jhāna, probably the fourth jhāna, or if you have more experience, you could go to a higher jhāna actually.

Let's say you already know the sixth or the seventh. Here I am trying to get into the fifth in this session but something in the body keeps returning. I could go back to the fourth or could go to the sixth or seventh if I know them and then come back. Those visitations will really help everything to become less solid again and then one can stay more in the fifth jhāna.

Or another option might be that one could—here I am, pain is starting to re-emerge in the body or just body sensations—and one can almost focus in between the regions of pain. Just look at the gaps, the space in between. And eventually those will open up and the space will re-establish itself.

But really, I think the best foundation is probably a really strong sense of stillness from the fourth jhāna, a really refined and pristine, pure sense of stillness from the fourth jhāna. And then if one attempts the fifth jhāna and it's not steady, one can always return to the fourth jhāna so that you can make it kind of a home base in many different ways.

But it's tricky. Like I said, a lot of what I say will have exceptions, but generally speaking, the fourth jhāna wants to be really quite mature before the fifth can be really established.

Sometimes there are suttas—I couldn't find them, but there are suttas where the Buddha talks about, if I remember, it's almost like there are four jhānas and then there are four immaterial realms. And what they really are, are perspectives on the fourth jhāna. They're ways of looking at what's happening in the fourth jhāna, particularly ways of looking at what's happening to the sense of the body. So that the immaterial realms are different ways of sensing or different ways of looking at the body sense in the fourth jhāna.

So in a way, infinite space as a realm is already there in the fourth jhāna. If I look at the fourth jhāna, if I look at the sense of the body in a certain way and I just see it as space, it's already there. There's already so little solidity. I just look at it and sense the body as space. Or, and this one matches more of the Buddha's descriptions, if I sense the body space—what did the Buddha say about the fourth jhāna? The analogy was a purified, bright awareness. Purified mindfulness. That's what was pervading.

It wasn't sukha. It was a purified, bright awareness that was pervading the body. So that one's already hinting at the beginnings of the sixth jhana. I look at the body and I see it as awareness. What I'm paying attention to is the very awareness there. And that will take me to the sixth jhana, and so forth.

For most people—I've never done a statistical analysis, but I think for most people—this jhana is perceived as pitch black. So you could have a very luminous white, bright white fourth jhana. For most people, I think the fifth jhana will be black, but it doesn't really matter. That's a very secondary thing.

I think one of the lovely things about this realm is that you can actually practice it with the eyes open. And this is something I would really, really recommend in addition to the usual eyes-closed ways of working: sitting, standing, looking at the sky, for instance, looking at space, getting a sense of the space, feeling that space—the space of the sky, the space there in nature—feeling it with the body, feeling it kinesthetically as well. And again, realizing it's boundless, it's ananta, it doesn't have boundaries.

When I was learning this, we had a heat wave—I think it was really hot from something like March until October—and I was on retreat the whole time. I would just stand in the fields and the less busy lanes and just be staring at the sky, much to the amusement probably of the neighbors. But that's one way of practicing and it's very potent, just as potent. Eyes open, looking and getting a real feel for the space. The body and the mind become kind of one with boundless space. That's what we're trying to do—again, dissolve the body and dissolve the mind in this boundless space.

And it's very exhilarating. Exhilaration is perhaps a really accurate word. There's really a sense of "wow." It's almost dramatic in that dissolution, in that infinitude, in that disappearance of body and solidity. We're moving in that direction. It's the same thing with samadhi—it's absorption, absorption as a direction. Dissolving body and mind. Absorbing into it. Being space. I used to say to myself, "Being space. I've become space." But it's a direction. However absorbed we are, we can always be more absorbed.

So with this kind of opening, there is—or there should be—a very strong sense of cosmic oneness, mystical cosmic oneness that emerges with the opening to this realm. Both in the jhana certainly, because one has become space, there's nothing but space. The whole cosmos is just space. And also in the aftereffects on perception. As I mentioned yesterday, to me, the aftereffects on perception become really important at this level. The formless jhanas are really powerful. They're potentially very potent. So there's a strong sense of cosmic oneness. And again, that does something to the heart, to the soul, to the sense of existence, to all of that. I'll return to that later, come back to the oneness bit later.

There's also in this state what the Buddha calls a sense of release. I meant to look up the Pali—I can't remember—but the Buddha talks about a release. Now all jhanas are releases. They're releases from the hindrances. Certainly the first four jhanas are releases from sense desires and the irritations or aversions to sensual impacts. But here we have a different kind of release. We're released from the perceptions of materiality and solidity. And that really is felt as a release.

That release, that sense of release is what I would call a secondary nimitta. The primary nimitta here is space and its endlessness—space, just nothing solid there, just nothing, nothing, nothing solid there. That's the primary nimitta. A secondary nimitta—which again, like we've talked about before with the metta or other secondary nimittas, you can lean into and emphasize and explore more at times—but probably overall, if you want the whole journey to deepen, it needs to remain secondary. But it's still really important to sense the release here.

And that's what I would call a secondary nimitta. It's a tremendous release to be released. This is one of those things—you could stop a person on the street and ask them if they feel imprisoned by materiality and solidity, and they'd probably tell you that you need to get out more.

There are imprisonments that we don't realize are imprisonments until we've gone beyond them. That's why I prefer to keep the word dukkha in the Pali, because it's talking about subtle things that we have no sense of as dukkha at all. We wouldn't list them on our catalog of what constitutes suffering. But the release from perceptions of materiality and solidity—there's a genuine freedom there. So that too becomes a secondary nimitta.

They're completely connected: release, freedom, secondary nimitta. It's very exhilarating. There's joy as well, perhaps, as a secondary nimitta at times. I would say wonder and awe arise, but these are all secondary.

The sense of infinity itself is going to affect—or it can, if we let it, if we don't get in the way, if we're not entrenched in certain views which erect walls of conception that aren't demolishable—if we actually allow it, then the sense of infinity and the release from materiality, this whole perception of cosmic oneness, they really affect the being deeply. They affect the sense of existence, the whole relationship with death, the self and the self's dying. This taste of infinity—it's more than a taste, this immersion in, this dissolution in infinity.

Like I said, all the jhanas really have their impact, and part of their impact, a strand of their impact, is in lessening attachment. So here as well.

Another secondary nimitta will be love—metta, let's say metta more accurately. Why? All this oneness and non-heeding of perceptions of diversity—metta is unconditional love. The more oneness, the more naturally there is metta. When I'm not heeding diversity and not attending to perceptions of diversity, then everyone is equally deserving of metta, and the metta flows to all equally. It's when I prefer this bit of diversity to that bit of diversity that metta becomes conditional and not so pure.

So metta is there as a secondary nimitta, again something we can certainly lean into at times. In the aftereffects on perception, it might be among those aftereffects—you might have many different aftereffects, so that might be a very strong one. Just walking around after this kind of experience, there's tremendous metta, and one may really lean into that. You're not so much concentrating on the space sense or the infinity—it's just the metta now, that profound sort of ocean of it.

Just a small point here that may not be needed anymore, but I remember years ago it was commonly taught that metta and karuna and mudita—loving-kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy—were good objects for jhana practice, but they only went as far as the third jhana. That's as far as you could take them. Has anyone heard that? It's from the Visuddhimagga. The Buddha never said that. In the Pali Canon, the Buddha says metta can take you to the fourth and fifth jhanas and beyond.

Again, it's a strange historical thing that has happened with the Visuddhimagga. A lot of material in there gets unquestioned for some reason, even though the Buddha is saying something quite different.

Relating a bit to what Derek asked yesterday, the Buddha says metta delivers, or karuna delivers to, let's say, the fifth jhana, but he adds, "for one who has not penetrated to further release." In other words, if you know the sixth or seventh, your karuna, your compassion practice, could take you to the sixth.

There are a couple of interesting things to point out here. First, just a small point regarding karuna: if karuna is taking you to the second or third jhana—karuna means compassion, right? That's your meditation—that means compassion needs to be, that means compassion is a happy state. Sometimes people have an idea that compassion is not a happy state, but actually, it's very clear what the Buddha meant by compassion: it's a happy state, a state where there's a lot of happiness in it. That's a small point.

The other thing—and I throw this out for you to explore, or whoever wants to explore when you're ready—is that at some point with all this, if you really get into it, you can start experimenting with different kinds of cocktails, what I call cocktails. I mean exactly this: mixing infinite consciousness, the sixth jhana, the realm of infinite consciousness, with, let's say, compassion. So you've got—you're starting to color space, or put two things together that are ordinarily not thought of together.

Mixing jhanas with brahmavihāras creates entirely new experiences—cocktails of consciousness, as I call them. What you read about in traditional categories begins to feel limited compared to the vast creative possibilities that open up. You can make your own combinations and even give them playful names.

But perhaps even more transformative than what happens during meditation are the aftereffects on perception. These aftereffects touch the heart, bring liberation and wonder, and fundamentally change how existence appears to us. They create the opening that transforms our lives.

From the realm of infinite space, two primary aftereffects emerge. The first is the perception that all is space. You know that old illustration about atomic structure? This pen represents the nucleus of an atom. Where are the electrons? If this were the actual size of a nucleus, the electrons would be orbiting somewhere around Plymouth, or perhaps Johannesburg! The point is we feel ourselves living in a solid world, but atoms are mostly empty space. When you really look at what matter consists of—this nucleus with electrons at impossible distances—you realize that what we experience as solid is actually almost entirely space.

The second aftereffect strikes even deeper—the perception that all sense objects are one materiality, one substance. We truly are star stuff. Everything and everyone in this room, all our atoms, probably originated from the same supernova. When a star explodes, the physical and chemical processes generate complex atoms that form carbon and other elements making up our material world. All of us, everything on Earth, likely emerged from atoms scattered by that same ancient stellar explosion. Before that, it all came from the Big Bang.

We can hear such facts intellectually, but with this perception of oneness—oneness of materiality, of physical substance—the truth impresses itself directly on the heart. It's not merely interesting information; it becomes a living reality that touches your being at the deepest level. This is mystical oneness, even though we're discussing matter. You sense not just connection but actual oneness with all materiality—the earth, each other, bodies, trees, everything.

While many suttas mention the realm of infinite space, most offer only the brief description I shared earlier. However, there's one sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya called something like "Ways to the Imperturbable" that I found particularly compelling when exploring the relationship between insight and jhāna practice. This text demonstrates how insight ways of looking can open particular jhānas.

Here the Buddha teaches that we should view all sensuality and sense perceptions in specific ways. He offers three options, though the third proves most relevant. First, all sensuality and sense perceptions are dukkha. Second, they are impermanent. These aren't mere intellectual concepts—they're insight ways of looking that must be translated skillfully into moment-to-moment perception, sensing over and over again.

This is what we mean by an insight way of looking. If the Buddha says all sense objects are impermanent, and I think, "Yeah, okay, that tells me I should live and try not to be attached," it's going to have about zero power in our life. But if we engage it as a way of looking—I mean a subtle meditative engagement—this is what I mean by insight way of looking: something very light in the consciousness as we're looking, sensing, relating

in a particular way. Seeing impermanence, recognizing all these things are dukkha. Whatever I see as I walk around, sit, look at the materiality, sense the materiality—impermanent, dukkha. Then it starts to do something.

And it's not that it starts to do something twenty years later, where maybe I'll be a little less attached. I mean, it may well have that effect too, but it does something now. This again is what I mean by insight ways of looking. They have their power now. They bring release now. They change the perception now. I just need to do it over and over and over. I'm training, playing with perception over and over.

But the most significant one of the three that the Buddha gives is not the dukkha, not the impermanence, but that all materiality is just the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. So again, what does that mean? It means perhaps I do my walking meditation or stand outside or sit with my eyes open, with my eyes closed, and with any sense of any sense object, I'm looking: it's just materiality, just materiality.

This has to mean something to me. If it doesn't mean something, then it won't work. So it has to both mean something but also in the looking be incredibly light and incredibly agile. I can't have a big philosophical essay that I'm pondering through and repeating. But pregnant in my "just impermanent, impermanent," or "it's just materiality, just materiality," there has to—that one's quite an easy one, I think—but it has to encapsulate something that means something for me. Do you understand? Then it has its power. Then it starts to have its power, and I need to sustain it moment after moment. It's a way of looking, an insight way of looking.

And that insight way of looking can take me to the fifth jhāna, the realm of infinite space. Why? You're not attending to diversity—that's one reason. And you're also not—it's all just, especially with the impermanent and dukkha—there's also a sense that I'm not interested in this. It's just all materiality; all sense objects, sense perceptions are just not interesting. There's a letting go of any clinging with regard to materiality and material objects.

So both for the reason Nicole mentioned—not tending to diversity—but also this kind of... we'll come back to this, but basically the Buddha says this is worthless, this is dukkha, this is Māra's snare, this is a cancer, this is a dart, an arrow. So all that's kind of in there. It doesn't need to be so—the Buddha's a little extreme sometimes in his language. It's more just a kind of "hmm, hmm." But very, very subtle. And then we're doing something very, very powerful. And this other realm can begin to open up from the insight way of looking.

I haven't gone through jhānas one, two, three, four. I've gone through the insight way of looking. There will be in that, and in all this—both in the sense of oneness that comes in the aftereffect on perception, and also if you follow that insight way of looking that I just described and the Buddha offered—there will be, in time, certainly in the moment but also more long-term in my life, more disidentification with the body becomes available.

And again, I would say it becomes available rather than just a constant thing, because sometimes it's important to identify with the body. Of course it's important. But that view, that relationship with the body of non-identification, becomes much more available through the insight way of looking or through the aftereffect on perception from the jhānic realm. There's just elements of the cosmos, just the material elements of the cosmos. And when we're eating, we're just moving elements from there to here and then out again, or breathing, or whatever. And again, there's a release, there's a beauty in that.

If I only ever think of body and physicality like that, to me that's an impoverishment. I miss all kinds of wonderful, beautiful, important things about existence. Do you understand? I think that's really important.

So that's one way it can happen, but the other way is not with the eyes shut, nor with the eyes open looking at the sky or looking at space, but actually looking at objects. And particularly if you've had a lot of experience going in and out of the realm of infinite space, but also maybe from other meditative experiences—which many of you have already actually already had—where you look at an object, and usually, as I said, I look at the wall or I look at Nathan or whatever it is, and in the looking there's a sense of their solidity. I just somehow sense it as part of the normal consciousness.

Again, I know there's going to be resistance and there's going to be obstruction there. But sometimes, especially if you've done a lot of fifth jhana or other kinds of meditation, there's this other perception available where you look at something and you can kind of see right through it, so to speak. It just doesn't appear solid.

So you can also train your perception, play with a way of looking where you're seeing and sensing things as space, not as solid. Look at the table and just get a sense of it not as solid. One's ability to do that rests on how familiar you are with that kind of perception from before. It could come from your previous experience of the realm of infinite space, but it could also come from other kinds of meditative opening. Because that decrease of solidity is, again, it's a kind of unfabricating.

And any meditative practice, certainly any kind of classical meditative practice, is a practice of unfabricating to some degree. Dana, sila, ethics, concentration, samadhi, jhana, insight practice—they're all unfabricating to some degree. So this kind of perception, if you're practicing any different kinds of meditation, it's very common to have that experience.

And so it might be that resting on one's previous experiences of a sense of the non-solidity of things, when one looks at them, you can actually engage that more deliberately rather than just waiting for it to come as a result. Engage it more deliberately, and then the realm of infinite space begins to open up with your eyes open. Don't need a big space. Don't need the eyes shut. It's more just a way of seeing, a way of sensing what's there that we usually perceive in a certain way. I'm just perceiving it a different way.

Does this make sense?

As we said at the start, most of you are pretty interested in this. But if my question is: Why am I doing Dharma practice? Why am I meditating? People have a lot of different reasons why they're meditating. They're looking for a lot of different things. There's such a huge variety in terms of what brings people to practice meditation these days. It's enormous. And even within Buddha Dharma, even people who come on retreats, and maybe I would say even really hardcore practitioners still have a lot of range of what they're wanting.

So if what I want in my life is simplicity and equanimity—equanimity in the sense of with regard to the eight worldly conditions: praise, blame, pain, pleasure, success, failure, gain, loss—if that's kind of why I'm practicing, I have a vision that Dharma and meditation can make my life more simple and that attracts me, and I want this kind of evenness of equanimity, if those are the goals of practice, I'm not sure whether there's that much point or need to open up to these kinds of realms really. Maybe attention to impermanence, realizing the impermanence of things would help, but I don't know that this is really necessary.

If, turning that around, if my vision of awakening, my idea of what an awakened person knows, is that they know the impermanence of all things, I'm also not so sure that one needs to open up to the realm of infinite space or the other immaterial realms. You don't really need that.

I would like to, having said that, just revisit again this question of desire, which we talked about earlier on the retreat. And one of the points I made—and I was trying to convey its significance because it wasn't obvious—is that exactly what I desire, exactly

what I'm looking for, is more significant than whether I reach a certain jhana. How I relate to my desire and what exactly my desire is, is more significant than whether I reach jhana.

As a teaching, that very nugget there—how much what unfolds depends on both exactly what I'm desiring and how I'm relating to my desire—that, as a teaching, I would say is more significant than any tip or technique or instruction on how to move from this jhana to another. I think I asked how many people believed me, and some of you put your hands up and some of you didn't. And then I talked a bit about desire.

I think the piece I wanted to emphasize was not so much how much desire we have. Because sometimes when I talk, it might sound to some people like, "Oh, there's so much desire. I don't have enough desire. Rob has all this hot-blooded Mediterranean Arabic passion and whatever. And I'm not like that."

So it wasn't really about how much—it was about how we relate to our desire and what exactly we are desiring. And that an enormous amount hinges on that. An enormous amount of what will unfold for us as practitioners hinges on that. And knowing that and understanding that may be more important than how to get from one jhana to another.

And it may be more important than attaining whatever jhana.

So again, what are we really desiring? Again, there's such a huge range in the Dharma. Many people these days, with meditation entering mainstream culture, come to the Dharma for some ease—understandably enough—for some reduction of suffering. They're oppressed and badgered by their inner critic and want a certain amount of freedom in relation to the inner critic, the self-judge, or whatever you call it. They want some ease in their life and some reduction of suffering.

What might happen is that a person might actually get that. They might get some ease over time, through practice—some ease, some reduction of suffering, some abating of the inner critic. Maybe it comes from a certain amount of Dharma practice. Maybe that ease, that reduction of suffering and reduction of the inner critic, comes as much from a change in outer circumstances: a shift at work, entering into a relationship or leaving a certain relationship, life conditions changing, and they actually feel better.

So they've got what they wanted originally. They've got that degree of ease or that reduction of suffering that they wanted. And then maybe at that point, they don't really want anything more. Why am I even practicing anymore? I've kind of got what I

wanted. How much would jhanas and these immaterial realms matter to such a person? How much would they even want or need to come on a retreat like this, or give much time to all this?

What exactly we want determines what unfolds, determines how we relate to practice and Dharma and all that. Someone was telling me a while ago they were talking about going on another jhana retreat—or for them it would have been the first jhana retreat—and explaining why they wanted to go. They said they thought that the jhanas would enable them to be more present.

They had been practicing meditation for probably twenty-five or thirty years. And that was how they viewed the whole of practice. It was really about being more present. Can I be more present to life? And they practiced diligently, very committed, but that was their view: it's about being present.

Wrapped up in that—it's about being present—actually is a whole cosmology. Do you understand that? Why would being present... In other words, being present gives a kind of sanctity to something. To what? To the present moment, to this world as I perceive it. It's got a whole hidden metaphysics and cosmology on which this idea rests, and this kind of raising up of this aspiration over and over: to be present, to be present to life, to be present to the way things are, to be present to the moment.

All these charged words—life, the moment, things as they are—they all pick... or rather, scratch away at the charge and they all hide certain worldviews. They're all pregnant with certain worldviews. Does this make sense?

Again, such a person, I don't think, would need to come. First of all, the jhanas are not going to make you that much more present. You don't need the jhanas to practice presence. So maybe that person would have gone on a jhana retreat and actually found only a marginal increase, if at all, in their ability to be present, but would have also realized that you don't need that. I think more would, at some point, decide that it wasn't really their cup of tea. They weren't really interested in that. It would be hard for them to sustain an interest in jhana practice.

When we talk about other realms or mastery or this mystical state or that mystical state... but the whole elevation of the idea of presence—those things have nothing to do with that. Presence has nothing to do with other realms or opening to other realms. Do you see what I'm trying to say?

So such a person, had they gone on that jhana retreat, probably would have decided—wouldn't have been able to sustain the intention. If it was a long retreat like this one, they wouldn't have been able to sustain the attention. They wouldn't have kept working

and playing, because it actually wasn't what they wanted. They wanted something else. And wrapped up in that wanting more presence was resting on a whole cosmology which was kind of entrenched, and there was no real interest in shifting the cosmology.

Or sometimes it's more obvious in other ways. A person doesn't want to—there's a kind of negative desire. My desire is not to budge a certain cosmology.

So I also run into people talking about jhana practice and retreats, jhana retreats they've been on, where—you know, I think I mentioned this before—a person's come after a jhana retreat and said, "Oh, it was really fun. I had a great time," whatever. But there was a kind of walled entrenchment in a certain cosmological view, in a certain view of the world, of human being, of the cosmos, of what awakening is, of being itself.

And the absolute priority was that this view did not get challenged, that it remained what it was. There was so much invested in that view—that the world is as it is, and existentially we have to face up to that: a purposeless world of cold, purposely dancing atoms in which a human being inexplicably finds themselves. Finite life, then death, and the whole point of dharma practice is to realize that, face up to it, and be relatively okay with that existential truth. That's the point of dharma practice.

So you can do a little bit of jhanas, but not too much. You can have a little bit of fun. Even the language—"Oh, I had a great time"—is almost dismissive. "I had a great time." It was like a little hobby on the side, something that was kind of cute to play with for a bit. But I don't want to do too much, because then if I have enough of these kinds of experiences, it might start challenging my view of the cosmos, my view of what human being is, my view of existence, of what the world is, of what reality is.

So there's a kind of negative desire operating, if you like—a desire for something not to be pushed on and challenged. This person will limit their exploration of jhanas and the ways of looking that we talked about yesterday, so that they're not allowed to open up those drastic and radical, repeatedly opening, drastic and radical changes in the sense of things and existence.

Limited exploration limits the challenge. So you can zip through jhanas from one to eight, but it doesn't really make any difference to the whole sense of existence. It's just a fun game that one's playing—pleasant in the mind.

Or again, it might be someone wants a kind of equanimity in daily life. And as we've already said, then again, it will be limited. The interest in this kind of thing will actually be limited. A little bit of impermanence, maybe a little bit of the vastness of awareness because you get quite a bit of equanimity there. Maybe a little anatta at a certain level.

But also, those practices will be related to as a decrease of papañca—we've talked about this—as a decrease of reactivity, as a decrease of fussing. And that's the point of dharma practice: decrease of papañca and fuss.

So I want to speak a little bit more about desire. Yesterday we spoke about emptiness and awakening and jhanas, and I still think more fundamental and more fundamentally important than emptiness, than jhanas, than awakening, is the question of desire and how we're relating to it. I'd say it's more fundamental than all of that.

When I talked about it the other time, what I perhaps should have said—and if it was a little out of balance—is that people are different with desire. In other words, people are unique with their desire. Not everyone burns with a certain kind of passionate desire. Some people do and some people don't. Some people's desire burns differently.

So whatever I said previously, I didn't mean to sound—and I'm sorry if it did sound—as if I was implying you should all burn this way, or like this, or with this kind of intensity. I think the more important question is: what is authentic for you? What's authentic for you? Your desire and how that burns.

Some people—and I was giving some stories from my past about how the pain of desire and of staying with something, the torment and the rub of it—but some people much more naturally don't have desire that burns that way. It doesn't burn with a great, huge, passionate flame of intensity that's problematic—their eros, their desire. Either they just don't have so much—it's just what's authentic to them, not so much desire, and this has to be respected. That's one of the points I'm trying to make. Or it burns in a much easier, less intense way than something I might somehow communicate when I share about myself. A less pressured way.

So this is really important. Some people's desire does burn with a lot of pressure, with a lot of intensity. Sometimes the pressure and intensity is not authentic—it's something added on by the inner critic or by peer pressure or something like that. Sometimes a person's desire is not so flaming, burning, and passionate like that. And sometimes that's authentic, but sometimes not being so burning and intensely is not authentic. In other words, there's actually something going on where a person is dampening their desire without even realizing it—inhibiting it, blocking it, avoiding it, fearing it, dissipating it, forgetting it.

So the question here, one of the important questions, is about authenticity for each soul in relationship to desire. I think partly after the other talk on desire, I felt like I didn't make that clear enough. So that's partly why I'm saying this now.

I think I said that a talk is a talk. When I give a talk in public to many people and it's being recorded, I speak in certain ways, but it should be—I hope you feel it—

If you come to an interview with me, I need to match you where you are and not impose anything about whether you need to be desiring this or you need to have more desire or less. My desire for one-to-one interviews is to meet you where you are with that, and to really respect—genuinely respect—if your desire burns differently than mine or than the next person. It would be rather obnoxious if I didn't, I think. But talking with a group is a different thing. And talking when there's a recording, when we don't know who's going to listen to this in however many years—it's a different thing. Anyway, I didn't make that clear enough.

So I need to respect how your desire burns and how much desire there is, if that's authentic. And I may also respect, even if we're working one-on-one, even if your desire is different than mine—why should it be the same? I also need to respect your process and where you are in your process of uncovering your—let's call it—natural and authentic flame and desire. Or where you are in liberating it and knowing its power. And that takes time. That process is at a certain place at any time.

So if I'm working one-to-one with someone, that's also part of what I need to do. Even if in some sense I feel that this person actually has a lot more desire and they're not really—for whatever reason—not really in touch with it or not really allowing it, I still need to respect the process there and not push that impatiently or out of time. So there are many different elements to consider here when we talk one-on-one, and again when we're talking in a larger context.

Authenticity comes in two respects. There's authenticity about what I desire. Monica asked this question: what's the difference? Through introspection, can I slowly learn to feel the difference between a desire that's coming, let's say, more from what we might call ego and a desire from what we might more call soul? That's why we give, partly, all the soul-making teachings—they point to the difference, all those elements of the imaginal, etc. They point to all this talk about eros. Can I discern the difference when a desire of mine is actually not authentic?

I might have been pursuing something for ages before maybe someone points out, or maybe I realize, actually this isn't what I really, really want. It's not what I really, really care about. As I said the other day when we were talking about getting inundated with advertising and all that, but what about things like—how many people have been engaging emptiness practices diligently, and yet emptiness and that realization is actually not what they really, really want? How did that happen?

I think what unfolds in terms of your emptiness realization depends and is determined to a large part by what exactly I'm desiring. And if I'm not really, really—if I'm not really genuinely, authentically passionate about it, it won't deliver. I do all the practices, I kind of do the things, but it's not my thing.

So what I desire, and learning to discern the difference between what's really an authentic, deep soul desire and what's a more ego desire and what's just indoctrination and programming from cultures or the wider culture or the subculture, including dharma cultures. You're in a situation where everyone—the teacher and everyone else—is going on about emptiness, emptiness, and doing these practices, and people are excited, and one naturally thinks, well, that's what I've got to do. And it could be jhanas as well. But I would say, you know, for these things to really deliver, there needs to be this authentic passion. And the same thing—even if a person wants to be a writer or a singer, songwriter, whatever it is. Why? Where's the desire coming from? Is there something that needs that? Or is there something that needs you to do that? These are hard questions.

So authentic about what I desire, and authentic also, as I said earlier, about how my desire burns. And that's really different soul styles. And that I think really needs to be respected. Some people, yeah, it's just kind of a whole big intense thing, whatever. And some people much less so. Some people it's a quieter flame, but it's very, very steady and it's not so dramatic. What's authentic to you, to your soul?

And then there's another question, another aspect: how to be true to one's deep desires. What does that mean? What does that look like? What does it mean really for me to honor my desires? For this, I need to know myself. If I say, "I want this, I'm going to do this. I will do this. I've pledged myself to this. This is the thing that I really care about"—

And then you see a person, a little time goes by and they're not following through on it. There are all kinds of what often look like good reasons to them: "Oh, my mother hurt her leg," or "Someone asked me to do this," and there are a million reasons. But oftentimes it's actually to do with self-knowledge. For some reason this person is not seeing this pattern of getting very passionate about something and not following through. It's not steady. It's difficult stuff.

This is why I say this is actually more fundamental than emptiness or jhana or awakening or whatever—because all that is going to depend on how wise I am about my desire, what's my relationship to desire, and how well do I know myself around that.

It's interesting. I think one of the gifts of modernity is that in a way we're free. There's no dominant narrative, no dominant kind of view anymore in modernity of what the most important thing is in life, and therefore what's most desirable. So we're not obliged to believe that this or that is the best kind of desire, and that if we were somehow wiser or better or clearer or less deluded, that would be what we would really desire. Modernity has done away with all that. If I was just less deluded, I would simply desire awakening. I would simply desire this. Modern Western culture has just done away with that.

It's no longer legitimate to say to anyone else, "This or that is what makes a life really worth living. That's what you should really desire." What that does—the gift of that—is it makes us free, free to choose. Or to a certain extent, it makes us more free than if that were uniformly agreed in the culture. Like in certain cultures, it was always agreed: it's best to become a monk. If you've really got the desire and the spirit and you're really clear, you'd become a monk. Everyone knew that. Someone who wasn't becoming a monk knew they were making a kind of second-level choice. But that whole view and narrative and framework has gone. There's nothing we can point to anymore, nothing that it's legitimate to point to in modern Western culture.

So there's an absence, the gift of which is a certain kind of freedom—freedom to choose, to a certain degree, because then we have to deal with all kinds of other stuff that gets in the way of freedom or looks like freedom but actually isn't.

But this very gift is at the same time, I think, a huge problem for modern culture. The loss of any kind of objective criteria or universally agreed-upon criteria to determine what is it that makes a life really worth living? What is the good life? What is a beautiful life? What is a life most worth living? And of course, relative to that is: what then should I desire? All this is connected.

The absence of that is the cause of huge and widespread and profound problems in modern culture, modern society, postmodern society. These are ethical issues, and I think at the root of our climate change, species extinction, racial injustice—so much of what's going on in the world are actually ethical issues at root. Part of the very ethical problem is this absence. Does this make sense?

So I've talked about that quite a lot recently on recordings and I hope to be able to talk about it some more. I just think it's so pressing and so important. You see how all these things are connected. We talk about emptiness, but until the desires are there and until that's connected to what actually makes a life worth living and how we're going to relate to all this and what is my relationship with all that—it's huge.

I just want to touch on this and pinpoint what's actually significant. Sometimes we don't realize what's significant because we're certain that something else is significant. You actually have to go to another level and realize, "Oh, there's something else here, a whole other level that I hadn't even considered that's actually really, really significant."

Just following on with a couple of small things about desire, primarily for soul makers—I'll be brief because this is not a soulmaking retreat. If you love soulmaking Dharma and if you love soulmaking practices, then you should realize, if not by now, you should realize at some point that your very sense of soulmaking Dharma will expand. It will expand into new territories that it hadn't included before. It will expand new possibilities, new realms of existence and being, and your being will get included. If you haven't already, it more and more gets included, worked into the soulmaking dynamic. What soulmaking dharma pertains to and is, the sense of it starts to expand.

I think at some point most practitioners, most soulmaking dharma practitioners, will realize two things. One is that jhana practice is a kind of art, and as such is also part of and contributes to the art of soulmaking practice.

So some of you already kind of get that connection, while others find it much less apparent or not there yet. Jhana practice as an art becomes or is seen to become very relevant to soul-making dharma practice - relevant in terms of the sensitivity and attunement that we've talked about, the magic. Some of you already get a sense of the magic of jhana practice and this magic of playing with perception. If you're practicing soulmaking dharma, you're practicing a kind of magic too. You start to see that these things are really, really connected. They're truly relevant to what possibilities open up. So that's one thing that should become clear.

A second thing that should become clear is that being able to really sustain - the demand in jhana practice to really sustain, to stay with over and over for hours and hours, to marinate in and return to the primary nimitta, to let that really mature that way in practice - that kind of sustaining needs eros. The very way we're relating to the primary nimitta is, in soul-making dharma language, erotic in the small definition of erotic. To sustain, to be able to sustain that eros in the small definition is relevant to the art and skill and also relevant to being in relationship with anything that we love.

So again, this question: How does your eros burn? What's your style? Is it that you get excited about this and then a quick flame, then a quick flame of excitement about that and then another quick flame of excitement - oh, this wonder opens up and then something else? Or is it this very steady staying with one thing, staying with one thing? What's the style of eros? A lot depends on that in terms of our relationship with jhana

practice and our ability to really sustain. It is an erotic relationship, in the small sense. And again, that comes back to what's authentic - what's the authentic way my eros burns?

A kind of contradictory or complementary question arises: because of the nature of the soul-making dynamic, there's always this double question. Because of the nature of soul and soul-making, there's always this question of what's authentic to my soul, and there's the possibility of my soul's growing and extending and learning new ways and new ways it can burn that I hadn't even recognized were available to me as part of me - the kinds, the styles of my fire burning, of my eros. So you get a kind of complicated question there.

The second small thing for soul-makers is this: I said much earlier on this retreat, and this is connected to all this business about desire, that one of the most significant things, one of the most crucial elements of fruitful practice is the view that we have of the self on the path. If that's problematic, then no matter what we experience in meditation, no matter what we open to, it won't deliver its full fruit. It can be stymied, it can be blocked. The view of the self on the path - this is important for everyone. It's not something we usually talk about. We usually expect that if I just do the right practices, that will all get taken care of. Maybe, but maybe not.

When we come - again, this is just for people interested in soul-making - a view of the self on the path can also be related to the fantasy of the path and the fantasy of the self on the path. Sometimes a person recognizes that they really need something like this to help them sustain, whether it's jhana practice or emptiness or just dharma practice or soul-making practice or whatever it is. I need something in the view of the self. If you know soul-making dharma practice, I need a fantasy here to actually sustain and keep delivering, keep encouraging me, supporting me.

There's the possibility of a kind of formulaic answer - taking the bodhisattva vows and having that kind of quasi-imaginal relationship with the whole quasi-imaginal sense of the self on the path. I'm a bodhisattva, I'm doing this for all beings, or I'm a warrior or whatever it is. All that's okay, taking a formula if you like. But it will be much more powerful and much more soulful if it's personal, unique to you, to your particulars - authentic again. The word "authentic" comes from auto, and auto means self. So it pertains to you. In other words, if the fantasy is a particular one, not just a generic Buddhist formula or something else like that.

If you are the author - that word "author" is phonetically related to "authentic," though not etymologically related. Its etymological root is from augere in Latin, which means to increase. An author is someone that grows something. But phonetically

they're related - authentic and author. If you want to be a real author, I need to be authentic, and that means getting in touch with what this self needs, what's personal and particular.

So how do I access that? Yes, possibly through generic universal Buddhist formulas or whatever. Or it's accessed in one of two ways, which is out of the corner of my eye, so to speak. What I mean by fantasy is something we kind of see out of the corner of our eye. When I'm really in love with something, when I'm inspired, there's somewhere - I'm not really noticing at first - somewhere is hiding a fantasy of what I'm doing and of the self.

in its journey of doing what I'm loving.

When I love, when I'm in love, when I'm inspired, there's a fantasy hiding there. So how do I discover what my personal fantasy is? I kind of glimpse it out of the corner of my eye. It's not really an image—it's a kind of background narrative image—but I can glimpse that in those times. Then I can use it, draw upon it, and develop it in practice, and it becomes really fertile potentially as a support for my desire, for my sustaining on the path, whatever path I've chosen.

So it can come out of those times of love, out of the corner of my eye I catch it. Or it can come right in and through my dukkha. When I'm really struggling on the path, when I'm really struggling with a sense of the self on the path, when it's got so heavy, so frustrating, when the longing is burning painfully, when there's grief perhaps, when there's despair—right there, in and through my dukkha, the very crucible of that dukkha, there's enough in there.

I have to go into it with a lot of skill and a lot of the right kind of holding. But if I do, in the alchemy of it, of this crucible of dukkha, it can emerge—a fantasy of self on the path that's liberating and supportive and sustaining and powerful and generative and nourishing and beautiful and endlessly fertile, as soul-making images are. So it's exactly when I feel really the pain of the problem of having a goal and my relationship with it—with all the soul-making skill that I have and art—that's exactly when the most fertile thing can come.

Last thing. So that was a bit of a digression. Again, I feel very important, this whole desire business, but I've talked about it so much elsewhere. Back to the realm of infinite space. Same deal with mastery. Same things. We're aiming for the same things in time when it's ready.

Can go there not from any jhāna, as I've described. Can go there either by subtle intention, just from a normal consciousness, through an insight way of looking, through just looking at things and seeing through them, sensing their non-solidity. Can go from not the fourth jhāna, but the second or the third, et cetera. Want to play with all this and develop all that.

Then one of the things I think gets really delightful at this point is walking in the realm of infinite space. I mean going for a walk on the lanes. Very interesting and very lovely experience, I would say. Then again, with every new jhāna, we've added more permutations for our leapfrog ping-pong, because you can jump around all kinds of different places to this one and that one.

I think that's all I wanted to say today. So let's have a bit of quiet together.

CHAPTER 219

The Sixth Jhāna (The Realm of Infinite Consciousness)

Rob Burbea · 1h19

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea guides practitioners through understanding the sixth jhāna, traditionally known as the realm of infinite consciousness (viññāṇañcāyatana). Drawing from the Buddha's descriptions in the suttas, he explains how this immaterial realm (arūpa-jhāna) involves awareness knowing itself - consciousness focusing purely on consciousness in an infinitely expansive way.*
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> *Burbea carefully distinguishes this transcendent state from the 'vastness of awareness' practice, noting that while both involve infinite consciousness, the sixth jhāna is more purely transcendent and intensely electric, representing a complete escape (nissaraṇa) from the phenomenal world. He explores various approaches to accessing this realm, from progressing naturally through the fifth jhāna to direct methods of tuning into the subtle sense of knowing present in any moment of consciousness.*
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> *The talk addresses the profound implications of such openings - the sense of touching divine dimensions, the mystical oneness of consciousness, and how these 'perception attainments' (saññā-samāpatti) relativize our ordinary experience while remaining provisional truths. Burbea emphasizes the importance of right relationship with desire, intelligent practice, and understanding these states within a coherent conceptual framework that supports rather than hinders the path toward liberation.*

I mentioned at the beginning of the retreat that in many ways, the retreat happening at all has been somewhat of a miracle for many different reasons. We had initially gambled that Robert's employers would give him the time off work to come, and then it turned out that they were only given partial time. Then Kirsten heroically sacrificed a full retreat to sit this retreat fully and joined with the teaching. So it's been a bit of a patchwork in that sense, but it's happening.

Now, in fact, tomorrow, the time has already come for Robert to say goodbye, as his employers demand his services on Monday morning. So he will be leaving us about lunchtime tomorrow after his interviews. Just again, I really want to say how grateful, how absolutely hugely grateful I am—and I think we all are—to you for being here and using your holiday time to do that, and also to Kirsten for stepping in. The retreat couldn't have happened. This kind of patchwork of tag team teachers was the only way

this could have happened. So we're really, really grateful to Robert for everything that you've brought here—your spirit, your knowledge—and also to Kirsten, for that willingness to step in and offer and share and be there for everyone.

Robert will slip out quietly with belly full after lunch tomorrow. Too much emptiness of time, and you get a little bit confused. Do you want to say anything, Robert? You don't have to.

[Robert responds] I would just say that eating with you all these last two weeks and seeing your practice and your patience and your perseverance has really touched me and brought much joy. As I'm leaving, I guess my wish for you all would be that during these last few days—this victory lap of the retreat—where the conditions are so rare and so precious, that your intentions remain strong and that the fire continues.

Actually, just to echo that last point, you all probably know how it is on retreats. We have, I think, four days left, something like that. If this was a week retreat, this would be really towards the end. The mind starts sensing it's towards the end. Papañca begins. Hindrances don't give a damn. They'll be coming and going—you're up and down, wherever you are in your little or big struggles.

As Robert said, keeping steady, keeping going—this is so much a part of the art, the fundamentals of the art of this practice. The fundamentals of any practice, the fundamentals that sustain staying in relationships, staying with a project that you love—it's so crucial. So how is your intention? How's that doing? What am I believing? Am I, again—this thing we've come back to several times—am I buying into what the seeds of the hindrances have spawned? And then it's a story and it's very, very convincing. And then my intention is wobbling.

They're seductive and they seduce us, the hindrances and upādāna seduce us into believing this or that because they're so convincing. So these are precious days, you know—these four days are precious days, precious opportunity to practice, to go further, to learn more about this territory, but also everything around this territory that we've talked about: my personal relationship with desire and intention and steadiness and form and all that. So again, once more the invitation to work, play, enjoy, and find out.

Okay, so today we will talk about the sixth jhāna—which the Buddha didn't call the sixth jhāna, but called the realm of infinite consciousness, the sphere or the base of infinite consciousness. Hoping to shed great light on what's involved here as he goes through the stages, describing a practitioner practicing, the thought occurs to him after he's gone through the first four jhānas and the fifth jhāna:

"What if I, with the complete transcending of the sphere, the realm of the infinitude of space, realizing that consciousness is infinite, were to enter and remain in the realm of the infinitude of consciousness?"

Without jumping at the realm of the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness, he enters and remains in the sphere of the infinitude of consciousness. He sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

So there's not a lot to go on there other than stick with it, develop it, pursue it, establish it. And it's something to do with consciousness. And again, it's very, very big.

Okay, what is this? What's he pointing to here? What's involved in this perception, this attainment, this opening?

I would say the central feature, if you like, is awareness knowing itself. Sometimes I've heard it described as actually it's awareness knowing the infinitude of space—in other words, it's the consciousness of the fifth jhāna. And there's certainly a way that it can seem like that. But I've come more to think that the primary feature is just awareness knowing itself, and then there's an infinite expanse of that.

But either way—whether it's awareness knowing infinite space, or the awareness that knows infinite space, or awareness knowing itself—I tend to think the second one, awareness knowing itself, is primary.

I should say right now that I use the words awareness and consciousness completely interchangeably. Over the last forty-five years or so, there have been different approaches—not really trends, but some people have at times drawn these two words apart, referring to consciousness as something much more limited. They see it as one of the aggregates, impermanent, unsatisfactory, narrow, tied to objects, while they regard awareness as something vast, free, even ultimate—giving awareness a capital A.

I don't ultimately buy into that distinction, so I think it's actually clearer to just use the words interchangeably—awareness and consciousness. Then we can explain different senses or perceptions of the nature of awareness at different times, each having different relative truth value. Anyway, all we need to know for now is that I will use those words completely synonymously and interchangeably.

So awareness knowing itself. What's happening here is there's a kind of honing in, tuning to and focusing on awareness, on consciousness. Consciousness hones in on consciousness. Awareness hones in on awareness. The Pali word is *viññāṇa*. There isn't,

by the way, a distinction in Pali between a word for consciousness and a word for awareness. *Viññāṇa* is, I think grammatically speaking, a verbal noun. It literally translates as "knowing." So awareness, consciousness, or knowing are synonymous terms.

What does awareness mean? In Buddhist understanding, it means knowing. Not knowing something—not "I know something" or "I'm clever because I know the square root of two to eight decimal places." It means knowing itself. It means being conscious. It means the recognition of something, the perception of something.

There's this quality, again and again in this state, of almost returning to and locking in on the sense of knowing. Sometimes, depending on how you access it, you can use these little grains, little tinctures of internal whispers in the mind to direct the mind and help support it to lock in on that primary *nimitta*. The primary *nimitta* is consciousness. The primary *nimitta* is consciousness knowing itself. You can use these little tinctures—just like "knowing" or "consciousness" or whatever it is—very, very subtly, to help support the mind in its attuning to, finding, and then sustaining its focus on the sense of knowing. There's a very subtle whisper internally to direct the attention to the sense of knowing.

I would say—and this is a long debate certainly in Buddhist history, in the Mahāyāna as well as the Theravāda and the Vajrayāna, and probably a debate outside of Buddhist philosophy and psychology as well—I would say consciousness of consciousness is an integral aspect of consciousness. In other words, to be conscious involves the subtle, at least the subtle recognition that one is conscious in the moment. Otherwise, a machine can be aware of this or that, but a machine doesn't have consciousness. It doesn't recognize itself. It doesn't have that feeling of being aware.

There's been a long debate about it, but in a way I think it's a little ridiculous. It's just part of the definition of consciousness—that consciousness in any moment is conscious of itself. Do you understand what I mean by that? Usually, that sense of being conscious is not something that receives much attention. It's very much in the mix of a moment of consciousness. There's much more attention to what we're conscious of—the object, this or that thing that I'm paying attention to, this or that object of consciousness.

But to some degree, some subtle degree mixed in with any moment of consciousness and as part of what defines it as consciousness, as I said, is some small degree of a sense that there is consciousness right now. And it goes with the subject: I am conscious. This is conscious.

Now that subtle sense, that subtle portion or strand within consciousness, can be amplified. And how do things get amplified? First they need to be noticed, then they need to be attuned to, and that attuning to what we notice amplifies it. In other words, in the mix of what consciousness is in any moment, by noticing this sense of being conscious, this awareness of awareness, by noticing it and tuning to it repeatedly, we amplify that sense within consciousness.

Eventually the relative balance can shift from mostly "I'm conscious of the object"—whatever the object is I'm paying attention to—and very little sense of the consciousness of consciousness, to the reverse. With noticing it, tuning to it, and the amplification that will happen naturally with that, it can start to reverse until eventually all the attention, all the consciousness, is the consciousness of consciousness.

Does that make sense?

So there's this kind of lock effect—you know, locks on canals with water, the way they function? Do you have those in Israel? Because it's a desert, you might not know. Like that, yes.

Can you just either look at something right now, or feel a body sensation, or listen to the sound of the heating? So there's the object—the sound, the sensation, the visual object, whatever it is. And at the same time that's there, can you get a sense that there is awareness present? You're conscious of being conscious. Can you be aware of the awareness there? It's mixed in with it.

So this is a beginning of something. It's quite a hard thing to stay with. It's a subtle thing. As we go into the jhanas, everything gets subtler and subtler, but you can train the mind to pick that up and stay with it and amplify it. But we're really talking about the present moment—this moment, this moment, this moment of awareness, and getting the sense of awareness of awareness in the present moment.

So this is key to the whole thing. It's subtle, and so some of you might not have been able to get a sense. That would be very normal. Some of you might have practice already doing this. Either way is fine. But we're talking about a subtle sense, and therefore it needs practice to develop that—to notice it, to stay tuned to it, to kind of develop it.

As I'll explain later, there are many ways into this, but this sense of consciousness can then expand. This lock effect happens where all the other objects are kind of filtered out of it, and it becomes just an infinite consciousness—infinitely expansive consciousness. Here, now again, we're really talking about something wow. It's so different a perception, so different an opening than we usually have as human beings.

I think I shared much earlier in the retreat: someone coming in for an interview and saying, "Oh yeah, I think I got into the sixth jhana the other day, and it was all very light." It can't be. We're really talking about something that's immensely striking and very, very impacting on the consciousness, on the sense of being. So it's a deep realm of existence, a deep—that's what that word ayatana means, I've explained—a deep realm, a deep dimension of the cosmos. Something divine there, for sure. That's a sense. It's very intense.

So it's quite an intense experience. Electric, almost, I would say. Consciousness moment after moment focusing on itself with nothing else there, and just an infinite expanse of this. It's electric, it's compelling, it's intense, usually. And there's something in that—it's almost like it's sufficient unto itself. It's just consciousness. There's nothing else. And this consciousness just knows itself and it pervades infinitely. And it has this kind of transcendent quality of being. It's sufficient unto itself. It does not need anything. Just consciousness knowing itself forever. Eternally sufficient unto itself. Eternally transcendent. Eternal in the sense of lasting forever.

So again, it is, as the Buddha calls it, nissarana, nissaranam—an escape. It's another dimension of the cosmos, another dimension of being. It's another realm. There is a freedom from everything else there. Freedom from the phenomenal material world. A release, a letting go of all else. There's just nothing else there but this pure consciousness, knowing itself, sufficient unto itself, infinitely expansive. And the objects are filtered out—everything else gone.

So I've mentioned a couple of times on this retreat, and I know some of you are familiar in practice with what I call the practice of the vastness of awareness. So it's actually worth lingering on this and comparing the two, because they can sound very similar.

They are both infinitely vast consciousness or infinitely vast awareness, both of them totally unperturbed by the arising or passing of phenomena. In both states, there's a sense that they last forever, that they're eternal in that sense of forever duration—forever undisturbed, forever radiant, forever peaceful. So there's clearly some similarity, and people might wonder about the distinction. But it's good to distinguish them.

We've said there's a letting go of everything else in the sixth jhana, in this infinite consciousness. The vastness of awareness too, if we compare, is also a letting go. It's quite difficult to pinpoint exactly what the differences are, but I would say that the

vastness of awareness, yes, it's a letting go and it has all those other similarities in common with this infinite consciousness, this realm of infinite consciousness. But the vastness of awareness is more inclusive of phenomena, objects, experiences.

Particularly, it includes and is even accessed by way of its relationship with phenomena, with other experiences. It's their relationship with the vastness of awareness that's the key difference—one of the key elements, including what we might call their substantive relationship.

When one practices the vastness of awareness, there are different stages. As it moves into deeper stages, there can be this beautiful sense that not only do phenomena seem to arise out of this vastness of awareness—this beautiful, peaceful, radiant and divine space of awareness—not only do they rise out and die back in, born out of and dying back into this source, but as it gets deeper, it also feels like their very substance is awareness. There's a sense that the substantial nature of all phenomena is this awareness, this vast divine awareness.

So the vastness of awareness also feels like a freedom, but it's a freedom with and within appearances and experiences and phenomena. It's a view or a way of looking, a perspective on phenomena, on experience, on this life as we experience it. It's a different view, a different sense of this world and this life, whereas the sixth jhana is something transcendent. It's beyond. It's gone beyond this world.

The infinite consciousness is more intense than the vastness of awareness, which has an almost infinitely deep ease to it. There's a real intensity in the sixth jhana, and it's a much rarer state for people to access for a number of reasons. Sometimes because it takes a lot to sustain that intensity, or even build up enough intensity that one would find oneself in such a state. It's also much rarer because one can open to the vastness of awareness from much more common ways of practicing insight meditation. If we just practice insight meditation with more open awareness, just being aware and letting things come and go, it will start to open up the beginning stages of the vastness of awareness. So quite a number of experienced insight meditators will have opened to some degree, to some level, to the vastness of awareness.

If you're interested in the vastness of awareness—we've mentioned it a couple of times on this retreat—there's a whole chapter on it in Seeing That Frees, depending on maybe the three chapters that come before it. It's there and should be very clear. Really worth that opening, and the modicum of effort it takes is so worth it. There are also, I think, four guided meditations I did years ago, each titled "The Space of Awareness" with different subtitles—guided meditations of different ways of opening up the vastness of awareness, if I remember.

It's a different state. It's not the sixth jhana. You could say it's related, and definitely worth visiting and opening to, putting some time in there and being touched by that beauty and the liberative and healing qualities. But the sixth jhana, the infinite consciousness, is something rarer.

They're also slightly different in their aftereffects on perception. In the vastness of awareness, you could get up and go for a walk and see a stone, and the substance of the stone is that awareness, is the divine awareness, is this vastness of awareness. Or that stone is somehow, the appearance of the stone is the play of this awareness. It's really hard to put your finger on, but I think it would be more accurate to say that in the infinite consciousness, with its aftereffect on perception, a phenomenon or a stone or an object feels more as if it has consciousness. Not so much that its substance is awareness, but that it has consciousness—even as part of a cosmic consciousness.

So distinguishing the aftereffects on perception between these two states, the vastness of awareness and the infinite consciousness...

The after-effect on perception in the vastness of awareness will be something akin to the stone—the appearance of the stone feels like its substance is awareness, or that the appearance of the stone is the play of awareness. With infinite consciousness, the after-effect on perception feels different—perhaps moving more toward the sense that the stone has consciousness, even if the stone's consciousness is part of a much more unified cosmic consciousness or divine consciousness.

It's hard to articulate. I've never really heard anyone even attempt to make these distinctions, but that's my current thinking about it.

Both of these states, though, are undisputedly mystical senses of divinity. It's very often the case that a person will start using words like "divine" even if they've never in their life used those words before—with either of these two experiences, the vastness of awareness or the infinite consciousness. One really feels as if there is something of a divine order here, something of the nature of the divine that is being revealed, that's being opened. "This is God's awareness" can be the sense.

But as we said, the sixth jhāna, the infinite consciousness, is more purely transcendent. It's really a realm beyond phenomena.

I would say that both of these experiences are immeasurably precious. And I would also say that they're part of our human birthright. As human beings, this is part of what is available to us and what is our human birthright—to know this, to open to this, to be touched by these levels of being, these dimensions of being, these openings. They're available.

Particularly with infinite consciousness, with repeated exposure, it brings such a different sense of existence—such a sense of opening up the dimensionality of existence, of the cosmos, of being.

There are also many variations and satellite states around the sixth jhāna, especially when we practice with the eyes open and especially in terms of their after-effects on perception. But I won't go into them now.

Again, I want to emphasize how important these comments about desire are. I think it would be really understandable if someone, with repeated experience of going in and out of this infinite consciousness—really being touched by it and opened by it, opening to it and assimilating that opening and that sense and that perception into their sense of existence—it would be really understandable if such a person were to look back and think to themselves that life knowing that realm is so much richer, so much richer in dimensionality, than life not knowing that realm. "How did I live that way?" would be very understandable.

And they might also think, "I wouldn't want to live without knowing this, without that opening, without that sense of dimensionality." To them, in retrospect, it might feel as if life without this was a kind of impoverishment—not that they want to escape into this transcendent realm, but that life without it would in some way be less worthwhile. That would be very understandable as a view or a feeling.

But it's tricky, isn't it? It's tricky. I'm hesitant even saying all this because it's loaded—loaded because of many things we've talked about on this retreat in terms of desire, in terms of goals, in terms of what I said yesterday about living in a Western culture that, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, has actually been deconstructing and dissolving any agreed-upon idea of what makes life worthwhile.

Don't underestimate how influenced we are—not by Buddhist history so much, but by Western history. Things that happened in relation to medieval theology influence us today way more than people realize. Something happened starting with the Protestant Reformation that fractured and fragmented any sense of agreed-upon idea of what was holy. And that influences very much what anyone can say to anyone else about what is worthwhile or what one should desire.

So all this is here when we talk about such states. It's loaded, it's charged in all kinds of ways—potentially painful in all kinds of ways, potentially enticing in all kinds of ways.

The usual insight meditation way of teaching—or at least it used to be—is not about experiences. It's just: don't try and get experiences. Just notice what experiences there are. Just be mindful. Just notice what comes up and what goes. To say something like what I just said—that these states are precious—is a little bit loaded. It's implying something. It invites, it opens the door for the pain of striving, the pain of desire that we've revisited several times on this retreat.

So the usual way of teaching insight meditation is a lot easier, because it effectively just closes the door on any kind of striving like that. Just: all you have to do is be aware. Whatever comes, whatever goes, it's all the same. Good experiences, bad experiences, remarkable experiences, boring experiences. All you have to do is just be aware.

And when you're not aware, you just notice it and you come back.

There's such value in that way of practicing and teaching. It's a lot easier—I think for both student and teacher. When you start saying, "Oh, this is really precious," or "That's really precious," or "This experience is..." then you start running risks. But there are risks both ways. If you go just into the mode of "experiences are not important," there are significant risks as well.

All this is tied into desire. What do I desire? Why do I desire what I desire? What's going on with me? What's authentic desire? What's deep desire? What's involved in my desire? And how do we teach regarding such experiences, such openings, such perceptions?

If one goes into an interview and reports such an experience, and what comes back from the teacher is a response of "Sounds good, but it's just another experience. It's impermanent. Let it go. Don't get attached"—that response itself is a kind of teaching. It's set in a framework that needs to be at least semi-coherently nestled within a whole idea of what awakening and liberation is and what insight is.

Again, we get this tracing down—a feeding down from a top-level conception into how I'm responding to this or that experience in any moment, or someone else reporting this or that experience in any moment. So if I say it's immeasurably precious, it's loaded. But it's tricky.

I think it would be understandable if a person did report such a sense of—almost like, I can't imagine life without the sense of that kind of dimensionality to it. It would be understandable. They may have some work to do, but it would potentially be understandable.

Such a different sense of existence, such a different sense of the cosmos, of the dimensionality of being that comes with this. We assimilate that, incorporate that into our being in addition to the usual sense of consciousness. It doesn't replace it one hundred percent of the time. It just becomes available sometimes—this completely other sense of consciousness, this completely other dimension. But our usual sense is still available.

The usual sense of consciousness is that it's mine, and it's somehow in here—usually in here, in the head. From here, in my head, it's somehow sensing out. It's associated with this materiality, meaning this physical matter, this physical organism. That's the usual agreed-upon idea, but also sense of consciousness in our culture. So that's still available, but other senses become available as well.

It's not the case that this infinite consciousness is the ultimate nature of consciousness. It's not. Even just labeling it as the sixth jhāna would strongly suggest that it can't be. Nor is it ultimately the true nature of mind, nature of awareness, nature of consciousness. Nor is the vastness of awareness. Neither of these are the true or ultimate nature of awareness or consciousness. They're not the final truth regarding awareness, regarding consciousness.

Also, I don't think such an experience really proves the possibility of a consciousness—let's say, without or not contained by matter. So that's the experience: there's this consciousness. It's an immaterial realm, right? We're now in the immaterial realms, the arūpa jhānas, arūpa āyatanas. There's just this infinite consciousness sufficient unto itself. The experience would seem to suggest that here is a consciousness without being contained in matter.

To me, it doesn't prove that. There's the whole question of epistemology from meditation experiences and what we can deduce from a certain meditative opening. We would need more convincing, other kinds of experience, other phenomena, other things to happen to be more convincing that there's a possibility of consciousness without being contained or associated with matter.

But still, again, how are we to regard all this? I think there's value to say: here now we're opening to deep provisional truths. They're deeper truths, but they're still provisional.

So we can talk about almost like a scale of relative truth, if you like. Deeper truths, still provisional. Provisional truths, experiences, openings, insights. What's the Buddha's words? Perception attainments. And he talks about them in a scale of percep-

tion attainments—the attainment, the ability, the achievement to perceive this or that as a level of truth, if you like, but still a provisional truth, not a final, not an ultimate truth. So that feels to me really, really important.

How do we get there? How does such a place, how does such a realm, how does such a dimension of existence, of being open up for us?

So there's a number of possibilities. One is simply, as usual, just hanging out in the previous jhāna—in which case the realm of infinite space—just hanging out there, really getting into it, revisiting over and over, hanging out, hanging out, and it will naturally mature. It naturally matures at a certain point from the previous jhāna. That would be a very normal occurrence.

I think I very briefly mentioned this earlier in the retreat though. Though I know one teacher disagrees with me and one teacher who agrees, I think the order of ease of access through these rūpa jhānas, much as for some of the order of ease of access through the rūpa jhānas, is individually variable. So I feel for me, I felt it was easier to access, for example, to learn this infinite consciousness, then the infinite space. Other people, it might be the other way around or something. But I think there's an individual variation here. So one teacher had insisted on doing them in their sort of numerical order, and another teacher was much less pedantic about that, less emphatic about that. But I would agree. I think there's individual variations in tendency there.

But one way, as I said, is just hanging out in the realm of infinite space and just really, really getting into it. When the fruit is ripe, it ripens, it matures.

Then a second possibility is to be in the realm of infinite space, to hang out there, and then at some point when it's steady, when you're really into it, when it's established, when you've got some mastery, then begin becoming aware of the awareness there in that state, in that space. This is just a subtle shift of the attention and of the intention to pick up on that subtle sense of awareness that we experimented with earlier today, but within the realm of infinite space. So that would be a very kind of straightforward way of going about it if it needs a little nudging.

Third possibility is any jhāna—well, any of the jhānas up to now, let's say, better, easier to say—or even a normal state of consciousness, a non-jhānic state of consciousness, and actually just what we did earlier. So can you get a sense? So if it's a jhānic state of awareness, the object of the consciousness at any time will be the primary nimitta. If it's a non-jhānic state of awareness it could be any smell, taste, touch, sight, sound—something that's quite steady though. You don't want something flickering too much. Something quite steady, or it's probably easier if something's quite steady. So

something you can look at and it's not going to disappear on you, or a sound that's continuous. If I pick the heating and not—well there are no birds right now—but pick the heating, it's more of a constant thing.

And so normal consciousness with a normal sense object or any jhānic consciousness with the consciousness of the primary nimitta and then noticing, tuning to and focusing in on that sense of knowing, that sense of consciousness. So in other words, this realm of infinite consciousness can be approached not from the fifth jhāna, not even from the fourth, third, second, first—can be approached from normal consciousness. It's just a matter of tuning, noticing, tuning, and then amplifying that very sense of consciousness, and then it can begin to open up and open up. So that's one way as well.

A fourth way is obviously related to that, but I mentioned it, I think yesterday—I can't remember—and the Buddha says it somewhere or other. He kind of classifies the arūpa jhānas, the arūpa āyatanas, as, if you like, perspectives on the fourth jhāna. So it's really that there are not eight jhānas, but four jhānas, and the fourth one has five variations: the fourth jhāna, and then the four arūpa jhānas. Somewhere or other in the Pali canon, I'm pretty sure the Buddha frames it like that.

Already, we said in his description, what he emphasized in his description of the fourth jhāna was the pure awareness, the body wrapped in pure awareness, or he sometimes says pure mindfulness. So it's right there in the fourth jhāna. And if I pick up on that, pick up on the sense of presence, the sense of consciousness, of pure mindfulness, pure awareness, right there in the fourth jhāna, the body has become that. That will open up into the infinite consciousness.

Fifth, there's insight ways of looking that will open up the infinite consciousness. They're actually the same as what opens up infinite space. In other words, the same ones might take you to either space, either the infinite space or the infinite consciousness. We mentioned them yesterday.

And lastly, as always, with experience, with enough familiarity, enough in and out...

Part of the whole deal with mastery is that eventually we can access these realms—or this particular realm—just by subtle intention, just by remembering it. We remember that realm, remember our experience of it, and that opens the doors to this divine awareness, this God's mind.

Again, I don't think there's any need to push or stretch it to infinity. Whichever way you go, I don't think that's so necessary. It should—I think it will—but it should automatically just expand that way. This happens partly because there's nothing else in consciousness. There's nothing in the way. There's nothing but infinite consciousness.

Again, that could be a little tincture. If it's not quite stable yet and you're working to consolidate, you can just drop in that phrase: "nothing but infinite consciousness." That kind of primes—it's very, very subtle. It's not like a big thing. This is an alchemical tincture one's putting into the space just to very gently direct and guide the mind and support that opening out.

So it should go—it probably will go—automatically because there's nothing in the way really, there's nothing to limit it. Sometimes you just need to relax into it. So it's strange—it is a very intense state, but there might be, as you work with it, times when actually more relaxation is needed, and other times it's more like really honing in with the intensity on that focus on the consciousness, on the consciousness of consciousness.

So one can just let it expand. This leaning forward business that I mentioned can start happening sometimes in the third jhana, but certainly in the fourth and later. This more relaxed approach may help with that because sometimes the leaning forward is, again, due to our usual—not just intellectual construal, but sense of attention—placing its mental object in front and then, with just a little bit of trying, we end up leaning forward because we're aiming in front of ourselves with just a little bit of effort. But the more relaxed approach can open it up more evenly. So it may help with that leaning forward issue.

A lot depends on how you access this infinite consciousness. If you're coming from infinite space, there's nothing there to prevent it from becoming infinite. It's already infinite. So it just kind of flips to consciousness. If you're coming from, let's say, just normal consciousness, and then you're focusing—you're noticing the sense of consciousness, you're noticing the awareness of awareness, you're tuning to that and amplifying it—then it may well be that other objects come in and out of the awareness as you're trying to do that. And either you just stay really, really with the sense of knowing, really with the sense of consciousness, or you somehow see, sense the other objects as consciousness.

The Buddha talks about escape—as we said, *nisaranam*. And again, I've still forgotten to look up the word, but he talks about what's often translated in English as "releases of awareness." So the different jhanas and then particularly the formless are releases of awareness.

So again, we're talking about a realm here, completely free from, completely transcending the hassle and the reach of material perceptions. Sometimes the Buddha calls the four formless realms "the peaceful liberations." So that's a synonym: the peaceful liberations.

And then there are passages where he talks about fully liberated beings, arahants, as liberated in one way or liberated in two ways. An arahant liberated in one way is just someone who's gotten rid of, exterminated, expunged all greed, hatred and delusion. They've ended their kilesas. But an arahant liberated in two ways is someone who also has access to these formless realms. And the Buddha has this lovely passage: they remain "touching with their body the peaceful liberations." Their whole sense of existence is touching with their body something that's beyond the body and immaterial. They remain in the world touching with their body the peaceful liberations. Other arahants, other fully enlightened beings, don't know these realms. They haven't developed them. They're not necessary. There's a difference.

Experientially, the very sense of release, of a beyond, of realms beyond—that very sense can help maintain, again, if you're working in this space, in this realm, and it's just working to really settle it at any one time, then the very sense of release and beyondness and escape can be part of what helps consolidate it in that moment. But I need to enjoy that. In other words, the very sense of this transcendence, the beyondness, the release—they're slightly different things because release is "I am released" or "this is released." Beyondness, transcendence—there is that. But the enjoyment of that, the subtle enjoyment of that, is again also part of the binding glue, the consolidating moisture, the liquid of the experience.

So again, such an opening, such a perception, such a revelation, relativizes this world—the world that we all agree on. This world of material forms, of things, of beings. Opening to that relativizes this world. It takes its place in a series of worlds, of realms. It's not just "there is this world and nothing else." And then it relativizes our relationship with this world, and that could happen in different ways. It could, as we said before—and this is problematic to my way of thinking—become problematically dualistic.

For many practitioners today, this kind of dualistic view—seeing this world as samsara, as something not worth much, something we want to escape—rarely poses a problem. In fact, traditionally the thrust of Pali Canon teachings embraced this perspective far more commonly than we see now. Some practitioners find no issue whatsoever with this dualism. Yet I believe it carries real dangers. When we regard this world in such a way, do we still care for it? Do we love it? What becomes of our duty to this world and to others within it? The relationship itself risks becoming problematically dualistic.

This danger diminishes significantly when we apply the same principles we've explored throughout: allowing the aftereffects of perception to open up, really exploring them thoroughly. This is why I emphasize so strongly that the aftereffects on perception are as significant as the pure jhanic experiences themselves. These aftereffects truly change everything—they have profound impact on our sense of this world.

When perception opens to reveal that stones possess consciousness, that divinity radiates from everywhere, this very quality of divinity permeating all existence, then the dualism we've discussed gets evened out. This represents one crucial reason for attending to these aftereffects.

The second approach for addressing any tendency toward problematic dualism involves understanding the dependent arising and therefore the emptiness of perception—everything we explored together yesterday. This experience of the world that seven billion people agree upon, this experience of infinite consciousness, this experience of subtle realm worlds, this experience of infinite space—whatever emerges—all arise as dependent originations. They manifest dependent on certain ways of looking.

This world and that world, this realm and that realm, are perceptions arising dependent on different ways of looking. Understanding this in the most powerful way transcends duality entirely, granting us freedom to be dualistic when we choose dualism and non-dualistic when we choose non-duality. As I've said, this collapses any duality between non-duality and duality itself. We become free—free with a full range of ways of looking, free to move, free to experience all realms with equal sacredness because we've understood something fundamental about the emptiness of it all, the dependent arising of it all. Through playing with insight ways of looking, through exploring various ways of perceiving, we open this entire understanding.

The Buddha characterizes these states as embodying a kind of equanimity. Certainly they are profoundly equanimous—completely unperturbed, completely undisturbed. In this sense, they express genuine equanimity, without any push-pull toward other objects. They represent states of very deep equipoise. So yes, they are both calm and focused.

Yet with experience, secondary background emotions often arise. While maintaining that equanimous, calm quality, one might simultaneously be jumping for joy in the background. Wonder emerges, potentially love, peace, ecstasy—all these can manifest as background experiences, and naturally so, rightly so. We've already mentioned the qualities of release and freedom that characterize these states.

Just as with infinite space, I strongly recommend practicing this realm with eyes open as well. Look at the sky or sense the space around you, allowing that to expand. Perhaps consciousness first expands to infinite space, then flips into this new realm. Maybe you begin sensing consciousness within that much larger visual or kinesthetic space. Or perhaps you work more intimately, as we described, with a smaller sense of space—not the vast sky, but simply any object before you.

Like infinite space, these states evoke a profound sense of oneness—mystical, cosmic oneness that feels almost overwhelming in its intensity. This perception emerges both within the jhana itself, in the pure jhanic experience, and in the aftereffects on perception that follow.

Again, this is precisely why I emphasize so strongly the aftereffects on perception. Really take that time off the cushion in a much more relaxed way—walking around, having a cup of tea, whatever feels natural—and notice the effects that formal practice has had on perception. How is everything right now? What has happened to your perception of self, of world, of consciousness? What has shifted in your sense of things, of materiality, of existence itself? Really noticing these transformations does something very profound indeed.

That oneness can emerge in the jhana itself or in the after-effects on perception. Yesterday we explored how the primary oneness that comes with infinite space is a oneness of materiality, of material substance. We are all star stuff. We are all the same big bang. We are truly one matter—our bodies, everything. This jhana, in contrast, reveals a oneness of consciousness, a oneness of awareness.

One can have the sense that while there appears to be separate awarenesses, separate consciousnesses, actually at another level there is one. There is one divine consciousness of which we are part or in which we partake.

When you get to soul-making Dharma, there are important variants of this and it becomes significantly different. I've noticed when I'm teaching soul-making Dharma and speak about participating in God's mind, sometimes people write to me, and from what I read, it sounds like they're relating or hearing what I said through this lens of oneness of awareness. There's actually something different in soul-making Dharma. There are more variants and more subtlety and more allowances for individual particularity. God's awareness needs my awareness, my particular awareness, my particular dukkha, my particular ways that my mind works—and yours, your particularities, your foibles, your struggles. That's different from the notion that there is simply one awareness, a

simple, pure, clean awareness in which we somehow participate. There are significant differences there, but this is not a soul-making treatment—just for those of you who are interested.

The oneness is technically, I suppose, a secondary nimitta. The primary nimitta is the consciousness. The oneness—though they may become completely fused at times—is technically secondary. So we should focus primarily, as always, on the consciousness most of the time. The oneness will come. It will arise naturally in the after-effects on perception. You can trust that.

Even though you could say perhaps one of the most significant, impactful, potent, and transformative perceptions here is the very sense of oneness, still we don't need to—probably most people don't need to—go looking for it. You can trust that it will arise and do its work. Of course, there are always exceptions, but I would say that.

The same approach applies with mastery—all the little tricks of the trade, going for walks, all of that. Just to emphasize, I don't know how all this sounds, but it's really just a matter of training.

When we talked yesterday about the fifth jhana, infinite space, or even today—yesterday with infinite space, we said looking at an object that we would usually sense as solid in the very looking, even though I'm not touching it, my sense in looking is of solidity. That would be the normal sense of it. Then seeing and sensing physical objects, material objects as space, seeing and sensing them as not solid and staying with that. Getting that sense and then staying with it—infinite space can open up from that.

What's basically happening, if I sustain it, is a training of different elements. Can I flip so I can see what I usually sense as solid? Can I flip the perception so that I sense it as space, as not solid? Can I sustain that? Can I allow that to open? These are all just elements of training. Training the perception of space.

Space is not something we usually pay attention to. Usually we're basically addicted or imprisoned by habit—we pay attention to objects in space. Even when an architect talks about paying attention to space, it's not quite the same thing. What they really mean is a geometry that has shapes. Actual space itself is not something human beings habitually pay attention to.

So we're training a perception, training an ability—a more refined perception. The point I want to make is it's all training, just training of perceptions. The training has slightly different elements in it. How many suttas are there where the Buddha describes some meditation, describing a monk doing this, and "thus he trains himself," and then a little further, "thus he trains himself, thus he trains himself"? It's just training.

What that means is it's possible, it's available. Even the thing we did earlier today—can you get a sense of the awareness of awareness? Can you become aware of awareness in the moment? Can you sustain that? Can you focus in on it? Can you let it amplify? Can you let it expand? It's all training, just training. What that means to me—it's an important word because it means it's totally possible, it's totally available.

I don't know how it sounds, but we're really talking about something majestic in its grandeur.

unfathomable in its beauty and wonder and depth and sublimity and dimensionality and divinity, but also that in another sense or at the very same time is just a training.

Yes, it's very rare and even rarer, as I said, than the vastness of awareness, but it's just a training. It's rare just because people have not been taught or don't sustain their journey of working towards it, playing towards it.

So it's possible and available if we get our relationship with desire right. All this. And I just want to keep coming back to that. I can talk about blah blah blah and all this great sounding stuff, but if the relationship with desire isn't right, if I don't understand myself in relationship to desire, I don't understand what I'm bringing in or what is brought into my desires at different times and how I relate to that—not just in this moment but over time in a sustained way for a retreat but also for years, months and years. It's possible and available if I have that fundamental inquiry and understanding and right relationship with desire.

And I think if I bring a kind of intelligence to my working and playing—and by intelligence I don't mean scholarship, I've said that before, nor do I mean something really intellectual. I don't mean that at all. I mean everything that we've emphasized: the flexibility, the responsiveness, the attunement, the coherent conceptual framework of what am I doing and why and where is it going and how does this fit into where I'm going. Because that bigger picture conceptual framework should guide me in my momentary choices and momentary emphases.

So if that's askew or I haven't got a coherent one or it doesn't make sense, or if I'm trying to work towards this jhāna but actually I'm laboring under the umbrella of a conceptual framework that doesn't really support it or emphasizes an aspect like, how long can I stay on one object? We've talked about this before—that I'm emphasizing something that's actually just going to capsize the boat and not let this boat deliver me to where I want to go.

So if there's the right relationship with desire and inquiry into that in the open—that's the hard thing. That's not an easy thing. That's a big ask. And it's more fundamental. And if there's this intelligent, what I mean by intelligent work and play, then these things are really possible and available. And they're just trainings. They're just trainings.

So last thing about desire, and someone wrote a note, a couple of people wrote a note, in fact. So again, it's just a small thing for people who are already familiar with soul-making dharma, just very briefly. We talked about this, the importance of the absolute necessity of having a helpful view of the self on the path, a helpful view of the practitioner self. And in soul-making dharma, we talk about fantasies of the path, fantasies of the self on the path. And I've talked about that several times in other soul-making retreats over the last years. I can't remember where, but it's there.

And a couple of people were asking, "Yeah, but okay, but when you're on a jhāna retreat, for example, let's say it's an emptiness retreat, or let's say it's a metta retreat, or it's a themed retreat, and it's not a soul-making themed retreat, how do I relate to this whole idea of fantasy? How can I work with the whole idea of fantasy? Because I'm supposed to be doing jhāna practice, I'm supposed to be doing emptiness practice or whatever it is."

So a fantasy is something, as I said, that's almost—I use it as a word—something in the background, something in the background. It's a background kind of imaginal narrative, if you like, or semi-narrative. But it in fact has an eternality to it, but it appears in narrative form, if you like, but it's in the background.

And what can happen or what we can do sometimes is bring that, when we notice that fantasy, we can bring it into the foreground and work on it with our imaginal practice. In other words, what was fantasy in the background becomes image in the foreground, and then we work and play with that image. And of course, it might be an image of myself. So that's what we're working with. So a glimpse of fantasy in the corner of my eye when things are going really well, when I'm into practice, when I'm inspired, a glimpse of fantasy. And then if I want, I can bring that to the foreground and work on it in a sort of conscious, deliberate, imaginal practice. But then once you've done that, it can go to the background again. So that's one way of doing it.

Or you might find there's no fantasy, actually. There's just dukkha. I'm just stuck here. I just am hitting my head against a brick wall. I feel completely contracted or imprisoned or whatever it is. There is no fantasy. Or what there is is a self-view that's not an imaginal fantasy. It's an impoverishment and it's a reified self-view that's painful.

Then as I said yesterday, then what I have to do is I have to go through that dukkha. I have to go right to the middle of the dukkha and feel the dukkha of it and feel the pain of it. I have to hold it in certain ways. I cannot approach it just with simple mindfulness. Simple mindfulness will drain the self out and drain the story out. Very useful at times, but here we want a certain kind of crucible, a certain kind of holding which allows the self to be there and the dukkha and the story but allows them to alchemically reconfigure or arise differently in a much more helpful way.

So through the dukkha and through the very heat of the dukkha and the material of the dukkha in that crucible, if I hold it right in my imaginative practice, then an image of the self and an image of the path will arise. And then that can go to the background.

If this is all in the context of a jhana retreat or an emptiness retreat or a metta retreat—and not a soul-making retreat—it can go to the background. In other words, we only use these fantasies, we only bring them to the foreground as much and when they are needed. Otherwise, they can stay in the background. And from the background, they quietly but powerfully do their work in their subtle, half-hidden, almost subliminal way.

So you bring it forward or you concentrate on your dukkha and allow the image to become primary only when you need it. A bit like using insight ways of looking on a jhana retreat if an insight way of looking is not your base or springboard practice. For some people it is, and that's fine—they're doing that all the time. For other people, it's sort of almost last in the list of things to do when something feels stuck. I try this, I try imagining, I try breathing through, I try this and that. Last on the list maybe is an insight way of looking, but I'm just taking something else, bringing it into primacy for a certain time for the sake of lubricating and opening up the jhanic path.

Now, on this retreat where there's an intention to stay constant with my intention and on a certain path, I bring it forward, and when it does its work, I can let it go again—unless it's my primary, my base practice. So we only use it when we've tried everything else which hasn't helped.

Let's sit quietly for a bit now. Thank you everybody. It's time for tea.

CHAPTER 220

The Seventh Jhāna (The Realm of Nothingness)

Rob Burbea · 1h26

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea guides practitioners through the seventh jhāna, traditionally known as the realm of nothingness or ākiñcāyatana. Drawing from the Buddha's teachings in the Ānañjasappāya Sutta, he explains three distinct insight ways of looking that can lead to this formless absorption: seeing all perceptions as not peaceful, recognizing phenomena as empty of self, and understanding that 'I am not anything belonging to anyone anywhere.'*
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> *Burbea emphasizes how this jhāna represents a deep understanding of emptiness (suññatā) - not mere impermanence, but the profound recognition of the 'no-thingness' of all phenomena. He explores the relationship between samādhi and insight (vipassanā), noting how insight ways of looking can both deliver the jhāna and be reinforced by it. The talk addresses practical aspects including the dissolution of space, working with perceptions that arise, and the importance of stepping-stone stability through previous jhānas.*
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> *The discussion extends to the liberating implications of emptiness realization, showing how understanding no-thingness frees us from imprisonment by forms and structures. Burbea connects this to mettā practice, explaining how love becomes more profound when directed toward beings understood as empty yet appearing. He concludes by examining the malleability of perception that emptiness understanding enables, illustrated through a practitioner's experience of activism supported by imaginal cosmopoiesis.*

So, seventh jhāna—which the Buddha didn't call it that, as far as I'm aware—has the appealing name of the realm of nothingness, the dimension of nothingness.

Let's again start by checking out what the Buddha says. A monk has gone through the first six jhānas, and then the thought occurs to him: "What if I, with the complete transcending of the sphere, the realm, the base, the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, recognizing there is nothing—what if I were to enter and remain in the sphere of nothingness?" Without jumping at the sphere of nothingness, he enters and remains in the sphere of nothingness. He sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

But believe me, it gets worse trying to put language to these states.

Some people—and I have no idea about statistics, but it's certainly not unheard of—encounter this realm unexpectedly. A person, even a beginner on their first insight meditation retreat, maybe someone who just heard meditation was good for stress reduction and relaxation, might be sitting there one day following simple instructions, minding their own business, when suddenly a huge black space opens up. They feel like they fall into it—a void, the void. They might have heard this language before. The term "void" carries different meanings in different Buddhist traditions over the years, and in other traditions as well.

Some proportion of people have that kind of experience. But usually when it happens out of the blue, without much preparation or orientation, there's not really a discerning of which, if any, of the four arūpa jhānas—the four immaterial realms or dimensions—one has encountered.

The person will speak of it simply: "Everything disappeared. There was nothing there." But actually, I've heard people say that in relation to the first jhāna. These states, including the first jhāna, are so different from people's usual experience that one understandably struggles not only to put them into language and describe what happened to a teacher or friend, but also to actually discern what has occurred. As the Buddha said, we need to understand what's present and what is absent.

So someone just says, "Everything disappeared." Well, actually, there's still a lot present. In the first jhāna, there's still pīti, sukha, and all the rest of it. Here, in the realm of nothingness, there's much less. But usually, without training, the eyes are not used to the dark, so to speak. There isn't this discernment of what is still there and what is not.

If you ask such a person who has stumbled into encountering something like a void or big black space, "Was there a sense of space there?" they may not have had that much discernment. Was there a sense of space or was there not? Usually, if someone is asked to imagine nothing—maybe not for you at this point, but if you say to someone, "Imagine just nothingness"—probably they would try to imagine a big black empty space with nothing in it. But that's not the realm of nothingness. That's probably more akin to the realm of infinite space.

At any rate, this novice meditator, without any kind of map or orientation or understanding of what has just happened—experiencing this big dark space with nothing in it—lacks the discrimination necessary because they're not trained and not prepared to discriminate the subtleties and differences in all these states. Most would call it noth-

ingness, but actually, because of this non-discrimination and non-preparation to discern, there won't be the blossoming, the full blossoming of whatever potential state is there.

It's the discriminating, the discerning, that allows something to blossom. We're back to this process of noticing, attuning, amplifying. Amplifying means blossoming. If I don't notice a difference, if I don't attune to it—and if I don't notice and attune to it—then it doesn't get amplified. In other words, it doesn't blossom.

So whatever state this is that oftentimes scares the living daylights out of a novice meditator, it's probably not really any of the formless jhānas. It's in that territory, potentially could be any of them, but because there's not the discrimination, because there isn't the preparation and skill and subtlety and sensitivity of awareness to discriminate, it doesn't actually become any one of them.

More significantly, the person almost certainly does not understand how that happened. They were just meditating, just noticing things, letting go, and then this thing occurred. They have no idea how it happened or why it happened. They may or may not get much explanation from books or teachers or retreat talks. No understanding of how it happened or why it happened—it just seems like a random occurrence.

What's the important thing? Two things: you'll be okay and it's impermanent. Both of which are true, but there's no real understanding of the why there. The why has to do with dependent origination, dependent arising, or dependent fading.

So it probably doesn't fully blossom. Probably there's very little or no understanding of how or why that has opened or kind of emerged. And as I mentioned, there's probably or often would be quite frightening, such an experience. One just feels like one's on the edge of an abyss or has fallen into an abyss.

There will be fear with such an opening, such a deep bottoming out of experience, such a deep disappearance of the world of phenomenal reality, the conventional and accustomed world of phenomenal reality. There will be fear, usually, if there aren't a series of stepping stones to such an experience—a series of stepping stones that one has enjoyed and learned to trust and delighted in and they've become stable bases, stable stepping stones.

And what are they? Well, the other six jhanas. So these other six jhanas up to the seventh jhana, because we learn to really trust them, they're also droppings out. They're also disappearances of to some degree. They're unfadings, unfabrications, unfabricat-

ing to some degree. Do you understand? But we've gotten used to that. Not only have we gotten used to it, we've learned that they can become stable and that they're delightful and we trust them. There's nothing to be feared here.

Without those stepping stones and the training and time that it takes to really establish those stepping stones, then just being presented with this edge of an abyss or falling into an abyss is going to be frightening. It's a long way from normal consciousness to such an abyss. It's much less of a way from the realm of infinite consciousness, the sixth jhana, to the seventh jhana. It's just a step. And so there's much, much less likelihood for there to be fear. And then that fear can cause mayhem in all kinds of ways.

So what's going on here? And the Buddha doesn't help that much, does he there? So we were in the infinite consciousness, and it's not then with this next step that consciousness is not there in the realm of nothingness, but the sense of space has gone. This is why I say, if I say to you, can you imagine a big black space with nothing in it? Most would have some sense of that. But we're saying that's not actually the realm of nothingness. Can you imagine nothingness, not even space? Little trickier, huh?

So this is really kind of gone beyond our, gone quite beyond our usual sense of things. Space has gone. It's not that consciousness has gone. Consciousness is there, but consciousness is not prominent in the way it was in the sixth jhana, in the realm of infinite consciousness, when the consciousness and the consciousness knowing itself or even knowing the infinite space was the primary nimitta.

There's still consciousness. There has to be consciousness there in the realm of nothingness. Otherwise we wouldn't have any sense of anything, any perception of anything, any consciousness of anything. But the consciousness is not prominent. It's rather that the citta, the mind, the heart is struck, captivated, drawn to the sense of nothingness. This sense of nothingness, which doesn't even have a sense of space with it. I might have the last vestiges of space, but as you get deeper into it, even the space kind of collapses or gets sucked into itself like a kind of black hole or something like that.

And that nothingness is the primary nimitta. That's what the mind is drawn to, captivated by, struck by, entranced by. The consciousness is still there but it's not the primary thing. Later on, and I hope we will get to go into this or describe it on this retreat, later we have to re-find and refocus on the consciousness as one aspect or thread of being able to go even deeper. So at the moment we forget about the aspect of consciousness. Later we have to find it again, as just one thread of a path that can take us beyond even this nothingness.

Experientially, the realm of nothingness is usually pitch black. As I said, we've gone beyond anything that could be described as space with nothing in it, which would be more akin to the infinite space. Sometimes, without the sense of space, it can feel as if it almost has a thick texture to it, because the space sort of thins things out—and then there's no space. It almost feels thick, though this is difficult language to use. But that quality probably passes, and it's not that thickness doesn't represent a step backwards in terms of refinement. This is definitely a refinement over the previous realm of infinite consciousness.

There's nothing left as a perception. Nothing left as a perception but the perception of nothing. There's nothing left but nothing. There's nothing left but nothingness. And that's the one thing that's striking one—something, again, very breathtaking.

It may be for some, even those who are not beginners—like the person we described just innocently sitting on an insight meditation retreat, having never heard about any of this—it may still be an acquired taste for some people. But I would say that at some point, either immediately or gradually or eventually, at some point it will turn and one will fall in love with it. Fall in love with this mystical nothing, this mystical void, this mystical nothingness.

So how do we get there? How does it open up? Well again, one possibility is just letting the realm of infinite consciousness mature—really getting to know that, sitting in that, loving it, opening to it, getting to know it inside out, staying in it, staying in it, staying in it, dissolving as much as one can. And naturally at some point there will be an evolution, and it will sort of take a quantum leap, a quantum jump into a different dimension—the dimension of nothingness.

As always, eventually with time and the intention to develop mastery, there's the possibility of accessing the realm of nothingness just through a subtle intention, through the memory of it. That takes a lot of practice, as with all the jhanas, just getting familiar, but it's equally possible.

But here—and I want to dwell on this—is where the insight ways of looking as a way into this realm get really interesting and really important, really significant. In the other sutta that we've already mentioned, the Anañja Sappaya Sutta, "The Way to the Imperturbable" or "The Conducive to the Imperturbable," sometimes translated, here is a sutta where the bulk of it is the Buddha talking about insight ways of looking predominantly to the formless realms. There's other material in it too.

He's talked about up to the sixth jhana and gives the name "the imperturbable" to the fourth, fifth, and sixth jhanas. So just for this sutta, it seems to refer to those three. He's gone up to that point and then says, "Then again the disciple of the noble ones considers this"—I would say this "consider," again, I don't know what a better word in English would be. It's not an intellectual pondering. One employs a way of looking. And that's very light, very agile, very subtle and very potent. A heavy pondering philosophically is not going to produce any meditative state and open any doors to other dimensions. We don't really have a word in English, but the way I would definitely translate this is: the disciple of the noble ones employs a way of looking.

The text says something like this, and understands something like: all sensuality and all sensual perceptions and all perceptions of forms and all perceptions of the form jhanas, the rūpa jhanas, and the realm of infinite space and the realm of infinite consciousness—all that, all sense perceptions, all form perceptions, all rūpa jhana perceptions, all perceptions of infinite space and infinite consciousness, all that—they're all perceptions. They're all just perceptions. Where they cease without remainder, where they end without remainder, where they no longer are, that is peaceful. That is exquisite—that is, the dimension of nothingness. Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, her mind acquires confidence in that dimension.

Let's take this individually rather than reading all the others first. So what's going on here? Basically, one's employing a way of looking. Again, if you're not used to this idea of ways of looking, we're talking about something very subtle. It's an insight way of looking. It's a certain conception and relationship with, in this case, all those perceptions. So anything that comes up or that might come up—one might be in the fifth jhana or one might be looking at a perception, a material sensual perception in the world, it might be the third jhana, a perception of a rūpa jhana, whatever—all those perceptions and whatever perceptions will come up or have come up, they're not peaceful, they're dukkha basically. Some of you know what I call the first dukkha practice: unsatisfactory. Particularly, they're not peaceful.

There's a sort of confidence there that when they're let go, when these perceptions fade, when they let go, there's a dimension called the dimension of nothingness which arises when they quieten, which arises when they're absent. Does that make sense? All that I just said is all right there in a way of looking that's just happening again and again and again. Very subtle tincture in the way of looking, very subtle—not a whole verbose philosophy. And one's applying it to whatever one is perceiving, again and again and again, sustaining over and over and over, and those perceptions fade. And in their absence, the perception of the realm of nothingness opens up.

They're not peaceful, but this is peaceful—this is exquisite, the dimension of nothingness. So that's one way the Buddha describes it. As one could say, yes, they're dukkha, they're unsatisfactory, but particularly with his emphasis on: they're not peaceful. This is peaceful.

The second way, the second insight way of looking that opens up this realm: Again, the Buddha says the disciple of the noble ones, having gone into the wilderness, to the root of a tree, into an empty dwelling, or into a retreat center in rural Devon, considers this. Again, "consider"—same deal. It's with the insight way of looking, very subtle, very potent. Its potency is proportional to its subtlety in the mind, to its non-verboseness. There may be words there, very subtle, but we're talking about something very agile.

Considers this—I really don't like the word "considers," but looks in this way: "This is empty of self or of anything pertaining to self." Or you could translate it: "This is void of self or of anything belonging to self." Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, the mind acquires confidence in that dimension, and the dimension of nothingness opens up.

When we read that originally, you think, "Oh yes, that's to do with there being no self because Buddhists talk about there being no self, right?" I think it's actually more to do with what I call the phenomenal self—not the personal self, but the self of phenomena. This is a lamp, this is a piece of paper, this is a glass, this is a hand. Just as habitual avidyā, habitual delusion, takes self to be something real, a real thing, we also do that with anything at all. This is a sound, this is a taste, this is a clock. Do you understand?

To me, what the deep teachings of emptiness are pointing to is not just the emptiness of the personal self, but also the emptiness of the selves of phenomena. Everything is empty. All things are empty of being things, of being inherently existing things.

So the way of looking: "This is empty of self. This is void of self or of anything pertaining to self or belonging to self." I think it's referring to that. And that if you practice it that way... And the "this" there, again, is anything. Anything that's in the attention, anything that one pays attention to—whether it's this body or this whatever it is—is empty of self, empty of self. It's empty in itself. That's another way of saying it's empty in itself.

If one does that again and again and again—we're talking about something very agile—it has to make sense to me what that means. It's empty, empty. It's empty of self or of being something that is a part of some larger self, like it's a part of a larger phenomena, like this spring here is a part of a larger lamp or anything like that. That has to make sense. The insight way of looking has to make sense to me.

A way of going about "empty of self" means it's fabricated in the way we've been talking about. This thing does not exist as a thing unless the mind fabricates it as a thing. And if the mind doesn't put in the conditions—clinging and conception and a certain relationship to it—that thing does not get fabricated or constructed as a thing. Does this make sense?

So these ways of looking have to make sense, but it will be equivalent, or one way of doing it, or a shorthand way is: fabricated, fabricated. But I have to have the experience of having seen things unfabricate through playing with other ways of looking in the past. I have to have enough experience of that so that when I point at something with my mind and say "fabricated," it's resting on the consolidation of my previous insight, seeing things fade. I know they're fabricated. I know it here in my heart. So I can just look at them as fabricated.

And in that one word, there's a whole—you could write a book explaining what that one word means: fabricated. So it has to be there, and that's what I mean. It's very agile because that one word contains a lot of understanding but in a very dense way, but very light.

So fabricated, maybe... It's empty in itself or of a phenomenal self, which is more than to say it's not me or not mine, I would say. To really point to this jhāna, we need to go beyond the teachings about personal self and not me, not mine, and actually to the level of the phenomenal self, the emptiness of phenomenal self, which is a deeper level.

It could also be—and some of you know this, and it's in *Seeing That Frees*—all this stuff is in *Seeing That Frees*—but it could also be: this is empty, empty of self or of anything belonging to a self, void of self or void of anything belonging to itself. Some of you know, in *Seeing That Frees*, you can find a meditation on wholes and parts and a way of going deep into emptiness, or pretty deep into emptiness, through a meditation on wholes and parts and their relationship and their mutual dependency and mutual emptiness.

And so this could be referring to something like that. Whatever this is, it's not a part of something bigger and it's not a whole which has parts. The very notions are empty. So there are different ways of doing it.

We don't have time to go into detail. I'm just pointing at various possibilities here, though they're explored in quite a lot of detail in Seeing That Frees. But that might be another approach.

So that's the second contemplation. The third one presents us with an even more puzzling formula: "Then again, the disciple of the noble ones considers this: I am not anything belonging to anyone anywhere, nor is there anything belonging to me in anyone anywhere."

This formulation should make us scratch our heads. I think we must consider the historical context of the Buddha's time—the different religious views and meditative practices that were prevalent then. It's quite possible that this addresses specific metaphysical positions. In fact, in the Buddha's biographical story, we encounter practitioners who take the realm of infinite consciousness as ultimate reality, believing that everything in the world belongs to that ultimate reality. Not only do they view it as the ultimate reality, but they hold that I in my true essence, and you in your true essence, are that ultimate reality. Your true Self with a capital S is that infinite cosmic consciousness.

This strange formula cuts through any possibility of viewing myself or any elements of myself in relation to something like this cosmic consciousness. "I am not belonging to anyone"—that deity, that cosmic consciousness. There's nothing in my makeup that belongs to that. Even though I might have been deeply attached to such a view, and it might have been an extremely helpful, beautiful, liberating, heart-opening perspective at another level, now I cut through it. Remember what we discussed about provisional truth—I'm moving to another level now.

"I am not anything belonging to anyone, any deity for instance, anywhere. Nor is there anything belonging to me in anyone anywhere." I'm also not taking the seat of identification with the cosmic consciousness or anything like that, claiming that all this somehow belongs to me.

If you reach this point in practice, however strange these formulas sound—puzzling, baffling, seemingly arcane—it's still worth engaging with them playfully. Sometimes even when we only half understand something, these contemplations can have a magical power.

Now I'm contradicting what I said earlier. I emphasized that when you work with concepts like fabrication or emptiness, they must really mean something to you—you have to genuinely understand them. Yet I'm contradicting myself here: there's also the possibility of thinking, "I have no idea what this means, but I'm just going to try playing with it and see what happens." That exploration is for later stages of practice.

The Buddha continues: "Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, his mind acquires confidence in that dimension." The realm of nothingness opens up in all its mystical depth. Again, we're talking about insight ways of looking, not mere intellectual pondering. We're working with something very light, liquid, agile, very subtle, yet possessing immense power. I want to return to these insight ways of looking and their relationship with this dimension of nothingness shortly, speaking practically in terms of technique.

So here we are again. I really want to dissolve into this nothingness as much as possible. As with all the jhānas, there will be a subtle polarity between subject and object. The object here is the nothingness itself, but there will still be some degree of subtle polarity, a subtle sense of separation, a subtle duality present. The fundamental structure of consciousness—what I call "sati"—remains.

But again, absorption: how much can I dissolve into this? It's an open-ended direction that doesn't reach a final endpoint. We keep trying to absorb more deeply, to dissolve more completely. Yet we will never totally absorb. Even if you feel completely absorbed, it simply means you haven't noticed a subtle remnant of subject-object duality, of subject-object polarity still present.

We cannot totally erase or collapse the subject-object duality without much deeper insight ways of looking. I know that in many circles it's very popular and quick off the tongue to say "no subject-object duality" and "there was no self" and "there's no this or that." It's very easy to say these things, but again, this is precisely why I place so much emphasis on subtlety, discernment, discrimination, attunement—really noticing that there is still a subtle subject-object duality here.

Unless I move the insight to a completely different level—which hopefully we'll explore in the next couple of days—that duality is not going to collapse. Usually when people talk about "yeah, there was no self and there's no duality and there's no separation," it's simply that they're not paying close enough attention to what's actually happening. They haven't noticed something crucial. There hasn't been sufficient training in subtle discerning and discrimination.

So when we talk about non-conceptual awareness, when we talk about the total collapse of subject-object duality, we're talking about something extremely rare and extremely strange. That takes quite a rare and sophisticated, profound, and subtle insight to collapse, to go beyond.

But practically speaking, I want to keep this absorption open-ended. I will never reach the end of it. It's open-ended, this absorption. I just try to dissolve mind and body in this nothingness as much as one can.

And again, this forward leaning tendency—we can configure this nothingness differently. We can configure this nothingness upright, so there's less leaning. Instead of it being in front of me with me falling into it, or the mind getting sucked into it, or trying to probe it in front of me, I can put it where the body is. There's nothingness here—it's not just in front of me, it's here too, in the space where the body used to be. Or I can configure it 360 degrees around. All this can help with that strong tendency to lean that happens for many people.

Depending on how one approached it, just like with infinite consciousness, many aspects of working with it depend on which route one has taken into it. If one is going from these insight ways of looking, one considers: this is empty of self, this is empty of anything belonging to a self. The "this" is really anything at all—anything that arises. It could be the perceptions of normal sensory awareness. And one starts with that: the perception of my body, the perception of this pain, the perception of this pīti, whatever. One just keeps training the insight way of looking on it.

Let's say it starts with a pain in my tummy. I just keep looking at it with the same insight way of looking. What's going to happen? Probably the pain fades. Probably it goes through a phase where there's pīti arising, maybe sukha. So maybe it goes through some of the jhānas. Maybe the train doesn't stop there—you're just kind of seeing the station out the window, and it goes by as it's fading. Then it starts to open up into deeper senses of fading.

So the "this" from the insight wavelength could be anything. And it might be, if one is approaching it that way through the insight ways of looking—or sometimes if one is approaching it other ways, from the infinite consciousness, for instance—that still other perceptions are arising.

This is quite important because some people say, "Oh, they're not gone," and they get into a tizzy about that, thinking the perceptions need to disappear—a very subtle tizzy. If that's happening, then what's really skillful is to regard them as no-things. They are not things. In other words, the same insight way of looking is just trained on them.

Now, by that point, it might be that I don't even need the whole "it's empty" formulation. It's just: they're no-thing. This thing is a no-thing. It's a no-thing. It's a no-thing. Or they're fabrications—again, I need to understand what that means. This sound I hear, that plane or whatever it is, it's fabrication, that sense perception. I need to understand that.

Or they're just perceptions. That's an interesting one. The insight way of looking "just perception" has many alternative subtexts. It can mean—and I think when some people hear it, or I've taught it in the past, they take it to mean, and it's totally valuable for it to mean at one level—what it means is: this is just awareness in substance. Whatever this sound or this pain or this thought is, it's just awareness in substance. So it's taking the insight from the vastness of awareness and applying it as an insight way of looking. It's just a perception. It's just awareness in substance.

But here we need to go beyond that. And if I say "just a perception," it really means it's fabricated. It's a deeper insight.

It's just a perception, meaning it's just something that's fabricated—as all perceptions are. So we might use as our tincture for an insight way of looking just this very subtle "just a perception," for example, or something like that, whatever the tincture is. But it's important to read the small print. It's important to know what it means, because the small print will determine what happens.

If I'm viewing it as "just a perception," but what I really mean or what I really understand by that is "it's just the same substance as awareness," it will take me to the vastness of awareness or maybe the infinite consciousness. But if my "just a perception" has the small print "just fabricated, because all perceptions are fabricated," then it takes me deeper. Make sense?

Again, when perceptions are still arising—when the nothingness is sort of there, but there's still stuff at the edges that one feels like, "Oh, it's not completely pure yet"—one could regard those perceptions as *dukkha*. *Dukkha* because perceptions are not peaceful, which corresponds to the first of the Buddha's three insight ways of looking. They're *dukkha*. But it has to be that we're not talking about aversion there. If that's *dukkha* and it's got irritation in it and aversion, that's not going to take me deeper. It will take me out of the whole depth, because aversion is a fabricator and we're moving in the direction of less fabrication.

So you have to be careful with these kinds of things and these insight ways of looking that aversion doesn't get woven in subtly. It has a very strong effect when it does that. You're really trying to view without aversion: "It's *dukkha*, it's unsatisfactory. It's *dukkha* because it's a perception and perceptions are not peaceful," as the Buddha says, but that doesn't mean there's aversion to them.

These insight ways of looking are very subtle, light, agile, liquid, but very finely poised as well. There's something where the degree of the delicacy and the subtlety of the poise is the degree of their power.

Actually, what I've just described—this kind of not quite pure *jhānic* state—it's like in the neighborhood of the nothingness, or the nothingness is there but the mind hasn't completely entered into it, or it's kind of half in and half out, or mostly in and there's a little bit less. This not quite pure *jhānic* state may actually be more useful because of the opportunity to practice those ways of looking at objects and at sense perceptions and mental perceptions right then.

Again, we tend to think, "Oh, it's not going well," or we judge it dependent on how deep the absorption is. But the very fact that it's kind of not quite in yet gives us more opportunity to look in a certain way at these perceptions. And that may be more useful than when it's just completely, purely emptied out, because it's the ability to look at—it's the ability to sense and to relate to perceptions in these ways, with these insight ways of looking—that's what's most liberating. That's what brings the radical change and the radical openings of view: our ability to be in the world of things, to engage things, knowing they are empty.

So this kind of "it's not quite settled yet" state with regard to the realm of nothingness gives us the opportunity to practice ways of looking right then in this kind of in-between state that one might judge as "I haven't really got it." It gives us the opportunity to practice ways of looking that are, in the end, actually more powerful.

So this whole realm of nothingness and everything that goes with it is an experience and/or an understanding of emptiness at a very deep but not yet total or ultimate level. When we're talking about the dimension of nothingness, we should be understanding emptiness at a very deep level from it, with it, or on our way to it. It's wrapped up in the dimension of nothing—an understanding at a very deep level of emptiness. It's not the final, ultimate deepest level of emptiness, but it's still really important.

Again, we can talk about nothingness and no-thingness, but they're really just two sides of the same coin. The advantage, I think, of working from the insight ways of looking, as the Buddha described—and as we went through very briefly there, and in a lot more detail in *Seeing That Frees*—the advantage of working that way is because those insights get consolidated more.

Especially the second and third: "This is empty of a self or of what belongs to a self." There's—what's that phrase again?—"I am not anything belonging to anyone anywhere, nor is there anything belonging to me and anyone anywhere." These ones are empowering a view of emptiness with regard to phenomena, the phenomena of the world, the phenomena of our life.

The first one—"perceptions aren't peaceful, let me go for something without perceptions where there's more peace"—again, you can hear the danger of dualism there. You can hear the danger of a dualistic attachment.

In a way, what I've just said—the *samādhi* here, in other words, how absorbed am I in this state—is actually less valuable than the insight. The degree of my absorption into this state may be less valuable than the insight that comes from the state or on my way to it or around it or in the after-effects. I would say that the insight is actually more important than the degree of *samādhi* here.

So no-thing, or the emptiness of things. The understanding of the no-thingness of things, of the absence of inherent existence of things—that really ultimately there are no things—the understanding of that while we're perceiving things is, as I said, immensely liberating. So freeing in its potential. It's a very profound understanding and it has different levels to it. Lots of different levels to it, at least the way I would teach it. The same understanding of no-thingness at deeper and deeper levels.

That's the usual way I would teach emptiness. You just go one level, consolidate that, then to a whole other level of what the same thing means. What it means to say something is empty. What it means to say there are no things. But even at not such a profound level, it can be enormously liberating. There is so much potency of potential freedom there.

When there's no thing, when we begin to sense that or be able to see there's no thing here really, then there's the possibility that we can be with something with either no or much less sense of imprisonment with regard to that thing. Much less sense, or no sense, of imprisonment in, with, or by any form.

Whether that form is a relationship one feels claustrophobic in, whether it's a work situation that one feels hampered by, stuck in, constricted by, whether it's any kind of situation or a social situation or an ongoing social construction that one finds oneself in, whether it's an illness, whether it's a retreat—all the bonds of finitude. Where there's finitude, we can feel imprisoned by those edges in all kinds of ways.

You just have to ponder this and actually see: where there's a thing, there's the possibility of imprisonment in relation to, with, by, in that thing.

So understanding this no-thingness, being able to relate to a thing, see a thing, be in a thing—I'm using 'thing' obviously in a very broad sense now—to be able to see that way and know its no-thingness can open up tremendous freedom, the end of a sense of imprisonment. One is free. The bars are still there; one is free.

Sometimes I used to say to people years ago, for example, in walking meditation: "Can't I just go for a walk? Same thing. I'll walk. I'll do it mindfully." And I would say, "No, walk up and down and up and down and up and down. You have a beginning and you have an end. Closed form."

Sometimes I would say to people, "Do a walking meditation period for six hours or more—six, seven, eight hours. Walk, walk, walk until you see the illusion of the closeness of that form." Of course, I have to incline my mind to that insight. Here I'm imprisoned. I can't be free to go anywhere. I'm just walking up and down in this body—until one sees through, sees through the form, sees through any sense of imprisonment in that form, sees the emptiness of walking.

What we're talking about here applies to so many other things, so many forms, so many structures, so many imprisonments. It's an emptiness insight, and it's related to this no-thingness of the seventh jhana.

As I said, there are many different levels of this. But even at a more conventional level, we can—as I said, "I don't know what all this means, just walk"—for example, do your walking meditation hours and hours and hours until you see through what looks like a restricted form. You're free.

So the samadhi, as I said, may be less valuable than the insight here. And there's a way, as we've been talking about, the jhana should bring certain insights. It will bring certain insights. When one goes into this level, this dimension of nothingness, it should bring certain insights.

But certainly the insight ways of looking will deliver the jhana. So the causality works both ways. But if I enter this jhana and this dimension of nothingness via the insight ways of looking, it will tend to reinforce those insights more. I will learn those insights more because they've been part of how I've arrived there as well.

In the jhana, as I said, you can have a sense of nothingness and a sense of no-thingness. They can be slightly different. I mean, the actual jhana is really a sense of nothingness. The insight is of no-thingness. It's the latter—the sense of no-thingness, the recognition of no-thingness—that's most important for insight.

Even if I just have an experience of nothingness, deep nothingness, to me it should lead to the insights that the Buddha is talking about: emptiness of phenomenal self and so forth. It should lead to the insight that there are no things, really.

But again, the power of conceptual framework. Because I've heard and read people talk about this state, and they seem to have very good absorption into it, but they don't seem to have sucked the juice from it in terms of the most relevant and the deepest insight from it. So all very well—the absorption is good and fantastic, and you can hold your mind there—but where's the liberating insight from it?

It could be again that because of a conceptual framework which isn't relating these things to emptiness, there's actually a stranglehold on the growth of insight. It may be that the force of the jhanic experience anyway opens that. But I do know cases where that's not the case. And to me, it points again to the hidden power of conceptual frameworks and how important it is to pay attention to conceptual frameworks and just see: are they—are we adopting and using and relying on the most powerful conceptual frameworks, the ones that make the most sense, the ones that point in the right direction? Are we picking the right thing from the fruit tree?

Or are we walking away with something else like a twig or something and not an apple?

So the view then that comes, that becomes available and the understanding and also the after effect on perception here is one moves in the world afterwards and one's clearly moving in a world of things. But they're at the same time felt and seen to be in some very mysterious way, not things. It's a thing and it's not a thing. And it's hard to put that into language. But one way of saying that is these understandings and these perception attainments, they don't make us dysfunctional in the world. Like I'm now unable to drink water because I can't sense a thing there. Of course I can sense a thing, but I can also sense it as not a thing.

No thing, as I said, related to emptiness, does not mean impermanence. Emptiness is way beyond impermanence. When we talk about the no-thingness of things, we're not saying there's not really a glass of water here, there's not really a glass here, there's not really water here. What there are is the really, really rapid arising and passing of either perceptions or atoms or whatever it is. That's impermanence. It might be super-fast impermanence. That's not emptiness.

So that would be an example. If I took the insight of rapid impermanence from all this business of no-thingness and this jhāna, I would be taking, I don't know, a twig from the apple tree and not the apple. No-thing emptiness, this is much, much deeper, much more powerfully liberating than impermanence.

So again there are certain recurrent themes through all this and still with this level of opening and this mystical kind of revelation really, it still brings mettā. Mettā comes from it, just like all the other jhānas. The mettā here, you know, luscious, profound, flavored with the depth of mystery and flavored with the depth of the mystery of no-thingness, of thingness and no-thingness at the same time, of emptiness. Mettā at a whole other level.

And again, we can ask, why mettā? Why mettā? Everything's disappearing. There's no thing. But there's also then less emphasis on the differences. There's certainly less emphasis on this self and the interests of the self and the selfish interests of this self over and above others. But even more, there's a kind of, again, there's oneness. Just like the other arupa jhānas that we've talked about. Oneness, another whole level of oneness, another whole level of mystical oneness opens up with these perceptions.

So we have the oneness of materiality, this sort of woven togetherness of our bodies, of our matter, of all matter, with all matter in the universe. We had the oneness of awareness from the infinite consciousness, the mysterious oneness of our consciousnesses. And here we have a kind of oneness of essence or substance, but that essence is a kind of essence of emptiness. I use essence almost in inverted commas, the substance of all beings and all things, the substance of all phenomena, the essence of all beings and all phenomena is recognized, is felt to be emptiness. But we have to use that word essence a little carefully. And that's a whole other level of mystical oneness that the heart opens to.

So it's emptiness understood at a certain level there, or a certain bandwidth of levels pertaining to the seventh jhāna. So mettā comes, as we would expect by now, and a further opening of oneness.

So just to linger on the mettā piece, later, after you've developed this for a while, and also with the development of other emptiness practices, again, we can make cocktails. So we can mix perhaps certain brahmavihāra practices, maybe mettā or karuṇā, compassion practice, with, for instance, this sense of no-thingness or emptiness.

There is, as we talked about, this spectrum of fading, spectrum of unfabricating, and it's possible, with practice, it's possible to play with perception, which is, again, one way of construing everything that we're doing, one way of construing what the whole dharma is. We're playing with perception and play along that spectrum of fading so that self and other fade to a great degree and phenomena as well. There's a partial fading of this being or that being who one is then directing mettā towards. They become extremely insubstantial, barely there because they're just on the sort of cusp of completely fading out and diaphanous there. They're on the verge of fading, but still they're there as an object, as a person, knowing that they're empty.

So there's a knowing that they are empty, they are empty of inherent existence. There's an experientially, that knowing of their emptiness is empowering an insight way of looking, which is empowering the fading down to a point where they're just kind of appearing, teetering on the edge. And then the love, and then practicing the mettā or the karuṇā towards this empty person, that balance somewhere on a cusp of fading and appearance.

So they're barely there. They're appearing, but they're barely there. They're barely formed. They're half faded, yet they're distinct.

They're just about distinct as this person or that person. Doing that and then adding into this alchemical mix, adding your metta towards this person or your karuna towards this person empowers the metta or the karuna to a whole other level.

Some people think, well, if someone's empty, surely I'm not going to have metta because they're empty, right? But no, if you actually practice it, it takes the love and the compassion to a whole other level, a whole other empowerment. And actually this kind of thing—playing with the spectrum of fading through an insight way of looking, making cocktails—there are all kinds of options that start opening up, all kinds of games we can play and be very creative here, all kinds of beauty and wonder that can open up in this territory.

In a way one could say this is the territory now of tantric practice, of vajrayana, ideally I would say. It comes from this knowing of emptiness, this understanding of emptiness, and this ability to actually control, if you like, or play with perception to a certain degree so that things don't just completely fade and then I can't do anything,

there's nothing because everything's completely gone. But nor are things or beings reified and solid. They're in this diaphanous, divine, empty yet appearing, on the cusp of fading yet appearing. They're in that place and it's a magical place and it's a place of potent magic.

In the Mahayana teachings, it's said that only a Buddha—not an Arahant, not a fully enlightened person in the Theravada teachings—only a Buddha, a complete Buddha, can both fully view something or someone as empty at the same time that they still perceive that thing or that someone. They still perceive them as someone or something. For all the rest of us, when I view X or Y or this person or that person or this phenomenon or that phenomenon as empty, if that makes sense to me what it means and I'm applying it in this agile, subtle way, I'm viewing this as empty, that thing will disappear, it will fade. Only a Buddha can fully view something as empty and still perceive it.

That's a core and fundamental but not very well known Mahayana teaching and it has enormous implications. One way of construing what one's doing when you're practicing Vajrayana visualization practices and seeing appearances as divine—and some of you will never have heard of this, some of you will have—is you're deliberately mimicking the mind of a Buddha and that capacity of a Buddha to do just that, to understand and view something as empty at the same time you're actually perceiving it without it completely fading. So that Vajrayana, that kind of practice, is just this pretend mimicking of being a Buddha. And if you do that enough, that's one way to become a Buddha, is you just imitate a Buddha and then you become a Buddha. That's all Mahayana and Vajrayana teaching.

I'm just mentioning it. But a couple of things from that, and they're significant. Well, I think that's very significant in all kinds of ways. And certainly as practice options, hugely significant and immensely beautiful playgrounds open up, immensely beautiful realms and possibilities open up there.

But there are a couple of points I want to draw out from what I've just been talking about. So one is about this malleability of perception with the emptiness and the fading. I'll come back to that. The other, again, is revisiting our theme of desire. We said there's this iddhipāda that the Buddha talked about, and desire is one of them. And then we keep touching on it in this retreat. And one of the things I said, and I've said it now, I've pulled it out as something to talk about twice and a third time now, at least I think, is again, what is it exactly I'm desiring from practice?

What exactly is the mix of desires, the precise mix of my desires that brings me to practice, that keeps me practicing, that takes me to retreats or whatever it is? What's in there, what those desires are, has a tremendous influence on then what unfolds, let's

say, on a retreat or in your practice or in your life. So that if one of those desires or even the main desire for practice is to open my heart and for the heart to be touched and that's really what takes me to practice and that's maybe what brings me on a jhāna retreat somehow—that may seem a bit of a strange choice of retreat. If you want that, why would you choose a jhāna retreat necessarily?

And again, talking about this, the influence of exactly what it is that I desire, the influence of that on what unfolds and what becomes possible. If that's my primary intention, maybe conscious, maybe semi-conscious, then it's probably not enough to sustain the intention for jhānas and for jhāna practice. It's a wonderful intention, but it's probably not enough to actually show up hour after hour on a retreat like this or a longer jhāna retreat to actually sustain: this is what I'm doing. I'm not getting distracted. This is the primary thing I'm doing. I'm occasionally doing something else, but this is what I'm doing.

We've talked over and over about just how hard that is to sustain that intention and also just how important it is to sustain that intention because without it sustaining, things won't open up. They'll open up in a very limited way, but they won't unfold to these kinds of depths or any real jhānic depths. Hard to sustain that, difficult to sustain that intention, a single intention like that. But if my kind of primary thing that I'm looking for or wanting from practice is the heart to be touched or open, then as I said, it's probably not enough to sustain that intention. It's probably not enough to keep working and playing, for instance, in the ways that we've been taught, because I'm actually interested in something else and it's hard to see the connection and I'll be drawn to other things because they're more obviously in line with my desires.

So this might seem a strange thing to say at this point of the retreat, but again, partly I'm talking to the recordings when I talk, but there's a more general principle which applies anyway, and I want to really reinforce that general principle. So if I'm interested in any deep practice, developing any deep practice—jhānas, emptiness, whatever it is—then I really have to understand, I'm saying it again, I really have to understand desire. And I have to understand my relationship with desire. And that has to be authentic. And I have to understand what I tend to do or not do with desire. And I have to understand what the influences are of different desires. And all of that, which is repeating what I've said before.

So it's this general principle that is really important. If there was someone listening to the recordings who starts listening, let's say, to the recordings from this retreat, but really what they're mostly wanting is open-heartedness and for their heart to be touched or something—which may not even be something they've articulated con-

sciously to themselves—it's probably the case that they will have given up listening to the recordings by now. But the general principle is really important about what we're talking about: that desire and really being clear about what the desires are.

But the second thing I think is really important because it is true. Most of you will have got this sense. It is true that the jhānas open the heart. Can I say that now? And you feel that that's a—yeah, it should be. You should have a real sense of like, wow, this really has an impact on the heart. The capacity of the heart to be touched, the capacity of the heart to hold ranges and depths and beauties of emotion and also difficult emotion, and all that. Jhānas do open the heart enormously in ways and at levels that perhaps before really engaging in such practices and staying with them and pursuing and staying with the intention and working in these ways would have been undreamed of—the way the heart opened. It would never have occurred to us that the heart could open in such ways or at such levels.

Again though, again, if consciously or semi-consciously I have a conception or a conceptual framework or an idea or an image of what heart opening, love, or even sensitivity—one word that we've been using—if I have an idea, an image, a notion, a conception of what those things mean. Heart opening, love, sensitivity, for example. What they mean, what they look like, what they involve, what they need. If my idea is limited, then it might be that there is a limited range and possibility and depth of heart opening. Because my very conception, even if it's semi-conscious, is limiting what's possible for the heart. It's limiting the heart opening that's possible. One remains confined in the presupposed limits. Again, they weren't even conscious perhaps.

In fact, the danger is even more, and especially so when we think, "Well, I just want my heart to open. I'm not really into conceptual frameworks. I'm not really a conceptual person. I'm just kind of open because I want my heart to be open. So I keep my mind open." But actually it's not. There's an idea there. There's a limit. There's an idea, an image, a notion of what heart opening or being touched or whatever means, involves, needs, looks like. And that limited idea is limiting what's actually possible.

So heart opening is endless, I would say. It's endless. There's no end to heart opening. There's no end. It's endless in terms of what it is and also what it includes and what it involves. It's endless if we let it be endless—meaning if we let the heart open, but also if we let the mind be not limited in terms of what it means.

Again, the power of conception, the power of conceptual frameworks, the power of notions and ideas, conscious or unconscious, is enormous, really, really enormous. This is something to really explore. Again, we can talk about jhānas, but there's other issues like desire and idea or conception that have power and have determinative power over

much, much more than we recognize. And they have determined over what will open for us as human beings or what remains closed. We don't even understand why is it remaining closed. We don't even recognize it remains closed until we hear other people talking about things. "Why haven't I had that experience?"

Okay, last thing relating back to the emptiness. We talked about the metta and the love and the desire. And again, coming back to our theme of malleability of perception. So it should be, I would say, that to the degree that one has realized the emptiness of things—and remember, that's a spectrum. It's really a spectrum. So we're talking about emptiness of things can be realized at a very everyday, not big deal level. And it's still really, really important. And it can be realized all the way down, incredibly deep, everything in between.

But that realization of the emptiness of things—or the no-thingness of things—for many people, it legitimizes and opens up the possibilities for playing with perception even more, for the malleability of perception.

In the opening talk, or very near the beginning of the retreat anyway, I acknowledged and wanted to recognize together the fact that I knew many of you would have been very active in different sorts of activism recently, particularly around climate change and species loss and the environment. You may have arrived at the retreat tired from all that—from the craziness of extinction rebellions and such—tired, wired, and grieving.

Someone who indeed arrived at the retreat after lots of dedicated activism, wired, tired, and grieving, left a beautiful note the other day. I'm going to read it to you and then say a few things about it.

She writes: "This morning I decided to walk in sukha"—so walk with the primary nimitta of the second jhāna—"being surrounded and welcomed by it rather than walking in a sukha bubble of my energy body." The usual instruction has been to keep the sukha, if we're doing sukha while walking, contained within the energy body bubble space. She tried something different—to walk surrounded by it rather than just in the energy bubble.

She continues: "For many months, I found it nearly impossible to enjoy being in nature, although I was in amazing places in the natural world. I mainly perceived nature as wounded, deeply ailing, dying. A perception that is not only very painful, but also, as I was very aware, not always helpful or sustainable for the being. This morning, all was radiating or being an expression or manifestation of happiness. The very fabric of the cosmos was sukha. This was very beautiful and healing.

"Yet what was even more profound and made me cry was that not only was all an expression of sukha, but the cosmos—or all, or it—was delighted and happy at my activism. No matter how flawed, mad, confused it may be at times, it rejoiced in it, no matter what the outcome."

I want to analyze this a little bit. This is a beautiful experience, very healing. There's jhānic familiarity—in this case with the second jhāna—and at least some degree of mastery, because walking with the sukha is part of the elements of mastery. There's jhānic familiarity, some degree of mastery, and then the deliberate choice not to contain it to the energy body as would be usual for the second jhāna, but to allow it to become huge and cosmic.

In soul-making dharma, I want to make a distinction here. We use the word cosmopoiesis, which means cosmos and poiesis—making or creating, or an art of perceiving the cosmos a certain way, of sensing the cosmos a certain way. Here came a cosmopoiesis at first, but that cosmopoiesis wasn't fully imaginal. The point I want to make is this: we can have a cosmopoiesis—as someone shared in a note the other day about the fabric of the universe being joy—so here the fabric of the universe is sukha. There's a cosmopoiesis, an altered perception of the cosmos, but we can have a cosmopoiesis that's not fully imaginal. It's just a cosmopoiesis, an effect of perception, a malleability of perception regarding what the sense of the cosmos is.

Then, in this report, that cosmopoiesis becomes more imaginal. What's the difference? One of the differences is that the self gets drawn into the soul-making dynamic. It's not just that the universe has joy as its fabric—delightful as that is, incredibly beautiful and mystical and lovely an experience as that is. When it becomes imaginal, when we enter soul-making territory, something else starts to happen: the self gets drawn into the soul-making dynamic. The self becomes image to some extent. Then other elements of what we call the lattice of the imaginal—the nodes, the different elements—start to get drawn in because the self has become imaginal.

This is very different from an experience where there's joy, where the cosmos is joy, where its essence and substance is joy, but the self is not really drawn into the experience. The self is prominent, enjoying it, touched by it, but it hasn't become imaginal in that way.

One of the moves that sends experience into imaginal territory—and it's not really a black and white division, like all these things, even with jhānas—is the becoming imaginal of the self. It's not just the objects, not just the world, but the self as well.

Back to fantasies of the path: what supports our desire, what supports our intention? Here opened up the possibility of an image that involved the image of the self and of nature and of the cosmos. Self, other, world all became imaginal. The potential here is for that very image—the delight and happiness and rejoicing in her activism, in the narrative of the self, in the dedication and even the willingness of the self to do this work, mad as it seemed, ineffectual as it seemed, difficult and painful as it seemed—the narrative and the dukkha of the self become image. They get drawn into the image.

It's different than just a cosmopoiesis where the fabric of the cosmos becomes joy and the self remains very quiet, very much in the background. It's a different level, but that possibility then can become—

immensely helpful in the long term—for instance, as a fantasy, as an image that really ramps up the support long-term for working at difficult things, working through difficult times, whatever it is.

If you're on a retreat and it's difficult, what's the fantasy of the path we've talked about? What's the view? In this case, it's activism. No matter what the outcome.

The blessing of when things get imaginal that way is they get liberated because of the eternality of the imaginal territory. They get liberated from dependency on the outcome. So one's free to work, free to be with the pain, supported by the beauty and the soulfulness and the depth of the fantasy that touches the self and not so hampered by and worried by and limited by what the outcome might be. And yet one's still working full out for it, but supported by this whole other dimension of being, the imaginal sense.

And then this support in the long time to be able to sustain one's soul desires, one's deep desires through the difficult, through the long term, without the heart having to close, without the heart having to close to grief, to pain, to possible failure and the threat of possible failure.

So it's not a soul-making retreat, but I wanted to say this because again, desire and understanding desire and understanding has a lot to do with being able to open up to what we want to open up to. Being able to do what we set out to do and sustain that. And there's also this connection with the malleability of perception, which starts to—we've talked about it from the beginning of this retreat, in this realm of nothingness, and we talk about the emptiness of things. As I said, the legitimacy and the possibility of the malleability of perception just open up even more, goes to a whole other level. So relevant in a few ways.

Okay, let's have some quiet time together.

Thank you everybody. Time for tea. Enjoy.

CHAPTER 221

The Eighth Jhāna (The Realm of Neither Perception Nor Non-Perception)

Rob Burbea · 1h09

> *In this profound exploration of the eighth jhāna, Rob Burbea delves into the realm of neither perception nor non-perception (nevasaññānāsaññāyatana), the most refined of the formless attainments. Drawing from the Ānañjasappāya Sutta and other canonical sources, he examines how this state represents an almost complete release from perception while maintaining awareness. Burbea emphasizes that perception (saññā) should be understood not as mere labeling, but as the forming or fabricating of objects for consciousness. In this eighth jhāna, consciousness doesn't land on any object—not even the strange object of nothingness from the seventh jhāna. The talk explores various methods for accessing this state, including natural maturation from the realm of nothingness, insight ways of looking that recognize all perceptions as unfabricated, and subtle intentional approaches. Burbea discusses the profound after-effects on perception, creating effortless equanimity through recognizing all experience as 'just perceptions.' He addresses important warnings about avoiding aversion in practice and emphasizes how deep understanding of dependent arising and emptiness should increase rather than diminish our love and compassion for the world.*

Yesterday we talked about the seventh jhana—what many people nowadays call the seventh jhana, though the Buddha simply called it the realm of nothingness. There's a possibility of going beyond that too, to a deeper jhana, a more refined jhana.

Again, the Buddha describes a practitioner who has progressed through the jhanas up to the dimension of nothingness, sticking with that theme, developing it, pursuing it, establishing himself firmly in it. After a while, the thought occurs to him: "What if I, with the complete transcending of the sphere of nothingness, were to enter and remain in the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception?" Without rushing toward this state, he enters and remains in the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. He sticks with that theme, develops it, pursues it, and establishes himself firmly in it.

That's it. Neither perception nor non-perception.

What is this about? We should be very clear. Again, what's primary here? There's something primary that the title, the name of this realm and jhana captures: neither perception nor non-perception.

I've come across writings and heard things that seem to emphasize the absence of thinking in this jhana, or how delicate a state it is—how any little thought will decimate the state, knock you out of it—as if that fact is the most significant thing about how easily a thought will disturb it. But the title is telling us something. The name is telling us something.

So much here, certainly with regard to this jhana, and so much in relation to all the jhanas—and I would say, perhaps you're getting an inkling by now—so much in the whole of the Dharma, the whole way we understand Dharma and approach it, what we think we're doing with it and what is primary in it, so much hinges on what we mean by perception. What we mean by that word "perception," how we understand it, and how we relate to it.

What does saññā mean in Sanskrit? What does it not mean? To perceive doesn't mean to label. Remember that? Often you'll come across that in lists of what these Buddhist words mean: saññā as labeling or remembering. We could interpret it that way, but what then unfolds in terms of the whole scaffolding and conceptual framework of the Dharma will be much, much more limited.

Perception is not a labeling. It's not a verbal labeling of things. That would also imply that the sheep out there don't perceive. I don't think sheep have language, but they certainly know the difference between food, a human being, and another sheep. They're perceiving without labeling, I would assume. We're talking about something else here. An insect, maybe even an amoeba in some ways, differentiates between what's to eat, what to avoid, which way to go—without, one assumes, labeling or language.

So what is perceiving? What is perception? I'd say it's probably most helpful, most congruous with the whole conceptual framework and scaffolding understanding of the Dharma that will be most liberating, if we think of perception as meaning something like the forming or constituting or fabricating of an object for consciousness. Do you understand what I mean by that?

This is so, so important. We do that when there's no verbal label going on. As you walk from here to the dining room, not everything you notice has a verbal label accompanying it. You're still perceiving. Sometimes we call it recognition, as if it's based on memory—that's another interpretation. We can always perceive an object without recognizing what that object is.

I don't recognize it, or just that it's some kind of object. All this is perceiving.

So we could say perceiving is the act of forming, constituting, fabricating an object for consciousness. And perception, as we defined earlier, we're using that word synonymously with experience—in other words, experience, phenomenon, appearance, object even. Object, experience, appearance, and phenomenon. Phenomenon is just a Greek-derived word—*phainomenon* or something in Greek means appearance. So I would use those words interchangeably: perception to talk about the object, the experience, the phenomenon, the appearance. Perceiving: the act of, again, constituting, forming, fabricating that object for consciousness.

So when we say playing with perception, we're playing with both. We're playing with the forming and the fabricating and the constituting. And of course that does form and fabricate and constitute a different object or a changed object, an altered object, a more or less fabricated object for perception.

Sometimes it's interesting what a difference in terms of defining terms makes. Defining terms in this way or that way can make for the whole possibility of what the Dharma can be. Something to really reflect on. And if you're really keen, you could actually trace it: have two different definitions of perception—for example, perception understood as mental labeling, and perception understood in the way we've just talked about—and see what kind of Dharma is possible from both. That would be a really good exercise if you're up for it. Based on that, the whole interpretation of the Dharma opens or goes in one direction or the other, or closes or gets limited. Other terms take on certain meanings which end up being very significant, very liberating, or not particularly.

Anyway, so everything to me hinges—certainly in this jhāna, because it's just in the name of the jhāna: neither perception nor non-perception; certainly in jhāna work in general; and even more significantly in the whole of the Dharma, the whole of the Dharma.

So in the realm of nothingness—the jhāna before this one that we're talking about today—the primary perception, and actually the only perception left, so to speak, because we've kind of... all the other perceptions of *pīti* and *sukha* and space and all, they've gone. The only perception left is this strange perception of nothingness. The only perception left is nothingness. And that's a perception. And as we said, try to imagine that. We're not talking about a very, very big space with nothing in it, which is what most human beings would think of when they say, "Can you imagine nothingness?" We're talking about something even beyond that. It's nothingness. But that's the only perception left, and that's the primary perception in the realm of nothingness. So that's strange enough.

And now we're going to go even beyond that: neither perception nor non-perception. We're not even perceiving nothingness, because nothingness—a nothing—is a kind of object, is constituted. In the realm of nothingness, nothingness is constituted as a kind of object for consciousness, for attention, for the *citta*. You understand? It's some kind of very strange thing that's a nothing. It's a thing there. It's a nothing.

Here, in the realm of neither perception nor non-perception, without being unconscious—in other words, without being totally non-percipient, so without being unconscious—the *citta*, the consciousness, is, we could say, not landing on any object at all. It's not landing on any object, not even the strange object of nothingness. It's not landing.

So when there's nothingness, when there's whatever jhāna you're up to and is your playground, it forms an object. The primary *nimitta* forms an object for consciousness, and the consciousness wants to really get into it and enjoy it and yummy up. It's a kind of... you understand, there's the subject and the object. The object is the primary *nimitta* or the jhāna itself, and that's an object of the consciousness, and you could use the language: the consciousness is landing on that object. And that's partly what attention means.

Here it's not landing on any object, not even the strange object of nothingness. And it's not landing in that way moment after moment. And that's what makes it the jhāna, the sort of constant burning. This not landing, this sense of not landing on any object, is the primary *nimitta*. In other words, in some strange way, the state itself—the sense, the fact of neither really perceiving (which means, again, neither really construing, constructing, fabricating, forming an object) nor not perceiving at all—that state, that fact, the sense of that, the sense of the mind kind of... would we say doing that or not doing that? Anyway, somewhere in between. That's the primary *nimitta*.

And you could say a secondary *nimitta* is the sense of liberation with that.

Because when the mind doesn't land on something, it's not—you know, like when you throw a hook and the hook lands in something—it's just not hooked by anything. It's unhooked. Not completely yet, I'll come back to that. It's not completely unhooked. But that sense of not landing, there's a kind of liberation in that. If I use the language "unhooked," you can feel the relative liberation in that. A hook is a kind of tether, a fetter, an imprisonment. So perhaps we could say the sense of liberation with that, the sense of freedom that comes with that, is a secondary nimitta.

Who's old enough here to remember The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy? For those who don't know, it was a series of books. I think I must have been a young teenager when it came out, and it was very funny science fiction. There were instructions on how to fly—a two-step instruction. The first step was: fling yourself at the ground. The second step was: miss.

In a way, that's what's going on in this jhana. Later on it might help you as an instruction, but probably at first it won't. What the ground translates as here, if we take the Hitchhiker's Guide instructions, is anything and nothing. Anything and nothing will constitute a ground that you want to miss. You understand?

There is a sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya where the Buddha gives an analogy. I think he's talking to Ananda, and he's giving the analogy of consciousness being liberated—liberated, unhooked, completely unhooked. The analogy he gives is sunlight rising in the east and coming into what starts off as a house in the analogy. He says to Ananda, "Sun rises in the east—where will the sunlight, which is consciousness, analogy for consciousness, where will the sunlight land?"

And Ananda says, "Well, on the western wall."

And the Buddha says, "Well, what if there isn't a western wall? What if there isn't an object for it to land on?"

And Ananda says, "Well, it will fall on the ground outside there."

And he said, "Okay, what if there isn't a ground outside?"

And then Ananda says, "Well, it will fall on the water"—which I guess is the water under the ground in some kind of cosmological system.

And he says, "What if there is no water?"

And Ananda says, "Well, then it wouldn't land."

"And if it's just so, that's consciousness liberated."

Now actually there, the Buddha's talking about the unfabricated, which is a stage ahead of even this jhana. But the analogy works very closely. We're almost there in this jhana. There's something almost but not quite analogous to the Buddha's analogy of nirvana, of the unfabricated, of what remains beyond cessation.

We could put it this way: it's not landing on anything, we could say we're not fabricating. There is not the fabrication at that time of any perceptions—all other perceptions have been unfabricated—except two perceptions. One is the very state, this sense of not

landing, this sense of not quite perceiving and yet not quite not perceiving. That's sort of a perception. It's a sort of remnant, or just on the edge. It's the very perception of not really perceiving, but not really not perceiving. So that's one perception.

The other perception that remains is time. Now I'm telling you this, but it may or may not occur to a meditator in this state that that's still there as a perception. There's a sense of this not landing happening in time. It happens in this moment, and implicit in this moment—even though I'm so, so in this moment—there's still implicitly and experientially a past moment and a future moment. So this not landing, this state, is ongoing in time.

This unfabricating represents a very secondary perception, one that most practitioners wouldn't even notice unless they compared it with a completely timeless sense that emerges later. So I'm pointing this out to you now.

There are two perceptions we could say remain in this state: first, no perception of anything—not even nothing, for nothing would itself be a kind of something. There's no perception of anything except the state itself—this strange not-landing, this peculiar experience of not really perceiving yet not really not-perceiving either. And secondarily, there's the perception that this is all happening in time.

It's this latter aspect—though actually both are significant—the happening in time, that marks a fundamental difference between this eighth jhāna and a state of cessation or complete unfabricating.

In this state, in this jhāna, there's a sense of something—another way we could phrase it is a sense of something so ultra-refined that it's really on the edge of perception. That's one way of seeing what's happening. It's something so ultra-refined we can barely say it's a thing to be perceived—an object, a phenomenon, an experience, an appearance. It's so ultra-refined there's almost nothing left of perception as we understood it earlier.

As we said, secondarily there's a sense of release, of being released from perceptions. Ajahn Lee—I mentioned him earlier in the retreat; he was the teacher of the teacher of one of my teachers, a Thai monk in the early twentieth century—phrases it this way: the citta, the mind-heart, is in this state struck by its inability to decide if it's a perception or not. This captures something essential, though perhaps the translation makes it sound rather clunky, as if one is simply pondering the question. Something extremely subtle is happening here.

Again, we can think of this ultra-refinement and connect it with the whole spectrum of refinement I've discussed throughout the retreat. This provides a fruitful way to understand what unfolds through the eight jhānas—they represent a spectrum of progressive refinement, which is the same as saying they're a spectrum of progressive removal of what is gross. This is simply another way of describing progressive non-fabricating, progressive unfabricating, because we would expect the grossest phenomena to be what's most fabricated.

When we don't fabricate something, it gets removed and what remains becomes more refined. Then the next gross thing—when we don't fabricate that, it too gets removed, and we become yet more refined. Do you understand?

Thinking in detail: the first jhāna represents a refinement. What's been removed in the first jhāna? The hindrances—the grossness of the hindrances, which are indeed gross phenomena. In the first jhāna, this grossness of the hindrances is removed. We could say, to express the same thing, that the hindrances are not being fabricated.

In the second jhāna, there's a removal of thought—and we've had this challenge with vitakka and vicāra and how to translate those terms. Certainly discursive thought, that grossness, is removed. It's not being fabricated.

In the third jhāna, what is removed, what is not being fabricated? Pīti is not being fabricated. Pīti is removed. Though relatively subtle compared to the hindrances or gross bodily sense, it's now the grossest element present, so it's not being fabricated.

In the fourth jhāna, even the sukha is not being fabricated, so it's being removed. That's the gross element being removed, though by this point it's something very, very subtle.

In the fifth jhāna, even the subtle sense of materiality—remember we discussed these three levels of being: gross materiality in the kāmaloka world, the world of subtle materiality in the rūpa jhānas, the realm of subtle form in Buddhist cosmology—even this subtle form is removed. Even subtle materiality is not being fabricated. Even that relative grossness, which is actually very subtle, is removed in the fifth jhāna.

We can continue this progression. In the seventh jhāna, space is not being fabricated. In the eighth jhāna, not even nothingness is being fabricated.

You can see how this refinement, this removal of the gross, this not-fabricating, all works together.

So what happens after this jhāna? Now we're not even fabricating nothingness. We've gone beyond that. Is there some further non-fabricating that's possible? Which hopefully we'll explore.

Remarkable feature of this jhana. Very, very remarkable. And in practice, it can help you to find or notice or tune to—focus on, if you like—the most refined perception.

So again, you could do this in the state itself before it's quite consolidated and come together. Just tune to the most refined there. Keep tuning to the most refined. That will help consolidate it. The most refined, we could say perception, but it's not even quite a perception. The most refined thing, object—that doesn't really do it. The most refined sense, the most refined level, I don't know. Words really start to fall apart at this level. It gets really hard to put things into language, but the tuning to whatever is most refined there can help consolidate it if it's not already consolidated in a session.

So we can kind of refine the whole experience and move it into the more pure realm of neither perception nor non-perception by very gently, very gently looking for, very delicately looking for, listening for, attuning to, putting our antennae out for whatever is most refined. And that's a very subtle, sensitive, delicate and gentle process.

And one can even perhaps start doing that in the realm of nothingness. When that's established, when you've got some experience with that, then maybe kind of looking for what's the most refined in there, ultra refined. And again, it may start, what would we say, maturing, purifying from that, moving on from that, just from that attending to the most refined level. And that amplifies it as we've talked about all the way through the retreat. So with experience that may work that way and may take you to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception.

So I was trying to find the sutta—well, anyway, I couldn't find it. But again, the Buddha says this is an escape. It's an escape, nisaranam. It's a release of awareness. Again, he uses this language a lot. It's almost a total release from perception, almost a complete not being hooked, not casting out a hook and finding an object, almost a total release from perception while there is still awareness. So we're not talking about general anesthesia or anything like that here.

And what I was looking for and couldn't find is there's some languaging. So remember we talked about how the Buddha talks about the jhanas as perception attainments. Do you remember this? I couldn't remember if then he says the highest perception attainment is the realm of nothingness. In other words, this one, because it's neither perception nor non-perception, actually doesn't qualify as a perception attainment. I couldn't remember if he counts this one as the highest perception attainment. It doesn't

really matter. The principle is the same. I do think somewhere or other he calls this one, the neither perception nor non-perception, he calls it the summit of perception or the limit of perception, I think.

But then we can go beyond this, and hopefully we'll get to that tomorrow. We can even go beyond this, this much unfabricating, this limit of perception, this summit, this perception attainment, if that's what it's called.

There is, again, with the sense of refinement there and somewhat akin to the fourth jhana and some of the other jhanas, there's a real sense of purity here. There's something in the very refinement itself and the stillness. It's extremely pure. Again, these words don't quite capture it. The experience itself is so different than normal experience that words which we use for normal experience get quite clumsy at this point. But I think that's quite a good word. There's something very pure about it. It feels very pure. Refinement, purity, release. These are all part of the texture, let's say, of this realm.

And there is something, I think—and then these words start to sound really ridiculous—amazing and jaw-dropping. So it is amazing and kind of jaw-dropping, but the whole thing is, at this point, very, very delicate because of the refinement. It's very, very still. It's almost like one is awestruck with very little reverberation going on in the being because that would disturb things. So if one can have one's jaw dropping without much reverberation, one would.

But in the refinement, in the purity, in the release, there is something really amazing there, I think—exquisite, beautiful. But these words don't really capture it. It's very different, as I said, from normal experience. We're really talking about something quite different. And in some ways, I think, in a lot of ways—at least that's my sense—in some ways it's quite different even than other jhanic experience. There's a kind of larger quantum leap here, I think.

The after-effects on perception reveal something profound. With regard to what's unfolding in both inner and outer worlds—how my mind is, how my body is, what I see, what I sense—there can arise in the aftermath a simple recognition: this is just what's happening in the realm of perception. All this.

My mind is foggy. My mind is clear. I have a pain in my tummy. I have a headache. This perception, that perception. It's just appearances—just what's happening in the realm of perception. This is profoundly different from experiencing "this is what's happening." Rather, it's "this is just what's happening in the realm of perception."

Through this understanding comes an even deeper relativizing of our phenomenal experience, both internal and external. And from this relativizing arises a truly effortless equanimity with regard to the things of this world—the eight worldly conditions of praise and blame, pain and pleasure, headache or no headache, whatever it may be. This effortless equanimity emerges partly from that after-effect on perception: it's just what's happening in the realm of perception. This relativizes everything.

These are just perceptions—whatever I'm perceiving, whether tummy ache, headache, foggy mind, this or that in the world. They're just perceptions. It's not that things are really otherwise—not that I have a foggy mind but really my mind is clear, or that some other state is more true. They're simply perceptions. No other perception is more true instead.

So how do we open this door? How does the door open for us?

One way, perhaps the safest and most reliable, is simply allowing it to naturally mature from dwelling as fully as possible, as wholeheartedly, attentively, and absorbedly as we can in the realm of nothingness. In time, it will mature.

At this point, the *sati, samādhi, sukha, ekaggatā* framework probably needs to shift. The *sukha* becomes less relevant because suffusion primarily pertains to the energy body experience. Perhaps we could speak of different kinds of suffusion, but the other factors become more important: absorbing into the nothingness, sustaining attention, maintaining the sense of nothingness, the intensity—which matters less now—and the enjoyment, which becomes very, very subtle. So perhaps *samādhi, sati, ekaggatā* rather than the full framework.

Working with this, entering it, abiding there repeatedly, at some point it should mature naturally.

The second possibility for reaching this dimension comes again from the *Ānañjasappāya Sutta*, where the Buddha describes insight ways of looking that lead to the immaterial realms. Having described the approaches we explored yesterday regarding the dimension of nothingness, he continues: "Then again, the disciple of the noble ones"—again, that word *considers*—"employs, engages subtly an insight way of looking thus: all sensuality, all sensual perceptions, all perceptions of forms"—which includes perceptions of jhānic forms and experiences, the perceptions of fifth and sixth jhāna, perceptions of infinite space, perceptions of consciousness, and the perception of the dimension of nothingness—"all of these are perceptions. Where they cease without re-

mainder, that is peaceful, that is exquisite"—namely, the dimension of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. "Practicing and frequently abiding in this way, his mind acquires confidence in that dimension."

This is essentially the same instruction as for the realm of nothingness that we explored yesterday, but now extended to include the perception of nothingness itself. Very, very powerful. If you can develop facility with these kinds of insight ways of looking, they become extraordinarily effective.

Again, we're speaking of something very agile—not some elaborate thinking process or philosophical system, but a very light tincture in one's way of looking, employed again and again. Way of looking means way of relating, way of sensing.

One could practice this recognition—that perceptions are not peaceful, seeking instead what is peaceful—from within the realm of nothingness itself. You could begin employing this insight way of looking while established in the dimension of nothingness. Or actually, you can engage it from anywhere.

You could do it from right now, just whatever is in front of me—foggy mind, and so on. And again, I contradict myself constantly, saying so much about how this jhāna will depend on the one before it, and that will depend on the maturing of the one before it, and on and on. After you've gotten the hang of all this, sometimes there will be plenty of times when you sit down and the body feels funny, the mind feels blah, blah, blah. And you just start on that very discomfort of body and non-settledness of mind and non-clarity of mind. You just start employing an insight way of looking like that. And lo and behold, you end up in the eighth jhāna.

So it's all in the art, in the trust, in the confidence—primarily in the art. Also in the familiarity. That's much more likely to happen if you have some familiarity beforehand with the neither perception nor non-perception. But it's definitely not going to hurt to try such a thing. Don't get too locked on where it might end up. You're still practicing a very powerful insight way of looking—see what happens.

It will be, as we will return to, connected with the whole spectrum and the whole process of unfabricating. So whether I actually end up in the eighth jhāna is again less significant than what I learn through employing insight ways of looking and seeing what they do and understanding what they do and adding two and two together and getting four. That's much more important than whether I have achieved eighth jhāna and I get my eighth jhāna badge.

It could also arise or be helped by a similar reflection: just a perception, just a perception—which again was exactly what we included in the list we gave out yesterday. It's just a perception. And again, that could be in and from the realm of nothingness. This too is just a perception, this perception of nothingness. And "just a perception" means again, fabricated, right? It's just a perception means it's fabricated. That's the fine print for "just a perception."

Or again, you can do that from anywhere. Again, I start with my body feeling not so good and the mind—just a perception. Whatever comes into consciousness, whatever perception there is: just a perception, just a perception, meaning it's fabricated, it's fabricated, it's just a perception. And that will start, if I'm doing it right, if I've got the art right of that insight way of looking, it will unfabricate. And because all this is related on the spectrum of unfabrication, it may open up the realm of neither perception nor non-perception. So I could do that from the realm of nothingness or actually from anywhere—from a very ordinary state of consciousness, even from the midst of the hindrances.

There are also plenty of other ways of looking that one could adopt or train on the object of the realm of nothingness. But I've talked about them elsewhere. I'm not going to mention them.

The slight risk in those last three I've listed—either "these perceptions are not peaceful," that one, or "just a perception," that one, or other insight ways of looking—is that they might, they could sometimes be so powerful that they even overshoot the eighth jhāna and you get even more unfabricated. It's possible.

So there's those four. Then there's, remember I said, I think it was very near the beginning of the retreat, I talked about how the jhānas end up being—the sense we can have is just that they're there already. They're in the air, they're frequencies, they're radio frequencies. And we can just tune our dial and find that frequency. So similarly with this, neither perception nor non-perception—it's kind of like a radio frequency or radio station. And when we have a memory of it, in other words, when we've gone in and out lots of times and really gotten more familiar with it, we can just from memory tune to that frequency again. And of course, that's very related to just the whole mastery thing—opening the door or the door to this realm opening through subtle intention. Very similar.

Someone told me a little while ago that their way of working was in the realm of nothingness, their way of moving from the realm of nothingness to the realm of neither perception nor non-perception was in the realm of nothingness to just introduce a little,

very subtle sort of thought or intention really: Might there be perception without this object of nothingness? And it was just a kind of invitation. Might there be a kind of perception without this nothingness as an object? And that would help open it up for them.

It might be also that some people are able to find or then tune to and open to—I don't know what to call it—a level of the mind or a part of the mind, part of the citta that already right now, or so it seems, is not perceiving but not non-perceiving. It's already neither perceiving nor non-perceiving. Sometimes that's possible, and then it's possible to find the nowness in it, make that very alive, present—now, now, now—the sense of that happening now, and refine it in that way.

So there's a part, or it can seem there's a part or level of the mind that is, even now, not engaging in perception, is free of it, or is not interested in perceptions. It wants to be free of perceptions, perhaps, and again unhooking from perception—or perhaps it's already unhooked. There's a very subtle sort of hidden dimension, but finding that and then that can be amplified. Perhaps for some people that will work, and again that's something that could work from any state of consciousness, from a normal state of consciousness. Of course the grosser the state of consciousness, the more turbulent it is, the harder that will be to do. But sometimes you get surprised with these things. You get very, very surprised at what's possible.

So these last three that I've mentioned—either tuning to it from memory, or the subtle intention, or this kind of very subtle question "Is it possible to perceive right now without this nothingness, without this object of nothingness?", that one, or this kind of finding a level of the mind that's already neither perceiving nor non-perceiving—all of them imply and need, I would say, some confidence that there is this possibility of neither perception nor non-perception.

And the confidence helps these methods to work so that we can kind of fish for it. And we have confidence in our fishing. And by fishing, I mean an ultra-sensitive, subtle receptivity and attunement. And through that it can emerge.

So again, though, there's an issue here with some of these methods. If I employ an insight way of looking, perceptions are not peaceful. They're not peaceful. I want what's peaceful. That's not peaceful. Any perception is not peaceful. If I employ this tuning to a part of the mind that's actually not engaging in perception or interested in perceptions, and maybe some of the other methods—is there the possibility of aversion? Is there the possibility of aversion to perception? Which means aversion to experience, appearance, objects. Yes, there is.

So what we're talking about here again is so important to emphasize in these insight ways of looking. If there's aversion mixed in with it, it sends the whole thing in a very different direction. It stirs things up in a very different way. So what we're talking about is an insight way of looking that doesn't have aversion in it. The aversion needs to not be there.

When the Buddha talks about insight on several occasions and the way some streams of practice mature, he uses the word disenchantment, and that the practitioner becomes disenchanted with everything actually—with the whole world of phenomenal experience in the outer. There's a disenchantment with sense objects, disenchantment with mental objects, disenchantment eventually with the jhanas, disenchantment eventually with the formless jhanas, all that. So that word occurs relatively frequently.

Some maps of the way insight progresses or the stages of insight really emphasize this quite a lot and emphasize that a practitioner practicing very deeply goes through a period or even recurrent periods of extreme disgust and repulsion at everything—the whole world of appearances, inner, outer states, mental objects, physical objects, the whole is disgusting and repulsive to them. And there's a lot of agitation often with that.

It may be that someone experiencing that sort of thing—it may just be that aversion and neurosis have gotten tied up in their practice. And one is deciding to view it as being on the edge of awakening and so forth. But actually it's just aversion. I'm aversive to my body. It's not great insight into Dharma or something. It's just there's aversion there. Or there's a kind of neurosis.

Sometimes there's a lot of encouragement for very high energy, high intensity, high intentness in practice with a kind of micro-sharp focus. All these things—intensity, energy, micro-focus building up with this teaching about disenchantment given primary place. Actually aversion gets mixed up in there and the whole thing just spawns cycles of dukkha that may have very, very little to do with liberating insight. But one might have heard that they have to do with liberating insight and so one just goes round and round in that.

Are they liberating? Is it liberating? Or are they dependent arisings? If I look a certain way, I get—there's a whole thing about playing with perception. If I look a certain way, I get a certain result. If there's aversion in my looking, I get a certain result. If there's neurosis and repulsion, I'm going to get a certain result—a result in my perception, in my sense of things. You understand?

In some circles, this is a really, really important thing to consider. Have to understand dependent arising, the dependent arising of perception. And if my whole mode of working in insight is not taking the inquiry into the dependent arising of perception—is not taking that as central—I've just got an idea. I'm going to laser beam through this and whatever I hit is closer to the bottom layer of rock and that's the truth. And eventually I'll reach that truth or reality. And I'm not inquiring into dependent arising. Do you understand what I mean by this?

To me, this is the most important thing. If I'm not thinking that way, I go back to what I said at the beginning: what's the conceptual framework? And is the conceptual framework set up to really liberate, or is it set up to take me in directions where I don't understand fully what is happening and what my experience is and why this experience arises now and why that experience arises at another time and why this experience arises or doesn't arise?

So we can certainly set up, and people do, a whole process of insight and stages of insight and there's very, very little consideration of dependent arising. It's almost like it's just a thing on the side.

To me then, dependent arising and emptiness are almost synonymous. Practically, until the very last levels, they're synonymous. If I'm not inquiring into that, if I'm not including that as the central theme and scaffolding of my meditative inquiry, then it's possible that whatever insights I have have very little to do with emptiness, as I would understand it anyway.

I remember coming across something once—I can't remember where exactly. There is a sutta in the Pali Canon, I believe, where two old monks are talking. It's not the Buddha speaking, I can't remember who it is. These two old monks describe a process of stages of insight that unfold—they go through something like disgust, et cetera. There's no place I'm aware of where the Buddha describes that process himself.

But it may well be one of those things that's very, very emphasized in certain texts like the *Visuddhimagga* or the *Abhidhamma*. And then that gets taken—this one instance of these two old monks talking becomes, in some paradigms and models, *the* way insight unfolds. These are *the* stages of insight, as opposed to: this is what will happen if you look this way. This is what will happen if you conceive this way and look this way. And if you conceive another way and look, this is what will unfold, and so on.

So the stages of insight is *a* possible model of stages of insight if I look a certain way, usually prioritizing impermanence and micro-focus, et cetera. I'm mentioning this because I know some of you have run into this, and some of you probably have no idea what I'm talking about. It may or may not be useful at some point.

It is true—somewhere the Buddha says, basically, there are four ways to liberation. You can choose the path that is pleasant, a pleasant path that's long. Or you can choose a path that's pleasant and short. Or you can choose a path that's unpleasant and short. Or you could choose a path that's unpleasant and long.

But I actually think what I'm trying to say now goes beyond that. Because to me, if it doesn't include this inquiry into the dependent arising of my experience now, dependent on my way of looking—if that's not in my inquiry—the question would remain. I'm not saying it's impossible. The question would still remain for me: Does that path open up a full understanding and a really deep understanding of dependent arising and emptiness? That would be a question I would have.

I would say most definitely that insight and practice and the path can be mostly fun. I absolutely, definitely say that. Mostly delightful, mostly characterized by a sense of release and relief and some degree of liberation now as I'm practicing. I would say that.

And it's part of what I mean when I say: can we bring some intelligence to this? Can we bring some intelligence to these very basic questions, or intelligence to how am I practicing? It's really, really fundamental.

We talked very briefly about what's the definition of insight. Well, we can define insight in all kinds of ways—all kinds of people do. If you listen to enough Theravadan-based Dharma, there are lots of definitions of what insight is.

But one way, and the primary way I find helpful—actually I would like to keep a few ways open—but one of the ways I would particularly like to emphasize is: insight means ways of looking that reduce clinging, which means increased letting go. In the future, for the future, but also now, right now, and even primarily now. That's what insight is. It's adopting ways of looking that liberate and that primarily liberate right now.

That means all these insight ways of looking that we're talking about—we'll give examples of, and there's loads more we could talk about—they should feel liberating. They should feel like there's a relief, a release, a delight, a beauty, an opening, a peace, a joy that comes with them. If they're not, then they're not—and they can still be insightful—but they're not the kind of insight that I would like to emphasize, put it that way.

So if we define it that way, then actually the whole... and we kind of use that as, let's say, the primary understanding of what we're doing, then the whole path just—it does not need to be this whole contracted thing of sitting through pain and all these eruptions of difficulty. Do you understand?

So again, some of these themes carry over from these different jhanas. In a way there, with that insight way of looking that Buddha gave here: perceptions are not peaceful. I want what's peaceful. That is peaceful, the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.

Other times the Buddha says—I couldn't find the whole quote, but it's very common, almost a stock formula—perceptions are *dukkha*. Perceptions are a hassle. He doesn't say quite that word, but perceptions are a boil. You know what a boil is? Like a big painful pimple, a big zit. A boil, a dart, an arrow, a cancer, a disease, and then he goes on. This is what perception is. It's extreme language.

Or even when we simply say perceptions are not peaceful, there's again the danger of tipping us toward a dualistic conception—not merely an abstract intellectual philosophy, but a dualistic sense, a dualistic lived preference that turns away from this world.

And the world is perception. What else is the world if not perception, phenomenologically speaking? Appearance, experience, objects, phenomena—the world is perception. So if I begin to say perceptions are a boil, a dart, a cancer, are dukkha, I'm essentially saying the world is. We might find ourselves again tipping into a dualistic preference, turning away from the world in favor of this subtler realm free of perception.

Even the way of looking that sees perceptions as fabricated, as empty—this too, if we don't fully understand what we're doing and what it means completely to say something is fabricated, carries the danger of dualism.

Fabrication is an interesting word. In English—I don't know about other languages—a fabrication is also a lie. We say something "is a fabrication." The word itself is fascinating because it connotes an untruth. I use it partly because it carries this connotation, though if we take it deeply enough, we go beyond that notion of untruth. We take it, but hold it provisionally and move even beyond it.

So it has this derogatory connotation—fabricated, fabricated, fabricated. When I adopt an insight way of looking and say "it's just a perception, it's fabricated," there's this slightly dismissive quality: it's a lie, it's not true. Do you understand? But I need to understand more deeply. I need to understand dependent arising and emptiness more deeply—not just intellectually, but through lived meditative exploration.

I really need to feel this, see this, sense this, watch it work in action and feel its effects. When I do this, this happens and it feels like this—the intimate experience of that. When I take this far enough, it goes beyond any notion of duality or hierarchy. The whole understanding, when explored this way, of what it means to say something is empty or fabricated—it's not dualistic. It's almost the opposite end from dualism.

We get a sense of being so profoundly intimate with the world of experience—though that doesn't even come close as language. The word "intimacy" doesn't come close. Something even more intimate than the word intimacy can possibly connote. We participate in the co-fabrication of the universe, of the cosmos, of the world, of things, of life. But even that doesn't quite capture it because we have certain notions of what "participation" means.

We participate in the magic of the dance and co-arising of subject and object in a way that's—again, there's no word for the depth. "Participate," "intimate"—they come sort of close, but it's even deeper.

Language is based on notions of subject and object, and when they start falling apart or collapsing into each other—not into some oneness, for they're neither one nor two, subject and object, nor nothing, nor many things. They're not zero, one, two, nor many. Language is based on "there's this and that," subject and object. So the whole language of intimacy, of participation—language cannot cope at this deep level.

But if we speak of this profound sense of participation in the magic of co-arising—of subject and object, of appearances and awareness, of self and world—the magic of that, the beauty of that, somehow we're completely implicated, interwoven with that in the most gorgeous and blessed ways. This is very far from dualism.

If one goes deep enough into this same investigation, into fabrication and dependent arising, I don't lose sight of that. If I investigate fabrication just a little bit, investigate dependent arising just a little bit, I'm not going to get this gorgeous full blossoming.

Again, similar themes emerge. It should be the case with this realm of neither perception nor non-perception. And it should certainly be the case that the more we understand and open to the emptiness of the world—if our conceptual framework doesn't get in the way—remember how much depends on that...

You can have all these wonderful experiences—or frightening experiences, amazing experiences, strange experiences. But if I'm not taking care with my conceptual framework, my big picture, my understanding of what I'm doing and what's going on, those experiences can deliver very little, or actually deliver what is really not helpful.

So even more than the experience itself, the understanding and the conceptual framework matter deeply. But it should be that experiences at this level of jhana and deep emptiness—where one sees the emptiness of the world—actually somehow open up even further, increase our love for the world, our love and compassion for the world. It should work like that.

The heart, opening in that way, sensing things in that way, touched in that way, becomes tender, open at a whole other level. It becomes wonderstruck, touched with what I would say is a sense of the profound blessing of the magic of appearances. The profound blessing of that—whatever the word is that's more than participation. It's the profound blessing at the mystery of things, the mystery of appearances.

I think let's stop there, actually. Let's sit together for a bit.

CHAPTER 222

The End of Time (The Cessation of Perception and Feeling)

Rob Burbea · 1h43

> *In this profound dharma talk from the "Practising the Jhānas" retreat, Rob Burbea ventures beyond the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception to explore the unfabricated (asaṅkhata) - that which is unconditioned and beyond all fabrication. Drawing from multiple Pali Canon sources, he examines how deep insight (paññā) into dependent arising (paṭiccasamuppāda) can lead to the complete cessation of all perception, including the six sense consciousnesses and their objects.*
>
> *Burbea presents three approaches from the suttas: viewing jhānic states as fabricated and unsatisfactory, applying the four characteristics (dukkha, anicca, anattā, śūnya) to jhāna factors, and Sāriputta's method of discerning how phenomena arise and pass away. He explores the deepest level of dependent arising - the co-arising of subject, object, and time - and how understanding their fabricated nature leads to complete unfabrication. The talk addresses profound philosophical questions about epistemology and ontology while maintaining practical relevance, showing how this understanding of fabrication forms a coherent spectrum from basic mindfulness to the most sublime mystical openings. Burbea emphasizes that while this unfabricated realm represents extraordinary freedom, it may not be the complete story, pointing toward even deeper understandings through emptiness teachings.*

So I think if I remember correctly, when the opportunity came up because of the building works—and this whole retreat was Kirsten's idea—I'm pretty sure I asked, can we have a month? For whatever reasons, they said this is what we've got: just over three weeks.

I feel a little bit like I'm rushing at the end and running out of time, not quite having the opportunity to say certain things I wish I could share. I certainly wish I'd had more opportunity to meet with you individually—interviews, Q&As, and such. But as I said at the beginning, in many ways the very fact of this retreat has been a miracle. The conditions came together to allow this. So we're doing the best we can, and that's good.

I'm partly wondering how you're doing with these later talks, when I'm not really speaking at the level of your learning edge playgrounds anymore. How are they landing for you? In our modern or postmodern society, it's completely okay if this kind of ma-

terial—these deep mystical states and openings—doesn't interest you. I genuinely feel it's really okay if you're not drawn to this. That's a perfectly valid relationship to have with it. Of course, some people will be absolutely fascinated and allured by it.

Someone might think, "I don't feel interested now, but it's probably because of my psychological dukkha. Once I've worked through that, then I'll be interested." It may be the case. But I would tend to guess that if you're not interested anyway, you probably never will be. It's not that a certain amount of healing or psychological clearing of the path needs to happen first. These territories are passionately interesting to some people and not so much to others.

The technical information I've been sharing in these recent talks—because I'm not really speaking to your learning edge playgrounds for most of you at this point—this technical material is really for later. As far as I can tell, it's being recorded, so it should be accessible to you if and when these territories do become your learning edge playgrounds.

But the big picture material and the conceptual framework will also be very relevant then, and it's absolutely relevant now. This bigger picture understanding is not stuff you necessarily need to write down frantically. In fact, it makes more sense to take notes on the conceptual framework than on the specific techniques for moving from the seventh to eighth jhana. You're welcome to write whatever you want, but I emphasize understanding the big picture and conceptual framework—that's what's relevant now.

What's also relevant are the reflections we've woven throughout these teachings on desire, intention, and our relationship with them. What is it to keep my intention on something I desire? How am I with desire? What happens within me around desire? These inquiries will be relevant when you're working with the eighth jhana or whatever it might be, but they're relevant now. These elements—big picture understanding, conceptual framework, our relationship with desire and intention—are more fundamental than whether one can move from this jhana to that jhana.

Sometimes we human beings have a habit of listening with misplaced priorities, without a developed sense of what's actually most important. Understanding the big picture and conceptual framework is actually rare—very rare.

Yesterday we talked about the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Today I'd like to speak about what lies beyond that: the unfabricated, the deathless, the asaṅkhata dhamma. Saṅkhata relates to saṅkhāra and usually gets translated as "conditioned" or "fabricated." So asaṅkhata means the unfabricated, the unconditioned.

Now, all this business about being rushed—that's not the end of the story for me. Opening to and realizing the unconditioned, the unfabricated, wonderful and important as that is, is not the end of the story.

For some people it is the end of the story, or for some maps of the Dharma it is. But even that is becoming quite rare in the Dharma world. Even any kind of importance given to this—I don't even know the word for it—the realm of the unfabricated or the unfabricated, this complete fading. That's actually getting rarer and rarer in many Dharma worlds. I think in the insight meditation world, certainly.

But in my book, it's extremely important, extremely touching, beautiful, liberating—but it's kind of like half the story, if you like. And the other half has to do with emptiness, which goes even deeper than the unfabricated. Now, unfabricated is important for emptiness, but emptiness, in its full understanding, goes even deeper.

I have written about and explained all this elsewhere extensively, and I'm not going to do it again today. This business about going beyond the unfabricated is in *Seeing That Frees*, in the chapters leading up to and then after the sections about the unfabricated, in considerable practical detail as well as conceptual detail. I've written and spoken about it, as I said, extensively—about the unfabricated, about how that opens up in practice, about what it means to go beyond it and how that opens up in practice, about the relationship of both of those stages to emptiness and liberation, and about the whole philosophy or the philosophical questions that are implicit in all that about reality and how we know what's real, how we can trust what's real. So ontology and epistemology.

I've written and talked about it extensively in where you'd expect to find it—in *The Seeing That Frees*, a book about emptiness and talks about emptiness. But there's also much of that material and many different approaches and even further elaborations of that material in talks about soul-making, in soul-making Dharma talks, because it's actually woven into all that and has profound implications philosophically for all that territory.

I received a note asking whether there would be any space in tonight's talk to distinguish the terms dependent origination and emptiness, maybe also codependent arising and lack of inherent existence, as the questioner had thought of them as synonymous. The short answer is no. Unfortunately, there isn't quite enough time. I can say something very brief now, but it's all in that material. It's all there. I think it's really, really clear. I really took considerable trouble being really, really clear. Every word means something, implies something. Certainly in the writing, and obviously the verbal teaching is a bit looser.

This isn't a talk about emptiness primarily. It's a talk primarily about the unfabricated, but briefly in terms of this question: Part of the problem is that terms like dependent origination and emptiness get used in many different ways in the Dharma. Even in the insight meditation world, you'll find numerous different ways they are used. I would say the same term is understood at very different levels, which a person using it at a certain level might think represents the totality. That's the final level of understanding. But someone else might, or as I would put it, rank those as provisional levels of understanding. So it gets quite tricky trying to untangle all that.

But briefly, dependent origination—we could say, okay, this book is a dependent arising. What does that mean? Well, someone sat down and spent considerable time writing it. The paper had to come from trees. Someone had to cut down the trees and take them to a paper mill and make paper out of them. And then there was the ink, and the author had to practice and study extensively. All these factors—the book arose dependently on all those conditions. That's all really, really important and lovely and can give a beautiful sense of interconnectedness with everything, but it won't do that much for liberation.

The primary emphasis I place on understanding dependent origination is dependent on the mind, dependent on the way of looking. We've seen this when we talked about working with pain on this retreat. Here's the pain. It is a pain. It seems to—I'll weave in the other word—it seems to inherently exist. It just exists. It is what it is. It's a pain and it hurts. When I find I play with perception, I look at it in a different way, I find that, oh, it's become a pleasure. It's become bliss. It does not exist inherently as pain. It doesn't exist inherently from its own side, as the Tibetans say. It's dependent. It dependently arises.

It dependently originates. Primarily, the most important thing for liberation—and I would emphasize this—it dependently originates on the way of looking in the moment. Do you understand?

So we could say much, much more about these terms. Codependent arising is, let's say for now, just the same thing, and I'll weave it into the talk later. Lack of inherent existence is at one level synonymous with emptiness or dependent arising.

In other words, to say that this pain lacks inherent existence is—as many of you have seen for yourselves and felt for yourselves in meditation already—to say that this pain lacks inherent existence is just the same thing as saying: without my looking at it in my normal habitual reactive ways, it does not arise and exist for me as pain. It lacks

inherent existence. It lacks an independent existence. And that's just the same thing as saying it's empty. And it's just the same thing as saying it arises dependently, dependent on the way of looking.

So that's a very brief answer. Is that okay?

Now, so that you don't get quite confused—or rather more confused than you may already be—you should probably know that this way I'm about to talk today, and the way that I've written about and talked about other times, this way of talking about the unfabricated and this way of talking about the fabricated and this whole idea of insight ways of looking—being ways of looking, ways of relating in the moment that reduce clinging and through reducing clinging fabricate less, and the implication from that that a thing is therefore empty to a certain extent and a dependent arising, with the implications about its reality—all of that together is rare in the Dharma world.

The way I'm talking about unfabricated, fabricated, insight ways of looking, clinging, unfabricating, emptiness, dependent origination and the implications for reality—all of that together—it's not like you can just expect it to mesh neatly or nicely with other things that you will read and hear. I'm not saying it's better or worse, and you're welcome to prefer whatever you prefer or makes more sense. I'm just saying that if you're approaching something else with the idea that they must be saying the same thing, you're liable to just get very confused. It's completely up to you to gravitate to what you gravitate to, explore what you feel drawn to explore. But if you know that from the start, then you won't be trying to mesh things together which actually don't really mesh that well.

So it's rare in the Dharma, this way of talking about these things and this way of explaining things. And it's very rare, the whole conceptual framework that ties it all together—certainly with the soul making, but even all that tied together. And as I said, the understanding is very rare. So it's very rare for people to really understand this, yet.

There's a passage in the Pali Canon where the Buddha and Ananda are sort of hanging out. Ananda, remember, was the Buddha's attendant, so he probably heard—let's estimate—maybe ninety percent of the Buddha's teachings. Talks to monks, talks to nuns, talks to lay people, talks to kings and queens, talks to individual wandering ascetics, question and answer sessions, one-to-one interviews. Over many years he was just there all the time, pretty much all the time. And he wasn't thick. After the Buddha died, he became an arahant, so he wasn't someone incapable.

They're hanging out one day and the Buddha says something about dependent arising, and Ananda says, "It's so clear. It's so clear to me. It's wonderful, this dependent arising. It's just as clear as clear could be." And the Buddha turns to him and says, "Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. We're talking about something really profound here. Profound as a teaching, profound in its manifestation."

Just to contextualize this a little bit: this is an interesting thing as a teacher, because I feel I'm talking to someone and they're like, "Oh, I don't understand. I don't understand." And then self-judgment: "I'm so thick, I'm lost, I'm confused," and all this stuff. And actually they do understand. They do understand very well the beginnings of this thread.

Remember I was talking about this whole thing—emptiness, fabrication, dependent arising—it's just a thread. It's the same understanding I'm taking from the most basic level that my mother could understand, who has not meditated for ten seconds in her whole life and is not interested in anything. She can understand when she gets into papañca compared to afterwards: that was fabricated, that was less fabricated. There was something unreal there and there was something—she would just say—real here. It's the same thing. Papañca compared to normal consciousness. And you just keep following that thread.

And the person says, "I don't understand. I don't understand." Actually, you do understand.

You're on the right thread, and you need to know that you understand and keep going. So there are some people like that who need encouragement: "Actually, you do understand. Just keep following. Same inquiry. Just keep going. Don't freak out."

Other people are a bit more like, "Yes, yes, yes, I understand completely. I get it. It's wonderful." And you don't understand.

So the question is, which one are you? And are you able to know which one you are?

Again, put this in a little context. I would say one doesn't understand dependent arising and emptiness and all this business unless one understands that what dependently arises does not arise. And one understands that that is the case for many reasons. What dependently arises does not arise. What is unfabricated is not unfabricated. Unless one understands that, one hasn't really understood all this business.

What is unfabricated is not unfabricated. Unless one has also understood that when we talk about this fabrication business and ways of looking, we're not talking about "ah yes, it's because the brain processes things like this, or these are the neural circuits," et cetera, because we're not talking about something based in materialism or physicalism. Brains, neurons, neurotransmitter molecules and atoms—they are empty too.

Neither are we talking about the kind of complement in philosophy from materialism: mentalism. Everything is projected by the mind. The mind is somehow real and everything is projected by the mind. So unless one understands all that, one doesn't really fully yet understand this dependent arising business.

Unless one understands why there is no trauma. There is no trauma. But we can respect and care for trauma and heal it. But there is no trauma.

Unless one understands why there are no ways of looking, but at the same time, it's impossible to exist even for a moment without a way of looking, but there are no ways of looking.

Unless one understands that things are not impermanent, but nor are they permanent. And one understands that there are no moments. There are no moments of time. One hasn't understood all this yet.

Unless one understands that there are many things and at the same time there are no things. And in a way there's one thing only, or there are many kinds of versions of one thing only. Or there are infinite things. All these are true. Many, none, one, infinite—and none of them are true.

Unless one understands that there is no suffering and there is no liberation. And unless one understands that emptiness too is emptiness. One hasn't fully yet understood dependent arising.

So if you're one of those people who think that you have... I could go on, we could go on adding to this list, but I need to... we're talking about something very profound and I'm not going to be able to explain it all today. Everything there, if you really read and listen and practice, obviously, it should actually all completely make sense in the heart through practice.

So this talk—I'm not going to go into the whole emptiness thing. We don't have time. In a way, it's only half of what I said. I'm just going to talk about the unfabricated a little bit. And it's only really a little of what's really a huge area and profound area of understanding and practice. I'm really going to talk about the jhānas and in relationship to the unfabricated.

And one more thing, you know, we're not... some of you are a bit new to this fabrication and fading thing.

So we should be clear: one isn't going to understand this business about fading and dependent arising and emptiness without practicing what I call insight ways of looking. One is not going to understand that without really practicing those insight ways of looking extensively and getting into them and really grappling with that and letting the beauty of it open up.

So jhānas are really not the best way to understand fading and emptiness. However, emptiness and fading is part of the best way to understand the jhānas. That's not quite a contradiction in what I said. Jhānas are not the best way to understand fading and emptiness, but fading and emptiness are part of the best way to understand the jhānas, along with what we talked about—development of sensitivity and attunement and deep resource.

Partly the reason I've been going on about emptiness and all that and ways of looking is because it forms the best and most coherent way of understanding the jhānas and placing them coherently in a much bigger picture of the Dharma—a picture which makes sense of a lot of possibilities, including soul-making Dharma, but even without soul-making Dharma.

Whether people use the word or not, I would say that certainly most insight meditation teachers use the idea of fabrication. They may use that word or not use that word. So when people talk about papañca, whether they use the word fabrication or not, they're suggesting that it's what we call a fabrication in both senses. It's something that the mind has just concocted—that's another word. It's a concoction. It's a construction. And with this double meaning that we have in some languages, it's also a lie.

That contrasts with what usually implicitly is something unfabricated, something real or reality, something true or truth. Even if a person isn't using that concept, it's there woven into most insight meditation teachings. Fabrication is a construction, a concoction by the mind—and what is not real, it's a lie in some ways. So unfabricating the fabricated, or not fabricating, is just part of practice. It's part of what is conveyed in any dharma teaching, let alone just insight meditation teaching.

More than that, implicitly or explicitly, there's an ontology woven in. Ontology means a view or philosophy or belief about what is real. So when people talk about papañca, even if they don't use the language "real" or "fabricated," the way they talk

and the jokes and the humor of it—it's clear like, "Wasn't that funny because it was completely not real, right?" So even if a person doesn't pull all this out, there are fabricated and unfabricated as notions that are implicit.

There's an implicit ontology, implicit view of what's real, and there's an implicit ontological hierarchy. Sometimes it's drawn out, it's made explicit. More often it's implicit—it's not actually talked about in this way, but sometimes it is. In other words, clearly the real is better than the unreal, is preferable, right? That's woven into it as well. And wrapped up in all that, there's a value judgment involved. It's better. This is a waste of time. This is ridiculous. This is worthless. This is even harmful.

Most of the time, that's just spun into the rhetoric, into the teaching rhetoric, sometimes verbally and sometimes not verbally. And it's not just in insight meditation. It can also be in pop versions of Zen. If you get a bit conceptual, you just get hit on the nose with a stick or whatever. And it's conveying something about what's real or not real, because reality is what's not bound up with concept. Very rarely is there actually a deep probing of the philosophical questions and psychological questions here. It's usually conveyed more non-verbally, non-philosophically.

So whatever kind of dharma we're talking about, not just insight meditation, that's an observation.

What is this unfabricated that people may be suggesting or pointing to or kind of is there implicitly without being named? And what is the fabricated? Again, whether they use those words or not.

Unfabricated maybe—we've touched on this—it's basically what is not papañca, as I just said. So when there's the absence of papañca, we are not fabricating. Or mindfulness reveals what is not fabricated. Mindfulness—less story, less view, less reaction, less conceptual involvement—and that mindfulness or bare attention reveals the unfabricated, even if one doesn't use that language.

It cuts fabrication. Does this make sense?

Or you may have heard someone say, "That's not an emotion. It's just some sensations. Really, it's just some sensations in the chest." And again, there's the "really," the ontological question, the hierarchizing, all that. Or "all there really is—not really self and story—all there really is, is the process of the five aggregates in time, including those sensations arising and passing in the chest area." Or this vast primordial impersonal awareness is regarded as what's real, and the whole concepts or stories of self is regarded as not real.

So whatever language one uses, there is this something that's fabricated, something that's not fabricated, some ontological distinction and hierarchy there, and value judgments woven in with all that.

When I use the word unfabricated, I don't mean what is revealed by bare attention. I certainly don't mean what is there, visible to us, sensible to us when there is no thought. I certainly don't mean what's sensible to us, perceivable to us when we're calm, without papañca, without making a fuss in the world.

Rather, I would say it's what appears or what opens when there is no intention whatsoever and no conception whatsoever. I could also say no perception whatsoever. But I have to explain those words, because I don't mean by conception "thought." When I say non-conceptual, I mean much, much more than non-thinking. Concept to me is a much deeper and subtler thing, much more deeply woven into consciousness. And I'll come back to that hopefully in this talk.

And when I say no intention, I certainly don't mean—or I mean much more than—"I'm just sitting here being. I'm just being right now." Or "I'm not doing," or "I'm not making any effort," or "I have no plans," or anything like that. I mean something much, much more subtle than that. Much more deeply intricated, if that's even a word, into consciousness and how consciousness works. I'll come back to that later.

But let's go back to what I said before. There is, in whatever dharma we're teaching, woven into this some kind of idea of the fabricated and the unfabricated, with all these ontological hierarchies and judgments. The question is: where are we limiting the process of unfabricating?

For all these dharmas, there is a practice that involves unfabricating. Do you understand? And the question is: where are we limiting that? Where are we limiting this practice of unfabricating? Where are we drawing the line and saying, "Oh, that's it now. I'm done with fabrication," or "That was a moment of unfabricating"? Where are we limiting it? And why are we limiting it there or here or wherever we are? Where and why?

And why not leave it as an open question?

These are real questions. In other words, someone needs to come up with a really good answer for these questions, I would say. So I'm meaning something quite different by the Unfabricated. And we'll return to those questions at the end. I think they're very, very important.

But there are lots of texts where the Buddha describes Unfabricated, at least to my reading of them, that sound like what I'm talking about. There are texts where the Buddha's describing a state where all perception has ceased. So not even what we were talking about yesterday—the neither perception nor non-perception. All perception of a subject, all perception of any kind of object, not even nothingness, not even a state of neither perception nor non-perception, all sense of time, all space, not even a present moment—all of that not there.

There are many texts in the Pali Canon. Something's interesting. A while ago, I don't know whether it's still the case, some people would say, "There's only one place in the Pali Canon where the Buddha talks about such a thing." It's not true. There are many, many places, and they're all different. It's not the same little passage getting reprinted. It's lots of different texts pointing to the same experience.

I should find one.

Let us exercise a little patience and explore this further.

That sphere should be understood, should be known. That dimension, that ayatana should be known, that realm should be known where the eye ceases and perceptions of forms fade away. There is no sight, no visual object. That sphere should be known where the ear ceases and the perception of sounds fades away. That sphere should be understood, should be known where the nose and smells, the tongue and taste, the body and perception of tactile objects fade away. That sphere should be understood where the mind ceases and perception of mental phenomena fades away. And by mental phenomena it doesn't just mean thought—it means any mental perception. So perception of a jhana, perception of the neither perception nor non-perception, perception of nothingness, any perception at all.

We're talking about something completely beyond perception of matter, completely beyond any kind of measurement, completely beyond any kind of perception, any subject, any object, any sense of time—even a present moment—no space, no nothing.

As I mentioned, there are people who claim there's only one passage about this in the Pali Canon, but actually in *Seeing That Frees*, if you're interested, there are many, many passages that in different ways describe such an opening and such a realm—place, whatever we want to call that. Some people really don't like this teaching. Some people really oppose such a teaching. That's always quite interesting to me.

Some people use some of those passages or use words like "the unfabricated," but if you listen to what's being said or if you follow the teachings, they're actually using "unfabricated" as synonymous with awareness—often vastness of awareness—and claim-

ing that is the unfabricated, that is the ultimate, or that's the nature of mind or whatever. Occasionally, very occasionally—usually people who haven't been practicing that long, certainly not teachers; I've never heard a teacher say this—but occasionally someone construes the unfabricated as just things as they are, as seen or as sensed, as revealed with bare attention or mindfulness.

So sometimes people use either parts of these quotes or the word "unfabricated," but in quite different ways. Very briefly, if yesterday's language stretched language to the limit, here it's really gone beyond the pale.

The Buddha sometimes talks in positive language here. "There is," as I said—something, that passage we just read: "this should be known, that dimension should be known." It's as if it's a something that should be known.

And there's another passage where he says: "Here, with regard to earth, the perception of earth has disappeared. With regard to liquid, the perception of liquid has disappeared. With regard to fire, the perception of fire has disappeared. With regard to wind, the perception of wind has disappeared." In other words, with regard to materiality—that was the physics of their day—with regard to materiality, the perception of materiality has disappeared. "With regard to the realm of infinite space, the perception of the realm of infinite space has disappeared. With regard to the sphere of infinite consciousness, the perception of the sphere of infinite consciousness has disappeared. With regard to the sphere of nothingness, the perception of the sphere of nothingness has disappeared. With regard to the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, the perception of the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception has disappeared. With regard to this world, the perception of this world has disappeared. With regard to the next world, the perception of the next world has disappeared. Whatever is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after or explored by the mind—the perception of that has disappeared."

"Absorbed in this way, samadhi-fied in this way, one is absorbed dependent neither on earth, liquid, fire, wind; dependent neither on perception of materiality, nor on the sphere of infinite space, the sphere of infinite consciousness, the sphere of nothingness, the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception, this world, the next world, nor on what is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, or explored by the mind—and yet one is absorbed. And to this one absorbed in this way, all the gods pay homage even from afar. 'Homage to you,' they say, 'you of whom we don't even know what it is that you are absorbed dependent on.'"

So it's something so beyond—and these gods are gods with very, very refined, subtle perception. It's gone even beyond that.

The point I want to make is that the Buddha's talking about it in sort of positive language. It's a something that we can perceive in a way. Other times he talks about it as if it's an object that the mind can know—the mind knows this object, as if in that language. Other times he talks about it as if it's a subject, as if it's consciousness released. There was that analogy I talked about yesterday of the sunlight not landing anywhere—it's completely released.

In those terms, talking about it in subjective terms, he talks about what remains with the cessation of the six sense consciousnesses: smell, sight, taste, touch, hearing, smelling—the five senses and mental consciousness. When that all stops, the cessation of the sixth sense consciousness and their respective objects of knowledge—smells, sights, tastes, et cetera, thoughts, or anything perceivable in the mind—what remains is consciousness without attribute, without end, luminous all around.

"Here water, earth, fire and air, materiality, have no footing. Here long and short, subtle and gross, pleasant and unpleasant"—all kinds of discrimination or measurement or relativisms. "And nama-rupa"—nama-rupa is perception, attention, contact, feeling, body, awareness—"all are destroyed with the cessation of consciousness"—i.e., those six sense consciousnesses. "Here each of these is destroyed."

The first phrase there, "consciousness without attribute," translates from the Pali as vijnanam anidasanam. A more precise rendering, I believe, recognizes that nidasa means to point to something or to show something, making this "consciousness that does not point to anything." Again, consciousness that does not land, as we explored yesterday. This describes awareness completely released from any kind of object.

Here the Buddha speaks of this unfabricated reality in subjective terms, as a kind of awareness beyond any sense of awareness we might ordinarily recognize. Even the sixth sense sphere—awareness aware of itself—does not apply here. This transcends awareness aware of itself, awareness aware of nothingness, and even the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. It has gone completely beyond, totally released.

Sometimes the Buddha describes this as a kind of object, sometimes as a kind of subject, but most often he speaks in negative terms—what the Western theological traditions call apophatic language, or the via negativa. You cannot say this, you cannot say that. No attribute you ascribe to it will capture its truth. The Buddha declares that where all phenomena are removed, where there is complete fading of all phenomena, all ways of speaking are removed as well. All possibility of discourse about it vanishes.

More often than not, the Buddha points to this mystery through negative language: the cessation of this, the fading of that, the unfabricating of this. The entire phenomenon is indicated apophatically, negatively—this mystery that lies totally beyond what the mind can grasp or understand through conceptual means.

This experience, this opening, this realization remains possible for us as meditators. I am absolutely not suggesting it is easy, but it is entirely achievable. Yet we are still left with fascinating philosophical questions.

One teacher remarked—I heard this secondhand—"You cannot go from meditative experiences to epistemology and ontology." In other words, just because you have had a meditative experience does not mean that what you experienced in meditation is real or trustworthy in any meaningful way. Simply because you enjoyed a pleasant meditation proves nothing about anything. You have merely had a nice experience. So what?

This raises a crucial question: Just because I have had a meditation experience, what does it prove about the reality of what opened to me? How can I be certain this points to anything genuine that I can trust epistemologically—that I can rely upon as knowledge pointing to something ontologically real?

I would respond: Fair enough. That is true. I cannot one hundred percent guarantee an epistemology based on meditative experience. No one can. What argument could possibly be constructed philosophically to do so?

But my question in return would be: Where does your epistemology come from? How will you prove your epistemology? What do you believe constitutes valid knowledge about reality? That is what epistemology means—it connects with ontology, the question of what is real.

Will you claim that this world of matter everyone agrees upon is real? You still must prove that. Simply pick up a few books on twentieth-century physics and begin asking, "What do you mean by matter?" The whole assumption that matter is something real begins to grow extraordinarily shaky.

Most people understand matter as Descartes and Newton conceived it following the scientific revolution. But consider the quantum revolution. Niels Bohr, one of the fathers of quantum physics, declared: "Everything we call real, everything we think of as real is made from things we cannot call real." This appears to be what quantum physics has revealed.

So when someone insists you cannot move from meditation experience to epistemology and ontology—to claims about reality—I simply ask: What is your epistemology? If they respond with belief in the reality of matter, I ask: What do you mean by matter?

And have you really investigated whether that's real or not in the way that you think it is? Or is your epistemology, your idea of what is real and what's trustworthy as knowledge, simply based on socially agreed-upon views? Something like: "Well, it seems most people in my society agree on this view, therefore it must be right. Because our society is very smart and we make all the right choices, right?" You haven't read the news recently, have you?

Or perhaps your epistemology is just the most common view that you choose as your idea of what most people believe. If we're talking about Descartes again—well, that was a long time ago, and philosophy has moved on. Western philosophy has developed quite sophisticated, profound critiques of Descartes and this idea that there's mind and there's matter, or whatever.

So I wouldn't disagree with this person who says you can't just automatically, unquestionably jump from a wonderful meditation experience that you've really enjoyed to claims of ontology and epistemology. But I would just turn it around and say: "Okay, well, where is yours coming from? What are we going to do?"

Some people say all that talk about epistemology and ontology—which I've talked a lot about in recent years—"we don't do that anymore." That's quite a popular view in modern Western philosophy as well: this post-metaphysical stance, this "we don't do metaphysics" kind of thing.

Actually, it's impossible. It's impossible to live in the world and be in the world without some view, some belief about what is real and what is not real, and what constitutes valid knowledge or valid judgment about that. It's impossible to be a person and function in the world and make choices—even walk from here to teatime or go to the toilet—without some ontological, epistemological view operating. This has nothing to do with formal philosophy or whatever.

So there's always some epistemology, some epistemological position or view operating. It's unavoidable. And similarly with ontology, with claims about reality. This is really, really interesting.

So it's a very complicated area. And we cannot, I think—if you really, really care about all this—you cannot get away from such questions. When someone says to you, "Well, you can't just glibly jump from your meditation experience to claims about reality, or assume this thing that you've opened to is real," they're in the same boat regard-

ing whatever they believe. They're just making their own glib jump, and it's easier for them because they're not questioning it, or not even realizing what they're assuming, or it simply hasn't been brought into question.

But there are profound, difficult questions here about epistemology and ontology. What is the reality status of this unfabricated that we might open to in meditation? What is the reality status of all this? I'm mentioning this—I'm not going to dwell on it now, as I've talked about it extensively elsewhere.

The meditative question becomes: How does this most wonderful of wonderful openings open? How?

As meditators, the Buddha says it's a fruit of jñāna—which means it's a fruit of deep insight. In other words, it comes about only through deep insight. We're not just talking about the state of samādhi or concentration.

You can get to the eighth jhāna just by concentrating. I start with my nostrils, if I'm using that method—I just concentrate, concentrate, concentrate. The first jhāna opens, I let that mature, let the mango ripen. The second jhāna, third, fourth, fifth, and all the way to the eighth. I haven't done any insight at all. I could have—as we said, the more I get into it, there are more insight ways of looking that open up these jhānas. But for this one, the unfabricated, I cannot get there without insight. It's not just a natural state of concentration that will open. It's not just a samādhi that will naturally ripen.

Again, this is all explained in *Seeing That Frees*—what kinds of insights and how we go about that. I'm going to give a very brief tour of a few possibilities, taking them from the Buddha instead of what I've said in *Seeing That Frees*.

Here he is talking—actually it's Ānanda. The first example is from Ānanda. He says: "There is the case where a monk enters and remains in the first jhāna. He notices that this first jhāna is fabricated and willed. It's fabricated and willed. It has intention in it. He discerns: whatever is fabricated and willed is inconstant and subject to cessation. Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents." The ending of the effluents is just another term for complete awakening, complete enlightenment—the ending of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Looking at the Buddhist teaching on the three kinds of suffering, we see that "anicca dukkha" refers to suffering that arises from impermanence. Even experiences of happiness, joy, and love are considered dukkha because they cannot satisfy us permanently. The third category is "sankata dukkha" - suffering that arises from fabrication itself.

This points to something deeper than mere impermanence: it recognizes that everything we experience lacks inherent existence and is, from a certain perspective, inherently unsatisfactory.

This understanding forms the foundation for the first method: taking a jhanic state - up to the realm of nothingness - or a stable brahmaviharic state like loving-kindness, and repeatedly viewing it as fabricated and therefore unsatisfactory. Through this sustained contemplation, clinging diminishes, and with less clinging comes less fabrication. Ananda's instruction suggests that developing this practice deeply can lead to profound realization - potentially all the way to complete awakening.

The second example presents a different approach. The Buddha declares, "I tell you, the ending of the effluent depends on the first jhana." Here, total awakening is said to depend upon this foundational meditative state.

The method is described precisely: A monk enters and remains in the first jhana, experiencing the joy and happiness born of withdrawal from hindrances, accompanied by initial and sustained thought. Within this stable state, the practitioner regards the phenomena connected with the five aggregates - form, feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness - through the lens of insight.

The practitioner sees these jhanic elements as "inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, a void, not-self." This extensive list of contemplative adjectives might seem overwhelming, but these various ways of seeing can actually be organized into four fundamental categories of insight.

The practice involves examining the very factors that constitute the first jhana - the five jhanic factors themselves - while remaining within that concentrated state. This represents a sophisticated integration of samatha and vipassana, using the stability of absorption as the foundation for penetrating wisdom.

The many descriptive terms in the text—inconstant, stressful, disease, cancer, arrow, and so forth—can actually be organized into four distinct categories.

We can group them into the baskets of the three characteristics and one of emptiness or voidness. The three characteristics are dukkha, which means unsatisfactory. Terms like disease, cancer, arrow, painful, affliction, and stressful are all similar words expressing that these phenomena are dukkha—fundamentally unsatisfactory. This represents the first characteristic.

The second basket contains the second characteristic: impermanence. Here we find words like inconstant and disintegration—expressions of the second characteristic as an insight way of looking. I'm examining the jhana factors right here within the jhana itself. This requires sufficient sensitivity, malleability, and attunement of mind to know the jhana intimately, then observe the individual jhana factors through these insight perspectives.

The third basket encompasses the third characteristic—not-self. When the text mentions "not self" and "alien," it points to anatta. It's not me, not mine. The piti is not me and mine. The sukha is not me, not mine. The ekaggata, the concentration—all of it is not me, not mine. We observe this through the insight lens of anatta, recognizing this truth again and again.

The fourth basket is "a void"—two separate words. This suggests these phenomena are not merely not-me, not-mine, not just anatta, but they lack phenomenal selfhood entirely. They are empty of inherent existence. The piti doesn't exist inherently. The ekaggata, whatever it may be, is void—empty of inherent existence. "Void" and "empty" are interchangeable terms here.

This is fascinating because the Pali word is sunya. Sometimes people tell me that the Buddha only discusses emptiness in two suttas with "emptiness" in their titles within the Pali Canon. Actually, there are numerous teachings about emptiness of phenomenal self throughout the Pali Canon—not just the anatta teaching about emptiness of personal self, but various ways the Buddha employs the word "empty," including different types of teachings about emptiness of phenomenal self. Here's one example: they are a void, an emptiness.

So we have four ways of looking: the three characteristics—unsatisfactory (dukkha), impermanent (anicca), not-me, not-mine (anatta)—and void or empty (sunya in Pali).

The jhanas provide excellent foundations for this practice because they offer stable objects. The etymology of jhana can be traced to a candle that burns steadily. Due to this steadiness—remember our two S's in the middle of samadhi—jhanas form ideal objects for practicing these insight ways of looking.

Additionally, because the citta in jhana is clear, subtle, and malleable, these states represent optimum conditions. As they say: location, location, location. They're truly excellent spaces and places for this practice.

However, everything we're discussing comes after you've thoroughly mastered and become familiar with jhana. Only then do you begin practicing these insight ways of looking. All of this represents a lengthy process of practice development, but it's incredibly beautiful, freeing, and gratifying. It simply takes time to develop all of this.

Earlier in the retreat we explored why jhana provides such an ideal foundation for this practice. Yes, we have a stable object and a clear, subtle citta, but already in the jhanic state there is less fabricating. We've almost defined the entire jhanic spectrum in this way. This means the self is less fabricated at that point.

And what do selves do? They go "me, mine, me, mine, me, mine, me, mine." They appropriate, right? So the habit of "me-mining" is already diminished. This makes it easier than usual in that space to simply see things as not me, not mine. The anatta practice becomes more accessible.

It's easier to let go because of the well-being, especially if you're confident that you can return to this jhana. It's not "Oh my god, I had this amazing experience once and I must cling to it." Once you've entered and exited repeatedly, you don't get attached to jhanas anymore.

I used to say it's like in this country - thank goodness for us - I'm not going to get super attached to water. I mean, there's water here, though I don't know how old that bottle is. But if I want water, I know I can go to the tap. It's simply there. When I don't know there's a tap I can turn on and off, then my relationship with water becomes very attached and difficult - understandably so.

But once we can move in and out of jhanas, we can actually let go quite freely within them because it's a well-being we become less attached to, more familiar with. We trust it can come and go, making it easier to release there. And as I mentioned, impermanence becomes obvious. These are additional reasons why jhanas are prime spaces for this work.

Here the Buddha is speaking, telling us that the ending of the effluents depends on the first jhana, then continuing through all the other jhanas up to the realm of nothingness. I would say it probably becomes easier with the third jhana simply because there's much more stillness there. What we're discussing at this level requires considerable stillness, spaciousness, and subtlety. If there's too much piti bouncing off the walls and creating turbulence, this kind of work can become more difficult. Theoretically, I think it's possible from the first jhana, but it's probably much easier from the third jhana onwards - though not past the realm of nothingness.

In neither-perception-nor-non-perception, you need to actually perceive things. You need to perceive what the jhana factors are, to make things clear. But in neither-perception-nor-non-perception, that's partly what defines the state - it's almost like not quite perceiving anything. Again, I've mentioned that only a Buddha can do this work in the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, not an Arahant, not anyone else.

The Buddha goes through the same process with all the jhanas. I've missed a section here - he regards whatever phenomena are connected with the aggregates there. I made an error earlier - this passage concerns the aggregates, not the jhana factors. So the five aggregates present in the jhanic state: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations or fabrications, and consciousness.

He regards them through one of these four ways: dukkha, anicca, anatta, or sunya - suffering, impermanence, not-self, or emptiness. Having done this, he turns his mind away from those phenomena because there's a letting go. Having done so, he inclines his mind toward the property of deathlessness, the amata - what is deathless, the unfabricated.

"This is peace, this is exquisite - the resolution of all fabrication, the ending of all fabrication, the relinquishment of all the paraphernalia of being, the ending of craving, dispassion, cessation, unbinding, nibbana."

And again, it says staying right there - in other words, remaining right in that space - one reaches total liberation. But if there's some attachment to their insight, which is after all quite an extraordinary level of insight, if they're somewhat attached to it, then they reach only as far as the non-returner stage. According to this teaching, they're reborn only in the pure abodes, the highest heavenly realms. In those realms, they will come to full awakening, there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world.

So this covers the first jhana through the realm of nothingness. Then the Buddha states: "Thus, as far as the perception-attainments go, that is as far as gnosis-penetration goes." This confirms what I said before - you can only engage this kind of insight practice up to the realm of nothingness, because beyond that, you're not really perceiving anything clearly enough to work with the aggregates.

Now, the third passage. Are you comfortable with this level of detail? Here the Buddha speaks about Sariputta, one of his chief disciples, saying: "Monks, Sariputta is pandita" - which can be translated as wise or skilled. The translator here renders it as "of great discernment."

It's actually *maha-panyo*, of great—you could say wisdom, you could say discernment, you could say insight. You could also say, and what I'd like to put the emphasis on because that's what the passage is talking about, is that Sariputta has great skill in insight ways of looking. That's exactly what the passage is addressing.

Sariputta is wise and skilled of great insight, of deep insight, of wide insight, of joyous, rapid, quick, penetrating insight. Note the joyous. Yes, joyous. This insight way of looking approach, as I said yesterday, is a joyous way of practicing insight. There's no way it can't be. I mean, maybe a little bit here and there, but basically because you're looking, because you're relating in a way that unbinds right then, you feel that taste, you feel it in your body, in the consciousness—some degree of unbinding, some degree of release from suffering, and therefore it is joyous.

So why is he all that? Because there is the case where Sariputta enters and remains in the first jhana. Whatever qualities there are in the first jhana—and then he lists again the jhana factors, the five jhana factors which we've had. And then he lists things like contact, feeling, perception, intention, consciousness, desire, persistence, mindfulness, equanimity, attention. The list could go on a little bit.

He ferrets them out one by one. Known to him, they arise. Known to him, they remain. Known to him, they subside. He discerns. So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into play, come into being. *Evam*, this is how. Such is the way they do.

Remember we had this brief discussion—I think Andrew asked about the Satipatthana Sutta and how it can so easily be read and heard and translated as a teaching on impermanence, missing this *how*. So this is how these qualities, not having been, come into being. And how, having been, they vanish.

He remains unattracted and unrepelled with regard to these qualities. Independent, detached, released with an awareness rid of barriers. He understands there is a further escape, there's a further *nissaranam*, and pursuing it he confirms that there is. And that further escape is the second jhana. And then he goes through the same thing all the way up to the realm of nothingness.

Here's a jhana—what makes up this jhana? Sometimes when we're practicing jhana, we for the most part want to not differentiate, not deconstruct it. We want to see it as one homogeneous yumminess and just throw ourselves into that vat of homogeneous chocolate yumminess. Yes, that's how we want to relate to it. I don't want to be deconstructing it, seeing its gaps and impermanence. I don't want to be deconstructing in terms of its constituent elements unless I'm doing that so I can work on one of them—

like my wattle and daub building has got a bit of a hole in it and I need to sort of focus on that bit and kind of push it back or bring something in. I'm not deconstructing it if I've got a samadhi intention, unless it's for the sake of shoring it up for the samadhi.

But now we're in an insight way of looking. We are really interested in the discerning, in seeing what's going on here, what are the elements here, and bringing into play an insight way of looking which changes my relationship with those elements very, very powerfully, very potently.

All this is extremely subtle, but it's absolutely doable with practice. So I put so much emphasis on this sensitivity, attunement, et cetera, taken to extraordinary levels, but absolutely possible. And if I can do that, then the whole thing begins to unfabricate, unfabricate.

In this example, he's going stage by stage through the jhanas. I think I said the other day, what might happen is a bit like an elevator shaft. Sometimes the elevator will just go, and you're just at a floor or in the area of a certain floor. Somehow, somewhere I'm around the seventh jhana, whatever it is. Sometimes it goes all the way. But here, there's a kind of stage by stage. He's stopping at every floor.

This word "void"—we've already explained that. There's many ways of understanding emptiness, as we said in response to the question on the note earlier. So we can understand if I'm looking at a jhana factor or something like attention or even the intention to pay attention or something like *vedana* or something like consciousness—there's many ways to understand its voidness, its emptiness.

In other words, there's many possible subtexts if I'm using that way of looking: empty, empty. One of them though could be fabricated, which one might have already understood. I see that when I practice letting go, this fades. Therefore it's fabricated, therefore it's empty of inherent existence.

But the key thing here, as we said, is the *how*—how something arises, how these elements arise, and not just the jhana itself, but the actual elements. How is it that consciousness arises? How is it that consciousness fades? How is it that a sense of contact or a perception—which remember means experience or appearance or phenomenon—how is it that it arises and how does it fade?

This is the deepest level of dependent arising. Dependent arising is a teaching you can take on many different levels.

At a certain level, it begins to deconstruct, which is why I could say at the beginning: what dependently arises does not actually arise. At the deepest level of understanding dependent arising, what dependently arises does not arise. But there's a whole range of levels.

At the deepest level where it still just about makes sense to talk about arising—let me see if I can explain this very briefly. Again, it's explored in *Seeing That Frees* in quite careful detail. We're speaking of a very deep meditative state. We don't even need to put a jhāna name on it—just somewhere in that territory where there's a lot of fading.

No sense of my story, no sense of my personality and all my neuroses and my whole complex me. There's just the simplest possible self. What might be the simplest possible self? Just a sense of consciousness. Just a sense of consciousness. No story, no personality, just an awareness. Just subject in the barest, most basic sense. Everything's faded and that's all that's left.

And with that, all that's left is a very, very simple object. That could be the realm of nothingness. It could be something in that territory—some very, very empty state in terms of object or what's being fabricated there as an object. Subject at its most basic level, we might say. Object at its most basic level, we might say.

And there's a third element that goes with these, that always goes with these. No subject, no object; no object, no subject. But they need a third element to stand together, to construct something: time. Time doesn't mean remembering the past or planning for after the retreat—completely beyond all that. It means just a sense of the present moment. Just a sense of a present moment.

Now implicit in a sense of a present moment—I would say implicit without any thinking—is a subtle sense of a future moment and a past moment. It goes with our sense of time. So this is the most basic tripod. Three legs propping each other up. They need each other. Generally speaking, there are always exceptions, but generally speaking, take away any one of these legs and the other two come tumbling down. The other two get unfabricated.

So this is the most basic perception. This is way down there at the low end of unfabricating. Here's the crucial point about conception and intention. I would say this barest subject, this most subtle subject, most unconstructed subject with an extremely unconstructed object and the barest sense of time—it still has pregnant within it conception and intention.

There is the sense of subject recognizing something as other than it. And subject, through saṅkāra, karmically is invested. None of this is thinking. There is an investment. This subject, this thinnest subject, is invested in some way or another with this object. I like it. I want more of it. This is not linguistic—"I like it, I want more of it." I want it to stay around. I want it to increase. I want it to decrease. I want it to go away. I want to keep it just as it is—some intention on the subject's part in relation to the object.

Do you understand? It's what subjects do. This is karma. This is saṅkāra.

This is the wheel of samsara at the most basic, basic level.

There's a conception of time—I'm not thinking about time. And there's a conception of an object—I'm not thinking about an object or a subject. But it's woven into the very perception. There's a conception of subject, object, and time. And woven into that, there's an intention, some intention or other to do with what happens in time, some investment on the subject's part to do with the object about what then happens in the next moment.

So implicit in a sense of a present moment, the bare sense of time, is implicit a sense of a next moment. And there's investment in what will happen in the next moment for this subject. So there's already clinging there. It's wrapped up in the most subtle intention and the most subtle conception. This is this most basic tripod. This is propping up samsara.

These three—coming back to that, coming back to the question on the note—they dependently co-arise. It's not like first there is a subject sort of sitting around, drumming fingers, waiting for an object and waiting for time. Or that there is time waiting for—which is also quite interesting if you know something about very recent developments in physics—but they arise together. We're even saying they arise together. We're really at the edge of what language and conception can express, because arising is something that happens in time. And now we're talking about the arising of time itself.

They arise together, they go together. Language—exactly at this point—this is the limit, I would say. This is the limit of conventional language in terms of how deep we can go with understanding the arising and passing of things and dependent arising.

They arise together. They are not separate. Subject, object, time. They're not three things. Nor are they one thing. Nor are they nothing. No things. Nor are they many things. Nor are they infinite things. Really. You could see them in all those ways. But really, they're not any of those things.

So typical avijjā, typical ignorance delusion believes in this conception. There is a subject, there are objects, and there is time. That basic conception is avijjā. Out of that basic conception comes inevitably these intentions in some way or another for the next moment in regard to this object, or I want a better object or whatever it is. Not talking about any thinking at all. It's so, so subtle. That's basic avijjā, propelling samsara, propelling the wheel of dependent origination at the most basic level.

In the conception, in this most basic conception, is the avijjā. Wrapped up with it—not even out of it, but wrapped up with it—is this stream of saṅkhārā intention. That's another intention as what fabricates. I'm invested, I'm clinging, I'm pushing, I'm pulling in the most, most subtle ways.

When we understand what's happening here, understand they're not three, understand they're not one, understand it's not nothing. When we understand how this arises through this conception and through the intention and the clinging. At the moment we understand that—or rather let's put it this way, when I am meditating and I bring that understanding and I use it as an insight way of looking, I take this: this is what's going on here. There's a conception of subject-object-time and it propels, it's wrapped up with, or wrapped up with it is this movement of intention, of clinging, very, very subtle.

When I understand that, and I plug that in as a way of looking, I understand what's going on, therefore these things are fabricated. These subject-object-time are fabricated. They're not unfabricated. Time is a fabrication. I understand how they arise together.

Then we could say, okay, at that moment our avijjā is much, much, much less. In that moment of employing that insight way of looking.

Does that make sense?

Looking at the foundation or the first link of dependent arising - avijja - we've just decreased it radically at that point. So we're not pumping into the wheel of dependent arising. We're not pumping the liquid into samsara. Samsara means "to flow" - sara, to flow into that flow. We're not pumping the liquid in because the avijja - that squeezy liquid box thingy - has got no liquid in it, or very, very little liquid in it.

And then our tripod collapses. Unfabricating. Total unfabrication. No time, no subject, no object, no present moment, no awareness in the usual sense of what we mean by awareness - or any big vastness of awareness or something like that.

So as I said, we're talking about something very, very subtle, actually very, very doable if I approach it in the right way. "Thus he trains himself." And that probably takes a while, but it's really, really possible.

The Buddha said - I'm paraphrasing; he probably said it much more elegantly - but it's something like: no matter how long your legs are and how long you walk for, you'll never reach the end of the world. No matter how long - even if you lived forever - you'd never reach the end of the world. But without reaching the end of the world, you won't know liberation. Without reaching the end of the world, you won't know liberation.

So he's talking about this - the end of the world. In other places he defines the world as basically the six senses, what appears in the six senses, including the mind. So you could say, philosophically speaking, all this has relevance as what we might call a phenomenological approach, a radical phenomenological approach in philosophical language.

And yet it's still the case that a person might go through all this business and open to the unfabricated as an experience, and yet not take it - or decide not to take it - as implying anything at all with regard to the world. It only implies something about the mind's relationship with the world and the world of experience.

So then they maybe conclude: I experienced the unfabricated, and therefore there's no rebirth, because I've severed my infatuation and my ties and my clinging with the world. There's no rebirth in the world. And from that kind of understanding, we do get a very - or it's possible to get a very - dualistic view: there's the unfabricated and there's the world. And not much more is understood about the world from that viewpoint. So one could view it that way.

One could also hear all this - and I think sometimes people do, or partially read about it - and view it as a kind of what we call in philosophy "mentalism." In other words, all this world is just... there is no materiality. Materiality is an illusion, and what's real is the mind, and the mind projects this world.

But we're going beyond that. There are lots of critiques of having that partial understanding. It's the mind, awareness, consciousness, and all the elements of the mind that make up the mind too - they are empty too. One can come to see that they are empty too. All of them - all the world and the mind and the elements of the mind - all this, they're like... Sariputta gives an analogy of two sheaves of corn or wheat or something. You know, like in a field after the farmers do their harvesting, they might prop two sheaves of wheat leaning on each other.

The whole thing - mind and world, the elements of the mind - they prop each other up. That's also partly what dependent co-arising means, like the tripod. They're not really separate things. They're empty of being really separate things. But they're not one thing.

What I've described here very briefly - kind of rushing through - what I've described here is not only beautiful as a practice, but profoundly liberating for people's lives. Maybe, let's say, most people. But we go back to the epistemology question. I'm still left with: well, how do I know I can trust this? What does this mean?

I'm not going into the epistemology thing right now, but for some people it's convincing enough. That's totally convincing and that does it for them. There will be people who don't like this approach for different reasons, or just would find, when they hear about it, they just don't find it convincing - this whole idea of less fabricating and exploring that meditative journey of less fabricating.

So there are other approaches to emptiness that are possible. And again, I've written about them in *Seeing That Frees*. They're what I call analytical meditations, or what are called analytical meditations. Very different from this business about insight ways of looking at fabrication. But through these analytical meditations, you can come to understand it's impossible for something to have inherent existence. It's just another way into emptiness.

Going back to something I said at the beginning: if a person says - again, fabrication, whether they use that word or not, whether I use that word or not - fabrication, what we mean by it, is an important concept.

Fabrication is an important concept. Seeing papañca as fabrication, and then seeing dukkha as fabrication, letting go of it, and then one is with the unfabricated. So papañca—in the common sense of the word, when the Buddha uses it, he means something much more subtle, I think. But anyway, we'll keep it at that.

So fabrication is an important concept because we see, for example, the difference between the papañca mind and the mindful mind or the mind of bare attention. But someone might say, "Fabrication is an important concept, but I'm not really interested in all this mystical, deep talk of the unfabricated. That's all irrelevant to life. What's that got to do with life? This business about the unfabricated—it's only for some people."

I would say, are we not then making an artificial distinction or drawing an arbitrary line between everyday life and the mystical? Because again, as I said at the beginning, why? Why have I, why have you, why has a person drawn the line about what is fabricated where they have drawn it? Why there? First of all, where exactly have you drawn it? And why there?

The principle of fabrication—the principle of clinging, the principle of the relationship between clinging and fading—it's the same and it's one spectrum. As I said, my mom can understand. There's papañca. I have to explain to her a bit what clinging

means at that gross level. And she understands, "Oh yeah, when I just calm down a bit and relax a little bit, then it all fades." Basically, it's the same principle. There was the fabrication. Then I let go of the clinging and the fabrication—the papañca—faded. It's the same principle.

It's one spectrum all the way from that to what we've been talking about this evening. It's one spectrum. There's one principle, actually a really simple principle running all the way through. It's only perhaps that preconceived, unquestioned ontological assumptions—assumptions of views about beliefs about what is real—are somehow dragged in to what's actually one spectrum, what's actually a coherent system. And then these preconceived assumptions about reality just make a division in that spectrum. And I end up dividing the spectrum and actually making it a bit incoherent.

Okay, last thing. Again, someone might say—and we talked about this yesterday a little bit with the realm of neither-perception-nor-non-perception—"What's this totally transcendent, unfabricated got to do with me? What's it got to do with life? What's it got to do with my life? It's so transcendent, so removed."

You know, life is contact. Life is experiences. Remember, that's what perceptions mean. Life is the senses and what comes to us in the senses. Life is emotions, it's heart, it's story, it's self. And even if it's not self, it's at least the flow of the aggregates. That's life. What's this got to do with life? What's it got to do with me? Why should I be interested in this?

Already in the fourth jhana we talked about the quietening of emotions, and that's part of life. In the jhanas we're getting used to this unfabricating. Again, it's one way of understanding what's going on. It's probably the most helpful way of understanding what's going on in the jhanas. They're not—for the hundredth time on this retreat—they're not states of deeper concentration and ability to keep your mind unwavering on one object.

So already in the fourth jhana there's a quietening of what we might view as life, and there's hopefully a kind of opening to the beauty of this which is sort of halfway or a lot less like life than we think, than we're used to thinking. So what's it got to do with me?

Again, we talked about this before, it may be that a dualistic understanding and a dualistic sense of the world and the sense of things comes out of all this. There is the unfabricated, this wondrous mystical release and opening and something that is completely beyond conception, completely beyond perception. There is the unfabricated and there's the world of the fabricated. And they're really different. They have no con-

nection. And this is clearly better than that. And I don't want to be reborn. I just want to, whatever the word is, dissolve, unbind. Nirvana means unbind—that's one of the etymologies. Vana, like a vine, like you wrap things in vines. Nirvana, I just want to unbind in that, not be reborn.

So it could lead to a kind of dualistic understanding. Absolutely. Could, doesn't have to.

Sometimes what happens for a person opens to this kind of experience and then it's as if that unfabricated then can be, at least at times, a sense of it shining through the world of experience, the world of matter, the world of phenomenal reality. The light of the unfabricated shines through. The song of the unfabricated blows through. It casts a light on this world. It casts its light on this world. Or it is the light behind and through the phenomenal world. Or it gives a kind of space and context to this world and the comings and goings and the ups and downs of this world. So that's much less dualistic.

We have to be careful though because remember we talked about the after effects of perception on perception. By now it should be clear there are many possibilities for what could be perceived as shining through. It could be the joy of the second jhana as some people have reported very beautifully. That can shine through or the third jhana or the realm of this or that. So there is this possibility, I think, of a sense of the unfabricated shining through, but we have to be careful in our discernment. Is it the unfabricated or is it something else?

But a third possibility is again what I've touched on before and I think we talked about it yesterday. Again it's like through all this I go further. I go further than the unfabricated. I don't stop there. Wondrous as that is. And I go further in my understanding of emptiness and dependent arising. And I realize through that, I sense through that in my being, in the fibers of my being, in my consciousness, I sense through that—again we run out of language, whatever the words might be—for something, for participation so profound that it's beyond the word participation. For an intimacy and an involvement so intimate and involved and close and deep, that it's beyond what we usually mean by words like intimacy and involvement. Participation, intimacy, involvement in the mystery of things, in the mystery and the magic of appearances.

And then there's sacredness everywhere. There's holiness everywhere. There's this beauty of emptiness everywhere without any duality.

So people take this different ways, but there are possibilities here, different possibilities.

Let's have some quiet together.

CHAPTER 223

Playing in the In-Betweens

Rob Burbea · 1h04

In this supplementary teaching from the Practising the Jhānas series, Rob Burbea addresses technical questions and methods for working in jhānic 'grey areas' - those transitional states between clear absorption and ordinary consciousness. He explores responsive practice rhythms, the crucial relationship between posture and citta quality, and specific techniques for working with obstacles in different jhānas. Key topics include spreading the nimitta when pain is present, stabilizing jhānas by moving between adjacent states, working with secondary nimittas like relief and release, and understanding the breath's role across jhānic levels. Burbea emphasizes the importance of tuning practice schedules responsively rather than following rigid patterns, and discusses how this principle applies to both samādhi and insight ways of looking. The teaching concludes with profound reflections on jhānas as dimensional resources for human flourishing, exploring how regular immersion in these states opens our sense of what human beings are capable of. A detailed exploration of soul-making approaches to energy body practice illustrates how intention shapes our relationship to meditative experiences, highlighting the difference between practicing from eros versus aversion.

Hi everyone. I am recording this from home. I got home and realized there were a few questions that I hadn't had time to respond to that I think would be helpful for people at later points in their practice. There were also a few other technical instructions that I think would be helpful for most people at some point as they go forward with jhana practice, along with a couple of general things. Most of what I want to go into falls into the category of working in jhanic grey areas.

As I mentioned, sometimes when the jhana opens for the first few experiences, it's very intense, very clear, seemingly effortless. One is very much in the jhana and might feel like there's nothing to do, nothing to improve on even. As one gains more experience in and out of that jhana and gets more familiar with that particular jhanic territory—whichever it is, whatever jhana we're talking about—then there do appear times where it becomes apparent in one's practice that sometimes it's very clear, very pure, a pure jhanic experience.

Other times we're sort of in the jhanic territory, but not quite—sort of para-jhanic territory, or kind of half in, half out, or on the edge. As I mentioned, there's mostly in, but some very subtle hindrances yapping quietly at the borders of consciousness, or

there's an area of the body that won't clear up. It falls into that kind of territory—the grey area, working in the grey areas or transitional states. Not everything, but a lot of things.

Before that, though, there are a couple of general things, and then something about soul-making and jhana. So let's see how we do.

The first general thing is, again, to make clear that I would say it's more optimal for the way we're practicing jhanas to not fall into a sort of strict, unbroken rhythm of formal practice: sit-walk, sit-walk, sit-walk—45 minutes, 45 minutes, one hour, one hour, however it's divided up. Of course, sometimes that will feel like it's the most helpful rhythm at that time, but the key thing here is, does it feel like it is? Again, am I listening? Am I being responsive? Am I being attentive? Am I tuning my practice rhythm at the moment—right now, not for this retreat, but right now, for this morning, or this afternoon, or this evening? Am I tuning it to what feels best, what feels like it's actually most fertile?

Sometimes if you sit and the jhana's coming and it all feels really good, you can go way beyond one hour—way, way, way beyond. Just sit in an unlimited way. You run out of batteries, try again. Try to get the jhana again without getting up, maybe two or three times. Sit as long as you can—not with any forcing, but just sit as long as it works, as long as it feels good. The same applies to walking practice and standing practice, unless for some reason you only have 20 minutes or 40 minutes or whatever it is, and you decide to just go 40 minutes to walk now. That's all fine.

Basically there needs to be this responsive attunement of the rhythms of our practice. We're really finding out, feeling into, getting a sense for and discovering what's the most helpful right now, and breaking out of a kind of rigid, tight, predefined, pre-set mold of a rhythm for practice and different postures. This is also part of what I mentioned because the day needs to breathe and there needs to be space for appreciation and beauty and a little bit of exercise and open-heartedness.

I'm reiterating that, but I also want to say that when some of you start exploring insight ways of looking as a huge stream of investigation in your practice, and when that opens up, I would say the same principle applies there. You can have times where it's sit, walk, sit, walk—very rigid and predefined. That's absolutely fine. But you also really want times where it's this more fluid, attentive, open scheduling that's much more responsive.

Again there, in the way that I would, or the way I most commonly teach insight practice—which is through different insight ways of looking, learning them, employing them, seeing what happens with them—we still want the day to breathe. We still want space in the heart and the soul for appreciation and beauty and to be touched and for open-heartedness. We also need space to notice the after-effects on perception. Whether we're doing jhanic practice as it goes deeper and they become more common—and we know to look for them and look out for them very gently without pressure—or insight ways of looking practice, there are again very potentially powerful, very noticeable after effects on perception there as well.

But there's another reason when we come to insight ways of looking, or practicing insight ways of looking. Partly the way that process works in this way of teaching insight meditation is not through the continuity, through the accumulation of a sort of power of mindfulness through just being completely continuous with the mindfulness. So sit, walk, sit, walk, unbroken, go to lunch, continue the mindfulness—it's a great way of practice. A certain intensity and this continuity of mindfulness will be developed hopefully that way, and through that continuity of mindfulness, it can illuminate certain things. So that's great.

An alternative approach emerges when we deliberately practice different insight ways of looking. Here I actually need the comparison. I need to practice this particular insight way of looking and then consciously let it go, comparing the difference in perception when I release it. Now I'm simply back to ordinary consciousness—not particularly trying to maintain any special awareness. Of course, there's still a way of looking because there's always a way of looking, but I'm not deliberately employing this or that specific way of looking.

It's through this comparison that I learn about dependent arising. I'm not trying to accumulate so much mindfulness that I then perceive "the truth"—because there isn't one truth. Instead, I practice a way of looking, then I let go of practicing that way of looking. When I practice the way of looking, I notice what it does to perception, notice the sense of things. When I stop practicing, I notice there's a different sense of things.

In this approach, we actually need a looser, rather less continuous schedule of practice. The intention can be continuous for long periods—that's absolutely fine—but there does need to be some kind of coming out of the insight way of looking, perhaps moving into a more normal way without deliberate intention, so that we can see through comparison the effect of the insight way of looking.

It's not that practice always has to be like that, but sometimes that's part of it too. There's less emphasis on continuity. When I practice this insight way of looking, I should see within ten minutes, twenty minutes, an hour—whatever it is—the obvious effects on perception.

The second general point concerns posture. As I mentioned on the retreat, eventually you can access jhāna and remain in jhāna in almost any posture. Posture becomes very unimportant. But before that time, before the practice has really ripened to that stage, posture is actually very important, particularly at the beginning.

I encouraged this in some of the early guided meditations—really sensing into the poise and balance in posture. See if you can develop a feel for, a sense of, the beauty in posture: the beauty, dignity, and nobility that posture reflects. Notice the balance between the citta qualities that posture manifests, expresses, and reflects—between openness, relaxation, and softness on one hand, and brightness, alertness, poise, and intention on the other.

There's also the sense of actual balance in posture and the way that when the mind encompasses the whole body and includes the whole body space in a very alert, open, receptive, sensitive way, the body and posture are very subtly affected. Subtle changes in posture can affect our ability to maintain that kind of pervasive energy body awareness. This is really, really important.

If you're not familiar with this, it's really worth taking time to explore, as I said at the beginning of the retreat. I remember Kirsten showing me a picture of her very young nieces—three or four of them, I think—meditating or trying to meditate. They were very young, between two and ten years old.

One of them, quite a young one, was very interesting. You could tell from the photograph that her awareness was spread throughout her body. They were all sitting cross-legged, copying Kirsten with their eyes shut. But the awareness was spread through the whole body. You could feel from the photograph the poise in posture, and also in the attention, in the awareness. You could feel the quality of attention and how it pervaded her whole body. It was very alive and present. Quite remarkable.

Posture and citta quality go very much together at first. It's really worth exploring this if you're not familiar with it.

I remember one of my first teachers in an interview many years ago. I was called in for an interview—I think I was one of the first people to be called. I thought, "Oh, why am I first?" I was a teenager, and he said, "You're very out of contact with the earth," or

something like that—"very out of contact with the ground." I had no idea what he was talking about, but it struck me as a serious problem. It sounded like a very serious ailment.

He had me sit and played with my posture a little. I was not really in contact with my body at all back then—had no training in that. I was probably quite disconnected, as most teenagers in that generation were, disconnected from my body. At a certain point, he was gently moving my shoulders and torso, and then he simply said, "There. There."

And really, it wasn't so much a visible kind of yoga-looking posture that he was responding to. He was responding to, he was feeling the way my posture helped my mind inhabit the whole body, the whole body space in a very natural and open and upright and alert way. And I think that's what he was picking up on. Of course, to me, it just seemed like some kind of supernatural powers at the time.

Now that I'm much more used to all this and teaching, and energy body is very much what I emphasize, I can easily understand how it's possible to have that kind of awareness with another person, how their mind and body are right now, and how their energy body awareness is, and how the posture is perhaps allowing, supporting, or limiting certain possibilities psychically, certain possibilities for the citta, or certain possibilities in relationship.

I remember working with someone in an interview, and they were in a very difficult space in their heart and mind and soul. I was asking them to come into presence, to be in relationship with me with an open heart and the sort of holding there, and encouraging them to open to their body experience as well. But I could tell that there was just something very, very subtle in how they were sitting and holding their posture. It didn't look like anything obvious—certainly nothing like being hunched over or contracted or some kind of obviously defensive posture. It was extremely subtle. But that was enough to prevent her from coming into a different relationship with herself and also from coming into a different relationship with me.

We played with that just a little bit, and it allowed the relational space, both with herself and with myself, to open up to possibilities that were just not available two minutes beforehand, five minutes beforehand. She had no idea.

So the mind, the citta, affects the body and the posture, and the posture affects the citta. And this goes very, very subtle and deep until it begins to be—states of openness and states of jhana, states of samadhi and all that become much more familiar and they're less dependent on the posture being like this or like that to enable them. But maybe for quite a while for some people it is quite posture dependent. So it's really

worth taking the time to play with posture, even in what might seem like microscopically subtle ways. That was part of what I was trying to encourage at the beginning of the retreat.

Okay, so let's run through a few more specific technical things. As I said, most of these are relative to things kind of going well but hitting some tricky spots where it's just not quite coalescing or coming together.

We spoke about how sometimes there can be pain or discomfort in the body, or a sense of contraction or holding or tightness somewhere in the energy body, the physical body. And we spoke about the possibility of actually taking that difficult spot—for example, if you're doing metta practice as your base practice—actually imagining the center of the metta there. The metta is radiating from that very difficulty. Or imagining the breath coming in and out there, or the energy, that being the center of the energy body and the center of the breath energy, if you like, or the center of the light, the white luminosity or golden white luminosity that might pervade the energy body. Just almost exactly where you'd least expect it, imagining that to be the center of what you're trying to encourage. And sometimes it can turn out, just as we'd least expect, counterintuitively to be the loveliest place.

But what I want to add now is that if the mind is fuzzy or foggy or woolly, the mind, the head, and if you're tired, a similar thing can work. Imagine light there in the head. The head feels dull or there's that kind of tiredness behind the eyes or just the kind of wooliness there. Imagine the light centered there if you're working with light as part of the energy body awareness. Imagine the breath energy coming in and out there or coming in or out through the top of the head, through the sides, the front, the back, whatever it is, or radiating, expanding out from that very wooliness.

So just the same principle, but applied to qualities of the citta. Same principle as we suggested with regard to bodily discomforts or blocks, we can apply to discomforts or blocks in the citta. And often they do feel in the head, so we just imagine them in the head.

Some of these are quite basic. Some will apply to working in the territory of any jhana. Some apply to later jhanas, and I'll go into that specific jhana. Some of them apply to working outside of a jhana, before even entering jhanic territory, or as I said, they might apply when the jhana's kind of going okay, but there's a little bit that's not kind of brought into the fold of the jhana, it hasn't spread there. So some of these things will apply at any level.

And we just mentioned pain, so again, we mentioned on the retreat, there might be—it could be any jhana, say second or first or whatever. The jhanic nimitta is there. I'm in the territory of the jhana, but it's not quite suffusing the whole body. And indeed, there's some place in the body where there's pain or discomfort. So it's in the jhanic territory, the nimitta has arisen, but it's not fully suffused and I'm not fully absorbed. Well, it's not always best to hurry to spread or suffuse the nimitta. That may be exactly the right thing, but sometimes just pause a little bit because we've got a few options.

Sometimes, you might find that the breath becomes very, very faint and light, almost like it's dissolving or barely perceptible. And this can actually be quite lovely and beautiful. But sometimes a person thinks, "Oh, I need to be really careful here. I need to manage this." There might be a little bit of fear arising: "What if I stop breathing?" or "What if something goes wrong?" This kind of worry or management mode can actually pull you out of the jhāna.

So if you notice this happening—if the breath is becoming very faint and there's some concern about it—often the best approach is simply to trust. Trust the body. Trust the process. The body knows how to breathe. Even when the breath becomes incredibly subtle and light, even when it feels like it might disappear completely, just let it be. Don't try to manage it or control it.

Sometimes people think they need to take a conscious breath or check that they're still breathing. But this kind of intervention, this moving into management mode, often disrupts the beautiful stillness that's emerging. So instead, just relax into that faintness of breath. Let it be as subtle as it wants to be. Trust that the body will take care of what it needs to take care of.

This principle of trust extends more broadly in jhāna practice. When we enter these deeper states, there's often a natural letting go that happens—a release of our usual need to control and manage our experience. The more we can surrender into this, the more we can trust the organic wisdom of the process, the deeper and more stable our jhānic experiences tend to become.

Another aspect particular to working with the third jhāna relates to the quality of contentment and equanimity that characterizes this state. Sometimes practitioners find that while they can enter the third jhāna, it doesn't feel as dramatically different from the second jhāna as they might expect. The happiness is still there, but it's quieter, more subtle. There might be a sense of, "Is this really different? Am I actually in the third jhāna?"

This is quite normal. The transitions between jhānas aren't always marked by dramatic shifts. Sometimes they're quite gentle and gradual. The key is to tune into the particular flavor of each state. In the third jhāna, there's often a sense of deep satisfaction, a profound okayness with things as they are. The body feels suffused with a gentle, steady pleasure that's less effervescent than the pīti of the first and second jhānas, but perhaps more deeply nourishing.

If you're working to develop familiarity with the third jhāna and you're not sure whether you're really there or still in the second, you can experiment with intentionally bringing back some pīti, some of that more bubbly, energetic happiness. If you can easily toggle back to that more energetic quality, then return to the quieter contentment, you're probably working skillfully with the distinction between these states.

In all the piti and sukha of earlier jhanas, it might be that we haven't noticed the breath. We've let the breath go, allowing the piti and sukha to become the primary nimittas—which is a completely fine way of working, as we've emphasized. But sometimes, not only does the breath organically become more sensible because there's greater calmness, it may actually help the third jhana to bring attention back to the breath.

At this point, the breath should be very, very subtle and delicate. As we said, the very movement of the breath is peacefulness. The very movement of that subtle, delicate, gentle breath is peacefulness itself—like those strands of seaweed in the lagoon, just gently swaying. It's so subtle, they're moving peacefully. There's movement, movement of the breath, but the very movement is peacefulness. Sometimes deliberately returning to find the breath again—whether it emerges organically as we begin to notice and include it, or we consciously seek it—can help deepen and consolidate the third jhana when needed.

This brings us to a more general point, particularly as we enter the deeper jhanas where we encounter secondary nimittas. For instance, the secondary nimittas of release and relief are important ingredients of the jhanic mix. Any experienced jhana meditator will notice these qualities and should notice them. While they're not primary nimittas, sometimes attending to them can be skillful. When working in a jhana that's not quite coming together—when we're definitely in the territory but it's not quite coalescing or fully deepening as we know is possible—we can very gently and delicately, without pressure, look for these secondary nimittas of relief and release.

By noticing them and focusing on them briefly, even for just a few moments, we can allow the whole jhana to deepen or consolidate. This represents a very skillful, subtle movement of attention. We're working with what will help, almost taking that relief and release—or whatever the secondary nimitta is—and using it as part of the glue, part of the stitching to help cohere the jhanic experience.

For the fourth jhana specifically, we've discussed how there's often a brightness—white golden light—that's quite central. The stillness is the light, the light is the stillness. Sometimes this manifests as a vertical column of bright stillness through the center of the body space. Sometimes it feels all around you, sometimes it's not quite all around yet. You can imagine this vertical column of bright white light that is the stillness, the stillness that is the light, rising through the center of the energy body space.

One can begin to allow or even encourage that light to melt outwards from that central vertical column. In doing so, it dissolves the body into it, dissolves the body with it. This can be tremendously helpful at times.

Sometimes with the fourth jhana, particularly when that leaning forward occurs—that intensity of focus on conceiving the stillness and nimitta in front of us—it's helpful to feel that you, or the body, the energy body, is falling backwards into a jhanic realm. You conceive it as being behind you, but in addition to just conceiving it there, you actually fall back into it. This represents a different mode of attention—falling backwards versus probing forward or trying to penetrate something in front. It's different too from the vertical column that we expand outwards. These various approaches offer different modes of attention, different conceptions of the directionality of attention and the relationship between body, jhana, and nimitta.

Returning to the Buddha's description of the fourth jhana, what remains is nothing but this pure, bright awareness—wrapped in this cloth of pure, bright awareness. This connects to our earlier discussion about mixing cooking ingredients to move between jhanas. If I can turn up the sense of presence in the fourth jhana—and this will take me toward the sixth jhana, infinite consciousness, because presence is consciousness and consciousness is presence—I begin to open that up. It's already there, already pregnant with it, already implicit in the fourth jhana.

Another way to understand this is through those cooking ingredients: I mix a bit of this, add more of that ingredient to this jhana, and it takes me to another jhana. We're adding more presence to the fourth jhana, but how? By tuning to what's already there.

So here it's different than cooking. The tuning to the sense of presence—when I notice it, when I tune to it, it amplifies it. So effectively I'm adding more of that particular ingredient into my cooking pot, and the fourth jhana will then change into the sixth jhana. I've turned up the sense of presence just by tuning to it and amplifying it. The tuning to it does amplify, and that turns up, and it goes to the sixth jhana.

Of course, there should be a very strong sense of presence in the fourth jhana. The mind is almost spellbound, but still, we can increase things by tuning to them, increase certain factors within the jhana, and that can sometimes just help that jhana consolidate. As I said, it's very common for a fourth jhana with a lot of experience to get just a little bit dull. So just turn up that sense of presence. But if I really then tune into the sense of presence and hone in on that, I'm amplifying it. And that can take me to the sixth jhana.

One thing that I mentioned—the Buddha says, technically the breath stops breathing. In the fourth jhana, whatever we think about the so-called biological reality of that, that will be the meditator's experience. It's hard to locate a sense of breath in the fourth jhana. It feels as if the body has stopped breathing.

But be careful. Don't try to assess, "Is this the fourth jhana?" by keeping on checking whether your breath has stopped. That's not the right way. It's not going to be helpful. Just as checking whether thought has stopped is not going to be a helpful way of checking whether you're in the second jhana. Doing that kind of thing—checking "Has my breath stopped? No, it hasn't stopped yet"—is, in a way, reinforcing that pattern I talked about, this micro-pattern in our psychology, micro-pattern in the citta, the sankhāras of the mind, to just give attention to the negative, to look for what's not quite right, what's not quite measuring up.

Rather, just get into the stillness. The stillness is there. "Am I in the fourth jhana yet?" Just get into the stillness. Really enjoy it. Really be with it with a very alive attention. Really see if you can penetrate into that stillness. See if you can dissolve into that stillness. See if that stillness can dissolve into you. The mind, the body dissolving into the stillness. The stillness dissolving into and dissolving the mind and body. That's what we need to do, and it will mature into the fourth jhana, if there's that alive attention, and that kind of right attention with it, rather than just keep checking whether the breath has stopped.

Someone wrote me a note, actually, about breath. This person was obviously working around the territory of the second jhana, I'm guessing from the note. "It's a quick and possibly silly question. Does it matter if the breathing is through the nose or the mouth? A combination of a cold plus an enormous grin indicates probably the second

jhana. Open-mouthed means I sometimes breathe through the mouth." So she had a cold, and there was this enormous grin, and so she finds herself breathing through the mouth. But then she says, "And sometimes it feels like it dissipates the strength of pīti or sukha." Breathing through the mouth actually dissipated the pīti or the sukha.

So I would say if it's from the grin, you don't have to stop your grin. Grinning is good and fine. But probably it's the case that you can just very minutely move the position of your tongue against your teeth. And that will somehow allow you to keep grinning without the mouth actually being open, and then you can breathe through your nose, so that we can have a full grin. I have a hunch—pretty sure if the tongue is in a certain position, we should be able to breathe through the nose.

Because it may well be that when we breathe through the mouth, the breath isn't allowed to become more subtle. So what the Buddha calls the bodily formations, the breath, are not allowed to become more subtle. And with that the citta is kind of—it's harder for the citta to become more subtle. If we're trying to be in jhana, it's characterized by refinement of body energy vibration and the refinement and subtlety of the citta.

You have to be present for jhāna. So if we're getting in the way by breathing through the mouth, and that keeps the breath unsubtle, then it can be a problem.

So if it's possible—if it's not because of a cold, if it's just because of a grin—there are probably things one can do with the tongue to start with. This allows breathing through the nose, and then maybe, if one is ready anyway, it goes beyond the second jhāna. Continue with the nose breath, and the whole thing gets more subtle.

If it's a cold, or a bad cold, well, you'll probably just have to breathe through the mouth and put up with it for a while. However, as the citta gets more subtle—if it can, and it's still, you know, it's not completely prevented by breathing through the mouth at all. It's not complete; that won't completely block things. You should find, as the citta gets more subtle, the breath will get more subtle.

And then even with a heavy cold—so this might even take, you know, going, avoiding the breath at first, going via what you remember of energy body vibrations of different states, of different jhanic states, or just remembering a jhāna—but if you get in the territory where the citta is subtle, then the breath will become subtle.

Again, body affects mind, breath affects mind, mind affects body and breath. So if the citta can be kind of just helped to become more subtle, even if we have a bad cold and we're breathing through the mouth, the breath will become more subtle. And because the breath is more subtle, actually less air is being moved. And with less air being

moved, you might find actually that even with a relatively blocked nose, a quiet blocked nose, you can actually still breathe through the nose, because we're not actually moving that much air, and the little amount of air can find its way through the blocked nose.

But it's not that we're trying to make that happen. It's just that we're helping the citta to become, or allowing the citta to become more subtle. Naturally that allows the breath to become more subtle, and effortlessly we will probably find that breathing through the nose, or nose breathing is happening, without us trying to manipulate that physically.

Okay, a couple of things, just to finish—two more things.

One is—so we talked last night about insight ways of looking that unfabricate and that potentially move through the jhanic stages in their process of unfabricating. However, I don't think in that practice the primary point or the primary aim is to necessarily learn a degree of skill that controls an insight way of looking to the degree that I can stop the elevator exactly where I want, at an exact jhāna. That's a, you know, that's a good skill. But it's not the most important thing there.

What's much more important—this is important to understand—what's much more important is that in that process of playing with insight ways of looking, we understand the principle of lessening fabrication. We understand the principle of unfabricating to whatever degree. Through this insight way of looking, there's less clinging. And because there's less clinging, there's more letting go, which is just saying the same thing. And because of that, because of dependent arising, there's less fabrication. And so the experience opens up, refines out in these different ways.

So understanding that principle of lessening fabrication through insight ways of looking is really, really important. Understanding how to fabricate less. And thirdly, understanding what exactly is involved in that subtle clinging.

So I use this word clinging in a very stretchy way. It means all the way from the most gross to the most subtle aspects of the relationship of the citta with phenomenal experience that we wouldn't usually think of as clinging. Really, really subtle. So that in the end, even avidyā—in the Mahāyāna, even avijjā, even ignorance—is a kind of clinging. Even believing, looking at something and the unconscious belief that it inherently exists, which is what most human beings do most of the time, most of their lives, with most of phenomenal experience. Just that unconscious, unnoticed, very common belief and assumption in the inherent existence of whatever is in perception and consciousness at any time. We could call that avijjā, but in the Mahāyāna they also call it clinging. It's a very subtle level of clinging, and I use clinging in that sense too.

So understanding the principle of lessening fabrication through insight ways of looking. Secondly, how do I fabricate less? How are we actually using these insight ways of looking and getting familiar with them and developing the art and skill of them? And thirdly, what exactly is going on here? What exactly is involved in subtle clinging? What subtle clinging is being let go of here? And what avijjā is being let go of here?

So avijjā also has a whole range of aspects, but also levels to it, from very, very gross—of course, complete, deluded thinking, etc.—to very, very subtle, and clinging as well. So what exactly is involved in subtle clinging, subtle avijjā? That's what we're talking about.

And lastly, the fourth thing, to understand the implications of all that, the implications of the way less clinging, less avijjā fabricates—results in less fabrication right then in the moment, in the moment of looking, in the moment of relating, a way of looking.

In other words, understanding dependent arising and emptiness as we touched on to some extent in the retreat.

So all that—those understandings, those four understandings—are much more the point than being able to control and manipulate the jhanas, thinking "I'll be able to go exactly to this jhana and not overstep it to the next jhana" when I unfabricate through a certain insight way of looking. As always, the insight is more important than the somatic experience.

Now, I want to read you a fairly long note from someone on retreat. This is quite important, and for those of you familiar with soul-making, it's very important. For those who are not yet familiar with soul-making dharma but who may one day be, it may well be crucial. It's a bit involved and lengthy, but I feel it's really essential. It also expands our sense of how we might approach jhana practice, especially when we have some soul-making dharma and practice background.

This person wrote: "This has been a dukkha-ful retreat for me—lots of dukkha, so much pain and struggle around desire and sustaining intention and effort." These were precisely the kinds of challenges we were addressing and trying to open up and inquire into several times during the retreat.

She continues: "Your teaching on desire and soul-making the last few nights finally prompted me to try to go into the dukkha last night, to hold and sense it with soul, and to see what images of the path and self on the path might arise. There were several beautiful and meaningful images that came from sensing the dukkha like this, and it felt like they began to clarify what I want from practice, and to give non-pathologizing place to some long-standing and painful patterns in my life. I won't go into this now."

"What I want to say is that later on last night, there was a lot of frustration around, and I felt some confidence from the above-mentioned experience about going in through the dukkha. So as skillfully as possible, I let the frustration rip, naming all the smallnesses and solidities in myself that I'm utterly sick of, tuning to the power rather than the poison of this emotion or energy." We talked about this as well during the retreat. "I didn't sense self-judgment in it, just clarity and fire." This is really important.

"Out of this, a sense of space opened. And in that space, as I was breathing, I became aware of a very subtle sense of the energy body breathing with me. This was the language that came, and it had soul resonances. My sense of the energy body was that they were creatively and definitely other than me." Rather than "I am the energy body" or "it's part of me," the sense was that they were creatively and definitely other. In soul-making practice, we sometimes speak of this as twoness.

"They were taking up a space somewhat larger than my physical body, though overlapping with it, and I had a strong sense of their autonomy and intelligence. I've not really worked with energy body as image, rather than as the terrain in which image and sensitivity to image arise. But I've heard you speak to this possibility, so I really tried to lean into it, using the nodes of the lattice to tune and sense."

"What opened was a gorgeous sense of twoness with the energy body, and a sense that they were taking me under their wing, teaching me how to be in right relationship with them. I would say that my relationship with piti on this retreat and in general has been pretty dysfunctional—tight with self and grasping and aversion. When piti arose in this experience with the energy body last night, though, it felt like they were giving it to me. They were saying 'Here, try feeling this,' and holding it for me while I worked and played, taking the pressure off and coaching me to try different things."

"I found I could stay with intensities and subtleties I hadn't been able to stay with before, because now they were being given to me as gift by this beautiful, unfathomable other. It was freeing and energizing and humbling. So I'd be interested to hear any thoughts you have, and specifically around allowing or inviting a sense of imaginal other into the base practice."

"In some ways what unfolded wasn't all that different from the energy-body-based practices you outlined on this retreat, but there was a strong sense of being in tuneness with mysterious otherness that ignited and aligned my desire, intention and effort, where they've been quite confused or limp through much of this retreat. I still feel very far from jhana, but I feel like I've begun to see the possibility of writing something in relation to why and how I practice."

She added a postscript: "Actually, a couple more thoughts around intention. My intention in working with frustration was for soul-making rather than samadhi. It was a surprise to me when the piti arose. And even when it did, I'd say the intention continued to be predominantly for soul-making, for the beauty of that dimensional relationship with the energy body. In subsequent sittings, with the intention for samadhi, I've tried to invite that imaginal sense of the energy body, but they haven't come. So perhaps it's that this soulful experience with the energy body now becomes part of the fantasy operating in the background of samadhi practice"—this was one of the options I had mentioned, where we work with an image and then it goes down into the background as a fantasy to help support things—"or I can choose to pick it up more intentionally in soul-making practice?"

I wrote a quick note back suggesting she choose the second option: to pick it up more intentionally as soul-making practice with the intention for soul-making, not for samadhi. Something had happened here for this practitioner...

So here for good reason, some difficulty, some knots had developed over time around intention and desire and goal—those themes we had been dwelling on and returning to several times in the retreat. There was so much importance, so much need to give careful attention to these questions, to inquire into them, to find right relationship with desire, intention, goal, aim, direction. A kind of long-standing history of dukkha and entanglement and difficulty existed there.

So actually, my sense was that here, much more helpfully, she should stay with the soul-making. Look, something extremely important and extremely beautiful had just happened—a real gift, a real grace that she could feel. Something that was perhaps the beginning of a much more profound and long-lasting healing.

If she thought she was on a jhana retreat, wanting to catch up with the others or whatever it might be, and rushed too quickly back to the samadhi intention, something wouldn't be allowed to ripen. To me, it sounded like it needed longer in that soul-making intention. That's what had opened things up. It was delivering something beautiful—the piti and the gorgeousness and so forth. Something was being healed. Something was also being ensouled: the dukkha was being ensouled, the energy body was being ensouled. Lots of things were happening that were really profoundly important, maybe more important than whether she attained such-and-such jhana right now, or even in the next month.

So that was my brief encouragement back to her. I really think that's important. I got a short response saying, "Thank you, wonderful, I'm so ready to put down the intention for samadhi." I don't know if I was hearing it right, but I was a little concerned getting that note.

There's a difference in making a choice. We've talked about how intention is really the primary thing that drives this or that practice, whether we're navigating a fork in the road between insight ways of looking and samadhi, or soul-making and samadhi, or whatever it is. The intention is really important for a number of reasons.

But there's a difference between an intention coming out of aversion and fed-upness, and an intention coming out of love and desire and a sense of grace and wanting something. Wanting soul-making is different than just really not wanting to be anymore with a certain intention for samadhi.

I didn't get a chance to find out or respond since it was right at the end of the retreat, but what I want to say right now is: be careful about these kinds of choices. Where there's been a habit of aversion or making choices out of aversion, or getting so fed up with a certain situation that we feel a lot of aversion and frustration, then the intention is coming out of that. An intention coming from aversion will have a different effect than an intention coming out of love for something, or eros for something, or responding to an invitation of an erotic-imaginal beloved other.

This is really, really important. I would guess that they will unfold differently. One could say, "Well, it's the same move—I'm choosing the soul-making intention over the samadhi intention"—but the dominant intention is slightly different. One is eros, and one is aversion. That probably will make a difference. I don't know if it was the case with this person, but the point bears making generally, because it applies very widely.

This is all part of getting wise to desire and eros and this whole territory. These meta questions are so important—how we respond to them, how we hold them, and how we choose in relationship to them.

So that's all I wanted to add as a sort of postscript to the whole retreat. I hope some of that has been helpful or will be helpful at some point.

Actually, one last thing I forgot. Someone was asking about resources, and I had mentioned from the beginning of the retreat and emphasized the ability of jhanas—our practice of jhanas—to really form and open up for us a profound resource of well-being in our life, stressing their potential function for us as deep resources.

So just to elaborate on this a little bit and draw out some of the other things I've been saying, to make something clear here that this person is asking: if one only experiences a jhana once or twice or a few times, it might be that for some period after those jhanic experiences, if they're strong, there is a relatively short-lived sense of resource, of happiness, of well-being, of energy. The kind of unshakability that might come with that, even from just feeling so happy.

But the danger, as I think of it—

The danger, as I've alluded to already on the retreat, is that with only experiencing jhāna a few times, it eventually fades and disappears. It may then become, through memory, an object of attachment and duality—comparing what we experience now with those jhānic experiences. Rather than providing anything as a resource, this actually fosters suffering through the duality and attachment to memory.

Much more significant is when we're able to frequently practice and experience jhānic states—perhaps daily or a couple of times a day, whatever our busy lives allow. Maybe not even every day, but regularly enough that it functions as a more constant source, like a well that isn't going dry or a spring. There's a sense of replenishment it brings, of rejuvenation, of energy being restored.

This deep emotional well-being—of different flavors and kinds depending on what jhāna we're experiencing—allows us to stay steady and meet difficulties. It supports us in sustaining our creative projects, our work, even when there are challenges. It helps us maintain our service work, activism, or whatever we're engaged in through the ups and downs, through the knocks, through the slog. Sometimes this might be work that's not well paid financially, where we receive no recognition or encouragement, where no one else seems to notice. But this regular dipping in, drinking from these wells, these beautiful springs of cool, clear water, will definitely provide resource in our lives.

There's a second way I want to emphasize—it's implicit in what I've said during the retreat, but I really want to draw it out clearly. Long-term, repeated immersion and exposure to jhānic states—let's say second jhāna and above—will open and deepen our sense of what a human being is, what we are as human beings, and what other human beings are. It opens and deepens the very sense of the dimensionality of human beings.

Our sense of our own being becomes dimensional. As I said near the beginning of the retreat, the jhānas become almost like dimensions of human beings. They're also dimensions of being more generally, or cosmic being, especially as we go deeper into the jhānas. This opening and deepening of dimensionality encompasses not just our own being, but also that of the cosmos.

In addition to functioning as the resource I just described, this opening up of dimensionality means that even if, for some reason later in life, the jhānas are not accessible—perhaps due to certain life situations where we're unable to practice, severe illness, or medicine with difficult side effects that prevent clarity of mind, concentration, or mental energy—they still function as a resource.

Something has been seen and sensed and known by the being, by the citta, so that even after years, when the jhānas become inaccessible, they continue to serve us. One senses and knows something about one's own being, about human being, and about the cosmos. This knowledge, this sense of things, remains present even when one can't directly touch or see it.

It's imprinted on the psyche, on the citta, on the heart and mind so profoundly that it has opened up, changed, and dimensionalized our sense of things. One knows it's true, even when one can no longer access it directly. This knowledge acts as long-term support for the citta, for the soul, including when circumstances may be very, very challenging.

So there are two levels of how jhānas can function as a profound and helpful resource for our lives—for meeting life, opening to life, and serving what we want to serve in life.

CHAPTER 224

Going Forwards

Rob Burbea · 49 min

> *In this concluding talk from a jhāna retreat, Rob Burbea provides essential guidance for maintaining and developing practice after returning home. He emphasizes the importance of appreciating one's efforts independent of perceived results, and offers practical advice for transitioning from retreat while caring for the sensitive, open heart that develops through this practice.*
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> *Burbea introduces the concept of structured practice periods - dedicating weeks or months to exploring specific practices like jhāna, mettā, or insight meditation with creativity and playfulness. He discusses various "practice streams" including samādhi, brahmavihāras, emptiness practice, and soul-making dharma, explaining how different approaches can work together as complementary elements of a comprehensive path.*
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> *A significant portion addresses misconceptions about jhāna practice, clarifying that celibacy, special diets, or retreat conditions are not necessary - rather, what matters is non-entanglement with hindrances. Burbea explores the deeper themes that emerged during retreat: our relationship with desire, the importance of conceptual frameworks in practice, and how patterns around goals and intentions mirror life itself. He concludes with reflections on practicing in groups, the necessity of clarity about intentions, and a beautiful dedication of merit for all beings.*

Thank you.

So hopefully you could get a sense of what you've put into the time here and to your practice, and hopefully you could get a sense of really appreciating that. It's really, really important to have that sense of appreciation, almost independent of how you assess the results from the perspective of the mind state right now. The mind state, the hindrances, not hindrances, and we judge this or that, how it's going, how I am, how my practice is, etc. Success, failure—but just independent of that to really be able to appreciate the efforts and the dedication and the consistency.

So I know certainly, as Robert said before he left and Kirsten before she went on retreat and Sari and I, we really, really appreciate what you've put into your practice, the efforts you've made, your willingness to work and play, your love of exploration, all that. And I hope that you have got a little taste, a little sense of the beauty of this kind of

practice and a little sense perhaps of its possibilities, the possibilities here and the kind of art and magic that can be involved. I think I know at least some of you have that sense.

So I hope you got a little taste of the loveliness, and I know that for everyone it will have been difficult and it has been difficult and challenging in lots of different ways at times. And that's also part of what we need to appreciate in ourselves, our willingness to just keep showing up and keep working and playing when it's difficult in all these different ways.

We've talked about the difficulties that come when we have a desire or desires, an aim, a goal, a direction. The difficulties that come when we want to stay steady with a certain intention over not just an hour, but over days and weeks and then years or whatever. The inner critic, the propensity in our culture for self-measurement, self-judgment—this is all part of the difficult terrain that we have to somehow navigate, somehow relate to wisely with these kinds of practices. So really, thank you for all of that. It involves a lot. It's a big deal.

Transitioning out of the retreat—you know, you've all done lots of retreats before. It's a little bit different this retreat. It's different than, say, some retreats where you really close the senses and you're really looking, really narrowing down to a microscopic attention. Usually the transition from that kind of retreat is quite jarring, can be quite jarring, needs a lot of care, especially if you've been really slowing down.

But here, because we've had this emphasis on more openness of awareness, more inclusion of appreciation in the senses, that kind of trauma of sudden sense stimulation is usually not such an issue on this retreat. It shouldn't be such an issue. What may be more asking for a little more care is the heart.

Sometimes, again, in this context, the heart becomes very open, very sensitive in lovely ways. And so that needs some care as you move, take your journeys home, wherever you're going, as you encounter friends and family again, as you move through the coming days. Do we know how to take care of our heart? What does that really mean? That's a huge subject. What does it mean to take care of the sensitive heart?

Actually, I don't know—how was breakfast for you? Were some of you a bit buzzing after that? Maybe, maybe not. Yeah, depends again on what kind of retreat, but that's quite a lot of sense stimulation, suddenly talking and the room full of people talking, probably a lot of energy gathered over three weeks, quite loud. So what does that kind of buzz need if there is such a thing?

And in terms of caring for the heart, when you go wherever you're going, caring for the heart, caring for your relationships, the relationships with the people in your life and your loved ones, which means also caring about what you share or how you share or when you share and with whom.

So you might be super excited about what you've uncovered, discovered, or you might just want to vent after the retreat or whatever it is, but who am I sharing with? And is it the right moment? Are they in the right space? Am I in the right space? Why am I sharing? What am I looking for here?

Of course, sharing is really, really important. But sometimes we, like everything, we need to be attuned. Because if it's not the right time for this person, or they're not really a person who's actually that interested, or I'm wanting something, and I'm not fully conscious that I'm wanting something from the sharing, and I'm not clear that I'm with the other person—this is what I want. When I share, I would like you to listen this way, or I would like this kind of interest or that kind of interest or whatever it is.

That's also, you know, to care for that, which means to enter into that with awareness, responsiveness, attunement. This is also really, really important in terms of caring for the heart.

Why am I sharing? What am I looking for here? Sharing is profoundly important, but like all things, we need attunement. If the timing isn't right for the other person, or they're not genuinely interested, or if I'm seeking something through the sharing without being fully conscious of that desire, then I'm not truly present with them. When I share, I may unconsciously want the listener to respond in a particular way, to show certain kinds of interest. To care for this tendency means entering into it with awareness, responsiveness, and attunement. This too is essential for caring for the heart.

So hopefully everyone is returning to a full and engaged life of practice, both informally and formally, in terms of daily practice. This is primarily what I want to address now.

I find that most people flourish when they have periods in their life dedicated to exploring a specific practice or element of practice. Just as we've done here with jhanas, creating our playground—this approach applies to any practice. You might return home and decide to focus on metta practice, or any other dharma door. The key is establishing a delineated period—a week, a month, six weeks, three months—where you're intentionally exploring this practice in your daily sitting, perhaps also in informal practice off the cushion. You have a playground.

After that period concludes, you review. If you're learning significantly and want to continue, you commit to another week or month. If it was beneficial but you're ready for something else, you establish another period with a different focus. Again, the intention remains steady and there's a playground—a learning playground.

While not universal, I believe people learn and develop much more effectively this way. Within that playground, creativity, experimentation, and playfulness are essential. You need to actually play in practice. With steady intention and the playground established, you can have fun, trying this and that, experimenting with different approaches—often very small, subtle adjustments.

This principle applies to all practice. We've discussed it extensively regarding jhanas on this retreat, but it encompasses all practices. Often people find they only make real progress on retreat, while outside of retreat they're merely treading water, putting in time without genuine engagement, sometimes even falling apart. Usually this happens because they're not allowing themselves to play, not permitting creativity within their steady intention and playground. Naturally, practice becomes dry, lacking juice or creative, playful input.

We can conceive of different practice streams. Much arises in our lives—at home, work, and elsewhere—and sometimes we react with, "Oh, this has come up, now this has come up," simply trying to cope with whatever emerges. While there's a place for that responsive approach, we can also establish what we're actively exploring. When we're investigating a particular practice and circumstances arise at work or in relationships, our current practice focus suggests specific ways of working with what emerges. Rather than merely sitting for a prescribed time and then coping with life's challenges, the practice determines how we meet what arises.

Just as on this retreat we maintained certain preferences for working with emotions—preferences that would be reversed on a retreat focused specifically on emotions—the practice shapes how we engage with what comes up.

Consider different practice streams: the whole insight ways of looking approach, samadhi and jhana practice, soul-making dharma, brahmaviharas, emotions and emotional awareness, emotional skillfulness, the entire realm of psychology and psychological inquiry. One might take specific elements of right speech and dedicate periods to exploring the expression of difficult truths, of what's challenging for someone to hear. Or focus on exploring generosity for several weeks. The possibilities are vast—the four foundations of mindfulness or a single foundation, or for those returning to activist engagement, discovering how to make that practice within intensity and hecticness.

Within these different practice streams, we cultivate our various playgrounds. Even within jhana practice, we maintain different playgrounds. Within insight ways of looking, different playgrounds emerge.

Someone asked whether it's possible to explain what I've previously discussed regarding skillful fabrication.

Now we're talking about unfabricating and what's the relationship between those two, and then what's the relationship between those two and jhana practice and emptiness and soul making. I've talked about that elsewhere. It's complex, but it's really important to understand.

I think for now, what might be important is just to think in terms of these different streams of practice—where my playground is—and listening and reading in collaboration with whatever my playground is. In time I begin to understand more the conceptual frameworks of each practice and how each relates to the other. Then we can have a big mandala of different practices that fits together very coherently to make something beautiful.

So it might be periods of jhana practice, for example, and you might feel after this retreat, "Oh, that's what I want to do." It doesn't have to be. If you choose insight ways of looking, if you pick up on this idea and want to choose something like insight ways of looking, then it's really good to do samadhi practice or brahmavihara practice in combination with or to balance out the insight ways of looking.

How much, what the ratio is—whether it's fifty-fifty or even eighty-twenty or twenty-eighty—you can experiment with that. But it also doesn't need to be in order. Like I said, it doesn't have to be "first I do my samadhi and calm my mind down and get my focus and then I do my insight."

I'm feeling wretched and restless and agitated and pissed off and confused. I could do my samadhi, or I could bring an insight way of looking to that. If it's working—because there's the release of clinging there—it should calm things down and then open things up, and then I can go to my samadhi. So don't get caught up in this whole idea that there's an order: "First I prepare my mind with concentration and then I do my insight." It really doesn't need to work that way.

If you're choosing different themes, there's the possibility of working together, making groups, connecting with each other and having themed groups where you practice together with a certain theme for a while—like an element of right speech or generos-

ity. You go out and play with something in the week with generosity. You come back and compare notes and really see the power of that. You learn from each other. And of course, there may be groups where there is a teacher.

One of the things I hope before I die is that I will be able to make it clear in these different streams of practice who's a qualified teacher in this stream of practice or that stream of practice. I've only made very little headway with that, but I'm really hoping that will be possible. So you can know where to go if you want to explore this practice or that practice.

In the meantime, there is already an emptiness group running online that meets every two weeks. Sari is teaching with Nathan, and Juha will be one of the teachers once he returns from his three-month retreat, along with Susie Keeley and Yahel, who's a teacher in Israel. It exists and is very lovely from what I've heard. For people who want to explore emptiness, you can learn a lot there and share together and benefit from that. Nathan will put up some information for that on the board afterwards.

Just in terms of jhana practice, the arising of jhana or the arising of samadhi depends on a lot of conditions. A lot of conditions need to come together. It's very possible off retreat. So it's not something that needs to be confined to retreat. If you find it's confined to retreat, then the question is: why is it confined to retreat? It's dependent on conditions.

Someone asked me, "Do I have to avoid orgasm in order to practice jhana?" Absolutely not. Where does this idea come from? Or "I have to avoid sex" or "I have to have a special diet" or something like that. What is it we have to not have? Entanglement—entanglement in the hindrances. It's not even that we need to not have the hindrance; it's entanglement in the hindrances.

When the Buddha says "withdrawn" or "in seclusion from the hindrances," it means withdrawn from entanglement, not entangled in whatever is going on in my life. That's the condition, more than anything else. So it's not that "I've got a busy job" or "relationships are tricky at the moment." It's how much the heart and mind are entangled. That's what makes the difference.

So it's certainly not true that one has to be celibate or not have sex or only practice Taoist non-ejaculatory orgasms or whatever it is.

There is that teaching out there, and it has its place. But sometimes people who are drawn to those approaches can become a little limited in their view.

Whether an orgasm brings energy or depletes energy depends on numerous factors. As lay practitioners, if sexuality is part of your life, you need to explore this territory for yourself. Whether sex and orgasm depletes energy or actually enhances it depends on elements like the quality of love present, the depth of soul connection, the degree of openness. These factors are far more significant regarding energy than the simple fact of orgasm, and much more relevant to jhanic availability.

Similarly with diet—you can get caught up in rigid ideas here too. We each need to discover what works for us individually. I speak as someone who has wrestled with a somewhat tormented digestive system for thirty-five years. Find out what works for you. Don't simply buy into theories wholesale. Don't avoid being within 150 meters of a clove of garlic just because some teaching suggests it. Discover if it's actually true for you.

Sometimes we encounter concepts from Ayurveda about sattvic foods—the pure, harmonious category. Don't develop what I call "sattvic neurosis" around all this. Experiment, play, maintain creativity and willingness to explore in practice, and also around the periphery of practice with elements like diet. This approach is really, really important. You can discover a tremendous amount on your own about all these aspects.

If all goes well, the recordings from this retreat should become available at some point. I hope they will prove very helpful—helpful now, as soon as you access them, and helpful for years to come. There is a tremendous amount of information contained within them. You may not realize it, but it's probably nearly impossible to absorb all that information just during these three weeks on your first listening. Many of the questions you would naturally have were already addressed, already given. It's simply too much information to process at once. So it's there, and it should prove helpful, I hope.

In terms of samadhi practice, don't forget about techniques like the counting with the breath that we explored right at the opening. It takes some time to become comfortable with it, but for certain people it can be a really potent practice, genuinely useful. It might feel quite awkward initially with the long breath and the counting, but something like that is truly worth developing. So consider all the tools that might be available to you.

One of the beautiful aspects of jhana practice—especially when we approach it with this emphasis on marinating and mastery—is that you could go away and not attend any retreats for a year, then return to retreat practice. It's rather like placing a bookmark in a book and leaving it on a shelf for a year; when you open the book again, the bookmark remains in the same place. Your playground, your edge of exploration, stays

pretty much in the same location. This happens when I've practiced in the way we've emphasized, with mastery and marinating, staying with states rather than rushing through them.

This is truly a lovely quality. In other words, you don't need to feel rushed or maintain a somewhat tight attitude of "I need to keep up my jhana practice, otherwise next time I go on retreat, it won't be there." It doesn't need to be like that. There exists this kind of mysterious bookmark magic as well.

But I also hope that you've begun to recognize how important it is to engage with larger questions—meta-questions about desire, for example. What is your relationship with desire? What happens for you around desire? What gets included in your desire, and what exactly are your desires? These meta-questions about desire and about conceptual frameworks—I hope you begin to realize that these inquiries are important, and that these questions themselves become part of your practice. The exploring of relationship with desire, the exploring of relationship with conceptual frameworks, the exploring of conceptual frameworks themselves.

Even understanding that conceptual frameworks are important to understand—that recognition alone is something really major, truly significant. Without a coherent conceptual framework, dramatic experiences can simply be "wow" moments that don't actually liberate very much or prove very transformative. They're not as helpful or opening as they could be. It's the conceptual framework that gives power to the experience.

Without an appropriate conceptual framework, or with one that isn't quite coherent or seems incongruent—doesn't really fit together with itself or doesn't align with how you're practicing—this can create confusion or a kind of myopia in practice. You become mesmerized by individual experiences, but they don't reach out and spread their transformative effect throughout your life.

Even more problematically, this can lead to a narrowing of what practice becomes. Some people have been doing the same practice for twenty years. Why?

Because there's no conceptual framework. They're not quite sure how that practice fits in with the rest of the Dharma or other practices. So the whole Dharma can shrink and the whole sense of what practice is can shrink.

So I really hope that you feel that you've learned not just about samādhi and jhānas and that sort of thing, but also about desire and your patterns with desire and having goals and aim and a direction and staying steady with intention. All that stuff mirrors our life.

Whatever we've bumped into here around desire, around feeling confined in a certain intention—I want to do this, I want to do that—feeling restless within it, whatever patterns around that, whatever problems we experience when we set a goal or an aim or a fear of doing so, all that on retreat just mirrors life. The same thing.

Inner critic, the difficulty to sustain singleness of intention, the wobbling, the ambivalence. Am I in the right place? Am I doing the right thing? I should be somewhere else. The doubt, the hindrances, becoming papañca and then becoming so convincing. This is life stuff. It's not just retreat stuff, meditative stuff. It's life stuff.

Feeling imprisoned in a form, in an intention, in a group, in a relationship—this is life stuff, all of that. So I hope that because we've talked about this, we kept returning to this, I hope that you can really see this. These elements are really important meta-elements in relation to practice, but of course, in relation to our life as well. As I said several times, they may end up being much more important than whether I attain this or that jhāna—how I am with these things, what I learn with these things.

There are all kinds of streams of practice, and within that, there are different playgrounds that one might have. As I said, there are groups, and sometimes we learn better with each other. So we might find a group where there's a teacher or teachers, and that's great, but also peer groups, working together, as I mentioned before.

I was thinking about this—I'm not sure if jhāna practice would work so well as a peer group. Maybe it would. I'm not sure. But my sense is it might be a little more tricky with people being in different places or progressing at very different rates. Again, because of lots of different conditions. But it might. Something to find out.

Something like emptiness or studying emptiness or soulmaking, for example, may work much better in terms of saṅgha groups together, study groups, practice groups together, peer groups together. And it might be that jhāna practice is more of a solitary endeavor. I don't know. But if you want to experiment, find out.

Actually, it's interesting with regard to groups because I've stressed so much about the necessity of clarity with regard to what's the precise mix of my desires—so for my practice, for my life, for this retreat, or for a group that I go to, that I form or I'm part of. What exactly am I wanting? What are the confluences of my desires and my intentions?

So on a soulmaking retreat, for example, many of you have been on soulmaking retreats—there's lots of dyad practice or triad practice, relational practice in the retreat, lots of sharing of images and experiences, lots of intimacy that way, lots of relational practice. But then very easily, it might be that one feels very touched by that sharing

and by that intimacy. And without realizing it, goes and forms a soulmaking group—let's form a soulmaking group together. Actually my desire is really for the sharing and the saṅgha, primarily, and less for the soulmaking.

What I really want is that sharing, which is a fantastic desire. It's a really important desire. I want connection, I want intimacy with other practitioners, I want that sharing. But if I've set up or am going to a soulmaking group and actually without realizing it—and without the others realizing it—I'm actually wanting saṅgha primarily and soulmaking maybe is just secondary, then because of the importance of what I actually desire, because of the determinative effect of what I actually desire in the mix, the soulmaking will not blossom so well because I'm actually coming at it wanting something else. Do you understand?

So groups can fall apart. I've seen groups trying to set up, trying to set up, not really happening, not really happening. People are not clear about what they're going for.

And so it's not really getting off the ground. Or you set up a group about a certain theme, and it somehow just becomes a general dharma group or a general "let's just sit together because it's nice to sit together, and then we'll share about whatever." All of that's wonderful. And if that's clear, then that can be the primary intention.

The larger point—which I've said so many times on this retreat—is about the importance of being aware of what my intention is, because that will determine what unfolds. So some people in the group wanting soul-making, for example, and some people just wanting sangha, or primarily wanting sangha—that group is going to be frustrating, probably for both, but certainly for the people wanting soul-making. Do you understand?

Staying with that idea of soul-making: it's certainly true that soul-making practices will build and grow the sense of sangha. Absolutely they will. For sure they will, because of all that lovely intimacy and sharing. But it's the primacy of intention—our intentions and desires and what they are—the primacy of that in determining what's possible and what unfolds in a group.

Or again, it could be that we have a group, or even just my dharma practice, and the intention is because I want to rectify my energy problems or my energy constrictions, or I want to heal my energy blocks—and not whatever the group was set up for: soulmaking dharma, or this or that, or even just dharma in general. Again, that lack of clarity or lack of honesty about what the intentions are will have an effect. Same issues.

So this is all stuff to think about going forward. It's all, I feel, really important stuff.

But let's end now. I wanted to say thank you to my three helpers. So I see Nick here and Lawrence, but I don't know if Leah's here. She's not here. Well, it's ten to twelve. So yes, thank you to Nick and Lawrence and Leah, who's not here, because I certainly wouldn't have been able to get here every day, and we wouldn't have been able to do this without you. So it's really hugely appreciated.

And thank you to Sari and to Kirsten and to Robert, who's left again. Just so valuable—your help and your input and being there and working together. Couldn't have happened without you.

Why don't we just take a moment to dedicate from our practice together. So just as Sari led us beautifully before, see if you can open to connect with a sense of appreciation for your efforts. Just bypassing the whole question of success, failure, and how well you practiced or what you achieved. It's actually impossible to know quite what the fruits of our practice are and will be as time unfolds, as conditions meet other conditions, as what has ripened and matured and been worked on here ripples out into the world in so many different ways. It's impossible to know what the fruits are. It's impossible to assess, measure, or judge that.

Know that you have shown up. Know that you have been willing, repeatedly, to work through the difficult, through the challenging, through the lovely. That you've been curious. Can you see in that the beauty of your intention? Over and over. The beauty of your intentions. Countless moments of intention. Countless, countless. Rain into the sea. All those raindrops of beautiful intention, of willingness, of courage, dignity, nobility, effort, wisdom, responsiveness. All that makes karma. It has effects. We don't know. We cannot know all the effects. In the wide, wild mystery of things, we cannot know the course of all that water, all the ripplings out.

But somehow, in the mystery of interconnectedness, in the mystery of dependent arising, may the goodness and beauty of our intention, of our work, of our efforts—may it be for the benefit of those near and dear to us, those who are close to us in life. May it ripple out to touch them, to bless them, perhaps in obvious ways, perhaps in not obvious ways. May they receive the fruits and the blessings of our practice.

And all those beings whom we don't really know but who we encounter in our everyday movements in the world, living their lives, struggling as we do with body, with mind, with relationships. We don't know them. Brief encounters here and there. Somehow, may they too receive the blessings and the fruits of our practice. All beings we will never meet face to face, we will never encounter directly. Again, somehow—perhaps in obvious, direct ways, somehow in the mystery of things, in not so obvious ways, in indirect ways—

May they too be touched, be blessed by the goodness and beauty of our intentions. May they receive the blessings and the fruits of our practice.

For those whose lives are caught up in war, living in fear, not in safety—may they receive the fruits and blessings of our practice.

For those tormented in mind and heart, not at ease—may they receive the fruits and blessings of our practice.

Those in the world living in areas of famine, of shortage, of scarcity—may they receive the fruits and the blessings of our practice.

And for all those beings, human and non-human, whose lives have become hounded by ecological devastation, who have to flee their homes, their homelands—may our practice be of benefit, be of support.

May all beings everywhere, without exception, receive the fruits and the blessings of our practice.

Thank you again. Go safely wherever you're going and practice with intelligence, with playfulness, with love and with enjoyment.

CHAPTER 225

Emptiness and Ways of Looking

Rob Burbea · 2h09

Rob Burbea examines the ways of looking approach to emptiness, a distinctive paradigm within Buddhist practice that investigates how different ways of relating to phenomena affect what we perceive. Drawing from concepts found throughout the Pali Canon, including dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) and the mutual dependency of nāmarūpa and consciousness, he clarifies how this approach differs from conventional mindfulness teachings.

Burbea addresses common misunderstandings, such as the notion that one can "rest from ways of looking" or that there exists a privileged lens revealing "how things really are." He emphasizes that every moment of consciousness involves a way of looking, and that different degrees of clinging (upādāna) in our relationship to phenomena determine what gets fabricated (saṅkhāra) in perception.

The talk explores the radical implications of this understanding: that time, space, subject, object, and even awareness itself are fabricated through ways of looking rather than being independently existing realities. This connects to the Buddha's teaching of the middle way between "is" and "is not" - the recognition that phenomena are neither ultimately real nor completely non-existent. Burbea concludes by examining how deep emptiness practice opens possibilities for soul-making and imaginal work, while also considering the relationship between emptiness realization and psychological development in contemporary Western contexts.

Welcome everyone.

What I would like to try to do in this short series of talks is perhaps extend some of the lines of inquiry, some of the themes and threads from one of the recent series, *The Four Circles for Parables of Stone and Light*, and the themes certainly of ethics. I would like to extend and explore that area, that whole domain, as well as opening up some more possibilities for imaginal practice or what imaginal practice soul-making might make possible for us as practices. Some other questions and reflections on ontology and epistemology, and also on tradition and how we think of path and goal and awakening.

I think I want to start—and it makes sense to start—talking about ontology. Questions and explorations of ontology, the theme of ontology, we've woven throughout these talks, but I want to start a little bit with that.

Ontology is, to say what it is, to define it very briefly—actually best for our purposes, defined as the views and beliefs we have about what is real and what is not real, and what kinds of reality or what kinds of beings, what kinds of being different things have. So a dream has a different kind of reality than what we perceive in waking consciousness, we tend to assume. That's an ontology, it's an ontological view right there. The views and beliefs about what is real, what is not real, what kind of reality and being different things have.

Usually ontology is a word used in a very philosophical context—philosophical systems and sophisticated philosophical analysis. I mean to include all that, but the reason I'm defining it as views and beliefs is partly because, as I want to emphasize again and again, we're always with an ontology. Whether we philosophize or not, whether we read those kinds of books, whether we think in a certain way or wonder in a certain way about what's real or not real, we always have views and beliefs and conceptual frameworks, conscious or unconscious, operating. The words "view" and "belief" give much more sense of the immediacy and inevitability of ontology in our lives and in our practice, in our experience.

Particularly what I want to focus on today is emptiness and the ways of looking approach.

The ways of looking approach to emptiness—which is, if you like, the bulk of what *Seeing That Frees* is devoted to—is quite unusual as an approach to emptiness and certainly as an approach to Dharma. The whole ways of looking approach to Dharma is quite unusual, but it's also unusual as an approach to emptiness.

What I've come to understand is that it's quite easy or quite possible—actually quite easy and relatively common—for it to be not quite understood in the correct way. People bring to that paradigm, the ways of looking approach, ideas, beliefs, formulations and frameworks that they've encountered elsewhere, read or heard—even within other Buddha Dharma contexts, of course. They bring all that to hearing or reading about the ways of looking approach to emptiness, and some of that other material comes in so that what they hear or read about the ways of looking approach is actually a little bit twisted or shaped or shaved to conform to the ideas that they already have. This is a very normal human occurrence and human propensity, something we need to be aware of and take care of in whatever it is we're talking about or trying to explain or trying to understand.

So the ways of looking approach—I've gone into this elsewhere in great detail and recently in the online seminars—has two key themes.

One is ways of looking. I'm not going to go into this now in detail, I'm just mentioning it. There are ways of looking, that we as human beings can look at things in different ways, that we have a range there, a possibility of flexibility there, a possibility of extending that range. Ways of looking mean the whole—in any moment, how are we relating to something? What ideas, conceptions, assumptions, beliefs, reactions, tendencies, likes, dislikes, propensities, emphases, kinds of attention or areas of attention—all of that together makes up the way of looking in any moment. We have the possibility as human beings to explore that consciously and really, as I said, extend that range, play with it, discover new ways of looking, develop them.

So one concept is ways of looking.

The second concept is fabrication. One realizes that different ways of looking have different amounts and kinds and levels of what we call clinging wrapped up in them. Clinging is a word that I use very elastically, meaning obviously what it tends to mean to most people—something very gross, really gripping onto something, not wanting to let go, in a very obvious or even dramatic way—all the way down to something really, really subtle.

Different ways of looking have different amounts, kinds, levels of clinging to them. That clinging turns out to be extremely important in determining what is fabricated in perception through the way of looking. In other words, a way of looking shapes, forms, fabricates what we then perceive. Look at something in this way, and that means I have that whole relationship with it. I see it, perceive it, sense it differently than when I look at it in another way.

One of the key constituents there of the way of looking is the clinging, because dependent on the clinging, the degree of fabrication—not just of how much suffering there is, fabrication of suffering, which of course is a key emphasis and inquiry in Buddhist practice, not just the fabrication of suffering, but also the fabrication of self, other, world, time, space, the whole show, the whole magic show of perception—is dependent on the kinds, amounts, and levels of clinging involved.

And so really what the ways of looking approach is, is taking those two ideas—ways of looking and fabrication, maybe a third idea, clinging, as we just said—and exploring what that is and what it involves at different levels, what might it involve. And just exploring that and seeing what's possible. What can I understand about fabrication here? How can I extend and develop my ways of looking? What does clinging involve at different levels? And through that, understanding something about the fabricated nature of things, of all things, all phenomena, all experience, all appearances.

This is a very deep, beautiful exploration. And then at a certain point, going even beyond the notion of fabrication, when one sees that time is empty and fabrication is empty, and that opens up a whole other level of the inquiry into emptiness.

So, very brief summary. I've explained that before. I'm not going to go into it in any more detail. But I want to pick up on a few of the possible ways it might be misunderstood or incompletely understood. Or we could say just fill out the understanding, hopefully make certain things a bit more clear, if that's possible.

Sometimes it has happened quite a few times that someone has been quite excited about the whole ways of looking approach and exploring it and found it very valuable. But then they say something or write something that makes it clear that they haven't really understood the sort of radicality of it or the fundamentality of it or just how pervasive it is, how pervasively it applies as an idea.

What can be quite common is for someone to say, "I play with my ways of looking, I practice that way," or even if they're a teacher, "I teach ways of looking. But then I tell people, perhaps at the end of the class or the end of the course or whatever it is, now you can rest from ways of looking." Or, "I do that, but then I just like to—I do that in my practice. I play with different ways of looking. I explore it. It's exciting. It's wonderful. But then I like to just be. I just like to rest from any way of looking."

If someone says something like that, it really means they haven't understood that it's impossible to have a moment of consciousness, a moment of perceiving anything, of experiencing anything, a moment of anything appearing without there being a way of looking. We cannot rest from a way of looking. Actually, not even the unfabricated, not even cessation of perception and feeling is really technically a rest from a way of looking. Anything we see, sense, anything we sense at all, anything we experience at all is always experienced through a way of looking.

Now, of course, we may or may not realize that. We may or may not be conscious of what the way of looking is at any time. We may or may not be deliberately playing with the way of looking, but there is always a way of looking. So it's not possible to let go of way of looking.

This isn't just a little pernickety sort of point, because if one doesn't understand that, one actually has undermined the whole structure of the ways of looking approach. It can no longer function in a profoundly and widely liberating way. If one has just converted the phrase "ways of looking" to "ways of practicing," and there's this kind of way

of practicing, or this practice and that practice—there's all these practices, which one might find all very powerful, very helpful. But then there's a time where I'm just resting from all that.

And that time of resting from all that assumes, in this kind of not-quite understanding of the approach, that time assumes that there's a possibility of not having a way of looking at any moment. And that has great implications for our understanding of the nature of perception, of fabrication, of reality, of emptiness. It limits it hugely.

So that's one thing that's very, very important.

A second thing—a minor thing, I actually mentioned it the other day in a talk, but I'll say it here as well. Although it's not possible to rest from a way of looking in any moment of consciousness, it is possible, however, to rest from deliberately practicing a way of looking. So I might be practicing a certain way of looking, whatever it is, and then I might decide to rest from that. Or I might move from that way of looking, that deliberate way of looking, to practice another way of looking.

The important thing is that I cannot rest completely from ways of looking, but also that it's actually important to move between ways of looking and pay attention to what happens when I move between ways of looking—whether I just rest from any deliberate way of looking and then I just fall back into a kind of default mode of way of looking, or whether I switch from one deliberate way of looking to another way of looking. It's actually important to see the effects, the changes brought to perception by changing ways of looking, either to the default one or to another deliberate one.

Through the contrast between what I perceive, what I experience, between this way of looking and the other way of looking—the point I was making the other day in a talk was this way of practicing insight meditation based on ways of looking is not so dependent on keeping the continuity going. Not "eighteen, maybe twenty hours a day of continuous mindfulness" and through that the mindfulness accumulates a kind of intensity and pervasiveness which allows it to see reality as it is or peers through illusion to see reality.

Here we actually need to rest from ways of looking at times, from deliberate ways of looking—excuse me—or change them in order to see the contrast. Because it's the contrast, it's seeing the contrast, the differences wrought in perception by different ways of looking that bring me the insights.

Connected to that, or a modification of that, sometimes you hear or read someone, maybe not using the language of ways of looking, maybe using the language of lenses—the lens of anattā, seeing things as not me, not mine, or the lens of impermanence. And

they're using that kind of flexibility of ways of looking with a slightly different language. But then they drop back into talking about being with what is, or the way things really are. And what they mean—and it's clear that what they mean by the way things really are—is not emptiness.

They don't mean emptiness. They don't mean the emptiness of any real way things are. They don't mean that the way things really are is that they're not any real way. As if all these lenses—the couple or two or three lenses that they've sort of described and practiced with—are kind of superficial levels, above a level where it's possible to be with what is, supposedly, and the way things really are. As if there's another mode of being that is not a lens, or as if there's a particular lens that is the lens that reveals the way things really are—that's bare attention, which is a conceptually-free sort of vividness of reality.

There's a similar kind of misunderstanding here, a similar kind of truncating of the whole possibility of deepening insight, a similar kind of roadblock in the road of deeper insight. Because one has assumed there's a "what is." One has assumed an end of fabrication somewhere that's not the end of fabrication. There's assumed a lens that will show me how things really are—a privileged lens, if one is using that language, a privileged way of looking. Not understanding that one can possibly travel the road of emptiness, exploring emptiness, beyond any notion of what is or the way things really are.

There is no independent reality, independent of a way of looking, of a lens. So we are just left with lenses, ways of looking. This too betrays a kind of similarly limited understanding or even a misunderstanding—a limited use of this approach. But it was really significant. Very, very significant.

Another version of this sort of thing, this sort of misunderstanding—a very limited understanding and a very problematic understanding—happens when someone talks about ways of looking, emptiness, no real way things are, just ways of looking, and then says something like, "All there really is is a flux or a flow out of which the way of looking shapes this or that perception or appearance. But all there really is, is a flux or flow." They don't actually explain a flux or flow of what, but the problem really is in that "all there really is, is a flow, a flux of something or other." And a flux, a flow is a process, something that happens in time.

So again, there is something that's assumed to be a reality independent of a way of looking—this basic flux or flow and time, in which flux or flow must happen. Flux or flow must happen in time. And it's out of that basic reality that the way of looking then

shapes this or that more familiar objects of experience that we know. But again, it's limiting, it's truncating the process of insight, truncating and limiting the possible depth of insight.

Time is also empty. Time arises through ways of looking. Take away the clinging, enough. Take away the avijjā, enough. Time is not there. Time does not get fabricated.

So there's a real danger there again, that practicing ways of looking with such an understanding, harboring in the background this "all there really is, is a flux or flow of whatever"—practicing ways of looking that way will not lead to an opening to the actual unfabricated, because it's staying entrenched in and clinging to a notion of time as something basically existing, really existing. It may even limit the amount of unfabricating that can happen with such a view in the background. Even if it's not in the foreground, even if it's not clearly articulated, maybe the practicing under the umbrella of such a view, having that view in the background, actually brings pretty limited unfabricating through practice.

So very significant, quite dangerous in a way, in terms of the way they will really confine our openings, our understandings—really our sense of what emptiness is, and of how far practicing it can go, but really of what emptiness is, and thus of what reality is. So that's a couple of things that are really important.

The second thing is a bit more subtle, but sometimes people when they're talking about their insight practice or reporting their insight practice to me—and perhaps they've come from another tradition—they might use the language of "drilling down through illusion" or of "seeing through self." For example, "I see through self" or "I see through a certain manifestation of the meditator ego" or something.

And that language of "seeing through" is very different than the language implied by a ways of looking approach, which is more "seeing as." So, for example, when I practice anattā, a way of looking, when I practice the anattā view, I'm seeing as: this phenomenon, this experience, this thing is not me, not mine. I'm seeing it as not me, not mine, rather than as me or mine. I'm not seeing through it.

The important thing here is that "seeing through"—the phrase "seeing through," the idea to see through something, to me—has certain implications and assumptions wrapped up in it, as does the phrase "drill down." It has certain implications and assumptions, including an implicit realism. I'm seeing through, I'm seeing through the illusion, seeing through this veil to something else, which is the reality that is veiled.

And that sounds—again, it might sound persnickety, but that's actually fundamentally different in terms of the presupposition of what we are doing and how we are approaching understanding emptiness, how we are approaching this inquiry and exploration into emptiness. It's fundamentally different than the language of "seeing as."

"Seeing through," as I said, has certain implications and a certain kind of realism, a certain assumed reality implicit in it, as does the phrase "drill down." "Seeing as," to me, just implies that there are a range of ways of looking whose effects on perception interest me, and whose effects on perception, particularly regarding fabrication and dependent arising and the implicit emptiness of all that, that interests me. I can see it as this—this pain, this physical thing, this phenomenon. I can see it as this, I can see it as that. I can look in this way, I can look in that way. And that's different than seeing through.

Similarly, the language can be quite similar, and again, this is something I mentioned the other day, but it bears repeating. That word "fabrication" wasn't so popular a number of years ago, and I'm aware that some people have picked up that word now, or repicked it up—perhaps they used it ages ago. Because it's a Pali word and it's a good translation of the word *sankāra* or *sankhata* as fabricated, people thinking about Dharma or teaching Dharma or reflecting on their own practice will very commonly agree it's an important concept. After all, the Buddha uses it. It's right there in the Wheel of Dependent Origination. It's right there regularly in the Pali Canon.

And they think of fabrication as an important concept. Seeing through the fabricated is important. For instance, one very common idea would be that what's fabricated is *papañca*—in the common understanding, proliferation, making a fuss, getting in a tizzy over something, catastrophizing, blowing things up out of all proportion. That's all fabrication. And when we let go of that through mindfulness and bare attention and equanimity, we're actually not fabricating. We are in contact with the unfabricated.

So mindfulness, bare attention, equanimity—these are ways of looking, modes of looking that reveal the unfabricated, just things as they are.

A person might, at the same time, be interested in the concept of fabrication, agree it's an important concept, and whether they use the word "unfabricated" or not, they might implicitly agree there is an unfabricated perception that we can be in contact with, that can be revealed to us. But they have no interest in the mystical depth of the unfabricated as I would understand it—as something beyond any sense of subject, object, space, time, awareness, beyond all phenomena. They have no interest in that kind of deep, mystical unfabricated, or it feels irrelevant to life as we know it, or it's only for some people who are kind of into that.

But holding all those views together would in a strange way be making a kind of arbitrary and artificial distinction between everyday life, or life itself, and what is mystical. Because this concept of fabrication, or rather fabricating, the possibility of fabricating, is actually one strand—there's one strand of fabricating in the ways of looking approach that I would like to support and make clearer.

We're not actually presupposing what the end of fabrication is. I'm not deciding in advance: fabrication stops at a kind of bare, pristine reality of things appearing to me, or it stops at the kind of view that most people would agree on when they're not in *papañca* or not in a tizzy. *Papañca* is a Pali word actually used at many different levels. It's come to be used really at a much more gross level. So that's just one end of the spectrum of fabricating—*papañca* is very gross fabricating.

But if we follow this idea of clinging deeper and deeper and keep the idea, just withhold any presupposition or any quick deciding on where fabrication ends—so fabrication itself is an open concept—let's find out through exploring ways of looking, through getting more skilled at letting go of subtler and subtler and deeper and more refined levels of clinging. Let's just see where this process of fabrication stops and where the unfabricated is.

It's actually just one spectrum. And to me, it goes all the way from *papañca* through everyday normal perception, through quieter, more pristine awareness of that, and then through a whole series of fading. All this is one spectrum, and that series of fading goes all the way down to the fading, the unfabricating of any sense of subject, any sense of object, any sense of space or time or consciousness or anything like that.

So if it's one spectrum, one inquiry into fabrication and how we can let go of fabrication, why has a person drawn the line where they have? They need to somehow justify that. If you draw the line at just what appears when we agree with most of the other people on the planet about what is real, or what appears when things look really shiny and clear, as they will with a kind of bright mindfulness—it's just a point on that spectrum of non-fabricating. So where exactly do you draw the line, and why exactly have you drawn the line there?

This principle of fabrication, clinging and fading—it's one principle, and it's the same principle that a person is drawing on when they say fabrication is an important concept, and *papañca* is what's fabricated, and we want to unfabricate that, get rid of that, so we can be with what's unfabricated. It's the same principle, but it's one spectrum continuing much, much deeper than that.

It's only presuppositions—essentially unquestioned reality assumptions—that one is dragging in to what's really, as I said, one spectrum and therefore a coherent system, coherent principle: fabrication, clinging and fading. It's one system, a coherent system. And then one is dividing that spectrum either arbitrarily or just in line with one's presuppositions, dividing what was coherent and undivided, a continuous spectrum, and in some way by dividing it, actually making it incoherent.

Now one can do that, of course one can, but what's the justification? It seems to me one would need a pretty strong, philosophically worked out justification if you're going to do that—to make something that was coherent incoherent.

And similarly, we encounter these minor misunderstandings, a little bit related to something we said earlier today. Sometimes someone reports to me, "I'm trying to get rid of the usual relentless sense of self." And that's actually how they're approaching their meditative practice. Again, they might have heard some teachings or picked up a book and have somehow twisted or distorted the intention—very understandably—toward trying to get rid, even momentarily, of the usual relentless sense of self. "I'm trying to unfabricate something, I'm trying to get rid of something."

That intention, to try to get rid—even if it's just for a moment, to have a moment's taste free of the usual relentless sense of self—may be coming either from an idea that's being dragged in about the reality of no-self. It's a very common understanding to drag in, to understand what we're doing in emptiness explorations as "we want to see that what's real is that there is no self." And then one's taking that idea—wherever one has heard it or read it or misunderstood it—and bringing that in, so then "I'm trying to get rid of this usual sense of self."

So maybe one drags in an idea, a habitual idea, a common idea, that the reality is that there is no self. That's the ontological truth of things—that the self has no reality, or that what is real is no-self. So one may be coming from an idea, or it may be coming from an aversion, or even a neurosis, a sort of aversion to oneself and the sense of self, or the kinds of ways that the self arises.

This is really not helpful. Aversion will certainly not help in the whole investigation. If aversion is there unconsciously, it won't help in the investigation of ways of looking at fabrication and emptiness. And if it's there driving things, it will tend to actually just fabricate more. But also it's not helpful because the understanding is wrong. One has dragged in another understanding, another assumption about reality and truth that is different than the assumptions that ground the ways of looking approach into emptiness.

Some of this will be obvious for some of you, and some will seem not obvious at all and a bit like hair-splitting, but actually it's really, really important. And you will see it in the fruits. Because if these sort of basic grounding ideas are not correct or they're limited, they will be limiting. And what they deliver in terms of the way the whole process—meditation exploration—opens up, and what it delivers and the degree of unfabricating it delivers and the degree of understanding emptiness that it delivers, that will all be limited because some kind of basic assumptions are getting in the way or distorting things or limiting things.

So when we talk about ways of looking, what are we talking about? We're talking about the whole collection or weave, as I said, of what's involved in the relationship with anything that one's experiencing in any moment. So the tendency to grasp or hold on or push away to whatever degree—clinging in that obvious sense—the appropriation of self, the assumptions about its reality, all kinds of other assumptions, the ideas, the conceptual frameworks, the belief in time—all that is woven into the way of looking.

When we practice ways of looking, what we're really doing is taking certain elements of that whole collection of what's in a way of looking at any moment, just focusing on certain elements and changing them. So for example, the one we used earlier was anatta: not me, not mine. The habitual way of looking—without thinking about it, without it being a conscious action in the mind, or something we can even often realize is going on, certainly without it being verbal—is "me, mine, me, mine" to this experience, that experience, this object, whatever. And what we're doing when we practice the anatta way of looking is we're just changing that, changing that to "not me, not mine."

And this "not me, not mine" is something that's very, very lightly held in the way of looking, or say inserted into the way of looking. Actually, we're removing the usual "me-mine," and very, very lightly and delicately it's there in the way of looking.

Ways of looking, as we practice them, have subtexts. So when we say "empty," for example, as a way of looking, we don't really say it. We might say it just as a whisper in the mind, or we look at something and look at it as empty. That's practicing a way of looking. But what that means—we could write an essay on it, or a book even. What does it mean? We're not going through all that every time, but it has to be implicitly woven into the way of looking when we look at things as empty. So the subtext, if you like—the sometimes jokingly called "small print" of a way of looking—is often very complex, and it has to be held very, very lightly. It's implicit there in the way of looking.

If we return to the anatta way of looking, I'll focus on something that was interesting. I was talking to someone the other day, so this just serves as a good example. They had moved on from practicing the anatta way of looking with, for example, body sensations and thoughts and mindstates and things like that. They had actually moved on to what's usually more difficult, to a stage of anatta practice where one's regarding awareness itself, the consciousness itself as anatta, as not me, not mine.

And in the course of the conversation, it became clear that the subtext here is a little more complex. So what's involved here? This person was aware that it meant there's no doing of awareness. So for them, what the anatta of awareness, what was...

The only thing that was in their anatta way of looking when they turned it on awareness was that there's no doing of awareness, which actually means there's no agency. So they needed to have that language slightly altered. It's not that there's no doing—it's that there's no one doing it. It's not that there's no effort and no doing, because when one really begins to understand at a very deep level and practice at a deep level, you see that any moment of experience, any moment of appearance and perception, or any arising of any phenomenon at all, involves doing on the part of the subject. It's not non-doing. It's the fact that we could say there's no agent, there's no agency. It's not me doing. The effort and the doing that go with awareness are not me, not mine.

So that was one thing he needed expanding. Because what he was finding was, unlike when he did anatta practice—anatta way of looking—on other phenomena, where it worked quite well with the fading and the release of dukkha, when he was trying to do the anatta awareness, it seemed to be quite limited. So we were finding out why. It's because there wasn't enough in his way of looking when he looked at awareness and said anatta—when he looked at it with the view anatta, rather.

So it's not that there's no doing of awareness; it's that there's no agency. That was one thing. But he was also missing two other factors. One is that there's no possession of awareness. It's not mine. So there's no entity of self that owns this awareness, of which the awareness makes up a part of this self, this entity. And there's also, thirdly, no identification with awareness. The awareness, the consciousness, is not me.

So we have no possession, no identification, and no agency. If you want a little acronym—if this is helpful—you can think there's no P-I-A: no possession, no identification, no agency. That understanding is tacitly wrapped up and present in the subtext of just attending to the sense of awareness and looking at it as anatta.

So even there, even before we get on to how it's empty in itself or empty-empty, even there with the anatta of awareness, what's involved in the subtext is actually fairly complex. And it needs to be woven in and understood as part of the way of looking. The way of looking needs to have that understanding in it.

This is not just about the details there, but the general principle is very important. This business with ways of looking is really—we're not talking about something abstract, we're talking about practice, and it's really an art, and in some cases a very subtle and delicate art and skill that we need to develop. It's not just going to happen like that, and it's certainly not abstract.

Do you know for yourself firsthand the effect of sensing something through the lens of a way of looking where you're regarding it as empty, compared to what happens when you're sensing something through a way of looking that just automatically, as a default, regards it as real, as inherently existing? These two have massively different effects on perception. When you're really regarding something through a lens that really understands its emptiness, there's profound fading that happens. Of course, we move in the world and only very little fading happens when we're essentially practicing unconsciously and automatically and by habit, the view that comes out of what the Buddha would call avijjā—ignorance, delusion—which assumes the reality, the inherent existence of phenomena.

So we're not talking about something abstract here when we talk about ontology and ways of looking and emptiness. We're really talking about practices which are real arts to develop.

If one just tries it, it's unlikely that it will have any effect to just regard things as empty or not real, unless it really means something—unless I'm very clear what it means and I have ground or reason. So if I just regard something as empty while I'm paying attention to it, unless that word "empty" really means something, and unless I have really good grounds or reasons to believe that it's empty based on my experience, based on something—an understanding, an insight I've really consolidated through practice—it won't do anything. It's just a word. You might as well say "octopus" or something.

So these ways of looking need to be understood by us. What does it mean? What's involved? What's the subtext in that way of looking? And we need to have confidence in that subtext, in what it means. I have confidence. There's a real grounding in my being. There's a real reason why I can sense something, pay attention to something, and at the

same time as I'm paying attention to it, regard it as empty. That has to be based on a clear understanding and a solid, consolidated foundation of understanding through experience.

I know it's empty. I know why it's empty. I know why I think it's empty - why I know it's empty.

Secondly, and related to what I said earlier, we're not talking about big, chunky, gross philosophical ramblings rumbling through the mind. We're not talking about thinking about things. We're talking about a way of looking. These understandings, these convictions, these clarities are very subtly woven into the way of looking, so that the way of looking itself is very delicate, very agile. We're actually sensing things that way. We're not busy thinking about some philosophy.

That ability to convert clear, essentially clear philosophical understanding based on experience into a very delicate and agile and subtle way of looking - a way of sensing something in any of the six senses - takes practice to develop, usually almost always.

But I would say, I wonder if there's anything in life, anything in existence, anything that we could spend our time developing in the interval between birth and death - is there anything more worth it than developing ways of looking? If I want the fullest, deepest, widest liberation, I think that comes through liberating ways of looking: the liberation of ways of looking, the development of ways of looking, of a range of ways of looking. Because that will open up this whole territory of emptiness.

We could say, in the end, what liberation is - as well as the liberation of suffering - is the liberation of ways of looking. In other words, ways of looking become available to us. We're not imprisoned. We're not constrained. There's liberation from the prison of only certain fixed ways of looking at things, only certain fixed relationships with the world and perceptions of self, other, world, time. So full liberation is a liberation of ways of looking - liberation into accessibility of ways of looking. And of course, that enables more liberation from suffering.

But even more, if I want the fullest, deepest, widest love - not just liberation, but if I want the fullest, deepest, widest love - then if I follow that love, if I follow the eros, if I follow the metta, and I pay attention to the ways of looking, it naturally opens. And then I practice those ways of looking. What that does is it increases the metta, increases the eros. And because of that, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, the soul-making dynamic, is ignited further, galvanized further, opens further.

There's more eros, but more psyche and logos. I'm trying to say that as image. There's more sense of things. The sense of things opens up. They show us more aspects. We can see sense levels of them, other perceptions of them - psyche. And logos - the whole idea, the whole conception of things, the perception, the conception. Psyche and logos: the perception, conception of things opens up. And in that opening up of psyche and logos, of perception and conception, idea of things, that can stimulate the eros even more. There's more ways of looking opened up. The whole thing opens up through following the ways of looking that we find are there when there is eros, and when there is metta or karuṇā. And then developing those ways, looking at what opens up further, further, further, further.

We've explained this many times in the Ecology of Love series of talks - how the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic works, how the soul-making dynamic works in the opening up of love, basically, to whole other levels, whole other domains, whole other spread, range.

So if we want the fullest, deepest, widest liberation: ways of looking. If we want the fullest, deepest, widest love: ways of looking. If we want also the fullest, deepest, widest meaningfulness and beauty in our existence, in our life - the sense of meaningfulness and beauty - if we want that to be the fullest, the richest, the deepest, the widest, again, trusting that perception of meaningfulness and beauty enough to discern what are the ways of looking that are there when those senses are around of meaningfulness and beauty. And there will be many. And then practicing them. And what that does again is open up further the sense of soul-making. Meaningfulness and beauty are integral to soul-making.

And that will open up further the sense of beauty, and suggest, open up more ways of looking. This is all just part, again, of how the soul-making dynamic works.

It's a general principle here. If we want something—whether it's to understand emptiness, whether it's liberation, whether it's love, whether it's soul-making—we need to practice ways of looking that lead to that. Practice ways of looking in ways that lead to understanding emptiness, to a sense of liberation, to love, to a sense of soul-making.

And then what those ways of looking deliver—understanding emptiness, liberation, love or soul-making—those deliverances will also open us to more ways of looking or deliver to us a greater range of ways of looking. We practice ways of looking as powerful means to open to what it is that we want, whatever that is, what we want deeply: emptiness understanding, liberation, love, soul-making dynamic, soul-making generally.

And then we let that opening that the ways of looking have delivered—we let that, or it will, open up more ways of looking. That's how the soul-making dynamic works. It's how liberation works. It's how an understanding of emptiness works. Practice ways of looking to get X, and then let X deliver to us, suggest to us, open for us even more ways of looking.

Sometimes I think there's nothing more worthwhile in life than developing the whole notion and idea of ways of looking.

As I said, let me just revisit this point. It's quite easy to hear about the ways of looking approach and hear about emptiness and how they relate, and jump to certain conclusions before we've practiced it, or even start—get off on the wrong foot in our understanding. So a few things here, particularly with regard to ethics.

Someone might hear the teachings about emptiness and start, so to speak, at the end, as if they're being asked to believe something—which is that everything, all things are empty. They might hear that or read it: all things are absolutely empty. And then they've forgotten about the whole ways of looking thing and they just interpret as if they're being asked to believe something, that all things are empty. Whereas that's a conclusion.

So in practice, we don't start by believing anything like that. We don't start with the conclusion, because someone who would start in such a way would understandably have the concern: but then I wouldn't care, or nothing would matter, and what about ethics and that sort of thing if everything's empty? They're trying to understand it from their usual conventional point of view without really understanding it, which can only really come about through practice.

Rather, we start with these two notions that I mentioned before. Start with the possibility that there is the possibility of a range of ways of looking—that's part of what it is to have a human mind and heart, a human citta. And secondly, that we explore the fabrication of suffering, of self, and other through different ways of looking.

And that exploration, as I said, is an open-ended, experiential, and experimental inquiry, without pre-deciding the limit of fabrication, or without pre-deciding that fabrication just ends here—thank you very much, it doesn't go down to all that deep fading business and that mystical stuff—without pre-deciding that. Or nor, without pre-deciding that everything is empty and everything is an illusion. Even though we might be told that may be the conclusion, we don't know what that means yet, and it would be silly to start with a conclusion that we don't really understand. Let's keep it open and find out.

Just take those two ideas: the possibility of flexibility of ways of looking and the extension of that range, and this idea of fabrication of suffering, self, and other. And then open-ended, experimental, experiential inquiry without pre-deciding either way.

So that should allay, to a certain extent, someone's fears around: well, you're asking me to believe this and that everything is empty, and that, to me, implies that I'm not going to care or nothing matters or ethics won't matter, etc.

But a few more things that it's important to say here. Emptiness ways of looking—in other words, ways of looking that see something or see experience, phenomena, objects, to some level or other as empty—any emptiness ways of looking is just a way of looking which we can pick up and put down. In other words, it's not an ultimate truth. It's not somewhere to park your way of looking as if we could forever stay in a certain way of looking. The whole thing is flexible and it needs to keep a range and flexibility. We pick up and put down emptiness ways of looking.

So sometimes we want to put down emptiness ways of looking and pick up a rarefied view of self, of other, of suffering, of this or that, of some ethical situation, even of something like responsibility in an ethical misdemeanor.

So how do we decide what we pick up and put down in terms of a way of looking? Well, we're responsive to what's needed. And in Buddha Dharma, we base our choice of way of looking in any moment on what reduces suffering. In soul-making Dharma, our choice is based on what opens up the soul-making. Suffering, if we're basing it on the reduction of suffering, is of self, of other, and world.

But emptiness ways of looking are things we pick up and put down. They're not—now I'm going to all the time be in this emptiness ways of looking or this view of the emptiness of all things and I'm sort of stuck there and how will the ethics come in and things like that. So that's the second point, very important.

The third point again relates to the fact that understanding emptiness or exploring emptiness through the ways of looking approach is probably more unusual. And what's more common, perhaps, is that emptiness is equated not with the kind of understanding that comes out of the whole journey through the ways of looking approach, but rather emptiness is equated with either a sort of big empty space in which appear just insubstantial objects without much self or personality, it seems, or much doing—and that's often someone's understanding of emptiness.

Or a second understanding can be: emptiness kind of refers to just a sort of machine-like process of the aggregates, the five aggregates of being.

Body, vedana, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. What's really empty is the self itself. Here emptiness means impermanence—impermanent—because there is just the impermanent moment-to-moment arising and passing of that process of aggregates in time, a bit like a machine. And that's what emptiness means to some people, or that's a common view.

So either it's a big empty space of insubstantiality—not much self, not much doing it seems—or it's this kind of emptiness of the self which actually relates to the impermanent nature of the aggregates as a process in time. But neither of those two understandings or views of emptiness has any obvious connection with dependent arising, nor does it easily bring out the connection with dependent arising and also with karma, which are two sides of the same thing—dependent arising and karma. So those two views of emptiness make the connection not obvious.

However, one of the reasons one might want to explore emptiness through the ways of looking and fabrication paradigm is that if we start with those notions—ways of looking and fabrication—then dependent arising is woven in always, right from the beginning. That's totally what we're exploring, what we're paying attention to. Dependent on this way of looking, dependent on this mind-state-attitude relationship that's all woven into the way of looking, dependent on this way of looking, then suffering and self and other and world arise and appear a lot, a little, or like this or like that, dependent on the way of looking. Dependent arising is woven into it.

So even something like generosity becomes a way of looking. When I'm generous, the self, other, world arise a certain way. I feel myself a certain way. If I really practice generosity, if I really am very generous and open-hearted, then I'll notice something about how self, other, world appear—if I really take it on as an inquiry. And also that suffering gets reduced through generosity in the now, in the giving. I mean, of course, you can have some suffering because you've given so much that you're afraid, etc. But generally speaking, one really explores it over time with wisdom. One sees that basically generosity becomes—we could call it—a way of looking. You see how expansive that term is.

But when there's generosity, I sense things, I sense self, other, world a certain way, and suffering is reduced. When there's the opposite, the absence of generosity—when there's, let's say, stinginess—then self, other, world get fabricated very differently: more separate, more contracted, more hard, more solid, and suffering increases.

So in this way of working with emptiness, the ways of looking approach and fabrication approach to emptiness, then ethics is integrated into emptiness right from the beginning. It's unavoidable. The approach integrates karma into our understanding of emptiness unavoidably. We see it, we know it, we feel it firsthand. And as we go deeper, we see the world is different, dependent on the way of looking.

Those other two understandings of emptiness that I mentioned briefly—the sort of big space of insubstantiality and the sort of moment-to-moment arising and passing of aggregates—it's possible, or rather it's more possible that they can lead to a kind of moral nihilism. One might assume, well, there's no self there, therefore there'll be no selfishness. There's no self in that machine-like process of the aggregates in time—momentary arising and passing—nor is there much self in that big empty space. And with less self, there's less selfishness.

So one might think, oh, they should help with morality, and maybe they will. But neither actually—is there much of a world there, and the effects of ways of looking and of actions kind of get dissolved and not noticed in that big space or in the kind of microscopic, myopic attention to the momentary arising and passing. And then it might well be that ethics needs supplementation by separate teaching, separate teaching about sila. Because it's not quite clear what these understandings of emptiness have to do with ethics.

This is also the case a lot in the Tibetan tradition, how they emphasize repeatedly the importance of ethics almost as a separate domain than the understanding of emptiness. It's like it gets re-emphasized as if—don't forget about karma. Karma is more important than shunyata, the Dalai Lama would say.

So sometimes either their approach to emptiness is not coming through the ways of looking fabrication dependent arising paradigm—it's coming through an analytical approach where one just analyzes logically to see that things can have no inherent existence—or it's coming through some level of a big space approach to emptiness. And then those two approaches too will need this kind of supplementary teaching on ethics, because it's not at all obvious what the connection is, and there's a danger of nihilism. It's not wrapped up—the way appearances arise dependently, and arise as this or that, as well as suffering, nor the fact of arising, that it arises dependently on the way of looking. No clinging, no arising. No avijja, no arising.

But in the ways of looking fabrication approach—the ways of looking approach to emptiness—there may be no need for extra ethical teaching in terms of basic ethics, because experience through the practice teaches ethics and karma through inquiry into ways of looking, fabrication, dependent arising. It's right there.

I remember interviews really quite some years ago, and someone came in for the interview, and as part of it he said, "Well, you know, this view you have about the non-reality of things and emptiness, that really is challenging." And he was a bit concerned about it, but he couldn't quite make the challenge himself. But he said, "It's just not right, it's not right." Now, I know that he was very concerned about things like climate change. So I can't remember how the conversation panned out because he had never practiced ways of looking, etc.

I don't remember exactly how that conversation unfolded, since he had never practiced ways of looking. But it would have been worth examining among dharma teachers who are the ones who seem less engaged with social justice or environmental issues—the very things he cared about. His concern was that if you hold this notion of the emptiness of things, it becomes dangerous to caring about climate and other urgent matters.

Yet he knew I was deeply concerned with climate issues and quite active in environmental work. Rather than dismissing the emptiness view, he might have asked a more penetrating question: How is it that you can understand the emptiness of things and still be so dedicated to climate and environmental issues, working so diligently to raise consciousness about them? That would have been far more appropriate.

If we look carefully at who thinks, practices, teaches, and talks in terms of the deepest and most comprehensive emptiness, we find they are often people with deeply engaged practice—their conception and practice of dharma extends naturally to engagement with social justice and ecological issues. Meanwhile, those who hold the most realist views, contrary to this person's easy assumption that non-realist views create problems, often show less engagement when we examine their actual practice.

Even if someone doesn't completely grasp the whole deep and comprehensive emptiness teaching firsthand, if they're drawn to it, it will still guide their philosophy and what they aspire to realize in practice. The comparison reveals something profound.

To put this whole matter more clearly: the coexistence of deep, thorough emptiness view with radical, long-term commitment to engagement should have led him to question his fears and assumptions that emptiness gives rise to moral nihilism.

We might also reflect—and I'll speak more about ethics in future talks—that it's not the non-reification or seeing the emptiness of things that leads to lack of ethical care. That's the common assumption, as this person made. But really, it's reification that

leads to harm: reification of self as a center of gravity for acquisition, reification of other, reification of objects we want as real things that will give us something. That's what leads to unethical behavior.

With non-reification of self and other, the impulses to acquire things harmfully actually decrease. This deserves deeper reflection, and I'll return to speak more about ethics later.

It's very easy to misunderstand or only partially grasp this whole understanding of emptiness and the ways of looking approach, or to drag other assumptions into it. Bertrand Russell wrote something I read recently—I'm not sure of the context, though he sounds rather ticked off and judgmental: "A stupid man's report of what a clever man says can never be accurate, because he unconsciously translates what he hears into something he can understand."

I don't know the context, and it does sound judgmental, but the general point is well-taken. As human beings, it's easy for us to read or hear something subtle and sophisticated and simply squeeze it into the box of what we already understand or know. We chop bits off, shave away parts, turn things around, squeeze and change their relationships so they fit into our existing framework of understanding.

This business of emptiness is deep and subtle. Throughout Buddhist history, there's been tremendous care around emptiness teachings, and also around tantric and vajrayana teachings. Great care about who receives them and how they need to be set up. Tantric teachings have parallels, similarities at least, with soul-making dharma teachings.

Do we really need to take care that both the emptiness and the soul-making are not misunderstood, distorted, twisted, only partially understood, or grasped at a superficial level? That we don't get sloppy with all this? I think so. Throughout the history of Buddha-dharma, through millennia until very recently, there's been tremendous care around how and when teachings are given and disseminated.

It's possible for us to be sloppy in our understanding of emptiness. It's subtle, sophisticated, and runs very, very deep. For example, when asked what emptiness means, we might say it means there is no real way anything is. But that fact of emptiness—that there is no real way anything is—does not entail that a thing can be anything. The absence of a real way things are doesn't mean anything can be anything.

Put slightly differently: the fact that there is no way a thing really is does not imply that there is no way it really isn't. It's not simply saying, "Oh, things are empty, therefore anything can be anything," or "a thing can be anything." This is subtle and sophisticated territory.

So I really think it's important not to be sloppy with all this business about emptiness. We're talking about a very refined understanding. And that middle way of emptiness is really a razor's edge—a very fine line between nihilism and realism. You need to take care not to be sloppy.

Some people say—this is not so much sloppiness, but just a little more precision is needed—I've heard several times someone say, "We need to understand emptiness before we practice soul-making dharma, because otherwise we're going to reify the images." A couple of things here.

First of all, not necessarily. I don't think James Hillman was reifying his images. Very much the sense I get from reading him was that he was really interested in that territory of as-if, what we would call neither real nor not real—the imaginal middle way. And I don't think he had any training in emptiness or Buddhist philosophy or anything like that. It's more almost an aesthetic disposition, more an intuitive understanding of what the imaginal involves.

But secondly, and more importantly, the non-reification of images involves more than just seeing that they're empty. It involves the recognition of their different ontological status than the ontological status of conventionally agreed upon objects or material things or emotions.

So emptiness is something that applies to all objects. It applies to, like we said at the beginning, this solid desk—it's empty of inherent existence. But it also applies to the dream your daughter had of a monster chasing her that came out from under her bed, as it applies to an imaginal image in meditation. Emptiness applies to all objects. It's not enough of an ontological assessment here.

What we need to do is understand that an image, an imaginal image, has a different ontological status. It's not just that it's empty. There's a different ontological status than conventionally agreed upon material objects. So that if that lion in the image wants to rip me apart and eat me and devour me, I understand in the meditation that there is a different ontological status than were it a real lion—but they're both empty. So there's something we need to understand a bit more precisely. It's not just the fact of emptiness that allows us to navigate imaginal practice. Different ontological status of images and conventional objects, but both empty.

When it comes to emptiness practice, and something I've said recently that I want to highlight again, is I think eros is really needed. We really need to be erotically curious about emptiness and the practice. We need to be passionately interested and excited even. You know, the necessity of eros for practice is actually the necessity of eros in life and in helping with all kinds of things—something we should emphasize.

So I think of someone I know, she's probably 85, and she has never trained her mind in meditation, not interested in any of all that. She's 85 and she has some physical dukkha, but a fair amount of mental dukkha in relationship to her physical dukkha and other things. But she has never trained her mind. So her reactivity is going to be more than someone who has trained their mind through mindfulness and meditation. And she's got lots of habits of the citta, habits of the way she relates to things, that are not going to really help, that will actually increase her dukkha.

So you'd think, okay, mindfulness will help her, training in mindfulness will help her, and undoubtedly it will. But I have a question: is it mindfulness that would help her the most? Because this person is also, I would say, not actually deeply interested in anything. And I've known her for quite some years, and I would say that she's never really been deeply interested in anything.

So she's been happy enough in her life, periods of less happy and all that. And now she's getting old. She is old. There's more mental dukkha. But is it the mindfulness that would actually help her most? Because she's also not deeply interested in anything. There's very little, in other words, eros in her life—eros to this deep interest in something that would give her life soulfulness, meaningfulness, beauty, vitality. In that, there'd be an increase in well-being and happiness.

So which is the more important ingredient? The mindfulness or the eros? The eros is really, really important in life.

In relationship to suffering, yes, eros cuts, but without it, a life without eros will inevitably have some form of depression in it.

To get back to what I was saying before, I think emptiness practices need to be fueled by eros, by a kind of erotic curiosity and excitement. They will be much more profoundly and widely helpful and liberating if one is really interested in emptiness, excited and passionate about it, loves it, loves exploring it. Instead of emptiness and emptiness practices just being a set of techniques to reduce suffering—which they can be regarded as: "Look at this this way, practice this way of looking and there will be

much less suffering"—but if they're just related to as a set of techniques to reduce suffering and decrease unhelpful cognitive patterns, I don't think we're going to get all the wide, deep, liberating juice out of it.

Actually, we could say that with any practice—mindfulness, metta, generosity, compassion—we need eros for that practice.

In the Mahayana suttas, I'm pretty sure it's from the different Prajnaparamita suttas but maybe other places as well, they say things like: a bodhisattva only teaches emptiness to those whose hair stands on end when they hear about it. They're so excited. Or they shed tears of joy or being moved, even if they don't understand it. It's only to those people. In other words, emptiness—the teachings of emptiness and the practice of emptiness—are not being set or received in fertile ground if it's coming with, "Oh, I should practice emptiness. My dharma friends are into it, or they say it's the best thing. Emptiness is the best, or emptiness is necessary. You can't be a proper practitioner if you don't practice it, or it's advanced, so my ego gets a certain boost or gratification in practicing that level of teachings."

All that will be a dry soil, an unfertile soil.

Practice of emptiness, practices of emptiness, inquiry into emptiness, exploration of it, needs eros. Absolutely. I think to be really fertile, it's the juice, it's the moisture, the water in the soil that allows it to be fertile. And it's that eros that also will prevent us being sloppy with it. We're not satisfied. The eros wants to go to more refined understanding, a more subtle understanding, a more careful and precise understanding of emptiness. So again, care with the sloppiness.

Care, as well as I said before, in regard to the ethics question, care not to start with a conclusion about emptiness. So someone—I had a question from someone a while ago that ended up on my desk and they were asking about trauma. And they were saying, "Well, in your book *Seeing That Frees*, basically, or the book *Seeing That Frees* is basically saying that trauma is empty, whereas there was another book they were reading and it was basically saying that trauma is real and it's neurologically wired and it's a real physical factor." And then the phrase they used was "the body keeps the score."

So you get these two views. Either it's empty—which was attributed to, "That's what *Seeing That Frees* says, that's what Rob is saying, it's just empty"—or this other view: it's a real thing. It's an absolutely real thing, and it's real because it's neurologically wired. You can't get away from the physical reality of that.

So why not bring a bit more care and openness and subtlety to the investigation here? This is a really, really important investigation. Why not acknowledge some dependence—there must be at least some dependence of the experience of trauma on factors in the present? So here's this traumatic event or series of events, maybe even series over a long time, and just acknowledge that how that arises for me, its effect in the present, how it comes up in the present, depends on factors in the present. It depends whether it's met by love, met by warmth, met by spaciousness, or whether it's met by harshness and judgmentalism and contraction and all kinds of other assumptions and all kinds of things. There's some dependence. We must know. Everyone must agree on that.

The experience of trauma, how I actually experience it in this moment, depends to some extent on factors in the present. And maybe just start with that without assuming either of those other extreme views. "Rob says trauma is empty," or the extreme view of "it's a real thing, the body keeps the score, it's an absolutely hardwired real thing." That's not what I'm saying, by the way, that one extreme view. It's not what *Seeing That Frees* says or the way it approaches it anyway.

But why not just start with some—acknowledge there's some dependency of the actual experience of trauma on factors in the present? The experience of trauma depends, to some degree, on factors in the present. And then, just start with that, and then keep exploring. Exploring with practice and with ways of looking without presupposing either extreme view.

Or again, presupposing how much or where is the limit of the effect of conditions in the present on trauma. Same principle. Keep it open. Keep it an investigation. Don't jump to either a realist or a nihilist view—what the Buddha called extreme views. The middle way is the middle between extreme views.

What else is trauma after all but an experience? We don't talk about trauma if it's gone completely and there's no experience, it has no effects whatsoever in the present. Trauma is its effects in the present. So that's what we're talking about.

This is really, really important. You're just starting with the idea—a very gentle, open idea. I don't know. They must be somewhat dependent on present factors. This experience of trauma must be somewhat dependent on factors in the present. Let's find out how much. That would be a ways of looking approach. And the way I would teach it is to find out. Find out. Just keep going. If you come to an absolute, that's it, okay. But find out. Because it also might be the case... I'm just pursuing this particular theme around trauma, that other factors are at play here.

So again, rather than argue between two views that are kind of absolute, abstract—abstract by which I mean they're taken as positions by belief rather than experiential inquiry—rather than argue between two views that are extreme with regard to trauma, either that it's an inherently existent, unbudgeable reality of the body and nervous system, on the one hand, or that it's empty on the other hand, it would be much more helpful to start with what should be quite obvious: that traumatic experiences will vary differently and have very different effects dependent on the attitudes, habit patterns of mind, heart, will, soul, and relationality that accompany them.

And those habit patterns might have been already established as habits before the occurrence of the traumatic incidents. This person might already have had, before this traumatic series of incidents, a quite strong tendency to aversion. Might already have entrenched, unfortunately, a habit towards what we might call laziness—a habit towards easily collapsing psychically, in terms of her strength and power and uprightness. Might also unfortunately have a lack of wisdom and a habitual avoidance of challenge, an avoidance of the unpleasant that became inculcated as a habit into the life, into the mind and being. Might have developed in many areas a weak will, and yet in other areas a kind of stubborn will.

All these pre-constituted habits and factors may be part of determining—more than the actual traumatic incidents themselves—how the trauma and its effects play out in her life over decades. It's not so much the trauma; it's the fact that those traumatic incidents landed in a soil that was already teeming with not-so-helpful ingredients. And they were habitual ingredients. So when the trauma comes up again—which again is already a presupposing notion—when it comes up again, it meets those same unhelpful habits, and it plays out in the soil of those unhelpful habits, and they create a really much more difficult soup.

Which bits the trauma? Which bits the pre-existing habit that was developed? So there's a lot to inquire into, and sometimes we're too quick, too sloppy in saying either our trauma is just empty, don't look at the past, or just giving it some kind of inherent reality without looking carefully enough at conditions. And it's exactly looking at conditions and what we can do with conditions in the present, including insight ways of looking, including bringing other factors in—it's exactly that that's going to help.

So how can I help in the present ends up being the same inquiry as what's inherently existent here. They go together because of the whole ways of looking approach. Because in the ways of looking approach we're interested in what gives rise to more suffering here, what locks suffering into place right now in this moment, and what decreases suffering. So the whole inquiry into ontology and into reality is totally connected with the

inquiry into what's helpful with regard to my suffering. Sometimes people again have the idea of emptiness as being something very abstract or not really relevant to their life, but it's really not.

Another thing people sometimes—or it's tempting, again very understandably tempting to do—is to equate the understandings of emptiness with the understandings of quantum physics. So the understanding of emptiness, ways of looking paradigm with the understanding of quantum physics. Again, this is very tempting. There's certainly some really, really interesting parallels, I think, and fruitful parallels. But I think we have to be a little careful here, partly because physics as a discipline can change, and trends in physics can change at any time. What Thomas Kuhn calls paradigms in physics can change at any time, and then change back.

So we have to be a little careful with equating the two and then using quantum physics as a sort of foundation where our understanding of emptiness depends on quantum physics or our belief in emptiness depends on quantum physics. I know I've talked about it in the past and I think it's really interesting, but it's more wanting to use those understandings to really shake up and shake loose and challenge the kind of usual assumptions and beliefs about reality, which often boil down to beliefs about material reality and the way it must exist independent of the observer, in a kind of Cartesian, Newtonian way. And really wanting to expose and shake up those assumptions and beliefs in response to what can often be—and even in the history of the Buddha Dharma, there's a sense of—the outrage at hearing emptiness teachings, the conclusions that a practical expression of emptiness yields.

So Einstein, as many of you might know, was very, very opposed to the whole implications of quantum physics. This idea that the moon doesn't really exist, or the moon isn't really there until you look at it. It's not there when we aren't looking. That seems to be what quantum mechanics, quantum physics is implying. And in various ways over many years, he tried to expose the flaws in quantum physics. But every time he failed. And at one point he teamed up with two other guys, Podolsky and Rosen, and they came up with a kind of thought experiment that seemed to really undermine the framework of quantum physics and this idea that things might not exist independently of our way of looking, of our observation.

And then, after he died—yes, it must be after he died—a physicist called David Bell came up with a way that one might actually decide whether Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen were right or whether quantum physics was right. And then I think after David

Bell died, a French physicist called Alain Aspect devised an experiment and was actually able to test it. And what it found were two results that are kind of not really arguable with.

One is that in some instances, non-locality is a fact of nature. Two particles are somehow woven together. They can affect each other, or it seems they can affect each other, across massive distances of space instantaneously, faster than the speed of light. In other words, space isn't quite what it seems to be. But the second one, for our purposes—interestingly, that first one is the second one for our purposes—is that quantum particles do only become real, become only this or that when we observe them. So this was a result of this experiment by Alain Aspect. Quantum particles are actually only real when we observe them.

And Einstein was really clinging to his preferred beliefs regarding reality, regarding nature, regarding the cosmos. Again, this is like, how passionate am I about wanting to go deep with these questions? And also the importance of recognizing what is it that I want to be true, which I've talked about a lot before.

Well, so in the—I've said this before, but the Schrödinger wave equation is a complex mathematical equation in abstract mathematical multidimensional space. And in a way, it describes what we will see, or the probability of what we will see when we look in certain ways at subatomic particles. When we look, we see something. And dependent on how we look, we see this or that, a wave or a particle, etc. But the Schrödinger equation kind of depicts, if you like, what exists when we're not observing. But it's not really something we could call real in the sense that it doesn't depict a thing that exists in time. As I said, it's an abstract mathematical equation in multidimensional space. It's as if there's a kind of indefiniteness of matter, an indeterminacy of matter before observation.

So again, there are parallels here to the ways of looking and emptiness understanding that I would like to offer. It's not saying there is the complete non-existence of matter. Matter is a complete illusion. It's just a mental projection. Some spiritual teachings say that. There is no matter. Matter is just purely mind. What the ways of looking and this emptiness approach and other approaches to emptiness stress much more is not that there's nothing there at all, there is no matter, but that it's dependent on the way of looking, that it forms to be anything and what it forms and where it is and all that.

So there's again a parallel between this ways of looking, understanding emptiness and certain quantum physics understandings, for example, the Schrödinger equation. Matter is—again, it's not that anything can arise, because there's no way something is,

because the Schrödinger equation is essentially indeterminate, it just gives probabilities, it doesn't then mean that anything can arise. It's not the case that it was an electron in one moment, and then when I looked in the next moment, it was the Hollywood set of Mary Poppins, or a Boris Johnson speech, or the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, or whatever. It's not the case that anything can come from something.

But matter is indeterminate, indefinite before observation—an object, a phenomenon in experience. It's indeterminate, indefinite. It's the observation, it's the looking, it's the relating to that makes it something.

And dependent on the way of looking in that moment is what we experience. So there are parallels there with quantum physics.

I think in one of those Dharma seminars recently—maybe it was one on ontology, I can't remember—but ontology is basic and unavoidable in life. Again, when we talk about ontology and emptiness, we're not talking about abstract philosophies. We're not talking about something that only is really relevant in microscopic, super-advanced physics or whatever. Ontology—views and beliefs about reality—are basic and completely unavoidable in life.

As I said, you would have a very different response, a different kind of concern, if your daughter reported, when she came down for breakfast in the morning, that there was a monster under her bed in the night and was chasing her. You would have a very different concern if you just thought that's a dream. Maybe some of you would be concerned what it meant about her unconscious and whatever psychological problems she had. But it would be very different from the concern than if you actually thought there was some kind of monster there, or a bear, or a tiger, or a snake, or something. So ontology is just part of our life. In every moment, we're making decisions about what's real, what's not. It's woven into our perception of everything.

That's why I said before, if you really practice and know how to practice the ways of looking and get to the point where you can engage a way of looking that holds something in attention and regards it as empty, and see what a vast, radical difference that makes to the experience of that thing compared to just the normal way of looking where there is the assumption of the reality of that thing. And that assumption of the reality is just normally woven into our experience. There's always an ontology, an ontological conception.

This is part of a larger point about there always being conception. There's always an ontology and an ontological conception woven into the perception of anything. But unless one has experienced holding, in one's way of looking, a different ontological con-

ception, practicing that, practicing with the agility of that, and seeing what it does, one probably doesn't even realize that, or one thinks it's something one doesn't realize that ontology is woven into perception. But it's inevitable, and it brings with it, of course, a hierarchy of value judgments.

I mentioned this the other day in the talk at Guy House. Again, relating to your daughter reporting a monster under her bed. Our ontological assessment brings in a certain value judgment. What do I need to do? But in practice, the hierarchy of value judgments that goes with ontology is actually constitutive and active in and as practice.

So, for example, in mindfulness practice, there's the idea communicated, the teaching communicated that papañca and story and self are somehow not real. They're fabrications. They're less real than what we might encounter as bare sensation or what is revealed with bare attention, with mindfulness or equanimity, etc. In Dzogchen and Mahamudra teachings, the nature of mind—which can be interpreted in all kinds of different ways and at different levels—is real, whereas this or that other thing is not real or less real. Or in Zen teachings, some Zen teachings, often what we know through thinking and concepts is not real.

So these ontological judgments are wrapped up with value judgments and they constitute and are active in and as practice. They get reinforced by the teachings and sort of indirectly by a kind of even non-verbal rhetoric, if we could even use such a phrase, without much philosophical or psychological unpacking, explaining, questioning, probing. But it's there.

So that, of course, in, let's say, mindfulness teachings, the relationship with image, imagination, the possible imaginal, would be, well, that's not what's there in bare attention and mindfulness. It has a much lesser status, it has a much lower place in the hierarchy of things. Occasionally it might be helpful if a person gets stuck or it might be helpful for the arising of faith. Imagine the Buddha or imagine this or that. Or if you just can't do it without mindfulness alone—as if mindfulness alone, that's the real practice. Real practitioners don't need this second-best use of the imagination, this unreal thing. That's kind of for weaklings or people who, when you hit a hard spot, you just need a little extra help.

So all these kinds of... Ontology is inevitable. It brings with it value judgments, not just reality judgments, which is what ontology means. Those reality judgments involve or imply value judgments. And all that's wrapped into practice, often in ways that, as I said, are communicated very, very strongly and repeatedly through different streams of Dharma and different styles of teaching, but not with a lot of real unpacking philosophically or psychologically.

So we need to be aware of that, I think. The importance of ontology, the importance of asking into all this, how we approach these questions and these explorations and inquiries into ontology will determine so much of what our practice is and what our practice delivers, what is legitimate and what opens for us.

So for the Buddha, I would say he was very concerned with this. Again, it's maybe popular these days to say he wasn't interested in that at all, he wasn't a philosopher, da-da-da. But I would say he was very concerned. There is, of course, his... You know, some people say there's only two suttas in the Pali Canon which address emptiness, and they've got emptiness in the title. It's the Greater and Shorter Discourses on Emptiness, or something like that. One of which isn't really about emptiness in any sense at all.

It's a strangely given title. And this reading back of Mahayana versions of emptiness as not what the Buddha originally taught is just, again, a little sloppy, a little lazy.

There are so many incidents one could point to in the Pali Canon. A lot of them are explored in *Seeing That Frees*, but there are many, many examples. When Kaccayana asked the Buddha, "What do you teach about right view?" the Buddha replied, "I teach the middle way, the middle way between is and is not. That's the middle view. Most people assume phenomena either exist—they are—or they do not exist—they are not. But I, the Buddha, teach the middle way: neither is nor is not."

What does this mean? It means the whole emptiness teaching, and it takes a lot to unpack what he means by that: neither real nor not real, neither is nor is not. It takes considerable exploration, but it's right there. And in the many investigations of dependent arising and dependent ceasing and dependent origination as a whole, it's right there.

There's a case where Sariputta is talking to a monk called Mahakotthita, and he tries to explain dependent arising. He explains how consciousness depends on nama-rupa. Nama-rupa means not just body, but the perception of forms, and perception itself, and attention, and contact, and vedana, and intention. Sariputta explains that perception and vedana depend on consciousness. Then he goes on to explain that consciousness depends on intention, perception, attention, feeling. So perception depends on consciousness, and consciousness depends on perception. Vedana depends on consciousness, and consciousness depends on vedana. Mahakotthita responds, "Excuse me, what?"

Of course, it's baffling. But Sariputta is pointing to this mutual dependency, which is exactly what we mean by emptiness. These two things—consciousness and perception—they're not two, but neither are they one. They're neither one nor two. They're empty. They're mutually empty. They're mutually dependent.

So it's there throughout, in many places in the Pali Canon. And it's, of course, tied to... the Buddha was concerned with this, and an understanding of ontology was very much tied to what he meant by liberation. It's there in his definition of right view—one of the definitions of right view. It's there completely in what he pointed to as the most central insight of his night of awakening: this dependent arising, and particularly the mutual dependent arising of nama-rupa and consciousness, of perception, vedana, and consciousness. Mutual interpenetration, mutual inseparability, mutual dependence. This causes that, but that causes this at the same time.

Dependent arising is the thing to understand, the thing that a liberated arahant understands, has penetrated. Similarly, the Buddha didn't just talk about the anatta of phenomena—that they're not me, not mine. He also used the word *sunya*: they're void. This means something different. They're void in themselves, they're empty in themselves. He gives different analogies regarding the aggregates and how they're empty of substance, empty of inherent existence.

So it's totally there in the Pali Canon, if one looks for it and knows what to look for.

Regarding awakening and emptiness, I think we need to make another point, which I've alluded to several times recently, but I'd like to draw out more fully. Someone was asking whether they just need to understand emptiness to be liberated, or whether there's a certain amount of psychological work they need to do as well. "Do I need to resolve and understand my psychological stuff?"

What's interesting is we never seem to hear anything like that in the Pali Canon about people's self-judgment or their inner critic, or their incapacity to sustain intimate romantic relationships, or their inability to commit, or their frustration at their own lack of self-expression or inauthenticity, or anything like that. There seems to be no report of that kind of dukkha in the Pali Canon.

It's also interestingly absent in, for example, the teachings of Ramana Maharshi or Nisargadatta Maharaj. You just hear these teachings about emptiness or the nature of awareness or that kind of thing. So why the absence? Is it that in the time of the Buddha in India, they just had better parenting? So people didn't have psychological issues? Or is it that the sense of self and the expectations of self and of relationship are very different now than they were in the time of the Buddha's India?

In terms of awakening and the self-view and penetrating the self-view in the first fetter of stream entry, we nowadays need and want and expect practices and realizations to address and to decrease or even eradicate that kind of suffering – the suffering around self that comes from a certain set of expectations and a certain self-sense and a certain expectations of self and of relationship. We expect, need, want practice and realization to address all that.

So I have a question: Do practices and realizations need to be different now? Or is it enough that we can just work with the emptiness? Those teachers like Nisargadatta and Ramana had very different socially constructed senses of self that they had to deal with than we do. Very different socially constructed senses of self they had to deal with in themselves and also in the issues brought to them by seekers and students. And on top of that, their role and status as constructed by Indian spiritual customs with respect to the guru – there's a whole way you are, a way you hang out with, a way you talk to the guru. There's a whole relational paradigm there. They have a certain role and status and it's determined within a certain range how you hang out with them, what you do, what you ask them for, what you expect from them, what the social situation allows and what their role and status determines.

So that meant that they also didn't have to deal with or even encounter a lot of the self-burdens and self-expectations and shapes and relational dynamics and relational expectations that most of us do. And we're expecting this one thing, this insight into emptiness, even if it's the emptiness of everything, to address what may be very different selves, different self-sense, different socially constructed self that we have nowadays in the West. Different sufferings, different challenges to address.

I can think of, and probably many of you can think of, people who seem to have had tremendous depth of practice in the past, whether it's jhānic, samādhi and emptiness understanding, but they don't seem to have much capacity or skill with, let's say, personal intimacy and personal connection. Maybe our notion of awakening needs to involve more than just insight, more than just insight into emptiness. Maybe awakening or enlightenment, or liberation, also implies certain skills with respect to the kinds of challenges that we have to address because of the society we live in, and because of the way the self is constructed differently in our society.

So yes, emptiness. Yes, it's empty. But I still have to have a certain set of skills. I have to be able – you know, if I realize that everything is empty, but I'm really insensitive in relationship, my capacity for intimacy, I just don't seem to be able to meet people and navigate that territory in terms of deep connection with people. Is that awakened? Am I satisfied with that?

So it might be, I do need to work on some of my psychological stuff, if we use that term broadly. And those kinds of skills, as well as the emptiness understanding and skill in emptiness practice, become a part of, or aspects of, a much larger thing called awakening.

But the emptiness piece delivers a lot. It really delivers a lot and it really opens up a lot. Even if it's not in itself the single thing that we can rely on and hope that everything in our life gets taken care of. But it does open a lot of doors the deeper we go into it.

So if we take it very deeply in practice, that the middle way of emptiness can, for example, open up the conceptual legitimacy and practice possibilities of flexible ways of looking and perceptions, for example, of particular divinities, not just universal sense of divinity and sacredness, of universal emptiness, but of particular divinities and particular sacrednesses that we go into with the soul-making practices. If I go deep enough in emptiness practice, it opens up the conceptual legitimacy for those, and it opens up the practice possibilities as well, for the flexibility of ways of looking and of perception that perceive particular divinity and not just universal divinity, particular sacrednesses and not just universal ones.

And actually more broadly, we could say that the realization of deep and comprehensive emptiness, really go deep, we've realized there is no ultimately true conceptual framework regarding conventional reality. There's no ultimately true way that we can explain the workings of conventional reality. Again, that doesn't equate to saying all conceptual frameworks are equally true or valid, but that there is no ultimately true conceptual framework regarding conventional reality.

And that understanding comes out of emptiness going very, very deep and very wide. That then legitimizes and opens up the possibility of a range and a flexibility of conceptual frameworks and ways of looking within conceptual frameworks. It's not just ways of looking, but whole ideas or systems of thought. We can also move between them with the same ease and flexibility and agility and lightness of touch, lightness of holding as we move between ways of looking. This comes out deep practice of emptiness. And of course, that too is very relevant to soul-making dharma, soul-making practice. It's one of the things we emphasize quite a lot.

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CHAPTER 226

The Ontology of the Soul, and the Soul of Ontology

Rob Burbea · 2h09

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines fundamental ontological questions in relation to soul-making practice. He begins by distinguishing between the imaginal middle way—a quality of images that appear neither real nor not real—and the middle way of emptiness taught by the Buddha in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta (SN 12.15). While emptiness practice aims toward precise ontological understanding through careful inquiry, imaginal practice deliberately leaves ontological questions open, allowing for multiple conceptual frameworks.*
>
> *Burbea explores how conventional truths shape our experience, examining concepts like willpower, discipline, and sacrifice through both etymological and phenomenological lenses. He suggests that what appears as mere willpower might better be understood as eros for the sacred, calling of the daemon, or duty to the angel. The talk delves into how eros itself can have ontological disclosure value, drawing on contemporary theology to argue that emotions and desire—traditionally excluded from scientific inquiry—may reveal truth when reality is understood as infinitely penetrable rather than independently existing.*
>
> *The discussion extends to fundamental questions about time, consciousness, and healing, showing how our ontological assumptions either open or limit possibilities for transformation. Burbea demonstrates how soul-making dharma necessarily rests on sophisticated ontological foundations while remaining practically accessible through the imaginal middle way.*

Let's continue on the track of ontology for a little bit, as there are several points I would like to make so we can weave them together.

The first comes up in relation to a question that someone asked: What is the difference between the imaginal middle way and the middle way of emptiness? This is an important ontological inquiry, an important ontological clarification that needs to be made here.

The middle way of emptiness was a term coined by the Buddha in the Kaccāyanagotta Sutta, which I mentioned the other day in the Pali Canon, where he answers Kaccāyana's question about right view. The Buddha says right view is his middle way, which falls between the two extreme views of "it is" or "it exists" on one hand, and "it

isn't" or "it doesn't exist" on the other hand. That's his definition of the middle way. Much more commonly, what most people are familiar with is the Buddha defining the middle way as between sensual indulgence—indulgence in sense pleasures—and hardcore asceticism on the other hand.

But there's a second meaning of middle way that the Buddha used in the Pali Canon, and that second meaning became the primary meaning in the Mahāyāna teachings. Nāgārjuna and others picked up on this, and you could say the whole elaboration and profundity and sophistication and breadth of the teachings on emptiness in the Mahāyāna, Prajñāpāramitā and Vajrayāna comes really out of that couple of sentences exchange in the Pali Canon between the Buddha and Kaccāyana, where the Buddha uses the term middle way as an ontological kind of teaching. It really has to do with emptiness, although he doesn't use the word empty or emptiness in that exchange. It's still what we're talking about when we use those terms empty and emptiness.

So there's the middle way of emptiness. And then in the soul-making teachings, when we talk about the nodes of the lattice or the elements or the aspects of the imaginal, we also have something called the imaginal middle way. What's the difference between these two? Because they've got similar sounding titles, are they the same? Are they different? Well, they're different, and it's important to actually clarify this.

That element of the lattice we call imaginal middle way, we can also call "theatre-like quality," and we do, or "neither real nor not real." Those are perfectly adequate synonyms and adequate terms for what we mean by the imaginal middle way. So all three—imaginal middle way, theatre-like quality, neither real nor not real—they're all saying the same thing.

As an element of the imaginal, it is, like the other elements of the imaginal, primarily a description of the qualities of the imaginal realm. Something we notice, something noticed or empirically observed that is characteristic of images when they are more fully imaginal. That's how the whole elements teaching arose. It was really me trying to pinpoint the flavor of the terrain, the flavor of the realm, what's characteristic of the realm of the imaginal. Because it's clear to me that images that I would call imaginal had different sets of qualities and implications and aspects than images used in other ways or in other systems, whether it's Ridwan or other psychologies or other approaches.

I was trying to designate, to pinpoint what's the difference. As such, what was involved was simply a sort of hanging out with an image in the mundus imaginalis, in the imaginal realm—and even that, the mundus imaginalis is Corbin's term, and so we're using it differently, the word imaginal, than he used it, which is different than how Hill-

man used it. But it was really hanging out and then just noticing these subtle differences or subtle characteristics of what I would call images that are more fully imaginal in contrast to images that are not really what we would call imaginal.

So it's a description, an observation, something we notice. And in that, this imaginal middle way is quite a wide designation. Theatre-like quality, neither real nor not real—it's quite broad, like the other elements. The word itself, the concept itself, the designation and pinpointing itself needs to allow room to be able to stretch. I'll come back to that in a minute—to be able to stretch, to broaden, to have soft and elastic edges. It's quite a wide designation.

In contrast, when we talk about the emptiness middle way, the middle way of emptiness that the Buddha was talking about and Nāgārjuna and others picked up on, the emptiness middle way is the result of a very careful, usually long ontological inquiry in practice and in conception. In other words, after practicing with emptiness practices or ways of looking or analytical practices, after really thinking it through and thinking it through in a very subtle way, and bringing together philosophy with practice and conceptual work, meditative practice and conceptual work, what results is the middle way of emptiness. It's the result of that ontological inquiry.

While we can and we do entertain various ontological systems and conceptual frameworks when we practice the imaginal and sensing the soul, there is not one ontology or ontological view that we are aiming towards, that we are hoping to arrive at or adopting exclusively. The imaginal middle way leaves ontological inquiry out of the forefront of imaginal practice and sensing the soul practice.

So emptiness and the middle way is a result of an ontological inquiry, and in imaginal practice we're leaving that aside. We might do it beforehand or around it, but the actual imaginal practice doesn't involve ontological inquiry.

And there's no one ontology that we're hoping to arrive at and claim as our definitive position. Of course, and I'll return to this, ontological inquiries may themselves become soul-making for some people at certain times. This whole question of ontology becomes very exciting for the soul, and thus images and fantasies naturally build up around and in relation to ontological inquiries and ontological ideas. It's also the case that the soul-making dynamic, the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, will eventually shake up and expand whatever ontologies we profess or hold. But still, ontological inquiry is not primary in imaginal or sensing with soul practice. We are not seeking an answer to an ontological question there, whereas in emptiness practice we are. We want to come to the answer, the truth about the fact of emptiness—the universal truth there.

As emptiness practices and understandings deepen and refine, the emptiness middle way becomes clearer and in a sense narrower. It's more like a razor's edge. It's very fine, this position between "it is" and "it is not," "it exists" and "it does not," "neither real nor not real." From the emptiness point of view, the emptiness middle way becomes clearer and much more like a razor's edge. In other words, the tendencies towards nihilism—"it's not real, this isn't real, nothing's real"—on the one hand, and reification—"it's real, it is, it really exists"—on the other hand, these two extreme views that the Buddha pointed to, and which the Mahayana picks up on extensively, these tendencies are gradually diminished as we go deeper with emptiness practice and understanding. As our understanding comes closer and closer to the narrow tightrope of the middle way of emptiness.

To contrast, the imaginal middle way is not such a precise or narrow concept. Partly because the whole imaginal process admits various ontologies or ontological systems, as we've pointed out several times and illustrated in different talks. So it's less of a tightrope or a razor's edge, and more like an avenue, a wide road, a boulevard rather than a razor's edge or tightrope. Within the range of the imaginal middle way, there can be various positions of more or less reification.

The concept of the imaginal middle way, like the other concepts in soul-making dharma, has soft and elastic edges. Still, starting soul-making practice with a careful emphasis on curbing the reificationist tendency, and then only later, in time, widening the range of ontological views in play—widening the range of ontological views about image or what we're sensing with soul, exploring positions at different points on the width of that broad road of the imaginal middle way—this will be the most fruitful way to progress. This order of starting with careful emphasis on curbing the reificationist tendency and then broadening out from there slowly, gradually.

If one has in the past only reified images—and that's mostly the case for those who use images in psychological or spiritual or shamanic practice, where they're usually reified—remember, even if a person says, "Well, I'm not reifying," unless they're really making it clear that they're not reifying, you can pretty much bet that they're reifying. You may not hear that word, but it takes a lot of work to not reify something.

So if one's used images in other ways, more conventional ways—psychotherapies or spiritualities or shamanic practices—and the images have been reified, then it will be very difficult to come out of that habit of reification and move towards the other side of this wide road of the imaginal middle way, to have the facility to explore a less reified

stance. If one cannot move away from the reificationist side of the road to explore the less reified road, then that whole side of the road, that whole territory of soul-making possibility won't open up.

The opposite direction of movement, from a stricter non-reifying—which is what we tend to emphasize at first—gradually to explore more reifying positions, that won't be so difficult or face so much inertia. This is because reifying is actually a normal human tendency, especially when we feel touched by an image or perception, when it matters to us, when it helps us.

A greater total territory will be accessible and open to us if we proceed gradually in this order—from emphasizing the non-reifying at first and then gradually expanding to more reified ontologies—for most people. It's all very individual, but generally speaking, this approach allows a greater total territory to become accessible if we go from emphasizing the non-reifying at first and then gradually expand to more reified ontologies that reify images more.

So the imaginal middle way, just to sum up, is really just something observed, something noticed about a quality, an aspect, a characteristic of images that are more fully imaginal. The emptiness middle way is a result of careful ontological inquiry in practice and conception. In the emptiness middle way, we're aiming for an answer, a result, to understand what that really means—it's one very narrow, razor's edge, tightrope of truth between "is" and "isn't."

In imaginal practice, we're not sticking to one ontology or ontological view, or even one ontological system. We can just as easily entertain an idea of a providential divinity, a providential dharmakāya or Buddha-nature that makes appear to us images and even events and persons in our life in response to what we need at a certain time in our path. We can entertain that kind of ontology as well as an ontology of a Buddha-nature and dharmakāya and divinity that does no such thing, that has no providence. We can equally entertain an ontology where there's no such thing as Buddha-nature or divinity or dharmakāya in any of those transcendent ways.

So we have a range of ontologies and we're not aiming at one necessarily. Ontology is not forefront in our practice. The imaginal middle way, in contrast to this narrow tightrope of truth that we're aiming for as a result of our inquiry, is a wide boulevard. We want to have freedom to take up any ontological position regarding reification at any of the points across that width of the boulevard and see what each one does.

but it might be easier if we start with the non-reification one. Because if we get too much into a habit of reifying images, it will be very hard to then open up non-reified images and all the soul realms and soul worlds that they open up.

So that's a clarification, hopefully, between the emptiness way and the imaginal way.

As far as emptiness is concerned, it's important to point out that from a strictly narrow Buddhadharma perspective, all we need to know about ontology for the sake of liberation from suffering and liberation from avijja, fundamental ignorance, is that things are thoroughly, completely empty. And that realization of emptiness needs to have woven into it, or alongside it—hopefully woven into it—an understanding that we need to respect conventional reality. There are some conventional realities that we really need to respect.

As I pointed out yesterday, if we have penetrated to that result of the emptiness Middle Way—the understanding of the thorough, deep, radical, and comprehensive emptiness of all things—if we have done that via the ways of looking approach, then ethics and karma and dependent arising of world, self, and world dependent on attitude, dependent on action, dependent on mind state, all of that is obvious and in fact woven in. It's obvious because it's woven into the very investigation into emptiness right from the beginning, as we talked about yesterday.

If we go deep enough in our inquiry into emptiness, in our penetration of the truth of emptiness, to understand the Middle Way of emptiness in its deepest and most precise sense, then we see that no-self also is just a view. We can pick it up—there is no-self—but it's just a view. It's not an ultimate truth. And the view of self becomes just as available, or available again, if you like, as the view of no-self. Emptiness is just a view. Emptiness is empty. Not-self is just a view. Self is just a view. And all of these become available as views. We are only left with ways of looking.

But from a Dharma perspective, this is all we need to know about ontology—that things are empty, because that's what liberates us from suffering and from the root cause of suffering, which is avijja. And hopefully woven into that understanding, that ontological understanding that everything is empty, we also understand the need to respect certain conventional realities, particularly around ethical consequences, karma, dependent arising in that sense. And secondly, that we have the flexibility to respect self as much as no-self, emptiness as much as not-emptiness—to not just respect but to practice and to see those ways.

So that's from a strictly Buddhadharma perspective. That's actually all we need to understand ontologically.

And if you've really gone into the question of emptiness, you will realize that even a realization, a full realization of emptiness, still leaves a lot of questions about the exact ontology of different conventional realities, of different relative truths. In the history of Buddhism, there has been vehement argument about this over 2,500 years. Certainly once you get into the Mahayana and certainly in Tibet, really quite a lot of very sophisticated and hot-blooded polemic debate around all this.

You only have to look at Mipham Rinpoche from the turn of the twentieth century, just before and into the early twentieth century, and his engagements and dialogues with other traditions, including Gelug scholars, or look at some of the writings of the Karmapas, particularly the Eighth Karmapa, Mikyö Dorjé. Especially when it comes to this question of the relationship between conventional and ultimate reality, conventional truths and the truth of emptiness, the thingness of things and the emptiness of things. This is really quite a long-standing argument. And in terms of how it then applies to Tantra as well and much else, there's a lot there that's left open and open to debate.

Some of that debate, particularly some of the things that Mipham and Mikyö Dorjé got interested in, actually bears very much on what we actually understand by the emptiness of something. So some of the areas of that argument pertain to the status of tantric deities, the ontological status of tantric deities and other things. But some of it actually pertains to what does emptiness mean? And therefore, is this version of emptiness actually liberating or not?

I've gone into this briefly, but in a fair amount of detail. It's quite a central piece of the last portions of *Seeing That Frees*, so you can find it there, and you can also find some references there if you're interested. But the main point is that even a full comprehensive understanding of emptiness still leaves questions regarding the exact ontology of conventional realities.

We could say the same might be true of, for example, quantum physics as it goes deeper. What exactly is the ontological status, the reality status of a basic particle? We think this table is made from molecules and atoms, and those are made of protons and neutrons and electrons, and then we go down—there's even more basic particles, though an electron is classified as a basic particle still. What is the reality status, what is the ontological status of those basic particles? And it's not simple.

I mentioned the other day, Niels Bohr, one of the founders of quantum physics and a Nobel Prize winner, said everything we think of as real is made up of things that we cannot think of as real. But now, even more, since his death, even space and time are regarded as emergent and not fundamental phenomena. At a quantum level, they

emerge, they're constructions, and in some sense also dependent on the observer. Einstein did some of that work with his relativity theories, and even more so at a quantum level.

So we're still left with these questions about the ontology of different conventional realities. And this is important.

When we then come to soul-making teachings, of course they cannot help stimulating such questions, or they should stimulate such questions, and they do stimulate such questions. Not for everyone, but certainly for some people. Some people will get very derisive. Some people will be too easy, perhaps too lazy and quick to just adopt a certain ontological acceptance. But it's up to them.

And I've been through all this in other talks, so I won't dwell on it too much anymore. But the questions pertain—ontological questions don't go away with regard to soul and image and soul-making. They are all empty, yes, but as I said, emptiness realization, gone all the way to the end, still leaves questions about the exact ontology of different conventional realities.

So what about the ontology of soul? This is something we've talked about quite a lot, but very briefly, just to repeat: we can define soul in a couple of ways. One is that soul is simply a kind of way of looking—or even a group of ways of looking. Soul is the collection of ways of looking that are soul-making, that open up a sense of soulfulness. That's what soul is: those ways of looking that open up the elements of the imaginal, that deliver the elements of the imaginal. Soul is just a way of looking; it's not an entity.

Or, if we want to define soul as a kind of entity, it's that entity, that instrument, that organ, so to speak, in the human being which looks in those ways—looks in those ways that open up soulfulness, that support soulfulness, that engender soulfulness and soul-making. Soul-making then, if we think of soul as an entity, is a kind of making or growing of that organ, of that instrument—a growing of its size, of its range, of its capacities, like a muscle that grows, or an organ, or a child's brain that's growing in its capacity as an entity.

So either it's not an entity—we think of it just as a kind of way of looking—or it's an entity, but that entity is just as empty as any other entity. It's just as empty as a self, and we use the language of self without too much problem in our conventional exchanges with each other, in the way we think about our lives, in the way we relate to what's actually very important in our lives. We use the language of self: "I want this, I don't want that, I really hope that, I feel this," etc.

But if we use entity language for soul, then that entity of soul is empty like self is empty. Like the aggregates are empty. Like the body is empty. Empty in itself. Empty of phenomenal existence. Empty of truly being an inherently existent thing. Vedanā is empty. Consciousness is empty. A moment is empty. All the aggregates are empty; any phenomenon is empty.

When I talked—I think it was in *The Mirrored Gates*—and began to talk about sensing the soul, actually playing a little bit with opening up the ontological considerations or possibilities of more reification, a bit more reification when we're practicing sensing the soul and the perceptions that come up with soul—that's a really interesting area as well.

So why bother to go into all that? Well, partly for our own purposes, in the sense that our conceptual framework, the whole logos of soul-making dharma, is really based in and on emptiness. It's based in ideas like create/discover, neither real nor not real, and all that. So it's rooted in that kind of—I would say—more sophisticated ontology, a participatory ontology, or an ontology of participation, rather than stark notions of independent existence, as if that's what qualifies for reality. It's based on a more sophisticated ontology, this whole logos, this whole conceptual framework of soul-making dharma.

But partly I'm explaining the ontology of soul—just briefly, just now repeating what I've said elsewhere—partly also to kind of proactively rebuff certain expected objections and critiques from either Buddhists who tend to think in a very narrow and common way, perhaps with not very well worked out ontology. I'm trying to rebuff certain objections and critiques: "Well, that's not Buddha-dharma if you're talking about soul. Didn't the Buddha say that's not something real, that's just metaphysical speculation? Any language of soul must be just metaphysical speculation, and it's the opposite of phenomenology," etc.

I've gone into this at great length elsewhere; I'm not going to repeat it too much now, except I will say a couple of things. So partly it's in response to that kind of somewhat typical or typically expected objection. And partly it's for our own purposes, because soul-making is necessarily rooted in a more sophisticated ontology and epistemology than the ones that most people in our culture are used to, and that our culture typically regards as simply: "This is what's real, that's not real, this is what's true," and it's because of this or that, in terms of independent existence, etc.—socially agreed upon perceptions.

It's interesting, if we just linger on this a little bit longer. Some people in the dharma, some expositions of Buddha-dharma, some explanations of Buddha-dharma, or simply of mindfulness extractions from Buddha-dharma, some people use reductionist materialism in a kind of obvious and explicit way. And they explain dharma and explain meditation and even explain liberation, perhaps, from those premises, from the premises of a sort of reductionist materialism. In other words, in terms of atoms and neurological networks, etc., and neurotransmitters and all the rest of it. And they explain what's happening in meditation and liberation as perhaps a change or even a kind of increased efficacy of, for example, neural pathways.

Other expositions of Buddha-dharma never mention atoms or those sorts of things, the components or the elements of reductionist materialism. They never mention them. They never perhaps even mention the classical scientific materialist worldview. But they try to present a more—what might seem to be a more phenomenological, let's put that in inverted commas—more "phenomenological" dharma or a more existential, existentialist dharma, and a more phenomenological existentialist idea of suffering, of what suffering is, what the problem is, and of what liberation from suffering is or might be.

The whole endeavor is given a more phenomenological or existential approach without mentioning scientific materialist elements or views. But when I explore such an approach more deeply, I quickly realize that this kind of phenomenology is very limited. There's only one way of looking that's admitted, and that way of looking supposedly sees the truth. This phenomenology assumes that all human beings, if they are honest and brave, will experience self and world in exactly this way. This is what such phenomenologies claim, and what many attempts at phenomenological philosophy and psychology do.

There's no place in this view for different ways of looking, no recognition that different ways of looking can open up entirely different perceptions and senses of self, world, and cosmos. Similarly, existentialist dharma rests on an assumption that the meaningless, flat cosmos of classical scientific materialism represents proven reality. It rests on reductionist, materialist ideas as a presumed background and basis, even when they're never explicitly mentioned.

It's interesting that this assumption—that reductionist materialist conceptions are irrevocably proven as fact—may be part of what gives some existential Buddhists their often haughty and unbudgeable arrogance that comes across in their stance and tone.

The problem with all this is that physics itself—the same scientific method that delivered that worldview starting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—has, as it developed, begun to bring about the crumbling of that very basis. Not just physics, but also contemporary Western philosophy has contributed to this dissolution, as has Nagarjuna's dharma and the whole Mahayana understanding of emptiness—the deeper working out of what emptiness truly means.

So that whole background view and basis—never mentioned but assumed real and relied upon—is no longer tenable or certain as truth, as the reality of things. We find ourselves in an interesting place right now in terms of Western philosophy, Buddhadharma, and certainly modern science.

I think ontology and epistemology—which naturally accompanies it—are never-ending explorations and questions. Epistemology asks: How can I trust this knowledge about what's real? What do I trust? My senses? My thinking? Scripture? Other people's opinions? I've talked about this extensively elsewhere, but I want to emphasize now that ontology and epistemology represent inexhaustible explorations and questions. I don't think humanity will ever come to the end of these inquiries, their possibilities, or the questions they raise.

Because of this never-ending quality of ontological and epistemological exploration, there can be eros for it. Ontology itself, as I alluded to earlier, can become for us an erotic, imaginal other. The whole domain, the entire inquiry, the image of oneself as ontological inquirer—all of this can become imaginal. There can be soul-making arising from that erotic-imaginal relationship with the inexhaustible nature of ontology, with ontological questions and explorations.

We can become very excited about this, deeply engaged with its possibilities for the soul. Soul-making can arise from ontology, from certain ontological views—I'll return to this point. But it can also emerge in relationship to ontology itself.

I don't remember if I said this in the Four Parables of Stone and Light series, but I was thinking: if you hear someone claim, regarding ontology or epistemology, or even concerning human emotions and ethics, that they've figured it out, that they now know the answers—in any of these areas—run a mile. I would run from such a person. Whether they claim to have come to the end of ontological inquiry, epistemological inquiry, to have fully understood what human emotions are and involve, how they arise, what they can be, or to have resolved ethical questions—I would run a mile.

Equally problematic is what's perhaps just as popular these days, especially among people influenced by some recent Western philosophy: the claim that ontology and epistemology are irrelevant. "I'm not interested in ontology or epistemology. That's all metaphysics. I put that aside. It's not relevant. It's not what the Buddha taught. It's not relevant to life." From this attitude too, I would run a mile. You should run a mile. Either of these extreme positions is, to me, deeply problematic.

I'll just say it's problematic. As I said the other day, and I've pointed out several times recently, ontology and epistemology are inevitable. They're inevitable in the very fabric of our perception—not even as big philosophical rambling inquiries with all this conceptual grinding, but they are woven in. Ontological assessments, epistemological assessments, are implicitly non-verbally, non-thinkingly woven in as conceptions into every perception we have as human beings. They're inevitable. Even if they're inconcludable questions, ontology and epistemology are inevitable.

I don't know, but I have a sense really that Western philosophy went through a phase and called itself post-metaphysical. Well, we might now be in a post-post-metaphysical phase, or just about to be, or something like that. So there's a lot here, again, that can open up soul-making, that can be soul-making for us in these inquiries, but also allow more soul-making to open up. I want to come back to that, but let's just stay with this for a while and actually bring in the connection between eros and ontology.

Let me try to convey what I'm getting at here. The scientific method attempted—it started with this attempt—to exclude affect, human affect, in other words emotion and desire (which could be regarded as an affect), from the process of inquiring into truth. When the scientific method arose in the seventeenth century and really got going, it attempted to exclude affect and desire from the process of inquiring into truth. This instigated and then installed for modernity, for modern culture, a definition of truth as partly that which is independent of the affect or desire of an observer.

So it started with that—this is our modus operandi, this is how we're going to go about things. And then that became a definition of truth. It instigated it, then it installed it. So that's how we tend to think of what is true: truth is that which is independent of the affect or desire of an observer.

But if one realizes, as one goes deeper into all these things, that there is no truth independent of the observer... Again, this seems to be very much what quantum physics, as much as some people don't like that conclusion, is concluding. It's remained unchallenged for getting on for a hundred years now. Not unchallenged, but it has re-

mained without convincing challenge at all. Some people still really don't like it. Very few people have really picked it up and inquired and opened up and looked further into its implications. But that seems to be, so far, unbudgeable.

So if one realizes there's no truth independent of the observer—similar conclusions from Western philosophies and certainly from Buddha-Dharma and emptiness and the ways of looking approach—if one realizes there is no truth independent of the observer, then the way of looking of the observer must be considered. And why then can't affect be readmitted? In my readmission of the observer and the position of the observer and what the observer does and how the observer looks, why can't I readmit affect and desire, and even eros? And perhaps they're given even equal status with any other affects. So desire and eros are given equal status with other affects. They're just all part of this idea that truth doesn't exist independently of the observer. There are just ways of looking, no ultimate truth, just ways of looking. And so there's what I see with this affect, what I see with that affect, what I see when there's eros, what I see when there's some other emotion, etc.

We can go a little bit further into this, push in a slightly different way. If the truth—put that even in inverted commas—is instead something that's infinitely penetrable... So it's not so much that there are lots of different angles on something, but it's more that truth is something infinitely penetrable, is a journey into dimensionality. And yes, we might say dimensionality and divinity—a journey of penetration, if you like, or opening to, if you want a more receptive mode, opening deeper to, opening oneself deeper to.

Then, if truth is defined that way, as infinitely penetrable and a journey, then there is no one final ultimate truth, except this general journey into more disclosures, more discoveries. And if that is what reality is—this deepening journey, never-ending journey, infinite penetrative movement—if that's what reality is, then it is exactly eros in the way that we are using that word.

Eros as we define it wants closeness, contact, wants to know, wants to connect with. And in that wanting more penetration, wanting more opening, it ignites a soul-making dynamic, and that allows more deeper penetration, the generation of more beyonds, the discovery of more facets and aspects of what it is that we're in relationship with, what our subject is, what we're penetrating.

So it's exactly eros in the way that we, in soul-making, are using that word. It's exactly eros which reveals the truth and reality. And in that case, eros is more valuable than other affects, and than an absence of affect, an emotion. You understand? Because

eros has this tendency to penetrate further. And if truth is something that's infinitely penetrable, rather than just horizontally infinite in terms of perspectives around a circle, then it's exactly eros which opens it.

And that view of truth and reality does not posit truth and reality as what is independent of the observer, independent of observing. It recognizes the profound participation of the soul in creating, discovering what is disclosed.

Creating, discovering what is disclosed. To me this is an interesting development—this idea of eros as having actual ontological value, more significant and powerful epistemological and ontological value.

The theologian and philosopher John Milbank—I'm just beginning to explore his work, and I find it fascinating, particularly the overlaps and common desires between his work in what they call the radical orthodoxy movement in Catholic theology. I know his work only a little, but there's a famous book he wrote, "Theology and Social Theory," which I've just picked up. I was reading the preface to the second edition, where he wrote about "the nihilistic vision"—what he means by this flat, purposeless cosmos of scientism, scientific materialism.

He writes that the nihilistic vision "makes its conclusions from a cold reason that disallows to the moods of eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity, and so forth, an ontologically disclosive status." This is exactly what I was saying before—affect is from the start ruled out of any definition of truth. The moods and affects of eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity are disallowed any ontologically disclosive status. They don't reveal anything to us. They don't open for us any knowledge about anything that's real. Ontologically, they disclose nothing.

But if our ontology admits a category of the real which includes our participation and creativity, our poetic response as well, then eros—and secondarily other emotions like those Milbank listed—does disclose or open up to us the truth, or we could say truths, or truth as a journey into infinitely penetrable truth, as I explained. To me this is really, really interesting.

The second point in the scientific method's starting assumptions—what was initially axiomatic in terms of methodological approach but then spread from methodological technique to become an unquestioned assumption about reality—concerns the ruling out of affect and desire. Truth becomes only what is observed in the absence of affect and desire. This has been questioned from other directions as well, but I first encountered a particular critique in reading Catherine Pickstock's book "After Writing." I

found it quite difficult to read, but she's a colleague of John Milbank, and she makes the point that Descartes, one of the founders of the scientific method, defined reality as that which is clear, discrete, and easily comprehended by the mind.

That definition or delineation of objects to be investigated—what is reality? It's what's clear, discrete, and easily comprehended by mind. That's what we should investigate. We should forget about everything else because it's not real, and we want to investigate the real. That's what science is.

But this definition came itself to be taken as truth. Initially it was simply: these are the objects we're going to investigate—the ones that are clear, discrete, and easily comprehended by the mind. But at some point it became: this is what is true. Anything that did not fit that definition was regarded as untrue, unreal, and unworthy of attention.

You can see this again in quantum physics or relativistic physics. If someone tries to say that the really simple, clear, discrete things easily comprehended are these little billiard balls of basic particles, or things like space and time as Newton defined them—absolute space, absolute time, just kind of there, a big empty space not doing anything, not affected by anything, with time just flowing—these little billiard balls seem like the simplest, most discrete, clear things, very easy to understand.

But starting from Descartes' view, quantum physics has completely overturned this. If you ask someone what really is an electron, you better have a lot of patience because we don't know. The answer is definitely not simple, definitely not something that's clear or discrete or easily comprehended by the mind.

The very starting premise of this mode of investigation became a definition of truth, and when the scientific method continued along those lines, it completely decimated its own starting point and definition.

For our purposes, I want to say something about eros in relationship to ontology—the ontological value and place, the epistemological and ontological value of eros. Because eros, when allowed to stimulate the soul-making dynamic—and that's what we mean by eros in its larger definition—will open up exactly what does not fit inside Descartes' definition. When there's eros for an object, in relationship to it, that object begins to become more mysterious to us, less comprehensible, because it becomes unfathomable.

It becomes not discrete, because it possesses dimensionality, shading into divinity. It possesses soft and elastic edges. It becomes polyaspected and complex rather than single and simple. So again, it's eros that opens up exactly—or that bursts open—Descartes' definition in much the same way as physics has done.

It's interesting too, and I want to pick up on just one of those words in that little quote from John Milbank. I noted the word "boredom" there, which I found intriguing. You tend to think, oh well, that's not a very productive or creative affect or emotion. So I don't know quite what he meant, but it was there in a list of affects with truth-indicative power, truth-indicating power, with potentially ontological disclosive status. Actually, all he was saying in that quote was that it had been ruled out, but by implication, might it be there? Even boredom.

Our boredom with, for example, this sort of typical, common insistence on the hegemony of the truth of a flatly materialist cosmos—might our boredom with that idea, our boredom with this insistence that "this is the existential reality of things," a boredom with the sort of little billiard ball idea of matter, and now even of mind, a boredom with reductionist materialism—might our boredom at those views, at being inundated and surrounded by those views, being inflicted on us and oppressed by them, might our boredom be a feeling to trust, telling us that something in that picture is not right, not true?

So I don't know what Milbank meant, but that's something I was wondering. Boredom as a valid, affective and effective indicator of truth—truth, in inverted commas, if we have this more open idea of what truth is.

Actually, just lingering with that—if we conceive of truth, and again, I feel like I want to put it in inverted commas, but truth conceived more as a process, a journey, a deepening and opening that is never-ending, if we conceive it that way, and if it is eros above or as much as anything else which drives that journey and reveals or opens truth because of the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, then the discoveries on the way are still valid as partial, provisional truths. They may be partial truths, but they're provisional truths.

And so we see parallels to that in science. Again, some of this overlaps with things I said in the Four Parables series. Just as in the history of science, Newton's laws of mechanics and gravitation, for example, function—they do function—very well to predict outcomes within a limited range. Within a limited range of accuracy, but also of the phenomena that we're dealing with. Newton's laws function very well to predict outcomes. It was Newton's laws that enabled us to land a rocket on the moon—very complicated mathematics working that out. And even to send probes to Jupiter or Neptune, with tremendous accuracy of prediction. It was all coming basically from Newtonian mathematics and equations.

They function very well to predict outcomes: how this cannonball will fly, exactly where this tennis ball will land, how high it will go, and so forth, within a limited range. And because of that, because they predicted outcomes so well for so long before there was stuff that didn't fit, they seemed, for so long, absolutely true—because they functioned so well to predict outcomes.

But in fact, Newton's laws are only—and does the word "law" even qualify anymore?—they're only, in fact, partially or provisionally true. They've been superseded by Einstein's special and general relativity theories, the conceptions and the equations. And so there's something in science where we see this—what we can call provisional truth. It's not like Newton's laws are completely not true or irrelevant, but they are not completely adequate beyond a certain level. It depends what we want to do, and depends also not just what we want to do or want to calculate or want to figure out or explain, but also depends on what our idea of truth is.

But we see a similar thing in Dharma. The relative truth of dependent fabrication, dependent unfabricating—it still functions. From its basis, from an understanding of "yes, if there's clinging, if there's aversion, if there's selfing to some degree, it will fabricate more; if, to the degree that I let go of clinging, let go of aversion, let go of fabricating, let go of delusion, avijjā, there will be unfabricating"—from the basis of that relative truth, we can accurately predict, as I was sharing recently, the fact that when you direct mettā at phenomena, keeping this phenomenon in your attention but directing mettā and compassion right at it as you pay attention to it, the phenomenon fades.

Or the same thing as I mentioned yesterday: if I view something as anattā as I'm paying attention to it, or any of the other three characteristics, there'll be some degree of fading. Even though fabrication and dependent origination, as we would conventionally understand them to be operating between separable phenomena—"this gives rise to that, dependent on this comes this," etc., as if they're separable and real entities, phenomena—that whole view of fabrication and dependent arising is not ultimately true. "This is fabricated by the mind," or "self is fabricated by clinging," or "this link in dependent origination is dependent on that link of dependent origination"—the twelve links as separable, real entities—that's not actually ultimately true.

But the relative truth of dependent fabrication and dependent unfabricating still functions, just as Newton's law still functions. They have a provisional truth to them. And impermanence as well is a provisional truth—a relative or conventional truth. Ultimately, neither impermanent nor permanent is true of anything, as Nagarjuna points out, because time is empty. Other reasons too.

So there's a parallel here in these three domains: science, classical dharma, and when we get into soul-making. The whole idea that conventional truths—the truths that open up through science, through the conventional truths of classical dharma, and the conventional truths of what we encounter in soul-making—these are provisional truths. They're provisional truths, but we can still have a journey, a directionality, a sort of infinite penetrability into truth in the bigger sense.

If we stay with this idea of conventional truth, something else I want to point out is that very easily conventional truths are assumed real. That's why I say conventional truths are provisional truths. It doesn't mean they're worthless. It doesn't mean they don't have a place. It doesn't mean they can't be relied on. Cause and effect reliably—if I drop something heavy on my head, it'll... Well, it's actually not such a good example, but cause and effect, conventional truth still functions. It's a provisional truth.

Provisional truth can still be relied upon to a certain extent within certain provisos, within certain limits. What happens is conventional truths are then usually assumed to be real in all kinds of ways. Conventional truths are typically assumed to be real, assumed to be ultimate truths. So that's really one thing to be very, very important, very aware of and to be concerned with. It's something I've talked about and written about so much.

There's a second thing, which is also important. I've mentioned it before, but it's really worth emphasizing again, maybe with a slightly different illustration and angle. When we assume or when we adopt a conventional truth, one question is: is it real? Is it ultimately real or is it just a conventional provisional truth? But a second question is: what does the adoption of this conventional truth lead to? When I assume and conceive and look in the terms of this conventional truth, this provisional truth, what does it open up for me and what does it close for me? What does it bar from my experience, from my understanding, from my journey, from my life and practice?

Let me give an example. Recently, I taught the jhana retreat at Gaia House, and I am very, very ill, probably in the last stages of my life, with a lot of pain, and experimenting with—the doctors are experimenting, trying to find the right medication for pain, sometimes just making me foggy and affecting me in all kinds of ways, and tired, and other times really not touching the pain very much. There's a lot of pain, there's a lot of difficulty, there's not a lot of energy. A lot of my time is spent struggling with my digestion, or on the toilet, or whatever.

And I managed, with the help of the angels I think, to teach a twenty-three-day retreat just recently at Gaia House, jhana retreat, and several people said or wrote to me something like, "Your willpower is amazing. Wow, you have such willpower." But I appreciate the affection and the kind of compliment there, though I want to just linger on this, although it sounds analytical and nitpicky.

I just want to linger on this, because if a person is conceiving of what a dying person is choosing to do and then somehow able to sustain over time, teaching every day for hours despite all the other challenges—and if one conceives of that as a result of willpower, what's that actually implying?

Willpower to me implies—what is willpower? Will. What is the will? It's a faculty of the ego or the self that can decide autonomously to do or not to do something arbitrary. In other words, what it decides to do or not do is irrelevant. You understand? It's just a matter of something called willpower. The ability, the capacity is purely a matter of the strength and steadiness of something called will.

What about love? What about love of something? What about eros again?

Does that have no place in why something is possible? Why something is sustainable? What about the call, the calling or the wish of the daemon, the demon? What about a sense of duty, a sense that honoring the demands of the angel is more important, more beautiful, more sacred than living comfortably or longer even, or living with pleasant vedanā or at least minimally unpleasant vedanā?

Of course, even before we get talking about eros and angels and soul duty and love and all that, what about just other factors like the capacity to see in different ways, the emptiness of dukkha, the emptiness of difficulty? What about qualities like patience? Patience to stay with what's difficult, what we call forbearance. It's one of the six paramis in—I think it's one of the six paramis of the Buddha religion, certainly one of the ten paramis of Mahayana. So there's a whole level that we could just look at in terms of classical Buddha Dharma teachings that's actually involved, rather than just simplifying it into this thing called will.

But what I want to emphasize more is, what about other dimensions of being? Aspects of our psychology, love, eros, again, the calling of the daemon, the sense of duty, the demands of the angel and the sense of that being more important than anything else in life. The honoring of that. That's more important, more beautiful, more sacred, as I said, than comfort or minimizing unpleasantness.

And if such a person is thinking in this way that doesn't include love, eros, the demand of the angel, the phenomenological fact of the call or the wish of the daemon, or the sense of the duty to the angel, if they are thinking without any of that, and if they are, on top of that, explicitly or even subtly, implicitly comparing—let's say themselves and their willpower to mine, and judging mine, again I want to put that in inverted commas because I don't think of it in terms of willpower really, and they're judging mine to be more, then they may be simply rather not understanding their own psychology, let alone my psychology—their own psychology or finely or accurately or carefully enough so their what seems like to them perhaps their relative absence of or their relatively weak willpower is—I say really, because otherwise they would mention it. Otherwise it would be included in how they assessed this, what seems to them, something quite remarkable, this feat of teaching through all that.

Their relative absence of something called willpower, relatively weak willpower, is really an absence of connection with their daemon, or their angel. A blocking, perhaps, somehow, of that connection and of their eros. And an inability to sense themselves as image and sense their lives with soul.

So I may come back to this, because all this actually bears on questions of ethics, on ethical choices. It applies, let's say, to ethical choices and to our individual ethos, our individual character. We may come back to this in another talk.

Now, of course, it's not that someone who has the kind of erotic relationship with a calling or a project or a creative project or an offering that they want to give or a service that they want to do, it's not that someone who has a sense of eros and duty to the angel and demands of the daemon and all that love—it's not that they will always feel that way. They always feel filled with love and eros and the juiciness of all that. So, of course, there will be times when the sense of calling, of love, eros, is not there, or is much diminished. And then there's, there may be at those times a reliance on something we could call will, or resolution, or discipline, or something. Actually, I'm going to come back to those words.

But it's like parenting or being in a long-term relationship. You know deep down that you love something, and that you're totally committed to it, and that it's meaningful and important. You know that even at the times you are not, and it's that knowledge that sustains. It's not simple willpower, it's a knowledge of the soul depth of something. Even at the time you're not feeling that love or eros so directly.

So, at the risk, considerable risk probably, of sounding anal and maybe crossing the line into some kind of pedantry about words and the words people use. If someone had said to me, or if they'd used the word discipline, on the other hand, rather than will,

because will just means, from the Latin, just means I want, I want something. It's from, just to stay with the intention. Discipline, on the other hand, is related to the word disciple, and from the Latin disciplina, which means teaching, or discipulus, which is a pupil, disceres, is to learn in Latin.

If a person uses that word, or if I think about it in those terms, there's a discipline involved in staying steady and showing up and offering that despite everything, all the challenges. Discipline implies that it's not self-enclosed. It's not self-deciding. It's not totally self-instigating and self-actualizing, as the word will is. We now commonly understand, actually, both words, will and discipline. But going more into the root of the word discipline, it could open out a different sense. It implies a relationship. At least its etymology implies a relationship. An imaginal relationship, perhaps. The image of offering something. The image of being a servant, doing one's duty. The image of what one wants to offer. The image of the retreat. The image of the teachings. The image of passing something on. The word discipline, in its more etymological meaning, invokes, implies, involves relationship.

It can become imaginal relationship and humility. I have to be humble to learn from this person or that person, or this thing, or that event or situation, or this experience. I have to be humble. Something has to be greater than me—the one who teaches, the thing that teaches me. And it implies, in all that, there is implied an other, and that can become an erotic, imaginal other.

So it's possible that the whole thing becomes an imaginal constellation. If we're talking about ethics and what it takes to stay true to one's ethics—really stand firm, courageously, unmovingly, unwaveringly—it may be that there's an image of that virtue, as we touched on in the Soulmaking Dharma talks on the Four Parables retreat. The virtue itself has become image, has become imaginal. And there's other there, and I'm in erotic, imaginal relationship with that other. I'm a discipulus and humble in relation to that other.

But it also might be a work project, a certain duty, a creative art project. Etienne Souriau talks about the angel of the work, the disciple of the angel of the work, perhaps. Just opening up words now to get a fuller sense of what can be involved here, when things are difficult, when things are challenging. When we want—how our sense of things can be extended. Put it that way. And not shrunken and amputated to fit into narrow and flat psychologies and philosophies.

So the word discipline could potentially, if we look at its etymology, open up more. Another word is resolve. A person could have used the word resolve: "Oh, you have such incredible resolve." Again, we typically hear these words—discipline, resolve, etc.—just as we hear the word will, as something totally self-instigated, self-initiated, self-sustaining, self-actualizing.

But the word resolve is from Latin re solvere, which means re, again, and solvere is to loosen, to loosen again. And solvere means to loosen or to release, but one of its meanings is to free from debt. So to free from debt again. What might it mean? To free from debt to the angel again, because the angel's demands are infinite and never-ending.

So I honor the angel by trying as best as I can to discern what my duty is and to carry that out as best as I can. And it will be not an exact copy of whatever the image is, or whatever the angel seems to be completely. I will always fall short. We've talked about this before. But there's, in that resolve, I'm freeing myself from debt because I'm paying my debt. Then I'm freed from that debt—the debt to the angel, to the daimon, the duty. And re again, because it will never end. And there's another duty, and the angel is always out ahead.

Or again, if we want to open up the potential meanings here, someone might have used the word sacrifice. I think someone did. And that means in Latin, sacer facere—facere is to make, and sacer is related to sacred, holy, to make holy or sacred.

Now, this isn't about me. I really want to point—again, I want to point something out about what I started with here, which was the general point about what conventional truths are we adopting? What do they lead to? The conventional truths that we adopt, the provisional truths that we adopt—in this case about psychology—what do they lead to? What do they open up or what do they limit?

Someone thinks in terms of certain ways, in terms of words like will, discipline, resolve, thinks of them as being self-enclosed, self-instigating, etc. Sacrifice already, hopefully it's already got the hint of another level in it, because it's already got the implication of making something holy or sacred. But it can lose that—it has lost that a lot in our culture.

So this isn't about me. I want to open up something about the ways that we tend to think about our psychology, about what drives us, about what we're doing, about what makes certain things possible or not. The question is: what do these ideas, what do the truths we are grasping at and holding onto, or even just adopting, open up or not? Where do they take us?

So if we go with the etymology of sacrifice—making holy, making sacred—what's holy? What's sacred here?

Again, the angel and the angel of the work. Very often these days when I teach, I carry an image not just of contemporary practitioners and students, but of unknown future practitioners - those who will never be known to me, existing elsewhere in space and time. This future sangha becomes a sacred, imaginal other to me, sensed as sacred.

To refract that angel of the work into this plane of existence, to bring forth that refraction, is sacred. To labor for this is doing for what is sacred. *Fiche* - doing. *Sacre* - sacred. Sacrifice: doing for what is sacred. Feel it as a making sacred.

If we're accustomed to certain psychological frameworks, all this may sound pompous or grandiose, and of course there's that danger. The ego can seize upon it, reify it, and create all manner of complications. But when held in the right way, in the soul-making way, it actually opens up dimensions and distances, perspectives and possibilities. We're then fueled and supported by something very different from my will and our flatly conceived notions of motivation.

It's important to understand that there will be times - of course there are times - when one doesn't have the sense of the other, of the calling, of the eros, of the love. Then perhaps we're in a mode of simply getting through, where the sense of the other, the love, the eros, the images, is much diminished.

Here we encounter another word: commitment. In long-term relationships or parenting, one is committed. *Com* derives from the Latin, meaning "to put together" or "to join." When you make a commitment, you join. But what are we joining here? In partnership, in commitment to our children's education, upbringing, safety - what exactly are we joining?

We could say that in those times when it feels flat, like drudgery, when we're not seeing with a sense of soul, when there isn't the depth and eros and calling and love - when we lack that sense in the moment - what are we joining? We're joining that very flat drudgery to the knowledge of the holy. In long-term commitments, relationships, or parenting, we rest upon that knowledge. We're joining what feels like flat drudgery to the holy, joining the holy to the flat drudgery. It's connected as if by an umbilical cord, fed by that knowledge and that sense.

Even this morning, I felt the effects of medication - so tired, lacking in mental energy, deeply sleepy. How would I manage these talks? With what seemed like very reduced mental capacity, sitting in attempted meditation, at some point the ideas themselves - these very ideas I'm speaking about today - became sensed as angels.

The ideas became erotic, imaginal, other, angelic. They wanted to be communicated. These concepts, some of the things I've been exploring today, want to be shared. There's a parallel here with the notion of the ideation of the imaginal, which I introduced on the Four Parables retreat. The ideas become sensed with soul and transform into images, into imaginal images.

Even when my mind feels tired, foggy, sleepy, lacking in energy and brightness, I can sense as other - not other than me, but as other - their energy, these idea angels, these angel ideas. I can sense their energy, their brightness, their desire and eros to be made manifest. Somehow I can trust that their eros will enable that manifestation.

This question - what does a conventional truth that I'm adopting deliver? Where does it take me? What does it open up? What does it close? - reveals that selves and others and worlds and cosmoses depend on the conventional truths I entertain or adopt, and much more powerfully when I assume they're real. These truths might limit certain avenues, entire realms of opening and being, possibility, conception - all of it.

Again, willpower versus eros or daemon. It's a helpful psychological notion—psychological theories, assumptions, so-called realities. It's a helpful idea. But compared with eros and daemon, it's very much less rich. And if we just have notions of willpower, we're actually missing part of our psychology. We're totally not seeing part of our psychology.

One could even go further and try to reduce willpower. You know, there are currents of reductionism in psychology that exist. And you could try to reduce willpower to a kind of quasi-electronic circuit of intentions and vedanā. Then the question becomes whether the reactions to vedanā—either unpleasant vedanā or pleasant vedanā that are not associated with what your intention has set out to do—overpower or deflect the intention.

Someone might experience the pleasant vedanā of having a nice long rest when they could be up preparing talks or interviewing. Or the pleasant vedanā of eating something that might be pleasant in the mouth, but will later be difficult in the digestive system, which may affect their capacity to teach.

One could try to reduce willpower to this idea of a quasi-electronic circuit of intentions moving along electronic pathways and vedanā. The question becomes whether reactions to the vedanā overpower or deflect the intention. You have a series of little gates in the circuit—one, zero, zero, one; one, zero, zero, one; zero, zero, zero, one. It depends on each electronic circuit junction whether a reaction has overpowered or deflected the intention, or whether the intention has stayed true to its course.

One can have a neurological model that's something along these lines—probably a lot more complex, but something along these lines.

Does that kind of reductionist explanation constitute for us an understanding? What does it do to our lives? Does it enrich our lives?

It might help at times to frame our process, our experience, our practice in those kinds of ways. Here's an intention, here's a vedanā arising—careful with the reaction. Can my reaction be taken care of so it doesn't deflect the intention from its course or overpower it?

But that's only one conceptual framework, really—one way of looking. And the important thing I want to say right now is it misses so much else.

Even if we think and practice that way, and even if through thinking and practicing that way we're able to better stay with an intention despite many incidents of that intention encountering unpleasant vedanā or pleasant vedanā pulling it away, or thoughts and beliefs that may deflect it—even if we're able to do that so that we get to do what was important or meaningful for us because our intentions stayed steady—such a framework does nothing to illuminate what actually is meaningful to us. It does nothing to illuminate meaningfulness itself.

What is meaningfulness in such a framework? How am I going to explain meaningfulness in terms of these neural circuits and gates shutting or opening, or neurotransmitters being secreted from one neuron to another, or movement of atoms and molecules across a membrane, or electrons?

Well, we'd have to reduce meaningfulness again. What is meaningful? It's just another pleasant vedanā. It's just another one or zero. Or meaningfulness just becomes the meaningfulness node of the circuit—just another one or zero on the binary circuit computer model of the brain.

This is such a poor and impoverishing psychology. Yes, to a certain extent it might be useful—we can adapt that kind of thinking to a way of thinking about mindfulness practice—but it leaves so much out. It's poor and impoverishing as a psychology.

All this becomes really important when we talk about ethics, and I hope to do so in a few days—to talk more about ethics and virtues and reductionist, behaviorist explanations that try to reduce our notions of ethics or virtues and really decimate them into more reductive and behaviorist notions.

Charles Taylor has written about this several times—he's a Canadian philosopher. I think he's still alive, though he's pretty old now. One of the things he says in his book Sources of the Self, and elsewhere as well, is that explanations like that actually end up being of no use—I would say almost no use—for a person living life. Certainly when it comes to ethics and virtues, they're no use for a person living life. They leave out what he calls actually indispensable ideas and terms.

This is quite pernicious because we tend to think that a real understanding, a real explanation of ethical behavior or feelings about virtues or what's really going on when we're ethical or virtuous—a real explanation must be based in realities. And the only realities are the realities that natural science, basically physics, has decided are real. In other words, atoms, electrons, neutrons, protons, and all the rest of it. Everything else is not really real. So try and explain everything using those constituents.

There are so many problems with that—I've gone into this already in this talk and in other talks. But the point he makes is that for human beings, in a cosmos where there are human beings, attempts at reductionist and purely neurological explanations—which anyway always fall short of actually explaining anything—they don't explain consciousness or mind from matter. They haven't yet, and I don't think they ever will.

They actually fall short. But apart from that, for human beings in a cosmos where there are human beings, such attempts at purely neurological, purely reductionist so-called explanations don't actually form the best account. The best account means what makes sense of things. What do I need to use as a human being in order to make sense of things, in order to navigate the world of ethical choices?

And I use the term "ethical choices" in a very wide sense to include things like: here is something that feels important to me, and there are a lot of reasons why I could decide not to do it.

And all these other challenging concerns. So that's ethos ethics as well. They're provisional truths, but they're not necessarily the best accounts because they're not the accounts I can work with. I cannot talk in those terms and explain to myself in those terms of reductionist neurology in a way that makes sense to me of the choices I need to make and of what will help me make those choices and help me to carry them out and stay steady.

Just as certain notions or models in physics—it's called the standard model of particle physics—seem to be, for now (it's actually hitting some serious problems), but seem to be, for now, for us, the best account we can manage of physical reality. When we get to the human reality, they're not the best account anymore. They're simply not the best account.

So this question, this inquiry, is really important, so crucial. What does this conventional truth that I'm holding, that I'm adopting, that I'm even just entertaining—what does it lead me to? What does it bring? What are its consequences for my experience, for my sense of things, for my sense of self and world and other? So it's that question. And there's the question: am I assuming it's real? Am I actually assuming a conventional truth is an ultimate truth? Is something real? This idea, this model, this notion is actually a reality. Am I assuming that?

So two questions there. We need to be careful with assumptions, but we also need to be careful with conclusions.

Sometimes we have a notion and a model, and it does function in the way that good science functions, where a theory or a law equation in science works as a provisional truth. It works, as we said, because it has predictive power—because that notion enables you to predict something happening or occurring or unfolding, if this or this is the case, that otherwise you wouldn't have been able to predict. So it has predictive power.

An example from the soul-making logos, from the soul-making Dharma logos, would be this: we can predict, we can expect, that unless we block the soul-making dynamic, unless we block the eros, or psyche or logos is blocked in some way, we can expect that the natural process of the soul-making dynamic will begin to involve not just the imaginal object, but also the self becoming imaginal, and then also the world becoming imaginal in some kind of cosmic theosis. Or if we start with the self in other and world or whatever, that this spreading will include self, other, world—and in fact, as we've discussed many times, self, other, world, eros—all become imaginal. They become infused with the imaginal, become infected, drawn in, involved, caught up in the whole soul-making dynamic and become imaginal. That's a prediction that we can make so that we expect that it bears out.

In our practice we can notice it. In doing interviews you can notice it. You can expect it. You can look for it. And if it's not happening, it's pointing to something being blocked. And then the question is: okay, where is it blocked?

So that would be an example of a conventional truth, or a conventional notion, that has only conventional truth and still has predictive power, and therefore is a useful provisional truth, a useful provisional tool, a useful notion.

Or take the whole notion of the soul-making dynamic itself—that eros will ignite that whole dynamic so that psyche, eros in seeking more, pothos in eros in seeking more, will open up more beyonds in psyche: more images, more dimensions, more aspects. So more will be perceived. And that will inflame eros even more. And the whole process opens up even more until it pushes on logos. And I'm describing it in one order—there are many possible permutations of how it opens. Pushing on logos and then the ideation changes. Either it's stretched or shattered. And all that opens up the sense of the beloved other even more, and there's even more eros. And so the eros-psyche-logos dynamic will work like that.

Both of these predictions—that self, other, world, eros become imaginal, and that the eros-psyche-logos will galvanize each other, deepen, widen, open, complexify each other—both of those predictions come from the very basic sort of provisional truth or notion or theory: soul loves soul-making. Soul loves soul-making. Just that simple kind of axiom leads to these other levels of notions. It's all provisional truth, you could say. But there's predictive power in provisional truth, again, unless they're blocked—but in that case it points to: aha, okay, where's the block? And you can find the block, perhaps unblock it, and then you see the process happening as predicted.

So that's an example of a provisional truth being used to make valid, helpful conclusions through its predictive power.

But careful with this. Some while ago—well, in fact many times—people, in my own experience as well, find that they've independently received or arrived at or opened to the same or very similar images. Either both have similar images of one person in a dyad, or they've arrived at them independently in all kinds of ways. But it's not that one person shared an image with the other and described it, and then the other person got a sense of the image.

They arrived at them kind of separately. But the people themselves were connected in some soul-making relationship. And I'm careful of what does that imply. What does that imply?

So here's an image that's shared, and one of the perhaps tempting conclusions is that from the fact that two or more people spontaneously share the same or a similar image, it could be that the image itself, its content, should be reified. Now because we've arrived at this independently, it must mean there's something true about this image—true in the sense of real.

It doesn't need to imply that. It doesn't automatically imply that. So careful about conclusions as well. Careful about assumptions, but careful about conclusions as well.

It may imply—this fact that two or more people independently share the same or a very similar image may imply, or it's more likely that it implies—something like the fact that the *citta*, the mind or the soul or consciousness, is not as bound by and not as bound to the individual physical organism as we typically assume in our modern culture.

So there are two conclusions there, and to me the second is the more justifiable conclusion, or step towards a conclusion. It suggests more than a reification of images.

The imaginal middle way doesn't apply to the latter conclusion, or the suggestion that minds are not really just bound up and ending with our skin—they're not bound up with my neurons, my brain, bound to and by individual physical organisms as we tend to assume so easily in our modern culture. That may be suggesting a fact of conventional or provisional truth.

The imaginal middle way doesn't apply because we're not talking about images then. We're talking about the nature of the *citta* and the capacities of the *citta*, the boundaries of the *citta*. The imaginal middle way should still apply to the image, in soul-making *logos* anyway. So it applies still to the image, even though they've both been arrived at independently, sharing the same image or a similar image. But the imaginal middle way doesn't apply to questions about where is the boundary of the mind here? Is it just as we tend to think, within the physical organism?

Sometimes things like this happen. Many things happen, and we have to—in soul-making practice, all kinds of things happen, and it's extremely interesting. But careful of our sort of logical process and what we tend to think something implies, what the conclusions are, what's suggested by some experience that's happened.

Especially something like that, because one of the things in our culture—one of the sort of ontological and epistemological assumptions in our culture that's pretty entrenched—is that if a perception is socially agreed upon, in other words, if it's not just

me perceiving something and you can't perceive it, if we—you and I and another person—perceive the same thing, then that social agreement of a perception tends to validate the reality of that perception for us.

That's one of our epistemologies: that we need to socially agree on something for it to be real. And anything that isn't socially agreed upon is not regarded as real. So that's one of our received criteria for what is real and what constitutes knowledge of the real. It's received and usually unquestioned epistemology and ontology.

So it can be tricky. Because we're sharing an image spontaneously, we tend to think, "Well, it must be real," because that's one of the criteria we tend to use for deciding what counts as real.

Let me take this point a little further about assumptions and conclusions and conventional truths. The question is: what do they lead to? What am I assuming? What am I concluding? What conventional truths am I adopting or clinging to? And what does that lead to?

We've talked about something very different. Now let me talk about the nature of time, for example, and explain something briefly.

Going back centuries and centuries—millennia, really—there were two views of time, two persistent views of time we can trace through the centuries in Western and I think also in Asian thought and Eastern thought. One of them is that time is something real. It's essentially a substance, like Newton's idea.

The other, though, is that time is essentially the product of the soul. It's something that the soul kind of creates, let's say, or co-creates.

The second point of view—that time is a product of the soul—was the view of Plotinus, who is regarded as the founder of Neoplatonism. He probably would have regarded himself just as a Platonist, but anyway. He held that point of view, and his explanation for it is that the soul is unable to grasp the contents of Intelligence. I have to explain what that word Intelligence means in this context.

Intelligence means, we could say, the attributes of Buddha-nature, or the attributes of divinity, or the attributes of the ultimate One, the angelic essences, you could say. The soul is unable to grasp the contents of that *pleroma* of Intelligences, those attributes of divinity.

In other words, here you have Buddha-nature, you have God, or you have the ultimate One. And just as with *Dharmakāya,* we could say the attributes of the *Dharmakāya*, there's a kind of transcendent nature beyond being and non-being, a kind of unity.

And then there's another level where the attributes of the Dharmakaya—love and compassion and power and countless other aspects—become manifest or visible at a level of reality before they become physically manifest. So there's a way that this Dharmakaya, for example, if we use Buddhist language, can be conceived as totally beyond any attributes, totally beyond even the attribute of being or non-being, one or nothing, or many.

And then another level where one can focus on the attributes of God, the names of God, the attributes of the Dharmakaya. So the soul is not able to grasp all that in one movement, in one indivisible act. Instead, it must approach them one by one, or perhaps in groups, and it must come into contact with, and behold, and get to know, and open to, and get to love, and practice manifesting those aspects of the divinity of the Dharmakaya. Let's say several at a time. Can't do it all at once. Maybe one by one, maybe several at a time.

But in so doing, it engenders time and produces the sensible world as a temporal world. Soul here really means world soul. So these hierarchies of reality where soul—world soul—engenders time. Time is a product of the soul because of its need to know and manifest those attributes of the transcendent divine, but its inability to do so in one gulp, in one gestalt. So it does so bit by bit or aspect by aspect, one by one or several at a time, and in doing so it engenders time—engenders time and also the sensible temporal world that we live in. World soul and our soul as part of, or as mimicking, the world soul.

It's a very different idea of time than absolute time as Newton would have it—independently existing time.

Now, in a very different way, the whole ways of looking approach and inquiry into emptiness that I talked about before, and that I've outlined in Seeing That Frees and other places—this phenomenological approach to emptiness and dependent arising—comes to similar kinds of conclusions. That time is a dependent arising, dependent on the way of looking. Even time, even something so basic, is fabricated. We've arrived at similar conclusions, though here we have what sounds like a very metaphysical or arbitrary metaphysical theory. I doubt that it was. I think it was probably as much something that came out of philosophical thinking as it was something that came out of meditative exploration, I'm guessing, for Plotinus and others.

And in Seeing That Frees and this phenomenological approach, ways of looking approach to emptiness and dependent arising, you have something that comes out of meditation and then realizes time is empty—the sense of time is a dependent arising. And then again, as I mentioned earlier, in recent years in quantum physics, there's also this sense that perhaps time is not a fundamental reality, but an emergent reality. And quantum reality as such is dependent on the observer.

So even within Neoplatonism, by the way, there were different points of view. Plotinus had that point of view. Iamblichus had a different point of view, a more substantial view of time, apparently. Alexander of Aphrodisias, who was actually a commentator on Aristotle, said that humans are poetae of time—the poetic creators of time. Time is part of our poiesis, and we talk about cosmopoiesis. Well, so there's a poiesis of time. So it's the subjectivity of time as its primary ontological reality, as opposed to the objective existence of time.

But what I want to ask again is, if time has no ultimately real existence, no inherent existence independent of the soul or the observer, what does that imply? What does it lead to and what does it imply for liberation? What kind of liberation does such an insight bring? What scope does it mean for what liberation means and involves? What also does it mean for soul-making? What does it mean for psychological healing?

We tend so much to think of the past caused this difficulty in the present. Time moves that way and it's an inexorable reality—time and the placement of things and the direction of causality, etc. So what does it mean then for psychological healing? Again this question: what we hold onto, what we adopt, what we grasp in terms of assumptions, conclusions and conventional provisional truths—what do they deliver? What do they open up for us and what do they limit for us?

So what becomes possible is a whole new way of approaching psychological healing, and doors that might open up—depths and areas of psychological healing that may not be reachable, possible, touchable through any other means—may be opened up, for instance, just from a different metaphysic of time. The whole notion of healing and how healing might be or what it needs or what's involved, but also a notion of human beings.

If our notion of time is not of something ultimately real, independently existing, what does that mean for a human being? What does it mean about death? I'm hoping to come back to talk about perspectives on death, different perspectives on death. But we jump so easily into very simplistic notions, all of them reified, around death and imper-

manence and time. And also around a human being. A human being is someone who's born and then dies and that's it. Whatever. Or they live forever in heaven or hell or whatever it is. Too simple. Too reified.

I mean, you know, again, valid, conventionally helpful, conventionally perhaps to a certain point, but provisional truths. Maybe not the whole truth.

Well, if you can see then, you can understand what gets blocked, what avenues, what openings, what experiences, perceptions, understandings, transformations become impossible if we're entrenched in the conventional view of time.

For example, I was talking about thinking of ways of looking, practicing ways of looking, teaching ways of looking, but actually harboring this idea of some fundamental, basic, sort of nebulous flow or flux to which we apply ways of looking and get this or that appearance of this or that object, but that basic flux being real, and time with it being real. And what that then prevents us from opening to, understanding, reaching, being touched by, what vistas, what realms get prevented, how significant this is.

But if time can also be opened up that way, conventional truths about time, different conventional truths about time can be adopted. What might that do? How might that open up for us areas and questions such as psychological healing and the nature of a human being and death? Not to mention liberation and soul-making.

These are important questions, important realizations.

Okay, I think we'll stop there for today. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 227

Pain, as Void and as Sacrament

Rob Burbea · 2h34

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea offers a comprehensive exploration of working with physical pain through meditation, presenting practices that range from accessible techniques to advanced approaches that can dramatically transform our relationship with dukkha. Drawing from both classical Buddhist teachings and soul-making dharma, he outlines methods that can reduce suffering around pain, attenuate the actual intensity of painful sensations, and even sanctify pain as sacred experience.*
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> *Burbea begins with foundational practices like simple mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna) and spacious awareness, explaining how dropping stories, temporal extension, and reactive patterns can reduce both suffering and pain itself. He then explores more sophisticated insight practices using the three characteristics (tilakkhana) - anicca, dukkha, and anattā - as ways of looking that unfabricate painful vedanā through reduced clinging (upādāna) and ignorance (avijjā). For experienced practitioners, he presents jhāna-based techniques where pain can be transformed into pleasure by adopting the primary nimitta of different jhānic states.*
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> *The talk culminates in soul-making approaches that engage pain as sacred gift and divine offering. Through personal examples from his own experience with terminal cancer, Burbea demonstrates how pain can become imaginal material for profound spiritual transformation, touching on themes of ritual, sacrifice, and the mysterious necessity of our particular sufferings. He emphasizes that while relief from pain is valuable, the deeper purposes are insight into emptiness (śūnyatā) and the opening of sacred dimensionality that transforms our entire relationship with existence.*

What I would like to do today is to offer a few things that might be helpful working with pain, working with predominantly physical pain. Although some of what I'll share will also apply very well to mental pain, I want to offer approaches that may be helpful in working with physical pain in meditation. These are skills and arts that can certainly reduce the suffering around and in relation to pain, but also actually attenuate, ease pain, and reduce the actual sensations of pain. Or, as well as that, can sanctify the pain, the very unpleasant sensations, transubstantiate them, divinize them. I'll explain what's involved there and what we mean by that.

So certainly, what I want to address is meditative skills and approaches—development of those arts of meditation that can reduce the suffering that comes with pain in relationship to pain, can also reduce pain, the actual intensity of the pain, sometimes quite dramatically, and also the kind of transubstantiation, divinization, sacramentalization of pain.

I should say that I'm personally aware through direct experience and painfully aware that there are three types of pain. There's occasional pain, from sitting a really long time in meditation, repeatedly on retreat—back hurts, knees hurt, hips hurt. There's also chronically recurrent pain as a kind of second category. It's maybe not all the time in an uninterrupted way, but it keeps returning. Maybe it never fades completely. Maybe it does fade completely at times, or fade naturally and just go away. But it keeps coming back. It's a chronic feature of one's life. One has to deal with that. And then there's simply chronic pain. It's just there all the time.

What I'd like to offer here—ways of working in meditation—applies across the board to all kinds of pain. However, in the third category, where there's pain that's just chronic, it won't be possible all the time to engage some of these practices because one's life will naturally need to be busy doing other stuff, interacting with other people, working. I have to meet the world, be in the world, do in the world, in relationship and work and whatever else. And there's this pain pulling on the attention, but it's not possible to give it the wholehearted fullness of intention or the kind of skill and subtlety and sophistication of attention of some of the practices I'm going to talk about all the time. Because I'm busy doing other stuff. I can't give it the same quality of attention as I can when I'm sitting down or standing or walking to meditate.

And so, of course, thankfully now, most people, certainly in the West, and hopefully more and more in developing countries have access to pain-killing medication. Not to forget that if there's just chronic pain, because we can't be in deliberate, full-on, artful meditative attention with it all the time. But actually, what I'm talking about applies to all three categories.

Partly what I'm going to do is just briefly list a selection of practices, not an exhaustive list at all. What it is, though, is a list in a little bit of a progressive or ascending order of skill or development or art. In other words, I'll start with practices and approaches, meditative approaches that are relatively easy, relatively well-known as well, and then include more and more that are actually a lot more powerful, but also a lot more difficult to develop.

What I really want to stress, though, is that they're absolutely possible. I'm not talking about anything that's not possible. So if some of this, towards the end of the list, or even the middle of the list, sounds completely outlandish and otherworldly and impossible for a human being with a physical body to accomplish, that's just not true. It's so much a matter of finding the right ways to practice and applying oneself in the right ways and really developing one's art stage by stage.

Some of the things later in the list will depend on the arts developed in the earlier stages of the list. They build on those stages as platforms. And then what we're talking about is absolutely possible. Absolutely possible. And available, accessible to us as human beings. No reason why not.

I'm not going to go into too much detail around technique because I've done so for actually most of these practices elsewhere and either written about them in Seeing That Frees or talked about them in different talks over the years and given quite a lot of detail of technique there. But what I do want to do is mention them and give some explanations of what we need to understand here. And I also want to include soul-making practices in relation to pain, sensing pain with soul, and so forth.

So, talking predominantly about physical pain, but much that I'm saying will apply to mental dukkha as well. If you're listening at a time when mental dukkha is what's interesting to you, then see if you can see how much of what I'm offering here is adaptable. And try it. And occasionally, of course, as I go, I'll try to remember and remind and put things in terms of mental dukkha as well.

The first practice is—well, the first thing I should say is probably everyone knows after being a young child that if we tense up, if we tense our muscles with pain, it usually makes things worse. Not always, but usually makes things worse. So if there's pain, a first thing to do for working in meditation is just relax the rest of the body as much as possible, because that tensing of the musculature is only adding to the problem.

The first thing may be very obvious, but it's actually quite important—just relax the body as much as possible.

The first practice is what we might call simple mindfulness or bare attention. So we're bringing mindfulness and a kind of bare attention to the pain.

What does that mean? It means trying to drop the story around the pain—the story that goes with it of how it shouldn't be there, and why me, and maybe I'll be a cripple the rest of my life, or whatever it is. Whether it's "I am this way" or "it's not fair" or

comparisons to other people, whatever story there is, the attempt with the way of looking we call simple mindfulness or bare attention is to drop the story. That's one of the strands of unhelpful relationship that we're trying to drop—dropping the story.

And seeing if it's possible to come, as part of dropping the story, to really come into the present moment, into bare or direct contact with the sensations of the pain. So less story—just what does this actually feel like? What does it feel like now, in this present moment? Not dwelling on how long it has been that way, how long this pain has been around, not dwelling on how long it will be or might be this way. So we're not joining the dots.

If you know the practice, I talk about sometimes about dot-to-dot, seeing how pain gets constructed—or actually, most phenomena get constructed, but certainly dukkha phenomena get constructed by joining the dots in time and joining the dots in space. So that's part of dropping the story. But really seeing: can I come in now? What does it feel like now? What's the sense of it now? What's my experience of it now? Really getting that sense in the present moment, coming back to the present moment.

What's happening, if you like, is we're jettisoning the story, but we're also jettisoning the projections of the mind into the past and the future, so that what we're relating to and what we're actually perceiving and carrying in the moment is not a temporally extended experience that's then made heavier and more difficult by that sense of temporal extension—all the way back in the past, all the way potentially in the future with the worry of all that. What it really is, is this sensation right now, these sensations right now.

It might also be possible, as an aspect of what we call mindfulness and bare attention, to even sometimes drop the label "pain." Sometimes even that word "pain," the labeling of it, starts to constitute something as pain. In other words, the label is not a neutral factor. It's not that there is something and then I label it afterwards and it would feel just the same if I labeled it "tomato" or "pleasure" or whatever. We start to realize that "pain" is actually a fabricating, constitutive factor. So part of the attempt in the way of looking that we call mindfulness, simple mindfulness or bare attention, is to see if I can drop the labeling "pain" that the mind is either doing automatically or deliberately.

Sometimes it might be labeling in a Mahasi technique way, which can be really helpful, but at a certain point it's like: hmm, maybe that labeling is actually not so helpful, because it's actually part of consolidating, solidifying, promulgating something. So that's really interesting as well.

So less story, more present moment, which means less temporal extension, less past and future and the worry that goes with that. Less construction by joining the dots in time. And I could say also in space, perhaps, but let's just stick with the time one for now. Dropping the labeling of pain, etc. And in all that, there's less reactivity, we could say. And in a way one's also trying to be less reactive. It's part of even that initial movement of just relaxing—just relax the body. See if I can be less reactive here at different levels of my being.

What this can lead to, if I just stay steady with that practice, keep trying with that practice, bringing that way of looking, the mindfulness and bare attention, is that the pain might just become—it's just sensations. It's stripped of all these other levels of story and temporal extension and all that. And it might even be stripped of the label of pain. It's just unpleasant sensations.

It might be, if the mindfulness is really strong, that even you find, even at this very basic level, that if you really sustain the mindfulness in these ways—keep dropping those unhelpful factors out: the temporal extending, the story, the labeling, the reactivity at a certain level—that if the mindfulness is really sustained and really strong and there's quite an intensity to the mindfulness, the degree of unpleasantness, which really means the degree of pain, reduces right there as I'm attending to it very carefully, very intently with the mindfulness moment after moment.

So that's what we might call the first practice. Actually, we might call it one version of the first practice, because a second way of doing that practice would be pretty much the same thing, but with a much more spacious awareness.

So in the first practice, let's say it was my back hurting, or the small of my back or my knee or something, I focus the attention in a narrow way on those sensations there and just work to support the way of looking we're calling mindfulness or bare attention —which when we unpacked it meant those things that I explained. I'm just focusing there in that small region, narrow attention, over and over, supporting and engaging that way of looking that we call mindfulness or bare attention.

But one could also do the same thing within a much, much larger space. So actually, again, relax the body, then let the awareness get really large. I mean, larger than the room that you're in, as large as up to the sky, even larger, if it's possible.

One way of really helping open up the awareness to a more spacious awareness is through listening, because sounds come from all different distances and directions. Simply give some attention to listening. If you can do that for a while, disregarding the

pain entirely, that's wonderful. If you need to include the pain while opening to listening, that works too. Either way, support and allow the awareness to open up much more spaciously.

Then, as you hold the sensations of pain—the vedanā, the unpleasant vedanā—within this vast space, you'll notice they arise and pass away, flickering. As we pay closer attention, we naturally observe all kinds of qualities in their texture: the way they throb, pulse, and flicker. All of this movement means they're changing in time. This entire dance of appearing, disappearing, throbbing, pulsating, fluctuating sensations occurs somewhere in the body, but now exists within the much larger context of this vastly expanded space. The unpleasant sensations are simply a small area bubbling away within a much, much larger context.

You have to practice this to actually discover how remarkably helpful this approach can be. In a way, we could say that instead of the pain occupying perhaps ninety or a hundred percent of our awareness, it now takes up much, much less. We actually have that felt sense: here is just this small area of pain within a much vaster space. Its impact on the being, on the psyche, on the citta, becomes something relatively small within a much larger expanse.

We can stay with even this level of practice, and it can lead to very deep, beautiful places, transforming our whole sense of experience and opening up our entire perspective. Whether we practice with narrow attention, as I first described, or with this much more spacious awareness, both approaches to mindfulness or bare attention will lead to a lessening of suffering in the moment. There will be less suffering in relation to, or arising from, the pain.

I could say there is less fabrication of the suffering, because we begin to realize that the pain becomes stronger only when we look in those other ways—when we unwittingly drag in temporal extension, when we bring in our story and the "poor me" and "why me," when we engage in the kind of labeling that actually constitutes and solidifies something. It's only when we do that that the suffering intensifies. When we let go, when we drop these elements from our way of looking, we discover that suffering was stronger when those fabrications were present. When we release them, the suffering lessens.

In other words, through this way of looking—mindfulness, bare attention, whether with narrow or spacious awareness—we fabricate less suffering. There is less suffering fabricated. As we practice, there's a fairly good chance that at times there will also be less fabrication of the unpleasant vedanā itself—actually less pain, not just less suffering in relationship to the pain, but less pain too.

All these factors—bringing the self in, bringing the story in, bringing reactivity in, papañca, temporal extension, labeling—they're all fabricators of vedanā. We really want to understand this. Sometimes people speak as if vedanā is simply a given, just what it is, and all we can do is minimize the suffering—the second arrow—in relationship to it. With just this first practice, or these two versions of it, that might indeed be what we see: yes, I can minimize the suffering around it, but the intensity of the unpleasant pain remains unchanged.

As we move into other practices, that whole teaching about the two arrows—the idea that suffering is an unnecessary addition to pain—reveals itself as a provisional truth, a provisional teaching. We begin to realize that, as with the wheel of dependent origination and its twelve links, the fabrications of self, papañca, reactivity fabricate all the elements of that wheel, all the links of that chain. So as there's more fabrication—more stories of self, more "poor me," more "why me," more comparing myself to other people who I'm sure can sit comfortably—as these fabrications increase, there's more fabrication of suffering. But there's also possibly more fabrication of the pain itself, the unpleasant vedanā. We may start to see this even at this level, or it may become apparent only as we move into the next levels of practice.

Usually where there's vedanā, there's some form of clinging. Let me expand what I mean by clinging. Always where there's vedanā, there's clinging. The habitual response to pleasant or unpleasant vedanā is clinging. We try to hang on to the pleasant or get more of it, and we try to push away or feel averse to the unpleasant. Even with the so-called neutral vedanā—neither pleasant nor unpleasant—we tend to fall asleep, and actually there's a kind of clinging in that too.

Or get dull, disinterested, bored, uninterested.

So this clinging—what we want to understand is how this clinging works as a fabricator. There's one way, as I mentioned, when there's really a lot of pushing away or trying to hold on, where the pain's very strong, there's a contraction of the muscles, and that contraction doesn't help. There's also contraction of awareness that happens with clinging. And as we discussed when we talked about the second version of mindfulness with much more spacious awareness, that contraction of awareness also doesn't help. It partly increases, as we said before, the sense of how pervasive the pain is—that it's taking up the whole of consciousness, the whole of experience.

There's also a way in which we could say that a smaller awareness puts pressure on something. It's like having a gas in a container—if we squeeze that container and shrink it, the pressure of the gas will increase. The intensity, the pressure in physics, is related to the speed of the movement, the momentum, the kinetic energy of the movement. So analogously, the pain increases when there's contraction of awareness.

But there's something more fundamental than this muscular contraction or contraction of awareness. There's something more fundamental to the way that clinging works. The degree of fabrication of vedanā is dependent on clinging. More clinging, more vedanā is fabricated. Certainly it's highly obvious to most practitioners, even after they've practiced just a little bit of insight meditation: more clinging, more suffering. But another level is more clinging, not just more fabrication of suffering, but more fabrication of vedanā itself.

This level of practice is really important and it's a basic skill for everyone to develop. It may or may not, as I said, reveal this deeper level of understanding about dependent origination and the way clinging fabricates vedanā. But then there's a whole other level.

For example, there are practices such as the three characteristics as ways of looking. Again, all this is in *Seeing That Frees*. But practicing the three characteristics in very specific ways—really engaging them as ways of looking. Those three, or actually any emptiness way of looking. Again, many, many in *Seeing That Frees*. So the three characteristics are dukkha and anicca and anattā. There's what I call Dukkha Method 1 and Dukkha Method 2, and then with Dukkha Method 2, there are different variations. I'm not going into detail because I've done this in so much detail elsewhere. You can find it certainly in *Seeing That Frees*, and you can find recordings that talk about it.

But there are many variations, and we can talk about welcoming practice—again, both with narrow attention and with spacious attention or awareness. We can talk about directing mettā to phenomena, to dharmas. Many, many practices here, again, can be done in narrow and spacious attention.

We can talk about emptiness practices such as seeing the whole and the parts of something—let's say a pain or a region of pain—contemplating the mutual dependent rising and mutual emptiness of the whole and the parts of the pain. We can talk about the practice of not one, not many. This pain is not one, not many. And that's a way of seeing its emptiness—looking at it, attending to the pain, feeling, sensing the pain. At the same time we have this very delicate, agile, sophisticated understanding, very lightly, almost like in shorthand, very delicately in the way of looking, wrapped up in the way of looking. It's not one, not many, meaning it's empty.

And in that very beautiful, profound practice, we can again feel the pain but be aware of the emptiness of any dualities, or particularly the emptiness of the duality of pain and pleasure. We can look at the pain and analyze it with the sevenfold reasoning or other reasonings. Many, many possibilities here. Very, very powerful practices.

What we're doing there—again, most of them can be done with narrow attention focused on the pain, or with wider attention—many possibilities here, and many variations for each possibility in many cases. And what we're doing here is we're engaging a way of looking, meditatively, lightly—as I said the other day in the talk on emptiness and ways of looking—that has much less clinging in it, much, much less clinging in it.

So you can see that in the Dukkha Method 2, it's actually deliberately getting a sense, in some way or other, of the clinging in the moment—any push-pull, any aversion, any hanging on, any tension in the relationship with a phenomenon that one is attending to—and relaxing that clinging. Some of them work obviously very directly with the clinging, some much more indirectly. Or they're working with the avijjā and reducing the avijjā in the moment, in the way of looking.

So I'm attending to this phenomenon, this pain, with some degree of less clinging at some level, some aspect of clinging, and some degree and some aspect of avijjā has gone. And again, because of the map that the Buddha gave of the links of dependent origination: less clinging, less fabrication. Less avijjā, also less fabrication. As I said the other day, avijjā also is actually just another mode of clinging—it's a subtle mode of clinging. It's seen as such in Mahāyāna terminology. But this is what we're doing.

And this is what an insight way of looking is, basically. It's relating to, attending to, sensing something or other—any phenomenon whatsoever—through a lens that has, in some way or another, a little or a lot less clinging in it, a little or a lot less avijja.

And because of that, that phenomena right now, right here, right now, in this moment that I'm still attending to it, is fabricated less. The intensity of the unpleasant vedana actually starts to decrease, and sometimes dramatically so.

We can talk about a kind of hierarchy of potency of these kinds of practices in a way that's partly traced through the thread of "Seeing That Frees." As I mentioned the other day, to look at something through the lens of emptiness, understanding that it's fabricated, is much more potent as a way of looking than just looking at it as anatta, which is usually more potent than, let's say, just impermanence. And looking at it through a lens of the awareness that knows it is anatta—is not me, not mine—is usually more potent than regarding this pain as not me, not mine.

It's empty of inherent existence. It's empty of having any phenomenal self, this pain. That's even more powerful, and so forth. So there's a kind of hierarchy, and in a way, "Seeing That Frees" is loosely organized in the progression of that hierarchy of potency, just because it's actually a hierarchy of, or a progression of both meditative skill and also depth of understanding—understanding that comes from experience.

As I said the other day, I can't look at something with a way of looking that understands it's empty until I have really understood for myself that it's empty. For example, because I've seen that it's fabricated, because I've looked at it with the second dukkha method or the first dukkha method or anatta and seen that it fades—therefore it's fabricated, dependent on the way of looking. When that's seen so many times and felt, and the impact on the being felt so many times, that understanding is consolidated. Then that consolidated understanding can be engaged, can be used as a way of looking. I've moved to another level of practice there, another depth.

So there are lots of these kinds of practices, these unfabricating ways of looking, these insight ways of looking. There are lots of them, but there's also lots to them.

As I said, for example, take the dukkha method—what I call dukkha method number two—lots of variations. Or we just mentioned the anatta—not me, not mine. We can regard the pain itself, the unpleasant vedana, as not me, not mine. But we can also attend to the unpleasant vedana, the pain, at the same time we're including an awareness of the awareness of that pain, including both, and then regard the awareness of the pain—our awareness of it—as anatta.

Or, for example, the usually completely unnoticed, so to speak, unconscious intention to pay attention. Whenever we pay attention to something—I don't just mean as a deliberate "oh, right now I've really got to pay attention," or deliberately in meditation. I mean just paying attention to anything. Whenever we hear a sound, there's a movement of the attention there. If we hear a sound, there's a movement of attention towards that object. And so that attention is something that needs an intention behind it. That intention is almost always unconscious—we don't realize it, unless we're actually making an exercise of trying to pay attention. But even then, we only realize, usually, a very gross level of that intention.

In every moment of consciousness, you could say, the mind is attending to something. It has to be. In any moment of experience, which means any moment of perception, which means any moment of appearance or phenomena, the mind is paying attention. And with that, there is an intention to pay attention to that phenomena.

Now, we could, as we're attending to the pain, also include in our awareness the very, very subtle sense of the intention to pay attention. It's a very, very subtle, moment-to-moment, almost throbbing movement, very, very subtle in the mind. And we could regard that intention to pay attention as anatta, as not me, not mine.

Or we could regard our aversion—notice there's some aversion to this pain, and what if I regard the aversion, the pushing away? I'm talking about aversion, not at the level of the mind saying, "Oh, this is terrible, I wish it would go away." Just the subtle energetic pushing, energetic trying to distance oneself. We could regard that aversion as anatta. We could adopt a way of looking where the actual object includes not just the pain, but also the sense of aversion to the pain, and regard the aversion as anatta, as not me, not mine. It's a more sophisticated way of looking.

And the same if we move to a level where we're engaging a way of looking that understands empty—looking at things as empty. So there are all those possible objects: not just the unpleasant vedana, not just the pain, but also the awareness of the pain is also empty, which again means more than it's not me, not mine. It's not just not me, not mine. It's empty of phenomenal existence. That's a very, very deep level of practice and quite sophisticated awareness—sophisticated understanding, excuse me.

So to be able to do that, and again, with the intention to pay attention, with the aversion—the aversion has no inherent existence. The aversion is empty, et cetera.

So there are many objects. It's as if what we could say is that pain is a dependent arising.

Through these practices, we begin to see how pain is a dependent arising because it's dependent on the way of looking. When you start to see that you can really pay attention and engage some of these ways of looking, the pain just fades. It disappears, dissipates, dissolves—or at least it attenuates. We begin to understand that the pain, the unpleasant vedanā, is dependent on my way of looking. But it's also dependent on all these other factors: attention, my identifying with the awareness of it, and many, many more.

So we could say that pain itself is a dependent arising in that it is a constellation—many things threaded together, woven together. It's already a thicket of things, hard to separate out these elements. But meditatively, one can separate them out enough. Ultimately, they're not separable, and that's one of the real deep understandings that emptiness teaches. But meditatively, practically, in our art—in our meditative art—it's pos-

sible to separate them out enough to isolate them, to work on ways of looking that target, that pinpoint different twigs in this thicket, different thorns in this thicket, different threads in this tangle. And that starts doing something.

But really, pain is a constellation. Any or all of those elements within the constellation of what we call pain can be objects of an insight way of looking. We can practice, we can train our insight way of looking on those objects. So pain is a dependent arising fabricated by the whole constellation, and it's also a dependent arising fabricated by unskillful ways of looking at the whole constellation. Most of them are just habitual and completely unconscious. Pain itself is a dependent arising in terms of being fabricated by all these other factors of attention and whatnot. But it's also dependent on ways of looking—it's a fabrication dependent on ways of looking at that whole constellation.

There's a huge area here, and I've gone into it in lots of detail elsewhere, so I'm just listing it and unpacking a bit of the understanding right now.

A third possibility, for those of you who have developed jhāna practice to some degree, offers a quite lovely and also quite amazing way of practicing. I actually offered it on a recent Jhāna Retreat at Gaia House, and I think a lot of people were just amazed at what happened—the magic of it, and that it would be possible, and what it suggested about the nature of things, the reality of things that we believe were just givens, just primary.

As I said, oftentimes our understanding of Buddha Dharma is that vedanā is just a given. It's just what it is—this is what we're given. Unpleasant vedanā, pleasant, neither. It might vary from person to person: this person likes that sound, another person doesn't, and that might depend on history. But in the moment, it's just a given. And there's a whole other level of understanding which really understands that's actually not the case. Vedanā is not a given. Vedanā is a dependent arising, dependent on how we're looking at it in the moment, on the way of relating to it in the moment, the way of looking at it in the moment.

So here, once one's developed enough familiarity or mastery at a certain level of jhāna—wherever that is, first jhāna, fourth jhāna, whatever—then one can, if one has practiced enough with that familiarity and there's enough skill with it, actually begin to take what I call the primary nimitta of that jhāna. For example, in the first jhāna, it would be pīti. That's the dominant flavor of the first jhāna and the thing that I'm giving most attention to, the primary perception.

And if one's familiar enough and skilled enough with the first jhāna, here's this area of pain in the body. And one can just decide to see it, to feel it, to sense it as pīti—which means bliss or ecstasy or rapture, or certainly means pleasant feeling. So what was unpleasant, one just decides to see as pleasant, based on my familiarity with that perception from my jhānic experience.

And if one is skilled in the second jhāna, one can feel, sense, see this area of pain in the body as happiness. It's no longer dukkha.

It's no longer unpleasant. It has become pleasant. Its very texture and vibration is happiness. Or again, through the different jhānas, a kind of luminous stillness it can become. It's not even pleasant anymore—it's very subtly pleasant, really, but technically speaking, it's a kind of neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Actually, it's subtly pleasant. So this area of pain has just now become an area of luminous stillness. There's no pain there.

In the fifth jhāna, it has just become empty space, or it's become consciousness. If I take the primary nimitta from the sixth jhāna, it's become nothingness, and so forth.

Again, this might sound completely unbelievable, but as I said, many people who'd never even heard of this possibility before coming on retreat at Gaia House, just over three weeks' duration of retreat, began playing with this when I suggested it and found —wow, wow—this is really possible. We're, you could say, coloring the perception of an area, we're changing the perception of an area. There's a kind of magic involved, just as there will be if one really develops the insight ways of looking practice. There will be a sense of: wow, this dependent origination business is magic. There's something in this unfabricating, fabricating, dependent on the way of looking in the moment. It's really magic. It feels like magic.

Our ability to do this—to take, let's say, an area of pain in the body and to just have the intention of feeling it as pleasure, as sukha, or as pīti, or whatever it is, or as nothingness—our ability to do that strongly implies there's only one conclusion: it's empty. It doesn't exist, this pain, as a given. This unpleasant burden doesn't exist as a given, as a thing that's a kind of absolute reality independent of the way of looking. It doesn't exist only from its own side, so to speak. It doesn't have inherent existence.

When we practice this way—let's say we develop jhānas and do that, or let's say the insight ways of looking and that happens—we understand it's empty. It's a dependent arising, but dependent on the present, not just dependent on the past. Yes, this pain is dependent on my injury. Yes, this pain is dependent on my illness, whatever it is. Yes,

this pain is dependent on sitting hours and hours and hours and the body getting stiff or whatever. It's a dependent arising dependent on the way of looking in the moment as well.

So we understand something, we have that insight, and we get that. We get that it's empty, it's dependent arising, and it's malleable. It's a fabrication dependent on the way of looking, and it's malleable. It's not a solid, fixed thing—not just that it's impermanent and not fixed in that way, and not solid in that way. It's actually malleable. Our way of looking shapes it, can shape it, does shape it, and with development of our skill in meditation, can shape it from pain to pleasure, and all different flavors of pleasure, in fact. Because that deep nothingness is also, in a strange kind of mystical way, a kind of pleasure. Even in its being neither pleasant nor unpleasant, it's actually a kind of pleasure.

The Buddha talks—sometimes he says, "Sometimes I teach three kinds of vedanā: pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Other times I teach just pleasant and unpleasant." The two kinds of vedanā model is a more subtle teaching.

Seeing this in practice, feeling it in practice, doing it in practice, and feeling, sensing the results firsthand—that area of pain there—it's not that I'll just go and pay attention to where it feels good. I mean, that's a skillful thing to do, as we explained on the jhāna retreat as well. But I'm looking at that pain there, and that pain transforms. It is malleable. It's transformed through adopting a different way of looking at it.

So we understand that. The very understanding of the emptiness, the dependent origination, the fabricated nature and the malleability of vedanā, of perception—in this case of pain—implies the possibility. It strengthens and adds to our sense that this is possible, that perception is malleable, that vedanā is malleable.

So we do it, we understand the emptiness, the dependent origination, the malleability, and that understanding of the emptiness, the dependent origination, the malleability actually shores up our sense of the possibility and actually increases our skill. It's somehow like our very knowing of that—technically, our very knowing of the emptiness, the dependent origination, the malleability of it—when we have that knowing, there's less avijjā. Because there's less avijjā, the pain is actually more malleable, because it's avijjā which fabricates the pain, fabricates the kind of solidity.

Actually, when we're engaging, when we're confident, and we're approaching something with a way of looking that knows that it's malleable, it actually becomes more malleable. But that knowledge of malleability needs to be first dependent on our experience, as before.

It might be through these practices, through these emptiness practices, that there's no unpleasantness present at all. But it may be that we replace the pain with pleasure, or that it's replaced with a very deep fading and unfabricating of vedanā. For example, when we play with perception in a way that we're just seeing consciousness there, or we're just seeing nothingness there, there's a very deep fading, a very deep unfabricating of vedanā. It is not yet a complete unfabricating—it's not a complete cessation of perception and vedanā—but it's very deep. It's gone beyond the vedanā of pleasure, beyond the perception of pleasure.

These practices might sound esoteric, but they're really not. I'm moving through them quickly because I've talked and written elsewhere about them in detail.

There's a fourth possibility, or fourth basket of possibilities—a deeper level of possibilities. Once one has developed skill in these emptiness ways of looking and insight ways of looking, it's actually possible to look at the pain, to sense the pain—and you can listen and see how much of this will apply to all kinds of other phenomena, not just physical pain, but mental pain and other experiences as well. There are much broader lessons and broader relevance here.

Once one has really developed the art and skill in these emptiness ways of looking, one can engage an emptiness way of looking while modulating its intensity. Let's say I'm looking at something as empty, understanding that it means fabricated, or just a perception, or empty of having inherent existence—because I've done the sevenfold reasoning before and seen it many times, recognizing that it can't have inherent existence. So I'm engaging one of these deep emptiness practices, but it's as if I'm not completely putting my foot down on the insight pedal, so to speak.

In my way of looking, there's not the full amount of the tincture of emptiness insight. I'm putting in maybe half the amount. In the car analogy, I'm pressing on the accelerator, but not completely. There's a whole range of how much I can lean on the knowing of emptiness within the way of looking in any moment.

This might sound outrageously sophisticated and impossible, but it's really not. It just takes practice—practicing in a certain way. It won't come about just because I've spent ten thousand hours on a cushion trying to be mindful. I have to practice in certain ways so that this kind of artistry is developed, building up stage by stage.

What happens here is that I am engaging a deep emptiness way of looking, but I'm playing with the intensity of the emphasis on emptiness within that way of looking—how much I'm leaning on that insight of emptiness, how much I'm pressing on that pedal, how many drops of this tincture of insight are in the way of looking. Then there's some fading, but not complete fading.

If I've developed those practices, those insight ways of looking—particularly emptiness ways of looking—then when I attend to pain and look at it as empty, and I've consolidated that practice, developed it, that pain will fade and disappear. Here, I'm actually looking at it as empty, but not allowing it to completely fade.

You might think, "Well, why would you do that? Why would you bother to do that if you can have it completely fade?" This is a very interesting question, and there are two answers we could give. The first one is what I would consider the more important one, and I'll state the answer as a question.

Here's the question we started with: Why would you want to only partially fade some pain when you could completely fade it? It's dukkha, it's unpleasant. Why would you not just want to fade it completely?

The answer, in the form of a question, I would put like this: What is most sacred? What is most sacred? That's the answer to this question of why I might only want to partially fade it at times.

Now this question—what is most sacred—is actually a question only for those practitioners who know, through their own experience in meditation, through their own repeated experience in meditation and their understanding, who know this deep, complete fading of things. Who know the unfabricated, who know cessation, and the implications of deep fading—implying the total emptiness of any phenomenal reality, any experience, any appearance, any perception, any vedanā.

So this answer that I'm going to give will only really make sense to people who know about very deep fading and know personally through their experience, through having developed the practices that I've just talked about, particularly those insight ways of looking, which must be based on mindfulness and so forth.

The answer is a question: what is most sacred? If you know, and you've gone as far as that complete cessation, complete deep fading, reached the unfabricated, recognized the fabricated and therefore illusory nature of all phenomenal reality, then you're at a point when there is likely to be a hierarchy of sacredness.

Phenomenal reality is an illusion. It's a fabrication, which has this connotation of illusion and lie, as does the word "concoction," both in translations of *sankhāra,* in contrast to which the unfabricated, the complete fading of all perception and all vedanā, is real, is true, because it's unfabricated. It's not a dependent arising, it seems. So one is probably at that point leaning or looking at the world as the lower tier, if you like, in a hierarchy: the fabricated in contrast to the unfabricated. And the unfabricated is the true and the holy, if you like, the sacred.

But as I've explained elsewhere, we cannot stop at that point. We can go deeper in our exploration of fabrication and emptiness. I'm not going to explain it here again—it's in *Seeing That Frees*, and in that talk, it's a two-part talk, "Approaching the Dharma," I think it's called "Other Places," as well.

We begin to see the emptiness of fabrication, emptiness of the process of fabrication, and emptiness of time—because fabrication is a process in time. The emptiness of fabrications, the emptiness of the process of fabrication, and the emptiness of time. And all that, as we go deeper then, we start to realize the emptiness of the unfabricated, which exists in a kind of dualistic opposition with the fabricated.

If the fabricated is empty, there's not really a fabricated, then the unfabricated too, as a dualistic contrast, kind of collapses. Not as an experience, but as a duality, it's collapsed. There is no hierarchy. And we come to a deeper level of realization, deeper even than realizing the unfabricated through the cessation, the total unfabricating of the phenomenal world of perception of vedanā. We come to a deeper realization that's non-dualistic.

What opens up for us then is a sense of a world of empty, divine and magical appearances—already magical to see that they're dependent on the way of looking, dependent on fabricating in the moment. But magical at a whole other level when you also realize that fabrication too is not a real thing, and a time in which things could be fabricated is not a real thing. The whole—you're at the edge of the level of what even "magical" might possibly mean.

Now emptiness starts to have a bigger meaning than fabrication. At first they were a little bit synonymous if you follow the ways of looking approach. Now emptiness means more than fabrication. And because there's no hierarchy of holiness, of sacredness, divinity everywhere, holiness, sacredness everywhere. The world of phenomena becomes a world of empty, magical and divine appearances.

But here's where language gets so tricky, because someone could hear something like that and perhaps they only know a level—still a very lovely level of practice, but perhaps they only know that level of practice that I call the vastness of awareness, where there's a very spacious, kind of effortless-seeming awareness, and phenomena arise and pass within that vast awareness, within that space, spacious awareness, and they seem very insubstantial, these phenomena. They're just diaphanous, see-through. They're of the nature, the substance of the awareness. Some people call that the opening to the nature of mind or the realization of the nature of mind, etc.

So someone just familiar with that level of practice could say, "Yes, yes, it's a world of empty, magical and divine appearances. I know exactly what you're talking about." But no, no, no, no, no—this is really, really important. I'm talking about a whole other level.

So beautiful as those openings and those perceptions are at the level of what I call the vastness of awareness—a really, really important stage for a lot of practitioners, maybe the majority of insight meditation practitioners—we're talking now about a whole other level. As I said, this is only for people who've gone beyond that, to the total fading and cessation, to the complete unfabricated, beyond any sense of space, any sense of awareness in that sense of vastness of awareness. Any sense of phenomena arising. Any sense of all of that. Any sense of time. Any sense of the present moment. Understood the implications of that and then gone beyond even that.

So we're talking really about several quite significant stages further than this vastness of awareness of what some people call the nature of mind—realization of practice of the nature of mind, nature of awareness.

When I use—this is where, you know, the same words can be understood or used at very different levels. So here, when we understand a world of empty, magical and divine appearances...

all three of those words—empty, magical, and divine—have just very different levels of connotation. They're imbued with a very different level of understanding. I'm really stretched further there.

So, the question I asked in response to the question, "Why would you only want to half-fade when you can fully fade pain and unpleasantness?" is: What is most sacred?

If this sense of non-dualistic world of empty, magical, divine appearances means that pain—that half-faded pain, I should say, will attenuate a little bit, can't help but attenuate some—that pain is empty, magical, and divine. And I've not just gotten rid of pain; I've maybe attenuated it somewhat, but it's become empty, magical, and divine.

If I care about sacredness, and if sacredness is part of what I want—or let's say it's not, let's say at least that it's not that all I ever want is to get rid of my pain, all I ever want is a reduction in dukkha—then this level actually becomes very important.

And this ability to, based on my understanding of this non-duality between fabricated and unfabricated, which is based on my understanding of the emptiness of fabricated, unfabricated, fabrications, time, the process of fabricating, which is based on my understanding of fabrication in the first place, which is based on my practice of ways of looking—then that actually becomes the one that opens me in this moment to a beautiful sense of sacredness, deep, profound, mystical, and that touches me deeply.

I still got some pain there in that moment, but there's a whole different sense of the pain, self, and existence, if I care about sacredness.

So that, I think, is, for me, the most important answer to the question, "Why would I only want to, why would I want an incomplete fade, want this, you know, only half-fading when I could actually fade the pain completely?" I would say that's the most important answer.

But historically, there's a very related answer, but it has to do with Buddhology, the notion of what a Buddha is. And I'm only going to allude to this. I may or may not come back to it in the context of another talk at some future time.

But there's a difference—there's quite a big difference between the notion, the Theravāda notion of what a Buddha is and what a Buddha mind is and does, and a Mahāyāna notion of what a Buddha is and what a Buddha mind is and does. In other words, the Buddhologies between Theravāda and Mahāyāna are actually quite different.

And in the Mahāyāna teachings, it's said—I think I mentioned this the other day in a talk at Gaia House, I'm pretty sure—it's said only a Buddha can look at a phenomenon and thoroughly look at it, knowing its emptiness, without it completely fading. Only the non-dual—it's called gnosis, wisdom awareness—only the non-dual wisdom awareness, or jñāna in Sanskrit, only the non-dual jñāna of a Buddha is capable of fully knowing the emptiness of appearances, fully knowing in that moment the emptiness of appearances, at the same time as keeping those appearances from fading.

So that's a kind of very basic tenet in Mahāyāna teachings. It's in the Mahāyāna Sūtrālaṅkāra and the Mahāyāna Saṅgraha, a very core text of Mahāyāna teaching. Tsongkhapa, a great Tibetan teacher, founder of the Gelug school, reiterates it in his Il-

lumination of Thought, commentary on a basic text of Candrakīrti centuries earlier. Mipham Rinpoche comes back to it from a different stream—he's a Nyingma master. So it's in the different streams of the Tibetan lineages as well.

Not a lot of people know it, though. Not a lot of people know that teaching or know just quite the import and the significance of that teaching in the Mahāyāna, for Mahāyāna philosophy. So it has to do with Buddhology.

I'm not going to go into this too much. And what is the aim of practice? So a Bodhisattva is someone who's aiming or has vowed to become a Buddha. But in the Mahāyāna, a Buddha is not someone who is then born—like the story of Siddhartha then becomes a Buddha, teaches for a while, and then dies, and just disappears because they're not reborn anymore, like an Arahant.

In the Mahāyāna version of Buddhology, a Buddha is someone who is able to be fully awakened, fully enlightened. That means no more avijjā at all, but they can be in the world. They are reborn, so to speak, or at least in most of the Mahāyāna Buddhologies, an emanation of them appears in the world—the Rūpakāya, the three bodies of a Buddha, the Rūpakāya, the emanation of the Buddha.

There's all kinds of, you know, arcane sounding and convoluted seeming and sophisticated Mahāyāna teachings that actually come back or trace, are rooted in this basic problem: How is it that if I don't have any avijjā in any moment, that I perceive anything?

Because for a normal human being, as the Mahāyāna Saṅgraha says, and those Mahāyāna texts, for a normal human being, when I look at something, when I engage a way of looking that has no avijjā in it, then that phenomenon fades. There's no perception of that phenomenon. There's less avijjā, therefore—well, there's no avijjā, therefore, no perception.

So the question is, how can a Buddha then be reborn into the world of perception? How can they be in the world, or at least an emanation of them, be in the world and help, continue to help, instead of just reaching enlightenment, teaching for a few years, and then not being reborn, and therefore not being of help?

So, with the full weight and force of their complete prajñā, paññā wisdom, insight and jñāna, their gnosis, which means no avijjā, and with no unskillful saṅkhāras, no karma of subtle craving or clinging—how can a Buddha be reborn without avijjā and without any saṅkhāras, unskillful saṅkhāras, be reborn so that they can be in the world, which means that they have to perceive, so that they can help?

To help you have to perceive, which means there needs to be a world, there needs to be a perception of a world.

So some versions: an Arahant is totally liberated, but has removed their avijjā completely, but they still have a kind of momentum of saṅkhāras, karmic momentum of saṅkhāras, that's only exhausted when the Arahant dies.

So it's a bit like a car that's been running and then runs out of petrol. And its momentum, even though it's run out of petrol, it's run out of the avidyā that would keep it going, it's still going to go for a while until the conditions are such that the friction of the road or whatever or hill makes it stop.

This represents one model for how an arahant exists in the world. Their continued existence until death is simply propelled by old karma, the stream of sankharas arising from past actions. At death, this karmic momentum is exhausted, and they are never reborn because there remains no more avijja and the stream of sankharas has been depleted.

But if you're not reborn, then you cannot help. And if you don't perceive—if you're not reborn into the world, or the world of perception is not reborn—you cannot help. Without this capacity, you cannot embody infinite compassion.

The bodhisattva in Mahayana teaching has a different aim. They seek to remain in the world with that full prajna, complete jnana—which means no avijja—while maintaining the ability to perceive simultaneously. This spawns all kinds of complicated conundrums and philosophies within the Mahayana tradition. Yet very few people understand the roots of these teachings. It's as if the Mahayana were given a kind of riddle to solve, which they did beautifully, creatively, and in various ways.

Vajrayana practice is essentially a mimicking of the Buddha mind. Tantra and Vajrayana involve this seeing of divinities and perceiving appearances as divinities. Tantric texts speak extensively about seeing the elements—earth, air, fire, and water—as divinities. "Seeing appearances as divine" is a fundamental Vajrayana phrase.

When practicing different Vajrayana methods, we can understand them as mimicking a Buddha's mind. The hope is that through this mimicry, we eventually become like a Buddha through the habit of imitation. What we're mimicking is that ability to fully know the emptiness of something while simultaneously sustaining the appearances without them fading.

Only the non-dual jnana, the wisdom awareness of a Mahayana Buddha, can fully know the emptiness of appearances without those appearances dissolving. For all the rest of us, we must either lean fully on the emptiness—in which case the appearance we're observing will fade and disappear, and perception won't be fabricated—or we must back off and allow the appearance to reconstitute.

When we play with this incomplete fading, we're actually practicing a light touching, a gentle including and emphasizing of the emptiness within our way of looking, ensuring it doesn't completely fade. In this way, we're mimicking the Buddha mind, Buddha perception. As I explained earlier, it becomes possible in that space, in that middle ground, dependent on all the insight and art of practice cultivated before, to begin perceiving all things as bliss—primordial, cosmic, divine bliss, not merely as piti.

Yes, they are pleasant, yes divine, but blessed. The bliss here means something deeper in Vajrayana teachings. The nature of all things is bliss, as the teachings declare—not simply that everything is pleasant, but that all is divine and blessed.

Dzogchen is said to contain nine levels of teaching within it. Yet it's not uncommon to encounter Dzogchen teachings, practice them, or read about them while understanding them only at the most basic level—in terms of the vastness of awareness and the so-called nature of mind. Many of the words can be employed at different levels, different depths of understanding and different stages in the art of practice: divine, magical appearances, bliss, insubstantial, empty.

There is much more here, but I won't elaborate further now. What I will say is this: through developing both our insight and our meditative art—this practice I'm describing of deliberate incomplete fading—through the gradual cultivation of our insight into emptiness and our meditative skill, we are granted both the license and the ability to fabricate for the sake of greater sacredness.

We fabricate to be touched by a sense of the sacred, of divinity, of beauty—to open to that reality, immerse ourselves in it, dwell within it. This serves sacredness and beauty and opens a completely different level of what we might call healing. There is physical healing, the fading of pain and finding relief. But there is also this divine contextualizing, this transubstantiation of pain into something magical, empty, and divine within a cosmos that is magical, empty, and divine—a universe of appearances that are magical, empty, and divine. This constitutes an entirely different dimension of healing.

The license to fabricate for this purpose and in this way is based on understanding that this represents a deeper insight. It is actually more profound than going completely into the unfabricated, than complete unfabricating. But it is only a deeper insight if we have experienced and understood that deeper or complete fading, that total unfabricating, the unfabricated itself.

If I haven't understood this completely, then merely a relative insubstantializing of pain or phenomena is not necessarily the deeper insight. But if I have gone all the way—gone completely to the unfabricated and then moved beyond that—then I understand that this partial place, this partial fading, this middle region of empty yet appearing, embodies and manifests the deeper insight. This understanding is only possible if I have gone deeper in terms of fading experience and realization.

So we have these four groups of practices: mindfulness in various forms, insight ways of looking, the playing with perception and jhanic qualities, and the deep emptiness ways of looking without complete fading—all oriented toward sacredness. There is also an entire set of practices usually called exchanging self and other, truly exchanging the happiness of self and other.

I won't say too much about that, but again, it's covered in *Seeing That Frees*. There's a section on exchanging self and other, and by that point, what becomes possible in this set of practices depends greatly on what one has developed through previous insight ways of looking practices and understandings of emptiness and fabrication.

Essentially, when we encounter pain or dukkha—and this applies equally to mental dukkha, hindrances, depression, or whatever arises—we begin relating to it in a completely different way. While actually in contact with this dukkha, paying attention to this experience here and now, I say: "I take on, I accept, I want this dukkha." I take it from someone somewhere else, someone I will never know or meet, to relieve them of their burden of suffering.

This involves a kind of magical thinking. We can also practice the opposite with happiness. When experiencing joy, or even just imagining a specific experience of happiness, we give that away to someone else in meditation.

Again, we're speaking not of a philosophy or way of living, but of a meditative way of looking—which means it's light, delicate, agile, and subtle. If we're working with physical pain, we remain in contact with that pain while looking at it in this particular way. By taking it on, by welcoming it in this manner, the practice relates closely to welcoming practice and certain versions of the dukkha method.

This is a very beautiful practice that connects us with others through the heart, beautiful intention, love, and compassion. It's also magical, opening so many possibilities.

When I decide to take on this suffering—this present experience of suffering—that very act lessens my normal, habitual, compulsive aversion and pushing away. I'm relaxing that aversion, which begins to attenuate the unpleasantness because there's less aversion, less clinging, and therefore less fabrication of the unpleasant. This actually makes the pain easier to bear.

If I can linger in that beautiful space where the heart is connected, the pain is somewhat eased, and I'm taking on suffering for others, I remain connected with compassion, beautiful intention, and sacrificial intention. My attention stays with the unpleasant vedanā, which attenuates as I change my relationship to it in the moment.

One can also mix this with emptiness. As the sensations become more unfabricated through this practice, I might taste unfabrication for the first time and realize their emptiness. Or perhaps I already understand emptiness from other insight ways of looking, and then I can work with these empty sensations, this empty unpleasantness, taking it on while knowing it's empty—which makes it easier to accept for the sake of others.

There are so many variations and possibilities here, such a beautiful realm of practices. This can be tremendously creative, opening up the malleability of perception and the sense of divinity in perception. By mixing love with emptiness, we move toward Buddha mind, or at least mimic Buddha mind, heading in directions that echo tantric and Vajrayana practices.

What often happens understandably when there's dukkha—mental or physical—is that the self contracts around it, becoming hard and woven around the pain. Here, we're opening up that sense of self, releasing that contraction. This is part of what's occurring in these practices.

The possibilities are vast and creative, engaging the imagination and opening pathways that are tantric, quasi-tantric, or Vajrayana-like. But there's also the possibility of imaginal practices within this realm, as I mentioned at the beginning. One possibility might be somewhat similar to exchanging self and other, related through its use of imagination and engagement with the self.

So where there's an imaginal relationship with an object, with pain, it will start to involve the sense of self. The soul-making dynamic and the imaginer will spread to include the sense of self. We can actually deliberately include the sense of self from the beginning.

Let me explore this a little more deeply. Here's this pain, here's this dukkha, here's this illness, here's whatever it is. One can have some kind of image of it as a sacrifice, or oneself as a sacrifice, as a sacrificial victim, if you like. This may be a fully blown image of a sacrifice with oneself in that role. It could also be much more subtle than that. But in some way, the pain and the suffering and the self are woven into an image of sacrifice.

This might manifest as a detailed, prominent image of being a sacrificial victim in relationship to the pain. Or it might be that the whole notion of sacrifice and sacrificial victim remains vague, not so filled out as an image but rather a kind of potent idea. Rather than paying attention to an actual image of being burnt on an altar or whatever it might be, it's actually just the notion – like a tincture – the idea of a sacrificial victim that remains vague. It might be just a kind of archetypal idea.

This archetypal sense might remain in the background while what's more in the foreground is the pain itself. The image functions more as an ideational background or a sense of a vague archetype. Or it might work through a very specific archetype – the obvious one being Christ. Perhaps there's an identification with Christ's passion, Christ on the cross.

Again, this could manifest in different ways. The image of Christ might come very much to the foreground while the pain is still there, but the image of Christ and the sense of identification becomes more prominent. Or it could work the other way – it's just in the background, the archetypal idea and sense and resonances and soul beauty of the archetype of Christ and the identification with that remains in the background, while what's in the foreground is myself, my particulars, this experience. But that has become imaginal, and partly the image of it is sustained by the background archetype.

We talked about this word "sacrifice" just the other day, very briefly, but the etymology here is "to make sacred." In Latin, it means to make sacred, to make something sacred. I'm not talking about Hollywood meanings of the word sacrifice with strange rituals on altars with blood and weird stuff that we don't understand. It might include that, but the question, as always with soul-making practice, is: is it soul-making? What's needed here? What degree of image, what degree of image in the background, what kind of image? It might be very subtle, or it might be dramatic and intense, but the question is: right now, what's soul-making?

Be careful not to buy into a gory, Hollywood, incomprehensible understanding of the word sacrifice. But in including the self in what's happening, and maybe this imaginal notion or image sense of sacrifice, sacrificial victim, then the whole thing can become imaginal. The elements of the imaginal can ignite – the divinity, the beauty – and it

starts to really include the person and my particulars, and maybe even the sense of the necessity of this suffering, the necessity of this sacrifice, the necessity of this dukkha to the divine. I'll return to that.

Before I come back to it, let me say a few things about all this. Any Dharma practice should bring about a reduction of pain in the here and now, in the present. Even something like doing mettā for other beings, or compassion, or whatever it is – any dharma practice should bring about a reduction of pain, even if that's not what one is aiming for, even if one isn't trying to or isn't paying much attention to the pain, or if one is, or if one can't help including it in the attention. Any dharma practice should bring a reduction in pain to some degree.

Why? Because any dharma practice – all dharma practices, even practices like mettā – are effectively reductions in the moment of clinging. Reducing clinging brings a reduction of fabrication, and with the reduction of fabrication, the pain gets fabricated less, the unpleasant vedanā get fabricated less. So any Dharma practice should bring a reduction in pain right now – not because I'm distracting myself by paying attention to my metaphors or whatever, but actually because there's less clinging. It should bring some degree of reduction in pain, even if it's just a little bit, in the here and now, not because one is distracting oneself through practice, but because there's actually less clinging.

That's the understanding of dependent arising.

But more importantly, I think—again, what's the point here? What's the point?

The Buddha spoke about meditation, particularly jhāna, but actually all meditation, as pleasant abiding in the here and now. This being one of the reasons to practice meditation—that one is actually able to abide, to be, to dwell in a pleasant state in the here and now. Pleasant abiding in the here and now is one of the reasons for meditation, for developing meditation.

But the other reason the Buddha gave, of course, is for the development of insight and the ending of the fetters, the ending of the āsavas, liberation, nibbāna. Obviously we regard meditation as a process leading to, developing that insight so that there is at some point liberation.

This first reason he gave—pleasant abiding in the here and now—is often not so much emphasized in contemporary teachings, but it's a reason he gave: this is why we practice meditation, for a pleasant abiding in the here and now. In other words, can I

abide pain-free? But also to develop insight. And that second reason, the development of insight, is actually the main point. Or rather, it's more important than pleasant abiding in the here and now.

Sometimes people say, "Well, this can't be right, what you said about fabrication and all that business about emptiness and pain disappearing and fading and not being fabricated, because the Buddha suffered from back pain. So you're telling me that it's possible not to fabricate physical pain, but the Buddha had back pain?"

But the Buddha said he could be without his back pain as an old man when he entered certain states of meditation—very deep, unfabricated states—and then the pain would disappear, unfabricate. When he moved about the world, as I said right at the beginning, when he moved around in the world and was interacting outside of that degree of meditative art and deliberate meditative attention, the pain was experienced again, refabricated again.

What's more important here, though, is that the point of these teachings—the main point of these teachings about fabricating and emptiness and learning to unfabricate—is not, or at least not primarily, to live free of pain, to live a life that just isn't touched by pain because one has learned these tricks so that one never has to experience pain anymore. This pleasant abiding is a secondary level of reason. It's important. It's a relief. We need to have some relief. We need to have that release from dukkha as much as is possible for us.

But the primary reason is not to live free of pain. Rather, it's in seeing the dependent arising, unfabricating, and therefore the emptiness of pain that there's a much more general sense, a profound sense of freedom in relation to existence that emerges for a human being. Because I see the emptiness of things—not just pain, but emptiness of everything—a much broader, deeper and more general sense of freedom in relation to the whole of existence emerges. That's more important. The insight is more important.

And that sense of existence changes, and this sense of the emptiness of all things—that has a bearing on my whole life. It influences my relationship with the whole of my life: the painful, the pleasant, how long my life is, how short my life is, how I feel about all that. It depends on this level of insight. This level of insight into emptiness changes my whole sense of things.

But I would say even more important, more primary than that, is not just this changed sense of freedom, of liberation in relationship to the whole of my life and my death. Even more important, and I'd say even more primary, is that seeing the emptiness of things deepens and opens a sense of the sacredness and mystery of all things as

well. A really deep emptiness, as we talked about the other day—and actually, I talked about it on the jhāna retreat as well, and a little bit today in this talk—opens up and deepens a sense of sacredness.

And to me, that's the most primary point. Second is this profound and widespread sense of liberation in relation to my whole life and death. And then third is the very gift we're very grateful for: the possibility of pleasant abiding in the here and now, relief from pain.

To me they have a hierarchy there, which I think I mentioned also in one of those emptiness seminars, in response to a question.

But also in soulmaking practice, that again translates as... Some of these soulmaking practices—and I'll describe one in a minute, or like what I alluded to with the playing with the idea of sacrifice—they will attenuate, they will reduce the sense of unpleasantness, the amount of pain, the intensity of pain in the moment. But still, that's not the point. Soulmaking is the point when we're doing soulmaking practice.

So all this, of course, is related in the Dharma to what I said about that middle space of half-fading, that region of the spectrum of fabrication, spectrum of fading. It's also related to the exchanging self. In other words, in those practices there is a sacredness, a beauty, a divinity that we open up to.

But when we come to soulmaking practice, soulmaking is the point of soulmaking practice. This is the primary point.

And yes, secondarily, we can often experience dissolving of suffering, relief from suffering, relief from dukkha. But the primary point of soul-making practice is soul-making.

I remember recently hearing that old gospel song "Oh, Happy Days." I was listening to it—I hadn't heard it for years and years—and I realized that I had been carrying the wrong lyrics in my mind for many years. The actual lyrics are "Oh, happy days when Jesus washed my sins away," but the version I thought I knew was "Oh, happy days when Jesus walked." I much preferred my mistaken version—not "when Jesus washed my sins away," but simply "when Jesus walked." That touched me and touched my soul much more.

In other words, there was an image wrapped up in simply Jesus walking, maybe with some of his disciples. The image wasn't Jesus Christ with trumpets blaring and triumphant glory and little pink cherubs floating around with gallons of white light gush-

ing down from the heavens. It wasn't that. It was sort of not even that distinct as an image, but in a way very ordinary looking—just Jesus as a young man walking, perhaps with some disciples and other people around, just walking. That was it.

But captured in that image of Jesus walking was all the stuff that I can't put into words: Jesus, his mercy, the mystery, the beauty, the divinity, the humility, the tenderness, the love, the compassion. When I think "when Jesus washed my sins away," it's almost like "Oh, happy days, happy because my sins are washed away"—there's a release, something for the self's process. The image I had with my wrong lyrics was just Jesus walking. There was nothing for the self's process in there. It was just the imaginal beauty of that. As I said, it was even a really subtle, vague image, but it moved me so much more than something oriented around being happy because he washed my sins away.

The gift and the grace in the image was not in washing my sins away, not in being saved—"Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me." The gift and the grace was much more mysteriously and subtly, and all the more powerfully for how mysteriously and subtly and quietly it was woven into just the image of Jesus in that sort of very earthy, humble, but divine way with all that beauty there.

So what's important in our dharma practice? Of course, you have to decide what's important for you. I'm just sharing that for me, if I put these things in a hierarchy, even in deep emptiness understanding, the most important thing is the sacredness. The freedom comes, the pleasant abiding comes, of course. But if I had to put them in a hierarchy of what the point of all this is, I would put the sacredness on the top, even above the freedom. And in soul-making practice, it's the sacredness too, and the soul-making, basically.

Just to fill out a little bit with an example from myself a few months ago: I've been in quite a lot of pain for the last few months in different ways from the cancer. So I was meditating and was in quite a lot of pain, and I just want to describe one possibility to get a little bit of a sense, hopefully to amplify and illustrate in a helpful way.

First, sitting in meditation with lots of possibilities—could have done all those emptiness things, or the jhanic thing, whatever—but at that point I was more inclined toward seeing what was possible in terms of soul-making practice, in terms of sensing the soul. That very intention invites and demands a certain poise of soul-making, which means I need to be there with my energy body awareness, I need to be there with that open and filled with that kind of sensitivity. I need to be there also with a receptivity and opportunism even around the sense of soulfulness.

Part of that poise is also confidence that it's possible that something here can be sensed with soul, that soul-making is possible in relationship to this dukkha. So there's energy body awareness, there's receptivity to the sense of soulfulness, there's a little bit of opportunism, also dependent on a kind of quiet background confidence, which is partly based on experience—or it might need to just inject a little bit of trust. There's also humility in the poise.

Here's a very challenging situation: dying of cancer, pain coming in often baffling ways and quite intense ways for long periods of time. Humility in relation to that situation, but also humility in relation to soul. That's part of what we might call the poise of soul-making—the sort of space in which the possibilities of soul-making are supported or prized. We're ready for that. Also, the knowledge that image or sensing the soul is a way of looking, something that I need to engage.

I'm not going to just be given it. I need to make sure that I take care of the elements, take care of looking in certain ways, the way of looking, and so forth.

Part of the poise also might be what we call the soul-making poise—but just slightly less fabricating. So that's one of the elements of the imaginal: just slightly less fabricating. And also the fullness of intention. The intention is soul-making—not just relief of dukkha, not just whatever else it might be.

Also, within this poise, or what I've called at other times the kind of crucible, I need to feel both the painful, difficult, or uncomfortable sensations. So I can't draw away from them. They have to be included. I need to feel them, feel the dukkha of that. I need also to feel the emotions initially as emotions. There needs to be some pathos there, some dukkha—you know, the emotions that go with this pain. I didn't understand what could help it, even physically. I was trying to stretch, wondering if it was my back, or this, or that. There's a lot of confusion, and a lot of work and time and energy going into trying to figure it out.

So there are all kinds of emotional strands and aspects within a kind of heart pathos. There's the physical dukkha and then there are the emotions. And at first I need to actually feel those emotions as emotions. Feel the dukkha there and some compassion for it. Compassion in the mix. Some amount of—really it was just spontaneous compassion that was there. This is all part of what I'm calling the poise of soul-making, or what makes the vessel, the space ready for soul-making. Part of what I have called in the past the crucible.

In other words, included in it is—we are deliberately including, I was deliberately including the emotions. They weren't super strong at that time, but even if they were, if they were super strong, that would need to be what's included. There's dukkha here, there's a kind of grief here, and so on. So it's including the emotions and a kind of softness in holding them. This is also part of the art, part of weaving that crucible or forming that crucible.

So I'm not relating to the emotions in a way that they're just becoming sensations. Nor am I relating to them and to the dukkha—their emotional and physical—as without story. When I talked about the mindfulness approach, I'm sort of relinquishing story, putting it aside, dropping story. Here, I'm not relating to it without story. So I'm actually including the story, the story of my life, the narrative of my life, the sense of myself in time. That's all part of the ingredients.

And so including the story also means including time. So I'm not just focusing on just this moment, just this now of these sensations. And the time awareness, as I'll describe as I go into explaining what happened, the time awareness actually is quite multileveled and complex. Because the time awareness included, as things opened up, it included the flow of time, it included this moment's experience of whatever was happening in this moment with the pain, and so forth. But it also included what I've described several times before as a sense of my whole life—what's this—*sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity, from the perspective of after death.

And the narrative of my life, almost like the whole narrative story of my life, viewed from, so to speak, beyond time or after death. The whole narrative of my life seen from that perspective of eternity—like it's an eternal sort of snapshot but it's got the whole narrative in it. So the time awareness involved, or that came, actually included all of that. Includes the story, includes the sense, or really the image of my life, of my whole life.

So my whole life, when it's looked at in that kind of *sub specie aeternitatis*, that eternality, that perspective from beyond death, is already kind of well on its way to becoming image, a fully imaginal image.

So including everything that I've just said in the poise of soul-making, including the self and the sense or image of my whole life, especially in the face of death, knowing I have a terminal diagnosis, knowing I'm dying. And this sense of self and the sense of my life is kind of circumscribed by the before life, before birth and after death times or periods. So somehow in the time awareness, there are all kinds of different senses and levels of time that we're talking about.

I may come back to this, but this relates to what I was talking about in yesterday's talk about the emptiness of time and what that might open up for us in terms of healing. I hope to come back to that in a moment.

But what came—so all these ingredients there, and then what came was a kind of sense of a ritualistic giving back of the moments of physical dukkha, the physical challenges and illnesses throughout my life. And I've had long years of chronic illnesses—a kind of ritualistic giving back of all those moments of physical dukkha, physical challenges, physical illnesses, to the divine, to the gods, to the angels.

But these gods, divinities, angels—they were not vividly seen at that moment. So we're not talking about that kind of image where they were vividly seen in the imagination. The sense of them was there, it was clearly felt, it was palpable. So they were very much a part of the image, their presence was felt, but they were not vividly seen in the imagination.

But there was this ritualistic giving back of these moments of physical dukkha and all the illness, the physical illness, moments of illness. And the sense of those sensations over a life as holy gift, sacred gift, which I was asked and agreed to bear. This was the imaginal sense that just came. All the soul-making poise and possibilities were there, and there was the receptivity and the attentiveness and a certain sense of one's whole life, *sub specie aeternitatis*. Somehow wrapped up in this ritualistic giving back of what I was given as sacred gift, as holy gift, which I was asked and somehow agreed to bear. It was a grace that

It was given to me. Someone had to carry this. For some reason, I didn't understand. I didn't know. And now there was, in the meditation, the handing them back with reverence. Of course, that handing back also echoed a little with the sense of dying soon, but in the meditation, handing them back with reverence and with care in this kind of ritualized, sacramental way.

The image was as if of passing back a ritual object in a ceremony. Again, this wasn't visually clear in terms of distinct, clear visual details—other images are, but this wasn't. Rather, it was the imagistic sense, the imaginal sense of the whole thing. It's part idea, part sense—not just the moment, but actually the whole of life and the whole transaction of life.

This touched my heart deeply, and the heart became very tender with it all. Peace came, and actually then pleasure in the body. Where there was pain, actually pleasure spread. So that's not the point, but there was this attenuation of the unpleasant vedanā, and pleasant vedanā came—to some degree, the reduction of the discomfort in the here and now.

But all the elements of the imaginal were there, and this sense of grace and beauty and all the rest of it. And then the painful sensations were also there. It was almost like they were still there as well as the pleasant, in this curious, mystically colored, mystically flavored mix of sensations—the painful and the pleasant. And the painful sensations became kind of like ethereal jewels floating in space, radiant jewels floating in space. And the heart bowed to all of that.

And the weariness of chronic illness—for some of you who have had chronic illness, you know just how tiring it can be for the psyche to have to deal with that day in, day out, month in, month out, year in, year out. Acute illnesses are very dramatic and, you know, both for the person going through it and also for people who love them or people around them. They stimulate a lot of interest and compassion. And there's a way in which chronic illnesses—they might be less intense sometimes, but they're asking something different of the psyche: to bear over a long time. And it can be wearying.

The weariness of the chronic illness was redeemed and given dimensionality and this divinity and eternality and meaningfulness and duty and purpose. But duty and purpose that the rational mind could not understand. I don't understand. What's my duty? What's the purpose of this? But it feels like it has a duty, a purpose to it. It feels like there's some meaning to it, wrapped up in the meaningfulness. But I cannot say what it is. I cannot understand with my logical mind what it is, what it could be. Beauty, love, lightness, the melting of the heart.

I mentioned Plotinus, this founder of Neoplatonism, the other day, and in the last years of his life he had developed some kind of illness. It's not really clear to us now what that illness was, but at any rate, he was abandoned by all his students because they feared that they would catch his illness. They feared that his illness was contagious. So I think for the last two or more years of his life, he basically lived in a kind of solitary exile.

There was one of his students who was also a doctor who stayed with him through that period, whose name I've forgotten now. But he was abandoned by the rest of his students and he lay dying. And as he lay dying, the doctor was with him, tending to him, just being with him as he died. And after he died, the doctor wrote down his last words.

Unfortunately, this doctor—which seems to be the case for doctors nowadays as well—had not very good handwriting. So it's a little bit unclear exactly, but it was one of two things that he said. Either it was a description of what he was doing as he was dying, and he said, "I'm trying to bring back or trying to give back the divine in myself to the divine in the universe." Or he said, as an instruction, "Give back the divine in yourself to the divine in the universe." And those were his last words.

Give back the divine in yourself to the divine in the universe.

And so this reminded me a little of that. We could say, oh, just awareness is divine in terms of it's the same substance, the same divine nature of mind in everyone. But that's all just like water everywhere.

It's all water. There's no difference between my awareness and your awareness and the next person's awareness. It's all just the divine substance of awareness. Once you mix it back into divinity, it's all just the same, like mixing water in water.

There's another kind of sacredness and divinity, a kind of sanctification of our personhood that we're very much interested in as human beings in soul-making practice. And that's more inclusive of our particulars and our particular narrative and our particular dukkha and the necessity—as I mentioned earlier—the necessity of our particularities and our personality and our dukkha to the Divine.

So in this sense, in this image of this kind of ritualistic giving back of these moments of physical dukkha, these physical challenges, to the divine, to the angels, to the gods, whose presence I felt but didn't really see vividly. And the sense of these sensations over a life being given to me as a grace, as a sacred gift. Because someone had to carry this for some reason I didn't understand. Something I was asked to do and agreed to do.

All of this, neither real nor not real. All of it theatre. Understood that way because it's image. But in that way, the divine in me being given back was something very personal. It wasn't just my awareness, let's say, being the same nature as everyone's awareness, universal awareness. So this, perhaps just as an illustration, one possibility.

I mentioned very briefly—we talked about time the other day and the different views of time as different conventional views of time one's adopting and what they open or close. And I mentioned that idea of the Neoplatonic idea of the soul engendering time because it wants to know the divine attributes or the level of angels or what was called intelligences or ideas or forms. It wants to know them and they are eternal and timeless and it can't grasp them, it can't know them all at once. So it engenders time. Soul engenders time so that it can know them all. But they have to be one after the other in sequence, in temporal sequence. We mentioned that the other day.

And because the self is always more than one thing or more than one way of looking at it, more than one narrative, more even than one soul narrative, because we have many angels, not just one angel, out ahead. So you could say the soul engenders time to know that particular angel, where there is this eternity of contract of being given as grace, as gift, a sacred gift, this pain. And then that's played out or stretched out over time, over fifty-something years, between birth and death. Because I also need to have times within that, other times, where I know other senses of self, other angels. Not just that one—I'm more than that. There's more to my soul than one story, one narrative, one angel. There are more angels to my soul than one. So it's just an illustration.

I don't know if we can make a summary, but there's a lot about the poise, the soul-making poise, if that's our intention for soul-making with a certain dukkha, with a certain physical pain. There were a lot of elements, a lot of aspects to that that I ran through. And then potentially this including the self, including this kind of beyond death, this *sub specie aeternitatis*, this view of one's whole life, one's whole narrative. So time and timeless get woven in. The way of being with the dukkha and the emotions and the story that don't cut them out, but also don't squeeze them or look at them in a way where they just become sensations. So all this is part of the crucible. And then an image, right? There's one possible illustration.

As I was reflecting on that a little later, I also wondered then, in that image sense of receiving these pains, these discomforts, these health difficulties, chronic health difficulties—in the image sense of receiving all that from the divine, from beyond or before life as part of my image, the image of me, the angel of me, the image of it as my duty to carry this for some reason, to manifest, to express it. And the image then of giving them back ritually, reverentially. And again, none of that reified—neither real nor not real, imagine a middle way, theatre-like quality.

Reflecting on all that, I reflected on a couple of things about ritual, actually. And I have to tell another little story here. There was a period after about a year... Actually, you're supposed to get, for the cancer I had, typical or standard treatment is six months of chemotherapy. And I persuaded the doctor—because I knew it was stage 4 cancer and the prognosis was very poor—I persuaded the doctor if he would just continue giving me chemotherapy after the six months. And reluctantly he agreed.

But after two more months, I actually developed an infection, what's called a sepsis, which is very dangerous, as some of you will know, when you're on chemotherapy because chemotherapy depletes your immune system. So you have this infection which could rapidly spread and just kill you because you don't have an immune system up and running strongly because the chemotherapy has knocked out your immune system.

So after about eight months of chemo, I ended up in hospital with this sepsis, and the doctor was really quite concerned, and he said, "Absolutely no more chemo," etc.

And so he said no more chemo, and I had to take a break. He didn't want to give me any more after that, which I understand—he was very concerned. It's a long story, and I won't go into all the parts of it, but I found another doctor who was willing to give me more chemotherapy. This new doctor, on the other hand, was more anxious: "You better start it soon, because if you wait too long, the cancer's just going to come back."

But in that time when I wasn't on chemo, my body also started to recover from the effects of the chemotherapy, which is really quite toxic and depleting and damaging to all kinds of organs and systems in the body. So I was beginning just to feel a little more human, a little better. It had been, as I've shared in other talks, really quite a lot of dukkha going through the chemo—not just because of its effects on my body and energy, making me feel sick with diarrhea and all the rest of it, but also, as I've shared elsewhere, just how difficult it was to go into that chemo ward and the soullessness of it.

So in this period where I had been almost three months without chemo, and some people—this doctor and others—were really anxious for me to start again, I could really feel a part of me that was saying, "I really don't know if I can." It was really hard to envision putting myself back in that soulless chemo ward and putting my body through that—primarily the soullessness.

Then I remember working with Catherine one night on soul-making practice, and I asked if we could do a ritual. I had decided I would go back to chemo, but it was a big deal—it felt like a big ask of myself. So we did a ritual one night that I devised. I can't remember exactly now, but we had a little crucible, and I cut some of my fingernails and put them in there, along with a bit of my hair, facial hair, some dead skin I peeled off, some saliva, and body hair from my arm—different body parts, as the Buddha enumerates in the Satipatthana Sutta.

I put these in the crucible and then offered this up—offered my body in anticipation and ritual preparation for re-entering chemo, trying to relate to it soulfully, in a soul-making way, in relation to the challenge and dukkha of that coming experience. We burnt those body elements, those parts of the body. There were other aspects—I included some element for my mind and perceptions, because that was what was quite difficult as well in the chemo ward: the soullessness, the plastic, the atmosphere, what people talked about and what they didn't talk about.

The point is, we made this ritual, Catherine and I did it together, and it was very beautiful. It really helped me take that next step and re-enter chemo.

But one of the things I was wondering about—especially after this image of a ritual in the "Sensing the Pain with Soul" meditation I described earlier—is this question: When does materialization in ritual actually increase and support the soul-making? And when does it decrease the soul power and the soul-making?

To me, this is a really important question, because in the meditation I described earlier in this talk, it was an image of a ritual with no action. I was just sitting cross-legged in meditation posture, just meditating. There was no materialization of anything. In the pre-chemo ritual with Catherine, there was materialization. So when does materialization enhance the soul-making and the soul power? And when does it decrease it? And why?

This parallels other questions—for instance, when you get a sense in meditation of your energy body moving in certain ways, or dancing, or vocalizing, or roaring, or whatever it is: When does it help for that to be actually materialized, concretized, acted upon? And when does it actually disempower it to do so? When does it have much more soul power, much more soul-making power, when there's no materialization, no concretization or actualization in physical reality of that image of what's happening in the energy body or what the energy body wants to do?

I think this is a really important question, and we need to be open to both approaches and able to do both artfully. But when is one going to be more helpful than the other, more soul-making, and why?

Some go back to Neoplatonism—Plotinus held that action is always inferior to contemplation. But I would disagree. We do include rituals on our soul-making retreats, and we have included movement, and hopefully will include vocalization and other practices at different times. But still there's this question of when to act and materialize, when not to, and why it helps sometimes and not others. Other times the reverse is true.

So that's one question.

This remains an ongoing question, and I find it truly fascinating. But a second inquiry emerged following that meditation experience I described—an illustration of the possibility of working with pain through imaginal sensing. I began to wonder whether giving is always a necessary ingredient of soulful ritual.

Consider the Eucharist, for example, the Catholic Mass. In that vision I described, there was receiving—the sense of being given something—and then the reverential giving back. All of it was ritualistic receiving and being given, then ritualistically offering it back, all pervaded by a sense of reverence and beauty. But I wondered: is this always a necessary ingredient for ritual? Or is it one of the more empowering elements that can enhance ritual?

I still don't know the answer, actually, but I wanted to share this ongoing inquiry with you. It is intriguing. I became curious about the word "Eucharist" itself and began exploring its etymology. Eucharist actually means thankfulness, thanks—implying a gift. Of course, there's the gift of the body and blood of Christ that one receives in the Catholic Eucharist. But there's also the gift of Christ's peace, when he says, "My peace I give unto you." Beautiful. There's the gift of that dimensional, divine, sacred peace, and all the dimensionality of what that can mean—Christ's peace given to us, "My peace I give to you."

But there's also, as far as I understand it—I didn't grow up Catholic—a gift from the congregation to each other. They give that peace they've received from Christ to one another. So there's this dynamic of giving and receiving, which is part of what I was wondering about.

It's also interesting that another word for Eucharist, or for similar ceremonies in other Christian denominations, is communion—holy communion. Communion suggests something like union with God—not so much oneness, but being together. There's communion with God and communion with the church, with the body of Christ, which also means the church itself. And so there's a giving of oneself in communion.

Another word for Eucharist is Mass, from the Latin "misa," which derives from the verb "mittere"—to send away. In English we have "dismiss," and words like "missive" or "mission." We're sent on a mission; a missive is something we send. There's a dismissal at the end of the Mass, and that's where it gets its name. You're sent away with the priest's blessing and having received the Holy Sacrament. Perhaps one interpretation is that we who have received what has been given to us in ritual—this gift from God—then go out as gifts from God to the world, to others. We're giving ourselves, passing on that gift; we become the gift that's passed on.

I don't know the answer yet. But since ritual is very much a part of soul-making practice, and I'm deeply interested in understanding what's involved and what's important in developing that dimension, this remains an ongoing inquiry. We don't have set, prescribed, formulaic rituals—we haven't so far. We've kept them very open; they're always created there and then on the retreats when we've done them. Sometimes they

have spontaneous elements. We don't have one ritual or even several rituals that we repeat. So far, I like it that way, though I remain open. But I'm very interested in this question: is receiving and giving a necessary part of ritual, or is it an ingredient—a possible ingredient—that can be very empowering?

One last thing, connected to what I just said: I am actually open to the idea of developing set ritual formulae that get repeated. I'm certainly not closed to that possibility. But I do think there's something valuable in this capacity to create and discover rituals that are new, fresh for soul-making work.

Connected to that, I described that practice, that imaginal practice of sensing pain with soul. But what I really want to communicate—what I most want to illustrate—is a possibility, and to give a general sense of what may need to be involved.

Some or all of what I pointed to in terms of the poise and other elements—what I really want to say is please don't assume that imaginal practice is formulaic, that there's a formula. Sometimes it might seem that way, but for me it really needs to, I think for its full flourishing and the fullness of its possibilities, retain a sense of improvisation and creativity, opportunism and openness and flexibility.

Some of those earlier practices I described with insight, ways of looking or whatever, we could say they're more or less formulaic. Actually, even then, there are lots of improvisatory possibilities and variations. But I think when we come to imaginal practice and the art of that, we need to be careful of getting into a sort of formulaic way of thinking—first I do this, then one, two, three, like that.

It's so often the case if I'm working with someone in an interview that I have an intuitive sense at some point; it just comes that this or that needs to happen, X or Y needs to happen, or something needs to be put in relationship with this image or whatever. But that X or Y that needs to happen, or whatever it is, is often not something I've actually thought of before or mentioned in talks, or systematized in the teachings.

So to me, part of the beauty comes in the improvised, open, attentive nature of the way we approach the practice with this flexibility. And there's grace there, because when one gets an intuitive sense—oh, this needs to happen, or this needs to get emphasized, or I need to put this image in relationship with this other thing, another image, or another particular dukkha or whatever it is—and they're not things that one has thought of before or formulated, then that's part of the grace. That's part of the discover-create. It's part of the humility in relation to soul as well.

So yes, we certainly can talk about what goes into making a crucible for soul-making work with dukkha. We can talk about the elements of the imaginal. We can talk about what I called today the poise of soul-making, of readiness for soul-making. We can talk about what goes on in there, but there's not necessarily a certain order. And there might be other things that get left out or things that occur to us, that are given to us as graces.

So the whole thing really becomes an art that's partly improvised, and not just stuff that I'm doing, that's coming from my will. It's in relationship—so to speak, in relationship to soul, to angel—we are given. And part of what we're given is an intuition, or intuitions about what might be included, what might need to happen.

So yes, of course, this is part of the balance. There is a place for working, for technique, for art. But there's also the place for grace, and the other, and soul, and the infinity of soul as other, and the notion of receiving from soul what we hadn't formalized, hadn't occurred to us, hadn't figured out. It's not a technical step. So both. There's a balance. There's a straddling of those two aspects or moments, directions.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 228

The Image of Ethics (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 2h12

In this opening talk of his series on ethics, Rob Burbea argues for a radical expansion of how we approach ethical questions. Moving beyond the contemporary reduction of ethics to law, rights, and "what to do," he advocates for reclaiming the deeper question of "what makes life beautiful and worth living." Drawing on his earlier Sīla and Soul series, Burbea explores how soul-making dharma can provide a compass for ethical navigation through love and eros for virtues, rather than mere moral rules. He critiques the slide of ethics into legal frameworks and rights-based thinking, examining how this creates a "moral vacuum" lacking deeper foundations. Using examples from climate activism and historical contexts, he demonstrates the limitations of current ethical discourse. Central to his proposal is the necessity of dimensionality in ethical thinking—the sense that meaningfulness, purpose, and sanctity reside in higher dimensions that can be accessed through soul-making practice. This approach allows virtues to become imaginal realities we can approach erotically, transforming ethics from boring obligation into beautiful aspiration. Burbea weaves together themes of ontology, epistemology, and the role of disciplined eros in discerning ethical truth, suggesting that soul-making practice offers a viable foundation for contemporary ethical challenges.

Tonight I'd like to start talking about ethics and pick up some of what I was speaking about in the Sila and Soul series—I think it's nine or ten parts there. I'd like to elaborate certain elements of that and extend what we said there. So these talks on ethics are very much based on those Sila and Soul talks. They're presuming them and, as I said, elaborate on certain strands there and extend it, and I hope take it just a little bit further at least.

Ethics is one of those subjects that's infinite, that I don't think we should ever finally arrive at a full stop and answer where we're completely satisfied. So whatever I say in these talks is really just a snapshot of this time in my own studies and reflections regarding ethics and particularly regarding their connection with soul-making, dharma and practice. So it's just a snapshot now of what could be and what should be, I think, a never-ending exploration.

I'm doing it now partly because I'm concerned there won't be another chance. I hope, obviously I hope there will, but if not, or even if there is for me, that others will explore this whole area and these themes further, more deeply, more widely than I

have done, and develop the soul-making dharma in lots of ways, but also in relation to ethics and the ethical aspects of directions within soul-making dharma. And that others would also study other ethical philosophies and perhaps there can be fruitful dialogue in the wider sense at some point.

Pretty much everything I say here rests on an understanding and a digestion of what I said in Sila and Soul, elaborates and extends that. I won't repeat the explanations and the vocabulary that I introduced in those talks very minimally. So I'm assuming that you're up to speed with that.

And why now? Well, because it seems obvious to me that there's an urgent need in our world at present to rethink and to reformulate ethics, to put it on a firmer foundation, to make it more coherent, to make it more central to our lives, and also to make it something beautiful, something attractive, this whole domain, this whole area of exploration. There's an urgent, urgent need for that.

And valuable and important as offering mindfulness to the world and to different demographics in society and the wider world, valuable and important as that is, I would say an even more pressing need, an even more urgent and more basic need is to open up and revivify the whole exploration of ethics and offer something there in terms of education, formulation, and practice. So that strikes me as a very urgent need.

It also strikes me after the Sila and Soul talks that I was perhaps a little too restrained there, a little too modest, if that's the right word, with respect to what I now think soul-making dharma might actually offer to the area of ethics. Sometimes people get very excited about soul-making dharma and I almost find myself taking the other pole of like, well, you know, let's see, it's not for everyone, and I tend to take the pole of the more unenthusiastic partner there. But perhaps in retrospect I was, as I said, a little too restrained, too modest regarding what soul-making dharma might offer and might inject into the discourse about ethics and how it might open it out and what it might give it and what questions it might bring to bear as well.

So in many ways this talk is questioning about what we need in ethical systems, but it's also a kind of proffering or putting forward or advocating of soul-making dharma as possibly a really potent and viable injection into the way we think about and relate to ethics—an injection into the wider society, not just soul-making dharma practitioners. So it's a little more positive as a stance, perhaps, at least I'm hoping, a little less restrained, a little less modest.

One of the things I think I touched on in the Sila and Soul talks was the very real danger that ethics, the whole area of ethics, slides or has already slid to really become a question of law and legality. So ethics as an area of philosophy has slid or is in the process of sliding to law. And the debate about ethics has slid to almost a debate about laws for the most part. Law ensuring as best as possible, whatever that might mean, that everyone's right to pursue what they want to pursue is protected, as long as it does not infringe on others' similar rights to pursue what they want to pursue in society.

So the whole debate and question, the whole way we see ethics, slides to a question of what laws do we need to put in place? Or what behavior do we need to ensure that will, in turn, ensure that, as best as possible, everyone's right to go after and do what they want to go after and do is protected, as long as, or to the degree that it doesn't infringe on other people's similar rights to pursue what they want to pursue. So that's the ideal of this kind of thinking, this level of thinking about ethics where it's really slid to a level of thinking about law, legality and rights.

And of course this makes sense and it's a good idea and historically it came—Thomas Hobbes was one of the people behind it at the time of the English Civil Wars, utter brutality and chaos and violence and bloodshed. And so thinking about ethics in this way and offering that as an idea was a really good idea and makes sense at a certain level.

But one of the things I want to point out is that it's a limited way of thinking about ethics and it will be limiting. Not to mention, of course, the fact that it's not very well implemented in our societies. The rights of the rich to pursue what they want to pursue seem protected often above the rights of the poor to pursue what they want to pursue even if they're just the rights to basic human needs, or the rights of one ethnic group over another. So it's not very well implemented, both in terms of economic status and race and other social status.

But just as important as that, it has no basis, and this is a big part of what I want to go into—there's no basis underlying that whole ideology. There's not a sufficient basis to decide between someone claiming, "This is my right to pursue this," and someone saying, "Oh, but that infringes on my right to do that." The philosophical theory, the ethical theory, just stops at this kind of unidimensional flat level of rights and law and has no deeper structure or ideation on which that level rests. And so it becomes, without basis, very difficult to actually go into certain thorny ethical difficulties. Nothing's in place to help us there.

And so ethics slides to a kind of law, and underneath that law is a kind of moral nihilism—a vacuum, a kind of moral vacuum where higher ethical sensibilities in particular, higher values and ethical discourse should or could be.

So the whole thing becomes a slide into a kind of contest or conflict between so-called rights—my right to do this, your right to do that. And there's no really good, well thought out or deep basis for deciding between these conflicting rights, or even for approaching the issue ethically at any deeper level.

One of the things I'd like to explore in these talks is asking the question: what do we need? What do we need in an approach to ethics? What do we need in an ethical philosophy? I want to use that question of what we need to help direct and navigate us through different possible ethical theories, seeing how soul-making Dharma and soul-making ethical Dharma might supply us with those needs and help us navigate what has become a kind of quagmire without signposts.

First of all, generally speaking, what we need is not primarily guidance about what to do, or guidelines and instructions—moral laws about what to do. I don't think any ethical system—utilitarianism, Kant's ethics, Habermas's open dialogue idea—is actually able to inform us or give us that information of what to do in every situation. There will always be moral antinomies, as I explained at length in the *Sila and Soul* talks.

Sometimes a person wants to just know what to do: "I just want to know what's right and what's wrong. Tell me what to do. Give me a list." Sometimes that need or felt need to know what to do may just be coming from a kind of ego fear. Sometimes it can be a lack of full engagement of the soul with these questions—a lack of full engagement that's actually open to the difficulties, for example, the antinomies between different values.

If I feel agitated regarding some ethical choice or ethical situation, can I tell the difference between what we might call ego—a more superficial level of my being and its concerns and agitations—and an agitation that's more rooted at a soul level, a deeper agitation? Or do I just have an aversion to any level of agitation, any difficulty, whether it's at an ego level or a soul level?

Generally speaking, I don't think that's what we actually need. Yet oftentimes that's how we think about ethics, or that's how ethics has come to be amputated as a subject. Ethics becomes: "Let's get a system or a way of thinking that will tell us what to do." And that's how the discourse has shrunk.

Rather, I think generally what we need is related more to the question: what is worthwhile? What is really worthwhile in life? What makes life beautiful? What opens up and supports and gives life to a beautiful life—what gives the beauty to a beautiful

life? What brings a sense of depth to our existence, makes life worth living, makes a life really worth living, brings some sacredness—including a sense of sacredness regarding the human being, who one is, what one is as a human being?

And sacredness regarding our relationship with others, with society. And sacredness regarding our relationship with the world, the earth, with nature, with the cosmos. Because we are human beings in a cosmos. We are human beings on earth as well as human beings in society.

Actually, I think this is what ethics needs. Very generally speaking, ethics needs that. We need to think about it in a broader way. We need to approach it looking for something much broader, something which has been amputated from the whole exploration, the philosophical domain of inquiry, and the whole conversation. It's what matters in that sense—about living a life worth living, in that direction, toward a life of beauty.

This is, I think, most generally speaking, what's needed to save ethics, to redeem it, to re-elevate it, and open it out again into a really flourishing subject—an area of exploration that's actually commensurate with our problems, capable of addressing the immense problems we have now as a species and the immense problems we're causing other species and the immense problems we have in society. An ethics that's actually adequate to that task.

So very generally speaking, we need to move from the question not only of what to do, but what makes life beautiful? What makes life really a life that is worth living? What is the good, to use the ancient terminology that I talked about in *Sila and Soul*?

This is more than just law, and it's also more than economy. We think the economy matters because if the economy is okay, then people will be okay because then they'll be able to pursue what they want to pursue. So if we take care of the law and the economy, then within that framework, everyone can decide for themselves what they want to do and what they feel is important. We need more than that. We absolutely need more than that, and I'm not the first person to recognize this and to say something about it.

But on the other hand, I don't think it's possible anymore in modern or postmodern society to impose this or that particular belief or activity as "this is what you must do ethically to be an ethical person." We have the law for that limited area, but beyond that, it's actually no longer possible to impose any particular belief or activity from the outside.

So what matters? What makes life important?

What makes life rather deep, beautiful, meaningful, worth living? These are the questions that need opening up again, I think. And as I said, that's related to a sense of sacredness—the sacredness of the human being as well as the sacredness of the earth, the cosmos, and our social relations.

But with regard to the human being, we also have to not be completely naive. Perhaps looking back at the sixties, a lot of people felt love and flower power, and it was all a little naive in terms of what that could really accomplish without what it was supposing of human nature, and also what could be accomplished without a more sophisticated practice and philosophy. So on the one hand, not wanting to be naive about human beings and the nature of human beings, but also not wanting to be pessimistic about human beings. And I want to come back to this as one of the themes that's quite central as well.

So it's quite a big ask. And also, you know, I touched on this with Buddha Dharma as well. Just following the five precepts could be regarded as only a kind of safeguard for society. If everyone did that, then society would be a safe place that would allow people to do what they want to do. And if part of what they want to do is get awakened, then that's good on the one hand, or a kind of minimum safeguard for personal liberation on the other.

So we're really talking here about ethics as ethos, as I explained in *Sila and Soul*, as something that's much bigger and has to do with meaningfulness and making life beautiful and worthwhile, and that whole question, and the sense of sacredness.

So what we need is a way of navigating that area, an instrument, something like a compass. And we need training and education in how to use such an instrument. We need to open up what ethics means beyond just taking care of law and economy to try and ensure everyone's rights are not trampled on by someone else's actions. But we also can't impose "everyone goes northeast" or whatever. We need a way of navigating, methods of navigating, an instrument—something like a compass—and training, education in how to use that instrument.

So a way of orienting that's different than a prescribed direction. As I said, not "everyone go northeast." Or prescribed direction together with proscribed directions—prohibited directions—regarding material things, material activities.

Do you understand the difference there? So rather than saying this actual activity or this thing is wrong, that one is right in itself, in themselves—these things, those things, those activities, prescribe this one and we proscribe that one, prohibit that one—we need a way of orienting. It's not so much the thing in itself, the activity in itself, but a way of orienting to this whole question.

And it might be for the, let's say, the least capable in society, it may be necessary that they are limited to prescribed and proscribed directions. It may be. But there's also this question: what's innate capacity and innate limitation with regard to ethics? And what's possible with education? It's a tricky question. It has history far back as, well, before the Enlightenment when they took a certain stand on that, and they believed everyone was *tabula rasa*—it was just a matter of education. It's tricky.

But might it be possible for there to be a more widespread education at some point? This might sound very elitist, but might it be possible for there to be a more widespread education that offers and teaches us, trains us in ways of orienting, in practices that help us orient in the realm of ethos and opening up that sense of life and navigating well, opening up the sense of beautiful life, deep, meaningful life, and navigating well—knowing that that might be different between different people to a certain extent?

And I think part of that, part of what immediately is kind of required and suggested by that way of thinking about ethics and opening up the idea of what we're actually after there, what we actually need in the most general sense—what comes immediately is the possibility and the need for a relationship of love and of eros with the virtues, with the values, as I talked about in *Sila and Soul*. And as I'm going to go into in a minute, then this opens up in many ways how we can think about and explore the whole domain of ethics. Things like sins of omission start to have their place. Emotion with regard to ethics starts to have its place, but a more mature place. I'll come back to these things.

So if I think about what's my sort of wish list, if you like, for an ethical system or an approach to ethics, a way of thinking about ethics, or what do we need? What do we need? What does it seem to me that we need as a species right now in terms of approaching ethics, thinking about ethics, constructed frameworks for ethics?

I would say, partly what I've already said, that ethics needs to be more than law. More than law and more important than law. And ethics needs also to be more than just an idea of "my rights, your rights." It needs more than just an idea of our individual rights. More generally, as I said, it needs to open up beyond this whole question of what to do.

"What should I do? What's right here?" Right in a different sense. And more fundamentally, this question about how to live: What is a beautiful life? What makes a life really worth living? What gives it depth? So ethics needs to be more than law, more than that singular question, more than law, more than rights—all these elements are interconnected.

It needs to allow place for the idea of sins of omission—sins of omission that recognize we can neglect to do certain things. It needs to expand that notion and give it space. These are the threads I'm going to weave through this talk, coming and going, in and out as we proceed.

As I've said, ethics must include emotion, but it must transcend emotion. Rather, it must be more than just emotion and give a mature place to our emotions. So that's our third point—or fourth, depending on how you're counting. Let me organize this: Not just "what to do" is one. More than laws and rights, that's two. Having space for sins of omission, three. Fourth is including emotion but not reducing ethics to emotion, not limiting it by emotion, and giving mature place to emotion.

Fifth, it must include love and eros, as I mentioned. Number six—and this is really important—it must have dimensionality. I touched on this in the Sīla and Soul talks, but for ethics to work, and all these needs and requirements on this wish list are connected, which is why I can only weave them together rather than present them separately—something needs to be sensed as or granted a higher dimensionality, a dimensionality in which meaningfulness and purpose and sanctity actually reside.

Without something being sensed as having, or granted, or believed to have, or felt to have higher dimensionality, it's very difficult to make any ethical headway, to say anything meaningful or justifiable about ethics. The justification of whatever we do in ethics needs to be rooted in another dimension. Even if you say "don't kill," the question becomes: why? The why needs to reach into another dimension. Meaningfulness, purpose, and sanctity organically, intrinsically reside in some other dimension. We need to sense ethics that way, even if sanctity is something secularly conceived—it doesn't matter.

This is a vast subject, and I want to explore what this means. How has it been attempted in the past? How might we attempt it now? Attempts without dimensionality, as I'll explain, usually just fail. They have failed. Attempts to explain ethics without dimensionality, to promote an ethical system without dimensionality—they've simply failed.

So that's six—dimensionality. Seven would be connected to this: questions of ontology. If we're talking about dimensionality, we need to address why you can claim something as having a certain dimensionality and therefore intrinsic meaningfulness, purposefulness, sanctity. You need ontological and epistemological arguments for that, justifications for that. Woven into all this are questions of ontology and epistemology—as always, unavoidable. And certainly as Buddhists, we need to go beyond the limited ontology of just emptiness as an answer to everything. I explained this a little in one of the other talks.

Number eight would be a sense of what a human being is. What does it mean to be a human being, and what can a human being become?

All of this is tied together—these eight items on the list of what an ethical system needs nowadays, what I think we need as a species for an ethical system. Eight interconnected elements. They're not really separate in any meaningful way.

One implies the other, drags in another. And so, yes, as I said, I can't really go through this in a linear way.

So there's a little bit of introduction. Some of what I'm going to say tonight—we'll see how far we get—but some of it may well still sound introductory to a superficial listening. Some of you might feel you're waiting for the meaty bit. Some of you won't, of course, but some of you might be. To a superficial ear, it might sound a little bit introductory.

But if you understand the basic theme of what I'm trying to get at here, what I'm offering—which is: why should we get behind the approach of sensing the soul?—then you'll already have heard what we've said so far. The basic theme is an advocacy of the sensing the soul approach to ethics. If you understand that theme, you'll have immediately heard that what we've already said is completely wrapped up in that theme, and there are already some very good reasons emerging from what we've covered for why sensing the soul would be a helpful approach—one really helpful approach to ethics.

Now, I mentioned this aspect where the way we think about ethics needs to be more than just questions of law and rights. We need to prevent this kind of slide of ethics down to questions of law and rights. It's interesting, some of what happened in the Extinction Rebellion protests recently, and how some people on the street were saying, "These XR activists have no respect for law and order. They don't care about law and order."

Let's go into this a little bit. Law and order are definitely—or is, if we take them together—a value in society. But its rank as a value in the hierarchy of values must always be subordinate to the ethical values it upholds and supports. The rank of law and order as a value has to be subordinate to the ethical values that law and order are upholding.

Law and order were healthy, robust, and respected in Nazi Germany and in Mussolini's Italy—two cultures with a lot of law and order, as far as I understand from the history books. But ethically, the whole thing was on a very dubious, completely unethical foundation. Therefore, the law and order there were not valuable—they were antivalues.

So law and order is not in itself a value. It depends on the ethical values it's trying to uphold. The purpose of law and order is to uphold ethical values. Somehow we've kind of divorced them. Law and order has gotten divorced from ethics, so that people are valuing law and order in and of itself, regardless of whether that law and order is supporting good ethics or bad ethics.

It was interesting when Yanai was in court for one of his XR actions. At some point in the proceedings, Yanai was allowed to present his case. He tried to present an ethical case, ethical grounds for breaking the law, for breaking law and order. And the judge at some point responded that this is a court of law and not a court of ethics.

Now, it sounds like this judge was actually pretty good, but his hands were tied. And he made a very valuable point. He doesn't sound like he really drew out all the implications, or maybe even all of what he felt about that limitation. "This is a court of law, not a court of ethics." He might have really wished that it was a court of ethics and been able to come down much more on the side of the Extinction Rebellion protesters being tried there.

But basically, we are not set up in our society—we are not equipped to have such ethical discussions or ethical courts. There's no basis. There's very little dialogue. I mean, people debate whether using stem cells is ethical, or euthanasia, or what's called dignified assisted suicide. Again, it's back to this question: What is it right to do? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do? That kind of level of discussion. What is right? What is wrong? What ought I to do? What ought I not to do?

And as Charles Taylor puts it, the "ought to do" has become divorced from the "good to be."

The "ought to do" becomes the limitation, the circumscribing of the ethical investigation. What ought I to do? As I said before. And that whole question has been divorced from the much deeper question of what is it good to be? And this whole notion of the good and the beautiful. This question of what is it good to be, which is this question of what makes a life really worthwhile, what makes a life a beautiful life—that has been jettisoned. It's been jettisoned from philosophical discussion, from ethical discussion. They're divorced and then they're jettisoned.

And that brings problems—huge problems. One of them is the problems it brings of this divorce of questions of law from questions of ethics. I don't know what the judge was thinking or feeling, but maybe someone will have the kind of courage at some point. Someone in that position will have the courage, or we will have the courage to admit the gap—admit the gap there, admit the whole, admit the kind of yawning nihilistic abyss above which the pomp and power of the law courts attempts to suspend themselves. It's resting on either nothing, a kind of moralistic nihilism, or very, very thin ice.

And this is connected to the whole question about my right to do this and your right to do that, my right to do whatever it is—my right to go on holiday, my right to enjoy myself after work, my right to whatever. And so much gets dragged into these kind of claims of rights.

Now, it might be soon that my right to fly for a holiday is reckoned legally, or recognised legally somehow, ethically and then legally, as less of a right than the right of others to have a home that's not flooded or not on fire or in drought. The right for others to live in a habitable planet might be regarded as a right that trumps my right to fly on holiday when I feel like it after I've worked hard. It might be that that day comes, and it might be that that day comes sooner—I hope it does—but sooner than later.

But even then, even if there is that sort of switch in the degree of rights, the hierarchy of rights in public opinion, and that gets enshrined in law somehow, in the wider ethical mindset and in law—even then, I would say it's still not an adequate and fertile basis for ethics. Something is missing. It's still just about those rights and the sort of competing rights, contesting rights, and then a decision that this right actually always trumps that right. Even then, still then, it won't be adequate and it won't be fertile as a basis—just that question about rights.

And you can see, even at that level of competing or conflicting rights, there's so much dishonesty and distortion that comes in when people talk on that level. And that, to me, betrays the fact that we're actually lacking a means of approaching ethical questions. So we just have this conversation about rights, but there's no actual way of ap-

proaching ethical questions. The means, the practices, the way of thinking about it just becomes my right versus your right, or your right versus my sense of those people on the other side of the world and their rights.

So much dishonesty and distortion that just partly—partly—betrays, not something so much about human nature, perhaps, but just our lacking of a means of approaching ethical questions.

Some of you may know this, but there were a couple of groups who tried to shut down airports or prevent planes from taking off and landing to draw attention to the huge and often unnecessary amount of carbon emissions that come from flying. And they attempted in different ways to stop the functioning of airports for a few hours or a day or two days or whatever it was.

And it was, I say interesting, but it was also kind of alarming and also totally to be expected and kind of normalised—the response of the airport authorities and others. So this happened, I think, one situation was a city airport in the middle of London, and a lot of activists went there and just sat in the lobby and sort of blocked entrances and things like that, in an attempt to stop planes flying for a while.

And the sort of dishonest and distorted rhetoric of the response and the statements from the city airport authorities, who talked about needing to ensure the safe running or the safe operation of this airport, and then gleefully reported that they had ensured that when the police had cleared the protesters. And this is just completely normal and expected kind of language and trope and attitude and response.

It hides so much, because the use of that word "the safe operation" is a deliberate deflection and distortion. It links the XR protests with terrorism, which, if you've read the news recently, apparently they were linked anyway by a police organisation called Prevent, and now they've retracted that link, but anyway. There was, in the rhetoric, in the spin of the response, this deliberate deflection and distortion as if XR protesters are like terrorists, airport functioning is safe.

But, you know, the carbon dioxide emissions from flying is not safe. And doubly so in an airport like City Airport, where it's mostly really very rich people and corporate executives flying here and there, where they don't need to fly to Manchester or—you know how long that is on the train, a couple of hours or whatever it is. The emissions are not necessary. The emissions are not safe. We know that now. Carbon dioxide emissions are not safe.

Was there anyone whose safety was affected, whose actual safety was affected by that XR sit-in protest? It's a spin. You might as well talk about the safe running of Auschwitz and wanting to ensure the safe running of Auschwitz. Okay, it's maybe extreme, but there's a parallel there. How ridiculous that sounds.

Even more insidious, I think, is the kind of incomplete honesty and distortion that gets deployed through certain common tropes—particularly that XR protests were preventing normal, hard-working people from putting food on their table and keeping a roof above their heads. These are normal people who want to go about their normal lives.

I heard this on a TV debate. I don't have a better idea about how consciousness can be changed in relation to climate change and species extinction, how the alarm can be better sounded. I don't have a better idea than XR. I have many difficulties with how XR does things or what it decides to do, but I really don't know a better approach, speaking as someone who's been involved in environmental activism for decades—writing countless letters, trying to pursue change through so-called democratic processes. I genuinely don't have a better idea.

But then there's this trope in response: these XR people are preventing normal, hard-working people from putting food on their table, having a roof above their heads—normal people who want to go about their normal lives.

Is that even really true? Did the XR protests really prevent hard-working people from putting food on their table that evening, or from having a roof above their heads? Is that really true? It might be in a couple of cases, but what proportion of cases? It's just a trope, a spin.

And regarding normal life—what if so-called normal life brings very abnormal disaster for others? Abnormal like the fires in Australia. Normal life brings abnormal disaster for others, and then for myself in my normal life too. Normal life was pursued in 1938 Nazi Germany by a lot of people. "I just want to go about my normal life"—but there's a bigger ethical question here.

Mass extinction, mass extermination of species is not normal. It's by far the most abnormal thing that has occurred on Earth since the planet has existed, perhaps apart from the beginning of life itself.

There's something even more insidious going on with this particular trope. Almost no one wants to say they don't care if anyone is deprived of food or loses their job. In this gig economy, some people have no benefits, no safety net at all. They're not slaves, but there's very little protection. This has become a reality—the gig economy and the economy of austerity.

So it might be true that for some people, getting blocked by an XR protest makes them late for work, they get fired from their gig economy job, and they're really on the edge, living at that level of poverty and vulnerability in society. Of course, that might be true.

But first, how many people does that actually affect? More importantly, what has happened in this trope is that the protesters—the people disrupting—get blamed for decades of systematic political and socioeconomic policies of austerity and the gig economy. They do something and they're blamed for the potential results, when actually most of these conditions rest in decades of socioeconomic policies that themselves rest on very shaky ethical foundations.

Yes, certain XR actions could have been better thought out in terms of demographics, areas, and who exactly they would affect. I really do think that. But there's also something more than a little sneaky, insidious, dishonest, disorienting, and distorting about what has become quite a typical response—such an easy trope that's hiding something.

The larger point, again, is about our ethical thinking needing to be more than law. We can't slide into thinking it's just about law and that's all we can talk about, or that ethics is just about rights—protecting people's rights. If we expand the conversation, expand the idea of what ethics is, then it opens up areas for what used to be called, I think, in the Catholic church, sins of omission—neglecting to do something.

This has quite important implications for me. Just as a thought experiment, let's take Nazi Germany as a setting. Compare ethical transgressions:

Person A speaks out during the Third Reich against Nazi policy and ideas, publicly and at the risk of their life. Privately, they're having an extramarital affair.

They're involved with someone other than their spouse—romantically, sexually involved with someone else. That's person A.

Person B is completely faithful to their partner, their spouse, but does not speak up about the Nazi policies, Nazi ideas. After the war, they may say, along with so many others, that they disagreed with Nazi policies and thought Nazism was terrible. But they say that after the war, when it was safe.

Person A, person B, and what they do—they're not antinomians. The point here is to ask and see how you, I, each of us tend to assess ethical misdemeanors. What's your reaction to person A, and your ethical reaction and assessment of person A compared to your ethical reaction to person B? Person A spoke out at the risk of their life, but they were having an extramarital affair. Person B was completely faithful to their spouse, but did not speak up until after the war, when they said they disagreed and thought Nazism was terrible. Maybe they did disagree and think Nazism was terrible, but during the Nazi reign, they did not speak up.

I invite you to ask and see how you tend to relatively assess those ethical misdemeanors. One of them is an omission, a sin of omission—person B. And this also, as I pointed out in "The Necessity of Fantasy," relates to how in the five precepts, as they're usually presented negatively, there's no place for a sin of omission. Walking by on the edge of a lake where someone is drowning, and simply keeping walking mindfully by while the person drowns or someone else has to save them—technically speaking, that's not a transgression, not an ethical transgression, not a sin. I'm still keeping the five precepts. Technically speaking.

Of course, Thich Nhat Hanh has added the positive side to the precepts, which is very helpful. But technically speaking, the Buddhist precepts, as they're usually thought of in terms of the five precepts, don't leave room for how much we can rise up ethically and extend ourselves to the higher virtues.

Now, what if we translate this hypothetical scenario, these hypothetical ethical transgressions—there are two kinds of transgressions there: Person A's transgression in terms of their marriage, and Person B's transgression in terms of their sin of omission, what they have failed to rise up to—what happens if you translate that to our situation now, where we know about and somehow even participate in a willful extinction, extermination of millions of species and climate change? We know that's going on, that those actions, those policies are perpetuated in our time by our societies, just as in Nazi Germany it was clear what was perpetrated. People said they didn't know about what was going to happen to the Jews and the Roma and the homosexuals and the Communists. Most people knew.

Translate that to our situation now.

This phrase, "sins of omission," can mean different things. But what I want to point to here is that we need to open up—I think we're talking about needs now. What do we need to bring to an ethical system? What does an ethical system need to have? It needs

to have a place in it, a space in it, spaces and places in it for the possibility of aspiring to higher values and virtues, for the recognition that it's important and good to aspire to higher values, higher virtues.

There's limited space for that in ethical systems that are not based on virtue. I wonder about this. I wonder if there's limited space for those kinds of aspirations or the recognition of their importance in ethical systems that are not based on virtue. I wonder—I'm not sure if that's correct, but it may be. These ethical systems based on virtue make that much more clear, let's put it that way.

If we go back to the legal thing—I think I've moved, I've lost count now. Since I got ill, I was living at Gaia House, I got ill, and I moved. Basically I moved out the morning of my operation. That was it. I never went back to Gaia House since then. I think I've moved four or five times since then, renting one place or another. I've never rented in England before because I lived in the States, so I don't know if it's an English thing or what, but I would say I had four or five places and three different landlords, I think.

While it's very clear that none of my landlords have acted illegally—they've always kept within the bounds of the law in terms of how they do things or raise the rent or limit things in this way or that way—and one could say from a certain point of view that they've acted ethically, they haven't acted unethically, one would be very hard pushed to find anyone who would say these people have acted virtuously in being a landlord or in their dealings with the tenant.

There's, again, in the wider society, this shrinking away from the idea or the attraction to higher values and higher virtues and the place for that as a possibility, the encouragement to aspire and to reach out to that kind of level. We just need to keep within the bounds of law—there's a sort of minimum, the lowest common denominator—and then that's regarded as ethical.

Sometimes ethical is a bit more than the law, but there's a shrinking here. So I don't know—I'm not sure that it's the case that this kind of thing is not possible with other ethical systems. There's something about a virtue-based ethical system that makes it more apparent, that invites it, that sets it up that way.

Going back to Hartman's hierarchy of values, and still with the notion that the higher values will need to rest on the lower, and including the knowing that there will be inevitable antinomies between different values, particularly values at the same level—that kind of virtue-based system, value-based system, still keeps this whole notion open,

what I'm calling sins of omission. And this possibility and encouragement, stimulation, invitation to aspire higher, to higher values, higher virtues. So different ethical systems open in different ways. They open more or less.

Not too long ago, I overheard a conversation between two people who, each of them was a relatively new parent. It was a man and a woman—they weren't a couple. So they were each in a partnership and each had a young child, one young child. They seemed to agree very easily that very close bonding between mother and child, where the mum rarely goes away and breastfeeding is continued until late, et cetera—that this kind of very close bonding would guarantee that the child, when grown, would not cause harm in the world. I just wondered whether that was a bit naive.

Peer influence becomes huge as time goes on, as does the influence of advertisement and social and cultural norms, including ethical ones. I can think of a family that I've known for many years—the children in that family, the parents and the children—and I've known the children since they were babies. They're now mostly in their twenties, and they have all become very nice, relatively well-balanced psychologically. They're polite, there's a degree of kindness there, they're okay with expressing affection with their parents and their social relations, and so on. But they don't think twice, for example, about flying many times a year. They're quite wealthy, and they don't think twice about what that might contribute to the suffering of others, human and non-human. There is also, it seems to me, very little interest or impetus towards the higher virtues.

This is not quite what I mean by sins of omission, but it's related. So is it enough, this idea that we won't cause harm if we have very affectionate parenting with healthy physical contact with mum and dad, good family dynamics, and all that? The affection from and healthy attachment to mother or primary caregiver—it's probably not enough to bring about the kind of ethical maturity the world needs now.

We may need moral education, which, as I said, has gone away. It's been ruled taboo. It's hard to find in our society. We may need further moral education, whether by the family or otherwise. The role of education and moral education might be huge, but as I said, in our society we lack any but the most basic moral education. Even that may be less really a moral education than one about conforming to norms and obeying the law.

So what do we need to open up a range of possibility—the impetus and the interest in the higher virtues, as well as this whole notion of sins of omission? Some kind of moral education that is not in place at present in Western societies, and that needs to be based on probably a very different way of framing and relating to ethics than is there presently. The two issues—the lack of education and the lack of a good way of framing and relating to ethics—are completely related.

When there is the possibility to aspire, when that's opened and deemed important, the possibility to aspire to higher values, when it's recognized as something good, then love and eros for virtues becomes possible and becomes normal. Because there's that possibility of a beyond, that possibility of extending, rather than just a kind of disgust at what one sees or decides is unethical, or a kind of sentimentality—the sort you'd get in tabloid newspapers or the Daily Mail. It's all pretty limited ethically. Not only is it trammeled in just one direction—it's pretty obvious what they're going to oppose or not—but it's very limited in terms of the emotionality in it. There's no real place there for genuine love of virtue or ethics and genuine eros.

So again, this is part of the list of needs: ethics needs to become an area and a domain in relation to which we can and do feel love and eros and plenty of it, and beauty, because that's all going to be tied in. I'm using that word eros in the soul-making sense. I'm not only saying this because I think ethics is an interesting subject and I love it—it's that exactly that is the appropriate relationship with this subject.

If we're thinking about what is a beautiful life, what is a life worth living, what is a life with depth and dimensionality and meaningfulness, and with this possibility for higher virtues and the beauty of that and extending myself, then it's exactly eros and love that is an appropriate relationship with that whole domain, with that whole subject.

I remember in the Sīla Soul talks, I played a little bit with different etymologies connected with the word virtue, and I offered different ones. I don't know if I mentioned these two—these two may be a repeat.

Looking at the phonetic or associative connections with the word virtue, I want to highlight two relationships that illuminate what I've just shared about eros and ethics.

Consider our colloquial use of "virtually" - we speak of virtual reality, virtual media. This virtual realm exists as image, electronically manifested. The connection between "virtual" and "virtue" suggests something profound: that virtues themselves can be understood as imaginal realities. They exist as images we can approach, ideals that beckon us forward.

Our other common usage of "virtually" - meaning "almost" or "approaching" - carries similar implications. When we say someone was "virtually exhausted" or "virtually there," we're describing movement toward something, an approximation of a fuller reality.

Both meanings point toward the same truth: virtues exist as imaginal idealities that we imperfectly approach through our lived behavior. Here is the ideational, imaginal reality of compassion or courage or wisdom, and we always approach it imperfectly in the instances of our actions. Our behavior becomes the instantiation of these ideal realities - not the complete embodiment, but the lived attempt to manifest what calls to us from beyond our current capacity.

This understanding naturally invites eros. When there exists an imaginal beyond, a higher dimension we cannot quite reach but yearn to approach, dimensionality opens. When virtues become ideational images rather than mere behavioral prescriptions, eros becomes not just possible but inevitable.

As I mentioned the other day regarding people who marvel at apparent willpower - perhaps what they're witnessing is actually eros. Eros for certain virtues and values. Eros for the ideas seeking expression through us. Eros for the future sangha we envision. Love and attraction, more than mere force of will.

Of course, in any long creative project, in sustained relationships, in parenting, there will be times when we don't feel that animating eros. The same holds true for our relationship with ethics and virtue. There will be periods when practice feels dry, when we're not inspired or called toward what's more beautiful. This is natural, even inevitable.

But when we have the right relationship to virtue - as we might with a long-term creative endeavor, an enduring friendship, or the ongoing project of raising children - we can remain rooted in knowing even when feeling has temporarily withdrawn. We know firsthand: this matters to me. This is part of my path. I love this work, even when love isn't immediately accessible as feeling.

This knowing itself carries eros, even in dormant periods. We can recognize the many elements of the imaginal present even when we're not actively enchanted.

This connects to another crucial need in how we approach ethics: our understanding must include more than just emotion or moral feeling. While I don't believe ethics should be reduced to cold rationality - as some philosophical systems attempt - neither can it rest solely on feeling-states. Our hearts and their responses form part of our moral instrument, part of our ethical compass, but not the entirety.

It's an element of our compass. So we need emotions and moral feelings, but we need also more than that.

Eros is actually, as you know, more than an emotion. And eros—again, I mean eros in the whole soul-making sense that we use that term—so yes, we need emotion, but we need more than emotion. And part of what's more is we need eros, and partly we need a hierarchy of values, or some sense of a hierarchy of values. I want to come back to that because I want to spin that a little bit differently as we go on. But what that really means is we need a conceptual framework.

So we need emotion, but we need more than emotion. We need eros, we need a conceptual framework, and we need ways of orienting, ways of practicing. More than just emotion to guide us.

Obviously, the value of something like passion depends on what it serves and what the intention is, just like we talked about law and order. Passion is an emotion, but its value—actually, its moral value—depends on what it's serving and what its intention is. Loyalty, I'm not sure if it's an emotion or a stance, but it's connected. The value of loyalty, even passionate loyalty, also depends on its object.

A football supporter completely loyal to their team has a certain value, but a pretty limited value in terms of how valuable that passion and loyalty truly is. Sometimes you see grown men, and the only place where they're really expressing any emotion, or any place you'd see them cry, might be in relation to a football result. You have to wonder what's happening there with the heart. Why so limited? Why so strong in this area and so limited in other areas? And what value does it have, really, if it's just about whether a football team loses or wins?

So the value is dependent on the value of its object. And of course, the value of the loyalty of an SS officer—again, taking Nazi Germany as an example—the loyalty of an SS officer to Himmler, the head of the SS, that's highly questionable what value that has.

I say this because sometimes I run into people who love the sound of soul-making and even start playing with images, but seem to shrink their sense of what's important down to passion—the sense of passion as something really important. It's not important. Just the emotion of passion is not inherently important. It depends what it's connected to, what it serves, what the intentions are, what its objects are.

I want to say something as well, just in connection with the emotions again. As I said, I feel like they're very important, they have a very important place in terms of our ethical sensibility and how we're going to approach ethics and how we orient and navigate with our ethical instrument, our soul instrument regarding ethics. But we can also sometimes overdo that and not see—kind of blind ourselves a little bit, blinker ourselves to other things—if we put too much emphasis on the emotion.

Take, for example, the idea of grief rituals and grief ceremonies, which some of us have been involved in and are starting more widely now, say with regard to species extinction or climate change. It's interesting: in those grief rituals, the person might come expecting a space where they can really grieve and wail and cry and it be okay and be supported and mirrored, where there's a shared space for intense, deep griefing emotion. But what people can find—and I think you will find if you attend a few of these things—is that a grief ritual may not lead to or support an emotion of grief. And it may not at all be because anything weird is going on in the dynamics, or it wasn't a trustworthy or safe space. It actually depends how the ritual is done and how it's held.

Oftentimes, a ritual distills something and contains it and connects levels. A ritual connects levels, and this is very important for soul-making. So, for example, we connect matter and the imaginal dimensions or the dimensions of divinity. That's the transubstantiation of objects and matter. That's something that happens in, or can happen in, a ritual. It's very powerful for the soul. And as I mentioned the other day, it may involve giving and receiving and grace.

These elements—this distilling of something, this containing of something, and particularly this element of connecting levels, and also this giving and receiving and grace—all of that may not lead to a sort of opening of the floodgates of, in this case, grief. So it depends what the ritual is trying to do and how it is set up and what levels it's aimed at. This is actually quite important, I think, for soul-makers to understand.

Is there a place for both? Spaces—call them rituals or ceremonies or whatever—where there can be collective grief and the depth of that grief regarding species loss, extinction, extermination, can be felt and held together in a safe space and recognized and valued and moved through? This feeling the grief, opening to it, and the importance also there of the heart's capacity expanding. Because as I said many times recently, there can be so much grief there. Part of the work that we do in meditation is to actually expand the heart's capacity, that it knows it can feel this terrible, awful, seemingly bottomless grief—a lot of it's not even mine—and the heart is big enough and knows how to let that move through and how to hold it well.

So can we have place for that kind of space and ritual together? And do we know how to set that up? And can there also be this contextualizing of grief through ritual?

The ritual that holds space in a different way—understanding how we human beings relate to the whole situation of species loss and ecological devastation—contextualizes grief through dimension and imagination, contextualizing it for the soul, not just for the heart. This kind of ritual might be much calmer, more sober, perhaps even silent. But from it might emerge strength, power, and stamina.

Theoretically, yes, just having the grief and opening to it allows one to move through grief toward empowerment to act. But there's openness and strength available from both kinds of rituals. Potentially, there's openness and strength, power and stamina through both approaches—but they come in very different ways, and they're given to the being in very different ways.

Emotions are vital, but they're not enough.

So we're exploring the possibility of soul-making practice as a basis and approach to ethics. This can happen in two ways, as I explained in the Sila and Soul talks. One is through values and virtues becoming—or being allowed to become—imaginal images, ideational imaginal images, imaginal ideas, whatever we call them. The values and virtues themselves become imaginal.

The second way comes through an image, an imaginal figure, and that imaginal figure implies, or has implicit within it, certain values and certain virtues. Our life then begins to refract and express those values and virtues in its imperfect mimicry and echoing of the image, responding to the duty that flows from the image.

If we talk about ethics in terms of virtues—virtue ethics—then virtues rest on a sense of values rather than on a rational system or enforcement of law. That's the fundamental tenor of virtue ethics: it rests on my sense of values. The soul-making approach would most easily fit with virtue ethics, and it too rests on a sense of values rather than a rationally worked out system or guidelines or enforcement.

A sense of values—extrapolating from much of what we explored in Sila and Soul—really involves sensing them with soul. In other words, sensing the ideational imaginal, and sensing with soul implies all the eros and everything else: the sense of beauty and devotion and duty and meaningfulness, all the elements. Ethics, in this sense, implies and needs sensing with soul, to a certain extent, with respect to values.

Let's explore this further. When we sense the things and beings of the world with soul, values are there, and reverence is there, as elements of the imaginal. There's a natural ethical relationship with whatever we're sensing with soul.

However, there will always be something—some object or person—left out of our sensing with soul until we notice them and give them attention, allowing them to be subsumed into the soul-making dynamic. It's also true that some fantasies involve enemies. So the question arises: what becomes of our ethical relationship with those who are our imaginal or fantastical enemies? If I have an image of a warrior protecting the earth from enemies, what about our ethical relationship with those enemies?

Here we can talk about imaginal duty and its refraction, but also the theater-like nature we've explored before. In a way, those enemies need to be subsumed—they need to become imaginal as well. Otherwise there's danger of reifying the enemy too much.

It's too much to expect anyone to be sensing with soul all the time and with respect to everything. It's actually impossible to be sensing with soul with respect to everything, because "everything" becomes a category that expands when the soul-making dynamic kicks in, creating and discovering more things, more aspects.

But it may be that as sensing with soul becomes more normal and digested, any situation or thing we attend to or experience—with respect to which we have to make some important choice, one that feels major—may become sensed with soul. Therefore our relationship with it becomes ethical, because it's reverential.

If we take sensing with soul as the basic approach to virtue or ethical living, it will not rid us of the inevitability of antinomies between values at the same level. That cannot happen.

I mean, it may rid a person of an antinomy they have between two values. Sometimes when I explore a dilemma, when I bring the soul-making sensibility and practice to it, I actually find that X is more soul-making for me than Y, even though someone else may have the reverse sense—they might find Y more soul-making than X.

But if everyone were trained in soul-making dharma practice and in approaching ethical choices through it, that person's choice, even though another person disagrees—they choose X, I choose Y; they choose X over Y, I choose Y over X—if everyone were trained in soul-making dharma and that approach to ethics, the person's choice would still be respected as valid if we sensed that it was honestly and authentically sensed with soul.

So what I'm exploring here is this: is it possible that sensing the soul could become a more widely established practice and basis even for ethics? I mean, that might be a total pipe dream, but I'm still exploring the theoretical possibility, at least the theoretical side of the possibility.

Part of the problem with ethics as we think about them now is that when we don't have a notion of dimensionality—when we don't have a sense of dimensionality, or when any idea or notion of dimensionality has been refused, has been shut out, disallowed, as is quite common and quite popular these days—then actually there can be no shared ethics. There's nothing then to prevent someone's ethics from being purely contingent, learned, arbitrary. Someone says, "This is my right, that's your right, this is how I think about ethics, that's how you think about ethics." But it could be held for purely

contingent or arbitrary reasons, or held principally for what are actually not ethical reasons at all. It's something amoral—not immoral, as in wrong, but amoral, having nothing to do with morality.

So without dimensionality, it's hard to justify, and it's hard to even know where a person's so-called ethics are coming from. Ethics becomes exactly prey to postmodern nihilistic relativism because of this absence of dimensionality.

If we pick up a few strands from what we've talked about here and in the Zealand Soul Talks and put them together—if we combine Hartman's notion of that firmament of values, which has an objective existence but has a kind of range and width that usually almost always exceeds the focus of any age, any culture, or any individual, and that also contains within it numerous antinomies—we combine that idea of affirmative values with a demand for a sense of dimensionality. I'll come back to this dimensionality question in more detail later, but if we combine this idea of affirmative values, we need to avoid this kind of postmodern nihilistic relativism with regard to ethics. Some kind of ethics needs to be rooted in something.

So I'm talking about what wishes or needs, let's say, a demand for some kind of sense of dimensionality. What will give us that? Well, soul-making, sensing the soul, gives us a sense of dimensionality implicitly. It's one of the elements. So we can get a sense of dimensionality for this or that virtue or ethic, or even just this or that action we're thinking about, from soul-making dharma practice and with all that implies about the ideational-imaginable.

So those two things—the firmament of values, which does have a kind of objective existence, and a sense of dimensionality, an actual practical, practiced sense of dimensionality—and we add the notion that we can trust the disciplined or trained soul to sense the ethical and to be touched by it, to want to move towards it, to have an erotic relationship with it and to want to manifest some or other of those inherently existing values. In other words, the duty is part of it as well.

If we combine all that—this kind of trust in the soul-making dharma practice, a demand for a sense of dimensionality which we can get also through soul-making dharma practice, and this notion of an objective but hugely ranged firmament of values—then there is an objectively or independently existing ethics to a certain extent, which we can discern epistemologically through the practice, by our careful sensibility and sensitivity, something which can be trained. Maybe there are other ways apart from soul-making dharma practice, but certainly including by training in soul-making and a recognition of and familiarity with the elements of the imaginal. This familiarity and re-

cognition of the elements of the imaginal tell me when I'm on the right track, when the whole thing has become soulful, has that sense of dimensionality, and that I can trust this.

Still, there will be antinomies and differences of opinion and inclination and feeling between different people, of course. But antinomies exist anyway for individuals within themselves. Antinomies are unavoidable in ethical life, as I stressed in the Zealand Soul Talks—they're unavoidable.

But if we ourselves and society are aware of both the independent existence of this value firmament, its wide range, and the inevitability of antinomies both within and between individuals, then at least a more understanding and harmonious existence in society might be possible. Do you understand? If we and most or a lot of other people in society are aware there is this independently existing value firmament with a huge range, and that there will inevitably be antinomies both within myself and within individuals, then at least we can have more understanding and a more harmonious coexistence in society.

Of course, it might also be—I think it probably would be the case—that if soul-making training and sensibilities were almost universally trained in members of society (let's just dream that for a minute), certain seeming antinomies would be universally understood to be not really antinomies, but oppositions between moral or soulful values and amoral values that are ego values or greed values. Not really antinomies at all. For example, I don't know, like the expansion of Heathrow Airport.

So again, the relationship with emotions. Notice one can have strong opinions and feelings regarding a value without a sense of soul-making and soulfulness there. If there's no dimensionality, then in the soul-making way of approaching ethics, it wouldn't be trustworthy. Just because there's an intense feeling, just because there's a strong opinion, without that sense of dimensionality and without the beauty and the other elements of the imaginal, it's not trustworthy. It's not fully trustworthy in that way of thinking about it.

This is hard as a dream, if we're dreaming this or proposing this. To kind of proffer that as desirable—to say it would be great if everyone, or at least a lot of people, approached ethics through sensing the soul, from soul-making dharma practice—

That would be, you know, actually to insist on, or at least to say is desirable, basically a new epistemology. You're basically insisting on a new epistemology, or saying it's better to have a new epistemology, at least for the domain of ethics. And for any new epistemology to take root and spread and even come to be a norm one day in the wider so-

ciety is quite an ask and a pretty rare thing. I don't know—perhaps the last sort of major shift of epistemology was the shift to the scientific materialist worldview and its epistemology hundreds of years ago.

So an epistemology is already dominant in a culture. We inherit it and it's hard to question it. Still though, trying to place a new ontology first, in other words, before the epistemology—in other words, just saying, "This is ethical, this is the truth"—before an epistemology, before a way of teaching people how they might recognize something as more valuable, in other words, just presenting ontology, "This is more valuable than that," is probably harder than opening the epistemology in the area of ethics. Actually, how might one sense for oneself that this is more valuable than that?

So in this hope, wish, fantasy, dream, ridiculous impossibility, pipe dream, it's a big ask. Shifting ontology is huge. Shifting ontology just sort of out of the blue and kind of cold is probably very hard before we've shifted and offered the possibility of epistemology. And by epistemology I mean the practice by which one can come to experience things and sense things for oneself palpably, to measure between different values or different ethical choices.

So the other day, I can't remember which talk it was—probably the one on ontology—we talked about the possibility of opening up and moving forward our sense of ontology and epistemology by allowing and giving place and importance, significant place, to eros. In other words, almost partly basing ontology and epistemology on eros. Of course, that's an idea that a lot of people would very quickly object to and be horrified by.

I read not too long ago a paper by—I don't know if he's a philosopher or a historian of philosophy or something—a guy called Wayne Hankey, who I must say I'm not a huge fan of. And it was a paper quite polemically critiquing John Milbank, the theologian-philosopher I mentioned the other day, who's associated with what they call the radical orthodoxy movement these days.

I want to read a little bit of what Wayne Hankey says and what he criticizes in John Milbank's approach. And as I mentioned the other day, John Milbank's approach seems to have a lot of affinity and overlap and commonality with what we've been working out with the soul-making dharma, but he's done it in an Orthodox Christian context and through very, very different channels of Neoplatonism and so forth through Western philosophy and theology. So he's done it through very different channels than we have. But to me it's quite exciting—at least the little bit I've read so far and what I've seen on YouTube and things—but quite keen.

Anyway, I read this Wayne Hankey paper and I'm going to read a little bit of his critiques. So he says, in trying to sum up what he's attacking here in John Milbank's approach, he says: "Theory belongs to composition and is not separable from it." I have to translate a bit. He means really that theory is something that we can just create. So again we have this poiesis common with our notions and this possibility of creating conceptual frameworks and so forth. So it's definitely not exactly the same—there's probably quite a lot of differences between what John Milbank's saying and what we're opening up, and he's, I think, still very much seeing his project as very much in process. But anyway.

"Theory belongs to composition"—in other words, it's a creative, artistic endeavor—"and is not separable from it. The requirement that we join in the cosmic and divine poiesis," creativity, artistic creativity, "governed not by truth but by desire, means that there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity. Theory occurs as a necessarily incomplete moment within praxis."

So to translate that, basically in our terms it's saying: This is terrible. If you follow your desire, eros, and not something called truth, and you create theory or create conceptual frameworks guided by your eros and desire, then there can be no theoretical objectivity, and it's just something that occurs as a stage, as an incomplete movement, direction, thrust, and temporary stage within practice. So in a way that sounds very similar to the kind of logos of logoi in soul-making dharma.

But then he doesn't like this at all, Wayne Hankey. He doesn't like this at all. He continues: "What belongs to theory is self-consciously constructed within poiesis, practice and desire in order to stand against modern theoretical truthfulness."

So there's this—again, in our language—this kind of standoff of this kind of notion of the emptiness of ultimate truth and any singly, finally true conceptual framework of things, and then our participation in the creation and discovery of theory and conceptual framework and logoi, using all the aspects of our soul and our eros, and that stands against and kind of in opposition to what he's called modern theoretical truthfulness in terms of classical thinking about there being an objective truth.

And he continues: "When we know that"—quote—"we know what we want to know, will to know in accord with desire, and cannot submit that desire to knowledge or knowledge to truth, the nihilist gap has already opened."

When we know that—when we understand that knowledge is something that, and even truth is something that's guided by desire, whether we admit it or not, whether we're conscious of it or not, that eros comes into our decisions about what is true, what

conceptual frameworks we pick up—when we know that, and when we, rather than see that as a problem, when we take it on board and go with it in the deepest and fullest and richest and most soulful way that we can, and when we will to know in accord with our desire, as he said, and cannot submit that desire to knowledge or knowledge to truth—in other words, we leave totally aside any requirements that the desire guiding our knowledge be limited by something called truth or objective knowledge—then the nihilist gap has already opened. There's a gap of thinking anything, believing anything, ethically, philosophically, religiously, and so forth.

So just to say I wouldn't agree with that: "cannot submit that desire to knowledge or knowledge to truth." There are, as I said in the talks on the Four Parables series, and just touched on it briefly the other day, there are limits to the eros. It's not just that there are other constraints in our movement towards truth, and one of them is just this power of predictability we talked about in scientific provisional truths, for example. That's the kind of thing that tells me that I know something—it predicts, like Newton's laws predicts. We gave that example. But also dependent fading is telling me that I...

you know, is a prediction that tells me there's something valid here, a provisional truth.

But he said, if that's the case, if we know what we want to know, and we will to know in accord with desire, now that we've let the Eros lead, then the nihilist gap has already opened.

But I would say the nihilist gap has not opened if the desire is disciplined. If it's disciplined desire. By which I mean that it's rooted in and shaped by a really sophisticated and deep and careful practice like soul-making practice. And then the eros there is disciplined. It's not just desire, willy-nilly, random desire that would open the nihilist gap. This is something else. It's actually disciplined and so that gap doesn't open in the way that Wayne Hankey thinks.

So, what does open is a truth that's neither objective nor subjective. Because this kind of trying to cling to a purely objective truth, or notions that truth is something purely objective, completely independently objective, it's very hard to kind of sustain that anymore, as I explained the other day. But with the inclusion and cooperation of Eros as a guide for our conceptual frameworks, for our logoi, for our ideas, for our notions, for our provisional truths, the discipline of eros when it's in practice in a soul-making way, in sensing the soul, then we arrive at something that's neither objective nor subjective.

We arrive at truths, logoi, conceptual frameworks that are true but neither objective nor subjective, which must be part of a new definition of truth. Because the old one of something purely objective is very hard, as I said, to hang on to. And then it's not a nihilistic free-for-all. And in the area of ethics, similarly, it's not a nihilistic free-for-all.

When we were talking the other day about an ontology or epistemology based partly on Eros and how Eros might be redeemed along with other aspects of our being and affects, might be redeemed and given place in a sort of more sophisticated and more powerful and more far-reaching ontology, we talked about truth being not something one finally ever arrives at, but more of a journey. We talked about this notion of truth that Descartes had, that the truth, true or real things are just what's clear and discreet and easily comprehended by the mind. And how if we don't buy into that definition, and if we also see that truth may be more a journey, and there are provisional truths in science as there are in Dharma, and there's a whole journey there.

Eros doesn't leave us with clear, discrete things easily comprehended by the mind, but opens up their dimensions and their shading into divinity and their unfathomability and their complexity and multi-aspected nature. All this taken together, again, suggests that eros may be, in John Milbank's word, ontologically disclosive, may have a status that is ontologically disclosive. In other words, it tells us about the truth. It tells us about reality, it leads us, and it opens, discloses, to open up for us what might be truth, but truth in inverted commas, because truth is understood differently than in the sort of, well, let's say definitely in classical modernist terms.

So Eros redeemed and given ontological and epistemological value regarding objects but also regarding conceptual frameworks—this to me is a really exciting and important possibility, way of opening up our thinking and validating it perhaps more positively. Validating Eros, validating our soul-making experience, validating what's possible there.

Last thing, I think, for today. It's interesting, just sticking with this idea about—so we're talking about the possibility of soul-making practice as basis and approach to ethics. That can happen in different ways. And what might it be just to dream into the possibility of that being more widely spread in society? And part of that, what would be needed there, is a recognition of the necessity to give some ontological and epistemological value, or value regarding ontology and epistemology to Eros. And the notion of participation, and the notion of truth that is not a final, ultimate, objective, independently existent truth, but a journey, a continuous opening up of provisional truths and participatory.

Last thing to say is interesting in this connection. Years ago, I told this story in some other place for some other reason, but years ago my colleague Stephen Batchelor shared he was scheduled to teach a retreat on ethics. Ethics was the subject. And no one signed up for it. It got zero interest. And of course that wouldn't happen these days because he's just very famous and people would go just for his name. But I thought that was very telling, the fact that no one signed up for that retreat because clearly no one was interested in ethics.

And in a way, ethics can seem like a very boring subject. And again, if you go back to what John Milbank, where I read that quote from John Milbank the other day, boredom, if you remember, was one of the, was in his list. In his list of what was kind of disallowed as having any ontological disclosive status. So eros, anxiety, boredom, trust, poetic response, faith, hope, charity, and so forth, are disallowed ontologically disclosive status, he said.

Well, one way of understanding a lack of interest is also something as boring. People don't sign up because it's not interesting, because it seems boring.

Boredom is also, we can understand, a lack of eros. When there's boredom, there's an absence of eros. When there's eros, there's no boredom.

But if we expand a little on this idea of the ontological and epistemological value of eros, potentially, then it might be that boredom—as an absence of eros—is telling me something. At its best, I mean boredom at its best. When I'm bored with something, it's not because I'm not open to being erotically engaged, not open to being mentally and soulfully engaged. Rather, boredom at its best might be telling me there's not enough here—in these ideas or this presentation or this picture of how things are. There's not enough truth value or truth possibility here, if we understand truth as a journey. There's not enough truth possibility.

So the usual way we think about ethics—why people didn't sign up—is possibly because how they thought about ethics is just not interesting. It's actually boring. Because the way it's presented, flatly, as a question of right and wrong and ought to do, without this other dimension, or these whole other dimensions, this whole other depth of richness and soulfulness around the question of what is it good to be? What is the worthwhile life? What is the beautiful life?

It might be that people were sensing there's not enough truth value. When ethics as a subject is trammeled and amputated and dis-dimensionalized in that way, there's not enough truth possibility here. And that's actually where the boredom sense is coming

from. There's also not enough erotic possibility—they're linked together. And that's where the boredom is coming from. There's neither enough juice nor enough truth possibility in the way we usually conceive of ethics.

CHAPTER 229

The Image of Ethics (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 2h05

> *In this continuation of his exploration of ethics through soul-making dharma, Rob Burbea delves deeper into the question of what constitutes a worthwhile life beyond mere moral rules. He examines how the Protestant Reformation's rejection of intermediaries between humans and the divine inadvertently stripped away the dimensionality necessary for robust ethical frameworks. Burbea discusses the distinction between shallow shame and what he calls 'soul shame' - drawing on the Buddha's teaching of hiri and ottappa as 'guardians of the world.' He introduces a practice of 'three-ness' - balancing attention between self, other, and imaginal figure in ethical situations. The talk addresses how scientific materialism's reductionism flattens our understanding of values, making it impossible to ground ethics in anything meaningful. Burbea outlines four historical attempts to provide dimensionality to ethics: rationality (from Plato to Kant), cosmic order (both vertical hierarchy and horizontal functioning), voluntarism (divine command), and utilitarianism (reducing suffering/increasing happiness). He argues that without sensing something as having higher or deeper dimensionality - where meaningfulness, value, and sanctity naturally reside - ethical systems become merely parasitic philosophies that attack other positions without offering constructive frameworks.*

Let me offer a short recap before we see how far we can progress today.

We are essentially putting forward and exploring soul-making practice—soul-making dharma, sensing with soul—as an approach to ethical practice and ethical philosophy. We're both working with and thinking about ethics in a new way.

I do feel this approach was implicit in the earlier sila and soul talks, but as I mentioned, I was perhaps too restrained there, too held back and modest on behalf of soul-making dharma. I also have a tendency to assume that what is implicit in what I say or write will be understood by anyone listening or reading, or by most people. This is really not a good assumption—it's quite naive. This is something I learned from writing *Seeing That Frees*. Much of what I thought were obvious conclusions, or implicit connections that one could make independently without my spelling them out, was clearly not the case for most people. So I'm trying to redress that tendency and hopefully be more helpful in opening things up.

To recap: we're exploring sensing with soul as an approach to ethical practice and philosophy, examining what this might offer. One thing we started with in the last talk was expanding our notion of what we're actually discussing—what ethics is and what we need to do in thinking about and approaching ethics.

Usually, or very commonly these days, ethics is thought of and approached as the philosophy or set of guidelines, laws, or prescriptions for what to do. What should I do? What ought I to do in this or that situation? We want to include those kinds of questions and ways of approaching them, of course—what should I do here, what ought I to do—but include them within a much larger question and exploration: what is of value?

I'm not the first person to insist on this expansion. Just in modern times, Nicolai Hartmann would say that before you can answer the question "what ought I to do," you have to answer the question "what is of value?" You need to understand this—it's really important. Think this through if it doesn't make sense. What is of value in life? Not just what should I do, but what is of value? What should I love because it's valuable, highly valuable, or ultimately valuable? This will imply, suggest, and direct me in terms of what I should do to a large extent.

We have Hartmann, and we have Charles Taylor, whom I mentioned the other day, who speaks about expanding the exploration from "ought to do" to "good to be" or "good to love." So not just what ought I to do, but what is it good to be as a human being? What ought I to love? What is it good to love as a human being? What should I love?

This expansion is really crucial to opening up ethics so that it becomes a much more fertile area and more dynamic, instead of something that just grinds to a halt or devolves into opposing parties shouting louder and louder at each other from opposite poles of some ethical debate.

What has happened is that this question—what is it good to be, what should I love, what is it good to love, what makes life worthwhile, what is it to live a really worthwhile life—became separated from the question of what is right or wrong to do in certain situations or across the board in all situations. Philosophy has stopped posing that first question: What is it good to be? What is it good to love? What should I love as a human being? What is a worthwhile life? It certainly doesn't attempt to give any answers anymore. It's stopped asking the question, has deemed it irrelevant to ethics, and doesn't include it in ethical philosophy, or only very rarely.

Gradually, whether philosophers, students of philosophy, or ordinary people on the street, it becomes hard to even see a connection between those two questions: What is it good to be and good to love? And what ought I to do? What's right or wrong in a certain situation? You can see a connection there. If it's not obvious, think it through—hopefully it will become more obvious as we continue talking.

As I said on a recent retreat: think on your toes, meaning engage actively. We learn much more when we think actively.

With all this, and as the years of modernity progressed into post-modernity, it became almost agreed upon in modern cultures that no one can impose this or that regarding what people should strive for, what they should aspire to. This cannot be imposed universally by anybody, nor can it be imposed by any individual on another individual anymore.

This freedom that has emerged brings with it tremendous possibilities—we're not all obliged to follow the same view about what is most worthwhile, what we really should be aspiring for. No longer does anyone dictate that "this is really better," leaving those who don't measure up feeling they've settled for a second-class existence.

We have the gift of great freedom these days because there exists, if you like, an imposition of the rule that no one can impose what we should strive for or aspire to, what constitutes the best thing. So we have a kind of imposition about barring an imposition.

This freedom opens up a great space—multidirectional possibilities for our lives, for how we can shape our existence, because of this debarring, this disallowing of any imposition from anyone onto anyone else. Of course, in other religious cultures, some still existing, this is much less the case. And there are many in-between areas as well. But certainly in secular-dominated society, this is indeed the case, though there remain many grey areas—societies that are religious in some ways and deeply secular in others, which is quite common these days.

So it brings freedom, but also brings massive, wide and deep problems. I'll return to that.

But just to get a sense of this, if you're not quite sure you understand what this points to, simply compare: Notice how acceptable it is and how common for people or groups to argue with others, to accuse them of doing something ethically wrong, with the other party arguing back. It's often unpleasant, but it's perfectly acceptable in our society and quite common—it goes on all the time.

But consider how unacceptable it is and how very uncommon to accuse another of living a life that is not worthwhile. "Look at your life. Actually, you're really not living with any deep meaningfulness. It's not a worthy life. It's not a worthwhile life." This is not acceptable to say to someone, and it's very, very uncommon to actually say it, even less common probably to even think it, because we're barred from that kind of view.

It would be unheard of if someone said, "I see you have family and children you care for, you have fun and many experiences, you travel, you're relatively kind—but actually, it's kind of meaningless. It's not a worthwhile life you're living." This is completely unacceptable in our society and pretty much unheard of. This gives you a sense of how far the divorce and division between these two questions has gone.

What happens then is that this first question about a worthwhile life—about what's good to be and good to love, what ought I to love, should I aspire to, what's the best thing to aspire to—is actually forgotten. Often it's not given attention. The question is forgotten and neglected.

On a social level, what emerges is a kind of directionless society without any basis or substantial foundation, without deep soil, deep fundament on which to erect an ethics or even decide about ethics. As advances in technology, consumerism, global population, and globalization thrust upon us different ethical emergencies, dilemmas, situations that need response, we have less and less soil, less foundation on which to grapple with such issues. On a societal level, we get a kind of rudderlessness—not only without rudder, but without even training in how to use one.

But it's generally said that people should decide this question for themselves about what's worthwhile, what it's good to be, what it's good to love, to aspire for, to strive for, what constitutes a truly meaningful life.

But what does "decide for themselves" really mean? Is it something they truly, deeply ponder with all their heart and mind and soul? Or do we just not think about it much? Or think about it briefly in our teens and then get pulled along by something, following what colleagues are following, just following the vedanā—following the pleasant vedanā, avoiding the unpleasant?

What actually happens to that whole question? It's quite interesting. It's not black and white. Some people do ask, "What's a beautiful life?" as I explored in the Sila and Soul talks. When you think of a beautiful life or the good life—yes, it's good to be rich, it's good to be handsome or beautiful.

It's good to be popular, maybe even famous if I can. It's good to have this and that and other material things. And it's good to have and get pleasant and interesting experiences and travel and all that. That would be one answer.

A more conscious answer would perhaps not even be stated as such, but rather incorporated into the direction and choices of one's life. A spiritual practitioner, Buddhist or otherwise, might say: well, it's good to be kind. It's good to be warm. It's not good to be arrogant. It's good to be helpful to the world in some way. It's good to be relatively confident so that I can actually manifest that kindness and warmth and help.

What we recognize here is the language of values and virtues, but they're only half anchored in dimensionality. It's just good to be those things. It's appealing to be kind, warm, not arrogant, helpful, relatively confident. But this is only half anchored in dimensionality, and therefore it's only half-hearted.

Yes, this person might appear kind and warm and not arrogant and helpful and relatively confident. This person has achieved that. It's good. Maybe it took them a little work. Maybe not so much. But because it was only half-anchored, only half-rooted in a deep dimensionality, it's only half-hearted, their attitude to those values and virtues. It's only half-souled.

Or there may be a kind of dim or vague sense of the dimensionality and divinity of those values, virtues, qualities—kindness, warmth, relative humility, helpfulness, confidence. So there's maybe a dim or vague sense of their dimensionality or divinity. But neither the conceptual framework around their dimensionality, nor the eros in relationship to them—and those things are completely related, the conceptual framework and the eros—neither are allowed to operate fully. This could be for all kinds of different reasons: a block to the eros, a conceptual framework that one hasn't troubled to think through because one's just adopted bits and bobs of other conceptual frameworks and has a bit of a hodgepodge that remains incoherent and therefore not as powerful and galvanizing and as delivering as it could be.

This is actually relatively common among people who would consider themselves, for example, Buddhist practitioners.

What's rarer among Buddhists, certainly in the West, is another type of response to all this. It's rarer, but it exists in certain Abhidhamma-dominated schools of Buddhism. If even a Western practitioner has been saturated or open to that so much it begins to really pervade their way of thinking, then they do think a lot perhaps about what's the good life, what's a really worthwhile life. It's the maximization of positive qualities of the citta. The maximization of mind moments of positive qualities—this mind moment

of kindness, this mind moment of helpfulness, this mind moment of compassion. And a minimizing of negative qualities or minimizing of mind moments dominated by negative qualities as they're classified by the Abhidhamma.

The whole way of thinking about the thing is as if it's some kind of mechanical system. These people are much less rare in certain insight meditation circles. In other insight meditation circles, you'll come across them quite a lot. So it depends what circles you move in.

But it could well be that someone listening to a person like that is actually a little disturbed. It sounds almost scary. It sounds so one-dimensional—a machine-like notion, logos, of the human being. This mechanical system of maximizing the positive mind moments and minimizing the negative moments is supposed to somehow deliver us to nibbāna.

A person can come away and feel: whoa, they're making all the right noises as far as Buddhist philosophy is concerned, I guess. It kind of gels with the teachings, but there's something almost ghoulish about it, ghost-like almost, monstrous, inhuman, Frankenstein-like. There's something hollowed out in the human being there. This is somehow not a beautiful life. Somehow it's almost not quite human. And for all the carefully, precisely incisive talk about virtues, what sounds like a very careful, discriminating, precise intelligence at work somehow also sounds sparkingly stupid in some way.

Or, you know, the whole thing—this whole talk about worthwhile life and values and virtues and aspirations, striving—can just go for a person right into the inner critic.

And the inner critic can just appropriate that whole set of ideas and that whole question and turn on oneself. The inner critic attacks the being, and the whole thing becomes very tight, very contracted, very self-depreciating and self-destructive—not soulful at all. Just as certain kinds of Abhidhamma-dominated Buddhists might come across as what we would call extremely unsoulful, similarly someone who's not even thinking that way can find that the inner critic hijacks the whole conversation. And that's not soulful at all.

But this divorce, this split and jettisoning and forgetting or ignoring—this debarring from approaching the first question of what is it good to be, what is a worthwhile life, what is a beautiful life, what is of utmost value—this relegating and forgetting, or only half-heartedly thinking about and including these questions, is part of the wider and deeper great crisis of modernity and post-modernity.

In our modernist, post-modernist culture, we can easily talk about the need to reduce suffering. But how do we calculate that? How do we compare different sufferings, different kinds of sufferings? What even are the different kinds of sufferings? That's related to what are the different kinds of value, of meaningfulness, and how they stand in relationship to each other.

Again, we can talk about wanting to reduce suffering or wanting to support human flourishing—another kind of modernist and post-modern trope. But what on earth does human flourishing mean? Unless you're talking about just biological survival, we can have a very poor understanding of what human flourishing means, good as it sounds, important as it sounds, wondrously enlightened and noble and modern as it sounds. Unless we actually go into this question of what is of value, what is really good, what is the ultimate good, what makes a life really worthwhile, we cannot possibly decide what human flourishing involves.

So one big need is to expand the conversation so that there are two questions, not just what I ought to do, but what it's good to be and what maybe I ought to love—included and put together, with one as a subset of the other.

The second thing we discussed was what would be a list of wishes or needs for an ethical system to be incorporated into ethical practice. I ran through a list of, depending on how you count it, six or seven items. If we include this expansion of the domain of what ethics means, which we just talked about, there are also other needs for an ethical system.

It needs to be more than a legal system. We need to be talking about something that's more than law and more than just rights—my rights to this, your rights to that, combating rights. It needs to include, secondly, the possibility of what we call sins of omission, which really means a sort of direction, the possibility and space for higher aspiration, for ethical growth.

Third, it needs to include and engage our emotions, the whole range of our emotional life and our heart capacity. That needs to be very much a part of what we bring to ethics and what ethics actually involves for us. But it needs to be more than that—more than just our emotions or just being governed by emotions, more than just involving our emotions as instrument and guide.

Another need is that we must be talking about, thinking about and practicing ethics in a way that allows love of ethics—and even eros for ethics, for values and virtues and living ethically—to come in, to be given space, and to be honored. It's not just natural for it to be there, but it's actually intrinsic and necessary.

Then we also talked about dimensionality, and that's mostly what I want to start talking about today. We need some kind of rooting in other dimensions, some kind of sense of dimensionality to the whole notion of ethics. Ethics needs rooting in other dimensions. All this requires ontologies and epistemologies that ground it and make sense of it. If we're Buddhist, that means our ontology needs to be more than just saying everything's empty.

Lastly, another need is that all this be related to the sense of what a human being is and what a human being can be.

So all those—seven or eight needs, depending on how we count. They're not separate, and you can't go through them in a linear order, at least I can't see a way of doing so. They involve and imply each other, these different needs.

For example, when we talked about emotions the other day, I mentioned the grief ritual. There's a kind of grief ritual conceived as and functioning effectively as a space where people can really let their grief rip, where they can cry or feel emotions deeply and not be shamed for that, maybe even be held for that.

There's that kind of grief ritual, so conceived, so functioning. And there's another kind of grief ritual, which is more to contextualize the grief. And part of the way it puts the grief into context is by connecting levels. And that would be exactly connecting levels, for example, of human being and soulful being or spiritual being, connecting levels in the cosmos between matter and whatever we're going to say—matter and soul, whatever. But other rituals function to connect levels and then even to transform levels. And partly what they do then is they contextualize.

Such a grief ritual is conceived and probably won't function in the same way as the first kind of grief ritual. It won't give rise to such a great amount of emotion and tears. But it's still extremely important—extremely important, I would say. So they're both important. There's something about the second one that's easily overlooked.

So emotions are not always the most important thing. And again, in the absence of a place for dimensionality—because that's what the second kind of ritual does: it connects dimensions, or it gives dimensionality, and that's part of the contextualizing of grief or contextualizing of matter or contextualizing of life or contextualizing of death or whatever it is. But in the absence of a place for dimensionality, then our conceptual framework, again implicit or explicit, whether it's conscious and explicitly spelled out or implicit, it can become limited and limiting, even when we're very well-intended.

We really need to feel our emotions about species loss or species extermination. It's very well-intended, but there's something I'm not understanding. There's more to this than my emotion of grief, no matter how deep and bottomless the grief can feel. Actually, the bottomlessness of the grief may be a clue that another dimension is needed. And until that other dimension is conceived and sensed—even if both the conception and the sense are vague—until then, that grief will be literally bottomless, because it's not contacting another dimension.

So that would be an example of how these different needs are not separate. The question of emotionality and the place of emotions is very connected to the place of the need for dimensionality. We could give a million different examples here, but they're really not separate. So I don't think there's a linear way through this.

When we come to thinking about how could we approach ethics through sensing the soul, through soul-making dharma and practice, first of all, a reminder regarding the soul-making dharma approach: this was all arrived at, or is being arrived at, through what we call a phenomenological approach. In other words, through our experience.

For some of us, it was arrived at through just the experience of appearances, of experiences, of perceptions, the whole ways of looking and fabrication notion—which is what I call the phenomenological approach, as far as it relates to emptiness. Just staying with that phenomenological approach all the way to the unfabricated, past the unfabricated, and then opening out and legitimizing the possibility of imaginal practice. So for some, the whole thing is just based on one phenomenological approach, or rather a thread that just evolves.

Or the phenomenological approach in the sense based on experience of having images and then paying attention to: hmm, these images sometimes feel a certain way, or I notice certain things about them, and that's what we'll begin to call, that's what makes them imaginal. The twenty-eight elements—that's, and other things not included in the list of the twenty-eight. I'm just going phenomenologically, I'm just going from my experience, including the experience of "this is important." There's something about images when they come like this, when they're imaginal, that's important.

So all this, just as a reminder, was arrived at through phenomenological approaches together with a kind of just bold and vigorous questioning of typical assumptions that we have in our culture or that we have in our subcultures, dharma or otherwise—typical logoi. So it was really just arrived at through phenomenology, meaning through our experience and through questioning certain inherited indoctrinations. It was not ar-

rived at through some kind of abstract metaphysical speculation. So I think it's important not to lose sight of that in this day and age, where abstract metaphysical speculation has for hundreds of years now such a bad press.

When we come to thinking about soul-making dharma approach to ethics—and we said, well, basically, you could say, broadly speaking, we could divide that in two. One is through working with the imaginal figure, and the other is through the sense of values or virtues becoming imaginal ideas, the ideational imaginal. So two broad ways.

And just very, very briefly to say, well, okay, what does that mean in practice? So, for example, what does that mean in practice with regard to ethics? How would I bring such teachings and approaches to bear on ethics?

So very, very sketchily, let's say I feel drawn to do X, whatever it is—to express something, to write something, to do something, to refuse to do something, whatever it is. I feel drawn to do that, though I can see some ethical reasons why I shouldn't do that. So here's my ethical dilemma.

Is there an image, an imaginal image, related to doing X, related to doing X?

Again, it might be the very crucible of not knowing and the heat of the situation, the pressure of the situation I feel in the soul that gives birth—that in the alchemy of the heat and pressure in the crucible, it gives birth to an image, it gives rise to an image. But is there an image related to doing X? It might be of doing X, but is it related to doing X? Is it a soul-making image? Is it what we call the authentic imaginal? Is it genuine imaginal? Are all the elements there?

We have to be so careful with this, so careful. So is there a sense of duty in relation to that image? And what's the sense of the refraction of the duty? Am I taking it literally? Am I taking it concretely? Is there autonomy of self? Do I have a choice here? Is there humility? Is there fullness of intention? These are really—I'm just selecting some of the really, really obviously important elements here. Is there fullness of intention here? Why do I want to do X? Is there the fullness of intention?

So that's really a question. I have to explore it imaginally. Is there an image? And is that really a truly imaginal image with all the elements there? And even then, that's not quite enough. What's the refraction?

And then maybe one thinks about not doing X, whatever X is. And maybe there is an image related to that. Or maybe actually there isn't an image, and that's partly why one feels not so cool that way. One can still see that ethically one could make a case that it's important to not do X. So maybe there's a sense of values there. So if there's not an

image, it's like, oh, what are the values that are related to not doing X? Not doing X expresses or upholds certain ethical values. And can I sense into those values with soul? Can I relate to those imaginal ideas, those values, those virtues, with soul?

So even though doing X might be actually an imaginal figure, not doing X may be an imaginal figure, may be just a sense of the ideational-imaginal. But I have to really, really work the practice with all the sophistication, all the care, and all the subtlety of attention and all that attunement. And then compare the soulfulness, compare the sense of soul-making either way, and use that as a guide to ethical choice.

Or it might be that here's an ethical choice that I'm needing to make. Here's some situation in my life. And I can see values on both sides, in either branch of this forking of the road. Choose this, there are values. Choose that, there are values. There is what Hartman would call an antinomy. There's a moral antinomy there. Actually, it might be a question of hierarchical difference. Either way, it doesn't matter. Can I sense with soul into each value and each choice, the imaginal idea, the ideational image of each value and each choice, and do that very carefully?

I sense the values on both sides. It's either an antinomy or maybe a hierarchy—hierarchical choice—but I'm sensing what Hartman would call antinomy versus hierarchy. I'm sensing each of these imaginal ideas, these values, each choice, with soul as carefully as I can. Again, then I'm comparing the soulfulnesses on each side.

So very, very briefly, that would be a way to proceed, very sketchily. It's the kind of thing we're talking about as a basic idea.

If we think about this whole approach to ethics, we can divide it up broadly into an approach with an imaginal figure and an approach with an imaginal idea, virtues or values.

So if we talk about the first approach—let's not go too far, let's spend a little time with working with an imaginal figure.

An imaginal figure has an ethos. It has an ethos and it has an ethical perspective. That's partly why values is one of the 28 elements of the imaginal. An imaginal figure has an ethos and an ethical perspective. This figure, that monster, that snake, whatever it is, that flower, that tree.

So there's another possibility for practice here that I would like to suggest and just sketch some instructions. You're familiar by now with the practice we sometimes call twoness, sometimes the balance of attention. I'd like to introduce the practice of threeness and a balance of attention within threeness.

In a situation—let's really talk about practice now. Here's a situation: maybe I'm with someone else, or I'm having some kind of dialogue with someone, or they're saying something to me, or it's a difficult interaction, whatever, some kind of situation. There's an other, there's myself, and then there's a third, which is an imaginal figure that has come to me. It might be an old imaginal figure that I've known for years, or one that's just come very recently or even in that moment perhaps.

Can I play with the balance of attention, the relative weighting of my attention between the three? So what is it? I'm here with this other person in this situation or here with this situation. Ten percent of my attention, let's say, with the imaginal figure, and the other divided between myself and the other, myself as a regular human being. Or divide three ways equally, 33% each, or 50% with the imaginal figure, or whatever. It's similar to the twoness balance of attention exercise, but now it's threeness.

The question is, what then happens to my sense of the situation? What then happens to my sense of the situation with this other person or some other situation?

One could do it in real time. In other words, this is going on now. I'm putting myself in a situation and trying this. I think I gave an example several times over recent years of that image I have of me as a jazz musician, which is actually kind of its real life, its memory. I was a jazz musician, but it's become image for me in all kinds of ways and very rich ways and sometimes difficult ways and sometimes just very beautiful ways. But sometimes I think I shared a couple of times that having that sense of jazz musician just a tiny little bit in the very background, let's say in an interview, in a dharma interview. It's just very much there in the background, but it's affecting my whole sense of the situation and how I respond and the whole dance of the interaction. It's very, very subtle.

So that would be an example. That's using it in the now, because one could do this—here's a present situation, and one's using an image, it's a past image, one's resurrecting it deliberately, deliberately calling it to life in the moment, and then just having it be in the background, or more in the foreground, or whatever it is, for a situation that's happening now.

One can also do this with a memory of a situation, a memory perhaps of a difficult situation or a confusing situation or one that we ended up feeling very contracted from or we ended up judging ourselves or whatever it is.

So that's one thing—bringing the image into the situation, then playing with the balance of attention, seeing how it affects the sense of the situation. Playing with the balance of attention three ways, and how do the relative balances affect the sense of the situation? Whether it's the memory of a situation or a situation in the present life.

Then there's also the possibility here: can I sense into the imaginal figure's perspective, their feelings, their evaluation of things? So it might be the imaginal figure's evaluation of me. The imaginal figure's evaluation of my stuff, or even my old stuff, the place where I trip up, the place where I get caught again. How do they see it? What's their perspective on it? On my stuff, my difficulties, my mistakes. I feel like if I'm doing it from there, I feel like I did make a mistake there. Can I get a sense of the imaginal figure's perspectives, feelings and evaluations on me, my stuff, my difficulties, my blocks, my mistakes?

Can I get a sense of the imaginal perspectives, feelings and perspectives of the other? Can I get a sense of the imaginal figure's perspectives and feelings and evaluation of the whole situation, whether it's an obviously ethical situation or not? I think there's a lot of potential here.

Can I enter into the imaginal figure, inhabit it, see through its eyes, sense through its senses, feel through its heart? It might be a stage further of really immersing there into that. So this is more than seeing an image and seeing what it does in imaginal meditation. And it's also more than just an image of sense of me. There's a lot of possibilities here.

But an imaginal figure has an ethos and an ethical perspective. Sometimes what happens is we get blinkered or caught or blinded ethically. And sometimes an imaginal figure, because values is one of the elements of the imaginal, can shine a different light on a situation, an ethical situation, on ourselves, on an interaction, on our difficulties, on our mistakes, on all kinds of things.

So again, a very brief sketch of another kind of practice, but I think very certainly soul-making, potentially, and also helpful in all kinds of ways. One of the ways I'm thinking about is with regard to shame. Because there might be either in a situation or after a situation we feel inadequate, or our shame, our kind of habitual sense of shame locks in. So doing this kind of practice, either now live or in memory, can really open things up and actually begin to separate out what we might call a shallow kind of shame. There's nothing but dukkha there. It's not necessary. It's not serving any function other than creating dukkha and a binding for ourself—ego shame, shallow shame.

Separating that out from what we might call a kind of soul shame, or soul-level shame, which may be more authentic, may have more necessity, maybe will be more fruitful. I think I gave a talk on the Path of the Imaginal retreat called something like "The Love and the Demands of the Imaginal," deliberately putting in the title what can seem like they don't go together—the love and the demands of the imaginal. Opening up the whole notion of duty to image, duty to soul.

So there's so much here that's potentially important, potentially healing at different levels, just in terms of dissolving or blowing away the kind of shallow shame, but also opening up to maybe a level of shame that is actually in itself healing—something we don't tend to think of—a healthy shame, a healing shame that connects us more with our soul power and soulfulness and sense of duty and meaningfulness and redeems something, reconnects, recontextualizes something or contextualizes it. I think there are a lot of possibilities here.

Let's linger. Again, let's not go too fast. I do want to talk about dimensionality primarily. I just want to linger a little bit on this whole question of shame and guilt.

Very loosely, I would say shame has to do with—at least the way I would define it—a negative view of how I am. I am bad or I am worthless or whatever it is. I am. It's a painful belief and binding belief about how I am. Guilt is a view or views about what I did or what I neglected to do. And it's quite possible, of course—there's a connection here—because it's quite possible that if I'm not careful with a guilt I feel in relation to what I did and didn't do, that I felt I should or shouldn't have done, it's possible that that guilt starts congealing, mortifying, and actually like a kind of rigor mortis into a sense of shame. It becomes something more pervasive, a conclusion that I then carry around or walk around in about who I am. It's quite possible that the guilt, if we're not careful with it, can lead to a more pervasive and long-lasting shame about who I am.

Of course, it's also possible the other way around. To the degree that I have a shame and I carry around or walk around in a shame about who I am, it's more likely that I will perceive situations and conclude without much thought at all that I am guilty of doing this wrong or neglecting to do that, which would have been better.

So these are loaded subjects in our culture, shame and guilt. And a lot of us inherit, of course, as part of our inheritance around ethics and morals, quite a painful relationship with these ideas of shame and guilt coming, some would say, through certain Christian teachings or interpretations of different teachings—different Christian teachings of original sin or whatever it is. Of course, that's not the case with all people. It doesn't have to be the case for Christian teachings. But I think a lot of people do feel that way.

And so the whole area of shame and guilt is something one just can't go near—those terms or those experiences as human beings—in any way that's helpful at all, other than trying to dissolve them or dismiss them. And then a lot of people come to Buddha Dharma because it seems that Buddha Dharma doesn't talk in terms of original sin and guilt and that sort of thing. And indeed, a lot of the way it is taught now in the West is very free of such terms and such even suggestions as shame and guilt and all that.

But the Buddha did in fact talk about these kinds of things. And he talked about hiri and ottappa. Two Pali words—hiri and ottappa. And he called them the guardians of the world. Hiri and ottappa, the guardians of the world. He said when these qualities wane—hiri and ottappa wane—human society moves towards the animal realm. Humans become more like animals and human society becomes more like the animal realm.

What's he talking about? Hiri is something we could say more—I don't know if internally directed is the right word—but it's really the innate sense of shame over a moral transgression. So we really feel ashamed for doing something wrong. And it's connected with our own self-respect. It's related to a sense of our personal honor. This is in the Itivuttaka, for those of you who are interested, among other places, I think.

And then Otapa is more externally oriented—though I don't find that a completely satisfying division. It's the moral dread, sometimes translated as fear of the results of moral wrongdoing. So while Hiri is this innate sense of shame over a moral transgression, Otapa is a moral dread or fear of the results of wrongdoing, which includes fear of blame and punishment by others. The Buddha says these are really important qualities. We need to be afraid of being blamed and punished by others in our community, in our society. It's also a fear of the karmic consequences of wrongdoing, and a fear that by wrongdoing I will scupper my chances of attaining Nibbana.

Buddhaghosa gives a striking analogy. It's like having an iron rod where Hiri is the excrement smeared on one end of the rod—you wouldn't want to pick up the rod there. But Otapa is as if the other end has been placed in a fire and is red hot—you wouldn't want to pick up the rod there either. So there's Hiri, a kind of disgust or shame at picking up the rod at the defiled end, and there's Otapa, the fear of picking up the burning end and completely scorching your hand.

Shame or disgust, and moral dread or fear of the result of moral wrongdoing. The Buddha says whatever evil arises springs from a lack of Hiri and Otapa. He also says all virtuous deeds spring from the sense of Hiri and Otapa—which I find interesting, though somewhat problematic and limiting, because it leaves no room for eros. All vir-

tuous deeds spring from a sense of shame or fear? Where's the room for eros there? Still, these teachings are clearly there in the Buddha's words, and you can hear just how much he emphasized them and how strong he was in articulating their importance.

It's interesting too because nowadays in postmodern society, we put a lot of emphasis on recognizing whether something is socially or communally constructed and contingent. And it sounds, to a large degree, like some of what the Buddha is talking about here in Otapa is exactly that. This raises questions about whether that's necessarily problematic, or what it means for its ontological status—though I won't go into that now.

Going back to the Sila and Soul talks, we discussed following Hartmann the idea that there is and should be a place for healthy shame and healthy guilt. That's what Hartmann mostly talks about—healthy guilt. I wonder whether there's a way of redeeming this whole area in terms of our ethical practice, our ethical sensibility, and our approach to ethics.

After the Nuremberg trials, Nazi war criminals were named and shamed, then executed. Nowadays there's this teaching about "don't name and shame," but they were named and shamed. It may have to do with what is deemed in society at the time as outrageous enough to warrant naming and shaming. So there's maybe a place—and there is a place, as I've written about and talked about—for ending or dissolving feelings of guilt, thinking more about actions and the conditions that gave rise to actions rather than persons. The importance of that approach is clear. But maybe there's also a place for taking responsibility and cultivating a healthy sense of guilt.

I saw headlines recently about how in Dutch culture, in Holland, flight shaming is becoming more acceptable—that it's increasingly okay to suggest to someone that they're flying too much and unnecessarily, pointing out the ethical cost of that. Well, why should that not be okay? Or shaming someone for driving SUVs? These vehicles use so much more fuel and emit so much more carbon than regular cars, requiring so many more resources. They're the fastest-growing segment of the automotive industry, so much so that the industry is not reducing its overall emissions at all—it's actually increasing them because of the proliferation of SUVs sold.

I don't know. Maybe there's a place for shaming. Maybe it's a necessary thing.

In terms of flight patterns, I didn't read the full articles, but I do remember being around different groups of senior teachers and sometimes hearing them talk about flying all over to teach retreats, discussing their frequent flyer status. Sometimes when people talk about this, it almost sounds like subtle boasting, or identification with being important because one flies a lot.

Perhaps the culture and society will hopefully, in not too long a time, evolve to a point where that kind of subtle boasting or identification as being important will be about as acceptable as subtly boasting about how many slaves one owns. I've talked about this before. It's easy to say, "But I'm flying for the Dharma. Because I'm teaching Dharma, it's contributing to less suffering"—just as the slave owner would say, "Well, I'm helping the economy, aren't I?"

Sometimes this whole idea of what it's okay to shame and what it isn't is really socially determined, based on where the average or lowest bar of ethical views of right and wrong have reached in a society at any given time.

Anyway, it might be that, certainly with regard to the ideation of the imaginal—the imaginal ideas of values and virtues—there can be, as Hartman said, a sense of guilt. He said that in the sincere soul, there needs to be a sense of guilt. There needs to be a place for that, as something that's inevitable in ethical life and practice. So maybe that has its place.

Also, with regard to imaginal figures, reverence is one of the elements of the imaginal. When I was trying to find the right term, I remember looking up the word "reverence," and it's related, I think from the Latin, to the capacity to feel fear and awe in relationship to something. So maybe this too—wrapped up in the reverence, there's a place for something like hiri and otappa. Whether we're talking about imaginal ideas of values and virtues, or an imaginal figure and how we are or are not refracting that figure, there's a possibility of shame or guilt—ahiri, atappa—for not trying to approach something, a situation, an ethical choice, without having tried to approach it with sensing the soul. And then feeling hiri or otappa, some kind of shame or guilt for that, but a healthy one—one that takes us forward, that inspires us to do something differently when the next situation comes.

Remember, all this, when we're talking about soul-making and the imaginal, is in the context of the benevolence of an image. Love and loving. Love and being loved. Being loved—that's an element of the imaginal. And I would say also, when you really get into the practice of the ideational imaginal, the ideas also can love you. They will love you.

They do love you. So in the ideational imaginal, there's a sense of benevolence. We are in relationship with beings, figures, imaginal ideas that love us and place demands on us. Love and demands of the imaginal, love and demands of imaginal ideas.

That word "benevolence," again from Latin—bene vol, where vol is related to our will, to wanting. Bene, good—they want what's good for us. There's a beneficence; they want what's good for us. Benevolent—that's what it actually means.

Someone asked me a little while ago what I mean by this element of dimensionality shading into divinity. Partly in trying to open it out a bit more with words, I'd say it's pointing to a sense of benevolent mystery. So when I have a sense of an image having this dimensionality shading into divinity, I partly mean there's a sense of benevolent mystery there. Mystery, but also benevolent. And one senses that, even if only subtly and vaguely.

Dimensionality is, to me, related to the word depth. And depth—one way of understanding what that word means—is that something's deep if it's not immediately apparent or immediately obvious. So that's the mystery. There's a benevolent mystery. That's part of what mystery means: depth. Not immediately obvious. Something is not immediately obvious. It's kind of hidden from immediate, obvious view.

But the hiddenness that's part of this dimensionality shading into divinity is not menacing. It's not like something I can't make out that's kind of sinister or menacing, or where the fact that I can't sense what it is clearly is somehow ominous. So this benevolence is very much part of what we mean by dimensionality shading into divinity.

It also means, as related to having soft and elastic edges—which is another of the elements—the dimensionality and the divinity is not sharply defined or clearly delineated.

So, dimensionality—that's what I wanted to begin talking about today. And I said in the last talk, you know, ethics needs something in order to ground ethics, in order to make sense of ethics, in order to evaluate between different ethical choices, in order for the whole thing to really function without any...

Continue beautifying this talk (part 11/17). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

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[END CONTEXT]

meaning in our lives and any vitality in our lives, something needs to be sensed or granted as having a higher or deeper dimension, order, or level.

In that higher, deeper dimension or order, because of this very depth, meaningfulness, value, purpose, and sanctity—in the broadest range of that term—naturally reside there. Without that sense of granting or sensing dimensionality in something, ethics cannot really work. It simply doesn't function very well.

Scientific materialism—a way of thinking that attempts to explain everything, all phenomena and experience, the whole of the cosmos both inner and outer—tries to reduce everything to purely material things, to small material elements like billiard balls. As an approach or enterprise to explain the whole of existence and all our experience, scientific materialism implies that there isn't a reality to values. They're not grounded in anything real. There's no possibility of grounding values in anything substantial.

This creates profound difficulties. It becomes very hard in such an enterprise of scientific materialism to even justify why we should try to reduce suffering in the world. Because suffering itself is scientifically and materialistically reduced—it's just the movement of particles in the universe. What's suffering? Well, it's really a material thing, some neurological impulses. That's really what suffering is, because that's what everything is. And neurological impulses can be reduced to neurotransmitters and molecules across neurological synapses, all of which come down to molecules, down to subatomic particles. Really, suffering is just a shifting, a moving around of particles in the universe. It has no more or less worth than anything else.

So even trying to justify why we should reduce suffering and make that the basis of ethics can have no grounding. If there's no dimensionality, everything's equal—it's just matter. Everything.

The scientific method also rules out human feeling regarding anything. In the scientific method, we try to put aside my feelings, my affects, my desires and wishes. That's all second-class citizen, a distorting thing. Put that aside. So my feelings about anything, including my feelings about values and what's valuable and deeply valuable, the scientific method sidelines.

Now the scientific method may study feelings and even measure them more recently. But it still can offer no real grounding or basis for them. As a psychologist, I might decide to study human feelings and measure them through brainwave activity or questionnaires or whatever. But I still can give no real grounding or basis for them.

Scientific materialism becomes impossible as a foundation from which to root any ontology of ethics. There's nothing real to give any rooting for ethics. There's no recourse to something of value to explain why we should do this and why we shouldn't do that ethically.

Let me point out something about reductionism and dimensionality. A kind of scientific reductionism that reduces everything down to billiard ball-like particles is a reduction merely to smaller units of the same kind of stuff. It's a flattening reductionism. If I start with something that feels rich, like my sense of value, and reduce it down to billiard ball-like particles, I'm taking something that was dimensional and rich and reducing it to something very flat.

If I'm talking about matter and reduce this table down to billiard ball-like particles in my theory of it, that's also a flattening reductionism—a reductionism that doesn't introduce another dimension.

However, if my scientific reduction goes down past such basic particles, down to quantum mathematical probability functions—which exist as complex mathematical functions related to probability in a kind of multidimensional abstract mathematical space—then something different happens. I've gone past electrons. What's an electron? Actually, an electron is this: we can't point to a particle or a wave. All we can point to is this kind of abstract, multidimensional, mathematical entity existing in mathematically multidimensional space. It's not even matter anymore. We've reduced to something of a different kind, a different order. Then we have given a kind of dimensionality.

It's not a flattening, but we've actually dimensionalized matter. We've gone from something that seems obvious - even if it's just small bits of solidity - to something that we can't even really say is the same kind or order of stuff. There's a different dimension there. So that's also a reduction, but it's got dimensionalizing in it.

Still, that second kind of reduction that is dimensionalizing - where we go down to these very abstract entities, where what's really real is not the table, not even the electron or the proton, but these abstract, very complex, very sophisticated mathematical entities, mathematical functions, equations that exist in a strange, abstract, mathematically multidimensional space - that's what's real. It gives a kind of dimensionalizing, but it would still be problematic if that view attempts to "explain" - put that in quotes - things like human love and sense of meaning through that reduction. In other words, again, if it's scientistic, if it attempts a reduction of the totality of existence, of being, and so forth, it's still not flattening, but it would be very problematic. It's not capable of doing so. It's not capable of making sense that way.

So dimensionality is what I'm going to start looking at now. We've just touched on it already briefly. It's a complicated subject and difficult to even find the right language to talk about it, but one way that a sense of dimensionality has historically been ripped out of our exploration of ethics is something we can trace historically.

One of its roots actually came from the Protestant Reformation. One way that emerged from that seed, from that revolution really, ended up impoverishing the kinds of dimensionality that human beings could feel and conceive of and sense in existence - in relation to all kinds of things and also in relation to ethics. It came through the Protestant Reformation partly because one of the main things the Protestant Reformation set out to do was to abolish and reject any kind of mediation between a human being and God. This was one of its central attempts and thrusts and insistencies: to reject anything that was intermediate between the human being and God.

So no priests - no priests with any kind of higher function or who served as intermediaries in any way. No sacraments either - no holy ritual or holy object, no sanctified object, whatever it is, that could mediate or was necessary to mediate between a human being and God. There was this attempt at completely getting rid of any intermediaries: priests, sacraments, and so forth.

What that brought with it was also a kind of affirmation or elevation or emphasis on ordinary life. It wasn't just the life in the church, and certainly not the Eucharist or the Mass or the priest who was needed as an intermediary. They also - not quite the same point, but connected - kind of rejected monasticism, monks and nuns. For a slightly different reason, probably connected, but one reason given was just basically: there's nothing between you and God, and it's totally up to you and God, that relationship. All of us need to have total commitment. There's no such thing as a person having more or less commitment. You either have a full commitment, or you're damned. A monastic

was regarded as someone who had decided, "Yes, I do want to give everything to God. I do want to focus wholeheartedly on that. That is the highest thing. And my commitment is total."

In the Protestant Reformation, the view was that this just wasn't a healthy notion because all of us need to have a total commitment. So no monastics. But in a way that's silly, isn't it? It doesn't really bear out, just looking around us at humans. Clearly there are people with very different levels of motivation and commitment, even if we just talk about their music or art or poetry or whatever. We see it definitely as well in the world of Dharma and practice - there are people with very different motivations and also different levels of talent. So there's something a little bit silly with that. Anyway, that's a side point.

The principal thing I want to focus on now is this rejection of mediation: rejection of priests, of sacraments, but also a rejection of angels as intermediaries. All this came with the Protestant Reformation - rejection of angels and saints, and the Virgin Mary, anything that was an intermediary or could be seen or regarded as an intermediary between the human being and God.

There's a rejection of angels, and including therefore the role of angels as reflecting and refracting at different levels the totally inconceivable reality, nature, or being of God. We reject intermediaries, then angels get rejected, and their role of reflecting and refracting at different levels this totally inconceivable nature of God - that gets rejected as well. Also rejected is the understanding of angels as beings the human can in turn refract and mirror. That we can, as we talk about refracting the angel, reflecting, refracting the *daimon*, mirroring in our life the image - that gets rejected, thrown out as well.

Rejecting angels as beings that reflect and refract at different levels - you know, the totally inconceivable nature of God.

The transcendent, almost unknowable being-in-itself of God, and the rejection of angels as beings that humans can in turn refract, reflect, mirror, and be called by. In being called by these intermediaries, we come into more intimate relationship with and sense of the attributes of the divine. In refracting and mirroring the angels, we express and manifest in human life the attributes of the divine.

All this has to do with a hierarchy of being, a hierarchy of cosmic being: God, hierarchy of angels, human being, nature. I've touched on this before, but these Platonic ideas and forms are sometimes called—and they came to be regarded as—the attributes of God. We can think of them, as I said in the soul talks, as the ideational, imaginal.

They're related to these Platonic notions of ideas and forms and images—attributes of God and angels. Ideas, forms, ideational, imaginal, and images all can be seen and regarded as the attributes of God and angels.

So there's a dimensionality here that was scrapped, done away with, outlawed. A hierarchy of intermediaries, and that whole dimensionality that opened up with that, that was very much related to what was ultimately good, pointed and drew us towards what was good, that enabled us to refract and be drawn towards what was virtuous. It embodied virtue, connected virtue with the divine in that ultimate dimensionality, connected virtue with holiness, with that whole scale.

When we talk about images in soul-making dharma, and we talk about the ideational images, we can say that they are a dimension, as angels are in this old sense, pre-Reformation. They are a dimension, and we feel that we're refracting, reflecting something of a different level. We can also say, and we do say, they have dimensionality. Experientially, it's as if the sense of an image is as if in itself it has a dimensionality shading into divinity. So they are a dimension—their very existence tells us of a dimensionality—but they have in themselves, so to speak, or in our sense of them, they have, their being has a kind of dimensionality shading into divinity. They are and they have dimensionality.

In soul-making dharma, this dimensionality is a connection. This whole order of angels and angels as intermediaries is really something that connects. It's sometimes called a chain of being, although that phrase became mixed up and two very different ideas got confused in what that meant. But it connects with one thread these different levels of being, different dimensions.

When I pray to the angels in a supplicatory way, when I ask for help from the angels—and sometimes I do, sometimes I have a sense of the soul-making angels, the angels of soul-making—being so ill and unwell, sometimes trying to give talks and feeling in myself not able to, I will pray to the angels, my sense of the soul-making angel, the image, the imaginal sense of soul-making dharma angels.

In my sense of these angels and the supplication to them, they are not me, but they're also not not-me. They are not me, but they're not other than me. Or they are other, but there is this direct line from my being, from them to my being, that somehow includes my being. To say it another way, I participate in the angels, and they participate in me. I participate in an image, and this imaginal figure participates in me.

Historically, one of the things that happened in the Protestant Reformation—one of the seeds there—ended up having quite a devastating effect in all kinds of ways. There were a lot of really good things obviously as well, but it had quite devastating effects on how we relate to the legitimacy of the world of angels and any sense of intermediaries with divinity or a sense of dimensionality in all kinds of ways in our existence. We inherit that partly as imaginal practitioners. We inherit the history of Western theology and Western philosophy. We can't help bumping into or being buffeted by or constrained by the different elements of that history of Western thought.

Again, what happens when we don't have dimensionality is that it affects our sense of ethics. This illustrates one way it affects the sense of the imaginal, but also our sense of angels as reflecting the virtues, and the virtues being the ideas, the forms, which are the divine attributes of a God, of a divinity whose nature is actually completely transcendent and unspeakable, and beyond any attributes. When we rule out dimensionality, we actually limit what we can do with ethics.

I think human rights, which is something we've become so used to as a notion now, has its roots in Hobbes and Grotius and some others. The notion of civil rights—the roots of that are in Hobbes and Grotius—but it's not because a human being has these rights because, for example, they're made in the divine image, which would be calling on the divinity and the fact of human beings being made in the divine image to give a kind of dimensionality to justify the sanctity and the careful treating of human beings because they're made in the divine image.

When we say, "Why should human beings have rights? Because they're made in the divine image," it's giving a dimension as an explanation, as a grounding.

But the original movement and development of the idea of rights in society wasn't coming from the idea of divine image or that kind of grounding. It was coming, again, post-Reformation, as a kind of... people were trying to figure out a basis for law. So it wasn't even a question of morality and virtue, really. It was trying to ensure stable society, stable societies.

And it was devised, it came up as an idea in the times of the post-Reformation wars—enormous bloodshed and brutality in Europe at that time, and also the civil war in England, likewise very bloody and traumatic. How can we have a sort of basis for law? When people started thinking away from purely theological and soul questions and dimensions to ground ethics, to more legal ways of thinking about it, and contractual. What's the social contract? These are all ideas that were born then, post-Reformation, in attempts at a purely secular moral philosophy—in other words, one that wasn't grounded, or was only very little grounded, in recourse to the dimensionality of divinity.

This is a complete aside. I don't know if I've mentioned this in another talk. I was reading a book called—I think it's called *Epistemologies of the South*. It's a collection of academic essays by sort of post-colonial or anti-colonial thinkers. And one of them was pointing out that the whole notion of human rights was a colonial notion and a Western notion, and they were rejecting it. So it's a very surprising thing to read because we're so used to thinking—I'm so used to thinking of that as a kind of, this is really basic and important universal notion. Everyone could sign up to this. And this person was saying, no, that's something created by colonial white guys. Anyway, that's an aside.

So when there's no dimensionality, then it's very easy for ethics to slide into what really becomes just law, or this kind of trying to figure out, okay, what are people's rights? And then you get this argument between rights, which is very hard to adjudicate, but it's partly because there's the withdrawing or the ruling out of any other dimensionality. And it has consequences.

So something needs to be sensed, sensed as or granted a higher dimensionality, a deeper dimensionality. It needs to be felt to be of a different level or order. And in that other level somehow naturally reside meaningfulness, value, purpose, sanctity, etc. And without that, we run into a lot of problems in our approach to ethics, in our trying to figure out ethical philosophies or practices.

Something or other needs to be sensed or granted as being of a higher, deeper dimensionality, level, order—whatever we're going to call it. And what happens—this is partly something I read in Charles Taylor recently. He uses a very different language and is coming at the thing from a slightly different angle. But when in the language we're using, when there's no dimensionality, or when the dimensionality is kind of hidden or unconscious—or we could also say in the language I've used in the past, when the soul preferences, because what I give dimensionality to has also to do with where my sense of soul-making is.

But when the dimensionality of my soul and or my soul preferences are hidden or unconscious, it brings certain consequences to the philosophy. So we've talked about—I talked about in other talks in the past—what happens... Or rather, am I choosing a dharma? Am I choosing a notion of awakening and goal and all that? Am I choosing a dharma based on really what my soul is desiring as a way of feeling myself and the cosmos? What kind of cosmos do I want to live in? What's my fantasy of self and cosmos? And then building the dharma around that. And that not being admitted. That actually I want to see the cosmos this way and I want to see myself in relation to the cosmos this way and that's why I'm choosing this kind of version of the Dharma.

So when a dimensionality is refused or it's hidden, unconscious, what you get is a kind of—Charles Taylor says in his words—parasitic philosophies. And I'm not sure whether he said this for all or at least some of what he calls Enlightenment-derived modern positions. I don't think it's all of them, but I'm not sure if he actually says that. They're parasitic in that they're actually relying on some already established moral assumptions about right or wrong, about what should be right—what should be done or not done. But they're refusing to give a why. They're refusing, in other words, to give a dimensionality. There's no grounding in anything else.

So they're parasitic on older philosophies that already, or older notions, older currents in the society that already established these assumptions around ethics. And they just take the same assumptions. They don't change them at all. They just piggyback on them, but they withdraw the why.

They actually don't need to provide a why because there's already a current of people established in those moral assumptions about right and wrong. But also—and this is Charles Taylor pointing out—they provide no positive view, no constructive practice.

I would want to agree with this and actually elaborate on it. There's no positive view or positive framework of philosophy or practice, whether personal or governmental. You can tell when a philosophy is parasitic in this way—or even a dharma or approach—because it's characterized mostly by its polemic attack on other positions. Mostly what you hear is very little that's positive in the sense of constructing views, constructing practices, constructing coherent frameworks. Mostly what you would hear and read is polemic attack on some other view. Or if something is constructive, it's very thin soup.

I was giving you an example in some of those online seminars about trying to construct a Buddhist aesthetics just around the Buddhist notion of impermanence—where art always has to point to impermanence, whatever kind of art. And it's terribly thin as an idea or framework. Very, very thin.

Without something being granted or sensed with a dimension—a deeper dimension, a higher, deeper dimension, order, level—it's actually impossible. It's impossible to ground ethics. It's impossible to make sense of it. It's impossible to even construct and give a why we should do this and not that.

I talk in the Sila talks about Richard Rorty and how, if you read his writings carefully, he will say: "We cannot ground it. There's no such thing as another dimension. There's no higher grounding. You cannot ground ethics in anything else." But then it just slips out in the language that he uses—he's using notions of what's good or bad. But he has no way of explaining or justifying why that is, because there's no other grounding.

I don't know exactly who Charles Taylor meant, but somehow in reading I got a sense that he was referring to what I think are called the New Atheists. There's nothing there except polemic attack on other positions. In terms of what's being offered as coherent construction of frameworks—conceptual frameworks—what's being offered in terms of practice, there's either nothing there at all or very thin soup. There's no way forward offered, really.

Again, with the soul-making dharma, there's both. We've tried to really create and discover a coherent conceptual framework that has depth and range, possibility of elasticity, but also practice. So conceptual framework and practice. And when we talk about ways of looking—practice, practice. It's not just the idea of ways of looking; it's the practice.

As we said, so many of these modern philosophers completely lack any practice. They might talk, like Richard Rorty does, about being open to different views: "keep the conversation going." But they have no way—as I've said this before—no way of actually practicing different ways of looking. So it's all just empty rhetoric. And again, you find there's actually very little offered.

Richard Rorty says—okay, so he's deconstructed this and that, and it's very good, excellent deconstruction of things to a certain extent—and he says what we really need to do is "keep the conversation going." That's his ethical standpoint: keep the conversation going. One of his main ethical standpoints.

But there is no conversation. There's just nothing to discuss. There's nothing offered. I can't take on other viewpoints to really engage in a conversation, and I'm not really offering anything of myself because I have no framework, because I have no dimensionality. All this is connected.

Looking back historically—and I should note I'm not a historian—we can see different ways that ethics has been provided with dimensionality, different attempts at giving ethics a foundation that would make sense of things, offer reasons, provide orientation, help adjudicate conflicts, and give justification.

I want to briefly mention these approaches now, though we'll return to explore them more deeply in our next talk. We could separate them into four main ways, though these are neither separate nor simple. I'm not presenting them chronologically, and in fact they aren't really chronologically divided either. They overlap, with different versions and variations arising on different timelines, along with modifications and combinations.

These four ways represent different attempts at providing dimensionality—another level, order, or dimension that can support ethics.

The first is what we might call rationality. This goes back to Plato, perhaps even Pythagoras, and who knows how much further back. But I want to emphasize that "rationality" is not a simple word. If you consider four philosophers—Plato, Locke, Kant, and Hegel—for whom rationality was central to their thinking about ethics, that word meant something very different to each of them.

There are at least two main ways rationality has been conceived, though there are many others as well. These different meanings of rationality connect with the second way of giving dimensionality to ethics: cosmic order.

One ancient way of conceiving and sensing the cosmos—lasting up through the Middle Ages—was as having a hierarchical, vertical order. That hierarchy of angels I mentioned earlier would be part of this structure. There's a kind of vertical ordering from the ultimate levels of the Godhead, the mystery of the divine, all the way down to the barest matter. We can speak of things being closer to or further from the divine. This is complex, with many different variations.

Another way of thinking about cosmic order, which came later, sees it as a more horizontal structure—the co-functioning of parts, like how an ecosystem works, or a machine, or a clock. Different parts exist at essentially the same level, functioning together, moving together, perhaps feeding off each other. It's a more horizontal order.

These two ways of thinking about cosmic order correspond to two ways of using either notion of order to ground ethics. For Plato, rationality meant seeing, sensing, and knowing this vertical cosmic order, then orienting one's life in relationship to it. It becomes clear what the highest good is, and what kind of scale or stairway leads to it. To be rational means to uncover this order, to see and sense it, and to live one's life in accordance with what it naturally suggests and demands.

For someone like Locke, rationality meant something very different—something more akin to what we mean today: being logical. Hegel understood it differently still, as did Kant. We'll explore these distinctions more deeply.

The third way of dimensionalizing ethics has been called voluntarism. This essentially says something is ethical because God said so—because God declared it in the Bible, or because the Bible records that God said it. There's dimensionality here because God is, by definition, a being of a different order, a different dimension, a different level. In this view, God possesses completely free will, and what grounds ethics is simply that God willed it so.

It has nothing to do with the structure of the universe. It has nothing to do with human rationality or our logic being able to discover what the most ethical thing is. It's simply God said so. God exists at a different level, in a different dimension, and therefore ethics gains its dimensionality through God's will. This is what philosophy calls voluntarism—God said so.

A fourth approach grounds ethics in suffering, or we might turn it around and say happiness. This involves attempting to calculate or estimate how much suffering this or that action would cause in comparison with another action, how much happiness would result, and trying to ground ethics in these notions of suffering and happiness.

Do you see how each of these makes its appeal as a dimension? There is an appeal in each to something intrinsically sacred, meaningful, good, valuable, true, higher. Actually, not the last one—I'm including it for now, but the utilitarian approach isn't really a dimension, which is part of its problem. This utilitarianism—thinking that reducing suffering is the most important thing, that increasing happiness is the most important thing—we'll return to this, I hope. But at least the other three, and in some way this fourth one, tries to mask itself as if it were another dimension.

So each of them appeals to something intrinsically sacred or good, ultimately valuable, meaningful, true, higher in some way. This implies or provides a why and a basis for ethics, whether it's an ethics of wrong and right or an ethics of what is good to love, good to be.

But each of these—rationality, cosmic order, voluntarism, reduction of suffering, increase of happiness—each has problems, has run into ways that it failed in the history of our culture. There are places where it fails. Some would say they have failed historically or philosophically, but each brings problems, has problems. There are places where it's easy to find where it simply doesn't function or no longer functions, where something becomes impossible.

I think I'll stop there for today. I just wanted to mention these approaches—these are the kinds of things that have been attempted as ways of providing dimensionality, or assumed to provide dimensionality, to ethics.

An example of a problem or failure was that notion of cosmic order. After the Protestant Reformation, and even more so with the Scientific Revolution, that idea of hierarchical order and an order of angels was either theologically brought into question, and then increasingly became more and more impossible to take seriously as reality as the scientific revolution grew. So that would be an example of the crumbling and disappearing of that as a possible way of dimensionalizing or giving dimension to ethics.

But I want to return to that as a possibility, in fact, in a different way. As with each of them, we could go through each one and see how it brings different problems.

But let's stop there for today.

CHAPTER 230

The Image of Ethics (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 2h22

> *In this third part of his ethics series, Rob Burbea delves deeper into the need for dimensionality in ethical systems - the requirement for ethics to be rooted in something beyond the purely human realm. He examines four historical approaches to providing this dimensionality: voluntarism (God's commands), cosmic order (hierarchical universe), rationality as divine faculty, and simple utility (reducing suffering/increasing pleasure).*
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> *Burbea traces how the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on God's absolute sovereignty eliminated intermediaries like angels, while the scientific revolution flattened our sense of cosmic hierarchy into purely mechanical order. He argues that soul-making dharma offers a sophisticated alternative through imaginal figures that provide dimensionality while avoiding naive dualistic ontology. Drawing on Augustine's notion of 'ordered love' and exploring participatory reality, he shows how sensing with soul naturally generates ethical orientation through recognition of divinity in phenomena.*
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> *The talk challenges common Buddhist assumptions about suffering-reduction as sufficient ethical ground, arguing for more nuanced understanding of hierarchies of value and meaning. Burbea demonstrates how soul-making practice both procedurally guides ethical discernment and substantively grounds ethics in participatory encounter with the sacred dimensions of existence.*

So again, we're looking at how soul-making dharma and soul-making practice can be used as an approach to ethics. Soul-making dharma both in terms of the philosophy, the conceptual framework, and also the nuts and bolts, sensitivities, sensibilities, and capabilities amassed and developed in soul-making practice—how all that can be brought to bear on the whole question of ethics.

We outlined at the beginning of these ethics talks seven or eight kinds of needs that I felt an ethical system should have—seven or eight items on a wish list for an ethical approach. One of them was dimensionality, and we've started to talk a little bit about it. I want to spend more time talking about that today: that particular need, the need to root ethics in some other sense, some other dimension, something deeper, higher, another level of being. The need to have recourse to some sense of dimensionality or some other level to justify, explain with regard to ethical choices, with regard to ethics as a whole—why ethics, why this ethics, why that choice.

One of the things that's happened historically is that a certain kind of dimensionality was provided by what we would call images, or what we have come to call images in soul-making dharma—imaginal images. A certain kind of dimensionality given historically by angels or daemons, or whatever one may call them, as we still call them as well: imaginal figures, angels, daemons. The kind of dimensionality they provide as being intermediate between human being and the transcendent, ineffable, completely beyond of the ultimate godhead, of the divinity, of the Buddha nature, of the Dharmakaya.

And that whole dimensionality that they provide just by being intermediate. We talked about how they reflect the attributes of God, of this otherwise completely transcendent being of whom one cannot ascribe any attributes. The angels, the daemons as refracting, reflecting, radiating those attributes of God. And our possibility as human beings, our birthright as human beings to be called by angels and to learn about and get closer to the attributes of God through the angels, and also to reflect and refract those attributes of the Dharmakaya.

Remember that etymology of the Dharmakaya: a body of dharmas, a body of qualities, a body of attributes of a Buddha, of a cosmic Buddha, one could say in the Mahayana. And that we can reflect, express, manifest that through our relationship with the angels.

But come the Protestant Reformation, with its central insistence on the ruling out of any intermediaries between human and God. And then come further the scientific revolution and the rise of secularism, the steady, slow rise of secularism. We are left in a position nowadays of needing to legitimize angels, images, daemons as teachers or guides of virtue, of value, of ethics.

So we've needed to put the whole thing in a new conceptual framework that takes into account and addresses everything that has come between the Middle Ages, medieval theology and thinking, the thinking at the time of the Buddha, and what we have now in contemporary Western societies.

So I can say, I can share, when I did share about a sense of praying to the angels, that has maybe quite a different sense than it might have had taken literally hundreds of years ago, perhaps. And I can share that and I can say that sometimes I can sense that I participate in the being of those angels. I'm being very careful with the language here. Sometimes I can sense that I participate in the being of those angels, but that likewise they participate in my being.

Looking more carefully, more closely, I can sometimes sense that I participate in their thought, in the thought of these angels. I participate in their sensing, in their action, in their speech. And again, likewise, they participate in my thinking. The angels participate in my thought—sometimes I can sense that. They participate in my sensing, especially when they're sensing the soul. The angels then are participating in my sensing, and I in theirs. They participate in my action, in my speech and communication. Sometimes I can sense all that.

And the whole thing has both a sense and a concept undergirded by the Imaginal Middle Way—neither real nor not real. So neither real nor not real, but yet I can pray, and yet it is still powerful. That prayer is powerful. So the ontology here and the epistemology here is different. And we've had to shape that because of everything that's come between, partly resting on a lot of what's come between.

I want to look a little further into this whole question of this whole area or element of our wish list—this item on our need list of dimensionality. I started outlining four ways that dimensionality might have been provided in the past, and I want to pick that up again.

The point here—just to be sure—this is definitely not a history lesson, but the question is more what can we learn here? What might we learn? And learn in the best sense. I mean learn in terms of what does it imply for our way forward? What might we take from that? What might we have to modify? And as well, what might soul-making dharma offer?

to these ways, to these possibilities of dimensionalizing, of providing some recourse to some sense of dimension? What ways might soul-making dharma and that whole conceptual framework modify some of these attempts or ways of providing dimension, dimensionality? So that's really the point.

We talked about these four approaches, and one of them was what has been called voluntarism. In other words, God commanded it. So why is this thing right or wrong to do? Because God commanded it. It's there in the Bible. And this is necessarily a dimension, it should be obvious, because God, by nature—his nature in this way of thinking—is a being of a different dimension. So if God commands it, the command of God, the word of God, is automatically something coming from a different dimension. That's kind of all the grounding you need, all the sense of dimensionality. Still, be clear, there's a very clear dimensionality there.

Notice here the epistemology. God commanded it. How do you know? What's in the Bible? So the epistemological recourse—the authority about knowledge, remember what epistemology means, what knowledge can I trust—is a reliance on scripture.

Now, to some of us that sounds completely ridiculous or archaic, but it's very much there in the Buddhist tradition. If you look, there are plenty of Mahayana texts, certainly in Tibetan tradition, probably in the Indian Mahayana as well—I'm pretty sure, in fact almost certainly—there will be texts devoted just to epistemology. How do we, as I said, epistemology... we need to base our understanding of emptiness and our process with emptiness on an epistemology. Otherwise, how do you know? You had this meditation experience, something faded. If you're doing it that way, how do you know you can trust that knowledge? Or you used your logical, analytical meditation and you saw it must be empty—how do you know you can trust logic? These all need to be epistemologically grounded.

Always in these Mahayana texts on epistemology, there's one category of epistemology, one sort of category of valid knowledge, which is scripture. Which is, well, it's in a sutta. The Buddha said it. So that's always regarded that way. To some, this sounds, as I said, kind of completely archaic and a little even silly, but it's actually very, very common among most Western Buddhists—this recourse to what did the Buddha say, and finding something in a sutta, and it goes back to "the Buddha said."

I've touched on this elsewhere—it's a sensitive subject—but I just want to point out, in this voluntarism, what we're calling that, as trying to provide dimensionality, there is this epistemological basis in scripture. The Buddhist tradition has had that very strongly for hundreds and hundreds of years. It's still alive and well, certainly in Asian Buddhism, and actually very much in Western-born and Western Buddhists as well.

The ontology regarding God here is usually a kind of very simple, reified "God just is, definitely God exists." Sometimes it's a more sophisticated ontology in which God kind of exists more than anything else exists. Very occasionally, it's an extremely sophisticated ontology in the medieval—actually pre-ancient, going from Pseudo-Dionysius and Plato, in fact. Well, its roots are there. It wouldn't be... With Dionysius, you get this recourse to scripture as well, so it probably started around then—maybe Philo, actually even earlier, Philo of Alexandria. It doesn't matter anyway. The nature of God is beyond existing and not existing, and it's quite sophisticated, a sort of negative theology that's incorporated. But usually people who put a lot of emphasis on this just very simple voluntarism—God commanded it, end of story, about what's ethical and what's not—usually the ontology regarding God is very, very simple, almost startlingly, naively simplistic, usually.

But something's quite interesting about this voluntarism, because after the Middle Ages and from the start of the Protestant Reformation, something also was central in the thrust of the Protestant Reformation and what they insisted on. A lot of what they insisted on was based in a theology of God's total and totally free sovereignty. In other words, God's sovereignty, God's power was completely unimpeded by anything at all. God was free to make the universe any old way, in a completely irrational way. God could have said it's ethical to kill and lie and cheat and steal and commit adultery and not respect your parents. He could have turned the Ten Commandments completely upside down, apart from the first one or two that are actually about God. So God is completely free.

What they were reacting to here was a tradition from Platonism and even Pythagoreanism—that there's a kind of order in the universe, a rational order, so that the whole creation, if you like, of the universe had to be ordered in a certain way. It was inevitably flowing or emanating from the very nature of God, so that the universe had to be a certain way. Within that, ethics and the good life and virtue, they all had to be a certain way.

The Protestant Reformation—a lot of what they were insisting on was really based in a sort of really strident reaction to that idea. God is not impelled or constrained or trammeled to create the universe in any way at all. There's no rational order that kind of flows out. It's completely God's will, and that's a totally free will, totally free power and sovereignty. So there's no rationality in the sense of a cosmic order or rational cosmic order in the first sense that I think we touched on the other day—I'll come back to that today. There's no cosmic order that implies or underlies ethics.

It's just God's will. And that's a completely free will. There's nothing at all in any way that limits or constrains God's power. And so the whole thinking of the Protestant Reformation was thinking partly from that very germ. We have to think of God this way—William of Ockham and people like that. Nothing at all to limit God's totally free sovereignty and power.

Which also meant, as we touched on the other day, there's no place then for ceremonies to make anything holy. There's no place for ceremonies to be in part unnecessary for our salvation. There's no place for sacraments. There's no place for intermediaries, as we touched on. There's also no place for human action and human development to bring about salvation.

Salvation is something completely God-given, completely dependent on the will or the whims of a totally free God. Nothing you can do as a human being to change that. And there are no intermediaries, no sacraments, no ceremonies that can help, no development of character, no development of virtues, etc. Nothing at all to limit the sense of God's power. Everything completely dependent on God's power.

And with that, as we touched on briefly, no ceremonies, no sacraments, etc. No intermediaries, no priests. And no special human action. So no development, no dedicated intense development in a monastery or anything like that made any sense. Salvation comes only from God.

And therefore with that, as a kind of corollary, there's this elevation of ordinary life. There's no longer a better kind of life. The really good life is if you can become a monk or a nun and give yourself completely to God, or be a priest, or it's the time in church, the time of the sacrament—that's the blessed space and something else is not.

So there's this elevation then. With the wiping away of any place for ceremony, sacraments, intermediaries, human effort, human striving, human action—with the wiping away of any place for all that—then ordinary life necessarily expands. The place for ordinary life necessarily expands to fill that vacuum, if you like. So there's this elevation of ordinary life that comes with and after the Protestant Reformation.

These things don't happen overnight; they're gradual. But it was there from the start, right from the start. Luther cancelling his monastic celibacy vows and marrying, the whole Protestant work ethic—it's all tied into this.

Now the elevation of ordinary life might sound to us at first like, "Oh, that's really non-dual." Then you have a really kind of what we would in Dharma language call a non-dual approach or view, because everything becomes holy. Ordinary life becomes holy. It's very Zen almost—some schools of Zen.

But it's interesting. It might sound non-dual, but it's actually totally and radically dualistic in its theological origin. There's this infinitely powerful God, and then anything else, anything human beings can work to develop or strive to grow in themselves, is irrelevant. So it sounds non-dual, but actually it's coming from a radically dualistic theological origin.

And just to make a sort of side point: sometimes people think the Protestant Reformation was in objection to, or in reaction to, the corruption in the priesthood. But actually it wasn't primarily—that wasn't the main point. The main point was a theological point, going back to William of Ockham. It was about God's power and not wanting to limit God's power.

If we think about this idea of voluntarism today, there are people in the world who still think that way from different religious traditions. It's just right or it's just wrong because it's there in the scripture. And it's taken very simply and concretely like that. There's very little other thought about ethics or other grounding needed for ethics.

And of course, at the same time in our world today, there are billions probably of atheists. So atheism is very prevalent. Such an idea as voluntarism to ground ethics is completely not a viable, sustainable idea nowadays for many people. And as I said, when there is a voluntarism alive today, it's usually interpreted, again, through a kind of radical duality of human and God, and a kind of literalism.

And if you remember back, I must have been in the Sila and Soul talks, probably near the beginning, where I did a little exercise comparing someone who was a fundamentalist religious terrorist and their views, which on a very superficial hearing can sound like they're saying and thinking some of the similar things that soul-makers seem to say. I spent time debunking that by going and pointing out the differences there.

If you remember that—I'm not going to do it again—but if you remember that, two of the problems with that sort of fundamentalist stance and two of the differences from soul-making Dharma were exactly that: the kind of radical duality of human and God, which is not really entertained, or is very difficult to entertain within a soul-making Dharma context. I mean, you can, but even that's within a backdrop of it not being really radically dual. It's sort of temporarily entertaining something that's really hard to sustain within the bigger framework of participation and creation and discovery and dependent on ways of looking and all that. Radical duality between human and God and literalism are two of the main differences.

So I suppose this voluntarism could be reinvigorated through a soul-making dharma framework and reinvigorated imaginally with notions of duty and things like that, as there are elements of the imaginal in our imaginal. But again, you have to be really careful if one chooses to play with that, because it really needs all the elements of the imaginal—all the elements of the imaginal, neither real nor not real, which are not literalist, this participation, creation, discovery, humility. We ran through all that in those talks before on the Sila and Soul. And it really needs all the elements.

So maybe not impossible, but harder today. And certainly I would be a lot less nervous about it, as I think most people would be nervous about it perhaps, but I would be less so if it was within a soul-making Dharma framework with all the protection and the softening and the flexibility and the wisdom of the soul-making Dharma framework itself and all the elements in the imaginal.

Anyway, that's voluntarism, which we talked about. The second one we talked about—I'm taking them in a different order tonight than last night—was the cosmic order. And the cosmic order, the order of the cosmos being something that implied and guided our ethical stance, our ethical responses to life and our ethical direction and development of our ethos.

So you get this in Plato, you probably get it in Pythagoreanism—I don't know much about it—but certainly you get it in Plato. So the cosmic order itself, once we see it, we can't help but feel drawn towards the higher, using the lower elements of the order as kind of—not really rungs, but something like rungs—or they draw us up, let's put it that way, they draw us up to the higher, towards the higher.

So you get that very much in Plato and in Platonic philosophy. And then you come to someone like Augustine, St. Augustine of Hippo, and he's very much influenced by Platonic philosophy. His Christianity was a molding, his theology was a molding, really, of Platonic and Christian elements. And so he writes something—now talking about cosmic order as looking at the possibility of the notions of cosmic order providing a kind of dimensionality for ethics, providing a sense of other dimensions which can ground and inform our ethics.

So this is from Augustine from his *De Civitate Dei*. He says: "Bodily loveliness is made by God but is nevertheless temporal, carnal, and a lesser good. It is wrongly loved if it is loved above God, the eternal, inward, and lasting good. Just as the covetous man subordinates justice, the value of justice, to his love of gold"—think of someone who doesn't care about justice, he just wants to steal gold or get rich or whatever it is—"Just as the covetous man subordinates justice to his love of gold, through no fault in the gold but in himself, so it is with all things. They are all good in themselves and capable of being loved either well or badly. They are loved well when the right order is kept, loved badly when this order is upset. Hence it seems to me that the briefest and truest definition of virtue is that it is the order of love."

There are two elements there that he's stressing: an order in the cosmos in terms of a ranking of what's higher or lower. So to rank the value of justice above gold, above money, above getting rich, is appropriate valuing. Hopefully most of us would tend to agree with that. To rank gold above justice, to love, pursue getting rich above justice—common in the world—is the wrong order. We're loving things not according to their order. So order and love, cosmic order and love go together. There's an order of things and there's an order of valuing that completely corresponds to that, and our love needs to be ordered with those scales of the cosmic order of things and their value that goes with it.

So one interesting exercise would be to consider how that compares and contrasts with Hartmann's scale of values. And for example, the transgressions that Hartmann talks about—transgressions of lower values being more grievous transgressions than the omission or neglect or failure in higher values. So that if we fail to stretch or aspire to some really high value, that's not such a big sin in Hartmann's thinking than it is to transgress a lower value, like steal or kill or whatever it is.

In Augustine, in just that little paragraph of Augustine—Augustine is a little too short because then we wonder again about things like how Augustine's conception would handle the possibilities of antinomies at the same level. What do we do with that in Augustine's conception? Because there will be certain values that exist at the same level, or maybe he's suggesting there aren't. Anyway, that's an interesting kind of exercise. I'm not going to go into elaborating on that. It might be interesting for some of you to explore.

So first of all, I just want to say: how do you hear that passage from Augustine? Do you hear the kind of beauty of the ideas there, or do you hear it as some kind of Christian oppression, anti-physical, anti-body, anti-sexual, etc.? I can certainly—I didn't grow up feeling oppressed by Christianity because I didn't grow up Christian, but I can hear the beauty in it.

There's something very beautiful there, very generous almost, very lovely in what he's trying to put out there—this ordered love for things corresponding to their place in the cosmic order and hierarchy, and therefore their value.

But how different is our modern conception? Just notice how different our modern conception and sense of the cosmos is, as only ordered by its meaningless and purposeless physical laws. We have a sense, most people these days, of living in an uncaring, purposeless and meaningless universe, without divinity or dimensions other than the physical laws.

Physical laws are a kind of dimension. I said the other day that the laws describing an electron's motion under certain forces are a kind of dimension, or can be seen as another dimension. The mathematical laws that describe an electron's motion can be seen as another dimension other than the actual material thing of an electron, or a muon, or a gluon, or a pion, or whatever particle or quark. Physical laws can be discerned as another dimension. But that's all there is in terms of order and dimensionality.

So for us, citizens and children of modernity and post-modernity, the only order in the cosmos is really the physical laws. That's the only order in the cosmos. Tom Caputo, a philosopher, says science is all the metaphysics you're going to get, or you're allowed.

I think his stance is very anti-metaphysical, as was popular until very recently. And this came or grew as a consequence—it developed as a consequence of Descartes and Galileo and others and their decision regarding what is real, what are real objects of knowledge. We touched on that. So when we said this is the only thing that's real, then it becomes: well, these are the only way in which the universe is ordered.

Understand they go together. If we just decide only these kinds of things are real, these kinds of things are secondary, these kinds of things are really, really tertiary—so even color was something secondary, because it's something the human perceives. Again, it's not an objective, independently existing reality like mass or length. And this was the thinking pre-relativity, pre-quantum mechanics. They decided what was real, and then you're just left with a flat universe only ordered according to physical laws.

But Augustine wants to put love and order together—love of virtue and order together, love of things and the cosmic order together. And with respect to love, we do have strong feelings. We have strong love and strong eros in relationship with what we sense as deep, high, holy, divine, as having another dimension.

So this initial marriage and correspondence that Augustine wants to make or emphasize—re-emphasize—is between our love for everything. We can love everything. We need to love it in the right order. Our love needs to be ordered, corresponding to its intrinsic value, which corresponds itself naturally to its place in the cosmic hierarchy, in the cosmic order, the hierarchical order of the cosmos.

Actually, even if just briefly as an aside, there seems to be an order in reading the Pali Canon and the sense of the cosmos there. The word cosmos means order, by the way, from the Greek. But reading the Pali Canon, getting a sense of the cosmos, it seems a very different cosmos than most Westerners, post-Enlightenment, would consider themselves, or feel themselves, sense themselves, take themselves seriously as living in. The Pali Canon cosmos seems to have different levels of being, divinities, and it seems to be ordered by karma and rebirth and transmigration between levels. You can be reborn in the Brahma heaven level and then in this hell or the hungry ghost realm or whatever it is. So these different levels, but still, there's a hierarchical order of a kind, but the whole thing is still kind of purposeless. The cosmos itself is kind of purposeless, and not basically or overall good.

And that would be a fundamental Augustinian and Platonic notion, I think—certainly Augustinian—that the cosmos is good, and its ordering is good. In the Pali Canon cosmos, there's some kind of order, there's hierarchies, there's different levels of being,

but the whole thing is essentially purposeless and not, as I said, fundamentally or taken overall, regarded as good. "The cosmos is good. God's work is good"—it's not really there.

So we've inherited, mostly from the West—we don't really inherit Pali Canon cosmos, most people, maybe some do, but most people in the West inherit this sense of order we have in the cosmos, this absence of hierarchy. It's no wonder it's hard for most of us these days to seriously entertain Augustine's sense of the ethical life. The ethical life is one that loves all things, but loves all things in an ordered way, according to where they are in the hierarchy, where the value is, and loves, values things, and loves the value in things, in a hierarchically ordered way. It's very hard to seriously entertain that whole conception.

So if we, in our modern and post-modern predicament, are not already sort of fallen into its abyss, we sort of teeter on the brink of postmodern nihilism, both in terms of metaphysics and in terms of ethics.

Because we don't have that kind of dimensionality. So thinking about this cosmic order as a possible dimensionalizing and rooting, a kind of guidance for ethics, support for ethics.

I think that even the vaguest sensing with soul, the slightest movement into sensing with soul with regard to nature and the things of nature—even the vaguest exploration of that—can get a sense that something like mass species extinction going on right now, species extermination, almost runaway climate change, that these are sins against the order of the cosmos. That sense would be there because even the vaguest sensing with soul brings some sense of the holiness of things and the dimensionality shading into divinity.

Species extinction, climate change—these would be felt as sins against the order of the cosmos, whatever words you want to choose. There's something greater than the sin against the possible uses for humanity—if this bacteria in the Amazon or this fungus found only in such a rainforest or ecosystem gets lost to humanity, or if humanity has less pasture land and less drinking water. Even greater, perhaps, than the sin to humanity of that loss, or the suffering for animals, there is a sense of a sin against the order of the cosmos, something that goes so deep as a kind of affront and pain to the soul.

Of course, all three concerns are there—the concern for the plight of humanity, particularly the poorest and marginalized, and the concern for the suffering of animals with their extinction and the way we treat them in industrial farming. Of course they're

there. But there's something almost of a different order—this pain when we sense that we are implicated in this massive, imponderable transgression against the order of the cosmos.

We can have a sense of an ordered cosmos, ordered hierarchically in this way, and we can have that sense in sensing with soul. But in Soul-making Dharma practice, we can also deliberately move between entertaining different kinds of cosmologies—Augustine's cosmology, the flat modern and postmodern one, the Pali Canon one. The cosmopoiesis can come first. We can simply entertain a certain concept or vision of what the cosmos is and how it is ordered, then practice with it. We can move between different cosmological ideas and see what opens up, see what happens to the actual sense of things.

With enough Soul-making Dharma practice and all the sensitivity, receptivity, and meditative skill developed there, we can actually move deliberately between different cosmoses and see what they do—what they do to us, to the heart, to the soul, to the very sense of things, the very sense of matter.

Returning to Augustine's example of bodily loveliness—in certain religious traditions, bodies are not holy. He's not quite saying that; he's placing them on a hierarchy. But with Soul-making Dharma, the question is whether this body, whatever body I'm speaking of—mine, my lover's, or someone attractive to me—is sensed with eros, sensed with soul. Remember, eros means far more than sexual attraction. I'm sensing this person's body with eros. There may be no sexual attraction whatsoever, but there's eros there, in our sense of the word.

In Soul-making Dharma, the question is whether this body is sensed with soul, sensed with eros. When it is, when there is eros in our sense, and that is allowed to ignite, instigate, catalyze the soul-making dynamic in psyche and logos, then there will be a sense of divinity in and through that body.

Here we have—and this is so important—a sense of ordering, and our love being commensurate and correspondent to that hierarchical ordering in the sense of divinity. But the position of something on that hierarchy does not rest in the thing itself alone, independently, inherently, intrinsically. It comes in participation. How am I relating to it? When I relate and sense with eros, when I sense with soul, then the divinity is right there in and through that body, and therefore it takes a high place on the hierarchy. It's not the thing itself. It's what's co-created, co-discovered in sensing with soul, in the relationship with the thing.

This is really key in terms of ontology and how Soul-making Dharma can approach this question of dimensionalizing and cosmic order—to open it up or shake it up in a different way, reorder the sense of order.

Let's linger with these questions of dimensionality and ontology. Grounding our ethics in the dimensionality of a cosmic hierarchy like Augustine's usually assumes, or subsumes within it, a naive ontology—an ontology that most people today still carry of independent objective existence. Most people today don't believe in any kind of cosmic hierarchy, but there's still a naive ontology assumed within us of independent objective existence. If we're talking about cosmic order, this hierarchy has independent objective existence.

With the scientific revolution and then the Western Enlightenment, that whole notion seems trashed, completely trashed. How can a person believe in such a hierarchical cosmic order as Augustine describes after the scientific revolution and Western Enlightenment became embedded in the culture?

However, as we've discussed many times, today, with developments in quantum physics, with our understanding of emptiness as I would understand it, with developments in Western philosophy over the last fifty years or more—any one of those delivers or opens for us possibilities of ontologies that don't assume independent objective existence, but rather involve a more participatory ontology. We participate in creating, discovering reality.

John Wheeler, the great twentieth-century physicist at the forefront of so many developments in quantum physics, general relativity, and other areas of modern physics, spoke of a participatory universe.

This is the nature of our universe—it's participatory. And let me be really clear about what this means. It doesn't simply mean that we take part in the universe. Of course we participate in the universe just by existing and breathing. I breathe in the universe, I breathe it out. I eat it in, I excrete it out. I drink it in, I pee it out. We participate in society by expressing ourselves and voting. But that's not what Wheeler meant, and it's not what we mean here.

We're talking about something much more radical and fundamental. This subatomic particle, this so-called fundamental particle—this quark, this electron, this muon, this pion, this photon—where it is, what it is, whether it's a wave or a particle, whether it is a thing at all in any sense that we can meaningfully use the language of a real thing, how fast it goes, how much it weighs—its very beingness is dependent on the way we

look, the way it's observed. It's dependent on the observer. We participate in the creation of the most fundamental constituents of the universe. That's why we call it the participatory universe.

So there's now the possibility of different, non-naive ontologies that don't assume independent objective existence, but rather assume participatory reality. Existence is participatory in this very deep sense.

Soul-making dharma practice both leads to and involves, I would say, loving order in this way—loving what is sensed as highest or divine or whatever words we might use in the cosmic order. And it recognizes that this sense of order, this sense of divinity, this sense of what is highest or deepest, is neither objective nor subjective. We've gone beyond such naive polarities of ontological thinking.

So it loves order, it loves the high and the deep and the divine and the dimensionalized, but it recognizes that this order is neither objective nor subjective. Soul-making dharma also provides the training to be able to sense in that way—to sense the divinity, to actually sense it, to really have that impact on the soul, to recognize it. It provides the techniques, the practices to do that, and also to feel, to sense, to open to and handle the eros that comes with it. All of that soul-making dharma allows and supports, both in philosophy and in practice.

And it doesn't need to only transcend the object—"this is just a material object, this is just form, I want the unformed, the unfabricated." Yes, that movement and that possibility is very much part of what we're including as soul-making dharma. But it doesn't only need to do that. That's not the only place where the highest resides—in the more unfabricated. I don't only need to transcend; it's just one of the possibilities. It certainly doesn't do away with transcendence and dimensionality and just flatten the cosmos or assume the reality of a flat cosmos.

Very loosely, there's a kind of historical parallel to this with Eriugena—again, Platonically influenced, influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius. I think he was a monk, an Irish monk, and quite a radical, novel theologian. In his thought—and there's a very loose parallel here—humans are created in the image of God, which means that they can, so to speak, think God's thoughts. If we use our mind well, if we use our soul well, then the thoughts that we have will correspond to God's thoughts because we are made in God's image. And God's thoughts are the structure of the universe. This is a very Platonically influenced theology. So if we use the soul or use the mind well, the order we discover through using our soul and mind well in the universe is just the order that God created and intended. A very loose parallel.

With the sensibility of sensing with soul, what it does is open up our trust for our sense of the divinity in things, of the Buddha nature in things. And that trusting of our sense of the divinity that comes with sensing with soul automatically brings love and reverence towards that sense, towards what we sense as divine. Automatically comes ethics—a steering of the ethics, an ethical stance, and an ethical rooting in that sense of another dimension. But it's, again, neither objective nor subjective. It's participatory. There's a much more sophisticated ontology recognized here.

I remember—it must have been certainly in the last year—I was in the chemo ward getting chemo in the hospital. I was sitting next to a guy who also had pancreatic cancer, metastatic pancreatic cancer, and we talked a little bit while we were getting chemo. He was on a slightly different chemo drug than I was, but essentially the same. We both knew that we were in a process of dying. His process too was quite drawn out. And we both, of course, knew the debilitating and limiting effects of chemo on the body and on the life, really—limiting very much what's possible with the life.

But it was only in the 18th century that this affection for one's spouse and children began to be seen as something that could constitute the meaning of one's life, or be the basis of a meaningful life, or be what makes life worthwhile. Before that, it was just assumed that of course you love your spouse and children - that's natural and beautiful - but that's not what gives life meaning. Meaning came from something else, something beyond the domestic sphere.

Similarly, it was only in the modern period that romantic love began to be seen as something that could be the foundation of a meaningful existence. Before that, romantic love was certainly recognized and celebrated - think of the troubadours and courtly love traditions - but it wasn't seen as the thing that makes life worth living. It was understood to be one beautiful dimension of human experience among others, but not the ultimate source of meaning.

These shifts in what we consider to constitute a meaningful life are historically contingent. They're not universal truths about human nature or the good life. They're particular ways of seeing that have emerged in our culture at specific times. And once we recognize this historical contingency, we can begin to question whether our current assumptions about what makes life meaningful are actually serving the soul.

This connects back to what I was saying about hierarchy and ordering. In our culture, we've largely flattened the hierarchy of values. We've said that all ways of finding meaning are equally valid, all pursuits are equally worthwhile. But this flattening can

actually impoverish the soul. When we don't discriminate between different levels of meaning, different qualities of engagement with life, we can end up settling for something that doesn't actually nourish us at the deepest level.

This doesn't mean we need to go back to some pre-modern hierarchy that dismisses domestic life or romantic love as unimportant. Rather, it means we need to develop our capacity for discernment - our ability to sense into the different qualities of meaning that different activities and relationships offer, and to order our lives accordingly. We need to cultivate what we might call "vertical sensitivity" - the ability to sense when something is opening us to deeper dimensions of meaning and when something is keeping us on the surface.

There has been affection for spouses and children throughout human history—this affection was always present between family members, though not universally. But it was only beginning in the eighteenth century that such affection came to be considered truly important, truly one of the things that makes life worthy. It began to be seen as a significant constituent or qualification for a worthwhile life, a beautiful life. This shift arose from the elevation of ordinary life. But as I mentioned, we don't recognize this historical contingency. Something has become entrenched, and what has also become entrenched is this taboo against questioning what makes a worthwhile life—whether you or I are really living a worthwhile life, orienting our lives in that direction. It becomes socially taboo to suggest this, to bring it up, to question someone else in this way.

Historically, there was this long-standing idea from ancient times through the Middle Ages of a hierarchically ordered cosmos. Then with the scientific revolution and the Protestant Reformation, there was a collapse of this understanding—at least for large segments of the population who could no longer really entertain that idea. What emerged instead was an emphasis on order in the universe, but not hierarchical order as Plato and Augustine would have it.

Moral philosophers like Locke and Hutcheson also emphasized order—the order of the universe—but not hierarchical order. The order they invoked to support another dimension for ethics was a much more Cartesian order, deriving from Descartes. This was the idea of the universe as clockwork, interlocking parts designed by God to work together for the mutual preservation and flourishing of human beings. But again, I return to this question of what flourishing means—this too is very contingent on philosophy and our sense of dimensionality. All these things are tied together.

Essentially what we have here is an order that's horizontal and flat, not dimensional. There's no hierarchical order, just a flat order of the cosmos. With this comes an idea of good—of moral good, of the good life—as being only happiness or pleasant sensations. The good life and beautiful life is no longer one directed toward the highest, oriented upward on the scale, on the rungs of the cosmic order's staircase. Instead, what is good becomes only pleasant sensations and happiness.

This was claimed to result from "natural" observation of biological and physical systems—this is what human beings want, perhaps animals too. Only happiness or pleasant sensations. Jeremy Bentham, regarded as the father of utilitarianism, embodied this philosophy. He wrote that wanting anything higher than simple, natural pleasant sensations of the body and happiness—wanting anything higher is just pride or comes from superstitious fear.

Again, we see Charles Taylor's observation that many such philosophies were parasitic. When Bentham claimed that wanting anything higher in life stems from pride—thinking you're better than you are, thinking human beings are better than they are—or from superstitious fear of divine punishment, Taylor points out that this rhetoric and judgment was actually parasitic on the Protestant Reformation's well-established ethic of ordinary life. This elevation and affirmation of ordinary life had already become established versus any kind of hierarchical ethics regarding virtues and values. Bentham could make such polemic statements because they rested on this well-established ethic of ordinary life. He would say: don't try to rise above gross sense pleasures.

So there's a shift in order from vertical to horizontal, and with this horizontal view comes a flattening of ethics' goal—what we need to care for in society and what we should aim for in ourselves. Nothing high, just pleasant sensations, just simple, natural happiness.

This is quite interesting. Post-Reformation, there was often really vitriolic rejection of asceticism and high moral goals—for example, those espoused by devoted religious or spiritual practitioners. There was scathing rejection of asceticism and high moral aims. Some of this related to the elevation and affirmation of ordinary life and the dedimensionalizing of hierarchical cosmic order. But some of it, particularly from thinkers like Montaigne or Hume, came from a psychology of needing relief from high moral standards, from pushing oneself and striving to be good, striving toward high virtues.

The thrust in Montaigne and Hume was often: give me a break, don't be proud, get real about what a human being is and should strive for, about our capacities. This attitude remains very common today and can be heard in many Dharma voices as well.

And there's a kind—sometimes it goes with a kind of despising of what is lofty, a kind of despising of what is noble. I'm using the word "noble" here as in aspiring highly with the dignity of aspiring to high virtues and what's beyond reach. I'm not using noble right now in Hartman's way that we talked about in *Sila and Soul*.

So I wonder quite what's going on here. And I wonder if in fact that whole attitude reflects an anti-libidinal stance—reflects a refusal of eros. We talked about this, I'm pretty sure it was in the *Eros Unfettered* talks, but it might have been in another series. Is my philosophy, my dharma, my ethical thinking, my ethical philosophy and practice, my whole life—is it actually driven by a refusal of eros and a kind of anti-libidinality? A fear of libidinality or imposition of a limit on it? Or is it held, this whole philosophy, in a very limited range of eros and libido?

Someone who holds this kind of view doesn't like the idea of very lofty striving, doesn't like the noble, despises it in some ways. More "give myself a break, get real, don't be proud." Sometimes such a person is very friendly, relatively warm. They enjoy socializing, they enjoy a glass of good wine with a good meal. But all of that—the friendliness, the relative warmth, enjoying socializing, the wine and the good meal—that's not what we call eros.

You can have all that, and it looks like the person's living, they're enjoying company and interaction with human beings, they're warm, and they're enjoying simple pleasures of life—food, good food, good wine, whatever, in moderation. But there can still be all that, and it's held within anti-libidinality.

The striving ascetic, who may be living in solitude or seeking out solitude, who doesn't go for the good wine, who seems a little aloof maybe—the striving ascetic may have much more eros, much more libido. So I wonder, sometimes at least, is it actually this that they're objecting to, that they're shrinking from, that they're uncomfortable with—the eros and the libido that go with lofty aspirations, moral aspirations, and the elevation of that, or the striving towards what is elevated? Is it actually an objection to, a recoiling from, a fear of the eros and the libido—a refusal of that that's driving things?

So that's to me a really important question. Again, what's the psychology, what's the soul-style that underlies, in this case, the ethical style? The picture of the dharma, the range of the dharma, the vision of awakening.

We talked about this before—something particular about anti-libidinal stances, anti-libidinal positions of soul, imprisonments of soul. Because if the soul loves soul-making, if that's a sort of axiomatic principle—the soul loves soul-making—it must love eros and

be okay with eros in order to let the soul-making, in order for soul-making to happen, because soul-making needs eros. So an anti-libidinality is kind of a locking of the soul, preventing it or limiting the range of its soul-making, and therefore limiting the range of what it can sense, what it can view, how it can conceive, and how it conceives whatever—ethics, dharma, human existence, etc.

So that's one thing I'm wondering about. But also, the second thing, very importantly as well, is that with a soul-making dharma approach to ethics, then there isn't an insistence on an absolute material standard or demand regarding ethics and virtues. It's rather only a kind of—soul-making dharma really only gives us a kind of request or invitation to a process, to a practice, to a training in approaching questions of ethics and ethical situations.

And that training, I would say, is not more difficult than either Montaigne's or Hume's trainings in philosophy, in literature, in introspection. Some people regard both of them, or one of them, as great introspectionists, masters of the art of introspection. So it's not that ethics imposes an absolute material standard or demand. It's an invitation to a process, a practice that brings a different relationship with the things of the world and different ethical interactions, virtues, etc.

But you can get a sense with all this of how there is perhaps a suppression, or at least the absence, the disallowing of eros and love—maybe the total suppression, or the partial suppressing of eros and love in relation to ethics, in relation to values and virtues.

If we think about Francis Bacon—he was, I think, a Puritan, certainly very influenced by Puritanism. And he's one of the philosophers who was really emphatic—we can see historically, he really emphasized this sort of instrumental stance. Science, knowledge needs to give us power—power over nature, power to do, power to make things work, technology.

And it's just worth pointing out that originally there was a real religious reasoning and motivation behind this instrumental stance. As I said, he was a Puritan, or certainly very influenced by that Puritan outlook. So science is, in this view, the correct and God-willed view and use of things, and also because it brings human dignity of having rational control—that rational control over things and in relation to things gives a human being dignity. But it's also the correct and God-willed view and use of the things of the world for our preservation and for our pleasure and happiness.

So the instrumental stance was seen as, initially, still religiously rooted. The instrumental stance—meaning how we approach the things of the world, how can we use them, make them part of our technology, technologize them—the instrumental stance

originally was part of the way we serve God in creation, by preserving ourselves and by preserving God's horizontal order. And there's also the injunction there to treat things as instruments, not as ends in themselves.

So you can hear the kind of puritanical tenor of that. I want to briefly read something from Charles Taylor writing about this instrumental stance in modern culture:

"The instrumental stance in modern culture is supported not just by the new science, the scientific revolution, not just by the dignity attaching to disengaged rational control. It was also central to the ethic of ordinary life from its theological origins on. Affirming ordinary life has meant valuing the efficacious control of things by which it is preserved and enhanced, as well as valuing the detachment from purely personal enjoyments, which would blunt our dedication to its general flourishing."

As I'll explain, as time went by, the theological origins got forgotten and the whole theology got jettisoned from all this. But initially, this was the religious, puritanically influenced passage of the idea of the instrumental stance in relationship to the horizontal order that God designed.

But then what happens when the vertical order is abolished and a horizontal order takes primary place in the cosmology, in our view of things? That horizontal order is no longer an order of divine signs, of divine forms and ideas. Rather, we're talking about an order where things become parts of a machine. It's not that this thing or that event or that person is a refraction of an angel, a sign, a theophany of an angel, an expression or manifestation of an attribute of God. That's all gone.

Rather, things become not diaphanous reflections and refractions of particular aspects of divinity, particular attributes of the Dharmakaya, the Buddha nature of the divine. Instead, they become parts of a machine whose parts work together to bring about God's plan. It's quite a different view.

This cosmic order is just one dimension—what we might call horizontal. It's a clockwork kind of ecosystem view. An ecosystem is still horizontal in the way most people think about it these days. It might have the top of the food chain as this animal or that, but there's no difference of dimensionality between the bottom and the top of the food chain. There's only a qualitative difference in terms of who eats whom and how much. So the whole thing's actually horizontal, the way we think about interconnectedness and ecosystems these days.

The cosmic order becomes this one-dimensional, horizontal kind of clockwork machine. If that's the view, then something like species extinction is not really a problem unless it affects the functioning of the ecosystem, unless it affects the functioning of the

whole, unless the function of the whole is impaired, unless the working of the clock is affected in a way that is problematic enough for us as humans—because of our investment and our dependence—or is problematic for large other parts of the mechanism. In other words, the whole mechanism itself might be impaired.

The reverence there for order is not reverence in a soul or religious sense. It's a kind of marveling, perhaps, at the intricacy of the web of life, the horizontal order of the cosmos—whether that's regarded as being designed by God or just evolved purely materially without God. It's not reverence in the way we would use that term. It's the whole mechanism's functioning that is important, rather than each of the individual elements being holy just because they are, just because they're connected to the divine through their places in the order as they would be in a hierarchical cosmic order.

Each thing a sign, a theophany, a showing of one or other of the attributes of God. Each expressing an attribute, an aspect, a quality of the Buddha nature, of the Dharmakaya, of what in Platonic terms are the intelligences, the thoughts of God. Each thing a sign, a form, a refraction, an expression of that.

Think about species extinction and a horizontal view of the cosmos. It only matters if it affects us—when we lose that species like the bees, people often say, "Oh, if the bees go then the pollination will go and we'll go hungry." But isn't there something else about our care for the bees and the plight of the bees as a species—something of a sense of their necessity, their beauty, and that beauty has a dimensionality and depth, as we talked about before when we discussed beauty in other talks and series?

In a hierarchically ordered cosmos, each thing has its value, has its place, and it is a refraction of God, of the divine. But in a horizontal cosmos, we can lose this species, that species, and that whole thing, as long as it doesn't affect the whole ecosystem or us.

Note also how totally anthropocentric was the view and concern of those who promulgated this horizontalizing of the cosmic order when it first emerged and its relation with ethics. Adam Smith, John Locke, Jeremy Bentham—this idea of everyone's happiness being prioritized. But who's the everyone? It's very anthropocentric. Actually, it was even more circumscribed than that, I would say.

So there's voluntarism, there's the notion of cosmic order in different ways that can give dimensionality, underpinning to ethics. We talked about how soul-making dharma might come in and modify, support different versions of that. Rationality was another one we mentioned—rationality as a kind of dimensionality.

For someone like Kant, Immanuel Kant, rationality—which was very much connected, for him, with morality and our freedom—were just facets of the same thing. To be rational was more important than to be happy and to have pleasure. Right there, you sense he's establishing a dimensionality. Dimensionality and rationality. Rationality is more important than being happy or having pleasurable feelings. So rationality as an attempt, a way of providing dimensionality for ethics.

And an ability to... Again, what are we going to root our ethics in? What are we going to have recourse to? What is it going to be supported by? It needs to be made sense of in another dimension, by its relationship with another dimension, by the implications streaming from another dimension. And so one of them could be simply rationality, as it was for Kant.

Now, rationality in the usual way that we would understand it is just our ability to think clearly, our ability to make conclusions, deductions, and so forth—our ability to be logical. That as an underpinning of ethics, as a dimensionality of ethics, that human, well, presumably human, merely human capacity to do that.

But rationality as we conceive it in that way is actually a kind of skill. Unless we're just following a rule that's devised or discovered—a rational rule devised or discovered by someone else—then for us to be rational actually means we're relying on a skill that we have developed as human beings, something we've been taught in school and so forth.

And I think: that's interesting. If you want to make that a dimension, then comparing with soul-making practice, isn't discerning soulfulness, or discerning whether something is soul-making, whether this sense of virtue is more soul-making than that, that value is more soul-making than that, or discerning the soul-making, the soulfulness in regard to an image—isn't that also a skill?

I think most people would think, on first reaction to such a thought: "Yes, but soul-making—the skill in soul-making—is much, much harder to develop than a skill in logical thinking, in rationality." That was my first thought. But then I thought, well, maybe that's just because of what we've been taught, how we've been educated. That rationality is the norm, that we're taught from an early age... There's a great deal of emphasis in our culture placed on being able to think clearly, rationally, in that sense.

So that becomes the norm, and therefore that seems to us much... I'm not sure if this is right, but is it that it's just an educational thing? It seems much easier to use our rational intellect. In our culture, it seems much easier than learning all the subtleties and sophistications of soul-making Dharma practice. I'm not sure. It's really a question.

But it's interesting to note that John Locke was also sceptical. So he was a big promoter of human rationality, this capacity to function and use our thinking mind as a basis for ethics. He was one of the main promoters of that, but at the same time he was also sceptical of most humans' ability to be instrumentally rational regarding ethics. So he believed as well that God's law, as it was written in the Bible, as well as God's threat of eternal punishment or eternal reward in hell or heaven, was actually a help from God, a help to humans to make the right choices.

Because though he was principally promoting rationality, he was also sceptical of humans' ability to actually be rational in an instrumental way. So God, in God's mercy, seeing that, actually then put out these promises of eternal reward if you are ethical, and promises of eternal punishment if you're not, and that helped human beings make the right choices.

So that's very interesting. The point I also want to make is: here was a new idea to base ethics in the dimension of rationality, and even the instigator of that idea was saying, "I'm not sure if everyone can do this, actually. I think ideally everyone should be able to do this, but I'm actually not sure. So we have recourse to another idea."

Maybe also with a soul-making approach to ethics. It's like, yes, ideally it would be great if everyone could be taught soul-making dharma and soul-making practice and actually learn that. If the whole culture was so radically, extravagantly, wildly different that that was the case, and still have the thought: hmm, not sure, not sure that everyone would be able to do that. I don't know, it's a question.

So I think I mentioned this when we just introduced the notion of rationality as a dimension, as a possible dimension the other day. But again, drawing on Charles Taylor, he makes the distinction—I'm not sure it's his originally, but it might be—between two uses or two meanings of the word rational. There's what we might call procedural rationality and substantive rationality.

So I'll explain those briefly. Procedural is what I just referred to. It's the ability to use the mind, use the process of logic and clear rational thinking to deduce something, to decide something. There's a procedure. Rationality is a procedure, a way of using the mind—instrumental rationality.

On the other hand, substantive rationality is more what someone like Plato and people much earlier than John Locke really meant by rationality. It was really that there is an order to the cosmos, and human beings, to be rational, means to perceive that order, perceive that hierarchy, and to conform one's being, one's whole mind and soul and heart,

and eros in correspondence with that rational order of the cosmos. That's what it meant to be rational—to perceive and to order one's life rationally meant living in correspondence with this cosmic order. So that's substantive rationality.

The word rationality has meant very different things and has come to be used in diverse ways. If we say rationality as a basis or dimension for ethics, it has come to be employed in vastly different ways.

For example, Philo of Alexandria is a very significant figure because he was the first person to combine Platonic philosophies with the Jewish religion. He was actually disregarded in the evolving stream of Jewish theology, but in Christian theology, he was absolutely seminal—the first person to integrate those two traditions, the Platonic and the Hebrew scriptures. Later people would incorporate the New Testament as well.

Philo believed that the human mind, because it's akin to God, is like God's mind. Eugena picks up on this idea much later, but its origins lie partly with Philo. The human mind is akin to God because it's made in the image of the divine logos. It's interesting that in the New Testament, John's Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Logos, in the beginning was the Word." That idea of Logos actually comes from Platonic thinking and very much from Philo's influence.

This idea of human beings being made in the image of the divine Logos—which means the divine reason, the divine rationality—is rooted in the Old Testament, in Genesis, where it says that God made man in the image of God, in the image of the divine. Later, in medieval times, Maimonides interpreted this in what I think was a procedural way. In other words, we are given this rational functioning, and that's what it means to be made in the image of the divine—we can use our minds in this procedural, rational way.

With Philo, I think it probably meant something different. It meant we are made in the image of the divine logos, the divine reason, and therefore we have, to some degree, a capability to receive and discover the truth about realities beyond time and space—about what exists higher in the cosmic order: the angels, the intelligences, the levels of divinity. So Philo is using a more substantive notion of rationality there.

These are very different—procedural rationality and substantive rationality represent very different meanings of the term rationality. Yet through history, there are times when they're often used together.

When you think about Soulmaking Dharma practice as a sort of process or guide for ethics, it's primarily procedural in that language, because we're really talking about a practice or procedure, just like using our minds logically is a kind of procedure that we

can be trained in. We have some innate capacity for logical thinking, for the rational procedure, but we can be trained. Some people become extraordinarily skilled in their ability to use the rational mind in a procedural way.

So when we think about Soulmaking Dharma practice as a process or guide to ethics, as an approach to ethics, it appears primarily procedural because you're doing this practice and using it to support, discriminate, or arrive at an ethical choice.

But Soulmaking Dharma practice could also be regarded as substantive, if we borrow Charles Taylor's terms. If we entertain a logos, a conceptual framework, that eros is epistemologically significant—that it has, in John Milbank's words, ontological disclosure. We talked about this the other day, and it's really, really important.

If we entertain the idea that truth is this journey rather than a final arriving point, and that together with other navigations, eros has epistemological significance because it can open up for us the levels of truth—it's the engine for that journey. And we're understanding truth in a participatory way, as something that's create-discovered rather than just discovered.

So if we entertain a conceptual framework that involves a different view of eros and gives it an important place in our ontology and epistemology, and if we think of truth in this way as more of a journey—an infinite journey into the truth of things—and we appreciate that it's create-discovered, that we participate in that, then we might also see Soulmaking Dharma as substantive, as related to something that's true. But the whole notion of truth and how that relation comes about is developed quite differently than we might usually think.

Origen was one of the great early Christian theologians, and he wrote something like this—I'm quoting now from someone writing about Origen, a scholar called Chadwick: "The soul of man has an intuitive longing for God." Origen was insistent that he won't believe that this yearning we have, this eros we have, can have been implanted in a human being's heart and soul unless it is capable of being satisfied. An interesting point: just as each faculty of our senses is related to a specific category of objects, so our nous —which we can translate as our soul knowing—is the corollary of God.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 14/18). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

So we're set up to move into truth, and our eros is actually implanted by God, and it wouldn't be implanted as divine unless it was capable of being satisfied. So again, we can translate that into soul-making terms. Soul-making is never finally satisfied, but it gets satisfied on the journey—the infinite journey of soul-making, the infinite journey into truth.

And this, again, in what he's saying, we can have the sense, we will have the sense, as we develop soul-making practice, of our eros being divine, having its roots in the divine, being given to us by the Buddha nature, by the Dharmakaya, whatever words you like. And in the movements of soul-making, as the soul-making dynamic opens, further levels, aspects, beyonds, dimensions open. That eros is satisfied, and then it moves again. But there's something in the infinite movement that is not unsatisfying at a deep level, but profoundly satisfying.

So again, we take these ideas, and they have to be understood differently, modified through the understandings and the conceptual framework of soul-making dharma.

The procedural rationality—what Taylor calls the procedural rationality—that the Western Enlightenment assumed, along with a throwing off of superstitions and being natural in terms of just what was natural human pleasure, being natural without imposing religious dogma and ideas on top, there was an assumption that that kind of rationality and naturality would bring pleasure, happiness, and would also bring the universal good.

And obviously there's some truth to that, definitely. A lot of moral progress came from the Western Enlightenment. But this kind of faith in that kind of rationality was shaken, I think, by Freud in terms of: is it actually possible for us—for that rationality to really rule in the psyche? The psyche full of other horrors and repressions and kind of bestial uncivilized impulses and movements and realities abiding in the id. So that started to question things a little bit.

By the time World War I was finished, the First World War was finished—absolute carnage and devastation and incredible loss of life there—people started to really question whether rationality itself, or rationality alone, was enough, and whether it would just deliver pleasure, happiness and the universal good.

In the Western Enlightenment thinking it was also assumed that a disengaged rationality, that sort of stance of the scientific method, that through that a person adopting a disengaged rationality towards their existence would obviously see the bigger picture. And in seeing the bigger picture of things they would let go of their selfish interest

because they can see the bigger picture. Again, there may be some truth in that, but others said that no, the turning and tuning to nature is what allows us to see a bigger picture and let go of selfish interest.

I don't know. Maybe the bigger picture is only ever as big as the conceptual framework's big picture. Maybe what really will rule is the conceptual framework. And in the Enlightenment there was a certain conceptual framework of what the big picture of the universe was, and what human being's place in that universe was. So it's the conceptual framework that will limit what the big picture is. How big the big picture is depends on how big the big picture is in the conceptual framework, more than anything.

And then again, it's interesting: in the soul-making dharma we have this theory or idea that the soul-making dynamic, the dynamic of eros, psyche, logos, will mean that the conceptual framework, whatever conceptual framework we entertain, will—there will be a breaking of the vessels just through the expansion and the stretching that come with the soul-making dynamic, the stretching and the walls of the structures of the conceptual framework and the image and the idea of things through the expansion and deepening fertilization of psyche and logos and eros. There will be a breaking of the vessels, a stretching of the conceptual framework and maybe a breaking of the vessel of the conceptual framework, and a new conceptual framework has to be created-discovered. So that's in the soul-making dharma sort of meta-conceptual framework as well.

There were a lot of assumptions in the Western Enlightenment, some of them were borne out and some of them clearly, historically, seemed to be misplaced or only partially valid.

So, for Kant, for Immanuel Kant and others, human rationality was God-made, God-given and God-made, and was also, as I said, in the image of God. I think that's what Maimonides took that to mean. But for Kant it certainly was. And human rationality was also the same as our freedom. Our freedom was bound up with our being rational. We are moral, rational agents. That's our fundamental, true nature.

With Hegel, who came a little later, human thought and art and religious explorations and expansions of religions—human endeavor, in all that, is just an expression, a movement of expression of a larger progress or movement of what could be translated as reason, often is translated as reason. And that's a divine thing. So whether we take the Kantian view—human rationality is God-made as part of what it means to be made in the image of God—or the sort of bigger Hegelian view that human thought, human

rationality, human art, human religion are expressions of a larger movement of kind of cosmic reason, developing itself, growing, expressing itself, and that is a kind of divinity. These were prevalent and very powerful views.

But then historically what happened was rationality was held up as important and offered and assumed as a dimension for ethics, as a supporting dimension for ethics, without any reference to God. So the God bit got jettisoned, got cut off. Similarly, the notion of hierarchical order was dismissed and replaced with an interconnected horizontal order that was designed by God, and then eventually just a horizontal order without any reference to God. There's a movement through history.

So just left with rationality, meaning instrumental rationality, what Taylor calls procedural rationality—our ability to think logically. Jean-Jacques Rousseau said, "Rationality which knows no principle will not raise me above the beasts." So there's this question—this is a very important question—is rationality, is our capacity to think logically and clearly and make deductions, is rationality sufficient as a dimension for ethics? As a soil for ethics? As a dimension that actually provides recourse for ethical thinking and practice? Is rationality sufficient?

We still have to decide what are the aims of rationality, what is rationality trying to judge. So is it that we're just, for example, trying to judge, as the utilitarians would say, just increase pleasure, increase something called happiness and decrease suffering, without trying to discriminate among all the varieties of happiness and suffering and put them in some order? And why? And if we say all human beings are worthy of respect, then why are we saying that?

That has to be grounded in another dimension. Why are all human beings worthy of respect? For Kant, it was because human beings are, in their true nature, rational beings. And that rationality was God-given, created in the image of God. Rationality itself possessed an almost semi-numinous quality—something almost holy, belonging to another dimension entirely.

So we need some kind of metaphysics. I wonder—would people hold that view of rationality today? That it contains a kind of divinity or divine dimension, or even exists as a higher dimension? Is our simple ability to be logical enough grounding for ethics?

Does ethics require a more sophisticated, powerful, or convincing metaphysics? For example, why are all human beings worthy of respect? Because of the spark of divinity within them? Because of the Buddha nature they embody, carry, and express? Because they are theophanies? The question I'm wrestling with is whether rationality alone suffices as a dimension.

Today we conceive of rationality differently than Kant and Hegel did. Even Locke, who conceived it more thinly than those who came after him, still maintained another level—that of God. If we've lost all that, don't we need a more robust metaphysics to justify why all human beings are worthy of respect? Why they are equally worthy of respect? How do we ground such claims?

As I mentioned in the Soul Talks, someone like Richard Rorty attempts to eliminate dimensions entirely—they're absolutely ruled out, flatly and explicitly. There's no recourse to any other level of explanation, meaning, or dimension. But he ends up talking in circles or betraying himself, because his writing slips and reveals these very recourses. It's impossible not to rely on them.

So I wonder—is rationality sufficient? I suspect we still need some kind of metaphysics, even if it's a metaphysics of the numinosity of rationality itself. But that implies a dimensionality that perhaps suggests another dimension altogether.

Again, soulmaking provides other metaphysics, other groundings, other dimensions—but in an ontologically novel way.

We've examined voluntarism, cosmic order, and rationality. The fourth approach grounds ethics simply in reducing suffering and increasing pleasure and happiness. This sounds very Buddhist, doesn't it? While voluntarism remains active for some people, cosmic order and rationality have largely fallen away. But many Buddhists hold this principle—reducing suffering—as paramount. This guides their ethics and provides the foundation for their ethical reasoning.

Let's examine this approach. There were certain assumptions underlying it. Adam Smith, regardless of being considered the father of modern economics or capitalist economics, along with others, assumed a potential harmony of interests. If everyone simply pursues their own happiness and pleasure, society and economy will naturally structure themselves in mutually beneficial ways, because of this inherent harmony of interest between human beings.

I'm not sure everyone agrees with that assumption. There are ways it could be true, though I wonder what Karl Marx would think. And we can observe ways this clearly doesn't work—sociologically, economically, politically speaking.

But what about ethics specifically? What about antinomies—defined as precisely not a harmony of interest, but conflicts of ethical pulls, conflicts between values? These occur within individuals, between people, or among groups. And what about hierarchical comparisons?

Even more important is this complete flattening that occurs with this kind of view—a flattening of any means to evaluate, discover, or create a sense of hierarchy and hierarchical comparison between different kinds of suffering, different kinds of pleasure, different kinds of happiness.

If we say that reducing suffering is the most important thing—that this is our compass, our purpose, our highest value, and all we need to think about in terms of ethics—many Buddhists, if you push them, would indeed say something like that. And I ask: why? Why is reducing suffering the highest value? Why is that the compass, the purpose, the most important thing?

As I pointed out in the last talk and previously in the Sīla and Soul talks, it depends on the view of suffering, which depends on ontologies and all kinds of things. For example, if I'm a staunch materialist, then actually it's hard for me to justify this idea that reducing suffering is important, because really what suffering is, is just a kind of movement—it has no reality in itself. It's just the movement of particles in the universe, just like anything else. So again, reducing suffering, making that the highest value, or increasing pleasure, increasing happiness—I have to base that in something else, in another level of ontology, another dimension. I have to justify it somehow.

It also doesn't really help. Reducing suffering seems simple—okay, that's really simple. That's my compass in life. That's what I do as a Buddhist, perhaps. That's how I decide things. But it often won't help very much at all in deciding what to do in a situation. If I do this, this much suffering will follow. If I do that, that much suffering will follow. But actually we need an infinite kind of arithmetic. Who the hell is going to know the full consequences as they play out in the web of existence? This affects that, and that condition affects that condition. And this incoming condition affects how that condition progresses or not, or what it affects. There's an infinite arithmetic required to discern which action in many, many cases.

And I think even more importantly, what about this question of hierarchy of suffering? There's certainly this infinite calculation that's needed that's kind of impossible. But what about this hierarchy of suffering? We still need to acknowledge a hierarchy. Even if it's just individually determined—this person's hierarchy—this suffering feels worse to bear, this suffering has not so much impact as that kind of suffering. Even if it's individually determined, we still need to acknowledge that there is a hierarchy, and somehow have a way of sorting through the various kinds of suffering.

What about the sufferings of meaninglessness? What about the suffering of a lack of soulfulness in life, of soullessness? What about the suffering of having a sense that I'm not really doing my duty—I have no idea what my duty is, or I do know what it is and

I'm just not doing it? How does that measure up in the hierarchy with physical pain and suffering, or with dying early and having a relatively short life, or not being able to go on holiday? How do we demarcate, delineate, measure? There is hierarchy, even if it's personal.

So I think with this one, we really need to think a little harder if that's what we say —"It's just about reducing suffering." Jeremy Bentham, who promoted utilitarianism, held this idea: it's just about maximizing happiness, pleasure, minimizing unpleasantness. That kind of idea—and it can be certain interpretations of Buddhadharma—is just about reducing suffering. It's just very, very simple like that.

That's the kind of view that's held and the answer that will be given, whether it's just self-suffering or self and others in a kind of more Mahāyāna, supposedly Mahāyāna kind of view. So the interpretations of what reducing suffering means and what the motivations are involved in reducing suffering—reducing the unpleasant—this is what human beings want: just reduce the unpleasant vedanā, reduce suffering, increase the pleasant vedanā.

This reflects a kind of small, flat psychology. It won't do—it's too impoverished. And the idea that we can somehow successfully compute massive totals of suffering from one choice versus another choice—this sort of vast, impossible project of one-dimensional arithmetic—simply doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

With the Western Enlightenment, there was a very strong current of "utility only"—the notion that people naturally desire pleasant pleasure and happiness and the absence of pain. Any conception of the cosmic order of things becomes completely irrelevant; only the consequences in terms of pleasure and pain matter. How can we maximize pleasure and something called happiness? How can we minimize pain and unpleasantness?

This entire philosophy, this whole ethical system, is actually an attempt at non-dimensionalizing. There's no dimensionality there. I'm not even sure I should have included it, since it's actually a form of non-dimensionalism—though I include it because many people think this way. But the very sense we have of a hierarchy of sufferings—even if it's individual, even if mine differs from yours—suggests, hints at, points toward some kind of dimensionality, some ordering of values. Utilitarianism completely ignores this, completely disregards any possible relative hierarchizing of values. When things exist in hierarchy, it's because they're rooted in, they somehow correspond to, a dimensionality. The sense of hierarchy of sufferings itself hints at, points to, suggests this deeper ordering.

You may have heard a teaching in the Buddha Dharma that's fairly common: You realize you're falling. You're falling without a parachute through space. Massive dukkha—falling! Then at some point you notice there's no ground. There's no ground. I'm just falling, but there's no ground. Therefore, there's no problem, because I'm not going to smash into something and die. So falling, but there's no ground.

This is often given as a teaching on emptiness or groundlessness, though when you examine what's actually being taught, it's more about impermanence. But either way, that doesn't matter for what I want to explore here.

What if the meaning—the highest meaning in life—was to recognize that there is no ground, so there is no problem, so there's no suffering? And perhaps, if you want, you could add helping and showing others this realization, so they too see there's no problem. That becomes the highest meaning in life: to recognize there's no ground, therefore no problem, therefore no suffering for yourself, and then to help others see there's no ground, no problem, no suffering.

How does that sit with you?

Just imagine people falling through space, initially terrified, then realizing there's no ground and explaining this to each other. Eventually, everyone is simply falling through space without any sense of problem, without dukkha. Linger with this as the highest meaning of life, moving toward this vision as the ultimate purpose. Imagine these beings falling through empty space, none troubled by it. That's the goal.

How does that sit with you?

If you feel called to defend this view of life's meaning—reducing suffering and helping others reduce their suffering—I want to say: Look closer. Just look closer. Consider this goal of realizing there's nothing to do, nowhere to go, and then no suffering. We're just falling through space, but there's no problem. We help each other see there's no problem.

With this goal of not suffering, of helping others see no suffering, I want to ask: If you look closer, if you linger with it and examine more deeply, doesn't it have some other appeal too? For example, when we're not worrying about the falling, when we simply realize we're just falling—going nowhere, nothing to do, no problem—then we sense the beauty or the radiance or the Buddha nature or the holiness, the mystery.

The appeal of "less suffering and help others suffer less" has something hiding behind it, something that's not being articulated, something hidden.

So you might have to stay with that a little longer.

But this is one of the central contentions, insistencies, explorations, theses of soul-making Dharma. There's something often unexpressed, unarticulated, hiding behind the view we have, the conceptual framework we have of Buddhadharma—for example, the way we explain it to ourselves and to others—that's not quite fully illuminated, not even fully self-honest, let's say. And soul-making Dharma tries to expose that, point out there's something hiding behind it, there's something that's not being articulated here, usually. Or at least that it needs another level. It needs something more than the ending of suffering, even if that's the ending of suffering for all beings.

So this is one of the areas where soul-making Dharma comes in and tries to open things out, give more of what might be needed, offer more of what might be needed.

Okay. So voluntarism, sense of the order of the cosmos, rationality, decreasing suffering, increasing happiness—these are some of the ideas, some of the ways the dimensionality or rooting of ethics has been offered, and the varieties of them through history. And again, I'm just using them as a framework, really, to understand something, open something up, see what soul-making Dharma and practice can offer into this question of ethical philosophy and practice and the dimensionality that's needed there—dimensionality that we need to ground and root our ethics.

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CHAPTER 231

The Image of Ethics (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h52

> *In this fourth exploration of ethics through the lens of soul-making dharma, Rob Burbea addresses the crucial question of what it means to be human and how this understanding must inform our ethical life. Drawing on the experiential foundation of imaginal practice, he invites listeners to compare their ordinary sense of humanity with the profound sense of self that emerges when sensing with soul.*
>
> *Burbea traces historical developments that have shaped our contemporary view of human nature, from the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on human depravity and total dependence on divine grace, through the secularization of ethics that divorced moral questions from religious dimensions. He examines how figures like Luther and Melanchthon created a radical separation between theology and ethics, leading to our current flattened conception of human being.*
>
> *The talk explores how soul-making dharma offers a different possibility - neither the Protestant view of total dependence on grace nor secular humanism's purely rational approach, but a participatory understanding where human eros and capacity for soul-making are themselves divine. This perspective allows for a rehabilitation of concepts like telos (the soul's calling) and magnanimity (big soul) while integrating healthy shame and guilt as soul phenomena. Burbea concludes by questioning what viable ways exist today for conceiving our humanity that support a genuine sense of blessedness and dignity.*

Let's continue our exploration, inquiry, and unpacking of what soul-making dharma and the practice of sensing the soul might bring to the whole domain of ethics—how we think about ethics, how we relate to ethics and our ethical choices, our ethical life. How can soul-making dharma really include ethics and support our notion of ethics, our idea of ethical life, perhaps in ways that it needs supporting these days?

Indeed, that's where we began with this idea that perhaps there are some needs we can identify. We listed seven or eight needs that any approach to ethics, any system of ethics, might have to incorporate somehow these days—at least that's how I would think of it. We've explored a few of these needs, and they're all completely interrelated, implying each other, involving each other.

Today I'd like to explore the need related to the sense and idea of what a human is, what a human being is, and what a human being can be. How we think about ethics and how we approach ethics must somehow impinge and affect, hopefully in a helpful way, the sense and notion of what a human being is and what a human being can be. That whole idea and sense of our humanity is very much—and should be very much—tied in with our sense of ethics, so that the two, our sense of ethics and our sense of our humanity, should imply each other, should feed each other, should support each other, should be congruent with each other.

Just to make sure that all this doesn't sound like a very abstract exercise in philosophy or worse, a history of Western society or Western philosophy, I wonder if we can really ground what we're talking about today in a real lived sense, in a real experiential feel for: "Oh yes, this is what we're talking about and this matters."

Perhaps most people listening to this talk have had enough experience with soul-making dharma practice that they've had even just a couple of images that have really touched them deeply. The whole experience of the way the imaginal opened up and how pertinent it was to the particulars of their life and situation, and the sense of beyonds there, the sense of the other elements: duty and beauty and eros and loving and being loved and eternality and reverence and grace and all of that.

Most people listening, hopefully, will have had at least one or two experiences where the soul has been really impacted. In that—as we say—because when an imaginal image is allowed to do its thing, when the soul-making dynamic is not interrupted, not blocked, there is the image as an erotic imaginal object, so to speak, and then the self will also become imaginable.

So hopefully most people listening will have had that kind of experience, maybe even once or twice, where the whole imaginal constellation has begun to subsume the sense of self. The self becomes sensed with soul, imaginal, so to speak. If you can remember back to those experiences and the profundity of them, and the sense of: "Oh, wow, wow, wow, this is really another order of sense of things than I'm used to, a different order of a sense of self than I'm used to"—different even than emptiness or dissolving in jhāna or mettā or whatever it is.

If you can just get a sense of that—is it possible to remember that? You don't have to invoke it completely, but just remember a little bit about it right now.

Perhaps we can delineate a spectrum. At one end of this spectrum, you have such an experience of your humanity. Not just a sense of yourself—what I want to point to is your sense of your humanity. In that experience, when the self was brought in and in-

volved in the soul-making dynamic, when the self became imaginal and the self was sensed with soul, yes, there's a different sense of self, but with that too, there's a different sense of your humanity, your depths, who you are, your relationship with divinity or Buddha-nature and the cosmos and all of that.

So you can remember the sense of your humanity there, the sense and the logos also of your humanity there as part of the sense of self that was there when you were sensing yourself with soul. Maybe that's at one end of a spectrum.

At the other end is just the normal, perhaps, sense of humanity that we—most people—walk around with and move around with today in our culture of Western secular modernity. Just the normal sense of what the human being is, the normal feel of that, the normal idea of that. Of course we could go further—when someone's full of self-hatred, etc.—but let's just stay with that norm, that norm of Western modernity. So that norm of Western modernity, that sense of your humanity, of our humanity at one end, and at the other end, this sense of humanity when the self is sensed with soul, part of an imaginal constellation: self, other, world.

Maybe in the middle, for some, there's a continuum where, depending on what circles you move in, there may be a prevalence of new age ideas about angels and being shamans or witches and that sort of identification, and maybe even practices and rituals. Also maybe the sense of your humanity that you might have had if you take seriously the Bodhisattva vow, or if you're in a ceremony of taking the Bodhisattva vows and feeling the self as bodhisattva with that aspiration—perhaps that affected the sense of your humanity in some way, or the idea of having Buddha-nature or being Buddha-nature. There are many possibilities.

At the risk of being contentious, let's put that in the middle. What I'm pointing to is more just when there's a kind of idea of something, and maybe a kind of practice, but it hasn't really turned the soil and ignited in the way that you know soul-making practice can. So there's a kind of something, a kind of different ideation that's supported by the people around you. Maybe there are ceremonies and rituals and certain language. Maybe certain practices, maybe a change in experience, but it's not quite of the order of what we're talking about when soul-making practice really ignites and the imaginal really gets going, the authentic imaginal.

So we have this spectrum: the norms of secular modernity, this middle ground where certain ideas are doing something in the psyche—maybe certain practices, certain rituals, certain ceremonies, certain communities and languages—and then the soul-making sense of one's humanity.

Can you linger with that spectrum, either the two ends or the whole spectrum, and just compare? Compare the senses of humanity, the ideas, but also the very sense of one's humanity. This is what I'm talking about. It's not abstract.

We're really talking about something that's not just in the realm of ideas or philosophy or history. It really has to do with that, and that degree of import and impact to the human being, to you, to me.

And then I wonder, as we go through the talk tonight, if you can hold that remembered sense or those remembered senses—the remembered sense of the normal human sense of your humanity, or that contemporarily normal sense of that, and also alternating with your remembered sense of your humanity when you were profoundly touched by an imaginal practice or soul-making sense or sensing with soul.

Just lightly, in the back of your mind, in the back of the citta, as a kind of reference, or references, throughout this talk, throughout the listening. Just to really make sure, as I said, that it's anchored in a sense of the import, in a realization, a palpable realization of the import of what we're talking about. We're not talking abstractly here.

So just as much as possible, very lightly in the background, I wonder if that might help digest and assimilate and empower, really, the listening.

So this is the wish list item I want to look at today: a sense and the idea of what it is to be human and what a human being can be.

Last time we talked about dimensionality. We gave out these four ways that sort of dimensionalize ethics, or provide something or other in another dimension to secure, to found, to root, to ground the ethical thinking and the ethical justifications. There were four ways, principal ways in which that was sort of given in history, and we looked at how soul-making Dharma kind of could modify them or what it would have to say about them.

One of them was actually a non-dimensionalizing: a utilitarian, or commonly for some people a kind of Buddhist notion, just decreasing suffering. That's the most important thing. That's the primary issue and the primary purpose. Decreasing suffering or increasing pleasure or happiness. And without really spending any time differentiating between the different kinds of suffering.

When we talk about differentiating between different kinds of suffering, I'm not talking about, for instance, your child getting upset in the supermarket when they see some candy that they want and you say no, and they start crying, and they're suffering. And in your mind, it's like, "Well, they're suffering now, but I'm saving their teeth later, and

their metabolism, and possibly their brain from deteriorating into ADHD." We're not talking about that kind of comparison of suffering. We're not talking about, as I think it was Ajahn Chah who said—we're not talking about the suffering now comparing a suffering now that just ripens in more suffering compared to a suffering now that brings about or enables less suffering in the future. We're not talking about that kind of comparison.

We're talking about more things like the examples I gave the other day, or have given examples of in the past. Like why chemo was so difficult for me. Going into a certain chemo ward in a certain hospital felt very, very difficult. And I pinpointed it—it was a soul suffering more than a body suffering. Body sufferings, there were plenty of body sufferings wrapped up with chemo. But something caused a suffering in my soul that was really, really difficult to deal with, the hardest thing for me to deal with.

So then I was trying to explain—we had set up this ritual with Catherine when I was going back to chemo, just trying to find the right soul orientation to it. I had this little crucible and was cutting fingernails and bits of hair and pricking myself with bits of blood, bodily elements in there, giving them up. And the question of whether giving is a part of soulful ritual, a necessary part of soulful ritual.

But there was something—which I actually can't remember—I was thinking about my eyes and my ears and the mind and what that has to encounter in there, that that feels like a wounding to the soul. So there was something in the ritual which I just can't remember now that captured the soul suffering and the suffering for the mind, for tomorrow's mind that would go into the chemo tomorrow. This giving up, this giving of elements of my body today. There was something for the mind, I can't remember.

But anyway, what we're really talking about is different kinds of suffering. There's a way of approaching ethics that just ignores any difference between different kinds of suffering. Soul suffering, for example, versus bodily suffering. Sufferings of meaninglessness versus physical pain.

What I want to say now is that refusing to make a differentiation between different kinds of suffering, refusing any hierarchy of sufferings—that they're actually sufferings of a different level in the being—and that refusal in utilitarian ethics or ethics in some kind of, for some people, their Buddhist-based ethics that is just about reducing suffering... In utilitarian ethics, just about increasing pleasure and happiness and reducing unpleasantness, reducing suffering, reducing pain.

What I want to say is that refusal of differentiating and hierarchizing suffering corresponds with a flattening of the human being—a refusal to acknowledge and to conceive and to sense that a human being also has dimensions. And these different kinds of suffering are, if you like, wounds at different levels of, or different dimensions of the human being.

If we talk about that other potential dimensionalizing, which is an attempt to dimensionalize in what's called voluntarism—just that God said so—usually that's conceived with the human being quite flatly conceived. And it goes very much with a post-Reformation theology without intermediaries, and the human is just flatly conceived. The dimensionality comes in the radical duality and the huge distance between the human being and God. But the human being themselves, or humanity themselves, is actually quite flatly conceived, usually in that voluntarist philosophical basis for ethics.

If we take the attempt to provide dimension for ethics in the cosmic order, then the vertical cosmic order, the hierarchical cosmic order, usually always goes with a sense of the dimensionality of a human being. A human being in themselves, or is themselves, a kind of being that is characterized by having different dimensions, different levels of our being, different levels of our soul.

Whereas the horizontal cosmic order, which came to prevail and predominate historically much more over a notion of a vertical cosmic order, that horizontal cosmic order, again, unsurprisingly...

brought with it, concomitant with that, was a notion of the human being—a flat notion of a human being, much more in common with aspects of our contemporary notion of human being. Not completely, because there are other complications historically. For instance, our interiority and things that came later have a long history as well. But generally speaking, we can say there's a flattening, in the sense that I want to talk about, of the human being.

If we try to offer rationality as a possible dimension in which to ground our ethics, then it depends on the metaphysics that goes with the whole idea of rationality. For Kant, for Hegel, certainly for Plato, rationality implied dimensionality of the human. For Plato and Hegel it certainly implied a kind of dimensionality of the cosmos—in very different ways between Plato and Hegel, but they're implied in that idea of rationality.

Again, there's a correspondence of the human being to the cosmic order. And to open to the cosmic order, and then to set one's life up erotically in correspondence with that order—that's rational human behavior and rational human thinking in the largest

sense of the word for Plato. For Kant, the rationality had a kind of numinosity to it, because it was part of our essential nature, part of what God had given us, part of what it means to be made in the image of God.

But with our current dominant use of what we mean by rationality—just what's called procedural rationality—again, at first it might have been conceived as God-given, this capacity as God-given. But now, over time and through history and with increasing secularization, I'm not sure how different people view rationality and how capable it is of providing that other dimension that ethics needs. And it almost never really does. No one would ever really claim that, for example.

Say this is where a human being's dignity lies—in their rationality. Because then someone who's brain damaged or has impaired mental functioning in terms of their logical, rational capabilities... if a person was strict with the view that rationality provided that dimension, then we would treat them with much less respect, which is generally not what we do in Western courts in terms of human rights.

But the question here, again, what I want to focus on today is: what do all these different ideas and attempts at dimensionality, how do they influence our sense of what a human being is?

We looked too briefly at the history of the Protestant Reformation and their rejection of any intermediaries between humanity and God, and that meant a rejection of angels as well—angels as intermediaries. Which means, in our language, no images, no devas to refract the divine attributes.

If you think of a kind of pure, bright, intense white light, and it reaches a prism, and then it refracts into different colors, all coming out at different angles—different wavelengths, different frequencies coming out at different angles. Maybe that's one way of understanding this pure, white, undifferentiated light of God. It has all these different attributes, all these different colors and wavelengths in it, but the prism refracts them differently. The angelic world refracts them differently, so we can separate them out, so we can digest them more, see their beauty more.

So the white light is definitely beautiful, but then this rainbow of other colors—we see more the beauty of the divine, the Buddha nature, and we see it in a bigger way. We spread it out through the prism. Perhaps that's a way of thinking of what the world of the angels does, and what images do. But in the Protestant Reformation, there was this refusal of intermediaries, therefore refusal of angels, therefore refusal of a dimension that refracted the divine attributes, and a refusal then of seeing ourselves also as in

turn reflecting and refracting those divine attributes through a sort of ladder from the divine, from the Buddha nature, into the world of devas and angels, and into human being.

So this rejection had a lot of influence in history regarding what a human is—a lot of impact on the notion, the sense of what a human being is and on their relationship to God and on their relationship to the cosmic order or the cosmos.

So what is a human being? If we talk again, tying in with something like species extinction and the crime of species extinction... So yes, of course, that's a crime against the individual animals—uncountable numbers, uncountable suffering of individual animals. And yes, of course, it's a crime against the species. If we can say, can there be a crime against a species? We talked about Polly Higgins and the crime of ecocide, hopefully making it into international law. So yes, yes.

And then is species extinction a crime against animals? Yes. Is it a crime against a species? Yes. Is it a crime against the cosmic order, or even the planetary order, the order of life on Earth? Yes. But is it not—I feel it is also, or can it be regarded as—a crime against humanity too?

Species extinction is a crime against humanity too, not just because we are probably biologically dependent on many of these species and the way they work in the ecosystem. What I want to focus on more now, right now, is because of our potential soul connection with other species and with ecosystems. Ecosystem is such a cold, scientific sounding word. Let's say with forests, for example, with coral reefs, with oceans.

One way of understanding what a human being is, is that they're profoundly connected. Our soul, as a human being, is profoundly connected with other species, other ecosystems. They are theophanies that we are called to witness, to open to, to sense with soul, to know their beauty, to know their depth, to know their divinity. And that potential soul connection—because of course it's often really not realized, that potential. We don't feel these things as a crime against humanity, or not enough people do, not enough human beings do.

But maybe that very potential soul connection—that capability to sense with soul and feel species and ecosystems that way—is whatever you want to call it, deep or high, part of our humanity. It's an aspect of our soul, a dimension of our soul.

Or even consider light pollution—the fact that it's so difficult now to find a place in the northern hemisphere, in the western world, where one can truly see the stars well. To lie down on the earth at night and open up to the magnificence of the heavens, the

mystery, the sheer scale of it, the radiance, the depth of it. Is the fact that there are fewer and fewer places where one can actually see that many stars also a crime against humanity?

Or noise pollution—there are so few places outside where the dominant sound is not mostly some kind of internal combustion engine burning fossil fuels loudly, as opposed to the sound of birdsong or wind in trees. Are these too crimes against our humanity?

What does it mean to be a human being? What is a human being? What can it mean to be a human being? What should it mean to be a human being? To me, these are really important questions.

We've talked about the Protestant Reformation. I certainly don't want to vilify it, because a great deal of good came out of it, despite the difficulties—the wars and other problems, and the historical threads we're tracing that had their origins there.

Martin Luther, in instigating the Protestant Reformation, held a very pessimistic and impoverished view of the human being. So poor that the human being was totally reliant on divine grace in Luther's view, in the Protestant view. There was very little a human being could do to work toward or ensure their own salvation. There was total reliance on the free will of God to save us.

The corollary of this, which we touched on the other day, is that there's very little place for the cultivation of ethical virtue. That loses its place as anything that might move you closer to God or open up the sense of the divine for you. Any kind of extra striving on behalf of monks or nuns becomes pointless. Ethical virtue itself, the whole notion of the virtues, gets undermined. The cultivation of and aspiration to the virtues gets undermined in terms of salvation, as does any notion of ritual or sacrament or other extraordinary activity.

There's very little place, then, for the *lava*, the *eros*—for that extra reaching that souls are capable of, that *super ire*, that going beyond.

At the time of the Renaissance, you had people like Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola—they held and promoted a more exalted view of the human being. Pico wrote a very beautiful text about that. Luther was really moving in the opposite direction.

He emphasized the fall—Adam and Eve eating the apple, getting expelled from the garden. That was central to his theology. Of course, the fall and expulsion from Eden was always present in Christianity and Judaism. Even when people espoused a more exalted and exalting view of the human being, there was still always some mention of

the fall. But Martin Luther insisted on placing it very centrally, and that human nature was completely corrupted by original sin. Why? Because the flip side of that is the necessity of total dependence on redemption through God, through Christ. Salvation only comes through God. There's nothing in us that we can rely on, develop, work on.

Paraphrasing the historian Jill Kraye: humanity was therefore unable to make any contribution to one's own salvation. It's all up to God. In Protestant thought, the spiritual impotence and depravity of post-lapsarian man—that means post-fall, post-expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which is simply how we are now—the spiritual impotence and depravity of post-lapsarian man became a central doctrine.

Calvin, who was very central in this Protestant movement, believed that man's high opinion of himself had to be deflated. He had to be convinced of his own corruption and debility. For only then would man realize he was lost and helpless without divine grace.

We mentioned the other day Michel de Montaigne. Though he was a Catholic and not a Protestant, he similarly set about taking humanity down a good few rungs in one's self-assessment. Kraye writes: "Montaigne was concerned to destroy man's presumption and lower his excessive estimate of his own worth."

One of the upshots of this for ethics was very significant, because Protestantism brought much less place and regard for ethics and virtue cultivation. It's all dependent on God.

Later, I want to read you something from Melanchthon, a reformist thinker who again stressed the fall, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But he did something very interesting...

almost separated out the realm of ethics, in fact he did separate out the realm of ethics from the realm of religion, theology. This came as part of a movement of Protestant theology—a separating out. First there's no place for ethics, and then ethics comes back in, but it's separated from any connection with religion, real connection with divinity or divine aspiration.

This separation came from Melanchthon. As Jill Cray writes, ethics had nothing to do with the will of God or the remission of sins. It was exclusively concerned with rules governing external action and civil society. Conversely, theology had nothing to do with these ethical rules. You can see how this recourse to dimensionalizing ethics by placing it in relationship to divinity gets totally shattered here as they are pulled apart. Ethics has nothing to do with God, nothing to do with religious aspiration, nothing to do with salvation even.

By delineating these two different spheres of influence, Melanchthon was effectively applying Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms to ethics. Luther had this idea: there's a kingdom of Christ, and there's a secular kingdom. They coexist—not in different places or times so much as they coexist. Yes, we live in civil society, but that's not the kingdom of Christ. The kingdom of Christ can be something constituted by some members of civil society, but it exists among them and in their relationship to each other and to God.

Luther distinguished between the sacred kingdom, in which true Christians are ruled by Christ through the Holy Spirit, and the secular kingdom, in which non-Christians are ruled by political authorities through laws and coercion. Since the secular kingdom is also established by God and is necessary to preserve society, Christians must obey its authority, provided it doesn't impinge on their higher loyalty to God by interfering in matters of faith.

There's a separation saying yes, you have to follow the laws and even the coercion of the ruler of your society. But that's only to preserve society because God said that's good too. It has nothing to do with that whole realm of ethics. The whole realm of ethics has nothing to do with your relationship with God. Nothing to do with theology.

Luther had really objected to scholastic theology and the influence of Aristotle, particularly Aristotle's Ethics. He regarded it as the worst enemy of grace. You get this polarizing: if you want to totally prioritize grace, divine grace, and dependence on divine grace, then you totally dismiss any place for ethics. And if you give a central place to ethics and ethical aspiration and virtues—perhaps even a road to growing into God, to theosis, to divinification—then you're shrinking the power of God and the place for God's grace.

Luther was very anti-Aristotle and anti-Aristotelian influence in the Middle Ages and scholastic theology, because of how he saw it compromising and limiting our dependence on divine grace. Whereas Melanchthon came in and completely separated ethics and theology, then was able to reclaim a place for even the ancient pagan philosophers like Aristotle—separate from one's relationship with God.

So ethics and that kind of ethical philosophy governed the external actions of those who had not yet been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and simply helped to preserve the peace and order of civil society. This divorce of ethical from religious questions is extremely significant—the dimensionality rooting the ethical sense is lost, and only rationality steps in, in the procedural sense, in the flat sense.

In a way, the whole Western Enlightenment and secularism partly had its roots in the very Protestant Reformation. It didn't start as secular at all. It started as an attempt at increasing religiosity. But there were seed ideas there that, when they grew and their consequences were extrapolated over time, had enormous consequences both for religion in general and the religious sensibility, but also on society and on ethics.

Interestingly, Melanchthon hated Plato because with Plato there's this teaching that one can purify—there's this kind of ladder, rational order to the universe, and one's sense of the virtues and values corresponds to that ladder, a bit like Augustine. One can climb up this ladder by purifying the virtues and moving closer to God, closer to a vision of God. Melanchthon thought that was literally the invention of the devil—as if you could live by that kind of rationality alone, without Christianity and without divine grace.

But Melanchthon's sharp delineation, splitting between ethics and theology, allowed even Aristotelian moral philosophy to become reintegrated into standard Protestant education. Enormous, enormous consequences of all this played out gradually over quite a while.

This emphasis in the Protestant Reformation—the emphasis on the fall, on the expulsion from Eden, on original sin, and the rejection of mediation by priests, by any elite, rejection of the sacraments and the sacred—all meaning that salvation is completely and only dependent on divine grace. All this, in terms of what it means for humanity, wraps up in a total and radical duality of God and human. God is completely and utterly different, and that's that.

There's no ladder in between. There are no dimensions of our being. There's no possible way of moving closer. There are no intermediaries that refract and reflect and function as theophanies in the world. It's all dependent on divine grace.

So again, if we bring soul-making dharma here, we have grace as an element of the imaginal. But in soul-making dharma, in contrast to this Protestant teaching where everything is dependent on divine grace—that's all there is, you can't do anything—we have something different. In soul-making dharma, interestingly, if you reflect on this, we have grace as an element of the imaginal, this sense of inexplicable gift. I've been given this image or this sense of things, and I couldn't really engineer it. I'm not the master of it. It's an inexplicable gift from the divine.

But that element is balanced by other elements. We need to develop energy body awareness—this is something we can do. The very idea that an image is a way of looking implies that there are ways of looking we can play with. It's dependent on us. Those

two elements or nodes of the lattice. Also the autonomy, not just of the image, but of the self—that we have to assent, that we participate. In fact, the node of create-discover, the emphasis on creation and not just discovery. All of these balance the node of the element of grace.

Do you understand? Instead of the Protestant view where it's all grace, you get this much more balanced, fluid network.

And if we entertain the idea that soul-making gives us the sense that our eros—our eros—my eros right now is divine. Maybe my psyche, the image, my capacity to have images, my soul, the logos, the thoughts I have, the insights, the conceptions. Either entertaining that idea or actually having those senses and ideas arise naturally through soul-making practice—it is divine and it's from the divine.

And again, either entertaining the idea or it arising naturally from soul-making practice that our egoic and neurotic shapes are kind of impoverished echoes or impoverished reflections of divinity, of angel, of image. These ideas and these senses very much provide a counterweight to a reliance on grace, on the guru, on whatever it is, on the divine completely. It's not totally up to me either. It's not just a matter of me becoming a master of soul-making technique, imaginal technique, practice technique.

But of course, we have to point out that those ideas and those perspectives—that my eros is divine, comes from the divine, that my egoic neurotic shapes are really just slightly distorted, impoverished reflections of the divine, of the angel, of the daemon, the image—could be corrupted. They can be corrupted, they can be faked, we can be mistaken about that. Just like there were corrupt priests in the Catholic Church at the time of the Protestant Reformation, and the Protestant Reformation was pointing fingers and objecting to that.

But actually, as I think I said the other day, that wasn't the main point of the Protestant Reformation. It wasn't an attempt to weed out corrupt priests—let's have a whole overhaul while we're doing that. Actually, the fundamental idea was theological. The fundamental point was a theological revolution, reformation. And that was this emphasis on the total power of God, on not imprisoning God's total freedom and power.

Just so, in soul-making, the fundamental point is on the possibility—through disciplined practice and sensitivity—to create and discover as sacred and as divine, as rooted in divine and as divinizable, with a conception of ontic roots in divine, with lived possibilities of human being. The fundamental point of soul-making is the possibility,

through disciplined practice and the kind of sensitivity that goes with disciplined practice, to create, discover anything as sacred and divine, especially including human beings.

We're emphasizing this today because the sense of human being has, through modernity and even through humanism and secular humanism, become flattened. First it was divorced from a radically different God, as we said in the Protestant Reformation. And then, with the gradual rise of atheistic secularism through different stages—many stages including deism, as some of you probably know—it was simply flattened. Not even just divorced from God, because God became non-existent, so divorce from God made no sense. It was simply a flat view of the human being.

All this has enormous effects on how we feel, sense and think of ourselves and our humanity. And we've used several times over the past four or five years this idea of telos—to think theologically or to conceive theologically the telos of the human being. For instance, the angel out ahead calling me.

In Plato, there's a kind of idea of telos, of the human moving towards, rising towards, if you like, the world of what's called the intelligences, the world of ideas, the realm of ideas, which is talked about in the *Sila and Sol* talks, the realm of forms. In some versions of Platonism, Neo-Platonism, there's an idea of humanity in general, but in others there's also included the idea of your individual form, the ideal version of you. We talked about that on *Sila and Sol*.

And there's this—that's there in the whole metaphysic and cosmology of Platonism. And again, to be rational meant to see that, to acknowledge it, to feel it, and to be drawn naturally through seeing it and through love of it and through eros for it, towards moving towards it. So there's a certain telos, there's a certain natural movement of humanity. This is our destiny, if you like. It's another word for telos.

When Aristotle came along after Plato, he had a different idea of telos. More eventually biological, if you like, but really, there's an Aristotelian telos as well, the idea of a natural inclination or a goal of our nature.

We naturally move towards. These whole ideas—that we naturally move towards the angel, we naturally move towards God, that we're built for this, that this is the natural inclination, the natural way we will grow if we don't distort that—these ideas were decimated, severed, beginning really with William of Ockham and others.

Often this transformation is presented as a kind of argument between what's called nominalists and realists, as if it's a philosophical argument about universals and particulars. Are universals real? "Table," as opposed to "this table." This table is clearly a real thing—but "table" as a universal, is it not a real thing? It's presented these days as if all the fuss was about some kind of pretty abstract-sounding philosophical argument.

Actually, it was fundamentally a theological argument again. And again, it had to do with refusing to limit God's power, God's fiat. Fiat means "let it be"—"let there be light" in Latin—God's ability to just, through God's will, decide what happens whenever, wherever, however. So the theological idea was nothing should limit that infinite and endless possibility and power of God's fiat, the enaction of God's will.

If there's a natural telos for the human being—how human beings naturally grow if things don't block it—that's actually a limit to God's fiat. Because then their growth, their salvation, their liberation, their nirvana, whatever you want to call it, their realization, their awakening, is something that's not entirely dependent on God, if there's a human telos.

Do you hear how significant this is? It came from a theological argument about not wanting to limit God's power. And then eventually, over time, that very idea became the seed for this mechanistic universe, because it was only a kind of flat and mechanistic universe that was compatible, really fully compatible, with this sort of endless and infinite freedom of God's fiat, of God's power.

It's complex—I'm oversimplifying—because with the idea of the mechanistic universe came also the encouragement for humans to exercise their power and technology. And we talked about Locke and the instrumental stance and human control, human fear. So it's complex. But still, there was something in the seed idea that had all kinds of implications and consequences about our sense of our humanity, our sense of ourselves, our sense of our souls.

No more possible the telos of the soul, the calling of the soul. This idea of an angel out ahead, completely ruled out. There's a radical duality between God and the human soul. Can't have—in that view, this idea we have that the angel is me and it's not me, ruled out. Or that there's a spark of divinity in me, or there's a natural inclining, natural inclination, growth, natural reach to the divine. All these would be impossible views.

So again, in soul-making dharma, what we've done, or there's an attempt to do, is to rehabilitate, to redeem notions like telos, and also ethics, obviously, but again, with a different ontology and epistemology. We need a different ontology and epistemology in order to make sense of these ideas. We can't just go back to the Middle Ages or ancient

Greece. So the different ontology and epistemology, and with practice, and with the subtleties and sophistications of practice and what that opens up and the senses that that opens up in the being—with practice, with care and practice, the eros opens up the psyche and the logos, the ideation as well, the idea of things and the idea of human being.

If we just linger—so there was this pessimism, that's the right word, regarding morality and human nature that came with, or that grew with, the Protestant Reformation. And then, historically, jumping forward some hundreds of years, there was even more of this pessimism regarding morality and human nature that came with Freud. We touched on that the other day. The influence of Freud's ideas in Western culture were quite pervasive.

And then getting into the twentieth century—World War I, World War II, the Holocaust, Stalin—there has been a kind of trend of pessimism regarding morality and human nature. That's one of the trends. There's also been a pessimism, if we want to use that word, regarding the human being's capacity for ontology and epistemology and what we can hope for there.

In a way, starting with Kant—I mean, it goes way before Kant really, but he, in many ways, what he did philosophically really started to undermine, in a way that became much more popular, the belief that we could really know things as they are, or know reality, and have a kind of pure knowledge of things. And since Kant, it's grown even more with postmodernity and other thinkers and lots of things.

So again, soul-making dharma comes in, is born in that kind of crucible, in that kind of soup, in that kind of opening of historical contingency. Part of what soul-making dharma says is not that it's possible to prove absolute truths about ethics or about ontology or about epistemology, about human nature, but what is possible through soul-making dharma is that we can, in practice and in concept, conceptually, relate to these areas—ethics, ontology, epistemology—so that they are fruitful, so that they are meaning-making, and so that they make possible for us a real sense of a genuine ethical nobility and beauty, without one fixed view or truth either.

This is the way things are: neither totally objective nor subjective, but participatory.

Through soul-making dharma and practice, it becomes possible to have this sense of dimensionality—a dimensionality that's potent and trustworthy, offering a genuine sense of nobility. While the history of Buddhadharma is probably most relevant to us as practitioners, perhaps even more impactful on how we sense our existence, the cosmos, and our humanity is the history of Western theology.

With all good intentions, the secularization of ethics brought about a view that there are no dimensional or transcendent principles, values, or virtues. What's more, it established the idea that there's no possibility of knowing any such dimensions or values. This becomes almost axiomatic. Then the question becomes: How do we organize society so that each person can pursue what they want and protect their right to do that—to pursue what they want and decide what it is they want—without causing civil war or social breakdown?

Starting with good intentions, this secularization removed dimensionality and the possibility of knowing such dimensionality, or even refused to believe such dimensions exist. Ethics then gets transposed into organizing society to prevent chaos and mutual destruction. Eventually this goes so far as to become game theory approaches to society—it's not even ethics anymore.

Consider the prisoner's dilemma: If I want to get what I want, should I trust other people, knowing they want to get what they want, which probably conflicts with what I want? Should I believe them? Should I trust them? Should I team up with them? This is now how people think about society and our social predicament.

Or consider explanations of altruism like Richard Dawkins' selfish gene theory, so popular in the 1980s. In that view, what looks like altruism is actually an illusion—merely biological evolutionary strategies for survival of the gene, not even the human being. The nobility of human altruism doesn't really exist; what's really happening is the gene trying to ensure its own survival through its own selfishness. This whole evolution of thinking ends up with such ideas applied to game theory, ethics, society, and economics.

Going back to Descartes, Locke, and Kant—for them, rationality and the capacity for rationality was part of what conferred and secured human dignity. The Western Enlightenment implied: let's not put our belief in superstitions about gods; let's realize our own dignity as human beings.

As time went by, however, the notion of human beings as having intrinsic dignity, or even of most human beings acting in a dignified way most of the time, seemed to get very thin, especially moving into the twentieth century. Perhaps the idea of innate human dignity was seen to fail or seemed to be an illusion.

Can we provide, find, create, or discover another basis for human nobility, human possibility, human essence and depth, and our sense of place in the cosmos? This is very much part of what soul-making dharma and practice does—it's one possibility, one way of opening up, deepening, and rescuing the sense of human being.

But it's tricky. We need only look in the newspaper or turn on the news, and it's hard to reconcile dignity, nobility, and human possibility with what we see of depravity. This brings us back to that question of shame we touched on the other day, which I want to revisit now.

We talked about naming and shaming and how it's often looked down upon in spiritual circles—certainly in some spiritual circles, at least the ones I move in. But when we read what the Buddha has to say about hiri and ottappa, it's clear they have a social dimension. His emphasis on them very much draws on our place in society and our connection with others in the community, with hiri and ottappa very much connected to that social fabric.

And it might be, just reflecting on this a little bit more, that naming and shaming may be a part of what keeps a society or community or culture healthy and ethically healthy. When there's naming and shaming, we are clear that this is wrong and that you have done wrong. It's clear and we're making it clear for everyone to see. It's part of making the ethics clear. So it has a function, and it's also a sign that the ethics is clear, perhaps.

Conversely, our shying away from naming and shaming may be due in part to our postmodern barring of a unanimous ethical view—partly a sign of our ethical confusion and lack of basis. I don't know. Maybe in terms of society and community, naming and shaming have their place or can have a place. But again, you just have to hear or read or sometimes witness how that can move over into something that's completely horrific—a naming and shaming that has become completely abusive and run away with itself. It's tricky.

But as was implied in our wish list for ethics, there needs to be a place for shame and guilt. As the Buddha said, for hiri and ottappa, the guardians of the world, he called them. So we need a place for shame and guilt, yet to me, it needs to not be everything. It's not everything about ethics.

So I was slightly taken aback to read the Buddha said all virtuous deeds spring from hiri and ottappa—spring from shame and moral dread—all virtuous deeds, leaving no place for eros, for our eros for virtues and values, or indirectly through an imaginal figure. So I would say we need place too for love and eros, as I've said before, with respect to virtues and values and ethics. There needs to be a place for shame and guilt, but it's not everything. It doesn't take up the whole space.

Can we integrate shame and guilt into our soul-making dharma conceptual framework, into our view, as soul questions, as soul issues? See them, feel them, work with them as soul questions and soul issues. Can the whole of ethics be approached with soul first? With an idea and a conception of soul first? And the scope of that.

So is what I called the other day superficial shame—I mean, it may not feel or seem superficial at all; it may feel like it goes to the core of one's being, so deep, the shame—but from our language, is that superficial shame, because it doesn't seem, it seems deep, but actually doesn't involve soul? Is that superficial shame an impoverished reflection of a soul shame? It's an important question, because it might be, but I don't know. Probably not always. It's still important to ask.

And I think I used the phrase "healthy shame," again drawing on Hartman and others. But I didn't mean to make a distinction between healthy shame and soul shame. I'd say healthy shame is soul shame. If we really open up what we mean by soul-making dharma to include, to incorporate ethics, and if we really approach ethics in a way that soul-making dharma is really integrated into that approach, then healthy shame means soul shame. In other words, it has a sense of the dimensionality and divinity and of our duty to images, to our images. Healthy shame is soul shame.

Anytime we feel shame that is healthy, what we mean by healthy is it's a soul shame because it's got this dimensionality, divinity, and sense of duty to images. And healthy guilt is soul guilt because, again, it's got this sense of dimensionality, divinity, of eros, of duty to values and virtues as ideational images.

So sure, we can approach all this area of ethics and shame and guilt without soul-making conception, soul-making practice. But what if we actually bring it right in, really incorporate it, really embrace that whole domain with the soul-making dharma conception? And healthy shame is soul shame. It will have that sense and that feel to it. There's dimensionality and divinity here and duty that I've let down. And healthy guilt is soul guilt—dimensionality, duty, divinity, eros to these ideational images, to these ideas, values, virtues.

And again, when I said the other day, sometimes people who are a bit more engaged in psychological work and spiritual work and work on their psycho-spiritual process and a bit more conscious—what they call conscious living—there can be, of course, included in that very naturally is, to some extent, an orientation and a devotion to virtues and values. But it's limited without a person even realizing it because their whole conceptual framework doesn't involve a sense of dimensionality. It doesn't invoke, it doesn't incorporate a sense of dimensionality. Or the eros is blocked and the eros is limited.

So yeah, this is warm and kind and not arrogant, whatever else I said. But it's somehow just—it's not really on fire. It's not really full. The soul is not really stretched that way. The eros is not really ignited.

It's not really soulful. And it's because the conceptual framework that's being entertained doesn't have an integrated and central place for dimensionality. And maybe the eros is blocked or limited in some way. This prevents the ethos and prevents the whole sense of ethics from its fullness. Prevents the ethics from its fullness.

Now I don't know how that sounds. Does it sound stern or strict or judgmental or forbidding? We have these puritanical associations with even just the word and the area of ethics. So I don't know how that sounds. But what I really mean is that ethics and the ethos is prevented from its full beauty—from its full beauty, from its sense of divinity, from its unfathomability, from its mystery. Because it's not seen as integrated with soul. It's not seen as part of soul. It's not in-souled.

So this question: what is the image of ethics? What is the image of ethics that we are operating with, that we are living our life with? Something kind of necessary? It's necessary to care about ethics. It's necessary to talk about them and have a good solid basis. Something necessary but kind of boring, maybe stern, maybe punitive. Something that has to limit. It limits us by its nature. That's what ethics does. It limits what we can do and say and all the rest of it. And itself, it's kind of limited in its scope. Or it's a kind of preliminary basis—sīla, okay, taking care of that, then samādhi and paññā, for example. So is it that? What's the image of ethics?

Or is it something soulful, something beautiful, something infinite in its reaches and its callings? Something we love, something we have eros for, something soul-making.

What does the word magnanimity mean? I'm not sure. It probably means different things, and it has meant different things at different times, and maybe means different things to different people. Magnanimity. Sometimes it just means generosity. It can mean other things as well. But the etymology: magna animus—a big soul.

What supports a human being to grow into magnanimity? Big soul means more than a big heart. Big-hearted. This person, that person—oh, they've got a big heart. What does it mean to have a big soul? What might it mean to have a big soul?

I wonder whether to fully honor human life, for it to have deep dignity, for our sense of our humanity as well to be deeply honored, it must include a kind of love and eros for something that's more than my human life—certainly more than my survival, something of a different order. Again, something I'm willing even to sacrifice my life for. Again, we have that etymology of the word sacrifice: to make sacred.

To me, if there's something that I'm willing to sacrifice my pleasure, my well-being, my happiness even, my life for—my actual, the prolongation of my life—this is part of the realization of that, the sense of that, the love and commitment for that, whatever that is. But it's another dimension other than just my life. That's part of what it means to fully honor human life, I'm wondering. For life to have deep dignity.

But you know, that love and that passion—again, that love and that willingness to sacrifice—it's like when we talked about passion. It depends on what the thing is. Just to be willing to sacrifice for some cause—well, it depends what the cause is. Just to be willing to sacrifice for some sense of this or that—it depends what the this or that are, and the sense of it is.

This is related to everything we're talking about—dimensionality and the other wish list elements and other list of needs about ethics, and related to what a human being is, what a human being can be, what a human being should be.

In ancient times, they had what at some point came to be called the honor ethic. This, in a way, only applied to a certain stratum of society—warriors, perhaps knights and rulers—whose lives were oriented to, centered on, and governed by this honor ethic concerning honor and glory. The central element was a willingness to risk one's own life for the sake of honor.

Within the honor ethic, there existed a hierarchy that regarded someone living this way, bound by this kind of honor ethic, as having a life at a different level than others who were concerned only with their ordinary life and prolonging it. Hannah Arendt wrote about this and modified it, discussing the citizen ethic in modern society as a kind of parallel to the honor ethic relative to work and labor.

She and others have argued that modern culture is really defined by this turning upside down, this dismissal of the honor ethic and a kind of leveling out—a demolition of that hierarchy. So again, we see this flattening of a hierarchical view and the affirmation of ordinary life: work, production, family, spouse and children. Higher aims and strivings are criticized.

Yesterday we pointed out the historical contingency of our taken-for-granted sense of ordinary life and its importance. Before the eighteenth century, this wasn't really seen, felt, and thought of in the ways that we typically do now, ways that most people kind of agree on.

You've probably come across this sort of thing—I'm sure most people have. When looking at alternative cancer treatments, on different websites where people discuss such things, sometimes they say: "I've got cancer and how much I want to live." It's very,

very common to hear something like: "I so want to live. I want to be here. I want to survive to hear my daughter's first words, my baby daughter's first words, or see her take her first steps." There's often fear: "I'm scared that I won't be there," or grief: "It grieves me that I might not be able to be there for that."

Or her first day of school, or her graduation from college, or her marriage, or her children—my grandchildren—I won't see them. It's very common to hear this sort of thing offered as a justification, as a reason for why "I want to live longer," even though the so-called quality of life—which usually means the relative ratio of pleasant to unpleasant—is poor.

But that thing is important. That thing—seeing ordinary life, witnessing ordinary life in my family—is more important. That this was given such import, put forward as a reason to live, as something that made life worthwhile, that qualified as an orientation and a wish, that qualified as the worthy life, a kind of worthy life—this was not thought before sometime in the eighteenth century.

We have to understand: this wasn't the case that everyone secretly felt that way and saw things that way, and only until the oppression of the church was lifted could they then admit it. It wasn't that all this time they were actually feeling that way, viewing their existence that way, viewing what was most important that way, but just couldn't admit it out loud, so they hid it and kept it secret. That wasn't the case. They actually didn't think that way. People actually didn't think that way.

It didn't qualify as something of that import, as something that would qualify as the good life, the beautiful life—"This is something that makes life worthwhile. This qualifies as me living a life that's worthwhile." This view of life or existence, in terms of what was most important, what qualified as making life worthwhile—this is a historically contingent development.

It's hard for us, or for many of us, to even grasp, to even stand outside that view. It's so taken for granted. This affirmation, elevation of ordinary life has become so pervasive, so entrenched.

I'm pointing out its historical contingency, but what does the fact of its historical contingency imply? What does it actually imply? What we take it to imply actually depends on our view of history, our view of the process of history. That's another question I've gone into in other talks in recent years. But still, it's worth acknowledging this. It's worth realizing this fact of historical contingency. How we interpret it is another matter, but I think it's important to be aware of it.

As I said, at a certain point, or over time, there evolved a demolition or flattening of hierarchies—hierarchy of values, hierarchy of strivings—actually an inversion of hierarchy. It was the affirmation then of ordinary life, work, production, family life, and an inversion because higher aims and strivings were put down, were criticized. To some extent a flattening, and to some extent an inversion evolved of that original hierarchy, that original hierarchy of values.

In Francis Bacon, in a way one of the founders of the scientific revolution, science was not the higher pursuit of knowledge, the higher quest to penetrate the mysteries of the universe, of the cosmos. Science was for the sake of technological power over nature in the service of ordinary life.

So all these trends and movements and developments in history, or through history, made it less possible to have, conceive of, feel a certain way towards something higher or more important than life, than preserving one's life, than ordinary existence, work, production, family.

And again, the question I have is: what does that do to our sense and our idea of human being, of our humanity?

And again, with soul-making Dharma, what does that offer us or open out in terms of possibility for what we might sense and feel and conceive of as higher or larger or more important than, say, having a long life or surviving physically or having more pleasant than unpleasant sensations or reducing pain or whatever?

Soul-making Dharma should, if one's practicing right, go right to the heart of that question, and it should open out a sense of that. For me, very, very potently and clearly, it should. In what soul-making Dharma practice opens, that should be one of the things that it opens: the sense of something or things—or whatever you're going to call them, dimensions or directions—that are higher, larger, more important than my living a long life, than my survival, more important than my not being in pain or reducing pain or whatever.

So this question—we talk about providing different dimensions, or attempting to provide different dimensions, or not providing any dimensions—and the question today is: what is the result of any of those dimensions, or the refusal to provide dimensions? What's the result with respect to what we might call anthropology, our idea of what it means to be a human being, what we've been talking about today?

What is the result? Also, of course, for theology, for our sense of divinity or Buddha nature. What's the result for our sense of existence? The different ideas of dimensions, or the refusal of dimension, will influence and have an impact on our theologies and

sense of existence, and also on our understanding of human being. Of course, it works the other way as well. Different senses of human being, or theology, will provide or disallow certain dimensions and non-dimensions for ethics.

I haven't talked much about Aristotle in this series of talks—I've mentioned him briefly in the Sīla and Soul talks—but Aristotelian virtue ethics were, as far as I understand, grounded in a notion of the common good of the polis, the city-state. A virtue had to be something which contributed, or at least didn't take away from, the common good of the city-state. Actually, he left out slaves and other strata of that society, so it was an even smaller view. But it's curious—is the dimensionality there in lateral number, in how many people, or in service of the nation or city-state, as if that's a kind of transcendent object in itself that provides the dimensionality? Is that related to the citizen ethic that Hannah Arendt was talking about? The question is: what does this do to our sense of human being and our humanity?

If we think about the Pali Canon and Buddha-Dharma with its cosmology of karma and rebirth, the rationale for simplification gives reasons for ethics: if you act unethically, you'll get a bad rebirth and reap bad karma. If you act ethically, you'll reap good karma. Moreover, if you act ethically, the complexities of your life and the agitations and busyness of your mind will simplify. That simplification allows practice—samādhi, then paññā, then liberation. You can see how the purpose of ethics is revealing something here as well.

In this way of understanding the Pali Canon, there's a pragmatic reason for ethics, a practical reason for sīla in concern for one's karma within that cosmological notion, and also because it allows meditation, insight, and liberation. So it's practical, but there's no ontological dimensionality or grounding for the ethics there.

You get something similar in John Locke—a kind of grounding in rational, pragmatic hedonism that many people objected to. In a way, you find this in Epicureanism too: just follow the pleasure. In good, charitable interpretations of Epicureanism, it's like the Pali Canon Buddhism—following the jhānas. I'll take this pleasure over the pleasure of the senses, then the second jhāna as a better kind of pleasure than the first, and so on. One goes up the rungs of the ladder, letting go of what has come before because one has found a better pleasure, until one actually lets go completely, having reached the highest kind of pleasure. Then one lets go into the so-called pleasure of nibbāna.

So there's a kind of rational pragmatic hedonism—which people vilify John Locke for, and Epicurus for Epicureanism—that has its parallels in Pali Canon Buddhism. But the grounding is pragmatic rather than what we could call ontological. There's no sense

of the Good or this higher order that gives us our ethics through some kind of participation. We might say rebirth in a Brahmā realm is a kind of deification that becomes ontological, but that would be stretching it a little.

Again, if we take the dimensionality of rationality—rationality as a dimension—people think of this in very different ways. For some of the German idealists like Kant, our capacity for rationality might have had this quasi-numinous, quasi-holy character. It's a kind of divine faculty, or divinely given faculty. Rationality itself was almost potentially, in our words, a kind of erotic-imaginative object.

What do all these ideas do—these ideas about dimensions and non-dimensions—for our sense of human being, of humanity, of our humanity?

In Platonic ethics and cosmology, almost every level of being is refracting and reflecting somehow the Good, the divine. It's existing in an analogous way. The world is analogy; the world is sign; the world is partial expression, is refraction, reflection in a hierarchical order of the divine, of the Good, of the ultimately Good. We can approach that. We can climb that ladder. We can read the cosmos, if you like.

That reading of the cosmos, that soul resonating with the theophanies, with the signs and the forms and the refractions and reflections of the Good, the divine, allows us to draw closer to the divine. We ourselves can become analogies of our image, or our angel, or our daimon, and in that way reflect and refract the divine, grow towards the divine. So there's also this eros and inexhaustibility of this transcendent Good, this transcendent divine, where, as human beings, we're connected intimately in our being with that divinity, with that Buddha-nature, Dharmakāya. But we're also separate from it. We're separate and not separate. We're in the image and likeness.

And we are, in our very essence, analogy. My life, if I live it with soul, becomes an analogy to my angel—a reflection of my angel which reflects God, which reflects the Buddha nature, which expresses an attribute of the Dharmakaya.

So there exists both: we are separate and not separate. We are connected in this most intimate way, by analogy, or potentially by analogy, in our very being. And there opens this possibility of direction, of growth, towards the divine—of theosis, as we call it in the Orthodox Church.

You can hear how this entire way of thinking about dimensionality serves as a grounding for ethics, construing the human being and our humanity in quite a powerful way that remains consistent, or relatively consistent—much more similar to what we encounter in the soul-making dharma, to what can possibly open for us in soul-mak-

ing dharma and practice. The senses we can have that open, rather than the ideas we start from—the senses that can open through practice. Again, it is a phenomenological approach, rather than starting with metaphysics.

When we look at all this, whatever valid reason or support or dimension for ethics one tries to provide, it tends to be related to the conceived purpose of ethics, certainly, but also to the conceived purpose of life. Consider the Pali Canon Buddha Dharma: the purpose of life, the purpose of ethics, the given reasons for ethics are intimately connected with what we understand as the purpose of life, the purpose of existence—which is to reach Nibbana. And so it is in these other systems as well.

There has been this divorce of ethics from law, but the way we think about ethics—certainly related to the conceived purpose of ethics—the way we try to provide dimensionality for ethics connects intimately with the conceived purpose of ethics and the conceived purpose of our existence. What does this imply about how we set up law, the purpose of law, and how we conceive of law? All this is connected.

Depending on how we think through this connection, which remains whole, it follows through to how we think of life, how we think of ethics, what dimensionality we give—then how we think of what the law is actually trying to accomplish, what the legal system is trying to accomplish. All is connected.

Again, if we simply ask this question: what is possible? Not just what is possible for us as human beings, but what is possible in terms of viable, valuable, and tenable ways we can conceive of and sense our humanity? What is possible there? What viable, tenable, and valuable ways exist for us to conceive of and to sense our human being today, now?

So much will depend on that—whether we feel blessed, whether our sense of existence is blessed, whether the sense of the cosmos is blessed. All depends on these questions, depends on these directions and decisions, these orientations.

If I want to live with a sense of blessedness, how can I support that possibility really, genuinely, deeply, robustly?

CHAPTER 232

The Image of Ethics (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 2h11

In this fifth part of his ethics series, Rob Burbea delves deeply into the ontological and epistemological questions that underpin any viable approach to ethics in our contemporary world. He examines how different Buddhist traditions—from Pali Canon realism through Mahāyāna emptiness teachings to Vajrayāna transgression—approach the reality of virtues and values, noting both their strengths and limitations.

Burbea argues that while emptiness teachings are sufficient for liberation, they may not provide adequate grounding for soul-making practice or a full engagement with ethical life. He explores how soul-making dharma offers an alternative ontological middle way—neither purely objective nor subjective—where values and virtues gain their reality through being sensed with soul rather than existing as universal truths about actions in themselves. Drawing on Augustine's theory of divine illumination and Hartmann's value philosophy, he suggests how ethics might be rooted in dimensionality while avoiding both naive realism and nihilistic relativism.

The talk concludes with provocative reflections on democracy, expertise, and the possibility of training in ethical discernment, questioning whether our current cultural approaches to moral decision-making are adequate for the complex challenges we face. Burbea envisions a potential future where soul-making practice becomes as foundational to education as mathematics or literacy, enabling deeper sensitivity to the larger questions of what constitutes a beautiful and worthwhile life.

When I talked right at the beginning of this talk on ethics and said it seems to me that any really valuable and viable approach to ethics nowadays would need certain things—and I listed seven or eight items of a wish list—I've been following through that thread through this whole talk. I mentioned ontology and epistemology as one of the more important considerations, explorations around ontology and epistemology.

I've already, in the parts of this talk, woven in questions of epistemology and ontology and ideas and possible new ways of thinking about ontology and epistemology—how that might be worked into older ideas to adapt them, modify them, open them out in a different way, allow them to deliver something they otherwise would not be able to deliver to us today. Of course I've talked a lot and written about ontology in previous talks, and some of Sila and Soul was also devoted to ontology and epistemology regarding ethics, regarding values and virtues.

So nowadays in our postmodern culture, most people who think about these kinds of things—philosophers, for instance—would probably tend to agree that ontology is impossible to come to conclusions around, that it's kind of an intrinsically inconclusive subject. But as I've pointed out several times now here and elsewhere, ontology and epistemology are inevitable to our lives, to living our lives, to making choices in our lives, and they're also inevitable to any moment of consciousness, I would say. We're always making ontological and epistemological choices, assessments and judgments about what we sense, what we experience.

We can't really avoid it. It's there anyway, and it's having an effect anyway. Ontology and epistemology are there anyway, in any moment of our consciousness. Certainly they're there in our life, certainly there in regard to our practice—dharma practice. Certainly they're there in regard to ethics in some way or another. And they're unavoidable; they're having an effect. They affect everything. They affect what we choose, they affect how we think, they affect our orientations.

The question, or a question then becomes—always this question—well, what does the ontology and what does the epistemology that I am holding right now lead to? What does the ontology and epistemology that underpins my dharma practice lead to? What does it open? What does it close? What does it bring? What does it deliver? And the same thing for soul-making dharma practice. In soul-making dharma practice we can understand different ontologies and epistemologies, but always this question: what does it bring? Which is a different question—related by is a different question—than just, is it true?

We can have different attitudes and orientations to ontology. Indeed, we do, of course. And there's a whole range there. I think in this talk, what I really want to do is, in terms of my aims and the scope of this talk, not too different from what I've done in the past, which is three things, really.

One is just to bring to light and mull over and discuss ontological questions and issues and epistemological questions and issues that we need to consider, that we need to at least acknowledge and realize. Just to bring them to light and acknowledge and realize them, see that they're in the picture and discuss them a little bit.

The second thing is to, so to speak, elbow enough room philosophically from entrenched and usually unquestioned ontological and epistemological assumptions. People tend to believe, or we as human beings tend to just believe this or that about what's real or about what constitutes valid knowledge. After many years of modern philosophy and dharma and modern physics, a lot of that is no longer actually tenable as true. A lot of those old assumptions, those entrenched ontological and epistemologic-

al assumptions, they're not really viable. So that's the second kind of aim: to elbow enough room and enough space to be creative and to discover. To see if there are other ways forward, but also what might just be allowed because of that space, so that something is not being illegitimately strangled out, illegitimately prevented from taking a viable place in our life, in our consciousness, in our practice, in our view.

And the third is to offer lightly possible alternative ontologies and epistemologies. But I do say lightly, because this elbowing of enough room—the second kind of aim—and this third aim of offering possible alternative ontology and epistemology, doesn't equate to an assertion of any definite ontology or epistemology. It's just doing enough that we can move forward, create, discover ontologies, epistemologies, attitudes that allow us to move forward, create and discover with regard to values, with regard to ethics, with regard to soul-making.

So let's start with a few considerations. If we take Buddha dharma, and especially Pali Canon Buddha dharma, the sense, the reading I have there is really that virtues and values, whatever you might call them, have karmic effects. I'm not even talking about future lives; I'm talking about in this life. They affect the citta, the tenor of the citta, the quality of the citta, the perception of self and other, all that. And that's what's important. So the ontology is just that much ontology: they have karmic effects, and that's what's important.

In Pali Canon Buddhism, particularly as understood in the Theravada tradition, this basic ontological framework predominates. However, in the Mahayana, there emerges a much greater emphasis on the emptiness of phenomena, including the emptiness of citta qualities, values, and virtues. We encounter the teaching of the two truths: the ultimate truth of emptiness and the conventional truth of relative reality.

While these values and virtues are completely empty—this is emphasized, acknowledged, taught, and studied—simultaneously, at the level of conventional reality, they function. They produce karmic effects through different values, virtues, vices, or what we might call disvalues. Thus the emptiness, in a way, becomes less of an issue. The ontological fact of the emptiness of virtues and virtuous qualities of the citta doesn't necessarily impede their practical function.

In the Vajrayana, we again find tremendous emphasis on the emptiness of these phenomena. Yet there also appears in Tantric texts and Vajrayana teachings a certain encouragement to transgress against what is valuable and virtuous. This presents a complicated subject, though typically the commentaries explain that such transgression is

purely symbolic. When texts speak of killing your mother and father, this doesn't mean literal matricide or patricide—mother and father symbolize particular psychological states, and their "killing" represents specific transformative processes.

From a soul-making perspective, we might think similarly to both Pali Canon and Mahayana Buddhism. The crucial question becomes: what is the effect of values and virtues? What happens when we relate to them seriously, when we take them as meaningful? And conversely, what occurs when we ignore them or consider them merely empty?

Actually, this question requires more precision, because if we follow everything we've been exploring in this talk, the effect of virtues and values depends entirely on our conceptual framework and our relationship to them. To what extent am I permitted an erotic relationship with values and virtues? What is my conceptual framework, and does that framework root them in another dimension?

We can broadly break down the ontological approaches within Buddha Dharma—though the categories aren't entirely clean-cut—into two fundamental attitudes. The first appears in Pali Canon Buddhism, especially as commonly interpreted through the Abhidhamma lens in Theravada tradition: virtues and values are real phenomena, real components of mind moments.

The Abhidhamma system categorizes a specific number of possible mental qualities that can arise in any mind moment. It provides an exhaustive list—this many qualities and not another number. In this framework, both the moment and its mental qualities are viewed as real, as inherently existent.

It was precisely this view of inherent existence that Nagarjuna challenged. Much of his writing consists of polemic attacks against this reified understanding of virtue, of mind qualities within mind moments. But our present question is: what does such a realist view, as we find in the Abhidhamma, do to our relationship with ethics, virtues, and values?

In our current language, such a view grants them reality—they're deemed tremendously important—but the entire conception remains what we would call flat, mechanical, almost cold. These mind moments and qualities lack soft, elastic edges. Something feels limited and limiting in this approach. It allows very little scope for eros or soul-making in relationship to ethics. There's no genuine sense of dimensionality, of infinitude, and quite an impoverished understanding of the human being.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the view that everything is empty, including virtues, mind states, values—all empty. Ethics itself is empty.

I think one crucial consideration here is questioning any immature or overly hasty relativism regarding the ontology and epistemology of ethics—any premature nihilism concerning ethical life. As we've touched on before in the Senior Soul talks and here, several thinkers, including philosopher W.T. Stace, have pointed out that just because people have failed to conclusively prove an independent existence of ethics doesn't mean such independent existence is impossible. To conclude otherwise from humanity's current inability to demonstrate this doesn't logically follow.

Similarly, a scientistic worldview that regards as real only what is measurable and material—this reductionist scientific perspective that leaves no place for questions of value or feelings toward value, dismissing them as merely illusory—represents immature, partial, blinkered thinking.

Ethics exists for human beings. As long as there are human beings in the universe, ethics has reality because there are human beings. Just because it only exists for human beings doesn't mean that it has less reality. This goes back to Descartes and Galileo and all that.

Or consider someone like the philosopher Richard Rorty, whom we've discussed as well. He dismisses any ontology or epistemology underlying ethics, then simply insists that what we need to do ethically is just keep the conversation going. We need to keep the conversation going. Well, why? Why do we need to keep the conversation going? That's an ethical assertion, and on what are you basing it? But because he's ruled out from the beginning any possibility of basing ethics in anything else, in any other dimension or value-giving dimension, he can't answer that. And so much of the time he just talks in circles.

We can have a similar kind of immaturity in bringing the teachings of emptiness to bear on the whole domain of ethics. Actually, before I get to that, it seems to me—and I've probably said this elsewhere—that those who emphasize, whether they're in the Dharma or outside of the Dharma, the impossibility of knowing any dimension or ground for ethics, for virtues, for values, are at the same time clinging, sometimes explicitly, more usually tacitly, to the classical scientific materialist view of reality. So very postmodern in the domain of ethics and other domains, but underneath that, or in other areas of life, just actually really clinging to the classical scientific materialist view—very not postmodern.

In this view, anything that Cartesian, Galilean science posits or explains as real is real. And anything else—for example, ethics or values—is not. But we've talked about Descartes. Actually, that came just from a decision made in the first place. And Galileo

also made a decision that became a truth. But then eventually even the whole scientific method, which they helped to start, sort of ended up pulling the rug out from under their starting modus operandi and their starting definitions.

We also pointed out how those definitions about what was real and how that scientific methodology over time started with people who were religious. Yes, Galileo was subject to the Inquisition or oppressed by the Inquisition, but they were still religious. Descartes was a very religious person. In fact, much of his so-called logic relies on the existence of God. The taken-for-granted existence of God proves other parts of his logical edifice. There are all kinds of doubt—that's his Cartesian skepticism. But actually, one thing he didn't doubt was the existence of God. Others—Locke—these were all genuinely religious thinkers. And what they started was rooted in and motivated even by religious thinking and religious aspiration to a certain extent.

But then over history, as we've traced a little bit in this talk, following that thread about "okay, this is real and that's not," all kinds of implications and consequences, including implications and consequences for ethics, unfolded through history over several hundred years. One step was taken and it in turn, in time, implied another step, or together with certain social developments, it implied another step.

But anyway, if we come back to emptiness, it's really important to realize that knowing the emptiness of all things, understanding in one's heart the emptiness of all things, will not lead to a nihilistic morality. It absolutely won't. At least, it's not the way I understand it. I've said this before: emptiness means things are not real. It also means things are not not-real. Neither real nor not-real.

And to me, the indicator of insight into emptiness is care—even an increase in care. Care for others, care for the world. An indicator of insight is the presence and even the increased felt sense of importance of values and virtues, the increased orientation to them—not a decrease, not a letting go and a negligence—an increase in compassion. These are the indicators to me of insight into emptiness. If that's not there and someone's talking about emptiness, either I'm not interested, but if I'm in a teaching position, I'm very interested because something's really not right. Something's off. It's not the Middle Way of emptiness.

I would also say, certainly in the way at least I would teach emptiness and the practices that lead to it, there's so much sensitivity required and cultivated in that path of practice. I think sensitivity too, including heart sensitivity and ethical sensitivity—all that will grow in the course of deepening one's insight into emptiness.

We've talked about much of this before. Sometimes people say, when they hear about emptiness, they think, "Oh, but then I won't—everything's empty, so I won't care about ethics."

Just briefly recapping what must have been the first talk of this series on emptiness and ways of looking—in the way I would teach emptiness through ways of looking and fabrication, we're not starting with asking anyone to believe in the emptiness of all things. That would be really unwise. Usually almost everyone would just say, "But then I wouldn't care, or then nothing would matter." They don't really understand. They're not ready to jump to that level.

We start with two threads: the possibility of ways of looking—the possibility of developing flexibility of ways of looking—and the notion of the fabrication of suffering, of self, and eventually of world, of objects. Start even just with the notion of fabrication of suffering, and then have a look at how the self is fabricated. Just start with those two possibilities, which almost no one can deny, and explore through an open-ended, experiential, first-hand experiential inquiry, rather than starting by believing something and then trying to act ethically on this belief that I don't really understand.

Open-ended means one doesn't decide the limit of fabrication, or pre-decide that everything is empty, everything is an illusion. One doesn't know what that means yet.

Secondly, emptiness ways of looking, as you develop lots of them, become different lenses—different ways of looking that we can pick up and put down at any time, based on or responsive to the needs of the situation. What helps to reduce suffering here, if that's my intention, for self, for other, for world?

I also said that in other ways of approaching emptiness—through analyses or intellectual analysis practice as they do in the Gelug tradition in Tibet, or through the idea of emptiness as a sort of big empty space with substantial objects and not much self, or the kind of interpretation of a Theravadan view of emptiness as the machine-like process of aggregates—none of those three will automatically weave in or integrate the understanding and exploration of dependent arising, which is the exploration of karma and how this intention, that way of looking, this way of acting actually brings about this sense of self, this sense of world, this much suffering, this kind of suffering.

We're seeing dependent origination and karma work right there when we're approaching it through the ways of looking and fabrication approach. So ethics is integrated unavoidably right from the beginning. Karma is integrated unavoidably right from the beginning into the emptiness exploration, into the emptiness teachings. And it's something we see and know and feel firsthand. That runs all the way through, as op-

posed to teaching emptiness in some way and then somehow having to stick ethics back into it because we're concerned that what we've done with emptiness might imply that ethics is irrelevant, or we might have forgotten about it.

But we need to be careful again with the whole emptiness thing, not to be lazy and sloppy. There are many ways we can be, certainly around the relationship of emptiness and ethics. So ethics are empty—therefore what? Just because there's no universal agreement doesn't necessarily imply that ethics are empty. What do I even mean when I say ethics are empty?

But even take something like "killing is wrong." Ethics is empty, therefore it's not true to say killing is wrong, or it doesn't apply. Going into this just even a little bit more carefully, we'll see that actually in relation to the notion of killing being wrong, there's always in all cultures and societies—and this is where it gets interesting, or if you like where the emptiness resides—the question of when is it deemed okay to kill. So it's not a blanket, sloppy "killing is wrong" or "no, because ethics is empty and everything's empty, killing is okay." It's neither simply wrong nor right. It's in the detail. When is it deemed okay?

There's putting to sleep a pet that we love, there's the question of euthanasia, there's the question of assisted dignified dying, assisted suicide when someone's terminally ill. Is it okay to kill when you prevent a murderer, you prevent a mass murderer, you prevent someone like Hitler? All these questions. Is there such a thing as a justifiable war? This is where it gets interesting. And we can still say ethics is empty because those details are hard to work out. Maybe we cannot arrive at a very clear, final, definite conclusion to some of these questions. That's where the emptiness resides.

Or similarly, if you think everything's empty—okay, well, is two plus two equals four? Is that empty of truth? Is that empty of being true? So what's the whole relationship between truth and emptiness? You could say two plus two equals four is dependent on counting to understand it. And you could even say two plus two equals four, in order to be a truth, is dependent on the specification of the base, the numerical base—for example, in base 10.

We call that. But in base 3, 2 plus 2 equals... What would it equal? It would equal 11. 2 plus 2 equals 1, 1. You could say 2 plus 2 is 4 is dependent on perception of 2 and perception of 1, etc. You could say all that. But any of those qualifications and dependencies don't deprive the equation two plus two equals four of a certain inviolable and non-empty truth.

And it may be similar with ethics. There may be lots that is dependent on individual or cultural perspectives. And as we said, on just the fact of human being, there are truths for human beings. But it still might be the case that Hartmann's firmament of values may have an absolute, relatively independent existence, reality, truth to it.

Two things here. One is that when we use the teachings of emptiness, it's really important, whether it's in regard to ethics, certainly in regard to ethics, but also in regard to soul-making and imaginal practice. To me, it's important not to be sloppy and lazy. So that's one thing. And the second thing is with regard to ethics, you know, the ontological and epistemological questions and issues and needs surpass what can be provided by just the notion that things are empty.

So we said, yeah, for liberation, emptiness is enough. For lots of other things, it's not enough. As an ontological stance, we've said that in one of the early talks of this series. And we also said ontology, epistemology, ethics, emotions - these areas of our existence, and they are areas of our existence, they're not just philosophical areas, as I said. Ontology, epistemology, ethics, emotions, probably others - they're endless. I don't think humanity will ever come to an end of their explorations.

And what did I say? You know, if someone says, "I figured them all out, I figured," or any one of those, "I figured ontology, I figured it all out," or epistemology, or whatever it is, run away from that person as a teacher. And if someone says, "You know, don't bother, it's not interesting, it's not useful, it's a waste of time, there's no point. Just ignore ontology and epistemology," I would run away from them as well, as a teacher.

As we said, really right from the beginning, I think, in the soul-making Dharma teachings, ontology and epistemology, or considering ontologies and epistemology and questions and issues there, really support soul-making. It really gives ground to, opens up space for, and also furthers soul-making practice and soul-making possibilities.

Soul-making needs ontology and epistemology, and I would say ethics too. Actually, by this point you might have got a sense that ethics is just a part of soul-making. Soul-making is an approach to ethics, but ethics is definitely a part of soul-making. Soul-making, therefore ethics, needs ontology and epistemology, needs us to turn that soil, to mull over, to be creative, to discover, to question, to open up, to play and construct.

And ontology and epistemology, like ethics and the area of emotionality, all these areas, all these domains, can themselves become erotic, imaginal objects for us. Our relationship to them in themselves can become soul-making and soulful.

So I think these areas are endless. And I hope, you know, my hope is that others, someone or some others in the future will, sometime in the future, will add to what we've been developing here and develop it further and build on it.

I think we need to - certainly in soul-making dharma, again, ethics is a part of that. We need to, and I would say any ethics, needs to include ontology. There needs to be the inclusion of ontology. So I would say soul-making dharma needs the inclusion of ontology, but let's say inconclusively. In other words, in this open-ended way. And it might be the same with regard to anyone trying to move forward with ethics these days. The ontology needs to be included, but in a kind of inconclusive way, maybe. But in a way, that kind of attitude to ontology and epistemology is kind of axiomatic to, fundamental to soul-making dharma.

We can look back in history in the sort of, let's say, the kind of literalism, ontological literalism of the belief in God in the ancient Judaic tradition, for example, of the Old Testament, or that kind of ontology, or Plato's ontology, or Descartes, or Galileo's ontology, or Bacon's - it was very similar, of course - or a kind of monistic materialism, "there is nothing but matter, mind is really just material." That kind of ontology, or the notions of truth that Karl Popper put forward, etc. All of these, over history, seem to have flourished and then kind of run into problems, gone out of fashion, failed, fallen short in some way.

And again, we can have that sort of what in some postmodern circles becomes a kind of widespread view, which is, "Oh, just forget the whole thing about ontology." Or we can say, still we can move forward here. Still we can play. Still we can create and discover.

As I said, regarding ethics, it's important to recognize how ontology and epistemology relate intimately to dimensionality. The ontology and epistemology of dimensionality is the crucial part in the ethical question. It becomes important to establish - or perhaps more accurately, to construct, create, discover, provide, explore - elbow space against the sort of inevitable, usually default indoctrination of ideas around ontology and epistemology, particularly with regard to dimensionality and whatever ways we're trying to give dimension to values, virtues, and ethics.

We spent considerable time in the *Sila and Soul* talk of the *Four Parables of Stone and Light* series exploring the notion of ideal reality, or the realm of ideas, beginning with Plato. Hartmann, whose moral philosophy we discussed extensively, picked up this notion of ideal reality - the realm of ideas - with values being part of that realm. The realm of values exists within the ideal realm, the realm of ideas.

Regarding the ontology there, Hartmann pointed out that values exist for human beings, but that doesn't mean they're not real. As he would say, just as geometrical laws exist for spatial figures, and physiological laws exist for organic beings, moral laws exist for human beings. This doesn't take anything away from their reality. A geometrical law simply is true - it exists, but only for spatial beings. Geometrical law has nothing whatsoever to say about anger, for example. No geometrical law addresses anger at all.

For both Plato and Hartmann, the realm of ideas, which includes values, exists. It has ontological validity - it exists as a kind of reality. For Plato, the realm of ideas, the realm of forms, was more real than any instantiation of that form. Beauty as ideal reality was more real than any material instantiation of something beautiful. This represents a very rare perspective in contemporary ontology.

Someone like J.N. Findlay, whom I've discussed in previous talks, upheld this kind of inversion of the usual ontological hierarchy - that instantiations of things were less real than the ideal realm. I paralleled this in mathematics when discussing the number pi and other concepts.

Earlier in this talk, we also explored the possible etymology or phonetic relationship between the words "virtue" and "virtual," meaning something that's an image of something. The thing itself is more real; the image is less real. So our virtues in the world are just an image, a copy - a not-quite-real copy of something that's more real, a really existing virtue or value. The word "virtually" might possibly be interpreted as "not quite the real thing" - virtually the real thing. Virtual reality would be the image, and "virtually" means almost, not quite the real thing.

Plato held this ontology - which sounds very unusual to most people today - about this level of the realm of ideas being more real than the level of material reality, things, tables, horses, or whatever.

For Hartmann, however, the level of ideal reality was less real. It was still real, possessing a kind of reality, but actually less real. Ideal being, he said, was "a kind of thinner, floating, insubstantial being, half being, so to speak," which "still lacks the full weight of being" - being what is primarily material.

In his view, there was a hierarchy of reality, from what was most real: inorganic being. Dependent on inorganic being, there was organic being - dependent on chemicals, there is life, some kind of living organism. Dependent on there being a living organism, there is mental being, which depends on organic being. And dependent on mental being, there is spiritual being.

What Hartmann meant by spiritual being was the whole realm of language, ethics, morality, arts, religion, law, politics, philosophy, ideology, historical consciousness, and so forth. That's what he primarily meant by spiritual being.

However, this view that Hartmann held has been brought into question. That hierarchy - which most people would agree with, minus even his... Most people would agree the most real thing is matter, and stacked on that hierarchy, you get things that are kind of real, and then you enter this area where they're sort of real, but not really real. When you reach values, many people would disagree: do those have reality in themselves? Do those have an independent existence?

Owen Barfield, for instance, represents a philosopher who questioned that whole typical hierarchy of reality, that ontological hierarchy that Hartmann put forward. In his well-known book *Saving the Appearances*, he really pulled that apart. Again, developments in physics, particularly in quantum mechanics, really question that order. It's worth pointing out that Hartmann himself was quite strong in his criticism of Plato's hierarchical ontology.

Hartmann believed that Plato's notion of an ideal realm being more real than the material world—where divine forms possess greater reality than earthly things—could only lead to devaluation and disregard of this actual world. If one believes some other realm is higher and more real while this world is merely illusory, it can only result in dismissing the significance of our present reality.

This perspective is certainly possible, and such philosophical attitudes have indeed fueled worldly disengagement at various times throughout history. However, when this material world becomes the sole reality, viewed purely in materialistic terms, we have witnessed how impoverished an ethics this ultimately delivers.

Actually, the notion that an ideal realm exists—that divine attributes, intelligences, and angels possess greater reality than this world—need not necessarily lead to devaluation of the material realm. This world might be understood as images and refractions of those ideals, or as completely real but having its origins in that ideal sphere. Rather than diminishing material reality, this can actually enhance it.

Quite the opposite effect often occurs. Because things reflect and find their roots in the divine attributes within this realm of ideas, there emerges a greater sanctity in the things of this world. Even for someone with a thoroughly secular mindset—imagine a physicist contemplating how everything originates in the mathematical laws and equa-

tions governing the universe—there frequently arises a profound sense of sanctity. This ideal realm of mathematics bestows a level of reverence upon the material things and everyday objects we encounter.

I disagree with Hartmann's assertion that Platonic idealism necessarily demeans worldly things or leads to their devaluation. This interpretation is so commonly presented and accepted as obvious, but I believe we should seriously question the actual implications of any particular ontology.

Returning to physics: if a quark—supposedly a fundamental particle—exists as a "thing" only for observers, becoming substantial only in the presence of observation with location, time, and properties like mass, direction, and velocity, then absent observation, only an ultra-complex, multi-dimensional mathematical idea remains. This suggests two important considerations.

First, this represents an instance where ideal reality—the mathematical idea—possesses more fundamental reality than the quark's apparent manifestation, which only emerges when observed. Indeed, some contemporary physicists propose that only the mathematical laws governing the universe are truly real. Matter, space, time—all are secondary to these mathematical principles.

Second, if quarks exist as things only for observers while fundamentally remaining complex mathematical ideas, then our assumed ontological comparison with "hard matter" becomes significantly softened. At minimum, this challenges our conventional notions of material solidity.

We encounter something similar when discussing emptiness as providing minimal ontology for justifying soul-making dharma and imaginal practice. Images often face immediate ontological dismissal—there's something in the mind saying, "Yes, but it's not real." An image gets compared unfavorably with objects assumed to be genuinely real, like this table.

At minimum, recognizing the emptiness of all phenomena removes any absolutely real reference point. While acknowledging ontological differences and varying ontic status between physical tables and imaginal ones, we dissolve the backdrop objection to taking images seriously.

Regarding Hegel's philosophy—though my knowledge is limited—certain interpretations might allow the ideal level more fundamental reality while involving and expressing itself through material movements, political developments, and historical processes. Different Hegelian interpretations may offer varying configurations of this ontological hierarchy between ideal being and what we typically consider material reality.

This could prove quite fascinating to explore further. If ideal being possesses more fundamental existence, then translating this to ethics, values would have more fundamental existence than their instantiations. In Hegel's framework, the development, movement, and history of values becomes primary, subsuming the material and historical within that process. What's actually occurring is an evolution of value at the ideal level.

We cannot escape epistemological questions regarding anything—material things, ethical matters, meditative experiences. This remains crucially important to acknowledge, even concerning virtues, values, and ethics.

Consider this: even when someone claims it's difficult or impossible to prove the reality of values, they continue acting and choosing according to their values. What I would add to this observation is...

Nietzsche said, well, yeah, most of that's just they're acting from indoctrination, from stupidity, from habit, etc. Their values are basically indoctrination, stupidity and habit. A pretty critical view.

But what I want to say is we still act and choose according to our values. All human beings do. And it's not all because of fear and conformity. Something's happening in our choices, in our ethical choices regarding values. We're trusting something.

What are we trusting as an epistemic authority? What are we trusting as, "I know this, I feel this way," or "I think," or whatever it is. What are we trusting? And usually it's some sense, it's some felt sense, a moral sense, a conscience, a sense of nobility or beauty, some push or pull in the being, some sense of that.

Could it be that anyway we're trusting something, and what we're trusting is some sense, and could it be that that some sense that we're trusting is maybe the very beginnings of a kind of sensing with soul, sensibility, regarding values and virtues and the choices we make.

So I don't know, is anyone entirely logical and rational in the substance and the basis of their ethical choices? Is there anyone who just kind of computes like a machine? I mean, people more or less. But I think there's always some sense, some moral sense. And I wonder if part of that moral sense has to do with a sense of what's noble, what's beautiful, something pulling me, calling me, something I push away from.

And could that be that in a very inchoate form, just the beginning, the germ, just a fraction, a portion of soul-making sensibility with regard to values and virtues. We are trusting some sense, and I would say we do have some hierarchical differentiation

between different values, contrary to what the utilitarians would say or allow us or give any weight to. And also those who just interpret the Buddha Dharma perspective as just saying, well, just reduce suffering, just reduce suffering.

This "just reduce suffering," this goal to reduce suffering or end suffering, is usually for something else, even if I haven't articulated what that something else is, even if I don't realize that it's for something else. So when I gave the sort of thought experiment of that falling and then realizing there's no ground, how that would be, just to imagine everyone's okay with that. You've worked towards everyone being okay with that just falling. The reduction of suffering is for something else in the end, or let's say past a certain point of reduction of suffering, something that we feel is good in some kind of alternate way—worthwhile, beautiful, meaningful.

Some people are scared of this idea. Sometimes I've mentioned it to people who are very committed Buddhists or they've heard me say it in a talk or something. Maybe ending suffering isn't the, or reducing suffering isn't the main thing or isn't the final goal or whatever. And it seems like it really stirs, it really bothers some people.

But again, my invitation is to just have a look, have a look, sense in, feel in, if that thought experiment works for you or something similar. Even if you're scared of the idea, see, is there not something else behind, underneath your concern and your efforts to reduce suffering and your focus on reducing suffering? Isn't there something else, another level?

So it could be that already what's operating for us, even if a person has never heard of soul-making or has heard of it and doesn't like it or doesn't practice it or whatever, it could already be that a part of how we are navigating our ethical choices is actually through the means of some very kind of inchoate and dimly sensed version of sensing the soul, of soul-making practice with regard to ethics. It could already be that that's what people are doing, we are doing.

So is it possible to develop that? Ontologically there, epistemologically there, there's this, we're already trusting something. What are we trusting? How's it working in us? And is it possibly the case that what we're actually already trusting is the beginnings of soul-making approach, but we don't know that language, or we don't know that practice, or another part of our mind objects to it, but actually that's already part of what's going on, part of how we're functioning epistemologically with regard to ethics and ethical choices and values.

So maybe that's already the case. Maybe it's something that can be developed. We've already said, we've already considered a couple of times already the possibility of regarding eros as epistemologically valid and as ontologically guiding and validating, as John Milbank wrote, giving it an ontologically disclosive status.

The eros, if we have a view of truth not as a definite this or that and a final arriving point, but more as this journey of provisional truths, as it in fact is the actuality in science, as a journey of provisional truths, progressive stages of provisional truth. And if we have that idea and how congruent that is with the way eros works, eros as what takes us, what galvanizes the soul-making dynamic, which also means the perception, of course, of psyche, the sense of what we're in relationship with and the idea of it, the logos, and taking us more into depth, the eros is what opens up the depth, what opens us up to the depth.

And the successive openings, the successive disclosures of truth or reality, but truth and reality just conceived a little bit more maturely, really, or differently. So eros as epistemologically valid and also as ontologically guiding and validating in terms of depth, but also in terms of direction, so that there's, I would say, there can be and there will be with soul-making practice, a trust of the kind of the compass needle, the orientation of eros. Not just that it will take me deeper, but also where it points, the direction.

And all this is within the careful discipline of soul-making dharma practice and sensibility. It's not just, oh, so truth can be whatever I like, or whatever you like. No, we're talking about a real discipline here, and anyone who knows soul-making down the practice, and really practices, understands that, should understand that.

It's a difficult training, asking a great deal—even of those who have already undertaken extensive meditative training. Yet I wonder whether what's unfolding for many practitioners is actually the beginning, the fragmentary emergence of a small version of soul-making sensibility operating in the realm of ethics. Can we fill this out? Can we provide it with greater ontological and epistemological support in our thinking, creating more conceptual space and offering possible frameworks for understanding the ontology and epistemology that might take this further, exploring what emerges from such an approach?

We have already examined how soul-making dharma can offer modifications and sophistications of ontology and epistemology with respect to the dimensions provided through notions of cosmic order or voluntarism. Soul-making dharma can reimagine these entire possibilities, placing them on different ontological and epistemological foundations.

Interestingly, while I find Hartman's conception of a value firmament and its hierarchy compelling, as far as I could discern from his writings, he simply asserts the independent existence of this firmament of values. It exists, he suggests, though we cannot grasp it all at once, and some people lack talent for recognizing and differentiating values.

Let us compare this assertion with something else from St. Augustine, drawn from his text on the Trinity. Here he explores his theory of illumination—the understanding that our minds and hearts remain fundamentally open to the light of God, capable of being illuminated by divine light. They function through this light; the light of the divine permeates our hearts and minds. This is a beautiful conception, a luminous image.

Augustine writes: "God is holy everywhere, whence it is that the mind lives and moves and has its being in him, and therefore it can remember him. Not that it remembers him because it knew him in Adam, or at any other time and place before entering the life of its body, or at the time it was created and inserted into its body—it remembers none of these things, whichever of them really happened to it. They are all consigned to oblivion. It remembers him by turning towards the Lord, as to the light which in some fashion had reached it even while it had been turned away from him."

He continues: "This is the reason why the wicked, too, can think of eternity and make correct judgments of approval and disapproval about human conduct. What are the rules according to which they judge, but the rules which show everyone how to live, even though they may not themselves live according to them? How do they know them? Certainly not in their own natures. For although undoubtedly it is by the mind that these things are seen, it is clear that their minds are changeable, whereas whoever perceives in his mind these rules as the standard of conduct also perceives them to be unchangeable."

Again, we encounter this notion of eternal, independent, objective existence of values and ethical principles. Augustine asks: "Where then are these rules written? Where is it the unjust can discover what is just? Where do they see what they ought to have and lack? Where are the rules written but in the book of that light which we call truth. Here it is that all the rules of righteousness are inscribed, and it is from here that they pass into the heart of the just man, not by bodily transfer, but as though leaving their imprint on him, just as the design of a seal is impressed in the wax without leaving the seal."

I recognize that this language may not resonate with everyone. Some will object for various reasons, and many carry wounds from certain histories that make such expressions difficult to hear. I don't share that particular history, so I find these words deeply moving, even when I may not agree with every aspect. There's something profoundly beautiful in this conception of an absolute light of God—like the light through the prism we discussed, with the attributes of God as refracted wavelengths, each color possessing its own beauty. This light permeates our soul, our mind, making values accessible to us. These values are eternal because they participate in that light, and they remain accessible because this light suffuses our consciousness, our very being.

Yet one phrase Augustine uses strikes me as ambiguous: "This is the reason why the wicked, too, can think of eternity and make correct judgments of approval and disapproval about human conduct." Does he mean thinking of eternity in terms of hell and its punishments, leading to fearful repentance? Or does he intend something far more congruent with soul-making dharma—contemplating the timeless, experiencing a sense of the timeless dimension?

Perhaps this sense of timelessness opens awareness of dimensionality, of divinity, of the soul-making dynamic itself, which naturally opens the soul. This opening then reveals the ideational and imaginal dimensions, the dimensionality and divinity of values and virtues themselves. Does Augustine mean timelessness in this sense, or does he refer to eternity as eternal punishment and reward? The text remains beautifully ambiguous on this crucial point.

Actually, I don't know enough of his work to know. But even if he meant eternal punishment and reward in that sense, we could, again, soul-making dharma could modify what he wrote there and take the beautiful idea—this idea of something that is absolute in this sense of beyond all categories, beyond all attributes, like when people talk about the dharmakaya, or people talk in the via negativa about the nature of the ultimate godhead, beyond anything that can be said about it—and take that beautiful idea, that light permeating our consciousness. It's one of the elements of the imaginal that then opens up the whole sense, and within that whole sense there will be a soul-making sense of values, and they will have dimensionality and divinity and beauty and duty and necessity.

So it's possible he meant eternal punishment and reward, but we can modify that. This beautiful idea and beautiful language that he's using can be modified from the perspective and understanding of soul-making dharma. But what it will lead to is a slightly different conclusion, I think, than what Augustine is implying. Because it won't necessarily always imply the same conclusions about an activity or a thing in itself. Rather,

this activity or that thing will be sensed with soul, and then implicit in that is the sense of divinity and dimensionality and duty and the self's autonomy—duty and my autonomy, beauty, creation, discovery, fullness of intention. All that will be there.

So not the thing in itself, but a different sense of this thing compared to that thing, this choice compared to that choice. And can we trust that? The fullness of intention and all the other soul-making dharma elements. So there's a soul-making dharma modification, perhaps, of what he said—probably, I would guess, but I don't know—in terms of what he said about eternity, the eternal, contemplating the eternal.

But there's also probably a modification, as we've said before, in terms of where it delivers us. It won't be a universal "this thing or that thing, this activity or that activity is taboo, proscribed or prescribed." Rather, what we're delivered to is a soul, a soul-making sense of something over something else. And that can guide us. Can we trust that to guide us?

I don't know if I mentioned this the other day—I think I mentioned it very briefly—but is there any place for antinomies in Augustine's view of ethics? We talked a lot about them in *Eros Unfettered*. It may well be the case that through soul-making dharma practice, soul-making practice in relation to ethical choices, antinomies are there, are felt, but they're resolved, they're solved for us through bringing the soul-making practice to bear. Because okay, I appreciate that these are antinomies, there are two moral pulls in different directions, but I feel, for me, guided to choose this one. I can trust that it's ethical, but I also know—I'm mature enough to know—that yes, this means I'm neglecting this other one. There's an antinomy there, as Hartman says, and I emphasize so much here.

I don't know if Augustine doesn't see that or tries to avoid the whole issue. But soul-making dharma practice helps us navigate those antinomies and accept the inevitable guilt, if we're going to call it guilt—the fact that in navigating an antinomy, in making a choice in life, and I have to make choices in life. Sitting on a fence forever is not—as Hartman calls it, that's really a sin. But I accept the inevitable guilt.

One example I've given several times: I wrote a letter to dharma teachers ten years ago about climate change and about flying so much in the dharma. I was fully aware there was a very strident tone, very critical, very aggressive, perhaps even sounded arrogant. I was very aware of that. And I was aware that it was going to piss people off and hurt people—people would feel hurt, rather. But I sent it anyway. And yes, quite a lot of people apparently were not happy at all. But I still to this day do not regret sending it. It was a soul choice.

I was tuning in to the... There was an antinomy there—to write it that way, to write it another way, to send it, to not send it. So it was soul that was guiding me, really. Even though at that time my understanding of all that was much less clear to me, much less articulated, much less explored, it was really soul that was guiding me. And I fully accept that I was in a way neglecting other moral values and virtues through the tone of the letter. But somehow it seemed necessary to write it in that way, in that tone. So I accept the guilt of neglecting those other values in the way that I wrote it.

Now if all this sounds... maybe for some people, again, who are not that experienced in actual soul-making dharma practice—I know there are some people who have listened to loads of talks, maybe all the talks on soul-making dharma, but actually haven't practiced much at all, or not in any way that it's really taken off and made a big impact on their being and practice. Maybe touched by the talks, or for whatever reason they're listening, maybe heard other people talk about it. But if you're in that camp, and this makes you... I think if you've done a lot of practice, this idea of soul-making practice, this idea of approaching ethics with soul-making sensibility and conceptual framework and practices, it won't alarm you.

There may be some people who just say, "Oh, I'm really not sure, I'm really not sure. How do I know I can trust that?" The practice hasn't matured enough to give you that trust in the whole paradigm yet. And maybe then an experiment. If you're really interested in the question, "Can I trust this? Is this a way forward?"

If you're really interested in the question, just take the trouble to do a little experiment: here's an ethical choice, and practice sensing with soul with regard to that ethical choice. As I said when I introduced it, either through an image, an imaginal figure that comes up, or through the values and virtues involved as ideal images. Practice sensing with soul that way in regard to that ethical choice, without carrying out the action that practice implies or suggests, without carrying out that choice, unless the same conclusion as what the soul-making practice suggests is provided via whatever your usual mode of approaching and judging ethical choices is.

You understand? So you're not actually doing anything different. You're not doing or choosing anything different than you would usually do or choose. But you're adding this practice. And do that many times with many different situations and many different kinds of choices. And see what happens.

If you don't really care, you're not going to bother to do that. But if you do care, if you're actually really interested in this question—can I really trust this with regard to ethics? Shouldn't we have another basis in ethics? Surely we can't put soul-making as a basis for ethics. There must be ethics as a basis, then soul-making. Surely. Especially

when I hear you talking about all those weird images you have, Rob, of devouring and devouring beloveds and blood everywhere and ritual slaughter and all that—surely we must put ethics first and then the soul-making.

So if you're really interested in that question, actually do some experimentation on your own, as I've suggested. Do that many times in many different ethical situations and see. And see if what happens is you don't learn to trust that actually the soul-making could be a basis for the ethics. You'll know for yourself, and you won't have done anything differently in the course of the experiment. You're not being asked to do anything different than you would have done anyway, or chosen anyway.

One of the modifications, a very central modification that the soul-making Dharma paradigm brings, as we said in regard to the Augustine example and others, and also Augustine's example of the cosmic order, was that it's no longer the thing or the action in itself, universally, that is decreed right or wrong, valuable or not valuable, ethical or not. It's the question of whether it's ensouled and ensoulable. This is really important.

Yesterday we talked about the whole notion of this post-Protestant Reformation affirmation and elevation of ordinary life—work and production and family and children. Historically, there was this equalization of ordinary life, where it was prior to that perhaps seen as less valuable than a life obviously devoted to and consecrated to God. Then there was historically, post-Reformation or with the Reformation, this equalization of ordinary life, this affirmation and elevation of it.

Originally, historically, we were seen as taking part in God's plans. So it mattered how we approached that, that we saw our ordinary life and our work and our family as really taking part in God's plan. And that plan eventually was connected with this more horizontal cosmic order. But anyway, we were taking part in God's plan. And over time, it became just ordinary life without any reference to God. Ordinary life was seen as valuable, as worthwhile, as in itself not just okay but important, as qualifying as the good life. But the reference to God had gone. It was a historical sort of evolution, devolution, development.

Now, with soul-making Dharma approach, what we're saying is it's not that ordinary life is or isn't worthwhile or good with a capital G or beautiful in itself, but it's how we sense it and how we sense the things of ordinary life—family, work, children. Are we sensing them with soul? Because when we are, then they're rooted in a sense, in our sense, our palpable sense of divinity, Buddha nature, whatever you want to call it.

But the ontology there is not simply objective and not simply subjective. So it's not in the thing itself as a universal—the value resides universally in this thing for everyone, and that's just true. It's in the sense of the sensing of the soul. It's in the soul-making sense. And that gives us the sense of divinity. But that sense of divinity is also neither simply objective nor simply subjective. Different ontology.

So in a way, we're not really making a statement about ordinary life or family life and its values. What matters is the relationship. What matters is, is it sensed with soul? And that's what makes it worthwhile, what makes it qualified as living a really worthwhile life.

The soul is more than the heart. That's what makes it beautiful in that way. So we're not saying for or against ordinary life or family life or anything like that. That's important. What's important is that it's sensed with soul—that's the guide for how to live, what to live for, what's worthwhile. This speaks to the bigger question of ethics.

So we just said, neither simply objective nor simply subjective. That's the ontology that's wrapped up in all this, or that's underpinning all this.

We could leave things there, but we might go a little further and extend into a slightly different connection here. With the risk and probability of actually leaving things a little inconclusive—but I still think it's worth exploring—we've been considering ethical values, but we can also consider aesthetic values, or beauty itself as a value too.

I want to explore this now. I've spoken about it before and written about it recently, which will be published sometime in the future. In both talking about it and writing about it, I've emphasized how important and instructive it is to actually inquire into beauty—our notions of beauty and our sense of beauty. How important and instructive that is with regard to soul-making dharma and practice. How intimate the connection is there.

So beauty is a value too. What's the ontology of beauty?

Again, William Stace and others can jump right in and say, "Well, the fact that you can't prove that this or that thing is beautiful, the fact that people don't agree, doesn't mean—does not imply—that there doesn't exist an objective independent truth to beauty."

Some people also nowadays would like to say that values, ethical values, are illusions, actually. There are different ways of saying that, different explanations for why they think this. They might say there's no such thing as beauty, really. What there is is a sense of pleasure.

And Hartman and others would say, "Well, beauty exists for human beings, just like values exist for human beings."

In Charles Taylor's words, just as our best account of material reality includes things like quarks—our current best account includes things like quarks to talk about and explain how material reality is and what it is—our best account of our humanity and our human concerns must include things like values and beauty. Because without them, without those notions and without that kind of vocabulary, it's not just hard but actually impossible to choose and to navigate in life.

We touched on this before. I might have an idea that it's all just atoms or whatever, or even that I'm choosing this because it's pleasant or unpleasant. But that's not really what's happening—it's not really the best account of what's moving me in this or that situation, or how I choose.

So there are different ontologies with regard to beauty: whether it has independent existence, whether it's completely an illusion, or whether it's neither wholly created by my way of looking nor fully, objectively, independently there. It's not just in the eyes of the beholder, but nor is it completely in the object alone. It's create-discovered. Again, this kind of alternate ontology. Alternative ontology.

Remember, quarks are participatory too. So the whole thing gets a little more—hmm, that's interesting. I'm not sure what the degree of prevalence is, but certainly a lot of people who really think hard about quantum physics—a lot of physicists don't think hard about quantum physics, but for the people who do—there's some portion that takes seriously the notion that quarks and everything else that is so-called material is participatory. As I said, it doesn't exist independent of the observer, and how it is and what it is and where it is all depends on the observer.

So it's an alternative ontology—this neither subjective nor objective, fully, simply. But it may not just apply to things like values and beauty. It may also apply to material things, as we've talked about.

And whatever the ontological status of beauty is, and of values—these things are deeply important to the soul. And somehow they're communicated soul to soul. Beauty can be communicated soul to soul and shared between souls. And a sense of value. And the beauty of value as well.

How wonderful, how amazing this possibility of communication. How wonderful, how amazing the depth to which we can care about these things, to which we feel they're important.

So it might be that there's a kind of ontological middle way with regard to beauty that's actually pretty similar to the imaginal middle way. And that's similar to one of the possible ontologies—the same kind of ontological middle way regarding values. That would be different, or in some ways of construing it, that would be different than Hartman's idea of a firmament of values objectively existing. But actually it could still be made congruent. It could still be made congruent.

But it depends on our notion of what the mind is.

It's interesting, too, if we just reflect a little bit on our culture, or where our culture is at, regarding ontologies of three different domains: mathematics, ethics, and aesthetics.

With regard to mathematics, I think most people in our Western culture would agree that there are independently existing mathematical truths, and also that there is a difference in human beings' innate talent to understand those truths and to realize those mathematical truths. Some people are obviously much more trained than others, and we trust those people who are trained more than we trust people who are not trained with regard to what's true in mathematics. These mathematical truths are widely regarded as independently true, whether you're a mathematician or not.

With regard to ethics, it's quite a bit more complicated. If we think about this question of ethos—of what's a really worthwhile life, what's a really beautiful life—then it seems almost fundamentally given in our Western culture to say there's no independent truth about that. No one can tell you what's a worthwhile life, what's a beautiful life. So there's quite a strong view that ethics, in that larger sense about what is a worthwhile life, what is really good—there's no independent truth to that.

When we shrink the domain of ethics down to the question of right and wrong, then people often say there is an independent truth. There is a truth here about what's right and wrong. The very fact that there's so much argument about what's right and wrong for so many questions and issues should make us wonder whether our aggressive belief that there is a right or wrong is actually tenable.

With regard to talent, I think most people would probably believe that some psychopaths or other people who have a mental illness are not capable, or much less capable, of recognizing right and wrong. But in regard to the area of ethics that has to do with

what's worthwhile, what's a worthwhile life, what's a beautiful life, the idea of someone being more talented in that domain or being better trained in that domain—it's not universally accepted at all. It's probably universally dismissed.

Mathematics, ethics, aesthetics—then again it gets really interesting. It seems to me that with classical art—figurative classical art, literature, music, classical music, classical literature, classical architecture—people are often willing to admit there's an independent truth there, but say, "I'm not capable of judging it because I leave that to the experts." So we agree that there's a training possible there, there's maybe talent possible in ascertaining these things, and there must be an independent truth, interestingly. And the expert knows that independent truth.

When it comes to more contemporary art, then it gets really, really more complicated and messy in a way.

Here's an interesting thing, I think: if one cares really deeply about art—and by art I mean all the arts—if one cares deeply about art, then one's relationship to art is actually related to what one wants art to do and to affect. So what do I—if I really care about art, I'm looking to art for something. I want it to have certain effects. I want it to do something in my soul, or maybe even in the world, if I really care about it.

And that question of what I want it to do, what I want art to do in my being or hopefully in other beings, that question is related to ethics in the sense of what I consider good, what I consider is a life worth living. It's connected to my sense of dimensionality and maybe even divinity.

So if I care deeply about art, I care deeply about what I want art to do. I have certain things that I want art to do, to effect. And that's related to my ethics in the larger sense—my sense of what's good, what makes life worth living, my sense of dimensionality and all that in existence. Maybe my sense of divinity, even if I don't use that word—sacredness.

And maybe then, if all that's there, I tend to harbor a view that tends towards a sense of the independent existence of truths regarding both ethics and aesthetics. If I care deeply about art, care deeply about what art does and what it affects in my being and hopefully in others' beings, and that's related to my sense of what's good, what's worthwhile, what's deep, what's really meaningful, what's really important in life—then it's often the case that I harbor, even if I conceal it a little bit from others, a view that tends towards more the notion of the independent existence of truths about both what is ethical in the sense of meaningful and what constitutes a life worth living, and also what's of value aesthetically.

So personally—and I've said this before—I cannot agree that the collected works of John Coltrane are equal in value to the collected works of the Smurfs, or even the collected works of Britney Spears, or whatever. I just can't agree, really, if I'm honest. I can't agree. To me, there's a whole different order of value—aesthetic value, which touches on spiritual value, which touches on ethics.

And what I want John Coltrane—when I hear his music, when I'm open to his music, what it does to me, what it can do to me—is totally related to my sense of existence, my sense of soul. It's totally related to my sense of what makes life worth living, and my sense of God, and my sense of dimensionality. The ethics and the aesthetics are connected here, if I care deeply about art, and I tend towards a more realist view of independent existence of value there.

I really cannot agree, if you're going to say, the Smurfs are just as valuable as John Coltrane.

But it's complex, because there seems to be also a kind of taboo more widely about asserting an independent truth regarding the aesthetic worth of something that's non-classical. I mean, you get sometimes the immature "oh, that's shit, that's shit." Usually it's just because someone's unfamiliar with some form or some kind of new contemporary music or contemporary art. But usually the person that says that—art is not that important to them. It's just "shit." It's not coming from a place where art is actually really important to them, something that they spend a lot of time opening themselves to and resonating with and feeling. It's just that something's unfamiliar, so they just say "shit." They're not trained in a way.

So I don't know—mathematics, ethics in both senses, in the wider sense that we've been trying to open up here: what makes life worthwhile? What makes life really meaningful? What's a life worth living? What is the beautiful life? What is really good that I should aspire to? And in the smaller sense of right and wrong. And aesthetics—the value in art is just a part of aesthetics, the question of value in art and whether that has independent objective existence.

There's a kind of confusion, I find, when you look at the culture and where we are in the culture with these things. Why am I bringing this up? Partly just because of the interesting connection in ontology between—we talked about mathematics in the realm of ideas and ideation and imagination and values. We've talked about ethics, ontology, and then the corresponding ontologies of beauty. To me that's just interesting.

But I'm also bringing up the cultural question of where we are, where we tend to be, our society, the kind of views that are prevalent around all that. Because soul-making Dharma is born now, at this time, in our culture. And so it's born into a set, or a soup really, of ontological and epistemological views and beliefs and questions and possibilities, but also unquestioned assumptions and rigidities and all kinds of things. So it's quite interesting and relevant to also reflect or kind of get a sense of where the culture is on these questions of ontology and epistemology with regard to different domains—mathematics, ethical domains in two senses, and aesthetics.

Because it may be that someone listening to all this, or someone listening to even previous talks before the ethics ones, thinks, "Well, all this soul-making Dharma business and soul-making practice, it's a bit elitist, isn't it? I mean, you have to have done all this other practice and understand this, and you're talking about all this sophisticated philosophy and psychology and Dharma understanding. Isn't that all a bit elitist?" And there's a certain kind of reaction in relationship to that born in a culture.

Then we say, "Well, if you're trying to propose a soul-making Dharma approach to ethics, then that's really elitist. You're expecting too much from people. Only a very elite few would be able to do that."

So it's interesting. You think, "Okay, well, if that's the case, why is it not like mathematics, where you would give the ethical questions to experts—elite, those who are trained—or train yourself?" And epistemologically speaking, giving something to an expert or relying on expert opinions—as I pointed out sometime or other in a talk, that's a kind of epistemology as well. We do that all the time with science. We do that with medicine. You know, if the doctor tells me, "Yeah, your cancer has come back," how do you know? "Well, this and this and this, the blood tests..." or whatever. "This is the probable prognosis." I'm relying on the expert opinion, and we do that all the time in lots of fields, primarily medicine and science, but as I said, also classical art and classical literature. Someone says, "This is good," so yeah, probably it is good.

But what about doing that with ethics? It's not that simple. We acknowledge, as I said, for mathematics and for aesthetics that there are experts and they've probably had a long and difficult training that's necessary to reach that level of expertise, and maybe they had some innate talent or dispositional propensity to that area. And we give those questions and those issues to them.

Well, one of the reasons we don't do that with ethics as well is because it affects—it is going to affect my life and my choices much more directly, it seems, than questions of aesthetics or mathematics. I can't avoid it like I can avoid mathematics, and I can even avoid art to a certain extent. I mean, soul-making practice is not something anyone else can really do for you anyway. It's your personal practice.

But maybe politically speaking, socially speaking, in issues and matters that affect everyone—so for example, Heathrow expansion, or they're talking about this HS2 rail line, high-speed rail line linking the south and the north of England, supposedly to more equalize the relative wealth and economic growth in the North and South, where it hasn't been equal so far. But while they're in the process of even beginning to build this HS2 railway line, high-speed railway line, it's decimating ecological reserves and nature reserves, some with endangered species and all kinds of things, felling lots of trees. Or as I said, Heathrow expansion. These kinds of issues that will affect a lot of people, or maybe even everyone.

Is democracy the best way of deciding? I touched on this, I think, in the *Cedar and Soul* talk. Maybe, maybe not anymore. I don't know. In a world of equal democracy, but there's Facebook and Google and who knows who tracking my preferences and opinions online and then feeding me both information and marketing in line with my history and my propensities and not opening me up to other views. On top of which there's the spreading of fake news, there's Russian cyber influence and who knows what else, there's the whole unrestrained global capitalist market, global market capitalism, and advertising in a way promoting sometimes the lowest common denominator of desires.

Even decisions about what appears on television—how much does that truly emerge from democratic processes? And can such processes be trusted anymore? For numerous reasons, I believe they cannot. Partly this stems from ethical grounds: as I've explored throughout this extensive talk, we have essentially lost our foundation for ethical thinking and ethical discernment. We've certainly lost the ground—indeed, we've lost even the question itself and the space—for ethics in its larger sense. I mean the profound questions of what constitutes a worthwhile life, what is good, what is beautiful. What is a beautiful life? We have simply lost this entirely.

Given this loss, is handing these decisions to the people through supposedly equal democratic processes really the wisest course anymore? I honestly don't know. It's obviously an extraordinarily complex question.

If everyone were trained in sensing the soul and educated in virtue ethics—approaching the soul through that pathway—then democracy and these decisions would be fundamentally different. These questions about what is worthwhile, what is beauti-

ful, what is truly important, what makes life worth living—they do bear significantly upon political, social, and economic questions. So if everyone were trained in opening that sense and skilled in discernment, democracy would be an entirely different phenomenon.

In Plato's *Republic*, one of his major texts, he describes an ideal society governed by a kind of spiritual elite—specially trained and dedicated individuals who make the important decisions. This is genuinely dangerous territory for Western culture and society, a dangerous and difficult idea, repugnant to most people when they consider it: the notion of a spiritual elite. But is democracy really in such a healthy state anymore? For many different reasons, I'm not certain it is.

I'm not sure what the answers are. But yes, in Plato's *Republic*—which reads almost like a fantasy novel, a utopian counterpoint to George Orwell—there exists this spiritual elite that educates and establishes a hierarchy of moral purposes. But what would it look like if that hierarchy related to sensing the soul rather than to particular activities in themselves? Quite complex territory.

I should also note that it's not as though we don't already have elites governing our democracies. Consider the ultra-wealthy: thirteen individuals possess wealth equivalent to that of roughly fifty percent of women in the developing world—I can't recall the exact statistic. These ultra-rich individuals and corporations already determine laws and policies within our supposedly democratic systems. Or consider political leaders like Trump, Putin, or even Boris Johnson, who demonstrate both willingness and ability to override, disregard, or circumvent democratic processes entirely.

So while we maintain this ideal of democracy, it's sagging at best and riddled with significant holes. I don't claim to know the answers to any of this. The idea of a spiritual elite is both repugnant and alarming to me as well. But who do you want wielding power? It's not as though elites aren't already running things at this moment.

These are simply questions I'm raising—opening territory that proves more inconclusive than conclusive.

It would be wonderful if we were all taught and trained to develop practices—if not soul-making, then something similar that helps us discern, navigate, relate to, and remain truly alive and sensitive to questions within this much larger conception of ethics. What constitutes the beautiful life? What makes a life beautiful? What is genuinely worthwhile? In what can I anchor my ethics? What sense of another dimension can ground my ethics—not merely my understanding of right and wrong, but also my sense of what is worthwhile and beautiful?

It would be wonderful if we were all trained to develop practices like soul-making dharma or something analogous that assists us in that territory, in that domain—practices that help the soul, help the mind and heart become sensitive, navigate skillfully, and possess a reliable compass. Just as most of us in Western societies ideally receive training in mathematics, reading and writing, logic to some degree, and now even computer skills as part of standard education, with mindfulness meditation increasingly taught in schools.

Part of me believes it's a complete fantasy that society could ever reach a place where these kinds of practices, tools, approaches, and ways of thinking—not necessarily soul-making specifically, but something similar—would enable our beings to bring our sensitivity, discernment, deep soul, and profound intelligence to bear on this domain, on these essential questions. In some ways, I think it's an utter pipe dream.

Yet we have established these other forms of training as cultural norms, and that establishment required considerable time. I'm uncertain whether mindfulness in schools has yet become standard, but it may well be soon. So who knows? Perhaps it's not such an impossible dream after all.

And perhaps we need not wait for the entire culture to adopt something or for it to become culturally established. We can begin ourselves.

And obviously, for ourselves, we can find out for ourselves: what does this do to my image of ethics? What does it do to my sense of existence and my sense of navigating choices in life, responding to ethical situations, responding to social, political, economic issues, environmental issues? What does it do to my whole sense of myself and my life and the possibilities of my life?

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 233

The Image of Ethics (Part 6 - An Inconclusive Conclusion, or A Prolegomenon)

Rob Burbea · 58 min

In this concluding yet open-ended exploration, Rob Burbea addresses potential concerns about soul-making dharma's approach to ethics while emphasizing that any ethical system, including the Five Precepts, has inherent limitations. He critiques the complacency that can arise from relying solely on traditional Buddhist precepts, noting how contemporary Buddhism was late to address climate change despite its ethical foundations.

Burbea proposes three developmental stages for integrating ethics with soul-making practice: first, establishing the Five Precepts as a foundation; second, allowing soul-making practice to naturally expand one's ethical range and sensitivity; and third, developing sufficient trust in sensing with soul to use it as a direct basis for ethical discernment. He emphasizes that values are intrinsically woven into imaginal practice, with hierarchy of values being a natural human phenomenon rather than an imposed system.

The talk addresses concerns about freely available teachings, drawing parallels with historical cautions around emptiness instruction. Burbea stresses that his approach integrates ethics from the beginning, avoiding the dangers of separating relative and absolute truths. He concludes by acknowledging these as ongoing questions rather than definitive answers, inviting further careful development of soul-making dharma's ethical dimensions.

I think it may be wise—or certainly helpful in a number of ways and for different reasons—to say a few more things after everything we've explored regarding ethics and soul-making so far. The *Sensing with Soul* talks, the *Image of Ethics* talks—and I emphasize those words "so far," as I've said before.

To me, these are endless subjects, endless inquiries, and they really should be endless inquiries—an active process. So whatever I've said now, as I mentioned at the beginning of the *Image of Ethics* talks, represents merely a snapshot of a process and evolution. I hope that others, when they've digested everything—and that's a prerequisite for soul-making Dharma—when they've truly digested soul-making Dharma practice and what's been said so far around ethics, may be able to contribute in a very careful and rigorous way. In an intelligent and soulful way, with integrity—moral integrity—they can contribute to the further evolution of the whole soul-making Dharma logos, and particularly this branch, this domain around ethics and soul-making Dharma.

What I'm going to say now is not really conclusive. It's not really a conclusion in any definitive way. You could say these are more preliminary remarks. You could hear this more as an introduction to the whole *Image of Ethics* talks. Some of what I'll say today is, in fact, just reminders of things I've already said, but because there's been so much covered, it's easy to lose track of much of it.

Part of the reason for offering this additional piece now is because some people may have listened to *Sensing with Soul* and *Image of Ethics*, or other material within soul-making, and feel quite confused or even concerned about what they're concluding are the implications or probabilities that emerge from what's been said. I think it's worthwhile addressing that.

I also want to remind people that when talks get posted on Dharma Seed, there's usually a caveat, a warning, user guidelines that say it's probably not a good idea to listen to certain talks until you've really digested X, Y, and Z. In the case of these talks and the *Sensing with Soul* talks, unless one has truly digested—not just intellectually, but in practice as well—the principles of soul-making dharma and its practices, not just played with them a little bit, but really gained a sense of what the authentic imaginal is like, the terrain of it, listening to these talks beforehand will highly likely give only partial understanding, probably misunderstandings, and naturally give rise to all kinds of concerns.

We post these notes, but I know for a fact that a good percentage of people simply ignore them and listen anyway because the title looks interesting.

The first thing to say—and this is something I've emphasized before—is that I believe any ethical system will be incomplete. It will have its strengths and weaknesses, but it will always have shortcomings and inadequacies. I think this applies to any ethical system that anyone anywhere in the history of humanity has offered, developed, established, or based their life upon. This includes whatever we've said so far about sensing with soul and soul-making dharma and practice as an approach to ethics, as forming a kind of ethical system.

Any ethical system will be incomplete, will have its strengths and weaknesses, places where it doesn't reach far enough or proves inadequate. This includes the soul-making dharma approach to ethics. It includes sensing with soul. It's really, really important to understand this—not just about what I've offered so far around ethics, but about any system, any ethical system.

I include absolutely Buddhist ethics, and particularly the Buddhist Five Precepts. They're wonderful, fantastic, and they have shortcomings and inadequacies. They have strengths and weaknesses. I would even extend this to those who keep more precepts—ten precepts, or the monastic Vinaya with its 236 precepts or whatever number exists in the Theravada monastic Vinaya. Even with all those precepts, all those laws and rules that can't be broken, all those guidelines, there's still the current—what feels like totally entrenched and unquestionable—current of patriarchy. You see this reflected in the ongoing battle around validating nuns' ordination, the general tenor of patriarchal hierarchy that runs through monastic life and the monastic sangha, despite all those precepts, manifesting in many other ways as well.

So I include sensing with soul, soul-making Dharma and practice as an approach to ethics, as a system for ethics—it's not going to be perfect. But neither are the precepts and approaches of Buddha Dharma, I would say.

One of the issues with Buddha Dharma and the Five Precepts is the idea of just reducing suffering. "As a Buddhist, I'm just interested in reducing suffering. That's what I care about. That's the primary thing. That's the orientation of my life. That's how we think about everything." With those two things together—the primacy of the view that the primary intention is to reduce suffering (suffering of self and other, all beings, the bodhisattva vow and everything), that view and the Five Precepts—it's very easy to slip into a kind of complacency. "Oh, it's all sorted, ethics is sorted, because I've got the Five Precepts, and I've got this intention as a Buddhist to reduce suffering, and that's the most important thing." Very easily, one can simply tick the box of ethics and *sīla*: "That's done. All I need to do is take care that I'm keeping the precepts, and the whole philosophy of it is complete. I don't really need to think about it much anymore."

There's a kind of complacency—or rather, kinds of complacency—that creep in. They're very, very dangerous and, I would say, very common within the world of Buddhism.

So there are many issues with the Five Precepts as an approach to ethics, many shortcomings. The shortcomings exist not only in the fact that people interpret the precepts very differently—hugely differently. The fifth precept about substances and alcohol. The third precept about sexuality. Heaven knows what people do with the fourth precept on speech.

The very formulation of the precepts creates a certain kind of limitation in our ethical thinking. It gets interpreted very, very differently. Vegetarianism, and so forth—so many different interpretations. Again, what does that show us? What does it imply? There are all these different interpretations, yet we feel secure in the notion of the five precepts, that we're on the right track ethically.

And it's not only because lots of so-called Buddhists break the precepts all the time—all the time, or quite frequently. Nor is it only because many Buddhists in power, as we've been hearing about and reading about in the news recently, as it has come to light, many Buddhists in power are actually abusing their power and breaking the precepts in doing so. That's not even the only issue. That's not only the reason why we need to wake up a little bit and expand the whole conversation about ethics, why the five precepts are not enough.

Nor is it only that, or even in addition to that, something in the Buddhist precepts and, as I've talked about before, in the kind of archetypes that rule over and through Buddhism but are not consciously recognized as archetypes and images that are ruling over Buddhism: equanimity, gentleness, non-harshness, that kind of kindness—all these images of what awakening looks like, of what a good Buddhist looks like, that are often semi-conscious. Semi-conscious is the power of that typical Buddha-rūpa image: sitting cross-legged meditatively with his eyes shut, very still, very calm, very unengaged. I've talked about all this before.

And what that does together—we've got the five precepts and these kinds of unrecognized precepts in their power and their pervasiveness, and what they do as images, as archetypes running through and ruling over Buddhadharma and its practitioners. What comes out then sometimes is a sort of passive aggression, for instance in speech and communication, because actually good Buddhists don't get angry and raise their voices. But what comes out is a kind of passive-aggressive abuse of power, passive-aggressive communication, and so forth. Or when people are getting a little upset, others kind of superciliously look at them as if, "Well, you're not really practicing well right now because you're not being really equanimous and calm."

But even all those put together—all those reasons: people interpret precepts differently, they break precepts, Buddhists in power abuse precepts together with an abuse of their power, there's a kind of passive aggression for which plenty of room and space is left in a kind of Buddhist shadow—not even all those together, important as they are, really important issues and questions, constitute the main point. It's simply the fact that the precepts are not enough as an approach to ethics, as a way of thinking about ethics,

as a way of taking care with ethics. They're just not enough, I would say. I certainly know one of my teachers would very much disagree, but I would say they're just not enough.

Thich Nhat Hanh's addition to each of the five precepts of adding a positive version—not just "don't take what's not given" but "practice generosity," not just "don't harm life" but "practice kindness," and so forth—this is really, really valuable. Really helpful, I think, in terms of opening things up further in a way that they need to be opened up. And for some people, that will be enough. That feels like it's enough. It's one approach to opening things up larger. But I still think there are larger questions here that need looking at and that need investigation.

Precepts are actually not values. So we talk about them as training guidelines, and the actual Pali is "I undertake the training guideline to refrain from whatever it is." That's the translation of the Pali, of the precepts: I undertake the training guideline or the training rule to undertake, to try to do this as a training rule. So it's very different from "thou shalt not."

But I would say they're still not values. A precept formulated like that is not a value. It's not a commandment either—it's somewhere in between—but it's actually more like a rule or a commandment than it is like a value. Now certainly there are values wrapped up in, or implied, or suggested by any of those five precepts, or we bring a sense of what values may be wrapped up in or implied or suggested in them. But actually, it's not very clear. They're wrapped up in them, but if you think your way through—I'm not going to unpack it for you, think your way through this—yes, values are implied. What values? What values are implied, and what are the limitations in terms of just connoting or pointing to that value through the formulation of a precept? It's not clear. It's simply not clear.

So I'll come back to this about the precepts. As I say, I don't think they're enough. And one of the indications that they're not enough, as I've started talking about in *The Meditator's Revolutionary* and *The Necessity of Fantasy*, one of the indicators that they're not enough is simply if we ask the question: why is it that Buddhists...

came so late to the party addressing climate change? Why so late? And I mean that as a real question—there's a real question there, not just a criticism. Why? Why so late? But really, why?

What was it, or what is it, in Buddhist practice and teaching and thinking and formulations—the way we think about ethics and the way we frame ethics and the limitations of the way we think about ethics—that meant that probably of all the major religions, it

was contemporary Buddhism that was the latest in really stepping up? Thankfully it's really beginning to change now, but it's taken quite a lot of work from a number of people. But this is a real question. Why? Why so late? Why were the Christians already there first and others? What was going on?

What was there in the way that we were thinking about ethics and thinking about practice and thinking about liberation and thinking about the world that actually wasn't picked up? Some of the teachers, when interviewed by David Loy years ago, some of them like Joseph, were just honest enough to actually really question themselves: "Yeah, that's interesting. I don't know. Why haven't I thought about that?" And even then, the galvanization is slow. Even when it's pointed out—why are we not thinking about it?—even then, there's a real question there.

This is part of my questioning: is it enough just to fall back on the five precepts, just to rest on the kind of presumed safety, the presumed laurels of the five precepts?

Someone asked why we don't have the five precepts as a ceremony when we begin soulmaking retreats, that it would help them feel safe. I think this is something we really have to listen to. Hopefully in future soulmaking retreats we can do that and create a space at the beginning of retreats for a ceremony to really invoke and establish the five precepts and give them a really central and sacred place.

To me, I think that's important. And for some people, it will help them feel safe. That's important—it's important that people feel safe. But to me, there would be a grave error and a grave shortcoming and a grave disservice to both the Dharma and certainly to soulmaking Dharma if we just stopped there. "Okay, that's the ethics piece that we're resting on." It's not enough.

So yes, I think it might be important to establish that as a ceremony in future retreats. Sometimes there's so much to get through that it gets squeezed out. There's also the case that at Gaia House we have a kind of legacy because of certain teachers. Since Gaia House was created, there was a real tenor of frowning on ceremonies and not having any ceremonies for anything at all. So at Gaia House we're a little bit battling that history and legacy. Even to have the ceremonies that we do is already sort of pushing the envelope, but I think that might be important because it is important that people feel safe. However, it's not enough. It's really not enough.

I think if we do have a ceremony, it should also be seen that it's a preliminary. I was thinking recently about how people approach the area of ethics and its relationship to soulmaking dharma and soulmaking dharma practice. So often with Buddha Dharma, you get taught the ethics first and say, "Okay, let's agree to that, and then you practice."

Ideally, that's what you do. Here are the five precepts, and then you practice. As I think I shared once, that's how it worked for me. I just heard them—first Dharma talk ever—it made complete sense, just immediately took them on, changed my life quite drastically, and then got into meditation immediately after that.

For a lot of people that isn't the case. But still, I think it might be—and I'm not sure if this is right, so I'm kind of thinking out loud here—it might be that for many people, the start of soulmaking practice comes through other dharma practice. Soulmaking dharma practice, just like other dharma practice, should be resting on and should be really taking for granted the care for and the adherence to the five precepts. I think I said that in a podcast interview maybe a couple of times with different interviewers: it rests on the five precepts absolutely, but maybe we should make that a little more clear.

So that's a beginning. One starts, already has a basis in the five precepts and a basis in everything else that we usually ask for before people come on soulmaking dharma retreats: mindfulness, insight meditation, samādhi, some understanding of emptiness, certainly mettā and things like that, and energy body. And then one begins practicing and developing one's soulmaking practice, one's imaginal practice. And then one starts to see...

Soul-making practice, because values are one of the elements of the imaginal, they're actually implied and involved inextricably in any imaginal practice, in any sense of soul-making. Even if it's a so-called extra-psychic image with a sensing with soul with a tree, or with a landscape, or with whatever it is, ethics are involved.

Again, with the elements, sometimes you have to notice and think, "Oh, I didn't even notice that at first, that element." It's like your eyes getting used to the dark. "Oh, there's that there as well." Like, "I don't notice that I'm being loved," or whatever it is. So these elements—it's like one really has to get used to the terrain of soul, the landscapes of soul and the landscapes of the imaginal.

And then one starts to realize not only are values there, but actually, inevitably, soul-making practice will start expanding—not contracting—the range of ethics and the care for ethics, but actually expanding it, making it larger, more, certainly deeper and richer, but also wider. A greater range.

As I've talked about before, we start noticing the gaps in just the five precepts and start expanding the whole notion of what an awakened being looks like and talks like, what are the dominant archetypes that are operating and running things and ruling things and sending things only down certain channels and expressions and activism only down certain channels of "this is what they look like, this is the tone, this is what

we do, this is what we don't do." One starts to wake up to that and expand the range there. More becomes permissible in one's ethical stance, in one's ethical response and one's ethical actions.

And also the whole nature of the world starts to expand. "Oh, maybe I'm responsible for more ethically here because the whole nature of the world comes alive." So that may be a second stage.

First stage is just the five precepts as usual, alongside your regular insight meditation practice and what you know from there. Those are two platforms you start practicing with. And through the practice itself—through having proper, genuine, genuinely imaginal experiences and working with that, grappling with that and listening to teachings and trying to understand, having a range of sensing with soul experiences and all that—then something, you will see, something expands. Doesn't contract—expands. Is more demanding. There's a greater range. So that would be the second stage.

And then at a third stage, at some point, with enough practice—through lots and lots of practice experience with sensing with soul and imaginal and soul-making dharma, and lots and lots and more thorough and deep understandings, both practice experiences and understanding—we start to, I think inevitably, reach a point where we trust enough in soul-making dharma and practice that we trust that sensing with soul can actually become a basis for ethics through, as I've described in this Image of Ethics talk, through a sensing with soul with regard to values, to virtues, to ethical choices and situations.

So there are three stages there. We're not starting with the third stage of asking someone to buy into some whole ethical system that might sound very odd or strange or might raise some concerns. So you're not asking them to buy into that before these other stages.

As I say, I'm thinking out loud here. I'm wondering about order, what the order is. People often ask me in what order should I listen to talks, in what order should I... So I'm thinking out loud. I don't know what the order is for sensing with soul practice, for soul-making dharma. But that might be one way of thinking about it, just these three stages, very different from putting the ethics—in the soul-making dharma sort of understanding of ethics—putting that first. That would be kind of ridiculous, because people wouldn't really know, have an ability to do that, or know what we're talking about, and would easily be misunderstood, misinterpreted, all kinds of things.

So there are lots of questions about this. What's the order? What's a prerequisite for soul-making dharma practice? And so one question we still have—I don't think it's quite resolved yet—is exactly how much real understanding of emptiness should a person have before they really get into soul-making dharma. And I've said just briefly as sort of secondary comments, you know, "I'm not sure yet, I'm not sure yet," but in several conversations there are people who think one really needs to have quite a deep understanding of emptiness, or quite a sure understanding of emptiness. And I mean emptiness as I teach it, that really thorough emptiness, not just a little bit about the sort of "emptiness is impermanence" or "aggregates in time."

That's also a question, it's a parallel question. How much emptiness practice and understanding do people have? Should we stipulate or even demand that people have emptiness before they do soul-making practice, maybe before they're even allowed to hear soul-making teachings? I don't know. These are all open questions. I'm really not sure yet.

So some may have heard in the totality of the ethics talk so far, the Sila and Soul and the Image of Ethics, this thing about hierarchies of values, for instance, and I don't like the idea of lower versus higher. So a few things about that.

Remember, and perhaps I didn't make this clear sufficiently at all in the Sila and Soul talks, but Hartman was really addressing a different question than, say, Kant. And we are prone these days, as I'm trying to make very clear in the Image of Ethics talks—we are prone these days to approach ethics with immediately the question of what's right, what's wrong. "This is what I want from an ethical system. I want a stipulation about what's right and what's wrong."

And Hartman actually said no, the fundamental question is what is of value?

And that's a bigger question - what is really good with a capital G? What is the good, as the ancients used to talk about? What is a life that's really worthwhile? What is the beautiful life? And that's a bigger question than what's right and what's wrong.

Before you can answer the question what's right and wrong, what should I do, what ought I to do in this or that situation, you have to actually answer or look at the larger question of what is of value. It's not so much replacing one question with another, but providing a ground - a wider and deeper ground for the question "what ought I to do?" - with the wider and deeper question "what is of value?"

And then, this whole question, or this whole exploration of a hierarchy of values is necessarily called in when we ask that bigger question. And the question of what's right, what's wrong, sits within that bigger question. I hope that's something that the Image of Ethics talks makes clear.

And the fact is we do have hierarchies of values. You have them anyway. So again, it's just a bit like the soul-making Dharma and practice - just making clear what goes on for us as human beings anyway. Soul-making Dharma, or in relation to eros when we really love something, and in relation to ethics when we make ethical choices, when we're arguing with someone about right and wrong and it's just stuck - we actually have hierarchies anyways.

In a way, we're exposing something, and we need to talk about this because it's already there. And we need to talk about it because actually we need to expand the conversation, the range of conversation. What are we trying to actually ask and address and inquire into? What's the fundamental question here?

Because a person says, "I don't like this idea of a hierarchy of values." Okay, well think back, for example, to Augustine's hierarchy and the example he used - or the example we used of an example he used. He says justice compared to gold. He said these are both wonderful things. They both have value. They're both part of God's creation. And as such, both of them should be loved. But for Augustine, it's clear there's a hierarchy here. Justice has a higher value than gold, and we should orient that way. We should appreciate the hierarchy of values and love justice and gold according to their place in that hierarchy. In other words, we should love justice more than gold - gold, personal profit.

And then one can say, "Oh, I could use that personal profit for justice." Okay, but the point he's making here is for personally used material gain. So if you think you don't like hierarchies of values, then just use Augustine's example. Do you really disapprove of the idea that it's better to love justice over your personal profit that you would use for your personal use? Most of us, even if we find it hard to live up to sometimes, would say justice is the higher value. There's a hierarchy there. And we would agree with Augustine, maybe, that we should love according to that hierarchy. We should love justice over our love and our desire for gold.

So this is the kind of thing that's being pointed to. And just to ask yourself, if you have this objection to a sense of hierarchy - do you object to that hierarchy?

Or to take another example from Nikolai Hartmann. So he has two values: the value of altruism and the value of egoism, of selfish interest, of selfishness of interest. They're in a hierarchical relationship to each other. Altruism is the higher value. It's higher than selfishness of interest. Selfishness of interest is still a value. Egoism is still a value. We need to take care of ourselves and our own needs. But how do we know there's a hierarchy there? Or how can you sense if you already feel there's a hierarchy there? That's the more important question.

How does your heart respond to stories of altruism? Or when you witness great altruism? Are you not moved and impressed? And how does your heart respond when you just see someone just taking care of their own needs? It may not even be at the obvious expense of anyone else.

But the way these things touch our heart and impress upon our heart, the way our heart responds when we witness altruism compared to when we witness egoism, is already implying that we sense a hierarchy there.

Now, of course, you may not. But I think a lot of people—maybe it's universal, maybe it's just a cultural thing that's come post-Christianity—experience this. My point is more for you to introspect a little bit here. Just see: is your heart not more impressed upon, more moved? Are you not more impressed when you witness altruism compared to when you witness just some example of someone taking care of their own interests? Kind of egoism.

Hartman adds to this: yes, there's a hierarchy here, but if it's completely, utterly lopsided, and there's way too much altruism and almost no selfish interest, it's so imbalanced between those two hierarchies that it borders on stupidity and dysfunction. So yes, there's a hierarchy, but still there's a qualification that one is not at the complete expense of the other. Altruism is not at the complete expense of taking care of oneself, of egoism. So there's a hierarchy, but it's got other considerations that are woven into the sense of that hierarchy—if we want a kind of wisdom with regard to the hierarchy.

There may have been things, for instance, in the Soulmaking Dharma talks, or even in the Images of Ethics talks, where I talked about a certain value and it just didn't resonate for some people. Of course not. So again, maybe I just didn't make this clear enough: if certain values don't resonate, you know, they're just rarer values and they're not for everyone.

For example, what Hartman calls the value of nobility, noble-mindedness—in his sense of the word, the very particular usage he has of that word in an ethical context, in the context of values and virtues that we talked about in Soulmaking Dharma—really

means for him the opening up of the kind of vision or sensibility or realizational capacities of the culture at any time. Opening up the telescope lens wider, opening up the focus of the telescope lens wider as it looks on the firmament of values.

Remember, every culture, every person has a limited scope, and the noble-minded nobility with regard to values actually stretches that scope. Such a person begins to discern new values that the culture at that time hasn't sensed yet. Their antennae are more receptive. They're ahead of their time, in a way—in much the same way that Christianity itself now has become such entrenched values. Even if one isn't a Christian or isn't religious or objects to our inheritance from Christianity and all the wrong that's been done and this and that, we've still absorbed so much from Christian morality.

At its time, though, it was a novel value. Novel and noble value, in the sense that Jesus and the first apostles and disciples were really feeling into the ether, into the firmament of values, and picking up on a new set of values, or stretching of the values: love over law. The value of love over the value of biblical law, of Moses' law. So at that point, those who were sensible to that and preached that were embodying, manifesting the value, the virtue of nobility in Hartman's sense. Now, of course, it's just totally old hat, as I said. But there's a value in nobility. And some people have that calling and some people just don't relate to that at all.

Again, if I talk about higher values or use that language, it does not mean a higher value is at the complete expense of a lower value. So for example, we're talking about love of the remote. Love of the remote really means love of those in the future, but those most excellent in the future—those most likely able to offer something really beautiful to the world and really valuable to the world in the future, and caring for those people who one doesn't even know or meet, one might not even be sure if they get the message, et cetera.

Comparing that or contrasting that with love of one's neighbor, which is those around one, the everyday sort of interactions—and some people like Nietzsche, almost discovering the love of the remote and prioritizing that to the complete expense of the love of his neighbor... You know, I don't know. He eventually went mad, but it was probably a biological thing, an illness, a physical illness that affected his brain. But anyway, it was a mistake.

Sometimes, in fact, as Hartman points out, sometimes people discovering new things get a little extreme at times. They're out in territory where no one else goes, exploring ideas or creative projects, and it's all a little bonkers. And I think I know that territory a little bit from peers in my life—creative projects that one feels very alone with and, yeah, gets a little mad.

Anyway, the point is: if we make a hierarchy between those values, love of the remote is not, absolutely not, at the complete expense of love of the neighbor. To prioritize it completely would be a mistake. And secondly, it's not for everyone. That one. We could talk about other values. They're just not for everyone. It's fine. We're just talking about things that, you know, for some people, it might make more sense.

I seem to be caring about something else that I can't quite articulate. So putting out a teaching like this may be helpful for those people who will almost certainly be in a minority, but who have been grappling with trying to make sense of their own life and their choices. They seem to not be completely doing what standard ethics would suggest they do. It's like, "Oh, okay, we need to expand our thinking here." And it's not for everyone. So if it's not for you, just leave it.

We could give lots of different examples here. But even more importantly, I think—now from the Image of Ethics talks it should be clear, again, that it's not in the thing itself. Eventually we can just use the soul-making sense as our guide. So it's not intrinsically—if we take, for example, that love of the row is higher than love of one's neighbor or whatever—it's not intrinsically in the thing itself. We've emphasized this several times when we talked about the ontology of values in the Image of Ethics talks.

It's more that if I personally or you personally have developed your soul-making practice, you start to get a sense of: is this or that value soul-making for you? Some people will hear about certain values and it just doesn't resonate—it never will resonate. And for other people, they start to really get a sense that the soul is called in a certain direction.

And again, even if it is, it doesn't mean to follow that call or to prioritize that call at the complete expense and total disregard of another value that might seem lower in your personal soul-making sense of hierarchy. So this is really important. Eventually one can use one's own personal soul-making sense, and that's different than decreeing that this is for everyone a so-called higher value, and that is for everyone a so-called lower value.

Again, I'll be repeating myself. If that sounds alarming, and you think, "Oh, so it can just be anything you like, any whim—you can decide what's a higher or lower value," then you haven't understood yet the discipline and the demands of soul-making practice and understanding, the discipline and demands of a disciplined eros, disciplined sensing with soul.

And again, to repeat, we're putting out, exploring, unfolding, supporting ethics with a different ontology and a different epistemology, different than Hartman's, and different than usual ontologies and epistemologies that we're used to. Certainly different than the usual one of modernity, or of postmodernity, or of premodernity. We've gone into this before.

But as I said, even that might sound alarming to people. Let it go for now, if it sounds alarming. It's really important to trust your concerns and leave what sounds alarming or what you don't like, or better, discuss it with others. Really discuss it. And it might be that you leave that part alone—just leave it, just go back to what you feel you can trust ethically, what makes sense, actually what really makes sense to you.

More than feel comfortable—it's like we need to be stretched and challenged with ethics and not necessarily comfortable. But I mean what feels that you can trust ethically. Leave it. And if you're still really attracted to soul-making practice, get into the soul-making practice. And it's probable that that evolution I was talking about before, those three stages—you'll start to realize, "Oh, now the soul-making business is opening up my whole ethical outlook and questioning and sensibility and ethical demands on me and the range of that and the range of expressions and all that."

And then eventually, it will mature even more, and you will feel that you can trust your soul-making sense with regard to ethics. And you will feel hierarchy of values, but it's your personal hierarchy of values, and you will feel that you can trust that. There's no danger. We can't say, "Oh, everyone can decide for themselves, so this mass murderer could just decide that this is how..." We've been through all that.

But if it's alarming for you now, it just means you're not ready for it. Just leave it. Put it down. Come back to what you feel you can trust, both ethically and in terms of practice. If you feel drawn to soul-making, just get into it. And if you really develop it, if you put the time in and you love it and it develops, at some point there will be these stages of evolution that will open up and transform your relationship with ethics and ethical questions and ethical issues.

So really important, I think, to establish the imaginal practice first—practicing with the imaginal, the soul-making, sensing with soul practice first, if you want to, if you feel called that way. And so establish that first, before you can really even properly, I think, for most people, probably even assess these whole teachings about ethics now.

And I really mean imaginal practice. I don't just mean the use of the imagination in meditation. And I mean more than just some images coming or working with some images in meditation or in therapy or somewhere else where that image has felt very

healing, perhaps psychologically or whatever. I really mean imaginal in the sense of what we tried to outline—the aspects, the elements of the authentically, the genuinely imaginal, with all the elements and with all the ways it spreads and all that business.

So really establish that first and really get, as I said, familiar with that whole landscape of the imaginal. And then you see, "Oh yeah, there are values implicit there. And some of them—just the fact of what values are in place—are actually expanding and making demands and stretching your ethical range and sensibility and inquiry." And there's the fullness of intention there. It's not that we're in the grip of some selfish intention.

With the fullness of intention, there's an ethical safeguard that goes with it. And there's the imaginal middle way – we're not rarefying, we're not concretizing, mistaking images for reality and acting on them indiscriminately.

There's also a crucial distinction between eros and craving. Craving always wants to possess its objects, always needs to have more, and that more spreads horizontally, as we've been talking about. I want to possess more and more objects, more and more experiences, at the risk of disregarding ethical concerns. I don't care. And it's not even that I think I don't care – I just don't see. This is what craving does when it's not allowed to become eros.

Eros, as we talked about, opens up the imaginal, the vertical dimensions. It can get the more it wants in this endless opening up of one image. It doesn't need to have more objects, possess them concretely. It's getting what it wants through that opening up.

And the dharma, again, it's not literal, but it's refracted into life. So even the dark images – if there are images of killing and sacrifice and drinking blood and rampage and whatever it is – they're refracted into act or speech. They're metaphors. The image can stay what it is, but it refracts into something that ostensibly doesn't even look like it. So I can see all those soldier-warrior images that I used to have, how they have been refracted into my life through my teachings. My teachings have been, one could say from a certain point, warrior-like. I'm certainly not going to join the army, get a sword, hurt anyone physically or anything like that.

So, touching on something I said before, there's been a question with the whole soul-making teachings. Really, almost from the beginning, not quite, but almost from the beginning, I somehow felt a duty when I started teaching soul-making and imaginal work. I somehow felt a duty in putting it out there in the Dharma context, and shaking things up, and asking questions, and expanding things. I felt a duty in doing that, a soul duty in doing that.

But quite quickly there came a question, and Catherine and I return to this question quite regularly: Should these teachings be freely available? I'm talking about the whole soul-making Dharma teaching, the imaginal teaching. They're just there on Dharma Seed, literally freely available. Anyone can listen. It's just open on the internet. You don't need to do anything. You just need to click on a button and you can hear all this material.

And is that appropriate? There are a number of reasons to ask: Should they be freely available? Or should there be a whole series of preliminary stages that we demand, require people to go through? Not even just suggest they go through, as we sometimes do, but demand that they go through before they can even listen to any teachings. Qualifications that they need to have to access the teachings and practices like it used to be in, for example, Tibetan Tantric teachings. And it's much less so these days, but still somewhat so. Before you can hear certain teachings, before you have access to the teacher, before you are given any practice instructions whatsoever.

So that's still an ongoing question. I'm not sure. I don't know. But I'm just sharing that this is a question that has been around for a while now and that we take very seriously as a real ongoing inquiry.

And, you know, historically, the same thing with regard to emptiness teachings. I think I shared this. You look at the old Mahayana texts and they say: don't teach emptiness to someone who's not excited about it, to someone who's not ready for it. We do that these days, certainly I do that, but I can see the wisdom in that teaching. What a difficulty it is when the person is not ready, when they're not excited, and when they jump to all kinds of conclusions just from hearing the emptiness teachings. I'm not even talking about ethics teachings, I'm talking about emptiness teachings.

And one of the things they jump to – this is what I shared a couple of times in this series of talks – is what does it imply about ethics? They hear about where emptiness might go, and they think, oh, that means I'm not going to care about anything, it means nothing matters, it means I'm not going to care about ethics because ethics must be empty, or blah, blah, blah. And as we said: no, no, no, no, no. Don't start at the end, start at the beginning. And the beginning is just these ideas about the flexibility of ways of looking, and there's this notion of fabrication. Both of them can start as really simple ideas. Papañca is more fabricated than normal consciousness.

Ways of looking, it's like this: simply compare mindfulness to non-mindfulness. Compare a way of looking that has emerged from some metta practice to a regular way of looking, or to when you're feeling grumpy or angry. Just really, really simple. Take it from there.

Take these two concepts, these strands of inquiry—ways of looking and fabrication—just take them for a ride and eventually see what they imply about ethics. In this way of approaching it, as we've said several times, the ethics is woven in from the beginning. You can't not see it. It's unavoidable. It's inextricably woven in.

In this way of approaching emptiness, there's never a division, never a separation between so-called relative and absolute—relative truth and absolute truth. Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings speak of the union of the two truths: conventional relative truth and ultimate truth. In this way of practicing emptiness, it's entirely obvious, as I said—inescapable, central at every level of the exploration of emptiness using this approach of ways of looking and fabrication.

So there's never any danger from the insights that come from this approach. There's never any danger of choosing the absolute over the relative, so to speak, or trying to justify some behavior, action, or speech through an appeal to the deeper truth of the absolute, of emptiness, or oneness.

If we approach emptiness in other ways or have different understandings of emptiness—that everything exists in the mind or that all is one—then danger can creep in. If everything is one, then no problem: it doesn't matter what we talked about before. It doesn't matter if this person dies or that person is miserable or if a whole ecosystem disappears—it's all one. You can't take away anything from the one. The one is infinitely one, no matter what disappears. Or if it's all in the mind, it's not a real thing in that sense.

So there are issues around emptiness teachings, but I think this way of teaching it has a really good safeguard, because the ethics is integrated from the beginning.

But again, just to say: these are questions, and they are questions with some history, if we look at the relationship of Buddhism and Buddhist teachers to teaching emptiness. You see this even in Prajnaparamita texts—core Buddhist texts—but certainly in many other texts. I'm pretty sure it's there with emptiness.

Now we have the same kinds of questions regarding who to teach soul-making dharma to. Should this material just be freely available, with all the instructions and examples and dharma ideas and philosophy? Should it just be freely available? I don't know. At the moment it is, but as I said, it's an ongoing question. It's something we take very seriously.

There's much in process now, and much that we're debating and thinking about as well. So I wanted to share this—as I said at the beginning, not conclusive remarks in conclusion, but more open-ended remarks, questions, and in a way, preliminary ones.

I hope that's in some way helpful. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 234

Practising with Death and Dying

Rob Burbea · 2h35

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines how we might approach death and dying through the lens of soul-making practice, moving beyond the typical cultural frameworks of impermanence, eternalism, or nihilism. Drawing from his own experience with terminal cancer, he explores how emptiness practice—particularly the realization of the unfabricated and the emptiness of time—can radically transform our relationship with death. Burbea introduces a sophisticated understanding of human relationships as multi-dimensional, involving both human-to-human and imaginal levels of connection that persist beyond physical death. Through a detailed account of a friend's journey with his diagnosis, he demonstrates how the question "Can this become soul-making?" can transform grief and loss into imaginal encounters of extraordinary beauty. The talk reveals how death itself can become image—not as metaphysical belief but as lived phenomenological reality—opening dimensions of love, meaning, and sacredness that make death not just bearable but beautiful. This approach offers practitioners tools for meeting death with soul, whether their own or that of loved ones, discovering possibilities for continued relationship and profound transformation of suffering.*

So tonight I'd like to offer to share just a few reflections on death and dying.

I suppose in our culture, primarily if people are going to broach the subject of death, there are a few primary or most popular directions through which they approach the subject.

One is, of course, just the fact of impermanence. The fact that we, our lives, like everything else, are impermanent. And that awareness, or the primacy of that awareness, is really spread throughout the culture, I would say. Somewhere I've said before, it seems to me it's the dominant theme in modern poetry, certain modern English poetry. Some way or another have to do with the poignancy of impermanence, the tragedy of temporal finitude, the ending of things, the fragility of things, the loss, the poignancy and heartache of separation and loss and the need to acknowledge that. This is part of life. This is what we will meet. This is what we will face. Our own and others' death. Of course, the cherry blossoms falling from the trees.

So there is, in the dominance of that theme in a lot of modern English language poetry, a lot wrapped up there. There's a sort of gentle encouragement to open to it, but there's also basically a whole metaphysical stance about what's important, about what's

real, about what's perhaps the only thing that's really real, about what it means to live life truly, openly, with an open heart, with open eyes. Of course, that's huge. Can we open the heart to that? Can we bear that poignancy, loss, separation from those we love?

Sometimes, whether it's in poetry or whether it's in the Dharma, this emphasis on impermanence can have a whole other level which is really a metaphysical level and a metaphysical stance and assumption of what the Buddha would call nihilism, what the Buddha would call annihilationism, and criticize very strongly, together with its opposite pole of eternalism, criticizing both very strongly as extreme views to be rejected and avoided. The idea that everything ends in death, that we disappear in death, that there's nothing left. It's a contrasting paired view that the soul just goes on forever, lasts forever in time.

But often, nowadays, even in the Dharma, there is this kind of undergirding in the drawing attention to the impermanence and the poignancy of loss and separation. It's undergirded, again, either explicitly or implicitly by a whole metaphysic, and a whole metaphysical assumption and position that's taken as truth, which is basically what the Buddha called nihilism, annihilationism. Then that's the end. There's a complete erasing of our existence. You can say, yes, well, the atoms that make up our body will be recycled, and whatever actions and speech we've done will somehow ripple out onwards in time. But basically there's a soil underneath there, a whole layer of sediment of nihilism.

But anyway, impermanence, one way or another, or in both ways, is one of the main, most popular, understandably, directions with which to open up and approach the conversation about death.

Another, much more in the wider culture and less in the Dharma culture, of course, is a kind of eternalism. So rooted in teachings about heaven and hell and existing forever in heaven and hell, maybe with some intermediate or rather provisional stopping over places like purgatory, where you get purified before going to heaven, where you'll stay forever or you'll stay forever in hell. And that's a kind of eternalism.

Not so popular these days in widespread culture, but still I think quite popular is the notion and belief in some kind of afterlife which lasts forever. And what has become fairly widespread, quite widespread, is that in this afterlife, which lasts forever, there is a reunion with one's family. And so, again, just tracing that historically, its beginnings can be traced in the 18th and 19th century. Someone called Samuel Lewis wrote a pic-

ture of life in Virginia in the USA at the time of Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson. And this was one of the things that was beginning to emerge then. So less this idea of heaven and hell, and more emerging this idea of an afterlife that the hell bit was dropped.

So the worst of all possible fates, hell, burning in hell forever, that was sort of shorn off things. And what was left was, for many people, this idea that after death we are reunited with our loved ones, with family. And this is still very popular. Of course, there are probably quite a few people for whom that very idea of being reunited with one's family forever is exactly a version of hell. It's all dependent, of course, but just tracing ideas is an idea of an afterlife, immortality somewhere. That's part of the again quite common themes or tropes or approaches to the question of death.

And then, of course, a third one in Buddhist circles would be reincarnation or more usually rebirth in Buddhist circles. And I've said this before, in the Pali canon view, rebirth, the whole teaching of rebirth was mostly terrifying. The idea of just literally endless, forever in time, just being reborn, getting ill, dying again, going through all the misery of people around, people you love dying, and just repeating that over and over again, maybe in more or less favorable rebirths, and a lot of the levels of rebirth, pretty miserable. Pretty miserable, not the level of comfort and ease and medical security that we have these days for the most part in the West.

So the whole teachings about samsara and endless rebirth was essentially terrifying. If you were really, really lucky, or rather if you had played your cards right, which you didn't actually know whether you had done in the past, somewhere in my infinite number of past lives, I may have been a really devoted meditator and exceptionally altruistic and maybe at some point that will earn me a rebirth in a high heaven for a while until I die from there and then I'm on the roulette wheel again.

So the whole teaching of samsara and rebirth in that sense was actually terrifying.

Nowadays, most Western Buddhists—and let's acknowledge it's a certain demographic even within Western society—are accustomed to relatively comfortable lives and security regarding illness. Even when we do fall ill, there's generally good care available. So the whole idea of rebirth carries a completely different flavor: "Oh great, we get another chance," or "It goes on for more," or "I wonder what I'll be next time," or "Maybe we'll meet again."

This gives rebirth quite a different tenor than it probably had in Pali Canon Buddhism when the Buddha was urgently teaching: get off that wheel, end rebirth. Can you not see this infinite roulette wheel—round and round and round—birth and

misery and death, birth and loss and death, birth and brief happiness and death and illness and sickness and old age and infirmity and loss and separation? Get off the wheel. Really staring at that infinite repetition was just horrifying.

So it carries quite a different tone and flavor in the modern Western notion among both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. This would be another typical approach to the question of death, certainly within Buddhist teachings, but I don't want to approach it from any of those angles tonight.

There's another possible approach—some of you will be familiar with ideas and recent discoveries in quantum physics. I've talked about this in another recent talk, though I can't recall which one. There's something called quantum entanglement. When two subatomic particles, perhaps two photons, become entangled, they're essentially connected to each other. If one has a certain quality—let's call it spin, an "up spin"—then the other will have a "down spin." They're entangled in that way.

But the fuller implication of entanglement is this: when something happens to one particle, it also affects what happens to its entangled partner instantaneously, even over massive distances. It's not that one partner photon signals the other—it simply happens instantaneously.

This idea emerged when Einstein uncovered it as an implication of quantum theory and declared it ridiculous. Two things troubled him: first, this seemed to involve instantaneous communication over vast distances—information appearing to travel faster than the speed of light, which was axiomatically impossible according to his theories. Second, and wrapped up with this, it meant that the object—the photon—doesn't exist as having this spin or that spin, this property or that property, until we observe it.

So there are two implications: first, that a subatomic particle's "thingness" is not defined before we observe it. It's not just that we don't know what it is while it remains a defined thing—it's actually not a defined thing. It's fuzzy, indeterminate, indefinite. It's not a thing as we call a thing. It's not a real thing. And second, there's this possibility of instantaneous connection across potentially billions of miles, light years and light years.

Einstein pointed this out, and Niels Bohr said, "Yes, that's actually right. We're going to call that quantum entanglement. That is a prediction of the theory." Einstein replied, "Well, that's ridiculous," for both reasons I've just explained.

This sparked a debate. Einstein, together with two other physicists, Podolsky and Rosen, wrote a paper in the 1930s with a very clever argument suggesting this was actually the downfall of quantum physics. It proved, they argued, that things could not be fuzzy before observation, could not be dependent on the observer or the way of looking. Things are things, independent of the way of looking.

It was a brilliant paper, but there was little anyone could do with it because they proposed an experiment to decide the matter. Later, an Irish physicist named David Bell —also very suspicious of this quantum idea that fundamentally, things don't exist before they are observed—proposed the actual experiment.

This notion was utterly ridiculous and deeply anathema to Einstein, Podolsky, Rosen, and especially to David Bell. He remained profoundly critical of this fundamental premise, insisting that "there's something rotten at the base of quantum physics."

Then, beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the early 1980s, a series of groundbreaking experiments emerged. Building upon Bell's theorem—a brilliant piece of theoretical work that proposed a way to test these quantum mysteries—researchers finally found a method to put these ideas to experimental scrutiny. A physicist in California, whose name escapes me at the moment, picked up Bell's theoretical framework and conducted experiments that seemed to actually refute both Bell's and Einstein's intuitions. The results suggested that, indeed, things are not definite—there are no independently existing things before observation.

When critics pointed out alternative explanations for these results, researchers refined their approach. Alan Aspect conducted more sophisticated experiments to close potential loopholes. Most recently, scientists performed the same type of experiment using light from two different quasars—ultra-high energy galaxies billions of light years away. This light originated near the birth of the universe, just after the Big Bang. Using such ancient light was meant to eliminate certain variables that might distort the results, though I confess I didn't fully grasp their technical explanation of why this was crucial.

Remarkably, all these experiments have consistently proven the same two fundamental points. First, objects—subatomic particles—are indeed not definite things. They are not things before observation. What they are and how they manifest depends entirely on the kind of observation, the way of looking. They remain fuzzy, indeterminate, indefinite—empty of inherent existence.

Second, these experiments prove that space is not what it seems. Across vast astronomical distances, two particles can be instantaneously connected with no signal traveling between them. The implication is staggering: what we think of and how we sense space is simply not real. Space itself, at some fundamental level, is an illusion.

Time also proves to be not what it seems. Many other results and experiments in both relativity theory and quantum theory have equally profound implications, shattering our sense of the independent existence of space and time. Our common-sense understanding of space and time—the way we typically think about them, what we assume about their nature—is not real. It is illusion. While exactly what's going on remains unclear, it's undeniably clear that our usual perceptions are illusory.

Space is not what it seems. Distance is not what it seems. Things can be intimately, instantaneously connected—entangled with each other across vast distances. Doing something here makes a difference over there. Doing something over there makes a difference over here, precisely because space is not what it seems.

One could certainly take these ideas and explore what they might imply about our notions of death and separation. However, I honestly don't know exactly what this implies regarding death and our experience around death and dying. So I'll leave that inquiry for now.

These are the four most conventional ways of approaching these questions. What I want to explore tonight is a more phenomenological approach—working directly with our experiences and what appears to us. A phenomenological approach involves inquiry and experimentation with our lived experience.

We could indeed pursue this quantum perspective further, because inherited beliefs and ontologies—and we are talking about ontology here—profoundly condition, shape, and limit our experience and what appears to us. Remember, the word "phenomena" means appearance. The ontology of space—does it inherently exist? The ontology of subatomic particles, allegedly the most basic building blocks of matter—what is their fundamental nature?

It may well be that if we begin questioning our inherited beliefs using insights from physics, this might open up our experience with death. Yes, it might. I'm simply not certain what exactly to extract from this beyond the most general notions of interconnectedness.

What I'd rather do tonight—what I'm going to do—is take a more phenomenological approach, starting directly with our experience and approaching inquiry from that foundation.

And especially the phenomenological approach as it pertains to, as it emerges from soul-making dharma and sensing with soul practices and openings.

So what is our experience when we approach death—our death, someone else's death, the whole question of death and dying—with the support of soul-making dharma, and through the modalities of sensing with soul and the kind of openings that sensing with soul brings?

In this phenomenological approach—as much as the phenomenological approach that has to do with ways of looking at emptiness—both of them recognize that ideas, logos, conceptual frameworks are always involved in our experience and that they condition experience. So there's always idea, conception, logos, conceptual framework involved in any experience, and it has a conditioning, shaping, fabricating and limiting influence on our experience. So an intelligent and more powerful phenomenological approach has to acknowledge that, has to recognize that.

And of course, it works the other way too. Our experience, if it's repeated enough and powerful enough, starts to change our ideas, our logos, our conceptions, conceptual framework. That's all part of the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic.

So this phenomenological approach, as much as it comes out of and is born by the sensing with soul approaches and openings, recognizes that ideas and logos are in our experience inevitably, and that they condition experience. It also recognizes the possibility of our flexibility with our ways of looking and with the ideas that are in the citta, in the way of looking at any moment, and the interest in that flexibility of ways of looking and the conception that's in there at any time, and what that does to experience.

This is really the tack that I want to take tonight.

In terms of ideas, of course, we must acknowledge that we have, or we are the bearers of, a mixed inheritance. As much as we are the bearers of a mixed inheritance with regard to ethics and values, with regard to ontology, with regard to epistemology, we inherit from the culture ideas and perspectives and the actual sense of things. And so with regard to death too, inevitably we also receive a mixed inheritance, a kind of hodgepodge of ideas.

I don't know if I'm making too much of this, but something came up the other day that I noticed when I was first diagnosed with cancer. Going to the hospital and going to the oncology ward for the first time—it was actually after my operation, so a few months after I was diagnosed—there was some talk, or there was a sign, a piece of paper talking about different departments within the oncology department. One phrase really struck me: "the end of life pathway"—the patient is on the end of life pathway.

Even now at the hospice, the hospice nurses talk about "end of life" like it's a phrase. And how little I heard the word "dying" or "death." In fact, I'm not even sure if I ever have heard a doctor or nurse utter those words. "Passing on." I'm not sure if I'm sensing something here. It's potentially a very big deal.

I think I'm sensing something underneath that. Are people—is the medical institution—avoiding those terms? And if it is, what's going on? Is it that life is all there is, so they talk about "end of life"?

"End of life pathways" seemed even more bizarre, almost jarring to me, as if the choice of terminology—I wasn't sure whether it had really come from the hospital administrator's flowchart of how they need to manage all these patients. So they have a flowchart of where different patients go: into chemotherapy, into radiotherapy, or after that doesn't work, then they're on this pathway, and then they're on the end-of-life pathway. Whether that's just a term reflecting more their management solutions than actually an existential position, I don't know.

But there seemed to be this avoidance of the terms "death" and "dying." Is that because life is deemed as all there is, and death is not seen in itself as something—an event, a momentous doorway? Even if it might be a doorway to total non-existence, it's still a doorway. If you just avoid that sense, or that whole notion of it, by using different words—"end of life."

Maybe irrelevant. But as I said, we've undeniably picked up a mixed inheritance, as we do for so many things in our culture. Probably even going back to India at the time of the Buddha, the Buddha had a mixed inheritance, and Tibetans have a mixed inheritance. That's just part of living in a culture that's not totally original or paleolithic.

And we inherit then a mixed bag of beliefs with respect to death—religious beliefs and traditions, even if we're not religious, that comes to us from that stream, but also secular or non-religious beliefs.

I use the word "beliefs" very deliberately when speaking of secular or non-religious positions, because usually these are not positions about death that have been thought through with any great intensity or originality. They are something we inherited from the evolving and emerging secularism of our culture over hundreds of years. And they are beliefs—not knowledges, not logical deductions one has carried out independently, not certainties, and as I said, not even rigorously examined with great questioning or intensity or vitality or originality.

So we have—all of us probably, most of us certainly—this mixed bag of beliefs, some religious in origin, some secular in origin, around death. I think it's important to acknowledge this, to realize what's going on within us, what steers and shapes and colors and limits our sense of things, in this case of death and dying.

Since being ill, I've encountered all kinds of expressions that reveal different attitudes and beliefs around death. Sometimes this mixed bag is apparent in a single utterance. I'm thinking of two people now, both staunchly, even aggressively secular. Both received serious cancer diagnoses, though not necessarily fatal. And both of these firmly secular people—one in his fifties when diagnosed, the other in his seventies—said, "I feel cheated."

How does that work? How can you feel cheated while holding such an aggressive secular position? Who is it you feel cheated by? What is it you feel cheated by? Where does this sense of expectation—to eighty years of life—come from? What's going on in the mixed bag of beliefs and inheritances that allows one to feel cheated while simultaneously espousing a strong secular, atheistic view? It's interesting in itself, these strange bedfellows that make up our view, our beliefs, our sense of things, our responses to something as basic as death.

But there's a second piece here. "I feel cheated" reveals something about one's relationship with existence, one's view of existence. The feeling that one is owed something, that one expects something about the duration of life—how different this is from a sense, a view, an idea but also a soul-sense of life and death as gift. Life, illness, and death as gift from the Divine and to the Divine. How different this is from "I feel cheated"—from the position of being owed something, expecting something and not receiving it—versus life and illness and death as gift from the Divine and to the Divine.

I mean this as a sense. All that I'm talking about in this series of talks, and most of what I discuss in the soul-making Dharma teachings, is really based on experience. For someone outside of this sensibility, who hasn't had experiences that open up the sense of things—the sense of self, of other, of the cosmos, of death, of illness—through imaginal practice, through sensing the soul, this sounds alien and disturbing and alarmingly... well, just alarming. The sense that your death and your illness are a gift from God? How does that work? Your early death, your difficult illness, your painful illness and all that limitation—a gift? What are you talking about? It's an affront, a nonsensical notion.

But for someone who has practiced, this kind of blossoming of sensibility—where the very sense of things, including one's illness, including one's early death, can be there as gift from God, from the Divinity, from the Dharmakaya, and gift to the Dharmakaya—becomes possible. A mystical gift from and to the Divinity, to the Dharmakaya.

Even the word "mystical" is problematic for some people. For some it just means nonsense, something that doesn't make sense, or something to do with mystery. But we're not talking about mystery in the sense of the baffledness—why there is existence at all, why there is a universe, why are there human beings. Behind that sense of mystery lies a kind of bewilderment, as if it's all completely arbitrary. That kind of mystery, that kind of question—"Why is there anything at all? Why does anything exist?"—carries a different quality entirely.

What a mystery. Actually, it's already assuming a kind of purposelessness in the question. It's not really a question—it's already assuming purposelessness and calling it mystery. Just this sort of arbitrary, seemingly arbitrary arbitrariness of the fact of any existence of anything.

But here, mystical and mystery mean having dimensions, having unfathomability, inexhaustibility, beauty—all of that. And how different I feel when cheated, expecting however many years, versus the whole movement of life and death as gift—the gift of life and the gift of death, receiving that gift and somehow giving it as well, giving my life, giving my death. That being a very different kind of gift, a mystical gift.

So what I really want to go into tonight is just a few possibilities—many possibilities—of what can make death okay. And even that sounds like a bit of a stupid question, because what do I mean by okay? I don't just mean a kind of shrugging: "Oh well, that's death, that's just life, right? Life goes with death—that's the deal." I certainly don't mean, or I mean much more than that.

I mean also much more—this should already be clear—than just bearing the tragedy of loss. It's not just okay because I can bear our tragic existential situation, can bear the poignancy of it, can bear the fragility of life, can bear even my personal losses and the grief that comes with that in my heart. So yes, that's part of it—can I bear it? Can I hold that? But what can open the whole question up more, the whole issue, the whole panorama, the whole horizon of death up more, without reverting to beliefs in rebirth or eternal afterlife?

This is what I want to offer tonight—a few things, among many possibilities, that may be ways of opening things up, opening the sense of things up.

Now, of course, death is difficult when it's our death we're contemplating. Usually that's a difficult thing. Sometimes not, for different reasons, but that may have nothing to do with deep insight and deep opening. Death is difficult when it's ours, generally speaking, and of course it's also difficult when it's someone else's, when we love someone and there's the looming—death is looming, death is coming as the imminence of our loss. So it's difficult in both those directions, and I want to say a little bit about both.

So, what makes death okay? Clearly—well, it should be clear to most people—accumulating a lot of money is not going to make death okay. Accumulating a lot of pleasant experiences or having more pleasant than unpleasant experiences is also not going to make death okay.

Sometimes, what's more common is people accumulating experiences to make death more okay—and again, it might not be so conscious or articulated, or it might be. We have this idea of the bucket list—the things I want to do before I die, the experiences I want to accumulate. Or even a sense of someone perhaps being told they have a terminal diagnosis, and thinking, "Oh, well, I've had a lot of really good things, I've done a lot of really interesting things, I've traveled here"—whatever it is. I've accumulated experiences. So for some people, that's something they look to to make death more okay. And it might be that works a little bit for some people to some extent.

It might also be—and what I've noticed is this sort of: "Oh, well, I've had a long life," or "They've had a long life," or at least it's as long as or longer than the average length of life. And if it's less than the average, then potentially we can feel cheated. But if it's longer than the average, then there's some okayness there. And again, that may help a little bit with some perspectives.

You can see how in modern culture we have very little wiggle room to really open up the sense of death and how we might feel about it, think about it, and die.

And of course, practicing, noticing impermanence, reflecting on impermanence, letting the fact of the impermanence of all things impress upon you—a lifetime of doing that will also help with regard to death. This is very often stressed in some dharma, in insight dharma as well, as the central reflection that's stressed and practiced. And of course that may help. It may well help. It should help. But it may also be quite limited—just repeated reflection on impermanence, repeated impression of the fact of the impermanence of all things. It may also be relatively limited what that can do in terms of how we actually end up feeling about our death or the death of a loved one. So definitely helpful, but may also be limited.

And then sometimes you get the other view, typical in some streams of dharma: there's no self, really. There's no self that dies. There's just a process of the aggregates.

And so, because there's no self, there's nothing really to fear in death, because what the self really is, is just this process of aggregates in time, the physical and mental aggregates.

I've said before that to have this as the only view of self and existence is—well, I don't know what the word for it is—narrow, certainly, but kind of silly, really. It's not adequate for our psychology, it's not adequate for life, it's not adequate for death, it's not adequate for relationship, which I'll come back to. It's not phenomenologically adequate.

As a temporary mode of relative perspective that can be used as a provisional truth and provisional way of looking, it can be helpful at times on the way to something deeper, for sure. But as a primary way of orienting to the dukkha and the pain of death? Not so sure.

If you ask me—and I have actually shared this elsewhere, written a little bit about it—what is it for me that makes my death okay as I'm approaching it? Much more okay. Like a whole different level of okay, so the word "okay" doesn't really even do it. What is it that opens out the whole sense of death and brings a level of beauty and peace there?

I've shared this with you before, but I think I can divide them into perhaps four. One is emptiness practice and understanding. By which I do not mean that limited view of the self as just the process of aggregates in time. I mean something way beyond that. I mean a practice and understanding that opens to the unfabricated, the complete transcendent beyond, the deathless—no subject, no object, no time, no world, no this, no that, beyond all perception.

That sense of that realm or dimension, as the Buddha sometimes called it, does something. The timelessness of that does something. Sometimes there's a sense of that being just there, as a holy other, transcendent other, and sometimes as shining through existence, through this existence, this world of temporality and thingness and subjects and objects and selves. But it does something, either way, both ways.

Similarly, seeing the emptiness of time—the emptiness of past, future, and present. The complete emptiness of time. The emptiness of any present moment. There's something about that. It would have to be, of course. Death is connected intimately, obviously, with notions of time, senses of time. You see the emptiness of time, and that does something that opens up the sense of death.

And of course, as I've talked about recently and before, even going beyond the unfabricated, where we're open to appearances that are felt and sensed and known as empty, magical and divine. I talked about this earlier in the series somewhere or other. Empty, magical and divine appearances. And in that, with that, shot through all that—in the magic, the emptiness and the divinity—is a sacredness. That sacredness, that sense of sacredness that comes right out of emptiness practice, makes a huge difference. There's so much power in that in relation to death.

The Buddha said, with a few different examples, "One moment of knowing that is worth a hundred years of"—and he gives a lot of examples—"pain-free life, a hundred years of knowing," I think he says even knowing impermanence. One moment of knowing that, and the whole sense of existence... something happens. It's turned inside out. That's not even the right word. But in that, the whole relationship with death is different, is opened out, is pacified and made beautiful.

So for me, that's one real way or direction or approach which really changes the relationship with death, makes it profoundly okay.

A second is related to what I said earlier about this sense of gift—at all different levels, receiving gifts or having received gifts, gifts showered on oneself, and also given gifts. At every level, I can see in my life I've been given a lot of gifts. I never felt growing up, despite all the craziness and difficulty and dysfunction, to use an out-of-date word, in our family and upbringing and all the intensity and intense sort of craziness there—I never felt that I would go hungry or go without a roof over my head. Just that level of gift, and the gift of education, and so many gifts.

At that level, but also the gift of life itself, and the gift of what's given particularly to me, and particularly to you. Your particular gifts. And wrapped up in my particular gifts and your particular gifts is your particular dukkha.

They go together, often. Certainly any gift I'm given brings—any deep gift I'm given seems to bring with it its kind of concomitant accompanying dukkha that's wrapped up in it. And I can see that I've been given certain gifts in this life and certain abilities and capacities and whatever you want to say.

So that's all these senses of gift and the sense of giving, of having given, that that has been important. It's been so important to me to give. Again, lots of different levels—just to practice generosity, but to give of my gifts and to give to the world and to give to the future, and to give of the beauty I sense, the beauties I sense, to pass that on, to communicate, to let something come through, to share that.

So all these different levels and what I talked about—when I think it was in the talk on pain and that kind of thing—this sense of gift, received and given. That sense of existence, and even, as I said, even the illness and the pain and the dukkha and the early death as being part of what I received, part of what was gift to me, part of somehow that I am sacredly giving back, or in a sacramental way giving back. That whole sense of life also does something to our sense of depth. I think very much, or I feel very much.

And then a third way is the sense of having done, having tried to do one's duty, having tried in one's life—even if one hasn't really understood it or had the words or a conceptual framework that will hold it and carry it, not been able to articulate it, only dimly sensed, or maybe not even sensed at all—that one has tried to do one's duty. One has let oneself and worked so that one's life refracts the daimon, reflects the angels out ahead that call to one, that govern one's life. So this sense too. And one can never succeed in that 100%. I've said that the reflection is never completely perfect. Virtually it's always falling short. But one has tried and let that lead one's life, devoted oneself to that, put that as primary. Even as I said, if one doesn't think in these terms at all, that one can hear something like that and understand, yes, I can see that I've done that. I've tried to do that.

And fourthly, connected to the whole thing we were talking about with the ethics talks in this series, that one has lived in a way that's tried to be—one has aspired to living a really worthwhile life, a life that is worth living, a beautiful life. One has aspired towards the good, with a capital G, towards what really matters, a sense of what really matters. Taking the trouble to find out what that is for oneself and to get one's bearings even in times of confusion and being inundated with other pushes and pulls and indoctrinations and advertisements and peer pressure and all kinds of things, risks and threats—that one has lived in that direction, one has tried to live as much as possible in that direction.

So those four things: from the emptiness in that much fuller sense, the sense of gift received and given at all those different levels and all those different ways, the trying to discern and to do one's duty—duty is refracting the daimon—and the attempt to live what really constitutes a worthwhile life, and sense of that, a beautiful life, a really good life, with a capital G. So for me, those are some of the principal things that really make a difference.

And of course, all of those are actually connected, those four things, kind of directions or approaches. Especially they're connected through, of course, soul-making practice and the sensing of soul sensibility—the sense of refracting one's day and undoing one's duty, the sense of life as gift, gifts received and given at all these different levels,

the sense of living in the direction of what senses a really beautiful life and the emptiness of it all, the very neither real nor not real nature of all of that. All of that comes together and is intimately woven together in soul-making practice and sensing with soul sensibilities.

Actually, just to add something to that list—because most of what's in that list of four things, four supports or openings that transform the relationship with death, most of what's in there are kind of currents and efforts and movements and openings over a lifetime or over years really, directions. So just to add to that, something which I've already shared in another talk, I think it was in the talk on diet practice, soul-making diet practice, I think it was there, it doesn't really matter, but there is the possibility of being so touched by a soul-making experience, having an opening in imaginal practice or sensing with soul, where one's profoundly moved by a sense of grace, a sense of eternality, a sense of participating in something so unfathomably beautiful and divine.

When we use it as one of the elements of the imaginal—participation—we're really meaning something much more, much more profound than what its usual meaning points to, like participate in this or that. Something almost impossible to articulate: mystery, profundity and sacredness in the sense of that participation, that just having those few minutes of experience transforms the relationship with existence and with death.

So it could be in diet practice or in a group soul-making practice, or it could just be solo with so-called intrapsychic image, or it could be sensing with soul, some experience perhaps in nature where there's the sensing with soul and the soul-making imaginal perception. And one feels as if so much grace bestowed, wonder, the privilege, the profound sacred privilege of opening to something so divine, to the divine in that way, we're just being touched by that, having that grace come, participating that way, having that sense of privilege—it changes the sense of death because of the grace, because of the privilege of participation, because of the opening to eternality, to timelessness.

And that kind of experience is very different than what I was talking about earlier at the start of the talk, trying to accumulate experiences. Because the attitude, the impulse to accumulate experience tends to be restricted to one dimension. It tends to be flat. And therefore it needs more and more experiences. It always needs more experiences because the eros there is limited to one dimensionality. Because it's not, for some reason—either because of the limited logos or for some other reason—not allowed to open up more dimensions, to open to more dimensions. It cannot penetrate and open two-dimensionality. So the pothos in the eros, that which wants more in the eros, can-

not go, so to speak, deeper into other dimensions, other aspects, facets of what it wants and what it loves. It has to go, so to speak, horizontally on the same level for more and more experiences. Now I've been there, my travels, I have to go there.

No, I've been there, I have to go somewhere else. More travel, been here, been there, flown here, flown there, seen this, seen that, so to speak. We've explained this in *Ecology of Love*, I think, *Path of the Imaginal*, plenty of other places.

When the eros is allowed to open up the dimensionality, open up the logos, open up the psyche—when there's that really profound experience of an opening to some soul-making experience of the imaginal, sensing the soul—then it has, in contrast to this kind of accumulation of experience, such a humility in it. There's a real humility in it, partly because of the sense of grace, of inexplicable gift.

And with it there's also a sense of: this is enough. This is enough. This gift is enough. That glimpse, those couple of minutes, that opening to something, that sense of deep participation, that sense of the privilege of that opening and that bestowal of grace is enough. That gift was enough, those two minutes. And that makes a difference in relation to death—this humility and a sense that this is enough that comes with the grace.

And there is a sense, you know, because our experience fades, of course—experiences are impermanent. Experience fades, but somewhere in our being, even when that sense of things and that experience feels inaccessible, it's not apparent, we can still be left with: I know something. Because I've tasted it, I've experienced it, I know something, even when it's not, at some later time, apparent or accessible.

And this knowing in the being—I know something about existence, I know something about human being, I know something about life—that something that I know, even if I can't quite articulate it, I can't really encapsulate it in words, it does something in relation to, it does something to my relationship with death. It's enough. It's enough. And it makes death much more okay.

So there's also that, which I would say is really important. There's certainly the importance of the currents in one's life, these longer trends and longer strivings and longer devotions, the sense of the whole life with all its beauties and all its difficulties and challenges and travails and tragedies, all of that as gift received, and all the gifts given at so many levels of one's life. These are longer-term devotional trends in the sense of trying to do one's duty, trying to discern and do one's duty, trying to seek out and sense what is the life that's beautiful, that's worthwhile, that's really good. And even the journey into the experience of emptiness—all this is longer-term devotions and trends.

But I just want to add to that: there's also the possibility, I think a very important possibility, of just these openings, sometimes, of soul-making practice that are so profound and so imbued with grace and beauty, and a sense of the privilege of participation—whatever we want to call it—in the divinity of things at such a deep level, that those moments—not so much longer-term trends, but moments or, you know, minutes or whatever, sometimes hours, but sometimes they're just really a few minutes—those experiences potentially can make a huge difference in our relationship with death. It's enough. It's enough. I've had that, and just those two minutes are worth more...

So that's just a little bit. I want to come back later on and share someone else's experience or approach to their own death. There's so much to say—we can only say a little bit.

But of course, like I said, sometimes it's another person's death, someone whose death is very difficult for us. And sometimes we encounter people who... What language could we use here? We feel they've lived their image. They've refracted their daemon. To use that language, we feel that. They've lived their image, they've refracted their daemon. They lived in a way that echoes and mirrors and does the duty of their daemon, of their image, of their—again if we use this language—their individual idea, the idea with a capital I in the ideal realm, individual form, their ideal person. It's a different language.

And when we have that feeling about someone, we are touched deeply by them and their life, and touched by that whole—what we feel we are sensing there and witnessing—because we sense that the divine and the deep soul is coming through that person. I'm thinking of someone like John Coltrane, for me. Early death. But somehow just did what he was here to do so devotedly, so beautifully, really living his image, doing the duty of his daemon.

And it touches profoundly. We have the sense something is going on here that has to do with—whatever your language—divinity, God, deep soul. And the soul loves that. The soul loves seeing that, witnessing that, sensing that. And of course, when we have that sense about someone else, when they die, naturally the grief then is deep for the very same reason. The soul loves that. There's so much beauty there. So much being touched by the divine. So much sense of divinity coming through. When they die, the grief will be deep for just that reason.

But in a way, you know, we have them still too. We have them still after death because in a way they are eternal. Their image has impressed itself on us.

So they can be an image for us, with all the elements of the imaginal, including the eternality and the timelessness. But they're already image. And that image lives on with eternality, with timelessness. So we have them. Yes, there's the loss. Of course there's the loss. And of course there's the grief. But somehow we still have them.

In Bach's St. Matthew Passion, there's a really gorgeous aria. I think it's sung by the baritone or bass, but the character is, I think, Joseph of Arimathea. Some of you will know from the Gospel stories. He agreed to bury Jesus, or he volunteered to bury Jesus after the crucifixion. And the lyrics of this aria are in German, which in slightly archaic English translates as, "Make thee clean my heart, I will bury Jesus." And that's the only lyric of the whole aria. "Make thee clean my heart, make yourself pure my heart, I will bury Jesus."

Again, I know people have different histories with all this, but for me, there's just so much love and soul, certainly in the music, but also in that very sentiment: "Make me clean my heart, I will bury Jesus." What does it mean to bury, in this case, to bury Jesus, bury someone we love, bury someone whom we feel lived their image, through whom the divine came? What does that mean? Bury, to bury Jesus, to bury this person in my heart, in my soul. This is a real possibility for us, that we can do that. Bury this person in the heart, in the soul, really, so that they somehow live in me, live for me, as image, as icon.

So yes, all the grief - I really don't want to say that this erases the grief, that it'll just be no problem - but there's a whole other possibility that can open up. And even if we take that lyric there: "Make thee clean my heart, I will bury Jesus." What does "make me clean" mean? In soul-making dharma, "make yourself clean" means purity, purify. And what does that mean? It means, in soul-making dharma terms, fullness of intention. That's a purification of our intentions. It means all the sensitivity of the poise of sensing the soul and even the preparation for sensing the soul. It means the elements of the imaginal: the humility, the reverence, the grace, the participation, the autonomy also of self and other, the beauty, the eros. This is all part of "make me clean" - all the elements, but particularly fullness of intention, particularly humility, particularly sensitivity, particularly the imaginal middle way.

There's also purification when that starts to either reify or go the other end where images are dismissed. Then we don't have the container for the real power of the imaginal rippling out and opening up more and more horizons. Something will get limited, stuck rigid, like the view of reality is stuck in either realism or kind of dismissive nihilism.

So we do love deeply when we see or sense or when our sense of someone is that they have lived their image, refracted their daimon. It touches us deeply, and then because of that, yes, there's a deep grief, and we don't really want to get rid of it - we want that grief. But at the same time as the grief, alongside it, for the very same reason that there's such deep grief, there is the gift of their impression on us, which has already been made. They've already impressed themselves as image. They've impressed on us. And in that sense, we can bury them, so to speak - keep them, a place for them as image, as icon, in our soul. In our heart.

"Make me clean my heart. I will bury Jesus." I don't know if you can hear all the soul and all the love in there. Again, with the help of soul-making dharma, we can take this and interpret it in different ways that really open it up and open up our sense of life, our sense of death, our sense of, in this case, the death of another.

And it's also the case with all this that, yes, as I said, there will be the grief there, but something is - I don't know what the word is - redeemed? Is that not quite the right word? But in other words, it's not just loss. There's gift here, even in the death. The death is gift. The death is loss and therefore grievable, of course, and grieved, of course. But even what seems like tragic - so Jesus' death, very early death, or John Coltrane's death, very early death - what seems tragic can then have, as well as the grief, as well as the tragedy, this whole other dimension.

Clement of Alexandria, one of the early Christian theologians, understood providence—the way the divine, or translated into Buddhist language, the way the Dharmakaya takes care of us—in a profound way. For him, providence does not prevent evil or tragedy from happening. It does not prevent the early deaths of those we love, or our own premature death. Rather, it seeks to overrule such events for an ultimately good end.

We could hear this as merely doctrine, as something we're asked to believe, as a certain philosophical view. But with soul-making dharma practice—actual practice—we can open up an authentic sense of this truth. This becomes our lived experience.

We don't push away the grief or close the heart, refusing to feel the pain. It doesn't become a superficial "everything's fine" attitude, dismissing difficulty with platitudes about impermanence or getting lost in shiny images that bypass the real hurt. With all the grief present and honored, there is somehow, in the middle of it, in the midst of the difficulty, with the difficulty, around the difficulty, this sense that providence is operating. Somehow this is perfect.

I wrote in my blog once about having a sense that my illness and even my early death is perfect. Someone responded that they really didn't like this statement. I can't remember their exact reasons, but it might have stemmed from certain religious conditioning. The way they were hearing it was as dogma or philosophy—"everything is perfect, oh everything is perfect." This operates at a much more superficial level. You can hear the brittleness in such thinking, the attempt to view everything as perfect as mere mental overlay. It's hollow.

You can tell when it's brittle—it has that brittle feeling. Sometimes it's not brittle but carries a quality of delusion, as if the person simply isn't in touch with dukkha, grief, tragedy, loss, or pain.

I'm not talking about philosophy here. I'm not speaking of religious dogma or views in the limiting sense of that word. I'm talking about soul-making practice, sensing with soul. In sharing about my illness, I was speaking from sensing my condition and prognosis with soul—the difficulty, the physical dukkha, the full knowledge of likely dying early, soon, within a couple of years. Sensing all of this with soul.

Out of the very practice itself—not from some cheap idea or religious teaching or philosophy—but from the practice comes what I can only call a mystical sense that everything is perfect. Not in a way that eliminates dukkha or disconnects us from suffering, but including it all.

This sense of perfection that emerges from practice, like seeing the emptiness of things, should not lead to inaction. If the fruit is "oh, everything's perfect, so I don't need to worry about social injustice, racial injustice, environmental injustice," then something is wrong. Something is off. This indicates the understanding is coming more from undigested ideas rather than from practice itself.

This kind of sense of the perfection of things, this sense of mysterious providence working through tragedy, placing it within a bigger arc, a bigger trajectory, a bigger picture, a bigger unfolding—when it comes from practice, it is not brittle. It includes dukkha very much, includes the softness and sensitivity of heart, the openness of heart, and does not lead to inaction or indifference.

I'm really talking about a sense of things, a view of things, that emerges from practice rather than easy ideas. Most of what I've been sharing, certainly in this series and others, needs to be approached through practice rather than simply hearing without practicing. Just listening and picking up ideas or hearing about far-out sounding experi-

ences will only cause problems or have no effect whatsoever. But when there's really that soil of practice being turned, then you have a very different understanding of what we're exploring here.

Of course, in the examples I gave—Jesus, John Coltrane, and others—these are clearly special people who give us a sense that something profound is happening. They're really living that image, really allowing the divine to come through, whatever language we use.

But this opening up, this redemption of our sense of a loved one's death, is not only for special people. It happens, it can happen, it should happen actually, in any relationship we have—in any deep relationship.

Because in deep relationship, the other becomes image for us. Deep human relationship has imaginal dimensions. I've spoken about this before, and it relates to what I discussed in the Four Parables of Stone and Light series when we explored soul-making diet practice.

So this is part of the phenomenology—in other words, part of the actual experience—of any deep human relationship, any time we really love or are truly devoted to a relationship.

If we can explain it a certain way, perhaps you can see it visually in your mind. We have what's agreed upon in contemporary society—one level of the relationship. There's this human being and that human being. The relationship happens in time. If I know this person long enough, there are the acts between us, the things we've done and the interactions we've had in the past—temporal, but in the past. I still have access to at least some of them through memory. And in an ongoing relationship, there are new actions and interactions, dialogue and all that.

So you have one level—the agreed-upon level of what human relationship is. It happens in time between two human beings who are conceived of as flat, not dimensional, other than being dimensional in the non-soul-making ways we consider human beings dimensional these days, conventionally in the culture.

You can visualize this as a diagram: human and human, with two lines between them—old actions and new actions. All of that unfolds on a temporal level, in time.

But if, in your mental diagram, above each of those humans—human A and human B, in whatever relationship they have—there's the image. Let's keep it singular for now. There's an image of human A and an image of human B. Human A has a sense of their

own image, their own daemon—another dimension of their being. But human B also has a sense of their daemon. And each human has a sense of the other's daemon, so to speak.

In soul-making practice, you can play with this, but really what I'm pointing to is what's there anyway in human relationship. So you have a diagram with human A and human B, and then what we'll call image A and image B above them, corresponding to human A and human B.

That level of the image—someone living their image—is a timeless level. The level in time is new and old actions, interactions. But you actually have relationships, or strands and directions of relationships, between every corner here. You have two kinds of strands from the conventionally human to conventionally human level—the new and old interactions make two. You have human A's interaction with their own image, and human A's interaction with human B's image. Human B's interaction with human A's image. And then the images' interaction with each other.

All of this becomes much more discriminated and discrete and apparent when you really explore soul-making practice, as I unpacked in that long talk on soul-making practice in the Four Parables series. But this is a way of thinking of what's actually going on. It becomes more apparent in formal soul-making practice, but I would say it's there in any deep human relationship where there's love and devotion to each other—all these levels and all these possible connections between different levels are going on.

Some people who think this way—they're quite rare these days—use the terms image and analogue. There's the image level, or we could say the daemon level, the angel level of a human being. And then what we've called the human level is called the analogue. The terms don't really matter. We could say image and analogue—image is the timeless, and interactions between the analogue level happen in time. Image to analogue level happens sort of between the timeless and time.

Why is this important? Because, as I said, I think this is what goes on in human relationships anyway. Usually, in our culture's language, the word image is considered a secondary phenomenon. We say "an image of this or that," and this or that is primary. So it's an image of a tree—it's not the real tree.

The real tree is the real thing, and the image of the tree is a secondary thing. It represents something more fundamental or something real.

But as we were talking about just yesterday, I think Plato had that whole ontology reversed—the hierarchy reversed—so that the ideal realm was considered by Plato more real. And this world was a representation, an attempt at reflecting, refracting that more ideal world.

So I think about the image as primary, and the analog—or what we call the human—as secondary. Words are tricky here, but also ontologies are really important here.

Now for what I want to say, actually, we could have either ontology. We could have the image level as primary, and the analog, or human, level as secondary, or we could reverse that and consider the human primary and the image secondary. In a way, it doesn't make much difference, but I do think in the overall scope of soul-making dharma practice, there will come a time inevitably where, at times, the sense of that hierarchy gets reversed. You can play with that, or you can even deliberately play with entertaining such an idea, such a notion, or it would just get reversed anyway in the natural unfolding of soul-making practice for a time.

And again, it's then not clung to as "this is the truth, this is the way things are, this is the correct conceptual framework." It becomes part of a flexibility, a range of flexible conceptual frameworks that we can work with.

One of my favorite composers—I think he's a great composer—Peter Maxwell Davies, died just a few years ago, has what I think is a really stunning, stunningly beautiful, very complex but stunningly beautiful piece called "Image, Reflection, Shadow." I think it's for quintet or sextet. And "image, reflection, shadow"—reading his liner notes, what he meant by that came to him seeing, and somehow it's sort of played out in the music, a seagull over sunlit water by the sea where he lived. He used to live on one of the islands off Scotland and composed a lot of music there, which really has a lot of the atmosphere of the sea and the space and the magic up there.

Anyway, "Image, Reflection, Shadow" was this seagull flying low over the sea, and the sun was out, so it was both reflected in the water—the image of the bird, there was a reflection in the water, there was the image of the bird for his eyes, and there was the reflection in the water, and there was the shadow of the seagull on the water. And so somehow that became a sort of paradigm for the music.

But maybe these words are better: image, reflection, shadow. So reflection or refraction may be a better word than analog for some of us. Image—we are the reflection or refraction, potentially, of an image. And shadow meaning, with that connotation of relative darkness, that even our distortions are somehow poor and blocked vestiges or echoes of an original emanation.

A shadow is that. It's a vestige, it's what's remaining of light that's blocked by something, partially blocked by something, but it's also an echo of light, because it's light reflected off from other places where that thing is not in the way. But even our—we've talked about this before—even our mistakes and our neuroses and our malfunctions can potentially be seen as related to that original emanation from the image.

So we get the reflection or refraction when we're more true to that image. But even our messed up stuff can be seen, our distortions as poor and blocked echoes or vestiges of that.

Actually, in fact, image and whatever we're going to call it—refraction or analog—are mutually dependent. They affect each other. It's not so much that it's not entirely or strictly speaking a one-way emanation process from image to reflection, refraction from image to analog, from image to human. We understand as part of the soul-making dharma understanding that they affect each other. There's a mutual dependency there.

And another thing about this idea, before I say what this has got to do with death—in a way I've touched on it, hinted at it, alluded to it—but we could, and I did when I said, "Can you imagine a diagram where images above?" You'd draw the image above the human just to get a sense of all the different lines between the different corners. Of course, we could, I suppose, conceive the relationship between image and analog here in spatial relationship or spatial constellation as like above, below, or below, above, or around, within, or within, around. The image is within the human, or below it comes up from the depths, the dark, rich depths of the earth, or it comes down from the luminous heights of heaven, or whatever.

We could conceive them in spatial terms like that, in any of those spatial terms. But much better, I think, is probably to jettison the idea of a spatial and a temporal location or existence of image or angel or daemon.

I've touched on this before, sometime in the last year or so. This is really, really important. Perhaps the analog is the manifestation in space and time, a partial and refracted manifestation in space and time, of what is non-spatial, non-temporal, what is timeless, the image. So this image has a kind of timeless existence. The angel is neither spatial nor temporal. And the analog is this refraction or reflection into time and into space of what is not spatial and not temporal.

And again, we can say all this—"Okay, that's really metaphysical, far out metaphysical ideas"—but is it not the kind of sense we have of things if we just open up soul-making practice? That at some point, this is the kind of sense we have of things.

And this is there in a germinal way, at least, or a non-articulated, non-discriminated way, in relationships where there is love, and deep relationships, and intimate relationships, and we have that. That's all mixed up, and it's just our culture doesn't have the language or the conceptual framework that supports that kind of articulation or discrimination.

So what I want to ask now is: what happens to this whole constellation of relationship, which means the sense of relationship after one person dies? Because actually, in a way, most of the fabricating constituents of the sense of—let's say the person who dies, for the person who remains alive—most of the fabricating and the creating, discovering constituents remain.

The image of the other, the memory of past interactions, actions, and even potentially new interactions, but mediated by a purely—I could say purely—imaginal consciousness. So of all the kind of strands of connection in our little diagram, it's only the —

And this brings us to a profound question: what happens to this entire constellation of relationship—to the very sense of relationship itself—after one person dies? Because actually, when we examine it carefully, most of the fabricating constituents of the sense of the person who dies, for the person who remains alive, most of the creating and discovering elements actually remain intact.

The image of the other persists. The memory of past interactions and actions continues. Even potentially new interactions remain possible, though now mediated by what we could call purely imaginal consciousness. In our diagram of connection, it's really only the analog-to-analog, human-to-human level of new actions and fresh interactions that seems to have gone after death.

Most of the fabricating, creating, discovering constituents of the sense of the one who has died—what makes our sense of them—is actually still there, remaining after their death. And honestly, I don't know if any of these constituents are really fully separate from any other. I don't think they are.

But as I've been suggesting, if a human person—what we mean by human, what we sense of a human person—is really comprised of what in this scheme I've tried to explain as image and human, or image and analog, then we must ask: does death really change that much? Is it possible that death changes only a small portion of the actuality of human relationships?

The image-to-image connections remain. The human-to-image and image-to-human relationships continue. The memory of human-to-human actions in time persists. All of this remains intact.

I hope I've explained this clearly enough. I probably could have done better, but this is so different from how we usually think, from what we've inherited in terms of our understanding of human being and what we're in relationship with, what constitutes a person. There's no room in our culture for this imaginal level, or for this idea that somehow this person is refracting something timeless, that relationship is multi-stranded and multi-dimensional between two human beings, that a human being is multi-dimensional.

This notion is very unsupported in our culture, so what I'm trying to say might sound completely bizarre, even ridiculous, if you can follow it at all. And I certainly don't mean to suggest that if you just see things this way, there'll be no grief. But it's certainly not the same as saying, "Oh well, they died, but you've got your memories at least." I'm saying much more than that.

Right now, in relationships with the living, if we open our sense of that, if we can sense with soul, with love, then we begin to sense what's actually there, what's already there in our understanding of human being when they're sensed with soul. And what does this do to our sense of death, our sense of loss? It doesn't take grief away, but it offers something that in many ways we prevent ourselves from receiving, from being open to, from having. We are prevented by the culture, by our linguistic and conceptual inheritances.

When someone we love dies, there are still all these different dimensions of relationship present that were there when they were alive too. It's not as if now they die and suddenly they're moving somewhere in some spirit world, and maybe we can communicate with them through a séance. While we're alive, these other dimensions are already there.

When we acknowledge these other dimensions and connections, these different strands of communication, of love, of connection, of seeing, of intercourse while we're alive, we begin to have a different sense of how much we've actually lost when a person dies. Image remains with us. Image communicates with us. We communicate with image. Image communicates with image. Memory becomes image.

Consider this sense of human being, this sense of human personhood. What is it to really be a person? What would it mean not to limit our sense of what a human being is, what a human person is, what our personhood encompasses?

Much of the Dharma involves deconstructing the sense of self, seeing its fabricated nature, stripping it down. And that's immensely valuable. We can explore completely unfabricating the sense of self, or working with less fabricated senses of self, or discovering the most basic sense of self—just the barest sense of a subject, of awareness, the barest sense of an object, and the most basic sense of time, of a present moment. This represents the most basic level of self-fabrication, just this side of the unfabricated.

And then we fabricate, fabricate, fabricate. One way we can fabricate is toward papañca—crazy ideas about ourselves and others and relationships, all reified and tied up in knots. But there's also skillful fabrication. We've talked about soul-making fabrication, the fabrication of soulful image, the imaginal.

I'm uncertain about the language, but we could say that one is a self whenever there is any perception of objects, whenever there's any subject-object relationship, even the barest—just a nothingness and an awareness, subject-object, object-subject. But we are persons only where there is relationship of some complexity, with some sense for us of meaningfulness and depth and dimensionality of our personhood and another's.

This relationship may be with a physically manifesting sentient being, someone alive with us, or an animal. It may be relationship with a divinity, an angel, something purely imaginally manifesting. Or it may be something in nature, supposedly non-sentient. Perhaps the division between self and person isn't quite right linguistically, but the distinction between subject and person might be useful.

We are persons when we are in relationship, when there is relationship of some complexity for us, with some sense of meaningfulness, of depth, of dimensionality of our own personhood and of the other's. Even when there are just the beginnings of that meaningfulness, that depth, that dimensionality—even just the beginnings of what we might call elements of the imaginal—then we're more than subjects; we're persons.

You can use the word "self" for the whole spectrum if you prefer. But both subjects and persons are empty; they're dependently arisen. And as always—and I keep emphasizing this—the fact of emptiness, the fact of their emptiness, the fact of the emptiness of any conception, any sense, any view of subject, self, or person, means that we are actually free to view in this way, because all views are empty.

We're free to view that way, we're free to pick up that view, if we want. And the question is: what does it lead to? What does it open for us? And what does it limit?

As I said, if I love someone, and I think, "Oh, they died or they're dying," and so I'll use my Buddhist history and practice and regard them as a process of the aggregates—it just does not do justice to our relationship, to their personhood, to their life. It certainly doesn't do justice to soul; it's phenomenologically incomplete. What will it lead to if that's my only view? If I'm always trying to, or thinking I should, see the other person as a process of aggregates?

Just going back to teachings we've given for a while, there's the whole teaching about fabrication: there's unfabricating, and there's skillful fabricating and unskillful fabricating. The question is: what does it lead to? All of it's empty. All of it's empty. So we can pick up anywhere on the spectrum and adopt a view. And the question is: what does it open for us? What does it deliver? What does it give us?

I hope you followed this. I probably could have explained it better, but I think it would be very common to think, "Well, okay, that's all a metaphysical theory about what a human being is and about an image and an angel and a level of angels and all this stuff." Is it though? Or again, is it more a phenomenological account? In other words, it's how we experience persons in relation to our person anyway, when there's love, when there's a real depth of connection, when there's a soulfulness in the connection. When we have a sense of a relationship that we're devoted to.

We have been gradually, over the course of history, over recent history, indoctrinated to believe and then to experience in line with a view of what a human being is and what the cosmos is. Some of this we traced in the recent talks on ethics, the image of ethics. It started from metaphysical theories, from philosophies, from theological moves about not having intermediaries and about the elevation of ordinary life and not having hierarchical order of the cosmos, which then got replaced with horizontal order.

All those philosophical, metaphysical and theological moves had repercussions. This has been very sketchily traced through history. So what we feel now as normal and non-metaphysical—we feel like we're just seeing things as they are naturally without any overlay or distortion through metaphysics and philosophy and strange religious notions—actually had its roots in philosophy, metaphysics, theology and religious notions.

It also had its roots in the gradual birth of the modern novel, this view of humanity with emphasis on particularities, on ordinary life. One of the main origins, one of the seeds of the modern novel, was journals written by Puritans. You had this view of very personal, unmediated relationship with God in a non-hierarchical universe.

So all this—we tend to think, "Oh, you've just described some really complex, bizarre metaphysics as some kind of weird idea that you're trying to superimpose on the way things really are." But maybe our sense of the way things really are is actually, first, an indoctrination, an inculcation, an inheritance from something that started there, from metaphysics, theology, philosophy. And second, our sense of the way things are is not actually an accurate report for us of the way things are for us.

Look closer, sense closer when there's love and the relationship is really alive that way. Again, is it not the case that at least the germs of what I'm trying to talk about here are actually already there in the sense we have of things? There's something that we've inherited that just makes us rule that out, or not take that seriously, or not see it even—not sense it, not discriminate, discern, and articulate it, and then in that way give it support.

So we lose someone to death, they die, we're left. And yet it may be that a lot more is possible in terms of the continuing sense of relationship, connection with them than we tend to think. That a lot less of the real whole of what was there in our relationship, what flowed in our relationship—a lot less is lost of the whole than we thought. That much more is still open, still possible, still alive really.

And yes, there's still grief. There's still loss. There's still the pain of that. There's still the wishing it weren't the case, perhaps. But to open this up, it's almost like we have to allow ourselves to see and sense—the sensing the soul will really help to open up this sense.

So that's one possibility, that's a few possibilities. I want to share something from a close friend in relationship. She was okay for me to share this; I asked her. A slightly different—well, quite different—journey and approach to the loss of a loved one. In this case, my being given a metastatic diagnosis: pancreatic cancer, which is pretty much always fatal. And it was shortly after I got that diagnosis, with all the implications that we knew, that life was—I was going to die from this, probably quite soon.

So this is part of her report I will read.

Again, what I'm really showing here is how can this terrible, deep grief and loss at the death of someone we love be opened up in a different way? How can the soul-making and the sensing of the soul help and support that to be opened up in a different way? A different sense of that, different possibilities.

So I'd gotten that diagnosis and knew what it meant and the implications of dying, that I would not be cured from this disease, that it would kill me relatively soon. And so she was quite upset and quite distraught. This is only part of her account, so this is in her words now.

"Can this become soul-making?" he gently asked—he is me. "Can this become soul-making?" he gently asked, reminding me through his question that this was possible and what I wanted. Thank you. Yes, it can, I said. Recognizing in that moment I was a little stuck and in some vague contention with the reality of the situation. And while contention felt better than collapsing, it definitely wasn't soul-making. And so perhaps this can be my question now as we embark on this leg of the journey.

And she kind of just lists her awareness of what this leg of the journey would involve and imply, and the dukkha and the loss and all of that. "And so, can this become soul-making? In theory, yes, it can. And what will support that? Remembering this question for a start and recognizing that caring for the dukkha in this way could be a fitting and beautiful offering to my beloved friend"—in other words, caring for the dukkha through soul-making. "My faith tells me this is possible. I have faith in soul-making. I've done a lot of soul-making practice. My faith tells me this is possible, but I do not know what this will look like as we face this time, or if I am up to the task. But I can see that the question itself offers a frame, a way to orient to the time ahead, whatever it may bring."

So I really want you to hear the wisdom in this. It's all about the skill in the approach, and the wisdom in the approach. There's this difficulty, stuckness, then contention, collapse, then just contention, then it's, oh, can it be soul-making? Yes, it can. I have some faith in that. So that's already a big step. And then what will support that? And the question, can it be soul-making? What will support the soul-making here itself? That question, as she says, offers a frame, a way to orient the time ahead, whatever it may bring, whatever the time ahead may bring.

She continues: "And as I let the question strike me, I light up. My sense and my posture straighten naturally, and I line up as if I'm filled with trillions of iron fillings that line up before a magnet." Okay, I recognize this is helpful. She's using the energy body sense as telling her she's on the right track. Taking on this question, can this become soul-making? "I am already much less in contention with the reality of the situation. And my loving desire is switched on again towards what I most love, soul-making. This lining up, as well as being strengthening and helpful, seems to make my human heart at once incredibly vulnerable, impactable and tender, and at the same time, steady,

bright and unwavering, as if allowing this question to strike me has the effect of beginning to shape me into the kind of organism that might be able to perceive all of this soulfully."

See the art and the skill here? Just, can this become soul-making? What will support that? And that question, together with a little bit of faith, starts to do something. Starts to shape her into the kind of organism, as she writes, that might be able to perceive all of this soulfully.

"I sense myself at a threshold now, where the conventional sense of myself, who is looking forward in time to the painful and demanding journey ahead, gets the sense of more possibilities with this inevitable dukkha. Something in the air is attractive to me, and my soulful antennae, my soul antennae are piqued. More is possible here," she realizes. More is possible here. "And, staying close to the emotional impact of this news, I feel first what I might still call a contention with reality."

I don't want you to die. I don't want my beloved friend to die. Because I don't. But I let myself sense this without collapsing around it.

She lets herself sense the contention—I don't want you to die—without collapsing around it. And then comes the desire. That's the other side of "I don't want you to die." I feel a strong desire, a desire for him to be well and a desire for him to live forever. I want you to live forever. Not cutting that off for being ridiculous and unrealistic. Just letting myself have it. So human, so understandable, so passionate.

And very close to this desire, I feel a kind of objective helplessness of being human beings in the face of death.

So there's so much here. There's the contention, the "don't want," then realizing there's a want that's the flip side of the "don't want." Not dismissing the want, even if it sounds ridiculous—I want you to live forever, how could that possibly be? Unrealistic. Letting herself have it, letting herself have that very human, understandable passion. And then, close to that desire, very naturally, there should be this sense of helplessness. We're helpless as human beings in the face of death.

And she continues: As I sense the current of the desire in my body—this desire, I want you to live forever—it comes through this vulnerable and utterly human spot in my heart. And that narrow spot in my heart starts to expand with the current. And as it expands, it is also illuminated. And as everything gets brighter in the whole citta, I am stopped in my tracks. My senses are arrested by a beauty that I start to sense.

Something is happening here and a beauty is opening up, and it's arresting. Right there, not divorced from the pain and reality of the situation, not losing any of its personalness, right there, he and I are being woven into image—the soul-scape of extraordinary beauty. Horizontal time is relieved from being the whole and the only truth. And I am somehow being loved by this whole scene, by the whole image.

He and I woven into image, and horizontal time not the whole truth. The whole scene is loving her—that's her sense.

And the grace of this—until now only unwanted suffering—the grace is apparent and makes me humble. His illness and imminent death, not reducible to a single meaning for him, for me, or for the Sangha. This perception is so blessed, so blessed.

Pain is not necessarily taken away, but it is happening within a soulful cosmos, where dimensionality and meaningfulness are shimmering with a startling beauty right here in the tragedy and loss, at once deeply human and utterly beyond.

Can this become soul-making? Yes, it can. And I bow.

This was the first stage, actually, of a journey with this whole ensouled relationship with death. It started to really open something up.

A little while later, she had a dream. In the dream, there was a black snake coming out from down under a kitchen counter in the house where she grew up, and she was sitting in the dream with her family, and everyone was sort of horrified—oh my god, it's a black snake, that shouldn't be there. At some point in the dream it shifted to, somehow, that's not wrong. It's not wrong that this snake is there. At first it felt it was wrong, and then somehow it didn't.

So in the way that sometimes what is immediately disturbing to the mind, the usual mind, or the mind thinks, "oh, that's wrong, that can't be right," in imaginal practice—in a similar way, that shift happened in the dream.

The next morning, she took that image of the black snake into her meditation practice and let it become imaginal, helped it become imaginal, and found that the snake loved her as it would if it becomes imaginal—it's one of the elements of the imaginal—but also that the snake itself seemed to kind of contain multiple images. And one of these images related to, or kind of related to then, my death and her feelings about my death.

So again, at some point later on, there was again this "I don't want you to die." And again, she really let herself feel it. And letting herself have this "I don't want," loosened something. Really letting herself have this "I don't want you to die" loosened something without dissolving the "I don't want."

So we can loosen things so that they dissolve and completely unfabricate, or we can loosen things so that enough slight unfabricating occurs that they can actually become more soul-making.

So it's like a cry out to the cosmos: "I don't want you to die. I don't want you to die." And she also realized that if she were either a good Buddhist or a good existentialist, she wouldn't have this thought, "I don't want you to die." And again, "I want you to live forever"—how ridiculous that sounds from either a Buddhist perspective or an existentialist perspective.

With all this, she noticed something else: that her sense of death, her almost subliminal sense of death, was a kind of big black empty space. And she realized—very subtle discrimination—she realized, "Oh, this is the usual sense of death in the cultures that I move in." Either it's a kind of nihilistic nothingness, just a big black empty space, the end of personhood, or it's a kind of spiritual big black empty space, a kind of universal emptiness of oneness or essence.

She thought, "Hmm, my logos here, what I'm used to thinking, my habitual conception and notion is part of my sense of death here. That's being brought in automatically, and it's coloring, it's shaping, it's forming and limiting the view I have of death"—either to the standard secular view, a kind of nihilistic view, or a kind of spiritual assumption of dissolving into universal emptiness.

Realizing she was conditioned by the logos, as we talked about right at the beginning tonight. And that realization—ah, that there's some conditioning by the logos, by the imported habitual notions here that she gets from the two main cultures she moves in: mainstream secular culture and the culture of Buddha Dharma, spiritual circles. Realizing that fact of the conditioning by a logos, by an idea, by imported habitual, unquestioned ideas—in realizing it, that lost its grip, and the sense of my death was allowed, and death itself was allowed to become more imaginal.

She also realized something else: that there was a notion that if she could accept the pain, then she would be at peace with it, or she should be at peace with it. So there was a lot of realizing about what the imprisoning logos was, what the limiting logoi were, and where she'd gotten them—because the acceptance and peace with it also comes from Buddhist and spiritual teachings.

It was that realization that loosened something, and then the sense of death could become imaginal. And then she said there was a sense: "Then I got the sense that your death is eternal. It's always here. My friend's death is eternal, it's always here." So it was more than accepting death—it certainly wasn't not wanting death, but it was more than accepting death.

As it was allowed to become image and become eternal and always here—"your death is always here"—then she got the sense, the very palpable and moving sense: "Your death loves me. Your death loves me."

Of course, from a mainstream, conventional, typical perspective: what on earth does that mean? "Your death loves me"? But when things and events become imaginal, when we sense them with soul—even things and events, not even talking about sentient or inorganic beings like trees, but things and events, "your death"—when it becomes imaginal, when they become imaginal, they have personhood. They have intelligence and autonomy and love and eros.

There's so much skill here and beauty in the way of working—very difficult, but then so much being touched, the soul being touched by this sense of "your death loves me, your death loves me, and your death is eternal, it's always here, it's always already happening." The death has become image with all the beauty and all the gifts that are given to us when we sense something with soul, all the gifts that opens up in our sense of something.

In a way, that was a second stage. And then something happened, perhaps more long-term, in her logos and the ideation that she carried around: that death is not only an impersonal thing, and more importantly, that impersonal depth is not more true than personhood. As if that big black empty space from a spiritual perspective or from a nihilistic perspective is somehow more true—well, actually she's talking mostly in a spiritual context. Sometimes we're taught to see that emptiness is more true, that the absolute is more true than personhood.

Now with these experiences, impersonal depth is not necessarily more true than personhood. So it opened up something more permanently in her ideation and perspective, her logos around death.

This becoming image of my death, becoming imaginal, my death loving her, a little later on enabled her death to become image for herself, to become imaginal image. So here is the third stage.

She's describing a practice she did actually while she was taking a flight. So she was practicing on a plane, and her death became image. She writes: "My death as beloved other, as deity, as enchanted—the most fulfilling perception. I love the image of my death. She is here as beloved other, the most intimate other. She knows me so well. I feel loved in a way I had never before known."

So my death is here as beloved other, the most intimate other who knows me so well, and I feel loved by this, my death, in a way that I have never known.

I love her, and I ask, "How can I come closer to you? I want to know you more." So there's the eros, an eros in a way that's going to allow the whole eros-psyche-logos dynamic to ignite further, open, expand, complexify, deepen.

And she writes, "I contract for a moment in judgment as fellow passengers on this flight throw away their plastic cups after one drink. I contract and lose sight of my death, of the sense of the image of her death. The destruction of the planet and our ignorance, seemingly more real than my beloved. But I see my heart is lost for that moment, and so I light a candle at the altar of my beloved, and I kneel."

Again, just to highlight the skill in working, something distracts, something contracts her. In this case, she's on a flight that she had thought a lot about even taking, given the climate crisis, decided to take it, decided on the balance of things it was the right thing to do and her soul felt the soul-making choice to do. And then contracting at this throwing away of plastic so easily. That distracts her and interrupts her process. There's a contraction of the being, and she loses the image. And she says, "Okay, I recognize what's going on. Can I, so to speak, light a candle at the altar of my beloved and kneel?" So there's the taking care of what I called the other day the poise for soul-making that enables us to open to soul-making, to image.

And then she says, "Tears upon my return and the settling of the disorientation that came in the contracting. I love you"—she's talking about her death—"I love my death. I love you. You feel like the most meaningful relationship I have ever had. In so many ways it is as if you were there before I was born."

Again, from the mainstream point of view, this probably sounds completely mad—someone talking about the image of their death: "I love you. It is as if you were there before I was born. You define my existence, not in the existentialist or literal ways of being an end point. Your reality status is not end point. That designation flattens you, and in so doing one would not see your beauty. You are more a beginning point, if anything."

But careful—there's no implication here of the usual beliefs of afterlife or rebirth or whatever. She's not talking about beginning point in those senses, the beginning of the afterlife, the beginning of the next birth or whatever.

"You are the most beautiful image I have ever seen, and the death of my body in time seems like one tiny image within your numberless dimensions. I can hardly believe it. It is not that physical death is insignificant—it is indeed one image in the wings of your magnificence, but you are so much more. You, my death, are resounding right through the cosmos. You are so intimately personal to me, and yet you seem to ring everywhere in many spheres, all at the same time. You know me as a point of time and space, and you love me as a human more closely and precisely than anything, and yet you also intimately mirror a multitude of other images that seem to exist in multiple other realms."

So the whole image is, again, doing exactly what we'd expect if eros is allowed to galvanize and open the soul-making dynamic—eros, psyche, logos—and mutually fertilize each other, complexify, take each other deeper, wider, further.

She continues: "This is different from the personal and seemingly eternal death in Carlos Castaneda"—I don't really know that work, but she's referring to it—"where one can consult this intimate companion about how to love one's life, knowing that death is always here at your shoulder. My death is not principally a point in time, or related to the point of space and time of my physical death, and nor is my death an annihilation, and nor is she impersonal. My death is somehow my fulfillment, and meeting her now I am called to my fulfillment. But this fulfillment is now, and eternally now, when she is known in erotic, imaginal meeting. I am drawn to this fulfillment, but it is not a fulfillment of accumulation of qualities—it's not that kind of fulfillment. It is a fulfillment of knowing my place as soul in a sacred cosmos, so completely woven into all dimensions, and that guiding divine being is my death."

"Here, death as idea is soft and elastic, and death in time is one image in the divine theater. It is not about making my physical death unimportant or relativized or small. To say 'small' would contrast it with 'big' or 'bigger,' and this is not the correct word for what is more than or more than one image. Logically, one should be able to say that the collective of multiple images is bigger than or greater than one image, like ten is more than one. However, in imaginal tonality and in the imaginal middle way, 'smaller than' and 'bigger than' do not make sense. In eternality, in an imaginal middle way, 'smaller than' and 'bigger than' do not make sense. It is not governed by logic. Size and proportions only belong with the arising of time and space and the appearance of this world. This lack of proportions is somehow very significant."

"And this is very different from the results of Buddhist reflections on death, as I have practiced them at least. This reflection does not rouse my passion as an urgency for a path of practice in time"—that's how we usually, or one of the ways we usually teach reflection on death, to arouse urgency for practice, path of practice in time—"but it does rouse my passion as a tremendous eros for eternality, for timelessness. It does also bring a steadying of my heart, but I wouldn't say it is an equanimity born from understanding and including the whole picture and being able to see the conditions of the world of time and space from a great view"—it's not that kind of standard way, one of the standard ways we reach equanimity, seeing the whole picture, stepping back, taking a larger view of conditions and the large span of time and space. "Rather, the steadying comes from the mind easily concentrating because this is the most compelling, meaningful and loving encounter."

There is no effort to steady the heart. We could unpack this a lot more, I think, and explore the steadiness and equanimity from many other aspects. She's touched on some of that in other talks about eros and equanimity. But there's so much to say here.

She says, "My death smiles at me as I recognize this. My duty is to re-enchant death."

So much here, in terms of the skillful ways of working, in terms of the ways something can start as a difficulty. Just asking the question, "Can this be soul-making?" Can we allow it to open up, get a different sense of it? Then that can be added to by an image that at first seems to have nothing to do with it—a black snake—and open further. And then we get a very different sense of things, a very different sense in this case of her friend's death.

This gave her confidence and a platform, or I feel like was a spark that in turn allowed her to sense her own death with soul, for her own death to become image. And that opening up all the sense of beauty and dimensionality there, sacredness—in terms of the death, but also in terms of the whole cosmos.

So much that's instructive, I think, in all this. I wanted to include that for that reason, as well as what I shared earlier—to offer some possibilities for opening up our sense of death and dying, whether it's our own or another's. What can we bring to that? How can we meet that with soul, genuinely? What happens, what might happen when we do?

These are real possibilities for the soul, possibilities that make a real difference. So important. So there for us.

CHAPTER 235

Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · 1h42

> *In this foundational talk from the Vajra Music series, Rob Burbea presents preliminary exercises centered on movement, gesture, and voice as essential components for soul-making practice. Drawing parallels between dharma training and musical education, he emphasizes how certain subtle capacities—like the tiny bones in a bird's wing—may seem insignificant but are indispensable for the full flowering of practice.*
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> *Burbea introduces two core exercises: a movement practice involving physical or imagined gestures while expanding energy body awareness to fill one's environment, and a voice exercise using extended tones to explore centers of emanation throughout the body. Both practices emphasize sensitivity to the energy body, spatial awareness, and the capacity for projection beyond habitual limitations. He addresses common practitioner inertia around active engagement with teachings, encouraging listeners to extract meditation instructions and principles from dharma talks rather than passively receiving information.*
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> *The talk explores fundamental questions about practice motivation and the fantasy of awakening, arguing against limited views that reduce meditation to mere stress relief or calm. Instead, Burbea presents dharma practice as an artistic endeavor—infinite, creative, and calling forth our deepest capacities for discovery and expression through embodied spiritual work.*

Hello everyone.

There are a few things I would like to offer as I'm making these recordings. Usually I would probably have waited a little longer—first, to gather a little more material around these topics, and second, to hope that I felt a little bit more capable physically and mentally. But despite the difficulties, I think it's probably wiser not to wait and just take this window of opportunity as it presents itself right now, as I don't know what the future will bring.

So I wanted to offer a few things, and really they're mostly exercises—that's the way I'm thinking about them. Like etudes, or exercises, or preliminaries, if you know that word used in Tibetan Buddhist circles: preliminary exercises, preliminary trainings, preliminary requirements, preliminary developments.

Of course, there's something a little strange about beginning to put out and accrue a set of preliminary exercises however many years we are into unfolding the soul-making teachings. But the teachings have grown very organically, and as we grow, we recognize: ah, this is needed, that's needed, this is what we need to add here. So it doesn't matter anyway.

I'd like to offer some what we might call preliminaries—some exercises. Primarily, these exercises involve and center around movement and gesture, so the physical body and movement and gesture, or the bodily experience of movement and gesture, and voice. Movement, gesture and voice.

Woven into that, I'd like to include some thoughts and teachings about soul, about personhood and about human being—anthropology, if you like—because it's very much woven into the way we're thinking about all this.

So preliminary, at this stage of development of the organic growth of the teachings. This is a beginning, and whatever I will offer in these talks is a beginning that can hopefully be developed. It should be developed. It will naturally evoke, suggest, and elicit development. And hopefully that development will be very discerning, congruent, sensitive, appropriate, and intelligent.

Movement, gesture, voice. These are huge areas. We can add all kinds of things willy-nilly just because we like them or we have a history there, or they make us feel good, or whatever. But hopefully, these kinds of exercises can be added to and can be developed naturally. As is the way of soul-making, things that get swept up into the soul-making dynamic will develop—they have to develop.

So this is a beginning. Hopefully they will be developed and grow and become more sophisticated, wider, further, deeper, more varied.

Actually, it's not even a complete beginning, because I have offered—and many of you will already know—other teachings that focus on movement, gesture, voice, and so forth. So in a way, what we're going to say in these talks adds to that thread that's already there. In fact, through other talks, through other exercises I've given out in the past, through instructions and guided meditations from the past—however long it is, five or six years.

I had a quick look earlier today and I remember there were a couple of talks called "Voice, Movement and the Possibilities of Soul"—guided meditations, exercises, instructions. There's something called "Movement of Devotion," if I remember, and a couple of versions of that. Perhaps that may have been the first one, though I think I started it all too subtly, too difficultly for a first teaching. So as I said, the teachings are growing

organically rather than in any linear way. They're presented over the years in ways where the chronological order of presentation doesn't necessarily match how one would unfold the soul-making dharma if one was starting from zero. It doesn't match that at all.

So there's that "Movement of Devotion." There are even things like guided meditations we did—"Hearing All Sounds as Mantra," "A Dual Line World," those kinds of things we've done where there's a lot going on. There's a lot of instructions going out. I'm asking people in the room to chant and move and do this and that and interact with each other. And while they're doing that, I may have been giving instructions, throwing them into the space at the same time.

Very understandably, if a lot of those instructions didn't get well absorbed or taken on, if that kind of practice didn't get built on and repeated, if the principles hidden in those instructions—in the mix of this very complex, intensive social situation of guided meditation and new experiences—if the understanding of the principles underlying and girding the instructions were not drawn out and capitalized upon and made clear, of course that's very understandable.

Similarly, in rituals and ceremonies that we've done and played with, there are often background instructions thrown in. But there's so much going on in the choreography and the sociality and interactions of that whole larger situation that it would be very surprising if those were taken on board as instructions in a way that one would actually build on them, or even recognize that there was anything there to build on or extract. So all that's completely understandable.

Even recently, in the last few months, I remember in one of those online seminars—I can't remember what it was called, but it was something to do with engagement and activism—I remember just saying something about the energy body and devotion, throwing something out and intending it really as a set of meditation instructions.

But I was way too quick. Way too quick in explaining that and expecting people to actually hear, "Oh, this is a set of instructions. And I can take this and practice it and do it a lot like I do my breath meditation a lot." So I didn't set it up that way. I didn't take the time that way, just because there's a million other things to talk about, or it seems to me there always is, so I'm always in a rush.

And similarly on the jhāna retreat, actually at some point—it might even have been in the opening talk—I did guide people very briefly through a meditation with body and devotion and energy body. But again, how many people will actually take that out and extract it and capitalize on it and repeat it, isolate it and repeat it as something, as a practice, as a set of instructions that are developable, remains to be seen.

Anyway. So a beginning here that will be developed, but actually not really a beginning because it ties in with other threads that we've put out in all these different talks.

In a way, following on from what I've just said, there's an implication which here I'm going to draw out now. One could, if one gets really interested in this stuff, go back to all those talks and listen again and listen to what's being said in the background and those instructions that one might miss, and take the material out, extract it. Write it down. Make a set of instructions. Start practicing it.

So there's an invitation there. Of course, that's much more work for you as a listener or as a saṅgha than if I just offer these instructions there and it's a separate thing and all you have to do is press play and follow the instructions. But there's the invitation.

So, why this area? I'm going to explain more why this area around movement, gesture and voice. I'm going to explain more later as we go on. But it's very much connected with this idea of preliminaries and what's necessary, what's required to, if we use a certain analogy, to be able to fly in soul-making practice—to really be able to soar on the air currents and glide easily and gracefully and freely, to wheel around and cartwheel and maneuver. A lot is required.

And sometimes the pieces that are required, they're really obvious, like, well, two wings are required, whatever that analogy might be in soul-making dharma. We need these really big structural pieces. But other times what's required may not be obvious at all.

So in this beautiful bird's anatomy, there may be a tiny little bone somewhere that just connects, for instance, this part of this bone in the neck, let's say, to a bone, a particular bone in the wings—a tiny little bone in the muscles, or a tiny little muscle. It doesn't seem that significant, but take it away, and maybe the bird can even still fly a little bit, but what its freedom of movement, its ease, its gracefulness, its security—severely curtailed there.

So to be able to fly, we need all kinds of things, some of which are obvious, and some of which are less obvious. There are some trainings which are really obvious, and some trainings which are really less obvious. And some which are obviously very central, and some which are really not. We don't actually notice them at first. So it might be

something like that, as an analogy. Not central, but indispensable, really, in the long run, to really have that freedom—the freedom to fly in soul-making practice, and the whole range of soul-making practice, and the whole potential range of soul-making practice.

Or, you know, like an airplane—similar, same analogy. You look: oh, it needs its engine, it needs its propellers or whatever they are, wings, of course, it needs this and that. But maybe there's just one bolt somewhere, and it's just a tiny little piece, but if it's missing, it's a big deal. Maybe you only notice it when you're trying to do a certain thing, like, I don't know, land, or turn around, or whatever it is. So that kind of thing.

The soul-making dynamic, it should be clear to you by now from past teachings, will eventually expand because of the way that psychologos dynamic works. It will expand, and it will expand to include within itself, to involve within its dynamic, within its creativity and discovery—it will expand to include every aspect of our being and every aspect of our life. Even more aspects than we even realize exist now. "I didn't even know I had that aspect to my being or that aspect to my life." And then it starts to come to be involved, to be ensouled, to be involved in the soul-making dynamic.

So just so, as the soul-making dynamic expands, it should, it wants naturally to start including movement, gesture and voice. And these areas—movement, gesture, voice—can also be particular areas where our relationship to them is also, without us even realizing it, a little bit blocked. We're blocking something there. We're holding back something there. So the soul-making dynamic doesn't naturally flow in to open them further. It doesn't actually manage to quite reach them. And we don't quite realize it. I'm going to expand on this later.

So there are a number of reasons for this particular focus on movement, gesture, and voice right now. But again, by way of introduction—a slightly long introduction before we get to the material—I want to say something about listening. And it connects with something I mentioned just now.

I think often when I'm teaching, I probably go too fast. I speak very quickly, and for me it feels like there's so much to say, so much to put in a talk. There's so much I want to share and convey, and time is limited in all kinds of ways. But often I'm aware that I go very fast.

Occasionally a person says to me, "Oh, I heard your talks. It's mostly repetition." But when I hear back about what they're thinking and how they're practicing, it's clear that they've actually missed a lot. They're not hearing many of the details. So I actually think the opposite is true—I'm going too fast rather than lingering and repeating.

What I often don't do is stop and give you an exercise, give you homework—especially if I'm recording like I am now, alone at home. On retreat, you can sometimes slow things down, feel what's happening in the room and what's appropriate for what people need there. But often I don't stop and isolate something, extract it and point it out: "This is a set of instructions—one, two, three, four, five. Do that." I don't set it up, give it a name, make it a thing. And again, it's just not very skillful teaching to expect people to do that work themselves. Partly naively, a part of me was expecting that, or has been in the past. But I think it's naive.

So time is still limited, and I'm going to try to do exactly that—give you exercises to do, and so forth. But still, when you listen to this set of talks, when you listen to talks that have already been given—maybe by me, maybe by another teacher—is it possible to think about listening more actively? Actually, there might be a job for you, or several jobs for you to do as a listener.

One of them might be for you to actively extract meditations and exercises from what's being said. What would it be to listen to a talk—even maybe a talk you've listened to before but haven't listened to with those kinds of ears on? Instead of just sitting and hearing it, being touched by it, or getting the ideas, what would it be to actually put on the hat of that particular job? You're actively extracting meditations and exercises. That's number one.

Number two: is it possible to actively extract larger principles? Sometimes these are even less obvious. Of course, sometimes I'll linger extensively on a larger principle, explaining something and why it's important, what the concept is, how it all fits together, even why it's important in our history—all kinds of things. But sometimes not, or to differing degrees.

So what would it be for you as a listener also to listen at times with the hat on of extracting larger principles? These are sometimes less obvious, and they'll be especially less obvious if I don't even bother to explain why we're doing this or that in a certain ritual or ceremony that we've just made up and maybe will only do once. Of course, that's not going to be obvious. But there are reasons—why we choose to do this, why I said that, why all of it. And so that takes quite a lot of intelligence, perhaps, to listen that way and try to extract those larger principles.

So, two possibilities for listening at different times. Number one: extracting meditation possibilities and exercises. Number two: extracting larger principles, which may be more or less explicit. Just like the exercises, I may make a very light suggestion—maybe explicit, but I just touch on it so quickly. It may just be implicit in what I'm saying.

So there's an invitation. Maybe think about doing that sometimes. Experiment with that kind of listening.

I taught a recent retreat at Gaia House on the theme of the jhānas, jhāna practice. And one of the things I mentioned there was about inertia—our inertia as practitioners, as students of the Dharma, but also as human beings. I would have, had there been more time, spent much longer really exploring that theme of inertia, really asking people to inquire into where inertia operates for them—how and where and in what ways does inertia operate in the way they relate to their practice, in the way that they practice, in the way that they listen, what they practice and how they practice, all that.

To me there's a huge, really important inquiry there. But I just mentioned it on the retreat and sort of pulled back from giving people too much to do, even though we had three and a half weeks. It still felt like it would be a bit much. But in my mind it felt actually really, really important.

Recently, still on this theme of listening, Nick and Sarah were listening to some talks together. As people sometimes do, they decided they would listen and then spontaneously ask each other, "Can I press pause for a second?" They would pause and say, "Should we just do that practice he just mentioned?" Sometimes it wasn't even when there was an actual guided meditation—I might have just been implying a practice or mentioning it in passing.

So they were really listening in quite a different way, and being together enabled them to listen like this. They got into a mode of listening where they were pressing pause quite frequently—to stop and actually discuss something they'd just heard, to question something, or if one person didn't quite understand. Sometimes questioning, "That can't be right," or whatever arose. A two-hour talk—I have no idea how long it ended up taking them to listen to. But it certainly sounded like they were having a lot of fun doing it that way. Maybe it was more fun, I don't know. Maybe other times it's much more fun listening on your own, straight through without interruption. Maybe they were digesting more, assimilating more.

So there's a question here. We can have active listening modes, if we call that active listening, as well as receptive listening—just letting it come in without interrupting, without stopping to turn the soil. But what is it to till the soil, to till the soul? It will need tilling at some point, the soil of the soul. Whether that's while I'm listening or afterward, at some point it needs that. And that cannot happen without you being active, without you taking some kind of initiative and responsibility and making choices and being intelligent. Listening on the tip of your toes or at the edge of your seat, as I think I said on a recent retreat.

Similar goes for reading. Some people, unfortunately—a surprising amount of people—make it clear that they read *Seeing That Frees* without doing any of the practices or without really spending much time at all on any of the practices. To my mind, it's like, how much can you hope to really get out of it? There's not enough working of the soil. And even reading it too quickly—that particular book is very dense. There's a lot there. Why that word? What does it mean? What does it imply? What does it suggest about my practice? What does it suggest about what I'm thinking and how what's being written might be a little bit different, or even a lot different, from what I'm actually thinking?

So anyway, just this question about inertia—in this case an inertia about how we practice, also an inertia about how we listen. We get stuck in certain modes of listening, certain modes of reading. And it takes a bit of work to push ourselves out of that particular groove or rut that we're in. It's inertia. In physics, it takes work to overcome, it takes force to overcome.

Again, there can be an inertia regarding what we hear, what we read. Without even realizing it, we actually end up hearing and reading what we already think we know. I'm literally chopping off, shaving off, just not hearing or seeing what doesn't actually fit into what I think I already know. So I end up reading something that's in fact quite different, quite challenging to what I already know, but I think I've just read something that completely confirms it, or just says what I already know in different words.

So there are all kinds of possibilities here for energizing and bringing some oomph and electricity and fire and soul—really more soul—into our listening and reading. All kinds of possibilities.

There's also the question—and this is related to what I've just said—when we're listening and reading, we can't help but have a process, usually unconscious, where we're determining or trying to determine, judging the significance of this or that thing we're hearing right now. Here's a talk that's an hour or two hours long: this part's not that significant, now that part's significant. Or here's something I'm reading, whatever. This, I think, is just natural to the way we need to listen as human beings—to structure, to make sense of what we're listening to or reading. What is the significance of this? How much significance does it have?

Some of what we're going to explore in this series—however long it ends up being—some of these exercises will probably not seem that significant. I'm going to say that right now. They probably won't seem that significant, but it's a bit like that tiny bone at

the bird's shoulder that connects the wing—one little bone and small filaments of muscle connecting to another bone in the chest. It doesn't seem that significant. Or that single bolt in the airplane.

Some of these exercises won't seem that significant. We can tend to think, especially with soul-making practice, imaginal practice, that if there's an image—especially if I get a clear image and a clear sense of the image—that's significant. But if I'm just doing something and there's no real movement or gesturing or voice, no real image, it may not seem that significant.

Something can seem to have more impact, and it can certainly seem more to the point of what imaginal practice is, obviously. If there is an image and we're impacted, it can seem that that's more significant, but in the long run it may not be. You might get lots of "wow, image"—you've definitely felt impacted and affected and it was beautiful—but in the long run it may not be that significant.

Just the fact that we talk about imaginal practice—well, obviously images must be significant. Well, it may or may not be, relatively speaking. Sometimes it's hard to be that wisely discerning in assessing what actually is significant and what is its significance. It's hard for us. All this is very normal.

I think I remember at some point using the phrase "structural listening"—I can't remember how often or even when, but it feels like a long time ago. Can we listen to a dharma talk structurally or read a book structurally? Seeing the whole structurally? This capacity is very, very rare—the ability to listen for the larger structure of ideas, the way it all hangs together, the progress of ideas, the larger conceptual framework.

What would it be to actually develop that capacity? That's a training. That's a big deal. So it's very rare. What would it be to listen or read for and from the whole conceptual framework? I'm listening or reading to get a sense of what the whole conceptual framework is. And then when I think I have that, I'm listening from the perspective of the whole conceptual framework.

That listening from an understanding of the whole conceptual framework—holding it there—frames my listening. Whether it's soul-making dharma, that conceptual framework, whether it's emptiness or mainstream dharma, whatever it is, that frames my listening and creates a kind of meta-view from which I can then discern with intelligence. It helps me discern the relative significance and the relative place of this or that thing I'm hearing, or this or that instruction, or even this or that word I'm hearing or reading right now.

This is hard. Or rather, it's very rare. It's rare for someone to have that as normally the way they go about things. It does exist, but it's very rare. It can be trained.

Listen, read for and from the whole conceptual framework. In the end, it ends up being a lot less work to do things that way, because things are ordered. The very conceptual framework tells me where things belong and informs me about what I might do in practice at any moment. It suggests and tells me how ideas fit together, so they're not just random—here's another idea, here's another idea, here's another one. I don't just have this pile of stuff to sort through, random objects, most of which maybe look a little interesting or glistening or curious. Instead, I have this big structure where they fit together and I can understand where things are.

Because I understand where things are and how they work, I can find them a lot easier. Things make sense. They're more accessible. I can make choices a lot easier, a lot more intuitively eventually, and a lot more intelligently, a lot more helpfully.

Even just now, up to this point, we've thrown out this idea about inertia and this question: actually taking on this inquiry—where is the inertia for me in relation to dharma practice? How and what I practice in relationship to how and what I study or hear or how I listen. Where is the inertia?

And how does that inertia balance with a need for steadiness? I actually need to stay with something for a while, yet I can get too entrenched in something. So all this inquiry into inertia—now I would say that this inquiry into inertia, even though we're not really going into it at the moment, again I'm postponing it or just mentioning it...

I don't know if I'll ever get back to it. I would actually say that inquiry into inertia is more important as a teaching, as an area of investigation. Structurally it's more important—at the meta level, it's more important than anything else I might say in this set of talks about movement and gesture or any other topic.

A similar dynamic arose on the recent jhana retreat. We talked about all these different techniques—where you can move between this jhana and that, how you can do this and that. All really important material. Great. But what I think was much more important for most people—and if it wasn't during those three and a half weeks, it will be at some point, or will have been at some point—much more important than all those little bits of really valuable technique, was the whole relationship with desire.

Jhana practice is a goal-oriented practice. I need desire because I'm moving toward something. I want to achieve whatever it is—the third jhana or whatever. This is what I'm aiming for. I have an aim. I need to put in effort and I need desire. And then the

whole question arises—the whole area of questions around difficulties, around complications, around my relationship with desire, my relationship with goals, my relationship with effort. All that comes up.

How much there is to explore there. Much more important in the long run to really open that up, to understand oneself within that territory, to liberate oneself in relationship to desire—being able to sustain a desire, a deep desire, and move toward a goal without getting completely tied up in knots.

First of all, it's important because I'm going to need that capacity to do the jhana practice. As much as I need to hear this little tip or technique for moving between one jhana and another, I'm also going to bump into—I can't help but move in—the domain of my desires and the difficulties of my desires. So I'm going to need that understanding for jhana practice.

And it's a subject that pertains to any other practice I do—pretty much any dharma practice I engage with—and loads of situations outside my meditation practice. It pertains to my life. Structurally, it's a much, much more important issue, an area of investigation and concern, and possibility of freedom in the broader sense—much broader freedom than just technique, or this piece of technique.

So again, even here, I mentioned inertia tonight. Even that inquiry is structurally more important than anything else, even though these other pieces are, as I said, really important.

There's a lot here, but I'm just... this is all by way of introduction. A little bit more introduction, actually, if you can stand it.

As I said, I will hopefully unfold more about the why of these exercises—why I'm offering them now, why I'm emphasizing them now. That will, as the talks unfold and the instructions unfold, hopefully include more about the why.

But just to say right now: of course, the why of these exercises is related to the why of practice in general. It has to be, right? Of course. The larger question of why I'm practicing informs the smaller question of why these exercises—why practice these exercises, why might they be important?

So the why of these exercises is related to the bigger why of why practice. Why am I practicing? It has to be, of course. Just think that through if it's not obvious.

And that, of course, is intimately related to what we've been calling the fantasy of the path—the fantasy of the goal of the path, the fantasy of awakening, the fantasy of the self on the path, or fantasies plural.

So the why of these exercises—the reasons why we're addressing, focusing, emphasizing, filling them out now, opening them out now—is related to the why of practice and the fantasies of practice, path, awakening, self as practitioner, self on the path.

Most of you will have heard me talk about, sort of emphasize, how crucial this is—this why. Why am I practicing? What's my idea of why I'm practicing? And what's my image or fantasy of practice, of path, of where it's leading, and of myself on the path?

Those ideas and those images and fantasies will always have consequences—major, major consequences. Consequences at every level of our dharma practice, actually at every level of our life. Our ideas about why we practice and our fantasies of path, goal, self, awakening, etc., will have massive consequences, certainly in our practice, at every level of our practice, and also beyond our practice in the rest of our life.

And one of the questions is: A, do we realize it? Second question is: do we realize that these ideas and fantasies can be limiting? They can also be nonsensical. So we can end up with a sort of conglomerate of ideas and fantasies about the why of practice and what practice is and where we're going that actually don't really make sense together. They're not very coherent. They're also limited. That's possible. That's very, very possible.

They will always have consequences. The question is, do we want to unlimit them if they're limited in an unhelpful way? Do we want them to be coherent and to make sense if they don't actually make sense once we start looking at them and questioning them and prodding them a bit—which often we don't. Often practitioners don't really. We've talked about all this before in other talks. There will always be consequences. We have to realize that.

I remember teaching in another country, this is quite some years ago now. And I was talking with a woman—I can't remember the context. I don't think it was in an interview. It was either before or after the retreat or some other situation. And she said to me, or to a group of us, "My husband doesn't need to meditate." She was probably in her late 60s then, is my guess, and I'm assuming her husband was a similar age.

"My husband doesn't need to meditate." And I don't know if she elaborated on that. Certainly my ears pricked up at that point. What she then said made it clear that what she meant is he's already calm—he's already a very steady character and calm. And of

course, implicit in that was her view that calmness and steadiness was the point and the goal of meditation. And that's why she was coming to retreat, and that's why her husband didn't need to, because he was already calm and steady.

The situation wasn't such that I was in the teacher role at that point, or I can't remember exactly, but it didn't seem appropriate for me to ask a question in response or probe that a little more. But to me, it was very clear that she was holding a very limited idea of what she was there for on retreat, what she hoped to get from meditation, what meditation was for. And this was, in fact, borne out by other interactions I had with her and things that I saw.

Now, that's fine if that's her view or if that's her thoroughly investigated view, and that's where she arrives at, freely and independently: "This is all I want meditation to be. I know there's this option, that option, that option, that option, that option as well, but I actually just want it to be calm and steady because I've looked at my life and looked at everything else and all the other things. Either I can get them elsewhere—I can understand the emptiness of awareness elsewhere, which is highly unlikely of course, or some other kind of freedom I can get, whatever it is. Or they're just not things I'm interested in."

But my sense was that she hadn't actually thoroughly opened up that inquiry. And so there was this quite small area delineated for the range and the purpose of meditation and retreat and all that. And you could also pick that up in other ways in terms of her responses and reactions to teachings that went beyond that.

Now, it could have been something else. She or someone else could have said it, you know, maybe not calm and steady. They could have replaced it by, "Oh, he, she, they have so much patience. They don't need to meditate. They're just so patient." Or "They have just unshakable metta and compassion. They just seem to love everyone, and it's just not shakable. Someone can be really difficult or whatever, and they're just always kind. They don't need to meditate." Or "They have incredible equanimity. This or that happens and they're just really steady." "They're just naturally mindful. You know, I forget this and I forget that. They're just naturally mindful." Or even, "They don't experience the self. I've talked to them and they don't actually experience the self. And they only experience this sort of flow of moments or whatever it is that they would explain." Et cetera, et cetera.

It could be anything. We could put anything there. "They don't need to meditate because..."—fill it with whatever you want.

But compare that to saying something like, "My husband doesn't need to make art, doesn't need to make music," or if they're an artist or a musician, "doesn't need..." If they're a scientific researcher, if we look at some of these other fantasies that we've talked about, fantasies of the past, "They don't need to do scientific research anymore. Or ever." Or the fantasy of the lover...

They don't need what? They don't need to make love. They don't need to spend time with their beloved. They don't need to expand or let expand, support the expansion of the range of landscapes and soul territories that one moves through and in with one's lover, creates and discovers with one's lover.

To compare it to saying something like that—don't need to meditate because they don't need to make art. They don't need to make music, they don't need to do scientific research, or any more scientific research, or they don't need to be in love anymore, and be in love, and do in love, and be together in love, in relationship anymore.

That need—to one who feels the need in the beauty of those needs, maybe for some people they only really relate to the in-love one, I don't know, but for me certainly, a scientific researcher, the artist, making music, meaning composing music, improvising music, whatever it is—to one who feels that need, feels the depth of that need, and the infinite depth of that need, those needs, and the beauty of those needs. The inexhaustibility of those needs, the mystery of those needs.

Those kinds of needs are not needs that there is really an end to. Not if you're really called that way. If the soul is called, if the soul is on fire. You don't think, "Oh, I get to the point where I don't need to do any more scientific research. I don't need to write any more music or whatever it is. I don't need to..." They're not—there's no end to that and you wouldn't want there to be an end to it because if there's an end to it, something has died and it's not about reaching an end.

It's not about achieving calmness, or "I've just discovered, imagine some, you know, I've just discovered this in physics. Great, okay, I think I'm done now. That's all I wanted to know." That's not how that kind of deep curiosity works. What person has written, "You know, I wrote one song, I wrote one piece of music, or I had that time improvising there, I took a solo or whatever it was, and I don't think I need to do it anymore." That's not how it works.

It's insatiable. It's bottomless. It's not even ours. It's calling us from a distance that is beyond us. It is not ours and it's ours. It's infinitely far away and it's the most intimate thing. It's not something that there is an end to. It's not something we would want there to be an end to. It comes out of love, out of beauty, out of eros and delight, out of soul,

out of curiosity, out of the depths of our being, just as can the intention for meditation practice come out of love, of beauty, of eros, delight, soul, curiosity, depth—rather than "I want to be steady like my husband is steady, or calmer, or whatever." Or even "I want to experience this thing where I don't have a self and there's just a sort of flow of moments."

Why stop there? Why stop there? Gosh, there's so much more than that. Wonderful as that might be.

And of course, if you're listening to this and you're just really caught up in dukkha, it seems like it has no... nothing. But dukkha, of course, we're going to want the calmness. And we've talked about this before. But once you've reached, let's say, even that place where there's just this kind of open self, or there's just an open sense of awareness, and —I'll put this in strong inverted commas—"no self," why stop there? Why stop there? Honestly, it would be like Einstein saying, "I've done my special theory of relativity, I think I'll stop there." Or Beethoven saying, "Yeah, I wrote my second symphony, I think that's it now." It doesn't make sense.

We're talking about allowing a desire to come from a different place, recognizing that a desire comes from a different place. And this very much has to do, again, with who we are as human beings. It's mine and it's not mine. It comes from an infinite distance, an infinite beyond, and it's the most intimate thing. And it's beautiful. The desire itself is beautiful, so we wouldn't want it to end.

And yes, along with that very desire, it brings difficulties. It brings frustrations, exasperations, challenges. We feel we're stuck at different points. It burns. It hurts. There's disappointment. There's all that, along with the beauty and the joys and the gifts and the creations, discoveries of it all.

So the why of these exercises is related to the why—why am I practicing?—has to be related to that in the larger sense. And that is related to my fantasy of the self and the path.

All of this is tied together. What ideas, what images do I have that are operating? How helpful are they? How limiting are they? How much sense do they even make? How coherent are they? They will have consequences.

I remember talking to people from very different dharma backgrounds than this woman I described, who had been trained from the beginning in a presentation of the dharma that didn't actually present much more than that basic framework. So that's what she had been taught the dharma was.

In these very different dharma scenes, with different teachings, sometimes people get caught up in certain ideas about what they're doing, certain fantasies. There's the idea that because the dharma has to do with liberation and freedom, it therefore has to do with not struggling. And if we're into something called non-duality, then we should just drop the struggle right now. Don't struggle in meditation. Don't struggle at all. Don't even struggle to stay awake. Just don't struggle.

This idea often goes together with narrow conceptions of non-duality. Don't deal with concepts. Just don't be conceptual. Drop the whole conceptual thing. It's easier, simpler, less struggle, more spiritual, because non-conceptuality and spirituality go together, right?

Out of all this comes a kind of mode of practicing, effectively a technique—although one tries to think of it as not a technique, because one isn't struggling or supposedly not struggling, not doing, not thinking. And it's non-dual. The idea is that it's open, but it actually ends up being very closed, because we've cut off a bunch of possibilities.

No struggling in any way at all, no thinking. But you have to think, you have to conceive. The only little bit of conceiving you're allowed is that conceiving isn't allowed, and you should try to be non-dualistic. Whatever that means.

What this also means, if we link it to other fantasies, is that there can be very little art, because there's very little doing. There's a shrinking of options, a shrinking of the possibilities for creation and discovery. It's not this infinite range and expanding playground of creation, discovery, of artistic possibilities. Practice just ends up being almost like one thing. In all this rhetoric and these convincing ideas and images about openness and liberation, it actually ends up being quite narrow—just doing the same thing over and over. It's one thing, and it's not really leading anywhere except to the same thing over and over. So what's supposed to be open ends up being actually quite closed, closing possibilities, closing the possibility of art in the largest sense.

When we come to soul-making dharma—and we've said this and emphasized it—we could pick other dharma areas like emptiness or whatever, but let's just say soul-making dharma. It requires so much by way of bases, of stepping stones, of prerequisites, preliminaries. It's so sophisticated and subtle, so wide and so deep. So many dimensions and aspects of our being are involved and demanded. Demands are made from them, requiring a lot of sophistication and subtlety and ability and facility in all these different areas.

One could say it's pretty elitist. And actually, I would agree. I think it is elitist in that sense. I'm not sure what the etymology of "elitist" is—it has to do with choosing—but it is elitist in the sense that, well, let me put it the other way around.

Picking up the music analogy a little bit, maybe a better image, a better way of thinking about what we're doing when we're teaching soul-making dharma practice—we could even teach jhana practice or whatever—is different from the usual ways we frame practice. Typically we say this is to do with liberation from suffering, or at least reducing suffering. And as such, as a teaching about the reduction of suffering, reduction of stress, it's for everyone and available to everyone. Therefore we want teachings that anyone can apply, anyone can understand, and it's really important that they're accessible in that way.

There's a kind of legacy we get from the Four Noble Truths, which is that this is basically for reducing suffering—if we water it down a little bit and just say reducing suffering. Of course, it's a wonderful legacy we get from the Four Noble Truths, so rich and brilliant as a teaching, and so powerful. I've talked about that lots before. But it's actually a mixed blessing, this legacy. It has a shadow side, and I've talked about that as well.

Particularly it has a shadow side when in this day and age we start to actually question: what does a reduction in suffering actually mean, and what does it look like, and how noticeable is it at different levels?

When we've done away with the universality of belief—there is no more universal agreement that the end of suffering means the ending of rebirth—what exactly do we mean by ending suffering? I've explored all this before. But despite the massive confusion that surrounds these questions, we still want to understand: what actually do we mean by the third noble truth? And by implication, the first noble truth, and then of course the second and fourth, but principally the first and the third. What do we mean by suffering? What do we mean by ending suffering?

In the swamp of confusion that has emerged from dropping this universality of understanding—whether it's a Theravada universality, a Mahayana universality, or whatever—coupled with the notion that because dharma is about reducing suffering, it somehow needs to apply equally to everyone and be accessible to all, this model brings with it all kinds of issues and problems, its own stumbling blocks and limitations.

Sometimes, more recently, I've been thinking: why not just conceive the whole thing like music school or art school? We teach all levels at this music school or art school—from beginners who have never put their lips to a recorder, never banged on a drum

with their fingers, never even shook a rattle. We teach all levels, from that beginner level all the way up, and there's actually no end to it. There's no point where we stop. This music school can just keep going.

But we understand that only some of the people who want to take up music and come to learn and play and develop and practice will have that really deep desire to play at the highest, deepest, freest levels. Of course, only some people have this. In that sense, it's elitist. But if "elite" is etymologically related to "elect" and "choose," then it's your choice—your choice how far you want to go.

Everyone will be challenged by something within that whole range of what's possible in practice and development, but it's your choice. Your choice about what you desire and how far you want to go and how much you want to develop. So yes, it's elitist—what's the problem with being elitist? It's elitist in the same way that music school is elitist. It's not refusing anyone entry. It's just saying that if you want to do that advanced thing, then you need to do this foundational work first, because otherwise you won't be able to do that. But we can teach you this, and after you do that, then let's talk about the other thing if that's what you really want.

We're hampered and tied to thinking about words like liberation and ending suffering or reducing suffering, and there are all kinds of accretions that go with that, particularly around non-elitism and accessibility and the idea that "it's for everyone." Sometimes it might be simpler to change the analogy.

I want to extend this musical analogy, though it gets a little limited here and has clear limitations like any analogy. Since music is something I have a history with, I know that whole area. I was a different kind of musician at different times—a composer, but before that a jazz musician. I studied jazz and worked to develop the art of improvising on the guitar in different jazz idioms, something I was completely dedicated to and put enormous energy into.

When you're learning to improvise jazz guitar, you've got many different skills and arts within one thing. It's not one thing—it's many, many different abilities. And it's open-ended, infinite in its possibilities. Sometimes, when you really get into all this and give yourself to it, there's a sudden growth of ability—of what you can do, what you can play or create or improvise. And you're not even quite sure how that sudden jump of level happened.

Of course it comes out of love—loving what you're doing and loving that whole area and loving the music. It comes out of listening, listening with love and listening with eros to other musicians and music you love. It comes out of playing, and it definitely

comes out of practicing. So it emerges from all four of these things. But it's not necessarily the case that I practiced X and then I was able to do X. Sometimes it is, of course, but not always.

Sometimes I practiced X and then eventually I was able to do X. Great, so now I can do X. It's added to my playground. It's added to the freedom that I have to create and discover musically in the moment. But other times I don't practice X, and somehow I'm able to do X in some way I don't even understand how it happened.

Probably more often than not, however, I don't practice X, and then I'm never able to do X, whatever X is. It will never appear in my playing. It will never appear in my creating, discovering, my improvisation, because I never practiced it.

I could talk extensively about this, but I want to keep it brief. If I had to look at death now and reflect back on my life, I think there's one grief. There's one grief in my soul that I think I will take with me to my grave, and it feels like a deep soul grief. That is specifically around not developing certain things in jazz guitar—my ability to do certain things to a level that I would have liked. A level of virtuosity and fluidity, specifically, that I would have desired. So it's actually about technique.

I don't know, maybe that sounds very strange to some people—to look back at life and think that's an odd thing to have grief about. But for me, that's what it is. And it goes very deep. As far as I can tell, it's the one thing, and it's a real soul grief.

In a way, there's a story behind that. I did develop all kinds of abilities on jazz guitar—some very rare abilities, I would say, capacities to do things that are really quite uncommon. Other things that were perhaps less rare or more seemingly obvious, I never got the chance to develop. The reason I never got that chance was partly, well, mostly because they weren't taught.

There was no one at that time—there is now, how many years later, more than thirty years later—but back then there were no people teaching electric guitar technique with a plectrum, with a pick. I went to music conservatories and colleges, and no one could teach that. They could teach it for every other instrument because all those other instruments had hundreds of years of history behind them for people to figure out how to teach piano technique so that people can be very fluid and fly in that way. But on the guitar, it seemed like no one really—if they could do that, they didn't really know how they figured it out. It was something they just stumbled across, and they didn't even realize quite what they were doing. They'd never put it under a microscope. It just worked, so they went with it. But a lot of people couldn't actually do that stuff to the level I'm talking about, so I wasn't alone in this boat.

I had to kind of make do with what I could do and work around my inabilities, my incapacities. I feel really good about that, but there's a grief here. And it has to do with this deep, unfathomably deep, visceral desire, calling, vocation for music to come through, which was then not physically enabled to be fully physically manifest.

I'm going to say that again because this is really key to what I'm talking about in all these talks: it was not enabled to become fully physically manifest. It was never explained to me. I couldn't find anyone to explain, to teach me those things which on other instruments would be completely basic—exercises and such that are just part of how you learn the instrument.

So there's a grief for me there. It's too late to go back. I eventually gave up the guitar, got more into composing, partly because of that, because I felt the limitations. I eventually gave up that and became a Dharma teacher. So who knows? Had I had available to me that enabling and that teaching of technique, and was enabled to fully physically manifest that degree of musical creation in improvisation, maybe I wouldn't have taken those other steps. I wouldn't be giving this talk today; I wouldn't be a Dharma teacher. But that's also been very wonderful, of course, and I feel very much that it's part of my calling too.

Anyway, the main point here—there's lots relevant, but for this talk there's one main reason for sharing this—it's about exercises that allow something to become fully physically manifest, that enable those possibilities.

Just as there are many elements or techniques and capacities and abilities that go together to make up being an improvising jazz guitarist, there are many that go to make up Dharma practice. There's a lot in there, and there's a lot even that goes to make up soul-making Dharma practice.

So when we come to soul-making Dharma practice, when we come to wanting to live a life of soul, we can hope that just practicing, just loving all this soul-making business, listening to the talks and loving them for the most part...

play and I meet with friends and we play soul-making together and all that. And it may be—or I can hope—that it opens possibilities. And it will open possibilities.

But the question is: will it leave some possibilities not opened to me, to my practice, to my soul-making dharma practice, but also to my life and my life in soul, and my soul in life?

We can hope, and maybe it will to a certain extent, but maybe not. When we talk about exercises and techniques, they're not everything. Some of you will be musicians—you know that when you're playing a scale, it's not really music yet. And some of these things we're going to talk about, they're not necessarily even soul-making. I mean, they might be, but like that bone in the wing of the bird or near the wing of the bird, or like just the ability to do certain things—they're crucial. They're absolutely crucial.

They're not everything, but they're necessary for music. They're necessary for the fullness of soul—the fullness of soul-making, formal practice, and the fullness of soul-making in one's life, and soul in one's life, and soul through one's life, and life in soul.

So what I want to offer—okay, that's the end of the introduction—what I want to offer is five exercises. And exercises means they're for practice, which means, in this sense, like doing technical exercises on the piano or whatever it is, or the scale. The point is repeating them, maybe. Gaining facility through the repetition. Not just something to do maybe once or twice, but actually doing them until you really don't need to do them anymore.

They're not necessarily soul-making, as we just said. They won't necessarily—these exercises—bring a kind of sense of a wow experience or some kind of dramatic shift in anything. "Suddenly I was doing this thing and this exercise and following the recording and suddenly there was a shift." They won't necessarily do that. They might, but they won't necessarily.

So five exercises. There's no prescribed order, I don't think, between these five. But I'm regarding them as preliminaries—and I hope you can get a sense of what I mean by that—so even if you're well into soul-making dharma practice by now, there would still be good to add, I think, and to explore. No prescribed order. They form part of what we might call a set of preliminaries, or might hopefully develop into a set of preliminaries. I'll talk about other ones later on.

And so I want to explain more about the why as we go through.

Okay, so five exercises, no prescribed order. Well, I need to choose where to start, so I'll start with one which I'll call exercise number one—but not because it's really number one. We're just calling it that. And it's a movement exercise, okay? All of them have movement, gesture, and voice, and some of them are a lot more complex. So this starts relatively simple. Relatively simply.

Okay, exercise number one.

Now, immediately you're going to hear there's lots of variations. So there's five exercises, but lots of variations within each exercise. This exercise can be done in two ways. It can be done as an actual physical movement—your actual physical body is moving and someone else in the room can see that you're moving. Or it can be done just with the energy body and the imagination, and there's no physical movement.

So all the different variations within this exercise number one can be done either physically or just in the energy body and the imagination without the physical movement. Between these two possibilities—physical body or just energy body—there isn't an order. Or I don't think there's an order. Try. Try different—you know, if you're going to do these a number of times at least, I hope, then experiment with different orders. First the physical and then not, and then the other way around.

Okay, so two large camps: physical and just the energy body. Also then, starting in four postures. So already we've got eight variations, right? We haven't actually started yet. So four postures: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. The four classic postures of the Satipatthana Sutta.

So that already leads to eight, and then the actual parts of the exercise—we're going to say there's five. Actually, even more. But you can see, it's just already proliferating variation. So it could be just in the energy body, standing, okay?

And then, or physical movement, starting in the walking posture. There are different variations within these different categories of choice.

So one category is whether it's physical or whether it's just energy body. The second category is which of the four postures you're going to start in. Well, let's take, as an example, let's say you start standing.

Then there are five parts of the exercise.

First, you adopt your starting posture and you feel the energy body. So let's say it's standing. You adopt the standing posture and you feel your energy body in that posture. And then you feel or imagine the energy body extending to fill the room that you're in, so that it touches the walls. This isn't something we would always want to do with the energy body at all. Usually we talk about energy body just a little bit bigger than the physical body. But here, with your primarily kinesthetic imagination, you're feeling, imagining your energy body extending to fill the room and touch the walls of the room and the ceiling and the floor. And what does that feel like? Maybe there's some visuals to it, but primarily you want it kinesthetic.

So that's the first thing. You're just standing and you're imagining doing that.

Second, you begin to move. So you have to really take your time working through this. We really want the experience. The intention here—I'll repeat this at the end—the intention here is sensitivity to the energy body and in this case also the projected or expanded energy body, and the space you're in. So really feeling a sense of sensitivity to the energy body, sensitivity to the expanded energy body, and the inhabiting or filling of the space you're in. That's the intention. It's primarily about sensitivity.

So you've adopted the starting posture, you've expanded and you're feeling that. You've extended the energy body and you're feeling that. Second, you start moving your hands and your wrists and your arms slowly, just in an improvised way. Move your hands and wrists and arms any way you want and feel your energy body. And feel and sense, imagine the space, as if you're pushing water or air—which you're doing as you move, you're pushing the air or the energy in the room. Or just imagine you're standing in a swimming pool or floating in a swimming pool, and you're alone in the swimming pool, and just the movement of your arms is going to send ripples out. The movement of the body will automatically send ripples out through the space, through the water there in the pool, and they will reach the sides and then they will bounce off.

We're not just talking about the space of awareness. We're not just talking about expanding the space of awareness—that's a different practice. We're talking about energy body sense expanding, moving and feeling, sensing and imagining not just the space of the energy body in its usual size, but also the extended sense of the energy in the room and how that's connected with and impacted by and filled by the energy of your body movements.

So it's more than just the space of the awareness. We're talking about energy body movements, sensitivity here. Of course, the awareness must extend, if we're going to do this exercise, from, for example, the palms of my hands to the walls. So actually, I first have to have that much expansion of the awareness. But we're saying more than that. Then it's this sense, imagination, felt kinesthetic sense of energy through the movement, in the movement, with the movement, initiated by the movement, propped up by the movement, occupying, filling the whole space.

This is just the second part of this: your hands, your wrists and your arms. Remember this can be done physically. It can be done just in the imagination with the energy body. There's no obvious physical movement there.

It could be done from the standing posture, lying down posture, or sitting posture - there are all these variations.

Spend some time doing that.

The third possibility, the third stage, is to then move your head and neck. You could stop moving your hands and arms and wrists and just move your head and neck. But with the same awareness, the same sensitivity, the same expansion, the same kinesthetic sense and imagination and feeling extending there. Or you could make it cumulative - so now you're moving your hands and wrists and arms and your head and neck freely, improvisationally. Same sensitivity, the same imagination, the projection, the inhabiting, the filling of the space.

Then the fourth stage is to add your legs, your feet, your ankles. They can start moving slowly, improvisatively. Again, that could be where everything else becomes still and you just move them, or you add that to the other areas of the body that are already moving.

And then a final stage - free and improvised movement including the whole body. So the hips, the pelvis, everything.

There are lots of variations, lots of possibilities. The intention is sensitivity to the energy body in the usual sense of size, but also to the much more projected, larger, expanded energy body, and the whole sense of the space that you're in - of inhabiting and filling that space with the energy body, or letting the energy body project to fill that space.

Another variation is that we can do the same thing with faster movements. I would probably start slower because there's much more chance of sensitivity. This really does take a lot of sensitivity - this is the prime intention of this exercise. Actually many of these exercises focus on sensitivity, and also the capacity to expand, the capacity to project and not always be held back. I'll talk more about this later.

But when you've done this for a while, when you've practiced this a few times, then you may want to experiment with faster movements. It may well be that doing it faster is much more tricky to maintain and really tune in and feel and have a good kinesthetic sense or imagination there. But see what happens. If it's too fast, then you need to slow it down until you can find what does work. Or maybe just stay with the fast a little longer because maybe it will come alive.

So that's the first exercise. You can see lots of different variations there. I'm not going to repeat that because you can just rewind and listen to it again.

The second exercise - I realize there are lots of variations, but relatively speaking, it's pretty simple. It gets maybe a little more involved later on in the exercise.

So the second exercise is a voice exercise. The first one is really movement, we could say. The second one is a voice exercise.

Again, broadly speaking, we can do it two ways. We can do this voicing, making an actual sound that's audible to ourselves and to others. Or we can do it only imagining making a sound and feeling that in the energy body, with image and energy body sense. There's no physical sound and no physical movement here. So two ways of doing it, and two ways of doing any element of it.

What we're going to do here is sound extended tones, extended notes - vowels probably, or syllables, or maybe mantric syllables. In this exercise, it doesn't matter which sound, or if it's a mantric syllable, which one. It doesn't matter for this purpose at all.

So make them extended - you hold a note for a long time. Not till you're out of breath, but the idea is long notes. And within that, you have notes at different pitches - higher notes or lower notes.

Use your full range—however high you can go, however low you can go. This isn't directly about stretching that range, though eventually it may connect with that. Use your full range without being uncomfortable, exploring both high and low notes.

The first thing to notice is: where in the body is the center of emanation of this sound you're making right now? Can you notice and feel this? While you're standing there practicing, you're still feeling your whole energy body as we do in pretty much any practice—maintaining that whole energy body awareness as at least a background. But where in the body is the center of the emanation of the sound? Can you notice and feel that?

Any trained singer will be aware of this. Different pitches will feel like they're coming from different places in the body. A very high pitch comes from actually higher in the body, or feels like it does—from the top of the head. From the crown of your head to the pelvic bone is the usual range where a singer will feel the center of resonance, the center of emanation of the sound.

So the first thing is: can you just notice and feel where it's coming from? Within that range, from the top of your head down to your pelvic bone, right down to your perineum, you've got the whole energy body awareness. Then you notice where the center is. Can you include the arms and legs? Can you feel the sound as also emanating from your arms and legs? Can it come from the whole energy body? Remember, the energy body is usually bigger than the physical body.

Do you notice that it's easier to feel and sound from certain places than others? Not so much hitting the note, but actually feeling the center of emanation and being comfortable with it really emanating strongly and surely and full-bloodedly and embodiedly from that center.

Over time, you might notice patterns. Perhaps it's the lower belly that's hard for you to really inhabit and fill out, hard to let that really be a center. Something's blocked there, or just not available. Or perhaps something up in the throat is much more possible, or a higher note. Other people experience the reverse. Just notice.

Maybe over time, with practice, the whole range becomes more evenly available—so that the sound your body is making can emanate full-bloodedly, full-bodiedly, with full presence and full power from any place in the body. And you're comfortable with this. It doesn't feel like there's a dead spot or that it's hard to get feeling there.

That's the first part of this second exercise. The second part is: can I have the sense of the whole energy body emanating? Where is your voice coming from? It seems to come from your mouth and throat, right? But what is it to really feel and let yourself imagine—with kinesthetic imagination, a felt sense—the whole energy body emanating that sound? The sound is really coming from that whole space, which extends a little beyond the physical body.

The third part: can the sound you're making and the sense of the energy body feel like they're mixed together—to quote the Buddha—like water in milk? They're not exactly the same thing, but once you mix them together, it becomes almost impossible to tell them apart. They're not going to separate like oil and water. Can you sense—get a kinesthetic sense and an aural sense—of the sound and the energy body mixed together almost indistinguishably? Hard to tell, almost impossible to separate them apart. They've almost become palpably the same thing. Sound is the energy body, is vibration. The vibration is the sound. The energy body is sound, has become sound, has become vibration.

The fourth part of the exercise: we've got this awareness of the energy body, as usual, and awareness of the sound, of course. Now add to it, similar to the first exercise, a sense of the space around you—the waves in the pool, the ripples in the pool around you. After all, sound is in fact waves in the air.

That's what actually makes sound—sound is waves in air. What is it to have the energy body awareness, to have the awareness of the sound, to be really in that, open to that, sensitive to that, and then also open the awareness to the sense of the space around, the sense of the medium, if you like?

Imagine, feel, hear that medium resonating with the sound, filled with the sound. That sound, that energy that you are sounding, that's coming through you, is filling the space, is reaching the walls. Can you get a kinesthetic felt sense, a kinesthetic imaginative sense, hearing it and feeling it as reaching the walls, the ceiling, the floor, filling the space?

And sometimes you think, oh, well, I need to get louder. Not necessarily. So here's a little sub-variation. Sometimes it's good to get loud. Let yourself get loud, because sometimes that's also—and this is very related to one of the reasons why I'm doing this—sometimes some people really hold themselves back from being loud as a whole. I'll return to this. So sometimes let yourself get loud as part of filling the space.

But you can also have this sense of filling the space, of projecting with the energy body and the sound and letting it fill and impact and shape and flow through and penetrate the medium when you're not necessarily getting louder, even in a big room. And it still feels like you're imagining that it's projecting. You're feeling it as projecting and filling the room.

So that was actually the fifth variation—sometimes you do it loud and sometimes you do it soft. I've run through these because I've woven some of them together.

So the first part is—remember, all this can be with sound or just with the imagination and the energy body. Extended tones, doesn't matter what—high, low pitches, different pitches over your whole range. First part: where in the body is the center of emanation of the sound? Can you notice that? Can you feel it? Whole tip of head to pelvis, and then actually include more and see where it's easier. And what happens over time to that sense of where it's easier to have that sense of the center of emanation?

Second part: can you have a felt sense, a felt imagination of the whole body emanating? The whole body radiating sound that way.

Third part: can the sound emanate and the energy body become mixed? The vibration, the resonance, and the energy body become mixed like water and milk, like milk and water.

Fourth part: with the energy body and the sound awareness, the awareness of the energy body and the awareness of sound, can we also feel, imagine, hear, get a kinesthetic, an aural sense of the whole medium of the space that we're in, and the whole space that we're in resonant with that sound, filled with, filling that space with sound and energy, reaching the walls?

And fifth: can we do that both loudly and softly, but it still fills, expands, radiates?

So I'm going to stop there now and introduce and go through the other exercises in another part. These are relatively simple, but still I think really worth doing. They may sound completely boring or pointless to you. Hopefully I'll explain more about why they're important. But I hope that's clear enough for now. We'll stop there.

CHAPTER 236

Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 2)

Rob Burbea · 1h50

> *In this continuation of his teaching on movement, gesture, and voice preliminaries, Rob Burbea presents exercise three—a series of five practices designed to open blocked circuits that prevent soul from expressing through the body. The practices include 'Thunderclap' (emphatic brief gestures that consolidate mind, intention, soul and body), 'Born Aloft by Angels' (surrendering to being held and moved by ethereal beings), 'Raging Beast' (allowing primal energy to move through without implying evil), 'Immovable Protector' (embodying steadfast guardianship), and 'The Serpent' (left deliberately undefined for personal exploration).*
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> *Burbea emphasizes these are technical exercises like musical scales rather than experiences meant to produce dramatic openings. He explores why certain soul expressions may be blocked for decades, preventing particular images from arising in practice and limiting soul's manifestation in daily life. The teaching addresses resistance to such practices, noting how blocked circuits can affect everything from anger expression to black-and-white thinking patterns. He discusses the relationship between allowing 'darker' expressions and opening to the full range of imaginal possibilities, stressing that soul needs access to the complete palette for its art. Each exercise can be practiced both physically and through the energy body alone.*

These movement, gesture, and voice exercises that we're exploring are intended to be added to what is already available in previous talks recorded over the years. I tried to give a list earlier, though I know there are some I'm forgetting. In fact, I remember sitting right here recording something about ensouling the voice, offering instructions or possibilities for meditation, but I cannot for the life of me recollect where that recording is. So there may be other material as well, but it's all to be taken together as a body of material—a strand within the soul-making dharma, within the practices.

Some of what we'll explore in this set of talks will repeat material from earlier recordings, and some will be unique to each. There will be material in previous talks that I won't repeat here, and conversely, there will be new material here that wasn't covered before. I'm actually curious about how many people who listened to or participated in those earlier exercises—I believe they were part of talks called "Voice, Movement and the Possibilities of Soul" on Dharma Seed—how many actually picked up those exer-

cises and practiced them repeatedly? Even more basically, how many listened and practiced rather than simply listened? And really, how many actually incorporated those exercises into ongoing practice and developed them further?

I'm genuinely curious about this. I'm also genuinely curious that if people heard those talks or experimented briefly but didn't pursue the practices, why not? I think it would be good for all of us to be genuinely curious about this question. Why not? I mean this as a genuine inquiry, not as judgment—not the kind of "Why didn't you do that?" that becomes self-criticism about another thing we failed at or neglected.

This becomes an interesting question insofar as it might shed light on those areas and issues we touched on yesterday: inertia, and the capacity to discriminate significance or the failure to discern significance. Maybe I didn't pursue those practices because of various forms of inertia—inertia in my practice, in my relationship with practice, in what and how I practice. The form of practice can become rigidified, set in particular ways. Practice becomes something where you don't move much, don't make noise, certainly nothing loud or wild or rambunctious like some of those exercises were.

So was it partly inertia, or was it that I simply didn't discern the significance—didn't grasp these practices as something important? There were, as I mentioned yesterday, other reasons having to do with how I presented the teaching, not taking enough time, rushing through material. But insofar as this inquiry sheds light on those two areas—inertia and the capacity to discern significance—it becomes pedagogically interesting as we go forward. Perhaps we need to take more time, really earmark something as significant, put a ring fence around it and establish it clearly as a practice.

So I'll leave that inquiry with you.

We introduced yesterday the first two exercises, and to briefly repeat some of the reasoning behind them: first, they develop sensitivity. The development of sensitivity is such an integral, necessary part of soul-making dharma practices. These practices depend so much on sensitivity—in this case, sensitivity to movement, to gesture, to voice, sensitivity to energy bodies, to space, to sound. All of this was present in exercises one and two: the possibility of developing sensitivity and recognizing how important this is in soul-making dharma practice. We're increasing both the scope of what we're sensitive to—the range of aspects of being and expression to which we're attuned—and deepening the quality of that sensitivity itself.

The second reason has to do with how we can live as human beings in this complex culture of ours, with its intricate social dynamics and psychologies, and find that our energy, our voice, our body can be held in, held back habitually. Often this happens unconsciously, not through conscious choice. We're holding ourselves back, holding ourselves in as a habitual pattern.

And that holding back of our energy and our voice, holding back of our bodily expression as well, is actually a holding back of our libido, of our life energy, of our life force, and also of our eros—again, in the larger, fuller, richer sense of that word eros. It is a holding back of our soul.

This, I think, is very, very common in our culture, and it may be common—I'm going to say more about this as we go on—it may be especially common in certain ways in some dharma cultures.

So there's the development of sensitivity in certain areas, and the increase of sensitivity both in refinement and depth, but also in scope. And there's this question: Is there a habitual holding back or holding in of my energy, of my voice, through my body, which is actually a holding back of my libido and my soul? Do I have a choice in that? Am I even conscious of that? This is very important—very, very important. I'll elaborate as we go forward.

We've talked about using this language of preliminaries and exercises. Just as it's probably obvious, if we call those exercises and the other exercises we'll give today and hopefully in the coming days preliminaries, they're also presupposing other preliminaries—for example, mindfulness, some degree of energy body awareness. So there are preliminaries that are resting on other preliminaries, you could say. That's probably obvious.

But also, if you've been listening to the teachings over the last while, even just over the last couple of years, you can see that some of what we might call preliminaries—what we might ask for as preliminaries from a practitioner as prerequisites—can then become ensouled. This relates to another thread we talked about: the difference between foundation and root, with a root being something that can actually grow. The foundation is something that's fixed. So what is a kind of prerequisite or preliminary can then become an ensouled area and grow and be developed to other levels that we had never even anticipated or intuited or dreamt of.

This is very clear, for example, if we take two areas that we can consider as preliminaries. The energy body—we've seen that it's this kind of thing, this kind of awareness, this kind of sense of the body. People get a hang of that. But after a while, we talked

about the imaginal energy body—that very sense of the energy body can become imaginal and can be related to as imaginal image. So it's not just a sort of basic instrument; it becomes itself an erotic, imaginal object. It becomes ensouled, it becomes alive and ensouled. Its depth, the range of its possibility, what it can be, how it can manifest, how we can feel it, the whole relationship with it becomes erotic and imaginal. The whole thing just balloons out exponentially to include other possibilities.

That would be one example of a preliminary or prerequisite that then becomes ensouled and completely opens out—actually infinitely—to other possibilities.

A second example would be sīla, ethics. Again, we rest our teaching as dharma teachings within the dharma framework of sīla, of ethics—in our case, the five precepts that we receive from the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, taking those very seriously as a basis. As practice develops—and I've outlined this in two sets of talks now, "Sīla and Soul" and "The Image of Ethics"—as practice develops and the soul-making dynamic starts involving ethics, sīla itself becomes... values and virtues become erotic imaginal objects, and the whole domain of sīla becomes erotically alive and alive to the soul and for the soul. Then that whole preliminary basis of the five precepts again just balloons out in complexity and depth and dimensionality and range and demand and beauty—all of that.

Those would be two examples of areas where preliminary becomes ensouled and then becomes something that's potentially the opposite of preliminary—super advanced. But the same could be said of something like dāna or even mindfulness. There are lots of possibilities in relation to this idea of preliminaries.

And again, to touch on this thread I'll keep coming back to: the why of all this. Let me repeat something I think I said yesterday. Why preliminaries? Why these exercises, these kinds of exercises? Why even think in terms of exercises or preliminaries?

As I said, we can just hope that the soul-making dynamic—we know, we've heard, or we've even had experience of what the soul-making dynamic does—will expand things. It will expand its range. It will include more and more, and it will expand something that it's got in its vortex, in its dynamics—some area or aspect of our being, our life. It expands that area, we expand with it, our understanding and our experience of that area or aspect of being expands with it, or shatters in the breaking of the vessels and has to be built in a larger way, a deeper, more full, far-reaching way.

So it might be that we can just hope that if we're practicing soul-making—we like it, we're practicing—we can just hope that the soul-making dynamic will expand, will get hold, in its expansion or in the breaking of vessels that happens occasionally from time

to time. Sometimes it's just a stretch, sometimes it's actually a shattering. In that whole process, over time, eventually it will just, by itself, come to involve and include and ensoul movement, gesture, voice. We can just hope for that, because that's what the soul-making dynamic does.

However, if those areas—movement, gesture, and voice, or some directions and possibilities within movement, gesture, and voice—if the blocks there that we have are really entrenched, if they're entrenched enough, then the power of expansion of the soul-making dynamic propelled by eros and the eros-psyche-logos dynamic, if the blocks are more entrenched and effectively more powerful than the soul-making dynamic at that point, it won't ensoul those areas, or those possibilities within those areas. Sometimes it does.

Sometimes the eros in the soul-making act simply does its work—it overcomes or stretches those walls, those blocks we've explored before, whether they arise from eros, psyche, logos, or elsewhere. But sometimes that same force encounters barriers it cannot penetrate. The blocks have become too entrenched, too deeply rooted. When this happens, those areas remain outside the soul-making dynamic. They cannot be ensouled. Certain possibilities simply won't open. The movement stops there, the walls remain unmoved, the limitations stay exactly where they are.

Can we know in advance whether any blocks we carry—often unconsciously—will prove weaker or stronger than the soul-making dynamic's push? How could we predict whether the fermentation and force of soul-making will successfully penetrate those particular areas of our being and life as it reaches them? I don't believe we can know this beforehand.

Certainly, in many cases the dynamic does expand those limits, pushing open walls, creating and discovering new possibilities—new roads for soul, new territories and landscapes to explore. But inevitably there will be blocks and walls that soul encounters in its process that it simply cannot overcome. The movement stops there. Those areas remain unreachable, unopened. No entry. The road remains closed.

What does it actually mean for movement, gesture, and voice to be ensouled? When we speak of these aspects of our being becoming ensouled, what exactly are we pointing toward? I believe it means at least two significant things, both quite profound.

First, it means that when soul wants to express and communicate through or using these aspects of our being—movement, gesture, voice—it can. These domains become available. Roads open within them, travel becomes possible, expansion can occur. The degree of possible development here is infinite. Consider the analogy of music and how

completely open-ended the development of these arts can be—the art of movement in dance, of gesture, of voice. The art of soul expressing through these media has no limits in terms of depth, height, or breadth. What some artists achieve is simply staggering, not merely in technical mastery, but in the profound soul power that flows through great art when deep technique couples with the full dimensions of soul.

For most of us, though, this availability probably manifests more simply—as soul expressing naturally in everyday life, in living soulfully or fulfilling what we might call our soul duties. When soul wants to express and communicate through these aspects of being, it can. This might involve developing movement, gesture, or voice to some degree, perhaps even extraordinarily, but more likely it means these channels remain open for soul's ordinary manifestation in daily life. Nothing bars these directions and domains from being ensouled; nothing prevents soul from flowing through and expressing itself in and through these aspects of our being.

The second meaning is equally important: the movement, gesture, and voice of oneself or another—in their everyday, ordinary usages—can be sensed with soul. A voice simply speaking in conversation, exclaiming something; a hand moving as it accompanies speech—these ordinary expressions of movement, gesture, and voice can be sensed as angelic, as refracting the angel, the daemon. They are perceived as dimensional, unfathomable, divine in origin, echoing the eternal.

These two meanings of what it means for movement, gesture, and voice to be ensouled are both essential if we speak of opening our lives to soul-making or allowing our lives to be open to soul.

I've shared about what I call my grief—though perhaps regret captures it better—particularly regarding jazz guitar improvisation and the technical mastery I never achieved. When people ask about approaching death and whether there's anything I regret, I can honestly say there's just one thing.

And it's that. Why the word regret? Because even though I did go to music school and conservatory, you actually end up having to figure out a lot of stuff on your own, especially if you're doing jazz. You have to find your own ways to do things, your own avenues that you're interested in and develop them.

So there were plenty of things, even within jazz, that I figured out on my own, so to speak—picking up different pieces here and there, following my intuition, following my eros, essentially, and playing, experimenting, creating, discovering. Plenty of things I figured out on my own. And looking back, of course, I could have chosen technique in

the sense that I was talking about the other day, this particular kind of technical area. I could have chosen that as something to focus on and say, "Let me just really try and figure this out and get really interested in it."

But actually, I effectively chose other areas instead—other areas of music, other areas of guitar playing as well. And I developed them. That was wonderful and very fruitful and beautiful. But I could have chosen technique. So it's actually a kind of regret. Yes, I wasn't taught it because, as I said, there wasn't the pedagogy there at that time. But I could have just kept bashing away in this kind of dogged way that one has if one really wants something. But I didn't. I chose other things instead. So there's regret. There's some responsibility that falls on me.

So in a way, offering these particular teachings now—offering them so that there's the possibility that you can practice. Practice so that you don't end up regretting. That you don't end up regretting not supporting yourself fully or allowing yourself or enabling yourself fully to move in the direction or be moved in the direction of what you want with respect to soul-making dharma. And also what you want with respect to soul in life—the expression and the living of soul in life, your soul in your life. We must call that soul-making dharma. It's not something separate.

So offering these is part of why I share the story of that grief and regret. Because sometimes there are things that are really important to our soul, and it's only the fact that we didn't take care of some really basic nuts and bolts that we actually were not able then to reap the benefit and play in the fields of the territories that we would have loved to explore.

So this offering is so that you have that choice, and you have a conscious choice. You can practice so you don't regret.

We said yesterday that these are small pieces, these exercises, this emphasis on movement, gesture, voice, and the exercises we'll do—they're kind of small, little small pieces, but they're indispensable, both. So they're not super central, not a super big deal, but they're indispensable, both. There's a kind of—not contradictory, but two sides of that statement, obviously.

How do you pick it up? What does hearing something like that do to your relationship and attitude to this whole notion of preliminaries and exercises and these particular ones that we're working through?

You probably want to avoid two extremes here. There's the "small pieces" side—therefore one hears "nah, it's not important," and one maybe never bothers to do these exercises. Or, well, okay, I do them once or twice. That would be one extreme, and I think it would probably be a mistake for most people. Maybe not for everyone, but for most people.

The other extreme you want to avoid is when you hear this "small pieces but indispensable" and therefore drop everything else and spend hours every day doing these exercises, vowing to do no other practices until you've completed three years of just these exercises every day or whatever it is.

As usual, a little bit of middle way can go a long way—bringing some intelligence here, knowing one's patterns, recognizing the kinds of inertia one typically gets entrenched in, falls into. All that's really important. As usual, it's really about discernment and intelligence and applying that to one's practice.

And just a small but important practical thing that I didn't say yesterday: if anything in these exercises, for any reasons—physical reasons or reasons of your health—if any part of an exercise or any exercise feels like that wouldn't be good for my body or that's just not possible for my body or it would be dangerous or something (which is the case for me at this point for one or two of these things), just don't do it or adapt it. Find, get, understand, discern what the kernel of it is, what the point is, and adapt it. Adapt it to your body, your body's condition right now, and the needs and capabilities of your body right now.

Okay, so let's move on and introduce exercise three. Now again, there are five exercises within this, so whether it's actually exercise three or exercise series three—it doesn't matter.

But there's five within them, I'll go through them. Again, each of these five could be done physically—concretized into actual movement and vocalization. It could be done concretely, physically, or it can be done just with the energy body, in the sense of the energy body, in the imagination only, where there's nothing physical or audible, perceptible there.

So each of the five can be done in either or both of those ways, and I would encourage exploring both—really, really encourage exploring both the concrete physical and the not concretized, not physicalized, just the energy body, just the image sense.

I can give these sort of little nicknames to these five. I'm not sure I'm such a fan of the nicknames—I've just come up with them very hastily—but it doesn't really matter. You could just go by numbers or you can make your own nickname.

The first one of the five, I've just called something like Thunderclap or Thunder and Lightning. But don't take that too literally and don't take it too narrowly either. What I mean by this exercise, what I want to get at by this exercise—and I think this one is really, really important—actually this one more than any other of all the exercises I'm offering was the start of this idea that something needs to be offered. It would be a good idea to offer something. This one I think is very important.

What I mean is: the object is an emphatic, brief or sudden gesture or movement, maybe with a vocalization, but the whole thing is maybe two seconds, roughly. Something very emphatic and relatively short. If there's a vocalization, it's also relatively short.

But within that, emphatic means there's force in it. There's power in it. There's energy and strength in it. And there is soul coming through. In this case, I mean soul in a slightly more limited sense, or rather as a minimum in a limited sense. It may come through in this fully imaginal sense, but I don't necessarily mean that at the start. It's just an exercise. I mean soul coming through—I mean soul as the spirit, the life force, the being, the person, the energy.

And really, it's coming through in a consolidation, in a gesture, in a movement, in a vocalization that consolidates, coheres, coalesces mind, intention, soul and body, in and through body movement, gesture or voice.

So something like just a stamp of the foot and maybe some kind of gesture with the arms or the fists, or just a gesture with the arms, or just stamping the feet, or a kick, or a step, or a karate chop. It's the movement itself. Anyone can do the movement—well, some of us can't do these kinds of movement at this point. But most people without physical difficulty can do something like that movement.

What's much harder is to have that sense of real coming together, coherence, congruence, consolidation, coalescence, integration. In that brief two seconds, the integration of mind, intention, body, person, in and through the body, movement, gesture, and voice.

And again, the vocalization could be anything. It could be a "ha," or a slightly longer tone. It really doesn't matter. And again, it could be spontaneous—you don't actually know what you're going to do. You just feel the impulse and let that coalesce and let it come out. Or it could be precise—you've rehearsed it and you know exactly what it looks like and what it's going to sound like and you do that. This will apply to all of these five examples: those two alternatives.

It would be easier if you could see me and I could demonstrate, even though I'm very limited in what I could do physically right now. But I hope you can get the sense of this. When someone is doing Kung Fu or Karate, in a way that's what they're doing. They chop bricks or whatever it is, or they make a move. That's part of their training: to bring everything together—mind, intention, soul and body like that.

And it's surprisingly rare, and in some circles it's even more rare than it might be in other circles. So can I do this? Can I train in doing that?

And as I said, I think this is the most important one, perhaps even of everything I'm going to offer. There are reasons for me saying that, which I'll come back to. But it may be that you just think, well, I don't know, that doesn't sound very interesting at all. Just notice your response.

After you've done your gesture, if this was on retreat—if we were doing this on retreat and I was introducing this—I would say, okay, the way we're going to do this is, let's say we have this whole week retreat. Every day you're going to come into an interview room with me, and I'm going to sit there while you do this thunderclap or thunder and lightning movement, gesture, vocalization thing. You just come in, prepare yourself, and then you do it in front of me while I'm watching you.

Then after you do it, you assess it. Maybe you say, "Oh yeah, felt like I wasn't quite in my feet there," or "I could feel I was holding back a little in my voice," or "I could feel like the energy was really coming through, but it was more hysterical than coherent. It wasn't really congruent."

And then after you assess, I assess. I assess you.

This might sound odd in our culture, in our dharma culture—a kind of little exam where you have to do something in front of the teacher and then they assess you. I'll explain why that would even be part of it in a retreat setting. Of course, if you're not in a retreat setting, then either you have to do it on your own and assess yourself, or you could do it with a dharma friend.

But I think even the ability to really read these things in another person and sense them is quite rare and something that needs developing. It will probably only develop through practice for most people—through doing it oneself. Then some people will develop the ability to sense these things with other people. We can be easily misled in these areas, very easily misled, and that's something I'll come back to later.

So again, if we were in a retreat setting and I was introducing this, I'd say, "Come once a day. You're going to do this thing. It will be a thread through your retreat." You can practice these exercises on your own as much as you want in motionless silent meditation, as I said, just with the energy body and with the imaginal sense. And you can also practice—for example, if we were at Gaia House—you can go out onto the grounds and just practice as much as you want. Then once a day, you'd come and do this thing.

I'll come back to what that assessment bit is about. Anyway, that's number one. So I hope I've conveyed something there. It would be easier to just see me, but anyway, we're recording this.

That's the first one. The second thread of this exercise is—and again, I'm not sure about the name—something like "born aloft by angels."

Here, not two seconds. Maybe you've got a maximum of two minutes. You don't have to use all that time—a maximum of two minutes. Certainly more than twenty or thirty seconds, but somewhere between, let's say, thirty seconds and two minutes.

You let your body, or you express with your body, the image of being born aloft by angels. Somehow these beings who have no weight are bearing you aloft, holding up your body on these gossamer threads of love and light, making your body buoyant, floating, light, weightless. Your body can give itself to being held by the angels and moved by these angels.

The body, in giving itself, can become fluid. Your body becomes fluid in this—almost the way that sometimes when they celebrate at a party, you can lift someone up, and if there's enough people, you can pass them along. Or in a big crowd or at a concert, you know, pass people along hand to hand. A big crowd passes a person along. Something like that, but much more delicate and almost ethereal.

The body becomes fluid in surrendering oneself to that being held and being moved. Another part of it is the surrendering oneself—surrendering one's energy body and physical body and heart as much as possible, and soul.

Probably in this one there's no vocal component. It's just moving your body in a way that expresses that as much as possible. And again, if we were on retreat, you and I might take turns in assessing that.

The third part of this exercise, or the third exercise in this series of exercises, is what we might call "the raging beast."

I don't know what even comes up in your mind now as a reaction when you hear "raging beast." Of course there are many types of beast. Some have tails, some have horns, some have fangs, some have teeth, some have tongues—all kinds of stuff. Many kinds of beasts. We're not going to put a limit on that. It's just a raging beast or the raging beast.

Maybe it's a ravenous beast, maybe it's not. Maybe it's just raging. Careful how you hear this. Do you hear "raging beast" and then hear evil, for instance, or ill-will? I certainly don't hear that implication. To me, it doesn't imply that at all. So I want to be very clear about this: it does not necessarily imply evil or ill-will.

Again, somewhere between thirty seconds and two minutes. It might be that within those thirty seconds to two minutes, there are bursts. So you have a little burst of letting this thing come through your body, or feeling into your body, and the movement and gesture and vocalization that might come with that. Then that subsides a little, you let it go, and you gather the intention, gather the citta, gather the energy, body, awareness, and then do it again. Another burst of, you know, up to fifteen seconds, whatever it is. This is all quite loose. Or it may be just two minutes straight—you're just really in this thing. Whatever.

Again, vocalization is possible but not necessary. So maybe sometimes you do it and there are vocals that come with it, sometimes not. Maybe try both ways. And again, depending on the context, we would both take turns in assessing that, getting more discerning and discriminating about what's working there, what's blocked, what's being included, what the issues are, what areas of the body or ranges are opening or not.

The fourth one is something we might call the immovable protector or the immovable guardian. Maybe they're human, maybe they're inhuman, maybe they're demonic, maybe they're angelic, maybe they're animal. Maybe they're some kind of mythic creature. It doesn't really matter.

The immovable protector or guardian—what are they protecting? Maybe they're protecting the earth. Maybe they're protecting in relation to some kind of social injustice or racial injustice. That might change from time to time. What's core here is this immovable protector or immovable guardian.

Again, a maximum of two minutes. It may be that within those two minutes it's broken up into little bursts of expression, of movement, gesture, voice—perhaps up to fifteen seconds, then gathering, stopping, regrouping, another burst. It may be, even in

the name "immovable protector," that there's very little movement. But in the stance, in the gesture, in the feel of the energy body, the being, the mind, the soul, that image of an immovable protector guardian is gathered and expressed and manifest.

So maybe a lot of movement, maybe a little movement, maybe very little movement, or even no movement. But it's in the gesture, it's in the stance, it's in the posture, it's in the feel of the energy body, or it may be in the voice. And again, if we were in a certain context, we would do this double assessment.

The fifth one I'm just going to call the serpent. The serpent. But I'm not going to say anything about it. What does it mean, the serpent? What might it mean? What's the range of possibility that it might mean? The serpent. Again, maybe up to two minutes, and may include vocal, maybe not. The serpent. There are a couple of deliberate reasons I'm not saying anything in terms of what that might be.

So five parts, each possibly both concretized and physical, or just in the energy body, just in the imaginal sense, image sense, imaginative sense—because as I said, it might not be completely imaginal, and that's fine. And also, as mentioned, it might be that they're just spontaneous and improvised movements, gestures, vocalizations, or it might be that they're quite rehearsed and you know precisely what the body and voice are going to do beforehand. So try both ways.

Those are the five, with variations, for what we'll call exercise series number three.

A little bit more about the why. As I said, especially that first one—what we're calling the thunderclap, or thunder and lightning—this ability to really gather the citta, the intention, the soul, the mind, the body, the movement, the gesture, the voice, to gather it powerfully into one coherent, congruent expression, gesture, movement, energy—it's quite rare.

And I have come to wonder recently whether it's even rarer in some Dharma circles, including our own. This capacity to actually gather everything—the citta, intention, soul, mind, body, movement, gesture, voice—into one coherent, congruent expression seems quite rare. In different ways, a person avoids it, never manifests it, falls short of it, falls shy of it, prevents it, has a bit of it but with a hollow space in the middle. There are many, many possibilities for how we avoid this wholeness.

Often that kind of coherence of body, mind, energy and soul is missing as a possibility. It's like the circuits are simply not there, or they're cut, or they're missing. When these circuits are severed, something profound happens: certain kinds and ranges of images won't arise for a soul-making practitioner interested in imaginal practice. Something is blocked in those circuits, and it limits what arises imaginally.

As we said before, if the eros-psyche-logos dynamic is strong enough—more powerful in its movement than whatever blocks or limits or holdings are there—then an image can arise that actually breaks open those walls, reconnects those circuits. A flame, a spark jumps over, and in jumping over, connects two points, reignites, makes available again, reconfigures that circuit. This comes from the power of the soul-making dynamic constellating an image, and that image does something. The power of the image is allowed to do something, or has enough soul-making power to reconstitute, reconfigure, reform that circuit.

But oftentimes, as I said, that won't happen. These circuits remain cut, and certain kinds of images, a certain range of images, simply won't arise in practice. They can't, because the circuit is severed. It's cut in relationship to movement, gesture, voice, energy, body, possibility, and self-view—all kinds of things are involved.

Without those images, there won't be soul-making in that direction. There won't be soul-making in formal practice, in meditation practice in that direction, because the circuits are cut. But it may also be the case that there won't be soul and soul-making in certain areas of one's life—no possibility of ensoulment in certain directions of duty and certain kinds of manifestation.

Both these lacunae, both these gaps—the impossibility of certain images arising and the impossibility of soul opening, traveling, moving, manifesting in certain directions in one's life—have profound consequences. They affect one's psychology, one's whole psyche, the heart, relationships with others, one's duties in life including soul duties, possibilities for one's life, work, life choices we make. And we may not even realize this is happening, or understand why we're making this choice and not that choice. We don't realize it's because this circuit is blocked, unavailable. Therefore the soul-making and the soul cannot move in that direction, and certain choices don't even occur to us.

This kind of pattern often operates beneath our awareness, setting all kinds of consequences—psychological, emotional, relational, in terms of work, life choices, duties, possibilities. Some will say about these exercises: "I don't know, this just isn't me," or "It's not relevant to me." They might participate a few times but feel it's just not interesting or applicable. It will seem that way, but actually it's because the circuit is cut. This makes it very hard to discern what's really going on.

All this is by way of saying: be careful if you have resistance to some of these exercises. Such resistance is probably very normal, and of course you're free to do whatever you want, to pick up and put down as you choose. I'm simply inviting you to take care, to have a closer look, to engage in real questioning and inquiring, rummaging around and wondering.

In this case, it means wondering about one's whole life and the patterns of one's life. It's not just wondering about how you felt in that moment when someone suggested an exercise and you thought, "Yeah, okay" or listened and felt, "All right." The invitation is to really inquire: is there something here—a much larger trajectory, or absence of trajectory, patterning, limitation, blind spots, incapacities, impossibilities?

You can do what you want, but I offer this invitation to take care and to really inquire. If you try these practices once or twice and then neglect them, again the question arises: why?

Why would you neglect this? And again, as a real question, as a genuine inquiry.

As I said, it's not that everyone needs to do all this, because some people may already have all that range available—if we just talk about these five we just talked about today, or include the ones we did yesterday—may already have all that range available. It's all there vividly and vitally and juicily and soulfully in image, in the energy body, in their physical body and voice in the manifestation there, available in their life. For some people, it's all there, right? "I'm not really interested in spending my time doing that," and yes, why would you need to? You don't need to. I don't need to practice the C major scale again, or practice that particular technique again, because I've taken it as far as it's going to be developed. I can move on to developing other things.

But just to know that if that's not the case, if all that range is really not available, or not really available in the range of images, in the energy body, in the physical body, in the life, in the directions of one's life, in the expressions and manifestations of one's life—then there will be consequences. Most likely there will be consequences, there will be further consequences, and those consequences will include limitations on soul-making in life. There'll be consequences to neglecting and not picking up and just kind of giving in to one's inertia without really examining it and questioning it.

So always the choice must be yours. You must have that autonomy. But just a real—you can hear it's a strong encouragement to inquire and to question: do I really know what's going on for me here? And here doesn't just mean here and now; it means in my life, in the patterns of my life, in the choices of my life, in the directions I end up taking and not taking.

Some of these examples we said take two seconds or three seconds or less to do. But the circuits they need may have been shut down or short-circuited or chopped or snipped or whatever for decades. Decades. So it can seem like the exercise is really not

a big deal—this is a two-second thing. But the circuits that they need, or the circuits that are involved in these exercises, or that these exercises in a way are trying to reinstate, may have been shut down for decades.

And therefore it may take repeated practice, certainly maybe a long time of practice, to be able to do these exercises well, to do them properly. Even that first one I was talking about, this sort of sudden, emphatic, thunderous gesture and movement and vocalization—to really show up there, coalesce with force, with all my soul force and power, not held back, embodied, fully embodied, fully congruent. It may take a while to do them well, to do them properly, to develop that.

All this is not for the sake of self-empowerment. It's not for the sake of winning friends and influencing people. It's not for the sake of making you more attractive. It's not for the sake of making you more whole or more integrated. It's not for the sake of some kind of catharsis—"Oh yeah, get my anger out" or whatever it is.

But it's primarily so that, as I said, if the soul wants to manifest in image, in energy body, in emotion, or in life and in duty in life, using these kinds of faces, expressing these kinds of theophanies—if that's what soul wants through you, through image, through energy body, through emotion, through life and duty—if that's what soul wants, it can. That's the primary purpose for these kinds of exercises.

Secondarily, through that, I think, through doing these exercises and some of the ones we've done on other retreats as well, and some of the ones we did yesterday, it can also, as I said, begin to awaken and ignite the possibility of sensing our everyday movement, gesture, and vocalizations of them being sensed with soul, without them being in any way extraordinary. And this is part of sensing ourselves and sensing others with soul. Other aspects of the being, other aspects of life begin to be dimensionalized in that way, as we said.

So why this business about the assessment and the sort of exam situation? Very unusual in our dharma tradition. Of course, in other dharma traditions it's rare, but it does exist absolutely in other Buddhist dharma traditions. Why would I include that if we were in a different situation, if we were actually on retreat and I was introducing this? Why?

Because being seen and judged makes it usually, for most people, more challenging. One gets self-conscious, one holds back, all kinds of reasons. Someone doesn't even know the reason. But that's actually part of it. Because again, if we think about what the

relationship here is between these exercises and the possible manifestations or duties, work, whatever it is that soul will ask you to do, will want you to do—those two, the manifestations of your duties, will be seen and judged in the world and by the world.

And what happens then? What happens to our energy, to our voice, to our expression through the body when we feel or know that we are being seen and judged in and by the world?

So putting that piece in—the assessment, the examination element—actually makes it more difficult usually and more challenging. And that's actually part of it, because that reflects, mimics the actual situation that soul finds itself in, in life. Soul is in life. And so that's what we need to work with.

And still, I wonder if it can be hard, not easy to understand why these exercises, why we're introducing this. So I've introduced it with a few people now, just a few. And sometimes in the exchanges, trying to explain it, sometimes the person understands immediately—but actually it's often easier when I'm demonstrating something that they seem to understand immediately. But then often after that, they sort of forget and they veer off into something else. Something's happened—the practice has diverted, or they forget. Something that they understood instantaneously with me working one-on-one in a room with them, showing them something, and they just got it immediately through me giving examples with body, voice and gesture, and they seemed to get it and it was all fine. And then it just kind of veers off into something else. They've lost the understanding of why, or they forget, or they drag in other kinds of propensities or habits of view.

Or what can happen is, if I'm not demonstrating, it's actually very difficult for a person to understand what it is that we're talking about or why this is important. Sometimes even working with a person with energy body and voice, it can feel very alien, or they're not really sure what we're getting at, or they can't really tell the difference in two movements or vocalizations they made. They can't really even tell the difference between them in regard to what we're talking about—how much one is there, how much it's radiating and filling a space, these kinds of things.

Or sometimes I might suggest to a person, "Why don't you learn to sing that song and sing it in a way with the full energy and really with the whole body, like we were talking about in yesterday's exercises, and with the whole presence there and being and person coming through, and not held back in the voice and the body and all of that." And I remember one person suggesting, the first time I suggested the idea, he was saying, "You know, choose something like a heavy metal song or a punk song or something." And that was a misdirection in terms of the teaching I gave. It can be that genre,

but actually the singer, if we're talking about singers, is quite held back and contracted, and they're not really fully in their voice, or fully—their body is not really expressing things.

And it might, at a superficial glance, be quite hard to even discern in other people. It might look like, well, the guy's raging around and jumping about on stage, and he's clearly very angry about something or other, but actually there's a tremendous amount of contraction and block there, and the voice is almost being squeezed out through a tiny little hole. Or with this song and that song, we don't recognize where this singer is actually fully, let's say, not holding back in their voice. They're fully inhabiting their voice and their energy is fully inhabiting the space that they're in and fully reaching the audience, the physical space that they're in, and their whole body is involved, and their whole body is emanating, radiating the sound and the song and the spirit of the song. And other times it can be hard for someone to realize when that's the case and when it's not the case. They're both good songs, they're both good singers. We're talking about something else here.

Or, as I said, might be, try this with people and they just didn't—I don't know, that just didn't land. It just doesn't seem—I don't think that's relevant to me. It might be for other people, I don't think it's relevant to me, or I don't think I need that. Or it just doesn't interest me. So that's also something that I've encountered.

In exactly those instances, I would really disagree with their assessment there. It's precisely a small but absolutely indispensable piece that they don't have yet, that's very relevant, that they do need, and that they should be interested in, would be my opinion. So it's really interesting what can happen here in terms of the whole sense and view of this whole area. It can just completely pass one by, like we just don't recognize there's anything of significance or value or personal relevance here at all.

Or for other people it can be just the whole thing—and I think this was the case when we did those exercises in that retreat, which admittedly were, some of them were quite intense, but some of them were comical. And the person can be—was it the voice movement? Possibly it was the Soul retreat, I think. And I think for a couple of people it's just so alien. Those kinds of ranges of vocalization or expression or manifestation or body or gesture, just really unusual for them. And not at all what they associate with spirituality or dharma or anything like that. Now, they might not even say that, perhaps out of respect, but it's there. And it just doesn't fit a kind of picture or idea or view that they have. And it's very, very alien.

So, to me, this is not just the doing of it, but also the whole sense of it, and the whole capacity to discern both its significance, but also its presence or its absence. As we were just talking about the first of these five exercises, we could talk about any of them, this is something that can be strikingly undeveloped for practitioners who, in other ways, may be very well developed. Very well developed. So I find that really, really interesting.

Sometimes, again, I'm still on the why aspects. Sometimes working with someone in an interview one-to-one or whatever, and it might be there's an emotion or a dukkha or a frustration or something that's there that they've brought in—maybe they weren't even aware of it when they came in, maybe they were aware of it, it doesn't matter.

This emerges—this emotion, this dukkha, this frustration. And with guidance, with one-to-one guidance, they can help to relate to that emotion, dukkha, or frustration so that it opens something, creates something, instigates something in the energy body, perhaps as an image. Maybe both, maybe in any order—perhaps the image comes first, then the energy body experience, or vice versa.

Here's this difficulty, and then with guidance and the kind of crucible of care that's there, something emerges, or it transforms. The alchemy there allows something to transubstantiate, really, and manifest in the energy body as image. And that manifestation in the energy body and as image opens up, in that moment, a whole new sense of self and also a sense of the body. I've given different examples of that over the years in talks. That would be quite a common occurrence.

But often what happens is that new sense of self and open sense of body—whatever capacity, etc.—will revert back to the usual shapes and structures. And oftentimes that reversion happens after not very long at all. Sometimes not, but that's also quite common.

When it happens, it's quite a dramatic experience—the sense of something alchemically emerging in the energy body and the image, the beauty and power of the image, the soul being touched by the image, and the new sense of self. It's all like, "Wow."

But the purpose here in these exercises is not so much the wow and the dramatic experience. What we have in those examples from interviews is a kind of dramatic, usually dramatic emergence of something that does very understandably trigger a kind of wow response, and is a dramatic, compelling experience. This is not what we're aiming for here.

It's more like, as I said, we're talking about etudes—or even less than etudes. Certainly in these first three exercises, they're more like just scales or technical exercises. They're not necessarily going to feel amazing. They probably won't. I mean, they might do, actually—you really don't want to limit things. But the point is to view them more as scales and technical exercises.

On that point, and again thinking about pedagogy in a larger way, if you were to ask me, looking back over my Dharma practice and retreats and all that, about dramatic experiences and dramatic openings that I've had over the years, I could describe many, I'm sure. I could say, "Oh, that happened in this situation, that other thing happened in that situation," whatever it is. So I could tell you about dramatic experiences and dramatic openings.

But if you ask me another question—what has made really long-term differences in terms of long-term openings or long-term being helpful long-term—the answer would not necessarily be the same as dramatic experiences.

I think about, for example, different week or ten-day retreats that I've done. There have been a number where I could say, "Oh yes, it was on that week retreat where I had that experience—that was pretty amazing. And on that other week retreat that dramatic experience happened." But the answer to the second question about what made long-term differences would not be the same.

Actually, what seems to have made long-term differences, if I'm answering this question just for myself now, is the possibility or when I have been able to repeat something—repeat a practice, do it over and over again. A practice or approach that's helpful, relevant, but also has some eros for me, that's alive for me, that's growthful, and that's an edge, and that therefore is interesting and exciting.

And I've been in a situation—either because I'm on personal retreat and I don't have to listen to everyday new instructions from the teacher and go along with the group, I've been on personal retreat and I just follow my own thread there and develop this thing, develop this practice that I'm exploring or discovering—or in everyday life, just every day getting on a track of something that I'm really interested in and repeating it, developing it, growing with it.

So that would be more my answer to what has really made genuine long-term difference in helpful ways, different kinds of helpful ways. The answers to what has been amazing, dramatic, wow experiences—how much does it overlap with my answer to what has really made long-term, genuine, genuinely helpful differences?

If I asked you the same question, what would you think? What would you answer? And careful not to confuse the wow factor, the feel-good factor, the dramatic factor with what makes a long-term difference. That may be something you want to reflect on. Of course, you might have a different answer, but it may be something you want to reflect on.

I've been on other retreats—I remember going on some Goenka retreats and getting a lift back with a group of people in a big truck or van. We were all talking and listening, and a lot of them, it seemed, had come from backgrounds where they were really kind of—I don't know what the word would be—like they partied hard. They had very little discipline in their lives, and some of them had addiction issues, and that's how they would put it.

And then they came on a Goenka retreat, and it's suddenly almost like being thrown into a high-discipline prison sort of structure compared to their life, where there was no discipline. Sit, sit, sit. They don't even walk—just sit, sit, sit. And sit through the pain again, again, again, many hours a day.

And for quite a few of these people, it seemed that doing this ten-day ultra-disciplined Goenka course for them really did kind of dramatically break the momentum of the unhelpful patterns in their life.

The lack of discipline in their lives, the hard partying, and whatever else—being thrown into that context of the Goenka retreat with all its discipline and pressure and intensity, that continuity of intense effort, created a dramatic break. After the retreat, this dramatic break was enough to generate a kind of momentum that could change their everyday practice and life, helping them maintain discipline and good habits they felt they had previously lacked.

So it may well be that in those kinds of cases, drama and the dramatic "wow" experience—even if dramatically unpleasant, though often there would be a breakthrough in the retreat and things would become easier and pleasant—did allow and support more long-term helpful changes in life as well.

But will it be the same in other styles or emphases of practice? Soul-making retreats, for example, have a very different flavor. The whole tenor, atmosphere, what we're doing, how we're doing it—the flavor of softness as opposed to intense pressure and effort—all these things are different. Particularly what we're doing and how we approach it is not the same.

So it may not apply in the same way. The fact that you go somewhere and have an amazing experience—so beautiful on that seven-day soul-making retreat, or perhaps a metta retreat, or some other kind where something touches one deeply—of course that's important and lovely, but it doesn't necessarily translate into making a long-term difference.

This is something to think about as we go forward as a sangha with soul-making. Pedagogically, we need to consider: is this model of week-long group retreats really the most fertile, the most soul-making in the end? Beautiful as the experience of that week can be, touching as some of those experiences are, might it be that something more steady—courses, classes, groups—actually provides more support? A different kind of support, but a necessary kind of support for making a real, more long-term difference in terms of soul and soul-making, what soul needs.

I don't know, I'm just thinking about it. But really, with these exercises, think of them more as technical exercises, like practicing scales, as opposed to something that's going to suddenly create an amazing experience because this image came or that something happened. It might be, but that's not the point so much, and that's certainly not how we should judge them.

It's something like practicing scales, or to shift the analogy from musician to instrument—if you had a piano where certain keys get stuck when they're not played regularly, so when you press them, no sound comes out, then you try to play or improvise something and reach that note only to find nothing comes because the key is stuck. This isn't a perfect analogy, but perhaps if those keys were played more regularly, they could be freed up so they don't get stuck, making them available for the music.

What we're really talking about again is what soul might need. Yes, there are psychological health reasons why these exercises might be beneficial for some people at certain stages of their lives. But even those psychological health reasons can be conceived as being on a continuum with soul reasons. The soul might need that kind of psychological health. The soul might need for those circuits to be connected, working, and available in movement, gesture, body, and voice. As I've said, there may be consequences—all kinds of consequences that aren't necessarily obvious at all.

Sometimes what happens is we don't let certain kinds of body movement or expression, certain manifestations of voice, into the body, into the possibilities of movement and gesture. It might be certain—I'm going to use the word "dark," though it can mean many different things—some of the darker faces and expressions given as examples in

exercise number three. Again, this has nothing to do with evil; I'm not using those words synonymously at all. But they're not let into the body. The body is not open to that. The expression, voice, gesture, and movement are not open to that.

Sometimes those kinds of things may come as images for a person, but it may not be enough. It may be that their soul wants more images like that, or a fuller range, or more depth to images like that, and we're only getting a trickle of what could come through. Or it may be that having images alone is not enough—I'll come back to that.

It may even be that in blocking the dark images, somehow there's also a blocking of more—if you like—light images. More conventionally or traditionally angelic kinds of images. This isn't obvious at all. Because I'm not letting this darkness into the body, there's also a block in my imaginal practice of a certain range of light images. We want the whole range of images. Soul wants the whole range of images to be available.

Remember that talk, "The Spreading of Five Wings," I think it's called. This very much has to do with inertia and limits and blocks and ideas and stuck places and contractions—five kinds of range that we want to check we're open to.

The spreading of five wings, I think it was called. We want the whole range of images. Soul wants the whole palette to be available for its art. And it wants that not just in imaginal practice, but also in the body and in the voice, in the expressions of body and voice, movement, gesture, and so forth. So there are consequences—consequences for our formal practice, consequences for our life, consequences for what soul can do. Maybe other consequences as well.

It might be that, for example, in not letting some of the kinds of movement, gesture and voice that we've pointed to in the exercises today, in exercise number three, it may be that this also affects how we are with anger. So it might be that in not opening up the circuits in the body and the voice in these ways, this actually affects the mind in terms of anger. And the kind of anger that's possible then doesn't have body and voice in it. It might also not have a range of images, as we said, in it. It has a very narrow range.

And in that narrowness, it might be a couple of things. It might be then that the mind gets into quite black and white thinking and viewing. And that's something that often goes with anger when anger is not so healthy—it gets very black and white, the thinking and the viewing. But there may well be a relationship between the prevention, the absence, the block, the non-existence of those circuits of movement, gesture and voice, and the entrenchment and habit of black and white thinking and viewing.

Even when things are rosy and we think something's wonderful—and that's just all taken as the truth. It really is this way. This person really is that way. We never think, what's the connection? And I think there's a connection between what we allow to move through and to open through and open in and as movement, gesture, voice—what's available there. There's a connection between that and something like the kind of black and white thinking and viewing that's really not helpful, certainly not when there's anger, but also when there's a kind of positive assessment of something. Even if you're praising someone, they might end up feeling a little bit put in a box that they don't feel comfortable with, even if you're saying this or that about them or about something they've done. But actually, it's black and white. It's something entrenched.

This is connected with the second aspect I wanted to draw a link to. Because something can be brittle here, without letting things, without opening up the movement, gesture, voice in these kinds of ways. Something can get not just black and white in our thinking, viewing, when we're angry or when there's positivity, but also then brittle. And again, if we're talking about anger, that anger can be merely cold anger, and that's all that's available to me, as opposed to a hot, juicy anger. Cold anger is not far from hatred in certain ways of using those words. But cold anger is also kind of brittle.

And again, there's a kind of brittleness that can come into the being through just through the non-availability of some of these circuits with regard to body and voice. Anger can be brittle and not have depth to it, not have juice, not have—I don't know, I'm thinking of a spicy, juicy curry sauce. It doesn't have that in it. There's something cold and brittle in it. And then being brittle, it easily shatters. And something shatters in the being not in a helpful way, and something shatters in the anger, in what we're trying to stand up against or for, what we're trying to express and the point we're trying to make. Something shatters and there's a collapse, a collapse in the being. And there's no strength there.

So the collapse, because of the shattering, because of the brittleness, because of the non-availability of these areas and circuits and directions and possibilities in movement, gesture and voice. The connection with all that with black and white thinking, black and white viewing. So this is not, I think, obvious at first. Again, I would say in some cases, I think it's significant and important to be investigated. I certainly wouldn't insist this is the only way things work or it works like this for everyone—not at all—but to be investigated. This is the kind of thing we would never think to connect these aspects.

So there's a relationship here to everything that we're talking about. There is a relationship to the question which I've brought up, I think, several times, but recently—gosh, now I can't remember. It might have been in the talk about pain on Psyche's Orchard. But anyway, somewhere, a few places in the last while, I brought up this question, I have at least, about, for example, ritual practices.

And when is it necessary? We have this question in relation to the energy body and movement. We've had it before, long before, the questions about ritual. When is it necessary for, let's say, an image of ritual to be manifested and concretized in an actual ritual? So this whole question about movement, gesture, body, movement, gesture, voice, vocalization is connected with that. When is it necessary for an image to be manifested, concretized as an image, or if it's an image of dancing or moving or whatever it is to be manifest that way?

And then we can break that question down into two kind of temporal levels. So one is, when is it necessary for the sense and the possibility of soul-making in the moment? Do I open up more of a sense of soul-making right now by actually concretizing a ritual gesture, manifesting it, or a movement in the body that's connected with the image? Or do I get more soul-making? Does more soul-making open if I don't, and I just let it brew in the image and in the energy body and in the soul resonances, and the physical body remains still?

But then there's a second temporal level. What about the possibility of soul-making in one's life, more long-term? So what is necessary to, if you like, open up, support the most soul-making right now, in this moment? And then what about in one's life and more long-term? Concretization, manifestation, or not. And it can work both ways. So it's not like there's one answer. It's a question. It's a living question. Again, back to the question of subtle soul discernment, receptivity, openness of being, inertia.

So, two temporalities to concern ourselves with. If we're talking about, let's take the example that this image comes. And right now, with this image, what is it that allows it to become more soul-making? Is it moving the body, or is it being still? Is it concretizing or not? And then the second, what is it that allows that image to engender and open and instigate more, you know, the fullness or a fuller soul-making in my life over the long term?

So it may not need concretization or expression, a reflection of the image in body or voice, but it will at least need a kind of refraction into dharma. The image needs to be refracted somehow into dharma. And what will that need? What will that need from movement, gesture, voice? And are they available for that? Are they open? Are the circuits working?

So there's lots of discernment, lots of questions here. And you know, sometimes the soul may want to express itself through movement, gesture, voice, but those are blocked. And they block so much—this relates to what I said earlier—that the person doesn't even feel the want. Those circuits are so cut, there's such an absence of electric flow there, if we use that analogy, that they don't even feel the soul wanting to express in that way, through movement, gesture, voice.

So maybe that if some of these exercises re-establish the circuits, reconnect those circuits, then we have an actual choice. Listening is possible. We will recognize a want. Then we can choose whether we can discern what's right and how, etc. Sometimes something is so cut that we don't even feel the soul's want. If the circuit is alive, we're more likely to be able to feel the soul's want, if there is one. And then we can make the choice. Then we can listen better.

So sometimes in all these kinds of openings, it's normal for a human being to have blocks, to have limits, to have areas of soul that are just not in soul yet, not alive yet, to have areas of unconsciousness. All this is very, very normal. Areas of limitation, areas where there's just barred entry, all that is very, very normal. So please understand that in context as well.

And sometimes what happens is the angels come, the daimones come, an image come, imaginal figures come and help you, help me with something that is not, that is a difficulty for me, that hasn't been alive, that's been an impossibility. So it could be exactly these kinds of ranges of movement, gesture, voice that we've been talking about, these kinds of expression. The angels come and they help. An image comes, an imaginal figure comes. And so from the power of the image, given with the image, and through the way of relating to the image, I am helped to revitalize, open, and travel in that area of being, an area of life.

It may be other issues. It may be, you know, in the Ridhwan school, Catherine was telling me they have this thing, I think they call it impeccability.

And what they really mean is the capability and the capacity to really be steady and grounded and consistent—to follow through with your plans or what you said, to honor your word. If you said you would do something, to really do it. I think it's called impeccability. It's like one of their foundational areas.

So it may be, for instance, that this quality is not really present, or in some areas it's not there. And we are helped by the visitations of the angels and the demons, and the ministrations of the angels and the demons, and the encouragement and the prodding

—and sometimes the tough love—of the angels, the demons, the imaginal figures. And then we're able to access that area; it opens to us, it comes alive, we're able to travel in that landscape, that territory, that soul territory, both in imaginal practice and in life.

Or as I said, it might be the range of bodily and vocal openings and expressions that we're talking about in these talks. And then they become available, we can use them, and that's wonderful. And it was from the grace of the angel, in a way. Also, of course, it needs me to—as always—relate, to assent, and to relate in certain ways that allow that image to become genuinely imaginal, so that it has its full soul power.

So sometimes things work that way around: from the angel, so to speak, by the grace of the angel, still needing our work. But other times it's the exercises themselves which will support soul-making at the two temporal levels that we talked about. The exercises will open the possibility of images that are impermanent, but that come and that feel and are soul-making and soulful in that time that they're around, and maybe whenever they visit after that. But these exercises may also support the longer term, the longer arc of manifestation and opening of soul in one's life—the refraction of the daimon, daimons in one's life, the duty to the images in one's life, the human being living one's image.

The capacity of the person to live one's image, to really live one's image, to embody it, to manifest, to refract. So sometimes we're helped by the angels and the angels open the territory. The angels reconnect the circuits. And sometimes we have to do this kind of more exercise work, and that opens the circuits, and then they're open for the angels. Our practice and our life is open for soul, for the images, for the angels, and for our human refracting of daimon, of angels—for our expressions and manifestations of soul.

CHAPTER 237

Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 3)

Rob Burbea · 1h21

> *In this third part of the series on voice, movement, and gesture, Rob Burbea delves deeply into the conceptual framework underlying soul-making dharma vocabulary. He shares a personal example of losing connection with 'the angels' during a pressured period, contrasting this with conventional notions of 'centering.' Burbea examines how terms like 'centering' imply interiority, circumscription, and singularity, while soul-making concepts point toward expanded notions of human being as both image and analogue—neither simply singular nor bounded.*
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> *The talk explores why some practitioners feel they don't receive images or angelic visitations, suggesting factors like lack of genuine desire, absence of soul stretch, or unwillingness to face antinomies. Burbea addresses resistance to the word 'soul' itself, comparing it to initially unfamiliar Buddhist terms like 'aggregate' (khandha) that become meaningful through practice.*
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> *The session introduces the fourth exercise: a dyadic blessing practice where partners take turns blessing each other through movement, gesture, and voice—but without using known language. This evolves into a second part that drops even the attempt to convey meaning, moving beyond conventional blessing toward pure expression of soul through embodied presence. The practice aims to expand sensitivity, range, and receptivity to soul while serving as a vehicle for soul's expression.*

I'm not quite sure what will be possible today, but I would like to introduce the fourth exercise, which could be seen as two exercises, as I'll explain when I get to it. I'd like to introduce that, and maybe the fifth one.

But before even introducing the fourth, I just thought I'd spend a little time opening up and considering some of the words and vocabulary we've been using. By now these words and terms are quite familiar to many of you who are familiar with soul-making dharma teachings, particularly as they inform and inflect and open up our sense of human being and our human person and personhood—what it is to be a person.

A few weeks ago, I was feeling really quite pressured and thrown off centre, unbalanced, pressured, flattened. There were many things that seemed like they needed deciding at the time—practical things in relation to preparing for death, my will, the fu-

ture of the teachings, teacher training, and all kinds of things. Many things that seemed to need figuring out and arranging before my death. Within that, there seemed to be lots of different people's requests and opinions and voices. It was to do with those kinds of things, particularly in relation to the teachings and the future of the teachings and teachers.

At some point I realized that I'm really not feeling okay with all this. It's all gone a bit crazy. The language that came to me, the language that seemed very natural at that point to describe what was missing for myself—and that language was also very insightful—came very naturally. It was not the language of "I've lost my centre" or "I'm uncentred" or "I need to get centred, I need to regain my centre, or centre myself." That wasn't the language that came. I would understand, of course, that in those kinds of situations, when feeling flustered and pulled in so many directions with so many decisions, that would very easily be a way that someone in our contemporary society might describe to themselves what has happened and then what needs to happen.

But the words that came, the description that came organically, naturally, spontaneously—and that contained the insight, the seeds of insight for what I needed to do to redress the situation—was that I've lost my connection with the angels. I've lost my connection with the daimon. I need to somehow reconnect, find that connection again with the angel, with the daimon, with the image.

As I said, the insight was there. In the description of the problem was the insight of the direction needed for a solution—where I needed to orient, what I needed to do, how I needed to look, how I needed to relate and think about things. And that was exactly what did indeed help: finding again these connections with the angels in relation to all this, all that was difficult, and what was at the middle, the pith of the difficulty in relation to the teachings. Most of it centered around the teachings and the future of the teachings. Finding again my connection with the angels in my relationship with them in relation to the teachings.

That's what I'd got lost. I was trying to figure out, solve, find answers to get through many decisions and things that needed to be made. It all felt quite pressured. But I had lost that connection. I'd gone into a much more one-dimensional mode of understanding and relating to all that set of issues and decisions and problems and conundrum. It was all one-dimensional. The angel wasn't there. I wasn't in relationship with the angel with all of that.

So when a person today uses language like "I've lost my centre, need to get centred or centre myself or find my centre, regain my centre," what does that word tend to imply? What's wrapped up in that kind of notion, in that kind of vocabulary? Particularly,

what does it tend to imply about the human being and about the self and about the person? What's the logos, the conceptual framework of human being, self, person, that is implicitly tied in with a notion such as centering?

There are probably quite a few possibilities—it's not set in stone, and it may vary—but consider a few of them. For instance, interiority is one of them. Generally, not necessarily, but generally, the centre of gravity, my centre of gravity, and therefore my sense of balance, my point of balance, is conceived usually as somehow within me. Here one's feeling perhaps pulled out, so to speak, to all these diverse distractions or pulls or demands or questions or whatever it is. And the center of gravity, the still point, the balance point, is conceived of as within, usually. So there's a kind of interiority there that's part of the conceptual framework of the human being that goes with words like centering and notions like centering.

Secondly, there's perhaps a notion of circumscription of the human being, of the self. Like, where do I end? I end here, the world starts there, or you start there, or whatever it is. So when we talk about a center, it's about a center of something. Usually it's a center of a circle, a center of a geometrical structure, or whatever it is. Center of a limited space, a limited area. Center of a country, whatever. So there's a delimited space, a circumscribed space. Where I end, that's my boundary, that's my border. That notion also seems wrapped up subtly, implicitly with the notion of centering.

Now, I could still have a circumscribed notion of where I end. That could still be involved when I use the language and idea of connection with the daimon, connection with the angel. But what I mean by that connection with the angels, what I would like to emphasize right now by that refinding of connection with the angels, is more an expanded notion or sense of a human being. As we talked about in the talk on death and dying in Psyche's Orchard, rather than "this area is me," we have a sense of the larger human being as both image and analogue.

So there are a couple of parts to that. The first part has to do with circumscription. The second part has to do with singularity. But just to stay with circumscription for now. Image and analogue. I, in my life to the best of my ability, more or less at different times, am the analogue of that image, of that angel. And where then do I end? If I have this more expanded notion of self, I am actually this whole—"system" is too technical a word—but this whole gestalt, this whole constellation of image and analogue, maybe images and analogues, and that's all me, then where do I end in that? Where is my circumscription in that, exactly?

And anyway, the image, because the element's the imaginal, the angel, the image—where does the image end? Because that's going to be unfathomable and have unfathomable beyonds. Where do I draw the line then of self there? Of my human being? And so where then exactly is the center of it? If I can't draw the line of the edge of the circle or whatever, I don't know where to place the center. I cannot say the center is here or there.

So that's another aspect: interiority, circumscription, but also, as I mentioned, singularity. Sometimes, usually with this notion of centering, there's the sense of the singularity of self. I need to find my center. I, as a singular self, need to have recourse to myself, find my resource in myself, in my center. And the sense then is the self as singular.

Now, a person in contemporary society could say, "I feel terrible, I feel really pressured," and reach out to friends and colleagues or whatever it is, reaching out socially, horizontally, to the horizontal sense of society and friends. But one could also reach out more plurally, not so much just to the singular self, not only reaching out horizontally to the flatly conceived society of others in which I exist, but rather conceiving of the self as a plurality.

Just the fact of conceiving of the human being, conceiving of the human person—as described and as I tried to really emphasize in that talk on death and dying—conceiving of the human person actually phenomenologically: when we have a deep sense both of ourselves and of another, and when another has a deep sense of ourselves, that the experience is not necessarily completely singular. And I don't mean it's fragmented in the way sometimes anatta gets taught. But I mean it's plural, or rather not simply singular, in the way that we are both image and analogue, or images and analogues. Several angels, perhaps, and servant to, analogue to that plurality even of angels.

So, quite different notions there. Interiority, circumscription and borders and singularity are not the default mode of sense of the human being, the human person. And they weren't in that case, and as I find more and more these days when things are difficult, when there's challenge in different ways, that the sense—and I mean that word in its double meaning, the sense, the actual perception and the idea of my human being or another human being—is more along the lines of this image and analogue, having angelic dimensions which are refracted into the human life, more or less, at different times, with a duty to that. There's a kind of doubleness there.

So it's also not—and we think about centering, that word centering—taking a fourth aspect or fourth notion that might be wrapped up in it: that one then encounters one's self, or one's true self, or one's core, at the center. Introspecting, one then finds oneself

at the center. And, you know, maybe not Dharma 101, but pretty soon in the Dharma, you're going to encounter the idea—and it's not just particular to Buddha Dharma—that when I look for the self, I can't find it, actually.

So we're not talking about centering as needing to encounter the self at our center. It could be that what we're expecting at the center is a kind of infinite depth of still nothingness—of stillness and nothingness, which is a wonderful sense. One can look inside and discover different kinds of nothingness, different kinds of stillness, but that infinite depth of stillness and nothingness is what one perhaps encounters at the center.

In the Christian tradition of the twentieth century, there was a re-stimulation, a revivification of some contemplative practices in the Catholic tradition—centering prayer. Originally it meant just that: at the center is this still nothingness beyond any image of God, beyond any word or directive—just a kind of emptiness. This is tied up with the Via Negativa, the apophatic tradition. Looking deep inside myself, I encounter nothing, and that nothingness is the same—the depth of that nothingness is the same as the depth of the nothingness of God.

This is wonderful, and this is a real mystical resource. But it still means something quite different if I'm not gravitating toward that notion and movement of centering and needing centering. It's not that I'm expecting to encounter myself at the center, nor am I hoping for an experience of still nothingness at the center, which may of course be very helpful at different times. Rather, there's a need to reconnect with the angels.

The angel, the image, is other and self. It's both and neither. It's me and not me, and it's not me and not not me. This angel, in the mystery of their being, the mystery of this angelic constellation, this angelic relationship—this angel is both other and self, but it's the theophany. It's a face of the divine. It's an expression of the divine, which is different than an emptiness. Emptiness is not a theophany. Emptiness is usually construed as an essence—a transcendent essence beyond all attributes. A theophany is a face, a presentation of what we could say are attributes, or is a being in itself, a person in itself.

So rather than encountering myself at the center, rather than encountering a deep well of still nothness—wonderful as that might be—actually, not at the center, but in relationship with a theophany. Not at the center of anything, but in relationship with. Where exactly is that? In space.

These are quite different notions, and some of this will be familiar to different degrees if you're familiar with soul-making dharma—some of the ways we use these words, and really what I'm pointing to is where the words point to, the direction of pos-

sibility in which these words and terms point. As opposed to the words themselves defining this or that, circumscribing and delimiting. More to get a sense that the words are directions—directions of soul possibility, directions of soul experience and soul conception.

Let us linger on this word "angel" a little bit. We've used it quite a lot over recent years, but I want to say a few more things about it. Be careful, for instance, of a limiting idea that the angel or an angel or an image kind of shows up out of the blue and will help you with something, or give you an idea or creative impulse—whatever it is, a seed or something. It might. It might show up out of the blue.

We've talked about—and I can't remember when—the phrase "soul-making poise." In other words, taking care of the stance, the poise of one's being, one's energy body, one's attention, one's receptivity, one's humility, and all of that. In that poise, in the soul-making poise, there's a sort of opening of the space, priming and preparing the space—thinking now of parallels with the Jewish tradition of preparing for the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the reception of the Shekhinah, the reception of the Sabbath angel who visits, who comes on that evening, on that day. The human being's job is partly to prepare—to make the space and the time beautiful, ready, prepared, holy, special, hospitable.

So it may well be that with an attitude of humility, we learn to take care with that soul-making poise. In that way, we are in a kind of humbly waiting and primed or prepared space. Our being becomes that space—a space of hospitality for the angels. They may visit then, sort of out of the blue, and with that there may be a gift. We may be helped with this or that in our lives, given something, given an idea, given creative seeds, whatever.

But be careful of that as an idea that might limit our sense of angels and what they are and how they arise and what our relationship with them is. Because it's often the case—and this is something I've shared before—it's often the case that one has already started something. Perhaps it's a creative project or a big piece of work, an idea. Perhaps it feels like a lot. It feels like a stretch or a challenge.

And the angel comes then. Then, and the coming of the angel might be the actual work itself, or this project itself becoming imaginal. It becomes angelic.

So it might be there's me, and there's this project, and there's this third character called the angel that's going to help me in my relationship with the project. But it might also be that the work itself, or the idea that's beginning to take shape, that I'm grappling

with, that I'm kind of gestating, or is wanting to come through—whatever it is, or this big project that I need to do—that it becomes angel. It becomes angelic. It becomes imaginal person, with autonomy, with desire, its own eros, its own desire.

So, careful again of not delimiting too tightly what we mean by angel. We have to delimit it somewhat—we're not just open for any old ideas about angels and all that business. As I said, the words, the concepts are pointing us in a direction, pointing us along a road, but that road is infinite. It has boundaries. It's not like anything can fall under the scope of that road and we can just call anything angel, which is, you know, in some circles fairly common—just using that word too easily, whether it's used completely unspiritually, just as a kind of term of endearment, or in certain spiritual New Age circles or whatever. We're not using it in those ways.

So maybe that's a good analogy. It's like we're pointing in a certain direction, and we can just keep travelling in that direction. And the road changes. The road develops. The terrain around the road develops as you walk down that road.

But another way of saying this is an angel is also, like everything, a dependent arising. So in what I was just talking about, it's almost like—or we could say in the first instance—it's dependent on the poise of soul-making. The visitation of the Shekhinah on Shabbat is dependent on the reverence and humility and the eros of the soul and the love of the soul for the Shekhinah and for the Divine. And expressing that by the way it takes care of creating the space for the Sabbath, in terms of body and house and setting and environment. Of course, all this applies in so many ways to soul-making and imaginal work and ritual and all that.

But an angel is a dependent arising also in possibly another sense, which is that something is already there. It's already stretching me. And then the angel visits in response to that stretch, in response to that task that I'm given, in response to that work that I have to do. And it might be that one possibility within that is that the work itself, the task itself becomes angel. It becomes imaginal, angelic.

So I've touched on this before, actually quite a few times—this question of someone saying, "I don't get any images," and sometimes people are okay with that, but sometimes it's like people get a little bit frustrated or wonder why don't I get images? Or they might say, using slightly different language, having heard other language being used, they might say, "Why don't the angels seem to come to me? Why don't they seem to come to other people? Or I hear this person or that person talk about the angels coming or the angel coming or whatever. Why don't they seem to come to me?"

Or it might be voiced as, "The angels, the gods, they don't seem to want anything from me. I hear this person or that person talk, and I hear them talk about the demand of the angel, the demand of the imaginal, or the duty, or this or that. But they don't seem to come to me, or they don't seem to want anything from me."

So this whole constellation of ideas and perceptions and things that people might think—I've talked about quite a lot over the years. Why don't I get images and what do we actually mean by image? And what are the kinds of preparations, poises of soul, but also relationships with one's emotions and energy body and all kinds of other factors that support the generation, the arising, the creation, discovery of images, angels, etc. So there are lots of reasons which I've elaborated elsewhere.

One I've touched on, I just want to touch on again, and that actually has to do with desire and need—maybe two aspects. Sometimes someone says, "Why don't I get images?" Well, I don't know. Other reasons that I've elaborated elsewhere aside—so there may well be, actually for many people, this isn't a relevant reason, what I'm about to say. Maybe there are just other things there, not relating in the right way to their emotions, or whatever it is. But sometimes it's like, actually, if you really, really deeply wanted images, they would come. You would have images. Images would visit you. They would arise. If you really deeply wanted them.

So something sometimes, for some people, the issue is one of desire. A person who wonders, "Why don't I get images, or they seem to get more—this person seems to get more than I do"—it may be that actually it's not something we really deeply want, and so they don't necessarily arise. Maybe, sometimes for some people, this actually is the relevant factor.

Or—and maybe they're related—it might be that for some people at some time, again this is not going to be relevant to some people, or in some instances it won't be relevant, but it may be: why don't the angels seem to come to me? Why don't the gods, the angels seem to want anything from me? It may be that you and I and the imaginal figures, the angels, don't need each other. They don't need me and I don't need them. They don't need you and you don't need them.

Because there's nothing in the way a person is living and the choices that a person is making that needs the help or presence of the angels, of the imaginal figures. There's nothing really on the line, so to speak. There isn't really a soul stretch. We touched on this before, if you remember—I can't remember where. There isn't really—they're not living and choosing in their life in ways that really stretch their soul or that open them to soul risks, if we might use that phrase. There's nothing really on the line.

They might be stretched in all kinds of ways, might be very busy, might be stretched doing something very helpful in the world, whatever—but it's not actually a soul stretch. There's no real risk there. And maybe it's that the angels, the imaginal figures, the daimons, don't need and won't choose someone who is not willing to stretch. Stretch themselves, stretch their lives, stretch their soul. So this is also a factor to consider. It won't be relevant in a lot of instances, but sometimes it is important to realize this is actually what's happening, and this is a reason why something is not happening.

It may also be that the—and again, this will be even only perhaps some instances of the instances that I've just talked about where that is the case—it may be that the kind of stretch needed to invite or call forth the angel, the angels, the kind of stretch to which they respond, maybe it needs to be one which involves or must involve a sense of antinomy. Remember that word from the ethics talks, from Sila and Soul and the Image of Ethics.

Antinomy is deeply felt in the soul. Having to choose, faced with that antinomy—the branches, the roads of their divergent pulls and callings felt sharply, deeply, genuinely in the soul. One is almost crucified, pulled this way and that, by two opposing values, by the love of and the duty to antinomical values. And it may be that that kind of stretch, that kind of difficulty, is the kind of stretch that sometimes—or maybe, I don't know, maybe it's in every case—is needed. That's part of what it means to be stretched. Maybe that's just a certain kind of stretch. I'm not sure.

So all these are things to ponder. And of course, some people—like I said earlier—well, it might not actually bother me that much that this sense of angels that I hear people talking about, or images, don't come to me. If it doesn't, okay, leave it. But if it actually does, then these are things that you might want to include in your inquiry and self-questioning.

Just briefly, I heard someone saying something about Soulmaking Dharma, and basically one of the pieces was—well, I'm sure it's all really great, but I'm very much paraphrasing—"I don't really relate to the word soul." This was from a person who'd been practicing Dharma a long, long time, who'd been teaching for decades and decades. Which is probably quite a common reaction, I imagine. Not really relating to that word soul at all.

Oftentimes, it's the "making" that people don't relate to. The word making—of course, if you understand the whole track of exploration of ways of looking and fabrication, fabrication is just another word for making, and how that deepens and how it opens out and the understanding it opens out—then the word making is almost an indispensable word in Soulmaking. But for a lot of people it's very puzzling because you'd

usually put a kind of—you'd usually think of the word soul or have a sense of soul, use that in a very rarefied way. It wouldn't be something that we make; it would be something that is, or we discover, or that just is a level of being, or whatever.

Anyway, this person, it was the word soul, and I thought about that and know them a little, and said, "Well, it's interesting—do you really relate, you know, you've been involved in Buddhism for thirty, forty years, whatever it is—do you really relate to the word aggregate, khandha, skandha in Sanskrit? Or put the question in the past tense: did you really relate to that word when you first heard it, or the words emptiness or anattā, no-self, those kinds of words and concepts?"

Probably not. But what's happened—it might be sometimes with words like emptiness, you know, sort of a predisposition that many people, many Dharma folk have, to that kind of intuition, if you like, of that insight and that whole direction, and that whole teaching even before one's even encountered the teaching. But a word like aggregate—it's hard to think that one would really relate to that immediately when one hears it. Might be, but probably not.

What has probably happened instead is one has been trained and trained oneself to use words like aggregate as skillful and helpful concepts, and then perhaps even as ways of looking. One has been trained in the use of a word like aggregate or a concept like aggregate, trained to use them and think of them in skillful and helpful ways. And they're not ultimate truths—this is something I've said many times. Five aggregates is not at all an obvious way of dividing up a human being. It's hardly, I would suspect, a way of thinking about self that one would have arrived at by oneself if one wasn't actually handed this teaching: five aggregates, and this is what they are, and—

It was handed to us by someone in a position of authority, with the authority of 2,500 years of Buddhist tradition, and then we trained ourselves in those words.

So just the fact that one doesn't really relate to a word that one is not familiar with means nothing much at all. Couldn't the word "soul" be similarly unfamiliar at first, but eventually, with practice and understanding, actually become—like the word "aggregate"—very fruitful? And in fact, couldn't the word "soul," the concept of soul, be something that contributes to and supports the reduction of particular sorts of suffering, just as the concept of aggregates does?

That's the function of the word "aggregate." It's not an ultimate truth. What the teachings of the aggregates do, or are supposed to do, or are designed to do, is just that—they're a group of concepts in the service of reducing suffering. It's not an ultimate truth. And couldn't "soul" be something similar? Unfamiliar at first, but with training,

with practice, as understanding grows, it becomes very fruitful as a term of vocabulary and a concept—fruitful in many ways, but in one particular way: reducing certain kinds of suffering.

For example, the word "aggregate" will not on its own authentically and finally reduce the suffering of soullessness. Again, if we open up the question: what does that first noble truth mean? What kinds of suffering are there? And therefore, what does the third noble truth mean—ending suffering?

We could say these days there is the suffering of soullessness in our society, in our culture. The suffering of meaninglessness. We could bundle it all together as the suffering of soullessness. It's also to do with lack of beauty and aesthetics, lack of depth, refusal of dimensionality—all kinds of things. But the word "aggregate" on its own will not finally, fully, and authentically reduce that kind of suffering. In fact, it might even support it. The suffering of soullessness may be worsened by the teachings on the aggregates if I'm not careful how I pick them up and when I put them down.

We could choose other words as well, even words from our contemporary culture, not from Buddhist culture, like "trauma." It's an idea, and actually it's a whole conceptual framework. When we speak psychologically and draw on that word, we're actually invoking "trauma" and implying a whole conceptual framework of psychology there. I don't really relate to that. In other times, other cultures, other periods of history, it would have been quite a bizarre notion—or even just the broader notion that early parenting experiences shape psychology, or are a dominant factor in shaping later psychology.

Again, there's a whole conceptual framework—actually there are many conceptual frameworks, many alternate frameworks which overlap—that we're invoking when we use words that point to these ideas. They could be really, really helpful, but we may not relate to them at first. They may be very useful, these words borrowed from psychology and these psychological concepts and notions.

Even when we use the word "brain"—certainly in the Buddha's time, they were aware there was an organ in the head. They had their word for it; I've forgotten what the Pali is. They had looked at corpses and dissected them. But the way we use the word "brain" now, or the way many people in our culture use it—as synonymous with mind—might not be, or definitely was not at all, how the Buddha meant it. The Buddha didn't see mind as something that was necessarily primarily physical, or certainly not completely physical.

So there are lots of words and concepts. At this time in history, in culture, or at this time in my evolution and my practice and my journey, I don't really relate to this word. So what? It doesn't mean that it cannot then become, with training, a very useful, very fruitful, very freeing idea, word, term of vocabulary, and concept.

Going back to that word "aggregates"—even if it's just picked up as a notion without much skill in using it as a way of looking in terms of anattā, it still functions to fabricate less. As a term of vocabulary, it fabricates less suffering; it certainly fabricates less self-sense. It dissects and undercuts self-construction, self-fabrication. It might do that at different levels, depending on how much skill one has in actually practicing with that notion.

But as a term, what it does is move in the direction of less fabrication of suffering and of self—of some sufferings and of some levels of self. But in so doing, in its movement towards fabricating less self, at the same time, the other side of the coin is that it doesn't honor and respect and keep in focus the person. The person as someone in relationship, in meaningful relationship—that gets lost.

The minute we start emphasizing talk of the aggregates and a view of the aggregates, we simultaneously lose sight of, lose sense of, the richness and multidimensionality of personhood and the relationality of personhood. Again, I'm going back to that talk—I'm pretty sure it was one on death and dying—where we're thinking: what could we use this word "person" to mean when we're talking about a human subject, a human being that's more than just a subject because they're in meaningful relationship? They're more than just self. They become a person if we really want to honor and respect and keep in our sense, in our senses, and keep making sense of the personhood of a person.

Looking at these divergent directions or modes - the notion of the aggregates versus the notion of soul - we find something fascinating in the later Vajrayana teachings. There, we discover the possibility of seeing the aggregates, the five aggregates, as divine, as holy. But even then, we actually lose the personhood of the person. It dimensionalizes in a different way.

Each aggregate, depending on different tantras, becomes associated with a different divinity, a different Buddha or Buddha's consort or dakini. So there's a wonderful kind of dimensionalizing and divinizing that can emerge through that approach, but it still misses the person - this beautiful range of practices that still misses the person.

The term "aggregates" and the term "soul" almost instigate mutually exclusive opposite movements. Almost. So we can talk about soul, talk about angels, talk about all this, but in dyadic practice, in soul-making practice, and even in some of these exercises, all

this that we're pointing to now - when we talk about these different words and all the different shades and meanings and scopes and dimensions of what these words mean, what they point away from, where they point towards, and what they open up - all this emerges naturally, I would say, through the process of sensing the soul.

You've probably experienced it if you've done dyad practice: at certain points, the question arises - who am I in relationship to here? Who is this other, or in triad work, who are these others? Sometimes when we've been leading that on retreat, you'll hear on the recording how we stimulate a shift in the sense towards sensing the soul, towards sensing the other as angel, others as angel, just by asking the question. When there is soulfulness, when there's soulfulness in the field, and then asking that question: who are these others? Who is this now that I'm beholding?

Just asking the question in a field of soulfulness can stimulate a further opening of the sensing of the soul. We begin to perceive other as angel. Other times we might deliberately suggest: can you see them now as angels? Or we deliberately start speaking of these others as angels, or a person makes that deliberate shift in their sensing - like deliberately calling up an image, deliberately deciding to sense, see other as angel.

But all these words - angel, soul, image - they imply an unfathomability. They also imply, going back to something I said earlier today, a kind of neither simple singularity nor simple doubleness. If I'm seeing this person as angel, I'm seeing them as neither simply single nor double. They are unusual Tom, Dick, or Harry and Tom, Dick, or Harry's angel. There's a mystery in the impossibility of finally dividing them up as one or two - this being that I'm encountering, this being whose soul I'm sensing.

Whenever we use words like angel or soul or "my soul," or any time we talk about image, there's that unfathomability present. There's this quality of being neither one nor two - not really simply - as well as the dimensionality, the divinity, the infinite echoing and mirroring implied in the words angel, soul, image.

This infinite echoing and mirroring flows from the angel into this person's life and being, and this person's life and being becomes the infinite echoing and mirroring of the angel. The angel also serves as a mirror and echo of the being in a kind of two-way exchange, echoing and mirroring each other. The mystery of that kind of sense and notion is also wrapped up in our understanding of angel and soul.

As, of course, is also the imaginal middle way - neither real nor not real, the theatre-like quality. When we use these words - angel, soul, just like image - all this is wrapped up there. And also eternality.

The angelic dimension is the timeless dimension. To perceive this person as angel, to perceive an angel or just an image, or the angel that I'm in relationship to, or the soul - eternality is implied. The angel, as we said in that talk on death and dying, is not of space or time. The being of the angel, the dimension of the being of the angel, is not located in space. It's not inside me or next to me or behind me or above me or below me. Nor is it located in time.

It's refracted, this angel - he, she, they are refracted into space and time. There's a sense, too, of participation. The angel is something - going back to examples - when I say "I need to reconnect with the angels," there's also a sense of re-participating in something, or reconnecting with my sense of participating in something, in the mystery of that word.

When we use these words, all these other notions become woven into their meaning. They become very rich words - soul, angel, just like image. Again, similar to the analogy I offered about these words being like roads, they point in a certain direction. That road goes on forever.

It's another way of saying all these words and concepts and perceptions, especially like soul and angel, have soft and elastic edges. Actually, all those words - participation and divinity and eternality and all of them - soft and elastic edges. They will stretch. So our notion of what we're talking about when we say soul and angel will stretch over time. It will deepen.

It will be deepened, complexified, and variegated as the sensing of soul is encouraged, as soul-making goes on, as the soul-making dynamic is allowed to do what it wants to do. Soft and elastic edges—they will stretch, deepen, complexify, and vary again.

So let's introduce what we might call the fourth exercise. We might consider it two exercises—the fourth and fifth—or a set of exercises. This one is in fact a dyad exercise, as are these next two.

In the first part—whether we call it two exercises or one exercise in two parts—we work in a dyad, setting it up with whatever is needed in terms of the *temenos*, the space, the presence. In this first part, one person in the dyad blesses the other, and the other person receives that blessing. One is blessing, one is receiving.

We've done quite a bit of this in different ways in the past, but I want to add a few more pieces, a few more variations. Some will be familiar, and some perhaps less so.

The person who is blessing offers their blessing through movement, gesture, and voice. But what you cannot do as the blesser is use any known language—any language known to human beings. You can utter sounds, use your voice, but not any known language. Somehow you're conveying blessing and emanating blessing, expressing and manifesting blessing.

One thing here is: what does that word "blessing" mean? And again, back to what we just said about these words—soft and elastic edges that will grow and deepen. The meaning of the word "blessing" may already be very wide, or it may not. I'm not even sure what it means exactly. But it is potentially wide, deep, multidimensional, open, elastic—soft and elastic.

As we practice more sensing the soul, especially in relation to blessing and being blessed, we can hopefully create and discover more and more of what blessing might mean. It might start, for instance, as just *metta*. "I'm not really sure about that word 'blessing,' but I know what *metta* means, and I'm familiar with that." So it might just start there. Let it start as that.

Maybe it includes praise—what they call doxology. Words of praise, or in this case, movements, gestures, and vocalizations of praise. So maybe that's a slight expansion from just the notion of *metta*. Maybe it includes gratitude—that in one's praise there's gratitude wrapped up in it. Remember that word "Eucharist" actually means thankfulness, gratitude in Greek.

It may be that as we work within this exercise, or as we repeat it, or as we generally do more soul-making practice and our sense of soulfulness grows and the range of experience and ideation grows, this whole notion grows of what it means to bless and what it means to be blessed.

In the exercise, it might be that as we're doing it, the self, the sense of the other, and the sense of the world, the environment—maybe even time or whatever—all this can become image. Maybe as I'm trying to use my voice without language, trying to bless but without language, the sounds—not even words, but the sounds uttered and heard—become image. They become imaginal.

And who is blessing? Who is blessed? All this becomes image. In so doing, it becomes imaginal images, and its meaning expands and deepens.

you're in a dyad, you're facing each other.

One person takes the first turn to be blessed. So the other person becomes the one who offers the blessing. For the one who is blessed, their task is twofold, but it really has to do with silent sensitivity and receptivity.

They want to notice—they're looking at and listening to and opening their whole energy body. We've done all this kind of thing before. Open the whole energy body and all the senses to the other and their blessing, their movement and voice and gesture. Open to the sound and the visuals and all the sense of the whole energy body in relationship with, sensing with the whole energy body. But then also sensitive to one's own experiences—one's own experiences as the one who is blessed, one's own experiences of the energy body. And that includes whatever emotions, whatever soul resonances arise and pass within that.

So for the one who's blessed, it's a task in sensitivity and opening the energy body and the senses to that really full relationship with the one who is blessing, and then tracking, noticing what happens primarily in the energy body and the emotions as this person blesses you.

One wants to establish that—a really good energy body and emotional sensitivity and awareness. And then on top of that, when that's ready—probably that needs to be there before one then opens it up to include any sensing the soul or soul sense of the whole relational field there. The whole experience of being blessed, the other, the self, the moment, all of it.

But practically speaking, or at least from the outside, one is just silent and still and open, and the task is one of sensitivity—the energy body and the emotion, and then the soul sense. So one's not responding.

Then maybe after ten minutes—well, you can time it yourself; ten minutes might feel like a lot doing something like this. So it may be that this is really quite difficult. Some people find it's really quite difficult. They're a bit baffled or stumped what to do, how to do this at all. But hopefully it could also be fun.

So after about ten minutes you can reverse roles, and maybe you need some silent meditation or something in between perhaps to gather—maybe not, you'll have to see. Ten minutes as I said may feel very long, or it may be that it feels very difficult and awkward and one isn't quite sure what to do and what sounds to make. Or it may be that actually it needs ten minutes or it needs a little longer to get going, to get into a kind of groove because it's unfamiliar. For some people it may not be at all. But either way, even if it's difficult, hopefully it can be fun as well—lots to discover there as an exercise.

So if you're in the blessing role, then you can improvise your utterances. Improvise what comes through your mouth. Take your time. It may be very fast—a very fast flow or a very slow flow. It may be there are pauses in between utterances or movements or gestures, or that it's just continuous streams. Or maybe a continuous stream, then a pause, or whatever. It may be loud or soft.

See if you can let your sense of any soulfulness that's there, any sense of soul-making, let that sense guide you, just as we use that as a guide in imaginal practice. And again, you want to be feeling, sensing the energy body, the resonances in the soul and the energy body. You want to be putting your whole energy body in relationship with the other as your blessing.

It may be that you deliberately bring in or play with the deliberate introduction of an image of yourself, that you inhabit a certain image perhaps that you're familiar with or certainly that's arising at the time, or an image of the other, a sensing soul of the other, or of the space you're in, or of the movements and gestures and utterances themselves—that you bring in deliberate images, a deliberate imaginal sense of what they are.

It may be that there's an image that you bring in that's a third, so that this imaginal figure is somehow coming together or in touch with you, and through you they are blessing the other. But it's really coming from this. So there are all kinds of possibilities here.

For some people this is going to be really quite strange and may take a little getting used to. It may feel a little awkward. Others will just—maybe not at all—and it's just easeful and delightful and fun.

Then a few variations. One is, you can—the only rule is no words. You can make any movement or any gesture or any vocalization. So any movement, gesture or vocalization is okay, but not words. So no language.

A second possibility is—

You can make any movement or any gesture or any vocalization. So any movement, gesture or vocalization is fine, but no words—no language.

A second possibility is no words and also no vocalizations. You can only use movement and gesture, no voice. It's still about how you bless, just through movement and gesture—what wants to come, what feels soulful there. Can I sense that, be in relationship with it, and follow that thread?

A third possibility is no words, but no movements or gestures either—only vocalizations. So you have three variations: movements, gestures and vocalizations all permitted; only movement and gestures; or only vocalizations.

Sometimes it might occur to you to sing a melody if you're allowed to vocalize, and that's fine. Maybe humming or singing something becomes part of the blessing. If you do choose to sing, make sure that sometimes you try it without melody, without singing anything. We're interested in really opening up ranges here.

The second part—which you could conceive as a separate exercise or simply segue into—involves the same thing, but dropping any idea of attempting to express or convey some meaning. In other words, something that could be put into words. Even blessing may contain aspects that could translate into words, but now you're taking it to another level, really dropping any attempt to express or convey meaning—something that could be articulated or an emotion you're trying to convey. You're not expressing an emotion or an image or an event or a story—your story or anyone's story. There's just movement, gesture, and voice, and you drop any sense of attempting to express something with that, to convey something meaningful.

Remember, we have this element of the imaginable, meaningfulness, yet soul is also not reduced to a single meaning. What happens when we recognize that soul is more than this or that meaning? Even if meanings are important, even if meanings matter to soul, soul is more than any particular meaning. And soul is also more than heart.

What happens now? Perhaps the notion of blessing itself gets altered or dropped. In this second part, we might say we've gone beyond blessing in the usual sense. Blessing is an interesting word—it occupies an area at the edge of what could be put into other words. But in the second part of this exercise, we're encouraging what we're doing through movement and gesture and voice to extend beyond the notion of blessing in the usual sense, because we're trying to drop any attempt at expressing or conveying meaning or anything that could be put into words.

I think we'll stop here for today and add the fifth exercise at a different time. Hopefully this is enough to work with and makes sense—you can play with these variations.

As I've said, it might feel very awkward or strange for some people, and maybe not at all for others—everything in between is possible. It might feel difficult; you might feel very self-conscious. All kinds of reactions can arise. But it might also be fun.

Wherever it starts, it can grow. Even if it feels nice and perhaps you're used to similar work from different retreats we've done, it can still grow and deepen and complexify, becoming much more subtle and involving much greater sensitivity—both on the part of the one who blesses and the one who is blessed.

In the second part of this exercise, we're perhaps talking about something beyond the notion of blessing as we usually understand that word. There is simply an exercise, a dyad using movement, gesture, and voice with the purpose and intention of deepening sensitivity, extending range, and being receptive to soul—receptive to soul and a vehicle for soul, a vehicle of soul.

All of this—the sensitivity, the opening up of where we can sense soul, how soul can express through us, and what we can recognize as soul—

All that becomes the main point, and that has an extraordinary range of subtlety that's possible there—sensitivity and growth and dimensionality. So that's really a big part of this practice: exploring range and depth, sensitivity that includes subtlety. Of course, it doesn't have to be subtle only, but it can move into that territory more and more as the practice matures.

So that's what this exercise is for. That's the purpose of this exploration. That's the invitation I'm offering you—to step into this realm where blessing becomes a vehicle for soul, where sensitivity opens doorways to dimensions of experience that can transform not only how we give and receive, but how we understand the very nature of our interconnection and the sacred possibilities that live within the simplest human exchanges.

CHAPTER 238

Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 4)

Rob Burbea · 1h59

In this fourth part of his series on voice, movement, and gesture, Rob Burbea expands on Exercise Four's blessing practice while introducing Exercise Five focusing on iconic moments. He explores two modes of approaching these practices: starting with conceptual ideas versus beginning with pure intention and allowing movement to emerge organically through sensitivity to soulfulness. Burbea offers examples from various traditions - Christ carrying the cross, Buddha's Bhumi Sparsha Mudra (earth-touching gesture), Abraham's hospitality to angels, and Rosa Parks' courageous refusal to give up her bus seat. Throughout, he emphasizes that these are not acting exercises but opportunities to sense into archetypal moments and allow authentic expression through the body. The talk addresses common challenges like self-consciousness and provides practical guidance for maintaining the soul-making orientation. Burbea concludes by connecting these practices to the tantric understanding of dwelling in the 'diamond heart essence of the body, speech and mind of all Tathāgatas,' showing how embodied practice can become a vehicle for expressing our deepest soul calling and dharmic duty.

Before I introduce exercise five or the fifth set of exercises, I'd like to say a bit more about exercise four and add a possible variation.

Given the instructions for exercise four and the first part with blessing, it would be quite normal and certainly understandable to hear those instructions and think, "What does blessing look like? What does blessing sound like? What would that look like as a movement or gesture?" There's a kind of process instigated by the mind, perhaps drawing upon past associations with blessing—though in our culture it's not a word in common currency anymore, having much currency only within certain circles.

We might think of placing hands on the head, as in some traditions one blesses by placing one's hands on someone's head and uttering a blessing. Or in other traditions, marking a cross or small crucifix on the forehead of the one blessed, or gesturing in the air marking a crucifix—all very beautiful gestures from other traditions. We might think blessing involves bowing, or hands in namaste prayer pose, or palms tracing over the energy body, conveying and conferring the energy of blessing through the hands into that space, penetrating the energy body and energy field with blessing.

When we think this is what blessing looks like or sounds like, out of that thinking and those associations comes the movement, gesture, or vocalization. All that's really great. When we've done rituals and ceremonies on past retreats and included these kinds of instructions with blessings, this is part of what's gone on for people, and it's wonderful, beautiful, and can be very powerful.

But it's possible to open up the recognition of a slightly different way of entering into this intention—where the whole propulsion and instigation of the movement, gesture, or vocalization doesn't come so much from an idea. Not so much an idea leading to an action, an idea of blessing or associations about what blessing looks like. Yes, that has its place, but I want to invite and open up space for a different possibility.

Starting instead just with the intention of blessing, even if I'm not quite sure what that actually means for me. Let it be an open word. Go with what I've got. Let the word itself be a seed—who knows what will germinate, what will sprout from that seed. Just start with the intention of blessing and begin moving, gesturing, vocalizing, whatever it is, depending on which part of the exercise you're doing.

So there's the intention, even if it's not quite clear what that word "blessing" exactly means, and just start moving with the intention. Almost like incorporating feedback from the movements, gestures, and vocalizations you're doing. Sense as you're moving, gesturing, vocalizing: Does this feel soulful? If I do this, does it feel more soulful? If I do that, does it feel less soulful?

Just as we do with imaginal practice and soul-making practice, maintain a part of your awareness as very attentive, refined, careful mindfulness on the sense of soulfulness in the moment—what is supporting that and what is not supporting that, where it opens and blossoms and grows and deepens, and where it shuts down a bit or gets flat or narrow. It could be the sense of soulfulness, the sense of blessing, or both.

What you're really doing is starting with an intention and beginning to move with that intention. Whatever actions, movements, gestures, vocalizations you're doing, you're receptive to and attuned to how that feels in line with the intention. Let the movement, gesture, vocalization shape the action in time as it goes—playing it by ear, creating it like pottery on the potter's wheel as you're going, through the feel of it, through the feedback and signals of soul and blessedness coming back to you. This is slightly different than starting with an idea and then replicating that idea, perhaps without putting so much attention on what feels soulful and what doesn't.

Both approaches are good, but I really want to open up that space. If we have space for that second possibility, if we do it that second way, or if at least some of the time we're in that second mode, then a couple of things arise. One is: what helps me be in that mode? It's quite difficult—actually quite difficult to dance, for example, and really be sensitive to the sense of soul-making in terms of the genuine, authentic imaginal and all the elements. So what would support it?

Well, one thing may or may not be—I have to find out—do I need to slow down? So do I need to slow the whole movements down, for instance, or pause between movements? What's the kind of rhythm that allows me to read, to sense, to be attuned and receptive to the sense of soulfulness in the moment and whether it's being opened and supported or closed and not supported—the sense of blessing?

So what pace do I need to go at? It's just like doing walking meditation, doing any kind of walking meditation. There's always this question: what pace should I walk at that right now most helps whatever meditation I'm trying to do, whatever way of looking I'm engaging in that walking posture?

So one is a question of pacing. It might be slowing it down. It might not be. So don't necessarily assume it is. But sometimes going slower allows us, affords us a greater sensitivity, a greater attunement and a greater reading of the soulfulness and the sense of soul-making, the sense of blessing that is there.

A second consideration may just be—and this goes for so much, of course—to the degree that we're judging ourselves in the moment, that will usually, almost always, shut down my sensitivity, my capacity to notice the sense of soulfulness and blessedness in the moment.

This is strange, you know, by most people's—by conventional behavior in our society, all this is pretty strange, some of these exercises. And this one in particular may be very strange. And then you're doing it in a group. So there are all kinds of reasons it would be quite normal and expected for fear of judgment or self-judgment to arise. "Oh, I'm silly" or whatever it is. "I look silly. I'm not getting it. I'm not doing it very well." Whatever it is. Is it possible to just let that go? It's a question. But I'll come back to that actually a little bit later.

But to the degree that there's judging there, self-judging there, and fear of judgment from another, to that degree it shuts down our sensitivity generally speaking, but also in this particular exercise and the kinds of sensitivity we need in this particular exercise.

But this second way of doing it, where we're sort of just focusing on the intention, planting the intention, letting the intention instigate and lead our actions, even if the intention is not fully comprehended by us. What does blessing mean? What does it mean to bless someone? I don't know. Maybe, or I only know a little bit, or whatever it is.

But in the second way of doing it, or second leaning, let's say, second emphasis, then we're letting that intention lead us and just starting the movement and kind of reading it, surfing the whole situation, responding with our receptivity, with our sensitivity, responding to what we sense in terms of the soulfulness and the blessedness, and letting that shape the movements, the gestures, the vocalizations we're doing. So we're letting the body and the energy body and the sense of the soulfulness in the moment guide the movements, the gestures, the vocalizations, at times at least.

Seeing if it's possible to lean into that mode, let's say more, sometimes at least, more than the other mode, which is a kind of—almost like a preconception, an idea, a notion, a memory, an association of blessing and what it looks like or sounds like. An idea of what the movements, gestures and vocalizations convey blessing.

So both good, both fruitful, but see if you can sometimes get a sense of moving between those different modes, or at least between those two different emphases, let's say, because it might not be so black and white.

As I said, this is quite a strange exercise by sort of conventional understandings and the way we conventionally understand what the voice is and how we use the voice, for example, how we communicate. So usually, of course, we use the voice and we think of the voice as an instrument, a vehicle through which, by which we communicate, share or communicate something. And that usually implies describing something.

Through our voice, we share, communicate, and thus describe what I'm feeling or my story or something that happened or an idea or an image or whatever it is. And that's usually the way we relate to how we use the voice and what the voice is—communicating something through trying to describe it, to represent it.

And even often sometimes when we're doing mantra practice or we introduce chanting and we kind of hear, "Okay, this is the mantra," we learn the melody and the syllables or whatever. And part of us is thinking, "Okay, what does it mean?" Or if not, "What does it mean?" What's the character of this mantra? Whose mantra is it? Which deity does it belong to? "Ah, it's, for example, Avalokiteśvara. Then I know. Then I know."

It's invoking compassion because Avalokiteshvara. So that in the chanting of the mantra, the reciting of the mantra, I'm invoking, I'm thinking—I'm obviously concentrating on the sound and the voice, but I'm invoking the meaning of compassion. Even if those syllables, I don't know what they mean, and some of them don't actually mean anything. They're seed syllables that don't actually have meanings. Others are seed meanings as well, in different mantras, but anyway.

But oftentimes we as Westerners will want to know, well, who am I invoking? So that when I'm chanting the Om Mani Padme Hum, and it's Avalokiteshvara, it's compassion. And part of me is thinking about the meaning of compassion. Again, I don't mean a lot of discursive thought, but I mean the whole vibe of compassion. And I realize that that's what this mantra means.

Now, of course, that's not wrong. It's not wrong at all for a mantra. And it wouldn't be wrong for the first part of this exercise, exercise four, where the intention is towards blessing, letting that word blessing be soft and elastic and expandable. But what if the sound itself, as sound, was sensed with soul? Not to do with its meaning. This is where the second part of the exercise comes in. Maybe they're already coming through and being predominant even at times in the first part of the exercise where there is the blessing.

So some sound itself sensed with soul. We're moving towards a jungle of sound, a landscape of vocalizations, mysterious, because not necessarily meaning anything, or at least not just meaning anything.

Now I've said this before—I've mentioned it several times, I don't know how much it's landed, because again I've been too quick, too brief in going through it—but the voice itself, my voice now, is trying to convey certain meanings. And there's a logical path through what I'm saying, and each sentence is structured grammatically, syntactically, and all that. But at the same time, there's a level of the sounds that you're hearing that transcends meaning.

Yes, there's a meaning there, and hopefully you're listening for the meaning, and you're understanding it, so you can apply it in exercises and understand soul-making and all that. But there's also a music here. There's also just the sensing the soul of the sound. The mystery, the ineffable mystery of the sounds, and so the sounds right now of my voice. And there's an unfathomable mystery in that, if it's sensed with soul. If I can sense it with soul. It opens up a whole other—it opens up other dimensions, but it opens up a whole other direction of dimensionality.

So the dimensionality of any kind of verbal utterance can be through the meaning. For instance, when we convey something and it's beautiful or poetic or we convey an image or even convey our life story or something that happened or how we're feeling or an image, in the meaning of what we're conveying, we can convey mystery—the mystery of what we're conveying, the mystery of our being, the mystery of being in general, the unfathomability of it, for example, the unfathomability of the image. All that's conveyed when we share an image and the person gets the image or starts resonating with the image.

So the person listening also—the dimensions of what is heard, of the sounds that are heard, open up through meaning, but also not through meaning, through just sound themselves, sensing the soul of the sound themselves. Now, as I said, they can be there both at the same time, if we enter a certain mode of listening and mode of speaking. So right now, for instance. The meaning of this and the dimensionality of the meaning of this and the sensing the soul of what's opened up through the meaning of what's being said in my voice. But also the dimensions that are opened up just through the sound, through the music of it, the mystery of it, the miracle of hearing and of sound. This particular sound right now. This particular music. Different than other musics, unique, particular.

So, both can be there at the same time, depending on both how one is speaking, but also how one is listening, whether we are sensing the soul, of course. In this exercise, especially in the second part of this exercise, we really want to emphasize—really in both parts, because we're not using verbal sounds, we're not using traditionally understood verbal sounds, or verbal sounds as traditionally understood in the first part of the blessing. But there's still meaning there. But in this exercise, especially in the second part, we want to emphasize that second direction of opening up dimensionality, beyond meaning, just in the sensing the soul of the sounds themselves, and the mystery of that, the incantation, the invocation, the spell-making.

So in terms of instructions for this exercise number four, for the witness, the person who's just silently watching, sensing with all their senses and the whole energy body, remember, and listening and looking at the person blessing or the person moving, gesturing, vocalizing. In a way, the exercise there, or the emphasis of the exercise, is really just on noticing.

And I think we demonstrated this at the beginning, if I remember, of movement, voice, and the possibilities of soul, or something like that. And Catherine and I demonstrated as a duet, and I asked her to move, and she made very, very subtle movements. Very subtle. In fact, almost none. She hardly did anything apart from blink a few times,

if I remember. But if I'm open enough, and the whole body in relationship, sensing with the whole energy body—we talked about this several times, bringing the whole energy body into sensual relationship there, without touching in this case—then even the blinking of an eye, I'm going to notice that that has an effect in my energy body, even in my emotional body, and in my soul.

Actually, any movement, any gesture, any vocalization will affect the energy body, and the emotions, but we're talking about very, very subtle. If it's a very subtle movement, it might be very subtle, or it might be very, very strong.

It depends on all kinds of things, of course. But there's no pressure for the witness—no expectation that it must be this or that experience. Really, I'm simply noticing what effects I observe in my energy body and in the field through these movements, gestures, vocalizations, pauses, silences, and all the rest. Just noticing. It doesn't have to conform to any particular expectation.

So it becomes, for the witness—for that person in that role—truly an exercise in relational sensitivity. And that's the emphasis.

For the person who's moving or gesturing or vocalizing, it may be that one feels quite baffled by these instructions, or it goes along well initially, then one becomes completely stumped, or at a loss for what to do, how to move, what to vocalize. Again, this would be very understandable, very normal, and completely okay.

If this happens, one way of responding is simply to pause, just stop, and sense. Sense the self, sense the other, sense the space you're in, sense the energy body, sense what's happening emotionally, and just be with that sensing. From this sensing in the pause, without pressure, perhaps allow yourself to truly pause—not feeling compelled to keep producing some kind of movement or gesture or vocalization. Allow yourself to stop, pause and sense, taking the pressure off in this way, while remaining attentive and connected and alive and attuned to the experience of self, other, world, energy body and emotional body.

Then perhaps out of that—out of that sensitivity and attunement in the pause—comes the instigation, the seed of the next movement or gesture.

Another approach is almost the opposite, or complementary: don't stop. So I'm baffled and stumped and somewhat at a loss for what to do, but see if you can simply keep moving or gesturing. As I said before, let the material—the movement, the gesture, the voice—continue flowing. The material is still there. You're not taking your hands off

the clay on the potter's wheel. You're not removing your hands from the piano. You keep them moving on the piano, making sounds as you move them, and you're responding to the sounds you hear, to how they make you feel, to your sense of them.

Rather than stopping the vocalization and gesture and movement, you actually just keep going. Don't stop. Don't let the bafflement or confusion halt the flow. You continue, but sense as you're doing so and see if you can follow what feels in any way soulful.

Again, like with the piano. I'm fumbling around, confused. I don't know what I'm doing—I'm not a piano player. But when I press these keys in the low register very softly... oh, yes, okay. Very soft and quiet in the low register, somewhat dissonant perhaps. That creates something. I can feel a certain mood with that, something stirring in my energy body and soul. Then it occurs to me, from this very sensitivity, that delicate darts of notes high up on the piano might complement that. So I do that. I'm not a piano player. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm simply responding to the feel, but I don't stop the flow of material—the flow of sounds that come from my fingers striking the keys.

In this exercise, I don't stop the flow of material. I don't stop moving, gesturing and vocalizing, but I'm tuning in and sensing as it unfolds, as there's this flow of material, and I follow what feels, as best as I can, what feels in any way soulful.

As I said before, I'm letting the material shape the creation rather than pausing in innocence and silence, then creating ex nihilo, or working from some preconceived notion or idea of what it should look like.

As I mentioned, it would be quite normal for self-consciousness to arise for the person moving, gesturing, vocalizing. It might manifest in all kinds of ways—variations on fear of looking silly, sounding silly, seeming silly, being thought of as silly; fear of being blocked and then judged as blocked, or simply judging oneself as blocked.

It could be all kinds of things. So much depends on background and history and conditioning and upbringing, as well as many other factors—personality and soul style.

We might even expect this to arise. It could be good to just expect self-consciousness and awkwardness and a little fear of judgment to come up. We can include this as an expectation, and also include it when it actually arises. Sometimes it may not need very much—we just keep going, and it's included through mindfulness. The mindfulness simply expands to include that: "Oh, okay, there's self-consciousness going on as well, there's a bit of anxiety, or even a lot of anxiety about looking silly or sounding silly."

Can there be a bit more space in the consciousness? Anxiety will contract the space of awareness, and sometimes just creating a bit more space can help.

Self-consciousness arises, and in the very nature of what we mean by self-consciousness in that sense, it's a kind of unskillful contraction of attention and consciousness to the self—not a skillful, careful, and caring examination or inquiry or awareness, but contraction, almost like an obsessive attention that's out of balance and contracted. So opening up the awareness—for instance, of the sky—just that opening out of more space for the attention, for the awareness, counteracts the contraction that's inherent in self-consciousness, in that kind of afflictive self-consciousness.

What we're doing here, working with the dyads, involves opening out the attentions—still aware of the other, still aware of what one is doing, the movements, gestures, and the whole resonances of all of that, the vocalizations, aware of self, energy body, all of that, aware of other, but also all that in a larger space. Just that movement, that opening out of the attentions to include more, to cover a broader space, to encompass and open to a broader space can be really helpful as one continues with the practice.

And of course, again, the fear of judgment from others or self-judgment—how important are the qualities of mettā and compassion? As always with these kinds of dyad exercises, we've talked about this before, but to stress it again: it can be so helpful as part of setting up the space, the field, setting up the dyad, setting up the temenos, to include either deliberately and formally, or rather informally, specific mettā practice. It can be just a few seconds, or a few minutes, or longer—whatever we need. We can set that up at the beginning.

Or, as we've discussed before regarding temenos, sometimes we're just with a person and we can rest assured that there's temenos there—we don't have to actually re-establish it. But if certain exercises or situations are likely to trigger self-consciousness, self-anxiety, fear of judgment, fear of self-judgment, inner critic—all of that—then taking care to actually put a little more emphasis and spend a little more time setting up the temenos at the beginning, particularly the aspects of mettā and compassion within the temenos, can be really, really useful.

This mettā and compassion can also be something we introduce by just pausing. Something's happening, it's getting in the way, I feel blocked here, there's a lot of judgment or fear of judgment or whatever it is. We can just pause and pause the exercise. We can voice that and actually articulate something to the dyad partner, or not voice it—it could be silent. We're just saying, "Okay, let's just spend a bit of time with mettā and compassion," not necessarily telling the other what we're doing right then, but just in that pause, however long it is, moving into a mettā and compassion practice.

I would suggest mettā and compassion for oneself, certainly, because that's where the affliction is, but also for the other. And maybe even again, a sense of a larger space—the space that you're in imbued with mettā and compassion in which you are both sitting. So all these are possibilities if or when self-consciousness arises.

It may be too that there's something accessible—a sense accessible, a perception accessible—in the dyad at that time of oneself, of the other, of the space that you're in, of the whole environment, the world, that can be sensed with soul. Some perception of sensing something or other with soul in all that configuration may be really helpful. This may have perhaps started to happen earlier in the exercise, and you can bring it back, bring it back a bit more deliberately, or lean on it a bit more.

When we're sensing with soul, it will tend to counter that kind of rarefied and contracted self-consciousness, self-obsession, because that's not really a soul movement. It's maybe a kind of squeezed, impoverished reflection of what's originally, if you like, a soul movement, but in itself it's not. So when we sense with soul, something opens that out.

There are actually all kinds of possibilities, but really to expect it, to include it—this possibility of self-consciousness and the affliction of that. We don't have to fight it. We can also, as I said, allow it, but also place it humbly, so to speak, in the sight of the angels, in the purview, in the holding of the angels.

What does that mean? Well, it's an open statement—what that means to your soul, what that means in that situation. Of course, it's connected to what we've said about sensing with soul. We can deliberately draw on or reignite a certain sensing of soul, a certain image or imaginal sense of what's happening that places this very self-consciousness and the problem of that in the sight of the angels, in the holding of the angels, in the lap of the angels. See what that does.

One can also, for instance, just recognize one's fullness of intention or reignite one's fullness of intention as one of the elements of the imaginal. Why am I doing this? What's the primary intention? Is it to look good, to impress? Is it just simply to avoid being judged or to avoid looking silly or whatever?

Of course, no one's going to start an exercise like this, a dyad exercise like this in soul-making, with that limited intention. But very easily and without our recognizing it, our intention can slip in a fraction of a moment, or just gradually it can slip so that what started perhaps as a fullness of intention toward everything that soul-making beckons us to open to and move toward—what can start as that ends up shrunken to an

intention, again without our realizing it quite easily, of just trying to get through the exercise, just trying to get through the time, make it through the time with a minimum of looking silly or being judged.

So again, it's not to judge that slipping from a fullness of intention.

Fullness of intention is, as I've said many times, quite a rare phenomenon. It's rare for that element to really be there in its fullness. So we're simply reminding ourselves and recognizing that capacity of the soul, that inclination of the soul—in fact, that eros of the soul that wants to have a fullness of intention. It's already there as a soul desire.

Remember, the fundamental action of all soul-making teachings is that soul wants soul-making. In a way, that desire, that eros of the soul for soul-making, is the most primary desire of the soul. So it's already there. It's a matter of recognizing it, reminding ourselves of it, re-accessing it, as opposed to judging that it's not there at that moment. It's a difficult one, but it's also the most fundamental one. Interesting.

On another level, kind of less soulful if you like, simply remind yourself or recognize the fact that this is an exercise, an exercise and a practice. It's not a performance. I'm not performing for the other, I'm not performing for myself or the teacher or the sangha or whatever it is. It's an exercise and a practice, and that means it doesn't have to be perfect. My very first teacher said to me, "If everything was perfect, why would you need to practice?" It's an exercise, a practice, an exploration. So all kinds of things are going to happen. I'm not going to get it totally right and be dazzling all the time. Very much of the time it's an exercise. So all kinds of possibilities if or when self-consciousness arises in that afflictive way.

What can happen as we do this exercise number four, or many of these exercises with movement, gesture, voice, is that something in the larger constellation, the larger configuration of what is present, what is unfolding—something in that larger constellation may at some point ignite and become image.

So it could be a kind of general sense of divinity, that divinity is present in all of it or in some elements of it, shining through it, being refracted through some or more or all of the components, the constituents of what's happening at any time. It may be that the movement, the gesture, the voice themselves become imaginal. We sense them with soul. It may be the sense of self. It may be the sense of even something like tradition.

And you might feel like, "Well, what tradition is this? I've never done anything like this. Sort of nonsense syllables and improvised movements that don't have any meaning, that look potentially very silly probably to most people. What tradition is that?" Well, I don't know, but it doesn't matter. There may still be an imaginal sense of tapping

into and being in the stream of some kind of imaginal tradition. And that could be a tradition of the imaginal, or just an imaginal tradition, some esoteric practice of sacramentalizing, making holy.

As things become image, or if things become image, here's a reminder: none of them need to be very clear and well-defined in order to be an imaginal image with soul-making power. I don't need to be exactly clear what my image of the tradition is, or what exactly the image—if I had to describe the image of the self, maybe it's hard to describe, maybe it's not so vivid, not so well-defined. But it can still—I've said this so many times in talks over the last years—it can still have tremendous soul-making power without being clearly defined and perceived on a sensorial level. So it can be fully authentically imaginal; it can be a fully imaginal image without being necessarily clear or well-defined.

It could be an image of the other. It could be an image of the space we're in. Where are we when we're doing this, when this is happening? Or if you like, the time that we're in. There's a sense of even just fragments or moments in this exercise of the blessing and being blessed, of moving and gesturing and vocalizing—there's a sense that even moments of that could be reflecting something that is always already happening. We are playing something out. We are analogues of an image that is always already happening in hierophantic time.

And as always, when something ignites, some constituent of the larger constellation configuration becomes image—just like with the elements of the imaginal, when one of them ignites—then it's possible that the whole then ignites, and the whole thing is then perceived at a whole other level of sensing with soul, with a whole other level of soulfulness, sense of soulfulness and soul-making there. So that's part of one of the possibilities of what may happen here in different directions.

Now I said I wanted to introduce a variation for this exercise number four. And in a way it's related to what I've just said, but it's a deliberate move rather than something that might just occur spontaneously. That variation, that possibility, is that it still remains a dyadic exercise, an exercise in a dyad, but your dyad partner is actually a so-called intra-psychic image. In other words, you're not doing this with another actual physical human being. You're doing this in dyadic relationship with an image. Same thing though.

So you take your turn to move the body and make gestures and vocalize to the angel, to your angel who is your dyad partner, to the image there, to the imaginal figure.

And then you receive in your imagination the movements, the gestures, the vocalizations, the blessing and the mystery of that communication from the angel in your imagination.

In the first of those two possibilities, when it's your turn to move, gesture, and vocalize to the angel, to the image, again, like in other exercises, it could be that this is physically concretized. In other words, someone else looking on, a third person looking on could see you move, see your physical body move and gesture and hear you. Or it could be, again, just in the energy body and in the imaginal sense, in the image sense, in the imagination.

So there's a whole other variation for this one, which is in a purely imaginal dyad. Why? Well, there are a few reasons for opening up that variation or suggesting that variation at times.

One is, in relation to what we said before, that it may be that doing it on our own, especially if we're on our own in a room somewhere, that we're actually less self-conscious because we're not being... So if that's an issue, if that comes up, as it might for some people, that actually just doing it on one's own in the privacy of one's own meditation space, just with the imaginal figure, that there's less chance of self-consciousness arising because we're less under the, or we feel ourselves less under the scrutiny of another human being.

But secondly, there's also a possibility—not necessary, but a possibility—that in doing it with an imaginal figure as your dyad partner, that the whole thing can actually become more subtle. The whole thing has to be, it's almost like because perhaps we're in relationship with a more subtle entity, an imaginal figure, our movements, gestures and vocalizations can be allowed to become correspondingly subtle. They have to, we're less pulled into the gross.

And there's a related reason, a third reason, related to that opening up the possibility of allowing the movements, gestures, vocalizations to become more subtle. Which, as I've said many times, in imaginal practice, soul-making practice, but also in other practices, oftentimes the movement into depth is a movement into more subtlety. So we really want to keep that range of things, the more subtle range, open and keep exploring it. Not at the exclusion of the grosser, but just a reminder that sometimes the more subtle is actually the more powerful and the more fertile and the more profound.

Let's say tied in, there might be a third reason, which is for doing it this way sometimes, doing it within, intra-psychically, so to speak, is that we may, it may allow the movements, gestures and vocalizations to be more unusual, stranger. And in the sense

that whatever we're doing in moving and gesturing and vocalizing, it no longer has to look or sound so much like praising or anything recognizable at all. It may be, at least, that maybe some of the pressure that may be constraining movements, gestures, vocalizations, and also perceptions of sensing the soul, gets removed by removing the physically present other. It may be.

For other times or with other people, it works the other way. The actual presence of a physical human being with all their dimensions allows something, allows what comes through me, and what I allow myself to do allows that to have more range, both in subtlety and in the unusualness of what I'm doing. But do it both ways, play both ways, with an actual human being, a physically present human being, and with an intrapsychic image.

So maybe there are a few reasons why this helps with just doing it with an imaginal figure and not with a physically present human. Fourth reason why is, I'm just going to touch on this briefly and just say, it may be that the soul needs some things that are, so to speak, only between me and the angels. Their secrets, their soul secrets, their treasures and precious confidences between me and the angels and only between me and the angels, only between you and your angels.

And it might be, as much as the soul needs to realize its soul-making and its sensing the soul in relationship with physical beings, actual human beings, and again the whole range and dimensionality of what that means—materiality and nature and human beings—as much as that's the case as a support and a foundation and the field for a lot of soul-making, it may still be that the soul still at times needs some things that are only between me and the angels, only between you and the angels.

So there's a variation there of this exercise number four.

And remember, if you are doing it, particularly if you're doing it with—and it's maybe more likely, a sort of near enemy or far enemy, but certainly a deviation, a perversion a little bit from the intention of the practice, whether it's more likely to come up if we're doing it without a physically present—a physical human being present in a dyad with just the angel. It's more likely, I'm not sure, for it to come up.

Remember, we're not here seeking information. So if the imaginal figure, the angel, is gesturing and moving in my imagination or vocalizing towards me, I'm not in that communication, in that sharing, in the very broad senses of those words. I am not seeking information. That is not my primary intention by far.

That kind of thing may occur at times, but it's not equivalent to soul-making. Knowing the future or this or that happens or something psychic or whatever like that. It may occur at times, sure, it may occur, but it's not the same thing as soul-making, it's not the primary intention.

Usually when the intention goes into that kind of thing, that's when I'm seeking information. Usually that information is for the sake of the reified self and what this self can get, or how it can aggrandize itself in some way. And then what we refer to for the fullness of intention has slipped at that point, or it hasn't been allowed to supersede that other narrow intention for the self. What can I get here? Issues of power and self-aggrandizement.

When there's the fullness of intention, that those other intentions get pacified and they get hugely superseded. The fullness of intention is much more powerful, much more primal, fundamental, beautiful, sacred intention than these other intentions that are more to do with the reified self and power and what it can get, and so forth.

So that's exercise four, the diet exercise, with two main variations in terms of whether we do it with an actual human being, with a soul-making partner, or with an imaginal figure, an angel. And also the variations to do with whether it's intentionally blessing or just moving completely beyond communicating any meaning, and the variations of which aspects of movement, gesture, and voice—which combinations of those are included and allowed at different times. So there are many variations within exercise four.

Exercise five might be viewed as a series of exercises. I'm not sure quite what to call it—I'm not sure it needs a name—but in a way it's really about iconic moments, iconic movements and gestures, and entering into them. Movements, gestures, moments that can become iconic for us, that can themselves become image or have for a culture at different times, or for subcultures, become iconic.

The exercise is to take one of these moments and embody it. Feel into the soul sense of that moment and then let your body and your voice and your gesture and movement embody it. Let the energy body and the soul sense really get a sense, and then see what comes. In a way, this might sound easier, but the level I want to talk about it at is perhaps a little more unusual, and perhaps even a little stranger than some of the other practices.

The first one we might call something like the Via Dolorosa—you know that name from the Passion of Christ, when Christ had been sentenced to death by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate. He was beaten and then was given this cross, this heavy cross. Those

who were going to be crucified had to carry their own crosses, weakened and injured from torture and mistreatment and imprisonment, and then had to still carry their crosses to the place, to Golgotha, where they were going to be crucified, going to be executed. If you know from the Catholic tradition, there's the Stations of the Cross that they do every year, and there are certain moments on that whole path that get contemplated, meditated upon in that meditation on the Stations of the Cross. But that whole journey towards one's execution—that's the iconic movement or moment.

So Christ carrying his cross, it could be on the Via Dolorosa. It doesn't have to be Christ. It could be someone anywhere about to be executed. It could be, again borrowing from the Christian tradition, the martyrs about to be thrown to the lions or walking out into the amphitheater before the lions, so they know what's coming. Maybe they can even see or hear the lions, and they're just there in that amphitheater in the moments before their execution, before their death.

What's key in this is that they are surrounded—or Christ, or this person who's to be executed, or the martyrs in the amphitheater, or someone before a firing squad—surrounded by those who are certainly willing one's death, but even more than that, they're mocking and jeering. It may or may not be everyone in the crowd, but certainly a good portion, and maybe everyone, is mocking and jeering the victim of execution.

And yet, and this is all part of describing this moment, the one about to be executed has faith. What does that mean? Faith in what? Has a sense of the angel somehow. Has perhaps even a sense of themselves as image, or even the whole scene as image, and the whole event as image, and the whole transpiring of their execution and death and the mockery and the loneliness. Has a sense of somehow, in this horrific and tragic death, execution, brutality, there is somehow my telos here. This is somehow part of what I've been called towards. Somehow this is part of my fulfilling my duty to the angels, to the daemon, to the divine, to the images.

It's not that the horror and the suffering and the death itself, or taken alone, so to speak, form the telos, that constitute the telos, but rather they are somehow part of a piece of a much larger soul movement and soul duty because of how the soul is moving through the whole thing, how the soul is relating to it. It's that together with the suffering. And also because of what and who the soul, whom the soul is standing with. Because of what and whom the soul is standing with and standing for. It's this standing with and standing for and the how—the ways in which the soul is moving through that dukkha, that suffering, and seeing it, and sensing it with soul, and relating to it—that this becomes, all this becomes somehow, mysteriously part of a larger, wider and more profound telos, movement of soul.

And of course, it may well be that amongst all this sense of rightness and the presence of the angel and the dimensionality, it may be that, probably would be that, amongst all that, there can certainly be, probably will be, some fear, some terror, some sense of torment, some doubt, sense of loss and grief. Of course, the sense of the soul being stretched to its limits by what it's being asked to go through, almost perhaps to breaking point, whatever that might mean. So that kind of complex of emotional and soul reactions can be there too. So there is plenty here that can be very, very rich.

So it could be any of those. It could be Christ carrying the cross on the Via Dolorosa, if that works for you. It could be the Christian martyrs to the lions. It could be just someone somewhere at some time before a firing squad being executed. Perhaps they're a political prisoner and they're being executed for speaking the truth, speaking out against power. The outer environment of that whole image has with it this jeering and this incredible cruelty. The inner environment, so to speak, or the soul environment, has with it faith, a sense of the angel, a sense of sensing the soul, self as image, others, maybe the whole scene as image, a sense of one's telos, one's duty.

Again, it could be really quite specific or really not very specific. And the exercise here—this is the first part of exercise five—they don't have to be in any order. I think there are four parts for now; we could add or change some. I'm just throwing out some examples here.

But that's not what I was talking about. The serpent was more a certain quality of energy, a certain quality of aliveness, a certain quality of movement that has perhaps a sinuous quality, perhaps a sensual quality, perhaps something that's emerging from the earth energies or connected with the earth energies. It may not look like a snake at all to an outside observer.

Similarly here, with these iconic moments, we're not trying to create a recognizable performance or mime. We're sensing into the soul dimension of these profound moments and allowing that to inform our embodiment. The gesture of touching the earth, for instance—it's not about perfectly replicating the mudra as carved in stone. It's about sensing into that moment of calling upon the earth as witness, that profound gesture of claiming one's right to seek awakening, that quality of invoking the support of the whole cosmos in one's spiritual endeavor.

So in both of these examples—the figure facing execution or the Buddha touching the earth—what we're interested in is the soul resonance, the archetypal quality, the depth dimension that lives in these images. And then allowing that soul sense to move through the energy body in whatever way feels authentic and supportive of that inner resonance.

The third example I want to offer is completely different from the first two. This one comes from the realm of what we might call sacred ceremony or ritual. Imagine the moment of offering incense at an altar, or making an offering to the sacred, or perhaps the gesture of blessing.

This could be quite specific—maybe you're a priest or priestess in some ancient temple, lifting your hands in blessing over the community. Or it could be more general—simply the archetypal gesture of offering something precious to the divine, or invoking blessing and protection.

Again, the outer circumstances might vary widely, but there's something about that quality of the sacred offering, of blessing, of connecting the human realm with the divine realm through gesture and intention.

The fourth possibility is the gesture or moment of deep listening—perhaps the moment when the oracle receives the divine word, or when the sage sits in profound receptivity to wisdom. It's that quality of being so open, so receptive, that wisdom or guidance can come through.

These are just examples to give you a sense of the range of what we might work with in this exercise. The key is to find something that has soul resonance for you, something that touches that deeper archetypal dimension, and then to sense into it with the whole energy body.

So maybe I get on the ground and put my arms by my side and sort of wriggle around or writhe around, finding a way of moving kind of like a snake, and then someone could tell it's a snake, or a worm, or something. That's not the point. That wasn't the point in that exercise either.

And it may be, also, that in these kinds of exercises—whether it's Serpent, or these ones we've just talked about—it may be that there's not much movement at all. Of course, with the Buddha's Bhumi Sparsha Mudra, one could actually just replicate that movement. And of course that's very easy to do, just take your hand and touch the earth. But what we really want is the whole arena and nexus and field of heightened sensitivity and soul sense and resonance. Then one's open to all kinds of other movements, gestures and vocalizations as well.

But it may be that actually in this exercise with the serpent, or one of these from exercise number five, there's actually not much movement or sound at all. I'm just standing in front of the firing squad, but everything else that's endemic to that image—in the larger sense of the image, the sense of duty, the sense of angel, the sense of calling and telos, and also the mystery of that, as well as the sorrow, as well as the fear, the

beauty of that, the sense of faith, the sense of knowing one is doing the right thing, all of that, the nobility—all that is there. And it may or may not transfer to much movement or sound at all, but that's the key thing.

So one goes from that, so to speak, inner imaginal sense, the energy body sense. This sensitivity is more important. And in a lot of these exercises, you know, the emphasis on the sensitivity even more than a sort of clarity of an image.

We've mentioned several times that it's actually quite hard to, let's say, dance and at the same time have a genuinely imaginal image, a fully authentically imaginal image at the same time as one is dancing. It's actually quite difficult. It's not to say that one might not feel a kind of soulfulness in dancing or really enjoy it or it's wonderful in all kinds of ways or it's soul-making in some ways, but actually to hold a fully authentic imaginal image and be in relation to that image and dance at the same time in a way that both the dancing and the image, the soulfulness of both and the sensing the soul of both is kind of mutually enhanced and mutually woven together and implicated—that's actually quite hard for most people. Even most people who have a practice of dance, and of the imaginal, to really knead them together, stitch them together, is actually quite difficult.

So more important, I think, in a lot of these exercises, is the sensitivity. More important than, say, the clarity of an image, or even the presence of an image in some cases. And sometimes it can be better then to start with the idea of developing the sensitivity to subtlety and going from there. So we've said that before.

Okay, so like I said, I'll throw out four possibilities for this fifth exercise of iconic moments. And the third, again, I don't quite know what to call it—perhaps "waiting for the angels," or "the hospitality to the angels."

Some of you may have come across a couple of online seminars that I did some months ago. They were filmed, and so they're somewhere on the web. There's a set of eleven, but a couple of them have the title something like "Dharma and Art" or "Arts and Dharma." One of the things, one of the illustrations I used for something I was trying to communicate was an icon by Rublev. It's quite a famous icon in the Orthodox Church. It has two names: "The Trinity" and "The Hospitality of Abraham."

It refers to an Old Testament story of Abraham in his tent in the wilderness, in the desert. He sees three travelers walking through the desert and he runs out to meet them and makes them at home, offers his hospitality to them. They turn out to be angels—three angels. So he feeds them and gives them drink and gives them a cool place to rest in the shade.

So that fragment of a story from the Old Testament, from Genesis—Abraham's hospitality to the angels. If you have come across, or if you do in the future come across those arts and dharma seminars, what I'm talking about here for the purpose of this exercise is really the moment or the time prior to the scene in the icon. Because the scene in the icon is actually just the three angels. Abraham is no longer there, and the three angels, or the three persons of the Holy Trinity, are just there at the table having received Abraham's hospitality.

So this refers, in this exercise, to the time prior to that—to Abraham and his openness of soul, his soul antenna, his receptivity, his hospitality to the angels and the imaginal figures.

Well, what exactly is prescribed as a movement or a gesture or a vocalization there? I don't know. But what would it be just to take that? And it's quite, as I said, at one level some of these, this exercise number five, I'm just acting something. But when it's not even obvious what movement goes with it, and I'm not even that interested in it looking like that scene, then it becomes an exercise at a whole other level—to do with sensitivity and attunement and openness and just seeing, connecting soul, movement, gesture, voice.

So it's not at all obvious. What's the kind of prescribed movement, gesture, voice there? Can I feel my way in? And how do I feel my way into that? Maybe I don't even know the story. I'm not familiar with the Old Testament or even Abraham and the rest of it.

Well, Abraham's hospitality to the angels offers another way of understanding this - it represents the soul-making poise we've explored in recent talks. It's the waiting in meditation for an image, making oneself available for the visitation of angels, creating, opening, allowing and supporting a space - a psychic space that can be visited by imaginal figures, in which the imaginal figures can be created, discovered, born, can come.

When we speak of the Old Testament story, we're really talking about the soul-making poise, that stance which involves many factors we've discussed. There's humility, reverence - present even before the image has come, there in relation to the potential of the image, in relation to the place or the level from which the angels come, from which images arise. In relation to that source, there is humility and reverence.

The elements of the imaginal are already present: the sensitivity of the energy body, the recognition that images are both created and discovered, that they emerge through a way of looking requiring our participation as much as they arrive through grace. All this and more forms part of the soul-making poise.

This icon of Abraham's hospitality to the angels connects with theology itself - the Trinity understood as a kind of openness to each other, an economy, what they call the Trinitarian economy. It embodies the poise in relationship to the soul-making stance.

Through the history of our soul-making practice, we develop an increasingly familiar sense of this poise. Not that it becomes narrowly or rigidly defined - like everything else, it maintains a range, remaining elastic with soft edges. But we grow familiar with that space, with the range of possibilities it encompasses, what it can be and what it involves.

The soul-making poise itself can become sensed with soul. It too can become image. As I mentioned, perhaps in *The Path of the Imaginal*, even the experience of sitting in meditation, open to the possibility of images coming, can itself become image. Any element of the whole constellation of the imaginal can become image. The reverence itself, as part of the soul-making poise, may become imaginal, or the humility, or whatever aspect emerges.

Another iconic moment that may help some find their way into this third part of our example is the preparation for the Sabbath - the Friday preparation for welcoming the Jewish Sabbath. The Sabbath represents the visitation of the Shekhinah, the female aspect of God, sometimes called the bride of God, the bride of the divine. The Sabbath is a kind of visitation into our lives, into this plane of existence, of that level of the divine, that aspect or face of the divine.

What does it mean to humbly and reverentially, with sensitivity and care, open up space and create space in one's house, in one's being, in the house of one's body, in the physical space one occupies? To open that space for the imminent visitation, the blessing, the arrival of the bride - the bride of God, the Sabbath bride, the Shekhinah?

So these are the third possibilities: Abraham's hospitality to the angels, the preparation for welcoming the Sabbath, the soul-making poise itself. Again, it's very difficult to know what's prescribed or what such practices might look like. Perhaps not much movement or sound is involved at all, or perhaps there's a great deal. You must feel your way into these territories.

The last possibility I want to offer for now - and you can hear in what I'm describing that many possibilities exist - is the example of Rosa Parks. Many know this story and its significance in human history, particularly in civil rights and racial justice history in the United States.

In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, racist laws enforced segregation on public transport, creating an apartheid system. The bus driver had discretionary power to extend the whites-only section when it became full, forcing African Americans to surrender their seats and stand so white passengers could sit.

Rosa Parks, already an activist who understood her purpose, was returning from work when exactly this situation arose. She had taken her seat in the so-called colored section early in the journey. After several stops, the whites-only section filled, and the bus driver ordered her and three or four other African Americans to move. The others complied; she refused. That refusal represents the iconic moment.

Unlike the firing squad or Daniel in the lion's den, where consequences remain unclear, Rosa Parks's situation held obvious danger. What she was doing was dangerous and would bring negative, probably harmful consequences. This was clear, and therefore her action required courage. She knew this, and she also knew something was right about what she was doing and something was wrong about what racist law was enforcing.

So she was actually fired from her job. She worked as a seamstress in a local department store, and she was fired because of this act. In fact, she received death threats for years as a consequence of this immovability.

In her autobiography, she describes that moment when the white bus driver came back and ordered them out of their seats. "I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night," she wrote. Already in what she's describing, there's the body—her bodily experience was central to this act of courage.

All these exercises we're exploring have to do with body and soul, and the connection between them. Her knowledge of what was right, her clarity about values and virtue, was intimately connected with her bodily experience. We've discussed in other talks how the whole arena of ethics, morality, values, and virtues can be understood from the perspective of soul. These concerns are central to soul—values, virtues, ethics are not separate from soul's deepest concerns.

But I want to emphasize how, in her very experience, the body was central. What enabled her to act as she did was perhaps the integration of her bodily sense with soul sense, integrated with ethical sense—these three aspects not separate but unified. Through all five of these exercises, this is what I'm wanting to knead together, knit together, help grow into each other: body, soul, soul sense, and voice.

In terms of her voice, she was already an activist, already outspoken, and she continued to be for the rest of her life. Another powerful thing she said was that in that moment when she didn't move, "I just thought of Emmett Till and I just couldn't go back—couldn't go back to where he was telling me to go."

Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old African-American boy who was accused—though it's very unclear what, if anything, actually happened—of offending or perhaps flirting with a white woman in a grocery store. He was basically lynched and murdered by four white men. There was a trial, but those four white men were acquitted of his murder. This happened not long before Rosa Parks' act in 1955.

She said when that bus driver came back, "I just thought of Emmett Till and I just couldn't move." Again, it's not for me to suppose the workings of her mind and soul and heart, but you can recognize that she drew on an image, the image and memory of Emmett Till—someone who had become deeply meaningful in her life because of her involvement in the movement for justice.

What enabled this immovability, this conviction, this courage not to move, this courage to break the law and defy what she was being told to do? She writes in her autobiography: "People always say I didn't give up my seat because I was tired. That's not true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was was tired of giving in—tired of giving in to racial injustice."

One of the beautiful consequences—and this is part of what we don't know when we act in line with the duty of our soul and the callings of our soul—is that we can't always foresee the beauty and fruit that comes from such acts. The African-American residents of Montgomery boycotted the public bus service. While Rosa Parks' court case was being delayed, they had to exercise tremendous tenacity—walking to work, car sharing where they had cars, staying steady when it would have been much easier to take the buses.

They boycotted the buses, putting financial pressure on the bus company. Many buses stood empty in the garages because the African-American people weren't filling them, weren't paying the fares that kept the system running.

So eventually the city retracted, repealed the law requiring segregation on public buses. Of course, there's a larger story there with the whole civil rights movement and the US Supreme Court, but this is the essence of what I'm drawing on here. These don't have to be exact—I'm just picking examples to give you a sense of the kind of things you might explore in these exercises.

Apparently Rosa Parks, as a personality, carried herself with a naturally dignified demeanor. She was quite quiet as a person, and serene, but dignified without in any way being pompous or putting on airs. And that too is part of the flavor of this image I want to communicate here. Her demeanor, her personality was quiet and serene, dignified, but you can hear—I hope you can get a sense of—the soul power there and the soul conviction and how much her body was involved in that, the soul stretch and all of it.

Now, this represents a certain personality, a certain kind of style of expression. It's not to say, certainly not to imply, that the only way to stand firm is in a quiet and serene way—I don't want to imply that at all. But if this is the kind of iconic moment we're drawing on for this part of this exercise, then that's actually part of the image: that it is quiet and serene.

So maybe you can get a sense of that whole gestalt, the whole configuration of that moment, that image, that time, that iconic moment. Then see how that wants to be mirrored or refracted or expressed with body gesture, movement gesture, voice, or what wants to manifest or express in response to that or from that as a seed.

You can hear three slightly different directions there. One is embodying it. One is reflecting it, one is more refracting. And one is just seeing what happens in my soul, from my soul—or better, included in my soul, including the aspects of my soul which are my movement, my body, my gesture, my voice. Including those aspects of the soul, what wants to manifest? Either because it's refracting it, reflecting it, or thirdly, just in response to it or from it.

These kinds of exercises may feel at one level very easy, but at another level—or perhaps they're just open-ended and you can hear there's quite a lot of subtlety here possible—could be quite difficult. I don't know. You'll have to find your way in and play and see.

So all these exercises are really offerings as seeds. It's not my intention at all that these exercises become canonical or rigid—"this is now what we do, this is our canon of exercises in this soul-making tradition." That's not my intention at all. There are many more possibilities. We'll see how time and opportunities unfold, but maybe we'll add to them or change things.

Some of what I've offered, the examples of certain directions and emphases in these exercises, are in response to different students I've been working with. A different sangha, a different set of students, a different situation would almost certainly have given rise to somewhat different content, different emphases—different needs would have emerged. And so there would have been either slightly or very different exercises.

But the principles remain: developing sensitivity with the energy body, with the emotional body, developing range. The principles of developing sensitivity and depth and range with sensing the soul. The principle of kneading together, knitting together, weaving together, stitching together to make one movement, to make one body and soul.

It's not like there is the soul and there is the body, but actually making the body just a part of the soul, not as something other. Just as perception can be either at times a soulful perception, sensing the soul, or at other times not, or more or less so—so also the body, so also the movements, the gestures, the voice. It's not really like they're two things.

Take away my sensing, take away my thinking, my imagining—where is the soul then? Similar to taking away the movement, voice, gesture. These are aspects of soul. And it's like either the blood can get there, or not. Actually, there's always a spectrum. How much can the blood flow? How much can the blood of the soul, the waters of the soul, the fires of the soul—whatever analogy you want to use—how much can that reach those aspects of our being? How much does it reach? Or is it blocked? Are they integrated or are they divorced?

So all these central principles of sensitivity, of range, of energy, of body, emotional and sensing the soul, and this kneading together, this knitting together, this integrating of body and soul—body, voice and soul—all of this applies to these exercises. And as we talked about earlier, these principles relate to practice and one's life, to soul-making in one's life, to soul-expressing and manifesting in one's life and in one's duty. All of that remains steady.

As I said, it's not really my intention for the details to become canonical, to become rigid necessarily. It's much better, as always, to understand through this structural listening—what's the real main point here? But be a little bit careful, because sometimes people think, "Oh yeah, I understand the main point." And then the habit of soul, or the habit of the psychology, reasserts itself.

For instance, in the first part of exercise number three—the thunderclap, or thunder and lightning—there's this quality of showing up with strong integration of thunderous energy. But this is so much out of the habit of movement, gesture, voice that someone might do it a few times, get it, understand the principles of why we're doing this, and then somehow their prevailing habit reasserts itself. They think, "Rob said the movements aren't important. He doesn't want us to get too rigid around the movements." And then they're back to choosing, perhaps, something like Born Aloft by Angels, or some opposite kind of movement—just very fluid and watery. They keep gravitating towards that kind of movement.

They've forgotten the principle. They might have understood it at one point, but they've forgotten it. In not keeping the principle current, they've allowed the force of probably long-standing habit to take over. As I said, usually the habits here have been reiterated and strengthened over decades—decades. Some other possibilities have atrophied; some other avenues have been blocked for decades.

So in the absence of really thinking, "Why am I doing this? Oh yeah, right—because of the principle," in the absence of reminding myself why, then the habit takes over. The habit might be for the weaker movement, the more flowy movement, the softer movement, the pink fluffy angels. Perhaps.

But if I remind myself of the principle—this is what I meant about structural listening and understanding things structurally—the principle tells me something important. If I understand the principle, then I'll say, "Oh yeah, it's about range. It's about having range of movement, gesture, voice, of having those avenues and pathways be fully open, fully available for the influx of soul and the efflux of soul and the manifestation of soul in life." Remember, that's the principle.

So I want range there. I want all of these to be open. If I just remember the principle, then the range of what I'm doing will not shrink to just the ones I'm used to doing out of habit, or indoctrination, or the cultures I've moved in, or personal history, or trauma, whatever it is.

This is so important—whether we're talking about jhāna retreat or emptiness practice. Understanding the meta-principles, the larger structural principles, will help us, will guide us, will inform us in terms of what practice to do and how to do this or that practice. Everything depends so much on understanding why, which has to do with the structural principles undergirding the whole thing.

So this is what we want: the body and the soul integrated together. We want the possibility of soul to manifest, express, flow through and flow from all aspects of the being—including the body movement, the body sense, the gesturing, the voice, the language, all of it. We want that soul to be able to come through there as soul wants to come through there, so that we can follow our telos. We can discharge our duty. We can carry that out. We can have a fuller sense of ourselves—sense ourselves with soul, sense our life with soul, our work, our duty.

Our relationships. Our being. The aspects of our being. This is what we want.

I think it was in the Eros Unfettered series where I quoted a Sanskrit line from the Guhyasamaja Tantra. It's actually a line that's quite common—almost a stock phrase or stock sentence introducing some tantras. In English it says, "Thus have I heard: on one occasion, the Bhagavan, the Blessed One, was dwelling..."—and then it gives a long compound describing where he was dwelling.

So where is the Blessed One dwelling on this occasion? You get this compound, which is like a jewel, a multifaceted jewel that, because of the structure of the Sanskrit language, can yield so many different permutations of meaning. What does it exactly mean for the Bhagavan, the Blessed One, to be dwelling in that—whatever that is, this whole Sanskrit compound? It means multiple things. It means many things at different levels. Even each way we might carve up that compound, grammatically and syntactically, can mean many things at different levels.

Sarva Tathagata means in Sanskrit "all the Tathagatas." Tathagata, some of you will know, is an epithet that the Buddha used to refer to himself. He didn't call himself the Buddha—I mean, he did once in a while, but mostly he called himself the Tathagata. And Tathagata was a word that was, I think, around before the Buddha's time. He picked it up. Even he gave multiple possible interpretations of what that word Tathagata could mean—what the name he had given himself could mean. Once you came to the Mahayana, there were even more interpretations, probably before him there were others. There's a kind of proliferation of meanings as you get into the Mahayana and the Vajrayana.

Sarva Tathagata—all the Tathagatas. So the Blessed One was dwelling in something, something of all the Tathagatas. Tathagata is also an interesting word because, due to the structure of the Sanskrit language and the way words are put together—called sandhi—it can mean many things. It can mean the one who has gone to the truth, or gone to suchness, gone to reality. But it can also mean the one who has come from the

truth, come from reality. So it has multiple meanings just in the word Tathagata: gone to reality, come from reality, come from the truth, the realm of truth, the realm of suchness.

So the Blessed One was dwelling in the kayavakchitta, the body, speech, and mind. What kind of body, speech, mind? The body, speech, mind of all the Tathagatas, but also qualified by some adjectives. And again, this depends on how you carve out that Sanskrit compound.

Guhya is a word that's sometimes there in the tantric texts, sometimes not. I'll put it in right now—it doesn't really matter. It's optional. But two others that are definitely there are hridaya and vajra. Vajra is diamond, and hridaya is something like heart essence, and guhya is secret. So the Blessed One, the Bhagavan was dwelling in the diamond—which also means indestructible, eternal. He was dwelling in the indestructible, the diamond heart essence, or the diamond secret heart essence, or the diamond heart essence of the secret—you can carve it many ways—of the body, speech and mind of all Tathagatas, of all Buddhas, of all those who are gone to and come from the truth.

There are so many directions of meaning, so many ways the light can reflect from and refract through this multifaceted jewel of this phrase, of this Sanskrit compound. Actually, there's even more there. I'm just taking these phrases.

Is it possible that we too, in our lives, in soul-making, when we're sensing the soul with that soul-making poise, when the elements of the imaginal are ignited, when we are sensing the soul, that we too have opened up the body, the avenues of the body, of the voice, of movement, the gesture, the range, the possibility, the depth, the sensitivity, the beauty? So that they too, like a multifaceted diamond, have that range of directionality—all the attributes of Buddhahood, all that dharmakaya, the body of the attributes of the Buddha, of the transcendent Buddha, the primordial Buddha. Can we exercise and open up the...

channels of our being, the movements we make, the body, the sense of the body, the sense of the emotions, the gestures, the voice, so that at times at least we too are dwelling—vidyaharas—in the diamond, the indestructible, the eternal heart essence of the body, speech and mind of all Buddhas, all Tathagatas, all those who go to and come from this transcendent truth, this transcendent reality, this reality that is both transcendent and immanent.

So I want, if I can, to actually talk a bit more about Buddha nature and this kind of thing. I just want to tie it to what we've just done. That movement, gesture, voice, body and speech, as well as mind—sensing and thinking, cognition, which we've talked much

more about in The Balance of Things, in the Soul Making Dharma. All of that can be open to, can reflect and refract the soul making of the dharmakaya, the sensing of the soul of the dharmakaya, the soul duty of the dharmakaya, which is my soul duty, the one that soul wants to come through me.

So have I opened up those channels? Have I exercised them? Have I pushed them out and stretched them from any kind of habitual collapse or block that might have accrued there, as I said, over years or decades for all kinds of reasons, so that more and more of my being, more and more of the aspects of my being are available, are open for soul to come through, to be soul and to make soul. So this is part of the why we're doing all this.

Just to say one last thing for now in regard to these exercises and this notion of preliminaries. And, you know, I've said part of it before, which is that we can have a preliminary exercise or a sort of foundation exercise. And as we develop that and as the soul-making develops, the range, both in terms of lateral scope, breadth, and depth, and dimensionality, and the sensitivity, and the subtlety, and all the rest of it, of that practice really starts to expand as we practice the exercises, as the soul-making kicks in, in relation to those preliminary exercises, and that field, that arena, or domain. What started as a preliminary becomes in itself soul-making and gets stretched in all kinds of ways. So I want to repeat that as well here now.

The second thing, and very related, is if you ask, say, a Tibetan Rinpoche or someone with a lot of practice in the Tibetan tradition, or who's even regarded as a master, and you ask them, let's say a Dzogchen master or something like that, where there's so much emphasis on Dzogchen or not doing, the ultimate practice and that kind of language or some language or traditions etc and you actually ask them or they report what they spend most of their formal practice time doing, they still, even after many years, spend perhaps most of their time doing what are basically preliminary exercises. Ngöndro is the Tibetan, some of you will know.

So yes, preliminary, this needs to come first, this is what precedes. But it doesn't necessarily mean that then, okay, now I've done that, and then I stop. First we do this, then I stop doing that because I've done it, and I've accomplished what I want to accomplish, and I can just do my sort of more advanced practice. So there's that whole relationship with this notion of preliminaries that's very much the kind of dominant one, actually, in people who take their practice in Tibetan Buddhism very, very seriously and Rinpoches and masters, etc.

And I'm not really sure about this word preliminary. I'm partly picking it and using it because there are preliminaries, as we've tried to explain, to certain areas, directions, domains of our being and our lives opening up with soul. So in some ways they are preliminaries, but they're also, as we've explained, they can be expanded, stretched, developed, they can become soul-making in themselves—extraordinary and not basic at all. So there's a whole range, and I think you will get that sense with all this.

So how does one relate to all these practices over time as one's developing one's soul-making practices? There's preliminaries and then soul-making, maybe there's a parallel, these two and going back and forth, and the periods of one or the other, all that. So I don't know that that's necessarily universally formulaic. But for right now we can use the word preliminary with that caveat.

CHAPTER 239

Preliminaries, Regarding Voice, Movement, and Gesture (Part 5)

Rob Burbea · 12 min

> *In this practice session from the Vajra Music series, Rob Burbea introduces a multifaceted exercise that integrates vocal expression with conscious movement and gesture. Drawing on previous retreat work with micro-movements and posture, he guides practitioners through combining melodic vocalization using syllables like 'ma' with various arm positions and gentle rotational movements.*
>
> *The exercise offers multiple variations: practitioners can experiment with different postures (arms spread wide, hands crossed over the chest), vary the pitch register from high to low, and modulate volume from loud expression to internal whisper. Burbea emphasizes that this is fundamentally an exercise in cultivating sensitivity—training practitioners to feel into how the combination of sound and movement affects the energy body, emotions, and potential arising of images or soul-sense.*
>
> *This approach reflects the broader Vajra Music methodology of using voice, movement, and gesture as tools for spiritual exploration. Rather than being a core meditation technique, Burbea frames these exercises as supplementary practices that help 'fill cracks in the soul-scape,' developing sensitivity to subtle inner states and the interconnection between physical expression and consciousness.*

Here's another exercise. Remember, it's only an exercise, like some of the other things we've done. It reminds me of a variation of something we did on the retreat—some of the movement exercises where we just moved the body in almost micro-movements and held a posture. We saw what that did to the energy body, to the emotions, to the soul sense, if images arose or if not. Just an exercise.

What we're doing here is training sensibility, training sensitivity.

There are many possibilities. You can start with an image and then let the body, let the voice move from the image, move into the voice, express, manifest through the voice, through the posture or the movement. Or we can start with the movement and see what happens in the soul. There are two ways to do it.

So there are all kinds of variations. We're going to combine voice and gesture or posture. This is just an exercise. I don't think we've done it before with this combination, but you can get to think in a certain way about exercises. It's not a big deal. It's like a screw on an airplane—if it's missing, it might be a big deal, but in terms of the bigger structure of the aircraft, how it works, it's not such a big deal. It's not a central component.

So these exercises, occasionally or for a while emphasizing them, are filling out cracks that have not been filled in the soul-scape.

There are two elements: a sound element—sonic, a voicing element—and a gesture or posture element, a movement element.

For this, if we start with the sound, with the voicing, it goes with a little melody. I'll try and sing it more strongly. It's just repeating. I'm singing it more clearly than you need to—it's part of your variation, how you sing it. It's just that fragment repeating with the syllable, for instance, "ma, ma..." Something like that, something rhythmically close to that.

I'm holding roughly the long note for a count of three or six, and the rest is one each—six eighth notes. That's a vague thing that you voice with the syllable "ma," just to stop.

As you do it, you can do it standing up. What are your arms going to do? You can open them wide, spread your arms down to the tips of your fingers to either side, parallel to the floor. So it's a very open posture. You sing it like that.

Maybe there's a slight movement, like rotating just very slightly, slowly, side to side, so that the angle of your arms—the angle your arms make with the body, with the feet, which are stationary—changes slightly as you rotate, slowly and slightly. Really, your job is to feel into this, feel into what that combination feels like—that movement, that gesture, that posture, and the sound, the sounding.

Maybe you have another posture gesture: your hands crossed, one hand up by one shoulder—the right hand up by the left shoulder, the left hand up by the right shoulder—and then hanging down from there so they cross over the abdomen, over the torso. And the same melody. You don't have to sing it like I'm singing it; I'm just trying to make it clear for you. You do that together.

What happens if you fold your hands like people commonly fold—cross your arms across your chest? Play with different postures of your hands, different slight movements, with the same sounding melody.

Maybe you want to vary the syllable, so it's not "ba," but "pa," or "ta," or "oo," or "ee"—exploring the different vowels. There are all kinds of combinations you can discover with what you're sounding and with your gesture, posture, and movement.

Go slow, take your time, but really repeat one variation for several minutes so you can truly enter into it and feel what it's doing, if it's doing anything. Some of these effects might be very, very subtle.

You can vary your posture, your position, your movement, your gesture—that's the first dimension of exploration. You can vary the pitch and the range at which you sing. Not the melody itself—keep roughly what I've been demonstrating—but it could go much higher in your range where it's more comfortable for you. Or it could stretch into the very heights of your vocal range. Or low, deep in the body, stretching down into those lower registers. So play with the register of what you're singing, the pitch of what you're voicing. That's the second variation.

The third variation is volume—all the way from really loud to moderate to a whisper, to internally where only you can hear it inside yourself. Throughout all of this, you keep exploring the other aspects: the gesturing, the pitch. There's tremendous variation possible here.

Your task is really an exercise in sensitivity. Your job is to feel into it deeply. How does it feel? What happens in the energy body? Remember our expanded understanding of energy body now. What happens emotionally, in the emotional body? And what happens, if anything, in image or soul? The soul responds.

It's very simple, with lots of variations. It's really about sensitivity—it's an exercise in attunement. Don't expect too much. Your job is simply sensitivity. Sensitivity.

You can do this whole exploration with another melody that comes to you, that occurs to you spontaneously, or a fragment that you know from something that touches your soul. What happens when you sing it, when you voice it, when you sound it in these different ways while your body moves and gestures in these different expressions? Put them together.

It's just an exercise in sensitivity. So that's another addition to our collection of contemplative practices. I hope that's clear enough.

CHAPTER 240

Perfection and Christ's Blessing

Rob Burbea · 4 min

> *In this deeply personal and contemplative dharma talk, Rob Burbea shares intimate reflections on experiencing a profound sense of divine perfection and Christ's blessing while facing severe physical deterioration. Speaking from his own experience of illness and bodily weakness, he explores how traditional notions of perfection—as the accumulation of wonderful capacities—give way to a radically different understanding: perfection discovered through stripping away, loss, and even dukkha itself.*
>
> *Burbea touches on the theological concept of theodicy—how suffering and difficulty can coexist with divine goodness—while emphasizing that this understanding comes not through intellectual reasoning but through direct heart-knowing and soul-sensing. He describes moments of washing his hands or hair, feeling the profound weakness of his wasted body, yet simultaneously experiencing an ineffable sense of Christ's blessing permeating everything, including the dukkha itself.*
>
> *This talk offers a unique perspective on finding the sacred within suffering, challenging conventional spiritual ideals of perfection and inviting practitioners to consider how divine grace might be discovered not despite our limitations and pain, but precisely within them. Burbea's teaching bridges contemplative Christianity and Buddhist understanding of dukkha, offering comfort and insight for anyone facing physical decline or spiritual crisis.*

We have a very different sense of perfection—our perfection, the perfection of being. Perfection runs through being, through existence itself.

Washing my hair. It's so bony now. I've lost so much weight. I feel my body wasted away—very much just bones, really. I can't see properly. I can't stand up. I don't have any balance. I'm washing my hands after going to the toilet, trying to be careful because of the virus. There you go. So now we're in touch—one hand on the other, the soap and the touch. And there's some kind of perfection there, some kind of beauty of God's grace.

This has nothing to do with perfection in the way that we usually understand it or think of it—becoming perfect. It's a way of seeing. It's very personal. I mean, it's universal and it's personal. Somehow the love in there, somehow the being known in there, the knowing. All of this is wrapped up in a perfection. A perfection wraps it up. It permeates through, it shoots through, it exudes it, it expresses it.

I'm feeling so bad, feeling so weak and tired and lost in almost all capacities. Somehow, Jesus' blessing is on everything. I don't know what that means. What does it mean? The heart—meaning the heart and the soul—knows something, feels something, senses something, opens to something, realizes something. Jesus' blessing is on everything, and that blessing is a perfection.

It is the opposite of accumulating wonderful capacities. It's in the stripping away, the loss, the misery, the incapacity. There's this word in theology—theodicy—which is like trying to explain how the occurrence of difficult, bad, even evil things is congruent or makes sense with a good God. Theodicy. There are all these different theories and perspectives.

Maybe it's something to do with what we need to sense in the soul. The soul senses something. We open to something. We glimpse something. We taste something. Our heart knows something. The heart of our soul knows something. We see it. We feel it. Jesus' blessing is on everything. Christ's blessing is on everything, in everything—in the dukkha itself, right there in the powerful dukkha.

It's a very different sense of perfection.

CHAPTER 241

Follow Your Heartbreak

Rob Burbea · 38 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea draws from his recent self-retreat experience and engagement with Andrew Harvey's "The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism" to explore the essential role of heartbreak in spiritual transformation. He examines how both personal awakening and collective evolution require us to courageously face suffering rather than avoid it, referencing the classical Theravāda Progress of Insight teachings that map the challenging terrain of deepening practice—from dissolution through fear, misery, and the "dark night of the soul" to ultimate liberation.*
>
> *Burbea connects this individual journey to Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey archetype and suggests we are collectively experiencing a "dark night of the species"—referencing the Hindu concept of Kali Yuga while also recognizing unprecedented opportunities for consciousness evolution. He explores how the Buddha's First Noble Truth of dukkha serves not as pessimism but as the necessary starting point for freedom, emphasizing that "you can't bypass" suffering to reach awakening.*
>
> *The talk culminates in Harvey's concept of "sacred activism"—following your heartbreak as a compass for meaningful engagement with world suffering. Whether responding to environmental destruction, social injustice, or personal loss, Burbea suggests that our broken-open hearts become doorways to wisdom, compassion, and effective action. He guides listeners through a contemplative practice of touching their own heartbreak with the breath and bodhicitta, encouraging transformation of pain into fuel for awakening and service.*

I wasn't here last week because I was on a self-retreat, which was really wonderful. Both sitting with people is really good, and sitting on your own—if you've been practicing and you kind of know the territory—has its own sweetness as well.

I went to this very small center called Silent Stay, which is just on the border of Napa Valley in Vacaville. It has room for about six people, and I recommend it if you just look up Silent Stay. The couple that runs it previously ran a retreat center in Assisi, Italy for twelve years. There was recently a CNN list of the top ten retreat centers in the world—at least that was their list. Spirit Rock was number one, by the way, and their center in Assisi was on that list too. They came back here about seven months ago and opened up this center, which is kind of a clone of the one there. They brought all their statues and art, so it's quite nice.

During this nine-day self-retreat, we'd sit a couple of times together with whoever was there—there were a couple of other people during my stay. It wasn't an intensive kind of retreat as I often do, with sitting and walking and sitting and walking, just building more and more momentum of mindfulness. I tried to be mindful in everything I did and sat maybe three to five times a day, usually about four or five times a day. I also did some writing, which was wonderful, and caught up on my email for the first four days after I'd been away.

But I also did some reading, and I've been hanging out with this book. I think I've mentioned it here once, but I've been with it for a couple of months, and the retreat was largely about digesting the full impact of this book, which is by Andrew Harvey, called *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism*.

He's the person—if you were here sometime in the last few months—maybe you were here the time that I played through my computer him reading Rumi about passion. Do you remember that one? "Passion, passion, passion, passion," and then he riffs on it. That touched me deeply, blew my mind, opened up my heart when I first heard it a couple of years ago, and I play it regularly.

I decided to reach out and have a conversation with him because he's open to that at times, and we had a rather rich conversation. He said, "Okay, read the book—read my book and tell me if it feels like you want to keep on hanging out. Read that first." And I read it.

He's brilliant, by the way. And he knows he's brilliant, but he also knows his impatience and his arrogance at times. He writes all about that, about all the places inside that come with having a mind and a heart like he does. But it's brilliant.

I've been really inspired by it as a kind of guidebook to a new area that I feel myself moving into, which is sacred activism. He presents this very sobering and very inspiring vision of where we are now as a species, in the evolution of humanity and in our consciousness. He doesn't hold back at all on both ends—both the sobering, overwhelming crisis of greed and fear, anger, outrage, disconnect from the natural world, a world gone mad. You don't need much to find confirmation or evidence. You'd have to be closing your eyes and walling yourself off in a cave to not see that aspect of where we are—a world gone mad.

What he calls being in the dark night of the species. As I was thinking about this, I thought about the Kali Yuga. Perhaps you're familiar with this—in the Hindu perspective, there are different epics of time, and many have talked about us being in the Kali Yuga now.

There are four different yugas—epochs of time—and the Kali Yuga, which if you're familiar with Kali, the divine dark mother that eats everything, that's one way to think of the Kali Yuga. But actually, as I looked it up, the Kali is actually referring to a demonic kind of Kali, not a beneficent Kali.

So if we are in the Kali Yuga, this is the prophecy for events in the Kali Yuga. In some schemas, the Kali Yuga is supposedly ending around 2025—who knows? There are others that say it's happening a whole different way. But anyway, it seems like we're in the Kali Yuga.

Some of the things that happen in the Kali Yuga: Rulers will become unreasonable. They will levy taxes unfairly. The rulers will no longer see it as their duty to promote spirituality or protect their subjects and will become a danger to the world. People will start migrating, seeking countries where wheat and barley form the staple food source as opposed to rice. At the end, avarice and wrath will be common. Humans will openly display animosity towards each other. Ignorance of the dharma will occur. People will have thoughts of murder with no justification and will see nothing wrong in that.

We just saw this in the news in the last couple of days—those kids that were just bored and shot that Australian baseball player. This is the prediction. I wonder when it was predicted, and if it wasn't like that then, what that might have been like.

But anyway, as Andrew Harvey talks about this dark night of the species, the inspiration is that it's held in a perspective, in the context of the potential of birthing an awakening of humanity that's never been seen before. And he's not the only one that holds this. If you're familiar with the harmonic convergence, there was that same kind of Mayan prophecy where there'd be a window of time where there'd be a lot of dukkha with the potential to shift things. That there can be, through the dukkha, through the suffering, a kind of new emerging of a consciousness and connection to the planet and to respect for life.

He talks a lot about how the divine feminine is going to play a key role in this, which I have felt for some time. The guys just haven't done such a good job. He talks about many different elements of both the death and the birth that is potentially here.

So that kind of perspective gives meaning to the tragedy and the heartbreak that probably many of us feel. It's like the system needs to crash before it can reboot. That's one way of thinking about it.

I'm not just going to focus on this global level, but I want to see it as a natural process on many levels—global unfolding of the species and the personal spiritual journey. I'd like to talk about and focus a bit more on that, and then we can open it up to looking at the bigger perspective as well.

We can see the same process that Andrew Harvey talks about—this very chaotic, confused, frightening place that the species is going through as an emergence, as a necessary emergence to something greater. This is exactly the process of our spiritual journey.

If you're new to this kind of work, I'm reminded of a line from Trungpa Rinpoche, who was one of the most quotable beings I ever met. In one lecture he said, "The spiritual journey is fraught with perils and dangers. So consider very carefully before you start." Then he paused for a while and said, "But once you start, it's best to finish."

It's not that it's some kind of mistake, some kind of warped sense of humor that would set up the game like this. This is an essential unfolding in our lives.

Anyone who's done a retreat knows it's not that you sit there and say, "Oh, how nice it is to be with the moment," and then that's how it is for the next five or ten days. "Oh yeah, they talk about being in the present, and how lovely—now I have ten days to just be in the present. How cool. This is better than Bali. What a cool vacation."

It's rare that that's somebody's experience. It can happen, actually does happen at times. But it's not usually your introduction to sitting there with your mind and your heart for however long it is. By the second day, the common question is: What am I doing here? Why did I sign up for this? What was I thinking? Or what was my friend thinking when they said it would be a good thing?

There's ups and there's downs and there's challenges. That's an essential part of the trip because in that journey, how else can you discover you have the capacity to be with everything? How else can you discover that you have the courage and the strength and the wisdom and the compassion and the love and the peace that can hold all of that, that can go through even all of those challenges and difficulties? How else could you find out? How else could you discover for yourself what's called verified faith, where you know absolutely the power of presence and the power of a loving presence or a kind awareness?

This is the way of this journey. It's forged by facing the very demons that we usually distract ourselves from. Through that being forged through the heat, there's a tempering, like iron is tempered into steel, and a strengthening that opens you up to places you didn't know were there. One could say it's a trial by fire.

I don't want to frighten people saying, "Oh my God, he just said sign up for a five-day retreat." No, it's not always this and it's not this every moment, but there are parts of it that are like this and that are okay. There's also being present in a way that you've never seen before and waking up to being alive and waking up to your own goodness and feeling a connection with life. There's, as the saying goes, the 10,000 joys and the 10,000 sorrows. You get to be here and sit with it all and see through it all.

You know that line, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger"? Well, not that you're going to get killed, but you are challenged. More and more, what happens as you go through those challenges, you have more and more confidence that it becomes less and less scary. It becomes more and more a place that you're drawn to again and again because you touch something that's so pure that you can't keep away. It's something that calls you.

It's just like something has called everybody here, even if it's just out of curiosity for the first time, that has called you through whatever challenges you've gone through in your life that has kept on pulling you through and facing you in the direction of being hungry to awaken to truth or love or whatever you want to call it.

There's a line that I like from Helen Keller. She says, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved. All the world is full of suffering. It is also full of overcoming."

That's one reason why the Buddha starts out with a very sobering fact. There's suffering in life. He doesn't sugarcoat it. There's suffering in life. And he says, the more one can learn to open up to suffering, the more the possibility of coming to the end of suffering. As probably many of you are familiar with his response when he was asked, "What do you teach?" He says, "I teach about suffering and the end of suffering."

But you can't bypass it. Awakening joy sounds good. "Okay, I'll just go for feeling good." Awakening joy, an essential part of it, is opening up to all the difficulties and challenges in your life.

I also want to mention another classical teaching that talks about this in another level besides just going through one retreat where you go through your ups and downs. And that's over the course of one spiritual journey. The classical model of awakening in the Theravadan teachings called the Progress of Insight. You can look this up online. It's no secret. But sometimes it's a little warning not to read too much about it because then you kind of see, "Oh, where am I? Have I made progress? Oh, no." It's like chutes and

ladders. But it's good to have a sense of the different places that one goes to so that you don't get confused if you're finding yourself not on a bliss trip, even after you've been doing this for a while.

In the Progress of Insight, which kicks in after one has done some practice and really seen in a profound way some basic realities of life, some basic principles of life, after one is deeply moved by seeing the arising and passing of everything—what's sometimes called a mini-Nibbana, a mini-enlightenment—

After the profound awakening experience—that glimpse of the arising and passing away of all things, sometimes called a mini-Nibbana—you might feel absolutely certain you've reached full enlightenment. But you haven't quite arrived there yet. However, something fundamental has shifted. You don't forget what you've seen.

As I share this, I must offer an important caveat: don't try to match your experience exactly to the progress of insight maps. The journey doesn't always unfold so neatly or linearly. But in the classical textbook version—which sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't follow such a tidy progression—after glimpsing that profound understanding of everything arising and passing away, you often begin to notice primarily how everything is dissolving.

This marks what's called the dissolution stage, where there's no solid ground anywhere because everything reveals itself as utterly empty. You see the complete insubstantiality of all phenomena. Where is anything, really? There's no security, no place to stand. While this recognition of emptiness and insubstantiality is profoundly important, when that sense of solid ground begins to give way, it becomes unsettling and shaky.

The next classical stages unfold predictably: fear emerges as you realize everything is dissolving and there's nowhere to stand. Then comes what's sometimes called the "rolling up the mat stage"—misery so intense that the yogi simply wants to pack up and go home. This refers to the meditation mats used in India, Burma, and Thailand. Remarkably, this represents a very high stage of practice, though it can last anywhere from a brief moment to an extended period.

Following this comes terror, then loathing and disgust, where you find yourself asking, "My God, what was I so attached to? There's nothing substantial here. What was I craving so desperately?" This is the Pali term *nibbida*—seeing the essential emptiness of everything. Sometimes this manifests as complete dispassion.

This profound seeing naturally leads to the urge for deliverance. A deep longing arises: "I want freedom. I don't want another ice cream cone—I can see that won't satisfy me. I want true liberation."

In recognizing the insubstantiality of all phenomena, you also begin to see that your fears themselves are insubstantial—the terror, the misery, all of it. While you're not as frightened, you're left wondering: what is there, really? What will truly fulfill?

Eventually, you begin to see both the beautiful and the terrible with equanimity. You recognize that everything unfolds on its own—that whatever you do won't fundamentally change the nature of things. This opens into a space of profound balance and equanimity around all phenomena.

This equanimity becomes the direct precursor to genuine freedom, to liberation, to Nibbana—the unconditioned reality that can manifest in various ways.

I share all this not to frighten you, but to offer comfort. If you find yourself experiencing terror, loathing, or disgust, it's reassuring to know this could indicate a very high stage of practice rather than spiritual failure. In touching such immediacy and intensity, in allowing your heart to be broken open, you're passing through necessary fire. For some, this process happens quickly; for others, it takes longer. But as long as you maintain sincere direction and genuine desire for freedom, it must be answered.

This progress of insight corresponds beautifully to what Joseph Campbell identified as the Hero's Journey—that archetypal pattern he discovered running through all great myths, fairy tales, and folk stories across human cultures. Campbell's insights into humanity's journey toward freedom are truly remarkable.

The Hero's Journey begins when something motivates the hero to leave their complacent routine—a call to quest that says, "Yes, there's something more." In answering that call, they inevitably encounter hardship. This pattern underlies virtually every action movie you've ever seen. Through that hardship, the hero faces great challenges, ultimate tests—the dark night of the soul.

And through that, there is victorious triumph. The hero or heroine wins and there's freedom. This pattern holds true whether we're speaking of Perseus in mythology, all the great heroes and heroines, Ulysses, or the Buddha himself.

Consider the Buddha going through his quest. Just before his enlightenment, there is Mara throwing everything at him after six years of the most intense asceticism and hardship. And there he is, with Mara saying, "Who the heck do you think you are? What makes you think you have the right?" Mara tries to frighten him, tries to seduce him

with visions, but then comes the final test—doubt. The Buddha touches the earth and becomes enlightened, declaring through his gesture: "By all the work that I have done, I know I have the right to be here."

Or consider Jesus on the cross, going through crucifixion and reaching that point where he cries, "Why hast thou forsaken me?" And then comes the resurrection.

In modern representations, we see this in the Star Wars movies. Luke Skywalker embodies the ultimate hero's journey, particularly in The Empire Strikes Back. There he is, going through his training while Yoda counsels, "Just slow down a bit. You've got to slow down." But Luke is impatient, filled with impetuosity. "I've got to do it. I'm ready," he insists.

"Okay, you're ready?" Yoda responds. "Take that lightsaber, go into that cave, and face your darkest demons. Hopefully one of you will come out alive." That's how he becomes a Jedi Master—by facing his greatest demons.

Or consider the recent Hunger Games with Katniss Everdeen finally making it through her trials. This is the path. There's no way around it.

Andrew Harvey makes a profound point: both on a personal level and on a global level, we have to let our hearts be shattered. We have to be willing to let our hearts be shattered. You can't protect yourself anyway. You might try, saying, "Oh no, I can't bear it anymore." Sometimes protecting yourself is important because the overwhelm becomes too much. But at some point, when you have the courage to become a warrior for goodness, a sacred activist, you have to let your heart be broken.

And in that breaking, it breaks open, just like on retreat. It breaks open to all the possibilities inside. Here lies this incredible paradox: in our protection, we cut ourselves off from all the good stuff within. But when we let ourselves be broken open and shattered, when we reach that point where we finally say, "I give up," when we feel we've hit rock bottom—that's the time we're reborn. That's when the ego truly surrenders and something mystical enters. But it requires our willingness to be shattered, and that means being shattered on purpose, not only on a personal level but also on a global level, emerging on the other side as warriors for goodness and peace.

In Harvey's beautiful presentation of death leading to rebirth, he speaks of all the awful conditions that are part of our death. But in our rebirth emerge aspects that have never been here before. Let me mention just some of the most important features of this birth to offer you some uplift as you go through this process.

The crisis itself demands a response, and people are responding and waking up in a way that has never happened before in this human experiment. Never before.

As my friend Roger Walsh says, we're in a race between fear and consciousness. Who knows what's going to win? If we have enough time, I always think that consciousness trumps fear. But whatever happens, the darkness brings out the light. So the crisis and our response to it become inseparable.

One of the responses he explores comes from Paul Hawken's book, *Blessed Unrest*. Hawken set out to discover just how many progressive movements—devoted to environment, human rights, gay and lesbian rights, animal rights, and so on—have been sparked by where we are. What he discovered and calculated is that there are between one and two million organizations on the earth now actively working toward ecological sustainability and social justice. In his book *Blessed Unrest*, this is not just hypothetical. He goes out and takes a look at what's actually out there. That's a little encouraging, isn't it?

The technologies, as destructive as they have been, are also leading to possibilities that have never happened before. We have instant access to all information that has ever been. Isn't that amazing? Think about that—all the information that has ever been. Never before on this planet has that been available. And not only available to some, but as he says, there are new forms of democratizing media. It's available to all. And it doesn't matter what the powers that try to control things are—the jig is up. The cat is out of the bag. There can be attempts at suppression, but it's too late for that. It's available to all.

There's the mystical renaissance. There has never been a renaissance of spirituality that's not just defined by one doctrine or dogma, but goes way beyond any one religion to the point where it's emerged above organized religion in this renaissance of spirituality.

The evolving philosophy of non-violence has emerged—which, just in the last hundred years or so with Gandhi and then Martin Luther King and the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela, shows us new ways of dealing with our struggle for sanity in this insane world. Non-violence, the power of non-violence.

The return of the divine feminine—as we can see just in the last fifty years, the feminist movement being such a key thing in bringing more compassion and more love and more understanding to the world, growing more and more in its power.

And then the last, as he calls it, the divine willing and blessing the birth of the divine human. That gets into something mystical. But he's saying if you look at all the signs, there is this birthing of a consciousness that wants to manifest more and more through all of us, through all the ones who are sacred activists.

And he talks about letting your heart be shattered—not just as bad news, but as the doorway to how much you feel and care and are connected with life. As he says, if you want to know what to do, how can I contribute in this world? He says: follow your heartbreak. Follow where your heart is broken, which might be gay rights, might be human rights, might be animal rights, might be the environment—there are so many to choose from. Follow your heartbreak because that's where the juice is. That's where the aliveness is, right there, if you let it lead you.

And out of that, there is this sense of joy in letting all your frustration and fear and anger be transmuted into love, into caring, and into compassion, into making a difference that awakens that same quality in others that you touch.

So I want to ask for a moment, as I stop my speaking, to reflect inside and see where your heart has been broken, how your heart has been broken—whether it's some personal challenge that you've gone through or your heart broken by picking up a newspaper and what really touches you or gets to you.

Let yourself first, for a moment, just breathe. Just breathe. You need to breathe. You need to give yourself all the space and support you can. You can't do this all in one breath or session, but just a little at a time. See, like in the Tibetan practice of tonglen, that it's possible to take in the suffering and have it held with something much deeper than that suffering—with that beautiful seed of enlightenment, your bodhicitta, your true nature that can hold your broken heart with compassion.

See what either you've learned from heartbreak in the past. You might reflect on that for a moment before we go on. Just heartbreaks in the past. What have you learned? How have you gotten stronger? How have they supported you in your development? How have you discovered places inside that you didn't know were possible, that were there?

To connect with some verified faith for just a few moments. And then, in your breaking heart, wherever it might be these days—maybe somebody that you care about going through a hard time, or going through grieving or loss or some challenge, something that touches you—what can you see? How can you possibly envision awakening to a new level of wise, loving response, to a new level of awakening that not only benefits you, but everybody who meets that awakened heart?

Don't be afraid to touch it. Touch it in whatever doses work for you. And if it gets too overwhelming, then you can always back off. But don't be afraid to touch it because right in there is the secret. Right in there is the possibility of transformation. Right in there is the hero's journey or heroine's journey that you're on, and that we're all sharing together.

And celebrate that you're on this journey. As scary as it can get sometimes, as scary as the world might seem sometimes, there's transformation—there's the dying and the being reborn on every level, from personal to global. And what an amazing opportunity and gift that we are given, that joyful responsibility that we are given as we go through this together.

Seeing how it's near the end of the evening, we'll just close with sharing merit. May our own journey be used for the benefit of all beings. May we awaken to the courage and the strength and the love and the wisdom that can hold all of the dark, frightening places. May confusion dawn as wisdom. And may our own practice be a gift to everyone in our lives and the world and the planet that so welcomes us in that way.

So thank you for your attention. That was what was coming out this evening. Have a good week and share your practice with the world.

CHAPTER 242

(On Climate Change) Earth's Crisis - On the Edge of the Roof

Rob Burbea · 26 min

> *In this profound guided meditation, we explore our intimate connection with the earth through embodied awareness and presence. The practice begins with establishing mindful posture and breath awareness, then systematically relaxes the body while cultivating receptive attention to sensations and aliveness within.*
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> *The meditation emphasizes sensing ourselves as 'earth in this particular vibrant, vital form,' inviting us to feel the earth's aliveness flowing through our bodies. This embodied approach to environmental awareness offers a contemplative foundation for understanding our interconnectedness with the natural world. Through practices of softening, letting go, and receptive listening, we develop the inner stillness and presence needed to truly feel our place within the larger web of life.*
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> *The session integrates traditional mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) with somatic awareness and earth-connection practices. Participants learn to 'arrive again' in present-moment awareness when the mind wanders, cultivating the alert inner stillness that reveals our essential nature. This approach to meditation offers both personal transformation and a deepened sense of environmental responsibility through direct experiential connection with the earth's vital energies.*

Take a moment to set yourself for the sitting. Find a way of sitting where you're upright so you feel quality of alertness, sitting tall. Sense the balance so that if you for a moment lean forward and then lean backwards, then lean to your left, lean to your right. Move around a bit and then come center and really feel that quality of sitting in a way that's balanced, centered.

Let your breathing deepen, expanding, extending the in-breath so it's fuller. And a slow out-breath. And again, inhaling deeply and fully. Slow out-breath. One more time, nice full in-breath, filling the lungs. And a slow out-breath. And letting the breath resume in its natural rhythm. Being mindful of the inflow, outflow, and relaxing with that.

Sensing increased quality of presence as you begin to slow down and pay attention to what's right here, to your senses. Letting the attention come into the heart area, so that we together can reflect, as we do most weeks, on what brings us here, taking some moments to feel the sincerity of your own intention.

What is your intention tonight? From the deepest, wisest, most sincere place in you, what most matters? You might sense this as a longing or a prayer, perhaps for presence, for open-heartedness, to realize the more full truth of who you are, to touch peace. Just sensing the flavor of caring as you bring your palms together, letting them touch lightly at the heart area.

And we'll chant the mantra Aum. Chant it three times. Please inhale deeply.

Aum.
Aum.
Aum.

Thank you.

Bringing the attention into the body first by simply softening around the eyes as if you could smile into the eyes. Let the brow be smooth, relaxing in the whole forehead area and just feeling the sensations of life that are there as you relax. Receptive, present.

Relaxing the jaw. Relaxing down to the root of the tongue. Letting the tongue spread, feeling it in the lower jaw. Soft. You might sense a slight smile at the mouth. A smile on the inside of the mouth. And feel the sensations that wake up as you relax through the mouth area.

Feeling the life inside the shoulders, sensing the possibility of softening, relaxing there. You might imagine a melting or dissolving, a letting go. And as you do, notice in an intimate way the play of sensations in the shoulders.

Feeling the length of the arms, letting the hands rest in a very easy and effortless way, softening the hands. And again, with the receptive attention, feeling the life, the play of sensations inside the hands, from the inside out. Notice that if you soften the hands even more, there's even more sensitivity to sensation.

Bringing the awareness to the region of the chest and the heart. You might imagine smiling into the heart, putting a smile spread through the heart and the chest area. This isn't to paper over what's there but rather to make space for it. Relaxed presence. Feeling from the inside out the sensations and aliveness in the heart area.

Scanning down the torso, relaxing the belly. You might again sense that curve and sense of a smile at the belly. Visualizing and feeling that. Letting this next breath be received in a softening belly. This breath. This breath. And again. Relaxing and sensing the aliveness and sensation in the belly.

Scanning deep into the torso, relaxing the whole pelvic region. And from the inside out, allowing yourself to feel the sensations and aliveness that's there, that spreads through genital region, the hips, the buttocks.

Scanning down, feeling the length of the legs. Right into the feet so that you feel the feet from the inside out. Softening, relaxing.

Feeling the play of sensation in the feet. Allow the awareness to sink deep into the earth, sensing the whole field of aliveness of this earth body, feeling it flowing through the feet, through our bodies, animating in a dynamic moment-to-moment way our forms.

Feel simultaneously this whole body as a field of sensation. Not stopping anything or opposing anything. Let this life live through you, including the dance of sound so that you're listening not just with your ears but your whole awareness. Let sounds wash through you.

Listen to and feel the whole moment. Sense the sounds, sensations, feelings, right here. And also be aware in the background of this presence, this alert inner stillness that's aware—that beingness which is the very essence of what we are.

At some point you'll realize that the mind has drifted and quite naturally has left that quality of beingness, contracting back into a narrative, a story, a comment, the future, the past. Without any judgment, see if you can simply notice that this has happened and pause. Then just arrive again. Come back to noticing the aliveness that's right here. This play of sensation. Letting sounds wash through.

For some, the mind will become more steady and quiet if you notice the sensations of the breath—the inflow and outflow, perhaps at the nose or the chest or the belly, or even feeling the whole body breathing, expanding, settling. We bring the attention back to what's right here in our senses. In that way we come back home to the presence, that awakeness and space and tenderness that's our deepest nature.

Notice that you can start fresh in any moment. If the mind has gotten lost in virtual reality, gently come back to your senses, right here, right now. You might ask yourself if it's possible to relax just a little bit more right now. Let go a little bit more.

As we explored earlier, let your awareness descend and immerse deep into the earth, feeling this earth body, this extension of our body, its full aliveness and creativity flowing through us—recognizing that you are earth in this particular vibrant, vital form.

Sensing the whole play of tingling and vibrating. Pressure, flow, light, dark. Sensing the play of sound washing through. And the vast awake silence that's aware.

CHAPTER 243

All In This Together

Rob Burbea · 57 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses the intersection of contemplative practice and our shared planetary crisis during Earth Care Week. He explores how the Buddha's teachings on interdependence reveal that there is no separation between 'inner' and 'outer' work—our individual meditation practice is intrinsically connected to our collective well-being. Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna teachings and insights from contemporary teachers like John Francis (Planet Walker), Burbea examines how genuine spiritual practice must embrace both the silence of the sage and the passion of the activist.*
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> *The talk explores key Buddhist concepts including citta (heart-mind), śūnyatā vihāra (dwelling in emptiness), and the brahmavihāras (divine abodes), showing how deepening meditation naturally leads to greater capacity for responding to suffering. Burbea discusses how awakening manifests differently across historical conditions, suggesting that our contemporary awakening must address climate crisis and social justice. He concludes with Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra verses on dedicating practice for all beings, emphasizing that individual liberation and collective healing are inseparable aspects of the dharma path.*

So I want to start from a different angle tonight, our last night together—and of course most of you will be going home tomorrow. I want to approach what we're doing here from what you might initially see as a bigger perspective, prompted by today being October 7th. In our tradition, though it's not huge, I'll say a little about this particular lineage.

This week, from October 1st to the 7th, is being celebrated as Earth Care Week in our lineage of lay insight meditation tradition. Today is the last day of it, so I wanted to make reference to this. In our sister centers in different parts of the world—we're not a huge lineage, but it's mostly Western and quite big in America—there are centers and teachers and students that have come out from California from the teacher Jack Kornfield, who many of you have probably heard of, and on the East Coast from Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg. There's a big network over there.

We're part of the same lineage here, and there are sister centers in California, Switzerland, France, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand—so it's mostly Western, as you can see. Although our teachers all came originally from the East, from the Buddhist countries of Thailand, Burma, and others.

This week has been nominated—and this is the first year it's being celebrated—as a response to the very real need that we have as a human species at the moment with our Earth, or our Earth has with us, whichever way we like to look at it. What would it mean to bring the Dharma to the table more and more fully in this discussion which we're all going to need to have together as the years move on? Already many are suffering from the effects of this, particularly in the global south, particularly people with less privilege than most of us.

In response to this reality, what does it mean to bring the teachings that on one level can look so inner—and they are, the inner work is absolutely crucial—to this kind of big question where some of us will go, "Oh my God, I hope she's not going to talk about climate change. It's way too big."

Where we can suddenly feel overwhelmed by things of such proportion, where the interconnection is so clear. So clear. You probably don't need me to spell it out, but there is no little separate ground on this earth where I can do my own thing and it not affect the whole. There never was. But it's more obvious now. Emissions that happen here affect someone there. And we're reaping the collective emissions from fifty years ago—those are the ones we're seeing the effects of now.

So I just wanted to name that, and I want to speak about what it has to do with this very fine, quiet work that we're doing here. What's the truth here for us, all of us?

I want you to check in right now and see what's the response in just hearing that much. Where does your mind go with issues of great proportion? Does it go to, "Oh my God, I was just managing my knee pain. Please leave me alone"? Or, "I've got enough in my heart already. I can't take that all on. Please give me a break"? Or, "I tried to take all that on, but it nearly killed me. And now I'm recovering and learning how to manage what's here"? Or maybe, "Oh goody, the Dharma and the world. Good." Or sometimes we feel our guilt and want to quickly say, "Okay, just give me the collection box. I'll put something in."

Whatever is our particular way of handling this intimate truth that we're all in this together. And I don't just mean about the planet right now. We always were all in it together. We could never have been otherwise. It's just that we hadn't yet woken up. And this is asking us to wake up to the fact that we're all in this together. All of us.

Is that okay by you? Is it okay by you that we're all in this together? All of us, even the ones you don't like. Or the ones you think are the ones causing the problems. The ones—if we could just get rid of those ones—which ones would you get rid of?

I want to really bring it into what the beauty of the Dharma means in our practice sitting here tonight, because otherwise we can go to the extreme of getting revved up and charged up in response to suffering, feeling impulsively compelled to act. And there's one thing the Buddha is clear about: that freedom is freedom from compulsion, freedom from being motivated by our guilt, freedom from being motivated by the impulsive restlessness that's actually spinning a lot of our wheels.

How can we still love that call to complete peace? The utter, utter, empty, transparent vastness, the undisturbed truth of what we are—and we love that and be in the world. And actually there isn't another way to be in the world or the world will spin us.

It's bringing together really the silence that we love—and you might not always love the silence, but what it calls you to in the depth, the unperturbable, the Buddha calls it. The unshakable release.

Many Dharma practitioners sometimes find this tricky edge. I'm bringing it down from this very big picture right now, but many of us have seen a kind of duality arise between doing the inner work and attending to our life, or the outer work, so to speak. And if there was another thing the Buddha was really clear about, it's that the perception of inner and the perception of outer are an illusion. He didn't say the world is an illusion—he's not doing that kind of nihilistic thing—but the separation of inner and outer, those are sort of superficial distinctions that help me recognize that I'm sitting here and you're sitting over there, help us function in conventional reality. But if we explore it deeply for ourself, that which appears to separate us, when we see it, we see that it's a construction of the mind.

And this is what we're waking up to—because we wake up to this for our own joy and love of seeing the truth more clearly, and because this serves the whole.

I want to share something I found useful. Let me talk about two teachers. There's a wonderful man I've discovered from North America, an African-American man called John Francis. You can check him out on the internet—he's called Planet Walker. Back in the seventies, he was in San Francisco and witnessed one of the oil spills in the water there and the devastation that caused to the wildlife. At that point, he was very disturbed by this and sensitive and open to that. He made a vow of silence and decided never to use any oil-based transport for a little while to see how it went. Kind of a pretty strong response.

And it turned out—he's a lovely man if you look at him, listen to his teachings—he kept checking it out year by year, and in the end he spent seventeen years in silence. He walked all across North America on foot. He got three degrees in that time. He managed to do three university degrees in silence. This was his response. This was a real response for this man.

And what he says about the environment is beautiful. When you see him, there is a radiance about him, and he keeps it really simple. He says, "We are the environment. How we treat each other—this is the environment." This is what he's boiled it down to from what can seem like overwhelming proportions of "Oh my god, what are we going to do?" to his years of contemplation and silence. He puts it quite funnily—he could never shut up before, so he was doing it as a gift to other people to just be quiet for a while. But he's brought it down to something right here in this.

This is the environment. Sometimes we think it's all the green stuff, or it's the trees, or it's all of that. But what he's saying is it's right here in this. That's where, as humans, we create and perpetuate the causes and conditions that either lead towards more happiness and freedom, or lead toward more suffering.

Right here. He boils it right down to this, because moment to moment we're always in relationship with something. We're in relationship with ourself, and as the silence settles and deepens, we see that we're always in relationship with everything else. Every action we do has an effect on the whole.

One of my teacher's teachers said that his Asian master would come in to give the Dharma talk and he would make a gesture like this sometimes. In fact, you're doing kind of stuff like that all day. When we get it, when we perceive it from the silence, what was he communicating there? This action affects the whole. There is no action that happens in isolation. It never could, it never did, and it never will. Check it out. We have to know that from the depths.

Because the ordinary perception just tells us, "Yeah, you're over there and I'm over here. It looks separate." Dharma teachings are about going deeper than appearances. Hurrah! Who's a little bit tired of living in appearances?

Going deeper to the cooling and the dispassion. The Buddha talks about waking up to the dispassion, the cooling out—the dispassion that can hold passions. So that our passion isn't running us. It's held in a context where the action that is born of love and energy and vitality is coming from the place that is not attached to the result.

So this is the bit from my teacher that I was going to read, my other teacher. He says, when the Buddha speaks about the world, uses the phrase "the world," what he means is the inner domains of mind and beliefs and all that happens—so-called inner—and the immaterial outer world, culture, social structures. All of it, all of it co-arising together. This is the world, he says. And the Buddha refers to and addresses this world with his practice and map of awakening. He's not just addressing the bit that arises in here. This is really important.

The Buddha taught the Dharma Vinaya. The Dharma addresses the practices of the teachings, we could say, and the Vinaya is about the behavior and our conduct in the world. It's for the monks and nuns—they have a very particular code of conduct that is designed to have them live, even if they haven't fully realized it yet, in complete harmony with the environment, the totality. Living in a way that is harmless, that is supportive, that is relational, that is living the interdependence even if we haven't fully gotten it yet at all levels.

So he goes on to say: We humans are an intrinsic aspect of this world. We are an aspect of this world that can reflect on itself and that can thereby develop a holistic wisdom that embraces—so just see this from what we've been doing here—that embraces and transcends any point or detail within the whole.

So right now you don't have to think of the big world. We can, if you like. You can look at this world that arises on your cushion. It's our microcosm, right? That embraces and transcends any detail that arises within the whole. And you see that that's what we've been practicing. The details arise. The thoughts, the feelings, the sensations, the emotions. Mind states. They're the details, always the details, that embrace the details. We don't go, "Oh, there's no details, it's all empty, forget about it." Embraces the details and transcends the details.

So a wisdom that embraces and transcends any point or detail within the whole. Such wisdom accepts and cares for all but is not attached to or confined to any position within the cosmos. How about that? Not attached to or confined by any position in the cosmos. You're not saying it has to be like this now. You know when action comes from that, it leads to more stress. Not attached to any position. Whether that be self, other, a mind state, a tree, a society, or infinite consciousness.

How about that? You're not confined to infinite consciousness. Doesn't sound bad, does it, to be confined to infinite consciousness? Not confined by any of it. This, he says, is what the Buddha referred to as awakening. This is awakening—embracing and transcending all the details, not being confined to any one piece of it and in the service of it all. This is awakening.

So how are we doing that here? We do our work at Gaia House. You've been doing your work to clarify what's arising in your location, right? The heart-mind keeps bringing things for us to see and at some point we go, "Oh yeah, okay." We try and ignore them, we try and fix them, we try and squeeze them, we try and do something other than experience them. Finally we go, "Oh okay, okay, it's this, it's this pain, it's this contraction, it's this expansion, it's this thought, it's this jealousy, it's this envy, it's this loneliness."

This arises in our heart-mind. There is our responsibility for what arises here.

Not what we should have done way back, but that's just coming into the present for us to hold the detail and transcend the detail. To both see it clearly and feel it at the same time.

So let's bring it right back to the brass tacks. That's the expression, isn't it? Breathing in and breathing out. Breathing in. Anybody holding their breath? Because now we've got to fix the world. We don't. That's actually one of the beauties.

And somebody saw it today in the group actually, seeing for herself where the mind was spinning stories about her work in one of the caring professions and seeing that she was spinning scenarios. And when she looked at it, she saw it was always going to try to fix the suffering, which sounds really reasonable, doesn't it? It sounds so reasonable. Like, thank you, someone cares, right? But she actually realized that wasn't where she was and didn't need to be happening. But there was, I think she said something a bit compulsive about it.

When she saw that she wanted to fix, that released, that detail was seen and transcended, that then let her see—I'm trying to remember what happened next, there was a number of insights along the way—that then let her see that there was something in the fixing that just wanted everything to be alright. Again, understandable, right? I just want everything to be alright.

What she saw though, even though that's on some level wholesome, what she saw was that wanting everything to be alright had a little bit of not quite allowing the suffering to be there first. It's a little like I said earlier, sometimes the reaction to suffering is, oh, let me do something about it. Because it's hard to bear, it's hard to bear, it's hard to witness the way we are together sometimes and the results of that. It's hard to bear without tightening and closing.

And as she saw that, a hole in her belly opened. Again, a transcending of that detail of the compulsive need to fix. She widened in the belly. She saw her people that she cares about come to mind. And there's first allowing. It's like this. Resting with the allowing. And from there, there can be action.

Compassion sometimes wants to act, very often wants to act. But the compassion that we all have for caring enough to even sit with our own mind, that compassion can widen and deepen. Like the metta we explored today, it is a boundless quality. It can go wider and include more detail of suffering without becoming it. Include the detail and in transcending it, resonating with the detail of our own karmic inheritance, our own and our own. It's all our own.

So when we sit on our cushion and have the courage to breathe in and out and let go of, for a moment, some of the compulsions of mind or action. One of the things we notice is that some of it can show up first, like we're looking outside for something to tell us, like someone to smile at us or somebody to... Basically, we want something to resonate with as human beings. We are resonant creatures. We resonate, we feel.

This citta, the citta is the heart-mind, it's the whole resonant... receptive, intelligent, touchable, available, feelableness that we are. This is called the citta. It's not just this mind, it's the whole heart, mind, sensitivity, availability. Responsivity can also respond. That resonates and we like it to resonate because otherwise we don't feel alive. We want something to chime with. Right? Right?

We like things that we chime with. We have friends that we like the resonance with. We hang out with people that we like. What happens here when we're with them?

On retreat we have a little bit of a fast from these kinds of external resonances, and we miss that sometimes. It's like longing for our cat or someone to smile at us, or at least a note on the board sometimes. Have you ever done that yet in these three days? Like hanging around at the notice board hoping someone's written you a note. We want something to resonate with, want to feel seen, want something to chime with—I'm here.

We mostly don't know that's what we're seeking. But that's what we are—resonant creatures. We want to feel. We want to feel alive.

I was hanging around that washing up area once—there are nicer places in the world. But I was hanging around that washing up area and there were buckets, where you put the dirty tea towels, the used tea towels. I was hanging around there until I clocked it, like, oh, what's going on? What am I doing hanging around the washing up area? And there was a bucket there that had the words "used tea towels" on it in red pen that I had written about three years before.

Sometimes it can feel so lonely. I was happy with a bucket. The heart was lonely. It did want something to say, "Yeah, you're all right, Catherine. It's okay." It's that sort of tragicomic human thing, isn't it?

But the point of that is—we could say that's really sad—but the point of that is, if we go through those thresholds where there isn't something that's resonating, it invites the citta to start to resonate with itself. Rather than needing my cat to snuggle up to in order to feel softness, the citta doesn't have that here. The citta, the heart-mind, has to start resonating with itself.

As it starts resonating with itself, it resonates with the pockets of places we haven't been able to resonate with before—like the loneliness, like the barren parts of the heart-mind that haven't been breathed into life, haven't had that detail embraced yet and transcended yet with compassion and wisdom. The stale parts of the citta—they're just kind of stagnant sometimes, pockets of our soul, so to speak.

As well as what starts to resonate are all the noble qualities. Also what is our aspiration, our joy, our kindness, our consideration, our gratitude, our appreciation—they start to resonate more as well.

That's the point of all this fasting from having a good time—that the citta starts to resonate with itself and we do the work. This is our world work while we're here on this cushion. Because as we let those old stagnant or crusty pockets start to be allowed into the light of awareness, they start to break up, dissolve, be digested, move on, liberate—and it leaves a little bit more space.

For what? The Buddha—it said that a Buddha, and Buddha means awake, it doesn't just mean a man from North India 2,600 years ago, it means awake, awakening that in us which is awake. That sacred aspect that can see what's happening, touch the detail intimately and automatically is wider than it. It's said that a Buddha lives in—I like this phrase—sunyata vihara. Vihara means a dwelling place where you hang out. Sunyata means empty.

Buddha dwells in sunyata vihara—empty. He hangs out in emptiness. Empty here does not mean deficient or lacking or looking around for something to do. It means he's emptied out the greed, the hate, the confusion. I've gotten emptied out, which leaves an awful lot of room. An awful lot of room to be alive, to be a human being. Because the citta, the heart-mind is responsive.

And he made a big response—the one from 2,600 years ago. It's a big response, a big teaching that he offered. It's called the turning of the wheel—a map, a human map for us to look at and discover for ourselves the fruits of.

A Buddha lives in shunyata vihara. So we do our work, our own work of emptying out. It clarifies the citta, it gets a little bit more clarified. Do any of you have that sense that—it's not like it's being evaluated, we see it for ourselves. We just start to see things more clearly. That's a function of being a bit more clarified. The grass looks greener. We see the angry thought as an angry thought. We see the light in someone else's eyes. We see the dodgy bits in our own heart. We see the light in our own heart. We see the still, dark peace of our own heart.

And we do our work, right? The work is the part where there we are in a moment of calm, a moment of peace, of ease, of resonating, of openness, hanging out, sensing—and before we know it something's arisen into consciousness and we've spun it and we're holding on tightly to a thought. Somebody—I don't know what—somebody did something. Somebody always does something. Somebody did something and we're reacting in some way, or they didn't do something and we're reacting in some way. Maybe, let's say, we find ourselves angry and we're spinning the story around that.

Here's the work. It's not that that shouldn't happen. There may be old angry pockets to digest. Don't go looking for them, but they pop up. There it is. We're holding on without that sacred knowing aspect. We're spinning this anger and then we spin another plate, another story of "I shouldn't be angry." Then we've got two plates spinning. And then we do another one called meditation and we spin that and we tighten and we lock down and then we're in a real pickle.

In the middle of the spinning, whatever it is you're spinning, can you see it? That something has just gotten picked up out of the infinite sea of possibilities of what consciousness can come up with—and it can come up with anything. Look what it does. In the infinite sea of that, we've picked something up and we've become it. The sense of separate self is born right there and then.

Our work is to stand in that sacred knowing in the moment: "Ah, this is anger." That which sees the anger is not bound. That which perceives the heat of the anger is not burning in misery. It's seen. This is sacred. This is sacred right there—that can see the detail and is already wider than it.

In the middle of the spin we wake up. We fall awake right there. Don't create a counter spin that says "I shouldn't be having that," or create the counter spin of holding on to my breath and widening, softening, transcending, breathing with the heat, letting our self sense it. This is sacred. This is awake. This is not perpetuating more dukkha in the world and it's clarifying and clearing up what arises on this seat.

Sometimes we wake up in the middle of a psychodrama. It's okay. It's the waking up that is our refuge. That seeing, hearing, that which hears the cry of the world.

You know, one thing that's said about this image here, Kuan Yin—she's embodying a quality that is a human quality of compassion. And it's said that—I think this is very interesting—two things are said: that she came to awakening by inquiring, "Who hears? What is that that hears?" Can you just sense it right now?

What sees the hearing? What is it that's hearing this voice making sounds right now, creating impressions? Is it you? What hears the silence in this very moment?

Through this inquiry into the nature of hearing, Kuan Yin came to her awakening. And it's also said that she hears the cries of the world and pours her healing balsam upon them. This capacity to hear the world's cries develops as our own awareness expands. We begin to hear the cries that arise internally—our old material, the places within us that haven't yet been truly heard. But it extends far beyond this personal realm.

The cries of the world arise right here, on this very seat where we sit. All beings, if we remain present long enough, keep appearing in this location. The sad one, the righteous one, the warring one, the benevolent one. The loving one, the hateful one, the one that wants to annihilate, the one that would give everything in love. They all arise here—both the personal detail and something immeasurably vaster than any detail.

How would it be to rest in that knowing, in that kind of expansive awareness?

I notice either the lights grow dimmer each year, or I'm simply getting older. It's definitely the latter. The arrogance of youth—I still carry it, though I'm probably humbly youthful compared to what I'll understand in ten, twenty, thirty, forty years' time. Each year when I write up the group lists, I think, "I need to write them bigger. Not everyone will be able to see those small letters." These small privileges we have in good health that we don't even recognize as privileges.

This passage from Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* speaks to this expanded hearing: "Siddhartha listened. He was now listening intently, completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything. He felt that he had now completely learned the art of listening. He had often heard all this before, all these numerous voices in the river. But today they sounded different. He could no longer distinguish the different voices—the merry voice from the weeping one, the childish from the manly one. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of the indignant, and the groan of the dying. They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a

thousand ways. All the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, the sorrows, the pleasures, all the good and the evil—all of them together was the world, all of them together was the stream of events and the music of life.

"When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices, when he did not listen to the sorrow or the laughter, when he did not bind himself to any one particular voice and absorb himself into it, but heard them all, the whole, the unity, then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: perfection."

And our mind cries out, "But it's not perfect! It's terrible!"

Yes? And what sees that? What really serves that protest? What is it that truly serves?

In some of the literature emerging around the interface of Eastern spiritual practice and social change—and I'm sure many of you know far more than I do or have worked in these fields—there's a beautiful way this integration is being spoken about. They call it the coming together of the silence of the sage and the passion of the activist. Neither alone is sufficient for our times.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master, is known for saying that the next Buddha will be—are you ready for this? Do you want it to be you? Oh God, I hope it's not me—the next Buddha will be the Sangha.

Sangha is a word we haven't used much here. It means all like-minded beings, and you don't need to be Buddhist to be like-minded—all beings who sincerely walk a path of ethics, cultivation of mind, and awakening.

The next Buddha will be the Sangha.

Let's sit with that for a moment. It takes the pressure off, doesn't it? But it also applies the pressure, because it requires all of us. And here, "us" is not meant in any exclusive sense.

It's us waking up together as a planet.

The next Buddha will be the Sangha.

The definition of awakening that I gave from my other teacher in the beginning: to develop holistic wisdom that embraces and transcends any point or detail. Such wisdom accepts and cares for all but is not attached to or confined to any position within the cosmos, whether that be self, other, mind state, tree, society or infinite consciousness.

Maybe that's something we do together. Maybe we wake up together this time around.

Awakening is awakening. That sacred knowing awakeness is what it is. It's timeless. But the way awakening manifests in the world changes according to conditions. The Buddha woke up in a different world—pre-industrial, agrarian, pre-carbon. We're waking up in this world, and one of the things about awakening is that while it is timeless and beyond time and space, the face that it takes in the world keeps changing. It's always a creative response.

Somebody once asked a Zen Master, "What was the Buddha doing during her lifetime?" I like the poetic opening there. And the Zen Master replied, "An appropriate response." They're good, aren't they? They're just to the point. Don't have to sit here for 45 minutes. An appropriate response.

Awakening is freed up. It's *shunyata vihara*—emptied out, done its work, and freed up to respond. Not necessarily the response that I think I have to make, but the response that comes when we're knowing our non-separateness. We know that more and more, the separating boundaries soften. They show up here because we need to work with them. We'll feel our separateness more acutely at times because the light's shining on it. We go, "Whoa, look at that. I feel really isolated, really separate, really different." That's because the light's bright and we're seeing it.

We're falling awake together right here and now because there isn't another moment. We don't have to tighten down around suffering. That's really one of the primary lessons we're learning here. Our capacity grows. We don't have to fling ourselves or force ourselves beyond our capacity. Our work in any one time might be something really detailed and look mundane on some level. Other times it might look really big. But the extent to which we're able to be authentic is really the point.

Sometimes our work is just to keep our feet on the ground. Thank you for doing that. Sometimes our work is to stay silent for 17 years. Thank you, John Francis, for doing that. Sometimes our work is to be really out there in the precinct. Thank you for doing that. Sometimes our work is to retreat.

Staying as close as we can to finding the appropriate response that's authentic, that's where we are—not who we think we should be, because that just kills the joy. And when the joy is killed, the life goes out of our best intentions. But also not to underestimate or overlook ourselves as part of all of this together.

One of the things that I found very humbling about our community picking up this Earth Care Week was getting emails from teacher colleagues in the USA about events in Washington DC and discussions and social action things. We're talking to each other about this with the love of the dharma as its basis, and that's linking us up in a whole new way. It's like lights—you know, like you see with the internet when they do a map of it—lights connecting dots all the way around. Yes, Brad clearly and beautifully pointed to the limitations and where we get hooked and sucked and lost in all of that, but one of the beauties of it is that it actually depends on the consciousness that engages that technology as to where we go with it.

There's something about that linking up—lighting up with my colleagues that I don't see because I'm over here, but have been dharma friends from donkey's years ago wherever they are, San Francisco. Coming together with this love of the silence.

And our inevitable intimacy with each other. And I'm not just meaning these practitioners here now, I'm meaning all of us.

As we wake up, we feel more... Well, let me put it from one of the Zen teachers—they do it better. He said, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to fully acknowledge the self. To fully acknowledge the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to become intimate with all things—is to know our intimacy with all things."

And if the word intimacy doesn't work for you, if you cringe with that word—it's not some kind of smothering thing. It's free. And it's just how it is. The air we breathe—it's not ours, it belongs to all of us.

The practice we do, even as we see as we go along the path—and maybe you know this very well for yourself—isn't just for us. It can't be. There isn't such an isolated thing. And yet you're fully included, more magnificently than our small mind could know.

I think I'll finish with this, or this... I'm going to be greedy and do both. What do you do when you want to do everything? Maybe I'll do this one now and one tomorrow. How about that?

This is a very famous verse from the tradition, from Shantideva—the verses of the Bodhisattva, the one who dedicates their practice of awakening for the benefit of all, of the whole. And try not to take it all logically or argue with the sort of poetry of it. Let it resonate with the heart-mind in the place that may know this on some level, or very deeply.

"May I be the medicine for the sick and the weary. May I be their physician and their nurse until disease appears no more. May I strike down the anguish of thirst and hunger with rains of food and drink. May I be food and drink to those in famine and disaster. May I be an inexhaustible treasure for those in need. May I give them all they desire, now and forevermore, everywhere.

"May I be a protector for the unprotected, a guide for wanderers, a boat, a bridge, a causeway for those who desire the other shore, a lamp for those who need a lamp, a bed for those who need a bed. And may I be a wishing jewel, an inexhaustible vase, a magic spell, a great medicine, a wish-fulfilling tree, a cow of plenty for all beings.

"As the elements of earth and water and fire and air are for the use of all beings who dwell in all of space, in many ways may I be the means of sustenance for the realm of beings in all of space until they have passed into complete freedom.

"And by my practice may the blind see and the deaf hear. May the fearful cease to tremble and the afflicted be consoled and the weary be made content. May the sick be made whole again and those in bondage freed. May the weak be strong and loving.

"And as long as the earth and the sky shall last, may I remain here to heal the sorrows of the world. As long as the earth and the sky shall last, may I remain here to be with all beings as we wake up together."

CHAPTER 244

Learning from Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 42 min

> *In this compelling dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses climate change not merely as an environmental issue, but as a fundamental teaching about impermanence, interconnection, and the need for collective awakening. Drawing on insights from eco-philosophers Thomas Berry and Arne Ness, as well as Buddhist teacher Joanna Macy, Burbea explores how ecological crisis mirrors the Buddha's teaching on dukkha and serves as a call to transcend the individualistic worldview of the "Age of Reason."*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that our discomfort with climate reality contains vital information, much like the feedback loops in natural systems. He suggests that truly digesting this information requires the same mindful attention we bring to meditation practice—staying present with difficult feelings rather than turning away. The teacher draws parallels between personal awakening and collective transformation, noting how species-level challenges have historically catalyzed evolutionary leaps.*
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> *The talk weaves together Buddhist concepts of interconnectedness with contemporary ecological wisdom, suggesting that climate change offers an opportunity to develop what Ness calls "ecological self"—an identity that encompasses all life on Earth. Burbea concludes by framing our current crisis as an invitation to deeper spiritual maturity, requiring both individual practice and collective response to this "most burning issue" of our time.*

I was recently at a gathering of teachers from America and Europe at Spirit Rock. The main theme of this gathering was how we can incorporate climate change into the teaching. Most of all, how can we speak about it without making people feel so uncomfortable that they don't want to come back?

This is a kind of conundrum, because if we really want to speak honestly about the situation, then if you don't feel uncomfortable when you think about it, you either have worked through a lot of this material already or you are completely cut off. It's a very complex issue and very complex to communicate. I have read extensively about it and try to translate it into simple language, attempting to communicate what I feel is going on. I feel very concerned.

When I think about teaching, there's actually nothing else I'd like to speak about in terms of Dhamma, of course. But this is for me the most burning issue. Everything else pales in front of the theme of climate change, I feel.

Polls conducted last year indicate that about seventy percent of people here in America consider that climate change is a real issue and that we have a big problem. But at the same time, those people, most of them, also think that we don't stand a chance, really, and that we don't know what to do—which is actually completely wrong. Because we know very well what we need to do. We do have the know-how and we do have the skills to do it.

But there's this emotional block that all of us—I can observe it even in myself, of course—experience when we hear of something big happening, something that is forever changing our situation. Like a shock, so to say, when a loved one dies, or when you suddenly receive a diagnosis that you have cancer, or maybe you have a big accident. This is so big that usually it takes us some time to really take it in. A shock is occurring—trauma.

Then we tend, normally we tend to shut down and go into disbelief for some time. There are different phases of how an average human being works through traumatic news. It starts with disbelief and then anger, and then if we don't stop there, if we really digest it, if we let it sink into our being, then we emerge from it usually strengthened. Because these issues of old age, sickness and death, impermanence—this is just part and parcel of being a human being. And because it is part and parcel of being a human being, we do have the innate strength and also intelligence to deal with those things if we open ourselves to it rather than turning away from it.

Around climate change there are so many very confusing messages given out. Scientists tell us the situation is really urgent, affecting every detail of our lives—from water and air and food, there's nothing which is exempt. There are these big corporations which are still interested to not change their ways of producing and selling goods, and they try to dilute this information. So there's a lot of confusing information, and people find it difficult to know what to believe. Even people who come here usually, I think, are better informed and have more capacity to open up to very inconvenient truth.

But actually, being a human being living in the world, discomfort always holds a message for us. For example, if we are going too close to fire, it becomes very hot. We feel this is dangerous, and this is good information. If we don't have this information, if we don't take this discomfort to heart and see what it is telling us, we will not be able to make it for a long time. So nature is built like this—discomfort has information for us.

We can develop what's called in system theory a feedback loop, a negative feedback loop. We get a sign of discomfort and then we adjust our way of going about life. When the next sign comes, we adjust again and again, and through that we can stay on course. At the moment we are getting huge, huge signs that the worldviews we are living by are not any more adequate to the conditions.

But those signs and those situations have been with us human beings since we have lived in the caves. There were always times when the old way of living wasn't any more adequate and there was a lot of dissonance. And then we had to make a shift. So it's not like this is happening for the first time. It has happened many, many times, and we have come a long way.

Human beings like us, similar to us, have lived on this planet for about 250,000 years. That's how we have evolved from using very simple stone tools and living in caves to living like we live now. We have always taken these negative feedback loops as a ladder, really, to climb up, so to say, in terms of developing skills which are very complex.

So evolution has this inbuilt intelligence and we are part of it. There is something much bigger happening than just what a human brain can understand. There's something much bigger happening than we can objectify or really conceptualize. We have to also try to work with this intuition. It's not that we have to throw away all of our intelligence or our reasoning.

reasoning overboard, but we need to balance it with our intuition, with what the heart knows. I found a very beautiful insight from Thomas Berry, an American priest who was also one of the first eco-philosophers in America. He says, "The universe itself is the primary sacred scripture."

The evolution of the universe from the Big Bang until today tells the story. We don't necessarily need religious scriptures—we can simply witness this amazing process, which is like one great example of impermanence and one magnificent example of something far greater than ourselves, of which we are part.

But the dominant worldview in our consumerist society, so heavily influenced by technology and rational thinking, is actually from the 17th and 18th centuries. It is no longer adequate for the conditions we face now. When this worldview entered the mainstream, there was only about a fifth of the current global population. There was still a stable climate and abundant resources—at that time, one could live this way.

This was called the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment, which began in Europe with René Descartes and in England with Isaac Newton. They were emerging from the Middle Ages, when large portions of society were oppressed by aristocracy and the church. People were fed up after living under such conditions for hundreds of years, and they insisted they could think for themselves. This kind of thinking had its place then—it was necessary to break free from an earlier worldview that had lost its validity.

We have been living with this Age of Reason thinking for three or four hundred years now. But conditions have changed dramatically. There are many more people on this planet, and we can no longer live as if everyone can simply think for themselves. We must return to a way of thinking where we consider ourselves as "we" rather than just "me," because there are too many people and too few resources. This old way of operating is outmoded.

Yet our media, politicians, and educational systems still function according to these outdated principles. We too have been taught this way—that we are on top of this planet and can manipulate everything. If we just study hard and become skillful and intelligent, we can make lots of money, be truly safe, and remain in control. This is how I was taught.

Now we find ourselves fully immersed in a situation where this simply isn't the case. Despite all the intelligence we thought we possessed, there were so many things we didn't consider because we couldn't see them—countless details of the complex web of life that makes up this planet and of which we are part. For example, just one small thing stops functioning, one kind of insect dies out, and then certain natural processes cease, crops fail. It's such an amazing system because it's all interconnected. With our limited brains, still functioning perhaps as they did in the 17th and 18th centuries, we cannot comprehend it all.

This is why I find Thomas Berry's quote so beautiful: the universe itself is the primary sacred scripture because it contains inherent guidance and meaning. It breaks all our concepts of how things work because we cannot understand it with the thinking mind alone—it's far too vast. But we can trust it if we have heart, if we can respect it and open ourselves to it, even when we don't understand it intellectually. There is something much more powerful than what the thinking mind can grasp, and the time has come when we all must be willing to remain uncomfortable long enough for this process to unfold.

We receive the news, we listen to talks like this, we read excellent books, and the information enters our brains, our intellect. But then we must truly be with it, sit with it, and digest it. This involves a certain amount of discomfort—feeling guilty, feeling despair, not knowing what to do. But if we don't allow that process to happen, we will never know what to do. The capacity to know what to do, the strength to act, and the will to act—these arise from taking in the news and digesting it.

This has happened many times in your life, I'm sure. Perhaps not about climate change, but other uncomfortable truths. There have been several instances in my life when I first heard difficult news and thought, "This is the end of the life I wanted to live. I'm no longer interested because this is too painful. I don't want to deal with this." But when I had no choice other than accepting it—because we can struggle against reality, but it doesn't change—accepting it and opening to it, sometimes after years, I realized that it was actually a stepping stone to greater maturity, wisdom, and compassion. These experiences shattered my previous understanding of what had to be in place for me to be happy.

I believe this so-called climate crisis, which is here right now and will remain for many generations to deal with and clean up, is simultaneously a great learning opportunity. This is how this miraculous cosmos seems to work—again and again, it comes to what we might call a bottleneck, but it doesn't stop there. Species or systems that cannot adapt to the shift simply transform into something else.

You've probably heard that we are currently in the midst of what's called the sixth mass extinction since the Big Bang.

And you know, the last one was when a meteor struck planet Earth before the dinosaurs emerged. That massive collision caused tremendous loss of life, filling the sky with so much ash that sunlight couldn't penetrate. The planet cooled dramatically for millions of years, food became scarce, and countless species perished. Yet after that devastation came another explosion of life. This pattern has repeated six times throughout Earth's history.

We find ourselves in the midst of the sixth mass extinction now, evidenced by the accelerated rate of species loss since the Industrial Revolution. The pace far exceeds natural background extinction rates, and there's overwhelming scientific consensus—about 97% of climate scientists agree—that human activity drives this crisis.

For the longest time, we simply didn't know. But over the past thirty years, the message has gradually spread: our actions are directly connected to these changes. If we continue on this trajectory, we risk eliminating ourselves as well. Yet we genuinely do have a choice.

The crucial point is viewing this entire situation within a much broader context. What learning does the climate crisis actually support? What is it calling us toward?

The learning involves stepping beyond the edge of reason—that worldview which served humanity well in transitioning from medieval times into the Enlightenment, but which has now reached its limitations. The Enlightenment paradigm treats the world as a machine and human beings as little machines running around, assuming that once we understand all the mechanical laws, we'll achieve complete control.

Obviously, this approach isn't working. If we truly were in control, we wouldn't have generated such massive pollution. If we possessed real mastery, we would have created something far more beautiful. The truth is we're not in control because we can only recognize certain depths of the process. We simply cannot fathom the mystery of this universe.

We're awakening to the recognition that we are actually part of it. We're not positioned above it, observing and manipulating from some external vantage point. That doesn't work—we're far too small-minded for such a role. More fundamentally, that's not our place because we belong within the web of existence.

The climate crisis serves as the very impetus that can provide the energy to catapult ourselves into the next worldview. We can cooperate with this movement, flow along with it, or simply pretend it's not happening and turn away, going down in flames.

I've brought some quotes that I find deeply inspiring. One comes from Thich Nhat Hanh, who has written about these issues for decades: "When we recognize the virtues, the talent, the beauty of Mother Earth, something is born in us. Some kind of connection. Love is born. We want to be connected. That is the meaning of love—to be at one. You would do anything for the benefit of the earth, and the earth will do anything for your well-being."

Another voice is Arne Naess, the Norwegian eco-philosopher, speaking as a scientist: "When we perceive our deeper identity as an ecological self that includes not just us, but also all life on Earth, then acting for the sake of our world doesn't seem like a sacrifice. It seems a natural thing to do."

This points toward opening ourselves to a deeper identity by moving through the discomfort, sitting with the dissonance that arises when we encounter this information. Often guilt, shock, panic, and many other feelings surface. If we can truly sit with these responses...

There's a wonderful woman named Joanna Macy who teaches extensively about this process. She's also taught at Spirit Rock.

She lives in Berkeley. She's in her eighties, and she's been working with this issue for forty years or so. She's a Buddhist, and she brings in a lot of Buddhist technology—the technology of meditation and of opening to one's feelings, to one's emotions, and through digesting them, coming to know what to do as an individual, because we all have a different role to play.

She speaks about opening to the pain for our world, and opening to all of the powerful emotions that can be triggered through this information. Not being ashamed for feeling really, really concerned, and maybe for a few days feeling really panicky about it, or feeling totally disturbed about it, or totally sad about it. This is all part of the process, because it is very, very urgent for people to wake up.

Because there's so much distraction in this culture—all around the planet there's so much consumerism, so many opportunities to distract ourselves, and the media constantly try to distract us—it is actually not easy to stay with the information long enough so that it translates into a new way of approaching one's life. It really takes time, and it takes a lot of samatha, I think, to be able to stay with it.

Whenever you get distracted into whatever—and it doesn't all have to be negative distractions—nevertheless, this is the most important thing we have to pay attention to, more important than anything else. Because if this course we are on, if we don't come off this course, then we don't need to do anything else anymore because we won't be here.

So we have to build resilience to be able to deal with all of the impacts that are on the horizon. And we do have the skills to contain the warming to degrees where human beings can still live here. Scientists think that we can contain it between two to four degrees Celsius. But even two degrees Celsius is already a very, very different way of living than what we live now, let alone four degrees. And if we don't change course, we're going to go toward ten degrees by the end of the century. There won't be any human beings around.

To really stop long enough to take this in, and do it together with other people, and really realize we can meet this together. Today is such an example—we hear this together, we speak about this together, because we have to meet it all together. We are all together in this. There's nowhere to go. There are some very weird people who think we can go to another planet, but I don't think that's going to work. I don't think there's any planet close enough we can go to. And then it would be only like a few very rich people who could go, so I'm sure we won't be able to go. So we have to make it work here.

What I found very interesting is that through not distracting ourselves, and through really paying attention to how we live, there arises a certain repulsion with the excessive way we live—a lot of everything, a lot of this, a lot of that. We can trust that if we really take in the information, our lifestyle by itself will make us feel uncomfortable with certain things we haven't felt uncomfortable with maybe just a few months ago. But if we take in the situation—because we are part of nature, we are part of the cosmos, and the cosmos gets to know itself through us, through human beings, because we have this capacity to reflect on what we are doing—because we are part of the cosmos, we are part of that shift, if we can really open ourselves up to it.

If we can start to see how all of this connects, which we will start to see if we really pay attention, certain things will start to become apparent to us. Then certain things we don't want to do anymore because they don't bring us joy anymore. And we don't have to be afraid of that, because it is the only way forward.

It might look bleak right now, but if we clear out these channels of ignorance—that we are really not aware of what we are doing—if we manage to clear this out through paying more attention, then through this clearing out we also feel much more connected to the universe itself. We experience ourselves much more as an intimate part of it.

Because we can only live the way we live on this planet because we are not connected enough with it. We are not feeling the pain of it. Or like Thich Nhat Hanh says, we are not aware of the crying of the earth because we are deaf to it. We are too invested in doing all other things and listening to other things. But if this rather inconvenient information makes us pay more attention—if we don't do it for the sake of ourselves, then maybe for the sake of our children or our future generations—then through listening and through paying attention, we also have the benefit of feeling more connected.

Through feeling more connected, we have much more resilience. It's like our roots go very, very deep into this very big web of life. We can actually connect into it because we are part of it. And then through that, the strength and the knowing what to do will flow through it. But first we have to build the connection.

This is all something that can be directed by the intention and by how we put our minds, where we put our minds. Do we put our minds into the next thing we want to buy, the next gadget, the next car, the next this, the next that?

Or do we put our attention to where does this all come from, actually? How does this all work? So do we go into the depths, or do we go into the flatland? It's up to us, really.

Because now, if we want to respond skillfully, we have to really go more into the depths. We can't go more and more outward to have more and more, because the conditions have changed.

There's a very good example of the Easter Islands, which are down in the Pacific, far away from here, between South America and Asia. They had quite a thriving culture at one time, and they had these huge monuments, which you have probably seen—these big heads that were buried half into the ground. There were huge blocks of stone they had to transport from certain quarries to the places where they had their shrines. In order to transport these stones, they needed a lot of trees to roll the stone blocks on. So they were cutting down all of the trees on Easter Island because the priests got slightly carried away, as they often do.

Then they cut away all the trees. And through cutting away all the trees, all of the soil was washed off. The whole culture completely collapsed. I think there are no more original Easter Islanders left. People who are living there now are different—people who came with boats later on.

That was an example which the explorers of Captain Cook's time witnessed when they came to the Easter Islands. The people had already died out. There were just a few people left. And that was once a very evolved culture. They had not paid any attention because they were so carried away with their power and with their glory that they completely lost everything. That's a good example of what we are doing now on a global level, really.

But seeing things in this bigger context can really help us to get the learning opportunity which we are having now. Because it's not that we are losing something which is worth having. This process of the universe is all about evolution and about constant change. We have the tendency to relate everything back to ourselves. This is just how it is when we are ignorant human beings.

But we already have stepped into the Dhamma because we have had a certain amount of dissonance in our lives already. Otherwise, we'd never come that far that we spend a Friday evening here with three shaved-headed women. We'd rather go somewhere else. So you can keep on going now. You don't have to stop just with putting your

toe into the water. You can go into it deeper. Because you're already going in the right direction. You can go further. And you have to go further because this is the only way to go.

Yesterday was the Independence of America Day, the 4th of July, which is also our child's birthday. We hope that she's going to be blessed because she had such an auspicious birthday. There were lots of fireworks going on, and because my room is in the backyard, there are all of those yards and I can hear people celebrating—glasses and cutlery and all of the sounds. It's very nice.

But then at the same time I was thinking of this beautiful poem by Rumi, and I thought this is so illustrative. He says: "Sit, be still and listen, for you are drunk, and we are at the edge of the roof." And it's exactly what I felt so much yesterday. We are all celebrating, fireworks and everything, but we are really at the edge of the roof, and if we just go one step further, we're going to fall down.

I think the human condition has always been like this, because this is a profoundly unstable situation—old age, sickness and death, impermanence, we never know what's going to happen next. It has always been like this, but there are times where we become more aware of it than others. And this is really such a time, like maybe the French Revolution was, or the Dark Ages were. There were always times when an old worldview broke down and a new one wasn't really formed yet. But it was clear that the old one didn't work anymore. Conditions came together and it all broke down. There was a lot of calamity and panic, a lot of disaster, a lot of people died.

And a big mess, you know. And we are now at the brink of something like that again.

But if you see it in a bigger context, then I feel much more equipped to be able to open to it and to accept it and have the humility to surrender to it as good as I can. And try to see what is my part in this, what can I do to make it a bit more bearable for everybody else, including myself. And at least to keep calm enough so that one can try to help other people to see the bigger meaning of this, which it totally has.

And knowing that this is an excellent opportunity for practice, because there's nowhere else you can go to escape it. So it's really, we have cornered ourselves.

Because this intelligent process which is called cosmos or universe, it wants to go to ever greater complexity and greater embrace of all that is living. And it doesn't shy away from the most powerful means to make that evolution happen. And if it has to make a climate crisis, it will make it. It has already made it.

And, you know, we can either really open ourselves to that truth and grow with it and through it, or we can just kind of despairingly try to distract ourselves and not look.

So, you know, I want now over the next months and so on, I'd like to study more about it and maybe speak some more in other evenings because there's lots of good material out there of people who are very wise and very connected and who are working with these issues for many, many years. A lot of Christian people as well.

So I'm very interested to go deeper into it and see the intelligence of this universe and how it wants to flourish really.

Okay, I stop here. Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 245

The Broader Context of Mindfulness

Rob Burbea · 57 min

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses the popularization and potential misunderstanding of mindfulness practice, exploring how authentic mindfulness extends far beyond simple attention or passive observation. Drawing from his recent backpacking experiences in the Sierra Nevada mountains, he illustrates how mindful awareness naturally draws together wholesome qualities like equanimity, patience, restraint, and wise discernment.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that in the Buddha's teaching, mindfulness (sati) is embedded within the Eightfold Path's broader context of sīla (ethics), samādhi (meditation), and paññā (wisdom). He distinguishes between right mindfulness and unwise attention, showing how true mindfulness serves the cultivation of well-being rather than selfish manipulation. The talk explores how mindful awareness illuminates the causes of dukkha (suffering) and naturally leads to skillful action based on understanding karma and interdependence.*
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> *Through personal stories and classical examples, including the Buddha's intervention to prevent warfare, Burbea demonstrates that authentic practice involves both the receptive capacity to be present with what cannot be changed and the dynamic wisdom to act skillfully when circumstances call for engagement. He concludes by challenging practitioners to reflect on how their mindfulness practice informs their actions and what areas of life might be calling for more engaged response.*

The title of tonight's talk is "Mindfulness is More Than Paying Attention," and this is partly in response to the popularization of mindfulness and the decontextualizing of mindfulness from its root tradition. There's been a flurry of articles from the Huffington Post and other places about "McMindfulness"—a critique of people like me who are teaching mindfulness in corporations and other institutions. There's this fear of the dumbing down of mindfulness, or the commercialization of mindfulness, or the commodification of mindfulness, which is all probable.

Western culture, capitalist culture tends to gobble up and spit out anything that it sees for its advantage, and mindfulness is no different than anything else. As you can see, there's a huge interest in mindfulness and a greater accessibility and reach—in schools and prisons and in business and in psychology and healthcare. This is wonderful because these practices of awareness are incredibly powerful, incredibly liberating, and help an enormous number of people work with their own minds and hearts and situations and suffering.

At the same time, whenever anything becomes mass marketed—mass produced, widely available—there's an inevitable chance for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, and people teaching who haven't really had thorough training. In this tradition, generally people only start teaching at the invitation of their teacher, and that usually has necessitated some substantive long-term relationship with the teacher—sometimes decades of practice. But of course, now you can just do an online course and then start teaching, or not even do an online course, just read a book.

So there are various fears, and rightly so, that the depth and the scope of the teaching, and the subtlety, is being missed. I'm not particularly speaking to that tonight, although I could go on a long rant. I'm just speaking to a piece of it—helping to remember the broader spectrum of the place that mindfulness is embedded within the tradition and within the teachings, and all the various concomitant related factors of mind that go to support this quality of mindful awareness that we are working to establish in our lives.

I'm going to thread throughout this talk my time up in the mountains. I'm an avid nature lover, backpacker, hiker, and so any excuse I get, I'll go outside. I hadn't been able to get to the mountains this year, mostly because of working and teaching. I figured this—we're in late September, sort of touch and go—might be the last chance to get up to the mountains and go camping before the snow and some of the roads close, including Tioga Pass up in Yosemite.

On the spur of the moment Friday morning, I decided to go camping for the weekend, backpacking. I threw my stuff in my backpack, somewhat hastily because I was eager to get up there before sunset. I got to the park, got my wilderness permit, and hiked about two miles to this beautiful lake. It was just past the full moon, so I was camping underneath Mount Hoffman, a beautiful peak of about ten thousand eight hundred feet.

I thought I'd go for a full moon hike to the top because the moon was pretty bright. It was about a fifteen hundred-foot climb, but not too difficult—steep, but doable. I happened to bump into some young men who were out backpacking for the first time, and they got excited by this idea of a full moon hike, so a couple of them came along.

Not knowing how difficult the hike was, it was probably about ten o'clock at night, really windy and starting to get cold, close to freezing. We got about two-thirds of the way up when one of the men became really exhausted from his backpacking that day and said he was going to stop—why didn't we two go to the top? We made a plan, made sure he was warm and had food and was protected from the elements. The two of us

continued to the top to see the stunning views. From the mountaintop, you could still see the burning fires from the Yosemite fire on the western side—quite stunning, mostly fading out but still smoking with little embers here and there.

Coming back down, we were having trouble locating our friend. We knew roughly where he was, but eventually we found him. He was really freaked out with the cold and was shaking. He'd never been out backpacking before, never really been out at ten thousand feet up a mountain, alone, hearing—and he lived in LA, so he wasn't quite used to the sounds. He was worried about bears and cougars and things like that. By the time we got to him, he was having a full-blown panic attack.

Fortunately, I'm quite familiar with panic attacks and know how to work with people when they're in panic. I sat him down, put my hands on his shoulders, looked him in the eyes, and said, "Look at me, look at me, breathe with me, breathe with me, just breathe." He started breathing slowly, and I told him to put his feet on the ground, push his feet on the ground, feel your feet, feel your breath. I had his friend sit behind him in a kind of bear hug.

I said, "Feel into your friend, feel into the warmth. Tell me something that you really long for."

He said, "My warm bed."

I said, "Okay, imagine you're in your warm bed. Breathe."

He started panicking again. "Breathe, breathe," I said, "calming down, calming down." After about half an hour, he slowly got to where he could stand. He started crawling down the mountain because he was afraid to stand, but eventually he gathered himself. It all worked out fine. We got him down, got him to bed, and all was good.

I thought, you never know when your practice is going to come in handy. We take for granted the practice of meditation and breathing, and yet in those kinds of situations, it's so profound.

When you actually get someone to just stay right here—look at me, stay here, this moment, this breath, feel your feet, you're here, you're surrounded by friends, breathe—and just this, over time that breath works through, cuts through, melts the fear and the anxiety.

So I went to visit him the next morning just to see how he was doing, and his friend said, "Wow, he was lucky to find someone like you on the mountain." I have other stories which I'll tell you later about backpacking where the situation was a little reversed, to my great humility. But that's for later.

As I mentioned earlier, the main association with mindfulness is attention. And it's true that an important component of mindfulness is attending—being attentive to what's here, being attentive to what's happening, knowing what's happening with clear awareness, clear attention. But it's not just about attention. We have to understand it in a broader context, because the Buddha was teaching it within the context of the Eightfold Path, within the context of a whole path of awakening.

So often—and I hear this again and again—the interpretation that many people have about mindfulness is that it leads to passivity. That we're watching, we're noticing, we're observing, we're being with, we're allowing, and we become a doormat, something non-responsive and non-acting. But for the Buddha, mindfulness was clearly in the context of a much more dynamic view of practice.

To give an example of this: that night after I put this guy to bed, I went to my camp spot. I had found this little ledge overlooking this beautiful valley, with Half Dome on one side and Mount Dana on the other—a beautiful 180-degree view. It was kind of a slightly precarious ledge, but I liked nice views and wanted to see the sunrise. So I decided not to sleep with my tent, even though it was a little cold.

I got my sleeping bag, but realized the zipper didn't work. I had a very flimsy old bag, so I sort of wrapped it around me like a blanket. But because it was windy, it didn't really work so well, so I was kind of freezing. But I was very attached to this morning view of the sunrise hitting Half Dome and all the various mountains that I like to see.

So I'd curl up, you know how you do when you're camping—you're hiding from every little air pocket and every little breeze that's coming in. I'd get little bits of sleep here and there, and then about three or four in the morning I was just—it was hopeless, just wind. And the thought came: just put your tent up. Just get in the tent! Ding! Right. Wise discernment leads to wise action.

And this is what the Buddha's teaching about. We see what's happening—in this case, my attachment to this view, to having this experience—and then get over it. It's not worth what's happening. You're freezing, you've got hypothermia. Go in your sleeping bag, go in your tent. So I did.

There are times when we can act on that discernment—many times, in fact. Much of the practice is about cultivating and discerning what brings about wholesome states of mind, what brings about happiness.

But of course there are many other times when we can't take action. The things that we're facing are out of our control, beyond our means to influence in some way—whether it's a larger political or economic situation, or just a personal situation that's beyond our control.

I was hiking the next day on an eight-mile hike, wearing these really old hiking boots. I'm not really sounding like this great wilderness trip leader at this point, and you'll hear more as the trip goes on. I was wearing—this is the last time I wore these hiking boots—and I got innumerable blisters from my very comfortable, very worn-in boots that somehow didn't seem to protect from blisters.

In that situation, I was hiking from A to B, and I had to get to this camp to meet some people I was planned to be with. There was a lot of pain, a lot of physical pain. My ankle was playing out, my knee was playing out, the blisters were terrible. And nothing to do. I'm five miles down the trail. I put on as much moleskin and band-aids and whatever else I could find. And then you just deal with the pain, just like in life, right? Whether you have physical injury, chronic illness, you're grieving somebody—there's only so much we can do.

And then we draw on that capacity of equanimity that comes from the practice of mindfulness, the dedication of being with.

So practice has both sides, both ends of the spectrum. It does have this profound quality of being with, resting in being, allowing, resting in awareness and allowing things to be as they are. And there's also the dynamic element.

As I said, in the Buddhist teachings, in the Eightfold Path, mindfulness is embedded within the threefold way of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Mindfulness comes in the basket of meditation, supported by our efforts, supported by concentration. We develop this lucid awareness.

We use this capacity of mindfulness to understand karma—to understand how our actions bear fruit. When we practice, it bears fruit. When we don't practice, it bears fruit. When we're unskillful, when we're unkind, when we're self-centered, it has a certain kind of fruit. When we're generous, when we're kind, when we're caring, it has a different fruit entirely.

With wise understanding, meditation supports clarity of view. What brings happiness? Why am I suffering? Why am I here tonight? What's causing me to look inside myself? Why, with all the conditions I have in my life, am I unhappy? Why do I leave peace behind so easily?

Did anybody stay peaceful from when you woke up this morning until now? Anybody remain serenely at peace? No? Well, what's going on? Something's happening, and we want to get curious about it.

It's a beautiful day—an exquisite day. What rubs us? What takes away that sense of ease or well-being? We're well-fed, it's safe, it's a gorgeous day. But we suffer, tormenting ourselves with our fears and worries, our projections and anxieties, our self-worth issues. We might find ourselves worrying about whether Larry Ellison will win the America's Cup, feeling contraction or delight at the comeback—who knows?

The point is to understand that our actions have consequences. I'm fascinated by the dialogue around Syria these past weeks, in contrast to the dialogue that happened post-9/11—or the lack of dialogue when going into Afghanistan—and the growing awareness around the consequences of those actions: bombing, killing innocent people. When we understand more deeply, there's greater discernment, wiser action. Hopefully, in this case, politically.

But the Buddha said there's right mindfulness and then there's wrong mindfulness, or more accurately, unwise attention. You might think, "What do you mean there's wrong mindfulness? I thought mindfulness was a good thing." What does it mean to have unwise mindfulness?

Unwise mindfulness would be using that attention in service of what causes suffering. We can all use our attention in skillful or unskillful ways, so we want to reflect on how we direct our awareness. Do we use it to manipulate or selfishly get what we want?

A thief, a burglar, is very attentive. Think of a pickpocket—probably more attentive than most of us in here, certainly more focused. But not necessarily mindful in the true sense. Mindfulness is really only used in the context of serving or supporting wellness of being.

When our attention is used for selfish means—in this case, thieving—it's not true mindfulness. This raises contentious questions around teaching mindfulness to the military. Do we want to create better snipers? More accurate marksmen? These questions are genuinely tricky.

A friend of mine, Richard Miller, teaches Yoga Nidra, which is very similar to mindfulness practice but from the yoga tradition, specifically from Kashmir Shaivism. He's developed a successful protocol to teach Yoga Nidra—a deep form of meditative relaxation—to veterans, especially combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to people preparing for active duty.

He once had a meeting with top brass at the Pentagon about his program. The research was showing very favorable results, so they were questioning him closely. They asked why he thought this would be beneficial for soldiers before going into active duty. His response was fascinating. He said—let me see if I can remember this accurately—"Would you rather..."

find out now whether someone can follow through with orders—in this case, orders to kill—would you rather find out they have the capacity to do that now or in the field? Because if they discover this in the field, they put their entire squadron at risk.

What he was essentially communicating was that when you teach people self-awareness, they can more accurately discern their capabilities and capacities. Actually, it becomes a life-saving practice for those people to know their own capacity. In the end, they adopted his programs.

Again, it's a very tricky area. Another piece of data he was using was that people in active service who had some kind of contemplative practice demonstrated much better emotional self-regulation and were therefore much less likely to be emotionally reactive. So much bloodshed has been caused by people in active service who are traumatized and triggered, with so much fear running through them, acting out in ways that are incredibly harmful. The more people actually have the capacity to work with their own fear and anger, the less bloodshed occurs.

So it's complex territory. I don't know what the Buddha would say about this in the context of sammā-sati, or right mindfulness, but if you examine it through the lens of what relieves suffering—all beings are suffering, and people serving in active duty, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere, experience intense states of suffering. I'm not advocating a position one way or the other, but I offer this as a reflection.

Another example of someone practicing unwise mindfulness would be someone on the sociopathic spectrum who uses that skilled attention to manipulate others. What other examples can you think of that would involve utilizing this quality of attention in ways that fall into the category of unwise mindfulness?

"Advertising."

Right. Say more.

"People who are looking at how to capture your attention in various ways—they're very attentive."

Exactly. So advertising falls into that spectrum of using attention to cultivate more greed, desire, longing, or wanting. Advertising for Marlboros, for instance. What else? On a more personal level, what comes to mind?

"Trying to gain friendships for status."

Yes, trying to use that skilled attention for social gain.

"Influencing someone's will."

Can you say more about that?

"Oh, someone's will as in their estate—convincing them that I'm a really worthy cause for a bequest."

Right, there's considerable elder abuse around exactly that kind of manipulation.

"For seduction."

For seduction, yes. There's a whole spectrum of ways we can use our attention to get our own way, to be self-serving.

Now, from the other side of things—when mindful awareness is established, when you're feeling that sense of clarity, attentiveness, presence—call to mind a moment or situation. Maybe it was during our last meditation, or perhaps right now, or a moment at work, with your family, or out in nature where you felt connected with a quality of mindful awareness.

Notice and reflect on what other qualities are present when you're in that place, when you're established in that clarity of awareness.

"Safety."

Safety. Do you mean you feel safe? Or that it feels safe in general? Like a safe refuge?

When mindfulness deepens, it creates a sanctuary where stories stop playing. The observation feels unfiltered and honest—safe from our own inner torments. This quality of safety that emerges is beautifully captured in the first metta phrase: "May I be safe from inner and outer harm." We find refuge from the mental constructions that usually capture our attention.

What other qualities arise when mindfulness is present? "I feel like I'm running on all cylinders," one practitioner shares. "You're in the zone," I respond. There's an aliveness, a sense of operating at full capacity. Time becomes fluid—you lose track of its linear progression and step into something more timeless.

Thinking becomes less dominant, and intuition emerges. There's a sense of accuracy in communication, as if words arise from a clearer source. The practitioner notices cohesion—things feeling in order both internally and in the outer environment. This is the capacity of clarity to perceive the natural harmony that's always present.

This sounds like homo sapiens sapiens—the self-knowing one, the knowing of the clarity itself. What's particularly fascinating is the absence of desire, or perhaps more precisely, the absence of identification with desire. When desire arises in mindfulness, it's seen clearly without the usual sense of "I want this" or "I must have that."

This points to a deeper level of freedom—not suppressing desire, but not being caught by it either. There's a happiness that comes from this peace with what is, an inner joy that doesn't depend on getting anything or going anywhere. It's the contentment of simply being present with whatever arises in awareness.

A sense of happiness and joy in being at peace with what is, not fighting with reality. There's a heartfulness in the quality of presence, a lightness.

As you're hearing these descriptions, we're evoking these qualities together in this room. I want you to notice what's getting stirred in your own body or being as people speak. We have both unique and shared collective experience here. Every time I hear something, I think, "Oh yes, I know that. That flavor's present sometimes. Oh yes, that too. Yes, that cohesion. Oh yes, that kindness. Yes, that's present as well."

What else emerges? In the sense of oneness, behavior seems spontaneous. There's a spontaneity and an aliveness. Intuitiveness arises. Less delusion. There's more clarity, more wisdom.

This is what I love about the model of the Eightfold Path—the mindfulness and meditative qualities lead to wisdom and understanding. Why is it understanding? It's the wisdom of knowing what's true. Out of that understanding arises the movement into the world, into life, into action. We move so that what emerges from understanding becomes our motivation.

When we become clearer and understand that things have consequences, that we're connected, when we understand suffering and its causes, happiness and its causes, this changes our motivation. We want to move in ways that cause well-being, peace, kindness, clarity, and connection. This informs our actions—that motivation shapes how we act.

In the Eightfold Path, this becomes the practice of ethical conduct: acting in non-harming ways, speaking truthfully and kindly and harmoniously, choosing work and engaging with physical reality in ways that bring about life, generation, nourishment.

So much bigger than just attention, right? Buddhist psychology tells us that mindfulness gathers other wholesome qualities to it—whether clarity or kindness or cohesion or whatever else.

Someone raises a concern about mindfulness being used as control by parents or teachers, creating fear in children to "get the job done" but not supporting their well-being. This highlights that mindfulness is fundamentally about giving up controlling and allowing things to be. Out of that allowing comes wise parenting, wise teaching—not acting or ruling through fear.

Another person notices that mindfulness makes the five senses keener and sharper, especially smell, which can transport them back to moments in the past, binding whole experiences together. Yes, mindfulness does awaken and enliven the five senses in profound ways.

These are the more receptive, gathering qualities that mindfulness draws to itself. There's a quality of restraint that naturally arises—a restraint from that which leads to suffering. When mindfulness is established, there's greater capacity to pause and slow down before reacting, before we hit that "send" button on an email because someone has angered us. You know how easily we can feel slighted through email, through some misunderstanding or text. Perhaps the boss said something belittling—there are countless ways we can feel hurt through these communications.

It's the pause that matters—that moment before hitting send when we think, "Oh, maybe I should just breathe for a few minutes. Maybe I should let this sit in my outbox for half an hour and see how it feels. Maybe I should give myself twenty-four hours." And we look at it the next day and think, "God, what was I thinking? I can't believe I was going to send that—and I had 'reply all' on too!" That's always a disaster.

I actually received an email today from someone on a board I serve on. One person was talking about someone else in a very dismissive way, speaking as you might to a friend in a coffee shop, not through a "reply all" email to the entire board. I was horri-

fied. That was clearly a case of someone not being mindful in their speech, not practicing restraint. Consider the ripple of suffering that creates, especially if it gets back to the person being discussed.

Mindfulness also draws to it the quality of patience—a tremendously helpful quality. I unfortunately do a lot of flying to various teaching venues, and I find flying to be excellent practice. It's a parami practice—parami meaning perfection—a practice of patience. Whether it's the security lines or, in my case, always being seated in front of crying babies, that's become my practice. I've come to expect it now. When I see a couple of young families boarding, I think, "There are my teachers for this flight."

With mindfulness, there's that moment of recognition: "Ah, okay, this is the teacher for this trip. She's one year old and having trouble with the ear pressure changes." Without that awareness, it's just reactivity and suffering—misery, self-pity, blame, and anger.

Mindfulness also supports another key quality: non-identification. We're not so enmeshed and tied up with our stories, our narrative of "Oh, this is spoiling my flight. I was supposed to have a nice, peaceful ride to New York, and now it's terrible, and poor me..." We can still feel irritated or angry—that's okay. But when there's that quality of presence that can observe these emotions arising, we're not caught by them. They're just emotions playing themselves out, samskaras—habitual reactions and tendencies expressing themselves. And somehow, it's not so bothersome.

We might not choose to have a baby screaming for five hours, but I'm reminded of a story that always struck me. When Matt Damon won an Oscar—I think it was for *Good Will Hunting*—he was interviewed afterward and said something startling: "I hope I didn't hurt anybody to get this, because it's just not worth it."

Here's someone speaking about using mindfulness to get ahead, for social recognition, and he offers this beautiful example of non-identification. There's enough clarity in him not to be identified with this piece of brass or gold or whatever Oscars are made of. "I hope I didn't step on anybody to get this Oscar because it's not worth it."

Mindfulness also draws in equanimity, which relates to everything I've been speaking about. You can see how all these qualities are interconnected. It gives us capacity—like when I was hiking—to simply hang in with difficulties.

Sometimes, however, that discernment, that knowing, that equanimity, that clarity does require action.

Returning to my hiking story: I'd hiked about eight miles down the trail, and because it was a very hasty trip, I hadn't really checked the weather. It was sunny and I thought I'd get in before the snow, so I wasn't thinking about snow and rain. Remember it was really pouring with rain here on Saturday? Well, four hours later it gets to the mountains and usually turns to snow.

So it was about three in the afternoon and it started to drizzle. I was like, "Oh, it's pretty." I was sitting by a lake, watching all the hail making these patterns on the water, thinking how beautiful it was, being up in the mountains. Then I started walking and it continued to rain, getting gray and darker. I thought, "This isn't looking so good," but I continued anyway.

I had this very light windbreaker—not really waterproof. I mean, it's sort of waterproof, but not really. Nothing's waterproof after a while unless it's plastic. So I get to camp and I'm waiting for my friends to show up. I'm in the middle of nowhere with just me and one other guy, who ends up starting a fire in his tent to keep warm that night—a canvas tent, which was a whole other story.

It starts to rain heavily and my friend shows up. Someone had just told me that heavy snowfall was coming and it would drop down to twenty-four degrees, and we should get out because we might get snowed in. But it was another six miles with a backpack in pouring rain. I thought, "Nah."

This was a really great case of how to stay present and not let fear and anxiety make the decision. The fear would have had me hike out in the pouring rain, which would have been quite challenging. So I decided to stay with these two friends.

By that time, pretty much everything was wet—my gear, my down jacket, warm gear, sleeping bags damp. The tent I had was really a summer tent, very lightweight. It's a three-season tent, but not what you want in snow and rain. We ate and I started shivering, getting really cold because I had nothing warm. I only had down, which stays warm when wet, but it was wet.

I started thinking, "Well, the tables are really turned." The night before I was rescuing somebody having a panic attack, and now I was starting to get really anxious—mostly about not being able to get warm in my tent. It's a very unsatisfying feeling.

So I went to bed early, wrapped myself up, and I was just freezing and shaking. I had to put my wilderness tail between my legs. I got up, found my friends at this temporary tarp they'd rigged as a kitchen, and said, "I'm really cold, I need help." One of them gave

me their down jacket, which helped calm my nervous system down a little bit. But I realized I couldn't sleep in my tent—it was so exposed to the elements and everything was damp.

So I had to sleep with them, all squashed into this little tent, which was very cozy. It was a three-person tent, so it was actually fine. But it was just a great lesson in humility and discernment and staying steady, thinking, "What's the wise decision?" If I'd let my ego self run the show, I would have stuck in my tent, toughed it out, frozen to death, gotten hypothermia, versus "Oh, what's the situation here? I'm cold. I'm wet. I can do something more creative about this."

In the end it turned out to be kind of a fun adventure. The tent was like a little igloo in the morning. Fortunately it wasn't too heavy a snowfall and it was actually very beautiful in the morning with clear sky. Everything was frozen, but we weren't. It was a beautiful day and a bear came sniffing around the campsite. All's well that ends well. And I've now thrown my boots away and I'm doing a lot of shopping at REI.

I think of one of my favorite stories of the Buddha and an example of his—anyway, his life was very dynamic even though he was a meditator and mystic and teacher. He was very active in creating teachings and this body of students, traveling and walking the plains of northern India and the forests for forty-five years.

One story that I'm particularly fond of: he was from a kingdom—my Indian history is going to go out the window here—he mostly was living in the kingdom of Magadha, but he was born in a kingdom up north somewhere on the Nepalese border. These two kingdoms in northern India at the time of the Buddha were very feudal...

a lot of war, a lot of ongoing wars, a lot of bloodshed.

At some point during the Buddha's life after his enlightenment, he heard disturbing news. He had many students who were from the courts—princes and kings and queens—and he would often give advice and help resolve conflicts through diplomacy. The king of Magadha was particularly warlike, and he had decided to march to war against the kingdom where the Buddha was born, where many of his family and friends lived, many from the princely castes.

When the Buddha heard that the king was marching out with his army, he went and sat by an old dead tree by the roadside. As the king and his forces passed by, the king had the army stop, dismounted from his horse, went to the Buddha, and paid his respects. "Why are you sitting by this old dead tree?" he asked.

The Buddha replied, "This tree is in the land of my home. This is dear to me. And I sit here as a request to stop the bloodshed."

The king was so moved by the Buddha's presence and his wish that he ceased his march, turned back, and war was averted. The same scenario actually happened a second time, with similar circumstances, and again the Buddha sat by the roadside. That time, however, the king ignored the Buddha's wish and there was great bloodshed.

What strikes me about this story is that the Buddha wasn't just sitting around in the forest navel-gazing. That's not the point of mindfulness practice. The point is to take this practice out into the world—to use this clarity, awareness, discernment, compassion, and kindness to take steps that relieve suffering for ourselves, our loved ones, our community, our country, however and wherever it manifests.

The last story I'll share is a more contemporary example. My first Vipassana teacher, Christopher Titmuss, and I would study together every year in Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha attained his awakening. The temple there was a simple complex of old buildings and one large stupa.

One year, the Sri Lankan government—a Buddhist government—decided to take better care of the temple and particularly the Bodhi tree, which was a descendant of the tree under which the Buddha was supposed to have attained enlightenment. In their good-hearted wishes to protect the tree, they erected a gold-plated fence around it, quite high and very incongruous to the idea of awakening and freedom—basically gold prison bars around the tree.

This was in Bihar, the poorest state in India, an area of incredible poverty. When you erect a million-dollar gold fence around a tree in such circumstances, what's going to happen? You're going to attract bandits who want to steal it. So they had to station a 24-hour armed guard at the temple to protect the gold. The whole thing was quite farcical.

Before they erected and inaugurated the fence, the Sri Lankan president came to visit and give his blessing, bringing the security that often accompanies such situations—military and guards everywhere. Christopher had been a lover of this particular village, the Buddha, and the people there, and was horrified by this development. He was determined to intervene, much as the Buddha had done, to say, "Please come to your senses and put that money toward building schools or hospitals, not a fence that people want to steal."

Despite the big procession and heavy military presence, Christopher somehow meandered his way through all the guards with their rifles and managed to stand right in front of the president. "Please," he said, "can you change your actions? Can you put this money to better use?"

He didn't get his way. But again, here's the principle of using clarity and discernment, of speaking one's truth and standing up to what's perceived as injustice or unskillfulness.

These are just some reflections as I wrap up here. Really, this is just the beginning of our conversation about how to understand mindfulness in a broader context—in the context of the Eightfold Path, and also in the context of how it leads to and supports wise action, wise engagement, wise discernment, which leads to moving more skillfully in the world.

A couple of reflections for you: In what ways does mindful awareness inform your actions? In what ways does your practice of mindfulness inform your actions? And second, what are you seeing with mindfulness that requires action that you are not taking? What are you discerning and yet not acting upon? Just reflections for the week.

Next week I'll be back here, and it will be the beginning of Earth Care Week. In our last International Buddhist Teacher Meeting, we had a session on climate change, and there was a strong desire in the community to begin speaking much more directly about the climate crisis.

No, we don't have those flyers yet.

So next week I'm going to give a talk about climate change and the Buddhist response to what's happening ecologically, and we'll have information and resources available. What the International Buddhist Teacher Group decided to do was dedicate the first week in October to raising awareness around these issues and our response as a Buddhist community to the climate crisis. There will be information and handouts available next week.

So I hope you can come, and have a wonderful week. Blessings on your practice and your week.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 246

The Meditator as Revolutionary

Rob Burbea · 1h09

> *In this provocative dharma talk, Rob Burbea challenges practitioners to examine their fantasies about awakening and the role of meditation in our troubled times. He questions whether the traditional archetype of the serene, aloof sage is adequate for addressing contemporary global crises like climate change, environmental destruction, and systemic injustice. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that he taught 'suffering and the end of suffering,' Burbea explores how our understanding of dukkha must expand beyond individual pain to include social and environmental suffering.*
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> *Burbea examines how cultural values of consumerism, individualism, and the myth of objective detachment create delusion and increase suffering. He argues that dharma practice must develop not just the capacity for personal equanimity, but the courage to feel and respond to the world's pain without denial, overwhelm, or ill will. The talk challenges practitioners to consider whether their practice leads to creative maladjustment rather than comfortable conformity, echoing Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for 'transformed nonconformists' who can address humanity's urgent challenges.*
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> *This revolutionary approach to dharma suggests that true liberation involves both turning inward to examine our individual suffering and turning outward to engage with collective pain, making the meditator not a detached observer but an active participant in the world's healing.*

I'd like to talk about something tonight that usually, if I talked about it at all on a group retreat, I would probably choose to do at the end—perhaps as the last evening's talk as you're moving back into the world, the other world. But for different reasons, we've decided to do it now, and some of the themes I'll pick up later on.

I'm going to start with a question for you: Where do you think all this is leading? Where do you think it's going? What's your sense of that? What's your fantasy of that? And fantasy is a good word here—it's not a bad word. We need fantasy; we need a fantasy of practice. It's very important. What's your fantasy? What's your sense? Where is it going?

Some people will be familiar, from hearing or reading, with the idea of awakening or liberation. Some may not have heard those terms before, or may have heard them but don't really relate to them. So whether I do relate to that kind of idea—awakening, lib-

eration, something like that—or whether I don't, whether I'm a practitioner of many years or someone very new to practice, what's the sense of where this is leading? Am I aware of my fantasy of where practice is headed?

We usually don't think this way consciously, but to me it's very important to be conscious. What's going on there? Not because it's a bad thing and I shouldn't have one—I should have one. I need to have one; otherwise I can't motivate myself. But I need to be aware of it.

So do I, for instance, somehow dimly or more consciously imagine that when I'm awakened, or more awakened, or further down the line, everything will be easier? I'll be much calmer? Everything will be simpler? The world and its complications will be simpler to my eyes? Do I expect that? Do I want that?

Consider the Buddha statue—the Buddha Rupa. You can get them at garden centers nowadays. What does it say to you? It's a really powerful image, an archetype already. Not quite as prevalent in our culture as the crucifixion, but it's there in our culture by virtue of the fact that you can get it in a garden store. People know what that is. What's it saying? What does it say? What's he communicating? What's that archetype communicating? What's he doing? What does it show him doing?

He's sitting there, very serene, very still, very undisturbed, oftentimes with his eyes closed in meditation. That's a powerful archetypal image being communicated there. And through the image, much else gets communicated. He is the archetype, or an archetype, of the equanimous sage—the sage, the wise one. Equanimous through his sagacity, through his wisdom.

But there is a kind of aloofness in it. If you read the ancient texts, there is an aloofness, a transcendence of the world that's very much there in the original texts. We don't like that so much nowadays, so we kind of paper it over to fit more of our contemporary view. But it's still communicating something about an equanimity that comes out of a certain kind of wisdom that has a kind of aloofness in it—separation, distance. Not good, not bad, but it has an effect.

Compare this to the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneylenders—this hot-headed young man in the temple. It's a different archetype being communicated.

Not good, not bad, just different and has different effects. I don't even consciously think about these archetypes, but they permeate our culture and our meditation culture and spiritual culture. They most certainly have their effect, even for people who are new to practice and don't think about concepts like liberation.

Why is this important? Because the fantasy I have in relationship to practice will determine what my practice becomes. It determines the direction of my practice—it cannot help but have an effect there. It might also be that I choose the fantasies and archetypes I relate to depending on what I want. Perhaps I want less bother, less impingement, less hassle, less disturbance, less agitation. So I zero in on the spiritual archetypes that seem to communicate that possibility.

A little while ago I was talking to a good friend. She was telling me that when she was growing up, as a child and into her adolescence, she felt visceral pain looking around her at the world—the pollution one can be aware of, the plastic in the oceans and environment, all kinds of things. She actually felt real pain with that. As she got older and encountered the possibility of learning meditation and Buddhism, her thought was: "If I practice, maybe that pain will die down. Maybe I'll have some freedom from that pain."

But that's not what happened. Actually, there was an increase in sensitivity. An increase in sensitivity with deepening practice as the heart opens—this comes with that price. Alongside a kind of equanimity, yes, but the sensitivity is growing.

In the Buddha's time, 2500 years ago, the whole fabric of society and culture was different. They couldn't have conceived that human population would grow so exponentially, or the rapidity of technological innovation and industrialization. They couldn't have conceived that humanity would be able to have such a devastating effect on the climate—it just didn't enter the picture. Couldn't have conceived of the kind of juggernaut of globalization that is now full steam ahead. It was a very small society: me and the acts I do and their immediate consequences.

When you have globalization, it's a much more complex picture. Where did this shirt come from? What effect does it have on someone in Bangladesh? So what does all that mean? It's a very different situation we're dealing with now.

What do I imagine as I move towards awakening—if I think in those terms at all? That everything will become easier, feel easier, appear simpler, more calm? That everything calms down? Some things, yes—and I can only share from where I am and my own experience—some things, most definitely: much more calm, much more ease, much more simplicity. Some dukkha, some areas of suffering, just gone. Cut off at the root, in Buddhist terms—they can't come up again. Absolutely.

But given all that complexity, some situations and some sufferings that we are in the midst of in our life, in our culture and society and global society nowadays—the answers are not so easy. The whole situation is not so easy at all.

The question is: Am I willing to be uncomfortable? How willing am I to open to that discomfort? This being, this heart and mind—am I willing to actually bear all that and have that kind of vulnerability?

What do I want? Is it my own private nirvana? If you think in nirvanic terms—which many people don't. Or maybe I don't think in terms of nirvana; I just have an image. As I grow in practice and hopefully develop, maybe I have this distant image: Someday, maybe my heart will be touched by this stuff, but not really disturbed. I'll have a kind of soft, open heart, which is nice—it's nice to have that—but there's not a sense of deep disturbing.

Some of you probably know the novel *Franny and Zooey* by J.D. Salinger. Do you know this?

It's a really fabulous, wonderful novel. They're sister and brother—Franny's the sister and Zooey's the brother. And they're talking. Zooey is in his thirties, I think, and he has an ulcer. So Franny's asking him about his ulcer. When his sister asks him about it, he says, "Yes, I have an ulcer for Christ's sake. This is Kali Yuga, buddy, the Iron Age. Anybody over sixteen without an ulcer is a goddamn spy." Typical J.D. Salinger language, but you get the point.

I was at a party two weeks ago or something, and I was talking with a friend of a friend. She made a very insightful comment. She's not a dharma practitioner, but just to preface it a little bit: Buddhism, the dharma, talks about suffering and the end of suffering. That's the thread through all dharma teachings and everything—suffering and the end of suffering. It's a very famous comment of the Buddha: "I teach suffering and the end of suffering."

But what does that mean, suffering? What does suffering mean? Nowadays it has a ton of different interpretations. What did the Buddha mean when he said suffering? What do I mean when I say suffering? What do you mean when you say suffering? And what do you mean when you say the end of suffering?

So this woman at the party was really insightful. She said, "Well, historically in the West, if you go back to Freud and this idea that we need to open the awareness to the depths of the psyche, to intra-psychic suffering that can come from that—understand that and relate to that. And a little time goes by, and psychoanalysts and psychologists understand that actually the family influence is really important."

So for Freud, it was all here—one was projecting onto the family, but the problem was really here. A few decades go by, and now there's a bigger understanding: the problem comes from the family, from stuff that happened in childhood. Nowadays, it's al-

most unheard of—you don't meet anyone who doesn't acknowledge that there's some suffering that comes from that. We all think, "Oh, my childhood and my parents were like this and this and this." And it's understood: I need to work with that, I need to explore that, I need to heal that.

So there's been this growth of understanding which you never encounter in the Buddha's teachings. He never talks about someone having a painful childhood or their parents being difficult. It just wasn't there in the understanding. But nowadays we wouldn't think twice about it. Maybe some people are now beginning to consider the influence slightly wider—of gender and race, maybe a little bit. But what about one step further: the society and the environment and the suffering that comes to me from that? You understand? The whole picture is getting bigger and bigger, and there's a growth in understanding here.

So Freud talked about the repressed—what am I repressing that can come up and cause me pain? But it's a hundred and something years later now. We all know about this childhood pain; it's very important. But is that really where the repressed is these days?

Looking at the cultural landscape today, I find myself wondering: is childhood pain truly what we're repressing in our current era? Or has the source of our repression shifted to entirely different territories? This remains an open question for me.

What feels clear is that the social and environmental situation affects us deeply, just as we affect it in return. Just as we've learned the value of exploring and healing family wounds and childhood trauma, so too must we attend to social and environmental pain.

With all this awareness, I notice something paradoxical about practice. Some agitation naturally lessens as we develop our meditation, yet I feel certain forms of agitation can actually intensify—and perhaps they should.

The same friend I mentioned shared stories of her many retreats in Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, at a monastery in Bihar, which is among the poorest states in India. There, suffering confronts you directly—children begging, incredible poverty, poor hygiene, malnutrition, disease. This reality permeates your meditation practice in ways utterly different from our protected environment here.

For her, this proved profoundly helpful, offering genuine perspective on her own pain and suffering. Not dismissing personal pain—never that—but contextualizing it meaningfully. Looking back, she observed how some retreatants found the conditions

too overwhelming. They kept the suffering at arm's length, attempting to create a protective cocoon. But she witnessed the consequences of such cocooning over the years, seeing how it carries its own significant costs.

This presents a fascinating paradox. Dharma practice is often described as revolutionary—and indeed it is. The revolution lies in learning to turn inward rather than constantly chasing external experiences, in staying present with our difficulties and emotions instead of running away. This turning inward remains absolutely essential.

Yet here we encounter one of life's many double-edged swords. Dharma practice itself can sometimes become insular, even self-obsessed. We might develop compassion for others, but only for certain kinds of pain—those we can readily relate to or understand. I'm not saying this inevitably happens, but it represents a potential shadow we must guard against.

Consider relationships—whether friendship, family, romantic partnership, or marriage. When difficulty and pain arise, the solution isn't always to let go internally, to look inside and work solely with our emotions as we're practicing here. Sometimes we need to communicate directly. Sometimes we need to take action.

The same principle applies to social and environmental difficulties that impact us. The work isn't only internal. Sometimes I need to speak out. Sometimes I need to act. Revolution requires both turning inward and turning outward.

This brings me back to the question I posed earlier: What do we want from working with emotions? What are we truly seeking? I suggested we compile a list throughout this retreat, adding insights as they arise. We've already identified several important elements.

For me, one goal feels particularly crucial: developing both the courage and capacity to feel the pain of our times. When I teach—when I focus on helping people meet their individual suffering through metta practice and other techniques—I always carry another intention in the background. Beyond individual healing, I'm interested in something more expansive: growing your heart's capacity and developing the courage to feel.

Can we cultivate this capacity to feel the pain of our era without denial? Can we develop this sensitivity with less numbness, less apathy, less overwhelm, less ill will? None of this comes easily—I truly don't believe it's simple at all.

About a month ago, I encountered a news story online that some of you may have seen as well.

It was there for a day or two, then it disappeared. Marine scientists are almost certain now that they haven't considered the combination of three factors: climate change, global warming with ocean warming, ocean acidification, and I think the third one was pollution. They hadn't considered how those three act together. And they concluded from very recent research that there's almost certainty that we are on the brink, in the next decades, of the largest marine species extinction—not in the history of humanity but in the geological history of the earth.

So that appeared for a day or two on the internet and then disappeared again. I don't know—I mean, that really affects me. I don't know where it lands with you. I find such grief when I open to that.

Or what's going on in Somalia and the Horn of Africa right now? And again, it appears a little bit and then it seems to disappear. So the famine and the drought there—perhaps you heard this too—in that area of the world, of course sub-Saharan Africa, the rains used to fail every ten to twelve years. That was kind of typical, and there would be drought and famine and massive crisis as there is now. And now more recently they're failing every other year, every two years. Why? I didn't read the next part of the sentence. I would guess from climate change.

And similarly, on the same theme, climate scientists and environmentalists are pretty sure that the chances to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius are pretty much gone. We can pretty much say goodbye to that. And we're looking at the moment at more like 3.5 degrees or something, which is actually a massive difference because it's above the limit that causes runaway climate change. We can actually predict what happens there.

So how does it feel? How is that? These are our times. This is what we're living in.

Now I know, and I know for a fact—and it's really important not to judge here, it's really important not to judge—sometimes a person cannot find any care in relationship to all that. It seems abstract. It seems like it doesn't involve me. I'm preoccupied with other stuff. Or for other reasons, there's no care. Could be all kinds of reasons.

But if that's the case, and that's really okay—so it's really important not to judge here—okay, to gently inquire: Well, what's behind that lack of care? What's supporting that lack of care? Why is it that there's this lack of care? It could be all different reasons. So where does that lack of care come from? That lack of connection, that lack of relationship with not just the earth and the biosphere, but also people elsewhere, humans?

Someone pointed out—George Marshall pointed out—climate change is principally a human rights issue. Forget about the environment; the earth's going to be fine. It's principally a human rights issue, which is a whole other way of looking at it.

So very easily it could be that the lack of care, in some cases, is from overwhelm or from a sense of powerlessness. Because what am I going to do? There are already seven billion people. It's already all out of control. And that's just too painful. Or it could be for many reasons.

It's really important that the inner critic, which Chris spoke about, doesn't come into these kinds of inquiries. But that there can be a gentle questioning there, a loving questioning.

There is, I think, what practice can offer—this capacity and courage to develop the capacity and courage to hold and respond to the world's pain.

Sometimes what we want is—because the situation now is so complex and the intricacy on the economic, political, sociological, biospherical, technological levels, all this comes together. It's so complex, and we want simplicity. I want things to be simple.

And that's interesting because part of this is asking: What does it mean to be an ethical human being these days? So the Buddha had a list of five things which Andy told you about—five precepts on the opening evening. You know, try not to do this and this and this and this and this. And one of my teachers said, "That's great. It's like you just do that, you take care of it, and then forget about it and don't wrap yourself up in complexity and guilt." Really wise.

But I don't know how well that fits anymore.

Sometimes we might want, or a part of us might want, to open the textbook, read the list of rules and tick them off. And it's all very simple, though it can be helpful. Chris will talk about the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths, but I wonder if they need expanding nowadays. I don't know. I think so. I feel that practice and the path and our whole notion of what we're doing needs to address our relationship with the world's difficulties. To me that seems important.

I know some people don't feel it's relevant at all and would even find it weird that I would be giving this talk. You might find it weird that I'm giving this talk right now. And you might feel this is a very strange talk to be giving on the second night of a retreat, when people generally have bodies that are aching, minds that are aching, when they're a bit fed up, they're wondering if it was really a good idea to come, they're tired. I know all that.

But that was part of the reason for giving it tonight. As I say, I usually give it on this night, because if I think this talk doesn't fit here, maybe it's not the talk that needs to move and shift. Maybe it's my view of what meditation and what practice is that needs to shift. If I feel that addressing these issues doesn't belong here on the second night, on a night of difficulty.

So the world and its events and the world and its suffering and the ideas in the world and the values in the world and the assumptions in the world—they do affect me. They affect us enormously and insidiously. And I can't turn a blind eye to all that. Yukio Mishima, in a book called *Spring Snow*, said, "To live in the midst of an era is to be oblivious to its style." There's a lot in the air, in more ways than one, that we're oblivious of. We just absorb it. We just drink it in and it becomes how we see.

So what is this situation? We have touched on it already, but this is from Lieutenant General Dallaire. He was the general in charge of the UN peacekeeping mission in Rwanda when there was the genocide there. And he said, "At the Canadian Forces Peace Support Training Center, teachers use a slide to explain to Canadian soldiers the nature of our world. If the entire population of the planet is represented by 100 people"—this is from 2006, I think, so it's out of date—"57 live in Asia, 21 in Europe, 14 in North and South America, and 8 in Africa. The numbers of Asians and Africans are increasing every year, while the number of Europeans and North Americans is decreasing. 50% of the wealth is in the hands of six people, all of whom are Americans. 70 people are unable to read or write. 50 suffer from malnutrition due to insufficient nutrition. 35 do not have access to safe drinking water. 80 live in substandard housing. Only one has a university or college education. Only one."

Most of the population of the globe live in substantially different circumstances than those we in the first world take for granted.

Here's another thing I came across in a fantastic book called *Requiem for a Species* by Clive Hamilton. It's about climate change. He said, "In 2007, the International Panel for Climate Change updated its assessment of the economic costs of emission abatement by bringing together and assessing the results of a wide range of economic models. What did it show? To be fair, let's consider the worst case for the economy—in other words, the most expensive it could be, which is usually the best case for the climate. So doing the utmost you can for the climate at the most cost to the economy.

"The most stringent target assessed involved cutting emissions to ensure that greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are stabilized at 450 parts per million of CO2 equivalent in 2050. The economic model showing the highest cost of reaching this target estimates that pursuing it would cause a reduction of global GDP of 5.5% in 2050." Okay, all very

abstract. Most models show lower costs. "Bearing in mind that world income will be very unevenly distributed, what would that mean to the typical individual? Global population, according to the UN average estimate, is expected to increase from 6.7 billion in 2007 to 9.2 billion in 2050. If incomes grow at the anticipated 1.75% each year, average incomes will double by 2047. If we took stringent measures to restrict greenhouse gas emissions so that they stabilize at 450 parts per million, then, according to the models that show the greatest economic damage, at most the effect on the world economy would be such that the doubling of average incomes would be held back until 2050—a delay of three years.

"I have selected the most pessimistic numbers. A more typical estimate of the cost to GDP is 2%, which would mean the loss of only one year's income growth between now and 2050." So he concludes, "A one-year delay in the doubling of average incomes is the basis for the belief that pursuing a safe level of climate protection would be too expensive."

So you read something like that, you hear something like that and you think, what is going on with us as a species?

What's going on? Something is happening, and I think it's really complex. I don't even pretend to understand it fully. Something is going on. I certainly don't want to dismiss modern culture, which gives us so many gifts. But some of the values and ideas that underpin modern society and culture basically increase suffering for ourselves and for others. And this is where the Dharma comes in.

So let's examine some of these underlying assumptions. Back in the 17th century there was the Enlightenment with Descartes and Newton and others. The idea emerged that we could know an objective reality from a distance—the universe does its thing separate from us and we can objectively know that. There arose at that time, and it persists until today, this myth of detached knowledge, of objective knowledge.

Julie Nelson, who is an economist, calls this objectivism. She describes it as "a romantic belief in the possibility of connection-free knowledge from an outside-of-nature, perspective-free viewpoint." This worldview praises emotional distance, autonomy, rationality, disinterestedness, and "hard" knowledge—all of which amounts to a deluded self-conception. This perspective persists in our view of nature, but also in our understanding of economics and politics. And this will come up in another talk—the whole idea of objectively knowing and experiencing meditation is also a myth, but we'll return to that.

Connected to this is another prevalent idea: that people are fundamentally rational beings. Really, when you give them the facts and lay out the information in front of them—whether about climate change or anything else—they'll see the pros and cons and dangers and choose the rational thing to do. This was assumed for hundreds of years to be how human beings operate.

But a host of recent psychological studies has shown that this is almost never what human beings actually do. Quite the opposite. In fact, sense of identity and sense of values almost always determines what information we accept. We accept only information that confirms our identity and values. We shape our thinking around protecting our social identity. When you present someone with inconvenient facts—like something about climate change and culture—that tends to actually harden their resistance and close them down even more. It's fascinating.

Researchers have furthered this work by distinguishing between what they call extrinsic values and intrinsic values. Extrinsic values include things like caring what other people think about me, financial success, status. Intrinsic values encompass caring about relationships, community, self-acceptance—values that transcend self-interest. People score differently on these value measurements. We're all mixed; there's a mixture there.

But this was a remarkably good predictor. Where someone fell in terms of their constellation of values was almost 100% predictive across numerous studies of how they would feel about the environment, human rights, their comfort with manipulation, and their relationship to prejudice.

What does this have to do with the Dharma? All of this relates directly to Dharma and Dharma practice, so please keep that in mind.

Another sociological survey recently tracking values and attitudes clearly showed that culture, society, and the messages within culture severely shape the values that people hold. In other words, whether we tend toward extrinsic or intrinsic values is shaped by the messages we receive from society—advertising and media in particular, but also political messages.

Advertising and media deliberately generate feelings of inadequacy. "I'm not good enough. I need to buy this. I need to change that and get this." They deliberately cultivate feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Intrinsic feelings are dampened, squashed, while extrinsic feelings rise.

Do I think I'm immune to this because I'm a meditator? Maybe I've been meditating for decades and think this doesn't affect me? Here's something from Tom Crompton, who works for the World Wildlife Fund as a researcher: Advertisers employ huge numbers of psychologists. I don't know if you knew that—they employ vast numbers of psychologists.

Guy Murphy, who is Global Planning Director for the marketing company JWT, puts it in his own words—this is a marketing director speaking: "Marketers should see themselves as trying to manipulate culture, being social engineers, not brand managers, manipulating cultural forces, not brand impressions."

The more they foster these extrinsic values, Tom Crompton observes, the easier it becomes to sell their products. So we have this massive inundation of marketing and messages deliberately engineered to tinker with our values and change our value system. All of this feeds consumerism, feeds the whole mindset of consumerism and individualism. Out of that emerge new values, and the whole thing cycles upon itself.

This is again from Clive Hamilton. In all of this, it makes certain types of thinking and conclusions feel completely unavoidable—obvious. Something like how we think about economic growth, for instance, and the whole notion of the growth machine.

"The growth machine, which we thought we had built to enhance our own ends, has taken on a life of its own and resists fiercely the slow awakening to its perils of the humans it is supposed to serve." Strong language. "The closer some get to the levers of the machine, the more they must be committed to its goals. It is hard to imagine that anyone who believes that economic growth is part of the problem would ever be allowed near those levers. More likely they would be ridiculed in the newspapers and denounced in the parliaments. Ordinary people may at times question the wisdom of relentless growth and conclude that it cannot go on forever, yet they are soon bounced out of their subversive reverie by the inducements to go shopping. The system has created the type of people who are perfectly suited to what it needs: unending expansion. In this way the growth system governs itself. We think we have power, but the growth system awards power only to those who will advance its objective. We internalize the discourse so that we begin to articulate the interests of the system and govern ourselves according to its rules."

So the whole thing starts feeding on itself. We're in the middle of that, and Dharma practice is in the middle of that. Consumerism and economic thinking and values play into each other, and a snowball effect happens. Relevant to the practices we're doing: the emotions I feel—how much of them come from the ideas and values that I have? Ideas and values really give rise to emotions.

As a meditator, because a practitioner is interested in delusion, and here is a gross delusion, to me that makes it part of the remit of a meditator—because it's delusion.

With all of this comes a kind of falling, a fragmentation of the social fabric. Everyone's individually pursuing their ends. We've lost this sense of common endeavor, of being in it together, supporting each other in society.

Václav Havel also comments on the current zeitgeist: "We are living in the first truly global civilization. This means that whatever comes into existence can very quickly span the whole world." We've already said that. He continues, "We are also living in the first atheistic civilization—in other words, a civilization that has lost its connection with the infinite and eternity. For that reason, it prefers short-term profit to long-term gain."

I find this very interesting. I want to return later in the retreat to this whole idea of the infinite and eternity and nihilism, because I don't think it's wrong to be nihilistic necessarily—but what does it lead to? If I'm going to be nihilistic, can I be fully one hundred percent nihilistic and really go into it and explore that? Because that would be different. But I'll come back to that.

So what are our reactions to all this? To me it's so complex—this whole situation—and equally complex are the reactions we have. We have to look at ourselves with compassion and have a compassionate view of ourselves. Are my reactions helpful or not? This is always the question in the Dharma: My responses—are they helpful or not?

One can hear all this—about which cities in the world on coastlines will be underwater in so many years' time—and the mind may start going, "Well, the house on the hill is starting to look pretty good. Maybe I can get somewhere that's a little high up where the waters don't reach." But it's also a metaphor, because maybe I won't be able to afford a house on a hill. It's a metaphor for taking care of me and mine.

But that very self-preservation thinking is part of the problem. It's part of this—it feeds a kind of disconnection, and in doing that it feeds suffering. I feel the only way we're going to relate to this well is if there's a real sense that we are in it together. When the waters rise, they rise everywhere for everyone together. I'm not going to run up that hill and shut my doors and bolt my doors and stand at the window with a shotgun, or have my wealth preserve a place for me and preserve my security.

I'm running out of time, but it's very interesting—in some research I've been reading about the psychology of what happens in relationship to the threat of climate change, which isn't an immediate danger. That's partly why it's so difficult; I don't feel immedi-

ate danger with it. But basically there are all kinds of what are called maladaptive strategies we can have in response to the threat: denial, distraction, minimizing the threat, distancing it—"It's just somewhere in the future."

A researcher called Anthony Leiserowitz was asked in 2006 to write a report for the US government, and he concluded regarding the attitudes of the US population: "As a whole, the US public is currently in what he called a wishful thinking stage of opinion formation, in which they hope the problem can be solved by someone else without changes in their own priorities, decision-making, or behavior." So it's kind of just mañana, mañana.

The pleasure-seeking is another maladaptive strategy, as is blame-shifting—it's easy to blame China now because of all their coal-powered plants they're building. There's also apathy, and what Clive Hamilton calls a "false optimism." He says about that: "Scientific observations of climate change have taken such an alarming turn in the last few years and global action remains so inadequate that pretending to oneself that it'll work out is a dangerous disconnection from reality."

It's actually a kind of disconnection from the reality of things. So it might not feel painful. Sometimes people don't feel any pain in relation to this. But I wonder about an analogy with that. You know, you can have cancer and be in a life-threatening situation or HIV, and there's no pain up to a certain point.

Or maybe a more accurate analogy—I worked for a very short time in a leprosy community in India, and I didn't know this until I got there. But the problem with leprosy, why they lose their fingers and things, is because what they actually lose with the disease is the nerve functioning in the extremities first. So they put their hand in a fire or something and they don't actually realize that it's hot because they don't feel it. And then fingers get burned and infected and they lose them.

Can I learn to tolerate these feelings? Really tolerate this—what I said earlier, this capacity. And I said in the opening, the range of the human heart and the capacity of the human heart is extraordinary. Can I learn to tolerate the feelings? Say with climate change—I'm using climate change just because it's in a way the most pressing issue of our times and certainly the most comprehensive.

Tolerate the feelings of, say, realizing that a major disruption above those two degrees which would trigger runaway climate change—can I tolerate those feelings that a major disruption in the climate is probably no longer avoidable? And what does that do? Can I tolerate those feelings? And can I practice so that I can tolerate those feelings?

So all kinds of unhelpful relationships and reactions we can have to all that. But also helpful, also helpful. And I don't have any easy answers at all, and I don't actually think anyone does.

So turning out, I call this talk "The Meditator as Revolutionary." So turn in and turn out. Revolution means to turn around, to turn out. But in a way, when I turn out the attention in terms of suffering, it's also relieving.

I feel this pain in life, and as I said earlier, maybe my pain in my life is not my fault. Maybe it's not my fault. Why can't I get it together? Maybe it's not my fault. Maybe it's the fault of the fabric of the society that we live in.

This is from James Hillman, a psychoanalytic thinker: "It's only depressing if you're in the posture of the child and feeling powerless, and then there's still another big thing out there to blame and you can't do anything about it. But for me it doesn't feel depressing. It feels relieving, immensely relieving to know that it's not me that's at fault and I don't have to own and be the cause of all my misery. There's something fundamentally wrong in society and this relieves me of the blame, first of all. And second of all, it relieves me of the guilt. And third, it excites me, draws my attention outside to more than myself. That's not depressing."

So he's a psychotherapist and he thinks a lot about therapy. Therapy could be causing depression as much as curing it. So everything he says about therapy we can say about the Dharma and practice. Therapy could be causing depression as much as curing it, because the classic symptoms of depression are remorse, a concentration on oneself and repetition. "What's wrong with me? How did it get this way? I shouldn't have done that." Feeling poor and broke and without energy. In other words, a withdrawal of libido from the world. The moment you're focusing back on the world as dysfunctional, you're drawing attention to the world and that's not depressing.

He also, in conversation with a guy called James Ventura—fascinating conversation to read—they're talking about different kinds of therapy situations. It's not just your parents, your childhood, or your relationship with your marriage. There is a dysfunction in the society that is affecting us.

And the second step is, I cannot repair it in myself, in my own relationships alone, because my problem is social dysfunction. So how is settling things with my wife going to repair the dysfunction of the general situation? That's a romantic delusion—that if we could just get our sex right, our conversations right, if I could just find the right relationship, if my little home could be perfect, could be safe, if I could find balance in my home, I'd be happy.

Talk to my kid, talk to my wife, quit drinking, get laid decently a couple of times a week, get on a decent diet, get exercise, make a little more money—then I would really be okay. Except you won't, because you still live in this crazy world of dysfunction that impinges on you and influences you and yours twenty-four hours a day. Where the school isn't right for my kids, where the food I eat is not right, where the air I breathe is not right, where the architecture in which I spend my time assaults me. The lighting and the chairs and the smells and the plastic are not right, where the words that I hear on TV and are printed in the newspaper are lies, where the people who are in charge of things are not right because they are hypocritical and hiding what they are really doing. So how can I ever get it right within my home and within my marriage?

One of the things we are saying is, you can't make a separate peace. You can't sign a peace treaty with the society through therapy, and I would add, or meditation, or dharma practice.

One of the things they talk about, say for example, working with an eating disorder—people go to a group and discuss and support each other with an eating disorder. But actually you have to include in that conversation, in my group from now on, we must talk about agribusiness, fertilizers, pesticides, packaging, advertising, school lunches, fast foods, diets. We have to talk about the entire thing because that's the situation, that's what's impinging.

So, meditator is revolutionary. Turning in, turning out.

Caroline Lucas, MP, said—I heard her speak and she was calling for national acts of civil disobedience from an MP. Cool. I don't know. You decide what it means. Meditator is revolutionary. You decide what that means for you. I need to look at my stuff. Definitely I need to look at my stuff. That's what we're doing. We're really looking at my pain and my stuff.

One of the words that dharma means, the original word dharma, also one of its meanings is duty. It's interesting. One of its meanings is duty. So we think, what is my duty in life? What is my duty to my family? My parents as they grow old, my children, my spouse, my partner, whatever it is. What's my duty? Duty can be a heavy word for us though. But what is my larger duty or my larger love and the movement of my larger love?

So all this to me very much affects dharma practice and how I feel I need to think about and relate to dharma teaching. This is James Hillman again. If you've never heard of him, he was head of the Jung Institute in Zurich. So he was at the head of Jungian psychotherapy world for ten years or something. He was head of their educa-

tion department. And he's totally embedded in the psychotherapeutic culture for decades. He's probably in his late eighties now. And he comments a lot on that culture, but from within. So it's not an outsider.

And he says, suppose that we entertain the idea—he's a very radical thinker—suppose we entertain the idea that psychotherapy makes people mediocre. And suppose we entertain the idea that the world is in extremis, suffering an acute, perhaps fatal disorder at the edge of extinction. Then I would claim that what the world needs most is radical and original extremes of feeling and thinking in order for its crisis to be met with equal intensity. The supportive and tolerant understanding of psychotherapy is hardly up to the task. It produces counterphobic attitudes to chaos, marginality and extremes.

Strong words now. Therapy as sedation, benumbing, anesthesia so that we calm down, relieve stress, relax, find acceptance, balance, support, empathy, the middle ground, mediocrity. Strong words.

But everything that's said there, I have to ask myself as a dharma teacher, am I supporting that? Is that what I'm in the business of doing? I have to be careful what I say. I feel I really need to be asking myself these questions. What am I modeling as a dharma teacher? Am I modeling a kind of nice security of fitting nicely in as a well-respected citizen?

Am I modeling that? Well-adapted, well-trained, well-tamed.

So again, I might imagine as a meditator—I've been meditating, I'm conscious because that's what meditators do, we're into consciousness—I imagine then that I'm immune to the effects of all this insidious value manipulation. Do I imagine that, and what am I going to do about it?

This reflection comes from Bhikkhu Bodhi, a monk and translator of the original Buddhist texts: "The special challenge facing Buddhism in our age is to stand up as an advocate of justice in the world, a voice of conscience for those victims of social, economic and political injustice who cannot stand up for themselves. This is a deeply ethical challenge marking a watershed in the modern expression of Buddhism."

The Buddha said the gift of the Dharma is the highest gift you can give someone. But what is the Dharma? What is it?

To me the Dharma is about values. So when I'm teaching the Dharma, I'm also teaching about values—values that matter, values that go deep. What that means is if you, if I, want to give the gift of the Dharma, it means speaking up about values. It means engaging this debate, starting a debate in the culture about values, a deep revolution in the discourse about values in our culture.

But this is hard. I don't have any simple answers at all. I'm fascinated and flabbergasted at the complexity of it all and the difficulty of it all. Sometimes it seems like we need a long view somehow. And also our time is running out, and we need a long view.

James Ventura relates a lovely passage from a conversation. He says just around when his kid was turning thirteen, "My kid came home one night after dark, sat on the couch"—and think of a thirteen-year-old boy where the sensibility is still there, the tenderness is still there, and the eyes are opening at that age and the adventuring is happening. This tenderness and openness of sensibility is going out to the world and exploring the world.

"He came home one night after dark, sat on the couch and in a kind of fury suddenly burst out with, 'It's fucked. It's so fucked, man. The whole thing is fucking fucked. What do you do in this world, man?' What could I say to him? That things are going to be alright when they're not? That it'll be okay when he grows up and gets a job when it won't?"

"I got a little crazy and impassioned and I said something like this: That we are living in a dark age, and we are not going to see the end of it. Nor are our children, nor probably our children's children. And our job, every single one of us, is to cherish whatever in the human heritage we love, and to feed it and keep it going and pass it on. Because this dark age isn't going to go on forever. And when it stops, those people are going to need the pieces that we pass on. They are not going to be able to build a new world without us passing on whatever we can—ideas, art, knowledge, skills, or just plain old fragile love. How we treat people, how we help people, that's something to be passed on."

Maybe you know the story: Once upon a time, two masons worked on a building site. A passing pilgrim asked the first what he was doing. "I'm just chipping away at another block of rock until payday on Friday," the man replied. The pilgrim turned to the second who said, "I'm building a great cathedral that will not be finished until long after I'm gone."

We need that long view.

And what's the difference? It's so easy for fear to come up in relationship to all this. I've heard fellow Dharma practitioners, seasoned Dharma practitioners say, "I don't get involved in all that because it's just going down the road of fear."

But what's the difference between fear and concern? What's the difference between being afraid and being concerned? There's a big difference. To me, concern has stability, rootedness, strength and balance in it, which fear does not.

And the same person also said, "I don't go there because it just seems like a lot of anger, getting angry."

But again I ask, what's the difference between anger and ill will?

Ill will is when I want to hurt someone, when I want to put someone down and make them suffer. We could say anger is energized responsiveness at something that's not right—when I don't want to hurt anyone. Out of all that can come a fearlessness.

That's possible for us, that there can be a fearlessness in relationship to all this, just as much as in relationship to our emotions, also in relationship to the world situation.

There was a practitioner called Jesse Maceo, and there was an interview with him ages ago. He's interesting because he takes quite strong stands. He refused to pay taxes in the US because of military funding through taxes. When asked to explain himself, he basically said, "The deeper I go into my practice, the less I'm willing to behave in ways that diminish my sense of purpose on this earth."

He takes a really strong stand. So I don't know what that means for you. I know that part of practice is taking risks—that's for sure. To deepen in practice involves taking risks. And taking risks and insight feed each other. The more insight I have, the more risks I can take. The more risks I take, the more insight I get. They're mutually supportive.

I don't know what that looks like for you. Perhaps you feel a lot about this stuff I'm talking about, or perhaps you feel a little bit. But you might also notice that in certain groups or situations or with friends there can be a fear or hesitancy or reluctance to speak up—that it becomes uncomfortable in the room or that they might think you're such and such or whatever. Fear of speaking out. Is that something that I need to be constrained by? Or can I be radical? Can I let my voice sing out? My concerns sing out?

Hannah Arendt, writing after the Holocaust, was a commentator on the Holocaust and other things. She wrote: "There was once a wicked time when intellectuals grew feeble-minded and declared life to be the highest good. But death begins his reign of terror precisely when life becomes the highest good." She goes on to say, "If you are no longer willing to die for anything, you will die for having done nothing."

She's talking about the Holocaust, but why I bring that up is—what's going to give me a freeing perspective on this, a powerful perspective and relationship with all this?

Psychological studies also recently show that if you think about death a little bit, just a little bit, you tend to get more selfish and more self-interested. Being reminded of death tends to stimulate self-interest and selfishness and self-protection. But thinking about death a lot, about your mortality, has the opposite effect. It releases us—we let go of self-interest and self-imprisonment.

So the contemplation of our mortality actually is quite central here. It relativizes the whole relationship with self and other and existence. That's a factor—less self-focused values. Obviously the practices that we're doing and developing this capacity to hold what's moving through. So I can hold my own individual pain. Eventually maybe I can hold this bigger pain too. It's possible. It doesn't mean it's not going to feel like a lot, but it's possible. Absolutely possible.

And we haven't talked about this yet on the retreat—there are these very deep teachings of emptiness in the tradition. A whole re-understanding of the nature of existence and reality. And that brings with it equanimity, deep equanimity, deep spaciousness, deep strength and deep courage in relationship to all this.

So I want to finish just with some words from Martin Luther King. I was in London some months ago, and I met an artist who was also a bit of a journalist working in environmental areas. She had been to some conference with lots of dignitaries—kings and queens and world leaders—and they were discussing nuclear disarmament. But every time they talked about nuclear issues, they kept prefacing it with "It's the second most urgent problem of humanity," the first one being climate change.

So when Martin Luther King said this, I think he was talking obviously about civil rights but also about the threat of nuclear catastrophe in the 60s. But to me it applies as strongly today.

"This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed non-conformists. The saving of our world from pending doom will come not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a non-conforming minority. Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted."

These words feel so relevant to our present moment. Whether we're facing the existential threat of climate change or the ongoing challenges of social justice and human dignity, the call remains the same: we need those who are willing to step outside conventional ways of seeing and being.

The dharma path itself is a form of creative maladjustment—a willingness to question the assumptions that most people take for granted about happiness, security, and what makes life meaningful. When we cultivate mindfulness, when we develop loving-kindness for all beings, when we see through the illusion of separation, we become beautifully maladjusted to a world that operates primarily from greed, hatred, and delusion.

This is not about being different for the sake of being different, but about being transformed by wisdom and compassion in ways that allow us to respond rather than react, to love rather than fear, to serve the wellbeing of all life rather than just our narrow self-interest.

The dedicated circle of transformed non-conformists that our world needs are those who have done the inner work—who have faced their own suffering with courage, who have cultivated genuine equanimity, and who can therefore offer something genuinely healing to our troubled world.

Shall we have some silent time together?

CHAPTER 247

The Brahmavihāras and the Climate Challenge

Rob Burbea · 52 min

In this profound dharma talk, Ayya Santacitta addresses one of our time's most challenging issues: how to practice with climate anxiety and environmental crisis. Drawing from her own meditation experience, she demonstrates how the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes) - mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity) - provide essential tools for meeting overwhelming global circumstances with wisdom rather than despair.

Ayya Santacitta emphasizes that true dharma practice cannot ignore the larger context of our planetary crisis. She guides practitioners through the progression of the brahmavihāras: first establishing mettā to calm the anxious heart, then opening with karuṇā to the genuine suffering present, finding muditā in the beauty that still exists, and finally cultivating upekkhā - the broad perspective that sees both ultimate and conventional truth. Like the Buddha caring for the sick monk covered in excrement, we must respond with compassion to our ailing planet while understanding the deeper nature of impermanence.

The talk integrates traditional Buddhist teachings with contemporary environmental awareness, showing how the Noble Eightfold Path's right intention - including thoughts of renunciation and non-harm - applies directly to our consumption patterns and lifestyle choices. Ayya Santacitta encourages practitioners to neither turn away from difficult realities nor become paralyzed by them, but to use Buddhist tools to transform climate anxiety into skillful action grounded in wisdom and love.

Namo'etassa bhagavato arahato sammasambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhutassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambhutassa. Buddhaṃ tamaṃ saṅghaṃ namassami.

This is my first time here at this group. It's not my first time in the monastery, but my first time coming to this group. I want to thank you all for your welcome, and it is very lovely to see this room filled with people. When I was first sitting here, I thought most of these people will probably have a very long practice because I know that James's group has been going for a very long time. Then I realized there are a lot of people here for the first time. So there's probably quite a mixture of folks—very seasoned practitioners and those just dipping in and beginning. It's lovely to have that mix.

It's very inspiring to see so many people interested in the practice who are here at this time in the world. I think it's very important that there is a real deep interest in the practice, in the Buddha's path, because we're in quite turbulent times now. They say there's a Chinese curse: "May you be born in interesting times." We're certainly living in interesting times. Whether it's a curse or a blessing depends on what we do with it. It depends on how we meet it.

When we first start to practice, we begin by learning to train the mind a little bit, settle the mind, focus the mind. In doing that, we see how it's pulled here and there—the tendencies, the particular tendencies we have. Maybe we have a lot of sensual desire and we're always pulled out into beautiful things, delicious things. Or we might have a lot of ill will and we always see what's wrong with the situation or what's wrong with a person or what's wrong with what's being said. Or we may be delusional, get confused easily, or get spun out into wonderful dreams that can't quite get realized.

When we start to practice meditation, we get to know these different tendencies of our own mind. We've all got different leanings and different ways those manifest. We get to know the parts, the volition of the mind that pulls us around. Before we get a handle on it, we're just following those forces.

As we continue the practice, we start to see: "Oh, I want to sit for thirty minutes and my mind is being pulled into wanting to do some really nice thing somewhere else. I don't want to be here." Or it's lost in a sense of aversion because our seat isn't comfortable enough, our body hurts, it's really irritating, or it's too noisy—that crow outside is distracting us. We get lost in these mind states. But as we practice meditation, we start to see those mind states. The more that we see them, the more of a handle we have. We have a choice. We don't have to be driven by them anymore.

Even though we get caught—we forget and we get caught up—then we have to remind ourselves again. That's all very much part of the practice, part of the training: to come back and start again, and remind ourselves of our potential.

I always like to reflect on the fact that the Buddha was a human being. He was born from his mother's womb. He was nursed at his mother's breast and then at his aunt's breast when his mother died. He was raised with food and exercise and education. He grew to be a man and then he went on his spiritual quest. He went to quite extremes on his spiritual quest before his enlightenment. But he's a human being as we are.

What he discovered—the awakened mind that he discovered—is not unique to the Buddha. The way of finding it was unique to the Buddha, but the awakeness itself is our birthright, our inherent nature. We can easily forget that. We get caught up in the per-

sonality, the stories, the scenarios of our lives. Maybe we come and practice and we're just trying to get a little bit more peaceful or a little bit less angry or a little bit clearer. That's good. It's good to do that. But not to forget that the actual legacy of the Buddha is much greater than that. It is a path of awakening. We all have the potential to fully awaken, and we find that moment by moment through training our minds.

So as I've witnessed the process of this practice, we start—often, I'll say we, it might be different for you—but often we begin with a lot of confusion, a lot of chaos of mind, a lot of maybe strong emotions. And then we start to meditate, start to train the mind. And maybe we can even have some quite good concentration, so we can drop away from the turbulence of mind into some very pleasant states. And then we come out of those pleasant states and oh, there's the world again, challenging me, irritating me, provoking me.

So the practice is balancing. We have to have enough collectedness of mind that we're not just wandering, the mind isn't just wandering here and there. But we also need the continuity. So not only to sit in meditation, have a nice experience, and then not worry too much about what you're doing the rest of the time, but to use the practice in a continuous way.

So it might be that the meditation, particular sitting, is not very focused, a little bit distracted. The mind is agitated. And then we might think, oh, I didn't have a good sit. And then another time we sit and we go into a state of bliss and the body feels really relaxed and everything falls away for a while. Oh, I had a really good sit. That was really good. So it's like, this is actually, I had a pleasant sit and I had an unpleasant sit. That's true. But a good sit and a not good sit, that maybe is not so true.

So what makes a meditation really valuable is the awareness that we bring to it. So if we sit for forty minutes and we're sitting with a lot of, let's say, agitation or anxiety, then if the awareness is really present, there's knowing. This is the state of the mind. The mind is agitated, it's restless, it's anxious. And then we can bring a sense of well-wishing towards ourselves. We can use the breath to help calm. And it may or may not subside—the anxiety or the agitation may or may not subside. But the important thing is that we're staying present with what's going on. We're keeping the awareness with what's going on.

So awareness itself, it doesn't have a preference whether what it's aware of is pleasant or painful, dull or interesting. The awareness is embracing all of it. It is fully present with all of it. And this is the practice that we need to cultivate, the practice of strengthening awareness.

So I'm very aware that at this time we have this interesting situation, this challenging situation, where we take on the practice and it's about calming and getting more clarity and living in a more skillful way. And then what can arise is a sense of... We might have like a peaceful meditation, but there's a certain sense of kind of tension or anxiety. I think it's a very, very common problem, a common phenomena now at this time is people live with a lot of anxiety or depression.

And when I look at the situation of the world that we're in at this time, I think, well, that's very healthy. That's very appropriate. Because it's pretty anxiety-provoking, what we're in the midst of. And for a long time there's been a kind of a denial of what's going on. And I was very encouraged to hear our President Obama actually kind of say the climate change is a reality. We don't have time for meeting with the Flat Earth Society. This is the truth. We are in a very challenging situation.

I think one of the difficulties is if we let it in, it's so overwhelming that we feel that we're just going to fall apart and we don't know what to do. So we'd rather just not really let it in. Let's just keep working with this heart here. May all beings be well. Try not to do too much flying and use ecological washing-up liquid and everything will be all right. And it helps. It's good that we do those things. But it's not... You know, there is more than that.

So the other week I was just sitting with this feeling of the tremors and the overwhelm and the anxiety that arises in the heart when you really take in the situation that we're in as a planet. And the sense of, you know, a few generations in my grandmother's time, it was normal to assume that you'd probably have children and they could have children and they could have children and on it would go if you were that way inclined to have children. And now it's a little bit different. You know, you have children and you wonder what are they going to be growing up into? What are they going to have to deal with?

Our children or our grandchildren—what are they going to have to meet in this world? Are they going to be able to survive even? This is a very different situation than we've ever known as a species before. We might have encountered it in pockets, but not at this global level. This is not a small thing.

To take this in is scary and overwhelming. If we absorb the whole picture, if we consume too much scientific information about all of it, we can become paralyzed and catatonic because it's simply too much. Yet I think it's vital not to turn away from this situation. When we remain in our little bubble, doing our practice while this bigger pic-

ture unfolds—something we don't really want to acknowledge but know is there—we create tremendous stress for ourselves. This cannot truly be a path of awakening. As long as we're keeping so much out, it isn't really a full path of awakening.

As I was sitting with this feeling—we'd been speaking in our little community about this intense situation—we went into our daily meditation. I sat there with this turbulent heart, observing it, and I could see that this state wouldn't actually help anything. I couldn't make wise decisions from this place. I couldn't take skillful action. It only created more stress.

Sitting in meditation, what immediately arose was the qualities of loving kindness—soothing the heart with metta: "May I be well. May I be free from all suffering. May all beings be well. May all beings be free from all suffering." I connected fully with that intention, and as I did, the heart began to calm and settle. But you don't want to stop there.

From that foundation came a natural progression. The metta, the loving kindness, provided the support to move into compassion. Compassion means opening to the suffering—opening to the suffering of others, of oneself, being present with it, allowing the heart to open. Because there was the support of metta, because the heart was calmed, it could open to the suffering without being thrown around by it. There was a foundation on which this could be felt.

I let my heart feel that painful feeling. I felt with the anger of an eleven-year-old I'd spoken with recently about environmental issues—the rage she felt at being a little girl growing up in this situation. I took in her anger, the fear of grandparents, the anxiety of probably all of us caught in this mesmerizing way of living that's difficult to escape. We're all part of it. There's actually no finger to point—we're all part of it.

Taking that in, feeling it: Yes, this is what's happening. The body is here, there's a certain foundation, and this is unfolding. Then I moved naturally to mudita. At first I wondered: What joy could I feel in the midst of this rather tragic situation? Where is the joy in that?

Then I thought of the sound of wind in the trees, the creatures living on planet Earth, the movement of river water. I thought of human beings with their dreams and intentions and love for their dear ones. Animals and birds do the same—they care for and love their families, their young. Thinking of this, of the beauty of this planet...

This planet appears like a jewel when viewed from space—a beautiful blue, green, and white sphere suspended in the cosmos. Simply feeling this sense of mudita for the beauty of our world, for the love that exists throughout this realm of sentient beings, naturally brings a sense of uplift and joy.

Then there is upekkhā, equanimity. This is a tremendously important quality—I think of equanimity as a very high form of love, a pure form of love. Equanimity involves looking from a broad perspective, not from a distance in the sense of distancing oneself from what's happening, but rather gaining the expansive view of understanding.

I'm reminded of the pelicans I watch near Ocean Beach. While other birds flap frantically and people rush about on the shore below, these ancient creatures—survivors since the time of dinosaurs—cruise peacefully along, doing their thing. They glide slowly, then descend to skim the water's surface before rising again, unhurried and serene. To me, they embody the manifest symbol of upekkhā. Having survived for eons, they demonstrate how that quality of maintaining a broader perspective, of not being caught in the rush of circumstances, possesses endurance and lasting value.

The Sanskrit root of upekkhā literally means "having a broader view." When we look at our situation with the mind of a mouse, everything becomes terrifyingly overwhelming. We don't want to venture out our front door or engage with anything because we're examining life from such close proximity that we become paralyzed by the intensity.

But when we adopt the view of the pelican—the broad perspective—we begin to see the changing nature of all things. We can zoom out into the cosmos and observe our beautiful planet Earth within this solar system, within this galaxy, which itself exists among perhaps two or three billion other galaxies in the universe. The scale is mind-boggling, inconceivable. This vast context helps us understand our place in the larger scheme of existence.

Similarly, when we examine life not with mouse-like anxiety but with microscopic precision, we observe the constant flux of all phenomena. Everything remains in perpetual motion. What I call "me" never arrives anywhere permanent—it continuously changes. Everything functions this way, always.

Even Berkeley Buddhist Monastery has arisen at this particular time and exists in the process of being Berkeley Buddhist Monastery. Eventually it will become something else. It is already decaying and will continue to decay, perhaps crumbling, with parts potentially repurposed or a forest growing here one day. This represents the nature of all existence—constant transformation.

Nothing can be permanently fixed or reach a point where everything remains safe and settled forever. Life simply doesn't operate that way. You might wonder, given this reality, why we should concern ourselves with anything at all. Why bother caring whether our grandchildren will have a habitable world, if everything changes anyway?

What's the problem?

So this is like the ultimate view. And then there's the conventional view. The Buddha brought these two together—the ultimate and the conventional—like two palms of the hand. You could say the ultimate view is like the wisdom view, cutting through, seeing the true nature of things: empty, changing, constantly changing. And then the compassionate view is seeing the sentience.

Here we are, sentient beings. We can pretend that we're empty, but we're sentient. We're both, actually. We're sentient beings, so we feel. We're influenced by, we pick up, we respond. And not just human beings, but every living being on this planet. So compassion meets the sentience—it meets life with tenderness.

There's a story in the suttas which you may be familiar with about the Buddha as he's wandering. He comes to a group of monks and most of them are sitting in meditation, practicing. But there's this one monk who's inside, lying in his own dysentery. He's lying in his own excrement. He's alive, he's living, but he's very sick.

So the Buddha asks the monks, "Why is this monk lying here in his own excrement?"

And they say, "Oh, you know, he's had dysentery for ages. He's sick. He can't do anything. He's of no use. So we just leave him there and we just get on with our practice."

The Buddha is with Ananda, his attendant, and so he asks Ananda, "Please get me some water and a cloth." So Ananda gets him some water and a cloth, and the Buddha bathes this monk. He takes off his robes, he bathes his body, cleans him of excrement, of dysentery—filthy, stinking stuff. He bathes him, gives him fresh sheets, makes sure he's comfortable.

And then he says to the monks, "You must take care of your fellow monks." He uses the example that now we don't have family because we go forth from home to homelessness. So he's saying now you don't have family—well, you maybe have family—so we have to take care of each other. You can't just leave people like that. You have to take care. Nobody else is going to come and do it. You have to do it.

The Buddha knew very, very deeply—as deeply as it gets—that everything is in a state of flux, that all that is born must die, everyone that is born must die, everything that comes into form even must break up. The Buddha knew that more deeply than anybody else in the world. And yet he responded to that sick monk in the way of: you have to take care. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. You have to take care.

So this is how it is. We're here on this planet Earth, which is maybe a little bit in the state of that monk. There's a lot of pollution. There's also a lot of taking. There's a lot of—resources are being used up. And there's a culture of taking and throwing away. I watch it every day. I see people buying drinks that last for maybe five or ten minutes in plastic cups which last for thousands of years. They have their drink, throw it in the bin. Don't even manage to get it into the recycling bin. This is the culture that we live in. It's asleep to the realities of change and of impermanence.

So we're in this situation where it could be in our lifetime—it's quite possible in our lifetime—that we meet with very extreme change. And if we pretend it's not going to happen, it's not going to help.

If we get overwhelmed and frightened and freaked out, it's not going to help. So we need to learn how to open with awareness, open to the way things are. Open to the sentient reality, the reality of our vulnerability, of our mortality. And open also to the ultimate reality, that on an ultimate level, everything's okay. Everything is in fact perfect, doing its thing. We were never going to survive anyway. We were born, we go through our life, we're going to die—that's how it goes. But meanwhile, we take care, the best care we can, out of love, out of compassion, out of understanding our sentience.

So I really hope that you will not just hear this talk and go home and say, "Oh yeah, I heard a talk by a nun," but actually take it into your lives and see: What can I do in my life—even if you're already doing a lot—what can I do in my life that brings this a little bit more deeply, a little bit more clearly, where I can live from a place of increased integrity?

Like I say, we're all part of this. Nobody's got clean hands here. We're all part of it because we've grown up in a culture that didn't actually know. And now we're starting to wake up to the effects of our actions, cause and effect. Once you know, then that's a whole different thing. Then we have a certain responsibility to meet this situation. We all have different strengths, different qualities, different abilities, different connections. So we'll all do what we do in different ways. But I just really ask you, implore you, and hope that you will really take this in and not just put it on the shelf because it's too uncomfortable or because you don't quite know how to meet it.

Let the discomfort come in. It's not going to kill you. Let the discomfort come in. Don't get overwhelmed. Stay in your body. Keep breathing. Keep breathing. But let the discomfort come in. And then use the tools that the Buddha gave, the *Brahma Viharas*, those four beautiful tools of the heart, to guide your heart in the right direction and strengthen your heart and mind. So it's all Dhamma. None of it is other than Dhamma. And it's how we meet it that is important.

So you may be familiar with the Eightfold Path. The Buddha speaks in terms of right intention. He speaks about thoughts or intentions of renunciation, of non-harm and non-ill will. So non-harm can be like wishing for the well-being of others, not wanting to see others experience harm. It's loving kindness, compassion, and non-ill will.

So getting angry at the big powers—it's okay if it gets you motivated to do something, but it's not a place to stay. It's not to just remain angry. That doesn't help. So to use the energy that this brings up, guide it in the right direction. Don't just get caught in aversion, anger, resentment. It's not going to help.

And then the intentions of renunciation. Just looking in your life: In what ways can I give up a little more? Because if we all give up a bit of comfort now, we can save a lot of discomfort in the future, whether it's for ourselves or for others.

Just to see—I mean, I'm a nun, so I give up things that you might take for granted, but I still enjoy comfort. I like nice things. I'm not beyond sense pleasure. But still, to bring that thought when you're going to go and buy something: Do I need it? How would it be if I didn't have it? Maybe, what if the money I'm going to spend on this big drink, I just have some water and then give that to some other more useful cause?

So just to bring in those thoughts of renunciation, intentions of renunciation. And renunciation, the true renunciation, it's not giving up to be pious and be really holy, but it's about giving up—

what is good in order to receive what is much better. That's actually how it works. Otherwise nobody would be doing it. I wouldn't have been doing this for twenty-something years if it wasn't like that. You give up what is good, what gives you some happiness, in order to open to what is much, much greater than that.

So I offer these words for your encouragement and reflection. And we have about maybe ten minutes if anyone would like to ask questions about anything I've said or share anything in particular on this theme.

[A participant raises their hand and speaks]

Thank you very much for the talk because I live with this discomfort that you're talking about all the time. I actually was really serious back in December—I had a lot of anxiety, just an extreme amount of anxiety. But I have a meditation practice and a yoga practice that I do on a really regular basis. And now I feel like it's been about six months or over six months, and I wasn't so in the grip of it, really trying, like feeling like I might kind of drown in it and just keeping my head above water. And so with my practice and with feeling, using my mind and my feelings, I have been able to get to a place where I feel like that grip is loosening somewhat. But it is still very challenging to face the situation that we're in. So thank you.

Thank you.

Could you elaborate more about the sunflowers, purifying things?

Well, I can only say—I don't know a lot—but as far as I know, when you plant sunflower seeds in the ground, or little seedlings in the ground, if the ground is toxic... I mean, I don't actually know which toxins, so obviously some things will kill sunflowers, but if the ground has toxicity in it, then the plant transforms that. So the sunflowers will take in the nutrients from the earth and they—I'm not sure what they put back—but they somehow transform that toxicity and produce these beautiful flowers.

I actually don't know enough about it to give you a proper answer. There might be someone else here, but apparently there was a young man who does know better than I do, who had the idea: wouldn't it be a nice symbol if people on this walk held a sunflower to remind that this is possible? And then to actually plant—his idea was to plant sunflower seeds there on the site, which may not happen because it's a privately owned company and all that. But there will be, I think, a garden somewhere nearby where sunflowers will be planted as a symbol of that possibility for transformation.

I just wanted to say I really appreciated how you shared the fruit of your actual practice about this. It was very meaningful and very close to what it is when you sit with these kinds of questions. So thank you.

Could you tell us a little bit more about your monastery that you're trying to set up?

Yes, so at the moment we, as I say, live in a little house in the Sunset District near the ocean. And we came to San Francisco—the idea was this was like a little transition time. We thought maybe a year maximum, two years, and then we would move to the country. So we've been there for three and a half years now. And it has been a wonderful place. It's a lovely place. And I do encourage you to come and have a look for yourselves.

But we are actually forest nuns by practice. So forest nuns meaning naturally we would live in nature. Nature being like a support for the practice in terms of quietude. And also when you live in nature and observe nature, it is teaching the Dhamma all the time. The teaching is going on all the time.

And there's something about being in a city, even though we're right on the edge of it, we're on the kind of quiet edge of it. You know, it's mind-made. It's constructed from people's thoughts and intentions. And nature is kind of from the mind of nature rather than the mind of nature through the human being.

So, you know, I was just recently co-teaching a retreat in the wilderness. And while I was there, it was so clear—this process, the ever-changing process of nature was just so clear. And that shift that I was talking about between the emptiness that everything is—it's kind of emptiness, sort of flux—and the sentience, because all of these swallows were having chicks and the little chicks were flying and we were watching and they were kind of like, "Oh look, they got their first flight."

So there was the sentience, the kind of marvel of the way they would sort of snuggle up together and the way the mother and the father would take care and the whole kind of process of that sentient aspect. And then recognizing this is a constant changing process. It never arrives anywhere. It's changing all the time.

And then coming back—and we were teaching this retreat just a few hundred yards from the ocean, so out in the wilderness on the big flats of the Lost Coast. Then I came back to San Francisco to our little monastery, which is almost exactly the same distance from the ocean as we were there. And yet we're in a house, there's cars, there's music going on around, there's people, there's all this stuff going on. There's a computer, there's a telephone.

So it's a very different scene.

By our practice we're forest nuns and we naturally live in a rural environment, but because we've come over here as foreigners really to start a monastery, we wanted to be in a central place where we could get to know people and make contacts. So we've been there for three and a half years and we're now actively looking to move into a rural environment.

During this month, we're looking at three different areas. Actually today I came back from Sonora. We're also going to look out in the Placerville, Sutter Creek area. And we're also looking in Sonoma County. So those are the three areas that we've been exploring.

One of the reasons that we want to move from where we are—it's not because it's not a nice place—but because we're a community of three nuns and we have one lay steward. And we have requests from women who are interested to live as nuns, who would like to try out the life. We don't really have anywhere to put them. So we're looking for a place where it's of a similar price but with more rooms and a bit of land so that flow can start to happen.

"Could you say a few words about how Ajahn Amaro is doing? I was so disappointed when he left here and went back to England. I probably sent him at least 75 articles because I thought he was bored up there in the sticks. He's got a bit of work to do. And I just wonder how he's doing."

I haven't had a lot of contact with him actually, so I can't tell you how he's doing right now. But as far as I know, he's just come back from a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash. He went on pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and he's just back very recently. And he did come to see us in October last year. He was doing very well, very well indeed.

The Amaravati Buddhist Monastery is a complex place. It's a big place. There's a lot of people coming through. There's a lot of people living there. And it's pretty complex. And he's doing a great job in pulling it all together and getting some cohesion there. I think he's far from bored! He seemed to really be very happy and enjoying the challenge of it all.

"So speaking of Ajahn Amaro and Amaravati, is there any change in the status of women? Because my understanding is one of the things he's going to be doing was making some change around that. Has anything happened that you know of?"

Well... I know that's a big subject. It's a big subject. I should just make it clear that I trained in that community and I was part of that community for 18 years. But since I've been in America, we actually left that community in order to take full ordination. So I'm no longer officially part... Our little monastery is no longer officially part of that lineage because we decided to take full ordination, which is not possible in that lineage.

So I think around the time that we were leaving—it wasn't the cause of our leaving, but it just happened to coincide—there was a lot of difficulties between the monks and the nuns, and the nuns' position was pretty difficult. It was not good, which is why I ended up leaving the lineage and quite a number of people left that community of nuns and a small number of monks also because of the real difficulties in the gender discrimination.

And so far as I know it's on a day-to-day level much better for the nuns now in terms of it's not so challenging as it was during those last couple of years. But no, there are no actual changes made in terms of the status of nuns and so on. It's the same. But you don't get your nose rubbed in it every day. So yeah.

"We've just got a couple of minutes. Don't ask me a big question."

"Can you talk about your process of transitioning from being a civilian to being a nun?"

It's kind of a big question. I'll try and tell you really short. I came across, I kind of went through, I had quite an insight when I was about 13 into death, where I just realized that we're all going to die at some point, and that this whole process that we're in, whatever we do, is going to end in death. And that was kind of a bit of a wake-up call. And it was quite a difficult thing to take on at that age because you're supposed to be preparing for the future. It's all about preparing for the future and becoming somebody. And it was like, oh, and then we're going to die. So what is it all about?

So I had that when I was 13. And then fortunately, I got very depressed from that.

and probably a few other things too. And then when I was 14, by my good fortune, I came across the Four Noble Truths—the very heart of the Buddha's teaching—in a book. That really changed my life because it offered a sense of the way out of suffering. You don't have to wait until you die, but you can find it here and now somehow.

When I read that, I would say from that day on, I had faith that the Buddha knows the way out of suffering. I didn't really understand how to find it, but I just trusted that over time I would start to understand it.

Then when I was 20, I met someone who had just come back from Thailand and had stayed with monks there. I didn't know that there were monastics alive at this time—I thought they had died out centuries ago. When I heard that, I remember saying within about five minutes, "That's what I want to do. I want to be a Buddhist nun." Sometime later on, after I've enjoyed myself a bit more.

I did have a little time to enjoy myself, but I must say it was shorter than I planned. I thought I'd ordain in my thirties. I was imagining thirty-six as my ideal age. But the calling was very, very strong. When I was twenty-two, I first visited a monastery and had just a feeling of coming home. Then I was a bit frightened because I felt I was much too young. So I managed to stave it off for a couple of years.

When I was twenty-four, I went to live in the monastery for a year, knowing that it would be a one-way ticket. I left my partner, whom I loved very much. I said to him, "I think it's kind of a one-way ticket." He was like, "In a year, you'll be out"—because he'd also spent time in the monastery himself and knew how challenging it could be.

I actually had quite a difficult year. But at the end of that year, it was clear that I needed to carry on. And it just unfolded from there, really. It was a calling. In some ways I would say it wasn't my choice. Sometimes people ask why that particular lineage, why that tradition. It was a calling. It just fitted together. Perhaps it was karmic—I don't know what you could say.

I can say I'm very grateful that I had that opportunity. I have a lot of joy in my life and I really love to live as a nun. I'm very grateful also to have been received so well here, that we have been received so well in this country. It's not an easy path because we're kind of having to reclaim the path in a way—the nuns' community—but it's worthwhile.

Do you have a closing? Do you do a sharing of merit at the end? We have a chant that we do, but you won't know that chant probably, so how do you normally do it? We'll chant the sharing of blessings in English. If you don't know it, just align your heart with the intention. This is really bringing to mind the goodness of your practice, the effort it takes to continue in this practice, the fruits that you've gained through the practice, and that you share those generously and liberally with all beings.

Now let us chant the verses of sharing and aspiration:

Through the goodness that arises from my practice, may my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue, my mother, my father and my relatives, the sun and the moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world, may the highest devas and evil forces, celestial beings, guardian spirits of the earth and the Lord of death, may those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile, may all beings receive the blessings of my life. May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the deathless.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice and through this act of sharing, may all desires and attachments quickly cease and all harmful states of mind. Until I realize Nibbana, in every kind of birth, may I have an upright mind with mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor. May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.

The Buddha is my excellent refuge. Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma. The solitary Buddha is my noble guide. The Sangha is my supreme support. Through the supreme power of all these, may darkness and delusion be dispelled.

Maybe see you next week.

I'll be back next week, all being well.

Thank you for listening.

To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharma-seed.org.

CHAPTER 248

400 and Rising

Rob Burbea · 42 min

> *In this deeply personal dharma talk, Rob Burbea shares reflections from recent travels to Buddhist communities in the Pacific Northwest, weaving together observations about monastic life, encounters with nature, and the pressing reality of climate change. The title refers to atmospheric CO_2 levels reaching 400 parts per million - well beyond the safe level of 350 ppm.*
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> *Burbea explores how to apply Buddhist teachings, particularly the four brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity), to environmental grief and our collective responsibility for planetary destruction. He discusses the challenge of holding both ultimate truth (impermanence, anattā) and relative truth (our duty to care for sentient beings and the Earth), drawing on the Buddha's teaching about caring for sick monks as an analogy for tending to our ailing planet.*
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> *The talk emphasizes moving beyond spiritual bypassing or despair toward conscious engagement with climate reality, supported by mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and upekkhā. Burbea reflects on karma as both individual and collective inheritance, encouraging listeners to open their hearts to difficult truths while maintaining the mudita of appreciating life's beauty and potential for positive action.*

It's very lovely to see everyone here. There's a few new faces also, and it seems like a lot's been going on. There's been a lot going on for us over the last while.

We had a trip up to the Pacific Northwest. We drove up with Dennis and Claire and stopped off at Davis on our way, where we met Amanda and got a feel for the town of Davis, which is a lovely place. Then we drove up to Shasta Abbey, which sits just at the foot of Mount Shasta, where there's a very mature Buddhist Zen community of Western monks. They're women and men, and they're all known as monks there.

They've been going for quite some time. Some of them have been in the robes since 1971, I think, for the most senior. But most of them have been thirty or forty years in the robes. They have a real—it's very inspiring and beautiful to be in their presence. Very humble, warm-hearted, kind, dedicated people and celibate monastics living in a relatively remote monastery up in Mount Shasta.

When I was with them, I had a sense that they're like river rocks, you know—all the hard edges have been worn away where you can see all the colors and the grain of the character, but without all of the sharp edges that most of us still have. I can see that living in community for a long time, you have to work through a lot of the difficulties and opinions and views that we all have. You have to keep letting go and letting go and letting go until you soften, but it's softening in a strong way, not in a kind of flabby way. So it was very inspiring to go there and meet those who had been there before, just to spend a bit of time with that community and be very warmly received.

Then we went on to White Salmon, which is in Washington, just across the border into Washington State, and spent a few days near the Pacific Hermitage there. This is three monks living in a very beautiful little hermitage with five acres of land, and they're very well supported by the local community. They didn't know when they moved there that there would be many Buddhist practitioners, but once they arrived and started to teach, they discovered that there were many people in the town who meditated and who knew each other but didn't know that each other meditated. So then they brought everybody together, and they have quite a nice community that supports them. They go on alms run every day and have very good support there in the community.

We met them, and then we went down to Portland and met with the board who supported them to become established. We learned a few useful shortcuts from the board about how to not get into too much conflict, because they pointed out that there are visionaries and nuts-and-bolts people. The nuts-and-bolts people get really annoyed—this is like in life, you know. The nuts-and-bolts people, the people who just want to get on with things and do things step by step, get very frustrated with the visionaries because the visionaries may have a vision that's bigger than the nuts-and-bolts people can actually meet or feel would be possible. Then the visionaries get really frustrated with the nuts-and-bolts people because they feel like, "Come on, you know, there's so much potential, there's so much that can be done. If we just stay looking at every little nut and bolt, we're never going to get there."

At first they had quite a bit of conflict, and then they realized that what they needed to do was step in the shoes of the other. So the nuts-and-bolts people would look from the eyes of the visionaries and learn a little bit from them. And then the visionaries would step over into the shoes of the nuts-and-bolts people and learn a bit from them. In that way they were able to work together and support each other, and they've done an amazing job, I have to say. It's very inspiring.

Also while we were up there, we got in a few fun things. We went kayaking and saw a heron with two huge great chicks in her nest—enormous, great big things, big massive nest. Then we kayaked a little bit further and saw a bald eagle in her nest up on a tree. Then there were quite a number of what we didn't know were young—they were juvenile eagles. We thought they were female eagles actually, but they were juvenile, kind of brown and tawny with a little bit of white on the head but not much.

So we were watching these vast, huge, magnificent birds flying, and one came quite nearby. We could go in a little bit further in our boats and get close to the logs where it was standing and just watch this great, beautiful bird. It's the first time I've seen bald eagles. They're huge, magnificent birds, beautiful.

One of the attributes of an eagle is that it has the ability to see from a vast—it can fly very high. Some of them go very, very high. So it can see a big area from a large distance, so it can have the grand vision. And it can also focus down on the prey, so it can have detailed vision. So it has both of those qualities.

As we were kayaking, we were all there in our—I guess they're fiberglass maybe—kayaks and plastic paddles, and we had our little life vests on and everything. So it was like modern kayaking. But as we were going along, it gave me this sense of timelessness. I realized people have been traveling in this way along rivers and so on for thousands of years. Quietly. Being part of nature in that way. And seeing creatures in the way that we were seeing them. This was a normal thing at one time and probably still is in some places. And it was such a peace and a joy actually to be in that...

position where one is more quietly simply part of nature.

In the city, it's very mind-oriented and people-oriented. It's very different when a few people move out into the large space of nature, and you see your place in it all. As humans we're very vulnerable. We've lost a lot of the natural skills that we might have had at one time, and we need a lot of support in order to get even just to go out there for a while. So you get a feel for how vulnerable we are and how vast nature is.

For me in some ways it's reassuring to get that perspective again, because I think as human beings we've lost the plot a little bit. We've gotten into this grandiosity, and we've believed it quite deeply—that we are not part of nature, which is a misunderstanding, and that everything is here for us, and that we can control it.

We have learned to control nature to some degree: genetically modified food, the way animals are farmed now as a commodity rather than as living beings, and medicine, surgery, all kinds of things that we've learned to do that give us the illusion of being in control. We've been running on this one for quite a long time now, this perception of being superior in some way and in control.

Part of what has been very prominent in my heart over the last few weeks is some of the results of this misunderstanding that we've been operating from.

Emily and I went to a rally outside the city hall shortly after she arrived. It was very poorly attended—there were about forty people there. It was very small. It was to encourage the divestment of government money from fossil fuels, started by a student, with very inspiring young people there.

Bill McKibben, who some of you might have heard of and who established 350.org about five years ago, came and spoke. He's been going around the country to encourage and rally people to really wake up to the situation that we are in—not just to sit back and say, "Oh yes, it is difficult, what a shame, the poor polar bears," but to actually take it in and make a stand and try to start to change the course of events that we've been actively encouraging at one time and, for many people, maybe more passively allowing more recently.

At one time people didn't really understand the results of, for example, burning fossil fuels. It wasn't seen within the bigger context because we didn't have the bigger context. But certainly in my lifetime, the trip to the moon where people first saw the planet earth as a whole—we have a picture of it by our shrine—people started to see for the first time: "Oh, it's a whole planet. It's not just about us and them and this border and that border and that continent. It is one planet." This was 1969, quite a long time ago.

Somehow we're very slow in really getting to grips with the fact that it is one planet—a unique and beautiful planet. Meanwhile we're still in this illusion of separation, and it's very difficult to wake up out of. But if we don't, well, we'll see, but it will have very serious consequences.

Bill McKibben established this organization called 350.org. The number 350 is what is considered a safe level of carbon dioxide in the environment—350 parts per million is considered safe. When he started the organization, there were 390 parts per million, so the intention was to try to get it down to 350. About a week ago, it was announced that that number has just reached 400, and there's no obvious indication that it's going to go down. If anything, it's going to go up.

This is part of the context within which we are living, and we are all part of it in our different ways. None of us are free from contributing to this, and I think for most people we prefer not to look at it because we don't know what to do. Maybe we don't really want to change our lifestyle, and there are things that we know are not that great but we're going to do anyway because of this reason and that reason. I have those reasons myself. My family lives in the UK and I hope I will see them again, and that will mean flying, which adds quite largely to the carbon in the atmosphere. So there's this dilemma of being part of this destruction of the planet as we know it and yet not really knowing how to meet that.

While we were in Portland, we went to a teaching of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He was teaching at an environmental summit over a number of days, and we attended just one afternoon talk. He was full of joy—playful, light, a beautiful spirit—and he was also addressing quite serious issues. He particularly spoke about the importance of the feminine qualities. This isn't about women and men, but about the qualities of compassion, of nurturing, of listening, of dialogue, and how these need to be used at this time. We need to develop those at this time, and education—the importance of education.

For me, one of the most powerful things that happened on that day was on the way back. We were getting a ride with a Buddhist family who went to the Pacific heritage center that we'd visited—a couple with their eleven-year-old daughter and her eleven-year-old friend.

As we walked along, I was talking with them and asking how it was for them going to hear the Dalai Lama speaking about these things. They said, "Oh, he's really great, he's awesome. Dalai Lama, he's so cool." They were being a little bit polite with me because I'm a nun.

When I asked what they thought about what he was talking about, I said something along the lines of, "It's such a big thing, we don't really know how to meet it. We have to be able to feel the sense of fear and grief that arises when we look at the situation that we're all in together."

This one girl turned to me and said, "And anger."

And I was very touched by that response. I thought, here is this eleven-year-old girl, and her inheritance is that she's been born into this world at this time, which is looking really serious. At one point her father said, "It's so good that the girls are interested to come to something like this because they are the future, they are the change." As he said it, I thought, surely shouldn't we be the change? Shouldn't we be doing something about it now rather than waiting for them to grow up when it's already maybe too late?

These girls were very conscious of the situation they were living in, very consciously growing up in this reality of inheriting quite a big mess and not knowing—just as we don't know—what to do with it. My feeling is that for many people of our generation, we know about it, but we can forget about it. We can look the other way for long periods of time. But for somebody that age, they can't forget about it. It's very present. And that's really a good thing. It's something we can learn from because it is present. This is the context we're living in.

As we were sitting in meditation, this was quite strong in my heart. I did feel quite emotional about it. It's a very big thing. I was just sitting there thinking, well, what to do? How does the Buddha's teaching come into this? Because there are practical things one can do—there are certainly many petitions to be signed, which I've signed plenty of—but somehow we need to allow it into consciousness enough that it will move us to do something. I know there can be a fear of that or resistance to that, knowing that it's uncomfortable and we don't really want to have to go there.

This is a bit like not acknowledging the fact that we will one day—that this particular body we have now will one day fall apart. That's just a fact. So not acknowledging the bigger picture is like not acknowledging the truth of the way things are. And it is a relative truth. The world and us as sentient beings and separate beings is a relative truth—sensitive and vulnerable as having been born into this world.

The Buddha is pointing to the truth of impermanence, change or flux, and the truth of no-self. So that is ultimately true. There is no self. There is this process that we're all in, or are not in, if you really want to look at it. That is truth. And there is also the truth of these sentient beings who feel and influence each other and affect each other.

As a Buddhist, for quite a number of years before I was a nun, I was very much in that relative truth and very conscious of the effects that human beings are having on the planet. I often used to think that this planet Earth would be a much better place if we didn't have human beings on it. But over time I've come to really appreciate the human race, fortunately. Because we are a marvelous manifestation. We have great potential, incredible potential. There is a lot of good and beauty that I see again and again—in people here who come here, and also when we go out on the street. It's surprising how many acts of kindness and consideration and respect I see, not just towards me as a nun, but toward each other. Many. And it's very beautiful.

It's part of our purpose here, as human beings on the planet, to manifest those qualities. We also have the ability to reflect deeply. So that's also part of our purpose—to understand, to look deeply and understand the truth of the way things are. The human race is not a blight. It doesn't have to be a blight on this planet Earth. We have greater potential than that.

But it is very difficult to know what to do, how to meet it. People can feel a sense of overwhelm or anxiety or maybe self-blame when we start to really open to the situation that we are all in together, and the fact that our actions have influenced that and continue to.

As I was sitting in the meditation, I don't have an answer. Don't look at me waiting for an answer because I haven't got one. I wish I had—it would be wonderful—but I don't. But as I was sitting there in the meditation, what I could see was that a support to opening to this truth is to really bring to mind and use the four brahmavihāras.

So I was sitting there and my heart was feeling quite a lot of turbulence, a lot of sadness. I thought, oh, I'm going to need the tissues next to me when I give the talk because I feel a lot of sorrow at what we've got ourselves into and what we're passing on to future generations.

And then I remembered the quality of loving-kindness. Just bring that quality to this troubled heart at this moment. And as I bring that—I have to do it again now because it's feeling a little turbulent again—but as I bring that, it's not like sugarcoating. That's not what metta does, but it's an acceptance and an easing and a kindness with things as they are.

So as I bring that quality to my troubled heart, then I feel like it starts to calm down, starts to be soothed, and with soothing there's more clarity. So it's not soothing everything away—there, there, it's all right, everything's fine, don't need to worry about it, don't think about it. It's not like that. But it's about letting the heart settle enough that there can be more ease and clarity.

And then bringing in the quality of compassion. And compassion is about feeling with. It's about taking in the suffering of another and feeling with that suffering. So, you know, once you start opening to this big picture, it's pretty vast. And we can—you know, our hearts can break—so be careful not to overdo it. But to just take in part of the picture and really feel with it and allow yourself to feel the suffering, the trembling. It's actually okay to let your heart break. It can be a good thing. But don't let your mind break. Don't go crazy over it.

So really, with the support of the metta, then there's the possibility for the compassion to arise. It's not anger. It's not "it shouldn't be that way." But it's like, it shouldn't be that way and it is that way. So it's like a sense of acceptance—not acceptance in a passive way, but accepting this is the way things are.

And then, I didn't really get to mudita actually in my meditation. I kind of jumped over mudita. Mudita is like having a sense of appreciative joy or altruistic joy, joy for others' well-being. But I think if I were to go there, then I would feel the joy of that river that we kayaked down and the joy of the heron with her two huge chicks and the joy of the eagles as they soared in the sky. And the joy of those eleven-year-old girls who, in the times when they're not angry about the situation they're in, have a life and interest and aspirations.

And connecting with those qualities gives me a sense of—you know, I don't just want to give up. I don't want to say, oh, it's all hopeless. I want to see how can I make—what can I offer? What can I do or offer or renounce perhaps that can give joy to others, give safety to others, give a sense of well-being to others. So I think it's very, very important to connect with that mudita, actually, even though I didn't in the meditation.

And the mudita, for me, like the mudita of a forest, of an old forest which has been allowed to grow in its natural way. Not a sustainable forest for making printer paper, which is a different thing altogether, because there isn't really the time for a whole ecology to evolve in a forest like that. It's a monoculture. The mudita of an old forest that's been allowed to grow and develop in its own way, that has probably billions of different life forms that are part of it.

And also quite a number of our supporters recently have had babies. And it's kind of a mixed bag, isn't it? Because you're bringing children into the world at this time. And what are you bringing them into? But at the same time, I'm seeing really, really good people who have good ethics and will know how to bring their children up well bringing children to the world. And then there's a real sense of mudita also—these kids are getting a really good start, the best as you can get really, at this time. So I feel like to bring those things to mind are really important because that gives a sense of purpose and uplift and generosity and love.

And this helps to keep the heart open and buoyant and keep a sense of purpose and meaning. So it's very important.

And then the fourth of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity. So one might think that equanimity is like a sense of indifference and not really caring or noticing or being attentive to. But equanimity is also one of the enlightenment factors. So indifference is definitely not a factor of enlightenment. So if you're thinking equanimity means it doesn't really matter, then you know you haven't quite got it tuned in right.

But equanimity is partly like having the broad view, seeing like the eagle when it's soaring really high. This is the nature of equanimity—seeing the broad view, seeing the whole picture.

The reflection that the Buddha gives us on equanimity is the reflection on karma. He says, "I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma. I inherit my karma. I am related to my karma"—or as I discovered when looking up the Pali recently, it also means "bound to" or "attached to my karma." I dwell within my karma; I abide in my karma. The results of what I do will be my home.

Karma literally means action. In Buddhist terms, it means action with intention. It doesn't refer so much to what we receive as to what we do and the intention behind what we do. All action with intention, whether skillful or harmful—of that we will be the heir.

This is a powerful reflection, and this is what the Buddha gives as a reflection on upekkha, equanimity. It's recognizing that when we feel "it shouldn't be this way" or "it's wrong"—well, it's like this. Everything we're experiencing in this moment is the result—maybe not everything, but much is—the coming together of past karma. This is what we call vipaka karma, the result of past karma.

If we're caught in the way of thinking of being separate, solid people, then it can feel a little bit stuck: "I'm just stuck with this karma because it's what I've done in the past." But the beauty of the teaching on karma is that it's a constant process. Whatever we meet at this moment, whatever situation we're in at this moment, how we meet it will determine how it evolves.

We don't really know whether there's time to change the course of events that we've set rolling in terms of the warming of the planet and the increase of carbon and the kind of runaway greed that is motivating all of that. We don't know whether we can change that or not yet. And we don't know that even if we did manage to change it now, whether it would be enough. We don't know.

But we can at least open our minds to it—to the situation that we're in, open our minds to our part in it, what we're doing, and what we can do to change that. The reflection on karma is like accepting, understanding, knowing things are this way. I'm in-

heriting this because of my personal karma and the collective karma of the human race. It's both. We're not just separate individuals. My intention, my speech and my action influence how things will evolve in the future.

This isn't saying that there's any guaranteed outcome—there never has been for anybody. But it means we have a choice in how we meet the world. First of all, we need to become conscious. We need to allow this into consciousness. Then we need to really bring in the qualities that will support opening to this vulnerable situation we find ourselves in as human beings. And then look at how we can best meet this.

I mentioned earlier that before I was a nun, when I was quite engaged and sensitive to the environmental situation, then as a nun I pretty much put it all on the shelf for many years—for about twenty years almost. I held a much bigger picture in my mind, which is also true. If you read the suttas, the Buddha talks about world expansion and world contraction, and many world expansions and contractions.

I understand that as referring to this physical world, or perhaps the arising of different planets, or the different eras that this planet Earth has been through—the ice age, whole species wiped out, enormous changes that have happened: meteors hitting, volcanoes, all kinds of turbulent processes going on already, and still ongoing.

For a long time I was living in that view of "well, it's all changing anyway, and the world is going to fall apart anyway at some point. That's how it is. That's how it's made." And that is true.

But I feel that to hold just that view is unbalanced, because while that is true, here we are in this situation. The Buddha spoke about the ultimate truth that everything is in a state of flux and the relative truth that a human being needs nurturing, needs food, needs to be careful when sick, needs to keep the ethical precepts so that we don't harm ourselves and others. This is paying attention to the immediate and the sentient.

I want to bring in the reality of the transience of all of this and that on an ultimate level, everything is okay. But on a sentient level, things are seriously not okay.

A story comes to mind of when the Buddha is wandering and goes to where there's a group of monks living together. There's one monk who's very sick with dysentery, lying in his own excrement. He's obviously been lying in his own excrement for days. He's sick and dirty and abandoned by the other monks.

The Buddha asks, "What's going on with this monk here? Why aren't you taking care of him?"

They say, "Well, he's really sick. He can't even go on alms round. He can't do anything. He's useless. So we're just leaving him."

We just leave him. He's of no use. He can't do anything.

So then the Buddha asks his attendant, "Please get me some water." And he gets some water and bathes this monk himself. He takes the dirty sheets away and gives him clean sheets and takes care of him with his own hands. And then he says to those monks, "You must take care of the sick, your sick monks, fellow monks, because when you leave the home life you don't have a family who will look after you anymore, so we have to look after each other."

To me that's a very clear message.

The Buddha gave detailed instruction on contemplation of death and the fact that we all die and the body decomposes and is made up of these elements—flesh and bones and blood. He gave very detailed teachings on this and on the different ways of looking at or approaching anatta or no-self. He gave very detailed teachings on this, but this didn't negate the fact that when somebody is sick and in need of help, we should help them.

So I see this as a very similar analogy.

Now we have this planet that is sick through the poisons that we've put out, which are motivated by greed, hatred and delusion—which are in themselves poisons. So that is the situation we're in. And we can say, "Well, it doesn't matter because everything's going to die anyway. It's all going to arise and cease anyway." But that isn't what the Buddha was pointing to. He was pointing to the care of the sentient realm within the context of understanding the ultimate.

So we have to kind of keep in mind both somehow. We have to make the mind big enough to take in both and not take a position on one or the other. And to remember in the midst of all of that to have the mudita, to look at the potential and the possibility and let that gladden our hearts in the midst of this work.

And maybe also we need to ask for forgiveness. I don't know how you resonate with that. But sometimes when I see what's going on, not that I've directly done something myself, but I just see something really horrendous going on and I just can't help but say, "Please forgive me." Because we're all part of the human race. We're all kind of in this together. And we do all have a part in what's playing out. And because of that, we can all have a part in how it can transform.

Even if that monk that the Buddha bathed died of dysentery a week later, if he was taken care of and bathed each day, and knew that he was cared for, then that's all okay. But if we neglect and turn away from that which needs our care, then we're not living up to our human potential and we're certainly not following the Buddha's instruction.

So that is the sharing from my heart tonight. I hope that your hearts also open to all of this even just a little bit and then a little bit more, and that you look at the ways that you can also influence the people in your own life and the people around you and the wider environment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 249

The Necessity of Fantasy

Rob Burbea · 1h08

> *In this challenging and provocative dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines why contemporary Buddhism has remained largely silent on urgent global issues like climate change, species extinction, and social injustice. He argues that our spiritual fantasies and archetypal images fundamentally shape our ethical responses and perception of dukkha (suffering).*
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> *Burbea critiques the dominance of equanimous non-attachment in modern Dharma culture, suggesting it may have contracted our range of spiritual expression and engagement. He explores how the traditional Buddhist emphasis on individual liberation through letting go of the three kilesas (greed, hatred, delusion) may be insufficient for addressing collective and environmental forms of suffering.*
>
> *The talk calls for expanding our spiritual imagination beyond the archetypal image of calm detachment. Burbea asks what new myths, stories, and fantasies might allow the Dharma to engage meaningfully with civilizational challenges, drawing on the bodhisattva ideal as a potential model for contemporary practice. He suggests that from mythos comes ethos - our deepest stories shape our ethics and capacity for response to the world's needs.*

So I really hope that you are feeling met through the interviews—the group interviews and the one-to-one interviews—and through the exchange of questions and answers through notes that happens, and through the instructions that we give each morning and in the afternoon. I hope you feel met where you feel you are, that you feel your experiences are being addressed through what is exchanged and what we're saying. And also that this is happening through at least some of what's said in the evening talks.

Because sometimes that is the purpose of what happens in the evening sessions as well—we're still adding elements to address your experiences as they're unfolding, ways of working, and so forth. But sometimes a talk has a different purpose. It has a different job to do, or different jobs, plural. There are different kinds of talks.

Tonight I want to give a different kind of talk, and talk in a different way about what may be, for many of us, different kinds of material. I want to talk differently in a number of ways.

First, I want to talk about the bigger picture. Some talks are about the bigger picture, and this one definitely is very big picture. My conception—one's conception and view, or imagination—of what the bigger picture is in which my practice takes place always

and inevitably must inform and lie underneath my sense and perception and concept, my actual perception of where I am, where I think I am, where I feel I am. Where I feel I am with this particular experience is always informed in a very fundamental way by my sense—even if I haven't articulated it—of the bigger picture. Always. The view of where I am, the perception, but also the response to it, the responses to it, are informed by that. This is a really, really important insight—a massively important insight.

The second way that this talk is different is that it's a difficult talk, not an easy talk. It's difficult for many reasons, and partly because I want to talk about two subjects, and they're both huge. One is nested, if you like, within the other. The first one, or the smaller one, is ethics, which is huge. And that's nested within a larger subject, which is fantasies and image. I hope I can explain what I mean.

So this might be a little dense. Some of the ideas might be quite unfamiliar to many of us, especially people who have been moving in these kinds of circles—quite possibly opposite sorts of ways of thinking, conceptions, assumptions, and so forth. In more ways than one, it's a kind of challenging talk.

There's a real risk here, especially when I talk about the fantasy element. There's a real risk of just not being understood. There's unfortunately a real risk of being misunderstood. Perhaps the best one can hope for is to be partially understood. But c'est la guerre, as they say. We'll take the risk and plough on.

So, ethics. That word, ethics. Let's just pause and stay with the word a little bit, because the relationship with words that we have is important. When you hear that word, what happens? Or the word morality?

For a lot of us in this culture, they're kind of heavy words. We bring in, sometimes unconsciously, associations with judgment, with sin, all of that. If there's a lot of inner critic that has a lot of power operating in the psyche, these words are really difficult, oftentimes. Sometimes when there's a lot of inner critic, the whole realm of ethics becomes just another realm with which to measure the self and find the self lacking. That's all it becomes. The whole thing—as the inner critic does with so much—it can do with practice, and it turns it into something just to measure me and prove what a failure, what a loser I am. The inner critic, if it's too strong, actually blocks authentic self-inquiry into ethics. I just can't have a free inquiry into ethics when the inner critic is strong.

So all this is loaded in our culture. Some modern—well, it actually goes back millennia, but particularly some modern—spiritual traditions just kind of sideline the whole ethical issue. There are quite popular spiritual traditions around, and they literally do

not address ethics in their teachings. Then it's quite interesting—the sense, the possibility of freedom or happiness in those kinds of traditions becomes dependent on something more like catharsis. If I release all this stuff stored from the past, if I do that enough, freedom and happiness comes.

That's the model, that's the conception, that's the image.

Or if I release the self-limiting beliefs I have, that brings freedom and happiness.

Right from the beginning, the Buddha is different and places ethics very, very fundamentally on the path. There's a different approach. Theoretically in the Dharma, it's partly the base of the path.

So what does it mean, ethics? Now I'm sure there's a way of precisely defining it philosophically, but I want to just be very loose with this and say what I'm talking about tonight at least is: how do I live? How do I live? And how particularly do I live in relationship to others? What is my relationship with others? So that's a very loose definition of what I mean by ethics.

Recently in this tradition, there's been a lot of crossover between this tradition and other approaches—the Diamond Approach and other sister traditions—and within this tradition, with insight dialogue. There's been quite a number, quite an interest over the last few years in relational practices, where people actually bring awareness and inquiry into working one-to-one with a partner, or in threes, dyads, triads. That sense of needing to work relationally, relational meditation if you like, relational inquiry—the sense of that as something really important has entered the image and the fantasy of what's important, or is starting to. People say this is important, this needs to be addressed.

But not yet the wider dimension. I mean not just two or three and my family and my friends, but the whole of humanity—seven billion people. And what about the other species? And not just now, but what about future others? That is not yet really part of, hasn't come into how we think about practice. We're not yet really addressing that. It's not yet, if you like, part of the image or the fantasy of what Dharma practice really involves. It's not really central to that yet.

I don't need, I hope I don't need to spend long outlining or reminding us all of the immense challenges that we are facing now as a species and through our actions and non-action that we are also giving as a challenge to other species as well. Population, resource scarcity, pollution, climate change, conflicts. Underneath them all, or driving

them all, perhaps one of the most fundamental is climate change. That will have more and more dominant impact on all the other factors—all of them—resource scarcity, pollution, all of it.

And the way we, together, we human beings are changing the climate now, today, and have been for the last hundred years—that is going to change the climate not just today or tomorrow, it will change it for thousands of years. The effects are cumulative. The carbon dioxide we're putting into the atmosphere through our actions affects the climate of the Earth for thousands and thousands of years. And this is already in motion. It drives everything.

So one of the things that's quite significant is actually the species extinction. The great biologist E.O. Wilson has reported that at present there is a rate of species extinction that is 100 to 1,000 times the normal rate. And it's been driven by human activity, human action, and climate change is one of the principal drivers of that. 100 to 1,000 times the rate—species are just going extinct, disappearing, never to appear again.

It barely made the news, but scientists and also some politicians are quietly admitting that the goal that was sort of very loosely proffered after the Copenhagen Climate Summit three years ago—that it would be kind of really a good idea if everyone agreed to keep the climate change two degrees or less because above that there is what's called runaway climate change—we don't know where it just starts feeding back on itself. We actually don't know where it will stop.

Now there is a sort of quiet acknowledgment that it's virtually impossible with the momentum that has gathered, the emissions that have already been emitted and what's happening—it's virtually impossible to keep within that two degrees limit. What we're heading for, and even the World Bank wrote this in an article the other day, what we're heading for is more like four degrees to six degrees. And that means, as an initial thing, because as I said, scientists don't even know what starts happening at four degrees or six degrees—a whole bunch of other feedback effects. We don't know. It's like a snowball rolling.

Now, in my mind that sounds quite nice. Add six degrees to here, it's a bit like the south of France. That's pretty nice. But actually that would cause immense and widespread devastation for human civilization, species and others. Massive floods—much more than the inconvenience of not being able to take a train here or there. Cities—London, New York, Mumbai—would probably become submerged, along with other cities. On the other end, droughts, crop failure has already happened in the States last summer.

leading to drastically raised food prices and widespread starvation in the developing world. Storms that we might once have considered normal become hugely magnified in their destructive power. The acidification of oceans threatens the marine life that feeds so much of humanity and has intrinsic worth in itself. And as resources become scarce —less water, less arable land—we face the specter of resource wars.

It seems that in our wider culture, as someone aptly put it, our technological intelligence has somehow raced ahead of our ethical intelligence. We're brilliantly smart with our gadgets and what we can build, yet our ethical intelligence hasn't kept pace. Even our political intelligence lags behind.

When we come together as a collective species to address these questions, we try to address them by scientizing everything. Parts per million of CO2—hugely important, massively important—but these are measurable facts. Perhaps there's a whole other level of discourse that underpins all of this, one that's being missed entirely. It's about values. It's about ethics. And it's simply not being talked about.

We discuss parts per million and changing technologies, but where is the radical questioning of how I am living, how we are living? Where is the radical questioning of what my responsibility is as a human being, given this life shared on earth that I did nothing to earn or create? What is my responsibility? This connects to another meaning of the word dharma—its original implication of responsibility, of duty.

Somehow, collectively, we're like a rabbit or deer entranced by slowly approaching headlights—dazzled by something, not moving, not engaging, not responding appropriately. What are we captivated by collectively as a society and individually? What am I so captivated by?

We speak of the intoxication of youth. What's the intoxication here? What is it that I, or we, are so intoxicated by that we cannot respond adequately? That's an open question, because I'm actually not sure. There are probably many answers. And the headlights are approaching—not the sudden impact of an oncoming car, but more like the slow onslaught of something inexorable.

The wider culture isn't responding, but neither is dharma culture. Buddhism isn't responding. Those of us in the dharma community are usually blessed, very sweet, warm, kind people who often engage in much service. Yet somehow this response hasn't really entered into the story of what we're about.

You may not know this, but Buddhism doesn't have a great track record with this kind of engagement. Perhaps a low point was Japanese Zen during World War II, which wholeheartedly, with great zeal, leapt into the expansionist imperialism of the Japanese

war effort. All of Japanese Zen got behind it, with all the slaughter and darkness involved. Why? Something in the culture subsumed the dharma, dragged it along. The dharma couldn't offer anything different—it was simply incorporated into what was happening culturally.

Compare this with someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian who wouldn't stop speaking out against the Nazis in Nazi Germany. They arrested him, gave him a summary trial, then executed him alongside others who refused to be silenced. Different. I'm not promoting Christianity over Buddhism—I'm simply pointing out that there's something in Buddhism that's not particularly strong in this regard.

You may not know that in the last year, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship—an organization that existed in America for decades, addressing these kinds of issues around peace, conflict, and engaged Buddhism—folded. It dissolved itself. Why? Not enough interest.

In the same period, the annual general meeting of its UK equivalent, the Network of Engaged Buddhists, debated whether they too should dissolve. People weren't interested. They almost did dissolve, but decided to continue.

Meanwhile, at Gaia House, almost every retreat is full these days. Almost every single retreat over the past couple of years. Yet one retreat got so few registrations that it was cancelled—the one on engaged Buddhism, featuring David Loy. Someone simply called and said, "Look, no one's interested."

So he cancelled it.

At the same time, in the culture, there's been a huge spread of the mindfulness movement, which is wonderful. But I don't know. We've had forty years of insight meditation in the West now, dominated by mindfulness as a core practice. And at forty years, I don't know if there's evidence that it's actually leading to practitioners who are really engaging the wider causes of suffering. I'm really looking at that. I can't honestly look at the forty years of insight meditation and say that that's happening. The view of suffering has not so much gone beyond the individual. And we—because that's my tradition, I'm part of that—most of us are not really grappling with these issues. Not even grappling so much with the lifestyle changes that the enormity of the situation is desperately asking of us.

So I don't know if, let alone mindfulness, even the Dharma as it stands can address these issues. I don't know if it has what it takes at the moment to address these issues, if it is actually healing the civilization, if it can. I don't know. And obviously I would love to be able to sit here and say it is, we are, it's happening—but I don't really feel that I can.

David Loy, in a recent essay, asked similar questions: Has there been a commodification of Western Dharma? Is it being co-opted into a self-help stress reduction program that does not challenge what he calls "institutionalized dukkha"—the dukkha that comes from our institutions, our social structures—but actually adapts to it? Doesn't challenge it, but adapts to it. Strong words.

The contemporary philosopher Slavoj Žižek—some of you will know him, definitely not a Buddhist—wrote: "Western Buddhism is becoming the hegemonic, the dominant, ideology of global capitalism, because its meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. Western Buddhism enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the illusion that you are not really in it, that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is, and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner self to which you can always withdraw."

Now, any Buddhist knows that Buddhists don't believe in an inner self, so he's got that bit wrong. But actually, there's something here—I want to return to this because I think he's got something else a little bit wrong too. But there's something here I think we need to pay attention to. I want to return to it though.

Someone in an interview a couple of weeks ago was complaining about this and called it "do not disturb Dharma."

A friend went to a conference of environmental scientists who had met a little while before and who—because it's the fantasy of science to be objective, cool, detached, not emotionally involved—were giving out facts and figures about climate change and species loss. But amongst themselves, they were actually experiencing enormous frustration and profound heartache. In this previous meeting, they were asked to make a list of what they would wish for to remedy the situation more widely. I can't remember what the first one was, but the second on this ordering of fifty things they were asking for—the second most frequently and most important thing they asked for—was that spiritual leaders would start voicing this, would start speaking up. That was the scientists. This was the second biggest thing that would make the difference: spiritual leaders need to start talking about this.

And yet, we are silent. We are silent. You might like or not like that word "spiritual," but it means people like me and the Dalai Lama and all the rest of it.

There's enormous suffering involved in all this. The Red Cross, back in 2001, estimated—it's obviously a tricky figure, but they estimated that even in 2001, and it must be much more now—there were already twenty-five million environmental refugees, greater than the number they calculated for those displaced by war. Already in 2001. Massive suffering is unfolding and will unfold.

This is an issue of suffering. We would think that the Dharma and Buddhism is relevant because we talk about suffering—dukkha. So what I'm interested in is: why not? Why are we not addressing it? Why are we so silent about this? What's happening psychologically, spiritually, psycho-spiritually? What's actually going on? Why are we not including this?

To me, that's a fascinating question, a very troubling question, a fascinating one. I actually think there are many reasons. I don't even pretend to know them all or understand them. I just want to talk a little bit about some of them.

Certainly there's the aspect of fear and the psychology of denial. There's also the whole reality that we are part of society, and society is addicted to our way of life, and we're not exempt from that in the Dharma.

There's something more fundamental perhaps, one of the reasons that has more to do with the whole view of what the world is: What is this world that I'm in? It goes back to Descartes and would view the world as basically just stuff—just material stuff that we can shift around, in itself meaningless, in itself valueless.

Some people place the origins of that materialist worldview even earlier, in the twelfth century. It doesn't matter precisely when. You might say, "Well, that sounds like abstract philosophy." But it has become common sense for us. That's how we feel and see the world—common sense. Listen to those words: common sense. We perceive the world that way. What started as abstract philosophy becomes common sense.

And that kind of materialism, in the larger sense, actually saturates our modern Dharma. We're immersed in it. Sometimes we encounter what they call idealism, which views everything as consciousness. That's a bit more rare, but it exists too. Either way, the world becomes just meaningless or valueless—it's just stuff, or it's just consciousness. Who cares what happens?

But actually, that's not what I want to talk about. I want to talk about this piece I mentioned about fantasy, which may seem a very strange way to approach this topic, or would seem unusual at first—image and fantasy.

One person who's troubled by all this said, "Why don't we do what the Protestant Christians do, what Evangelical Christians do? They ask this beautiful question: What would Jesus do in this situation?" Beautiful. What would Jesus do? You use the fantasy, you use the imagination. What would the Buddha do?

Well, actually, I think it's a lovely question, but you run into a problem immediately: Whose Buddha are we talking about? Whose Buddha? If you read enough biographies or even passages referring to the Buddha, you realize it's a fantasy of the Buddha. It's an image of the Buddha. We have a fantasy, an image of the Buddha, and within that, an image, a fantasy of the direction of practice—Buddhahood being the direction of practice, of the goal.

Whose Buddha? Some Buddhas don't give a damn about the world. Some Buddhas are thinking about other things entirely.

But actually, even more than that, with this business of fantasy and image, if you go back and read the original texts, the Pali Canon, you find they are actually saturated—it's not obvious at first—they are saturated in fantasy and image. The whole thing is saturated with a certain fantasy and image, and that is of a kind of equanimous removal from the world. Sometimes we don't quite like that in some aspects, so we've kind of covered it over a bit or filled it out a bit. But actually, that is the dominant archetypal image of Pali Canon Buddhism: in the world but kind of removed, on the way out and not really that involved. Cool, non-attached, equanimous. Maybe warm.

So I wonder if we can question that as the dominant image and actually critique it even. And maybe that makes some of you nervous. But to that I would respond: Why are we not free to question that? Why are we not free to question the dominant images and fantasies of Buddhism, of Dharma? And if I feel, or you feel, that you or I or we are not free to question and critique that, I would just respond—I would ask in response: What fantasy, what story and what imaging tells you or gives you the sense that you're not, that I'm not, that we're not?

Do you see it's a religious fantasy? "I can't go back and question the Buddha." It's part of a religious story. Do you see what I mean? There's a religious fantasy at play even in the non-allowing of the questioning, the non-allowing of shining that kind of light on the tradition.

There are other problems here. In the Dharma we tend to talk a lot about letting go of fantasy, non-fantasy, about being with things as they are, about meeting actuality, letting the story go, and so forth. All of which is quite important, but it's almost an indoctrination there.

We assume that letting go of fantasy is actually possible. If you go deep into Dharma understanding, into emptiness and dependent origination, you actually see that what we perceive—our reality—is being constructed all the time, and the mind is playing the dominant part in that construction. Part of this construction is the fantasy, the image, the story that we have of what we are doing, what life is, what this is and what that is.

Certainly, meditatively it's possible to let go of fantasy. But you don't arrive at a bare actuality—everything empties out. You go into non-appearance, levels of non-appearance. One can emerge out of that meditation, but once I emerge into the world, I'm back into the realm of fantasy, of imaging, of story.

Even now, or monks in the Buddha's time who come out of their meditation, perceive themselves in fantasy, in story, in image: "We are monks in the dispensation of the holy Buddha. He is the holy Buddha. I am on this track of the tradition." Even now, 2,500 years later: "I'm on the track. I see the past behind me, the tradition stretching through this self and this time and this place and all the work that went into it, into the future"—story, fantasy, image.

I'm not denigrating fantasy and image. It's necessary. It's part of the way the psyche works. I'm using it more in the sense that Jung or Hillman or those kinds of psychologists would use it. I'm not talking about being lost in some elaborate daydream. I'm talking about levels of resonance, levels of meaning, colorings of things, the way we give vitality and meaning and direction and beauty and love to things in our existence and the self in that.

Rather than trying to get rid of fantasy or trying to pretend that it's not there, maybe it would be helpful to really acknowledge that it is here—we are saturated in it. The way we tend to talk, the way I dress, the way this place is set up, its decor, certainly the images, what we talk about, what we don't talk about—it's all part of the fantasy and the image, the story of what's happening here. And it's beautiful. But let's acknowledge that it's here and it has tremendous power. It's in everything that we love. It has to be there.

So admit fantasy, image, story. It's here. We cannot live without it. Mythos, fantasy, image, story—from the mythos comes the ethos. From the mythos, from the fantasy image story, comes the ethos, meaning the ethics and the feel of things, the emotional resonance of things.

That's one thing: acknowledging, admitting, recognizing the power. The second thing is, has the Dharma tradition, either recently or right from the beginning, shrunk the range of fantasy and image? Has it contracted it down to predominantly one? The archetypal range of expression—has it contracted it down to one? And is that very singleness the problem, or a problem?

We could ask, here in this culture—and some of you have been around many years—where is the madness? Where is the divine madness? Where is the warrior? Where is the raging? Where is the balls? Where is the wildness? Different kinds of wildness. Where is the diversity of sexual expression? I don't just mean being open to LGBT, important as that is. I mean the different sexual personae, the archetypal ways that can express. Are they given equal honoring? What about sensuality or the breadth of artistic expression and range and feeling?

Is it rather that something—this calmness, equanimity, warm stillness—has actually become the dominant thing, the dominant image, the image to which consciously, explicitly or implicitly we feel we're moving and should move? So other kinds of things, certain other expressions or manifestations or archetypal ranges actually get relegated. Maybe they're seen as morally inferior in some cases.

Maybe they're just relegated or sidelined. Maybe they're tolerated—we can be mindful of that and tolerate it. But it's still one thing that we're drawn into, and we don't actually regard those others, those other images, fantasies, archetypal expressions as equally beautiful, that diversity—honoring them equally. I don't even mean we need to integrate all of that. I'm not even going in that direction now.

Some of you may have heard of the teacher Andrew Cohen. He used to be involved many years ago, before my time, in this tradition at Gaia House. Now he has his own sort of tradition where he is a teacher. I read just a small passage from his biography some years ago, and he relates an incident with one of the senior teachers in this tradition, donkey's years ago. Something happened in an interview or over a couple of interviews, and the teacher—the senior teacher from this tradition—I don't know what happened exactly, something got a little heated and he shouted at Andrew. And Andrew said this was unbelievable. It just blew his mind. How could a spiritual teacher shout? How could they shout? This is showing anger. And how can you be a spiritual teacher and have that? And it ruined it. I don't know if that was the breaking point, but something happened, and off he went and did his own thing.

What's interesting to me there is: what's in the image? What's in the image of what a spiritual teacher is like? And by extension then, what we are moving towards—what this person is supposed to be embodying as someone who's further along on the path.

What's in the image? What's included in the image and what's excluded even from consideration in the image? Shouting, anger—or what? Don't even think that has anything to do with it.

So within the Dharma, there is not—I could look and say it does exist, but generally there is not really much life force in the fantasy of engagement, of dynamic response to these gargantuan crises that we face right now. You certainly get outdoor Dharma, wilderness Dharma, but it's kind of about being equanimous or calm in nature, or connected to nature. It's a different thing. And you certainly get people with veggie gardens and stuff. Great! Is that really going to hack it?

So I don't want to suggest shrinking the fantasy either to one of "now we're all going to be eco-warriors." I'm not suggesting that at all. What I want to really suggest is expanding—expanding the range, that somehow it's gotten too tight.

Let's explore this a little bit more about the image and fantasy, because we have image and fantasy of the goal and of the path. And wrapped up in that, part of it is simplicity. Just to draw out that dimension: we have an idea that both the goal and perhaps the path are simple, that we're aiming for some kind of simplicity. It's so attractive as a notion.

And maybe, secondly, we're also then too simple in the way we regard, say, agitation. So it's interesting—generally we want to do away with agitation, we want to move away from agitation, let that go. And yet certain kinds of agitation are okay. Perhaps if it feels like something is catharting from my childhood or whatever and I'm agitated as I go through that, that's maybe allowed. Or the agitation of, in some traditions, the fourteenth stage of insight or whatever—that's allowed because it's seen, there's a conception behind it that allows it. But generally, we don't like agitation. We let go of agitation.

Or, again, too simple in the way that we're considering rage.

That which rages within us and that which is outraged or might be outraged.

So much of our attraction to simplicity stems from this understanding. But climate change is not simple. It's not a simple issue. And the forces that are coming together to propel this juggernaut—they're not simple at all.

So we like this simplism. And perhaps we're a bit seduced, understandably, by our complex lives. Seduced by what feels like a siren song. And maybe there's something missing in there, something even a bit foolish. Endlessly letting go of agitation, main-

taining non-involvement, even using the word equanimity—dressing it up as equanimity when it's actually non-involvement. Is that what's needed? Are we too much in the thrall of one dominant direction?

We use words like wakefulness and awakening. But maybe with all that, we've been lulled to sleep. Or some dimension of the being is being lulled to sleep. And though we might be very alive and sensitive in some area, in some other range or arena, there's actually quite a numbness there. A disengagement.

It's interesting—historically, and I think I mentioned this in the opening talk—Buddhist ethics has a lot to do with simplification, in fact. That's one of the driving reasons behind Buddhist ethics. It's a kind of safety net, as one of my teachers would say. Just keep the five precepts. It forms a safety net for your practice and for your being, for your heart and your consciousness. So I don't have to think about what lie I told to that person. I don't have to remember the lie and how it relates to other things, or who I gossiped about behind their back, or what I took. I don't have to keep being troubled by all that. It simplifies, and that simplification allows calmness because I'm not agitated by my non-keeping of the precepts.

But within that there is a kind of individualism. The range of ethics is very individual, and the notion of awakening is very individual. Nowadays, if we think at all about the bigger picture, the wider picture in modern times, we perhaps hope that by working in our personal way on ethics and meditation and awareness and kindness—in our circle of family and friends and work colleagues—hopefully that will ripple out and cause a wider change in the wider culture. Oftentimes that kind of idea is there.

But maybe we don't quite understand. We're a bit naive, underestimating the power of what we are up against or what we are creating. The enormous power of the social structures and assumptions that form the fabric of our society—a globalized society. Because we do now live in a globalized society, a globalized world. The carbon that we emit, the climate change that is happening—it's not localized, it's globalized. It's everywhere.

Looking into and probing a little bit into Buddhist precepts and ethics and their history, there's a lot about trying not to do. I try to undertake the precept to try not to harm, to try not to kill, to try not to steal, to try not to be abusive sexually, to try not to lie. It's quite negative. But then, quite interesting, like throwing in a moral dilemma.

So if I'm walking by a lake or the sea and a young woman is drowning and shouting for help, is it morally wrong not to help her? Clearly it's good to help her—we say it's good, it's kind or whatever—but is it morally wrong not to? In Dharma language, per-

haps it's good karma to help her, but is it bad karma not to help her? And if my equanimity is disturbed or whatever else is disturbed, is it still bad karma? I don't know. Stinginess is bad karma, but you have to kind of search for that teaching.

Now, that's one person passing by another person in trouble. Amplify it to a globalized situation and these moral dilemmas become quite difficult. Because one can always say, "Well, there are other people around, and everyone else is walking by. No one else is stopping, doing this or that, or stopping flying, or whatever it is." The whole situation morally becomes so entangled and so easy to just shrug away.

If I look at it karmically in a globalized situation—if you believe in karma—my bad karma for not jumping in to save her is dissolved in the very globalization, in the very complexity and wideness of what's happening. Is that okay?

Molière, the writer, already in the 17th century, said: "It is not only for what we do that we are responsible, but also for what we do not do." That's a hard thought, especially if the inner critic is strong. It's a hard thought. The inner critic just takes that as so heavy. Not just for what I do, but also for what I do not do. The action I don't take.

Complex—all this is complex and difficult.

This complexity is not easy or simple, and it proves genuinely agitating. Woven into all of this—as part of the images, fantasies, conceptions, views, and assumptions we hold—are our beliefs about the Dharma itself, about practice, about the goal and the path.

We speak of suffering, of dukkha. But what is dukkha? What on earth are we talking about when we use this word? This is the problem, isn't it? Dukkha is the problem. The Buddha said, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." But what do we mean when we say dukkha? What is the problem we're actually addressing?

And what do I believe? The second noble truth follows the first. If the first is dukkha, what do I believe is its cause? These are fundamental Dharma conceptions. What are we actually talking about? What are we actually addressing?

Because dependent on my conception of what dukkha is and what I believe its cause to be, the other two noble truths emerge—what I believe it looks like to be free of dukkha and what I need to do to get there. Dependent on my conception of the first two truths comes my understanding of the remaining two.

Is dukkha individual? Is it purely personal, or am I including social structures, social assumptions, and by extension, environmental factors? If, for example—and this view is quite popular—my notion of dukkha centers on my patterns, my personal patterns that prevent my freedom of expression, this becomes the dominant framework. My patterns, probably rooted in family and past experiences, become the primary challenge.

Such a view, when it becomes dominant, has enormous effects. It will profoundly shape the fantasy and image of what freedom looks like and what's involved in achieving it. It will determine what I imagine it means to help others achieve freedom. When this perspective shrinks around us as the primary lens, there's no inclusion of attention to social and environmental roots of dukkha.

We have the Four Noble Truths and the three kilesas—greed, hatred, and delusion. We say awakening means eradicating the three kilesas. These lists and concepts, these Dharma frameworks—we use these terms constantly. But they're like skeletons. The Four Noble Truths is a skeleton. The three defilements form a skeleton. They need fleshing out. How do we flesh them out? That's what brings them alive.

It's difficult to read the Pali Canon, the original teachings, without sensing that the goal was to escape the wheel of rebirth, to avoid being reborn again. You can reinterpret and remove elements, but the teachings don't quite hang together without this framework. That's fine—I have no problem with leaving rebirth out of the equation. But if that was the central image and fantasy of what awakening meant, what is it now? What will it be? What is our image and fantasy of awakening, of liberation, without that foundational concept?

For many people, that framework has disappeared as a central organizing principle. What fantasy and image replace it? I've come to think—and I don't see any proof for this—that some people, even engaged Buddhists, claim that when the self is released, when the three kilesas die, a person will naturally become engaged. They argue that having less self automatically leads to addressing the social roots of dukkha, to caring for environmental ethics, to making radical and important changes in lifestyle.

I'm not sure. I don't know.

I was at an engaged Buddhism conference—I don't know when it was, Yuho was there, perhaps a year ago. David Loy was speaking, and he offered an intriguing historical perspective. He suggested that shortly after the Buddha died, monasteries arose—Buddhist institutions that needed the support of local kings, both financial backing and military protection. Because they depended on this support, they couldn't speak out. They had to confine their discourse and teaching to individual dukkha, avoiding any

discussion of socially caused suffering and the social roots of dukkha. For that reason, they simply decided to confine their teachings to individual dukkha and maintain the status quo. According to this view, that's why we have Buddhism as it is now.

It's a nice idea, but I don't know—it's conjecture. Is it true? We have modern traditions like this one that have no need to pay lip service to any government, military ruler, or king. Other contemporary approaches—the Diamond Approach, modern Advaita—all point quite similarly at the self and seeing through the illusion of the self in some way or other, using different language, yet they offer very little discourse about engagement.

So perhaps the idea that the self, the ego, is the problem may not be psychologically sophisticated enough in relation to all this. Maybe we need new fantasies, or there's one thing we certainly need: new fantasies, new myths, new images to be included. Mindfulness alone, but even insight alone, perhaps without the right fantasies or appropriate images, simply will not bear that fruit. It will not give birth to that kind of engagement, that kind of wrestling.

So can I, can we as teachers, give you new myths? What new myths? What new stories? What new fantasies? What images? Will you demand of me new myths, new stories, new images, new fantasies? And what will they be?

From the fantasies, from the images, from the stories, from the mythos comes the ethos—comes the ethics. In the wider culture, what are the images? What are the fantasies? Norman Brown said that if you want to change a civilization, you need to change the imagination of the masses. That's what actually transforms things—you change the imagination of the masses. Ben Okri puts it more gracefully: "Stories are the secret reservoir of values. Change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations."

The stories, the fantasies—they also condition the emotions we have. The very fact that we're not speaking and sharing with each other much in our culture about the enormous grief of species loss, of climate change, of what we are actually engaging in together and giving rise to—this is partly because it's not in the image. It's not being nourished by the right image. Grief and outrage haven't become normalized through images and fantasies.

Anthropologists and historians recognize how the emotions we feel as human beings—emotions we consider so primary, so natural—are actually deeply conditioned by the stories and conceptions in our culture. In medieval Europe, there existed a whole range of emotions that we have completely lost because they were tied to certain conceptions

of God that no longer exist in our culture. Conversely, we experience emotions they never knew because we inhabit entirely different fantasies, images, and conceptions of self.

So what fantasies? What images? In the wider culture, there's something very beautiful from the wonderful astronomer and physicist Carl Sagan. In an address he gave to a graduating class at an American university—it must have been shortly before he died—he showed them a large photograph taken by the Voyager 1 spacecraft a few years earlier. He's offering them an image, giving the world an image:

"We succeeded in taking that picture from deep space, and if you look at it, you see a dot. That's here. That's home."

That's us.

On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives—the aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and in triumph they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of the dot on scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner of the dot. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this dark vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us.

It's been said that astronomy is a humbling and, I might add, a character-building experience. To my mind, there is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

To me that's beautiful. It's an image, and wrapped up in it is a certain fantasy—a cosmic fantasy of our cosmic situation, and the rhetoric goes with it. It's beautiful rhetoric. No problem with rhetoric. Image, fantasy brings rhetoric. We have rhetoric in here. No problem. As I said, fantasy is good. It brings meaning, brings image.

But we've had that image since 1969, when Apollo went up and turned around and took the photo. Maybe it's not enough for all. Maybe we need a plurality of images and fantasies, and this is really what I'm getting at.

So what image, what fantasy, what do you love? Because there's so much love coming through what he's saying. And maybe it works for you—for me it moves me tremendously. It doesn't work for everyone. It will not work for everyone.

What do you love? What do you love? What has more meaning for you even than your life? What has more beauty and more importance than your pleasure or your pain, your suffering? More beauty and more importance than anything else. What image, what fantasy gives that?

What happens if we don't have a fantasy? If we don't have a spiritual, a meaningful, deep image in the psyche—or images in the psyche? One thing that can happen is we start sacrificing at the altar of the god of convenience. Convenience fills up the void left by the absence of meaningful fantasy, of vitalizing fantasies.

Sacrificing what? Sacrifice used to mean "make something sacred," but it's the opposite. We're actually letting go of what's sacred. Everything's about convenience. That's one possibility. Or perhaps convenience itself becomes the fantasy. But it's a pretty thin fantasy. It's a pretty meager fantasy. A mean fantasy, actually.

that shopping in big supermarkets feels so wounding to the sensitive soul? Sometimes people who've done a lot of retreats think it's because there's so much sensory stimulation. I actually don't think it's that at all.

I wonder—and all this is questioning, I don't know the answers to any of these things—I wonder if it's actually because what is the supermarket? There isn't the deep care for deep beauty. It's gone. It's not addressed. It's not brought into the equation, into the economic equation, the fiscal equation. There is also not any real intimacy with either the produce or those who sell. It's a place of non-intimacy. What it is a place of is convenience. Let's put everything in one place and people can park and it's convenient. And that trumps what is more meaningful and more deeply beautiful. And it's painful and it has an effect.

So in the wider culture, what are the fantasies that we can maybe give rise to, that we need to give rise to? What are the dominant ones? What ones can we question? What ones can we bring in?

But in the Dharma culture as well, and this is my world and that's what I want to address, can we shake something up? Can we open something up? So that there's less of a kind of monolithic dominance of the equanimous, non-attached acceptance of a situation, the doing nothing attitude as a style of existence. Less monolithic the simple, the simplifying, the non-agitation, the non-fire of rage. Can there be a greater range? Can we admit and open up a greater range?

It was interesting when the Occupy movement was there and Rowan Williams, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, had no problem actually publicly saying, "Yes, I agree, this is great, there should be a Robin Hood tax," making political suggestions. Archbishop of Canterbury. As far as I was aware, no one in my Dharma circle felt it was appropriate for a spiritual person to be commenting on matters like that, about social structure, etc. Why? It's not in the image.

Or again, if we go back to that situation with Andrew Cohen and his teacher back then, we might notice and question and feel morally troubled if a teacher or someone who's been practicing a long time is, for instance, promiscuous, and we think, well, that can't be morally right—sexual promiscuity. Or if there's a bit of wildness in how they are and what they express, or if what seems like rage or anger is coming through, we maybe notice that more than we would notice non-engagement. It's an absence—we don't notice an absence. What if we turn that around and actually one starts to question the non-engagement? Say, that can't be quite right, maybe.

Go back to that Žižek quote. He's saying, "You guys, you're retreating to your thing and you can just turn the world off with your meditation." I think what he got wrong there is people need to rest. Even a soldier—apparently you can only give soldiers sixty continuous hours of combat before they start to lose it. But even an activist needs to rest. Meditation is rest, deep rest.

What he's mistaken is the dominant image in Buddhism, in Dharma, is not so much of meditation as entering into deep calm and then emerging. It's actually the dominant image is a life of calm, a pervasive equanimity. So even if people say, "It's okay if you can't get deeply calm," the implicit, often, or explicit image is of a life of equanimity. And that is poisonous, perhaps.

It's fine—I mean, beautiful—to be able to rest deeply, but to try and have a calm life, an untroubled life, an equanimous life, so that the image, the fantasy that's beginning to get quite pervasive is one of an equanimous or spacious busyness. So I can do all this stuff and be really busy with the demands of modern life and yet inside I'm equanimous and spacious. And maybe that's not such a great fantasy and image to have, popular and attractive as it might seem.

Maybe again, included in the range of images can be this sense of: is there a place for a kind of Dharma that's not about me? It's just not me and my suffering. It's much wider.

So can maybe, as a part of all this increasing the range—we can't force anyone into falling in love with or adopting a certain fantasy or image. It's impossible, especially in a postmodern era. Sometimes the eco-psychology movement, I feel, tries to sell this kind of Mother Nature image, but it won't be. Some people just think Mother Nature—they feel there's a bunch of hippies talking. I don't relate to it. It won't be for everyone.

Going back to the Buddhist tradition, we have the fantasy, the image of the bodhisattva. But it's not forced on anyone. At the beginning, when it came to preeminence—when it was arising—this bodhisattva image, this fantasy, actually found expression in monasteries where people who took up that fantasy and image coexisted very well and very peacefully and amicably with people who didn't take it up. Mahayana and Hinayana, no problem living together and simply saying, "That's your fantasy, it's fine, this is mine." No problem. There has to be, perhaps, a plurality.

Originally this bodhisattva fantasy and image involved the idea of many lives and a kind of transcendent goal of unbelievably transcendent Buddhahood, almost difficult to even wrap one's head around. What might it mean now? What might it involve now—a modern version of the bodhisattva? What image might that be, without all this business about lives and other realms and transcendence?

Might it be a range of images, and within that greater space, a wider range of fantasy and wilder range? The fantasy, the images, admit wider and wilder.

The Buddha in the time of the Buddha talked about the lion's roar of the awakened ones. Upon awakening they utter the lion's roar. What is the modern lion's roar? What might be included in the modern lion's roar of awakening?

So is it that these other aspects that we tend to perhaps dismiss or just not notice or not give life to or feel troubled by—we tend to want to try and tame them or look down on them. Maybe there's something about honoring them deeply, allowing them, making them available.

And if you're listening and you think, "That sounds dangerous, all this talk about wildness and rage and outrage—it sounds dangerous"—maybe it is. Maybe there's no such thing as a path without danger. I don't think there is. Any path has dangers—eyes open to danger. There's always danger.

But if the only or the dominant image is equanimous non-involvement, warm but not really getting involved—it seems safe, seems like there's no danger. Safe, sane, sanitized. But maybe there's a huge danger lurking there through the very non-involvement, the non-agitation, the non-outrage.

So maybe one element in all this that we're facing—one small but perhaps important piece—is to do with widening the range of what we honor. And I really mean honor in the fullest sense, not just tolerate: honor the images that emerge, the fantasies that emerge. And then maybe that's one element that allows—that will, might allow, might contribute to allowing—the Dharma to actually really offer something to the world at this time.

CHAPTER 250

Planet Earth as Divine Messenger

Rob Burbea · 52 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea draws parallels between the Buddha's encounter with the divine messengers and our current ecological crisis. He begins by exploring the traditional story of the young Buddha witnessing old age, sickness, and death for the first time, which sparked his spiritual quest. Burbea explains how the Pali term dukkha—often translated as suffering—actually means 'unsatisfactoriness,' like a wheel with an axle that doesn't fit properly, creating a bumpy ride through life.*
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> *The talk then expands this teaching to address climate change as a contemporary divine messenger. Just as the Buddha recognized impermanence through witnessing bodily decay, we are now called to recognize the impermanence and interconnectedness of our planetary home. Burbea examines how our consumer culture conditions us to turn away from discomfort rather than toward it, yet the Buddha's path requires us to face suffering directly as the doorway to liberation.*
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> *Drawing on insights from eco-philosophy and the Four Noble Truths, Burbea challenges us to develop what Arne Naess called an 'ecological self'—an identity that includes all life on Earth. He emphasizes that responding to climate change is not sacrifice but natural action when we perceive our deeper interconnectedness. The talk concludes with practical encouragement for both personal lifestyle changes and collective action, viewing our current crisis as an unprecedented opportunity for awakening.*

Good evening again. I hope you have meanwhile arrived fully—not just the body, but also the mind. Always take some time after rushing around the whole day, perhaps coming from work or from another engagement. It takes time for the body and the mind to come together. Once we become aware of how we feel and how the body is right now, that really helps us to fully be where we are.

The Buddha's teaching is all about pointing us in the right direction, which is where we are. In the present moment is where we can learn more about how our mind works and also how the bigger context operates. Through shedding different levels of concepts, we arrive more and more at clarity, which helps us to live our lives with less and less friction. Our expectations change through getting to know the way things really are, rather than what we have learned through our conditioning from the day we were born, or maybe even over lifetimes, if we can open up to that way of thinking.

One way of summarizing the Buddha's teaching is this: the Buddha said, "I teach about suffering and the end of suffering." That was one way he expressed what his teaching is all about, especially in the Theravada presentation, which I think is the basis of how Philip also teaches here.

The word "suffering" in the Pali language—or rather, the word *dukkha*, which is one of the three characteristics of existence—is often translated as suffering. But actually, in the original Pali, *dukkha* doesn't mean suffering. It means rather unsatisfactoriness. Originally, the word *dukkha* consists of two parts. The prefix *du-* means difficult or not really fitting. The second part of the word, *kha*, means the axle of a wheel—the hole in the center of a wheel where the axle is inserted. It means that this axle doesn't perfectly fit into the hole, so it isn't a perfect fit. Because of that, the wheel doesn't run smoothly. That's the example of how this unsatisfactoriness, which is one of the three characteristics of life, is illustrated.

Basically, it says this life is a rather bumpy ride. If we expect it to be a smooth ride, we will suffer. But if we can adjust ourselves, if we can move with the bumps, then we won't suffer. Instead, we understand how this process works better—inside ourselves and also outside. Even ultimately, there is no inside and outside, but that's how we experience it as human beings.

The Buddha said this was his whole intention in trying to share what he understood in the process we call enlightenment. He understood that the life process is unsatisfactory, which means it can't give us any lasting solutions for anything other than really opening up to impermanence. That was the first insight he had, which sent him onto the path.

The tradition has it that the Buddha, as a young man, grew up in quite privileged circumstances. It is said that for quite a long time he wasn't aware of impermanence because he had so much access to all kinds of entertainments—beautiful people, beautiful clothes, good food, everything—so he wasn't really aware that there is actually a lot of uncertainty in this life.

At one point he became tired of those different sense pleasures and wanted to know more about life. The story has it that he was going out with his charioteer into the town. At that outing—it might not have really been a first outing, but it was the first time he became aware of certain aspects he had never really taken in consciously before. Even though he had maybe seen these people, he hadn't really seen them with his heart. He just saw them maybe with his eyes, but he really didn't take it in.

He saw what are called the divine messengers. He saw a sick person, he saw an old person, and he saw a dead person. When he saw them, he suddenly realized that he himself would also be sick, old, and would die. That was just a shocking recognition for him.

At the end of this outing, he also saw what's called a truth seeker—somebody dressed in robes who obviously had dedicated their life to really investigating their own experience and had dedicated their life to getting deeply in touch with reality. He felt very inspired by that sight. That was his entrance into the path.

After that, the story has it that he lost interest in his privileged situation and chose to dedicate his life to trying to find the truth.

This experience of having a body as a human being operates according to laws of nature which we can get to know. We can adapt ourselves to those laws, accept them for what they are, and then work together with those laws of nature. But we can't stop them from happening. This can be a very sobering insight when we really start to notice that this doesn't happen only to other people—it happens also to ourselves.

This is a contemplation which we as monastics are taught to contemplate every day—to every day contemplate the fact that our bodies do age, they get sick, and they're going to die. It's considered that these contemplations, if you really take them deep, give us a sense of urgency for practice.

Our culture and upbringing doesn't encourage us at all in these contemplations. Instead, our culture tries to hide these facts of aging, illness, and death. If you look at how we live, especially here in the West, we try to separate those things out. People who undergo these laws of nature in a big way—those who are very ill or very old—are very difficult to actually see if we don't have them in our own families. This is something we have to really make an effort to consider.

I wanted to speak about this today because I feel that nowadays, we not only have our personal bodies to contemplate, but it's happening in a much bigger way as we become aware of what changes our planet is undergoing right now. A similar process becomes apparent when we hear about climate change, because our planet is also quite sick right now. If we don't pay attention to that, we don't know what's going to happen. As a human race, we have never been in such a situation. We have been on this planet for about 250,000 years now, and it has never been this way.

I think it's very important nowadays to extrapolate these reflections about old age, sickness, and death in relation to our personal bodies and extend them to the planet as well. We need to take the teachings of the Buddha further and see our personal suffering and the ways we cope with it in a much larger context.

When the Buddha was walking the planet about 2,500 years ago, the situation was very different. Climate change definitely was not an issue. People were under the impression that this planet and its resources—the air, the water—were all limitless because there were so few people living on the planet, perhaps a fifth or even less than today. So that wasn't an issue the Buddha addressed directly.

The Buddha did speak about world systems arising and ceasing, but he didn't speak about it in terms of an experience you could have within your own lifetime, because those changes happen on such a big scale that we can't really witness them directly. But because modern science has developed many different tools that allow us to look into the past and future, to go into the depths, we have extended our sense organs in such a way that we can actually witness some of those changes now.

One result of this is that we know this climate change taking place now is heading in a direction that is very disconcerting when we think about future generations and our responsibility to them. We need to find ways to translate this information into action. I think quite a few people know about these facts—I'm one of those people and I've read quite a lot about it—but I also came here with someone driving me in a car, and I'm going to go back the same way because I wouldn't even know how to get back otherwise. The systems are not in place.

The question is: How can we as a society translate information into action? The teaching of the Buddha offers a whole array of skillful means for how we can translate information—for example, about old age, sickness, and death, about impermanence—and let it really sink into our being so that our actions are informed by that information. There seems to be a disconnect.

There are many books and websites where you can see the warming and the predictions for the future: that if we don't make some real big changes around 2030, we will have reached a degree of warming where very dangerous feedback loops could kick in, which would then be basically unstoppable. But if we were to really start changing our ways now, we actually could contain the warming at manageable levels. Yet somehow, as a society, we are not able to organize ourselves accordingly.

I'm not thinking that I'm good at this either. I'm just trying to reflect on the fact that we have so much information because science is so advanced, but somehow we lack the connection between the heart and the information. Those channels are so clogged up with conditioning that we can't really bring it home in a way that allows us to live accordingly.

This is exactly what the Buddha was saying 2,500 years ago. We see all of these things going on, but we live as if they weren't happening. What's going on here, really? Why are we like that? Including myself, of course.

Somehow, we are not really aware that we are all part of this planet Earth. We live on it as if it were just some kind of environment where we can take what we want and dump what we don't need, assuming it will be cleaned up by somebody else. But who is that somebody?

I find it very interesting to reflect on this work...

The word ecology is fascinating—its first part, "eco," comes from the Greek word "oikos," which means house or home. So ecology literally means to study one's home. The word economy shares the same root, meaning to look after one's home, to care for one's house. I looked this up on Wikipedia, and discovered that the word economy was first used in the 14th century in a book about monastery administration—how to care for the monastic home in the best possible way so residents could live a healthy life and leave behind a dwelling that future inhabitants could also enjoy.

Yet somehow we're not living this way. We inhabit the Earth like careless teenagers who don't think about tomorrow, trusting that parents will clean up after them. These young people haven't yet made the connection between where food comes from and how difficult it is to maintain a household. They're simply mindless. And this is exactly how we live—because we don't see our lives within the bigger context, we haven't truly understood our situation. If we had, we would live differently.

It's illuminating to contrast "ego"—the limited self that doesn't understand the larger context—with "eco," the bigger self, the broader perspective. If we could see ourselves and our lives within this expanded context, we could step out of identification with our personal likes and dislikes and embrace a more encompassing view of existence.

This is what the dharma wants to open us up to. The teaching points us toward the dissonance we experience in life. But in our consumerist culture, we're conditioned to always move to the next thing, and the next, and the next. We never turn toward the dissonance because we haven't been trained to do so. The Buddha's teaching offers various means to turn toward difficulty, trusting that the healing direction lies within the

suffering itself. Only by facing our pain can we break through the delusion of our conditioning, the identification with our thinking about how things are. The doorway to freedom is suffering itself.

Philip Moffat writes about this in his book "Dancing with Life," where he explores the Four Noble Truths—the essence of Buddha's teaching. The First Noble Truth acknowledges that there is suffering, dissonance, unsatisfactoriness in life. The healing lies in turning toward it rather than away from it. Modern consumerist culture excels at turning toward the next thing, but it's poor at facing dissonance. Now the planet is sternly telling us we must wean ourselves from dependence on endless consumption because we simply don't have the resources. We're living far beyond our means.

I've read that American culture lives as if we had six planets' worth of resources to exploit, but we have only one—and it's on its last legs in terms of sustaining human life. The Earth will continue, of course, but we won't be part of it. We're taking many other species down with us.

I don't say this to assign blame, because we've only been aware of this crisis as a society for about thirty years. We're slow learners, and it takes time to translate information into action. But circumstances are becoming increasingly urgent. If we don't change our ways dramatically by 2020, we face the possibility of severe changes that will make it extremely difficult for humans to remain here—shortages of food, water, clean air, fertile soil, widespread illness, climate refugees, and resource scarcity. We're looking toward an extremely turbulent future.

Some difficulties are inherent in human existence—old age, sickness, and death. We can't do anything about these; they're simply part of the human experience, and they have their own beauty. Like flowers that bloom, reach their peak beauty, return to earth, and bloom again, the human body follows this natural cycle with tremendous built-in intelligence that can leave the human mind speechless.

But other forms of suffering—like how we live on the planet—represent choices. We can live differently. This kind of suffering isn't inherent in human existence; it's the result of ignorance. Here we can take action, because we don't need to live as we currently do.

It's not needed to live in this kind of way, really squandering the resources as we do. I've brought a quote from a Christian priest named Thomas Berry, who died perhaps twenty years ago. I found a very powerful, very short quote from him. He says, "The universe itself is the primary sacred scripture."

To look at the process of the evolution of the universe, which modern science tells us has been going on for over thirteen billion years since the Big Bang - this planet has developed such amazing life forms, and we are one of those. This process has a very mysterious intelligence built into it, moving toward ever greater complexity, ever greater levels of inclusion, and also greater levels of diversity.

As the human race, I think what this means is that greater levels of inclusion and diversity require us to see ourselves not on top of the planet and all the different species that are here. They are not here for our use - it's more like we are just one of them. Meditation is a technology we can use to tear away those veils of delusion that make us believe we are separate from everything else and that we can somehow control this.

Even though there is so much information telling us we cannot - otherwise we wouldn't have created such a mess. We would really be able to control it because I think the intentions were good. But obviously the ignorance was so great we did not know so many things which we thought had no real value. Nowadays we know that if just one kind of insect dies out, a whole process is interrupted. We just didn't know any better.

But now we start to understand that there's so much we cannot fathom with our little minds. So I think it's very important to develop this kind of respect for that which we do not know. It is difficult, but I think the practice is there exactly for that.

One other central insight the Buddha had when he experienced what's called enlightenment was the insight into emptiness. Or in the Pali canon, it's often expressed as not-self or anatta. This means that the way we understand reality when we look at it with our senses - when we touch things or see things or hear things, taste things and so on - this is one way we can interpret experience, but this is not really reality in the ultimate sense.

With our sense organs, we do experience ourselves as separate entities, walking around and doing things. But in reality, this is not the way things are. We are all part of something much bigger than ourselves. This being part of something much bigger than ourselves is a responsibility and at the same time a great privilege, because we sustain ourselves through that.

But in terms of awareness and consciousness, we somehow seem to be like teenagers. If you have had children - I didn't have children, but I have read in psychology books - teenagers want to be independent, they want to do what they like, but at the same time, they want to be taken care of by their parents. This is our level of consciousness in terms of how we live on this planet. We just want to take whatever we like, but we don't want to have any rules to live by. We want to have the best of everything.

Now our parents, so to say - if we want to call the planet our parents - show us the limits and say, "No, stop now. You can't go this way any longer. You have to turn inward and learn to live with dissonance, learn to live with greed and hatred and learn to transform it rather than try to always get your way." This is what maturity is all about - to be able to know what you are feeling and to be able to hold this feeling and not necessarily act on it.

The teachings give us different tools so that we can develop the strength to be with what is, go through it, come out at the other end, and respond in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

Here is a quote from a Norwegian eco-philosopher named Arne Naess: "When we perceive our deeper identity as an ecological self that includes not just us, but also all life on Earth, then acting for the sake of our world doesn't seem like a sacrifice. It seems a natural thing to do."

It is exactly that ability to perceive our deeper identity which we have to train ourselves to develop. We have to really be able to stay long enough with our experience so we can go deeper. The meditation teachings are the skillful means by which we can work on this deepening and on the letting go of identifying with more surface concepts that our culture is bombarding us with all the time, especially the media. The media are just very irresponsible.

It takes a lot of strength to really stay alert. Coming to a sangha like this on a regular basis is a very powerful reminder that we have to help each other to really stay vigilant with this. There's a lot at stake - what is on stake is just immense right now, and it's very difficult to stay conscious of it because wherever you go you are bombarded with messages that point in all different directions, only not in the most important one.

So I hope that you'll be willing to take in the message I try to give.

These messages may not be pleasant to hear, most likely. But I believe they are important. We have a very powerful opportunity for practice now because there's nowhere to run anymore, really. The only escape we have is into awareness, because the planet has become a very small place with over seven billion people. The only place to go is to wake up.

In terms of practice, it's a very good opportunity because there are many delusions we simply can't afford to maintain anymore. So in terms of practice, it's a very powerful time.

I also want to end by saying that we do have all of the skills and all of the knowledge to make the changes that need to be made. The challenge is that the media are not willing to make this known because they are supported by businesses that have enormous investments in the old ways of doing things. They don't support information that would end their dominion over our bank accounts. This is the conundrum of how to support the dissemination of this information.

I think we can all do our part. I certainly try to do that and work to bring this awareness more and more into the teaching evenings we hold in the Bay Area and other places. I'm also working with all of the feelings this brings up within myself and within the sangha, and witnessing the changes that are occurring. A few years ago, people weren't really very interested in hearing this, but now there's more and more capacity and space for people who want to hear it. That's a very good development.

So there are five or ten minutes left. If there are any questions, please ask. Do you have a microphone here?

[Question about Spirit Rock teacher meeting and environmental leadership]

Thank you for that question. Yes, I was at that meeting. This environmental awareness is one of the main themes we're addressing as dharma teachers. We had a presenter who is one of the top advisors on climate change for the Obama administration give a presentation to the teachers. We've formed a group and are having our first conference call on the 17th of this month to develop ways to bring this more into our teaching. We've received very good information presented in a simple way about what's happening.

We're working on having an Earth Care Week in the first week of October, with all the teachers connected to Spirit Rock, IMS, Gaia House in England, and Beatenberg in Switzerland working together on this.

Our little vihara personally attends different rallies on climate change. We were at the rally on June 20th to stop the pipeline, at the Golden Gate Bridge. There's a very big rally organized for August 3rd in Richmond, walking to the Chevron refinery exactly one year after the big explosion. It's a rally demanding the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and I'll be there as well. Please join us. We meet at 10 a.m. at the Richmond BART station on August 3rd—that's a Saturday. You can find all the information online.

You can visit our website—it's all there under what's new, and it's also on the homepage where you can click. We're very happy to meet you there at the rally. It's all non-violent and peaceful, and people are encouraged to bring a sunflower as a weapon with you.

I feel that it's this concern—how we leave this planet for future generations—which brings people from all walks of life together. Because we share this responsibility together, and we have to start somewhere. It's not clear how all of this will unfold, but we don't need to know. Because we are all part of this planet, and we can trust that if we really start to listen collectively to what is needed, we will find a way to do it.

We just have to start. We don't have to know the whole thing. We just need to know the next step—just like life. It's not different from life; it's just part of life.

I want to make a comment more than a question. It's fine to go and protest at a refinery, but I think the reality is that what every person as an individual can do in their life is what's most important. Where does your water come from? Most people don't know. How do you heat your home? Maybe you can make changes. Maybe you can use public transportation more. Maybe you can get a different kind of car. There are so many things—from using our bag to go to the grocery store to how we recycle our garbage. Just so many personal things that we take for granted, and it has to start from us. Of course, we need to reach out to our families and the community, but the us part, the me—we're not doing that.

I think both are important. The systems have to change. We little beings also have to do what we can. But we can only do what the systems support us to do, so we have both. You have to look at what you do, but we also have to collectively act. So it's everything—everybody has to find their own ways to respond, of course. But I think to collectively respond by urging the administrations of our different areas in society, the big changes also have to be implemented. It's all important.

Many times humanity has given up an old world for a new one. You know, 250,000 years ago we were living in caves. Now we don't live in caves anymore—well, just a few people maybe. So we have many times already left behind old ways of doing things. We are good at that. But every time, before you do it, you think, "Ah, this I can't do. It's too much," because we are afraid of what we don't know.

But we have stepped into the not-knowing so many times. When you were giving birth to a child, you didn't know before how it would be, and you did it—somehow it came out. And that's again like this, by just opening to it.

I'd like to end with a beautiful quote by Joanna Macy: "If a hole appears, just walk through it. See what's on the other side. You'll never be lost because this emptiness is central to life, figured into the nature of all things."

The hole is maybe not knowing how to respond. But to just really open up to not knowing how to respond other than taking the next step. Right now you don't know how to respond, and I also don't really know how to respond.

But for example, what you can do right now is keep your heart open to this information, even if it's very uncomfortable. You might feel like you don't want to know, and then go to your car, drive home, eat something, turn on the TV and forget about it. Or you can consciously keep your heart open and go home and perhaps start to read something about this—look up 350.org or Sierra Club or whatever—and maybe join such a site where you get regular information about these things. You just put your toe into the water and go a step further, and go a step further, and do what you can rather than turning away from it.

That's how it starts. And that would be a good thing to do.

CHAPTER 251

Practicing in Times of Big Changes

Rob Burbea · 35 min

> *In this profound talk, Rob Burbea addresses how Buddhist practice can support us during times of unprecedented global change, particularly the environmental crisis facing our planet. Drawing on the middle way teaching that "everything is already perfect, but there's a lot of room for improvement," he explores how we can find stability amid uncertainty through developing wisdom (paññā) and equanimity (upekkhā), one of the four brahmavihāras.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that true wisdom is not accumulated knowledge but rather the capacity to be present with experience before conceptual thinking arises - what he describes as "before knowledge" (pra-jñā). He discusses how practice helps us develop tolerance for difficult feelings, which are often the entry point where we can interrupt the cycle of dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) before reactive patterns take hold. Using the metaphor of a caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, he suggests that practitioners can serve as "imaginary cells" - agents of positive transformation during societal breakdown and renewal.*
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> *The talk weaves together personal practice with collective responsibility, showing how inner transformation through meditation naturally supports outer change. Burbea draws on the Buddha's enlightenment story, where Māra's attacks transformed into flowers, illustrating how challenges become the very soil for wisdom and compassion to grow. This teaching offers both practical guidance for working with difficult emotions and a broader vision of how dharma practice can contribute to navigating our current global crises.*

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma-Sambuddhassa.

Good morning, and thank you for inviting me to speak here today. This is a very beautiful place, and I was deeply moved by the request you made earlier.

I'd like to begin with a quote from Suzuki Roshi, the founding teacher of your lineage: "Everything is already perfect, but there's a lot of room for improvement." I've always found this to be a profound reflection on what we call in the Theravada school —and I've heard in the Tibetan school as well—the middle way, the middle path between two extremes. On one hand, ultimately everything is already perfect as it is. But conventionally, we often find ourselves unable to connect with that perfection, par-

ticularly when we're thrown about by afflictive emotions and when strong energies move through our body and mind. In such moments, it can be quite difficult to connect with the innate perfection of everything just as it is.

Because of the power of these disturbances, I have chosen to live this life in a way that provides strong support to help me hold steady in the midst of challenges—when greed, hatred, and delusion are triggered by different experiences, people, and relationships we encounter in the world. All of this can be included in practice, but remembering this when we are triggered is another matter entirely. We tend to forget that our whole life can be called an opportunity for practice, especially when it would actually be most beneficial to remember it.

In this day and age, I feel there is tremendous uncertainty. Of course, there is always uncertainty, but it has never been so much "in your face" as it is nowadays with the whole issue of climate change. We could reach a tipping point of what this planet can cope with at any moment—we don't know when it's going to happen, but it's something that's very much on the cards and could hit us at any time.

I believe having a strong practice has never been more important than it is right now, because there's really nowhere to go anymore. We can only wake up. That's the only place to go—within rather than without—because in the external world there isn't much space left. So much has been impacted by our greed, hatred, and delusion that the situation is looking quite dire.

Yet even this huge perspective—that we may be wiping ourselves off the planet—can be an opportunity for practice if we have enough wisdom and compassion to open up to it and not see it as something outside of practice. However, I think it's such a massive issue that many people still don't want to hear about it. There's a lot of denial, and much misinformation comes to us through the media. To really sort this out, we need to take a genuine interest in what's happening.

In terms of the elements that come together to produce mind states for us, this isn't very different from other challenges we face. It's just that the magnitude of this particular situation is unprecedented.

Coming together as a group like this today to sit with this truth can be very powerful and empowering, because we are not alone in this—we are all in this together. Once we really take that to heart, I feel a new window of opportunity opens up, because this togetherness, this third refuge of sangha, is a very powerful agent for transformation and support.

Those of you here who have a regular practice are very fortunate in this time, because you have something to fall back on and something that helps make sense of the whole situation. This environmental crisis is something we have been co-creating with nature because we haven't truly understood how nature works. For quite some time, we've been doing things that have produced effects we never intended. Now we seem to be waking up to this reality as a society more and more.

People who have a spiritual practice tend to be quicker in picking things up because there is generally more capacity for sensitivity. You've been meditating for some time and have developed a certain understanding of how the mind works. You're generally less afraid of feeling, and that's a very good beginning, because we can connect to life only through feeling. If we cut ourselves off from feeling, we cut ourselves off from life. This disconnection from feeling is one of the main issues that has brought us to this environmental crisis.

Our culture has become quite cynical about feeling and cynical about the feminine aspect—which is present in all genders—the aspect that is open to feeling and able to hold both chaos and creativity. This aspect has been relegated to second place for hundreds of years because of the direction our evolution has taken. There's nobody to blame; it's simply how things have unfolded.

We are waking up to a time when we very much need this capacity to open to chaos and, in a sense, to admit defeat. We cannot control nature because we are part of nature. But we can get to know her, and we can make friends with her.

A practice like this is a technology for learning how to make friends with the laws of nature. By simply sitting down in the way you're doing and listening—listening to what nature has to say, what she has to tell us about how our minds work and how our bodies work—we gain increasing clarity. This clarity doesn't come from storing up more information or knowledge, but rather from tearing away veils of delusion, releasing certain assumptions we've held about the way things work that have turned out to be utterly misguided.

We have been polluting so much, yet that wasn't our intention. As a human species, we originally simply wanted to flourish and thrive. But somewhere along the way, our methods became disconnected from wisdom, and now we find ourselves needing to reconnect with the deeper intelligence that practice can offer.

We originally intended to create abundance so everyone could share. But instead, we've created a severely polluted planet where resources are concentrated in the hands of very few, while countless people have nothing or very little. Our approach has failed because we operate from ignorance, not paying attention to how things truly work.

Now we face an enormous wake-up call. We've pushed nearly to the limits of what our planet can sustain. We're being forced to change our ways, which is perhaps fortunate—otherwise we might never have transformed.

Holding this reality in mind can serve as a sobering incentive for practice. We must trust that within the depths of our connection to life lies guidance—we need only develop the heart to listen. Someone truly connected to life's guidance is what I would call a wise being. They may have studied extensively, or they may not have. Wisdom isn't accumulated book knowledge or memorized suttas and instructions.

Wisdom is not a body of knowledge but a capacity to be with things as they are without overlaying concepts, allowing ourselves to be informed by the process we call nature without creating barriers. The Sanskrit word *prajña* illuminates this beautifully. *Jña* means knowledge, while *pra* adds a dynamic quality meaning "before." So wisdom literally means "before knowledge"—that moment when we encounter something before the mind begins thinking. This is when wisdom arises, when we're directly present with reality without imposing past stories.

These moments of being with things in their suchness cultivate wisdom. As we accumulate such moments, wisdom permeates our being, becoming part of who we are rather than something stored in the brain. When triggers arise, we don't need to recall that Buddha taught impermanence—we simply know it. This knowing provides less surface for difficulties to impact us. Wisdom makes us fluent and flowing rather than rigid, able to be with reality as it is.

This doesn't make us victims of circumstance. Rather, we recognize ourselves as part of nature, not separate from her. We participate in life's process without falling into extremes—the middle way between "everything is perfect" and "everything is terrible and out to get me." Most of us fluctuate between these poles. Some people, labeled bipolar, experience such extreme swings they can no longer function, but we all carry this tendency to some degree while managing to get by.

Our practice brings the pendulum to ever-smaller swings through insight into how things work. With less rigidity comes less surface to be disturbed. Equilibrium—*upekkhā* or equanimity—is one of the four *brahmavihāras*, the divine abidings. It results from wisdom while simultaneously providing ground for wisdom to grow.

When I first heard about the middle way, it captured my attention completely. I felt deeply drawn to this teaching because I'd never considered such an approach. Like most young people, I was attracted to extremes, believing that standing out through extreme positions was admirable. Over the years, this approach becomes exhausting. Eventually, we may feel ready for a less challenging way of living. That's when I became ripe to truly hear and consider this teaching.

when I heard this about the middle way, it sounded so healing to me—that there's a possibility here to have somewhere to observe everything from.

The founder of the lineage I have been trained in, the forest tradition, was a Thai master named Ajahn Chah, who passed away in the 1990s. When people would ask him questions, he would say something to one person and then something completely different to another person. People would wonder, "What kind of teacher is this? He says this to you and this to me. It doesn't make any sense."

He would explain: if somebody goes too far to the right, he would say, go to the left. If somebody goes too far to the left, he would say, go to the right. When people were too much on one side of the extremes, he was simply guiding them back to the middle. This is the ground from which we can observe how life works, and through this observation we can grow in wisdom and compassion. It's not like going up, up, up, but rather going down, down, down into the depths of the process of life, allowing the process to reveal itself to us.

The foremost quality we need to develop for this is the willingness to be with feeling—which is not an easy thing to do. Living these very privileged lives in Western society, with all our conveniences, we are especially susceptible to having little tolerance for difficult feelings. We simply press a button here and press a button there—making it hotter, colder, this and that. We have very low tolerance.

In this time of impending great changes, we need to increase our tolerance for many things we haven't been thinking about much. We have all been schooled in a culture that believes in endless growth, endless improvement, endless "making it all better" and "making it all more." But we have reached a point where it's obvious things won't continue that way.

This is where we can consider ourselves very fortunate to have a practice and teaching that contains all the information we need to strengthen our capacity to be with the way things are and to learn from it. From that equilibrium—this equanimity which results from practice—comes wisdom and compassion that we can bring into our lives and share with others. It's a great privilege to be able to do that.

A precious human life coinciding with meeting a teaching like this is considered very fortunate. We can take solace from that. Whatever is going to happen next, at least we have a framework within which we can hold all of it.

I recently read a beautiful analogy about our situation called the butterfly story, which I'd like to share with you. Initially, a butterfly is a caterpillar. At one point in its existence, that caterpillar starts to overeat—consuming about three hundred times its body weight in a day. It begins to horrendously overconsume. There's some comparison there with our culture as well.

The caterpillar overconsumes until it can't move anymore. It becomes very sluggish and heavy, then hangs itself from a tree or somewhere. The skin starts to harden and becomes what's called a chrysalis. The body of the caterpillar inside the chrysalis begins to dissolve into a soup. For a long time, it wasn't clear how one creature—a caterpillar—could transform into a butterfly.

But scientists discovered that during the lifetime of the caterpillar, there are so-called imaginal cells already built into the caterpillar's system. In the time of crisis, those imaginal cells start to wake up. Through the soup of the dissolved caterpillar, these imaginal cells multiply. At one point, there's a tipping point and the imaginal cells take over. A completely new creature—a butterfly—is formed, and eventually slips out of the chrysalis and flies away.

This is a beautiful analogy for when one worldview is breaking down. There are always some people who are those imaginal cells, coexisting with the old system for some time. At one point, the tipping point sets in, and they start to multiply very quickly and link up with each other. Then the new worldview—the butterfly—is born.

I recently heard that for a tipping point to occur, only seven percent of the population is needed. After that, there's no return. I find this very encouraging—it's not so many people, actually. We could all be those imaginal cells.

With the practice we have, we possess all the tools to strengthen ourselves so we can hold the friction that a change of worldview inevitably brings. We also develop the capacity to truly look at what's happening, because if you don't fully look at it, the change won't be born. Change comes from really seeing what's going on. The change isn't something we have to force—we simply have to take in what's happening, and then change is born out of seeing clearly.

But to see clearly, we have to look, and look long enough. We don't have to force ourselves, but simply see. Notice how quickly we need to do something else after looking at difficult information. Even if action needs to be taken, just notice that impulse.

This is all part of the process—really noticing how we busy ourselves with things that may not be so important. See if there's an element of wanting to distract ourselves because we don't know what to do, and we think that because we don't know what to do, we shouldn't look.

Consider how the Buddha realized enlightenment. There's another beautiful analogy: when the Buddha was sitting under the Bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment, various personifications of Mara came to him, hurling weapons against him and sending beautiful women and all manner of temptations.

And he just decided to simply sit there and not move. And then all of those assaults, those weapons, they turned into flowers. They turned into blessings because they were the soil for wisdom and compassion to grow out of.

If there's no experience, there's no process. There's no learning. We need those experiences. They are the soil for those flowers to grow. And whatever soil is there, that's what we have to work with. We don't have a choice about saying, "Oh, I want a different experience." We don't have a choice here. But we have total choice to really make the most out of it in terms of practice. This is where we have a choice.

And then, you know, if the internal changes, the external will change as well. And the climate crisis today is just like a reflection of the collective internal. It doesn't look very nice. But if we do our bit, we can contribute to that shift. And that's what I'd like to do, to the best of my abilities. And sometimes I also just go to sleep, but I try to at least be aware of it—that sometimes I just need to turn away from it and rest. That's okay too.

So there's not much time left, but if anybody would like to comment or ask a question, please feel free.

A participant asks about the distinction between emotions and feelings, and requests more explanation about vipassana as feeling being the main way to connect with our inner connection to other beings.

I think generally, how I understand it, feeling is a part of emotion. For example, a feeling arises, and then we're maybe not aware enough, not mindful enough, so we start thinking about it. And then it becomes an emotion. It starts with a feeling, and then we put thinking into it, and then it becomes a whole mix. Or sometimes it can be just thinking something, and then a feeling arises.

So feeling is more basic—there's neutral feeling, pleasant feeling, and unpleasant feeling. Neutral feeling we are mostly not aware of, but we are very aware of unpleasant feeling and pleasant feeling. Emotion is much more than just feeling. So anger, jealousy, infatuation—all of that are emotions, and feeling is just a part of it.

The emotions which are built up around pleasant feeling—we want more of those, isn't it? But what they all have is a quite deluding quality, because if we experience a certain situation or relationship through that veil of emotions, then we don't really experience what's there. It can be very colored, very selective. We pick up certain clues, but we don't see others, and then we just go down that road and maybe complicate our lives.

In terms of what I was saying about prajna, or pañña in the Pali language—it was very surprising for me to hear that pañña or prajna is not a body of knowledge, but the capacity to be with suchness, to be with the way things are. And in any moment, we can be fully with experience as it is without putting something on top of it. We actually are collecting information about the way things truly are.

That's what we do in formal meditation first, but then ideally we bring that into our daily lives. And then, when a certain amount of information is collected, at one point it shifts into an insight. Suddenly you see into the depths of something, or you see the connections of something, and then you have an insight. If that's a really deep insight, it can be what you call satori in Zen—then it becomes something which is a permanent change of the consciousness of that being. There might be certain what we call in Pali language "fetters"—which bind us to the wheel of becoming, of being born in ignorance again and again.

And then if there are certain insights which are very deep, some of those fetters are cut off permanently. And then these kinds of delusions won't be produced any longer. And then there is more capacity to be with the way things are, if some of those delusions fall away permanently.

I don't know if you have observed it in your own life, but what is the most difficult element to be with is very strong feelings. And in what's called the dependent origination...

It's at feeling where that wheel of becoming can be stopped. When feeling becomes grasping, attaching and grasping—this is where, if we wake up to it, we can step out. But if we don't let go, then we become it, and then we'll be born into aging, sickness and death. We're already down the drain.

So it's at feeling where we can step out—at the junction of feeling and attaching. If we can wake up to that moment when the feeling comes... but this is a very fast process. When the feeling arises, when the attaching or the pushing away begins—when that reaction, the very nature of reaction, occurs—if we notice it with mindfulness, there we can step out.

But if we don't step out there, then we are just... we're already becoming it. We're already the angry one who has been saying those things. But if we notice the contraction in the body, the heat coming up, the thoughts—if we notice it in that moment—we can still step out.

This is the precious opportunity that each moment offers us: to wake up at the very point where suffering is born, to step out of the wheel of becoming through the power of mindful awareness. In this stepping out, we find our freedom.

CHAPTER 252

The Dhamma of Global Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 59 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines global climate change through the lens of core Buddhist teachings, revealing how our fundamental delusions contribute to environmental destruction. Drawing on the Four Noble Truths, he explores how our addiction to sense pleasures (kāma-taṇhā) drives energy-intensive lifestyles that conflict with natural cycles. He discusses how wrong view (micchā-diṭṭhi) around ownership versus stewardship of Earth's resources stems from the illusion of a separate self (attā), and how this fundamental ignorance (avijjā) prevents us from seeing our deep interconnectedness (paṭiccasamuppāda).*
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> *Burbea argues that climate change is not merely a political issue but a moral one requiring inner transformation. He explains how the Buddha's teaching that "all experience is preceded by mind" (from the Dhammapada) applies directly to our environmental crisis - our collective delusion manifests as ecological destruction. The path forward involves cultivating contentment (santuṭṭhi), practicing ethical conduct (sīla) based on non-harming (ahiṃsā), and developing wise view that recognizes our role as stewards rather than owners.*
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> *The talk emphasizes how mindfulness practice enables us to see cause and effect (kamma) clearly, transforming our worldview "from me to we." Burbea suggests that addressing climate change requires the same fundamental practice taught by the Buddha: learning to see things as they actually are, which naturally gives rise to compassion and appropriate action for all beings.*

How about now? Excellent. Thank you. How's everyone doing tonight? It's an interesting day. Yes. Different. How many people found parts of today challenging? Yeah. Yes. These human relationships. It's so much easier when we're just like this.

So this is the talk now. How many times have you heard yourself ask this, or another student? They'll say, "Why should I pay attention to this? Or what's the reason for paying attention to this?" And the teacher says, "Because it's happening. Because that's what's happening." Have you heard that? It's a very common thing. We're aware of what's present. Why? Because it's what's happening. It's what's presenting itself to us in our life at that moment. It could be anything.

There's one thing that's happening now, and it's not unique to any one of us. It is and will be impacting us for a long time. And that thing that's happening that I'd like to talk about tonight is global climate change.

Just this idea, just to frame the talk: it's the same reason on one level that you would be aware of pain in your knee. Why? Because it's what's happening in it. And in order to have a correct relationship with it, or a helpful relationship with it, it's good to get to know it and to connect with it and learn about it and learn about what our relationship to it might be. So we do that with everything—with a thought, with the sound of a cricket. And so because it's happening, then the practice tells us it would be good to do that with global climate change as well.

So this can be a little bit of an interesting subject, sometimes maybe hard. So I want you to just keep checking in with your bodies. Perhaps notice any reactivity you might have. It's not going to be a doom and gloom talk, so don't worry about that. But it might be good to just stay connected and feel into, "Oh, how am I actually relating to this?"

I'm not going to go into a lot of statistics here—how many feet sea level is going to rise, or how many degrees Celsius the average temperature is going to go up, or by what date will there be no ice in the Arctic, that kind of stuff. That information is out there. It's available. It's easy to find. And if that interests you, you can do that. So this talk isn't going to go down that road.

This is more about beginning to talk about and grapple with this situation that is currently impacting us and will continue to impact us on a greater and greater level far into the future. This is going to keep going. So it's very important to consciously turn towards what's occurring.

The reason that it's important to consciously do it is there's this interesting study that I read about where the study subjects were put into a room and told to fill out some form. That's what they thought they were doing. What they did—there was an air vent and they pumped in smoke through the air vent. When that happened, the people would see that and go, "Wow, something's wrong. We're out of here." They'd go out of the room and they'd go to the researchers and say, "Hey, there's something wrong in that room. Smoke's coming out of the vent." So kind of very natural and appropriate behavior.

Then they would have, so let's say there would be six people...

Then they repeated the experiment with five subjects and one plant—one person who wasn't a real subject but was in on what was going on. They would pump smoke in again, and the plant wouldn't notice it. They would keep filling out their forms. Even as the smoke poured into the room, they would just keep working as if nothing was happening.

They did this many, many times. People would look at the person who wasn't reacting and would keep doing what they were doing. They wouldn't get up and leave until much, much later. There was a really strong impact of that one person carrying on with business as usual. In the face of someone carrying on with business as usual, when people were faced with that, their own natural response to what was difficult went right out the window.

I tell that story because this is actually where we're at with climate change. The smoke is coming through the vents. It's very clear. But there are strong forces—which I'll talk about later—that are carrying on with business as usual. We all get caught up in it. We get frozen. There's not really a national dialogue about it. We're like those other people who see, "Well, someone's not reacting to this. Well, okay."

For that reason alone, it's helpful to consciously turn toward this and start talking about it so we break the freeze. For us as dharma practitioners, this talk is to show how the teachings we've all been studying and practicing can shed light both on how we've gotten to this point and what an appropriate response might be.

Just to be clear: climate change is not a political issue. I'm not sitting up here talking politically from one side or another. Of course, climate change does end up being talked about in politics, but it's not inherently a political thing. It's about the truth of what's happening right now, what's going to happen in the near future, and what is going to happen in fifty or one hundred years.

The biosphere—that layer of life on earth from a few inches down in the soil up to the atmosphere where birds and insects live, very thin, quite thin—is rapidly changing. Faster than it ever has in history. The species that live in this biosphere, and in turn make up part of it, are suffering and dying off. We are currently in the midst of the largest species die-off, or mass extinction, since the dinosaurs died out sixty-five million years ago.

People are suffering, and they will continue to suffer at an exponentially increasing rate as time goes by. This is not a political issue—it's a moral issue. It transcends political, cultural, and religious boundaries because it's happening to the whole planet.

Even though all people will be impacted and will be increasingly impacted by climate change, not everyone will be impacted in the same way. Unfortunately, as with other crises—political turmoil, economic turmoil—people who are most advantaged tend to be more buffered, while people who are more disadvantaged take the brunt of it. It's going to be the same way, at least to some degree, with climate change. People who are more advantaged will have some buffering. The disenfranchised people are going to bear the brunt of it.

But everyone will be impacted. Even people who might be quite buffered from it—it's going to depend on how they work with that gap between themselves and disenfranchised people. If they don't bridge that gap somehow consciously and just stay in their white castle or whatever, they may not be impacted so much on a physical level, at least for some time. But to do that, the level of cutting off one would have to do—they're going to be impacted by that. They're going to have to live with that.

The analogy that came to me was when the Titanic sank. The people in first class were in the lifeboats, and the people in second and third class didn't get to be in the lifeboats. There they were in the lifeboats while the ship was sinking and people were suffering. Yes, they were safe and dry in their lifeboats, but they had to live with the knowledge that maybe they didn't row back. They didn't bridge that gap. They didn't row back for the people. "We're safe over here."

So everyone's going to be impacted. Everyone's going to have to deal with this, even if in slightly different ways. For some it might be more physical. Some people might be dealing with it more on the heart-mind level.

Just to say, that's about as grim as it's going to get in this talk.

Two fundamental questions emerge from this recognition: How do the teachings of the dharma shed light on global climate change? And how can we respond skillfully to such an immense challenge?

One of the first dharma teachings that illuminates our climate crisis is the deeply ingrained habit pattern we have for craving sense pleasures. We are naturally drawn to what feels pleasant and recoil from what feels unpleasant. This fundamental tendency lies at the heart of the Four Noble Truths—particularly the second truth, which identifies the cause of suffering as our desire for sense pleasures. This same craving that creates personal suffering also serves as a root cause of global climate change.

We inhabit a world of constant flux, where conditions perpetually shift between pleasant and unpleasant, comfortable and uncomfortable. Sound emerges and dissolves into silence. Some experiences delight our senses and feel genuinely enjoyable. Others feel disagreeable or painful. This is simply the nature of our existence—the fundamental truth of our world.

Yet we carry within us a profound habit pattern of wanting only what brings pleasure while rejecting what causes discomfort. Here lies the discord—a fundamental misalignment with the way things actually are.

Maintaining this discord requires tremendous energy. Consider holding an object against gravity's natural pull. Initially manageable, this resistance becomes increasingly taxing. You can feel your arms beginning to shake as the effort intensifies. The longer we remain out of alignment with natural forces, the more energy we must expend to sustain our position.

As a species, particularly in Western societies, we have organized our entire civilization around this discord with natural conditions. We maintain this misalignment through massive expenditures of literal energy—burning coal, oil, and gas to power our resistance to what is.

On a warm day when it's eighty-five degrees outside, we create seventy-degree environments indoors. The cooler, drier conditions feel more pleasant, more agreeable to our preferences. We actively manufacture these conditions, and something must power those air conditioners—electricity generated somewhere, somehow. When winter brings temperatures ten degrees below zero, we maintain those same seventy-degree indoor environments. This isn't about promoting discomfort or suggesting we should all suffer in harsh conditions as some path to enlightenment or climate salvation. Rather, I'm illustrating how our fundamental unwillingness to be present with natural conditions requires enormous energetic resources to maintain the gap between what is and what we prefer.

The natural tendency seeks equilibrium. Houses want to reach the outside temperature; left to their own devices, they would simply come into balance with their surroundings.

Consider cities in the desert—vast amounts of energy required to sustain them. The Colorado River, once mighty, no longer reaches the ocean. It runs dry one hundred miles before the sea, so much water pumped out to sustain cities where cities were nev-

er meant to be. We prefer sunny and eighty degrees in January to the snow and cold of northern winters, so we move to the desert. Our technology makes this possible, but it still requires enormous energy.

Houses built solely for views rather than thoughtful placement on the land that might capture solar gain from south-facing windows. Repainting interiors simply because we no longer like the color, though no repainting is needed—paint that comes from oil. None of these choices are inherently wrong or bad. But when our society's primary paradigm becomes maximizing the pleasant while minimizing the unpleasant, we consume tremendous energy in the process. This approach runs counter to the truth of how things actually are.

Some say the Buddha was the first environmentalist—not because he carried protest signs or campaigned against drilling, but because he was an activist for seeing things as they truly are. This was his mission: walking from village to village, teaching people to follow practices that would reveal the truth of existence. When we see things as they are, we can live in accord with reality. Living in accord with reality requires far less energy.

The Tibetan teacher Atisha offers this wisdom: "Friends, the things you desire give no more satisfaction than drinking seawater. Therefore, practice contentment." Contentment with the way things are—whether pleasant or unpleasant, we simply say, "Okay."

Practicing contentment naturally lowers our carbon footprint. You won't hear this on the evening news alongside advice about compact fluorescent bulbs, but it's profoundly true: contentment reduces our environmental impact.

This first dharma principle—our addiction, our deeply ingrained habit patterns of craving sense pleasures—forms one of the pillars supporting our climate crisis.

A second principle emerges from sila practice, our ethical conduct. I want to examine this from one particular angle: the notion that human beings can own land, that the earth's gifts can become "ours." This belief contradicts the fundamental truth of how things are. We simply made this up—invented the concept of ownership because it serves our purposes, particularly our desire for sense pleasures.

Everything connects to everything else. All phenomena arise in dependence upon all other phenomena, while simultaneously giving rise to everything else. Given this profound level of complex interdependence, how could we possibly extract something from this web and declare it "mine"?

How can we own this? Another really important question we need to ask ourselves is: given such depth and breadth of interdependence, how could it be possible to harm a certain aspect of this world and in turn not harm ourselves?

Of course, the answer to that question is we can't. At least intellectually, it's not much of a stretch to see that we can't. Yet one of the big reasons we've gotten ourselves into this mess is that this wisdom that knows we can't—it's not always present for us when we're making our decisions about our lives and decisions about the things of the world. It's not right there, fully present and necessarily steering the ship.

Our dominant cultural narrative—and that could be the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Europe to some degree, maybe a little bit less—the cultures that tend to have the largest impact on the resources of the world, but also politically and socially, they tend to ripple out into the world. Our dominant cultural narrative is that each of us deserves everything we want, and anything that gets in the way of that is just wrong.

Americans—we deserve whatever we want, and anything that gets in the way of that is not a good thing.

This reminds me of a quote by David Korten, an economist and author who has written extensively about sustainable economics and community development. He points to this very issue—how our cultural assumptions about deserving and entitlement create the conditions for environmental destruction. When we believe we deserve unlimited access to resources, when we see the natural world as existing primarily to serve our desires, we inevitably create systems that cannot sustain themselves.

The Buddhist understanding of interdependence offers us a radically different way of seeing. When we truly understand that we are not separate from the web of life, that harming the earth is harming ourselves, our relationship to consumption and desire naturally begins to shift. We start to see that what we call "our" desires are actually arising from conditions—cultural conditioning, advertising, social pressure—rather than from some inherent truth about what we need to be happy.

When the stories a society shares are out of tune with its circumstances, they can become self-limiting, even a threat to survival. That is our current situation - stories out of tune with our circumstances, not in alignment with the way things are.

It can be difficult, though, to stay connected to basic truths. Our garbage and waste goes somewhere - it doesn't just disappear. Our electronics require an increasing amount of electricity to run. They have to be manufactured somewhere, in factories

powered by electricity produced from fossil fuels. It takes electricity to charge the batteries that run them. This all happens - it doesn't happen magically, disconnected from everything else. Yet it's hard to remember this in the moment.

It's hard to remember that every time we get in our car and drive, we're putting carbon dioxide into the air. Every time we board a plane, we're releasing massive amounts of carbon dioxide into the worst part of the atmosphere. It's hard to remember that the strawberry we eat in January probably traveled two or three thousand miles to reach us. This is simply how we live. In the fast pace of our lives - with families, children, jobs - it's difficult to have these truths be present with us much of the time.

These impacts are also physically invisible, at least in this culture, because we are privileged to have them be invisible. In other cultures, they're not invisible. But until now, at least here, they've been invisible. Though we're starting to feel and see the effects of climate change, aren't we? It's not just theory anymore. It's actually happening. It's becoming visible.

I want to point out one example of this wisdom that recognizes we can't harm one part of this interconnected web without harming ourselves - one way we've actually acted on this understanding wisely. In the nuclear arms race, it was clearly known that in an all-out nuclear confrontation, no side would win. The amount of radiation released would be devastating for everyone. Everyone would suffer terribly. So this was one example where we understood that harming one part of the population or system would harm everything. We knew this, and when we know something clearly, we act on it.

Very consciously, there has not been a major nuclear war for this reason - because of that wisdom. It's self-protecting, but it's still wisdom. It's that clear knowledge present as we make our decisions. We can act appropriately when we have the right information, when it's present for us as we're making decisions.

Our task as human beings and as dharma practitioners is to reflect on the understanding that we're all connected. Not only reflect, but by being mindful of things as they are, as they arise, understand through our own experience that we're all connected. We see how conditional things are. Some of you have experienced this and reported it - "Oh, that thought happened because of this. That thought preceded that emotion." It's like recognizing that things are actually connected, not happening in isolation.

To the degree that we start tuning into this cause and effect - which I'll discuss more - it becomes less possible to harm the environment and therefore ourselves. Again, that very natural morality arises from this understanding. This is a deep and undeniable truth, and it's one of the main insights we begin to open to as we walk this path.

Cause and effect - you could call it karma, though they're not exactly the same, but very similar. This is like this because that is like that. As that changes, it affects this. As this changes, it affects that. When we think and act in accordance with this law of cause and effect, the outcome is one of harmony and peace, because again, we're congruent with how things are.

There's no friction. We're going with the flow. When we think and act in opposition to this law, then the outcome is one of disharmony and much suffering.

Let me give you an example of how we got in accord with this law. Back in the 1960s, it was discovered that DDT—I think it was a pesticide—was extremely harmful to living beings and that human beings would suffer if we kept using it. Once that connection was clearly made, DDT was banned. It's very simple. We see cause and effect clearly, so we stop using it.

Now you might be wondering: aren't we making the connection now between CO2 and temperature rise? Aren't we getting that? The more CO2, the higher the temperature. Aren't we seeing that cause and effect? And aren't we even making the connection between temperature increase and human suffering? Isn't that cause and effect starting to dawn?

Well, yes and no. Remember that study I mentioned where people were ignoring the smoke coming through the vents? There are strong forces at play keeping us from making this cause and effect connection. Some of these forces are outside of us and have to do with the industrial political complex that basically runs the show these days. How much airtime global climate change gets on the news is a very calculated, conscious, controlled thing—not just how much, but what gets reported.

Yet there are forces at play inside of us that can keep us from really clearly seeing the cause and effect truths of global climate change. And it is these internal forces—and how to work with them—that our dharma practice can really effectively address. I'm not saying not to address the outer forces, but in terms of looking at our own lives, looking inward at our own hearts and minds, it's the inner forces that our dharma practice will really illuminate.

I'm going to read you an introduction from a wonderful book by Bob Doppelt called *From Me to We*. If you're at all interested in climate change, it's excellent:

"Economic breakdown, rising unemployment, and escalating political hostility, coming at a time of intensifying climate upheaval—storms, floods, heat waves, and droughts—have left us all confused and despondent. Everywhere we look, the systems we depend on seem to be collapsing.

"Our first reaction is to blame others for these problems, be they greedy Wall Street bankers, rapacious corporations, or dishonest politicians of either the conservative or liberal persuasion. But here's some news for you: Playing the blame game is merely an ingenious avoidance technique. It allows us to place the focus outside of ourselves and steer clear of having to look at our own contribution to today's troubling situations.

"Don't get me wrong—I know some people and organizations do bad things. But we often project onto others the very things we need to examine in ourselves. The economic, social, and environmental ills we face today are of our own making. They are the outcomes of how we see and respond to the world. Unethical corporations and disreputable politicians might seem to cause the most egregious harm, but they are merely taking today's dominant cultural perspectives to the extreme. The challenges our society faces today illuminate the changes each of us needs to make in ourselves."

By the way, he's a dharma practitioner. You can hear some of the dharma wisdom coming through in that.

How does our dharma practice help us to look at ourselves in this way that he's describing? I'm going to read a quote from the *Dhammapada*, a collection of Buddhist sayings of the Buddha. It's a pithy collection of the most essential teachings, and this is the very first quote of this collection. So you might say it has some weight or importance to it.

This is the Buddha speaking: "All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind. Speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox. All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind."

Speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow.

But what is a corrupted mind? What is a peaceful mind that the Buddha was speaking to? How do I know what a corrupted mind or a peaceful mind is? How do I know what actually leads to happiness and what actually leads to suffering?

Well, you've been doing it this week. This is how we know. This is how we come to find out in our own experience, not from me or another teacher saying it or something you read in a book. You know for yourselves what actually leads to happiness and what leads to suffering.

Ajahn Chah said, "If you want to understand your own mind, then sit down and look at it." It's that simple. And this is exactly what we're doing here. We're learning to see that we create the world we live in moment by moment.

When I say create, I don't mean like poof—you create the paper. Not so much like that. But if there's a lot of fear in my mind and I'm not aware of it and I'm just really identified with it, I'm living in a fearful world. I'm creating a fearful world in that moment. If there are strong feelings of love and compassion, then the world I live in in that moment is a very loving and compassionate world. That's what they mean by us creating the world, not necessarily physically.

Although we created this retreat center through generosity. Global climate change got created by the mind—it got created by strong greed and sense desire and fear, which I'll talk about in a moment.

This takes us to the last dharma principle I want to discuss. If you dig down to the bottom of why human beings suffer, what we discover is that we mistakenly take ourselves to be solid, unchanging entities that exist separately from everything else. This is what the Buddha said. This is a deep ignorance, called a root defilement.

If we look closely—and that's what we're here for, that's what we're learning to do here, what you've been doing all week—to connect with and look at our experience and understand our experience. If we look closely, we can see that to the degree our thoughts and actions revolve around what I want, what's good for me, what would be most pleasurable for me, and conversely, what I don't want—to the degree that this is the predominant paradigm in our mind running the show—is to the degree that we don't see or understand how we live impacts all of life, that we're deeply connected.

Why? Because we're not looking. I can't see that I'm connected to you if I'm so involved with me. It's not rocket science. If we're so involved with ourselves, we're not going to know, we're not going to understand that we're connected.

This intense focus on self and this belief in this separate self also supports tremendous fear that I won't get what I want or what I need. So a strong sense of a separate self and fear—they're bound together, inseparable. The more our world revolves around a solid, separate sense of self, the more afraid we are. And then the more we consume and try to manipulate our environment to quell that fear.

We're basically acting out of fear. It is this consumption and manipulation of our environment in reaction to being afraid that we won't get what we want and need—which itself stems from this mistaken view that we're separate—that is at the core of why hu-

manity has gotten to this point. Not just in climate change, but in all sorts of difficulties that we're having. When you dig down and ask why, that's the core reason. And it's at the core of why global climate change is happening.

This is by Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, a wonderful, beautiful being, Tibetan master from the last century: "One sees that all human suffering results from one's own and others' fundamental ignorance which misconstrues the infinite display of illusory appearances as being composed of separate permanently existing entities."

Remember right view? Well, this is wrong view—this view of separate self. This wrong view is a self-centered view of the world and not seeing clearly how we create our own suffering.

But when we connect through training our hearts and minds to connect, to be present, by connecting with our own experience, then we can come to know: How does it actually feel to focus so much on ourselves? By spending our resources of time, attention, creativity, money, so as to just make ourselves more comfortable, have more pleasant experiences, and keep away unpleasant experiences?

What is that actual experience like? We want to look and see—for ourselves, each of us. You'll see what you see, but when I look, for me, if I get caught in that self-centered approach, or when I do get caught in it, it feels isolating, deadening, cut off, not connected to life.

And then we want to look and see: How does it actually feel to share our time, energy, money, and other resources with others—basically what Spring was talking about? How does it feel when we're generous? We want to look and see. It feels good. It feels right. It feels enlivening, connecting, open. We love that, even when we're not used to it.

One real simple example that I've noticed, and other people have mentioned too, is very simple. Maybe after a significant weather event like a blizzard or a hurricane, let's say there's your neighbor that you just really never talk to. It's not that you're avoiding them, but whatever—you don't really communicate much. But maybe after the blizzard or the hurricane, you go over and you ask them, "Are you okay? You need anything? Electricity's out. I have a generator and a freezer. If you want to keep your food over there, please bring it over." We feel ourselves open and be generous with our resources. It feels so lovely to do that.

What something like a big weather event does is take us out of our little world. And in a way, it tells us it's okay to do that now. It's okay to reach out now. This is kind of what's called for now. It gives us permission. And we jump on it because we love it.

So based on all of this, how can we respond to global climate change? What would be an appropriate response? This response needs to include a change in worldview from each individual thinking only for themselves to one where we're all in it together. And as Bob wrote in his book, *From Me to We*—such a great title.

This is supported by neuroscience that tells us we're wired to cooperate. That's how we're actually put together. And also evolutionary science that says, yes, we went through a time—a natural evolutionary time—where it was kind of survival as a species, every person or maybe every small band for themselves. We needed to do that to survive. It was appropriate then, 10,000 years ago. But that time has passed. We are evolutionarily in a different time, where what's appropriate now is to be mutually supportive and cooperative.

Listen to what Joanna Macy has to say about this change in worldview in her book *Active Hope*:

"What inspires people to embark on projects or support campaigns that are not of immediate personal benefit? At the core of our consciousness is a wellspring of caring and compassion. This aspect of ourselves, which we might think of as our connected self, can be nurtured and developed. We can deepen our sense of belonging in the world. Like trees extending their root systems, we can grow into connection, thus allowing ourselves to draw from a deeper pool of strength, accessing the courage and intelligence that we so greatly need right now.

This dimension of the great turning arises from shifts taking place in our hearts and minds and our views of reality. It involves insights and practices that resonate with venerable spiritual traditions while in alignment with revolutionary new understandings from science."

It's not that we don't have a wellspring of caring and compassion. You do. We all do. That isn't the problem. The problem is that these minds that we are constantly creating the world with, moment by moment, are often deluded and not seeing things as they actually are. From not seeing cause and effect, to not seeing the incredible interdependence of things, to believing in a solid separate self, we project this mistaken reality onto life and then live life as though it were real. And we make decisions individually and collectively based on that.

This is Nyosho Kempo Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher:

We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When we understand this, we see that we are nothing. And being nothing, we see that we are everything. That is all.

So the result of this delusion in the human heart and mind is widespread feelings of fear, isolation and disconnection from life. The result in the outer world is simply a manifestation of this collective, deluded and fearful inner world.

I want to suggest that a very appropriate way—the appropriate way—to address global climate change is to look at the root issues of why we do what we do. Understand it, each of us, for ourselves.

If we can summon up the courage to look closely at our hearts and minds and see for ourselves how the mind gets fooled into thinking things are a certain way, how we mistakenly create our own and others' suffering, then not only will we begin to mitigate the causes and therefore the effects of global climate change, but we will spontaneously open to that wellspring of caring and compassion that Joanna Macy spoke of. We'll open to a level of energy and creativity that has not been known to us. And although when we feel that, we'll know it was already there.

We'll begin to get in touch with the depth of our natural love and compassion for all of life. And the mind's natural radiance that maybe we touched into this morning a little bit in the meditation—the mind's natural radiance that shines the light on the truth of suffering and its causes and on the truth of happiness and its causes—that will dawn. It will begin to be clear to us.

If you think about it, if there ever were a more perfect situation for Dharma practice than global climate change, I don't know what it would be. It's actually a great situation to practice with. It's demanding us to engage in Dharma practice, to see things as they are. It's screaming for us to do that. And if we do, we can completely turn this impending human tragedy into a vehicle for awakening of the human heart and mind. Because it's such an intense thing, that the power of that intensity can be transformed into power of awakening. That's what Joanna Macy is talking about in her book.

And it all starts by learning to be present with ourselves and just what is in the moment. It all starts with that and it actually all ends with that.

I want to end with a quote that speaks to this wonderful transformation that can happen from taking something that's difficult and having it be this jewel for awakening. It's by Jennifer Wellwood, and the title of the poem is "Unconditional."

Willing to discover, willing to experience aloneness,
I discover connection everywhere.
Turning to face my fear,
I meet the warrior who lives within.
Opening to my loss,

I gain the embrace of the universe.
Surrendering into emptiness,
I find fullness without end.
Each condition I flee from pursues me.
Each condition I welcome transforms me
and becomes itself transformed
into its radiant jewel-like essence.
I bow to the one who has made it so,
who has crafted this master game.
To play it is purest delight.
To honor its form, true devotion.

So through the training of our hearts and minds to connect ever more deeply with life, may we turn global climate change into its radiant, jewel-like essence.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 253

Earth As Witness: International Dharma Teachers' Statement on Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 1h04

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea shares "Earth As Witness," a collaborative statement signed by 170 international Buddhist teachers addressing the climate crisis through the lens of Buddhist wisdom. Drawing from core teachings on dukkha (suffering), the three roots of unwholesome action (lobha, dosa, moha - greed, hatred, delusion), and the Noble Eightfold Path, this presentation demonstrates how climate change represents perhaps humanity's greatest dharma teaching about the consequences of unchecked craving and delusion.*
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> *Burbea, working alongside sustainability expert Bob Doppelt, explores how the Buddha's teachings on interconnectedness and dependent origination (paticcasamuppada) reveal our intimate connection with Earth's climate systems through each breath we take. The talk examines how our consumer culture reflects the three poisons that create suffering, and offers a dharma-based pathway forward through wisdom (paññā), ethical conduct (sila), and mindfulness (sati).*
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> *The presentation includes practical guidance for reducing personal carbon footprints while emphasizing the need for collective action and systemic change. This talk bridges contemplative practice with engaged Buddhism, showing how mindfulness and loving-kindness (metta) can inspire the consciousness shift needed to address our planetary crisis. Essential listening for practitioners seeking to understand their spiritual responsibility in the face of climate change.*

Thank you. So as I said a few moments ago, this is Bob Doppelt. One thing I didn't mention in my introduction about his beautiful work with sustainability and climate change is that he wrote a book I have found to be a great piece of work called *From Me to We: The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life*.

What Bob did was take some dharma principles—five dharma principles that he feels are the key ones to shift our consciousness if we're going to have a meaningful response to what's lying ahead with climate change—and use it as an opportunity to wake up. He presented this in non-jargon language, and it's a beautiful book that Bill McKib-

ben praises highly, along with many other people. As I said, for years Bob has been a practitioner, and in the last two decades he's been mainly focusing on sustainability and making this a better planet.

When I saw him earlier this year, I said, "Gee, it's so wonderful that your dharma world and your sustainability world have come together." He looked me in the eye and said, "James, the dharma holds the key if this is going to be a meaningful and fruitful shift." That's when I said, "I want all the teachers in our community to hear that right from you." And he's done a beautiful job with that, so it's nice to have you back here, Bob.

Well, thank you. It's nice to be back here with all of you. This is very similar to climate change, where all sorts of things go wrong and you really don't know what's happening or what the outcome is going to be. All we know is something's not working right.

My name is Bob Doppelt. I direct the Resource Innovation Group, a nonprofit affiliated with Willamette University in Oregon, where I'm on faculty part-time. Before that, I was at the University of Oregon for ten years directing an organization called the Climate Leadership Initiative. We have one foot in academia and one foot out, and we've been working on climate change issues around the country for about fifteen years. This has led me to a number of conclusions about where we are and the kind of steps we need to take to really begin to address this issue, and I want to share some of that today.

It led me on a long path back to connecting with James. James and I met twenty-eight years ago at a retreat—a couple of retreats—and reconnected as a result of the book I had published and some other things.

But the first thing I want to do is ask you all to tell me or tell each other: How is it that you are part of the Earth's climate? How are you part of the Earth's climate?

"It's simple enough that I breathe."

You breathe. Thank you. I breathe in oxygen and I exhale carbon dioxide. Right on target.

"I use up resources of the planet, whether it's water or any of the resources."

"I'm a proud driver of a Prius, and so I think that I thereby help the planet a little bit."

So let me rephrase the question then, because this was a trick question. By driving a Prius, how does that make you part of the climate?

"Well, I don't contribute so much in the way of emissions when I go about my daily activities that involve driving. So I'm not contributing so greatly to the problems of the environment."

So you're not affecting the climate necessarily as much?

Not as much, right. And I'm also a vegetarian, which means that I don't eat meat, which means that I don't contribute to methane being put into the atmosphere and thereby causing a problem with the ozone layer.

Anybody else want to take a shot? My son recently graduated in engineering, and I had him do a calculation for me once. If you take any character in history long enough ago so their breath has swirled all around the atmosphere, every breath that I take, every single breath I take, has approximately—we may be off by an order of magnitude—something like half a million molecules that every person in history ever breathed. There you go. And in several hundred years, if there are people still to breathe, the same will be true of my breaths.

I saw one other hand here. Well, I'm aware that we are lit mostly by the use of oil or gas producing the energy that lights our buildings.

The answer to that question is all of the above. But the first answer was really central to the question that I asked: how are you part of the climate? When you sit and meditate and you follow your breath, every time you're breathing in, you're breathing in what?

Oxygen. How many of you know where the oxygen was produced? Where is the oxygen that you're breathing right now that allows your life to exist? Where was that produced?

Plants? Are you sure? Oceans. There you go. About 75% of the oxygen you're breathing right this second that is giving you life was produced through a process called photosynthesis in single-cell green algae in marine environments, estuaries and oceans, and the other 25% roughly in vegetation all around you.

So as you breathe in, in addition to following your breaths and concentrating your mind, what you're also doing is following through on your part, your contribution to the climate system. Complex interactions occurring all around the globe are creating the energy that are allowing you to live right this second.

Then when you breathe out, what happens? We heard it before. You're breathing out CO2, carbon dioxide. What happens to the carbon dioxide that you're breathing out? That's right. So the plants and ocean resources are absorbing that, are sequestering it, and converting it again. That is the natural carbon cycle that has existed on Earth for thousands of years, and we're part of it. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here.

And if you don't believe that the oxygen you're breathing at every moment—produced in these complex processes—is the key to life, I invite everyone to hold your breath for about five minutes.

So we are intimately connected to, we are dependent on, we are part of the climate, part of the Earth's systems in general. But unfortunately, we humans have this fantasy that we are freestanding, independent beings that somehow exist outside of those processes. And that has led to a number of problems. And one of the problems is global climate change. And that's what I want to talk to you about tonight.

For about 10,000 years on Earth, we've had a pretty stable climate. There have been some ups and downs that mostly have to do with when the Earth moves a little bit further away from the sun and then moves a little bit back closer. But the climate has been relatively stable, and it's in that 10,000 years that human civilization developed, that agriculture was able to develop—what we see now took off then.

And that stable period was caused by a relatively stable amount of greenhouse gases that surround the Earth and form a blanket, keeping the Earth warm. By greenhouse gases, I mean a complex mixture of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, methane, and a few others. And that mixture has been, from the scientific perspective, between 200 and 280 parts per million—the mixture of those gases and pure oxygen around the atmosphere. And it forms a blanket.

So solar radiation comes in from the sun, comes through that blanket of gases, and hits the Earth's surface. Some of it is then absorbed by plants and other processes. Much of it is actually reflected back out into space. That blanket of gases that surround the Earth trap some of the heat that's being radiated back, and just enough of that heat to keep Earth at just the right temperature to support life. And the rest goes back through that blanket of gases out into the atmosphere, out into space.

That blanket of gases—maintaining between 200 and 280 parts per million—has been precisely the right amount to allow Earth's temperature to stabilize and life to flourish. This delicate balance has sustained our planet for millennia.

But over the last 150 years, we have dramatically altered this equation. We have added greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, pushing concentrations to 400 parts per million—a 40% increase that continues rising rapidly. Consequently, we now have a thicker blanket around the Earth, one that captures more heat, and this is the essence of climate change.

We all exist within a very narrow temperature window. Consider your own body: when your temperature hovers around 98.6 degrees, you feel healthy. But with just a one-degree increase, you begin to feel unwell. At two or three degrees higher, you become quite ill. Should your temperature rise five or six degrees for an extended period, survival itself becomes uncertain.

This same principle applies to all life on Earth, including our planet as a whole. We have already experienced about a 1.6-degree Fahrenheit temperature increase. Without significant changes, we are on a trajectory toward a 6-degree Fahrenheit increase—roughly 4 degrees Celsius—which would essentially spell the end of human civilization as we know it.

When I say we are "on a path," I mean something quite sobering: the warming we witness today results from emissions released into the atmosphere 20, 30, and 40 years ago. The extreme weather events we see occurring with increasing frequency around the world—these are the consequences of greenhouse gases emitted in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. What we emit today will manifest its impacts 20 to 30 years from now.

We face a very serious problem—one that most of us remain unaware of as we go about our daily activities. Yet we also have an unprecedented opportunity to create meaningful change. We can reduce climate change to manageable levels. While we cannot eliminate it entirely at this point—we have traveled too far down this path—we can still get a handle on it.

Today I want to share one way to do that, and after we explore this together, I will offer you specific suggestions for action—to leave you on a hopeful note.

This can be sobering material. Anyone feeling some anxiety? As the Dharma teaches us, we can only begin to adopt a path toward solutions once we acknowledge the suffering we are experiencing. Understanding what is truly happening becomes essential.

James invited me to speak to the Vipassana Teachers' Council last June about this issue, and a wonderful collaboration has emerged. Teachers around the world have come together to explore how the Dharma can illuminate both the causes of climate change and the path toward solutions. Through tremendous collective effort, this collaboration has produced a statement I would like to share with you.

The full statement spans about three pages. I invite you to listen deeply—perhaps even closing your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so—and let these words enter your being. Rather than analyzing intellectually, notice how this feels in your body, what sensations arise within you. After I read this, we will explore together what emerges in your experience.

This statement, titled "The Earth as Witness," has been signed by 170 Dharma teachers from around the world:

"Today humanity faces an unprecedented crisis of almost unimaginable magnitude. Escalating climate change is altering the global environment so drastically as to force the earth into a new geological age. Unprecedented levels of suffering for all life on earth, including human, will result. Significant reductions in greenhouse gases and other actions will be needed to reduce climate change to manageable levels. But more fundamental changes are also needed, and this is where we can draw guidance from the rich resources of the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma.

"This statement briefly describes core Buddhist insights into the root causes of the climate crisis and suggests ways to minimize its potentially tragic consequences.

"As a starting point, the Dharma states that to formulate meaningful solutions to any problem, we must first acknowledge the truth of our suffering. As shocking and painful as it may be, we must recognize that without swift and dramatic reductions in fossil fuel use and major efforts to increase carbon sequestration, global temperatures will rise close to or beyond 2 degrees Celsius—3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. This increase will lead to injury and death for millions of people worldwide and the extinction of many of Earth's species. Millions more will experience severe trauma and stress that threaten their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. These stresses will, in turn, trigger social and political unrest.

"In a grave injustice, low-income communities, poor nations, and people systematically subjected to oppression and discrimination—who contributed little to climate change—will initially be harmed the most. Even worse, as frightening as it is, if we fail to make fundamental changes in our energy, manufacturing, transportation, forestry, agriculture, and other systems, along with our consumption patterns, with utmost urgency, in mere decades irreversible climate shifts will occur that undermine the very pillars of human civilization. Only by recognizing these truths can we adopt a meaningful path toward solutions.

"The Dharma teaches us the origin of our suffering. The majority of the world's climate scientists are unequivocal that on the external physical plane, climate change is caused by the historic and ongoing use of fossil fuels and the greenhouse gases they generate when burned. Destructive land management practices such as clearing forests also contribute to reducing nature's capacity to sequester carbon.

"The Dharma informs us, however, that craving, aversion, and delusion within the human mind are the root causes of vast human suffering. Just as these mental factors have throughout history led to the oppression, abuse, and exploitation of indigenous people and others outside the halls of wealth and power, craving, aversion, and delusion are also the root causes of climate change.

"Climate change is perhaps humanity's greatest teacher yet about these mental forces when left unchecked in ourselves and in our institutions, and how they cause harm to other people and the living environment. Led by industrialized nations, the desire for ever more material wealth and power has resulted in the relentless destruction of land and water, excess use of fossil fuels, massive amounts of solid and toxic waste, and other practices that are disrupting the Earth's climate."

However, by acknowledging and addressing these internal mental drivers, we can begin to resolve the external causes of climate change.

The Dharma offers hope by teaching us that it is possible to overcome the detrimental forces of craving, aversion, and delusion. We can use the climate crisis as a catalyst to acknowledge the consequences of our own craving for ever more material wealth and the pursuit of power, and realize we must change our assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors. We can use the climate crisis as a catalyst to educate ourselves about planetary processes so that we understand that the Earth has ecological limits and thresholds that must not be crossed. By learning from our mistaken beliefs and activities, we can create more equitable, compassionate, and mindful societies that generate individual and collective well-being while reducing climate change to manageable levels.

Finally, the Dharma prescribes a pathway of principles and practices we can follow to minimize climate change and the suffering it causes.

The first principle is wisdom. From this point forward in history, we must all acknowledge not only the external causes of climate change, but the internal mental drivers as well and their horrific consequences. To be wise, we must also individually and as a society adopt the firm intention to do whatever is necessary, no matter what the cost, to reduce climate change to manageable levels and over time restabilize the planet's climate.

The second Dharma principle is ethical conduct, which is rooted in the compassionate concern for all living beings in the vast web of life. We need to make a firm moral commitment to adopt ways of living that protect the climate and help restore the Earth's ecosystems and living organisms. In our personal lives, we should recognize the value of contentment and sufficiency and realize that after a certain modest level, additional consumption, material wealth, and power will not bring happiness.

To fulfill our wider moral responsibility, we must join with others, stand up to the vested interests that oppose change, and demand that our economic, social, and political systems and institutions be fundamentally altered so they protect the climate and offer nurturance and support for all of humanity in a just and equitable manner. We must insist that governments and corporations contribute to a stable climate and a healthy environment for all people and cultures worldwide now and in the future. We must further insist that specific scientifically credible global emission reduction targets be set and means adopted to effectively monitor and enforce them.

The third dharma principle, and the one that makes all of the others possible, is mindfulness, or mind control. This offers a way to heighten our awareness of and then to regulate our desires and emotions and the thoughts and behaviors they generate. By continually enhancing our awareness, we can increasingly notice when we are causing harm to others, the climate, or ourselves and strengthen our capacity to rapidly shift gears and think and act constructively.

Mindfulness increases awareness of our own inherent interdependency with other people and the natural environment and of values that enhance human dignity rather than subordinate people, animals, and nature to the craving for more material wealth and power.

As we awaken to the responsibility to follow the path described in the Dharma to help us protect and restore the planet and its inhabitants, we may feel awed by the immensity of the challenge. We should take heart, however, in the power of collective action. Buddhists can join with others in their sanghas, and our sanghas can join hands and hearts with other religious and spiritual traditions, as well as with secular movements focused on promoting change. In this way, we will support each other as we make the necessary shifts in perspectives, lifestyles, and economic and institutional systems required to reduce climate change to manageable levels.

History shows that with concerted, unified, collective efforts, changes that at one time seemed impossible have time and again come to pass. When we come together to celebrate our love for the natural world and all of the beings that inhabit it, and when we take a stand to counter the forces of craving, aversion, and delusion, we reclaim our

own inner stability and strength and live closer to the truth, closer to the Dharma. Together, we may seek to ensure that our descendants and fellow species inherit a livable planet. Individually and collectively, we will be honoring the great legacy of the Dharma and fulfill our heart's deepest wish to serve and protect all life.

Would anybody like to share what's going on within you or what went on within you as you heard this? Anybody want to share anything that's happening right now? Anything stand out as you heard it?

As I listened to it, I actually felt more hopeful. I could make a difference. I felt energized. I started thinking through, oh, what could I do? And started reviewing various things that I use and do, and how can I do better?

Anybody else experience anything like that? Anybody else have other reactions?

I thought that it reminded me that one person really can make a difference, but also it sounded very first world to me. And I've seen a lot of people around the world who live for today, and they don't really have the luxury of this type of thought. So I just wonder what you think about that.

It's a very good point. Did you want to say something? Actually, let me respond to that and then talk about some solutions here.

The document actually—what I've just read to you is somewhere between the thirtieth to one hundred thirtieth rendition of the document as it was being written, with thirty or more teachers from all over the world with different perspectives, so it kept changing to reflect all that. One of the pieces of feedback we got in an early document was that it was very Western-focused and wealthy Western-focused, and so it was changed substantially to reflect that. I'm not sure we captured everything, but we also decided we couldn't capture everyone's perspective from all over the world. We could do as best as we can.

But there were two goals in writing this document. The first is to inform all of you—that is to say our sanghas all over the world—about this issue and how the Dharma helps us understand the causes. If there was ever an issue that is a Dharma issue, it is climate change. Yet for many of us, we believe this is not a Dharma issue. It's a political issue. When we walk in here, this is about our own internal process. But in fact, it is our internal processes that have created this external problem. So this is the ultimate Dharma issue. And I'll say if we don't address it through the principles described in the Dharma, we're going to have a very tough time ahead. So one goal is to inspire all of you and all other members of sanghas around the world to engage in solutions.

And there are individual level solutions that can be implemented and can make a big difference. Let me give you one example.

About ten years ago, my wife and I bought a house—not a new house, but an old house, a new place to live. It was not very nicely built, so I spent the first three years on my hands and knees with lots of scars, putting in new insulation and installing new windows and doing all sorts of improvements. We had the energy bills from the people we bought the house from, so we were able to compare our new energy bills with the previous ones. We cut our energy costs—therefore our emissions for the house—by about 40% through that process. Mostly it was because it was an old, leaky house.

But then we thought, that's just not enough. That's a good start, we're glad we did it, we saved some money. So then we looked around and thought about what we're doing personally just out of wanting to have things easy—our craving for comfort—that we really don't need. We did an assessment of the entire house and looked at all the electronic gizmos we had everywhere. We asked, what do we really need? It turns out we needed about a fifth of them.

Then we asked, what of those are on constantly? It turns out we had lights in back rooms that we were only in about once every two weeks—a spare room when somebody came over. So we first recycled or reused all of the electronic items we didn't need, and then we unplugged the rest unless we were using it. We even unplug the toaster now, even though we use it every morning. The hot water heater for tea—everything gets unplugged. We cut our energy use by another 15%. We're down to about 60% of our original usage.

Then we put up a solar electrical system and solar hot water system. Now, we own our house—if you don't own your facility, you may not be able to do that. And we have very good solar access; we bought the house with that in mind. There are no trees in the way, no other buildings blocking the sun. Not everybody can do that. But we put up these solar systems and basically got off the grid. We figured we're going to pay that off in about seven years.

If we can do it—although we have the financial capacity, we owned our home, we had solar access—it just gives you a sense that much of our energy use, at least in this country, in the industrialized nations, is frivolous and wasted. If we can just become aware of that—again, increase our mindfulness of what we're doing and take steps—we will make a big difference.

Just look around Berkeley and San Francisco and Oakland tonight and look at the immense number of lights that are on. How many are really, really necessary?

When I first moved to Oregon in the early seventies to go to grad school, we had a governor named Tom McCall. I don't know if anybody remembers that name, but he was a Republican, and we had a long-term drought. In the Northwest, the power was produced by hydroelectric facilities, so drought means less energy. He knew that we were going to have an energy shortage, so he issued an executive order to all state agencies to turn off all your lights at night. Then he got the Chamber of Commerce in Portland and other major cities to do the same thing.

Our towns went pretty dark at night. And the public loved him. He was revered because he not only had cut energy use, but it was a symbolic act to make it clear. So then the public did the same thing. And what do you know? Lifestyles didn't change. We pretty much went about our business just like normal. But we had now understood—we were more mindful of what we were doing.

And we had no problem with energy use that summer. So we can make these changes—in our own homes, in our sanghas, and in the places we work.

This is one part of what the Teachers Collaborative is trying to motivate you to do: engage in your own homes, in your own lives, in your workplaces. But we also need to realize that systemic change and institutional change are required. You alone aren't going to make the difference, but without your changes, we're not going to get there.

This is because of how our political system works—elected officials follow rather than lead, in our country and in many other democracies. We think they lead, that we're electing leaders, but leaders follow what they perceive people want them to do. Right now, there's a group of people and industries that they're following who are not taking us on the right path. So it's got to be you they follow. That requires you all to engage by modeling it, walking the talk, and then working collaboratively with others.

There is tremendous activity happening behind the scenes that people don't know about. Businesses especially are keeping their heads low. My organization works with many companies—they don't want their names known, but I think this one will: Nike. You all know Nike, the Oregon company. We helped them analyze their entire economic value chain. Where do their raw materials come from? Where are they shipped to be turned into one part of a shoe that goes to the next part, and so on, until they eventually end up on your feet? And what happens after you wear them? Where do they go as waste?

We did this assessment with graduate students—lots of fun. Nike realized they were at great risk from climate impacts and that they were contributing significantly to those impacts. So they've made fundamental changes in their business model, including a

commitment to completely get off fossil fuels. A number of other corporations are doing something very similar, but they're keeping quiet. Some won't even talk about it. Others will discuss it, but only privately—they're not putting it on their websites.

This is why I'm optimistic that so much of our energy use and emissions is simply frivolous and wasted. If we become mindful of what we're doing, we can make a difference. Underneath it all, there are many changes happening. If we can get a push over the edge, I think we can make significant progress.

I want to suggest that the Dharma shows us it's absolutely right that first we must acknowledge the suffering that exists and the suffering within ourselves that has caused that external suffering. But the Dharma offers a pathway we can follow simultaneously. If we do follow that path, we have an opportunity to reduce climate change to manageable levels, while also realizing we will see some serious impacts no matter what happens. So we also need to prepare for that.

The second goal of the Teachers Collaborative is to infuse the Dharma—these principles I just read—into the public debate about climate change, with your help and others'. The public and decision makers need to understand the root causes of these problems and the pathway to solutions.

I encourage you to talk about these issues. You can use Dharma language or mainstream language. When you see someone not worrying at all about how they might be contributing to climate change, ask them to take a breath and become aware of their connection with everything—that they don't exist except through these interconnected processes. Those simple steps often help people become much more aware.

Other thoughts or questions at this point?

I'd like to add a couple of things. First, you can see that statement online and sign your name if you want. Go to oneearthsangha.org—"one" either as the number or spelled out. I just wrote an article for the Huffington Post yesterday. The link is there too, or you can Google my name and "Huffington Post." It's called "Inspiration and Joy Amidst Suffering and Loss."

I want to ask you to address something as well. When I read it, I felt a couple of familiar responses. One was, "Oh my goodness, this is really heavy." Another was, "How could the population shift in thinking to the point where we say, 'Yes, we're all on the same team'?"

What I really got from both your presentation at the teachers' conference and your book is a sense of cautious optimism about the possibilities. Your cautious optimism has rubbed off on me a bit. How do we transmit that so it starts to shift consciousness?

Those are both excellent points. Let me address the solar energy question first. The way solar energy works is that during the day, when the sun is shining and your solar panels are producing electricity, that electricity goes directly into your home to power whatever you're using at that moment. When your panels are producing more electricity than you're consuming, that excess gets fed back into the electrical grid. Your electric meter actually runs backwards during those times, giving you credit.

At night or during cloudy periods when your panels aren't producing electricity, you draw power from the grid using those credits you've built up. So yes, technically you are sometimes using electricity that may come from coal-fired power plants. But the net effect is that you're adding clean, renewable energy to the grid during peak sunshine hours when demand is highest, and you're displacing dirty energy sources.

The beautiful thing is that as more and more people install solar panels, we're collectively cleaning up the grid. Each solar installation is like adding another clean energy generator to the system. Over time, as renewable sources grow, the electricity you draw from the grid at night becomes cleaner and cleaner too.

Your second point about your sphere of influence is wonderful and so practical. Thirty family members plus twenty-five tenants—that's fifty-five people you can directly impact! Those programmable thermostats, efficient lighting, water conservation measures—these are exactly the kinds of changes that multiply outward. When people see these practices working and saving money, they adopt them in their own lives and share them with others.

This is how consciousness shifts happen—not through grand gestures, but through these ripple effects of practical changes that make sense to people. One person influences fifty-five people, who each influence their networks, and the change spreads organically. That's the kind of positive momentum we need to build.

I can influence certainly a large body of people, but I would like to hear about the coal aspect of having solar.

I'm not exactly sure what they're talking about. They may have used coal to generate the materials that made the solar system themselves, the actual physical components. Or it could be that it's the backup system. Your solar system isn't producing energy all the time.

"Yeah, I'm still on the grid."

Right, still on the grid. So in the evenings, for example, if your system isn't hydro or some other renewable source—but as we scale that up with more and more renewables, and solar isn't the only one, I think we can find ways to balance out the system. We've seen it in other countries. Germany is actually the largest solar user in all of Europe, and Germany is a lot like Oregon—cloudy and rainy much of the time. Yet they're doing very well. They're even struggling with how the grid can work to absorb that much renewable energy, as we are here in the Pacific Northwest.

So I think these are transition issues for the most part that we'll have to work our way through. Solar isn't like a steady baseload energy system—it doesn't work in the evenings or on cloudy days, and it's not quite as effective in heavy rainstorms. But these are transition issues. We have to just keep at it.

There are a couple of international issues. One is that much of the major pollution around the world is out of the control of either corporate heads like Nike's CEO or democratic governments. Look at Cairo or Tehran or Bangkok or Beijing—the pollution from automobiles is overwhelming, and this isn't something that can be controlled by a government or a movement of people. The other thing is that there are many poor people in the world who want these consumer items from China. So how does that relate to what we can do?

Good questions. I can only say that I've been to two of the UN climate summits, and in both of those, what I see very clearly is that the rest of the world is waiting for the U.S. to act. And not only because of the symbolic nature of it, but because the size of our economy really determines so many things.

If we actually get serious—the president did release the first presidential climate plan ever in July. You might have heard about it. It's a good start, not earth-shattering, but it's the first time a U.S. president has ever done that. If we can actually scale that up by fifty or a hundred percent and then get the U.S. Congress to act as well—which we're not going to get right now but could—we will see other countries act also. We heard that time and again at the climate summits: "If you're not going to do anything, why would we? Our economies are dependent on yours in so many ways."

At the same time, there are negotiations going on now. I think we will start seeing some agreements, just within two or three countries, including the U.S. The U.S. is working with China and a few others. So I think those are going to be smaller-scale agreements.

But the bigger issue—again, I'm not suggesting this is what you're doing at all—is that it's very easy for us to say, "Well, we don't need to do anything because others aren't doing anything." All we can do is control what we can control, which is our own emissions, our own household and family, and then community and organizational and state levels. Once we get that under control, once we realize that that's the power we have, then we have to see if organically—if you will—or because of the interconnected nature of the economies, these things will fall together.

Wait, hold on. There was something a professor at Berkeley, Professor David Roland-Holst, had said. In California, when they were going to limit energy use for big corporations, the corporations were kicking and screaming, saying, "If you try to make us comply with all these energy regulations, we're going to be uncompetitive." When they finally pushed it through anyway, the corporations actually saved a lot of money by implementing all these energy-saving technologies. So maybe the United States can lead the way and show the rest of the world that you can enrich your country by being more energy conscious.

I think that's true. Let me ask you all a question: How many of you really like to make a big change in your behavior? Not many of us, right? So it's a natural response. The first thing you get from any kind of regulation is, "Oh no, don't do that."

You have to change your habits. Some people will lose power. Some people gain power. All those issues are there. So any change, we see that every time business stands up and says the entire economy is going to collapse. It never happens.

That's not to say that some regulations are smart and some are dumb. Of course they are. And we're going to have to learn through the process. We're going to make mistakes. And regulations are not the only tool. But mostly what we're going to find is we're going to become more efficient. We will save more money, and it will spur innovation. That's what you really find. The research shows unequivocally when there is regulation, it spurs more innovation in other ways.

So I don't really worry about it, but we have to go through that dance. That's just the political dance we go through whenever there's regulations proposed.

Let me wrap up so we can get out of here on time. I just want to thank you first for all the work that you're doing and all the impact that you're having in our Dharma community. Just this last week, Bob was working with San Francisco. He was at the city offices today with the San Francisco government, and Oakland as well. He's hitting the whole Bay Area with the Oakland city government today, looking at how cities would deal in a resilient way when things do start getting more and more difficult.

So this guy's working overtime. Sometimes I think that I'm busy, but when I look at his schedule, I hope you're taking care of yourself and finding some balance in there as well. I'm really inspired by everything that you do.

The last thing that just came to my mind is a study that happened quite a while ago—I think Stanford did it—that said what is needed for a shift, a new way of looking at things, is a 7% shift in the population. You don't have to convince everybody. When there's a 7% shift, that seems to be the tipping point, then a new way of thinking becomes more in vogue and accepted. So we can be part of that. It's not like you have to change the whole world. Just in your own commitment, it starts to have its rippling effect. And 7% is not impossible.

Let me just say one quick word about that to summarize. I think this is actually an incredibly exciting time to be alive. We have this scary thing out there that will cause suffering, but it's the suffering that can trigger a new way of being. I think it's an exciting time, and we have tremendous opportunities.

I think mindfulness, being aware of what we're doing and our thoughts and our motivations, is really the key to this. And it's a wonderful opportunity to grow mindfulness in many, many other people. Not everybody has to do it. We just have to get enough. And you're the leaders, along with other Sangha members, to trigger a real fundamental change.

So I encourage you all to stay with it. There will be ups and downs, but stay committed. I think we'll make this.

That was the gist of the article that I wrote—that just like in practice, when you go on a retreat and you go through some really hard times, those difficult moments aren't a mistake. They are the actual initiation, the passageway to a deeper awakening. In the same way, we are having this opportunity now, this awakening of humanity. Suffering is staring us in the face, and suffering shakes us out of our complacency and starts waking us up to a new way of acting and being.

So I do see this, in my bigger perspective moments, as a call to awakening. Thanks for being part of that.

Let's close with a brief loving-kindness meditation. Maybe for a moment feel how much you love this planet and are grateful for the life that you have and that it sustains. Out of that gratitude, connecting with...

your intention to do your part to be as conscious as you can and support its flourishing.

And sending metta to yourself, to all beings in all directions and to this miraculous earth that we live on, live in, live on.

May there be harmony, health, wisdom, love. Peace.

May all beings be happy and free.

And may this planet feel the caring of all who live on it.

The path forward is not always clear, but our commitment to awakening—both personal and collective—can guide us through these challenging times. When we recognize that our individual liberation is intimately connected with the healing of our world, we find the strength and wisdom to act with both urgency and compassion.

This is the dharma calling us home: to remember our interdependence, to cultivate the wisdom that sees through the illusion of separation, and to respond to the suffering of our time with open hearts and skillful action. In doing so, we become part of the great awakening that our world so desperately needs.

CHAPTER 254

Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point

Rob Burbea · 35 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses the challenging intersection of Buddhist practice and environmental crisis. Drawing from recent scientific warnings about climate tipping points and articles by Bhikkhu Bodhi and Joanna Macy, he explores how practitioners can respond to ecological devastation without falling into overwhelm, apathy, or despair.*
>
> *Burbea examines the Buddhist diagnosis of environmental destruction through the lens of the three root poisons: greed, hatred (arrogance), and delusion (ignorance). He emphasizes how our culture's acceleration of time and focus on immediate gratification obscures the "deep time" perspective needed for wise action. The talk includes a powerful guided exercise where participants imagine speaking from the perspective of beings living 75 years in the future.*
>
> *Rather than prescribing specific actions, Burbea invites practitioners to hold the climate crisis with loving awareness, recognizing that our caring response arises from compassion while avoiding the extremes of anxious activism and paralyzed despair. He suggests that cultivating consciousness, love, and the capacity to rest in not-knowing may be our most authentic offering to this unprecedented global challenge. The talk beautifully integrates traditional Buddhist wisdom with contemporary environmental awareness.*

Perhaps you saw the front page article in last week's San Francisco Chronicle: "Close to Tipping Point of Warming. Only major global effort can halt it, scientists warn."

The article reported that the Earth is reaching a tipping point in climate change that will lead to increasingly rapid and irreversible destruction of the global environment unless its forces are controlled by concerted international action, an international group of scientists warn. Unchecked population growth, the disappearance of critical plant and animal species, the over-exploitation of energy resources, and the rapidly warming climate are all combining to bring mounting pressure on the Earth's environmental health. Scientists from five nations, led by UC Berkeley biologist Anthony Barnofsky, reported their analysis in the journal Nature.

This is both not news and yet when it makes the front page, it's news again. Every so often periodically, we are reminded of the inconvenient truth that things are getting dicey, not to mention the weather patterns that seem to be breaking new records one way or another.

We've talked about this topic in the past, but it's come up again now, both because of the article and also because of the *Inquiring Mind* issue on "Earth Now." As often the case, the *Inquiring Mind* issue is very thoughtful, thought-provoking—a deep inquiry into what this means for us as Dharma practitioners and how to respond and incorporate it into our practice. Please take a copy with you. It's not only bad news and depressing; some of it is really inspiring and moving.

What do we do with this? What do we do when we read a front page story saying only major global effort can halt catastrophe? I'm here not to give you the right answer, the right response—this is what you should do or think or act. I'm sharing my own process as we talk, because I've gone through so many different feelings and reactions and responses about this. It's still a work in progress, just as the whole unfolding is.

A couple of years ago, I gave some talks on this topic after reading the book *Eaarth* by Bill McKibben, which deeply impacted me about where we're headed, what it's going to look like, and what our wisest responses can be. I was kind of on a crusade: "Okay, we've got to do something. And I've got to do something."

Besides giving some talks, I was one of a number of voices at Spirit Rock in the teachers' council saying, "If we're a place of consciousness, we've got to be a leader in consciousness around sustainability and around speaking out about this." I'm happy to say, by the way, that Spirit Rock has evolved into really placing sustainability as a very high priority in our new master plans. We've just started a capital campaign for replacing the community hall—which is trailers—with a community temple that will give us a lot more options and facilities, and teacher and staff quarters that are much needed because they're all twenty-three-year-old trailers. Sustainability is at the highest level, so that's good. That has made a lot of us feel really good.

But as far as whether we're doing enough—if we've got to bring more awareness into our own hearts as well as the community—are we doing enough? So I went through a period like that: "Come on, it's up to us, and particularly what can I do to save the world?"

And then I've gone through periods of real overwhelm that would lead to apathy, that would lead to "Who am I kidding? What can I do? And what's the point? Yeah, I'll do the recycling and I'll do the little things here and there, but this is much bigger than my mind can wrap around."

We go between engagement and acceptance—slash equanimity—or anxiety to apathy and despair and everything in between. Can you relate to those responses?

So I'm not here to preach to you. I'm here to explore with you. And it came up recently again. You know that experience where there's a theme that comes up and then you kind of hear different messages from a lot of different parts in your life? Well, this was happening as I've been exploring this issue. One was a really terrific book that was sent to me by somebody who used to sit with me twenty-five years ago in Oregon, who's taking the Joy course now.

And he said, "I've gotten into this topic and have written a book." His name is Bob Doppelt, and he sent me this book: *From Me to We: The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life*. He's a systems change expert who wrote about Buddhist principles—though this is a mainstream book, and I'm not sure if he even refers to Buddhist or Buddha in here—but five Dharma principles that he sees as essential for not just personal change but societal change in addressing this. So I got that and started reading and said, "Oh, that's pretty good."

I wrote him, and he was delighted. I said, "If you're ever here in the Bay Area, I want you to come and share." So that came in. And then the *Inquiring Mind* issue. And then another message, which was having some contact with a few teachers in Europe who are good friends.

Every few years, the teachers have what's called an International Teachers Conference for the Vipassana community. Teachers from Europe and some from even farther away, and the states, East Coast and West Coast, get together and explore the future of the Dharma in our tradition and the vision that we all hold. I said that I'd be part of the planning committee, along with a couple of other friends here, and wanted to involve these two friends from England to be the European representatives of the larger meeting.

They both have a great commitment as far as consciousness around climate change. And they said, "Well, the meetings are wonderful, but each of them independently—I have to really look at when I get on a plane, what's the payoff and what's the price that I

pay for using all that energy." They said, "It's something for us all to think about as the future unfolds, how much we're using planes and how much we're teaching locally and at what cost."

I said, "Well, that's fair enough. I really would love to have you here, not only because of your presence, but maybe to lead a conversation around this." We're thinking about maybe doing a webcam for those teachers who don't want to use the transportation and maybe doing a carbon offset. I brought it up to the Spirit Rock teachers at the last teachers' council, and it got people thinking. It's like, "Oh, okay, hadn't been in our consciousness, we've got to start thinking about this." So it's going on the agenda for next year, whether or not these people come: what is our responsibility as far as use of energy and travel in the future?

From all sides, it's up for me. In one of the articles—there were two articles that really struck me that I wanted to share a little bit about and then we can explore together—one was by Bhikkhu Bodhi, who wrote the article "Drawing Back from the Edge of a Cliff." He gives this example of the old Roadrunner cartoons. Remember Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote would chase the Roadrunner and he'd go off the cliff and there he is spinning his wheels, and then he goes back to the cliff and avoids catastrophe. He says we're kind of like that. We're spinning our wheels off the cliff. Do we wake up in time and draw back, or do we crash?

In his mind, he thinks of the Dharma as helping us to navigate through these dangerous times, first in diagnosing the problem, and then in giving some pragmatic ways to act. As far as diagnosing the problem, probably not hard to see that the problem is the suffering that comes from greed and what he calls arrogance—our ethnocentric view—and ignorance. Just not seeing the consequences of our actions.

He says it's based on the misunderstanding that the key to economic growth is mass consumption. That is a basic fallacious thinking that is propagated by corporations, politicians, and the media. And that in order to make a change, in his opinion, from a dharmic point of view, it requires an immediate response, a long-term pragmatic response, and a systemic response.

I'll just share with you some of his thoughts. The immediate one is we wake up and realize we are destroying the planet, and we stop doing whatever we can. Like the article in the *Chronicle* says, well, we better stop real fast. And then the long term, just looking for different sources of energy and that the corporations aren't running things. Okay, now that's a pretty big long shot.

The second response requires a long-term pragmatic approach, finding different sources of energy and ensuring that corporations don't run everything. As he acknowledges, that's quite a long shot.

The systemic response calls for nothing less than a change of consciousness—truly seeing that genuine happiness lies somewhere other than in getting our next hit of pleasure. This involves recognizing that fulfillment doesn't come from feeding our cravings, and understanding how our actions have consequences in an interconnected world. As he puts it, this transformation will require a clear, honest understanding of our predicament and ethics grounded in humility, compassion, and global stewardship.

When I read that article, it all made perfect sense. Yet part of me wondered: how could such a transformation actually come about? Good luck with that. Perhaps it happens only when we see there's no turning back—when we're off the cliff, about to fall. It's quite possible.

I've always believed that dukkha is usually what wakes us up, both personally and globally. Perhaps we have to experience enough suffering to finally change. It's so hard to transform our habits. When you think about it in your own practice, even when you know that doing a certain action will lead to regret, you know that mysterious moment where you think, "I know this won't be good in the long run, but it feels so good now. What the heck?"

You know this. Here you are, dharma students trying to be as conscious as possible, and probably you still get deceived from time to time by your own consciousness. So imagine how difficult it is for those who are less aware, or for an entire social psyche to change, unless there are real consequences that are immediately felt.

That's one article. The other piece that really touched me, which I highly recommend, is by Joanna Macy. The title is something like "Woman on the Edge of Time." She's both brilliant and inspiring. I'm sure most of you are familiar with Joanna, who lives right here in Berkeley.

She offers the long-range view, the dharma perspective. She did a three-month self-retreat at her house last year, simply reflecting on these issues—seeking a deeper kind of inquiry. It was a retreat into deep time. Some of her insights were articulated in ways that felt new to me.

One understanding is that our lifestyle masks the perspective of deep time—the perspective that includes the past and all that came before, and the future and all that will unfold. We might grasp this intellectually, but everything in our culture conspires against embracing that long-range view.

I want to share a few of her thoughts that really struck me. In our current life, time becomes an increasingly scarce commodity. Our lives are driven, pressured, and fragmented by hurry. We often blame ourselves for having poor time management skills, but the source of the problem lies in the nature of industrial growth society—specifically, in its technology and market forces.

Searching for efficiency, we develop technologies to increase the speed of every operation and machine, measuring time in ever more minuscule fragments: nanoseconds and fractions of nanoseconds. These speed-induced pressures affect the body, producing many forms of "hurry sickness" and the feeling that things are spinning out of control.

Beyond technology, market forces accelerate time as well. With primacy given to corporate returns, goals are determined and progress measured by how fast profits and market shares increase. Corporations seek not only greater profit every quarter, but also a rising rate of growth. This creates exceedingly short-term thinking, leaving little or no room for reflection or weighing consequences.

In my teaching, I find this theme resonates deeply with young people. Although they enjoy instant communication through electronic devices, they suffer from not having time to finish anything or think through one matter before something else demands attention.

I remember when Sesame Street was just starting when I was young, and I thought, "Wow, the attention span is being narrowed down to two seconds—quite a hit for a young child's brain." And now even that seems long. You see these rapid-fire sequences with fifty images flashing in two seconds. We've forgotten how to think of time in a different way.

We use up everything we can—forests, fisheries, oil, coal—without any thought of what's left for future generations. What we don't consume, we contaminate or destroy: rivers, oceans, topsoil, not to mention cultures. It's strange indeed that we're willing to do this, given the fact that in past eras people labored for generations on cathedrals and sacred cities and irrigation schemes that they didn't expect to see completed in their lifetime. What a different psyche that is.

Yet I've come to believe that this behavior, as distressing as it is, is not because we're evil, but because we're caught up in a mind-destroying acceleration of time. And I also believe that we can begin to free ourselves from this and reclaim our birthright to live in sync with the natural world and in wholesome relation to the past and the future.

She talks about continual connection to the future—continual, while you're living in the present, of course—continual connection to see actions and consequences and to think in terms of what the Native Americans, the Iroquois particularly, would consider: making every decision based on what will be the consequence for the seventh generation from now. There's actually a company that does recycling called Seventh Generation—named for this very principle. What is the consequence of doing this for people and other beings way in the future?

Let me read one more piece, and then I think we'll do a little exercise:

"When fear and despair arise over the state of our world, the deep time perspective helps me look farther down the road and keep on going. There are so many who've gone before and who are coming after. It buoys me to feel linked with them in this ongoing drama, feeling that I can see the work my colleagues and I are doing as giving people an appetite for living with our planet in this fateful time and doing what we can so that the beings of the future can play their part as well. This is my most basic motivation.

Because I think about the future beings so much, there are times when I imagine I hear them. They are right behind my left shoulder and they're telling me not to give up. They're telling me it doesn't matter that I'm not a nuclear physicist or climatologist with expertise and renown. They remind me that what matters is that I'm alive now and they are not, and I can speak for them."

So one exercise that she does—and I thought maybe we could just experiment with this ourselves—is to imagine being a being in the future and looking back at what we would have to say to us, with hopefully as wise and kind a heart as possible.

So I invite you, we'll just experiment with this, to sit up for a moment and close your eyes. Imagine living seventy-five years from now. You can pick the age—you can be a child, a teenager, a young adult, or an adult. First, just hang out with your idea of what life might look like or be like. Just the way it is. This is what life is like now—whether it's something that has some hope or inspiration in your vision or not. There's no right or wrong in this. Just see what comes to you as what somebody seventy-five years from now, what their life might look like—at least the external part, as well as what it feels like inside.

And then, suppose you had a chance to speak to someone today and share any thoughts, any reflections, any questions or words of encouragement to someone today, maybe someone just like you. What would that being want to say?

Now, what I'd like you to do—I've done this exercise myself with Joanna in a slightly different way, but the general idea here is—if you're open to it, get into a triad with two other people and speak from that being who lives seventy-five years from now. You're speaking to two people who are living today and sharing with them what you want them to know or what you want to ask or what you want to say, either for inspiration or for frustration or whatever, and witness each other.

I think we'll take about three minutes each, and I'll ring a bell when it's time. It can be a dyad if it's not evenly divided up. I'd really encourage you to do this. I know you might say, "Oh my goodness, I don't feel like talking to anybody," or "I don't have anything to say." This is kind of showing up for the situation. There's no right or wrong. Let's just see what comes out of you.

So I welcome you to turn to a couple of people near you. You can decide who goes first. The other two are really witnessing—you're witnessing. Ready? First person can go.

So one person speaks at a time. Okay, start finishing up now. You can thank your partners and let's come back together for a few minutes.

First, just notice what's going on for you now inside. And if you can make space enough to hold it all with a very kind, loving awareness, getting in touch with caring inside, held with wisdom.

So we have a few minutes, and I realize that things might get stirred up. Part two, which I thought was next week before I got the dates wrong, is about these different strategies and working with it as practice. I hope you can just hang in there for a couple of weeks.

But anything that came up for you either in that exercise, or as a way that helps you hold in your wisest moments this whole issue?

"I don't know if this is wisdom. It's actually something that bothers me. This is something that I've been thinking about for a while. For myself, I do my best to be as conscientious as possible, and I'm starting to feel this anger towards humanity. And it feels in conflict with my Buddhist practice of compassion. So there's this disdain that's coming up—well, I should feel compassion toward people, but they're so awful, you know, like what we're doing. But then there's this real compassion for the earth, which is suffering. And it's almost like these two things are in conflict: my compassion for the earth and then compassion for people. I've never voiced it out loud, and there's a confusion about how to hold that."

Well, it's understandable to feel anger and outrage because it's coming from caring. So that's the first thing to get in touch with—that's the source. It's a heart that really cares. And I think it's possible to have both anger and frustration on the one hand, and another level of compassion for the ignorance that causes people to act against their own self-interest.

It's like the Buddha saying—everybody he could see wants to be happy and everybody doing exactly the things that cause more suffering. That was 2,600 years ago. Now we've just kind of upped the ante with our modern technology. But it's just ignorance. So it's compassion for the ignorance. Because even the corporate moguls would probably want a better world, a good world for their grandchildren if they could think about it. It's just not connecting the dots.

So there's anger, outrage, caring, and compassion for the confusion behind it all. But you've got to make space for it all. If you say, "Oh no, I shouldn't be feeling that," then you're just working against yourself. So it's just, yes, it's all there, and there's an awareness that can hold it.

As one of the articles talks about, world systems come and go. This is another shift in the Earth's balance. But in one of the other articles that I wanted to share with you, there is—it's just the natural way of things. Even our confusion and our ignorance is part of the natural evolution of things. We're part of that. We just have this image that it's up to us to make it all right. But maybe it's not. Maybe there's something that will come beyond us and after us. But you've got to let go of knowing. That's where the deep time helps so much—you're letting go of figuring out any answers and just allowing yourself to hold it all.

"When this first came up, I pretty immediately go into berating myself and just being like, 'I shouldn't drive or I shouldn't eat tropical fruit or should I get on that plane that I booked a month away?' And then I start coming back to the compassion thing where everything goes and it makes sense and that's why it's the center of the practice—just noticing that that anxiety and that fear of technology or things speeding up isn't productive for myself or my energy or around me or anything. So it's just coming back to seeing that. I think the deep time is really important to just understand that I don't need to solve it or I don't need to feel the guilt, and that it's bigger than that."

I guess it's like you were saying earlier—the difference between apathy and equanimity. If you have compassion for yourself and don't get stuck in that crazy feedback loop where you're just feeling guilty and bad, then you can be aware but not be so

swept away by it, moving more toward equanimity. But it's interesting to hear this and to feel it come up, to go through so many things and then come back to just compassion. It's beautiful.

Yes. And the thing is, guilt and fear don't add to the solution. They're just more contraction, putting that energy out into the world. Of course, it's completely understandable and human to feel guilt and fear. It's not that you shouldn't feel them—just like you're not avoiding feeling the anger—but somehow to hold it all in a bigger picture where, oh yes, that's part of being human. And there's something I can do: cultivate a bit more love, a bit more caring, a bit more consciousness. That also is our offering to the world.

Jackie offered another perspective: "I read a long time ago a book by Doris Lessing called *Shikasta*. She was a follower of G.I. Gurdjieff, but she put his philosophy—which, as I find out more and more about Buddhism, was a Russian interpretation of Buddhism, more or less—into this really long viewpoint. That really helps me when I'm starting to feel discouraged or desperate, or when I'm caught up in how futile my individual efforts seem. I think of that long view, and that each one can do what they can do. If you can keep doing what you can do and have a positive attitude and that hopefulness in the long term, that helps me tremendously."

Yes, and in a couple of weeks I will share both from this book, *From Me to We*, and also a beautiful piece written by Ernest Callenbach, who wrote *Ecotopia*. He passed away in April, and I've gotten to be friends with his wife, Christine, who sent me this piece. It was found on his computer after his death—an epistle to the Ecotopians, a visionary letter of how to hold our current situation that really inspired me. One of the essential ingredients he writes about is that the human heart sustains us most through hope—not hope born of fear, but hope arising from possibility. It's so beautiful, and we'll look at that along with *From Me to We*.

In the meantime, as we close, get in touch with the fact that you care. Remember that it's not up to you to save the world. It's just up to you to perhaps be as conscious and as loving as possible, to have the capacity to hold it all without figuring out any answers—just resting in the not knowing. And that includes not knowing that things might transform into the next visionary possibility. You don't know. Letting go of knowing and just loving.

May we all see through our fear and confusion and hold our lives and our Earth with great kindness and compassion. May all beings come to the end of suffering and express their love well. May you all benefit from our coming here together and sharing the Dharma.

CHAPTER 255

Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point: Concern for the Planet as Dharma Practice

Rob Burbea · 35 min

Rob Burbea addresses the profound challenge of climate change from a Buddhist perspective, exploring how dharma practitioners can respond skillfully to environmental crisis. Drawing on articles by Bhikkhu Bodhi and Joanna Macy, he examines the oscillation between engagement and overwhelm, activism and apathy that many experience when confronting ecological destruction.

Burbea identifies the root causes through a dharmic diagnosis: greed, arrogance, and ignorance driving mass consumption and short-term thinking. He emphasizes how our modern lifestyle masks "deep time" perspective - the awareness of past and future generations that indigenous cultures like the Iroquois embedded in their decision-making through the seven-generation principle.

The talk includes a powerful guided exercise where participants imagine speaking from 75 years in the future to present-day dharma practitioners. Burbea addresses the anger and guilt that naturally arise when witnessing environmental destruction, offering compassion as a way to hold both outrage at harmful actions and understanding of the ignorance behind them. Rather than trying to "save the world," he suggests cultivating consciousness, love, and the capacity to rest in not-knowing while remaining engaged. This approach transforms environmental concern into genuine dharma practice, emphasizing that our caring itself - held with wisdom rather than fear - becomes our offering to the world.

Perhaps you saw the front page article in last week's San Francisco Chronicle: "Close to Tipping Point of Warming." The lead story warned that only major global effort can halt catastrophe, according to scientists. The Earth is reaching a tipping point in climate change that will lead to increasingly rapid and irreversible destruction of the global environment unless its forces are controlled by concerted international action, an international group of scientists warn. Unchecked population growth, the disappearance of critical plant and animal species, the over-exploitation of energy resources, and the rapidly warming climate are all combining to bring mounting pressure on the Earth's environmental health, they say. Scientists from five nations, led by UC Berkeley biologist Anthony Barnofsky, reported their analysis in the journal Nature.

This is both not news and yet when it makes the front page, it's news again. Every so often periodically, we are reminded of the inconvenient truth that things are getting dicey, not to mention whatever the weather patterns are for the day that seem to be breaking new records one way or another.

We've talked about this topic in the past, but it's come up again now, both because of the article and also because of this issue of Inquiring Mind on "Earth Now." As often, the Inquiring Mind issue is very thoughtful, thought-provoking, deep inquiry into what this means for us as Dharma practitioners and how to respond and incorporate it into our practice. Please take a copy with you. It's not only bad news and depressing—some of it is really inspiring and moving.

What do we do with this? What do we do when we read a front page story saying only major global effort can halt catastrophe? I'm here not to give you the right answer, the right response—this is what you should do or think or act. I'm sharing my own process as we talk because I've gone through so many different feelings and reactions and responses about this that it's still a work in progress, just as the whole unfolding is.

A couple of years ago, I gave some talks on this topic after reading the book *Eaarth* by Bill McKibben, which deeply impacted me about where we're headed, what it's going to look like, and what our wisest responses can be—the possibilities that come out of this. And I was kind of on a crusade. We've got to do something. And I've got to do something. Besides giving some talks, I was one of a number of voices at Spirit Rock in the teachers' council—a few of us, but I was kind of fired up and saying, if we're a place of consciousness, we've got to be a leader in consciousness around sustainability and around speaking out about this.

I'm happy to say, by the way, that Spirit Rock has evolved into really placing sustainability as a very high priority in our new master plans. We've just started a capital campaign for replacing the community hall, which is trailers, with a community temple that will give us a lot more options and facilities, and teacher and staff quarters that are much needed because it's all twenty-three-year-old trailers. Sustainability is at the highest level. That's good. That has made a lot of us feel really good.

But as far as doing enough—if we've got to bring more awareness into our own hearts as well as the community, are we doing enough? So I went through a period like that: come on, it's up to us, and particularly what can I do to play my part to save the world?

And then I've gone through periods of real overwhelm that would lead to apathy. That would lead to, you know, who am I kidding? What can I do? And what's the point? Yeah, I'll do the recycling and I'll do the little things here and there. But this is much bigger than my mind can wrap around.

We go between engagement and acceptance or equanimity, from anxiety to apathy and despair and everything in between. Can you relate to those responses?

So I'm not here to preach to you. I'm here to explore with you. And it came up recently again. You ever have that experience where there's a theme that comes up and then you kind of hear different messages from a lot of different parts in your life? Well, this was happening as I've been exploring this issue. One was a really terrific book that was sent to me by somebody who used to sit with me twenty-five years ago in Oregon, who's taking the Joy course now.

And he sent me this book, *From Me to We: The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life*. Bob is a systems change expert who wrote about Buddhist principles—though this is a mainstream book and I'm not sure he even refers to Buddha or Buddhism explicitly. But the five dharma principles he identifies are ones he sees as essential not just for personal change, but for societal change in addressing these challenges. I started reading and thought, "This is really good." I wrote to him expressing my appreciation, and he was delighted. I told him if he's ever in the Bay Area, I'd love to have him come and share with our community.

Then came the *Inquiring Mind* issue. And then another message arrived through some contact with teacher friends in Europe. Every few years, teachers in the Vipassana community hold what's called an International Teachers Conference. Teachers from Europe, some from even farther away, and from the East and West Coasts of the United States gather to explore the future of the dharma in our tradition and the vision we all hold.

I had agreed to be part of the planning committee along with a couple of other friends, and I wanted to involve two friends from England as the European representatives for the larger meeting. They both have a deep commitment to consciousness around climate change. Independently, each of them said, "Well, the meetings are wonderful, but I have to really look at when I get on a plane—what's the payoff and what's the price I pay for using all that energy?" They continued, "It's something for us all to think about as the future unfolds: how much we're using planes, how much we're teaching locally, and at what cost."

I responded, "That's fair enough. I really would love to have you here, not only because of your presence, but maybe to lead a conversation around this." We began thinking about doing a video conference for those teachers who don't want to use the transportation, and maybe arranging carbon offsets. When I brought this up to the Spirit Rock teachers at our last teachers' council, it got people thinking. "Oh, okay, this hadn't been in our consciousness—we need to start thinking about this."

So it's going on the agenda for next year, whether or not these European teachers come: What is our responsibility regarding energy use and travel in the future? From all sides, this question was arising for me.

Among the articles I read, two really struck me, and I want to share a little about them before we explore this together. One was by Bhikkhu Bodhi, titled "Drawing Back from the Edge of a Cliff." He gives the example of the old Roadrunner cartoons—remember how Wile E. Coyote would chase the Roadrunner, run off the cliff, and find himself spinning his wheels in midair before realizing he could go back to the cliff and avoid catastrophe?

Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests we're rather like that—spinning our wheels off the cliff. The question is: Do we wake up in time and draw back, or do we crash? In his view, the dharma can help us navigate through these dangerous times, first by diagnosing the problem, and then by offering pragmatic ways to act.

As for diagnosing the problem, it's probably not hard to see that the suffering comes from greed and what he calls arrogance—our ethnocentric view—and ignorance: simply not seeing the consequences of our actions. This is based on the misunderstanding that the key to economic growth is mass consumption. This is a basic fallacious thinking that's propagated by corporations, politicians, and the media.

To make a change from a dharmic point of view, he believes, requires an immediate response, a long-term pragmatic response, and a systemic response. Let me share some of his thoughts on each.

The immediate response: We wake up and realize we are destroying the planet, and we stop doing whatever harmful things we can stop. As that article in the Chronicle suggests, we'd better stop real fast.

The long-term response involves seeking different sources of energy and ensuring that corporations aren't running everything. Now that's a pretty big long shot.

The second element of the systemic response calls for a fundamental change of consciousness—truly seeing that genuine happiness lies in a different place than getting our next hit of pleasure. This involves recognizing that fulfillment comes not from feeding our cravings, but from understanding how actions have consequences and that we live in an interconnected world. As he says, it will require a clear, honest understanding of the predicament and ethics grounded in humility, compassion, and global stewardship.

When I read that article, it all made perfect sense. And there's a part of me that says, "Yeah, so how could that come about? Good luck." Maybe it comes about when we see there's no turning back—we're off the cliff about to fall. And it's quite possible.

I've always thought that dukkha is usually what wakes us up, both personally and globally. So perhaps we have to go through enough dukkha to change. It's so hard to change habits. When you think about it in your own practice, even when you know that doing a certain action you're going to regret, you know that mysterious moment where you say, "I know this is going to be not so good in the long run, but it feels so good now. What the heck?"

Here you are as dharma students, trying to be as conscious as you can, and probably you get deceived from time to time in your own consciousness. So imagine how hard it is for those not so aware, or for a whole social psyche to change, unless there are real consequences that are immediately felt.

The other article that really touched me and I highly recommend is Joanna Macy's piece called "Woman on the Edge of Time." She's brilliant as well as inspiring. I'm sure most of you are familiar with Joanna, who of course lives right here in Berkeley. She has the long-range view, the dharma perspective.

She did a three-month self-retreat at her house last year, just reflecting on this, inquiring into how to develop a deeper kind of understanding. It was a retreat inquiring into deep time. There were some understandings that were new to me as she articulated them. One is that our lifestyle masks the perspective of deep time—the perspective that includes the past and all that came before, and the future and all that will come about. We might know it intellectually, but everything in our culture conspires against looking at that long-range view.

Time in our current life becomes an increasingly scarce commodity. Our lives are driven, pressured, and fragmented by hurry. We often blame ourselves for having poor time management skills, but the source of the problem is in the nature of the industrial growth society. To be more precise, it is in its technology and its market forces.

Searching for efficiency, we develop technologies to increase the speed of every operation and machine, and start measuring time in ever more minuscule fragments—nanoseconds and fractions of nanoseconds. Speed-induced pressures affect the body, of course, producing many forms of hurry sickness and the feeling that things are out of control.

In addition to technology, market forces are at work in accelerating time. With the primacy given to corporate returns, goals are determined and progress is measured in terms of how fast profits and market shares increase. Corporations seek to show not only a greater profit every quarter, but also a rising rate of growth. This makes for exceedingly short-term thinking. There's little or no room for reflection or weighing consequences.

In my teaching, I find this theme of great interest to young people. Although they enjoy the instant communications through the acceleration of electronic gadgets, they suffer over not having time to finish anything or to think through one thing before something else comes along.

I remember when Sesame Street was just starting out and I was thinking, "Wow, the attention span is narrowed down to two seconds." That's a long hit for a young child's brain. And now that's long by comparison. You see these flashes where there are about fifty pictures in two seconds. We forget how to think of time in a different way.

We use up everything we can—forests, fisheries, oil, coal—without any thought of what's left for future generations. What we don't consume, we contaminate or destroy: rivers, oceans, topsoil, not to mention cultures. It's strange indeed that we're willing to do this given the fact that in past eras people labored for generations on cathedrals and sacred cities and irrigation schemes that they didn't expect to see completed in their lifetime. What a different psyche that is.

Yet I've come to believe that this behavior, as distressing as it is, is not because we're evil, but because we're caught up in a mind-destroying acceleration of time. And I also believe that we can begin to free ourselves from this and reclaim our birthright to live in sync with the natural world and in wholesome relation to the past and the future.

She talks about continual connection to the future—continual, while you're living in the present of course—continual connection to see actions and consequences and to think in terms of how the Native Americans, the Iroquois particularly, would make every decision based on what will be the consequence for the seventh generation from

now. I think that's where one of the companies that does recycling, Seventh Generation, gets its name—from asking, what is the consequence of doing this right for people way in the future, and other beings way in the future?

I'll just read one more piece and then I think we'll do a little exercise:

"When fear and despair arise over the state of our world, the deep time perspective helps me look farther down the road and keep on going. There are so many who've gone before and who are coming after. It buoys me to feel linked with them in this on-going drama, feeling that I can see the work my colleagues and I are doing as giving people an appetite for living with our planet in this fateful time and doing what we can so that the beings of the future can play their part as well. This is my most basic motivation.

Because I think about the future being so much, there are times when I imagine I hear them. They are right behind my left shoulder and they're telling me not to give up. They're telling me it doesn't matter that I'm not a nuclear physicist or climatologist with expertise and renown. They remind me that what matters is that I'm alive now and they are not and I can speak for them."

So one exercise that she does—I thought maybe we could just experiment with this ourselves—is to imagine being a being in the future and looking back, seeing what we would have to say to us, with hopefully as wise and kind a heart as possible.

So I just invite you—we'll just experiment with this—to sit up for a moment and close your eyes.

Imagine living seventy-five years from now. You can pick the age—you can be a child, a teenager, a young adult, or an adult. First, just hang out with your idea of what life might look like or be like. Just the way it is. Oh, this is what life is like now—whether it's something that has some hope or inspiration in your vision or not. There's no right or wrong in this. Just see what comes to you as what somebody seventy-five years from now, what their life might look like—at least the external part, as well as what it feels like inside.

And then, suppose you had a chance to speak to someone today and share any thoughts, any reflections, any questions or words of encouragement to someone today, maybe someone just like you. What would that being want to say?

Now, what I'd like you to do—I've done this exercise myself with Joanna, in a slightly different way, but the general idea here is, if you're open to it, to get into a triad with two other people and speak from that being who lives seventy-five years from now.

You're speaking to two people who are living today and sharing with them what you want them to know or what you want to ask or what you want to say, either for inspiration or for frustration or whatever, and witness each other.

I think we'll take about three minutes each, and I'll ring a bell when it's time. It can be a dyad if it's not evenly divided up. I'd really encourage you to do this. I know you might say, "Oh my goodness, I don't feel like talking to anybody," or "I don't have anything to say." This is kind of showing up for the situation. There's no right or wrong. But let's just see what comes out of you.

So I welcome you to turn to a couple of people near you. You can decide who goes first. The other two are really witnessing—you're witnessing. Ready? First person can go.

Being With the Complexity

First, just notice what's going on for you now inside. And if you can make space enough to hold it all with a very kind, loving awareness, getting in touch with caring inside, held with wisdom.

We have a few minutes, and I realize that things might get stirred up. Part two, which I thought was next week before I got the dates wrong, is about these different strategies and working with it as practice. I hope you can just hang in there for a couple of weeks.

What came up for you either in that exercise, or as a way that helps you hold—in your wisest moments—this whole issue?

"I don't know if this is wisdom. It's actually something that bothers me. This is something that I've been thinking about for a while. For myself, I do my best to be as conscientious as possible. And I'm starting to feel this anger towards humanity. And it feels in conflict with my Buddhist practice of compassion. There's this disdain coming up—like, well, I should feel compassion toward people, but they're so awful, you know, like what we're doing. But then there's this real compassion for the earth, which is suffering. And it's almost like these two things are in conflict: my compassion for the earth and then compassion for people. I've never voiced it out loud. And there's confusion about how to hold that."

Well, it's understandable to feel anger and outrage because it's coming from caring. So that's the first thing to get in touch with—that's the source. It's a heart that really cares.

I think it's possible to have both anger and frustration on the one hand, and another level of compassion for the ignorance that causes people to act against their own self-interest. It's like the Buddha saying everybody he could see wants to be happy and everybody doing exactly the things that cause more suffering. That was 2,600 years ago. Now we've just kind of upped the ante with our modern technology.

But it's just ignorance. So it's compassion for the ignorance. Because even the corporate moguls would probably want a better world, a good world for their grandchildren if they could think about it. It's just like not connecting the dots.

So there's anger, outrage, caring, and compassion for the confusion behind it. But you've got to make space for it all. If you say, "Oh no, I shouldn't be feeling that," then you're just working against yourself. It's just, yep, it's all there, and there's an awareness that can hold it.

As one of the articles talks about, world systems come and go. This is another maybe shift in the Earth's balance. But in one of the other articles that I wanted to share with you, there is—it's just the natural way of things. Even our confusion and our ignorance is part of the natural evolution of things. We're part of that. We just have this image that, oh, it's up to us to make it all right. But maybe it's not. Maybe there's something that will come beyond us and after us.

But you've got to let go of knowing. That's where the deep time helps so much. You're letting go of figuring out any answers and just allowing yourself to hold it all.

Another person shared: "When this first came up, I pretty immediately go into berating myself and just being like, I shouldn't drive or I shouldn't eat tropical fruit or should I get on that plane that I booked a month away? And then I start coming back to the compassion thing where it seems everything goes and it makes sense and that's why it's the center of the practice—just noticing that that anxiety and that fear of technology or things speeding up isn't productive for myself or my energy or around me or anything. So it's just coming back to seeing that. I think the deep time is really important to just understand that I don't need to solve it or I don't need to feel the guilt, and that it's bigger than that."

I guess it's like you were saying earlier—the difference between apathy and equanimity. If you have compassion for yourself and don't get stuck in that crazy feedback loop where you're just feeling guilty and bad, then you can be aware but not be so swept away by it, moving more toward equanimity.

It's interesting to hear this and to feel it come up—to go through so many things and then come back to just compassion. It's beautiful.

Yes. And the thing is, guilt and fear don't add to the solution. They're just more contraction, putting that energy out. Of course, it's completely understandable and human to feel guilt and fear. It's not that you shouldn't feel them, just like you're not suppressing anger. But somehow to hold it in a bigger picture where, oh yes, that's part of being human. And there's something I can do: cultivate a bit more love, a bit more caring, a bit more consciousness. And that also is our offering to the world.

One more comment before we close. Jackie?

I read a long time ago a book by Doris Lessing called Shikasta. She was a follower of G.I. Gurdjieff, who, as I find out more and more about Buddhism, offered a Russian interpretation of Buddhism, more or less. It includes this really long viewpoint, and that helps me a lot when I'm starting to feel discouraged or desperate, when everything feels futile and my individual efforts seem meaningless. I think of that perspective—that each one can do what they can do. If you can keep doing what you can do and have a positive attitude and that hopefulness in the long term, that helps me tremendously.

Great. Thank you.

In a couple of weeks, I'll share both from this book, From Me to We, and also a beautiful piece written by Ernest Callenbach, who wrote Ecotopia and passed away this past April. I've become friends with his wife, Christine. She sent me this—it was printed out, found on his computer after his death. He was this amazing visionary person, and it was a letter, an epistle to the ecotopians—a visionary letter about how to hold our situation that really inspired me.

One of the pieces he writes about is that one of the essential ingredients, one of the things that sustains us most, is hope. Not out of fear, but out of possibility. I wanted to share some of it—it's so beautiful. We'll look at that and the From Me to We material.

In the meantime, as we close, get in touch with the fact that you care. And remember—it's not up to you to save the world. It's just up to you to maybe be as conscious and as loving as possible, and to have the capacity to hold it all without figuring out any answers. Just resting in the not knowing.

And that includes not knowing that things might turn into the next visionary possibility. You don't know. Letting go of knowing and just loving.

May we all see through our fear and confusion and hold our lives and our Earth with great kindness and compassion. May all beings come to the end of suffering and express their love well. May you all benefit from our coming here together and sharing the Dharma.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 256

Seeing the System You Are Part Of

Rob Burbea · 45 min

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea examines how seeing our interconnectedness with all life is fundamental to addressing our planetary crisis. Drawing from Buddhist teachings on śūnyatā (emptiness) and pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), he explores how the illusion of separation drives destructive behaviors. The talk weaves together insights from systems thinking, ecology, and dharma practice, emphasizing the need to shift from 'me to we' consciousness.*
>
> *Burbea references the work of systems expert Bob Doppelt and visionary Ernest Callenbach, presenting five transformational commitments needed for planetary healing. The first commitment - 'see the systems you are part of' - forms the core teaching, illustrated through scientific understanding of our cellular ecosystem and the interdependent web of life. He guides listeners through contemplative practices to experientially understand our embeddedness in lineages of care, biological systems, and the broader community of life.*
>
> *This teaching offers both theoretical framework and practical guidance for developing ecological consciousness rooted in fundamental Buddhist insights about the nature of reality and our interconnected existence.*

Hi, this is James Barris. I hope you find this talk supports you in your practice. If you'd like to support my teaching, you can use the donate button underneath my picture on Dharma Seed to do that. Your support is greatly appreciated.

First of all, just want to acknowledge it's been a good day for news, at least if you're from Berkeley. Gosh, so now the debates begin, but at least it still might be possible for 30 million people to get health care who need it. The Supreme Court upheld the Health Care Reform Act. You got to really rejoice with every positive step. Not to miss it. Because it's so easy to focus on all the things that are wrong or that seem crazy and insane and the mind goes, where are we headed?

Does your mind ever go down that road? What are we doing to ourselves and to this planet? What are we doing? And will we wake up? And will we wake up in time? As my friend Roger Walsh says, it seems like we're in a race between fear and consciousness. And I believe that in the end, consciousness trumps fear. It's just a matter of—there's a time element here.

That's why I'm calling this series of talks, Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point. Because we, in many people's minds, and I'm sure you've been reading actually recently in the news, we're at a tipping point in our lives, in our evolution and the planet's evolution as far as life on it. And we better wake up soon.

So I wanted to share with you a few things as we continue on with this series. The first is an essay that I found very inspiring that was shared with me. And I know it's not good form to do a lot of reading in a lecture, but I'm going to read a chunk of this essay —not all of it, but a chunk of it because it's articulated in a way much better than I can. It's by Ernest Callenbach, who recently passed away. He passed away in April, April 16th, and he was a professor at Cal and a real visionary who wrote a book called *Ecotopia* a number of years ago, and *Ecotopia Emerging*, yeah, was another book.

And he was this amazing visionary who—it's a novel of what the possibilities of humanity might look like if we really woke up. And this was written in the early 70s, I think. Unfortunately, it's still ahead of its time, way ahead of its time. And before he passed away, he wrote what is called an epistle to the ecotopians that was found on his computer after he passed away. It was like his last reflections on where we're heading with a hopeful possibility. And it's just really beautiful. If you Google "Epistle to the Ecotopians" or "epistle" and probably "Callenbach," that'll do it. It's from Tom Dispatch, this blog that's really a progressive visionary blog.

So I'm going to read parts of it that give inspiration as to the possibility.

"To all brothers and sisters who hold the dream in their hearts of a future world in which humans and all other beings live in harmony and mutual support, a world of sustainability, stability, and confidence, a world something like the one I described so long ago in *Ecotopia* and *Ecotopia Emerging*.

As I survey my life, which is coming near its end, I want to set down a few thoughts that might be useful to those coming after. It will soon be time for me to give back to Gaia the nutrients that I've used during a long, busy and happy life. I'm not bitter or resentful at the approaching end. I've been one of the extraordinarily lucky ones.

So it behooves me here to gather together some thoughts and attitudes that may prove useful in the dark times we are facing, a century or more of exceedingly difficult times. How will those who survive manage it? What can we teach our friends, our children, our communities? Although we may not be capable of changing history, how can we equip ourselves to survive it? I contemplate these questions in the full conscious-

ness of my own mortality. Being offered an actual number of likely months to live, even though the estimate is uncertain, mightily focuses the mind. On personal things, of course, on loved ones and even loved things, but also on the big picture.

But let us begin with last things first for a change. The analysis will come later for those who wish it."

And then he lays out different qualities that are needed to see through the hard times that lie ahead.

So I wanted to share with you the qualities that he feels will be most important.

One, hope. Children exude hope even under the most terrible conditions, and that must inspire us as our conditions get worse. Hopeful patients recover better. Hopeful test candidates score better. Hopeful builders construct better buildings. Hopeful parents produce secure and resilient children. In groups, an atmosphere of hope is essential to shared successful effort.

"Yes, we can" is not an empty slogan, but a mantra for people who intend to do something together, whether it's rescuing victims of hurricanes, rebuilding flood-damaged buildings on higher ground, helping wounded people through first aid, or inventing new social structures—perhaps one in which only people are persons, not corporations. We cannot know what threats we will face, but ingenuity against adversity is one of our species' built-in resources. We cope, and faith in our coping capacity is perhaps the biggest resource of all.

This is something I have often reflected on and used to motivate myself—to somehow hold a positive vision of the best case scenario. Who knows what that is? But if we throw in the towel and just say, "What's the point? It's hopeless," then what we do is contribute to that despairing energy which finds lots of company in the soup of human consciousness and resonates with others who have that vision.

Of course, we can't be pie in the sky, thinking everything is going to be fine. But along with knowing how difficult the times will probably be, to have a vision—an inspiring vision—what you do is contribute to holding that in the consciousness. That in itself is magnetizing and energizing, and finds others who have that kind of consciousness. Just like in the last election, when there was a groundswell of "Yes, we can"—that was a paradigm shift in feeling of caring and consciousness, the audacity of hope, actually. There's a possibility.

So who knows what's going to happen? But to hold that vision of the best case scenario is something that not only feels good inside, but is also a gift in the larger consciousness. Again, not to live in denial, but to practice what Coleridge called "suspension of disbelief." Instead of thinking, "I know how it's going to end up," we don't know. Nobody knows. We can have an idea of where things might be heading, but all kinds of possibilities are still in the air.

Second, after hope—mutual support, another essential quality. People who do best at basic survival tasks, we know experimentally as well as intuitively, are cooperative, good at teamwork, often altruistic, mindful of the common good. In drastic emergencies like hurricanes or earthquakes, people surprise us by their sacrifice of food, of shelter, even sometimes of life itself. Those who survive social or economic collapse, wars, pandemics, or starvation will be those who manage scarce resources fairly. Hoarders and dominators win only in the short run and end up dead, exiled, or friendless.

So in every way we can, we need to help each other and our children learn to be cooperative rather than competitive, to be helpful rather than hurtful, to look out for the communities of which we are a part and on which we ultimately depend.

Third quality that he sees as essential: practical skills. With the movement into cities of the US population and much of the rest of the world's people, we have had a massive de-skilling in how to do practical tasks. When I was a boy in the country, all of us knew how to build a treehouse or construct a small hut or raise chickens or grow beans or screw pipes together to deliver water. It was a sexist world, of course, so when some of my chums in eighth grade said we wanted to learn "girls'" home skills like making bread or boiling eggs, the teachers were shocked, but we got to do it.

There was widespread competence in fixing things—impossible with most modern contrivances. We all need to learn or relearn how we would keep the rudiments of life going if there were no paid specialists around or means to pay them. Every child should learn elementary carpentry, from layout and sawing to driving nails. Everybody should know how to chop wood safely and build a fire. Everybody should know what to do if dangers appear from fire, flood, electric wires down, and the like. Taking care of each other is one practical step at a time, most of them requiring help from at least one other person. Survival is a team sport.

Next—and there are two more of these—organize. Much of the American ideology, our shared and unusually unspoken assumptions, is hyper-individualistic. We like to imagine that heroes are solitary, have superpowers, glory and violence, and that if our work lives and business lives seem tamer, underneath they are still struggles red in blood and claw. We have sought solitude on the prairies as cowboys, on the range in

our dependence on media rather than real people, and even in our cars—armored cabins of solitude. We have an uneasy and doubting attitude about government as if we all reserve the right to be outlaws.

But of course, human society, like ecological webs, is a complex dance of mutual support and restraint. If we're lucky, it operates by laws openly arrived at and approved by the populace. When the group recognizes its group powers, it can limit any distortions that happen. Thinking together is enormously creative.

Looking at this vast perspective, it has enormous survival value. And lastly, we must learn to live with contradiction.

These are dark times. These are bright times. We are implacably making the planet less habitable. Every time a new oil field is discovered, the press cheers—hooray, there's more fuel for the self-destroying machines. We are turning more land into deserts and parking lots. We're wiping out innumerable species that are not only wondrous and beautiful, but might also be useful to us. We're multiplying to the point where our needs and our wastes outweigh the capacities of the biosphere to produce and absorb them.

And yet, despite the bloody headlines and the rocketing military budgets, we are also unbelievably killing fewer of each other proportionately than in earlier centuries. We have mobilized enormous global intelligence and mutual curiosity through the internet and beyond it. We've even evolved, spotily, a global understanding that democracy is better than tyranny, that love and tolerance are better than hate, that hope is better than rage and despair. We're prone, especially in catastrophes, to be astonishingly helpful and cooperative.

We may even have begun to share an understanding that while the dark times may continue for generations, in time new growth and regeneration will begin. In the biological process called succession, a desolate, disturbed area is gradually, by a predictable sequence of returning plants, restored to ecological continuity and durability. When old institutions and habits break down or consume themselves, new experimental shoots begin to appear. And people explore and test and share new and better ways to survive together.

It's never easy or simple, but already we see under the crumbling surface of the conventional world promising developments: new ways of organizing economic activity, like cooperatives, worker-owned companies, nonprofits, trusts; new ways of using low-impact technology to capture solar energy, to sequester carbon dioxide; new ways of building compact, congenial cities that are low in energy use or even self-sufficient, low

in waste production, high in recycling of almost everything. A vision of sustainability that sometimes shockingly resembles ecotopia is tremulously coming into existence at the hands of people who've never heard of the book.

Callenbach writes, "When disasters strike and institutions falter, as at the end of empires, it does not mean that the buildings all fall down and everybody dies. Life goes on, and in particular the remaining people fashion new institutions that they hope will better ensure their survival."

So I look to a long-term process of succession, as the biological concept has it, where disturbances kill off an ecosystem, but little by little new plants colonize the devastated area, prepare the soil for larger and more complex plants and other beings who depend on them. Finally the process achieves a flourishing, resilient, complex state—not necessarily what was there before, but durable and richly productive. In a similar way, experiments underway now all over the world are exploring how sustainability can in fact be achieved locally.

I have become less confident of humans' political ability to act on common sense, shared values. Our era has become one of spectacular polarization, with folly multiplying on every hand. That is the way empires crumble—they're taken over by looter elites who sooner or later cause collapse. But then new games become possible.

Humans tend to try to manage things: land, structures, even rivers. We spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and treasure in imposing our will on nature, on pre-existing or inherited structures, dreaming of permanent solutions, monuments to our ambitions and dreams. But in periods of slack, decline, or collapse, our abilities no longer suffice for all this management. We have to let things go.

All things go somewhere. They evolve with or without us into new forms. So as the decades pass, we should try not always to futilely fight these transformations. As the Japanese know, there's much unnoticed beauty in wabi-sabi—the old, the worn, the tumbledown, those things beginning their transformation into something else. We can embrace this process of devolution, embellish it when strength avails, learn to love it.

There is beauty in weathered and unpainted wood, in orchards overgrown, even in abandoned cars being incorporated into the earth. Let us learn, like the Forest Service sometimes does, to put unwise and unneeded roads to bed, help a little in the healing of the natural contours, the revegetation by native plants. Let us embrace decay, for it is the source of all new life and growth.

That is the question and the task—when your mind has a hard time wrapping around it all and making sense of it all, to at some point let go of what you think you know. For me, in the bigger scheme of things, what the Dharma perspective always does is open up to a much larger sense of time rather than this thin slice called now or called this year or this decade. We can see that there is a natural law that we are a part of, and that life finds its own new ways, with or without humanity—but hopefully we can be participating in a new creative possibility.

Given that backdrop I wanted to share as a way that we can hold some vision, I wanted to now start exploring this book I mentioned before the break. It's called *From Me to We*, with the subtitle "The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life," by Bob Doppelt, who is a systems expert and executive director for the Resource Innovation Group, a sustainability and climate change education, research, and technical assistance organization. It's connected with Willamette University, and he also teaches at the University of Oregon and has written a number of books on sustainable thinking.

But he's an old Dharma friend. He sat with me, oh, twenty-five years ago at Breitenbush. I used to teach there regularly, and he and his partner would come on retreats. He's taking the Joy course now, and he said, "Hey, you might not remember me, but I'm taking this Joy course. I really like it."

He sent me his book, and when it arrived, it was one of those things that sits on your nightstand for a while—you know, thinking, "I really should pick this up and at least honor him by reading a bit of it." I do receive quite a number of books, but the fact that this one was thin certainly helped. And then there was this beautiful piece by Ernest Kallenbach in the Inquiring Mind issue, alongside this book. When I started reading it, I thought, "Oh, this is good. This is really good."

What he does is examine some basic Dharma principles—not new to any of you, probably—but sees them in the context of what would be needed to shift our consciousness, the keys to making that transformation. The not-seeing of these principles is what keeps us bound in ignorance, confusion, and suffering.

When I contemplate the word Dharma, it's often translated as nature or the natural law. Many of the Buddha's teachings were based on observing how things work in nature. He would say, "There are trees and roots of trees. Go sit in nature and see how life works." In that experience of being part of nature and examining the mind and body in that context, you become more connected to the basic principles of life.

What's particularly interesting is that he doesn't use Buddhist jargon in this book—just a brief mention of the Buddha in the preface or introduction. It's written for any mainstream person, yet it's based on Buddha Dharma. These five principles are five Dharma principles, returning to that definition: understanding the natural law, the laws of nature, and applying them to the planet. This is really what deep ecology is about.

It's not just about recycling, doing our part, avoiding further pollution, or shopping locally—though these matter. It's about seeing that the underlying consciousness needed to save us requires a completely different way of bringing practice into this situation. As he says, and as I mentioned in that previous essay, we are right now at a moment of choice, a choice point in our evolution.

His title, "From Me to We," captures the essence of this choice point. We live in a society that, as Ernest Kallenbach observed, glorifies the individual. The shift required is to move away from the erroneous idea that individual focus is where true happiness and fulfillment lie, to see quite the opposite. That individualistic approach is a prescription for doom. The task that all these principles point to is this movement from "me" to "we."

He references Erik Erikson—many of you are probably familiar with his stages of human development. Erikson's theory shows how we start off completely absorbed in "me" and our physiological and emotional needs. In the first year or two, the infant is so me-centered that the whole world is "me." But gradually, from childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood, we begin seeing the importance of connections and love. Moving into greater maturity, there's a movement toward finding fulfillment and happiness through feeling greater connection beyond ourselves. True happiness comes from living a life of contribution—both to those around us through connection and love, and through vision for future generations as well.

This aligns with positive psychology, where authentic happiness, as Martin Seligman describes it, isn't about getting as much as you can as fast as you can. Genuine, deeper, fulfilling happiness comes from discovering your gifts and sharing them with the world. Again, it's that movement from "what's in it for me?" to "what do I have to offer? What do I have to give?"

We are, as Bob describes it, in an adolescent stage of human development, hopefully moving from showing our power and sowing our wild oats to asking, "How can I feel greater connection to others in this world?"

Throughout different periods of human history, there has been this back-and-forth movement from "me" to "we." He points out that hunter-gatherers were completely focused on "me" and getting individual needs met. When agriculture emerged, there was a need to organize and help each other—a shift toward more of a collective approach. Of course, people helped each other in hunting as well, but agriculture created a different kind of cooperation. Then, moving into cities and organizing at that level...

And there have been these oscillations throughout different periods in history—like during the time of the Buddha, which coincided with the emergence of Taoism and Lao Tzu in China and the Golden Age in Greece. That era seemed to represent a flowering of consciousness to some extent. I don't want to romanticize it, but there was a quality of consciousness in human thinking at that time that gave birth to some of the greatest insights about the importance of recognizing that we're part of something much larger.

Then came the dark ages, followed by feudalism, then periods of collective organizing—whether around church or country—each with its own shadow side. This was followed by the age of reason and the period of enlightenment, which emphasized the individual. We've been gradually growing beyond that age of reason with its focus on individualism, and now we're hopefully moving into a new era of "we."

At this crucial choice point, our sustainability depends on looking carefully and considering this movement toward greater connection, this fundamental shift in our life perspective.

Let me give you an overview of the five principles, the five commitments that he discusses. We'll explore just the first one this evening.

The first commitment is: See the systems you are a part of. This encompasses the understanding that we're all interconnected—really seeing deeply into interdependence, into the Buddhist concepts of śūnyatā (emptiness) and anattā (not-self). All of these fall under this commitment, which I'll explore in a moment.

The second commitment: Be accountable for all the consequences of your actions—simply recognizing the law of cause and effect.

The third: Abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice.

The fourth: Acknowledge your fiduciary obligations and take responsibility for the continuation of all life. This is compassion in action, compassionate engagement.

And the fifth: Choose your own destiny—which embodies the principle of intention and vision.

The more consciously we can embrace these commitments, the deeper our Dharma practice becomes, both internally and externally. It aligns with recognizing: "This is my part in this puzzle."

So, the first commitment: See the systems you are a part of.

You've probably all encountered the concept of emptiness. Emptiness means being empty of a separate self—empty of anything that exists independently. As John Muir said, "When you try to pick out anything by itself, you find it hitched to everything else in the universe." Nothing can be separated out.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers the example of a piece of paper. He says when you look at a sheet of paper, all of life is present in it. When you look deeply, you see the tree that became this paper, and the rain and the sun, and the logger and the logger's family, and everything that went into the production—the earthworms tilling the soil, the nutrients, everything can be found in this single sheet of paper.

In the same way, when you see yourself as part of a larger system, it shifts your limited worldview.

I want to share another passage I love, from Lewis Thomas. Has anyone read *Lives of a Cell*? It's a wonderful, slim book written many years ago. This is from the very beginning, and it really captures, at the most fundamental level, the reality that you are not separate from anything:

"A good case can be made for our non-existence as entities. We are not made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing the oxidative energy that sends us out for the improvement of each shining day, are mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours. They turn out to be little separate creatures, replicating in their own fashion, privately, with their own DNA and RNA quite different from ours. Without them we would not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought. Mitochondria are stable and responsible lodgers, and I choose to trust them. But what of the other little animals, similarly established in my cells, sorting and balancing me, clustering me together? My centrioles, basal bodies, and probably a good many other more obscure tiny beings at work inside my cells, each with its own special genome, are as foreign and as essential as aphids in anthills. My cells are no longer the pure line entities I was raised with. They are ecosystems more complex than Jamaica Bay. I like to

think that they work in my interest, that each breath they draw for me. But perhaps it is they who walk through the local park in the early morning, sensing my senses, listening to my music, thinking my thoughts."

This is what's really happening.

And if you probably know that you have trillions of bacteria—billions and billions, I should say—of bacteria in your stomach, in your mouth. I love that line Wes Nisker has, that there are more living organisms in your mouth right now than there have been humans since the beginning of time. It's true. And without those bacteria, you're gone. You are an ecosystem. That's an interesting way to think of yourself. But that's how it works.

And when Bob talks about just seeing the world in terms of systems, seeing this emptiness of separate self, this law of interdependence or interconnectedness—when you see there's no separate me, then who are you serving? Who is the you that is wanting things better? If you're an ecosystem, then you're representing a whole lot of beings right in here.

When you think about this, as he says there are systems nested in larger systems, nested in larger systems—if you see how it's all held together, we're connected. We're part of many, many systems, both from the micro to the macro. Where are you in that continuum?

When you think about it, the mitochondria or the cells—when a couple of cells go haywire, it affects the whole system, doesn't it? The cells work together and create a functional tissue which is different in your kidneys than it is in your lungs or your heart or any other organ. Your organs are working together in a complex way, in balance, that creates this pattern of life called you.

And you are part of other systems, starting with your family system, but moving beyond and beyond and beyond—from family to tribe to perhaps geographical region to city, state, country, planet, solar system, galaxy, universe. Where does it stop? You draw a line around and say, "This is me and there's life out there." That's just a very narrow perception of things.

Unfortunately, one of the perceptions that we have not seen, or one of the perceptions that we've fallen into misunderstanding, is the perception of humans separate from the rest of life. Because we think in terms of economic systems—at least that's what's driving our worldview. And in those economic systems, growth can be measured in how many units are consumed. The whole understanding of the whole system needing to be in balance to thrive is missed. And so that's where the real dysfunction comes—just not seeing the systems that you are a part of.

So I'd like to just lead us in a little reflection that can perhaps get us in touch with that aspect of systems.

[A brief interlude about adjusting the fan, with the teacher noting how one little shift in the system has a big effect on the body.]

Just close your eyes for a moment. And first, get a sense of all the beings who've come before you, who've given and passed on love and caring and understanding. Might start with the ones that you've received directly—kindness and caring and wisdom and support.

And get in touch with the next generation back, where they've received their own kindness and caring and love and wisdom that was passed on through your benefactors to you. And back generations—all the lineage of caring and kindness and goodness and compassion and wisdom that's been passed through the generations that has come through those beings and poured into you, into your heart, into your mind. You've been the beneficiary of a lineage of caring and consciousness that's continually evolved and is coming through you right now.

And think of all the people now who are touched by your own goodness and caring.

Maybe friends, relatives, children, people in your life to whom you extend that caring and kindness. And how that ripples out. And how it will ripple out through future generations. Who does that belong to? Who does your caring belong to? Who does your good heart or your love belong to? It's just been passed on. And you've been a fortunate recipient. And you can pass it on. You do pass it on.

And now for a moment, reflect on all the beings who have had an impact on you, one way or another, who shaped who you are through experiences, through interactions, and all the beings who you impact in your own unique way.

And now for a moment, move out of just the limiting human realm and reflect on all the beings right inside of you right now who go into keeping your ecosystem in balance. And all the sources of food that go into your mouth through your alimentary canal, digested into your body for nutrients, for fuel, passed on. The whole recycling process of life—it's just life moving through this form, and the essential importance to keep that life in balance. Know all the systems that you're part of. See the systems that you're part of.

This is the first commitment to bringing more consciousness to this planet. You are not separate. You are simply a vehicle for life to express itself. And the more you see that and care about it, the more you naturally are in harmony with it.

So just as we close, since it's time to close, just appreciate the web of life running through you, called you, and that you are connected with all around you. And send some love and appreciation, well-being inside and outside.

May I care about this being and the systems that it is part of. May I keep in mind my connection with all of life and allow the love and kindness to shine through me. And may all beings find happiness and peace.

So, thank you for your attention, and this week I would really encourage you to just kind of play around with seeing yourself as part of something much bigger—on an on-going practice perspective. Life is just moving through you, in you, within you, without you.

Okay, see you next week.

CHAPTER 257

Karma and Sīla as Gaia Practices

Rob Burbea · 40 min

In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea presents the second and third of five transformational commitments for addressing planetary crisis through Buddhist wisdom. Drawing from Bob Doppelt's "From Me to We," he explores how the fundamental teaching of karma—understanding that all actions have consequences—applies not only to personal practice but to our relationship with the Earth itself.

Burbea examines five common misconceptions about cause and effect that prevent us from seeing the long-term impacts of our choices, from interpersonal relationships to global climate patterns. He connects the Buddha's teaching on karma with the urgent need for environmental consciousness, showing how our daily actions—driving, consuming energy, using resources—create ripple effects throughout interconnected systems.

The talk then turns to sīla (ethical conduct) as the foundation for planetary healing. Burbea frames the traditional precepts of right speech, right action, and right livelihood as "Gaia practices"—acts of care for the Earth community. He presents the vision of an "eco-sattva," a bodhisattva committed to ending environmental suffering, and explores how personal integrity and harmlessness extend naturally to planetary stewardship. This integration of classical Buddhist ethics with ecological awareness offers practitioners a framework for dharma practice that serves both personal liberation and planetary healing.

Hi, this is James Barris. I hope you find this talk supports you in your practice. If you'd like to support my teaching, you can use the donate button underneath my picture on DharmaSeed. Your support is greatly appreciated.

This is the third in a series of four talks with the overall title "Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point." We're exploring how to hold the challenging situation we all face living in today's world with consciousness, with clarity of vision, with seeing how we can bring our Dharma practice to the issue of planetary crisis.

I've been deeply impressed with a book given to me a couple of months ago called *From Me to We* by Bob Doppelt – "Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life." The overall theme, as the title suggests, is going from me to we – moving from a feeling of separateness, of disconnection,

of focusing on personal interests and agendas and gains to having a larger view of your place in the world. This shift in consciousness is essential, recognizing that you are not separate from the rest of life.

The more you can see this basic Buddhist principle of anattā or not-self, seeing the emptiness of self through the delusion of separation, the more you are moving towards freedom in the Buddhist teachings. This basic understanding applied to global consciousness is the key shift that could make a difference in the world. If all of us could somehow open to that reality, this would be a very different world. This is what freedom is about.

There's an irony here: we're caught in focusing on "me," thinking that's where happiness lies, yet it's the very thing that leads to disconnection and unhappiness. This shift is not only global but personal on every level, moving us towards greater well-being.

The first principle – what Bob calls these "commitments" – is to see the systems you are part of. This is basically understanding the law of interdependence, that everything is connected to everything else. As John Muir said, "When you try to pick anything out by itself, you see it's hitched to everything else in the universe." The more you can see that you are part of many webs and systems – from your family system to your clan to your city, ethnic group, country, planet, and universe – and recognize all the systems that make up who you are inside, just within your own body, from all the different biological systems working together, you understand this basic principle of how life operates. As George Harrison said, it's operating "within you and without you" – inside of you and all around you. Seeing your place in this web is the underlying premise of recognizing that you affect everything around you.

The second of these principles and commitments is: be accountable for all the consequences of your actions. This is deeply understanding the law of cause and effect, or in Buddhist teachings, the law of karma – that actions have consequences. What you do matters.

We live in a world of conditioning. Everything has a cause and conditioning. The only level of reality that is not conditioned in the Buddhist teachings is nibbāna – that is the unconditioned. But everything else is arising from causes and conditions. To see this, and see your place in it, and to see that what you do matters, can go very deeply in how you relate to yourself in the world, not only in your personal practice but in global consciousness.

In the subtitle, Bob says these commitments are "required to rescue the planet, your organization, and your life." He's not just thinking in terms of "me and the planet," but recognizing that you have an effect on all the organizations you participate in as well. As a systems analyst, Bob sees everything in terms of nesting, interlocking systems. The more you can bring about greater consciousness within yourself, then you affect the systems you have direct connection to, which in turn spread out to affect all the other organizations and connections that your organization or organizations interface with.

As I was reading this book – and it's one of these books that's really thin, which very much appealed to me at first – I discovered it's one of those thin books where every sentence is chock full of not just information, but depth and understanding. There's so much to share about this principle of accountability for all the consequences of your actions.

One profound idea that struck me while reading this is probably familiar to you: actions have consequences—the fundamental law of cause and effect. Yet most of us don't truly live with this understanding, not just on a global level. It's one thing to intellectually grasp how we affect our entire environment, but even on a personal level, if we genuinely understood that "if I do this, this unpleasant consequence will follow," you'd think that knowledge would be enough to deter us from unskillful actions.

Oh yes, if I eat a third dessert, there might be consequences, but it tastes so good right now. Or if I really let loose and vent, getting something off my chest in a way that feels justified in my self-righteousness—it'll be okay, it'll feel good. We rarely pause to consider the repercussions that follow. How many times have we acted this way? How often have we looked back after acting unskillfully and wondered, "What was I thinking?"

If it's challenging enough on a personal level to truly grasp that actions have consequences, how much more difficult it becomes when we exist in such an amorphous understanding of our place within larger systems, unable to see how our actions ripple out beyond ourselves.

This is about recognizing that we have choice and becoming as conscious as possible about the consequences of our choices. If we genuinely seek real well-being, we need to slow down and see what we're actually choosing.

The Buddha encountered this very predicament when deciding whether to teach. As you've probably heard, when he first became enlightened, he hesitated to go out and teach—it seemed like too much trouble. As the suttas tell us, he thought, "It would be a great vexation to me if I were to go out and try to teach the Dharma that I've seen and people would not understand."

But then, encouraged by a deva to survey the world with his psychic powers, he saw that everybody wants to be happy, yet almost everyone engages in precisely the kind of behavior that leads to more suffering. This recognition motivated him to teach, especially when he saw that many people had "but a little dust covering their eyes," and that if he shared what he had discovered and truly awakened them to deeper happiness, they too could realize what he had come to understand.

This isn't merely our current predicament—this is the human condition. Even when we understand cause and effect, we somehow blind ourselves to it. This is precisely why we practice: to see more clearly, to understand deeply that we have choice, and to connect with what we truly want to create in our lives.

Most people probably acknowledge climate change—not everyone, but most can see that we're in a precarious, even frightening situation. I don't want these talks to discourage you, but it seems essential that we come to terms with what's actually here. Yet despite this recognition, there's often a feeling that nothing can be done about it, leading to helplessness, hopelessness—what's the point? But you simply don't know what it might take to bring about change.

What if people truly decided they wanted a healthy and thriving planet? Here's one of my favorite quotes from John Seed, the brilliant deep ecologist:

"Perhaps if you were able to multiply all the efforts of conservationists by a factor of ten or even a hundred, it might not be enough. So there's nothing on the horizon that can help us. You might think, well, what kind of miracle would it take for there to be change? Well, it would be a very simple one, really. All that would be needed would be for human beings to wake up one day different than they were the day before, realizing that this is the end unless we make these changes, and then decide to make the change.

"Now that doesn't seem like a very likely thing to happen. But on the other hand, the whole road that we've traveled is so littered with miracles that it's only our strange kind of modern psyche that refuses to see it. I mean, the miracle of being descended from a fish that chose to leave the water to walk on land? With a pedigree like that, anything is possible."

What's truly needed is simply to wake up one day different from the day before and say, "Oh wow, this world is worth saving. And what we do matters."

Senge discusses five erroneous views about cause and effect that lead to a narrow way of being in the world, views that obscure how cause and effect truly operates. First, we assume one-way causality instead of feedback loops, and thus fail to account for non-linear consequences.

It means that we think in terms of immediate consequences from our actions—that we can see the results of what we do right away. But really, the web of cause and effect is far more subtle than that.

He uses the example of a workplace situation where you want to feel superior to somebody, so you make a little off-the-cuff mild criticism or playful put-down—something that seems relatively minor to you. But somebody else, just as if you were on the receiving end, takes it in and it hurts. They might not say anything, but you've set in motion a kind of energy that will emerge from them. It might not surface right away, but when they're around you, it will come out in little ways that you don't even realize where it's coming from.

You might just think, "Oh well, I was just teasing, playing around, you know, poking or whatever." But sometimes we hit somebody in a sensitive moment or a sensitive place and it hurts. It might be completely off your radar screen, but they're harboring that pain. So they might respond with little reactions or ways that undermine. Then a kind of tension builds between you. Because they're acting in that particular way, it just builds the system between you. And you might have no idea what the original cause was, but there's something that you've set in motion that you're completely unaware of.

This leads to the second erroneous view: we underestimate or ignore inherent time delays between cause and effect. A little seed that you plant might be sprouting the next day, the next week, a month from now, and you don't realize that seed has been festering or waiting to germinate and come back at you. This is just on an interpersonal level.

Third, we respond to symptoms rather than addressing root causes. Maybe that other person says something really nasty a month down the road. You think, "How could she say something like that? That's not really fair!" Maybe it's five times worse than what you originally said. And then you're addressing the symptom—the immediate interaction, what she says—not realizing the root cause had something to do with what you did. So we look at symptoms and try to address them instead of what underlies that whole setup of energy.

Fourth, we focus on daily events rather than long-term patterns. Maybe you try to be really nice to that person and make up to them, saying, "I'm going to really be kind to them today and put an end to this." Except you don't realize how long the conditioning has been going on. So you wonder, "Gee, why don't they get off it? Why are they so nasty to me?" But you're not realizing there's been a pattern that is very hard to change.

And finally, we assume that the whole system will be improved by optimizing its parts. This means thinking that if one person is feeling better—say in this situation, if I'm trying my best and feeling better—then everybody else will feel better too. But really, he makes the point that in a system when there's a balance, if anything is thrown out of balance and some position is improved for one element of that balance, it's usually throwing the whole system out of balance. Even though one element feels a lot better, it will have its consequences in another part of the system.

Now, applying these five errors to the earth—not seeing cause and effect, not seeing that what we do will have an effect over time, and that there are patterns that get set up over time that are deeply conditioned, making that conditioning really hard to change unless you're very aware of it.

He uses the example we're all familiar with: burning coal or oil or gas. We've been doing it for so long and thinking there's no problem with that. Even when we know there's a problem, it's hard to change the conditioning. The same with cutting down forests. We've been building and using land for agriculture for so long that in our consciousness, it's just the way things are. So even though you know intellectually that there's harm, that habit is so hard to change.

I was remembering one of the Buddha's discourses where the Buddha gives this example about how impurities can be thrown in a lake and you won't notice the consequences, or impurities can be burned in the air and you won't notice the consequences because it's such a wide space, or impurities can be thrown into the ground and the earth can absorb them.

That's not so, is it? If you think the Buddha knew everything, he wasn't taking into account our current condition where there's a certain point at which laws that have been going on since the beginning of time don't apply. So it's not seeing how those patterns become outdated and are no longer working.

He makes the point with a few facts: the temperature of the earth is now one degree centigrade higher than it was at pre-industrial levels. It seems that right now we're in the middle of it rising another degree, which is having huge impacts. But it could rise by as much as 6.4 degrees centigrade if it continues for the next century or two.

One degree centigrade is where we are now. Can you imagine 6.4 degrees more?

He presents the striking reality that the effects of our actions remain largely invisible to us—we don't see the effect on cutting down the forests, which account for twenty percent of climate disruption. When forests are destroyed, CO2 is released into the air while the trees that would transform that CO2 into oxygen are gone. The plants that naturally cool the earth are no longer there. We might understand this intellectually, but we don't embody it in our hearts.

The effect of just one degree centigrade higher temperature creates a four percent increase in water vapor. As the atmosphere heats up, more water evaporates, causing intense rainstorms and floods, along with record-breaking high temperatures. When he wrote this book, record highs were outnumbering record lows two to one. Just last week I heard on NPR that there were around 2,000 record highs in the United States over the past month or two, compared to only 40 record lows. This is simply climate cause and effect playing out before our eyes.

In the biosphere, we're witnessing a loss of biodiversity without seeing the cause and effect and long-term consequences of this destruction. It disrupts the delicate balance we depend upon. The fires burning in Colorado right now illustrate this interconnectedness perfectly. Much of the devastation stems from pine beetles that have grown unchecked because warmer weather has affected their proliferation. These proliferating pine beetles are devastating the trees, and when a pine beetle attacks a tree, the tree dies and retains only ten percent of its original moisture content. Each piece affects every other piece—all these dead trees become kindling for any spark that ignites. It's quite sobering to contemplate.

Another way we fail to recognize cause and effect appears in our consumption patterns. Population growth combined with our increased technological capacity to exploit Earth's resources has resulted in an astounding increase in material consumption. Consider this: in 1900, the United States consumed approximately 160 million metric tons of material. By the year 2000, we consumed 3 billion metric tons. The author calculates that if everyone lived as North Americans live, we would need seven additional planets to maintain our current material lifestyle.

So, not to depress you entirely, what is the answer? This is where mindfulness becomes essential. We must honestly examine the effect of our personal actions and consider how we want to be present on this planet.

The author offers a stark example: "Our failure to understand or accept that we're pushing the Earth's climate system beyond its limits every time we turn on the lights, use electronic devices, drive vehicles, or in other ways use or burn fossil fuels or denude the forests is a matter of life and death for billions of people."

Now, how do you live with that awareness without becoming completely overwhelmed by guilt? This remains a genuine question for me. I drove here today. Yesterday I was speaking with Jaime, who rides bicycles everywhere. He's put only 3,000 miles on his car over the past two years because he cycles wherever he goes. At the picnic, I found myself feeling inspired by his example while simultaneously feeling like such a glutton—the ugly American, you know.

But I believe there's a balance between overwhelming guilt and genuine awakening to our effect on the planet. We need not become so immobilized by our choices that we can't appreciate and enjoy life, but we can become more conscious of our decisions.

As I reflected on these facts, particularly on cause and effect, I thought of Jaime and another person in my world who often sits on my shoulder—my friend Julia Butterfly Hill, who has visited here several times. I've told her this directly: "If you knew how much you're with me every time I'm about to throw out extra paper..." She laughed when I said, "It's good, though sometimes I wish you weren't in my head, but there you are. What can I say?"

There's something powerful about cultivating mindfulness in how we move through life, especially when we're doing something that, if we pause and really consider it, prompts us to ask: "Is this helpful or not?"

And to just slow down enough to get in touch with your choice rather than acting on automatic pilot—that makes a difference.

So I would like to read this commitment again and have us get in touch with it. Not with heavy-duty weight where we're burdened by it, but where it becomes a source of real joy. Why don't you close your eyes as I say this. In fact, we'll do the first one and the second one—I didn't do that last week.

First commitment: See the systems you're part of. Really recognize the dharma principle of interdependence. No human is an island. How wonderful that life connects you to everything around you. Take that as a dharma practice. See yourself in the web of interconnectedness.

Second commitment: Be accountable for all the consequences of your actions. Can you take that on as a joyful responsibility? To do the best you can, be accountable for all the consequences of your actions—for yourself, for all the people you influence, and for the planet. You might even imagine what that might look like in the places where you go unconscious. Just bring a little bit more consciousness to the fact that your actions have consequences.

Third commitment: Abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice. So again, another dharma principle. The first one—interdependence, anatta. Second one—law of cause and effect, karma. And this third principle is the foundation of a good, peaceful heart: sila. Right speech, right action, right livelihood—three components of the Eightfold Path that bring about a sense of ease and peace and openness in the heart.

Bob doesn't talk in terms of dharma principles. He doesn't use jargon at all. He mentions Buddhists briefly in the introduction, but very off-handedly. These are universal principles—the law of moral justice, which exists in every spiritual tradition. But the Buddha particularly said: if you want to find peace in your heart, then don't cause suffering.

Now, more than ever, this principle is essential if we're going to change our place on the planet. More than ever, we are asked to have some restraint, to have some self-control, to be cooperative. We're all in this together. Harmony within the system is essential if we're going to maintain balance—harmony, to the extent that harmony is a conscious choice.

Of course, disharmony is part of the world, just like earthquakes and volcanoes and old age, sickness, and death. But as far as moving from "me" to "we," moving from the individual to the common good—if you have an understanding of the law of interdependence and of cause and effect, then you see that the welfare of others is intrinsically connected to your own welfare.

In the Buddhist tradition and other spiritual traditions, it's often put as "do no harm." That's the basic attitude of right speech, action, and livelihood—not causing suffering. The inverse of the golden rule: don't do to others what you would not want them to do to you. But really, on a more positive expression, the notion of ahimsa—not just nonviolence, but the goodness that comes from caring, from acting in a harmless way. The gift of harmlessness.

I was reading an essay by Stephanie Kaza where she talks about an "eco-sattva"—a bodhisattva pledged to end environmental suffering. It really comes down to the basic fact that all people have a right to live on a healthy planet, a planet with as little toxicity and consumption and climate disruption as possible.

But even beyond all people, beyond human needs—not harming others means taking into consideration all the species that make up this delicate balance, caring for the earth, not harming the earth.

Here, I'll just read—the moral obligation to accept limits on human behavior. This is radically different from how we think in terms of "Well, if it's good for me, why not?" And changing from an us-versus-them mentality to... When I was growing up, I remember when they first had the picture of the Earth from outer space, and there was this big poster—maybe some of you remember it from Buckminster Fuller, I think it was—that said, "We're all passengers on spaceship Earth."

Just having that... oh, I'm getting goosebumps remembering this... just having that experience when we first saw that picture of the Earth from outer space. That was such a radically new visual: "Oh, that's our home. It's not what's in it for me. We're all in this together."

So to change that us-versus-them mentality, a moral obligation, he says, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to cut material energy and consumption, to rise above economic self-interest, to place climate and biosphere needs above human economic needs and rights, to rescue the innocent and protect the most vulnerable, to reduce economic inequality, and a moral obligation for restorative justice.

When we do this, both in our own personal life as well as holding that vision for healing the planet, we affect everybody around us. Just like he says, you don't know the effects of your tiniest actions—you don't know the effects of you living with greater integrity in your life.

So again, as he suggests, to take these commitments—just get in touch with this commitment: the third commitment to abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice. That is, as best you can, to live a life of integrity for yourself, for everyone in your life, and for the sake of the planet. If you can see that living by that dharma principle, which I'm sure you're quite familiar with, is an act of caring for the planet, it up-levels your whole motivation to be aligned with your values. "I'm doing this for myself and because I care about the planet." What a joyful responsibility that is.

To really take these basic dharma practices in the context of a larger rippling effect that we have because we care about the planet—it gives a whole other dimension to our dharma practice.

So we just have a few minutes left if anything comes up from any of this that you want to share.

"Hi, I'm Hannah. When you spoke, it reminds me how we have a synchronicity—I kept wanting to say synchronicity—how we are connected, and out of fear we push other things away. But because that connection is intrinsic to who we are, we feel that isolation and loneliness, and it's only when we are fearless and we do connect with that, that we feel a lack of duality and we're able to—which is our essence—we are able to identify with that oneness. Does that make sense?"

"And you're saying that fear gets in the way of feeling that connection?"

"Fear gets in my way of feeling that love and connection. But when I go past the fear and I just stand in it, like if I stay in the suffering and then I transcend it, then I'm able to feel that connection and the fear goes away. And when I'm coming from that, I'm able to be a vehicle of the flow that goes through everything."

"Yeah, lovely. You can just hold on to it. It takes going through the dark places that say, 'Oh no, I can't face that,' to get to that place of real caring. But when we touch the caring and feel connected, then there's a whole different motivation for acting consciously."

"And for me, very much it's beyond the mind, the intellect. I don't have access to it. And I also don't have access to it in the future, in the past. I only have access to it in the present. Right now."

"Yeah. Great. Thank you."

Any other last comments?

Okay, so let's close with a little loving-kindness for ourselves and for the earth. And as you do, seeing the understanding of karma—cause and effect—and sila, acting with integrity, as being gifts to the planet as well as to yourself, because it affects all the systems that you're a part of.

May I feel all the caring inside my heart. And may I share my love well. May I see through fears to open to all the goodness inside. May I help awaken the true nature inside for myself and for all beings. May all appreciate this life...

that we're given and care for the planet.

May our coming here together be of benefit to all beings everywhere.

Next week Lama Palden will be here, and I'll return in a couple of weeks.

Thank you.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 258

Stewardship and Intention as Gaia Practices

Rob Burbea · 39 min

In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea presents the fourth and fifth principles from his series "Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point," drawing from Bob Doppelt's work "From Me to We." He explores the law of trusteeship - understanding that greater power brings greater responsibility to act benevolently - and the law of free will, recognizing that our intentions and choices create our karma and world.

Burbea examines how the Buddha's teaching after his awakening exemplifies compassionate trusteeship, spending 45 years teaching out of care for others' liberation. He discusses the legal duties of trustees - loyalty, prudence, monitoring, and disclosure - applied to our role as planetary stewards. The talk addresses practical obstacles to change, including confirmation bias and stages of transformation from disinterest through deliberation to active engagement.

Connecting Buddhist principles of interdependence, karma, and ethical conduct (sīla) to ecological consciousness, Burbea invites listeners to see themselves as trustees of the living earth. He emphasizes that understanding "we don't own anything" - neither thoughts, emotions, nor planetary resources - can shift us from individual to collective responsibility. This teaching bridges traditional dharma with urgent contemporary environmental concerns, offering a framework for conscious response to climate change.

This is the third talk in this series, which I've been calling Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point. I'm inspired by this book by Bob Doppelt, *From Me to We*, and also from the current issue of *Inquiring Mind*, an excellent issue on ecology, deep ecology and concern for the environment.

This book is written by Bob, who is a systems change expert and also a Dharma student, as well as something of an expert on climate change. He teaches up in Oregon at Willamette University and University of Oregon, and has an organization that he heads called the Resource Innovation Group.

He wrote this book as a follow-up to a book he wrote a few years ago on sustainability, where he realized that although he felt good about the book that he wrote, it wasn't clear as to what exactly would be needed to shift our consciousness—what will be needed to shift our consciousness as more and more climate change affects us all, as it already is, and as it seems like it will be continuing in that direction.

What he did was take five Dharma principles, but he doesn't talk in terms of the Dharma. It's very mainstream. He did such a beautiful job in explaining these principles in a non-jargon, non-Buddhist way. Very skillful, as he is an instructor, a teacher, a college professor.

We've taken these five principles—we've gone through three of them so far—each of them based on a natural law. That is another way of saying the Dharma. One aspect of Dharma principles that would lead to a commitment to shift one's consciousness.

So far, the three laws leading to the three commitments that we've covered:

First, the law of interdependence, which means that we are all connected. This is another way of saying emptiness—the emptiness of a separate self—that we are all connected and part of a system much larger than us. These are all supporting this shift of consciousness from me, the individual way of seeing things, to realize that we're part of something much bigger and that we need to care for it. When we can see that other perspective, we're more likely to care for it in a meaningful way.

So that law of interdependence—understanding that we are part of something much larger than our separate self—leads to the first commitment: to see the ecological, social, and economic systems of which you are a part. See your part in the greater systems.

Second, the law of cause and effect—the law of karma. Actions have consequences, which leads to the second commitment: be accountable for all the consequences of your actions and the consequences on those systems.

This is not going to be new to you, but it's seeing ecology in this perspective—to apply these natural laws, which are part of Dharma practice, to a global consciousness. I find it really quite brilliant the way he laid it out.

Third, the law of moral justice. Once you understand that you're part of something larger, then you want to, as you become more conscious, see that happiness lies in non-harming. That is the basis for the Eightfold Path: sila, samadhi, and panna. Sila—right or wise speech, action, and livelihood—that's the basis for the training the mind and the heart and wisdom to arise. The commitment that would come out of that is to abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice, that that is where true happiness lies. To just lead an ethical life will start you making wiser choices in your life, especially as you see more that you're part of a larger system.

This leads us to the fourth commitment, based on what he calls the law of trusteeship. Once you...

Once you see that you're part of a bigger system and understand cause and effect—that actions have consequences—and you are living with integrity and an ethical life, then you begin to understand your place in that system.

If you have greater power, if you have the capacity to influence everything around you, that naturally gives rise to a compassionate, caring stance. There is a kind of universal moral principle that the more power one has over others, the greater is the duty to use that power benevolently.

This represents a real leap for most people who have power. This would be a very different world if those who had power realized that it is both their responsibility and a joy to use that power benevolently. But once you are really aligned with the Dharma, you see—oh, of course! How could I want to harm another if I've got the power to relieve suffering? Then it behooves me to do what I can to be benevolent.

So Henderson calls this the law of trusteeship. It's really about expressing your caring and compassion. The basic law of compassion being the natural expression of a wise heart. This is what motivated the Buddha to teach after he was awakened.

"Oh, what do I do now?" And I think I mentioned this here before recently—pardon the redundancy if I have—but there he was, awakened, enlightened, asking, "Oh, wow, well, what do I do now?" At first he wasn't so excited about teaching because he said, "Oh, what if I try to communicate what I've learned and people don't get it? It would be a vexation to me." Those are the words in the discourse. Then he saw that yes, that's what he needed to do, because it's possible for others to wake up. And so he spent the next forty-five years of his life teaching out of compassion.

This law of trusteeship is really also based on the understanding that you don't really own anything on this planet. Somebody says, "Oh, I own this land." In their minds, they do. And relatively, "Oh, I have the deed." But nobody owns land, truly. Nobody owns all the resources on the earth. They might have power and a legal right to say what happens to those resources for a while, but those resources in a world of interconnectedness belong to us all.

As Ram Dass says, we're just accountants in the firm. The wealth or the material that comes through us is moving through us. When you really see the idea of no ownership—which in Dharma practice means you don't own your thoughts (what a relief!), you don't own your emotions (thank goodness!), they're just coming through you, you don't own this body (it has its own laws), you don't own anything—to see on a macro level, we don't own the earth. We're part of the earth. We're part of an ecosystem, one very influential part, but the earth is home to everything that lives on it.

This shifts our consciousness to being trustees, because we have a lot of power and affect what goes on here to an inordinate extent, as never before in history. I was reading—oh, maybe it's in Henderson's book, or maybe it's an article I was reading recently—but some are calling this the Anthropocene Age. You know, the Pleistocene and the Mesozoic and all of those different ages in the history of the planet. This is the first time that one species is the major influence of changes on the planet.

Which has its downside, doesn't it? But if we see ourselves as trustees, then it has an upside if we can wake up in time.

I'm remembering, as I was putting down these thoughts, seeing one of my favorite performers, a musician named Andreas Vollenweider. Anybody know Vollenweider's music? He's the Swiss harpist who writes the most amazing, beautiful music. He was giving a concert in the Greek Theater a number of years ago—a really high guy. And he said something that still touches me when I think about it.

This was around 2003, 2004, during the Iraq War when things were getting intense. And he pleaded with us, saying, "You here in America, we look to you—you're a very important part of our family. You're our big brother in the best sense of the word. And as an elder, as a stronger, more powerful brother, we look to you for support and understanding so you can inspire and guide and lead us to a better world."

I remember it was a fabulous concert, but that was the most memorable moment. Tears were streaming down my face and many others'. It was this heartfelt plea: Look at your place. Look at your place in this world—and beyond just us in this country, but for all humankind, to see our place in the bigger world.

There's what Julia Butterfly Hill calls "a joyful responsibility" once you see the effect you have, that you can really make a difference.

So here we are, trustees. And what Bob does brilliantly in this fourth commitment is examine what being a trustee entails in our society. He looked at all the legal documents of trusteeship and discovered certain duties that come with being a trustee. He simply applied those duties, those obligations, to being trustees for this planet—which in the fullest sense is our living trust. This is our living trust. It's alive, and this is the trust. To see ourselves as trustees means following the basic guidelines of any trustee.

Here are some of those guidelines. First, the duty of loyalty. When one is entrusted with an estate or resources, the duty of loyalty means we act in the best interests of the beneficiaries. In this context, the beneficiaries are all the other beings on the planet and all the generations to come, as well as the human race itself. We all benefit from good trusteeship.

So we act in the best interests of the beneficiaries, which means being completely fair, with no favoritism. If you're dividing an estate, you want to do it as fairly and impartially as possible. A trustee shouldn't appropriate assets for private gain. While a trustee should be compensated for managing a trust, one of the duties is that there be equitable distribution of compensation for the efforts of being a trustee.

Here's where I'll share some rather striking facts about trusteeship, particularly in the US and UK. The top 1% of U.S. earners receive 23% of the nation's total income—almost triple the 8% share they held in 1980. The top 1% also own over 34% of all privately held wealth. This was in 2007; it's probably jumped since then. The top 20% of the population own 85% of the wealth, while the remaining 80% own just 15%.

In the UK, the richest 10% of the population are more than 100 times wealthier than the poorest 10%. The US, with less than 5% of the world's population, holds about 25% of total global wealth. Europe, with about 11% of the world's population, owns about 32% of the total wealth. So 16% of the world's population owns 57% of the total wealth. Less than 1% of the global adult population owns more than a third of the total global household wealth.

Equitable distribution of compensation is a duty. Another aspect of the duty of loyalty as a trustee is to become aware and accept responsibility—not just to make money, but to see the planet, the climate, and the biosphere as public goods, not private assets.

One last duty of loyalty: to treat all beneficiaries fairly. Bob makes the case that in certain countries where there is equitable distribution of assets—namely Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, which have very high standards of living—they have far fewer health and social problems compared to the US and UK. When people are treated fairly, society as a whole is better off. This is just common sense, but we have to get it into our consciousness.

The Buddha, in one discourse, talks about the duties of a king. He says that one of the first duties is to ensure that the poorest of the land are given their needs and necessities. Because if they're not, and there's a big discrepancy between poor and rich, then there will be a disgruntled segment of the population which will have an uprising, causing war and chaos in the land. So he spells it out: A good king, a wise king who doesn't want chaos in the land, distributes the assets in a way that everybody benefits.

So that's trusteeship—the duty of loyalty. Another duty is the duty of prudence: a trustee must discharge duties with care, skill, and prudence.

That means a trustee should avoid risky investments, should acquire knowledge and skills needed to effectively act as responsible trustees and educate themselves, and understand how the living trust works and their responsibilities and how to perform them.

In terms of global trusteeship, it means a duty to abandon the idea of continuous economic growth, that economic growth is what we're based on, is what wins. We need to redesign the consumer paradigm instead of take it, make it, and waste it, to have an understanding of how assets are limited and there's a recycling that's needed, to use resources sustainably, to follow the precautionary principle, which means that the burden of proof is on corporations not to harm rather than on the public to prove that it will harm. And also to prepare for and adapt to climate disruption. To really be seeing in the big picture where this is leading and to have preparation for it, and a duty to monitor and disclose when things are getting out of whack.

So he asks, do you see yourself as a trustee? And before we look at this commitment, I want to just share with you his words: "Do you see yourself as a trustee of the living trust that is the earth? To what extent do you strive to perform your duty of loyalty, duty of prudence, duty to monitor, duty to disclose? Once you understand that what humans do today will determine the health and well-being of everything on the planet, you must acknowledge that we're trustees of the living trust that is the earth."

So here's the commitment, and I'll just put it out to you. If you want to, I invite you to go inside and see if this is something that you could take in and take to heart. Realizing that we need to make the shift from me to we: the commitment to acknowledge your trustee obligations and take responsibility for the continuation of all life on this planet. And as he says, there's a power in taking this commitment inside. You're a trustee on this planet. And it needs you.

Now we get to the fifth commitment which is based on the dharma principle that what we do matters. That basically we have a choice. What he calls the law of free will. And this is really another way of saying that we are creating our karma in every moment. The Buddha said, through intention, we are creating our world. We are what we think; with our thoughts, we make the world. And to really see that you have a choice, the law of free will, breaking free from the false beliefs that control your life and your organization, and to realize you can choose your own destiny. That what you choose matters. And how you participate in this unfolding over the next few years has a very powerful rippling effect.

And he talks about what gets in the way of choosing to participate wholeheartedly as trustees. Even if you know the score, it's not easy to make this commitment. And as I was reading the chapter, I must say there were all kinds of feelings that came to me where I know, and I've been educating myself a bit on this score, and there's a part that is saying, can I really make a difference? What will it take to make a difference? And it depends what day it is for me between saying, what else is there to do? And what can I do? Can you relate to that? And that choice point is really the one to keep alive and see you are choosing one way or another, you're choosing.

And he talks about the things that get in the way, and how the process of self-change happens. First of all, he talks about what's called the confirmation bias. And I've talked about this as well in neuroscience, that once you have a belief, your brain looks to everything that will confirm that belief. And if your belief is, "What's the point? Forget it. Who are we kidding?" Then you will tune into all the information that will corroborate that belief. And you might be aware of the other stuff, but you'll kind of tune it out.

And there's actually a lot of very inspiring information out there. We've never been as conscious as well as we've never been as unconscious in some ways in our consciousness, that can inspire. And once you decide to move towards choosing your destiny and choosing to be a trustee for the earth, then you start to notice all of these inspiring dimensions and you're in the process of change.

And he talks about the process of change. I thought this is really fascinating. There are different stages of change, particularly around this subject of climate change and how the planet is unfolding. The first stage, the disinterested stage, where it

Here are the four expressions within this disinterested stage. First is reluctance—there's too much inertia. "Oh, I'm comfortable where I am. Yes, it's a problem, but it would just be too much to try to make a difference." Second is the rebellion reaction, where you have a high investment in the dysfunction: "What do you mean there's climate change?" Third is resignation, where you feel overwhelmed and lack confidence that any change can happen. And fourth is rationalization: "Oh, it's not my problem. I'm not personally affected, so it's okay."

These overlap but are distinct. Reluctance is inertia and comfort. Rebellion means you're invested in not believing. Resignation feels like too much. And rationalization declares it's not your problem at all.

What changes you, what gets you out of this disinterested stage—which perhaps comes to all of us—is first a disturbance, like a catastrophe that wakes you up. If you're living in Colorado, maybe experiencing all the fires, or Hurricane Katrina, or tsunamis,

you start connecting the dots. "Oh my goodness." This is just like the Buddha saying that suffering is what awakens us. There needs to be enough disturbance to shake us out of our complacency.

That's often how we move out of this disinterested stage: through disturbance, awareness building—getting information that challenges our beliefs—seeing that small steps feel good, and having supportive relationships. You're not doing this alone.

If you can move out of the disinterested stage, you enter the deliberation stage of change, where you say, "Okay, I get it. I think I want to be part of more consciousness on this planet in an active way," but you're still deliberating. To move from deliberation, goal setting helps. You've got to weigh the pros and cons, weighing the information. We need to see two upsides for every downside in order to make change. If it's equal, inertia wins out. "Well, I've been doing it this way. I can go along." But if you see the upsides far outweigh the downsides, you're motivated to change.

Then you move to the design stage, where you clearly understand, "I'm going to change"—changing to being an active trustee. In the design stage, you have a plan that works for you with a limited number of clear, workable goals. You don't want to overwhelm yourself.

Next comes the doing stage, where you say, "Oh, I am changing." You hold yourself differently. You have a positive attitude about shifting your identity. Instead of being discouraged by how far there is to go, you're inspired. You start looking for the good feelings and successes that come with that.

Finally, you move to the defending stage, where you're really going from me to we. You're an active trustee, and you realize, "I have changed, or I'm in the process of changing more and more," but that's your identity, and you want to invite others to join you.

He says there are three keys to change: sufficient tension or dissonance between your life and the facts—"Oh my goodness, something's got to give here"—sufficient confidence to do what's necessary to reduce this dissonance between how things are and how you'd like them to be, and seeing that the advantages of change far outweigh the disadvantages.

Given that, here's the fifth commitment, and I invite you once again to take this based on the law of free will: to break free from the false beliefs that control your life and any organization you're part of, to realize you can choose your own destiny, and to choose that destiny as a trustee of the planet.

Just wear that for a moment. I have a choice and what I do matters. What I do matters not only to me, but to everyone I am in contact with. Whatever stage you happen to be in, feel okay about being right where you are and know that you're heading in that healthy, benevolent direction from me to we.

I know this isn't your typical dharma talk, but it feels so inspiring and moving that I appreciate your staying with it.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/7). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

I would invite us all to hold these seeds of commitment in our consciousness and to keep allowing them to joyfully sprout in our hearts. I'm not saying I have all the answers, and I'm not claiming I'm at that defending stage. I can do my part, but I want to be more than just talking about it. We really are all in this together.

I know some of you have been very active and committed in your love of the planet and caring for it, and you've inspired me. We all need to inspire each other. That's the spirit I'm sharing from.

We have a few minutes for comments and reflections. Andrew shared this morning that he heard on NPR about the drought in the central part of the country—we haven't had a drought like this since the 1930s, around the time of the Dust Bowl. Usually droughts are in smaller areas here or there while other places get rain, but this huge expanse of land experiencing such drought simultaneously. We're at the tipping point, with more and more signs appearing.

One person shared that she's recently found joy in cooking, making things she used to buy in packages—yogurt, cookies, croutons. It has slowed her down and brought all these other benefits too. That's the beauty of finding joy in small things and thinking, "This is pretty cool."

When asked about deep ecology, I understand it as Joanna Macy and John Seed describe it—not just seeing environmental problems as things that need fixing through recycling and small actions, but recognizing that we are part of a larger system. We see the interconnectedness of things, where we are not separate from the whole, both subject and object, understanding our part in the bigger picture. It's not just about what I can do to make things better "out there," but recognizing that we are the system affecting everything else, all interconnected.

Jenny shared a beautiful example about being asked to care for a chicken. She studies sustainable agriculture but found herself resisting the commitment—having to wake up five minutes earlier to feed the chicken, let her out, watch her. She discovered those same resistances I mentioned, even for this small action. But committing to this little act of caring for this chicken has been profound, connecting her to this being that provides eggs and is part of her little ecosystem. It has connected her to the food system in a larger way and to compassion for animals that give us life through food. It was profound to move through those resistances and make that commitment.

This gives me the opportunity to address something I promised someone who emailed me—a fellow named Carl from San Diego who has been listening to these talks. Carl pointed out that I left out one important piece when discussing carbon footprint problems: the extent of our animal-based diet has a huge impact. I was amazed to learn that an estimated 51% of greenhouse gases come from the livestock industry.

The main sources of greenhouse gases from animal agriculture are fourfold. First, deforestation of the rainforests to grow feed for livestock, which contributes hugely to releasing CO2 instead of converting it to oxygen. Second, methane from manure waste—and methane is seventy-two times more potent as a global warming gas than CO2. Third, the refrigeration and transport of meat around the world. And fourth, the raising, processing, and slaughtering of the animals, which uses massive amounts of water and other resources.

Fifty-one percent. That's just amazing.

So our food choices have a huge impact. I'm not here to say you've got to change your diet, but you might just consider that each time you choose a veggie option instead of a meat one, you're really contributing to the wellbeing of the planet. It's a nice way to look at it instead of feeling guilty. You know, if you eat fish or whatever you eat, you can choose to contribute in a meaningful way.

So I hope we all keep each other awake as we go through these times as consciously as possible.

Let's close with a short loving-kindness meditation. I thank you for your attention.

First, reflect that you are part of a larger system and that your actions matter—your life of integrity matters, your compassion matters—and that you can choose your place in this consciously. Let yourself feel the wholesomeness of choosing to care for yourself and the planet, sending kindness toward yourself and to all beings.

May all be free of suffering. May all know wellbeing. May all wake up to their true nature. And may our coming here together be for the benefit of all beings.

Including the earth in that—may the earth feel our love and our care and be healthy and thriving. May all beings and the earth be at peace and at ease and free of suffering.

Thank you. See you in a month.

CHAPTER 259

Practice & Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 49 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses one of our time's greatest challenges by exploring how Buddhist practice can support us in meeting climate change with wisdom and skillful action. Drawing on the teachings of Ajahn Chah and other masters, he examines how meditation practice serves as preparation for 'when the passions touch the heart' - offering three essential dimensions: refuge, resilience, and response.*
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> *Burbea discusses the Buddha's teaching on the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) as both external supports and inner resources, emphasizing how samādhi practice helps us discern between the fundamental awareness of citta and the activities of mind. He explores the principle of nekkama (renunciation/simplification) as both a meditation technique and lifestyle practice essential for our times. The talk weaves together classical teachings with contemporary urgency, showing how mindfulness of breathing and ethical conduct create the stability needed to respond rather than react to overwhelming global challenges.*
>
> *This teaching offers both newcomers and experienced practitioners practical guidance on developing inner refuge and resilience while maintaining the capacity for compassionate, wise action in the face of planetary crisis. Burbea's integration of traditional Buddhist wisdom with ecological awareness provides a contemplative framework for engaging with climate change from a place of gathered awareness rather than overwhelm.*

A great sense of honor and privilege to come together in this way and have a dedicated space for practice. We're very fortunate to be able to take the time out of our lives to do this, to contemplate the Dharma and cultivate the Dharma. It can be a real refuge for us.

One of the things that a teacher who had a great influence in my life, Ajahn Chah, whom I met first in the UK and then in Thailand, used to say was: this practice is preparation. Preparation for when the passions touch the heart. In that moment, do we react and generate more suffering and complexity, either for ourselves or in the world around us, or can we pause and reflect and apply this training? Moments of gathering, moments of mindfulness, moments of wise reflection.

We practice in these containers that we have built together—the container of the retreat and the retreat place—so that we can have the quiet and the support to reflect inwardly and practice with just the simplicity of being with the day as it unfolds. Very

simple things: feeling tired or feeling a bit dislocated, wanting to be here, not wanting to be here, feeling happy, not so happy. All the different kinds of changing moods—to see them come and go and to be able to apply this training of moments of being with the breath, being with the body, being with the reality of the moment and not being so distracted. Not moving out of our habits, particularly when it's uncomfortable and we just shift.

This is a training to be able to withstand impingement from the world around us and from our own internal psychodynamic material—whatever arises—to withstand that without defaulting to patterns of distraction, and through that building some capacity to be more fully here.

When we arrived yesterday at IMS, Kittisaro and I came from Tennessee. We traveled from Atlanta, flew to Boston, and were then driven here. When we woke up this morning, there was a note on the notice board from someone who hoped that during this retreat we would reflect on or give some perspective on practice and climate change.

This is probably one of the biggest issues that we're in the midst of: very compelling, very impactful, very serious, very threatening, very alarming. We practice to be with the reality of life, not to live in some kind of cloud that we float off on, but to actually be more able to be here and meet the moment—meet whatever arises within ourselves and in the world around us. We're not separating out from the world in this practice, but we're learning to have capacity so we can meet the world.

Rather than when we think of something like this, or we read more and more, see more and more, experience more and more what's happening to our earth, it can be very activating for us. It brings up a lot of very strong feelings and reactions, and can activate deeper, sometimes quite primitive and early patterning to do with fear and overwhelm. That can really dislocate us from a sense of deeper sanity and well-being. It's very powerful—things that hit us. Like Ajahn Chah said, when things hit that are very strong, they activate us.

But we are here to practice, to learn that there are alternative ways of responding, that there are alternative resources within this heart and mind that we can draw from, that can resource us, that can support us in the face of whatever we might face, both personally and collectively.

One of the things that Einstein said is that we can't solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it. There has to be a shift somehow when we approach things in life. When we approach difficult things from the same mindset, we tend to just

go round and round and round. Sometimes it's these shifts that can happen that bring about a shift in response that can change the whole picture and allow for something quantum-like to happen—some kind of shift that we didn't even know was possible because we've shifted our mindset.

Our usual conditioned mindset has been very much—our human consciousness has been very conditioned by this mind that objectifies, that goes out, this thinking mind. It's called mano-vijñāna in the Buddhist map of the mind: the mind, the vijñāna, the consciousness that goes out to name things. It's a very important aspect of our consciousness, of our awareness, of our mind. It helps us to differentiate and to name and to know and to be able to discern difference.

But it tends to become a way that we become addictively filtering our experience of life just through this primary capacity to objectify the world, and in the process of doing that, create this sense of separation—me and the other, whatever that other is. When there's that separateness, even at a subtle level or not so subtle level, then there's a whole dynamic between me and the other: liking, disliking, wanting, not wanting, fear, lust. It's quite complex within that field between me and the other.

So this mind that's constantly creating an object—when we create the objects of, say, the earth and others around us—we can sometimes in that process lose the reality, the deeper reality of awareness, this deeper dimension of the mind-heart which is aware, which is actually sensitive to and knows the reality of interconnection. That there is no ultimate other; we're part of each other.

The breath that I take in is the carbon dioxide the trees give out. The oxygen that the trees give out allows me to breathe. The food I take is from the earth. Every day is an affirmation that we're not apart from what we experience or see or name or experience through our senses as other than us, different than us. We're actually part of a whole unified web of life.

This is the Dharma: to really know that, not just intellectually—maybe we start there—but to really begin to feel that and ultimately to move from that reality. So to shift—this practice is helping us shift, not to judge how we are or to put down, but just to notice there's another dimension that we can awaken to. We're awakening out of the obsessive objectifying mind that generates this feeling of separative consciousness that's connected with brilliance and creativity but is also connected with suffering and discontent. We're awakening into a deeper dimension. This practice is helping us to awaken into the reality of the seamlessness of the whole. This is a quantum shift.

So in this practice, when we're meeting whatever it is, whatever intensity—whether it's this very big picture that we're now in the midst of and will be for the rest of our lives, the changes happening due to the extreme release of carbon into the atmosphere and the effects of that, or whether it's in our personal life in smaller ways—whenever we meet intensity or difficulty or challenge, this practice does have a lot to offer.

I'd like to talk about three ways of thinking about what this practice can offer us, connected with what we've been doing today.

This practice offers us a whole range of skills and benefits. Let me explore three dimensions: refuge, resilience, and response.

As we begin to practice, we develop familiarity with refuge—a place, a way of abiding that is sustaining and nourishing, that can reorient us. The entry into the Buddhist path begins with this sense of orientation around refuge. Classically, we take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Initially this may seem like some formula that doesn't have much immediate resonance for us. But as we deepen the practice, these three dimensions reveal themselves as aspects of our own being.

At first they appear external to us. The Buddha as a historical, brilliant teacher who had insight into radical awakening and understanding—insights we're still contemplating two and a half thousand years later. He taught for forty years, challenging the status quo of his time as a revolutionary teacher who split the atom of consciousness and awakened. His resonance reaches us still today.

We can think of the Buddha historically, archetypally, or as those beings who inspire us. When I reflect on our years living and working in South Africa, I think of someone like Nelson Mandela, whose life inspired a whole country. I think of my grandmother, who was extraordinarily sweet and had all the time in the world. If I had come home saying, "Nan, I've just murdered someone," she would have said, "Well, never mind dear, have a cup of tea and we'll talk about it." Whatever you brought to her doorstep was workable—someone who inspires us. She wasn't a Buddha, perhaps, but she was a bodhisattva: someone with compassion, love, and kindness.

I think of our dog Jack, who lived with us for fifteen years as we established our small hermitage on the border of Lesotho. The local Zulus called him "Numsan"—"the man"—because he was such a presence. Retreatants would arrive with stress and difficulties, and he would simply move among them with tremendous love. During practice, he would sit on his cushion, and when we chanted—especially Kuan Yin chants—he

would throw himself on his back with legs in the air, making everyone laugh. If he didn't like the Dharma talk, he would get up, shake his collar, and walk out. He was an excellent teacher.

These beings, in whatever forms they come, inspire us. They are the energy that keeps us going.

The Dharma encompasses both the classical teachings—profound, brilliant, well-worn teachings practiced across generations—and the immediate Dharma of everything around us. I wouldn't have known how to practice samadhi, how to return to breath and body, if someone hadn't taught me. They could teach because they had received the teaching themselves—this entire lineage of Dharma teachings that inspire us.

More immediately, everything expresses itself according to Dharma. Nothing exists apart from Dharma nature. Everything teaches us: the trees, the moods of the heart, different people, the various unfoldings in the world. All of it becomes something we can contemplate and be with.

In Sangha, we discover that we can practice. We're not merely leaves in the wind. Whatever arises, we can practice. We can apply mindfulness, reflect wisely, discern clearly, and respond rather than react.

This refuge is an inner orientation we can align with again and again in each present moment. We practice returning, so that when life strikes in a big way or things happen, we know how to come back. We have refuge—an inner refuge not dependent on circumstances around us.

The Buddha also taught the refuge of ethics, of knowing how to align ourselves—as we reflected last night before entering retreat on the five great gifts.

Buddha called the five precepts the great gifts that offer freedom from oppression, freedom from fear, internally and externally. This ethical base is not dependent on external social or religious morals. In fact, often social and religious so-called morals are in direct conflict with an internal ethic. When that conflict arises and there's manipulation of behavior, if we don't have an internal ethic, we can find ourselves getting caught up in unwholesome actions. The karma from that can be very difficult.

To have this inner compass is what the Buddha called the *hiri* and *ottappa* - the conscience that can feel and is sensitive to when we move out of alignment with harmony with the Dharma. When we do or say something that was perhaps not skillful, we can feel that. There's a sensation: that didn't really go very well. We feel that and realign

ourselves from that information without creating the sense of me as a guilty or bad person. It's much more dispassionate than that. That wasn't very skillful. That speech was hurtful, or that action was colored and tainted and manipulative in some way. I feel that and it informs me to be more careful.

The *ottappa* is having a sense of wholesome fear. If the mind suddenly gets activated into violence and you feel like you want to do something really outrageous - you're filled with hatred and want to act out of that - then something, when the conscience is working in a purified state, will arise like an internal red light and say, "That's not good. That's damaging. It's going to damage you, damage someone else. Just restrain. Hold back. Wait. Be patient."

The Buddha said these are the guardians of the world - these inner capacities for conscience. This is our internal ethic, and it becomes an internal compass for us, something we can rely on. It's very important in our world when there are so many influences, so many ways that human consciousness is hijacked and distorted and pushed into unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind.

When Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest for many years as she stood for freedom in Burma, one of the things she said was that however much the state machinery oppresses, courage arises again and again. It can never destroy this inner courage, this inner strength, because this is the nature of the deepest heart. This is our deeper nature. It has courage. It's fearless. Yes, we can feel fear, we can feel the loss of courage, but we can return and know our refuge and know that there is capacity. It's been demonstrated by many inspiring people through time facing all sorts of different difficulties within society.

This practice of resilience is part of what we've been doing today - learning in a very simple way to gather, to know that when there is this capacity for *samadhi*, for gathering, there is a strengthening. From the very simple activity of moments of awareness, moments of mindfulness, moments of just being with one breath at a time, gradually there is this unification that starts to happen.

The gathering of the body starts to be illuminated with the energy of the mind. As the mind - this mental energy that's so fickle - starts to steady on the slow rhythm of the body, the mind starts to calm and the body starts to illuminate and digest some of the stress that it carries. Some of the undigested emotional material that is carried at the felt sense level starts to be digested by this *samadhi*, this gathering, and clears out our bodily experience energetically.

Then the mind begins - this mental faculty that's untrained and gets very colored by whatever state we experience - to steady and calm on the rhythm of the body. This is a unification, a steadiness. It's very pleasant, very pleasing as this is developed. It becomes an abiding that we can cultivate and return to - this inner steadiness, this singleness of focus in the moment.

This is a great skill to practice little by little, planting the seeds so that whatever arises in the field of our experience, when it hits the mind in that moment, hits the heart, touches the body, we feel it as sensitive beings. We can feel the effect of that. But then there's a moment: do we react? Do we act out of our activation and our patterning? Or can we digest? Can we pause? Can we take a breath? Maybe even one moment of taking a mindful breath may be the difference between creating heaven and hell in that moment.

One great Thai meditation master, Ajahn Tate, said that this practice is to discern the difference between mind and the activity of mind.

This is to discern between the *citta*, the awareness—the fundamental nature of mind that is aware. It has this knowing quality; it's untainted, luminous, reflective, discerning, clear. To know the difference between this undifferentiated awareness, this presence, and the activity—the mental activity, the movement of what's coming and going—to know the difference, to discern, and to be able to awaken into and recognize and touch, through the simple practice of returning one breath at a time, that which is unmoving, that which is aware, just present as a refuge, as a reference, as a point of well-being in the midst of whatever is happening.

When we think of something like climate change—we're in that reality now—it activates so many strong, destabilizing feelings: dread and fear and outrage, denial, dissociation, anxiety, all of these affects. And if we don't know the difference between that which can know what is arising but not be overwhelmed by what is arising, if we don't know this refuge, this place of returning, this practice, then we can just completely freak out and lose any capacity to respond from a place of clarity.

We're living at a time—we've always lived it, the world's always been unstable—but whatever we've understood as stable is really in question. That is something we can't rely on in perhaps the ways we have done in our world. We're living in circumstances where the chances and the likelihood of whatever's been stable for us, whatever we've relied on, is increasingly becoming unstable. So it's frightening, it's difficult.

Ajahn Chah would always say that if we look for certainty in the uncertain, then we're bound to suffer. We have created a culture and society where we've really tried to create certainty, and yet reality is uncertain—whether it's the reality of our life or our relationships or our economic status or our work or even our moods. But that's one thing. To even begin to take on board the instability of the elements that we're now experiencing—that's a whole other realm, a whole other heightened intensity.

So it means we have to really take this seriously in terms of our practice, to really take seriously and realize it's important that we use this time well, these times that we have to gather, to sow the seeds through this moment-by-moment simple practice that will support well-being, so whatever arises, we can meet it.

There's a poem you must know, "The Guest House" by Rumi: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival—a joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor." I don't remember the lines exactly, but you get my drift—"Meet them at the door laughing." Well, it's not always easy to laugh at what we meet, what we might meet and what we are meeting. It's not easy, but this is an aspect of the practice: to know that actually, whatever is arising, there's still this dimension that we can awaken to that is okay.

Or as one of our teachers from Sri Lanka, Godwin Samararatna—I find it difficult to pronounce—would say: "Okay, even when it's not okay." It's not okay, but we can be okay because we know how to return. Even within this heart, this unified heart, it's blissful. It's the place that the Buddha said is more pleasurable than any sense pleasure.

This practice sows the seeds for profound joy. Gathered mind and heart, focused, absorbed, connected, rooted, steadied—it's a very pleasant abiding. It's a very healing abiding. So it's worth cultivating, and it's also an abiding that helps to strengthen us. So that gathered mind that's infused with steadiness, with this practice, when that is turned to whatever it's turned to, whatever touches us, then it's a very different experience than when we're touched by fear or dread and then just get overwhelmed and washed away and reactive.

So it's not easy. This isn't an easy practice. In fact, another great Thai meditation master who's considered a great master of *samadhi*, Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, would make an analogy. He said this path, this path of awakening, is a bit like you're building a bridge from one shore to another. It's just an analogy—in some ways the shore that we're on and the shore that we're going to is always here. But it's just an analogy that we're moving; this path is a movement. It's a movement, a transformative process from

a place of suffering and constriction and reactivity and stress, transformed into gatheredness, wise reflection, engaging whatever's presenting itself rather than being caught in a reactive experience.

So this is like building a bridge from one shore to another, and that bridge has to have supports. You build a support on the near bank and on the far bank, and those supports you can plunge down into the earth. You can see the earth; you can plunge those supports. But then that middle support—you've got to plunge it down through a fast-flowing river. That's difficult to do. I mean, I'm not an engineer, but I can imagine that would be more complicated.

And it's in the same way with this path, this transformative path that we're practicing. The near bank is the cultivation of ethics, *sila*, refuge—all of these wholesome qualities. And then that far bank is the wisdom aspect, that which can wisely reflect and notice things are changing, notice "It's like this in this moment. What is my relationship to how it is?" Can adjust, can apply inquiry. But those, he said, in some ways are accessible to us and in some ways easier.

Perhaps that's maybe relatively so. But the middle pillar, he made the analogy to this practice of samadhi, of gathering, which is in a way more patient and challenging work because of the fickle nature of the mind. It's always slipping away because of the momentum of our patterns. The patterns and habits are so powerful that when we sit here we just feel the momentum of that, always pulling. The mind is always like the asavas, always flooding out into our thinking, into our stories, into our distractions, into our wanting not to be here, into our wanting to be somewhere else, whatever it is.

And so plunging and encouraging and returning again and again to the very simple practice of moments of just being here with something that seems to be pretty boring perhaps at first—like one breath—that is challenging. That is not an easy thing to do, to sink that middle pillar.

So this is what we're doing today, what we're gathering. But it is a very vital pillar, because when that samadhi, when that gatheredness starts to really strengthen and become a strong base for practice, then it gives us a lot of capacity.

This capacity, this support in samadhi practice helps us to begin to discern between the activity of the mind and that which is just aware. We've all today experienced a lot of activity—a lot of different feelings, often different body states, a lot of different moods—and yet there is that which is aware, which is present to the experience. It's illuminating the experience actually. We know the experience without this fundamental awareness, this fundamental knowingness.

So to be able to discern that and to gather—gather the body through the mindfulness of the breath into the awareness, to gather the feeling tones of the heart however disparate, however tinged they might be sometimes with pain, to gather those into the awareness, to gather this mental activity into the awareness, to suffuse the awareness through these bodies, energy bodies and physical body, mind body, heart.

This samadhi is supported by many different factors, but one very helpful dharma principle—not only for supporting this practice but also as we talk about how to practice for the times we're in and the increasing destabilization of the elements due to climate change, due to increased destabilization that's creating all the effects of undermining stability and generating migration, beginning to create conflict, resource conflict, wars, beginning to create unpredictable and increased weather patterns, acidification of the oceans, diminishing of food availability. All of these things are beginning to become the world that we're moving into.

So how can we meet this? One of the dharma principles that's very important for us in these times and in our practice—both supporting this moment-by-moment cultivation of attention and for training to meet our lives, whatever our lives are, the bigger context of what's happening globally and then our personal lives, our community lives—is this principle of what's called in Buddhism nekkhamma, which means to simplify, it means to renounce, it means to know how to let go, how to put down.

Rather than—sometimes we can think that sounds like a bit of a drag, to renounce things, to say no to things—but actually in some ways it's saying yes. When you say no, it's saying yes to "there's enough here." To know what is enough is actually a very powerful place to be in, to be free from the conditioning of ever consuming, ever wanting, ever grasping, which leaves us in a weakened, disparate place. It's not our natural state, in fact. Yes, we have desire and needs, but to be always activated into needing more and more and more as an addictive pattern is not natural. It's not our natural health and sanity.

So to simplify is to know we can return to our natural health, our inner capacity for well-being. This works in both very subtle ways—to inwardly be willing, like even the moment of training your mind, train your attention to come to a breath as a moment of renunciation. Give your mind—no, "I want to think about this. I really want to think, it's really important that I kind of chew over that resentment a bit more. What they did, you know." So when you say, "Just put that down," it's a renunciation of ill will or renunciation of having to get right or get back or renunciation of the distracted mind, fantasizing mind.

So even on that subtle level, it's a strength that we're building. The fruit of that can become quite tangible in a retreat experience because then we start to actually connect with more contentment. We realize that something we've just overlooked—the boring breath, another meal, oh, another tree out there—can actually become a source of great fulfillment. You sometimes see yogis just staring at the trees or really enjoying their food because as there's a simplification, there's a sort of heightening of the senses, an appreciation for what is. One breath can be so fulfilling for us. This is a training because it's not usually how the mind works.

Or in our life, to practice: what can we give away? What can we—all the stuff, we have so much stuff—what can we let go of? I feel like I'm in a constant losing battle trying to trim things down because stuff just accumulates. I spent a few months cleaning out our place. There's not actually a lot in there, but it's still enough stuff. Packed it all up: some to the recycling, some to the dump, some to pass on. And I noticed it still seems to accumulate.

So it's a real practice to just keep—there's something about just being able to not be stuck to stuff, to be able to be that fluid. If we needed to leave our stuff, could we just leave it? So this is something we can contemplate. We can practice it and we can contemplate it, just so that there's that sharpness and aliveness of not having to hold so much in our minds and physically. To realize we can live quite simply.

This is one of the encouragements of the Buddha. It's one of the lifestyles he demonstrated in his life: to live very simply, in harmony with nature. To let go—this is what our teacher Ajahn Chah would always talk about—to practice with the mind that lets go, even when we're sitting here, rather than practice with the mind that's trying to attain something.

He said that regardless of time and place, the whole practice of the Dharma comes to completion at the place where there is nothing. It is the place of surrender, of emptiness, of laying down the burden. This is the finish. This is the finish. Coming to this place.

Actually, this is our reality. All of the other stuff is arbitrary in a way. The reality in the moment is the place of nothingness. It's the place of emptying. So when we come back to our one breath in this moment, we're really coming back to an emptying. We're coming back to this simplification, this letting go, this renouncing.

And that's why in some ways it's quite hard because we want to fill ourselves up with stuff—our thoughts and our feelings and our stories and our possessions and our roles and what we've got to do. But it's also a great relief to realize, and I'd like to

encourage us, and I'm encouraging myself as well in this practice, because it is a practice that's ongoing. One doesn't just somehow snap out of one's habits. Mostly, for most of us, it's an ongoing practice to explore this willingness to enter into this place of nakedness really—the naked moment, the naked moment of awareness, of our presence, our truth behind all the layers and the patternings of the self, getting somewhere, fearing things, upset about things.

So this being able to surrender, as Ajahn Chah taught, to open into that inner space—it's a place of trust. We then are entering into this dimension that we're awakening into, this profound, alive, aware intelligence of the presence of the knowing of the heart. We're awakening into that.

And then when we listen into that, this is the place of the shift of consciousness. This is the place where we're listening together. I'm listening to that place. I'm listening inwardly, stripping away all of the layers of my stuff into the nakedness of my heart, the awareness here and now. You're listening. We're listening together. The world is listening. The earth is listening.

And it's from this place that response can emerge. A different kind of response, maybe. A response that's not splitting the world up into ten thousand things and creating more aversion.

My friend that I practice with, when she lost her child, the child died as a baby, and when I asked her years later how it was for her now, how she was with that very life-transforming experience of loss, how was she coping? And she said, "You know, when I think about my baby, I feel this tremendous grief. Of course, one would. I feel that anguish of loss. But when I return to my listening heart, to this place, this gathered refuge, this awareness—my child is listening there too. It's the place where we meet. It's where we hear a deeper intelligence. Where we hear the place where all things, as Ajahn Chah said, where they finish."

And it's the place of true response, whatever that response may be. I don't know how we will respond, how you will respond, how I will respond in the times we're in. That's for us to explore—many different kinds of response, whether it's to sit on a mountaintop spreading metta, whether it's to scream at the gates of the White House, whatever it is, this is our response. But can we do it from this heart, from this listening, from this resourcefulness? Can we do it at the door that can laugh, welcoming whatever is here rather than freaking out? Can we do it from a place that contributes to healing rather than continues to split?

This is a challenge. The heart that was demonstrated by Aung San Suu Kyi or Nelson Mandela. So whatever—we don't know. We don't know how it's going to turn out. We don't know. Some people say this sort of time we're in, it's like an excruciating. It's like a crucifixion. Maybe it's bringing forth a new birth.

Maybe that's the picture—that we're evolving something. I hope so. I love that possibility. But maybe not. Maybe it's the great sixth extinction. Who knows? We don't know. We're on the cusp.

But what we can know, what we can do, is turn very simply to this breath and know that we're planting the seeds of our capacity to maintain our sanity, our well-being, our strength, our refuge, our resiliency. All of that will inform whatever response emerges in the conditions we meet.

Ajahn Chah said that this activity of the mind—this mind-world, which are the same thing on some level—is like a cobra. Whether it's good or bad, liked or disliked, when you grasp it, it will poison you. It will affect you with longing and desire or with aversion and resistance. So you must know this mind, you must know this activity of the mind. Whatever it is, whether it's good or whether it's not good, watch it arise and pass. When you can do that, you will know peace—the peace that remains. This peace you can rely on.

This peace of our heart is present here and can be with whatever's unfolding. This peace we can rely on, whatever arises, whatever we meet, whatever responses are taken. We know how to return to this deeper peace.

This is our practice. This is why we do, as Ajahn Chah said, this difficult practice—to prepare, little by little, to plant the seeds. Moment by moment, each moment we return to the breath, we plant the seeds of our sanity, of our well-being, of our capacity. We plant the seeds of our awakening. We plant the seeds of our ability to be here together, listening within the times we're in and cultivating from that listening the optimum response that each of us can make.

CHAPTER 260

Responses to Climate Change: Awareness, Action and Celebration

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this Earth Day dharma talk, James Baraz introduces Bob Doppelt, who presents a framework called "From Me to We: Five Dharma Principles That Could Save the World." Doppelt, a longtime practitioner and climate policy expert, connects Buddhist teachings with environmental sustainability. The talk explores how core dharma principles—interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), karma (cause and effect), moral conduct (śīla), compassion (karuṇā), and wisdom (prajñā)—offer essential guidance for addressing climate change. Beginning with a meditation on the breath to illustrate our interconnectedness with Earth's ecosystems, Doppelt presents five "natural laws of sustainability": interdependence, cause and effect, moral justice, trusteeship, and free will. He emphasizes how individual awareness and ethical action can create the collective consciousness needed to address global environmental challenges. The presentation includes a call for sangha members to petition dharma teachers for guidance on climate issues, reflecting the traditional relationship between students requesting teachings and teachers responding with wisdom.*

So as promised, climate change—one of the reasons that we are here, one of the central topics of our focus in this time, in this era.

We're moving into our second segment of the morning with James Baraz, who you probably are all fairly familiar with. James has been central to the transmission of the Dharma in the West, and most specifically here in the Bay Area, starting many sitting groups and being a co-founder of this beautiful place, Spirit Rock, and author of a book called *Awakening Joy*. If you need some joy, I highly recommend it. James is going to introduce his co-presenter here, Bob Doppelt. They're calling their segment, "From Me to We: Five Dharma Principles That Could Save the World."

Well, it's so heartening and moving to see everybody here and to have this day together. I think this is a really significant day for us, for our community, for the greater Dharma community. I just want you to know that what you're doing here, people know about far away, too. Email wishes from two teachers in England, Catherine McGee and Chris Cullen. Tara Brach sent an email yesterday saying, "I hope it's a really great day, really successful day." Their communities and a lot of people know what we're doing here.

It is significant because it's our community coming together, taking refuge in the Sangha. This is one of the three jewels. And I think if anything can make a difference, it's all of us coming together to inspire, motivate each other, get in touch with our caring, with our concern for the planet. The more there's a kind of critical mass of people aligned with that intention, both in the Dharma community and, of course, out into the world, then there's a possibility of actually making a difference, making a real difference.

As one friend, a very wise friend and teacher, says, we're in a race between fear and consciousness. I think in the long term, consciousness always trumps fear. However, the question is, is there a long term? And just what's the timing on this? So all we can do is the best we can do and have as much consciousness spreading and addressing the fear. And I think what we have to offer here as Dharma practitioners and lovers of consciousness is something special that we have to offer to this whole question addressing our love for the planet.

The more we can come, as has been said and how Malcolm so beautifully articulated, and I know Joanna so beautifully articulates, the more we come from love and care and equanimity, as well as feeling all of our fear and all the emotions that come up, but not to lead from fear, to lead from love after we've processed all of our concern, the more magnetizing it is for everyone. So I think our dharma practice is key not only for ourselves, but for what we can contribute to the greater question.

I wanted to share that this is something that for a while has come more from practitioners than from teachers. There are a few teachers that are here today, particularly Wes and Donald and Mark and a number of teachers who have been really concerned and articulating so beautifully their care and inspiring others. But many, many teachers have been more focused on intensive practice. We're in the middle of a shift right now. And I want to share with you that shift that you can make a difference in.

At Spirit Rock, we're going to have an international Vipassana teachers' gathering in June, which we do every three or four years, either in Gaia House or Insight Meditation Society or here. It's coming up, and we're going to have it here in June. Mark and I and a couple of others, Sharda Rogel and Catherine McGee in England, are the organizers, and we get to help create the agenda. One of the main agenda items is going to be our role in the coming years, particularly addressing climate change. The role of teachers, the role of our community, the role of the Dharma. What do we have to offer as things start to become more and more important?

One of the things that we wanted to do that affects you or that involves you is that there's a letter that was written up first in England by Catherine and Chris and a couple of other people that is now being spread among various sanghas. Catherine McGee, who's a Gaia House teacher, has gone around to various sanghas as a kind of... You know, the Magna Carta, when the Magna Carta was brought to the king in 1215 from all these different communities saying, we want democracy. Well, we're having different sanghas sign this letter encouraging the teachers for guidance and teachings around this and taking a leadership role, as is customary in the traditional teachings that the students or practitioners request teachings.

If you've ever been to a monastic retreat, you know that the student, one of the students says, please, can you share the Dharma? And when the students request, then the teachers respond. This is a request for teachers to not only reflect for themselves, but to bring some guidance and teachings around this question.

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blow up as you just at the bottom of the steps for you all to sign and also to take home—there's copies that you can take to your communities and friends either your formal sanghas or your dharma friends petitioning and requesting for teaching and leadership on climate change.

I want to just read to you the letter so you have a sense of it and you don't have to block while everybody is reading it if there's online.

"Dear teachers, the scale of the challenge presented by climate change is perhaps unprecedented in human history. Already it is a cause of immense destructive suffering to many species and ecosystems and to many of the poorest and most vulnerable people on the earth. The world's most respected climate scientists are unanimous that we indeed live in a time of emergency in which urgent action is needed.

We feel profoundly grateful for the teachings of the Buddha Dharma, and we believe that they have a great deal of wisdom to offer not only to Buddhist practitioners, but to wider society at this time of immense challenge. Spiritual and moral guidance is needed if we as a human society are to respond adequately and appropriately to this emergency.

We are therefore writing to ask you for your leadership, guidance, and teaching as we seek to explore the relevance of the Buddha's teachings amidst the crisis that we face. Together, we need to find a wise, engaged, and active Buddhist response. We wish to encourage you to reflect deeply, both as individuals and as a teacher body, and to speak about this issue and give guidance.

We hope that the forthcoming teacher meeting at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in June of 2013 will provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss this issue as a matter of priority and to begin to formulate wise collective responses on behalf of the Global Insight Meditation community. As members of this community, we are ready to engage with you as you do this.

With thanks and appreciation for your sharing of the Buddhist teachings in a world that needs to hear them."

And whatever your signature, you can write. If you want to write your own version of it or share some of your own thoughts, then please feel free to do that. And we're going to present this to the teachers. We'll have thousands of signatures. That's the idea for the teachers to say, "Oh, you know, it's like hitting your send button to move on," and hoping that your senators will get it.

I would like all the teachers to see how much this community cares and our greater community cares about addressing this. So I invite you to please take a look and sign it and take one home.

And now it gives me a great pleasure to introduce to you Bob Doppelt, who is an old friend. We first sat together in the 80s up at Breitenbush. And he's, besides being a longtime Dharma practitioner, one of the leading Dharma voices that is making a difference in this issue. He is the executive director for the Resource Innovation Group, which is based in Oregon. He teaches at Willamette University, and he's on the faculty of University of Oregon.

And he's also one of the organizers of this group collective called the National Climate Ethics Campaign, which is comprised of 135 organizations, 18 of which are working with the White House these days. And he and his group are actually coordinating these meetings. He's going back and forth to Washington a lot because the administration has it on their agenda as a priority. However, with all the other priorities, it's slipping lower on the priority list, but it's still on the priority list. And they're working to craft a narrative for people, for our country and our population to see, "Oh, this is something that affects me. I want to be part of this."

So it's not often that we have a Dharma practitioner that's making a difference in where it counts. And he wrote a book called "From Me to We." It's a fabulous book. Unfortunately, the copies that were supposed to be here didn't arrive in time. But it is a book that I've given a series of talks on in my Berkeley group. It's about five Dharma principles with the subtitle "The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life," put in a very non-jargony, accessible

form for the general population of what's going to be needed to shift our consciousness and our action to make a difference in saving this planet and loving this planet for as long as we can.

So I'd like to hand it over to Bob now to share his philosophy and perspective on this.

Well, thank you, James. Thank you. It's wonderful to be here. I come here often for retreats, and it's nice to see all of you here on this Earth Day, and especially an Earth Day focused on climate change, which in fact is an extremely pressing issue that we all face, are going to have to deal with, are already dealing with, and certainly our children and their children are going to be dealing with. This is going to be the issue that all future generations have to adjust to.

What I do for a living is work with local, state, and federal government agencies and private organizations trying to help them think about and learn about ways to address these kinds of complex social, ecological, and economic issues. In the work I've done, I kept trying to find a way—a simple framework to help organizations and people realize the kinds of changes they need to make in their thinking and behavior to really become or adopt a true path to sustainability.

So the framework I'm going to share with you today has really emerged out of many years of experience. And what was remarkable to me was one of those "duh" experiences. I've been practicing socially engaged Buddhism for 25 years and not really connected it to my work on sustainability and climate change issues till 10 years ago or something.

And I realized the dharma principles are in fact the principles that we need to use to make this shift, but most people aren't really going to embrace the dharma right off the bat, especially if it's presented in Buddhist language or Buddhist jargon. So what I've done is tried to put this into a mainstream framework using mainstream language that I want to share with you today.

I'm going to go through this quickly because we don't have a lot of time, but I want to first start with a very simple way to think about the problem of climate change. This is a picture of what's called the Blue Marble—the very first photograph of our home, Earth, taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts in 1972. It's the first picture we ever had of ourselves hanging out there in space.

Now, I want everyone to take a very close look at this picture and see if you can find any intake valves that would allow us to bring in extra resources if we contaminate the ones we have or use up all the ones we have. Anybody see any? None. Now look very closely for the pipes that go away from the Earth that allow us to get rid of our toxicity and pollution and waste—those discharge pipes. Anybody see any there? No.

The Earth is a partially closed system, which means we take in solar radiation and reflect some of it back out into space. Some of it's captured in the mix of gases that surround the Earth, and the gases that are trapped create the heat that make life possible here. Other than that intake and outtake of solar radiation and a few meteorites every now and then, the Earth is a closed system. Everything we make, everything we do stays right here in our biosphere or in our immediate atmosphere.

What climate change is about is that we have actually created an anthropic breakdown of the systems we are part of and created too much growth—too many greenhouse gases that are building up in the immediate atmosphere and warming the Earth beyond what has existed for the last 10,000 years. But it's not just greenhouse gases. Through extensive forestry, converting forest lands to agriculture, filling wetlands, and so forth, we have also undermined or degraded nature's ability to sequester carbon. So we have both a source and a sink problem.

One way to think about the problem is always to think about the Blue Marble. Every decision you make, every product you buy, every time you use energy, any time you use a material, every technology you support or policy you support—ask yourself: How does it affect this closed, semi-closed system that is the Blue Marble?

As James just said it very well, I think we are actually in a race for time now between the growth of consciousness—which is really the growth of awareness of our connectedness with others and the growth of empathy and caring we're going to have to demonstrate in order to address this issue—and the growth of this entropic breakdown that's happening on the planet. The question is: which is going to win out?

I think we have no choice but to make sure that the growth in consciousness, the growth in empathy, the growth in caring for other people and the natural systems that created them and support them and created us and support us wins out. That said, we're also in line for some very difficult times ahead. We're going to hit roughly two degrees Celsius—3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels, from what we can tell. The question really is: can we keep it from going beyond that and into runaway climate change? So we've got some tough times ahead.

I want to share a framework that I think could help you think about a way to make this shift in thinking and behavior, and how you can also help others do the same thing. Because I think it's really important that we move beyond ourselves. First, we have to start with ourselves, but then we have to move beyond ourselves and motivate other people that we work with, our families, the organizations, and ultimately the institutions of society that really are controlling things.

I'm going to suggest that there are five interrelated commitments that you can think about to make this shift to increased empathy, increased caring for other people and the systems they're part of. None of these commitments are new. The Buddha talked about them 2,500 years ago. Many other religious leaders have talked about them, and the physical and social scientists describe them today. But they haven't really been put into a framework that I think the average person can understand.

These are really important principles today because they help us align our thinking and behavior with what I call the natural laws of sustainability. That's my own term for a set of universal truths that are going to be essential to follow—to learn how to interact with each other and the planet today if we're going to make this transition, come through this very difficult time that lies ahead, and come out the other end by managing global warming. We're not going to eliminate it. The best we can do now is manage it and then come out at a much better place down the road.

I'm also going to emphasize commitments, which are vows. Commitments reflect our sense of purpose, our values, and our priorities. We're going to have to make some very critical choices about what we're going to do and not do, what we're going to as a society allow and not allow through laws and regulations in order to manage this issue.

And we expand our choices by altering our interpretations of the world—or as the Buddha said, by seeing through the illusions that control our minds and seeing reality for what it is, being truthful about reality. That's what I hope these commitments help us do.

So I want to start by just having you, if you would, for those willing, relax into your body a bit. If you want to close your eyes, you can. Just take a few deep breaths and relax, let yourself settle in, let go of any tensions that you might have, and become aware of your breathing.

As you know, focusing on our breath is a way to concentrate our minds. But it is actually much more than that. I invite you to pay attention to what's actually happening within your body as you take in that breath. You're inhaling oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. Most of us don't realize that it is the oxygen we breathe that actually cre-

ates the energy that allows us to live. Oxygen metabolizes the food and water that you eat and drink and turns it into energy. Oxygen actually is the most important aspect of life. We can live for a long time without food and water. We can't live very long without oxygen.

Now think about it as you are aware of the breath that you're taking, and try to find out where this oxygen is coming from. What is the source of this oxygen that you're breathing that is allowing you to live right now? Well, about seventy-five percent of it is created through photosynthesis with green cells and green algae and bacteria in marine environments. And the other twenty-five percent of the oxygen you're breathing in right now is created through the same process—photosynthesis and vegetation all around you.

So complex interactions occurring in the oceans and in the estuaries and in vegetation are creating the oxygen that are allowing you to live right now. Just become aware of that. Try to trace in your mind and see if you can feel that oxygen coming in from these other sources and you're exhaling the CO2 that is absorbed by many of those same processes. And then try to ask yourself, how conscious are you of those processes? Every time you take a breath, do you give thanks to the oceans and the vegetation all around you? Of course, most of us don't. That's not something we normally do, but that is reality. This is how life on our planet actually functions.

Here is a fundamental truth: nothing exists on its own on this planet. Everything is created by and sustained by other processes and organisms. This is a core dharma principle and what in mainstream language I call the natural law of interdependence, which is the first and most important natural law of sustainability as I think about it.

In Buddhism, we call this emptiness and dependent origination. Nothing is a solid entity in itself. All things are dependent on multiple causes and multiple conditions. Anatta, or no-self in Buddhism, means that since all things change—our thoughts change, our feelings change, we're breathing oxygen in and it's going out as CO2—there is no such thing as a separate or permanent self. We, in fact, are just mediums through which energy is concentrated for a short period of time through our lifetime, and molecules of food and water and oxygen pass through, pass in and pass out.

Can you become aware of that as you follow your breath? Just how these molecules are entering and passing away, passing out of you. There is no permanent or separate me.

Now if you would come back and notice your own pattern of breathing and become aware of your immediate surroundings. If you would like to open your eyes, come back to the room.

The Buddha said we can give ourselves no greater gift than increasing our own awareness, and no greater gift to another than increasing our own awareness. So give yourself thanks for increasing your awareness of how interconnected we are.

If you are not constantly aware of the complex web of social and ecological systems that created you and sustain you, and create and sustain all other life on Earth, you're likely to do more harm than good. Said differently, if you're not constantly aware, trying to increase your awareness of the true context in which you exist, then we'll do more harm than good.

So the first natural law of sustainability is the law of interdependence. The dharma principle is emptiness, dependent origination. And the commitment then is to see the systems you're part of—to always strive to see the context in which you exist, the systems you're part of. It's very hard to see all the systems that we're part of.

We often have difficulty seeing the vast systems that sustain us. It's hard to perceive the oceans creating the oxygen we breathe. But there are practical tools we can use to develop this awareness. Systems mapping is one such approach. When I work with organizations, I have them map out their social systems on paper. With my college freshmen, I teach systems thinking and have them map their family system, their school system, and the ecological and economic systems they're part of.

If you haven't explored systems mapping, I encourage you to try it. It's a powerful tool that helps organizations truly understand the interconnected systems they inhabit. Unfortunately, most people today don't think systemically. We live in a culture of what I call extreme individualism that has grown for many reasons over the years. We believe we are freestanding, independent entities. In fact, at my college, there's an entire school of economics teaching that we are all separate entities with no responsibility for anyone else—that we should pursue our own economic self-interest without concern, and everything will magically turn out for the better.

A little experience and insight reveals this isn't true. Consider the financial collapse of 2009, when the financial industry pursued its own economic self-interest without considering the broader economic system it was part of, collapsing the entire world economy. Or here in the U.S. and other parts of the West, where we've pursued our economic self-interest by burning massive amounts of fossil fuels, destabilizing the climate system we're intimately part of. This way of thinking simply doesn't work.

We have confused self-centeredness with individual self, and consequently, we are all much less free. All of our children will be much less free in the future if we continue this path.

This brings us to the second natural law of sustainability: the law of cause and effect. Everything happens based on what emerged before it. In today's overcrowded, over-consumed, overheating, and super-connected world, everything we do creates the conditions for what will be possible in the future. This is the Buddhist principle of karma. What we do matters. Your actions have consequences. Everything has causes and conditions. The deeper you go into this understanding, the greater your awareness grows.

The commitment here is to account for all the consequences of your actions. Of course, just like seeing systems, it's difficult to account for all consequences. We often don't know, and sometimes there are unintended consequences we couldn't predict. But tools can help. Have you ever used a fishbone diagram? I have students do this exercise. You place the problem or action you're about to take at the head of what looks like a fish skeleton, then move backwards, outlining all possible consequences that might happen. These simple tools help expand our awareness.

It's never possible to understand all consequences of our actions, but as the Buddha taught, the key is to increase our awareness—always striving to expand our consciousness. This is really about right intention and right thought, becoming aware that we have choices. If we truly want to manage climate change to manageable levels, we must make different choices. This begins with understanding the systems we're part of, then being conscious of what our impacts mean for those systems. This is why we practice meditation—to increase our awareness and clear our minds.

I'd like you to take a journey with me now. Imagine that a genie has swept you away from your everyday job, your house, whatever you do for a living or with your time, and made you the most powerful decision maker on earth. Just play along with me. At your fingertips is any information you want to make any decision, and whatever you decide will happen. Actually, many of you would be excellent as the most powerful decision maker on earth, but bear with me.

There's a catch. This genie has given you a unique form of amnesia. You can't remember your name, where you live, who your family is, your nationality, religious status, or financial status. You don't remember anything about yourself. All you know is that whatever you decide will happen.

Now, how would you make decisions under these circumstances?

What's happening right at this very moment? Be here now. I would consult the wisest people I knew. Okay, so you would consult wise people. But wait—do we have any memory of what we already know or knew? No memory, because we don't know who we are.

Anybody else? "You'd want to help everyone." Wanting to help everyone—good. Okay, I think we have one more. Go ahead. "You don't know the consequences, so how would you make decisions?" Right, exactly. Okay, one more. "Use the seventh generation principle." Use the seventh generation principle—excellent.

I think all of these responses are getting at the core of it. You would adopt some decision-making model similar to the age-old moral rule called "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—the golden rule. Because those others might be you, right? You don't know who you are.

What I've just described sounds completely far-fetched, doesn't it? It's never going to happen. But what I just described is actually more or less the condition we live in today. Those of us here in California and in the West are emitting greenhouse gas emissions that are affecting people in China, in India, and all over the world. They don't know we decided to drive our car here today and made that decision, but it's going to affect them. And vice versa—they're doing the same thing.

We have globalized environmental problems never before seen on Earth—global issues like climate change, ocean acidification, the breakdown of the biosphere. Each of us now is making decisions that affect everyone else. We're living in a very different era, even from thirty or forty years ago. Because of that, we're going to have to think and act differently.

It starts with first understanding the systems we're part of and the consequences of our actions on those systems. Then we have to decide how we're going to respond. And I think the first response is to adopt a clear moral principle based on what I call moral justice. In Buddhist terms, this is sila—moral conduct—which in Buddhism is the foundation of a peaceful life.

This really means we have to adopt the moral principle, the starting principle, to do no harm. Every religion that I looked at when developing this model begins with the belief that we must do no harm. Even if you can't do good, try not to do harm. That's the first starting point. The commitment is to adopt the universal moral principle to do no harm.

This is about trying to constrain our aggressive and harmful activities. It's not always possible to know all the different aspects of what we do and how it might harm others, but we really need to focus and raise our awareness as much as we can.

So reflect for just a moment: How often do you strive to do no harm? How often are you aware of that moral principle as a driver for your life? Sometimes? Never? Often? We'll come back to this in a second. But just become aware—do you have a core moral principle of doing no harm?

Now I want you to play along with me again for just a second and go back to that first picture we showed of the blue marble. The acceleration of population has led to an acceleration of economic activity, which has led to an acceleration of energy use around the world, and material use, and basically climate change as a result of massive throughput of energy and materials through our economy. Because energy that's used only breaks down and disperses, that's what created climate change.

And so what many scientists are now saying is that this massive increase of human impacts on the planet, on our blue marble, has actually ushered us into a completely new geological era. For the first time in Earth's history, human activities—rather than natural processes—will determine future life on our planet. Natural processes will certainly interact with our actions, but we are now the primary driver. This new era is called the Anthropocene.

Climate scientists and others are speaking about this transformation. Perhaps you've heard this term before—the Anthropocene? They're telling us we've entered a different era now, permanently, for the first time ever. This means that what we determine, what we do, what we decide, the actions we take, the technologies we adopt, the policies we implement—all of this will determine future life on Earth. What lives and what doesn't, where they live and where they cannot, how the entire web of existence shapes itself.

There is a universal moral axiom: the more power you have over another, the more responsibility you have to use that power benevolently. This means we have now become trustees. This is the fourth natural law of sustainability—the law of trusteeship.

This principle embodies karuna, having compassion and taking care of all living organisms. It encompasses mudita, taking joy in others rather than being concerned only with ourselves. And it requires non-attachment. Trusteeship recognizes that each of us is on Earth for only a very short period of time. No one in this room will be here one hundred years from now. This means we are only temporarily managing or responsible for the resources we have stewardship over. We are temporary trustees.

We now bear the responsibility that what we decide as trustees will determine what life on Earth exists fifty, one hundred, one hundred fifty years from now, and where it will exist. We have the responsibility to manage this sacred trust with extraordinary care.

The fourth commitment, therefore, is to adopt your trustee obligations and do good for all life. The first principle of moral justice focuses on trying to do no harm. But now, because climate change has become so serious and other impacts so profound, we also must actively do good.

Different tools and strategies are developing for each of these principles. Most organizations I work with—businesses and governments—are focused on reducing their environmental impacts, which means doing less harm. But we also need to transform our approach entirely and actively do good.

There are emerging fields you might know of, such as biomimicry, where we create new products and services that mimic nature's wisdom. There's green chemistry, which uses natural processes rather than synthetic chemicals. We actually must restore the Earth—we cannot simply reduce the harm we're doing to it. This is the crucial difference between the two approaches.

The final principle I want to share is the principle of free will—the natural law of free will. The Buddha taught often that as we increase our awareness, we become aware that we are free at any moment to make different choices. But this requires greater awareness and deeper understanding.

The dharma principle connected with free will is paññā—the wisdom that leads us out of suffering. This wisdom manifests as increased awareness and increased mindfulness of all our actions, of the systems we participate in, of how we impact those systems. It involves adopting an ethical way of life and understanding that we are trustees.

This is the final principle: choose your own destiny. We do not have to continue down the path we have traveled these last fifty to one hundred years. Throughout history, societies have made fundamentally different changes driven by new ways of thinking and seeing the world—many, many times. We don't always realize this transformation is possible, but it has happened repeatedly. And each time societies have made such fundamental shifts, most people have ended up much better off.

I believe that as we expand our consciousness—and perhaps this framework can help you and others do just that—we will all find ourselves much better off.

If we have two more minutes, I'd like each of you to reflect briefly on how often you find yourself following these commitments, essentially following these dharma principles. Then turn to a partner and share for a moment what you discovered.

Evaluate yourself honestly—how well are you doing? How much awareness are you cultivating? Try to stay focused on the dharma principles. For just a very short time, share this reflection with a partner and explore it together. We'll take two minutes for this conversation.

Does anyone want to share something that emerged from this conversation? Anything that became particularly clear or meaningful? I apologize for the brief duration—I encourage you to continue this dialogue afterward for as long as you can. What would anyone like to share?

Absolutely. The point you raise is crucial—it's challenging to make right choices or skillful choices today because of the structure of the systems we're embedded within. I think we all feel this tension deeply.

But this practice is not about achieving perfection. This is about continuously expanding our awareness. As more people expand their awareness, we will generate the collective wisdom and political will necessary to transform those very systems that currently constrain our choices.

So it's really about increased mindfulness and then encouraging others to take the same steps forward.

I think the comment from the back was that we often get stuck thinking only about cause and effect, without considering the systems we're part of and the moral principles we need to adopt. Moral justice needs to guide our thinking and behavior, along with trusteeship. You're absolutely right. That's why I use this framework now with public and private organizations and nonprofits of all kinds, and I find very positive results.

We're actually using it in work I've been coordinating with the administration to encourage a national conversation about climate change. I'm optimistic that something significant is going to happen. They've gotten overwhelmed with the gun debate, healthcare, immigration, and other issues, so finding political space for them to act has been one of our challenges. The structure of the system in which the White House works is also very difficult to navigate, and there are other issues within the administration itself. But I'm optimistic that we will see this administration take more positive steps than any other, by helping them expand their awareness beyond narrow issues.

The point about not getting caught up in self-judgment is absolutely right. The more aware you become of the consequences of your actions, the more you can feel humbled and think, "Oh my gosh, I'm doing all these wrong things." But you have to first realize the systems you're part of—you live in this society. Then constantly grow your awareness and realize that you have a choice.

The more choices you make, the better off you're going to be. Sometimes you make a choice thinking it's not the best one you could have made, that it might have serious impact, but it's the only thing you can do. As long as you're aware of it, next time you can make a different choice. And as other people begin to think the same way, we can create the social change necessary to transform the structures of those systems.

So don't feel bad. This is just the structure of the systems we're working in. But keep growing your awareness.

I want to thank Bob for coming and sharing all the work that he's doing—truly making a difference. And remember to write those letters to teachers to help encourage and motivate them to make a difference.

I'll leave you with this quote from John Seed, who Joanna teaches with—a very inspiring environmental deep ecology being. He says: "Well, you might think there's nothing on the horizon that can help us. And you might wonder what kind of miracle would be needed to make a difference? Well, it would be a very simple one, really. All that it would need would be for human beings to wake up one day different than they were the day before and realize that this is the end unless we make these changes, and then deciding to make the change.

"That doesn't seem like a very likely thing to happen. But on the other hand, the whole road that we've traveled is so littered with miracles that it's only our strange kind of modern psyche that refuses to see it. I mean, the miracle of being descended from a fish that chose to leave the water and walk on the land. Well, anyone with a pedigree like that—you can't lose hope."

Thank you very much.

CHAPTER 261

From Me to We: Five Dharma Principles That Could Save the World

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this powerful Earth Day address, Rob Burbea presents five interconnected dharma principles essential for addressing climate change and environmental crisis. Drawing from core Buddhist teachings including pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), karma, śīla (ethical conduct), and karuṇā (compassion), Burbea demonstrates how ancient wisdom provides a framework for contemporary environmental challenges.*
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> *The talk explores the 'natural laws of sustainability': interdependence (recognizing our connection to all life systems), cause and effect (understanding karmic consequences), moral justice (commitment to do no harm), trusteeship (compassionate stewardship of Earth), and free will (wisdom to choose different paths). Through guided meditation on breath and oxygen cycles, participants experience viscerally how deeply interconnected we are with marine ecosystems and vegetation that sustain life.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that climate change represents humanity's entry into the Anthropocene epoch, where human decisions determine future life on Earth. This unprecedented responsibility requires moving from 'extreme individualism' to systems awareness, recognizing that our individual choices affect the entire 'blue marble' of Earth. The presentation concludes with practical tools like systems mapping and fishbone diagrams for expanding awareness, while maintaining hope that collective awakening can create the transformation needed for planetary healing.*

So as promised, we turn to climate change—one of the reasons we are here, one of the central topics of our focus in this time, in this era. We're moving into our second segment of the morning with James Baraz, who you probably are all fairly familiar with. James has been central to the transmission of the Dharma in the West, and most specifically here in the Bay Area, starting many sitting groups and being a co-founder of this beautiful place, Spirit Rock, and author of a book called *Awakening Joy*. If you need some joy, I highly recommend it. James is going to introduce his co-presenter here, Bob Doppelt. They're calling their segment "From Me to We: Five Dharma Principles That Could Save the World."

Well, it's so heartening and moving to see everybody here and to have this day together. I think this is a really significant day for us, for our community, for the greater Dharma community. I just want you to know that what you're doing here, people know about far away, too. Email wishes came from two teachers in England, Catherine McGee and Chris Cullen. Tara Brach sent an email yesterday saying, "I hope it's a really great day, really successful day." Their communities and a lot of people know what we're doing here.

And it is significant because it's our community coming together, taking refuge in the Sangha. This is one of the three jewels. And I think if anything can make a difference, it's all of us coming together to inspire and motivate each other, to get in touch with our caring, with our concern for the planet. The more there's a kind of critical mass of people aligned with that intention, both in the Dharma community and, of course, out into the world, then there's a possibility of actually making a difference, making a real difference.

As one friend, a very wise friend and teacher, says, we're in a race between fear and consciousness. I think in the long term, consciousness always trumps fear. However, the question is, is there a long term? And just what's the timing on this? So all we can do is the best we can do and have as much consciousness spreading and addressing the fear. I think what we have to offer here as Dharma practitioners and lovers of consciousness is something special that we have to offer to this whole question of addressing fear and our love for the planet.

The more we can come, as has been said and how Malcolm so beautifully articulated, and I know Joanna so beautifully articulates, the more we come from love and care and equanimity, as well as feeling all of our fear and all the emotions that come up, but not to lead from fear, to lead from love after we've processed all of our concern —the more magnetizing it is for everyone. So I think our dharma practice is key not only for ourselves, but for what we can contribute to the greater question.

I wanted to share that this is something that for a while has come more from practitioners than from teachers. There are a few teachers that are here today, particularly Wes and Donald and Mark and a number of teachers who have been really concerned and articulating so beautifully their care and inspiring others. But many teachers have been more focused on intensive practice. We're in the middle of a shift right now, and I want to share with you that shift that you can make a difference in.

At Spirit Rock, we're going to have an international Vipassana teachers' gathering in June, which we do every three or four years, either in Gaia House or Insight Meditation Society or here. It's coming up, and we're going to have it here in June. Mark and I and

a couple of others, Sharda Rogel and Catherine McGee in England, are the organizers, and we get to help create the agenda. One of the main agenda items is going to be our role in the coming years, particularly addressing climate change—the role of teachers, the role of our community, the role of the Dharma. What do we have to offer as things start to become more and more important?

One of the things that we wanted to do that affects you or that involves you is that there's a letter that was written up first in England by Catherine and Chris and a couple of other people that is now being spread among various sanghas. Catherine McGee, who's a Gaia House teacher, has gone around to various sanghas as a kind of—you know, the Magna Carta, when the Magna Carta was brought to the king in 1215 from all these different communities saying, "we want democracy." Well, we're having different sanghas sign this letter encouraging the teachers for guidance and teachings around this and taking a leadership role, as is customary in the traditional teachings that the students or practitioners request teachings.

If you've ever been to a monastic retreat, you know that the student, one of the students says, "Please, can you share the Dharma?" And when the students request, then the teachers respond. And so this is a request for teachers to not only reflect for themselves, but to bring some guidance and teachings around this question. And there is a letter, one copy of this letter...

requesting for teaching and leadership on climate change.

I want to read you this letter so you have a sense of it, and you don't have to struggle reading while everyone else is looking at it online.

"Dear Teachers, the scale of the challenge presented by climate change is perhaps unprecedented in human history. Already it is a cause of immense destructive suffering to many species and ecosystems and to many of the poorest and most vulnerable people on the earth. The world's most respected climate scientists are unanimous that we indeed live in a time of emergency in which urgent action is needed.

We feel profoundly grateful for the teachings of the Buddha Dharma, and we believe that they have a great deal of wisdom to offer not only to Buddhist practitioners, but to wider society. At this time of immense challenge, spiritual and moral guidance is needed if we as a human society are to respond adequately and appropriately to this emergency.

We are therefore writing to ask you for your leadership, guidance, and teaching as we seek to explore the relevance of the Buddha's teachings amidst the crisis that we face. Together, we need to find a wise, engaged, and active Buddhist response.

We wish to encourage you to reflect deeply, both as individuals and as a teacher body, and to speak about this issue and give guidance. We hope that the forthcoming teacher meeting at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in June of 2013 will provide an opportunity for teachers to discuss this issue as a matter of priority and to begin to formulate wise collective responses on behalf of the Global Insight Meditation community. As members of this community, we are ready to engage with you as you do this.

With thanks and appreciation for your sharing of the Buddhist teachings in a world that needs to hear them."

Whatever your signature, you can write your own version or share some of your thoughts if you wish. We're going to present this to the teachers with thousands of signatures. The idea is for the teachers to recognize—like hitting your send button to move on and hoping that your senators will get it. I would like all the teachers to see how much this community cares and our greater community cares about addressing this.

So I invite you to please take a look, sign it, and take one home.

Now it gives me great pleasure to introduce Bob Doppelt, who is an old friend. We first sat together in the 1980s up at Breitenbush. Besides being a longtime Dharma practitioner, he's one of the leading Dharma voices making a real difference on this issue.

He is the executive director of the Resource Innovation Group, based in Oregon. He's associated with Willamette College and is on the faculty of University of Oregon. He's also one of the organizers of the collective called the National Climate Ethics Campaign, which is comprised of 135 organizations, 18 of which are working with the White House these days. He and his group are actually coordinating these meetings. He goes back and forth to Washington frequently because the administration has this on their agenda as a priority. However, with all the other priorities, it's slipping lower on the priority list, but it's still there.

His work is to craft a narrative for people, for our country and our population to see: "Oh, this is something that affects me. I want to be part of this." It's not often that we have a Dharma practitioner making a difference where it counts.

He wrote a book called "From Me to We." It's a fabulous book. Unfortunately, the copies that were supposed to be here didn't arrive in time. But it is a book I've given a series of talks on in my Berkeley group—five Dharma principles with the subtitle "The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life." It's presented in a very accessible, non-jargony form for the general population about what's needed to shift our consciousness and our action to make a difference in saving this planet and loving this planet for as long as we can.

So I'd like to hand it over to Bob now to share his philosophy and perspective on this.

Well, thank you, James. It's wonderful to be here. I come here often for retreats, and it's nice to see all of you here on this Earth Day—especially an Earth Day focused on climate change, which is indeed an extremely pressing issue that we all face, are going to have to deal with, are already dealing with. Certainly our children and their children are going to be dealing with this. This is going to be the issue that all future generations have to adjust to.

What I do for a living is work with local, state, and federal government agencies and private organizations, trying to help them think about and learn ways to address these kinds of complex social, ecological, and economic issues. In the work I've done, I kept trying to find a simple framework to help organizations and people realize the kinds of changes they need to make in their thinking and behavior to really become or adopt a true path to sustainability.

So the framework I'm going to share with you today has emerged out of many years of experience. What was remarkable to me—it's one of those "duh" experiences—I've been practicing socially engaged Buddhism for 25 years and didn't really connect it to my work on sustainability and climate change issues until about 10 years ago.

And I realized the Dharma principles are in fact the principles we need to use to make this shift, but most people aren't really going to embrace the Dharma right off the bat, especially if it's presented in Buddhist language or Buddhist jargon. So what I've done is tried to put this into a mainstream framework using mainstream language that I want to share with you today.

I'm going to go through it quickly because we don't have a lot of time, but I want to first start with a very simple way to think about the problem of climate change. This is a picture of what's called the Blue Marble - the very first picture of our home, the Earth, taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts in 1972. It's the first picture we ever had of ourselves sort of hanging out there in space.

Now, I want everyone to take a very close look at this picture and see if you can find any intake valves that are allowing us to bring in extra resources if we contaminate the ones we have or use up all the ones we have. Anybody see any? None. Now look very closely for the pipes that go away from the earth that allow us to get rid of our toxicity and pollution and waste, those discharge pipes. Anybody see any there? No.

The Earth is a partially closed system, which means we take in solar radiation and reflect some of it back out into space. Some of it's captured in the mix of gases that surround the Earth, and the gases that are trapped create the heat that make life pos-

sible here on Earth. Other than that intake and outtake of solar radiation and a few meteorites every now and then, the Earth is a closed system. Everything we make, everything we do stays right here in our biosphere or in our immediate atmosphere.

What climate change is about is that we have actually created an anthropic breakdown of the systems we are part of and created too much growth - too many greenhouse gases that are building up in the immediate atmosphere and warming the earth beyond what has existed for the last 10,000 years. But it's not just greenhouse gases. Through extensive forestry, converting forest lands to agriculture, filling wetlands, and so forth, we have actually undermined or degraded nature's ability to sequester carbon as well. So we have both a source and a sink problem.

One way to think about the problem is to always think about the blue marble. Every decision you make, every product you buy, every time you use energy, any time you use a material, every technology you support or policy you support - ask yourself: How does it affect this closed, semi-closed system that is the blue marble?

As James just said it very well, I think we are actually in a race for time now between the growth of consciousness - which is really the growth of awareness of our connectedness with others and the growth of the empathy and caring we're going to have to demonstrate in order to address this issue - and the growth of this entropic breakdown that's happening on the planet. The question is, which is going to win out?

I think we have no choice but to make sure that the growth in consciousness, the growth in empathy, the growth in caring for other people and the natural systems that created them and support them and created us and support us win out. But that said, we're also in line for some very difficult times ahead. We're going to hit roughly 2 degrees Celsius, 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels from what we can tell. The question really is, can we keep it from going beyond that and into runaway climate change? So we've got some tough times ahead.

I want to share a framework that I think could help you think about a way to make this shift in thinking and behavior and how you can also help others do the same thing. Because I think it's really important that we move beyond ourselves. First, we have to start with ourselves, but then we have to move beyond ourselves and motivate other people that we work with, our families, the organizations, and ultimately the institutions of society that really are controlling things.

I'm going to suggest that there are five interrelated commitments that you can think about to make this shift to increased empathy, increased caring for other people and the systems they're part of. None of these commitments are new. The Buddha talked

about them 2,500 years ago. Many other religious leaders have talked about them. Physical and social scientists describe them today. But they haven't really been put into a framework that I think the average person can understand.

These are really important principles today because they help us align our thinking and behavior with what I call the natural laws of sustainability. That's my own term for a set of universal truths that are going to be essential to follow to learn how to interact with each other and the planet today if we're going to make this transition, come through this very difficult time that lies ahead, and come out the other end by managing global warming. We're not going to eliminate it. The best we can do now is manage it and then come out at a much better place down the road.

I'm also going to emphasize commitments, which are vows. Commitments reflect our sense of purpose, our values, and our priorities. We're going to have to make some very critical choices about what we're going to do and not do, what we're going to as a society allow and not allow through laws and regulations in order to manage this issue.

And we expand our choices by altering our interpretations of the world, or as the Buddha said, by seeing through the illusions that control our minds and seeing reality for what it is—being truthful about reality. That's what I hope these commitments help us do.

So I want to start by inviting you, for those willing, to relax into your body a bit. If you want to close your eyes, you can. Take a few deep breaths. Just relax, let yourself settle in, let go of any tensions you might have, and become aware of your breathing.

As you know, focusing on our breath is a way to concentrate our minds. But it is actually much more than that. I invite you to pay attention to what's actually happening within your body as you take in that breath. You're inhaling oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. Anyone who's inhaling carbon dioxide, raise your hand.

Most of us don't realize that it is the oxygen we breathe that actually creates the energy that allows us to live. Oxygen metabolizes the food and water that you eat and drink and turns it into energy. Oxygen is actually the most important aspect of life. If you don't believe me, let's all hold our breath for two or three minutes. We can live for a long time without food and water. We can't live very long without oxygen.

Now think about it as you are aware of the breath you're taking and try to find out where this oxygen is coming from. What is the source of this oxygen you're breathing that is allowing you to live right now?

About seventy-five percent of it is created through photosynthesis with green cells and green algae and bacteria in marine environments. The other twenty-five percent of the oxygen you're breathing right now is created through the same process—photosynthesis in vegetation all around you.

So complex interactions occurring in the oceans and in the estuaries and in vegetation are creating the oxygen that is allowing you to live right now. Just become aware of that. Try to trace in your mind and see if you can feel that oxygen coming in from these other sources as you exhale the carbon dioxide that is absorbed by many of those same processes.

Then try to ask yourself: How conscious are you of those processes? Every time you take a breath, do you give thanks to the oceans and the vegetation all around you? Of course, most of us don't. That's not something we normally do, but that is reality. This is how life on our planet actually functions.

Here is a fundamental truth: Nothing exists on its own on this planet. Everything is created by and sustained by other processes and organisms. This is a core dharma principle and what in mainstream language I call the natural law of interdependence—the first and most important natural law of sustainability.

In Buddhism, we call this śūnyatā and pratītyasamutpāda—emptiness and dependent origination. Nothing is a solid entity in itself. All things are dependent on multiple causes and multiple conditions. Anattā, or no-self in Buddhism, means that since all things change—our thoughts change, our feelings change, we're breathing oxygen in and it's going out as carbon dioxide—there is no such thing as a separate or permanent self.

We, in fact, are just mediums through which energy is concentrated for a short period of time through our lifetime, and molecules of food and water and oxygen pass through—pass in and pass out. Can you become aware of that as you follow your breath? How these molecules are entering and passing away, passing out of you? There is no permanent or separate me.

Now if you would, come back and notice your own pattern of breathing and become aware of your immediate surroundings. If you'd like to open your eyes, come back to the room.

The Buddha said we can give ourselves no greater gift than increasing our own awareness and no greater gift to another than increasing our own awareness. So give yourself thanks for increasing your awareness of how interconnected we are.

If you are not constantly aware of the complex web of social and ecological systems that created you and sustain you, and create and sustain all other life on Earth, you're likely to do more harm than good. Said differently, if you're not constantly aware, trying to increase your awareness of the true context in which you exist, then you'll do more harm than good.

So the first natural law of sustainability is the law of interdependence. The dharma principle is śūnyatā and pratītyasamutpāda—emptiness and dependent origination. And the commitment then is to see the systems you're part of, to always strive to see the context in which you exist—the systems you're part of. It's very hard to see all the systems that we're part of.

We often struggle to see the oceans creating the oxygen we breathe, yet there are practical tools that can help us develop this awareness. Systems mapping, for instance, is a powerful methodology I employ when working with organizations. I have them literally map out their social systems on paper. Similarly, when teaching systems thinking to college freshmen, I guide them through mapping their family systems, school systems, and the ecological and economic systems they participate in.

If you haven't explored systems mapping, I would strongly encourage you to try it. It's a transformative tool that helps organizations truly understand the systems they inhabit. Unfortunately, most people today don't think systemically. We live in a culture of what I call extreme individualism that has grown over the years for various reasons. We have come to believe we are freestanding, independent entities. In my college, there's an entire school of economics that teaches we are all autonomous entities with no responsibility for anyone else—that we should pursue our own economic self-interest without concern, and everything will magically work out for the better.

A little experience and insight suggests this isn't true. Consider the 2008 financial collapse, where the financial industry pursued its own economic self-interest without considering the economic system it was part of, collapsing the entire world economy. Or look at us here in the United States and other parts of the West, where we have pursued our economic self-interest by burning massive amounts of fossil fuels, collapsing the climate system we are intimately part of. This way of thinking simply doesn't work.

We have confused self-centeredness with individual self, and consequently, we are all much less free. Our children will be much less free in the future if we continue down this path.

This brings us to the second natural law of sustainability: the law of cause and effect. Everything happens based on what emerged before it. In today's overcrowded, overconsumed, overheating, and hyper-connected world, everything we do now creates the conditions for what will be possible in the future. This is, of course, the Buddhist principle of karma. What we do matters. Your actions have consequences. Everything has causes and conditions. The deeper you go into this understanding, the better off you'll be as your awareness grows.

The commitment here is to try to account for all the consequences of your actions. Of course, just like seeing systems, it's very difficult to account for all consequences. We often don't know, and sometimes there are unintended consequences we couldn't predict. But there are tools we can use.

Have any of you used a fishbone diagram? It's a simple tool I have students employ. You place the problem or action you're about to take at what looks like the head of a fish, resembling a fish skeleton, and work backwards. You outline all the possible consequences that might happen by taking that step—simple tools to help expand our awareness.

It's never possible to understand all the consequences of our actions, but as the Buddha said, the real key is to increase our awareness. Always try to increase our awareness. This is really about right intention and right thought—becoming aware that we have choices and that if we truly want to manage and reduce climate change to manageable levels, we must make different choices. This starts by first understanding the systems we're part of, then trying to be very conscious of what our impacts mean for those systems.

Of course, this is why we practice meditation—to increase our awareness and clear our minds.

I'd like you to take a journey with me now. Imagine that a genie has swept you away from your everyday job, your house, whatever you do for a living or with your time, and made you the most powerful decision maker on earth. At your fingertips is any information you want to make any decision you want, and whatever you decide will happen. Many of you here would actually be beneficial as the most powerful decision maker on earth, but please, play along with me.

But there is a catch. This genie has given you a unique form of amnesia. You can't remember your name, where you live, who your family is, your nationality, your religious status, or your financial status. You don't remember anything about yourself. All you know is that whatever you decide will happen.

Now, how would you make decisions under that circumstance?

What's happening right at the moment? Be here now. I would consult the wisest people I knew.

Okay, consult the wise people. Do we have any memory of what we already know or knew? No memory, because we don't know who we are. Anybody else?

You'd want to help everyone. Want to help everyone. Okay.

One more? Right. So you don't know the consequences, so how would you make decisions?

Use the seventh generation principle. Use the seventh generation principle, good.

I think all those are getting at the core of it. I think you would adopt some decision-making model that's similar to the age-old moral rule called "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—the golden rule. Because those others might be you, right? You don't know who you are.

What I describe sounds completely far-fetched, right? It's never going to happen. But what I just described is actually more or less the condition we live in today. Those of us here in California and in the West are emitting greenhouse gas emissions that are affecting people in China, in India, and all over the world. They don't know we've decided to drive our car here today and made that decision, but it's going to affect them. And vice versa—they're doing the same thing.

We have globalized environmental problems never before seen on Earth, these kinds of global issues like climate change, ocean acidification, the breakdown of the biosphere. Each of us now is making decisions that affect everyone else. We're living in a very different era, even than we lived in thirty and forty years ago. Because of that, we're going to have to think and act differently.

It starts with first understanding the systems we're part of and the consequences of those systems, of our actions on those systems. Then we have to decide how we're going to respond.

I think the first response is to adopt a clear moral principle based on the natural law that I call moral justice. In Buddhist terms, this is sila, moral conduct, which in Buddhism is the foundation of a peaceful life. It really means that we have to adopt the moral principle, the starting principle, to do no harm.

Every religion that I looked at when I was developing this model begins with the belief that we must do no harm. Even if you can't do good, try not to do harm. That's the first starting point. The commitment is to adopt the universal moral principle to do no harm. This is about trying to constrain our aggressive and harmful activities that we engage in.

It's not always possible to know all the different aspects of what we do and how it might harm others, but we really need to focus and raise our awareness of it as much as we can.

So reflect for just a moment: How often do you strive to do no harm? How often are you aware of that moral principle as a driver for your life? Sometimes? Never? Often? We'll come back to this in a second. But just become aware. Do you have a core moral principle of doing no harm?

Now I want you to play along with me again for just a second and go back to that first picture we showed on the PowerPoint of the blue marble. The acceleration of the population has led to an acceleration of economic activity, which has led to an acceleration of energy use around the world, and material use, and basically climate change as a result of a massive throughput of energy and materials through our economy. Because energy that's used only breaks down and disperses, that's what created climate change.

And so what many scientists are now saying is that this massive increase of human impacts on the planet, on the blue marble, has actually put us into a very new geological era. For the first time ever, human activities will determine future life on Earth, not natural processes. Of course, natural processes will interact with that. It's called the Anthropocene.

Climate scientists are now talking about this—that we're in a different era now, forever, for the first time ever. This means that what we determine, what we do, what we decide, the actions we take, the technologies we adopt, the policies we adopt, will determine future life on Earth. What lives, what doesn't, and where they live, how things shape up differently.

It is a universal moral axiom that the more power you have over another, the more responsibility you have to use that power benevolently. This means that we are now trustees. This is the fourth natural law of sustainability—the law of trusteeship.

This is actually about karuṇā, having compassion and taking care of all living organisms, muditā, taking joy in others rather than just being concerned about ourselves, and non-attachment. Trusteeship means that each of us here is just on Earth for a very short

period of time. No one in this room will be here 100 years from now. This means we're only temporarily managing or responsible for the resources we have. We're just temporary trustees.

We have a responsibility now because what we decide as trustees will determine what life on earth exists 50, 100, 150 years from now and where it will exist. We have a responsibility to manage that very, very carefully.

The fourth commitment is to adopt your trustee obligations and do good for all life. The first principle of moral justice is about trying to do no harm. But now, because climate change is so serious and other impacts are so serious, we also have to do good.

There are different tools and strategies developing for each one of these principles. Most of the organizations I work with, businesses and governments, are trying to reduce their environmental impacts—that is, do less harm. But we also need to flip it around and do good. There are fields you might know of called biomimicry, where we're trying to create new products and services to mimic nature. There's green chemistry using natural processes rather than synthetic chemicals. We actually have to restore the earth. We can't just reduce the harm we're doing to it. That's the difference between the two.

The final principle I'd like to talk about is the principle of free will, the natural law of free will. The Buddha said often that as we increase our awareness, we become aware that we're free at any time to make different choices, but it requires more awareness and more understanding.

The dharma principle with free will is paññā, the wisdom that leads us out of suffering. That wisdom is increased awareness and increased mindfulness of all of our actions, of the systems we're part of, of how we impact those systems and adopting an ethical way of life and understanding that we are trustees.

This is the last principle: to choose your own destiny. We do not have to continue down the path that we have continued down the last 50 to 100 years. In fact, I will say that throughout history, societies have made fundamentally different changes that are driven by different ways of thinking and seeing the world many, many times. We don't realize it, but that has happened. And every time they've made a fundamental change, most people have ended up much better off.

I think as we grow our consciousness—and maybe this framework can help you and others do that—we will all end up much better off.

If we have two more minutes, what I'd like to do is have each of you think just for a second about how often you find yourself following this commitment or basically following these dharma principles. Then turn to a partner and just talk for a second about what you discovered.

Evaluate yourself as to how well you're doing, how much you are aware of and try to stay focused on the dharma principle. Just for a very short period of time, share that with a partner and talk about it.

Does anybody want to share anything that popped up as you had this conversation? Anything that became particularly clear—and I apologize for the short duration of the conversation. I would encourage you to continue that afterwards for as long as you can.

The point that emerges is that it's hard to make the right choices or good choices today because of the structure of the systems we're part of. I think we all feel that. But this is not about being perfect. This is about continuing to expand our awareness. As more people expand their awareness, we will create the political will to change those practices.

So it's really about increased mindfulness and then encouraging others to take the same steps forward.

I think the comment was that we often get stuck on just thinking about cause and effect and don't realize the systems we're part of and the moral principles we need to adopt—moral justice that needs to guide our thinking and behavior, and also trusteeship. I think you're right. That's why I use this framework now with public and private organizations and nonprofits of all kinds, and I find very positive results.

We're even using it in working with the administration and others to try to encourage what the president announced—to create a conversation with Americans about climate change. I'm actually optimistic that something significant is going to happen. They've gotten overwhelmed now with the gun debate and healthcare and immigration and other issues, so finding the political space for them to act has been one of our challenges. The structure of the system in which the White House works is also very difficult to work within, and there are other issues within the administration itself. But I'm optimistic that we will see this administration take some very positive steps more than any other. It really is about helping them and others expand their awareness beyond just thinking about some very narrow issues.

The point was not to get caught up in self-judgment. You're absolutely right. The more you become aware of the consequences of your actions, the more you can be humbled and feel, "Oh my gosh, I'm doing all these wrong things." But again, you have

to first realize the systems you're part of. You live in this society. Then constantly grow your awareness and realize that you have a choice. The more choices you make, the better off you're going to be. Sometimes you make a choice and think, "Well, it's not the best one I could have made. It might have a serious impact. But that's the only thing I could do." As long as you're aware of it, next time you can make a different choice. And as I said, as other people begin to think the same way, we can create the social change necessary to really change the structures of those systems.

So don't feel bad. This is just the structure of the systems we're working in. But keep growing your awareness.

I want to leave you with this quote from John Seed, who Joanna teaches a lot with—a very inspiring environmental deep ecology being. He says, "Well, you might think there's nothing on the horizon that can help us. And you might wonder, what kind of miracle would be needed to make a difference? Well, it would be a very simple one, really. All that it would need would be for human beings to wake up one day different than they were the day before and realize that this is the end unless we make these changes, and then deciding to make the change. That doesn't seem like a very likely thing to happen. But on the other hand, the whole road that we've traveled is so littered with miracles that it's only our strange kind of modern psyche that refuses to see it. I mean, the miracle of being descended from a fish that chose to leave the water and walk on the land. Well, anyone with a pedigree like that, you can't lose hope."

CHAPTER 262

Connecting Inner and Outer Responses to Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 37 min

> *In this dharma talk, Donald Rothberg addresses the urgent need to connect our inner spiritual practices with outer responses to climate change. Drawing on the bodhisattva ideal from both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, he argues that neither purely private meditation practice nor conventional activism alone is sufficient for our times.*
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> *Rothberg explores how traditional Buddhist training in sīla (ethics), samādhi (meditation), and paññā (wisdom) must extend beyond individual liberation to encompass our interconnected response to collective challenges. He references the core teaching of dukkha and interdependence, suggesting that our hyper-individualized sense of self must evolve into an interdependent understanding that naturally responds to the suffering of climate change.*
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> *The talk presents practical applications through Joanna Macy's framework of the Great Turning: holding actions, creating new systems, and shifts in consciousness. Rothberg challenges practitioners to examine their carbon footprint and find their authentic calling in climate response, whether through household changes, community organizing, or larger systemic work. He emphasizes that this integration represents an evolutionary development - a contemporary manifestation of the bodhisattva vow to work for the liberation of all beings, now including future generations and the Earth itself.*

Our next presenter is sitting up here in his beautiful coat of many colors, Donald Rothberg. He's been practicing the Dharma since 1976, and he's really been very active and a pioneer in bringing the Dharma into the world of activism and peace work. He was instrumental in keeping the Buddhist Peace Fellowship going and teaching classes in communication skills and peace work—all that good stuff. He's the author of *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*. So, Donald, welcome.

Thank you very much. I should also mention that I have gone through very rigorous training at the Clown School of San Francisco, which is very important. And I also want to express my sadness that my collaborator, Conda Mason, is not here this afternoon. We had been planning for some time, but difficult personal things came up and it didn't work for her to be here today. I'm going to try to bring in some of her perspective. She is a teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center, very involved with permaculture. She's

been developing Hub Oakland and is especially interested in issues of climate justice and really addressing questions of how climate impacts the most vulnerable and the most marginalized. I'm going to bring some of those perspectives in, and I hope we all can bring those perspectives in.

I wanted to begin with a short meditation. I want to do this by saying some lines which I find very beautiful and inspiring. In fact, a lot of times when I practice, I say these lines twenty, thirty, forty, fifty times a day to myself to invoke really a quality of awareness and a quality of mind. You can do this with your eyes open. I was reflecting on this—this really is a kind of invocation that has us see our minds as of the earth. This is from the sixteenth century Tibetan tradition, Dagpo Tashi Namgyal. It goes like this. Just let this influence your awareness:

Open like the sky, pervasive like the earth, unshakeable like a mountain, shining like a flame, lucid like a crystal.

And feel free to take that home and repeat it twenty or thirty or forty times a day. Let me say it one more time:

Open like the sky, pervasive like the earth, unshakeable like a mountain, shining like a flame, lucid like a crystal.

Most days I call my mom up, who's in her eighties, and she likes me to say those words, and we just do it on the telephone every day. I especially like it because it actually cuts through, in a way, the distinction between awareness and the earth, between inner and outer, and lets us really experience those qualities.

I think that's really the essence of what I want to bring up today, which is about the need for a deeper relationship, maybe even a marriage of our inner practices and our outer response. This afternoon, we've really been invited as presenters to move more into the area of how do we respond. What I want to explore particularly in this short period here is the crucial way that we need to connect our inner practices with our outer responses. I think this was very much implied by what James and Rob in particular were saying. But I think that connection of our inner practices and our outer responses is absolutely critical. I think we actually need nothing less than the resources of our spiritual practices, our spiritual principles are needed for what needs to happen.

So I want to explore that in a few different ways. First, talking more about that vision. Then secondly, talking a little bit more about the inner responses. And then last, talking some about the outer responses. I wanted to bring up some, in particular Spirit

Rock as a community, because I think it's very helpful in terms of outer response to think of personal response, the response of one's community or organization or family, and then the larger collective response—to see how we respond in all of those ways.

So first, on that vision—it's very possible that without that marriage, as it were, of inner practices and action, we fall into distortions. If we stay with our inner practices being primarily private and our outer action following models of activism that have been prevalent in the past, I don't think that works.

Without that practice connecting with response to the world's needs, we run the risk of our beautiful practices becoming, in a way, a wonderful, privileged peace while the world burns.

I wanted to read something from a text by Bhikkhu Bodhi from a few years ago, where he said: "It seems to me that we Western Buddhists tend to dwell in a cognitive space that defines the first noble truth largely against the background of our middle-class lifestyles—as the gnawing of discontent, the ennui of oversatiation, the pain of unfulfilling relationships, or in Buddhist theory as bondage to the round of rebirths. Too often we do not focus on the suffering of the world."

Many of the teachers I worked with in Asia, people like Sulak Sivaraksa, and liberation theologians from Latin America, expressed real concern about the future of Buddhism—that it might become, in their words, a kind of escapism.

Yet we also know that traditional, or prevalent modes of action and activism are also very subject to distortions. There's an occupational hazard for people who want to do good: to be self-righteous, to be attached to their views, to be unskillful with challenging emotions—particularly anger—and often to be fueled exclusively by anger. To demonize the enemy, to find themselves burning out and not really able to sustain for the long haul, to lack those qualities of equanimity, and to not be able to be skillful with the immensity of difficulty or suffering.

So guess where activists learn how to correct those possible distortions? Learn about attachment to views, working with difficult emotions? They learn that in the Dharma—right here.

You see that there's such a joining that's really called for. This connection points to something new—the imagination of the earth is coming up with a new kind of being. It's really the bodhisattva of our times that would be able to respond deeply but have the inner skills to do so for the long haul, to be able to be with difficulties, to keep that sense of freedom of mind even with very challenging situations.

My own sense is that this is actually an evolutionary development—something that's being called forth because without those being connected, I don't think we have the resources to really pull off what needs to be done.

And it's very much the spirit of the Buddhist bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is being reborn in our times. Remember who the bodhisattva is? The being that is dedicated both to awakening and to helping others. That makes a commitment: no matter what happens, I will be there for other beings.

From the Theravada bodhisattva tradition: "Crossed, I would cross others. Freed, I would free others. Tamed, I would tame others. Calmed, I would calm others. Comforted, I would comfort others. Purified, I would purify others. Awakened, I would awaken others. Oh, may I awaken to supreme perfect enlightenment and bring well-being and happiness to all beings."

And from the Zen tradition, the Bodhisattva vow:
"Living beings are infinite. I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible. I vow to cut through them.
Dharma gates are boundless. I vow to enter them.
The Buddha way is unsurpassable. I vow to realize it."

What I find is really being invited is our own way of doing that. And I want to say very directly that for me, this means really finding our own place to be active.

It doesn't mean everyone becomes an activist. I remember that beautiful response from the African-American theologian Howard Thurman, when asked by a young man, "What should I do?" Howard Thurman had created the first interracial church in the Bay Area in the 1940s and was very active. This was near the end of his life, and you might have thought he would have said, "We have this project that needs people. Why don't you do this or that?" Instead he said, "Don't ask what the world needs, but ask what makes you come alive, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

It's another way of saying what Paul was expressing in terms of being in love with life—ask what makes you come alive. And I think very much of Joanna Macy, my dear sister's teaching, which has stayed with me for a very long time. She says that the great turning, which is what we're in the midst of, has three dimensions. Some of us are drawn to one, some to another, and some to yet another. We all find our place where our gifts are. This is a very important point, because this is not about everyone having to be on the front lines, but really finding where we are, where our gifts call us in the turning.

She said that there are three aspects of the turning. First is what she calls holding actions to prevent further damage. There's a lot of that needed—a tremendous amount. Second is really seeing how our institutions work and developing alternative institutions. This would be developing environmental education in the schools, different kinds of medical approaches, new approaches to parenting or community—really doing things in a way that is sustainable in whatever field we feel drawn to. Very crucial.

And the third is a shift in consciousness, really having one's action be part of this shift towards that sense of interdependence, towards that way of being that is sustainable—whether it's teaching yoga or teaching meditation. What I find crucial is that it's very helpful for all three of those to know that the others exist and to be connected. Some people will be activists, but it's really good to know that part of that turning is a shift in consciousness. I just want to name that because this isn't about telling everyone, "You should do this, you should do that." What's being called for is to feel that inner calling and know what that inner calling is.

So what kind of inner responses are we talking about? I think a lot of it is very connected with what Bob was saying in terms of those principles. I think a lot of it is to really make those connections between inner and outer, very much like Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1950s and 60s, coming out of a traditional monastic life in the presence of crisis.

This is what he said: "When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who are suffering? After careful reflection, we decided to do both."

That's what this is about—both. To go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. "We call it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help."

Very crucial. And so we can really look at those core principles of our practice.

And I discover that when working over the years with training programs to connect inner work with outer response, our core understandings of the Dharma are often given only in individual interpretations. Our practice develops beautifully in an inner way, but the challenges arise in how we bring our practice into the relational realm and into the collective realm.

Another issue with our practice—and this is offered as a completely loving critique of our beautiful practices, as well as a self-challenge—concerns how we approach the traditional three trainings in the Dharma: ethics, meditation, and wisdom. We tend to emphasize meditation most strongly, while not always emphasizing ethics and wisdom with equal depth. This happens partly because we primarily teach meditation, bringing in the other trainings but not always with the same thoroughness.

When we examine ethics, for example, and very much as Bob was expressing, we commit ourselves to non-harming—but how do we extend that commitment to all aspects of our lives? How do we truly examine our ethical commitment in terms of future generations? Are my present actions harming or tending to harm future generations? Are they harming people in other lands? We know the impact of climate change falls especially on those who are not causing the problems. This is our challenge: How do we look more deeply?

In our wisdom practice, how do we truly see causes and consequences? This requires looking deeply into these core teachings: What are the roots of suffering? How do I understand the structure of self? What kind of self am I? We know that we are very conditioned in this culture—not uniformly, but we tend to maintain a very self-centered self, even as we're meditating. One can be a very deeply self-centered meditator trying to deconstruct the self. There is tension there—do you sense it?

How do we understand that our times are calling for this self-centered, hyper-individualized self to become an interdependent self? This is challenging. It's very difficult sometimes to know what to do in terms of outer response.

Some things we can be very clear about. Looking at Spirit Rock, for example—I've spent the last week reviewing all the documents, and there are beautiful ways that Spirit Rock and its capital campaign are totally dedicated to green buildings and greening everything on the land. It's truly amazing. I was also inspired by attending meetings of the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, which offers a beautiful, precise analysis of Berkeley's carbon footprint. Someone at the UN called it a model for all cities.

Their analysis was very precise: here's the footprint from transportation—people coming and going from Berkeley; here's the footprint for housing and all its different needs; here's the footprint from waste. Transportation accounted for 46% of the footprint. Berkeley voters committed the city to reduce its carbon footprint by 33% by 2020 and 80% by 2050—which may not be quite enough, but represents significant change.

Our challenge is that we can do wonderful things where we have control—for example, at Spirit Rock with housing, usage, and everything from how we use paper. But what's really challenging? Transportation. This is where we confront our own habits, convenience, perhaps privilege.

To see this graphically: How many of you came here today in a car with one or two people? How many came in a car alone? How many came by bike? How many walked?

What I feel every community needs to do is assess its carbon footprint. Transportation proves especially difficult because it involves the lack of nearby public transportation and would require genuinely encouraging carpooling. But that's challenging, isn't it? Do you feel yourself bumping up against our habits? What would it truly take?

Some people say that in the long run, pulling this off requires a mobilization akin to the mobilization after Pearl Harbor.

If we really thought this was of concern, how would we act? How would we act? And what would we look at in terms of our own behavior? This, for me, is very challenging. And I can feel a little uncomfortable, which I think is healthy.

In terms of responses—outer responses—just to name them, I think we all know there are many responses we can implement in our households that can be quite beautiful, and we can reduce our carbon footprint. I've been reading a book called *The Low-Carbon Diet*, which promises to help us lose 5,000 pounds a year—because the average American consumes 55,000 pounds of carbon annually. We can very easily cut that. Sweden, which I believe has a higher standard of living than us, consumes 15,000 pounds per person. We consume 55,000. There's so much we can do on a household level, and I think this is within our control. This is accessible.

We can also act in our communities. As I mentioned, already a huge amount is being done. I think everything that's easily within the control of Spirit Rock is being acted upon. The harder things like transportation will take a little more work and some action, I believe.

It's also encouraging to know—this is what I believe—that the large-scale collective solutions are actually pretty clear. Those of you who've read Lester Brown know they're quite straightforward. There's an outline of what needs to be done to reduce by 80% by 2020: increase energy efficiency, shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy, stabilize population and eradicate poverty, restore the earth, feed people. Under each of these, he has fifteen specific actions. So it's quite clear.

Of course, what's challenging is that our leaders are not doing this at all, or very little. How do we find ways to respond at all of those levels in our own ways—personal, community, and that larger level?

Bill McKibben said something very interesting in an article a week or two ago. He said that if 10 or 15% of the population develop impeccable, sustainable ways of being in their own personal lives, it'll be nice, but not much will change. If those 10 or 15% of people choose to be very active with the horizon of helping to shift the larger systems, everything will change.

That really calls forth the bodhisattva. I want to finish with this, and maybe do a little exercise.

As we connect this inner work and deepen it, seeing more and more how to have it flow into the different parts of daily life and into our actions, what can inspire us? I was thinking of the bodhisattva figure.

The bodhisattva figure knows several things—these are really our training areas. First, the bodhisattva knows freedom—knows the freedom of awareness from having practiced, knows how mind states are temporary and can be worked with, knows where he or she gets stuck and how to work with that, and can increasingly touch freedom even in the most challenging situations. The bodhisattva has that training.

The bodhisattva also has the training of knowing how to be with suffering, knowing how to be with difficulties. This is our training—we have to train in this. We have to keep training. The bodhisattva knows how to be with suffering and can be skillful with one's own suffering, with other people's suffering, and is ultimately not scared of suffering, not scared of pain. That's a training we have to have deeply in these times.

The bodhisattva has skillful means—all sorts of tricks, all sorts of ways of working with challenging situations. I think ultimately, in our own being and among the people we know, we have to really encourage this combination of the inner work and the outer response. We have to see where am I called to respond in this area of climate change.

May people who are active gain the gift of dharma practice, and may that give them tools that let them act while avoiding those distortions and problems which are so pervasive. This is very, very crucial.

So I want to invite you to reflect for a moment on that Howard Thurman quote and ask: what makes me come alive in the context of our day? Where are you called right now in terms of your own response? This could be at a personal level, in your community, or helping with the collective issues. What one or two trainings, further practices, or actions are calling you right now?

Take a moment now to find a neighbor and share what pulls you, where you are called particularly in light of our theme for the day. Turn to someone near you and spend just a few minutes sharing what's there for you.

I'd love to hear from a few people about what's calling you right now.

"I'm really called to look at investments and examine what's causing damage and what's beneficial."

Beautiful. Thank you.

"I was thinking how much easier it was for me to answer the question on a day like today, with all these wonderful community organizations present. I'm thinking about not only doing something but joining a community."

Yes, plugging into existing communities and organizations. Thank you.

"I think one of the most common organizations people belong to that's so powerful are churches. Churches are right on the cusp of acknowledging this crisis, but they need to take that further step. Many of us can help them along in that way. The concept of God has often been very disembodied, but there's change happening, and I don't think it has to be that way. There is movement, but we could encourage that."

So being more active in one's community, particularly in churches, synagogues, temples, or meditation centers like Spirit Rock.

"I work for the Marin County Bicycle Coalition, focusing on transportation. One of the things I was called to do a few months ago was to ride the Climate Ride—a 300-mile bike ride down the California coast from Eureka to San Francisco. I am not an athlete. I'm usually the last person in group rides, not one of those fast, energetic riders. So this is a big challenge for me, but it's to raise awareness about climate change and promote bicycling for transportation. I'm raising money for the Marin County Bicycle Coalition. If you'd like to help me out, please find me."

Thank you for that commitment.

I want to end with three very brief passages that capture this marriage of inner and outer, inner response and outer response, and bringing that into the world.

The first is from the Jewish tradition, from the second century. Rabbi Tarfon said: "It is not upon you to finish the work. Neither are you free to desist from it."

It is not upon you to finish the work. Neither are you free to desist from it.

The second passage comes from Odo Sessho Roshi, the Zen teacher who guided Gary Snyder in Japan. He offered this profound simplicity: "Listen to this with a big mind. In Zen, there are only two things. You sit and you sweep the garden. It doesn't matter how big the garden is."

Do you understand? Whether our garden is our own backyard or the entire Earth, the practice remains the same—we tend what is before us with presence and care.

Finally, these words from Dina Metzger, her poem called "Song":

"There are those who are trying to set fire to the world.
We are in danger.
There is time only to work slowly.
There is no time not to love."

In these lines lives the essence of dharma practice—recognizing the urgency while maintaining the patience, holding both the danger and the love, working with deliberate care rather than frantic desperation.

This is how we bring our practice into the world: not trying to finish all the work, but never giving up our part in it; sitting in meditation and sweeping whatever garden we find ourselves in; working slowly with great love, even when—especially when—the world feels like it's on fire.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 263

Active Hope

Rob Burbea · 49 min

> *In this powerful dharma talk, renowned eco-dharma teacher Joanna Macy shares her journey from despair about environmental destruction to discovering "active hope" - hope as action rather than wishful thinking. Drawing deeply from Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, particularly the Prajñāpāramitā literature and Avataṃsaka Sutta, Macy explores how the bodhisattva path provides a framework for engaging with climate change and global crises without falling into panic or paralysis.*
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> *Macy recounts her pivotal moment hearing Jacques Cousteau's warning about ocean plankton decline, which opened her to the Buddhist teaching that "the bodhisattva has no place to stand" - finding stability through the twin wings of karuṇā (compassion) and prajñā (wisdom). She emphasizes how bodhicitta, the awakened heart-mind of the bodhisattva, emerges more powerfully through uncertainty, allowing practitioners to act from caring rather than optimism.*
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> *The talk weaves together practical activism with profound dharma, including the "ten universal enterings" from the Avataṃsaka Sutta that reveal our holographic interconnection across space and time. Macy demonstrates how facing our climate crisis can become bodhisattva training - learning to be fully present to suffering without being overwhelmed, finding joy in collective action, and expanding our temporal perspective beyond individual lifetimes to include ancestors and future beings.*

I love that song. It's my favorite, and Dave Carter wrote it—starting with that single cell, "This Is My Home," all the way through. And Donald, thank you for bringing in the Bodhisattva. When Paul said we can choose whether this is happening to us or for us, my response from deep within, without even thinking, is that it's for us. It's showing us what the Bodhisattva means.

We now have before us this work called *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy*. My favorite part is actually the subtitle. But I need to explain the "active hope" part, because if anybody here was working with me ten or twenty years ago—and I've been around quite a while—you might well remember me saying, "Hope is a killer. Hope is wishful thinking. Don't go there." I never would have imagined that I would write a book with hope in the title.

What I discovered in writing this is that hope is not something you have—it's something you do. It's not a noun; it's a verb. When you see it that way, then you can be doing hope even when you're not hopeful. I have found that this country, built as it is on dreams of manifest destiny and its own exceptionalism, has enshrined optimism to the point where you feel as if there's something wrong with you if you're not hopeful. Being hopeful and smiling becomes the sign of a successful, competent person. It's how you sell politicians and cars and anything. There's a tendency for us to be taking our pulse constantly: "Am I optimistic? Am I hopeful yet?" Thinking that you need to be hopeful in order to step forward for the sake of all beings.

Let me say right away that hope is loving, caring about your world, caring about it enough to step forward whatever you think of your competencies or whether you have a fail-proof plan or not. You probably have a better chance of going somewhere if you don't have a fail-proof plan—if you're just ready to take this next step, and after that, the next step afterwards.

This book was co-authored by Chris Johnstone, who is a physician in the United Kingdom, living in Bristol and now up in northern Scotland. He's not a Buddhist—not in Buddhist practice by any means. He's an addiction specialist, which is appropriate, don't you think? But he's been in the work. We've been working together in group work for helping people tell the truth about what it's like to be alive in the world today, to tell the truth about what they see and feel and know is happening to our world. In that process, they discover huge reservoirs of their own caring and learn to trust that. Really, it's Bodhisattva training, because it involves, as Donald just said, not being afraid of the suffering of our people or of our world. When you're not afraid of that, then nothing can stop you.

Though he's not in Buddhist practice, there are two terms in this book that are in Buddhist Sanskrit. One was Bodhisattva, simply because we couldn't find a term in English that says it. If you have a term, tell me. You can explain it with a phrase—a person who is animated by a lively caring for all beings, a being who knows that we are so interwoven, interconnected, that there's no private salvation, and that the one with the boundless heart... So we said, well, we're just going to keep it in the book.

The other phrase we kept was what's enshrined in the Bodhisattva's heart-mind, which is an intention, an impulse for taking part in the healing of our world, for being in service for all beings. There isn't a word for that either in English. So that word *bodhicitta* becomes more and more powerful for us, certainly for me, in being alive in this time and also as we look together at what helps us.

Let me scroll back thirty-six years to a turning point in my life. I walked into the Boston Coliseum with my second son, who was a freshman in college, and my daughter, who was still in high school. We were going to a Cousteau Society Day. How many of you remember Jacques-Yves Cousteau? I walked in and heard Cousteau say, "We have, in another thirty years, the plankton in our oceans will be insufficient to provide sufficient oxygen for us."

Somehow—you never know, I could have been looking at what my daughter was wearing or thinking about something else—but that just landed. He only said it once, and it just went right through me.

And it opened me up to a vast anguish of uncertainty. I took Cousteau at his word—he was an oceanographer who had sailed the oceans for decades, one of my heroes. We wouldn't have sufficient oxygen, he said. And now we know we have lost 40% of the plankton we had when he made that statement. I felt as if I'd lost some ground to stand on.

That phrase—"no ground to stand on"—was almost word for word what I was encountering in my studies. I had gone back to school in my forties and was studying the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, the Prajnaparamita, which first describe the Bodhisattva. I was deeply interested in the descriptions and metaphors because, without needing to explain it to myself, I needed to understand this human capacity.

This was the dawn of the Mahayana, some 500 years after the Buddha's life, when his central teaching of our interdependence had circled around to be perceived with extraordinary power. People realized through meditation and every aspect of Buddhist study and practice that the Bodhisattva was not merely the Buddha's earlier lives, as had been understood before. As practitioners went deeper into the teaching of interdependence—even more than interdependence, inter-existence—they recognized that the Bodhisattva is the one in us that knows there is no private salvation, that we are inextricably part of each other and of Earth, part of this world.

These scriptures made a clarion call: "Wait a minute! We're all bodhisattvas. How can we say we're interdependent, interconnected, and claim it's only the Buddha and his early lives? We're all bodhisattvas."

Among the many descriptors of the bodhisattva, one stood out: the bodhisattva has no place to stand. That's what came to me immediately when I heard about the plankton, when I confronted the incredible uncertainty we're facing as a result of what we have been doing in our culture, our technology, our political economy.

Since then, I have been turning to the bodhisattva teachings to understand how you can be okay and hang in there—hang out deeply, as Malcolm said—when you don't have sure ground, when the situation we're in is so uncertain.

One way the bodhisattva functions without solid ground is by flying. And you fly on two wings. You know what they are: compassion and wisdom. You fly in the deep space of wisdom—a wisdom of our interbeing known as the perfection of wisdom, the mother of all Buddhas.

That Cousteau Day changed my life. After hearing about the plankton, I went to different booths and panels addressing every stress point on our planet. This was 1977, thirty-six years ago. Whether it was oil spills, nuclear weapons, nuclear power, deforestation—climate change wasn't yet prominent in public discourse—the total effect after that word about plankton was to feel in my body-mind that maybe we might not make it.

Not that we were doomed. I wasn't convinced we were doomed. But simply realizing that we might not make it was enough to completely change the frame and feel of the ground under me and to transform my sense of life's purpose.

I could see that our people faced—and what became my chief preoccupation—nuclear radioactive materials from both nuclear power and weapons production, along with an awful lot of other terrifying news. The big question became: how to be open to this, how to be with what we're learning and not go crazy.

This surfaced directly in the book I brought out last year: how to be with what we're doing to the world, how to be fully present to it without panic or paralysis.

I began to see the path we would walk—the Bodhisattva path—as a road with two ditches. On one side, panic and social hysteria; on the other, paralysis. Both are grounded in fear, are they not?

And so how to be with, not caught in fear, is to me the defining journey of my life since then. What I've written and the work I've done, and the help that the Buddha Dharma and the Bodhisattva Yana has been, is how do we be present to a situation in a beloved world that might be going under and not check out. How can we bring our full presence?

Because certainly, you know, in your own life, if your mother or your spouse or your lover or a dear person—your sister, your brother—were there with a terminal disease, you're not going to walk out the door. You're going to be right there. I want us to be with

our world with that kind of presence, and I know that we're capable—just absolutely know that we're capable of that. And it became clear to me that this presence, full presence of heart and mind, is the biggest gift we can give our world.

But there was a point right after that plankton moment in my life, after that realization that we might not make it, that there wasn't a ground to stand on, when I really went into despair. I didn't want to tell my family how I felt because I didn't want them to worry about me. I loved them too much. And I didn't tell my friends because I didn't want them to try to cheer me up. That was the last thing I needed—like Job's comforters. I wanted to be with it. But then it was hard to sustain.

So what I did was—God bless whoever did it, maybe it was you, but somebody inside my head told me—get out there and you've got to work with other people. So I joined a team under Ralph Nader's critical mass movement. I got busy in a legal intervention, a kind of lawsuit against the Virginia Electric Power Company.

And boy, that was amazing. These young people were twenty years younger than I was. They were law students. They were sharp. They were full of zest, and they were like ten times smarter than I was, so they wanted to keep me busy. They thought I was very dear, and they sent me to work looking up the health effects around nuclear power plants.

I went into the library of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission—this was before the national security state; under Obama you could do things like that—and I learned a lot. I remember going back to them and saying, "Oh, what I'm learning! I'm learning about miscarriages and tumors and stillbirths and birth deformities. The closer you get to a reactor—it doesn't need to have an accident." And I said, "Oh boy, when we tell people that and we tell the judge, it'll be over for the nuclear power industry."

They looked at me and said, "Uh-huh, yeah, Joanna."

But at any rate, I grew up a lot on that. And what I learned was more important. By the way, we lost. We lost the lawsuit. And it still was one of the most valuable things of my life because I realized the utter joy of working with a group of people whom you automatically love and admire because you're pouring it out and doing something for the larger web of life. And you respect them so.

Don't you love respecting people? Oh, this is the best thing—admiring them. I love admiring people, and here when you start working on a cause like this.

So lesson number one—or maybe three, maybe I gave you some lessons already—but one is: if you want to do something in the world, don't you dare try to do it alone. This is for working with people. And you find out so much when you link arms with them. And it means going to where you can see the problem. Don't just read about it. Go down and look at it. Look at the fact that it's right there on an earthquake fault, that reactor.

I felt the same thing about the tar sands sometime later. It was beginning to worry me, and I thought, "I've heard about this. I need to see it. How do I see it?" Oh, I just got an invitation to give a talk in Alberta. Oh, there's Jennifer Berezan—she's from Alberta. So I said, "Jennifer, will you go with me to see the tar sands?" What we did was organize an event in her hometown at the time of her family in Edmonton, and we took the money that we'd earned by our event, and we went up to Fort McMurray, and we hired an airplane, and we flew out over the tar sands.

I saw hundreds of miles of hell—stinking horror with machines three times the size of this house—and we witnessed it with our own eyes. I just knew I had to see it.

That's another lesson. You may be like me and need to be present to your world, to actually see something. What I didn't know was that Jennifer would turn it into art, and she's ready to sing you her song about the tar sands that resulted from this. That's my lesson number five.

"Joanna, I loved what you said about not doing things alone and the kind of joy that comes from being together, even in the most difficult circumstances. Because I remember getting off that airplane—there were five of us on this little plane. We got off, and it was such a mixed feeling of horror and distress and love. To be there, especially with Joanna, and to witness that together and feel the combination of just rage, really, and the love for the land—that very potent combination—and the feeling of connection to the other people that we were on the plane with that I'll never, ever forget my whole life. So this is a song called 'My Memory Forever.'"

[Jennifer performs her song about the tar sands, accompanied by Eveli Posch and Barbara Borden]

Remember when we got to the airport, Jennifer, before we got on the little plane, there was a First Nations woman going upstream to the settlement there on the Athabasca. The water's poisoned, and the air's poisoned. There are these big ponds, and if geese and ducks fly over—if the ducks land, they're dead. So these big corporations,

Suncor and others—it's American money, American corporations up there—they put cannons by them. *Boom!* They shoot the cannons so that the wildfowl in migration don't land.

Now the Native people—and it's wonderful to see them moving—what they can teach us. Among the things they can teach us is how to mourn. We don't have in our culture funerals for our brother-sister species that are just tipping into extinction, that don't have enough habitat left to survive another generation or two. We have no ways, but we need to develop them. Let's do that here at Spirit Rock, so that we can water our souls in being able to be fully present. Just as you greet the beauty of a child and the wonders or gifts of life, so too can we be washed by those tears. I think Malcolm mentioned that, didn't he, about what tears can do to you.

So this is what climate change can do to you—or for you. Last week there was a conference in the Bay Area on renewable energy, and there was the mayor of a town in Kansas, Greensburg—Bob Dixon. His whole town was wiped out by a tornado. He was telling how the town is completely rebuilt, one hundred percent renewable. He said, "We took the wind that destroyed our town and turned it and built it up to restore our town." This is almost like a tantric flip, isn't it? It's just wonderful.

So we're asked to be inventive like that. We're asked to go totally beyond what we think is going to show us off as a really canny activist. And how not to even try to compute your chances of success.

I brought along my favorite quote from Paul Williams for when feelings of personal futility come over me. He said, "How dare I be discouraged by anything so trivial as fear of personal failure?" Because what you're doing is letting a much larger purpose move through you. That's what uncertainty can do for you. It can acquaint you with this bodhicitta, with the intention of the bodhisattva.

And you can feel it, I've discovered, all the more powerfully because of the uncertainty. Because there's no one—no one can tell us whether we're going to pull through or not. And if they try to, don't believe them. Because it's the not knowing that sharpens our presence and makes us alert, makes us be there, opens us up to the courage and risk-taking that can reveal our true nature.

So you can't count on anything out there. The one thing you can count on is your own caring, your own yearning, because you really give a shit. That you can count on. That's one way to translate bodhicitta.

This is from a climate scientist telling us what we will learn to do in this time, even if we survive, because of the changes already in store for us—the huge changes that climate change will inevitably bring. We might pull through it, but there's going to be very hard slogging.

And so this scientist, Suzanne Mosier, writes: "What then is asked of someone who chooses to be of service in this time? I think it's to be a steward, a shepherd, an arbiter, a crisis manager, a grief counselor, a future builder. You must be capable of helping people face new, more difficult, more pervasive challenges than ever before."

This person—that's you—must be capable of holding that which is happening to and in our world. We will need to mentor, guide, and assist people in processing enormous losses, human distress, constant crises, and seemingly endless need to maintain, restore, and rebuild.

This is made to order. Are we up to it at this point of our evolution to blossom into capacities of wisdom, moral strength? You know you have it in you. You know we're capable of that. We just have to be honest with ourselves. We have so much going for us.

That wasn't a bodhisattva scholar writing that.

What has made the biggest difference for me is expanding my temporal context and working with other people—the time span, the timescape that we're living in, beyond our separate lifetimes. Because the causes of climate change are so far beyond what we brought about, so far beyond our personal culpability. Come on, that could just shut us down. How can I feel responsible for that? How can you?

If you look to the causes and then if you look to the consequences—oh my word—how can one claim to be responsible for something so vast? So what do you do with your own sense of agency and responsibility? You have this life in which to act with your hands, mind, mouth, heart, brain. But you also need, it seems to me, grounding in something so much wider than your lifetime. Because our karma now—the consequences of our actions—extends into geological time spans.

So we can learn what the bodhisattva in Buddhist literature, and particularly in that wonderful school of Mahayana Buddhism conveyed in the Flower Garland Sutra and the Avatamsaka, understands: that on the one hand we are just in this moment, faced with this situation, but on the other hand we've been here since the beginning of time.

Look at your hand. That hand—really, well, look at it. The hand that we can act with now to reach out, to grasp, to lead, to comfort, to guide. Every atom and every molecule and every cell of that hand, of that body, goes back to the first splitting and spinning of the galaxies.

And as one of my teachers, radiologist Sister Rosalie Bertel, says: every being who will ever live in the future is here now. Where? In our ovaries and in our gonads and in our DNA. And the decisions that we make now, pertaining to our policies and how we live in our civilization, will have everything to do with whether future beings a thousand generations from now will be able to be born sound of mind and body.

So they're here, the future ones. And the ancestors are here. They're wanting to help us, but they only have our bodies to work through.

The Avatamsaka Sutra says the bodhisattva knows that there's one body—this body here—but also all the bodies of all the beings. You're working with both. It's as if all of creation, all of that exquisitely interconnected web of life, holds time as well as space.

And I'm imagining that as we face climate change—the causes so distant and the consequences so vast—we are up for a transformation in how we experience space-time.

And to just give you a clue to that, I would like to end with your listening to what's called the Ten Enterings of the Bodhisattva from the Avatamsaka Sutra. I will read it first, and then you'll hear it sung by an anti-nuclear sister of mine.

How does the Bodhisattva—that's you, that's me—how do we perform the ten universal enterings? What are they?

They are to bring all the universes into one hair, and one hair into all the universes. You will see that this is a holographic vision of reality. There are many thinkers in this time—Stan Grof, David Bohm, Karl Pribram, systems theorists—and there you see in science the showing that the whole is in the part. We know about the part being in the whole, but the whole story is also within each part.

To bring all sentient beings' bodies into one body and one body into all sentient beings' bodies. With the radioactivity from Fukushima that is here on the West Coast now and has been for two years, what's happening to the children in Tohoku and northern Japan isn't just there. It's here. It's as if we're in all bodies. Do you follow me? This transformation of our relation to space-time where we are in this moment and at the same time, by this extraordinary development of our karma, we are in intimate interconnection with all that is.

When a Bodhisattva attains the ten wisdoms, she can then perform the ten universal enterings. What are they?

To bring all the universes into one hair, and one hair into all the universes.

To bring all sentient beings' bodies into one body, and one body into all sentient beings' bodies.

To bring inconceivable kalpas into one moment and one moment into inconceivable kalpas.

To bring all the Buddha's dharmas into one dharma and one dharma into all the Buddha's dharmas.

To bring an inconceivable number of places into one place and one place into an inconceivable number of places.

To bring an inconceivable number of organs into one organ and one organ into an inconceivable number of organs.

To make all thoughts into one thought and one thought into all thoughts.

To bring all voices and languages into one voice and language and one voice and language into all voices and languages.

To make all the three times into one time and one time into all the three times.

This is the supreme samadhi.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 264

Reflections on the Day

Rob Burbea · 26 min

> *In this unique dharma offering, performance artist Nina Weiss leads the community through an embodied practice before sharing a profound piece of motion theater that weaves together themes of ecological awareness, interconnectedness, and transformation. Beginning with gentle movement to awaken the body, she transitions into storytelling that explores our collective response to climate crisis through the lens of Buddhist understanding.*
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> *Weiss shares two powerful stories: her encounter with a young woman grieving after watching a documentary about melting glaciers, and Catherine Sneed's prison garden project that transforms lives through connection with the earth. Through these narratives, she illuminates the Buddhist teaching of interdependence - how we are not separate 'me's but part of an interconnected 'we' that includes all beings and the natural world.*
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> *The talk demonstrates how contemplation of impermanence and suffering (dukkha) can lead not to despair but to love and compassionate action. Like the traditional charnel ground meditation that contemplates death to awaken wisdom, facing ecological destruction can open our hearts to deeper connection. The stories reveal how tending to life - whether through gardening or witnessing each other's grief - awakens recognition of our fundamental interconnectedness, echoing the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination (paṭiccasamutpāda).*

The impresario Bill Graham once said, "The Grateful Dead are the best at what they do, and they are the only ones who do what they do." The same, I think, could be said of our next performer, speaker, presenter, dancer, spirit, Nina Weiss.

Hi, everybody. What a moving day, an inspirational day. Wow.

I'm going to do a little performance, really little, soon. But I thought it'd be a good time to... have a body. So come to your feet, yeah. And I know you don't have a lot of room around you, so we're gonna adjust to tight space, as if we're seven billion people squished into a half a mile.

Lifting your arms up above your head, and if it's available to you to interlace your fingers, do that. Some of you are really tall. Turn the palms over and reach. And if you can't interlace your fingers, just keep your arms separate from each other. But really press, press, press. And then with the gentle movement of the neck, look up. And on an out-breath, let the arms go gently and go, "Ha." Excellent.

Now roll the shoulders up and back. Up and back in circles and go, "Ba, ba, ba, ba, ba, ba." Good. And front and back and go, "Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop."

And then gently with the feet about hip width apart—I can't see you all and you can't see me—let the chin come to the chest. The weight of the head falls and then make sure the knees are very soft, a little bit bent. And let the weight of the head carry the spine over so you're hanging from the hinge of the pelvis.

And then say that out loud: "Hanging from the hinge of the pelvis." And say it again and enjoy the sensuality of vowel and consonant. "Hanging from the hinge of the pelvis." Isn't that pleasurable?

Shake the head like you're nodding it, yes. And shake the head like you're shaking it, no. And then shake out the shoulders and go... And then gently roll up the spine one vertebra at a time.

Now take a tiny bit, a little bit of a wider stance and swing gently from side to side. And every once in a while go, "Ha!" Good. "Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha."

Then bring the knees parallel to each other again. I'm making sounds. And bounce and go, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." Shake out the shoulders, spine, tailbone, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha."

Palms together, jaw goes slack. You shake your hands and you let the jaw flop in its socket. You go...

Lift the arm up and hold the opposite ear. And then pull the head so the ear comes towards the shoulder. And breathe. And then let the hand go away, but the head stays. And then let the head just float back. Good.

Other arm comes up and around. Hold the ear and just pull the head so the opposite ear comes to the shoulder. And then drop the hand. Keep the head where it is.

And let the head float back. Then one more time—shake it up, add a little vigor.

Okay, you can sit down. Thank you.

You know, I think if we're going to change the world for the better, we're going to have to do a bit more of that.

So I do a form of improvisation called motion theater. It's autobiographical—I tell stories that are true, and I move around while I do it. I need a timekeeper, so Wes, you're my timekeeper. Can you give me a three-minute signal? Like wave your hand? How much time do I have? Twenty minutes? How many have I taken? Or do those not count because they were we and not me?

I've been sitting in the back of the room. It's hard to see from back there because, despite all these years of meditating at Spirit Rock, we are still in the trailer with the very low ceilings and the very lack of sight lines. So I'm craning my neck one way to see Paul and the other way to see Joanna.

Now we are nearing the end of this Earth Day, which we have devoted to devoting ourselves to ending the end of the species. We are going to end our trajectory that is leading us to our end. We are going to turn it around. We are entering the Great Turning. Somehow.

And we are coming to the end of the day, and there are a lot of takeaways. I just can't remember them. No, no, I can. One of them is: I am no longer a me, I am a we. I'm shifting from me to we. I am entering the grand we-dom of the future that may not be. And there are eight steps to doing that, which I do not remember, but there is a book in the back of the room. I'm going to buy the book. I am not going to read the book. I'm going to read the table of contents.

We have spent the entire Earth Day learning about how being outdoors in nature is the only way to really fall in love. We have to fall in love. I have to fall in love. No, no—do not despair, do not despair. Reframe: fall in love. But fall in love from the despair. It is by looking it straight on—we are ending, we are all going to die. Not just me, everyone. Everyone is going to die anyway. No—it's all going to die. It's a charnel ground meditation. The entire species.

We have never, ever seen anything like this before in the history of this species. We do not even know how to understand it. Our DNA is not programmed in a way that we can actually conceive of this magnitude.

of the extinction of the species that we are causing, but it is not my fault. And so I am going to look it in the eye without flinching. And I'm not going to be depressed that we've been in the trailer all day. My neck hurts from craning. My shoulders are getting kind of tense.

Now enter the grief. The Bodhi sought the courage to grieve and then fall in love. And out of the love, I can't remember what comes next.

I was at the Raphael Theater a few weeks ago to see Chasing Ice, that big film. Has anyone seen it? Made by the geologist, the photographer who worked for National Geographic. Despite his knees falling apart and his hips, nevertheless, he put on pitons—is that what they're called? Crampons—and climbed into the remote regions of the Arctic and Antarctic and Siberian tundra in these freezing cold conditions, clamped onto the sides of disintegrating glaciers.

He photographed these amazing glaciers disintegrating, melting away, and it was the most symphonic music, grand ice landscape, beauty, beauty, beauty. I was sitting in my seat with my popcorn just falling in love, falling in love. And then the next year when he went back, the landscape was so different. It had all turned to a kind of brown gravel. These grand ice-blue sculptural, massive, unimaginably large sculptures of ice were gone. They had receded so far that he couldn't even recognize the landscape anymore.

As I left the theater, there was a young woman standing in the aisle. She had very dark hair and bright, freshly painted red lipstick. She was probably wearing a vegan leather jacket. And I noticed that her back was shaking. She was quietly sobbing. And she couldn't move. We were the only two left in the theater. These tears were just cascading down her cheeks, and the mascara was making tracks and collecting in her cleavage.

I didn't know—should I touch her or not? So I stood very close and she said, "Where is everybody?" We were the only two left in the theater. "Where are all the people my age?" she said. She looked like she was maybe twenty-eight, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two—you can hardly tell, but younger and in that arena. The language when you're weeping is fragmented: "Where... they can't... the where..." And she said, "I have to stop crying so I can get outside."

And I said, "Don't stop. Don't stop." I needed her not to stop crying. "Keep crying and go get the people that are your age." It's like giving her a mission to weep. "Keep weeping. Keep weeping," I said, "and I will weep too." We went out of the theater kind of metaphorically hand in hand, devoted to weeping.

My friend Catherine Sneed tells a story. She was working in the prisons. She was working in the San Francisco Police Department. She's African American and has wild hair and this gap between her teeth. So when she smiles, you kind of celebrate the gap. She's broad-shouldered and kind of broad-waisted and walks with this kind of assurance that she seems to have downloaded from the police department.

She went into the jails and noticed this vacant lot that was full of hypodermic needles and condoms and broken glass and bits of marijuana—roaches, they're called. You kind of hold them with a special piece of equipment.

She decided to make a garden.

So she had to jump through a lot of intensely bureaucratic hoops until she got permission for an hour a day for the men in their orange suits to come out and first clean out the bicycle parts and gear shifts and old tires and hypodermic needles and used condoms. They had to use gloves. Tampons, Barbie doll heads. And then they brought in the shovels, the kinds with the pointed edges, and the kinds with the straight edges, the wooden handles, and the hoes, and the spades. And they turned over the earth.

And then they carried in—these big guys with muscles, because they work out in the jail, shaved their heads, proud of their lost teeth. And they turned the soil with compost and amendments, and then they planted food. Carrots, sweet peas, green beans, cauliflower. When the cauliflower came up, they didn't know what it was, because they hadn't been fed cauliflower. Mustard greens, collard greens, kale. There's a movie you can see.

And what started to happen is the men got released. They missed the garden. So they committed small crimes in order to get back. One of these men looks into the camera and he says, "I planted a seed and the seed sprouted—carrot, the little frilly leaves. And if I didn't water it, it died." He said, "Nothing ever needed me before. And I fell in love with the carrot." And there are tears streaming down his tattooed face because he fell in love with a carrot.

She realized it wasn't such a good plan that the men had to commit crimes to get back to the garden. So she found a vacant lot in Hunters Point and started an out-of-prison garden project, as opposed to the in-prison garden project. And she started to jump through the bureaucratic hoops, but got bored with the tedium of bureaucratic hoops. Because, as they said today, certain systems just are not working, and don't imagine that they ever will.

So instead, they climbed the fence. She and some of those big guys took their shovels and the bare root trees because they were going to turn the vacant lot into a garden in the middle of Hunter's Point. They climbed the chain link fence and dumped the shovels and the hoes and the spades and the amendment on the other side. And they began to amend the soil after ridding it of the needles and the car parts and the condoms with the gloves and the Barbie doll limbs. And they dug a hole.

And as Catherine was kneeling down to plant the bare root of a tree into the Hunter's Point hole, she looked up and there was a young boy about seven holding a gun. Could have been a toy, but it was a gun. And she looked up, and she'd grown up in that part of town, so she knew that it was unlikely she would make her way out of that garden. All of the men who had also grown up in that part of town with the muscles and the tattoos had gone back over the fence, because they knew what it meant to look into the barrel of a gun as well. She turned around, and there was no one there.

And then suddenly one of the ex-cons looked at that boy and he realized that he knew that boy's aunt. And he said, "Your aunt, her name's Maria." And the boy looked up. And another ex-con came back over the fence and he said, "Yeah, I know where you live." And the boy looked up. And suddenly all of the men came back and gathered round and named the streets and the neighborhood and knew which trees grew on which block and knew the colors of the houses and knew the boy's aunt and sister.

Catherine looked at the boy and she said, "Do you want to plant the tree?"

And he put down his gun and he knelt on the earth, holding the bare roots in his bare hand. And he laid the tree into the hole. And she said, "Now you have to fill in the earth and tamp it down." He tamped it down with bare feet. And then they poured water on it. And she saw as the water fell this little moment of recognition in his eyes. That the water was like rain, that rain came from clouds and clouds moved through the sky by wind that was caused by movement of ocean. And that the trees would reach to the sun and the sun had a movement in the sky that defined the movement of the stars and that his own hand, in his own hand, in our own hands, we recognize stardust.

Pressure cookers, shrapnel, nails, childhood of violence. The violence comes at us and we can't help ourselves. We extend it back out. And the way we change is to start to understand I am not me. I never have been.

And "we" isn't a big enough word. Stars, wind, guns, roots. He started to see just for a moment—because she saw the recognition in his eyes—that he was connected to everyone. And he put down the gun.

Imagine driving home, making that right turn at the end of the Spirit Rock driveway, even though I want to turn left. Driving down the road where the green hills are just starting to go brown, and there's that moment where I want them not to turn brown—that color in California we call gold. It's gold. Reframe it.

I'm going to go home and take a hike with my dogs and look really carefully at the lupine that is just starting to burst with its purple flower. And look at the leaf which has five fingers and is shaped just like a hand. And I'm going to see stars.

This is what it means to practice. To slowly, patiently train ourselves to see the interconnection that was always there. To recognize that our own hands hold stardust, that our breath moves with the same wind that carries the clouds. When we truly see this—not just intellectually, but with our whole being—something fundamental shifts. The boundaries that seemed so solid begin to dissolve. The separation that breeds fear and violence reveals itself as illusion.

Each moment of recognition, no matter how brief, plants a seed. Each time we choose to see connection rather than division, we water that seed. This is how transformation happens—not all at once, but through countless small moments of awakening, until one day we look at a lupine leaf shaped like a hand and know, with complete certainty, that we are not separate from anything at all.

CHAPTER 265

Loving the Earth: Awareness, Action and Celebration

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this inspiring dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses how to engage with environmental and social crises from a place of love rather than despair or guilt. Drawing on Gary Snyder's advice to "save the earth because you love it," Burbea weaves together stories of Polynesian navigators, encounters with elephants and dolphins, and teachings on interconnectedness to show how our activism must emerge from recognition of our fundamental unity with all life.*
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> *The talk addresses common challenges faced by activists: working with despair, anger, and grief while maintaining joyful responsibility. Burbea emphasizes that we are not separate from nature but are the earth itself, sharing breath with all beings. He introduces the concept of planting seeds of intention rather than trying to control outcomes, referencing the Bhagavad Gītā's teaching on acting without attachment to results.*
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> *The session concludes with a powerful meditation expanding awareness from personal identity to cosmic consciousness, followed by the creation of blessing cords tied with three knots representing refuge, compassion, and personal bodhisattva vows. This practice helps participants carry their sacred intentions from the meditation hall into engaged action in the world.*

I have a question to start with. Those of you who have been here all day have heard inspiring and visionary calls to action, information, and so forth. What would help you as we prepare to transition from here back out into the dance of the freeways, the blue waters of the bay, and this Easter evening? What themes, what concerns?

James asked me to come in toward the end, and I wasn't sure whether it was tired activists who are here taking a break—"I've tried too hard and I'm carrying the entire world like Sisyphus and I need to take a little rest"—or whether it's people who are aspiring activists actually saying, "Oh, I think it's about time to get my act together." Anyway, themes, topics, anything that you would like.

You can take inspiration—you can take all you want. This is actually the dump. You can leave stuff here, and what you can take is inspiration and spaciousness and what else?

Can you speak about how to work with the despair that comes up? Despair, how to work with despair. Other themes?

Joyful responsibility. Oh, my heavens. That joyful responsibility. Parenting. Reaching people. How to mindfully converse with people who may not quite have the same perspective as we do on some of these crises—what the Dalai Lama calls "his friends the enemy." It's very interesting. He doesn't say "my friends." He says "my friends the enemy that I talk to." Including each other. How do we talk to one another?

Slightly on similar lines to despair, but the anger thing. Anger, how to deal with anger. And all the issues around the animal world—all the many, many other sentient beings that are being affected by everything so deeply. The animal world and the other sentient beings. The grief around that and concern. Grief. Grief, despair, and grief. Anger and conflict about all this.

Grief and despair. Anger and conflict—with those around us, with corporations, with the systems we're embedded in. These are the waters we're swimming in.

Yet somehow I feel called to begin on a different note. I loved sitting here with Wes and Kevin, witnessing how they transform despair and concern into art and community. This creative alchemy feels essential to our time.

Wes recently interviewed Gary Snyder, one of our greatest living environmentalists—Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who was writing about "Earth household" back in the 1950s, long before environmental consciousness had taken root. Wes asked him: "Now you're in your mid-eighties, watching seas rise and species disappear, witnessing this global climate disruption you've long warned about. What advice do you have for us?"

Gary's response was stunning in its simplicity: "Don't feel guilty."

Three words that cut through everything. He continued: "If you're going to save it, save it because you love it. If you go out because you're angry, or bitter, or to fight—it's not going to help you, and it's not going to help the world. The world needs this transformation of consciousness, and it really has to come out of love. It's the only power that's going to make a difference."

Reflecting on Gary's wisdom, I see he's pointing toward something profound: what's going to serve the world is our tenderness and care. That's what it's asking for. That's what any child always asks for. This Earth is both our mother and our child.

This brings me to a poem by Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1945. She was known for her exacting standards—a harsh critic of poetry. But one day a sixteen-year-old boy handed her a sheaf of his poems. After reading them, she looked up and said, "Pablo, you're a real poet. Keep writing." She had just encouraged Pablo Neruda.

Her poem speaks to this quality of heart we need:

A woman is singing in the valley. The shadow falling blots her out, but her song spreads far across the fields. Her heart is broken, like the jar she dropped this afternoon among the pebbles in the brook. And as she sings, the hidden wound sharpens on the thread of her song and becomes thin and hard, and her voice in modulations dampens with blood.

In the fields the other voices die with the dying day, and a moment ago the song of the last bird stopped. But her deathless heart, alive with grief, gathers all the silent voices into her own, sharp now yet very sweet.

Does she sing for a husband who looks at her silently in the dark? Or for a child whom her song caresses? Or does she sing for her own heart, more helpless than a babe at night-fall?

Night grows maternal before this song that goes to meet it. The stars with a sweetness that is human are beginning to come out. The sky full of stars becomes human and understands the sorrows of this world.

And her song, as pure as water filled with light, cleanses the plain and rinses the mean air of day in which men hate. And from the throat of the woman who keeps on singing, day rises nobly, evaporating toward the stars.

A song of tears and beauty, connected to the turning of the earth. Somehow we must find a way to carry all the information—the rising CO2 levels, the corporate malfeasance, the climate disruption—in our hearts, in our bodies, in our being, and do it out of love.

What helps is realizing you're not alone. I don't mean this in the conventional activist sense of "we have a big movement," but in something far more mysterious and wonderful.

My friend Deena Metzger, poet and activist, writes: "Give me everything mangled and bruised and I will make a light of it to make you weep and we will have rain and we will begin again." Take the worst of things and transform them.

She has traveled the world sitting with shamans, healers, sages, and wise women, asking: What do we do in this difficult, perhaps dark time? Her dream was always to sit in council not only with humans but with the non-humans as well.

In Zimbabwe and Botswana, sitting with the traditional healers there, she shared this vision. "Oh yes," they said. When she expressed her longing to sit in council with elephants, they arranged for a truck to take them to a watering hole in the Okavango, near the elephant herds. They parked and sat in a circle in the truck bed, spending half an hour in prayer and peaceful meditation, envisioning their connection with all life—which is real, which we truly have.

Then a very large elephant—though they are all large, aren't they?—approached...

But this was a particularly large—they are all large, aren't they?—but this was a particularly big elephant, female, who walked down from the hills to the truck where they were seated in a circle, stuck her head in the circle, her eye four feet from Dina's, as she said, and stood there with them for twenty minutes without moving while they were all there. Then nodded and walked off.

"Okay, that was pretty wild, all right?" They sat there, made prayers, thanked the elephant, and so forth, turned the truck around, and were getting ready to go when they noticed that the elephant had gone up over the hill and now came back with fifteen or twenty other elephants. They all lined what was a sort of dry riverbed that had a two-track jeep road. They lined the road as if to acknowledge those who had come to listen and sit with them as they all exited.

She said, "I don't know exactly what it means, but I do know that it means that we're not alone, that we're not alone."

I was in Hawaii and met one of my heroes, a man named Nainoa Thompson. How many people have ever heard of Nainoa Thompson? Maybe one or two people in the room—okay, that's good, this is a treat then. I get to tell you.

The Pacific islands were populated by the Polynesians who, if you trace the DNA and so forth, whose genetic tree or stream takes them back to the islanders of the Philippines and Borneo and Southeast Asia. The Polynesians and the Hawaiians and so forth all knew that they had these great voyaging canoes in the old days. There were still pictures and paintings of them.

And they navigated half the earth covered with water, which is the Pacific Ocean, so that when Captain Cook—who was arguably the finest navigator in the Royal Navy of England—went to the South Pacific, to the far islands, he met some of the master navig-

ators there and said, "So tell me about what's here in the South Pacific." They cleared the sand and put 120 stones on it, which were the islands in 4,000 miles of direction from there. Then they took one of these navigators on the ship. Rain, doldrums, dark clouds—you couldn't see the sky at night, no way to know where you were. And whenever they asked, he'd say, "Oh, my island is there, and here's where we're headed."

So the Hawaiians in the '70s decided they would start the voyaging tradition again. They went to the far Marquesas and found a man named Mau, who was one of the last living navigators, who'd been trained in this lineage of shaman navigators. And Nainoa was one of the small group of people that went there to train.

The training was intense. When Mau was trained, he got seasick, so his grandfather tied his hands together with rope, threw him overboard of a little boat, and just towed him around for some weeks until he got used to being part of the ocean. Later on in his training, his testicles were tied to the bottom of the boat for twenty-four hours so that he could feel the waves. There are five levels of waves—the waves that bounce off the islands that are 500 or 1,000 miles away, the deep waves in the ocean—and get them in his body. Learn to read hundreds of stars, to watch the floating things from the seaweed and the birds, to look at the other levels of waves and so forth.

So Nainoa went and did this training. And then they took the first big voyaging canoe—two sixty-foot trees tied together and lashed together in a traditional way—and began to voyage the Pacific. With some difficulties, I won't go into all the stories, but when they finally got to Tahiti, half the population of the island came out to greet them as if they were gods, because they were showing what this beautiful culture had known: the capacity of sailing the ocean without a single instrument and knowing where you were always.

And Nainoa sits like a yogi, and now he's trained his successors, including this young Hawaiian woman. You don't sleep for the whole month or two of the voyage. You sit in a kind of yogic meditation and you always know where you are.

But they decided to do the hardest of all sails, which was to Easter Island—the Rapa Nui—which is the farthest, most remote island in all of the South Pacific. Through the doldrums, through rain, gray skies. And almost getting to that area, Nainoa fell asleep. He woke up and it was the middle of the night and he realized he'd fallen asleep and he didn't know where he was. And he didn't want to tell anyone that he didn't know where he was because they'd been out for six weeks sailing and paddling, and he didn't know where he was. So he just sat not knowing for a couple of days, letting them sail.

And then in the night he heard Mau, his teacher's voice, say, "When you don't know where you are"—it's like Wes's song—he said, "stop and do a very deep meditation and realize where you really are." And he said, "So I just let everything go and realized that I was in the center of the universe, that the boat was the center of the galaxy. We're always in the center. Where are you? Here. Now."

And he said, "All of a sudden I came at rest. I knew what my teacher meant. I was just where I was." He said, "And then if you are still lost," he said, "with your heart and your imagination, raise the islands out of the ocean."

He said, "I didn't quite know what he meant by that, but there I am sitting and realizing now it's dark and I'm in the middle of the universe, and what to do? Just be." Then there was a break in the clouds, the moon came out, and it showed on the horizon the peak of this island, which was Rapa Nui. He said, "It's as if when I was ready, the island appeared for me."

He said, "My teacher could do that at will. You know, we'd be out somewhere, and he'd say, 'All right, this is where we're going,' and things would just appear." He said, "I don't know how he did that, but I've come to trust that I'm part of something so huge, so much bigger than anything that I could possibly imagine with my little brain, that when we go out"—imagine going out for two months through the storms in a double-hulled canoe, basically, to cross the Pacific—"I've come to trust that I am part of something so wondrous and mysterious and enormous. And it's not me who's taking care of it. My job is to become in harmony with this and let my love, my voice, my connection, my vision come out of that."

One day, when I was walking through the Stanford University campus—this is from Vandana Shiva, who is another great activist. Her work a lot was to clean up the Ganges project. She worked with the Mahant of Varanasi of the Tulsi Temple to do this whole project to clean up the Ganges River.

I was walking through the Stanford University campus with a friend when I saw a crowd of people with cameras and video equipment on a little hillside. They were clustered around a pair of chimpanzees—a male running loose and a female on a chain about twenty-five feet long, a light chain. It turned out the male was from Marine World Africa, and the female was being studied for something at Stanford. And who I thought were the spectators were actually scientists and publicity people trying to get them to mate.

The male was eager—you know how they can be. He grunted and grabbed the female's chain and tugged. She whimpered and backed away. He pulled again. She pulled back. Watching the chimps' faces, I began to feel sympathy for the female.

Suddenly, the female chimp yanked her chain out of the male's grasp. And to my amazement, she walked through the crowd straight over to me, took my hand, and led me across the circle to the only other two women in the crowd, and joined hands with them. And now the four of us stood together in a circle. I remember the feeling of that rough palm against mine. The little chimp had recognized us and reached out across all the years of evolution to form her own women's support group.

We're part of something, and that something—which is life, which is huge and mysterious and beautiful—is asking of you to participate in life. And it's asking you all the time. You know, you may not always pick up the phone or answer your text or whatever it is.

This from Alison Luterman, a poet in Oakland. She describes the generosity of life. She said, "In the same way sun drapes a buttered scarf across your face, rose opens herself to your glance, and rain shares its divine melancholy, the whole world keeps whispering or shouting to you, nibbling your ear like a neglected lover."

Here we are on this amazing earth connected with the creatures and the animals and the atmosphere and the food chains and the corporations. We saw these white freshwater dolphins in the Irrawaddy River in March when we were traveling in Burma—the dolphins of the world swimming along with us. And Trudy, my partner, wanted to jump off the boat and swim along with the dolphins because she does that in other places. But I said, "The Irrawaddy is not the right place to do this right now." It was pretty, with lots of other boat traffic and things like that. But we're part of this web. Everybody knows it in some way.

And then the question is: well, what do we do? How do we take the spirit and the song and the vision and the science from this day and bring it—each in our own way—into action?

I would like to use the image of planting seeds. You don't make the fields, you don't make the rain, but you carry seeds in your heart. And the seeds are really the seeds of your best intentions and the seeds of your actions. As Henry David Thoreau said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there to plant and I am prepared to expect wonders."

And so it's not given to you to hold the world or change it. It's not your responsibility. That would be pretty egotistical—"Okay, I'm going to do it!" But it is given to you to plant beautiful and amazing seeds and to join with others and to water them and to amend the soil, each in your own way. And it's going to take a while. I'm sorry to say, the earth changes slowly.

My friend—our friend—James and Jane and others know this fellow named Ari Ratana, who is the best, most famous community organizer in Asia. He started the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka that eventually spread to half the villages or more in the country. When the Norwegians were brokering a peace treaty there, Ari called all his people together to Anuradhapura, the great ancient temple there, to talk about how to make peace. Six hundred and fifty thousand people came—and this is a country of only eighteen million people. A quite extraordinary being.

He stood up there and he said, "It took us five hundred years to get into this civil war, this mess. Four hundred years of British colonial oppression, five hundred years of conflict between the Muslims and the Buddhists and the Hindus, two hundred years of disparity between the rich, wet parts and the poor, dry parts of the island. So the Buddha teaches us that things arise according to causes and conditions. If we wish this to change, we will have to change the causes and conditions. Therefore, I offer you the Sarvodaya five-hundred-year peace plan.

"Five years of ceasefire, ten years of rebuilding roads and schools, twenty-five years to learn each other's language and religion, fifty years of an economic plan to bring harmony between the rich and the poor parts of the island. And in one hundred years we'll have a council and we'll sit down and we'll say, 'Twenty percent—how are we doing? Are we on the right track?' And then we'll do it again for the next hundred and the next hundred. And maybe in—"

Five hundred years, and maybe he was half-kidding, but he said, "If we pursue it" – not maybe – "if we plant these seeds in five hundred years, we will have the island of peace that we dream of."

I got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama when I was doing some teaching as part of an event with him. Having the Dalai Lama sit there when you do teaching is actually a very cool thing. I told this story and he was grinning, because he's in the same predicament. He's got Tibet and it's fifty years of Chinese military oppression and the loss of temples and cultures and all those things. Talking about anger and suffering, he said, "They've taken our sacred texts. They've burned our temples. They've taken our ability to practice our religion and rituals. They've taken so much from us. Why should I let them take my happiness?" And then he laughed.

You understand that no one can take away your joy. No one can take that part of your heart from you.

So I got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama, and then share the passage from Thomas Merton, where he writes to an activist and says: "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no results at all, if not at times perhaps bringing about its opposite. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

And so you set an intention in your heart, you align yourself with what the Earth asks of you – because you are of the Earth, you are the Earth – and you plant your seeds. For some it will be demonstrating, and for some it will be teaching kids in a preschool how to make a garden, raising conscious children, running a conscious business. For some it will be teaching not only English to immigrants, but really making immigrants understand that they too are part of the web of the world that's welcome. Or tending the animals and letting them know that you love them, that they're part of you, that we exist with the animal world. In fact, we are the animal world. It's kind of a delusion to think somehow that we're different from all this.

And so you have one foot in the trees and the soil of the earth and the other foot in eternity. Because the question is not the future of the earth or the future of humanity, but it is the presence of something greater, of eternity itself.

And that means somehow that in order to do this work – to not feel guilty, as Gary says, but to do it out of love – requires that you carry first that you set an inner intention that's really beautiful, maybe something you can't possibly do, but you set it as the vision, your bodhisattva vow, you act on it, you plant your seeds.

And here's the secret. It's a summary of the Bhagavad Gita. The secret is to act well without attachment to the fruits of the actions, because it's not given to you to determine how it's going to come out. But what's given to you is to act beautifully and bravely and mercifully and to love. And if you do that, all kinds of things – and the elephants will be cheering you and the dolphins will be swimming with you and the chimpanzees will take your hand and say, "Come on baby, let's do more of this." The earth will be with you. Because the earth wants this as well, and you can begin to trust this.

I'm supposed to teach a meditation. Let me read you one little thing, then we'll do our meditation. It's one of my favorite poems from Diane Ackerman. When I think about people making a bodhisattva vow – you know, "sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all," and so forth – of course, it's very complicated because if you

decide to save the sentient beings in your family, they don't necessarily want to be saved by you. Then you realize that saving sentient beings means something a little different than your ideas about how they're supposed to be.

This is Diane Ackerman's version of what I call her version of the Bodhisattva Vows, saying if you were to have prayer in the schools, here's maybe a morning prayer that kids could make: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder and an architect of peace."

And so in the meditation, which we'll do now, one of the things I'll ask is if you were to make a little vow, make your own bodhisattva vow from today, what would it be? What would the seeds be? Sometimes it's just as simple: "I vow to be kind to every being I encounter." It can be that simple, but it might be something else and only you can know. It's sort of setting the compass of your heart.

So let your eyes close gently and come back just to feel your breath breathing. The wind that was carried to you, that dusted the peaks of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, swept across the Pacific to your breath that you take in right now. Of course, it also was the breath of the person sitting next to you a few seconds ago. You don't even have to kiss them – they give you your breath. And it's the breath of the...

raccoons that are in the trees and the deer around us and the earthworms and the sparrows. Let your life breath breathe in and out and bring your attention gently to the area of your heart.

Feel that you've been given life. You've been given this amazing incarnation, this gift of being alive. Sometimes it feels small and you get identified with unworthiness and grief and fear and attachments. But it's also possible to feel the radiance of life given to you that breathes itself and moves. In this there's a deep peace and natural love.

Imagine as you sit now that this love, which is what was born into you—the tenderness and care that's born into every newborn child—fills your body, all the cells of your body with life force and healing and care.

Then imagine somehow that you could expand so that your head poked up from the ceiling and your body got bigger and bigger, and you were bigger than this whole building. All the beings inside here, breathing and meditating, they were all inside you. You become this great vast being who holds Spirit Rock in your body. All their human experiences are breathing and thinking and feelings. Let yourself get bigger and bigger.

Imagine, because identity is so mysterious, that you can feel not just the room, but float up in the sky and be enormous. As if you float over the Bay Area, and all of California is now down there, part of this huge body. You're becoming bigger and bigger. In there is humanity, the human condition of joy and desire and loneliness and caring and violence and the love of parents for their children and failure and creativity—and all the animals, the bay and the ocean, all that is in you.

You're now this vast being and you get bigger and bigger, as if you're so big that the whole earth is there in front of you and you could hold it in your lap. You realize, no, it's part of you. You're as big as the solar system and you expand like the galaxies, huge. Even the little earth is just there, a blue-green ball deep within you, with all its dreams and hopes and hundreds of millions of years of life.

You rest in the vastness that is silent and peaceful and everything that exists is all within you. You are the ancient one. Everything that ever is or was or will be, all time, the dance of the universe is within you. It's silent and peaceful, no boundaries, beyond form.

Gently begin to collect yourself and gently the vastness starts to collect and get smaller. Slowly you feel the galaxies and the solar system and the earth floating within you with all the cities and forests and oceans. Now you look and see the earth and the beings on it and realize you are being given the gift of incarnation to be a little part of the whole and yet at the same time to have one foot in your human body and another in eternity itself, in the timeless.

You can do something beautiful with the life you've been given. You can tend this earth, you can care for all beings, not out of guilt, as Gary says, but out of love and compassion, out of care, for they're all part of you.

Before you come back to your small self, to the limited and beautiful and wonderful incarnation that you've been given in this body, as you look at this earth from this vast perspective, let yourself listen for your own bodhisattva vow or your own highest intention. What would it be that on this day you might say, this is the direction of my heart? What is the spirit and what are the energy and the vision that you want to carry from this day? How can you carry it beautifully in your own form—as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, an architect of peace?

As you envision now coming back to this body and incarnation, let the heart fill with compassion for all the worries and struggles that you and others carry. Let there come an understanding in this tenderness, heart filled with tenderness, of how to navigate

the joys and sorrows, the gain and loss, the praise and blame, the birth and death. This is human incarnation. This is this earth. How to carry yourself so beautifully and plant the best of seeds.

As you envision, feel what your body would be like to carry the spirit of awakening. Sense what the quality of your heart will be as you carry this spirit of awakening and care.

As you get ready to re-inhabit this human life with now wisdom and the vows of what you'll do, and a deep sense of tenderness, as you come back, you realize that in your lap, the bodhisattvas and Buddhas, the Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion, has left you a gift. You can picture or imagine that there's a gift in your lap, which is a clear symbol of just what you need to carry you into this work of loving and serving the earth most skillfully.

You open this gift from the goddess of compassion and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It's the perfect thing that you need to keep this sense of peace and the beautiful seeds and the action you'll take. Let yourself unwrap it, picture it, imagine it, envision it any way you can. If it's not clear, hold it up in your hands to the sunlight. This is the gift, the clear symbol of just what you need as you leave the temple back to the marketplace.

Finally, coming back to sense yourself seated here now with this gift and with your heart's intention, let there be loving and compassionate awareness of this life you've been given. Think of the people that care about you the most, how they love you and want the best for you. You are a daughter or a son of this earth. You are wanted here.

And let the love in because compassion and love are never complete unless they include the one seated right here on your own cushion. Then the circle is complete and you become an expression of that love. Fill yourself with that love. Let it bless you. Let it touch all the cells of your body, every breath and heartbeat. Take your gift. Remember your vows or your sacred intention. Most of all, remember that you can dance.

Now we're going to create blessing cords together, sacred green cords that will carry your intention. As these cords get passed around, don't tie them on yet. Just hold them and pass them to others near you. You may have seen people wearing blessing or protection cords—red ones and golden ones throughout the world.

Throughout Buddhist Asia, all the way from what were the Buddhist countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan and India, and across Southeast Asia through China and Japan, the sacred thread is used as a symbol of our interbeing and interconnectedness. It's part of all kinds of rituals of blessing and care. Often they're colored red—I received this one from the Dalai Lama—or sometimes they're golden in color. The reason is that

they're considered one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun that you wear in the marketplace. It's basically remembering that this is your true nature. You're a monk or a nun in disguise out there in the marketplace. You have to remember that your true home is the temple and that your vows and the intention you set really speak from and to who you are in the deepest and most beautiful way.

These sacred threads carry ancient wisdom. If you go to India and meet a Brahmin priest, they'll wear a white thread around their body for their entire adult life to show that they're living within the understanding that takes every experience, every being, everything they touch as part of the divine, as part of what's holy.

When I first received these protection blessing cords with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche years ago, somebody asked, "What exactly does this protect you from?" And he said, "Why, yourself, of course."

To create these cords, we're going to put knots in them as a way for them to truly bless you. The first knot is the knot of refuge. Hold your cord and reflect on what is the deepest refuge you can take, the refuge that will carry you and support you. In the Buddhist tradition, sometimes it's refuge in the Buddha and in all awakened beings—the possibility of awakening, seeing the Buddha nature in every being. Refuge in Dharma, in what's true—speaking truth and acting from truth. Refuge in Sangha, the community of all those who are awakening together.

Your refuge could also be refuge in life itself, in Mother Earth, in Pachamama. The refuge could be in the community of all who are serving life. Think for a moment: what is the refuge I turn to for support when things are hard? When I want to sit in council with the elephants or the dolphins? When I know this is really where I go for my connection to all things?

Knowing what your refuge is and that it can support and carry you through anything, take refuge and tie a knot in your cord—a reminder that you are connected with this timeless, eternal refuge, always there for you.

The second knot is the knot of compassion. Traditionally in the creation of a protection cord or when entering a temple or monastery, you would take vows: to refrain from killing or causing harm to living beings; to refrain from stealing or taking that which doesn't belong to you; to refrain from being greedy and disrupting the wise relations of the world by taking what you shouldn't; to refrain from causing harm through speaking falsely or misusing speech; to refrain from causing harm through the misuse of intoxicants or sexuality.

But underlying all of those is simply the heart's vow to move through this world out of compassion for yourself and other beings and not to cause harm—to let your life be one that affirms life. This is the knot of compassion. Hold it up and reflect on your own deep intention not to cause harm and to meet all beings—those who are joyful and those who are suffering, those who are causing suffering and those who are liberating beings from suffering—to meet every being with a tender heart, especially yourself. To be the carrier of compassion.

When you're ready to take the intention or vow of non-harming, tie the second knot in your cord.

Now it's almost fully activated, but not quite. The third knot is the knot of the bodhisattva vow—that intention from when you were coming back to this body and this planet and this life, when you saw what you would take to set the compass of your heart. You each have envisioned something: an intention, a vow, a sacred direction, touched by what you've seen today, by what moved you, by what reminded you who you are, what inspired you.

Now, holding the cord for the third and final knot, tie into it your sacred intention so that you might not forget, but that you might carry it beautifully from this place and this day. And now it is fully activated.

If you want to wear it around your neck, you can put it around your neck. Don't tie it on yet and let the two ends hang down. If you want to wear it around your wrist, or your ankle for that matter if you're feeling particularly creative, whatever feels right. Wrap it around three times and let the two ends hang down.

Before you do anything else with it, I'm going to ask that you turn to a person sitting near you. Before you tie on their blessing cord, when you tie it, really give them a silent blessing. But they have to tell you what their vow was that they made. Because giving it words and saying it out loud brings it more alive on this earth and in your being, in your consciousness.

Then before they tie yours on, you get to tell them what your vow was, what your sacred intention was. And then you tie these together and we'll have a little celebration to end.

So turn to someone, find a partner, whoever's near you. This is not dating, remember. This is just sacred witness. And if there isn't a pair, it could be three people.

The story you're telling is of the third knot—your main intention from the day.

Thank you for listening.

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CHAPTER 266

Compassion As We Take Action

Rob Burbea · 53 min

> *In this inspiring dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses the challenges of taking compassionate action in the world without falling into despair, anger, or guilt. Drawing from poet Gary Snyder's advice to 'save the world because you love it,' Burbea weaves together powerful stories of connection—from Polynesian navigators who trust the vastness of the ocean, to shamans sitting in council with elephants, to chimpanzees forming solidarity circles.*
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> *The talk explores how to work skillfully with difficult emotions like despair, anger, and grief when facing environmental crises and social injustice. Burbea emphasizes that our responsibility is not to single-handedly save the world, but to plant seeds of intention and action rooted in love and compassion. He draws from the Bhagavad Gītā's teaching on acting without attachment to results, and the Buddha's understanding of dependent origination—that lasting change requires transforming underlying causes and conditions.*
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> *The session includes a guided meditation on expanding awareness to cosmic proportions before returning to embody our bodhisattva vows, and concludes with a blessing cord ceremony where participants tie knots representing refuge, compassion, and personal sacred intention. This talk offers profound wisdom for anyone seeking to engage dharma practice with social action while maintaining inner peace and joy.*

I have a question to start with. Those of you who have been here all day have heard inspiring and visionary calls to action, information, and so forth. What would help you as we get ready to transition from here back out into the dance of the freeways and the blue waters of the bay and the Easter evening? What themes, what concerns?

James asked me to come in toward the end, and I wasn't sure whether it was tired activists who are here taking a break—who've tried too hard and are carrying the entire world like Sisyphus and need to take a little rest—or whether it's people who are aspiring activists who are saying, "Oh, I think it's about time to get my act together."

What themes or topics would you like to explore? You can leave stuff here, and what you can take is inspiration and spaciousness. What else?

"Can you speak about how to work with the despair that comes up?"

Despair, how to work with despair. Other themes?

"Joyful responsibility."

Oh, that joyful responsibility. Parenting. Reaching people.

"How to mindfully converse with people who may not have the same perspective as we do on some of these crises."

What the Dalai Lama calls "his friends the enemy." It's very interesting—he doesn't say "my friends." He says "my friends the enemy that I talk to." Including each other. How do we talk to one another?

"The anger thing."

Anger, how to deal with anger.

"All the issues around the animal world and all the sentient beings, environmental issues."

All the many other sentient beings that are being affected by everything so deeply—the animal world and the grief around that and concern. Grief, despair, and grief.

"Anger and conflict."

Anger and conflict about all this.

Grief and despair. Anger and conflict—with the people you live with, or perhaps with the corporations that are, after all, also people we share this world with.

I want to weave these concerns into what we explore together today, into our meditation and the setting of intentions. But somehow I feel called to begin on a different note.

I loved sitting here with Wes and Kevin, witnessing how they transform despair and concern and community into art. This is critical work. Wes went to interview Gary Snyder, one of our greatest living environmentalists—Pulitzer Prize-winning poet who wrote "Earth Household" back in the 1950s, when people hadn't yet begun to think environmentally. Wes asked him: "Now you're in your mid-eighties, and you see the seas rising, the extinction of species, global climate disruption, and all these things you've spoken about for decades. What advice do you have for us at this time?"

Gary's response was stunning in its simplicity: "Don't feel guilty."

Three profound words: Don't feel guilty.

He continued: "If you're going to save it, save it because you love it. If you go out because you're angry, or because you're bitter, or to fight—it's not going to help you, and it's actually not going to help the world. The world needs this transformation of consciousness we've been talking about, and it really has to come out of love. It's the only power that's going to make a difference."

Reflecting on Gary's words, what he's really saying is that what will save the world—or serve the world—is your tenderness and your care. Because that's what it's asking for. That's what any child always asks for. The Earth is both our mother and our child.

Here is a poem from Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet who won the Nobel Prize in 1945. She was known as a harsh critic of poetry, with extraordinarily high standards. But when a sixteen-year-old boy handed her a sheaf of his poems, she read them, looked back at him and said, "Pablo, you're a real poet. Keep writing." She became the inspiration for Pablo Neruda.

A woman is singing in the valley. The shadow falling blots her out, but her song spreads far across the fields. Her heart is broken, like the jar she dropped this afternoon among the pebbles in the brook. And as she sings, the hidden wound sharpens on the thread of her song and becomes thin and hard, and her voice in modulations dampens with blood.

In the fields the other voices die with the dying day, and a moment ago the song of the last bird stopped. But her deathless heart, alive with grief, gathers all the silent voices into her own, sharp now yet very sweet.

Does she sing for a husband who looks at her silently in the dark? Or for a child whom her song caresses? Or does she sing for her own heart, more helpless than a babe at night-fall?

Night grows maternal before this song that goes to meet it. The stars with a sweetness that is human are beginning to come out. The sky full of stars becomes human and understands the sorrows of this world.

And her song, as pure as water filled with light, cleanses the plain and rinses the mean air of day in which men hate. And from the throat of the woman who keeps on singing, day rises nobly, evaporating toward the stars.

It's a song of tears and beauty and connection with the turning of the Earth. If you were to take all the information—the 360 parts per million, the 410, the 420 that happens to be today's measurement—all the data about global systems and corporate power and climate disruption, somehow you have to find a way to carry it in your heart, in your body, in your being, and do it out of love.

What helps with this is realizing that you're not alone—not in the superficial sense of "we have a big movement," but in something far more mysterious and wonderful.

My friend Dina Metzger, a great activist and poet, once wrote: "Give me everything mangled and bruised and I will make a light of it to make you weep and we will have rain and we will begin again." Take the worst of things and transform them.

Dina has traveled around the world visiting shamans and healers and sages and wise women from many cultures, sitting in council together to ask: What do we do with this difficult, if not dark, time? She said her dream had always been to sit in council not only with humans but with the non-humans.

So when she was in Zimbabwe and Botswana sitting with the sangomas—the shamans there—she shared her dream. "Oh yes," they said. She told them she would love to sit in council with the elephants. They got a large flatbed truck and drove down to the Okavango to a watering hole near where herds of elephants gathered. They parked the truck and sat in a circle in the back for about half an hour, making prayers, sitting peacefully, and envisioning their connection with all of life—which is true, which we have.

Then a very large elephant—though they are all large, aren't they?—

But this was a particularly large elephant—they are all large, aren't they? This was a particularly big female who walked down from the hills to the truck where they were seated in their circle. She stuck her head into the circle, her eye four feet from Dina's, and stood there with them for twenty minutes without moving while they held their sacred space together. Then she nodded and walked off.

"Okay, that was pretty wild," they thought. They sat there, made prayers, thanked the elephant, and prepared to leave. They turned the truck around and were getting ready to go when they noticed that the elephant had gone up over the hill and now returned with fifteen or twenty other elephants. They all lined what was a sort of dry riverbed with a two-track jeep road, positioning themselves as if to acknowledge those who had come to listen and sit with them as they made their exit.

Dina said, "I don't know exactly what it means, but I do know that it means we're not alone—that we're not alone."

I was in Hawaii where I met one of my heroes, a man named Nainoa Thompson. How many people have ever heard of Nainoa Thompson? Maybe one or two people in the room—good, this is a treat then, because I get to tell you his story.

The Pacific islands were populated by the Polynesians, whose genetic lineage, traced through DNA, leads back to the islanders of the Philippines, Borneo, and Southeast Asia. The Polynesians and Hawaiians knew they had these great voyaging canoes in the old days—there were still pictures and paintings of them. They navigated half the earth covered with water, which is the Pacific Ocean.

When Captain Cook, arguably the finest navigator in the Royal Navy of England, went to the South Pacific islands, he met some of the master navigators there and asked them about the South Pacific. They cleared the sand and placed 120 stones on it, representing the islands within 4,000 miles in every direction. Then they took one of these navigators on Cook's ship. Through rain, doldrums, and dark clouds when you couldn't see the sky at night—with no way to know where you were—whenever they asked, he would say, "Oh, my island is there, and here's where we're headed."

In the 1970s, the Hawaiians decided to revive the voyaging tradition. They went to the far Marquesas and found a man named Mau, one of the last living navigators who had been trained in this lineage of shaman navigators. Nainoa was one of the small group who went there to train.

The training was intense. When Mau was trained, he got seasick, so his grandfather tied his hands together with rope, threw him overboard from a small boat, and just towed him around for weeks until he got used to being part of the ocean. Later in his training, his testicles were tied to the bottom of the boat for twenty-four hours so he could feel the waves in his body—there are five levels of waves, including those that bounce off islands 500 or 1,000 miles away and the deep ocean swells. He learned to read hundreds of stars, to watch the floating seaweed and the birds, to feel the different levels of waves.

Nainoa underwent this training, and then they took the first big voyaging canoe—two sixty-foot trees lashed together in the traditional way—and began to voyage across the Pacific. When they finally reached Tahiti, half the population came out to greet them as if they were gods, because they were demonstrating what this beautiful culture had always known: the capacity to sail the ocean without a single instrument while always knowing where you were.

Nainoa sits like a yogi—now he's trained his successors, including a young Hawaiian woman—and during the voyages of one or two months, you don't sleep. You sit in a kind of yogic meditation, and you always know where you are.

They decided to attempt the most difficult voyage of all: to Easter Island, the Rapa Nui, the most remote island in all the South Pacific. Through doldrums, through rain and gray skies, almost reaching that area, Nainoa fell asleep. He woke up in the middle of the night and realized he had fallen asleep—and he didn't know where he was. He didn't want to tell anyone he was lost because they had been sailing and paddling for six weeks. So he just sat, not knowing, for a couple of days, letting them continue to sail.

Then in the night, he heard Mau's voice, his teacher's voice, saying, "When you don't know where you are, stop and do a very deep meditation and realize where you really are."

"So I just let everything go," Nainoa said, "and realized that I was in the center of the universe, that the boat was the center of the galaxy. We're always in the center. Where are you? Here. Now." He said, "All of a sudden I came to rest. I knew what my teacher meant. I was just where I was."

His teacher had told him, "If you are still lost, with your heart and your imagination, raise the islands out of the ocean." Nainoa said, "I didn't quite know what he meant by that, but there I was, sitting and realizing it's dark and I'm in the middle of the universe—what to do but just be."

Then there was a break in the clouds. The moon came out and showed on the horizon the peak of Rapa Nui. "It's as if when I was ready," he said, "the island appeared for me. My teacher could do that at will. We'd be out somewhere and he'd say, 'All right, this is where we're going,' and things would just appear. I don't know how he did that, but I've come to trust that I'm part of something so huge, so much bigger than anything I could possibly imagine with my little brain. When we go out"—imagine going out for two months through storms in a double-hulled canoe to cross the Pacific—"I've come to trust that I am part of something so wondrous and mysterious and enormous. It's not me who's taking care of it. My job is to become in harmony with this and let my love, my voice, my connection, my vision come out of that."

One day when I was walking through the Stanford University campus, I heard this story from Vandana Shiva, another great activist. Much of her work involved the Ganges cleanup project. She worked with the Mahant of Varanasi at the Tulsi Temple on this whole project to clean up the Ganges River.

I was walking through the Stanford University campus with a friend when I saw a crowd of people with cameras and video equipment on a little hillside. They were clustered around a pair of chimpanzees—a male running loose and a female on a chain about twenty-five feet long, a light chain. It turned out the male was from Marine World Africa, and the female was being studied for something at Stanford. And who I thought were spectators were actually scientists and publicity people trying to get them to mate.

The male was eager, you know how they can be. He grunted and grabbed the female's chain and tugged. She whimpered and backed away. He pulled again. She pulled back. Watching the chimps' faces, I began to feel sympathy for the female.

Suddenly, the female chimp yanked her chain out of the male's grasp. And to my amazement, she walked through the crowd straight over to me, took my hand, and led me across the circle to the only other two women in the crowd and joined hands with them. And now the four of us stood together in a circle. I remember the feeling of that rough palm against mine. The little chimp had recognized us and reached out across all the years of evolution to form her own women's support group.

We're part of something, and that something—which is life, which is huge and mysterious and beautiful—is asking of you to participate in life. And it's asking you all the time. You may not always pick up the phone or answer your text, whatever it is.

This from Alison Luterman, poet in Oakland. She describes the generosity of life: "In the same way sun drapes a buttered scarf across your face, rose opens herself to your glance, and rain shares its divine melancholy, the whole world keeps whispering or shouting to you, nibbling your ear like a neglected lover."

Here we are on this amazing earth, connected with the creatures and the animals and the atmosphere and the food chains. We saw these white freshwater dolphins in the Irrawaddy River in March when we were traveling in Burma. The dolphins of the world were swimming along with us. And Trudy, my partner, wanted to jump off the boat and swim along with the dolphins because she does that in other places. But I said, the Irrawaddy is not the right place to do this right now—there was lots of other boat traffic and such. But we're part of this web. Everybody knows it in some way.

And then the question is, well, what do we do? How do we take the spirit and the song and the vision and the science and so forth from this day and bring it each in our own way into action?

I would like to use the image of planting seeds. You don't make the fields, you don't make the rain and so forth, but you carry seeds in your heart. And the seeds are really the seeds of your best intentions and the seeds of your actions. As Henry David Thoreau said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there to plant and I am prepared to expect wonders."

It's not given to you to hold the world or change it—that's not your responsibility. That would be pretty egotistical: "Okay, I'm going to do it." But it is given to you to plant beautiful and amazing seeds and to join with others and to water them and to amend the soil, each in your own way.

And it's going to take a while. I'm sorry to say, the earth changes slowly.

Our friend Ari Ariyaratne is the most famous community organizer in Asia. He started the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka that eventually spread to half the villages or more in the country. When the Norwegians were brokering a peace treaty there, Ari called all his people together to Anuradhapura, the great ancient temple there, to talk about how to make peace. Six hundred fifty thousand people came—and this is a country of only eighteen million people. A quite extraordinary being.

He stood up there and he said, "It took us five hundred years to get into this civil war, this mess. Four hundred years of British colonial oppression, five hundred years of conflict between the Muslims and the Buddhists and the Hindus, two hundred years of disparity between the rich, wet parts and the poor, dry parts of the island. So the Buddha teaches us that things arise according to causes and conditions. If we wish this to change, we will have to change the causes and conditions. Therefore, I offer you the Sarvodaya five-hundred-year peace plan.

"Five years of ceasefire, ten years of rebuilding roads and schools, twenty-five years to learn each other's language and religion, fifty years of an economic plan to bring harmony between the rich and the poor parts of the island, and in one hundred years we'll have a council and we'll sit down and we'll say, 'Twenty percent—how are we doing? Are we on the right track?' And then we'll do it again for the next hundred and the next hundred. And maybe in..."

He said, if we pursue it—not maybe, if we plant these seeds—in 500 years, we will have the island of peace that we dream of.

Now I got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama when I was doing some teaching at an event with him. Having the Dalai Lama sit there when you do teaching is actually a very cool thing. I told this story and he was grinning because he's in the same predica-

ment. He's got Tibet and fifty years of Chinese military oppression and the loss of temples and cultures and all those things. And he said—talking about anger and the suffering—he said they've taken our sacred texts. They've burned our temples. They've taken our ability to practice our religion and rituals. They've taken so much from us. "Why should I let them take my happiness?" And then he laughed.

You understand that no one can take away your joy. No one can take that part of your heart from you.

So I got to tell this story to the Dalai Lama. And then there's the passage from Thomas Merton, where he writes to an activist and says, "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no results at all, if not at times perhaps bringing about its opposite. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

And so you set an intention in your heart, you align yourself with what the Earth asks of you—because you are of the Earth, you are the Earth—and you plant your seeds. For some it will be demonstrating, and for some it will be teaching kids in a preschool how to make a garden, raising conscious children, running a conscious business. For some it will be teaching not only English to immigrants, but really making immigrants understand that they too are part of the web of the world that's welcome. Or tending the animals and letting them know that you love them, that they're part of you, that we exist with the animal world. In fact, we are the animal world. It's kind of this delusion to think somehow that we're different from all this.

And so you have one foot in the trees and the soil of the earth and the other foot in eternity. Because the question is not the future of the earth or the future of humanity, but it is the presence of something greater, of eternity itself. And that means somehow that in order to do this work—to not feel guilty, as Gary says, but to do it out of love—requires that you first carry, that you set an inner intention that's really beautiful, maybe something you can't possibly do, but you set it as the vision, your bodhisattva vow. You act on it, you plant your seeds.

And here's the secret. It's a summary of the Bhagavad Gita, and you get your money's worth today. This is the secret: to act well without attachment to the fruits of the actions, because it's not given to you to determine how it's going to come out. But what's given to you is to act beautifully and bravely and mercifully and to love. And if you do that, all kinds of things—the elephants will be cheering you and the dolphins will be

swimming with you and the chimpanzees will take your hand and say, "Come on baby, let's do more of this." The earth will be with you, because the earth wants this as well, and you can begin to trust this.

So I'm supposed to teach a meditation and we don't have all that much time. Let me think for a second. Anything else that I want to say? Yeah, I'm going to read you one little thing, then we'll do our meditation. It's one of my favorite poems from Diane Ackerman, who's also a good friend. When I think about people making a bodhisattva vow—I think Donald and David Loy talked about the bodhisattva vow: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all," and so forth. Of course, it's very complicated because if you decide to save the sentient beings in your family, they don't necessarily want to be saved by you. Then you realize that saving sentient beings means something a little different than your ideas about how they're supposed to be.

This is Diane Ackerman's version of what I call her version of the Bodhisattva Vows—saying if you were to have prayer in the schools, here's maybe a morning prayer that kids could make: "In the name of daybreak and the eyelids of morning and the wayfaring moon and the night when it departs, I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder and an architect of peace."

And so in the meditation, which we'll do now, one of the things I'll ask is if you were to make a little vow, make your own bodhisattva vow from today, what would it be? What would the seeds be? Sometimes it's just as simple as "I vow to be kind to every being I encounter." It can be that simple, but it might be something else, and only you can know. It's sort of setting the compass of your heart.

So let your eyes close gently and come back just to feel your breath breathing. The wind that was carried to you that dusted the peaks of Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, swept across the Pacific to your breath that you take in right now. Of course, it also was the breath of the person sitting next to you a few seconds ago. You don't even have to kiss them—they give you your breath. It's true. And it's the breath of the...

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/8). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

raccoons that dwell in the trees and the deer that move around us and the earthworms and the sparrows. Let your life breath breathe in and out, and bring your attention gently to the area of your heart.

Feel that you have been given life. You have been given this amazing incarnation, this gift of being alive. Sometimes it feels small, and you become identified with unworthiness and grief and fear and attachments. But it is also possible to feel the radiance of life given to you that breathes itself and moves. In this there dwells a deep peace and natural love.

Imagine as you sit now that this love—which is what was born into you, this tenderness and care that is born into every newborn child—fills your body, all the cells of your body, with life force and healing and care.

Now imagine somehow that you could expand so that your head pokes up through the ceiling and your body grows bigger and bigger until you are larger than this whole building. All the beings inside here, breathing and meditating, are now contained within you. You become this great vast being who holds Spirit Rock in your body. All their human experiences—breathing and thinking and feeling—rest within you.

Let yourself grow bigger and bigger. Imagine, because identity is so mysterious, that you can feel not just the room, but float up into the sky and become enormous. As if you float over the Bay Area, and all of California is now down there, but part of this huge body you are becoming, bigger and bigger.

Within you is humanity—the human condition of joy and desire and loneliness and caring and violence and the love of parents for their children and failure and creativity—and all the animals, the bay and the ocean. All of this dwells in you. You are now this vast being, and you grow bigger and bigger as if you are so immense that the whole earth is there in front of you and you could hold it in your lap. You realize, no—it is part of you.

You are as big as the solar system, and you expand like the galaxies, huge. Even the little earth is just there, a blue-green ball deep within you, with all its dreams and hopes and hundreds of thousands of millions of years of life. You rest in the vastness that is silent and peaceful, where everything that exists dwells within you.

You are the ancient one. Everything that ever is or was or will be, all time, the dance of the universe, exists within you. It is silent and peaceful, without boundaries, beyond form.

Gently begin to collect yourself. Gently the vastness starts to gather and grow smaller. Slowly you feel the galaxies and the solar system and the earth floating within you with all the cities and forests and oceans. Now you look and see the earth and the be-

ings on it, and realize you are being given the gift of incarnation—to be a small part of the whole and yet at the same time to have one foot in your human body and another in eternity itself, in the timeless.

You can do something beautiful with the life you have been given. You can tend this earth, you can care for all beings—not out of guilt, as Gary says, but out of love and compassion, out of care, for they are all part of you.

Before you return to your small self, to the limited and beautiful and wonderful incarnation that you have been given in this body, as you look at this earth from this vast perspective, let yourself listen for your own bodhisattva vow or your own highest intention. What would it be that on this day you might say: "This is the direction of my heart"? What is the spirit and what are the energy and the vision that you want to carry from this day? How can you carry it beautifully in your own form—as a guardian of nature, a healer of misery, a messenger of wonder, an architect of peace?

As you envision now coming back to this body and incarnation, let the heart fill with compassion for all the worries and struggles that you and others carry. Let there come an understanding in this tenderness—heart filled with tenderness—of how to navigate the joys and sorrows, the gain and loss, the praise and blame, the birth and death. This is human incarnation. This is this earth. How to carry yourself so beautifully and plant the best of seeds.

As you envision, feel what your body would be like to carry the spirit of awakening. Sense what the quality of your heart will be as you carry this spirit of awakening and care. As you prepare to re-inhabit this human life with wisdom now, and the vows of what you will do, and a deep sense of tenderness.

As you return, you realize that in your lap, the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas—Kuan Yin, the goddess of infinite compassion—have left you a gift. You can picture or imagine that there is a gift in your lap, which is a clear symbol of just what you need to carry you into this work of loving and serving the earth most skillfully.

You open this gift from the goddess of compassion and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. It is the perfect thing that you need to keep this sense of peace and the beautiful seeds and the action you will take. Let yourself unwrap it, picture it, imagine it, envision it in any way you can. If it is not clear, hold it up in your hands to the sunlight. This is the gift—the clear symbol of just what you need as you leave the temple and return to the marketplace.

Finally, coming back to sense yourself seated here now with this gift and with your heart's intention, let there be loving and compassionate awareness of this life you have been given. Think of the people who care about you the most, how they love you and want the best for you. You are a daughter or a son of this earth. You are wanted here.

And let the love in, because compassion and love are never complete unless they include the one seated right here on your own cushion. Then the circle is complete and you become an expression of that love. Fill yourself with that love. Let it bless you. Let it touch all the cells of your body, every breath and heartbeat. Take your gift. Remember your vows or your sacred intention. Most of all, remember that you can dance.

[Pause for movement and preparation]

As these cords are passed around, don't tie them on yet. Just hold them and pass them to others near you. You may have seen people wearing blessing or protection cords—there are red ones and golden ones. While they're distributed, let me speak about them briefly.

Throughout Buddhist Asia, from what were the Buddhist countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan and India, all the way across Southeast Asia through China and Japan, the sacred thread is used as a symbol of our interbeing and interconnectedness. It's part of all kinds of rituals of blessing and care. Often they're colored red—I received this one from the Dalai Lama—or sometimes they're golden. The reason is that they're considered one thread from the robe of a monk or a nun that you wear in the marketplace. It's essentially remembering that this is your true nature. You're a monk or a nun in disguise, basically, out there in the marketplace. You have to remember that your true home is the temple and that your vows and the intention you set speak from and to who you are in the deepest and most beautiful way.

These sacred threads appear across traditions. If you go to India and meet a Brahmin priest, they'll wear a white thread around their body for the whole of their adult life to show that they're living within the understanding that takes every experience, every being, everything they touch as part of the divine, as part of what's holy.

When I first participated in these protection blessing cord ceremonies with Lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche years ago, somebody asked, "Well, what exactly does this protect you from?" And he said, "Why, yourself, of course."

To create these cords, we need to tie knots in them as a way for them to truly bless you.

The first knot is the knot of refuge. Hold your cord and reflect on what is the deepest refuge you can take—the refuge that will carry you and support you. In the Buddhist tradition, sometimes it's refuge in the Buddha and in all awakened beings, the possibility of awakening, seeing the Buddha nature in every being. Refuge in Dharma, in what's true, speaking truth and acting from truth. Refuge in Sangha, the community of all those who are awakening together—the ordained Sangha, the Sangha of awakened ones.

But your refuge could also be refuge in life itself, in Mother Earth, in Pachamama. The refuge could be in the community of all who are serving life. Think for a moment: what is the refuge I turn to for support when things are hard? When I want to sit in council with the elephants or the dolphins? When I know that this is really where I go for my connection to all things?

Knowing what your refuge is, and that it can support and carry you through anything, take refuge and tie a knot in your cord that is a reminder that you are connected with this timeless, eternal refuge—always there for you.

The second knot is the knot of compassion. Traditionally, in the creation of a protection cord or when entering a temple or monastery, you would take vows: to refrain from killing or causing harm to living beings; to refrain from stealing or taking that which doesn't belong to you; to refrain from being greedy and disturbing the wise relations of the world by taking what you shouldn't; to refrain from causing harm through speaking falsely or misusing speech; to refrain from causing harm through the misuse of intoxicants or sexuality.

But underlying all of these is simply the heart's vow to move through this world out of compassion for yourself and other beings and not to cause harm—to let your life be one that affirms life. This is the knot of compassion. Hold it and reflect on your own deep intention to not cause harm and to meet all beings—those who are joyful and those who are suffering, those who are causing suffering and those liberating beings from suffering—to meet every being with a tender heart, especially yourself, to be the carrier of compassion.

When you're ready to take the intention or vow of non-harming, tie the second knot in your cord.

Now it's almost fully activated, but not quite. The third knot is the knot of the bodhisattva vow—that intention you held when coming back to this body and this planet and this life, when you saw what you would take to set the compass of your heart. Each

of you has envisioned something: an intention, a vow, a sacred direction, touched by what you've seen today, by what moved you, by what reminded you who you are, what inspired you.

Now, holding the cord for the third and final knot, tie into it your sacred intention, so that you might not forget but carry it beautifully from this place and this day.

And now it is fully activated.

If you want to wear it around your neck, you can put it around your neck. Don't tie it on yet—let the two ends hang down. If you want to wear it around your wrist, or your ankle for that matter if you're very hip, whatever. Wrap it around three times and let the two ends hang down.

And then, before you do anything else with it, I'm going to ask that you turn to a person sitting near you in a moment. Before you tie on their blessing cord, and when you tie it, really give them a silent blessing. But first, they have to tell you what their vow was that they made. Because giving it word and saying it out loud brings it more alive on this earth and in your being, in your consciousness.

And then before they tie yours on, you get to tell them what your vow was, what your sacred intention was. Then you get to tie these together, and we'll have a little celebration to end.

So turn to someone, find a partner, whoever's near you. This is not dating, remember. This is just, you know... And if there aren't two people, it could be three.

The story you're telling is of the third knot—your main intention from the day.

CHAPTER 267

How To Be an Earthling

Rob Burbea · 26 min

> *In this unique Earth Day celebration, Rob Burbea offers a joyful and profound exploration of what it means to be truly present as inhabitants of this Earth. Beginning with Gary Snyder's ecological Pledge of Allegiance and honoring naturalist John Muir, this talk weaves together environmental consciousness with dharma practice in an unconventional yet deeply meaningful way.*
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> *Burbea addresses the overwhelming nature of contemporary crises - climate change, environmental destruction, and social upheaval - while offering the Buddhist teaching of presence as both refuge and response. Drawing on the fundamental dharma principle of interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda), he explores how recognizing our literal and spiritual connection to all life forms can transform our relationship with the Earth and each other. The talk emphasizes the practice of mindful awareness (sati) as essential for navigating both personal anxiety and collective environmental challenges.*
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> *Through humor, music, and poetic reflection, this dharma talk demonstrates how Buddhist practice can inform ecological consciousness and vice versa. Burbea's approach shows how the simple instruction to 'be here now' becomes revolutionary when applied to our role as earthlings, encouraging practitioners to find presence and joy even amid uncertainty while maintaining commitment to protecting our planetary home.*

I thought I would begin by leading you all in Gary Snyder's version of the Pledge of Allegiance. Hands on your hearts, hats off.

"I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island, and to the beings who thereon dwell, one ecosystem in diversity, under the sun, with joyful interpenetration for all."

Those beatniks were our ancestors and heroes who first truly noticed the natural world and what was happening to it. They were perhaps the first generation to really understand and respond to our environmental crisis.

Tomorrow is the birthday of another great hero, John Muir. Think about walking up into the Sierras and how much he did to preserve the most beautiful part of this continent. Here's a poem by him:

"This grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere. The dew is never all dried at once. A shower is forever falling. Vapor is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gleaming on sea and continent and islands, each in its turn as the round earth rolls."

We've been talking about many difficult issues we're facing, and I want to address what I think is one of the most challenging—the crisis of crisis itself. There is so much crisis. I used to tell my journalist friends, "You are what you cover." These days it feels like apocalypse all the time.

We're bombarded with fears about viruses and diseases, the thinning ozone layer, potential cosmic threats. There are warnings of worldwide food shortages, government instability, and endless conflicts. The constant stream of things that could kill us can leave us dying of broken hearts from overwhelm and despair.

But perhaps before we can get it together, we need to let it all come apart. Sometimes we need to relax into the chaos, to find our ground even amidst the million things that threaten us. There's wisdom in recognizing that our anxiety about death and destruction can become its own form of suffering—one we can learn to hold with greater equanimity.

Don't consume the sugar. Don't consume the salt. Cholesterol clogs your arteries while giant corporations devour your land and computers consume your consciousness. You've heard the temperatures are rising, and the oceans are too. Soon enough, the beach will come to you.

There are a million things that will kill you, and you're dying of a broken heart. There are a million things that will kill you, and you're dying of a broken heart. But before you can get it together, you must allow it all to fall apart.

So just relax. Stop singing the blues. Go out and create your own news. There are a million things that will kill you, and you're dying of a broken heart.

Thank you, Mr. Kevin. That was my burst of energy, and now I'll sit down.

Here's a piece I wrote and rewrote for today. Hello, earthlings. Say hallelujah, because springtime has arrived in the northern hemisphere of Earth, and it's time for our annual springtime spiritual jamboree—with Christians honoring Jesus, Jews honoring Moses, and pagans venturing into the woods to celebrate.

If Moses were alive today, he would likely be organizing a people's revolt against the corporate pharaohs who have transformed millions of us into wage slaves, laboring to construct their pyramids of filthy lucre. If Jesus were alive today, he would undoubtedly be dwelling in the Tenderloin as the rabbi of the homeless and poor, distributing loaves and fishes along with wine to wash them down.

Both Jesus and Moses would be urging people to cease worshiping golden calves, pork futures, and the evil mammon.com. Meanwhile, here in Northern California, we've transformed Passover into a spiritually correct liberation party for everyone who is oppressed—and who isn't, really?

In Berkeley, you can find a prayer book for a socialist Seder where the kugel is divided according to each person's need. At my Passover feast, we always raise a glass of wine to the Buddha, even though there remains some dispute over whether he was Jewish. Nonetheless, he helps lead our minds out of bondage. So here's to you, Buddha: Let my people be here now.

For research into Buddha's Jewish origins, you might consult the Oy Vey Sutra or the more esoteric Double-Breasted Sutra.

It is appropriate and auspicious in this season of spiritual renewal that we celebrate Earth Day, getting down to the real essence, paying respects to Pachamama, the goddess Gaia, this ancient rock of ages. This day should be the most important holy day of all because it can be celebrated by all life, regardless of race, religion, nationality, kingdom, genus, or phylum—regardless of coverings of fur, feathers, scales, skin, leaves, or bark, because this Earth is everybody's neighborhood.

Just consider: here we are, all riding together on our home planet, hurtling through space at incredible speeds, spinning in our orbit around the sun at approximately 66,000 miles per hour. You don't even need to hold on because Earth Mother is holding you, embracing you with her strong arms of gravity.

On Earth Day, we offer gratitude to Uncle Charlie Darwin, who began spinning us a wholly new story about who we are and where we came from. As Sir Charles wrote in the final paragraph of his book on the origin of species: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

That includes you and me—beautiful and wonderful earthlings born from the three-and-a-half-billion-year dance of life on this planet, a story containing as much awe and wonder as any scripture. To paraphrase cosmologist Brian Swimme: only four billion years ago, the Earth was a ball of molten rock, and now it can play guitar.

Here we are, nearly Earth Day 2014, playing guitar in the Holocene—or is it the Anthropocene? Regardless, it's my scene and your scene, living through this mild interglacial period. But we're heading toward trouble. The biohazards are now in the house: temperatures rising faster than expected, endangered species multiplying, a looming water crisis. There's so much trouble everywhere that the very word "ecology" can make you scream, "Eek-ology!"

What's required of us isn't merely Obama's green economy, recycling, or driving hybrid cars, but a shift of consciousness. We need an upgrade of our mythology. Over centuries, humans have become so arrogant we believe the entire universe was created just for us, that we are separate and specially made. Our major religions have come to regard Earth as some kind of training planet where you learn lessons or burn off karma before departing for your true home elsewhere. This is only a test.

But these beliefs are now dysfunctional because they remove the divine from Earth and extract humans from the great web of life. Hallelujah, because in recent years we've begun telling ourselves a new story about our origins. There's no longer doubt that this evolutionary story is true—at least among people with well-developed forebrains.

Now it's time to embrace that story as our new creation myth. We must create ritual around it, sing and dance it, bring it alive in the corridors of our psyche and the marrow of our bones.

Speaking of bones, friends: our bones are composed of calcium, magnesium, phosphate, silicate—literally the clay of Earth molded into human form. Most of our bodies are liquid, and most of that liquid shares the chemical consistency of oceans. We literally sweat and cry seawater. We're not merely on the Earth; we are of the Earth, made of all-natural ingredients.

We are certified organic.

And we're built out of all the life that came before us. Scientists have discovered that we have three brains inside our skull: a reptilian brain, a mammalian brain, and the neocortex, or new human brain. The latest research indicates that we use our new human brain mostly to make excuses for the behavior generated by our other two brains. We are not so much rational animals as we are rationalizing animals.

And yes, the lizard and the wolf still live inside of us. In fact, in this story of evolution, we find that we're related to every being that ever lived through the miracle molecule of DNA, deoxyribonucleic acid. Too cold and clinical a name for this miraculous substance that separates life from non-life.

So I hereby declare a new acronym. Every time you see or hear the letters DNA, think divine natural abundance. Divine natural abundance.

The unraveling of the genetic code reveals that we share over 98% of our DNA with apes, 70% with worms, nearly 50% with yeast. So if we declare ourselves divine, is not the slime also divine? And if not, where do we draw the line? Let's face it, we are all cell brothers and cell sisters. Can you dig it? A t-shirt from the biology department at UC Santa Cruz makes the point: "You share 25 percent of your DNA with bananas. Get over yourself."

And if we see ourselves in this story of evolution, we find hope because we see that Earth life is tough and creative and has survived comet collisions and continents bumping into each other and ice ages and Dick Cheney. So there's reason for optimism.

I also find hope by reminding myself that the word ecology has only been around for 40 years. And the first UN Conference on the Environment took place in 1970—a blink of a blink of an eye in biological time. We're just now waking up to our impact on the life of the planet, just now learning how we have to change our way of living, change our story.

Turns out that what Mother Earth needs most from humans right now is a few years of negative economic growth. Instead of another stimulus package, what we really need is a sedative package. Let's follow the advice of the great sages and simplify our lives and cut back on consumption in a way that is fair and causes the least amount of suffering for all, and we will all become happier in the process.

And finally, to commemorate Earth Day this year, maybe do something radical. Like, go picket in front of the oil company of your choice. Or go out into the ocean and take a swim in the primal amniotic fluid. And while you're out there, maybe chain yourself to an endangered coral reef. Or just play some soothing music for the fish, who must be very confused lately due to the changing temperature of the oceans.

At least take a vow on this Earth Day, a vow that you will do something more to protect your mother. And at some point in your celebration, take off your shoes, dance on the earth, touching your mother skin to skin, or just lay down flat. Ignore your inner cynic and give your mama a great big hug. As always, she will forgive you and welcome you home.

And this is Scoop saying all praises to the earth. Long may she spin. If you don't like the news, go out and make some of your own.

This is a song whose title comes from Wes, though I can never remember the words properly. I wrote this piece during a family retreat here at Spirit Rock a few years ago. The theme was something like letting go—one of those classic dharma topics. It occurred to me that there was a wonderful line from Wes that would work perfectly with that theme.

This song was actually written on this very land and appears on my Laughing Buddha CD. I have to confess, there's something deeply satisfying about playing heavy metal chords in the Spirit Rock meditation hall—it just does me good somehow.

The song explores our relationship with material abundance and the endless cycle of wanting more. It playfully catalogs the overwhelming array of possessions that fill our lives: technology, entertainment, convenience items, luxury goods—everything from SUVs to virtual pets to summer houses. The repetitive chorus serves as both a mantra and a reality check: "Enough, enough, we got enough stuff."

There's a wonderful contradiction captured in the lyrics: "We got enough to sink a ship and not enough to make your backbone slip." This speaks to how we can be drowning in possessions yet still feel somehow unsatisfied, still lacking something essential.

The song becomes almost absurd in its inventory of modern life's accumulations—credit cards, bodyguards, hundred-acre backyards, drugs that promise superhuman abilities, even pet Tibetan tiger cubs. Each item represents another attempt to fill some perceived emptiness, another promise of satisfaction that never quite delivers.

As dharma practitioners, we recognize this endless cycle of acquisition and craving. The Buddha spoke of tanha—this thirst or craving that drives us to constantly seek more, whether material possessions, experiences, or states of being. The song captures this beautifully through its relentless rhythm and ever-expanding list of stuff.

Yet there's also humor and lightness in this examination of our material excess. Sometimes we need to laugh at ourselves and our tendencies before we can truly see them clearly. The playful tone invites us to examine our own relationships with possessions without the heavy burden of guilt or judgment.

So here we are. Oh, it seems complicated, but it's not that complicated. In fact, it's very simple.

No matter what you do, try to be here now. Be here now, and then be here now again. I'll tell you where and when: here and now. You'll never get away from here, no matter how it may appear. You won't find "there" out there—it's always here, here, here.

And what time is it? You know you can't miss it. It's never the future or past. It's just now, now, now. And forever it will last.

So be here now, and then be here now again. I'll tell you where and when: here and now.

Now we're going to do a little call and response. I'm going to say "where," and you're going to say "here." I'm going to say "when," and you're going to say "now." Everyone ready?

Feel it as you say it: Where? When? Where? When? Where and when? Where and when? Where, when? Where, when?

Where, when—here, now. Where, when—here, now.

Stay here and now. Enjoy your life here and now. Be here now again, and again, and again, and again. I'll tell you where and when: here and now, here and now.

CHAPTER 268

Today's Climate Reality

Rob Burbea · 27 min

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea applies Buddhist wisdom to one of our time's most pressing issues: climate change. Drawing on the First Noble Truth's teaching to look directly at dukkha (suffering), he presents sobering scientific evidence about current climate impacts - from rising seas and extreme weather to ecosystem collapse and human displacement. Burbea connects this examination to fundamental Buddhist principles, noting how the Buddha encouraged us to "look" and "connect with the stress, the suffering" before transformation can occur.*
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> *The talk presents detailed findings from recent climate reports, including rising global temperatures, ocean acidification, and accelerating extinction rates. Burbea explains the "terrifying new math" of carbon emissions: we can safely burn only 565 gigatons more carbon to avoid catastrophic warming, yet fossil fuel reserves contain five times that amount. He addresses the economic and political forces perpetuating fossil fuel dependence, including massive government subsidies.*
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> *Rather than ending in despair, the talk emphasizes practical solutions and engaged Buddhist response. Burbea outlines concrete steps including carbon pricing, ending fossil fuel subsidies, and supporting renewable energy. He connects environmental action to core Buddhist values of interdependence and compassion, particularly for those most vulnerable to climate impacts. The teaching demonstrates how dharma practice calls us to face difficult truths while maintaining hope and commitment to skillful action for all beings' welfare.*

So as I was preparing this, I thought, oh, I'm going to be the bearer of the difficult news. But of course, the Buddha encouraged us to look. The first noble truth—we need to connect with the stress, the suffering, understand what's happening before we can transform it, before we can heal, before we can move to that unlimited way of thinking. So we'll look for thirty minutes. Brace yourself at the reality of what's happening.

I'm drawing upon two reports, one from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which came out recently. And this is what's happening now, observable now. The evidence is overwhelming, says the AAAS report. Levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere are rising and temperatures are going up. Today, our world is the warmest it's been in 100,000 years.

Half the Arctic sea ice is missing. That's an area that's nearly twice the size of Alaska. Glaciers and ice sheets continue to melt rapidly in Greenland and Antarctica and other places, contributing to sea level rise. It's also affecting water supplies for as many as a billion people around the world. The oceans are now 30% more acidic. The current acidification rate is likely to be the fastest in 300 million years.

For anyone who doesn't think climate change is happening now—that it's going to be happening sometime later—it's not the case. This is all happening now.

Because the sea level is rising, storm surges are higher, pushing saltwater into the aquifers that coastal communities depend on for fresh water. There's also an increase in the extent of coastal flooding. Over the last two decades, sea levels have risen almost twice as fast as the average during the previous century. Saltwater is infiltrating coastal wells in southern Florida and other places around the world.

The pattern of precipitation is changing worldwide. In the United States, there's increased flooding in the northeast, the Great Plains, and the Midwest. Drought has increased in the southwest, and we're painfully aware of it here as well. Drought impacted a large area of the United States in 2012.

Since 1950, heat waves worldwide have become longer and more frequent. One study indicates that the global area hit by extremely hot summertime temperatures has increased fifty-fold. Extreme storms like Hurricane Sandy and Super Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the Philippines and was one of the strongest storms recorded on the planet, are now more intense and more frequent. By the way, in this report from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, they used the word "extreme" nineteen times.

Time for a breath.

The area burned by wildfires and the length of the fire season have increased substantially in recent decades. Climate change has increased the threat of megafires—large fires that burn proportionally greater areas—and wildfires are now happening in areas that didn't have them before, at least not in recent history.

So why is this happening? This is the highest level of CO2 in the atmosphere in 800,000 years, and that's because of burning carbon. This is being caused by human activity. The AAAS report wanted to make that clear. They said 97% of climate scientists worldwide agree humans are causing this change. That's the good news, I think, because we can make changes to change that. And this is the same level of consensus—I

thought it was brilliant that they brought this out—this is the same level of consensus in the scientific community as the medical community has that smoking contributes to lung cancer and heart disease.

No matter where they live, Americans are experiencing the effects of climate change. And of course, that's also true around the world. On every continent and in every ocean, plants and animals are already moving towards the poles, towards deeper depths and higher altitudes. Migration patterns are changing. Some seasonal behaviors are taking place two or three weeks earlier than they did just a few decades ago. There are many organisms that can't adapt that rapidly, so they're having problems. Climate change threatens to collapse some ecosystems, and it amplifies extinction pressures. We're already experiencing increased extinction rates.

There's another paper that just came out a couple weeks ago from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They say heat waves, droughts, floods, cyclones, and wildfires alter the ecosystems.

They disrupt food production and water supply, damage infrastructure, increase morbidity and mortality, and impact mental health and human well-being. As an example, an estimated 70,000 people died prematurely in the 2003 heat wave in Europe. They estimate that 50,000 people died prematurely during the heat wave in Russia in 2010 due to the heat and the air quality caused by the many fires that were burning.

For perhaps the first time in an official report, the IPCC has linked violence to climate change, and it works in multiple directions. Wherever there's violence, populations are more susceptible and vulnerable to climate change impacts because their infrastructure and support systems are likely experiencing breakdowns. But climate change also has such profound effects on populations that violence becomes more likely to occur.

How many of you watched "Years of Living Dangerously" last Sunday? It was the first episode in a series airing on Showtime. Now, we don't have Showtime at the monastery, but the sisters and I were able to watch that first episode streaming over YouTube. One segment they highlighted examined the violence in Syria, showing how it really came on the heels of a prolonged, deep drought that prevented people from farming, from having food and water. When the government was unwilling to respond, this led to violence. When we don't have sufficient food or water, and our government is either unwilling or unable to respond, violence quite naturally follows.

This graphic from the IPCC report gives us an opportunity to see how widespread the impacts of climate change truly are. The solid symbols indicate that climate change is making a major contribution to these problems. The outlined symbols show some contribution from climate change. The snowflakes represent glaciers and ice melts happening on every continent—including the Arctic at the top.

We see water issues in many places where climate change has major impact—in Africa, South America, here in North America, in Australia. Everywhere, on every continent. All these solid green fish symbols indicate high impact of climate change on marine ecosystems. We have high impact on terrestrial systems in many places around the world. We also see impacts on food production, represented by the little tractors. Perhaps not as strong in some places, but significant effects of climate change on the ability to grow food.

This is what's happening now. What are we to expect for the future?

In the near term—the next thirty years—we'll still be dealing with the effects of what has already occurred. Adaptation is essential, and there's extensive guidance in the IPCC report on how to adapt. We've already increased the average global temperature by 0.8 degrees Celsius, and it will probably rise another 0.8 to 1 degrees because we're not going to stop burning fossil fuels tomorrow. The consequences are dangerous now, and everyone agrees that we want to keep the increase below 2 degrees, because that would be a dramatically different world than we have currently.

As Thomas Lovejoy, former chief biodiversity advisor to the World Bank, says: "If we're seeing what we're seeing today at 0.8 degrees Celsius, two degrees is simply too much." NASA scientist James Hansen, probably the planet's most prominent climatologist, says the target discussed in international negotiations for two degrees of warming is actually "a prescription for long-term disaster."

So we want to do all we can to stay below two degrees.

What about the longer-term future? It depends on whether we adopt a low-emission scenario or a high-emission scenario. The IPCC report lays out what's going to happen—what's likely to happen, what the risks are—depending on which path we choose.

With high emissions, we have increased warming that leads to a greater likelihood of severe, pervasive, and irreversible impacts. All the things we just discussed will get worse if we go down that path.

But it's important to say: there's no such thing as too late. Everything we do to reduce emissions, everything we do to sequester carbon, everything we do to employ energy efficiency—it all helps. There's a lot we can do.

Right now, however, we're still on a high emissions path. So I'm duty-bound to explain what that's going to look like, at least a little bit. If the planet warms between 4 and 6 degrees before we make the changes we need to make, it's going to be a very, very different world.

A 5 degree increase ended the last ice age. The American Association for the Advancement of Science reminds us that temperature changes due to CO2 emissions are essentially irreversible for several hundred years, since the CO2 is removed from the atmosphere only very slowly by natural processes. Rates of extinction are likely to place our era among a handful of severe biodiversity crises in Earth's geological record.

People's lives will be directly affected through impacts on livelihoods, reduction in crop yields, and destruction of homes, and indirectly through increased food prices and food insecurity. This is especially true for the poorer people of the world. We'll see breakdown in infrastructure, unplanned migrations, and probably more violence.

A scientist named Michael Werner of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory was interviewed by KPFA earlier this month, and he talked more directly about the impact on our area. He says that the snowpack in the Sierras, which largely provides our water in California, and that the faster rate and earlier melting has dire consequences for our reservoirs. He says this will be happening before the middle of the century—not that much more time. In a recent paper, he reported that if we go up to 2.5 degrees warmer, the entire nation will be in severe drought. The West will be in extreme drought. The drought in Mexico, he said, will be off the charts. It will be unlivable. And this, he expects to happen sometime in the latter half of this century. He said this is straightforward based on a knowledge of physics and what happens with evaporation when things get hotter.

Now I'd like to shift our perspective and talk about the emissions that are causing this problem. I don't know if many of you have read Bill McKibben's article, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math." What's interesting about it is that this math is very simple. It has three numbers involved, and it gives us an idea of exactly where to put our effort.

We've already talked about two degrees. 565 gigatons. Scientists started to wonder how much carbon can we burn before we cross that line of two degrees warmer. They calculated that it's 565 gigatons. They give that a pretty likely possibility, although it's

not for sure—it might happen before we burn that much. But that's something to hold as an idea: that we only want to burn 565 more gigatons before we stop using fossil fuels.

So then they looked at how much we're burning now, what the rate of burn is, and how much we're increasing the rate of burn year by year. This was reported in 2012, and they said we have 15 more years. So right now we've got about 13 or 14 years left before we'll cross that line. We need to get to work on this.

Then what's interesting is a team of London financial analysts started looking at how much carbon we actually have. How much is in all the reserves that companies declare on their filings and reports? How much does Venezuela and Kuwait have? They started adding things up and came to a very important number. How much do we already have at our disposal? It's five times the amount that we can safely burn if we call hovering up to two degrees safe. And the fossil fuel companies are still exploring for more every day.

A couple of years ago, the then CEO of ExxonMobil, Rex Tillerson, told Wall Street analysts that the company was planning to spend $37 billion a year through 2016. That's $100 million a day on further exploration. And that's just Exxon, searching for yet more oil and gas.

Now, what makes it so hard for the people involved in the fossil fuel industry to look at the reality of climate change and say, "Wait a minute, this is crazy. What are we doing?" Well, just to give you an idea, all those fossil fuels that are in their reserves contribute to their bottom line, and they're worth on the order of $27 trillion. So when we talk about keeping 80% of that in the ground, they're going to have to write off $20 trillion. I don't think they can wrap their heads around it.

So what's the sensible thing to do? Keep 80% of the fossil fuel in the ground. Remove the subsidies from the fossil fuel industry. What's really interesting is that our governments around the world give money to the fossil fuel companies to continue doing what they're doing. Governmental subsidies globally for fossil fuels increased from $300 billion in 2009 to $544 billion in 2012, according to the International Energy Agency. That came out in The Economist in January of this year. That's almost $1.5 billion a day going to the fossil fuel industry to keep destroying our planet.

If anyone tells you that we have an addiction to fossil fuels, tell them we don't have an addiction to fossil fuels. We'd be just as happy to get in our cars that are powered by the sun or the wind. In fact, a lot happier. It's the people with the $27 trillion that are addicted to fossil fuels. So just remember that. This is where that passion thing starts happening and people go, "Nuns, passionate?" Okay.

In addition to taking away the subsidies, we need to put a tax on carbon so that everybody on the planet wants renewable energy and we start demanding it from our governments and our infrastructure. We need to say, let's stop building more fossil fuel stuff. Stop exploring. Stop putting in new infrastructure. And we need to ban extreme extraction—fracking, deep sea drilling, tar sands, mountaintop removal, Arctic drilling. We're trying to get at every bit of fossil fuel that the Earth has.

James Hansen said that the tar sands in Alberta contain as much as 240 gigatons of carbon. That's almost half of the 565 that we can safely burn. This is dangerous stuff. We need to increase carbon sequestration and energy efficiency.

So why aren't we doing the sensible thing? Well, we're kind of caught in these feelings to some degree and some misinformation. And largely where the misinformation is coming from is the fossil fuel industry has enormous amounts of money to control governments and media. There are also large corporations profiting on the crisis—which is hard to imagine how anyone would want to make that karma—but Nestlé is going into poor countries like Pakistan and buying up whatever clean water is available so they can put it in plastic bottles and sell it to us.

And that's happening while the World Health Organization is telling us that over a billion people in the developing world lack access to sanitary drinking water, and two million people die every year as a result, most of them children under five. So I'd recommend giving up on the bottled water.

So where do we go from here? Well, we know it needs to be done. People have been telling us for quite a while now. Lester Brown, who's an amazing economist and agronomist, has been telling us for a long time. There's a whole plan: Reduce carbon emissions by 80%. When he started talking about it, it looked more possible to do it by 2020, which he says is what's needed. But if we really turn around, if we really start doing the right things, we can go a long way toward that goal.

He also said we need to stabilize world population growth, which is something that happens every time you bring education to women. And when you give women an opportunity to have a say in their government? When you give women a chance to decide how many children they'll have and what their spacing should be, and you give them an education, population growth stabilizes.

One young woman said to me, "Don't feed them." As part of being involved in Buddhist Global Relief, our focus is on chronic hunger and malnutrition. "Don't feed them. They'll just have more children." I said, "No, I know. We have to appreciate that there are different points of view in this world." And the reality is we can create a better life for everybody.

Another of the four points Lester Brown brings up is eradicating poverty. When people have decent medical care and they believe their children are going to live, they don't have as many. I should say we don't have as many—I'm out of that business now.

And then he also says we need to restore our natural systems—our oceans, our rivers, our forests, our farmland.

So we need to understand what prevents us from acting. What are the emotional barriers, the psychological barriers, the physical and financial barriers in our own lives that keep us from really putting the effort out there, making that commitment to be engaged? And we need to determine to not stop until we break through those barriers.

And we really can do this together. Together is how it's going to happen. Thank you.

CHAPTER 269

Right Action on Climate

Rob Burbea · 49 min

> *In this compelling dharma talk, Rob Burbea and Ayya Santacitta address the climate crisis through the lens of Buddhist ethics and right action (sammā-kammanta). Drawing on the profound teaching story of the Buddha caring for a sick monk despite understanding the emptiness of all phenomena, they explore how wisdom and compassion must work together in responding to environmental destruction. The teachers examine the resistance within Buddhist communities to engaging with climate issues, often justified through misunderstanding of teachings on impermanence (anicca) and non-attachment. They emphasize that understanding emptiness (suññatā) does not negate the ethical imperative to act with loving-kindness (mettā) and compassion (karuṇā). The talk includes practical guidance on climate activism as spiritual practice, from individual lifestyle changes to collective action, while maintaining the Buddhist principles of non-violence and skillful means (upāya-kausala). This teaching demonstrates how the threefold training of wisdom (paññā), ethical conduct (sīla), and mental cultivation (samādhi) applies directly to our environmental responsibilities as practitioners walking the Noble Eightfold Path.*

I was sitting there listening to the different teachings, poems, and songs, feeling very deeply moved by the depth of love and connection to this earth. As each person spoke, you could see behind me the beautiful leaves of the trees, the sun shining on them as they made their food. Those leaves nourishing the tree—all happening right now as we sit here.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a very rural part of Wales, an ancient land where the land is still considered sacred. When the military tried to take over what was known as the Sacred Mountain, the local people came out—the religious people, the farmers, and the ordinary folks—and they demanded that this land be given back, declaring it sacred. After discussions, demonstrations, and some very strong-willed Welsh folks making their voices heard, the land was returned.

This is still considered sacred land. I realize there aren't so many places in the Western world where we really understand the sacredness of this earth, so I feel very fortunate to have grown up in a place where that is understood. It's as though we are reclaiming something. We Western people who have valued so highly the intellect, individualism, and progress are beginning to remember again where we come from and the sacredness of the earth.

It may sound a little funny to hear a Buddhist nun talking about the sacredness of the earth, because the Buddha speaks about the emptiness of all things. Everything is impermanent. Nothing belongs to us. It's all empty. When I was thinking about what to speak about today, what came up for me quite strongly was the apathy in the Buddhist world around the climate change issue—there's a lot of resistance to looking at it.

I realize that all of you are here because you're not resistant, but many people have reasons why this is seen as not relevant in the Buddhist world. There's the sense that all things are impermanent, so of course the earth is going to die at one point. Of course we're going to die at one point, so why bother? Why bother getting involved?

It could also be not knowing how to deal with the emotions it brings up. I've had a lot of things evoked through this day. I've been very moved in many positive ways, and also heartbroken to hear about Alberta and heartened to hear about Nebraska. There can be a sense of not wanting to go there, not wanting to go into that emotional realm, but to stay centered and calm and equanimous because it looks like a safe place to dwell. But it isn't a safe place to dwell if one isn't open to the realities of what is going on in the world.

There's a story that comes to mind from the suttas, from the Buddha's time. The Buddha was visiting a group of monks who had been living together for some time. He would travel around and visit different monks and nuns who were practicing together in India, checking how they were doing, if they were on track. He went to this group of monks with Venerable Ananda, his cousin, attendant, and spiritual brother. Since you have to walk everywhere, he walked to this place and found among this group of monks one monk in a hut who was sick, lying in his own dysentery. The other monks were out doing what they were doing—going on alms rounds, meditating—and this monk was just lying there in his own excrement, abandoned.

The Buddha, who more than anyone in the world understood the empty nature of all things—the fact that this body, these feelings, these thoughts, perceptions, and sense experience are not me and mine—understood this more profoundly than anybody else on the planet. His response to this monk lying there in his excrement was to ask his attendant to go and get some water. Then with his own hands, he bathed this man. He bathed him, cleaned off the dirt, changed the sheets, made him comfortable.

Then he went to the monks and asked, "Why is this man lying here like this?" They said, "Well, you know, he's sick. He can't do anything. He's of no value, so we're just leaving him there. He'll die. We can't do anything about it."

The Buddha strongly scolded those monks and said, "He is your family now. You've gone forth. He is your family. You must take care of him until his last breath."

This story really touches me. The Buddha, who so deeply knew the emptiness of all things, also so deeply knew the importance of taking care, of loving, of caring. He lived those two truths.

When I think of that story, somehow for me it has a kind of parallel to the situation we are in now on this planet Earth, where we've taken so much from her. We've mined and cut off tops of mountains and poured poisons into the earth to extract more gas.

I mean, it's insane, really, what we're doing. We've been doing it for a very long time, and over the decades we've become more conscious of what we are doing. I think at one time it wasn't really clear, but the mass scale of the destruction that we're causing as a human race is known, and yet we're still doing it.

And I see that as like that monk who's lying there in his own excrement—we're leaving the earth in that state. And do we want to do that? Are we just going to leave it like that and say, "Well, there's nothing I can do about it. It's all too much. I'm just going to get on with my practice"? Or are we going to turn and get our hands dirty?

It's not easy to turn towards the situation we're in. And Ayya Santussika very soon will tell us some of the ways we can meet and address the situation we're in. It's not easy. We have to get our hands dirty. It might smell bad. It might make us feel a little bit difficult and turn our stomachs sometimes. Or we might feel that we can't quite manage it. It's frightening. We don't feel that we've got the means, the skills. But just take a step. Just take a step, and things start to open up. People start to connect together. And even if you feel you really can't do very much, like this beautiful song that you sang—if we sing together, then we have great strength. We can do great things.

To me, this is an ethical issue. There's no doubt that this earth had a beginning. It's going through a process and it will have an end. This has always been the case. There's no doubt that each one of us who has been born and is going through our life will die. There is no question about that. So this isn't about eternal life or making things last forever. This is about responding in an ethical way, in a loving way, in a compassionate way. And holding that truth of emptiness, holding that truth of impermanence while we do it.

So we're not doing it in a desperate way or in a frightened way or trying to make everything all right. But we're doing it out of love and compassion, out of responsiveness. Because it simply is the right thing to do. And because once we know the state of

the situation, we can't really get on with our life. We can't really just go home and pretend it's all fine. We can't. This is where the anxiety comes from. This is where the addictions come from. Because we're trying to not feel the enormity of the situation.

So using the skillful means that the Buddha gave us, we need to turn and look and face and step into the situation that we are in. And like I say, the Buddha spoke about world expansion and world contraction. There's a whole sutta about the demise of the human race through following greed, hatred, and delusion. We're witnessing it. We're in the midst of it. And then also the whole planet Earth falling apart and then coming into being again. And this happens. This is natural.

But there's also what we're doing, what the human race has done and is doing that is speeding up that process so rapidly. So that's the part that we can meet and respond to. So I hope that between us we'll be able to offer some suggestions of how each one of us can respond.

Now, I wanted to speak a bit about the crisis which is building up and that this crisis has a purpose. If we have enough resilience to turn towards what is happening inside and outside of ourselves, if we can really recognize that what's going on is not just like a coincidence, but we are in a certain stage of the evolution of consciousness and the external situation actually comes to our aid to create that sense of pressure which we seem to need in order to have enough sense of urgency to really pay attention.

And it's not the first time. Since this planet is spinning and since there's life on this planet—over three billion years—there have been always again and again phases of great pressure, which have been creating such a shift that new forms of being came into life.

And we as a species now, we have that opportunity to use the situation to renew ourselves, to renew our ways of relating to life, to come out of that myth of separation which we have been living in. In terms of the evolutionary progression, we are not doing anything wrong. This is exactly how it's supposed to be. But we can't stop here at this point. We have to keep going because otherwise we will simply disappear from the face of the earth, and the earth will of course go on and other life forms will follow. So it's really up to us what we want to do with the situation we have.

I really think the most important thing is to develop the inner strength and the resilience so that we can use what's happening for the benefit of ourselves and for all beings we're living together with on this planet. How can we do this? The most important thing

is to develop the resilience to take in what's happening. And in order to have that resilience, I think we have to try as best we can to live a life which is congruent with what we know to be true.

Because if we increase that congruency, we'll have an increased sense of self-respect, a sense of strength, a sense of peace. And then from that increased sense of strength, we have increased opportunity to make a difference. It's a spiral which can lead us towards an ever greater sense of connectedness.

James, you were speaking about this morning how in the beginning, for two years, you thought you didn't know what to do, and you felt confused and depressed. Then you started, made one step and another step, and connected with some people. And suddenly, seeing we are not alone in this, and there are so many people actually who are waking up to this, and if we work together, we can evoke energies and powers which are far greater than the sum total of the beings who are together in this.

I really have strong faith in that because this process of life evolving on the planet has been going on for so long. I don't have to sort it all out, I don't have to have a plan, but I have to get out of the way and I have to look through my own confusion and my own distortions which I'm getting hijacked into by those strong emotions.

So it's very important to have a good practice so that we can stay centered, but not centered in a way that we are cutting off—because this is not really centeredness, this is just escapism. Being truly centered means to let all of that come through me and to honor the pain, as Joanna Macy says, to honor my pain for the world and not think that there's anything wrong with it. But then not stopping there, going down with the pain, getting all depressed. That's just the first step.

If we can hold steady with it and recognize that we are not alone in that, it starts to change because it's the dark night, and then that pain transforms into a strength. And then from that strength, we can give our gifts. We don't have to sort it all out. You just do your thing.

And if you don't know what your thing is, then I have a whole list of things. I'm always the sister with the list. So I gave my list to you. You'll see it on the side. It's not only mine—we worked together to create concrete action. And I'm going to talk about concrete action after we get the presentation up.

But I want to tell you that I've gone through lots of phases too with regard to this whole area, including the phase where I'm being told, well, be careful. That was a warning, I think. Be careful—you might get to be known as the activist nun. Is that so bad? Right action on climate, what can we do?

Your list is in front of you. My fondest wish is that when you take this list with you, you'll circle some items and you'll make a commitment.

Now, I don't know if you've heard the word *adhitthana*. *Adhitthana* is a Pali word, and I was just told today that the *adhi* part means higher, and *tthana* means to stand on or a foundation. It's a way to stand higher. So an *adhitthana* is like a commitment, except it's a commitment you don't put down. You give yourself a time frame, you keep it for that period, and you do it.

There are a number of things on this list, and I want to talk through them just to give you an idea that maybe you're already doing some of these things. You probably are. But there might be some others there that would be a stretch. They certainly were for me a stretch, and it took a commitment to go ahead and do it.

One of the first steps is to become knowledgeable about this area. You've gone a long way with that already, but I wanted to recommend three sources that are worth looking at. One of the papers that I was quoting from this morning is from the American Association of Advancement of Science, and it's called "What We Know." That's worthwhile to read. Watching the "Do the Math" movie that's put out by Bill McKibben and 350.org is very worthwhile. You can find it on Vimeo. This article by Margaret Klein, who's a climate psychologist, was really helpful to me: "Our society is living a massive lie about the threat of climate change and it's time to wake up." This is what really helped me understand how to live in climate truth and how to tell the truth, because at first it's hard to break the ice on that and actually talk about it with people.

Speaking in line with truth means that if somebody says, "Oh, this is natural, these changes happen," then I got the courage, thanks to Margaret, to step up and say something about that in a kind way, in an informative way, in a way that gathers in rather than alienates, hopefully. I'm still practicing on that. Speaking up when people say things that you know are not true, connecting the dots between climate change and the conditions we're experiencing.

Someone said to me, "But they're having really cold weather over there." And of course, that's the problem with calling it global warming. Most climate activists now call it climate change. One friend told me in Canada they're calling it climate weirding. So really just speaking out—like Margaret in her article, she says, if someone said, "Isn't it weird weather?" What if, you know, if that's on Facebook, what if forty-five people wrote back and said, "That's climate change, honey."

This is, I think in some ways, the most exciting time in all of human history. Now, why would I say that? Not because I'm into drama. But it's exciting because it's the very first time ever that everyone on this planet, all human beings, are facing the same threat. Always before it's been one group against another. One group stands to gain and another group stands to lose. And even the people who think they're gaining aren't really, because the world that is being created is not going to be nice for anybody.

So what that means is we can gather people in. We can talk to the people around us. We can talk to the people we're connected to. And we can talk to the people we're not connected to.

I was invited up to Canada to do some teaching. I was invited to British Columbia—to teach in Port Townsend, Washington first, and then Salt Spring Island and Victoria. And then from there, I was going to Alberta. I was going to teach the Dhamma. I went with the themes love, devotion, and determination. So I taught a daylong on Salt Spring Island on that topic, and when I opened the floor for questions, the very first question was about climate change: How do we bring those teachings into climate change?

I don't think they were prepared for what they got. And that night in Victoria, someone in the back of the room said, "I heard you talked about climate change on Salt Spring Island." I'm like, "Were you there?" "No?" "Great, fine."

The British Columbians assured me, "We're very progressive. We're very in touch with environmental issues—we always have been. But everybody east of us wants the tar sands."

So I wondered what I would encounter when I landed in Calgary—tar sands central. What I found were people who were very much opposed to the tar sands. One social worker, wife of a minister, both retired after thirty-five or forty years in their work, told me, "No people of faith want the tar sands."

I started learning that we can very easily think: those people over there, those people with that political leaning, those people with that religion, those people with those ideas—they're outside the group that's going to understand. When people realize what's happening, I realize it takes more than talk. But there's a point at which people understand, and some of them understand now more than we know.

So I've noticed in myself when I start thinking, "Well, I can't talk to them about that," I just override it. Do it anyway. It's very surprising.

Invite people to commit to take action. One of the most wonderful things about this work is participating in these organizations. Every time I do it, I am uplifted. I am so impressed with how peaceful the people are doing these actions, how loving, how much people care about the planet and the beings on it. And they're not all Buddhists—some of them are, but it doesn't matter. We connect at the heart level about all of what's going on.

Doing things together is fun. It's exciting. It relieves and absorbs the anxiety and the fear. So you can connect. These groups have my contact information and they send me things online, and I sign the petitions. Then I go out and participate in rallies. You can do that too.

You'll know which groups resonate with you when you read what they write—whether it has a really peaceful, loving sound or if it has an edge to it. All of these actions need people who will come out with a solid, peaceful base. So you're really needed in this, coming out with your practice, being a source of stability. This is really important.

The online petitions make a difference, and then you can write actual letters. Ayya Santacitta and I walked across the bridge when Nurses United came out in the thousands and spoke out against climate change and their concerns for human health. Walking across the Golden Gate and back was wonderful with my dharma sister. It's good to do things together.

We can persuade our government. It's important to write letters—the ones you send through regular mail have more impact. We can meet with our officials. You can create a relationship with your representatives, with your officials at every level. Go to their office with a group of people with concerns.

Those people are concerned too, and they're under a lot of pressure to do other things than the right thing. So what do you do when a friend is doing the wrong things? You bring equanimity and you try to help them get on the right track. We can feel that way about everybody.

There's an action coming up that's going to be important. The hearings will start in June and July at the California State Assembly for a bill called SB 52, the California Disclose Act. This is a very important part of the whole picture because disclosure of who's paying for political ads is crucial. We need clean money in the political process, not the translation of great wealth into great power in our government. So this is an important piece. You can find out more at cadisclose.org.

We need to resist business as usual.

And I know that may sound like a tall order because we're all kind of caught in this web. However, we can do everything that we can to speak out against the continued extreme fossil fuel extraction in all of its forms. We can even write letters to companies. You know, there are some companies that really do care, and they're really doing sound environmental things, and then there are other companies who are greenwashing. Greenwashing is when they say the right words, and they act like they're going green, but they do exactly the wrong things—they're really doing it as a ruse. So you have to notice that and watch out for it. That's another reason why it's really valuable to be connected with activist groups because you learn what's really going on. You've got friends who are seeing things. You get to understand what's actually happening.

This was the rally against fracking. We want fracking banned in California. The fossil fuel companies are salivating over the Monterey Shale. The Monterey Shale is on the San Andreas Fault. Fracking is creating earthquakes in places like England and Arkansas where they never had earthquakes before. Fracking is hydraulic fracturing. They force, with great pressure, millions of gallons of water down these wells with toxic chemicals and break apart the rocks below in order to get the natural gas or oil out of there. It poisons the land. It poisons the water. The last thing we need to do in California is send millions of gallons of water down a fracking well. And the water is contaminated—it cannot be recovered. The land gets contaminated.

If you've watched Gasland, anybody? And Gasland 2? Josh Fox told us on a conference call not long ago, preparing for this rally, that everywhere he goes where there's fracking, fossil fuel industry people walk out with money in their pockets and the land—the people's property—is destroyed. It's just destruction in their wake. Josh Fox got involved because he was minding his own business, living on his little place in Pennsylvania when someone knocked on the door and wanted to lease his property for fracking. When he started looking into it—he's a filmmaker—he found out how horrible this is and then made these films. They're great. He really helps us understand what's going on. These are things that the fossil fuel industry doesn't really want us to understand.

So this rally—this is Sacramento, the Capitol building—and there were 3,000 or so people who showed up. A friend of mine who works with the government, actually working hard on this clean money issue, said when 3,000 people show up, government officials pay attention. Every time I go to one of these things, I think, wouldn't it be great to have 30,000 people out here? We could have 30,000 people out here. Nobody would be able to ignore that.

A lot of people say, "But I'm not an activist." And that's okay. You don't have to be an activist. All you have to do is show up and walk around with your friends and smile and be peaceful and happy. You might want to carry a sign or not. New York did it, we can too. Grassroots organizing—that's all there was to hold fracking out of New York State, and they're still holding it out of New York State. There's no fracking in New York State at this time. It's a moratorium and not a ban. They need a ban, but Pennsylvania's got fracking all over, just across the river. So it's not because the fossil fuel industry hasn't been wanting to get into New York, it's because the people have said no. And that's what we need to do in California—say no. You get all these signs: Americans against fracking, Californians against fracking, farmers against fracking. Don't think you don't belong in this.

The world watches California. Recently, a number of us involved in the Dharma Teachers Climate Group had a conference call with Kumi Naidoo, who's the executive director of Greenpeace International. Fantastic person, fantastic organizer, fantastic human bodhisattva. One of the things he said—among many important things—was, "If the United States goes to renewable energy, I guarantee China will follow." That was really encouraging, because a lot of people say, "Well, it doesn't really matter that much what we do, because there's China, and there's India." The world still looks to the United States, whether we like it or not, whether it's a good idea or not.

We have the ability to move to entirely renewable energy. This is part of what's so frustrating—we can do this, but we're not, for the reasons we talked about before. And if the world is watching, guess who watches California? It's the rest of America. How many other things have we started over here? So we have this wonderful opportunity. We have a responsibility. If 30,000 Californians came out in Sacramento, the world would notice.

You never know where these nuns might go. Oh, do you know who that is? Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi. This was mentioned before. He doesn't usually wear a cowboy hat, but he told me he went to this rally in Washington, DC to stop fracking. He said it was so incredibly hot, he couldn't stand it, and someone gave him a cowboy hat. I love that photo.

He's one of my heroes because he's got the Dhamma down in his bones. He knows more about the Pali Canon than anybody I know on the planet. He can tell us everything about why we should be doing this, every reason that's in the Dhamma, and he's out there doing it. Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi is probably the foremost translator of the Pali texts into English. He's also the founder and chairman of Buddhist Global Relief. He's an amazing man.

Now there are many personal choices we can make in our own lives. Taking every opportunity to reduce the use of fossil fuels. Reduce, reuse, compost, recycle. Someone handed me a piece of paper as I walked out and suggested a book called *Meatonomics*. Fifty-one percent of climate change comes from animal agriculture, and government subsidies for the meat industry exceed those for the fossil fuel industry. I'd like to know more, but I do know I've been a vegetarian for a really long time. I would encourage any reduction in meat we can make.

And buying local and organic. Agriculture is a very heavily fossil fuel oriented and chemical oriented business. We need to really support organic local farming. We need to support the people who have a different vision about business—a different vision about how we can relate to each other.

When you find someone like that, give them your money. There's a woman I know who has a nail salon, and the way she treats the people who work there, the way she treats her customers, it's really exemplary. I went to a print shop one day, and the way the person operates with the customers—you know that they put people above profit. There are larger companies that do this. Patagonia comes to mind. Credo Mobile, if you haven't switched from AT&T yet, they'll even buy out your contract.

This is important—noticing this new vision that we need to make into a reality about how we interact with each other, how we trade with each other, how we work together.

And gratitude is the best attitude. This gratitude for having people in our lives to share this with, for having the opportunity to go out and make a difference, for having the opportunity to call our representative and have the staff person on the phone say, "Thank you so much for calling. We're getting a lot of calls about this. I am so happy to pass this on to Representative so-and-so." It's very uplifting and encouraging.

A woman from Sacramento raised a question that touches the heart of our daily dilemmas: "We recently had a solar company come out to look at our house, and they said we could have solar, but we'd have to cut down these trees. I'm not willing to cut down my trees because they shade my house. If I cut down the trees that shade my house, then my house will get hot, and then I can use my solar to run my air conditioner." She continued with other examples—electric cars where you still struggle with where the electricity comes from, rebates to replace perfectly good refrigerators with more efficient models, the endless analysis of cloth versus disposable diapers that concluded there was no clear winner. "So I'm constantly having to choose what is the greater evil," she said. "Sometimes I don't feel like there are good choices." She kept her trees, by the way.

I think those are true dilemmas for all of us who care. My personal take is to do the best you can without worrying about it too much, and put your energy into the big pieces. Because it's not individuals who are going to say no to the fossil fuel companies. It's not even individuals putting solar on their houses—though it's important to do if you can. I'm not trying to minimize individual action. But we need to put pressure on our government to make the changes, because it's governments that are going to say no to these big interests. That's where the real power lies. So pay attention to what you can do, but don't get too bogged down in the small details.

Someone recommended a helpful resource: there's a book called *Cooler Smarter* that the Union of Concerned Scientists put out within the past year. You can get it from their website. The book goes through all those dilemmas and uses data to tell you which way to go, which can help navigate these everyday choices.

Another person added practical wisdom about contacting businesses: "You can also do this with your local grocery stores or coffee shops. If they're having practices that you don't like, let the upper people know—not the staff because they're not in a position to do anything, but if you take the time to write an email or a letter, and if there's enough of you, that makes a difference."

Finally, someone mentioned an organization that hasn't come up yet: movetoamend.org. They're working to amend the Constitution so that corporations are no longer treated like people with the rights of people. This addresses one of the fundamental structural issues we've been discussing—how corporate power shapes our political and economic landscape.

And this is an organization that Pachamama is deeply committed to. I just completed the Game Changer Intensive with Pachamama Alliance, and they strongly recommend this as one of the organizations that could make a tremendous difference if we unite behind this movement. They demonstrated how corporate rights have evolved far beyond their original intention. Originally, in the nineteenth century, corporations were established to serve specific needs and then dissolved once those needs were met. Over time, legislation gradually granted them increasing power. Now they wield more influence than individual citizens, creating what amounts to an oligarchy.

We've faced oligarchy before and successfully dismantled it through antitrust laws in the early twentieth century. We can accomplish this again through peaceful means.

Let me share two additional practical steps. First, anyone with bank accounts can transfer their money to credit unions and small local banks that invest in their communities, rather than supporting the big five banks that fund mountaintop removal and coal expansion.

"I'm glad you brought that up. Is divestment included in that list? I think I missed it in the presentation."

"It is there, though I didn't read it aloud. Divestment from fossil fuels is crucial, along with moving money into credit unions and local banks so funds are invested locally rather than in practices harmful to our planet."

"I have another question about presenting this to people. Meat eaters are often very dedicated to their diet and might easily dismiss this message if told they must stop eating meat. Frankly, I don't understand why that's necessary. How does reducing meat consumption help address climate change?"

This is indeed a recommendation, and I understand your concern. I think it's more effective to suggest people simply try eating less meat. The issue with the meat industry is the tremendous methane production from livestock and dairy operations. Methane is actually a more harmful greenhouse gas than CO2, though it doesn't persist as long in the atmosphere. As global population grows and people in countries like China and India gain more discretionary income, they're consuming more meat and dairy. This means we're raising far more animals than ever before, while simultaneously clearing forests for grazing and feed production.

"What about eggs?"

"I was wondering the same thing."

Consider also the vast quantities of feed grown for livestock. If those grains fed humans directly, it would be far more efficient. When cereals go to animals to produce eggs, milk, or meat, we lose what people could eat directly. It's inefficient and involves tremendous cruelty—the way these animals are confined resembles slavery.

I want to emphasize that I'm not insisting people stop eating meat, dairy, and eggs entirely, but reducing consumption helps both the planet and our personal health. When we choose what's healthy for our bodies, it tends to benefit the planet as well.

There's a wonderful documentary called "Fed Up" premiering this Friday and Saturday at the San Francisco Film Festival before opening nationwide. It promises to spark an important movement.

"Can we take one more question?"

We have to finish now. Thank you so much for your interest and for listening.

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CHAPTER 270

Wise Action for the Earth

Rob Burbea · 34 min

> *In this compelling dharma talk, Rob Burbea draws striking parallels between the Buddha's fundamental teaching on individual suffering (dukkha) and our current ecological predicament. He argues that just as personal dukkha arises from the illusion of a separate self, our environmental crisis stems from humanity's collective sense of separation from the natural world. The talk explores how the Buddhist understanding of non-self and interdependence offers profound wisdom for addressing climate change and environmental destruction.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that overcoming our sense of alienation from the Earth requires the same spiritual awakening that resolves individual suffering - recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness with all life. He discusses how industrial growth society represents a collective attempt to fill an existential void, much like individuals seeking external solutions to internal spiritual poverty. Drawing on Zen master Dōgen's teachings about "forgetting the self" and realizing oneness with all phenomena, he presents a vision of ecological awakening rooted in Buddhist wisdom.*
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> *The talk concludes with practical reflections on cultivating what might be called the "new bodhisattva" - practitioners who integrate deep spiritual practice with engaged environmental action. This synthesis of inner transformation and outer service offers a powerful framework for responding to our planetary crisis with both wisdom and compassion.*

The question that really comes to my mind is simply: why do we think that the Buddha can help us understand our ecological crisis, given that he lived in a very different time and place long ago, far away in Iron Age India? He didn't really know anything about the kind of global warming that we're experiencing. He didn't know anything about melting glaciers, melting Arctic seas, melting tundra. For that matter, he didn't know anything about carbon dioxide and its role in heating up the atmosphere, or methane gas doing the same sort of thing. So why do we look to the Buddha for help in this particular situation?

There are a number of answers that can be given, but I'm going to focus just on one of them, because there's one thing that really leaps out for me from the tradition. It's the quite extraordinary parallel that I see—precise and profound parallels between what the Buddha taught about our personal predicament, our usual individual problem of dukkha and how to solve it, and our collective civilizational situation right now with regard to the biosphere.

What I'm pointing at is this: I think that what the Buddha had to say about our problem and what we need to do about it is really very much the same problem that we face collectively in relationship to the biosphere. I'd like to spend the few minutes that I have exploring that a little bit.

In particular, I'm going to give you one particular way of articulating what I think the Buddha was focusing on. I want to emphasize the connection between dukkha—suffering in the broad sense—and our sense of separate self. For me, this is actually the most important teaching of the Buddha: that he sees that the normal sense of separate self, the feeling that I'm inside and the rest of you are outside, that we're separate from each other, is one of the primary sources of our dukkha. It's not just that it's a delusion, but that it's a delusion that causes us to suffer.

In more contemporary language, we can say that the sense of self is a psychological construct. From this perspective, we can see that the Buddhist path is about deconstructing and reconstructing the sense of self. Moreover, because this sense of self is a construct, because it's not actually real, because it's inherently ungrounded, this sense of self that we normally have—feeling separate from others—is inherently uncomfortable, inherently insecure. Or, as I sometimes like to say, this sense of self is haunted or shadowed by a sense of lack.

That's how we normally become aware of it. It's the feeling that I think we all have. We know that we have it ourselves, but we're not aware that everyone else feels the same thing. This feeling that we all have that something is wrong with me. Something is missing. Something isn't quite right. It's one of the great secrets of life, I think, that we all feel this, but we think it's our own problem. We're not aware that everyone else feels much the same thing.

Where it gets tricky is that we misunderstand the problem. We don't realize where it comes from, this inherently insecure self. We're conditioned by our society, and so we think we know what we lack. We learn pretty quickly from our society: we don't have enough money, or we don't have enough consumer toys, or we're not famous enough, or we don't have a partner, or our partner isn't good enough, whatever. We end up always looking out here, trying to hold on to something that we hope will fill up this sense of emptiness, this sense of lack at our core.

Of course, one of the essential Buddhist teachings is that there's really nothing there that we can hold on to. Everything is insubstantial. Since the fundamental problem is really inside us, it means that anything we might be able to obtain out here is not going

to satisfy us. It's a symptom. If you understand your fundamental problem is that you don't have enough money, you're never going to have enough money, because that's a real misunderstanding of what the root issue is.

We can appreciate the Buddhist path from this perspective. Here I'm speaking out of my Zen experience. The Buddhist path is about learning to overcome this sense of separation. In Zen we talk about letting go of the sense of self or forgetting the sense of self. The Japanese Zen master Dogen said that to study Buddhism is to study yourself. To study yourself is to forget yourself. And to forget yourself is to realize your intimacy, your oneness with all things.

He also described his own experience after his awakening when he said he came to realize that his mind wasn't something in here, that his mind was nothing other than rivers and mountains and the great white earth, the sun and the moon and the stars. In other words, realizing that I'm not in here—I'm one of the ways in which all of this, all of you, all of us come together through all the causes and conditions. Overcoming the sense of separation, overcoming the feeling that there's a me inside.

And I think we can see how this empowers what is sometimes called the bodhisattva path. Nisargadatta summarized this beautifully when he said, "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I'm everything, that's love. Between these two, my life turns." Wisdom and compassion—the two pillars of the Dharma.

As we begin to wake up and realize that we're not separate from each other, we're not separate from the world, then we also begin to act in a way that responds to that understanding. We begin to realize that I can't separate my own well-being from yours. And we learn to live in a way that acknowledges and embraces this truth and works for the well-being of everyone.

Everything I've just said on the individual level also applies collectively. This is exactly the same situation we're in now in relationship to the earth. Except it's not the issue of an individual construction, but rather we have together as a species developed this sense of separation, this sense of alienation from the rest of the earth.

Collectively we feel separate. We feel that the earth is something we can exploit and use and abuse in whatever way to satisfy our own needs and wants. But we don't feel a sense of responsibility or obligation because it's just there. It's not us. It's like a convenience store for us to draw from.

The other side of that is a collective sense of alienation that I think we as a civilization have. We're not sure what it means to be human. We're not sure what it means for us as a society, what we should value, where we should be going.

The comparable problem that occurs individually also manifests collectively. We look out and try to grab something that we can hold on to, some security. The collective version has become our industrial growth society, this preoccupation with never-ending technological development, increasing industrial economic growth. These things in themselves could be very valuable as means—they give us the ability to do things. But what's really happened, because we don't know what else to value, because we don't know where else to go, we've become stuck on the means. We have made the means into the end.

So technological development in itself, economic development in itself, becomes the whole meaning and the goal of our collective life. And yet we can sense that there's something really inadequate about that.

The parallel holds. We're still preoccupied with trying to secure and control ourselves. What we really need to do from this perspective is to begin to wake up, to begin to overcome this sense of separation that we feel between ourselves and the rest of the world.

Just as I, as an individual, if I start to wake up and realize that my well-being isn't separate from your well-being, and if I'm concerned to follow a kind of bodhisattva path—so that I want to live in a way that asks not what's in it for me, but what can I do to make this situation better—the same thing is true collectively.

It's become clear that at this point, we as a species need to wake up. The ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis. The Earth is really calling upon all of us to wake up or get out of the way. And what that wake-up involves is realizing that we cannot separate our own well-being from the well-being of the whole.

To wake up means to experience our non-duality with the earth—not only our source, not just our home, but our mother, a mother from whom we never really cut the umbilical cord. As we begin to wake up to this, we realize again that we can't separate our own well-being from its well-being.

This is the kind of understanding that we're reaching toward—realizing that the meaning of human life, especially at this particular point in history, is acknowledging and living in a way that sees our task in life as the well-being of the whole earth. This is

the answer to this larger question: What is the meaning of human life? The meaning of human life is to realize the whole earth is our body and that we have this bodhisattva responsibility to work for its well-being.

If we do that, then the process of healing that will occur will also transform us as much as the planet.

I've given you a lot of concepts in a very quick way. I want to finish with a few lines by Rumi, who described this so well in a poem he wrote called "The Worms Waking": "This is how a human being can change..."

There's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves. Suddenly, he wakes up—call it grace, whatever—something wakes him, and now he's no longer a worm. He's the entire vineyard and the orchard too, the fruit, the trunks, a growing wisdom and joy that doesn't need to devour.

He doesn't become the vineyard. He realizes that he's always been the vineyard.

And that's our task. We don't need to become part of the earth, but to realize that we've never been apart from it.

David and I are teaching a retreat in the upper area now, and it's wonderful to come down, even though normally this time is nap time. But as David said, it's a time to wake up.

This sense of parallels between the individual and collective predicament that David was speaking about is in some ways a new way of seeing, but it's also been known for a long time. This is from Shantideva's eighth-century text, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*: "This entire world is disturbed by insanity due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves."

This entire world is disturbed by insanity due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves. It points to the predicament, but I think David's talk and this passage from Shantideva also point toward how we move, how we begin and continue acting.

I know we've already started with James's presentation, really bringing the focus onto action. Later this afternoon, the panelists will be particularly concrete about specific actions that help us respond to climate issues. What I want to focus on in this short time is how we can approach this work.

I think it's helpful in terms of acting to see that something new is being asked of us—to respond to these crises with a deep connection of inner work and inner inquiry with outer response. We may be imagining a kind of being, if we want to call it the new bodhisattva, that hasn't really been in our world in a very full way.

What I want to point to is this vision of training and action, and really the importance of connecting the inner and outer aspects. I believe that without inner resources we won't be able to respond adequately. Without the resources of awareness and kindness and joy and equanimity and wisdom, we'll burn out, we'll get discouraged, we'll succumb to negative emotions. We need these inner practices, I think in part due to the largeness of the problems.

And yet if our spirituality doesn't go outward, in a way we may be only embracing privilege as much of the world burns. These are challenging imperatives for all of us to look at. It takes a lot of looking into how we use our energy, what's important, whether we feel called to this vision.

I think also of something Bill McKibben said in relation to climate change. I want to read a passage from something he wrote, which I think is very supportive of the notion that we need to help train and ourselves become these new bodhisattvas—these new beings dedicated to inner awakening and responding to the needs of the world at the same time.

He says: "If those of us who are trying really hard are still fully enmeshed in the fossil fuel system"—as most of us are; how many came by carpool? Good, very good. How many came by bicycle? How many walked? Very good. You know where I'm going with that one—"it makes even clearer that what needs to change are not individuals, but precisely that system. We simply can't move fast enough one by one to make any real difference in how the atmosphere comes out.

"Here's the math, obviously imprecise. Maybe 10% of the population cares enough to make strenuous efforts to change. Maybe they reduce their emissions by 15% if they do all they can in their homes and offices and so forth. And then, well, nothing much shifts. The trajectory of our climate horror stays about the same.

"But if 10% of the people, once they've changed the light bulbs, work all out to change the system—that's enough. That's more than enough. It would be enough to match the power of the fossil fuel industry, enough to convince our legislatures to put a price on carbon."

And talking with James, he said there's been some other studies which show that if only 7.5% of the population is really active and engaged, that becomes a critical mass. What I'm suggesting is that part of that 7.5%, and a very important part of that 7.5%, will be what we might call new bodhisattvas—those who are trained and skilled in the inner work and are also responding outwardly. We will connect with people from other spiritual traditions, with secular activists, with ordinary people, but there's something very important to contribute from those who can have that combination of inner and outer training.

I mentioned the bodhisattva, so I want to say a word about this ideal. Traditionally, the bodhisattva is the one who comes to awakening but is dedicated to helping others—not necessarily, in the Asian context, by addressing the structural problems of society, but perhaps more through kindness, through helping, through the large heart. That's why I speak of a kind of new bodhisattva.

Many of you know from the Zen tradition those beautiful lines: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them. Delusions are endless, I vow to overcome them. The Buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to master it." What does that look like in the contemporary world?

The training for the contemporary bodhisattva involves, first of all, many of the inner practices that we're very familiar with. The bodhisattva needs to be able to work with the mind and the heart and the body, and be able to track when difficult thoughts or negative thoughts arise. When fear arises, they are someone who knows fear. When anger arises, they know anger—what it is, where it comes from. They can have empathy, but can also respond skillfully.

Through our mindfulness practice, through our wisdom training, through our development of the heart in loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and forgiveness, we learn how to respond to fear, how to respond to crisis. We become people who bring calm to a difficult or dangerous situation. The bodhisattva, through having done the inner work, has the equanimity to stay balanced when others are unbalanced. The bodhisattva is not afraid of suffering and is not afraid of pain because they have had training in how to be with what's difficult. Of course this is ongoing—I'm not saying that after this training all fear is gone. But can you see how this is exactly what's needed for our times? To have people who really have those capacities.

The bodhisattva also knows how to respond skillfully. There are what we might call intermediate trainings that the bodhisattva develops. The bodhisattva has skillful means and knows about skillful speech, has trained in wise speech, and knows how to speak in difficult situations without making things worse, without being reactive. The

bodhisattva is very well trained in knowing how to work with conflict. The bodhisattva has been through several diversity trainings and knows how to be with a range of people, perhaps having spent time in a range of communities.

The bodhisattva has trained in—and not just trained but had a lot of fun—loving the earth more. There are whole series of ways to be, ways to train, ways to learn to connect more deeply with the earth on all sorts of levels: through our gardens, through really knowing the earth better, being immersed in it. Much of the energy to respond comes from cultivating love for the earth. That's where a lot of the energy comes from. We get training in community and community action. We get training in all sorts of other approaches that help us to act skillfully in various areas.

The bodhisattva, I think, also acts where there's a particular calling and vocation. I'm reminded of a very beautiful, powerful, and simple analysis of what's needed for transformation from Joanna Macy. She says that the Great Turning has three aspects.

The first is holding actions to prevent further damage. This is very crucial—the province of traditional activism. It's very necessary for many of us to act in that way at certain times, and for all of us sometimes.

The second is to analyze our institutions and develop alternative institutions that are sustainable. This is crucial. This isn't just about protest, right? A true transformation...

requires vision, requires other ways of doing things, and many of us are already exploring this in terms of alternative agriculture, economics, medicine, law, education, and so forth.

And the third aspect of this great transformation is to shift consciousness—to be able to help others come to a different understanding, very much following what David was saying. So this may be to train us to have a different relationship to our body if we're yoga teachers or Qigong teachers or nurses or doctors. It may be to help people in meditation, to see things differently.

All three of those are necessary. And what I particularly got out of her understanding is it's not like we all have to do the same thing, but we have to go where we're called. We have to go where the gifts are, where the calling is, where the energy is. And it might be in one of those three areas primarily. But the important thing is to connect all three together.

So I might be a yoga teacher teaching a different way of being with the body, but I want to stay connected with those who are helping to prevent further damage. And I might, a certain percentage of my time, be an activist. Maybe most of my time I teach a different relation to the body.

And I think there's that calling which we have to have, very much like that beautiful statement—kind of paradoxical—from Howard Thurman, the African-American theologian, who said, in response to a young man... This was a man who had been a lifelong activist, started the first interracial church in the San Francisco Bay Area. And a young man asked him, "What should I do with my life?"

You might imagine he would say, "Well, we really need people at the church," or "Here's the movement now." And he said, paradoxically, "Don't ask what the world needs. Rather, ask what makes you come alive, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

And so I'll leave us with that and invite us to look for and demand training to connect our inner work and our outer response, because that's what the world needs and it also makes us come alive.

Thank you.

And we wanted to leave a little bit of time for any questions or responses. We understand there hasn't always been so much time so far during the day. I noticed there was one question in the back, one gentleman there, or comment.

"I just noticed how difficult it is sometimes to speak what we're trying to say, and how often we have duality in our language and we articulate a relationship with the earth when really we are the earth."

Thank you for that. Actually, especially difficult for a philosopher like me, which is why I wanted to end with that poem, because it's the poets, it's the artists, it's the musicians who do a lot better real articulation of that than somebody like myself. So use language differently. People say, "How do we relate to nature?" Say... It's here.

Other observations, reflections, questions? Could be from something earlier in the day that hasn't had time or space yet. Please, Susan.

"The name of the Rumi poem, was it 'The Worm is Waiting'?"

No. The title I have, and I'm not sure it's his original title, is "The Worm Awakes."

"The Worm Awakes. Thank you so much."

You're welcome.

In the far back, to my left at the back.

"Thank you for your talks. And one thing that has occurred over the years is that I often felt that now I've got it, and if I can just explain it to the other people, you know, in a good way, they'll get it and go with me, whether it's the women's movement or whatever it is, you know, you get an understanding. Nothing could be further from the truth. And very often the frustration... So I think in these efforts, you have to be resilient and have to be able to take failure again and again and again and keep on."

Great. Thank you. And remember the 7.5% understanding, because we don't need to reach everyone. At a certain point, it becomes contagious.

"So this is a share from something that happened earlier where I don't remember who was talking about holding hands. And it makes us stronger. And there's a beautiful song in Spanish called 'La Cancion es Urgente'—The Song is Urgent. And one of the things, and I sing, so I love that song. And it says... No, just one line, and it says, so it's urgent, it's 'la cancion es urgente, es un rio creciendo, una flecha en el aire, es amor combatiendo,' and there's a part that says..."

"Que si vamos cantando, no podrán detenernos" - if we're singing together, they cannot stop us.

This beautiful line captures something essential about the power of collective practice, of sangha, of coming together in dharma. When we join our voices - whether in literal song or in the song of our shared commitment to awakening - we create something unstoppable, something that transcends our individual limitations.

The urgency of the song reflects the urgency of our practice. In a world filled with suffering, with division, with forces that would separate us from our deepest wisdom and from each other, there is indeed something urgent about coming together. There is something urgent about remembering that we are not alone in this journey toward freedom.

When we practice together, when we hold hands as this community has been exploring, when we allow our individual streams of mindfulness to merge into a river of collective awareness, we discover a strength that no external force can diminish. This is not mere sentiment - it is a profound spiritual truth that communities of practice have known for millennia.

The dharma itself is urgent in this way. It calls us not just to individual liberation, but to the recognition that our freedom is intimately connected with the freedom of all beings. When we sing together - when we practice together, sit together, walk together in mindfulness - we embody this interconnection. We become living proof that separation is an illusion, that love truly is combating the forces of division and despair.

This is the gift of sangha, the third jewel of our refuge. In coming together, in sharing our practice and our commitment, we discover that the path to awakening is not a solitary journey but a collective song - urgent, unstoppable, and filled with the power of love in action.

CHAPTER 271

Buddhist Perspective on Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 1h07

> *This comprehensive talk bridges contemporary climate science with Buddhist ethical teachings, offering a unique perspective on humanity's relationship with the natural world. Beginning with findings from the IPCC report and regional climate assessments for both the northeastern United States and Nepal, the talk establishes the scientific reality of anthropogenic climate change before exploring its deeper spiritual and ethical dimensions.*
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> *Drawing on the Āṭānāṭika Sutta (AN 3.70) and its teaching on the relationship between human righteousness and environmental harmony, the talk examines how Buddhist ethics directly address our ecological crisis. The principle of ahiṃsā (non-harm) embodied in the first precept extends beyond human relationships to encompass all breathing beings—from the smallest insects to the fish in acidifying oceans. The Karaṇīyamettā Sutta's universal loving-kindness toward 'all beings without exception' takes on new urgency when species face extinction from human-caused climate change.*
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> *The talk identifies greed (lobha) as the root cause of our ecological predicament, manifesting through consumer culture and economic systems that prioritize exploitation over harmony. Peter Harvey's scholarship on Buddhist ethics frames the ideal human-nature relationship as 'harmonious cooperation' rather than domination—a perspective shared with Native American traditions. Practical solutions emerge from mindfulness practice itself: the gradual simplification of lifestyle, reduced consumption, and the cultivation of contentment. The teaching concludes with the Saṃyutta Nikāya's praise for those who plant groves and establish parks, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama's call for universal responsibility toward future generations.*

The topic of our Dharma talk this late afternoon is the Buddhist perspective on climate change. You might, at least some of you, wonder what this has to do with your mindfulness retreat. Well, let's wait and see whether there is any connection or not, and whether what we're doing here has anything to do with the climate.

The structure for today's Dharma talk will be as follows. First, we shall focus on observed changes in the global climate system. Then we will take our exploration a little bit closer to where we are here right now, namely to the northeast of North America. After that, we shall also take a closer look at somewhere quite different, quite far from here—namely Nepal—and how climate change has affected that country and the indicators for climate change there.

Having done all of this, we shall take a closer look at some of the causes of climate change and then go on to discuss or highlight the more Buddhist perspective on climate change. Part of that will be an exploration of whether we have a responsibility or not. Is there an individual as well as a universal responsibility, or is this certainly something that just doesn't concern us?

Within this last year, two major reports were released. One, if I remember correctly, was in September of last year: the summary for policymakers as issued by the IPCC, which stands for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. That summary is available on the internet and elsewhere and provides very interesting reading on the topic. We will not have time to go into all those many details—there are plenty of facts and figures—but we'll keep it to the key findings of the IPCC: key findings with regard to the atmosphere, with regard to the oceans of the globe, the cryosphere (which concerns the ice masses), and the main finding with regard to sea level. Carbon and other biogeochemical cycles is another area, and certainly we shall also mention the detection and attribution of climate change. To whom can climate change be attributed?

This is the most recent report, and please do know that hundreds if not thousands of scientists in the field were involved in preparing it. The report says clearly: warming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to even millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, sea level has risen, and the concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased. That's the overall summary concerning the major aspects of our globe. Although, unfortunately—and some of you might have noticed this already—this summary is not talking about the impact on, or considering, wildlife and the impact on species.

The more specific summary for the atmosphere is given as follows: each of the last three decades has been successively warmer at the Earth's surface than any preceding decade since 1850. In the Northern Hemisphere, 1983 to 2012 was likely the warmest thirty-year period of the last 1,400 years. This statement was given with medium confidence.

When it comes to the specific conclusion for the oceans, the statement is as follows: ocean warming dominates the increase in energy stored in the climate system, accounting for more than 90% of energy accumulated between 1971 and 2010. There's high confidence for this finding. It is virtually certain, the scientists say, that the upper ocean —extending from the surface all the way to 700 meters below—warmed from 1971 until 2010, and it likely warmed between the 1870s and 1971.

The cryosphere concerns itself with ice sheets. The statement of the scientists here is the following: over the last two decades, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have been losing mass, glaciers have continued to shrink almost worldwide, and Arctic sea ice and Northern Hemisphere spring snow cover have continued to decrease in extent. There's high confidence for this finding. Each of the findings is attributed with a certain level of confidence—sometimes extremely high confidence, sometimes high confidence, and certainly sometimes less certain confidence.

As for sea level: the rate of sea level rise since the mid-nineteenth century has been larger than the mean rate during the previous two millennia. There's high confidence for this statement. Over the period 1901 until 2010, global sea level rose by 0.19 meters —almost twenty centimeters. This, we will soon see, has an impact on certain populations, namely coastal populations. People living in coastal areas are likely to get wet feet, and maybe more than this.

The main finding with regard to carbon and other biogeochemical cycles is stated in the following words: the atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide have increased to levels unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years. Carbon dioxide concentrations have increased by 40% since pre-industrial times, primarily from fossil fuel emissions and secondarily from net land use change emissions. The ocean has absorbed about 30% of the emitted anthropogenic carbon dioxide, causing ocean acidification.

Before this IPCC report was published, there was a heated debate in the scientific community as to whether climate change is happening at all—maybe it's just imagination—and secondly, what to attribute this climate change to, with some stating that it had nothing to do with human activities. The most recent IPCC report from 2013 came up with a really clear statement.

It says, under the heading of detection and attribution of climate change: human influence has been detected in warming of the atmosphere and the ocean, in changes in the global water cycle, in reductions in snow and ice, in global mean sea level rise, and in changes in some climate extremes. This evidence for human influence has grown since the earlier assessment report—number four, which if I'm not mistaken was from 2007. Earlier on, the level of confidence wasn't that great yet. However, with the 2013 report there was hardly any room left for doubt. The report states that it is extremely likely—which means 95 to 100 percent likely—that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.

Now, all of us happen to be humans, which certainly means this concerns us greatly.

A number of countries, when addressing climate change issues, initiated what are called climate change assessments. What these assessments do is look at the respective country, observe changes within that country, and then make predictions of what might happen next. Not long ago, the U.S. National Climate Assessment was published, and for this report too, many hundreds of scientists were involved in putting it together. The United States National Climate Assessment was ordered by the government itself.

This national climate assessment is interesting because it clearly states findings not only for the country as a whole, but also for various geographic regions—one of them being the Northeast, another the Northwest, then the Southwest, and so on. Since we're here in Barre, Massachusetts, as part of the Northeast, let us, just for the sake of general knowledge, take a closer look at what this climate assessment finds with regard to the impact of climate change.

The report states: Heat waves, coastal flooding, and river flooding will pose a growing challenge to the region's environmental, social, and economic systems. This will increase the vulnerability of the region's residents, especially its most disadvantaged populations. Infrastructure will be increasingly compromised by climate-related hazards—infrastructure such as roads, bridges, buildings, airports, and seaports—including impacts from sea level rise, coastal flooding, and intense precipitation events. Agriculture, fisheries, and ecosystems will be increasingly compromised over the next century by climate change impacts. Farmers can explore new crop options, but these adaptations are not cost- or risk-free. Moreover, adaptive capacity, which varies throughout the region, could be overwhelmed by changing climate. While a majority of states and a rapidly growing number of municipalities have begun to incorporate the risk of climate change into their planning activities, implementation of adaptation measures is still at early stages.

Now, in the case of Nepal—a small landlocked country in Asia, placed right between two superpowers, namely China to the north and India to the south—even though it is contributing less than 0.01 percent of global carbon emissions, there is little that Nepal can do to decrease greenhouse gases. What has been noticed over the years in Nepal is a decreasing amount of snow on Mount Everest caused by rising temperatures. Nepal's glaciers—and Nepal covers a substantial part of the Himalayas, especially that part where eight of the highest peaks are located—have retreated by 21 percent over the past 30 years, and more reduction is expected in the near future.

Now this itself has some serious consequences, namely that the number of glacial lakes at high altitude is increasing—between 20 and 26 in Nepal—and if they burst, there will be major flooding in the mountain areas. The glacial melt is increasing as

temperatures rise and will lead to increased summer flows in some river systems for a few decades, followed by a reduction in flows as the glaciers disappear. Scientists say the effects of climate change could be devastating, as the Himalayas provide food and energy for approximately 1.3 billion people living in downstream river basins.

It is this last aspect that is being increasingly highlighted by scientists, for instance, scientists from ICIMOD—the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, a regional scientific institute. What is happening is that black carbon is being pushed towards the Himalayas. There are well-known channels for this black carbon, which is emitted by millions and millions of households cooking with solid fuel such as firewood. The black carbon haze, or so-called atmospheric brown cloud, is also owing to millions of vehicles, many of them not properly maintained. Furthermore, thousands of brick kilns contribute to the black carbon pollution, as well as a number of heavy industries.

All of that atmospheric brown cloud—a brown haze—gets moved towards the Himalayas and has a major impact on air quality. More than this: black carbon has a tendency to absorb sunlight and warm up the atmosphere. When layers of the atmosphere in which the black carbon is predominant come in contact with the snow and glaciers, it leads to increased melting. Plus, when black carbon particles settle on the glaciers, the color black absorbs the sun's rays, and that too contributes to a warming and melting of the glaciers.

Within the next couple of decades, scientists expect an increase in meltwater from the glaciers. However, once the glaciers have greatly receded, there will be no more water supply for the major rivers in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent.

So a greatly decreased inflow of water for the Ganges River, for the Brahmaputra, for the Indus-Sutlej River, for the Salween, and other major rivers. When those major rivers in their respective river basins carry less water, there will be less water available for agriculture, and this will have an impact on the population. Obviously, it will. And then there can be even further consequences in terms of food security and beyond. So there are some really major consequences to be expected from climate change.

Now, are those changes always the same in every country, in every place? They're not. There are huge differences between the impacts of climate change here in the northeast of the United States and the impact of climate change on the southwest of this country. And again, the impact on a country like Nepal is certainly quite different.

Various causes have been mentioned for climate change. Natural causes, for instance, such as changes in the Earth's orbit and the Earth moving closer to the Sun, changes in solar activity, and volcanic eruptions. And then as another major source, the IPCC has concluded that there is human activity—anthropogenic cause. These have greatly contributed to the changes in Earth's climate.

Now, many of these major changes have occurred since the industrial era began. And the industrial era began with which invention? The steam engine—there you go. The invention of the steam engine, the combustion engine. At the time, it was heralded as a big innovation, and it has brought many changes, much more power, also much more comfort. But in the long run, the side effects of this invention have been disastrous.

Among the things that have greatly contributed to climate change, we have the greenhouse gases. Among those, carbon dioxide being the first one, methane the next one, nitrous oxide yet another one. Water vapor has also been mentioned. And the sources of carbon dioxide emissions include fossil fuel burning, cement manufacturing, and land use changes—by which is meant turning, let's say, an area covered by a dense tropical forest into an agricultural area, burning down parts of the tropical forest and then starting agriculture.

This much in terms of observed changes and the major sources that have caused climate change. Now let us take a look at the Buddhist perspective on climate change. Let us start with some very fundamental aspects, namely humanity's relationship to nature, or humanity's place in nature. You will surely know that there are certain religious systems that have proposed humans' role with regard to nature to be what? Domination. There you go—domination of nature, conquering nature.

Now, the Buddhist perspective, or let's take the Native American Indian perspective on this. Would Native Americans share this idea of conquering nature, domination of nature? Not at all. Well, with certain of the Buddhist teachings, it's about the same thing.

Peter Harvey, a professor of Buddhism originally from the UK, has stated the following in his book *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, a book that I can highly recommend. Given all that has been said so far in his chapter on our relationship to nature, he says, "It is clear that the Buddhist ideal for humanity's relationship with animals, plants, and the landscape is one of"—and please note—"harmonious cooperation. The Buddha's teachings emphasizes a disciplining and prudent overcoming of the negativities within the conditioned nature of the human heart."

What do we do here during this retreat? We meditate and we try to overcome those negativities within the human heart.

"Such an approach goes hand in hand with a friendly attitude to the environment," Harvey continues. This can be seen in Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki's statement about making a good friend of a climbed mountain rather than conquering it. So our role as humans is not to conquer and subjugate the planet Earth but rather to live in harmony with it.

Now, an aspect that hardly gets highlighted in this discussion of climate change and the impact of humans on the environment is the ethical aspect of our actions. Our actions will have direct impact on the environment. If we as an individual, or as part of a corporation, or as a local society—if our carbon footprint is really high, well then there will clearly be an impact on the atmosphere and with this on the environment.

This, however, the Buddha says, is not the only thing to consider. There is the so-called Ādamika Sutta from the Aṅgūtrāṇikāya, namely volume two, section seventy-four to seventy-six, and that discourse is structured in a very simple way. It says if the king of a country is unrighteous, if the ruler or governor of a country is unrighteous, then the vassals of that country will also become unrighteous. When the vassals of that country are unrighteous, then the town and country folks will also become unrighteous.

And then it goes on like this. Because human beings become unrighteous, the sun and moon will be off course. And then the constellations and stars will be off course. Day and night will be off course. Winds will be off course. And even the deities will become upset. And when the deities, the discourse says, become upset, the rains will not be regular anymore. This certainly has an impact on the crops, of course. With little rain falling there would be poor crops, and certainly the human beings who have to make do with such poor crops will end up being weak and short-lived.

Then the discourse goes on. That Ādamika Sutta goes on to state just the opposite. If the ruler of a country is righteous, then the vassals and Brahmins of that country become righteous. If they are righteous, then the town and country folks will also become righteous. And then the same sequence again. At the end we will have crops that are abundant, and the people will be strong, healthy, and enjoy a long life.

So what we have here is an ethical consideration, an ethical consideration in the context of our environment. Hardly anyone is considering this these days.

Now, there is, as Peter Harvey has stated, the pan-Indian value of ahimsa, or non-injury, which then corresponds to the first of the five precepts which exhorts us to abstain from the onslaught on living beings—literally, breathing beings.

This first precept usually is understood as being limited just to fellow human beings, that we don't torment them, that we don't take their lives. But in the context of our climate change topic it becomes obvious that this precept takes on a new dimension. To abstain from onslaught on living beings includes even the tiny ants and insects of whatever form. It includes certainly the fish in the oceans and lakes. It includes the birds in the sky.

Now, if because of our way of living on this planet, certainly causing much carbon dioxide emissions—if because of this the CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere go really high, and that then leads to a warming of the global climate, and that then has an impact on many species, causing certain regions to become so hot that certain species just can't survive anymore—then what? Are we observing that first precept or not? Not. So collectively we are at fault.

The non-harming of animals could be understood out of this first precept, but could also be understood coming from a different point of view. Namely, if millions of species get harmed or become extinct because of climate change and because of our human anthropogenic activities, then we will pile a huge amount of unwholesome karmic results onto our own heads—and that's collectively speaking.

So ideally, we do not want to intentionally harm living beings. The Buddha is very clear about this, as is nicely expressed in the Dhammapada, verse 131, when he came across a group of children that were molesting a snake with sticks. The Buddha speaks to them: "Whoever, seeking his or her own happiness, harms with the rod or a stick pleasure-loving beings, gets no happiness hereafter." In other words, there will be unwholesome karmic results, and those will then contribute to our unhappiness.

Now, in certain passages, the first precept is formulated in a very beautiful way. Namely, it says one avoids killing of living beings and abstains from it, without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, desirous of the welfare of all living beings. "Full of sympathy" sometimes also gets translated as "with a trembling of the heart." One feels, one empathizes with some living being that is under attack.

Out of the four divine abodes—namely mettā, karuṇā, sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā)—out of those, mettā and karuṇā, loving-kindness and compassion, play a major role when it comes to our relationship to the environment, to nature. As Peter Harvey states, as all sentient beings like happiness and dislike pain, however much their specific desires and sensitivities vary, the Karaṇīyamettā Sutta, the discourse on loving-kindness, speaks of radiating loving-kindness to all types of beings—not only to our pet dog or pet cat or white mouse or whatever it might be.

"Whatever living beings there be," the Sutta Nipāta says in verses 146-147, and this really goes to the heart, "whatever living beings there be, feeble or strong, tall, stout, or medium, short, small, or large, without exception, seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born or those who are to be born—may all beings be happy."

So there's an equal regard, a positive regard, towards all living beings.

Some researchers, Buddhist scholars among them, have pointed out that our current economic system is also at fault, or is at the root of this global eco-crisis, and that indeed seems to be the case. Our current global economic system is based on greed, and the greed leads to consumption. Marketing is artificially creating an increase of consumption by creating artificial needs. We think we need certain things when maybe we don't really need them.

Does genuine happiness and well-being truly arise when we go to a big shopping center and pile fifty items into our shopping cart, pay for all of this, and then take it back home? Does this really make us truly happy? No, not really. True happiness is more likely to be found in a place like this, when engaging in mindfulness practice.

Buddhist studies scholars have proposed that the root cause of our ecological crisis, as mentioned, lies in our greed. We would be well advised to reduce that greed as much as we can. Especially when we meditate, we realize for ourselves over years that gradually we manage to get by on less and less. Usually there is a simplification of lifestyle, which means we need less, and with this there is less need to purchase goods, less need to exploit nature, and less need for unnecessary manufacturing.

Researchers in the field of climate change have proposed some obvious solutions. They are calling for more research on the topic, and each and every country has to do that. In the case of Nepal, the research is still at the infant stage, even though the country is facing major climate change impacts. The second solution that has been proposed is creating awareness for climate change issues—and this is where we can come in. Thirdly, reduction of carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases, an area where we can also contribute. And fourth, preparedness for extreme climate conditions.

From a worldly point of view of what could be done as an individual contribution to addressing climate change, the website of the United States Environmental Protection Agency contains wonderful information—proposals for what one could do at home, at school, in the office, and on the road. I don't have time to go into all those suggestions, but they are really good and worth looking up and considering.

From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, a number of principles apply. First of all, we have both a personal and a collective or universal responsibility towards the environment. This arises out of the first precept of not injuring living beings, and also out of compassion, namely *karuṇā*, or concern, which is a related term *dayā*, and sympathy, *anukampā* in Pali.

Dhammapada verse 129 has the following to say: "All tremble at violence, all fear death. Comparing oneself with others, one should neither kill nor cause to kill." So it is not just our fellow human beings who fear death, but the ant that is crawling across your path, or perhaps some spider in your room that prefers to live and not to get squashed.

Did the Buddha encourage animal sacrifices? Not at all. He followed through with the intuitive wisdom he gained, and that meant a clear no to animal sacrifices, which were common at his time and unfortunately are still common on the Indian subcontinent. It is said that the Buddha strongly recommended performing different kinds of sacrifices, namely by making offerings of vegetables, of fruit, milk, lighting a candle, or lighting some incense sticks.

Now, why do you think the second precept of avoiding stealing could be important in the context of our topic? The first precept is evident, but what about the second one? Someone said, "We're stealing the future of our children." That's a really good point. Yes, that's it. And in a book I found the following statement in this regard: we have a responsibility not to rob the planet of its trees, water, fresh air, and minerals in whatever form this might take place. Some big corporations feel they have a right to exploit planet Earth in every possible way and to rob the planet of its resources.

If you contrast this with the attitude of the Native American Indians towards nature, do you see any difference there? There is a huge difference—a tremendous respect for nature. Not even moving, or when moving, let us say, a stone or rock, then later putting it back where it originally was. And taking from nature only what is absolutely necessary, and not more.

In terms of cause and effect, action, and karmic results, the third volume of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, section 369 to 371, states the case of a big fruit tree with several branches, and each branch was yielding bountiful fruits—enough for the entire country. Yet one day an ignorant man came along and helped himself to the fruits of that tree as much as he could eat, and then went on to chop down that branch. The tree spirit that was inhabiting the tree was very upset and decided, "What is this? This I will stop," and made it so that the tree would not bear fruit anymore. Then the king of that kingdom, Koravya, complained to the king Sakka, saying that previously the tree was

bearing lots of fruit, but now no more. "Please change this." And so Sakka then had an impact, speaking to that tree spirit. Part of the story was that eventually even a strong wind came and uprooted the fruit tree, and so the tree spirit was strongly affected by the karmic results of its deed.

In contrast to this, we have a discourse given in the first volume of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, section 33, entitled "Planters of Groves," and there it says: "For whom does merit always increase, both by day and by night? Who are the people going to heaven, established in Dhamma and endowed with virtue?" The answer is given: "Those who set up a park or a grove, the people who construct a bridge, a place to drink, and a well, those who give a residence—for them, merit always increases, both by day and by night."

Those are the people going to heaven, established in Dhamma and endowed with virtue.

So planting trees, setting up a park or a grove, is clearly mentioned here as a wholesome deed.

The Jataka, in its section 32, speaks of a person who, resting in the shade of a big tree, having rested there before moving on, shows his gratitude to this tree by chopping it down. This is clearly denounced as someone who is an evil and false friend, someone who doesn't know gratitude—first enjoying the shade of that tree, enjoying perhaps even the fruits of that tree, and then before continuing the journey, breaking branches, if not even chopping down the entire tree. So that's another reference.

Now, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, in an article published in a book entitled *Moral Ground*, states the following: "Universal responsibility to take action to protect the future of a planet in peril for the survival of humankind. The key thing is the sense of universal responsibility. That is the real source of strength, the real source of happiness. If our generation exploits everything available—the trees, the water, and the minerals—without any care for the coming generation or the future, then we are at fault, aren't we?"

And that's it.

So allow me to conclude today's Dhamma talk on the Buddhist perspective on climate change by wishing: May we be fully aware of our individual as well as collective or universal responsibility towards nature, towards the environment. And may our mindfulness practice here at the Forest Refuge help to purify the mind of negativities—of greed, of hatred, of delusion—as much as possible. And then may this lead to the arising of much loving-kindness, much compassion, much karuṇā, and of much con-

tentment and understanding. In this way, may we contribute to a proper addressing of climate change, be it in a small or larger way during our very existence, and thus may future generations benefit from it.

CHAPTER 272

The Anatomy of Ignorance 2 - The Social Roots of Ignorance and Climate Disruption

Rob Burbea · 1h03

> *In this second talk of his series on the anatomy of ignorance, Rob Burbea focuses on social conditioning as a form of ignorance that prevents clear seeing of systemic issues like climate disruption. Drawing on recent UN climate reports, he examines three types of denial - intellectual, emotional, and environmental tokenism - that keep us from responding adequately to the climate crisis. Burbea connects Buddhist understanding of ignorance (avijja) with social conditioning around race, gender, nationality, and economic systems that blind us to interconnected realities. He outlines three levels of response: individual actions like energy reduction, community initiatives like carpooling, and collective mobilization for systemic change. Throughout, he emphasizes how dharma practitioners have unique resources - mindfulness, compassion, equanimity - essential for sustained climate action. The talk integrates practical solutions with spiritual practice, showing how working through personal and social ignorance connects to the universal ignorance addressed in traditional Buddhist teachings.*

I want to continue this week with the theme that was developed initially last week, which is the theme that I'm calling the Anatomy of Ignorance. Last week we looked at an overview of that theme in terms of three main forms of ignorance: what I'm calling more personal ignorance, ignorance on a psychological level; social ignorance; and then what I was calling more universal ignorance, which is typically pointed to by spiritual traditions.

We looked, especially I think in the discussion time, at the very interesting way that framing essentially the problem of human life as ignorance, as opposed to framing it in terms of good versus evil, which is what so many cultures have done, is both hopeful but also very sobering. It gives some advantages from the model of seeing the roots of human suffering, problems, conflict, and so forth as the fight between good and evil. The fight versus good and evil also makes for better movies, I think. Ignorance is much less cinematic than the fight between good and evil.

I also pointed to the way that we have, in this culture, somewhat of a schizophrenia around that. At times we seem to really emphasize that ignorance is the problem and we can learn, and in a sense it's more hopeful. It also can really be connected with a certain amount of compassion, because we can have compassion when conditioning

and ignorance are the root of unskillful behavior. When the problem is simply that people are bad or evil, we tend to want to destroy them, or punish them at least, or lock them away forever. I mentioned how there is that conflict within our culture. We even can see it very dramatically in the whole history of the so-called criminal justice system, in which at times prisons have been understood as ways for people to learn, to reform. We have the idea of reformatory, penitentiary, as opposed to penal institutions, which are more about punishment. And there's been conflict there. You can see that conflict in many parts of culture.

From the Buddhist tradition, the emphasis is clearly that ignorance is the issue, that there's a kind of deep unknowing that we have, which results in unskillful behavior, which is connected with suffering. And in our practice we have a major tool for investigating that ignorance.

I also mentioned how ignorance is sometimes challenging to investigate. We sometimes talk about the roots of suffering being greed, hatred, and delusion or ignorance, or greed, aversion, and delusion or ignorance. Greed and aversion are very evident experientially. We're often clear when we're greedy or when we're very aversive. It's something that we can know—oh my God, I was really just caught in that, not wanting that to happen or aversive towards that person or that situation. As we practice meditation, as we develop in mindfulness, as we develop in wisdom, often the greed and the aversion or the compulsive wanting and the aversion become clearer. And ignorance is harder to find.

We sometimes, by investigating greed and aversion, open up to places where we were, as it were, on automatic. But some of the deeper roots of our ignorance are harder to access. And that's why I think it can be very valuable to focus on how do we actually understand and how do we actually transform ignorance.

So the framing that I gave last time, which is on Dharmaseed, was to identify these three types of ignorance. The first being the more personal ignorance, often identified very skillfully by psychological traditions, which talk about our unconscious dimensions or look to places where we were stuck in our upbringing or didn't get optimal nourishment or care, or there was some kind of trauma or difficulty. A lot of Western psychology is quite skillful for identifying where developmentally we get stuck, or where we develop certain, what's sometimes called neuroses, or patterns of confused reactive behavior.

When we asked for hands last time, most of us had explored—it's in the culture very much to explore that and to discover some of the places where one is less conscious or unconscious on a personal level, in large part related to one's personal history and

one's basic patterns. Many or most of us have explored that, at least some, and have probably worked through a lot of very old and sometimes chronic patterns. That was the first kind of ignorance, which I'm going to be particularly focusing on, I believe, next week, because my intention was to give the overview last time, and then in three successive meetings, focus on each of these three forms of ignorance.

The second, which I'll be looking at especially today, could be called the social aspect of ignorance, or the aspect where there is social conditioning that leads us to not see clearly. This would take shape probably in a number of ways. One of the most evident is the confusion and the conditioning that we have around being a member of a certain group. We find tremendous confusion and significant suffering around race, gender, age, sexual orientation, nationality, religion. We probably could go on with a number of others.

Many people have looked at some aspects of that conditioning. Many women and some men have looked at gender conditioning with a lot of depth in a way to identify it clearly and resist it. There's been tremendous movement in that way in the last 50 years, maybe longer time. A certain amount of attention has also gone into looking at how race influences our consciousness, and it really is so pervasive how we think in those ways. That, I think, is less investigated generally, even if some of the grosser manifestations of conditioning around race that manifest in discrimination and so forth, some of those have been ended.

There also are all these other areas. And there are also all sorts of social ideologies that we take in just from being a member of society. When we look back to another culture, when we look back to a culture 100 years ago in the US, or we maybe look to a foreign culture, we can often see, oh yeah, they really have that conditioning. Of course, we don't see our own very well, right?

We don't see our own, but we can point to different aspects of ignorance. It can manifest as certain ideologies—like the idea that if only we work hard, everyone will succeed. This notion carries a measure of truth, but it also neglects many of the pervasive systemic influences around all those dimensions I just identified. Then we criticize people for not succeeding because "everyone, if one works hard, can succeed." This represents an aspect of social conditioning that blinds us.

Typically, in a culture so informed by individualism, we don't see the larger systems. We focus so intensely on the individual, and this becomes a kind of ignorance—we simply don't see certain things. I'll explore this dimension more fully later.

The third kind of ignorance is what I'm calling universal ignorance. I'll examine this in focused detail, probably in three weeks, but this represents a form of ignorance that Buddhist tradition identifies—and we can see it recognized in many spiritual traditions—as the root problem.

This kind of ignorance is described in various ways. Sometimes it's framed as not truly understanding the Four Noble Truths. Another way of expressing this is that we don't really understand the sources of suffering and the sources of happiness. We look for happiness in all the wrong places, we look for love in all the wrong places. We particularly seek happiness by grasping onto experiences, people, things, careers, objects.

This is the core teaching, as we know. The deepest freedom and the deepest happiness come more from letting go and opening up to our deep nature, which as long as we're grasping, we will never see. We will never know ourselves deeply. The meditative practices and teachings associated with them are ways to address this more universal ignorance.

It's really a way that we become caught in a self-centered way of seeing, which tends to view ourselves and the world as permanent and tries to find happiness in grasping after things. It doesn't see our depth, our potential. Spiritual practice is designed to let us see through that ignorance and open up to our depths. That's why we're here. That's what draws us here. That's why Spirit Rock exists. That's right at the center of the tradition.

Last time I discussed how simply laying out these three forms of ignorance can be very sobering. There's a lot of work to do. Hopefully we've signed up for that, but it's a lot—not just one form of ignorance, but three. Some of them we don't know quite how to transform. We don't yet know so well how to address social ignorance. There's still much to be learned there. And transforming psychologically-based ignorance can be expensive at times.

So how do we approach this? It's very sobering, all this ignorance to work through.

But as I've mentioned, there's hope in identifying ignorance as the problem in all these approaches. There are ways we can actually act both in an inner way and in a more outer way to respond and transform the ignorance. Ultimately, this represents a hopeful vision of human life.

When we work with this model of ignorance as the root problem, we probably alternate between feeling "my god, this is a lot" and actually experiencing the excitement of learning, the excitement of moving and growing. How many of you can identify some area of personal ignorance that you were stuck in five or ten years ago that you are now free of? Go back twenty years.

In all these aspects of ignorance—psychological, social, and universal—there are numerous ways to transform our blindness. Today, I want to explore how we understand ignorance and how we transform that ignorance in relationship to this Earth Care Week. I want to particularly examine climate issues—a huge issue where ignorance takes many forms, yet remains workable.

I'm going to take us through this investigation, hoping we can encounter both the sobering aspect of ignorance and the hopeful perspective of working with it. I'm pleased to be conducting this exploration with you, knowing that something very much like this is happening in hundreds of similar communities this week, that many people are examining these same concerns and issues, hopefully to catalyze larger engagement.

Because it's not an exaggeration to say that the fate of the planet rests on precisely this kind of awakening.

I would say that without question, the science is clear and sobering. Let me examine this from three perspectives: first, the realities of what is sometimes called climate change, though I believe it's more accurately termed climate disruption. Change suggests something neutral, but what we're witnessing is the disruption and breakdown of established patterns.

Second, I want to explore how we can understand social ignorance as part of the root cause of this crisis. And third, I'll discuss how we might transform that ignorance into understanding and action—individually, as a community, and collectively.

Ultimately, I'm offering a positive vision of how to respond. In the long run, I believe that people with dharma practice, who understand inner transformation—particularly the personal and universal aspects we discussed—have a special role to play. Connecting these three types of transformation of ignorance is essential to address the depth of our current crisis.

Our inner practice trains us to study difficult emotions, to understand the roots of personal suffering, and to work skillfully with reactivity. We learn to be present with fear, despair, and anger while developing equanimity, balance, and mindfulness. These

capacities are essential for the long haul, and those of us cultivating them have something vital to offer. We can connect contemplative practice with meaningful action and response.

So I hope this exploration will be both sobering and hopeful, maintaining a balance between these two necessary perspectives.

Interestingly, as I give this talk today, I notice the huge traffic jams that delayed many of us getting here—itself quite significant. And as many of you know, this past Monday, the UN climate panel released its report. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC, assembled approximately 1,500 of the world's foremost climate scientists. While their report contained little that was entirely new, it powerfully affirmed their earlier findings: all concerning trends have continued, they are serious, and if not stopped, they will lead to unprecedented suffering.

As the co-chair stated: "Our assessment of the science finds that the atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amount of snow and ice has diminished, the global mean sea level has risen, and concentrations of greenhouse gases have increased." The report continues: "Human influence has been detected in warming of the atmosphere and the ocean, changes in the global water cycle, reductions of snow and ice, sea level rise, and changes in some climate extremes. It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-twentieth century."

What was particularly significant in this report was the scientists' conclusion that if the temperature rise exceeds two degrees Celsius, catastrophic consequences will unfold. We have already warmed by nearly one degree, with many changes already in motion and more already determined by past emissions.

The scientists established that no more than one trillion metric tons of additional carbon can be burned. This connects to Bill McKibben's influential Rolling Stone analysis from a year ago, where he calculated that to stay within the two-degree limit, we can burn no more than 565 gigatons of fossil fuels. Yet the current business plans of major fossil fuel companies project extracting approximately 3,000 gigatons—five times the amount that would trigger catastrophic consequences.

In other words, the existing business models of major fossil fuel companies, if pursued, will result in climate catastrophe.

The scientists warn that exceeding the two-degree limit will bring "irreversible and potentially catastrophic climatic changes," with the poor and those in developing countries bearing the greatest burden. We see here interlocking systems—political, economic, and ecological.

This is indeed the sobering side of our investigation. Without decisive action, the two-degree limit will certainly be exceeded within decades. One study suggests that 2015 must mark the peak of global emissions, with sharp reductions beginning immediately thereafter.

As we know all too well, political leaders have accomplished little meaningful action thus far.

Very, very meager, even though there have been some pledges. Recently, Obama gave a speech in June, and he said that he wanted to reduce America's greenhouse gas emissions by 17% from 2006 levels by 2020. Well, it's a move in the right direction. Most of the people I've read said it needs to be closer to 80%. But there we are.

So, okay, that's a brief version of the realities. Now, how do we understand our relationship to those realities? I think it's really important for all of us—I certainly include myself—to look at this in terms of the model of ignorance, in terms of certain kinds of ignorance that we simply carry within us. Because if we're really wanting to respond to this, we have to examine our own ignorance and work through it in order to be part of a response.

So let me say a little bit about the dimension of ignorance, how this manifests, and then what seems to be required or what kind of responses are possible, because they are all very, very possible.

When we look to ignorance, I think there are different aspects here. On one level, probably everything that I just mentioned we know in some way, right? How many of us felt rather familiar with the details of what I said? Maybe there were a few things here and there that were new or didn't quite track, but the basics we know, right?

And so what constitutes our ignorance? It's some way that we don't take that in. There's some way that we don't take that in, that somehow—and again, I speak for myself as well—we go about our daily activities knowing that, but not quite knowing that. There's some way that we, and it's partly because we don't know what to do, or we don't have a sense of how we can respond, and we continue with our daily activities.

I think we're kind of vaguely aware of some of the realities: that this country consumes 25% of the world's resources with 5% of the population, or that the household average use of carbon emissions is probably three times greater in this country than in Sweden—which probably has a higher standard of living because they have enacted certain measures—and double what the household amount of carbon emissions is for

Germany. We may not know those details. We may not know that each of us has about 50 times more carbon emissions than a person in Bangladesh. We may not know those kind of details, and we can be confused about this.

So there are certain kinds of denial that we seem to have. And again, I totally include myself here. We're trying to find our way together. In a sense, we are like children in a burning house. I think we know that, and there's a sense in which we are not facing the realities collectively as a society. We are not looking at these realities. Somehow most of our lives are—we are for the most part proceeding with business as usual while knowing that that's not going to work. That's unsustainable. That the current way of life is unsustainable.

So there's a kind of denial that we have just to stay sane. We segment that knowledge. It doesn't enter the entirety of our lives. There's a psychologist named Margaret Klein who's done really quite skillful study of denial in relation to climate change. She says there are three main forms of denial.

One of them is intellectual denial, which I think probably we are not engaged in. We probably know what's happening. There are people who've engaged in intellectual denial, and they've had a tremendous impact. And it's been heavily funded, as we know, by the fossil fuel industries and by a number of wealthy people like the Koch brothers. We know that that has happened and has tremendously impacted public discourse, starting in the 90s particularly, in very negative ways. This kind of intellectual denial has happened. And even though something like 97, 98, 99 percent of scientists have a clear consensus, they have found scientists who are willing to—I presume—get paid to say that, to give a scientific voice on behalf of denying these realities.

There's also a kind of emotional denial, which is probably closer to home, that to really take this in is not easy. We don't even necessarily have venues for that. I've been influenced a lot by working with Joanna Macy, and her work is really about creating venues where we can take in the emotional reality of these facts, of these studies, and so forth. And I think if we really take those in—even if you right now just feel what's there for you—and if we were to do this more fully, we would actually maybe have a whole session where we would work on what are the emotions connected with this. And when I've done day longs on this theme, we have that as a big component, really wanting to look.

So if you look in there right now, if you just see what is the—after hearing that statement of the facts, most facts and trends—if you go inside for a while, what is there?

What emotions or what inner states are there? Maybe you could just name them in a word or two.

"Stunned." "Shock, fear, despair." "Denial." "Sadness." "Overwhelm."

If we don't have ways of working with these emotions—and while our practice gives us tools, we can't necessarily access them individually—that's why work like Joanna Macy's becomes so important. How many of you know of Joanna Macy's work? It's very beautiful work in which people function in groups and find ways to access the emotions we've just named. Somehow opening up to those feelings in a group setting can free up energy, allowing us to process those emotions rather than remain trapped by them.

I've seen this transformation very dramatically myself. When I was first training with her—this was quite a while ago, 1990 or '91—we had the training the weekend of the first Gulf War, actually right after it started. I'd been active with Buddhist Peace Fellowship, attending countless meetings in the six months before that war, trying to help inform people. Yet when the bombs started dropping, I was in shock and incapable of acting. I was somewhat overwhelmed, just numb.

We did that training that weekend—sustained work for a whole weekend going into what people were feeling, offering rituals and practices. I encountered what I found there: anger, sadness, numbness, shock. I could work with it, could have it be heard by others, and came out the other end freed for action, freed for response.

We can't do this fully today, but I want to name that this is a significant piece. Perhaps part of my role would be to create venues where we do this work, because I think it's really necessary. If we don't process these emotions, we stay trapped in what was described—the overwhelm, the shock, the denial. But these feelings are workable. They're not simply the necessary emotional correlates of these realities; they're more like initial reactions that can be transformed.

Maybe we could use a session to explore this if you'd like, or perhaps I would offer that separately. But I want to acknowledge that this emotional processing is essential. We can do some of this individually in our practices by calling forth those emotions in small ways and being with them. In my experience, though, it helps tremendously to do this collectively—to be recognized, to know that these are normal patterns, not reasons to blame ourselves.

This emotional denial is pervasive, and it's based on these overwhelming feelings. Somehow that has to be worked through, because emotional denial often locks us into confusion and inaction when we don't work through it.

The third kind of denial comes in the form of what Joanna called environmental tokenism—where we do something small and think, "Oh, there, I've dealt with the big issue." I drive an electric car. Of course, not to denigrate that action, but the problem lies in thinking that by doing that, one has fully responded to the situation. These small actions are very important, but they're not the complete response.

Then there are the personal levels of denial, and beyond that, various collective ideologies which remain strong—ideologies related to the assumptions of an ongoing consumer culture in which we can keep consuming, keep using resources, believing there are no limits. These assumptions are still very much with us. The sense of individualism makes us either not look at the larger picture or feel incapable of dealing with the larger situation. I could go on about the assumptions that, to some significant extent, influence us from our larger systems.

So how to respond? We've gone to the sobering dimension. Anyone feeling sobered? Sobered and perhaps shocked a little if we've truly gone into that reality.

I want to distinguish between three kinds of responses: individual, community responses, and collective responses. I think all three are necessary.

But individual responses are very important. Even though I was using the electric car example to illustrate how limited such responses can be if that's all there is, all sorts of individual responses remain a key part of our overall response.

There is a tremendous amount one can do, ranging from staying well-informed to conducting an energy audit on one's home—to the extent that this is within one's control—to examining transportation patterns, living more simply, and taking responsibility for one's actions. Perhaps most importantly, we can work on connecting more deeply with the Earth.

We held Earth Day here on April 20th last spring, and one statement that most impacted me was that the real basis for action that will truly protect the Earth is love of the Earth. This love naturally arises from being more immersed with the Earth itself. So cultivating this connection can be a vital part of our response—really feeling more connected with the Earth so that this love leads us to want to act.

There are countless ways we can respond individually, and many wonderful resources are available. One book I've found helpful is called *The Low-Carbon Diet*, which provides a step-by-step approach to cutting your personal carbon emissions in half or less. It's not particularly difficult—there are numerous choices one can make, various actions one can take.

We can also respond at the community level, through our institutions. To the extent that we participate in institutions, we can exercise whatever influence we have. Here again, as with individual responses, we often have considerable power to make a difference. We can work with local institutions to encourage them to implement the equivalent of the individual responses I've been describing. We can examine our transportation systems.

One area I've become particularly conscious of is Spirit Rock's own carbon footprint. While we don't have a complete analysis yet, I've been influenced by attending meetings of the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition. Berkeley has a plan, approved by voters in 2006, to reduce emissions by 80% by 2050 and 20% by 2020. These targets were modest and informed by the science available at the time, which has since evolved. Still, Berkeley has been doing a good job of meeting these goals. When you account for the growth that has occurred, Berkeley is actually reducing its emissions by one-third. Some UN representatives have pointed to it as a model for much of North America.

In Berkeley's analysis, the breakdown of carbon emissions was revealing: 28% from households, 26% from businesses, and 46% from transportation. Transportation represents the largest category. When I've tried to examine Spirit Rock as carefully as possible—and the community is doing wonderful things, with new building plans that are very green indeed—transportation emerges as the most challenging issue.

This leads me to wonder: what would it take to organize carpooling for the Wednesday class? How do we at Spirit Rock reduce our carbon footprint? How do we address transportation? I think carpooling confronts American individualism directly, doesn't it? It points to the fact that the changes necessary will require us to transform our way of living. This reality isn't publicized much, but I believe that in significant ways, we'll need to live more simply and more cooperatively.

Carpooling represents one important example. How many people would be willing to carpool if we could design a good system for it? I see almost everyone raising their hands, which is very encouraging. We'll need to act on that enthusiasm.

Let me turn finally to collective responses, where I'll be briefer. One of the remarkable discoveries in reading climate change literature is that practical solutions to fully address the situation already exist. Many of you may know this—there are people and institutions that have worked out exactly what we need to do.

One of the clearest analyses I've encountered comes from Lester Brown and the Worldwatch Institute. You can find this on the web—the websites and books are listed in my resource list at the back of the room. Here you'll find a very clear plan for reducing greenhouse emissions by 2020. It's not rocket science.

From a technical standpoint, the solutions aren't complex at all. The challenge lies entirely in the political realm. Lester Brown's comprehensive plan outlines several key areas: increased energy efficiency and conservation, a fundamental shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy, population stabilization, poverty eradication, ecological restoration, and ensuring food security for all. What he emphasizes, however, is that achieving these goals requires a massive mobilization of people who truly understand the urgency of our situation.

This is where the real work lies. We can make all the wonderful changes we want individually and collectively within our institutions, but without broader engagement, little will fundamentally shift. Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org and a longtime leading voice in climate activism, offers a striking perspective on this challenge. He points out that while 10 to 15 percent of the population is highly attuned to these issues, even if all of them perfectly align their personal actions—completely reducing energy consumption, embracing carpooling, and supporting institutions that express these values—the overall impact remains minimal.

But here's the crucial insight: if those same 10 to 15 percent truly become active on these issues and commit a significant portion of their lives to responding in whatever way calls to them, everything changes. This is a profound shift in understanding. The power lies not merely in personal lifestyle changes, but in dedicated engagement and action.

The study of social movements confirms this pattern repeatedly. The American Revolution succeeded with only 3 percent of the population being highly active. Other transformative movements, like the civil rights movement, achieved massive change with perhaps 5 to 7 percent deeply committed. When 10 percent of any population commits to making an issue central to their lives, systemic transformation becomes inevitable.

So the question becomes deeply personal: Are you part of that 10 or 15 percent? Do you feel called to be part of that committed minority? And if so, what concrete actions will you take? Part of the answer involves connecting with organizations already doing meaningful work in this arena.

Joanna Macy offers valuable guidance here through her concept of "the great turning." She identifies three essential forms of action that create systems-level change, and it's important to understand that engagement can happen at any of these levels. The first is preventing further damage—the traditional domain of activists. This might mean taking concrete action to halt further extraction of fossil fuels from the earth. The Keystone Pipeline represents one of the most dramatic contemporary examples of this kind of work. If you want to witness the stakes visually, I recommend seeking out Jennifer Berezan's powerful song and accompanying footage from her flight over the tar sands with Joanna Macy. The YouTube video provides a sobering view of what we're confronting.

The second form of action involves transforming core institutions, and this can manifest in countless ways across medicine, education, and other vital sectors. Imagine what could happen if our educational system truly taught sustainability as a fundamental principle. This could become someone's passionate calling—we don't all need to be on the front lines in identical ways.

The third area is consciousness transformation. What's being asked of us isn't that everyone abandon their current path to become frontline activists, though certain moments may call for exactly that level of response. Lester Brown suggests that one likely scenario for genuine transformation would require a World War II-style, post-Pearl Harbor mobilization of our entire society. That level of collective commitment would certainly create the change we need, though we remain far from such unified purpose.

The alternative model involves gradual transformation through grassroots education and action. This third level of consciousness shifting asks each of us to discern deeply: Where am I called to contribute?

This requires a fundamental shift in our economic thinking. The question you raise about energy companies being bound by their current business models points to one of the deepest challenges we face. These companies have massive investments in existing fossil fuel infrastructure and reserves. Their shareholders expect returns on these investments, creating what economists call "stranded assets" if we transition too quickly to renewables.

But here's where I think our practice offers something essential. We understand impermanence. We know that clinging to outdated models—whether personal habits or business strategies—ultimately creates suffering. The companies that can release their attachment to fossil fuels and embrace the inevitable transition will likely thrive. Those that cling too tightly may find themselves obsolete.

There's also the deeper question of what we mean by prosperity and success. Our current economic model assumes infinite growth on a finite planet, which is simply impossible. Buddhist economics, as E.F. Schumacher called it, offers a different vision—one focused on well-being rather than endless accumulation.

The transition won't be easy, and it will require what economists call "creative destruction"—the painful but necessary process of old systems giving way to new ones. This is where the second quote I shared becomes relevant: "Liberation from ignorance is as painful as being born."

We're being asked to birth a new economic reality, and like all births, it involves both pain and incredible possibility. The question is whether we can stay present with that discomfort long enough to allow something genuinely new to emerge.

What the energy companies need—what we all need—is the courage to let go of what we think we know about how things must work and open to what might be possible.

And on a personal note, I want to create a consulting practice where I not only go through that transformation and shift you were talking about myself, but bring it to other people—mindfulness and things like that. Bring that out into the communities, like business communities.

Yes, how to bring both this understanding and then also bring these capacities and tools—mindfulness, compassion. Because as I said, I think that combination is extremely important. And so to be motivated to bring that combination into one's work is beautiful. That's what I'm really hoping to invoke.

What Bill McKibben is doing with 350.org is he is going to college campuses all over the country with the message that we have to take the same approach with fossil fuel companies as we did with South Africa. And that is divestment from stock and financial support for the fossil fuel companies, because they're determined to extract every last thing out of the environment. One very concrete way to try to alleviate that is—you know how Marin County is probably one of the richest counties in the state—imagine that many people may have mutual funds and equities. They may look at a mutual fund and realize, wow, I've got BP stock or Exxon and didn't even know it, and start putting pressure on them, as they're doing with universities, to divest from these stocks the way it was with South Africa. And that worked.

So really pointing to one strategy, which is based on seeing how the business plans of many or most fossil fuel companies are in conflict with not going beyond this two degrees Celsius rise, as we presently understand their plans. And so one of the responses

would be, in terms of Joanna Macy's model, stopping further damage from happening would be to call for divestment from the stocks of these companies. And that's happening on hundreds of college campuses and can be done also with every institution. This would be part of the response, right? Because if all that's in there, as they calculate and research, if it comes out, it's game over. That's the end of it.

I think people just aren't willing to face it, because the economic impact—it's hard stuff.

Yes, so let me just repeat the comment for others listening: the analysis is that if those fossil fuels come out of the ground and are used, we go beyond the limits. And yet it comes up against these very powerful companies and comes up against really a lot of the economic rules of the game.

Maybe let other people speak who haven't yet.

I live and teach in Central Valley, which is also called the Valley of the Poor. It has one of the highest poverty rates. And I've been talking a lot about these issues in my classes, and I have a very difficult time sustaining myself—creating this us versus them, or getting out of that us versus them mentality. There's a lot of judgment involved that I'm personally trying to overcome in my life. I don't know quite where I'm going with this, but I guess that's why I'm here.

And I see a lot of the people around me—they do not have the problem that people in Mill Valley have, that they have the resources where they can divest. Rather, they are tied to the system where they have to work in the food industry, which is petrochemical. They have to work in the oil fields to feed their families. I'm not sure what I'm saying. I guess I'm saying—and I see this as a very—how do I reach people when I'm saying, this creates more problems the way we are. We are in this system. But there are livelihoods, and even just enough. I mean, I'm not talking about investing in the market. I'm talking about getting basic food on the table. Does that make sense?

Yes, so the comment raises a few different concerns. One is just about how to communicate these kinds of issues and these kinds of concerns in different settings, particularly in a setting where people are poor or working-class, less well-off maybe than in general than Marin County, and their work is fully, as it were, enmeshed in systems which are based on using petrochemicals, such as different kinds of agriculture and so forth.

And so I would identify at least two core issues there. One is something we're actually talking about quite a bit in some of our teacher discussions—just about how do we talk about this? For some people, coming to Spirit Rock or coming to a center is an at-

tempt to find refuge from the world. And then if a teacher or someone else brings up a crisis, some people would feel, that wasn't the contract that I'm here for. I know that's not what you're saying. I was just connecting it to other issues.

And so how do we talk about this in a dharma setting? How do we talk about it with other people whose livelihood is dependent on the ongoing functioning of a system, and for whom a radical change could be very disorienting and there's not a clear sense of where to go? I think these are multiple issues—it's a large set of issues.

I think approaching the people who actually have power—as human beings and in time, in some way, they are going to realize that they're not immune from the effects of what's going to happen. And their children and grandchildren are not immune. Everyone's going to suffer if this goes on.

Right, exactly. The crucial point is that those who hold power must, if they truly look deeply, recognize they are caught in profound inner conflict. Their own actions are creating an unstable and often frightening world for their children and grandchildren. Have they genuinely examined this contradiction?

This could be a point of access—a way to reach them. When people are trapped in patterns that will ultimately undermine the wellbeing of their own families, there's a fundamental contradiction at work, a significant delusion that binds them.

This inner conflict, this cognitive dissonance between their actions and their love for their families, might be where genuine dialogue can begin. It's through this recognition of their own suffering, their own entrapment in systems that harm even those they love most, that awakening becomes possible.

The path forward requires both wisdom and compassion—wisdom to see clearly the interconnectedness of all our actions, and compassion for everyone caught in these cycles of harm, including those who seem to hold the power but are themselves imprisoned by the very systems they perpetuate.

Perhaps this is where the Dharma offers its deepest gift: the recognition that liberation is possible for all beings, and that our individual awakening is inseparable from the healing of our world.

CHAPTER 273

Dharma Practice and the Climate Crisis

Rob Burbea · 1h01

> *In this Earth Day-inspired dharma talk, Rob Burbea addresses a dilemma many practitioners face: how to balance the compelling pull of deep spiritual practice with the urgent need to respond to climate change. Drawing from his recent four-week retreat experience, he explores whether these two paths are truly contradictory or can be integrated in a meaningful way.*
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> *Burbea examines how core Buddhist principles—including dāna (generosity), karuṇā (compassion), and the understanding of interdependence—naturally call us to engage with the world's suffering. He references the examples of engaged contemplatives like Thích Nhất Hạnh, Thomas Merton, and Buddhadāsa, who found ways to combine deep practice with social engagement. The talk explores Joanna Macy's framework of "the great turning" and its three approaches: holding actions, shifting institutions, and transforming consciousness.*
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> *The second half addresses how traditional activism often lacks the spiritual resources necessary for sustainable engagement, leading to burnout, self-righteousness, and infighting. Burbea argues that both inner development and outer engagement need each other—spiritual practice without engagement risks becoming privileged escapism, while activism without spiritual grounding tends toward reactivity and unsustainability. He concludes with practical reflections on finding one's own way to respond, honoring both the urgency of climate action and the wisdom of staying centered in love and awareness.*

Last week I talked about being on retreat for four weeks and the beauty and the glories of going deeper into silence, exploring the nature of mind and heart and body, and some of my reflections and intentions coming out of that. This morning I want to talk about a theme that in a way seems to belong to another world from being on retreat. I'm inspired by Earth Day, and I want to talk about the relation of our dharma practice to responding to climate change and climate disruption. But I want to do this quite personally and in a way that I hope is not didactic or preachy, either to myself or to anyone else.

I'm doing this partly because I'm inspired for the Saturday event that I'm joining in with others. But I want to frame it initially as something like a dilemma, which I think many of us probably feel. I want to do this rather personally with myself.

On one hand, the practice of meditation is so compelling. For me, being on retreat for those four weeks—and I've probably collectively in my life been on retreat seven or eight years, maybe more, so I clearly value it, which is an understatement—there's something very precious about the experience of sustained meditation. Of course, we all experience this when we practice regularly in a way that's not as intensive, but still to practice for half an hour, to come to Spirit Rock, to be with the land.

The time on retreat, I talked about the beauty of living simply, of not having input, of being away from emails, of being just with the natural beauty. I talked about the qualities of renewal, of deeper insights. From a certain perspective, you could make the case that what else is there really to do in this life other than to develop wisdom and love and really to focus on it? Really to do that and to touch more deeply.

I talked about how I was deeply motivated to have my own daily life express a little more fully those qualities of simplicity and awareness and beauty and slowing down. Daily life for many of us, but maybe not for all of us, is fast moving, and it's often hard to remember our priorities.

When I came back—I've been back about two weeks—I noticed that I've really implemented a number of small ways to have more awareness in daily life. Some of it's just doing small practices. I stop. I'm not so busy. One of the secrets is that a lot of meditation teachers get very busy. True confession. We get busy. Scheduling retreats is really, really hard, knowing what to do. Sometimes we just think, "Oh my God, did I really schedule that? Three things in a row? Oh my God." My friend and colleague Gil Fronsdale once said, "Too much dharma is not dharma." Very interesting. So we get busy too. We do more retreats, and we have a perk that when we're teaching we get to meditate a lot, which is very nice in that way.

But I found that in really giving more attention to awareness in daily life, you know what I did less of? I didn't read the newspaper as much. I didn't listen to the radio, actually, almost at all in the last two weeks. I mean, I looked a little bit, I knew more or less the headlines, but I didn't do so much. I usually, in the past, most days, listened quite a bit to Democracy Now. Some of you listen to that program? Very wonderful. A little more focused on the problems than the solutions, but that's okay. I found myself not doing that so much. I wasn't intending not to do it in the future, but it just was to have that space to bring in these changes. It took something like that.

So, very compelling. Dharma could seem like this is what I want to do. Forget about the world, right? Or just be a little bit in the world. It's a very compelling vision. I feel deeply drawn to have more awareness in daily life and to develop more wisdom and love.

And then...

There's the question of responding to climate change. It could be other issues—violence, racism, whatever it might be. But in a way, we could say that responding to climate change may be the defining issue of the current generation. We could really say that.

I've personally also been deeply drawn to understand and help be part of the response to that issue. In the past, I've done several workshops on that theme with colleagues. One colleague, Sarah Shedler, worked with Friends of the Earth on climate issues, and we did a day-long workshop together. It's been a consistent theme.

I've been attending the meetings of the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, which is quite inspiring. It's really open to anyone. The United Nations said that the Berkeley Climate Plan may be a model for all of North America. There is a very clear plan which is being acted on to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 33% by 2020 and 80% by 2050. So beautiful plan.

And we could see that this is so compelling. This is the future of the earth. There's a very clear scientific consensus—we might say 97% of climate scientists agree—that we have major problems, that there have been significant shifts already.

There was an article that maybe some of you read by Bill McKibben a few months ago. I think it was in August in Rolling Stone. It's become a famous article. He was clearer than usual, saying that in June in the United States, there were 3,215 records for cities for highest temperature in a month. You could go on like that, assemble the facts, but it's very clear that things are actually happening more quickly than scientists thought. It's dire, and it's more dire in some places than others. It's actually most dire, as we know, in countries that have not caused the problem.

There's this pressing need to radically shift behavior. Some scientists say we need to cut greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 80% by 2020. That's quite hard to imagine happening. But yet on the bright side, the solutions are actually very, very clear. It doesn't take much thinking to know what to do.

There are some excellent books out there. Some of you may know Lester Brown's work. He has a very clear model for how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2020. He says it would cost 200 billion a year, which is way less than the defense budgets of so many countries. So it's very possible, and he has a clear analysis of increasing energy efficiency and conservation in a number of ways.

A key to it is taxing carbon emissions—most people say that—and shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy. There are all sorts of actions that come under these categories: stabilizing the population, eradicating poverty. Poverty, as social scientists tell us, is one of the major reasons for population increase and thus greater resource use. Restoring the earth and feeding people in a different way.

So it's completely doable. How to resolve the problem is completely doable. Intelligent people have thought about it, know what to do, and yet governments aren't acting—or they're acting minimally, or they're acting more in some countries than in others. Our country is not acting much. Some cities are acting, like Berkeley and others.

We have this challenging situation where it's really the fate of the earth. If the warming continues unabated, it will be horrifying for future generations in a number of ways. If it isn't changed, there will be resource wars, there will be probably millions and maybe even billions of refugees.

We know... I think those scenarios—we probably live with them in an unconscious way inside, so we know that.

Bill McKibben says if 10% of us are deeply passionate about this and change our lifestyles and have fuel-efficient cars and act impeccably with recycling, not much will change. But if 10 or 15% of us are active, along with the good lifestyle, and actually act to shift the systems, he says everything will change.

So it's kind of a call. Do you want to be part of the 10 or 15% who help shift the world to a sustainable course?

So again, very compelling. Incredibly compelling. What—who wants to meditate all the time when the world's at stake, right?

So do you see the dilemma? If you just came in, I presented the dilemma. On the one hand, the spiritual life and just seeking personal peace and just getting one's life somewhat together. It's such an important pursuit, right? We heard there are challenges. We have personal challenges. Our family members have challenges just to be helpful, to have more love, more wisdom. Sometimes they say that's a full-time pursuit, right?

And then, on the other hand, the world's in great need.

So what do we do? How do you work with that dilemma? Do you choose one way or do you choose the other way?

And so the answer is what? The answer is do both. Do both and connect them. And I'll say more about that because I don't at all mean that everyone needs to be an activist. And I'll get to that. So I just wanted to say that initially.

But how to respond to that kind of dilemma of the power of inner transformation and bringing that out into one's life on the one hand, and then the really dire need for caring people to be part of a deep response right now. How do you work with that? And I think, I mean, I'm sure each of us at times grapples with that. It's really very, very urgent.

And I thought of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese teacher who was in Vietnam as a monk, being in the monasteries with the traditional training at the time of deep social need—war and civil war in Vietnam. And this is what he said. This is the, as it were, the both-and response.

He said, "When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both—to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help."

And we can see that in the lives of other deep contemplatives, that they came to something like that approach. And they did it in their own ways. Some of you know the life of Thomas Merton, who was a lifelong contemplative in a monastery in Kentucky at the Abbey of Gethsemane. And he had been an activist before he became a monk. Some of you know—you've read The Seven Storey Mountain. And he kept that consciousness even when he was in the monastery, even when he was a hermit. And some of you may know that a lot of the Catholic activists used to visit him. The Berrigans, people used to write to him. And he, in some ways, even though he stayed in the monastery, he stayed connected. So he did it in his own way. It wasn't like he had to do it in someone else's way.

He brought this consciousness into his writing, exploring moral responsibility and larger social issues as a monk living his final years as a hermit in the forest. Buddhadasa, the great Thai teacher, followed a very similar path in Thailand. People would come to visit him, and he wrote extensively about connecting the Dhamma to social

concerns. He was someone who maintained a lifelong meditation practice even in situations of urgency, and he found his own ways to honor both contemplative depth and engaged response.

I think of Dorothy Day, whose story follows a remarkably similar pattern. A person called to religious faith who found ways to combine spiritual practice with social action. Or Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma. There are these luminous figures—perhaps someone like Gandhi as well—who discovered ways to do both. I think much of this comes down to recognizing where one's gifts lie and finding authentic ways to help.

I think often of Joanna Macy's work—she'll be one of the teachers present on Saturday. She teaches about what she calls "the great turning," essentially the transition to a sustainable world. It's a beautiful vision, a compelling picture of what that transformation might look like.

She describes three main ways that the great turning occurs, and I invite you to listen for where you feel drawn. Some people, she says, must engage in what she calls "holding actions" to prevent further damage. This is traditionally the province of activism—stopping additional harm from occurring. Some people are called to this essential work.

Others are called to help shift basic institutions toward greater sustainability, toward ways of operating that embody more dharma. These are people working in the helping professions who bring different perspectives to their work, those shifting children's education to include more teaching about sustainability, those transforming the medical profession, creating farmers' markets, developing community agriculture. All of these institutional shifts represent profoundly significant work.

So where are we called? The third pathway involves shifting consciousness itself. This transformation happens through developing different approaches to parenting, to education. It might mean teaching yoga while exploring the parallels between earth and body. It could involve teaching meditation to cultivate greater sensitivity not only to ourselves but to the earth. All of these practices form part of this essential work, because what truly needs to shift is an entire way of being—a complete transformation in how we exist on this earth.

What I want to explore further is how dharma practice necessarily engages with this transformation, and how those seeking to create change need dharma practice. Without this integration, there tend to be significant distortions. This is what I want to examine for the remainder of our time together.

We want to discover our own gifts. I often share that beautiful quotation from Howard Thurman, which feels particularly relevant here: "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, because what the world needs is those who have come alive."

Where are my gifts? Where am I called in ways that connect with this vast need for transformation and that also connect with dharma practice? Sometimes we must listen deeply to discern what that calling might be.

I want to acknowledge, from personal experience, that there are natural cycles to this work. Sometimes we're drawn more inward, sometimes more outward.

There are cycles where I've chosen not to engage with social issues for two or three years, focusing primarily on the inner work. At other times, I've felt called to bring this practice outward into the world more actively. We also experience developmental cycles where we're genuinely called to focus on our own personal healing, to cultivate a little more peace, or to work through something specific—and these periods need to be honored.

This is really about respecting where we are in our own journeys while asking ourselves: Am I called to help in some way? I'm posing this question for myself as well, because I'm definitely more engaged with the meditative aspects these days than the response side, even though teaching can be part of that outward expression. So I'm genuinely asking myself these same questions. These are inquiries for all of us.

For the remainder of our time together, I want to make two key points. First, that dharma practice needs engagement to be mature and complete. Second, that these two aspects—inner development and outer engagement—desperately need each other. People who want to help shift the world need spiritual practice, for without it their efforts tend to become distorted. Similarly, our spiritual practice, without some sense of how we engage with larger issues, may also become distorted.

I also want to return to some core principles, because I believe responses develop beautifully from our foundational practices of kindness, generosity, compassion, interdependence, wisdom, and so forth.

But there's a real danger that our meditation practice will become limited and privileged. When I was in Thailand and attended meetings of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, many of the Thai leaders in that movement expressed concern about the future of Buddhist practice in the United States and the West generally. They

feared it would become a form of middle-class escape from the world's problems—a luxury practice for those seeking a little more peace in a difficult world, available only to the already privileged.

Cultural critic Slavoj Žižek from former Yugoslavia has made some provocative observations along these lines. He's become something of an iconoclastic philosopher whose talks resemble rock concerts, complete with Yugoslav accent. He makes strong statements, including this one about Western Buddhism: he fears it's becoming "the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism" because "its meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity."

According to Žižek, "Western Buddhism enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game while sustaining the perception that you are not really in it, that you are well aware of how worthless this spectacle is, and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner self to which you know you can always withdraw."

I don't necessarily agree with this assessment, but it's a pointed critique that raises important questions about how we use our practice and how we relate to the world's needs.

I think a more constructive approach is recognizing that the core principles of our practice naturally call us, as we deepen, to respond to others and help them. This is what we've explored extensively as the path of the bodhisattva—one who works for personal well-being while also helping others come to greater freedom.

There's a beautiful passage from poet Gary Snyder, who lives near Nevada City in California, that captures this integration: "Historically, Buddhist philosophers have failed to analyze out the degree to which ignorance and suffering are caused or encouraged by social factors, considering fear and desire to be givens of the human condition. Institutional Buddhism has been conspicuously ready to accept or ignore the inequalities and tyrannies of whatever political system it found itself under."

He continues: "The mercy of the West has been social revolution. The mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self void. We need both. They are both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom, meditation, and ethics or morality."

Snyder defines these beautifully: "Wisdom is intuitive knowledge of the mind of love and clarity that lies beneath one's own ego-driven anxieties and aggressions. Meditation is going into this mind to see this for yourself over and over again until it becomes

the mind you live in—until love and wisdom become the mind you live in. Ethics or morality is bringing it back out in the way you live through personal example and responsible action, ultimately towards the true community or sangha of all beings."

He wrote this in 1961—quite a prescient statement about the both-and approach we need.

Reflecting on how our core principles call us to respond, I see that this integration could easily become a much longer exploration...

For example, I was talking this morning over breakfast with Steve Armstrong, who's teaching the retreat up above, and we were talking about generosity. Generosity is dana, the first of the paramis, the first of the virtues we develop traditionally. This is really about giving—ultimately, it's about giving one's life. But it's also about asking, how much is enough? What can I offer?

I think this connects with the ethical precept of not taking that which is not given. Are we taking what actually belongs to future generations? Are we acting in a way that impacts them? If we want to be generous to future generations and give them the same kinds of opportunities we have, we would want to make sure that their lives have the right conditions to prosper. That comes out of a sense of generosity. It can come out of a sense of interdependence—that we are connected, that we are responsible.

The core ethical idea is that my actions matter, that there is karma, that my actions have impact. When we are collectively using resources in a way that has negative impact on future generations, we want to know that. If we want to live ethically, we want to know that. We want to be caring. We want to live according to the precepts of not taking that which is not given. We want to be generous—not just to future generations, but to people in other countries.

We know that people in the U.S. consume 25% of the resources of the world, and we have about 5% of the population. I also saw that each U.S. citizen, on average, is responsible for 55,000 pounds of carbon emissions a year through our ordinary activities. In Germany, it's 27,000, and in Sweden it's 15,000—because they do things differently and probably have a more abundant lifestyle than we do in terms of the average level.

If we are collectively acting in ways that impact the future, isn't that something to consider in terms of our core principles of compassion, of generosity, of interdependence, of being aware of things, of wanting to respond to the suffering of others? If our actions collectively in the West have caused climate issues, which are more acutely felt probably in Asia and Africa right now than in the U.S.—although more recently in the U.S.—isn't there an imperative for us collectively to respond, to change?

Part of our dharma practice is having a sense of the causes and conditions. How does this arise? What's the relationship between my actions and other things happening? We want to know that. We want to be more attuned to it. We want to act—again, the core principle of our ethics is non-harming. We do not want our lives to harm others. It's an aspiration. And so any of these principles, if we go into them more deeply, are a basis for wanting to have some energy to collectively shift.

There are many ways that we can personally shift. On Saturday, I'm going to particularly reflect on how Spirit Rock might become more aligned with this. I think the primary hard issue is transportation. So would the Wednesday morning group be willing to do more carpooling? Some of it comes down to this. Would you be willing to do more carpooling to help reduce the carbon footprint of Spirit Rock? Because ultimately something like that's collectively going to be necessary.

At certain times in our history, there was collective mobilization towards a great cause. World War II was like that after Pearl Harbor. An entire country totally mobilized. People shifted their lives. They did things. People grew victory gardens. Women went to work. Industries shifted to help the larger cause, and something like that may be necessary now. How to be part of that, how to do that—these are the questions we face.

So I think that all of our core Dharma principles, and also very significantly the meditative training that helps us to be aware of what's there in our minds and when there's reactivity, and when there is also to see more deeply into our conditioning—some of the conditioning may be, if there are aspects of privilege, more subtle, or to see how much am I attached to certain levels of comfort. I saw that a lot when I traveled in Asia, and particularly the former Soviet Union, which is actually way harder than Asia. I've talked about that—the lack of Western toilet paper. Big issue! But again, I don't think it's about deprivation, but it's just about what are we called to do? What are we called to do?

And the other side of that is, I think, that the current models of how change comes about, particularly traditional models, current models of activism, are woefully inadequate. I don't think they're going to work. The model of confrontational activism, of blaming and judging, demonizing the enemy—it tends to alienate quite a large part of the population. So I think a whole new model of how change occurs has to come into being.

What are some of the problems with this traditional model of activism, which, of course, has its merits? I'm not demonizing it or wanting to dump on it. But let me name a few ways. These are probably very familiar.

It can be incredibly self-righteous, as if everyone's not part of the problem. There can be attachment to views, possibly. It goes along with the self-righteousness—attachment to views. There can be lack of skill with difficult emotions, being caught up in anger, for example, not working skillfully with anger. Having anger fuel a movement has its limits. It can be demonization of the enemy, lack of creating what Dr. King called the beloved community. There can be, because people aren't also taking care of themselves, burnout. People often don't take care of themselves and even think that taking care of oneself is wrong. Perhaps you've met people like that.

I remember when I was in college and I was an activist and I had friends who thought it was a waste of time to go to a movie. Things get a little extreme in college sometimes, but who felt guilty doing that. And I've talked with present-day people who work—sometimes there's a certain culture of that in some circles. Burnout happens. Often people get burned out by being with difficulty or not having the success they want, and they start blaming.

When I went in 2005 to a conference on spiritual activism, I asked people what they mostly needed to learn, and they said, "We need to work with anger. We so often turn on each other." Infighting among activist groups is a huge issue, big problem.

So think about this: attachment to views, lack of skill with difficult emotions, demonization of others, blaming, judging, lack of taking care of oneself, difficulty of being with difficult situations. Where are they going to learn these things, how to do them better? In the home initially, but basically in exactly what we're doing here. Isn't that interesting? I just named those—that's the list of topics we talked about. Working skillfully with difficult emotions, not being attached to views, being mindful of our own reactivity, looking into our conditioning, taking care of oneself, having compassion for self as well as others.

So that's very significant for me. I think that there has to be this marriage, or it's not going to work. And it really is actually sowing the seeds of a culture where we connect inner and outer together. For me, there's a very inspiring vision of these coming together which I want to be part of and I want to help come into being.

So let me just finish by summarizing a little bit. I think that there's a danger that spiritual practice, when it's not connected in some ways to the urgent needs of the world, can become distorted. Again, allowing for the cycles of being—times when we really need to focus primarily in an inner way. And that can be several years. That's been that way for me. So it can be distorted.

There's also the danger that we don't recognize the world is actually within us—that we take in the world and carry it inside ourselves.

For those who feel called to work directly in the world, there's a profound need to develop spiritual resources. Without the inner foundations of compassion, equanimity, balance, and the ability to see and work skillfully with our reactive mind, the overwhelming nature of global challenges becomes unbearable. People simply won't be able to sustain their efforts without these spiritual underpinnings.

This points to a very natural and beautiful connection between inner work and outer engagement. This is a large vision—one that might guide us for the next fifty, seventy, or one hundred years.

Personally, I believe it comes down to looking deeply within and asking: Where am I called? You wouldn't be here tonight unless you were called to deepen in love, wisdom, and compassion. Many of us are already acting in the world in various ways, but the question remains: How do we work with this calling authentically? Where do we fit within Joanna Macy's three dimensions of engaged response?

This means we must find our own way, our own voice. Our engagement might be directly on the front lines, or perhaps in quieter ways—cultivating community gardens, supporting educational systems for children, or countless other forms of service. The key is discerning where we're genuinely called: helping to prevent further damage, working to shift institutions, or focusing on changing consciousness in ourselves and others.

I want to end with a short poem by Deena Metzger that I love, though I'll have to recite it from memory:

The world is on fire.
We are in danger.
There is no time not to love.
There is no time to rush.

I may not have it exactly right, but the essence captures something essential: there is genuine urgency, and yet it's possible to stay rooted in the present moment, to avoid rushing frantically or having our heads on fire. We can remain centered in love, awareness, and wisdom even as we engage with the world's pain. This is her way of holding both the urgency and the peace.

Let me invite us to sit quietly for a few moments before we continue.

Thank you for your generous attention. I know that sometimes when we come to dharma talks, we're seeking peaceful reflection, and suddenly—oh my goodness—here comes the world again! I'm aware of this tension, and it really does embody the dilemma I've been exploring tonight. So thank you for your patience and willingness to engage with these questions.

Any reflections or thoughts you'd like to share?

"I was wondering what organizations you'd recommend for people wanting to get involved?"

The beautiful thing about climate action is that we can respond meaningfully at every level. We can make significant impact right in our own households, and then expand to city-wide initiatives. Berkeley, for example, has developed a remarkable Climate Action Plan that's both comprehensive and precise. They've clearly analyzed where greenhouse gas emissions originate—transportation, housing, and waste being the three primary areas—and created specific pathways for reduction.

There's tremendous potential for household-level action. I brought along this wonderful book called *Low Carbon Diet*—it's a thirty-day program designed to help you "lose 5,000 pounds." That's 5,000 pounds of carbon emissions, which is significant when you consider that the average American household produces 55,000 pounds annually. The book offers simple, practical steps that anyone can follow.

Organizations like the Ecology Center here in Berkeley provide excellent support for this kind of household-level engagement, offering resources and community for people wanting to reduce their environmental impact in concrete, manageable ways.

Then there's the community level, city level. You can be part of a city that adopts a plan very much like Berkeley's. It's a beautiful plan that's out there on the web, and many Bay Area communities are already implementing similar initiatives. Marin has adopted this approach, and Spirit Rock has embraced green energy. We know that all of the electricity and resources we use here come from the Marine Energy Authority. While there are some challenges with it, it's essentially a sustainable model of energy use.

Cities can accomplish meaningful change, and at the national and international levels, the work becomes more complex. I like to think that ultimately, the personal and community or citywide levels become the foundation for these larger transformations. They go hand in hand - it's not an either-or proposition.

I have a handout I'd be happy to share with you, which I prepared for a workshop some time ago. It lists numerous organizations doing excellent work. I particularly appreciate Bill McKibben's work with 350.org. Lester Brown, connected with the World Watch Institute in Washington, D.C., has written books that lay out complete solutions. It's not hard to imagine, and it's all doable. The challenging part is getting there.

This is the truly promising aspect of our situation. The solutions are achievable - it's more a matter of political will and being willing to act in ways that challenge the power of energy companies. There's a political dimension here, as energy companies are closely aligned with politicians. This creates a challenging dynamic.

Organizations like 350.org, Greenpeace, and Al Gore's climate leader training program are doing exceptional work. Gore's training happens once or twice yearly and is making a real impact. This Saturday, nine organizations will be present, offering comprehensive resources.

From Buddhist perspectives, there's wonderful work being done. A few years ago, my friend David Loy co-edited "Buddhist Responses to the Climate Emergency," which I believe is available in the bookstore. It provides an excellent summary and includes many meaningful statements. There's also a valuable resource called the Forum on Religion and Ecology, which shares relevant information and focuses on the intersection between spirituality and ecological responses, particularly climate change.

In the Bay Area, there's an organization called Green Sangha that undertakes various projects, including offering household audits.

Someone asked about handling conflicting data and views within the movement. For example, one school of thought advocates that a vegan diet will save the most carbon, while the Organic Consumers Association suggests that pasturing animals as our ancestors did is actually more effective. How do we work with these differences among people moving in the same direction?

First, we want to apply our practice of working skillfully with views - to not be attached to our positions. So all those people should come on Wednesday morning! But seriously, there are numerous intersections here, and I've facilitated several retreats specifically for activists.

And we should do more of that maybe here. Because a certain number of people really love that. It's a relief to really not be so caught in views and anger and so forth. So that's the first point.

But I think that my sense of it, without knowing a lot of it in detail, is that the area of disagreement in the big picture is relatively minor. On those issues.

Well, it's just an example. I just wondered if there were an established process or practice, or people who really made it their work to sort out conflicting approaches or enable people to hold the possibility of different truths.

I think that's important, because the big causes of greenhouse gases are other than the ones you've mentioned. And I hope that there can be—I think people have to be trained in not being attached to views. And then of course, people can do research on those issues to help clarify. But I think there are different views on that particular issue, as there would be on quite a few. But I think the larger agreements are the important ones. That would be my perspective on that.

I belong to the Marine Green Sangha, and I really enjoy it. And then we also have some very interesting guest speakers that come every week and speak. So if you're looking for something like that, it's on Sunday morning from 10 to 1, the second Sunday of the month.

Yes, I think feeling connected on these issues is important. You know, it could be in one's block or neighborhood or something. I mean, there's a lot of creativity demanded, and leadership as well. Because it's—I don't know about you, but many of us are very busy, right? And it's like, "Oh my God, climate change as well as my..." It's a little bit like the mentality—remember that t-shirt that had a cartoon of a woman saying, during the anti-nuclear war movement, "There goes my career."

I think we have to be very humble about our inner contradictions.

Can you say just a few words about how to not be discouraged? That's a great question.

Well, for one thing, I think generally it's like a lot of our practice. The core structure of practice in general is being willing to look at difficult stuff and then also spending a certain amount of time in beautiful states. If we only worked with our own suffering, we get burned out—in meditation as well as in other areas.

When I work with people on transforming the judgmental mind, which is hard stuff personally, it's very clear that there's a balance between going into the judgmental mind, which tends to be painful and difficult. When you go deeper, you get into hard stuff—sometimes old patterns that come out of difficult childhood material and so forth. It's important to do that, but it's also important to really touch base with loving

kindness, with beautiful states, to feel one's own beauty—especially if self-judgment's the issue—to really be away from the judgmental mind and touch the beauty and touch the wonderful qualities.

And I think this is interesting in terms of how change occurs. Does change occur more by defeating the bad stuff or the hard stuff, or does it happen more by touching the good stuff and connecting with that more and more? A lot of times, I think historically, when you look at it, it's more the latter. I think personally it's often more the latter.

Once, Heather Sundberg and I were talking at a seven-day retreat on transforming the judgmental mind, and we asked, "Have you transformed your judgmental mind more by actually going into it, hanging out with it, doing the hard work, or just actually shifting more to more beautiful states of confidence and beauty and wisdom and love?" And we had to say, well, maybe the latter actually. The first—you have to be willing to do that. It's important. You can't run from that.

And so I think, for me, that suggests a model. And that's part of what's missing in traditional activism. It's almost entirely focused on, "Here are the problems." Here are the problems. And it's natural, if you just focus on the problems and haven't found so many recent successes, it's very easy to get discouraged.

So I think focusing on the positive is essential. This is what Gandhi understood deeply. Yes, there was the campaign to oust the British, but something that's not often well known is that he had what he called the constructive program, which was about truly transforming India in a particular way. This is where the focus was on village agriculture, economics—this is where he had the weaving and spinning wheels. That was very much a central focus.

Generally speaking, I would focus on the positive and be careful about dwelling too much on the negative. Watch your mind. Watch your mind telling negative stories. Watch other people telling negative stories that impact you.

Ultimately, my own confidence comes from my faith in the human spirit and from what I know directly, personally, experientially—which is that love and wisdom are deeper than suffering. That's the root faith that would keep me going through almost anything, because I know that. That's a fruit of practice: to know that more and more, to know that no matter what anyone tells you, no matter what your experience is, no matter what difficulties arise, this is deeper. This is deeper. And of course, as one rests in that more and more, it becomes increasingly unshakable. We call that equanimity.

So personally, explore your own depths more and more until you know your own depths in a way that gives you a clear sense of what are the roots of suffering and confusion—which are part of the crisis, part of the roots of this global crisis. What are the roots of that in our own minds? How do we understand that? And is there something deeper than that? I think we get a clear answer that there is something deeper. And so we have to know that. We have to study all of this.

How does suffering occur? We have to understand. We have to look out at the world and have dharma eyes. That's why I say look out at the world and see it through the eyes of your own practice. That becomes like a protection—a protection against discouragement. And then you have to work with it, work with people like Joanna Macy and all these beautiful practices to work with that issue in particular.

So again, thank you for your patience. I realize this is challenging material at times, sometimes troubling and upsetting. But I think we have a commitment with practice to look at reality, as skillfully as we can, and to respond.

So thank you again. And may our time together be of benefit to others.

CHAPTER 274

The Four Noble Truths of Responding to Climate Change

Rob Burbea · 1h06

> *In this dharma talk, Rob Burbea frames our response to climate change through the Buddha's core teaching of the Four Noble Truths, offering both sobering scientific reality and hopeful spiritual guidance. Drawing on the traditional physician model that inspired the Buddha's framework—identifying the problem, its causes, the possibility of healing, and the path forward—Burbea presents climate change as humanity's greatest collective challenge requiring both outer action and inner transformation.*
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> *The first two truths examine the 'bad news': the reality of accelerating climate disruption and its roots in both systemic causes (fossil fuel dependency, consumerist culture, economic inequality) and the classical Buddhist poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion manifesting collectively. The third and fourth truths offer the 'good news': the genuine possibility of transformation to a sustainable, just world, and the specific practices—personal, community, and political—needed to realize this vision.*
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> *Burbea emphasizes that our meditation practice provides essential resources for this work: the capacity to be present with difficult emotions like climate grief, to act from compassion rather than reactivity, and to maintain hope amid uncertainty. He encourages practitioners to see climate action as ethical practice (sīla), noting Thich Nhat Hanh's expanded interpretation of the first precept to include protecting 'people, animals, plants, and minerals.' This talk integrates Buddhist wisdom with practical guidance, offering both spiritual framework and concrete steps for engaging this defining challenge of our time.*

This morning I want to continue the exploration of ethical practice. We began that last time with looking more generally at the place of ethics in our practice. We took the ethical precepts last time together. And for those here for the first time, all of the sessions here are recorded and are available on the website dharmaseed.org.

So we explored in some depth this sense of living ethically. It really is about how do we live with integrity, particularly with the challenges of life, the difficulties—individual, relational, in our communities, in our world. How do we live a life of integrity?

Lines from the Buddha from close to 2600 years ago: "One who is virtuous and wise shines forth like a blazing fire." And there can really be tremendous inspiration. Last time, I particularly encouraged us to not take the ethical dimension of our lives for

granted. Sometimes we think, "I'm basically, as my sister says, a good human being, good person. And I don't hurt others too much. And I don't lie and steal too much. And basically, okay, you know, I'm here for meditation. I'm here for peace and bliss."

And those are wonderful intentions, but last time I tried to suggest that the ethical dimension of our lives actually is one where there can be very deep practice. It's a challenging form. Traditionally, there was this close relationship between ethical practice, our meditation, and our cultivation of wisdom. Those are traditionally the three areas of training. And last time in particular, I tried to point to the ways that ethical practice really is important in all the parts of our lives and not just, as we often think, in my personal interactions, my face-to-face behavior.

And I suggested that some of the ethical forms of practice at certain times in history actually involve our relationship to larger collective issues. We could imagine, you know, maybe being in the South in the 1940s or 50s, the ethical issue of racism and injustice might be very central for anyone living in that time. And we could look at other ways that the large-scale ethical issues really are very central. And I think that's true in our time.

But even in the time of the Buddha, the understanding of ethical practice, as I emphasized quite a bit last time, has a larger dimension than the face-to-face behavior and really has to do with how we relate to all around us and how we relate to others' behavior that might be harmful. From the Buddha also, "Non-harming is the distinguishing mark of Dhamma," or the path—to live a life of non-harming. And as I mentioned last time, he also understood that as not letting others harm. So it wasn't just what I do, but it's also what happens in my community and in my world.

An updated version of this from the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh: "Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals." This is Thich Nhat Hanh's restatement of the first ethical precept, that of non-harming. He goes on, "I'm determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life."

And so today, I want to particularly connect this with our relation to the earth—to, again, this large issue that is right there for all of us, which is how do we relate to the growing destruction of the world's ecosystems, and particularly related to climate change. I thought I'd read first some of the statement which I got from the Spirit Rock website about Earth Care Week: "Earth Care Week is an opportunity to come together with our Sangha to both celebrate the natural world and address the major environmental issues of our time, including climate change."

And so, this morning, I want to talk about that ethical response and particularly focus on the issue of climate change, which I've talked about from time to time over the last few years. And I want to frame it in terms of the core teaching of the Four Noble Truths. So we could call this talk the Four Noble Truths of Responding to Climate Change. And it gives a valuable framework.

The Four Noble Truths, probably most or all of you know, is perhaps the core teaching of the Buddha. He identified what he took to be four truths. The truth that there is suffering. The truth that there is a cause of suffering. The truth that there is a way out of suffering, and the fourth truth that there is a path to transform suffering. We could say that the first two truths are about the nature and roots of suffering, and the third and fourth are about the nature and roots of freedom. This is a core teaching.

Interestingly, the original model of the Four Noble Truths, as far as I know from my study, actually was modeled after the typical kind of physician model for diagnosis in ancient India, which is very commonsensical. It's: what's the problem? What's the cause of the problem? What's the solution? And how do we get to the solution?

It's a very simple way to see the Four Noble Truths. Many people have applied this framework to various issues in this way. Ajahn Buddhadasa and a number of teachers in Southeast Asia have sometimes taken the Four Noble Truths into broader frameworks.

So I want to talk about the Four Noble Truths of climate change. I have a PowerPoint presentation for this—this is one of my early PowerPoint presentation dharma talks.

This is an overview of the Four Noble Truths of Responding to Climate Change. I want to express gratitude to three people who have deeply influenced this presentation. One is Bob Doppelt, who has been a key figure in bringing together dharma teachers around the issue of climate change, based in Oregon. He was very kind to let me use some of his slides, and I've taken many of them. Some I've modified slightly, but much of this material comes from Bob.

I've also benefited from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who has his own version of the Four Noble Truths related to climate change, which I've learned from tremendously. My approach is somewhat different, but his insights have been invaluable.

I also want to thank Sarah Shadler, who I worked with for several years and who now lives in Massachusetts. She worked for many years with Friends of the Earth in San Francisco. About four years ago, we offered a full day in Santa Cruz devoted to practice and climate change, and I have benefited from her insights and some of the material we developed together.

We start with the first two truths, which I could call the bad news. This is the most serious issue facing us—possibly a 3.5 Celsius temperature rise by 2035—and it will increase all other problems. There is a huge gap, as most of us know, between the scientific reality and the political response. Everyone is being and will be affected. We all will be dealing with this for the rest of our lives, and humans will deal with this for the next few hundred years.

The good news—these are the third and fourth noble truths. In our practice we often face the bad news first and then get to the good news. There is cause for optimism. There is a great opportunity for transformation—economically, ecologically, socially, and spiritually—toward a sustainable and just world. There's tremendous potential, and many people are connecting the dots.

Secondly, we actually have the knowledge, skills, and technology to reduce warming to manageable levels. People know what to do. It's not technically difficult at all, though it would require great mobilization. The challenge is political and social, not technical.

Third, tremendous progress is underway. Rapid positive changes could occur with the right efforts.

Let me take us through the four noble truths individually, and then we'll have time for discussion.

The first noble truth calls us to look honestly at the nature of the problem. In our practice, the first noble truth invites us to look carefully at the nature of suffering as it appears in our individual experience, our relational experience, and in the world.

In the Buddha's teaching, it wasn't just about examining the different truths, but there were tasks connected with each truth. The Buddha said that the truth of suffering needs to be understood—embraced or entered into. This is not easy to do. We don't look at suffering from a distance; we enter into it.

Here, the realities of climate change must be understood. Some of this will be familiar, but for some of you, much of this may be new territory.

So first, let us examine the basic physics of climate change. This is the well-known greenhouse effect: incoming solar radiation strikes the Earth, and infrared radiation radiates outward from the Earth's surface. When greenhouse gases—particularly increased CO2 in the environment—are present, this outgoing radiation is absorbed. It's as simple as that. The infrared radiation becomes trapped in the Earth's atmosphere

and reflects back to Earth, and the process accelerates. More radiation is trapped in our environment, and the Earth grows warmer. It's as simple as that—not particularly profound physics.

For the last 10,000 years, the Earth's temperature has remained relatively stable. This stability has allowed civilization to develop. You can see this temperature stability since the last ice age. While there is much detail in the scientific data, the basic picture shows relative stability for the last 10,000 years—which is changing now. We are altering a 10,000-year pattern.

We know that global temperature correlates with CO2 levels. When there is more CO2, temperatures rise. The data shows parts per million of CO2 and how it has accelerated tremendously in the last fifty years after relative stability. We are familiar with these numbers—350 parts per million, 400 parts per million. Today we are over 400 and rising rapidly. This represents the highest concentration of carbon in three million years, and it has happened extraordinarily quickly.

We have seen a large increase since World War II—a total increase of close to one degree Celsius so far, with most of it occurring in the last two decades. Emissions have risen 61% since around 1990. The evidence appears consistently in our headlines: 2007 was the second warmest year, 2008 the eighth warmest, 2010 tied for warmest on record, and 2012 became the warmest year in U.S. history. Things are changing rapidly, and they are moving in one direction.

Here we see Arctic sea ice change between 1979 and 2007—roughly 39% less ice in the Arctic by 2007. This represents a total area five times the size of the United Kingdom lost in terms of ice. Again, this is not attributable to the sun or other non-human factors. Virtually all scientists agree this results from human activity.

The data comparing observed changes in surface temperature with the sun's energy output shows solar energy remaining fairly constant while temperatures have not remained constant at all.

There exists virtual consensus about virtually everything I have mentioned so far. Some say 95%, some say 97% of active climate scientists agree on all of this.

Where is this leading? We have almost a one-degree Celsius rise, and the target aimed for by various international climate organizations is not to exceed two degrees Celsius. But two degrees Celsius—the political figure around which there is agreement—remains very dangerous. There have already been major impacts with less than one

degree. The political agreement people are aiming for is actually quite dangerous. One degree would be safest, but is now impossible. 1.5 degrees may be the best target to aim for, as many suggest.

The impacts at two degrees Celsius affect all aspects of our life: water, ecosystems, food, coastlines, health, and other systems. Profound effects occur even approaching two degrees. We can see this vulnerability already—while we cannot know with certainty about the drought in California, we know we are extremely vulnerable to droughts. There is profound vulnerability around water and different effects on ecosystems. The global food supply is extraordinarily vulnerable, and there are numerous health issues as well.

There are also significant justice issues. We know the effects of climate change are not borne equally. Generally speaking, the people and places that caused the problem experience far less impact than others in the world. Climate change has much greater impact on what we call the global South, creating major issues of justice and equity that have become an increasing concern.

Consider deaths attributed to climate change—the red areas on the map show the most impact, which falls mostly in Africa. There is also a disproportionate effect of climate change on women. Oxfam reports that 85% of those who die from climate change-related disasters are women, who generally have fewer resources, less mobility, and less ability to cope with famine, flood, drought, and other challenges.

The climate data reveals a stark reality about limiting warming to two degrees Celsius—it's extremely challenging. The crucial factor is cumulative emissions rather than emission rates, since CO2 lingers in our atmosphere for over a century. For a reasonable chance of success, the United States must achieve extraordinary reductions: 40% by next year, 70% by 2020, and over 90% by 2030, sustaining these cuts for several decades. Yet global emissions continue rising rather than falling.

This leads me, along with many others, to conclude that only mass mobilization offers a path toward meaningful solutions.

Some might wonder whether we could simply adapt to greater warming. But consider where we're headed without intervention—perhaps four degrees Celsius of warming. Scientists describe this scenario as "hell on earth," marking the end of stable civilization. We would experience the highest temperatures in 30 million years, sea level rises inundating coastal cities like San Francisco, drought affecting 40% of inhabited land, half of all known species extinct, widespread and novel illnesses, hundreds of millions of climate refugees, and resource wars.

Current projections show us on track for six degrees of warming under business-as-usual scenarios—a path leading beyond even this hellish description.

Perhaps we should pause here to breathe with all of this information. It's overwhelming. As we examine the causes of climate change, I invite you to draw upon the resources of the Fourth Noble Truth—the path itself. Our meditative practices offer skillful means for working with the distress that arises from truly seeing our situation.

How many of you notice some form of distress in your body or heart right now? Let's acknowledge what's present. I'll share a technique from Joanna Macy's work, which provides crucial tools for engaging with such distress. In one of her exercises, people express what they're experiencing, and we respond together with "we hear you," because isolation intensifies suffering.

Would anyone like to share what you're experiencing, perhaps in a single sentence?

"My heart hurts."

We hear you.

"I regret that I didn't do anything sooner."

We hear you.

"Fear of being a victim."

We hear you.

"Fear for my children and grandchildren."

We hear you.

"I feel some terror and also a frozen quality. Shock, maybe."

We hear you.

Practices for working with distress, fear, numbness—these form part of our essential toolkit. Those who understand how to engage with these emotions have vital roles to play. The meditative practices we cultivate prove absolutely crucial. This points us toward the Fourth Noble Truth.

Now let's take a briefer look at the Second Noble Truth—the causes of climate change. This exploration will be relatively concise, offering my particular perspective, though many would share these observations. We'll examine both outer causes of climate change and what we might call inner causes—our attitudes and behaviors.

Several aspects comprise the Second Noble Truth in relation to climate change—these collective causes of climate-related suffering.

First is the long-scale process we might call the objectification and desacralization of the natural world. This worldview permitted people to see the Earth as merely stuff existing for our purposes—a complex development that formed part of the causal chain, treating the world as essentially dead matter simply there for our use.

Second is our dependency on fossil fuels, interlinked with the powerful influence of fossil fuel corporations. We must state this bluntly: the long-term economic plans of these corporations are fundamentally incompatible with civilization's survival.

This stark reality was powerfully illustrated in an article by Bill McKibben published in Rolling Stone about two years ago, where he demonstrated that the long-term economic plans of fossil fuel corporations are fundamentally based on extracting and burning resources that, if used, would take us far beyond critical tipping points. That's precisely what I mean when I say their plans are incompatible with civilization's survival.

We also see the perpetuation of a consumerist, individualist culture with extremely high fossil fuel consumption, including the intensive consumption of meat, which requires enormous energy to convert grains into animal protein. These are further collective causes embedded in what we might call "business as usual" – the free market or neoliberal economic system with its familiar characteristics: financial deregulation, free trade agreements, privatization, the decline of public services, lowering of corporate taxes, and cuts in public spending. All of this operates on the principle of short-term profits rather than long-term economic stability, ecological sustainability, and economic justice.

This entire system of business as usual is intimately connected with climate change, alongside the domination of political systems and mass media by corporations invested in maintaining this status quo. We also see a profound lack of climate justice in relation to indigenous peoples, communities of color in the developed world, and the global South. As I mentioned earlier, those who suffer most from climate change didn't cause the problem, while those who caused it are impacted far less.

Then we encounter what we might call the inner causes of suffering related to climate change. Here we can return to the traditional Buddhist analysis of the roots of suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion, which manifest clearly in our current crisis.

We observe pervasive greed – evident in businesses, corporations, and financial institutions, but also, to some extent, in all of us through our attachment to certain comfort levels. One of the most challenging aspects of examining climate change causes is recognizing our universal implication. This isn't simply about "them" – while some bear greater responsibility than others, we are all implicated to some degree.

There's also what we can identify as self-centeredness, privilege, and arrogance operating at individual, national, social, racial, and cultural levels. Many countries and peoples live in self-centered, privileged bubbles, unaware of others' suffering, which prevents the natural empathy and compassion that would arise if we truly understood the scope of pain being experienced. From my perspective, and certainly from the Buddhist tradition, I deeply believe in the fundamental goodness of people and the inherent goodness of our hearts. However, when we lack accurate information, those good hearts remain untouched. When we live in bubbles, unaware of suffering, transformation cannot occur.

There's also widespread fear and anxiety among much of the population – certainly in the United States – among poor, working, and middle classes over economic security, housing, terrorism, and countless other concerns. Additionally, we see considerable ignorance and denial, which we could categorize under several headings: apathy, distraction, preoccupation with whatever captures our attention – even something as innocent as the Giants making it to the championship series.

I couldn't help but notice, after the climate march in Washington, when I compared the inches of coverage in the San Francisco Chronicle devoted to the climate march versus the 49ers game that same Sunday, the ratio was approximately 40 to 1 in favor of sports coverage. While this is complex, the reality of distraction is undeniable.

We also encounter skepticism and outright denial, with a substantial percentage of people still believing that global warming simply isn't happening. Denial remains a tremendously powerful force. In a way, I suspect that what I've shared about what's actually occurring isn't entirely new information for most of you, yet somehow we don't act on it. We continue to live – myself included, despite my intentions – in a kind of bubble. Denial is a crucial aspect of this entire situation, but it's something that can be worked with and penetrated.

Now we arrive at solutions. Much climate change work unfortunately ends with the first two noble truths, which I find decidedly unuplifting. Here we want to engage with the third and fourth truths, which truly examine possibilities.

The third noble truth reveals the possibility of a sustainable, more just, wise, and compassionate world if the roots of climate change suffering are genuinely addressed and transformed. This directly follows the third noble truth in traditional practice, which affirms that deep peace and freedom are possible. Accessing that profound peace and freedom is, I believe, crucial for addressing climate change, because we need extraordinarily powerful spiritual resources to remain present with this situation. The spiritual practices of all traditions will play a vital role in this work.

It's essential to maintain a vision recognizing that this represents humanity's greatest challenge. We need to reduce emissions by 70% by 2020 – some experts suggest this means 8 to 10% annually in the West. Yet this is achievable. We can accomplish this by making substantial cuts in energy use and emissions through various means.

For example, many of you probably know that Germany has transformed its energy landscape over the past decade, moving from 6% renewable electricity to 25% renewables. The United States remains at only 4%. During certain periods, Germany has achieved remarkable feats—in some months drawing 74% of their electricity from renewable sources. Such rapid transformation demonstrates what becomes possible when there is collective will and vision.

This reveals the second crucial point: we can increase clean renewable energy very quickly when we commit to doing so. Germany has proven this path forward. We can also dramatically expand sequestration—the capturing of carbon in plants, forests, and agricultural systems, and possibly through what's called geoengineering, though this remains controversial. These approaches, combined with building our capacity for resilience, form the vision of where we need to go.

In terms of our path of practice, we must somehow increase wise view, compassion, and skillful action faster than the increase in dukkha. As I've mentioned, we possess the knowledge, skills, and technologies to make this transformation work. There is genuine reason for hope in this vision.

Applying these practices and moving toward these technologies will bring tremendous benefits as we learn to live in an ecological way, creating pathways to a truly sustainable world. The critical threshold remains 1.5 degrees. Large-scale changes could occur rapidly if enough people shift their perspective, particularly if widely promoted cultural narratives increase dissonance with current practices, and if we can demonstrate greater efficacy and benefits.

Here at Spirit Rock, for instance, our building plans include making the center completely self-sufficient in terms of energy. Imagine if all new construction followed such principles. As I've mentioned, this is already happening in various countries.

There's also tremendous potential to move toward a more just world. Because business as usual proves incompatible with addressing climate change, we have an unprecedented opportunity to transition to a different, more equitable economic system. This would require a significant movement, but we could actually develop an economic system based on local, just, and sustainable approaches to economics.

This transformation fundamentally involves shifting toward more local power and reducing the dominance of international corporations. We can see this happening already—many municipalities are reclaiming their energy systems and demanding clean energy. This is occurring throughout the United States and extensively across Europe. Most cities in Germany now operate their own local energy grids. In Berkeley, where I work with the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, people are actively researching these possibilities. Similar initiatives have already begun in Marin County over recent years. We're witnessing a fundamental transformation in how we generate and distribute energy, and there's much reason for hope.

Now, are you ready for the Fourth Noble Truth? The Fourth Noble Truth addresses the path of transformation itself. I've organized this into three levels: personal and individual changes, community and local changes, and national and international steps we can take.

On the personal level, the meditative tools we cultivate remain absolutely crucial for the long term. The ability to remain present with difficult situations, to meet conflicts with compassion, wisdom, and skillfulness—this capacity becomes essential for sustained engagement.

What steps can we take personally? First, we can develop deeper understanding. We can study the problem and its roots more thoroughly. We can grasp the necessity of moving toward a vision of a sustainable and more just world, and truly commit to following that vision. We can cultivate our sense of the interdependence between our individual actions and what unfolds in the world. This cultivation of wisdom and understanding stands at the very center of our practice.

This perspective comes from a statement issued by an international group of Dharma teachers that I participated in creating, released at the beginning of this year.

From this point forward in history, we must all acknowledge not only the external causes of climate change, but also the internal mental drivers as well and their consequences. To be wise, we must also individually and as a society adopt the firm intention to do whatever is necessary, no matter what the cost, to reduce the climate crisis to manageable levels and over time stabilize the climate.

Part of wise understanding is clarity of intention. Then there's the ethical training, in particular where our ethical commitment is to respond to harm, to do less harm ourselves and to respond to harm and suffering in the world, to have that come out of compassion. Again, from the dharma teachers' statement: we need to make a firm moral commitment to adopt ways of living that protect the environment and help restore the Earth's ecosystem and living organisms. There are all sorts of personal actions—that's why I gave the handout that has numerous ways that one can, in one's own household with one's own consumption, make changes.

There's also the training in meditation. Remember, the traditional trainings are in wisdom and understanding first, in ethics, and in meditation. The training in meditation is something that we can actually offer those in the larger movement to address climate change, because the qualities or the capacities of mindfulness, equanimity, patience, working with difficult emotions, are all invaluable. They're particularly capacities that we've all cultivated, and so there's a very important role in sharing those. We know that without training in those areas, it's very difficult. There's a crucial role there and we can do that both individually and also through these wonderful group forums for working with challenges that Joanna Macy and others have developed.

One of the best books to read, if you want to read one book, is called *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. It's in the bookstore: "How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy." Very beautiful book. And Joanna is 85 now. Study with her. Go work with her. Soon. Right away. She's wonderful. She sometimes teaches at Spirit Rock.

What can we do on a local basis? There are all sorts of things we can do with the local sangha. I think the large-scale changes, in a way, are the most difficult. The political, the working on the level of the larger economy—those are harder. There's tremendous impact possible at the personal and local level that everyone can do. That actually can happen often very quickly. That doesn't solve the problem fully, but it goes hand in hand with the others, with the larger scale issues.

So there are all sorts of things we can do: have study groups that are local, be in local organizations, work with our local governments. I'm very pleased to go to the Berkeley meetings and there are people—the mayor has come, there are people from the city of Berkeley government who go to all the meetings. It's right there. If you want to look,

there's a website for the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition that I think the UN said if every city in the world, in the country, did this, it'd be tremendously helpful. So there are options locally, in one's community, with one's family, and so forth.

This is from the dharma teachers' statement: "Buddhists can join with others in their sanghas, and our sanghas can join hands and hearts with other religious and spiritual traditions, as well as secular movements. In this way, we will support each other as we make the necessary shifts in perspectives, lifestyles, and economic and institutional systems. History shows that with concerted, unified collective effort, changes that at one time seemed impossible have time and time again come to pass."

That's very helpful. That's part of the vision. We know that at one time the Soviet Union was thought to be continuing for another hundred years. It fell very quickly. South Africa, apartheid—there are a lot of examples of that. Things can happen very, very quickly.

So all sorts of local and community things: having workshops, sharing your knowledge, working in all sorts of areas—community, agriculture, all sorts of things are called for. I think probably there are places for all of our gifts. It's not like everyone has to do everything, but we just see where we can help and see what could be helpful.

One statement that I appreciated a lot was from Bill McKibben, who's one of the main leaders in climate work, as most of you know, and he said that if 15% of the population get it totally together with recycling and their own personal energy use, nothing will change. But if those same 15% become active, everything will change. And some people think it's even less.

I've heard figures suggesting that the American Revolution occurred with just 3.5% of people being very active. There have been studies connected with Stanford indicating that if 7% of the population really gets mobilized, major change can occur. So the question becomes: will I be part of that 7%?

And it doesn't necessarily take a lot of time. I found it helpful to quantify it and ask: do I have two to four hours a week to devote to this? If 7% of the population committed two to four hours a week, I think it will happen. That's not so much, right? Maybe it means going to one less movie. Does that make it easier? You can still go to movies.

The national and international level, as I mentioned, is the hardest. But that's where this larger mobilization is necessary. So it could mean coordinating with different groups, connecting with local groups that are working on climate change. There's special value for interfaith groups. There was a lot that happened in New York with interfaith groups on September 22nd.

There are all sorts of possibilities for taking firm stands in relationship to investments in fossil fuel companies. There's a term—divest and reinvest—which has to do with where do I put my money? There's a lot that can be done there. Where's my money? Where's my institution's money? Where's Spirit Rock's money? Where is my college's money? I think there was a turning point where people saw that the economic plans of the fossil fuel corporations are incompatible with resolving these issues. It's really as simple as that. And so those approaches are very effective.

One could work politically for certain candidates, help change the story, work on education, work on different ways of understanding, and so forth. Again, from a technical point of view, the changes that are necessary are not hard. What's necessary is having enough people who are willing to respond, be verbal, get out there, and commit to that change—to make what actually could happen tomorrow, if there was political will, happen.

Countries can turn around. One of the people who writes a lot about this, Lester Brown, who has very clear solutions right there in books, says there are different scenarios. One of them is to have something like a sense of what this country did after Pearl Harbor—total mobilization where everyone felt important to be involved. And things did change. Things happened. All sorts of things happened. That may be what's necessary.

So the question is: what's one's part in this?

I'll finish with three quotations from Buddhist teachers. This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who has been very active and wonderful to be a colleague with on the climate group. He says: "If we let our hearts be stirred by compassion, we will see that we have no choice but to act to solve climate change and to act in ways that will truly make a difference and determine our future destiny."

Secondly, from Joanna Macy, this is from the book *Active Hope*: "What's catching on is commitment to act for the sake of life on earth, as well as the vision, courage, and solidarity to do so."

And lastly, from the Dalai Lama. Many of you know Heather Sundberg, who just came back from India a few days ago, and she had two opportunities to study with the Dalai Lama. She said she would be with him and just be crying, but he brought together this deep inner development with the deep commitment to the world. And this is how I'll end.

Then we can have some questions. We can keep recording with the questions.

So the Dalai Lama: "This small blue planet is our only home. If we do not respect it, the entire planet and billions and billions of species will be affected. This is a question of life, a question of survival for the entire planet. We need full cooperation based on a clear realization that we are all one. Each and every individual's future depends on the entire humanity, especially right now."

So we have some time for any reflections or observations or questions. And we'll use the microphone. Thank you for your attention.

I appreciate it. Maybe many of you already know there's an excellent group called 350.org in Marin. They need more people. And elect Larry Bragman—he's all about this. One of the handouts lists many groups, websites, and talks connecting with our meditation practice, and you can find this resource list on the Spirit Rock website under my name on the teacher page. If you want to share it with others, they can download it there.

"Hi, I'd like to inform the Sangha that today at the San Rafael Theater there's a movie at 2:30 called Racing to Zero. It's about what San Francisco has accomplished with recycling and composting."

This area can actually serve as a model. As Germany models many approaches for the world, we too can be a model. Things travel east—the wind blows east. We know all sorts of cultural changes have already begun in California. Why not this one?

"Hi, I'm Mary. I want to encourage all of you to investigate the National Citizens Climate Lobby, citizensclimatelobby.org. We are a vast, rapidly growing national organization of citizen volunteers teaching ourselves how to lobby and develop relationships with our members of Congress in every congressional district in the country. Those of us in the Bay Area are somewhat lucky—we live in this embarrassment of riches, so we're preaching to the choir when we approach our own congressional representatives. But what we're actively doing in all the Bay Area chapters is developing chapters of the Citizens Climate Lobby in conservative Republican districts in the Central Valley, because this isn't a partisan issue, as we all know. Our belief is that as citizen activists, we can transform political leadership. We will make it happen. For example, every member of Congress assumes that for every letter they receive in their office, there are 10,000 people in their district who share that same belief. So we believe it's a truly transformative way for active, regular citizens like us to meet in Washington with every member of Congress every year and develop these kinds of relationships at that level. So it involves both our own personal transformation—I'd never lobbied in Congress until this year—and a political one as well. I encourage you to check out CCL."

I'll add that this theme is very dear to Sylvia's heart. Some of her first teaching at Spirit Rock was developing a series called "Citizenship as Spiritual Practice." Anyone attend that? It was some time ago, but she says that's really how she was raised.

Other questions or comments? We could also stay with the experiential level if you'd like—just what one's feelings are.

"Though I live in Tiburon at this moment, I'm from Louisiana. My family's all there, and I'm moving back to Louisiana, where oil is king. Most politicians are in the pockets of big oil companies. People barely recycle, much less compost. There is some solar there, but it's few and far between. So I guess, first of all, maybe I'm asking for some love and light coming my way so that my beliefs, which are very strong in this area, don't lead me to feel disgust. I'd rather feel compassion for people who live either in ignorance or greed. There's a lot of both. I know there must be pockets of people who feel very differently. If anybody knows of any of those pockets, please let me know. Or maybe through the national organization, there's some way that I can connect?"

"What part of Louisiana will you be in?"

"We'll be moving to New Orleans."

There are some very good people there—very good people in New Orleans and around Tulane, I believe, as well. I think a key thing is to stay connected. You can stay connected to people in the Bay Area, so you don't feel isolated. Joanna Macy has a wonderful phrase. She says it's really necessary in difficult times to have "rough weather networks." It's a beautiful term. To really stay connected—and that can be inspiring.

Know that this work is long term, though denial can evaporate surprisingly quickly when the moment is right. There are many people, particularly those affected by Katrina, who have witnessed these forces up close and been deeply educated by the experience. Much of what I discussed regarding economics rings true in what happened there—it was connected to climate change, but also very much related to the decline in public infrastructure. In many ways, it was more a political and social disaster than a natural one.

The main thing is to stay connected. There will be plenty of people to connect with. And continue your metta practice for difficult people—this is something we uniquely bring to these challenges. It's possible to be firm and oppose certain policies, even institutions, while maintaining care and compassion without demonizing. This becomes especially valuable when things intensify and the tendency to polarize grows strong.

We explored this in our July and August sessions on working with difficult circumstances, including examining our tendencies to polarize. I remember once joining a retreat at Los Alamos National Laboratory where we met with nuclear scientists developing weapons. We tried to encounter them as human beings in an empathic way. Not everyone in our group could do that, but it was profoundly instructive.

This becomes part of our practice: To what extent are we writing people off, polarizing, judging, or demonizing while still being firm in our stance? We have models for this—in Buddhist tradition and figures like Dr. King.

[A brief discussion about local political candidates ensues, followed by disagreement among participants]

How do we hold this kind of disagreement with our practice? These challenges, while real, will likely be much less difficult than future ones we'll face. When people hold different views while seemingly working toward the same ends, how do we work with that? This is precisely what our practice can offer.

It's not easy. We're always getting lost and finding ourselves again. But there's a particularly rich set of resources available when we look to what I was calling the fourth noble truth—the path. These tremendous inner resources and understanding need continuous development so we can work skillfully with such moments.

As a teacher, I don't make political endorsements. The question becomes: How can we discuss these matters as a community? This itself becomes wonderful practice. The key is remaining empathic, understanding where people come from at their best, and connecting there.

Even with those who might head fossil fuel corporations—and this is what I discovered working with nuclear scientists—there's often some kernel of genuinely good intention we can connect with. This represents extremely advanced practice, but the principle remains: watch the tendency in difficult times to be reactive, to blame, to judge.

And yet, how do we still act in a strong and firm way? I think that may be the koan of our times. That's a way to say it—it's kind of the question of our times. How do we do that so that we don't lose our humanity in trying to save humanity? So that's really the koan, the challenge.

So let's end by inviting ourselves to see what is the intention that's there for you. What one intention do you have at the end of this morning session? It might not even be related to the talk. Maybe something was sparked that's important for you. What's your intention?

So I'll finish with the dedication of merit, a traditional practice. The Dalai Lama says, "We need full cooperation based on the clear realization that we are all one." May our time together be of benefit to everyone, including ourselves.

CHAPTER 275

The Eco-Crisis as a Spiritual Crisis

Rob Burbea · 54 min

> *In this Earth Day dharma talk, Rob Burbea presents a profound analysis of how our ecological crisis mirrors the individual spiritual predicament that Buddhism addresses. Using the metaphor of two icebergs, he explores what lies beneath the surface of both climate change and contemporary Buddhist practice.*
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> *Burbea argues that just as individual suffering (dukkha) stems from the constructed sense of a separate self that feels fundamentally lacking, our civilization's destructive relationship with the biosphere arises from a collective sense of separation from nature. This separation drives our obsession with endless technological and economic growth—a collective version of trying to fill the unfillable void through external acquisition.*
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> *Drawing on Zen teachings and the realization that the sense of self is a construct that can be deconstructed, Burbea suggests that awakening involves recognizing our fundamental non-separation—both individually and collectively. Just as we cannot 'return to nature' because we have never left it, the path forward requires waking up to our inherent interconnectedness rather than trying to escape or merely cope with our predicament. This understanding reveals the ecological crisis not merely as a technological or political challenge, but as a spiritual crisis requiring both personal and collective transformation.*

Today is Earth Day at Spirit Rock, and the theme of my presentation is our ecological situation, which explains that postcard on the bulletin board. Did you have a chance to look at it? If you haven't seen it before, I think it's quite striking. It's like a bit of a wake-up call.

How many of us realized how little water there is? That's all the water in that little bubble—salt water, ocean water, fresh water, glaciers, groundwater, so little. We tend to be misled, I think. We look out at the ocean, which covers well over 70% of the Earth's surface, but we miss the fact that the average depth is less than a mile and a half. In relationship to the Earth, which is 8,000 miles in diameter, it's very, very thin. So we really don't have that much water, and yet all of life is so dependent on it.

The same thing applies to the air. We're inside the air, and so we have the sense of air as kind of endless, boundless, infinite. Yet when we see those videos of astronauts taking off from space, we realize just how thin that layer of atmosphere is around the Earth. Where I live in Boulder, Colorado, we can feel it too. We're only a mile high, but

it's thinner there. You go up to Estes Park or Rocky Mountain National Park, you can tell the difference. There's really so little air there. So little water, just reminding us how fragile the earth is.

The theme of Buddhism and our ecological situation obviously suggests questions like: What can Buddhist teachings teach? How can they help us understand our ecological predicament and how to respond to it adequately? That's certainly one of the main things we want to talk about, but not the only thing. I also want to turn that around in line with Buddhism's emphasis on mutual causality. I'm not only interested in what Buddhism has to say about our ecological situation; I'm also interested in what our ecological situation has to say about Buddhism. What does it imply about the way that we understand and practice Buddhism?

The way I'd like to do that is to begin by telling you a story of two icebergs. With apologies to Bradley, who heard it all before last Sunday, these icebergs don't have anything to do with the fact that glaciers are melting and calving off. For me, the icebergs are a metaphor. With an iceberg, only about one-fifth actually sticks above the surface of the water. Four-fifths is submerged. So we see what's here, but it's easy to miss or ignore how much is down below. I think this is a very good metaphor for looking at our ecological situation—the first iceberg.

At the very tip of the iceberg, of course, is the challenge of climate change, global warming, whatever phrase we want to use. As we're all aware, we are changing the atmosphere of the planet. We're warming it with pretty serious consequences. Climate change, global warming—those are unfortunately sort of neutral terms, aren't they? Almost euphemisms. A lot of people would like a little more warmth. Better terms might be something like climate breakdown or climate emergency, to really give us a sense of what this implies.

We're naturally focused on this because it's happening so quickly. I don't know how many of you read the recent IPCC report. Once again, things are happening more quickly, more urgently than the scientists themselves predicted. The amount of time that we have to really address this seriously is shrinking.

I'm not going to spend our time talking about that, but rather making the pretty obvious point—which I think we all know, but we need to put it in context—that the ecological crisis is not just climate breakdown or climate emergency. That's a very important part of it, which is implicated in a lot of other things, but the ecological crisis is much bigger than that.

When we think about the oceans, for example, we can see how increased carbon in the atmosphere is affecting coral reefs—the acidification, the warming, the reefs get bleached. This is pretty scary when we remember that about 80% of all ocean species are living in coral areas. But climate change doesn't explain, for example, the fact that virtually all the ocean's fisheries are pretty well fished out. This is why those of us who eat fish are eating a lot more farmed fish—salmon and tilapia and things like that—just because there's less in the oceans and what is being caught is smaller and smaller.

Or consider the oceans' incredible pools that have collected of garbage, especially plastic. We have these whole areas of human-made sargasso seas—not of seaweed or something, but of plastic—which fish and other birds and other species sometimes eat to their detriment.

So that's one good example. An even better example—perhaps "better" isn't the right word—but something that stands out even more for me is the fact that we are now in the midst of the sixth great extinction event in Earth's history.

By extinction event, I mean a period when most of the species on Earth disappear. There have been five previous extinction events. The last one may have been 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared. What's special about the one we are experiencing right now is that it's happening more quickly than any of the others, apparently. And it's the only one caused by a particular species—one particular species. That is to say, us, of course.

The Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has estimated that by the end of the century, as many as half—half—of all the plant and animal species on earth could either be extinct or so weakened that they will disappear soon thereafter. That's within the lifetime of our children and grandchildren. Truly something almost incomprehensible.

No one really knows how many species there are—maybe between three and five million, something like that. Most of them haven't been identified and named. But they are disappearing, hundreds or thousands every day, according to the scientists, because of what we're doing to the planet, particularly to the habitat of so many of these species.

As I was rummaging through my notes, I found this poem that really brings it down for me. You know, "extinction event"—okay, it's a concept. But actually bringing it down to the feeling level is this poem by Sam Hamill called "The Book of Endings." Have any of you heard it? I've adapted it slightly. I want to read most of it with slight changes because it really touches on this point so clearly—just how quickly it's happening and what it means.

So here it is, "The Book of Endings":

Sometime while you listen to this poem, a species will disappear. A species as vast as your life and the lives of all your ancestors will no longer exist. A species that's found its own ways of eating, of moving, of hiding from predators. A species that meets itself and makes love in the bark of a tree, or on the leaves of the canopy, or in the humid dirt.

And it's come with us for millions of years. For millions of years, it's watched the night and day follow each other. It's breathed with the frogs. It's wrapped the stars around it like a blanket.

At the beginning of this poem, there may have been three or four of that species left. But now there's only one. And if you hear this poem again, it will be another species, another story of four billion years telling itself for the last time.

Wherever life began, it was all of us there, as it is now, in this unknown last one. It's bored into wood. It's carried water in its back. It's drunk the dew from its back in the desert. It's fed its young with strips of leaves, built homes out of bark. It's caged the sky into a song. It's spoken in ways no human has heard.

It has emerald wings. It has sapphire wings. It has wings of night.

You will never see it. It's already gone.

So the ecological crisis isn't simply climate change. There's a lot more going on. And that's what brings me to what's below the surface. The fact is, when we look at the totality of our effects on the earth, we can't really just pick out something like changing our energy sources. We really have to acknowledge that the fundamental issue is something about the way our civilization is working.

We have an industrial growth society that is really at the heart of it. That's the nature of our industrial growth society. That is to say, it keeps growing, it keeps needing to extract more resources from the earth at great cost, and it keeps spewing more and more pollutants and waste out into the water, the air, the land. Fundamentally, it's this whole basic orientation, along with increasing population, that's really the fundamental cause.

I spoke yesterday about corporate capitalism, but it's not just capitalism.

Capitalism is just one form of this industrial growth society. During the time of the Soviet Union and in pre-capitalist China, they were doing the same sort of thing, with the same emphasis on growth. I'll have more to say about that later, but that's the fundamental point I think we need to realize: we're not going to really resolve the ecological crisis without looking very deeply into the whole orientation of our society. Again,

something I think that we all, for the most part, know, but I just want to remind us of that in terms of this iceberg. And I'll have more to say about this industrial growth society a bit later.

So that's the first iceberg. What do you think the second iceberg is? The second iceberg is Buddhism.

At the top, in relation to what we're talking about—and there's no moral implications here, but the top, the visible part—I would include socially engaged Buddhism, such as we're concerned about here in our retreat. I think it's worth mentioning that in certain ways, it is itself in crisis. A number of socially engaged organizations have disappeared or are having a lot of trouble. Buddhist Peace Fellowship, that both Donald and I have been associated with, is now beginning to sort of resuscitate, but it basically collapsed for the most part in terms of members and financial support. Zen Peacemakers, Bernie Glassman's organization, basically had to sell off their places, and it's just down to Bernie himself. Network of Engaged Buddhism in England, founded in part by my friend Ken Jones, has pretty well collapsed. Socially engaged Buddhism institutions and organizations are not in very good condition.

I want to contrast that with the success of the mindfulness movement, which in the last couple of years has literally exploded in terms of its visibility, its impact, and the fact that so many—literally millions of people now—are doing mindfulness and benefiting from it.

I mentioned in the discussion period of my first talk the distinction we might make between service and activism. In a way, I think BPF was a victim of its own success in the sense that social engagement in terms of service—helping homeless people, prison work, hospitals and hospices—is generally accepted as an important part of the Buddhist path for many people. But when we look at activism, that is to say, challenging structures of oppression, it becomes a lot more complicated. As I quoted David Chernikoff saying, in his experience, a lot of Buddhists, maybe most Buddhists, are conflict avoidant. We don't want to go there. We find that uncomfortable. We find it easier to turn to our practice.

In a way, I think this points to something distinctive about Buddhism. We Buddhists have our own way of addressing and resolving the ecological crisis. When we think about the ecological crisis, what happens? Anxiety comes up about the future, about what's happening, certain types of thoughts and fears and so forth. And we have a way to deal with those. We meditate. We meditate and we've learned to let the anxiety go. The problem disappears, right? We've learned how to do that.

That is a kind of response to the ecological crisis and other social engagement issues. In terms of our own connection to them, that is a way to deal with them. But of course, it's not a way that's actually addressing them. It's dealing with them subjectively.

So I see this as the top part above the surface. In particular, I'm concerned about some aspects of how mindfulness is being promoted from a socially engaged perspective. I'm reminded of something that this influential European philosopher named Slavoj Žižek said. He's very well known, quite a character, quite a performer. For some reason he's become interested in Buddhism. What he says about it sometimes suggests he doesn't know that much about it, but he's a very acute observer of the cultural scene.

And what he's concluded is that Buddhism is the perfect ideology for twenty-first century consumer capitalism. Because it helps us deal with the stresses, the anxieties of daily life, our jobs, and so forth. So we can have a very intense, difficult job. It's very hard to keep everything together—job, family, and so on. But if we can meditate, if we can be mindful, it helps us find a way to cope with all that. And that's what he's referring to—that mindfulness, as he sees it, is becoming this grand coping mechanism that helps us cope with our lives, helps us fit into society better.

This brings me to the bigger part of the iceberg, the part that's below the surface, which is what we need to look to if we want to understand the role of social engagement in Buddhism now. What do I mean by this?

I think that this kind of uncertainty about social engagement, about the role of mindfulness in society, points to a deep-seated ambiguity within the Buddhist tradition itself—in particular, about the nature of awakening or enlightenment. I think there's a kind of uncertainty there that we're experiencing now, and it's an uncertainty that really does need to be clarified if we're going to move forward.

What do I mean by this ambiguity? If you go back to the Pali Canon and to the earliest texts we have of what the Buddha has to say about awakening—there's a lot of text, so it's not always easy to put together—but it's very clear the way the tradition, the Theravada tradition, developed. Nirvana ultimately is about not being reborn. To be born is to suffer in this world of samsara, this world of suffering, craving, delusion. And the ideal is not to be reborn at all. That's the ultimate goal.

In other words, the idea is not to fix up this world, but to check out of it, to escape it. In which case, maybe we don't need to worry too much about what's going on here, because the idea is to get away from it. And if we label it samsara, then the implication is we shouldn't waste our time trying to fix it up.

In contrast to that, in contemporary—especially Western—Buddhism, we can see another stream that doesn't see the role of the Buddhist path as escaping this world, but rather sees it much more involved with changing our minds so that we harmonize better, so that we fit in. So the jagged parts of our mind, our afflictive emotions and ways of thinking that cause a lot of suffering for us—if we can get a handle on them, then we can fit into society better and we can play our roles better.

But in that case, too, it's not about changing society, is it? It's about fitting into society. In other words, neither of these ways of understanding awakening really helps us focus on transforming the world. The one wants to escape this world, the other wants to accept and fit into it. And the question is: Which of those should we understand as the goal of the Buddhist path, or is there, in fact, another version?

And that's what I really want to point to. That's what I did point to very briefly in my first talk on Friday. You remember I said a little bit at the very end about sense of self as a construct, haunted by sense of lack and so forth. This is a third understanding of the Buddhist path, which to me personally makes the most sense. And it also fits into the task of socially engaged Buddhism best.

That is to say, the challenge of awakening is to realize that the world as we normally experience it, including ourselves as we normally experience ourselves, is a construct. It's a psychological, social construct—a construct that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, which, as I understand it, is what the Buddhist path is all about. And when we are meditating, for example, we are deconstructing, or rather letting the self be deconstructed.

So what I'd like to do in the rest of the time here today is go back to that fundamental understanding, say a little bit more, try to flesh out this basic understanding of how I understand what the Buddhist path is doing, and then relate it to the larger kind of social transformation or social reconstruction that's necessary. Because I think you can see how these two fit together. If the Buddhist path traditionally is about personal deconstruction and reconstruction—experiencing the world and ourselves differently—there's also the possibility, in fact the necessity, to do that socially. We can see more clearly how the personal transformation and the social transformation end up being two sides of the same thing.

Are you with me so far? Does this make sense?

So let me say a little bit more first about our individual situation. And then on the basis of that, I want to point out what I think are some really extraordinary parallels—precise and profound parallels—between this individual predicament, such as

Buddhism is talking about, traditionally talking about, and our collective predicament today in relationship to the biosphere. Because I think they're the same predicament. The one is the microcosm of the macrocosm. If we really understand this way of articulating what Buddhism is about, then we can see that the ecological crisis is just a larger version of the same thing.

So let me start by saying a little bit more about this individual predicament. As you may remember, the basic claim is that the sense of self—that is to say, the feeling that there's a me inside and somehow I'm inside and the rest of the world, including you, outside, that there's a kind of boundary between inside and outside—that this sense of separation is a delusion.

That this is the fundamental construct—not only the fundamental construct, but at the heart of our dukkha, our suffering. In a way, it's a kind of necessary construct as we grow up. I'm not saying we don't need a sense of self. The problem arises insofar as the sense of self really feels separate from others.

The way I understand it is to say that this is at the heart of our dukkha: the feeling that there's a me inside and the rest of the world is outside. And the reason that's dukkha is that this constructed sense of self—this supposed me inside—in an important sense, is a delusion. It doesn't have any reality of its own. It's a construct made of mostly habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, reacting, remembering, planning, intending. In other words, processes. It's the way these processes work together. But there's no hard core of self inside them. There's no thing inside. There's no pure consciousness or something that's real in there.

And that points to the real dukkha involved: not having any reality, this sense of self is inherently uncomfortable because it's inherently ungrounded, insecure. I know this is a bit of a stretch. The way I tend to understand this is to say that we normally experience this fundamental dukkha as a sense of lack—the feeling that something is wrong with me, something's missing, something isn't quite right.

All of us have this sense of lack. We tend to think it's our own problem. We don't realize that everyone has it to some extent. It becomes especially acute in adolescents when they're losing the identity that the family provided and constructing their own identity. They're very vulnerable to the opinions of friends. This construction of identity is a response, a way of coping with this. But it doesn't really resolve the fundamental issue. The sense of self is haunted or shadowed by the sense of lack.

Where the real problem occurs is the way this gets inverted. The problem isn't that there's a sense of lack—if we know where it really comes from, then we know how to deal with it. The problem is we're conditioned by society to understand the lack as something out here. What do I lack? We learn pretty quickly growing up in this society that what I lack is I don't have enough money, or I don't have enough consumer goods, or I'm not famous enough, or I don't have a partner, or my partner isn't good enough, and so forth. We're encouraged to look out here and to find something out here.

The tragedy is that since this looking outward is a symptom of the basic problem, nothing we can ever get out here can ever really resolve the fundamental problem, which is an internal one. If it's money that we want, if it's money that we think is going to resolve our sense of lack, we can never have enough money. Because you can get a lot of money, but you're still going to have your sense of lack. And that's true whether it's money or fame or any particular consumer goods.

What Buddhism does in this context is offer us the path to actually resolve the sense of lack. Here's where I fall back upon my own Zen training and my own Zen way of articulating it. In the Zen tradition, we talk a lot about forgetting the sense of self, letting go of the self. The great Japanese Zen master Dogen said: "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to realize your intimacy with all things."

In the process of focusing on our meditation practice, whatever it may be—as my Zen master Yamada Koen said, "Zen practice is forgetting oneself in the act of uniting with something," uniting with whatever it is your meditation is focused on. That moment of forgetting oneself and realizing that I'm not in here—rather than being something inside here that's looking out at the world—I'm simply one of the many countless ways in which all of this is coming together right here and now. That's what Zen describes as kensho or awakening. It's not inside separate from outside.

The great Japanese Zen master Dogen also described his own experience when he said: "I came to realize clearly that mind is nothing other than rivers and mountains and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars." Mind isn't somehow in here separate from the world. All this, all of you, are my mind. And of course, that's equally true for each and every one of us. In the Zen tradition, the emphasis is that each of us has exactly the same nature as the Buddha.

It's just that the Buddha realizes it clearly and lives in a way that accords with that realization.

All this was summarized much better than I can by a Vedantan teacher named Nisargadatta, who said: "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love. Between these two, my life turns."

When I look inside and see that I'm nothing—wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everyone—that's love. The two pillars of Buddhism: wisdom and compassion.

I think this also points to the whole idea of the bodhisattva path. Realizing that we're not separate from others calls for this kind of reorientation, so that instead of asking, "What's in this situation for me?" we turn it around and ask, "What can I do to make this situation better? How can I respond to it?" That is one way of encapsulating what the Buddhist path is about.

What I want to do now is point to the quite striking parallels between this articulation I've just given you and our collective situation in relationship to the biosphere. In this case, the self doesn't refer to the individual anymore, or to the kinds of selves I was talking about yesterday—men, women, American, Chinese, whatever. Here, the collective self is humanity as a whole, or if you like, human civilization.

This too is a construct, isn't it? It's our collective social construct. Just as the sense of self is a kind of psychological construct, we can say human civilization is our collective construct with the same sense of separation, the same sense that we, as people, are separate from the earth. We still have this same sense of what we could call alienation.

Now, I think it's important to see that human beings didn't always have this sense of separation. If you go back to the earliest cultures—before the Greeks—you remember I referred in my first talk to the Greek idea that we can change the way we organize things if we don't like it. We can change our social structure, our political and economic systems if we want.

Prior to the Greeks, people basically didn't realize that. For the most part, people accepted their social structure, usually very hierarchical. They accepted that as just the way they accepted everything else. It was considered natural. That's just the way things were. So if you're an Egyptian living in Egypt, the guy at the top of the social pyramid—the pharaoh—he's not just a political ruler, he's a religious one. That's all part of the way the cosmos is organized. The social structure is part of the eco-structure. It's just the way things are.

And there's a sense of being embedded. If you live in that society, you have a kind of social security in the sense that you know why you're there. You know what your role is when you're born and grow up. You know what your job is. And interestingly, for many of those cultures, human beings and human society had an important role to play in keeping the cosmos working.

A good example is the Aztecs. We know they had this practice of dragging large numbers of war captives to the top of their pyramids and cutting out their hearts with an obsidian knife and offering them to the sun god. Why did they do that? Because they felt they actually needed to do that to keep the sun god on his course. That's a rather extreme example, but it's very common that people in those cultures knew why they were there. They had a role to play—even if we think it's very deluded—they nonetheless had a role to play in the cosmos, which we do not. We lack that kind of social security.

That's the important point I want to stress. You see, what's happened in the modern world—and it really comes out of this Greek realization—is that we realize our social structure is something we're free to change if we want. But the other side of that freedom is a kind of anxiety that we don't really know what it's all about. We don't know why we're here. We don't know what kind of society we should have. We don't know what role we have to play in the larger order.

In fact, science seems to tell us that we don't have any role to play. It's just a matter of amusing ourselves or enjoying ourselves as much as we can, if we can, as long as we can while we're here. Human beings have no special meaning on the face of the planet.

Can you see the parallels with the anxiety, the individual anxiety here? Feeling separate, there's a kind of insecurity. I want to say that not only is there a sense of lack at the core of each of us individually, there also seems to be a kind of collective sense of anxiety or lack. We don't really know what it's all about.

And here's where it gets really interesting. How do we respond to this? What's our way of dealing with this? Well, remember first of all what we do on the individual level. We misunderstand the source of the problem and we try to secure and ground ourselves by grabbing onto things out here—money, fame, whatever. And as Buddhism emphasizes, everything's impermanent, everything's insubstantial. There's nothing we can secure ourselves with out here.

What's the comparable response of our civilization as a whole to this fundamental anxiety? I think the answer is pretty clear once we ask the question in that form. I think it's our preoccupation—or even you might say our obsession—with never-ending tech-

nological and economic development. We have become obsessed, you could say even sort of demonically obsessed, with more and more. More technological growth. To what end? More and more economic growth. To what end?

Well, again, we can't imagine what the end would be. We can't imagine a point where we have enough technology and we just say, "That's all we want." Or we have enough economic growth and we say, "Okay, no more." We really can't conceive of that, which makes me wonder: Is it that we're trying to get somewhere, or is it rather that we're kind of running away from something inside? To use the phrase that I think I used yesterday, why is more always better if it can never be enough?

So I think that we, as a civilization as a whole, are trapped in a kind of response which I identified earlier as industrial growth society—that our whole way of living on this earth is to understand that what it's all about is more and more technology, more and more growth. And somehow, because we don't know what else to do, it's like technology and economic growth and resources can be really valuable. But the trap is because we don't know what other ends are of value, we have become stuck in the means. It's like we've made the means into the ends. And because the means don't work very well as ends, we can never have enough. We're kind of trapped in this spiral and we don't know how to get out of it.

And yet this, more than anything else, seems to be what is destroying the planet. Because, of course, the biosphere is limited. The planet has very limited possibilities for growth, and yet we seem to be trapped into a system that has to keep growing—as I said earlier—if it's not going to collapse. And inevitably, sooner or later—and I think it's now—we're going to reach the point where this project of never-ending growth is going to run up against the boundaries of the biosphere. And that's exactly what's happened right now. That is the source, or that's another way of describing, the ecological crisis.

I hope you can see the parallels. One more parallel, actually two more. Just as we can't get rid of the self, according to Buddhism, because there never has been a self—we can wake up and realize that the self was a construct to begin with—likewise, we can't return to nature. That's not the solution here. We can't return to nature because we've never left it.

Really. We have the illusion of separation, but in fact we've never been apart from it. We're very good at creating environments like this one, a very fine hall, where everything we look at sort of reflects our activity, our manufacture. And yet if you think about it just a little bit, you can see that everything here is natural. It's just been—the form has been transformed in some way. Where does my paper come from? Where do

the light bulbs come from? Where does the carpet come from? Where do the walls come from? We can see they're all derived from the natural world. All we have done is organize them in a certain kind of way.

And this is even more true, or we can see it more obviously, I think, with our bodies. Have we ever separated from the natural world? Maybe astronauts for very, very brief periods. But basically, of course, it's the nature of our bodies that they are microcosms of the larger macrocosm.

So our breathing—our breathing in of oxygen and out of carbon dioxide—is connected with what the plants are doing. The water and the food that circulates in us and passes through us, that's all part of the greater circulation that forms the biosphere. So our bodies have never been separate from the natural world. We're just very good at creating the illusion of that separation.

And then, of course, things break down when, for example, we don't know how to deal with the massive amounts of waste that are produced by our bodies and by our society as a whole. So it's not a matter of returning to nature. It's waking up to the fact that we've never been apart from nature.

And that really seems to me the heart of the challenge that we face today. Here I'm reminded of another poem—actually two poems. The first is a very short one by Rumi, which again I think expresses very well the individual transformation that this path is about. It's a poem called "The Worm's Waking."

This is how a human being can change. There's a worm that's addicted to eating grape leaves. Suddenly, he wakes up. Call it grace, whatever, something wakes him. And now he's no longer a worm. He's the entire vineyard. And the orchard, too. The fruit, the trunks, a growing wisdom and joy that doesn't need to devour.

What's he pointing to there? It's not that the worm becomes the vineyard. He's always been the vineyard. He just realizes that he's not separate, that he's one of the things that the whole vineyard is doing.

And the second poem, I think, articulates really beautifully this experience of realizing that we're not separate from the natural world. It's from a poem by David Whyte called "Everything is Waiting for You." And I'm just going to read part of it:

"Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely even you at times have felt the grand array, the swelling presence and the chorus crowding out your solo voice.

You must note the way the soap dish enables you. Or the window latch grants you freedom. Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you."

Everything is waiting for us. This sense of separation that we have, both individually feeling sort of trapped inside this anxious, alienated, lonely sense of self, and this sense of separation that we as a species feel, collectively separated from this bountiful earth—both of those senses of separation are delusions.

And what seems clear at this particular point in history is that we not only need to address the individual delusion, such as Buddhism has traditionally emphasized—this path to overcome my individual sense of separateness. But it's also, I mean, I think this is the meaning of the ecological crisis. It's like the earth is challenging us to grow up or get out of the way.

The fact that when China produces coal smoke, it doesn't just stay over China, but circulates around the world—it's reminding us that everyone and everything is interconnected and that we have to be able to find a way of living together that acknowledges that.

In other words, it really does seem that just as I concluded yesterday—you remember the parallels between our individual three poisons, greed, ill-will, delusion, and the collective institutionalized version: institutionalized greed as our economic system, institutionalized ill-will as our militarism, institutionalized delusion as education and media.

And I concluded by saying that if it's true they are institutionalized versions of the three poisons, then we really need to look upon them as part of a spiritual crisis—our collective spiritual crisis. This isn't something separate from our spiritual lives, but rather a larger version of the same spiritual problem.

When I think of our ecological situation in this same light, when I appreciate the parallels I've tried to briefly draw out between our individual sense of separation—how we misunderstand, how we respond in ways that just make things worse, how we need to wake up and realize our non-duality and live according to that—when I see the parallels between this individual predicament and our collective sense of separation, with the anxiety and alienation that accompanies it, the way we respond with our preoccupation with industrial growth, more and more technology, more and more economic

expansion—if we really see these parallels, then I think we have to acknowledge that the ecological crisis is not just a technological or economic or political or social challenge. It's also fundamentally a spiritual challenge.

This is the macro challenge. If our individual predicament is the microcosm version of our larger collective ecological predicament, then the ecological crisis itself is simply a larger version of the same spiritual crisis. And just as a spiritual path such as Buddhism shows us how to wake up from our individual predicament, we need to understand that our ecological crisis too requires this same kind of awakening—but on a collective scale.

This brings us back to what we keep returning to, what we keep saying again and again: ultimately we cannot separate the two. We cannot separate personal inner transformation from the larger social and ecological transformation. They are inextricably linked. That's the profound challenge we are faced with—recognizing that the path of individual awakening and the path of collective awakening are not two separate journeys, but one seamless movement toward wholeness.

This is our calling: to see that healing the delusion of separation within ourselves and healing the delusion of separation that underlies our ecological crisis are the same work. The dharma invites us into this larger understanding, where personal liberation and planetary healing are revealed as two faces of the same truth.

CHAPTER 276

Healing Ecology - A Buddhist Perspective on the Eco Crisis

Rob Burbea · 1h36

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea draws striking parallels between the Buddhist understanding of individual suffering and our collective ecological predicament. He argues that just as our personal sense of separation creates dukkha and compulsive behaviors, human civilization's constructed sense of separation from the natural world has led to our current environmental crisis. Drawing on core Buddhist concepts of anattā (non-self) and pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), Burbea suggests that both individual and collective awakening involve seeing through the illusion of separation. He explores how our obsession with endless growth and technological control mirrors individual attempts to secure a non-existent separate self. The talk weaves together evolutionary cosmology with Buddhist wisdom, proposing that human consciousness represents the universe becoming aware of itself. Burbea challenges us to consider whether humanity can become the "collective bodhisattva of the biosphere," finding meaning through healing our relationship with the Earth. This integration of Buddhist philosophy with ecological consciousness offers a spiritual framework for understanding and responding to climate change, suggesting that environmental healing requires the same fundamental insight that Buddhism offers for personal liberation.*

I'd like to begin this evening with a word of appreciation, not only on my behalf, but on behalf of all of us who have been able to gather together in these almost ideal conditions. We have had a wonderful opportunity here—this kind of retreat, this kind of opportunity to reflect on our own practice and the wider implications of Buddhist teachings. I am grateful, and I know I'm not the only one grateful, for all the people at Gaia House who have made this possible. We know that many people have worked very hard in all kinds of ways to create this environment and to sustain it.

The topic for this evening is Buddhism and Ecology. The question is whether Buddhism really has something special to offer us that can help us understand and respond to the ecological crisis at this very special time in history when we seem to be doing so much to damage the biosphere.

It's not at all clear that religion is what's called for here. We have scientists who tell us about what's happening. We have technologists who devise new technologies that we need to adapt to the crisis. We have politicians who, at least should be, changing the social structure to adapt to our new situation. So what's the role of something like Buddhism here? Essentially an Iron Age religion, right?

The Buddha lived in a very different time and place—India, at least 2400 years ago. Like his compatriots, he didn't know anything about climate change, global warming, melting glaciers, rising sea levels, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere, or methane deposits. For that matter, they didn't know anything about carbon or oxygen or calcium or any of the periodic table of elements. They didn't know about the genetic structure of life or the cellular structure of life—so many other things that we today take for granted and that are essential to our understanding of what's happening right now to the biosphere. So we can certainly wonder whether Buddhism might have something really valuable to contribute.

Of course, Buddhism is not just one religion. When you really look closely at it, Buddhism is a big tent that includes many different types of Buddhism. Within all of these types—Pali Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and so forth—you would expect to find some things that would have something to say about our situation.

There is one story that especially speaks to me. It has to do with the Buddha's relationship to trees. According to the Pali Canon, or the story of the Buddha's life—which we know is largely myth—the Buddha was born under trees when his mother went into labor prematurely as she was traveling. After he left home on his spiritual quest, the Buddha studied, practiced, and did ascetic practices under trees. Later he meditated under trees. Supposedly he had his great awakening under a Bodhi tree. Thereafter he often lived, taught, and slept under trees. And again, if we can accept the traditional story, he died between two trees.

In particular, there's a story in the Vinaya about a tree spirit who appeared to the Buddha in one of his dreams and complained that one of the bhikkhu monks had cut down its tree in order to make a hut, and now the tree spirit had nowhere to live. I don't know what to think about the tree spirit, but interestingly, the next morning, the Buddha called the Sangha together and made a new rule. He said bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are not allowed to cut down trees. Not only that, they're not allowed even to hack off branches of living trees or even pluck a green leaf from a tree.

That's a nice story. It gives me a good feeling, but I admit it doesn't take us very far when it comes to understanding and addressing the climate crisis. So we can still wonder, where does Buddhism fit in here?

What I want to suggest to you is that there is, in fact, a precise and profound parallel between what Buddhism says about our individual predicament—in the way that we've been talking about it this week—and our collective predicament in relationship to the biosphere. Yesterday I talked quite a bit about collective selves. I mentioned, for example, that David Loy isn't only David Loy; he's a man, not a woman. I'm American, not British, and so forth.

In this case, the interesting collective self is the largest possible one, you might say. It's the human species. It's human civilization in relationship to the rest of the biosphere. The question is, how can we understand that duality? How can we understand that relationship?

What I want to suggest to you is that the ecological crisis is every bit as much a spiritual crisis as it is a technological or economic or political one.

And of course many people refer to this and say this, but I'd like to try to put a little bit more flesh on this claim and go into it in some detail.

Does this mean, therefore, that there might also be some parallel between the two solutions? Does the Buddhist solution to our individual predicament, therefore, imply something important about the collective solution? Well, I'll try to say something about that toward the end of the talk.

Now I'm going to ask Jenny to pass out a handout. There are two sides to it, so you can do me a favor by folding it so that you only see the left-hand side for now. Let's just look at the left-hand side.

If you look at those six points, I think you'll see that basically that's what I've been trying to talk about this week. Just looking at the left-hand side for the moment, let's go through it quickly, and I think you'll see that this is really what we've certainly been spending our time on—the claim that we can understand anatta today in more contemporary terms, that our sense of self is a psychological and social construct.

The problem with the construct is that it involves a sense of separation. The construction of a sense of self that's separate and inside is also the construction of that which is outside, an objective external world. This involves anxiety because this sup-

posed self inside can never secure itself because there's nothing there, really. Because it has no reality separate from the whole. It's simply, as I've been saying, one of the ways in which the whole comes together.

And anxiety, therefore, that includes—and maybe I haven't said very much about this—confusion, naturally, about who I am and what my life is about as a separate person.

We talked about two nights ago some of the ways in which we try to ground ourselves in response to this anxiety of separation. Ways that often make things worse. So I talked a little bit about money, fame, romantic love. We could have said as much about the desire for power. The irony so often is that by trying to secure myself in this way, I so often make things worse because the things I do, the kind of manipulations I might have to play, deceiving people, or at least using them as means to the ends, has the long-term effect, of course, of increasing the sense of separation, alienation.

In response, Buddhism doesn't say that we have to get rid of the self. That's not possible, because there never was a self. But we can wake up—that is to say, we can see through the delusion of a separate self. And this awakening in Buddhism liberates us and empowers us. And I think one of the things it naturally does, because it radically reduces our own self-preoccupation, our own narcissism, because we know that we're not separate from other people, then naturally there's a lot of different ways we can respond. But it's going to be a way that wants to help other people. We can find various ways to do that according to our own temperament and our situation, but in general it's going to be something along that line.

So that's basically what we've spent enough—or maybe too much—time talking about on that left side.

What I think is extraordinary is that this Buddhist account of our individual predicament corresponds so precisely to our collective ecological predicament, which is on the right side, and now we can open it up.

If this parallel is true, then the following must also be true. Human civilization is also a construct, just like the personal sense of self. It's the construct that's led to a collective sense of separation or alienation from the natural world, in this case—an alienation that causes collective anxiety, an anxiety that includes uncertainty about the role of humanity. What does it mean to be a human being? What's the meaning of civilization? Where are we going? Do we have a goal? Is there a meaning to it? I mean, Christians a thousand years ago thought so. What do we think now?

In response, we try to ground ourselves in ways that make our situation worse. Just as if we become preoccupied, say, with money, that can often make our situation worse by aggravating the alienation. So I think that we respond in ways that aggravate our alienation, our collective alienation from the earth.

The solution is not to return to nature. We can't return to nature for the simple reason that we've never left it.

Just as we cannot rid ourselves of the self because there has never been a self, we do need to awaken and realize our non-duality with the biosphere and what that implies. This realization can collectively free and empower us to heal the biosphere. It can resolve our collective existential or spiritual problem about what it means to be human.

With us, the biosphere becomes self-conscious. Our role today has to be to heal it—to heal the biosphere and to heal that sense of bifurcation between us and the biosphere.

Let me set the stage with two favorite quotations. The first is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "We are here to overcome the illusion of our separateness." The second comes from the great 13th century Japanese Zen master Dogen: "I came to realize clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars."

The first claim—that human civilization is something constructed by us—is both the most obvious and yet the most significant. We're familiar with revolutions, reform movements, legislatures that can pass laws. If we're not happy with the kind of society we have, we have governments that can reconstruct it.

Nevertheless, this claim that human civilization is a social construct is not something that most ancient societies would have understood. In the West, we owe this insight to classical Greece, which as far as I know was the first civilization to distinguish between what they called *phusis* and *nomos—phusis* being the natural world with all its patterns, and *nomos* being human convention or social convention, including the nature of human society.

The Greeks realized this distinction and proceeded to reform their society. We trace Greece as one of the roots of Western evolution because they had this insight and started the process of self-transformation that we have continued. The Greeks realized that unlike the natural world, whatever is social convention can be reconstructed. In that way we can attempt to determine our own destiny.

Think of Plato's Republic—a complex blueprint for a new society. We're familiar with such blueprints today and take them for granted, but Plato was doing something truly radical. The Republic was revolutionary for its time.

Today it's difficult for us to understand that traditional societies didn't realize this distinction between nature and society. Without our sense of historical development, they lacked our sense that future possibilities might be quite different from the present. Most ancient societies accepted their own social conventions as inevitable, just as natural as their ecosystems.

Rulers might be overthrown, but the new ruler would take his natural place at the top of the social pyramid, which was also a religious pyramid. Kings usually had special roles in relating to the gods, the transcendent powers that supervised the created world. Often human beings had crucial roles in keeping the cosmos functioning.

Consider the Aztecs and their massive human sacrifices, tearing hearts from victims to offer to the sun god. Why? This was necessary to keep the sun on its course through the heavens. Without human participation, chaos would ensue. The Mesopotamians believed humans had been created by the gods as slaves to serve them, to provide what the gods needed—that was our function within the cosmos.

For these societies, the distinctions we take for granted between the natural world, the social order, and religion didn't exist. Understanding one's society as natural justified social arrangements we today wouldn't tolerate. None of us would want to live in an Aztec or ancient Mesopotamian society.

But there was nevertheless a significant advantage they had over us—a psychological benefit. People in such cultures shared and took for granted a collective sense of meaning, the meaning of their lives in the cosmos, that we today do not have, that we've lost.

For them, it's not only that their society and religion are woven into the very fabric of existence—the meaning of their lives is embedded in the cosmos itself and revealed through their spiritual understanding. For them, of course, this isn't conceived as "a religion" but simply as an explanation, an account of the way things truly are.

For us, in contrast—and this is the crucial point—the meaning of our lives and the purpose of our societies has become something we must determine for ourselves in a universe whose meaning, if any, is no longer evident. Even if we choose to be religious, we must choose among countless different possibilities, which tends to diminish the natural security and comfort that comes from growing up within a tradition and simply accepting it as truth.

So although we enjoy many freedoms that such ancient societies didn't provide—freedoms we certainly wouldn't want to surrender—one of the profound costs of our liberation is that we have lost their kind of social security. That is to say, we've lost the basic psychological comfort that comes from knowing our place and role not only in society but in the cosmos itself.

In other words, part of the rich cultural legacy of the Greeks, for better and worse, has been an increasing anxiety about who we are and what it means to be human. This is what accompanies the freedom to reconstruct our societies. This is what comes with recognizing the distinction between the natural world and social convention. Yes, we're free to change things, but then they're no longer natural in that fundamental way.

The loss or reduction of faith in God has left us rudderless, both collectively and individually. Thanks to our modern technologies, it seems we can do almost anything we want to do. Yet paradoxically, the more we become capable of doing, the less we seem to know what we should do, what we want to do, what our role actually is. What sort of world do we want to live in? What kind of society do we want to have? If we can't depend on God or God-like rulers to tell us, we're thrown back entirely on ourselves. And this lack of grounding greater than ourselves becomes another profound source of dukkha, collectively as well as individually.

To sum up: our modern sense of separation from the natural world has become an ongoing source of alienation and frustration because we no longer know who we are, what the meaning of our lives is, or what purpose human civilization might serve.

Now, what has been our response to this collective predicament? Let's first remember how we respond to the individual, personal predicament. I try to make my anxious sense of self more real, more comfortable, often by becoming attached or preoccupied with things in the outside world—money, for instance. But no matter how much I may acquire, I never seem to have enough because it doesn't address that basic anxiety. Money isn't the real issue when the problem is a fundamental sense of lack stemming from the inherent insecurity of the constructed sense of self.

Believing that something outside myself is the solution to my sense of lack—this is the fundamental delusion, leading to solutions that actually reinforce the basic problem: the sense of separation.

But here's the crucial question: Is there a collective parallel to these personal, individual compulsions? I think as soon as we ask the question this way, the answer becomes apparent. It's our obsession with never-ending progress and growth.

What motivates our attitude toward economic and technological development? When will our gross national product be large enough? When will we collectively consume enough? When will we have all the technology we need? These are strange questions because we cannot conceive of an endpoint. This suggests that perhaps we're not trying to reach somewhere, but rather running away from something.

Why is more always better if it can never be enough?

My point is that technology and economic growth in themselves cannot resolve the basic human problem of what it means to be human. More resources may be excellent means to accomplish something, but they cannot answer the problem as ends in themselves.

They're not good as ends in themselves. But since we're not sure how else to solve the problem, in effect, they have become a collective substitute—you could say forms of secular salvation that we seek but never quite attain. The means have become de facto ends.

Does that make any sense? Because we don't know what to value, we're preoccupied. Since we don't really know where we should go in our secular society, or what we should value, we have become demonically obsessed, I would say, with ever-increasing power and control.

Please notice the parallel with our individual predicament. Lacking the security that comes from knowing our place and role in the cosmos, we have been trying, vainly, unsuccessfully, to create our own security, collectively, as well as individually. Modern technology, in particular, has become our collective attempt to fully control the conditions of our existence on this planet. You could say, in effect, we've been trying to remold the earth so that it's completely adapted to our purposes, until everything becomes subject to our will, a kind of resource—resources meaning something we can use.

This is despite the fact, or maybe because of the fact, that we don't know what those purposes should be. Ironically, if predictably, this hasn't provided the sense of security and meaning that we seek. In the modern world, we've become more anxious, more confused, not less.

Now, if these parallels are valid, if they're an accurate description of our collective situation, I think we can see that something like the ecological crisis is going to be inevitable. Sooner or later, and it seems to be now, we're going to bump up against the limits of this compulsive project of endless growth and never enough control. And if our in-

creasing reliance on technology as the solution to these problems is actually a symptom of the larger problem, that seems to imply that the ecological crisis requires something more than just a technological response.

That's not to say that technological responses aren't necessary. We know we need, for example, more efficient fuel cells. But the problem is that increasing dependence on ever more sophisticated technologies, ever more powerful technologies, can still aggravate further our sense of separation and alienation from the natural world. Whereas it seems to me that any successful solution has to involve recognizing that we're an integral part of the natural world. That also means embracing our responsibility for the welfare of the whole natural world, the biosphere, because ultimately its well-being cannot be differentiated from our own well-being. The rest of the biosphere is our body —and I mean that literally. It's not just a metaphor.

Remember Thich Nhat Hanh's cloud in the piece of paper? Well, the rainforest is in our bloodstream. Understood properly then, humanity taking care of the earth's rainforest is like me taking care of my own leg.

So what does this mean? Does it mean returning to nature? That would be like getting rid of the self—something neither possible nor desirable. We can't return to nature. Why? Because we have never left it.

We are very good at creating environments for ourselves, like this one, where we see our own image reflected back on us. We're here in this beautiful room, very well done in many ways, and we don't think about the forests or the oceans or what's going on elsewhere. But you don't have to think very hard to realize that everything here in this room, including our own bodies, is not just derived from nature, but is a way of nature taking form. The wood, obviously from trees. The carpet, maybe from wool. Many things are from oil, plastics, metal ore from the earth. Everything here is nature—just nature reformed, nature restructured. It's not as though we've created a world separate from nature.

The environment isn't merely an environment. That is to say, it's not merely the place where we happen to be located. The biosphere is the ground from which and within which we arise.

So the earth isn't only our home, it's our mother. And you could say, in this case, the relationship is even closer because we can never really cut the umbilical cord. We don't cut the umbilical cord. People have fantasies about terraforming Mars or something, but basically, as long as we're on this planet, as long as we're part of this biosphere, think of the air, the water, the food that circulates through us. We take it in our mouths,

it's digested, it comes out the other end. That circulation is part of the great circulation of the natural world. It's not separate from that. It's just one microcosm of the macrocosm.

We've never been separate from the natural world. It's just that we've had the illusion that we can somehow sustain ourselves, just as we can have the illusion on the individual level that I have a separate self inside.

So according to this understanding, the problem that we have is not our technologies that are destroying the earth. Rather, I think it's the obsessive ways that we have been motivated to exploit the earth. It's not just the technologies themselves, it's our attitude toward the earth. Without these motivations, I think it would be possible to evaluate and use our technologies in a more beneficial sense because we could really discriminate more clearly between the ecological solutions that they can actually contribute to as well as the problems that they have created.

Recently, one example is nuclear power. It's interesting that in response to the disaster in Japan, we've had a big propaganda campaign on the part of nuclear power companies who were gearing up to get going full blast again. People had forgotten Chernobyl. And I feel almost sorry for them. Just when they're starting to get developed, this thing happens. And so a lot of people are spending a lot of time and money to persuade us that what happened in Japan can't really happen here in Europe or in the U.S. because our reactors are different.

The irony, by the way, is that when I was in Japan for twenty years, there was a nuclear movement that was arguing how crazy nuclear power was in a country like Japan with so many earthquakes. And the argument was always, "Oh, don't worry, what happened in Chernobyl could never happen here because we have different types of nuclear power plants."

Personally, I understand that I can see the attraction of nuclear power. If you need large amounts of power and oil and gas because of carbon and coal are very bad, I can see the tendency to want to move to nuclear. But I'm still struck by what I think it was Amory Lovins said: using nuclear power to create electricity is like using a chainsaw to cut butter.

And I still notice that the people who argue for nuclear power, the argument is almost always, "Well, it's better than coal." But I haven't seen anyone really come up with the answer to the fact that it creates waste products. I mean, even if nothing goes wrong, even if there is no disaster—and there are always disasters. I used to have a

book, a Greenpeace book, that listed every nuclear accident. And there were hundreds of pages in it. Each page had several incidents. There's always things going wrong. We're human, right? They're going to go wrong.

But even if they go right, what you end up with a nuclear power plant is tons and tons and tons of radioactive material that's radioactive for many, many thousands of years. And I'm just astonished that we don't seem so concerned about that. Most of our CEOs can't think any further than the next quarterly report, or our presidents can't think of anything further than the next election, and we're willing to create these incredibly toxic, dangerous radioactive materials that are going to be dangerous to all living systems for tens of thousands of years and we don't seem to be bothered by that.

I can understand the argument if you need lots of energy: maybe nuclear is the best way to go in the minds of some people because it's better than the carbon fuels. But I'd like to suggest a different solution. The problem is that we keep assuming the necessity for continuous economic and technological expansion—that we're thinking, "Okay, we have this much energy that we're using and we need more and more energy because we're making more and more stuff. And how are we going to find a way to make all that energy if we don't have fossil fuels?"

But if we didn't assume that kind of economy that has to grow if it's not to collapse—if we had a different kind of economic system that was more steady state and more frugal—then maybe we wouldn't need such a huge source of energy. Maybe one of the things that we would be able to do is reduce our energy needs.

In other words, what I'm suggesting is that we reverse our way of thinking. And I want to offer a very simple, if not easy, solution to our energy problems. Instead of asking the question, "How can we get all the energy we need?" I propose that we turn it around and determine how much energy we can get from renewable resources like fuel cells, solar, wind, and so forth. And then on the basis of that—on the basis of the energy that's available—we consider restructuring our societies.

I mean, it seems to me sooner or later that's what we're going to end up doing anyway, whether by choice or not. Doesn't that seem commonsensical? I have to stress it's simple but not easy because it requires pretty basic changes in governance and so forth, but I expect it's going to be necessary.

Are you with me so far? Am I persuading you about the parallels?

There's still one big question left, and that's what I want to finish talking about: how does this kind of approach resolve that basic anxiety I was discussing at the beginning? Remember the Aztecs—they were part of the world, and the meaning of their lives was

naturally structured into the cosmos. We're not going to be able to return to that even if we wanted to. So how do we resolve the basic anxiety that haunts us now, where we have to create our own meaning? We have to find our own meaning in a world where God has died, in a secular world.

Like it or not, our individual and collective self-consciousness today, our historical development, distances us from those ancient worldviews and the kind of natural meaning of life they provided. We wouldn't want to return to those even if we could. But the question is, what other kinds of alternatives are available for us?

I think this is really to ask: what kind of collective parallel might correspond to the individual awakening that Buddhism promotes? Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction." But what can that mean?

I want to conclude with a few reflections on this, and I wonder if the important issue here is evolution—how we understand evolution. It's very interesting. Lots of religions have problems with evolution because they have their own creation myths. But Buddhism has no problem whatsoever. In fact, the whole concept of evolution fits perfectly with basic Buddhist ideas about impermanence, interdependence, lack of substantial identity, and constant transformation.

It seems to me that if religions are to remain relevant today, they need to stop denying or ignoring or minimizing evolution and turn it around. I think we need a religion that makes the evolutionary process central to its teachings. What religion adds is the question about the meaning of that process, which scientists sometimes think they answer themselves, but I think that's a big delusion. They can tell us what's happening, but they don't really understand the meaning of it.

According to Brian Swimme, a cosmologist, the greatest scientific discovery of all time is that if you leave hydrogen gas alone for about fourteen billion years, plus or minus a few hundred thousand, it turns into "giraffes, rose bushes, and humans."

Is that also one of the most important spiritual discoveries of all time?

It seems to me fourteen billion years is actually a very short period of time to evolve from hydrogen gas—thinking about the Big Bang, first plasma, then hydrogen. Fourteen billion years from the Big Bang to create a Buddha, a Jesus, an Einstein, a Gandhi—that's remarkably short. I know my sixty-three years have gone very quickly.

Unless, of course, hydrogen gas is actually something a little different than the reductionistic way it's usually understood. And that's the issue here.

What we normally think of as evolution—genetic evolution, biological evolution—is only one part of a triple evolution. I suggest we need to look at the whole arc and see all three evolutions as part of one big evolutionary developmental curve.

Well, at the time of the Big Bang, what do you have? You have plasma and then you have basically hydrogen. That's the first element that's formed. But then how do you get all the other elements that we know about? They have to develop, they have to evolve in a sense. And where do they develop? In the cores of stars.

What happens is that after a long time, the cloud of hydrogen gathers and then it condenses. When it reaches a certain density, nuclear fusion begins. In the very core of the stars, hydrogen starts to fuse into heavier elements. You start getting helium, and the process continues from there. That's where the heavier elements are created. So that's the first evolutionary process.

I remember reading somewhere—I think it was Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*—that a normal star can only fuse elements up to gold. Gold is too difficult. In order for gold and the higher elements to be fused and created, you need supernovas that are so big and so powerful that they can create all the higher elements. But then these stars have to explode and scatter all these heavier elements around, right? So that's the first stage of evolution.

Then over time—and this is a wonderful story, I think. It's incredible. Think about it. And it's our story. We're talking about our bodies here. After time, you get these secondary solar systems forming. Now you not only have hydrogen, but on Earth, you've got all these heavier elements. And it just so happens they're the elements that we need for life, or at least life learns to depend on the ones that are here. You get calcium, CO_2—carbon, oxygen—and so forth.

Because you have all these higher elements, heavier elements, you have the possibility of life and self-replicating life, where some of these elements somehow work together. You get amino acids and DNA, and you actually have something that can replicate itself. Then you get this incredible story—we all know the Darwinian story about the evolution of life on earth. But even that is only the secondary evolution.

We cannot minimize the third evolution, which is what? Cultural evolution, of course. There's still a big development—although comparatively fast now—between the first human beings, wherever you want to draw that line, and Einstein. You're not going to have an Einstein unless you've got the evolution of an incredibly sophisticated culture, civilization, which is what we have, which is what we're part of, which is what created all of us, as well as Einstein.

These are nested. If you think about these three developmental processes, the first one creates the conditions necessary for the second one, and the second one creates the conditions necessary for the third one. Human beings, our species depends on many other species still.

Here's the question: How are we to understand this whole sweep of 14 billion years? What's going on here? Is there a meaning to it? Theists, a lot of people who believe in God, they say that there's a being outside these processes that's directing it. In contrast, you'll find a lot of scientists who say this is basically a kind of haphazard, accidental process, including the evolution of life due to random DNA mutations.

The question is, is there a third alternative here? According to the evolutionary biologist Theodore Dobzhansky, evolution is neither random nor determined, but creative. That's his word: creative. Creative of what? Well, obviously, in one sense, the tendency toward increasing complexity is hard to overlook, and also the fact that this increasing complexity seems to be associated with some kind of greater awareness. From a Buddhist perspective, this opens up very interesting possibilities.

Here's the important question, I think: Can we understand this groping self-organization of the universe, this whole sweep, as the universe struggling to become more self-aware, or groping in its own way toward awareness? Is my desire to awaken—remembering that the word Buddha means "the awakened"—is my desire to awaken supposedly the desire of this separate sense of self that doesn't really exist?

Is my desire to awaken from the other side the urge of the cosmos to become aware of itself—in me, as me? Is this the answer to that old question: if there is no self, who becomes awakened?

Please put this in the context of what we were saying yesterday about Indra's net and the piece of paper. Everything comes together in a certain way to create the piece of paper and us. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry wrote a wonderful book in this direction called *The Universe Story*, which I recommend highly. They make this kind of claim: "The mind that searches for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way galaxy itself in search of its own inner depths."

What does this imply, for example, about Walt Whitman admiring a beautiful sunset? "Walt Whitman is a space the Milky Way fashioned to feel its own grandeur." Isn't that beautiful?

Think about our eye. Think about the evolution of the eye. Isn't the eye something that the whole biosphere has evolved in order to see itself, rather than thinking of me as something behind the eye looking out at the world? What different perspective do we have on the eye if we think of it just like Thich Nhat Hanh's piece of paper?

Is this how Buddhist enlightenment can be understood today? What did Shakyamuni Buddha realize when he looked up? According to one Mahayana tradition, he had his enlightenment when he looked up from his meditations and saw the morning star, Venus, shining brightly in the sky. And then he said something like, "I now realize that all beings have the Buddha nature."

But there's another phrase that sometimes is said—and I think I've mentioned this already—that when the Buddha became enlightened, the whole universe became enlightened. All of us became enlightened. And how did Dogen describe his own awakening? "I came to realize clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars."

But there's a problem. As we know, here we go back to the problem. Every species can be looked upon as a kind of experiment of the biosphere. And scientists tell us, biologists, that less than one percent of all the species that have ever evolved on Earth still exist. Over ninety-nine percent have evolved and then disappeared.

What's special about our species is that our supersized cortex enables us to become co-creators. And here I'm thinking about that famous phrase from the Bible where we're told that humans are created in the image of God. What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Does that mean God has two eyes and one nose? Or is it the case that somehow... I think God is this kind of creative principle, this self-organizing creating principle. And what's unique about human beings is that with us, new types of creativity become possible.

If God wanted to create a symphony, he needs us. He's got to work through us, right? And there are a lot of things he's got to do—or it's got to do, or she's got to do—to create a symphony. Think about it. But there's a new kind of creativity that's become possible. With human evolution, with cultural evolution, the creative possibilities explode exponentially. We not only have symphonies, we have incredible things. With us, new types of species become possible that we co-create. Again, made in the image of God.

Knives—there wouldn't be any knives without us. Cities. Poetry. And world wars. Cathedrals and concentration camps. Symphonies, as I said, and nuclear bombs.

As some of these examples suggest, there does seem to be a problem with our hyper-rational cortex. Nietzsche has his Zarathustra saying that "man is a rope across an abyss"—I think we can put that in gender-neutral language.

The human species is a rope across an abyss. The implication I derive from this is that we're a transitional species, that there's something incomplete about us. Must we evolve further in order to survive at all?

There's a book by Michael Dowd called *Thank God for Evolution*—I love the title, and it's a pretty good book too. In it, he describes our collective problem as "systemic sin"—that's the Christian word. He writes: "The fundamental immaturity of the human species at this time is that our systems of governance and economics not only permit but actually encourage subsets of the whole to benefit at the expense of the whole." Our systems encourage subsets of the whole—he gives the example of individuals and corporations—to benefit at the expense of the whole.

Is that where we're stuck? Because those subsets think of themselves as separate from the whole? Again, we come back to this sense of separation that's so problematical. Again, we bump into the delusion of separate selves that pursue their own self-interest at the cost of the greater whole that they're actually part of.

So what I'm suggesting is perhaps figures like the Buddha and Gandhi—maybe we can look upon them as prototypes, harbingers of the way in which our species needs to develop. What do you think? If that's true, then the kind of cultural evolution or evolutionary development that's most necessary now involves spiritual practices that address this fiction of a separate self, that help us overcome the fiction of a separate self whose well-being is separate from other people.

I'm really struck by this realization in recent years—how plastic the brain is, how it changes, how when we are meditating, the brain is changing. The brain is restructuring, rewiring itself. I'm just amazed by that, and I almost can't help thinking of it as like a fourth kind of evolutionary process. At this point in our cultural evolution, we have reached the point where we realize that in order to survive, we don't just need genetic DNA mutations of a certain sort, but we can contribute to the process by doing nothing—getting out of the way, as it were—and this whole transformation, this evolutionary development continues when we are on our cushion. That's the way it seems to me.

Perhaps our basic problem isn't self-love, but a real deep misunderstanding of what the self really is. I think it's becoming very clear that without the compassion that arises when we realize our non-duality—that is to say, empathy not only with other human

beings, but with the whole of the biosphere—it's becoming more and more likely that civilization as we know it is not going to survive the next few centuries. Nor would it deserve to.

And I think it remains to be seen whether the Homo sapiens species experiment will be a successful vehicle for this evolutionary process. Maybe it won't. Maybe we'll be like the other 99% who have their day and then disappear. But it would be kind of a shame. I mean, it seems like there's that possibility, and it depends on us.

But then I always remember that in one way it's really strange to think of ourselves, as we always do, as separate from the natural world. We are literally an experiment of the biosphere. So if the experiment goes wrong, it's the biosphere that tried something that didn't work. But it does feel as if we're being told now: grow up or get out of the way. That's the feeling I have, and not only me.

To conclude: Does all this give us a different perspective on our collective relationship with the biosphere? Is the eco-crisis a spiritual challenge that calls upon us to realize our non-duality with the earth? It's very interesting at this particular point in history—remember from the first night, the coming together of these two worldviews, the Buddhist emphasis on personal transformation and the Western one on social transformation, the new possibilities that happen when they come together. It's very interesting that this occurs at a time of urgent change. And I think it's more than eco-crisis—it's social and economic crisis as well. Very interesting. Is it just a coincidence?

So what I'm doing to conclude: I think all this suggests a final parallel between the individual and the collective. The question is, will our species become the collective bodhisattva of the biosphere? Isn't humanity challenged today to discover the meaning and the role it seeks in what I think is going to have to be the ongoing long-term task of repairing the rupture between us and Mother Earth? In other words, repairing what we've done to the biosphere. It seems to me that's going to be—isn't that the meaning that's given to us at this point in history? Of what it means for us collectively.

And that process, that healing—one suspects will therefore transform us as a civilization as much as the rest of the biosphere. What do you think?

Well, I realize I forgot one beautiful quote from Thomas Berry, who has been one of the major figures in this whole evolutionary perspective. We might summarize our present human situation by the simple statement: in the twentieth century, the glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth. And now, the desolation of the earth is becoming the destiny of the human.

Ouch.

A participant asked: "You wrote about thinking of awareness as bound and unbound. Would you say now, regarding this subject, that actually this unbound awareness you're speaking about is exactly the key to realizing this connection? The natural way of..."

That's a fascinating question. The issue of awareness is quite complicated, and that way of expressing it is complex in itself. I haven't usually developed it in relationship to this ecological perspective.

The article starts with some quotations, including a very famous line from the Diamond Sutra that's sometimes translated as: "Let your mind arise without fixing it anywhere." It points to the tendency of awareness to stick to things. I think we can understand this in the context of what I was saying earlier—we're always looking for security. Our awareness is constantly seeking security, trying to secure the sense of self. It's the very nature of awareness that it's looking for something to grasp onto.

And yet that's the problem. Awareness isn't aware that in and of itself it doesn't need to do that. The liberation of awareness is the realization that the mind doesn't need to stick anywhere.

This goes back to the Heart Sutra's famous teaching: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." For a long time I puzzled over that, looking for the emptiness inside that takes form as things. But of course, the real emptiness is the emptiness of our own minds—the nature of our own awareness, our own consciousness. It has no qualities in and of itself, and that's why it can become anything. That's why it can take any form.

Whether I can relate that to evolution right now, I'll have to think more about that, to be honest. It's a very intriguing question. Did you have some connection in mind?

The participant responded: "I think I can put it like this—by not letting our awareness be unbound, we actually hinder evolution in the sense you were talking about. We are always in the way of evolution by creating a self which is not there."

Yes, awareness gets stuck. For example, I was suggesting that in meditation there's a kind of transformation going on in the brain—and we know this is physically true. This happens because awareness isn't sticking to something. There's an open quality to it, and then transformation occurs naturally. That makes a lot of sense.

Another participant raised the challenging issue of population: "David Attenborough said at a conference last year that the actual problem is not climate change—the problem is population growth. From an ecological perspective, this makes sense, but when people are already struggling to respond to climate change, and you introduce a subject

like population growth—how do you even begin to discuss something like that? Unless you get to a crisis point where you really have to limit population, people are not going to want to respond."

Exactly. What politician is going to run on the platform of restricting population? That may be the toughest challenge of all in a democratic society. And yet, obviously, there are too many people.

The unconscious presents another fascinating dimension. I read Guy Claxton's *The Wayward Mind*, which explores how we might understand this realm beneath consciousness. For some, like Freud, the unconscious becomes a repository of troublesome impulses. Jung saw it more positively—as something archetypal, even religious in nature, containing far more wisdom than what operates at the conscious level.

Buddhism also has a concept of the unconscious in the Yogacara school, which describes different levels of awareness. It speaks of the alaya-vijnana, the seed repository consciousness, where the karmic seeds—the habitualized patterns of thinking and acting from our past—are somehow stored. Though in this Buddhist understanding, these seeds are generally viewed as problematic. The goal is to "roast the seeds," to eliminate these conditioning patterns that perpetuate suffering.

In terms of practice, if we're working to get the ego-self out of the way, then we're allowing something deeper to manifest. The sixth patriarch expressed this beautifully when he said he had nothing to teach—no doctrine to transmit. He simply recognized where people were stuck, where their minds had become caught, and offered whatever might help them let go. It wasn't about giving them something new, but removing obstacles so their true nature could manifest.

This connects to something profound about our cosmic story. When we hear about how we're literally made of stardust—how the atoms in our bodies were forged in the hearts of ancient stars—it fills us with awe. John Seed, working with Joanna Macy, tells the story from the Big Bang onward as our creation myth. But we don't usually recognize it as myth; we present it as science. Yet traditional societies understand that creation stories serve essential psychological and spiritual functions.

If we could embrace this cosmic narrative as our creation myth, we might better envision where the story goes next. This beautifully parallels the Buddhist understanding of overcoming separation. When Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of the piece of paper containing clouds and rain and sun, or when we contemplate Indra's net of infinite interconnection, these aren't vague concepts. We can see how evolution demonstrates this interdependence—how everything truly inter-is with everything else.

It's a magnificent story. Yet as long as we maintain this sense of separate self, somehow apart from the web of life, we tend to distort this understanding. We can't quite rest comfortably in it.

There's something strangely comforting in recognizing that every atom in our bodies will be recycled through cosmic processes. Yet there's also a tragic dimension we shouldn't ignore. The Beethoven symphonies will be lost. Our individual consciousness, our unique way of experiencing the world—these too will pass away.

Buddhism helps us transcend attachment to these losses, but we needn't deny their poignancy. David Loy will die. The people I love will be lost. This tragic element remains real and shouldn't be dismissed as we explore these deeper truths.

Regarding population control—this raises such intense feelings, and I understand the anger it can provoke. It's often presented as a red herring that distracts from more fundamental issues. History shows us repeatedly—from the Irish famine to crises in India—that the problem isn't typically too many people. The problem is how resources are controlled and distributed under systems like capitalism. When we focus solely on population, we risk overlooking these deeper structural inequities that create scarcity amid abundance.

This dialogue continues today. What concerns me deeply is that environmental catastrophe could become a dangerous red herring, because as you've just articulated, the logical conclusion of certain population arguments can lead toward authoritarianism—and that's truly perilous territory.

This is precisely why I felt compelled to speak. It's a crucial consideration that the reality of these massive catastrophes we face could result in total annihilation, or perhaps the emergence of something entirely new. But in that very process, we could easily find ourselves capitulating to some of the authoritarian tendencies we discussed yesterday. I believe this represents one of our greatest challenges—one that anyone considering themselves an environmentalist must seriously grapple with.

Thank you for raising that point. Sheila, did you want to respond?

Could I offer just one brief thought first? I find this a very important argument, and I actually find myself agreeing with both perspectives. I completely agree that population arguments are so often used to rationalize the present inequities. Those who already possess great wealth and power invoke population as the real problem, diverting attention from the profound maldistribution of resources in our civilization. I accept that critique entirely.

Nonetheless, I also believe that six billion human beings on this biosphere represents an enormous load with vast consequences for all other ecosystems. My conversations with biologists suggest this is genuinely problematic. We can sustain this population, but not without consuming so much of the earth's resources that it creates serious problems for countless other species.

So while I share your main concern, I still suspect we face genuine overpopulation. I also admit I have no clear solution to this dilemma—at least not in the short term. There are various approaches to population issues: educating women, for instance, typically leads to lower birth rates. That seems like a constructive path. But my sense remains that population represents a very serious and growing challenge, without dismissing your concern that it's so easily weaponized as a red herring to distract from the widening gap between rich and poor.

Sheila?

You present a very grim picture, notwithstanding your inspiring portrayal of evolution's different stages. Though I'm not sure it's quite that grim, actually. I'm experiencing something of a déjà vu at this moment. I feel as though I'm in a Catholic church in the late sixties, at one of those missions where a visiting priest arrives to tell you how sinful you are, how dire the situation is, how you better watch out. I was a teenager then and felt frightened. I'm not frightened now, but I wonder...

If we truly believe—and we do, as you say—that we are part of nature, then we are. Our awareness of this connection is another matter entirely, but the fundamental unity remains. This implies something hugely powerful. And I believe this awareness is dawning in people. I spoke recently about the banking crisis in Ireland and how there's a genuine feeling throughout the country that, as one academic put it, everything is now out on the table. There's nothing left to hide.

Even Americans who claim not to believe in climate change actually do understand what's happening to the planet. They're not in denial—they're lying for political reasons. Eventually they'll have to stop lying. They do believe it.

So I simply don't see things as quite so grim. We haven't reached the end yet. We don't know what power we collectively possess to unleash positive change. I don't want it to be that grim, and I genuinely don't believe it is. Things may be factually and statistically dire, but I don't necessarily think the outcome will be as bleak as you paint it.

When you say things aren't that grim, do you mean the situation climate scientists describe—the carbon levels and their consequences? That's as grim as they say it is.

But you think because of our response and the fact that...

I think our response is more than what is being portrayed. Our response is manifold and varied throughout the world in all sorts of different ways, both large and small. Things are happening in response.

Yes, I think they are responding, and I think they are too. Whether they're enough, I don't know, but they are happening.

Someone in the back raised a point about being proven right or wrong in ten years time, noting that much damage has already happened to the ecology. But it's not a question of proving anything in that sense. I could spend a week quantifying the response that's been happening around the world in all sorts of ways. The situation is as grim as it is, yes. But I'm saying that we are responding. The world is responding. Not adequately enough, perhaps, but I don't think it's as grim as it's being painted.

Another question came up about people's belief or disbelief in climate change - watching someone shift from a consensus view during election periods. I'm not denying climate change; I'm simply saying that our view of what's happening doesn't have to be as grim. And yes, it doesn't take much energy to stop people believing something.

But let's consider this: if that thesis about our predicament is correct, the only way we can move forward is to look at what we can actually grow with the resources we currently have - our natural resources. If that thesis is correct, we've actually got an answer in one of the Buddha's teachings that shows how we can reframe this situation.

His famous teaching to Angulimala. Can you recall it? Angulimala had killed ninety-nine people when he encountered the Buddha. He started running after the Buddha, but the Buddha was simply walking. However hard Angulimala ran, he couldn't catch up - the Buddha just walked. Finally Angulimala called out, "You stop too!" And the Buddha replied, "I have stopped. You stop too." Through this, Angulimala gained insight.

If we reframe that teaching into a wider context, if Buddhists are going to adopt this perspective, we could say simply: "You stop."

Speaking of reframing, what Buddhism says about śūnyatā, emptiness, is understood and presented in different ways across Buddhist traditions. Nāgārjuna, for example, understands it as shorthand for the absence of being, the absence of svabhāva or self-being in things. It's a way to deny that things have any inherent self-existence.

But can we understand śūnyatā, this emptiness, more dynamically? Could it be another way to understand that fundamental creative principle we've been discussing?

Is that the fundamental principle of... Is that the emptiness that's always taking form, taking new forms, transforming? Not taking new form out of nothing. It's dependent on the previous evolutionary possibilities that are available there. But it's not bound. It's always creative. It's always taking new form.

Looking at the time and the fact that we're limited now, the question I'd like to leave you with is this: going back to your point about mind bound and unbound, this fundamental creative principle that Dobzhansky talks about and the nature of our own minds—as in the Diamond Sutra, "let your mind arise without fixing it anywhere," because your mind in and of itself has no qualities, it can take any form—is it the same thing? Is that the creative principle?

Is it the same creative principle that existed at the time of the Big Bang and the kind of transformations that took place with the Big Bang, and then all the evolutionary developments I was talking about? Is that the same creative principle that is the very nature of our own minds?

CHAPTER 277

Climate Change, Capitalism, and Buddhadharma

Rob Burbea · 57 min

> *In this compelling dharma talk, Rob Burbea draws profound connections between ancient Buddhist wisdom and our contemporary climate emergency. He explores the Buddha's teaching on mamatta (mine-ness) and the illusion of ownership, referencing the Aggañña Sutta (DN 27) - the Buddha's creation story that traces human suffering back to the establishment of private property. Burbea examines how the fundamental Buddhist understanding of anattā (not-self) naturally extends to questioning our attachment to ownership and possession.*
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> *The talk weaves together insights from early Buddhist texts with urgent contemporary issues, including the UN climate conferences, corporate influence on environmental policy, and the growing wealth inequality between nations. Burbea demonstrates how the Buddha's vision of the Saṅgha as a community without private property offers a radical alternative to current economic systems that prioritize profit over planetary wellbeing.*
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> *This dharma talk challenges practitioners to consider how Buddhist principles of interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda) and compassion for all beings can inform our response to the climate crisis. Burbea encourages engaged Buddhist practice that moves beyond individual liberation to collective action for the welfare of all life on Earth.*

Good evening. I am so glad to have a chance to be with you tonight. It's been quite a while since I've been here, and it's always a treat. I feel honored and glad to be in your presence.

I want to start by thinking about the title I've given tonight's talk, which describes what I'm prepared to discuss: Climate Change, Capitalism, and the Buddha Dharma. So you're forewarned.

Right as we sit here, there has been an epochal event happening all week in Warsaw—the 19th Conference of Parties on Climate Change, with 198 countries coming together to see what agreements can be reached and enforced to slow down the accelerating growth of greenhouse gas emissions. This comes right on the heels of the latest report from the UN's IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shows the increasingly serious situation we're in. The dates are getting closer by which it will be

out of control, and we'll be lucky if we can keep emissions to not much over 400 parts per million and keep the temperature from exceeding 2 degrees Celsius or 3.6 Fahrenheit.

Today, hundreds of people walked out of the meeting. These were representatives from civil society—Oxfam, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, ActionAid, International Trade Union Confederation, 350.org—and the pictures show many young people among them. Why did they walk out? Because of the corporate presence. At the very same time, there is a big coal conference—the coal industry meeting—in Warsaw. The presence of corporations and what they're handing out to delegates is more obvious than ever before.

This may be connected to another report released today showing that the industrialized nations of the North have failed to deliver on their promise to provide 500 billion dollars each year to help developing countries reduce their emissions and adapt to climate change impacts. The whole sense of justice around who's causing climate change versus who's suffering from it is so heartbreaking and ironic. Those whose emissions continue to be generated, who are fearful and reluctant to set enforceable limits, are not suffering nearly as much as those in the global south. We've just seen, right on the eve of this meeting, what happened and continues to happen in the Philippines.

Even if these nations do deliver what they've promised for helping developing countries deal with climate change, it turns out to be only one-fifth—20 percent—of the subsidies they pay to fossil fuel companies. This reveals the grip that transnational fossil fuel companies have on the carbon-emitting nations.

There was a fascinating article in AdBusters the other day by Richard Smith titled "Sleepwalking to Extinction: Capitalism and the Destruction of Life on Earth." He points out that we can't make any real dent in emissions given the obstruction and power of oil, gas, and coal companies—with new coal plants opening every week in China. He ends with a sobering observation: "These giant corporations are wiping out life on earth in the course of a routine business day."

Looking at this political economy, I wonder what the Buddha would say about it. He didn't talk about capitalism, but he did talk about private property. Capitalism is built on the principle of private property—the principle that certain humans can own the earth for the purpose of exploiting it for profit.

I invite you to reflect on what we can find in the Buddha's teachings that speaks to this. My scholarship in Buddhism draws from the early Pali Canon, where our insight meditation practice originates. You know how important the notion of there not being a

separate permanent self is in Buddhist teachings—this is called the anatta doctrine. When you really look at it, the Buddha didn't say there wasn't a self. He simply said he wasn't sure there was one, that you couldn't find one, that he'd never seen or experienced one. Within vipassana practice itself, within insight meditation...

It is such an exquisite part of the practice itself that as you attend to what is happening in your experience, moment by moment, second by second, you see a stream of psychophysical events happening. There are thoughts and there are sensations and there are memories. But as you become more and more aware, you can slow down enough to see this stream of consciousness. Nowhere there can you seem to locate a personal self, an abiding self, the one who is experiencing it. You can see experience, but not an I or a self who is doing the experiencing. You can see the stream of these events, thoughts, feelings, but you can't see anybody sort of on the banks of the stream watching it.

So I find that as a practice, vipassana is very linked to this notion of anatta, and liberating—truly liberating. In my own practice, in my own life story, the liberation that comes from understanding that there is not a permanent self. There's not a permanent Joanna that I have to fix or improve or mortify or punish or save or enlighten, or anything. It's because it's just a stream of experience, and what I choose and what I experience shapes that. Certainly, Joanna exists, but she's changing.

The Buddha Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, are so exquisitely revealing to help us see how in that changing we can grow in our capacity to understand, in our capacity to respond to need, in our capacity for clear comprehension, in our capacity to feel loving-kindness. All of these can grow because these are factors that we can encourage in our stream of being.

But you know what? Even before the Buddha talks about there being no permanent separate self, he talks about mamata, which means "mine-ness." He says, "Watch out." Even before he says watch out for thinking you have a permanent self, he says watch out for the thought or feeling that something can be mine, that something can be yours. That notion of possession, that you can own something, he says produces great suffering and is an illusion, even more than thinking of the self.

And so when he called together his group of wonderful disciples and co-journeyers on the path, all those who gathered around him during his forty years of teaching, and he created a community—a model community that he called the Sangha—you can see that he put that notion to work because there's no private property in the Sangha. And there was equality in the Sangha. It was open to everybody. And it was self-governing.

Its decisions were to be taken in what they call in concert, in consortium—everybody sat together to make the choices, to decide where they were going to settle, to decide how they were going to keep their precepts. It was self-governance.

This has been fascinating to me over the years in my own reading of the early teachings. What I want to focus on though, I want to go back to this private property with a story that he told, which illustrates in a humorous way—because it was slightly humorous as he told it. It was a kind of tongue-in-cheek Genesis story. If you're looking for a story of how things began, how the world started in Buddhism, you'll find this. It was called the Aggañña Sutta, and it was in the Dīgha Nikāya.

And I'm going to tell it to you. I brought the scriptures here, and like many stories, it's extremely tedious to read, so I will not try to read it to you. I think that is largely because these were committed to memory. You know that these discourses of the Lord Buddha were remembered for three centuries before they were written down. And so to keep the mnemonics, to help people learn them by heart from generation to generation, there was a lot of repetition, a little bit like nursery rhymes. There's "The House That Jack Built"—you repeat, repeat, repeat in order to bring in new elements. But if you sit down for a quick read in our cultural tempo, it's challenging.

So I'm going to tell it to you. And if you want to look at it later, I have the scriptures right here so that you can see I'm not kidding.

Now, I said it was humorous, tongue in cheek, because the Buddha in his teachings said that there are certain things that you can't know and that are pointless to discuss because they're outside our experience. One is whether there's a God or not. Another is whether there's life after death, whether an enlightened arhat gets reborn. He said you can't tell that from your experience. It was very empirical. And another one—he says you can't talk seriously or debate about the beginning of things because it's not in an empirically verifiable way of understanding.

So the fact that he would begin to talk about "once upon a time there was nothing at all" and then a world came into being—you could know that he was having a twinkle in his eye.

The very reason he told this story was because there was a conversation going on between some Brahmin monks, bhikkhus in his sangha among his followers, who were from the Brahmin caste. The Brahmin caste was the most pure, highest caste in Indian society. As you know, there were the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, and then the Vaishyas and Shudras—these castes were clearly considered one superior and purer than the other.

The fact that the Buddha opened his sangha to people from all castes, even to outcaste people, even to runaway soldiers and runaway slaves, made people quite offended. Some of his followers from the Brahmin caste said, "When we go back to our families and hear what's said about us, people are reviling us and casting dirt and dust upon us and saying terrible things about us because we have joined your sangha which allows people in that are from menial backgrounds—dark-skinned people too, because the Brahmins have paler complexion—and we associate with people who are water carriers, leather workers, escaped slaves."

In Indian lore at that time, the castes were understood from the sacred texts of the Vedanta of Hinduism to have come from the different parts of the body of the great divine being, the Mahapurusha, from whom the world was made. From the head came the Brahmins, from the arms came the warrior class, the Kshatriyas, from the loins came the tradespeople, from the feet came the workers of the soil. This was like our notion of divine right—an organization of society that was divinely and permanently put in place from the beginning of time.

Well, Gautama the Buddha didn't buy into this. There were many things about the Vedantic Hinduism of his time that he didn't accept. And so when they said, "But they tell us that the Brahmins came from the head," he replied, "You want to know about the beginning of things? I'll tell you a story about the beginning of things."

The people who knew him and his teachings well knew that he was joking because he had made it clear that you can't know the beginning of things.

Now, having taken too long telling you that, I will proceed to tell you the story.

At the beginning of things, he said, all was just dark and undifferentiated. All the beings were luminous and floating around, weightless and indistinguishable, totally the same one to the other. They were little bits of light wafting about over a dark and undifferentiated expanse.

Then, gradually, a kind of scum appeared on the waters below them—like a skin coming over milk as you heat it. The beings got curious about it. They looked at this substance, and it began to glow a little bit. They reached down and tasted it. It was delicious. "Oh," they said, "what a wonderful savor it has"—like honey.

It was so good that more and more of them began to taste it. The more they took of it, the more they wanted it. As they ate more of it, things began to differentiate. The surface below them began to be more earth-like and solid. They began to look more differentiated themselves. They began to lose their luminosity as heavenly objects appeared—a moon and sun and stars.

The more they ate, the more they began to look different from each other. Then they began to notice each other and compare: "She looks better than her. I look better than her." Discrimination arose from this comparing.

That reminds me of my friend Wes Nisker, who told me something that helped me so much. He said, "On the way to becoming a Buddha, according to the scriptures, one of the last imperfections that clings to the end is comparing mind—the temptation to make comparisons, which always can get you into trouble, especially when it's reflecting on yourself."

Well, as this comparing arose, the delicious substance they were eating disappeared. They bemoaned it: "Oh, the savor of it! Oh, wasn't it delicious? But where did it go?" All of this is in the sutta, if you think I'm making this up.

It's all there in the text—how they would cry out, "Ah, the savor of it!"

And so then something else appeared. As the land grew more solid, mushroom-like growths sprouted from it. These intrigued the beings, who were all looking quite different now, and they began eating these mushrooms. They were so good—just out of this world delicious. And so they continued eating, and then...

As they did, they became so differentiated. Some were quite gorgeous, some were rather homely. They had grown so different that there were males and females. When that happened—whoa! Lust arose, you know, and you know what early Buddhism thinks about that.

So pretty soon, those delicious mushrooms went away. What came after that were vines and creepers. The land was getting solid now, so green things were growing. But they were equally delicious when the beings ate of them. The beings were getting heavier with all this eating, walking around, and as they became all the more discriminating of each other—passing judgments on each other, forming cliques and developing clubbiness among themselves—when that happened, all those vines and creeping greenery went right away.

But now in its place, after a while, rice grew. Now you have real land, real soil, and delicious rice growing. This rice grew without any husk or chaff, so you didn't have to work to eat it. What you harvested grew right back again—what you took in the morning would grow right up again by afternoon and evening. So it was all you wanted, forever and ever.

You'd think that would be a pretty perfect situation. But then what happened was that one being—they said a rather lazy one—thought, "Oh, you know, I don't want to have to get up and go out to gather rice for every meal. Why don't I just take enough for two meals—my breakfast and my supper? I'll just take it all at once, and then I won't have to get up again to gather rice for supper."

And so that idea began to spread. Others thought, "Well, that's clever," and they began to harvest rice for two days at a time, then more and more people for four days at a time.

When that happened—when hoarding began—the whole situation changed. The rice didn't grow back. It stood as stubble. They had to wait and grow it themselves by the sweat of their brow. They had to winnow it, and it had husks that they had to remove. This meant there was scarcity.

So at this point, something very determinative happened. They said, "Well, I may not have enough, so I am going to build a wall. I'm going to fence this off. This is mine." And people began to build fences and walls to delineate their property.

When they did that, the next step followed—and the Buddha laid it out clearly. One person went over the wall and took some of his neighbor's rice. When he was told not to do that, he said, "I didn't do it. It wasn't me, it was him." And when they told both of them, "Don't do it again," they went over anyway.

So finally, thieving arose, lying arose, scolding arose, admonishments arose, and then violence—beating people up so they wouldn't take rice from the neighboring plot. And this, said the Buddha,

all arose because they thought they could own their plot. It came with private property—theft, violence, lying, stealing, admonishment, and scolding.

So then the beings gathered and said, "We need to elect one among us to give punishment when needed and admonishment when needed to keep order." They chose someone they called the maha samatha—the great elected one. Everyone could vote, and this person would maintain order. In this way, the Buddha explained, organized society came into being.

He proceeded to show how this led to a division of labor that characterized what came to be called castes. But he emphasized that caste did not arise from divine decree or from some great sacred body. It emerged from the activity between people according to the dharma of paticcasamuppada—dependent co-arising, the central teaching of interdependence that lies at the heart of Buddha's doctrine.

What captivated my attention when I first read this forty years ago, and strikes me powerfully now as I share it with you, is this question: what spiritual teacher has actually traced human social suffering back to private property in this way?

I tell you this because we find ourselves in a desperate situation—all life on earth hangs in the balance. Those reading the latest IPCC reports from the UN, the most recent scientific assessments, are genuinely terrified. The outlook appears very bleak. If we cannot forge enforceable agreements, this effort will fail just as Copenhagen did, just as Doha did last year. But now we're failing at a point where we may be hitting the skids.

The young people and civil society representatives who walked out of the great stadium in Warsaw today, where the climate talks are meeting—their departure speaks volumes. When we try to stop the greenhouse gas emissions belching forth in such accelerating quantities, with fossil fuel companies still clinging to their subsidies and their private holdings, we face a profound challenge.

As Richard Smith writes in his powerful piece on Common Dreams, we are being asked to face our mortality as a species. We're asked to confront the demise of our brother and sister species, and of our planet as a home for conscious life. And we're asked to examine our habits of thinking we can own things—it comes right back to that fundamental delusion.

If we think this is too basic, too much to ask of us, perhaps we're at a time when there's simply too much at stake. There's growing conversation about gift economy, wonderful creative thinking around sacred economics. At the urban farm where I spend much of my time in East Oakland, teaching and offering workshops, they operate largely on gift economy principles. People are beginning to see that we can reinvent what it means to relate to each other as human beings.

May we have the moral imagination and love for life to begin to reinvent together.

My chime just rang, indicating an opening for the next ten minutes for any comments you might want to make or questions.

"So what happened at the conference when people walked out?"

"What happened at the conference today when people walked out?"

We'll find out. That happened today.

"Did they call off the session or did it just keep going?"

Well, it was not the official government delegates, but what we call civil society—the non-governmental organizations, the likes of us working for the planet—that walked out. There are some pictures of it. So that'll be very interesting. But it shows how desperate, yet maybe determined and fierce people are becoming. Maybe it's time for this kind of action.

"Do you have any suggestions for how to talk to people about this overwhelming crisis without making people shut down, run away, or unfriend me on Facebook?"

I think we can assume that there's caring, because even though what's hard is that in our country—not nearly as much in Europe—the mass media carries very little about it. There was none of this in the New York Times today. When I looked through all the main features of the New York Times online, today and every day this week, there was nothing listed. Now, it might have been on a back page, but I was just looking at their main features online.

People are not going to be persuaded by an argument we make. If people think we're trying to persuade them, resistance immediately rises—this is my experience. But there are two strategies that I find create openings.

The first is to simply state how you feel: "You know, I've just been reading about what's going on, or I've been hearing about this, and I'm worried sick. How do you deal with this? These reports make me sad." That's a feeling. Nobody can contradict you. That's a fact—I'm feeling worried, I'm thinking about my grandchildren. And then that might be enough.

Or you could say, "How is it with you? How do you handle it?" With genuine curiosity. People can smell a mile away if you're trying to change them, don't you think?

"I'm wondering if you have any recommendations about local groups or organizations that we could join to do some of this work."

Well, I'd like to draw from suggestions here too. I've been very impressed by 350.org. And I know that some of the churches are getting involved—there's a whole series coming up at the Presbyterian Church in Marin. So there's more and more happening.

There's an appeal coming from Vipassana movement practitioners the world over, starting in England, asking teachers to give teachings on climate change. In response, you can go to a website like One Earth Sangha—One Earth Sangha. That's a great source of guidance.

All right, come on—what about locally? Who knows? Come on.

"Do you really not know?"

This is wonderful! You have found out you don't know. What a great place to start. Then you don't want to stay in ignorance.

So you go out and find. How about for investing? What kind of investment can you make for your retirement fund that doesn't contribute to harm? There are options that exist, though they require effort. Socially responsible investing has various organizations and investment companies focused on ethical choices. You can simply search for "socially responsible investing."

I have a nest egg, and I have people help invest it for me. I simply tell them: no nuclear, no fossil fuel, no investments that cause harm. You need to be explicit about your values. And there's divestment—joining programs to get organizations, universities, and colleges involved, working as alumni to pressure for divestment from fossil fuel companies. Students are doing this, and alumni can participate too.

I think it's important to recognize the difficulty of the international community coming to any agreement, period. When you look at the World Trade Organization and the failure of the Doha rounds, the rise of protectionism in the last decade, it's very difficult to imagine countries that couldn't even agree on farm subsidies and basic everyday issues coming to agreement about climate change. For countries producing greenhouse gases to take responsibility and for affected countries to be compensated seems nearly impossible given how the international system works. It's incredibly complicated, and it may be an illusion to expect meaningful agreements from such bodies.

The other thing to recognize is the power of multinational corporations. They are incredibly powerful—more powerful than states. I think the only way to begin having traction is to build civil society from the ground up.

One concrete suggestion is mass gathering in Washington—bringing numbers bigger than anything we've seen so far. We've got to stop the subsidies. We can sit and moan, or we can show up. This requires being ready to bring your life to a screaming halt in other respects, to prioritize this action.

There are success stories around the world in the carbon credit movement. Indigenous societies have completely rejected carbon credit deals with multinational corporations. We're seeing native indigenous communities who may not be highly educated or wealthy, but they understand what this is about. They act with incredible force against multinational corporations. There's success happening right now in the Amazon, in Lat-

in America, just from grassroots organizing by indigenous people. Of course, multinational corporations, working through the governments of those countries, are putting up a big fight. But there are success stories we can learn from.

There are efforts to counter programs like REDD, where carbon credits are used problematically. There's pressure on Governor Brown to stop using that approach in California. There's much that can be done.

I'm struck by what you're saying about grassroots action because it's really difficult. There's overwhelming evidence of climate change's devastating effects—Hurricane Sandy, the tornadoes that swept through the Midwest with incredible destruction, the devastation in the Philippines. It has to start at the grassroots level.

I imagine those families who experienced tornadoes in the Midwest, who lived through that destruction, will eventually stand up and say "this is enough." They don't have any choice but to make the connection because the devastation keeps coming, episode after episode. Maybe I'm being idealistic, but I sense some sort of uprising coming—not just in Washington D.C., but in the communities devastated by climate change effects. I don't know enough about what's happening in local communities, but I think that's where real change will happen.

We've reached our closing time, and that's a good note to end on. I've become very interested in the experience and concept of peer support in social change. This crisis is too big, too scary, too immense for the response needed to be faced alone. If I try to look at it by myself, it's far too overwhelming.

But just with one other person or a small group to sit down together and say, let's find right here in the East Bay where we see work on climate that speaks to our heart and mind. You look here, I'll look there, and then we report back together to see what seems big enough in scope that it's not just some futile effort.

So I'd like to close with remembering that the Buddha said when we go forth, we go forth together. We go forth for the welfare of all beings, for the happiness of all beings—and that includes the future ones as well. And he said you do it as a sangha.

Maybe this sangha—you decide to have a group that will meet and report back. Why not? Why not put a paper out at the table and say, who wants to meet so we can report back in two weeks after Thanksgiving with ideas of what we at this sangha can do? Even if there are two people, go ahead. But maybe there'll be more.

So now, as the time for our closing comes, let us share the merit of this. Because everything that has come up indicates our sense of belonging to this sacred living planet. Everything that we have questioned betrays our caring for life, our feelings of responsibility for it. So this has been a beautiful moment for us, and we take the merit of that and share it with all beings.

May all beings be happy.
May all beings be safe.
May all beings find ways to serve life and each other.
May all beings be free.

CHAPTER 278

For The Sake of Life on Earth, part 1

Rob Burbea · 41 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Rob Burbea weaves together Buddhist wisdom and ecological consciousness, exploring how practitioners can respond to the overwhelming challenges facing our planet. Drawing from the ancient Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Burbea shares the 12-century-old Shambhala warrior prophecy from the Kālacakra Tantra, which speaks of a dark time when "barbaric powers" possess weapons of devastation, and how spiritual warriors emerge to dismantle these threats through two essential tools: compassion (karuṇā) and insight into radical interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda).*
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> *The talk addresses the Buddhist understanding that our global crises—from nuclear weapons to environmental destruction—are "mano-maya" (mind-made) and therefore can be unmade by transformed consciousness. Burbea emphasizes that true spiritual practice requires the courage to "not be afraid of the suffering of your world," embodying the bodhisattva ideal of boundless compassion. Through personal accounts of witnessing environmental devastation in Alberta's tar sands, he demonstrates how practitioners can maintain both clear seeing of destruction and deep gratitude for the opportunity to serve.*
>
> *This teaching offers a compelling integration of traditional dharma with contemporary activism, showing how Buddhist practice naturally leads to engagement with social and ecological healing. Burbea's approach honors both the darkness of our current moment and the transformative potential within each practitioner to become agents of positive change.*

One of the amazing teachings of gratitude is that it does not depend—your experiencing it does not depend—on external circumstances. I used to think that I had to approve of the way things were set up if I was to feel thankful. That it was like counting the blessings. But what we experienced then in that singing was something deeper than that, wasn't it? It had something to do with belonging.

Belonging. It has something to do with the mystery that has called us into being that is still there at the heart of everything—that we will never, ever be separated from. So in whatever the situation, when you're faced with a seemingly overwhelming task, when you're faced with needing to repair something that's broken, gratitude can well up then too. The capacity for that is in us. It comes with life.

Last month I had an amazing week at a dismantled nuclear bomb factory. It's outside Boulder, Colorado. It's called Rocky Flats. It's where the plutonium pits were made. In every warhead in the U.S. arsenal, there's that plutonium pit or trigger that was made at Rocky Flats. There are 20,000 nuclear bombs now, many of them still targeted.

We did this work with a group of people of all ages who want to stop the Department of Energy from turning this area, which is laced with plutonium from 37 years of making the triggers with very sloppy management by Rockwell International—illegal burnings and the whole mess. You know that developing nuclear weapons and nuclear power doesn't make you the neatest person in the world.

What grew up in the work was—it's still staggering to me—the sense of gratitude of this little band of a couple dozen nuclear guardians. A huge job, because they want to stop the Department of Energy from turning it into a recreational area where children will play. And that's planned, actually, for all the weapon sites—Hanford, Savannah River—when they're dismantled, because that will show the world that it's been an okay operation.

At any rate, a huge job. And what came through that was almost intoxicating to me: the sense of, "Oh, good, we have something really big to work on." And there was a sense of summoning up of the blood and an electricity in the air, a kind of "Oh, my life has tremendous meaning. How good it is—I'm so glad I was born to be here, faced with this, with all my senses and my brain and my good friends." And that sense of linking arms and being glad for each other—it just made your heart sing.

So things don't have to be just perfect for you to feel gratitude. And I felt that when I received this week a message from one of them, a young man named Seth. He was writing to the others and said, "Dear friends, dear brother, sister guardians..." He was announcing the next meeting, and there are several strands of what they're doing. But then, in a postscript, he said, "And in parting, let me say, rest and be kind to yourselves. Feel within you the great winds of time. Feel how deeply rooted you are in the earth. Feel the immensities of the seas that are within you and outside you."

And he said, "Whether we go forth to perish or to flourish, we are inextricably intertwined in the living body of earth."

That just blew me away. And it wasn't saying, "Oh, woe is us, faced with this terrible... we're the worst people who ever lived, we humans, and oh, this is so terrible." Instead, he turned, being able to see fully the danger, and said, "Ah, this is our work. And we are part of this world and it's in us. Whether we perish or flourish, we go forth inextricably intertwined."

So I think of that as we move into this next station of the spiral of the Work That Reconnects, which is: feeling grounded now—grounded and gladdened with our gratitude for the gift of life—we use our capacity. We use our attention. We use our breathing lungs and beating heart. We use the rhythm of life within us. We use all that we are to see what is happening to and in our world and to our brother-sister beings.

Because our world cannot heal unless we see it. This world cannot repair itself and cannot self-heal if we pull down the shutters and close the curtains and say, "I won't think about that, it's too depressing." But strengthened by the gratitude, we even feel gratitude that we're here now. Isn't that so?

So with them, as with you, I shared the Shambhala warrior prophecy. And I'm going to share it now. Many of you have heard it from me because it's kind of my marching orders.

And it comes from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. I heard it from people who are very close to me, and my life has been greatly shaped and influenced by being part of a Tibetan refugee community in northwest India. I've been linked with it since the mid-1960s when my family and I were there in India with the American Peace Corps. I got to know them then. They had recently come into exile from Tibet, fleeing the Chinese occupation.

But it wasn't until over fifteen years later, when I was back on a visit in the early 80s, that I was visiting the community. They're partly lay people—about three hundred lay people, one hundred monks and lamas. So they were talking about this prophecy. They said, "You know, it seems to be coming true in our time, in our generation, even though it's so very ancient."

And I said, "Well, what's it about?"

And they said, "It's about a very dark time, very great danger."

Well, you see, I'm kind of apocalyptic by nature. And I said, "Oh." The Cold War had begun in earnest by then.

So I heard three different versions of it. And the one that locked in, the one that I'm going to share with you, is from my friend Dugu Chögyel Rinpoche.

Wait—just a minute. You will hear reference to the Shambhala warrior. And you will know, you will recognize, that this is a metaphor for the bodhisattva, the hero in the Buddhist tradition. The one with the boundless heart.

All right, so these are pretty much his words:

"There comes a time—and we are living in this time—when great powers have arisen, barbaric powers. And although they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common. Among the things they have in common are weapons of unfathomable devastation and death, and technologies that lay waste the world. And it is just at this moment, when all life hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.

"Now you can't go there because it's not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors. And actually, you can't tell a Shambhala warrior by looking at her or him because they don't wear any uniforms, no insignia. They have no banners that they wave to identify whose side they're on. They have no barricades on which to climb to threaten the enemy, or behind which they can rest and regroup. Always they have only the terrain of the barbaric powers to move across.

"Now is the time," Chögyel Rinpoche said, "when great courage is required of the Shambhala warriors—moral courage and physical courage—because they are going to go into the centers of power of the barbaric powers to dismantle their weapons."

They're going to dismantle weapons in every sense of the word. They're going to go where the armaments are manufactured and deployed. They're going to go into the halls of power where the decisions are made.

And then he said, "Joanna, mark this. The Shambhala warriors know that these weapons can be dismantled. Why? Because they are mano-maya. That means mind-made. They are made by the human mind, so they can be unmade by the human mind."

Because the dangers that are facing us now are not brought upon us by some satanic extraterrestrial force, or some evil deity, or even some inexorable, inalterable, predestined fate. They arise from our choices. They arise from our relationships. They arise from our habits of mind and body and action. They are made by the human mind—they can be unmade by the human mind.

So he said, "Now is the time when the Shambhala warriors go into training."

You can imagine. How do they train? And he held up his hands...

the lamas in his community hold their ritual objects in the great lama dances of his people. And he said, "They train in the use of two weapons." That's actually the word he used—two weapons. And then I said, "What are they?" And he held up his hands. "One is compassion and the other is insight into the radical interdependence of all phenomena. And you need both," he said. "One is not enough."

You need the compassion because that provides the fuel, the motive force to get you out where you need to go to do what you need to do. And what it boils down to is this: to not be afraid of the suffering of your world. And when you're not afraid of the suffering of the world, then nothing can stop you. You can go where you need to go to do what you need to do.

He said, "By itself, it gets very hot. It can burn you out. So you need the other weapon, the other tool." And with that insight, understanding, wisdom into the inter-existence of all things, the radical, inextricable—just as Seth said in his little email this week—inextricably intertwined nature of all things, then you know that this is not a battle between the good guys and the bad guys. It's not about that. Because the line between good and evil goes through the landscape of every human heart.

And when you have that tool, that insight, you know that we are so interwoven in the web of life that even the smallest act with clear intention has repercussions through that web that you can barely begin to see, let alone measure. It makes all the difference. But he said, "By itself, that's a little abstract, a little cool. So you need the heat of compassion." And as he said that, I was thinking, oh, that's what I've been seeing. The monks with their flowing gesture, hand gestures, the mudras, as they chant. There, likely, is the dancing interplay between compassion and insight.

Well, that was it. That was the prophecy. I was so excited. I went racing down to the edge of the community where my family happened to be visiting at that time too. And it was the end of the afternoon and I burst in and I said, "Oh, you will never—you can't guess what I just heard from Juja Rinpoche." And I proceeded to tell my family the prophecy. And my son Jack was with us. And he listened and he said, "Well, didn't he tell you how it's going to turn out?"

That is so good that you laugh. And I did too, and I said, "Oh, if he had tried to tell me how it's going to turn out, I wouldn't have believed anything." So don't you believe people who tell you how it's going to turn out. It's the fact that we don't know—that is our awakening in this time. We can't wake up if we have it handed to us. No, it's too late, it's over, don't bother. Or it's a sure thing. No, no, it's that not knowing that calls us to be and understand what we need to be and understand at this time.

So I tell that now because as we address our pain for the world, as we address the woundedness we see around us, as we address the dishonored ocean—as the poet Denise Levertov talks about it, and boy is it dishonored now—as we look at the clear cuts, as we look at the homeless in the streets, as we hear of the fantastic hungers in the Horn of Africa, as we look at the hungers and statistics in our own country, as we look at the layer of smog over our cities, as we hear about the spasms of extinction of spe-

cies, as we look at more and more foreclosures of homes and people falling through the safety net in a greed-devoured society, as we watch a climate system spiraling out in ever more fearsome oscillations of heat and flood...

As we allow ourselves to remember every minute of every day of these days, the war-making, the trillions that we're spending destroying the lands and the people in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan with our drones. Oh, it's enough to break your heart. And your heart is breaking.

But then the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe. It's beautiful. We discover the mystery and the wonder of our being able to suffer with our world, with our friends who are sick, with our friends who are jobless, with our own experiences of failure and fear. Oh, this is a dark time. And this is the time you have. In a way, perhaps you even chose it. Perhaps we asked for it.

But would you want this to happen to Earth and you not be on hand? Would you?

My grandfather did that once in a while. He'd yell. He was a preacher, and he would thump on the pulpit. But the thing is, he thumped not to tell people they were bad, but to tell people how much God loved them. "God loved you so much!" I certainly hope some of you are going to raise your voice. There's quite a bit to raise our voice about.

My sweet sister here and I were getting pretty hot under the collar about some of the devastation happening, and we couldn't think of anything worse than what was happening in Canada in the tar sands. So something possessed us to just decide to go up there and see it with our own eyes. We set up some gigs, took the money from our performance, and hired a plane. I kid you not. A little plane with five seats. Joanna was in the front with the pilot. And the stink. I was a little airsick—I didn't throw up, but that was my other great preoccupation: how horrible this was and whether I could keep my breakfast down.

"Well, you know, Joanna had come up to me when we were working up at Holy Names University a couple of years ago and said, 'I want to go to the tar sands.' And I knew immediately what that was because I'm from Alberta. How many of you have heard of the tar sands?"

The response showed many raised hands.

"It's really Canada's dirty secret. Being Canadian, we're very proud of the way we've managed the natural world—big extensive parklands. This really doesn't fit with the Canadian persona, this idea that one of probably the worst environmental disasters on the planet is happening in the northlands of Alberta and now moving east to Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

"Essentially, they're trying to get the last bits of oil from the earth. It's not like there's oil being drilled for. They have to use massive amounts of chemicals and remove entire ancient, pristine forests—hundreds and hundreds of acres completely demolished and removed from the surface of the land so they can go underneath and, through chemicals, leach out this tarry substance and then process it into something that gets shipped to the United States and turned into oil. It costs an enormous amount of water and energy to get the tar out of the ground.

"The land alone—when Joanna and I went up in that plane, I had some ideas. I'd seen pictures in National Geographic. We both had. But we flew for an hour in one direction and did not come to the end of it. It is simply—you look down and all you see is pools of toxic waste. They're called tailing ponds. And it's right adjacent to the great Athabasca River, so the river is being completely destroyed. There are all these native communities living downstream, and they're suffering hugely from the repercussions. There's a lot of denial about it in Canada and Alberta and around the world.

"To go with Joanna—when she asked me, I thought there's no person I'd rather go with to do something like that. It was absolutely profound and distressing to see. I've created a song about it and really sing it everywhere I go because it seems like such an important thing to be talking about."

One thing that amazed us was our constant state of complete distress and hysterical laughter because the situation was so absurd. It was like we were in a bardo of the absurd. In Fort McMurray—known locally as "Fort McMoney" because of all the wealth being generated from this destruction—corporations like Suncor from the United States and Europe have erected massive billboards proclaiming messages like "Suncor: Leaving the Land Better Than We Found It." They promote this fantasy that they'll plant trees and rebuild the landscape, while you're standing there looking at the devastation thinking, "What parallel universe are we in?"

I remember driving along those enormous lakes filled with toxic effluent—the lethal chemicals pumped from the extraction process that they simply don't know where else to put. Sometimes these waste ponds are contained by nothing more than earthen dams. This area sits directly on the flyway of ducks, geese, and other migratory birds. If

they touch down on these poisonous waters, they can't get up again. The companies have tried various solutions—cannons to scare away the birds—but nothing works effectively.

The complexity of the situation became clear when we held events in Edmonton and Calgary and met people who actually worked in the tar sands. There are many jobs to be had. I remember during one event, a worker raised his hand to share his story. Many workers there are heavily drugged—crack is a massive problem because working in what can only be described as a hell zone, going in for days at a time, is unbearable without chemical escape.

The social infrastructure of the entire region has been destroyed. This isn't simply a matter of environmentalism versus a pristine economy—it's the complete unraveling of community life. There's no affordable housing because prices have skyrocketed. People who have lived there for generations can no longer afford to stay. Meanwhile, young men with suddenly massive incomes have no culture, nothing meaningful to do with their time or money. Prostitution, drug addiction, and crime rates have exploded through the roof.

This is the whole complex of interdependence made devastatingly clear.

The last thing I'll share before singing is a moment of profound recognition. We had rented a car to drive around, and I remember stopping to fill up with gas after our flyover. Standing at that pump, having just witnessed the source of that fuel, I felt the complete interconnection of cause and effect with piercing clarity. It was the most poignant moment of my life in terms of understanding how we're all part of this system and how the solution must come through all of us.

The area is so vast it can be seen from outer space. Most of this extracted tar is destined for the United States. So breathe with this. Breathe it through your heart.

Thank you, and thank each other.

I want to call your attention to something I feel strongly about, so I'm going to stand up. Please observe and notice how far the concerns you've just shared extend beyond your personal ego. Notice how what you've been experiencing and expressing reaches far beyond your individual needs and wants. Just notice this, because it reveals something vital about who and what you are.

It shows that you are capable of suffering with your world. To suffer with—this is the literal meaning of compassion. You are compassionate beings.

This recognition is crucial in modern American culture, which tends to reduce people's distress over social and ecological conditions to personal pathology. Again and again, this suffering is interpreted through the lens of individual biography—some hypersensitivity, childhood trauma, hormonal fluctuations, or other personal failing. As James Hillman pointed out in "100 Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse," this reductionism serves to silence people.

While I owe a personal debt to psychotherapy, it's essential not to fall into this cultural trap. This is precisely how people get silenced. So recognize this truth: it takes courage to suffer with our world.

It takes courage not to be afraid of the suffering of the world. You're evincing a strength. And you are actually—that's the definition, is it not, of the bodhisattva, the one of the boundless heart. Hi, bodhisattvas.

So I would like to close this morning with a poem, and then we'll have some announcements from Sean before we go to lunch. This is a poem that has meant a great deal to me. It honors the great pain that we're in and the darkness that we're in, and also how it can transform us and take us into our true nature and our identity as life on earth.

So it's from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*—it's the last one:

Quiet friend who has come so far, feel how your breathing makes more space around you. Let this darkness be a bell tower and you the bell. And as you ring, what batters you becomes your strength.

Move back and forth into the change. What's it like, this intensity of pain? If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night, be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses, the meaning discovered there. And if the world has ceased to hear you, say to the silent earth: I flow. To the rushing water speak: I am.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 279

For the Sake of Life on Earth, Part 2

Rob Burbea · 42 min

> *In this powerful dharma talk, Rob Burbea continues his exploration of "the work that reconnects," guiding practitioners through a transformative spiral journey from gratitude through honoring pain for the world, to seeing with new eyes, and finally going forth with renewed purpose. Drawing on the Buddha's core teaching of radical interdependence—the insight that we are not separate beings but are "made of relationships"—Burbea demonstrates how this fundamental Buddhist understanding offers profound medicine for our ecological crisis.*
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> *Burbea weaves together indigenous wisdom, poetry by Rilke, and Buddhist teachings to show how our pain for the world is actually "the boundless heart of the bodhisattva" and proof of our interconnection. He guides participants through a sensory awareness practice outdoors, helping them experience their belonging to the "sacred living earth" as their larger body. The talk culminates with a call to embody our deepest longings for healing the world, challenging the comfortable "middle way" with the Buddha's truly radical teachings.*
>
> *This teaching offers practical guidance for environmental dharma practice, showing how Buddhist insights into non-self and interdependence provide both spiritual foundation and urgent motivation for engaged action in our time of ecological crisis.*

I also would like to announce that I'll be available during the break this mid-afternoon—I'd be happy to sign books. At the end of the afternoon, I have to scoot out of here very fast to go to a birthday party. Good reason, isn't that a good reason?

So, my friends, we are coming around the spiral. We started in the East this morning, being grounded in gratitude. It's our birthright to be alive. Then we move into honoring our pain for the world. That part of it is absolutely essential. It's like the hinge of the work that reconnects.

We have to just know in our bodies that we won't be broken by the fear or grief that we carry for the world, that this is the most natural thing in the world. It's like we are a living cell inside the living body of earth. And if that larger body is being traumatized, it is only healthy and right for us to feel that too. Otherwise we're disconnected. So if you want to reconnect, if you want to make a difference in this world—and that is what your deepest desire is, isn't that so?

Having been honoring—and you could stay there all week, you realize that. My goodness, we have all sorts of ways we can cry and thump and scream and beat our chest, all kinds of things. But the main thing in this honoring our pain for the world is to simply not be afraid of it.

And you can never fully cathart it. You can't purge it out by all kinds of cathartic processes because then the very next minute there's something else that you're seeing, beholding, experiencing in our world. So you're never finished with the pain for the world. You're going to feel more tomorrow. But you won't be afraid of it. And you'll learn how to see what it really is, how it really is the boundless heart of the bodhisattva, how it really is a gift of this extended awareness.

And pretty soon you see that this, whether you're experiencing it as sorrow or as dread or as outrage—that's a big one for me—anger, confusion, doubt, etc., that these are not reducible to the self-interest of the little ego. They are grounded in your connectedness with the world.

So think of it as a two-sided coin: your pain for the world, whatever flavor it's coming in for you—despair or rage or sorrow—is simply one side of the coin, and the other side of the coin is your love for the world. And if you try to anesthetize yourself against one, the other gets numbed out too. Isn't that so?

Just don't try to carry it all by yourself. Because what's going on now is, I like the phrase of a teacher of mine, David Corton, great economist, he calls it the great unraveling. It's the unraveling under the pressure of the industrial growth society, which is constructed—it has to grow. That means it has to keep extracting resources out of the body of earth, turning them into goods, weapons, and waste, and then dumping them out on the earth.

It's been a good twenty years that we have known that we're taking the resources out of the earth faster than they can be renewed. And maybe we didn't get it in our minds, but we got it in our psyches. We got it in our sense of things. And that we are at the other end—and it's a pretty short little passage because of the built-in obsolescence. So we dump, and we are dumping things into the earth faster than they can be absorbed. And that's becoming clear to us. That both the source and the sink, we've gone far beyond already.

But we continue to treat the earth as a supply house and a sewer. And as long as we do hold that thought in our mind, we can do all the activism and all the organizing and it won't make any difference.

We have to change our view of the larger body of which we are a part. First of all, to see it as our larger body. And that this is not a supply house and a sewer. This is the sacred living earth—mother, father, lover. This is our larger body, and every society and every tradition worth its salt has always steered itself by prayers and thanksgiving and tending and stories that breed that understanding in us.

You're alive now at a wonderful time when you are going to be participating in our culture's getting back to that absolutely life-saving apprehension of what we are.

So guess what? We've come to the part in this spiral, which we call seeing with new eyes, where we enjoy training and experiencing the ways we can embody this understanding. And it takes some deconditioning. It's not enough for any of us to go to a lecture—whether it's Deepak Chopra or Fritjof Capra—and for them to say, "This is a living earth." You have to practice it. You have to know it. And that actually is not onerous. It's a joy, a continual joy. We're coming home.

So we're going to be going outside for a little deconditioning work. First I've got a couple of poems. I'm giving you poems because the song we had planned is waiting for somebody I'm dying to meet to come and sing with Jennifer. But we're cool. We're totally relaxed.

I remember the day in the 1950s when I was standing on a snowy day in a bookstore near the university. I saw this little cloth-bound book, *Das Stundenbuch*, the book of hours by Rainer Maria Rilke, and I opened it and saw the second poem.

Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen, die sich über die Dingen ziehen. Vielleicht werde ich letzten nicht vollbringen, aber versuchen werde ich ihn. Ich kreise um Gott, um den uralten Turm, und ich kreise Jahrtausende lang. Und ich weiß noch nicht, bin ich ein Falke? Ein Sturmer? Oder ein großer Gesang.

I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world. I may not complete this last one, but I give myself to it. I've been circling around God, around the great mystery, the primordial tower for thousands of years. And I still don't know: Am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?

Well, that just took the top right off my head. And all of a sudden I saw that I was not a spiritual failure. That the many connections I'd felt, the many voices I'd heard, the many teachings I'd received, the many times I'd flown with the birds—all of that was really important for this little Protestant girl.

It is our opportunity now in this hyper-individualized society—this hyper-individualism that serves late capitalism very well—to recognize that we consider ourselves to be separate, and that all we can be sure about is "this is me inside this bag of skin and I better take care of number one." I've got to make sure she's got enough of what she needs. I've got to push away what threatens. Maybe I better improve her, make her look pretty, and so on.

It is this concern with defending or improving or enhancing the separate self that is really a strong driving engine in the capitalist economy. It breeds dissatisfaction because you're never enough.

you can never satisfy that self. Because, as the Buddha pointed out, you can't satisfy something that doesn't really exist.

So we come then in this part of the spiral to the second weapon or tool of the Shambhala warrior—that insight into the radical interdependence of all things. This was the core teaching of Gautama the Buddha. And they say it was the core teaching of all the Buddhas because when people, as centuries passed, found that the Buddha's teachings and practices were so wonderful and so useful and so helpful, that they must have been part of the fabric of reality even before Gautama Siddhartha. And so they imagined that there were other Buddhas that appeared at other times. Why not? And this was something—this was the key teaching of all of them.

That we are not separate. That we are made of relationships. That we change from moment to moment because of that. That we grow strong through our regard and connections with others and with the web of life. Learning to see the world as exquisitely precious, like one's only child, like one's dearest partner and lover, like one's mother—like one's larger self.

And every spiritual tradition has wrestled with this question of what do you do with this first person singular? What do you do with this I? Always talking, always wanting, always insisting. What do you do? You can mortify it. You can punish it. You can work to improve it. You can sacrifice it. So in all the different spiritual currents and streams and rivers of spirituality there were these different ways of imagining how you could tame or get on top of or kill this sense of the separate ego, this self-interest and this pride.

But what's distinctive—what just blew me away about the Buddha's teaching—is he didn't say mortify it, sacrifice it, improve it, make it noble, make it gorgeous. He just said, see through it. It's just a convention. It doesn't really exist as a self-existent permanent being. So see through it, and then see what you're really, really a part of. And that you don't have to knock yourself out or make applications or submit your cur-

riculum vitae: "I want to belong to Earth. Let's see, what do I deserve to do that? Well, let's see, I was a Girl Scout," or whatever. But that belonging comes with you—it is most deeply what you are.

Well, that saves us a lot of worry.

Let me read you a teaching by an Australian Aboriginal, because as Jennifer said, the Native peoples are so wise in indigenous people's wisdom on our relationship to our world. And I'll read you some lines by Big Bill Neji. He has recently died. He was an Aboriginal from the Kakadu area in northern Australia. And you may think it's written in his speech—I'm not making it up.

"Well, I'll tell you about this story, about a story where you feel laying down. Tree, grass, star. Because star and tree working with you. We got blood pressure, but same thing. You're working with you. Even nice windy blow, having a sleep because that spirit is with you.

Listen carefully to this because you can hear me. I'm telling you, Earth, just like mother or father or brother of you, that tree, same thing. Your body, my body, I suppose, I'm same as you, anyone, tree working while you're sleeping and dream.

This story, he can listen carefully. He can listen slow. If you're in city, well, I suppose lots of houses, you can't hardly look this star. But maybe be one night you look. Have a look, star, because that's the feeling. String, blood, through your body. That star, he working there, see?"

He's working there. I can see him. Some of them are so small you can hardly see them. Always at night, if you lie down and look carefully, he's working, you see? When you sleep, your blood is pumping. I love this tree because he loves me too. He's watching me, same as you. Tree, he's working with your body, my body. He's working with us. While you sleep, he's working. In daylight, when you're walking around, he's working too.

That tree, that grass—they're all like our father. This dirt, this earth—I sleep with this earth. Grass is just like your brother. In my blood, in my arm, this grass, this dirt exists for us because we'll be dead. We'll be going to this earth. This is the story now. This is the story now. This is the story now and always.

We are not separate from our world. We are birthed from our world. As that young man at Rocky Flats said—we are utterly... Oh, that was the line I couldn't remember. He said, "My brothers, we go forth to flourish or perish because we are utterly of this world and the world is utterly of us."

So we're going to go out and listen to our world. We're going to go out in pairs. Listen and feel and look, smell. You're going to go out two by two. Outside, you can put on your shoes or go barefoot, but we're going to be outside the whole time. Put on your shoes—I don't want you to be worried about what rattlesnakes you're going to step on.

The shorter one will close their eyes first. Once you're outside, you will have a period of ten minutes when you will be the guide or the guided one. The guided one keeps their eyes closed, and this is done in silence. Then we walk.

When you close the dominant sense, you know what happens. The sound, the smell, the texture, the air on your face—everything else kicks in. You feel like you're a virgin to this world, that you're just going out and feeling it as if for the first time. As the guide, I'll be sure that you're safe and guide you to a place where you can maybe touch something. I might put your hand there—oh, that's a living object. Or the trunk of a tree. Or the grass on the ground.

I might pick up something—there might be a dead leaf there and I might have you hear it crinkle. I might have you smell it. So it becomes a feast of the senses where you're experiencing your adherence in the living body of earth.

Every once in a while, maybe five or six times in your span of ten minutes of guiding, you will place your guided one in front of something that you'd like them to see and then say, "Open your eyes and look in the mirror, and you see yourself." That's what all the poets and mystics say—that you can learn to move in the world as if it were yourself, your larger body, as it is indeed. You're always home.

So once you get out there, I'll ring the bell. You can start right away, obviously, but I'll ring the bell after ten minutes or so, and what you do then is change roles.

We come now to the last station on the spiral of the work that reconnects. Having grounded and centered and opened ourselves in gratitude for life, for the chance to be alive in this amazing world—with being breathed by life, with senses that can apprehend and receive messages, able to listen, to see, to hear, to communicate, to touch, to plot and plan, to be alive—praise be. Hallelujah.

And then with that fullness inside us, we know that we're not just some living abstraction, but we're in a flesh and blood world where things are being torn and bruised and unraveled, where great things are being invented and created—art and music and new perceptions and new thoughts—and great unraveling at the same time. This is the world that we have chosen, or that has chosen us. We're here.

And so we are not going to be afraid of the suffering that comes along with that. We practice that too. We saw that the suffering reminds us—it's proof positive, each time we remember to think it, remember to see it that way—that we are connected. We are bodhisattvas. We are Shambhala warriors. Threads in a tapestry of life.

And life calls to us, always surprising. A year ago, Jennifer didn't know that she'd fall in love with the Yukon River and the Yukon River would love her back and give her this song. New stuff arising all the time.

So we see with new eyes. We throw open the windows and doors of our being. And there's so much to feed that in this time—the ancient currents of indigenous teachings, the science of our time. Systems theory has been particularly powerful for me. And oh, the Buddha Dharma.

So now we come to the going forth, and we allow some glee and appetite to arise in us. Wait till we get out there. Oh, what we're going to do.

We've got to remember certain things. Some of the good remembering comes in a poem I love—a good going forth poem, of course, from the Book of Hours. The poet imagines that God is talking, which is interesting because Rilke was not much of a theist. He was kind of turned off on Christianity. But the fact that he didn't like the theology to which he was subjected as a child—he didn't let that in any way close him off to the mystery and the beauty at the heart of life.

You must nourish that surprise you feel every morning as you wake up and look at the world as if you're looking into your lover's face.

Here's the poem. God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear:

"You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me.

"Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

"Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness.

"Give me your hand."

Let me share that again. "You, sent out beyond your recall." It's too late now. You're already on stage. You can't go back. You're here, here, here. You are of this world utterly. Too late to check out.

"You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand."

So remember that. Just keep going. You don't need to approve of everything that's happening. Just don't stop.

This was sent to me yesterday—a newspaper from a farmer's market co-op in Santa Barbara. An interviewer once suggested to César Chávez that he might be a fanatic. "I am," he responded. "Those are the only ones who get anything done."

The writer, who appears to be a teacher at UC Santa Barbara, continues: "I often recall this exchange when I hear talk of walking the middle road or the middle way for the sake of our suffering planet. It's as if the bold and tenacious approach is by nature too radical, misguidedly fanatic."

"Now it seems to me that we preach the middle way to let ourselves off the hook. We don't care to do the work of disenthralling ourselves from assumptions, of examining the worthiness of our jobs, of going with a lot less, of changing our day-to-day habits, of cheerfully tolerating a little discomfort. No, we don't want to do that. So we glibly invoke the middle path, good and proud of our own reasonableness. And we continue to live more or less like we always have and sleep at night, relatively untroubled. Meanwhile, the world of nature literally dissolves—dissolving, as they say, offstage, out of sight, almost as a rumor."

But whoever told us that the changes that are needed are supposed to be middling? If that sounds like an echo of the Buddha's middle way, it should be remembered that the Buddha's middle is modernity's extreme. After all, here was a man, and God bless him for it, who exhorted followers to cease travel during rainy season to avoid stepping on surfacing worms.

As many reading these words already know—and he probably would be amazed to know that I am reading it to such a distinguished collection of people—changing for the sake of our world is often difficult. It is anathema to the wallet and to the status quo. But as the many who are struggling to make these changes will surely attest, there is satisfaction in such sea changing and pleasure too: the satisfaction of entering through the narrow gate, the pleasure that can abound in the single gourd life.

"Angels began shining," Rumi sings, "when they achieved discipline." Get a load of that! You rarely hear the words angel and discipline in the same sentence, but let's put them there. Each one of us could use some discipline. That's how open systems self-organize—through constraints. Angels began shining when they achieved discipline.

"Life was hard," a Navajo elder once said, "but we lived it gloriously." Sacrifice, Gandhi teaches, is making sacred.

The aim of this is to summon up the blood and make you ready for extreme actions—to be ready to take your desires for the self-healing of our world seriously. Be ready to take your dreams for a just, sustainable society seriously. We can do it. Why do we want to settle for anything less? Do we dare to take our dreams and wishes seriously? It's hard to do without others, hard to do alone without linking arms with some others in your neighborhood, in your town, in your life.

CHAPTER 280

Mindfulness and Climate Action

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this powerful dharma conversation, three distinguished teachers - Tara Brach, Ruth King, and Jack Kornfield - explore how Buddhist practice can inform our response to climate change. The discussion begins with recognizing our fundamental interconnection and the ways that the illusion of separation fuels both environmental destruction and social injustice. Tara Brach draws on the Parsifal legend to illustrate how presence and genuine care can awaken us from the 'trance' of disconnection from the earth. Ruth King emphasizes the systemic patterns of exploitation affecting both marginalized communities and the planet, connecting climate justice with racial and social justice. Jack Kornfield offers the bodhisattva vision as a framework for sustained engagement, sharing inspiring examples of long-term commitment to healing. The teachers address practical questions about working with anger, balancing inner practice with outer activism, and finding hope amid overwhelming challenges. This conversation launches the Mindfulness and Climate Action series, creating sangha for dharma practitioners committed to earth care. Throughout, the discussion weaves together themes of dukkha, interdependence, compassion, and the bodhisattva path as foundations for authentic environmental response.*

Greetings everyone.

My name is Tanisra and I welcome you to our conversation, Mindfulness in the Dharma and Climate Action. I'll be hosting this conversation today and through the coming months on behalf of One Earth Sangha, the Buddhist teachers for climate action and our sponsor, Maestro Conference. A really warm welcome to each and every one of you who have called in today to join this important conversation.

Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the tremendous work it has taken to reach this point for the team in the background, and also for each of you as you enter into the reality of what we're engaging—the tremendous challenge we're facing now to ensure a sustainable future for the generations that come after us.

Let me suggest that we begin by taking a deep breath and really feeling that breath in your body. Feel your body, feel the connection to the earth beneath you with your feet on the ground and the pressure of sitting on your seat. Just connect with that sensation. Take a deep breath and arrive here. Let's arrive here into our body, into this space, into our presence, and into this conversation together. And then breathe out, trusting the flow and the process that we're going to be engaging.

Today marks the start of Earth Care Week, and this is a wonderful way to begin. We have 1,500 people and more signed up for this conversation. There's been a huge response from the Dharma and mindfulness community, and we really appreciate that.

Just before we begin, I'm curious to know how many of you have been involved in the People's Climate March which just happened in New York and across the globe recently. If you were involved in that or aware of that, just press one on your dial pad so we can get a sense. That's fantastic. Thank you so much.

This was a huge event and I think what happened during that time is we became aware of ourselves as a global tribe—a huge collective of people gathered across all diversities, representing all kinds of concerns. I think this really marks a turning point in the climate movement. Our conversations together are to place our particular unique contribution as Dharma practitioners.

Let me briefly introduce our team that are providing backup for our talks. Lou Leonard is involved and co-founder of One Earth Sangha. Kristen Barco is also co-founder of One Earth Sangha, both resident in Washington, D.C., and Yong Oh, resident in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who's also been very involved in helping us with the IT.

Today, the theme of our discussion—and we're very grateful and appreciative to have three fantastic, accomplished and experienced Dharma teachers to help guide our conversation—is: what is the authentic attitude or understanding that moves us towards real and authentic transformation in our times? The presenters will reflect together on the qualities of heart and mind that enable us to face the suffering of the earth and how we can begin to respond wisely to this.

Our teachers leading our conversation this morning will begin with Tara Brach and then Ruth King and Jack Kornfield. Many of you, if not all of you, will be very familiar with them. You can also check their detailed biographies on the One Earth Sangha website.

I'm going to hand over to Lou Leonard from One Earth Sangha now to introduce himself. He's been supporting us with the science and will be engaging the conversation in that way. Lou, if you're there, please introduce yourself and then take us into the conversation with Tara who will be leading us into this focus.

Thank you, Tanisra. Hello, everyone. On behalf of Kristin Barker, the amazing co-founder of One Earth Sangha who I work with on this project, welcome to this first climate conversation.

One Earth Sangha is an online community of thousands of mindfulness practitioners and also a network of sanghas staying connected and learning from each other about the Dharma and climate change. We're so excited to kick off the series today and really grateful to all of you for sharing part of your Sundays with us over the next five weeks.

You all received a background paper last week created by Kuti Kanko, a senior scientist from Environmental Defense Fund and me. If you didn't get the paper, let us know and we'll send it to you. Don't think of this as an authoritative treatise. We couldn't do that in 10 pages, and that's not necessary for this class, but it's intended as a common starting point for all of us.

Rather than running through the 10 pages of the paper, because the science can be a barrier for some, I thought I'd offer my favorite 10 words that summarize where we are now on climate. Those are: things are getting worse and worse and better and better, faster and faster. Almost seems like a climate koan.

For example, on the one hand, the Arctic is collapsing before our eyes, and it's doing so at breathtaking speed. There's growing evidence that this warming of the Arctic is also causing larger impacts to our planet. It's causing the jet stream to wobble, which is helping to create things like the polar vortex, the California drought, and the path of storms like Sandy.

On the other hand, for the first six months of this year—the first six months of 2014—70% of new U.S. electric generation capacity came from wind and solar. Seventy percent. And just two weeks ago, China announced that it's developing a plan to cap its carbon pollution.

So if you read nothing else in the background paper, look at the graph on the bottom of page four. It shows that the key fork in the road for us on this challenge is still ahead, not behind. We don't know how this movie is going to turn out, and what we do matters.

In my day job, I lead the climate change program at World Wildlife Fund, and on many days, the enormousness of this challenge makes me feel small and inadequate. Most difficultly, it makes me feel alone a lot. But the best cure that I've found for managing these feelings is what we're doing today, and that's Sangha. So thank you so much for being here and helping to create this Sangha over the next five weeks.

We are going to have a Q&A period later in this call where you can virtually raise your hand, and you can also submit questions during the course of this conversation to questions@OneEarthSangha.org. This class is being recorded and will be available afterwards.

So without further ado, I'd like to welcome the first of our teachers, Tara Brach. Tara needs no introduction, or at least not one that I'm qualified to give. She's simply one of the wisest hearts of our time, and I'm grateful to say that she's also the leader of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, where I practice here in Washington, D.C. Tara, we're so grateful to have you.

Thank you so much, Lou, and thank you for your powerful words. I'm just sitting here resonating with what you said about feeling alone and about Sangha, because everything that is better and better is coming out of some feeling of us all together, our connection, our consciousness.

So I'm inviting us to pause again and reflect. I gather in the last hour, instead of 1,500, we're more like 1,700 and counting. Just to feel yourself right here—feel your body, your aliveness, whatever state of heart is here right now. And to widen your attention to sense all of us here, that we really are creating a field of attention and a field of caring. Maybe just as many times as you can remember to pause and keep feeling into that, because that's where change arises from.

When we go to that basic inquiry about how this predicament unfolded—how our enlarged body, our living earth, came to be in such a state of dis-ease—most spiritual traditions will describe the suffering that comes from feeling separate, that it's the original suffering. There's a self in here and a world out there. Out of that separateness, there's a phrase I love: the primal mood of the separate self is fear. These energies of grasping and fear lead us to violating ourselves, each other, and this earth.

If something's out there—I think of the term "unreal other"—it becomes unreal. Another person or a racial group or a species or the natural world is other. And then we can violate it. It doesn't have the same heart or vulnerability or subjective reality that we have.

One of the frames that I find really useful from an evolutionary perspective is this sense that originally there's that fused, part-of-everything consciousness—the primordial mood. Then we emerge into our egoic state, which most of humanity is in, where there is a sense of unreal other. If we're honest with ourselves, a lot of moments of the day feel like that. We're waking up now, and this is the third stage in a simplistic way—emerging to this realization of interdependence, where we belong to the web. That's where the better and better is coming from. It's from that consciousness.

But humanity's been in this prolonged, arrested place of development in terms of egoic consciousness. Sometimes I think about the consciousness of manifest destiny. Most of you are familiar with this emergence in the 1800s—this sense of entitlement to

vanquish and destroy anything indigenous, anything that's "unreal other." It's still operating. Manifest destiny is that consciousness where those in power believe they have the right or entitlement to dominate and oppress others of different races, sexual orientations, ethnicities. The devastation of our earth is no different. It's this egoic separation that thinks the earth is ours to plunder and violate.

Most of you listening probably share, like myself, a deep love and admiration for Joanna Macy, one of the pioneers in caring and acting on behalf of the earth. She says we've been treating earth as if it's a supply source and sewer—extracting resources, pouring waste into it over and over. We're now in what's described as the sixth great extinction, worse than when the dinosaurs disappeared. There's trauma to all systems. It's estimated that half of all plants and animals and bird species will die off before 2100, and 75% of mammals in the next 334 years.

I used to go frequently to the Museum of Natural History in New York when I was younger, and they have an amazing exhibit on climate change. One scientist writes that this should keep you awake at night. And so what most of us are wondering is: how come it doesn't? What stops us from recognizing what seems to be right in front of us?

If we look at it honestly in our own lives and those around us, we're preoccupied with what feels more personal and immediate. We get moved by what's emotional to us in a personal, egoic way. Anyone who's really hungry, anyone in the midst of war, struggling with poverty or their own health, anyone in a major relational crisis—what's immediate is going to distract from what's happening. And of course, for many of us who do sense what's happening, it's too upsetting to think about.

But I think one of the biggest things is the feeling—and Lou pointed to it—when we sense that we're alone, that there's nothing we can do to make a difference. I want to speak to that, because that's when we close down or cut off and stop listening and looking and attending. That's where the great suffering is. We become like lobsters in this heating pot where it's gradual.

We're not registering it day to day, the crisis.

I'm thinking of one of the phrases from Rumi that most has captured this predicament for me, which goes like this: "Sit, be still, and listen, for you are drunk, and we are at the edge of the roof."

This is what most spiritual traditions point to—that we're in some way drunk, in a trance, asleep. This is the arrested state in the egoic stage; we're not seeing. And so the deep inquiry is: what wakes us up?

One of the things I'd like to share with you is a legend from the Knights of the Round Table that has really impacted me. In this story, there's a knight seeking the Holy Grail. Parsifal, a young knight, stops in a kingdom that's been turned into a wasteland. People are wandering around as if it's business as usual—they're not really noticing. He goes to see the king in the castle, who is lying prone, mortally wounded.

Parsifal sees this and leaves. It's kind of like "it's not my business" or "what can I do?" and "it's rude to interfere." He's uncomfortable about the situation, so he just leaves.

Then he's confronted on the road by a witch named Kundry, who's enraged that he didn't bother to even reach out to the king. So he returns, more thoughtful, more present, and kneels by the king's bed. With real, deep kindness he says, "What ails thee?"

In that moment, the king's cheeks get their normal flush of color and he stands up. Outside, the kingdom awakens from the trance—there are flowers and grass, and everything's alive again.

This is a story of a wasteland, and we're a growing wasteland. There's a trance that we're in. The first step—and the reason I love this legend—is to just start right where we are and offer our presence so that we're paying attention. What's going on inside this heart and body? What's going on in my larger body, the earth? Sit, be still, and listen. Feel into what's happening.

Again, Joanna Macy says you don't have to be optimistic. She says trying to be hopeful can wear you out. Just be present.

What we find in starting where we are in that presence is that whatever we're really paying attention to, we fall in love with. For me, I go out every day. I spend a lot of time outside, and I pay attention to the trees and the river I live near, and I'm totally in love with it. When I'm in nature, it dissolves that sense of self and other.

And then if I see trash on the trail, it hurts—like it feels bad—and I pick it up. So there's this presence with this life, being in this world, in this living web, and then there's compassion for the devastation. We start attending to the clear-cutting, and it feels like our bodies are involved, because they are. Or the loss of the coral reefs, and the sea's dying, and it's us. Or the cruelty to animals that's due to human consuming. They're part of us. So we care, we respond.

I'm saying this as I begin to wrap up here because it feels to me that we'll only respond—people will only wake up and respond to the pain of this earth—if they're in love with this earth, in love with life. The choice to act has to come from the human heart, and that unleashes our intelligence so we can respond wisely because we love.

I heard that Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. Here's what he says: "No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would become religious overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God."

Instead—and this is me speaking—the stars come out every night and we watch television.

I'm very struck by the fact that in the United States, we spend on average 90% of our time indoors. How do you fall in love with the earth? What's going to happen to our kids in terms of loving the earth? Americans spend 11 hours per day with digital media. How can we love the earth if we're online all the time?

D.H. Lawrence says—and this is 150 years ago—"We're bleeding at the roots because we are cut off from the earth and the sun and the stars."

So the response to this trance is to come into presence, to reconnect with our bodies, with this earth body, to get that we are this living earth, to really get that. Cosmologist Brian Swimme says four and a half billion years ago, the earth was a flaming molten ball of rock. And now it can sing opera. It can care. It can self-heal through these awakening hearts—those of us sitting right here.

We need to belong to our world, love our world, less in a cyber world, more real.

And the last thing, returning to what Lou shared about waking up from the unreal other and reconnecting—we must act collectively. We must do this together. It simply doesn't work to respond to the suffering of Earth as a separate self.

For myself, being involved with Teachers Collaborative, working locally with Lou and Kristen—it's just part of something larger. It's not a self acting. It's just belonging. It's wonderful to be reminded of that together, and I think this truth runs so deep.

Thank you.

"Thank you so much, Tara. That's a wonderful way to enter into our conversation. It's very, very beautiful. Thank you. So I'd like to invite Ruth. Thank you so much, Ruth, for joining us this morning, and I really look forward to your words as well."

Thank you, and welcome, everyone. It's exciting to be on this call with all of you, and it did my heart such wonders to see the march and witness the unifying power that emerges when we recognize a need and step into it. This is no small task at all.

I had to educate myself about climate change in order to step into a deeper understanding. I kept feeling the pull at my heart, but it was almost in conflict with so many other pulls in my life—family concerns, so many other systemic issues demanding attention, like family members in the prison system. So I educated myself by connecting with One Earth Sangha and really delving into Naomi Klein's book on the shock doctrine and her latest work. It proved deeply helpful.

One thing I realized is that climate disasters are teaching us about the illusion of boundaries. They're showing us our utter interdependence, our relatedness, our reliance on each other. I remember when AIDS was considered an African issue—now we understand how these elemental forces spread without regard for borders. We're looking at phenomena that won't be defined by territorial boundaries.

So the very notion of territory through climate change is calling us to examine the structures we've been conditioned within and to consider a realignment in this crucial area. Our life depends on this necessary attending.

As I educated myself around climate change alongside the other pulls of heart in our shared humanity, I recognized something profound: there's actually a template. There's a template of greed at the systemic level that we can begin to recognize—a constellation, almost a skeletal shape of exploitation and oppression with systemic qualities. We can't always see these patterns at the individual level. We have to step back and widen the lens beyond our special interest groups or silos to see the dynamic relationship—actually a power dynamic—that has been at play in our society.

It's like examining the relationship between capitalism and culture, looking at the dynamics between dominance and subordinate relationships at the systemic level. The planet Gaia, the great mother, has been and continues to be exploited just as poor people, First Nations and other indigenous cultures, people of color throughout the world have been for centuries. This is just to name a few.

So it's important to see that what's happening to the climate and our planet fits into this same template. Poor people and people of color are ongoingly, disproportionately, and systematically disenfranchised by these climate disasters throughout the world. The NAACP Climate Justice Initiative published statistics showing that 68% of African Americans live within thirty miles of a coal-fired power plant—the zone of maximum

exposure to pollutants that cause an array of ailments from heart disease, which I experienced as a child, to birth defects. Communities of color breathe in nearly 40% more pollutants than white people, classically, in our country.

So choices are made about where and how things happen as we examine these systems. There are consequences to this kind of greed seeding that has occurred over time, and they're both gross and subtle in their expression. Some consequences we can see as separation in our humanness, in our relatedness—denial, hatred, rebellion, and wars. People of color, poor people, and the planet are all rebelling for balance.

I think this is a critical piece for us to examine—not just the special interest of climate change, though I believe it's crucial at this time, but to also see that it's actually a reflection of a dance that's been going on for some time. It's very difficult for me to see climate change without also seeing these other issues.

This is not a call to point out and create division—it's a call to recognize the divisions that already exist among us. This isn't about placing anger or pointing fingers, but about seeing clearly and being willing not to have our focus so narrow that we miss the larger patterns at work.

other people, other situations are left out. I'm mostly concerned with how our hearts are divided, and I think climate change is changing us, forcing us to see the delusion of the boundaries that we have.

Martin Luther King Jr. said it well from his letter from the Birmingham jail: "We're all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

And Shirley Chisholm—some of you may remember she was the first African-American congresswoman in 1968 and the first Black candidate for the U.S. presidency—she said that "service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this planet. It is the very purpose of life, not something you do in your spare time."

One of the beautiful things about what we can start to look at in terms of what we do next is to most fundamentally maintain our practice, which allows us to know deeply. The Buddha specialized in suffering and the end of suffering. We have many tools that can support our awareness and deepen our presence so that we can act wisely and respond well to what's happening in the world.

Comfort and discomfort can keep us apart or bring us together. I see climate change as a call to this coming together. Martin Luther King again reminds us that "power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

I'd just like to say that we are the environment, and what we do next is important for both presence and love. Thank you.

Thank you so much, Ruth. Very powerful words, and powerful to be reminded of Martin Luther King and his struggle—such a great example of the disproportionate impact on marginalized and oppressed communities historically through the arc of colonialism and the abuse of those peoples and the earth.

So Jack, welcome. Jack has been so amazing in contributing to the implanting of the Dharma in our Western world.

Thank you, Tanisha. I'm so moved and touched by the words of Ruth and Tara and all of you, and the spirit of so many on this call. It's as if our own children are sick and our grandchildren, and we're at the bedside of the earth as we talk about this kind of illness. We're gathered around and now coming together to say: What can we do? How can we respond?

What I'd like to speak on and add to the conversation is sustaining ourselves in this difficult time. It's an age-old question: Born into the human realm, how do we sustain our good heart even though there is dukkha?

The first noble truth of the Buddha: birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha—whether you translate it as sorrow or suffering or insecurity, lamentation, pain, distress, despair—and we're feeling all that. This is the words of the Buddha: dukkha is distress and despair. Encounters with what is difficult and painful, which we're experiencing, is dukkha. Separation from what is dear, from the things we care about, is dukkha. Not getting what we want, not having it turn out the way we'd like—all the forms of clinging.

This is part of the human realm, the first noble truth, and it is staring us in the face with climate change, affecting our lives and the lives of beings all around us.

We might say, well, this is the first time that terrible suffering is human-caused, and the scale of it is something new and devastating. But even from ancient times, from the Buddha's time, there was much human-caused suffering: the continuing warfare between the Vajjians and the Kosalans and the Sakyans around the Buddha, life expectancy which was half of ours, illness and slavery. This is not a new story. Human beings can create heaven and tend one another and bring alive love and connectedness and care and wisdom and awaken—and human beings also can contribute to dukkha, to the suffering that's part of the human realm.

There's a giant vision offered of the role of the awakened heart and the awakened being, which we all are. "Nobly born," begin the texts. "Oh, you are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas. Remember who you really are." You think you were born into this body as a separate being, but from what Tara and Ruth are reminding us, when you begin to awaken, you awaken in the bodhisattva body—the body of awakening together with all beings—and realize: whether it's a year or a century or a hundred thousand mahakalpas, the bodhisattva has only one way, the way of connection and compassion and care for all beings.

What's beautiful about the vision of the bodhisattva...

is it doesn't exclude suffering, but instead the bodhisattva appears together with suffering and is committed in the midst of the difficulty to find in our hearts that wisdom and nobility and dignity that brings light and connectedness and care and the end of suffering to beings.

Not a small project. When you sit in a Zen dojo and begin Zen practice, you recite the four vows starting with "Sentient beings are numberless, boundless. I vow to save them all." Not a small thing. Even if you look in your own family, they don't necessarily want to be saved by you. People around you resist, and yet at the same time, this is a vow of the bodhisattva to tend to all beings.

When the Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning and recites the vows from Shantideva's bodhisattva vision: "May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be food for the hungry. May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge for those to cross the flood. May I be a lamp in the darkness. May I be a light of dharma and inspiration for beings. As long as earth and sky exist, as long as beings exist, may I be born and work together with them to bring liberation."

So we hear these bodhisattva vows, and we realize that these are the instructions for navigating difficult times. If you look at the life of the exemplars, like Mahatma Gandhi, who lived in a time of tremendous difficulty—of violence and colonial oppression and

caste system—he took a day a week, no matter what was happening. While bringing down the British Empire, he said, "I'm sorry, I know there are hundreds of thousands of people out marching. This is my quiet day." Once a week, he would quiet his mind and listen in his heart to the action he could take that was most connected with all, from the most skillful, dharmic, awakened place that we can do together to bring us together and to manifest change.

As Martin Luther King did, or Aung San Suu Kyi, who I was fortunate enough to meet with in Burma earlier this year. She said, "They never really had me in prison. I was arrested for seventeen years, but I never hated them."

And so we tend our heart. And then as a bodhisattva, we set the compass of our heart with our vows of long-term dedication amidst joy and sorrow, amidst dukkha and sukha, amidst praise and blame and birth and death. The bodhisattva has only one way, the way of compassion and the way of envisioning the service and connection with all of life.

One of my favorite examples of this is the great Buddhist elder, Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka, who started the Sarvodaya movement to connect villages across the country—more than half the villages in the country—to dig wells and build schools and collaborate and make peace. Toward the end of the terrible Sri Lankan Civil War, he called all the members of Sarvodaya together to try to support the Norwegian peace plan. Six hundred and fifty thousand people gathered together at the ancient temple at Anuradhapura, and Ariyaratne stood up.

He said, "It's taken us five hundred years to get into this difficulty. And the Buddhist teachings have us look at the causes of things and not just the effects. So if we look, there are five hundred years of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims and Hindus and four hundred years of colonial oppression and two hundred years of economic disparity between the rich, wet parts of the island and the poor, dry parts. So what I have to offer you is the Sarvodaya five-hundred-year peace plan."

"If it's taken us five hundred years to get into this, here's the plan to get out: Five years of simply ceasefire and ten years of rebuilding roads and schools and twenty-five years of learning each other's languages and religions and fifty years of working on an economic program to right the economic injustice and having the poor parts and the rich parts collaborate for everyone's well-being. And after one hundred years, we'll have a grand council to see how we're doing and start all over again. And over five hundred years, I think we can turn Sri Lanka into the island of peace and mercy and awakening that she was meant to be."

When I heard these words, I almost wept. I got a chance to tell this story to the Dalai Lama, knowing he carries the sufferings of Tibet that has happened so much in the last fifty or sixty years, the weight of that in his heart and his shoulders. And he was grinning hearing this long-term vision.

Thomas Merton explains it this way. He says, "When you are doing the work"—he wrote to an activist—"do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, if not, at times, bring about its opposite. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself."

And so there's a kind of courage in the bodhisattva and a vision that is vast, as vast as the earth and the sky, the galaxies that we are part of. As it says in the Bhagavad Gita, the secret is to act without attachment to the fruits of the actions, and for us to trust the seeds that we plant. It is given to each of us as part of, as cells in the awakening organism of the earth, to plant our seeds, to contribute our peace, no matter what is happening.

And as we plant the seeds and contribute our peace, as Henry David Thoreau says, "I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, but I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

And so we plant our seeds not out of bitterness and not out of fear or confusion, but out of a sense of rightness and truth, and then something else happens.

When my dear friend Wes Nisker, another dharma teacher, was interviewing Gary Snyder recently—Gary being one of the fathers of the American environmental movement for half a century, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet of "Earth House Hold"—he said, "Gary, you're eighty-four years old, you see the climate disruption, the oceans rising, the loss of species. What advice do you have for us at this time where there's so much despair and worry and fear?" And Gary looked back steadily and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you are going to save the earth, save it because you love it, not out of anger, not out of guilt, not out of fear."

All those are the source of what creates dukkha—greed and hatred and anger. If you save it, you must save it because you love it.

And it's the love that took those monks out of their forest monasteries to wrap their robes around the greatest trees in the forest and ordained them as the abbots to save that part of the forest from being cut down and logged. It was the love that allowed my teacher and friend, Mahagosananda, after the Cambodian genocide where all nineteen

of his own family members were killed and his monastery burned, to walk for fifteen years through the killing fields and the war zones of Cambodia, step by step with hundreds of people behind him, leading them in the chant: "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed." He told them that to return to the earth, to your village and your community, you can't ride a bus, you can't go back in a truck. You have to walk step by step, and with each step, practice loving kindness and compassion, and bring that back alive on this earth.

This is our work as a bodhisattva. This is our time. Oh, nobly born, you were born for this. You were called to do this. And in doing this, you plant your seeds and you become part of the whole that is healing itself.

It's so wonderful to be reminded of the big vision and the inner orientation of setting our compass at the heart. As we've been speaking about the Bodhisattva way, these conversations will be leading into the creation of an eco-satsang training online, globally, across traditions. As things are moving fast on the ground, we'll be seeking feedback from all participants involved in this love of the earth, so that we can continue to apply everything that's been shared this morning more fully and bring it into action and response.

I feel my heart filling up listening to these words. I feel I've been nourished and calmed and yet also energized—a wonderful impact.

Now we're going to shift into hearing each other by moving into breakout groups. We have fifteen minutes for this guided reflection. In groups of four, you'll each have about three minutes to reflect from what you've heard and where you are: How is it for you as we wake up into the reality of climate change and all that's implied? What kinds of responses are you experiencing in terms of what you're thinking or maybe even things you're doing? It's not a long time, but in three minutes, much can happen for each of us. I encourage that as you listen, you're not responding to each other—you're simply listening. Then we'll take whatever comes from the breakout groups into more dialogue for the last part of our call together.

After the breakout groups, a question came in via email that I'd like to ask Tara. It's about a common area of concern: How do we actually deal with this feeling of righteous anger? Sometimes in Buddhism there's confusion around strong emotions in response to what's going on—outrage, anger. How best do we use that energy or be in relationship to it?

First, I'm really glad that question's out there because there's so much in spiritual worlds about how taboo anger is, and we are rigged to feel anger. It's natural. It's an intelligent response to harm and violence and dis-ease. So the bottom line is that this is a message, an intelligent message to respond to. When I think of tar sands or the cruelty of factory farms, there's an outrage that comes up in me.

The point isn't to get rid of that energy, but there's a shadow side: when there's a story wrapped around anger that there's a bad other involved—bad guys out there doing bad things—it perpetuates separation. The storyline actually will distance people. So the deal is we need to listen to the message and not get caught in the emotional trance of it.

And I want to give you one example of how we can do that, which I discovered for myself when we were about to go to war against Iraq. I was definitely feeling "bad other" - you know, they are the bad ones, they're the violators, those in the administration who wanted to create this ripple of violence.

I started doing this reflection when I'd read the newspaper and it would trigger these "bad other" feelings. I'd feel the anger and say, "Okay, let's get rid of the storyline - just feel the energy." I'd let the energy be as much as it was. Then I'd find that underneath it was fear. I'd let that be as much as it was - really this practice we do of presence and being with. And I'd find that under the fear, when I let it be big, was this grieving for all the loss. Then I'd let that be big, and under that was care.

When I could then move from that place of caring about people, caring about the suffering, there was a group interfaith protest, and we all got arrested. But the protest wasn't like a fist-waving angry protest. It was people with posters of Iraqi children and American children. One child at the process had a sign saying, "Don't bomb them, they're children over there and they hurt too."

My point is not to get lost in the storyline of bad other, but to really be with the energy and find the love underneath that cares about our world.

"Thank you. That is so helpful. That is fantastic. Thank you."

"Ruth, if I can just bring you another question that just came in via email. I think this is a very archetypal question, actually. It's about the split between secular activism - the activists who are out there - and those engaged in so-called spiritual quietism on the mat, doing the inner work and Dharma practice that's usually about personal transformation. How do we bring those together? In what way can they inform each other? What's your take on that?"

"Yeah, that's a great question as well. I've heard it termed as the line between the monastic and the marketplace. How do we bring our awareness to or balance these two apparently separate approaches? But what I've found is that they're not so separate, this idea of activism and quietism, if you will."

"I actually see that our activism is an extension of our practice. Those of us who have a practice are sitting with what Tara just offered around these intense emotions and the passions or the fire of the heart that gets lit up. We are challenged with how we express our passions in the world from a place of practice and presence."

"One thing to keep in mind in moving from our cushions out into the world is that we have a practice of doing no harm - that's square in our foreheads and in our minds. That's our mantra playing all the time: to do no harm, to be present, to do no harm."

"An example of this that was palpable for me was being in South Africa around the time Nelson Mandela was elected. I went around with a number of people and spoke with nonprofit organizations there. I was curious about how you did this without just being enraged all the time - how did you fight apartheid without being enraged all the time? The message I got from a number of people, maybe not all of them but most of them, was that the issue of apartheid was never about the person. It was about the system. It was a matter of seeing that it was a system that needed to be dismantled. It wasn't about hating the people."

"That really stuck with me - to be able to see what needs to happen, bring our quiet practice to a sense of equanimity and presence and clear seeing and groundedness, not the reactivity or the heat that sometimes we find in activism. It's really important. Growing up in the civil rights movement, I saw many people die on the vine from righteous rage and righteous indignation. What I've found is that it's really nice to bring your heart into activism and to see the humanness and the heart and love that is in all people, even the ones we have judgment about."

"That's wonderful, thank you so much. Again, such a brilliant insight to hear about Nelson Mandela. I remember him saying that to hate your enemies is like drinking poison, hoping it will kill them. It's poison. So again, this question of heart and how the Dharma can inform our response so well."

"I'd like to open up now. You've had some breakout groups and questions and dialogue coming. It would be lovely to hear from our participants. If you have anything you'd like to share or say or ask about, please press 1 on your keypad and Kristen will help navigate this next piece. We have about just over 15 minutes left of our time together today. So Kristen, over to you."

"Okay, great. Thanks, everybody. It's just so great to be with all of you. I'm so grateful to all the teachers and to be able to do this work as a sangha with you."

As Tanissara mentioned, please press 1 if you have any questions. We'll take your question now. Josh, I see some hands raising. Let's go to Jeffrey first.

"Thank you. My question comes from the last person who spoke about how people in South Africa coped with apartheid by seeing it as the system. My concern is: how much progress can we really make working on climate change if we don't do something about the nature of our political system that supports it? The massive amounts of power and money in politics, the oil and gas industries, and the basic structure—as seen in the Citizens United ruling—of corporations having way too much power. I've decided myself to try to divide my time and work on both, but I'd be interested in what anybody else has to say about that."

That's a great question, Jeffrey. Jack, do you have a response?

"There are two parts to this question. The personal part is: which should we tend to? I think we each have particular gifts. Some might have the gift of being a political organizer. Some might have the gift of systemic and systematic thinking, where you can really tend to and put your heart into getting money out of politics or working to change the way corporate charters have created rampant, freewheeling exploitation. If you can do that, great. Others may be tying their robes around trees, or going to preschools and elementary and middle schools, educating the next generation so that they can act. I think the answer is all of the above—listening to your heart to see what you're particularly drawn to contribute, because we need all of those seeds.

"The underlying question—do we need to address the systemic nature? Absolutely. But there's an even deeper question you allude to: the world doesn't need more energy, more food, more things. It needs less greed, less hatred, less ignorance of the sense of separation, less delusion. Not only on the systemic level, but on the deepest Dharma level—a kind of education and awakening in ourselves, our community, and the community of humanity—that is the biggest systemic change of all. I see a lot of potential in the internet that's connecting us and in wild changes happening that may actually aid us in this process."

I'd like to embroider a little onto that. Through what's happening—as I mentioned, the ground is moving very fast under our feet as we awaken into our reality and as people mobilize and organize. By the end of these conversations and as we move forward together as a Dharma community, we'll be offering connections and networks we

can align with: people of faith, people in activist communities, people on the front lines, organizations with good strategies. The main message is: we're not alone. We're doing this together.

Let's hear from Julia next. What's your question?

"I think Tanissara sort of touched on this just now. My question is: how can our sangha facilitate sharing good news about initiatives happening across the world, so we can gain some inspiration and heart that there is movement?"

That's wonderful. There are fantastic things happening. Let me see if Lou is still on the call to share some good news... While we find Lou, would one of the teachers like to respond? Any positive actions or movements you're seeing in response to our times?

Jack: "This isn't current climate news, but there's a really fine book called *The Better Angels of Our Nature* by Steven Pinker, a philosopher and anthropologist at Harvard. He charts several hundred years of human history and shows the gradual reduction in slavery—even though people are still enslaved—the better treatment of children, the gradual freedom for women, even though it's still difficult in parts of the world, the gradual reduction in warfare. If you need heart in the possibility of humans becoming more conscious, I really recommend this. It gives you the sense that you're part of this great movement of awakening that is actually happening."

I think also, as there's more sense of a big movement and shift happening to mobilize, we're going to see a lot of creative work emerging. Naomi Klein's latest book, *This Changes Everything*, is something we should all be reading—very realistic but with a positive perspective. The work of Bill McKibben and 350.org, Idle No More—which is a mobilization of First Nations peoples—these are movements that are very good to connect with.

So we have about ten minutes or so. Can we take another question?

Great. Let's go to Louise.

Well, that's interesting. My phone is starting to beep. But Mike, I had two suggestions in response to the last couple of questions. One is about systemic work—Joanna Macy also talks about another level, which is the consciousness behind the systems. So that's another level that we can work on in changing consciousness. That does translate into eventually changing systems. And then as far as good news...

We don't get to hear the good news from Louise. I'm sure we can all look around and see plenty of good news, but we didn't get to hear Louise's version.

All right, so it looks like we'll have time for one more. How about Stephanie?

Hi, can you hear me?

Yes, we can hear you. Go ahead.

Well, I had a really interesting experience a couple weeks ago. I live in Houston, which we call the Petro Metro. So it's really one of the big centers of the fossil fuel industry. A couple weeks ago, I went to a conference on climate and energy put on by a group called the Heritage Foundation, which you may be aware is a pretty conservative think tank that is certainly trying to bolster the case for continued fossil fuel use. One of the speakers there gave a presentation about his visit to the People's Climate March, and I'm trying to figure out how to say this exactly...

Just tell us what's the heart of it for you. What's the question that's deep in your heart?

When they were presenting, this man started off with a picture of Buddhists meditating before the march saying, "Oh my gosh, look at these crazy people." Of course, being a Buddhist, I took that pretty deeply and all these questions about anger arose for me. I think this may be something that will come up more and more—that people of different spiritual traditions may face some targeting, as has happened in the past. How can we work with this to make it a strength for this movement?

I think this is a really good question, and the wonderful thing to know is that we have time throughout this whole month to continue exploring and deepening into these kinds of questions that have been brought to us together.

I think that it's okay that we're targeted. As Martin Luther King spoke about, sometimes you actually need to bring out the toxins and bring out the poisons so that they can be addressed with compassion in a very direct way. There's some heart of justice that's there to be touched in every being, although in some of them it's still deeply covered over. So I'm not worried about that. I think that is actually part of the movement that eventually will bring us together.

That's brilliant. Thank you for that reminder.

So again, thank you so much, everyone. We're going to start the wrap-up now for the last few minutes of our call together. I can't tell you how much I appreciate—how much we all appreciate—your presence, giving your time. We know that those on the call and those who will be listening to the recordings represent just the tip of the iceberg of our deep sense of care and concern about the challenge we're in. But it's so helpful to know

that we're here together, that we're on the same page and looking together at how to embody this bodhisattva energy and how to find the most authentic, realistic and powerful responses that we can.

So next Sunday, please do join us again at the same time. We're going to be hearing from Reverend Angel Kiyoda-Williams, Aya Anandabodhi Bakuni, and Susie Harrington—three wonderful practitioners and teachers. They have much to further our discussion, so please tune in to that.

As I mentioned, all of this is going to be feeding into the development of an Eco-Sattva training, which will be launched next year. I also want to say that One Earth Sangha is a new initiative. Everyone working on One Earth Sangha is offering their time on a volunteer basis. We'd like to embody and ground One Earth Sangha more deeply, and for that we do value support in all manner of ways—but also particularly any dana and financial offerings that can be given on the website will go directly to ensuring that this initiative actually becomes a movement in and of itself, one that can be a platform for all of us to orient toward and find our home within as we navigate the times ahead.

I'd also like to invite Josh to speak. Maestro Conference has been so generous in offering their platform freely as dana to host our call. Josh, do you have a few words to say about Maestro?

"Yes, thank you. My name is Joshua Edwards, and I'm with Maestro Conference. We're so honored and excited to support the Mindfulness and Climate Action Initiative with the technology you're using today. If you would like more information about Maestro Conference—either for hosting your own events or for information about our other upcoming world-changing conversations—please dial the number 1 on your telephone keypad now, or your Skype dial pad or computer keyboard. We'd love to send you more information about how you can turn presentations into conversations. We're so glad to be here with you all today. You can certainly stay on and continue to connect together in small groups after the formal part of the call is complete. Thank you."

Thanks, Josh. And just to mention, you can continue to email us at OneEarthSangha. We're going to be setting up a Facebook group where we can continue the conversation—you'll hear about that.

So, as in the Dharma, the way of the Dharma, this has been wonderful to draw this energy together. I'd like to invite Ruth, if you would—as we finish, as is in our tradition—to share the blessings and the good karma and the good energy and the prayerfulness from our gathering for the welfare of our earth and our planet. So please, Ruth, over to you to finish.

"Thank you so much. Thanks to all of the good hearts that are collected here. Let me invite you just to take a breath or two right here and now, and to feel the aliveness of our sharing together. To know that we are a sangha.

May we envision our service to life. May we tend to our hearts. May we set our compass to compassion, connection, and care. May we plant our seeds and contribute to peace. And may we be a part of the home—our earth—that is healing itself for the benefit of all sentient beings.

May our practice be of service to all beings in all directions without exception. Thank you."

Thank you, everyone, and stay well, go well until next week.

CHAPTER 281

Mindfulness and Climate Action: 1

Rob Burbea · 1h13

> *In this opening conversation of a groundbreaking series, renowned Dharma teachers Tara Brach, Ruth King, and Jack Kornfield explore what authentic transformation looks like in our climate crisis era. Drawing from the Buddha's teaching on dukkha and the bodhisattva ideal, they examine how the illusion of separation—the "unreal other"—underlies both our climate emergency and historical patterns of oppression.*
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> *Tara Brach reflects on the Parsifal legend and Rumi's words about being "drunk at the edge of the roof," calling us to move from unconscious consumption to presence with Earth's suffering. Ruth King connects climate justice to systemic oppression, noting how communities of color disproportionately bear environmental burdens, while emphasizing Martin Luther King Jr.'s insight that "power without love is reckless." Jack Kornfield offers the bodhisattva path as our compass, sharing stories from Gandhi, Mahāghoṣānanda, and Ari Ariyaratne's 500-year peace plan, reminding us that we plant seeds "not out of fear, but because we love."*
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> *Together, they reveal how mindfulness practice—sitting still and listening—can awaken us from the trance of separation and guide us toward collective action rooted in interconnection and compassion. This conversation launches One Earth Sangha's initiative to create an online Eco-Sattva training, bringing Buddhist wisdom to our planetary crisis.*

Greetings everyone. My name is Tanisra, and I welcome you to our conversation on Mindfulness, the Dharma, and Climate Action. I'll be hosting this conversation today and through the coming months on behalf of One Earth Sangha, Buddhist Teachers for Climate Action, and our sponsor, Maestro Conference. Again, a really warm welcome to each and every one of you who have called in today to join this important conversation we're having together.

Before we begin, I'd like to suggest—as it's taken quite a lot of work to get to this point for the team in the background, and also for each of you as you enter into the reality of what we're engaging, the tremendous challenge we're facing now to ensure a sustainable future for the generations that come after us—that we begin by just taking a deep breath and really feeling, as we take that breath, the breath in your body.

Feel your body. Feel the connection to the earth beneath you, with your feet on the ground and the pressure of sitting on your seat. Just connect with that sensation. Take a deep breath and arrive here. Let's arrive here into our body, into this space, into our presence, and into this conversation together. Then breathe out, trusting the flow and the process that we're going to be engaging.

Today marks the start of Earth Care Week, and this is a really great way to begin. We have fifteen hundred people and more signed up for this conversation. There's a huge response from the Dharma and mindfulness community, and we really appreciate that.

Just before we begin, I'm interested to know how many of you have been involved in the People's Climate March, which just happened in New York and across the globe in recent weeks, and all the events that were engaged with that. If you were involved in that or aware of that, just press one on your dial pad so we can get a sense. That's great. That's fantastic. Thank you so much.

This was a huge event, and I think what happened during that time is we became aware of ourselves as a global tribe—a huge collective of people gathered across all diversities, representing all kinds of concerns. I think this really marks a turning point in the climate movement. Our conversations that we'll be having together are to place our particular unique contribution as Dharma practitioners.

To continue, I'd like to first briefly introduce our team that's doing the backup for our talks. They will be speaking and helping out later in the call. Lou Leonard is involved and co-founder of One Earth Sangha. Kristin Barker is also co-founder of One Earth Sangha, both resident in Washington, D.C. And Yong Oh, resident in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has also been very involved in helping us with the IT.

Today, the theme of our discussion—we're very grateful and appreciative to have three fantastic, accomplished, and experienced Dharma teachers to help guide our conversation—is: What is the authentic attitude or understanding that moves us towards real and authentic transformation in our times? The presenters will reflect together on the qualities of heart and mind that enable us to face the suffering of the earth and how we can begin to respond wisely to this.

Our teachers leading our conversation this morning will begin with Tara Brach, then Ruth King and Jack Kornfield. Many of you, if not all of you, will be very familiar with them. You can also check the more detailed biographies on the One Earth Sangha website.

I'm going to hand over to Lou Leonard from One Earth Sangha now to introduce himself. He's been supporting us with the science and will be engaging the conversation in that way. Lou, please introduce yourself and then take us into the conversation with Tara, who will be leading us into this focus.

Thank you, Tanisra. Hello, everyone. On behalf of Kristin Barker, the amazing co-founder of One Earth Sangha, whom I work with on this project, welcome to this first climate conversation.

One Earth Sangha is an online community of thousands of mindfulness practitioners and also a network of sanghas staying connected and learning from each other about the Dharma and climate change. We're so excited to kick off the series today and really so grateful to all of you for sharing part of your Sundays with us over the next five weeks.

You all received a background paper last week created by Cuti Kanko, a senior scientist from Environmental Defense Fund, and me. If you didn't get the paper, let us know and we'll send it to you. Don't think of this as an authoritative treatise—we couldn't do that in ten pages, and that's not necessary for this class—but it's just intended as a common starting point for all of us.

I'm not going to run through the ten pages of the paper. Because the science can be a barrier for some, I thought I'd offer my favorite ten words that summarize where we are now on climate: Things are getting worse and worse and better and better, faster and faster. Almost seems like a climate koan.

For example, on the one hand, the Arctic is collapsing before our eyes, and it's doing so at breathtaking speed. There's growing evidence that this warming of the Arctic is also causing larger impacts to our planet. It's causing the jet stream to wobble, which is helping to create things like the polar vortex, the California drought, and the path of storms like Sandy.

On the other hand, for the first six months of this year—the first six months of 2014—70% of new U.S. electric generation capacity came from wind and solar. Seventy percent. And just two weeks ago, China announced that it's developing a plan to cap its carbon pollution.

So if you read nothing else in the background paper, look at the graph on the bottom of page four. It shows that the key fork in the road for us on this challenge is still ahead, not behind. We don't know how this movie is going to turn out, and what we do matters.

In my day job, I lead the climate change program at World Wildlife Fund, and on many days, the enormousness of this challenge makes me feel small and inadequate. Most difficultly, it makes me feel alone a lot. But the best cure that I've found for managing these feelings is what we're doing today, and that's Sangha. So thank you so much for being here and helping to create this Sangha over the next five weeks.

We are going to have a Q&A period later in this call where you can virtually raise your hand, and you can also submit questions during the course of this conversation to questions@OneEarthSangha.org. Also, just want to let you know that this class is going to be recorded and available afterwards.

So without further ado, I'd like to welcome the first of our teachers, Tara Brach. Tara needs no introduction, or at least not one that I'm qualified to give. She's simply one of the wisest hearts of our time, and I'm grateful to say that she's also the leader of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, where I practice here in Washington, D.C. Tara, we're so grateful to have you.

Thank you so much, Lou, and thank you for your powerful words. I'm just sitting here resonating with what you said about feeling alone and about Sangha, because everything that is better and better is coming out of some feeling of us all together—our connection, our consciousness.

So I'm sensing in that spirit for us to pause again and reflect. I gather in the last hour, instead of 1,500, we're more like 1,700 and counting. And just to—as you feel yourself right here—just feel your body, your aliveness, whatever state of heart is here right now. And to widen your attention to sense all of us here, that we really are creating a field of attention and a field of caring. And maybe just as many times as you can remember to pause and keep feeling into that, because that's where change arises from.

When we go to that basic inquiry about how did it happen—what really, how did this predicament unfold? This enlarged body, our living earth, in such a state of dis-ease? Most spiritual traditions will describe the suffering that comes from feeling separate, that it's the original suffering—that there's a self in here and a world out there. And out of that separateness, there's a phrase I love: the primal mood of the separate self is fear. These energies of grasping and fear lead us to violating ourselves, each other, and this earth.

It's like if something's "out there"—I think of the term "unreal other"—it becomes unreal. Another person or a racial group or a species or the natural world is other, and then we can violate it. It doesn't have the same heart or vulnerability or subjective reality that we have.

So one of the frames that I find really useful from an evolutionary perspective is the sense that originally there's that fused, part-of-everything consciousness—the primordial mood. And then we emerge into our egoic state, which most of humanity is in, where there is a sense of unreal other. And if we're honest with ourselves, a lot of moments of the day, it feels like that.

And we're waking up—and this is the third, in a simplistic way—the third, emerging to this realization of interdependence, where we belong to the web. And that's where the "better and better" is coming from. It's from that consciousness.

But humanity's been in this prolonged, kind of arrested place of development in terms of egoic consciousness. And sometimes I think about the consciousness of manifest destiny. Most of you are familiar with, like in the 1800s, this emergence, this sense of entitlement to vanquish and to destroy anything indigenous—unreal others. And it's still operating. I mean, manifest destiny is like that consciousness that those who are in power have the right or entitlement to dominate and to oppress others of other races, of other sexual orientations, ethnicities. And the devastation of our earth is no different. It's this egoic separation that thinks the earth's ours to plunder and violate.

Most of you listening are probably like myself—have a deep love and admiration for Joanna Macy, who's one of the pioneers in caring and acting on behalf of the earth. She says we've been treating earth as if it's a supply source and sewer—extracting resources, pouring waste into it over and over.

And it's described now—again, many of you know this—that we're in the sixth great extinction, worse than when the dinosaurs all disappeared, that there's trauma to all systems. It's estimated that half of all plants and animals and bird species will die off before 2100, that 75% of mammals in the next 300 to 400 years.

I went a lot when I was younger to the Museum of Natural History in New York, and they have an amazing exhibit there on climate change. One scientist writes that this should keep you awake at night. And so what most of us are wondering is, how come it doesn't? What stops us from recognizing what seems to be right in front of us?

If we look at it and are really honest in our own lives and those around us, we're preoccupied with what feels more personal and immediate. We get moved by what's emotional to us in a personal, egoic way. And if we look around the world, anybody that's really hungry, anybody that's in the midst of war, struggling with poverty, with their own health, anybody that's in a major relational crisis—what's immediate is going to, in some way, distract from what's happening.

And then, of course, for many of us where we sense what's happening, it's too upsetting to think about. But I think one of the biggest things is the feeling—and Lou pointed to it—when we sense that we're alone, that there's nothing we can do to make a difference. And I want to speak to that, because that's when we, in some way, close down or cut off and stop listening and looking and attending. And that's where the great suffering is. It's like we become like lobsters in this heating pot where it's gradual.

We're not registering it day to day, the crisis. I'm thinking of one of the phrases from Rumi that has most captured this predicament for me, which goes like this: "Sit, be still, and listen, for you are drunk, and we are at the edge of the roof."

This is what most spiritual traditions point to—that we're in some way drunk, in a trance, asleep. This is what it means to be arrested in the egoic stage; we're not seeing. And so the deep inquiry becomes: what wakes us up?

One of the things I'd like to share with you is a legend from the Knights of the Round Table that has really impacted me. In this story, Parsifal, a young knight seeking the Holy Grail, stops in a kingdom that has been turned into a wasteland. People are wandering around as if it's business as usual—they're not really noticing what's happening. He goes to see the king in the castle and finds him lying prone, mortally wounded. Parsifal sees this and leaves. It's kind of like "it's not my business" or "what can I do?" and "it's rude to interfere." He's uncomfortable about the situation, so he just leaves.

Then he's confronted on the road by a witch named Kundry, who is enraged that he didn't even bother to reach out to the king. So he returns, more thoughtful, more present, and kneels by the king's bed. With real deep kindness he asks, "What ails thee?" In that moment, the king's cheeks get their normal flush of color and he stands up. Outside, the kingdom awakens from the trance—there are flowers and grass and everything is alive again.

This is a story of a wasteland, and we are becoming a growing wasteland. There's a trance that we're in. The first step—and the reason I love this legend—is to just start right where we are and offer our presence so that we're paying attention. What's going on inside this heart and body? What's going on in my larger body, the earth? Sit, be still, and listen. Feel into what's happening.

Again, Joanna Macy says you don't have to be optimistic. She says trying to be hopeful can wear you out. Just be present.

What we find in starting where we are, in that presence, is that whatever we're really paying attention to, we fall in love with. For me, I go out every day. I spend a lot of time outside, and I pay attention to the trees and the river I live near, and I'm totally in love with it. When I'm in nature, it dissolves that sense of self and other. And then if I see trash on the trail, it hurts—it feels bad—and I pick it up.

So there's this presence with this life, being in this world, in this living web, and then there's compassion for the devastation. We start attending to the clear-cutting, and it feels like our bodies are involved, because they are. Or the loss of the coral reefs, and the sea's dying, and it's us. Or the cruelty to animals that's due to human consuming—they're part of us. So we care, we respond.

I'm saying this as I begin to wrap up here because it feels to me that we'll only respond—people will only wake up and respond to the pain of this earth—if they're in love with this earth, in love with life. The choice to act has to come from the human heart, and that unleashes our intelligence so we can respond wisely because we love.

I heard that Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. Here's what he says: "No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would become religious overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God." Instead—and this is me speaking—the stars come out every night and we watch television.

I'm very struck by the fact that in the United States, we spend on average 90% of our time indoors. How do you fall in love with the earth? What's going to happen to our kids in terms of loving the earth? Americans spend eleven hours per day with digital media. How can we love the earth if we're online all the time?

D.H. Lawrence says—and this was 150 years ago—"We're bleeding at the roots because we are cut off from the earth and the sun and the stars."

So the response to this trance is to come into presence, to reconnect with our bodies, with this earth body, to get that we are this living earth—to really get that. Cosmologist Brian Swimme says four and a half billion years ago, the earth was a flaming molten ball of rock. And now it can sing opera. It can care. It can self-heal through these awakening hearts, those of us sitting right here.

We need to belong to our world, love our world—less in a cyber world, more real.

And the last thing, returning to what Lou said about waking up out of the unreal other and being connected, is that we have to act collectively—we must do this together. It simply doesn't work to respond to the suffering of Earth as a separate self.

For myself, being involved with the Teachers Collaborative, being involved locally with Lou and Kristen, I experience this as part of something larger. It's not a self acting; it's just belonging. It's wonderful to be reminded of that together, and I think this is so true.

Thank you so much, Tara. That's a wonderful way to enter into our conversation—very, very beautiful.

So I'd like to invite Ruth. Thank you so much, Ruth, for joining us this morning. I really look forward to your words as well.

Thank you, and welcome everyone. It's exciting to be on this call with all of you, and it did my heart wonders to see the march and to witness the unifying power that can arise when we recognize a need and step into it. This is no small task at all.

I had to educate myself about climate change in order to step into a deeper understanding. I kept feeling the pull at my heart, but it was almost in conflict with so many other pulls that I find in my life—my family, so many other systemic pulls that can capture my attention, like family members who are in the prison system. So I educated myself by connecting with One Earth Sangha and really delving into Naomi Klein's book on the shock doctrine, as well as her latest work. This was truly helpful.

One of the things I realized is that climate disasters are teaching us about the illusion of boundaries. They're teaching us about our utter interdependence, our relatedness, and our reliance on each other. I remember when AIDS was considered an African issue, and then it spread because these things are elemental. We're looking at phenomena that will not be defined by territorial boundaries.

So the notion of territory, through climate change, is calling us to question and examine the structures we are conditioned within, and to look at a realignment in this vitally important area. Our life depends on this necessary attending.

As I educated myself around climate change while feeling the other pulls of heart in our shared humanity, I recognized that there's actually a template—a template of greed at the systemic level that we can begin to recognize. It's almost like a constellation, a skeletal shape of exploitation and oppression that has a systemic quality. We can't always see these things at the individual level, so we must step back and open the lens beyond our special interest groups or silos to see that there is a dynamic relationship—actually a power dynamic—at play that has been operating in our society.

This involves examining the relationship between capitalism and culture, and looking at the dynamics between dominance and subordinate relationships at the systemic level. The planet Gaia, the great mother, has been and continues to be exploited just as poor people, First Nations and other indigenous cultures, people of color throughout the world have been for centuries—to name just a few.

It's important to see that what's happening to the climate and our planet fits into this same template. Poor people and people of color are ongoingly, disproportionately, and systematically disenfranchised by these climate disasters throughout the world.

The NAACP Climate Justice Initiative published a statistic showing that 68% of African Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant—the zone of maximum exposure to pollutants that cause an array of ailments from heart disease, which I had as a child, to birth defects. Communities of color breathe in nearly 40% more pollutants than white people in our country.

Choices are made about where and how things happen as we examine these systems. There are consequences to this kind of greed seeding that has occurred over time, and they're both gross and subtle in their expression. Some of these consequences we can see as separation in our humanness, in our relatedness—denial, hatred, rebellion, and wars. People of color, poor people, and the planet are all rebelling for balance.

I think this is a critical piece for us to examine—not just the particular concern of climate change, though I believe it's crucial at this time, but to also see that it's actually a reflection of a dance that's been going on for some time. It's very difficult for me to see climate change without also seeing these other issues.

This is not a call to point out and create division; it's a call to recognize the divisions that already exist among us. This is not about placing anger or pointing fingers, but about seeing clearly and being willing to not have our focus so narrow that we miss the larger patterns at work.

other people, other situations are left out.

I'm mostly concerned with how our hearts are divided, and I think climate change is changing us, forcing us to see the delusion of the boundaries we have created. Martin Luther King Jr. said it well from his letter from a Birmingham jail—words you all know: "We're all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

And Shirley Chisholm—some of you may remember she was the first African-American congresswoman back in 1968 and the first black candidate for the U.S. presidency—she said that "service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this planet. It is the very purpose of life, not something you do in your spare time."

So one of the beautiful things about what we can start to look at in terms of what we do next is to most fundamentally maintain our practice, which allows us to know deeply. The Buddha specialized in suffering and the end of suffering. We have many tools that can support our awareness and deepen our presence so that we can act wisely and respond well to what's happening in the world.

Comfort and discomfort can keep us apart, or they can bring us together. I see climate change as a call to this coming together. Martin Luther King again reminds us that "power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

I'd just like to say that we are the environment, and what we do next is important for both presence and love.

Thank you so much, Ruth. Very powerful words, and powerful to be reminded of Martin Luther King and his struggle—such a great example of the disproportionate impact on marginalized and oppressed communities historically through the arc of colonialism and the abuse of those peoples and the earth.

So Jack, welcome. Jack has been so amazing and contributing to the implanting of the Dharma in our Western world.

Thank you, Tanisha. I'm so moved and touched by the words of Ruth and Tara and the rest of you, and the spirit of so many on this call. It's as if our own children are sick, and our grandchildren, and we're at the bedside of the earth as we talk about life in a kind of illness. We're gathered around and now coming together to say: What can we do? How can we respond?

What I'd like to speak on and add to the conversation is sustaining ourselves in this difficult time. It's an age-old question. Born into the human realm, how do we sustain our good heart even though there is dukkha?

The first noble truth of the Buddha: birth is dukkha, aging is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha—whether you translate it as sorrow or suffering or insecurity. Lamentation, pain, distress, despair—we're feeling all that. These are the words of the Buddha. Dukkha is distress and despair. Encounters with what is difficult and painful, which we're experiencing, is dukkha. Separation from what is dear, from the things we care about, is dukkha. Not getting what we want, not having it turn out the way we'd like—all the forms of clinging.

This is part of the human realm, the first noble truth, and it is staring us in the face with climate change, affecting our lives and the lives of beings all around us. We might say this is the first time that terrible suffering is human-caused, and the scale of it is certainly something new and devastating. But even from ancient times, from the Buddha's time, there was much human-caused suffering: the continuing warfare between the Vajjians and the Kosalans and the Sakyans around the Buddha; life expectancy which was half of ours; the illness and slavery that existed then. This is not a new story.

Human beings can create heaven and tend one another, bringing alive love and connectedness and care and wisdom and awakening. Human beings also can contribute to dukkha, to the suffering that's part of the human realm. There's a giant vision offered of the role of the awakened heart and the awakened being, which we all are. "Nobly born," begin the texts. "You are the sons and daughters of the Buddhas. Remember who you really are."

You think you were born into this body as a separate being, and from what Tara and Ruth are reminding us, when you begin to awaken, you awaken in the bodhisattva body—the body of awakening together with all beings. You realize that whether it's a year or a century or a hundred thousand mahakalpas, the bodhisattva has only one way: the way of connection and compassion and care for all beings.

What's beautiful about the vision of the bodhisattva

is it doesn't exclude suffering, but instead the bodhisattva appears together with suffering and is committed in the midst of the difficulty to find in our hearts that wisdom and nobility and dignity that brings light and connectedness and care and the end of suffering to beings.

Not a small project. When you sit in a zendo and begin Zen practice, you recite the four vows starting with: "Sentient beings are numberless, boundless. I vow to save them all." Not a small thing. Even if you look in your own family, they don't necessarily want to be saved by you, much less the people around you. And yet at the same time, this is a vow of the bodhisattva—to tend to all beings.

Or when the Dalai Lama wakes up in the morning and recites the vows from Shantideva's bodhisattva vision: "May I be a resting place for the weary. May I be medicine for the sick. May I be food for the hungry. May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge for those to cross the flood. May I be a lamp in the darkness. May I be a light of Dharma and inspiration for beings. As long as earth and sky exist, as long as beings exist, may I be born and work together with them to bring liberation."

We hear these bodhisattva vows, and we realize that these are the instructions for navigating difficult times. If you look at the life of exemplars like Mahatma Gandhi, who lived in a time of tremendous difficulty—of violence and colonial oppression and the caste system—he took a day a week, no matter what was happening, bringing down the British Empire. He said, "I'm sorry, I know there's hundreds of thousands of people out marching. This is my quiet day." Once a week, he would quiet his mind and listen in his heart to the action he could take that was most connected with all—the most skillful, dharmic, awakened action they could take together to bring unity and to manifest change.

As Martin Luther King did, or Aung San Suu Kyi, who I was fortunate enough to meet with in Burma earlier this year. She said, "They never really had me in prison"—there she was, arrested for seventeen years because she never hated them. And so we tend our heart. And then as a bodhisattva, we set the compass of our heart with our vows of long-term dedication amidst joy and sorrow, amidst dukkha and sukha, amidst praise and blame and birth and death. The bodhisattva has only one way: the way of compassion and the way of envisioning service and connection with all of life.

One of my favorite examples of this is the great Buddhist elder, Ari Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka, who started the Sarvodaya movement to connect villages across the country—more than half the villages in the country—to dig wells and build schools and collaborate and make peace. Toward the end of the terrible Sri Lankan Civil War, he called all the members of Sarvodaya together to try to support the Norwegian peace plan. Six hundred and fifty thousand people gathered together at the ancient temple at Anuradhapura, and Ari stood up.

He said, "It's taken us five hundred years to get into this difficulty. The Buddhist teachings have us look at the causes of things and not just the effects. So if we look, there are five hundred years of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims and Hindus, and four hundred years of colonial oppression, and two hundred years of economic disparity between the rich, wet parts of the island and the poor, dry parts. So what I have to offer you is the Sarvodaya 500-year peace plan."

If it's taken us five hundred years to get into this, here's the plan to exit: Five years of simply ceasefire and ten years of rebuilding roads and schools and twenty-five years of learning each other's languages and religions, and fifty years of working on an economic program to right the economic injustice and having the poor parts and the rich parts collaborate for everyone's well-being. And after one hundred years, we'll have a grand council to see how we're doing and start all over again. And over five hundred years, I think we can turn Sri Lanka into the island of peace and mercy and awakening that she was meant to be.

I heard these words and I almost wept. In fact, I got a chance to tell this story to the Dalai Lama, knowing he carries the sufferings of Tibet—so much that's happened in the last fifty or sixty years, the weight of that in his heart and his shoulders. And he was grinning, hearing this long-term vision.

Thomas Merton explains it this way. He says, when you are doing the work—he wrote to an activist—do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and achieve no result at all, if not, at times, bring about its opposite. As you get used to this, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, and the truth of the work itself.

And so there's a kind of courage in the bodhisattva and a vision that is vast—as vast as the earth and the sky and the galaxies that we are part of. As it says in the Bhagavad Gita, the secret is to act without attachment to the fruits of the actions, and for us to trust the seeds that we plant. Each of us is given, as cells in the awakening organism of the earth, the opportunity to plant our seeds, to contribute our peace, no matter what is happening.

And as we plant the seeds and contribute our peace, as Henry David Thoreau says, "I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, but I have great faith in a seed. Convince me you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

And so we plant our seeds not out of bitterness and not out of fear or confusion, but out of a sense of rightness and truth. And then something else happens.

When my dear friend Wes Nisker, another dharma teacher, was interviewing Gary Snyder recently—Gary being one of the fathers of the American environmental movement for half a century, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet—he said, "Gary, you're eighty-four years old, you see the climate disruption, the oceans rising, the loss of species. What advice do you have for us at this time where there's so much despair and worry and fear?" And Gary looked back steadily and said, "Don't feel guilty. If you are going to save the earth, save it because you love it, not out of anger, not out of guilt, not out of fear."

All those are the source of what creates dukkha—greed and hatred and anger. If you save it, you must save it because you love it.

And it's the love that took those monks out of their forest monasteries to wrap their robes around the greatest trees in the forest and ordained them as the abbots to save that part of the forest from being cut down and logged. It was the love that allowed my teacher and friend, Mahagosananda, after the Cambodian genocide where all nineteen of his own family members were killed and his monastery burned, to walk for fifteen years through the killing fields and the war zones of Cambodia, step by step with hundreds of people behind him, leading them in the chant: "Hatred never ends by hatred, but by love alone is healed." He told them that to return to the earth, to your village and your community, you can't ride a bus, you can't go back in a truck—you have to walk step by step, and with each step, practice loving-kindness and compassion and bring that back alive on this earth.

There is no other way.

So this is our work as a bodhisattva. This is our time. Oh, nobly born, you were born for this. You were called to do this. And in doing this, you plant your seeds and you become part of the whole that is healing itself.

[The facilitator's voice returns, expressing gratitude for the profound teachings and announcing the transition to breakout groups for participants to share their reflections on waking up to climate change and their responses to it.]

How do we actually deal with this feeling of righteous anger? Sometimes in Buddhism there's confusion around whether you shouldn't feel angry, and there's uncertainty about how to be with strong emotions in response to what's going on—outrage, anger. How do we best use that energy or be in relationship with it?

I'm really glad that question's out there because there's so much messaging in spiritual worlds about how taboo anger is. But we are wired to feel anger. It's natural. It's an intelligent response to harm and violence and dis-ease. So the bottom line is that this is a message, an intelligent message to respond to. When I think of tar sands or the cruelty of factory farms, there's an outrage that comes up in me.

The point isn't to get rid of that energy, but there's a shadow side. When there's a story wrapped around anger—that there's a bad other involved, bad guys out there doing bad things—it perpetuates separation. The storyline actually will distance people. So the deal is we need to listen to the message and not get caught in the emotional trance of it.

When we were about to go to war against Iraq, I was definitely feeling "bad other"—you know, they are the bad ones, they're the violators, those in the administration that wanted to create this ripple of violence. I started doing this reflection when I'd read the newspaper and it would trigger my bad-other feelings. I'd feel the anger and say, "Okay, let's get rid of the storyline, just feel the energy." I'd let the energy be as much as it was.

Then I'd find that underneath it was fear. I'd let that be as much as it was—really, this practice we do of presence and being with. Under the fear was this grieving, and when I let it be big, it was grieving for all the loss. Then I'd let that be big, and under that was care.

So when I could move from that place of caring about people, caring about the suffering, there was an interfaith protest where we all got arrested. But the protest wasn't like a fist-waving angry protest. It was people with posters of Iraqi children and American children. One child at the protest had a sign saying, "Don't bomb them, they're children over there and they hurt too."

My point is not to get lost in the storyline of bad other, but to really be with the energy and find the love underneath that cares about our world.

Thank you. That is so helpful. That is fantastic. Thank you.

Ruth, if I can bring you another question that just came in via email—I think this is a very archetypal question, actually. It's about the split between secular activism, you know, the activists out there, and then those engaged in so-called spiritual quietism on the mat, doing the inner work and dharma practice that's usually about personal transformation. How do we bring those together? What way can they inform each other? What's your take on that?

That's a great question as well. I've heard it termed as the line between the monastic and the marketplace. How do we bring our awareness to or balance these two—what appears to be separate?

But what I've found is that they're not so separate, this idea of activism and quietism. I actually see that our activism is an extension of our practice. Those of us that have a practice are sitting with what Tara just offered around these intense emotions and the passions or the fire of the heart that gets lit up. We are challenged with how we express our passions in the world from a place of practice and presence.

One thing to keep in mind in moving from our cushions out into the world is that we have a practice of doing no harm—that that's square in our foreheads and in our mind. That's our mantra playing all the time: to do no harm, to be present, to do no harm.

An example that was real palpable for me was being in South Africa right around the time Nelson Mandela was elected. I went around and spoke with a number of non-profit organizations there. I was really curious about how did you do this without just being enraged all the time? How did you fight apartheid without being enraged all the time?

The message I got from a number of people—maybe not all of them, but most of them—was that the issue of apartheid was never about the person. It was about the system. It was a matter of seeing that it was a system that needed to be dismantled. It wasn't about hating the people. That really stuck with me—to be able to see what needs to happen, bring our quiet practice to a sense of equanimity and presence and clear seeing and groundedness, not the reactivity or the heat that sometimes we find in activism.

Growing up in the civil rights movement, I saw many people die on the vine from righteous rage and righteous indignation. What I've found is that it's really important to bring your heart into activism and to see the humanity and the heart and love that is in all people, even the ones that we have judgment about.

That's wonderful, thank you so much. And again, such a brilliant example to hear about Nelson Mandela. I remember him saying to wish to hate your enemies is like drinking poison, hoping it will kill them. It's poison. So it's this question of heart and how the dharma can inform our response so well.

I'd like to open up now. You've had some breakout groups and questions and dialogue coming. So it would be lovely to hear from our participants. If you have anything you'd like to share or say or ask about, please press 1 on your keypad and Kristen will help to negotiate this next piece. We have about just over 15 minutes left of our time together today. So Kristen, over to you.

Great, thanks everybody. It's just so great to be with all of you. I'm so grateful to all the teachers and to be able to do this work as a sangha with you.

As Tanissara said, please press 1 if you have any questions. We'll take your question now. I see some hands raising—this is wonderful. Let's go over to Jeffrey.

"Thank you. My question comes from the last person who spoke about how people in South Africa coped with apartheid by seeing it as the system. My concern is: how much progress can we really make working on climate change if we don't address the nature of our political system that supports it—the massive amounts of power and money in politics, the oil and gas industries, and the basic structure we see in rulings like Citizens United, where corporations have way too much power? I've decided to try dividing my time to work on both, but I'd be interested in what anyone else has to say about that."

This is a profound question with two dimensions. The personal part asks which should we tend to? I believe we each have particular gifts. Some might have the gift of being a political organizer. Some might excel at systemic and systematic thinking, putting their heart into getting money out of politics or working to change how corporate charters have created rampant, freewheeling exploitation. Others may tie their robes around trees or go to preschools, elementary schools, and middle schools, educating the next generation so they can act wisely. The answer is all of the above—listening to your heart to discern what you're particularly drawn to contribute, because we need all of those seeds.

Regarding the underlying question about addressing systemic change: absolutely. But there's an even deeper question you allude to—the world doesn't need more energy, more food, or more things. It needs less greed, less hatred, and less ignorance of the sense of separation, less delusion. Beyond the systemic level lies the deepest dharma level: a kind of education and awakening in ourselves, our community, and the community of humanity. This represents the biggest systemic change of all. I see tremendous potential in the internet connecting us and in the extraordinary changes happening that may actually aid us in this process.

The ground is moving very rapidly under our feet as we awaken into our reality and as people mobilize and organize. By the end of these conversations and as we move forward together as a dharma community, we'll be offering connections and networks we can align with—people of faith, activist communities, people on the front lines, organizations with skillful strategies. The main message is that we're not alone. We're doing this together.

Let's hear from Julia now. "I think Tanissara touched on this just now. My question is: how can our sangha facilitate sharing good news about initiatives happening across the world so we can gain inspiration and take heart that there is movement?"

There are indeed many extraordinary things happening. I want to mention a book that offers perspective on our capacity for positive change—not current climate news, but Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. This Harvard philosopher and anthropologist charts several hundred years of human history, showing the gradual reduction in slavery (though people are still enslaved), better treatment of children, gradual freedom for women (though conditions remain difficult in parts of the world), and gradual reduction in warfare. If you need encouragement about humans' capacity for greater consciousness, I highly recommend this book. It offers the sense that you're part of this great movement of awakening that is actually happening.

As this movement grows and mobilizes, we're witnessing tremendous creativity emerge. Naomi Klein's latest book, *This Changes Everything*, offers realistic yet positive perspectives we should all engage with. The work of Bill McKibben and 350.org, the Idle No More mobilization of First Nations peoples—these movements offer excellent opportunities for connection and collaboration.

So we have about ten minutes or so. Can we take another question? Let's go to Louise.

Well, that's interesting—my phone is starting to beep. But I had two suggestions in response to the last couple of questions. One is about systemic work—Joanna Macy also talks about another level, which is the consciousness behind the systems. So that's another level we can work on in changing consciousness. That does translate into eventually changing systems. And then as far as good news...

Sorry, I lost you there. We don't get to hear the good news. I'm sure we can all look around and see plenty of good news, but we didn't get to hear Louise's version.

All right, so it looks like we'll have time for one more. How about Stephanie?

Hi, can you hear me? Yes, we can hear you. Go ahead.

Well, I had a really interesting experience a couple weeks ago. I live in Houston, which we call the Petro Metro—one of the big centers of the fossil fuel industry. A couple weeks ago, I went to a conference on climate and energy put on by a group called the Heritage Foundation, which you may know is a pretty conservative think tank that's certainly trying to bolster the case for continued fossil fuel use. One of the speakers there gave a presentation about his visit to the People's Climate March.

Just tell us what's the heart of it for you. What's the question that's deep in your heart?

Well, when they were presenting, this man started off with a picture of Buddhists meditating before the march, saying, "Oh my gosh, look at these crazy people." Of course, being a Buddhist, I took that pretty deeply, and all these questions about anger are certainly arising for me. I think this may be something that will come up more and more—that people may be targeting groups as has happened in the past. How can we work with this to make it a strength for this movement?

I'm going to come in here because we have a few minutes left. This is a really good question, and the wonderful thing to know is that we have time throughout this whole month to continue exploring and deepening into these kinds of questions that have been brought forward together.

I think it's okay that we're targeted. As Martin Luther King spoke about, sometimes you actually need to bring out the toxins and bring out the poisons so that they can be addressed with compassion in a very direct way. There's some heart of justice that's there to be touched in every being, although in some it's still deeply covered over. So I'm not worried about that. I think that is actually part of the movement that eventually will bring us together.

That's brilliant. Thank you for that reminder.

So again, thank you so much, everyone. We're going to start the wrap-up now for the last few minutes of our call together. I can't tell you how much I appreciate—we all appreciate—your presence, giving your time. We know that those on the call and those who will be listening to the recordings—this is just the tip of the iceberg to our deep sense of care and concern and the challenge we're in. But it's so helpful to know that we're here together, on the same page, looking together at how to embody this bodhisattva energy and how to find the most authentic, realistic, and powerful responses that we can.

Next Sunday, please do join us again at the same time. We'll be hearing from Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams, Aya Anandabodhi, and Susie Harrington—three accomplished practitioners and teachers who have much to offer in furthering our discussion.

As I mentioned, all of this will be feeding into the development of an Eco-Sutta training, which will be launched next year. I also want to acknowledge that One Earth Sangha is a new initiative. Everyone working on One Earth Sangha is offering their time on a volunteer basis. We'd like to embody and ground One Earth Sangha more deeply, and for that we value support in all forms—particularly any dana and financial offerings that can be given through the website, which will go directly toward ensuring that this important initiative becomes a movement in itself, a platform for all of us to find our home within as we navigate the times ahead.

I'd also like to invite Josh to speak. Maestro Conference has been so generous in offering their platform freely as dana to host our call. Josh, would you share a few words about Maestro?

"Thank you. My name is Joshua Edwards, and I'm with Maestro Conference. We're honored and excited to support the Mindfulness and Climate Action Initiative with the technology you're using today. If you'd like more information about Maestro Conference—either for hosting your own events or learning about our other upcoming world-changing conversations—please dial the number 1 on your telephone keypad, Skype dial pad, or computer keyboard. We'd love to send you information about how you can be involved in turning presentations into conversations. We're so glad to be here with you all today. You can certainly stay on and continue to connect in small groups after the formal part of the call is complete."

Thank you, Josh. Just to mention, you can continue to email us at OneEarthSangha. We're setting up a Facebook group where we can continue the conversation—you'll hear about that soon.

As in the way of the Dharma, this has been wonderful to draw this energy together. I'd like to invite Ruth, if you would, to share the blessings as we finish. As is in our tradition, to share the good karma, the good energy, and the prayerfulness from our gathering for the welfare of our earth and our planet. Please, Ruth, over to you to close.

"Thank you so much. Thanks to all the good hearts collected here. Let me invite you to take a breath or two right here and now, and to feel the aliveness of our sharing together. Know that we are a sangha. May we envision our service to life. May we tend to our hearts. May we set our compass to compassion, connection, and care. May we plant

our seeds and contribute to peace. May we be part of the healing of our home, our earth, for the benefit of all sentient beings. May our practice be of service to all beings in all directions without exception."

Thank you, everyone. Stay well, go well until next week.

CHAPTER 282

Mindfulness and Climate Action: 2

Rob Burbea · 1h09

> *In this powerful dharma dialogue, three Buddhist teachers examine climate change through the lens of Buddhist teachings, revealing it as both an environmental and deeply spiritual crisis. Aya Anandabodhi Bhikkhuni emphasizes how the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion manifest in our ecological destruction, calling practitioners to move beyond denial and overwhelm into skillful action. She reminds us that we cannot achieve calm minds "in a room that is burning" - our practice must include responding to the climate emergency with wisdom and compassion.*
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> *Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams provides a profound analysis of how hypercapitalism, colonialism, and systemic racism are root causes of climate change, showing how the same structures that marginalize communities of color also devastate the Earth. She calls for Buddhist communities to examine these interconnected systems of oppression and to reimagine sangha as a force for collective transformation rather than individual comfort.*
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> *Susie Harrington speaks from her experience in the wilderness of southeastern Utah, where oil sands extraction threatens sacred lands. She emphasizes that spiritual practice requires "unbroken receptivity to truth" - even when that truth breaks our hearts. Drawing on Einstein's insight about expanding our circles of compassion, she shows how connection with nature and community action can transform overwhelm into compassionate response. The teachers address common resistances in dharma communities to discussing climate issues and offer practical guidance for engaging this crisis as essential dharma practice.*

Welcome everyone, and welcome back to those who joined us last week, along with a very warm welcome to all of you joining us for the first time today.

My name is Tanisra, and I am the moderator and host for our conversation on Mindfulness, Dharma and Climate Action. We live in increasingly precarious times regarding the impact on the natural environment from our ways of living. It is clear that unless we radically change our relationship to Mother Earth, to each other, and to ourselves, we will jeopardize a sustainable world for future generations.

To explore these issues today, I'd like to welcome our teachers, for whom I'm very grateful. We have Aya Anandabodhi Bhikkhuni from Wales, who is a Theravada nun in the forest tradition for over twenty years, currently living in Placerville in Northern California near Sacramento. Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams is author of *Radical*

Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation and founder of the Center for Transformative Change, based in Berkeley, California. And Susie Harrington, guiding teacher for Desert Dharma based in Moab, Utah.

Welcome to our teachers who will be reflecting on the global issue of climate change as it interacts with the deeper social causes and issues of justice. We look forward to exploring that together.

Before we move to our teachers, I'd also like to introduce our team: Kristin Barker, co-founder of One Earth Sangha and member of Washington DC Insight; Yong Oh, teacher at Chattanooga Insight in Tennessee; and Barry Bettman, who is representing and helping us host through Maestro Conference today. Thank you to all of our team working in the background.

I'd also like to welcome Lou Leonard, co-founder of One Earth Sangha and leader of the Climate Change Program at the World Wildlife Fund, who is supporting us with scientific input.

Before I hand over to Lou to introduce himself and welcome us, I'd like to encourage us as we arrive into this call together and engage this very intense issue to take a deep breath. As we take that breath, feel yourself coming into your body, into your seat, and into your presence, bringing attention to the sensation of your body, the feet touching the ground, and the pressure of sitting.

As we connect with that, we're connecting with this earth element. This body is part of the earth element and the element of breath and warmth in the body. Just taking a few deep breaths as we arrive here together.

Lou, if I could hand over to you, please, to introduce yourself and welcome us, then introduce Anandabodhi as our first speaker.

Thank you, Tanisra, and welcome, everyone. As Tanisra said, I'm helping support this conversation with some background on the science and policy of climate change. You will have all received a background paper that was prepared by Kriti Kanko, a scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, and myself, describing some of the basics of the science. If you haven't received that, just let us know by sending an email, and we will get that out to you.

For this call, it's very appropriate that we should look at some of the equity and justice elements of the climate crisis, because those concepts are really at the heart of both the causes and harmful effects of climate change. There are a couple of elements of the science that are useful to have in mind as we enter this conversation. First, car-

bon dioxide, the most significant greenhouse gas, once deposited in our atmosphere, lasts for centuries. Second, unlike other forms of pollution, the effects of greenhouse gases are felt cumulatively over time. So the emissions that were deposited by burning coal, for instance, in the United States and Europe in the 1800s and the last century are contributing to the warming we're feeling today.

You could think of it like a bathtub where we're filling up with pollution, and so it moves out of the system much more slowly than when we put it in. Right now we are adding...

Lou, just to interrupt you here, you're breaking up quite a lot, so I'm wondering whether we should hand over to Aya Anandabodhi and then come back, because at the end of the teachers' presentations, you're going to speak to us more about the scientific import.

That sounds great. Thank you, Tanisra.

So, Aya Anandabodhi, I welcome you again and thank you so much for being here with us today. I'm really looking forward to sharing this presence and space with you and your words.

Thank you so much, Tanisra. I'm very grateful that this is happening and for all the organizers who've made these calls happen. When I came to America five years ago, I was sent to teach and I would speak about climate change and about our concerns. We were told, "We don't want you to talk about those things. We want you to talk about Dharma, about enlightenment, about inspiring aspects." And so we were quiet for some time. But once one is conscious of the severity and seriousness of the situation that we are all in, it's pretty impossible to stay quiet.

So I'm very heartened to see that now people are beginning to speak in the Dharma communities, are beginning to speak more openly and publicly about the realities of climate change and how we can meet that. I know for a long time people would find it overwhelming. "It's all just too much. I don't want to go there because it's too big. I don't know what to do." Or sometimes I've heard that Dharma teachers shouldn't speak about climate change because it's political.

So these are all reasons why for a long time, for many years, there has been silence or just quiet whispers here and there. I'm very grateful that this is being opened up now, because I feel it's vital that we bring this awareness of the reality of the context within which we are living into our practice and into our right action in the world.

I see the climate situation as, yes, political—there does need to be political change. And it is social, because it affects first of all people in more disadvantaged situations worldwide, and eventually all of us. People and animals and forests and land. Those who can't speak up for themselves are often the first affected. So it has massive repercussions.

And it is also an ethical issue. I feel as spiritual practitioners that we have an ethical requirement to open our minds and hearts to the situation that is going on and to really take in the enormity of it, the pain of it, the sorrow that comes with it, and to let that touch us and motivate us to respond in a skillful and active way.

I also feel that this dilemma we are all in is a deeply spiritual matter. As the Buddha points out so clearly, we are interconnected. We are interbeing. We are interconnected with everything on this earth, in this universe. The situation that we are now in—that Lou can speak about in more scientific detail later—is partly natural and to a large degree the making of our human greed, hatred, and delusion that has been running rife for so long. Because this is now so deeply ingrained on a corporate level and on a political level, it feels sometimes overwhelming. How can we ever do anything to change this? How can we meet this?

A number of people have written in questions expressing anger, feeling overwhelmed, and feeling frustrated that their communities, their sanghas don't speak about climate change, feeling isolated. I think it's very important to look at all of these questions.

We are in a situation where those who hold the greatest power are fully motivated by greed and are not at all aware or conscious of the consequences, even for their own families, let alone the rest of this planet Earth. And that can bring us feelings of hopelessness, of rage, of fear, of impotence.

I feel it's very important that we recognize that each of us is part of the creation of this situation. As long as we put everything out onto somebody else, we remain as victims and we remain impotent. But I think there's probably nobody on this call who hasn't driven in a car, hasn't ridden on a plane, hasn't used plastic. We're all part of this in our little ways, or maybe some bigger ways.

So first of all, just to acknowledge: we've all contributed to this. We're all part of the creation of this rather disastrous situation that we're in. And we can all do something to start to turn the tides. As long as we think it's got to be somebody else out there, we keep ourselves stuck, we keep the whole situation stuck, because the people who are creaming off the benefits—the short-term benefits—are not motivated to change.

We need to take on the truth of all having been part of this, feel the sorrow of that, and cultivate the wish to really be motivated to do something to turn our lives in the right direction.

It's inevitable that there will be fear, there will be anger. These emotions are energy. Fear is energy that's trapped. Anger is energy that's pushing against something else. But we can use this with mindfulness. We can use this energy as powerful energy for transformation, to be actively involved in whatever way each individual listening feels they can make a change.

It doesn't matter if we're young or old, able-bodied or disabled, highly intellectual or simple—it doesn't matter what our qualities are. We each have something to bring to this situation.

I want to mention that we often think of nature as being something outside of ourselves. We go into nature, but we are nature—we are part of nature. And nature is diverse, and it is responsive, and it is creative, and it is totally interconnected. Each of us is part of this. It's not that one of us has to change the world, but each of us has to find what our part is and do that.

Whether it's speaking out, whether it's going out on the streets to demonstrate, whether it's developing alternative energies, getting into politics—whatever it may be, you need to really connect with and look at how you can make a difference. And don't be afraid to speak up. If your sangha doesn't want to talk about climate change, don't be afraid to speak up.

Look into questions like: Why is there this inertia? Why is there this resistance? Because this is not other than our practice. This is the context within which our practice is happening. We're trying to meditate and develop a calm mind in a room that is burning.

We're not going to get very far if we don't first look at the situation and respond to that, using our wisdom and right action to address the circumstances we find ourselves in as best as we can.

I've also spoken to a number of people who have been involved in climate action for many years and are starting to feel hopeless—wondering if their efforts are going anywhere, questioning whether change is possible. I want to really encourage everyone: if those feelings arise, please don't be stopped by them. Don't believe in them. Because if we all give up, then of course it becomes hopeless. But we each have a possibility to influence.

Through calls like this, through talking in your communities, through bringing up these issues—not in a fundamentalist way or in a way that turns people off, but just bringing them into consciousness—the issues of climate change and the ways we can influence them, just by connecting with each other, we start to create a strong force.

Who knows where we are in the scheme of things? We don't know if we can make great changes and all will be well. We don't know if we are too late. We don't know whether there's just a little avenue within which we can squeeze through. We don't know, but we still have to respond with motivation to the reality of the situation.

Some people in the dharma community say, "Well, everything changes, all arises and passes away, so why get involved?" That's a little bit like having a mother or grandmother who's aging and saying, "Well, she's going to die anyway, so why bother?" But we don't say that. We say, "Oh, she's precious. She's given so much. We want to make sure she's cared for, that her years are comfortable, that she's respected and loved."

It's the same with our Mother Earth. If we just say, "Well, all arises and ceases," it's a heartless response. It doesn't bring in the compassion the Buddha so clearly lived and taught.

I really want to encourage everyone not to be bound by fears or doubts, and not to be trapped by anger, but to use the energy of fear and anger with awareness to motivate you—to focus that energy and move it into action. Get past the doubts and just respond. Do what you can. Speak out, act, do what you can.

"Beautiful words, Ayya Anandabodhi, and a beautiful reminder. As I listen, it really brings me into my body and into my heart. I can feel a sense of softening and opening and connection and tenderness, and that beautiful sense of our Mother Earth like a grandmother—all that she's given. Thank you so much for that nourishing support.

I'm so grateful that Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams is able to join us. Her work is so important and meaningful. I listened to Reverend Angel recently at a Shambhala Center after the People's Climate March in New York and was incredibly moved and motivated by her words. Reverend Angel, we're so grateful you can be with us today."

"Thank you. Really, as Ayya said, I'm deeply moved that this is happening. I think many of us have been in places and have had experiences such that we feel like it's long overdue. At the same time, all the people who have chosen to participate in this call, and particularly the organizers, are really at a turning point—an incredibly important turning point in what is a significant crisis facing all of us. So I'm really happy to be here.

I want to continue with what Ayya was speaking about so beautifully, particularly the aspect she referenced about the human contribution to climate change. As many people know, there's been a lot of discussion about how much of this is natural and how much is contributed by human beings. There was some degree of debate about that, but now clearly the science has come out from many different directions showing that overwhelmingly, the contribution is human. It's a human interference with natural patterns.

In terms of the social aspect, one of the things I think we're often not speaking of sufficiently is that not only is human contribution significantly impacting the environment and our habitat—our place to live in good connection with all other beings on the planet—but that our contribution, as Ayya said, we all have driven cars and used plastic bottles and those kinds of things. But at the root, the degree of overconsumption that humans have contributed on this planet has been a result of those poisons that afflict us: greed, hatred, and delusion.

I want to speak about them quickly in terms of looking at greed very specifically in the form and dominance of hypercapitalism that the West has contributed to, most specifically in the form of colonialism over the last 500 years that has continued to morph. I'm not saying we shouldn't trade among human beings, but rather this hypercapitalism that places arbitrary values on human beings and planetary resources is very much the greed that is at the root of this drive to overconsume—way beyond what is needed, way beyond what helps us thrive as human beings."

At its base, this hypercapitalist system contains a fundamental anger that places different peoples at different levels of society depending on what is perceived as their value. Are they contributors of labor? Are they to be bought and sold? As a result, we have developed a structure that elevates the white race over other races, then divides people along racial lines.

We are dealing with something that, for many people, is not an overtly racialized view in their daily lives—they are not walking around being consciously racist. Rather, we are all contributing to and participating in a structure where anger, racism, and separation are at the root, dividing people. When we are unable to look at this clearly and see it for what it is through the lens of our practice, we unwittingly contribute to this structure that keeps us divided. This system is designed to perpetuate institutions and structures of marginalization of some people, constant deprivation of access to resources for others, and the ordinary unconscious bias that pervades all our lives.

Finally, in the form of ignorance, all of this is only able to manifest because we are experiencing what I believe is an unprecedented, very deep disconnect from our planet and from other peoples. This disconnection results from these systems, these structures, these institutionalized and insidious forms of racism and superiority that are designed to keep us separated. They prevent us from questioning the kind of valuation of people and planet that enables our resources to be consumed in such a way that allows a very small group of people to maintain elite status at the cost of each of our own hearts, our own ability to truly meet one another heart to heart, mind to mind. We carry these seeds of bias, these seeds of discrimination, these seeds of confusion—ways of looking at each other with suspicion, all seeded there because of the greed and the inability of those operating from that place to see clearly, or perhaps their indifference to the degree they perpetuate suffering.

One of the things I feel most gratified about regarding the Buddhist community's engagement with these issues is that we have a set of teachings that provides us with lenses through which we can look. As I just spoke about the three poisons, those lenses are available to us, offering our larger sangha the opportunity not only to take up our individual practices and recognize our contributions to climate change and to a racialized system of superiority, but also to embrace a unique responsibility as a larger community.

We can begin to look at how we, as people practicing these teachings and truly bringing them to heart, seeking to embody them in our actual lives, can respond more collectively. We can have the kinds of conversations about the root issues that have contributed to climate change. Climate change is a manifestation—a tangible, increasingly palpable manifestation—of behaviors and a social ego construct that has been operating for hundreds of years.

What we're presented with at this time is not only an opportunity to look at climate change, which completely makes sense, but also, in concert with the nature of our practice, to choose to say: "This is the behavior I'm seeing. These are the outcomes I'm seeing. What is at the root? What is at the root?" We must get down to the root, however painful, disconcerting, or overwhelming it may be to be confronted with the ways we have not seen or been able to respond to these things before. This would be true for us as sanghas as well.

More importantly, I would say that what is required and most useful is that because we get to look at these things through a lens of shared teachings, we finally have the opportunity to truly utilize the notion of sangha in the way it was always meant to be used. Not merely as a group of people we do things with—which is often the case in

many sanghas that function more like fellowship, particularly in the West—but to actually rethink and reimagine our utilization and relationship to sangha as a whole. A community of people we are in heart with, getting down to the root of things that impact us all, doing so in such a way that we support one another and pull back from the hyper-individualized ways we draw from Western society and its constructs.

"Thank you so much, Reverend Angel, for your words. I really feel there's so much work here, the invitation to go so much more deeply into the work, to look at the systemic level of the colonial mindset that we have somehow all been seeded within. It's like decolonizing our heart and mind so that we can come into this deeper relationship and out of the brutality of that colonized place—brutality against others, marginalized people of color, and ourselves, our own hearts and bodies and minds, and of course the earth. Thank you for this wonderful invitation into where we have to go, this deep heart of sangha, reclaiming and healing the soul of sangha, where there's a deeper web of life. Thank you so much for opening those doors for us and inviting us deeper into that piece of work.

Our last teacher this morning is a person of great warm heart who does wonderful work and feels so deeply with the wilderness, works in the wilderness, and teaches meditation and wilderness retreats. I'd like to warmly welcome Susie and invite you to contribute to our conversation."

"Thank you so much, Janice, and thank you, Aya, and Reverend, for what you have offered. As we all move into this, and as you were talking, Reverend, I was thinking of a friend of mine, Terry Tempest Williams, who lives in our community and has been speaking out for the earth for a long time. I remember her once saying that somebody told her, 'You are married to sorrow.' She replied, 'No, I just don't choose to look away. My curiosity is greater than my fear.'

I feel like that's what we're doing right now. We're saying we choose not to look away. I think that in itself is a huge shift. What we're doing is very much an extension of our practice because it's saying that we prefer and are willing to step into truth. That's what the Buddha was pointing to over and over again—it's the truth that will free us, not our wishes, not our ideas, not our isolation."

So I'm just so grateful to all of us stepping into that truth together. And one of the pieces that I want to bring in is the outsourcing, as Reverend Angel talked about—the outsourcing of the cost of our actions, how that's been displaced socially and how we've split ourselves into classes as a result. Another place that we've outsourced these costs is environmentally.

The extraction of the resources that we burn, creating climate change—these resources, as they've been extracted, as we all know, have impacted oceans, rivers, people, and animals all over the world. I'm very aware of this where I live in southeastern Utah. Roughly thirty-five percent of the land here is leased to the gas and oil industry and is potentially open to development, and much of it is being developed.

Even more concerning is what's happening about three hours north of where I live, on the border of our county. The first oil sands development in the U.S. just opened there, developed by a Canadian company that was also involved in the development in Alberta. If you don't know about oil sands, I really encourage you to inform yourself. You can search online for "Alberta oil sands" and add Joanna Macy's name—you'll find a YouTube video of a flyover. It reveals an incredibly devastating form of extraction. You're basically leaving behind a wasteland, a black, lifeless wasteland where nothing can grow. It has impacted the water in Alberta so severely that people downstream have been told not to drink it.

And now it's starting here, in a very remote, wild, beautiful place on the north edge of a county that has 10,000 people. The people here aren't going to be able to provide sufficient resistance to stop this—it's going to require a much greater level of awareness and activity. The impact will be on that land directly, but what they're expecting to extract twenty years from now—they hope to get forty to sixty million barrels a day. That is enough, in and of itself, to tip the climate over. It represents a huge amount of carbon dioxide being proposed for release into the air.

How we can respond and act to this—the XL pipeline that has been fairly effectively stopped at this point has shown that stopping infrastructure can have impact. It's so important that we move out of the idea that we can't have impact, because we are having impact. There are things that need to be responded to.

One of the things I'm so aware of in our spiritual practice, as I talk about these things and as we all share and step into this, is that we have the idea that we come to our spiritual practice for relief, for ease, for happiness. But as Aya Nandabodi said so clearly, it's like trying to have a calm mind in a room that is burning. What frees us, what we really need, is the truth. And that involves being willing to step in.

Yul Rinpoche speaks of "the unbroken receptivity to truth." Gloria Steinem says, "The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off." I want to propose that the truth will set us free, but first it will break our hearts.

It's easy, as we feel into this and acknowledge where we are, to feel a personal sense of overwhelm. As I and Nandabodi spoke to this, I want to say more about it because I think it's the thing that holds us back, that locks us in place so that we don't move—and we're in a time when movement is so important. The overwhelm, when we see the depth and breadth of what's happening, is a movement towards collapse and separation. We so need to move instead towards connection.

When we believe in the illusion of self, when we don't see clearly in that way, the world becomes a cause, a separate thing. Instead, it's like tending to our own wounds and the wounds of those that we love who are right here. Einstein has this beautiful quote: "A human being is a part of the whole, called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is really a prison for us, restricting us to personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our path must be to free ourselves from this prison by expanding our circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty."

Our wise scientist ancestors are pointing so clearly to these expanding circles—our ability to see harm and our desire to not do harm that is so much bigger than our small self. As we can move into that and feel our connection, then the alternative to overwhelm is compassion. That is what allows us to move and not get collapsed and stuck.

One of the things that helps us so much, that I'm so grateful for, is being in nature, connecting to what's here. Tara last week spoke to that beautifully—taking time to connect and really being willing to value truth more than our comfort, letting go of the resistance and the denial and being willing to feel our emotions as Aya spoke to.

Joanna Macy speaks beautifully of this, of being willing to connect and to cry for our planet, to feel rage about it. She says, "It is a measure of your open heart. As your heart breaks open, there will be room for the world to heal." And that feels so true to me.

I know it's mattered deeply to me to allow my heart to break open again and again, to feel touched by what is happening. And that allows us to love in every moment. Everything that has ever changed in a wholesome way has to come from love.

From this compassion that moves us, what can we envision? How can we move? What becomes possible? One of the things that Reverend Angel spoke to so beautifully is that this is not just about addressing climate change—it's about transforming

everything in a way that is so much more whole and real. Looking local, doing things that empower people rather than corporations, moving away from consumption, connecting with each other.

This is allowing us to move, encouraging us to move toward the good—the deepest good—rather than from some idea that we're being cut off or won't get what we want. That idea comes from a sense of greed, from losing touch with what is most important.

One of the things that moves us out of overwhelm is to do something—to acknowledge what you're already doing. It's really like our practice: we know what we know, you're doing what you're doing, and then we keep moving. We do more. Our love will always have more capacity. What else can you do? What's possible? Can you spend more time being creative with others, changing the system, changing your habits, sharing with others?

This whole movement feels to me like it's all about the precept of not doing harm. Locally here we have a soil called cryptobiotic soil that grows on the sand. It holds the sand together and serves as the starting point from which other plants grow. If you don't know about it at first, when you walk on it, it gives this crunching sound—kind of interesting. But once you learn about the harm your footsteps cause and the long-term effect on this crust, to step on it becomes painful.

I think we're in that phase of adjusting and understanding the impact of our steps, learning how to adjust how we walk and where we walk in order to be sensitive to all beings everywhere.

And we don't have to do this alone. We're part of a whole movement. We don't need to feel alone. I want to mention two resources: Carrie Nelson has been doing work with groups for a while to help people move in their communities. You can find her at placeforpeace.org. There's also a Sustainable World Sourcebook that you can find through Google—it's full of ideas for how you can work and do things in your community with other people.

It's going to be messy. We don't know how to do this. So we just have to start doing it.

Thank you, Ayaan and Abodi.

Before we move into breakout groups for discussion, I'd like to invite Lou back into the call. Lou, particularly regarding what Susie shared about the tar sands and what's happening there, do you have anything to contribute from your perspective?

Hi, Tanisara. Thank you. I'm worried that my connection might not be great, so perhaps I could share at the beginning of the full Q&A just to give us a better chance of being heard.

Your connection's good. Your connection's good now. Go for it.

Okay, just quickly—I think one of the important things to remember is that in order for us to stay below the temperature threshold that scientists tell us will bring the greatest danger, places where we're going to really start hitting tipping points, we have a limited budget: a limited amount of carbon dioxide and other gases that we can emit into the atmosphere.

The thing about tar sands is that it is such a carbon-intensive energy source, in addition to all the other horrible impacts to the earth and to the First Nations people in Alberta. It's very carbon-intensive, and it actually produces a fuel oil that is largely used by wealthier segments of the world's population, leaving us very little room in that budget for things like electricity and energy to cook—basic needs for all people.

Just to give you a couple of numbers: if the tar sands that are currently being extracted in Alberta were all to be extracted and burned, they would use up half of the remaining budget that we have in the atmosphere. That would leave us only about eight years of CO2 before we start hitting some of those very dangerous tipping points.

So thinking about those kinds of impacts from tar sands as well as other sources of energy—it's important to understand both the impact they have on the atmosphere and how they benefit the wealthier, more powerful segments of society versus the energy needs of the poor.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

Well, that's very clear. As I'm listening to you, it's really important for us to educate ourselves. One of the things we'll be moving to post our series of calls is an Ecosattva training session. As a mindfulness dharma Buddhist collective, we want to really get behind some of the actions happening and support our challenge to things like the tar sands and other issues that are going on. We want to translate our engagement into actual action and connect and join other groups.

So let's just leave it there for now. I think at this point in our call, we're going to move into breakout groups. I'm going to hand over to Kristen to guide us in that process.

The theme we're going to explore when we go into our groups for discussion—and Kristen will say a few words about that and encourage you to stay for this process. Of course, if you don't feel comfortable and would just like to meditate through the next ten or fifteen minutes while we go into discussion, that's quite fine too.

But if you join the breakout groups—and I encourage that—we're going to discuss together: Where are you in response to the teachers' input? What touches you and where do you feel moved to speak from?

So Kristen, if I can hand over to you to guide us into the next process, with Barry supporting that.

Thank you so much, Thanissara. Greetings, everyone. As the other co-founder of Dharma Sangha, I have to say it's such an honor and privilege to be with you on these calls. I'm especially excited that we can support the ability—as Susie was saying—to move into closer and closer connections, actually connecting with others on this call around the issues we've discussed so far.

So we're inviting you to share in these breakout groups—we'll make it all happen for you. What is arising for you? What is your response to the teachers' input so far? Was there anything in particular that touched you? Offer this sacred space for others to share and let that in. This, I think, we see as the cultivation of sangha. It's something that we feel is so vital.

Welcome back everyone. Thank you for taking that moment to either explore this internally or with other participants on this global call.

We're going to move into the Q&A session now. If you have a question you'd like to ask into the full field here, you can press the number 1 on your phone keypad or your Skype keypad or your MC Dialer keypad—again, not your keyboard.

I would just ask, with so many of us on the call, please keep that question brief. Don't feel too constrained, but just know that we'll try to get to as many people as possible, so keep it as brief as possible.

If you have a question, go ahead and press 1 on your phone keypad.

Welcome back everyone. Thank you for taking that moment to explore this internally or with other participants on this global call.

We're moving into the Q&A session now. If you have a question you'd like to ask into the full field here, you can press the number 1 on your phone keypad. With so many of us on the call, I ask that you keep your question brief—don't feel too constrained, but know that we'll try to get to as many people as possible.

Let's start with George. George, what is your question?

"I wasn't on the call last week, and I was wondering about an educational program mentioned in the email. Is there something beyond these series of calls? Are other materials being prepared?"

Tanisra, would you like to speak to that?

"Yes, we are launching a training called the Ecosat Training on April 22nd, Earth Day, next year. It will be a three-month program, and you'll hear more about it before this series concludes. If you're on our mailing list, you'll receive updates."

Thank you, George. Now let's go to Vanessa from Canada. Welcome, and what is your question?

"My question is about engagement. This call has focused on equity issues underlying climate change, and I think many of us have more power than we realize—socioeconomically or in our communities. Yet when climate change threatens people's fundamental sense of being in the world, it becomes very hard for them to face it and lean into the issue.

I do social advocacy work in healthcare, and I find resistance to addressing climate change openly because of the personal threat people feel to their life choices and way of being. In our very conservative political culture in Canada, I wonder how to engage people in conversation and action in ways that are non-threatening and help them manifest the power and influence they have for creating change and demanding political action."

Aya Anandabodhi, would you take this question?

"Thank you. This is something we all encounter, because acknowledging the reality of our situation is indeed a huge threat to our way of living. It can be a very slow process trying to convince people who aren't open. It may be more fruitful personally to involve yourself in larger social actions—like the People's Climate March on September 21st, or with international groups like 350.org who organize events.

Rather than trying to convince people, engage yourself in meaningful action and let that arise naturally in conversation as example. I've also found visual imagery quite helpful through social media. There's an artist named Chris Jordan from Seattle whose extraordinary photographs show the effects of our consumerism—particularly his work on albatrosses and plastic waste. When people see those images, something awakens. It's not about convincing someone, but simply showing them: this is actually what's happening. This is the result of our actions."

So that's what I would suggest. Does that help in any way?

Let's take one more question. Emily Shaw, what is your question?

"Hi, so I was wondering—my question was actually pretty similar to the last one, so you can choose someone else if you'd like to."

Since this is such a challenge for so many of us—working with environments that are not receptive—Reverend Angel, would you like to speak to that?

"Sure. Emily, would you like to say what your question is specifically?"

"I haven't been involved in climate action groups that I would like to be, and I'm a little bit afraid that it's going to be really intense. Maybe the culture of the group would be very pressuring for people who are just entering that space. I guess I'm curious about the really strong divide it feels like there is between activism and just regular people who don't even talk about these issues."

This is a good question for me. I'm involved and have been sitting on the board of a green organization for ten years now. I think there are many groups to choose from, and I'll say off the top that many environmental organizations have changed their tone over time. Much of the antagonism and intensity has actually shifted because all of us have seen that overwhelming people is not necessarily the best strategy. That conversation is happening very actively amongst climate groups. I sit with folks from thirty big green groups in the country, and we really see a big conversation shift about approach.

That said, like anything else—even like sangha—it is a kind of community you're going to belong to. Finding a good fit is what's important. There are many, many organizations doing work out there in ways that are actually really uplifting and effective. They're trying to approach the work in a way that includes the reality that all of us have to actually live here together, recognizing that merely an antagonistic way of being isn't going to be effective.

I would say find something close to your heart in terms of issues and start there. It's the easiest place to enter.

I'd also add to the list of resources a stunning site created by designer Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Memorial when she was twenty-one. It's called whatishappening.net. I encourage everyone, wherever you are in the world, to visit that site. It gives you a very interactive way to not only see what's happening in different places of the world, but also to make contributions of your own—to recognize losses you may have observed or actions your community may be taking.

The last thing I want to say is that in Buddhist communities, we're often very concerned about challenging people and finding ways to do things that are not threatening. But what we're up against is something that is fundamentally threatening—and that's actually what people are responding to. There is a fundamental threat to our lives on this planet, and that gets papered over by the threat to the lives we're living in this particular moment.

I would encourage us to be a little more willing to take risks, because we're close to an edge. We need to not be afraid of being risky about getting across to people—not in an aggressive way, but recognizing that being threatening in the sense that our practice is threatening to the ego and the way we've constructed ourselves. This issue is similarly like that, and that is part of the work.

If you're entering from your own heart into spaces of love, really recognizing how important it is that we find our way and begin to have these conversations—we are no longer in a place where we can afford not to have these conversations. Whatever the risk is, I think we need to take it.

That's wonderful. I couldn't agree more, Reverend. Thank you so much.

This brings us to the point of wrapping up our conversation today. I'd like to again thank everyone for your contribution—both our wonderful teachers and the team that enabled this conference, and each and every one of you as participants.

The conversation will continue with our presenters next week: Jamie Baraz, Catherine McGee, and Chris Cullen, each doing wonderful and profound work. Please join us next Sunday at the same time. I've already mentioned and will continue to mention that we'll be moving towards developing a course to launch next year on the platform from One Earth Sangha.

I'd also like to encourage you to check out the dana page on One Earth Sangha. You can go to oneearthsangha.org and choose "support our work" to make a contribution to help us maintain and continue this conversation, continue this work, and continue to grow One Earth Sangha.

I'd also like to invite Barry from our host, Maestro Conference, who's been doing wonderful work to really help this happen. Barry, could you say a little about Maestro as a platform for other organizations if they wish to use it or other conference calls?

"Sure, thanks Tanissara. Maestro Conference is an amazing engagement tool, as you got to experience today, with breakouts and polling. It makes for very robust engagement. If any of you would like to know more about Maestro Conference, you can press one on your keypads. Maestro Conference will send you a gentle email with information about the features and benefits. They also have a free trial if you're interested. Simply press 1 now on your keypad if you're interested and we'll get that information to you. Thank you, Tanissara. Back to you."

Thank you so much. I think just again to take a deep breath and really absorb everything that we've been with this hour and a half together. I'd like to help us with that by inviting Ariya and Nandabodhi to share the blessings in a prayerful way as we finish our call today.

Let's just take a moment to connect with this body, with our bodies sitting on the earth beneath us and the space above and around us. Feel the interconnection with everyone else here who's called in today and with all living beings on this planet Earth.

Just taking in the beauty of this Earth, the preciousness, the connection and relationship that we have with each other. Let that touch and fill our hearts. Recognize our incredible good fortune in coming across the Dharma in our lives, having a chance to practice.

Reconnecting with the heart, feeling the punya—the goodness, the good energy that comes through our awakening, our wholesome intentions, the actions that we do in the world for the benefit of others, for the benefit of all beings.

I'd like to invite you to share in all directions the good energy, the good intentions, for the benefit of all beings: those who are friendly, those who are indifferent, those who are hostile, those who are helping, those who are harming. May all receive the blessings of our practice, that they may realize the true nature of benefit in this world.

Thank you so much. Thank you again to everyone. I look forward to connecting with you next Sunday and to remind you that we have the Facebook group to continue the discussion. Thank you so much. Goodbye.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

CHAPTER 283

Mindfulness and Climate Action: 3

Rob Burbea · 1h08

> *In this third installment of the Mindfulness and Climate Action series, three experienced Dharma teachers examine how Buddhist practice can inform our response to the climate crisis. Catherine McGee opens by exploring "the meeting place of the silence of the sage and the passion of the activist," emphasizing our nature as open systems interconnected with all life. She draws on Right View from the Noble Eightfold Path to understand how wise intention leads to skillful action in the face of overwhelming climate data.*
>
> *Chris Cullen presents Joanna Macy's four-stage spiral of reconnection: coming from gratitude, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, and going forth into action. He emphasizes how contemplative practices of mettā and mindfulness can transform our relationship to climate grief and despair, while practical steps like reducing carbon footprints and engaging in courageous conversations help build political momentum for systemic change.*
>
> *James Baraz focuses on maintaining inspiration through what he calls "sacred activism" - holding an inspiring vision while acknowledging suffering. Drawing on contemporary teachers like Bhikkhu Bodhi and Andrew Harvey, he frames the climate crisis as a "dark night of the species" that offers unprecedented opportunity for collective awakening. The session concludes with guided reflection on personal next steps, emphasizing how individual contemplative practice and community engagement can multiply our courage and effectiveness in responding to this urgent global challenge.*

A very warm welcome to everyone. Welcome back to those who are following these calls and welcome to all of you who are joining us for the first time today. Just to let you know that we've had over 2,200 people sign up for this series and about 15 to 30% of you are on the calls. Some are calling in as a group and people are calling in from the US, from Canada, from the EU, New Zealand, Italy, Finland, Ireland, UK, India, South Africa, so it's a wonderful representation of us as a global community.

My name is Tanitha and I'm the host and moderator for our conversation Mindfulness, Dharma and Climate Action. It is our hope that these conversations here will encourage each of you to engage conversations on climate change in your own communities. But before we begin, I would like to also encourage your support for this series and for the ongoing work of Dharma and Climate Action through making a dana contribu-

tion. This will help us to continue our work and for that we need your support. You can do this through going on the One Earth Sangha website, going to support our work in the menu and finding the dana button. Thank you so much.

We are in increasingly precarious times in regard to the impact on the natural environment from our ways of living. It is clear that unless we radically change our relationship to Mother Earth, to each other and ourselves, we will jeopardize a sustainable world for future generations.

Today, to explore this issue, I welcome our three teachers and speakers. Catherine McGee from Devon in the UK is a teacher at Gaia House and a student of the Diamond Heart approach. She emphasizes embodiment and working with whatever hinders us from living our deepest knowing in the world through body, speech and mind in her teachings. Chris Cullen is a Dharma teacher and psychotherapist from the UK. Chris co-founded the UK-based Mindfulness in Schools project and is on the teaching team at the Oxford University Mindfulness Centre. Chris also teaches at Gaia House in the UK and offers mindfulness courses for members of Parliament and peers in the Houses of Parliament London. James Barras from Berkeley, California, is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Centre. James has also initiated the very successful Community Dharma Leader Program and has been teaching the popular online course, Awakening Joy.

I also welcome our team, Barry Bettman from our host, Maestro Conference, Kristen Barker, co-founder of One Earth Sangha and White Awake, Yong Oh, teacher at Chattanooga Insight and Center for Mindful Living, Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Lou Leonard, co-founder of One Earth Sangha and leader of Climate Change Program at World Wildlife Fund and our science advisor for our series.

So before I hand you over to Lou, again, I welcome you and just invite you to take a deep breath, to really feel the breath in your body and then as you breathe out to relax into your body and to feel the sensation of sitting in your seat and on the earth, connecting with that sensation. And taking a deeper breath again, breathing in and feeling the air in our body, breathing out, relaxing and arriving into our presence, into our hearts, and into our bodies. Thank you.

Lou, please, if I can invite you to say a few words, then hand it over to our first teacher, Catherine.

Thank you, Tanisra, and hello, everyone. It's wonderful to be with you again today. I wanted to remind you all of the background paper that Priti Kenko and I have put together for the course. We've sent you all a link to it in emails, and if you'd like to access it directly from the website, you can do that at the One Earth Sangha website on the archive page where each of these talks are placed after we finish.

Also wanted to remind folks that if you have some questions that you would like to bring into the discussion, feel free to email those to questions at oneearthsangha.org. And again, as a reminder, we're recording this and the recording will be archived in the next day or so for those who aren't able to join in person or if you'd like to listen to it again.

So today we're going to, among other things, begin to explore a little bit of moving into action on climate change. The science research shows us that this can be one of the big obstacles for some as they begin to move into this space because climate change can feel so big and so impossible for individuals to have an impact on. And sometimes it even feels like no action is happening and certainly not enough. So I just want you to know that working on this every day, I feel those things too often in my own heart.

But I can tell you that there is a lot going on right now, activity-wise, on climate change. Just on Friday, as a sort of up-to-the-minute update, world governments agreed to take the last steps to set up the new Green Climate Fund, which will help support vulnerable communities and countries as they prepare for climate change. I expect to see a down payment of at least $10 billion U.S. dollars pledged next month to open up that Green Climate Fund and even see a pledge by the United States, which would be impressive.

But it's not just government action that matters. Individual action really matters a lot. We need to look no further than the People's Climate March from last month to show what kind of an impact we can have as individuals. And in the background paper, I just wanted to point out on pages five and six, you can see some examples of ways that you can get involved individually, and there's also a resource section at the end of the paper with more ideas.

And then, of course, what you're doing right now is actually one of the most important things you can do because helping to understand how our emotions and our hearts are affected by climate change is so critical to staying resilient and to help others do the same in the face of this crisis. Thank you for taking this action, this important brave step, and for your willingness to do more.

So I'm really grateful to be able to hand you over to Catherine McGee, who's really one of the biggest and wisest hearts exploring the space of the Dharma and climate change. Catherine, thank you for being with us.

Thank you. I'm just pausing to land and feel my legs, feel my heart and the excitable sensation that's arising in my arms as I come to share and explore with you all. I'd like to bring to the conversation a question that I've been pondering that is helping me go deeper with the question of how to come into action. And the question goes something like this: What is the meeting place of the silence of the sage and the passion of the activist?

Where do they meet? And where do they meet in me? My love for the silent depth that we're invited into in our practice, where we can know what it's like to not be blown around by what arises internally and externally. And how to hold that with my love of conditions, my love of life, my love of what can arise internally and externally.

The other way I'm holding these questions is how to hold the timeless refuge of the Dhamma—being invited into that timeless knowing—with a very real urgency in time.

When we come into action, whatever action we take, we know from the Eightfold Path and from our direct experience that action always comes from intention. And our intention always comes from our view—right view, wise view, or unwise view, as the case may be. That right view heads up the Eightfold Path.

One way I like to understand right view was taught to me by one of my teachers: you are, I am, right now, here and now in this place, an open system. You're not a closed system, you're an open system. Everything we do affects everything else. There is no sealed unit, no fixed entity that we can retreat into or push our way forward with. We are an open system.

Another way of seeing this is that we sit at the interface of inner conditions—our inner responses moment to moment to the world within us and around us. We sit at this interface of inner and outer, how the outer world meets the inner. This is the meeting place. This is the meeting place that I want to reflect on and look into more deeply right now, because that's where we always are.

Right now as I speak, if I take a breath, that's where I am. There are inner conditions arising. There's still some kind of excitement and nervousness and tenderness in my heart, meeting the knowledge that I'm sitting here with many people. I can't see them, but I'm sitting here with many Dharma friends who want to listen and look into these questions. As I say that, my heart softens. Some of the nervousness relaxes. This is where we always are, at this interface.

Can we learn how to rest at that interface? Because that's sacred. That is whole. It has a wholeness to it where I'm not fragmenting or pushing away parts of myself or parts of the world in order to stay comfortable or okay.

It's not always easy to be an open system. There's so much that can be coming up for us sometimes and so much coming toward us. So we have our practice for stabilizing and grounding, to not be blown around. But it's not easy. We're not a fixed entity, this open system. It's sensitive, it's responsive, it's easily impacted, and we deeply feel.

In whatever actions we come to take in our response to the climate crisis, for this to be truly sustaining and truly nourishing, we are invited to cultivate this deep intimacy with ourselves—because that's where we are—so that whatever action we take, we don't leave ourselves behind.

Let me take us into an example. A couple of weeks ago, I had the good fortune to speak on Skype with one of my Dharma teachers to discuss what we were doing in this mindfulness and climate work together. He's an older, wise, old tree of a man who has handled a lot internally and externally. I know he cares deeply about the planet, her beings, and this crisis that we're in together.

As we sat and breathed together, considering this topic, I brought to the table some of the information from Lou's sheets—the science information that he gave us. I brought it into the meeting and said, "Can I offer this?" He said, "Yes." I said, "We now know that to stay within two degrees Celsius of warming—to have a fair chance of staying within that, which will help us avoid more catastrophic runaway climate change—we can only burn 565 more gigatons of fuel to make that much CO2 in the atmosphere."

He paused and considered. I continued, "And the fossil fuel companies currently have 2,790 potentially burnable gigatons in reserves, in the knowable traditional reserves."

We breathed. I looked at him and saw his face. I thought, oh my goodness, I've delivered some bad news. I said, "How are you doing? How is that, to hear that?"

He said, "Catherine, that is truly bone jangling. That is truly bone jangling."

His bones were jangled. As I watched him, it looked as though a wind had just blown right through him. "Stirring stuff," he said. "This is stirring stuff indeed."

So how do we take that stirring stuff into our practice so that we can hold it within the sacred matrix and restore ourselves into the sacred matrix? Because as we handle what arises—and as I was with him I could feel my impatience and my sorrow and my pain—as I learned to handle that, my silence, my love of the silence helps me not be blown away by all that's arising.

And the passion, the bone jangling, the fire that also arises can help me be alive. That energy, when together with silence, can serve to light up and illuminate more truth, more ways to see the situation, more ways to understand skillful actions. This is the meeting place for me—this silence, this grounded, imperturbable silence, and that which is willing to be perturbed, willing to be altered by this information, willing to be woken up further into the sacred matrix of life.

I'm thinking of the bright lights of our history and the bright lights that are shining in all of you as we come into this together. I'm thinking of those beings who really exemplify this spiritual depth and this bright, alive passion for justice. An easy one my mind goes to is Nelson Mandela, who had that spiritual depth to hold complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, discomfort, dis-ease. He could hold that, and yet that bright aliveness illuminated the territory for us. It's like a bright light in the world.

Having been with my teacher, I stood at my back door and I took this into my practice. As I handled my material—yes, there was my material, my stirred stuff—but also then my opening into more ease, less tightness. And then the thought arose: "But if I'm not tight, maybe I wouldn't act," as if trusting action would only come from tightening up.

I breathed and I softened. As I stayed close, this heart-mind, this chitta, this meeting place got wider and wider. I sensed, as all those little knots and pains unfolded, the energy didn't dissipate. I saw that this heart-mind was teeming with life—teeming with life that sometimes is encapsulated and hurting and in bondage, but also so much more than that. As I listened, I sensed this teeming life and I got the potentiality of us, this meeting place in coming into action.

This is sacred. This is the same nature, this heart-mind that I see out there. It's ever-receptive, restoring itself constantly and keeps revealing itself more and more the more I dare to live and breathe as an open system. This is where I want to meet you, and this is where, when I remember, this is where I meet myself. And I think as a sangha, this is where we can support each other in meeting each other. That our actions come from that—what flows out from that will be a reflection of that inner orientation.

So as urgent as our awakening is to a responsible and cooperative relationship with each other and the biosphere for the continuing of life, it's also essential if we are to remain human and let our human nature unfold its riches. So that's where I want to leave you as we move to Chris and move into action. Thank you so much.

"Thank you for your words, Catherine, so very beautiful and moving. I can feel them landing and the heart being opened and body softening into this incredible interface that we hold and can be with in such a sacred way. Chris, I'd like to welcome you. Chris is a very dear friend and I'm so grateful you can join us on the call. Please welcome you to share your considerations for us this morning."

"Thank you, Tanissara. And hello, everyone. It's really moving and inspiring to connect and be with you all in this conversation. I'd invite you and invite myself just again to reconnect with our contact with the ground, with the earth, with the body, with the breath, because it does seem as if reconnecting is what this is about.

The climate crisis has arisen as a result of us humans becoming tragically disconnected from ourselves and from each other and from the earth. As I'm becoming more mindful of my own patterns of connecting and disconnecting in relation to the climate crisis, I'm really appreciating the wisdom that's set out in a book called *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnston. Many of you may know this or have read it. In a very clear and compassionate and inspiring way, they highlight the perennial spiral of four processes that are involved in the work of reconnecting."

And so I'd like to offer a few reflections on these themes.

The first is coming from gratitude. As we know from the story of the Buddha's awakening, his first practice after enlightenment was gazing at the Bodhi tree in gratitude and appreciation. What a profoundly resourcing, healing, and reconnecting practice this is—learning how to open our awareness and senses to receive with gratitude the presence, the gift of a tree, of a forest, of a city park, of a garden, even of a plant in our homes.

Of course, First Nation and indigenous peoples across the globe have always known this is not a luxury. Practices of thanksgiving and deep communion with nature are essential to bringing us back into right relationship with the larger life of which we're part. They build reverence. They bring healing. They open us to joy and to love.

Whether we're feeling numb and disconnected in relation to climate change, or on fire and in flow as activists, or burnt out in despair and fatigue, there's deep value in making a regular practice of mindful, grateful being in nature—centralizing thanksgiv-

ing in our lives as a key part of our response to climate change. Thanksgiving and gratitude support and nourish the heart. They remind us of our deep belonging, and they help develop our capacity to honor our pain for the world.

This brings us to the second theme in the spiral: opening to the personal and collective pain that we hold for what human beings have done and are doing to the biosphere. We can reflect on what relationship with this pain is showing up in our experience right now.

As we do this, we notice we have different relationships at different times. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by anger, fear, or despair and need to practice reconnecting with a sense of resource that can support me—that can support us—in holding pain with mindfulness and compassion. I really appreciated Tara's words in the first of these conversations about dropping the storyline of the bad other and allowing, connecting, breathing with the raw energy that has within it the care and compassion that our hearts are born for.

I notice that my tendency is often to be in a state of disconnection where the daily demands of personal, work, and family life can keep me somewhat out of contact with the urgency of the climate crisis and with the searing social, racial, and ecological injustice and suffering taking place in frontline communities. This, I know, is the disconnection of privileged distance, because the place where I live happens not to have been badly affected by climate change so far.

There's a particular moral imperative for those of us in this position to lean in and educate ourselves by reading, watching, and learning. I appreciated Catherine's words about the importance of making this self-education a practice—to watch and read and learn and discover more about climate change and the suffering involved in it as a meditation, as conscious heart work. To really practice opening to this stirring material, because this is precisely the work we as human beings most need to practice: coming consciously into contact with the truth of climate change and its suffering, and allowing ourselves to be affected.

We need to learn the skills of this and pass them on to others. Research in the UK suggests that almost 80% of people accept the science of climate change, but only 14% act accordingly. There's talk about the need to move the unmoved—those who know the facts but are apparently not affected by them. It's been inspiring and challenging that some scientists have recently been acknowledging the role of spiritual tradition in doing this work. Perhaps there's an important role for the mindfulness movement as it spreads into wider society to play a part in this.

So we develop our capacity, learn how to resource ourselves, to turn toward and honor our pain—our individual and collective pain for the world. This opens us into the possibility of seeing with new eyes, a transformation of view. In the book, Joanna and Chris write about developing a wider sense of self, a different kind of power, a richer experience of community, and a larger view of time. I won't speak about each of these now, but I really encourage you to read this book and familiarize yourself with this material.

This practice of seeing with new eyes is really what we're doing when we practice mindfulness, when we practice dharma. There's this sense of dharma and mindfulness practice as consciously practicing ways of looking that lead our hearts toward greater freedom, connection, and compassion. There's subtle but significant contemplative work to do in becoming mindful of the ways of looking that disconnect us, that support the creation of self and other, whether in relation to other people or to the earth itself.

We can practice ways of looking that honor and open the deeper truths of our connection and interdependence. We can give time to this in our meditation practice—practicing widening our metta, our hearts, to include all creatures and the earth itself. Practicing holding the current climate emergency in a sense of vast time and noticing how this affects us. Practicing releasing the clinging to outcomes as we respond to climate change and trusting and feeling into the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself, as Thomas Merton puts it.

This is a transformation of view that reconnects us and develops our capacity to respond to suffering in the world with greater wisdom and compassion. This brings us to the fourth of these perennial themes: going forth, reconnecting contemplative work with action in the world. James will say more about this in a moment.

But as Catherine has been reflecting, contemplation and activism need and support each other. Climate change is a challenge to bring them into conscious relationship, into what Andrew Harvey calls sacred activism—the activism of the bodhisattva path. As the saying goes, action absorbs anxiety. It builds confidence and connection. And wise action coming from love is contagious.

And so now, as we're having these conversations, perhaps this is a good time for each of us to review and reflect. What are my specific intentions in response to climate change? Are there particular connections or pledges that I feel called or inspired to make? Are there ways in which I could reduce the carbon footprint of the building I call home—perhaps by looking at better insulation, or even just small daily acts? As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says in his autobiography, just because switching off the lights when leaving a room seems inconsequential, it doesn't mean we shouldn't do it.

I've been reviewing my transport patterns, mindful of the fact that these are a huge source of CO2 emissions, especially flying. Are there ways in which we could make different choices about travel, both locally and further afield? What about our diet—what I eat and where it comes from—and our other patterns of consumption? The Buddha presented compassionate renunciation, voluntary simplicity in the service of compassion, as a path to joy and an expression of love.

As Tanissara said at the start of today's conversation, having courageous conversations—talking with people in our homes, our communities, our sanghas, our workplaces—these are one of the main ways in which we can help bring this conversation into wider society and not collude with the taboo of keeping quiet about climate change. And there is a growing wisdom about how to do this in ways that engage and connect rather than alienate. I appreciate the work of George Marshall and the Climate Outreach Information Network here in Oxford in the UK on this.

What the science seems to be suggesting, and both Lou and Catherine have referred to this, is that the biggest leverage we can have in helping to prevent runaway climate change is in helping to build political momentum locally, nationally and internationally to help keep fossil fuels in the ground. This points to the importance of encouraging our councils, our churches, our universities, our arts organizations and governments to divest and change their relationship with the fossil fuel industries, seeking to replace fossil fuels with more sustainable sources of power.

This is not about creating more us-and-them thinking. All of us in developed economies are involved in consuming fossil fuel products. But what this is pointing to is the sense that this is a systemic problem that we all need to take action on to help move us to more sustainable ways of living.

And so as we contemplate the dharma of climate change, as we absorb what it's teaching us, as we seek to respond with wisdom and compassion to its challenge, as we hear its call to reconnect with ourselves, each other, and with the earth, perhaps this perennial spiral of four themes can hold and illuminate the contemplative and active work in which we're engaged: coming from gratitude, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes in ways that transform our view, and going forth into action together, knowing that we do so in sangha and in solidarity with each other and with this beloved, precious earth.

James then joined the conversation, bringing his perspective on the crucial importance of holding an inspiring vision. "For me, if my inspiration is not there, then I feel discouraged and defeated," he shared. He spoke about seeing dharma practice as a way to acknowledge suffering and transform it through wisdom and love as a vehicle for awakening.

James recounted his own journey: "I've been teaching about happiness for some time and was enjoying seeing dharma as a path of happiness for many years. But then I was stopped dead in my tracks when I read Bill McKibben's book *Earth* about four years ago. I was well aware of climate change, but that was the first time that I really let it sink in. And it shook me, as everyone is shaken when they take in this information. It was hard for me to talk about joy for a while."

He described a necessary period of absorption: "I really had to let it absorb for about a year, a year and a half, to just feel all the pain and wonder, 'What can I do? What can we do?' And then I realized that this is my dharma practice. How can I take this on as my practice and not be overwhelmed with it?"

Drawing on the Buddha's teaching, James reminded us: "In one of the discourses, the Buddha says, 'Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of their mind.' As I was frequently thinking and pondering upon how there's no hope and we're doomed, it became more and more a discouraging way to hold this. I realized I need to hold an inspiring vision and to find my inspiration wherever I can, because otherwise we're subject to what neuroscientists talk about as confirmation bias—everything we see will confirm our belief. As I found my own inspiration, I found that I had more energy for addressing this problem, both intrapersonally and outwardly."

Bhikkhu Bodhi's beautiful essay, "A Challenge to Buddhists," where he says: "The special challenge facing Buddhism in our age is to stand up as an advocate for justice in the world, a voice of conscience. This, in my view, is a deeply moral challenge marking a watershed in the modern expression of Buddhism."

This felt like a calling—oh, this is what we're meant to do, and I want to be part of that.

I also found inspiration in Andrew Harvey's beautiful book "The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism." He talks about this dilemma we're all facing, that the world is facing, as a dark night of the species. Just as our own Dharma practice requires us—anyone who's done deep work knows—to often pass through a dark night of the soul, as it's sometimes called in Christian terms, where we face our deepest fears and somehow transform them, emerging on the other side into a great awakening.

If we can see that the world is going through this dark night of the species, then we recognize this as a tremendous opportunity. We are living in an unsustainable way, and something needs to change. As one friend puts it, we are in a race between fear and consciousness.

I loved what Lou said on our first call: that things are getting worse and worse and better and better and faster and faster. That perfectly articulates this challenge we're in. Going through this together represents an opportunity for a great awakening.

When I reflect on this, I also think about Arnold Toynbee's statement. The great historian said that looking back, he thought perhaps the most important development in the 20th century would be Buddhism coming to the West. That's amazing foresight, and it's possibly true—whether you call it Buddhism or the Dharma or consciousness—this seeing ourselves in the bigger picture of interconnectedness, understanding actions and consequences, understanding the possibility of a worldwide deepening of consciousness and caring. This is what we have to offer.

When I think about it in that way, it becomes exciting: we are conveyors of that attitude and principle. It's up to us to hold something in a positive, possible light.

Another person who has inspired me is Bob Oppelt, who works with the Obama administration and is a longtime Dharma practitioner. We had him speak to the International Vipassana Teachers Conference, and he was a key mentor in helping us create the Dharma Teachers' Climate Change Statement. At one point I said to him, "Bob, it's so wonderful that your Dharma practice and your sustainability work have come together. How synchronous, how fortuitous."

He looked at me and said, "James, the Dharma holds the key to this."

I realized: here's one of the leading sustainability experts saying the Dharma holds the key. What can we do to more and more articulate these teachings and have a voice for consciousness?

This encourages me, as does seeing how quickly things can change. We have no idea what's possible. I don't want to be naive and say everything's going to work out just fine—it's quite possible there isn't time to change direction enough to avoid deep suffering. But we don't know, and things change so quickly.

Think about same-sex marriage in the last ten years, how conventional wisdom has shifted. Or even climate change in the last decade, even the last two years. I recently saw that two Senate candidates who were climate deniers have now changed their plat-

forms, realizing that position won't get them elected. That kind of shift in conventional wisdom changes who's in power, and once people see it's no longer acceptable to deny climate reality, things can change very quickly.

Or consider the divestment movement Chris mentioned—the Rockefellers and Stanford being part of this huge divestment wave. I've read that just a seven to ten percent shift in population thinking is what's needed to shift conventional wisdom generally. You don't have to change everybody—just work with those who are open to change. Most people, once they hear "this is how I'm supposed to think," will go along with that.

And as Catherine mentioned, Mandela talks about the multiplication of courage. When people gather together, they feed off each other's commitment. The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts—when people unite, amazing things can happen.

When we come from love and connect with each other, we experience that multiplication of courage. Neuroscience shows that when you hold someone's hand, you have a higher threshold for pain. Amazing things become possible.

As Chris said, action absorbs anxiety. I think it's important for us to get clear on our next steps, because remarkable things can happen when we hold hands and join together in possibility. We inspire others and become agents of inspiration.

With that, I want to lead us in a reflection in a few moments, where we can hold that inspiring vision and see what our next steps might be.

I'll stop here to allow us to transform what can feel like overwhelm into recognizing the power and opportunity in this moment—the urgency, the power, and the possibility of moving together into action and response. I'll be guiding us into a reflective inquiry that we'll explore in our small breakout groups.

Thank you, Kirk. What I'm hearing is a deep concern about those forces and influences that seem to operate without the kind of consciousness or care that our planet desperately needs right now. And I think this touches on something really important - how do we as practitioners work with what feels like destructive elements that seem overwhelming in their scope and intent?

One of the things I've found helpful is to remember that even when we encounter what appears to be unconscious or harmful behavior, we're still working within the realm of human consciousness. And consciousness, by its very nature, has the capacity

to wake up. Sometimes what looks like sociopathic behavior is actually deep suffering that has become so defended and armored that it can't feel the interconnection that we all share.

This doesn't mean we become naive or passive in the face of destructive forces. Rather, it invites us to bring both wisdom and compassion to our response. We can work to create systems and structures that don't reward harmful behavior, while also holding the possibility that even the most defended hearts can open.

I think James touched on this earlier when he spoke about the importance of not getting lost in overwhelm, but rather channeling our energy into skillful action. When we encounter these seemingly unconscious forces, our dharma practice invites us to respond from a place of clarity rather than reactivity - to meet unconsciousness with consciousness.

Barry or James, what comes up for you in response to Kirk's concern?

One was this idea of kind of a personal practice that would be helpful is around impermanence and death, and having some kind of regular contemplation around the fact that we're going to die, our earth is going to die, that nothing's permanent, and that that reflection kind of helps us cut through a lot of the stuff that we get into a lot of difficulty with, a lot of the desires and cravings that we get into that cause a lot of environmental damage.

And the other thing that came up for me was when I heard James talking about conventional wisdom, it reminded me of this quote from Gandhi about first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win. And it feels like in many ways we're at that fighting stage right now where the powers that be are really pushing back against environmental awareness and climate action.

So I wonder if the teachers have any reflections on how we can skillfully engage when we're in that fighting stage, and also about this practice of impermanence as it relates to environmental action.

That's a beautiful question, John. Thank you. Let me offer a reflection on both of those elements you've raised.

On the contemplation of impermanence and death—this is indeed a profound practice that can radically shift our relationship to consumption and environmental harm. When we truly internalize the reality that this body will die, that this earth as we know

it will transform, that all the things we cling to are temporary, it naturally creates a letting go. It helps us see through the illusion that accumulating more will somehow give us lasting security or happiness.

This contemplation isn't morbid—it's liberating. When we're not desperately trying to hold onto what's already slipping away, we can engage more freely and compassionately with what's actually here. We can make choices based on love rather than fear, on wisdom rather than craving.

Regarding the fighting stage that Gandhi described—yes, there's definitely a sense that we're in that phase where there's tremendous pushback against environmental consciousness. The question of how to engage skillfully when there's such resistance is crucial.

I think this is where the Middle Way becomes essential. We need the fierce compassion of a protector—someone willing to stand up for what's precious and vulnerable. But we also need to maintain our inner equilibrium so we don't get caught in reactivity that actually undermines our effectiveness.

This means practicing with our own anger and fear, using them as fuel for wise action rather than letting them burn us out or turn us into the very forces we're trying to counter. It means finding ways to stay connected to joy and beauty even while facing difficult truths about environmental destruction.

Thank you, John, for that wonderful reflection.

The one thing that gives me some sense of confidence—and I think Chris and James both addressed this, as has Tanissara—is knowing that my individual actions are not mine alone. My neighbors, people in my building, people in my sangha, people elsewhere are all doing the same thing, and those things all do have an impact.

That said, and I guess I'd mostly want to hear from Chris on this: it seems to me that if somehow our actions could reach and make one tectonic shift—reaching a Koch brother or the head of ExxonMobil or whoever—these people may be deluded, but they're not unintelligent. They know full well what the impacts of their actions are. If somehow a shift can be made on that level, then one of those shifts would have a massive impact throughout.

What we can do to make that happen is what's frustrating, because it's not easy to reach people like that. While James was talking about that 10% shift in the population, there's still this frustration of seeing the destruction these companies are doing and recognizing that if they would only shift, everything else would shift.

That's a really great question. Chris, we don't have a lot of time, but I'm wondering if you can reflect on what John is proposing.

I really appreciate what you're saying, John. It seems to me that these big institutions are also vulnerable. They're vulnerable to what people—they depend on us as consumers and on what we think of them. What we need is a growing mobilization of public opinion that starts to regard these big companies the way we've come to regard tobacco companies, where we see them very differently now from twenty years ago. If we can, through our conversations and our work, help each of us shift attitudes, then this is how we can engage and influence these big, seemingly impregnable organizations.

That's fantastic. Thank you so much. We're going to begin our wrap-up now.

Thank you, Krista, and thank you to our teachers. Just take a breath, because it's just so full and so rich, this conversation, and I'm so grateful. We're also grateful for all of you participating because we know that it represents others who are not actually online but will hear the conversation and are engaged.

Much gratitude to everyone. Before we finish, I'd like to mention that we do have the Facebook group that you can access through One Earth Sangha to continue the discussion. And Barry, if you would give us a minute about Maestro, which is our host for these conversations.

I'm the call driver for today. Maestro Conference provides leading industry teleconference features like being able to let people raise their hands and create breakout groups. If you would like information about Maestro Conference, simply press 1 on your telephone keypad. Maestro will send you information about the features and benefits of their service, including a free trial.

Thank you so much. I'd like to invite you all back to our fourth conversation, which will be next Sunday at the same time, when we host Chas DiCapua, Bonnie Duran, and Vinnie Ferraro. We'll continue on Facebook as well.

Catherine, please, can I invite you to finish us today with a sharing of blessings?

What a privilege to share the blessing here. I'm really letting myself feel it right now. If you will breathe, sense your feet on the ground. Take a breath through the heart-mind, this sensitivity, this intelligent, receptive, ever-regenerative quality.

In gratitude—really in gratitude for you all and all that you bring to the table here: your practice, your love of truth, your love of justice. To all the people who have been involved in setting this up, and all the different qualities you bring—we're all so different and with such different gifts and qualities that we bring to the table—in gratitude and in blessing.

May this blessing of being in sangha, of the awake and timeless refuge, be for the welfare of the many, for all beings: to the north, to the west, to the east, to the south, above and below, without exception—those that swim, those that crawl, those that fly, those that breathe, those that are human, all of us, wherever we are right now. May all beings receive the blessings of our good intention and our continuing work together. May all beings be free from suffering.

Thank you so much. It's beautiful. Again, thank you to everyone. Goodbye for now, and see you and listen to you and share together next Sunday.

And may this blessing of being in Sangha, of the awake and timeless refuge, may this be for the welfare of the many, for all beings—to the north, to the west, to the east, to the south, above and below, without exception. Those that swim, those that crawl, those that fly, those that breathe, those that are human—all of us, wherever we are right now.

May all beings receive the blessings of our good intention and our continuing work together. May all beings be free from suffering.

Thank you so much. It's beautiful.

And again, thank you to everyone. Goodbye for now, and see you and listen to you and share together next Sunday.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 284

Mindfulness and Climate Action: Part 4

Rob Burbea · 1h05

> *In this fourth installment of a series on mindfulness and climate action, three dharma teachers offer profound perspectives on responding to our environmental crisis through Buddhist practice. Bonnie Duran frames climate change as an outcome of colonization, presenting mindfulness as "neurodecolonization" that counters the three root poisons (lobha, dosa, moha) manifesting in our economic and political systems. Drawing on indigenous wisdom traditions, she emphasizes how the Eightfold Path cultivates right view of our fundamental interconnectedness. Chas DiCaprio examines patriarchal paradigms that overvalue intellect while devaluing the body, women, and nature. He connects our disconnection from our "small body" to our abuse of the "big body" of Earth, referencing the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta's emphasis on mindfulness of body as foundational practice. Vinnie Ferreira guides listeners into embodied presence, exploring how to transform paralysis into skillful action while remaining rooted in our deepest nature as "sprouted earthlings." The conversation weaves together themes of belonging, revolution, and the Buddha's teaching that spiritual friendship forms the foundation of the path. Through guided reflection and community dialogue, participants explore practical questions about balancing personal needs with planetary responsibility, finding strength through collective wisdom rather than individual effort.*

Welcome to everyone to our call today. Welcome back and welcome to those joining us for the first time. My name is Tanisara and I am the host for our conversation, Mindfulness, Dharma and Climate Action.

I'd like to warmly welcome our teachers. First, Bonnie Duran is a Dharma teacher at Seattle Insight Meditation Society and helped to establish the People of Color and Ally Sanghas in Seattle and Albuquerque. Bonnie is involved in Native American spiritual practices, is an associate professor in the Schools of Social Work and Public Health at UW, and director of the Center for Indigenous Health Research. So a very heartfelt warm welcome to Bonnie.

Also joining us is Chas DiCaprio, who is resident teacher at Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Chas trained in meditation, primarily in the Theravada school with Burmese masters and senior Vipassana teachers and monastics from the Thai forest tradition. Chas is interested in how the basic material of our everyday lives, including relationships, can be used as a vehicle for awakening.

And a very warm welcome to Vinnie Ferreira. Vinnie has studied with several renowned spiritual teachers, including Ajahn Sumedho and the Dalai Lama, as well as spending a year at San Francisco Zen Center Hospice Program sitting with the dying. Vinnie has taught meditation to incarcerated youth and adults and is currently head trainer of the Mind-Body Awareness Project. He also teaches at the Urban Dharma Center in San Francisco.

I'm so grateful that our teachers can join us today for our conversation. I also welcome back our team: Kristen Barker from One Earth Sangha, Yong Oh from Chattanooga Insight, and Barry Bettman from Maestro Conference.

Before we begin, I'd like to encourage the offering of dana—making a contribution to help support the cost of running this program and to further the work of One Earth Sangha. If you'd like to do that, please go to the One Earth Sangha website and make a contribution, which we so deeply appreciate.

Let's take a breath together and really feel ourselves in our bodies as we breathe deeply. Arriving into our presence, into our hearts, and into our seats here, feeling the sensation of sitting, connecting with that sensation, with the ground, with the earth elements, and with the feeling of the breath in the body.

This week, Lou, the co-founder of One Earth Sangha and science advisor for our conversation, is on retreat. So I'd like to address a question asked by several of you regarding advocating a plant-based diet.

There are several dimensions to this question. First, land use for animal agriculture is one of the leading causes of greenhouse gases heating our planet. Livestock production occupies about 30% of the land surface of the Earth and accounts for 18% of CO2, 37% of methane gases—which are 20 times more potent than CO2—and 65% of nitrous oxide, which is 300 times more potent than CO2. Altogether, 7 billion humans raise 70 billion farm animals.

The single largest contributor to environmental ills is caused by modern factory farming and animal agricultural processes, which lead to deforestation—for example, an acre of rainforest is decimated every second. This leads to water scarcity—it takes 600 gallons of water to produce one hamburger. It leads to destabilization of communities that are cleared off the land to make way for agricultural farming practices, which creates hunger as grains go to animal feed rather than directly to humans. It leads to the decimation of wildlife, oceans, and the loss of species and biodiversity of plants and insects. It is also the leading cause of water pollution—in California alone, 70 million animals produce as much untreated manure as 456 million people.

On a humane and compassionate level, and in accordance with our first precept to refrain from taking life, it is an act of ethics and compassion to be aware of the horrific practices now involved in the production of meat and animal-based products. Truly, if there is a hell on earth, it is factory farming and the shipment of animals destined for the slaughterhouse, where tremendous suffering and trauma is released and processed ultimately into our bodies and atmosphere, increasing violence and disease.

As we awaken, we become acutely aware of our interconnection with all beings, which means we become more sensitive to the suffering and rights of others, including the animal kingdom, and our need to act accordingly. It is in this regard that it's important we consider reducing our reliance on animal-based products.

Today, I am deeply grateful to have our wonderful teachers with us, focusing on this theme of connection and interconnection. It's with great pleasure that I welcome Bonnie to speak with us first.

Thank you, Tanisara, and everyone who's on the call. Thank you so much for this invitation to speak today.

As a person who works in Indian country—meaning in indigenous communities—and as a Buddhist, I think both perspectives can understand the truth of climate change as a natural outcome of colonization. I want to explore that a little on this call.

One way to think about the three root poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion that the Buddha and other teachers discuss so eloquently is as a process of colonization. They colonize our hearts and minds. Greed manifests as unending craving for anything that will be permanent and provide us some sense of contentment and well-being. Hatred and delusion manifest as conceit, where we have thoughts that we're better than or worse than or the same as others, and the sense of self forever has us creating an identity for ourselves. And delusion, which in my understanding is the root of all of these, is us not understanding our interconnectedness and experiencing ourselves as separate human beings.

And in my life, I have taken the Eightfold Path and mindfulness as the medicine for these afflictions. One of my colleagues in Indian country who teaches mindfulness, Dr. Michael Yellowbird, calls mindfulness "neurodecolonization."

Next week we'll have the benefit of listening to Dr. David Loy on this call. He has a wonderful conceptualization of the three root poisons on a grander scale—that the three root poisons colonize our economic system, our political and governance system, and our knowledge development system. And it's a dualistic error to think that we don't need to work on decolonizing these levels as well.

One way that delusion manifests in a larger context is not understanding that there are more than one way of knowing things. In Indian Country, we really do believe that going back to or including indigenous ecological knowledge is one way to think about a very important, cogent, and wisdom-informed approach to climate justice. Some ecological knowledge is very similar to Western linear conceptual science, but it's also very deeply rooted in what we understand to be intuitive awareness.

We all have two knowledge systems. We have a knowledge system of intuitive awareness that—the way I talk about it—mindfulness is the data gathering system for our knowledge system of intuitive awareness, seeing things very directly beyond concepts. And then, of course, we all have our Western linear conceptual way of looking at things, which is not inherently bad, it's just inherently limited.

Greed manifests in our larger social context through our economic system that promotes unchecked accumulation as an antidote to our suffering. I'm sure none of us have ever acquired anything that gave us a sense of contentment beyond never wanting anything again. In the larger social context, hatred manifests in our polarized political system where people just can't seem to get things done, at least in the United States right now. And hatred manifests in our war industrial complex as it applies to other countries and other people.

But in my view, the Buddha Dharma is the medicine for this suffering. Mindfulness is a form of neurodecolonization. We know that when we practice, we are uprooting our intentions for greedy intentions, our aversive intentions, and our deluded intentions, and trying to replace them with the truth of how things are. It really uproots our vipallasas.

I love this teaching of the Buddha—our distortions of perception, which arise as we understand ourselves as individual selves. Our distortions of thought that come from that, where we try to accumulate as much as we can in order to situate ourselves or to bring some level of satisfaction. And then a vipallasa or distortion of view—that deeply held belief that we have that we can exploit and consume without consequences to our environment.

For me, the Eightfold Path brings us into alignment with things as they really are. One of the deepest realizations that we all are opening to is how we're not separate people. And I think climate change has absolutely proven that to be true. The Eightfold Path and mindfulness promotes our understanding of right view—that we are all interconnected and that we all are going to share the same fate.

I want to talk briefly about one manifestation of this indigenous, intuitive way of knowing. The presidents of Bolivia and Ecuador, both indigenous states, have actually changed their constitution to give rights to Pachamama or to give rights to nature. In Bolivia, the constitution now reads that nature has a right to live and to exist, to continual vital cycles and processes free from human alteration. Their constitution states that nature has the right to pure water and clean air and the right to balance and the right not to be polluted. And nature has the right to have cellular structure not modified by genetic altering. I think that's one manifestation of indigenous knowledge or intuitive awareness that humans are not at the center of the life cycle, but definitely a part of a larger approach.

I want to end my brief talk here with a quote from John Mohawk, who was one of our spiritual and political leaders. He died in 2006, but what he says here really speaks to us as beings that are deeply interconnected.

John Mohawk says, "The culture that I come from saw the universe as the fountain of everything including consciousness. In our culture, we're scolded for being so arrogant to think that we're smart. An individual is not smart according to our culture. An individual is merely lucky to be a part of a system that has intelligence that happens to reside in them. In other words, be humble about this always. The real intelligence isn't the property of an individual. The real intelligence is the property of the universe itself."

Drawing on this universal intelligence, we come to understand our deep interconnectedness and we come to understand how colonization and climate change as an outcome of that continues to disproportionately affect people in resource-poor countries and indigenous communities. Turning back to incorporating indigenous knowledge and intuitive awareness in the Eightfold Path gives us a way out of the hopefully not inevitable outcome of our unfettered use of resources and exploitation of nature.

I think that intuitive awareness is where we come to see the reality of impermanence, of things changing all the time. The reason why no conditioned experience will give us ultimate satisfaction is because things are always changing. Intuitive awareness is where we see the truth of dukkha, the fundamental unsatisfactoriness of any conditioned experience. And it's where we open to and have deep realization of our interconnected existence—not as separate beings, but as all part of an ecosystem that thrives and lives together or dies together. That too is intuitive awareness.

The Buddha said, go live in the forest as a way to open to truth. And indigenous communities have been stewards of the forest for millennia.

I really feel this movement of humility. We need to be more humble, to move out of this linear paradigm of Western knowledge and take a humble journey into the wisdom that First Nations peoples, indigenous peoples, have held about the earth and reality for millennia.

So Chas, I'd like to welcome you from Insight Meditation Society, a very venerable institution supporting the practice of mindfulness, awareness and meditation for many years. Thank you for being with us today. Would you share your thoughts on this pressing issue of entering our times of climate emergency from the place of the Dharma?

Yes, thank you, Tanisha. I must say I was taking notes frantically trying to capture all the good points Bonnie was making. I'm also seeing on my screen all the people from around the world on this call, and that itself is wonderful. Even if nothing else happens with this call, the fact that we're doing this is a huge step in the right direction.

Before I begin, I want to clarify two things. First, I'll be talking about technology, and it might seem negative, but I'm not saying technology is all negative. We're on this call because of technology. Second, I'll be speaking about masculine and feminine energies, which don't equate to male and female. They're energies within the human psyche—very powerful ones that Jung helped us understand. Much can be understood when we place that lens onto what's happening.

A few years ago, information came to me that the institution with the largest endowment in the world—the largest pile of resources that people have given to it—is Harvard University. When I heard that, I thought it makes sense, actually, because often money is energy, and we place our energy where we think it's important. So it would make sense that an institution about intellectual knowledge would receive so much energy from so many people.

This reflects the society we live in, really the world we live in as it becomes more homogenized. The intellect and technology and the esteem given to them—it's not just that they exist, which is fine—but the esteem they're given, almost the bowing down to them, gets out of hand. It gets out of balance.

Many of you may have seen the movie Koyaanisqatsi, that beautiful film with no words, just pictures. As many know, that Hopi word means "life out of balance." We can see this happening—the bowing down to technology or science. The food pyramid gets reconstructed, scientists say "eat this," and everyone in advertising runs in that direction. Then the food pyramid changes, they say "eat this," and everyone runs in that direction again. There's this sense of giving our power over to what is based in science and technology.

I even see this with the exploding research in mindfulness. They're hooking up the brain, and I wonder, why don't they hook up the heart? Why don't they put electrodes on the heart and study the heart?

So you can almost see that bias towards the brain or towards the intellect, even showing up in our arena, in our Dharma arena in terms of the research.

All this has a root. As Bonnie mentioned, the colonization absolutely plays a role. But I want to take that root even a step further back and talk about patriarchy—this dominant energy or paradigm in our world that's been going on for thousands and thousands of years.

In patriarchy, which tends to be masculine energy dominated, the intellect is held in high esteem. In the paradigm of patriarchy, the intellect is probably most valued. And then, of course, there needs to be a shadow side to that. So in the paradigm of patriarchy, the body or that which is feminine tends to be devalued.

I could spend the rest of the call talking about examples of this, but just one interesting example, especially in terms of spirituality: In many religions or in many spiritual places in the world, certainly in the past and still present some, women were not allowed in the temple during that time of the month when they were bleeding—body being seen as somehow dirty and devalued.

This is powerful, deep, insidious messaging that we all inherit, whether we know it or like it. It's just something that we inherit.

So in this paradigm of patriarchy, because that which is of the intellect and that which is masculine is dominant and revered, it's going to get a lot of energy, a lot of resources. Again, think of Harvard University. And then, in order to be that unbalanced, if something's going to be revered, something's going to have to be put down. The feminine energies are going to be put down. And those manifest in the body—often feminine energy associated with women, but again, as I mentioned, it's not exclusive—but also in the natural world.

So I want to talk about the ways that in this patriarchal paradigm, we have devalued and therefore disconnected from the body, from women, and from the natural environment. Of course, you can see the connection between those three.

Often when I teach meditation, I have to spend quite a lot of time working with students to really get folks connected to their bodies—not just the idea of their body, but really settled back into and having a very intimate connection with the body. Because of the patriarchal environment, we've really become disconnected from our body. We

spend so much time in thought, so much time in the intellect. And during those times, the somatic experience of the body is completely lost. It's not present. And so we become disconnected from the body.

Then we come into this weird relationship with the body, this thing that we've gotten disconnected with. On one hand, we either spend too much time kind of paying attention to it, almost revering it too much—you can see that in hyper getting in shape and working out and how one looks, that end of the spectrum. And on the other end of the spectrum is just the abuse of the body and not taking care of it.

I want to point out a correlation with the natural world. One of the points I want to make here is the connection between how we relate to our own bodies and how we relate to the natural world. So again, with the natural world, we may have this view of "oh it's so beautiful, it's so wonderful," and we want to make parks and national parks, and there's a part of us that knows just how exquisite it is. And yet, as with the body, we also abuse it. We heavily abuse it. So as goes the body, as goes the natural world. What we are disconnected from becomes much easier to harm.

If we are standing next to another human being and we are upset with them, it's much more difficult to be really mean to them than it is when we're in our car and someone cuts us off and there's space and steel and glass between them. The level of violence that can come out of us given that lack of connection—what we're not connected to becomes much easier to harm.

When I'm using body and nature as two different words, sometimes I like to say small body, big body. We become disconnected from body. And therefore, based on everything that Bonnie was talking about, based on what we know about greed, hatred, and delusion, those three defilements then run rampant based on that disconnection.

One of the reasons I said if nothing else happens with this call, it would be a good thing, is because part of addressing climate change is about us connecting, about us coming together. And just by being together in this call, on one level, we're in relationship.

But we have to start—all our dharma practice starts with ourselves. And then we take it into the wider world. So starting with ourselves and starting with connecting with our bodies is just so key.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha talks about mindfulness of body, which is the first foundation. And if you look at that sutta and the number of pages that it takes up, the section on the body takes up more space

and the Buddha has more words to say about it than any of the other three foundations of mindfulness. So this connecting with the body, being mindful of it, is just totally essential. And it's a coming home that we really need to come back to.

If we can do that, or as we do that, it's a natural connection. It's not like we have to do anything. The more we are connected to body, the more we are connected to body—to small body, to big body.

That's beautiful. Chas, thank you so much. And thank you for bringing and weaving in from Bonnie her wisdom on this issue of the overarching connection with patriarchy and its impact so deeply for all of us—whatever gender or outside the gender binary—and bringing it back to a place where we can begin with our own bodies. Thank you so much.

Just taking a breath and receiving and drinking in those words from Chas that I personally feel very moved to hear and nourished by.

I'm also very glad that we have Vinny with us on our call today. Vinny is a very dear friend and practitioner who goes to the difficult places to practice and share the Dharma like a great Bodhisattva. So Vinny, thank you so much for being with us. We really welcome and appreciate you and invite you to share your thoughts.

Thank you so much. Thanks for the invitation and setting this whole thing up. It seems like a really necessary conversation, and so much has been offered already.

When I started thinking about this conversation and this theme of interdependence, I was brought back to the Buddha and what he talked about around spiritual friends—that they were the foundation of the spiritual path. He knew that our connection lies at the very core of the human psyche.

So what is this journey that Chas and Bonnie were both speaking about? This journey back to belonging, from this disembodiment to the truth of our interdependence. I experience it as slowly waking up out of a trance. How do we wake up to the truth that we're living in an interconnected field?

When we look at the response of the Earth to everything that's been happening, you could say it's a lawful response to the stress that we've put on this planet. But I want to bring it back down to a really personal level. How do we rest in this field of interconnectedness when ninety percent of our time is spent indoors? How can we love something that we're removed from or that we even ignore? This is this feeling of disembodiment—I'm not connected to me, so how can I be connected to you or anything else?

I like what Chas was saying about how the practice has been readying us for this conversation. We know how to do this. So how do we get back in touch with this belonging?

The first place I go personally in my practice is: how is this just some kind of funhouse of mirrors? How can I see this in myself, what Bonnie was talking about around greed, hatred, and delusion? How do I see these energies in me? How do I see myself as hooked on growth and progress—just one more workshop, just one more thing, and then I'll be okay? This need to improve and progress. How do we see that mirrored in the acceleration of culture, where everything needs to be better and faster and stronger?

It can be an overwhelming time for a lot of us, caught in our own survival beliefs that I'm not enough or I need more—this kind of addiction mentality. It's easy to be almost paralyzed into no response. I see that in myself. I know that I can get so busy setting up a good base camp that I never get around to climbing the mountain because I don't know where to begin. It all seems so big.

I know we all cherish this principle of non-harming, but how do we turn that into action? How do we move from belief to action? How do we discern the difference between the acceptance that we've been practicing and activism?

The words of E.B. White come to mind as he talks about: "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day."

I think this is where I'd like to put our attention. Is there a place on this path for revolution? And was the Buddha really a revolutionary? What he laid out was really revolutionary at that time, for sure. Even 2,600 years later, it seems like it's a pretty revolutionary path, as we say, against the stream.

I want to read a little bit from a teacher that has taught many of us about reconnecting.

This makes it hard to plan the day. I think this is where I'd like to put our attention. Is there a place on this path for revolution? Was the Buddha really a revolutionary? What he laid out was truly revolutionary at that time, and even 2,600 years later, it seems like a pretty revolutionary path—as we say, against the stream.

I want to read a paragraph from a teacher who has taught many of us about reconnecting—Joanna Macy. She writes:

"When we include the natural world in our identity, we're brought into a much larger story of who we are and what we are. Recognizing ourselves as part of the living body of the earth opens us to a greater source of strength. The expression 'at your age' takes on a different meaning when we see ourselves as part of an amazing flow of life that started on this planet more than 3.5 billion years ago. We come from an unbroken lineage that has survived through five mass extinctions. People fear that if they let despair in, they'll be paralyzed because they're just one person. Paradoxically, by allowing ourselves to feel our pain for the world, we open ourselves up to the web of life and realize that we're not alone."

Knowing that the voice we most need to hear comes from within us, I want to invite everybody to sit back for a few minutes and go inside. I'll guide it a little. This is what we've been practicing—how to go inside and listen. This willingness to turn toward and to stay present.

We begin by feeling the sincerity of our intention and sensing the flavor of caring. How do we stay in the conversation if it feels overwhelming and difficult and uncomfortable—in this cloud of unknowing, this place of no answers? We're really sitting in the questions and connecting to this deepest, wisest part of you.

Connecting down into the body of the earth like the Buddha plunging his hand into the earth, we allow our awareness to descend. We're literally made up of earth—we're sprouted earthlings. John Seed writes, "I try to remember that it's not me trying to protect the rainforest. Rather, I am part of the rainforest protecting itself. I am the part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking."

So we connect to this deep intention to listen to whatever's alive. We share this connection to Mother Earth with all beings, all a part of her. When we reconnect to this greater intelligence than our own, we realize we have the ability to give voice to her struggles. We come home to our deepest nature because the enormity of the task forces us into a collective response.

Each of us is a community. Each one of our bodies is a community of seventy trillion cells that work together—talk about an ecosystem. In a millisecond, our body processes ten times more operations than there are stars in the universe. That's us. So we're already working together. Whether we know it or not, we can draw strength from this earth, from the planet, and from nature.

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu puts it: "What we are doing with this practice is giving back to nature that which we mistakenly appropriated as our own."

We know we didn't make this journey alone. We're all standing on a lot of shoulders. It's just something to acknowledge.

I'll end with the words of Rumi: "We began as a mineral. We emerged into plant life and into the animal state, and then into being human. And always we have forgotten our former states, except in early spring when we slightly recall being green again. Humankind is being led along an evolving course through this migration of intelligences. And though we seem to be sleeping, there is an inner wakefulness that directs the dream and that will eventually startle us back to the truth of who we are."

Maybe finally just ending with a deep, low bow to whatever it is that you come into contact with when you go inside and listen. Inward and outward.

I appreciate your time and attention. Thank you.

"Thank you so much, Vinny. I think when I go inside right now, I feel like I want to cry. The combination—I feel like that through all of these calls after each teacher speaks."

Thank you so much for those beautiful words of gratitude, Alex. It really speaks to the power of sangha and how connection can transform our sense of isolation around these challenging times we're facing.

The poignancy of what you shared about feeling alone in this work, and then discovering that we're not alone at all—that there are people all over the world who share these same concerns, these same hopes, these same commitments to responding with love to what's happening on our planet. That's really the medicine that sangha offers us.

And I appreciate what you said about working with whatever material we have at hand. Whether it's the frustration, the anxiety, the anger, or even our attachments to particular outcomes—all of this becomes part of our practice, part of our path of awakening. We don't have to wait until we feel differently or until we've resolved all our inner conflicts before we can be of service. We can work with exactly what's present right now.

Let's continue with our sharing. Who else would like to offer something to our global circle? Remember, you can press one on your phone if you'd like to speak.

I think what's emerging so beautifully in this conversation is this recognition that none of us has to carry this alone. Whether we're in San Francisco or Norway or anywhere else in the world, we're part of something much larger than our individual efforts. And that belonging, that sense of being held by something greater, is itself a revolutionary act in a world that often feels fragmented and disconnected.

This is exactly what the Buddha was pointing to when he established the sangha as one of the three jewels. The community of practitioners, the web of relationships committed to awakening and service—this isn't just nice to have, it's essential. It's medicine for the isolation and despair that can arise when we face the magnitude of what needs healing in our world.

Well, I'll just say to you, Alex, thank you for contributing your energy. You're a part of this too, and your gift to others in being present for all of us. So, you know, right back at you.

How about Siobhan? Siobhan Quintero, you're on. We can hear you.

So I think this is for Vinnie or for Chaz. I know for myself, I'm in the midst of creating a business for myself. And I feel a lot of tension between building a business and trying to create a living. I feel stuck when I say successful and then feeling the tension with that in contrast or coupled with this bigger undertaking. It feels to me like the place to start is just to feel where I'm at, but I would really, really love to hear some thoughts from the teachers.

I'm happy to talk with you. I'd just like to understand the question a bit more. Can you say a bit more of exactly what you'd like to explore?

Sure, yeah. So this place of tension between personal advancement, so to speak—like making a living, trying to be successful beyond just paying bills—and also at the same time trying to... like I feel stuck. It's like, well, should I not be doing that because I should just be trying to dedicate all my time and attention to this crisis? And yet that's not realistic. I've got to pay bills. So if you could just speak to the struggle between personal accomplishment, achievement, need, and this greater reality that we seem to be in. Is that helpful?

Yeah, totally. That helps me understand the distinctions you're making here.

Yeah, I think we do have a personal responsibility to our own sustenance, you know. It's almost like when the Buddha was close to enlightenment, and Mara visits yet again saying, "Look, you're going to die, man. This is not going to help anybody. You can actually do some help if you just make this kind of agreement with me." And he comes

poised as almost disguised as compassionate. So it's like, we do have to take care of ourselves in order to do any kind of good work. That was the truth of that message in that moment.

So I do believe in being able to sustain ourselves so we can actually stay in the exploration and continue to do our work in the world in whatever way that manifests, right? So what kind of work are you thinking about doing or what kind of work do you do?

Sure. I have what I'm trying to build as a high-end in-home professional pet sitting business. So it's, yeah, it's that part of personal advancement. And of course—well, I shouldn't say of course—for me, a bigger vision of it is wanting to do well financially so that I can give more time and energy and have more visibility in my community to really give to the causes that I care about a lot more and to speak to those causes. And yet I still wonder about my own greed and myself, my concern and the seduction of how I appear to others or... I don't know, I mean, there's just a lot wrapped up in it, I guess.

Yeah, yeah, I totally hear that. I mean, I talked a little bit about where this line lands in us between acceptance of what is and activism, right? So I think that kind of line runs through each one of us where it's like, okay, how do I most advance this conversation, not only within myself, but how am I part of a larger whole?

And I really do feel like we get our answers when we sit down and listen deeply to our own voice. That's what I wanted to contribute to the conversation after Bonnie and Chaz laid out the landscape so well. I felt like, okay, the only thing that's left for me is to try to bring people back to their bodies and see that these are really where our answers come from—the voice within.

So I think we're all in this balancing act of how much are we building the world and how much are we tending to this inner life. I don't know what to say beyond that. This balancing act is super normal for all of us. And it seems like if you keep connecting to this intention that you have—this beautiful intention to even speak up or be on this call or trying to balance these two energies—I feel like you're in good hands. Does that make sense, Siobhan?

That was perfect. That was great. Thank you.

Thank you.

Okay, well, thank you so much for the participation from everyone. We have to move into wrapping up our conversation today.

I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of the teachers for their profound contributions today. I know that all the teachers who participate in our course spend considerable time in deep dialogue together, going deeply into their own practice and inner processes so that they can offer these illuminating glimpses of empowered and deeply embodied communication. I hope these exchanges will inspire us toward our own meaningful conversations and further inquiry and exploration. This isn't simply about receiving ready-made answers, but about each of us claiming our power to engage authentically and explore these vital territories ourselves.

Next week brings our final conversation in this series, and we're deeply excited to welcome Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ayya Santussika Bhikkhuni, Ayya Santacitta Bhikkhuni, and Dr. David Loy, who will guide us in bringing all of these teachings into concrete action. Please note that there's a time change occurring in the USA and perhaps other regions as well, so do check your local listings.

Beyond the conclusion of this series, Werner will be hosting ongoing gatherings, so this is not an ending but rather the beginning of our continued engagement together. Please join us next week for this culminating conversation.

To bring our beautiful and profound dialogue to a close, I invite Bonnie to share blessings with us all in a deeply prayerful way.

Coming back into our bodies, as Chaz and Vinny so beautifully outlined, let us rest in this present moment. The Mangala Sutta teaches us that regardless of how we experienced this hour and a half together, it is conducive of blessings. Let us gather all of these blessings—all the positive energies of practicing the Dharma together—and offer this merit to all our relatives in every direction.

May the positive energies of our practice be dedicated to the happiness, well-being, and awakening of all our relatives: the two-legged, the four-legged, all our winged relatives, the finned ones, and even the creepy crawlers. May they all benefit from our practice.

I offer special mention of all our animal relatives who suffer so tremendously. As Thanissara shared earlier, they are treated so despicably by various industries. May we open our hearts to their suffering and find ways to alleviate it.

We dedicate this merit to all our relatives, both close and distant, throwing no one out of our hearts—even those we might blame or find difficult. Understanding that the root of their greed, hatred, and delusion is our own greed, hatred, and delusion, we extend this dedication to them as well. May they open to the reality of things as they are.

Aho.

Let me also acknowledge Maestro Conference, which has generously supported our conversation today. Maestro Conference provides the advanced teleconference features that enable gatherings like ours. If you'd like to learn more about their services, simply press 1 on your telephone keypad, and they'll send you information about their features and benefits, including a free trial period.

And so we close with deep gratitude—to our teachers, to our team, and to each participant. May we carry everything we've listened to, everything we've sat with, everything we've practiced with today into our hearts, our bodies, our lives, and into the world around us for the benefit of all beings.

Thank you so very much. We'll see you next week.

CHAPTER 285

Mindfulness and Climate Action: 5

Rob Burbea · 1h08

> *This concluding session of the Mindfulness, Dharma and Climate Action series addresses the crucial question: How do we transform contemplation into effective action? David Loy opens by challenging traditional Buddhist approaches that either seek transcendence from the world or merely psychological adjustment to it, proposing instead that awakening requires reconstructing our dualistic relationship with reality. He emphasizes the bodhisattva path as Buddhism's most vital contribution to climate work - the integration of wisdom practice with compassionate engagement in the world's suffering.*
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> *Ayya Santussikā outlines practical steps for building a Buddhist climate movement, calling for organized resistance to corporate and governmental moral failures through coordinated action, divestment campaigns, and political engagement. She announces plans for a national Buddhist network to mobilize communities around climate legislation and local environmental justice issues. Ayya Santacitta reinforces this call to action, emphasizing that we are both the first generation experiencing climate change and the last able to address it meaningfully.*
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> *The discussion weaves together the five precepts, particularly non-harming and not taking what isn't given, with contemporary climate ethics. Drawing on the Buddha's earth-touching mudrā and the fearlessness gesture, the teachers present climate action as authentic dharma practice rather than worldly distraction. This represents a powerful synthesis of contemplative depth with urgent environmental advocacy, offering both spiritual practitioners and climate activists a framework for sustained, joyful engagement with our planetary crisis.*

Welcome everyone who has joined us for the call this morning. This is the last call for our series on Mindfulness, Dharma and Climate Action. It's the last call of the series but not the last way that we can gather around this really pressing subject.

I'm so glad you can join us today and I'm also very glad to welcome our teachers who will be presenting today. Unfortunately, Bhikkhu Bodhi messaged us this morning and said that he was so looking forward to joining us and giving some input, but unfortunately, due to health considerations, he's unable to join us. I really recommend that each of us explore the work that Bhikkhu Bodhi has done as a leader for all of us in climate action and bringing our attention to the emergency of our situation.

I'm very glad that we have David Loy and Aya Santajita and Aya Santusica joining us on the call to give some guidance and input, and also to our team, Lou and Kristen from One Earth Sangha, Yong and Barry. Without further ado, I would like to hand over to you Lou to begin our call. Our focus today is what can we actually do? How can we turn all of these conversations that we've had, all these considerations into action? So, Lou.

Thank you, Tanisra. Hello, everyone. Such a wonderful topic to wrap up this series on.

Climate change really is such a big problem that sometimes it feels that we can't make a difference. In fact, social scientists tell us that this sense of hopelessness is one of the top reasons why people don't act at all. But as our conversation last week reminded us, we aren't just our small selves in this. We're part of this larger body that's acting. And together we absolutely can make a difference in so many different ways on this issue.

I can tell you from where I sit, change is happening and we are making a difference. The background paper that we shared for this series includes on pages five and six and in the appendix some of the many ways that you can get involved, that people can get involved. I want to mention two quickly without judging them to be better than the others, but just as examples of the change that's happening and different ways to get involved.

The first is to really name a revolution that's happening right now in our electric power generating systems around the world. As you probably know, the generation of electric power is the number one producer of CO2 pollution in the world, but right now there's a revolution going on in that system and it's driven to a great degree by a revolution in solar power. As you might know, there's been a sixty percent reduction in the cost of solar panels over the last five years and a ninety-nine percent reduction in those costs since 1977.

What studies show is that if as few as five percent of households in many utility systems in, for example, North America and Europe were to switch to solar panels on their roofs, this would create a tipping point that could change our entire utility systems towards renewable energy. The background paper has more details about how going solar can be accomplished, especially with a focus on North America and Europe, but with resources for other areas, including ways that individuals can join together to make this change happen through bulk purchases of solar systems that can bring costs down even further, like going to Costco to buy solar panels with your neighbors.

So solar is a place where every individual action really adds up and it's a place where there are tipping points that are right around the corner.

The second area that I wanted to mention quickly is political action, which is absolutely critical and sometimes can be discouraging because our political systems don't always seem up to the challenge. But we can't ignore the opportunities that arise within those systems to make change around climate. The last month's People's Climate March began a road that leads to Paris in December of 2015, where countries will negotiate a new international climate agreement.

There's a key stop on that road to Paris that I want to make everyone aware of, and that is the deadline of next March, 2015, when countries have to put new national carbon pollution cuts on the table, all countries of the world, ahead of Paris. This is a key moment. No matter where you live right now, in your country, the government is developing a new national target for reducing climate pollution. So I encourage you to find out what that process is like in your country and make your voice heard.

In the U.S., you can add your name to a petition to President Obama to put a strong target on the table for the United States. You can call your members of Congress to say we want a strong outcome in Paris. But most of all, as you think about getting involved, find a way to do so that speaks most to you. By doing even a little, studies show that people gain confidence and they do more on this issue. Remember that you aren't alone. Whatever way you choose to contribute really does matter and is helping us get to the change that we need.

I'm really excited for the panel that we have today. I want to turn things over to David Loy to get us started.

Thank you, Lou, and thank you to Tanisra. I'm really very happy to be a part of this conversation. I really appreciate the invitation and the opportunity.

Listening to the conversations that have happened so far, a number of things have come to mind for me, and one of them in particular that I think I need to begin with is to look at the fact that I think one of the things we're called upon to do now is actually to reexamine our own tradition. What I mean by that is it's not only an issue of what Buddhism might be able to do to help us understand and respond to the climate crisis, but also I think the climate crisis also encourages us, in fact, challenges us to look at our own tradition and what it is within it, certain ambiguities there that I think sometimes haven't encouraged us to take this kind of step.

What am I getting at here?

I've been trying to discuss climate and ecological issues for a number of years, alongside broader social concerns. Frankly, until quite recently, there's been considerable frustration with the often indifferent and sometimes even resistant response within certain parts of the Buddhist community.

For example, about five and a half years ago, John Stanley and I co-edited a book called *The Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*, and frankly, the response was rather a thunder of silence. I've been struck by this. Why hasn't there been a more progressive response on the part of Buddhists generally?

Thinking about it, looking into it, I could see some ambiguity within the foundation of our tradition that I think we really need to address. When you look at some of the earlier Asian traditions with their emphasis upon transcending this world—understanding the goal of nirvana as not being reborn, for instance—insofar as that becomes the goal, it's sometimes understood as encouraging a kind of indifference to this world.

This world of samsara is sometimes devalued as the place of not only suffering but craving and delusion. Often the response of Buddhists has not been to want to engage with it but to try to transcend it, to try to escape it, to try to check out of it. That can be very problematical when we're in a situation such as we are now, where clearly we do need to engage.

I'm not so sure that this is the primary perspective we find in Western or Westernizing Buddhism. But there is a kind of opposite response that isn't always more helpful. As Buddhism has come to the West, there's been this really interesting and generally very fruitful interaction with Western psychology, especially psychotherapy. As I said, I think there are a lot of very wonderful, important things that have come out of that.

But one of the implications that has sometimes gone along with it is the sense that my problems are in my head—they have to do with my own mental and emotional life. If I simply work on that level, then the basic problems of my life will be solved. In other words, this too doesn't necessarily encourage engagement with society.

If the more traditional approach is to understand this world as samsara, something that you want to transcend, a more psychological approach can encourage us to see the solution as simply engaging with our own minds. As a result of that work, when everything will be okay, we will harmonize or fit into the world better. The danger is that both of those discourage the kind of engagement with the world that we really need now.

What I'm saying here is that I think we really need to clarify the nature of awakening and acknowledge that the fundamental issue isn't so much about escaping this world or fitting into it, but rather realizing how much our experience of the world is due to the way that we construct it—due to our delusions, due to our cravings. We have this particular dualistic understanding that makes us feel separate from the world. In a way, that's the challenge: we need to overcome this sense of separation.

Insofar as Buddhist practice can encourage us to simply try to transcend the world, it can actually encourage us to move in the wrong direction. If we realize that our own personal problem is this dualistic relationship with the world—the sense that I'm inside my head in some way and the rest of the world is out there—insofar as I need to deconstruct and reconstruct that way of experiencing the world, the same thing is true collectively. The same thing is true socially.

The dukkha that we're talking about with climate change and the ecological crisis generally—and indeed a number of social and economic problems—it's not just something individual. It's something that is institutionalized, and it requires us to clarify and develop the Buddhist tradition in this way in order to really successfully address those concerns.

So that's my first comment and concern: this need to clarify exactly what it is that we're doing when we're doing Buddhist practice. Are we trying to transcend the world? Are we trying to just fit into it? Or do we realize that we really need to reconstruct the way we experience it and experience ourselves?

Moving on from there, it seems to me that within the Buddhist tradition, we have an archetype that speaks exactly to that. In fact, sometimes I wonder if this might actually be the most important thing that Buddhism has to offer, to contribute to the kind of situation we are in now. Here I'm referring to something that Jack Kornfield mentioned in the first conversation, but I think we can say a bit more about it. I'm referring to the bodhisattva path.

If one looks at the history of the Buddhist tradition, the bodhisattva path has sometimes been understood in a kind of sectarian way as part of the Mahayana critique of Theravada. But I really think we need to rise above that and realize that it's rather providing us with a particular orientation that can really help us address the kinds of situations that we find ourselves in now ecologically.

What is so special about the bodhisattva, of course, is that he or she has a double practice. That is to say, they're not only continuing their own meditations or whatever their contemplative practices may be, but they're also out there engaged in the world.

Traditionally, this has often been understood as helping other people wake up. But I think we can see now how the situation we're in is really calling upon us to find ways to address the kind of problems that we're looking at here, especially climate change.

Just a moment ago I mentioned that this is a double path, but it really seems to me that it's not a double path. It's actually two sides of the same path.

In the vast landscape of awakening, we find that beginning to wake up—to let go of ourselves, as we say in Zen, to forget ourselves and open up to the realization that we are not separate from the world—does not automatically eliminate our basic self-centered tendencies. These patterns remain within us, requiring careful attention and skillful engagement.

This is precisely where bodhisattva activity becomes essential. If waking up means realizing our fundamental non-separation from others, then how do we learn to live in ways that actually embody this understanding? This is the heart of the bodhisattva path.

Nisargadatta expressed this beautifully when he said, "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love. Between these two, my life turns." Here we find the two pillars of the Buddha's practice: wisdom and compassion. The compassion of the bodhisattva working in the world to create positive change is simply the actualization of the growing wisdom that we are not truly separate from it.

There is something particularly profound about the bodhisattva that deserves emphasis. In my Zen tradition, we recite daily the four Bodhisattva vows, the first being: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all." This vow calls for liberation from dukkha for all beings—a project so vast that one could never expect to fulfill it completely. Yet this impossibility is precisely the point. The vow calls for a fundamental reorientation of our entire stance toward existence. Instead of asking, "What can I get from this situation?" we learn to ask, "What can I do to make this situation better?"

This reorientation becomes essential when facing the overwhelming magnitude of our current challenges and the strength of forces resisting necessary transformation. The bodhisattva, having taken such a vow, will not be overawed by the scale of the problem. The nature of the challenge calls us to do our very best without knowing whether our actions make any difference whatsoever—a profound test of faith and commitment.

What makes this possible is the bodhisattva's integrated practice. Through meditation, we touch that place of equanimity, or as we say in Zen, emptiness—the place where there is nothing to gain and nothing to lose. Even when bodhisattva activities bring incredible frustration, we can return to this place of equanimity and be recharged.

This combination seems crucial for our time. For activists, it offers protection from the burnout that comes from getting caught in anger and frustration when hoped-for results don't materialize as expected. The meditation practice provides a way to recharge our batteries. But it works both ways—the bodhisattva knows it is not enough to simply find stillness, equanimity, or emptiness and dwell there. We are called to emerge from that place and engage fully with the world of form, the world of dukkha, the world where suffering requires our active response.

As we pause here to reflect on this beautiful balance—Nisargadatta's wisdom of compassionate response in the world informed by deep wisdom, that unified place we reach through both inner reflection and outer action—we can appreciate how the bodhisattva template challenges us to rework and understand anew our relationship to Buddhism and the dharma.

Building upon these foundations, we must consider what concrete actions this bodhisattva presence can take in our world. We need to examine how we can build what might be called a Buddhist movement—not from a desire to gather for its own sake, but because our leadership has lost its moral compass.

At the corporate level, if executives and shareholders were truly committed to ethical conduct, they would never hide the harmful effects of their products. The tobacco industry wouldn't have spread disinformation about health impacts—they would have said, "We don't want to harm anyone," and removed dangerous products from shelves. This is the ethical stance our world desperately needs: business that refuses to engage in lying, stealing, or killing, but instead takes responsibility for actions that are wholesome and beneficial to the earth, the biosphere, and human populations.

The question becomes: who ensures that business acts ethically? Rather than speaking of corporations as though they were autonomous decision-making entities with inherent power, we must recognize the human responsibility within these structures.

It's the people who are running the corporations that make decisions and take action. I want to be clear about this—I think we need to remember that every decision we make creates karma. If we really understand karma and take that in, then we don't want to have any investments in fossil fuels. We don't want to be encouraging the use of

fossil fuels. We want to try as quickly as we can to move away from them, even though we still have to use them at the moment because we don't have sufficient alternatives. We want to create those alternatives as rapidly as possible.

But really, what we all want is governments that protect the people rather than exploit the people—government that keeps business in check when they've lost their moral compass. But now it seems our government leadership has also lost its moral compass. So when that happens, any time throughout human history, the people need to get together and make their voices heard. We need to rise up. We need to talk about this openly and band together. When thousands of people, hundreds of thousands of people, millions of people come out and say we want to protect people, animals, life, the biosphere—we want ethical leadership—then people start to pay attention and things begin to change.

Right now, we're dealing with an enormous amount of unclear information. There was an elder woman the other day who said, "Well, our government's doing everything it can to prevent climate change." And of course, it's not—not at all. If we were doing everything we could, then there would be a ban on extreme extraction methods, there would be a ban on further fossil fuel exploration. There would be a high tax on carbon emissions. We wouldn't be worried about what the governments would come together and do in Paris in 2015. We would be sure that there would be a binding, effective treaty. But that's not the case, and that's why we have to get involved.

So one of the ways that we can get involved that I'm excited about and interested in is coming out of our experience in organizing for the People's Climate March. A number of us were involved in the People of Faith organizing for the People's Climate March. We had weekly conference calls on a national level about what we were doing in our local areas and what we were doing in each of our faith communities. It was inspiring to hear that there were forty mosques that were going to be represented at the People's Climate March, and it made me feel like, wow, the Buddhists—we really need to start to reach out to each other, get involved, make sure we get to the march and make our voices heard, our presence known, our wishes clear.

Those groups that were working during the People's Climate March are still continuing because we know there's still much more that we can do and need to do. One of the things that we're going to put into action soon—and we're beginning discussions about how to do it—is a Buddhist team on the national level that has periodic conversations, conference call conversations, where we check in and discuss what's happening in different areas. This can be done in the United States, but it can also be done anywhere. The same model. Have a national conversation among the Buddhists. It doesn't have to

be limited to the Buddhists—anybody can hang out with us. But to really try to reach out to different Buddhist groups. There are many, many different Buddhist groups that have never connected to each other.

Right now we have a thriving group in the New York City area. People from different sanghas came together to work to host the People's Climate March, and they're continuing their work. So they're intending to have a representative call into this national team on a regular basis and report what they're doing locally. We want to have those same kinds of groups in Portland, Seattle, San Francisco Bay Area, Dallas, and anywhere else in the country and anywhere else in the world to talk about what it is that we're doing on our local levels and organize the local Buddhist sanghas.

This is really a powerful way to connect. It's a powerful way to inspire each other. It's an excellent way to share information and to be ready for mass mobilization when it's needed—like the People's Climate March, like what we want to do to really make sure that the climate treaty in Paris in 2015 is solid, effective, and more than sufficient to put a stall on climate change.

So the intention behind this gathering together and really making our best efforts in all different kinds of areas, depending on what is needed in various districts... For example, in California, there are efforts to try to convince Governor Jerry Brown to put a moratorium on fracking. There are efforts to resist the transportation of the tar sands oil into Richmond, California to be processed, and other like efforts—trying to get the University of California to divest from fossil fuels. All of these efforts can be joined by coming together as Buddhists and getting involved.

So if you're interested in participating in this, I would invite you to send me an email to santussika—that's S-A-N-T-U-S-S-I-K-A—at gmail.com. In the subject line, put "Buddhist action" and then we'll add you to a mailing list and get you involved. We can help each other with outreach, and we'll be connecting with the larger movement through the people of faith, connecting with what's happening with other faith-based groups and also with the general activists.

We still have a webpage on the People's Climate March hub, and we are now going to have a Buddhist page on the hub for Our Voices. This is an effort coming through Green Faith, which was organizing the people of faith for the People's Climate March.

Our Voices is an organizing group with the goal for millions of people of faith and moral belief to sign on and pray in their own tradition for the Paris 2015 UN Climate Summit to succeed where all past talks have failed. By signing on, we are expressing our love and concern for all our children, for vulnerable people, and our precious planet.

So this effort is focused on three things: spreading awareness of what spiritual groups are doing, helping spiritual groups with their own call to action and outreach, and organizing days of prayer and action. One that's coming up is a vigil on December 7th, using solar lamps instead of candles. That's called the Light for Lima. It'll be in the midst of the conference in Lima.

When many, many people take an action like this, then the people who are in those negotiations are encouraged, inspired, and pressured. That's what we need to really try to stand up to the pressure of the billions of dollars that are behind the industries that are furthering the destruction and leading us into disaster and catastrophe.

Abraham Lincoln, in his Gettysburg Address, talked about a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But we don't have that anymore. We have a government of the billionaires, by the billionaires, and for the billionaires. This is what we need to stand up to. And we do that from a place of practice and depth and the bodhisattva vow. And we do it from a place of connection, connecting together. And it's joyful. It's a happy thing to do.

So I want to encourage everyone in America to get out and vote on Tuesday. Make sure we're voting for people who are going to really actually take action on climate. Put pressure on the ones who are on the fence. And put pressure on the ones who have denied it. I want to encourage everyone to participate in talking with everybody you know about getting involved. There's a great tool called the Pledge to Mobilize that you can look for at www.climatemobilization.com and see if that fits as a support for how to talk to each other.

We are the first generation to feel the effects of climate change, and we're the last generation that's going to be able to do anything about it. This is so imperative. We can bring all of our love and our joy. Coming together is a happy experience. And making a difference to do the right thing and encourage our brothers and sisters everywhere to do the right thing is the best we can do.

Thank you so much, Ayya. Beautiful. And I also just want to add that in the movement of the people of faith and our Buddhist engagement with that and contribution to that, we've also been hooking up with AVAS and 350.org and Idle No More, First Nation

Indigenous Movement, so that we can bring the faith voice to inform and connect with and collaborate with the activists on the front lines. So more about this later. As I said at the beginning of the call, this is an ongoing process of gathering our energy and forces together and our focus.

So thank you so much, Ayya Santussika, for such clarity. Ayya Santacita, who is also a dear friend and great practitioner over so many years, and also involved in the People's Climate March, People's Climate Train—this is a discussion we've been having together. So I'd also like to invite you to bring your words into this forum for us today. And thank you again, Ayya, so much for being with us today.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today with all of you. I just want to invite us to just take a moment and connect with ourselves and also with how it feels when we hear all of this information coming to us from a Buddhist nun who is so very clearly outspoken about the fact that we need to act on what is happening.

We can no longer just be with our own experience and stop there. We really need to see what holds us back from wholeheartedly engaging in the conversation and wholeheartedly engaging in stepping out into the world and making a difference. However, wherever we are, we have to just start where we are. And if we are feeling a sense of threat, a sense of despair, a sense of confusion, resistance, not really wanting to step out, then we have to start with that.

But it's really important that we do start and that we see that the whole world is holding up a very big mirror for us, wanting to wake us up to the fact that the way we are living is no longer sustainable. Our worldview we have been living in for a long time now is clearly not working any longer. And our worldview, which is in many, many ways based on fossil fuels—we are dressing ourselves in fossil fuels, we are eating fossil fuels.

We are living inside of fossil fuels. We are transporting ourselves with fossil fuels. They are woven into all corners of our lives, everywhere we turn.

And yet we also know that if we want to stay within the so-called safe limit of two degrees of warming, we can burn only another 550 gigatons of fossil fuel. Our industries have identified about 2,800 gigatons of fossil fuel reserves—about five times as much as we can burn if we don't want to exceed those two degrees of warming.

The situation is very dire, and we need to organize ourselves to pressure our government officials to make clear limits, clear commitments, and strong decisions. We don't have much time left, and we have the opportunity to decide whether this passage into a new way of living will be difficult, very difficult, or impossible. We can no longer take

this lightly because we have already gone much too far. We really need to wake up to the fact that if we don't take action, it will be impossible for civilization as we know it to continue. It simply will not be possible.

To take in that truth—all of the suffering and strife, the horror of imagining such a reality—is difficult. But I think it is necessary that we open our minds to the fact that if we do not act, this is what will happen, because it will not change by itself.

I like to think about contemplating the old age, sickness, and death of a worldview that no longer serves us and that truly needs to change. We need to speak about it. We need to demand action from our politicians and support those politicians who are willing to make change. We need to be very clear about this, and for that, we need to work together.

I feel very inspired by what Ayya Santacitta mentioned about this national network, where we can support each other, inform each other, and learn what we can do. Even right now, you might not know exactly what to do, but as soon as you step out and meet with others, you will hear what they are doing. You can join in and grow together.

In order to make this process possible, we need a framework of teaching, and the Buddha has left us with a very strong framework, starting with the five precepts, especially the first two. They are completely relevant to the question of climate change—it's all about harmlessness and not taking what is not given freely. This connects directly with how our systems are treating the planet. We are completely out of touch with what is needed. We are destroying our biosphere, and we have known this for quite some time.

It's heartening to hear that more and more people are willing to speak up about it. This call is such an encouragement—to see that Buddhists are stepping out and wanting to organize themselves to make their voices heard.

I also want to connect with what David said about transcendence being so long favored in the Buddhist world as the way to embody the Buddha's teaching. But I really think it's transcendence of the ego, not transcendence of the planet itself. We don't need to let go of our planet. We don't need to let go of the beautiful species living here with us. But we do need to let go of our egos—the ways we think we need to live, what we think we need to have, what we need to throw away. All of these things we must reconsider. Is this really true? Do we really need all of these things? Or is this just a worldview we can outgrow and must outgrow? Because the planet cannot support this worldview.

I felt very inspired by what Penny Opal Plant, one of the First Nation leaders, said: "We are the immune system of the planet. We have to speak out. We have to ring the alarm bells. We have to increase the numbers of those who want to act on behalf of our Mother Earth, who is sick right now."

If we all act together as the immune system, if we speak out, we need only be 7% to 10% of the population to establish this different worldview in the mainstream. We can do this. If we work together, if we establish systems of communication and mutual encouragement, then we will make a difference. We don't know what the result will be—we can't know that. But we can do our best and then let go. Not before we have done everything within our power to make a difference, but after we have truly tried.

There's a beautiful slogan that was heard often on the march: "The people united will never be defeated." It's about working with all those obstacles that prevent us from uniting and working together—both the internal and external obstacles. We have to attend to both.

And they are both of equal importance because we cannot be truly effective externally if internally we are completely caught up in our own reactivity and confusion. We also cannot wait forever to step out, to do something, to say something, and to act.

We must remember what the Buddha was doing on the night of his enlightenment. He was sitting under the Bodhi tree, and he was touching the earth. He was calling the earth to witness because we belong here. Simply because we are here, we have the authority to speak on behalf of the earth.

In order to do that skillfully, we can remember also the fearlessness mudra, which the Buddha used in his way of teaching people and encouraging them to have the courage to act on what they value, act on what they care for, what they want to protect. These two mudras can really help us stay on the path: touching the earth, and the fearlessness mudra.

Both of these mudras help me personally to stay present with my own experience and to have the courage to step out and say, "Yes, I want to practice. I want to be fully here and embody the truth for as long as I can." I want to end with this encouragement: connect with each other and live the Buddha's teaching fully. Thank you.

"Beautiful words. Thank you, Ayya."

While listening, I'm hearing the trajectory of today's call—from David's teaching helping us re-understand how we practice and bringing in bodhicitta, the bodhisattva paradigm, to Ayya Santacitta's clear call encouraging us to connect together, to become a strong force and engage on every level: engage politically, engage for systemic change. Ayya Santacitta is really bringing and empowering that vision for us.

As I'm listening, what's arising for me is this sense of the robe, of being in the robes. I'm sitting here at Aloka Vihara near Placerville, the new monastery for bhikkunis. I was at the bhikkuni ordination yesterday of Ayya Jayati Bhikkuni. The robes, the robed ones, are those who help guide us. To hear such clear guidance coming through from the ayyas—I feel very moved and very energized.

This brings to mind our call very early on when we were putting together our teachers' statement about climate change. Kumi Naidoo, the executive director of Greenpeace International, came from South Africa where he was in the anti-apartheid struggle. He reminded us that the people of faith and the voice of ethics brings such important energy to activism—it was that energy that helped topple the apartheid government, helped overcome segregation in the U.S. through the civil rights movement, and enabled Gandhi's satyagraha to overcome British colonial domination in India.

I think we have very important work to do. We have our map laid out, and now we should move into our breakout groups to allow space and time for your discussion and questions.

"Well, thank you, and hello everyone. We've heard wonderful wisdom from teachers on this and all our calls, and it's clear that wisdom lies not just with teachers but throughout the sangha. The breakout groups provide a lovely opportunity to hear and connect with others around the world, creating this connection of sangha in the midst of this incredible challenge. We consider this an important part of cultivating sangha. If you're not comfortable going into breakout groups, you might instead do your own meditation on what you've heard and where it's landing in your heart, mind, and body."

"Welcome back, everyone. We're all here together in one big sangha conversation. We'd like to hear from you now—any reflections from the breakout rooms, your meditation, or questions you might have. With so many of us on the call, please share from the heart and keep it relatively brief so we can hear from as many people as possible."

"Thank you so much. I was deeply impressed and moved by both David's talk and Ayya Santacitta's. David's talk was incredible in how it looked at our own tradition, going deep and showing how we can truly be bodhisattvas. And the dynamism of Ayya Santacitta's talk—all the options and possibilities she offered are incredible resources.

"Yet so many things she mentioned today, I had no way to capture that information. There was so much I'd really like to have—even her email address, the different organizations she mentioned like Our Voices, the Climate Change Mobilization. I'm sure I missed many that I would really like to connect with and be involved in.

"I'm a community dharma leader here in Tucson, Arizona, and I'm just starting my first experiment in classes on what I'm calling 'Climate Justice: How to Live Courageously in This World.' I want to bring this to as many people in my sangha as I can, and in that way keep touching other people. So how can I get that information?"

"I completely hear you, and thank you for your leadership and what you're stepping into where you are. It's beautiful."

And I'll say that we will share these resources with you. If you go to the Conversation Archives on the Wonder Sangha website, all the resources mentioned during these calls will be delineated there, including email addresses. We'll make sure that information is available to you.

Great. So let's go to Jeffrey. Jeffrey, what is your question and what would you like to offer?

Well, the main thing is that we are extremely excited and fulfilled by this series of five meetings, and we want more. We want to know what's next. We hope this isn't the end of what you're doing. This has been an amazing, enlightening experience and has left me feeling very hopeful. I don't feel hopeless now at all because of all the possibilities. It's more a question of where am I going to put my energy among all these incredible possibilities. So we appreciate the leadership you've provided and please continue.

What a wonderful segue. Actually, we are going to talk a little bit about that later in the call, but I will say that we hear you. We have heard from many that they have been really nourished by these conversations, and so we're not going to leave you out there by yourself. We're going to keep finding ways to connect, so we will be following up. I'll say a little bit more about that towards the end of the call.

Okay, Jeffrey?

I knew you would. That's great.

So I'm going to go to Anandabodi Bhikkhuni. You are on the public mic. Go ahead.

Hi, this is Aya Sudama. I'm on Aya Anandabodi's telephone, so it might be my pressing the button that you've seen there. Is that correct, Aya Anandabodi? Are you there?

She's not there, okay. So I just wanted to say—oh, I'm from Charlotte, North Carolina, but here in California with these friends at Aloka Vihara, listening in with much appreciation, much mudita, much admiration.

I want to say I grew up in a household led by an executive from Duke Power Company. I had no idea until recently that Duke Power is one of the worst polluters in the world. I read that 500 mountaintops have been decimated by Duke Power in its search for energy and coal, doing so much harm in this world. I had no idea, just no idea. I have felt very helpless. Especially as a bhikkhuni, a Buddhist nun—I'm a little tiny one all by myself. I just started a new little center in my hometown a year ago and feel sort of fragile and alone, not like I'm someone who could or should speak up. These things are bigger than me. Besides, a good Buddhist shouldn't get involved in these things—that's been my thought.

And I heard something in our conversation about transcending the ego, not the world. Just a light bulb went off. I feel like, oh, I can participate in this conversation.

I'm getting tears now. Just recently, I got the paperwork from my city, Charlotte, North Carolina, to start a neighborhood group. My neighborhood doesn't actively have a group. So I'm seeing possibilities. The wheels are turning as I've been listening. I'm very interested in this and will pursue it.

And I also registered to vote within about 48 hours, just in time to register. I'm going to vote for the first time in years. I'll get back to Charlotte just in time to do that. I was determined to vote in this election.

Thank you so much, John. It's so wonderful to hear from you and the group in Totnes. What a beautiful spot in the world—one of the places that started the transition town movement, which we should add to our list of resources.

We are getting very close to wrapping up our conversation, but Ayasudama and Geeta, John mentioned joy, which feels like such an essential thread running through everything we've shared today.

The question of how to find and sustain joy within Buddhist practice while facing something as overwhelming as climate change is profound. Without that positive, life-affirming energy, it becomes nearly impossible to keep going, to keep acting, to keep communicating about these urgent matters.

This speaks to something fundamental about the dharma path—that even in the face of suffering, even when we're looking directly at the most challenging aspects of our world, there's still space for joy. Not a superficial happiness that denies reality, but the deeper joy that comes from connection, from meaning, from taking right action together.

When we act from love rather than fear, when we connect with others who share our values and commitment, when we remember that our efforts are part of something much larger than ourselves—this is where joy naturally arises. It's the joy of the bodhisattva path, the joy of serving something greater than our small self.

And as we've heard today, this joy is contagious. When one person steps into inspired action, it moves others. When we gather in community—whether here on this call or in your sitting group in Totnes—we kindle and sustain each other's light.

Do you have a minute just to say something about joy in response to John's call and question?

I want to share with everyone that every time I've participated in climate action, knowing that the government recognizes we are here wanting this change—that we are putting our bodies on the line, putting our hearts on the line—it's been a joyful experience. I think this stems from the fact that everyone I've been in contact with, when we come out for actions whether it's the People's Climate March or other more local gatherings, people are coming from a place of love. They're coming from a place of really wanting to give something—this precious planet, this precious environment, this ability to live and to practice—to the generations to come. They genuinely want the frontline communities, the people who are struggling most, to be supported. It's inspiring to come together. There's tremendous joy involved in that.

Thank you so much, Geeta. Kristen, please tell us something about what you and Lou have in mind for carrying on.

It's so wonderful to be carrying this energy forward, and I can feel everyone wanting to bring that energy into what comes next. As co-founders of One Earth Sangha, I can speak for Lou and myself in saying that we sincerely thank each of you for joining these calls—whether this is your first call, your fifth, somewhere in between, or if you're just listening to the recordings afterwards. Your presence is deeply nourishing to all of us and to all who are coming together in service of the continuance of life.

We have heard from many of you that you have felt helped, encouraged, supported, and inspired by these calls and would like to retain that live connection in some way. We are exploring the possibility of monthly calls to keep our community connected and

to share leadership around the globe, letting us offer into a collective space what we can do, very much as was mentioned by the teachers earlier. We will be emailing you with information as it becomes available. Stay tuned—we will continue.

Taking a final breath, Ayaz, would you please share the blessings and the good energy from our series as we conclude our conversation today?

Focus on your wish to make a difference. We're going to share a Buddhist blessing to keep us all connected and encouraged in this time of great challenge, as we step out and act for the benefit of all sentient beings.

May you have every good blessing
May all the Devas protect you
By the power of all the Buddhas
May you ever be well

May you have every good blessing
May all the Devas protect you
By the power of all the Dhamma
May you ever be well

May you have every good blessing
May all the Devas protect you
By the power of all the Sangha
May you ever be well

Thank you for those blessings. I feel them resonating out into the world around us. Again, my thanks to all for your participation. It's wonderful that we're going to carry on the conversation and come together to offer what we can into the suffering world and the climate emergency.

I'd like to thank each of you for your donations—they've been very supportive. Thank you to Maestro Conference for their amazing support, and to One Earth Sangha. Thank Kristen and Lou for initiating this great platform for us to find a home within. Thank you to our entire team, including Yong and Barry working behind the scenes.

We'll continue. Take care, and go well. Stay well.

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